

The World of Ashfar

The countries of Ashfar range from cosmopolitan democracies where races of all kinds freely mingle to entrenched bastions of tradition where the same race or class has been dominant for centuries. Unlike other worlds, where different cultures slowly reached out to encounter one another, Ashfar has had a hub for the past thousand and a half years. The civilisation that rules it has had an impact upon virtually all of the humanoid races.

Civilisations from all over the world have been brought into contact with each other via the Xoth Sarandi sea-gates. This has led to a global culture of suavity and acceptance in which you are just as likely to encounter a half-naked barbarian walking down the street as you are to meet a noble in his finery.



Boskenland

The humans who live here have made their home in about as cold and forbidding a place as could be imagined, yet they seem to like it. Boskenland is all birch woods, bleak hills and blue rocky outcrops. The original human settlers were from Jahannum and have retained their burly, robust approach to life.

Brith's Folly

This craggy, featureless stretch of land is where the god Brith is said to have severed his malformed left hand, which then grew into the spider-goddess She that the drow worship. A crack in the ground supposedly leads to the kingdom of the drow.

Caldraza

A long-established monarchy, Caldraza is one of the wealthier and more refined human nations. The country recently converted officially to the Marianist religion, sweeping away the old Pagan pantheon still worshipped in Chillhame, Ghael and Jahannum. King Titus lost his son and heir a year ago in a murderous attack by a clan of Ghael, leading him to declare war on the entire nation. Troops are gathering on the river border but hostilities have not broken out fully as yet.

Caldraza supplies most of the world with fine glass products, having plentiful supplies of the necessary raw materials and generations of experts to work with it. The royal palace at Beacon City is walled on the outside with black glass panels.

Cendra

The land bridge between the northern and southern continents is a sprawling rain forest, many hundreds of miles from end to end. While the colonists to the north were able to cope with the more temperate climates there, even if they had to wrest the land from monsters, the humidity and sheer danger of Cendra's jungles were too much for them. The jungles are thickly infested with kobolds on the outer edges and reptilian life forms in the unexplored heart.

There are travellers' tales of human tribes living in the jungle, who speak no known language, though these have never been verified. Expeditions have, however, brought golden ornaments and utensils out of deepest Cendra; whether these are the work of humanoids or some skilled non-humanoid race remains a mystery.

Chillhame

This small island is notable only for being the place where a massive drow army was defeated one thousand years ago, at the end of the last Equinox of the Heroes. It is independent, though the kingdom of Caldraza has long considered it a part of itself and is keen to recover it. The capital of Chillhame is Saragost, a walled city that boasts a fortified harbour.

Corona

Corona, otherwise called the 'Crown of the World', is a series of gigantic ice peaks that rise out of the sea, strangely regular and artificial-looking. The peaks form

an insurmountable barrier, concealing whatever lies beyond them from the eyes of the world. Although creatures with the power of flight could theoretically fly over the mountains to see what secrets Corona hides, none is known to have done so successfully. Wild theories nonetheless abound, with some tale-tellers insisting that beyond the peaks there is a titanic hole leading to the interior of the world and others describing a bizarre city built by a race older even than the elves.

Whatever is beyond the peaks of Corona, one thing is known: it occasionally sets the northern sky on fire with rainbows of light, chasing each other in arcs and ripples. These lights can be seen from the Waste and from the northern mountains of Caldraza.

Eagle Nations, The

This huge country was originally entirely wild and was referred to as the Scarred Land. Monstrous humanoids, giants and dire animals made up its population; the only humanoids to live there were small bands of wood elves, who were tough and resilient enough to cope. Some six hundred years ago, a group of decommissioned Caldrazan warriors decided that it was better to live as rulers in a new land than servants in an old one. They set off for the Scarred Land, determined to carve themselves out a place in the world.

The fighting was hard, but they cleared out an area large enough to support a village and kept it fortified. This village grew into a town and eventually a small city. The elves of Xoth Sarandi, impressed by the humans' bravery and tenacity, constructed a sea-portal to help them bring in supplies and colonists.

Over the last five centuries, colonists have been shipping out to the Scarred Land, with the same dream as the original warriors. Every country in the world, with the exception of the elven nations, has had people leave for a better life in the colonies. The elves retained their attitude of quiet observation, though they continued to give assistance and a second sea-portal was constructed on the western coast a hundred years after the first. The frontier has been steadily pushed back from both sides, so that all that remains of the original wilderness is a broad patch in the centre, which is crammed full of monsters forced out of their original habitat. This patch is still called the Scarred Land.

The settlers organised themselves into regional states, some feudal, some democratic according to the citizens' preference. This collective of sub-kingdoms was termed the Eagle Nations, as it represented liberty and freedom from the chains of the past. For a brief period, the Eagle Nations were united by common treaty and were the most powerful country on the planet. Unfortunately, strife between the different kingdoms has caused the Eagle Nations to collapse on itself, turning a league of allied powers into a country of feuding principalities.

Ghael

Tribal humans, organised into clans, populate this wild hilly country. Their culture is similar to that of historical Scotland. The clans are constantly feuding with one another, with no one clan holding dominance for long. Caldraza has recently declared war on Ghael, which is prompting the clans to set aside their differences and unite against a common enemy.

The border between Ghael and Caldraza is the river Schlass, which is too broad to be fordable in its lower reaches and runs through the monster-infested Forest of Meere in the upper. The Caldrazans have built a chain of forts along their side of the Schlass, to watch for hostile forces. The Ghaels in turn have established camps along their side but lack the organisation to build permanent defences.

Horned Reaches, The

This vast area of desolate prairie is named for the herds of horned animals (buffalo, ibex, antelope, feral cattle and the like) that roam across it, migrating from one feeding ground to the next. It has never been settled, as there is no easy way to transport materials and supplies out into the deep wilderness. Besides, the land is more suited to wild herds than to people. Some wild tribes of elves live here, the descendants of exiles who were driven from Shallemoi centuries ago and who have adapted to living in the inhospitable wild land.

The Horned Reaches form a natural barrier around Shallemoi. Few people would bother crossing the seemingly endless prairie to reach the elven lands, which is one reason why they have lain undisturbed for so long. The sea-gate between Xoth Sarandi and Shallemoi is open only to the elves and to those who they invite. It is not open to tourists or casual visitors.

Jehannum

This militaristic human country is home to a proud breed of humans, who are convinced of their own superiority and invulnerability. The dwarves of Svarth have been trading with the humans of Jehannum for centuries, exchanging dwarven metalwork for human meat, beer and cereals, with the result that Jehannum is now the most strongly armed and armoured country in the world. The Iron Dukes rule the country from Burgenstoch Castle, a steel-plated fortress in the capital, Crom Calamar.

