

The war of thorns and flowers

"I thought you lot claimed Lorenzo should be an exemplar! This'll shit on his reputation. You're trashing his legacy!"

Else Van Temeschwar slid her half-moon spectacles to the end of her nose and peered over them at her outraged neighbour. She was glad she was on the top step of her premises - even so she was virtually eye to eye with him. Usten's business was... well nobody was quite sure what Usten's business was. More than a few people had expressed surprise when his premises was not raided by the magistrates when the Vyig were run out of Temeschwar. The unkind ones expressed their surprise with a healthy degree of disappointment. What Else had often noted was that Usten's business involved keeping some quite extraordinary shop hours. Not many premises are open only between the hours of two and five in the morning. Perhaps he sold candles to desperate citizens she'd suggested to a friend. Sadly she was going to have to say something and a wry comment about his unconventional business associates was not the best way to defuse this.

"La Volpe was an inspiration to a great many of us Usten. I'm absolutely delighted to discover that you are a convert to our small church. But I can assure you, having actually met the esteemed butcher, we are very confident that this is exactly what he would have wanted. He loved Temeschwar and the League, but he loved the Empire more. Why else would he have spent his vast fortune leaving so many legacies to inspire us."

"You're destroying the roads! This'll ruin us all. He can't have wanted this!"

Usten's face was getting redder as he got angrier. Else despised his type - the kind of citizen who thought that an argument becomes more articulate the louder you shouted it. She'd enjoyed taking them apart with a little rapier back in her university days but the steps of her accounts office was no debating society and she hadn't carried a blade since those days. Just as she was thinking she could really use a little backup in case things got physical, the Butcher of Temeschwar answered her prayers. Emiliana appeared at the door of her shop, tools in hand. Maybe it was her prayers, maybe she'd heard the shouting. Either way she caught her eye and nodded at her to let her know she had her back.

"I fear you are confusing what you want with what the Master of the Bloody Bank might have wanted. But... as

he was crudely poisoned by some nefarious criminal ne'er-do-well..." she paused for a moment to ensure that Usten got the point, but the insult was completely wasted. She might as well be stabbing a wall with a stiletto she thought. "...then none of us will ever know for sure what he thought."

"I won't let you get away with this! That's our money by right!" he bellowed.

Else's hand shot to her mouth to cover her mirth. "Get away with it? I'm afraid it's much too late for that. The civil service have received my recommendations and confirmed they will be publishing my findings. It's all in the hands of the Senate now. But perhaps you could make your most cogent arguments to Senator Giuseppe? I'm certain he will find your company almost as pleasant as I do." No - that didn't work either. Nothing worked. It was like stabbing a rock.

Usten reared up, as if he was about to grab the hems of her robe, but he was interrupted by a loud cough from behind him. He whirled round to find Else's neighbour stood right behind him, cleaver in one hand. The butcher raised it up, just slightly... but she didn't need to. Usten might not know a riposte from a feint, but he understood a threat when he saw one.

"Out of the way pig's breath. I've got honest business..."

with my accountant."

Usten glared at the merrow, as if trying to stare her down. His hand dropped slowly to his belt. Paragons, he couldn't even disguise the movement, he wouldn't last two seconds in a duel.

"Draw that knife, and you'll lose the hand" Emiliana threatened, in a voice that might have been the Sorrowful One herself. Usten hesitated for a second, then thought better of it before spitting into the dirt and storming off. Else mentally lobbed a few more verbal thrusts at his departing rear but it was no more fun stabbing him in the back than it had been stabbing him in the face.

"You had business Emiliana?" she smiled at her friend.

"Oh I just said that." Emiliana grinned at her. "I was just about to go on my lunch," she explained.

"Perfect," she said, descending the steps. She placed a hand lightly on her arm and smiled at the merrow. "Why don't you leave your pig-chopper on your counter and then let me take you to dinner."

Overview

The nations of the Empire have begun to rise to the challenge of the coming war with the vallorn, determined to be ready for

this apocalyptic war. The Highborn have called the grey pilgrims home, allowing them to raise another army. The League have asked their most ambitious and innovative people to study the problem, while the Varushkans have sought to draw on dark powers to battle civilisation's most implacable enemy.

For now, the Dawnish, often first to battle, are not yet ready to commit to the fight. Some are girding themselves for this War of Thorns and Flowers, as one creative troubadour calls it, but their assembly, like that of the Urizen, did not back it with a greater majority. Perhaps that will change in the future as the day comes closer. The Wintermark Assembly have taken the opposite position, stating firmly that they cannot support the Navarr at this time.

Highguard

There is no sacrifice so great that we cannot meet it to defeat this terror. We send Hazelelponi with 200 liao to urge every Highborn to prepare for the coming battle. No price is too high to realise our dreams.

