

DYSTOPIAN AGE

THE ORDER OF THE ALLSHARD

Existing in a formless realm of energy beyond mortal comprehension, the Order has been waging a ceaseless crusade against the malign influence of the Hex. On Earth, their followers believe in the righteousness of this cause but their true understanding of the powers they serve is shrouded in mystery and doctrine. For the men and women of the Order, they know that their crusade is just and that the very fate of humanity rests with them. With such a burden, the Order strive to put themselves above their human frailties and morality. The Order knows that should their crusade here on Earth fail; the world will burn.

*From the confessional writings of
High Sircan Horst Abner.*

Let me tell you of the true saviours of mankind. Their original name or what planet they might have called home is now lost to time. But somewhere in this fathomless universe, there was a species who sloughed off their physical forms and ascended to a higher state of being. Having departed from the physical universe, they found themselves in a new reality; a dimensional plane they refer to as the Allshard. To those previously bound to the perceptions of matter and energy, this realm took the form of a river of blinding light. Amongst this infinite stream of energy sparkled the very essence, the souls as it were, of those who came to be known as the Order.

The Allshard is a timeless realm, unfettered by the physical laws of our own. Within the cocoon of the Allshard, the Order's understanding continued to expand as they developed a thirst for knowledge that dwarfed the ambition that had first driven them into the light.

While contemplating the deepest workings of the universe the Order found they were briefly able to re-join the material plane should their studies and curiosity drive them to do so; but time spent in the realm of the flesh was anathema to them, its rigid, linear flow as uncomfortable as gravity or any of the other limitations of the physical universe.

A SHADOW ARISES

Within the Order's ever-widening understanding of the universe, they began to sense the encroachment of a familiar shadow from the

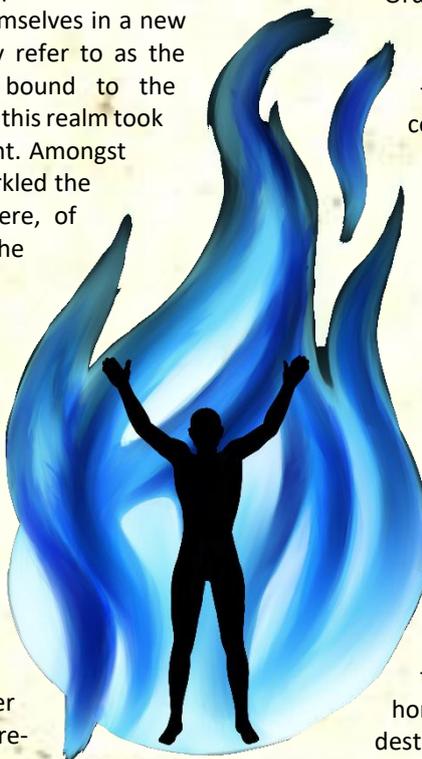
universe they had left behind. This morass was known to them as the Hex, a relic of a life long forgotten. The Order, loath to allow the stain of this creature to corrupt the physical galaxy, felt the first stirrings of compulsion in aeons. The Hex had to be eliminated.

Bending their will upon the physical universe, the Order was able to touch upon the sleeping consciousness of countless beings scattered among the stars. Refining this skill, they found that not only could the subjects of this process convey information into the Allshard, but images, beliefs, and messages could be subtly insinuated back into the sleeping minds thus contacted, in a process the Order referred to as Gnosis.

Through Gnosis the Order began to track the shadowy taint of the Hex across the galaxies. Travel in the material universe was the process of a mere thought for them, the entirety of creation in the aether could be spanned in an imperceptible moment. The consciousness of the Order found the still nascent Hex, studied it with horrified fascination, and then moved to destroy it utterly and erase its every trace from the backwater galaxy in which they found it. It is worth noting that this distant galaxy contained an obscure ball of dirt and water its inhabitants would come to call Earth...

