Dogs of War



SPAGHETTI WESTERN GAMES

COOL MINI OR NOT

A GAME BY PAOLO MORI

Dogs of War

A GAME OF SHIFTING BATTLE ALLEGIANCES
FOR 3 TO 5 PLAYERS

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IN ALPHARETTA
by Cool Mini or Not

MMXIV
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Dear Son,

I, Cosimo de Babeli, son of Cesare de Babeli of Auralia, leave to you and you alone the following bequest. Everything herein is written in my own hand in my last moments. God is my witness. In these pages you will not find an enumeration of our family belongings, not titles, or deeds, or inventories. No Draco, my son, here you will find the most valuable thing in Gravos: Knowledge. This alone, in such a dark and bloody age, can make the difference between life and death.

I know you didn't expect this. We became so estranged, and you believe it's my fault. You are mistaken. When the High Cardinal asked me to disinherit you, you saw that I did. When he banned you from Turania, you saw me abandon you. Did you really think it was that simple? For all your cleverness you saw, but you did not understand.

You should have known me better, observed me as carefully as I observed you. You are so like your grandfather Cesare, the first to conceive the way of cogs and steam that today moves all Gravos. You betrayed no religion, offended no God, whatever some say. You are an omen of evolution, a harbinger of an age of questioning and experimenting. I understood this, after the many years spent watching you and the shifting nature of our land. You are a herald of the future in the present. Unfortunately, the present is the High Cardinal.

You're a daring scoundrel, Draco. You enjoy embarrassing the ignorant with your discoveries, and you take a morbid pleasure in destroying the certitudes of the old world. But you are not wicked, although there are things you don't know.

Your contribution to science, art, and the study of human thinking will end, quickly, if you don't heed my words. I have spent my life in a world of intrigue and spies, many of whom the High Cardinal has no notion I control. I conducted my personal researches in every Court and all the fiefdoms that entered the War of the Houses. Until we have a new king in Graalis—or we know for certain that we never will—keep my warnings in mind.

The Harlows, the northern people that you consider your allies, care only for the machines you create. You may judge this an improvement, compared to the superstitious and conservative people of Turania, but don't let this blind you. Their pride is forged in their factories, and their heart is made of blacker, harder stuff than the coal they rip from the ground. To them, you're an expendable cog in the machine that will burn Gravos in the fire of their sterile progress. They will make our land more arid than any great drought. In their veins flows the blood of the Varahi, the sea raiders from the north. They will take whatever they can and build wherever they find space. Sir James Harlow is living the dream of his grandfather, Alexander. A dream where Man is imperfect, and they are building the perfect machine to replace him.

The Tornborns, enemies of Turania after the religious schism they dared perpetrate, are just as dangerous. For them, battle is everything. All they know is looting, the music of horns assembling their clanking armies, and the peace of battlefields full of crows. There's no mercy in them, and their new scripture is written in blood. Lady Eve Tornborn is a very skilled warrior and strategist. Never underestimate her, my son. The Tornborns will fight because they know nothing else. For them, the War of the Houses is simply another path to glory. The Hacketts wield a very strong weapon in their vast wealth. Unfortunately, they don't understand that it will be turned against them. Envy will gain them enemies within and beyond Gravos, and those of honest or convenient scruples will align against them. You'll see. I cannot imagine how the High Cardinal will punish their avarice, but he surely won't leave the matter to God. The Hacketts desired, obtained, and amassed too much wealth without regard to the means or injuries they caused. At this moment, their shipyards are building warships unlike any that ever sailed through the Red Gulf. They paid for the project you designed for the Harlows, and they will use your knowledge to build armies you cannot even imagine. The navigable rivers will become the roads of their soldiers. They will settle

their camps on the lakes, and the cliffs will be the only walls between them and victory. All parts of Gravos touched by water are in mortal danger. A different kind of danger festers in the capital itself. The Talbots, long quiet and overlooked, are the ones responsible for the War of the Houses. You know their methods are treacherous and despicable—truth is alien to them—and you know what they've done to scale the heights of power. Like most of Gravos, however, I doubt you know their part in the fall of the Ethelreds and the War of Succession. I didn't discover how they extracted the combination to the treasury from King Harran, but I can tell you one thing for certain: the child in Lady Kadlin Talbot's womb is a real Ethelred. All the others will try to kill her, to finally end the ancient royal bloodline, and I can't imagine the barbarities Charles Talbot will commit to prevent that. Expect the revelation of truths that should stay buried, more cruel murders, and even worse. If the child should draw its first breath, it would unite the two families, and then the Talbots would really become the legitimate heirs of the whole kingdom.

Unless the Mallorys can stop them. It's no secret those two Houses are in conflict, in the same way our House Bastiani is in conflict with House Tornborn. No one can foresee what Sophia Mallory might attempt, or risk, to bring down her enemies. Draco, you read the alchemy and occult studies in your grandfather's library, so you understand some of the danger. All Mallory women have a gift. That blasphemous and incestuous family has interbred for generations, but they are more than just ghosts with weak blood. In them flows the power of witchcraft. I hear you scoff, but do not dismiss their power. I have seen it. In every legend, fable, or ribald tavern song regarding the Mallorys' dark deeds, there's some truth. I'm not even sure if there's still anything human in them. That's why none can say what they might do. Rest assured, my son, that it will be subtle, depraved, and lethal.

