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# Wisdom of the Drylanders

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*Wisdom of the Drylanders* contains a wealth of role-playing material for the Dark Sun campaign setting. Other than this introductory page, this entire work is written from the point of view of Kurnan NPCs, mostly master spies working for King Oronis of Kurn. Kurn's "school of spies" is an organization of Kurnan psionicists that studies non-Kurnan societies, and brings back information to the Oronis for the defense and betterment of Kurn.

Kurnans call outsiders "Drylanders," for reasons that should be obvious to anyone familiar with the Dark Sun world. Obviously, this document should not be considered the total intelligence report of Kurn's spy organization; this is an excerpt from their training manual for new and prospective spies. As a result, these articles focus heavily on the language and culture of different "drylander" groups.

Kurns are a very different people than the rest of Athasians. The seven cities of the Tablelands have banned reading and writing to the common people for generations, while in Kurn, literacy is fostered and encouraged. In Kurn, all citizens and even most slaves have a basic reading vocabulary of at least a thousand word-symbols and can write their own names. Furthermore, since they do not participate in the slave trade with the tablelands, Kurns do not natively speak the Common tongue.

The Kurnan written (or rather "painted") language is an adaptation of the Eldaarish word-symbols. Note that this is a pictographic system like hieroglyphics, where one symbol corresponds to one word. If possible, Kurnans prefer to use at least two colors while painting their words, in order to get across the proper *emphasis*, or to quote. In order to represent words in "Drylander" languages such as the Common speech, the Kurnan spies tend to use **DWARVEN LETTERS** since this is the letter-set that they are most familiar with, and the most prolifically used writing system in the known world.

In Kurn, inexpensive paper is harvested from local domesticated wasps; as a result most Kurnan paper tends to be stiff and card-like. Hence, Kurnans tend not to bind their books or to roll up their writing in scrolls, but rather keep large loose "cards" associated in collections. It is not unusual for cards in a collection to be re-written or replaced.

## Contents

The articles in this document are only a few cards of the *Wisdom of the Drylanders* collection. The training of spies lasts for years; this document represents only a few of the most interesting and useful cards:

*"Welcome to the School of Spies"* from the master of the school of spies; a critical explanation of the purpose of the *Wisdom of the Drylanders* collection.

*Wisdom of Strength* from Spymaster Meret – proverbs & folklore of the Tablelands; discussion of "civic virtues."

*Wisdom of Betters* from Spymaster Meret – discussion of power, social class, and morality in the Tablelands.

*Common Wisdom* from Spymaster Meret – discussion of the Common speech, its popular expressions and insults.

*Dwarven Wisdom* from Spymaster Klianis – discussion of Athasian Dwarves, their language, culture, and eccentricities.

*Elven Wisdom* from Spymaster Kalisvrani – discussion of Athasian elves, their language, culture, and eccentricities.

*Kenku Wisdom* from Spymaster Andapho -- an account of observation of mysterious Athasian Kenku, their culture, isolation, motives, and tactics.

*Wisdom of Terror* from Prodigy, a veteran spy – an illumination of the unfathomed lands of Eldaarich, its people, culture, and politics.

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# Welcome to the School of Spies

My friend,

The cards before you will take you on a journey into the minds of the Drylanders, a journey that for your safety you should take before you depart into the dry lands. These cards sum up the wisdom won by many daring spies, not all of whom returned to paint their own tales. But because of this wisdom won by blood and cunning, you will travel into the dry lands armed with knowledge, and return alive to paint new cards into this deck. Each generation of spies goes into the dry lands more prepared than the last. And none has been as well-armed as you.

This deck is enough to prepare you, but there is a word for you before you go:

*Know yourself.*

But before you peer out into the dust I would have you gaze into the reflection of your own Kurnan eyes. You cannot fully unlock the wisdom contained in these cards until you comprehend the elements that make you Kurnan. Allow me to tell you about yourself, and never again take your upbringing for granted:

You call your king *Oronis*, not *The King* or *King Oronis*. Your fellow Kurnans do not speak of Oronis any more deferentially in front of his templars; he is *Oronis*, that is enough. Only some Kurnan nobles cling to archaic **TITLES** — a Drylander word for expressions that proclaim that someone is more important than the rest of his name allows. You call the templars and your clave-chiefs by their names, granting them respect not according to their positions but according to how much you actually respect them.

You live without fear. Your neighbor weaves a basket, sells it, and enjoys the fruits of his labors. Your sister bears a child, and never fears that she or the baby will die of thirst. When your parents told you to watch your little brothers play, it was not out of fear that your neighbors would snatch and sell them to prowling slave traders.

Such fears do not occur to you, but you carry a weapon with you everywhere, as does every citizen of Kurn. As a citizen, you are required to own and master the longbow, and keep one within a breath's reach at all times. As children, you knew that your parents and friends parents might give their lives to protect Kurn, whether against the Bandit-states, the Kreen, the Eldaarish, or against the Grey Horde, and yet you have seen more of your quick-tempered friends die stupidly, accidentally, in petty inter-clave competitions and brawls, than in skirmishes with Kurn's enemies. The few bandits that have attacked Kurnan villagers say that the villagers *fight like the dragon*, you would say rather that they *fight like the wasp*. Only a fool attacks the wasps' nest: unlike bees, each wasp stings again and again, and Kurnans see to it, like the wasp, that their nests offer no honey or wealth of any sort to the successful invader. In spite of Oronis' efforts to erase an unpleasant memory, you know that your people once called themselves *Kel Tas* meaning *wasp nest*, before Oronis restored Kurn to its ancient elven name. You humor your king, but your parents have taught you what you are.

You have learned that to be *wealthy* is to live between walls of stone, and to be *wretched* is to live within a paper tent, but the most wretched folk that you see have not known hunger, nor have they considered selling their son to a Tyrian **FLESHMONGER**. The wealthiest nobles that you know of never indulge in extravagant waste, like the Nibenese merchant who pours out his mug of **BROY** upon the sand in front of a wide-eyed thirsty beggar child.

You think that *slavery* means being denied the rights of citizenship because of some act or incapacity to carry out one's duties of citizenship, being forced to work in exchange for food and shelter, and being told when to rise and when to sleep. Yet slavery among you is more bound than binding. Kurnan nobles complain more about Kurnan slavery laws than their slaves do. Your nobles are forbidden to buy or sell slaves, except with the templars, who will cease to sell slaves to cruel or neglectful masters. It is not lawful for the slave-owner to lie with the slave. Each slave has a week of every month to study with the templars, and any honest slave who learns to read and use the longbow may purchase freedom and win citizenship. The children of Kurnan slaves do not become property of the master. Drylander elves and merchant houses have painfully learned that enslaving a single Kurnan citizen means declaring war on Oronis.

You will smile at a stranger's child, and the children of your friends and kin are like treasure. There is no translation in your language for the Raamin word **BRAT**. You glower at the Drylander that so much as looks at a Kurnan child. You will do little of significance without thinking *how will this affect my children*, even if you are childless at the time. While you despise the past and shy from your elders as if they were ghosts, your mind is ever on the future.

Your people tend to marry young. The marriages in your community are **MONOGAMOUS**, a Drylander word which means that no more than woman marries no more than one man. You wonder that there would be need for such a word! Yet you make allowances for the wives of infertile husbands. For this reason the men in your community speak curtly to Drylander humans. The rumor among you is that it is easier for a woman to conceive a healthy child with a Drylander than with a Kurnan, You only apply the word *dally* to the actions of an *indiscreet* wife. If a man of Kurn were to *dally* with a Drylander woman, he would become a *traitor* in your eyes – not only to his wife but to his clave and to the larger community of Kurn, and you would be understanding of the jealous wife that slew such a

husband. Your word *dally* does not even apply to the woman who discreetly trusts a single time with a Drylander. Though this act is common, you have no word for this act, for you have been taught not to notice it.

Your selective blindness passes for naïveté, but your people are more indifferent than naïve. In your waxed-linen clave tents shared by forty fellow clavers, it is politeness, not naïveté, to pretend you know nothing of the impotence of the clave-chief's new husband, the gambling losses of your uncle, the sixth consecutive miscarriage of a claver that you dislike.

The fact that you have petitioned to serve as Oronis' spy shows you to be more curious and meddling than the average Kurnan. You have always noted and pieced together unspoken details, and communicated knowledge to other curious ones through hints and innuendoes. Your slower, less curious friends were left behind, because you were loathe to repeat yourself, or to explain anything straightforwardly.

As sharp as you are, you have begun to observe danger in what you perceive as the dullness of your fellow Kurnans. You have wished that Oronis would take a greater share in the government of the city, would set all things aright. It is perhaps for this reason that you have petitioned to serve him, to call his attention to the problems that he has somehow neglected.

You may think, for example, that the Drylanders are taking advantage of your people. Indeed, accustomed to plenty, Kurnans make poor bargains, and lose their purses to the elves at dice. Only the high walls and remoteness of Kurn, and the machinations of shrewd templars keep the naïveté of Kurn from passing into a Drylander by-word. Perhaps it bothers you that your fellow Kurnans would rather sell the fruits of their labors for a song, rather than let a single berry rot on their shelves. Rather than admiring your people's thrift and respect for the gifts of the land, you are angered that foreigners should take advantage of them.

You may also have ideas of increasing the wealth of Kurn; you have heard, for example, a rumor of gold discovered in the stream near Fort Protector. You have heard that the mountain fungus that long ago produced the rich blue dye that coveted by Drylanders, is not in fact extinct, but thrives in some hidden valley in the White Mountains. Whether true or false, such rumors must be extinguished. Kurn's poverty in metal and other loot protects it more than its high walls, its arrows, its magic. Poverty is our greatest defense.

Our greatest weapon is knowledge. As the templars taught you reading and archery as a child, in this school you will be armed with knowledge of the Drylanders. You will not only learn the tongues of the Drylanders; you will learn to speak to them, to deal with them, to steer them like stupid beasts, to pass as one of them. Armed with knowledge, you will go forth with the blessing of Oronis, to enrich your land and people with the *Wisdom of the Drylanders*.

Welcome to the school of spies.

**-Oronis**

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## Wisdom of Strength

As children of Kurn, we often heard stories and fables that were composed for our amusement and edification. As adults, we can look back on these stories and see how they were constructed to teach us what we call *civic virtues*: restraint, patience, generosity, discipline, wisdom. These are the virtues that make us Kurnan.

Stories told to the children of the dry lands reflect a very different set of *virtues*. As you must pass for a Drylander, I want you to listen to these stories with the mind of a child:

### THE BEGINNING

*On the eve of the age of kings, the Dragon destroyed the land, sea, and the sky. The sky was filled with stars, until the dragon swallowed most of them, leaving only the brightest. The sun was a brilliant yellow fire in the sky, until the Dragon burnt it to a red ember. The sea was full of water, until the Dragon sucked it dry and breathed dust into the place of the waters. The land was full of cities, trees, wells and grass, until the Dragon began to gnaw, and it gnawed until almost none were left.*

*Gorged, Dragon lifted its head, and saw that a few cities, fields, and wells remained in distant pockets on the land. But as it reached out its claws to devour the last city, a great slumber came over the beast. Thanks to the power of the seven Kings, it has slept for many ages, and will sleep for ages more, if you do not wake it with your crying about your hungry belly.*

*Here in the last cities, the weak bow before the strong. If you do not like the way of things in the city, then leave. Walk away from these city walls, and see if the eaten lands are more to your liking.*

## **THE ELVEN BROTHERS**

*Two elven brothers returned from a hunt to find that their tribe had packed up and left them stranded in the desert. The water hole had only six days of water left, so the elder, stronger brother gathered the water into skins, and gave three days worth to his younger, weaker brother. With the water, they sprinted after the tracks of their tribe.*

*They traveled for four days, never catching up to their tribe. Each day, the younger, weaker brother drank his fill of water, while the older, stronger brother only drank half rations, looking with disapproval at his brother's gluttony. On the morning of the fourth day, as the younger brother drained the final drops from his water skins, the older brother finally spoke:*

*"It may be days more until we catch up to our tribe, brother. I have saved my water, though it cost me discipline and sacrifice. You have drunk your water and have no more. Now your gluttony will be your downfall."*

*"Not so, brother," replied the younger, drawing his dagger. "My water packs have been lighter the past three days, and my body is refreshed from its fill of water. You are tired from carrying your load, and weak from deprivation. Now I am the stronger."*

## **PROVERBS OF THE DRY LANDS**

*"The beast snarls. The snake hisses. The stranger smiles. Take warning!"*

*"Birth is painful. Life is short. Death endures."*

*"You cannot quench the hunger of a fire, the thirst of a desert, or the greed of a templar."*

*"The cut worm forgives the plow."*

*"The locusts share no king, yet the desert trembles before their bands."*

*"The spider takes hold with her hands, and spins her webs in kings' palaces."*

*"As one who binds a stone into a sling, so is the one who gives honor to a weakling."*

*"Better to be clever than to be thought clever."*

*"Spit boldly in the slave's face, but spit quietly into the templar's footprints."*

*"Judge not a quarrel between your betters."*

*"The elements reclaim us all, but better you than me."*

*"An open wound invites hungry flies."*

## **Lessons from Strength**

So what have you learned, my *child*? Can you set aside Kurnan notions of *fairness*, to enter a world where *strength* is the only virtue, where might makes right, where laws are painted with the sword rather than the brush? And having done so, will you remember Kurnan notions of right and wrong when you come home to us?

Settle this in your mind, sister, that you will do what is necessary to survive in the dry lands. But remember who you are. Go forth and learn, but return and live.

**-Spymaster Mereth**

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## **Wisdom of Betters**

### **A Word on the COMMON Speech**

When you report to me, I will refine your skills in the most widely spoken language in the seven cities: the **COMMON** speech. Before you leave my instruction, you must learn fluency in **COMMON** and some appreciation of its subtleties. Because of the importance of this language to virtually all missions and all spies, I will provide you with two cards on this subject.

This first card will prepare you for my course, where you will read your first original text in the **COMMON** speech: the **B'SLAV'SEK** codex, which is titled *Slave Tribes*. My second card, **COMMON Wisdom**, advances our discussion of the **COMMON** speech and what I call the **COMMON culture** of the six cities. My second card will assume that you have read this first card, and that you have thoroughly studied **B'SLAV'SEK**. One of your sister spies recently obtained the **B'SLAV'SEK** codex in **NIBENAY** and transported it to our school at great risk.

We cannot verify the identity of **B'SLAV'SEK**'s narrator, since we purchased the codex from a dubious elven Drylander named **B'SLAV'SEK**, but the descriptions of slavery in the seven cities are true to our experiences. To help you understand **B'SLAV'SEK**, I will outline the Drylander structure of **BETTERS**:

## The Drylander Structure of **BETTERS**

### Templars

In terms of food, shelter, possessions, legal rights, and personal power, templars live at least as well as the freeborn artisans, and the most powerful Templars far exceed the richest of nobles. And yet the highest dry lands templar is the object of contempt from everyone that they know. Their sovereign uses them as dispensable slaves; the nobles sneer at them, slaves spit in their footsteps when their backs are turned; and their fellow templars despise them most of all. Templars are the butt of the harshest jokes of the dry lands, and other Drylanders submit to them only when templars invoke the terrors of their office. Few slaves or freemen are so unwise as to insult templars to their faces, but sullen obedience, averted eyes, and other not-so-subtle messages convey their derision in clear tones. Templars respond to this general contempt with arrogance, aggression, gaudiness, and pretentious dignity, but everyone knows that templar privileges are unearned and fleeting. Privileges such as literacy set templars apart as despised.

