

Rok'Shen

The raucous call of the gulls woke me. The coarse sand in my fur quickly reminded me of where I was, and why. I forced myself to my feet, surveying the coast for the first time since washing ashore in the night. Up and down the shore were a hand full of others, either still asleep, or dead. Behind me the frigid Awkales Reef. Looming over me, Hrungnir's Rampart. Nearly half a mile overhead, and chasing the horizon to the North and South, the grey cliffs stood as the first great obstacle of my passage to the Enwi'ddefod, the Naming Rite. I would master it, and the trials beyond it, or I would die in the attempt. I was Sayer of the Morwr, and I would have my Name! I am Rok'Shen!

More than any of the great races, except perhaps the Ent, the Rok'Shen are in touch with, and at home in, the natural world. The Rok'Shen are believed to be a people descended from an ancient race of shape changers. They believe it is through this lineage and the passing of time that this gift has, for the most part, been diluted and lost, though they produce a remarkable number of Callers. The greatest evidence that this mutability remains in their blood can be seen at the beginning of their lives.

At birth, a Rok'Shen child looks much like an elf or human, but they are covered in a light, soft fur that changes color rapidly and randomly. This flux slows, then stops, over the first year of the young one's life. Occasionally feathers or scales beginning to replace fur after the first half year. The animal a Rok'Shen resembles, which is always an animal natural to Amaren, but not necessarily local to the individual, is not hereditary. A Rok'Shen's animal appearance usually has no effect on her personality, but there are two specific exceptions, serpents and bats. These two rare breeds are outcast almost immediately if not killed near birth. They are referred to by their race as cursed. For some reason they are inherently evil by nature and no amount of raising has ever seemed to change that fact. If the true source of their curse was ever known, it has been well hidden, or long lost, for a reason.

Before the Reality War most Rok'Shen called the rich land of Vollois home, but after the shattering of that land they scattered, carried by wind, wave, and fate to the distant reaches of the world. While Rok'Shen may be found living in nearly any open population, most choose to remain among the tribe of their birth. Lesser tribes can be found in most of the lands of Amaren, but the five great tribes are the foundations of modern Rok'Shen culture. Two tribes, the Marchoglu horsemen and Adeiladwr warren builders, call Trice home. The seafaring Morwr call the all the waterways of Amaren home in addition to ports in Illmarsh, off of Vollois, and Esterbeeche. The tree dwelling Coed'dringwr are the guardians of the wild jungles of Grol. Finally, the mysterious Ysgolhaig haunt the forbidding shores of Winterghyl off the coast of Norvis.

Great Tribes

Marchoglu \ 'märsh-ō-'klü\

Rain washed out the sounds of the passing March, four dozen riders and half again as many camp aides, and smoke reigned among the aromas of the small yurt. Fyodor no longer joined in the spring raids. His leg, lame from a pike wound that nearly took his life ten years ago, kept him by the fire. Lost in his work, he hardly noticed the passage of the young warriors, among them his own daughter. His deft black furred fingers worked the dyed fibers of his weaving into a breathtaking pattern. Fyodor's work was sought after from Dun Cove to Sea Haven, the rug at hand would see him well fed and warmly dressed through the harsh Trician winter.

The grasslands and hills of Trice are home to the Marchoglu, a tribe of Rok'Shen known throughout the world as master horsemen. The Marchoglu consist of over five hundred clans, spread over the sweeping lands of Trice, each one gathering as many as two dozen family groups. Mercenary troops from the Marchoglu are highly sought after as being among the greatest light cavalry and irregular skirmishers in the world. In addition to their martial prowess, the Horse brothers (and sisters) have developed many artistic traditions. Most notable of these traditions are wood carving, leather working, and hand weaving carpets. Most families keep small herds of long haired sheep for wool and meat.