Lastly, I come to our own sad secrets, the things I hoped you would never learn. You have no idea how much it costs me to write these last lines, with my soul full of regrets and my body broken by illness. The deepest secret, the greatest truth, is that I no longer believe in the Bastiani family. I love deeply the sweet valleys of Turania, but I wish the House that rules them to fall as soon as possible. The slaughtering of the Innocenzi and Pietrasanta families almost a century ago marked the beginning of our curse. High Cardinal Nicodemus Bastiani gained the city after that night of sacrifices, and I've no doubt he did so through a pact with mysterious forces—forces not of Heaven. What kind, merciful God demands such blood for power? I believe the High Cardinal is right in one thing, however: the tragedies that have devastated our land are punishments from God. I believe the storms were His angry voice and the earthquakes the strikes of His cane. I believe He scourges us because we continue to let the Bastianis rule and rot the purity of our hearts. Never trust the High Cardinal. he's not the voice of God, and he fights against the Divine to defeat death.

There is so much more to say. So much I regret I didn't tell you but you deserve to know. If only our lives had been different, you and I would have shared more than grief and recriminations. But we're people of Gravos, corrupted by generations of distrust and intrigue. Even father and son often see each other only as an enemy to defeat or a useful and temporary ally.

So make use of me. I cannot be the father I wished to be, that you should have had, the one who wants you by his deathbed. Let me, then, be the man—the ally—that you need. Imagine I'm only a useful comrade in the war that we both know is coming. If you accept nothing else I've written, heed my last advice. Trust no one. Use everyone.

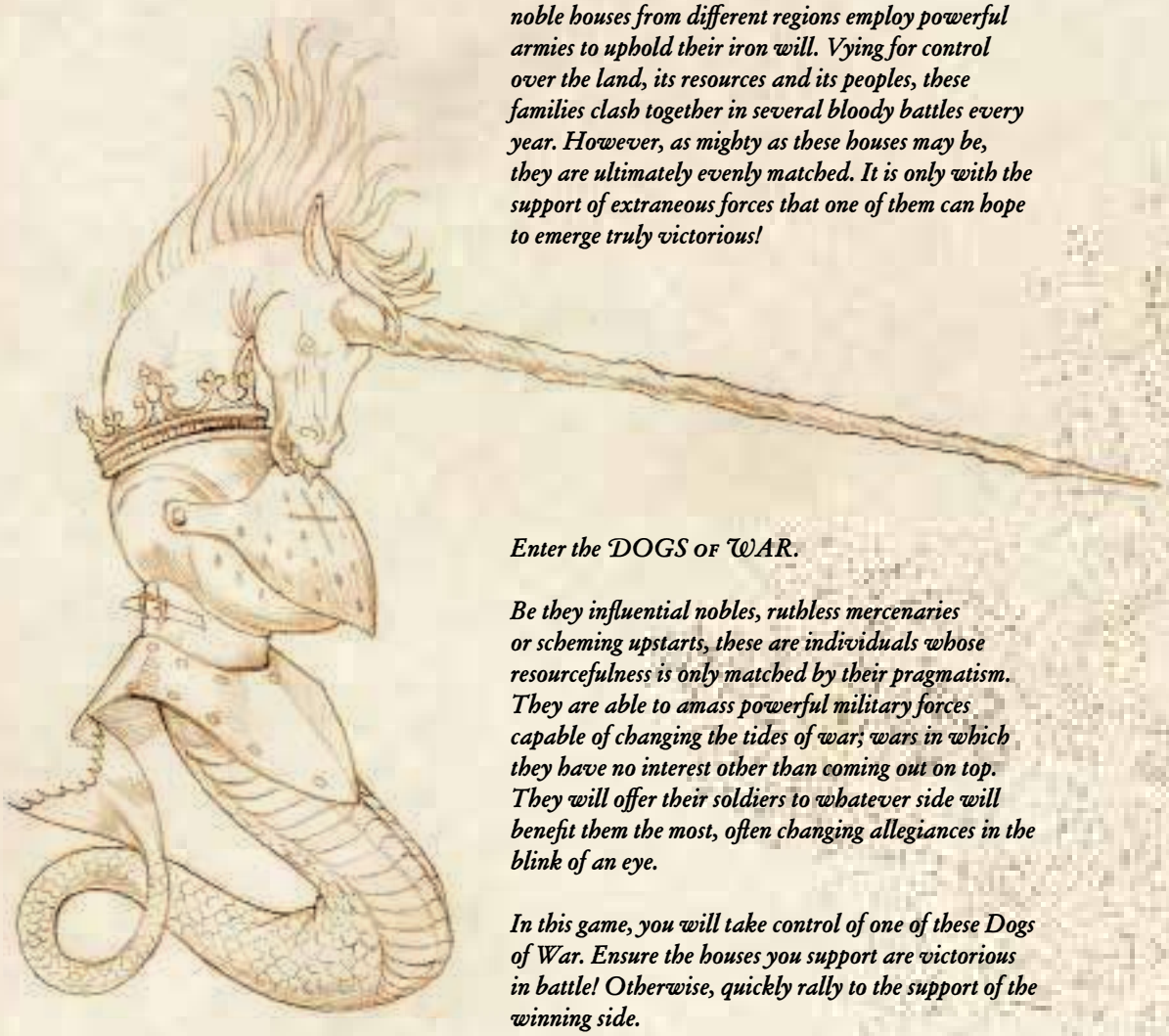
You're such a scoundrel Draco, that you might even succeed.

