

SITES OF POWER

Throughout the Sundered Scales there are locations rife with arcane power or elemental energy, ready to be harnessed for good or ill. Many of these places have become corpse-strewn battlegrounds, as rival warbands seek to claim them as their own.

GODHEAD CAVERN

So-named for the immense, gem-studded statue of a slann skull that occupies its vast interior, the Godhead Cavern is a cleft in the floor of the Gnarlwood lined with fleshy tree-roots and shattered columns of obsidian. This is no natural formation, but another violent result of the Eye of Chotec's crash-landing. One of the temple-ship's central ziggurats sheared its way through the trunk of several elder gnarloaks, carving an open a gaping wound. This was further expanded by tectonic trauma and the excavations of Seraphon as survivors desperate to reclaim what they could from the scattered wreckage.

The so-called 'Godhead' itself is in fact an immensely powerful source of energy known as an Idol of the Old Ones, an engine of unfathomable complexity that once powered the workings of the Eye of Chotec. Far bigger than others of its kind, the 'Godhead' is connected to a network of similar devices located throughout the ruins of Talaxis, and appears to once have functioned as a form of central intelligence, uniting their energies and focusing them upon one particular process. Though sorely damaged, it still thrums with reality-shaping power. Aware of the horrors that ignorant meddlers might cause by trying to loot or manipulate the Idol's pulsing star-gems, the Seraphon defend the Godhead Cavern with particular ferocity.

THE OPENED THROAT

In this rancid, blood-stained stretch of the Sundered Scales, the ground erupts with arcing jets of foul-smelling gore, staining the soil a reddish-brown and drawing hungry beasts from far and wide. It has come to be known as the Opened Throat, because the geysers bring to mind the pressurised spray of a sliced artery. Bloodwasps and bloated gore-ticks infest the area, growing fat upon the rancid liquid.

This disgusting phenomenon is in fact caused by elder gnarloaks expelling a slurry of undigested liquids and scraps of indigestible matter from their innards. Lesser gnarloaks are particularly drawn to these foul-smelling places, and eagerly slurp up pools of bubbling effluent, preying upon other creatures drawn forth by the repulsive stench. Worshippers of the Plague God Nurgle have also displayed an unnerving interest in the place in recent times, intrigued by its piquant aroma of rot and decay.

VEINS OF THE DEROVAR

Where once the mighty River Derovar surged across the Thondian plains, carving contemptuously through rock and loam, now the ancient waterway consists of nothing more than trickling channels and falls of foetid rainwater. Choked and obstructed by the roots of ravenous elder gnarloaks, the Derovar's raging spirit diminishes with each passing day, just another casualty of Ghur's endless continental churn.

Yet the river is not dead. It yearns to break free of its prison of root and branch, to join wayward tributaries as one and burst its banks, smashing its way free of the Gnarlwood and snaking across the lands once more.

The Lumineth known as the Ydrilan Riverblades aim to hasten the Derovar's reawakening, and have established a sanctum at the point at which the river's remaining tributaries – the so-called Veins of the Derovar – meet. Here they commune with the Derovar's bestial spirit in rituals of song and meditation, urging it to awaken and reclaim its lost territories. There are signs in recent days that their actions are having an effect, for the waters are rising across the Sundered Scales.

THE SCREAMING BLAZE

Rising amidst the tangled, blackened undergrowth of the Sundered Scales is a great column of emerald fire, within which swirl the shrieking faces of tormented souls. This unnatural inferno scars the lands for leagues around, turning soil to charred ash and gnarloaks to withered skeletons, whilst unleashing waves of necromantic magic that cause the buried corpses of men and beasts alike to claw their way to the surface. Unable to quench the fires and barely capable of keeping them at bay, the Seraphon of the Ravening Ruin scramble to drive the Nighthaunt back, attempting to activate malfunctioning Starfire Pylons and other defences at the risk of their own lives.

Known as the Screaming Blaze for the deafening chorus of anguished cries that it emits, this horrific blight is the work of Nagash's spectral servants, the Pyregheists. In its horror it recalls the dreadful splendour of the Great Necromancer's citadel of Nagashizzar, eternally illuminated by braziers filled with burning souls. It is a chilling glimpse of Nagash's plans for the Gnarlwood, and – eventually – the entire Realm of Beasts.



The Screaming Blaze is a horrifying sight – a column of shrieking spirit-stuff the size of a castle tower.



The Idol of the Old Ones that lie scattered across the land, once still radiating powerful magical energy, are now little more than choked and parched beds, but its ferocity is not dead yet.



The tragic remnants of the River Derovar are now little more than choked and parched beds, but its ferocity is not dead yet.

FLAMES OF DEATH

Unnatural flames sweep across the Gnarwood, and all those swallowed up by the inferno are consumed both body and soul. Yet there are those that would combat this spectral firestorm with elemental power, awakening the wrath of ancient river-spirits to rise up and sweep away its malignancy.

Fire is a constant threat in many forests, especially those as ravaged and war-torn as the Gnarwood. The dry flesh of wandering gnarlocks burns easily, and many of those faced with the prospect of venturing close to their grasping limbs rather than risk their incineration the predatory trees usually murderously attention – even if such fools are usually skewered on the tip of a lashing limb well before they put torch to bark.

Yet the fires that now ravage the Gnarwood are neither creations of reckless mortals nor the natural conflagrations of ignited swamp-gas or volcanic activity. Instead they are summoned into being through means most unnatural. Kindling rituals of death and suffering are carried out by Pyregheists, smouldering spectral nightmares who serve Nagash, the merciless God of Undeath. Sweeping out from the blackened scar known as the Scorched Valley, they spread their balefire infernos with terrible swiftness. Not only does the unholy heat incinerate all in its

path, but the fires also strip souls from bodies, and grant a terrible animus to the countless corpses that lie buried beneath the charnelhouse of the Gnarwood.

