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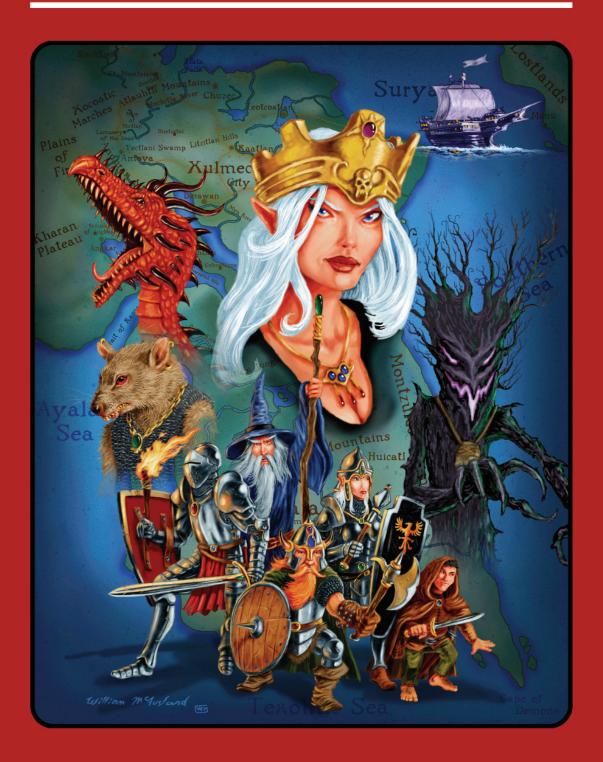
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Dungeon Crawl Classics #35 Gazetteer of the Known Realms



A COMPLETE CAMPAIGN SETTING
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DUNGEON CRAWL CLASSICS #35

GM'S GUIDE TO THE KNOWN REALMS

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INTRODUCTION

Telcome to the Known Realms, a world of adventure, arcane secrets, and untold riches, where a sharp sword and a shirt of mail are a warrior's only defense against wicked mages, monstrous hordes, and fierce dragons of yore.

Culled from the pages of an ancient tome, the Known Realms represent the scribes' world simulated by the d20 rule system. Whether the codex is the spurious work of a dark-age madman or a medieval tome of esoteric conjecture will never be known. What is certain is that it provides a wealth of information for the modern gamer.

During the arduous process of translation, concessions were made to fit the Known Realms to the d20 system, but otherwise the spirit and tone of the tome was left unchanged. Until such a time that the lost companion tomes are discovered and translated, it falls to you, the GM, to answer the lingering mysteries and fill in the unknown realms.

A WORLD OF HIGH ADVENTURE

The world of Áereth is foremost one of legendary adventure. Noble knights ride to the ends of the earth questing against legendary dragons and wicked warlords. Mighty wizards wage eldritch battle atop high mountain peaks and in the halls of lonely towers. Cunning rogues creep along rooftops of smoky cities, stealing past lethal traps and demonic sentries. Devout priests fight for the common good, bringing freedom to enslaved masses. Fearless adventurers unearth forgotten tombs and plumb the depths of endless caverns, ride at the head of armies, and cast powerful spells that shape the very nature of reality.

The Known Realms are vast. Many of its locales are recorded in the Dungeon Crawl Classic series of adventure modules, but these are only the first, tentative steps into the world of Áereth.

Looking for a shadowy port to sell your ill-gotten loot? Wicked Punjar beckons. Craving high intrigue and back-stabbing politics? The Council of Lords awaits your petition. Hungry for the wail of war horns and the crash of armies? The armies of Leherti cry out for your command. Want to carve out your own fief from the untracked wilderness? The wild borderlands call. Eager to sink your glowing blade into the gullet of a dragon and ransack its fabled trove? Look no further. All these adventures and more are contained herein.

While the scribes of the codex outlined their world, it falls to you and your players to bring the Known Realms to life. Bind it to your home campaign, ravage its lands with the march of armies and dragon fire, make its people come alive through the heroics of your players.

Our work with the codex is finished. The legends of Áereth have only begun.

STYLES OF PLAY

Just as PCs gain levels and face more challenging puzzles and foes, so too must a campaign world evolve to paint an ever-broader horizon, luring heroes with treasures and ambitions just beyond their reach. As a world, Áereth can accommodate any number of styles of play, ranging from classic dungeon crawl to convoluted court intrigue. GMs need simply hold to a simple rule: Always make the PCs the focus of your world.

With this in mind, consider the following adventure suggestions for your evolving campaign:

Low-level PCs: Beginning and low-level PCs spend their time exploring nearby ruins, working as caravan guards, serving wizened sages, studying beneath noble knights, and fighting in merchant companies. Most settlements in the Northlands are isolated from their neighbors, and are forced to turn to unproven young heroes in times of desperation and need. The PCs might undertake short wilderness journeys, or the GMs may choose to simply assume that PCs begin their adventures at the



entrance of the dungeon. A band of low-level PCs can spend their first few levels simply exploring the surrounding lands, mapping out the wilderness and clearing dungeons and cave complexes of wicked creatures.

Mid-level PCs: Mid-level characters are often heroes who have carved out names for themselves. While not yet legends, they have established themselves as dangerous foes worthy of respect. These adventurers often travel far and wide, exploring the Southlands and Lostlands in the service of kings and regents, secret societies and knighthoods, or simply in the search of greater wealth and power. As renowned heroes, PCs quickly attract the notice of those more powerful than themselves. Some of these powers may choose to recruit the heroes to their noble causes; others may perceive the PCs as threats, and work to eradicate or corrupt the heroes before they grow into powerful threats.

High-level PCs: No longer the servants of emperors, high priests, or guildmasters, high-level PCs are these rulers, conquering existing kingdoms or carving new ones from the wilderness. Gathering wisdom, power, and fame, PCs undertake epic quests, riding at the head of armies, challenging dragons and demons alike. Only the fiercest or most numerous of foes present a challenge to a party of high-level PCs. As living legends, the heroes are responsible for defending their people from threats that can span entire planes. High-level games can also focus on the subtle plots of courtly intrigue, where a single careless phrase can plunge entire nations into war and chaos.

