

The Warrior Totems

A Vanoran Nation Book Preview



Later this summer, Kyoudai Games will be publishing the first in what we hope will be a series of books that examine the nations of the Known Lands a little more closely. The first one in the series is the Empire of Vanora, also called the Dragon Empire or sometimes the Empire of the Beasts. While most of our releases have told the story of Aden as a whole, for the first time, we will dive into the specific culture and history of a single nation, and see what manner of stories there are to be told about it before, during, and after the Darkfall.

Toward that end, please enjoy this brief preview of Vanora, the Dragon Empire, with a section discussing three of the Ten Beasts whose philosophy dominates so much of life in the nation of Vanora.

THE WAY OF THE TEN BEASTS

Depending upon who one asks, the Way of the Ten Beasts is either a philosophy or a religion, and one that is incredibly pervasive within the borders of Vanora in southeast Aden. Although it has not spread much beyond Vanora, with only a handful of adherents in other nations, mostly those who once dwelled within Vanora before emigrating somewhere else in the Known Lands, and therefore does not have the widespread acceptance of other faiths like the Church of All Saints or the Radiant Path, the sheer, overwhelming dominance of the Way in its home nation ensures that it is one of the most prevalent faiths in the Known Lands. Although it is not the oldest faith currently practiced in Aden, it is one of the oldest and has perhaps the most well documented history.

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In the waning days of the Great War, there were many who had lost everything to the continent-spanning conflict. Whatever kingdoms or young nations had existed in the region that currently makes up Vanora had long since fallen, leaving the area to be dominated by a number of tribes, most of which had predated the now-fallen kingdoms in the first place and had survived the conflict thus far intact. These tribes held shamanistic beliefs, a holdover from a previous age that no one remembered any longer. They varied according to their specific beliefs, but each was a proud group of warriors, and they were perpetually at one another's throat over every conceivable reason: territory, resources, and feuds so old that no one remembered how they started.

THE FORMS OF THE BEASTS

Those who have studied the Way of the Ten Beasts, which includes almost every educated soul within Vanora, readily notice that the Beasts fall into three approximate groupings, each of which represents a vast cross-section of all within Vanora and its society. The Shark, Ursax, and Wolf all represent warriors or martial prowess in some form or fashion. The Basilisk, Drake, and Leviathan all confer potency to those who have taken spellcasting as their emphasis in life. The Eagle, Fox, and Serpent represent cunning for those who are not as strong or as wise as the other groups. And of course Dragon is all these things, the perfect combination of all Beasts, ruling over them as the first among equals to provide perfect order for Vanora.

There are some scholars of Vanoran history who believe that when the first Emperor united the tribes and created the Way of Ten Beasts, there were other tribes that venerated other totems present at that time. These scholars point to references to "many tribes" and "others" who rejected the Emperor. In the most remote, rural areas of the Vanoran wilderness, one can occasionally find the last remains of ruins or occasional artifacts that bear stylized symbols of other animals, which some experts claim is proof that ancient, pre-Vanoran tribes revered other totems as well. Some believe that, if these tribes did exist, they fled ancient Vanora in the face of the burgeoning Dragon Empire, or were simply absorbed into other existing tribes. Others have suggested, somewhat more darkly, that the first Emperor needed a common foe to unite those tribes he felt could serve his new Empire, and that he would have used any other lingering presence in the area as an anvil against which to forge his new nation. Others find this suggestion borderline treasonous, thus it has never gained any real traction and has been relegated largely to the scholarly fringe and a handful of conspiracy theorists.

The Shark

Several of the Ten Beasts are patrons of warriors, each in a different way or representing a different aspect of the warrior's way. Shark is one of the warrior's totems, albeit one not generally embraced by the more traditional warriors. Shark is a fiercely solitary, brutally aggressive hunter that stalks its prey without remorse or rest, then attacks with everything ounce of strength and violence it possesses. The tribe that revered Shark was a smaller sized tribe that ruled the coastal region near the southern seas, and though they were few in number, the warriors of the Shark tribe were avoided by the other tribes for fear of their wrathful nature and their insistence on hunting down anyone who wronged them, no matter the cost or distance involved. The circumstances surrounding the Shark tribe joining with the first Dragon Emperor are something of a mystery, as Dyok travelled alone into the territory of the tribe, something that was regarded as a veritable death sentence, and emerged intact three days later with the allegiance of the Shark.

