

# Blood and mire

*Blackthorns! We march east to the smoke pillars of Therunin. To the steading of Eastring then East Ashes via the Barrens. I call upon the spear of the Pines. To our banners as we retrace our home via steady reconquest. Invoke the flame of Khol to burn back the Druj with extreme prejudice, leave nothing but silence in your wake.*

*Rhisiart Dancemaker, General of the Black Thorns*

*Our allies fight to drive the Druj from their home. Both our peoples have suffered the malice of the Druj. They fought beside us to reclaim the Eaves of Peytaht. Who would we be, if we did not raise our spears to fight alongside them?*

*Vallack, War-Chief of the Great Forest Orcs*

*Towerjacks, the Druj have returned to Imperial lands. We shall prove that the very land rejects their presence. Take the trees and build great walls, use the earth to ensure they cannot advance. Do as only the Towerjacks can, steel guard our bodies, virtue guard our souls!*

*Marcus Barossa Di Tassato, General of the Towerjacks*

*Glorious Knights of the Golden Sun. We march to Therunin to support the Navarri. We will make a grinding advance through the territory avoiding the now poisonous Lower Tarn Valley. We have pushed the Druj out of our home. Now out of Loyalty. Let us push the m out of Therunin.*

*Zoran De Orzel, General of the Golden Sun*

*Gryphon's Pride, the Druj have returned as we predicted. This plague on Imperial citizens and threat to our faith cannot go unanswered, so I call upon you to march with me with loyalty to aid Navarr. I command you to protect Imperial Lives, the families, the children, the weak & those who cannot defend*

*themselves. We will charge into the horde and remind the Druj why they fear us. courage and Glory to you all!*

*Archavion Wolfborne, General of the Gryphon's Pride*

*Loyal Schlacta of Varushka, the Drums of war never cease. We march on Therunin with steady conquest to reclaim the land & remind the Druj why they run from our dogs & hide from our fury*

*Alderei the Fair, General of the Iron Helms*

*Ancient Boughs and murderous beasts; Therunin welcome us just as the forests of home would. Advance boldly, northern eagle, for the Druj blight our Empire once more. Hold dear your oaths and for no malice, for we are the Pride of Varushka and our banner is held ever high. Aid our Navarr Cousins and show their fearful allies that we stand between them and the Druj no matter how they see us. Not for thanks not for glory; we march for Imperial hearths, Imperial Homes, and Imperial Destiny*

*Jaromir Ostrovyn Kostka, General of the Northern Eagle*

## **Shadow of the Mallum**

Following the Spring Equinox, the Druj launched a terrible assault against the Navarr territory of Therunin. Tens of thousands of orc warriors poured over the border from the marshes of Sarangrave into Eastring. From there they spread south and west, conquering the lakeside regions of East Ashes and seizing the Feverwater Docks and the fortified steading there.

Despite a valiant effort, they smashed the Holt of the Oak, and set about slaughtering every Navarr and especially every Great Forest Orcs that fell into their hands. Only the Gift of Kaela offered any escape from a tormented, torturous death.

Those who embrace that tragic boon are gone forever; their bodies will not rest in the funeral groves of the Navarr and their spirits will not return as ghosts. It is to be hoped that their souls at least are safe in the Labyrinth, or in the embrace of the Great Forest.

Tens of thousands of Druj, and among them the wicked sorcerers of the Tainted Basilisk – powerful ritual magicians whose mastery of the arts of Night and Spring allows them to raise wards and defences in East Ashes and Eastring, to try and stamp the dominion of the Druj on the Navarr lands. At the same time, the Rivers of Life are called and merge into the waters of Therunin – and there is a lot of water in Therunin – ensuring that any warrior who is not slain by the defenders will be whole of body by the next dawn. And, as such unconstrained Spring magics so often do, causing the vallorn to stir in its fitful centuries-long slumber..

Then, during the Summer Solstice, Imperial heroes used the Sentinel Gate to launch a desperate assault against Druj forces passing through the Lower Tarn Valley. The orcs of the Mallum bore with them a deadly weapon-of-war, the Sephals Cauldron, which contained a terrible cursed brew of poison and venom intended to seep into the waters of Therunin and spread north to taint the lake at Hope's Rest in the Barrens. Despite brave efforts, it proved impossible to capture the cauldron, but Imperial heroes were able to overturn it during the battle. Its abominable tincture sank into the earth, vile tendrils creeping out in all directions to bring ruin to the Tarn Valley. At least Hope's Rest is safe, for now.