A contact of a junior spy stationed near **URIK** describes the templars as *broken men*. Drylanders focus the inseparable powers of reading and management into one hated, contemptible office, and blame the templars for the inevitable abuses of power. Without templars, the dry lands cities fall into anarchy. **TYR** succeeded in ridding itself of slavery at great cost, but failed to rid itself of the Templarate.

### Unskilled slaves

The lowest of the low, unskilled slaves perform backbreaking, dirty tasks, every day of their miserable lives. But do not be misled: many who are called slaves in the Seven Cities are not considered the lowest of the low. The child of a Drylander slave is automatically the property of the Drylander master, but in other respects, some Drylands slaves are treated much as Kurnan slaves: as weak-minded or irresponsible involuntary workers; not as disposable possessions.

In the **BALICAN** and **RAAMIN** fields and mines, of course, it is clear who is free and who is slave. But in **RAAM** and **BALIC** itself, slaves are generally called **SERVANTS**, and are considered the **BETTERS** of a free unskilled laborer. Before the death of Ablach-Re and the chaos that followed, this was particularly true in **RAAM**, where the caste system superseded the issue of slave or free. **RAAMIN** Viziers, artisans, laborers, or untouchables may all be slave or free, since no self-respecting Vizier could keep a personal house servant who was of a **LOWER** caste. (This has changed lately with the **RAAMIN** civil war; many **RAAMIN SERVANTS** have been seized by **M'KE** and other factions who treat them as disposable instruments.)

The notion of **BETTER** slaves applies to **GULG** native slaves, some house slaves of the Drylander nobility, and to **NIBENESE** artisan-slaves and soldier-slaves. In my next card, **COMMON Wisdom**, I will focus on the culture of the **COMMON slaves** who are bought, sold, and treated like cattle. The concubines and personal slaves of templars may receive more food, but the mistreatment they receive from other slaves compensates for this. **LACKEYS** that are known to collaborate or inform the templars, receive even crueller treatment. Slaves are most harsh with those slaves who take on qualities that remind them of templars, such as reading, authority, magical ability — slaves hate the very idea of their own rising above them.

### Unskilled free day-laborers (Freemen)

Free day-laborers either are ex-slaves, or refugees from the drying and destroyed towns that dot the dry lands. They starve or steal during slow seasons, and stand daily in places designated for employment -- any sort of employment. Nobles often require short-term labor for planting, harvest, or other back-breaking tasks, and pay a ceramic bit per day, plus food and water, for sunrise-to-sunset work. One bit is enough to feed a child for a day, if it is not stolen, drunk or gambled away. Day laborers are usually freemen, not freeborn, and this is an important distinction for most Drylanders. Female ex-slaves who bear freeborn children often pay to have them apprenticed to freeborn artisan families.

### Artisan Slaves

In **BALIC**, prestige lines between freeborn and slave are blurred in service to the **PATRICIANS**, but in **TYR**, **URIK**, and **NIBENAY**, there is a clear line between slave and free artisans. Artisan slaves include those who perform tasks that

require training, and that carry some degree of prestige. Artisan slaves cling to these skills that make them better than the unskilled slaves and freemen, whom they frequently call **COMMONERS**.

Skill prestige arbitrarily varies from city to city. For example, gladiators, soldiers, and **COURTESANS** are all considered skilled artisans in **URIK**, but not in **DRAJ**, where these are considered **COMMON** skills. In my next card, I will discuss this complex and fascinating word in detail.

### Freeborn Artisans

Freeborn artisans jealously preserve their skill, referring to these skills as a craft or **MYSTERY**. Unable to own land (only nobles own land in the six cities), Freeborn artisans know that preserving the secret of their craft is all that separates them from slavery and destitution. They despise artisan slaves, and prefer to take apprentices from the freeborn. Freeborn artisans are generally the least superstitious, least hysterical, most moral, and most judgmental of the Drylanders. They work for a living, as their own masters. Only the most lazy and corrupt among them leave to become templars. As Kurnans you will find Freeborn artisans the easiest to understand, since their family craft operations superficially resemble our own Clave industries. Artisans are the source of Drylander morality. Slaves are bred for profit, **COMMONERS** and templars rut to bring a moment of pleasure to a hateful existence, nobles and Traders marry for alliance; but generally only the freeborn artisans marry for love, and remain faithfully married. The most skilled Freeborn title themselves **MASTER** artisans, a **TITLE** that continues to grow in prestige. Psionics schools tend to fall into the artisan caste, although these organizations are not based on family; **MASTER** psions clearly borrow the term from the artisans.

Sadly, in their dedication to their particular **MYSTERY**, Drylander artisans and mindbenders shun skills that would give them power: as reading, writing, and magic. Artisans do not object to mindbenders in their midst, but are incensed by the very idea of a **MASTER** wizard. Our spies in **TYR** report that when **TYRIAN** counsel voted to proclaim preserver magic a legal craft, artisans rioted and stoned reputed wizards behind the council building.

### Servants and Stewards

Although they are usually slaves by law, Stewards are often considered part of the noble family, and even more often, are literally family. Since nobles only marry other nobles, nobility itself would have fallen to inbreeding ages ago if noblewomen did not frequently bear children from their discreet matches with the **HELP**. Stewards and house servants are quick to see opportunities in relationships with their owners, in spite of the frequently mortal risk of offending noble spouses.

**RAAMINS** and **BALICANS**, whose noble families control whole districts of the city, often downplay the distinction between Slave and Free. Most citizens, from the nobles to the slaves, are bound to a noble house with a strong head of the family. This head (called the **VIZIER** in **RAAM**, or the **PATRICIAN** in **BALIC**) is obeyed without question — it is considered more acceptable to kill the family head over a disagreement than to express that disagreement publicly!

Honored slaves such as stewards, or soldier-slaves that rise to officer ranks, have been known to accumulate property and to **PUT ON AIRS**. Some **NIBENESE** noble houses have left all real power and practical decisions in the hands of house stewards, and more than one **NIBENESE** noble has fallen ill to bad food after disagreements with the **HELP**.

### Traders

These inter-city travelers are prohibited citizenship in all seven cities, but frequently lease city buildings from nobles, and hold land within a day's travel of the city. *Hold*, not *own*, since force is the only basis of legal ownership in the lawless wild. Traders are foreigners to every city and town. The eldest trade houses have whole languages and societies of their own. Dependent on the goodwill of the cities, Traders are generally polite to all, and work to preserve a reputation for good business, without acquiring a fatal reputation for softness.

As powerful outlanders, Traders do not fit precisely into the system of **BETTERS**; thus they tend to title themselves according to their fancy. Most heads of Trade houses title themselves after the tradition of artisans: **MASTER WAVIR** or **MASTER REES**. A few powerful ones, such as **LORD SHOM**, pretend to the titles of nobles. Their **ASSUMPTION** of noble **TITLING** is generally considered **PRETENTIOUS**, but no one suggests this to **LORD SHOM**'s face. By nature of their business, Traders must work closely with artisans, templars, and nobles, so they often learn the language of each in order to gain social advantage. Nobles and traders frequently exchange loans, and have been known to occasionally intermarry for the sake of alliance — nobles consider such alliances **BENEATH** them, but not so much that a saving Trade house alliance would not be worth **UNDERMARRYING** a third or fourth child. Trade houses pay dearly for such prestigious alliances, typically covenanting not to purchase goods from rival noble houses.

### Nobles

Like Kurnan nobles, Drylander nobles live from the labors of others on their own lands. In most of the seven cities, these nobles are the *only* property-owners; there are no small farms, and no other large industries to compete with them. Nobles run the industries that range from farming, to the mining of **BALICAN** silver and lead, to the quarries

and brickyards in **URIK**. Generally, if a large industry is within a day's travel from the city, nobles or templars probably own it; if farther away, then it is owned by a king, a trade house, or a tribe.

Nobles flatter themselves with traditions of names, **TITLES**, and descent. Noble **TITLING** systems vary from city to city, so few freemen or slaves grasp which precise titles and names a given addresser should call a given noble in a given situation. Again, **COMMON** speech comes to your rescue. Since nobles rarely speak directly to slaves or freemen, and since their Stewards will find ways of making you feel foolish even if you got the names and titles right, simply referring to a noble as **LORD** should suffice. In the unlikely event that a noble talks to you directly, and wants you to reply to her, **GREAT ONE** should do the trick.

Like our own stolid nobles, Drylander nobles almost never look beyond their own interests and land. They are prohibited from traveling (the kings probably fear they would make inter-city allegiances that would compromise the power of the templars and crown). For example, some trade houses such as Vordon and Shom seem to have originated as noble houses whose lands were seized as they made foreign allegiances.

Those noble houses that have survived ages of templar intrigue and jealousy, can be said to both profit and suffer from a narrow, inbred cunning. Within their own city-states, they outwit the very templars, and yet all of their wisdom dries out at the edges of their city's verdant belt. Eight years ago, as **URIKITE** forces marched on their city, **TYRIAN** nobles squabbled and bickered over their obligations to support the war, as if oblivious to the threat of **HAMANU'S** armies to their own lands and persons! The sheer narrowness of the noble mind is best summed up by the words of a young **NIBENESE** noble who had broken an edict of his king, slaying a **PEER** over some hotheaded love story. His servant (one of our spies) attempted to persuade him to flee to **RAAM**. Facing penalty of death if he remained in his city, this noble retorted: **THERE IS NO WORLD OUTSIDE THE NIBENESE LANDS**.

You probably smile at that late young noble's naiveté. Save such smiles until you return safely. You are going into a land of madness, where absurdity and irony are as **COMMON** as dust and sunshine. I bless you that you may master their madness, and return to us as the sane sister that we knew.

### **-Spymaster Mereth**

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## **COMMON Wisdom**

### **Foreward**

Since my discussion builds upon the matter and manner of the **B'SLAV'SEK** codex, I strongly recommend that you peruse this document before reading further. Certainly my discussion will confuse you if you have not achieved a rudimentary grasp of **COMMON**. No language, indeed, no skill, even your knowledge of the Way, is as critical to your mission as a **MASTERY** of the **COMMON** speech.

### **Reading and Writing in the Drylands.**

Your sisters teach you to read **COMMON** because reading helps you to acquire fluency, but in the field, you must obviously hide your reading skill! Study the **B'SLAV'SEK** and **WANDERER** codices. These texts represent a rare opportunity to study native use of **COMMON**, before you go out into the field, where you must pass for a native.

Once in the field, you will have few opportunities to read **COMMON**. As you know, in the dry lands, only templars and nobles can read without risking the legal penalty of death. The few Drylanders that do read and create texts do not actually use paint and brushes, but use sharpened sticks and feathers to scribble their funny letters in dyes called **INK**. Drylanders call this process **WRITING**. We will not train you to paint in **COMMON** — this skill would not benefit you. The **COMMON** language is rarely painted at all — or **WRITTEN**, as they would say, since templars and nobles usually write in their own ancient city or house scripts.

Like the dwarven script that I use to paint the **COMMON** words on this card, most Drylander scripts languages use sound-characters called **LETTERS**. **TYRIAN** and **BALICAN**, and most of **RAAMIN** family scripts also employ dwarven letters. (**TYRIAN** and **BALICAN** nobles of course claim this script-system as their own, calling it the **ALPHABET**). Drylander elves have lost knowledge of the ancient elven characters that remain engraved in the old monuments surrounding Kurn; when they write they tend to use dwarven letters. **NIBENAY** and **URIK** have unique systems of **LETTERS**, and the two oldest **RAAMIN** noble houses adapt the **NIBENESE** script for their own house dialects. **DRAJ** uses a word-glyph system, but none of their symbols resemble the Kurnan and Eldaarish glyphs.

The **URIKITE** letters are fastest for the scribe — if the scribe does not mind having to write exclusively in soft clay with a wedged stick. The **NIBENESE LETTERS** and **DRAJAN** word-glyphs, like our own, are a labor of art — elaborate, time-consuming, and impractical for adapting for new languages. The dwarven letters seem the logical choice to write **COMMON**, in the rare cases when this is desired. Such is the case with the **B'SLAV'SEK** and **WANDERER** codices, which seem to be intended for the largest possible range of readers. Note that this is an unusual purpose, since most Drylander documents are usually intended for the *smallest* possible range of readers!

Naturally, Drylanders have developed a few script-like systems that seem designed to avoid the legal dangers of writing. Traders employ symbols somewhat like our own figures, allowing templars to formally pretend that Traders' accounting texts are not writing. **NIBENAY** has a popularly known dance-script that could be used for other purposes; templars allow the dance-figures when engraved in stone, but treat them as **WRITING** if they are placed onto paper. Desperate to conceal their craft, Drylander wizards employ a hodge-podge of concealable spell-scripting systems that include elaborate patterns of beads and weaving.

## The **COMMON** Speech

After reading the **B'SLAV'SEK** codex, your mind is doubtlessly caught up in the image of a society that treats its slaves more cruelly than we would treat our cattle. This image is generally accurate; indeed the narrator chooses rather mild examples, given the reality of Drylander slavery. But look beyond the codex matter, to the codex language itself. Does it not seem odd that six distant and isolated cities would share a convenient language? In our own tongue, this Drylander word **COMMON** translates into three unrelated terms: *shared*, *frequently encountered*, and *worthy of contempt*. Usually, when a Drylander uses the word **COMMON**, she means all three of these meanings at once. What does this mean? First, **COMMON** is *shared* by six cities and most of the villages and nomads in that live between; so second, the language is *frequently encountered*; Third, **COMMON** is despised *because* it is shared and frequent. Most non-slaves will speak another, native language among their kin, and reserve **COMMON** speech for strangers. Many Drylander nobles do not speak **COMMON** at all, or at least pretend not to.

You will soon be exposed to a second original text in the **COMMON** speech: the **WANDERER** codex. **WANDERER'S** authenticity is confirmed since I debriefed its author myself when he visited Kurn, but the accuracy of **WANDERER'S** speculations are often in question.

## Origins of the **COMMON** Speech

My predecessor theorized that **COMMON** was developed by merchant houses, but the idea is absurd. The oldest merchant houses have their own languages; and the theory is belied by the richness and flexibility of **COMMON** speech. Most importantly, the dune traders make it a matter of pride to master the languages of the people that they encounter -- it would be utterly against the character and interests of the merchant houses to create and share a language that would make it easier for city-states to communicate with each other! Merchant houses make their living by serving as the bridge between isolated cultures. Breaking that isolation is the very last thing that a merchant house would want to do.

**WANDERER** argues that the **COMMON** speech is inherent in all sentient beings because it descends from the language of halflings. **WANDERER'S** theory does not mesh with the fact that the **COMMON** speech is only **COMMON** to the vicinity of the Seven cities. Furthermore, the theory ignores **WANDERER'S** own claim that all humanoid descend from Halflings! If all peoples and cultures descend from the "Rhulisti" Halflings, then *all* humanoid languages are then descended from the original Rhulisti language, so the **WANDERER'S** explanation does not really tell us anything distinctive about the **COMMON** speech.

It is less important how the **COMMON** speech *originated*, than how it spread and came to be shared by so many very different human and humanoid societies. Clearly the operating factor here is the inter-city slave trade -- huge groups of slaves traded from one city to the next. These slaves have to communicate with local templars and overseers, and also with other slaves who come from various city-states. This situation *requires* a shared language -- if the **COMMON** speech had not existed previously, then a language would have developed to fill this need!

