

The War of a Thousand Crowns

A Cataphracts Campaign



Daniel Hawkins

Soldiers, servants, and kings -

Their bones seem all the same

To me

*- Anonymous, carved into driftwood found
on the coast of the Tyresian Sea*

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INTRODUCTION

I started planning my *Cataphracts* campaign immediately after Sam Sorensen's blog post about the game was shared in the Ranged Touch Discord's tabletop channel. It was immediately the kind of thing that I was interested in: as a fan of the Malazan series by Steven Erikson, *Crusader Kings 3*, *Mount & Blade*, and RPG-wargame hybrids, *Cataphracts* was right up my alley.

I asked around in the Ranged Touch channel if anyone was interested, and asked a few of my friends if they wanted to participate. I also made a post on Paper Cult Club and in the LFG channel of the MCDM community discord, where I was a livestream moderator. When we started the game on May 10th, I had 10 players in the game. When we ended on November 11th, almost exactly six months later, 45 players had made commanders in the game.

This campaign was the most interesting, intense, and rewarding role-playing game project of my life. Having spent an entire half-year on this project, I wanted to take the time and give it a full retrospective and recount both the running of the game and the fiction that was collaboratively produced.

RHONE, AND THE LAND OF A THOUSAND CROWNS

Shortly after graduating college in 2019, I began working on a fantasy worldbuilding project that I would continue to tinker on for the next few years. Originally intended for a series of short-lived *Burning Wheel* campaigns, the world went through a couple major revisions, but it was always a fantasy setting more inspired by *Artesia* than the Gygaxian D&D worlds I previously played in. Eventually, this would take form in some geography and landmasses that I was aesthetically pleased with, and some proper nouns for people and places that I thought were evocative.

Having found no time or interest among my friends for playing RPGs in this setting, I started writing fiction, in what became the first three chapters of my in-progress fantasy novel, working title *A Dead Past Beckons*. I even made use of this material in another project, an attempt to make a total conversion mod for *Crusader Kings 3*.

This setting contains the continent of Rhone, and the land of a Thousand Crowns, the Solemnity of Kard, the Caelian Domin, and the various characters and places that populated it. So by the time Sam posted about *Cataphracts*, I had a fairly coherent fantasy world sitting around without much use that happened to have a lot of similar inspirations to what inspired *Cataphracts*. It was trivial to take the maps I had already drawn and make them suitable for *Cataphracts*. This unintentional preparation allowed me to spend some time (perhaps unadvisedly) before the game began writing short fiction about the starting commanders, which is something I always try to do when running RPGs with pre-made characters.

What follows is the narrative of the campaign, interspersed with fictional in-world epigraphs editorializing on the wars. Following that is a presentation on the movements of the various forces in chronological order: for the most basic overview of the campaign's events, skip to that. Following the campaign report is a collection of lessons, charts, and opinions gathered from 6 months spent running the game.

PLAYER MAP

Below is the final version of the Commander's Map given to the players at the start of the campaign. It contains numerous inaccuracies, both intentional and unintentional, mostly regarding river routes and lengths, exact stronghold positions, and roads. For the accurate map that I used to run the game, see page iv. This map was made by hand in Rebelle 7 and Affinity Photo 2.



REFEREE'S MAP

Edited and labeled version of the referee's map that I used to run the game. Hex grid's opacity was lowered and regions were labeled. Made in Azgaar's Fantasy Map Generator and Affinity Designer 2.



FACTIONS

Campaign Background

Rhone is aflame. Its kindling is the paper maps devised by Tyresian warlords, now long dead along with their Empire, that marked the borders and territories that they chose for themselves. When the Tyresian Empire fell, two-hundred and forty years ago, it was in a flood, a god-driven deluge that sunk Tyress, her lands, and her administrations beneath a brackish sea. The Tyresian legions, then without a homeland, settled among their conquests, split apart and fractured. The art of war-magic faded, forgotten to all except for the Phoenix Hold, who charge kingly sums for their limited services. The last two and a half centuries have been spent rebuilding, and the states of eastern Rhone, stable enough now to field armies, have begun once more to hunger for conquest.

The spark came from the interior lands of Thousand Crowns, so named for the innumerable petty kingdoms that have risen, proclaimed themselves, then died in this wartorn valley. These lands were never truly conquered by the Tyresians – when Tyress drowned, her farthest legions were only just beginning to probe this tangle of petty kingdoms. What was once considered a minor region of squabbling minor warlords has taken prominence in the minds of generals and strategists across the eastern states, each of which claimed to be the proper inheritors of Tyresian authority. Thousand Crowns, littered with towns and castles and fortresses, alone in Eastern Rhone for having thrived since the destruction of Tyress, is a land that could supply a conquest of the rest of the continent if subjugated – or united. The state that controls Thousand Crowns will surely control Rhone in time.

In the last year, Coscyrion, the petty king of Aultlane, a minor territory in Thousand Crowns, has conquered his neighbors by breaking the Phoenix Embargo, the unwritten taboo against inferno magic set by the war college. This set countless events into motion. Rulers who had been eying Thousand Crowns as their next conquest began to muster their forces, now racing to control the lands before they unite under their own leader – or else obliterate themselves through vicious infighting.

The Caelian Domin: Domin Kayes II, or Kayes the Last, seems to get younger every year. At 94, he appears to only be in his mid-60s, and it is no secret that his court alchemists are the source of this vitality. The Caelian Domin, however, has to this point been a non-hereditary autocracy, where a cadre of hopefuls – called Dominunants – competed to win the throne via merit. Now, the Dominunants have been scattered, assigned impossible or ludicrous challenges, with no option but to accomplish them or be disgraced. It is Kayes' task, then, that Dominunant Stola Selonn take a legion of the Domin's own troops and conquer Thousand Crowns – should he succeed, by Caelian rights the throne will be his.

Leader: Domin Kayes II, “The Last”, 94

Commander: Dominunant Stola Selonn, 17

The Solemnity of Kard: Kard is a bitter, windswept island north of Rhone. It is no wonder that the Tyresian Empire never conquered it -- seeing its high cliffs and jagged harbors, the Tyresian fleets never even tried. As the region's greatest scholars, academics, and artists, the Kardish were content to leave the conquests to others. Until recently, this council of philosophers scarcely had a military at all. This changed with the acceptance of Orwin Lorahts into the Solemnity, having proved in her capturing the fortress-city of Vivimord that war was indeed a poetry worth

practicing, and the conquest of Thousand Crowns is to be her greatest performance.

Leader: the Solemn Council (Twelve Solemns)

Commander: Orwin Lorahts, Solemn of War, 31

The Darrath Triumvirate: When Tyresia sank beneath the Sea, the Darrath province was left stranded; its interim governor was a drunkard, and half the garrison was wiped out in the Flood, having returned home for a triumphal parade. The next two centuries were a constant struggle of rebellion, insurrection, and foreign conquest. The last thirty years, however, have been marked by unprecedented stability, consolidation, and military victory under the leadership of the late dictator Thetrum Tarac. Thetrum, on his deathbed, left control of the realm to his three children: Ecklo in charge of finance, Fetrel in command of the military, and Vettien in control of administration. They have managed Darrath now for three years, but have separated for the first time as Fetrel has ventured north with Darrathi soldiers.

Leaders: The Tarac Triumvirate, Ecklo (27), Fetrel (29), and Vettien Torac (33)

Commander: Fetrel Tarac, Praetor of the Darrathi XIXth Legion, 29

The Edark Marches: To keen-eyed observers, High Margrave Lotallo Manene has but a single domestic policy: keep General Halec Meer busy. The commander of the Steel Charter is Edark's most profitable enterprise – and its most dangerous. The Imperial mercenary company traces its legacy back four hundred years, and when Tyresia sank, the Charter thrived, now the official military of the province that last employed it. Halec Meer is popular, charismatic, and brilliant, having campaigned up and down the Rhonic coast to great reward. Now, with intimations that Meer was considering settling permanently in Gallemark, the High Margrave has commanded that Meer set out with his loyal soldiers to conquer Thousand Crowns and establish Markish supremacy in the region... or die in the attempt.

Leader: High Margrave Lotallo Manene, 40

Commander: General Halec Meer, 57

The Diocese of Vercia: Centered in Antium, the City That Withstood the Sea, Vercia is a theocracy that worships above all other gods the child-deity Attor, whom they believe dwells in Kalacos, the City of the Dead, that was once Tyress, the capital of the Tyresian Empire, now sunk beneath the Sea. The Attorites, once a fringe cult, have ballooned in numbers in recent years thanks to reported sightings of movement beneath the black waves of the Sea of Rage: the dead, constructing a city of their own in service to Attor. Now, the Dioecesan Purtho Ortolon is agitating his people for a holy war – if the faithful dead are in service to Attor, then the faithful living must make as many dead as they can. Before their crusade begins, however, they must first convert and conscript as many people as possible.

Leader: Diocesan Purtho Ortolon, 64

Commander: Crest-Commander Makial Ortolon, 36

MINOR FACTIONS

Petty Kingdom of Aultlane: Two years ago, Aultlane was a minor town in Thousand Crowns with a meagre military. A year ago, it was mired in skirmishes against local rivals. Now, it has conquered its neighbors as vassal states, leveraged their forces as its own, and begun a campaign to conquer all of Thousand Crowns. King Coscyrion has done this with a shrewd strategic mind and the service of Ursito Mattalax, a mysterious sorcerer whose command of taboo and forgotten fire magics has led rivals to quietly accuse the mage of being a dragon in human form.

Leader / Commander: King Gaios Coscyrion, 44

The Free City of Thelua: Alone among Thousand Crowns, Thelua has risen above the local warlords of its neighbors. Its placement near both the shores of Nortoro Sea and several high-yield mineral deposits have launched it into prosperity, but it was the canny negotiations of its ruling guildmasters that solidified it as a regional economic center. As forces converge on Thousand Crowns from external – and internal – threats, the goal of Thelua is clear: maintain their independence, and if this is impossible, secure their status. The commander elected to lead the deployment of the Soldier’s Guild won by plurality: a young, untested engineer named Carsus.

Leaders: The Assembly of Thelua

Commander: Guildmaster Carsus, 22

NOTABLE NPCs, MERCENARY COMPANIES, AND ORGANIZATIONS

Phoenix Hold: This ancient college of war magic was founded hundreds of years ago – they claim that it was their knowledge that allowed the Tyresians to conquer so much of Rhone. As specialist mages, they are mercenary commanders that sell their services to select employers, though advisors all across Rhone note that despite their presence, none of their employers have ever conquered Thousand Crown... or perhaps, this is directly because of their involvement in the local wars.

The Pikes of Baranim

An experienced mercenary group from the Riverlands to the south of Thousand Crowns. They are tough, stout, and bristly, used to fighting across the southern continent. They are expert infantry fighters.

Leader: Captain Lucius Esoc

Ashen Company

The Ashen Company is a mercenary company from Western Rhone that has several exiles from the Phoenix Hold as its members, practiced war mages who still have with them the secrets of the war college. They are highly sought by the Phoenix Hold.

Leader: Shegreth the Forsworn

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CAELIAN DOMIN

- Dominunant Stola Selonn*, 17, heir-aspirant of the Caelian throne. (Honorable).
- Adjutant Rethan Rilori, 38, a rival of House Selonn. (Guardian).
- Adjutant Detric, 38, a rival of House Selonn. (Beloved)
- Amnak of V'Zet, 54, Stola's teacher. (Beloved, Outrider, Vanquisher).
- Promin Elhavry, 59, Rethan's priestess. (Logistician, Spartan, Vanquisher; Defensive Engineer)
- Ordinate Nist, 65, a soldier in Detric's army. (Beloved, Brutal, Siege Engineer, Vanquisher)
- Ordinate Elha Selonn, 35, a cousin of Stola's. (Crusader)

DARRATH TRIUMVIRATE

- Praetor Fetrel Tarac*, 29, commander of the XIXth Legion of Darrath. (Commando; Scholar).
- Legate Seruna Tavan, 46, Fetrel's councillor in the XIXth. (Ranger, Scholar)
- Tribune Vaeren Callun, 37, Seruna Tavan's bodyguard. (Logistician)
- Tribune Thallina, 36, Seruna's quartermaster. (Duelist)
- Priestess Ahmina Khova, 66, Seruna's priestess. (Brutal, Duelist, Raider, Stubborn)
- Tribune Cornelius Torquatus, 50, Seruna's rival in the XIXth. (Siege Engineer, Commando, Vanquisher)

THE DIOCESE OF VERCIA

- Crest-Commander Makial Ortolon*, 36, commander of the Vercian Crusade. (Veteran).
- Knight-Marshal Teslan Karolon, 38, a rival of Ortolon. (Ironsides)
- Knight-Commander Talaneth Karolon, 34, brother to Teslan. (Raider)

THE EDARK MARCHES

- General Halec Meer*, 57, commander of the Steel Charter of the Edark Marches. (Beloved, Spartan, Raider).
- Lt. General Yvonne Rend, 55, Halec Meer's swordsmanship teacher. (Outrider, Raider, Duelist)
- Colonel Jarek Cross, 59, Yvonne Rend's step-cousin in the Steel Charter. (Raider, Guardian, Spartan)
- Colonel Prioneft Rend, 36, Yvonne Rend's half-sister. (Logistician).
- Brigadier Ockham Thenn, 45, Yvonne Rend's teacher. (Beloved, Defensive Engineer)
- Colonel Horace Stillwater, 43, Ockham Thenn's councillor. (Logistician, Raider)

THE FREE CITY OF THELUA

- Guildmaster Carsus*, 22, the elected commander of Thelua Soldier's Guild. (Defensive Engineer).
- Ulhad de Ablemarle, 66, Carsus' uncle-in-law. (Duelist, Scholar, Raider, Ranger).

THE KINGDOM OF AULTLANE

- King Gaios Coscyrion*, 44, the warlord King of Aultlane. (Brutal, Vanquisher).
- Nicolae of Virnac, 18, son-in-law to King Coscyrion. (None).
- Lucius, 40, friend of Nicolae. (Honorable, Raider).
- Marcus of Virnac, 20. Nicolae's nephew. (None).

A. Aulus Geta, 53, Lucius' quartermaster. (Honorable, Outrider, Veteran).
Captain Darinn, 39, a rival to Nicolae. (Guardian).

THE SOLEMNITY OF KARD

Orwin Lorahts, 31, the Solemn of War, commander of the Kardish army. (Logistician).
Phenom Ertzal, 63, Orwin's teacher. (Beloved, Vanquisher, Outrider, Commando).
Master Askil Sahl, 51, a soldier in Orwin's army. (Honorable, Guardian, Defensive Engineer).
Master Ogfrid Sobol, 48, Orwin's step-cousin. (Beloved, Commando).
Master Brook Lorahts, 22, Orwin's nephew. (None).

OTHER COMMANDERS

Arrist of Vallo, 43, a Darrathi revolutionary. (Siege Engineer, Commando).
Captain Lucius Esoc, 45, mercenary commander of the Pikes of Baranim. (Honorable, Ranger)
Shegreth the Forsworn, 41, mercenary commander of Ashen Company. (Logistician, Scholar).
Stormbringer, 60, a wizard of Ashen Company. (Scholar, Beloved, Vanquisher, Veteran).
Alois Lightfoot, 48, a revolutionary from Aultlane. (Raider, Commando).
Mak Morne, 40, a zealot revolutionary from Gathalac. (Guardian, Crusader).
Malrik of Gathalac, 34, a local revolutionary from Gathalac. (Beloved.)
Barr of Virnac, 48, a local revolutionary from Virnac. (Beloved, Guardian).

Ursito Mattalax, 45, the fire mage wizard in the employ of King Gaios Coscyrion. (Scholar, Brutal, Vanquisher)

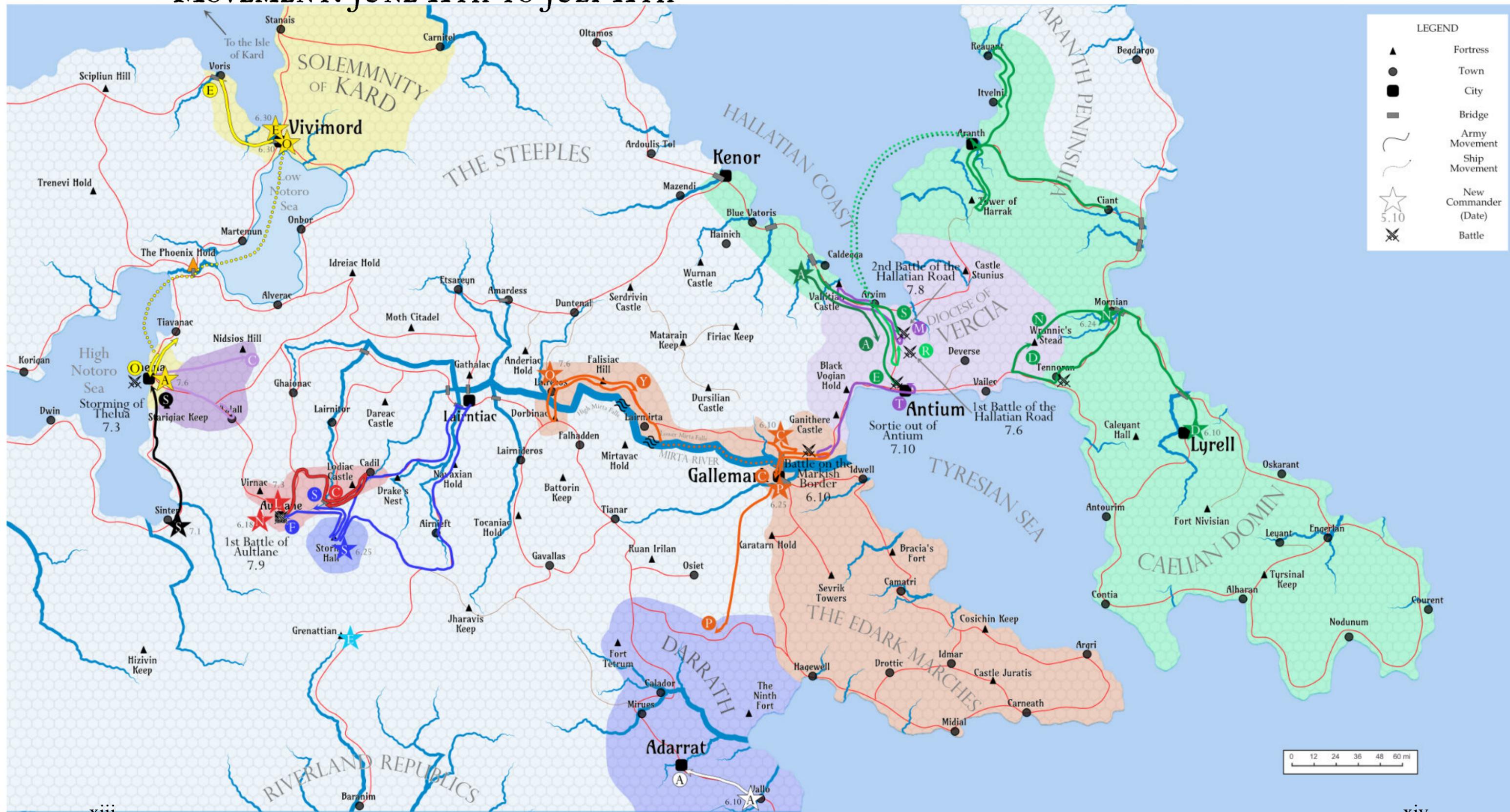
NON-PLAYER FIGURES OF NOTE

Domin Kayes II, the alchemically-immortal leader of the Caelian Domin, issuer of the Domin's Charge.
High Margrave Lotallo Manene, ruler of the Edark Marches and employer of the Steel Charter.
Archmage Volont, head of the Phoenix Hold.
Lutorn, a wizard of the Phoenix Hold.
Princess Mircalla, daughter of King Gaios Coscyrion.
Rathad de Ablemarle, a Phoenix Hold wizard loyal to Guildmaster Carsus of Thelua.
Lord Madaval Gathalon, Lord of Gathalac, ruler of Lairntiac, and founder of the Coalition of the Mirtan Lords

MOVEMENT: MAY 10TH TO JUNE 10TH



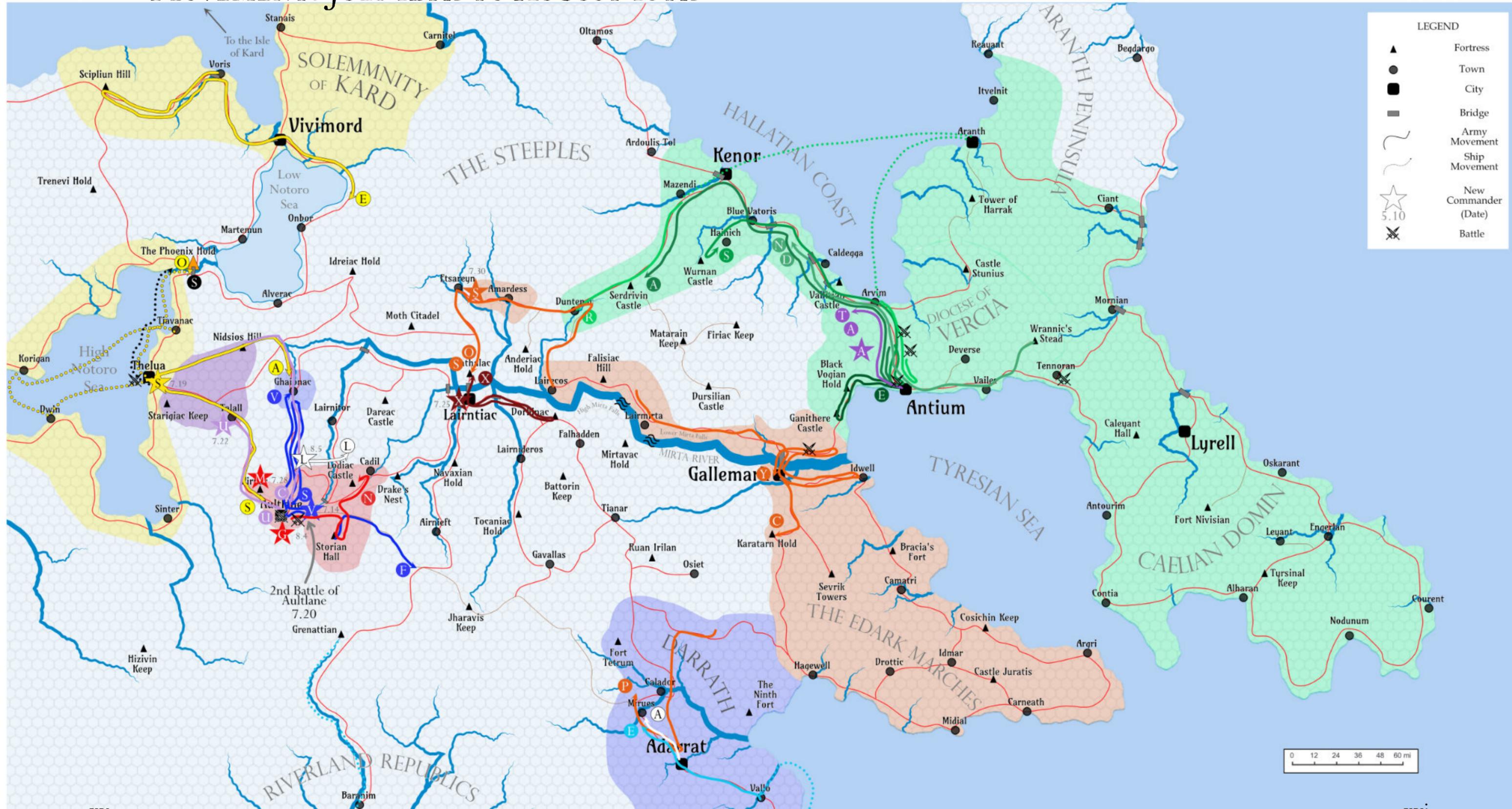
MOVEMENT: JUNE 11TH TO JULY 11TH



LEGEND

- ▲ Fortress
- Town
- City
- Bridge
- ~ Army Movement
- ~ Ship Movement
- ★ New Commander (Date)
- ✕ Battle

MOVEMENT: JULY 12TH TO AUGUST 10TH



MOVEMENT: AUGUST 19TH TO SEPTEMBER 19TH



MOVEMENT: SEPTEMBER 20TH TO OCTOBER 20TH



MAY-JUNE

INITIAL MOVEMENTS

THE CAELIAN DOMIN

1. Stola Selonn gives half of his forces to Adjutant Rethan, his rival (May 10th) and sails from Lyrell to Kenor (May 13th) and begins to move southeast along the Hallatian Coast towards Vercia. Selonn negotiates surrender of Kenor, Blue Vattoris, and Caldegga, and begins muster.

2. Adjutant Rethan marches north from Lyrell to Mornian, where she hears news by rider from Tennoran about the approach of Crest-Commander Makial Ortolon from the Diocese of Vercia. Rethan marches south to Tennoran and, on May 23rd, defeats Ortolon in the field and captures him. They negotiate terms for Vercia to retreat from Caelia and return Tennoran, and Ortolon departs. Rethan then heads north, brings in her Priestess, Promin Elhavry, and transfers her infantry to the new subcommander before forced marching with the cavalry up past Contia, to Aranth, and up to Itvelnit.

3. Promin Elhavry is brought in on the 1st of June, and ends the 10th at the recently-taken town of Contia.

4. June 10th: Adjutant Detric (another rival of Selonn's) takes command of the newly-mustered 2nd Caelian Army in Lyrell, and begins marching north to Mornian.

THE DARRATH TRIUMVIRATE

1. The XIXth Legion began its long march from Mirues towards Aultlane, passing by Jharavis Keep without taking it, and eventually arriving at Storian Hall.

Fetrel attempted to muster Darrath for a second time and failed the revolt roll, and decided to deal with it after going to Aultlane. Unbeknownst to her, Arrist of Vallo — the new revolutionary commander — rolled a 19 on the revolt die, getting 4500 infantry back in Darrath, and forms up around Vallo, on the southern border of the map.

THE DIOCESE OF VERCIA

1. Crest-Commander Makial Ortolon sends half his forces to Black Vogian Hold, near border of the Edark Marches, and leaves Antium to attack Caelia with his remaining troops.

Ortolon takes Tennoran, and then engages Adjutant Rethan in the field as she approaches from the north. Ortolon suffers a major defeat, and is captured.

On the retreat from Tennoran, and after negotiating his release from Caelia, Ortolon sent a messenger to Black Vogian Hold to bring in a new commander and orders them to begin an attack on the Edark Marches.

Ortolon heads north through Antium and ends June 10th at the town of Arvim.

2. On May 30th, a rival of Ortolon's Knight-Marshal Teslan Karolon is given command of the half of the Vercian forces at Black Vogian Hold, and begins to march south towards the Edark Marches.

THE EDARK MARCHES

1. Halec Meer begins marching west from Gallemark along the Mirta River, taking the town of Laimirta and the stronghold of Falisiac Hill. On June 2nd, General Meer receives a letter from Stola Selonn, warning of the Vercian attack that they believed (correctly) was impending and offering an alliance. Meer elevates to Lieutenant General a captain and his swordsmanship teacher, Yvonne Rend. Rend is given half of the Steel Charter and sent back east to secure the border against the Vercians.

Meer's half continues on to the town of Lairecos.

2. Yvonne Rend returns towards Gallemark with half of the Charter. Just before engaging Teslan Karolon, Rend assigns command of the Night Blades to her step-cousin, Col. Jarek Cross

THE FREE CITY OF THELUA

1. With no immediate adversaries, Carsus takes a portion of his infantry and his Theluan Scouts and seizes Nidsios Hill, returning to Thelua long enough for his wizard to conjure a road to the newly-claimed fortress, and then moves to the town of Talall.

THE KINGDOM OF AULTLANE

1. King Coscyrion takes his army and travels as far as Cadil, negotiating the surrender of Cadil, Lodiad Castle and an arrangement with Drake's Nest, before turning around and returning to Aultlane.

THE BATTLE OF TENNORAN, MAY 23RD

The story of Stola Selonn's success in Thousand Crowns is also the story of Adjutant Rethan and Adjutant Destruc. While many questioned Selonn's capabilities at the outset of this campaign, none questioned those of his subordinates. It was Rethan who repelled the advance of Makial Ortolon from Caelian lands, secured the Aranth peninsula, defeated Ortolon once more, and then led the charge into Thousand Crowns itself. Rethan's successes only lost momentum when encountering the Solemn of War herself, Orwin Lorahts at the Battle of Moth.

- Mylal Rilori, Chronicles of the Caelian Houses, Vol. VII., 282

On May 22nd, the Vercian forces under command of Crest-Commander Makial Ortolon seized the Caelian border town of Tennoran in an assault, replenishing their losses with converts from the local population. Meanwhile, Adjutant Rethan of the Caelian Domin was approaching Tennoran from the north, having heard news about Ortolon's invasion via messenger from the town itself. Because Rethan was traveling at a forced march, there was no forewarning of her approach for the Vercians, who were busy foraging. The resulting battle could have easily gone either way — Rethan's forces had the element of surprise but were exhausted from their march, while Ortolon's were out of position, but had the advantage of terrain. What transpired was the first successful coin-flip of the Caelian campaign — in even odds, they resoundingly defeated the Vercians and captured their commander. Rethan's immediate negotiation was swift and merciful: Ortolon was to never again enter Caelian territory and return Tennoran to Caelian control, though they could keep their converts from the local population. For the first battle of the War for a Thousand Crowns, the Battle of Tennoran was decisive at both the tactical and strategic level, and representative of events to come.

JUNE-JULY

THE CAPTURE OF FETREL TARAC & THE RISE OF ARRIST OF VALLO

The noble lords of Rhone — including the Taracs of Darrath — underestimated how widespread the influence of the Riverland Republics was among their peoples. In communities from Aultlane to Adarrat, common folk increasingly organized themselves into small democracies, where they were able. Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that this fervor turned to revolutions when the opportunities presented themselves. Some of these were highly successful, though predicated on outside events. Most significantly, the departure of the XIXth Legion from Darrath resulted in the near-immediate and uncontested capture of Adarrat by Arrist of Vallo, a former legionnaire who spent time in the Riverlands. Had Fetrel Tarac turned the legion or delegated some force to quash this revolt before it took the capital, Arrist's name may have been soon forgotten. Instead, and as the result of the XIXth's catastrophic first assault on Aultlane, it was Fetrel whose name soon fell to the margins.

- Sarlano Gimmek, Treatise on the Republics of Rhone, University of V'Zet, 272.

On May 10th, Fetrel Tarac, Praetor of the XIXth Legion of Darrath, began the march from the Darrathi town of Mirues up northwest along a trail that went over the highlands towards Aultlane. The Darrathi campaign was centered on two objectives: the capture of the fire mage Ursito Mattalax and the subjugation of the Phoenix Hold war college. Ultimately, the Triumvirate believed that control over the two most valuable sorcerous powers in the region would give them the power and flexibility to more easily conduct future campaigns.

Before leaving, Fetrel ordered additional armies to be raised across Darrath, to be a fresh force of reinforcements that would supplement the XIXth Legion. Unfortunately, these reinforcements would never arrive.

Referee's note: For the first few weeks of the campaign, I ruled that the roll commanders make to determine if a muster of new troops provokes a revolt happens *after* the 1-month it takes to complete. Essentially, commanders would have no way of knowing if they were waiting for friendly troops or hostile troops. This was a ruling that I quickly reversed after some retrospection, but not soon enough to prevent Fetrel Tarac from being a victim of that first judgment.

By the time Fetrel's player rolled the 1 on the die and saw that a revolt was triggered, the Darrathi army was nearly at Aultlane, over 200 miles away from their home territory. (I also

think that, in retrospect, perhaps the referee should roll the die secretly, but at the time I justified it as being the commander was in contact with whatever administrative apparatus existed back in the governed territory.)

Still, with some news of revolt from back in Darrath, Fetrel was faced with a significant choice: turn around and return to Darrath, deal with the revolt, and then begin the campaign anew in two or three months, or attempt to swiftly capture Mattalax, and use his power to put down the revolt upon their return.

