

The Pirates of Rook's Roost



The nation of Yzeem is a peaceful place, comparatively speaking, and one where the people work together toward the common goal of survival. The few settlements in the largely desert environment of Yzeem are centered almost exclusively around the River of Life, which is in a very real way the lifeblood of the entire nation. The capital city of Balaquim, the busiest port in the Known Lands, houses nearly fifty percent of all the nation's populace, with almost no other settlements large enough to qualify as true cities. There is, however, one glaring exception, and one that is as different from all other Yzeem settlements as is possible to be: Rook's Roost.

The common citizens of Yzeem know the story of Rook's Roost inso-much that it is commonly believed it was constructed as a secondary port to separate the trade at Balaquim into eastern and western ports, alleviating the crushing traffic and often-overwhelmed docks of that great city. Within a decade of its construction, however, criminal elements seized control of it and eventually compromised it entirely, causing it to succumb utterly to corruption. The story is often repeated as a cautionary tale to encourage Yzeemites to take ownership of their creations and guide them carefully to ensure that they are not co-opted by outside forces. However, the story is largely false, despite being based in part on true events. The origin of these stories is unknown, although some historians believe that they were started deliberately by Balaquim's leadership in order to diminish the memory of the man responsible for the creation of Rook's Roost and the impact he had on the rule of an entire nation.

Located on the westernmost stretch of shoreline in Yzeem, Rook's Roost is effectively a city-state that has severed all ties with the Veiled Council of Balaquim and the other settlements along the River of Life. Its independence was initially a matter of indifference, but later became one of necessity, and finally something that could not be altered without resources that the government of Yzeem is unwilling to commit due to the

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circumstances following the Darkfall. Its beginning, however, is very much the story of one man, a wealthy Yzeemite merchant patron named Ensef Narook.

Centuries ago, the structure of power in Balaquim was very different. The Veiled Council had not yet been created, with a more traditional ruling council still in place. The politics in the city were a constantly shifting balance of trade, negotiation, alliances, and betrayal. Ensef Narook, while a ruthless businessman, was nevertheless not corrupt and would not embrace the backstabbing and bribery that was required for him to advance to new levels of influence. Disgusted by the state of affairs in the capital, Narook used a portion of his vast wealth to create an estate far away from the capital so that he could conduct his affairs without the interference or spying eyes of his business rivals. It took him the better part of a decade, but as a half-elf, Narook was a man with great patience to match his long life. In time, his estate was complete nearly six hundred miles from the port of Balaquim, and he immediately began expanding it to include a small port where he could dock his various merchant and personal vessels in order to conduct business more thoroughly.

Narook's gambit paid off, and soon his merchants who dealt in the western nations of Aden were showing dramatically increased profits with their ability to restock and resupply at his new estate, avoiding the endless fees, bribes, and price-gouging of the port at Balaquim. In short order, several other like-minded merchants secured permission to use his facilities as well, for a nominal, honest fee that was a dramatic fraction of what the larger port to the southeast would charge them. Slowly, Narook and his allies formed a merchant coalition that began to change the economic balance of trade in the western Known Lands. The merchant princes of Balaquim, who had previously taken note of Narook and dismissed his efforts, began to pay closer attention. When the situation continued to escalate, the most powerful people in Yzeem began to feel the difference in the one place that made them pay the most attention: in their profit margins.

It is perhaps one of history's greatest ironies that Narook's estate, which by this point had grown into a true settlement and bustling center of commerce, became a force for reform within the political and economic landscape of Balaquim and the entirety of Yzeem. The policies in effect at Narook's port forced the vastly larger port at the capital to become more honest and straightforward, because if they hoped to compete, they had no choice. In time, the two ports established an equilibrium, where the larger was slightly more expensive but had a vastly larger marketplace, thus ensuring slightly greater return on an investment. Essentially, the two offered slightly different services, allowing captains of different vessels to choose based on their specific needs, and ensuring that neither was undercut by the other. When Ensef Narook passed away of old age, he had seen his private estate, now known as Rook's Roost, to become a major economic power throughout the Known Lands.