The **COMMON** speech is rarely spoken in **GULG**, for a simple reason: by decree of the **OBA**. The **B'SLAV'SEK** codex describes the exceptional mistreatment of non-**GULG** slaves in **GULG**. Slaves sold to **GULG** from other cities are given a new, **GULG** name, and are severely punished for speaking any other language. This **GULG**-only policy has made **GULG** the most isolated of the seven cities, and the city where outsiders feel the least comfortable. Master spies often refer to the *Six Cities*, meaning the seven minus **GULG**, which is exceptional in many ways.

In contrast to **GULG**, **RAAM** is the city most open to the **COMMON** tongue; only a few **RAAMIN** nobles speak other tongues, and these tongues are not called **RAAMIN**, but specific to a noble family. In other cities, nobles and artisans (both slave and free) speak the language associated with the city: **TYRIAN**, **BALICAN**, **URIKITE**, **DRAJI**, **GULG**, or **NIBENESE**. Most Drylander nobles and artisans speak **COMMON** as well, depending on whether or not it is convenient to speak to a given stranger. Your mastery over multiple languages will influence where we can place you.

## Breeding Anarchy

To avoid the bitter danger of slave revolts, nobles and templars tend to sell off the most rebellious slaves before trouble starts. Slave traders always make sure to separate families and friends as soon as possible, in order to isolate and conquer every spark of sentience. There are slaves living who have worked in six cities at one time or another. I do not say all seven, since the **OBA** (who technically owns all slaves in **GULG**), tends to kill troublemaking outsiders, and sells only native trouble makers to other cities (a fate the native slaves regard worse than death). In the short term, these practices quell rebellion. The isolated slaves are stripped of influence over others, and denied the security that one needs to assert one's rights. Yet I will show you that over time, the unplanned effects of this slave trade have set the stage for bloody revolts and anarchy.

Templars are bound to their king; nobles to their lands and families; artisans to their cities and craft; traders to their clans; all are bound by local laws, long-standing traditions, tight-knit cultures, and most importantly by family bonds. But slaves in the Six Cities share a versatile language and a compelling culture that transcends cities, government, and family. Slaves are discouraged from forming natural familial bonds. Since the master of a woman that gives birth owns the child, and since the master of the father gets nothing, nobles often punish male slaves for spending strength, but encourage promiscuity among females, particularly rewarding those who attract strong slaves of other nobles. While childbirth is generally encouraged and accommodated by most masters, maternal behaviors are discouraged, and paternal behaviors are strictly prohibited. Newly delivered mothers return without nursing, and elderly slaves take on feeding and caring for the young, until the babies are old enough to sell to another noble house. One sign that **COMMON** speech is a tongue of slaves is that their only words for fatherhood and motherhood are *tasks*: **SIRE** and **MOTHER**. Slaves often speak of their mothers *as the one who MOTHERED me*.

Of fathers, slaves speak little save in jest. Nobles sell the paternity of their gladiator-slaves as a commodity to other slave owners. For some reason, what the Drylanders call **STUD DUTY** carries twisted sort of prestige, since the **STUDS** are selected for their strength, endurance, and attractiveness. Only mul and dwarven slaves resent the **STUD** title. Long-living dwarves maintain some of their own culture throughout the slavery, and the word **STUD** is too close to the dwarven insult **MULFATHER**. Furthermore, the women they must mate with are usually drugged and involuntary, especially the humans women who will usually die in childbirth bearing the mul offspring. Of course, anyone calling a mul a **STUD** has either a cruel sarcastic wit, or an astonishing ignorance of the facts of life. Muls do not typically enjoy being reminded of their sterility.

Even when freed, former slaves tend to hold on to concepts and traditions of their slave upbringing, and even influence their freeborn children: Freeman and freeborn marriages and relationships tend to be temporary, and free fathers often abandon and neglect their children. To make matters worse, slaves have little means to learn of concepts such as *principle* or *law*.

Drylander artisans, templars, and nobles alike must deal day-to-day with more-or-less consistent rules of behavior. Obedience to these laws and rules usually means continued freedom. Slaves on the other hand face an ever-fickle set of overseers, whose mandates frequently contradict each other. One scenario you will often see: an angry overseer shouts a question into a slave's face. Slaves who try to answer (however submissively) are punished for **TALKING BACK**. Slaves who hold their silence are punished for **PLAYING DUMB**.

With their lives filled with these daily double binds, the cleverest slaves learn to choose their actions in terms of which action will get them beaten least severely. And most slaves rarely take the luxury of choice at all, but react to the most powerful drive in their being. Overseers are employed to ensure that this most powerful drive remains: **FEAR OF THE LASH**. When the **LASH** fails to inspire the most striking impulse, **THINGS FALL APART**.

Without bonds of family, city, or society, slaves honor only strength, power and brutality, but they also feel a powerful *need* for family, but they fail to comprehend what it is that they lack, other than *freedom*. Their compelling, shared, **COMMON** culture can easily be woven into the *illusion* of brotherhood. Few leaders emerge from the ranks of slaves, but the voice of a charismatic leader can whip slave and freeman alike into a fearless rage. Once roused, slaves make a powerful destructive force, but they possess none of the skills to rebuild. Once their **COMMON** enemy is vanquished, their unity and brotherhood falls apart like glass, and they begin to oppress each other as harshly as they were ever oppressed. As you read **B'SLAV'S** descriptions of the Drylander *slave tribes*, observe the simple repeated pattern: *Oppression. Hope. Struggle. Freedom. Brotherhood. Anarchy. Return to Oppression.*

Recently, the slave revolt chaos has spread even to the cities, beginning with **TYR**. **KALAK'S** folly was to seize all of the slaves of the nobles, and pool them in a single, long-term project. As templars were executed for falling behind in their deadlines, their successors resorted to more and more desperate means to increase their labor pool. Slave traders slid into **TYR** like a storm; freeborn artisans and foreigners were enslaved without cause; the wells of the city ran dry quenching the thirst of slaves — and still the labor pool was too small for **KALAK'S** ziggurat. Mercenaries and soldiers were employed to capture free villages and slave tribes from the neighboring desert. Treasury funds evaporated. Templars, mercenaries, and soldiers were strained to the limits just containing slave revolts! Distribution of food and water became unwieldy. Settling disputes among the slaves was out of the question; the overseers were

few and terrified. As Drylanders often do, templars cloaked their own terror in cruelty. To fill the void, gangs and leaders formed among the slaves, for distributing resources and space, and for resolving quarrels. When **KALAK** was slain, and the templars suddenly lost their spells, there was simply no possibility of sending the slaves back to their masters! Revolted slave bands had already seized whole portions of the city, and the decimated and quarreling templars, nobles, and guards were in no position to face a united mass that outnumbered them twenty to one. If **TYTHIAN** had not freed the slaves in that moment, that day, the golden walls of **TYR** might have dissolved in blood.

While power seems to have shifted permanently into the hands of **TYRIAN** ex-slaves, they have failed to use it to raise themselves from poverty or desperation. The few **TYRIAN** successes can be attributed to the unique situation in **TYR** where freeborn artisans were enslaved in mass, bringing a degree of consciousness and discipline to the raging slave-born mob.

Unbound to city, law, or language, slaves identify more closely with a slave from another city, than a noble would identify with a fellow noble from the same city. Slaves tend to expect the same treatment that another slave receives. If one slave eats, other slaves salivate. If one slave gets flogged, others wince or falter at every stroke of the lash. If one slave escapes to the desert, others, still in chains, either dream of freedom, or sit up contemplating the miseries of dying in the wastes. Every slave in the six cities knows another slave who at one time was in **TYR**; and it follows, to the mind of a slave, that what happens in **TYR**, could happen in **BALIC**. Many interpreted the unexplained failing of the Messenger comet as a long-awaited sign to the sky-watching, superstitious Drylanders. Since the recent deaths of local monarchs, the entire region is on the verge of erupting in bloody slave revolts.

### COMMON **Insults and Praises**

Some of the first targets of angry slaves seem to be the most harmless of wizards. The slaves blame magic for their misery, and do not fear the quiet independent preservers as they fear the agents of the nobles and the kings. The popular sayings among the slaves are filled with contempt towards the arts of magic and even of reading, and these sayings have spread to the Freemen and even to the Freeborn:

**WEAK-EYED** is a reference to reading, since mages and others who read secretly use candles at night, ruining their eyes. **STAINED FINGERS** is a reference to writing. Remember that Drylanders do not paint, but **WRITE**, that is, they *scribble* with a sharpened stick or feather-tip (a **PEN**), in dyes which Drylanders call **INK**. Drylander templars often use **STAINED FINGERS** to accuse someone of writing or wizardry — both punishable by death. **WEAK-EYED** and **FINGERSTAIN** are not only insults, but epithets that if taken seriously, could result in your being executed by the templars, or lynched by a rabble. If you are called a weak-eyed **FIREFLY**, or **FINGERSTAIN**, be willing to fight for your good name, or die for your bad name.

Better humored, but still a provocation to fight, are these gladiator's taunts, which use literacy as signs of laughable, pitiful weakness:

When comparing scars: **THAT'S NOT A WOUND; THAT'S A PAPER CUT!**

To an opponent that scratches you in combat: **ARE YOU TRYING TO WRITE A LOVE-NOTE ON MY CLOAK ?**

To intimidate an opponent with a bigger spear than yours: **THAT BIG PEN OF YOURS JUST SIGNED YOUR DEATH WARRANT.**

Distance yourself from anyone who uses reading-insults against templars! Always ready to brutally protect their battered dignity, templars are especially sensitive to reading insults, since their reading sets them apart as despised.

Slaves are even harsher with other slaves who take on qualities that remind them of templars. As the **B'SLAV'SEK** codex shows, ex-slaves cannot abide the peace-time leaders, counselors, or would-be teachers or lawmakers. Slaves and ex-slaves despise words, which remind them of templars; they prefer actions; they hate the one that instructs them more than the one who flogs them. Hence the slave proverb, famous in the slave tribes: **ONE LAW IS OPPRESSION. TWO LAWS MAKE TYRANNY. THREE LAWS MAKE SLAVERY.** (The elves add a fourth phrase to the proverb: **FOUR LAWS MAKE MARRIAGE.**)

The **COMMON** speech is filled with expressions of contempt for learning and wisdom. **I AM GOING TO TEACH YOU A LESSON** does not offer actual instruction; but rather threatens physical assault! We are unable to come to an agreement of what **DON'T GET SMART WITH ME** means, but if someone says it to you, then be very careful what you say to them from then on — any word you say risks offending your new enemy's sense of pride.

If reading is associated with weakness and distrust, magic is distrusted with a fanatical terror. One who loses in a contest, may save face by accusing her rival of using magic to best her: **YOU GLOW!, YOUR EYES STILL SHINE, WAS THAT THUNDER? . . .** among friends these expressions of the loser may be considered a strong jest, but among strangers, these expressions may give deadly insult. Take care not to translate Kurnan compliments into **COMMON** terms! Some of our expressions translate into backhanded insults, such as **YOU HAVE A CHARMING SMILE** or **ISN'T THIS AN ENCHANTING SONG?**

While harmless suggestions of magic turn virulent in the **COMMON** slang, some of the most severe insults that we might imagine, are used as casual greetings, or even to terms of *affection*. Slaves, freemen, and even some freeborn

use terms like **DIRT RAG**, **SCUM**, **DUST BAG**, **TUMBLEWEED** freely on their fellows. Templars address this semi-derogatory slang terms to equal or lesser-rank templars, and to slaves and free alike, but never to those that they consider to be powerful enough to injure them politically: Nobles, greater templars, and master artisans and traders. All these, the templars call **GREAT ONE**, **STRONG ONE**, or the increasingly popular **NIBENESE** term **BOSS**.

## COMMON Knowledge and the Seven Cities

As one would expect, the names and slang expressions of most Drylander languages eventually make their way into **COMMON** speech, as do needed crafts and concepts. Other tongues have their slight advantages. But with few exceptions, **COMMON** offers the fullest vocabulary for any given task. The exceptions are remote: **VORDON'S** merchant's script seems the best for maintaining records, **DRAJAN** for discussing star-study and navigation, the Forest Ridge halfling dialect for herbology and medicine, **URIKITE** for large-scale military strategy, and arguably Kreen for physical maneuvering in battle. For all other tasks, those who know **COMMON** tend to switch into it, or to borrow its words, in order to describe a given task. You will notice that your sister teachers often do the same thing from our own Kurnan Speech into Common — there is often no clearer means of expressing actions and directions.

Even when it comes to these topics where other languages excel, **COMMON** competes by absorbing new and needed words. For example, the common word **TACTIC** is obviously a corruption of the Kreen terms **TAK-TIK** or **CHAK-TIK**, which have to do with the mental edge of the hunter or warrior. The simple structure of the slave language fosters adaptation and innovation. Ironically, the language of the lowest adapts to encompass the riches of Drylander wisdom.

Even more ironically, slaves are the source of most **COMMON** knowledge in the dry lands. Elves, traders, and slaves are the only regular inter-city travelers. Drylander elves are notoriously un-trusted; the Traders are closed-lipped and deceptive about their travels, since regarding knowledge of different places and cultures is their only commodity. Thus, most of the **COMMON** knowledge that the seven cities have of each other, comes from the slaves exchange.

Wise to this, templars frequently purchase slaves fresh from other cities, interrogate them about news from their previous city, and resell them to the local nobles. I attribute part of **GULG'S** survival, in the face of much larger city-states, to the fact that they take many slaves in, but sell only rebellious **GULGS** to other cities. Thus **GULG'S** defense deficiencies remain unknown. The elements help the unfortunate templars who try to interrogate native **GULGS** for knowledge of that city's defenses! **GULG** is a poor language for conveying numbers, and this facet remains undeveloped since they have no land-owning nobles, and all accounting is done by **GULG** templars.

Although everyone else in the city must speak the **GULG** tongue, **GULG** templars secretly use **COMMON** speech for administration, numbers, and accounting. Since **GULG** possesses no native reading characters, **GULG** templars are among the few that write in **COMMON**, and like us, they use the dwarven letters.

## A Word About Purpose

I must reiterate: no skill is as critical to your mission as the **COMMON** speech. If you are swift with tongues, you have already inferred from my *Wisdom of Beters* card that the word **MASTERY** derives from the artisan's **MYSTERY**. You may notice that your eldest sisters all bear the title of **MASTER Spies**. You should now understand what this **TITLE** means. Your elder sisters use many such words with you, sometimes to train you in **COMMON** speech, and sometimes since these words simply fit better than any of our own. When you return from the dry lands, you will share many such words with your sister spies, and find yourselves unable to fully express yourselves with your fellow Kurnans.

The words and ideas of the Drylanders can become intoxicating. In spite of their madness, the Drylanders have wisdom for us to exploit, otherwise we would not bother to spy them out. In the last three ages, most of the rapid improvements in our communications, defenses, agriculture, medicine and trade derive from the Drylander wisdom gathered by your sister spies. Our profit from the wisdom of the Drylanders is no shame to Kurn — there are more Drylanders than Kurnans, so it follows that the Drylanders develop a greater number of striking ideas. After learning a little knowledge, many junior spies arrive at what they think is a tremendous realization. Let me save you the embarrassment of blurting yours out in a report to Oronis:

Any fool can see that the dry lands are in a state of transition. Seventeen Ages of dull steady slumber have suddenly given way to violent and unpredictable convulsion. But let us not mistake threat for opportunity.

