

The

Caldwell Commentary

To Common and Uncommon Lore of the Evershroud Isles



Written and edited by

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4th edition, 784 y.s.

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Preface

It is with a heavy hand and yet heavier heart that I have picked up my quill to pen down this commentary to my esteemed grandfather's magnum opus, the venerable Common and Uncommon Lore of the Evershroud Isles. Some sixty-three years have passed since my esteemed grandfather, Baron Eurydites Caldwell, first attempted to chronicle the myriad secrets and shifting allegiances of our beloved Evershroud Isles. His work, now revered as a foundational text for understanding our history and culture, was penned in a time of discovery, optimism, and, admittedly, some naïveté—qualities befitting the first breath of a new age. But that age, with its bold adventurers and its noble quests, has long since given way to an era far more complex and grim.

Indeed, much has changed since the days when Xar'El's chosen fought valiantly at the front lines, and the hero Rhiri stood as our symbol of hope against the tides of darkness. That hopeful moment in history, where a decisive battle might have set our Isles on a path of peace, collapsed with the tragic fall of Barnabus, the Son. In the aftermath, the woman now known as St. Rhiri was elevated to sainthood, becoming an enduring symbol of sacrifice and virtue, much like Rael herself. Yet the true events surrounding those days remain shrouded in ambiguity, and the Cult of Rael, with its fervent zealotry, has undoubtedly woven their own narrative to obscure whatever truth lies beneath.

This volume seeks to address the yawning chasm of knowledge and understanding left by those fateful years. Where my grandfather captured the optimism of fledgling heroes, this commentary bears the burden of recounting their failure—a fall from grace that ultimately altered the fate of every corner of the Isles. The ascension of Rhiri to sainthood—an act that once promised redemption—has instead been used as a tool by the Cult of Rael to fortify their authority and moral supremacy. Their version of history, with Rhiri as a righteous martyr, has given them an unchallenged platform to carry out their increasingly oppressive campaigns. It is widely known that the Raellan Sisters Militant, with their ruthless sanctimony, have suffocated dissent and grown bloated with power.

The lands themselves have likewise changed. The once-proud Caldwell Dominion, now brought to heel as a puppet state of Silt, serves as a constant reminder of the fragility of freedom. The atrocities committed by the city-state of Silt against my ancestral lands are a testament to the depth of corruption and cruelty that have taken root. The acolytes of Xar'El, the Dragon's Phallus sect, have been systematically exterminated by the Sisters, their embers all but extinguished beneath the weight of persecution and betrayal. Even Azure, once the centre of thriving trade and

intellectual exchange, has turned inward, abandoning its island neighbours to instead seek solace in the commerce of distant shores.

Yet amidst the encroaching darkness, there are glimmers of resilience—new hope found in unexpected places. Margraeve-Duskhaven, long haunted by its own ghosts, has become a refuge for those fleeing the tyranny of Silt and the devastation of war. Its undead guardians now share space with the displaced living, forging a unique, if uneasy, coexistence. There is vitality here—a chance, perhaps, to rekindle some of what was lost, to build anew even in the shadow of what has been torn down.

It is also worth noting the ominous presence of a certain figure who now serves as an advisor to the current Sovereign of Silt. Ra'Jerr, a grey old tabaxi, is known for his sharp mind and long history within the politics of these Isles. While his influence appears outwardly benign, I cannot ignore the whispers of his prior involvement in the darker dealings of Silt. Ra'Jerr is believed by some -whom I will not name here for I fear for their lives - to have played a significant role in the corruption of the magistrates of Silt, particularly the Princeps of Lamya, Therec the Bold. It was under Therec's orders that a mercenary force fought at the Siege of Castle Margraeve, where Barnabus, the Son fell. Such connections are, of course, conjecture and not to be fully trusted, but they do paint a troubling picture of the true nature of the forces that steer our fate.

It is my humble duty as the bearer of my grandfather's legacy to ensure that our history—in all its nuance, complexity, and tragedy—is neither lost nor whitewashed by those who might seek to rewrite it to suit their own ends. This commentary is not merely an addendum, it is a reckoning. It is an acknowledgment of both our failings and our resilience, a testament to the price of misplaced hope, and a chronicle of those dark days that shaped the world we now struggle to comprehend.

May The Caldwell Commentaries serve not only as a record but as a warning—that heroes are fallible, that history is fragile, and that hope, though it can be extinguished, can also rise once more, perhaps from the most unlikely of places.

With the utmost faith in your unwavering resolve,

J.M. Caldwell

I My Father's Son

I have often pondered, in the quietest hours of the night, what it means to be my father's son. To bear the Caldwell name, in all its pride and gravitas, is both a blessing and a weight I have carried since I was old enough to walk the fields of our plantation. This chapter is not merely a recounting of the history that books like my grandfathers have attempted to capture; it is instead the story of a boy, and then a young man, growing up in the Caldwell Dominion before war and shadow gripped it by the throat.

I was born in the year 725, during what we now call the Golden Interval. These were the days of bright summers, of endless green pastures, and of our family's dominion flourishing without contest or strife. My earliest memories are not of courts or council chambers but of rolling hills, the smell of horses, and the laughter of our household's laborers. The people of Caldwell worked hard, but they did so with a sense of belonging that made our estate feel less like a fiefdom and more like a community. We did not have the divisions so often present in other dominions, where a lord's subjects were an indistinct mass that lived beneath the weight of his taxes. Instead, we had something closer to family. Or so it seemed to my young eyes.

My father, Lord Alistair Caldwell, was a man whose shadow covered every inch of our land. He was stern but fair, a man whose word was law and yet whose laughter could warm the coldest room in our manor. I remember, as a boy of seven or eight, watching him ride up the cobbled path to the manor house after a long day inspecting the fields, his hair streaked with the first signs of grey, and his eyes tired but kind. He would lift me off the ground and set me upon his saddle, letting me hold the reins while he guided the horse the rest of the way home. Those moments—just me, my father, and the warmth of the late summer sun—are forever etched into my mind.

The manor house itself was both grand and humble in equal measure. Built from the sturdy stone of the highlands, it bore the scars of our family's history—marks left by old battles and past trials. My room, a modest chamber on the eastern side, had a narrow window from which I could see the plains stretch endlessly, the horizon an unbroken line that called to my young imagination. At night, I would hear the distant howling of wolves, the rhythmic croaking of toads, and the occasional bawdy laughter of the overseers sharing an ale beneath the moonlit sky.

There was something raw about life in the Caldwell Dominion during those years. The Dominion was a wild place, not in the sense of lawlessness, but because nature itself seemed to assert its dominion alongside my family. I would wander the edges of the woodland, where ancient oaks loomed like solemn sentinels, and the underbrush rustled with creatures unseen. I remember the stories the serfs used to tell—stories of old spirits that haunted the woods, of creatures that emerged from the mists, and of the fae that would steal away children who strayed too far. Most nights, those tales frightened me enough to keep me close to the house, but there were times when curiosity overruled fear, and I would find myself slipping into those woods with nothing but a lantern and my imagination.

One summer, I remember particularly well—it must have been the year 736. I was eleven, almost twelve, and it was a summer of sweltering heat. The river that ran through our lands had dried to a trickle, and the laborers struggled to keep the crops watered. I spent those months with Garth, a boy a few years my senior, whose father worked as the stable master. We were inseparable that summer—racing the horses across the fields when no one was watching, daring each other to swim in the stagnant ponds, and getting into all manner of mischief.

Garth was different from me in so many ways—he was freer, bolder, unrestrained by the weight of family expectation. I envied that about him. While I was expected to learn my letters, study the histories, and understand the intricacies of managing our lands, Garth seemed to live entirely in the present. He would laugh with the ease of someone who had never heard the word responsibility. I remember the way he would whistle—long, low notes that carried across the fields—while I tried to mimic his tone, often failing to produce anything but a squeak. He was my first friend, truly, the first person I felt I could be just a boy with, not the heir to a name that weighed as much as a suit of chainmail.



That was also the summer I first began to understand the complexities of our dominion. There was a man—Old Jeb, they called him—who had lived on Caldwell lands longer than anyone could remember. He was a fixture in the community, known for his tall tales and his ability to mend almost anything. But one day, the overseers came to take Old Jeb's cottage. It was needed, they said, for expansion, for progress. I didn't understand it then—why someone so beloved could be made to leave, why progress had to mean loss. It was my father who made the decision, and while I knew he did it for reasons of governance, it was the first time I saw that our land was not a perfect place, and that even the kindest rulers had to make choices that hurt.

My father explained it to me that night, as we sat by the fireplace. He spoke of duty, of the need to look beyond individual desires for the sake of the greater good. I remember nodding, but I didn't fully understand. I looked into the fire and wondered why something as bright as duty could cast such dark shadows.

And then, of course, there were the visitors. Caldwell Manor was a bustling place in those days, a waypoint for merchants, knights, and even the occasional wandering mystic. I would watch them arrive, their clothes dusty from travel, their eyes wary but intrigued. They would bring stories—of battles fought in distant lands, of the strange customs of the folk of Azure, and of the ever-present tensions with Silt. I listened eagerly to these tales, feeling the pull of the world beyond our dominion. There was a restlessness growing in me, a sense that the world was so much larger than the plains

of Caldwell, larger even than the Isles themselves. It was in those moments that I first dreamed of leaving—of finding my own place, my own name, away from the shadow of my father.

And yet, I loved Caldwell. I loved the people, the land, the very air that seemed to hum with life. The Dominion was not perfect—far from it—but it was ours. I was my father's son, after all, and as much as I dreamed of distant horizons, my heart was firmly anchored in the fields and forests of my youth.

These were the years before the storm—before the war, before the cults, before the shadows of Silt cast their long, terrible pall over all we knew. They were not idyllic, but they were real, vivid, and filled with all the color and complexity that comes with the simple, undeniable truth of growing up.

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It began as whispers. Rumors carried by merchants and vagabonds—whispers of the Battle of Ald Margrave. I remember overhearing the hushed conversations between the servants in the kitchens, the nervous glances exchanged by the stable hands. I was barely fourteen then, but there was an undeniable tension that had settled across the Dominion. The Battle of Ald Margrave, they said, had been a slaughter. The city-state of Silt had dispatched their mercenaries and they had torn through the defenders like a scythe through dry wheat.

The first time I heard the word "mercenary" spoken with such venom, I did not fully understand. But I saw the fear it put into the eyes of those around me. My father said little, but there was a change in him as well—his laughter, once warm and easy, became rarer, replaced by long silences as he sat by the fire, staring into the flames as if seeking answers from their flickering dance.

The summer after Ald Margrave, the villages nearest our borders began to fall. It was not sudden; there was no great trumpet blast heralding the arrival of war. Instead, it came like a creeping mist—slow, inevitable, swallowing one village after another. It started with the smaller places—hamlets we had scarcely heard of before the war, each one consumed by Silt's forces. The men who came were not soldiers of honor; they were hired blades, their tabards stitched with symbols of the Cult of Ragl. They were dirty, ragged, and yet there was something terrifyingly efficient about them.