Convinced of the ability to do the latter, Fetrel ordered her forces to continue, unaware of the size of the revolt led by Arrist of Vallo: nearly 10,000 soldiers emboldened by the Legion's departure, prepared to move on to the capital.

Back in Thousand Crowns, however, Fetrel was focused on more pressing matters: the lack of supplies available in the highlands and the maintaining the element of surprise against the defenders of Aultlane. While there was a supply train returning to Mirues to load up with the excess supplies there and returning, the Legion would have difficulty remaining in place while waiting for its return. (Referee's note: Because of limited subcommanders in the queue to draw upon, I would allow for small detachments to do very, very simple A to B fetch and carry missions without the need for a player commander).

This never really came up in game in a meaningful way, but in the first few days of the campaign, Fetrel's player pitched me on having her starting the campaign a few weeks pregnant. Because her backstory short fiction was all about ending legacies and starting new ones, I think that this was an attempt to — like a character in a myth or fairy tale — siphon a destiny into a sacrificial child. I think that only future games set in Rhone will tell what becomes of Fetrel's child.

After taking the independent fortress of Storian Hall, Fetrel assigned her cavalry to her counselor, Seruna Tavan, and sent Tavan to reconnoiter the heart of Thousand Crowns, up north from Storian to Lairntiac, west to Ghaionac, and then south again to meet up at Aultlane.

Meanwhile, King Gaios Coscyrion of Aultlane had begun to hear news of the XIXth's approach. Coscyrion's response was to take half of his force and return to Cadil, a recently claimed town to the north, to begin the muster of additional forces. (Referee's note: I told him that this could be accomplished by messenger, but Coscyrion's player still insisted on going himself).

Left in defense of Aultlane was Coscyrion's son-in-law, Nicolae of Virnac, the 18-year-old wedded to the king's daughter, Mircalla Coscyrion. Nicolae soon gave additional command to his friend Lucius, who would assist him in the defense of the city. Untested in battle, Nicolae's first taste of warfare was the arrival of the XIXth Legion at the gates of Aultlane. With too few supplies for an extended siege, Fetrel began an immediate assault against the walls.

Although the Legion was aided by their use of weather magic to obscure their approach through a thick fog, the result was nevertheless an instantaneous disaster for Darrath. The attacking army was soundly defeated, and Fetrel herself was captured in the attempt to storm the walls. Nicolae

confiscated her sword, *Legacy's End*, among other effects, and imprisoned her in one of the towers of Aultlane's keep.

Shortly thereafter, Seruna Tavan returned from his reconnaissance of Thousand Crowns, and shifted command of the then-leaderless XIXth Legion to his bodyguard Vaeren. The XIXth Legion would remain in the vicinity of Aultlane for the remainder of the campaign.

Meanwhile, Arrist of Vallo was finding the success in the Darrath homeland that eluded Fetrel. With a large army of disgruntled Darrathi under his banner and the assistance of Captain Lucius Esoc, of the Pikes of Baranim, a mercenary company from the Riverlands that negotiated a contract with the rebels, Arrist was able to quickly march from Vallo north to the capital city of Adarrat. After long enough of a siege for the defenders to conclude that Fetrel was not near to returning, Arrist entered the city, deposed the other two remaining Triumvirs, Ecklo and Vettien Tarac, and proclaimed the formation of a new republic, naming himself First Consul.

Word would eventually spread of Fetrel's defeat and capture, but between the first defeat at Aultlane and the revolution back in Darrath, the XIXth Legion were, in a matter of weeks, left with no direction, leader, or homeland.

Referee's Note: Apparently, Fetrel's player (a good friend of mine IRL) read *The Art of War* after Fetrel was captured and lamented that Sun Tzu specifically advised to keep armies moving so as to not run out of supplies, the precise trap that Fetrel fell into.

KARD, THELUA, AND THE LEAGUE OF RHONE

Referee's Note: Technically, the first thing to happen in this campaign was the original player for Orwin Lorahts, the Solemn of War for the Solemnity of Kard, dropped out of the game, meaning that one of the five major factions — what was meant to be a major presence from the west side of the map — instead left a notable absence.

Thelua began the campaign by asserting control over some territory near the city. The first conquest of the campaign was Guildmaster Carsus taking a group of scouts and infantry and crossing country to take the nearby Nidsios Hill while his wizard, Rathad de Ablemarle prepared a spell that allowed the conjuration of roads.

For the first two months, Carsus spent most of his time claiming nearby strongholds like Starigiac Keep, the town of Talall, and Tiavanac; meanwhile, Carsus was sending nearly-flirtatious introductions to various faction leaders across the map, including Fetrel Tarac, Orwin (not knowing at first that the player had dropped out), and others. Pretty quickly, Carsus' player characterized him as a sort of effete-yet-ruthless commander, sort of like if Oscar Wilde was also wanted for war crimes.

Diplomatically, Carsus wanted to ally with Aultlane, the other minor faction that was also nearest to Thelua. What was at first a non-aggression pact never evolved further, as King Coscyrion's player grew distant from the campaign, and his attention was more spent on defending the city than answering correspondences.

By late June, Carsus was in waiting in Talall for word from Coscyrion on if Aultlane needed his aid for defense. However, at this point in the campaign, word of Cataphracts had spread, and apparently the post I made advertising the campaign on Paper Cult Club had very good SEO, so we had an abundance of players in the subcommander queue. One new arrival, @dpr, asked to play Orwin after reading the available fiction and lore material.

Orwin Lorahts, the Solemn of War, was intended to be — in the fiction — a genius of warfare interested in conquest more as demonstration of skill rather than territorial ambitions. Her new player was *extremely* successful in bringing this character to life, sometimes frustratingly so from my perspective as the referee, since having one player extremely invested in a game can disproportionately use my attention — generally a welcome problem to have, in all honesty.

A larger problem was the fairness of suddenly plopping a major faction down near an unsuspecting player. Vivimord was connected by the Notoro Seas to Thelua, just one day's travel up the coast, separated only by the Phoenix Hold, which controls the strait connecting the seas.

On June 30th, as Orwin prepared her invasion of Thelua (the Solemnity of Kard's war goal was to control the Notoro Seas), I realized that there was no way for Carsus to effect a defense, since he was unaware that the faction had found a new player and was back in the game. I wanted to be fair to all players, which meant neither denying Orwin the capacity for a surprise attack or locking Carsus out from being able to defend Thelua in any way.

I thought that the most straightforward to handle this was basically in-character as the Phoenix Hold, which was the major NPC power in the region (at least, in the fictional positioning: they didn't field armies or actually take an active participatory role as a discrete organization). The perspective of the Hold as I understood it at that moment was that they were aware that one major faction would likely be able to successfully conquer Thousand Crowns, and were looking to support whichever faction was the most likely to be favorable to them. Even though Carsus' mage Rathad was one of their own, they were aware that Rathad's loyalty was primarily to Carsus (Carsus' player and I agreed that they could be engaged to wed), and the Hold was suspicious of the diplomacy between Thelua and Aultlane, worried that Carsus would side with the fire mage Ursito Mattalax. Having decided all that, I decided that the Hold's course of action would be to hold the Kardish fleet for a day while one of the council mages, Lutorn, conversed with Orwin, and they would also sorcerously alert Rathad as to Kard's arrival, instigating a bold "wait and see" approach.

For my part, this was probably the most stressful refereeing I did in the game, since I had to make some decisions in-character that didn't feel arbitrary to the players and would have significant, lasting effects. I knew I wanted the Phoenix Hold to feel powerful, arrogant, and self-assured, and it was hard to straddle that line without coming off as capricious to the players. Luckily, the Phoenix Hold was soon destroyed, so I didn't have to worry about it for long.

For now, however, Carsus had just enough time to send some cavalry back to Thelua while he rode back with the main force, and Orwin arrived at the city with time to plan an attack. Simultaneously, both factions were in contact with Ashen Company, one of the two mercenary companies that had begun sending out letters for prospective employment across the map. While

the Pikes of Baranim contracted with Arrist of Vallo in the southeast, Ashen Company, based in Sinter, was deciding between Thelua and Kard. The choice was soon made for Shegreth the Forsworn, the leader of Ashen Company — Orwin stormed the citadel at Thelua and seized the city just before Carsus returned. With his city under occupation, Carsus had little choice but to agree to negotiate terms with Orwin, who had a proposal already in mind.

Orwin offered this: Thelua would join a new republican league of the strongholds around the Notoro Seas, and Carsus would assume the rank of Marshal of the League, beneath Orwin's title of Hegemon. The two forces would exchange units of soldiers as a form of hostages, and Thelua would be kept under Kardish occupation, and Carsus would be forbidden entrance until after the campaign concluded (this last term was between Orwin and the garrison, and was not an official part of the treaty). Upon Ashen Company's arrival in Thelua, they were also inserted into the terms, becoming official members, along with their hometown, Sinter. Carsus had no choice but to accept.

Orwin's own teacher, Phenom Ertzal, had spent this initial time seizing the strongholds west of Vivimord across the Notoro Strait, and so this league of strongholds was already gaining members, albeit at the point of a sword. Orwin already had a plan for their future campaigns: She and Shegreth of Ashen Company would besiege the Phoenix Hold; Ertzal would continue claiming the strongholds north of the War College, while another Kardish commander, Askil Sahl, would traverse the lower Notoro Sea and claim the towns of Dwin and Korigan before returning to Thelua. Orwin's step-cousin, Ogfrid Sobol, would take the newly-raised Theluan reinforcements commandeered from Carsus' own leadership and proceed to Talall, to gather the Theluan troops raised there before rejoining Carsus, acting as both his subordinate and informant for Orwin.

However, delays meant that Sobol arrived in Talall after the muster completed, with enough time for Carsus to send a messenger to the town, placing the newly-raised detachments in command of Ulhad de Ablemarle, the uncle of his fiance, Rathad. Ulhad, soon after taking command of the modest Talall muster, encountered Sobol on the road. There was a tense moment where Ulhad, new to the command and still trying to figure out the circumstance of Thelua's relationship to Kard, was contemplating making an immediate assassination attempt against Sobol and instigating a battle — had he done so, the entire League of Rhone would have likely dissolved immediately. However, ultimately Ulhad decided to avoid instant hostilities, and instead would travel alongside Sobol to meet Carsus.

I saw Ulhad prepare to go meet the Kardish commander, that Sobol. Ulhad hid a knife in his sleeve — a dirty trick I thought above a sorcerer, but I suppose that nobody expects a wizard to stab you in the throat. I thought for sure that Ulhad would try to kill Sobol then and there. This "League" that we're a part of doesn't seem that strong to me...

- Apprentice Mevan, personal correspondence, 241

With this, the League of Rhone was formed, and word quickly spread of its presence in central Rhone, even if it was a wholly uneasy alliance. While Orwin and Shegreth would spend the next month besieging the Phoenix Hold, Carsus, Ulhad, and Sobol would soon find themselves mired in the area around Aultlane.

THE FALL OF VERCIA AND THE SURRENDER OF ANTIUM

The Surrender of Antium might represent the last moment of Vercian sovereignty, but it also represents the rebirth of the Attorite religion. Though no longer able to crusade against its neighbors, by being subsumed by the Caelian Dominion — under generous terms — Attorites found a greater mobility across eastern Rhone, spreading across the Hallatian Coast, the Aranth peninsula, the Mirtan Valley, and Caelia itself.

- Hetres Vayant, Chronicles of Kalacos, Vol. III.

While the Battle of Tennoran was an immediate setback to the Vercian campaign against Caelia, their attempt at inquest into the Edark Marches seemed to be more promising at the outset. After receiving the orders from Ortolon, Knight-Marshal Teslan Karolon gathered half of the Vercian forces and proceeded south from Black Vogian Hold and crossed the border into Edark, soon taking Ganithere Castle, which would remain theirs for the duration of the campaign. With the most recent news of the Steel Charter being their progress to the west into Thousand Crowns proper, Teslan continued to press into Markish territory. However, the lands were not as undefended as he thought.

After receiving forewarning of the Vercian attack from a letter sent by Stola Selonn, General Halec Meer dispatched half of his forces, including the elite Night Blades and the Markish Lancers, back to Gallemark to defend their border. From his pool of officers, Meer promoted Lt. General Yvonne Rend, his swordsmanship instructor and one of his captains. Rend hastened back along the Tyresian Road to Gallemark, elevating in command her step-cousin, another Charter officer named Jarek Cross. With Cross commanding the Night Blades and Rend commanding the remaining forces, they intercepted Teslan just before he made his approach to Gallemark.

On June 11th, the Edark Marches fought the Vercian invaders in the Battle of the Edark Border. The result was, unfortunately for Vercia, a repetition of Ortolon's defeat at the Battle of Tennoran — the Vercians were resoundingly defeated and Teslan was captured. Similar to the Caelian treatment, Teslan was soon ransomed, in exchange for a cache of supplies and a treaty to return to Vercia and end the campaign for Edark, though Ganithere was left in Vercian control.

By this time, Ortolon had progressed through Vercia, from the capital of Antium, past the town of Arvim on the northern coast, and now occupied Vallitian Castle, on the northwest border of Vercia before the Hallatian Coast. Just as he arrived at the castle, Ortolon saw an unwelcome sight: The Caelian forces of Stola Selonn, defending the town of Caldegga, just across the river.

There was no communication between the two camps, who waited in their respective strongholds in an uneasy standoff, both unwilling to attack the other's fortifications. But while Teslan was returning to Antium to lick his wounds, Adjutant Rethan and her priestess, Promin Elhavry, were

finishing their conquest of the Aranthi Peninsula.

Referee's Note: this part of the conquest represents some of the last instances of me roleplaying specific non-player characters, which was something I tried to do as often as possible in the early days of the game but quickly became impossibly inconvenient as player counts swelled. Much of the dialogue that happened between a player and an NPC occurred in Rethan's campaign on the Aranthi coast, as she negotiated with Callo Nohern of Reayant, who became the Governor of the Aranthi Peninsula after the city of Aranth was taken from Lord Nerre by Rethan and Promin Elhavry. The shrewd Callo Nohern, Lord Nerre (who fled the city as the citadel was stormed) and the unnamed commander of the Aranth guard who opened the gates to Rethan are all — in my mind — standout non-player characters of the campaign, even though they only really interacted with Rethan's army.

Now with Aranth captured, and with swift communication between their camps and Stola's forces in Caldegga, they were able to coordinate a marine invasion of the north coast of Vercia, swiftly taking Arvim by sea and proceeding south to the capital.

Teslan arrived in Antium just before the Caelians, and Ortolon used the first spellcasting of the game, *Attor's Blessing* to invigorate his troops and rush from Vallitian faster than Stola can pursue. The next few days, around the second week of July, were pivotal for determining the subsequent campaign.

After Rethan and Elhavry encircled Antium and contained Teslan, Rethan took her forces north to repel the advancing relief of Ortolon. The odds of victory were roughly the same as their first battle, but Rethan's confidence was rewarded: once again, the Vercian forces were turned away, this time back towards the north, and though Ortolon escaped capture, he was placed into perhaps a more difficult position. A day's march behind him in pursuit was Stola's army, accompanied by the newly-mustered contingent of cavalry recruited from Kenor, commanded by Stola's own teacher, his tutor Amnak of V'Zet, who was himself once a great general in his homeland.

On July 8th, Stola Selonn commanded his first battle of the campaign, against the weakened — yet still dangerous — Vercian army. This time, the Caelian victory would be far more conclusive: with Rethan blocking the road to the south, Stola's forces were able to defeat Ortolon's and break them, since they had no easy retreat. Ortolon formally surrendered, and the army scattered.

However, the fight for Vercia had not completely ended. Just before the Caelian sappers could begin their demolition of the Antium walls, Knight-Marshal Teslan led a sortie out against the besiegers, commanded by Elhavry, who successfully rebuffed the sortie. Teslan retreated back inside the city, when news arrived of Ortolon's final defeat.

With the bulk of the Caelian forces mere days away, Teslan wrote to his besiegers and formally offered the Vercian surrender.

The Surrender of Antium occurred on July 11th. In the presence of Stola Selonn, Adjutant Rethan, Promin Elhavry, and Amnak of V'Zet, Teslan surrendered Vercia to the Caelian

Dominion and pledged loyalty of the remaining Vercian soldiers under his command.

For the rest of the campaign, Vercia served as a loyal rearguard to the Caelian advance into Thousand Crowns, though they were beset by supply problems for the duration of their marches. Teslan and his brother Talaneth were to follow the Caelians into Thousand Crowns and take several highland fortresses south of the Hallatian Coast, before being redirected later (see map).

Referee's Note: The Diocese of Vercia, being religious fanatics on crusade, were initially meant to be the heel of the campaign, a logical villain to be opposed by the other factions, but hardy enough with their faction abilities to be difficult to stamp out. One of their spells (which I only finished designing a month into the game) would allow them to summon armies of skeletons from around the sea to attack coastal targets: this spell was never used. But with just a little more luck, and perhaps a little more patience and coordination, the Vercians could have been a significant threat to the other factions around the map, instead of swiftly being conquered as they were in the game.

Yes, I did take some artistic liberties with my painting of The Surrender of Antium, but I hold that these show a greater truth of the moment. On that summer's day, the sky was clear, but in my painting I added a great storm approaching the city from the east — from Caelia. Barithe's own lightning struck the city as Teslan — standing nobly before the seated Dominunant — presented Stola with his sword. This gesture did happen, though the weather was merely mild at the time. The vista in the background, however: the Caelian lines and engines arrayed outside the walls, the furtive ships in the harbor, and the plumes of smoke from inside the city — those I painted as they were.

- Empiric Torofess Agrahn, in correspondence. 245.

JULY-AUGUST

THE FALL OF PHOENIX HOLD

Referee's Note: The War College of the Phoenix Hold was one of the foundational "lore" elements that I struggled to portray faithfully over the course of the game. Originally, I intended them to be a significant border location to be fought over and bargained with — which still held true — but it was easier to imagine how I would do that work in a game with 10 players, rather than the 25 we had midway through July. They still needed to be significant presence, and when Orwin Lorahts gave the command to proceed to the Hold and begin siege preparations, I had to sit down and write out the Phoenix Hold special rules, which are included with the other handouts.

In order to represent the strength of the Phoenix Hold, I doubled the defenses of a regular fortress and garrisoned it with additional troops. In hindsight, I should have played more into the magic of the fortress, or had it work out some kind of negotiation. It ended up just being largely a time-sink with few material rewards for the League of Rhone. I decided that there would be 12 wizards, for whom I would roll to see if they were captured as if they were regular commanders, with the capture representing either literal capture or aligning themselves with the League, while the rest fled to other factions.

Improbably, I rolled a 1 or a 2 on the d6 for 7 out of the 12 wizards, meaning that at the end of the siege the League of Rhone had a total of 11 wizards at their disposal (the 2 starting Kardish sorcerers, Rathad under the command of Carsus of Thelua, the 7 new Hold wizards, and Ulhad, who had the Scholar Trait, though it was never used).

And while there were other benefits to the Phoenix Hold as a stronghold, such as halving the research time for wizards resting in the fortress, and access to a ritual that could remove the scholar trait from commanders and give them immunity to sorcery, the only meaningful reward was the Phoenix Claw, two small detachments of a hastily-designed skirmisher unit that dealt 100% of their number in casualties in a battle, and took -5% casualties. This unit was probably *way* too strong, but it got across the strength of the Hold at least. In any case, I think that members of the Phoenix Claw will appear in future campaigns set in Rhone.

From July 20th to August 18th, Orwin Lorahts and Shegreth of Ashen Company besieged the Phoenix Hold until its defenses were sufficiently destroyed and the fortress was taken in an assault. The League of Rhone soon became a sorcerous superpower in the region, empowered with the ranks of more than half of the Hold's council, and now commanded the Phoenix Claw, perhaps the most elite fighting force on the continent, but perhaps the most immediate effect was the relative sequestering of Orwin and her forces along the Notoro Seas while the Caelians and the Edark Marches negotiated with each other. While seizing Thelua carried momentum and reward, some of this inertia was lost as Orwin oversaw the siege of the War College instead of advancing her forces further to the east. The force into Thousand Crowns was instead left in the half-hearted command of Guildmaster Carsus, who wanted nothing more than to return to Thelua

and reclaim its independence.

As for the War College itself, Orwin declared that the site of the fortress, now mostly an indefensible ruin, would be known as “the Ashen Hold,” and the headquarters for the organization would be removed to Starigiac Keep, just south of Thelua. While this decision had no impact mechanically, I always thought in the fiction that this would be perceived as a grave insult by the remains of the Hold, and would cement their resistance against the League of Rhone. By the time the Phoenix Hold flew the banners of the League, Ursito Mattalax had revealed himself at Gathalac, and Aultlane was once more under siege, and events were proceeding across the region beyond the direct supervision of the Solemn of War.

THE MEETING AT KENOR

The disappearance of Halec Meer was, perhaps more than any single battle or campaign, one of the most decisive events of the War of a Thousand Crowns. The indomitable Steel Charter, though no less capable in battle (indeed, their subsequent showings against Vercia and later at Shadow Hill are demonstrative of this), were left in organizational disarray at a pivotal time. Indeed, it is entirely possible that Manene gave up all hope at subjugating the Mirtan Valley without Meer. The Charter was left in command by Yvonne Rend, a capable warrior but untested strategic officer, whose indecision and inclination to see to every obstacle personally often left the company adrift without clear direction. This is a lesson in the importance of the continuity of command and discipline of communication. Now, who can tell me how this relates to the movement of the Golmari forces during the Frozen War?

- Excerpt of a lecture by Nevik of Carnitel, Empiric of War, 290

Referee’s Note: By the end of June, the player for Halec Meer, one of the starting top-level commanders, had to step away from the game, and I had to decide what to do with his character. We had so few players waiting in the subcommander queue at the moment that I was reluctant to bring one in to hand him off, so I ultimately asked the other two current Steel Charter players what they wanted, if I should bring in a new player, or if one of them wanted to step up and assume command of the whole faction. Part of this decision was because of the metagame logistics of bringing in a new player for that role, but a large part was my own concern with the fiction I wrote and the affection I had for Halec Meer as a character, since “Farewell to Nitian” was my favorite of the short stories I wrote for the faction commanders. In that story, Halec Meer feels compelled against his will by the High Margrave of the Edark Marches to fight this war in Thousand Crowns, but he alludes to a plan he has been devising, though the details are ambiguous. I thought it would be fitting if Halec Meer had arranged his own secret retirement, advancing just far enough into Thousand Crowns to be beyond the eye of the High Margrave and then disappear. The Edark Marches would then fall under command of Yvonne Rend, the next highest-ranked player in the Charter.

When word reached Yvonne Rend and Jarek Cross that Meer had disappeared and left the command of the Steel Charter to her, the army was at a rest in Gallemark, still savoring their victory over the invasion of the Diocese of Vercia, but in desperate need of command. News was just reaching them of the Caelian invasion of Vercia, and though Meer had intimated that the Charter would join Caelia as part of a two-pronged attack, the remaining subordinates were unsure of the advantages — by allowing the two factions to fight each other, Rend and Cross reasoned, they could weaken each other and leave the Charter in the superior position. They did not know, however, of how decisive and unrelenting the Caelian victory over the Vercians was becoming. Additionally perturbed by the lack of news from the south, Yvonne Rend brought in the command of her sister, Prioneft Rend, to take the elite scouts of the Night Blades and travel south to Darrath and learn more news of the XIXth Legion and the current state of the Triumvirate.

While they waited for more news, and to complete some spell researches — including the first of the crucial Inks of Sympathy spells that would facilitate much of their essential communication in the oncoming campaign — and a second muster of the Marches, Rend traveled personally via ship up the river to Lairmirta, and then to Lairecos, where the main army of the Charter waited. After crossing the Mirta using sorcery and seizing the castle of Dorbinac, where she noted rumors that the people of Thousand Crowns were gathering in joint defense at Lairntiac, Rend returned across the river and further subdivided the Charter forces, giving half of the Main Host to her own teacher, Brigadier Ockham Thenn, with orders to travel north to Duntenal and proceed into Thousand Crowns, remaining in contact with one of the pages of their Ink of Sympathy, a spell that allows 200 total words of immediate communication between possessors of the pages before becoming inert.

Meer's gone. Disappeared, and half of the senior staff with him. From Lairecos, he could have gone anywhere — upriver to Duntenal, then to Kenor, or down to Arnieft and then to the Riverlands. He could even have taken a boat back to 'Mark and sailed out under the nose of Manene. All I know is we're sitting here waiting for orders from the Margrave. Hah! He's probably shitting himself with fury right now.

- Letter from Lieutenant Morcal to home, 241.

As Thenn began traveling north, Rend returned to Gallemark, where now news had reached of the Caelians conquest of Vercia and the Surrender of Antium. Along with the reports came a message from Stola Selonn, inviting the commander of the Steel Charter to a meeting in Kenor, where Stola, along with the Caelian commanders of Adjutant Destruc and Ordinate Nist were planning the next phase of the Caelian campaign — Adjutant Rethan and Amnak of V'Zet were already advancing in towards Thousand Crowns by way of Duntenal, with Rethan leading the way. Two months into the campaign, and the Caelians were only now beginning to progress towards their objective.

Rend decided to accept the invitation to the meeting, and took a ship by herself from Gallemark to Kenor towards the middle of August, meeting privately on the 23rd.

Their negotiations were productive, which came as a surprise to both parties. Rend held that the

disappearance of Halec Meer was caused by an unforgivable hostility from the High Margrave, and was already considering ideas of turning the Charter against the ruler of Gallemark. Dominant Stola Selonn offered the following terms: since Caelia and the Steel Charter were both bound to conquer the same lands, they were necessarily in conflict with one another — unless one were suborned to the other. He offered that they might join their two factions, with the Charter working under him and Rend until he had succeeded in the Domin's Charge and assumed the throne from Domin Kayes the Last, at which point their two factions would merge. Rend agreed, and the two factions were now allied, though importantly, the precise terms of the alliance were not disseminated among the other Steel Charter officers.

At the conclusion of this meeting, Selonn and Rend were interrupted by Archmage Volont of the Phoenix Hold — the War College had fallen just a few days ago, and I decided that the remaining council members that had not thrown in with the League would stay together to negotiate with the Caelians, whom they (and I) considered to be the greatest rival to the League of Rhone. In return for the cooperation of the five exiled wizards, they promised to restore the Phoenix Hold to independence from the control of the League of Rhone. This agreement, assented to by both Selonn and Rend, was what intractably set the Caelian-Edark alliance against the League of Rhone, though the latter did not yet know how formal the ties between Edark and Caelia were. (By this point, Orwin Lorahts was already supposing an alliance between Caelia and the Steel Charter, given the lack of news regarding any conflicts between the two.)

As this meeting was ongoing, Adjutant Rethan was close behind Brigadier Thenn and his councilor, Horace Stillwater. Early friction between the two armies was avoided as Thenn and Stillwater chose to move directly past the town of Duntenal instead of seizing it, which meant that when Rethan took the town less than a week later, it was not officially an aggressive action against the Charter, as news of the alliance had not yet reached them. Because of the Ink of Sympathy, the Markish commanders would hear about this new diplomatic relationship sooner than the Caelian commanders afield, and hostilities between these two vanguards were initially avoided when they would eventually meet.

There were whispers of unease in the court of Lyrell after it was known that Meer disappeared, and word reached us that Selonn had allied with the Charter. Domin Kayes thought he sent a legion of House Selonn soldiers into a drake's nest, but after Ortolon surrendered and Meer disappeared, there was... uncertainty. Events had not unfolded as the Domin's court predicted. It was soon known that Kayes expected Halec Meer to be an insurmountable obstacle to the Dominant, but, like the High Margrave, was blindsided by the General's secret plot to retire. And then somehow, Stola negotiated an alliance with the Steel Charter, and what was thought to be a threat instead became a strength.

- Attendant Nilehn Anourant, in an encoded letter, 242.

AUPLANE UNDER SIEGE

Never has a rising power fallen so far, and for so little cause, as Aultlane had under the reign of Gaios Coscyrion and his successors. His partnership with Ursito Mattalax changed the face of Rhone forever, but not for the reasons he thought it would. His expansion caused the collapse of the Darrath Triumvirate as Fetrel broke her army against Aultlane's walls. Coscyrion himself was murdered in an argument with Mattalax, who then fled to Lairntiac. Without knowledge of this, both Thelua and the remains of the XIXth took the city, hoping to capture him — though considering what would later happen to the Theluans, it was perhaps a great mercy that the wizard was absent from the city...

Ral Arcios of Cadil, Warlords of a Thousand Crowns, 286

While the siege of the Phoenix Hold and the conquest and surrender of Vercia allowed some respite for the other factions of Rhone, there were no such reprieves for the armies in and around Aultlane. Though Fetrel Tarac was captured and the XIXth Legion was beaten back, they were still a significant force, outnumbering the defenders loyal to King Coscyrion. When Legate Seruna Tavan returned with the Darrathi cavalry to the main force, he brought in his commander, Vaeren, with orders to besiege Aultlane once more, take the city, and rescue Fetrel, while Seruna once again took a force of cavalry and sought out King Coscyrion, who was still returning from his inspection of Cadil.

Seruna encountered King Coscyrion on July 13th, as Coscyrion reached the crossroads just north of Aultlane. The Darrathi cavalry scored their first victory of the campaign as they spent the next few days harrying their enemy — Coscyrion's forces were harassed, hurt, and delayed from reaching their home. After the second day of harrying, Coscyrion was able to break away to east, back along the road he came, and Seruna declined to pursue.

On July 14th, the second siege of Aultlane began, as Fetrel watched from her tower window as her reorganized army began to encamp outside. The defender, Nicolae of Virnac, was again accompanied by his friend Lucius, who commanded the other portion of the Aultish defenders. The XIXth Legion still outnumbered the defenders, despite their recent losses, though their supply situation was still dire.

The Aultish, aware that their attackers did not have the supplies to effect a long siege, waited six days until the Darrathi engines were nearly completed and then attempted their sortie, charging the Legion's battle lines. While Lucius's attack was repelled, for the second time, Nicolae succeeded in his defense of Aultlane. The already-low morale of the Darrathi soldiers fell further, and they routed to the north, where they would soon encounter Seruna's forces coming south, which was a small bit of fortune for them, since it was the presence of his cavalry that prevented Nicolae from endlessly harrying the retreating attackers as they fled.

Fetrel Tarac once more saw her army break against the walls of Aultlane, but this time from the

prison of a chamber at the top of one of the citadel's towers.

Fleeing north, the Darrathi commanders decided that they needed refuge, supplies, and loot, and so made for the town of Ghaionac, which they would seize and plunder.

Meanwhile, Nicolae and Lucius returned to Aultlane — their own supplies were diminishing, a drain which would increase when Coscyrion and his troops returned from cross country.

However, Coscyrion's return was, itself, short-lived. On July 27th, he ascended the citadel tower in which dwelt the rogue fire wizard, Ursito Mattalax. All that is known of the following event was that the tower caught fire, Coscyrion was murdered — his body charred, and Fetrel Tarac's sword *Legacy's End* was rumored to be melted by the heat — and Mattalax was not seen again in Aultlane.

Referee's Note: Around the end of July, Coscyrion's player had to drop out of the campaign, and I thought it would be most dramatic if Ursito Mattalax was responsible, since I sensed an opportunity for the rogue wizard to really shake up ongoing campaign.

With Nicolae, now King of Aultlane by wedding to Coscyrion's daughter Mircalla, in charge of the defense of the petty kingdom, an attempt at diplomacy with their attackers was now made. Nicolae brought in his nephew, the 20-year-old Marcus of Virnac, to command another portion of the Aultish forces while Nicolae himself took another force to free Storian Hall from the Darrathi while the XIXth Legion was still in the north.

Marcus took a portion of the Aultish forces and went to defend the fortress of Virnac to the northwest. As part of his mobilization, Nicolae took Fetrel from her tower, and after claiming the stronghold from its garrison, offered her freedom in exchange for returning back to the southeast, to Darrath, and leaving Aultlane forever.

Fetrel agreed to these terms — however, neither party sent messengers to Seruna or the remains of the XIXth, so as Fetrel slowly began the march back to Darrath with the detachment of infantry that previously held Storian Hall, the rest of the Darrathi forces were preparing their own return to Aultlane.