In troth,

Cosimo de Babeli

Dogs of War

A GAME OF SHIFTING BATTLE ALLEGIANCES
FOR 3 TO 5 PLAYERS



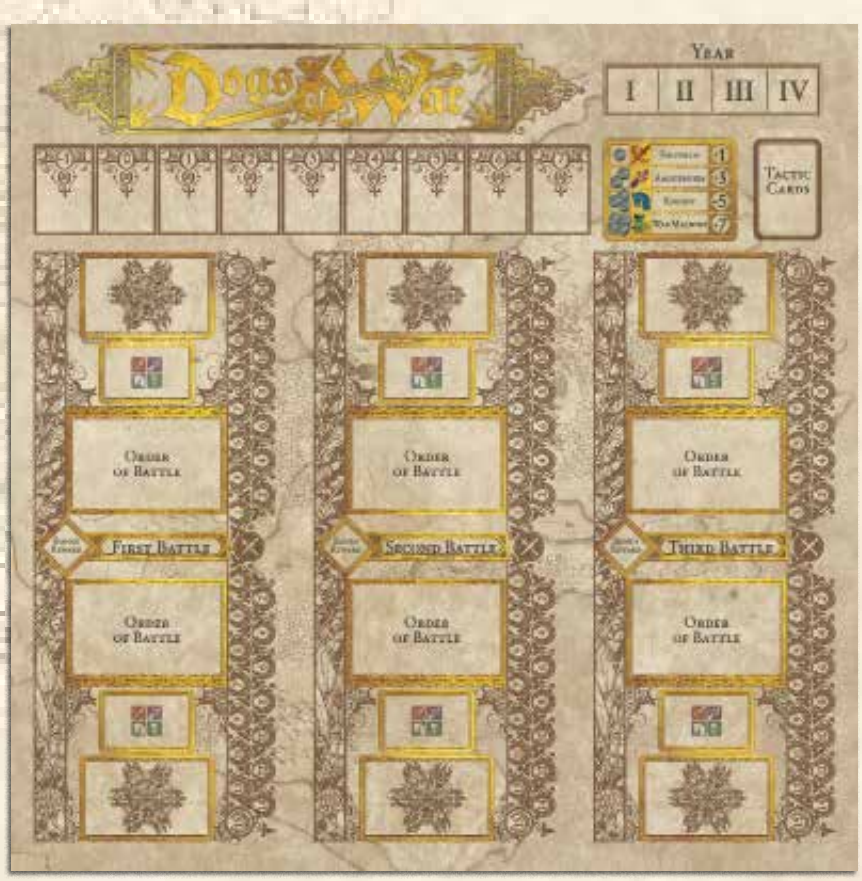
IN THE PROSPEROUS LANDS OF GRAVOS the balance of power is always in motion. Ancient noble houses from different regions employ powerful armies to uphold their iron will. Vying for control over the land, its resources and its peoples, these families clash together in several bloody battles every year. However, as mighty as these houses may be, they are ultimately evenly matched. It is only with the support of extraneous forces that one of them can hope to emerge truly victorious!

Enter the DOGS OF WAR.

Be they influential nobles, ruthless mercenaries or scheming upstarts, these are individuals whose resourcefulness is only matched by their pragmatism. They are able to amass powerful military forces capable of changing the tides of war; wars in which they have no interest other than coming out on top. They will offer their soldiers to whatever side will benefit them the most, often changing allegiances in the blink of an eye.

In this game, you will take control of one of these Dogs of War. Ensure the houses you support are victorious in battle! Otherwise, quickly rally to the support of the winning side.

COMPONENTS



1 GAME BOARD



1 YEAR MARKER



1 FIRST PLAYER TOKEN



6 BONUS REWARD TOKENS



36 COIN
(20 worth 1, 16 worth 3)



60 VICTORY POINT TOKENS
(20 worth 6 VP, 20 worth 3 VP, 20 worth 1 VP)



72 HOUSE INFLUENCE TOKENS
(12 for each House)



32 TACTIC CARDS



50 SOLDIER CARDS
(20 Footmen, 15 Arquebusers, 10 Knights, 5 War Machines)



6 HOUSE CARDS



6 HOUSE SUPPORT CARDS



5 PLAYER SCREENS



8 ORDER OF BATTLE TILES



6 HOUSE VICTORY TOKENS



3 BATTLE VICTORY TRACKERS



30 CAPTAINS
(6 of each Dog of War)

GAME OVERVIEW

During the course of four rounds, several battles between six noble Houses take place. Each player represents a Dog of War, choosing which House to support at each moment by sending his captains and soldiers into battle. As a House emerges victorious from battle, it becomes more valuable for the player who has influence with it. For the Dogs of War, however, there are several paths to ultimate victory. While earning influence with the prominent Houses is key, victory can be achieved by defeating your opponents in battle, earning rewards, or accumulating riches and soldiers.