*Icarus of the Sepulchre of the Red Suns, Highborn Assembly,
Autumn Equinox, 386YE, Vote: 510-110 (Greater Majority)*

After five long years walking the trods, the grey pilgrims are finally coming home. Five years might be a drop in the ocean for the Navarr, but they are a peripatetic people who long ago gave up the idea of settling in one place to build a new life travelling the trods. The grey pilgrims were not born to that life,

but instead chose to take a journey away from home, away from their loved ones, away from their kin in the chapter houses. They gave up everything to commit to the fight against the vallorn.

Now they are returning to Highguard. But their pilgrimage is not abandoned. The Highborn Assembly have called them home. It's time to stop rambling, there's work to be done. Now at last, it is the time to fight.

The Fourth Army

With the Grey Pilgrims returning home, Highguard calls for the Thundering Tide to be reborn upon their banner. Highguard looks to the legacy of its past to forge its future!

Kish of the Flame Beneath the Earth, Highborn Assembly, Autumn Equinox 386YE, Vote: 446-60

- **The flood of pilgrims coming home allow Highguard to raise a fourth army**
- **The grey pilgrims will form the core of any new army**
- **The new army cannot be called the Thundering Tide**

The tide of grey pilgrims returning home is a trickle at first, but it soon turns into a flood. Loved ones are reunited, families re-joined, friendships restored. There are celebrations across Highguard as people embrace the returning heroes. But the celebratory mood soon turns sombre. This is the feast *before* the battle, not after it. The grey pilgrims have come home because the horns of war have been winded.

Highguard gave up the potential to raise a fourth army five years ago, when they committed themselves to the pilgrimage against the vallorn. Now the pilgrims have come home, eager to fight, that potential is reclaimed. The maximum number of armies that Highguard can support has now increased to four.

At any point where the Imperial Senate approves the creation of a new Highborn army, the grey pilgrims will flock to the banner, eager to begin the final battle. They will form the core of the new army, giving it a beating heart that drives it forwards. The determination of the grey pilgrims to defeat the vallorn will define the army's special purpose, preparing it for the final battle.

The grey pilgrims have one demand - they will not join an army that is named for the Thundering Tide. The Highborn Assembly passed a judgement calling for that to happen, but it did not get a greater majority. Had it received overwhelming support from the Assembly, then the pilgrims could have swallowed their Pride, but it didn't. There are long-standing rumours that the Tide was infiltrated by a sect devoted to the malign spiritual force of Hatred. The grey pilgrims have always been staunchly dedicated to opposing such malign influences, and the majority of them will not join an army that marches under that name.

You Get a Banner

- **The Empire can reduce the cost to raise a new Highborn army by consecrating banners for the Highborn armies**

with true liao

- **Each newly hallowed banner will reduce the cost to raise the Grey Pilgrim army by 30 wains of mithril**

There is a widespread desire across Highguard to capitalise on the return of the grey pilgrims, to take advantage of this opportunity now, before the moment fades and people's attentions move on. But there is a grim awareness that two hundred mithril is a huge burden for the Empire to find, especially when other nations also need to raise armies to fight the vallorn. When the news comes of the loss of Isaella's Dance and the Iron Helms in Therunin, people grow concerned that the mines of the Empire simply cannot produce enough mithril to meet the need.

The answer, in Highguard at least, is to embrace the Way, the one true religion that can inspire humans and orcs alike to achieve impossible things. A proposal is put forward to create up to four hallowed banners, one for each general of a Highborn army. If the banners are hallowed with true liao, they will inspire the soldiers who march beneath them, and rally Highguard to the cause. Each newly created banner that is hallowed with true liao and made part of the regalia of a different Highborn general will reduce the cost to raise the new army by 30 wains of mithril.

Such a mammoth project would call on the resources of the whole nation, allowing them to contribute to this national goal. The benefactors would need to acquire the true liao needed,

but they might also want to find artisans who can create magical standards to carry the hallow. Highguard could hallow a mundane banner - true liao is just as effective when used on a mundane banner as it is on an artefact - but that strikes many as something of a wasted opportunity.

The benefactors will need to commission artists to design and make the banners. The three existing Highborn armies have iconography associated with them that would be likely to form the centrepiece of any banner. But the best banners are works of art, granting an artist the freedom to build an inspirational design that incorporates existing symbols and images to express a core theme. Someone would have to produce those designs and then someone will have to manufacture the final banner so that it can be enchanted if that has been arranged.

Once all that is done, a dose of true liao will need to be found to hallow the banner, before it is confirmed as part of the regalia of office of the general. It is a high price to pay, but the benefits would be very real. Each banner, magical or not, that was hallowed with true liao and formally presented to an existing general in a grand ceremony in front of the nation would reduce the amount of mithril required to raise a new army by 30 wains.

Of course, there is no general of the fourth army yet, but if a banner was created and hallowed in readiness, it could be included as part of the regalia of office for the general when

the Senate motion raising the army was passed. If that happened then the same benefits would apply.