Certainly the butcher-kings of the south were needlessly oppressive, wasteful, and cruel. Certainly their templars are corrupt, harsh, and in every way despicable. Certainly our natural sympathies are drawn to the heroes that oppose these kings: preserving wizards who defy prejudice and ignorance, slaves with the honey of freedom on their tongues, orphans with a hope of a better world. We would not be Kurnans if we did not sympathize. But let us not risk ourselves or our missions for the sake of sympathy. *Do not involve yourselves in Drylander politics.* You will find that there are worse things than to be subject to **TYRANNY** (a curious new **COMMON** word that refers to the late king of **TYR**). **ANARCHY** is one of those worse things — ask any **RAAMIN**, these days. Our well-intentioned meddling would *worsen* the matter.

As Kurnans, we must remember where our duties lie. Spying for Kurn means that we must pass up worthy Drylander causes. If you cannot single-mindedly embrace your Kurnan duty, then you do not have the heart to spy. If pity and sympathy move you to help the Drylanders, rather than to protect your own land, now is the time to resign your commission. As your training progresses, you will know too much for your sisters to let you leave Kurnan lands, except as a loyal, single-minded spy.

As a spy, it is unavoidable that you should begin to see the world as a Drylander sees it. This is why no missions last over five years, and why so few spies return to become senior, veteran, and master spies. Do not trust the sympathies that you accumulate in your role. You are forbidden, unless specifically directed otherwise, to associate yourselves with Veiled Alliances, or other secretive organizations. The reasons for this prohibition:

*First*, our agents in these organizations have plumbed the depths of Alliance secrets, and found that Veil mystique shrouds more ignorance than wisdom.

*Second*, such an affiliation puts an agent in unnecessary jeopardy, as the Veil assigns much more deadly tasks than we ever do, and their ranks are often penetrated by the local templars.

*Third*, our sad experience shows that involvement in such organizations compromises a spy's commitment and discretion. Working so closely, you come to depend on your fellow conspirators, and to trust them more than is ever appropriate. However we might train you, Kurnans are only capable of so much guile, and deceiving your fellow conspirators is more than you should expect of yourselves.

*Fourth*, your revealing your origins to trusted Drylanders would burden one of your sisters with the heavy task of silencing you and your too-beloved and too-knowledgeable companions. Do not impose this hateful duty upon your sisters. I have had this cruel assignment myself. Believe me, silence duty destroys your sister's soul, turns a bright-eyed sister into an embittered old BITCH like myself.

Do not harshly judge your elder sisters for this policy. The relative safety of your missions is due to our vigilance.

The prohibition against infiltrating Drylander Templarates comes for a much simpler reason. The alienation and unending suspicion among the Drylander templars would ideally suit one of our agents, if it were not for the detail of the medallion connects the templar's mind to the Sorcerer-King . . .

A word before we finish: *Calm your mind*. The wisdom in my card may have angered you. Be still and remember the purpose of your training: to pass as a Drylander and live.

**-Spymaster Mereth**

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## Dwarven Wisdom

### Dwarves and Kurn

Of all the drylanders, the dwarves seem like the easiest to understand, because they are little different from the Dwarves who live among us in the Kurnan lands. As we all know, dwarves are a closed and guarded people. To call them *workers* would be a laughable understatement; they are a driven people. From our cradles we have heard tales of the banshees, and of the dwarven **FOCUS**; from a distance we admire dwarven dedication to a purpose, but our admiration of dwarven seriousness is mingled with pity and even fear. Most of us have enjoyed the camaraderie of a dwarven co-worker or fellow-at-arms, but few of us have been into their homes, or know the particulars of their personal lives. Dwarves manage the kip-herds, and much of the leather and fine stone work in Kurn; and if we take trouble to greet them in our shops and streets, we take more trouble to leave them alone. There is much that we do not know about a people that has lived side-by-side with us for nineteen Ages.

Unlike the elves and aaracokra who judge their identity by their tribes, and the humans that judge it by their city, Dwarves tend to consider themselves dwarven above all. Many dwarves in the Drylands feign allegiance to a lord or king or city, but among their own kind they hold these allegiances lightly. Kurnan Dwarves will frequently remind us, as a token of good will, that nineteen King's ages ago, our King and city (whose ancient and obsolete names the Dwarves insist on remembering) was the first human city-state to welcome the Dwarves. While other cities welcome dwarves to entrapment and enslavement, Dwarves are free in Kurn to live according to their traditions. Yet for all their gratitude, they consider themselves not Kurnans but Dwarves.

*Dwarves do not forget*, they tell us. Kurnans tend to respond that when it comes to day-to-day matters, dwarves do not have any better memories than we do. One might even call them *absent-minded* about certain details. Their Kurnan friends are inclined to tell them *to forget about the past, and to regard instead the future*, which to the dwarves is a terrible affront — to be told by a human where to place their **FOCUS**. One dwarven proverb that they do not share with us translates roughly that *the future is bound up in the past*. Since today's dwarf-child will live to see your great grandchildren grow old, dwarves do tend to live with one foot in the past. Their leaders hone this trait into ritual, poring over the writings, stories, and opinions of their ancestors. Dwarves remember a favor rendered, even when those that rendered the favor have passed into the Grey. Most importantly, they do not forget who they are.

## Dwarven Writings

In Kurn, all dwarves are literate in the Kurnan language as well as in their own curious **SCRIPT**. Dwarven lore is painted in single-color onto long strips of linen cloth, which is bound in rolls which dwarves call **SCROLLS**. Even in the drylands, where reading is forbidden by death, the leaders of the dwarven communities continue their tedious study of history. To add to the jeopardy, dwarven ancestral writings may never be burnt or discarded! Hence many dwarves become masters of hiding places, locks and traps. Never discuss this knowledge of the dwarven writing with dwarves; non-dwarves are not supposed to know about such things.

Although the written characters are identical to those used in **TYR**, **BALIC**, **RAAM**, and **GULG**, (the dwarves say that these cities stole **WRITING** from them), dwarves keep their documents secret from the eyes of all non-dwarves. Dwarven elders, known as the **URHOMOUS**, meet (periodically and secretly) with friends and relatives to argue out and interpret the **WRITINGS** of the dead, and to reconcile contradictory stories. Dwarven communities are ruled by their elders, and the elders consider themselves ruled by their **OROSCRIT** — their word for those ancient writings that they consider to have canonical or privileged status. That the canonized **OROSCRIT** themselves do not agree with each other in significant points does not seem to dampen the enthusiasm of the elders, who frequently put a great deal of effort to reconcile contradictory rules or histories in the **OROSCRIT**. To be fair, dwarven **SCROLLS** contain more than tedious histories; some include practical applications of the Way. Dwarven **FOCUS** gives many an advantage in the Way, and many of us have come to believe that their **WRITTEN** tradition is an important part of their **FOCUS**, and also enhances their powers of the Way.

My theory is not without detractors. Prodigy (influenced by the **RAAMITE** Tarandan academy) suggests the opposing theory that writing weakens the mind and dulls memory and the psionic senses. With due respect to Oronis' talented **CONSORT**, Tarandan opinion is merely one tradition of the Way, albeit the most known and respected tradition. Like all traditions, Tarandan psionics has strengths and weaknesses. Dwarven writings on psionics suggest that unburdening one's mind onto paper frees the mind for other pursuits, such as the Way.

Other than these instructions in the Way, and a few community by-laws, dwarves do not use their documents for anything particularly useful. Most of their writing is full of histories, unforgotten grudges, and the **PROPHECIES**, that is, *expectations* of their ancestors. Yet discovered dwarven writings prove useful to our understanding of their culture, and help us understand dwarves better as we fulfill our roles as neighbors, templars, or spies.

## Dwarven Types

Dwarven philosophical writings describe four types of dwarves, and these classifications have helped our spies to work with dwarves subtly and effectively: **PROUD**, **COMPROMISED**, **CORRUPT**, and **BROKEN**.

### The Proud

Roughly half of the dwarves of the dry lands keep all of the traditions, and limit their contact with humans. Their lives focus on an exclusively dwarven community such as Hasken or Kled. Less rigorously **PROUD** communities will deal or bargain with humans and other non-dwarves on a regular basis; North and South **LEDOPOLDUS** serve as examples here. **PROUD** dwarven communities have even been known to accept a human leader who has proven himself, as the Kurnan Dwarves give homage to Oronis, as the ash-dwarves west of the **ROAD OF FIRE** give homage to the human merchant **TRENBULL**, and as one community of **TYRIAN** dwarves follows a **TYRIAN** human named **GRANJ**. (As we will discuss in class, **GRANJ'S WARD** is an unusual case of a **PROUD** dwarven community interacting closely with a human community; this is an unusual case because the humans in **GRANJ'S WARD** are isolated and alienated from the rest of the City State of **TYR**, which in turn has been isolated and alienated from the rest of Athas. Furthermore **GRANJ** and lately, the **TYRIAN** government have actively promoted general literacy. Within this unique climate humans and dwarves seem to have melded into a **COMMON** community — but we will see with study and time whether reality reflects this appearance. In any event, there is no intermarriage, and furthermore it is clearly the humans of **GRANJ'S WARD** that have adapted to dwarven ways, not the other way around!)

Even the **PROUDEST** of the **PROUD** have been known to deal with humans on a limited basis: **HASKEN'S** well was recently re-dug with the help of some drylander scouts working for House **M'KE**, and **KLED** has had some very friendly interactions with human drylanders, but I cannot share this information with you at this time.

To the Dwarves, **PROUD** simply means *unadapted*. The **PROUD** never reveal their **FOCUS** to humans, no matter how close a friend that human might be. They may accept human sovereignty, but they will also have their own leaders from among the **URHOMOUS**. Their **FOCUS** never serves outside the community. To use one's **FOCUS** to serve a human . . . that would be **COMPROMISE**.

### The COMPROMISED

Nearly half of the dwarves in the dry lands keep all of the dwarven traditions, inasmuch as they can remember them and can practice them in safety. They elect an **URHOMOUS**, if they are allowed to; they live with other dwarves, if they are allowed to; they keep and read the **OROSCRIT**, if the templars are not watching; they teach their children the dwarven tongue, if the nobles that own them do not snatch the child from their laps and sell it to the slave-masters. In short, their **FOCUS** adapts to survival, and those that can determine the **COMPROMISED** dwarf's survival, may find themselves served with a dwarven **FOCUS**.

Yet even the most **COMPROMISED** of the **COMPROMISED** are still stubborn and delightfully dwarven in every way, and a **COMPROMISED** dwarf will usually seek to regain her **PRIDE** as soon as practical.

### The Corrupt

These are the dwarves who have gone beyond **COMPROMISE** into acceptance of corruption and servitude. They will lie about their **FOCUS**, cheat other dwarves out of goods and freedom, and even serve willingly as **MULFATHERS** (a deadly dwarven insult which you will understand better when you have learned fully about drylands slavery). **CORRUPT** dwarves are always individualistic; they care nothing for a dwarven community, and their community cares nothing for them. The **FOCUS** of a **CORRUPT** dwarf is invariably greedy, whimsical, or vengeful; frequently it is an issue of a selfish or destructive **FOCUS** that caused them to be expelled from their community. They hate the sight of their own kind, except for other **CORRUPT** dwarves. These they still will not trust; indeed they trust no one.

### The Broken

**BROKEN** Dwarves are those who without malice or terrible wrongdoing have become unmanageable by the standards of the dwarven community. You have heard tell of the dwarf who set out alone with a wheelbarrow to level the ringing mountains, and you have heard the idle elven ballad of the dwarf afflicted with the malady known as the **TRIBE OF ONE**.

But not all **BROKEN** ones are insane; some are focused on a lonely, ludicrous, and impossible goals (such as wiping out all clans of the **SILT STALKER** tribe); others compulsively drink until their focus becomes addled, still others have broken faith with their **FOCUS** — the dwarves call these **LIVING BANSHEES**, speak of them in whispers, pity and fear them, and generously pay them to leave the community.

### Dwarven FOCUS

This issue of dwarven **FOCUS** is greatly misunderstood, and dwarves have no interest in explaining it more precisely to humans. As we might best surmise from the dwarves that we observe, and from the writings we have uncovered, there are four types of dwarven **FOCUS**:

#### Maintenance

Unlike the other types of **FOCUS**, a Maintenance **FOCUS** is a type of **FOCUS** that cannot be **ACCOMPLISHED**. Dwarves may **FOCUS** on protecting a ward or an object, on acquiring wealth, and so on, and since this is a goal that does not have an end, it is considered a Maintenance **FOCUS**. Dwarves may change their Maintenance **FOCUS**, but cannot do so at a time when the current **FOCUS** is being threatened. For example, an elder who is **FOCUSED** on protecting the community will not suddenly change **FOCUS** when some event threatens that community.

#### Purpose

While a dwarf has a Maintenance **FOCUS**, she might **FOCUS** on a specific goal related to her Maintenance **FOCUS**. For example, a dwarf **FOCUSED** on serving a merchant house might set a Purpose **FOCUS** to guard a shipment vigilantly throughout the night.

While set in a Purpose **FOCUS**, the dwarf still remembers her Maintenance **FOCUS** and may grudgingly set aside a purpose temporarily in order to solve a higher-priority emergency. A dwarf **FOCUSED** on providing for their village might set a purpose **FOCUS** to dig a well, but would set the purpose aside if he learned that a silo of grain was on fire. But he would be annoyed and nervous about this shift in purpose, for no dwarf ever wishes to set aside an unfulfilled purpose. The dwarf would probably finish one minor step of the task at hand, and set all of his tools down carefully, before rushing to help put out the fire.

#### Aim

An aim **FOCUS** is unconnected to any maintenance **FOCUS**; the dwarf must drop his maintenance **FOCUS** in order to **FOCUS** on an Aim. For example, a dwarf could be Maintenance **-FOCUSED** on raising his child; one day the dwarf

becomes convinced (sincerely) that his child can take care of himself, and he chooses the Aim of returning to the village of his birth. His wife and child might be angry that he had chosen this Aim but they would not try to argue — there would be no point.

## Vow

Vows are Aims that are associated with a specific penalty. A dwarf may Vow: *I will neither eat nor drink nor sleep until I have recovered my stolen kank* and he will not become a banshee if he fails; only if he breaks his Vow, fails, and eats, drinks or falls asleep without accomplishing his **FOCUS**. Sometimes bansheehood may be made part of a penalty: “and may I become a banshee if I fail” but this is rare.

Vows are taken very seriously, and communities may exile dwarves who have vowed carelessly, e.g. sworn an oath on their parent’s heads, etc. A frequent theme in dwarven folk tales is the drunken Vow, the Vow made in drunkenness, and regretted and **FULFILLED** in soberness.

Another interesting tale about vows is the reported story of how dwarves became hairless: a great dwarven king Vowed to kill some **DWARF-BUTCHER** long ago, and apparently failed. Somehow the failure of this Vow demanded the penalty that all dwarves everywhere remove their hair.

## Dwarven Society

The image of a hairy dwarf is amusing, since dwarves have come to hate hair and compulsively pick at the few hairs that do grow from their noses, ears, and eyelashes. According to our **OROSCRIT**, some dwarves are not naturally bald at all, but are ritually buried as children in a mixture of lye and special ashes that prevent hair growth. To help the children survive this ordeal, they are made to breathe through a tube, and their eyes, ears, and nose are sealed with wax — hence these are the only areas on a dwarf that produce hair.

This balding ceremony is the ritual that marks the passage of a young dwarf from infancy into childhood. The dwarven *infant*, hairy and naked, is ignored by all but his parents, until he learns to speak and demands that others pay attention to him. Then the community elders submerge the infant in the lye mixture as described above, and he is considered a *child* after this ritual. We must remember that dwarves age differently than we do: a dwarven *infant* is frequently over six years old, and dwarves are often in their forties before they are considered *adults*.