Epic-level PCs: Epic-level PCs can reshape the face of Áereth at their whim, rallying entire races to their cause, or laying waste to whole empires. Epic-level PCs are on the path to becoming minor divine powers and masters of Áereth. At this level, PCs can expect to regularly draw the attention of gods and infernal powers, working either with or against the PCs as suits their moods.

CONTAINED HEREIN

The Known Realms are comprised of three continents: the Northlands, a collection of isolated kingdoms, faded empires, and majestic forests and mountains; the Southlands, a land of dense jungles and forgotten cities occupied by drakon and the ancient nagas; and the Lostlands, once the cradle of civilization, now a place of fearsome monsters and ancient, sand-swept ruins.

This boxed set contains the following:

Gazetteer of the Known Realms: a reference guide to the three continents, detailing the myriad nations, cultures, and monsters;

GM's Guide to the Known Realms: the book you hold in your hands, containing secrets and information crucial to running a campaign set in the Known Realms;

Dungeon Crawl Classics: Halls of the Minotaur: an introductory adventure designed to bring 0-level characters to 1st level and beyond;

Dungeon Crawl Classics: Vault of the Thief Lord: a challenging adventure designed for expert players and character levels 4-6, set in the deadly city of Punjar;

Three full-color maps detailing the vast sweep of the Known Realms; and

The Player's Map to the Known Realms, an incomplete map of the world for the players to complete in the course of their adventures.





CHAPTER 1 CREATION AND EARLY HISTORY

The summation below is gathered from the creation myths of many of Áereth's religions and cultures. No single church will cite this information in such a concise, comprehensive form, but if one made a painstaking study of the clergies of the Sancturn Pantheon, interviewed disciples of numerous demigods, and consulted scholars of the Triad, one might gather an account similar to the one below.

GMs are encouraged to alter this mythology as they see fit to better accommodate their campaigns. This is merely one possibility regarding the origins of Áereth.

In a formless age measureless to mortals, there arrived a clan of beings that theologians would one day name the Greater Gods. Leading them was the Triad, and the eldest among them was Choranus, the Seer Father and the figurehead of Law. At his side was his equal and consort Ildavir, the Giver of Form, and his brother, Centivus the Shaper. When the Triad and its kin entered the Void, its sole occupant, a being of Chaos known as Zhühn, fled before their luminous presence.

With the help of his children, Choranus began the creation of the world, a place of light, water, and air. He designed laws to govern the course of nature and the powers that could suspend them, setting the stage for impending life. Yet even as the Greater Gods forged this world, Zhühn extended his hands and unmade it, for ever was destruction swifter than creation. Again and again they fashioned their world anew and Zhühn, their Great Enemy, broke it apart. Choranus sought to bring order into the vast expanse, but Zhühn would allow only entropy.

After the Triad took counsel, they welcomed an assemblage of other gods to take part in creation. Most pivotal was the Sancturn Pantheon, divinities who sought refuge from the ruin of their previous home. The Triad granted them their protection and magnified their power. These divinities, later named the Lesser Gods by theologians, were exemplars of good, evil, and neutrality—moralistic ideologies carried over from their former home. Once the

Sancturns had settled themselves among the Outer Planes, the Triad invited them to take part in its designs.

With their collective work, Choranus oversaw the construction of a ghostly new world—a place of raw magical convergence suffused with the spirit of nature and the collective power of the Greater and Lesser Gods. Under the direction of Ildavir, the gods gave physical substance to the world by drawing upon the Inner Planes, and Choranus set it spinning within the spiral arrays of the Material Plane.

Though he fought to unmake it, Zhühn's power was outmatched. Dwelling in the corners of his diminishing Void, Zhühn recoiled at the sight of such enduring creation. To him, the existence of anything but the Void itself was a blasphemy, for he was a being of chaos and oblivion and knew only those. Now light and life flourished, spoiling the endless gloom. This new world, having survived the Great Enemy's will to destroy, has come to be known in the current age as Áereth—derived from a phrase in the Old Giant tongue meaning "where we walk."

Seeing it safe from Zhühn's negation, Choranus at last asked Centivus to devise the first creatures to inhabit Áereth. As his brother set to work, the Seer Father and Giver of Form rejoiced at his artistry and lent their skills to his. From the hands of the Triad, many beings entered the world. This was an antediluvian age of legendary beasts, a time when rocs alone soared the skies, krakens swam the depths, and colossal worms bored the earth unchallenged. Ever was Centivus the artist, his divine imagination given free rein to shape new beasts. This he did with the counsel of Ildavir, whose knowledge of nature and balance lent focus to his work. It was she who infused his creations with life and substance, giving each the ability to proliferate its own kind. At last, Choranus decided which would be given sentience, sharp intellect, or the gift of magic.

The three gods continued to create, experimenting with flesh and blood to set a multitude of strange and monstrous creatures free to roam all the lands. From these



beginnings the animal features of the Known Realms find their origin. When Centivus designed the first felines, Choranus marveled again at his brother's skill, and he gave the most powerful among these features like those of he and his consort: fair faces crowned with flowing hair. These became the first sphinxes, and they were graced with wisdom and prescience. The next creatures were serpentine, and Choranus smiled at their colorful, scaled bodies, and he gave them, too, faces like the gods' own. These became the nagas, and they were graced with cunning and a talent for sorcery.

Seeing the need for greater balance in the world, Ildavir began to populate Áereth with a host of lesser forms, taking her inspiration from the great works of Centivus. These became the animals, and they would thrive in all climates and terrains and rule the wild places. From sphinxes, Ildavir created lions and great cats of all varieties. From nagas, she created reptiles and all species of serpents. From rocs, she created birds, and from the great ocean dwellers, she created fish. These new beasts were at first larger than their eventual progeny, and are known in the present world as dire animals.

Then Choranus crafted a race formed fully in the gods' own image. This effort took the form of titans, large of stature and great in strength. Intending the titans to rule over all others, he found that they did not obey the edicts intended for them. They became a race of discord—seeded, perhaps, by the subtle hand of Zhühn—and the titans went their separate ways and withdrew to the mountainous corners of the world. The magic within them adapted their bodies to the regions in which they chose to dwell, and their power slowly declined. They became the giants, lesser forms of the titans. Lost in their own selfish struggles, the giants abandoned their heritage and forsook the gods.