The banners would need to be inspirational symbols that epitomised the fighting spirit of the army in question. There is an existing war banner for the Thundering Tide, but that army is dead and gone, and its history does not inspire. It won't provide any benefit to Highguard to ask the Granite Pillar or the new army of grey pilgrims to march under the banner of another, long-dead, army.

The costs are huge, nobody is denying that. A beautiful banner is an expensive proposition by itself, and true liao is the single most valuable commodity in the Empire. But even if Highguard is only able to create a single inspirational banner it will help the Empire's war effort - it won't just help make it easier for Highguard to raise a new army, by reducing the demand on the Empire's mithril, it helps the whole Empire raise more armies to meet the coming challenge.

Salvation of Souls

Virtue's Rest
Commission Type: Edifice
Location: Bastion
Cost: 120 crowns in labour
Effect:

- Completely removes the level of investment and returns provided by Virtue's Rest
- Allows eligible Imperial armies to take a resupply action in Bastion, boosting resupply
- Creates the title Exarch of Virtue's Rest

Exarch of Virtue's Rest

Type: Highborn National

Appointment: Tally of the Votes

Powers: Receive 12 doses of liao each season

Responsibilities: To support the supply and provision of Highborn armies and help ready the territory of Bastion for the war against the vallorn

- **An Imperial commission could be used to remodel the hostels of Virtue's Rest**
- **This would remove the level of investment provided by the great work but provide additional resupply to eligible armies resupplying in Bastion**
- **It would create a new title, the Exarch of Virtue's Rest, charged with directing the hostels to resupply armies in Bastion**
- **The Highborn Assembly could veto this relinquishment of an important national asset**

Raising a new army is just one part of the challenge facing Highguard and the Empire. Nobody imagines that the final battle against the vallorn will be easy, or quick. Uniting the vallorn hearts will unleash a tide of madness on the Empire - virtue will bring victory - but thousands of lives will be lost to

the Labyrinth in a war that will take years to win. Armies will need to rest and resupply so that they may return to the fray reinvigorated.

Inspired by the work done by *Graciana i Lòpez i Guerra* in her recent appraisal, some of the Highborn who run the hostels of Virtue's Rest have suggested that their work might more usefully be directed to helping an Imperial army recuperate and rebuild their strength when resupplying. Imperial soldiers would be welcomed into the hostels and offered anointing's and hallowings as their wounds were treated, speeding up their return from convalescence.

The proposal would require a Senate motion to alter the existing great work to better suit the new role. That would involve a significant sacrifice by the congregations of Bastion that currently benefit from Virtue's Rest. The great work would effectively be changed to an edifice and no longer boost the level of investment of congregations in the territory, meaning no additional liao would be provided. That liao would instead be used to anoint soldiers who were recovering in the hostels. That would allow any *eligible* army to issue a defensive order to resupply in Virtue's Rest.

Resupply in Virtue's Rest

- **Casualties suffered by this army are decreased by a**

half

- **The ability of this army to defend territory is decreased by two fifths**
- **This order can only be taken while an army is in Bastion. 250 points of resupply are distributed between all eligible armies taking this order**

A general that wants their army to benefit from the hostels and sanitoriums of Virtue's Rest in Bastion can order their army to resupply there. The army will give ground if the territory is attacked, but if they are able to benefit from natural resupply then they will resupply faster. 250 points of additional resupply are divided between all eligible armies taking this order each season. Emergency resupply is unaffected.

The motion would also need an Imperial title to be created to oversee the healing work of the hostels. The proposed title, *Exarch of Virtue's Rest* would receive a small sinecure payment of 12 doses of liao each season, to help them in their work.

Armies from any Imperial nation that have committed to the war against the vallorn would be welcome in the hostels of Virtue's Rest. At present, that would include the nations of Navarr, Highguard, Varushka and the League, but if other nations gather their Courage for the fight to come, they would also be able to issue the order to resupply at Virtue's Rest.

Converting Virtue's Rest would require a senate motion, but it could not be done against the wishes of the Highborn Assembly. The Constitutional Court have stated that it would be treated as a special case of relinquishment, which means it could be vetoed by vote of the affected National Assembly.

The League

The greatest assets of the League are our ambition and ingenuity. We send Ortenzia di Sarvos with 50 liao to urge every citizen to commit everything to finding new ways to fight the vallorn. Even the most impenetrable forest may fall one tree at a time.

*Ortenzia di Sarvos, League Assembly, Autumn Equinox 386YE,
Vote: 272-16*

- **The League has committed themselves to the fight against the vallorn and asked citizens to be ambitious and ingenious in their approach**
- **No statement of principle raised by the League Assembly that calls on citizens to support a different cause will have an effect for the next year at least**

The League has also thrown their weight behind the call to face the vallorn, asking people to use their ingenuity and ambition to find ways to help win the fight. This dedication has an immediate cost - the League citizens expect their leaders to do whatever is needed to start the war, and more importantly to finish it. They will expect their Assembly to stick to the course and not get distracted by other struggles. For the next year, at least, no statement of principle raised by the League

Assembly that calls on citizens to support another cause, be that civil or military, will produce an effect beyond Anvil. Minds are focused on the conflict with the vallorn.