The drow were once tolerated and sheltered in Jehannum. Following the defeat of their armies in Chillhame, the humans showed compassion for the survivors (mostly females and children) and assigned them land that they could cultivate, on the understanding that they caused no trouble. Much to the surprise of all concerned, the drow proved able to cohabit peacefully, establishing settlements and even trading their knowledge of magic and alchemy with their human protectors. This arrangement came to a bitter, bloody end when the elves of Xoth Sarandi offered Jehannum a massive sum in tribute to cancel the protection, quietly promising a bounty for the head of any drow collected in addition to this. The humans gave vent to their hatred and forced the drow out of the region, an act which the drow have never forgotten, much less forgiven.

Kahoor

This hot country, blessed with mineral wealth and huge tracts of fertile land, has a rigid caste system, developed when the elves first made contact and entrenched by them over the years. The nobility are so far removed from the peasantry that they are essentially a different species.

The King of Kahoor, Parhav the Thirty-First, is a boy of fourteen. Despite his age, he is not sentimental and has overseen quite draconian punishments for his subjects. The law in Kahoor is rigid and ignorance of it is not an excuse. Furthermore, the upper classes can commit certain offences with impunity, while a serf would be stoned to death for the same thing. There literally is one law for the rich and another for the poor.

Kahoor's principal dependency, Shumil, is much more relaxed. Many of Kahoor's people migrate to Shumil in the hope of finding a more tolerant society, though the work there is no less hard.

On the border of Kahoor and Urmish lies the Wall of Grand Iora, a spectacular structure of white stone, consisting of a single unbroken wall with guard towers at half-mile intervals. The Wall has defended Kahoor against the monstrous humanoids of Urmish for generations.

Kandang

The southern tip of the continent is a marshy place of river deltas and rice fields, where the houses of common folk are built on stilts. This part of Kandang has whole families of boat people, who live their lives migrating from island to island. Further north, one finds ancient cities and lonely towers on hillsides, along with curious ruins from an age where dragons walked among men in human form.

A hereditary line of sorcerers forms the monarchy of Kandang. The usual claims of dragon blood apply. Specifically, the ruling King claims descent from the golden dragons who lived in the area when humans were still living in caves. These legends are well documented and are in fact true.

To be a sorcerer in Kandang is a great honour, as it proves that one is related (however distantly) to the royal ones of old, the Dragon-Kings of Kandang. However, it does make for some strange customs that are repellent to foreigners.

The best-known custom is that of blood preservation. In order to preserve the royal blood in its full strength, interbreeding among the royal family is not only common but required by law. Brothers are married to sisters and parents to children. The result of this is that several members of the dynasty are both physically and mentally unusual. Those with the strongest concentration of dragon blood sometimes have draconian characteristics, such as hourglass-shaped pupils, forked tongues or scaly-looking skin.

Lost Athul

This island was once home to the Myrrik, a species of sentient tentacled bipeds that have now died out, who worshipped a vast sea-beast as an incarnate deity. Although the Myrrik never allowed visitors further inland than their ports, leading to speculation that they were carrying out horrible rites in their lopsided temples, they were still willing to trade. They supplied Xoth Sarandi with pearls, whale oil and fish in such quantities that a sea-portal was built by the harbour in order to deal with the volume of shipping.

Athul was 'lost' in a titanic cataclysm that submerged the island completely. The Myrrik appear to have been wiped out entirely; the trading ships that came found thousands of floating dead bodies. The sea-portal is still standing.

Murduk Râm

This country of high mountains and eternal snow is under the control of a wise, benign monarch, King Kallimon, who remains neutral to the conflicts of his neighbours and has occasionally been able to broker diplomatic solutions to their differences. Nobody has ever been able to invade this country, as even the peasants seem to be schooled in martial arts.

There is an abundance of monasteries in Murduk Râm, which draw seekers from all the nations of the world. Those who would learn the fighting arts of the monk are well advised to pack light and travel to the mountains.

Qual

This region is thickly forested, with great rolling swathes of green land between the wooded regions. It is widely believed to be the most beautiful country in Ashfar; of all the settled lands, it is certainly the least built upon. Qual is home to several thousand families of wood elves, who came here via the sea-portals from Xoth Sarandi and preferred life in the wild to the unending dream of Shallenoi.

There is also a huge half-elf population in Qual. This goes back to the time when the dragon Scalliandrax and the armies that were allied with him laid waste to the

kingdom of Kandang, sending the populations of entire towns fleeing into the forests of Qual for shelter. They had previously had a superstitious fear of the forests and the elves that dwelt there, but the horror that was tearing their land apart was worse. The elves realised that the humans were unfit for life in the deep forest and would die without their help. They chose to shelter them, even going so far as to adopt some of them into their own families.

One thousand years after these events, there are very few pureblooded humans left in the forests of Qual. Almost the entire population is elven or half-elven.

Shallenoi

This was the original elven homeland, before Xoth Sarandi was discovered and colonised. It is the oldest continuous civilisation in the world. Only that of the now-destroyed Myrrik was older. Many of the glorious temples, palaces and towers of Shallenoi have stood for three thousand years and are expected to stand for three thousand more. Nothing important has changed in all that time; the inhabitants seem almost as if they are living in a perfect dream. Shallenoi is a flawed paradise, a place simultaneously beautiful and stagnant, stifled under the weight of its own history.

There is more magic worked in Shallenoi than anywhere else in Ashfar. The country seems to run on it. At times it is as if the occupants would rather cast a spell than exert themselves in any other way, even for something so simple as to open or close a door, or lift a book from a shelf. The place is, as human wizards have been known to say, 'drunk on magic'.

Shard, The

This island, once a small human prison colony, has been completely taken over by pirates. They prey on ships whose owners are too poor (or too mean) to pay to use the sea-portals and take the long overseas route to the Eagle Nations. The pirates of the Shard are not the only group of freebooters in the Incarnadine Ocean; there is at least one other major group, the sea-harriers, whose home is as yet undiscovered.