What they cannot make or trade for the clans regularly raid to obtain, leading most outside merchants to be very generous in their negotiations. The Marchoglu do not discriminate or hesitate to raid other clans, Adeiladwr warren, or the cities and towns of others races of Trice. People taken in these raids are treated, and expected to act, as part of the clan. Those who refuse are disciplined as if they were disobedient children, few maintain their rebellions for long. The idea that this practice is slavery is abhorrent to the Marchoglu, as claiming that children working to help the family is slavery would be abhorrent elsewhere.

While their traditions keep the tribes distinct, the Marchoglu and Adeiladwr have very close ties. When an outside force threatens an Adeiladwr warren local clans do not hesitate to come to their aid. When severe illness or injury befalls one of the Horse brothers a nearby warren will take them in as one of their own until they are well enough to return to the open air. On the occasion of Marchoglu and Adeiladwr choosing to be joined, it is for the newly bonded to choose for themselves which tribe to claim, all family ties are severed with the tribe that is left.

Adeiladwr \ 'ād-il-ad-wər\

As Aelwen rounded the corner, turning quickly again down an unused shaft, she could hear her two pursuers closing on her. This span of the warren was unknown to her, and with the market and festival of Chynnydd drawing everyone into the sun she was unlikely to find a friendly guide to help her. In spite of her instincts and years of

warnings she took cover in the rubble at the mouth of the collapsed tunnel, hoping the voices of reason were more compelling to her two cousins. The gamble paid off when Bethan and Dwyn passed her shadowed refuge with hardly a glance. With her tiny feet carrying her towards the “den” she knew she had won, all that was left was to choose who would be the next “stray”.

The rich black loam of Trice hides a secret few outsiders ever experience, aside from the occasional dwarf or deep elf passing through most never take advantage of their remarkable hospitality, the vast tunnel networks of the Adeiladwr. Called warrens, these networks delve as deep as fifty feet, split across three levels, and most span more than a mile. As the home of the most “urban” of the Rok’Shen, it is not unheard of for a warren to exceed one thousand individuals, though most house from one to two hundred. The only structures to mark the surface are a few access buildings, which seem like small family houses from without, and wind traps, which provide both ventilation and power for the warren. Each warren is kept dry and stable through the use of cunningly integrated irrigation systems and alchemical hardening of all of the passages. Deep in the bedrock beneath every warren is a deep warren cut into the very stone, including storage space and a cistern to provide drainage, water, and in an emergency it can be used as a final refuge.

The sunlit spaces above and around a warren are dedicated to agrarian discipline. Farming, animal husbandry, and the keeping of the famous Trician guard bees are the primary industries of the Adeiladwr. Augmented by carpenters, chemists, and preeminent healers, the Adeiladwr form the heart of the Trician economy.

While they are easily the most numerous of the Rok’Shen tribes, few Adeiladwr leave the comfort and safety of their homes for the chaos of the wider world. Those that do tend to be very grounded and dependable, often they find a group or band to act as an adopted family, to whom they are fiercely loyal.

Morwr \ 'mór-wər \

Aderyn stepped out onto the stony shore of the Coldnese and her feathers ruffled in agitation. She disliked all dry ground, but at least sand would throw up ripples. Stone was just dead, each step was like a day in the doldrums. She was Ceidwad, “Keeper” to dry folk, and every bolt of cloth, precious stone, or grain of rice that passed Freuddwyd’s rails, on or off, was hers to inspect and record. Some Fôr-lywydd would allow their Keepers to work from deck, risking pests or worse, but Fôr-lywydd Aneirin kept discipline as rigid and dependable as the Starherd. Fortunately this cargo, two cord of unmilled mountain mahogany for three stoneweight of Harrow steel ingots, would take little time to examine and log. The krew would be back on the river before a dozen degrees crossed above. Still she ached to have living water underfoot again as she took up another length of the knotty hardwood.

When Vollois fell to the ruin of the Reality War legends tell of five score ships that carried the remnant of the Rok'Shen to the distant shores where they would make their new homes. The descendants of these heroic seafarers call themselves the Morwr. While some of them, a few hundred, work at the ports of Hafan on Illmarsh, or Dwr'clir on Esterbeech, the vast majority of the Tribe spend their lives on the seas and rivers of Amaren as marines, merchants, and messengers.

