STEEL AGE



CORE RULES COMPENDIUM



For Jesse, Nat and Chris on the "River Constantinople"

For Tony, Sharon, Heather and Kristin

and for Daga who makes me want to be better

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SPECIAL THANKS

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Introduction



"Watch out," cried Viktor. Freyja heard the warning at the last moment before the arrow struck her shield. The thunk registered for only a heartbeat before her attention snapped back to the attacker in front of her. The blows her armor had turned aside when the bandit slipped past her guard were beginning to tell, and her breathing had grown heavy. Another bandit was emerging from the woods. He would soon join the engagement. After that, the outcome would be predictable. Two blades against her one tired spear.

She needed to end this fast.

Freyja mustered her resolve as she heard Viktor chanting behind her. Whatever working he was weaving tingled through her limbs, almost guiding her hand as she feinted low with her spear, then drove upward as the bandit took the bait. The point found yielding flesh in her opponent's neck. He crumpled, gasping.

The second bandit slowed. She could see the calculation happening behind his eyes — the math of a man who had picked a target and was now reconsidering the arithmetic.

He ran.

Freyja leaned on her spear and let him go. Her side ached where the axe had caught her. Viktor looked pale, hands at his sides, whatever he had spent on her behalf already costing him somewhere she couldn't see. Twelve miles to the next settlement. The wound needed tending before dark.

"We should move," she said. "Before something smells this."

The roads that still exist were built by dead men.

The few surviving chronicles of the fall agree on little. The songs that are still sung, of which there are many more, agree on even less. Three generations have passed since the last great order fell. Long enough for children born under the smoke of its undoing to grow old and die. Long enough for ruined keeps to have their walls breached by the relentless siege of time and vine, for roads and names of places to vanish from maps. It is not long enough for memory to fade.

Those memories take the shape of baronies, starostwa and jarldoms, more than fifty by a heraldman's reckoning and fewer by any count that asks who can hold what they claim. A strong gate can mean order. A mile beyond it can mean hunger, bandits, old grudges, monsters, or worse. Still, the fields are planted. Oaths are still sworn, caravans move under guard and mostly return, the dying are still blessed in the name of gods no one alive has ever seen. The world has not ended. It has narrowed.

Steel Age is a game about living in that narrowing. It is about what happens when a blade is drawn in dying light and everyone present understands, at once, that something irreversible may follow. It is about fatigue, fear, wounds that do not vanish, roads that take longer than they should, and choices made because no clean choice exists. It is about the songs that will be sung in their wake.

This is not grimdark. It is tragic fantasy. The world is hard, but meaning is real. Fear matters because life matters. Names matter because they are carried on the lips of those who must take their place. A person is measured not by safety, but by what they do when the road darkens and the cost becomes clear. Its heroes are not Achilles in his splendor, but Hector before the walls.

Who You Play

One of you is the Game Master, or GM. The GM plays Dyrhal itself: its lords and reeves, every stranger at the way-house fire, whatever waits past the treeline. The GM tells the players what their characters find and decides how the world answers what they do. Everyone else is a player, and each player plays one character, a single person in Dyrhal whose words and choices are that player's alone.

Most characters begin as ordinary human beings shaped by wherever they came from, with the skills that place taught them and the obligations it left on them. Some serve a lord, a shrine, a guild, or a household. Some work for coin. Some carry debts they did not choose. In Dyrhal, most people live inside structures of duty, faith, labor, and fear, and they stay there. Player characters are the ones who begin to move at the edges — between settlement and wilderness, safety and exposure, obedience and necessity. They are the people who may become worth remembering.

What Kind of Game Is This?

Any game can say its world is hard. What makes Steel Age worth a night at your table is what the dice are made to do about it. Start with the fight.

Most close combat in Steel Age resolves in a few opposed rolls, and what those rolls decide is not whether you hit but who holds control. Win the clash and you have momentum; press it and the blade goes in. Lose it and you are the one being pressed. Opening Order is set once, momentum carries from round to round until something breaks it, and every exchange costs breath, so a fight that begins even does not stay even for long. It tips, and once it tips it wants to keep tipping. That is why fatigue, not the sword, is the real killer in Dyrhal, and why the wisest move in a bad fight is often to get out of it. A single mistake can end a life, no matter how skilled you are.

Then there are the things that would make a fight safe in another game, and do not here. Magic is rare, feared, and paid for in strain and blood, and steel, preparation, and the people standing beside you will do more for you than any Working. There are no classes and no scripted builds. Your character is the sum of what they have done under pressure. Wounds heal in days, not moments, some leave scars, and a hard road takes as much out of you as a hard fight.

And the world does not scale to meet you. A foe who could kill you in your first season can still kill you in your fifth. It lets the GM put believable threats in your way — a bandit troop, a river in flood, a thane with a grudge — without escalating toward spectacle, and it means that what you gain across a career is judgment. You are tied to living people, and when a character falls, the story can go on through the ones who must take their place. Survival is victory. Names are what outlast it.

Core Resolution at a Glance

Nearly everything uncertain in Steel Age is settled the same way: roll **2d6**, add what matters, and beat the number in front of you. When the world itself is the obstacle — a cliff, a locked door, a fever, a long day's march — that number is a **Challenge Mark** set by the GM. When another creature resists you, the mark rises for their skill, wits and readiness; in a fight or a casting it is their own opposed roll. Ties never go to the one acting; they go to the world or the defender.

Combat, magic, travel, injury, and skills all build on that roll. Which means that once you have made one check in Steel Age you already know how to make all of them.

How to Use This Book

Combat, travel, injury, magic, and character growth all speak the same language, and each chapter assumes you have met the ones before it. You do not need to master the whole book before you begin, but it will make more sense read in order.

If you are a player, start with Setting of Dyrhal, Character Creation, Contacts, and Skills and Advancement. After that, read Combat and whatever later chapter your character depends on — The Unseen Craft if you are Omen-Born, Wealth & Equipment if you are the one carrying the purse.

If you are a GM, add The Unseen Craft, Travel, Injury, and Running the Game to that list before your first session. The remaining chapters can wait until play calls for them. The Glossary in Appendix C gives every term and the page where its rule lives, so that you can find a specific procedure in the middle of a session without rereading a chapter to get there.



A Note From the Designer

Before you dive into the rules of Steel Age and the dangers of Dyrhal, I would like to thank you for your interest in this game.

I read my first roleplaying game rulebook at six years old — my cousin's Boot Hill rulebook, then the red box, of course — and I have been reading them ever since. This book is, in many ways, a love letter to the designers who shaped my imagination. Like every human endeavor, it was built on the work of those who came before it: all those manuals, compendiums, and modules full of fantastic and ingenious ideas that it was my fortune and pleasure to absorb across a lifetime of reading and playing games. If this work gives you even a fraction of the joy that those creators gave me, I will consider a small part of that debt repaid.

Steel Age was built to be the game I always wanted to play in: one where the world feels true, and where words and choices carry weight because our deeds bear witness to them.

Now, Dyrhal is waiting — the old empires are gone, yet the roads are still there and the watchfires still burn. Beyond their fragile light, older truths resume their place.

FIND THEM.