SETUP

At the beginning of the game:

- Place the Dogs of War game board in the middle of the table
- Shuffle the Tactic cards and the House Support cards decks
- Each player choses a Dog of War to play and gets:
    - The player screen of his Dog of War
    - 5 coins
    - 2 Tactic cards (do not reveal them)
    - 1 House Support card (do not reveal it. Counts as 2 Influence tokens for that House)
- Put the unused House Support cards back in the box (face down)
- Place the Year marker on the "1" space of the Year track
- Place all six House Victory tokens in the "-1" space of the House Victory track
- Place the three Battle Victory trackers on the central space of each Battle Track
- Place the Tactic cards deck in its respective space on the board (face down)
- Randomly determine a player who receives the First Player token

- Place the following items next to the board where all players can easily reach them:
  - The coins
  - The Victory Point tokens
  - The Soldier cards (divided in four decks according to their type)
  - The House Influence tokens. ***Note:*** *If you are playing a 3-player game, remove 4 tokens of each color; if you are playing a 4-player game, remove 2 tokens of each color.*
  - The Captains for the Dogs of War who are in play



Round Structure

A game of Dogs of War is played over 4 rounds, named Years. Each Year is made of the following four phases:

1. Battle Setup Phase
2. Mustering Phase
3. Action Phase
4. Battle Outcome Phase

Battle Setup Phase

- At the start of each Battle Setup Phase advance the Year marker one space on the Year track (except at the beginning of the first Year).
- Shuffle the six Bonus Reward tokens, face down (thus showing the side with the "3 victory points" icon) and place one of them, face up, on the appropriate space in each battle; keep the three unused tiles separated; ***Note:*** *in the fourth Year, place three tokens showing the "3 Victory Points" icon face up. This will be the bonus reward for all the battles.*
- Shuffle the eight Order of Battle tiles, and place two of them, face up, on the appropriate spaces in each battle. Keep the two unused tiles separated.
- Shuffle the House cards, face down, then place two of them, face up, on the appropriate spaces in each battle.
- With this setup, three battles will be formed, each battle with a Battle Track, a Bonus Reward token, two Order of Battle tiles and two House cards. The House cards represent the two houses that fight each other in each battle.
- The player with the First Player token may decide to be the first player, or may choose to give the First Player token to any other player.

Optional 3 players setup

For a more cutthroat 3-player game, remove two House cards and their corresponding House Support cards and House Victory token from the game. During the Battle Setup Phase, do not set up the Third battle. Only the First and Second battles will be played throughout the game.

Mustering Phase

- Each player gets a number of Captains, depending on the number of the Year being played.
  - 3 Captains at the beginning of the 1st Year
  - 4 Captains in the 2nd and 3rd Year
  - 5 Captains in the 4th Year

  These are added to any Captains that players could have got through a Bonus Reward, at the end of the previous Year.

- Each player gets a fixed income of **3 extra coins per Year**, that are added to the other coins earned or saved from the previous Years (including the 5 starting coins).

- Proceeding in clockwise order, and starting from the First Player, each player can spend any number of his coins to buy new Soldier cards. Different soldiers have different costs:

  - Each Footman has a cost of 1 coin
  - Each Arquebuser has a cost of 2 coins
  - Each Knight has a cost of 3 coins
  - Each War Machine has a cost of 4 coins

Spent coins are put back in their area next to the board. If there are no more of a specific Soldier type available, no Soldier of that type can be bought.

Players keep all of their resources hidden behind their screen (coins, cards, Influence tokens and Victory Points). Their Captains, however, must always be in front of the screen.

Action Phase

Starting with the First Player, and proceeding clockwise, each player's turn resolves in the following order:

1. If you desire, you may play a single Tactic card from your hand and apply its effect. The used Tactics card must be discarded.

2. You must play a single Soldier card from your hand on the Soldiers area of the House you want to support in the current battle.

3. You must place one of your Captains on any free space in the Order of Battle tile of the House you've chosen to support.

4. You must move the Battle Victory tracker on the Battle Track a number of spaces equal to the strength of the played Soldier, towards the supported House.

5. You take any reward listed on the occupied Order of Battle space (see below).

When choosing a space on an Order of Battle tile, the following rules apply:

- You cannot place a Captain in support of a House if you have already supported the other House involved in the same battle, in the current Year. ***Note:*** *After you play the "Betrayal" Tactic card on a battle, you may place Captains on either side of that battle during that Year.*

- Some spaces in the Order of Battle have a pre-requisite, being reserved for Captains leading specific types of Soldiers. Spaces marked with a "Knight/+" icon can be occupied only by playing a Knight or War Machine card. Spaces with an "Arquebuser/+" icon can be occupied either by playing an Arquebuser, a Knight or a War Machine card.

- If there are no eligible spaces on an Order of Battle tile, you simply cannot place your Captain and Soldier in support of that House.

- Captains must always enter a battle accompanied by a single Soldier card, and vice-versa.

Taking the Reward

Different types of rewards are printed on the various spaces of the Order of Battle tiles and the Bonus Reward tokens. Each has a different meaning:



Take this number of Victory Points



Take this number of coins



Take a new Footman



Draw this number of Tactic cards
Note: *If the Tactic cards deck ever runs out, reshuffle the discarded cards and make a new deck.*



Take a new Arquebuser



Take a new Captain to use in the current Year. If it's a Bonus Reward, keep it in reserve for the next Year.



