

the Thornfall Alliance. Aided by a mad human genius named Dr. Arkadius, these farrow have been arming themselves with impressive new weaponry and augmented warbeasts. The Thornfall Alliance has become truly formidable in the last few years, making the farrow a race that can no longer be ignored.

In a more gradual consolidation, the gatormen of several swampy regions have recently seen the expansion of the Blindwater Congregation. This group is united in support of one of the most powerful bokors of the age, an ancient and feared gatorman named Bloody Barnabas, who aspires to divinity through bloodshed. Barnabas had already united dozens of villages in and around Blindwater Lake, in the process enslaving the region's bog trogs. Though joined unwillingly here and in other gatorman territories, there is no doubt that the various swamp tribes have become more formidable by combining their numbers.

Where there is war, there is also opportunity and the chance for change, a fact seized upon by some of the more courageous, heroic, and cunning warriors of the wilds. On the fringes of civilization, the misfortune of one group nearly always represents an advantage for another. The rule is hunt or be hunted, and it is all too easy to go from one to the other in the blink of an eye.

PEOPLES OF THE WILDS

In western Immoren, a number of diverse peoples have carved out a place for themselves amid the forests, swamps, and mountains. Whereas humanity has erected massive cities on the ruins of older civilizations, the people of the wilderness live much as their ancestors did, in small isolated communities and tribal villages. Though many of their territories lie within the borders of great kingdoms, the people of the wilds follow their own laws and swear fealty to chieftains and warlords, not kings or empresses. They care little for lines on maps and claim whatever territory they can hold.

This section describes the most numerous and powerful of these peoples.

CIRCLE ORBOROS

The Circle Orboros is the most ancient unbroken human organization extant in western Immoren, the product of thousands of years of coordinated efforts to master nature's powers. Their true goals are hidden behind layers of secrets. Obscured in dark cloth and long, black cloaks, the members of this organization are known to outsiders as blackclads.

Some in the wilds look to druids of the Circle as prophets and priests of the Devourer Wurm. The truth is more complicated. While the blackclads draw supernatural power from the chaos embodied by the Devourer and describe the natural world in a way not entirely dissimilar to Dhunian shamans, they have a complex philosophy and an approach to the natural world that is all their own. The blackclads believe both the Wurm and Dhunia are manifestations of a single primal and all-pervasive entity they call Orboros.

Blackclads recognize the Wurm as the destructive consciousness of the primal Orboros and work to ensure it remains distracted by its eternal war against Menoth. Though the Wurm is the wellspring of the power they wield, it is a terrifying force whose attention they do not wish to draw. The vital force that drives the Wurm is the lifeblood of Caen, the natural energy flowing through the veins and arteries of Orboros. The druids can sense and tap into these conduits, which they call ley lines, and work tirelessly to ensure this supernatural system remains strong.

These invisible arteries can become choked by civilization: anything that disrupts the flow of rivers, the integrity of the mountains and hills, or the growth cycles of forests injures Orboros. When its body becomes too riddled with wounds left by civilization, the Devourer will feel its weakening condition

STRADDLING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN CIVILIZATION AND THE WILDS

Blackclads are not entirely unknown on the fringes of civilization. Communities living near major wilderness regions may have periodic contact with local druids, who are treated with a respect tinged by fear. Blackclads visit these communities on mysterious missions or to barter for information.

In turn, the blackclads sometimes offer to manipulate the weather, drive off feral threats, or ensure a bountiful harvest. The Circle has often used such negotiations to further its agendas; desperate communities might agree to any terms a blackclad offers. Blackclads are also known to visit communities to recover children undergoing the wilding. Although occasionally a community might accuse the druids of stealing their children, usually parents are complicit in these arrangements, agreeing to give up children who seem deranged and dangerous. Another common reason to seek the help of blackclads is to broker peace or trade among local wilderness peoples.

Their reputation and the mystery surrounding their objectives enable the blackclads to step between civilization and the wilds with some ease. Even in the best circumstances, though, most townsfolk will go out of their way to avoid a druid. Just as the blackclads are valued for their strange powers, so they are also seen as the harbingers of disaster, plague, and natural destruction. In extreme cases, such as after a mysterious calamity, townsfolk may band together to drive blackclads and their allies away. In most wilderness communities the fear blackclads evoke is sufficient to ensure their safety, as it is widely known that the Circle repays any harm done to its members tenfold.

and will return to the world to unleash unparalleled devastation across the face of Caen. For this reason, the blackclads focus on limiting civilization wherever possible as well as battling any other threats to the body of Orboros, such as the blight of dragons. The scope of this work is vast and its goals perhaps unachievable, but that does not deter the druids.

Operating in scattered groups, the blackclads have created a network of sacred sites to channel the natural power of the ley lines. They can use this network for communication and to transport themselves instantly across vast distances. Maintaining their network of sacred sites has sometimes required them to go to war with groups who would defile their territories. When roused to battle, the Circle Orboros is unsurpassed at exploiting terrain to their advantage, striking swiftly and unexpectedly across great distances, and invoking destructive elemental power. Storm thunders by their will, stones rise from the earth with a gesture, and terrifying beasts rage at their command.



The blackclads, however, are few. To wage their wars and protect their holdings, they have had to establish many alliances with the peoples of the wilds. As much as possible they avoid risking their own lives, their most important resource, preferring instead to sacrifice the many minions, pawns, and vassals in their service. Those loyal to the blackclads can be found in the wilds of every nation and in every sizable forest, mountain range, swamp, and desert in western Immoren.

Among the families in these remote corners are some who are bound to the druids by ancient ties and who stand ready to lend their strength. Barbaric peoples have willingly allied with the Circle, and the blackclads manipulate them to fight on their behalf. When the Circle gathers for war, it does so as it has for millennia: at the head of a howling horde that would smash the cities of man and cast humanity into an everlasting dark age.

Through its agents, allies, and raw power, the Circle wields unparalleled might in the wilds. The blackclads prefer to move unseen, however, working through emissaries, manipulation, and the implication of threat. Though the organization can quickly bring its own strength to bear, raising armies among its allies can take time, careful negotiation, and the invocation of ancient pacts. The Circle is at its strongest when its agents have time to meticulously prepare and execute their plans.