For Whom The Road Tolls

Toll the Imperial Road Networks

Commission Type: None - Motion Only

Location: The Empire

Effect:

- Completely removes the level of investment and returns provided by all affected road great works
- Boosts Imperial taxation by 130 thrones a season if the Blood Red Roads, the Sunset Roads, the White Roads, the Iron Roads and the Crow Roads are affected
- **The Imperial Senate could use a motion to put tolls on all the major roads in the Empire to raise money to pay for the war**
- **The benefits to personal resources from Blood Red Roads, the Sunset Roads, the White Roads, the Iron Roads, the Crow Roads would be lost**
- **The effective level of investment in that territory would decrease**
- **Imperial taxation would rise by 140 thrones a season**
- **National assemblies could veto this relinquishment of an important national asset**

Few nations in the world really grasp the power of money like the League. They are rich of course, but so are many nations in the Empire. The Freeborn pride themselves on putting a cost on all things, but the League have a rich appreciation for the way in which money can change the world. The merchant princes of the League understand that it's all well and good for people to *commit* themselves to defeat the vallorn, but that won't do the slightest bit of good whatsoever if there isn't the money to pay for the armies to do the actual fighting.

The notable accountant, *Else Van Temeschwar*, claims afterwards that she never said "Heroes don't win wars, accountants do". She insists what she *actually* said was that "accounts win wars", but once the phrase is out there it sticks anyway, because some people nod sagely and everyone else enjoys ridiculing them for it. Her real point is that what the Empire really needs to fight the vallorn is money... and lots of it. But of course that will require a sacrifice, and a big one... but the League knew that when they committed to this road.

Else has a radical proposal that is elegant, simple, and constitutional. She has put considerable effort into researching that last point. The Senate has many powers, but the Imperial Constitution forbids it from raising taxation and *Magistrate Abraham* is known to be notoriously dubious on the constitutional prospects of *anything* that might be considered taxation. But after an exchange of more than a dozen letters the curmudgeonly magistrate is unhappily forced to concede

that *tolls are not taxes*. There are already tolls to cross over some bridges in the Empire and tolls to use most Imperial ports. So why not put tolls on the roads?

The impact would be significant - Else proposes putting a small toll on *every* major road network in the Empire, the Blood Red Roads, the Sunset Roads, the White Roads, the Iron Roads, the Crow Roads - all of them bar the Kamkrags of Kahraman (Abraham has identified a loophole that makes it unconstitutional to include the Kamkrags). That could be done with a single senate motion if it was targeting all the Empire's major roads. The civil service could be instructed to use effective prognostication to set the tolls at the optimum level, the level that would produce the best return for the Senate.

If that happened, any great work benefit to the inhabitants of the territory through which the road passed would be permanently lost (or at least for as long as the tolls lasted, but nobody imagines the Senate would ever be likely to remove them). It wouldn't affect the benefits to Varushkan armies provided by their roads, but their roads would no longer boost the profits of mines and forests in the nation. Instead, every territory in the Empire would see increased tax revenue - boosting the total taxation by 140 thrones a season!

While Else is very pleased with her analysis, some of her fellow citizens are less enamoured of the idea. There would be a significant loss of personal income for individuals in the

League and in many other territories in the Empire.

Varushkans would be hit hard and some argue passionately that the Iron Roads and Crow Roads should be excluded from these tolls because of the powerful hearth magic associated with roads which is essential to keep people safe as they travel through the haunted forests and dark hills of the north. If the Senate is minded to agree with them it could instead pass *three* senate motions, one for the Blood Red Roads, one for the Sunset Roads, and one for the White Roads. That would still produce 110 thrones of additional taxation - more than enough to pay for the support of two entire Imperial armies.

If the Senate puts tolls on Imperial roads, then the level of investment in the territory in question will drop - the benefits to personal resources would be exactly as if the great works had never been built (although this would not prevent new great works being built in the territory). The Senate would get increased taxation, but people would still be using the roads - just paying tolls. If any substantial new roads were built there - roads without tolls on them - then the additional taxation from the tolls for that territory would be lost.

Converting the roads would require one or more senate motions, but it could not be done over the wishes of those who were affected. The Constitutional Court have stated that it would be treated as a special case of relinquishment which means it could be vetoed by vote of the appropriate National

Assembly. The Blood Red Roads cover the entire Empire, so a motion that relinquished their benefits could be vetoed by the General Assembly. A motion that relinquished the Sunset Roads could be vetoed by the Freeborn Assembly, the White Roads by the Highborn Assembly, and the Crow and Iron Roads by the Varushkan Assembly. Such a veto, regardless of assembly, requires a greater majority.