These occurrences are signs of the potent necromantic aura that is gathering force in many areas in the Gnarwood, fuelled by a constant churn of death. The greatest concentration of this power has been focused upon the Sundered Scales, a swathe of swampland and sunken ruins near to the heart of the forest. As warbands of all stripes hack and hew each other to pieces and gnarlocks creep forth to feast upon the carrion of the slain, malignant powers are emboldened. Strange vampiric warriors have been sighted feasting upon the blood of defeated foes, and in the deep places of the Gnarwood it is said that mausoleum kingdoms ruled over by long-dead tyrants are awakening, stirred by the scent of tormented souls. Nagash's pallid hand is clenched around the throat of the Sundered Scales, and its fingers close a little tighter with every passing day.



All that protects the region are the faltering wards of Talaxis – the legendary ruin that lies half-buried and hidden at the heart of the forest. Devices of cosmic provenance still retain a fraction of their power despite the disastrous shattering of the temple-ship *Eye of Chotec*. The reptilian Seraphon guardians of the hazardous region known as the Sundered Scales know just enough of these machines and their functions to keep them running, emitting arcane shielding and realm-altering magic in an attempt to prevent the onslaught of death – and keep at bay the avaricious looters and other intruders venturing into their domain.

Without the wisdom of their toad-like slann overlords to guide them, however, the Gnarwood's cold-blooded sentinels cannot keep the damaged star engines of Talaxis running in perpetuity. The moment that the harnessed starlight of the Old Ones' mysterious technologies fades, predators and fiends come creeping forth from the darkness to feast upon the corpse of the Ravening Ruin.



Not all those who intrude upon the sacred ruins of the Seraphon come to spread death and destruction across the Gnarwood. The Ydrilan Riverblades have journeyed all the way from the radiant lands of Hysh to seek out the great river that once carved its way through the land upon which the Gnarwood now stands. Strangled nearly to death by the relentless growth of the Gnarwood, the Derovar endures only as a series of trickling streams. It is these that the Ydrilan mean to conjoin into a single, mighty current. Yet even their elemental rituals cannot restore the Great Red River to its former glory while the terraforming engines of Talaxis continue to reshape the environment around the Ravening Ruin.

The Ydrilan will not suffer the presence of despised undead so close to the Derovar, for the hellish flames of the Pyregheists already lick at the banks of the ancient waterway, threatening to snuff out what remains of its once-mighty animus. The long and bitter conflict between the aelves of Hysh and the servants of Nagash is about to be resumed in the war-torn arena of this ravaged forest.

THE RIVER DEROVAR

Once the lands of western Thondia were carved in two by an enormous, snaking waterway that stretched from the Mawbight gulf all the way to the northernmost valleys. The River Derovar was renowned for its ferocious speed and the lethality of its waters, which were filled with razor-sharp fragments of rock. Swept along by a racing current, these shards eviscerated anything falling into the Derovar's foaming depths.

For many centuries the Great Red River – so named by the local tribes because so many beasts were swept up in its roaring currents that the river was constantly stained the colour of blood – dominated the western coastal plains of Thondia. This was an impressively long reign by the standards of the Realm of Beasts, where the landscape is defined by constant and brutal trauma, and mountains and forests possess the same rampant hunger as the predators that dwell within them.

But no mighty hunter can endure forever. The Derovar met its match in the form of the ever-expanding Gnarwood, which sent forth clutches of gnarlocks to sink their roots deep into the Great Red River, glutting themselves upon its bloody waters and damming up those regions through which it had once easily coursed. In answer, the Derovar unleashed violent floods across the land, smashing many gnarlocks to fleshy kindling and giving rise to foul-smelling swamps that still mar the southern reaches of Thondia to this day.

For many years this duel of river and forest ground on, for the Derovar was powerful and not easily denied. Yet the crash of the *Eye of Chotec* ultimately spelled its doom. As the grievously damaged temple-ship's Realmshaper Engines were driven into overdrive, they caused the already fecund Gnarwood to grow at an even more astonishing rate. For each gnarlock swept away by the currents of the Great Red River, another dozen took its place.

So it was that the proud Derovar was slowly bled dry, until at last it was little more than a series of trickling streams, winding their way through the cavernous root-halls beneath the forest's surface. Here the animal spirit of the Great Red River endures, filled with savage fury, longing to be free of its fetters and once more flood free across the lands.

THE SCORCHED VALLEY

When the Eye of Chotec smashed headlong into the Gnarlwood, the resulting impact sent a shockwave of energy coursing through the forest, pulverising many gnarloaks and setting others aflame. Echoes of that terrible disaster can still be seen in the region known as the Scorched Valley.

The Gnarlwood is inconstant and ever-changing. Gnarloaks roam far and wide in search of prey and the ancient engines of the Seraphon alter the environment with their uncanny powers. Yet there are regions within the forest that remain scarred by the momentous disaster that struck the forest many years ago, when the Eye of Chotec fell from the skies

IDOLS OF THE OLD ONES

Phenomenally powerful creations, the Idols of the Old Ones are fashioned in the image of an amphibian head, studded with pulsing gems and astrographic circuitry. It is beyond the ability of mortal minds to comprehend the inner workings of these devices, and not even the slann claim to truly grasp their complexity.

In layman's terms, they can be understood as something akin to a power source, alloyed to an artificial consciousness capable of controlling vast sub-sections of the sunken ruins of Talaxis. A solitary Idol of the Old Ones can activate a dozen of the Seraphon's realm-shaping engines at once, transforming the surrounding land from frozen tundra to boiling, sulphurous swampland in a matter of moments. It can cause a fort-sized section of sunken, ruined temple-ship to rise into the sky, or trap dozens of warriors in an impenetrable bubble of stasis. Merely laying a palm upon one of the glittering star-gems inlaid upon the device's surface can fill one's mind with visions of wonder and searing cosmic truths so potent they can cause instant insanity.