CHAPTER ONE

Setting of Dyrhal

What follows is Dyrhal as the people who live in it understand it. Not all of it is certain. Scholars argue about where the Nythrasi came from. Priests argue about what the Nine are. Nobody who has stood at a treeline at dusk argues about what lives past it. Where the record is disputed, this chapter says so; where it is not, it tells you what a thane's reeve or a caravan master would tell you, if you asked and they trusted you.

It moves from the near to the far. First, how people actually live now — behind walls, under obligation, inside the reach of somebody's sworn men — and who your characters are within that order. Then the land itself, its peoples, its gods, and the long fall that made the present what it is. If you are a player, the first half is what your character grew up knowing. If you are a GM, the second half is what your world remembers.

The Present Age and Social Order of Dyrhal

Three generations and more have passed since Solkaris burned. In the years after it, Dyrhal drew in on itself. Fields went unworked because there was no one to work them, and settlements emptied because there was no one to hold them. In some places the famine took more than the war had. In others the wilderness did, walking in over the unwatched fields as if it had only been waiting to be asked.

That drawing-in is over. What remains is leaner, harder, and deliberate.

Ask a heraldman and they will name you more than four score lordships on the continent: baronies, starostwa and jarldoms, each with its walled town, or two, and the fortified manors that ring it. Ask instead who can hold what he has named, and the count comes down, and nobody agrees where it stops. All of Dyrhal is claimed. Very little of it is held. Between the ground the monsters keep, and the ground the humanoid tribes and desperate men raid, and the ground two lords have each drawn in their own color on their own maps, only what is patrolled and fortified and defended is possessed, and it is possessed for exactly as long as the patrols go out.

Authority here is a strong gate, a stone wall, a timber palisade, a score of men with spears and hauberks. A lord's power reaches as far as his men can walk before dark and no farther, and it thins with every mile from the gate the way light thins from a doorway. A road unguarded for two tendays becomes dangerous. A watchtower left unmanned becomes a den.

Life in the Shadow of the Wall

Most people in Dyrhal are born, live and die within a day's walk of the gate they first saw from their mother's arms. This is not a failure of ambition. It is the shape of a rational life in a dangerous world.

THE COUNT AT DUSK

I keep the gate, so I keep the count. Eleven went out to the far strips this morning. I do not write it down; I do not need to. When the light goes I stand where I can see the road and I count them back in, and I do not shut the bar until the number is right or the priest tells me to. Twice in my years the number has not been right. Both times we knew by full dark what had happened, and both times there was nothing to do about it but bar the gate anyway. People here do not say goodbye in the morning. They say what the light will be doing when they mean to be back.

— Tova Ashgrim, gate-warden, Barony of Orchyvas

THE MAP IN THE HALL

The baron had us to dinner, the caravan masters, the way he does before the roads open. On the wall behind his chair there is a map, and I had time to study it while the speeches went on. His barony is drawn on it in red, right up to the river and over it, and the next lord's in blue, and the line between them runs clean through country I have been walking for twenty years. Nobody patrols within fifteen miles of that line — or nobody, and nothing, wearing either baron's colors. I have paid tolls to the baron's men on his side and to bandits on his side and to nothing at all on his side, and the map shows none of it. I drank his wine and did not say so. The borders on a map are what a lord intends. The border that matters is the last place a man will stand for him.

— Bettan Rusk, caravan master, Merchants' Guild of Strandholdt

WHOSE WORD IS LAW

In the town the baron's word is law and nobody argues it. Out here it is the Thane's, and nobody argues that either, for a plainer reason. The baron is nine miles off. The Thane is the man who decides whether the gate opens for you when you come in late with the light going. I have seen him keep it shut on a stranger and I have seen him open it for a family he had quarreled with all summer. Both times he was right. You do not question the man who holds the gate at dusk. You thank him, and you are inside before he changes his mind.

— Orm Fell, reeve of a manor holding, Barony of Orchyvas

MEN I CANNOT SPARE

Every man I send into those ruins is a man not standing the wall. Every man I lose to whatever lives in the old Aurikronton keep is a man I cannot replace before harvest season. My sworn men are for the hard tasks — the wall, the road, the lord across the river who has been eyeing the ford since spring. I will not spend that strength on rats and rubble.

What I will do is what I have always done. There are men in the cells who would prefer a hard road to a short one. There are desperate freemen at the gate every month who have run out of better options. I give them terms, a purse if they come back, and the understanding that whatever they find in there is theirs to keep above the fee. More than half of them do not come back. The ones who do are harder and usually willing to go again.

It is not a proud arrangement. But my walls are standing and my men are fed and I have not had to explain to any widow why her husband died clearing someone else's century-old problem. I call that governance.

— Lord Hareth Vorn, Baron of Orchyvas, from a letter to his Alder-Reeve

WE ARE HOLDING

My father used to say the wall keeps nothing out that truly wants in. He was not wrong. But he also lived behind it his whole life, and so did I, and so will my children if I have anything to say about it. The year the patrols thinned — the baron had a dispute east and pulled the men — we lost two families from the outer holdings before the first frost. People I had known since I was a girl. They simply did not come to market one tenday, and then we found out why.

The ones who left did not all go far. Some took to the roads south looking for easier ground, softer lords, less to fear at the tree line. A few came back inside a season. The ones who did not — I heard things, later. Most of what I heard I believed. Dyrhal does not reward the assumption that somewhere else is safer. The wall and a harsh thane you know are better than the open country you do not. My mother taught me that. I have not found a reason to argue with her.

It is hard. But we are here because our grandparents were here and theirs before them. We stayed when leaving would have been easier. That is its own kind of claim, even if no charter says so. We are not surviving. We are holding.

— Helga Brautsdóttir, peasant, Barony of Orchyvas

The land past the patrolled roads is occupied, by things that keep no borders and answer to no lord, and that have grown bolder in the three generations since the legions stopped hunting them. A farmer working the last strip inside a barony's patrols knows this better than any map can tell him. The treeline is the line between a world that can be defended and one that cannot, and on a still evening he can hear which side of it he is on.

Children learn where safety ends before they learn anything else. They learn the distance from the field to the nearest palisade the way children elsewhere learn prayers, by repetition. They learn which roads are walked and which are not. They learn to heed a fading sun's light, and that a traveler who is not back by nightfall is usually not coming back.

What lives past the treeline shapes everything on this side of it. It shapes trade. Nothing moves between towns without guards, and guards must be fed. Grain, salt, iron, and cloth all cost more because someone must pay to carry them safely. A merchant's prices reflect the hazards of the road as much as the value of the goods.

It shapes what people are, so deeply that they no longer know it as an answer to anything. Hospitality to a known traveler is an obligation people would sooner die than fail. A stranger with no lord and no guild is looked at hard, not out of cruelty but out of memory. An oath is sworn with a gravity that outsiders find excessive, until the night their life turns on whether a man meant what he said, and after that they find its weight about right.

None of this is a land without hope, and it should not be read as one. The towns endure. The harvests come in, most years. Children grow up and build things their parents did not have. But hope in Dyrhal is a thing done on purpose, against the evidence, by people who have decided that what they are holding is worth what it costs to hold it. Nobody here lives long beyond the reach of a wall, and nobody here mistakes the wall for the reason they are alive.