In Ghaionac, the Darrathi commanders made a new and productive relationship. After completing the second sorcerous road conjured from Nidsios Hill, Guildmaster Carsus of Thelua arrived in Ghaionac from the north, a mere day after it was taken by the Darrathi. With no real cause to fight the XIXth Legion, Carsus offered his assistance — together, they might be able to succeed where the XIXth itself had failed, and take Aultlane. At this point, Carsus, yet unaware of either Orwin's completion of the Siege of Phoenix Hold or the recent murder of King Coscyrion, wanted to capture Ursito Mattalax and trade him to Orwin or the Phoenix Hold in order to secure Thelua's independence. Seruna and Vaeren were motivated by the rescue of Fetrel Tarac. Therefore, as they marched south together, none of these new allies were aware that none of their objectives were in their current target.

King Nicolae, having dispensed with Fetrel and believing the threat from the Darrathi to be over,

proceeded north from Storian Hall, performing his own inspection of Cadil, retrieving Coscyrion's muster of new troops, and making his own arrangement with the stronghold of Drake's Nest. When Marcus of Virnac sent him a message reporting the passage of nearly 5,000 soldiers of the League of Rhone marching past Virnac, he believed it to be a diplomatic encounter. In reality, Ogfrid Sobol of the League of Rhone and Ulhad de Ablemarle were en route to reinforce Carsus in the siege of Aultlane, which began when Carsus and Seruna reached the city on August 7th, with Vaeren a few days behind after finishing his rest in Ghaionac.

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER

THE CINDER AND ASH OF URSITO MATTALAX PT. I

There's a certain dark humor in how all the plans and schemes came down to hang in the balance of a single mad wizard. The whims of Ursito Mattalax decided the fate of a Thousand Crowns. Faced with the Theluanx seeking him to the south or the Caelian-Charter forces to the north, Mattalax expressed the full extent of his power but once before his flame was snuffed. Should north or south? Mattalax chose south, the Theluanx were shattered, and the alliance of the nascent League of Rhone buckled, its principal adversary of the Caelian Dominion emerging unscathed. Had Mattalax chose North, the Caelians and the Steel Charter would have been pressed back from the Mirtan Valley. Of course, had Mattalax constrained his power, ruined both armies, as he had no doubt intended, we might be living in a very different Rhone indeed...

- Artell of Moth, *Sorcery in the Mirtan Valley*, c. 260

Referee's Notes:

Ursito Mattalax was the standout figure of the campaign, though his entrance and context were the most that I as the referee took on an authorial role during the game. Mattalax started in the Lore: he was the rogue fire mage in the employ of King Gaios Coscyrion of Aultlane. It was his potent wizardry — what was in the fiction the last sorcerer in the region capable of devastating fire magic — that instigated the multi-faction War of a Thousand Crowns. His spell list (never used by Aultlane) was the only faction that had magic capable of directly inflicting significant casualties on opposing armies.

But in July, when King Coscyrion's player decided to drop out, I had to decide as to his character's fate. I saw my options as being:

- Bring in another player to play Coscyrion
- Retire the character like Halec Meer
- Have something dramatic happen.

The third option felt very alluring to me. Over a quick few text messages, I decided that Ursito Mattalax would kill Gaios Coscyrion and flee from Aultlane, and become the commander of a new minor faction, the coalition of the Mirtan Lords.

This solved a couple of issues, made a few more problems, but was ultimately highly successful and dramatic.

Firstly, Mattalax was thus far unused, and this was a way of taking a character that was hugely important to the fiction of the setting and giving him a little more agency and character. Second, I had to been hinting to General Yvonne Rend of the Steel Charter that the strongholds surrounding the city of Lairntiac at the heart of the Mirtan Valley were uniting under a coalition. Early on in the game, I was already plotting and hinting that the interior strongholds would have increased defenses — assigning a player to that lead that effort would complicate the arrival of the various factions.

I also thought that this would take some pressure off of the beleaguered Aultlane. Mattalax was

part of the war goals of the XIXth Legion of the Darrath Triumvirate, and part of the personal objective of Guildmaster Carsus of Thelua, who wanted to capture Mattalax in order to negotiate independence from the League of Rhone. Giving the character over to a player and sending him to the center of the map would bring more factions into conflict with one another, and also make for a more interesting narrative.

I messaged the next player up in the subcommander queue to ask if he would be interested in playing a character in an unusual circumstance, in that this was a character that I would make. Player @civilbeard said yes, and to his credit did an excellent job of playing the mad sorcerer. In order to not spoil the rest of the players, I had him not change his server nickname or subcommander status while he settled in to playing Mattalax as the commander of the Mirtan Lords, to whom I assigned an NPC figurehead, Lord Madaval Gathalon, the Lord of Gathalac. Gathalon was to be the villain of a play-by-post GURPS game I tried running for my brother, the player of Stola Selonn, that lasted about two posts, so this was another opportunity for me to insert more pre-existing canonical information about the setting, and perhaps seed a villain for a future campaign.

Since the quartermaster supply bots we used were made by the player of Orwin Lorahts, I had to take care to not spoil Mattalax's existence. I said that the supply bot was for a player that was dithering in coming up with a name, and so the supply bot had a temporary name in the JSON code I was sending along, "Mirtan". I wanted Mattalax's existence to be a secret until he was encountered by other players and news of him had spread.

I also used this opportunity to re-design his spells. I thought that since Mattalax was a one-of-a-kind wizard, his spells should also be one-of-a-kind, both in their effects and their mechanics. I wanted Mattalax to be unpredictable and temperamental, and having to sit in a stronghold and research a spell for weeks seemed counter to that.

I devised a fairly simple "Strain" mechanic. Casting spells added d6s to a dice pool, with each spell adding a different number of dice. After every cast, Mattalax would roll the entire pool. Any result that had at least 3 sixes would cause Mattalax to be overwhelmed by his own power and incinerated. Resting for a week would remove two dice from the pool, and later I ruled that any 1s he rolled would also remove those dice from the strain pool.

In this mechanic, I was pretty purely inspired by the one ability from *Armour Astir* as featured on *Friends at the Table*, where a player could add another dice to their 2d6 roll, but rolling 6, 6, 6 would cause them to instantly perish. This is pretty much the only reason I had the negative effect be on the 6s instead of on the 1s. (666, hell number, flames, etc.)

With this preparation and re-design complete, I handed the character over to civilbeard.



A portrait of Ursito Mattalax that I painted after his entrance into the game.

Mattalax spent the first few days of his command taking stock of his surroundings. With a smaller but meaningful force of troops gathered by the Mirtan Lords, Mattalax began to spread out from Lairntiac and search for news of nearby enemy forces. First, he took a portion of his troops and marched to Dorbinac, and seized the castle from Steel Charter control, and left a sizable garrison behind. Upon his return to Lairntiac, Mattalax learned of the approach of Steel Charter forces from the north, having just passed the town of Etsareyn. Mattalax took his army across the Mirta River and waited inside Gathalac for the invaders to arrive.

On August 18th, Brigadier Ockham Thenn and his councillor Horace Stillwater marched to within sight of Gathalac, noting the increased garrison of an additional army, but unsure of its commander.

As they rode forth to attempt to negotiate, Mattalax revealed himself. With a cry of “Ursito Mattalax reigns supreme! Death! Death!” he cast his first spell of the game as his forces rushed

forth from Gathalac, *Deluge of Fire*. In the brief ensuing battle, a quarter of the Charter forces were killed by flame or fighting, and the two commanders retreated swiftly to the north, pursued as far as the town of Amardess by Mattalax before he turned around to resume defense of Lairntiac.

The smoke was visible from over 30 miles away, meaning that Adjutant Rethan of the Caelian Domin was able to see the plume from Anderiac Hall, around 30 miles to the northeast of Gathalac.

Via the Steel Charter's Ink of Sympathy, Thenn was able to alert General Yvonne Rend of his encounter with Mattalax instantly. At this time, Rend was just about to enter the meeting with Stola Selonn at Kenor, meaning that the Steel Charter and the Caelians were the first in Rhone to be alerted as to the rogue wizard's whereabouts. The news that Mattalax was now acting on his own inspired caution and fear in commanders that were otherwise confident of their ability to handle any normal military threat.

Adjutant Rethan approached Amardess and conferred with the Charter commanders there, before deciding to advance and investigate Mattalax herself, believing him to be a dragon in human form. Mattalax himself was venturing south from Lairntiac to ensure that he was not being surrounded. Rethan's scouts captured a messenger from Etsareyn to Mattalax (referee's note: for "home territories" I automatically sent out messengers to the nearest commander when enemies were spotted within range). The wizard did not know of Rethan's approach until she reached Gathalac and stormed the fortress on the 12th of September. Gathalac and Lairntiac are within sight of each other's towers, separated only by a bridge across the Mirta River and a few miles of marshland, and so they settled in to their respective strongholds and waited: Rethan unwilling to test the wizard without Caelian reinforcements, and Mattalax unwilling in exerting all his power to destroy a vital fortification in order to squash a single commander.

Meanwhile, Amnak of V'Zet, Stola's teacher, was fast approaching, and Stola Selonn, Ordinate Nist, and the two Steel Charter commanders Thenn and Stillwater, were only a week away. However, their arrival would be interrupted by the greatest battle of the campaign.

We had just taken Anderiac Hall when we saw the smoke rising from the southwest, just a blur in the distance, but even still it filled us with dread. I heard Adjutant Rethan say that she thought it was Mattalax, encountering the Steel Charter. Sure enough, when we met them again around Etsareyn, they were burned and scorched by some terrible flame. By then, we had all heard the rumor as it came from above, from the highest ranks, it was said. Mattalax himself was a dragon in human form, and that he could swoop down at any time. The rest of the campaign, up until Lairntiac, we kept our eyes on the skies.

- Servient Gelheon Garant, 6th Selonni House Infantry, correspondence, 243

FALL OF AULTLANE

As King Nicolae of Aultlane inspected Cadil, Lodiace Castle, and Drake's Nest, believing that the threat to Aultlane from the Darrathi legion was ended, things were becoming dire back at the capital. Inheriting command from Lucius, the new Aultish commander A. Aulus Geta received an army that was out of supplies and starving. With no choice but to forage the already twice-plundered countryside outside Aultlane, Geta managed to feed his army but provoked a revolt in the process, as Alois Lightfoot took command of five hundred skirmishers. With so few soldiers, rather than risk an outright attack on Geta, who was still occupying Aultlane, Alois took his soldiers northeast, until he neared Nicolae's position.

Soon, however, the joint forces of Carsus and Seruna arrived at Aultlane and began a siege, demanding their own supplies. Phenom Ogfrid Sobol and Ulhad de Ablemarle arrived from the west soon after. Their combined foraging caused an additional rally of 5,000 more troops to Alois' strength as the rebels sought him out (referee's note: in order to conserve subcommanders, I allowed for multiple revolt rolls to combine under a single commander).

Negotiations between the two camps were quite limited. The besiegers assumed that Mattalax was in the city, but never asked for his surrender, and the defender, the newly-in-command Geta, did not know to offer any news of the sorcerer. With dwindling supplies and patience, the attackers agreed to amass their forces and attack the city instead of waiting for a lengthy siege. The 3rd Battle of Aultlane occurs on August 22nd, and this time the attackers found success.

Geta lost the walls to the attackers and retreated back into the citadel, but there was little improvement in the situation, and he soon surrendered after a threat of no quarter from Carsus should he continue to resist.

After three sieges and three months of pressure, Aultlane had finally fallen, though its capture achieved none of the strategic objectives from either the Darrathi or the Theluan — instead, it became an anchor tying down the XIXth Legion, trapping them in its walls as they scrounged for supplies and skirmished with the remaining Aultish forces.

King Nicolae and Alois Lightfoot, the latter ostensibly being hired on as a mercenary company by Nicolae in order to repel the invaders, learned of Aultlane's siege and began rushing back to the city. However, immediately following Geta's surrender, Carsus and Ulhad began heading north to Lairntiac, taking the Aultish prisoner with them. This left the city in the hands of Legate Seruna Tavan, who was once more in need of subcommanders. (Referee's Note: Vaeren followed the attackers from Ghaionac, but had to leave the campaign, depositing his troops with Seruna before bowing out). Not counting Fetrel, who at this point was still making her way back to Darrath, Seruna was the only remaining Darrathi commander.

Seruna brought in Tribune Thallina to venture west from Aultlane along with Ogfrid Sobol of the League of Rhone. Still unsure of King Nicolae's whereabouts, they wanted to secure Virnac to solidify their control over the area.

Inside Virnac, Marcus' troops were starving to the point of disbandment. (Referee's Note: This was another case of a player not having time for the game. What I should have done was brought in another player to take over from Marcus before his army got to this point, but I received just enough communication from the player to not count him out entirely, and as was sometimes the case, my Eye of Sauron was focused on other parts of the map.)

The supply situation inside Virnac meant that when Ogfrid Sobol arrived, the garrisoned defenders were willing to exit the fortress in exchange for being allowed to leave. The remaining fortress defenders were overwhelmed by Sobol's forces, and hungry Aultish troops joined Nicolae's army as they approached Aultlane.

Tribune Thallina, at this point, had already stopped responding to messages and was already out of the game, after a "playtime" of about four days, meaning that once more Seruna was out of subordinates. I brought in another player from the queue to take over, Seruna's Priestess Ahmina Khova, who commanded the Darrathi cavalry that were assigned to Thallina, and Khova began to return to Aultlane.

Simultaneous with her force's return was the arrival of King Nicolae, Alois Lightfoot, and a new Aultish subcommander, Captain Darinn, who commanded the reassigned Aultish Rangers, which were detached from Nicolae's army.

The Aultish forces attempted to keep their enemies divided. On the 4th Battle of Aultlane on September 16th, Captain Darinn attempted to harry and slow Seruna's sallying army to prevent him from aiding the defense of Khova against Nicolae and Alois. The battle was largely indecisive: Darinn's harry failed, and he took minor casualties but succeeded in the broader objective of preventing Seruna from participating in the battle alongside Khova, though that battle ended in an effective draw, with Alois Lightfoot taking the most casualties.

With the Aultish forced to retreat, and Khova able to enter the city, Aultlane was once more secure in the control of its captors, though with the addition of the cavalry, the question of supplies would become increasingly imperative.

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER

THE BATTLE OF SHADOW HILL

Shadow Hill was where the war was decided. Darrath had lost its leaders, and Aultlane was starving in the aftermath of the Legion's attack. Thelua, suborned to Kard, while Caelia and Edark allied together. Thousand Crowns was split in two: the League of Rhone to the west, and the Caelia-Edark alliance to the east. When they finally met, it would determine which side had the momentum to march to victory, and drive out the other.

- Finore of Aryim, The Influence of Kard, 294

PRELUDE:

Unbeknownst to one another, but suspecting each other's arrival, the League of Rhone, led by Orwin Lorahts, with Shegreth the Forsworn of Ashen Company and Phenom Ertzal of Kard, approached the crossroads north of Lairntiac after taking Idreiac Hold and Moth Citadel just as Adjutant Rethan snatched Gathalac from under the nose of Ursito Mattalax. The League heard news that Caelians were spotted to the south, but were not sure if it was the main force of Stola Selonn or not. Meanwhile, Stola had just brought to Ockham Thenn and Horace Stillwater news of the alliance he had negotiated with Yvonne Rend, and was now departing Amardess towards Lairntiac, unaware of how close the League's forces were.

Around Gathalac, still defended by Rethan, Amnak and Mattalax were dancing around one another — when Amnak's cavalry were out scouting, Mattalax would begin encampment to prepare for a siege of Gathalac, preparations that were abandoned once any other force showed itself and Mattalax ran back to Lairntiac. It was around this time that Amnak's forage of around Gathalac, which procured enough to supply Rethan for the rest of the month, also provoked a small revolt in the form of the zealot Mak Morne and his few band of five-hundred followers, who soon latched themselves on to Mattalax's army.

Amnak was the first to learn of the League's approach, though his message to warn Stola was intercepted by the League. Unwilling to give up the defenses of Gathalac for a much-less advantageous field battle, Rethan hunkered her army down in the fortress while Amnak attempted to skirt around the approaching League.

Knowing from Amnak's intercepted message that the Caelians were also behind them, Orwin had one of her wizards cast a Kardish spell to swathe the countryside in an opaque fog — from inside the mist, all light was dimmed and colorless; from the exterior, it was a roiling, black smoke that stretched for miles, centered just south of the crossroads. It was meant to be a foreboding barrier to slow the Caelian reinforcements from the north.

Orwin commanded Ertzal to venture further south and attempt to spot the Caelian forces, which was soon accomplished. Ertzal found Amnak east of Gathalac, near the Druacan River. The two sides were extremely evenly matched, both in composition and in the temperaments of their commanders. (Referee's note: Both Amnak and Ertzal had Beloved and Vanquisher, though in my recollection I think that during the game I conflated which traits they shared, so at least once I gave Ertzal information as if he had the Outrider trait, which Amnak has but Ertzal does not.)

BATTLE OF DRUACAN MARSH

The Battle of Druacan Marsh was a miserable affair held on September 16th, about 20 miles east of Gathalac. Ertzal intercepted Amnak off road and pressed for the attack, winning a minor victory that had the strategic effect of pushing Amnak across the river into the forest south of Anderiac Hall, meaning that when the remaining League forces encountered the Caelians, Amnak was absent.

With Amnak forced to retreat, the League were able to make the approach to Gathalac, once more evicting Ursito Mattalax from his siege of the fortress through their approach. Here, they were faced with a dilemma: attempt to take Gathalac from the Caelians using their overwhelming force before their reinforcements could arrive, or turn to make battle with the approaching armies and then begin a siege from a place of greater safety. Ultimately, they chose to turn back north and trust that Rethan would not leave the fortress to pursue them — this was certainly the correct decision, since unknown to them, Mattalax was waiting until enough of his many enemies gathered in location before he unleashed his spell *Desolation*. Besieging Gathalac would therefore have caused incredible casualties on all parties involved.

Around this time, the Caelian and Edark joint companies reached the north face of the Risen Shadows, just around the crossroads. A day or two to their northeast was Prioneft Rend, crossing country after having traveled all the way from Darrath, but like Amnak, Prioneft was too far away to support her allies. After entering the shadows, the Caelian scouts saw the rapidly approaching forces of the League. With numerically equivalent armies on either side, each pressed for an advantage, leading to Stola's first major tactical error of the campaign. In searching for a defensible position off the road, Stola decided to leave their wagons up the road, intending to retrieve them after the battle either in victory or as part of a retreat. However, Orwin saw that in leaving the road, Stola had given the League full control of the road, and so the wagons were taken and burned in the night.

SORCERY UNLEASHED

The Battle of Shadow Hill. The greatest displays of sorcery in Thousand Crowns in hundreds of years. The wizards of the Phoenix Hold, pitted against each other. The Caelian and Markish wizards arranged against the Kardish; the Phoenix Claw, dancing through the ranks of the Caelians, while the Markish squad mages fought in the front lines. All the while, Caelian alchemical bombs detonated beneath the feet of the Kardish attackers, while Ashen Company wizards in dragon-form, shadows of them lingering in the skies as they swooped and flamed and tore. It was all the chaos of sorcery brought to bear down upon that nameless hill, now remembered for the craters and metal shards and dragon bones that are all that remains.

- Taraga Rune, Spellkeeper of the Riverlands, 270

Now without meaningful supplies and denied the immediate battle as each camp waited throughout the night, the Caelian-Edark forces needed a battle, or else they could be waited out and starved. They began preparations on their hill, using their Caelian sappers to emplace charges and munitions around their terrain, while Ockham Thenn's defensive engineering helped prepare fortifications. On the morning of the 19th of September, they got their battle. Orwin and her commanders, now roughly parallel with the Caelians, did not want to give them the chance to rush south and regroup with their allies, and so ordered the battle to commence. The Caelian sorcerers, conjured a terrific thunderstorm that covered the region, worsening the terrain and providing some amount of cover. The Caelians were using bad weather to train fighting in rain in preparation for an eventual confrontation with Ursito Mattalax, but now that work would be first spent against the League of Rhone. Their Steel Charter allies mostly relied upon their squad mages, but Ockham Thenn's wizard was able to prepare *Runes Upon Steel*, an enchantment that sharpened the weapons of his soldiers.

On the other side, the sorcery expended for the battle was even greater — one Kardish wizard conjured a *Phantom Rampart*, a quasi-real illusory wall that surrounded the Caelian-Edark position on the hill, trapping them should they be forced to retreat. The three wizards of Ashen Company, including their commander Shegreth the Forsworn boldly transformed themselves into dragons, a terrifying sight for their enemies, compounded by a spell from one of the League's Hold wizards that made shadowy duplicates of each dragon.

THE BATTLE AND AFTERMATH

We stumbled about in black night like drunken shades, in that cursed landscape dimmed by the Kards. Our torches were like white stars, the light from our campfires bathing the hill in moonlight. Every shadow was deepened, every wisp of smoke and mist lengthened. And then the storm came, and it was like ink spilled across the sky, broken only by searing flashes of lightning, sudden inversions that turned black to white. We heard that the storm was conjured by one of our own, the Dominunant's own wizard, as some kind of deterrent against the Kards. After that, the orders came in that we were to dig in and prepare for battle, set

charges in the mud. The only reason we were able to see anything at all in that rain was from the mages of the Steel Charter. Each squad had a mage who conjured light just bright enough for us to work with — even still, it was a miracle that no sappers lost their lives just placing the munitions. It was Ordinate Nist – Promin, now – who showed me himself how to place a single crash bomb so that it would detonate every other charge in sequence back towards the enemy lines. When the battle came, I watched from my ditch as every charge blew apart. Soldiers, horses... and a dragon.

- Loris Ceterh, Caelian grenadier

For all the sorcery that was commanded at Shadow Hill, the battle itself was little more than chaos. On the attacker's side, were Orwin, Ertzal, and Shegreth, and the defenders had Stola and Ordinate Nist representing the Caelians and Ockham Thenn and Horace Stillwater representing the Steel Charter.

The League forces pressed in and every contingent of the defenders were forced back against the Phantom Rampart except for those under the command of Ordinate Nist, who was able to repel the League forces by a narrow margin of victory, but a crucial one. Not only did Nist's victory spare the Caelians and their allies from being corralled against the Rampart and decimated, he was also able to inflict a grievous casualty: Shegreth the Forsworn, commander of Ashen Company and still in dragon-form, was forced to ground and landed on the emplaced munitions there, where they were killed, the first commander killed in battle this campaign.

(Referee's Note: While Ashen Company had access to a spell that would let the caster change shape into any sort of beast, I didn't want becoming a dragon to be standard practice or a win-button, so I made its effects pretty limited, and gave it serious drawbacks: dragons count as some hundred infantry — I don't remember how many exactly, but probably around 500 — and increase morale damage on a victory, but there's a chance that the caster will be driven mad with the power of being a dragon and never change back to their original form. In this form, instead of being captured, they are simply killed. What happened to Shegreth was two consecutive failed dice rolls — the 1-6 chance to remain a dragon and the 2-6 chance to be killed by Nist. This was the last time a wizard turned into a dragon this campaign.)

The League of Rhone took roughly equivalent casualties to the Caelian-Edark armies (indeed, perhaps took fewer overall casualties in terms of pure numbers) but were driven back from Shadow Hill to the north, ending their ingress towards Lairntiac. With the death of Shegreth, one of their wizards became the new commander of Ashen Company, Stormbringer. With diminished morale and not of the mind to risk compounding additional losses, Orwin decided to bring her forces back to Moth Citadel and recover, leaving Caelian to deal with Lairntiac — and Ursito Mattalax.

(Referee's Note: This battle, both the anticipation of it and the execution, caused what I can best describe as an actual IRL *Crusader-Kings*-style Stress Break for Orwin's player, and they relinquished control of the character to the player for Shegreth, since their character was just

killed in battle. For the rest of the campaign, Orwin was played by Shegreth's original player.)

When the shadows around the Hill faded, the Caelians and the Steel Charter arrived bloodied but victorious at Gathalac, where they were soon joined by Amnak and Prioneft Rend. Adjutant Rethan welcomed Stola to the fortress with cries of "Domin! Domin!" proclaiming his (perhaps preemptive) victory over the Domin's Challenge, and naming him as the new leader of the Caelian Domin over the current ruler, Kayes II.

With the League of Rhone in retreat, their eyes now turned to the city of Lairntiac and its terrifying guardian, the rogue wizard Ursito Mattalax.

THE CINDER AND ASH OF URSITO MATTALAX PT. 2

In the autumn of that year, black bones came to rest on the banks of the Mirta River, all the way down to Gallemark. The remains of Mattalax's scourge against the Theluans, which destroyed the countryside south of Lairntiac. The Charfields, they call it now, and still slagged iron and burned remains are tilled from that broken earth.

- Mirrat of Gathalac, 258

The Caelian march to besiege Lairntiac very nearly spelled their doom, if not for the arrival of Guildmaster Carsus of Thelua.

After leaving Aultlane subsequent to their participation in its capture, Carsus traveled north towards Ghaionac, and then east along the road on the southern bank of the Mirta River in the company of his uncle-in-law Ulhad de Ablemarle and initially Askil Sahl, though the latter left the campaign, leaving his forces back in Carsus' control. Along with them was A. Aulus Geta from Aultlane, first as a prisoner, but later given command of some detachments of soldiers — a surprising and generous turn of events, facilitated primarily through the lack of any real loyalty Geta felt towards King Nicolae, whom he had never met before the capture of Aultlane. Together, these three marched east, roughly alongside the League of Rhone forces on the north side of the River, though the bends of the road as it neared Lairntiac, along with some supply-related delays, meant that the Theluans only reached the city after the Battle of Shadow Hill.

As Carsus approached from the south across the western bridge spanning the Tiacan, the Caelian-Edark forces had already crossed the bridge and were besieging the north side of the city. Amnak was afield to the east, looking for General Yvonne Rend and performing reconnaissance. Ever the aspiring diplomat, Stola had initiated communications with Carsus and was about to begin some hesitant negotiations with the fire mage himself, meeting outside the walls with Stola. This is their conversation.

STOLA SELONN: "Thank you for meeting with me. I'm sorry to have to tell you, Mattalax, but your dreams of your own Mirtan state are over. I outnumber you at least four-to-one, and already reinforcements from Vercia under Knight-Marshal Teslan and the Edark Marches under General

Rend are on their way here, to more than double our numbers. And even if you manage to defeat all of us, Orwin Lorahts of the League of Rhone and Guildmaster Carsus are also near and ready to take up the siege should we fail. I was not overstating things when I said all of Rhone is marshalled here against you.

“I know you are powerful, Mattalax, but even you cannot burn the entire world. It's over. It is now up to you what shape the end takes. All of my advisors told me that negotiation was futile, that a man of Mattalax's power and ambition would never give up or surrender, let alone negotiate. But in some way I see a kinship in you, Ursito. I am also a man of ambition. I too want great things - to complete the challenge of Domin Kayes II, to rule, to claim my inheritance as Domin of Caelia, to bring prosperity to Rhone. And like you, seeking my ambition brought me to Thousand Crowns. So in some ways it pains me deliver this doom to you - I see how fragile my own dreams are.

“Our wizards might not command fire as you do, Mattalax, but no one has a better command of alchemy and its application in sieges than the Caelian Dominion. By my estimate, the walls of Lairntiac will be reduced to nothing but rubble by the end of the week. Then, you face battle with me, my reinforcements, and the League of Rhone, waiting in the wings. If it comes to that, to pitched battle, Lairntiac will burn. Thousands of soldiers will die, and thousands more of the citizens you claim to rule. And then, Ursito, you will die. There are none who would take the risk of leaving you alive, save perhaps Orwin Lorahts who would enslave you and wield you as a sword as she does with some of the wizards of Phoenix Hold.”

URSITO MATTALAX: "Then what do you propose, Dominunant? You claim to have left me with no choice, but I haven't yet heard the one choice you claim to offer. So far only threats to the most powerful man in Rhone."

STOLA: “You were the most powerful man in Rhone. But a flame without air soon burns itself out and we have you quite smothered. I'm offering you a chance to surrender and redeem yourself. You have sinned by breaking the Taboo of Fire, by starting this war that has cost thousands of lives. Give up your power willingly and you might atone.

"If you continue to fight, then you, and your ambition, dies here. But if you surrender, if you allow this dream to die instead, then you might live and aspire to something else. I'm asking you to order the Mirtan Lords to stand down. Come willingly into the custody of the Phoenix Hold and submit to their sanctions. They will take your magic from you, but will not harm you. And in Phoenix Hold, you will be protected from the rest of the world who would want your head, wizard or no. But even without your power you are a man of great scholarship and have seen depths of the arcane that no one else alive has done. You have much that you could give to future students and mages beyond fire. Or you could do something else entirely, follow your own ambition. The point is, if you surrender and make things right, you'll have that chance. A chance to find a new dream. If you don't, if you keep fighting, I don't think there will be another chance. It's your choice, Ursito: death or life. Conflagration or redemption.”

MATTALAX: "I think you already know what I will choose, and I think you truly underestimate the power I wield. The Great Flame will always choose conflagration. We'll meet on the battlefield soon, and then the victor will be talked about for centuries to come."

[Mattalax leaves]

STOLA: “We’ll see.”

Subsequent to this conversation, Stola went to meet with Carsus, who agreed to write to Orwin Lorahts and suggest a joint alliance to capture Ursito Mattalax — the conversation was also more fruitful from Stola’s perspective, as after informing Carsus of Orwin’s defeat at the Battle of Shadow Hill, Carsus spoke fairly plainly of his dissatisfaction of Thelua’s vassalage within the League of Rhone, and how he desired to return to an independent Thelua.

The meeting between Carsus and Stola, however, was soon interrupted. After Mattalax met with Stola, he returned to Lairntiac convinced that he was surrounded, and was willing to risk everything in a single gamble.

As Stola met with Carsus, Mattalax went to one of the towers of Lairntiac and was faced with a choice: to the north, the gathered forces of Caelia and the Steel Charter; to the south, the forces of Thelua. However, at this point, he did not know that these two groups were not allies. According to his whims, he turned to the south and cast *Desolation*, the most potent of his sorceries which utterly destroys a single hex and devastates any armies contained within.

The Desolation of Mattalax occurred in the evening of September 23rd. Casting from one of Lairntiac’s towers, Mattalax summoned a firestorm that spilled out, a sudden and instantaneous blast. To the north, in Moth Citadel, Orwin and the remaining League commanders felt a rumble in the earth, while far to the east, around Falhadden, Yvonne Rend heard the distant blast. For those in the immediate area, it was a blinding and deafening explosion that left thousands dead and ash falling from the sky.

The Theluans immediately lost over 6,000 soldiers, nearly halved by Mattalax’s spell. As for Mattalax himself, the wizard was overwhelmed by the sorcery he commanded, and the strain of controlling the sorcery proved too much. The tower he was standing on was destroyed in an explosion, and of Mattalax only a charred and ruined skeleton was ever found. The Caelians were left unharmed but bewildered, unsure of what happened to Mattalax, and if he was preparing a second strike against them.

MAK MORNE AND THE CULT OF THE FIRE-MAGE

Shortly before the Battle of the Druacan Marsh, Amnak's of V'Zet's foraging of the countryside around Gathalac provoked a small revolt. Five hundred rebels, led by the zealot Mak Morne, emerged from the countryside. Mak Morne was a mule-riding Attorite who suddenly found himself surrounded by some of the greatest powers of Eastern Rhone. With nearly the full weight of Caelia bearing down around Gathalac to the North, provoking his revolt, he had little choice but to turn south and petition the Mirtan Lords who held Lairntiac — which meant encountering Ursito Mattalax at his stronghold.

It was likely the few number of soldiers that Mak Morne commanded that persuaded Mattalax to allow him to enter the city, since he was so obviously not a threat to the wizard. From within the city, Morne quickly became the rare figure that Mattalax could tolerate, though his zealotry quickly led him to believe that the source of Mattalax's power was his own god Attor.

Morne entered Mattalax's shadow and followed the wizard as moved between Lairntiac and Gathalac, twice besieging the fortress in an attempt to draw more forces within range of his *Desolation* spell.