In truth, however, neither the Seraphon of the Gnarlwood nor those reckless arcanists that have tried to channel the power of such an Idol are capable of harnessing more than a fraction of their true potential. Few realise that there are dozens of these devices scattered throughout the interior and exterior of Talaxis, all connected to one another via some strange cosmic alchemy. Once, these devices performed the unfathomably complex task of guiding the Eye of Chotec through the vastness of the Great Void, with all its hidden hazards and unnatural phenomena. Those links are long broken. Yet even separated and sorely damaged, the Idols are capable of protecting what is left of the temple-ship – for a while, at least.

with the force of a blazing comet. One such place is the Scorched Valley – a dank and blackened vale at the heart of the Sundered Scales, still marked by the charred skeletons of gnarloaks incinerated in that terrible impact.

Death permeates everything here. The land is cracked and barren, and the twisted skeletons of incinerated gnarloaks stretch off into the distance like the limbs of dead spiders. Underfoot one feels the crunch of brittle bones. Scholars of the Realm of Beasts might find it strange that the surrounding wildlife has not poured into the Scorched Valley, to indulge in the same savage bloodshed that defines the ecology of Ghur. Yet for some reason all but the most ferocious stay away, as if themselves unnerved by the stillness and sterility of the place. Those who wander here speak of terrible visions of fire and death, of columns of ash-covered corpses rising up from the ground to seize living prey, and of strange fluctuations in the flow of time – as if the entire valley is locked in some unnatural limbo, stuck in the both past and the future.

It is not surprising that spectres and cursed souls are drawn to the Scorched Valley like crows gathering about a mouldering corpse. Here lurk the Nighthaunt Pyregheists, kindling their deadly infernos and periodically surging forth to unleash them upon the living. Though they have scorched many souls, thus far Nagash's agents have been unable to deliver unto the Great Necromancer the grand inferno he demands. Some lingering arcane force continues to gutter their flames just at the point when it seems they must spread unchecked.

The roots of elder gnarloaks have pulled open those wounds in the earth created when the Seraphon temple-ship struck solid ground. Crevasses descend into the subterranean root-halls that run beneath the forest, sometimes opening into vast caverns drenched in trickling rainwater and filled with shorn-off fragments of the Ravening Ruin. Indeed, the core of Talaxis proper lies underground, somewhere amidst the unnavigable tangle of the roots, protected by a multitude of wards, illusory defences and arcane shields. Scattered throughout this subterranean world are elements of its shattered super-structure: splintered ziggurats, crumbled obsidian towers and caverns filled with faintly glowing crystals. It was during the Eye of Chotec's violent crash-landing

Most of these ruins possess no innate power, so damaged were they during that cataclysm. Yet many seemingly inert devices are anything but. Constructed aeons ago by minds more complex than any mortal could hope to comprehend, they were intended to endure across ages, and even the doom of the Eye of Chotec could not snuff out their power. All are mere cogs in a far more elaborate network of star-powered engines that keeps the crippled Talaxis functioning, granting power to its arcane wards and – just barely – keeping the relentless growth of the Gnarlwood at bay. Seraphon guardians toil endlessly to safeguard these machines against looters, while remaining ignorant as to their true purpose.

Even the Lumineth, no strangers to complex creations of the arcane weave, cannot hope to comprehend the complexity of the Seraphon devices. They are, however, clever enough to intuit that they are somehow connected to the reality-shaping devices that litter the Gnarlwood – devices that can transform tangled undergrowth into barren desert in a matter of moments. The Ydrilan Riverblades know that so long as such powerful magic interferes with the natural order of things, they cannot hope to revive the River Derovar. Yet quelling the engines' power will challenge even their keen intellect beyond breaking point.

Baclus fled, stumbling over roots and rocks, terror making him as clumsy as a newborn foal.

Somewhere behind him, he could hear the others screaming, burning. Crazy sounds. The dogs whining in fear. Behind that, he heard the worst sound of all – the ragged, insane laughter of the pyre-spirits as they made living torches of his former comrades.

Baclus dared not stop. He dared not even turn, for the old Wildercorps soldier knew what he would see: those terrible, burning wraiths, the ones that had set the trees ablaze and melted his comrades' skin with their unholy flames. But Baclus would not meet that fate. Never. He was a survivor. Something grabbed him by the ankle. Flailing, Baclus went down on his face, and his jaw cracked upon charred earth. Dazed, he rolled onto his back. Bony, blackened fingers were wrapped around his lower leg. The more he struggled, the tighter their grip became. All around him, rotting, cadaverous figures clawed their way free of the soil. More hands seized the wailing, terrified Baclus, scrabbling at his throat and binding his arms.

And all the while, the flames crept closer.

Eternal agony awaits those who defy the Great Necromancer



FIRES OF HATRED

The conflict that has erupted between the Nighthaunt Pyregheists and the Ydrilan Riverblades is an echo of the ancient feud between Nagash and the aelf-god Teclis. It is waged with merciless fervour, and has already laid waste to many regions of the Sundered Scales.

DECREE OF NAGASH

Though sorely weakened by his arcane duel with Teclis the Mage God, the consciousness of Nagash continues to direct a multi-realm war against the living. Seeking to prepare vital regions of the realms for conquest, the Great Necromancer commands Lady Olynder – ruler of the Nighthaunt – to unleash her Pyregheists, kindling balefire infernos to smother the lands under the pall of death.

RESTORATION

Though the twin aelf-gods Teclis and Tyrion were caught unaware by Alarielle the Everqueen's great ritual of life at the outset of the Era of the Beast, they are quick to understand the implications. Across the realms, the elemental spirits of river, lake, wind and mountain are infused with a surge of vital energy, and many stirred for the first time in centuries.

By the command of the Mage God, the aelemantor temples dispatch agents near and far to awaken and heal the realms' wounded spirits, hoping to restore the lands in the

same manner as Hysh itself was painstakingly tended to following the horrors of the Ocari Dara.

Of all the aelemantor temples, it is the Ydrilan who most aggressively take on this task, with several warbands dispatched to the Gnarlwood to awaken the mighty River Derovar.

