

DARK FANTASTIC PAPER MILLS

ON THE TRAIL OF THE BEAST

MY TRAVELS THROUGH JAGERHOLM



VOLIN SKALDOUS

INTRODUCTION

Just as one would struggle to grasp air in their fist, it is hard to truly know a people from what can be seen and heard every day. To understand the Jager folk with any certainty, one must know their history.

Here I have gathered all the legends, myths and stories told by the people of the Trail. I regret not being able to record these histories verbatim, but its content alone would consume this book and still leave far too much out. Instead, I aim to provide a carefully edited account of only the most enlightening aspects of their past.'

Volin Skaldous, explorer and man of letters.

WHAT CAME BEFORE

In ages past the Jager folk lived under the domain of the great city of Eblan. They raised towers, built walls, and enjoyed the fat of the land. At their head, a great king ruled over the people, supported by hundreds of noble families all vying for prestige and wealth. Eblan was the jewel of the western shores and seemed fit to last forever.

The arrival of the Beast ended their age of splendour. A hundred and one tales come from the night of the Beast's arrival in Eblan, all differing in the telling. Some say it was a colossal worm that churned the earth and sunk entire streets with its passing. Others tell of a winged serpent who torched the entire city in a single breath.

All tales agree the Beast left as suddenly as it arrived, disappearing west with the dawn, and leaving a city reduced to rubble. The survivors were bereft of leadership; their king and high priests killed in the destruction. To stay was not an option; the land had been forever tainted by The Beast's passing. Most left for neighbouring lands, hoping to find salvation in the arms of their neighbours.

Five families choose a different path. Amongst the ruins of their past, they swore a blood oath to hunt The Beast to the end of the world and kill it. They packed what little remained and set off into the west, across the ocean, to the untamed lands beyond. They would become known as the Jager Houses.

THE TRAIL

The lands the Jager Houses arrived in became known as the Trail. Spreading from their first landing on the coast, the Houses have ventured into the mountains and valleys beyond. The extent of this new land is unknown, and the houses know only of what their scouts have been able to map.

It is a harsh environment, riven by mountain ranges, great rivers, and glaciers. Each of the five have had to learn in their own way how to traverse and survive its many dangers. Not least, the uncountable numbers of monsters that prowl the Trail. Wyverns, trolls, cockatrices, and manticores all can be found, often of a size and ferocity not seen in their cousins further east. Every day presents new dangers, and every night new terrors.

For all its apparent hostility, the people of old Eblan have found prosperity and security in their new lands. It is a peace bought daily through hard work and vigilance, as the dangers of the Trail always seek to encroach on their territory. Few of the Jager folk have ever considered leaving though, even when the option is presented to them. For the land spoken of in awed terror by people across the world is named by them as 'Jagerholm', the hunter's home.

ANCIENT REMNANTS

The Houses are not the first people to have settled these lands, for scattered among lost valleys, hidden coves, and abandoned islands – the Dúnfolk linger. Their ruins lie so far back into the past, not even their original name is known. The Jager folk's title for them refers to the many overgrown hill forts they found after the first landings. Always a practical people, many of these sites were repurposed into the first settlements. Perhaps in the beginning, they believed the Dúnfolk long vanished, and their sites no more than curiosities.

It did not take them long to pay for the mistake. As the first settlers dug out cellars and stores, they broke into old chambers beneath the earth. Within these ancient dungeons, the undead remnants of the Dúnfolk had wandered for more than a millennia before being disturbed. Their wrath is legend to the Jager folk, and many families still hold the memory of those lost during the early encounters.

The period is much mythologised, so an accurate telling of the events known as the Landing War is difficult to provide. It is said the arrival of the Jager folk reawakened the king of the Dúnfolk, known as the Crag Tyrant, who laid waste to their homes. He came riding at the head of an army of dead warriors and accompanied by packs of roving beasts bent to his will. The Crag Tyrant was unstoppable, for a time. Here the stories diverge, for all give a different account of the Crag Tyrant's final defeat. Some say he was slain by a champion from one of the great houses in single combat. Others say his army was lured into a valley and buried under a forced landslide. Many claim there was no single event, but that the war was won through stubborn defiance and the loss of far too many lives. Regardless of the method, the Dúnfolk's king was laid low. Without their lord, the dead lost their purpose and took to wandering.