When Mattalax, feeling trapped, finally cast his greatest sorcery on the 23rd of September, Mak Morne was the only direct eye-witness to the events of the Desolation of Lairntiac. He witnessed Mattalax be overcome by the spell and be destroyed along with the tower. It was Morne and his followers that searched the smoldering rubble and found Mattalax's charred skeleton, and hold a funeral for the sorcerer within the still-besieged city. It was this funeral that first alerted the Caelians that Mattalax may have perished during the conflagration, as Adjutant Rethan had previously invested in placing an informant within the city.

This news was not immediately trusted by the besiegers, and the chaos within gave Morne the chance to assert command over the remaining Mirtan soldiers left in Lairntiac.

(Referee's Note: A few times over the course of the campaign, I felt it necessary to have commanders roll for army unity when I thought their actions might provoke defections. In those cases, I had them check morale as if their morale were at a 2. Morne rolled well, and only a single detachment of heavy infantry remained not under his command.)

However, even with command over the Mirtan soldiers, Morne was not interested in continuing Mattalax's war against the rest of Rhone, and so opened negotiations with Stola and the Caelians — his terms were that he and any other loyal Attorites would be permitted to leave Lairntiac to make a pilgrimage to Antium, where he could bury Mattalax's body (and the reliquary containing it) in the Tyresian Sea. Stola agreed, and Morne's eastward procession could begin.

Before he got far, however, Carsus and regrouped with his surviving forces and counted their losses. When his scouts reported that Mattalax's remaining forces were leaving Lairntiac to the east, he set out at once to confront them. Not desiring his promise of safe passage to be so quickly violated, Stola set out to intercept Carsus, who did not believe that Mattalax was dead. Arriving just in time to stop the battle, as Morne wheeled around to confront his pursuers, Stola

was able to negotiate a truce until Mattalax's remains were revealed, and the Mirtan army inspected to make sure that the wizard did not yet hide among them.

After this was complete, the three commanders went their separate ways. Carsus took Ulhad and Geta, and their surviving forces, and vowed to return to Thelua, though Mattalax's Desolation destroyed the bridge that carried the road west. With a choice between north or south, Carsus elected to go south, and take the long road past Aultlane to get back to his home city. Stola returned to Lairntiac with his subordinates to plan out the next stage of his campaign, and Mak Morne continued with his original plan and began to march once more to Antium.

With this, Morne exited from the War of a Thousand Crowns, taking his forces on a long, circuitous march through Edark towards Vercia, outside the campaign's theater, all the while preaching about the martyrdom of Ursito Mattalax.

(Referee's Note: I wanted to include a section on Mak Morne specifically because I suspect that his actions will have an outsized effect on future RPG campaigns set in Rhone — a fanatic cult devoted to a fire mage is incredible fodder for future antagonists, and I am extremely grateful that their invention was entirely organic.)

REST AT LAIRNTIAC

The negotiations did not cease after Mak Morne departed Lairntiac. First, there was the official surrender of the city and the remaining holdings of the Mirtan Lords, which Caelia already controlled much of. Madaval Gathalon saw the Caelian arrival as an opportunity to throw in with what seemed to be the winning side, and offered terms: In exchange for being given rulership over Lairntiac as the new Lord Governor, Gathalon would organize the surrender of Lairntiac, Dorbinac, Navaxian Hold, Moth Citadel (currently under control of the League of Rhone), and the other strongholds.

(Referee's Note: I think that this was in-character for these rulers, but this was also another instance of seizing an opportunity to set myself up for future campaigns set in Thousand Crowns. I had an idea of who Madaval Gathalon was from my initial notes when Rhone was going to be a more traditional RPG campaign: I wanted him to be equal parts cruel, shrewd, and ambitious. I was really excited about the opportunity to set up a future villain in a campaign in a way that also complicated one of the player characters. Stola's shown himself to be a decent, honorable person, and now he's basically given a huge swathe of land over to a Sheriff-of-Nottingham type, which is a problem for some future cast of characters in some future campaign. But I do think of Gathalon's negotiation here as one of my biggest exercises of GM authorship during the campaign, though in-game it was just a few lines of text exchanged between me and Stola's player:



Dan 9/25/2025 12:10 PM

As Morne departs, you receive a message from Lord Madaval Gathalon, leader of the coalition of the Mirtan Lords. Here is its summary:

- With Mattalax dead of his own hubris, their advantage is lost.
- The Mirtan Lords will negotiate surrender of their combined territories to the Caelian Dominion on the condition that Gathalon be made the local governor, and have direct control over both his home of Gathalac and the new seat of Lairntiac.
- The lands that were members of the Mirtan Lords will each retain their titles and be under this governorship



Dan 9/25/2025 1:26 PM

Your response determines what the Theluans see today, so you should try to come up with an answer somewhat soonish



Domin Stola Selonn (he/him) 9/25/2025 1:30 PM

Ok I accept with the conditions that they obey Caelian laws and swear fealty to me.

With Lairntiac now flying Caelian flags, there was a welcome respite for the victors of Shadow Hill. Ursito Mattalax was dead at no cost to their own forces, Orwin and the League of Rhone were nowhere to be seen, and Carsus had seemingly split from his alliance with the Kards as he marched back to Thelua. As far as the Caelians were concerned, all that was left was to plan the capture of the remaining strongholds that would achieve their war goal, of “establishing strategic control over the region of Thousand Crowns.”

At this point, the commanders in Lairntiac were joined by General Yvonne Rend from the east and her sister Prioneft Rend, each of whom had the consistent misfortune of being just late enough to miss participation in several battles.

Together, they drew up a plan for the remaining conquest: Adjutant Rethan would break camp immediately and seize Moth Citadel from the League of Rhone, and would be closely followed by Amnak of V’Zet and now-Promin Nist, having been promoted after slaying Shegreth the Forsworn at Shadow Hill. Stola himself would take a portion of the loot taken from Lairntiac and traverse the rivers, taking Lairnideros and then Ghaionac. Meanwhile, the Steel Charter would move south to Navaxian Hold and eventually Aultlane, in order to evict the remains of the Darrathi XIXth Legion and re-install King Nicolae, in the hopes that he would then be sympathetic to Caelian governorship of the rest of Thousand Crowns. No messages were ever sent to Nicolae informing him of this.

All parties agreed to this course of action and set out from Lairntiac, and all parts of the plan fell apart at practically every step.

RETURN OF FETREL TARAC

Of Fetrel Tarac, what is there to say? A long march up through the highlands, through hunger, only to immediately fall upon the walls of Aultlane and be thwarted by an untested boy. News of revolt in Darrath did not turn her aside, and the Legion, left with no orders, made itself a scourge on the countryside. Between Fetrel's failure and the exile of the Taracs, Darrath was transformed almost overnight.

- Lakene Nurek, *A History of Ilian Independence*, 265

While climactic battles were being waged in the heart of Thousand Crowns, one commander entered their own denouement. Fetrel Tarac, Praetor of the XIXth Legion of Darrath, returned to her homeland via the overland path through the Highlands to the town of Mirues, where she began her campaign in May. Now returning with but a single detachment of light infantry, unaware of her force's relative success back around Aultlane, Fetrel emerged from the highlands to news of Darrath's complete surrender to the rebel forces of Arrist of Vallo — news delivered in person by the new First Consul of the Darrathi Republic. None were more surprised by the arrival and state of Fetrel than Arrist, who was in the company of all of the forces that had not been stationed as garrisons around Mirues and the surrounding strongholds. But there was no risk of combat from Fetrel, who immediately surrendered to the First Consul.

Everything had fallen apart for Fetrel Tarac. Her sword, *Legacy's End*, was destroyed when Gaios Coscyrion was incinerated by Ursito Mattalax. Her armies lay starving and neglected around Aultlane, and no communication had been made between herself and Seruna Tavan. The other two Triumvirs of Darrath, her sister and brother Vettien and Ecklo had already abdicated and been exiled by Arrist after he took Addarat, and had since fled to the Riverland Republics to the southwest. Every purpose that she had set out to Thousand Crowns with had burned away at Aultlane or been driven away by Arrist.

However, there was one change for Fetrel — while at Storian Hall, she had turned 30 and rolled the “Scholar” Commander Trait, representing some culmination of scholarly study on Fetrel's behalf. With no sword, no army, and no state, Fetrel had one quality left, which was her newfound wizardry. As part of the public abdication ceremony insisted upon by the First Consul Arrist, Fetrel went further than what was demanded of her and renounced the Tarac name entirely, becoming now “the Wizard Indigo,” and vowing to serve Arrist as a sorcerer.

With Fetrel / Indigo returned to Darrath, it seemed that there were no major threats impending on Darrath, who still employed Captain Lucius Esoc of the Pikes of Baranim. Arrist had received several messages from other factions after news spread of his rise over the Taracs, and even encountered Prioneft Rend of the Steel Charter in person in early August, shortly after taking the capital, in which the two parties agreed on an official border between the Edark Marches and the new Darrathi Republic. As far as Arrist knew, his revolt was a sudden success, having not only deposed the Triumvirs, but also turned one of them into his own, loyal sorcerer.

However, he was never certain that the rest of the XIXth Legion was not already approaching Darrath over the same trail that Fetrel had traveled across twice now, and for the rest of the

campaign was spent anxiously scouting the Highland pass, waiting for some sign of reprisal — one that never came.

But with peace apparent in Darrath, Arrist's contract with Lucius Esoc of the Pikes of Baranim came to a conclusion, and the mercenary company from the Riverlands then marched northwest into Thousand Crowns, pausing briefly to besiege and capture Jharavis Keep, which Fetrel had repeatedly bypassed. Arrist was left alone with the former Praetor, preparing defenses against any potential invasions coming from Thousand Crowns.

THE FIGHT FOR AULTLANE

Queen Mircalla and King Nicolae inherited much more than they presumed to at the start of their reign. A city under siege, and soon taken, by the Darrathi. A countryside pushed to the limits by months of persistent foraging by invaders and defenders alike. The sweeping conquest envisioned by Gaios Coscyrion when he began his expansion was swiftly becoming an ashen dream. To his credit, Nicolae devoted himself completely to the defense of Aultlane and Virnac. And a true Mirtan, when those defenses failed, he pledged himself to revenge.

- *Ral Arcios of Cadil, Warlords of a Thousand Crowns, 286*

If the action around Aultlane had not yet diminished, it had at least formed a rhythm. After the Fall of Aultlane, the various remaining forces — the occupying Darrathi commanded by Seruna Tavan and Ahmina Khova, Phenom Ogfrid Sobol of the League of Rhone, and the local Aultish defenders of King Nicolae, Captain Darinn, and the rebel Alois Lightfoot — all remained in the area. Nicolae retook Virnac from Sobol's control after the latter abandoned it following the Battle of Virnac, and the two sides circled one another in an ever-widening gyre as supplies around Aultlane dwindled. Seruna Tavan and Ahmina Khova left the city in search of un-pillaged areas to the south, up into the highlands, to find only meager rewards. Meanwhile, Aultlane was left in the custody of Tribune Cornelius Torquatus.

(Referee's Note: Torquatus was one of the last handful of subcommanders brought in to the game. It was at this point — late September — that I started thinking about when and how the campaign would end, and I admit to my regret that I did not give this last batch of subcommanders the attention they needed to make meaningful participation in the campaign. Cornelius Torquatus as a character, therefore, was barely present in the game, which was my fault, and I apologize to that player and a few others.)

The Darrathi efforts to maintain their supplies forced them farther and farther away from Aultlane, which brought them into contact with the Aultish defenders around Virnac, who were also in need of their own fresh foraging grounds. On September 27th, Ahmina Khova of Darrath and Ogfrid Sobol were returning to Aultlane after a foraging mission to the northwest and were intercepted by the forces of Alois Lightfoot and Captain Darinn. Darinn's small detachments of scouts retreated off-road to the north, while Alois engaged with Khova, and Sobol continued his march towards and through Aultlane.

In the 5th Battle of Aultlane, Alois suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of Priestess Khova. His forces were routed to the south, and Alois himself was captured. This capture quickly became a negotiation in which Alois promised Khova that he would turn against Nicolae and cause enough trouble to keep him from retaking Aultlane.

For his part, Nicolae was most concerned with maintaining the defense of Virnac, while working attempting to harass the Darrathi out of Aultlane. For the next month or so, Nicolae spent most of his time patrolling around Virnac and working on making accurate maps of Rhone, which earned him ‘the Cartographer’ as an epithet.

He also had his own issues arising from supplies: Barr of Virnac, another local rebel from the area that rose up in revolt against the excessive plundering of the area around Nicolae’s home fortress. On the 26th of September, Barr of Virnac took command of some 2,000 of local soldiers. Instead of attempting a direct confrontation with Nicolae, whose Aultish forces even still greatly outnumbered him, Barr took his troops north to Talall, overrunning the town and using its loot to prepare for more covert means of revolution against Nicolae.

From within Virnac, Nicolae spent much of early autumn building siege engines and attempting to sow misinformation among the other factions of Rhone, with mixed results. Intending to turn enemies both real and perceived in directions other than Aultlane, letters were sent to Orwin Lorahts, Stola Selonn, and Arrist of Vallo, among some others. Occasionally, these were inadvertently misinterpreted to be helpful warnings: an intentionally ambiguous missive of “Beware Amardess,” a fabrication about armies approaching from the Riverlands interpreted to be a sensible description of the Pikes of Baranim, etc. The most consequential of these deceptions was sent to Arrist of Vallo, warning him of the return of the XIXth Legion towards Darrath. Unbeknownst to Nicolae, Arrist received the message while following the Pikes of Baranim towards Thousand Crowns, in the hopes of removing the XIXth Legion from Aultlane, and the news that they were approaching forced him back to Mirues, to establish defenses, thus depriving Nicolae of a potential ally.

Towards the middle of October, the Darrathi commanders were more concerned with feeding their troops and maintaining supplies than in continuing the conquest of the nearby fortresses. Both Seruna and Ahmina were travelling cross country around Aultlane and Storian Hall, foraging whichever scrap of land they could find that had been yet unplundered. From Talall, Barr of Virnac attempted to have a spy poison the wells at Virnac — fortunately for Nicolae, the attempt failed, and he set out north to deal with these rebels. Before he did so, however, King Nicolae gave a standing order to Captain Darinn: proceed west to the Notoro Seas and sack, pillage, and burn every settlement controlled by the League of Rhone, as retaliation for Sobol’s temporary capture of Virnac and Carsus’ siege on Aultlane.

As for Sobol, word had reached him that his presence was needed with Orwin Lorahts and the gathering League commanders, so he began to head north towards Ghaionac, mercifully departing the starving Aultish territory.

MEETING AT MOTH CITADEL & THE ATTACK ON VIVIMORD

After the strategic meeting that planned the next phase of the Caelian-Edark campaign across Thousand Crowns, Adjutant Rethan was the first to depart Lairntiac, a vanguard force meant to take Moth Citadel, to be supported by Amnak and Promin Nist. Meanwhile, Stola would set out by ship to Lairntinor, before sailing to Ghaionac, whereupon he would travel south to meet up with the Steel Charter as they approached Aultlane and liberate it from the XIXth Legion, on the assumption that Nicolae would be a grateful ally thereafter.

(Referee's Note: When coming up with the stronghold names before the campaign, I wanted some conventions that would establish local identity of the Mirtan valley and would also help me come up with a long list of names. I decided that "Lair-" would be a prefix meaning "By the river of," and so strongholds would be named around their local waterways. Lairntiac was by the Tiacan River, Lairmirta was by the Mirta River, and so on. This might be a little realistic but it was also very confusing for both myself and the players, as we had Lairntiac, Lairmirta, Lairnideros, Lairecos, and Lairntinor, all in pretty close proximity. I spent the whole campaign correcting myself and others.)

From the north, the brothers of Teslan and Talaneth Karolon of Vercia, given rearguard duties, had captured most of the highland fortresses between the Hallatian Coast and the Mirta River and were ordered to rendezvous with the Caelians. At this point, they were passing Duntenal, though were slowed by persistent supply problems ever since leaving Antium.

It was as she was nearing Moth Citadel that Rethan met her first major opposition. After the Battle of Shadow Hill, the League forces retreated to Moth to regroup, rebuild lost siege weapons, and research spells. While they were planning their next steps, however, they received a troubling messenger from Vivimord — the city has been besieged by Caelia.

In late August, after the meeting at Kenor between Stola Selonn and Yvonne Rend, Destric was left with the order to proceed north, bring the rest of the Hallatian Coast under Caelian control, and look for any potential routes through the mountains of the Steeples or around the coast. By mid-September, Destric had reached the town of Oltamos, and from there realized that there was no path through the mountains, and that traveling on foot around the coast would take around six weeks.

Faced with either an interminable march in one direction, or returning south through foraged areas and arriving late to any action in Thousand Crowns, Destric took loot and supplies from Oltamos and begun preparations to set sail from Vivimord on September 15th, sending messages to Stola and the rest of the Caelians, which arrived after the Battle of Shadow Hill. After a day of embarkation, two days of travel, and a day of disembarkation at Vivimord, followed by a forage, the siege began on September 20th. The city, however, was left with strong defenders by Orwin Lorahts, who planned precisely for this event. A detachment of Chisels — Kardish heavy engineers that increase the defenses of strongholds they garrison — had been left to guard the city since Orwin departed in July. With these added defenses, Destric was forced to begin what would have to be an enduring siege, which gave time for messengers to reach the League forces gathered at Moth Citadel.

Orwin responded appropriately quickly, sending Phenom Ertzal with his cavalry to force-marched to Vivimord and relieve the siege before the capital could be taken, and Stormbringer to take Ashen Company at a regular pace to act as reinforcements. Orwin would hold Moth against any Caelians attempting to travel west. In late September, just before Rethan arrived at the Citadel, Orwin delegated command of the Phoenix Claw — elite skirmishers recruited from the Phoenix Hold — to her nephew Brook Lorahts, and sent him out to slow and harass Rethan's advance. Not knowing exactly how many forces were inside Moth, Rethan confidently began siege preparations, not waiting for Amnak and Nist to reinforce her, when Brook's Claws attacked from off road to the north, inflicting Rethan's first — and significant — casualties of the campaign. Quickly realizing that the situation was untenable, Rethan broke the siege and fled west, past Moth, resulting in a pursuit from both Orwin and Brook.

The following battle was critical for Rethan: if Brook was able to harry and slow her army, Orwin would catch up and engage an exhausted, bloodied force. Winning the battle meant that Rethan could repel Brook and escape for at least another day.

Brook's harry occurred on October 1st, and it was a narrow thing. Brook's forces were barely repelled and forced off the road to the north, while Rethan's army was able to effect a continuous march to the west. Orwin, not wanting to leave such open terrain behind her, had her wizard cast a repetition of Risen Shadows, the same spell used that swathed the countryside around Shadow Hill in a blanket of desaturated fog. Advancing out of it, she engaged Rethan's army. The result was a draw: Rethan's forces held the line and withdrew, and Orwin, taking some casualties, were left in a stalemate — probably the most fortunate outcome for both sides.

After the inconclusive battle, Orwin rode out under the flag of truce to speak with Rethan. Seeking to delay any additional confrontations for a chance that reinforcements would arrive, Orwin suggested that she and Stola Selonn meet in Lairntiac to negotiate in one week's time. Unfortunately, once more, luck was with the Caelians.

Just after Rethan left the city, Stola went by ship to Lairntinor, and from there intended to go to Ghaionac, also by river. On the 2nd, the same time as this negotiation between Rethan and Orwin, Stola's forces had finished their embarkation and were traveling upriver. Unintentionally, however, Orwin's cast of Risen Shadows alerted Stola to Kardish presence, as its billowing form fell over the river where the Cadadrak merged with the Mirta. Abandoning the plan to take Ghaionac, Stola signaled for his troops to land on the north bank of the Mirta, after which his scouts soon established contact with Rethan's, and he was appraised of the situation.

Referee's Note: This moment was probably the most detailed accounting I took of the passage of time, once I realized that Stola would pass through the Risen Shadows. I triple-checked my calculations that yes, Stola would be passing by the fork in the river just as Rethan was preparing to head back east after the battle, and that they would be within scouting range should Stola take to the bank.

From Rethan's perspective, this was almost a miraculous synchronicity that solidified Stola Selonn as a worthy commander. For Orwin, this was a near-catastrophe, remarking to Brook, "I can not think of a worse development," than the surprise arrival of the Dominant. Meanwhile, a day's march back to the east, Promin Nist and Amnak of V'Zet were nearing Moth Citadel with

no knowledge of what was occurring to their west, and began to besiege the fortress.

The negotiations between Stola and Orwin proceeded. Ever the aspiring diplomat, Stola was eager to negotiate favorable terms from Orwin, and Orwin was positioned such that diplomacy was far preferable to a two-to-one confrontation.

After some initial friction between the two leaders, they both quickly came to an agreement: Orwin would relinquish claims on the interior of the Mirtan Valley, and Stola would leave the settlements around the Notoro Seas in the League's control, save for the Phoenix Hold, which would be returned to its original wizard lords, now under Caelian rule. Additionally, Orwin intimated that, since her primary concern was the practice of the art of war, that she would be willing to fight on Stola's behalf in the future. As part of this immediate exchange, Orwin would be allowed to move past Rethan's army to the west, to regroup with her commanders. This verbal agreement offered Stola everything that he needed to satisfy his war goals, and so he was eager to accept it. Though as negotiations concluded, Stola let slip that during his meeting with Carsus, the latter seemed most interested in an independent Thelua — information which was new and significant to Orwin.

Crucially, as these negotiations were about to unfold, two messages came from Vivimord, one for each commander. On October 1st, Phenom Ertzal engaged the siege lines held by Adjutant Detric. The Battle of Vivimord ended with an inconclusive victory for the Caelians: Ertzal was repelled to the south, but Detric's forces took overall more casualties. Messengers were quickly dispatched to each of Stola and Orwin by their respective subordinates, which helped inform their negotiations, as it was now unclear from the contents of the message if Ertzal would be able to relieve the besieged city.

Running out of supplies in the aftermath, Detric was forced to forage around Vivimord once more, resulting in a revolt as 8,000 locals rose up in arms to join Ertzal, who was also spending a day gathering supplies before a second battle. Ultimately, these delays proved vital, as messengers from both Orwin and Stola arrived, declaring their hostilities at an end, as the two leaders agreed to terms. Thus Detric, after a week of disassembling siege engines, withdrew to the west across the Notoro Strait, and began marching towards Phoenix Hold.

Back near Moth Citadel, the two sides were preparing to split ways, with Orwin and Brook moving west to rejoin their fellow Kardish commanders and Stola rejoining Nist and Amnak at Moth. Rethan and Nist, it was decided would follow Orwin and Brook and travel on to Phoenix Hold, and claim it for Caelia, while Stola returned to his original objective of securing the remainder of the Mirtan Valley.

Referee's Note: Readers might wonder at how the opposed forces were able to reach an agreement that was so beneficial to Stola. From my perspective — and not based on any information given to me by any players — it was clear at the time that Orwin would agree to whatever terms Stola described in order to regroup with her other forces, and that the agreement (which was, until I pointed it out, an entirely verbal agreement between the two parties) entirely a tactic in order to avoid an unfavorable battle, and that as soon as the Kardish commanders were safely away from the Caelians they would resume their previous plans. That assumption turned out to not quite be accurate, in that Orwin did not overtly order anything contrary to this treaty,

but it was still not nearly as resolutely a conclusion as Stola hoped. I saw this as a moment of naivety and overdue trust from Stola, who was so eager to negotiate a victory that he took Orwin at her word when, with reinforcements from Nist and Amnak a mere day away, could have potentially forced a more decisive surrender from the League of Rhone. However, this was not to be.

With the League of Rhone regrouping and Rethan and Nist moving towards the Phoenix Hold, Stola had a moment of self-congratulation before checking in with his Edark allies via the Ink of Sympathy, and learning that they were far off from the agreed-upon courses of action made at Lairntiac. Yvonne Rend had moved to Tianar, approaching her home territory of the Marches, and instead of moving towards Aultlane, Lt. General Cross was marching to Lairnideros, intending to ship from there to Airnieft and closer to Aultlane. However, all of Stola's efforts to wrangle the Charter officers were halted with the arrival of Lt. General Prioneft Rend, who came with a message that a new agreement between Caelia and the Charter was needed.

COUP OF THE STEEL CHARTER

The future of the Steel Charter was balanced on the edge of a blade at Lairntiac. What were its loyalties? To the Edark Marches itself, and to the High Margrave Lotallo Manene? Or to its own officers, and its own independence? The latter was the position of Yvonne Rend, who had no loyalty to Manene, while her sister Prioneft still felt the bonds of duty and honor towards the Charter's sponsor. The split between the Charter, as it happened, was between the two Rends.

- Sarlano Gimnek, Mercenaries of Rhone, Vol. II., 285.

Prioneft Rend, since her assumption of command of the Night Blades from Jarek Cross in June, had been traveling across Rhone mostly independent of any communication. She first traveled overland to Darrath, where she was the first faction commander to meet with Arrist of Vallo (excluding the mercenary leader Captain Esoc of the Pikes of Baranim), a meeting during which she established official borders of longitude and latitude that were to be respected by both states. After concluding her meeting, Prioneft — with little communication from either Cross or Rend — had no choice but to follow the news of other Charter activities. This led her north and across the Mirta River, crossing country and fording rivers to the northwest until she just barely missed participating in the Battle of Shadow Hill, arriving at the Caelian-Edark lines the day after.

After the strategy meeting at Lairntiac, Prioneft finally had the opportunity to discuss with Yvonne Rend and the other Charter officers the state of the war, and the nature of Edark's new alliance with Caelia. This last topic was also unclear to her fellow officers — neither Ockham Thenn or Horace Stillwater had more details about the precise arrangement. Yvonne Rend was still sparse with the details — herself having doubts about the deal with Caelia. All that was alluded to was that the future of the Edark / Caelia alliance was yet to be determined.

Thus, it was decided: Prioneft Rend would take a company of Markish Lancers, the Steel Charter's light cavalry, and proceed north to Moth Citadel to re-negotiate the terms of the Edark-Caelian alliance, with the offer of assisting Stola with deposing Domin Kayes II by force in exchange for Edark control over the Mirtan Valley, up to and including Lairntiac. At the same time, Yvonne Rend convinced herself that the procession of zealous Attorites under Mak Morne heading to Vercia needed personal inspection, and so she gathered several other detachments of cavalry and began a forced march up back through Lairntiac and east towards Falhadden and Tianar. Ockham Thenn and Stillwater, once more, were left to advance towards the Charter's objective on their own.

With the Markish Lancers, Prioneft was swiftly able to travel north, and soon met Stola at Moth Citadel after sending him a terse message asking for a meeting to discuss "a new proposition." What was intriguing to the Dominant soon became alarming, as Stola realized that his alliance with Edark (which formed the strength that allowed them to win at Shadow Hill and progress so deep into Thousand Crowns) was in jeopardy.

Throughout their conversation, the two quickly realized they were at odds: Prioneft shrugged at the oaths her sister made at Kenor, and Stola refused to hand over the Caelian-occupied territories in exchange for promises of mercenary work. Via the Inks of Sympathy, Prioneft told Yvonne that her presence was required, and the two commanders agreed to meet in Lairntiac and settle the matter once and for all.

Throughout this tense negotiation, Amnak and Stola were already returning to the city, as well as searching for signs of another revolt produced by their latest forage. Unbeknownst to them, Malrik of Gathalac, along with 3,000 infantry, were proceeding north, past Etsareyn towards Amardess, crudely disguising themselves as Caelian soldiers along the way.

As a sign of good faith with the Steel Charter, Stola agreed to temporarily place his troops with Amnak and to ride back with Prioneft personally, in the company of her Markish Lancers. Thus, when they reached Lairntiac the following day, on October 9th, the only troops garrisoned there were the Lancers and the remaining defenders from Mattalax's forces that did not leave with Mak Morne, including the soldiers retrieved from Dorbinac.

Referee's Note: Yvonne Rend's crisis of doubt regarding her relationship to Stola and Caelia was sort of born from a desire to properly role-play the character and act towards the strategic benefit of her faction. Her faction was also complicated by an internal division that other factions did not necessarily have to deal with, which was that there did exist a fictional bifurcation between the state of the Edark Marches, which is led by High Margrave Lotallo Manene, and the Steel Charter, the Marches' state mercenary company was led by Halec Meer, and the two were (in the preliminary fiction) politically opposed to one another. This meant that Yvonne's player felt that they had to consider a significant in-character perspective about a fairly complex situation. Yvonne's player used her orders thread as a sounding board for figuring out her in-character thoughts more than any other player, so I thought I had a solid enough sense of the character to help her player figure out what Yvonne would do next. I ended up pushing for them to make a decision about their beliefs and position more than I would have for other players. Part of this was because I felt like their indecision was because of the complexity of the situation, not because of some characteristic of Rend's. The other reason I encouraged some decision-making

was that, a little selfishly, I saw that a Steel Charter betrayal would prolong the campaign by a *lot*, and I was already feeling the fatigue from running the game for five months.

The following day, shortly before Yvonne Rend arrived, Lt. General Cross arrived via ship with his army. Not willing to go so far as to let an entire army into the city while the alliance with Edark was still shaky, Stola permitted Cross to enter the city, but none of his soldiers. Yvonne Rend, also convinced of the need to resolve this dispute swiftly, traveled by herself, leaving her army to forage and march to Lairntiac by itself, a day behind.

They met within Lairntiac's Great Hall, and at this point, free from the persuasion of her officers, Yvonne had resolved herself to commit once more to the agreement she had struck with Stola at Kenor, now made explicit. She and the Steel Charter would win Thousand Crowns for Stola, and after he became Domin, she would replace Lotallo Manene as the High Margrave of the Edark Marches, which would be a state beneath the Caelian Domin.

This discussion left time for Prioneft and Cross to meet. The former, convinced that the betrayal of the Marches would be an ultimate dishonor, argued that only the removal of General Yvonne Rend from the command of the Steel Charter could save their reputations and honor. Cross, caught between his loyalty to both his captain and step-cousin and his sense of honor, eventually agreed. If the negotiations with Stola concluded in agreement with the Dominant and with the alliance unchanged, they would remove Yvonne Rend from command by force, taking both her and Stola captive. To that end, they devised a plan: Cross would return to his army outside Lairntiac. The Markish Lancers under command of Prioneft would be split in two groups. The first would seize the Great Hall where Stola and Yvonne were meeting, and the second would attempt to overwhelm the gate guards and allow Cross' army into the city.

Referee's Note: I wanted to be clear to the plotters at this point that I would resolve this operation to take the gate with a secret die roll. On an 9 or higher on 2d6, the Lancers would successfully seize the gate. They agreed to the plan.

When Yvonne Rend and Stola reached an agreement that the Steel Charter would retain its independence even if the Edark Marches were under Caelian rule, their satisfaction at resolving this dispute was dissipated as they realized that Cross had left the Hall.

Prioneft stepped forward to relieve Yvonne of command, and the General immediately drew her sword. Markish soldiers under the command of Prioneft drew their weapons against the Mirtan soldiers under Stola's command. Yvonne immediately hefted her own sword, and Stola drew his in her defense. The two allies fought against Prioneft, but they were each wounded and defeated by the younger Charter captain, who had just the right amount of youth and experience to beat both the young Dominant and the older duelist.

Referee's Note: At this point, I wanted to hold to the severity of duels — death or dismemberment. I thought the fairest outcome would be for each loser of the duel to roll for their wound location, and that would determine the extent and severity of their injuries. I used the 3d6 "Hit Location" table from GURPS, and made it clear that wounds to the vitals — throat, neck, vital organs, etc., could result in an instant death for that character. Yvonne Rend rolled a "groin"

result (I imagine that as representing an upward slash that struck her on the inner thigh) and Stola rolled a “hand.” Since Prioneft said she was using a saber, I thought it was unlikely that she would be able to lop an entire hand off in a duel, so I asked for an additional 1d6 roll — the result being the number of fingers Stola loses from his sword hand, with a 6 resulting in a loss of the whole hand. He rolled a 2, and lost his little and ring fingers.

Thus wounded, Stola had his guards carry him from the Great Hall, leaving Yvonne behind with her captor, Prioneft, and the Markish Lancers that barricaded the Hall, waiting for Cross to relieve them.