The Shape of Safety

Stand on the wall of any town of consequence in Dyrhal and look out, and the land arranges itself in the same manner it does across the continent. Concentric rings of safety. Nobody decreed this. The same dangers teach the same lessons everywhere. The same pressures forge the same shapes.

At the center is the town, and every yard of it is spoken for. The lord's hall and the two guildhalls take the best ground; guild freemen, commoners and the lord's men crowd the rest. Only some inside work a field. All of them eat from one.

After the town, the innermost ring runs about three miles from the wall. Here the roads are walked every day and the fields are kept the year round, and people sleep in their own beds with their own doors barred. Whatever comes in is met quickly. This is as safe as Dyrhal gets outside a settlement's wall, and even here no one goes out to work the fields without a look at the sky and a word at the shrine.

Beyond it lies the manor ring, six miles deeper, and the fortified manors of the thanes (the Komes, in a starostwo) whose sworn duty it is to hold it. The farms here are as good as any and worked harder, because the light is the fence. From first light to last the fields are full; when the dark comes the farmers are inside a manor wall, thankful for the spears and mail that hold it. The lord's patrols, venturing out from the settlement, walk a two-day circuit and reach the outer edge every other day, at best. Those gaps are known. They are known by the people who sleep behind the manor walls, and they are known by whatever watches from beyond the treeline, which has had three generations to learn the patrols' habits and has been a good student.

Past the manor ring there are no homes and no fields worked by anyone who means to live in anything resembling safety. There is the fringe: the mine, the timber camp, the hunting ground, worked because a barony must have iron and timber and meat and cannot get them from inside a wall. Parties go out with one purpose and come back the same day when they can. Past even that, the land belongs to whatever has claimed it. No patrol goes there on purpose.

How a Barony Is Held

Take Orchyvas, a barony of middling size on the northern road. Its lord is Hareth Vorn, and Hareth Vorn is a baron. In a starostwo he would be a starosta and among the Skeljari a jarl; the titles are cultural, the office is the same, and the office is older than any of them. A baron was once a man with a duke above him and an emperor above the duke. There has been no one above a baron for three generations, and no baron has yet dared to call himself more, because every baron knows what a baron now is.

Inside the manor ring, Vorn's word is law. At the treeline it is an opinion. He holds one walled town, the fields within a morning's walk of it, and nothing else that he does not pay men to stand on.

What he pays them with is other men's grain. Ringed around the town, three to nine miles out, sit the fortified manors of his thanes, and each thane's title comes with a number attached: so many professional men-at-arms, equipped and fed and housed at the thane's cost. Those men do not answer to the thane. They answer to Vorn. A thane who took it into his head to march on his neighbor would find that the spears in his own yard belonged to the baron, and would find it out from the spears. The wealthier thanes keep a few household men of their own, a manor reeve's escort, a pair at the door, and these are a mark of standing and never a force. Every soldier in Orchyvas is a farmer not in the fields, and every dead one is a smaller harvest next year. Trained men-at-arms are the true coin of power in Dyrhal, and the baron's grip on that currency is how a barony survives its own protectors.

The town's two guilds are held to the same bargain. In Dyrhal a holding has the tradition and people for two and rarely more. The merchants' guild owns the caravans and the barges and the right to trade.

SETTING NOTE

Most baronies have one town because one town is what they can keep. Its walls take men, its men take grain, and the manors around it have only so much of either to spare. A second town needs walls and sworn men of its own, and someone there to command them when trouble comes and the baron is several days' march away. In time the townsfolk look to that man, and the nearby thanes bring their quarrels to his hall. His children may still send tribute. His grandchildren are likely to wonder why. Many of Dyrhal's baronies began as somebody else's second town.

WHAT THE CHARTER BUYS

People think the charter is about prices. It is about the wall. The baron lets us keep every trade in this town closed to anyone we have not trained, and in return I put fourteen men on the roll every winter, fed and armed at the guild's cost, and I do not get to choose which fourteen.

The year we sent twelve he did not fine us. He came to the hall and asked, in front of the journeymen, which two of them had decided their lives were worth more than the wall. Nobody has sent short since.

— Otmar Wenn, Guildmaster of the Craftsmen's Guild, Orchyvas

IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE BEER

I plow the field the thane calls his, I sow the seed the baron owns, I reap the grain the reeve counts twice, and the wolves can have my bones.

So pour it out and count me in before the gate shuts up at dusk; the thane has the wall, the baron the thane, and I have the ale and the husk.

Nine days I owe the manor ditch, nine more I owe the road, the baron's men eat at my board and call it a light load.

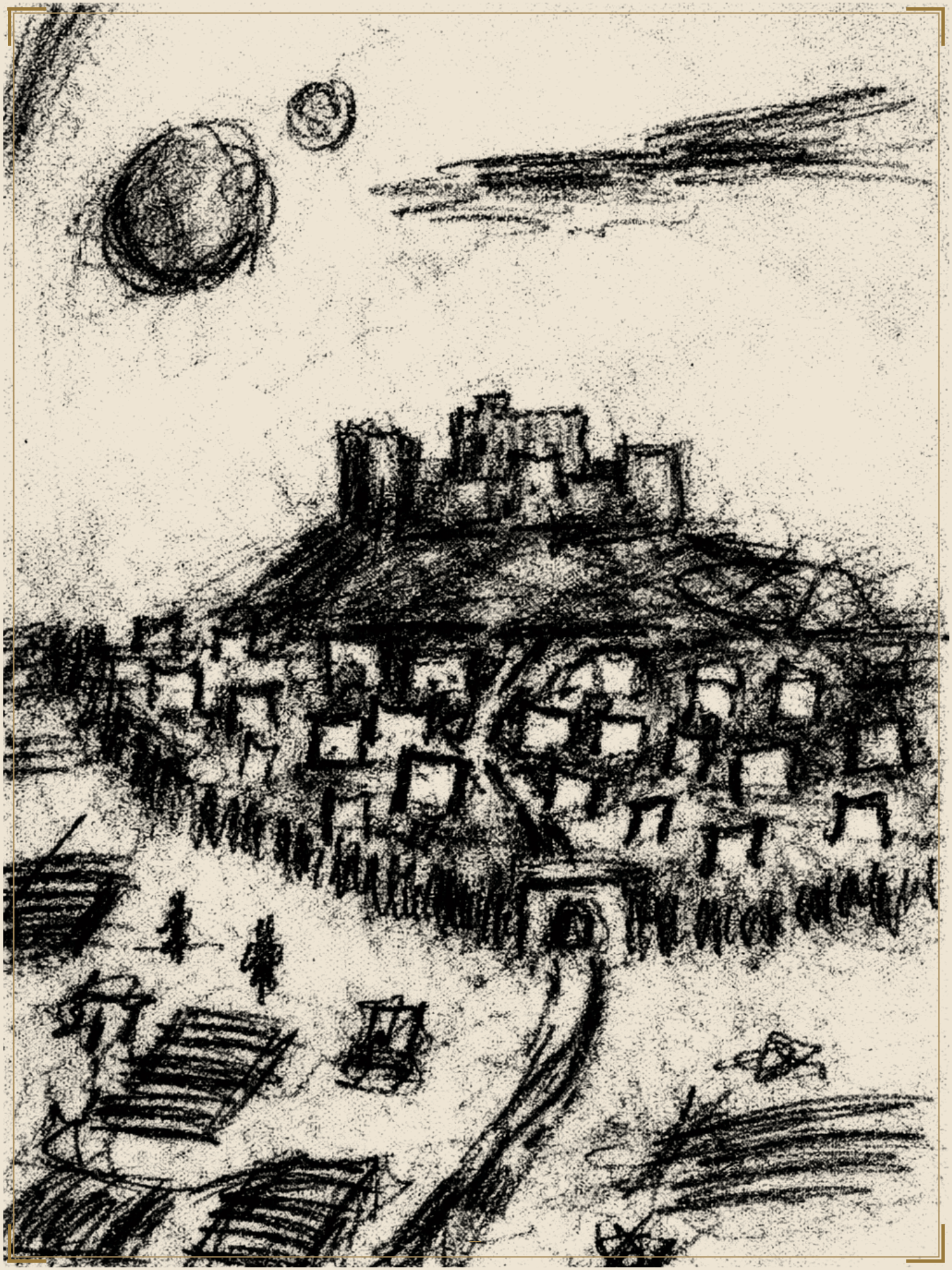
My brother cleared the baron's road the spring the river rose; the river cleared my brother too, and that is how it goes.

