

In less than two years the Second Unification was complete. With the skorne once more under his control, Vinter Raelthorne moved his seat to the Abyssal Fortress and initiated reforms requiring all houses to contribute soldiers to the Army of the Western Reaches. As a reward for Archdomina Makeda's loyalty, Vinter granted her the dominion of the western empire and tasked her with leading the army he sent to conquer the west. Slaves and soldiers moved rapidly west to construct a supply chain of fortresses and waypoints beyond the Abyss, eventually occupying key points on the western fringes of the Iron Kingdoms.

While planning attacks upon Cygnaran fortifications, Makeda learned Vinter's true plans: to weaken the skorne and Cygnar both in order to reclaim his former throne. Makeda rebelled against Vinter's rule, redirecting her army to march against him. She drove the Conqueror from the Abyssal Fortress and claimed the title of Supreme Archdomina of the Skorne Empire. The fate of Vinter after being deposed is unknown.

SOCIETY

The skorne are one of Immoren's most ancient civilizations. Their culture developed apart from the forces that shaped the western nations, but though they never suffered the lash of the Orgoth or the conflicts of the west, they endured a litany of catastrophes and warfare. The skorne have been fundamentally shaped by tremendous destruction and suffering, beginning with the annihilation of the Empire of Lyoss and the supernatural cataclysm that consumed the east. Had the Lyossans not plunged the world into fire, though, the skorne would likely never have risen to prominence. From humble nomadic roots, the skorne established a permanent civilization in an era of dramatic upheaval. Over thousands of years spent thriving despite misfortune and learning to strengthen themselves through privation, the skorne developed into the dominant inhabitants of eastern Immoren and became one of the two most influential races on the continent.

The skorne are devotees of millennia-old philosophies that shaped a complex society with distinct concepts of honor, sacrifice, and morality. Their long history of struggling for survival and internecine warfare amid a desolate environment forged them into remarkable warriors who draw on a powerful and dark mystical tradition that taps into the very power of flesh and death. Though they were once fractured and divided, the unification of the skorne into an empire has turned them into an existential threat to the west, a culture of proud, united warriors boasting a singularly formidable army bent on conquest. For the skorne, the subjugation of the west is the only possible outcome of thousands of years of refining the arts of war.

Philosophy has played a key role in the evolution of the skorne people, including the central tenet of ancestor worship. The skorne do not acknowledge or revere gods but look instead to the great figures of their family lines and aspire to emulate those who have achieved greatness. Such a legacy is the closest most skorne can come to immortality; they have no expectation of enduring past death except in the memories of their kin. They have no knowledge of Urcaen. Instead, the skorne believe only annihilation awaits them as their spirits tumble into a hellish wasteland they call the Void.

Skorne society is strictly regimented, with the warrior caste above all others. Great warlords direct the course of skorne society, and the warrior caste subjugates the workers and scholars who advance skorne society in more subtle ways. Their tribal culture relies upon the enslavement of defeated enemies and the use of beasts of labor. All skorne dwelling within the empire know their place in society, who their betters are, and how to offer the proper amount of deference to their superiors. The caste system exists even among tribal nomads living beyond the borders, though not as rigidly enforced as within the great cities of eastern Immoren.



SKORNE HOUSES

The largest and most established skorne tribes coalesced into houses thousands of years ago, with some tracing their roots back to the establishment of Malphas, the first permanent city of the skorne. Most houses maintained the former tribes' rivalries, and every house sought to arm and train a sizable force to protect its interests and wage war against its adversaries. These house armies laid the foundation for the modern cohorts.

All skorne are born as members of a specific house or into its service, and they know their place within it from a very early age. Membership in a house can be abandoned by those entering into certain mystical traditions—a step not taken lightly, as such individuals can never return. Even small groups of skorne who live in nomadic groups maintain a similar structure, though their families may include fewer social strata. A tyrant or dominar who leads a house has complete power over its members and can do what he pleases, as long as he obeys the dominar or archdominar to whom he is sworn and honors the broad codes of skorne honor. A tyrant will designate a chosen heir, most often a first-born child, to be groomed for leadership.

Below the tyrant are senior military officers, often chosen from the tyrant's immediate family, who oversee the house's warriors, which comprise the house's army. Below the warriors are a house's workers, divided by function and led by masters in their respective fields. Lowest of all are the slaves. A house may employ individuals that are not technically members of the house, such as paingivers, who nonetheless must obey house leaders during their time of service.