Narook's passing left a power vacuum that was, for a short time, hotly contested among his surviving partners. Eventually a ruling council of major merchant captains was established to oversee affairs in the port. Initially, this was beneficial for all involved, but unfortunately, the men and women who replaced their founder did not possess the strength of character he had. Within a decade, they began to exercise their power to manipulate economic decisions in Balaquim, reversing what had become a relatively benevolent trend among the leadership and cause it to begin sliding back toward corruption. It became more profitable for the captains of Rook's Roost to abandon trade in exchange for significant kickbacks from the port at Balaquim, which soon recovered all the trade that was no longer taking place at the Roost and drive their fees back up. The capital became more corrupt than ever and, over the years, the ruling council of Yzeem became mere puppets for the captain's council at Rook's Roost, most of whom had descended into piracy to slake their endless avarice and desire for adventure.

Years later, it would be the appearance of the Green Councilor and his advocacy for all members of the ruling council to abdicate their position and allow a new, anonymous council to take their place, immune to threats against their privacy and attempted assassination outside the council chambers. When no one knew who the councilors were, no one could attempt to use outside pressure to force them to capitulate to the pirates of Rook's Roost. It was not a perfect process, and it was very gradual, but in time, the newly named Veiled Council became all but immune to the manipulation by the Roost, much to the pirates' chagrin. This was not to say that the Council was completely benevolent, because politicians and power-brokers are always susceptible to vice and power struggles, but the situation was such an improvement over the past levels of corruption that had choked the city.

For their part, the pirates of Rook's Roost saw the loss of influence in Balaquim as an insult, and even the most even tempered, reserved among their numbers, those who had chosen to act as privateers or even eschew piracy altogether, rapidly descended to the same levels of barbarity as their comrades. Those who did not survive only a very short while. The last vestiges of civility disappeared, and Rook's Roost became the den of thieves, pirates, murderers and brigands that it is known to be today.

AFTER THE DARKFALL



The Darkfall was a largely beneficial event for the pirates who make their home in Rook's Roost. It was only a matter of time before Yzeem or one of the other nations marshalled their forces and took the city by land. Attacking by sea was not safe for anyone purely due to the sheer number of pirate vessels who would protect their safe harbor, and the few attempts the forces in Balaquim made to do so ended poorly for the People's Navy. Recognizing that this would eventually happen, the captain's council fortified the Roost extensively, which in turn led to the city being completely safe from nocturnals when the Darkfall occurred. What's more, the chaos happening all across the Known Lands ensured that no nation would ever risk committing their naval forces to something so insignificant as pirates.

In addition to allowing them peace of mind regarding their security, the Darkfall has increased profits for the various pirate crews that operate from the Roost. Supplies are more valuable than ever, and very few merchants or settlements ask a great deal of questions about where goods they are offered come from; most simply purchase them without inquiring at all. Pirate crews can now sell their looted cargo for significantly more than it was worth prior to the cataclysm, and have to work far less to find a market for their goods before doing so.

POLITICS OF PIRACY

As might be expected, the “society” of Rook’s Roost is chaotic at the best of times, and violent almost without exception. Brawls are commonplace, even expected, and serious injuries are not uncommon. Murders are not unheard of, but the captain’s council discourages it because it robs ships of needed crew. Individual crew members view the Roost as a safe haven to indulge in their various vices, including primarily liquor, gambling, violence, companionship, or some strange combination of those things. Taverns, gambling dens, and brothels are the most common establishments in the settlement around the Roost itself, and a few pit fighting arenas are present as well, albeit more strictly supervised than anything else in the city. There are merchant houses, established by the few merchants who do enough business with the pirate crews that it has proven cost effective to maintain a trading house on site. These are typically the most well-protected locations in the city, and attempting to rob one is an offense punishable by death by even the most lenient and forgiving of the various captains who make their home at the Roost.

The politics of the Roost’s ruling council is somewhat more complex than one might expect, and ironically much more closely resembles the ruling council of Yzeem as it existed in the old days. Only the most powerful and influential pirate captains find themselves on the council, and their position there lasts only as long as they can maintain the level of influence that granted them the seat in the first place. Power struggles are very common, and membership is fluid, with the average length of one’s position on the council no more than six months at the outmost, although outliers obviously exist. Methods up to and including assassination have often been used to create vacancies in the council for ambitious captains to gain an opportunity to take their place.