After the opportunity was published by the civil service, they received a request from one of the Empire's leading economists, Laurencio di Sarvos and the Pillars of Mariika Sodality, requesting additional information to assist the Senate and other bodies in their deliberations. Crucially Laurencio asked the civil service to produce estimates of the number of citizens attending Anvil who would be affected by the changes. Given that much of the Senate budget comes from citizens bidding on Bourse resources, the Pillars have published research suggesting that this is crucial to understanding how much money the Senate has to pay its bills.

To ensure that all citizens have equal access to such information, the civil service have arranged to publish these figures. After careful prognostication, they have identified that *last season* the road networks of the Empire contributed 117 thrones, 1 crown and 16 rings. In addition to that sum, they provided 304 additional ingots or measures. Of course these figures vary over time - but those were the figures last season.

All Along the Watchtower

Citadel

Commission Type: Fortification

Location: Any single region the Empire controls

Cost: 80 wains of white granite, 240 crowns, 1 year to complete

Upkeep: 10 Thrones

Effect:

- Provides a 6000 strength fortification in that region. The strength of this fortification is not doubled when attacked
- The citadel takes 80% less damage when attacked but does not benefit from resupply
- Citadels provide no benefit to other regions in the territory
- Citadels do not remove the undefended penalty from a territory unless attacked directly
- Citadels are considered equivalent to a fortification, for all rules that would apply to a fortification, e.g. who can build or repair them, rituals that affect them, etc.
- **The Empire could build a citadel rather than a fortification**
- **A citadel would only provide a benefit if the region it was in was attacked**
- **A basic citadel would have a defensive strength of 6000 and take 80% less casualties when attacked**

Federico von Apulian is an architect living in the new League territory of Spiral. Rather than living in Apulus itself, Federico is

currently enjoying the hospitality of the *Citadel of the Star* in Ossuary. The citadel is home to a small, but thriving community of Urizen architects. Their arbiter, *Hadrien*, has been collaborating with Federico on a grand new idea, one that combines the best ideas of civil engineering pioneered by the League with traditional Urizen approaches of building isolated defensive citadels for people to live in.

Together, they have proposed a new commission for the Imperial Senate to invest in. Current Imperial fortifications sacrifice defensive strength for flexibility, allowing the garrison to project force across the territory. The price of that benefit is that the fortification is made more vulnerable to collapse than it needs to be.

That is a major concern for Hadrien and Federico. They point out that the violence of Spring magic is often drawn to substantial commissions, and most especially to fortifications. If that holds true when the vallornhearts are linked, then the spawn might pour forth and quickly overpower the defences and tear down any nearby fortifications. Pointing to magic such as Rising Roots that Rend Stone and Thunderous Tread of the Trees, Hadrien cautiously expresses a concern that vallorn forces might ultimately prove more effective at destroying fortifications than an army of mortal soldiers.

Instead, they propose the Senate commission *citadels*, massively fortified structures in the style of Urizen citadels but

on a much larger scale. Their proposal for a basic citadel would cost the same as a fortification - 80 white granite and 240 crowns - and take a year to build. But it would produce a defensive structure with a military strength of 6000 if it were attacked (and proportionately higher for bigger citadels). It would have the same upkeep as a fortification, 10 thrones a season, but it would be much more difficult to tear down, reducing casualties taken by the structure by 80% when attacked. The drawback for all those benefits is that it would only provide protection to the region it was in; it wouldn't help protect the rest of the territory in any way, and it would not be able to benefit from any natural resupply.

There are several vallornhearts in the Empire from which their spawn are likely to boil out of once the hearts are joined. Eventually, the Empire will need to overcome these armies of vallornspawn and destroy them, but the initial problem will be preventing them from over-running the Empire and laying waste to every trace of civilisation in their path. The armies of the vallorn could well rip through a regular fortification without pausing for breath, but a well-defended citadel might be enough to slow them down. And if the armies of the vallorn burned themselves out on the walls of a citadel, that would be even better.

The big weakness of a citadel - that a regular army might just go round it - might be offset against the vallorn who are likely to target such structures. It might even make it easier for the

Empire to plan where the attacks would come. If the Empire built one or more citadels in regions adjacent to a vallornheart, then they could guarantee that it would be the first structure attacked when the vallornhearts are joined.

Hadrien and Federico have passed a complete set of their proposals to the civil service, who have confirmed that the plans are viable. The Imperial Senate could commission a citadel in place of a fortification in any location and at any time. This is the first real widely-applicable benefit from a fusion of League and Urizen thinking, but the Citadel of the Star hopes it will not be the last.

Varushka

The greatest assets of Varushka are our Wisdom and resolve. We send Vaclav Mladenovich Kosti with 50 liao to urge every Varushkan to use our knowledge of the dark powers to choose the lesser of two evils. The virtuous apply what they have learned.

*Vaclav Mladenovich Kosti, Varushkan Assembly, Autumn Equinox
386YE, Vote: Greater Majority 280-12*

Know your heart and what commands its devotion above all else. We send Amris Johann Merikovich with 50 liao to urge the Iron Helm to abandon cruelty and focus on the dark magics and curses of Varushka. Embrace your past; never be ashamed of it.