Disappointed in the fallibility of the titans, Choranus turned to Centivus again. He asked him to devise a ruling race, one that perfected on the forms that came before. As his younger brother set to work on these next creations, Choranus delighted at the beauty of their draconic form. Cunning as the nagas, they possessed the strength of titans and the wisdom of sphinxes. Ildavir gave them life in the cradle of a mountain valley, and Choranus gave them sovereign minds. The Seer Father also granted them profound skill with magic that they might shape their civilizations and defend themselves against enemies who would supplant them. These beings were the first dragons.

As the most intelligent creatures on Áereth, and possessing breaths of deadly elemental power, dragons lorded over all others. At their head, Choranus placed four avatars shaped much like the titans but draconic in feature. These were the Dragon Kings, ambassadors of the

gods, given the task of relaying the laws of Choranus to the dragons and those in their charge.

At this time, Choranus longed to recreate his attempt with the titans, this time on a smaller, more numerous scale. Taking inspiration from his own family, he created the smaller humanoid races that would serve the dragons in their mighty empire. In the likeness of Ireth, his sagacious, eldest daughter, he fashioned the elves. For Daenthar, his stout and industrious eldest son, Choranus hewed the dwarves. From the image of Poderon, his good-humored, hard-working son, he forged the gnomes. For the harmony of Olidyra, his diminutive, wayward daughter, he conceived the halflings. Foreseeing the eventual rise of these humanoid races, Choranus at last created humans, a people who would embody the virtues—and failings—of all others. One by one, these five races revealed themselves, and they were at first wary of the great beasts that ruled the land. As they increased in number, the intelligent creatures that came before began to contend with them. In time, some adopted the humanoids as a master might foster an apprentice, beginning with the dragons. As intended, the elves, dwarves, gnomes, halflings, and humans became as servitors to the wiser, more powerful dragons.

Watching the works of their superiors, some of the Lesser Gods grew jealous and began to experiment with the powers of creation, giving rise to goblinkind and many others. Hags, harpies, ogres, and trolls numbered among the many monstrous denizens. Affronted by these bastard creations, Ildavir appealed to her consort and his brother. With their approval, Ildavir countered with new creations of her own. Beings such as centaurs, merfolk, satyrs, sea cats, treants, and all things fey came from this time.

The ethics of law and chaos, loyalty and disobedience, were in flux within Áereth. Each race fought for its place in the young world and many refused to bow to the lordship of the Dragon Kings, sovereignty decreed by Choranus himself. Zhühn, seeking to subvert the work of creation, sent forth his mightiest servant, a fallen titan named Cadixtat that the Great Enemy had fostered since that race's birth. Once instrumental in the titans' defiance against the gods, Cadixtat, the most powerful of his kind, now marched across the face of Aereth sewing chaos and disloyalty wherever he went. Empowered with a portion of Zhühn's own anarchic power, even the Dragon Kings dared not challenge him. Unwilling to allow the Great Enemy this heavy-handed stratagem, Choranus sent forth a sentinel of law named Teleus to defend Aereth, imbuing him with some of the Seer Father's own axiomatic power.

The battle between Teleus and Cadixtat spanned the world and carried far into the Reign of Dragons, as the





law of Choranus and the chaos of Zhühn sought to rule the fate of Áereth. This Great Conflict of ideologies, physical, and spiritual power never knew a victor, however, for when Teleus at last disarmed Cadixtat of his Axe of Unmaking, Choranus recalled his champion. Content to allow the absence of both ethical extremes, the Triad commanded the rest of the Greater Gods to stay their influence as well. In their place, they charged the Sancturn Pantheon to watch over the mortal races of Áereth and allow their morals of good, evil, and neutrality to hold sway. The Greater Gods would remain only the distant figureheads of creation.

Unable to exert his power physically upon the world again, Zhühn endeavored to dissolve it slowly, piece by piece, with the patience only a creature of the Void could understand. Though he was great in power, many of the gods of good and evil would forever oppose him.

The time had come for mortals, not gods, to shape the course of the world.

EARLY HISTORY THE REIGN OF DRAGONS

From the moment they entered the world, the dragons were lords, and at their head were placed the immortal Dragon Kings. Cast in the likeness of the gods themselves and infused with draconic might, they were paragons of virtue who ruled over the dragons and their great empires. Embodying the elements of fire, lightning, cold, and acid, each was affiliated with a direction of the world itself.

In addition to their roles as rulers, the Dragon Kings served as mediators between the gods and mortals, delivering divine will to Áereth. Under their wisdom, the dragons' dominion flourished during a time of peace and discovery. Many beautiful things were wrought and many magics woven. Mountainous cities were constructed like vast aeries and sprawling temples were raised in swamplands, fertile steppes, and secret valleys. There was no soil on the surface of Áereth that had not felt the talons of a dragon walk upon it.

As the eons passed, the gods began to look to their newer creations, and the influence of the Dragon Kings over their own vassals waned. Sensing their own fading power, they erected the Vault of the Dragon Kings deep within the Frosteye Mountains. It became a haven for dragons who wished to hold onto the glory and virtues that their empire once held dear. Within lay the Pool of





Dreams, a reliquary that cared for the souls of dragons that passed from the mortal world. The Pool would preserve the collective knowledge and memories of the dragons until the gods favored the world's firstborn again.

In the creation of the Pool of Dreams, the Dragon Kings of the East and West sacrificed their power and succumbed to death. Unforeseen by the remaining two, this tumultuous event divided dragonkind as never before, for now dragons had witnessed the frailty of their lieges. Some retained their loyalty to the remaining Kings, while others claimed that a new era had begun and sought to grab the power for themselves. From this ideological rift, their magic became manifest. With the march of time, each faction evolved into the variances of metallic and chromatic. Abandoning the Kings and the gods they served, the rebellious chromatic faction began to lose their luster, their scales dulling to the matte hues of the color spectrum.

When the transformation was nearly completed, a great red wyrm named Sevrylascarethiin—or Sunscratch in the Common tongue—rose to prominence. Together with his brethren, he waged war against the remaining Dragon Kings and their followers and personally struck down the King of the South at its outset. The King of the North in turn slew Sunscratch but himself fell gravely wounded in the struggle.