Though they lack the numbers and organisation that they once had, the Dúnfolk remain a constant problem for the people of Jagerholm. Small bands still roam the countryside, attacking anything that comes near. Many sites lie undisturbed, their residents waiting for the next explorer to happen upon them.

'If the wildest legends are to be believed, the head of the Crag Tyrant has been in the possession of the Lords of House Triath since their ancestor looped it off in the final battle of the Landing War. Kept secure in a chest deep in their family keep, it is whispered to still be active, calling for its lost body in a dead tongue.'

THE HOUSES

Long separated from the old ways of Eblan, the people of the Jager Houses have developed their own distinct identity and ways.

All the Jager folk can draw their allegiance and ancestry back to one of the original five Houses. Each House is made up of multiple holds; a large community made up of three hundred or more people working and living together. Each Hold is led by a Kaster, who upholds the law and their sacred mission. The Kastors in turn look to the authority of the House lord for direction and settling of disputes between Kastors.

Particularly large holds may have satellite settlements branching off from them. These villages and outposts are often created for a specific purpose; to tap a resource site, control a trade link, or simply to deal with excess population. They are too small to have a Kaster and may lack many of the formal positions found in a hold. This has contributed to a perception of the outer settlements as unruly and lawless by hold dwellers. It is not entirely unearned, but the people of the villages also have a reputation for hardiness and resourcefulness in the face of constant danger. Often unprotected by large walls, they live a precarious life even by the standards of the wider Jager folk.

Unusually, the Jager folk actively choose to distance their settlements from one another. Holds are often built at minimum a few days travel from on another, whether by water or land. It is a practise established from hard lessons about living in the Trail. If a threat manages to overrun a settlement, it is the duty of its last defenders to burn down anything remaining to send a signal to the next nearest community. It is the hope that with the distance between them, the threat's rampage may be halted or at the very least give the next settlement time to prepare. It is a grim mechanism, but one that has proven effective time and again. The cost is a high one though, for every year handfuls of villages and outposts simply disappear; their calls for aid missed or the defenders wiped out before they had a chance to send it out.

Though no true city exists in Jagerholm, the Great Holds come close. These are the seats of power for the Jager Houses and their House Lords. Most of the Great Holds are situated on the coast where the first landings occurred, but a few reside further inland. They are some of the safest communities to live in Jagerholm, though even they must contend with larger threats from time to time.

THE JAGER HOUSES

The five Houses are as follows: -

Triath-Grian: The largest of the houses in people and territory. It is said they had the largest fleet when the Eblani first set sail and have maintained a position of dominance over the other houses ever since. Though preeminent, Triath-Grian has never attempted to rule over the other Jager houses, instead respecting their autonomy.

Their Great Hold is called First Step, in honour of their progenitor's first steps onto the shore. It is located at the base of the Starving Mountain, a natural edifice of terrible size even by the standards of Jagerholm. Once home to some of the most dangerous creatures encountered by the Jager folk so far, it has now been mostly cleared.

Dorcha-Iarann: The smallest house, but also the fastest growing. Dorcha has spent much of its history isolated to its island home, mining, and trading with its neighbours. Their fate would change with the discovery of black powder and the development of the first explosives (legend has it both occurred together, by accident). The years since have brought a plethora of new innovations, and ever deadlier weapons. This has come at a cost, for House Dorcha's hunger for raw materials is voracious and they must expand constantly to keep up.

Their Great Hold is called Ash Bounty, in reference to the great natural splendour of their volcanic home, but also its ever-present danger. Recent years have seen the hold covered with more and more refineries and smelter shrines to feed the house's demand for weaponry.

Àrd-Iris: The most isolated of the houses. The first settlers of House Àrd travelled further into the interior of the Trail than any before them. For a time, they were thought lost by the others, for they were not sighted for decades. It was only when the other houses made their own pushes into the interior, that they found their kin again. The house had built its holds in hidden valleys and the tops of great mountains, difficult to reach and even harder to find. No one else in Jagerholm knows the lands secrets quite as well as House Àrd.