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I remember the day we heard that the village of Lantony had fallen. Father had gathered the overseers in the great hall, and I was there, hovering at the edge of the room, trying to make myself invisible so I could listen. Lantony had always been a peaceful place—a cluster of cottages surrounded by farmland, where people lived simple lives. The overseers spoke of the village in low voices, of how the mercenaries had come in the night, burning what they could not take, tearing families apart, and leaving the fields scorched in their wake.

It was then that I saw the first crack in my father's composure. His jaw tightened, his knuckles turned white where he gripped the edge of the table. He dismissed the

oversseers, and for a moment, he stood there, staring at the map of our lands spread across the table, a map that now seemed so much smaller, the edges curling inward as if it were being consumed by the very forces it depicted.

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The days after that seemed to blur together—a haze of preparations, of men arriving at Caldwell Manor asking to speak to my father, their faces grim, their clothes marked with the dust of long travel. There were meetings behind closed doors, voices raised in anger, the sound of my mother crying softly in her chambers. Gareth and I no longer raced the horses through the fields; instead, we were told to stay close, to keep away from the woods, to always be within sight of the manor. The laughter that had once filled those summer days was gone, replaced by an uneasy silence that settled over everything like a pall.

I watched from my window one morning as the first group of refugees arrived. They came slowly, a line of carts and weary figures, their belongings piled haphazardly, children clinging to their mothers' skirts, their eyes wide with fear. They were the people of Lantony, or what was left of them. The overseers met them at the gate, and I could see my father standing there, his silhouette framed against the grey sky. He spoke to them, his voice low, his hand resting on the shoulder of an elderly man who had once been a farmer, now reduced to a hollow-eyed refugee.

War was no longer a distant rumor. It was here, in the faces of the people who had once lived peaceful lives, in the empty cottages that now dotted our lands, in the way the servants moved quietly, their eyes downcast. It crept closer with every passing day, until even the manor itself seemed to shrink beneath its weight. The fields that had once been filled with laborers were now empty, the crops left untended, the tools rusting where they had been dropped. The laughter of my childhood had vanished, replaced by the distant rumble of something dark and unstoppable.

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I was sixteen when my father was summoned to the Brine Aleazar. The name itself seemed to carry a chill—a fortress that rose from the rocky coastline, its walls slick with salt, the waves crashing violently against its foundations. The summons had come from Ra'Jerr, the newly appointed advisor to Silt's puppet Sovereign. My father knew what it meant, even if I did not fully grasp it at the time. To my surprise, he told me that I would be going with him. He said it was time I learned what it meant to be a man—to witness the weight of choices and the cost of defiance.

The morning we left, the sky was overcast, a dull grey that seemed to swallow all light. My mother stood at the doorway, her face pale, her eyes rimmed red from crying. My father embraced her, his hands lingering on her shoulders, his eyes searching hers for a moment longer than necessary. Then he turned to me. I had grown taller in the past years, and for the first time, I stood almost eye-to-eye with him. He placed a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm.

"Look after your mother, John, if anything happens," he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. There was something in his eyes then, something that spoke of finality, of a goodbye that went beyond words.

We rode in silence for the better part of the journey. The roads that had once been busy with merchants and travelers were now empty, the fields on either side untended, the cottages we passed shuttered and silent. The closer we drew to the Brine Aleazar, the more oppressive the air became, as if the land itself knew what awaited us. My father spoke little, his eyes fixed on the horizon, his face a mask of calm that I now recognize as the resignation of a man walking to his fate.

The Brine Aleazar loomed ahead, its dark silhouette stark against the stormy sky. The sea crashed against its base, sending spray high into the air, and the salt clung to our skin as we approached the gates. Guards met us there—men wearing the blood-red colors of Silt, their faces expressionless as they led us through the winding corridors of the fortress. The air inside was damp, the stone walls slick, and the scent of brine was everywhere, sharp and overwhelming.

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We were taken to a great hall, a vast, echoing space with high ceilings and narrow windows that let in slivers of pale light. At the far end of the room stood Ra'Jerr. His fur graying but lustrous, his eyes sharp and calculating as they rested on my father. He wore the robes of an advisor, his demeanor one of someone who had already decided the outcome before the first word was spoken.

My father stood tall, his shoulders squared, as he was led to the center of the room. I stood beside him, my heart pounding in my chest, my mouth dry. Ra'Jerr spoke in a voice that was almost gentle, offering terms of surrender—the Dominion would be spared if we swore fealty to Silt, if we accepted their rule, if my father bowed. It was then that I saw the flicker of emotion cross my father's face—not fear, not hesitation, but defiance.

"The Dominion will not bow," my father proclaimed, his voice ringing out across the stone hall. "Not if the sun itself were to burn out above us, nor if the oceans rose to wash away every trace of our name. We will never bow to the likes of you, Ra'Jerr. Caldwell will stand, unyielding and unbroken."

The silence that followed was absolute. Ra'Jerr's expression did not change, but there was a coldness that settled in his eyes, a hardness that seemed to sap the warmth from the room. He nodded once, almost imperceptibly, and the guards moved forward. My father turned to look at me, his eyes meeting mine for the last time. There was pride there, a fierce pride that made my chest ache.

"Remember who you are, John," he said, his voice steady. "Remember our name."

I watched as they took him away. I wanted to shout, to fight, to do something, but my feet were frozen to the floor, my voice caught in my throat. They led him to the far end of the hall, and I turned away only when I heard the sound of the blade, the finality of it echoing through the stone chamber.

They did not allow me to see his body. Instead, they led me from the hall, their hands gripping my arms as if I might collapse at any moment. I walked in a daze, my vision blurred, the world around me reduced to a haze of shadows and the sound of the waves crashing far below. My father was gone, and with him, the last remnants of the world I had known. The war had taken him, and now it had taken me as well—though in a way that left me hollow, a shell of the optimistic young whippersnapper I once used to be.

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I left the Brine Aleazar in disgrace, a prisoner given freedom not out of mercy but because I was of no value to them. They did not need a boy with no title, no power, and no hope. Ra'jerr had looked me in the eye as I was cast out, his gaze filled with something between pity and amusement. I was escorted through the streets of Silt by the same guards who had watched my father's final moments—their hands gripping my arms tightly, their laughter echoing in my ears as they paraded me past the sneering citizens.

They stripped me of my dignity that day, shoving me into the mud as the townspeople jeered, some of them even throwing scraps of food and stones. To them, I was nothing—a relic of a family that had refused to bow, a symbol of defiance that had been crushed underfoot. I remember the taste of blood in my mouth as I picked myself up, the sting of bruises already forming on my skin, and the way my heart pounded not with fear, but with a hatred so deep it burned.

They left me at the edge of the city, their laughter fading as they turned their backs on me. For a moment, I stood there, looking back at the towering gates of Silt, the vermillion banners fluttering above them, the sigil of Rael emblazoned in dark, menacing colors. I wanted to scream, to shout at them, to do something—anything—to make them feel what I felt. But I had no strength left, nothing but the ragged clothes on my back and the hollow ache of loss. And so, I turned away, my head bowed, and began the long journey back to Caldwell.

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I returned to Caldwell Manor a boy who had seen too much and understood too little. I was but a young lad then, though I felt centuries older, as if the weight of history had settled on my shoulders, pressing me down with each weary step I took. The journey back was long, filled with twists and detours as I evaded the eyes of those who hunted me—Silt's elite guards, their tabards stained with the blood of the unbelted, eyes sharp as hawks and hearts as cold as winter stone.

By the time I crossed into the familiar hills of Caldwell, the place I had once called home no longer seemed to know me. The fields that had stretched endlessly, golden and bright, now lay barren, choked with weeds and overrun with brambles. The cottages that dotted the landscape, where I once heard laughter echo and saw children play, stood abandoned—their doors left swinging, their thatched roofs collapsing

under the weight of neglect. Everything was quieter, as if even the wind had chosen to abandon this place.

And then there it was—Caldwell Manor. Or what remained of it. The walls were blackened, charred where flames had licked their stone, and the great oaken doors that had once seemed so imposing lay splintered in the courtyard. The windows, those proud windows that had always gleamed in the morning light, were shattered, shards of glass littering the ground like fallen stars. The garden my mother had so carefully tended had turned to a twisted tangle of dry stalks and thorny overgrowth, choked with the bitter scent of abandonment.

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I paused at the gates, my heart a weight in my chest, my breath catching in my throat. I knew that the manor would not be as I remembered, that the war had reached its cold fingers even here, but knowing did little to ease the hollow ache that settled in my bones. The Dominion, our land, our legacy, had been crushed underfoot, and there was nothing left but the ruins of what once was.

As I moved through the remains of the courtyard, I saw them—those dreadful sigils, emblazoned on crimson banners hanging from the scorched stone, fluttering weakly in the breeze. They were tattered, but they hung like a dark proclamation, a statement that Caldwell was no longer ours. And then I saw him—the new potentate, a man whose name I did not yet know, flanked by two guards, his posture arrogant, his eyes dismissive as he surveyed what had become his dominion.

He stood there, dressed in rich silks dyed in deep reds and dark blues, his finery a stark contrast to the desolation around him. He looked out of place—as if he had been cut from the velvet of some opulent palace and pasted into the grey, burnt world of Caldwell. It was the way he moved—without care, without respect, like a conqueror surveying his spoils—that twisted something in my gut. I watched as he laughed, gesturing to the ruins of what had once been my family's home, his guards smirking beside him, as if the destruction before them were some grand joke.

I could barely breathe. The weight of it all hit me at once—the empty windows staring back at me like hollow eyes, the scattered remnants of a life that no longer existed, the mocking laughter of a stranger standing where my father once did. The memories of my childhood flooded back—my father lifting me onto his saddle after a long day in the fields, my mother tending the garden, Gareth whistling as we raced through the sunlit pastures. All of it now lay in ruins, trampled beneath the boots of those who did not belong, who would never understand the love and life that had once filled these walls.

I wanted to cry out, to charge at him, to make him pay for every broken stone, every shattered memory. But I couldn't—I knew I was outmatched, outnumbered, and that to act would mean my death. So I stood there, hidden in the shadows, the tears burning in my eyes, my hands trembling as I clung to the remnants of the gate. It was a feeling of utter helplessness, a sense that everything I had ever known had been taken from me, piece by piece, until there was nothing left but this—a stranger laughing amidst the ruins of my past.

I fled Caldwell that night, under the cover of darkness. There were voices behind me, calls that echoed through the empty fields, torches moving in the distance—the hunters had seen me, or perhaps they had always known I would return. My heart pounded in my ears as I ran, the shadows shifting around me, the branches clawing at my clothes like skeletal hands trying to pull me back. I had no destination, only the need to escape, to put distance between myself and the twisted remains of what had once been my world.