*Amris Johan Merikovich, Varushkan Assembly, Autumn Equinox
386YE, Vote: Greater Majority 342-0*

- **Varushka has committed themselves to the fight against the vallorn and urged citizens to use knowledge of the**

dark powers to fight the vallorn

- **No statement of principle raised by the Varushkan Assembly that calls on citizens to support a different cause will have an effect for the next year at least**

Much like the League, Varushka has also committed to the war to destroy the vallorn, asking people to use their knowledge of the dark powers to battle the enemy. This dedication has an immediate cost - the Varushkan citizens expect their leaders to do whatever is needed to start the war - and to finish it. They will expect their Assembly to stick to the course and not get distracted by other struggles. For the next year, at least, no statement of principle raised by the assembly that calls on citizens to support another cause, be that civil or military, will produce an effect beyond Anvil. The people of Varushka understand that when you start a thing, you damn well better finish it.

The Heart of Darkness

- **The Varushkans can support four armies; at present they have two armies remaining**
- **The Varushkans could ask one or more sovereigns to help them build an army**

Varushka is a wealthy and powerful nation with a great deal of territory under its control. Their lands are harsh and cruel, with many dangers, but they also contain great wealth in the forests that cover the hills and in the mines that lie beneath the mountains. At present, Varushka can support four armies, but

with the destruction of the Iron Helms they currently have only two. That means they could, in theory, raise two new armies.

Of course, doing so will be difficult - every boyar is currently thinking the same thing. Navarr want to raise several armies to fight the vallorn, the Highborn want to forge the grey pilgrims into a new army. Where is all the mithril going to come from to raise these forces? There isn't enough mithril to be had unless people wait for years for it to be produced. The Varushkans are an industrious people; sitting on your hands is nobody's idea of getting something done. The Highborn have a plan involving true liao and banners which is nice for them - the Varushkan approach is much more brutally pragmatic.

There are powers in Varushka, dark powers, that stand ready to offer aid to those prepared to pay their price. The Iron Helms were backed and supported by the Charnel Lord and his unwholesome followers. They are gone now, but what was bought once could be for sale again, if the Varushkans can afford the price. It's hard to imagine Dho'uala negotiating with Varushkans, but the Night Below has already demonstrated just how powerful that strange being's aid can be. The *Howling Queen* has many fearsome minions; would some of them march beneath an Imperial banner? The *Dubik* is one of the strangest of all the sovereigns, but it too could be negotiated with.

Gaining the aid of a sovereign is no easy task and not

something to be undertaken lightly. The costs are high, and the road is hard and often paved with regrets. The Varushkans would need to find a way to reach out to a sovereign - some way to make contact with them - to open negotiations. There are no clear options that are known yet, but the mandate has spread across Varushka now, which means that those sovereigns that care about such things are undoubtedly aware of it. Perhaps some of their number will send agents to enquire what price the nation might be willing to pay for their aid?

Those who are experienced with such things do make one thing clear. An army could only have one dark patron. The sovereigns ignore each other at best, but they are jealous and possessive creatures at worst. It would be unspeakably foolish to try and obtain two patrons for a single army. It would be possible to have two armies with two different patrons, but it would be wise to ensure they were always a long way apart when drawing on the dark power provided by their patron.

It's impossible to know what the benefits might be - that would depend on what was negotiated, what was offered and what was requested. The Iron Helms were the Empire's only cruel army in recent times. The Varushkan Assembly have firmly renounced the cruel approaches employed by the Iron Helms in recent years, but perhaps other offers might be more palatable? What is clear is that such aid could be substantial - sovereigns are powerful beings, almost as powerful as eternals in their own way. Even beyond the price

they might ask for their aid, however, there is the question of what a sovereign may gain by serving as patron. Stories have flown for years that the Charnel Lord was somehow able to "see" and perhaps even influence events in the vicinity of the Iron Helms no matter how far beyond the borders of Varushka they travelled. What might other nations, less familiar with the dark powers of the north, make of this patronage?

The Threat From Skuld

Irontooth Keep

Commission Type: Fortification (Citadel)

Location: Suvretz, Volodmartz

Cost: 150 wains of white granite, 30 wains of weirwood, 540 crowns, 6 seasons to complete

Upkeep: 18 Thrones

Effect: Provides a 12000 strength citadel in Suvretz

- **The vallornheart in Skuld is the one nearest to Varushka**
- **At present there is nothing to stop the vallorn pouring out of Skuld and into the forests of Suvretz**
- **The Varushkans could build a citadel in Suvretz that would also defend against any attack from the Thule in the near future**

For years now there have been calls to fortify Suvretz to defend the region against the Thule. Peace with the Thule has perhaps seduced the soft-hearted, making them imagine that

this state of affairs will last forever. Nothing lasts forever. In the end, even the mountains will fall. One day, the Thule armies will come, and when they do, they will likely come for Suvretz first.

