

Steel and salt

Axes, my beloved Schlacta, we have achieved such wonders together. We have helped and played our part in bringing Ossium, the Barrens, and now Mareave into our Empire, now we walk in virtue to Ayereed with Vigilance, Wisdom and Courage. We take their land with Loyalty of our Imperial forces of Armies. And captains who came with us once more we take steps i foreign soil, once more we bring the way and the light of our Empire. Let us Welcome Ayereed into our Empire, the Vard way.

Belakov Zakharovich Prochnost, General of the Golden Axe

Salve Zemress! We call to the Seventh wave to seek out passages to the isle of Zemress to enable virtuous crusade to reclaim it for the Empire. For the Holy Land associated with the Exemplar of Prosperity. To remain in the pirating hands of the Grendel is an affront to the essence of her virtue.

Melkior of Balthazar's Vineyard, General of the Seventh Wave

Heroes of the Winter Sun! We have spent a season securing our new home, but now we march forth to claim land for our siblings in the Brass Coast we are bleeding hard beneath Grendel blades. We know little of Ayereed so advance with Wisdom and judge your foe. We march to push the Grendel back to the sea but if other people's meet with us without violence then extend them our virtue and let this new land know that the Imperial Orcs have arrived.

Skywise Rykana, General of the Winter Sun

The Northern Orcs have dared to attack our people and try to steal our lands. We march forth to bring retribution down on these invaders. March! March forth! We will salt the earth where they walk and fling their bodies into the sea!

Astakar, General of the Brine Turtles

Pick up your pack and march soldiers. We're destined for Maraeve to rescue Fleisardh - time to whet our blades at last. There's opportunity for the first ones to get there and salt mines for the laggards.

Neeve, General of the Hamsin

Due South

Three Imperial armies gather in Mareave - the Golden Axe, the Seventh Wave and the Winter Sun. They have spent the last season securing the dominion of the Imperial Orcs; now they are on the move again. The sept of the Brine Turtles, the orcs of Fleisardh watch with uncooperative suspicion; there is no welcome for the Empire's forces in the town of Fioroult or anywhere in the southernmost region. Rather, there is a palpable fear that the armies are gathering to purge them, to crush the people of the Brine Turtle, perhaps to punish the warriors of the sept who still fight for the Grendel. The presence of a Varushkan army in particular seems to raise the spectre of imminent slaughter.

But the armies are not here for the sept. After a few days to lay out their plans and gather their forces, and to allow roughly a thousand soldiers led by independent captains to join them, the Empire's forces march across the border into the largely unknown territory of Ayereed. The Brine Turtles watch them go, an undercurrent of resentful but impotent anger eddying in their wake.

The Varushkans lead the way; the Golden Axe is enthusiastic about the opportunity to conquer new lands, to bring the whole territory under the Imperial banner as they did in Ossium, the Barrens, and most recently Mareave itself. Close behind them come the Winter Sun, the Imperial Orcs equally eager to claim new land for the Empire. Finally the Highborn Seventh Wave, their scouts already spreading out into the unfamiliar land south of Mareave, seeking opportunities to gather as much information as they can about the land. Ideally to find some kind of route to the Isle of Zemress, although how practical that will prove is difficult to say.

Ayereed is largely unknown to the Empire. There are trade routes south from Mareave that cross into the territory. Five years ago the Imperial Senate supported a scheme to map the Bay that recorded the shape of its coastline but said little about the interior other than it was as arid as Mareave to the north. There is a Grendel city here with the unlikely name of Gainmeachdubh, the seat of Salt Lord Azshur, and that surely means that somewhere in the territory there is mithril. As with Mareave, there are a number of odd monuments there – the Giant Heads that line the cliffs south of Gainmeachdubh for example. But the first landmark the Empire encounters is the eerie petrified forest, and it is there that they encounter a serious obstacle to their plans.

