

## THE SIEGE OF IPOTAVO, SUMMER SOLSTICE 379YE

The Gates of Ipotavo lie along the north-western borders of Axos. It is what they call a citadel - a large town or perhaps even a small city. Built on the gentle slopes of a low mountain, it is heavily fortified, with seven rings of great walls, each with three gates. The highest point of the citadel reaches above the peak of the mountain, and is topped with a beacon that sends out three equally spaced beams of dim radiance after nightfall. The lowest point... is hidden deep within the earth. The mountain beneath Ipotavo is riddled with tunnels, ossuaries, tombs, chambers, and catacombs. A vast necropolis that would qualify as a second city if the inhabitants were alive. In many ways, the Axou seem more concerned about protecting their dead ancestors than their living descendants.

To the north and south of the city spreads a solid, remarkably thick stone wall supported by white granite. It is garrisoned day and night by silent, unmoving sentinels. It blocks a narrow valley that provides what appears to be the only easy route into eastern and central Axos.

Ipotavo is currently besieged by the Druj; Imperial assistance at the start of the year has begun at last to turn the tide of battle against the barbarians. There are two armies camped before the citadel, the glowering red embers of their campfires stretch as far as the eye can see when the sun sets. The citadel would have fallen before their onslaught long ago, if not for Axou sorcery.

On arrival, each Imperial captain is interviewed by the ochre-robed General Dancia. She wears ornamented armour, and conceals her upper face behind a carved bone mask. She is young, but confident – promoted to replace a less fortunate general she has already demonstrated a solid grasp of strategy and siege-tactics. She speaks for the leader of the citadel, the Grand Ilarch Adonai, and appears to be comparatively popular with the people and the soldiery alike.

She takes pains to explore the abilities of each Imperial volunteer, and how best to deploy their soldiers. She makes no effort to conceal her delight that the Empire has sent some five thousand troops to support her forces. She is matter-of-fact and straightforward where another General might be arrogant or look down on foreign soldiers – she greets those who have fought alongside the Axou before with guarded camaraderie.

While the majority of mercenaries fighting here are Imperial, there are not the only ones. News of Imperial support has spread, and return visitors can see a marked increase in the number and quality of the foreign volunteers. Gloomy warrior-artificers from southern Skoura, clad in heavy armour and primarily armed with large shields and hammers, eye the Imperial troops suspiciously. They keep very much to themselves. Expert siege engineers, they have been assisting the Axou to neutralise Druj sappers, locating and collapsing tunnels beneath the walls. There is also some guarded talk about a future push, past the walls and toward the Tunnels of Kaban in the east. A liberation – if the besieging Druj force can be broken.

There are also six serious-faced captains from the Sarcophan Delves. They speak very little Imperial, being more comfortable with the Gemeinsamesprache of the Commonwealth. Close-quarters fighters, they prefer vicious one-handed blades and small round shields. They are friendly, despite language barriers.

The weather is very warm – comparable to the southern Brass Coast in Summer. Despite the heat, the Axou wrap themselves from head to foot, often in bulky robes. Most wear ivory or porcelain masks whenever they are in company – the masks are only removed among close family.

There are also a number of Axou from the eastern citadels – Issyk, Maykop and Kantor. They bring limited, cautious aid for the western citadel. General Dancia has thinly-veiled contempt for them; when Ipotavo was being overrun they found excuses not to send aid. Now that it appears the Gates may hold, they are suddenly finding their spines – worried that they might look weak or miss some opportunity if the Druj are beaten off.

There is a grim, festive air in the streets. Imperial troops – especially those from Urizen and Navarr – are greeted with open celebration. Even the arrival of the Highborn forces is greeted with subdued joy – although the Ipotavans rarely drop their guard around the people of Highguard. For generations they have been taught that the Highborn view them as dangerous heretics, and ingrained prejudice is hard to shake.

While you are attached to the army of Ipotavo, you find it extremely easy to integrate with their odd customs – they have employed a potent magical ritual to let soldiers from very different backgrounds fight together in harmony. The magicians of Urizen determine that this is a ritual of the Autumn realm, perhaps of the eightieth magic – no minor working but a significant demonstration of Axou necromantia. They reassure suspicious newcomers that the ritual is very similar to the Bound By Common Cause ritual used in the Empire – but there are some significant differences.

The power of the magic manifests as partially-seen spectral shapes that whisper advice but vanish if looked at too directly. According to the Axou defenders, these are the ghosts of honoured strategists and commanders called back from beyond death to help the Axou defend their citadel. Special pains are taken to explain to the Highborn captains that these are honoured dead and not dangerous spirits. Their advice helps strangers fit in, and they advise General Dancia how best to employ her forces in defence of the citadel.