FIRE AND JADE

Aware of the escalating conflict waged over the Gnarlwood and its buried riches, the Mortarch of Grief dispatches Pyregheists to see the forest burn. On they come in smouldering cohorts,

Deacons of Flames directing their spectral servants as they set gnarlwoods ablaze, revelling in the predator-trees' agonised roars. Their rampant, pyromaniac spree soon draws the attention of the forest's many warring factions. The Nighthaunt cross their ethereal blades with roving plague-knights, warriors of the hated God-King and the masked iconoclasts of the Jade Obelisk.

The latter rivalry proves most bitter, as the Obelisk's Nephrite Priestesses call upon their strange powers to make the gheists tangible for a few, brief moments, long enough for their warriors' hammers to smash many Torchwraiths into ectoplasmic motes. Yet the Pyregheists simply spew more balefire until the entire battlefield is a shrieking furnace, and the Jade Obelisk are forced to flee or burn.



CLEANSING OF THE CURRENTS

The Ydrilan Riverblades enter the Gnarlwood, seeking the strangled tributaries of the River Derovar. They are repulsed as the dry gullies of the western forest slowly turn into gory pools of boiling blood and rotten flesh. The Bloodmad Ravage is a blight upon the land, a testament to the same corruption that seeped into the soul of Ghur and smothered the Derovar to the point of death.

Many outraged Ydrilan seek out the Khorne-worshippers responsible for this abomination, and a warband under the leadership of Pureflood Seneschal Pytharil

discovers the barbaric hunting packs of the Claws of Karanak prowling in the gore-swamps of the Ravage. Pytharil slays a drooling daemonkin abomination that barrels towards him on all fours, only to fall to the axes of the beast's masked pack-mates. He is the first of many Ydrilan to sacrifice their lives to cleanse the Gnarlwood, though his kin avenge their fallen by eviscerating scores of Chaos-worshippers in a brutal purge of the Ravage.

SKULL OF THE SLANN

While seeking the source of the Derovar, an Ydrilan warband known as the Azure Blades stumbles upon the damaged remnants of a strange technomantic engine shaped in the image of an amphibious creature's skull. The elves intuit that this device is somehow connected to a series of strange, serpent-like arcs across the Sundered Scales, for when its crystalline orbs pulse and glow, these machines radiate waves of climate-altering magic.

The Lumineth realise that while these strange ruins remain functional, there will be no natural restoration of the Derovar. Yet when they attempt to disable the device by removing the powerful crystals embedded in its surface, they incur the wrath of stalking packs of Seraphon. Many Stream-runners are struck down by paralytic poison darts before the cold-blooded hunters are driven back into the trees. This proves merely a brief cessation of hostilities, however, for the forest's merciless eyes are now fixed upon the Lumineth.

CURSED FLAMES

The Ydrilan finally discover the trickling streams that are all that remains of a once-mighty river, a location that the Riverblades name the Veins of Derovar. Yet their rituals of awakening are

interrupted by terrible heat and the sounds of shrieking souls as an inferno of eerie green flame surges towards them. Robed wraiths drift out of the forest, setting their balefire torches to the undergrowth and hurling firebolts that incinerate unguarded aelves in both body and spirit.

The Ydrilan fight back with blade and volleys of throwing weapons, some passing harmlessly through ethereal forms but others blasting them apart. The Pyregheists are driven back at great cost, but the Lumineth aelemantiri are all too aware that the servants of Nagash are not so easily denied.



The fighting between Pyregheists and Ydrilan proceeds to escalate furiously, with the Lumineth snuffing out the Nighthaunt's cursed flames wherever they can, and the spirits responding by snatching isolated Riverblades and condemning them to the pyres. Both foes realise that their vision for the Gnarlwood cannot be realised whilst their enemy exists. The stage is set for a desperate conflict fought to the bitterest of endings.

'Burn the forest to its core. Let no living thing escape the flames. This is the will of Nagash, thy lord and master.'

- Lady Olynder's command to the Pyregheists



YDRILAN RIVERBLADES

Agile as a skimming stone and relentless as the driving current, the aelves of the Ydrilan temples serve the sacred aelementors of the realms' rivers. They defend their blessed waterways with swift and merciless judgement, purifying those tributaries befouled by corruption and slaying any who interfere.

The complex culture of the Lumineth Realm-lords is defined by their intimate connection with the realms, and with the sacred aelementor spirits that inhabit each mountain, cloud and rushing river. The Ydrilan temples stand sentinel over the latter, protecting the life-giving waterways that wend their way across the Mortal Realms. The aelementiri warriors are mystics that inhabit them are distinguished – even amongst aelkind – for the speed and agility of their movements. They embody in all things the restless motion of a free-flowing river.

To become Ydrilan requires a force of will that few aspirants can muster. Those who seek to become one with the spirits of the riverlands must test themselves to their physical and mental limits, leaping into the churning rapids and attempting to weave their way past jagged stones and other obstacles as the current drags them along. Other trials involve would-be aelementiri standing for hours atop a single, slick-wet boulder as the frothing river crashes around them, or leaping from the summit of a roaring waterfall into a churning maelstrom below. Such trials are often lethal, and it is not uncommon to see a pallid aelven corpse draped on the shore near to a Ydrilan temple.

Those who learn to commune with the spirits of the river may adorn a helm fashioned in the image of Daixo Whitecrest, the mightiest of all river aelementors, in her noble equine form. They seek to embody Daixo's relentless motion, wielding weapons as swift as a racing current. An Ydrilan warrior never retreats or hesitates, but keeps

surging forwards, their movements fluid and almost impossibly fast as they embody the momentum of rushing water. Leaping, twisting and swaying aside to avoid the enemy's clumsy strikes at the last moment, they respond with precise, scything ripostes that open throats or pierce vital organs.

Like all aelementiri, Ydrilan warriors are tasked with the protection of a sacred site of nature. In their case, they protect rivers, defending the glittering waterways of Hysh – and other realms – from those who would spoil them. Yet a river is not a static thing: it does not simply endure like the mountains, stoic and deliberate. It is an entity of constant motion, charging ever forward in search of the open sea, adapting to overcome whatever obstacles are placed in its path. The tenets of the Ydrilan temple teach that the realms' waterways are the veins that give life to the lands, cleansing the scars of war and corruption with their purifying touch. Yet not every river-spirit has a temple to watch over it. Countless watercourses have been strangled or despoiled by encroaching forces, both natural and otherwise.