The Shard was really a self-created problem for Jahannum, Caldraza and Kahoor. When the Eagle Nations were still in their infancy, these countries used the Shard as a dumping ground for their undesirables, sending them there to live in exile as a preferable fate to execution. The criminals of the Shard soon organised themselves into an efficient force, making weapons from wood and using what limited magic they had to help shape metal. They were able to overpower a ship that came to deliver the next load of convicts, setting the prisoners free and using the ship to harass the colonists who were coming to the Eagle Nations to start a new life. Reports tell of a Pirate Queen who rules the Shard, supposedly a former noble of Kahoor. The Shard has not been a prison colony for many years; new arrivals are born rather than brought in on ships. A child born in the Shard is raised to be one thing only: a rogue. The rogues trained up on the Shard sometimes make their way to other lands, where they put their skills to good use.

Sharn, Desert Of

This bleak, sandy zone of dead land effectively seals off Jehannum and the northwestern countries from the remainder of the eastern continent. It is all but uninhabitable; only monsters, madmen and hard-bitten desert nomads live here.

As if the heat and lack of landmarks were not enough, large lodestone deposits cause magnetic compasses to behave erratically, making magic the only means of navigating the desert. There are legends of demon-

haunted rock plateaus in the desert's centre, though these have never been confirmed.

Shumil

Whereas the colonisation of the Eagle Nations was an every-man-for-himself affair, with warriors claiming whatever regions of the Scarred Land they could take, the colonisation of Shumil was far more orderly.

Shumil was originally almost as inhospitable as the rest of the Horned Reaches. However, when colonists from Kahoor first arrived, they brought their distinctive irrigation and plateau cultivation methods with them, which quickly brought flourishing crops to the region. Shumil remains a satellite of the Kingdom of Kahoor, supplying that country with exotic spices and silks.

Its culture is much like that of Kahoor but without so much of the old world hierarchy. Shumil is a land of merchants, labourers and tradesmen, not of lords and serfs. Natives of Shumil are usually humorous, sarcastic and enterprising, quick to see the potential profit in any undertaking.

Spine, The

Jagged mountains, known collectively as the Spine, encircle the southernmost landmass of Ashfar. These are not the immense ice peaks of Corona, but a series of broken crooked masses inhabited by frost giants and other monstrous creatures. The land around the South Pole is taboo; none of the residents of the outer mountains will go there. This is because it is a frozen battlefield. It preserves the ice-stiffened bodies of hundreds of dead frost giants and their warriors, a grim memorial of a time when the various giant clans waged war upon each other.

Svarth

This mountainous region is home to more dwarves than any other part of Ashfar. The rock is rich with precious mineral deposits and good iron ore, and the dwarves have tunnelled deep to extract it. The dwarves of Svarth are on good terms with the humans of Jehannum, whose gritty, unsentimental, militaristic ways appeal to them. They have fought alongside them more than once, most notably in the Battle of the Azoic Sea.

The mountains to the northeast of Svarth are not populated by humanoids at all. They are one of the last places in Ashfar to be haunted by dragons. So long as the dragons are left alone, they are willing to leave the dwarves and humans alone. They pursue their own long-smouldering feuds and bitter territorial disputes.

Topaz Dominions, The

This mighty kingdom of pyramids and sand dunes is ruled by a Sun King, who his people believe to be the earthly incarnation of a God. Its people are sun-browned and brawny, raised with a respect for wizardly magic, since human wizards are often in charge of the cities here. The Sun King's special infantry forces, the Phoenix Legions, are also priests of his faith, giving them the power to wield divine magic while in the fray.

The lands of the Topaz Dominions are strikingly different from the northern countries, in that buildings are made from clay and stone rather than bricks and mortar, and some of the finer items that one would expect to find are rare or missing altogether (such as sophisticated locks, full plate armour and rapiers). The people are content to live in a more technologically backward land, as the prevalence of magic makes many devices redundant.

Urmish

To the northeast of Visk are the hills, woods and low mountains of Urmish, which is the closest thing to a goblinoid nation anywhere on Ashfar. As with so many

countries, the border with Visk is a river, in this case the river Blute.

Urmish contains massed tribes of orcs, goblins, hobgoblins, ogres and bugbears, without any humanoid settlements at all. Only the jungles of Cendra are less civilised. The Wall of Grand Iora prevents the creatures of Urmish from moving south, while the river Blute and the tough natives of Visk keep them from moving further westwards. It is worth noting that 'Urmish' is the human name for this region; the population themselves do not have a name for it, nor do they even recognise it as a country. It is simply the place where they live.

Valjinn

The predominantly human Republic of Valjinn is a prosperous and stable country. With murky, damp Kandang to the south and the cryptic, bleak mountains of Murduk Râm to the north, Valjinn is a realm of stability between two extremes. The rulers, a council of elected representatives headed by a president referred to as the Falcon Elect, are based in the city of Sephardia.

There is considerable hostility between Kandang and Valjinn. Kandang once occupied the entire region south of Murduk Râm, including the forests of Qual and most of the southern portion of Kahoor. Under the benign (if autocratic) rule of the Dragon-Kings, the entire region was renowned for its wealth, magical prowess and the wisdom of its rulers. Approximately a thousand years ago, at the last Equinox of the Heroes, many of the family of the Dragon-Kings were destroyed, along with their patron golden dragons. At the head of this massacre was the black dragon Scalliandrax, who had recently fought and overcome the silver dragon Aristeele above the mountains of Svarth and was now convinced of his own invulnerability. The rule of the golden ones in Kandang had been an annoyance to Scalliandrax for many years; he tore into their civilisation without mercy. Many of the humans fled into the eastern forests (the land that is now Qual) for refuge, where groups of elves took pity on them and helped to shelter them.

In the chaos that followed, the remnants of the Dragon-Kings attempted to re-establish their rule over southern Kandang, while a group of ordinary humans were simultaneously rallying the survivors in the north. Without their dragon patrons to guide them, the Dragon-Kings rapidly became mere tyrants, demanding subjection and obeisance. This merely hardened the resolve of the rebels, who declared that Valjinn was to be an independent republic.

Vella

The hills of Vella are where the gnomes live. They have kept goodwill with their halfling neighbours in Verd for many years, though they are far more curious and eager to explore the world. The academies of Vella are acknowledged to be the best in the world where mechanical sciences and handcrafting are concerned and as a result, gnome artisans are in high demand. Trainee artisans spend a 'journeyman year' travelling the world, working wherever they are required, usually as jewellers, stonemasons or metalsmiths.

The capital city of Vella is Quinazzi, the 'pale snow jewel', a city of canals, walkways and intricate stone fascias.

Verd

This green and peaceful country is the home of Ashfar's halflings. They live here as they have always lived, content and isolated from the world. The dangers here are very few; there are no monsters any more and even strangers from other races are uncommon. The elves of Xoth Sarandi intended to build a sea-portal by Verd but the halflings petitioned them not to, as they did not want

their home opened up to the world. Their request was honoured and Verd was left in peace.