## **Venom and Spite**

When they came as a terrible tide, the Druj swept into Therunin with remorseless fervour. A wave of warriors, smashing

everything in their path. Now, their strategy has changed. They must know that Imperial forces will not allow them to claim Therunin – that the Navarr alone would stop at nothing to protect their steadings. Where their initial assault was overwhelming in its nature, the armies of the Mallum now shift to a more considered, careful approach. Not falling back onto the defensive – not while there are still lands to seize and Navarr to slaughter – but more measured. More prone to retreat, regroup, and attack from a different direction rather than surge forward to drown those who stand against them.

It is always difficult to assess the numbers of the Druj. They are masters of stealth and skirmish, adept at misdirection and deception. Yet they are also proud, and their banners give some hint as to which forces are present. There are signs that there are more Druj in Therunin than there were last season – the serpent-and-sword banners of the Deadly Blade, the twining brambles of the Thorn Born, the plain green-or-yellow fields of colour that herald the arrival of the treacherous warriors of the Hidden Widow. At least three more armies than were here last season, perhaps more.

The bulk of the Druj forces assay a careful, probing strategy. Warbands of scouts press forward through the Tarn Valley, some even reaching the eastern steadings of Peakedge Song. Where they encounter resistance they strike swiftly, trying to kill their opponents before they realise they are being attacked, and if that initial assault fails, they fade back into the trees and marshes. Every warrior wields envenomed weapons, and they make great use of potions and philtres to seize the advantage over those they fight.

There are exceptions however. The Hunting Scorpion, true to their name, are everywhere. Swift skirmishers, they identify steadings with stronger-than-normal defences and without

warning fall on them from all directions seeking to overwhelm their walls. The Poison Crane, beneath their predatory marsh-bird standards, fight beside them actively seeking out defenders who might prove to be a challenge to the Druj advance and focusing all their efforts on killing as many warriors as they can, clearly less concerned with conquering Therunin than they are with murdering as many of its inhabitants as they can.

Great use is made of the wards the Tainted Basilisk have raised – the forests of Eastring and the marshes of East Ashes alike conspire to aid the orcs in their attack. It is no surprise to see the heralds of Arhallogen alongside a Druj force – although there seem to be fewer than before – but there are also grim masked shadows that emerge from the darkness under the trees to fight with the Druj armies before fading away once the fighting is done.

Several of the armies are also clearly enchanted, bearing boons that help them to find and slay those trying to flee their advance or hide from their forces. Relentless, ruthless, merciless. Spring magic at odds with the Rivers of Life that nonetheless leaves a trail of blood and sorrow in the wake of the Mallum armies.

## **No Mercy**

They know the Empire is coming, and come it does. Six Imperial armies from across the Empire, with the Black Thorns as their vanguard. The Golden Sun and the Gryphon's Pride come south from the Barrens; the Northern Eagle and the Iron Helms close on their heels come down from Ossium; and the Towerjacks making good time as they push up through Altis into Peakedge Song. Thirty thousand soldiers, give or take.

Twelve thousand warriors lead by the heroes of the

Empire, warbands predominantly of the Navarr, rally to the banners of the Black Thorns, ready to drive the Druj from Therunin whatever the cost. Another thousand are scattered between the other armies, answering the call to fight for the Empire.

Out of the Barrens, a great force of orcs come to fight alongside the Black Thorns. A thousand Great Forest Orcs, the Spears of the Pines, raised to aid their neighbours, their allies and friends. They are as merciless as any Varushkan, as any Navarr, when it comes to fighting the Druj. They have a thousand years of debt to be repaid, quite apart from the more recent slaughter of their people at the hands of the current invasion. It would be easy for their presence to cause friction between the armies, given the presence of Dawnish and the Varushkans, but the orcs are scrupulous in simply avoiding them. They stick with the Black Thorns, and follow their lead.