In the years since the Darkfall, a divide of sorts has manifested within the ranks of the pirates at Rook’s Roost, beginning with the captain’s council and running all the way down to the lowliest swabs and deckmates on the most decrepit vessels in port. There are some who see the world after the Darkfall as an entirely new place, with new opportunities. The united pirate fleet, if it were ever gathered in one place at one time, would be one of the most daunting naval forces in existence, and the wealth that travels through the vessels coming and going at the Roost is such that they command mercantile power equal to any other major city in the Known Lands save for the national capitals like Balaquim, Mekanus, or Sea Reach. These captains and their followers believe that this is an opportunity for Rook’s Roost to seize greater influence than ever before, not merely in the form of holding the seas hostage, but economic power, military power, even political power. They crave to be recognized by the nations of the Known Lands as an equal, and are eager to stand shoulder to shoulder with others as, if not kings, then at least rulers like the so-called Dust King of the Rhanate or the Grand Kazan of the High Steppes, two others who would never have been recognized prior to the Darkfall.

The pirates tend to fall into two distinct camps in regard to this issue, and can be roughly described as follows:

The Plunderers

The name “pirates” tends to conjure a certain image, and that image is the archetype of those who have come to call themselves the Plunderers. The Plunderers revel in every part of their lifestyle, from the wealth that they glean from their efforts to the violence necessary to secure that wealth, and the hard-drinking celebrations that follow suit as their hard-fought riches quickly evaporate in a raucous, days-long indulgence that leaves them hungry once again for prey on the open seas. Anything else, anything less than the chaos and violence of the life

to which they are accustomed, is tantamount to the mundane non-existence that they believe all others live, and they want no part of it. Those who even suggest such a thing are, to the Plunderers, less for it and privately, they agree that such individuals are weak and will one day be ripe for conquest themselves, but only after other available targets have been exhausted.

For the time being, the Plunderers hold a majority over the population and leadership of Rook’s Roost, although it is much closer to being even than any of them would care to admit (those few of them who bother to follow such things in between bouts of trying to kill themselves with rum, that is).

The Opportunists

The vocal minority of the captain’s council, as well as those who support them, fell into a life of piracy by happenstance or necessity, if you were to hear their version of events. They took to the life as part of their economic opportunity, and take no particular joy in the chaos and violence that it involves. The world since the Darkfall fascinates them, and they see opportunity where others simply see madness. The bandits of the Rhanate have united under the banner of the Dust King, for the most part, and the same could be said of the various tribes of raiders that call the High Steppes home, though no one would accuse the Grand Kazan of being a particularly wise or even stable ruler. The Opportunists have money, and they have power. What they do not have, what they desperately crave, is legitimacy. The motivations for this vary wildly. Some seek to return to a life they knew before the seas called them, while others are simply strategic thinkers who envision a much larger picture than their more violent comrades-in-arms among the Plunderers. They view the Plunderers as a barely controlled weapon that would be best put to use turned against their enemies, but cannot currently see a way through to harnessing them properly. They recognize that the Plunderers view them as weak and ineffectual, not truly pirates but pretenders who will one day be weeded out of their number.

What the Plunderers do not yet recognize is that the Opportunists are aware of their disdain and are taking steps to ensure that their chaotic nature will not be a problem for much longer. If the Opportunists have their way, the streets of Rook’s Roost will soon run red with the blood of those who have no place in the future they are making for themselves.

Firebeard, Captain of the Bloodied Fang

[MALE JURAK BARBARIAN 13]

Without question, the most powerful and fearsome pirate currently calling Rook’s Roost his home is Firebeard, called by some the Scourge of the Southern Sea. In addition to being incredibly dangerous on a personal level due to his lethal combat prowess, Firebeard is exceptionally cunning in his use of tactics against merchant vessels and has claimed more conquests on the ocean than any other captain in Rook’s Roost. His reputation, while completely earned, is carefully managed to create even more of a psychological advantage in battle. He has a habit of tying matches into his beard and setting them aflame during boarding actions, hence his name. Most of those who have crossed blades with him have not survived, but a few that have given him what he considers to be an acceptable challenge have been spared if they survive long enough for his battle rage to abate; otherwise, he scarcely remembers the fight itself, much less his opponents.