Occasionally, a halfling born in Verd will find the peace and quiet unbearable and go adventuring, taking a ship to Jahannum, Caldraza or the Eagle Nations. Many halfling adventurers hail from Verd and have a strange mixture of homesickness and resentment for the place.

Visk

The Empire of Visk covers more ground than any other single dominion of Ashfar, ranging from the temperate eastern zones to the flat northern tundra where only the nomads and shamans go. The people of Visk were nomadic for many generations before they settled and are still most comfortable in the saddle, ranging from town to town. The horsemen of Visk are the finest in the world, whether they be the cavalry of the royal guard or the raiders who prey on the border towns.

The Emperor of Visk is Caranacus, who is sixty years old and looks forty, and rules his empire with the confidence of an unconquerable tyrant. He is known to have escaped death countless times, walking away from assassination attempts that left those around him torn to shreds.

Some say that Caranacus is no longer human, that he is some sort of vampire or incarnate ghost. Others claim that he is one and the same person as the historical conqueror Uzbal Jin, who subjugated the lands of western Visk eight hundred years ago and set an entire city to the torch when they did not capitulate quickly enough. Whatever he may truly be, his people all fear him, even those who adore him and would gladly die in his name.

There is an uneasy peace between Visk and Jehannum, though the nations have been at war more than once in the past. The Desert of Sharn forms a natural shield, though its northern coast is less harsh than its central region and invading armies can be (and have been) sent through it. The most celebrated failed invasion of Jehannum came three hundred years ago in the Battle of the Azoic Sea, when a massive force of troop ships from Visk attempted to land on the eastern coast of Jahannum and were repelled by the dwarves and humans of that land fighting together. The superior siege weaponry on the Jahannum side smashed dozens of the ships of Visk to splinters before they could make landfall.

Waste, The

Beyond the limits of Boskenland and the Eagle Nations lies a zone of barren tundra that ultimately becomes an arctic wasteland. No humanoids have ever settled here, for though there is enough hunting to support life, the area is home to dreadful monsters that shun the warmer climes of the south. There are local tales of a snow warlock or ice queen (the legends vary) who has a frosty citadel in the depths of the Waste, but this has never been seen by human eyes.

The nearest settlement to the Waste is Ommersdale, a thriving town built upon the fur trade.

Xoth Sarandi

The island of Xoth Sarandi, home of the elven archmages, is the undisputed centre of the world. Around the island are titanic stone archways, the sea-portals, which connect to similar archways in far-off parts of the globe. This feat of magic has enabled the elves to colonise the various continents and keep their colonies supplied and defended, without having to risk the hazards of the open sea. Later, when the portals were made available to other races, they grew wealthy beyond measure from the fees they were able to charge from the use of their transport system.

Xoth Sarandi is the crossroads of the world. Almost all ocean-going traffic travels to its destination via this magical island. It is almost entirely urbanised, with two tiers to the city. The outer districts are those in which the other races live, along with those elves who are involved with shipping or trade. These districts are essentially a huge mass of dockland, with buildings ranging from salubrious structures of marble where ships with peacock sails lie in harbour all the way down to filthy warehouses and wharves where the worst excesses of the decadent can be indulged.

The inner districts are restricted to the elves and their few honoured guests alone. They are, politically and magically, the most important regions in all of Ashfar, as they are the points from where the portal network is controlled. This system is the source of the ruling houses' immense wealth and the enduring dominance of the elves, even though they no longer have colonies across the world and the sun has finally set on their empire.

The Elves of Ashfar

The elves are a race in retreat and decline. Centuries ago, they colonised the world from their island home of Xoth Sarandi, building magical sea-gates from that island to the continents of the world. To the races that occupied those continents, they brought their own advanced civilisation, with all the arcane secrets that elves are renowned for. In some places, they ruled over the colonies like despots, turning the other races into slaves. In others, they went so far as to teach the secrets of high magic to the natives, seeing it as a life-improving technology that they would need in order to advance themselves.

That empire is now gone and has largely withdrawn from the world. As with all empires in their time, it fell into decadence and crumbled, leaving behind only a legacy of beautiful buildings, lawful government and magical knowledge. The elves who remain are mostly the descendants of late colonist families who chose to stay, or young sons and daughters of Xoth Sarandi who have an urge to explore the world.

Following treaties with other races and kingdoms, Xoth Sarandi has changed from the dominant capital of the world to a transport nexus. It now profits by trade, not by conquest. The sea-gates are still active, but are used by commercial shipping to cross the world in days instead of months.

All over Ashfar, the elves are remembered as former overlords. Some regret their passing but most are glad to be back in charge of their own destinies again. The elves' attitude to the people over which they ruled was coloured by how closely they believed themselves to be related to them.

Humans were seen as less evolved brothers, with the potential to achieve much, if they were guided correctly. Many elves took on what they called 'the elven burden' of 'civilising' human beings, which in many cases meant that they installed elven governors controlling provinces of human subjects who were virtually enslaved but were usually treated benevolently.

The elves had only contempt for the squat, lumpen dwarves and treated them as if they were fit only for labour. In this, they twisted the dwarves' own morals. The respect for hard work that many dwarves have was viewed as the dwarves' innate

understanding of their place. They were created to work, while the elves were created to rule. This philosophy worked on paper but failed in real life. The elves simply could not tolerate the claustrophobic underground environments in which the dwarves thrived.

Elven colonies in dwarf lands were thus few and disastrous. The governors given responsibility for them had to be the toughest, most ruthless commanders that the elves could muster. This meant that elven rule was harsh, with relatively minor infractions punished with wounding or death. Enmity between elf and dwarf continues to this day, with the dwarves detesting the elves' arrogance and the elves looking down on the dwarves' rugged culture and graceless form.

The elves have never taken the halflings very seriously, as they do not believe that they are capable of much. To an elf, a halfling will always seem like a child. Elven colonies in halfling lands did not so much govern them as protect them, much as a parent would.

Swamp Elves: These are a sub-race of elf found inhabiting the marshes of some parts of Ashfar. They have slightly webbed feet and toes and much larger ears than usual. When resting, they tend to sit in a squatting posture. The elves who first discovered them were horrified, thinking them to be some kind of throwback. Unlike the drow, who were corrupt and evil but at least civilised in their way, the swamp elves were living like the most primitive of humans. The only thing to do was to enslave the lot and put them to work on the elven plantations.