THE FIRST CRUSADE

In one of the farthest corners of the firmament away from our Earth, the Hex had settled upon a small, hot planet whose inhabitants were millennia from discovering even the simplest machines. These four-armed natives, who called themselves





the Sindar in their own language, lived in discrete, primitive communities hunting the wide veldt and gathering fruits and berries from plants growing along the boundaries of the plains.

Even primitive societies have rules. With rules come outcasts and misfits; those deemed unworthy of inclusion, who had been relegated to the fringes, to eke out what pathetic lives they could, demeaned and disrespected. It was here, within these small, disenfranchised communities, that the Hex had taken hold, driving these outcasts further from the other Sindar, and then twisting and corrupting their flesh and their minds.

The Order, driven by disgust and overconfidence, struck at the Hex too soon, assuming their foe would be easily destroyed and thus the galaxy would be saved from their debasement. The Hex, unaware of the Order's existence, reacted instinctively and violently to the sudden attack. The Sindar who had been as hosts and helpers lashed out in all directions, arousing the ire of the nearby villages. The entire emerging civilisation was torn apart in violent upheaval and open war. In the resulting confusion, the Hex escaped into the wider galaxy with enough of its essence intact to begin anew.

BURNING OBSESSION

Several things became clear to the Order at that time. The Hex, although a creature of energy like themselves, was limited in its power and scope. In fleeing from the Order's attack, the Hex revealed its inability to exist beyond the material universe. The Hex seemed only able to touch upon a single world at a time, which should, theoretically, make it much easier to eliminate it. The problem with theories, of course, is that they can be disproved.

An appreciable percentage of the Order's capacity was deployed and engaged in the task of locating the Hex once more and this time eliminating it for good. Through dogged persistence, the consciousness of the Order emerged from the bright river of the Allshard for brief forays into the material realm. Countless lesser sentient minds were sifted through the scrying power of Gnosis for any sign of the Hex.

The events on the Sindar homeworld repeated themselves again and again. But now, aware that they were being hunted, the Hex proved far more elusive. The Order perfected their ability to twist a society's innate xenophobia to their own ends, as the Hex always gravitated toward fringe elements

of the societies they attempted to infiltrate.

In time, as the Hex continued to evade destruction, the hunt took on a formal structure. More and more of the Order were drawn into the effort, their higher contemplations and aspirations abandoned for the destruction of the Hex.

CEASELESS VIGILANCE

Through the millennia, the Order settled upon a fixed strategy in their efforts against the Hex. When the hated foe was once again discovered, a crusade would immediately be declared, following a rigid framework of events and techniques that would, it was hoped, bring about the destruction of the foe. The initial phase of a Crusade begins when the first hint of the Hex's presence on a world is identified. An exhaustive study of the planet's societal structures is then conducted through the analysis of the dreams and subconsciousness of the sentient natives in the process of Gnosis. This scrutiny is intended to find both the root of the Hex incursion and suitable organisations and also to highlight individuals that the Order may use as agents in the coming conflict. With the strength of the Hex corruption ascertained the Order are careful to ensure that they have identified appropriate allies amongst the native inhabitants before declaring Phase One of the Crusade to be at an end.

As the Crusade moves into its second phase, the Order begins to shape the beliefs of those native groups who have a sympathetic outlook on the tenets of purity and discipline. The beliefs of their unwitting allies are gradually and subtly influenced towards a more close-minded, intolerant worldview conducive to the persecution of the disenfranchised Hex-touched populations. Throughout the first and second phases, the chosen native allies are unwitting proxies in the Order's conflict. Select individuals begin to have lucid dreams from a presence they believe to be their godhead. The goal of the Second Phase is to use the population to cull those fringe groups and societies where the Hex might be harboured, with the intention of eradicating the hated shadow before it is allowed to fully take hold. Should the direct action aspects of this phase of the Crusade fail, the groundwork will have already been laid for the declaration of the Third Phase.