For days, I moved through the countryside, hiding in the underbrush by day, moving by night, a specter drifting between the memories of my past and the harsh reality that now lay before me. I passed the ruins of villages that had once thrived, saw faces gaunt with hunger, eyes hollowed by fear. I saw children clutching their mothers, men staring listlessly into the distance, and everywhere, the banners of Silt—a dark reminder of how far their influence had spread, how completely they had devoured the Isles.

For weeks, I wandered westward in hiding, my only companions the distant calls of night birds and the whisper of the wind through empty hamlets. I kept to the shadows, slipping through fields and sheltering in abandoned farmhouses, each step carrying me farther from Caldwell and deeper into the harsh lands ravaged by war.

I survived on wild roots, the occasional scraps left by other refugees, and the precious rations I had managed to scavenge from Caldwell. In the silence of these hollow villages, memories of my father haunted me, his final words echoing in the quiet nights. Those first weeks were filled with unrelenting loneliness, a fear gnawing at the edges of my thoughts—a fear not only of the assassins hunting the Caldwell heir but also of the lingering emptiness that stretched around me.

But then, through the endless days of flight, a thought began to grow, faint at first, then clearer with each passing mile: I could go to Azure. I could seek out Uncle Dzelan, a figure from my childhood who, though not a true Caldwell by blood, was bound to us by the union of my great-aunt Dorothea's daughter Katherine. Uncle Dzelan, the lively, eccentric merchant with his shop of imported curiosities from far-off lands, most often from Zhi-La. Dzelan and Katherine had visited the plantation on numerous occasions, always arriving with tales of adventure and gifts wrapped in silks from lands I had only dreamed of. And I had even once spent a summer there, staying with my uncle and aunt whilst my father and mother partook in the yearly fertility rites of the Dragon's Phallus. Oh to go back to those days...

In Azure, I might find a place to hide, a sanctuary where the reach of Silt's grasping tendrils would be dulled amidst the bustling markets and towering walls of that ancient city. Uncle Dzelan's shop, filled with the scents of incense, of foreign spices and curious artifacts, loomed in my mind as a beacon of safety, of something close to home.

With this new sense of purpose, I quickened my steps, my mind filled with the image of Azure's gates. The specter of fear still followed me, but now it was tempered by the glimmer of hope—that perhaps, amidst the unfamiliar faces and clamoring streets, I might yet find a place to lay low, to rebuild something of what I had lost. In my heart, I clung to the thought of Dzelan's warm welcome and the promise of refuge, hoping that his shop would be the sanctuary I so desperately needed.

And so, with resolve hardening in my chest, I turned my steps toward Azure, leaving behind the scarred lands of Caldwell, and stepped onto a new path, one that I hoped might lead me to safety.

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Eventually, bruised, exhausted, my tattered clothes held together by but a few threads, I made my way to Azure. I had heard of the city, of its towering walls and bustling docks, a place where people still lived, where life still had some semblance of order. When I finally saw those walls, rising like the edge of the world, I felt something that I had not felt in a long time—hope. A fragile, wavering hope, but hope nonetheless. The gates were busy, crowded with traders, with travelers and refugees, and I slipped through unnoticed, just another face among many.

The shop was as I remembered it—crammed with curiosities, the air thick with incense, and the layered scents of spices that blended seamlessly with the bustling aroma of Azure itself. Small figurines of carved jade lined the shelves, alongside scrolls from Zhi-La, with paper so fine it seemed woven from mist. The gentle chime of bells announced my arrival as I stepped over the threshold, my weariness palpable, yet tempered by relief. But the atmosphere felt different, heavy in a way I hadn't anticipated. Something lingered in the air, something more than incense—a cloying sense of sorrow, of loss waiting in the wings.

Dzelan appeared from the back of the shop, his face etched with lines I didn't remember. His eyes widened, a glimmer of recognition shining beneath the shadow of exhaustion. Without a word, he embraced me, his grip both reassuring and pained, as though he feared I might vanish from his arms at any moment.

"She's been asking after you," he murmured, his voice as soft as the silks he sold. With a nod, he led me through a narrow corridor, past crates of herbs and strange powders that had once seemed the trappings of mystery but now felt like relics of a distant life.

In a small room at the back, Katherine lay in a bed draped with curtains of worn, gauzy fabric, the remnants of her once-lavish life now faded and fraying. She was almost unrecognizable—her skin had turned nearly translucent, veins like thin blue rivers visible just beneath the surface. Her breath came shallow and slow, each exhale a struggle, as if the very air were too heavy for her frail form.



I took a seat by her bedside, the silence of the room broken only by the faint rustling of fabric and her quiet, labored breaths. Her hand, cold and light as paper, lay on the sheets, and I hesitated before reaching out to hold it, fearing that even a gentle touch might shatter her.

“Katherine,” Dzelan said softly, his voice laced with tenderness and pain, “John has come.”

Her eyelids fluttered open, and for a moment, her eyes, though dulled by illness, sparkled with the faint recognition of youth, of days long past. She smiled—a weary, fragile smile that seemed to take all her remaining strength. “My... brave little John,” she whispered, her voice barely more than a breath. She paused, her gaze unfocused, drifting past me, then returned to my face with a trace of confusion. “But... where’s your father?”

The words caught in my throat, and I could not answer. The unspoken truth settled in the room, mingling with the incense and quiet despair. She seemed to sense it, or perhaps she was simply too tired to pursue the question. Her hand tightened weakly around mine, her eyes softening, as if seeing me not as the young man I had become, but as the child she had known. “You must be strong, John,” she murmured, each word a struggle. “The world is... a harsher place now. Remember who you are... where you come from...”

Her voice trailed off, her breath growing fainter, her hand slipping from mine as her eyes drifted shut. A slight smile touched her lips, as though she had found peace in those final words. And then, quietly, her chest rose and fell one last time, and Katherine was gone.

Dzelan’s hand rested on my shoulder, his grip gentle but firm, grounding me in that moment of stillness. We sat in silence, as though even our breaths would be too loud, disturbing the delicate finality that had settled upon her. The air felt heavy, as if it, too, mourned her passing, bearing witness to the end of an era and to the fragility of all we hold dear.

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My uncle would never be the same. Katherine’s passing left a hollow in uncle Dzelan that time never seemed to fill. Though he’d been a lively and generous man, her death seemed to pull the warmth from him, leaving behind a hardened shell. His mirth turned to bitterness, his joy a mere echo, faded by years of quiet grief. I watched him turn to drink, his temper darkening as if he could dull his sorrow with each empty glass. Where once his laughter had filled the shop, now it was the crashing of bottles, the mutter of resentment, the occasional shout echoing through the walls in the dark hours.

The old uncle I had known—the Dzelan who had once been a bright spark of life—was slowly replaced by a man given to bouts of violence, his anger simmering just beneath the surface. There were times when he would pull himself together, even go as far as to teach me about the trade, about the strange relics of Zhi-La and the secrets of the

Azurzan markets. But those days were rarer as the years wore on, and his despair seemed to deepen, driving him to seedy taverns where he drank strong ale and bellowed thick clouds of blackleaf late into the night. It was there that he met his end: a bar fight with a goliath—a creature with fists the size of anvils—left him with an injury so grave he couldn't recover.

Even in death, however, Dzelan hadn't abandoned me. His will, scratched in an unsteady hand, left the shop, its charter, and a small fortune to me. It was as if he'd always known this day would come, always intended for the shop to be passed down. And so, as I closed the door on his life, I found myself with an unexpected inheritance and a legacy I had never sought. The shop became mine, a sanctuary that once had been Dzelan's, and I took to the trade with a quiet determination, feeling in some small way that I was honoring the man he had been before grief twisted him.

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Over the years, I learned the subtleties of the trade, piecing together fragments of knowledge Dzelan had shared. I delved into his personal notes, full of secrets of the Evershroud Isles and rich with tales of the distant continent of Zhi-La, learning about its silk routes, its strange, potent herbs, and the ornate relics that Azurzan collectors so desired. Each item that passed through my hands felt like a step in a larger journey, a continuation of Dzelan's life's work, though the air in Azure felt heavier than it had before. My reputation grew, and soon, I was an established name in the Azurzan League, my shop a fixture in the bustling market, attracting merchants, mystics, and nobles alike.

I took another name – for obvious reasons, and during those years gained some renown as Miles Kinean, purveyor of all things extraordinary. It was a name true to my Dominion heritage, but as the Kineans were but a mundane offshoot of our noble family, it roused no suspicion. Yet, even as I carved out a life for myself, the shadows of Silt loomed over the Isles, dark and unyielding. Rumors trickled into Azure, tales of Silt's grip tightening on the neighboring dominions, of its banners unfurling like a storm across the Isles. Refugees from Caldwell and other ravaged lands would arrive with stories of brutal raids, the crimson-clad mercenaries of Rael casting terror in their wake, leaving towns silent and fields burned. And while trade was good and the coin plentiful, there was an unease that clung to the air, a sense that the Isles as I knew them were changing under the quiet, relentless advance of Silt's shadow.

In the evenings, I would sit by the shop's single window, looking out at the flickering lanterns that lit the market square, listening to the distant songs and shouts of the Azurzan night. It was a fragile peace, one that felt all the more precious in the knowledge that it might soon be shattered. The Evershroud Isles were slipping, inch by inch, into darkness, and as I watched the patrons drift by my door, I couldn't help but feel a storm was coming, one that even the safety of the Azurzan walls could not keep at bay.

As the years wore on, Azure began to decline, the life slowly drained from it by endless skirmishes with Silt. It was never outright war, but a series of constant

conflicts—small battles, border disputes—that gnawed at the city’s strength. Treasury coffers emptied, taxes climbed, and the hard-earned coin of Azure’s citizens disappeared into the machinery of a futile defense. I watched the once-bustling markets grow quiet, the once-proud ports reduced to barely a trickle of ships, and the festivals that had been Azure’s pride became ghosts of their former selves. The city fell under a strict lockdown, and with it, a stillness settled over our lives, the future dimmed by the shadows of Silt.

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Now, well into my forties, I feel the shop has changed around me—become emptier, quieter. The trade that once brought people from across the Isles has slowed to a standstill, and in these long, silent evenings, I turn to writing, hoping it might bring me a measure of comfort or purpose.

One evening, just weeks ago, while sifting through my uncle’s old library, my hand fell upon a book that feels like an echo from another life. The spine is cracked, the leather worn, but I would know it anywhere: *Common and Uncommon Lore of the Evershroud Isles*. My grandfather’s work. I traced my fingers over the title, feeling an unexpected pang—a strange mix of pride and grief, for I know that world is gone, lost in the shadows that have crept over the Isles.

The *Common and Uncommon Lore* my grandfather wrote was a product of its time, penned in an age of hope, of open roads and new discoveries. But the Isles have changed beyond recognition; what was once a land of promise has become a place riddled with treachery and darkness. And I realize I have a duty—not merely to record the Isles as they were, but to tell the truth, raw and unvarnished, for the next generation. This, dear reader, is my own account, my own commentaries, a guide for those who dare to venture beyond the safety of their homes, whether or not they wish to face the reality that awaits them.