The swamp elves' preference for living in the wild was in fact born of distaste for civilisation and contempt for organised society, not an animalistic nature. They have accepted their role as slaves because they have a philosophy of relaxed endurance. So what if they are working in the fields all day? In time, they believe, the wheel will turn and they will be the ones to rule. Some of the more fanatical swamp elves hold to prophecies that one day a deliverer will come and force this change.

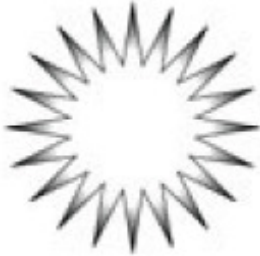
The lot of the swamp elves has not really improved with the passing of elven rule. People are simply too used to thinking of them as illiterate, simple labourers. They are still seen as an underclass and are bought and sold as slaves by all races.

Pantheons of Ashfar

Avillon pantheon

The Avillon pantheon is worshipped in Chillhame. It was also worshipped in Caldraza before that kingdom officially adopted the church of Marius as the state religion. Humans, halflings and dwarves are most likely to be followers of these deities.

Aranu



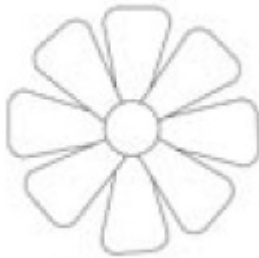
Aranu is the high God of the pantheon, a personification of the Sun who bears a spear of golden fire. He is the Lawmaker of the Gods, setting limits on what even the divine beings may do. Aranu is the special patron deity of kings and tribal chiefs.

Domains: Sun, Law, War, Protection

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Favoured Weapon: Spear

Blediwesse



Blediwesse is the flower-maiden of spring rain. She is the special patron goddess of unmarried maidens. She brings life to the earth after the ravages of winter, blessing the earth with the waters that cause plants to ripen. She is also a goddess of wells and rivers, who sends the waters of the natural springs for the good of men. Priestesses of Blediwesse must be virginal and often go crowned with flowers as part of their regalia.

Domains: Good, Healing, Earth, Water

Alignment: Neutral Good

Favoured Weapon: Sickle

Firinna



Scarlet-haired Firinna is the quick-tempered goddess of the hearth and of battle. She is compared to the sudden spark that shoots from the fire and burns down your house when you are not looking. She represents the

stubborn, selfish side of humanity and is a goddess of envy, resentment and grudges, though she is also the fiery spirit that inspires you to fight to your last breath.

Domains: Fire, War, Chaos, Trickery

Alignment: Chaotic Neutral

Favoured Weapon: Longsword

Gahaira



Gahaira is the goddess of the north wind, the goddess of hunger, leanness, want and desolation. She is portrayed as an old woman with a lean face and straggly hair. She is mostly propitiated rather than worshipped, with offerings left for her as the evenings begin to grow dark, so that she will not blow too fiercely in the winter months. Men don't like to speak of her by name and refer to her instead by her title 'the witch of November'.

Domains: Air, Evil, Destruction, Death

Alignment: Neutral Evil

Favoured Weapon: Flail

Hernun



Hernun is the god of the hunt, who is eternally locked in the chase to bring down his brother Wohoon. Sometimes one brother will win, sometimes the other, but the hunt always begins afresh. Hernun represents man at his most basic, contending with the wild. Druids often revere him, though the more chaotic ones favour Wohoon. He is represented as a powerfully built man with antlers atop his head in honour of the beasts he hunts.

Domains: Animal, Protection, Travel, Strength

Alignment: Neutral

Favoured Weapon: Bow

Old Heakun



This god is also called 'the walker of the plains'. He is muddy brown in colour and is the grandfather of the gods. Unlike them, he did not stay in the heavens and instead chose to wander the earth continually, examining this strange creation that he had made. It is said that Heakun placed megaliths along his path to mark where he had been, giving rise to the legend of invisible lines of force that crisscross the countryside.

Domains: Travel, Earth, Magic, Protection

Alignment: Neutral

Favoured Weapon: Club

Hombel



Hombel is the innkeeper, the storesman, the god of preserving things. He is the one who gives you your due; as such, he is a god of justice, especially of the kind that is often called 'karma' in which you get what you give out. He is represented as a fat, jolly man with a sack over his shoulder. In the abstract, he is symbolised by a set of scales.

Domains: Good, Law, Protection, Strength

Alignment: Lawful Good

Favoured Weapon: Mace

Merrithrawn



The bearded Merrithrawn is the God of bards, sometimes called the charm-singer. In legends, he is so persuasive that he can change the very machinery of the universe to suit himself, simply by talking it around. Rogues often favour Merrithrawn, as he embodies the charm and panache that lets you talk your way out of a sticky situation.

Domains: Knowledge, Luck, Magic, Trickery

Alignment: Neutral Good

Favoured Weapon: Short sword

Wandul



Wandul is the holly-crowned god of the winter months, the god of the cold and the dark. He comes when the darkness begins to grow greater than the light. As with many of the darker gods of the pantheon, the only time when he is worshipped is when people want him to stay away. Worshippers of Wandul are few and are usually fighters or barbarians who revere him as a challenging, grim deity of strength.

Some humans believe that Wandul was originally a god of the giants, left behind from an earlier time.

Domains: Death, Destruction, Plant, Strength

Alignment: Lawful Evil

Favoured Weapon: Heavy mace

Wohoon



Wohoon is the god of the wild things, brother to Hernun. He is not fully human and has the ears and teeth of a wolf. There is nothing of civilisation about him at all. The only worshippers of Wohoon are druids and those who live their lives in the outdoors. Everyone else is content to honour him for what he is – the wild, animal nature that they have left behind.

Domains: Animal, Trickery, Chaos, Strength

Alignment: Chaotic Neutral

Favoured Weapon: Greatclub

Yosa



Yosa charm-weaver is the Goddess of all crafters and makers, from the blacksmith and woodcarver to the seamstress and even the stonemason. She is depicted as a statuesque woman with long scarlet hair, bearing the wheel that is her sacred symbol. The wheel represents all crafts, being simultaneously the potter's wheel, the spinner's treadle and the waggoner's cartwheel. Hers is the knowledge that is passed down within the home; not just the simple business of managing a house but the crafter's art, vitally important in a cottage industry in which each home is also a place of business.