With the death of their champion, the chromatic dragons fled the ancestral valleys, while the remaining Dragon King retreated into the Vault and barred its doors. The metallic dragons disbanded, disillusioned by their loss, and left their homeland as well. As the centuries passed, the Vault was lost and its memory passed from common knowledge into legend.

THE REIGN OF CATS

Then the dragons ruled Áereth with their great empires, many intelligent and ambitious creatures vied for petty dominance under their expansive shadow. When the Dragon Kings and their vassals fell from power, the first to walk abroad uncontested in the world at large was the sphinx.

Believing themselves to be paragons of physical and mental perfection, the sphinxes saw themselves as caretakers of the world. They used their wits and their appetites to maintain order among the lesser races by devouring those who could not answer their riddles. In the eastern deserts and hills, the collective might of the sphinxes elevated them above all others. Building upon the ruins of the dragons who came before and studying their abandoned works, the sphinxes united as a single power. Any enemies who attempted to challenge them were swiftly cowed or devoured.

Seeing the need for servants, the leonine race ceased devouring the numerous humanoids and began to subjugate them instead with the persuasive acuity only a sphinx can employ. They coaxed the elves from the forests of Ahna-Vithyre with cryptic promises of magic



and bribed the dwarves from the Gorzeruun Mountains with promises of mithral and gold. With riddles and promised knowledge, they lured the gnomes from their overrun homeland, and the halflings of Gadjarria dwelt already upon the doorstep of their desert home. Humans, a race of uncertain desires, were brought under wing with sheer aggression. Even great numbers of hobgoblins, haler than their goblin cousins, were seized by the sphinxes for their own purposes.

Some resisted. The dwarves who refused the lure retreated to depths into which they knew the sphinxes would not venture, and these would become deep dwarves and duergar. Some gnomes, upon reaching the sphinx homeland, found hidden tunnels in the earth and delved deeper still, eventually becoming the svirfneblin known today. Those elves who refused to leave their forests were the wood elves, while sea elves retreated deeper into their waters when the sphinxes approached.

With the lesser races in tow, the sphinxes carved a vast empire throughout the Lostlands and named it Khonsuria after its first pharaoh. The humanoid servants were viewed as pets or pack animals to the sphinxes; useful, even affectionately cared for at times, but patronized nonetheless. While some humanoids were afforded a measure of esteem within Khonsurian society, even the greatest among these were considered beneath the lowliest of sphinxes. The empire expanded its borders north and west, reaching its paws partially into the Northlands.

A family of androsphinxes ruled the young empire, and the third such pharaoh was a brutal tyrant whose cruelty tested the loyalty of his own kind. His daughter, however, was a high priestess of Amun Tor and was beloved by her people and even their humanoid servants. Legends say that Amun Tor himself consorted with the beautiful gynosphinx and that their child was destined from conception to rule the gilded empire. Whatever her origin, the last and most enduring sovereign to rule the Khonsurian Empire was a Queen. With the approval of the sphinxes and the gods themselves, she dethroned her wicked father and took his place.

Her name was Ankharet the Blessed, an immortal gynosphinx who ruled the Empire for prosperous millennia. She took as her consort the great gold wyrm Kozuragen, who had served the Dragon Kings in his youth and fought against the armies of Sunscratch in his prime. Now he sat at Ankharet's side and offered the council and wisdom of his long life.

Under the Queen's guidance, each species of sphinx was given a role within their society. The noble androsphinxes became the empire's prophets, leaders, and priests, serving as councilors and interpreters of the Queen's law. Gynosphinxes served as Ankharet's ambassadors, and

carried her diplomacy into foreign lands. The bloodthirsty hieracosphinxes served as the warriors of the empire, defending it from all enemies. Criosphinxes carried the Queen's directives to her humanoid subjects, overseeing the construction of pyramids and monuments to the glory of Khonsuria and its Queen.

The empire was not without its insurrections. A faction of elven rebels sought freedom from the desert sands and searched in vain for the tunnels that the early svirfneblin had used long before. When their brethren refused to join them in their escape, the rebels named them traitors. The sphinxes, deigning not to risk their own against the insurgents, sent the loyal elves to retrieve their wayward kin. The Kindred War ensued, and the rebels found their only escape to be an ominous rift called the Devil's Cauldron. Corrupting fumes seeped into the elves, seeding their hearts with evil and initiating a slow change within their bodies. Fleeing into the chthonian depths, the rebel elves found their own dark paths in history, heard the call of a goddess, and would one day be known to the surface world as the drow.

THE REIGN OF SERPENTS

hortly after the rise of Khonsuria and across the Surya Sea, another creature came into its own. On Zimala, the Island of Obsidian, the totemic nagas had united their tribes and established their own budding empire. Though the dragon empire that preceded them had been unrivaled in its power, the nagas held conviction that they had been created first, that the limbless serpentine form was one of perfection. The god Madrah, they knew, had been charged to oversee the lands of the west, and though the nagas themselves varied in their chosen virtues, all paid homage to him and the spirits he engendered.

With the help of lizardfolk, marsh-dwelling neighbors north of Zimala whom the nagas had coerced into alliance, the nagas began to expand their lands. As their empire grew, the god Madrah took an empress to be his consort and from her egg was hatched a female they named Cynhuara. When the empress died suspiciously, he took a consort of common blood and she hatched a male they named Axaluatl. Immortal nagas of great power, the two half-siblings were revered by their kind as gods, and in their name stately temples were raised even before their coming of age.

Eldest of the two, Cynhuara was given the Zimalan Empire to rule as her own. However, she eschewed the role of Empress, instead establishing the Naga Council. Populated with all species of nagas, it was predominantly comprised of wise and benevolent teotl-nagas (guardian nagas). Axaluatl became an emissary for the Council who traveled abroad and explored beyond the





empire's borders. Incredulous that his half-sister would relinquish the power of regency, he plotted in secret to become Emperor. Axaluatl's conspiracies included a number of tlanti-nagas (dark nagas) of sinister power.

The Naga Council was given the task of overseeing all aspects of the Zimalan Empire with a view toward its eternal preservation and the needs of its subjects. Cynhuara herself sat at the Council's head, and together they led the Empire into a peaceful coexistence with many races for long years. Within Zimala and some of the lands north of the Island, the nagas were dominant, and those who challenged them were struck down with fang and spell. Within naga society, the tlanti-nagas served as explorers and military leaders along with the ehecatl-nagas (spirit nagas). The mali-nagas (earth nagas) and atl-nagas (water nagas), by far the most numerous, served as warriors on land and sea whenever force was required.