With this escalation of the Crusade, the Order will have consolidated its hold over those organisations it has decided to use as proxies, imposing a more militaristic, disciplined structure upon them. In addition, through Gnosis, the Order will agitate



general trends of prejudice and bigotry in the general population to create a hostile and deeply unwelcome environment for the Hex.

The vassals of the Order will be inspired to create advanced technologies and weapons for use against the Hex. These technologies are never imparted with the education of the underlying principles. Understanding of the technology is not required, only explication. Through many generations of parents and their offspring, entire bloodlines are focussed in the recreation of the weapons and technologies required to defeat the Hex. While one faithful family may perfect the replication of how to assemble a complex relay or layer the steel for a sword blade, another may strive to achieve an exact copy of a sword hilt that they were shown in their dreams. Others work on mining specific ores, gem-working or learning how to inlay inscrutable yet sacred holy runes into the metal. Finally, a privileged family would be shown how these elements combine to form this relic, such as an energised blade or portal emitter. This family would now possess knowledge as to how the sub-assemblies are crafted or even become aware as to the identity of the other families who have worked over the centuries on those components. A thousand years might have been spent across multiple generations of devout families all to bring about the assembly of that single relic. All they know for certain is that their gods will direct them and provide instruction so that they may play their small part in the greater plan.

During the final stages of Phase Three, a disciplined core of devout militia arises: the Spica. These Spica will have been formed, trained in the use of these advanced weapons and are prepared to hunt down the Hex-influenced natives. It is these holy warriors who are the physical extension of the will of the Order. Over the centuries the Spica conduct a sacred but hidden war against the Hex and the ruling Dark Council that serves to push the Hex's agenda of corruption and murder. Relics such as the Spear of Light and Tumbler enable the Spica to extend their campaign and reach even the most distant or elusive of a tainted populace. But there will come a point where even these fabulous devices are insufficient on their own to bring about the extermination of the Hex.

RISE OF THE COR CAROLUS

The replication of technologies is time-consuming and ultimately has its limits. The more complex a technology, the more families and generations must be dedicated to its creation. Something like a

relic blade might take a century to enter the service of the Crusade. However, technology such as the portals that allow the Spica to instantly teleport between two points on the battlefield would take more than a thousand years to bring to fruition. The final relic that can be taught to a mortal mind is so complex that in many ways the initial components are amongst the first revealed to the native servants. The completion of the first Apothic Arch at the heart of the Order's stronghold signals the end of that phase and the commencement of the next.

The Fourth Phase is marked by the activation of the Apothic Arch. These archways connect directly with the Allshard and provide a bridge between the best warrior servants of the Order and their patrons. Believing themselves marked for greater service, chosen Spica willingly enter the Apothic Arch expecting to receive some small measure of the blessings of their god. Instead, their bodies are invaded and possessed by one of the ascended beings in the Allshard. After several minutes of being wracked with agony, the now smouldering host steps free on the arch as a member of the warrior elite - The Cor Caroli. These holy warriors inform the assembled senior priests and commanders, the Sircan, of their true purpose and finally, the real nature of the Order is laid bare for those leaders. With the highest ranking mortal members of the Order having now been made fully aware of their role in the millennia-spanning conflict they are sworn to secrecy. Only the Sircan like myself are privileged to know the truth of the Cor Caroli, the god-like alien masters we must serve.

With the arrival of the Cor Caroli, the Order's Crusade is no longer relegated to the shadows, though a degree of secrecy and restraint must still be shown. The Cor Caroli will be too few and the Spica too mortal to escalate the conflict so quickly that the native governments and powers be alerted. The last thing the Order wants in the Fourth Phase is to become embroiled in a conflict with the mortal governments of the planet as well as the Hex. A war on multiple fronts is unlikely to always be fought on the Order's terms. Better to restrict the Spica and Cor Caroli to precision strikes of overwhelming power so that the natives can be strategically weakened and the Hex confronted. By this time the Hex will have corrupted a small but significant portion of the planet's population. Should repeat strikes against their post-war bases and supporters prove insufficient and the Hex survives, Phase Four will reach a conclusion. Under



the direction of the Cor Caroli, the construction of immense strongholds on each of the planet's major continents is completed. These Bastion Armatures are hidden in remote locations and are staging areas for the final war against the Hex. While the exterior fortifications may be completed relatively early in the Fourth Phase, it is the completion of the immense Revelation Gate at the centre of each citadel that signals the beginning of the Fifth Phase.