Take a new Knight



Take a new War Machine



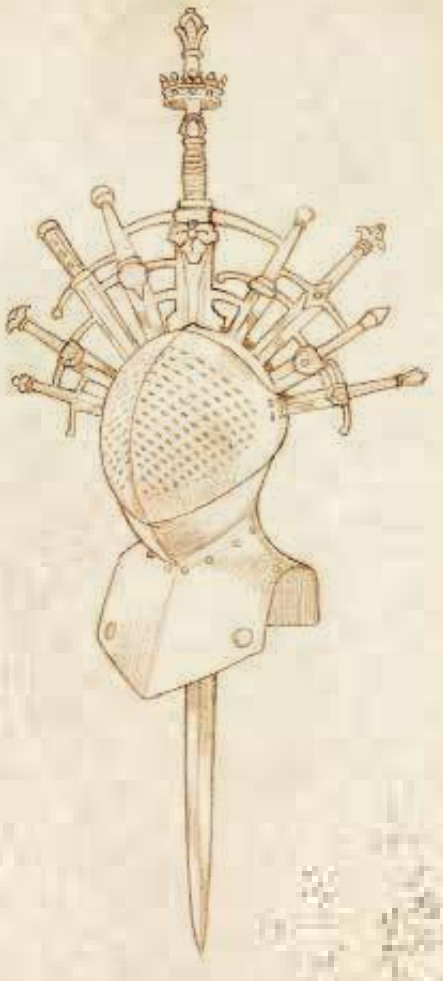
Take this number of Influence tokens of the House you are supporting in this battle.

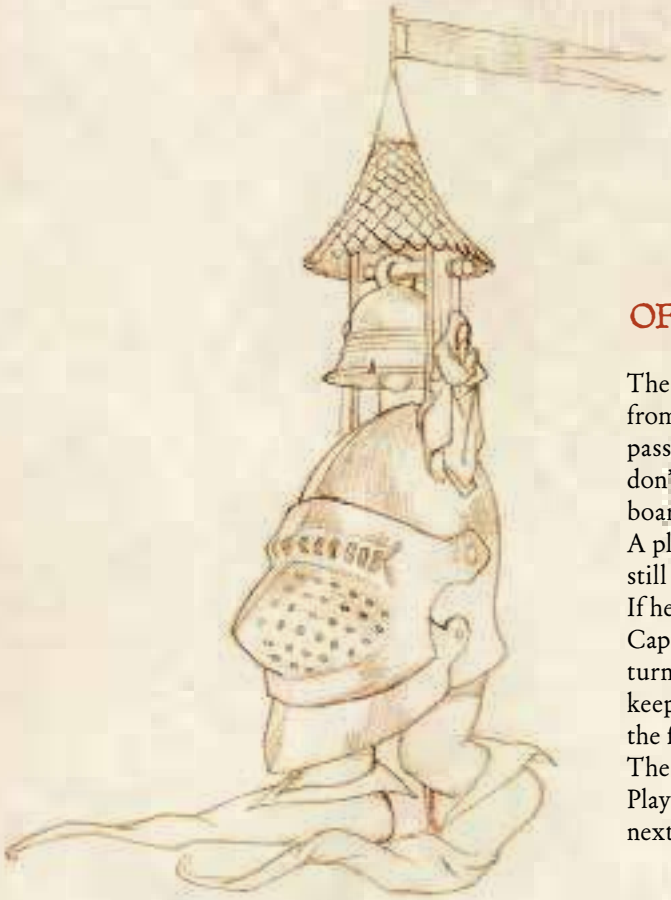
Adjusting the Battle Track

When you play a Soldier card, you must advance the Battle Victory tracker on the Battle Track a number of spaces towards the supported House equal to the strength of that Soldier type, thus changing the chances of winning or losing the battle for the two Houses involved.
Each type of Soldier has a different strength value:

- Footmen advance the Battle Victory tracker 1 space.
- Arquebusers advance the Battle Victory tracker 3 spaces.
- Knights advance the Battle Victory tracker 5 spaces.
- War Machines advance the Battle Victory tracker 7 spaces.

The Battle Victory tracker cannot advance beyond the "15" space of the track. Leftover spaces are simply ignored.





Passing and End of the Action Phase

The Action phase proceeds clockwise from player to player, until every player passes, either because they cannot or don't want to place more Captains on the board.
A player can decide to pass even if he still has unused Soldiers and Captains. If he passes, he discards any unused Captains, and resigns his remaining turns for the rest of the current Year. He keeps any unused Soldier cards to use in the following Years.
The first player to pass receives the First Player token for use at the start of the next Year.

Battle Outcome Phase

At the end of the Action Phase, all the battles are over. Each battle is then considered separately, one at a time, starting with the First Battle.

