

The Empire of Thorns

In the seventh century of the Old Kingdom, some eight hundred years ago, a cabal of sorcerers led by the infamous Delsha the Dark seized the throne and executed the remaining members of the Council of the Wise. Delsha declared herself Empress Delsha I, the first ruler of the new Empire of Aldis, also known as the Empire of Thorns.

An alliance of rhydan and vatazin attempted to stand against Delsha's empire, but their powers were insufficient and they paid a terrible price. One of Delsha's first decrees placed a bounty on all vatazin and rhydan. Darkfiends hunted them down with the aid of corrupt humans, who were paid for every rhydan pelt and vatazin head they delivered. The vatazin were never numerous, and in less than a generation, they were no more. The only remains of that noble race are the half-breed vata, born to human families with some vatazin ancestry. Thousands of the rhydan were slaughtered and most of the unicorns slain, but the survivors hid in the depths of the wilderness and under the sea.

Delsha ruled the empire with an iron fist. However, even her greatly extended life eventually came to an end (some say through betrayal, others through sorcerous mishap). Ambitious sorcerer lords scrambled to seize power for themselves, splitting the empire and leading to civil war. None of them had either the magical might nor the force of personality to unite or destroy their rivals, so the empire fragmented as each sorcerer lord seized a portion of it and defended it against all challengers. Within a decade after Delsha's death, the empire was a shattered ruin.

Using sorcery to prolong their lives or transform themselves into unliving monsters, the Sorcerer Kings were effectively immortal. They grew contemptuous of the people they ruled, regarding them as little more than useful beasts of burden. They were aware even lesser beings could prove dangerous, however, so they ordered their servants to hunt down adepts of the various arcana and to seize every arcane device.

The lives of the general populace became increasingly brutal and impoverished. Hundreds died of diseases virtually unknown a generation before, and blight and famine stalked the land. Anyone attempting to learn the arcane arts to remedy these problems did so at the risk of their life and the lives of their families. Moreover, the Sorcerer Kings' arcane experiments became reckless, jeopardizing whole communities. Nowhere was this more true than the port city of Falzanoth, whose Sorcerer King accidentally triggered an earthquake, causing the entire city and its environs to crumble into the sea. The place is now called the Leviathan's Teeth for the rocky pinnacles that jut from the water.

For the first century after the civil war, the Sorcerer Kings were content securing their realms, subduing minor rebellions, experimenting with ever more powerful and dangerous arcana, and seizing all mystic power in their kingdoms. Eventually their eyes turned toward each another's domains, hungry for new lands to conquer.

The Shadow Wars

Six hundred years ago, the Shadow Wars began. The Sorcerer Kings warred against one another for more than two hundred and fifty years, each seeking dominance and, eventually, the imperial throne. In their quest for power, they raised armies of the unliving. Using the flesh-shaping arts, they produced aberrations and shadowspawn to fill their ranks: ogres, night people, troglodytes, and nightmare creatures with no names. They invoked the exarchs of Shadow in the open and summoned darkfiends to serve as soldiers, spies, assassins, and counselors. They corrupted promising new adepts, some of whom then overthrew their masters to become new Sorcerer Kings. The sorcerers crafted arcane weapons that could lay waste to entire regions and thousands died in sorcerous plagues. Many people fled to hide in the wilds between the kingdoms.

Over the years, rebel movements slowly gained strength. Most of these started out as tiny freeholds hiding in remote areas. These settlements preserved as many of the old ways as possible, including worship of the Primordials and the gods of Light and study of the arcane arts. They plotted the overthrow of the sorcerers and sent out spies and representatives to rescue and recruit those with arcane talents. Unfortunately, the power of the Sorcerer Kings was greater than most of them understood. In the end only the sorcerers' greed, paranoia, and overconfidence allowed the rebels to defeat them.

As the Shadow Wars continued, the weakest Sorcerer Kings were destroyed. Some of their kingdoms were conquered, others were devastated, remaining blasted wastelands filled with ruins to this day, the Shadow Barrens being the most enduring example. The surviving Sorcerer Kings grew increasingly paranoid and summoned larger hordes of darkfiends to defend them. In the end, their reach exceeded their grasp.