As the Goddess who manipulates matter into new patterns, she is also a Goddess of magic and of weaving

the threads of invisible force. Clerics of Yosa favour the magic of the hearth and home above the more convoluted rituals of high magic. Images of Yosa in clay are often kept above the hearth beside those of Hombul, to protect the house.

Alignment: Lawful Good

Domains: Law, Magic, Knowledge, Protection

Favoured Weapon: Sling

Callistan pantheon

The Callistan pantheon, named after the now-destroyed holy elven city of Callista where all of the gods of elvenkind were worshipped together, includes all of the deities described below. However, many of them are revered only by the elves or by the drow, not by both. Only two deities, Arosi and Jubb, have followers on both sides of the divide.

Arkady



Arkady is the grand vizier of the drow deities, second only in rank to She. She stands for intelligence, without which power is only unenlightened force. As such, she is the Goddess of all drow archivists, scholars, researchers, alchemists and wizards. Arkady acts as adviser to She, whispering counsels in her ear, telling the secrets that others believe are safely concealed.

The drow, a people who cherish their own secrets, do not like other people to keep secrets from them. The presidency of Arkady thus extends to spies, interrogators and torturers, as she also has dominion over darkness and the fear of darkness. In truth, Arkady is almost more feared than the primary Goddess of the drow. The head of the Secret Police is always more terrifying than the monarch.

Her form is that of a drow woman whose dark flesh is as translucent as thin smoke. Her pale skeleton can clearly be seen beneath. Her teeth are filed to sharp points. Her symbolic weapon is the scythe and her symbol a mirror of obsidian glass.

The drow create statues of Arkady by encasing sculpted silver bones in molten dark glass, which creates an effect as macabre as it is beautiful. Violet flames burn continually before these statues in offertory shrines.

Alignment: Lawful Evil

Dominions: Evil, Death, Knowledge, Magic, Trickery

Arosi



Arosi is the pale Goddess of intoxication. As such, she is both honoured and feared by elven society; honoured for the rapture her gifts bring and feared for the dangerous rage that can result. Her image is placed upon chalices and drinking vessels in order to secure her blessing and remind her that she is not forgotten. Among the elves, it is customary (when drinking at a formal occasion) to

pour at least one bottle of wine on the ground in honour of fair Arosi, as a libation.

Her patronage extends to all things that appear enticing and yet conceal peril for the unwise, such as flowers that are beautiful but secrete poisons. She is not evil, but she is dangerous. She takes the form of a beautiful, slender elven woman with ice-blond hair and a deceptively innocent smile.

The drow honour Arosi both as the Goddess of drug-induced debauchery and of the poisons they rely upon so much (like alcohol itself, Arosi is not a force for evil, though evil beings are among her most fervent worshippers). Only vegetable poisons are under the dominion of Arosi. Poisons of animal origin, especially those of spiders, are under the direct dominion of She.

Alignment: Chaotic Neutral

Dominions: Chaos, Luck, Plant, Trickery

Favoured Weapon: Dagger

Brith



When the star goddess Nuith first attempted to create a light for her children on earth to see by, she gave birth to the goddess Lumiya, the moon. Although the elves saw well enough by the silver light of Lumiya, it was too changeable and faint for the other creatures and so Nuith focused her will and created the brilliant light of Brith, the sun.

Brith is the sun god of the Callistan pantheon and the chief deity of all. With the exception of the insane god Jubb and the two principal drow deities, Arkady and 'She', the other gods acknowledge his authority and obey his commands.

He appears as a powerfully built male elf, armoured with golden chainmail and bearing a double-handed sword that shines like the sun. In place of his original left hand is a mechanical one made from mithral. The reason for this is given below, in the description of 'She'.

Brith is worshipped by all, but especially by warriors and nobles.

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Dominions: Good, Law, Fire, Sun

Favoured Weapon: Greatsword

Jubb



The fearsome Jubb is pale as a corpse and has eyes of dull red. He is utterly insane. To the elves, he symbolises the battle-madness that can take over a warrior's mind. He was the first male child of Nuith but was found unfit to rule, because of his madness. He represents the wildness that the civilised elves are proud to have outgrown. Wild elves often revere Jubb, seeing in his madness a spontaneity and joy in life that is to be emulated.

Jubb dresses in spiked armour whose pieces seem to have come from several different sources. It is chaotic and ill matched, covered with chains and hooks, decorated with checkerboard patterns in one place and grinning demon faces in other.

Alignment: Chaotic Evil

Dominions: Animal, Chaos, Destruction, War

Favoured Weapon: The dire flail, the many spikes of the head representing the star of chaos.

Kyros Threadcutter



Kyros is the elven god of law, reason and exactitude. He clears away illusion and reveals truth. Those who ensure that the Law is kept, such as city officials, lawyers and guardsmen, worship him. Despite his intellectual prowess, he is a very popular God among warriors, as he also stands for honesty and plain speaking.

His title of 'threadcutter' refers to a legend in which he severs the tangled nets of spider-thread spun by She that were holding his fellow deities immobile. Priests of Kyros, who pride themselves on their ability to come straight to the point and not waste time blowing hot air, often recall this legend. In a party of adventurers, a priest of Kyros will insist on action over debate.

Kyros is depicted as a grave young man in dark clothing, wearing ornaments of office and carrying a lamp. His symbolic weapon is the rapier, adopted by the priests because of its piercing directness.

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Domains: Law, Knowledge, Strength, Sun

Favoured Weapon: Rapier

Lumiya



Lumiya is the elven goddess of the moon. She rules the night as Brith rules the day. She was the first of the gods to emerge from the starry body of Nuith and carries more of her mother's wisdom than any of the other children. She is the goddess of those who prophesy the future and has a special dominion over the hours of rest, when elves enter trance. This means she is also goddess of dreams, which often bring visions of what is to come and of healing, which is greatly aided by sleep.

The light of Lumiya is also that by which night creatures hunt. She is both the protector of animals and the patroness of hunting. If an animal escapes the chase, then it is said that Lumiya has blessed it; if the hunting party brings home meat, then thanks are given to Lumiya. Finally, as the changing moon, she is patroness of the tides of the sea.

Alignment: Neutral Good

Domains: Animal, Healing, Knowledge, Water

Favoured Weapon: The sickle, representative of the crescent moon.

Melmoth



Gaunt, saturnine Melmoth, sometimes called 'the king of shreds and patches', takes the form of a male elf with black hair in straggly tangles. His features are hollow, as if he had gone hungry for many days. His clothes are tattered and torn and he wears a long, hooded cloak.