And when the howling comes at night I lie behind his stone, I curse the thane with every breath and bless him with each bone.

So pour it out and count me in before the gate shuts up at dusk; the thane has the wall, the baron the thane, and I have the ale and the husk.

They say there is a kinder lord a tenday's walk from here. I'd go tomorrow, so I would, if it weren't for the beer.

— common tavern song



The craftsmen's guild holds every skilled trade from the forge to the tannery. A charter from Vorn lets the merchants set the tolls and the craftsmen keep their trades closed, and in return each guild owes him coin and a quota of trained men, and a rich guild can put more men on the wall than a poor thane can. Guild members are freemen, and a guildmaster's word carries in the baron's hall. Nothing worth taking leaves Orchyvas except in a guarded caravan or on a barge with armed men aboard.

Below the guilds stands nearly everyone else. Commoners live within reach of the baron's or one of his thanes' walls, work the land or a trade, and get protection and a share of the granary for it. What they do not get is arms. A belt knife, a wood-axe and a hunting bow are tools. Vorn, like every lord in Dyrhal, does not teach those who are meant to work the land the spear. A farmer taught the spear is a harvest lost and a rebellion armed. A strong one or a clever one may be taken into the men-at-arms or apprenticed into a guild, and some rise that way. Most do not, and do not expect to.

What Player Characters Are

Most people in Dyrhal do not go armed. Steel means something. A blade, a mail shirt, a war spear each say that the one carrying it has station and a sanction, or is willing to be asked about them by the sworn men who keep a lord's peace. Whether the asking is a nod or a lowered spear depends on where they are, their reputation with the lord those men are sworn to, and who is watching from the wall. The hold on violence in Dyrhal is not as complete as a baron would like those who are fed by his lands and guarded by its spears to believe, but it is never absent, either.

Player characters are the rare people who live in the gap between the settlements and certainty. Retainers in a lord's service. Guild blades guarding coin and craft. God-sworn wanderers who go where oaths and walls do not reach. Caravan guards and scouts under a factor's seal, or simply proven survivors whose name reaches a town a day before they do. Whatever they are called, they are the people willing to go where authority thins and the roads go unwalked, where the ruins and rival claims begin, and where people with better options will not go. The glory they win in Dyrhal is measured in towns that are still standing, harvests that were not burned, and names that are still said after the danger has passed.

Where such people are found is no mystery. A company begins at a gate that shuts at dark, in the common room of the way-house outside it, where the ones who did not reach the wall by sundown sleep and the ones a lord will not spend his own men on are hired. It is tasked with the job nobody wants: a mill cleared of what came up out of the fen, a debt collected from a man the reeve will not go near, a caravan that did not come home. If it ends well, it ends with a lord's grudging approval, a guildmaster's note or simply an unbarred gate.

If it does not end well, it is most likely forgotten by all but those who knew the men and women who set out in it.

A CALF HE MEANT TO KEEP

At twelve I was the biggest of my father's sons, and the sergeant who came through at harvest saw it from the road. He put his hands on my shoulders the way my father put his on a calf he meant to keep.

My brothers are still behind the ox, on the strips our grandfather broke. I eat at the thane's table and carry the baron's spear. I was the lucky one. Everyone said so, my mother loudest. My brothers never did.

But they live in the inner ring. They sleep in their own beds, behind their own doors. I think of that when the light goes. Most nights it is enough.

— Wilmar Gerstenfeld, man-at-arms at a thane's manor, Barony of Akada

THE FEE IS THE SAME

I have run the ferry at the Durnovka ford for eleven years and I can tell you who crosses. Farmers, when the market is on the far bank. Sworn men, twice a season, who do not pay. Priests. And then the other kind — two or five together, armed like sworn men but wearing no colors, who pay in coin that has been in the ground and do not say where they are going. I used to ask. Now I take the fee and note which of them come back the other way. About half. The ones who do are quieter on the return, and they tip.

— Pavel Straka, ferryman, the Durnovka ford

OVERHEARD AT THE CRACKED CUP

"Reeve came through the yard this morning asking after men. Not for the wall. For the old watchtower on the north road — the one nobody has manned since my father's time."
"Asking what?"
"Whether any of us could hold a spear and keep our mouths shut. Baron's paying. Silver, not a granary share."
"There is a reason nobody has manned it."
"There is a reason I owe Otmar's guild for two winters of grain, too."
"Half the men who take that kind of silver do not come back to spend it."
"Then the guild can collect from my widow. She would rather have the silver than me."
"That is not true."
"No. But it is nearly."

— two day-laborers, overheard in a tavern at Orchyvas

WHAT THE DOGS ARE FOR

People think the dogs are for the sheep. The sheep know where the fold is. The dogs are for the ridge, where a man can see for miles until the cloud comes down and then cannot see his own feet, and for the one hour at dusk when everything that eats sheep knows exactly where they are.

I run three. Two walk the flock and one walks behind me, and the one behind me is the one that matters. He has never looked at a sheep in his life. He looks at the trees.

The winter the lake froze early the wolves came down to the ring, which they do not do, and took a ewe from under the manor wall with the thane's men standing on it. The dogs did not go into the trees after them. I had taught them that, and I lost the ewe, and nobody in the hall said a word about the dogs afterward.

The one that walks behind me is nine. I have never had a dog that old.

— *Ulrich Falkenberg, herder, a holding in the Barony of Bryn*

THIS SIDE OF THE ASH

You can tell where the used wood stops without looking. The coppice stools give out, the paths stop being paths, and the sound changes; there are birds in the old wood, but they are not the same birds. My father burned charcoal on this slope and his father before him, and neither of them went past the big ash at the top of it, and neither of them told me why, which I took for the usual reason a father says nothing.

I went past it once, for oak. A mile in there was a clamp already, cold, older than me, built the way we build them, with the burner's rake laid across the top the way you lay it when you mean to come back in the morning.

I cut my oak this side of the ash now. It is good enough.