Under the teotls' guidance—and against Axaluatl's—the humans of neighboring lands were taken into Zimalan protection. Existing formerly in a loose society of feuding tribes, the humans were inlaid into naga society like an intricate mosaic and were taught minor magics and the arts of medicine and industry. As with nobles of modern Áereth, nagas and their human retainers would often form strong bonds of friendship. As apprentices and servants, the humans helped the nagas build their glorious cities and raise pyramids and temples in devotion to Madrah and his divine offspring, Cynhuara and Axaluatl.

THE CLASH OF EMPIRES

Both the Khonsurian and Zimalan Empires contended with many hostile creatures, for they were wealthy and harbored many coveted secrets. Humanoid and monstrous enemies arose and fought to raise their own nations, but the might and magic of the Serpents and Cats put down every challenge.

Yet the two great empires remained unaware of each other for centuries, with only the whispered rumor of a faraway empire ever crossing the ocean that divided them. Ankharet the Sphinx Queen forbade her people to fly west across the sea, for they believed that only the Realm of the Dead lay there. To travel to where the sun met its demise each day was to join the Accursed. The Naga Council, meanwhile, did not seek to expand its holdings beyond their own continents and the far north was filled with barbaric peoples not worth the effort to conquer. They had little desire to sail the oceans.

The ventures of Axaluatl, however, brought him at last to the far north, where he heard still more rumors of the Khonsurian Empire. With his entourage of supporters, he crossed the Surya Sea and there at last met the outlying sphinxes. When Ankharet learned of the Zimalan Empire, she embraced the discovery. Her people believed then that the gods had pushed the Realm of the Dead further to the west and in doing so had revealed new allies.

In the minds of some, the discovery prompted dreams of invasion and further conquest. Yet Cynhuara and the



Naga Council extended the tail of alliance and mutual trade. Ankharet responded in kind. Though they were great rivals in power, each empire agreed to maintain peace, for neither desired the other's land and there was much they could share.

For long years, both empires prospered. Beseeching the gods of the earth and sea, the nagas and sphinxes called upon great elemental magics and drew up a chain of islands across the Surya Sea. With the labor of millions, nonpareil magic, and a technology now lost from the world, the nagas and sphinxes constructed Ayoxatlan, a causeway of colossal scale that stretched across the miles of the sea. Using the god-given islands as their primary support, the bridge allowed for easy passage between the two empires. Though a sphinx could fly the distance unladen, the journey was overly taxing and they welcomed the convenience of a paved roadway where they could cross the water with their humanoid attendants and other trade goods. In the tongue of sphinxes, the marvelous span was known as Harak Manu, or "bridge to the west."

This golden era came to a close, however, when corruption entered the heart of Ankharet the Blessed. What led to the great Queen's fall none can accurately say, whether she was lured into darkness by the whisperings of Zhühn or whether her soul had been steeped in depravity from the very beginning. Perhaps it was her acquisition of the mysterious Shadowcrown that darkened her heart or the many potent gifts given her by the nagas. Yet even as the final stones were laid in place within Ayoxatlan, so did Ankharet and the wicked Axaluatl agree to a secret plan of mutual benefit.

In secret, Ankharet began to prey upon the servitor races—and even her own kind—as a vampire would its victims. Her deepest crime was the murder of her own consort, Kozuragen. To disguise her sin and set in motion her plans with Axaluatl, the Queen publicly accused the Naga Council for his death, claiming it had sent assassins to kill both she and her consort in a bid to sow confusion for an inevitable naga attack.

The sphinxes' faith in their revered Queen was absolute. Without hesitation, the sphinxes turned baleful eyes upon the Serpents across the sea. Led by the Queen's own daughter, Meraph the Golden, the Khonsurian Empire launched a vengeful crusade against the Zimalan Empire. Fury at the death of her father burned in the heart of Meraph.

The nagas were ill prepared for the invasion. Cynhuara, shocked at Ankharet's accusation, sought to calm the attacking sphinxes and clear away the misunderstanding. When she confronted the arriving Meraph, Axaluatl at last betrayed his half-sister and used his magic to silence

her. The half-dragon sphinx, blinded by rage and unwilling to hear diplomacy, killed Cynhuara with the help of her elite warriors. The Naga Council fought back, but half its members were slain outright. An all-out war had begun between the powerful races. The nagas collapsed the bridge Ayoxatlan to prevent easy access for the Khonsurian armies. As if both empires had lost the favor of their gods, the isles upon which the great causeway had been built sank into the sea again.

Axaluatl, whose agreement with Ankharet only included the removal of Cynhuara and the Naga Council, realized that the Queen had betrayed him. She sought now to eliminate the Zimalan Empire altogether. Enraged at her duplicity, Axaluatl led his subjects in frequent counterattacks. For years, the two empires struggled against one another, Serpent against Cat. The nagas were nearly annihilated in the great war.

THE WAR OF BROTHERS

n androsphinx of prophetic power named Khubsheth, who was a disciple of Choranus and the consort of Meraph, discerned the corruption of the Sphinx Queen. He saw the Naga Council to be innocent of the crime for which the war had been waged, and revealed the truth to Meraph and her wrathful armies on the eve of the nagas' destruction. When the sphinxes halted their attack, Meraph, stunned by the magnitude of her mother's treachery and the genocide Meraph herself had begun, fled in grief. Khubsheth pursued his beloved and asked her to return with him and confront the Queen.

Yet Ankharet's loyal subjects were many, and sphinx turned against sphinx in a great civil war known as the War of Brothers. Years of bloody conflict ensued, ending at last when Meraph and her followers were victorious. Ankharet's defenders were routed and the Queen herself captured. During the conflict, however, the servitor races had found their freedom and the sphinxes' many enemies had advanced on the weakening empire. The surviving sphinxes from both sides, thousands strong, disappeared from the Lostlands almost overnight, a mythic event that modern historians cannot explain. The few sphinxes that remained chose solitary existence over the united civilization they once ruled.

