



Freeholds of Nar



Lands in Shadow for Shadow of the Demon Lord

On the Empire's northeastern edge, perched on the giant rocks that tumbled down into the swirling waters of the Auroral Ocean can be found the Freeholds of Nar. Once a string of fortresses belonging to the doughty dwarfs who mined, prying gold and jewel from the stone's tight grip. The wealth unearthed and the skill of the artisans established the holds as a place of wonder and riches, a reputation that lasted until, one day, the ring of hammering went silent, the light of torches guttered out, and the dwarfs who had made the place their home disappeared.

Today, the Freehold is a stark place of stubborn people. Founded by the desperate on the bones of the dead, each generation fears this year will be the year the Empire comes to bring them back under the lash. That fear has made them strong, but has also eaten at their minds and hearts.

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History

The history of the Freehold begins in the days of legend, when a great and terrible water genie fell in love with an elven maiden.

The lady was not pleased by this state of affairs, and fled the genie in terror. In response, he attempted to drown all of Rûl in water to trap her in his realm. She fled then to the only place left, descending into the Underworld. In frustration, the genie pounded upon the door to this realm with the might of all the oceans, until a band of earth genies grew so tired of his roaring and smashing they dropped a small mountain range on top of him. Trapped beneath the earth, the genie fell into a deep slumber.

Centuries later, the ever-digging dwarfs expanded their great empire, building a great kingdom into the face of the cliffs above Crescent Bay. As well as the iron and lead below, the position let them gain sea trade and enabled them to be a bulwark between the Kingdom of Sails and the Empire, ensuring trade between both nations went via the dwarfs. The trade agreement was enforced by the might of the citadel the dwarfs constructed. Five great fortresses were built, each bristling with dwarfen cannon in the heights and launching dwarfen battleships from the caverns at sea level. Into each fortress was carved the likeness of the greatest dwarfen kings who ruled the kingdom, staring fiercely out across the waters to warn those who would try to test their mettle.

But with their power came hubris. The dwarfs of the Crescent Sea fortress believed that if they controlled the fate of the Empire and the Kingdom of Sails, they should also control the fate of the entire dwarfen kingdoms. They cut off access to sea trade to others; when the other clans responded with force, the coastal kingdom became paranoid, sure that the other clans wanted their power and fortune. They sealed their borders and attacked any dwarf that came close. The king of the mountain citadel renamed himself Nar, which in the Dwarfish tongue means "pure." They were the true dwarfs; all others were traitors.

Infighting spread across the dwarfen lands and their unity was forever broken. In Nar, their xenophobia made them blind to attack from within. Five hundred years ago, the seas around the mountain experienced a higher tide than any dwarf could remember. A tide so high that waters reached a tiny crack in the mountains, running water down into the genie's prison, awakening it from its slumber.

It had slept for centuries but its passion was still white-hot and it was enraged to find a dwarfen kingdom between it and its love. For a year and a day, it grew in power, drawing water into its prison and pumping it up through the cave system above. The dwarfs noticed the rising water, but thought it a trick of their enemies and plotted retaliation. On the final day, they were

caught entirely unawares when the genie drove an ocean of water through every cave and tunnel. In moments, every single dwarf was drowned

and their bodies blown far out to sea. The genie was again rebuffed by the barrier across the Underworld. Heartbroken and exhausted from this great expulsion, the genie collapsed once again into his stony prison.

A decade later, the first settlers found the empty fortresses and began their occupation. Originally, they were heretics and apostates, fleeing the Holy Kingdom and the Crusades into the North as they intensified worship of the New God (and intolerance of other faiths), giving the new kingdom a disdain not just for outside rule but the gods as well. Next came bandits pushed out by the latest raid on Tear, pirates fleeing the wrath of the Kingdom of Sails, criminals fleeing the injustice of the Nine Cities. So, the new kingdom gained a disdain for written laws, and judgment from on high. The Freehold has unwritten codes, and elects leaders to oversee mining and trade, but they maintain a deep distrust of authority. In the Freehold of Nar, everyone is free, and no laws, kings or gods shall rule them.

With no central authority, nobody can decide what to do about the rising water. Another high tide has occurred, and once again awoken the mad genie. The lower caves are slowly disappearing under rising water. Mines and homes have been lost beneath the waves. The five thousand inhabitants of the Freehold have just three hundred days left in which to make an impossible decision: leave their trusted homeland, or join the dwarfen dead beneath the sea.

Geography

From afar, the kingdom appears to be five separate fortresses, each with a series of buttresses and smaller towers centered around a singular spire carved to represent one of the five dwarfen kings that ruled there. Behind the facade, the fortresses do connect but few settlers go deep except to mine. The new occupants prefer the sun and fresh air, and so cling to the front of the fortresses, carving new caves out below the parapets. Beneath a great cavern at the bottom of the cliffs is a beachside shantytown that serves as a communal space, and there folk from each of the four inhabited peaks mix. A series of narrow trails and steps have been cut into the cliffs, but most prefer to descend and ascend in the pulley-buckets, a primitive elevator system of rusty chains and old barrels.