Many houses were founded hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago and they still keep fortified palaces in the cities of the skorne homelands. These compounds can be truly enormous in the case of the wealthiest houses, which maintain equally impressive private armies. Sizable houses boast shrines to their great ancestors and the exalted members of their bloodlines. The pious spend time in meditation at these sacral-stone shrines, particularly before embarking on difficult tasks. As houses fell in the wars of unification over the past few decades, the victors claimed many of the sacral stones from these shrines. House Balaash holds a vast store of seized sacral stones from previous conquests. Now that it is the Imperial House, these stones and any newer exalted gathered in the course of ongoing conquest are under the care of Supreme Aptimus Zaal, who leads the entire extoller caste.

Before the founding of the Skorne Empire, wars between houses were common. The destruction caused by most of these wars was limited by the desire of each side to seize the lands and assets of the other. These assets included not only wealth and resources but also the members of the defeated house, who were enslaved as a matter of course. It was quite common for house members outside the warrior caste to endure these conflicts with little loss of life, changing one house allegiance for another as they became slaves of the victor. Nevertheless, skorne history is marked by a number of major wars involving large alliances between dozens of houses that reshaped the landscape of society and devastated cities, forcing the victors to rebuild what had been torn down.

Since the wars of unification, fighting between competing houses has been considerably reduced, but not entirely eliminated. The nature of skorne society traditionally made it difficult for groups to work together effectively across house divides, though communication has improved substantially since the reforms imposed by the Conqueror. Conflicts tend to be smaller in scale and ritually formalized since the imposition of empire, but remain a method of vying for political supremacy and settling disputes. Members of houses that are defeated can still be enslaved by the victors, an important aspect of the slave-based skorne economy.

DARK GIFTS

The skorne are an inherently gifted race and take easily to the study of the arcane arts. In addition to the extollers who are so vital in preserving the exalted from the Void, the skorne integrate magically gifted individuals throughout their societies. Indeed, the Gifted often rise to the highest echelons of skorne society. The great houses of the skorne are dominated by powerful tyrants and dominars who have mastered the arts of mortitheurgy and are able to command their subjects in life and in death.

CASTES

Caste means everything to the skorne. Each knows his exact place among his peers. The existence of castes predates the transition from nomadic to urban culture after the construction of Malphas. Urban living greatly accelerated these caste divisions, calcifying rapidly once the skorne settled in the Shroudwall Mountains following the Cataclysm that destroyed the ancient Lyossan Empire and shaped the land of Immoren into a clear east and west. The word for "warrior" has the same ancient root as "hunter" and meant those who stalked the plains. Today a distinct difference exists between these groups within the larger warrior caste.

Failing to practice proper caste conventions and show proper respect can provoke the insulted skorne to bloodshed. Cases of extreme insult can throw entire houses into war. The imposition of centralized rule has not changed this fundamental aspect of skorne society. Killing another skorne over insults remains perfectly acceptable behavior. Peers consider the death of one combatant as an affirmation of the loser's weakness and the end of the matter.

The caste system only indirectly affects governance. Caste represents a social force rather than chain of command. Two house lords, bitter rivals and enemies, may wage battle with all of the resources of their respective houses, yet they occupy the pinnacle of their castes and therefore remain peers. Even

enemies of lower caste owe them respect. A lowly soldier of an enemy house cannot voice an insult to an enemy house lord, for such a person stands far above his station. Making eye contact with an enemy lord may merit brutal punishment by the soldier's superiors regardless of the enmity between their respective houses.

The skorne are organized into three basic caste categories: warriors, workers, and slaves. Each of these categories encompasses additional layers added over the millennia. Additionally, two distinct special castes slightly transcend these categories: the paingivers and the extollers. Both technically fall within the worker caste, but their unique roles in skorne society afford them special respect and status above the rest of the worker caste. While sometimes inflexible, skorne society has evolved over time as the need arose. The emergence of Vinter Raelthorne forced adjustments in thinking by adding a layer of hierarchy to which the skorne are still adapting.

Birth determines a skorne's initial caste, and opportunities to attain a higher caste are severely limited. Some few raise themselves at the onset of adulthood through a demonstration of combat prowess or other exceptional skills, for example, but nearly all skorne remain in their birth caste for life. Rising above the slave caste is especially difficult—usually impossible within a single lifespan. More often the offspring of an enslaved generation have the opportunity to rise to the worker or warrior castes. A slave can be elevated beyond his birth caste through the intercession of his lord, but such occurrences are rare in the extreme.

