

# DEWIZENS of the DREAMING™



by Christopher Howard  
with Tadd McDivitt

## Credits

**Written by:** Christopher Howard with Todd McDivitt  
**Developed by:** Nicky Rea and Jackie Cassada  
**Edited by:** Aileen E. Miles  
**Art Director:** Richard Thomas  
**Layout and Typesetting:** Ron Thompson  
**Artists:** John Poreda and Melissa Uran  
**Front and Back Cover Design:** Richard Thomas

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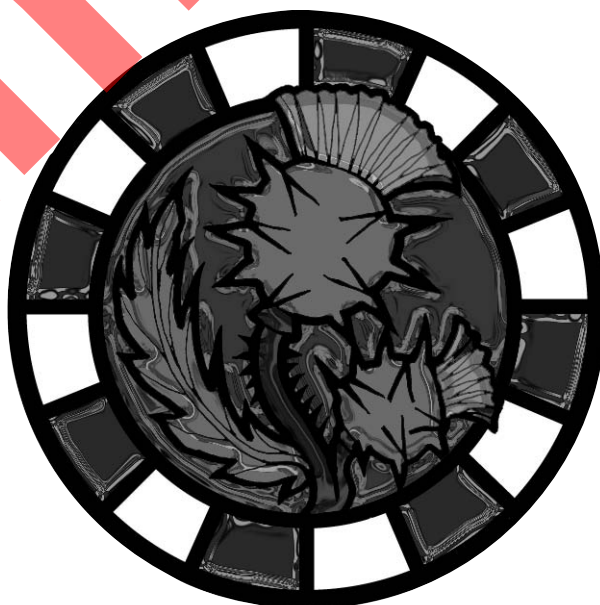
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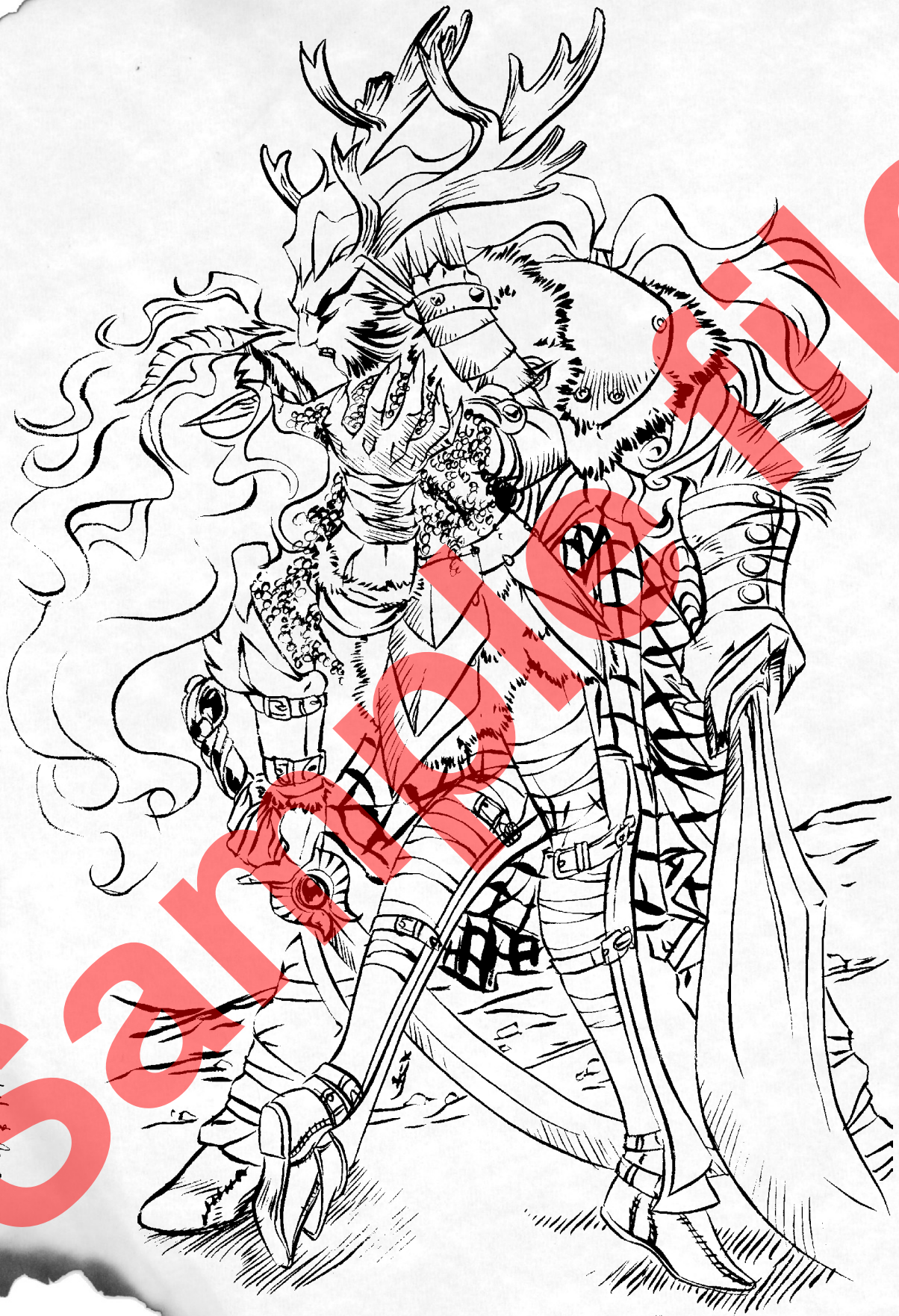
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# DEWIZENS<sup>of the</sup> DREAMING<sup>TM</sup>