SCOPE AND TERRITORIES

The scope of the Circle is far-reaching. No corner of western Immoren falls outside its sphere of influence, barring small pockets of blighted landscape that have been poisoned by the dragons, and even there they watch. In every corner of the wilds there are sacred sites protected by the blackclads and their allies. The only regions the Circle sees outside its purview are those in which it is impossible for them to maintain a presence—places like the main island of Cryx, irrevocably blighted by Toruk, and the depths of the Abyss. Their organization is largely focused on western Immoren, though some members constantly push the frontiers of their domains in the exploration of new territories.

The Circle Orboros has divided western Immoren into three large regions called dominions: the Northern Dominion, the Eastern Dominion, and the Southern Dominion. Each of these dominions falls under the oversight of one of the order's omnipotents. These regions are divided into smaller territories overseen by lower-ranking druids. The allocation of territories forms the basis for the convoluted hierarchy of the Circle.

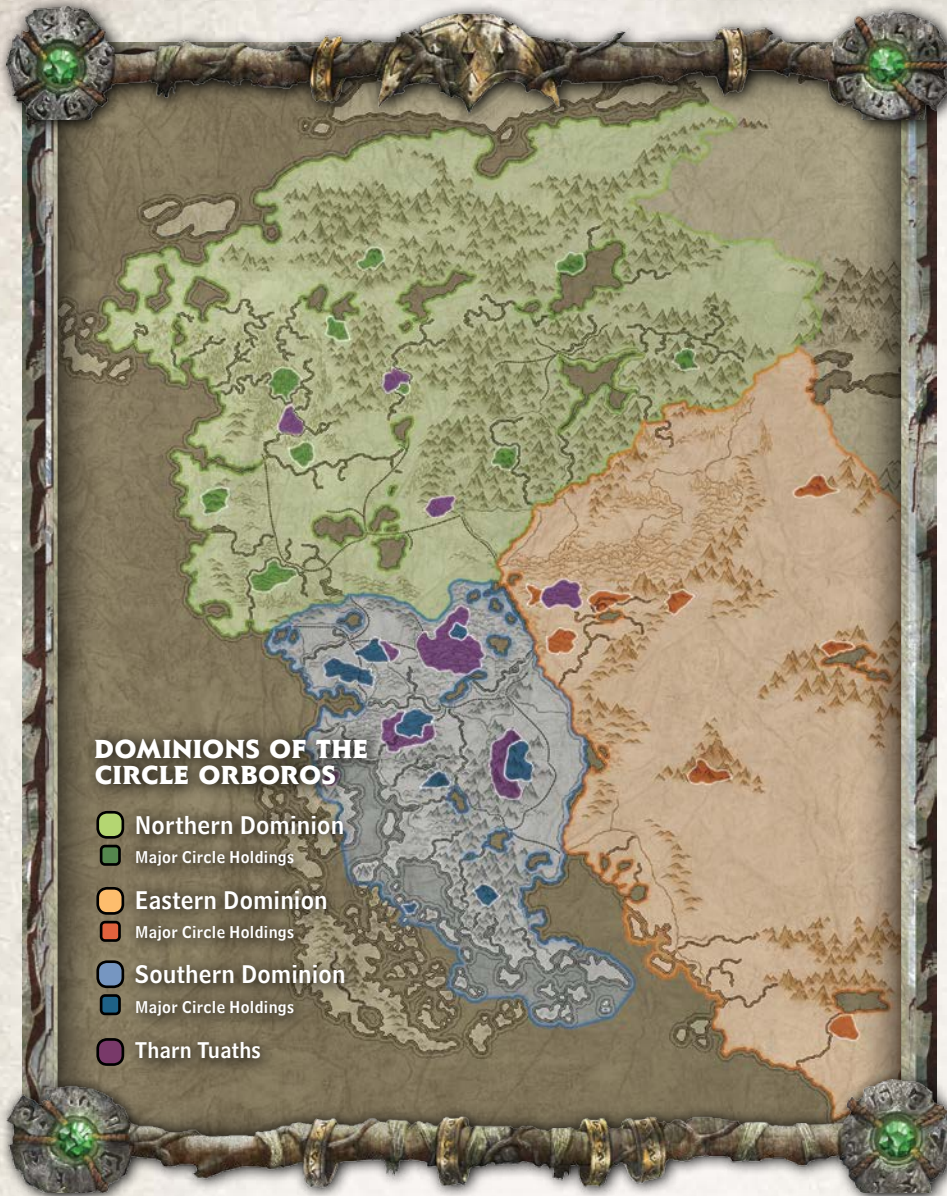
Despite its territorial claims, the Circle does not have actual power or authority over every square mile of these areas. Their regions are encompassed by powerful nations and the domains of many hostile competing groups, some more overtly powerful than the Circle Orboros. The blackclads have direct control over only small portions of their territories, usually centered on sacred sites, secluded villages, and places of particular interest.

HIERARCHY AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Though the Circle employs a variety of allies and minions, the blackclads are the only true members of the organization. There are echelons of power, authority, and knowledge within their ranks, and members must earn advancement to be entrusted with deeper mysteries and perhaps the oversight of territories.

In ascending order, blackclad ranks are: wilder, warder, overseer, potent, and omnipotent. These ranks have a direct bearing on an individual's responsibilities, and the gulf between successive ranks is vast.

All power in the Circle Orboros flows downward from the three ruling omnipotents, who divide all the order's territories among themselves and safeguard the order's deepest secrets. Lower-ranking druids are given tasks and bestowed responsibilities and territories as a means of managing the order's far-flung assets. In theory, the omnipotents have absolute power over their territories. In reality, matters are more complex; the political machinations within the Circle can be many-layered and somewhat treacherous.



DOMINIONS OF THE CIRCLE ORBOROS

- Northern Dominion
- Major Circle Holdings
- Eastern Dominion
- Major Circle Holdings
- Southern Dominion
- Major Circle Holdings
- Tharn Tuaths

Each rank designates the degree of trust, autonomy, and authority a blackclad has been afforded. For example, a wilder has little to no responsibilities other than to learn and obey. He has no autonomy and is accountable for the success or failure of only the very narrow tasks his mentor gives him.