Dwarven children are allowed to play as they please, but when they start to ask questions of the elders, they are taught about the **FOCUS**. To become adults, the dwarf must complete a significant **FOCUS** that satisfies the community elders: repair a wall around the community, etc.

Generally, the rite of passage of childhood to adulthood is marked by introducing the new adult to strong drink. Strong fermented beverages are not considered appropriate for dwarven children, since drunkenness inhibits the **FOCUS**. (This guarded dwarven secret is the reason that no dwarf will willingly drink with a non-dwarf.) It may interest you to learn that Kurnan dwarves are horrified and disgusted at our method of calming children with strong drink mixed with milk. *No wonder they never learn to FOCUS*, I have heard dwarves mutter to each other!

During the days between one **FOCUS** and another, dwarves try to meet alone with their own kind, so they may stay safely, and become roaringly drunk. Dwarven sub-communities often set dates for the **FOCUS** of all community to be **FULFILLED**, so that whole communities may get drunk together; these celebrations are known as **DAYS OF ACCOMPLISHMENT**. These celebrations last for sleepless days and nights; they begin jolly, with flutes and dancing, but inevitably end on a mournful note, as the hung-over dwarves begin to consider what is yet to be **ACCOMPLISHED**. Dwarves refer to these moments as the **DREGS OF THE PARTY**, and a dwarf who is late in finishing his **FOCUS** before the days of accomplishment is often warned to hurry lest she **ARRIVE ON THE DREGS OF A GOOD PARTY**.

**DAYS OF ACCOMPLISHMENT** are determined season-to-season by the elders, according to the needs and goals of the community. They are not fixed calendar days, otherwise enemies of the dwarves would have destroyed the dwarven race years ago.

The Elders of a dwarven community do not drink, for they are maintenance-**FOCUSED** on the well-being of the community; they have no aims or specific purposes to accomplish, and someone must stand guard during the **DAYS OF ACCOMPLISHMENT**.

## Spies and Dwarves

The Dwarves are a strange and noble people, and while their minds may be rooted in a decaying past, their fruits are the fruits of wisdom and discipline. Unfortunately, they are rarely inclined to share their wisdom or skills with humans. We do not choose dwarven spies, for it would deeply offend the dwarven community to learn just how much we know about them. So much arcane dwarven wisdom (such as metallurgy, masonry and leatherwork) remain unknown to us. For the time being, this is acceptable to Oronis, since Kurnan dwarves labor with their hidden wisdom on behalf of Kurn.

But it may be that some of these wisdoms will be revealed in ancient **SCROLLS**. Should you happen on a dwarven ruin, break up the floors beneath their old meeting-places. If you find sealed vessels, do not open them; bring them to Kurn at once. The fragile scrolls within may contain wisdom of the old times that even the living dwarves do not remember.

To gain the trust of the living dwarves, feign indifference to all that is different about their culture. They guard their cultural secrets, and curiosity frightens them. Talk about their accomplishments, not their **FOCUS**. Give Dwarves the illusion of privacy, and you may find their wisdom left carelessly unguarded.

Close your mouth and open your eyes, and may surprise never find you.

**-Spymaster Klianis**

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## Elven Wisdom,

By Spymaster Kalisvrani

You know the elves; you see them every day. Our elves that have been raised in Kurn are our greatest storytellers and poets. The infrequent nomadic elves that visit Kurn alternately frighten, amuse, and delight us. It seems that elven blood has an infinite capacity for emotion and the depth to share that emotion with others. All the greatest poetry in Kurn has been composed by elves. It seems that the elf can achieve a passion that we humans can only brush against. Where we humans carry our emotions like a torch, the elven heart burns like a bonfire. Remember that elves easily shed the soft cocoon of civilization, and you must see into the elven soul to understand how the tunes that you love in Kurnan elves can play out differently among the elves of the dry lands.

### The Now

*MAKOM KUU, EETMAKOM BATO. ( My Now is swift; yours is slow and sad. )*

The elven heart is as erratic as it is bright. Like a falling star, the elven Heart can go out as if the light was never even there. One moment an elf can be enraptured in the romance of a new love, only to regard the relationship as old within a week. The elves of the dry lands are no different. They live in the eternal *now*. The elven Heart keeps them so rooted in the present, the lingering emotions of the past that humans are the victims of are unknowable to elves. They are a passionate, forgetful people, and that is their weakness. As long as what they are doing is fun and interesting they will continue. If it turns boring or routine, elves move on to something else.

Elves are prone to ecstatic states— whether in dance, in song or in the *Run*. Elves will become consumed by an altered state of mind that seems to control their actions. It is as if their emotions eclipse their rational minds. They will allow themselves to dance until collapse, run for hours on end, sing praises to the elements all day. If any race is prone to shamanism, it is the elves.

Imagine being in the heart of an elf, whether Drylander or Kurn. Noble, terrible, loving, hating. All the passions that you are prone to — multiplied a hundred-fold ... Only to have that emotion blow away like sand, leaving a vacuum for another inferno to fill you. How focused you would be on who you *are*. You would be unable to tolerate frustration. You would be unable to perform tasks you did not love. You would be incapable of resisting temptation.

While we envy the elves for their gifts, we pity them for the plights that their impulsive natures throw them into. Elves, on the other hand, often speak of how horrible they would find it to be human. To an elf, the idea of bridling ones passions reeks of a lingering death! It is no wonder that the dwarven mind and the elven one see so little in common. Whereas the dwarf is steeped in history and is focused on the future, the elf is so forced in the present moment, that thoughts of the past and the future become indistinct and unrealistic.

### History

Elves share a rich oral tradition, with many myths about their origins, and twice as many myths about the successes of their tribes. But none of these stories seem to agree. For example, every tribe claims that it was founded by **CORAANU**, and blessed by **CORAANU** to be the greatest elven tribe. **CORAANU** is the universal father of the elven people, but the tales his exploits vary from tribe to tribe, and even from year to year ! In fact, the truth of **CORAANU**'s exploits is immaterial, although at the time of a ritual or celebration the tales are believed totally. The true importance of the tales of **CORAANU** is the importance of the elven race, and their racial ability to survive on speed and wits. Around the elven campfire, these myths are not only recounted, but also performed, and all manner of

insults towards the other races are acted out. If you have the opportunity to see these rituals in progress, you are a lucky individual, for outsiders are not taken in lightly.

Elves often speak of *the one who will return*. This individual will be carrying the sword of the last great elven chieftain. These myths follow that this individual will be the return of a **CORAANU** and the elves will once again take their rightful place in history. But like all elven stories, the exact particulars to this story vary from tribe to tribe. I think that these stories are a justification for the elven self-esteem. Seeing that their place in society is nomadic, and they are shunned by most settled civilizations, the myth of a redeemer gives a sense of hope that is vital to the survival of their society.

## Elven Cultural Types

There are four types of elves; Nomadic, Settled, Healers, and Savages.

### Nomadic Elves

**MUPO COMMON ?** ( *Do you speak common ?* )

Nomads are tribes of elves that wander where the mood sends them. They are raiders, herders, traders. They are versatile and usually are some of the larger tribes. They can do anything to survive and usually do. Some Nomads must walk their own path to the point of forsaking their Tribe for a time. They walk their own way. They are generally pacifists, unlike the Savage elf. Nomads do not desire constant strife, they only seek for the horizon and what lay beyond. The best examples of these elves are the Swift Wings. ( 'Kuualko-dai' in their own language ) They are primarily herd Kanks and only stop to trade for supplies that they cannot make themselves.

### Settled Elves

**KOMAHH E'KOMAKE !** ( *Drink Now - Pay Later !* )

The Settled elves are the most like the elves we are used to. They are not nomads, wandering about, but they have permanent homes and have an emotional commitment to that home. Some of these elves are members of Slave Tribes, or are currently involved with a human lover. ( Although these relationships are rocky at best. ) Sometimes an entire tribe will settle. The *Silver Hands* and *Night Runners* offer two examples:

*The Silver Hands* (**UTRAMUT-DAI**), lead by **TORAMUND**, own a fort surrounding the Silver Spring. A traveler there will meet an affected, carnival-like atmosphere designed to relieve visitors of their pocketbooks. These elves' only goal is money, primarily the Silver that **TORAMUND** craves. This situation is most likely temporary as the wish to settle is Toramund's alone. With his death, the Silver Hands will very likely move on.

*The Night Runners* (**UTKOTUU-DAI**), have adopted the city-state of Raam as their own and work in its underground as a black market, assassins, courtesans, and entertainment. This is the only tribe known to embrace half-elves in to the tribe as full members. The tribe is rumored to have the throne of Raam in mind. We have no solid information on this tribe and nobody can guess as to the leader's motives.

### Healers

**MUEET MANALB SAB, JUKKETE** ( *Let me help you, city-dweller.* )

Healers are elven priests of the Elements or individuals who act with Athas in mind. Some are historians or archeologists, some are members of tribes that act in consort with Druids. The Clear Waters (**UUTOBO-DAI**) are the only example of a whole tribe of Healing elves that I know of. The Healing elves share some sort of religious zeal for improving their current conditions. One has to wonder if a Healer as an overdeveloped sense of past and future for an Elf. This could be a result of elemental spirits interfering or influencing specific elves, or a sign the Now isn't as strongly felt in some elves as in others. Or even stranger, that some Drylanders just have good hearts !

### Savage Elves

**NEEK MUTA, GUHDATO !** ( *Prepare to die ! Human scum !* )

The wilderness of the Drylands can turn the most intelligent person into an instinctual animal. *Savages* seem to act on instinct alone, attacking for food, killing for territory, settling disputes with violence and bravado. For these elves there is no peace, only one battle after another, one conquest after another, *until the end comes for you, only to be replaced by your children*. This cycle is becoming more and more common, it seems. As more and more tribes fall into hardship and survive through violence, more and more tribes are becoming Savages, such as the dreaded **JURA-DAI**, also known as the *Silt Stalkers*. The Silt Stalkers strike from ambush and destroy all they lay their hands on. More information is needed about these Savages, but the risks of spying among them are great.

## Dealing With Elves in the Dry Lands

**MUGEE TOGE !** ( *This one's a sucker / easy mark!* )

If you wish to pass unnoticed, bore them: dress blandly and speak slowly. Elves secretly believe in their superiority and regard all other races as slow and short. **DATO** is their word for human, which means just that, *short and slow*. (Half-giants they call **AD'DATO**, that is, *twice than human*, that is, twice as short and slow).

On the other hand, if you wish to catch an their attention, you must be flashy, highly-skilled, or best an elf in some sort of competition of some sort. Elves seem to expect some sort of humility from humans and because of their height, and derive a measure of satisfaction from intimidating humans with their superior height. To overcome your innate disadvantage, and to gain higher ground, brag with gusto whenever you have their attention. This will invite more challenges, although most will be verbal. Elves like nothing more than to be entertained. If you can return their verbally abuse skillfully and in good humor, you will offend nobody other than the one you are insulting.

If you wish to win their friendship then be prepared to prove your honesty. Don't allow yourself to take advantage of elven *mistakes*. These are deliberate ploys to measure the character of your proffered friendship. Elves expect that everyone not in their tribe is an enemy, so you must be resolute in your plea for friendship. You may be '*tested*' for years before being accepted into the fold. In most cases, you will not have time to win an elf's friendship.

If you need their short-term cooperation, simply offer money. Bribery and gifts are an inherent part of elven culture and it is a rare elf that refuses a gift. Beware giving to Savages though. (In fact, beware Savages altogether. ) for they will assume your gift as tainted and treat your gesture as a threat. A gift will get an elf talking to you, but not trusting you. However, a bribe will probably get an elf to help you as long as it is not too much trouble. Bribes can be blatant with elves, but remember that it will only work in the short term, or as long as your money holds out.

Above all realize that the elves of the dry lands are crafty, intelligent, and clever. They improvise moment to moment and may not give you time to adapt to them surprising you. They will see through a ruse quicker than you think. Tell them as few lies as possible.

## Looking into the Elven Soul

Enjoy their music! It has a feral quality that the elves of Kurn lack. Their savagery has not affected their innate beauty. Do not take them lightly, even if they appear to take themselves lightly. Beneath the mirth and frivolity there is a streak of intensity that should even make a dwarf think twice. Listen to the intensity of their poetry and song —

**MAIEUU MUMIKA, MAUUTRA FFAIE, CORANNUGUU**

**MAIEUU NIKUUKO, MAUTA AKOTOTA, CORANNUHUU**

**MAIEE NI'KOM, MASARGUU FAE, CORANNUTAA**

Translated —

*As we run to the horizon, our silver souls ring out, with Corannu's song.*

*As we run into battle, our blades steal death, with Corannu's fury.*

*As we dance in the now, our music plays on, with Corannu's laughter.*

## -Spymaster Kalisvrani

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## Kenku Wisdom,

By Spymaster Andapho

### Foreward

Unlike most of Kurn's spies, I was sent to study not some foreign people and their manners, but the engineering marvels of **LEDOPOLUS**. My training was in architecture, not in social mores and styles of breads! Therefore this card will be a narrative tale of my experiences, painting facts and not fanciful pronouncements about an entire race's behavior. Others may infer, but I will not pronounce!

### The Mission

As the records in the Chamber of Seekers will show, I was sent not to pursue curious birdlike creatures but to study the labors of the dwarves, as they constructed the Great Bridge from **LEDOPOLUS**. I was in **LEDOPOLUS**, observing the

construction and working my way into the chief architect **WRANGAR**'s confidences, as ordered, when a tantalizing prey entered my ken.

I had just left **WRANGAR**'s chambers when the morning light revealed a dwarven patrol stomping back into North Ledopolus. As usual they were crass and smelly, but unlike normal they were not drunk. In fact, they were dragging a large bundle, which at first I thought to be a dead mul or young half-giant wrapped in rags and tarps. But the creature was neither, nor was it dead – its psionic waves of pain, skittering and crying, bespoke life. But I could not interpret the images, they were alien, with strange perspective, and shifting suddenly. The alien nature of my contact with it reminded me of the first time I made contact with a kreen in the wastes.

*A thief! A thief! Tried to cheat the uhrnomus's nephew!* shouted the crier following the troops and their burden.  
*Have a care for your thoughts, it's a 'BENDER!*

I laid a simple net, gathering the thoughts of the dwarven constables, and learned that the creature was caught trying to sell false goods to a dwarven merchant. The merchant's mindbender had detected the fraud—which means that it could not have been hard for a more skilled mindbender such as myself to detect. The merchant had summoned the city constabulary, since the event took place near the walls, and in the ensuing fracas the other thieves had escaped.

Still singing their songs of victory and conquest, the dwarves dragged their prisoner off to the Gaoler's Hole. There aren't many cells, since the gaolers tend to move their charges swiftly on to the waiting Grey, and the strange mindbender was the day's only guest. I retired to my chamber, and spent most of the day seeking to understand more of the strange psionic cries of the prisoner – it seemed to be trying to converge, but found none with whom to achieve the unity, and its aloneness tormented it as much as its physical injuries. After hours of attentive meditation, I could begin to understand its image-wails, and I thought I might be able to communicate with it.