A skorne with very specialized skills may perform two roles without loss of status. If a warrior also happens to be a weaponsmith, he receives the respect due his warrior status. This situation commonly arises among occultists and other intellectuals who also fight on the battlefield, such as mortitheurges and extollers. For example, Lord Tyrant Hexeris of House Kurshon acts as both a cohort leader and a master mortitheurge. His warrior standing takes precedence over his occult studies to determine caste standing. A Hestatian serving his liege as a weaponsmith remains a Hestatian, although his peers who fight more often hold him in lower regard. When a skorne gives up his weapons, whether from age or crippling injury, he falls from the warrior caste. Such skorne can become members of the worker caste, but few choose this fate, seeing such diminishment as worse than death. Some old or crippled warriors instead venture one last time into the wilds with a weapon readied, hoping for a death that is in keeping with the hoksune code.

A house lord poses the one exception to this general attitude. A lord always ranks among the warrior caste regardless of his fighting skill or actual presence on the battlefield, though there are strong social pressures for house lords to prove themselves worthy. Lords of active fighting houses command far greater prestige than their inactive peers. It is acceptable for older house lords to dabble in other areas of power, such as expanding their practice of mortitheurgy at the expense of their fighting prowess. However, younger heirs who desire to lead while in their prime may resort to violence in supplanting elder house lords. There are acceptable and unacceptable ways to go

about this: confronting a tyrant in a duel is honorable; having one killed via proxies or other indirect means is cowardly and dishonorable. A lord widely suspected of having secured his position dishonorably rarely lives long and is likely to be toppled in turn by an officer who is respected by his house army.

THE WARRIOR CASTE

Every skorne is keenly aware of the position of his caste and his level of prominence, and of the relation of these factors to those of his superiors, peers, and inferiors. Though all warriors in the skorne armies are members of the warrior caste, subtle but important distinctions exist within this group that provide different degrees of stature and esteem. Each warrior discipline has its own pride of place and values its distinct fighting style and discipline, but some are acknowledged to be closer to the core of hoksune than others.

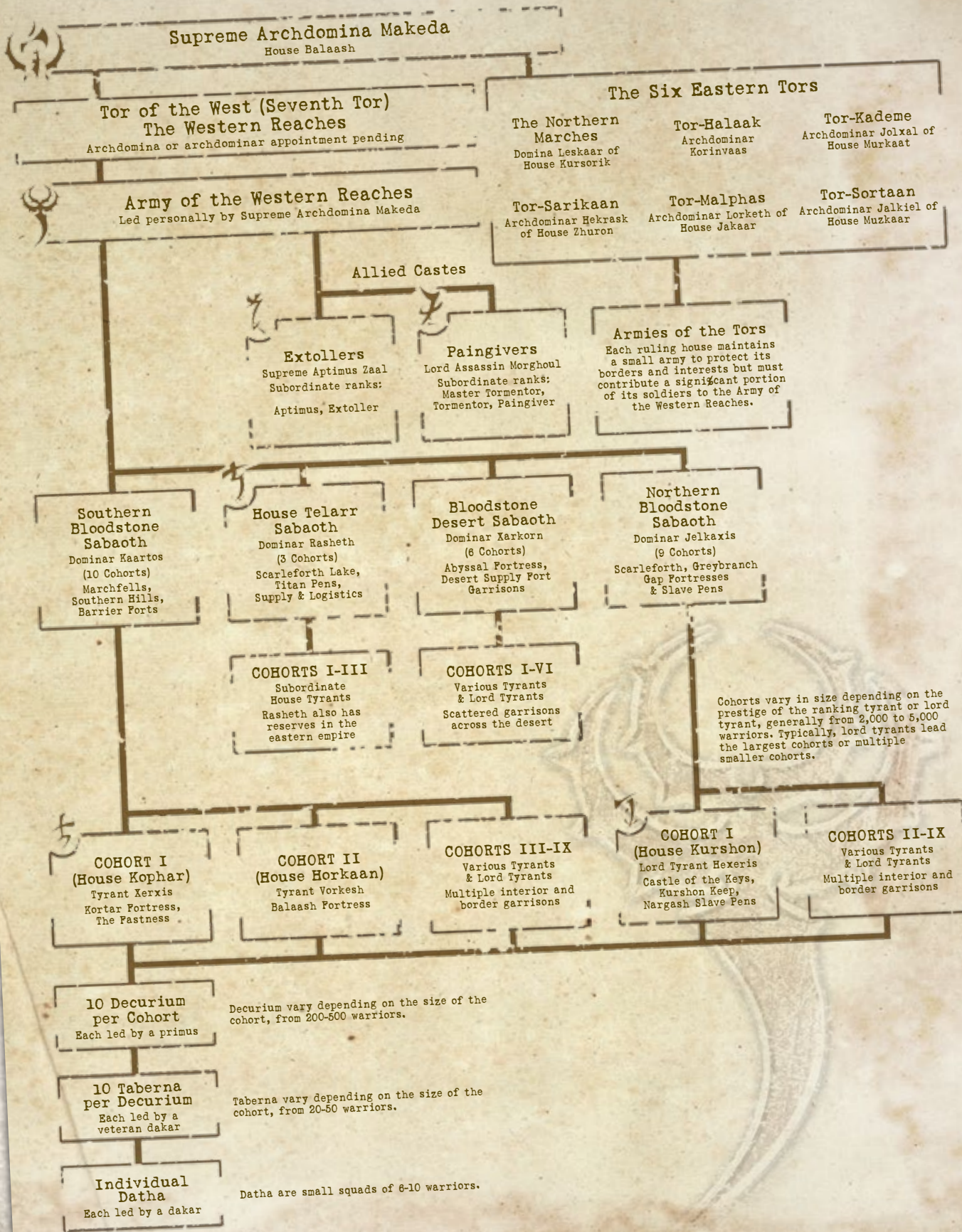
Because of the size of the warrior caste, many warriors also perform tasks normally relegated to lower castes in the day-to-day execution of their duties. For example, many houses encourage or require their warriors to learn the craft of making armor and weapons. The amount of this work a warrior might perform without loss of status comprises one of the indeterminate subtleties of skorne caste interaction. Among house armies in the east where workers and slaves are more numerous, a warrior has less need to lower himself to perform menial tasks. This situation changes considerably when lower-caste support is minimal, as within the Army of the Western Reaches. Soldiers in the field must be more flexible. They must contribute their efforts to the construction of new settlements and fortifications as well as the upkeep required to house and feed the army.