By the time the Order reluctantly commences with the next phase of the Crusade, direct, open warfare has begun on all fronts. The Cor Caroli have grown to sufficient numbers and are deployed to seize every strategic and tactical resource on the planet to deprive it from their enemies. Every enclave of the Hex is attacked simultaneously, instilling panic in the population and resulting in hasty, terrified reprisals from the native governments in response to such violence. The entire world will be engulfed in war as the Order attempts to exterminate the Hex. The Cor Caroli are openly unleashed, and no quarter is asked – neither is it expected. This state of total warfare may continue for years until the Order determines that all indigenous survivors have either sided with the Order or have been infected by the Hex. When there is nothing to be saved the Order reluctantly moves to enact the final phase in the last effort to destroy the Hex before it can once again escape.

At the declaration of the Sixth and final Phase, each of the enormous Revelation Gates is activated. Their true nature is revealed in that moment. They form a portal, linking the gate room directly to the surface of the planet's star. These gates unleash a burning tide of superheated gas that washes across the planet. Everything is destroyed; every last vestige of the native populace, the servants of the Order and those corrupted by the Hex alike, are gone. The Cor Caroli host bodies vaporise as the planet is cleansed. The eternal energy form of each Cor Carolus is welcomed back into the Allshard and a quiet vigil of several moments is offered up to the memory of the destroyed civilisation, another victim to the corruption of the Hex. Then the eternal watch of the dreamers in the physical realm begins anew, in the anticipation that the Hex will emerge once more on another planet.

Seventeen times the Hex has been discovered. Seventeen times the Order has come crashing down on them. And each time the Hex has forced the Order to burn a world. Each time the entity manages to escape and begins its cycle of foulness anew.

THE EIGHTEENTH

After the eradication of the planet Chy the Order believed that the Hex had been completely destroyed at last. The crystalline-based native Chyne had proven less susceptible to the touch of the Hex, and their rigid, structured minds had been more amenable to Gnosis. Despite this, it had still become necessary to carry out the Sixth Phase on the world and burn it to ensure that the Hex was no more.

For many years after the death of Chy, there was no sign of the Hex and a feeling of hope began to emerge within the gleaming river of the Allshard once again. Then the dreams of a soft, primitive people isolated within the far spiral arm of a galaxy grew dark. The unsophisticated inhabitants of the Earth were not advanced far beyond the ability to shape soft metals to their uses.

There was a darkness shading the dreams of some of the inhabitants of Thera, a small, protected peninsula jutting into a long, narrow, land-locked sea. Through more careful observation, the first two phases of the Crusade were implemented. A likely Hex infestation was identified on Thera along with the most suitable force capable of confronting them, the people of the neighbouring island nation of Atlantea.

The Crusade of Earth was well into the Third Phase, with Atlantean Spica working surreptitiously against the tainted folk of the island city of Thera. The first Apothic Arch was nearing completion on Atlantea and construction of a Bastion Armature was begun in the heart of the island to support what the Order believed would be the final battle of their long war. Within a generation, the Cor Caroli would arrive to join their servants in preparation for a massive assault. The Order supposed with some confidence that their victory was at hand. But then Atlantea disappeared.

An immediate campaign of Gnosis was begun, but none of their followers appeared to have survived the utter eradication of the island. Even the subconscious of the tainted inhabitants of Thera was unavailable to the Order as it appeared that the Hex enclave on Thera had been completely destroyed by a volcanic eruption.