About 350 years ago, a horde of darkfiends turned on their summoner, Rhaz Tethes, lord of what would later be known as the Veran Marsh. They attacked his citadel in the heart of the city of Veran-Tath, and he summoned all his power to defend himself. The resulting cataclysm destroyed both Rhaz Tethes and the darkfiends and transformed the region around his citadel into the vast and deadly swamp that remains today.

Within days, darkfiends serving several of the other Sorcerer Kings rebelled. Some scholars speculate this was a plot by the exarchs of Shadow to gain dominion over Aldea. Others believe the gods of Light undermined the Sorcerer Kings' hold on the darkfiends, giving the creatures impetus to turn on their masters. In the end, two Sorcerer Kings were slain by their own summoned minions, and several others were greatly weakened. The rebels had been waiting for an opportunity, and they seized it, striking at the Sorcerer Kings all across the empire.

The Great Rebellion

The Great Rebellion began as a series of coordinated attacks by a few heroic rebels, but rapidly became a mass

THE SOVEREIGNS OF ALDIS

Queen Seltha, founder of the Kingdom of the Blue Rose
Queen Varti, "the Builder"
King Lartik, "the Just"
King Karthakan, "the Bane of Kern"
Queen Allia, founder of the Sovereign's Finest
King Valin, "the Tainted"
King Rikin, "the Peacemaker"
Queen Larai, "the Mad"
Queen Fashi, "the Restorer"
King Rannath, "the Explorer"
King Issik, "the Ghost-Touched"
Queen Hulja, "the Merchant Queen"
King Haylin, "the Fair"
Queen Jaellin, the current sovereign

uprising against the Sorcerer Kings. Slaves rioted and slew their overseers, and a few Sorcerer Kings were slain in their beds by their own previously docile servants.

The rebels were aided by the rhydan, in hiding since the vatazin genocide. Rather than cowering in fear, these proud creatures had been strengthening their numbers and seeking weaknesses in the Sorcerer Kings' defenses. When the moment came, they approached the rebels and joined forces with them. The leaders of the rebellion rode griffons, unicorns, and rhy-horses into battle, followed by packs of rhy-wolves and rhy-cats. Treants stalked from the wild depths of the Pavin Weald to tear down walls and towers.

The rebels were also aided by an unexpected arrival, the mysterious Golden Hart. It appeared suddenly in the city of Aldis and bounded to the rebels' aid. This mystical being was not only immune to sorcery, but could confer its immunity upon anyone within of it. Under its golden aegis, the rebels were able to overcome the magic of the Sorcerer Kings, but still had to battle hordes of darkfiends and the unliving. The surviving Sorcerer Kings still refused to unite even for their own protection and in many cases betrayed each other to the rebels, each thinking they could easily defeat the rabble once they had destroyed their rivals.

After almost two decades of war, some of the Sorcerer Kings destroyed themselves and their strongholds, rather than accept defeat, and the rest were slain by the rebels. Only in the northern land of Kern did one of the Sorcerer Kings manage to hold on to power, shielded by the grim Ice-Binder Mountains, which prevented the rebel army from advancing northward to sweep away his dark stronghold. Bands of rebels tried to storm Kern for years, but Jarek the Lich King managed to maintain control over his darkfiends, and his land was rich in shas crystals used to bolster his defenses. After four defeats at the hands of the Lich King's forces, the rebels retreated, leaving Jarek in power. Although it led the rebels during their campaign, the Golden Hart vanished as suddenly as it appeared, shortly after the last assault on Kern. Its disappearance is widely seen as the end of the Great Rebellion and the reign of the Empire of Thorns.