Trees of Stone

The Petrified Forest seems to stretch across most of the border with Mareave. The orcs of the Broken Shore call it the Cravanclosh, and the observations of ship captains have done little to prepare the army for how unsettling it is. An entire forest, that seems to stretch from the steep cliffs to the eastern

mountains, where every single tree seems to have somehow turned to stone. The soil is loose and dangerously dry, and the tramp of armoured boots cannot help but throw up choking clouds of dust and ash. Soldiers are forced to fashion makeshift masks from scarfs and blankets to cover their mouths and noses, or risk hacking coughs brought on by inhaling too much of the fine substance. In a few scattered cases, those who get the ash in their wounds suffer a uniquely horrible form of infection - the skin, flesh, and bone around the wound begin to petrify. As long as it is treated quickly with a poultice of Marrowort and fresh water the infection can be arrested, but a few Imperial soldiers lost limbs entirely before the cure is discovered.

This need to ensure wounds remain clean puts even more pressure on the army's reserves of drinking water, and it soon becomes a valuable resource. Requests are sent back north to secure more. Thanks to the rarity of fresh water in Mareave, and the uncooperative nature of the septs who effectively control access to it, this turns out to be more of a challenge than initially anticipated. Rationing is imposed, to ensure the army does not run out, while new supplies are being arranged. Food likewise needs to be conserved; the only creatures that live in the petrified forest appear to be a species of large grey scorpion the size of a small dog, with thick scales and a vicious stinger. They mostly flee the advancing armies, but there are still a few tragic incidents involving smaller creatures and the enticing depths of soldiers' boots.

There's no obvious sign of what is responsible for the destruction that has clearly been visited on this place. Examination of the trees shows that they are solid stone, but the sheer number of them and the intricate detail leaves no doubts that at one point they were living wood. There are also signs here and there of "logging camps" - although clearly picks and hammers are more suited to the task of harvesting these stone

trees than axes.

It's not initially clear why the orcs of the Broken Shore might choose to do so, until by pure chance a Highborn scout discovers a small amount of what appears to be petrified ambergelt in one of the more recently abandoned camps. This red-yellow mineral is clearly valuable – beautiful when polished and perhaps with hidden properties. There's little time to determine what those properties might be, or how common the material is, because at the same time the scouts are uncovering it, the Empire has its first encounter with the Grendel orcs.

Northward Ho

Rather than face destruction at the hands of four Imperial Armies, the warriors of the Brine Turtles sept quit Mareave last season. They clearly spent the season resupplying and joining up with the Hamsin. Where most Grendel armies are made up of orcs of the Broken Shore – from the septs ruled by the Grendel rather than the Grendel themselves – this army is an exception. They fight with steely discipline, and it is obvious that many of their soldiers are from wealthier backgrounds than the run-of-the-mill orc warrior. Their officers in particular are equipped with both finest quality weapons and armour, and enchantments to help them fight - and lead - more effectively. Indeed, they are leading the way north through Cravanclosh to launch an attack into Mareave, and seem almost as surprised to see the Imperial armies as they are to see the orcs.

The Broken Shore armies immediately fall back, but only to establish a defensive line. Both armies seem to be supernaturally aware of the best tactics to use to block the Imperial advance; a game of cat and mouse ensues between

their commanders and the captains of the Winter Sun who have been blessed with supernatural strategic insight. The Grendel are cautious, but they have no interest in letting the Empire push into Ayereed, and seem committed to trying to push them back over the border.

While at first the Imperial forces have a clear advantage of numbers, the Brine Turtles in particular know the terrain much better than they do. Within a week, significant reinforcements arrive from the south – nearly ten thousand additional soldiers seemingly drawn from the garrisons of Grendel fortifications. They are led by Commander Marradhol, the granddaughter of Salt Lord Azshur, and the majority represent the household troops of the ruler of Gainmeachdubh. They are a stark contrast to the soldiers of former Salt Lord Ehsan; brutal, and uncompromising, they seem to take the intrusion of the Imperial armies as a personal affront.

While the petrified forest is hostile, the Varushkans seem least affected of the Imperial forces – indeed it is a Varushkan who first discovers that while they are dangerous to hunt, the giant scorpions of the Cravanclosh are quite edible – and draughir in particular find their peculiar meat distinctly palatable. They excel at preserving water – and seizing it from the Grendel forces who, well aware of the challenge of navigating the petrified forest, have brought extra rations with them.