Their Great Hold is known as Blue Nest, a small settlement compared to the other Great Holds, but famed for the incredible views to be found from its perch atop the World Talon Mountain.

Uamhalta: Highly religious and devoted to the sacred art of beast hunting. While all the houses respect the faith of the Red River, only amongst the holds of house Uamhalta does it hold real power. Every action of the house is guided by the divine messages of the Carmine Priests and their goal of cleansing the land of unclean creatures.

Their Great Hold is known as Clean Spring, for the powerful mountain river that washes away the daily sacrifices of the priesthood. Many of the Red River faithful consider the hold a holy sight and dream of travelling there. Few who set out ever make it there, but those that do are said to be forever changed by the visit.

Toic-Marcach: Once known for their relics of the old city, the House was shattered after the destruction of their Great Hold by a titanic monster. With the loss of its leading authority, the house's remaining holds have splintered and diverged into their own small territories. Given time, a new house may rise to replace House Toic, either by assent or civil war.

Their Great Hold was known as Silver Hall, though much of the splendour for which it was known was wiped away during the attack that splintered the house. Little more than a ruin, it has maintained an importance as a memorial by the people of House Toic.

No single ruler has ever commanded the might of the entirety of the Jager Houses. Each is nominally autonomous, managing its own territory and expansion separate from the others.

WARFARE IN JAGERHOLM

Warfare at anything larger than the occasional skirmish between settlements is exceedingly rare amongst the Jager folk. When they do mobilise in number, it is only ever to combat external threats like the Dúnfolk, foreign raiders, or the occasional gargantuan beast. The fights that do occur are often over territorial disputes, which are usually solved once one side wins a clear victory over the other in the field. In a small number of cases, settlements have maintained bitter feuds for years, striking at each other with small raids and acts of sabotage.

To this date, no great house has ever fought another directly, even when great differences and tensions exist.

‘The Jager folk’s dislike of open conflict is one of their unsung virtues. This is not only a benefit for them, but also to us, dear reader – for if they ever turned their attention towards conquest, I doubt any army in this world could stand against them.’

THE HUNTING OF BEASTS

Hunting is considered a religious act for the Jager Houses. It was discovered long ago that the greater the power of a monster, the better the information that could be divined from its innards by the Carmine Priests. As such, the Houses send their hunters out to track and kill all manner of monsters in hopes of finding the next clue to the Beast’s location.

To hunt monsters is to straddle the line between glory and death at all times. The Jager Houses hold great respect for their hunters, and many of their highest positions of authority are held by them. Every year, scores of new hunters completed their training and set out to face the greatest foes of the land. Many do not return, their names carved onto memorial stones in their hold. There are always more to replace them though, for until the Beast’s destruction the hunt can never end.

Everyone under the Jager Houses contributes in some way towards their goal. From the lofty Carmine Priests to the tanners and cobblers that work their trade. The houses have made an industry of monster slaying; every part of a kill is used. Bone and hide go to house construction, entrails to the priests, and blood goes to the most important craft of all. Within the Smelter Shrine of each hold, weapons are forged in fire and cooled in the blood of beasts. It was one of the first techniques discovered upon their arrival to the Trail. Prepared as such, weapons take on a strength and resilience not seen anywhere else. There are also tales of objects of vicious power known as Grafted Blades; weapons fully imbued with the soul of a slain beast. The fame of these tools has spread even back across the ocean to the eastern lands, with some brave merchants willing to ply the dangerous waters to bring back even a handful of Jager crafted weapons. Try as they might, none of these merchants have been able to learn the secrets of blood smelting, for it is guarded well.

‘It is one of my great prides to own a Jager forged knife. Though barely larger than a letter opener, it has served me better than a weapon twice its size.’