- If the Battle Victory tracker is on one side of the track, on any space between "1" and "15", the House on that side is victorious, and the opposing House has been defeated. If the Battle Victory tracker is on the central space, both Houses are considered as being defeated.
- Advance the House Victory token of the victorious House - if any - 1 space forward on the House Victory track.
- If the Battle Victory tracker is on the "15" space of the track, the victorious House has achieved a Glorious Victory and its token is moved forward 2 spaces, instead of just 1. The defeated House suffers a Crushing Defeat and its token is moved back 1 space.
- Any player with at least one Captain supporting the victorious House gets 1 Victory Point for each Captain that supported the **defeated** House.
- The player that has placed the most Captains in support of the victorious House takes the extra reward shown on the Bonus Reward token. If there's a tie, all tied players get the Bonus Reward. If both Houses are defeated, nobody gets the bonus reward.
- Captains and played Soldier cards are put back in the common area.
- House cards, Order of Battle tiles and Bonus Reward tokens are removed and put back in their piles. The Battle Victory trackers are returned to the central space of the Battle Tracks.



In the example above, the Mallory House has won over the Bastiani by 5 points, so its House Victory token advances 1 space on the House Victory track. The Pink and the Brown players would get 4 Victory Points each (1 for each defeated Captain). However, the Stormcrow's ability says his defeated Captains don't grant Victory Points, so the winners only get 2 Victory Points. The Pink player, having the majority of Captains in the Mallory Order of Battle, also takes the Bonus Reward: another Captain to use in the following Year.

Each of the Dogs of War possesses a unique Special Ability. These abilities are always active and take effect under the conditions described in each of them. Each Dog of War's Special Ability is listed on both sides of his Player Screen, so all players should be aware of their opponents' abilities.

End of the Game and Winner

The game ends after the Battle Outcome phase of the fourth Year.
Each player reveals his Victory Points and adds those deriving from House Influence tokens earned during the game, and for the House Support card received at the beginning of the game (which is equal to 2 Influence tokens). Each Influence token is worth the number of Victory Points shown by the space of the corresponding House Victory token on the House Victory track (including negative values).
Each player also gets 1 Victory Point for every 2 leftover coins, and 1 Victory Point for each Tactic or Soldier card (of any type) still in his reserve.





The player with the most Victory Points is the winner of the game.
In the example above we have the final position of each House in the House Victory track, and all of a player's resources at the end of the game. Analyzing his final score we have:

- 4 Victory Point tokens with different values = 11 VP
- 5 Coins (worth 1 VP a pair) = 2 VP
- 3 Tactic cards = 3 VP
- 2 Soldier cards = 2 VP
- 2 House Talbot Influence Points (worth -1 VP each) = -2 VP
- 2 House Bastiani Influence Points (worth 0 VP each) = 0 VP
- 5 House Harlow Influence Points (worth 1 VP each) = 5 VP
- 1 House Hackett Influence Point (worth 5 VP each) = 5 VP
- House Harlow Support card (equal to two Influence Points worth 1 VP each) = 2 VP

This player's final score for the game is 28 Victory Points!


THE LANDS
OF GRAVOS
W
S

The Dogs of War



Sir Blackmane

Sir Leonard Blackmane is perhaps the best example in all Gravos that bloodlust knows no boundaries. He first showed his skills as a fighter and war leader in the harsh northern lands of his birth. He was extremely disappointed when his lord, James Harlow, sent him to distant shores to fight off the Hacketts' colonization attempts. With a good ship and crew, he sailed to the southeastern islands to win glory and honor for his House. His loyalty to the Harlows lasted just two summers, during which Blackmane destroyed, looted, conquered, and settled the new and wealthy territories as their absolute ruler. Slavery was the main feature of his rule and also the means by which he defeated the ships that came from Norcliff, at first to get good news and then for revenge. Blackmane annihilated all the expeditions sent against him and began plotting his return to Gravos. He knew that once the Houses finished their war and chose a new king, he would lose the territories that had given him almost fifteen years of prosperity. More importantly, however, his bloodlust and desire for battle had been dormant far too long. Nothing, not even his five exotic wives, had such a sweet taste.

Special Ability: **Spoils of War**

For every battle in which the player controlling Sir Blackmane wins the Bonus Reward (by being on the winning side and with the majority of Captains) he may look through the Soldier cards played on the defeated side of that battle and take the strongest one to himself. This captured soldier goes to his reserve and may be played in any subsequent battle normally.

Lady Ordalia Macbeth



Lyoness is a land of blood and battles. Life here is an endless struggle for glory, honor, and the trophies of war. The Tornborns achieved all of these through centuries of sacrifice and death in the endless border conflicts. This land is a cradle of heroes, a crucible of leaders, and a forge of legendary swords. The Macbeths are not exactly that kind of people. Though once a very brave family, they have not excelled militarily for several generations. Lady Ordalia Macbeth swore to prove to all what the members of her family do excel at, especially the women. The quintessence of her skill is deception and intrigue. Any lie sounds true from her seductive lips. She was determined, however, to be more

than just a beautiful schemer. In the beginning, her weapons were secret papers, and then simple requests whispered in a lover's ear. Much of what she won this way, she devoted to training and preparation. Finally she made the decision to actually step into battle, and proved her sword as sharp as her mind. Contrary to what most of the other noblemen of the fief believe, however, she doesn't want to win glory for her Mistress. Lady Ordalia Macbeth's driving goal is to redeem her name and her family's reputation at any cost.