Meraph, Khubsheth, and their few remaining allies were left standing with their shackled Queen. Divinely protected from her own kin, Ankharet the Cursed could not be slain. Khubsheth, granted divine foresight, determined that those destined to slay Ankharet would not be born until thousands of years later. Until that day, he knew, the Queen would have to be bound. And so the Tomb of the Sphinx Queen was built, the last monument to a oncegreat empire and a prison for its traitorous Queen.



Meraph insisted upon interring herself within the tomb to await the prophesized heroes and the death of her mother. Khubsheth, granted immortality for his vigilance, would wait through the passage of centuries for that fated time.

The Khonsurian Empire itself was no more, brought low by its own beloved Queen.

THE WRATH OF SERPENTS

eanwhile, the nagas nursed their wounds in the aftermath of their war with the sphinxes, struggling to recover from the devastating losses. The dark nagas found an opportunity in the chaos to reshape what little remained of the Zimalan Empire. Seeing that the actions of Axaluatl had led to the slaughter of his own people, his former devotees renounced him. Once a strong disciple of Axaluatl, a dark naga priest named Zuyuan seized political power and led a revolt against the Shadow Serpent. Unable to slay the immortal—for he, too, was divinely protected like Ankharet—Zuyuan outlawed his worship. Those who professed loyalty to the betrayer were slain, and Axaluatl, diminished in status and power, was forced into seclusion.

Excited by his success and lusting for more power, Zuyuan led a campaign of persecution against the Naga Council for failing to perceive the sphinx threat. With great support, he dissolved the now-impotent Council and exiled the teotl-nagas who had backed it. Into this void of power, Zuyuan established the Dark Council. Staffed with his chosen cohorts, he rebuilt the struggling Zimalan Empire into a regime of tyranny. Zuyuan insisted that magic and intrigue, not peace and diplomacy, were the tools of survival for their kind. Unwilling to trust anything that was not a naga, they tightened their coils on their human servants until they become little more than slaves and chattel.

As the years passed, the humans grew restless. Rumors reached Zimala that the servitor races of the far east had been freed by the fall of the sphinxes. The once-great Khonsurian Empire was fast fading into mere legend, and elves and dwarves began to rise in great numbers in the Northland regions. It seemed to the wise that the gods now favored beings that walked on two legs. Unable to recover their former might, the nagas grew cynical and jealous. Hearing the stories of freedom, the nagas' human slaves began to chafe against the oppression of their masters.

Realizing that the future belonged to these lesser, more numerous races, the Dark Council decided to breed their own humanoid species in a bid to retain dominance. If humanoids were to inherit Áereth, then the nagas would control those who ruled them. Inspired by the lizardfolk race but desiring a people of greater power, the nagas sought to create a race in their own serpentine image. Zuyuan supported experiments with human slaves and captured lizardfolk, infusing them with foul sorcery and the blood of reptiles. From these unholy trials came inphidians and tzopiloani, evil human-reptile hybrids. When the nagas began to use their own sorcerous blood in the experiments, they spawned their greatest achievement, and also their ultimate downfall: the drakon.

Possessing the same ambition as humans, the innate magic of nagas, and a sinister lack of fear, the drakon eventually rebelled against their progenitors in a conflict known as the Wrath of Serpents. With the inphidians and tzopiloani on their side, the drakon threw down the Dark Council. In the chaos, the nagas were unable to maintain constriction of their slaves. The humans slipped their bonds and fled toward the northern reaches of the old empire and the wide peninsula known as Xulmec. Some believe it was the exiled teotl-nagas lurking beneath the earth who first broke the humans' shackles to set them free. The Naga Council of old, after all, would never have enslaved their humanoid servants.

Even as they struggled against the nagas, the drakon sought to replace them as slavers of the humans. Assassins were sent against Huamec, the human slave who dared to lead his people to freedom, but they fell at his hand. Locked as they were in the death throes of naga might, the drakon could spare no further attempts against the refugees.

And so the Zimalan Empire was no more, destroyed by its own desperation and insolence. The nagas that survived the Wrath of Serpents withdrew from the politics of the world and hid away in dark places, coiled in hate. Only the teotl-nagas, though few in number, remained seekers of peace. They laired in the tombs of their ancient civilization, lived the virtues of Cynhuara, and guarded the secrets of their once-mighty empire.

THE HOMECOMING

hile the Xulmecs sought to establish their own civilization bereft of naga rule, the former servants of the Khonsurian Empire had migrated north into the vast, unspoiled lands whence they had first emerged before sphinx rule. The remnants of long-vanished draconic realms riddled the lands that they settled into. Each race found its own path, contending whenever another's presence threatened.

As the elves wandered, they sensed the familiar presence of Ireth, goddess of verdure and wizardry. Following her voice they settled once again in the forests of Ahna-Vithyre, for there it was that elves had first awakened in



Ácreth. In the Foresthome, Ireth taught them the deepest secrets of magic and forestry. This tutelage came to the elves as memories long buried, for their time among the sphinxes had suppressed their origins. When they returned to the woods, they met again their wild kin in the deepest groves and their sea-dwelling cousins in Ahna-Vithyre's coast.

Guided by the rhythmic intonations of Daenthar, the earth god of industry, the dwarves climbed back into the mountains. With his mentoring, they resumed their agesold love of mining and crafting amidst their native stone, and steadily the dwarven kingdoms forged strong alliances with one another. The mightiest of these nations was the mountain kingdom of Amonzadd, whose great stone windows looked down upon the vast forests of Ahna-Vithyre.

The savage tribes of humans dispersed among the Northlands, trading eagerly with their neighbors but never making enduring allegiances among their kind as did the dwarves, nor did they settle in large numbers like the elves. Without exception, no race ever exhibited as much diversity in culture as humans. They were vast in number but largely divided, and so their inherent desire for expansion could not include the holdings of the stronger races.

The gnomes had no homeland to return to, for their gemladen hills in the far northeast had been largely depleted of their mineral wealth and the lands were rife with goblinoids. Never a people to despair of the past, the gnomes settled wherever commerce was good, serving as mediators and tradesmen between towns, cities, nations, and races. Poderon, the earth god of levity, became their patron, and gave them the optimistic worldview that gnomes still enjoy.