I rolled for the operation for the remaining Lancers to seize the gate. I rolled a 5. The garrison was able to fight off the Lancers and drive them into the streets. Cross, alerted by Prioneft via the Ink of Sympathy, taken from Yvonne Rend, began his attack, but the gates were not open, like they had planned. Faced with either attacking and chancing victory or departing in the night dishonorably, Cross ordered his troops to attack. The Battle of Lairntiac was fought on the night of October 11th. Stola, wounded but still in command, ordered his Mirtan soldiers — pre-emptively retrieved from garrison duty at Dorbinac and whose loyalty Stola bought with the remaining loot after returning to the city — to defend the walls.

The result was a resounding victory for the defenders. Cross’ forces, still out of formation from disembarking that same day, in a sudden night-time assault, were driven off before they could reach the walls. It was only due to Cross’ own skill as a commander that he was not captured in the attempt. From across the bridge to the north, Amnak saw the battle, but could not reach in time to participate, yet still forced Cross to retreat off to the south in order to avoid being caught by the Caelian reinforcements. Back inside Lairntiac, Prioneft was surrounded in the Great Hall. To her credit, after some negotiations, Prioneft surrendered to Stola and released Yvonne. She never seriously considered killing her sister, Prioneft said. While Stola demanded an immediate execution, Yvonne protested, and claimed a familial responsibility, and asked that Prioneft simply be arrested, to which Stola reluctantly agreed. Cross, however, was another matter. The remaining conspirator retreat southeast from Lairntiac, hoping to lose any pursuers in the forested valley between the two rivers. He ordered his wizard to cast a spell allowing his troops to move offroad at their full speed, and urged them south.

In pursuit was Amnak of V’Zet and Stola, who traveled south on the road before conjuring a road east with the use of one of his Phoenix Hold wizards. For the next six days, Cross’ army was harried and harassed by Amnak, and then Yvonne Rend, returning with gathered cavalry. On the 17th of October, Cross found himself without supplies, on low morale, and surrounded, with the Tiacan river on his east, Stola to his west, Amnak to his north, and his step-cousin and former general to his south. To spare the lives of his soldiers, he surrendered to Yvonne Rend and Stola Selonn. He was executed by Stola the next day.

Yvonne Rend gave Cross’ remaining troops to her trusted friend, Ferrick Oss. She and Stola knew that Prioneft was able to send out a final message to Ockham Thenn and Horace Stillwater imploring resistance to Caelia before her capture; without knowing their loyalties, there was an urgent need for the faction commanders to learn the whereabouts and dispositions of the two Charter officers. In reality, they were nonplussed by Prioneft’s message, and resolved to wait around Airnieft and see who the victor of the coup attempt was, a very pragmatic response from

the mercenary commanders.

Stola left the Mirtan garrison under the command of his cousin, Elha Selonn, who was tasked with claiming the few remaining strongholds in Thousand Crowns not yet under Caelian control, like Ruan Irilan and Osiet. Meanwhile, Amnak encountered the Pikes of Baranim, who were moving towards Navaxian Hold, looking for either unclaimed strongholds or further employment. As they negotiated, Rend, and Oss moved south to rendezvous with the Charter, and proceed to Aultlane, to remove the Darrathi occupiers and return Nicolae to his throne. Stola once more embarked from Lairntiac, this time shipping upriver to Cadil, intending to meet up with his remaining allies at Aultlane.

Referee's Note: The coup attempt was the single most dramatic thing I've ever witnessed in a role-playing game; it was stressful to even go back and re-read the messages exchanged as each player realized that they were mere sentences and single die rolls away from potential catastrophe. It was tense and claustrophobic, and I know that Stola and Yvonne's players were up until at least 3 A.M. discussing the night of the coup, even after the battle resolved. Narratively, I'm satisfied as a neutral referee, and I'm grateful that the dice and the players resolved in such a way that it was an intensely climactic, dramatic sequence. I give props to the players Menevalgor, Sand&SNW, sesquipedalianThaumaturge, thesnorlaxking, and bluejay_beren for accepting the dice rolls, roleplaying to the hilt, and making one of the dramatic scenes I've ever witnessed happen. The Coup of the Charter, along with the Desolation of Mattalax, is one of the events within the fiction that makes me most want to play more campaigns set in Rhone, to further realize the state of the world as left by these players.

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER

DIPLOMACY IN DARRATH

Months ago, back after the Surrender of Antium, Promin Elhavry was given the task of ensuring that Vercia was properly pacified, while the remaining Caelian forces progressed through the Hallatian Coast and into Thousand Crowns. This tour of the captured lands took Elhavry months of backtracking and foraging. And while she heard scraps of news and intermittent messages from her fellow Caelians, Elhavry's role, similar to the Karolon brothers Teslan and Talaneth, that of the rearguard. It was unknown at that point if the League of Rhone would attempt would Detric would later do, a surprise attack on the heart of a faction's home territory by sea, and so Elhavry's continued presence made sense from a strategic perspective.

By late October, however, Stola attempted to redirect these remaining forces. Convinced by deceptive letters sent by King Nicolae that there was a major XIXth Legion army making its way back to Darrath, Stola ordered that Elhavry requisition loot for sea passage to Calador, where she was to assist Arrist of Vallo with the defense of Darrath against the Legion, as a promise of good-faith diplomacy. In reality, these threats were baseless — there was never a Legion return to Darrath.

The most notable event to occur as a result of Elhavry's transit to Darrath and meeting with Arrist of Vallo was their conversation, in which Elhavry wondered if this supposed invasion could be commanded by the missing Fetrel Tarac, not knowing that Fetrel was in fact beside her throughout this dialogue as the Wizard Indigo, a revelation that only occurred after the campaign ended.

Meanwhile, up in the north, the last group of active rebels against Caelia made their way towards Amardess, flying stolen flags and makeshift uniforms made from scraps from Shadow Hill, commanded by Malrik of Gathalac. At Amardess, they discovered that the town was defended by troops recruited by Ockham Thenn after he retreated from Mattalax at the Burning of Gathalac. These few detachments — a handful of infantry and some cavalry — were enough to slow the Gathalac rebels until Knight-Marshal Teslan arrived. Suspicious of their Caelian disguises, Teslan offered to meet with the commander, but the rebels instead retreated back west. Teslan pursued, eventually catching the rebels. While battle was offered, Malrik instead chose to negotiate, offering his services to the Caelians in exchange for autonomy around Gathalac, terms that Teslan promised he would bring to the Dominant.

With Malrik — at least temporarily — pacified, Teslan and Talaneth continued their long journey towards eventual rendezvous, though the campaign would soon end before they saw either friend or foe again.

RACE TO THELUA AND THE LIBERATION OF AULTLANE

When Carsus and the rest of the Soldier's Guild returned to Thelua, there was a sense of relief within the city. At first. Then it became clear that the Kardish commander of the garrison would refuse to open the gates, and were preparing to defend the walls against our own soldiers. Word came to us slowly of Carsus' response: the capture of the Kardish soldiers under his command, and their hanging from the trees that lined the Theluan road. After that, there was no more talk of if the commander would let them into the city or not.

- Scrivener Lowenne, Annals of Thelua, 230-250.

After the Desolation of Mattalax on September 23rd, Carsus' entire Theluan forces were reduced by about half, with the soldiers under his command taking the brunt of the casualties, followed by those commanded by Ullhad de Ablemarle, and with Geta's few troops, loaned to him under provisional command, taking the fewest. The ruination of his army soured any remaining appetite Carsus had for his participation in Orwin's conquest, and so he resolved to a single, final action: the return and liberation of Thelua. However, the destruction of the bridge across the Cadadrak River, which allowed access to the road traveling to Ghaionac and then to Nidsios Hill and Thelua, meant that the exiled Theluan commanders must travel all the way south and through the starving lands around Aultlane in order to reach their home.

The journey would take them a month of marching, traveling at a forced march for about half that time, ablating supplies and morale throughout. And they were not the only ones pressing to Thelua: Orwin, having been alerted by Stola during their meeting that Carsus sought to assert Theluan independence from the League of Rhone — effectively disbanding its leadership and any pretext it had at being anything other than a collection of Kardish vassals, should he be successful. Orwin ordered the gathering of the remaining League commanders — Ertzal, Sobol, and Stormbringer — to gather in Alverac and prepare for the march to Thelua to deny Carsus the city.

However, none could move so fast as Captain Darinn, who commanded Aultish rangers with the standing order from King Nicolae to sack and burn every League settlement around the Notoro Seas. On October 9th, he reached the town of Sinter and proceeded to sack, loot, and raze it, torching the surrounding lands before heading north.

Back around Virnac, King Nicolae had seen much activity in the recent days. While the Caelians were dealing with the coup attempt, Carsus and the Theluans marched through Aultlane on their long journey back to their city, passing by Virnac just as Nicolae was heading north to investigate the rebels that had seized Talall and attempted to poison his wells back at his home. Due to stormy weather, the two armies were practically atop one another on the road before they became aware of each other's presence, which certainly affected how Nicolae, at least, reacted to the Theluans.

While Carsus was generally receptive to whomever he spoke to, and viewed his participation on the attack on Aultlane as being relatively incidental in the scheme of the campaign, Nicolae

harbored a great deal of resentment to the commanders that struck his city. But the sudden appearance of the Theluans, who still outnumbered him, gave him a little pause. While both sides were wary of one another, Carsus offered that A. Aulus Geta be the first to ride out and make contact with the Aultish, a move that almost ended in disaster as Nicolae had never met his ostensible subordinate before Geta was captured in the fall of Aultlane and taken away. Nicolae was prepared to loose arrows upon the messenger before he recalled (referee's note: I reminded him) of Geta's identity, after which negotiations could commence. The two sides agreed to retake Talall from the rebels in a joint operation — an assault in which Nicolae plotted to turn his forces against Carsus, a betrayal that never occurred as Barr of Virnac, leader of these rebels, retired from the campaign, and I thought that his peasants would surrender with offers of dispersement rather than certain death in an overwhelming assault.

Denied his chance at revenge by circumstance, Nicolae allowed Carsus and the Theluans to continue to the north, and though he told them of his subordinate with orders to raze the League's territory, he insinuated that Darinn was beyond his ability to control, and had no communications with the captain.

On October 22nd, Captain Darinn reached Starigiak Keep, nominally the replacement fortress for the Phoenix Hold, though it remained a traditional stronghold. This, Darinn seized, though he did not burn it at as he did Sinter. Finally, he moved on to Thelua itself. Similar to Vivimord, however, Orwin's foresight paid off, and the garrison that was left to deny the city to Carsus instead was sufficient to discourage Darinn from attempting the assault the walls. Still, he could hurt the enemies of Aultlane without taking the city itself. He burned everything with twelve miles of Thelua, leaving the city with no forageable land anywhere near it. Unlike his burning of Sinter, however, this did provoke a revolt from the local Theluans.

A local Theluan commander, Daraloth, son of Daralok, rose up with 4,500 infantry. Darinn attempted a swift harry to slow down his sudden pursuers, and fled to the northeast, towards Nidsios Hill, where they waited out the remainder of the campaign. Barred from access to Thelua just as Carsus was, Daraloth decided to follow the road next to the sea to the north, where local news had informed him that the Phoenix Hold had just been taken by the Caelian Domin. In seeking allies to the north, he inadvertently departed Thelua just a few days before Carsus would arrive from the South, after he parted ways with Nicolae at Talall. For his part, dissatisfied with the denial of his vengeance — and the absence of his particular target, Ogfrid Sobol — Nicolae returned once more to Virnac, and Aultlane.

All who approached Aultlane expected violence, a climactic confrontation between the Darrathi occupiers and the liberators of Aultlane. In truth, none were less enthused about the prospect of fighting over the city than the remains of the XIXth Legion. While Seruna Tavan occupied Storian Hall, starving, Ahmina Khova prowled the hills, also starving. It was only shortly after she decided to butcher her horses and procure a meager amount of supplies in order to keep her troops fed that Khova encountered Stola Selonn, who approached the city from east. Having sailed upriver to Cadil, and from there negotiated with Lodiad Castle and Queen Mircalla, whom King Nicolae had deposited there following the fall of Aultlane, Stola traveled southwest and conjured additional roads, connecting the winding road from Cadil to Aultlane with the straighter eastern running path that led from the city to Storian Hall. It was along this road, approaching from the east, that Khova found Stola.

There was never a risk of battle. Khova's forces were clearly equipped as cavalry, yet had no horses, and morale was visibly low, in comparison to Stola's Caelians, who were kept in high spirits. Indeed, there was even a sense of relief, that someone non-hostile to the Darrathi had finally arrived, and could take the burden of protecting Aultlane from them. Khova wrote to Seruna Tavan, who agreed to meet with Stola outside of Aultlane. Stola, having learned suspicion from his dealings with Prioneft, took Khova as hostage into his camp, a state to which she resigned herself.

Nearly simultaneous with Seruna's arrival with Stola outside of Aultlane, General Rend, as was her wont, traveled ahead of her Charter officers with her cavalry, and met with Stola. The two leaders met with the highest ranking officer remaining of the XIXth Legion, and began to discuss terms for the relinquishing of Aultlane while they waited for King Nicolae to arrive, having sent him messages requesting his presence.

It was ultimately a large gathering, as even Alois Lightfoot arrived, having sent his own messages in an attempt to contrive a definitive confrontation resolving the fate of Aultlane — a confrontation that proved unnecessary. The negotiations around Aultlane were by no means feats of diplomacy. While Nicolae wanted blood and justice for the attacks he and his lands suffered, he was not in a position to take it himself, and nobody else was eager: Seruna and Khova offered full relinquishing of Aultlane to Nicolae and Ghaionac to Stola, and in exchange they would remain at Storian Hall for the winter, or else disband and return to Darrath in the hopes of serving Arrist of Vallo and the new Republic as the XIXth Legion once more. While the Darrathi planned to leave, Stola and Yvonne planned to march north to assist Carsus in retaking Thelua. For Stola, this was a chance to indirectly harm the League of Rhone and secure an ally in Thousand Crowns. For Rend, this was an opportunity to battle an enemy that wasn't another Charter officer for the first time since the Battle of the Edark Border. They were to be accompanied as far as Talall by Nicolae and Alois, who were each planning their own strikes against the other as soon as these new forces were to depart.

However, the Caelian plan was just a few days too late. Rend returned to her officers and found that the dire supply situation around Aultlane meant that it was impossible for her soldiers to reach Thelua without going hungry, and so after conferring with her officers, she ordered that they disband for the winter and return to Edark.

More significantly, Carsus had reached Thelua and found it barred and guarded by Kardish soldiers. He offered them a single chance to surrender and permit him entrance, which they refused. In brutal retaliation, he seized his own Kardish soldiers (placed in his command as a sort of hostage exchange by Orwin after taking Thelua, along with the troops he inherited from Askil Sahl) and arrested them, hanging hundreds of the soldiers outside of Thelua's walls as an example to the garrison within.

That night, Carsus attempted to have loyal Theluans inside the city open the gates and allow his forces entrance. The first stage of the operation succeeded, and the gates were opened, but the battle, the last battle of the War for a Thousand Crowns, ended with Carsus' forces being beaten back, denied by the stalwart garrison of the Kardish occupiers.

Then from the north of Thelua came four armies: Adjutants Rethan and Detric, Promin Nist, and Daraloth. With this near tripling of the perceived attackers, and the brutal display made outside the walls, I rolled a morale test for the defenders, and based on the result, they asked to be allowed to take a ship north to rejoin Orwin's army, who were themselves only a week or so behind, just passing by Phoenix Hold. Carsus agreed, and the following day, November 7th, Carsus returned home with the remains of his forces.

In actuality, the Caelian armies were not willing to besiege Thelua, not wanting to risk the terms of the negotiation Stola made with Orwin — but the Kardish commander of the garrison would not have known that.

While Nicolae, Stola, and Alois marched north, and Rethan, Detric, and Nist traveled inland in search of supplies, Carsus began his garrison of Thelua. The remaining League of Rhone commanders were nearing on a punitive mission, wanting to make an example of Carsus for his betrayal, but their current status was grim. After they rendezvoused in Alverac, it was a long, slow march to Thelua, along roads that had already been foraged for supplies. Just a day or two before they reached Thelua, their armies were scraping the barrel for provisions, and the news that reached them was not promising. In order to take Thelua, they would need to assault against two strongly defended fortresses — Thelua's outer walls and its citadel — while they were at low morale and a high risk of failure. The other option was to attempt a long siege, in land that was torched beyond foraging, while adversaries gathered about them.

It was a long debate in the League's officer tent, but pragmatism won over vengeance. Without the supplies to effect a siege, there was no point to their continuing towards Thelua. On November 11th, six months and one day after the start of the campaign, the Kardish forces elected to stand down for the winter, and return to their homes. The War for a Thousand Crowns was over.

STATUS QUO

Referee's Note: I make no attempt to hide the fact that I was itching for a conclusion to the campaign after six months of running the game. For as important as this game was and is to me, it took up so much of my time and energy, and I was starting to feel extremely relieved at the prospect of calling time on the game. I don't like to think that I contrived the ending to the campaign, even though I'm sure several players wish it had gone on for longer. I don't think I actively pushed for an ending — it was more like I was holding a box of jumbled nails and running the game was like shaking the box a few times a day, and by November I was tired of shaking, and it seemed like the nails had sorted themselves into an even distribution. And like every referee, at some point you just gotta blow the whistle.

At the end of the campaign, it was less of a discussion of outright winning and losing factions versus interest in resolving the narratives of characters. However, some factions demonstrably achieved their war goals, while others did not. Vercia, of course, was vassalized by the Caelian Domin, and the Darrath Triumvirate was entirely dissolved and replaced by the Republic of Darrath. With the death of King Gaios Coscyrion and the capture of Aultlane, King Nicolae had little chance of accomplishing his predecessors goal of conquering Thousand Crowns, but he was able to end the campaign with a liberated Aultlane and expanded sphere of influence as

compared to how the faction started.

Thelua's goal of independence was ultimately successful, though at great tribulation.

The Edark Marches, as a faction, failed to conquer the Mirtan Valley, but the Steel Charter, in allying itself with Caelia, aligned its war goal, and could be said to have succeeded.

The Solemnity of Kard's effective transition to the League of Rhone also altered their war goals — they maintained control of most of the settlements around the Notoro Seas but for Thelua and the Phoenix Hold, though Sinter was set aflame.

However, the undeniable victor of the War of a Thousand Crowns was the Caelian Domin, which now controlled the Aranth Peninsula, the Hallatian Coast, and all of the strongholds from Ghaionac to Ruan Irlan, either directly or by proxy by the Steel Charter. Like I told Stola's player many times, I attribute Caelia's success to two things: having reliable subcommanders right from the start of the game, and winning about a dozen coin flips in a row. I think that overall, most factions had players that put in incredible effort and commitment to playing the game and playing their characters, and I'm so thrilled that I got to see this world realized by so many passionate players. I look forward to seeing what happens to the Caelian Domin in future games set in Rhone.

EPILOGUES

Immediately after I ended the campaign, I unlocked a new channel for the players to access, “Epilogues”. This was an area where players could publicly discuss what they imagine would happen to their characters after the war, with input from other players and myself if needed. There were a few longer threads started where discussions could take place, both in-character and out-of-character. Rather than go into detail on each epilogue thread, I will simply summarize the major moments. If any reader is still curious about the particular events, they can read the archived threads in the discord channel of the Server of a Thousand Crowns.

CAELIAN AND MARKISH EPILOGUES

Taking place in Lairntiac in mid-winter after the campaign’s conclusion, Stola Selonn invites his commanders and some other notables, like King Nicolae, First Consul Arrist of Vallo, and even Orwin Lorahts, to announce his intention to return to Caelia and assume the throne held by Domin Kayes II. After which, he would begin rule over the conquered lands (Caelia, Vercia, the Hallatian Coast, the Edark Marches, and most of Thousand Crowns) in the Caelian style of meritocratic advancement.

Personally, I think (and what I think matters a whole lot) before this can happen, there would be two civil wars — the Edark Marches and the Caelian Domin, as the Steel Charter attempts to overthrow the High Margrave Lotallo Manene and Stola and his allies attempt to depose Kayes II. Both of these are in the favor of the players characters: the Steel Charter, in the lore, already had the history of putting down revolts in the Marches, and would have the advantage now that they were the rebels. I imagine that Manene would flee Gallemark before the Charter reached him.

Caelia would be more difficult — Stola succeeded on the Domin’s Charge, which would give him legal claim to the throne, and would have significant military and popular support. I think it’s likely that Stola does succeed in becoming the new Domin, but the chaos of his succession means that it is some time before he can actually begin administering Thousand Crowns, or any of the other newly-conquered regions.

VERCIAN EPILOGUE: “THE LONG GAME”

In the aftermath of the Caelian Epilogue, Teslan and Talaneth Karolon begin preparations to build chapters of a Knight Brotherhood in service to Attor all along and within the now-conquered Caelian territories. These chapters would work towards order and Attorism throughout Thousand Crowns.

DARRATH EPILOGUE

While much of Fetrel Tarac’s post-game story was decided by her player during the long march back from Aultlane to Mirues, and the subsequent negotiation with the First Consul Arrist, the fate of the XIXth Legion itself was yet to be determined. Arrist considered it to be a vestige of imperial conquest, but Seruna Tavan viewed the Legion as being principally of Darrath, led by the Triumvirs or not. While King Nicolae of Aultlane attempted to negotiate extradition of Seruna and Khova back to Aultlane for punishment of their capturing of the city, ultimately Arrist allowed the Legion to return and submit themselves to republican reforms. Come spring, the Republic of Darrath would be defended by an army of peasants no more.

LEAGUE OF RHONE / KARDISH EPILOGUES

There was not a substantial thread on the post-game fates of the Kardish commanders. There was a brief discussion of what each commander would think of Orwin Lorahts following the war, and how that would affect their commitments to her future campaigns. As for Orwin herself, her future was left undetermined, though it seemed likely that she would commit herself to another military campaign in the next season.

As for the “League of Rhone” itself, I think that more than the other conquered areas, the strongholds around the Notoro Seas will have to be continuously occupied in order to preserve the organization — while Thousand Crowns can be governed by some appointed governor, the semi-feudal system remained in place. But the independent towns along the Seas have little commonality other than their proximity to one another, and the independence of both Thelua and the Phoenix Hold would mean that there is little economic benefit from their association. I think that in the near future of the League of Rhone, either parts of it just slide away back to independence, the League itself becomes a far more informal association, like a loose defensive pact, or more Kardish force is required in order to preserve it.

AULTLANE EPILOGUE: “THE FATE OF ALOIS LIGHTFOOT” AND “SONGS ON THE WIND”

By far the most narrative of the various epilogues, there were two major threads that resolved the Aultish commanders. The first was a described showdown between King Nicolae and Alois Lightfoot in Talall, immediately after the end of the campaign.

Referee’s Note: I didn’t actually realize how committed these two players were to fighting each other, and is the main thing that I wish I had waited for in-game. Either telling them that I was wrapping up the game, or delaying the whistle until they were done would have been better, but I also really appreciate how collaboratively they were in writing their epilogue.

After an attempted betrayal by Alois against Nicolae, the two fought just outside the walls. Alois was defeated, and most of his men are killed. Alois himself manages to scar Nicolae and gouge out one of his eyes before being killed himself. In the epilogue to this epilogue, “Songs on the Wind,” Alois’ player described how Alois’ daughter Anya would take up her father’s cause and wage a rebellion against King Nicolae in a quest to avenge Alois.

In the short term, Aultlane has a hard winter because of the complete plundering of the countryside that happened over the course of the war. Afterwards, its power would be greatly diminished: Aultlane would hold Virnac and Talall as fiefs, but otherwise its territory was not significantly increased from before the war. However, it would be vital as being the only remaining notable independent stronghold left in Thousand Crowns.

LESSONS

REFEREE'S RETROSPECTIVE

Confession: After several weeks, I stopped rolling the 1-20 chance that messengers would be captured while travelling through neutral or friendly territory, and just made peace with naturally losing track of around 5% of messages without rolling for it. For messengers that traveled past hostile armies, I still rolled the 1-6 chance for them to be captured.

TOOLS

I think the best thing the prospective *Cataphracts* referee can do while preparing to run a game is decide on what suite of tools you will use to actually make it work. What programs will you use to track information, what areas you will find a way to automate, etc. Here I'm going to describe the tools that I used, what I would use differently, and what I would try were I to ever run another game.

DISCORD

The most obvious digital tool, if you plan on running *Cataphracts* you almost certainly are planning on using Discord. I'll keep this section to a minimum, but here's how I organized my server:

- Commander roles, queue roles, and spectator roles.
- Lore channels for fiction, world history, un-related maps.
- A handout channel for commander maps, relevant lore documents, mercenary info, etc.
- Each faction had its own text channel, and each commander's had a thread within that channel.
- There was a "local communications" channel where I would make a new thread every time player-characters gathered together so they could chat directly to one another. Generally, I did this whenever they entered scouting range of one another.

The Vizier and Anti-Vizier

This is my most fun suggestion. I made two custom emotes for my server, a "Vizier" emote and an "Anti-Vizier". Both were pretty useful. Some players invoked the Vizier emote when they wanted rules clarifications or unbiased advice on stuff that their characters would know, and I used the Vizier to gently point out what I perceived to be obvious missteps based on information that the player already had but had forgotten about, or some element of the rules that they had not considered but applied to their current circumstance.

I used the anti-vizier emote (just a negative version of the vizier emote) consistently to troll and point out mistakes after the fact or to jokingly offer bad suggestions to dilemmas the characters were in. I cannot say how well received the anti-vizier was by all players, but I was happy to have him.

DISCORD WEBHOOKS:

This became increasingly important to my campaign, so it gets its own section. I am not a

programmer, so my knowledge of this is limited, but Webhooks are what allows automated scripts and bots to “hook” in to your server and make posts. In my game, we used webhooks to post daily supply updates for each thread. Each faction had its own webhook, and each thread has its own unique ID. The “Quartermaster Bots” would run a script every night that went in to each player’s Google Sheet for their army, deduct supplies based on usage, and then post that information in their respective thread. **I consider this essential to the running of the game**, but this functionality was designed by one of my players, I did not (and am unable to) do it myself.

GOOGLE SHEETS:

Pretty self explanatory. There’s a lot you can do with Sheets functions to make life easier and track more information.

AZGAAR’S FANTASY MAP GENERATOR

I ended up doing nearly all my campaign management in Azgaar’s Fantasy Map Generator, a tool I had a lot of familiarity with since I used it to do my initial worldbuilding of Rhone many years ago. There were, I found, many advantages to using Azgaar’s and a couple disadvantages.

Advantages:

- Everything can be tracked in Azgaar’s, from armies, notes about locations and factions, diplomacy, messengers (I used a diamond marker with the scroll emoji to track each message)
- Foraged areas, torched areas, and recruited regions can be tracked with the “Zones” functionality.
- Built-in measurement tools for distance
- Can track political boundaries, biomes, altitudes. Players will sometimes ask for this information

Disadvantages:

- Armies all visually have the same size.
- Web-based — you can download a version to run off-line, but high-detail maps might run slowly depending on your computer.
- Azgaar’s is cell-based, not hex based, which means that while you can easily overlay a 6-mile hex-grid over the map, zones and borders will align with the cells, not the hexes. Mostly a cosmetic issue, I found.

RULES

I mostly ran *Cataphracts* as written, updating to v1.1 when those rules came out in July, with one major exception. I think every referee will have friction against particular parts of the rules for their own idiosyncratic reasons, so here are mine, and my thoughts behind them. One change I did make off the bat was that Capital Cities for each faction had Citadels, a fortress inside the city that defenders could retreat to after losing an assault, or immediately if they wanted to abandon the rest of the city to attackers in favor of a more defensible position. This double layer of defenses meant that factions could be a little more confident that with a few defenders they wouldn’t lose their home territory to a small sneak attack, and was an added obstacle for when those strongholds *were* eventually besieged, adding a climactic element to the attack.

STRONGHOLDS

In my campaign, there was never a long siege of another player's defended stronghold. The default garrison sizes meant that determined players could sweep over strongholds without issue, and if any faction had a single commander with the "Guardian" trait, they could march from stronghold to stronghold without taking any casualties. This may have been yet another issue downstream of making the map way too large, but I think there are ways to make strongholds more valuable.

I would make a few changes for future campaigns regarding strongholds: First, I would allow players to budget garrisons at the start of the game — allocate more troops to some strongholds, and fewer to others. Raising default garrisons means that opposing armies can't swarm over the walls. (Alternately, giving garrisons a greater bonus to counteract numerical advantages would also achieve the same result).

Second, and this addresses another issue that arose in the game — I would designate a few Coastal Cities on the map that generate a large amount of supplies every month. This would make these strongholds and their surroundings High Value Targets for opposing players, and they would also emphasize the logistical element of the game. Supply lines were simply not a reality in my campaign, since it was always easier to just forage out in the field. Having cities generate supplies that need to be transported to the front lines reduces the overall foraging that occurs (though, as I found, foraging *did* set a natural timer on the campaign, which ended just as supplies became difficult to find for most armies. This is something that should be taken into account when starting your campaign). From what I saw, complete reliance on foraging became a problem that was both labor-intensive to solve and also not very interesting. Managing supply lines is more in line with what *Cataphracts* promises, and does not remove the problem of keeping your soldiers fed, but adds an element that is (hopefully) a little more interesting to solve.

WIZARDS

I think the type of campaign determines how valuable any of the advice here will be. Rhone is a high-fantasy setting with sorcerers and High Mages, which meant that wizards were regarded in the setting as being fairly important. However, they were also largely underused, since no army was stationary enough to spend 4 weeks researching their most powerful spells. If you run a campaign in a similarly high-magic setting, I would recommend either reducing the research time required for each spell to around 2 weeks at the maximum, which would drastically increase the total number of spells cast across the campaign, or else remove the possibility that wizards will become their own commander. Having wizards be safely placed to research inside a stronghold is another reason to besiege a stronghold, and the subsequent movement of the wizard is another logistical consideration for the players. "Where do we put our wizards?" could be a meaningful question for them to consider!

Additionally, I think that in a high-fantasy world like Rhone, wizards should provide a passive modifier for battle rolls: +1 if you have more wizards than your opponent or something (Mattalax would have counted for 3 or 4 wizards, probably).

HARRYING

This is the big one — when Sam introduced the Harrying rules in *Cataphracts* v1.1, I thought

sensible. And then my server descended into chaos. There were literally hundreds of messages of debate about the harrying rules, with some players doing fairly advanced math to prove how they were incentivized to always harry instead of the normal battle rules. I remain not particularly convinced of this, but in the interest of calming everyone I decided to design my own harry rules, mainly so that players would be less likely to complain in my own Discord server if harries had my stamp on them. Here are the rules I designed:

During a battle, you can decide to forego your normal positive modifiers in order to harry the enemy. You instead get the following modifiers to your battle roll. +1 if you have skirmishers, +2 if you have cavalry +1/-1 per difference per mile between enemy army length and your army length (i.e., a 1 mile force attacking a 3 mile force would gain a +2, a 5-mile army attempting to harry a 0.5 mile army would get a -5) results: if you lose, normal battle loss effects. If you win, margin of victory: 1-3: pick 1 4-5: pick 2 6+: pick 3

- inflict 10% of your total as casualties,
- steal 1 of your days' worth of supplies or loot,
- halve enemy movement for the next day,
- you can move up to your scouting range,

Commander Trait interactions:

- "Crusader" does not apply to harrying,
- "Guardian" functions as normal,
- "Outrider" increases retreatable range,
- "Raider" 10% additional stolen supplies / loot,
- "Vanquisher" 5% bonus calculated from the harrying army's totals, not the harried totals

To be honest, I quite like these rules — they make a couple trade-offs that prompt interesting decision-making on behalf of commanders. Army length currently only matters for determining movement speeds, but giving a modifier to harrying based on length differences gives players the opportunity to make informed choices about their own army compositions. They are not so severe that all armies will always harry, but now small detachments of cavalry and skirmishers have better justification for their existence.

TACTICS BONUSSES

In the post-game discussion, this was a surprising point of contention. Many players felt that tactics bonuses (-3 to +3 on the battle rolls, though in practice I don't think I ever gave out a penalty) were far too subjective and arbitrary. They felt that the bonuses often went to the player who wrote the most compelling fictional description of their battle tactics (which I'm not sure is true, on my end). In the post-game, there was a lot of talk in favor of removing tactics bonuses entirely, which I am sympathetic to, but not persuaded by. Personally, I decided early on that a +1 would be for smart positioning that took advantage of their army's composition, a +2 would be for what I deemed as being exceptionally effective tactics that made use of units and terrain, and the rare +3 would be for instances when both one player exceptional tactical decisions while their opponent inadvertently played right into their hands.