The Ydrilan see it as their duty to heal these elemental sites, restoring the rivers to their former glory by healing their source, invoking the powerful aelementors of Hysh in complex rituals. Through such means the Ydrilan have awakened many slumbering spirits, turning trickling streams into vital, gushing waterways. This pursuit can lead to much upheaval and environmental disruption: many short-lived humans cannot comprehend why the aelves would

so willingly unleash flash-floods and other violent phenomena upon them in such a reckless manner.

The Ydrilan rarely rise to respond to such condemnation, for they serve the essence of the realm itself, a force more vital than any non-aelf could ever comprehend. What are a few hundred drowned souls measured against the vitality of that which gives life to all living beings? The aelves of the river temples focus their efforts most intensely upon those territories befouled by Chaos, where the elemental spirits of the land have been grievously wounded by the corruption of the Dark Gods.

Of all the aelementor temples, it is the Ydrilan that carry out the most aggressive purges of regions deemed by the Lumineth to be tainted by evil, whether that malignity takes the form of vengeful spectres, murderous orruks or Chaos-worshipping raiders. Their far-roaming mission to wash the lands clean has taken them to the Gnarlwood. The festering aura of brutality that emanates from this predator's forest has long troubled the aelves of Hysh, who have sensed from afar that something dangerous lingers at its centre. Whatever it is slowly grows in power as more and more mortals plunge into the Gnarlwood in search of riches, fame or bloody trophies.

Furthermore, the Ydrilan elders sense within its depths the presence of a once-powerful spirit: that of the River Derovar. One of Ghur's mighty, continent-carving waterways, the Derovar was choked and strangled to nothingness centuries ago by

the relentless growth of the Gnarlwood. If somehow restored to its former splendour, it would surely wash away the corruption that has overrun the forest, and restore true balance to the region.

'The river is life. It brings renewal and purity to the land, even if it must do so by violent means. We must be prepared to follow that same path. We cannot simply stand dormant as the silent mountain, enduring all: we must surge forth like the driving current, eroding the stain of corruption wherever we encounter it.'

– Pureflood Seneschal
Suthylaine of the
Daixo Temple

DAIXO WHITECREST

Mightiest of all Hyshian river spirits is the legendary Daixo Whitecrest, guardian of the Great Daixo River. Her war-form is said to be that of a graceful equine shaped from foaming water, its mane gleaming like the sun. It is this image that adorns the helms of Ydrilan adherents, and it is Daixo's fearsome speed and boldness that they seek to emulate in war.

The physical manifestation of Daixo Whitecrest has not been seen in centuries, not since the terrible events of the Ocari Dara that saw her tainted by arcane pollutants. The aelves of the river temples seek to bring about her return by restoring the great watercourses of Hysh – and the other realms – to their former splendour.



THE RAGING CURRENT

Agents of the Ydrilan temples see it as their spiritual duty to awaken the spirits of the realms' dormant rivers, those ancient waterways that have been dammed or despoiled by unnatural means. This calling has led them to the Gnarlwood, whose hungry roots long ago strangled the once-mighty River Derovar.

The Ydrilan Riverblades did not enter the Gnarlwood in search of treasure, or pursuing rumours of cosmic power. These aelves are austere beings, who shun the trappings that other mortals crave so greedily. Instead, they risk their lives – and their souls – on a quest of purification, hoping to restore balance and elemental harmony to the realms. If this sacred mission results in the deaths of a few unfortunate beings too ignorant to understand its importance, then so be it. More than one truculent human settlement has refused to heed the Ydrilan's patient insistence that they vacate their settlement, only to be swept away by a flood caused by the aelves' elemental rituals.

For all their centred self-assurance, the Ydrilan were unsettled by the ferocity of the Gnarlwood and the aggression of its murderous denizens. The deeper they plunged into the depths of the hungry forest, the more impenetrable it became, and the adaptability and agility of the Riverblades were soon challenged to their limits. Even for these masterful warriors, it was no easy thing to deploy the graceful moves of the Nine Currents in such close proximity. This was precisely how the Gnarlwood had conquered the mighty River Derovar centuries ago: by surrounding it with a cage of grasping roots and tendrils, strangling its momentum and slowing its foaming waters to a trickle.

Yet the Ydrilan possessed the indomitable will of true aelementiri, and neither the predation of the environment nor the increasingly murderous attentions of rival warbands would sway them from their task. Many hard-bitten warriors thought to stalk the lightly armoured aelves, foolishly mistaking them for easy prey. Such ignorance was paid for in lives, as clumsy ambushes were repulsed with deadly efficiency.

Weaving their way through the grasping limbs of ravenous gnarlwoods and leaping over the shattered remnants of the fallen ruin Talaxis, the Riverblades eventually forced their way into the deadly region known as the Sundered Scales. Here, smothered deep beneath the forest floor, they found the mouth of the Derovar – or rather, the pathetic, trickling channels that were all that remained of the once-rushing river. Yet no matter how pathetic the state of the Derovar, its spirit still endured, awaiting the chance to rise up in fury once more.

So it was that the Ydrilan began the elaborate dance of their cleansing rituals, channelling vitality into the slumbering behemoth of the Great Red River. Slowly, but with steadily increasing momentum, its meagre streams would surge and rise, frothing with geomantic energy.

The Ydrilan know their trials have only just begun. It will take much time, effort and sacrifice before the Riverblades can restore natural equilibrium to the lands surrounding the Gnarlwood, but there are few beings alive who possess more relentless determination than they. Perhaps only the dead can boast the same single-minded devotion to their cause.



Few enemies are as despised by the aelves of Hysh as Nagash's undead creations, who represent an existential threat to everything they hold dear. It was only very recently – at least in the eyes of aelkind – that the Great Necromancer himself launched an assault upon the Realm of Light, and though it ended with his defeat at the hands of Teclis and the Mage God, the losses suffered by the Lumineth were immeasurable.