Whereas soldiers of other races fight for victory, survival, and the glory of their nations, the skorne desire only an honorable death after deeds worthy of exaltation. Every skorne knows that torment and annihilation await them in the afterlife and their only hope of escaping this fate is to embrace death through the pursuit of battlefield glory. This fatalistic outlook is a potent weapon: Soldiers of the Skorne Empire seek neither comfort nor recreation and can be pushed to incredible lengths in the pursuit of victory. Desertion from a cohort is nearly unheard of, since the warriors of the skorne embrace every opportunity to prove themselves in the hopes of earning eventual exaltation.

Skorne commanders subject their troops to the magic of mortitheurgy to enhance their vitality in combat and to bolster their endurance on long marches across harsh environs. Master mortitheurges can reduce a skorne's need for food and water by applying simple rituals and surgical procedures. These rites typically have deleterious consequences on affected souls but rarely impact morale, since skorne are raised from birth to expect and even embrace the realities of their society. In fact, some of the most powerful mortitheurges can transform the bodies of soldiers such that their flesh is no longer truly alive, feeling no need for food and no pain from injury until released from this state.

During the formative centuries of the first skorne cities the warrior caste divided itself by discipline and fighting style,

SKORNE MILITARY



eventually narrowing to the three fundamental modern military disciplines: Cataphracts, Praetorians, and Venators. Those warriors who fail to be recognized as Praetorians become members of the Hestatians, the lowest warrior caste, relegated to militia and sentry duties. Hestatians are still warriors, but are recognized as inferior ones, respected only above those who do not live by hoksune, and in some cases less than this. In practice, extollers and paingivers are often given greater respect than Hestatians.

ARMIES OF THE SKORNE EMPIRE

Before the military was reformed, the terms "cohort" and "army" were almost synonymous, and tyrants still informally refer to the soldiers under their command as a "house army." Dominars able to field multiple cohorts referred to their collected might as a "sabaoth," a term that signifies a great host of allied cohorts. Since Vinter's reforms, the term "army" formally denotes specific large regional forces comprising multiple sabaoths and commanded by an archdominar. An army protects each tor, which is a large administrative region of the Skorne Empire. Sabaoths are divisions of these armies, each controlled by individual dominars or, more rarely, lord tyrants. Beneath the sabaoth are cohorts commanded by subordinate tyrants and lord tyrants.