Druids who survive their training as wilders and prove themselves over several years can earn promotion to warder. This rank is bestowed by the druid's mentor and is an evaluation of his performance, obedience, and growing skill. Fundamentally, a warder's primary function is to do whatever his immediate superiors ask. This includes short-term tasks, such as rooting out a pernicious enemy or gathering intelligence, as well as long-term functions such as aiding in the training of warbeasts, constructing wolds, or watching over a specific region. Blackclads are few enough that warders are continually kept busy on a variety of missions.

Initially a wilder or a newly promoted warder answers only to a single superior—usually his mentor. Sometimes a mentor

will arrange with another blackclad to entrust the junior druid's service to him in order to lend him support or as a way to secure future favors. Such arrangements also benefit the junior druid, as further promotion generally requires a number of patrons willing to speak on his behalf. The chain of command within the Circle is unusual in this way, in that blackclads often find themselves reporting to multiple superiors.

It is also common for higher-ranking druids to approach lower-ranking ones to ask them to perform tasks. A blackclad who is already working for another druid, such as his mentor, is under no obligation to agree to outside requests, but these opportunities to forge new bonds might not come again if refused. These missions may start small, with something simple to test a junior druid's capabilities, but soon become more dangerous and difficult. Each blackclad must learn, often through difficult experience, how to prioritize tasks given them by separate and equally demanding masters. Ambitious druids learn quickly that the only way to advance is to demonstrate initiative. The more patrons a druid has impressed, the faster his rise; a junior blackclad who serves a single master and refuses tasks for other members of the order will rise slowly, if at all.

Once a senior druid is convinced of the capability of a junior blackclad, he might create a more lasting bond by offering a portion of his territories. This is a form of feudalism—a blackclad is expected to carefully manage territories entrusted to him by his superiors. Accumulating multiple territories continues his advancement. After completing multiple missions for different superiors and managing several territories, a warder might petition the ranking potents for promotion to overseer. Such a promotion requires the supporting testimony of two or more overseers who have worked closely with him and the authorization of two or more potents.

Overseers are a vital link in the Circle's chain of command, as they are trusted to undertake difficult missions requiring considerable coordination and personal power. Overseers are responsible for any sacred sites in their territories and must ensure that their energies contribute to the ley line network. Small though these regions may initially be, they are larger than what a lone blackclad can patrol; this duty may fall to subordinate blackclads or to locals who can act as the druid's eyes and ears—and, in times of threat, as expendable warriors.

RANK AND PLAYER BLACKCLAD CHARACTERS

A Game Master should discuss a blackclad character's upbringing and training with the player and identify his mentor(s). Memorable moments during those early years can be discussed as part of fleshing out a character's background, including whether the character remembers his or her family.

It is recommended that blackclad characters begin at the warder rank. This represents a degree of autonomy and authority but is the lowest rank allowed to take on more interesting tasks. Wilders are rarely allowed to function without the direct supervision of higher-ranking druids. Warders, on the other hand, are frequently in a position to work with individuals outside the Circle as well as those in allied groups such as the Wolves of Orboros or the Tharn.

Advancing in rank is at the Game Master's discretion but should be slow and primarily rely on a character's contributions to the order, considering internal politics. As a general rule, a character should not advance to the rank of overseer before attaining Veteran level or to potent before attaining Epic level (see p. 151). Many blackclads never advance beyond overseer.

Overseers also receive additional tasks from their masters, such as collecting, raising, and mentoring new wilders. Furthermore, as his territories grow, an overseer may seek out talented warders to oversee portions of his domains, reinforcing the chain of fealty and command. The accomplishments of the junior druids reflect on those they serve. It is to a blackclad's advantage that his subordinates do well as they rise in rank. Ambitious overseers will broaden connections to other senior druids in the hope of continuing to prove their value to the organization.

Not all overseers supervise territories, though most do. Although blackclads who do not oversee territories rarely advance beyond the rank of overseer, some capable druids earn acclaim through other means, such as by leading strike forces in the order's battles or constructing wolds.

Elevation from overseer to potent is an even greater milestone. Each potent is a puissant master of elemental forces and a keeper of large territories across multiple dominions. Just as with promotion from warder to overseer, an overseer can be raised to potent only if two or more of the ruling omnipotents agree the promotion is warranted.

The influence and authority of the potents are such that it is difficult for lower-ranking druids to refuse their orders, even if the requesting potent is at odds with the druid's mentor or other

superiors. Animosities and even open conflict between druids at this rank is not uncommon. Generally members of the order vie with one another through subtle means, such as by poaching subordinates or seeking to steal territories directly. Bitter rivalries between blackclads can last for decades. The omnipotents might intervene if such conflicts threaten their larger goals, though some degree of competition and even hostility is considered healthy, as it fosters strength and capability.

Potents govern their diverse territories by leveraging personal ability, charisma, bargains, bribes, old alliances, and favors. Because they are a representation of the authority entrusted to them by their feudal masters, their territories are vast but not equal. Some even seek to expand their holdings by reclaiming territories lost to the order. The most significant potents of the Circle Orboros include Krueger the Stormlord, Morvahna the Autumnblade, Baldur the Stonecleaver, Bradigus Thorle the Runecarver, Tamora the Longshadow, Donavus the Wornrock, Lyvene the Wayopener, and Vernor the Nightbringer.

At the top of the Circle's hierarchy are the three omnipotents: Mohsar the Desertwalker of the Eastern Dominion, Dahlekov the Scouring Wind of the Northern Dominion, and Lortus the Watcher of the Southern Dominion. These figures inspire dread and awe in the rest of the order, for they safeguard the Circle's most terrible secrets and mystical rites. They hold the legacy of the sworn pacts made at the birth of the order with primordial supernatural powers linked to the Devourer Wurm.

Omnipotents hold their positions for life. Should one perish, the survivors call a grand conclave to select a successor from among the attending potents. The omnipotents know their subordinates well and generally have already determined who will be the next to rise. Lortus is the most recently elevated of the omnipotents, having in 606 AR taken the place of Ergonus, who was slain by the trollkin chieftain Madrak Ironhide.