The Winter Sun back the Varushkans, while looking for any sign of inhabitants in the petrified forest. As the Imperial force pushes south, they begin to see more signs of habitation, but there seem to be no actual settlements in the Cravanclosh itself. Unsurprising, given the choking ash and the lack of anything approaching water or food. Where the Golden Axe seek out every attempt to engage the Grendel and push them back, the Imperial orcs maintain a more balanced footing, defending

where the Broken Shore forces attack but pushing after them when they retreat.

At the same time the Seventh Wave focus on getting a better understanding of the lay of the land – not just in the Cravanclosh. They're by no means able to create a map, but they do manage to get a feel for northern Ayereed. It's the Highborn who identify the two fortifications that protect the territory – the walls of Stormlords Rise and the castle of Beynagahoyne. They're also adept at finding paths through the petrified forest to intercept the Grendel, and block their attempts to flank the Imperial forces.

It's clear that it is Commander Marradhol that has taken charge of the Grendel forces, and that some of the Hamsin commanders in particular resent her doing so. If they had successfully made it to Mareave, it would have been the wealthy captains of the Hamsin who would have been able to claim all the glory of facing the Empire. Now that their strategy is in ruins, it is Marradhol and the forces of Lord Azshur that command the defence of Ayereed. This friction is apparent to the Winter Sun in particular – their supernatural acuity picks up on the weaknesses caused by the arrogant Hamsin being slow to respond to certain opportunities that would have required them to backup the garrison of Gainmeachdubh. These weaknesses dry up quickly – it's clear Commander Marradhol has taken steps to assert her authority.

The Brine Turtles work reasonably well with the defenders of Ayereed – certainly better than they did with the forces of Salt Lord Ehsan. Their main interest seems to be in probing the Imperial forces, looking for any opportunity to get scouts and skirmishers past their lines presumably to try and make contact with their septmates in Fleisardh. The Turtles are strong and resilient, heavily armoured against the weapons of their foes,

but they are by no means stealthy. Those few that do manage to evade Imperial patrols are quickly intercepted by the unconquered scouts of the Seventh Wave.

Slow Retreat

The forces under command of Maradholl narrow the gap between the two sides, but it slowly becomes apparent that numbers alone will not determine this conflict. The Grendel are too cautious, too interested in preserving orc lives and falling back rather than commit entirely to toe-to-toe fighting. The Golden Axe take advantage of this weakness, leading the attack against the defenders and pushing them inexorably south.

As the Autumn Equinox draws closer, it's clear the advantage is with the Empire. For all their caution, it's also clear that the two Grendel armies have suffered significantly more casualties in the fighting than the Empire has. Commander Mradholl's forces are much more interested in slowing and containing Imperial troops than they are in killing them.

There are challenges ahead to be sure – the hostile terrain of the petrified forest coupled with the difficulty of maintaining supply lines through southern Mareave alone are going to cause difficulties for invading Ayereed. But there are already plans afoot to address the challenges of uncooperative septs, and presumably Ayereed is not entirely made up of poisoned petrified woodlands so eventually an Imperial force will be able to support itself. But for now, the two forces remain locked in battle in the Cravanclosh and who can guess what tomorrow may bring?

Game Information

The Empire is almost halfway to conquering the petrified forest. They are still broadly unaware of the layout of Ayereed, beyond knowing there are two fortifications. The General of the Seventh Wave has taken the Gather Information order and so will receive additional information about the armies and forts in the territory at the event.

The challenges presented by the uncooperative nature of the Mareave septs, coupled with the difficulties of bringing supplies into the territory mean that the armies operating in Ayereed are at a disadvantage. They require additional food and especially fresh water. Until these challenges are addressed, the armies operating in the territory require additional upkeep. With three regions - Fleisardh, Eoradal and Clisearn - disinclined to support Imperial troops, this means the upkeep of the armies is increased by three tenths. The Imperial Senate has appraised ways to address this problem and hopefully they will be able to find a way to support Imperial advance deeper into the Broken Shore.

Like Mareave, Ayereed is too arid for the Rivers of Life and Rivers Run Red rituals to have their predicted effects.