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# KUREKSARRA TWILIGHT

Punctuated by black columns of smoke, the red Kureksarra Plains spread before Warleader Azag in all their rocky magnificence. Battered but unbent, Azag leaned heavily on his great scimitar and surveyed the carnage below, his massive hand shielding his eyes from twin setting suns. Hot, soot-laden wind lifted his tattered cloak and teased his black beard as his eyes swept along the jagged dragon-tooth ring of the Splintered Mountains. Their twisted peaks stabbed impossibly high into the fiery sunset, casting long black and purple shadows across the land. The wind blew from the Eastlands, carrying with it smoky remnants of the great firestorm that had blown through a week before. Unfortunate parosemes and other wind spirits, along with more malignant creatures of sickness and fire, swam in the clouds' billowing embers, their cacophonous dirge echoing throughout the land. Azag grunted his contentment at the day's victory, a deceptively simple exclamation which drew an equally short but sophisticated animal reply from his aged uncle, Chorak, who stood with six other warriors nearby.

The creatures that lay below them had fought well and with abilities Azag had never seen. They burned with supernatural fire and some had as many as a dozen arms. Their ferocity and sheer numbers had nearly pressed the already divided fir-bholg fiefdom to its knees, but their ignorance of the realm proved their undoing. Despite their savagery,

they seemed confused, almost amnesiac. Azag used this to his advantage. Now his men rounded up prisoners below, tying their captives to killing posts and hacking them to pieces in the animal frenzy of their victory dance. Any survivors would go to the great flaying machine to force their origin from their lips, amnesia or no. The Silver River fireholg had held this portion of the Red Plains since time out of memory and Azag would be damned if that would change under his reign.

This attack from the Eastlands was the first test of Azag's mettle as the tribe's warleader after his mother's death. He had acquitted himself well. Carrion birds lazily circled the darkening fields, but Azag's eyes focused on movement from another quarter. Leta, beloved consort and comrade-in-arms, strode up the pathway toward him, her leonine gait beautiful and predatory. Armor torn in several places and charred in others, still she grinned triumphantly as she approached. Azag returned the smile, gathering her into a forceful embrace before his men, his powerful stag's antlers locking with her shorter, curved horns. Their mouths wrestled in a fierce animal kiss, which Leta ended with a small bite, drawing a delicious wisp of blood from his lip. Her love and passion nourished Azag like a banquet

fed a starving man. Uncle Chorak gave a wolfish grin of approval.