Firebeard is currently the longest-serving member of the captain’s council, having been on the council for almost three years. He has brutally rebuffed no less than six attempts to unseat him, and no one who has attempted such a feat has survived. The most recent one was a year ago and resulted in the offender’s entire crew being sunk in the harbor aboard the captain’s ship. There were no survivors. Unsurprisingly,

Firebeard is the most vocal advocate of the Plunderers faction within the Roost, and the one around whom most other advocates rally when their opponents attempt some new gambit to advance their agenda. It is very likely that Firebeard's presence alone is what ensures that the Plunderers continue to hold sway over both the council and the Roost as a whole, which has painted a bigger target on the jurak than any of his previous activities in the past, and that is no small feat.

Ariana Darkfeather, Captain of the Black Dawn

[FEMALE ELF FIGHTER 11]

Although no one outside the ranks of the Opportunists recognizes it, Ariana Darkfeather is the power behind the throne, so to speak. The movement is pushed forward largely by her will, and it is her keen intellect that has grown its ranks from a handful of like-minded captains to a minority of the captain's council and a dozen more captains from the lower ranks as well. Darkfeather presents her theories and actions as perfectly logical and reasonable, and they are. There is, however, something deep within her past that she does not share with others, no matter how much she may trust them. Darkfeather's father was a disgraced noble cast out from Sylfanus in Arasteen, and died almost penniless after decades of back-breaking labor to take care of his family in a mining town in southern Columbey. Darkfeather turned to piracy to strike back at the self-righteous bastards in her homeland who had dared slight her father so, and her life has never diverged from that vengeful path.

Darkfeather knows that the Plunderers have more numbers, and that their followers are more violent and experienced warriors. She knows that their leaders, Firebeard in particular, are incredibly dangerous and cunning, albeit not as cunning as she. She recognizes that if she were able to cut the head off the snake and eliminate the leaders, the crews would run amok. Likewise if she eliminated the crews, the captains would pose a threat that she and her allies might not be able to defeat. So, she has concocted a plan that will allow her to do both simultaneously, then pick up the pieces and make something completely new.

Zardis, Captain of the Chum Gible

[MALE HUMAN SUMMONER 7]

Although no one questions the idea that Firebeard is the most fearsome and successful pirate on the southern seas, no one disputes the fact that the arcanist-pirate known as Zardis is the most bloodthirsty. Firebeard has spared opponents on occasion if they have impressed him with their courage and their skill in battle; Zardis is never known to have willingly spared anyone in his brutal rampages on the water, although a few shipwrecked survivors have washed upon the beaches now and then to tell stories of the nightmares visited upon their vessels by Zardis and his crew of cutthroats. Zardis's ship is one of the smaller sizes commonly used by pirates to prey upon other ships, and attacks ships almost exclusively larger than itself. This is due to Zardis's almost legendarily anti-social nature; he can tolerate the presence of very few other beings, and prefers a much smaller crew. Likewise, very few are able to deal with the stress of being around such an obviously murderous and sociopathic individual, so even with his limited needs for crewmen there are few applicants. The other reason that Zardis keeps a smaller ship is that he has no need of a larger one due to his arcane abilities as a summoner.

Zardis is a powerful arcanist who can summon a powerful ally from one of the adjacent planes, believed to be the elemental plane of water. His ally takes the form of a truly massive shark, a spirit that resembles the aquatic predator but is vastly more powerful and possessed of a deadly intelligence. The shark has done more damage to Zardis's opponents than his ship's meager armament has ever inflicted, and the vast majority of those who perish at the hands of the captain and his crew end up consumed by the perpetually-hungry beast, who also periodically feeds on any crew whom Zardis considers disloyal or mutinous in any way. Needless to say, Zardis's crew tends to be loyal.

The heinous nature of his crimes against enemy ships goes well beyond piracy, in the eyes of most, and as a result Zardis has a sizeable bounty posted on his head in Yzeem, Vanora, and of late, Urbana as well. Although the pirate captain himself appears to be incapable of fear or concern, even for his own self-preservation, members of his crew are becoming noticeably anxious about their growing notoriety.



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