Modern day adherents of Shark are an odd and mixed group. All warriors pay at least minimal homage to Shark in hopes that, if they should find themselves standing alone against a horde of enemies, that they will have the ferocity and strength to overcome them or at least take as many with them into the next world as possible. Those warriors who are by nature solitary sometimes revere Shark if they find other warrior totems less palatable for whatever reason, and many who make their life upon the sea and pursue the path of the warrior choose Shark above the other Beasts as their inspiration and emulate its tendencies whenever possible. It is perhaps for this reason that the sailors who make their living on the waters around Vanora are not preyed upon by foreign pirates, although the pirates of Vanora are equally fierce; battles between the two are legendary for their ferocity, and it is rare that both ships entering into a battle emerge.

The month of Shark is the mid-month of summer in Aden, perhaps the most ruthlessly hot and relentless month of the year. Even when it rains, and in Vanora summer rains often take the form of powerful monsoons, the people have no choice but to forge ahead and labor in the fields regardless of conditions. The threat of crop failure, greatly exacerbated by the presence of nocturnals eager to inflict such misery on the people of the Known Lands, is so great that nothing else comes close, not even weather that could be deadly for the incautious.

The Ursax

One of the three powerful warrior totems that were adopted into the Way of the Ten Beasts when Vanora's early tribes were united. The tribe of Ursax made their home around the foothills of Vanora's mountain ranges, where the great forests ended and gave way to stone. The mundane ursax that could be found there, reptilian creatures similar in most ways to the common bear but almost supernaturally adaptable, were revered by the tribe and never hunted (to be fair, no one hunted



them due to their incredible strength, durability, and ferocity). The rival tribes that dominated the nearby forests, Wolf primarily but others as well, were always careful not to cross the boundaries into Ursax territory unless it was intentional, because the Ursax did not forget or forgive any slight, no matter how minor. The first Emperor traveled to the edge of Ursax territory and remained there for two weeks, never crossing the border but waiting patiently and living off of the land. The stalwart Ursax tribe eventually became curious and asked him what it was he wanted. The discussion that ensued eventually, over months and months of convincing and consideration, led the tribe to join with the first Emperor and begin the earliest days of the Vanoran nation.

Those who follow the path of Ursax value adaptability above all things, although hardiness is a very close second. Mundane ursax are known to develop significant, sometimes supernatural abilities closely tied to their environment, often elemental in nature. While it isn't possible for the followers of Ursax to mirror this level of alteration, they do believe that they must be strong enough to change to suit any given circumstance, no matter what the challenges they pose are. Warriors who favor Ursax tend to employ heavier armor as well, due to Ursax's legendary durability and thick armor. This sets them apart from Shark and Wolf, who favor different fighting styles, none of which focus on an individual's ability to endure an enemy's attack and then counterattack while they are exhausted from their failed assault.

The month of the Ursax is the first month of summer, when the heat of the season truly begins to climb and farming efforts are well underway. This is also when most major construction projects undertaken by the Emperor's government or even private individuals are taking place in earnest, due to the first month of spring being avoided because of soft ground and damp conditions from melting snow. It is a time of strenuous but honest labor, a time when men and women take comfort from their hard work in the form of their families. The last vestiges of bulk gained over the winter, when work is scarce, melt away in the face of arduous exercise and high temperatures, ensuring that all who labor in the name of their Emperor adapt to the new season just as Ursax adapts to whatever it encounters.