"H'rah, my lady, it seems you are somewhat the worse for wear since I saw you last," said Azag, mindful that his men awaited new orders.

"And you no less, my lord and love," she laughed. "These damned spiders, 'naraka,' they call themselves. Do they serve the Red Court?"

"Perhaps. The firestorm has blown the flotsam and jetsam of a dozen distant realms upon our borders over the past week, but the naraka are the most worrisome. Their coming portends death and other poisonous spirits travel in their wake. Almost a quarter of our clan has fallen ill. I hear it is even worse in other strongholds. The Red Dream awakens, despite our seers' assurances; even the Five Great Beasts are in turmoil."

"Well, we have given them pause enough today," interrupted Chorak, licking the blood from his ax for emphasis.

Azag and Leta laughed their agreement with the old warrior's sentiment, but Azag remained troubled. The fireholg had been pressed hard over the past centuries merely to survive. Once, the great Beast-Kings had ruled over all they could see, meting out pain or pleasure as they saw fit. After their victory over the ancient fomorian courts in the time-before-time, however, the Men of Bholg had suffered defeat at the hands of the hated Tuatha dé Danaan and had since fallen even further. Barbarous foes surrounded them on all sides — the fuaths of the forest lands, the Bright Ones and



the Middlemarch redcaps to name but a few. Leta and Chorak walked ahead on their way back to the Silver River fastness, laughing and boasting about the day's exploits. Azag brooded, eyeing the great bone-like machines that loomed on either side of the path. Their form and function had changed a thousand times over the centuries since the fall of the Beast-Kings. Current fir-bholg seers could only divine the simplest devices' function. Torn from his weighty concerns by Leta's sharp hiss, Azag snapped to bestial alertness as his eyes spotted the signal light from atop a nearby tower. Someone, or something, was approaching.

Azag and his men melted swiftly into the shadows; if it was the naraka, they would rue the day they entered the realm of the beast-men. The intruder's speed was impressive; mercurial blackness flowed through late twilight shadows, accompanied by the sound of clattering hooves. Two of Azag's men leapt from their perch with a guttural shout, casting a wide net across the narrow passage. Two more appeared from behind, swords drawn. The shadow form spun on its fell mount in an affronted manner. A cold, damp stench permeated the passage and the two net-men fell dead, their screams mixing with a sound like snapping twigs. The first swordsman lunged, sweeping with his short blade and drawing a ragged

hiss from the darkling entity before he too fell, his neck gouting blood. The intruder hissed, its rasping voice hinting at dry rot and unwholesome death. Then Azag and his men were upon it. The creature — here a patch of bare bone, there of black armor — twisted and turned with nearly unimaginable speed and ferocity. Another of Azag's men fell dead, but at last the weight of their numbers brought it down. Azag ended the melee with a well-aimed blow to its head and the creature's dark steed fled shrieking into the night.

The noise summoned more of Azag's clan who brought heavy, barbed chains to bind the prisoner. The creature, now clearly visible, was a skeletal cadaver of a man. His hollow, corpse-like eyes flashed yellow in the light of their torches. Horrendous old wounds ravaged the captive. Azag realized they had only triumphed over it because the creature was already hurt by another, more potent, enemy. The warleader shuddered to think of the chained creature in its prime. Despite the creature's alien appearance, it was its fallen possession that most attracted Azag's attention. In the dust lay a black stone box without key or lid. When Azag picked the object up, it seemed to pull, gently but insistently, to the east. Emblazoned on its surface was a black serpent coiled around a golden tower — the symbol of Harroth the Mute, one of the Five Beasts.

He was also one of the Bright Ones, called sidhe by some.