THE DRIVEN

The consumption of monsters has not always brought benefits to the Houses. Many different experiments were practiced during the early days of their arrival, some leading to dark results. Properly prepared, beast blood could be consumed to grant the drinker a temporary spike of primal power. While each dose would erode the subject's humanity, there were no shortage of those willing to take any shortcut to greatness and the practise spread. Only the intercession of the House Lords put an end to blood consumption, forbidding the practise. Those that still could were forced to give up their blood supplies, but a few were too far gone. They fled into the wilderness, hunting only to fuel their endless hunger. Even centuries later, small bands still roam the Trail.

'The Driven are the wound that will never heal, a black mark rarely spoken of in public or private. I do hope my hosts will not take offence of my cursory mention of them.'

POSITIONS OF POWER

House Lord. Each of the five houses is led by a House Lord. It is their responsibility to oversee and direct the actions of their house at large. The role is fully hereditary, passing from parent to oldest child to continue the traditions of the house. While each resides in a Great Hold, they do not act as the Kaster for their hold. This position is usually filled by a younger sibling or in other cases, the heir apparent. This division is one of practicality; House Lords must travel to meet with the heads of the other houses to make larger decisions, often leaving their hold for months at a time.

Kasters. Each Hold is led by a Kaster; a single individual who oversees the running and safety of the settlement. The position is hereditary, passed down from parent to child. However, a Kaster may be removed from their position through a collective vote if their service is found wanting.

Carmine Priest. Each Hold has a handful of Carmine Priests. In smaller Holds there may be only a single priest and acolyte, with larger ones having multiple. They are responsible for processing monster organs for haruspicy – a special form of divination employing living tissue. They operate closely alongside blacksmiths in the creation of beast blood weapons. While most of the religious leaders of Eblan were lost in the night of the Beast, the Carmine priests managed to survive and thrive with their skills in high demand.

Blacksmiths. Each Hold must always have at least one Blacksmith. For a society in constant battle with dangerous creatures, the need for weapons and armour is a given. When the hunt first begun, the Blacksmiths of the Houses brought with them the ancient smithing techniques of lost Eblan. Since then, they have been adapted, refined, and improved. The very importance of the art of metal working gives Blacksmiths power almost on par with the Kaster and Carmine Priests of a Hold.

Lead Ranger. While a Hold will often employ a range of scouts to patrol and expand its territory, all of them answer to the Lead Ranger. These individuals earn their position through merit, rising through the ranks of scouts. It is their role to identify problems in the hinterland before they can threaten the Hold, and if possible, destroy them. Such work leads them far from home for long periods of time, making the Lead Ranger a shadowy presence even amongst their own people.

Hunt Master. All hunters in a Hold come under the authority of the Hunt Master. Employed to constraint and divert the rowdy energy of the hunters towards useful pursuits, the Hunt Masters are a powerful presence in their community. It is a rank not bestowed lightly and requires years of service and dedication to the cause. While not a requirement, most earn their position through the slaying of a rare monster.

First Watcher. All guards and defensive measures are overseen by the First Watcher. It is their role to man the walls and towers that keep a hold safe from the harsh world beyond. Because of this, the First Watcher rarely, if ever, leaves the confines of their hold. Most employ an Outer Watcher to act as a second in command and be assigned to locations outside of the hold that require security.

THE LOST ARTS

Of all the great wonders lost with the fall of Eblan, the practise of magic was one felt most. Little of the works of past sages and sorcerers survived the great fires that consumed the libraries of Eblan and crumbled their towers to dust. Those that try to reignite their lost heritage are forced to contend with scattered records copied down from third hand sources.

Only the more holistic magical practises survived intact. The magic of branch, water, and stone have all found renewed purpose and importance amongst the Jager folk's new home. Hedge wizards and druids, once found on the edges of society have found greater acceptance than ever before.

RELIGION

The formal religious institutions of the Eblani were as much a part of their ancient city as bricks and mortar. They made worship through temple and shrine, honouring the many celestial patrons of their civilisation.

The city's destruction left only a handful of the smallest cults intact. These new gods had no grand edifices to display their virtue and protect their priests. Their worshippers had hidden away in the back alleys and hinterlands of old Eblan. That the most vulnerable would survive the city's greatest crisis was a clear sign of divine favour.