WARRIOR DISCIPLINES

Praetorians are the backbone of virtually all skorne armies, the baseline against which all warriors are measured. Their training emphasizes close-quarters fighting utilizing a variety of traditional weapons intended for distinct roles on the battlefield. These include the pikes and shields employed by the defensive karax, the long cavalry spears of the mounted ferox, and the dual blades wielded by the swordsmen majority. A longstanding rivalry exists between the Praetorians and Cataphracts as to which of their disciplines holds most true to the hoksune code. Praetorians believe they most closely represent the ideals of Vuxoris with their emphasis on first strikes, speed, and precision, but the Cataphracts are the most universally respected of the martial disciplines, famed for their resilience and stamina. Even warriors that excel as Praetorians might not be able to qualify as Cataphracts.

Only the largest and most physically powerful skorne warriors can become Cataphracts, and only the wealthiest houses can afford to outfit and maintain the exotic armor and weaponry they use. Many devoted adepts of the hoksune code are found among the Cataphracts, who have a reputation for incredible stoicism. Trained to endure extreme privation and the most

inhospitable of environments, Cataphracts embody their people's ideals of life and death. They are expected to hold the most dangerous positions in battle and revel in opportunities for glorious death. Many of the most honored exalted were Cataphracts in life, possibly including Vuxoris himself.

Venators, trained to fight at range with reivers and heavy siege weaponry, occupy a lower stratum of the warrior caste. Their betters view the Venator tradition with disdain because a focus on ranged warfare distances a warrior from his enemy at the time of death. In centuries past Venators fought with javelins, slings, and other thrown weaponry. Their modern armaments require significant skill and training, and they now play an integral role in skorne military strategy. Their tactical usefulness has led to a grudging respect for their discipline, particularly within the Army of the Western Reaches, but Venators are never candidates for full exaltation. The best they can hope for is to become revered companions (see p. 96) by the timely intervention of ancestral guardians in the heat of battle.


Among the Hestatians, it is rare to receive even this honor, given they are rarely afforded the opportunity to engage in major battles alongside ancestral guardians. Often the only chance a Hestatian has for glory is if his house is completely overrun, in which case every soldier is called upon for defense.

THE WORKER CASTE

The worker caste is responsible for trade, long-distance communication, construction, food production and distribution, and other vital tasks. Despite the essential duties performed by workers, their caste claims no glory, and warriors generally treat them with contempt. The worker caste is arguably the broadest and most diverse caste, with clearly differentiated strata. Dedicated mystics among the skorne fall into this caste, for example, but are generally afforded much more respect than laborers, in part because their powers often have use and utility on the battlefield. Members of this caste are often respected proportionately to how directly their work impacts the needs of the warrior caste. There exist several organizations within this caste that function outside the normal house structure so intrinsic to skorne society, a fact that places them at odds with traditionalists.

Each house is essentially self-sufficient. Prior to their unification as part of an empire, all houses saw to their own needs—from agriculture and mining to the training of a military force. The workers within a house would arrange trades with allied houses for commodities they could not produce. Since the formation of the empire houses still handle many of these vital matters internally, but complex exchanges require cooperation and communication between members of diverse houses and communities separated by great distances. Commerce, communications, construction, and other necessary tasks all fall to prestigious members of the worker caste. The nature of skorne society makes it difficult for specialized groups to effectively handle some of these tasks across house divides.

Individual industry and craft concerns sometimes organize themselves into local collectives loosely comparable to trade guilds in western Immoren. However, powerful skorne houses



view such groups with suspicion and suspect them of intrigues beyond their caste. House leaders gather up leaders of these collectives who overreach their bounds and submit them to paingivers for torture or execution. This bias has slowed the development of skorne civilization. More than once a house has developed a significant invention or engineering method in isolation, then extinguished its techniques in silence before others could learn or steal them. Such practices did not die out with the imposition of Vinter Raelthorne's central government. It may be some time yet before these collectives can readily share information and resources.

A well-maintained infrastructure, the flow of commerce between cities, a widely varied labor pool, continuing industry, and beneficial innovation—all these have become much more important to skorne society since the creation of a unified empire. This change has had a significant impact on members of the worker caste. Certain administrators and laborers are tasked with the smooth operation of large and far-reaching projects that may involve multiple tors. Members of this caste can now rise to a degree of responsibility and influence never before seen in skorne society, though even the most influential still must answer to members of the warrior caste who may have little comprehension of the details of their work.

THE BONDED PORTERS

Vinter Raelthorne instituted the Bonded Porters when he experienced the difficulty of ensuring the smooth operations of supply lines for essential materials when constructing the Abyssal Fortress. To prevent supply delays or interception, he instituted a law requiring each house to contribute members of its lower worker castes for two years of mandatory service among these bonded laborers. The ongoing war effort in the west has made the efforts of the Bonded Porters increasingly critical, forcing the organization to expand its numbers. This organization supervises caravans carrying goods from one major city to another across the empire and provides a supply chain through the Abyssal Fortress and the skorne forts across the Bloodstone Desert to reach the Army of the Western Reaches. Their purview also includes the major roads and shipping along the Hezaat River and Mirketh Lake. Though not soldiers, the Porters serve the war effort in a vital way.