The sidhe claimed kinship with the fir-bholgs' ancient foes, the Tuatha dé Danaan. Harroth's brood also claimed kinship with the fomorians and openly courted the distant White Court, making him doubly dangerous in Azag's mind. Harroth commanded not only sidhe, but ogres, redcaps and other fearsome creatures. Many of Azag's own people — barbaric fir-bholg cousins from the Dark Vale — served Harroth or one of the other Beasts. Like the other so-called Great Beasts, Harroth Balor sought the shattered pieces of the Triumph Casque of Sorrows wielded by the last great fomorian king at the end of the War of the Trees. Now with the Red Court once again on the verge of waking, perhaps this box contained part of the lost key to the casque.

"Bring him," Azag growled.

The cadaver would not speak, nor even scream. Maddening. The great flaying wheels slowly scissored away chunks of its body in a vain attempt to wring the truth from its throat, at last reducing the creature to strips of twitching flesh and tendon before the pale yellow light finally left its eyes. Azag bit his lip, trying to push down his disgust. Not at the torture, for it was a harsh truth that such things were necessary (though Leta chose not to watch), but that such a creature existed at all. Its silence was no sign of bravery, for it soon became obvious that it experienced neither pain

nor pleasure — an anathema to the passionate fir-bholg. A captured naraka did not do quite as well against the machine, spitting his defiance for some time before the master confessor finally tore down his resolve. The prisoner confessed that he and the other invaders were indeed amnesiac, but that they had fallen under the serpent and tower banner in return for Harroth's aid in regaining their lost past. Azag had to admit some admiration for the enemy warrior's resistance and rewarded him with a swift death.

Finally, exhausted, Azag took to his bed in the high tower of his bone fortress for the first time in three nights. Leta was still abroad, ordering the organization of the clan's defenses. As Azag lay his round helm upon a table, his long black hair cascaded around his weathered face. He studied the coffer with its serpentine emblem; there was much to consider and he did not know where next to turn. A sharp knock interrupted his thoughts. Ardifal, his shield bearer, appeared at his command to enter.

"A soothsayer has come and begs permission to speak with you, master," said Ardifal. Normally Azag did not entertain such charlatans, sending them away with hands bound and pelted by stones and excrement — if they were lucky. Still, there were some who truly knew the ways of Dán and the moment seemed propitious.

The seer was not what Azag expected. Grizzled old pooka skinchangers or women of a disfavored Bholg clan were

the most common diviners in the Red Plains. This woman was small and lacked the horns, fur or other animal features most often seen in that clime. She was pale and fragile. Long fiery red hair fell in ringlets around her sharp features. She wore a simple white robe and sandals that seemed ill suited to the terrain she must have traversed to reach the tower. She could almost pass for one of the Bright Ones, but her beauty was muted and did not radiate the terror and magnificence that marked the first children of Dana. Azag thought he could crush her between two fingers, but something in her gaze gave him pause.

"So, vagabond, what brings you to me? Have you come to read my palm or sing for your supper? Perhaps you wish to help yourself to my treasury's fire-gems? Speak! If your jests amuse me, you will leave here unharmed. If not..." The smile died on his lips along with his bravado. Something about the woman's eyes — knowing, unchallenging and amused — pierced his very soul.

"No, fiery lordling. I come not for reward, but to bring you advice — and a warning," her voice tripped melodiously like the Silver River in spring, yet portended gathering storm.

"Then you honor me with your presence," he mocked, though she seemed

impervious to his sarcasm or his intimidation.

"Yes," she agreed. "The loom of fate binds you tightly to that which has fallen into your possession. You hold the fate of your kingdom, if not the entire Dreaming in your barbarian hands."

"You speak of the box? It is the Casque of Sorrows?" he whispered.

"No, though its time, too, shall come again. The Red Court awakens and holds its first torporous reune since time forgotten. Some served the Red Dream's cause even as it slumbered; these now seek to spread the red fomorians' path of blood and pain to the source of all things."

"The firestorm! Was that the Red Court's doing?" exclaimed Azag, his suspicion and warrior's cynicism evaporating in the bright dawn of sudden revelation.