Their unique sensitivity and connection to the ley line network allows omnipotents to extend their awareness throughout their dominions. Little of import transpires in western Immoren's wildernesses that does not come to their attention. While their knowledge and power are great, the full scope of their authority over subordinates is reliant on an omnipotent's power and personal charisma and the willingness of those they command. This sometimes requires omnipotents to make examples of those who would defy them, reinforcing their fearsome reputations.

Although the omnipotents expect their commands to be obeyed, territorial hierarchy allows some leeway. The Circle has long prioritized success over adherence to the precise letter of an order. There is always a risk in disobedience, as the elimination of a junior druid for transgressions is not unknown. The key to a druid's survival and elevation in the hierarchy is becoming an asset too valuable to easily replace.

CONCLAVES AND GRAND CONCLAVES

Ranking druids meet to discuss the direction of the order in formal gatherings called conclaves. Those below the rank of overseer are rarely included. Conclaves are held at each solstice, though they can be called at other times. Conclaves serve to coordinate combined efforts and to arbitrate disputes. The

three omnipotents hold their own conclaves and are in frequent communication with one another through mystical means.

A grand conclave is a special gathering of all omnipotents and potents. These rare meetings are called to decide issues of great significance to the order, such as the promotion of a new omnipotent or the trial of a ranking member. Certain decisions or punishments require special majorities among the assembled—for example, a “sublime majority” of either three omnipotents or two omnipotents plus all potents is required to sentence a potent to death.

LIFE AS A BLACKCLAD

No blackclad lives an easy life. Working to forestall apocalypse, they are few in number and face many threats. Should the blackclads fail in their work, the Devourer Wurm’s attention would return to the world to topple mountains, set loose tsunamis, and erase humanity from the face of Caen. That is why the druids are willing to endure the difficulties their duties entail. Many blackclads have fallen in the pursuit of the Circle’s agendas.

However, the deeper agenda of the Circle occupies the minds of only the higher-ranking members. The majority of the blackclads have more immediate tasks, not least of which is satisfying their superiors. It is not uncommon for lower-ranking druids to be unaware of the significance of their missions. They must juggle seemingly contradictory directives while trying to rise through the order to gain a sense of the bigger picture.

The power flowing through blackclads gives them supernatural health and vitality. They can expect to live twice as long as an ordinary human, some even longer. This affords considerable time to gather power and to learn the mysteries of the order.

THE WILDING

Each blackclad is born with the potential for endless power. This is called the wilding, and it is believed to be an innate connection to Orboros by the selection of the Devourer Wurm. The age at which the wilding manifests varies; it usually comes on between the ages of three and seven, but there have been some individuals who have gone through it later, even as adults. Those ignorant of Orboros often mistake the wilding for madness. It prompts behavior such as leaving the home to wander the forest alone in the dead of night, barking or howling, and staring deeply into the eyes of animals. Most communities shun such children, while others abandon them or, in extreme cases (such as in certain Menite communities) slay them for fear of the Wurm’s taint.

Because the wilding is an inborn gift that cannot be taught, it is a top priority of the Circle to find and protect such individuals as early as possible and provide them with the training necessary to control their powers. To this end, the Circle has become adept at sensing the emergence of this power. Once a child with the potential to undergo the wilding has been identified, one or more blackclads are dispatched to recover the child for the order. The order acts particularly swiftly if there is a risk the child might be harmed by an intolerant community.

BLACKCLAD NAMES AND EPITHETS

It is most commonly at the rank of overseer that a blackclad will take on a descriptive title or epithet. Epithets like “the Wildborne,” “the Stormwrath,” or “the Farstrider” are intended to embody a druid’s outlook on the world or individual talents. Many of these are self-chosen upon elevation to the rank of overseer, but sometimes such titles are bestowed by a mentor or other high-ranking druids.

These epithets are taken seriously within the order, and changing one is significant if not rare. Such a change may be prompted by a personal transformation or a shift in philosophy. In theory a change of epithet represents the druid becoming a different person, though this is primarily symbolic—past deeds and relationships are not forgotten.

In some cases the blackclads may be able to persuade parents to voluntarily hand such a child over, particularly if the child was born into a community that is aware of the blackclads and comfortable dealing with them. Should the parents prove intractable, the child is stolen or taken by force. Under no circumstances do the blackclads accept refusal—a truth that has lent an air of the sinister to their reputation.

Over the centuries the Circle has refined its methods to find these children regardless of where they are born. The druids have kept a close record of bloodlines known to manifest the wilding. Many of these families are among the Wolves of Orboros, who serve as the order’s soldiers. Such families are familiar with the signs of the wilding and willingly surrender children displaying such signs to the druids. The emergence of this power is seen by them as a gift, not a curse.

UPBRINGING AND TRAINING

Usually a single mentor oversees a young druid from the time of their entry into the fellowship to the period when they become a full wilder—often the same blackclad who brought the child into the fold. Such children are often taken hundreds of miles from their communities to minimize the chance of contact with their families. It is not uncommon for freshly inducted youths to try to escape and return home, but mentors ensure such efforts never succeed. Until a youth completes early training and can be trusted to enter battle alongside other members of the Circle, his mentor might simply refer to him as “cub,” “pup,” “worm,” or “weed.” In the Circle, names must be earned.

Mentoring a young druid is time consuming and distracting, a task many blackclads resent and loathe. Many mentors are cruel and unforgiving, subjecting their wards to a gauntlet

of trials and severe training. Most young druids learn to fear their mentors. Those senior druids with proven competence at instruction might be selected for this duty more often, but few escape the responsibility forever. It is not unheard of for a mentor to be tasked to raise and train more than one wilder simultaneously, though two or three is the typical limit.

Wilders are often dragged along to observe their mentors on their duties, even if this places an aspiring wilder in peril. Only the youngest are shielded—and even they must quickly learn how to handle themselves and survive. As valuable as a developing wilder might be, the Circle cannot afford members who are fragile, indecisive, or thick-witted.