In the meantime, the threat from the vallorn is even more pressing. The forests of Suvretz stretch all the way over the border and into Sköld, right to the heart of a vallorn. If the vallornhearts are linked, then at the moment, the first thing the people of Volodmartz will know about it is when an army of ravenous insects is stripping the flesh from their dying bodies. The best way to stop that would be to build a massive citadel in the region.

The old plans for *Irontooth Keep* have been pulled out and dusted off. There's no reason that the ruins couldn't be built into a massive new citadel, forcing anyone planning to attack Suvretz to think twice about their ambitions. The original costs for the project are out-of-date as time has moved on, but this plan for an upgraded citadel wouldn't cost any more than normal. The big advantage is that it could be done *quickly*.

The great *Irontooth Keep* would require 150 white granite and 30 weirwood to construct, with labour costs of 540 crowns. Under normal circumstances, it would take two years to finish, but the existence of the strong foundations and the assistance of the *koboldi* would each reduce that construction time by one season. If the same magics as were employed to speed the

completion of Alexandra's Watch could be employed, Volodmartz could conceivably have a major citadel to rival the Silent Sentinel in Casinea or Remember Exile in Reikos in less than a year!

Following the Winter Solstice 383YE, the newly appointed Master of the Koboldi spoke with the civil service about the feasibility of undertaking the work to build a fortification here. There is no barrier to them doing so - they are explicitly allowed to announce that they will work on a fortification, and that would allow them to create a citadel. Indeed, the *koboldi* still remain enthusiastic about the opportunity to work on this massive fortress.

The Dark Nights of Winter

Icy Crag of the Eternal Sun

Commission Type: College of Magic

Location: Srodkoja, Miekarova

Cost: 270 crowns, 3 seasons to complete

Effect: Changes the power of the Icy Crag's Mastery of the Lore of Summer to Mastery of the Lore of Winter

Special: Could be achieved with a declaration of Concord at a cost of 180 mana crystals

- The Winter realm offers the greatest potential for those prepared to call on the dark powers of the realm
- The Icy Crag of the Eternal Sun could be turned into a

college of winter magic

- **The Cabalists of Void would be prepared to pay half of the 540 crown costs for the commission**

There is another way that Varushka and the Empire could embrace dark powers in preparation for their war with the vallorn. The Icy Crag of the Eternal Sun is a college of magic that was built years ago in Srodkoja in Miekarova.

The Master of Ice and Darkness has served the Dean of the College ever since. The Crag is specialised in Summer magic, allowing the Master to codify new Summer rituals more quickly than the rituals of other realms.

The Cabalists of Void argue that the most important benefits of this dedication to Summer magic are now part of the Empire's history. Just as the Highborn are turning a new page of history, so should the Crag. Mastery of Winter magic is what the Empire needs now, the better to fight the vallorn and its spawn. Winter lore resonates with potent wards, and with the cold touch that ravages plants no matter how supernaturally vital they may be. There can be no doubt that the curses of winter are effective at weakening the vallorn, and that its power can annihilate large numbers of abominations in a scything strike. It is to Winter that wise magicians should look for victory over the vallorn.

The civil service has confirmed that the Senate could use a commission to remodel the Crag to change it from being dedicated to Summer magic to being dedicated to Winter

magic. That would mean that instead of benefitting a Summer ritual being codified, the Master of the Icy Crag could spend money to increase the speed of codification of a Winter ritual. The patronage of the Jaheris, might be lost, but the Silver Prince has shown signs in the past of being happy to offer support to the codification of curses no matter what realm they come from. Regardless, the Conclave could approach any of the Winter eternalists to ask them to patronize a remodelled college - some have already shown interest in serving as patron even while the Crag is focused on Summer magic.

It would not be cheap to change the college. If the Senate ordered the work, it would need a commission for a college of magic and cost 540 crowns, but the Cabalists are prepared to pay half that sum, reducing the effective cost to 270 crowns.

There is an alternative, given that the College is under the remit of the Imperial Conclave. The Conclave could use a declaration of Concord to have the regions in the Crag realigned. That would achieve the same effect but would cost 360 mana crystals; passing the declaration would see the mana removed from the font and used to realign the college. Again, the Cabalists would be prepared to fund this work, which they see as very important, reducing the effective cost to the font to 180 mana crystals.

There is some concern that the Summer eternalists might be angered by the change - they have always fought jealously

over the college and who offers their patronage to it. After some circumspect enquiry, the civil service are able to confirm that the Summer eternal would barely notice if the college ceased to be a college of Summer magic and they certainly wouldn't care. Their jealousy is provoked by the patronage of a rival eternal - the moment it stopped being a Summer eternal who was patron of the college, they would lose all interest in it.