Carrying them on their trek are the hallmark of the Morwr, the crogen, enormous domesticated creatures, sea creatures whose origins are lost to the mists of time. Morwr anchor wooden structures to the keratinous shells to make them suitable for carrying crews and cargos. With their broad, sleek shells and powerful flippers, they bear a passing resemblance to giant sea turtles, but a look below the surface puts an end to such musings. The crogen have four symmetrical pairs of flippers, no visible head, and a ventral shell covered in feather like growths. The Morwr breed crogen in hatcheries at Hafan and Dwr'clir, these hatcheries are also the training halls of the Gŵr, or husbands (gender neutral) of the crogen. Gŵr dedicate their lives to acting as companions, caretakers, and translators for the behemoths who literally carry Morwr society on their backs.

The fundamental unit of the Morwr Tribe is the Crew, simultaneously family and corporate entity, even port bound Morwr organize themselves as crews. The sovereign head of every crew is its Fôr-lywydd, similar to a captain in some formal navies. Every sea bound crew has a Gŵr to see to the needs of their beloved crogen. Most crews employ a Ceidwad to maintain records and inventories of necessary supplies. Larger crews, twenty or more, may have additional levels of command and specialization.

Coed'dringwr \ 'kōd-il-ad-wār

Kalin'ini crouched on the limb over the game trail. Balanced with an easy tension, flint-head spear resting on the curly mocha fur of his knees. He allowed his mind to travel down other paths, crossing the years, he trusted his reflexes and instincts to see to the hunt. Lightning blazed across the sky, reflecting oddly off the wet skin of the hairless. They brought magical long knives and spearheads that never broke and shone like moonlight. The shorter hairless, with a beard even more impressive than Kalin'ini's, gave the elder many of the clear gourds full of spirit water. The taller hairless, with her pale skin and pointed ears, reminded Kalin'ini of a horned eel. She came towards the hut where the newer taken lived, those who were not yet of the camp. She pointed to two of them, one touched by bear another by mouse. They both stood and walked out, waiting behind her. After a moment she pointed at the scrawny bundle of red fur hiding behind Kalin'ini. His little sister curled more tightly into her herself, her eyes barely visible behind her bushy tail. The shorter hairless came and drug her out by the scruff. As the bristleback crashed down the trail below, Kalin'ini dropped, spear first, onto its back. Rini's barking screams echoed in his ears long after the boar died.

For thousands of years the hellish slopes and steaming jungles of Grol were the solitary crucible of the Coed'dringwr, uncharted by any but the Morwr. The Coed'dringwr were aware of the outside world, but aside for the Enwi'ddefod, they choose to live apart from it. A hundred years ago that changed when a hurricane drove a cargo vessel, the *Fallen Angel*, far out of the established shipping lanes and onto the black shores in the shadow of the Hellfont. The camps that controlled that portion of the island were suffering from the effects of a plague and did not venture to the secluded cove where the crew of the *Angel* restored their ship. The *Fallen Angel* completed her repairs and set sail for home, thinking they had found and uninhabited new land. Eight years later the flotilla that made land and the Coed'dringwr who met them, were both equally stunned.

The nine decades that have followed have been marked by conflict, treachery, and suffering. Colonists struggle against natives, camps unite and betray one another, and the age old intrusion of elemental forces from the Hellfont have only increased over the last two score years. Grol has turned from a land of physical and spiritual refinement, to a den of outlaws, slavers, and thieves.

**Ysgolhaig \ 'i-sgŭl-hāg **

Su stood beyond the edge of the Great Disk as the false dawn began to erase the stars overhead. He had gone out with the Boat in the Night with the first of this year's challengers. As chief Master of the Third Circle, it was his right and duty to cast challengers out of Youth and into the icy midnight waters of the channel. Su walked around the the outside of the Great Disk until he reached the Gate of the World, where guardians entered the Fourth Circle, and callers crossed it to reach their own Circle of the World. Once he had entered the World, Su bowed in turn to the linked First and Second Circles across the Disk from him. Only footprints, and a few errant scorches, marred the gravel of the Circles of Life and Seasons. Su looked fondly upon the craters and gouges the Wrath of his order had left upon the Circle. Sunlit treetops and a hurricane with a simian face welcomed the druids to morning training.