When the Ydrilan Riverblades encountered the Pyregheists and their vile necromancy, they immediately sought to annihilate the Nighthaunt by any means possible. They knew that if the flame-spreading spirits were given licence to unleash their balefire inferno across the Gnarlwood, it would surely spell disaster for their plans to revive the River Derovar. Defeating the wraiths would not prove easy, for the fiends' incorporeal nature made it difficult for the deft blows of the Ydrilan to strike true. Many Lumineth perished in those first skirmishes, their souls torched by the Pyregheists' balefire torrents. But soon the formidable will of the Ydrilan began to alter

the flow of battle as they invested each strike with such focused surety that it cut through the incorporeal rage of its target to wound the spirit's hateful essence.

PUREFLOOD SENESCHAL

In all things the Ydrilan seek to embody the swift-flowing momentum of a rushing river. They prize swiftness in both thought and motion, overwhelming each obstacle in their path with the speed of their movement and the graceful lethality of the martial form known as Ydril'Qar. The undisputed masters of this discipline are the Pureflood Seneschals, those that have plunged into the roaring river and become one with its raging momentum. Each of these enigmatic figures has communed with the animus of one of Hysh's great fractal rivers, immersing themselves in the wisdom of twisting course and eddying flow.

Even when meditating they seem to be in constant motion as they perform the Nine Currents – the core forms of the Ydril'Qar martial discipline, each based around the movements of a rushing river. Very few warriors are capable of landing a blow upon a Pureflood Seneschal as they sway and leap aside from every sword stroke or wild swing, moving with a liquid grace that no creature but an aelf could hope to replicate. There seems to be an almost hypnotic quality to these motions, a serenity belied when the Pureflood Seneschal opens a foe's throat or pierces a lung in a spray of viscera.

As their name suggests, Pureflood Seneschals act as the tip of the Ydrilan's battle formation. They lead the way with trident, glaive or hurled ythara – light throwing blades favoured by all Riverblades, hurled in all directions like the spray from a crashing wave. Their actions dictate the direction and flow of the battle, selecting the most dangerous enemy targets to overwhelm, and exploiting weaknesses in their formation into which the Ydrilan might flow.

CRESTDANCERS

Following in the wake of their Pureflood Seneschal come the Crestdancers, the warrior-monks of the Ydrilan temples. These aelves have progressed through the forms of the Ydril'Qar, and though their skills do not rival those of the temple masters, they are still living weapons that can outrun and outfight almost any foe. Where the Pureflood Seneschal leads, the Crestdancers follow, widening the angle of the assault with a flurry of sweeping strikes – in this way they form the driving current that comes after the wave, further buffeting those swept up in the river's fury.

The Ydrilan martial discipline focuses upon combined attacks rather than individual mastery. Adherents are trained to combine their lethal skills to deadly

YDRIL'QAR

The martial form of the Ydrilan is a closely guarded secret, taught only within the sacred chambers of their riverside temples. It is an art that was developed by the first Lumineth to commune with the spirits of Hysh's great rivers, its techniques passed seamlessly between successive shrine guardians and mages like water along a sacred concourse, and its intended as a method of attuning one's spirit just as much as it is a weapon to defeat one's foes in battle.

Still, none can deny the deadliness of those who have mastered the Nine Currents, for they possess the ability to defeat almost any foe. The Eroding Current, for example, involves using fast, rhythmic strikes to cripple an opponent's armour, while the speed of the Racing Current sees the Ydrilan warrior move so blindingly fast that they seem to defy the laws of physical reality.

effect, each warrior exploiting the openings their fellows have created, wearing their target down with lacerating strikes that spill blood and sap strength.

Thus, while a single Crestdancer is a dangerous foe, they become truly deadly when they attack in a single, rushing charge, subjecting their quarry to death by a thousand cuts.



STREAM-RUNNERS

The ranks of the Stream-runners are composed of those acolytes of the river spirits yet to immerse themselves in the most dangerous trials of the aelementiri. Though not yet at the summit of enlightenment, they are well trained in the Nine Currents and possessed of a spiritual certainty that makes them fearsome warriors.

Their task is to patrol the shores of the waterways surrounding their own Ydrilan temple, ensuring that the river's flow is unimpeded by sabotage or corruption, and that the sacred waters are not tainted by the presence of Chaos worshippers, rampaging orruks or the unquiet dead.

PYREGHEISTS

Malevolent spectres obsessed with committing their mortal prey to the flames, the Pyregheists embody Nagash's towering cruelty and spite. They haunt the darkest, most death-drenched places of the realms, seeking to punish those who attempt to deny the true lord of the dead his due.

The Great Necromancer Nagash is a merciless god. His endlessly inventive cruelty manifests in the

form of the eternal punishments doled out to those souls that have wronged him. Nagash takes cold satisfaction in subjecting those who wrong him to eternal sentences that spitefully reflect the nature of their sins. There is no greater crime in the eyes of Nagash than the attempt to escape the consequences of death, thereby denying him the souls he believes to be his by right.

Mortals who seek to safeguard their own immortal souls or those of others against the Great Necromancer's judgement earn his most vigorous hatred. Such 'criminals' include embalmers, sanctify corpses with oils and unguents, or crematorium-priests who commit the bodies of the fallen to sacred braziers, thereby ensuring their peaceful journey into the afterlife.

These defiant men and women had best pray to whatever gods they worship that their own spirits are not dragged to the dungeons of Nagashizzar upon death, for they have earned themselves the attention. This is never a good thing for any living creature. Once Nagash has been slighted, he will always exact a terrible vengeance, whether it takes him one year or a thousand.

Few fates are grimmer than those of the Pyregheists. These spectral fiends are fashioned from the spirits of those who in life sought to preserve the souls of the dead through rituals of cremation, and – in a display of Nagash's unpredictable spite – corpse-stealers who in life sought to disrupt this practice. Now, both priests and graverobbers burn forever in the same hellish nightmare. To the Great Necromancer, this seems a most fitting and satisfying sentence in response to their blasphemous defiance of his laws.