The people then set about the long and difficult task of rebuilding their shattered lives and homelands. Many cities lay in ruins, vast tracks of land were too tainted to farm, and the dead outnumbered the living. Reconstruction occupied most of the next century. Towns and villages slowly grew, and some ruined cities were rebuilt, including the ancient city of Aldis. In this twilight time, long-distance travel was rare, as travelers had to brave gangs of bandits, roaming shadowspawn, and darkfiends who occasionally emerged from the remaining shadowgates. Eventually, states emerged and grew stable enough to secure their roads and borders. There were still some areas ruled by bandit lords, but traders, storytellers, and couriers could travel the world again.

As communities transformed themselves into nations, different ideologies emerged. The inhabitants of the newborn Theocracy of Jarzon remembered how the Old Kingdom had become corrupt and tyrannical. The Jarzoni sought to create a society free from that legacy. Meanwhile, the lands around Aldis were filled with people who preserved stories of the grandeur of the Old Kingdom. Many longed for those wondrous days and came to see themselves as the heirs of the Old Kingdom's traditions of justice and wisdom.

The Rebirth of Aldis

Several communities in the fertile valleys around ruined Aldis were spared the worst of the devastation in the Shadow Wars. They became one of the most prosperous regions in the post-Rebellion world. Vast numbers of refugees flooded into the region in the last days of the Great Rebellion, so it was faced with the daunting task of assimilating people with different ethnicities. Large numbers of rhydan also came to dwell in the wilderness areas on the edges of the valleys.

Seltha, a charismatic and visionary leader in Aldis, reached out to the rhydan and earned their respect by proposing the creation of a kingdom where they would have full citizenship and their wilderness homes would not be disturbed. In return, the rhydan presented the people of Aldis with the Blue Rose Scepter, a gift of the Golden Hart to them and a symbol of unity. Unicorns and griffons worked rituals to ensure Aldis would always be ruled by a fair and just sovereign. They called the Golden Hart, who appeared again in the center of the fallen city and chose Seltha as the first sovereign of Aldis. This happened on the first full moon after the spring equinox. Ever since, that day is celebrated in Aldis as Hart Day.

To further ensure the fledgling nation remained free from the Shadow of the Old Kingdom's latter days, Queen Seltha ordered anyone who wished to become a noble to pass the test of the Blue Rose Scepter, which would accept only the touch of someone devoted to the Light. She adopted the scepter as her badge of office, and within a decade, Aldis was widely known as the Kingdom of the Blue Rose.

Because of the city's central location and the stores of knowledge in its surviving libraries, the inhabitants of Aldis reconstructed it to serve as the new kingdom's

— CHAPTER I: THE WORLD OF ALDEA —

capital. The city was laid out in the pattern of a giant rose blossom, and blue tiles were used extensively in the new palace and the Azure Plaza, the open space where the Golden Hart had appeared. Much of this work was overseen by Varti the Builder, the second queen of Aldis and a devotee of the god Goia.

The kingdom became a haven for peoples and creatures of goodwill faced with hatred and persecution elsewhere. Diversity and acceptance were the founding principles of the land; even the newest immigrant could become a noble if he or she passed the test of the Blue Rose Scepter.

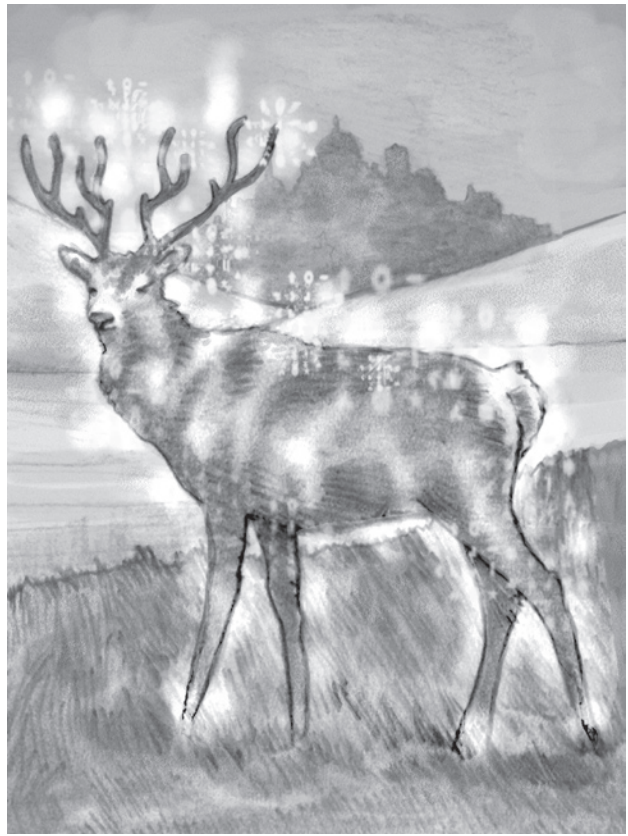
One of the kingdom's first challenges came when people living in the bordering areas asked for aid against the bandit lords. Troops from Aldis, aided by the rhydan, attacked, liberated their neighbors, and drove the bandit lords to the Ice-Binder Mountains. The Bandit Wars were fought over the course of more than a decade and more than doubled the land controlled by Aldis. The wars also depleted the kingdom's resources. As a result, it was ill prepared for the threat it faced shortly after the centennial of its founding.