I risked a report back to the spymaster, informed her that I had discovered a Drylander mindbender seeking to use the same convergence techniques that previous spies have reported before vanishing in the Dim Lands. Perhaps this prisoner was a rogue Eldaarish, but even if not, the chance to study its techniques could not be missed. I was granted permission, and moved swiftly. I knew little enough about the creature, but I knew from **WRANGAR** that it would be executed the next day so I had to act quickly to glean any intelligence from it. I slipped past the guards – even the obsessive ones have to sleep sometime – and made my way into the Gaoler's Hole. The strange prisoner was being kept in the oubliette, the windowless hole at the base of the jail. It was still hobbled, and a rasclinn hide was knotted over its head to impair its psionics.

The thing was instantly aware of me, and it struggled to its feet as I entered the oubliette. But it was blinded, and its mind distracted by its injuries and the rasclinn hide. I had to remove the hide to invade its mind, but it was far weaker than I and none of the aid it so desperately beseeched appeared. It was easy to conquer its mind, and learn all that it knew. It was not Eldaarish; the creature was not a man. It was a bird, though bulkier and not so tall as our aaracokra allies. Even so it was taller than I was, and larger, and could have proven a challenge to a human warrior had it not been hobbled and wounded. Its brownish feathers, perhaps once glossy, were ragged and dun from confinement and abuse, and many lay scattered across the floor.

The bird-man's bright yellow eyes reflected the little light in the cell, showing a hint of gold. The stains of dried blood marked its face and chest, and its dun yellow beak was cracked at the tip. Clearly the dwarves had not exaggerated when they told me how the thief had resisted being taken. The bird-man had talons on its bare feet, like a kes'trekel, and its hands had similar but more facile claws. Its back was broad, with heavy wings folded against them not unlike a large traveler's pack. The dwarves had bound the wings, of course, with taut kip hide that had tightened cruelly as it dried – dwarven guards do not like their criminals escaping!

The bird tried to evade me, I could sense it had a terrible fear or dislike for strangers, but the cell was small and I had little trouble keeping up with its hobbling gait. Feathers swirled up from floor, until I backed it in a corner and forced it to open its alien, avian mind. I learned that it called itself a **KENKU**, and that its tribe lived in hidden nests in the cliffs overlooking the **ESTUARY OF THE FORKED TONGUE**. Carefully I studied the creature's mind, dominating it and searching it thoroughly. Its alien contours were easier to master than those of a kreen, though the **KENKU** seemed to shift its thoughts distractedly just as **KREEN** do.

The poor thing was a young male, confused and alone. It knew only that it was in the clutches of the *wingless unblest* and that it could never go home again – apparently it had been taught that outsiders were cursed, and that any contact with the unblest tainted it also as an outsider. Its name was **T'TRR'ACK**. Like others of his kind, **T'TRR'ACK** was incapable of any human words, though psionic illusions permit limited interaction with other beings. **KENKU** beaks allow them only simple sounds and unspirated consonants, but I took from him the knowledge of posturing and mental speech that **KENKU** use among themselves.

Nearly everything in **T'TRR'ACK** mind was worth memorizing. **KENKU** cannot smell very well, and their sense of touch is muffled by their feathers and the scaly skin on their talons. Their eyes are large, and their vision is excellent – though not as good as that of our aaracokran allies, I suspect. They sense the world primarily through their large, but

hidden ears, which are extraordinarily sensitive. They also seem to have a peculiar ability to sense movement or pressures around them, but try as I might I could not figure out either how they did it or how to duplicate it.

Morning light was breaking. I had probed through nearly all of the prisoner's memories, and there was little value in risking discovery. I swiftly disengaged and departed before the dwarven guards appeared. I watched the execution; they cast **T'TRR'ACK**, still bound, into a pool of silt, with only a giant's hair line tied around his taloned legs. The cheering dwarves watched him pitch and thrash until he was dead, then they dragged the body out and burned it. *Abomination!* shouted the crier as the **UHRNOMUS'S** deputy set the torch to **T'TRR'ACK'S** dusty feathers.

I took the usual precautions and then left **LEDOPOLUS** that night. What a relief to escape my duties with **WRANGAR**! I moved carefully along the estuary, following the route I had seen in **T'TRR'ACK'S** head. I hoped to either find his companions, or perhaps discover the base or nest where they had come from. After two days, climbing east up the rising ground of the cliffs along the silt estuary, I found **T'TRR'ACK'S** band.

Or rather they found me. They perceived me and pounced - I was in kenku shape, and showed them the mind of **T'TRR'ACK** as well, and I let them take me. There was risk, for **T'TRR'ACK'S** mind had revealed well how little love his people had for outsiders or even for other kenku that had been soiled by contact with the unblest. But I hoped they would take me to the bird-men's home, so I acquiesced.

The dozen or so **KENKU** bound me, clipping my wings and guarding me closely. Metalseeker **KASS'TAKA**, the leader of the trade-band, interrogated me with the Way. I used my skills to convince him he was talking to **T'TRR'ACK**. It wasn't even that hard, for someone trained by Kurn's masters. **KASS'TAKA** wasn't looking for an imposter, he was seeking to find out just how much **T'TRR'ACK** had been tainted by the unblest.

The memories that I had created convinced him that **T'TRR'ACK** had escaped after the briefest captivity, before being taken to **LEDOPOLUS**, and **KASS'TAKA** seemed to believe this ruse. But the conditioning against strangers and those tainted by strangers was strong - so I was taken to the nest of the **KK'RASS'ATK** bound.

We traveled down the estuary, using psionics to fake human form by day - even when no one was around, just as a precaution - and hiding in secret camps disguised with psionics by night. All the camp-holes were carefully hidden, nestled under rocks or in the leas of small hills, far off natural lines of drift, and each had a small cache of dried meat and other supplies, itself hidden beneath stones or buried in pouches. Such meticulous planning! Not even Kurnan forays are so carefully planned! The **KENKU** take no chances, it is no wonder they are so little known!

I tried to get Metalseeker **KASS'TAKA** to trust me, but neither he nor any of the other **KENKU** paid me any attention. They were absolute in ignoring me, or in clawing me when I attempted to speak to them. Above all the bird-men honor their code, which calls for all treating everyone not in and of the nest with suspicion.

After three days of furtive travel we reached the area of the **KK'RASS'ATK** nest. The nest itself, I knew from **T'TRR'ACK'S** memories, was a series of caverns opening in the cliff face overlooking the estuary. Metalseeker **KASS'TAKA** urged his patrol to hasten, bundling my bound body in a lizardskin as we reached the edge of the cliffs. Long shadows ran down the rugged, beetling rocks and down to the silt, invisible far below. It was nearly dark when all the trade-band's bundles were secured and they dove, in pairs, bearing bundles, over the side. Four of them hefted me, trussed and packed, as they leaped.

**KENKU** fly laboriously when burdened. No doubt they are far more graceful when not carrying heavy loads, but this flight all the bird-men were struggling. Wings prevent them wearing packs while in flight, and the weight carried in their smallish arms unbalances them - so it was slowly, and unsteadily, that we flew down the canyon walls. Maintaining my illusions of appearance and weight while being swung back and forth like a stonethrower's sling is less easy than it sounds!

The sun was setting behind us as we flew. As we rounded a sharp outcropping, it seemed like a hundred flaming amber dewdrops were lining the cliffs before us. As we approached, I could see the golden disks better - they were not giant gems but the eyes of the **KENKU**, glowing gold in the sunset as they all clung to rock spurs and perches and looked west down the Estuary. It would take me weeks to learn that this was their typical evening ritual - what significance it may have for them I could never determine, though it did not seem to be worship. Only the rulers of the nest fail to appear for the farewell to the sun; perhaps this one penalty of their bloated size.

The nest-caves were honeycombed in the beetling cliff of sandstone, irregular domed passages 10' in diameter. Numerous chambers lay off the passages, for purposes of which I which I will paint presently. The rooms which overlooked the silt estuary below were shaded by narrow ledges and overhanging stone like awnings, no doubt to make the disguise of the place more complete.

I was roughly dragged into a large room well within the caves and cast down before the Nestlord and Priestess Consort of the **KK'RASS'ATK**, two huge **KENKU** taller than elves and as massively built as tareks. There were no preliminaries, no questions - the huge Nestlord immediately probed me, searching my mind for exactly what had happened to **T'TRR'ACK** in the hands of the dwarves. Hiding myself wasn't hard, and the false memories I had created were plausible - but it was difficult maintaining the illusion of a bird mind.

As the Nestlord rampaged through my mind, I realized with sudden horror that he had more familiarity with **T'TRR'ACK** than one would expect between a tribal leader and a lowly journeyman (later, when I had seen more of the nest, I recalled the Priestess Consort's bloated abdomen, and realized that all the **KENKU** in the band were hatched from her eggs, and therefore the Nestlord's own children). I took quick action to hide my own mind more deeply, pretending memory loss. Despite his suspicions about **T'TRR'ACK'S** curious memory losses and unverifiable tale, the Nestlord decided that his *son* **T'TRR'ACK** could live, but henceforth as a slave to the nest, no longer a member of the tribe. In token of my status I had to have my (illusory) wings clipped permanently. This is standard practice with strange and estranged **KENKU**, I learned – in addition I was watched, but I had some freedom of movement. In fact it was just as well I was prevented from flying, as it would have been a chore that quickly exhausted me.

Over several weeks of performing menial tasks in the rough caves and tunnels of the nest, I despaired of ever getting any of the other **KENKU** to talk to me. They regarded me as a slave to the tribe, a nameless creature unworthy of speech – all **KENKU** from other tribes, or soiled by the unblest, are treated in this way. I doubt that different bands of **KENKU** ever associate with one another. Each is an island, hidden, suspicious, and xenophobic.

For an isolated band, there seemed to be significant diversity among the **Kk'RASS'ATK**. Most of the males were 7' tall, with glossy brown feathers and large yellow beaks, while the females were slightly shorter, often with speckled tan and brown feathers. Some **KENKU** were darker, or had patterns of darker feathers, however, and several of the females were a uniform sand color. All had the distinctive large golden eyes.

Since I was impersonating a male **KENKU**, I was given male tasks to perform. I hauled things through the nest, cut fungus for the females to distill, and waited on the tables of the Nestlord and Priestess Consort. Since male **KENKU** are about as strong as male humans, the hauling was taxing work. All things considered, I could have been happier sitting on eggs with the females in the nest!

One of the more onerous duties I acquired was that of minding the colonies of renks that the **Kk'RASS'ATK** kept in their deeper caves. The bird-men cast their droppings, and the offal from their meals, into pits in the deepest of the nest's caves, where these leavings are fed to colonies of nauseous renks. The renks of the **Kk'RASS'ATK** grew to more than four feet long, glistening slimy things that groups of **KENKU** would fall upon at once, tearing apart alive as they bespattered their feathers with slug entrails. As a slave, I was spared participation in such rituals, being given only the wretched leavings to eat in dark corners.

But as weeks passed I learned more and more about **KENKU** minds. I was able to skim information from my companions, first sparingly and then more effectively. I learned that the Nestlord and Priestess Consort were parents to all the other **KENKU** in the band. They gained their vast size because they received extra shares of food, food which allowed them to reproduce constantly but which made them too large for all but the most ungainly of flight. I never did see the breeding pair leave the nest, and they always seemed to walk stiffly and slowly.

The Nestlord and Priestess Consort indeed come to require their additional food – several times I was pecked for failing to ensure they received all they desired before parceling out renks or mekillot flesh to the others. Breeders who are returned to normal rations dwindle and die.

When a Nestlord or Priestess Consort does die, the vacant place is filled by one of the younger **KENKU**. The larger or bolder males will fight for domination to replace the Nestlord, while females who seek the place of the Priestess Consort declare their candidacy and await the choice of the elements. Losers in these contests do not survive.

When the **KENKU** nest grows too large, beyond 50 perhaps, the Nestlord and Priestess Consort permit the older and more accomplished members of the nest to challenge one another. The rituals are the same as occur when one of the breeding pair dies, but in this case the winners do not claim places in the nest but are driven out to found a new nest. Members of the original nest fly out with the new breeding pair, driving them away from the original nest, and then leave them to fend for themselves. Once laid, the **KENKU** eggs are gathered by the nest's females and removed to special chambers away from the breeding pair. The females which have not been blessed by Silt's favor are tasked to sit upon the eggs. Only about half the eggs are allowed to hatch, however. Periodically the Nestlord emerges from his chambers to inspect all the eggs, psionically determining whether the hatchling inside has the ability to psionically converge. Those which lack this essential skill – used by the **KENKU** not only for combat but also for most sorts of social interaction – are left unhatched.

How and what other **KENKU** worship I do not know, but the **Kk'RASS'ATK** tribe adheres to the faith of Silt. Based on gleanings from their minds, I think they have a profound fear of the element that daily threatens them with choking duststorms, blinding sand rains, and the Grey Death. Yet they believe that the Silt also guards them, by keeping outsiders away, and that their reverence for it offers them some protection from its worst ravages.

I saw no druids in the **Kk'RASS'ATK** nest. By subtle interrogation of one of the senior priestesses I learned, however, that **KENKU** druids do exist. These legendary **KENKU** are outcast, however, driven from the nest when they adopt guarded lands. **KENKU** place absolute loyalty in the Nestlord and Priestess Consort – druidic devotion to guarded

lands interferes with this obedience. No doubt **KENKU** druids are not only extremely rare but well-hidden – if entire tribes of **KENKU** can exist unseen for generations, consider how easily a single druid could remain unknown!

The **Kk'RASS'ATK**, are poor warriors but clever traders. They are all adept with their clawed hands, and can pick pockets and do other fine work with ease. I think they all must be natural rogues, gifted with bard-like skills. As they age, the young ones learn more advanced thieving skills, and the males are tutored in tradecraft and psionics. Female kenku learn to tend eggs, and how to perform the various rituals of the Silt faith.

Male **KENKU** are sent out by the Nestlord on trading ventures. The Metalseeker, an advanced trader and mindbender (by **KENKU** standards), carefully plans his patrol's route, meticulously noting all the cached food supplies and secret camps that his band will use on their journey. I saw several chambers filled with crude maps, where the Metalseekers draft their plans – I think they are careful to avoid areas where they have had troubles in the past, and also they make sure not to visit the same places too frequently, even if they have proven safe and profitable.

The Metalseeking bands take little with them to actually trade, for the kenku produce little that is of value to others. A few bone trinkets and tools, or small stone carvings, such were their wares. From the minds of several returning traders I confirmed that these pittances were used only as models or base material for psionically-created false goods, which the **KENKU** pass off as real. They then move on, or alter their psionically-masked appearances, to avoid retribution when the false goods vanish.

Once a Metalseeking band returned with several bags of metal coins and fragments. The Nestlord was very pleased, and I was ordered to drag the loot to the coldsmith. **KENKU** are nervous about fire, so they work metal not with furnaces but with psionics. The *coldsmiths* are mindbenders skilled in reshaping previously forged metal into forms the **KENKU** need. They have little ability to smelt, refine, or forge metal themselves. Now I understood the tribe's eager desire to gain worked metal in trade.

**KENKU** do not use metal in the ways we do, for soldiers' weapons and critical tools. Instead they almost exclusively use metal in specialized hunting weapons. **KENKU** are poor hunters, as a rule, as they are poor warriors, but they do take prey. The **Kk'RASS'ATK** hunt with massive darts, which they call "wind anchors". A wind anchor is a 4' long dart made of carefully worked stone, hollowed out and fitted with heavy metal plugs (I saw one plug that weighed 5 lbs or more). The plug is shaped to fit the stone cylinder, positioned so that impact will force the plug down and thus squeeze out the poison contained in the wind anchor's sharpened tip.