Bound together in self-hatred and bitterness, Pyregheists are obsessed with wreathing their mortal prey in sheets of

cursed balefire, annihilating their foes' physical forms and condemning their souls to an eternity of agonising suffering in the underworlds of Shyish. Through inflicting such terrible pain they can, for the briefest of moments, forget the horror of their own existence.

The Pyregheists' are tasked with tending to the balefire beacons and braziers that can be found throughout Nagashizzar and Shyish, ensuring that the unholy fires are fed with a constant supply of mortal flesh and soul-matter. These fires radiate an intense aura of necromantic magic, suffusing the surrounding lands so thoroughly with the energies of death that vast undead hosts can be raised and ghoulish manifestations of the Great Necromancer summoned by his acolytes at will. Thousands of Pyregheists toil away at this gruesome task across the Realm of Death, dimly aware that they are responsible for a horrific perversion of the noble cause they once served in life.

Nagash is not content for his creations to merely maintain the workings of his macabre realm, however. Not when the Pyregheists are such an effective weapon of terror. The prospect of burning eternally in balefire is the perfect weapon with which to torment those mortals who refuse to accept his dominion of death. The burning cold flames of Nagashizzar will one day spread to engulf the entirety of the Mortal Realms, and it is the Pyregheists that are given the task of kindling this firestorm.

Under the pitiless command of Lady Olynder, Mortarch of Grief, Pyregheists drift forth in packs, wielding their pyromantic powers to set swathes of land ablaze, and giving rise to cursed storms of balefire that consume hundreds

or even thousands of lives. Each mortal that perishes in this fashion suffers a fate worse than death, as their immortal soul is scorched so terribly that the pain follows them to the afterlife, rendering their tormented spirits easy prey for the Great Necromancer and his servants.

The particularly potent aura of death and suffering that swirls around the Gnarlwood has drawn many of these cruel spectres, who seek to ignite the entire forest in a single, horrific inferno that will consume all who dwell within. A sacrifice of such horrendous scale would surely please the Great Necromancer. From such a place, Nagash's lieutenants could summon vast hordes of Nighthaunt and shambling, blackened corpses with which to strangle the entirety of Thondia in his lifeless grasp.

The Great Necromancer has good reason to see to it that the Ghurish Heartlands brought to heel, for their wild savagery is quite at odds with his own vision of a realm bound together in silent sterility, beholden only to his own desires. In the form of the Pyregheists he has a potent weapon with which to burn away that which offends him, for even beasts fear fire.

*'Ten times came the
gheists that bitter night,*

*Ten-hundred souls they
set a-light.*

*Thus was the fate of
doomed Grymfyre,*

*A gift to Old Bones on an
emerald pyre.'*

*-Excerpt from a
Lethisian folk song*

BALEFIRE

Unnatural in their intensity, the flames of a balefire inferno not only char the flesh but lick at the soul, inflicting agony that lingers even after death. Balefire is a hideous creation, produced by burning flecks of powdered grave-sand along with the remains of recently slain beings. The unholy alchemy results in a flame green-white in colour, at once blisteringly hot and yet capable of exuding an unnatural cold – the chill of the grave weaponised. It is a common catalyst in spells of necromancy, such as the fell enchantments that radiate from Corpse Carts and Mortis Engines. Such potent loci grant nearby corpses a flicker of animus, enough to for them to claw their way free from the grave and join a necromancer's shambling throng.

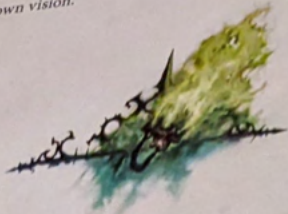
Some say that it was Nagash himself that created true balefire by burning the souls of his slain rivals, the ancient gods of the underworlds. These scholars of necromancy insist that the balefire braziers utilised by minor death mages and corpse-raisers in their rituals are a pale imitation of the towering columns of emerald flame that illuminate the dread city of Nagashizzar.

There seems to be an element of truth to this, for the pyromantic powers of the Pyregheists – creations of the Great Necromancer himself – burn with terrifying intensity, eating through stone, metal and even continuing to burn underwater for a time. Even the finest enchanted armour seems to grant only a meagre protection against its murderous intensity.

LET THE LIVING BURN

Spectres of horror and agonising pain, the Pyregheists exist only to sacrifice the living to their baleful flames. They come to the Gnarwood at the command of their dread master Nagash, with the intention of incinerating the entire forest and its occupants in a massive, deathly conflagration.

Pyregheists – like all Nighthaunt spectres – possess no drive or goals of their own. They are entirely the creations of the Great Necromancer Nagash, and exist solely to carry out his will, dictated by the appointed ruler of all Nighthaunt, Lady Olynder. Their presence in the Gnarwood is therefore a sign of the Great Necromancer's interest in events unfolding in Ghur, and how they might be twisted to serve his own vision.



Nagash is a patient god, whose schemes often span the course of centuries. Yet for all his cruel cunning, the Great Necromancer knows the value of indiscriminate terror, unleashed without distinction or mercy. The presence of Pyregheists abroad in the Gnarwood indicates that Nagash is not interested in prising arcane secrets from the ruins of Talaxis, unlike so many of the realms' great powers. Instead, his intentions are both grander and more simplistic – to turn the Gnarwood into a vast funeral pyre, incinerating any living thing within its borders, and whatever remains of the ruins at its heart.

His Pyregheists have been sent to see this done, and they have spread their balefire infernos far and wide. Even gnarloaks are driven back by the Pyregheists' unnatural flames, which can burn through even their thick bark with ease. Almost no region of the Gnarwood is impassable to the Nighthaunt. As creatures without form, they drift through the dagger-like thorns of its briars, and pass by snaking strangle-vines that would garrotte any mortal straying so close. They have made their lair in the Scorched Valley, a huge furrow of blackened earth that marks the location at which the main body of the Eye of Chotec struck the floor of the Gnarwood. Here they gather in packs, circling great, blazing pits of balefire into which the souls of their living victims are cast.