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This, then, is the purpose of my work. I am no hero, no grand adventurer, but I have walked these Isles long enough to see them change, to witness the shadows deepening across our lands. I cannot promise tales of glory or lands waiting to be claimed. Instead, I promise the truth. If you choose to read on, know that I will give you nothing less.

This is no longer the Isles my grandfather knew; it is something harder, harsher. And yet, there are glimmers still—the secrets in Azure’s marketplaces, the strange relics from Zhi-la, the names that drift into legend but remain close enough to be real.

The Evershroud Isles may be fading, slipping into a darkness we cannot yet measure, but perhaps these words will hold a piece of it—a light, however dim, for those who seek it.

II The Isles and their inhabitants

I am certain my grandfather created his glossary of Evershroud and its denizens to the best of his abilities and knowledge. However, as any scholar with even the slightest of experience will assure you it is no easy feat to write a comprehensive yet complete guide on a subject as dynamic and complex as the subject of the Isles, their demography, and the mire of political intrigue that pervades them. As his summary of the great Cataclysm demonstrates quite effectively, even the geographical nature of a place so tied in to the legends of old may be subject to change, though by the grace of the Five, we have been spared in that regard.

Regardless, I too will do my very best to describe the current demography and political landscape of the Isles with that very same accuracy to which my grandfather did aspire, even though by the time I put down my quill perhaps the work will have become obsolete.

To the average commoner, life in the Isles is much the same as it has been for centuries: hard, but fulfilling. From the farmer in the field to the fisherman at the docks, to the miners of the Ungolid mountains, all are well versed in surviving the often harsh climate. Dressed in clothes of wool or sometimes furs, they lead a relatively simple life in their humble dwellings. Smoke rises from chimneys above thatched roofs and children play with crudely made toys in the muddy streets of hamlets no larger than a few dozen of such abodes.

Most of them work only towards subsistence, but then, as is the habit with such people, very few actually desire anything more. They marry young, proliferate vigorously, and when winter comes those no longer strong enough to withstand the damp, cold climate die off by the dozen. Nevertheless, true poverty or famine is something only few of them have ever experienced, as their rural upbringing ensures they have at least a rudimentary knowledge of plants, herbs and fungi common to the Isles, enabling them to forage when the autumn harvest falls short.

In the cities, however, poverty does rear its ugly head, especially in these times of war. It is a heartbreaking sight when one witnesses the hollow eyes and gaunt faces of orphans for whom hope is as scarce as the morsels of food they manage to attain. Squalor is high, and gangs of unkempt, emasculated youths roam the city streets at night, searching for an easy victim.

Such victims, in turn, are often found in the bourgeoisie, the merchant class of which I myself have become an upstanding member. Few are those of my standing who dare venture into the back alleysways of Azure once the sun has set, lest they be pickpocketed, robbed, or worse. Nevertheless, more than once have I found myself facing off with such groups of violent miscreants, and more often than not do they scatter at the least sign of resistance from their would-be victim. It is, after all, not malice, but desperation that drives them to such acts, and those in more fortunate positions than they would do well to remember that, had the Five decided to favor them differently, they could have stood at the other end of the robber's blade, so to speak.

Had I not been bequeathed such a generous inheritance by my late uncle Dzelan, I myself might have turned out very differently.

Craftsmen, stewards, and merchants such as myself comprise the middle class of most of the Isles' towns and cities, and many more travel the central Island's myriad roads or take to the seas in search of profit. Inland trade, after all, is an important part of the Isles' economy, and without overseas trade many of life's most meaningful indulgences simply couldn't exist. I won't bore you with the details of common trade, as my grandfather has explained them quite adequately in his histogeographical synopsis, however, let it be said that the middle class is independent-minded, and cares little for the whims of local lords and fiefs. Rather, they are governed internally by guilds and trade conglomerates, upon which I might expand in a later chapter should I see fit to do so. For now, it shall suffice to say that they are – unlike the commoners I mentioned earlier – more than anything motivated by the jingle of coins tumbling into their ever hungry purses.

Then, of course, there is the nobility. Comprised of two layers, they present a glass ceiling of sorts to those of the middle class, though war, if nothing else, seems to increase social mobility among the ranks of the victor. For the lower ranks of the Isles' aristocracy are made up of not only those who have inherited their father's lands and title, but also of those who have enjoyed some amount of military success and have had titles and holdings bestowed upon them. The freeholders are counted among their ranks, but much in contrast to the rest of the Isles' nobles they have surprisingly strong bonds with the denizens of their fiefdoms. After all, together they made their homes amidst the wilderness of Evershroud, and the cold season left them with little other choice than to enjoy more than a few glasses of mead by the hearth, warmed by not only the fire, but by each other's company.

The higher ranks of nobility, of which my family was once a proud representative, harbor little sympathy for the middle and lower classes of the common people, and reside in opulent manors, dressed in fine, exotic silks and drinking exotic Xondaran brandy. Dozens of servants cater to their every whim, and – were it not for the occasional exercise in fencing or horseback riding their hands would be pristine from a life free from the drudgery of menial exertion.

Then, of course, there is the clergy. Drawn mostly from the merchant class and lower nobility, where proper upbringing and education is more common, they form the spiritual sinews that bind society in the Isles together. Acting as advisors, councilors and healers, they are revered by commoners and nobles alike, for it is they who know the will of the Five younger Gods, who govern the world and its inhabitants. It is mostly the middle class – the pragmatic, well learned traders, magi and craftsmen who seem to have a more level-headed approach to religion, for their profession often brings them in touch with those from different walks of life, nuancing the otherwise sometimes extreme views of the Pentarchs and their subordinates.

Apart from the more stratified societies of the Isles' major factions, there are a number of tribes that roam the wilds, surviving on the fringes of civilization, and only visiting towns one or two times a year to gather what supplies they need before retreating into

the dense forests, impassable mountains and putrid swamps of the Isles. Though considered primitive by many, it is these so-called savages who provide the most capable rangers, hunters, druids and witchdoctors among the people of Evershroud. From beastmen shamans, who enter trances and tell the future, to the rangers that keep the woodland paths from being covered by the all-consuming undergrowth, these often overlooked tribesmen provide unsurpassable skills and invaluable guidance for the pasty city-folk that seek to traverse the boundless wilderness.

Brigands, themselves often not without a certain knack for survival in the Isles, stalk the highways that connect the various city-states and freeholds. Often mercenaries, out of work or unfulfilled by their masters' compensation, these men have taken to a life of extortion, kidnapping and trafficking. Many a trader has had the experience of trading profits for their lives as their caravans were held up by bands of highwaymen. Many a noble house has a family member referred to by names such as "Ophelia of a hundred coins" or "Sven never worth a dime", and it is not uncommon for the Isles' aristocrats to brag amongst one another on the exorbitant sums that were asked and (however reluctantly) paid for the continuation of their good health.

At times, they also lend their services to whichever city-state pays them best, and in recent years, the number of brigands on the roads has steadily decreased – their lives expended at the behest of Silt's ever growing hegemony, with the dead receiving little more than an unsanctimonious burial by Rael's lower clerics. However, the wide open road remains a dangerous place, and where one brigand lays down his life, plenty more stand ready to pick up their fallen blade.

As unlikely as it may seem, immigrants too have found their place in the Isles. Despite mostly residing in coastal cities, of which the Isles have a great many, they comprise a class of fortune-seekers with an unbridled thirst for the many riches of the Isles' uncharted territories. From the gold-seeking humans and dwarf-kin who flock to the mountains in summer, to the illustrious bronze-skinned elves of Zhi-La and the ever-enigmatic Xondaran mystics, in search of forbidden knowledge amidst long-forgotten ruins, they play an important part in the exchange of ideas, rumors and goods in the Evershroud Isles.

And I do suppose the same can be said of adventurers – an odd mix of immigrants and locals who, for one reason or another, have abandoned the well-trodden path of the common man's livelihood, and have taken refuge in a life of adventure and discovery. Few of them ever amount to anything of note, but when they do their stars shine brighter than many a lantern across the Isles' many fog-swallowed ports, and their stories are told in taverns from the tiniest hamlet, to the greatest metropolis.

Perhaps a final notable mention goes out to the beast-men of the Isles. From the nimble harefolk who make their comfortable nests in the hills near Fagwood Glen, to the bands of secretive and long-lived tortoise-men who roam the Forgotten Wastes with no need of hearth nor homestead, they all have one thing in common: they shun the world of men, for it is men who so often destroy their habitats, men who take their homes and then, when the disheveled beastfolk strike back, label them as barbarians, brutes and savages, who have no place in the "civilized" world.

IV The current state of Political affairs

As I have mentioned before, at times it seems pointless to write anything of note on the political landscape of a region as tumultuous as the Evershroud Isles. One may write “this city has belonged to this or that faction for a thousand years” and upon waking the next morning, find its government overthrown, its towers burning, its citizenry scattered like chaff to the wind.

I shall however, offer a glimpse into the current powers, potentates and the illicit insurgencies that seek to overthrow them. I will not endeavor to replace my grandfather’s glossary of politics in this regard, but rather mention the most significant changes that our Isles have seen over the last decades, and the new factions that have arisen in their wake. So then, without further ado, let us begin with the passage that pains me the most.

The Hegemony of Silt

It is no understatement to say that the raw economic and military power of Silt in the Isles, is greater than that of all other forces combined. If not for the unparalleled resilience of Margrave-Duskhaven and the strategic prowess of Azure’s elven nobility, I believe the Isles would now be united under the iron fist of the House of Lamya. Encompassing the northern half of the Isles, and having taken the fertile lands of my noble father’s many holdings, their superiority in the Isles is without question.

And yet – though I risk that precarious bridge of flesh that connects my head to my body by saying so – I am glad to see the other factions hold on with all their might. Still, all-out war is not something they would lightly consider, since merely defending their territories is an act that stresses every sinew of their socio-economical body.

Theocratic through and through, the Cult of Rael is judge, jury and executioner in their domain, and even the Sovereign – once a keeper of the balance between the great houses of the Isles – offers them no opposition.

Economically, though trade with the other factions has diminished in recent years, Silt seems to be ever self-sufficient, relying on none other than their own to keep their population fed and their forges burning. To the outside world at least, it appears they have largely succeeded, but the ravenous appetite of their mercenaries would suggest otherwise.

Margrave-Duskhaven

After the battle of Old Margrave in the seven-hundred and twenty-eighth year of the Sun, a non-aggression treaty was signed between the house Margrave and Thrice of Lamya. His son, Garce, took great care to uphold this treaty, but with the influx of refugees since Garce’s conquest of my good father’s lands, the general public has taken a much more hostile stance towards the Hegemony. Tales of war, pillaging and outright murder have spread widely in the Withering Fields, and in all dealings between these two powers there is an air of mistrust.