The last of the servitor races to leave the Lostlands—and the only to regularly return—were the halflings. Despairing at the malignance their homeland had become, the music of Olidyra, the goddess of travel and exploration, called to them and instilled in them a love for the open road. Gypsies and vagabonds all, the halflings chose a life of constant wandering and could be found in all realms. Traditionally, halflings returned each year to Gadjarria, where they weep at their loss and sing of their freedom.

Explorers of all races began the long journey across the Empyrean Ocean and rediscovered the humans of the Southlands that they had once met when the sphinx and naga empires had been allies centuries before. Culturally, the Xulmecs were considered primitive and the coast-lines were riddled with dangerous creatures. The threat of drakon and lizardfolk lurked deeper within the jungles, and few explorers would approach the remote Island of Obsidian, Zimala.

Powerful with magic and crafts reminiscent of the old naga and sphinx empires, the elves and dwarves exerted their influence across the lands. The greatest human wizards apprenticed themselves to the elves of Ahna-Vithyre to refine their art. Master blacksmiths of the human lands studied in the hold of Amonzadd. Gnomes and halflings, for their part, wound their way as peaceably as possible through all racial societies. Whenever the ambitious humans pushed their borders too far, they were swiftly reminded with overwhelming force that their dominions existed only at the behest of elven and dwarven mercy. Goblinoids occasionally emerged from the plains, hills, and mountains, but the concerted effort of local territories inevitably drove them back.

With this influx of magic and artistry, the elves and dwarves grew haughty over the years and made enemies of jealous races—and even each other. Humans continued to study at the foot of their trees and mountains and some sought ways to steal their arts for themselves. Nations began to war with one another even as they fought off the ever-persistent hordes of goblinkind.

THE WAR OF DIVINE RIGHT

ar from civilized lands, a young storm giant named Aeshotal grew restless from the turbulence of Áereth and its bloody conflicts. He set off on a pilgrimage around the Known Realms. Giantkind in its many, scattered tribes had dwelt outside of the march of history, and the troubled Aeshotal sought a place for his people. The storm giant's quest led him to the monasteries and libraries of many kingdoms, yet always his search found no answers.

At last, in the deepest catacombs of a mired temple in the Great Swamp, Aeshotal heard a disembodied voice address him from the shadows. The voice told him to find the Cave of Truth in the Frosteye Mountains, a place labeled on no map nor named in any tome. With nowhere else to turn, Aeshotal journeyed to the Cave and found a great door guarded by a curious sentinel. The strange human tried to convince the giant to turn away, explaining that only death and the ruin of Áereth lay beyond.

In his mind, the mysterious voice whispered to Aeshotal that the smaller races were hiding the truth from his kind, and that the destiny of giantkind lay within. Conflicted and angry, Aeshotal struck at the man with lightning, only to find the energy passing harmlessly through him. When he struck at him with his greatsword, he found that this, too, could not pierce him. Aeshotal simply stepped through the ghostly man, wrenched open the door, and entered the darkness beyond.

Within he found a network of chambers with ancient lore etched into stone walls in thousands of glyphs, bas-



reliefs, and even sculptures. He spent years meditating here, attempting to decipher the glyphs, aided only by his patience—and the mysterious voice. At last he found the answer to his quest: the knowledge that giants, formerly the titans, had been created by the gods *before* the smaller races, and had in fact come before the Dragon Kings themselves. With this knowledge came the conviction that giants were *meant* to reign over all others. Cold, logical madness gave Aeshotal the answer he'd long sought. If the giants united now, as their godless ancestors had failed to upon their creation, they could bring order to the world and rule as they were divinely decreed.

Aeshotal left the chamber and began his campaign to unite the giant tribes. He spoke of prophecies and the divine mandate that giants were sovereign to the smaller races. Highly charismatic and growing in power as he went, Aeshotal was seen as a visionary and messiah, and most giants were easily seduced into joining his dream of righteous conquest. In the frigid reaches of the Northern Wastes, he won over the frost giant jarls. In the fiery mountains of the east and west, he found support with the fire giant kings. The primitive hill giants from the Valley of Xyr Muthal and stone giants from around the Northlands flocked to his banner, though some cloud and storm giants were not as easily swayed. After more than fifty years, he'd established an insurmountable force at his disposal in all corners of the Northlands, the vast majority of giantkind poised at his command.

United as never before—and never since—the giants of the Known Realms laid siege upon the humanoid kingdoms in the War of Divine Right. On many fronts and in terrains advantageous to the giants, they laid low city after city, destroying those who refused to surrender to their authority. For the first time since their service in the Khonsurian Empire, the elves, dwarves, and humans banded together against the collective might of the giants—against which they steadily lost ground. Even gnomes and halflings joined their fellows and fought against the giants with guerilla-style warfare, excelling as they always had against large opponents.

During these years, each side searched for every advantage as battles took place in every part of the civilized world. While the humanoid races struggled to unite, the giants persuaded other monstrous and giantish creatures to join in their war. Ogres and ettins swelled their armies against the elven realms, while trolls and gargoyles emerged from the mountains to assail the dwarf holds. Kapoacinths and scrags joined the storm giants against the sea elves and coast-dwelling humans. Cloud giants threw their magic against the nations' capitals. Chief among Aeshotal's supporters were the sinister and wealthy Stormbringer family of storm giants and the Stone Wings, an extensive clan of fiendish gargoyles

summoned from the hellish Outer Planes.

As the Northlands were steadily subdued by his persistence, Aeshotal sent storm and fire giants across the sea to conquer the humans of Southlands, whom he regarded as impotent primitives. Even united against the onslaught, the Xulmecs were unprepared for the attack and lost many lives. They called upon Madrah and their godkings to save them. When death seemed inevitable, it was Huamec, the first Xulmec god-king, who answered. He instructed his priests to build an icon in his image carved in pure obsidian. Constructed of immense size, Huamec possessed the idol and led a counter-attack against the giants. The giants in the Southlands were soundly defeated, but Huamec himself was slain in the endeavor and the monolithic idol itself was cast down.

In the Northlands, the humans of the Abylosian Empire, in an attempt to halt the advance of giants east and south, enlarged a river valley into a gorge of titanic proportions with the concerted efforts of druids, wizards, and countless slaves. Becoming a permanent scar in the land, the barrier worked only too well, funneling the full strength of the giants back toward the elven Foresthome and surrounding lands. The frontiers of civilization were either smashed flat or conquered by the giants, their people enslaved.