For all these reasons, a druid's upbringing is generally harsh. They are quickly introduced to the realities of the wilds and the elemental forces they must master. They are subjected to injury to learn how to recover. They are steeped in the philosophy and principles of the Circle Orboros, and all connections to friends and family are severed. Blackclads are a tight-knit and secretive society whose adherents draw a clear distinction between members and outsiders. By the time a new blackclad is indoctrinated into the organization, he is convinced that only other members of the Circle are worthy peers. The lives of outsiders begin to seem trivial and unimportant.

Among the methods employed in the development of a wilder, few are as potent as teaching the young druid to tap into the ley lines crossing the surface of Caen. This process changes the wilder's perspective, allowing him to comprehend his true nature and his connection to Orboros. Once a wilder learns to sense the flow of these energies through other druids, he also begins to perceive an emptiness in ordinary humans, and the distinction between Circle members and outsiders becomes tangible.

As a druid learns to draw on such power reliably, his learning shifts to guided self-mastery. The wilding manifests differently in each individual, and a young druid must look inward to master himself. He is exposed to the powerful beasts the Circle controls and is tested for intuitive affinities. Exposure to wolds and raw elemental forces follows. Early in this process a mentor can discern whether a wilder has the potential to bond with and control warbeasts. This is a highly valued capacity. Not every blackclad has this ability, but the druids do have greater success in developing this potential than any other organization in western Immoren. Such power seems almost intrinsic to the wilding.

At this point a druid's early training comes to an end, and he may be transferred to a different mentor to further his specialized training. There are druids adept at controlling beasts, others who master power over storm and flood, and yet others who feel drawn to shaping stone. Regardless of talents, in the early years all wilders are expected to learn and comprehend the diverse array of natural powers at the disposal of the Circle.

Late in this process, usually after the age of sixteen, a druid is at last recognized as a full wilder. This represents capability but not authority. Wilders must obey their superiors at all times. They are sometimes sent into battle as a risky but effective crucible for their potential. The bloody reality of warfare toughens druids to the cruel necessities of their responsibilities.

Senior druids do everything in their power to preserve youthful potential, but fatalities are inevitable. The same natural forces that ensure only the strongest predators survive to hunt also applies to aspiring druids—the weak are culled and forgotten.

WHERE DO BLACKCLADS LIVE?

Though possessed of supernatural power and insight into the world, druids are still human beings and require food and shelter. Their responsibilities often require them to be on the move, so they rarely stay in one place for long. The training of young wilders is one time when a mentor might remain in a fixed location for an extended period. Most blackclads create at least one secure holding or base of operations, and often they have many. These vary wildly from one blackclad to another, particularly among the higher ranks, and they are among the most private aspects of a druid's life. Generally only wilders being mentored by a blackclad will have access to another druid's holdings.

Druids can endure hostile environments far more easily than most humans and can comfortably operate in the wilds for extended periods. This means a druid's holdings might be located in remote and dangerous locations, such as mountaintop caves, hidden grottos, remote islands, the hollows of giant petrified trees, or tomb-like vaults. Often, such places are connected to a significant ley line conjunction within that druid's territories.

DAY-TO-DAY MISSIONS AND TASKS

The fact that every druid beyond the lowest ranks reports to multiple superiors is an essential aspect of the order's checks and balances. While this has not always prevented hidden agendas and cabals from arising within the order, it serves to mitigate any one faction from becoming too strong. Not only is an overseer or potent receiving orders from multiple superiors, he is also being watched and evaluated by them.

Tasks assigned a druid can vary widely but usually fall into one of three general categories: territorial oversight, preserving the Circle's infrastructure, and active missions. The first two responsibilities are long-term and a druid attends to them day-to-day, particularly when not occupied by higher-priority missions.

As an added complication, a territory assigned to an individual blackclad might not be entirely or even predominantly controlled by the Circle Orboros. Higher-ranking druids frequently have territories that may contain large regions where the druids have little actual power. This includes ley line conjunctions that are inaccessible because they are within

a major city, held by competing groups, or occupied by hostile tribes or military forces. A druid with such holdings is expected to keep a watch on these areas (directly or indirectly, through allies and subordinates) and look for opportunities to break the hold of the Circle's rivals.

Blackclads must be prepared to fight to preserve key holdings from incursion by outsiders and are responsible for knowing when to ask for help if a threat is too great. Defeating a foe with limited resources may be more impressive than sounding the alarm, but losing a key site because of being too proud to ask for aid is inexcusable.

Tasks related to preserving the infrastructure of the Circle might include building or repairing sacred sites, tending and training warbeasts, constructing wolds, fostering a wilder into the fold, and creating or maintaining relationships with allied organizations or potential minions.

Active missions include gathering intelligence, delivering important news and messages, and most importantly fighting the order's enemies. A combat mission might include active defense of a sacred site or leading aggressive strikes against enemies. There are some druids particularly specialized in leading strike forces for the order and whose fighting talents are so crucial they have little time for anything else.

LANGUAGES OF THE CIRCLE ORBOROS

There is no one language used universally by the blackclads. Any human language might be known to an individual druid, depending on his upbringing and the preferred language of his mentor. Some blackclads are surpassing linguists, able to communicate with a wide assortment of peoples with whom they are in contact.

That said, Cygnaran is pervasive among southern blackclads, and Khadoran is spoken by most northern blackclads. Molgur is spoken by those having regular contact with the Tharn, and it is closely related to several other languages employed by wilderness races. A blackclad who knows these three languages can communicate with the majority of his peers and most important allies.

SECRETS OF THE CIRCLE ORBOROS

Any organization with as much history as the Circle Orboros has many secrets. Only its ranking leaders understand the order's inner workings or are conversant in how its various regional groups and the ley line networks they protect combine to become greater than the sum of their parts.

THE COST OF PROTECTING ORBOROS

For generations the blackclads have worked to keep the consciousness of Orboros, the Devourer Wurm, focused on its battles in Urcaen. To this end they have kept the life's blood of Orboros flowing through its mystical networks while attempting to limit the spread of civilization. Without their work the arteries of Orboros would become clogged, the Wurm would return to Caen, and an apocalypse would ensue.