There was no sign that the Hex had survived the destruction of their island stronghold, but the Order was not quite ready to believe that victory had arrived from such an unexpected and



unprecedented quarter. They were right to be suspicious.

FACTORS OF COMPLICATION

In all the time the Order had kept a watch across the galaxies for the taint of the Hex, they had spared no interest in the unrelated goings of the myriad of lifeforms flourishing across a thousand other worlds. So single-minded were the Order in their crusade that entire civilisations were born, evolved and died without the all-powerful Order even learning their name. Certainly, the Order had no concept that in the more recent moments of the material realm, say a mere few thousand years or so, that a close-knit federation of worlds had been formed, an organisation of sentient races, unlike anything this galaxy had ever seen before: The Watchers.

It took decades of analysis and penetrative Gnosis of the galaxy before the Order finally understood what had happened at Atlantea. At first, it was feared the Watchers were tools of the Hex's Dark Council, having clearly brought about the destruction of Atlantea. But it was revealed that in this case, appearances were deceptive. These Watchers were nothing more than younger races who had wandered unknowingly into the eternal war between the ancients. These galactic children would normally be of little consequence to the Order, but here on Earth they were a dangerous obstacle to the crusade.

RENEWAL

Keeping a wary eye out for any future visits from the Watchers, the Allshard maintained a vigil for many centuries over the developing nation-states of Earth. Eventually, after more than two thousand years, signs began to emerge once more of the Hex taint. The corruption was predictably more widespread in its resurgence.

As it was evident that the Hex was active once more, the Order were forced to restart the crusade at the first phase. This time a secretive religious sect, known as the Holy Path of Man, proved the most predisposed towards the Allshard's approach. Located in the densely populated continent of Europe, the newly daubed Holy Order of Man began to extend its power and influence throughout the region. Confident with how they could impart their technology through Gnosis to the humans of this cult, the Allshard moved at an expedient pace and within two thousand years had progressed the Crusade to the third phase with the Holy Order of

Man at its heart.

Since the resumption of the Crusade of Earth at an accelerated pace, the Holy Order of Man has developed quickly into a well-disciplined secret army. Now known simply as the Order, we are a fanatical force who mask our true beliefs beneath the cover of a fringe religion. In this way, carefully eschewing the established concepts of Godhead and the doctrines of the other orthodoxies we can move amongst the spreading colonial powers to found enclaves across the globe. From these multiple strongholds, we are able to strike out against Hex activity and agitate the local populations against the pawns of the Dark Council. Chapel-Fortresses have been built in remote areas as precursors to Bastion Armatures. Finally, in my lifetime, the Apothic Arches have been assembled. The Cor Caroli finally walk the Earth amongst the faithful - a glorious sight to behold indeed.

ALLIES AMONGST THE HERD

Yet for all of our recent successes there have been setbacks as well. Our situation has become infinitely more complex since the appearance of other advanced technologies. These have suddenly begun to appear across the continent as if being purposefully spread to confuse and confound our task. Perhaps these are of the Watchers or even might be remnant Order equipment lost with the destruction of Atlantea. Whatever their source, they are to be expunged from the Earth with the same zeal and fervour as though they were infernal Hex-blighted weapons.

It is fortunate that in hunting down and destroying enemies of our orthodoxy we have found allies. After bandits using Hex-tainted weaponry were found to be raiding the city of Edirne on the border with Greece, I despatched Sircan Dylan Callus and his Spica Iapetus to cleanse them from the region. During this action Callus saved the son of an Ottoman noble and within the year the Order had found sympathetic supporters within the Sultanate.