Special Ability: Upstage

During the Battle Outcome phase, when determining who gets the Bonus Reward, the player controlling Lady Ordalia Macbeth is always considered to have one extra Captain in play. This means that if there is a tie, she wins the Bonus Reward alone. If she has one less Captain than the player with the majority, then they both get the Bonus Reward.

Captain O'Malley



Constantine O'Malley was just a young and promising captain when Lord Udo Hackett sent him to discover new territories, found colonies, and bring their wealth back to Namar. His Frothing Hound, one of the fastest ships in Gravos, had excelled against smugglers and pirates, and had helped restore law in the Red Gulf. His voyage brought him to distant lands that had been little more than myths for centuries. He began profitable commerce with the local people. He traded barrels of beer for gold and precious gems. He gave them broken and rusty artifacts from Norcliff for beautiful, shining silks. He exchanged stinking tobacco from the Old Man Waste for bottles of perfumed spices and aromatic, colored oils. Captain O'Malley's negotiations poured wealth into the Hackett's fief, and the House purchased a good part of its military force thanks to him and his Company of the Spices. Years of experience had made O'Malley a wily man, however, and his business sense was not limited to the simple ways and means of profit and trade. As soon as the war among the Houses broke out, he joined the fighting to increase his personal wealth. Tired of making fortunes for others, he saw a chance to be loyal to nothing except himself and the shining beauty of gold.

Special Ability: Profiteer

Whenever the player controlling Captain O'Malley has a Captain on the winning side of a battle, he gains one extra coin.

The Nameless Conqueror

Nobody but his creator has ever seen what lies behind the helmet or under the armor plates and pneumatic steam machinery that make the Nameless Conqueror such a formidable warrior. Nobody except Draco de Babeli, who restored the Conqueror's broken spirit with hope and helped him escape from the palace of the Mallorys. So Harran Ethelred, the last King of Gravos, regained his freedom in spite of regicidal plots, bitter betrayals, and black sorcery. Harran spent weeks in a secret laboratory in the harbor city of Caere, where he recovered his identity and a part of his memory. The more time he spent separated from the lady who had killed and resuscitated him, the more he became self-aware. Remade as a weapon to conquer Gravos, he decided to do just that, but for himself rather than any would-be

usurper. He did not strike immediately, however. He is reorganizing his forces and awaiting the proper time to make the traitors pay. Either he will deal the killing blow on the battlefield, or he will allow them to become king but strike them down a moment before they can touch the crown he was born to wear.



Special Ability: Last Stand

Before the start of the Battle Outcome phase, the player controlling the Nameless Conqueror may move the tracker on the Battle Track of any battle in which he played a Captain, up to 2 spaces in his favor. This means that a tie or a defeat by 1 point turns into a victory, and a defeat by 2 points turns into a tie. This ability cannot be used to move the tracker if the battle ended in a crushing defeat by 15 points.

Stormcrow

One of the many mottos of Graalis says, "Knowledge is the narrowest way to victory. Ignorance is the widest way to fear." The man called Stormcrow is faceless, with no past or allies. Since his first appearance in Gravos, his mask has become a symbol of mystery, and his secrets are his strength. Some people swear they saw him crawling through alleys in a ghetto in Graalis during the first days of the War of Succession. Others believe he was present for the exodus from the Visuvia citadel, when the Garumna volcano erupted. Many, many other stories circulate about him; all of them placing him near the site of tragic or revolutionary events, and nearly all possessing a ring of truth. Nobody knows how he can foresee these terrible events, but people have seen him in all the main Courts of all the fiefs. He would be barely glimpsed a second before disappearing behind a corner, a curtain, at the bottom of a staircase, or in the darkness of a dungeon. The councilors warned their lords, and soon all the best spies and bounty hunters were on his trail. However, finding a man—or woman —with no identity proved nearly impossible, especially since he always seems to know more than his pursuers. The Stormcrow understands the power of knowledge, but he also expertly wields the power of fear.



Special Ability: Retreat

At the Battle Outcome phase, remove from the board any Captain placed by the player controlling Stormcrow on the defeated side of a battle. His Captains do not grant Victory Points to the players with Captains on the victorious side of the battle.

The Noble Houses

Ever since the last king left on a foolish crusade, never to return and leaving no heirs, Gravos has been a king-less kingdom. The most prominent noble families quickly seized full control over their lands, dividing the kingdom amongst themselves. Several houses were completely wiped out in the bloody conflicts that followed, and after the dust settled only the six most powerful remained in control over the land. But the wars are far from over, as these six houses continue to wage battle against each other in an endless struggle to attain supremacy over all the lands of Gravos.



House Harlow

Traditions

Throughout the ages, House Harlow has followed a hereditary succession. Only the male scions may lead, and this has occasionally caused problems for the families of Harlow. In fact, this has led to a long line of strict, intolerant, and paranoid governors, stiffened by the precarious conditions of surviving a feud in the extreme north of Gravos.

Lord James Harlow is the result of centuries of discipline, isolation, and secrets. He understands that the House's position rests on its technology. The mysteries of crafting and refining these devices have ended up in enemy hands far too often, and Lord James knows he must defend these secrets at any cost. For this reason, the Harlows have only married within the House for generations. Lord James has still not found any noblewoman that he trusts to help him protect the location of the Secret Workshops, the true identity of the Nameless Conqueror, and the Archive of the Crypto Patents.