So, it came to be that the new high priests came out from the shadows and helped guide the five houses on their journey to the Trail. They have remained ever since, blending into the new Jager folk society. Some vestiges of their past form continue, for the priests of Jagerholm do not build temples or great shrines – seeing it as arrogant folly only likely to bring down retribution. They walk among the people, offering their services and guidance wherever needed.

GODS

The Red River. The largest of the faith groups. The Red River is said to be the force that connects all life – everything flows into it, and everything flows from it. It is the role of the Carmine Priests to guide the passage of the living through the river, from birth to death. Under their religion, the killing of monstrous beasts is considered an act of healing; removing excess and harmful life to allow the river to flow more smoothly.

The Fifth Maker. Patron of smiths and craftspeople. Believers contend that the world was forged by four great makers: one of fire, one of air, one of water, and one of earth. When the fifth maker appeared, the world was already made and there was nothing left to add. Undaunted, the fifth maker set about creating something new, something to populate the world the four makers had crafted – life. While a popular deity, the fifth maker lacks for official priests, and it worshipped most commonly through crafts rather than prayer.

The Wind Dancer. Patron of hunters and warriors. The wind dancer is the gale that cuts across the mountain tops, the slide of steel from scabbards, and the pumping of the heart when danger closes in. The dancer is an elusive figure, one that comes only to those it chooses. Its nature is so mysterious, some even doubt its existence. Yet those that have felt a sudden gust turn a missed arrow into a direct hit, or a feeling at the back of their neck that warns of them a coming strike, all swear by the power of the Wind Dancer.

The Beast. The Jager folk's greatest enemy. The true nature of the being that destroyed their forefathers' homes has always been a subject of debate. Over time, the memory of the Beast has formed into myth. It has taken on more and more godlike aspects, coming to resemble a force of nature more than flesh. Some have even taken to blaming the fall of Eblan on their own arrogance; seeing the Beast as a form of divine punishment meant to cleanse them of sin. Such beliefs are considered the height of heresy and punishable by exile. For if the Beast truly is a god, then the whole purpose of the houses is thrown into question.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

While the survivors of Eblan brought an extensively law tradition with them to their new lives in Jagerholm, much had to be changed to fit with their new environment.

Most petty crimes are punishable by forced labour. The convicted are made to perform the most demeaning and often dangerous tasks necessary for a community's survival. A few stints of labour are not considered a terrible mark against one's honour and criminals often are able to return to their usual jobs at the end of their sentence.

More serious crimes require a period of exile from the community. Offenders are forced to wear an identifying mark and sent out into the wilds to serve their sentence. Households are not required to give hospitality to exiles and most bar their doors to them. For some, this is tantamount to a death sentence, but others may survive long enough against the threats of the Trail to one day return. Though they will carry the stigma of exile, offenders are welcomed back into the community by law once their journey is complete.

For the most unacceptable of offences, a criminal has only two choices; execution or a cleansing hunt. For the latter, the offender relinquishes all possessions and status, taking up only a single spear and heading out into the wild to hunt a monster. No Jager folk may offer them aid, but no one may bar their path. Offenders must also be accompanied by a teller; a person of unquestionable honesty who can vouch for their success, or more likely, their death. Sometimes both can occur, with an offender slaying its target only to die from wounds received in the battle; honour restored but life lost. Few in the history of the Jager folk have ever completed a cleansing hunt and lived to return to their community.

'Crime to the Jager folk is a matter of personal responsibility and status, a failure of the self. But no failure is final in their world, and no criminal beyond redemption.'

THE EXTENT OF JAGERHOLM

Jagerholm is a vast and dangerous territory, making determining its true extent difficult. Many scouts are sent out, and many never return. Those few that have ranged out into the unmapped zones often return with wild tales of what they saw. Some speak of the mountains giving way to long grassy plains and eventually arid desert. Others tell of patches of wasteland where spires of metal twist out from earth at maddening angles. The oddest accounts inform of islands off the coast where bladed fortresses of bolted iron rise from the rock.

'I wonder if I will live to see the edge of this strange continent. As far as one can glean, no one has ever cross to its farther western edge, if it even possesses one.'