The mystics of Winterghyl act as hosts and minister to every Rok'Shen at least once in his life. For many the fearful and dire days before and after their Enwi is all that they ever see or know the Ysgolhaig. For others, their first days as adults are the last time that they will ever see their mist shrouded home.

Every adult member of the Ysgolhaig is a magic user, an Adept, Druid, or Templar. Those who can not or will not follow one of these paths are banished after their Enwi'ddefod, often taking the place of one of their contemporaries who will never return home from the trials of Norvis. These changelings are a mixed blessing, at once filling a void and acting as a constant reminder of a lost friend or relation. At the same time they exist in perpetual tension between honored guest and pariah, but never belong where they are.

Those who stay Devote themselves to the study and perfection of their chosen path, dividing themselves according to one of four Circles. Healers study the First Circle, the Circle of Life. Evokers Study the Second Circle, the Circle of Seasons. Callers study the Third Circle, the Circle of

the World. Templars and Guardians study the Fourth Circle, the Divided Circle. Taken together, these four circles form the Great Disk, the metaphorical and tactical center of Ysgolhaig society.

Unlike others of the Great Tribes the Ysgolhaig form one singular collective on the Isle of Winterghyl. Though they are the smallest of the Tribes, rarely numbering more than five hundred, they are revered by nearly every Rok'Shen.

Naming Rite and Feasts

Enwi'ddefod or Enwi \an-wē-di-fō-d\ or \an-wē

In the Spring of her sixteenth year every Rok'Shen child is carried to the forbidding coast of Winterghyl to begin their passage into adulthood. The clan of the child assembles a parcel to offer the Ysgolhaig in gratitude for their service. This offering is traditionally equal in value to two years of work and consists of trade goods, preserved foods, and crafted goods. In addition to this contribution the clan pays very generously for passage from the Morwr.

Throughout the Spring young Rok'Shen arrive on Winterghyl where they present their offerings to the Mystics. At sunset on the day of his arrival the youth is ushered onto one of the small ships which the Ysgolhaig maintain specifically for use in the passage to and from Norvis. The aspirant is instructed to capture an Aderyn'glas, commonly known as a Northern storm jay, then bring it, alive, to a dock on the coast where a ship awaits them. While the children are being instructed in what will be required of them the vessel makes its way across the icy waters of the Winterghyl channel. When the coast of the mainland comes into view the petitioner is thrown bodily from the ship into the frigid waters with no warning. The combination of the chilling waters, powerful currents, and jagged spines of the Awkales reef turn the passage into a one of the deadliest natural hazards in the North.

Upon reaching the shore the young Rok'Shen comes face to stone with the tallest cliff in all of Amaren. Standing just over twenty-two hundred feet from base to edge, Hrungnir's Rampart is the last thing many young Rok ever see. The cliff is by no means sheer, but despite numerous holds and clefts the Rampart has no mercy for those whose endurance and focus fail them.

From the top of the cliff a journey of over one hundred miles, full of predators, giants, and hostile terrain, separate seekers from the nesting grounds of the storm jays. Reaching the nesting ground alive is a feat unto its self, but the youth must still safely capture one of the Aderyn'glas and return to the coast with it intact. Finally, after making their way back down the Rampart with their precious prize in hand, the ordeal is over. A small cabin and dock are maintained by a rotating staff from Winterghyl to ferry those who return back to the island. Those who return successfully with their quarry undergo a ritual, using a small sample of the bird's blood, to reveal the name Nature has chosen for them and usher them into adulthood. Those who return empty handed have no place in the Tribes of their birth, or any other Rok'Shen population, they are outcasts. While many are lost to the trials, Rok'Shen support the Enwi'ddefod because it keeps their bloodline strong.