Melmoth never rests, moving on from place to place eternally. As a God who exemplifies both magic and ceaseless wandering, he is thus the God of all those elven mages who take their magic from town to town, looking for employment. He personifies the need that many elves feel for solitude and distance from the claustrophobic nature of cities, as well as the wanderlust that draws so many of them to roam far from their homes. Followers of Melmoth generally enjoy good relations with druids, as they share their respect for wild spaces. Many bards also worship him, because of their wandering ways.

Alignment: Chaotic Good

Domains: Chaos, Magic, Knowledge, Travel

Favoured Weapon: The quarterstaff, which is both the staff of the traveller and the characteristic weapon of the wizard.

Nuith



The goddess Nuith is more of a primal force than a deity. She is the starry heaven itself, from which all else emerged. The elves believe her to be the mother of all earthly life, whether evil or good. That which is 'of Nuith' is necessary to existence. Alien forces, such as the drow, magical aberrations or demons from other planes, are not 'of Nuith'. They are to be feared and guarded against.

Nuith does not have clerics. She is too distant and universal to be worshipped at all. According to legend, she only intervenes in the lives of mortals through her other children, the Starborn. These are avatars of individual stars, whose destiny it is to protect the world against the forces from outside that threaten it.

Domains: Nuith does not have domains, as she is not worshipped and has no priesthood.

'She'



The true name of this Goddess is never spoken aloud. Only her priestesses and priests may name her and then only when worshipping her with secret rites. She is the Queen of Spiders and the ultimate sovereign of all drow. All drow honour 'She' as their mother and protector. She is their inspiration and the reason that spiders are sacred to them. The legend of her creation is paralleled by the way the drow themselves were cut off from the main body of the elven race and exiled beneath the earth. She has other names that the races of Ashfar use to refer to her, but the drow only ever use the term 'She'. They know well enough who they are talking about.

Alignment: Neutral Evil

Dominions: Destruction, Death, Evil, Magic, Protection, War

Favoured Weapon: The sacred weapon of She is the net, symbolic of the webs that entrap her foes.

Valkazz



Favoured Weapon: Dagger

Valkazz the Childfree is the goddess of warrior women. She is called 'the Childfree' not because she is virginal, but because she stands for a way of life that does not involve bringing up the young. In the elven religions, women who choose a path other than that of child-rearing and home-making are respected for it. Although males may enter her service, her clerics are always female. Priestesses of Valkazz often worship her with riotous celebration that would put any men's feast to shame.

While a cleric of Valkazz is engaged in active temple service, she may take as many husbands as she wishes, but may not become a mother. Should she become pregnant, she must retire from temple service until the child is born, in which event it is either given over to be adopted or the priestess retires altogether, a much rarer event.

Valkazz is depicted as a female elf dressed in leather armour, with broad shoulders and braided waist-length hair. In addition to being a goddess of war, she is also a bringer of favourable winds, so it is customary for an image of Valkazz to be placed at the prow of a ship.

Alignment: Neutral

Domains: Air, Destruction, Strength, War

Favoured Weapon: Battleaxe

Vendyss



The voluptuous Vendyss is the Goddess of the volcano's heart. In the Callistan pantheon, she has presidency over all things of fire, metal and searing heat. She is depicted as a woman wreathed in fire, with hair the colour of metals in a forge. Legends relate that when she lay down to rest in the aftermath of creation, her flaming hair spread through the cooling mantle of the earth, in strands of silver and gold and glimmering copper. These then became the filigree threads of ore that trail through the rock and can be restored back to metal once again with the application of her own fire.

Clerics of Vendyss are typically weapon smiths, armourers and jewellers. Those who make their living working with metal rely on her blessings to prosper at their trade. As she is the Goddess of precious metals and of fortunes found under the earth, she is also considered to be the Goddess of wealth itself, bringing good luck at the time when it is most needed. Her weapon is the trident, which resembles a flaming torch cast in metal. Clerics of Vendyss have a great respect for non-evil dragons, will always assist them if they are in need and will never assault one except in self-defence.

Alignment: Neutral Good

Dominions: Earth, Good, Fire, Luck

Favoured Weapon: Warhammer

The Constellations

As the year progresses, each of the constellations in turn appears on the horizon. The months are thus named after the twelve signs, so that the year begins with the month of the Great Wolf and ends with the month of the Watchman. There is a rough correspondence between the sign and the activity of the month in peasant communities; for example, the month of the Reaper corresponds with harvest time.

The Benefits Of The Signs

Players characters will be able to benefit from the constellations. A sign can be invoked once per game session. As the benefit is a manifestation of fate, it takes the form of a luck bonus to the stated check. A result of 'automatic success' gives the minimum result necessary to indicate success, no more. The ability can only be used when the skill check DC is 20 or less. These benefits cannot be used under certain circumstances.

1. The Great Wolf

A wolf's head bares its teeth, with a single star forming the gleam in its eye. The wolf represents the threat of starvation during the cold, dark months of winter, but is also a positive sign, as he devours the old year and its woes.

Those born under the wolf's sign are usually practical, down-to-earth people, with a tendency to be harsh, having contempt for the soft and weak. They are fiercely protective of their few true friends and allies.

Benefit: +1 luck bonus to any single attack roll or +1d4 additional damage to any damage roll.

2. The Unicorn

The unicorn's star-tipped horn, reminiscent of the icicles of winter, breaks the horizon as the snowdrops break the cold earth. It is as cold, bright and pure as the ice but brings the promise of renewed life.

People born under the unicorn are enthusiastic, keen and direct. They can become obsessive; when they want something, they stop at nothing to get it. They detest circumlocution and petty debate when there is action to be taken.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to Armour Class for one round or +10 ft. increase to movement speed for 1d4 rounds.

3. The Delver

The earth has now softened after the winter frosts. The symbol of a man (or, as some say, a dwarf) digging the ground represents the sowing time, when the farmers plant seeds in the soil. A star gleams at the tip of his shovel.

Those born under this sign are often curious, inquisitive people, with a desire to look below the surface and find out the secrets of others.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to a single Fortitude saving throw or automatic success on a single Strength-based skill check.

4. The Wave

Heavy rains and floodwaters follow the full thaws of spring. The Wave is the symbol of the rushing waters and signals the beginning of the season of safe sea voyaging.

Those born under the Wave tend to be graceful, empathic people, though like the waters they can be deceptive and shallow.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to a single Reflex saving throw or automatic success on a single Charisma-based skill check.

5. The Satyr

With spring in full bloom, the blood runs hot in man and beast alike. The Satyr is the sign of animal energy, fully restored to life. This is an exultant sign, representing joy in one's own strength and the freedom to exercise it.