The people of Freehold tend to use very descriptive names. The central town below is called Fishgut, because of its most common element of scenery. The five fortresses above are named for what made their great dwarfen monument distinctive. One-Eye is the most southern statue—a fierce warrior with a scar carved over one eye. Bulger is next, where the sculptor made a decided peak in the trouser area. Then there is Twistneck who faces to the northeast instead of east. The center of the fourth's face is nothing but smashed rubble, earning him the moniker Bloodnose. Furthest north is Baldnob, a king lacking helmet or hair.



Nar-Necked

The people of the Freehold dug out much of the dwarfen stronghold, there are many areas they have left as-is, designed for dwarfen heights. So much so, about a quarter of all inhabitants have crooked backs and twisted necks from a life lived bent over. Across the north, the term "Nar-necked" means hunchbacked or stooped.



Baldnob has never been inhabited in all the centuries Freehold has stood. Every attempt to explore it leads to death and misadventure. It is here, in the deepest tunnels, that the dwarfs uncovered the door to the Underworld. In a great cavern lies a mist-shrouded lake with a mirror-grey surface. Both mist and water are corrosive to everything, and mortal visitors find their equipment, then clothes, then skin stripped off them with each passing minute. Yet, they also feel compelled to walk into the lake, as the call of oblivion and forgetting is so powerful. As they reach the middle, they are willingly pulling their own flesh from their bones to shrive themselves for the final, blissful journey into eternal night. At last, the skeletons turn and beg their companions to join them as they sink into the Underworld. With magical aid, it is presumably possible to enter that realm without tearing oneself apart, if you desired to reclaim a lost soul from below.

Unsurprisingly, the lake and all the tunnels above it are surrounded with undead and fey creatures. Killing mists, phantoms, shadows, and screeching manes are almost invisible in the darkness. Bloody bones and boneguards keep guard over the gateway to below.

The bombardment of magic on all five of the mountain networks have filled them all with horrifying monsters. Lashcrawlers, boggarts, and oozes are common, while trolls and ogres make their homes in deepest caverns. Fungal hulks and giant spiders lurk among the mushroom farms.

Keeping the Freehold safe and functioning requires constant recruitment of adventurers and mercenaries. But the risks of exploring are great, as vast reserves of silver, gold and jewels still lie unclaimed below. More than any other place on Rul it can offer quick riches to those ruthless or bold enough to seek them. Most find death in cave-ins, gas leaks or falls, or a slower death working poor claims, but a few find fortune.



Superstition

The people of the Freehold have no time for gods or rites but their lives are fraught with so much random calamity—and gambling—they depend on a lot on superstitions. Here are six common beliefs:

“Women walk first” There’s a belief that women have better eyesight than men, particularly in darkness, so should always walk in front. This extends beyond tunnels, and is why most Axe Teams and spelunking groups are led by women.

“The East Wind lies” From the east comes ships of traders who cannot be relied on. To make an oath or say something important, face west or lies will slip in unnoticed.

“The fifth is cursed” They believe this because of the fifth fortress being cursed, Narfolk believe it applies to everything. If they have five fish, they throw one away. If five warriors are journeying together, they abandon or kill the fifth lest he doom them all.

“Darkest tunnel, brightest silver” This has a metaphorical meaning that the greatest risk offers the greatest reward, but it is also taken literally as a trust of darkness. Freeholders seeking omens prefer night to day, a black bird to a white one, a dark-skinned ally to a lighter.

“The sea remembers” Although the dwarfs lived far above the Freeholders prefer the solidity of sea level. When delving deep into the mountains or high above, they take a shell or a skin of sea water, or fill their boots and pockets with seaweed or sand so they return to the sea.

“Never eat alone” Originally a safety measure so that no-one would be caught off-guard when relaxing, this is now a semi-sacred ritual. Most of the Freehold leaves their mines and fishing boats to return to tables in camps, towns and gatherings for three meals a day, to mark strength in a shared fate.

Of course, if eating together would bring five people together, then one will “eat alone”, a Narfolk way of saying they will die.



Politics

Nar has always been about mining. The only law in Nar, the saying goes, is if you work a claim, you own a claim, and vice versa. If you’re not actively digging material out

of a shaft, then anyone who can work it can take it from you. This was meant to stop people squatting on more claims than they can work; in practice it means claim-owners will work men to death out of fear of poachers. Meanwhile poachers will find subtle ways to kill miners to make a claim appear unworked. As a result, every claim is guarded as well as worked.

When the first settlements of Nar began, the new arrivals divided themselves beneath dwarfen logos — Pick or Axe. Picks dug out the precious ore that funded the Freehold, Axes kept them safe while they did so. The division exists to this day. Anyone can join whichever they prefer—everyone in Nar is free—but family lines and identities are built around the division. Each claim typically has a head Pick (usually a man) and a head Axe (usually a woman), adding a familial feel to small claims. Each of the four strongholds elects a Chief Pick and Chief Axe, to handle any overreaching issues and deals with the other strongholds.

Every full moon the eight Chiefs meet in Fishgut at the Gizzard (see below) to answer any grievances or issues. Generally, there is a lot of drinking and with each pair acting only in their own interest, very little is decided. This is one reason why the rising water issue has not been greatly discussed. Another is that each fortress is sure the other fortresses will suffer the most.