Only devices of arcane power prove capable of repelling Nagash's servants, for the ancient wards of the Seraphon were built to repel ethereal foes as well as living trespassers. Yet even these wonders cannot withstand torrent of concentrated balefire, for these unholy flames are imbued with the magic of death and endings.

The leaders of the Pyregheists seek out the Seraphon's warding stones and the immense statues known to the cold-blooded ones as Idols of the Old Ones. Pyregheists not only consumes flesh and soul-matter, when the stars were still young. Already gravely damaged by the Eye of Chotec's fall, gems containing bountiful solar energy rupture and splinter, turning the colour the Great Void as they are pumped full of tormented spirits and flames that radiate both heat and unbearable cold.

Through such unsubtle means do the Pyregheists slowly destroy the defences of Talaxis, and prepare to deliver the Gnarwood unto Nagash in a hellish firestorm. Yet they have reckoned without the interference of Teclis the Mage God's aelven meddlers, whose own plans to restore the River Derovar threaten to smother the spreading fires in a rising tide of floodwater. Such defiance of the Great Necromancer's desires must be answered with fire and death.

DEACONS OF FLAMES

Deacons of Flames are beings that have fallen from grace to damnation, becoming the epitome of everything they once despised. In life these gheists were priests of Shyishan mortuary orders dedicated to the preservation of the soul upon death. Their duty was to anoint the body of the deceased with unguents and perform a litany of esoteric rites before committing them to the flames of a holy pyre. These rituals – known only to a select few – not only protected the flesh and bones of the fallen from the malign attentions of Necromancers, but also sanctified the lingering remnants of their soul, ensuring that their spirit would find its way into whatever underworld they believed in.

Such meddling, of course, enraged Nagash, who went to great lengths to claim the souls of these mortuary-priests. Many were purged by his agents,

Tethar watched Riyalin leap to the attack, driving his dagger through the burning spectre's throat, but leaving no mark.

Tethar followed behind, ducking beneath the swing of a blazing torch before bringing his crescent blades sweeping across to bisect the wraith. He felt no impact. Nothing but the rush of air and the scorching pain of intense heat.

'We cannot even score a blow,' the Stream-runner warrior gasped. 'Daixo guide us, how can we fight such fiends?'

Riyalin's only answer was a piercing scream. Tethar turned to see his comrade engulfed in those unholy flames, writhing in agony. The smouldering wraith now turned the pitiless coals of its eyes upon Tethar, even as it siphoned the tormented spirit of his friend into the spherical iron cages hanging from its mantle. It drifted towards him, the dry kindling beneath it erupting into flames. As Tethar opened his mouth to cry out, livid green fire leapt down his throat, and his world was swept away in a flood of excruciating pain.

master the scorched and charred ruins of their living prey, so that whatever remains of their soul might be painfully extracted.

Balefire Guard rush at their foes, sweeping their weapons about in wide arcs, scoring precision and simply trying to ignite everything in their path. Yet when their Deacon of Flames is threatened they react swiftly, surging forth to place their own incorporeal form in the way of enemy blades and spells.

FLAMEWRAITHS

Those who were tasked with lighting the sacred fires of the Shyishan mortuaries were known as Flamewraiths, and their duty was considered one of great honour. They retain that title in death, but there is no honour left in these deranged gheists. Swinging balefire torches about themselves with wild abandon, they seek to spread their unholy flames far and wide, heedless of the reason or the cost.

As the inferno grows, Flamewraiths are fuelled by the screams and howls of their agonised foes, their crazed lashing becoming ever faster as they race after those not yet consumed by the rising heat. Any mortals brave enough to raise their sword against these horrors soon regret their boldness, as their blade turns red-hot and their skin begins to blister and char.

TORCHWRAITHS

Nagash's sense of justice is driven by a twisted malice that makes no distinction between those who act with good intentions and those who revel in selfishness and depravity. All are subject to his cruel whims, and any who fail to adhere to his laws – regardless of their reasons for doing so – risk the most appalling punishment. So it is for the Torchwraiths, those wretched, burning spirits trapped eternally in a hell of their own making. They were once grave-robbers and meagre hedge-Necromancers who sought to loot cadavers from the crematoriums and corpse-pyres of Shyish without offering the appropriate tribute to the Supreme Lord of the Undead.

Caught and sentenced to be impaled upon stakes and burned on the same sanctified pyres from which they sought to steal, they perished in fire. Death provided no relief, for their souls were claimed and remade by the Great Necromancer as a just reward for their insolence. Trapped in a halo of unholy flames and screaming in non-stop pain, they seek to inflict upon others the same torment they suffer every moment. Torchwraiths hurl bolts of balefire, igniting enemies and the environment alike, and slash wildly at their scorched victims with ritual daggers – the same weapons they once used to cut up corpses and pry loose the valuables of the recently deceased.

their screaming spirits broken in the innumerable obliettes of Nagashizzar. They were remade as Deacons of Flames, twisted spectres bearing a mockery of the panoply they had worn in life, and dedicated not to preserving the souls and flesh of the living, but delivering them up to the rightful God of Undeath by immolating them in immense balefire pyres.

The scorched mantle these gheists carry across their shoulders has a nadirite crucible on each end, into which the souls of the Deacons' burned victims are drawn, screaming and writhing. Deacons of Flames can store souls indefinitely within these cages, or call upon the captured spirit-stuff to increase the ferocity of their own summoned firestorms. Those who do not so easily succumb to the fire are easily dispatched with a flaming brazier-staff or else snatched by a pyrekeeper's tongs and dragged into the unbearable heat.

BALEFIRE GUARD

As they once watched over the mortuaries of Shyish in life, protecting them from malign trespassers, so do the Balefire Guard stand guard over the huge pyres erected by the Deacons of Flames. Now, however, they do not seek to preserve the sanctity of life but to profane it. They have been reshaped into hooded and masked wraiths, their tattered robes smouldering and fire-wreathed weapons clutched in their hands. They serve the Deacon of Flames to which they are pledged unwaveringly, spreading the inferno with blazing flails, axes and torches, and dragging back to their