"In a sense, though it stemmed from another source. A power from outside the Dreaming has played its allotted role and is no more. Poor Ravnos, so timeless, ambitious and doomed," she sighed. "His passing has broken the chains which bound the Red Court to the Splintered Peaks and once again the red fomorians enter their ageless cities. The White Court is already abroad in the Forest of Lies. If the Red Court should regain its full

senses, then so too shall stir the Green Court and all will become Black..."

She did not need to finish. Azag and a dozen rulers before him had fought the Red Court's worshipers for too long to diminish the disaster of such an event. His own advisors predicted that the End-of-All-Things would not occur for another hundred generations, yet in the endless carnage that surrounded Kureksarra, it was easy to think of this in the present tense.

"But then, your seers' record has been less than impressive of late..." The woman did not utter the words, but it was clear from her eyes and infuriating half-smile what she was thinking.

"Then what shall be done?" he asked, angry, confused, even a little frightened. His enemies were numerous and allies hard to find, especially since the cursed Asterlan had slain the Lord of the Mountains.

"Why, you must take the box to the Source of All Things, of course. The casque is a key that shall find its own lock if you will permit it."

"The Source of All — ?"

"The Flesh Realms. The land of men," she said, her voice now hinting that she was patronizing a simpleton.

"Humans? Phah! Our lore-speakers tell of such creatures in a far-away land and even of those called the Beaker People who once served us. They are the product of children's dreams, nothing more," he said, his voice trapped between derision and wonder. "Besides, why would such a weak and primitive creature be the source of all things?"

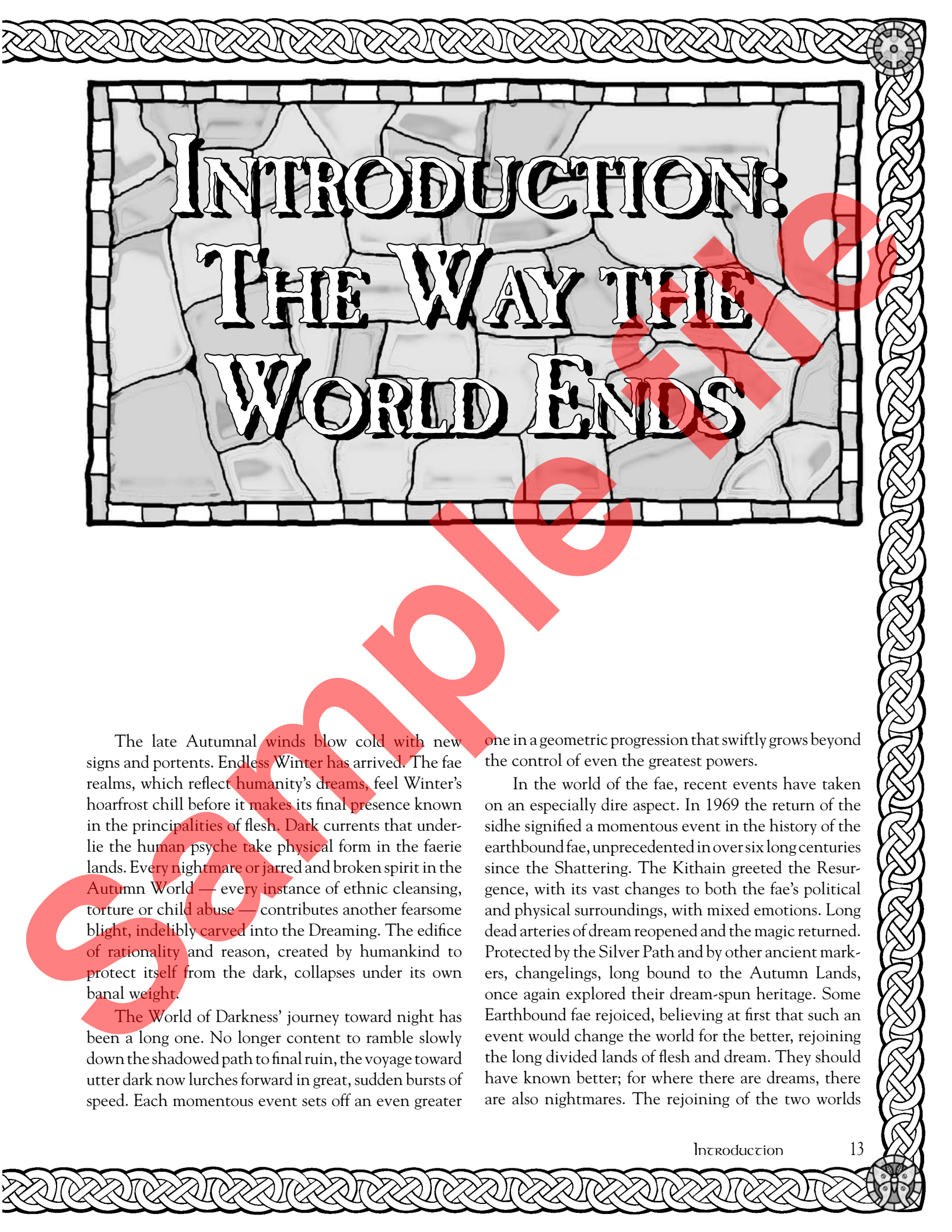
“Fool!”