**KENKU** hunters patrol over the desert alone, each carrying a single wind anchor. The hunter drops the anchor from a great height, using his excellent vision and estimates of the wind to strike the target. The anchor's great weight and streamlined shape reduce the effects of wind. The force of impact causes the metal plug or plunger to force the anchor's poison out of its reservoir and into the prey.

I grew accustomed to the ritual of the **Kk'RASS'ATK** hunt. The successful hunter would appear back at the nest, squawking and fluffing its feathers to declare its triumph. The other **KENKU** – the true members of the nest, not the lowly slaves – would swiftly collect flensing poles and tarps and fly out with the hunter to carve up the carcass. Flensing poles are 10' bone poles, or spears, fitted with razor-sharp metal blades, which the **KENKU** coldsmiths form out of forged metals. These flensing poles are too valuable to be used in battle, and are kept secure in the nest when the tribe is not out hacking up prey. When they had cut the carcass into chunks of bearable weight and size, the **KENKU** would use the tarps as slings and haul the meat back to the nest. All this was done with the greatest urgency, for the tribe felt vulnerable and afraid gathered in such numbers in the open waste.

In the depths of the nest are the chambers where meat is kept in cold storage, and where the flensing poles are stored. The **Kk'RASS'ATK** caves extended more than 100' into the cliffs, and had several levels – the inner chambers were cool enough to preserve meat for several days. Longer storage was not needed, for the **KENKU** gorge themselves when food is plentiful and then rely on renks and small insects until the next large kill.

Between the chambers for meat storage and the renk colonies in the very bowels of the cave were two large rooms where the **Kk'RASS'ATK** grow their fungus. The **KENKU** eat only meat, but they grow a nasty green-yellow striated bracket fungus which the females distill down into the tribe's hunting poison. The fungus is hard and woody, and produces little juice, so vast quantities must be grown in order to accumulate enough poison for the wind anchors.

The **KENKU** make use of the large fungus chambers by using them to teach the very youngest of their kind how to fly. As soon as hatchlings are old enough, the females bring them to ledges in the fungus chambers and show them how to fly. Once the fledglings can handle gliding from the rooms' highest ledges down to the floor, they are permitted to practice outside the nest on the cliffs over the silt.

Watching the young **KENKU** learn to fly, I plotted my escape. I had been among them for four months, and the stench of renk innards was driving me mad. **KENKU** get all their water from meat, they do not drink, and they take dust-baths, so there was no water anywhere in the nest. I had learned all I could, and was determined to escape further torment by the feather lice that plagued the caves, so one night after the **Kk'RASS'ATK** returned inside after sunset,

and darkness was deep, I *accidentally* fell off one of the ledges and into the silt below. If any of the **KK'RASS'ATK** saw me fall, they didn't consider a slave worth rescuing.

*-Spymaster Andapho*

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## Wisdom of Terror

### Foreward

You think you have known the Eldaarish: Short, skinny, grey eyes, that certain complexion of the face. So humble and servile in the first generation; so bold, brazen and angry in the second generation. You call these people refugees, but you know little of the place called Eldaarich, and less of the terrors that drive these *refugees* to take refuge in a life of Kurnan slavery.

Such a frightened, submissive people, you think. They slink penniless to your gates, asking timidly for work. They embrace the role of slavery as worms take to the soil; they refuse to learn to write your characters, or to shoot your longbows, even though learning these skills would entitle them to the privileges and duties of citizens. When asked questions, they answer loudly and clearly but deferentially. They rarely initiate a conversation with a Kurnan, and speak in whispers with their spouse and children. If you stare at them without speaking, they tremble.

The Eldaarish refugees seem like a meek and cowardly people. Yet their children born in Kurn grow as tall as Kurnans, become prominent citizens, and often out-compete your children at contests of wit, will, and strength. How curious that the children of the meek will inherit your city.

How you must fear us. An elf, dwarf, herder, Drylander, or even child of the bandit state that puts down roots in Kurn's foreign quarter, and finds employment in aclave, is accepted as citizen, and her child is called a *child of Kurn*. The child of Eldaarish parents is called Eldaarish, even though he is a citizen and a skilled artisan in his guild, even though she has served three times as the King's spy and now shares his name and bed. No one will ever call me a *child of Kurn*, for terror hides in my shadow.

You know Eldaarich as a place of terrible oppression, a place of famine and terror. Until I returned from my veteran mission, you thought that Eldaarich was oppressive in the same ways as the Seven Cities, only more so. You debriefed dozens of Eldaarish refugees, who all told you similar stories, which you assumed to be the truth. They told you what you wanted to hear.

### Daskinor's Lands

Daskinor's lands include *the Dim Lands*, and a separate volcanic chain known as the *Huuros Islands*. The *Dim Lands* include the South Guard fort on the mainland, and four islands linked by bridges. A single silt port runs skimmers to the Huuros volcano cluster, which contain Eldaarich's most productive mines. Unlike the Dim Lands, the Huuros Islands offer natural sources of food and water, interfering with Daskinor's tactic of controlling the people through their bellies. Daskinor constantly ships templars to Huuros to squash independence and rebellion. During my visit to the volcanoes, I observed a squadron of defilers aimlessly despoiling the land, presumably to force the Huuros villagers into dependence.

East of Fort Holz is the *mud quarry*, the only source of water that I saw in the Dim Lands: a deep-cliffed cove walled off from the silt to expose the mud dozens of feet beneath the silt's surface. Buckets of mud are pulleyed up the cliffs from the quarry, and water is extracted from the mud in the villages above. The villagers that *quarry* the mud live in ledges in the rock beneath the cliffs. I could hear the creaking of the pulleys all day and all night.

Five great stone bridges connect the mainland and the four islands that make up the Dim Lands. How these bridges were built simply baffles my imagination. Decades of labor have not completed the bridge at **LEDOPOLDUS**, and even if **LEDOPOLDANS** ever complete their project, any of the five Eldaarish bridges would dwarf it.

The South Guard fortress is designed to keep the bridges safe, to keep intruders out, and (just as importantly) to keep the villagers in. Portions of the bridges appear retractable, but I never saw them drawn in. Security seems to rely more on fear than on actual force. Like all Eldaarish architecture, the fortresses seem designed to frighten and intimidate. The watch towers cast threatening shadows across the bridges. Crossing the bridge on foot, one feels as vulnerable as a fly on a white-painted wall.

## Grey Death

While there are days where the sky is clear and even the horizon is visible, typically the silt stirs up so that you cannot see farther than sixty feet. One day in three the sun is blocked out and you will need a candle, and still cannot see more than ten feet in front of you. One day in six the air is too thick to breathe without a filter. Drylander Merchants call this phenomenon “the grey death.” The Eldaarish have no name for it; they take it for granted.

Since island winds may stir up grey death at any instant, Eldaarish commoners and slaves live and breathe in the masks that the merchants call **SILTERS**. While the peoples of the Seven Cities go uncovered day to day, and harden their skins from the sun, the Eldaarish (like the Kurnans) are loathe to uncover their bodies, since the sun would burn their overprotected skin. Speaking from experience, I can tell you that the Eldaarish black robes are unbearably hot. They wear these robes from sunrise to sunset, and hide in their brick houses during the night. The silt in the air and around the islands tends to muffle most sounds. A shout does not travel far in Eldaarish air, and The Eldaarish try to get by with gestures when they are outside. When they have to speak, they speak loudly, to overcome not only the muffling of the silt, but the constant sound of the heartbeat drums.

## Heartbeat Drums

Unseen outposts keep up a constant drumming on the islands day and night. While I have broken most of the drum-code, I was unable to ascertain exactly how it is that the net of drummers passes messages from one drummer to others miles away. What I can tell you is that when one set of templars learns of a problem, the message is transferred back to the capital miles away within minutes, and instructions return in the same medium -- all without changes to the rhythm that could be discerned by untrained ear. The drummers must be extraordinarily skilled in both hand and ear.

## Broken Ground

Except for the island of Daskinor’s capital, the isles of Eldaarich are riddled with tunnels and craters. The Eldaarish mine the dim lands for salt, for gems, and for the smoky fire-rock they call **COAL**. Empty and abandoned mines lay gaping everywhere, and fearsome creatures are said to dwell inside, and crawl out at night searching for food. But at night the most feared predators are the other villagers, who often raid for goods when their own village looks like it will fall short on its quota.

Every few miles or so in the Dim Lands, a rocky pillar juts from the ground. All of these are narrow except for the great pillar known as *The Rock* in Eldaarich. Our scholars say that these pillars suggest that the Dim lands are riddled with long-dead volcanoes, but rock-wisdom is beyond my ken. Several of the pillars throughout the Dim lands are used as drummer outposts.

## The People of the Dim Islands

Thousands of peasants dwell in tiny isolated villages, each administered by a domo. The domo is given noble status for life — however short that might be. Although the villagers elect one of their own as domo, the demands of the Red Guards will soon place the domo at odds with his community, and he will oppress it as severely as the last one did.

Every week or so, the Red Guards arrive at the village with a mekillot wagon. These red-robed, masked templars bring the villages’ food and water for the next week, and take the allotted production quota of ore, finished goods, quarried stone, or whatever else the village produces. If the village does not produce the allotted quota, the domo is slain in front of the villagers, and the villagers are expected to produce the full quota by the following week without leadership. Each week, until they succeed, the Red Guards will slay one of the villagers as an example, and will cut the food allotment. Red Guards tend to slay the weakest, the children, or the elderly. When the village finally meets the quota, they are permitted to elect another domo.

The strangeness of these scenes is that they occur wordlessly. In my five years in the islands, I never once heard a Red Guard speak. They communicate their will by signs or gestures, but mostly the commoners and domos are forced to guess what it is that Red Guards require of them. When it comes to precise matters such as quotas or new rules, the Red Guards paint their messages on the walls and on the streets. The elaborate Eldaarish characters Kurnan characters look like simple Kreen scribblings. All Eldaarish are expected to read about a thousand word-characters, but only the templars master the writing.

## Eldaarish Literacy

Mereth presses me on the issue of Eldaarish literacy, forcing me to dedicate a full section on this tedious matter. Here it is:

You believe that your safety and freedom derive from rights that are denied the Seven cities: your right to read, and your right to choose your leaders. Know now that in the islands, the children of Eldaarich also enjoy these skills -- *possess* them I should say, for they do not enjoy them. Some find it impossible to believe that Eldaarish commoners

practice reading, supposing that reading leads to free thought and hence to a better, more Kurn-like civilization. I could repeat myself until my fingers were sore, and Mereth will still not believe me: Eldaarish villagers read, and it does not make them free. Whether Mereth likes it or not, literacy can be used as a tool of oppression, when only the oppressors can *write*, and when the commoners can only *read*.

Others among my sister-spies do not accept that someone could read an entire lifetime, and never learn to write. I invite you to examine the characters of the Eldaarish texts that I painstakingly copied from the village walls. Unlike the Kurnan script, which simplifies and streamlines the Eldaarish characters, each Eldaarish word-character is strikingly unique (thus easy to recognize) and strikingly difficult to duplicate. No schooling is necessary to learn to recognize a thousand unique symbols, especially when they are before you every day, and others read them out loud. I have seen teams of two or three Red Guards take nearly half an hour to paint motivational catch-phrases such as *Got Water?*, *Work Brings Freedom*, or *Have you filled your quota?* over the gates of a village. I have seen them take as much as a full hour to write inspiring suggestions such as *The work day begins with the heartbeat drums, and when they stop, only the dead lie in their beds, Exchanges with other villages are punishable by dismemberment*, or (my personal favorite) *Do what you are told: We are watching you*.

The Red Guards bring longer writings (consisting more than a few sentences) pre-painted on paper or leather, and simply fasten them to the walls of the village fortresses. Some of these *literary* works include timeless titles such as *Seventeen Mandatory Points of Order for a Contented, Prosperous Village*, *The Importance of an Earnest Disposition*, *Instructions to the Young Bride on her Wedding Night*, and *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child*.

Mereth marvels that Eldaarish villagers or anyone would bother to read these pompous and self-serving missives. My response is that I have lived with them (Mereth has not!), and the villagers study every word. Reading is the only means of clear communication with the world outside the village. Over centuries of enforced isolation, the language of the various villages have corrupted to mutually unrecognizable dialects. Since the writings present virtually the only communication outside the village, the villagers pay close attention to every new writing that becomes available. The only available written texts that are authored by templars, and posted on the walls. It is a deadly offense for anyone else to author or alter texts, and only the domos and templars can touch texts or hold them in their personal possession. One of the reasons that Daskinor so vigorously hunted and exterminated Eldaarich's Veiled Alliance is that they began to author and disseminate subversive texts. How I wish I could have found one of these texts!

### **Eldaarish Trade**

For ages, Eldaarich's late Veiled Alliance controlled a significant underground market between the villages. Since the extermination about four King's Ages ago, only a few fugitive peddlers have stepped in to fill this void, and the absence of any sort of trade is killing the villages, who for the first time are forced to absolutely depend on the rations and supplies provided by the Red Guards. The Red Guards carry about requisition books, and when they stop at the villages, the domos can requisition new tools, clothing and other goods from the templars by pointing at the appropriate symbols in the requisition books. The Red Guards note the requisition, and sometimes they deliver. Bribes rarely expedite the process since no one can tell one Red Guard from another beneath those heavy masks.

Many villagers and domos still possess gold, silver, and ceramic coins minted with Daskinor's fading likeness. Villagers hardly know what to do with these coins, now that the Veiled Alliance is no more. The closest thing to trade that I saw was the infrequent visiting of traveling peddlers. If a village is lucky, every few months one of these traveling peddlers will come to the visit -- usually shortly just after the Red Guards have left.

During the last weeks of my stay in the islands, I observed that the Red Guards were bringing more food and water than before, and that the domos' requisitions seemed to be getting filled. Notices painted on fortress walls promised the villages actual bonuses of food, water, money, and goods for exceeding the quota. The villagers seemed to think that it was some sort of trick, that the Red Guards were trying to lure subversives and gluttons into the open with more benevolent laws. The domos would rather pass on the reward, and hoard the surplus, in case one week the production falls short.

### **Defense in the Villages**

Working from dusk until dawn, living in fear, restricted from wearing armor or carrying weapons, you would hardly expect the villagers to develop and refine an art of war. And yet they have done precisely that. Each village contains at most eight or nine large buildings housing 10-20 people each, and includes an formidable outer wall and a defensible gate.

The villagers use tools as weapons, and regularly practice fighting with extraordinarily un-weapon-like weapons: rocks and ropes, poles and picks ... I once saw a whole village practicing to use their *buckets* as bludgeoning weapons. Some weapons require assembly before combat: gauntlets filled with gravel and tied to belts... the villagers have an amazing capacity for weapon improvisation. The peddlers that I mentioned are masters of this art, and often spend long hours teaching these defenses to the villagers.

## **Eldaarish Martial Arts**

One of the few things that my parents ever taught me about their land, was the Eldaarish martial art **CUURNU**, whose name roughly translates to *Serenity*. I never understood why my parents refused to learn the Kurnan longbow and the spear, and yet secretly practiced an art of fighting with household tools. In my sojourn in the islands, I came to understand that **CUURNU** is not simply a means of defense, but a means of communication and a means of holding onto sanity in their insane land.

At the initiate level, the martial art uses the ubiquitous drums to provide a rhythm for the fighting, although at the higher levels of mastery, the rhythm comes from within the mind of the fighter. **CUURNU** also seems to provide advantages to fighting in darkness or dim conditions (since the grey death is so prevalent in the islands). Of all the martial arts that I have encountered, **CUURNU** seemed the closest to psionics. There is only so much information I can paint on these cards. If the spymasters would allow me to teach you, I would teach you these skills.