The Azurean League

A more outright enmity is felt by the good citizens of Azure, whose border conflicts

with Silt have evolved from brotherly disputes into displays of visceral brutality over the last decades. Pikes adorned with the heads of fallen soldiers have become a



common sight along the much-disputed borders, and both countries remain in a state of alertness, though never all-out war. For it is Azuran smugglers who provide what few creature comforts the Bishops of Silt enjoy, and thus an uneasy balance has been struck between deep-rooted dislike and indispensable convenience.

Most of Azura's legitimate traders, however, extend their eye beyond the horizon and look to foreign lands for opportunity. Ideally positioned in the vast seas between Zhi-La in the South and Xondara in the

west, Azura's traders bridge the gap between worlds with undeniable grace and incomparable cunning.

The Caldwell People's Republic

I cannot claim to be unbiased when it comes to the former Caldwell dominion, but without making any unsupported egalitarian claims about my father's rule, I shall say that the whole political entity that is the People's Republic is nothing but a farce. For no matter how frequent their elections, how "diverse" their governing body or how "well informed" their citizenry, it is without question that the only true authority there is the Hegemony of Silt's machinations. The IFÄ, or Independent Farmers Alliance, may have beat the Caldwell People's Party in the most recent vote, but what body of government entirely sponsored by the Cult or Rael could act independently from its agenda? And yes, the Lords of Silt may pride themselves in setting the halflings free, but what to think of the Great Famine that followed shortly after? It is, therefore, imperative that you understand that no government propaganda you hear in these parts can be trusted, and no government official, for that matter, should ever hear of your questioning the legitimacy of their rule, for the tales of disappearances of any who showed even the slightest filament of dissent are manifold – a cautionary tale to those merely visiting, and a day-to-day reality to those who live there.

The Dwarven Union

Once, the gates of the underground realm of the Dwarves stood wide open to those adventurers willing to face its depths. In spite of only appearing as a minor power on the surface, the Duergar-Dwarven Union in its true form may present one of the biggest threats that Silt still faces. Deep the roots of the mountains run, and what goes on under the surface is seldom retold under the sun.

Independent by heart, and strengthened by the union with their grey-skinned brethren, the dwarves have largely retreated into the vast cavernous realm which they, and only they, have laid claim to. Though often the Hegemony has tried to pressure them one way or the other, it seems as though – non interventionist as they may be – the dwarven Lords have been as immovable as the mountains they inhabit. Should one

ever find the means to motivate these hardy folk into action, Silt's nobility will surely quiver in its well-shined boots.

The current state of the Avernium, as one might have guessed, is largely unknown, for those who rule it have taken an enmity towards surface dwellers such as my humble self that requires no further explanation.

The Dragon's Phallus

What little remains of the once mighty order of the Dragon's Phallus, is now little more than ... well, just the tip. Though the structured worship of Kar'el has been outlawed, and the mighty towers of the Phallus' priesthood have long been left to shrivel, some of the old faith remains deeply embedded in the common people's practices. Those truly still loyal to the old Dragon God however, stand tall and firm amidst the turmoil of the Evershroud Isles, and perhaps a droplet of hope is yet to be gained from their unconventional beliefs.

V Beyond the Veil

As my grandfather already hinted at, and as I have gotten to know more intimately as my troublesome fate unfolded, the far-away lands that lie beyond the veil of mist that often surrounds our island are a source of myths, newcomers, and untold riches to the inhabitants of the Isles. It is through my very livelihood that I have over the decades gained knowledge regarding such matters greater than my grandfather ever could have conjured up – even in his most blackleaf-crazed delirium.

I was but a young lad of 20, 21 years old when for the first time, under the watching eye of my uncle Dzelan I set foot in the ancient port-city of Xon-Levass. Its spice-filled air and titillating urban allure made my uncle's decision to keep me close at hand seem all the more asphyxiating. Though I suspect he was right, for the night life of a port city of such grandeur and decadence would without a doubt have swallowed me whole.

Xondaran traders though, without a doubt, have knack for bringing out the worst in their business associates, and it was on my first night of my stay in the Xondaran city of dreams that I entered my chambers a boy, and left him the next morning a man of my own.

The girl herself was a lithe thing, just short of 18 summers, and I, a bumbling youth certainly lacked the elegance a man of my standing should aspire to. But in my memory she found a trust in me, naïve as I was, that was not bequeathed unto her by her regular clientele of rough sailors and drunken merchants.

It is of little consequence, for I spend my days alone, the sole proprietor of a dilapidated storefront, long in decline. But let it suffice to say that on that very journey I learned that a Xondaran trader will do whatever he needs to to gain your confidence.

From a more strictly factual point of view, the Xondarans seem to thrive mostly due to the loose confederation of their steppe-dwelling nomads and coastal sedentary tribes. Those who roam the vast prairies of their lands rear cattle, providing a steady source of meats and dairy, while the coastal tribes produce a vast array of vegetables and luxury produce.

The city dwellers are among the most cunning of their people, trading the flesh of men like the flesh of beasts, and holding no qualms when it comes to fulfilling their frequent visitor's wishes.

As for their religion, in this respect they are truly foreign. Their monotheism – a concept hard to grasp for many, including myself – adheres to a strict doctrine in which there can be only one true god. They call that all-encompassing deity “Ümbek Al Zayif”, which translates roughly to “He/she who knows the hearts of men”. I have not had a chance to delve much deeper in to their enigmatic religion, for to truly understand their theology requires initiations both exotic and excruciatingly painful. These initiations, on their own kin, are performed when they are mere infants, and in spite of my prodding them on the secretive nature of these rites I have not been able to gain more insights into their precise nature. To say that those few I’ve met who underwent the process at a later age are reluctant to speak of it, would be an understatement.

It has, however become clear to me that there is perhaps one more god in their pantheon – whether they realize it or not. This god, and his theology, I understand very well. For above anything they revere the warm glow of gold coin, and for a foreigner such as myself, doing business in their land, that knowledge was all I truly needed to know.

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The pristine lands of Zhi-La, with their sweeping rice terraces, venerable sages, and profound reverence for honor, stand in stark contrast to such conspicuous companions. Though they do not uphold the strict doctrines of the Five with the same fervor we of the Isles so resolutely maintain, theirs is a way of life that seems to embody the very essence of the Five’s principles, harmonising them with a natural ease.

To my understanding, their animistic worldview imbues a subtle spirit in every aspect of their reality. From each stone in the mighty Florain River’s bed to the leaves of the trees growing undisturbed near their seats of power, the Zhilan people appear to enjoy a profound communion with nature—a harmony we ourselves may have lost in our relentless pursuits. Indeed, it stirs a certain wonder: might we, in our pride, have severed an ancient kinship with the world around us? Could we, as a people, have drifted from the path the Five truly intended for us? Such musings are, of course, verging on heresy; yet, despite my discord with the Cult of Rael, I hold that faith in the Five transcends the borders of nations and the petty quarrels of mortal men.

In considering the Five, I am drawn to the striking architectural parallels between the Black Pagoda of Nergal—a monumental temple to the Lord of Death dominating Duskhaven’s skyline—and the worship houses of Zhi-La. One could easily conjecture a shared ancestry between them. Given Nergal’s esteemed role within the cycle of life and death, it is not implausible to surmise that the Zhilan faith may well be an offshoot, a distant echo, of the true faith of the Five younger Gods.

VI Omitted Factions

I do believe my grandfather made a conscious choice not to mention some of the organizations I will at least briefly touch upon in this chapter. His reasons may have been entirely legitimate, though part of me suspects the eldritch nature of at least a few of them contributed in one way or another to our family's good fortune.

However, it would be unfortunate if, due to some random happenstance, you, dear reader, were to stumble upon these guilds unprepared, for sometimes, it is better to know the seedy underbelly of the world than to be blissfully unaware whilst under their influence. So, let us begin:

The Noble Guild of Assassins

The political intrigue of the Evershroud Isles has always called for ... unconventional means of resolution. Under the watchful eye of the Sovereigns of old, it was often the only way for one Potentate to gain power over another. The Noble Guild – the more inconspicuous shorthand with which they refer to themselves – has guild houses in every major city, though their exact whereabouts are well hidden. Often, these places pose as sophisticated inns or brothels catering to a highly wealthy clientele, and they indeed do provide that service. But a few highly specific words uttered to their proprietor may open doors that allow one to subtly shift the balance of power in the isles – for the right price that is. I myself will admit to having frequented one or two of these places, for my family name though not often spoken still bears some weight in the lands of Azure, even in this most inauspicious time. But these I will not share with you. Should you be deserving of the honor, they will certainly find you. Beware, however, for I have reason to believe they lend their powers to whoever offers them the greatest amount of coin, and the Hegemony of Silt possesses plenty of it.

The Harbingers

Perhaps an organization that has been overlooked due to its sheer ubiquitous nature, the Harbingers are an organization of brave and faithful messengers, carrying orders, bribes, draft notes and many more across the Isles. Apart from relaying messages and finances and thus providing an efficient means of communication, they seem to have an uncanny ability to locate individuals in the isles. Many have sought to learn the nature of this almost preternatural knowledge they seem to possess, but they have revealed nothing, even under the most strenuous of circumstances.

The Sisters Benevolent

An outlawed offshoot of the Sisters Militant, these women, once faithful to the dogma of the Cult of Rael, have turned heretical in the eyes of their more warlike siblings. They, in turn, believe that the Sisters Militant have been corrupted, be it by internal or external influence, and seek actively to prevent the execution of the Lady's Justice. To use a metaphor fitting their religious schism, the Sisters Militant act as the sword of Rael, striking down the would-be heretic, whereas the Sisters Benevolent act as the Lady's shield, sheltering those they believe innocent from the wrath of their peers. Not a separate organization per se, but a cult within a cult, so to speak, they operate in secret within the convents and monasteries so ubiquitous to the northern lands.

VII Magi of the Isles

Among the many reasons my grandfather wrote so little about the metaphysical arts in his Common and Uncommon Lore, one stands out above all others, for in his time there was but one supreme authority on such esoteric knowledge, being the scholarly Order of the Dragon's Phallus. Not being an initiate himself, he possessed little more knowledge about such matters than that which he shared, nor did he have much interest in acquiring it.

The ruthless persecution of the Order by the regime in Silt has, however caused a much wider dissemination of knowledge on the subject of magic and the intricate methods used to cultivate it. Be it through former members of the Order establishing schools of their own, or through a more informal sharing of knowledge acquired over the years of sheer necessity, the more menial types of magic are now accessible to all with the right amount of talent – or the right amount of coin. I'll explain the most important ones.

The Arcane Academy of Silt

A state-sponsored institution established as a replacement for the dismantled Order of the Dragon's Phallus, the Arcane Academy of Silt serves as the principal centre for the



magical education of Silt's intellectual elite. Unlike its predecessor, which operated independently of any political or religious influence, the Academy is firmly rooted in the ideological framework of the Raellan theocracy, ensuring that its teachings remain aligned with the regime's dogmatic principles.