Ending

- **With the Iron Helms gone, and the Varushkan assembly choosing to move away from cruelty, the legacy of past actions is fading**
- **Varushkan armies no longer take penalties for fighting alongside Freeborn or Wintermark armies**

Before they fell, the Varushkan Assembly had chosen to step away from the cruel practices of the Iron Helms. They had called on their people to find a way to change the path of the army, to leave behind their merciless ways and find a way to embody the Varushkan understanding of dark powers. What should have been the start of a new future for the Iron Helms was dramatically cut short by their bloody destruction at the hands of the Black Wind in Therunin. The manner of their passing has blunted some of the controversy that once attended them, even the critics of the Helms cannot deny that the army fell valiantly, protecting their Imperial allies. They faced darkness, and made the ultimate sacrifice.

For many soldiers, any question of the Iron Helms now seems

moot. As a consequence, Varushkan armies no longer take a penalty to the victory points they generate when fighting in a campaign alongside Freeborn or Wintermark armies. However, if they wish, the Freeborn or Wintermark assembly could reiterate their concerns about Varushka, about their attitudes to war. A statement of principle that received a greater majority in one of these assemblies and called for their soldiers to remain careful of Varushkan ambitions would mean that the penalty would resume.

Alternatively, any assembly could raise a statement of principle denouncing the merciless strategy of the Iron Helms. If such a statement received a greater majority, it would create a mandate that would ensure that any cruel Imperial army raised in future would automatically receive the penalty to victory points generated if they fought in a campaign with an army that eschewed cruelty. If this statement and resulting mandate passed the General Assembly, the Empire would no longer be able to raise armies with the cruel quality.

Dawn, Wintermark and Urizen

- **Dawn and Urizen upheld statements of principle but they did not achieve greater majorities**
- **Wintermark upheld a statement with a greater majority, but with no clear call to action**
- **Any nation not already committed might raise statements about the vallorn, but they are no more likely**

to generate opportunities than any other statement

Three national assemblies passed statements of principle on the matter at the Autumn Equinox. All of them passed but two of them did not get a greater majority. The one raised by **Eurydice Starchaser** that urged for the people of Urizen to support the Navarr in Loyalty, with Courage and Pride, and to support the magical army to be raised in Miaren. The other, by **Larkin Shrike of House Du Beste** called on the people of Dawn to seek glory and great deeds by carving into the bark of the vallorn, lest they be found wanting. While there is clearly some support for the war of thorns and flowers as the Dawnish are calling it, it is not strong enough to focus the nation on the dangers, despite the fact both Urizen and Dawn are directly threatened by the vallorns of Therunin and Brocéliande especially.

Wintermark, by contrast, did uphold a judgement with a greater majority, but the people of the Mark remain unsure what action to take. The statement explicitly stated that the Empire is mighty, but finite, strongly implying that the nation must make a choice. The suggestion is that the Empire is taking on too many problems at once: the war with Asavea, war with three orc nations, and now this suggestion of war with the vallorn. It seems to be building to a conclusion that Wintermark should decisively reject helping the Navarr and turn their back on this madness, but the statement stops short of that and instead exhorts people to make ready for all the threats they face. With the judgement presenting no clear focus, and with the

assembly having rejected a judgement calling on the nation to support Navarr, the Winterfolk will continue as they always have; scions of the storm preparing for a hard winter.

The moment for the Synod to act is now passing, so any new statement of principle is no more likely to create a mandate dealing in opportunities than any other. This means it is not impossible for any assembly to act but clear, strong wording either in support or in opposition to the war of thorns and flowers - and the backing of the greater majority of the assembly - would be essential.

Virtue demands more than fine words and good intentions. The Empire is mighty but it is finite. The Synod provokes war with Asavea and the vallorn at a time when our armies are already stretched too thin. The Empire's people will suffer the consequences. The people of Wintermark must prepare for the storm to come. We cannot support the Navarr at the exclusion of every other threat we face. Make ready for them all. Cleave to your loyalties, provision your halls and prepare for more hard winters. We will not be broken.

*Ingrid Talon-of-the-Mark, Wintermark Assembly, Autumn Equinox
386YE, Vote: Greater Majority 266-35*

The Navarr show Courage in their Ambition to remove the threat of the Vallorn for good. In Loyalty and Courage, we are being called to support this by taking Pride in our magical prowess to support the creation of their army in Miaren that

focuses on a mage based front.

Eurydice Starchaser, Urizen Assembly, Autumn Equinox 386YE,

Vote: 150-0

Once again we are called to action and to glory by our neighbours. The Navarr have committed to eradicating the Vallorn once and for all. The League and Varushkans have offered their aid. Dawn will not be found wanting. Great deeds are eternal; let us carve them into the bark of any vallorn who dares oppose us. The people of Dawn shall march with our siblings in the Way to destroy the vallorn now. Let us commit to a War of Thorns and Flowers.

Larkin Shrike of House Du Beste, Dawn Assembly, Autumn Equinox

386YE, Vote: 282-64