Against Aeshotal's hordes, the crafts of the dwarves and the arcana of the elves were sorely tested. Working together now efficiently, the greatest dwarven artisans and elven wizards crafted golems of stone and iron to counter the strength of the giants, while elven sorcerers bargained with genies for elemental conjurations to use against them. These efforts slowed the giants but could never push them back.

The War of Divine Right raged on, with the smaller races continuing to lose ground each year. Aeshotal and his greatest forces eventually surrounded Ahna-Vithyre and Amonzadd in the land of Lirea, enclosing the power bases of both elf and dwarf civilizations within his grip. Once the defenders' lines broke, the giants would swarm into their capitals and lay claim to all of Áereth. The elders of the elves and dwarves formed the Eldritch Coalition, an alliance comprised of archmages, high priests, and generals of both peoples. They came together in desperation, ready to discuss new strategies, contingencies—or even surrender to Aeshotal.

At this time, a cloud giantess named Jathra fought her way through the elf and dwarf fortifications, subduing but not killing every guard who dared to arrest her infiltration. When the slender, white-skinned giant broke into the council chamber of the Eldritch Coalition, the elves and dwarves thought they had come to their end at last and prepared to fight. Instead, Jathra bowed and intro-



duced herself to them, speaking words of peace and pacifism. She had not been sent by Aeshotal, she explained, but represented a faction of giants who opposed the war.

Desperate, the Eldritch Coalition listened to the giant, but some among them doubted her intentions, so full of hate for giants that they were blind to her offers. Jathra presented to them a cache of scrolls she'd recovered from the fabled Vault of the Dragon Kings, relics that harbored magics that she believed could end the war peacefully.

The scrolls contained the arcana needed to construct the Pillars of Expulsion, artifacts that could exert powerful enchantments that could forcefully compel the giants to leave the region and scatter their armies. Originally conceived by the Dragon Kings to mercifully defeat Sunscratch and his followers, the project had been abandoned in favor of the Pool of Dreams. The Pillars had therefore never been created, but the lore to build them lay now in the hands of the Eldritch Coalition. It was Jathra's belief that the giants were never meant to rule; they were meant to dwell in remote places and offer guidance to the smaller races who sought them out. The scrolls offered the means to bring peace to the land again.

The construction of the Pillars—adamantine obelisks carved with complex runes and woven with many spells—would represent the ultimate achievement of the artifice of elves and dwarves. The elves of Parhokk, a city famous for its enchanters, were called upon to imbue the Pillars with the compulsion magic that was their core.

When the obelisks were complete, Jathra explained that the placement of the Pillars of Expulsion was vital, and that they would have to be arranged in a great ring around the land outside the giant encampments. She spoke of sacrifice and honor, and such virtues struck a painful cord within the hearts of the long-lived people of Ahna-Vithyre and Amonzadd.

Once they were built, the greatest elven and dwarven champions carried the obelisks, at great risk, through the enemy lines. Though most of these heroes fell at giant hands, the Pillars were placed without exception in a great ring around the land of Lirea, fully encircling the giant forces. When the time was right, the Eldritch Coalition called upon their gods and their magic and activated the Pillars of Expulsion as Jathra had instructed.

Had the Coalition worked in concert, the plan might have succeeded. But doubt gnawed at the hearts of some, who feared that Jathra was as evil as the rest of her kin and was deceiving them. Some tales say that the surreptitious hand of Zhühn was at work within them, corrupting them as he may have Ankharet the Blessed, Aeshotal, and countless other across the ages. These elf and dwarf dissenters dared to believe that they could alter the magic of the Pillars, to transform their compulsion magic into energies deadly to the giants. They channeled their magic and their hate into the whole, and the Pillars of Expulsion came to life.

Thus polluted, it was not enchantment magic that flared from the obelisks, but another power altogether that rent



apart the elements around them. The fabric of the Material Plane was torn asunder in the immediate vicinity of each obelisk, turning into a churning mass of deadly elements. Much was drawn back into the elemental planes even as portals to the same planes were opened nearby. Fire, lightning, cyclones, and great torrents of water poured through. Tremors shook all the land within the circle of Pillars, and great caverns beneath the earth collapsed.

As a result of this cataclysm, the land known as Lirea slowly sank into the sea as portals to the Elemental Plane of Water spilled onto the landmass. Ocean waters from the Empyrean Ocean flooded inland, spilling over the Foresthome of the elves and the dwarven hold of Amonzadd. The devastation was vast and thorough. Giants, elves, and dwarves—along with numerous other creatures in the crossfire—were swallowed up.

The land sank too fast to save the nations but slowly enough to horrify those looking on from outside the deadly ring. In the end, Aeshotal and the giants had been defeated, but at a cost greater than anyone ever imagined. What once crowned the land in magic and majesty now dwelt at the bottom of a vast bay that would later be named the Lirean Sea. Ruins of the elves' and dwarves' former glory were held now in the dominion of the world's oceans and its denizens.

In time, the elemental portals were closed, and the wild storms were tamed by druids and clerics. Those elves and dwarves that survived the cataclysm were those who'd settled in outlying forests and mountains beyond Lirea. Though many humans had lost their lives in the devastation, there were countless more scattered throughout the land, greater in number than any other. The remaining elves and dwarves could not recover their former might, nor repopulate their own kind as swiftly as humans. Gnomes and halflings, like humans, could be found in all countries and never built their own kingdoms. Sea elves, who once dwelt along the coasts of Ahna-Vithyre, now swam the newly formed Lirean Sea and kept a vigil over the ruin of their homeland, to protect its secrets from treasure hunters.

With the sudden end of the giant-led war and the fall of Lirea, the thinking races of the Known Realms knew that an era had ended. Seasons passed differently now, distant threats seemed more ominous. Great magics had been wrought and cast down upon the mortal world, and devastation could come swiftly. The dwarves and elves formed solid treaties in honor of the Eldritch Coalition, living tributes to their fallen heroes and sovereigns. In the aftermath of the War of Divine Right, it was clear to all who was left standing stronger than all others.

The era of humans had begun