Sultan Suleiman Mustafa I has had his eyes opened to the truth of the Order of the Allshard. Once he was given a version of the true nature of the Order that he could comprehend, he spent a full day in counsel with his Grand Vizir, Mehmed Pasha. Calling Callus to his court, he proclaimed that the Order of the Allshard were thereafter a permitted religion in the Ottoman Sultanate and that he would consider whatever our requirements would be to establish a stronghold in the Sultanate. His conditions were simple, firstly that his royal



personage would be guarded by a phalanx of Cor Caroli at all times as he moved about his realm. Furthermore, the Sultanate required the Order to deploy their forces alongside his own in the pursuit of mutually beneficial military objectives. These two points were readily accepted, and detachments of Spica are now routinely deployed alongside Sultanate forces.

THE ORDER MADE MANIFEST

The pinnacle of the relationship with our new Ottoman allies was the completion of the second Bastion Armature. Though construction of the first had begun in the Rocky Mountains many years previously, work had been slow as it was carried out in secret and with limited resources. No such guile or restraint was required in the Ottoman Sultanate and now a mighty Armature has finally been completed. This colossal fortress is known as *Izadkhast* and lies amongst the rugged vistas of Persia. The Bastion Armature located in the Rocky Mountains was finally completed in 1870 and we have titled it the *High City*. Alongside *Izadkhast* they have become the focal point for most of the Crusade's activity.

As the regional politics developed, both in the Sultanate, but more particularly here in the Union, we have been disturbed to find more and more signs of Hex taint emerging. The chaotic, rough-and-tumble nature of the western borderlands is proving to be a perfect environment for the Hex. The entity is driven to take advantage of the plight of the dispossessed and outcasts of the fevered expansion of this young nation. To combat this ruising corruption my Sircans, under the guidance and with the advice of our Cor Caroli, direct the Spica in their training and preparation, as stockpiles of advanced weapons build beneath the Bastion Armatures for the coming war.

I pray I have the strength to temper the will of my masters in the Allshard. For if the Order cannot destroy the Hex here in the American West or elsewhere in the world, then the burning of the Earth must follow.

THE ZEALOT AT MY HEELS

My calls for temperance are heeded by many, as is my right as High Sircan, but I am aware that there is a growing following building around that upstart Elita Nura. Within our number she was only recently raised to the rank of Sircan following years of service in the field as a Mimreg during the Third Phase. Nura's selection was initially something of a

disappointment to her, as with the construction of the Apotheosis Gates she yearned for the chance to join the Cor Caroli. Unlike many of her rank within the Order, Nura was fully aware of what apotheosis to a Cor Caroli entails but this knowledge did nothing to dampen her zeal. Her fervent desire to serve the Order more fully was thus recognised by the Allshard and so Nura has been given command of the Portal Vanguard - the Spica Astraea.

Nura believes that the last battle against the Hex fast approaches so she pushes for Phase Five of the Crusade to be enacted. As such, Nura's voice is the most extreme within the Order as she seeks to provoke a suitably devastating encounter with the Hex that would justify the declaration of Phase Five and all-out war. Within the Council she is considered a fractious zealot and I know she is marked to succeed me as High Sircan should I succumb to an assassin, approaching old age or an accident.

When in the field acting as the Allshard's instrument she is equally impatient to bring about the unveiling of the Order's true mission. This reveals itself as a disdain for the use of subterfuge and stealth, instead portal jumping into combat directly and taking her foe unawares with the precision application of overwhelming force against those tainted by the Hex through absorption of its essence or simply through being manipulated by the Dark Council. She finds that the seismic powers of her Luminant Staff more than capable of eliminating either type of foe.

For now her violent excesses and insistent urgings for progression of the Crusade have been forestalled by my patient testimony and sermonising but as open war looms ever closer it is only a matter of time before she gains enough support on the Council to convince the Allshard to begin the next phase of the Crusade. Nura's commitment to the Order is absolute and her greatest fear is that her faith in its mission should be found wanting in this most desperate hour, a fear whose voice she drowns out with strident calls for war. Should she learn of my true reasons for wanting to stall the furtherance of the Crusade she would decry me to the Allshard and perform a permanent excommunication by severing my head from my shoulders. I pray I have the strength to see through my plan before I am discovered...