— *Petros Doukas, charcoal burner, Barony of Hesphate*

SAID AT THE FIRST FROST

Count the loft, not the days.
Dig the ditch before the rain and the grave before the frost.
The ice will carry a sledge on the tenth day and a fool on the third.
A wolf at the wall is the wall working.
Spring is a rumor. Firewood is a fact.

— *sayings of the northern starostwa*

The Land of Dyrhal

Dyrhal lies in the northern hemisphere of Telas, a temperate country of forest and water and stone, where the air smells of wet leaves and cold stone, with a spine of mountains that divides its north from its south and turns every road that tries to cross it. It is a severe country from one coast to the other: the south has the mild end of the weather, which is rain and gray water and a winter that rots a boot before it freezes it, and the north has the other end of that wrapped in early frosts.

Most of Dyrhal is trees. Oak and ash and beech in the lowland, pine and birch where the ground rises and everywhere in the north, and the two meet in the wooded hills, which are a great deal of Dyrhal. The worked land is the exception, cut right into them in some cases. Around every settlement, a ring of fields and pasture stretches outward from the wall, first dense with tilled land, then thinning to manor holdings, reaching only as far as the lord's men-at-arms can ward, and beyond that the forest presses in once more. Nearest the ring the wood is used, for charcoal and for swine when the mast falls. Past that it is old, and it belongs to what lives in it.

The rivers are the roads of weight. Grain and timber and ore move by barge where a barge will float. Below the mountains is lake country, the great lakes of the center, of which Tyress is nearly a sea, and the long cold lakes of the north, and between them the fens, where nothing but the causeway is a road. The fruitful areas of the coasts and the gray miles of wind between are worked with one eye on the sea, always watching for a raider's prow or mast.

The uplands are iron country. Ore comes out of the mountains, and a mine is the only reason anyone lives high. There are few passes, every one of them known, and none of them safe. The hills in places were once fire, and off the northern coast Mount Kolasa still is.

Deer keep to the wooded vales and boar to the oak mast, and the herders on the ridge paths keep dogs for what holds to the rest. Wolves are the ordinary danger. In a hard winter they come in to the manor ring, and the teeth bound in wire on a shrine post are what the common folk think of them. The rest is not ordinary. Things the Nythrasi bred are still in the deep forest and fen; in the mountains there are tribes that were never men; and in the barrows and the old places the dead do not always keep still.

Everywhere the land is written on: Nythrasi obelisks in the fields keep strange vigil for their long-vanished masters, the empire's roads straight under the moss, its aqueducts crossing valleys that no longer need them, barrows older than any of it. A ruin is never empty ground.

No empire of law or alien overlords binds Dyrhal together now, yet its people are bound together anyway, by the land itself. Rivers ignore borders. Mountain passes decide what a lord may want. Early frosts decide how many souls that same lord may count the next thaw.

Faith and the Nine

Across the continent the Nine are acknowledged at the shrine and at the household rite. Each of them holds one of the nine months, and the months are marked in the sky, by the turning of Telas's three moons, Naur, Oru and Aesh, blue and rust and gray, and the shapes they make together; the heavens order the calendar and the farming year and the rhythm of worship, and a farmer who cannot read can read that. Their names are known everywhere: Vargthyr, Eirveth, Arkaelos, Farrkjol, Thalarion, Verdaine, Pravon, Tajmork and Lyubera.

What the Nine are is another matter. Some traditions hold that they were mortal heroes who rose in the Nythrasi catastrophe and imprisoned a greater and more terrible power, which they name only as the Nameless Tenth. Others claim the Nine are not separate beings at all but aspects of that same nameless primordial thing, divided in some ancient age. Still others argue that the Tenth never existed, and that the Nine are symbols given divine form by centuries of devotion. There is no consensus. Nor is there anyone who has not, on some night, taken a side.

The gods do not walk the land. They do not come down in glory or speak out of fire, and no one alive has seen one. They are known by omen, by lunar alignment, by small signs. The arrangement of the moons is studied with care, and a birth under a particular sky is watched for the rest of that child's life. Those children are the Omen-Born, and the midwives, priests and old folk who mark them are seldom in doubt about which they are.

Temples once stood in every settlement of consequence. The great ones are ruins now, and worship in Dyrhal has gone back to what it always was beneath them: the shrine, the hearth and the oath. There are no orders. A shrine has a keeper, who sweeps it and takes in what is brought, and a priest if the place can feed one, and neither answers to anyone above them. A hedge-priest or a wandering preacher answers to no one at all.

At Orchyvas there is a shrine of Vargthyr a stone's throw outside the north gate, where the road begins: a roofed post and a stone, kept by a man called Mirek Sobol, who drove carts for the merchants' guild until his knees went. Passersby leave a tooth or a claw bound in wire on the post and ask that the wolves be turned and the roof spared. He does not know whether Vargthyr hears.

An oath sworn in a god's name carries the weight of law and of custom, which in Dyrhal are the same weight. The symbol worn at the throat or inside the collar does not keep harm off. It claims who will be displeased by it.

In a country of fallen kingdoms, shattered sorcerer towers and the ruins of an empire, the idea of something that endures holds power over people. Whether the Nine guard Dyrhal, or divide it, or only watch, no one knows. But their names are still spoken.

The Three Moons

*Telas keeps three moons, and no two of them keep the same time. **Oru** is the largest and the warmest to look at, a rust-red disc that rides high through the growing months and sinks away as the cold comes; the old farmers say the year begins when Oru clears the trees. **Naur** is smaller, blue-white and hard-edged, and it rules the winter sky, bright enough on a clear night to cast a shadow and cold enough, the saying goes, to freeze the shadow where it falls. **Aesh** is the third and the least loved — gray, quick, and inconstant, closest in the campaigning months and the sailing months, the moon of war and of the road. Where two of them rise together the month takes its name, and each such rising belongs to one of the Nine.*

The Moons and the Months

Eirvethon *Dead Winter*	Eirveth	● ● ●
Tajmorkar *Long Darkness*	Tajmork	● ● ●
Vargthyrion *Spring's Fury*	Vargthyr	● ● ●
Verdaineis *Growing Season*	Verdaine	● ● ●
Farrkjolar *High Work Season*	Farrkjol	● ● ●
Arkaelios *Campaigning Season*	Arkaelos	● ● ●
Pravonar *Harvest*	Pravon	● ● ●
Thalarionis *Last Voyages*	Thalarion	● ● ●
Lyuberan *Year's End*	Lyubera	● ● ●

● *Oru* ● *Naur* ● *Aesh* *large: dominant · small: near · faint: distant*

A birth is marked against the alignment of that night. A child born when the moons stand as the chart shows for a month is that god's, and if a small sign attends the birth — a candle leaning, a rook at the window — the household will remember it for the rest of the child's life.

THE RITUAL

The ritual is the thing I keep returning to. Not the conquest — conquest has a logic to it, even when it is brutal. But a sorcerer house powerful enough to hold a continent for six hundred years, choosing to end itself in a single act of collective ambition. That is not desperation. That is certainty. They believed it would work.

What they were attempting, the sources do not agree on. Immortality is the common answer, but I think that is too simple. The structures they left behind — the obelisks, the deep foundations, the sealed vaults we have never opened — those are not the work of people planning to live forever. They are the work of people planning to leave.