The Bonded Porters operate along the lines of a military organization, starting with a period of strict training in isolation from their respective houses. When sent to join, each skorne must wear neutral garments, putting aside all signs of house affiliation. While working, they wear what amounts to a uniform: brown robes and a black cowed hood. No skorne may speak of his house or family while serving among the Bonded Porters, though in some cases this is common knowledge. The Porters tolerate no infighting or dueling and execute violators. Interfering with the Bonded Porters constitutes an attack on the servants of the Supreme Archdomina and her archdominars and always results in deadly reprisal.

The Bonded Porters deliver food, weapons, armor, and building supplies to the Army of the Western Reaches as their first priority, but they also move large shipments of a variety of

items across the empire. They frequently recruit young house warriors as escorts for long voyages. Some embrace this chance for danger and to prove their worth in distant places. Warriors stationed among the Bonded Porters are most often considered Hestatians, since they do not regularly confront enemies on the battlefield, though they are generally of higher fighting capability than Hestatians in house armies.

The Bonded Porters suffer some inevitable corruption, particularly regarding the shipping of non-military goods or when interacting with less influential houses. Nevertheless, they serve as an effective means of connecting the skorne cities. They allow the empire to exploit the resources of its various regions without inciting large house wars over these resources. After two years of service among the Porters, individuals may return to their house and continue their previous duties. Some decide to continue with the Porters and may eventually take on administrative tasks.

Criminals and escaped slaves can avoid punishment by choosing service among the Bonded Porters. Membership supersedes a skorne's past deeds for as long as he remains within the order. Such skorne usually choose to remain in service to the Bonded Porters far beyond the initial two-year membership, since these protections end the moment enrollment does.

THE CORPUSULEM

The Skorne Empire has no organized educational system. For generations learning was passed down from master to pupil within the traditions that eventually became chymistry and chirurgery. This lack of common learning was reinforced by the rivalries of the houses and the disdain of the dominant warrior caste of anything that did not relate directly to martial prowess.

A progressive group of surgeons came together in Malphas in 350 BR to challenge the status quo. The group intended to create a systematic methodology for compiling results of surgeries and experiments as well as recipes for poultices and salves. They called themselves the Corpusulem, and their efforts provided the foundation for most subsequent skorne scientific advancement.

Over the century following its founding the group added mortitheurges to its ranks, created the distinction between surgeons and chymists, and spread across skorne civilization. As it grew, the organization faced opposition from house leaders who feared conspiracies and spies who might pass information between houses. In most regions, the Corpusulem was declared a threat and its members faced persecution. This persecution did not completely destroy the group or prevent it from contributing to skorne society, but its membership dwindled over the years.

The modern incarnation of the Corpusulem emerged in 356 AR. A small circle of scholarly surgeons and mortitheurges in Malphas and Halaak reorganized the ideas of the original founders, adopting rules of procedure to allow members to withhold research with military applications to maintain house loyalty. Still, the group's membership remains small since many ruling tyrants and dominars still consider it seditious.

This venerable archive and scholarly fellowship has endured nearly a thousand years. Many refinements to skorne chymistry, chirurgery, and engineering science can trace their origin to the Corpusulem. The organization also must periodically hide its membership and operate as a secret society to avoid destruction at the hands of paranoid house lords. These tribulations led to members forming pacts that transcend loyalty to any particular house. Though cabals within the fellowship are sometimes at odds, members of the Corpusulem protect others of their order when asked, even from the Hestations of their own house lords. The Corpusulem keeps its central archive and headquarters well protected and secured in Malphas, but it has significant branches in Halaak and Kademe, and individual members reside in most major skorne communities. Communication between these branches is slow, but discoveries made in one branch eventually disseminate to all the others.

EXTOLLERS

Extollers occupy the highest rung within the worker caste, serving as a vital bridge between other skorne and the exalted ancestors, and are generally referred to as a distinct caste despite also being workers. This function combined with the fact that they are the guardians of exaltation means even the most arrogant of warriors will think twice before insulting an extoller, especially one in charge of evaluating those worthy of preservation. Extollers remain members of their house, serving to preserve and honor the ancestors of that house and to determine who among the slain will join them. At the same time, extollers maintain significant solidarity. Even before the creation of the Skorne Empire it was common for extollers of different houses to communicate with one another. At one time, each house had an autonomous senior aptimus who led the extollers of his house, until the caste was unified under a single supreme aptimus in 600 AR.