Covetous of the heart of the Old Kingdom, the Lich King of Kern mounted a long-planned attack upon it. He sent a force of humans, night people, darkfiends, and unliving across the northern border. While the darkfiends and unliving attacked because it was their nature to do so, the humans and night people only fought because they feared the Lich King. Jarek held their loved ones hostage, and anyone who deserted or refused to fight knew their families would be slain and added to the ranks of the unliving.

In addition to sending troops to engage the invaders, King Karthakan, fourth sovereign of Aldis, sent adepts to probe for weaknesses in the Lich King's forces. When they understood the Lich King's hold over his living troops, King Karthakan developed a daring plan. A force of the most skilled scouts and soldiers, carried by griffon allies, flew deep into Kern and freed the hostages in several of the Lich King's labor camps. Because Jarek never imagined his enemies would attempt to aid their enemies, the camps were only lightly guarded.

King Karthakan's adepts then contacted the most charismatic and disaffected members of the enemy forces and placed them in psychic contact with their now-freed loved ones. As news spread through the Lich King's army, many troops deserted and joined the Aldin forces, while others launched surprise attacks against the Shadow-tainted officers commanding them, as well as the foul unliving and darkfiends. Although fighting was hard and most of those who struck back at their overseers died, the desertion of over half of the night people and human troops spelled the end of the invasion. Aldis was weakened in the war, but the loss to Kern was greater; it took the Lich King almost a century to reestablish order and rebuild his forces.

In the end, Aldis gained several thousand exceptionally loyal citizens, including almost a number of night people. Although many Aldins initially distrusted these creatures shaped by sorcery, their courage and



dedication in the war against the Lich King's forces impressed many others, so the night people's petition to settle in Aldis was granted.

The attack by Kern spurred Aldis to assign more scouts to watch its borders. Eventually the scouts were joined on patrol by adepts, warriors, and others concerned with the kingdom's safety. These sentinels became the model for the Sovereign's Finest, founded by Queen Allia, King Karthakan's successor. This organization grew in prominence and expanded its mandate from watching the borders and outlying settlements to keeping track of all manner of social and supernatural problems in the kingdom. The establishment of the Sovereign's Finest allowed Aldis to rely less on its military, so it was able to maintain a relatively small force of loyal volunteers.

The next major challenge to the kingdom came when Aldin diplomats met representatives from Jarzon. Shortly after the Great Rebellion, the taint of the Veran Marsh rendered the it virtually impassible. Eventually, the wild magics subsided somewhat, and exploration by the Sovereign's Finest discovered several safe routes through the marsh. During the initial meeting between Aldis and Jarzon, the Jarzoni were horrified by the widespread and largely unregulated use of arcana in Aldis, while the Aldins were equally disturbed by the repressive nature of the Jarzoni theocracy. Shortly after the two nations came into contact, the Jarzoni attempted several large-scale attacks on Aldis, but most of their forces never made it past the hazards of the marsh. Since then, relations between Jarzon and Aldis have been strained, but the marsh and delicate diplomacy have prevented all out warfare.