Three champions of the Summer Realm, lieutenants of Eleonaris, have been called forth by Imperial magic, brought to the eastern marshes to face the Druj. They are eager for the battle; Lady Moriamis, golden-eyed warrior-poet and her cohort of warsingers join the Golden Sun, inspiring their fellow knights to acts of heroism and glory. With the Northern Eagle comes Ser Gaspare, wearing the head and skin of a great white bear as a cloak over her crimson plate, whose proud schlecta lock their adamant shields into an unbreakable bulwark against spears and arrows. And with the Black Thorns, Mistress Malachie, a relentless war-witch huntress who once served Hayaak and now fights under the lion banners of Eleonaris. Six thousand Knights of Glory, who it seems despise the cowardly, treacherous Druj even more than the Empire does.

The Empire is no stranger to the strategies of the Druj, to the traps they lay and the ambushes they prepare for the unwary.

Their tactics match those of the Mallum – steady, careful, cautious, considered. This is not a battlefield for reckless charges or risky gambits. The Black Thorns and the Iron Helms set the tempo for the fight, paying close attention to the advice of their physicks and battlefield healers. Even with the Rivers of Life, a poisoned or tainted wound might still cripple a warrior, still bring unexpected death from an injury dismissed as minor.

The Northern Eagle move more quickly, eager to fight the Druj and push them out of Therunin. Yet even these doughty Varushkan warriors know not to take too many risks – there are veterans of the war in Ossium among them who keep keen eyes peeled for signs of flanking attacks or opportunities that are too good to be true.

Dawn's armies focus their efforts on securing the land the Druj have taken. The Gryphon's Pride push forward into lands where the orcs are known to have set up their command posts, aided by the Day magic enchantment that lets them anticipate even the obfuscated strategies of the stealthy orcs and adjust their tactics to match. The Golden Sun spread out behind the Imperial lines, rooting out the hidden Druj planning to attack from behind, ensuring that the land behind the front is safe.

While the majority of the Imperial force is on the attack, the Towerjacks are more concerned with fortifying and bolstering the steadings. If things go wrong, and the Druj not only face the Imperial attack but turn it back, thousands of people will be endangered. They dig in, turning their engineering expertise to the task of building temporary defences. A great spiked palisade is thrown up around the hospital-steading of Peakedge Stand. They prepare traps, and build barricades, around the settlements of the Tarn Valley, both orc and human, and establish supply caches and watchposts wherever they can. Moving with

remarkable speed and acuity, they seem to know exactly where to apply their genius to the best effect. Their fortifications are temporary but will provide an invaluable advantage in the months to come.

## **Clash and Fray**

Two great forces facing each other across the Lower Tarn Valley. Both sides eager to fight. The orcs pushing west to take the rest of Therunin. The Empire pushing east, seeking to drive them out.

There is no one great landmark battle in the months the two sides battle over the marshes of lower Therunin. The war is too fluid, the strategies at play too shifting. It would be hard to map where the line of battle is on any given day, even with a map, even with the omniscient view of a great eye in the sky. When the Druj assail a steading here, the Empire destroys a major encampment there. Where the Poison Crane butcher a scouting party in the north, the Gryphon's Pride encircles and annihilates a band of skirmishers in the south. There is a very real fear that a season of fighting will see thousands dead and neither side victorious.

But little by little, the Empire gains the upper hand. Slowly, slowly, the Druj begin to fall back further than they advance. Inch by inch the Druj cede more of the Tarn valley to the Empire, slipping back into Eastwing, toward the Sarangrave. Eventually the last major Druj camp is located and broken, their presence in the Lower Valley excised. It is something of a pyrrhic victory – the poison that has seeped into the land here is already beginning to make its presence felt, killing trees, befouling pools and streams, only the ongoing power of the Rivers of Life slowing its spread through the waters of the region.



Terrible as this is, it is a problem for the future. The challenge now is to try and drive the Druj out of Therunin altogether.

If anything the fighting in East Ashes is even more vicious, more brutal, more unforgiving than the fighting in the Lower Tarn Valley. The Druj must know that if they lose control of the eastern forests, they will be left with only two choices; to withdraw east into Sarangrave or south into Eastring. In the latter case, they will be trapped in Therunin, between the vallorn and the Feverwater, unable to escape without pushing south into the forests of Lustri, and there is no guarantee that if they do so they will be victorious. The Druj are cruel, and savage, but they are also cowardly. Most likely they will abandon their attempts to seize Therunin rather than risk another trap like the one that saw their numbers decimated during the liberation of Zenith.