Because civilization has spiraled out of control, even incessant warfare between nations has not diminished mankind's populations. Facing this, the blackclads insist violence on any scale against civilization is justified. Even were all the great kingdoms shattered and the capitals obliterated, it would not be enough to reverse this imbalance between the civilized and the wild.

The senior members of this organization will sacrifice any ally or resource and commit any action to attain their goals. Blackclads have a deserved reputation for callousness and bloodshed, using terrible tools like plague and famine to achieve their ends. Despite these drastic methods, their intention is to forestall far greater destruction. They seek to preserve a place for humanity on Caen—albeit in reduced numbers.

MASTERING THE LEY LINES

To the blackclads, the vital rivers of natural power known as ley lines are the veins and arteries of Caen. The power within them is the lifeblood of Orboros itself. The ley lines follow natural geographic features, moving along the course of great rivers and following the spines of mountain ranges. Among this web of ley lines are conjunctions of power, nodes that the Circle Orboros continually works to identify, liberate, and access.

The blackclads have developed methods to amplify and harness the power of the ley lines. For centuries they have erected stone columns aboveground along their paths. The ignorant believe these stones are no more than territorial markers, altars, or monuments. In truth these stones are tools of immense power. The runes set into each tap into and channel the flows of the ley lines below. The sites of the largest



and most imposing stones are nodes where multiple ley lines converge. The Circle has concentrated their martial might in these places.

Druids believe the movements of the stars and planets are mystically tied to the ebb and flow of Caen's natural energies; by combining knowledge of ley lines with celestial conjunctions, they enact extraordinarily potent rites. Many of the order's most powerful mystical weapons, tools, and relics were created at ley line nodes during significant celestial events.

COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPORTATION

Through their secret rites, masters of the Circle Orboros can send and receive complex messages from one site to another simply by manipulating the energy flows of the ley lines. It is the long-distance teleportation made possible at their sacred sites, however, that is one of the greatest tools of the Circle.

Traveling this way involves transformation through a complex and powerful ritual. The traveler literally joins with the energy of Orboros at one site and then flows through the arteries of the world to emerge solid and whole at a different connected site, no matter the distance. The loss of key ley line nodes can interfere with this, potentially making remote sites inaccessible. Because teleportation efforts can be dangerous and disruptive, they are most often left to specialists called wayfarers. Even senior blackclads rely on the coordination of powerful wayfarers to enact these rites, knowing they are tapping into tremendous mystical forces.

The movement of a single wayfarer, who is a consummate master of ley line travel, is a negligible strain on the network and can be simply done. Often messages between distant members of the order are conveyed directly by these individuals, who appear

with a rumble of thunder and vanish in a flash of lightning. The potents and omnipotents also make regular use of this form of travel; their vast experience and subtle power allow them to conduct such travel without the strain others would incur.

Escorting larger numbers is much more difficult and requires exponentially greater power. Sending a group of even five or six individuals across Immoren requires coordinated effort and a great surge of power. Teleporting an entire army can be initiated only at the greatest ley line conjunctions, might require dozens of senior wayfarers working together and timed at a special celestial conjunction, and could diminish the power flows across the entire ley line network for weeks.

Regardless of these operational limits, it is because of their ley line network that far-flung elements of the Circle Orboros can remain in close communication and execute such precise coordination. Given sufficient cause, whole armies can be sent across the continent in a matter of moments, making it nearly impossible to anticipate their movements. There is always a price, however. Earthquakes and powerful storms are among the most common consequences of evoking this power, and the repercussions are not predictable.

THE POWER OF WOLD CREATION

Blackclads have long held the secrets of crafting the semblance of life from base materials, animating powerful guardians from stone and wood. Wolds encompass a wide range of versatile and mighty constructs crafted from natural materials. Though very different from truly living creatures, wolds are effectively a unique type of warbeast and are controlled by a similar mental connection. Some Circle warlocks consider the wolds far more reliable than the wild beasts that serve the order, as wolds are incapable of acting out or disobedience; they do precisely what they are directed to do. Wolds are as durable as stone but lack the recuperative powers and vitality of living beasts; they do not recover from damage without repair. Crafting wolds is a long and laborious process, but in the end a warlock gains a potent extension of his will. Wolds can be crafted to serve a wide variety of purposes. They are most often created to guard sacred sites, while others are sent forth to crush the Circles' enemies.

For more on wolds, see "Wold Creation" on p. 254.

ALLIES AND MINIONS

The blackclads count numerous peoples among their vassals, and individual druids have cultivated relationships with almost every group in the wilds of western Immoren. Over centuries, the druids have selectively ingratiated themselves with or bullied into compliance those they thought might be useful. In many instances, this relationship is largely one-sided: the Circle requires its "allies" to fight on its behalf as a favor for services the blackclads may have performed generations earlier, or to prevent some sort of implied calamity. Some of these arrangements are little more than extortion. In other cases the blackclads manipulate the religious beliefs of certain groups so they think they share the same goals as the Circle Orboros, even if that is not actually true.

The Circle has also established a number of true, long-standing alliances that can be called upon in times of need. Rather than

HAVE LEY LINES, WILL TRAVEL

Access to long-distance teleportation or communication can have a drastic impact on an *Unleashed* campaign, often to its detriment. Such power could be used to avoid important obstacles, necessary encounters, or significant geographical regions. Game Masters should be judicious in allowing players to travel via the ley line network.

The best use of ley line transportation in a game is as a planned plot device. For example, at the outset of a campaign a group could be teleported to the location of their first scenario, or just before the campaign's climax the group could be teleported close to the final adversary. The use of wayfarers as NPCs is a simpler matter and can serve as a means to connect a blackclad character to his superiors and to deliver significant news or orders.



ruthlessly exploiting these groups, the blackclads instead use their prodigious power to aid and protect them, creating a mutually beneficial arrangement. The Tharn and the Wolves of Orboros are among these favored allies. Even here, the blackclads strive wherever possible to get more from the arrangement than those who serve them.

Some blackclads are diligent in honoring promises; others are more manipulative and treacherous. Though some harshly abused groups do break with the druids, most do not, as the blackclads have a fearsome reputation. Rather, tribal leaders learn to be more careful regarding future negotiations.