The Drezdani lore says that when the survivors came to the places where the Nythrasi had gathered for the ritual, there was nothing. No bodies. No wreckage. Only gray ash across the ground, uniform and cold, as if something had been burned away at the root.

I do not know where they intended to go. I am not sure anyone does. I am not sure anyone has thought to ask that question carefully.

— Vasek Drel, antiquarian, Free City of Strandholdt



A History Written in Ash

Of Dyrhal's earliest centuries little is known, and the little is argued over; but the scholars agree that the ancestors of the Drezdani have held the continent for most of the time anyone has kept a record of it. In time the Drezdani settled into nine kingdoms, bound by one custom and one faith and divided by lake and forest and old grudge, and at times a High King rose among them, first among equals and never sovereign of all. The old songs disagree on how many High Kings there were. But they name many and give each of them a virtue, a flaw and usually a storied death.

That balance ended with the coming of the Nythrasi. Where they came from is still argued. Some say by sea, from beyond the southern deserts of Keshar; others say they were not of this world at all, and there are days on the old roads when that is the easier thing to believe. What is certain is that they wielded a sorcery the Drezdani had no answer to, magics that held the gods in contempt, and the nine kingdoms fell one by one.

For nearly six centuries the Nythrasi ruled Dyrhal with an alien arcane might. They reshaped the land with works whose purpose is still not known: obelisks, foundations sunk deeper than any well, and vaults that have never been opened. The lucky among the Drezdani were the ones kept as thralls. Others were taken for magics that bred beasts that had no business being born, whose seemingly unnumbered spawn now stalk the forests and nightmares of Dyrhal.

Some imagine they were made as footmen for the internecine quarrels that were sport to the Nythrasi noble houses. No one is certain why they were made, but there were few risings against power such as that. Drezdani history is told through song, often with mention of heroes. There are almost no songs from this time, and no heroes of the Drezdani people receive a serenade.

What is remembered is that the Nythrasi did not rule as one. Their houses held Dyrhal against each other, and quarreled with magics and beasts. And through all six centuries they dug, scouring the land in no order legend can find, as a man goes through a bought house for what the last owner hid. What they sought, no record says; the Drezdani who dug were not told.

Their dominion ended in ambition.

Suddenly the digging ceased and the Nythrasi were called to attempt something the Drezdani could only imagine was a bid for immortality. The Nythrasi nobility gathered for a ritual on a scale nothing since has matched. That a nobility which could not share a river gathered, every house in one place for one working, is what the scholars cannot explain and the Drezdani do not try to. It failed spectacularly, or it succeeded at something else. The Nythrasi were gone in an instant, all of them, and the Drezdani who came afterward to the places where they had gathered found no bodies and no wreckage. Only ash, gray and even and cold, across the ground. Left behind were subjects who had not known freedom in over half a thousand years, and the monsters that their masters had held on a leash and now did not.



Revival and Conquest

From that chaos the Drezdani found leaders, and the leaders began taking the land back, and over some generations the outlines of the nine kingdoms could be seen again on the ground. Heroes filled songs again. It was a restoration of form, a shape remembered and cut again, and it was brief.

From the eastern seas came the Aurikronton.

They were driven from their own heartlands by the empire that would become Parzashar, and they landed hardened by the losing of one home and set on not losing another. Their legions came ashore disciplined and heavily armored and ordered for war, driven as only a people with nothing behind them can be driven, and among them marched Skeljari auxiliaries, who would leave their own mark on the continent. The Drezdani realms, still half-made, could not stand against it. The resistance gathered in the north, and held there for a while, and yielded, to new conquerors.

The Golden Age

Where the rule of the Nythrasi had been alien and cruel, the rule of the Aurikronton was ordered and written. Roads were laid across the continent, straight, because that was how they laid them. Aqueducts and canals fed the fields. Monsters were hunted without rest, by legions paid to do nothing else. Trade moved on guarded routes, and Solkaris, raised on foundations older than the city, was made the capital and the administrative heart of everything. For seven generations Dyrhal knew stability. It is remembered as a Golden Age, and not because it was without hardship, but because it was ordered.

THE LAND WAS WAITING

We came ashore in the month the locals give to their god of harvest and law. They call him Pravon. We call him Eunomios, the Orderer, and I have stopped correcting the priests on either side, because I have come to think we are describing the same hand.

I had expected a wilderness. It is not. It is a garden that has been let go — roads under the moss, still straight; stone quays under the reeds; whole towns of cut stone with trees growing through the roofs. Someone held this land once with a firm hand, and then the hand was withdrawn, and everything that was planted has gone to seed. The rivers run clean and go where a river should. The soil turns black under the plow. I have never seen a country so plainly built to be governed.

The Drezdani met us at the ford and again below the lake. I will write nothing false of them. They fought with great bravery, as men fight who are defending their grandfathers' graves, and their chiefs led from the front and died there. But bravery is a thing a man brings to a field by himself Discipline is a thing men bring together. The legions held their intervals, took the ground a pace at a time and did not give it back.

I do not think we were driven here. I think we were led. A people that has lost one home does not find another by chance, and this one was waiting, with its roads laid and its rivers running, for someone who knew what order was for.

I have given the ford a name in our tongue and the chiefs their graves, and I have set the legions to the roads before the walls, because a road kept is a claim nobody has to be told about. The priests on both sides have noticed that the harvest came in. I let them argue over whose god did it.

— Nikephoros, called Ktistes, first Emperor of the Aurikronton in Dyrhal; from the campaign journal, the year of the landing

ON THE VIRTUES OF THE STATE

A road is a promise. Whoever lays it swears that a man may walk from one gate to the next and arrive; and every stone that is not maintained is a clause of that promise broken. The virtue of the state is not that it is strong, for beasts are strong. Its virtue is that it keeps promises to people it will never meet. When the legion clears the hill road it does so for a carter not yet born. That is the whole of it. A ruler who cannot say what he has promised to strangers has no state, only a household with walls.

— Demetrios Kallistos, On the Virtues of the State, written at Solkaris in the reign of Basileios



The Fall of Solkaris

Its end came neither by foreign conquest nor by slow decay, but by a fracture at the heart. In the later years of the Emperor Basileios Eirenikos the court at Solkaris divided against itself. In the record the quarrel was about succession law and chartered authority. In truth it was about ambition, and the old grievances that ambition had sharpened. The emperor's brother Theodos advanced a claim of his own, and legions were moved on one pretext and another, and alliances were made in private, and every attempt at reconciliation failed.

Some chroniclers, writing later, argued that the quarrel did not grow on its own: that pride was fed, and trust worn thin, and every compromise quietly poisoned; and they pointed to certain advisors of obscure origin whose counsel both brothers welcomed and whose every word deepened the division. Among them, the court rolls of those years name one Vaelkuris Drazhir, a man of minor rank and unusual access. The rolls place him at the emperor's table one year and at Theodos's the next, and after the battle they do not place him anywhere.

The matter was settled on the plains outside Solkaris, in one day. Imperial banners faced imperial banners, and the legions drawn up on that field were the finest ever raised in Dyrhal, and they destroyed one another. Basileios fell, mortally wounded. Theodos died. The greater part of the senior nobility died in the same hour, and the empire did not so much lose its leaders as lose the memory of how it worked.