The Axou make good use of their magic – it seems to underpin much of their military strategy. While most of the ritual *necromantia* serve in a support role, they also offer rituals to the Imperial captains helping protect the city. Any captain who wishes can receive an enchantment from them without charge. The most common are a ritual that asks a ghost to help guide a warrior's weapon to strike crippling or fatal blows; a ritual that binds a warrior's metal armour to the stones and spirits of the citadel making it harder to damage; and a ritual that allows several warriors to fight together with additional skill as long as they are prepared to listen to the advice of ghostly voices. All are evoked through the invocation of ghostly spirits.

The advice of ghostly spirits has also helped the defenders of Ipotavo to predict the likely plans of their enemy – and divined the nature of their forces. After the support offered by the Empire at the beginning of the year, the defenders have redoubled their efforts to assess the Druj defences and create a strategy they hope will give them victory over the barbarians. They had planned for another force the size of that provided by the Empire previously – when the General realises she has a force nearly twice that number at her disposal, supported by powerful Axou magic, she changes her plans.

Rather than a series of short, overwhelming assaults against weak points, the Axou launch a major offensive against the Druj. Supported by newly-constructed siege engines, and catapults provided by the Chambers of Isskyk to the west, the combined forces push through all three gates simultaneously against the Druj. The barbarians are taken by surprise – unaware of just how seriously Ipotavan forces have been swelled by mercenaries and allies from the other citadels.

The humans quickly overrun the front line of Druj pickets, and the fighting spreads to the great Druj encampment. Shortly after the main force emerging from the citadel is engaged, a large mixed force of Skourans, Navarr and Axou “Blessed Ones” emerge from hidden catacomb tunnels a short distance behind the Druj lines. The unliving *Tavos Ageli* do not speak, but fight with utter abandon, slaughtering Druj with the same ease and lack of emotion with which a Marcher might reap a field, and proving extremely resistant to physical harm. It appears that the Ipotavans have fielded their entire force of “Holy Warriors” - each one that dies is a significant loss to the Axou soldiers, but seems to spur them to even greater violence against the orcs.

When darkness falls, the great beacon atop the citadel explodes into life; a sequence of polished mirrors have been arranged to feed the light onto the battlefield. Any Druj looking directly toward the citadel are momentarily dazed, and it is at this point that the other Axos army joins the fray. Several hundred shambling shroud-wrapped cadavers from the catacombs beneath the city, among whom flit dozens of wrathful wraith-like horrors. This second army of the dead is supported by Axou necromantia ritualists, by heavily-armoured *Agema* warriors, and by several cadres of white-robed Axou priests. The cadavers and ghosts make poor soldiers, but driven by the ritual-magicians and supported by the warriors and priests, they push against the main strength of the Druj.

Both Axou and Druj fight without honour; they encourage their Imperial allies to do whatever it takes to achieve victory. No quarter is given, nor asked. The fallen are executed, or eaten alive by the tomb herd. By the morning of the first day, both Druj armies are in retreat from the overwhelming assault of human soldiers.

Rather than sound the retreat, General Dancia gives her forces an hour to regroup and then pursues the barbarians. Over the next several weeks, the campaign pushes south and west. The Axou sustain serious losses, but they inflict significantly more damage on the Druj. Towards the end of the season, the two barbarian armies split – the more damaged of the two breaks north toward the Mallum, which the other retreats back to the conquered Tunnels of Kaban to the west.

Victory, for the Axou, then. Yet the war continues – the Imperials have helped push some of the Druj to flee, but the larger of the two forces remains. Aid has been secured from the other three citadels but it is still cautious. The Grand Illarch Adonai himself addresses the Imperial troops, gathered on the battlefield before the Gates of Ipotavo. He thanks the Imperials, and credits their presence as having been a significant element in the victory. He expresses the hope that this might be the beginning of closer ties between Ipotavo and the eastern Empire, but that the war is far from over. The Ipotavans will not rest until the last Druj is slaughtered, and the Axou still enslaved in the Tunnels of Kaban are liberated.

The guests from the other three citadels seem especially concerned about this, and are quick to offer their continued aid in the western territories. There appear to be complex Axou politics at work here but it is not clear what their basis is.

All captains are paid a small bounty of crystal mana, promptly and without question. Whatever other problems it might have, it seems that Ipotavo is not short of crystal mana.

### **Game Information**

You are welcome to use this information as you see fit – but this document is out-of-character and should not be shown to other characters during the event. Instead please use it as the basis of your roleplaying regarding the events described.

Stories of how your army reached Ipotavo are up to you – the most likely scenario is that you took passage on an Axou or Sarcophan ship from a port in the southern Empire.

You might have personally fought alongside your military unit, or you might have gleaned some or all of this information from a written report from one of your lieutenants.

It is possible that the opportunity to continue to support the Siege of Ipotavo may continue during the Summer downtime period, so you may choose to roleplay that your military unit is still in Axos, or you may roleplay that it has returned (or is returning) safely to the Empire.

You may also wish to review the Axos brief for additional information; use this to create any plausible stories about your time among the Axou.

Finally, you should have a number of additional mana crystals in your pack. The basic reward is 3 crystal mana, but you may have more if your military unit was sufficiently upgraded.