CULTS OF THE DEVOURER

The druids have a long-standing tradition of taking advantage of isolated Devourer cults deep in the wilds. Some of these groups see the blackclads as special emissaries of their god and therefore serve them willingly. This serves as a point of easy connection for blackclads to individuals in many remote towns and tribes. The more ardent the cult, the easier for a blackclad to make use of its membership.

FARROW

The Circle's use of the farrow exemplifies the callous aspects of blackclad diplomacy. The farrow are generally seen as widely available fodder for the Circle's schemes. Farrow villages scattered across the Bloodstone Marches help keep human civilization from reaching precious Circle resources deeper in this region, and the boar-men require little goading to strike against the villages of mankind. Blackclads who have the ear of a farrow chieftain find it simple to point him at targets, and the farrow are eager to serve as warriors in return for certain boons. They are often quite willing to risk their lives in battle for worthy potential spoils; after all, the fewer farrow who are left in the end, the larger the individual portions.

GATORMEN

Gatorman tribes often unwittingly serve the interests of the blackclads. Gatormen stalwartly defend the borders of their swamps, so sites sacred to the Circle hidden within lands held

BEASTS OF THE CIRCLE ORBOROS

Beyond their minions and allies, the Circle's strength relies on its access to powerful warbeasts. These beasts embody the destructive power of nature: formidable elemental constructs perfectly execute a druid's will, and wild beasts stalk the battlefield filled with a primal ferocity that only the blackclads dare harness and control. The order's warbeasts are among the most varied serving any fighting force in western Immoren, comprising a wide array of terrifying creatures.

Although not wantonly cruel to their warbeasts, most druids rarely regard them as more than effective tools. Warbeasts exist to serve the purposes of the Circle Orboros, and their inevitable deaths, while costly, are acceptable so long as a warlock can achieve his goals. Individual warlocks may develop a closer bond with particularly useful and long-serving warbeasts, but even these will be sacrificed when needed.

For more on the beasts of the Circle, see "Devourer Warbeasts" on p. 274.

by a gatorman tribe are well shielded from intrusion. To ensure the gatormen do not discover these sites, the blackclads weave artful deceptions to keep them away or establish pacts with the bokor of the tribe to set aside the location for the Circle's exclusive use.

Blackclads also use the gatormen as allies in times of war, as the powerful race can greatly enhance the strength of a war party.

Circle wardens with oversight of swamp territories go out of their way to influence tribes into their service, whether through straightforward negotiation or more subtle manipulation.

THARN

Tribes of Tharn are a potent weapon in the Circle's arsenal. They were once among the most fearsome warriors of the Molgur, a bloodthirsty race who relished ritual consumption of their enemies' flesh. After the fall of the Molgur, the early blackclads ingratiated themselves to the Tharn and turned their strength against mankind's cities when possible. The chiefs of these tribes made promises to the blackclads that have been passed down through generations and reinforced by continuous contact with druids.

More recently the Tharn have come to owe the blackclads an incalculable debt; Morvahna the Autumnblade helped save their race from extinction by the curse of the Ten Ills. Even beyond this, the Tharn appreciate the opportunities given them by the Circle Orboros to pay reverence to their god by making bloody offerings in combat. Though arguably manipulated by the blackclads, the ethos of the Tharn is such that they cooperate willingly and enthusiastically in the Circle's schemes.

It is common tradition among Tharn to welcome any blackclad and treat him with respect. Each Tharn tribe knows and supports the local blackclads. Unfamiliar druids are also supported so long as doing so does not violate existing arrangements with blackclads to whom they are specifically indebted.

For more information, see "Tharn Tuaths" on p. 65.

WOLVES OF ORBOROS

The Wolves of Orboros are the most closely integrated, the most numerous, and the most organized of the Circle's allies. Since the dawn of the order, the Circle has been served by the warriors of many Devourer-worshipping tribes from the wilds. These tribes venerated the Beast of All Shapes and saw the blackclads as its prophets and shamans. In time these tribal warriors evolved into the Wolves of Orboros, a fighting force dedicated to the needs of the Circle. When called by the blackclads to battle, the Wolves bear the brunt of the fighting.

The Wolves dwell in small communities scattered across the wilderness of western Immoren. It is accepted that individual members will carry on normal lives and raise families when not called to war. Members pass the Wolf tradition to their children, training them to fight for the blackclads. When young Wolves reach maturity, they are formally introduced to their local blackclads to renew old oaths of fealty. In sizable villages the Wolves do not reveal themselves as such to outsiders, only donning their armor and weapons when the druids summon them.

The most dedicated members of the organization worship the Devourer Wurm and join in ritual worship together, taking the wolf as their predatory totem. Not all Wolves are equally devoted, though, and some require compensation from the blackclads for their services.

The Wolves are skilled warriors versed in the arts of ambush, exploiting wilderness terrain, and tracking. They rely on

weapons that can be readily built and distributed even in small villages. Cleft-bladed spears and swords have long been favored by the Wolves, just as they are by other groups devoted to the Devourer. These spears and the crossbow have become the most widespread and traditional weapons of these hunters. They also make frequent use of trained war wolves, drawing from a stock of the largest breeds found in the Wyrmwail and the northern Khadoran mountains.

The Wolves of Orboros have a structure rooted in their ancient tribal traditions. At the most basic level they fight in packs led by the most senior and able among them, called huntsmen. Veteran warriors can call out leaders in ritual combat challenges for leadership positions. If several packs live in a given area, they are coordinated by a master of the hunt, the seniormost leader in a community or combined pack. Masters of the hunt can control approximately twenty to fifty Wolves. Greater numbers are led by chieftains, who might command anywhere from fifty to two or three hundred soldiers drawn from a specific region. Women are nearly as numerous as men among these fighting groups and are well represented in leadership ranks.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER POWERS

Due to the nature of their work and their militant fervency to protect their secrets and sacred sites, the Circle Orboros has many rivals in western Immoren.


BLINDWATER CONGREGATION

The Blindwater Congregation is considered a dangerous development, one the blackclads are still adjusting to. This unification of a large number of gatorman tribes has imperiled many standing agreements between blackclads and tribal leaders. Nevertheless, some accommodations have been made. In times of need the druids can leverage their agents within the group to gather limited information or offer mercenary labor. Contact with this group must be made covertly, for the leadership of the Congregation do not respond well to outsiders meddling in their affairs.