What came after came with a precision that unsettles the historians still. Within days, humanoid tribes long driven into the mountains came down as one, under a war chief whose name no one recorded. The garrisons had been thinned to feed the brothers' war. The messengers between the provinces did not get through. The relief did not come in time, and Solkaris burned. An empire that had kept order on Dyrhal for two centuries came apart in a few tendays. The banners that remained went their own ways. Governors called themselves lords. The roads went perilous, and the watch that had kept down the monstrosities spawned by the Nythrasi was not kept, and these creatures noticed first.

Solkaris is still there, at the center of everything, which is the trouble with it. Stretches of the outer wall stand, cracked and grown over. Whole districts lie open to the sky and to a rot that does not seem to finish. Humanoid bands hold parts of it, other darker things claim the rest, and the legend persists that the restless spirit of the last emperor still reigns over a ruined throne. The country around the walls has changed. The forest near them grows stunted and dark. The low ground has sunk into marsh and standing water that nothing drinks from. Travelers on the old imperial roads that once ran to the gates speak of an unease that begins some miles out and does not lift until the walls are behind them. What lies under the fallen towers is spoken of less. Whether the sickness in that ground began with the sack of the city, or was there long before and was only the reason for it, is a matter of debate among people who have never been closer to it than a barge.

THEIR FIRES ARE LAID LIKE OURS

Their fires are laid the way ours are laid, because the same men taught us both. From the rise I can count them. I stopped counting.

Nobody in my camp is singing tonight. My men are not afraid of the men across the plain; they know them too well for that. Half my line has marched beside half of theirs and buried friends with them. None of them has asked to go home. Theodos has made himself a traitor, and they know what is owed to the emperor.

I wish it had not come to this. There were men at court who could say how two brothers came to it, and none of them are on this field. The priests of Eunomios blessed our standards at dusk. I am sure across the plain they are blessed in the same words.

Every soldier of the empire is taught the first emperor's words, that bravery is a thing a man brings to a field by himself and discipline a thing men bring together. Tomorrow both lines will hold their intervals and keep their shields and take the ground a pace at a time, and a line that spares the man in front of it will be broken by a line that does not. We will not flinch, and we will not spare them. They were taught the same.

It will be over by dark. The city will still be standing behind us, whichever of us walks back through its gate.

— Leontios Skleros, legion commander for the Emperor Basileios, written on the plain outside Solkaris the night before the battle

THE DURNOVKA ROAD

The Durnovka was the fastest route. I had heard what they say about the stretch past Solkaris. Everyone in Kallipherion has.

The river runs clean and the current is good there; the Aurikronton cut the banks straight and the water does not argue with you. We made good time until the ruins came into view on the eastern bank. Then the barge hands stopped rowing without being told. Nobody spoke. We drifted for a moment in the current before the foreman got them moving again, and even then nobody looked toward the walls.

Nothing came out of the city. Nothing showed itself The ruins just stood there in the gray light and the water ran past them without any particular interest in us.

We reached Nikara on time. I will plan a different route next season.

— Maret Ossven, factor, Kallipherion

THE PINES DO NOT ASK

Go north, go north, where the lakes lie black,
where the pines stand close and the roads turn back;
the wolf knows your name and the frost knows your track,
but the pines do not ask where you came from.

Your grandsire cut the beam and your father raised the door,
and the same nine gods were prayed to on the same nine nights before;
the empire came and the empire went and left us as we were,
and the pines do not ask who was master.

So bar the gate at dusk, love, and put the child to bed,
and count the ones who came back in, and pray for the rest instead;
the lake will hold its cold, and the ground will hold its dead,
and the pines do not ask who remembers.

— Drezdani work song, northern starostwa; sung at the timber-cutting, tune older than the words

WHAT THE OLD MEN SAY

There is a thing your grandfather told me, and his grandfather told him, and it goes back further than any of us can say with certainty. When the empire still stood — when Solkaris had its walls and its roads and its legions — the emperor kept a guard of picked men. Not Aurikronton men. Skeljari. He chose us because he knew what we were. His own men he could never fully trust, because his own men wanted what he had. We wanted nothing he had. We wanted only the fight and the reputation that came after it. That is a thing an emperor can rely on.

They called it an honor. It was an honor. But it was also the truth of us.

Your name is Yurfressen. Your grandfather's grandfather stood inside those walls. When Solkaris burned, his company held the southern gate against the monstrous hordes for the whole of an afternoon. Bought time for some to escape what was coming. Then the walls came down and there was nothing left to hold.

I tell you this so you know what the name means. It does not mean we are better. It means we are expected to hold.

— Harl Yurfressen, Ravnsfjord — spoken to his son Bjarte the night before his first raiding season

The People of Dyrhal

Centuries of empire and conquest and collapse and migration have marked the people of Dyrhal. Nearly everyone on the continent carries more than one tradition in the blood, the name, the prayers and the cooking. A man in the central baronies may bear a Drezdani surname his grandfather's grandfather carried out of the north, worship at an old Aurikronton shrine because it has stood in his town longer than anyone can say, and call a tool by its Rhenmari word because that is what everyone on his holding calls it. Nobody finds this remarkable. It is what happens when people stand the same walls against the same dangers through the same harvests for long enough. The exceptions are at the edges. In the northern starostwa the Drezdani have held the land since before any empire came, and the people there are still mostly of one heritage. The southwestern jarldoms tell a similar story, though not by isolation: the Skeljari have held to what they are on purpose, fiercely, and for a long time.

Four heritages, then, persist in Dyrhal, each with its own tongue and its own way of naming a child and its own history and its own ground. They are streams that have fed into one another for generations and still run clear where they run strongest.

The Drezdani

The Drezdani are the oldest people on Dyrhal, and the only ones who never came from anywhere else. They held nine kingdoms before the Nythrasi came, and raised those kingdoms again after the Nythrasi were ash, and came through the Aurikronton centuries with their tongue and their customs largely as they were. They are a people used to enduring.

Today they hold the north and the northeast, where their starostwa, sovereign domains under elected or hereditary starostas, keep a way of ruling older than any empire on the continent. Their settlements follow the rivers and the lake shores, and their borders are drawn by water and timber as often as by a wall. The land feels settled not by decree, but by memory.

They value the obligation owed to a neighbor, the line of one's fathers, and a faith that does things. The Nine are honored in the north with a particular intensity, where the oldest shrines stand and the memory of what the Nythrasi destroyed runs deepest of all. They are not a people who forget easily. It is their strength, and it is a wound that has never quite closed, and they would not close it if they could.

The Skeljari

The Skeljari have never built an empire and never wanted one. Their power is older than that and more personal: it lives in reputation, in the strength of a warrior house, in the memory of deeds done and of enemies met without flinching. They measure a man or a woman by what they have been seen to do.

They hold the southwestern jarldoms, a great island of ridged and wooded country where the mountains come down to the sea, and it is not a gentle land and has not made a gentle people. The jarldoms are ruled by warrior houses whose right rests on strength and on the loyalty that strength commands, and not on any parchment. A jarl who cannot hold what they claim will not be claiming it long.