But the biggest reason is fear.

The Freehold was built by desperate people sure their old masters would snatch their freedom away at any moment and that psychology runs to the bone. An existential crisis like rising floodwaters is the embodiment of that fear. Few in Nar are brave enough to face such facts long enough to consider a solution. Better to stare blindly ahead then look back at the demon behind.

Culture

Of course, there are more than just Picks and Axes in Nar. Fishermen feed the population, traders broker deals with those who seek their precious ore, and all the occupations found in any city mill between them. Fishgut is full of inns for visitors and locals alike. The biggest one of them all, reserved for locals only is The Gizzard. It is run by Vat, an ancient trolley clockwork built to move vast quantities of beer up and down the dwarf mines. Now he steams back and forth across the Gizzard at breakneck speeds belching foamy drinks from dozens of orifices. Vat is an excellent host, but he’s rusted in the head—all he really cares about is more customers and more drinking and he does anything to make that happen. He spikes the drinks of anyone talking about gathering their friends to leave. Suddenly those party-poopers become sleepy, nauseous, and deeply thirsty. Vat has no sense of proportion and will kill a man to keep the party going, or otherwise ensure things turn to his favor.

Besides drinking, Fishgut, and by extension the whole Freehold, runs on gambling. With little to set each of the four citadels apart, they created identities through fielding teams to compete in sporting competitions and betting heavily on the outcome. Pit-fights are common but so are climbing and sailing races, cliff diving, and axe throwing. By far the most popular sport is Stakes, a game played by two four-man teams. Each player is fitted with a metal stake chained to a collar around the neck, and the aim is to pin each man down with the stake so he cannot get up without assistance from his teammates. If all of one team is staked, the other team scores a point. Weapons are not allowed but every manner of hand-to-hand violence is, and although regular games go for an hour, finals are played on the beach at high tide, and last until the first person drowns (which docks a point from that team's score).

Since bets on the game can be more than a year's worth of ore sales, the outcomes of games is life and death for the spectators as well. In Nar, everyone is free—free to die in the mines, or the gutter. The choice is yours.

Memory Mist

The mist that pours out of the Underworld spreads all the way across the high peaks, and is not mere water vapor. Much like Killing Mist (*Shadow*, p243) it is a deadly predator, with a silver sheen instead of red. It too hides in regular fog and picks clean its victims but instead of feeding on flesh, it feeds on minds. Victims are left with no memory of their past or identity and wander away not knowing they have anywhere to return. Often such folk end up chained to a pick, making sure a claim keeps turning out ore. It happens enough in the other four fortresses to be nicknamed Cave Madness; few realize its true cause.

Use the statistics-box for **killing mist** with the following adjustments.

MEMORY MIST

DIFFICULTY 250

Size 10 frightening undead

SPECIAL ATTACK

Memory Wipe Each creature within the mist's space must get a success on an Intellect challenge roll with 2 banes or take a -1d6 penalty to Intellect and become fatigued. If already fatigued, the creature becomes slowed and the penalty worsens by 1d6 points. A creature reduced to 0 Intellect by the penalty become dazed and the penalty is permanent. While dazed in this way, the creature has no memories. Otherwise, the penalty is reduced by 1 each time the affected creature completes a rest.

Character Backgrounds

If your character comes from the Freeholds of Nar, you can roll on the following background table in place of the one from your ancestry.

Background Table For Freeholders

d20	Background
1	You are so Nar-necked your face is almost upside down.
2	A loved one disappeared in the tunnels and you have sworn to find them.
3	You inherited a gambling debt from your parents, which will take a lifetime to repay.
4	You've killed many times on the Stakes field, and both relatives and fans of those players are out for revenge.
5	You almost died in a pulley-bucket accident and since have a great fear of heights.
6	You have no idea how you came to Nar, and strangers accost you for not recognizing them.
7	You've eaten so much salted fish in your life you can no longer taste anything, and seek fiery spices that might make an impression.
8	You felt so cursed with bad luck that you cut off your fifth fingers and toes.
9	You like cave mushrooms so much you grow them on your own clothing.
10	You promised your parents you would be an Axe but you love stone and want only to be a Pick.
11	You spent most of your youth drinking and fighting those from the other three citadels, and have your fortress' symbol tattooed prominently on your body.
12	You have spent so much time in the caves you find bright light painful.
13	You and a fellow spelunker found a great vein of ore, and you killed your partner so it was yours alone.
14	You built a boat with your own hands and dream of sailing away from Nar.
15	Your lover is a Chief and people from other citadels have offered you great sums of money to influence your love's political opinions.
16	You damaged your spine as a youngster and now prefer to walk on all fours.
17	You are such a natural climber you believe the sky is your ally and you can never fall.
18	You secretly worship the dwarfen gods or some other faith brought to the Freehold.
19	You are addicted to gambling and can't go a few minutes without speculating on anything random around you.
20	You lost almost your entire memory when you glimpsed the silver lake that leads to the Underworld. Whatever your actual age, you are mentally only ten years old.