Cychwyn \sīz-win

The warm days and cool nights at the end of March herald the coming of new growth and

life. It is a time of beginnings and the Rok'Shen celebrate this time by marking the beginning of the year with the Spring equinox. For the three days centered around the equinox Rok'Shen around the world mark new ventures and begin new chapters of their lives. At sunrise on the first day of Cychyn families with children born over the last year gather together with the whole community to present and name the new members. On the second day of the feast those children who have seen sixteen years are celebrated, presented with the offerings that they will bear to Winterghyl, and spend their last day as children. At sunset on this second day these oldest children set out on the first steps towards their Enwi. Children of the Ysgolhaig meet the cold currents of the channel that night. Sea bound Morwr are sequestered until their crew reaches the misty island, youths from other tribes their only companions until then. For children of the other tribes, great and small, the night of the equinox is spent traveling with their peers to the port where they will await the crogen. Even those with the means to send their young across the leagues by magic or artifice honor the traditions of their ancestors, traveling by the shelled ships. On the final day of the feast, those who have chosen to be bound, one to another, are blessed and recognized by the elders of their clans.

Chynnydd \ 'sīn-id

The blazing days of Summer are full of the vibrant struggles of life, predator seeks prey, storms rage, and the Rok'Shen compete. For three days before the solstice Rok'Shen communities are completely closed to outsiders. Traditionally these days are set aside for preparation. On these days terms are set for the coming contests, pavilions are erected, fields and waterways are made ready for sport and play, and staggering amounts of food and crafts are prepared for consumption. On dawn of the longest day of the year five days frenzied rivalry are commenced, with spectators coming from both near and far. Most every manner of sport can be found at some point or another. Races, group and individual mock combats, tests of marksmanship form the cornerstones, but anything that can be found to have a winner can be found at Chynnydd. Balancing, climbing, dancing, enchanting, juggling, marching, reading, selling, and many other exotic and bizarre tournaments may be found. Some clans even hold sleeping or mediating matches. Infusing the air of constant challenges are the sweet aromas of fresh fruits, pies, preserves, honey, honey roasted meats nuts and grains, and honeyed baked goods all judged, both in quality and quantity, as well as consumption.

Ymadawiad \ 'i-mad-a-wād

Autumn sees the slowing down of the turbulent growth and work of harvesting. A time to come together in preparation for more difficult times ahead. On the cusp of both plenty and want, of looking back and looking ahead. The Fall Feast of the Rok'Shen is a time of balancing opposites. Four days before and after the equinox Rok'Shen communities join together in a day of lavish feasting and merriment. Telling tales of past glories, and bragging of greater deeds yet to be done. Rich food and exotic delicacies are presented and enjoyed by all. Just as the day beginning and ending Ymadawiad are times of bounty and merriment the week between them is marked by somber toil. For eight days everyone goes into seclusion, acknowledging only their immediate family, eating very plain and sparse meals, working diligently in preparation for the lean, harsh

days ahead. During this time no word should be spoken, save those specific to the work at hand. No laughter or affection is given or expected. When the communities come back together for the closing feast friendships are renewed, smiles restored, and the Children of Nature remember that all things, good and bad, end in time.

Dychwelwch \dis-'wel-wish\ - Dec 21

The long cold nights provide ample time to reflect on the past and on the losses suffered through the year. On the longest night Rok'Shen gather to remember what has been lost. Throughout the night stories are told of history, recent and ancient alike, and tokens are exchanged. These tokens are meant to represent the return of what has been lost, a hammer for the daughter of a dead smith, a toy for a grieving parent, or a single boot for a wounded soldier. The gifts are bitter sweet, but they are a chance to show that no one suffers loss alone, that one's pain is known and shared by those that remain. It is customary to serve dried fruits and meats, a reminder that all things shrivel and die, but they may still have value. The Feast of Dychwelwch ends at sunrise, when a final exchange tokens is made. Stones, potsherds, or sticks painted half black, half green are exchanged with the simple invocation, "Vollois".