The Academy offers a comprehensive curriculum that encompasses the majority of recognised magical disciplines, ranging from elemental channeling to divination and alchemical studies. However, certain branches of magic are conspicuously absent. Illusion and necromancy, deemed incompatible with the Raellan doctrine of "pure magic," are strictly prohibited. Illusion is regarded as a deceitful art, contrary to the Raellan ideal of absolute truth, while necromancy is condemned outright for its perceived desecration of the natural order.

Graduates of the Academy are carefully vetted to ensure ideological loyalty and are often absorbed into Silt's bureaucracy or military, where their magical expertise is put to use in furthering the ambitions of the Hegemony. The Academy thus not only serves as a centre of learning but also as a means of consolidating the regime's control over the practice and dissemination of magic within its domain.

The Duskhaven Black Arts Education Centre

In stark contrast to the rigid orthodoxy of Silt's Arcane Academy, the Black Arts Education Centre in Duskhaven seeks to demystify and destigmatise the delicate and often misunderstood field of necromancy. Dedicated to dispelling the fearmongering and misinformation surrounding the necromantic arts, the Centre offers a holistic education that not only trains aspiring wizards in the practical use of spells but also fosters a nuanced understanding of the undead and their role in society.

The Centre emphasises that necromancy, at its core, is not an art of destruction or malice but one of transition and service. While an animated skeleton guarding an ancient tomb may react violently due to the nature of its binding spell, the undead servants of Nergal, Lord of Death perform far more benevolent roles. These reanimated beings aim to ease the passage of those at the end of their lives and provide empathic comfort to the bereaved. Their very existence stands as a testament to the necromantic philosophy: that death is not the end, but merely the next chapter in life's grand narrative.

The Centre operates out of the Black Pagoda, the iconic seat of Nergal's worship in Duskhaven. Its public halls are open to all who seek to learn more about necromancy or wish to challenge their preconceptions about the undead. However, the deeper study of spells and the care of undead minions is reserved for those who commit to a traditional four-year curriculum. This rigorous programme balances theoretical knowledge with hands-on experience, ensuring that graduates emerge as skilled, ethical, and responsible necromancers.

By equipping its students with both magical expertise and a profound respect for the natural cycle of life and death, the Duskhaven Black Arts Education Centre strives to elevate necromancy from its shadowed reputation and demonstrate its rightful place among the arcane arts.

Madame Seryell's School of Song and Spell

Taking a more liberal and artistic approach to illusion magic, Madame Seryell's School of Song and Spell stands as a beacon of creativity and enchantment in the Evershroud Isles. Founded by the flamboyant and widely celebrated entertainer Madame Seryell, the School merges the arts of magic and performance, nurturing a unique blend of spellcraft and stagecraft. While battlemages may unleash devastating fireballs and conjurers summon fearsome elementals, it is musicians, actors, playwrights, and dancers who truly stir the hearts of men and shape the soul of civilisation.

Madame Seryell's philosophy centres on the belief that magic is not solely a weapon or a tool but an art form, capable of evoking awe, inspiring change, and healing wounds unseen. Illusion magic, in particular, is taught not as mere trickery but as a profound means of storytelling, capable of weaving dreams into reality and bridging the gap between the mundane and the extraordinary.



The School of Song and Spell is highly competitive, drawing students from across the Isles and beyond, all eager to learn from its esteemed faculty of thespians, authors, and composers. The education offered here is as rigorous as it is inspiring, with students mastering not only the intricacies of illusion magic but also the disciplines of music, theatre, and dance.

Situated in the idyllic town of Providence, nestled amidst the vibrant wildflower-dotted plains of the former Caldwell Dominion, the School is a sanctuary of beauty and refinement. Its sunlit surroundings and tranquil atmosphere inspire creativity and encourage excellence, making it difficult for those who graduate—or even the faculty—to imagine a life elsewhere.

Graduates of the School of Song and Spell often go on to become celebrated artists, performers, or playwrights in their own right. Others choose to remain within its hallowed halls, becoming instructors to a new generation of aspiring enchanters and entertainers. Madame Serpell's School is more than an institution; it is a community of dreamers and visionaries, united by the belief that art and magic together can shape the world.

The Druidic Order of Bergynian Scythes

Often dismissed by city dwellers as "lesser" or "folk" magic, the art of Druidry stands as one of the most intricate and profound magical disciplines in the Evershroud Isles. Far from being practitioners of simple spells and rural superstition, Druids of the Bergynian Scythes are deeply educated in an array of arcane and mundane sciences. Their knowledge spans the realms of biology, geology, medicine, and the intricate currents of magic that govern the natural world. To them, the miracles of the everyday—the changing colours of autumn leaves, the renewal of spring, and the mystery of birth—are tangible expressions of the Life Force that flows through all living beings.

It is no surprise, then, that the Scythes remain insular, shunning the bustling cities and their sceptical inhabitants. To commune with those who fail to appreciate the profound interconnectedness of nature would be as fruitless as explaining the tides to the mountains. The Druids view themselves as stewards of the ubiquitous magic that sustains life, a responsibility they carry with solemnity and care.

The path to becoming a Druid is arduous, with only a select few applicants admitted to the Order each year. Training is conducted on a one-on-one basis, where apprentices study under a seasoned Druid for no less than a decade. This intimate and immersive mentorship ensures that each student not only masters the mechanics of Druidry but also gains a deep understanding of its ethical and practical applications.

The stakes of a Druid's work are immense. It is the Scythes who bless the fields before the planting season, their rituals ensuring bountiful harvests that sustain entire communities. A single misstep in their delicate craft could spell disaster—a failed harvest that plunges hundreds, if not thousands, into starvation and ruin. This weight of responsibility shapes every aspect of their training, instilling a profound respect for the delicate balance of nature.

The Druids of the Bergynian Scythes are not merely practitioners of magic; they are custodians of life itself, guardians of a harmony too often overlooked in the chaos of civilisation. Their isolation is not arrogance but necessity, for only in solitude can they fully commune with the forces they serve and protect.

Private Tutors

For a privileged few, private tutors offer an unparalleled opportunity to not only accelerate their magical education but to delve into spells and disciplines far beyond the standard curriculum of the Isles' established institutions. Such tutors, often wandering magi or retired scholars, are highly sought after by nobles and Freeholders who wish to bestow their offspring with an edge over their peers—or provide a second chance to those rejected by formal academies like the Arcane Academy of Silt or Madame Seryell's School of Song and Spell.

It is not uncommon for these wandering magi to find themselves warmly welcomed into the halls of power, offered fine lodgings or even their own towers in exchange for their tutelage. The arrangement is mutually beneficial: the magi receive stability, patronage, and resources for their own arcane research, while their hosts gain prestige and an advantage in the form of highly trained heirs or protégés.

These tutors are often individuals of considerable renown, ranging from ex-members of the Dragon's Phallus and the Berynian Seythes to foreign mystics from far-off lands like Zhi-La. The latter, in particular, bring exotic philosophies and techniques rarely seen in the Isles, making their instruction both valuable and transformative for those fortunate enough to study under them.

The education provided by private tutors tends to be rigorous, intimate, and tailored to the student's specific talents and needs. As a result, their pupils almost invariably rise to become mages of note, their skills often surpassing those of their contemporaries trained in larger institutions. However, surpassing the tutor themselves remains a rare achievement; the accumulated wisdom and experience of these magi create a lofty ceiling that few apprentices ever reach.

To be taken under the wing of such a tutor is both an honour and a responsibility, for the legacy of the teacher often reflects upon the pupil. Those who earn this rare privilege carry not only their own reputation but also the weight of their mentor's name—an inheritance as heavy as it is rewarding.

The Order of the Dragon's Phallus in Azure

Though the glossy domed towers of the Order of the Dragon's Phallus have been reduced to ruins in Silt, Caldwell, and Duskhaven, the Order maintains a resilient foothold in the City of Azure.

Behind the its fortified walls, the Order serves as a bastion of tradition and reason, dedicated to ensuring not only the survival of their venerable belief in Kar'el, the great Serpent, but the responsible use of magic and esoteric knowledge itself. From this refuge, the Order conducts inspections of magical schools, alchemists' shops, and other arcane centres within the Azure League, working tirelessly to preserve the balance between innovation and caution.

However, their influence extends little beyond Azure's borders, leaving the untamed expanses of the Evershroud Isles rife with opportunities for rogue wizards, sorcerers, and warlocks to experiment with volatile and dangerous magic. In these unregulated

regions, such practices have led to both groundbreaking discoveries and disastrous consequences.

Though diminished, the Order of the Dragon's Phallus remains unwavering in its mission to safeguard the arcane arts and uphold ethical standards, even as the Isles slip further into turmoil.

VIII Gunpowder in the Isles

The story of gunpowder in the Evershroud Isles begins not with war but with celebration. Originating in the distant lands of Zhi-La, this volatile substance was first employed to light up the night sky with spectacular displays of fireworks. Zhilan artisans, steeped in their culture's reverence for harmony and artistry, saw gunpowder as a tool for joy and wonder rather than destruction.

However, when Siltan merchants brought the shimmering sparks of Zhi-La to the Isles, the alchemists and craftsmen of Silt saw something entirely different: a devastating weapon. Their ambitions culminated in the decisive Battle of Old Margrave, where mercenaries armed with crude blunderbusses crushed the previously unassailable armies of Margrave-Duskhaven. This marked the dawn of a new era for the Isles, one defined by smoke, fire, and the resounding thunder of gunpowder weaponry.

Origins

In Zhi-La, gunpowder was developed centuries ago by alchemists seeking to create dazzling effects for festivals and royal ceremonies. Though its explosive properties were well understood, the Zhilan philosophy of balance and restraint precluded its use in warfare. For them, gunpowder was a celebration of light and life, not an instrument of death.

Enter the merchants of Silt, opportunistic and ever eager to exploit new discoveries. When they first witnessed the brilliance of Zhilan fireworks, they marveled not at their beauty but at the sheer power contained within. Returning to Silt with barrels of black powder and knowledge of its composition, these traders unwittingly brought the seeds of a military revolution to the Isles.

The Ingenuity of Silt

The Hegemony's alchemists and engineers wasted no time in experimenting with gunpowder. Within a decade, they had developed rudimentary firearms, including the blunderbuss—a short-range weapon capable of firing a lethal spread of projectiles. Cannons followed soon after, their ability to breach even the strongest fortifications cementing gunpowder's place as the future of warfare.

The Cult of Rael, ever vigilant for tools to expand its hegemony, quickly incorporated gunpowder into its arsenal. The clergy declared the substance a divine gift, a manifestation of Rael's righteous wrath. With the backing of the theocracy, Silt became the first power in the Isles to field gunpowder-armed mercenaries, ensuring that no rival could match its newfound dominance.

The Battle of Ald Margrave

The true potential of gunpowder was revealed at the Battle of Ald Margrave in 728 YS. Margrave-Duskhaven, long celebrated for its resilient armies and unyielding fortifications, was caught unprepared by Silt's innovative tactics.