The Wolf

Wolf is a fearsome Beast, a hunter and a pack animal who thrives in the company of others. The Wolf tribe was one of the last to join the first Dragon Emperor, as they preferred their own company to that of the other tribes. Although the men and women of the Wolf tribe were smaller physically than many of the other tribes, and included a larger number of smaller races such as goreaux and faerkin, they nevertheless had a fearsome reputation due to their ability to work well together and bring down larger prey, including warriors of other tribes. According to legend, Dyok won their loyalty by defeating three of the Wolf tribe's greatest warriors in combat single-handedly, claiming a rightful position as the new alpha warrior of their tribe. This is widely considered apocryphal, but it is a colorful story that is popular nonetheless.

Wolf is a particularly popular patron for warriors that work together to accomplish their duties. Because of the nature of their duties, Wolf is especially venerated among the militia that protects the cities and boundaries of Vanora, those who serve beneath the Sons of the Dragon and who are not yet permitted to bear the crest of the Emperor themselves. Wolf is also a popular choice for young adventurers who want to forge their way in the world, either as a group or, less frequently, as individuals. This is much more common in more rural portions of the nation, particularly smaller settlements like Shang, the smallest major city of Vanora, and walled villages smaller than it. The Sons of the Dragon show respect to Wolf and the fact that a great many of their members were once strict adherents of it by displaying Wolf's symbols throughout their dojo, and often call upon Wolf extensively when training nascent Sons in tactics fighting alongside their brothers in arms.

The month named after Wolf is one of the spring months, which is appropriate because of the extensive labor necessary in large groups to oversee the planting and maintenance of crops during that season. Offerings to Wolf are common during this period so that individual village groups will be blessed with strength and the spirit of cooperation necessary for them to succeed in their work, bringing prosperity and a plentiful harvest to feed their extended families. The people who work the fields in large groups honor Wolf with long songs that mirror the howls of wolves, a song beginning at the edge of a field and carrying from one worker to the next for long distances, until a single song can cross miles of fields before its conclusion.

MECHANICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many citizens of Vanora choose to venerate one Beast more closely than the others, although there are virtually none who abandon the others in favor of a single Beast, for to do so courts disaster. Because of this, it is possible for literally anyone to follow any totem, and while it is not particularly common, one can find such oddities as a morbidly obese politician who venerates Shark, for example, despite how at odds such an individual might be with the common traits associated with that Beast.

For obvious reasons, the three warrior totems have more fighting men and women among their adherents than any of the other Beasts, and fewer arcanists or other, non-martially inclined individuals. Fighters, rangers, and paladins are common among all three of these totems. Clerics can be found in the adherents of each as well, although often in Vanora clerics are referred to as beast shamans rather than priests. With regard to the three warrior totems, some general notes on the kinds of followers they attract can be summarized as follows:

SHARK – Shark is the most solitary of the warrior totems, even more so than Ursax, and its followers tend to follow the same path. There are more arcanists than usual among Shark's followers, including sorcerers and wizards who make extensive use of weather- or water-based magics. Barbarians are vastly more common in Shark's adherents than other totems, and there are a few rangers, rogues, and slayers who specialize in tracking and striking their enemy from the shadows with a single, devastating attack. Popular domain choices for beast shamans following Shark include Animal, Death, and Water.

URSAX – The focus on adaptability means that Ursax has a much more diverse body of followers than the other warrior tokens. Those who value strength and hardiness are its adherents, of course, including a significant number of barbarians and golemoids, but those who consider how to adapt to a different situation or combat are a varied group; warrior monks are also frequent followers of Ursax because of their belief in changing to suit the needs of a challenge rather than merely using pure brute force to overcome it. Among spellcasters who follow the warrior tokens, druids are most likely to adhere to Ursax's teachings. Popular domain choices for beast shamans following Ursax include Animal, Protection, and Strength.

WOLF – In addition to a great many traditional warriors, Wolf is the totem of choice for a surprising number of inquisitors, due primarily to their focus on teamwork and leadership among other men- and women-at-arms. Followers of Wolf are intelligent with their tactics, and many arbiters can be found among their ranks as well. Arcanists who follow Wolf tend toward enchantment as a focus in their magic, enhancing the abilities of their companions and equipment in order to better function as a whole group. Popular domain choices for beast shamans following Wolf include Animal, Community, and Glory (Heroism).

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