## **The Horror**

The ghulai have wrapped the marshes of East Ashes with Night magic wards. There is talk of sucking quagmires, that eagerly embrace those who stumble or fall, sucking them down into lightless crushing depths with unnatural speed. Of glowing mists that rise without warning, flooding through the trees like an oncoming tide, muffling all sound and reducing visibility to barely an arm's length, but which do not impede the bloodthirsty orc ambushers who move silently through them to kill and maim. Of people getting lost barely a dozen feet from their own camp. Of flitting figures with razor-smiles and razor-knives. It is nothing new to encounter odd beasts with too many legs in the marches of Therunin, but never in the past have they spoken with human voices, mocking and threatening, or possessed such facility for laying deadly ambushes.

East Ashes becomes charnel ground, the waters turning red with

spilled blood. The sun itself turns its face away, heavy clouds rolling in from the east and presaging a thunderous downpour that lasts nearly a week as if the sky itself is weeping to see the slaughter. All told, nearly two thousand Imperial soldiers die in East Ashes alone, more than three times as many brave souls as fell to clear the invaders from the Tarn Valley. So many bodies, fallen in the densely wooded marshes, lost in the poisoned waters of the lower valley, never to be found by either side. Denied the rites and ceremonies their sacrifice earned, it is no surprise that an aura of dread begins to settle over East Ashes as the season draws on, something beyond the strangeness of Night magic wound around the region like a choking noose.

Scouts talk of encountering lost patrols, sheltering from the rains in bloodied canvas. Of spending a night at cold campfires speaking with knights, and thorns, and warriors strangely dazed and confused, scared and afraid, and in the morning finding no sign of them save their empty tents. Of dead orcs whose gnashing teeth chatter and snap at any who come near; even removing their heads does nothing to silence them and in the end half-mad soldiers have to bury them in the thick mud to quiet their terrible cacophony. Of steadings abandoned by the orcs but hung with the bones and bodies of those who gave their lives to try and defend them, their corpses so decayed and flyblown as to make mundane identification impossible yet still somehow showing the signs of their excruciation. A reminder that there are those who do not trust the gifts of Kaela, perhaps.

Two thousand dead Imperials, and perhaps as many again dead orcs. A harvest of blood and terror. The ghosts of those who fall fighting join those who were killed during the first months of the invasion, and even when the Druj are gone their presence will linger beneath the still pools, beneath the dark boughs, of East Ashes. Imperial and Druj ghosts, haunting the battlefield where they fell to darkness, bitter and hateful.

While many feel the horror sinking into their blood, the cold dread nestling in their breasts, others embrace the fear. This is a reminder of what the Druj are. Of why they must be stopped, of why their hold over the Mallum must be broken. In a way, the marshy woodlands of East Ashes become a warning of how the Druj would remake the world, if the Empire does not stop them, does not turn back their tide.

## **Clouds Break**

In the end, all the horror and the dread does not save the Druj. The Empire continues to press them. Their own strategies in a way betray them – too eager perhaps to fall back in the face of strong defence, too quick to favour ambush and skirmish over pitched battles. Sometimes they are able to come back to a steading in force, but other times Imperial forces have time to dig in, prepare their defences, receive reinforcements, and turn them back when they return. When the season began the Druj dominated East Ashes entirely; as the Autumn Equinox nears their control is almost entirely broken. One last push, and the battle of Therunin might be won.

But for now the fighting continues, and while the Empire and the Druj have contested East Ashes, there has been precious little fighting in Eastring. Between the shores of the lake and the horror of the vallorn, there has been an eerie silence. Scouts who have pushed south, and probed the edges of the Druj presence there, encounter significant difficulties. The orc magicians have given cruel awareness and mobility to many of the plants, have drawn on Spring magic to choke well-trod paths, to wrap walls of poison thorns around Druj-controlled steadings. They can discover very little of what is going on here, but what little they do learn is cause for alarm.