The battle began traditionally, with Silt's infantry advancing under the cover of archers and sorcerers. But when Margrave's forces attempted their famed counter-charge, they were met with a deafening volley from Silt's blunderbuss-wielding mercenaries. The devastating spread of shot tore through the charging ranks, sowing chaos and panic. Meanwhile, Silt's cannons pounded the walls of Ald Margrave, reducing them to rubble in hours rather than weeks. By the end of the day, the once-proud fortress lay in ruins, its defenders shattered by a technology they could neither counter nor comprehend. The victory was not merely a military triumph but a statement of Silt's newfound supremacy. The battle marked the beginning of a new era, where brutal cunning—not steel or sorcery—would decide the fate of the Isles.



A New Era in the History of War

The introduction of gunpowder has rendered many traditional forms of warfare nearly obsolete. The once-dominant knight in shining armor now finds himself vulnerable to even the humblest mercenary armed with a blunderbuss. Sieges, once drawn-out affairs reliant on attrition and treachery, have become swift and brutal contests of firepower. For centuries, magic was the ultimate force on the battlefield. But with the advent of gunpowder, even the mightiest spells struggle to compete with the raw destructive power of cannon fire. This shift has forced many magical orders, including the remnants of the Dragon's Phallus, to reconsider their role in the new age.

But more than anything, it has disrupted the Isles' delicate political balance. Margrave-Duskhaven, once a bastion of independence, now shudders at the thought of its defeat at Ald Margrave. Azure, ever pragmatic, has begun smuggling gunpowder and firearms to level the playing field. Even the Independent Farmers Alliance, nominally under Silt's thumb, harbors secret stockpiles of black powder, waiting for the day the South will rise again.

IX Sources and Recommended Reading

It would be the pinnacle of hubris for me to claim that I alone in my writing I have offered you the keys to unlocking the untold riches, secrets and adventures that might await you in the Evershroud Isles. In fact, my work, like that of my revered grandfather, stands upon the shoulders of giants. For were it not for the many hours that I spent during my childhood exploring and absorbing the vast troves of knowledge stored away in Caldwell Manor's extensive library, I would've been poorly equipped for the task of writing anything of value.

However, I have been fortunate in my upbringing, and I hope that with this sharing of knowledge I can bestow unto you a substantial footing of knowledge to help you in your further educational endeavors as much as any adventure you might undertake following your perusal of this meticulously crafted tome.

The following books have been an inspiration to me in writing this very tome, and acquiring a copy of any of these will certainly and substantially aid you in your life in the Isles, whatever course it might take:

A short history of the Halflings, by Buckminster Hillbottom

This historical work by a freed serf of my great-great-grandfather Ozymandias Caldwell, goes a long way in describing the history of the Halflings as they themselves view it, and to me personally has been more than a little revealing. Who knew that halflings enjoy more than two meals a day on the regular? Who could have thought that such diminutive creatures could harbor feelings – though it pains me to say it – much like our own? Who would have suspected that their short stature is not due to a curse from the gods, or some deficit in their upbringing, but a feature they have known about and exploited for centuries? Truly an engaging read, I recommend it to anyone hoping to keep a household of Serfs in good health and productivity.

Mysterious Mycology of the Withering Fields, by Seymour Spittle

A curious and intoxicating volume, *Mysterious Mycology of the Withering Fields* is both a scientific treatise and a cautionary tale of the author's descent into fungal obsession. Written by the enigmatic druid Seymour Spittle, this tome explores the myriad species of fungi found within the Withering Fields—a region notorious for its peculiar ecological phenomena and potent magical flora.

Seymour Spittle, a devoted practitioner of the druidic arts and an adventurer of no small renown, approached his study with the kind of zeal that only a mind deeply attuned to the natural world could muster. Each chapter brims with vivid descriptions, detailed illustrations, and personal accounts of his encounters with these bizarre organisms. However, the text is not without its peculiarities. By the time one reaches the infamous "Chapter Omlet," Spittle's prose becomes erratic, as though the very fungi he describes have begun to influence his thoughts—a chilling reminder of the symbiotic and often insidious nature of his subject matter. For the practical scholar, chapters I through XII are a treasure trove of enlightenment.

Among the highlights:

Chapter I: Fungal Fundamentals

A primer on the basics of mycology, this chapter establishes the groundwork for understanding the taxonomy of the Isles' fungi. Spittle introduces his "spore-spectrum" theory, suggesting that each species emits a unique magical aura detectable by those sensitive to such phenomena.

Chapter IV: The Singing Spores of Faewood Glen

Spittle's account of this rare and melodic fungus, which hums softly when exposed to moonlight, is a delight. The accompanying illustration captures the luminescent caps of the spore clusters in astonishing detail.

Chapter VIII: Death's Delight

This chapter serves as both an identification guide and a dire warning regarding the Isles' most lethal fungi. Spittle recounts a harrowing personal experience with the Widow's Veil, a mushroom that emits a paralytic vapor when crushed, leading to his brief death and subsequent revival by a fellow druid.

Chapter XII: Sacred Symbioses

Arguably the book's pinnacle, this chapter explores the symbiotic relationships between fungi and other flora and fauna. Here, Spittle provides evidence of "root whispers," a mycorrhizal network that allows for communication between plants across vast distances—an idea that has profound implications for both druids and scholars of arcane botany.

By contrast, the infamous *Chapter Omelet* (numbered XIII but unindexed) veers into a surreal and almost indecipherable narrative. It begins with a recipe for a mushroom-based dish and spirals into what can only be described as a fungal fever dream. Scholars have debated whether Spittle's mind was addled by prolonged exposure to the psychotropic spores of the Gilded Dreamer fungus, or if the chapter serves as a deliberate artistic metaphor for the interconnectedness of life and decay.

Despite—or perhaps because of—its eccentricities, *Mysterious Mycology of the Withering Fields* remains a foundational text for students of both mycology and druidic lore. Its mixture of rigorous study and personal anecdote captures the duality of the subject: fungi as both harbingers of decay and stewards of renewal, offering lessons to those brave enough to seek them.

For those venturing into the Withering Fields with Spittle's work as their guide, take heed: the mushrooms may listen as much as they teach. And should you find yourself compelled to write a Chapter Omelet of your own, remember to tread carefully—the line between researcher and specimen is thinner than one might think.

Grok's Guide to Punchin'

A work of unapologetic bluntness and raw charisma, *Grok's Guide to Punchin'* is, at first glance, exactly what its title implies: a manual for inflicting violence with both precision and enthusiasm. Yet beneath its pugnacious veneer lies a surprisingly rich resource for understanding the diverse inhabitants of the Evershroud Isles. This

unorthodox guidebook, penned (or perhaps etched with a blunt instrument) by the Oreish warrior-scholar Grok Bonecrusher, is a treasure trove of geological, cultural, and behavioural insights into the Isles' myriad denizens.

Grok, whose reputation as a brawler is matched only by his unexpected eloquence, brings a uniquely Oreish perspective to his work. While the tone is undeniably Oreish—bold, irreverent, and occasionally littered with profanity—there is a clear intellect and curiosity behind his words. The author's love for his subject matter, coupled with his firsthand knowledge of both the Isles and its inhabitants, results in a guide that is as educational as it is entertaining.

Structure and Content

While I have only managed to acquire a few excerpts of this remarkable work, they are enough to reveal the depth and breadth of Grok's observations. Each chapter, or "Round," as Grok refers to them, focuses on a specific species, cultural group, or particularly troublesome foe.

Round 5: Gobbos and their Sneaky Tricks

Grok offers a no-holds-barred exploration of goblin culture, geology, and combat tactics. While his tone is often dismissive ("Filthy little buggers with knives too small for real Ore hands"), he provides fascinating details about goblin society, such as their reliance on swarm tactics, their penchant for scavenging, and their peculiar religious reverence for "Big Stabby," a mythical blade said to reside in the belly of a long-dead troll.

Round 5: Fuzzy Beasties—Harengons

In this excerpt, Grok reluctantly admits a grudging respect for the Harengon tribes. "Fuzzy, fast, and don't fight fair," he writes. "If they weren't so damn nice about it, they'd make proper Ores." This section delves into Harengon hunting strategies, their use of the terrain, and their "weird, hoppy dances," which Grok acknowledges as both ritualistic and surprisingly effective in combat.

Appendix: Punchin' for Diplomacy

This unexpected addition shows Grok's depth as both a thinker and a storyteller. He recounts instances where the Oreish art of punching was employed not for violence, but as a form of communication, respect, and even bonding. "Sometimes a good, solid punch is just another way of saying 'Hello.'"

In the end, Grok's Guide to Punchin' is more than just a combat manual; it's a reflection of the Oreish spirit—fierce, unyielding, and, perhaps unexpectedly, deeply curious about the world around it. As Grok himself might say, "A good punch tells you more 'bout someone than a thousand fancy words ever could," providing a raw, unfiltered insight into both the geological and cultural richness of the Isles.

X A final Word of Advice

To my esteemed readers,

It is my honor to have been your chaperone on this imaginative literary tour of both my grandfather's work and the vast expanse that lies before you in the Evershroud Isles.

Should you set forth into the mists of these lands, I offer this final word of advice: approach with both caution and curiosity. This land, for all its splendor, is a realm of contrasts. Its beauty is rivalled only by its dangers; its riches, by its secrets.

The Isles are not for the faint of heart. From the fungal forests of the Withering Fields to the windswept heights of the Ungolid Mountains, every step carries the promise of discovery—and the threat of peril. Here, one may find treasures in the ruins of a long-forgotten civilization or become lost forever to the labyrinthine paths of the Avernium. The Isles reward the bold but never forgive the careless.

It is also a land shaped by its people. Whether in the bustling markets of Azure, the austere halls of Silt, or the untamed fringes of the wilds, you will find no shortage of characters to challenge, aid, or confound you. Approach each with an open mind but a steady hand upon your sword or staff. Trust, like the Isles themselves, is a thing to be earned.

This guide has been crafted not to answer every question but to light the path for your own discoveries. The Evershroud Isles defy easy understanding; they are as much an experience as a place. If you travel here seeking simplicity, you will be disappointed. But if you come seeking adventure, you will find it in abundance.

Take these pages as a map, not a compass, and let your wits and courage carry you the rest of the way. For in the Evershroud Isles, every adventurer is the author of their own tale.

- J.M.

XI Addendum – The Adventurers Guild

In the wake of mounting conflicts along Azure's borders, and the ever-present shadow of Silt and the People's Republic of Caldwell, the Azurean League has faced an escalating strain on its military forces. With the nation's defenders stretched thin and the city guards consumed by the thankless task of managing rising urban squalor, a solution emerged: the Adventurers Guild.

Over the last decade, this institution has grown from a desperate experiment into a grudgingly accepted fixture of Azurean society. Tasked with handling the myriad threats and oddities too minor for military intervention yet too dangerous for neglect, the Guild has become an outlet for the ambitious, the foolhardy, and the desperate. Its creation offered not only a reprieve for Azure's professional defenders but also an unexpected opportunity for those seeking fame, fortune, or simply a purpose.