Logistically, the way I ran battles and appraised tactics was once a battle was occurring, I would make a thread in the battles channel (called #the-field in my server) and would give an overall lay of the land, the two sides' relation to one another, and then ask that each commander write out their tactics in their respective orders threads. I would then compare their tactics against one another, and adjudicate. This method successfully got me through the campaign, but I have thought about how I would improve it.

I think I would make a standardized rubric of bonuses that would apply to battle modifier rolls, that includes all existing modifiers such as “advantageous terrain” and “Chosen Battlefield,” in addition to a column or row of tactical advantages based on circumstance. If there are sufficient entries in this hypothetical rubric, there would be just enough such that commanders couldn’t attempt to capitalize on *every* tactical option, but not so many that it would be extremely long.

MAP DESIGN

When I showed Sam the map I was planning to use, he remarked that it looked pretty big. Reader, I should have listened. My intention was that each faction would start on the outside of the region of conflict and move in to a smaller subsection of the map. Instead, the entire map was exploited and conquered, meaning that the distances between players quickly became far larger than what I was prepared for. Heed my warning: make your maps smaller and more compact.

My excuse for Rhone was that I was using a pre-existing setting that had its own factions and geography. If you are also working with those constraints, try to zoom in much, much closer than the 200,000+ square miles that my map covered.

I would approach the map like a level designer. Try to make interesting paths and choices with roads and rivers, such that there are natural choke points and key locations that make obvious zones of control, but have several different unique paths to get between those locations. I was too arbitrary in making my roads and bridges, and it definitely hurt aspects of the game in ways that were obvious to me in hindsight.

ENDING A CAMPAIGN.

This was not something I considered for the first months of the campaign, but eventually I had to reckon with the fact that I had no idea how to actually conclude a campaign. It is **incredibly** difficult to force an ending in *Cataphracts*. The chances that one faction can completely eliminate or subdue every other faction are low, and doing so would take an incredible amount of time and luck. It is far more likely to “draw by agreement,” but even then, some factions or players might want to stand down and exit the campaign before others.

About half-way through the game, I announced that we would, at a minimum, be breaking for the winter — On December 1st, all armies would stand down, and though commanders could continue to plot and correspond over winter, armies could not be raised again until March 1st. I feel like this is still sensible, but after hitting the 6-month point of running the game, I just wanted it to be over. When the game reached a stable status quo point of commanders realizing that there was simply not enough supplies remaining to achieve any meaningful objectives before December 1st, I called the game to an end and opened up a new channel, “epilogues” where players could write about what their characters or factions did after the war’s conclusion. I recommend doing something similar, but I would try to be even more open about this style of ending than I was with my players. I think knowing that there was a space to be more authorial after the end of the campaign would benefit players.

SUPERLATIVES & AWARDS

MOST VALUABLE SUBCOMMANDER

Adjutant Rethan (*Defeated Ortolon Twice, Drew against Orwin Lorahts*)

Honorable Mentions

Promin Nist, Captain Darinn, Priestess Ahmina Khova

FARTHEST DISTANCE TRAVELED

General Yvonne Rend (*2,200 miles*)

Runner Ups

Adjutant Rethan (1,600 miles)

Adjutant Destruc (1,000 miles)

Blademaster

Prioneft Rend (*Defeated both Stola Selonna and Yvonne Rend*)

Scariest Commander

Ursito Mattalax (*By Unanimous Vote*)

Messenger

Dominunant Stola Selonn (*81 messages sent, 51 received*)

Worst Destination

Aultlane

Loneliest Commander

Prioneft Rend (*80 days without receiving a message from an allied commander*)

Worst Luck

Shegreth the Forsworn (Successive 1-6 chance to die as a dragon)

Runner Up: Knight-Marshal Teslan “Ironside” Karolon

I’m Not the Subcommander. I’m the Commander Who Subbed In.

King Nicolae

Honorable Mentions:

Legate Seruna Tavan

Most Horses Eaten

Priestess Ahmina Khova

Needlessly Cryptic

General Yvonne Rend

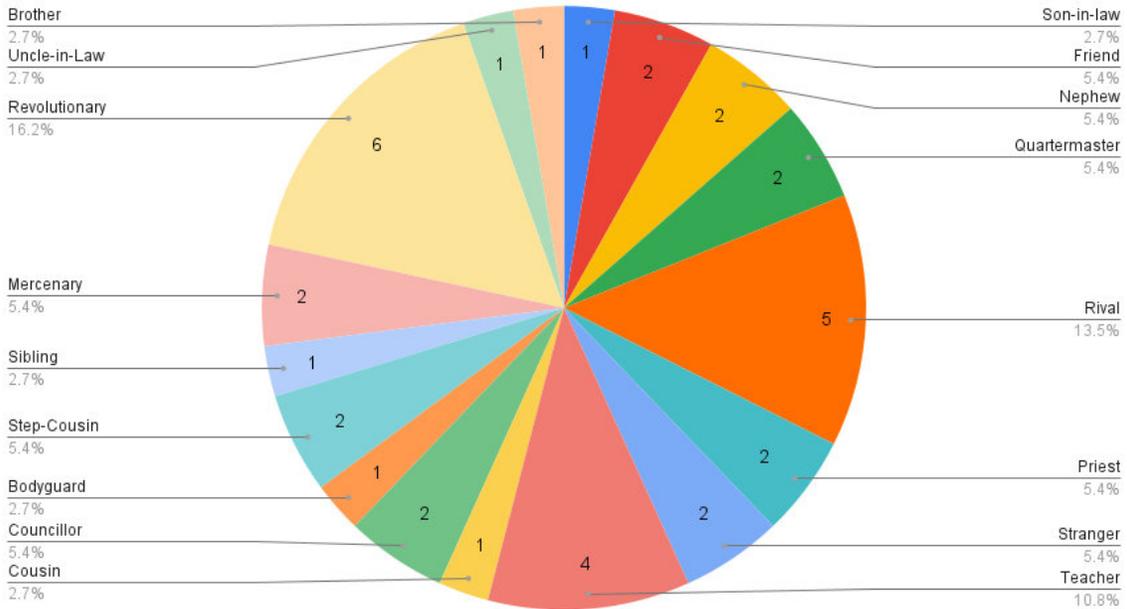
Would Benefit Most From Reading the *Art of War* Award

Praetor Fetrel Tarac

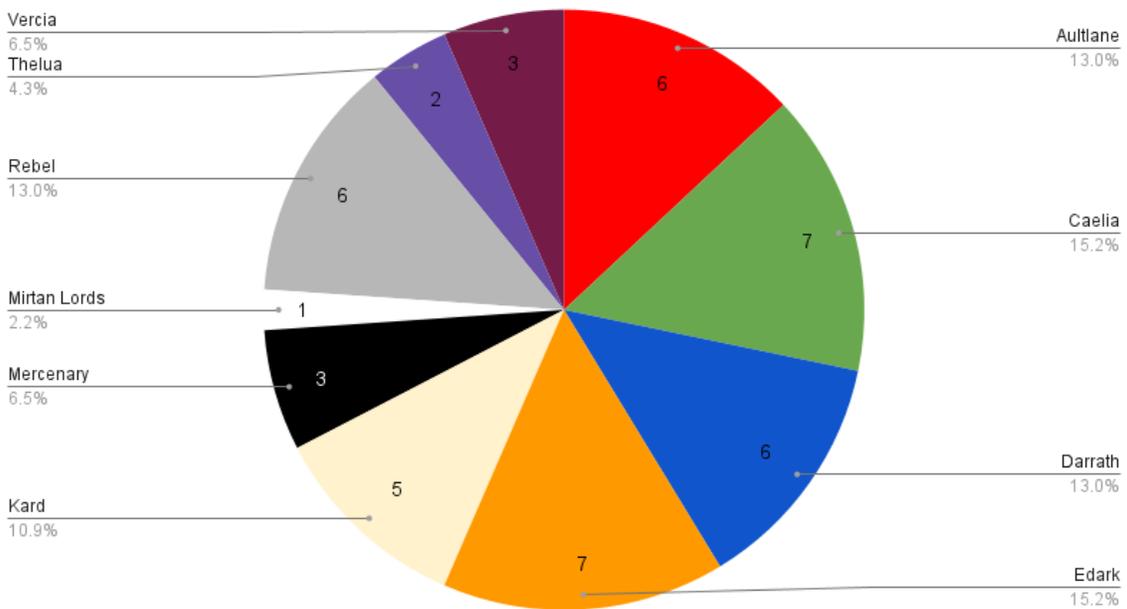
DATA AND CHARTS

The following two charts show the relationship between a rolled subcommander and their “parent” commander. Interestingly, “Rival” was rolled quite often, particularly by Stola Selonn, and within the Steel Charter, “Teacher” was rolled twice, which we decided to characterize as part of the internal structure of the Charter, in which officers were expected to instruct all other officers on their fields of expertise; hence, Yvonne Rend was Halec Meer’s fencing instructor, and Ockham Thenn was Rend’s defensive engineering instructor.

Relationship to Superior

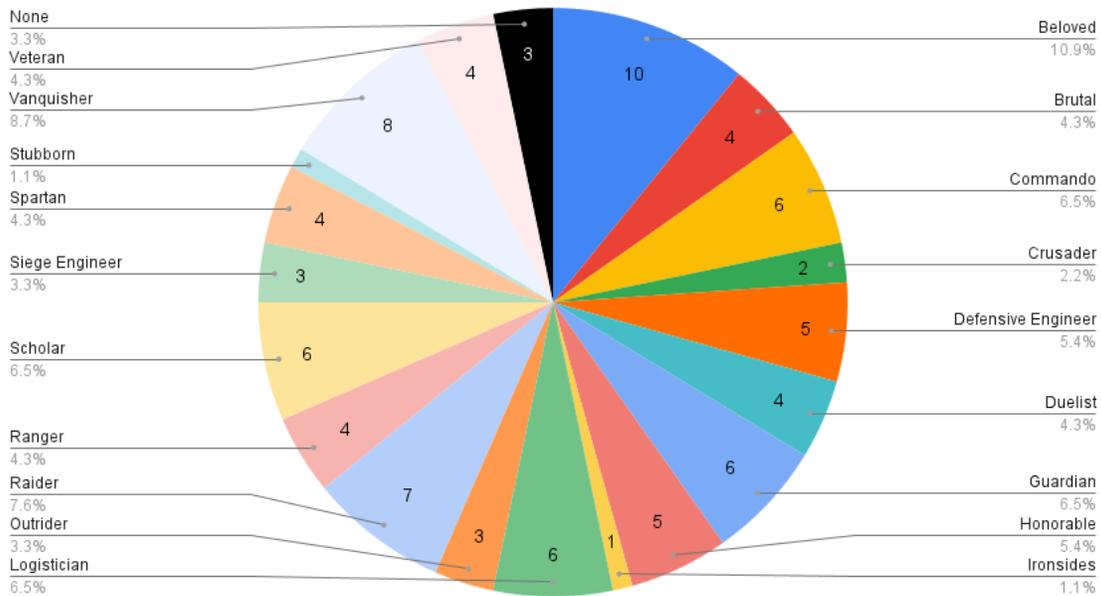


Amount of Commanders per Faction

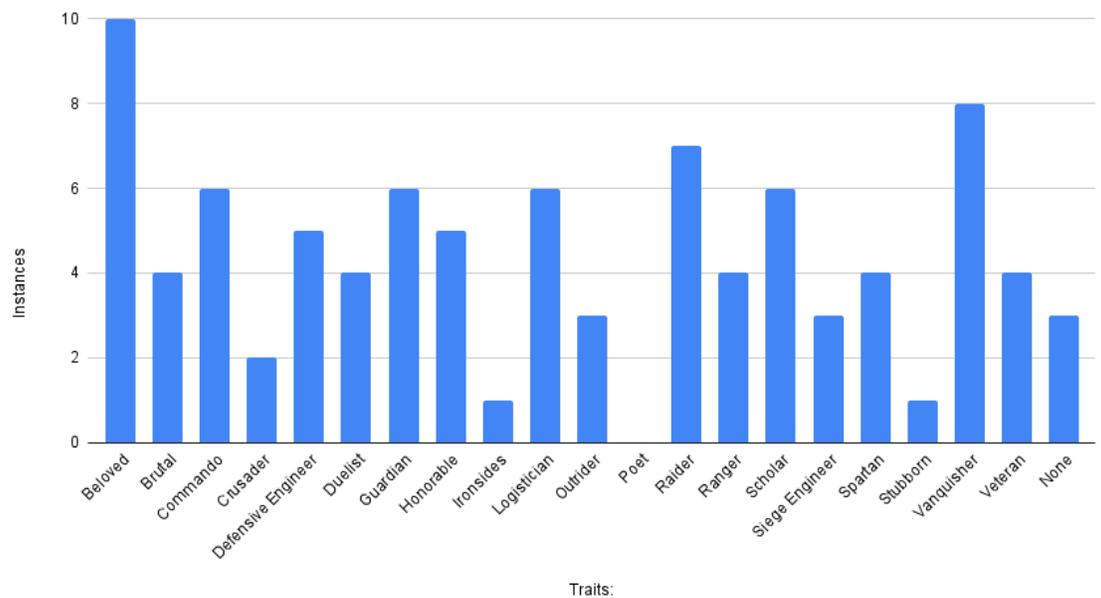


These two charts show the total commander traits across all commanders. Because these were all random, I find it interesting to note which traits occurred more often, and which ones barely at all. Note that faction leaders and Ursito Mattalax all had hand-picked traits by me, thus skewing the data some.

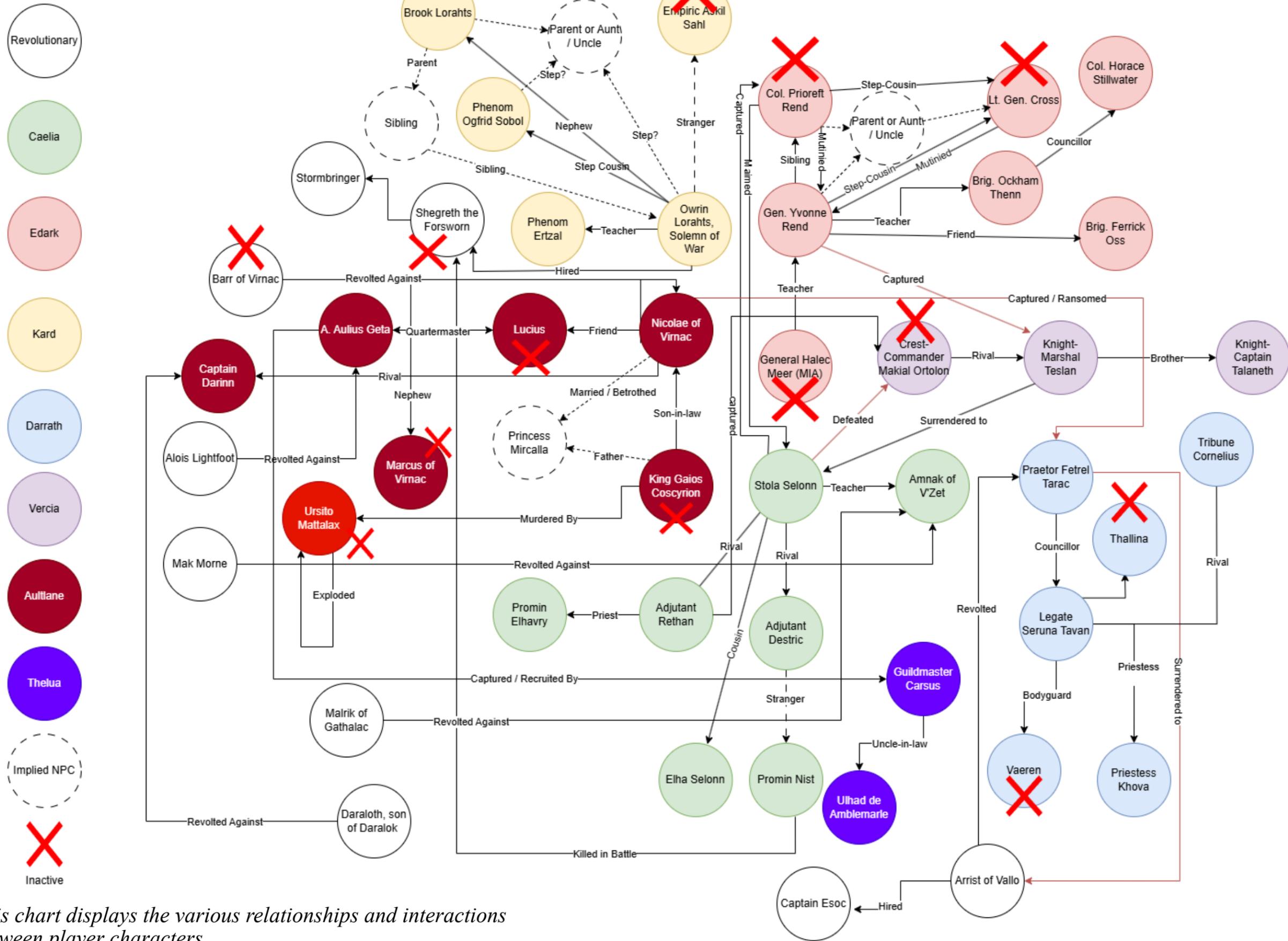
Commander Traits



Count of Commander Traits



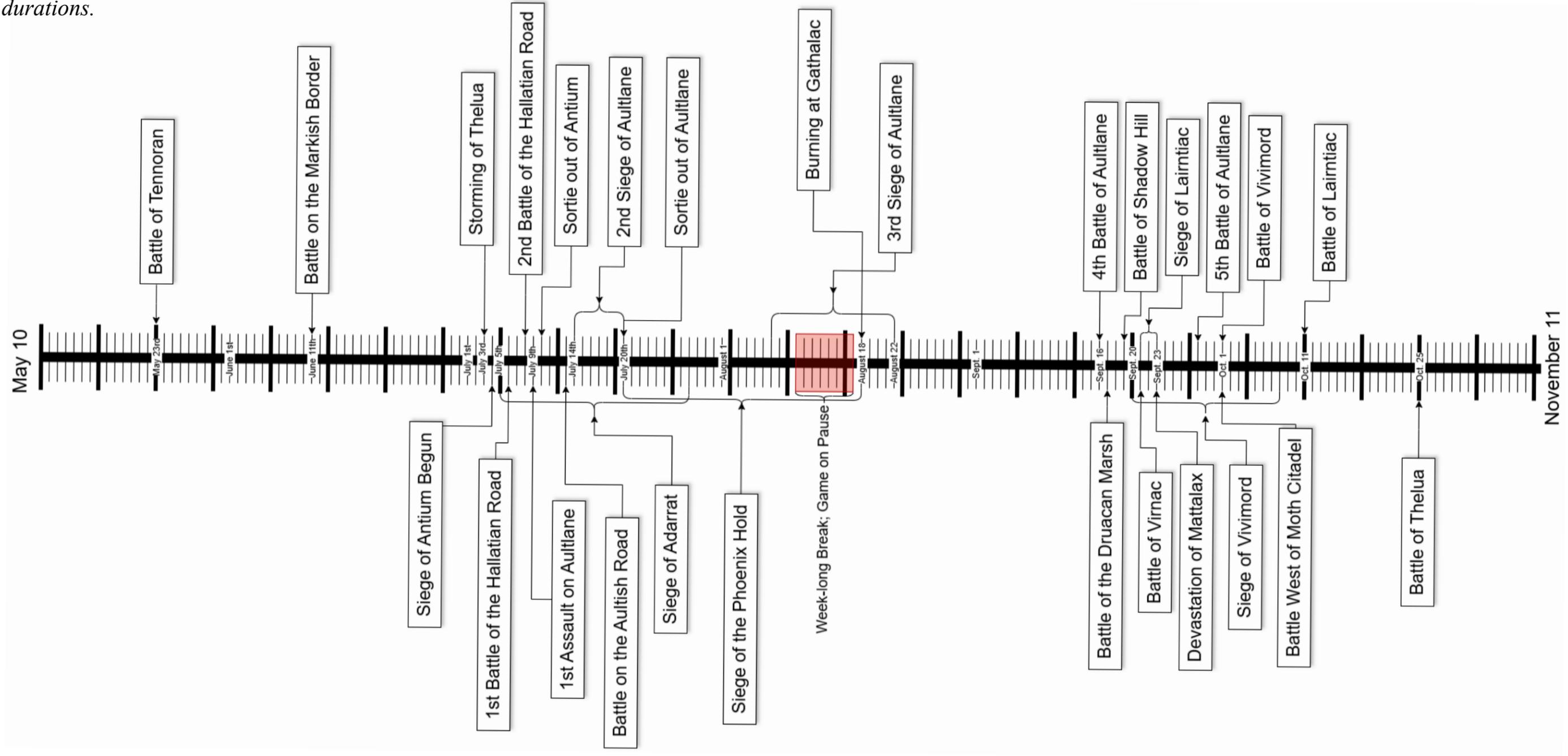
COMMANDER RELATIONSHIPS



This chart displays the various relationships and interactions between player characters.

TIMELINE OF BATTLES

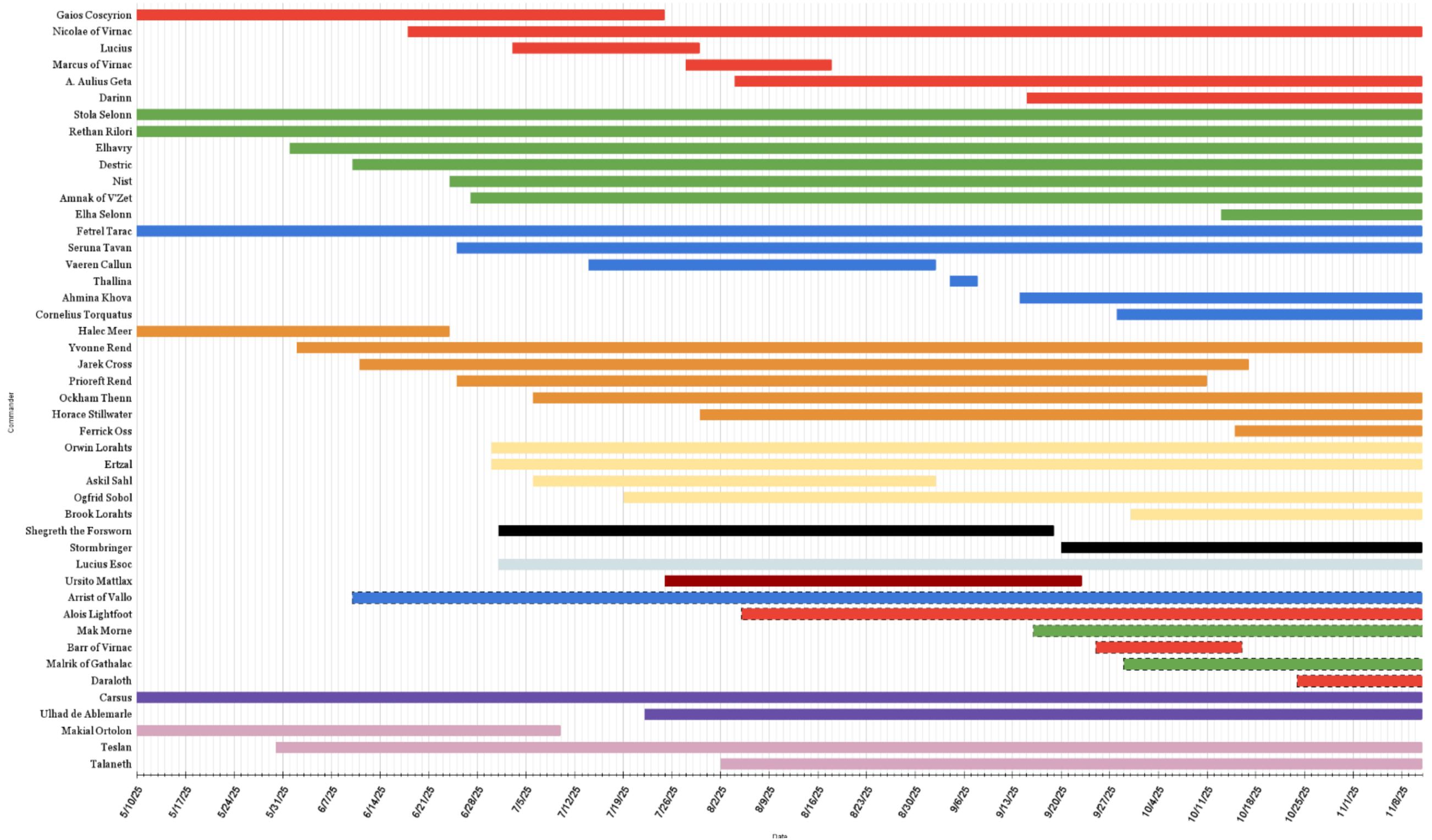
This chart shows every major battle and siege, along with their durations.



PLAYTIME BY COMMANDER

This chart shows the chronological participation of each commander: what day they joined the game, and what day I considered to be their last (usually on the day I decided that they were no longer an active player, if they simply stopped responding to messages).

Commander Days Played by Faction (Aultlane / Caelia / Darrath / Edark / Kard / Mercenaries / Rebels + Other / Thelua / Vercia)



FACTION HANDOUTS

The following are the faction handouts as were given to players. They contain more background for each faction's history, and their special abilities and units. I only got around to creating a list of names for the Caelian Domin, which might be apparent. Following each handout is the list of their faction-specific spells.

THE CAELIAN DOMIN

The Caelian Domin claims that it alone is the true descendant of the Tyresian Empire, that its hilly coast, the first region to be settled by Tyresia beyond the now-sunken valley, is as near to the heart of the culture as might still exist. To be sure, Caelia has inherited much of the knowledge possessed by Tyresia – this is evident in their great stone towers, Lyrell's University, and the most learned alchemists in Rhone. This continuity also led to the exaggeration of an existing local custom: the Domin's Challenge. During the Tyresian Imperial era, the Caelian region was governed from Tyress, and had little more than a ceremonial regent left over from its independent age – the Caelian Domin. While the governor was selected by the Imperial bureaucracy, the Domin was inherited not by blood, but by the completion of ostensibly meritocratic tasks, though in practice these were often won by scions of powerful families that could afford the tutelage and training required to excel. In early centuries, these challengers were fairly martial – the Challenge was often a tournament-style series of martial tests. But as the Tyresian Empire urbanized, they became more varied, including literary or artistic challenges.

It was after the Drowning of Tyresia that this system became truly significant. With the eradication of the region's Imperial government, it was the continuity of the Domin's Challenge that kept some semblance of unity throughout the surviving powers. Instead of fracturing into disunity like so many other remnant provinces, the Caelians, encouraged by the meritocratic ideal that by remaining a unified state *any* of them could potentially gain supremacy over the others, avoided much of the violence and chaos that swept across the rest of Eastern Rhone.

There have been six Dominants since the Drowning, with an average reign of 35 years. Domin Kayes II, the assumed title and name of one Arsuo Callevet, has reigned since he was 22, and at 94 years old has far exceeded the lifespan of any prior ruler. As a trained alchemist himself, Kayes redirected Lyrell's University to concoct potions of youth, vitality, and longevity. With the end of his reign no longer in sight (apparently) Kayes now mocks the Challenge, assigning the prospective Dominants nigh-impossible tasks. To Stola Selonn, the son of a Caelian admiral and general, the Domin challenged that he take a single legion and conquer Thousand Crowns: a patently ludicrous task. To the surprise of all but those who closely knew him, Stola accepted, and began mustering his forces at Oskerant.

Ruler: Domin Kayes II

Commander: Dominant Stola Selonn (Trait: **Honorable**)

Initial War Goal: Strategic control over the region of Thousand Crowns

SPECIAL RULES AND DETACHMENTS

Caelian Alchemy: You have an additional magic-user type of detachment, Field Alchemists, that can produce explosives and warfare alchemy. While resting in a stronghold, each Field Alchemist can turn 1 Infantry into a Sapper for every 2 Supplies they spend, up to 100 supplies per Field Alchemist, or 1 Heavy Infantry into a Grenadier for every 5 Supplies they spend, with the same limit.

Sappers

Sappers are skirmishers. Every 25 sappers counts as a Siege Engine in terms of reducing a stronghold's defensive bonus.

Grenadiers

Grenadiers are heavy infantry. When defending a stronghold, inflict an additional 5% casualties.

Faction Magic

While Caelia is particularly advanced in terms of alchemical works, they still use mages and sorcerers in primarily auxiliary roles, since the knowledge of Tyresian war magic was largely lost in the Drowning. Caelian mages typically specialize in communication, divination, and weather spells.

Commander Titles

1. Servient
2. Custodiate
3. Ordinate
4. Promin
5. Adjutant
6. Dominunant

Faction Names

1. Ansuin
2. Arsuo / Arsha
3. Avhery
4. Byrant / Byrana
5. Ceorin
6. Cinian
7. Destruc
8. Dian
9. Elha
10. Estrun
11. Getrian
12. Hanic
13. Loris
14. Murhan
15. Nist
16. Rethan
17. Rulha
18. Sarha
19. Steris
20. Tavher

CAELIAN MAGIC

ROVINGS OF A DREAMING MIND

Communication. The entranced wizard visits another in dream, conveying to them a message. Duration: 1 Night. Research Time: 1 Week.

MOCKERY OF SPEECH

Communication. Ravens are given a mockery of speech, allowing them to speak messages and recite replies upon their return, upon which the magic fades. Duration: Instant. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

TIDINGS OF A PRIOR DAWN

Divination. The wizard calls forth memory of a chosen location, and recalls events that happened in its recent past. Duration: 1 Day. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

VISIONS OF THE MORROW

Divination. The wizard casts their mind out to the future, and sees all that happens tomorrow. Duration: 1 Day. Research Time: 4 Weeks.

WEATHER WORKING

Weather. Allows the wizard to choose the next week's weather, from clear skies to thunderstorms. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

FURY OF BARITHÉ

Weather. Conjures a mighty and violent storm of booming thunder and angry lightning upon a single location. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 3 Weeks.

THE EDARK MARCHES

Faction History

While Tyresian expansion to the north and west of the Tyresian Vale was swift, its control of the Markish hills was far more prolonged and contested. The Markish fiercely defended their homes, but in time the Tyresian legions adapted and local rulers submitted. The campaign to conquer the Mark was long enough and local resistance persistent enough, however, that Tyresian authority over the region was kept as a military governorship, Edark. At the time of the Tyresian Drowning, the High Margrave was a post with great responsibility and few benefits, that was then occupied by a Markish man named Horian Thar. Seeing the Tyresians wiped out practically overnight, Thar was quick to assert governance over the newly-independent Markish hills. It was this initiative that stopped the Mark from collapsing into immediate anarchy, though the remainder of Thar's lifetime, and the rest of the following century was spent regaining control of the Hills.

It was by pure chance that the Steel Charter was in Edark at the time of the Drowning. It was the Imperial Mercenary Company, a legion of irregulars leased out to groups outside the Empire. At the time of the Drowning, they were just returning to Tyress by land after assisting in the conquest of the Riverlands. Left without a home, the Steel Charter were hired by the Margrave to solidify control over the region, and in time became critical to Edark's wealth and unification. In time, the Charter resumed its original function and became a state-owned mercenary company once more. In the last thirty years, a variety of states have relied on the Steel Charter for their successful campaigns, including Edark's neighbor of Darrath in their conquest of the island of Ilia, and of the Solemnity of Kard in their initial capture of Vivimord.

Under the command of Halec Meer, a lifelong soldier, the Charter has seen unprecedented success, and brought fabulous wealth to Edark through a variety of successful campaigns. Far more than the Margrave, General Meer is popular throughout Edark, and beloved by his troops. Because of this, the High Margrave, wary of Meer's influence surpassing his own, has "commissioned" the company to venture upland into Thousand Crowns and seize it for Edark.