Those who have the Satyr as their birthsign enjoy life to the full. They can sometimes annoy people by taking nothing seriously, treating life as one big joke. When they

are in the mood to be cruel, they can be viciously sadistic in the name of their own fun.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to a single Will saving throw or temporary hit points (+1 per character level) lasting 5 rounds.

6. The Rose

The Rose is the beauty of the blossoming earth made manifest in the heavens, though its thorns also symbolise treachery and cruelty for its own sake.

The people of the Rose are often physically attractive and able to manipulate those around them by subtle cues. They make good leaders, whether of heroes or villains.

Benefit: +3 luck bonus to any single Initiative check or automatic increase in Non-Player Character reaction by one stage upon initial contact (see the Diplomacy skill).

7. The Firedrake

A firedrake is the old name for a dragon, specifically one who breathes flame. This sign symbolises the searing heat of summer. It also calls to mind the dim memory of the time when dragons would visit the towns of men to receive tribute; this would always be in the seventh month, as the herds and crops were at their fullest then, allowing for the greatest plunder.

Those born Firedrakes are difficult to read; they conceal deep thoughts behind placid faces and can smoulder with resentment for years before taking action. They are usually rational and calm, though they can break into furious fits of passion when provoked or stirred.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to Armour Class for one round or +1 luck bonus to Armour Class for three rounds.

8. The Reaper

The Reaper appears at the end of summer, the figure of a tall man with a sweeping scythe. He stands for hard work, the fruits of labour and the reward (or punishment) that waits for you after death. This is an auspicious sign to be born under, signifying the power to conquer whatever lies before you.

Those born under the Reaper's scythe are strong-willed, sometimes to the point of bullheadedness. They do not give up easily.

Benefit: +1 luck bonus to any single attack roll or +3 luck bonus to a single critical check (made after a critical threat has already been scored).

9. The Flail

The Flail is both the tool that threshes the barley and the weapon of the same name. As the Flail rises in the sky, the earth beneath is scourged by wind and rain. Summer is over and the hardships of the darker months begin.

Those whose sign is the Flail are meticulous and focused. They are very thorough in their investigations and tend to stick doggedly to a task until it is achieved. They make excellent researchers; many wizards are born under this sign.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to a single Fortitude saving throw or automatic success on a single Intelligence-based skill check.

10. The Spinner

The Spinner is one of the more mysterious signs: a huge spider, with eight closely clustered stars for eyes. The common interpretation is that the spider stores up food and weaves webs, reflecting the work of stockpiling and cloth spinning that happens at this time. Other interpretations see the spinner as the sign of magic, weaving the web of fate and trapping the unsuspecting with charms.

Spinners are patient people by nature, who enjoy making plans and hatching plots. They can bide their time for a long while before taking quick, decisive action.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to a single Reflex saving throw or automatic success on a single Wisdom-based skill check.

11. The Spectre

The eleventh month is often said to be of ill omen. The animals are slaughtered on its first day, in the blood-harvest; by the end of the month, the bitter cold of the season has usually claimed its first victims. The sign of

the Spectre is a grim reminder of death, which also has its place in the order of things. It also recalls the belief that the souls of the dead are believed to revisit the world during this month, to make sure they have not been forgotten.

Those born under the sign of the Spectre seem to be older than their true age, as if they were recalling some previous life.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to a single Will saving throw or +2 luck bonus to any skill check.

12. The Watchman

Sixteen stars form the shape of a man holding a lantern aloft. His lantern is the brightest star in the sky, the symbol of hope through the winter months.

Characters born under the Watchman make natural leaders. They have a nigh-unshakable confidence in themselves, which radiates to those around them. This leadership ability makes them superb teachers, battle leaders or even criminal bosses.

Benefit: +2 luck bonus to any other character's skill check or +1 luck bonus to any other character's saving throw; the character must be within line of sight.

INTRODUCTION.

At first, it feels as if you must be dreaming. The sense of dislocation, the giddiness, the feeling of flying rapidly through space, all add to the unreality. Where are you? What were you doing a moment ago? These thoughts arise in your mind, as if you were half-awake, on the borderlands of consciousness. Perhaps you have been knocked senseless, or poisoned with some hallucinogenic drug. One thing is certain; you are in a strange place and you do not remember how you came here.

What you can see before you is as clouded and vague as the contents of your mind. There seems to be nothing but mist, swirling in eddies around you, with a suggestion of huge shapes briefly glimpsed through it. The mist is cold on your face and with a start you realise that this is no dream. You are here, physically here in your body, fully dressed and carrying your equipment. There is wet grass beneath your feet. You feel no pain, so it stands to reason that you were not knocked out and dragged here. How, then, did you come to be here?

Alone in the mist, you wonder why you do not feel more afraid. There is a presence here, something old and comforting, like a childhood memory.

The mist begins to clear. In the faint light of a new day, you see the huge forms that you glimpsed before. They are megaliths – standing stones that tower over you, set into the form of a circle 30 feet across. This place is achingly familiar to you, yet you have never been here before.



Through the thinning mists, you see that you are not alone. There are others here, and by the look of them, they are as surprised to find themselves here as you are.

Out of nowhere, a voice speaks to you. It is faint but perfectly clear. As it speaks, the stones thrum with a strange vibration, as if they were amplifying the voice somehow.

'The time of the Equinox is come. My children... I am sorry. I have done what must be done. You deserve answers. I am far... too far from you. You must learn who you are. The land is yours. The people are yours.'

The speaker seems to be under great strain, as if speaking to you was exhausting her.

'This place is sacred to you. Sacred to the stars that you are. There are other places like this. From the time when people remembered. Heed me now. If any of you should fall, then bear him to the stones, and the soul will be able to enter the flesh... once again. But make haste, for flesh that is spoiled can never be made whole.'

There is silence again and you wonder if that is all. Then the voice speaks once more, faint as a dying echo:

'Know this. There is a force against you. Already it gathers, already it senses your return. Seek the sword of Starkweather John... it lies near, waiting to be claimed... when that is found, you may begin to understand, to remember.'

The voice falls silent. You are left alone in the thinning mists, as the light of a new day begins to dawn.

Over the next five minutes, the mists vanish altogether. You are on a scraggy, almost featureless island a quarter of a mile across, with nothing by way of landscape other than grass and rocks.

The stone circle is the only sign that anyone has ever been here. To the south, a causeway of stone connects the island to the mainland that can clearly be seen stretching away in either direction.