The Guild's survival depends largely on its overseas recruitment efforts. By sourcing its members from distant lands, the Guild avoids entangling itself in the Evershroud Isles' labyrinthine politics, safeguarding its ranks from infiltration by hostile factions such as the Sisters Militant. However, this impartiality comes at a price: the recruits often arrive naïve to the Isles' treacherous realities, believing the promises of grand adventures and opulent rewards emblazoned on their recruitment posters.

Reality strikes swiftly upon their arrival. Guildhouses—described in flyers as "welcoming bastions of camaraderie and comfort"—are, in truth, dilapidated structures hidden in the back alleys of Azure and Jornath. Boarded-up windows, sagging walls, and the faint scent of mildew greet these bright-eyed hopefuls, who find themselves herded into squalid quarters boasting flea-ridden bunk beds and a communal steel tub of murky water. Promised armories brimming with weapons are little more than racks of worm-eaten clubs and rusted mail, while the lavish meals are reduced to mouldy bread and watery gruel punctuated by unidentifiable morsels of meat.

Despite its grim reputation, the Guild has seen modest success. It has quelled threats that might otherwise have festered in the Isles' dark corners and served as a crucible for individuals destined to become legends—or cautionary tales. The organisation's influence has even spurred imitation, with Margrave-Duskhaven and the People's Republic of Caldwell establishing their own guilds. These rivals, however, have struggled to replicate Azure's overseas recruitment strategy, leaving their halls largely empty.

The Adventurers Guild is, above all, an institution of contradictions: at once pragmatic and predatory, noble and ignoble. To some, it is a beacon of opportunity; to others, a stark reminder of Azure's willingness to exploit desperation in the name of survival. Its legacy remains as yet unwritten—whether it will rise to prominence or collapse under the weight of its own promises lies in the hands of its recruits.

XII On Organized Crime in Azure

It is no secret that, in the writing of history, it is often the major powers of states and religions that are mentioned in elaborate detail whilst other influences are ever so easily overlooked. For many, this may be a matter of cause and effect, but for some insidious factions this is more than mere coincidence.

Much like the Noble Guild of Assassins, such organisations tend to keep to the shadows, operating in secret and never revealing more about their organisation and structure than is absolutely necessary. As such, you might imagine my joy when, one faithful and particularly windy afternoon in late November 783, Mei Xi Yuan, a well-respected member of the Zhilan Triads walked into my humble establishment in search of a rare and valuable gnomish construct which I may or may not have been in the possession of.

As you may well understand, I shall go no further into the nitty-gritty details of our dealings that afternoon, but it was during this rather pleasant tête-a-tête that we came to an agreement regarding a mutual exchange of knowledge, so to speak. I, having an ear to the ground in regard to many of the mercantile goings-on in the Isles, would divulge to her the precise location of a Silt-bound caravan owned and operated by one of my miscreant competitors whom I had long known to be in league with the Hegemony. She, in turn, with the full blessing of her elders in the Triad, would grant me a rough sketch of the Isles' seedy underbelly, and the protection that would allow me to share it with you in this very publication.

Should you ever see fit to engage with the organisations mentioned in this addendum, I pray that you will do so with the utmost caution. However, as your faithful chronicler and informant in the Isles – and hopefully a trusted companion as you set upon your own journey through their vast reaches – I feel I am obligated to at the very least ascertain that at the very least you have a vague idea of whom you are dealing with. And so, let us begin:

The Zhilan Triads

It is often remarked that the shadow of one's homeland lingers long after crossing foreign shores. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Zhilan Triads, whose roots, entwined with the traditions of the great families of Zhi-La, run deep through the bustling heart of Little Zhi-La in Azure.

At the helm of this shadowed organisation stands Jin Hua, a matriarch of unparalleled poise and cunning. With her silver-streaked hair and a voice that carries both honeyed charm and veiled menace, she has become both a revered and feared figure within Azure's Zhilan community. Jin Hua's influence is felt in every whispered negotiation, every silent nod exchanged in the market stalls of Little Zhi-La. Beneath her careful stewardship lies a web of control that stretches far beyond her modest public persona.

The Jade Council, of which Jin Hua is the foremost voice, consists of esteemed elders claiming descent from Zhi-La's noblest families. These elders orchestrate the Triads' affairs behind closed doors, their decisions deliberate and steeped in tradition. To

seek an audience with the Council is to subject oneself to the scrutiny of generations, their authority tempered by the wisdom—and ruthlessness—of their matriarch.

The Crimson Lanterns, by contrast, are the Triads' enforcers, ensuring loyalty through their iron-fisted presence. Named for the small red lanterns they carry, these tax collectors and debt enforcers patrol Little Zhi-La, their arrival met with careful silence and lowered gazes. Their reputation is as much a weapon as the blades they carry, whispered warnings ensuring few dare cross them.

Though the Zhilan Triads rarely reveal more than they must, their influence ripples beyond Little Zhi-La, touching trade, governance, and even the murkier depths of Azure's underworld. Their operations, much like the mist that shrouds the Isles, remain elusive to all but the most determined—and daring—observers.

The Xondaran Syndicate

In any thriving port city, it is inevitable that certain shadows will grow longer than others, and in Azure, few shadows stretch as ominously as those cast by the people of old Xondar. While the Zhilan Triads maintain a veneer of cultural pride, the Xondarans operate with a raw pragmatism born of survival and ambition. Their roots, steeped in the rich and storied traditions of the Xondaran culture, blend the intricate elegance of their heritage with the cold, unflinching calculus of organised crime.

At the heart of the Xondaran syndicate lies the Majlis, a council of wealthy and influential leaders who wield power from the comfort of Azure's most affluent quarters. These individuals, draped in silken robes and surrounded by the heady aroma of spices and incense, present themselves as patrons of the arts, religion, and trade. Yet beneath this cultivated image lurks a ruthless ambition, their influence seeping into the very grain of the city's docks and marketplaces.

The operations of the Majlis are executed through a precise hierarchy, with the Rahib serving as overseers and intermediaries. These mid-tier commanders maintain the balance between the affluent masters and the foot soldiers who tread the docks. It is said that no Rahib ascends without proving themselves both as a negotiator of finesse and an enforcer of absolute loyalty. Their distinctive sashes, adorned with embroidered patterns denoting rank and achievements, are a common, if unsettling, sight in Azure's dockside taverns.

Beneath the Rahib are the Al-Adwa—a shadowy legion of operatives and enforcers who blend seamlessly into the chaos of the docks. They pose as merchants, labourers, or sailors, luring the unsuspecting with promises of wealth and opportunity. Many who fall for their charm find themselves aboard ships bound for distant waters, waking with no memory of their conscription save for the faint taste of rotroot on their tongues.

The Xondarans' cultural heritage permeates every facet of their operation. Their symbols, from the crescent moon with three dots to the handwoven sashes of the Rahib, speak to traditions that predate their criminal enterprise. Their gatherings, cloaked in secrecy, are said to follow ancient rituals, where disputes are settled over meals of shared bread and blackleaf-laden stew. Yet even in these rituals lies the ever-

present threat of violence—dissenters are silenced swiftly, their absence noted only by the faint aroma of burning clove that seems to follow such matters.

Though their activities are widely reviled, the Xondarans' control over Azure's docks remains unchallenged by all but the most foolish. From shanghaiing unwary travellers to smuggling rare goods, their grip on the underworld is as pervasive as the mist that shrouds the city. To cross them is to invite retribution not just from the enforcers of the docks but from the unseen hands of the Majlis themselves, whose reach extends far beyond their gilded quarters.

The Blackjacks

Among the myriad factions prowling Azure's shadowy streets, none embody raw audacity and rough-edged cunning quite like the Blackjacks. Where other groups cloak themselves in ritual or mystery, the Blackjacks thrive on visibility and reputation, their presence marked by swaggering confidence and sharp-tongued wit.

Operating primarily in the lower districts of Azure, the Blackjacks are a loosely organised collective of ruffians, pickpockets, and hustlers, bound together not by tradition or creed but by a shared love of mischief and opportunity. Their name derives from their preferred weapon—a crude sap or cosh—which is as much a symbol of their identity as it is a practical tool of intimidation.

Though their operations often appear chaotic, there is a rough structure to their ranks. At their helm is a figure known only as The Jack, a title passed down through cunning or combat rather than inheritance. The Jack rules through charisma and ferocity, their word law among the gang, though internal squabbles are as common as the fog that blankets the docks.

Unlike the more calculated Zhilan Triads or the ruthless Xondaran gangs, the Blackjacks' crimes are opportunistic—smash-and-grab robberies, street-level extortion, and the occasional brawl with rival groups. Their antics are equal parts menace and spectacle, with their members often boasting of their deeds in the taverns and alleyways they frequent.

Their attire, a ragtag mix of stolen finery and patched streetwear, reflects their brash character. Many Blackjacks sport black scarves or sashes, an informal badge of membership, alongside hats tilted at rakish angles or boots polished to an almost absurd shine.

Despite their bravado, the Blackjacks are not without cunning. They know the value of loyalty—both to their own and to those who pay for their services. Many a merchant has found their debts collected or their rivals cowed by a band of Blackjacks eager to make a quick coin.

Yet, for all their charm and audacity, the Blackjacks remain a volatile force. Their frequent clashes with Azure's city guard, not to mention other criminal factions, ensure that their story is one of constant conflict and reinvention. To underestimate them as mere street thugs, however, would be a grave mistake. Beneath their roguish exteriors lies a hardened pragmatism, born of survival in the harsh streets of Azure.

For those navigating the city's labyrinthine alleys, the Blackjacks are both a potential threat and an unlikely ally. One need only remember: their loyalty is as fleeting as their coin purse is light.

The Scarlet Swallows

A tightly controlled faction operating in Azur, the Scarlet Swallows are known for their network of pleasure houses and the calculated influence they exert. Their operatives, referred to simply as Swallows, are marked with a red swallow tattoo on their inner thigh. This mark is not a mere symbol of belonging but a stark reminder of their status as the property of the enigmatic leader known only as the Madame.

The Madame oversees the Scarlet Swallows with an iron will veiled in silk, her influence felt in every aspect of the faction's operations. She remains an elusive figure, rarely seen, yet her reputation alone ensures loyalty and fear in equal measure. The Swallows are trained rigorously, their roles extending beyond companionship to include subtle manipulation and intelligence gathering.

While the Swallows maintain an air of discretion, the tattoo they bear signifies their unyielding bond to the Madame's will. It is a mark that carries both privilege and constraint, as it ties them irrevocably to the faction's fortunes and its dangers.

The Scarlet Swallows' establishments are frequented by a diverse clientele, and their reach extends far beyond the walls of their pleasure houses. Through their operatives, the faction collects secrets, shapes alliances, and ensures their influence in Azur's social and political spheres remains undeniable.

Those who challenge the Scarlet Swallows or fail to meet their obligations quickly discover the Madame's wrath is as efficient as it is inescapable. The Swallows, bound as they are, become the instruments of this retribution—silent, precise, and unyielding.