Extollers occupy a variety of roles, including the fabrication of sacral stones and the statues into which they will be set, communicating with the ancestors, and accompanying warriors into battle to select those worthy of exaltation. Those who join an army in battle are respected the most, and they serve an extremely important battlefield function. The mere appearance of an extoller can raise troop morale, and few tyrants fail to take advantage of that fact. The most talented of extollers can persuade ancestors to accompany their descendants into battle and draw on their power to protect and assist living soldiers. Housed in carefully crafted vessels, the spirits of the exalted become powerful guardians. Many exalted, especially those recently transformed, yearn to take part once again in glorious battle. These ancestral guardians are potent warriors and can act as receptacles for the spirits of skorne who perish near them, allowing extollers time to decide which spirits are worthy of full exaltation and which will receive the lesser honor of becoming revered companions in the afterlife (see p. 96).

House leaders rely on their extollers beyond the battlefield as well. Communicating with venerable ancestral spirits is a difficult process expedited by the work of an extoller, so most tyrants and dominars have a number of extollers on hand. These extollers often dwell in chambers adjacent to the house shrine

and are expected to serve as intermediaries for their lords at all times of day and night. Skorne wishing to seek the guidance of their forebears must rely on extollers to serve as a bridge between the world of the living and the wisdom of the dead.

PAINGIVERS


Paingivers are also referred to as their own caste, occupying a status below the extollers, but above other workers. Through the application of pain and terror, paingivers master the gathering of information and become unequalled handlers of beasts. They can tame any living thing by crushing its spirit and forcing obedience. As interrogators, spies, and beast trainers, these cruel individuals learn every detail of living anatomy, memorizing nerve clusters, key arteries, and the placement of vital organs. Chirurgeons study these subjects to treat injury or prevent death by grievous wounds, but paingivers use this lore in battle or, more often, in the process of questioning captured enemies. Their ability to shape behavior through the application of pain affords them tremendous influence over creatures of weaker wills or simpler minds, like the animals utilized across skorne society as weapons or beasts of burden.

Paingivers do not practice these “arts” for pleasure, but out of a deep spiritual calling. They find the application of pain a science as valid as engineering or arcane ritual. They are highly educated and supremely skilled specialists in an ancient practice. In addition to a thorough knowledge of anatomy, paingivers must learn the application of poisons, elixirs, and alchemy for use on and off the battlefield. Paingivers believe truth lies in suffering. Their practices grow from an ancient ascetic philosophy that encourages the mortification of the flesh and pushing the body past its limits.

The paingiver caste is a manifestation of skorne philosophy. Interrogation by torture is hardly unique to the skorne, but acknowledging the paingiver as a recognized and respected caste is an inextricable element of skorne culture with no exact parallel in the west. Skorne do not view torture in the same way as westerners. A subordinate may be tortured by his superiors after failing at a critical task and then return to his duties afterward, with no resentment borne by either party.

Paingivers occupy a unique niche between the warrior and worker castes, entirely removed from house politics and loyalties. Paingivers often arise from the lower castes since their discipline requires initiates to forego all house affiliations, and such a prospect holds little appeal to those born to privilege and status. In rural areas, paingivers may emerge from the fringe communities that track or tame beasts. In urban areas, senior paingivers look for and recruit outcast or slave youths of exceptional latent talent, intelligence, and manual adroitness who often languish in poorer districts. Through their highly selective process, senior paingivers seek a special combination of survivability, talent, and a sense of self-worth and honor. Paingivers never recruit those they do not believe can rise above the caste of their birth.

Recruits endure grueling physical and academic training designed to discipline and strengthen body and mind. They must completely embrace the deeper philosophies of the great ancestor Morkaash before completing their initiation. This



process includes enduring an extended period of deprivation and performing difficult tasks while affected by starvation, extreme thirst, and lack of sleep. Once brought into the ranks of the paingivers, individuals dissolve former house loyalties and cannot restore them. The distinctive mask worn by paingivers in public is a symbol of their faceless resolve and aloof isolation.

Independent and freed from normal house duties, paingivers can share their services with any house that seeks them. This autonomy places them in a unique position in skorne society as unaffiliated and highly specialized professionals that perform tasks in great demand. Paingivers might be utilized as spies to gather information, as assassins to neutralize special targets, as beast-tamers to bring fresh military assets into a house, or as interrogators to pry secrets from captured enemies. Paingivers tend to specialize in one these roles and rarely attempt to master all of them. Some paingivers establish a reputation for their singular interrogation techniques, while others gain renown for their skill at rearing and training beasts of war.