The Skeljari came to Dyrhal in the Aurikronton years as auxiliaries, hired to march under the imperial banners, and they left their mark on how the continent makes war. They took their island and kept it, and when the empire fell they absorbed that as they had absorbed everything else, unbowed and unchanged. Skeljari appear across Dyrhal as mercenaries, as bodyguards, as hired blades in every quarrel, and the jarldoms stay a world of their own, proudly, even when it is Skeljari steel that is settling the baronies' quarrels for them.

The Aurikronton

The Aurikronton came to Dyrhal as conquerors, and they came as survivors first. What they built on Dyrhal's soil, the roads and the aqueducts and the courts of law and the great capital at Solkaris, was the work of a people who knew what a civilization cost because they had already watched one be taken from them.

Three generations after the second one died, they persist as a culture without an empire. Some of them carry a quiet pride in what their ancestors raised. Others carry the weight of its loss. A few, in places like the Barony of Aurikast, founded by a legion commander who would not let the standard fall, still keep something of the old discipline and the old order, as if waiting for a restoration that no one has told them is not coming.

Where they cannot keep the empire's order, they keep its habits: a debt written down instead of just remembered, a road mended because it is a road, a watch set before the fire is lit.

The Rhenmari

The Rhenmari came first as traders, following the Aurikronton roads and settling where the trade was thickest, and they came later as refugees, from wars on their island homeland so brutal that whole generations chose to make the crossing rather than stay. They settled the central and western baronies, and their cultural heart is the Free City of Strandholdt, built by people who had lost one home and did not mean to lose another. They are industrious, practical and deliberate. They have made themselves indispensable by craft and by trade rather than by the sword, and the plate that comes out of Strandholdt's forges is the finest on the continent.

No ship from the Rhenmari homeland has reached Dyrhal in more than two generations. Strandholdt does not send one to learn why. The city was built by people who were fleeing that past, and it has never made its peace with looking back, so what remains of the Rhenmari in Dyrhal is something quietly changed, by loss and by the deliberate silence of a people who chose survival over memory.

THE THIRD VERSE

My mother keeps the house the way her grandmother kept it, which is the way the empire kept everything. The stores are counted every tenday and written down, the bread is cut before anyone sits, and a servant who is late to the hearth is late once. She calls the harvest god Eunomios and corrects the shrine keeper when he says Pravon. The baron's men in our yard are more afraid of her than of my father, and they are right to be.

My father is Drezdani, and he sings. He sings at table, the river songs from the north that have too many verses and no endings, and she tells him to stop, and he does not, and by the third verse she has stopped telling him. Once I saw her mouth the words. There is one war he never sings at her table, and she has never asked him why.

The ring was her grandfather's. He marched in the emperor's legions, and it came home on his hand when most of the legions did not come home at all. It is iron, with a mark on the face worn too smooth to read. I turn it when I am thinking, which my mother says is my father in me. One day I mean to be a man who would make my great-grandfather proud of the hand it is on.

It is still loose on me. She says I will grow into it. My father says that is what she said about him.

— *Markos Wilczek, a thane's son, Barony of Hesphate*

A STRANGER IN STRANDHOLDT

Nobody in Strandholdt asks where you came from. I had heard that and thought it a courtesy. It is not. It is the city's one rule, and it applies to itself There is a shrine near the harbor with no name on it and no image inside, and old women tend it every morning and will not say to whom. The harbormaster keeps a ledger of every hull that comes in and, I am told, a second ledger that has had no entry in sixty years. Everyone I met was industrious, courteous, and prosperous, and I never once saw anyone look out to sea.

— *Ferenc Halasz, factor for a Keshar house, letter home from the Free City of Strandholdt*

SETTING NOTE

The vast majority of the trade that reaches Dyrhal from the ports of Keshar comes through the harbor at Strandholdt. Unlike anywhere else in Dyrhal, the free city is run by its guilds, and the coins minted there are the most trusted on the continent after those that remain from the old imperial mints.

SIX OF THEM, ON FOOT

We came around a bend and there they were. Six of them, on foot, moving north. Bronze scale, each plate edged and fitted — not field armor, something more deliberate. The kind of work that takes months and does not get made unless someone intends to use it. Red and purple cloth beneath, deep colors that should have faded from the road but hadn't. They moved like men who had already decided what would happen if anyone made a problem.

Our driver pulled up without being told. Nobody spoke. They stopped, looked at the wagons and the men, looked at the road ahead, and then simply waited. Not threatening. Not cautious. Patient in the way that things are patient when they have already decided the outcome. We moved to the verge. They walked past without a word or a glance.

I watched them until the road bent and took them out of sight. They did not look back.

I asked if anyone knew what they were. Nobody did. One of the guards had heard of them — ships off the western coast, bronze armor, never speaking, always moving like they knew exactly where they were going. He said they had been seen further north the tenday before. He said it quietly, like saying it louder might bring them back.

I do not know what they are looking for. I have been in Dyrhal eleven years and I know most of what moves through it and why. These I do not know. I am not certain I want to.

— Petra Vasken, trader, Velmorys — written at a way-house on the northern road

Foreign Heritages

Dyrhal's ports and its trade roads and its quarreling lords draw travelers from beyond the Northern and Southern Seas: merchants, soldiers, exiles, wanderers. They are rare enough in the small towns to be stared at and common enough in the ports that most people have seen one, and every one of them came by sea. A foreign face in a Dyrhalan port is the end of a long voyage, and nobody makes that voyage without a reason.

From Ardeaux, the feudal continent to the east, come knights errant and noble exiles and mercenary companies, whose chivalry sits uneasily against Dyrhal's grimmer ways. They are known by their elaborate heraldry and their formal manner of address, and by the trouble some of them have accepting that a barony here does not keep the rules of honor they were raised on, and will not begin to for their sake.

From Parzashar comes almost no one. A Parzashari in Dyrhal has crossed distances most people here cannot well imagine, and has not done it without a serious reason, and their purposes when they do appear are seldom plain.

From the Keshar kingdoms to the south come merchants and sailors who have made the long sea crossing for profit. They come from a dozen fractious desert kingdoms with no single voice among them. They are shrewd and at ease among strangers, and more interested in what Dyrhal has to trade than in who rules it. Most arrive through Strandholdt, and few of them go far beyond the southern ports.

Rarely, and never comfortably, people report meeting men from the far west. Tall, composed, in red or purple, armored in bronze. Their ships are deep-sea hulls of a design no shipwright here knows, built for crossings that make the Keshar route look short. They ask few questions and answer none. Most people in Dyrhal have never seen one. Those who have do not forget it, and do not talk about it much.

That is Dyrhal, from the gate outward: the wall and the count at dusk; the manor, and the men a lord can feed; the roads an empire laid, and the ruin at the end of them; the peoples who came by those roads and stayed. None of it is finished. The Drezdani are holding the north as they held it before the first empire came. The Aurikronton are keeping their standards in baronies that have no emperor to carry them to. Strandholdt is still not looking out to sea. And somewhere on the northern road a baron is asking after men for a watchtower nobody has manned in a generation, and a man with debts is thinking about it.

The land remembers, and it endures. What it has not yet decided is who comes back in at dusk. That is what your characters are for.