The Blindwater Congregation sometimes challenges the territorial claims of the Circle, and their leader Barnabas refuses to be cowed by the blackclads. He has become a matter of some concern. Barnabas seems intent on becoming a god, and the fact that ranking blackclads are not certain this is impossible has some troubling cosmological implications. That said, senior bokors under Barnabas see the advantage of negotiating arrangements with the Circle Orboros and can serve as less dangerous intermediaries.

CEPHALYX

The blackclads view the strange subterranean race known as the cephalyx as parasites on the body of Orboros, but for the druids even these depraved creatures have their uses. For reasons not well understood by the Circle, the cephalyx have a deep animosity toward the Convergence of Cyriss, sometimes driving the Cyrissists from temples built on ley line nodes. The cephalyx rarely retain these sites for long before moving on, which presents the Circle Orboros with opportunities to reclaim lost nodes or acquire new ones.



Otherwise the two groups inhabit vastly different environments and do not share much contact. Until recently the cephalyx were seen as a very dangerous but largely disorganized force. Now it appears at least some cephalyx have allied with Cryx, a very alarming development. Much of the difficulties the Circle has faced in the Thornwood Forest has been a result of this alliance.

When the Circle Orboros moves against the cephalyx, they do so with the overwhelming force befitting a dangerous foe.

CONVERGENCE OF CYRISS

The Convergence of Cyriss is a mostly subterranean cult that venerates the goddess Cyriss. This organization has been at odds with the Circle for centuries. Both groups utilize the flow of natural energies through the world, but otherwise their methods are utterly antithetical. Each group would enjoy nothing more than the obliteration of the other. The Convergence blithely builds its machines to draw power from ley lines, stealing this resource from the Circle and jeopardizing the integrity of its networks. Efforts to control nexus points of ley line energy have brought the Cyrissists and blackclads into conflict many times. The worst aspect of the Convergence from the Circle's perspective is its ability to secure major nodes in urban centers that are often out of the Circle's reach, such as deep within Caspia, Korsk, Ohk, and Five Fingers.

DRAGONS

Toruk, Everblight, and the other dragons represent a clear threat to the Circle's goals. Dragon blight corrupts the land, seeping into the soil and rock to poison the very body of Orboros. Its malignant presence can disrupt and stagnate the natural flows of ley line energy, making the blight every bit as harmful as the spread of civilization.

The Scharde Islands, for example, were once abundant with natural energies, but now all but the outermost islands are useless for druidic rites due to the pervasive blight of Toruk. Similarly the rise of the Legion of Everblight is considered a particularly urgent threat due to the alarming proliferation of dragonspawn as well as evidence of blighted energies wielded as weapons of war. Everblight's ability to manipulate these energies shows a level of control and cunning unlike that evinced by any other dragon and presents a threat to Orboros that cannot be ignored. The Circle has developed techniques to cleanse and mitigate dragon blight, but such solutions are unreliable and slow. No matter the cost, the Circle must see the dragons' influence and blight minimized and eventually undone.

Even individually the dragons are too powerful to act against directly, but the highest-ranking blackclads watch them closely. Keeping track of their movements and actions is of supreme importance to the Circle Orboros.

SKORNE

Though the skorne would conquer any in their reach, the wars and chaos they bring to the west sometimes work to the blackclads' advantage. Still, the skorne practice a form of dark magic called mortitheurgy, a close cousin to necromancy and anathema to the natural order of the world. Additionally, the skorne sometimes seize territory of importance to the Circle,

particularly in the Eastern Dominion. The blackclads keep a close eye on the movement of this people and do battle with them when necessary to preserve the Circle's domains.

This has proven to be a difficult proposition, as the armed forces of the Skorne Empire are far larger than those the Circle can muster. The Circle has lost several key sites in the Bloodstone Marches in particular. This includes most critically the Bones of Orboros near Scarleforth Lake as well as several lesser sites along the Greybranch Mountains near the Castle of the Keys.

THE IRON KINGDOMS

The Iron Kingdoms represent an existential threat to the Circle. Unwittingly these nations imperil the lifeblood of Orboros with each city they erect, each natural place they despoil. One might expect the Circle to commit itself to aggressively stopping the spread of civilization lest mankind unknowingly draw the Devourer's attention back to Caen. However, this is considered a long-term objective, not an immediate one. Facing more imminent threats, the Circle leaders have been forced to focus their energies elsewhere, in particular against groups like the Legion of Everblight and the Convergence of Cyriss.

So far as the omnipotents are concerned, any reckoning with civilization will have to wait. Not everyone in the order agrees, and there are some who would prefer to strike immediately and decisively against major population centers. The omnipotents take a dim view on subordinates who take matters into their own hands—provoking the Iron Kingdoms could invite disaster. The order is not ready for direct conflict with the kingdoms and prefers to exploit opportunities when those forces are otherwise engaged.

THORNFALL ALLIANCE

Unlike the Blindwater Congregation, which requires much more artful manipulation, the Thornfall Alliance is relatively simple to influence. The ego of its leader, the megalomaniacal farrow warlord Carver, makes him easy to goad into striking where the Circle desires. The human Dr. Arkadius, however, is another matter and considerably more dangerous. He is far more clever than Lord Carver and seems to have long-term plans of his own for the farrow. The Circle Orboros prefers to interact with smaller independent tribes rather than negotiating directly with the Thornfall Alliance.

TROLLKIN KRIELS

Until recently the Circle counted the trollkin among their most potent allies. The blackclads worked over many generations to earn the trust of various kriel. A grave miscalculation on the part of Ergonus, the deceased omnipotent of the Southern Dominion, unraveled this work, setting many trollkin against the Circle Orboros. Specific groups, such as the United Kriels in particular, are more or less at war with the Circle and cannot be approached except with great caution.

Despite this, relations with all trollkin kriel were not severed. The northern kriel of the Scarsfell Forest and certain isolated kriel such as those in the Wyrmswall Mountains remain in contact with blackclads, a fact some druids can use to their advantage.