The Tainted Basilisk have, again, been oddly absent from the

battlefields of Therunin. Oh, there have been vikari aplenty, but the twisted lizard banners have not really been seen except by scouts. Their attention is elsewhere, it seems. A powerful coven of Druj ghulai including several commanders of the magical army - have gathered at the Feverwater Docks, and are preparing for some terrible working. Imperial spies cannot get close enough to determine exactly what is going on, and many die to gather what little intelligence the Empire is able to glean. They are planning to unleash Spring magic – which is to be expected. If the Druj think they are losing, they will surely seek to curse Therunin as they cursed the Barrens – to set the trees walking most likely, or to bring down punishing storms. Yet there is more at work here than the familiar maledictions; a slave liberated from the Druj brings news of a planned “cataclysm” - something to mark Therunin forever, to punish the Navarr, to show the might of the ghulai. The vates who hear of this exchange glances. Could the Druj be planning to wake the vallorn, to set it to do what they have failed to do – to destroy what they cannot control?

## **Game Information: Therunin**

- The Empire has pushed the Druj back but the fighting continues
- Lower Tarn Valley has gained the poisoned quality and East Ashes has gained the haunted quality
- The Towerjacks have established temporary forts in Peakedge Song

The Druj have been driven out of the Lower Tarn Valley, and the Empire is nine-tenths of the way towards forcing them out of East Ashes. Their control of Eastring and the Feverwater Docks is currently uncontested.

The presence of the Tainted Basilisk means that the Druj can target territory-wide effects on Therunin, including the ability to raise wards and lay curses.

The region of Lower Tarn Valley has gained the poisoned quality as a consequence of the Sephals Cauldron being spilled there. This will have unpleasant consequences for the armies currently engaged in East Ashes should they need to retreat through that region.

The region of East Ashes has gained the haunted quality. The unquiet dead of both Navarr and the Druj walk beneath the trees, and haunt the marshes here. Those steadings where the Druj committed their most terrible crimes against the Navarr people are particularly haunted. While the priests of the nation will do their best to deal with the worst of the hauntings, the nature of the wild marshes means it will be extremely difficult to find and deal with all the spirits abroad here.

Through the use of their Engineer quality, the Towerjacks have established temporary fortifications in Peakedge Song with a strength of 1000. The fort will slowly decay; by the start of the Winter Solstice its strength will have dropped to 500, and by the start of the Spring Equinox 386YE it will no longer be useful.

## **Participation: Touched by Glory**

Three Imperial armies were supported by Knights of Glory, and a character whose military unit was assigned to support the Black Thorns, Golden Sun, or Northern Eagle may choose to have been inspired by fighting alongside the warriors of Mistress Malachie, Lady Moriamis, or Ser Gaspare.

Any such character can choose to embrace a roleplaying effect: You feel an urge to ensure that those who have wronged you, or harmed those you love, receive neither mercy nor

forgiveness. It is easy to take action against such people, and hard to stop short of ending their lives. As long as you experience this roleplaying effect you can also respond to any other roleplaying effect that would make you afraid, or fill you with doubt, by becoming angry instead.

In addition, each of Eleonaris' lieutenants offers a different boon to those who fought with them.

If your military unit fought with the Golden Sun and you possess the stay with me skill or get it together skill, the inspiration of Lady Moriamis allows you to use one of those two skills once during the Autumn Equinox without needing to expend a hero point to do so.

If your military unit supported the Golden Sun and you possess the relentless skill or unstoppable skill, then the inspiration of Ser Gaspare allows you to use one of those two skills once during the Autumn Equinox without needing to expend a hero point to do so.

Finally, if your military unit supported the Black Thorns, then the inspiration of Mistress Malachie means that once during the Autumn Equinox when you regain hits thanks to any kind of healing effect, you are also purified of any venom or weakness affecting you, provided you spend a few moments of appropriate roleplaying bringing to mind the majesty and terrible splendour of Eleonaris' war-witches.

These effects last until you overcome the roleplaying effect for some reason, or until the end of the Autumn Equinox, whichever comes first.

## **All Along the Lakeside (Battle Opportunity)**

- The Druj are planning something terrible in Therunin

There is an opportunity for Imperial heroes to face the Druj in Therunin, in an attempt to stymie whatever grim plan it is the orcs of the Mallum have for Eastring.