Leader: High Margrave Lotallo Manene

Commander: General Halec Meer (Traits: Beloved, Raider, Spartan)

Initial War Goal: Complete control of the Mirta River and its tributaries

Special Rules and Detachments

Mercenary Contacts

Other mercenary companies require 20% less payment. Loot takes up 25% less supply space.

Night Blades

Night Blades are skirmishers that are not affected by night in terms of travel or scouting.

Markish Lancers

Markish Lancers are both cavalry and skirmishers. They can fight in hills as if they were grassland.

Squad Mages

Squad Mages are not a discrete detachment; rather they can be assigned to other infantry detachments. Each squad mage assigned to a detachment reduces combat casualties by 3.

Faction Magic

Tyresian war-magic died with the Drowning, but even before then the Steel Charter made little traditional use of sorcerers. Instead, they relied more on Markish enchanters to empower the company with runes and investitures. In the time since the Drowning, the Charter has also incorporated local magic-users to act as squad-level healers and auxiliary support. The Enchanters, however, specialize in granting entire detachments blessings and boons.

Commander Titles

1. Lieutenant
2. Captain
3. Major
4. Colonel
5. Brigadier
6. General

EDARK MAGIC

CARRY THE ROAD BENEATH OUR FEET

Enchantment. Every step is sturdy, every wheel and shoe finds purchase upon even the most uneven of grounds. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

RUNES UPON STEEL

Enchantment. Armor or weapons are inscribed with secret runes, increasing their effectiveness in battle. A beloved enchantment for the rank and file. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

EASING THE EFFORTS OF MANY

Enchantment. Hewn trees are lifted lighter, knots hold, and structures are sturdy beyond their make. This enchantment allows for bridges and improvised fortifications to be made quickly. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

INK OF SYMPATHY

Enchantment. An ink well enchanted with sympathy, and any number of pages along with it. Words written with this ink will appear next to one another on the page, wherever those pages may be, until the well runs dry. The ink can be split into up to 4 different wells.. Duration: 200 Words. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

WOODD AND STONE AS STEEL

Enchantment. No pick, no axe, no ram, shall break these walls or burst these gates, for they are now as an iron anvil, resolute and unbreakable. Duration: 4 Week. Research Time: 4 Weeks.

FAVOR OF THE ROAD

Enchantment. The road itself is enchanted, hastening your journey while delaying others. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 3 Weeks.

THE DIOCESE OF VERCIA

Faction History

Two hundred and forty years ago, the city of Antium stood and watched as the world before it was obliterated over the course of eight days. The few Tyresian refugees that had time to flee north from the flood could only watch as the lush, developed vale was swallowed in a black, brackish sea. Towns, roads, cities, swallowed. Yet no bodies on the shore. No evidence of the million people that lived there and were taken in the Drowning. And somehow, the waves broke at Antium, making a broken and marshy shoreline – but the city was safe.

It did not take long for a cult to spring up in the city, believing that the Tyresian gods had abandoned the land, or else caused the flood. And when the first fishermen that braved the new Tyresian sea reported sailing over Tyress and seeing banners unfurled among its towers just beneath the waves, the cult flourished. Seers and god-botherers claimed visions of Attor, the Divine Child, dreaming in his Cradle in the Imperial Palace.

Before the Drowning, Antium was a mercantile city, governed by guilds. But as the cult grew into an organized religion, more and more power shifted to it, until the Diocese of Attor became the state power of Vercia. While its military strength is thus far contained by its borders to the south and east, they have expanded rapidly when able, a process made easier by their evangelists found in every major settlement around the Tyresian Sea. Their promise is that once the Work of Kalacos, the re-named city at the center of the sea is complete, the waters will recede once more and the land will be an earthly paradise kept for all the faithful.

There are rumors across the Sea that the Diocesan plots for a grand crusade, conquest of his neighbors of Edark and Caelia such that he can completely encircle the Tyresian Sea. But that effort requires more soldiers and more resources, and so with as all eyes in Rhone turn towards Thousand Crowns, so too does the Diocesan's...

The campaign to capture Thousand Crowns is led by the Diocesan's nephew, Makial Ortolon. By all accounts a capable and professional commander, there are rumors that Makial serves the Diocesan from ties of blood, not by faith.

Leader: Diocesan Purtho Ortolon

Commander: Crest-Commander Makial Ortolon (**Trait:** Veteran)

Initial War Goal: Grow an army strong enough to seize the Tyresian Sea. Weaken Caelia and Edark.

Special Rules and Detachments

Convert and Conscript: After a siege of a town or city, you gain 1d6 x 100 *converti* as long as you do not pillage it.

Etoshian Knights

Etoshian Knights are heavy cavalry. When in an army of only Etoshian Knights and *converti*, resting morale increases by 1.

Converti

Converti are infantry. At the end of every week of rest in a town or city, half of the noncombatants you would otherwise lose become *converti*.

Faction Magic

The Diocese of Vercia is ambivalent about sorcery, mistrustful of career mages and largely intolerant of folk magic-users, who make up a substantial proportion of the heretical Cult of the Sibylline. Therefore, the Diocese relies on learned Attorite seers and diviners, whose magic often includes divination of the future and the scrying of distant lands or individuals. Additionally, it is spoken that Attorite priests can speak with the dead and chain spirits to the earth.

Commander Titles

1. Sergeant
2. Brother / Sister of the Order
3. Crest Captain
4. Knight-Commander
5. Marshal
6. Crest Commander

VERCIAN MAGIC

SEER SIGHT

Divination. The seer augurs the future, revealing weather, or the shape of impending events. Duration: 1 Day. Research Time: 1 Week.

EAR OF THE YOUNG GOD

Divination. Speak with the Dead, and learn their secrets. Duration: 1 Day. Research Time: 1 Week.

ATTOR'S BLESSING

Prayer. The caster calls and receives the Blessing of Attor, invigorating those around them and bolstering their morale. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

GLIMPSE OF GODSIGHT

Divination. Scry upon an individual or an area. The more the wizard has knowledge of the target, the more information will be revealed. Targets may realize they are scried upon, especially if they are in proximity to another wizard. Duration: 1 Day. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

PETITION OF KALACOS

Prayer. Petition Etosh Himself to deliver servants back into the living world to fight for Attor, for a time. They will stride out from the Holy Sea to make war upon our enemies. Duration: 1 month. Research Time: X Weeks.

DENIAL OF SERENITY

Prayer. Curse your enemies to trap their minds inside their corpses, denying them peace after death. Duration: 4 Weeks. Research Time: 4 Weeks.

THE DARRATH TRIUMVIRATE

Faction History

The XIXth Legion should have been destroyed in the Drowning along with the VIth and XIIIth, but was saved by punishment. While its sister legions returned to Tyress for a parade celebrating their conquest of Ilia, the southern-most islands of Rhone, the XIXth was denied the adulation due to the insubordination of its commander, Vitia Tarac, who refused to carry out the suicidal plan of attack devised by the Darrath territory's civilian governor, Rudo Goral, and instead executed her own daring attack of the islands, which then led to the complete Tyresian occupation of Ilia. Goral, by all remaining accounts, hoped that by making Tarac responsible for the legion's dishonorable exclusion from the Tyresian parade, some vengeful legionnaires would murder her, and Goral's hands would be clean of the execution of his rival.

Instead, Tyresia was destroyed in a god-driven flood, and the Legion looked to Tarac as their savior. The next few decades were challenging for the XIXth. With no empire to support them, the locals rose up in arms to reclaim their independence. It was through discipline and training that Tarac was able to keep the XIXth alive and together. The Legion occupied Adarrat, the regional capital, but even within those walls, there was little stability. Eventually, as Vitia Tarac aged, command passed to her son, who served as one of her officers. Thus began the Tarac line of command of the XIXth, a tradition that continues into the present day. Each generation of legionnaires are born from the legion itself, making it one of the few remaining groups of direct descent from Tyresia.

It was not until Thetrum Torac that the Legion actually began to thrive in Darrath. Having found that, over time, the local populations grew unaccustomed to traditional Tyresian battle tactics, the drills and exercises that the Legion practiced in order to keep themselves united were once more effective. Thetrum expanded outward, reconquering lands in the footsteps of Vitia, several generations ago. He spread south, along the coast, gaining control of the region until at last, he followed his great-grandmothers in controlling Ilia, home of the famed Ilian steel, made by the finest metallurgists in Rhone, who drive their furnaces with the power of monsoon gales.

Thetrum then turned his eye north, but before he could execute on his plans, he fell ill from a tropical disease. Rather than designating a single heir, he split control of his conquered territories to his three children, Vettian, Fetrel, and Ecklo – with Fetrel, his middle child in command of the XIXth. With their Thetrum passed, the Taracs were left with a large realm, a veteran army, and their father's ambitions.

Leaders: Vettian, Fetrel, and Ecklo Tarac

Commander: Praetor Fetrel Tarac (Trait: *Commando*)

Initial War Goal: Capture the Autlane fire mage Ursito Mattalax. Take control of the Phoenix Hold.

Special Rules and Detachments

Marching Camps: When your forces rest outside of a stronghold, they gain a defensive bonus as if they were a stronghold, that starts at +1 and increases by 1 every week that you spend encamped.

XIXth Cataphracts

XIXth Cataphracts are heavy cavalry. An army comprised only of “XIXth” detachments does not reduce morale after a forced march.

XIXth Legionaires

XIXth Legionaires are heavy infantry. An army comprised only of “XIXth” detachments does not reduce morale after a forced march.

Faction Magic

Darrath is humid, and frequently beset by tropical storms. As a result, Darrathi sorcerers are experts in weather manipulation magic, able to create localized effects and greater conjurations. Additionally, they are also able purify water and move earth.

Commander Titles

1. Principales
2. Centurion
3. Primus
4. Tribune
5. Legate
6. Praetor

DARRATHI MAGIC

WINDCRAFT

Weather. Creates or negates an element of weather in the area around the army. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

A RAIN OF PLENTY

Weather. Water purifies, rivers swell, and crops flourish in an area around the wizard. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

TURN THE SLUMBERING EARTH

Move Earth. The earth stirs, and with groaning effort moves to the wizard's bidding, to create simple structures and fortifications. Duration: 1 Month. Research Time: 1 Week.

UPON A CRAFT OF CLOUDS

Weather. The Wizard alights into the sky and travels atop a cloud, and travels as they will the wind to take them. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

STEELWATER

Weather. The Wizard freezes the surface of water, allowing it to be tread upon as if it were a road. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 2 Weeks per 18 miles.

A TEMPEST DRIVEN LIKE CATTLE

Weather. The wizard conjures a roiling storm in a wall, that advances before your army, a monsoon that breaks the land before you. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 4 Weeks.

THE SOLEMNITY OF KARD

Faction History

The Solemnity of Kard is an ancient polity, tracing its history back over a thousand years. Throughout that time, it has largely remained isolated – the Isle of Kard is high, with chalky cliffs and windswept plateaus, and though it is strategically located in the North Sea of Rhone, its natural geography made it largely unassailable to invade and difficult to make use of as a harbor. The Solemnity has always lived on Kard, in both the isle and the city built vertically into the cliff walls of the island. A culture of scholarship, philosophy, and artists, the Kardish have established a reputation throughout Rhone as the continent's greatest sages. Since the Drowning of Tyresia, Kardish have frequently been found as prized courtiers throughout the continent – a sign of status for many rulers is to be a patron of a Kardish artist.

The Solemnity is ruled by the Solemn Council, a governing body of peerless masters of various farms, the Solemn Disciplines that are accepted to require the greatest mental acuity: Astronomy, Logic, Rhetoric, Literature, Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, Enchantment, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Theater. To be a Solemn of a Discipline is to have total and undisputed mastery of the subject. In the last decade, there has been a push to accept another Solemn Discipline into the Council – War. In a way, Orwin Lorahts' conquest of Vivimord, through the use of mercenaries and levied soldiers served as her proposal; the conquest of Thousand Crowns is to be her thesis, a demonstration of the artistry of war. Provisionally named as the Solemn of War, Orwin has chosen an incredible challenge for herself. Given the funds and troops necessary for this deployment by a 7-5 vote among the Council, she faces both a hostile campaign before her and skepticism behind her.

Leaders: The Solemn Council.

Commander: Orwin Lorahts, The Solemn of War (**Trait:** Logistician)

Initial War Goal: Secure control of the Phoenix Hold and both Notoro Seas. Expand to be the dominant military strength in Thousand Crowns.

Special Rules and Detachments

Ships move 6 miles per hour faster, and your wagons can ford rivers at a rate of 5 per day.

Marines

Marines are skirmishers. An army of exclusively marines can undergo a forced march to travel along a river as if they were in a ship (at a regular pace), even without a ship.

Bylda

Byldan (builders) are infantry. When defending a town or city, they count as heavy infantry, and if at least 1,000 byldan are at rest in a town or city, they can spend 1 week and 1,000 supplies to increase its defensive bonus by 1.

Faction Magic

In Kard, magic-use is traditionally perceived as being an interdisciplinary form, not entirely its own domain, though Enchantment is considered a Solemn Discipline. The most impressive of Kardish wizardry is drawing phantasmic structures into and over the world, quasi-real creations that might be bridges or walls, or entire structures that fade in time.

Commander Titles

1. Adept
2. Expert
3. Master
4. Empiric
5. Phenom
6. Solemn

KARDISH MAGIC

THE RISEN SHADOWS

Illusion. A dark mist lays thick across the land, concealing all within its areas. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

BEGUILING MULTIPLICITY

Illusion. A detachment is enchanted to appear as many times in number as they actually are. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

GLAMOROUS SUCCOR

Illusion. Conjures a few days worth of supplies that can provide temporary relief to an army. Duration: 3 Days. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

GLYPHIC INSCRIPTION

Enchantment. An area is inscribed with enchanted runes, allowing easy passage for bearers of the runes, and complicating the passage of those without. Duration: 2 Weeks. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

PHANTOM RAMPART

Conjuration. A wall is conjured, functioning as either a blockade over an area or a bridge over water. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 3 Weeks.

HAVEN OF THE MIND

Illusion. Conjures a fortress from the imagination of the caster -- while ephemeral, it is calming and invigorating to those within. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 4 Weeks.

THE FREE CITY OF THELUA

Faction History

At the time of the Tyresian Drowning, what would become Thelua was merely a close distribution of fishing villages on the Notoro Sea, engaged in mostly subsistence fishing, though they also salted portions of their hauls and sold them inland. What changed the area forever was the discovery of an enormous deposit of silver in the hills around the village, which thus far had been stripped of tin. Rather than resulting in a mad scramble, the village elders took the measure of their situation, debated with one another until they came to an agreement, and then acted together. The fishing village formed a fishery guild and a mining guild, and created an economic council to ensure that they would not ruin their own trade with this influx of silver. It was an act of cooperation uncharacteristic of Thousand Crowns, which may have what made it so lucrative.

Thelua flourished from a collection of fishing villages, to a fortified town, to a bustling trade port with suburban towns. The guild system extended outward to other trades and industries, and is the central governing body of the city. The Fishing Guild now controls maritime trade, and Theluan silver goods can be found across Rhone and beyond. They even managed to negotiate passage along the Phoenix Strait, with the permission of the War College there. For many years, it seemed that Thelua's rise would only ever increase.

The threat of war in Thousand Crowns – true conquest, not the skirmishes and raids of neighbor against neighbor – was taken seriously by the Guilds. Just like the initial debates that brought the villages together over the silver mine, Thelua took the time to analyze their situation. Then King Coscyron of Aultlane forced the surrender of his neighbors with the help of his Fire Mage, Mattalax, and Thelua realized it was time to act. Should they not prepare themselves, it would only be a matter of time before some army came marching upon them.

It was surprise to the rest of the Guildmasters, therefore, that Journeyman Carsus was elected to be Master of the Soldiering Guild by a wide margin – the twenty-two year old had quickly rose through the ranks of the guild, but had done little to establish any public prominence. Now, charged with Thelua's defense, some in the city are worried that their fate rests in the hands of an untested commander.

Leader: The Theluan Guilds

Commander: Guildmaster Carsus (**Trait:** Defensive Engineer)

War Goal: Maintain independence and freedom of trade at any cost.

Special Rules:

Guilded City: Every month, you gain 1d6 x 200 Loot in Thelua. When you rest in Thelua, your supply cost is reduced by half, and when your soldiers rest in another settlement, their resting morale increases by 1.

Special Detachments**Theluan Scouts**

Theluan Scouts are skirmishers. When moving off road, every 2 Scouts in an army allows for 1 infantry in that army to travel as if they were a skirmisher.

Armored Wagons

Every wagon attached to a detachment of infantry or heavy infantry counts as 50 additional soldiers of that type.

Faction Magic

Thelua does not generally rely on mages within a civic capacity, but due to their economic power within the region, they enjoy a close relationship with the Phoenix Hold, and keep one of the college's War Mages on retainer. The Phoenix Hold's magic specializes in sorceries that assist in an army's operations, such as creating roads, clearing fields, temporary bridges, and the like, rather than outright battle magic.

Theluan Ranks

1. Apprentice
2. Sergeant
3. Journeyman
4. Master Sergeant
5. Captain
6. Guildmaster

THE PETTY KINGDOM OF AULTLANE

Faction History

Until recently, Aultlane was one of the many small petty kingdoms that litter Thousand Crowns, ruled by a series of usurpers, stealing thrones out from beneath their predecessors in the tradition of the land. Coscyrion was determined to end that cycle with himself. Once a bandit-turned-mercenary, Gais Coscyrion fought for recognition and wealth, which he leveraged into a banner for the lord of Aultlane. As a reward for his service, he was granted a small fiefdom, though Coscyrion had larger ambitions in mind. He challenged his lord, allowing his keep to be besieged as he and his men snuck over the walls of the town and took hostage his lord's family, which he used as leverage to usurp the seat – an unorthodox claim to rulership in Thousand Crowns, but not unheard of.

Despite how he took control of Aultlane, Coscyrion's rule has, according to his subjects, been a moderate one, neither especially tyrannical nor particularly benevolent. With an air of legitimacy, Coscyrion set his sights on the controlling surrounding lands that he toured as a bandit in his youth. His first attempt at expanding his territory failed, his small army beaten on the field before reaching the stronghold.

Despite the loss, Coscyrion's ambition simmered, and he began to plan. While his immediate neighbors knew that he was rallying troops and preparing for another attempt, none were particularly concerned – Aultlane was a hilly town, poor in farming and in wealth, and could not afford the mercenaries required to pose a legitimate threat to them.

They did not know about the sorcerer Ursito Mattalax. Nobody knows how the two met: whispers are of a mage exiled from some other land, come up north through the Riverlands. Others say that Mattalax himself is a dragon in disguise, and Coscyrion is dooming himself by associating with the creature. Whether true or not, what is known is that Mattalax commands powerful, destructive sorceries not seen since the fall of the Tyresian Empire, whose battle mages could lay waste to entire fields of soldiers. The extent of the sorcerer's power is not known, for none dare to test it. After fielding his armies, Coscyrion's mage made his debut, conjuring an inferno firestorm that routed the opposition. The neighbors capitulated immediately, hoping to secure their own safety until the Phoenix Hold deals with the rogue apostate, a consequence that has yet to materialize. In the past year, Coscyrion has taken the fealty of countless surrounding villages, and is suddenly in control of the largest single kingdom in Thousand Crowns, excepting perhaps the Free City of Thelua.

This conquest drew the attention of the surrounding states – indeed, it brought to bear their full focus, as Thousand Crowns grew to be recognized not as merely the midland land of countless warlords, but of a region that could be united or conquered. In the future, historians will surely say that it was Coscyrion and his mage that sparked the fire that would become the War for a Thousand Crowns.

War Goal: Repel the invaders. Become the King of a Thousand Crowns

Special Rules and Detachments

Knowing the Land

When your army forced-marches off-road, its speed is not halved.

Aultish Rangers

Aultish Rangers are both heavy infantry and skirmishers.

Mirtan Banners

Mirtan Banners are heavy cavalry. While within 24 miles / 4 hexes of a stronghold you control, each detachment of Mirtan Banners adds +1 to battles in the field.

Faction Magic

Rather than reliance on local traditions of sorcery, Coscyrion relies on the magery of Ursito Mattalax, a rogue fire sorcerer of unknown origin. An apostate mage wanted by the Phoenix Hold, Mattalax is a powerful force who commands the lost art of Tyresian battle magic, able to summon firestorms and conflagrations that can sweep across battlefields or over castle walls. Mattalax is powerful, yes, but also volatile and terrifying, and it is yet to be seen if his presence is more of a boon or a curse on the Autlane forces.

Faction Commander Titles

7. Lieutenant
8. Captain
9. Lord
10. Baron
11. Count
12. King

URSITO MATTALAX HANDOUT

Below is the handout that I gave to civilbeard after I brought him in to play the rogue wizard. Some information was left deliberately vague, since I didn't want to answer every question about the character in just a handout.

Ursito Mattalax Commander Sheet

Ursito Mattalax – a name feared throughout Thousand Crowns, and beyond. None know his origins, though many speculate: some say he was a Riverlander who learned secret spells from an old library; others say that he was a member of the Phoenix Hold before being cast out by the war college; some few whisper that he is actually a dragon disguising himself as a human.

Whatever the theory, all agree that Mattalax is one thing: dangerous. The fire mage wields powerful sorceries that can ravage entire armies and burn away swathes of the countryside. It was a demonstration of this power that first caused the lands around Aultlane to surrender to King Coscyron, and thus begin the series of events that resulted in the invasion of Thousand Crowns from its various neighbors.

The relationship between Gaios Coscyron and Mattalax was never quite certain – how they met, and why the mage allied himself with this petty king were never clear. Ultimately, Mattalax betrayed the King of Aultlane, incinerating him in his tower and fleeing to the city of Lairntiac. Whether this was because of some personal falling out, a disagreement over strategy, a better offer from the Mirtan lords, none now can say. The result was that Mattalax arrived in Lairntiac to assume direct command of the forces gathered there.

When news entered Thousand Crowns that its neighbors were each preparing an invasion of the region, Mavadal Gathalon seized the opportunity immediately. Under the pretense of an alliance, he gathered together forces from his home of Gathalac, Cadil, Lodiace Castle, Amardess, Etsareyn, Dorbinac, and others to the city of Lairntiac, to discuss plans to jointly defend Thousand Crowns from these outsiders. Gathalon, young but cunning, betrayed the lord of Lairntiac, Valaos, and seized control of the city.

It was shortly afterwards that Gathalon contacted Mattalax, and offered him command of this new alliance, the Mirtan Lords. In terms of sheer numbers, they could not compete with any of the invading forces – but with the Last Fire Mage in command, Gathalon hoped, the would-be conquerors would be pushed back by the deluge of fire controlled by the sorcerer.

What Mattalax himself intends is beyond anyone's guess. Perhaps he seeks only some title and petty kingdom over which to rule as sorcerer-king. Perhaps he imagines himself ruler of all Rhone. Or perhaps his only goal is to unleash as much fire and devastation as possible.

Age: 49

Commander Traits: Scholar*, Brutal, Vanquisher

War Goals:

Primary War Goal:

- Repel invaders from Thousand Crowns

Secondary Goals:

- Destroy the Phoenix Hold
- Uncover the secret to Kayes II, Domin of Caelia's alchemical immortality

Special Rules:

Intuitive Sorcerer: Mattalax does not need to research spells. Instead, every time he casts a spell, he adds 1d6 per Strain Score of the spell to a dice pool and rolls it. If he ever rolls three sixes, he spontaneously combusts and is killed. Each week of rest in a stronghold reduces the number of dice in the pool by 2. Results of a 1 removes that die from the strain pool.

URSITO'S SPELLS

DELUGE OF FIRE

Battle Magic. A sorcery of tremendous damage -- Mattalax summons a great deluge of flame that chars the field. The magic is wildly dangerous and unpredictable, but its scars will remain upon the land for many years. Duration: 1 Battle. Strain: 4

WILTING ASHES

Weather. A cloud of ash descends upon the land, shading it in sweltering cinders. Armies choke and crops wither. Duration: 1 Week. Strain: 2

BURSTS OF BRIMSTONE

War. Sulfurous clouds explode in the air, sending out bright flashes and deafening those nearby. Duration: 1 Day. Strain: 1

BLOOD OF THE EARTH

War. Stone melts to a searing mud, ruining walls and brick. Large structures are weakened and dissolved as stone melts like flesh. Duration: Instant. Strain: 6

EATER OF FLAME

War. No flames in the lands around may grow larger than a campfire. Duration: 1 Week. Strain: 1

DESOLATION

War. What was once vital land has now been lost to fire -- petrified trees and scattered bones are all that now remain. Duration: 1 Day. Strain: 9

THE PHOENIX HOLD

Below is the handout given to the factions that took control of the Phoenix Hold. First, the League of Rhone, but shortly before the game ended the remains of the fortress were taken by the Caelian Domin.

The Phoenix Hold

The Phoenix Hold is the last vestige of Tyresian war magic. Built a hundred years before the Drowning of Tyresia, it was first a small outpost on the frontier, an inland bastion that watched the Notoro Strait. Its commander, however, was a sorcerer-general named Coros Madirion, an accomplished practitioner of both battle and war magic. Stationed at the fringe of the empire, Madirion took apprentices from his junior officers and taught them not just the skills of sorcery, but the application of magic to warfare. Almost without meaning to, the Tyresian Empire became the possessor of a powerful school of war-magic. Much of their greatest triumphs in the years before the Drowning were due to the sorcerous workings of the College's officers: walls were felled, roads were built, armies moved swiftly across great distances. The great possibilities of sorcery were bent to the practice of Tyresian warfare.

So too did they practice battle magic. Tyresia's legions were the elite of the continent, but even they paled in comparison to the great sorcerers of Phoenix Hold.

The War College Today

The last 250 years has seen the Hold grow in strength. They have established themselves not only as an institution that the elite would send their children to for learning, both sorcerous and academic, but as a mercenary organization that would send advisors and war-mages to different factions and rulers around Rhone. Some recent scholars have noted that, despite the apparent skill of the Phoenix Mages, none of their employers has ever managed to use their talents to expand their territory beyond any rival's ability to stop them.

The Fortress of Phoenix Hold

Once it was a Tyresian Fort. Over centuries, however, it has been built with stone and metal and sorcery to become a towering fortress between the two Notoro Seas. To the south, it crosses the Notoro Strait only by bridge, a high, narrow stone bridge that connects the fortress' southern gate to the cliffs on the far side. On the north, steep, sloping stone walls rise over ten man-heights – and that is only the outer wall, the citadel itself is many-towered and looms over the surrounding countryside.

In addition to the apprentices and adepts that train within its walls, the Hold is also home to a small army, a garrison of professional soldiers recruited from those who could not pass the college's difficult trials.

The fortress itself sits amid a landscape of charred, blackened earth. While the Phoenix Hold trades with cities across the Notoro Seas, especially Thelua, it also maintains its own gardens and stockrooms, able to feed itself for quite a long time.

Common wisdom is that the fortress is unassailable.

War Magic & Battle Magic

The Phoenix Hold asserts that it is the greatest practitioners of War Magic in the world – this remains to be seen, but in Rhone this is certainly true. Their magic spreads across many different schools and forms: Auguries that reveal the future, the persuasion of natural elements to reorganize themselves according to the caster's whim, the invigoration of the mind and body, mass illusions – it is not merely the potency of the sorceries involved that make the Phoenix Hold so dangerous, but in their creative application to the art of warfare.

However, the practice of battle magic – the art of devastating sorcery that sweeps across battlefields – is considered, even among the members of the Phoenix Hold, to be something of a lost art. In recent times, the only fire mage (for all other sorceries pale in the face of fire magic in terms of raw destruction) is the mysterious Ursito Mattalax, the high mage in the employ of King Gaios Coscyron of Aultlane.

The Phoenix Hold keeps a careful eye on Mattalax. He has only demonstrated his power a handful of times, but should the Hold ever perceive him as a threat, they may take more direct action against the sorcerer...

Units & Abilities

Special Unit:

Phoenix Claws

Phoenix Claws are heavy infantry and skirmishers. They deal an additional 100% of their actual numbers in inflicted casualties, and receive -10% fewer casualties. Magical effects cannot cause them to rout.

The Phoenix Claws are the elite soldiers of the Hold, trained in its martial arts that combine small-unit fighting tactics and battle sorcery.

Abilities:

Grand Lore:

Researching spells while at rest in the Phoenix Hold takes 50% less time.

The library of the Phoenix Hold is the greatest repository of arcane knowledge on Rhone, with some works said to have been penned by Nayak himself.

Rite of Vacancy

By spending a week in ritual inside the Hold, the subject of the ritual can strip all magic from their body and mind, becoming inert to sorcery. Any character with the Scholar trait loses it, and instead gains a commander trait of their choice.

They say that in the grandest courts of Rhone and Karego, there are bodyguards who were once skilled mages, who killed that part of themselves to become deadly assassins and warriors immune to the effects of magic.

Council Wizards

1. Archmage Volont [missing]
2. Lutorn [missing]
3. Carnasian [missing]

4. Nachele [surrendered]
5. Jessamine [surrendered]
6. Feddiec [missing]
7. Blackroot [surrendered]
8. Thill [missing]
9. Argoval [surrendered]
10. Jahroud [surrendered]
11. Marrar [surrendered]
12. Gettlelai [surrendered]

PHOENIX HOLD SPELLS

THE WORLD HOLDS ALL ROADS

Move Earth. Stones rise from the dirt and displace root and tree, then arrange themselves according to the wizard's desire. Creates a stretch of road that lasts for a year. Duration: 1 Year. Research Time: 1 Week per 12 miles of Road.

THE PATHS OF TWILIGHT

Conjuration. The wizard and up to 100 individuals, 50 cavalry, or 10 wagons transports themselves to a distant location, appearing there the following day. Duration: 1 Day. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

RIVERSPEAKER

Nature. Rivers halt, reverse their course, or shift, for a time. Rivers shifted into new areas will flood the region they enter. Duration: 1 Month. Research Time: 1 Week per 60 miles of river.

ARTIFICE OF THE WILD

Nature. Tree and Stone arrange themselves into a wall or bridge. In time, the wall will crumble as the magic fades. Duration: 2 Weeks. Research Time: 3 Weeks.

PHANTASMS OF FOES

Illusion. The wizard summons a legion of phantasmic troops. These may either be practiced against to train troops, or to deceive the enemy in the field. Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

SHARPEN THE MIND, BODY, AND BLADE

War. Steely focus fills the army surrounding the wizard, allowing them to forced march continuously for three days without need of rest or sleep. After these three days are over, the wizard must rest for 1 week. Duration: 3 Days. Research Time: 4 Weeks.

MERCENARIES

The following is the referee version of the handout describing the various mercenary companies that some players could choose to play as. Only the Pikes of Baranim and Ashen Company were chosen.

Mercenary Companies of Eastern Rhone (Referee Version)

While the Steel Charter is the largest, most storied, and most successful in this region of the world, there are several other noteworthy commanders that make their riches from war.

New Commander Age (Mercenary Company)

Age: 25 + 2d20

Generic Mercenaries: Can be hired from any City on the map at default rates, but have a minimum contract period of one month. If they are **supplemental** to your army, no new commander is needed, but if they act on their own, they are played by a commander.

Special Mercenaries: Must be separated into their own detachment (though can fight alongside) and must be played by a new commander player. Once hired, they act as a regular player, able to negotiate, raid, etc.

The Varlmen

Hirable only by in-person negotiation at the Steeples

Reclusive highlanders from the Steeples, the Varlmen ride flying wolves, though they mostly defend the valley between the four mountains. Occasionally, however, they can be bribed to launch raids across Thousand Crowns, flying in from mountain peaks.

Special Units

Varl-riders: Flying Cavalry (x8 multiplier); 50 supply a day (0 while at rest in the Steeples) Can travel 60 miles a day, or 80 if starting from a mountaintop. Every hex they rest in outside of the Steeples becomes *torched*.

Pikes of Baranim

Hirable from the Riverlands or Roads to the South

An experienced mercenary group from the Riverlands, to the south Thousand Crowns. They are tough, stout, and bristly, used to fighting across the southern continent. They are expert infantry fighters.

(3 x 400 detachments)

Special Units: River-Pikes: The River-Pikes are heavy-infantry. Each detachment of River-Pikes cancels out a cavalry detachment's numerical multiplier.