Certainly no spy should think of visiting the Dim Lands without knowledge of this art, since it is the sole method of communication between the villages. Years of isolation have reduced the villagers to separate, mutually unintelligible dialects. It is difficult to explain, but the Eldaarish martial art provides gestures and postures that communicate ideas, allowing battling villages to negotiate a cease-fire, and allowing the master peddlers to hawk their wares to the villages.

### **The Master Peddlers**

Every few months, a hooded, dirty-robed peddler approaches the village, carrying a mountain of goods in a pack. These visits usually occur hours after the Red Guards have left the village -- since if the Guards find the peddler, they will slay him.

You would think that the villagers would welcome these travelers, but the climate of fear in the Dim Lands is such that every peddler must be tested. When an unknown peddler comes to a village, the villagers usually send their best warriors to try to kill him, since he could be a rival villager or a templar spy. During the brief time of testing, the peddler refrains from killing the warriors, as a token of friendship to the village. When the village's strongest all lie bruised or unconscious on the ground, the peddler spreads his wares and trade begins.

All of these peddlers are masters of the Eldaarish martial art. They master not only the combat side of the art, but improvise or mime with the postures and gestures, to the point where they can communicate entire stories. I have seen the master peddlers *telling* these stories for hours, as the villagers (especially the young children!) sit rapt in total silence. I have even seen the villagers share their meager food and drink with the best storytellers.

Villagers who perfect their technique often apprentice to a master peddler, and leave the terrible life of the villages. As a parting gift to their families, the apprentice-to-be assists her village on a final raid against a rival village, in order to obtain a body to give the templars, so that the village is not punished for her "escape". Let another village pay the price. It is how things are done in the dim isles.

The few great masters of the Eldaarish martial art do not peddle wares at all, but act as priests and teachers to the peddlers, who pay them honor and tribute in exchange for training. At least one of these great masters is also a master of the Way.

### **The Domos**

If the Dim lands are a "prison-state," as some say, then the guardians of this prison. In the villages, the domos are the trustees. The templars despise the domos as they do the other villagers, but the domos dress and live as privileged nobles within their village.

When a Domo is elected, the Red Guard see to it that he is quickly isolated from his former peers. The day that he is elected, the Red Guards remove him for days of intense training. The domo returns pale and unwilling to speak of what he have endured. Furthermore, the domos are not permitted to wear the mask or the clothing of the villagers. They are dressed in gilded clothing that never becomes dusty or dirty, and they wear a thin golden collar that seems to magically allow the domo to breathe the siltiest air without injury. Domos are also armed with weapons and scourges to frighten their people into obedience and hard work.

The domos have discretion to determine who works and who rests, who eats and who starves, who gets water for their silt-masks, and who chokes. And yet the villagers possess power over the domo's life: if they fail to meet the quota, the domo dies. Sometimes this mutual fear brings peace and productiveness to a village, and a few domos have lived to die of old age or gluttony.

### **The Red Guards**

To maintain the terrifying isolation between the villages, only the Red Guards travel legitimately between villages, and between the villages and the capital. Their silent dominance holds the villages in a pitiless grip. Not a single village that I saw had its own well or source of grain -- all of this comes from the Red Guards. Some of the villages

raise flocks of cattle, but they are not allowed to slay them, on penalty of death. The more clever villages raise hidden caves of mushrooms to supplement the food ration, but to be caught is death. The law says that *those not content to live from the king's hand will die by the king's boot*.

When the Red Guards come to collect the quota and to deliver the food and water, they also make a count of the villagers, and collect the dead. They do not keep names, but they keep count of the villagers, and if anyone is missing for the count, two people's rations are cut permanently from the village's food and water, and the quota is not decreased. For this reason, whole villages conspire to prevent each other from escaping. When a fellow villager does escape, the village sometimes resorts to extreme measures such as killing someone from another village so as to have a body to give the Red Guards. Once in a great while, an entire village has tried to make a break together. They rarely get far. Those that do make it usually find their way to the gate of Kurn, where they live prosperously as your slaves, while you Kurns snigger at their fearful demeanors.

### **The Stalkers**

The Red Guards do not represent the villagers' greatest fear. When darkness creeps in and candles burn out, I saw the parents trembling. Huddled their stone fortresses, they told of invisible monsters that stole babies, or switched them in their cradles. I thought these stories superstition, until I first perceived a Stalker in the act.

I have managed to capture, examine, and destroy nearly a dozen of these Stalkers, and I have stalked over a hundred. Some were defiler-wizards. Most were mindbenders. Most of them were living beings, human defilers and mindbenders. Four of them (clearly the most powerful ones) were corporeal undead. I suspect that Daskinor kills his defilers and mindbenders when they reach a certain level of ability, so that he might control them more completely. Since the undead never die, Eldaarich may be filled with legions of undead mindbenders.

The Stalkers' duties appear to include patrolling the countryside, spying on the villagers and templars, relaying messages to the drummers — and stealing and replacing babies. From a practical standpoint, I suppose this business of exchanging babies is Daskinor's method of preventing inbreeding without breaking the isolation. Even among the templars — I observed the Stalkers spying on their homes as well, in the outskirts of the capital. It stands to reason that their babies are exchanged as well. Standing at the crossways, I used the Way to see Stalkers carrying babies towards the capital, or away from the capital. I assume that they use magic or the Way to determine which children show promise at defiling, priestcraft, or the Way, and which children should be given to the villagers. I doubt that more than half of Eldaarish children are switched by this means. The parents guard the babies furiously, and the stalkers seem unwilling to risk being seen or detected. Surprisingly, the villagers raise the *changeling* child even though it is not their own. Their practical reason: the templars provide an adult's allotment of food and water for every baby or child in the village, and do not include a matching adult's share in the production quota. When the Stalkers are not performing the duties that I described above, they return to the capital.

### **The Wraiths**

The villagers whisper stories of Stalkers taking possession of a living person, but I believe that they are referring to the actions of the incorporeal undead that Eldaarish templars refer to as *Wraiths*. One of these creatures saw through my disguise once, and I barely escaped with my life. If these creatures are at all like the ones called *Wraiths* in the Seven Cities, then these *Wraiths* are probably the ones that take possession of bodies.

Occasionally during wartime, whole village populations disappear. Given that the villagers never are permitted to touch weapons, the fact that I never saw a standing Eldaarish army other than the Red Guard, and the stories of savage and fearless Eldaarish warriors that pour out of South Guard and Silt Side, I believe that Daskinor uses wraith-possessed villagers to fight his wars.

Think of it: the Eldaarish squads attack fearlessly, with keen tactics, they fight savagely to the death ... but only the villagers die, and the wraiths creep out of their bodies subtly after the battle, leaving Daskinor's real army intact. I would suggest that our templars devise an area attack that harms only the undead. It has been decades since our last skirmish with Eldaarich, but our friends in Winter's Nest could use an effective weapon.

### **The Farmers**

While much of the grain that feeds the Dimlanders is now purchased from Kurn, this has not always been so. I found farmlands outside the outer walls of the capital, and farmers dressed as villagers: black robes and **SILTERS**. At first I assumed that those who produced the food are slaves, as they are in most of the seven cities. But the absence of domo supervisors suggests a darker secret about those who till and harvest the soil. I found that beneath those masks and suits are the animated corpses of the villagers. Daskinor trusts no living soul to harvest food, lest they eat the fruits of their own labor and cease to eat from his hand.

Eldaarish Nobles technically own the fertile lands around the capital, but the mansions on their outer estates are ruined and desolate. The nobles live within the city walls of Eldaarich, and only leave the capital to assign the undead laborers provided by the templars, to replace broken agricultural tools, and to carry baskets of harvested

grain to the templars, who in turn dispense back to the nobles what they can eat. Other Eldaarish nobles own herds, and use living slaves to tend them, but these herds are mostly pastured within the city.

## **The City of Eldaarich**

While each village is a fortress into itself, Eldaarich, the capital, is monstrous to behold. The stonework of Eldaarich is exquisite, designed to arrest the heart with horror and dismay. Nevertheless, I found it surprisingly easy to penetrate Eldaarich's walls, dressed in the robes and mask of a Red Guard. As long as I did not use psionics, as long as I looked like I was about my business, no one intercepted me as I moved through the gates of black stone.

Within the walls of Eldaarich, the ground slopes to the center like a bowl, and then levels in a central oval called the *inner city*. The sloping *outer city* includes a small noble district, and the rest is filled with the houses and caves of free citizens. The flat *inner city* at the center includes the city arena, the Temple of Founders, the Temple of the King's Eye, and hundreds of privileged citizens who for some reason I was unable to fathom live alongside the templars in newer houses at the city center. At the south-eastern edge of the inner city, the Rock, Daskinor's high citadel, juts up like a half-melted candle, climbing to far above the top walls of the city. A steep bridge climbs from the eastern edge of the inner city, to the lower gates of the Rock. Prisoners, alive, dead, and undead, hang in cages beneath the bridge.

If you manage, as I did, to look down on the city from the citadel above, the purpose behind this insane layout becomes frighteningly clear. Most of the homes in the city have a dome or flat roof made of glass -- giving the king a clear view into the building itself. It is as if to tell the king: *we have nothing to hide*. It seems that King Daskinor has difficulties with trust.

Around the rim of the inner city, a number of barred trap doors lead to various *under-villages* of laborers. *Under-villagers* live, work, breed, and die underground, without ever seeing the sun, stars, or sky.

### **The Temple of the King's Boot**

The low, flat, windowless building of the Red Guards sits undisturbed near the Northern gates of the city. Free citizens are expected to contribute at least one qualified boy per generation to the Red Guard. The child is selected before it can speak, and the parents never hear from him again. However, they are permitted to burn a red candle in the window, to indicate their contribution to the city. Households without red candles burning are sometimes looted and vandalized by the Red Guard.

### **The Temple of the King's Hand**

In Eldaarich, you find that not all of Daskinor's templars are Red Guards. In fact, the white-garbed templars of The Temple of the King's Hand, also known as *the King's Handmaidens*, seem as kindly as any Eldaarish. The handmaidens are responsible for all of Eldaarich's legal food distribution. They are also the templars most often in Daskinor's personal presence ... they nurse him to health during his fits of insanity, or I should rather *say they labor to prolong his brief episodes of lucidity*. Supposedly, the Handmaidens are never allowed to leave the city. My guess is that Eldaarich's current experiment with rational inter-city trade is due to a handmaiden who somehow obtained permission to travel to Silt Side. I am fairly confident that Azeth does not negotiate with the Red Guards!

*The Temple of the King's Hand* is the Handmaiden's complex of storehouses and bakeries, surrounded with a high brown walls covered in murals of bounteous harvests. Food is exchanged for ceramic coins through barred windows, and citizens of Eldaarich often spend hours waiting in line for bread. Food is illegally available in private establishments in the Free district, but the prices are gouging. Most of the handmaidens do not live in the King's Hand complex, but in the citadel itself, with the King.

### **The Temple of the King's Eye**

Few set foot beyond the open gate, into the circular pavilion of the Temple of the King's Eye. The Stalkers keep this temple, but the Eldaarish never see them, and fear this place as they fear the King. This is a place of judgment. Only the most desperate of plaintiffs ever calls for the King's judgment, but when they do, the accuser and accused are escorted by templars to the Pavilion of the King's Eye, where *both* accuser and accused are judged. Someone or something (probably a powerful sentient empowered psionic object) probes accuser and accused until they both collapse weeping and half-insane on the pavilion floor. The condemned parties (sometimes the accused, sometimes the accuser, and often both) finally confess and shriek out their own sentences -- compelled telepathically, I assume.

### **The Temple of Founders**

*The Temple of Founders* is a partially open complex of ancient buildings next to the city arena. The *Founders* are a few hundred statues of ancient templars, warriors, and heroes of Eldaarich. Some of these statues are reputed to speak, and to command the thousands of wraiths that inhabit the lower levels of the temple. I do not know if the *Founders* are real, or if the statues are simply possessed by wraiths; most likely the Founders are the wraiths themselves, and the statues are the images of the people that they once were, or imagine that they were.

The Nobles often consult with the Founders while running the Arena games next door. The Founders also consult with the Red Guard raiding parties that sometimes leave the Dim lands against the herders, the Aarakokra, and, until an age ago, against Kurnan villages. Sometimes these hunting parties are accompanied by wraith-possessed villagers, who return to Eldaarich with foreign prisoners and animals who are to die in the arena games, for the entertainment of Daskinor and his people.

### **Orkuta Temple**

Across from the Temple of the King's Hand in New Market Square, another set of templars, the blue-robed Haleban, sell the worked goods brought in by the Red Guards. For some reason the Haleban seem to be contained to the inner city, but not to the citadel. The Haleban have an odd collection of duties – they oversee construction of public works, distribute worked goods, and run the state schools. They are totally unarmed except for walking canes, live alongside privileged citizens within the inner city, and yet for some reason the Eldaarish seem to fear them as much as they fear the Red Guards.

### **The Rock**

Built on a great basalt pillar, the King's citadel, known as *The Rock*, looms hundreds of feet above the city, its insane spire rising above the highest dust clouds. Most of the citadel is empty, except for a few *favorites* - unfortunate handmaidens who are condemned to spend every moment soothing the erratic King.

I noted another organization in the citadel: The Watchers, a group of powerful psions who maintain the unparalleled psionic defenses over the Dim Lands. The Watchers spend days at a time in a state of convergence, dropping out to rest and regain psychic strength. At least one of the converged psions must be living, so that the Watchers can switch personalities with an unfortunate whose harbinger crosses their interceptive fields. As you may have heard from the school gossips, this is how my own interesting sojourn into Eldaarich began.

Be warned. Do not scry the Dim Lands. Do not use telepathy to contact someone who is near the borders of the Dim Lands -- unless you think you can best a dozen converged mindbenders.

### **Eldaarich in Recent Years -- and Future Ages**

Minor changes appear to be coming to Eldaarich. After returning to Kurn, I learned that House Azeth after decades of persistence had managed to open negotiation with Eldaarish templars, and so for the first time in ages, Kurnan food, water, and clothing are exchanged for Eldaarish gold, silver, and copper through Azeth's trade village at Silt Side. Through a little stealth I was able to verify through Azeth logs that the timing of the first shipment corresponded to the increases in rations and supplies delivered to the villages.

Recent Eldaarish refugees also bring back talk of an anti-psionic purge in Eldaarich – even the templars banned from using psionics on pain of death. It is not that I think Daskinor is too sane to make such a blunder, but rather than I find the news too good to believe. If this news were true, and if the prohibition held, then Daskinor's ages-old hold on the islands would falter. There is no way he could have kept such tight control for two thousand years without the power of his psionic templars and undead. Without the psionic wards, we could get spies in and out of his borders as easily as we do in the Seven Cities. Perhaps Kurnan wizards might even be able to revive the Eldaarish Veiled Alliance.

My training and experience teaches me to distrust appearances. I do not see liberty on the Eldaarish horizon. Some templars are clearly trying to stave off collapse of the villages that sustain their power. They have their desperate people by the throat; if their grip loosens it is only because they do not wish their prey to strangle. Tighten—loosen—tighten again ... it is a dangerous dance that has lasted dozens of ages in the dim islands.

If you are ever assigned to Eldaarich, may you be ready. Do not volunteer for such assignments unless you have nerves of steel and a mind of ice. Weigh my words carefully before you set foot into the land of endless drums.

### **-Prodigy, Veteran Spy**