Historically the scattered paingivers across skorne territories were only loosely connected and affiliated, with each city or region having its own local leaders, largely based on seniority. Competing master tormentors might vie for the respect of their peers. The rise of Supreme Archdomina Makeda also came with the elevation of Morghoul to lord assassin, unifying the entire paingiver caste under his leadership. Morghoul has begun to work toward creating closer ties and a greater sense of shared purpose among the paingivers, treating the caste more like a sprawling house under his rule. Paingivers now serve as an extended intelligence network and enforcement arm of the Skorne Empire, helping to protect against the rise of any internal threats to the supreme archdomina. Morghoul's control of the paingivers is limited and does not affect them on a day-to-day basis. In the far-flung corners of the empire, his orders may never be heard. Nonetheless most paingivers respect him and fear his wrath. The strongest and most organized senior paingivers who stood in opposition to the unification have disappeared.

SLAVE CASTE

To outsiders the skorne may seem cruel, but this perceived cruelty allowed their race and culture to thrive in an unforgiving environment. One facet of this cultural bias is the skorne approach to slavery. In the west it is a loathed practice, but the skorne see the widespread imposition of slavery as a fact of life. They consider the institution perfectly natural, whether applied to their own people or outsiders. Slaves occupy the lowest rung of skorne society. For skorne taken as slaves, there is the possibility of one day becoming elevated beyond this caste, but this does not often occur within a single generation. All that most enslaved skorne can hope for is that their children might eventually be adopted as full members of their captor's house.

Though lower in standing than free workers, slaves are vital to the infrastructure of each great house. When war breaks out between skorne houses, the victor commonly absorbs the losing house, including sworn slaves who may earn freedom only through service and the passage of time. In many cases the conquered generation remains enslaved until death, but

offspring have the chance for freedom by integrating into the victorious house. Fallen houses are absorbed and annihilated while the victorious preserve and extend their legacy.

A house's slaves are in some cases used as raw materials in mortitheurgical experimentation. The number of slaves a house maintains directly represents its wealth and degree of influence. The decrease in inter-house warfare since unification has reduced the availability of new slaves, and this could eventually have a significant impact on the economy of the empire. Some eastern houses resent House Balaash's influx of fresh slaves from the conquest of the west.

SKORNE PHILOSOPHY

Outsiders mistakenly believe that the skorne have no religion. In ancient times the elves of Lyoss called the skorne "godless" and "faithless." The first label is accurate, but the second is not. Their religion comprises a sophisticated form of ancestor worship that does not venerate any god or pantheon of gods.

Skorne accept that gods may exist, based on exposure to the power of religious figures in other cultures, especially the ancient Empire of Lyoss. However, the obliteration of Lyoss convinced them of the fickle nature of gods, and skorne see deities as a crutch for weaker peoples. Skorne philosophers take pride in having freed themselves from the divine and refuse to acknowledge a creator. They do not refute the possibility that a god may have had a hand in their creation, but they consider this notion irrelevant. They pass down no creation myth, believing instead that they have risen to greatness as a people on the strength of their will and the example of their ancestors.

Skorne ancestor worship focuses on those great individuals whose deeds are immortalized in legend, paragons of values the skorne consider vital. Different schools of philosophy center around the legends of specific skorne ancestors, and these comprise the varied "faiths" of the skorne. Myriad cults are dedicated to specific ancestors. Some remain exclusive to a single family or bloodline, while the entire skorne population reveres certain ancient and singular ancestors. A skorne may venerate multiple ancestors, but most choose two for the majority of their devotion. Usually they first select one of the great ancients whose legend all skorne know and who embodies the virtues of their caste. The second, typically exalted within recent memory, possesses a lineage deemed particularly admirable and has a more direct relation to the individual skorne.

Skorne demonstrate veneration in several ways, such as maintaining a small dedicated shrine in one's home or keeping an item associated with the ancestor on one's person. Some skorne inscribe ancestral names and symbols on weapons or armor. As in the west, individual piety varies. Some skorne rarely think of the ancestors, while others spend a lifetime painstakingly attempting to emulate them. Those who possess the core sacral stone of such a revered ancestor, or a fragment thereof, are particularly fortunate and favored, though this rarely occurs outside the extoller caste.

The skorne have a very different depiction of the afterlife than any religion of western Immoren. Skorne have no equivalent