Hallatian Guard

Hirable in the Northern coastline of Rhone

A professional company from the Hallatian Coast, the Hallatian Guard are second only to the Steel Charter in terms of how far and wide they have served as mercenaries.

(3 x 600 detachments)

Special Units: Hallatian Guard: Hallatian Guards are heavy infantry. They can travel along coastline as if they were cavalry undergoing a forced march (wagons included).

Golmar Raiders

Hirable in the Northern Coastline of Rhone

Sea-raiders from the northern island of Golmar, northeast of Kard, these pirates are masterful sailors that can blockade large areas of water and coastline.

2 x 400 skirmishers

50 ships with siege engines (not removable)

Special Units: *Golmarran Raiders:* Golmarran Raiders are skirmishers. They can torch a hex to get loot equal to 10x its settlement score.

Special Rules: Designate a 10-hex area to be patrolled by ship.

Accord of Leshent

They say that in V'Zet, blood is cheaper than ink, and these Southerners spill the former and honor the latter. In addition to being skilled engineers and soldiers, they are masters of V'Zetti ciphers.

2 x 500 heavy infantry

2 x 250 heavy cavalry

10x Siege Engines

Special Abilities:

Messages sent from between Leshent detachments cannot be deciphered.

Every 10 V'Zetti Siege Engines increase the defense of a defending stronghold by 1.

Greenwurm Company

A Mirtan Mercenary Company that knows the region like none other, named for their slaying of the dragon Atessin that came to the valley over a half-century ago.

(4 x 400 detachments)

Special Units: Greenwurm Company are skirmishers. When fighting off-road, they are also heavy infantry.

Ashen Company

The Ashen Company is a mercenary company from Western Rhone that has several exiles from the Phoenix Hold as its members, practiced war mages who still have with them the secrets of the war college. They are highly sought by the Phoenix Hold.

Special Rules: Ashen Company wizards can research spells while marching.

2 x 800 infantry

1 x 400 cavalry

2 War Mages

ASHEN COMPANY SPELLS

SECRETS OF CHANGING

Shaping. For the duration, the wizard can take the form of any beast, and shift freely between forms for the duration. Turning into a dragon comes with a chance of permanent change.

Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 1 Week.

BOLT WIELDER

Weather. The wizard conjures a storm of lightning and thunder and hailstones, centered on a distant location. The storm will slow and dismay armies caught within it. Duration: 1 Week.

Research Time: 1 Week.

STONEWRATH.

Sorcery. The sorcerer lifts great stones into the air and smites them against a target, causing severe damage. Duration: Instant. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

SINKING OF STONES

Nature. Turns a stretch of road to mud and muck, that slowly settles back to normal over time.

Duration: 1 Week. Research Time: 2 Weeks.

SPELLBREAKER

Sorcery. Ends any ongoing sorceries in the area around the sorcerer. Duration: Instant. Research Time: 3 Weeks.

BLOODFIELDS.

Blood. Casting this sorcery on a fresh battlefield rejuvenates the land itself, at the cost of the bodies of the fallen. Duration: Instant. Research Time: 3 Weeks.

FICTION

Below are the short pieces of fiction that I wrote prior to the game's start. Initially, I intended to write one piece of short fiction for each faction leader, but I ran out of time, and only wrote the stories for Orwin Lorahts, Halec Meer, Stola Selonn, and Fetrel Tarac before I got too wrapped up in the campaign to write out the ideas I had for Makial Ortolon, Carsus, and King Gaios Coscyrion. Whenever I start a campaign with premade characters (such as this one, at least for the starting commanders) I like to write some flash fiction about each one, and I like to think that if I do a good enough job, each player feels like they picked the coolest character out of the selection.

THE SOLEMN OF WAR

They had climbed the hill in the dark so as to reach its crest before dawn. Below them, the camp was already stirring with activity, as adepts and experts roused their soldiers. Spreading out before them in the near distance, only a few hundred strides from the edge of the camp were the high walls of Vivimord, receding into the darkness — it was too close to morning for candles, and the sun had not yet risen over the mountains to the east. Their illumination was the great array of torches and lanterns that lit the camp at all times, suffusing the landscape with a saturated orange glow.

Orwin Lorahts, the Solemn of War, glanced at her adviser. Phenom Ertzal stood beside her. Each had an easel and a wooden panel, though they shared a palette of oils between them. Ertzal had already begun his first brush strokes, wide black lines filling the bottom half of the panel.

“You are wasting darkness, Solemn,” he said, not taking his eyes from his painting.

She nodded, inwardly grimacing at her own silence. It was Ertzal. The Phenom had been her tutor when she was a child. He was the same now as he was then, all lessons and brevity, and perhaps that was why she sometimes felt like a student still in his presence. She daubed her brush in the umber, instinctively making the motion to roll up her sleeve even though she now wore the short tunic that was the spring style in Vivimord.

She was demonstrating a lack of acuity unbecoming of a Solemn, she thought as she began to apply the paint, shifting her focus back and forth between the her subject and the panel. But this was the response of a mind partitioned into a thousand different focuses. The impending campaign demanded all of her attention in countless ways. She noted the section of Vivimord's wall where it had been repaired, the brick lighter in hue, less weathered, and she adjusted her paint accordingly. It was from this same hill that she watched her engines destroy the crenelations of that section, two years ago, scattering the archers that fired upon her soldiers. It was upon learning that she had never painted a commemoration of the scene that Ertzal insisted on this morning's practice, so that, in his words, she would be prepared for her future victories, though this last justification was a brazen excuse from her adviser.

Next to her, Ertzal cleaned his brush with the rag draped over his arm, and slid it through the pile of yellow that was untouched at the top of the palette, mixing quickly with some other pigments. She briefly wondered what he was using that color for as she looked at the city, but felt no need to peer over his shoulder and see for herself. Ertzal would reveal it when he was finished, and Orwin never understood the desire to imitate others.

“I was surprised when the Council answered my request for a practitioner with you, Phenom,” she said.

“There were no shortage of volunteers for this position, Solemn, but I still have some sway, and the Council were relieved to oblige me.”

“Indeed? You requested it? I had presumed that they chose you to reign me in.”

“Have I ever ‘reigned you in’ before?”

“No.” She smiled.

“I volunteered out of curiosity. The Council wanted a Phenom like me, rather than one of your younger admirers, to advise you with wisdom rather than enthusiasm.”

“I wasn’t aware that I had admirers.”

“You haven’t been back to Kard in some time, and I’m sure your correspondences do no justice to the frenzy there. It seems that every new empiric wants to follow in your footsteps and surpass you, as if you were Solemn Daldanere and they were his contemporaries. Not as though any of them could name the works of Kalirn, or Tor-Finse, or, or...”

“Or Thrune,” Orwin said.

“Yes, or Thrune, precisely.”

“My correspondences do inform me of certain attitudes. I know that the inclusion of War as a Solemn Discipline has invoked criticisms from both those who opposed the inclusion and those who opposed me being the first Solemn.”

“None deny the brilliancy of your capture of this city, Solemn. Not even I.”

“Perhaps not, but I have heard the whispers.”

“Whispers?”

“That this campaign will be no masterpiece.”

Ertzal said nothing.

They painted in silence until the sky was yellow-gray instead of black, the stars faded with the impending morning. Her painting was taking shape: the walls and rooftops of Vivimord rendered with accuracy, and a looming sky pressing upon the city below. Now, she could focus on precision. She would never remark this aloud to Ertzal, but she always considered an unfinished painting as her enemy, to be defeated in detail. It was to be separated, weakened, and destroyed, brushstroke by brushstroke. Even though her fingertips and tunic were stained with paint that would last a week, the practice felt good.

The camp bell rung out below them, the signal for the entire camp to begin its muster. With a sigh, Orwin dropped her brush into the clay cup of water.

“I’ll be needed back in my tent shortly. It won’t do for my other phenoms to climb all the way up here with every question or report.”

“Very well, Solemn. I’ll have an adept carry these panels back to my retinue after they dry. Now, before you go, let me see.”

She stepped aside and let him squint at her painting.

“You’ve always been a strong realist, but here, these clouds are an invention. But a strong one, the way the light reflects upon them, it gestures at movement. Your painting shows a keen sense of distance and possibility.”

She had to stop herself from grinning. The lack of outright criticism was, from Ertzal, high praise. “And you?”

He stepped back, gestured at his panel. The sun, risen over the mountains, finally spilled across them. Orwin gasped. Ertzal’s painting captured this precise moment of daybreak as the sun reflected off of clay rooftops and raised speartips. Her army was there in the foreground, ascending the walls with her banners raised. Simultaneously, they were leaving the city into the dark to the south in the background, anticipating the march that Orwin had planned for the day. Ertzal had somehow captured in lavish impressions the culmination of her past victory and the moment that had yet to begin her future conquest. The imagery was clear enough: her armies marching into the unknown darkness.

“I tried to capture *time*.”

The image of the painting lingered as she made her way back to her tent, even still as she spoke to her other phenoms about the logistics and organization of an army breaking camp. Her capture of Vivimord was as lucid in her mind as the orders she gave the night before, but the memory was composed of oil on wood, and blended seamlessly with her vision of the future. The simultaneity of it filled her, a single coherent procession from past, to present, to future. Vivimord was not the conclusion of one performance, and this the start of another. It was a contiguous piece, a portion of a work unfinished. The command that won her a Solemnity, that forced the Council to admit that war was a sacred discipline, was still ongoing. And this day, it would march into the future. Where she would perfect it.

FAREWELL TO NITIAN

The curtain hanging over the doorway to General Halec Meer's terrace was ripped aside and Gharis stormed in.

"I'll kill him. Give me the order and I'll kill him." The captain was already pacing around the small terrace, but the limited area meant that he was mostly turning in place, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Halec Meer did not look up from his table, merely grimaced at the drop of ink that his officer's entrance caused him to spill over his parchment.

"Who exactly are we murdering today?" he dabbed at the blot with his sleeve.

"Who else? Manene."

That caused Halec to look up from his map. "Will you at least take off your cloak before committing sedition in my house?"

Gharis rolled his eyes and shrugged his cloak off his shoulders, folded it over the back of the chair across from Halec and sagged into the seat.

"Should I even ask the cause for this latest treason? What has the High Margrave done now?"

"I was just at the tavern with Jorin and Kadde —"

"I can smell it."

"—And we were talking to Maife. You know Maife? Vorison's captain?"

Halec shut his eyes. "Fought at Baranim in the Riverlands. Infantry captain. Left-handed, if I recall. She had to be put at the end of the wall."

"Yeah, that's her. *She* told us that Vorison, Adene, and Wreft all spent the last three days practically *on their knees* begging the Margrave to let them command the Charter into Thousand Crowns. But he refused to hear any of it. Said that you would be in command and no other."

The general dipped his pen and turned his attention back to his parchment. "That is neither new nor actionable information."

"You knew that the other generals were petitioning the Margrave?"

"They came to me last week, before going to him. I think they wanted my blessing."

Gharis scowled and turned to look out of the vine-wrapped terrace window and to the courtyard below as he bit back whatever it was he wanted to say. Finally he turned back to the table and nodded at the parchment that Halec was working on. "What are you drawing up, General?"

He turned the map towards Gharis. "My battle plans. Crops for the next season at Nitian."

Gharis stood and peered over Halec's shoulder. "Hah! Well thought out, General. Tell me, do you have a plan for if this line of turnips wheels around and counter-attacks?"

Despite himself, Halec smiled, then laughed, and Gharis pushed further: "These cabbages seem out of position to me, a quick charge shall send them routing straight into the kitchen. And here, what is this, wheat? A square phalanx, sturdy enough, but keep them pinned down with arrows and once the cabbages are scattered we can make short work of them. Now, these olive trees might pose a problem for the infantry, but with some engineers—"

"Alright, alright, that's enough" coughed Halec, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"Ahh. Hah. I needed that, Gharis. Thank you."

The captain sighed. "Do you really think you'll be at Nitian for the harvest?"

Halec was silent.

"Do you think... will Manene ever allow you a life, Halec?"

He dropped the pen back into its well and sat back. "Probably not. No. The plans are just my way of, I suppose, satisfying that dream without realizing it."

"Damn the Margrave! The Charter stands with *you*, General, not him. When you took Cosichin Keep and stopped that rebellion before it even began, did Manene even thank you? Reward you? Or the holds full of plunder you brought back from the Riverlands, what was your

share versus his? Or when the Charter were the first to land at Ilia and the last to leave, were you given a reward? And now, when you've finally earned the chance to set down your spear, he'd instead throw you to those drakes! It's like the man's only purpose is to forbid you any peace."

Halec looked back down at his sketch. The turnips *did* resemble a line of infantry, in a way.

"If you follow the Margrave's command, the Charter will be with you," Gharis continued. "No doubts, no hesitation. But if we come out of Thousand Crowns without you, if we come back at all, it'll be to burn Gallemark to the ground."

"I don't plan on dying there," Halec said quietly. Slowly, he lifted up the parchment with the map of the estate and turned it over to the opposite side, where another map was drawn. One of a far larger area, heavily annotated.

Gharis was quiet as he squinted over the map, following with his eyes the long arrows that arced and curled across the terrain. "How long have you been working at this?"

"Long enough. Hopefully."

"Can it be done? With just the Charter?"

Halec shrugged. "It wouldn't be easy. And that's just one contingency, there. I have some other ideas. You know how I work. See the field before you fight on it, but come prepared."

"This is why you haven't put up an argument? Because you think this is possible?"

"Yes."

Gharis sat back into the chair, his leg jittering, clearly mulling things over. Eventually, he grinned. "The Margrave's got no idea, does he? No idea about this."

"You're the first I've told. Keep it that way."

"Yes, sir." Now both of his legs were jittering, and Halec silently put the cork back onto the inkwell.

"You should submit something formal to the Margrave. A complaint or missive. Some formal kind of protest."

"I shouldn't look too meek, you think."

"Or enthusiastic. So something that looks like you've given it a lot of thought, but is easy for the Margrave to ignore. Don't give the reasons that you think it's impossible, give the reasons you think *the Margrave* would think it's impossible."

"Hmm, it'd be easier for him to rebut the argument that way. He can feel clever and I'll still be seen as reluctant. Good idea."

Gharis waved his hand dismissively. "I learned it from you."

"You did? Where?"

Gharis frowned. "Arvim, maybe. That feint at Calador? Shit. I must have picked it up along the way somewhere."

Halec stood and put his hand on Gharis' shoulder. "We'll need all our tricks for this one."

"That's for sure," Gharis laughed. "I tell you, General. If this all works out... well, to me at least, it's a lot better than pulling turnips up at Nitian."

He looked down at the table. "I hope so. A lifetime better."

On the back side of the map, a line of carefully-drawn turnips, the ink still wet, smeared against the wood.

NOMAD

The game board that dominated the cabin was an elaborate device, built into a system of counterweights. The board itself was flush with the rim of a shallow bowl, which was attached via hinges to a brass tray. The result was that the board was gyroscopically stabilized, the round, checkered board always remaining parallel to the floor, no matter how the tray was being carried. In a carriage, or on a ship as they were now, none of the many pieces would move from their place, even in a storm or along the most uneven of roads.

It was an extravagance that somewhat ran counter to the simple premise of the game. *Nomad* was the favorite pastime of the Dominunants, a game of war brought all the way east from Karego, it was said. About fifty brass figures filled the board, gleaming in the lantern-light. In the center of the board, about a dozen of these depicted armored soldiers, their shields raised, frozen in a stance of protection. In their center was a golden king, one arm raised in command. Surrounding these pieces about four tiles away in a counter-clockwise ring were a horde of horsemen, depicted with bows knocked and pulled, facing inwards, whose circumference very nearly stretched the entire board. The ring of the nomads was in most places two or three ranks deep, and the only obvious break in the ring was the silver queen, whose rearing mount marked the head of the attackers.

Stola Selonn was playing the defenders; he enjoyed the clarity of being outnumbered. It had always been that way. One Dominunant against eighty others, his competitors for the Caelian throne. Sometimes he could see their faces in the brass horsemen that encircled his pieces on the board.

He sat back and listened to the clack of his opponent shifting his pieces around the board. Each turn, all of the nomads circled closer, while he could only shuffle a few of his own defenders around his perimeter. That was the other advantage of playing the defenders: it gave more time to think as the opponent moved all their pieces.

Seated across the table from Stola was his tutor, a V'Zetti named Amnak, his dark face buried in shadow from the swaying lantern suspended over the board. The ease with which he slid his pieces across the board made it seem like he was playing idly, but Stola knew that this was not the case. Soon enough, he finished his turn and sat back, his one arm hanging over the back of his chair, thumb fiddling with the jewels adorning his fingers, the stub of his other arm hidden in the folds of his indigo robes. As soon as Stola touched his first piece to respond to the advancing nomads, his teacher broke out into a grin.

"I am reminded of a joke," Amnak said in a perfect Caelian accent. "A peaceful man is called off to war. Before he goes, he says to his wife: 'Darling, I am loathe to take a man's life, even in battle. Should I return, let us bear a child for every man I've slain, so that I can repay what I've been forced to take.' The wife agrees, and the man goes off to war. At the end of the season, he returns to her and says, 'My love, I killed a man on the field. You must bear me a child to balance this crime.' Nine months later, they have a baby. Then the man gets called off to war once more, and he makes the same promise to his wife as before. When he returns, he falls to his knees and says 'My sweet, I killed a man with an arrow. Let us have another child to repay death with life.' His wife agrees, and again, nine months later they have another baby. The man gets called off to war for a third time, and this time the campaign takes him far from home, and it is more than a year before he returns to his wife. He comes back with a grave expression, and teary eyed, says to his wife 'My beloved, my heart hangs heavy, for I killed two men besieging a wall.' His wife takes his hand and brings it to her belly and says 'I knew that you would, so I'm having twins!'"

"I don't get it," said Stola as he finished his turn, his defenders spread out in pairs, a sortie away from his guarded lines, encroaching out towards the invaders.

"Ah. Well. A joke is no better than its audience." Amnak moved his pieces in, aiming to

leverage the space between Stola's defenders and break his line. Two of his soldiers were picked off by the advancing horde, and Amnak dropped them into the bag that hung beneath the board.

"I prefer riddles," said Stola. He moved quickly, retreating back into a staggered square around his king. Amnak frowned. What was a gap in Stola's line had constricted, and the horsemen that were poised to plunge into his ranks now found themselves charging into empty space, or in some cases, forced to move into each others' positions, thus defeating them. The aggressive sortie feinted into a solid defense. Stola plucked those eliminated pieces and dropped them one by one into the bag, allowing himself to savor the metallic clicks they made as they piled within.

The ship swayed, and though Stola leaned in his seat, the game board merely tilted in its hinges, perfectly level despite the listing of the deck beneath them. There was a knock at the cabin door, and one of Stola's attendants entered.

"Dominant," the attendant said, saluting. "We have turned off the coast, and up the Metreii River."

"Thank you, Tarlis," said Stola, dismissing the attendant.

When the door had closed once more, Amnak looked hard at his student. "The pieces are being placed. Soon, the game will begin in earnest. Do you know all the rules to this one?"

"There are no rules," Stola muttered, and Amnak held up a warning finger.

"Not so. It is a rule that people try to act in their own interests, and largely fail. It is a rule that those who have tasted power will be consumed by it. And it is a rule that ink must be mixed with blood if it is worthy of the pen."

"Those are the sayings of V'Zet," said Stola, recalling the lessons about his tutor's homeland across the sea. "But they do not require purposeful obeisance. If those rules are fundamental properties, they don't require effort to maintain. In *Nomad*, the rules demand discipline. I choose, every time I pick up a piece, that I move it according to what we agree are the rules, instead, of, say hurling it at my opponent."

Amnak plucked his queen from the board, examining it. "And you think an army functions differently?"

"In war there is no need for me to agree to my opponents rules. I do not have to fight where they expect me to, when they want me to. I can act according to my ability."

"And what limits that ability, hmm? Time, the hours in a day, the days in a month. The need to sleep, the need of your soldiers to sleep. The time it takes to move from one place to another. Blisters on the feet of your soldiers. Nails, to shod your horses as their shoes are undone by the road. Water, bread, grain. You will be bound by the limitations of the world at all sides, there is no escaping it. You are good at thinking tactically, my friend, thinking strategically. But in fighting a war, you must first think *practically*. And your limitations are the same limitations that your enemy has. Thus, rules."

Stola nodded. As impassioned as Amnak was, he knew his tutor too well to feel chastised. "[Thank you for your wisdom, teacher,]" he said in V'Zetti. "I hope I don't disappoint you."

Amnak waved his hand. "Bah. You are young and clever. When you fail, you do so once. You must do this thing, and though it is difficult I am sure you will do it well."

"The Domin's Charge."

Amnak put his queen back on the square he took it from. "A funny challenge, that. 'Win me an empire, and I shall give you my kingdom.'"

"He thinks I'll fail. I won't."

"Perhaps. But do not mistake his purpose with this challenge."

"To insult me. To announce to his court the limits of my ability."

"Close. The Domin wants to make a show of you. He claps his hands, and off you go."

"He won't be clapping when I've done it, and the throne is mine."

Amnak sighed. "Perhaps. In the meantime, Stola..."

“Yes?”

“You should think less on riddles and more on jokes. Now let us continue our game. Maybe I can afford you one last defeat before your conquest.”

Stola smiled, and began to move his pieces. “Or I shall whet my appetite with this first victory.”

And once more, the only sound in the cabin was clack of metal on stone and the creak of the wooden walls.

WINDFORGE

Her father always insisted that a battle truly began when the first blades were forged, which is what led Fetrel and her siblings to this rainy mountaintop in Ilia. To witness the start of their battle.

They stood with their hoods low, pulled over their faces, their oiled cloaks wrapped tight about themselves so as to not whip about in the wind. Ecklo and Vettien huddled together, their backs to the rain, shouting to one another in order to be heard above the gale. Fetrel, in contrast, faced the windforge, grimacing at each lancing raindrop that struck her exposed jaw.

The forging pit was large, but not so enormous as she had pictured in her head during their journey from Adarrat. On the ship across the Ilian Strait, she imagined a stone fortress built across the entire cliff face, a keep-sized crucible of incredible design and intricacy. During their climb up the mountain, when it was apparent from the slope that no such structure existed, still she imagined a network of caves built into the edifice, a labyrinth of tunnels that supplied the legendary smithies of the island.

The reality was less grand, to be sure. The windforge of the master smith Beleka was a sandy pit dug at the tip of a shallow crevasse facing the east, towards the sea. The anvil, such as it could be called, was little more than a large square of iron, hammered by centuries into a flattened face. The main structures of the forge were the furnace and the funnel. The furnace was about five feet high, a sealed ceramic sphere with an opening in its top for gouts of flame to erupt from. The funnel was the more impressive structure: a wide ceramic cone laid sideways along the entire crevasse, its mouth hanging outward over the cliff by four or five feet. In total, it was probably about three or four man-heights long, narrowing to a mere hand's span in diameter as it met with the furnace. The entire forge was covered by an open roof made of wide leaves, but the heavy rain was traveling nearly horizontal, and the water, having nowhere else to go once it entered the funnel, hissed as it evaporated and escaped from the hole at the top of the furnace.

Beleka himself did not fit the model of the legendary blacksmith that she had formed in her mind — perhaps a little too hungrily, she pictured a towering ironworker, all sweat, callouses, and muscle. Beleka was, in reality, an old man in a loincloth, squatting barefoot in the sand, eyeing the furnace with a statue's intensity as his attendants studied him, trying to learn from the master.

Fetrel had to admit that, despite the shattering of her grand fabrications about the windforge, the truth was still impressive. Not because of any architecture — that scarcely existed — or impressive characters out of some myth, but because of the practiced expertise that the smiths worked with.

The rain falling off the roof above the pit made a thick curtain of water around the forge, partially obscuring the craftsmen within, but still their demeanor could be seen, their mastery over the craft evident in how still they were, how precise and economical their movements were. Beleka drew the shape that the blade would take in the sand with his hands, measuring the length with the distance between his splayed fingers: seven hand spans for the blade, four fingers wide, each measurement done mechanically, instinctively. It was clear that the bodily motions of the craft were so ingrained within Beleka that they required no effort at all.

Somehow, even just this demonstration was marvelous. That so little activity could convey so much mastery.

Would she ever attain such visible expertise? Would her officers look at her and wonder at the ease of her skill? She thought about her father. Thetrum was certainly the greatest commander of the last century, but her perspective on him was too close, too personal. When she thought of the times she was with him in the field, it was not the objective view of some observer, able to watch and judge with distance. Her earliest memory of him as a commander was sitting in his saddle, his mailed arms around her, letting her grip the reins as a battle was fought on the plain below

them, a clamoring, wiggling line that stretched out for half a league in either direction. Her father's voice was calm and loud enough to reverberate in her back as he hugged her, but the words themselves were faded in her recollection, a lyricless tenor melody. Every subsequent memory was built atop that one. When he thought she was old enough to serve as one of his captains — still too young, by any measure — still she saw in her commander the same father that lifted her up to sit in his lap as he ordered his officers about the field.

So of course she never saw in him the same kind of mastery that she saw in Beleka. But there was something familiar about the smith's focus. Looking at him, she wanted that recognition for herself, imagined what it might look like to be as practiced a general as Beleka was a craftsman. Knowing in her muscles the least amount of effort to achieve the greatest result, the experience required to envision the outcome of every decision, the confidence generated by her evident ability.

Beneath the rain and the howl of the wind escaping the furnace, illuminated by the brilliant roar of white flame escaping its lid, she swore to herself that she would reach that height.

"Captivating, isn't it?" Vettien said, suddenly close beside her. Fetrel's older sister was slim, half a head taller than her. "The hearsay is that the elder smiths know some kind of spell, that they can sing the iron out of the dirt. I haven't seen it myself, but that's what's been told to me. What do you think?"

"I think father was right to want Ilia so much," Fetrel said, without turning away from the forge.

"He better have been." There was no need to voice aloud what they both knew — taking this island ultimately killed Thetrum.

"Still," Vettien continued, "the Legion, equipped with Ilian steel. Which of us would father have traded for that, I wonder?"

"Me, of course," said Ecklo, their younger brother, pushing himself between them. "He'd have traded me to a Riverlands merchant for a fast horse and an hour in the same room as a Numist Senator. If he could have gotten this island just by sending me away, it wouldn't have occurred to him *not* to."

"If he had traded you to a merchant, he'd have expected you to return as head of the company by the end of the year," said Fetrel. Ecklo shrugged deeper into his hood. He alone of the three siblings never served their father as an officer in the field, being at first too young, and then too studied in numbers, Thetrum judging that he would be more valuable to the Legion as a quartermaster, then as Darrath's master of coins. Despite Ecklo's grumbling, his sisters both knew that his role was perhaps the most crucial out of any of them. Another of Thetrum's early lessons in warfare was that it was far easier to fight a thousand soldiers than it was to feed them. Without Ecklo's ability to leverage deals with every trade company on both sides of the sea, the Legion would have died out with their father, their conquest of Ilia with it.

"Look," said Vettien, nodding her head at the windforge. "I think they're ready."

There was activity in the pit. Beleka felt with one hand the ground near the furnace, and nodded to his assistants. Fetrel gasped, realizing that the master smith could gauge the heat of inside the furnace by the temperature of the surrounding sand. A pair of assistants pried the lid off of the furnace using long sticks, while a third reached deep inside it with a pair of iron tongs. The assistant carefully withdrew a smaller crucible, a white-hot cylinder that was swiftly set in a shallow pit that Beleka dug into the sand. Beleka studied the container for a heartbeat, then grasped a hammer and struck the top of it, shattering the clay into the sand. Inside was a cup of white-hot steel, so hot as to appear as a pool of pure light.

Beleka muttered something to an assistant, who jerked his head up, and glanced up to Fetrel, then hesitantly beckoned her closer. She approached, stepping just within the shelter of the leafy roof. Even here, the heat from the furnace struck her as a solid wall, and she could not bring herself any closer. Beleka spoke to her in Ilian, still squatting in the sand, and the assistant

translated.

“My master wishes to know if you have decided on a name for the blade?”

Fetrel’s eyes widened, nearly tearing up from the heat. “A name?” she coughed. She hadn’t thought about it. Her father never named a weapon — as far as she knew, he merely thought of them as tools. “No, I don’t have a name.”

The assistant said something short to Beleka, who had not taken his eyes off of her. She shifted under his gaze and the oppressive heat from the furnace, and felt herself starting to sweat. Then Beleka spoke in Ilian and took up a piece of charcoal and wrote a word on the metal anvil, down the shallow groove into which the liquid steel would be poured. There was murmuring among the apprentices, and at Beleka’s signal, they poured the molten steel atop the anvil, the metal roiling over the charcoal words that the smith had scrawled there.

“What was it?” asked Fetrel. “What were those words?”

The metal was quickly cooling — no longer the color of straw, it was now a red — not just from the heat, Fetrel saw. The metal itself had a slight reddish hue, the result of some aspect of the composition added to the iron. Even now, fresh and unworked, she saw the swirling, rivulet pattern of the steel, the distinctive signature of Ilian steel. Beleka grasped the steel using a pair of tongs and flipped it over, and Fetrel gasped. The symbols were no longer on the anvil, but had transposed onto the blade, a faint line of letters that ran along the metal, only distinguishable as negative space amid the swirling pattern.

The assistant took a minute to consult with the other apprentices, conferring upon a proper translation. Eventually, one cleared his throat.

“The sword is named in Ilian, *Aggnavest*.”

“And in Tyric?”

“*Legacy’s End*.”

CREDITS

COMMANDERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

King Gaios Coscyron.....	Wkitsune
Dominunant Stola Selonn	Menevalgor / Will Hawkins
General Halec Meer.....	a_kelley
Praetor Fetrel Tarac.....	shubit
Guildmaster Carsus.....	andyxrider24
Crest-Commander Makial Ortolon.....	segul
Adjutant Rethan Rilori.....	IGotCareless
Knight-Marshal Teslan “Ironsides” Karolon.....	BigSpoon
Promin Elhavry.....	azrayel_
General Yvonne Rend.....	Sand&SNW
Adjutant Destruc.....	AriadneTheBad
Arrist of Vallo.....	Delent
Lt. General Jarek Cross.....	thesnorlaxking
Nicolae of Virnac.....	TorvakMOS
Ordinate Nist.....	malduibious
Legate Seruna Tavan.....	warrewal
Colonel Prioneft Rend.....	sesquipedalianThaumaturge
Amnak of V’Zet.....	Beren
Orwin Lorahts, Solemn of War.....	DPR/naesm
Phenom Ertzal.....	wimdr
Shegreth the Forsworn.....	naesm
Captain Lucius Esoc.....	axslashel
Lucius of Aultlane.....	mstross96

Bigadier Ockham Themn.....inkoate
 Master Askil Sahl.....DuckBot
 Tribune Vaeren Callun.....LakeIslands
 Empiric Ogfrid Sobol.....Zephyr
 Ulhad de Ablemarle.....oats373
 Ursito Mattalax.....civilbeard
 Marcus of Virnac.....dirigible0896
 Colonel Horace Stillwater.....quordlepleen
 Knight-Commander Talaneth Karolon.....Zeaver
 A. Aulus Geta.....sushi047575
 Alois Lightfoot.....Greenduke
 Tribune Thallina.....Maple
 Priestess Ahmina Khova.....tinfoiltophat
 Captain Darinn.....thewisebantha
 Mak Morne.....Pool Time With Swim Allen
 Stormbringer.....Thormjolk
 Barr of Virnac....._dutt
 Tribune Cornelius Torquatus.....Dewwy
 Malrik of Gathalac.....kartoffelsvater
 Expert Brook Lorahts.....Auvern
 Ordinate Elha Selonn.....Sanaer
 Brigadier Ferrick Oss.....pyrrhicnoodles
 Daraloth, Son of Daralok.....Mr HD

Finally, a sincere thank-you to Sam Sorensen for making this game. It arrived at just the right moment in my life that I could get up and have something exciting and fulfilling to look forward to every day. This campaign of *Cataphracts* was a lot of things at different points: a fun game, a responsibility – a burden. But after the six months spent running this game, I feel that it was an incredible privilege to have so many people from all these different corners of the Internet come and spend so much time in this fantasy world that I never expected anyone other than myself to care about.

To all of the players that helped make Rhone and the land of a Thousand Crowns real for half of a year, I salute you!

Dan Hawkins