She stepped forward, a simple action far more menacing to Azag than her dainty form suggested. He felt strangely like a hare transfixed by the serpent’s gaze.

“You have had your advice. Now, little chieftain, your warning...” The melodic voice dissipated, swallowed up by a raven-croak; the woman’s youthful features aged into those of an ancient crone. “The keremet — the creature you slew — its box has its pull; you felt it; did you not? Despite their power, your enemies among the sidhe are replete with weaknesses. They must exchange their souls with those of their human receptacles to gain their ends in the Autumn World. This box holds one such human soul, a soul exchanged for that of Har-roth Balor no less. You see the Mute as one more enemy in these blood-soaked planes, but he is far more, and his entry into the Waking makes him a danger to the true order of things; he defies Fata’s wheel in his cursed arrogance. Your concern for your people makes you an ideal agent for fate in this matter, and by serving us you serve yourself. The old Paths of Balor are opened once more and the path lies clear. It is not often that the Sisters Three give such a warning; disregard it at your peril.” The woman was close to him now, her breath hot on his face. For a moment, he felt as weak as an infant. Then she was gone and Azag was shouting for his fastest messenger.







# INTRODUCTION: THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

The late Autumnal winds blow cold with new signs and portents. Endless Winter has arrived. The fae realms, which reflect humanity's dreams, feel Winter's hoarfrost chill before it makes its final presence known in the principalities of flesh. Dark currents that underlie the human psyche take physical form in the faerie lands. Every nightmare or jarred and broken spirit in the Autumn World — every instance of ethnic cleansing, torture or child abuse — contributes another fearsome blight, indelibly carved into the Dreaming. The edifice of rationality and reason, created by humankind to protect itself from the dark, collapses under its own banal weight.

The World of Darkness' journey toward night has been a long one. No longer content to ramble slowly down the shadowed path to final ruin, the voyage toward utter dark now lurches forward in great, sudden bursts of speed. Each momentous event sets off an even greater

one in a geometric progression that swiftly grows beyond the control of even the greatest powers.

In the world of the fae, recent events have taken on an especially dire aspect. In 1969 the return of the sidhe signified a momentous event in the history of the earthbound fae, unprecedented in over six long centuries since the Shattering. The Kithain greeted the Resurgence, with its vast changes to both the fae's political and physical surroundings, with mixed emotions. Long dead arteries of dream reopened and the magic returned. Protected by the Silver Path and by other ancient markers, changelings, long bound to the Autumn Lands, once again explored their dream-spun heritage. Some Earthbound fae rejoiced, believing at first that such an event would change the world for the better, rejoining the long divided lands of flesh and dream. They should have known better; for where there are dreams, there are also nightmares. The rejoining of the two worlds