Sir Harlow remains unconcerned with this, however. His austere manner leads him to minimize the festivities, dances, and formal occasions his family hosts. The House lives under a constant military rigor. The most common jobs are miner, engineer, smelter, refiner, enameller, man-at-arms, gunsmith, alchemist, carpenter, lumberjack, and hunter.

The Technology

The House was the first to realize the importance of emerging technologies and to realize that such wonders would soon lead to the largest arms race of all time. The story goes that Sir Alexander Harlow, the grandfather of James, invented the first steam machine with a little-known sapper by the name of Cesare de Babeli. The prototype was a noisy woodcutter automaton that only moved its forearm. However, they rapidly refined a tin man that could only cut logs into a lethal weapon.

House Harlow has branched its studies into many fields, including mechanics, steam engineering, and clockwork devices. The fruits of these researches flow at a great rate from the forges of the Secret Workshops, gigantic underground foundries that belch black fumes to the surface via chimneys hundreds and hundreds of meters long. At the moment, the Secret Workshops produce soldiers armed with heavy blades,

great maces, and even fire weapons; terrible siege machines; and experimental equipment to fly in the skies and sail unseen beneath the sea.

Recently, Lord James has assembled a new group of researchers and scientists that includes famous alchemists and theorists of unstable substances. He has tasked them with creating explosives that might be installed inside the mechanical soldiers. Combined with a short fuse that triggers after these metal warriors have fallen in battle, this could create lethal final strike weapons as well as high-powered bombs to demolish the defenses of besieged castles.

Draco de Babeli

The friendship, respect, and loyal cooperation between the Harlows and De Babelis continued until Draco, Caesar's nephew, betrayed his ally.

From an early age, Draco showed a talent for invention that far surpassed his grandfather. He was the first to design flying and diving machines. Animated by a feverish curiosity, he improved and revolutionized the mechanical soldiers and firearms, making them more precise and less prone to explode. He also studied alchemy, the natural sciences, and forbidden knowledge considered blasphemous by most theologians of his time. He always pushed beyond any limit, perhaps more for his enjoyment than any other reason.

This attitude wasn't limited to his work or studies—it also influenced his way of life at the court. Young and handsome, Draco was always trying to seduce and tempt even the most reserved ladies. He whispered to them about the nature of Man as a creature of instincts and passion, and he quickly earned a bad reputation. More and more noble knights with adulterous wives asked for his head, but Lord James' protection allowed Draco to avoid most duels and fights.

This continued until he managed to seduce and deflower the beautiful Betrys Harlow, Lord James' younger sister. When the fruit of their forbidden relationship became visible, Harlow sent the pregnant girl to a distant monastery on the coast. He arranged to have Draco exiled based on the accusation of attempting to sell secret projects to enemy families, something that had never happened.

Arrogant and proud, Draco could not forgive a punishment he felt was so disproportionate to his crime. Before he could be expelled, he burned his workshop—along with all his notes—and vanished. A few years later, other houses of the kingdom began to use mechanical soldiers and steam-powered war machines. At that moment, Lord James Harlow realized that defending the honor of his sister had cost him a sure victory in the Gravos domain.



House Tornborn



Even before the kingdom of Gravos erupted into bloody civil war, House Tornborn was already battle-hardened and ready for the fight. Controlling the lands of Lyoness that separate Gravos from the untamed west, the House had single-handedly repelled several savage invasions. When the kingdom broke apart, House Tornborn was the first to claim that land and supremely well positioned to press that claim. The head of the House, Lady Eve Tornborn, is an accomplished commander who requires more than just loyalty from her subjects. She demands faith, belief, and absolute dedication. In a land built on treachery, Lady Eve heads a House dedicated to honor won in battle and duty performed to the end, and she stands ready to raise her blade against all traitors.

Traditions

Lyoness has always formed the armed borders of Gravos. Hundreds of years spent fighting the treacherous Mlechcha nomads of the south and the colossal Varahi from the north have hardened the traditions and lives of Tornborn's subjects and soldiers.

Austerity, discipline, equality, and loyalty are House Tornborn's most valued qualities. They have no time or place for gentleness and piety in the "bloody feud". Where elsewhere the people hold celebrations to bless the crops, here they stage tournaments in which hopeful young warrior compete for places on the training fields. Instead of winter dances, the fief's halls host public duels to resolve political and family disputes. Marriages are mostly austere and hasty. Courtship has become a matter of favors and pledges that girls affix to their favorite knights at tournaments. Neither romance nor politics determine these unions; merely the sharp and unyielding edge of a sword.

This Spartan atmosphere and centuries of continuing conflict and practical necessity has replaced the medieval machismo pervasive elsewhere in Gravos with a total respect for the strength of both sexes. The law of Tornborn, quite contrary to the other fiefs, allows women to take up arms if they participate in a common ceremony called The Bleeding, personally officiated by the Lady. Participants stand before the whole court and cut their hair with a sword to the level of a helmet and burn it in a brazier. Then they draw their own blood with their blades and present the stained weapons to their Lady, who recognizes them as women-at-arms.

All of the House's noble families are related to the Tornborns in one way or another. The power in each family lies with the man or woman who has won the most glory and renown on the battlefield or tournament ground. This honor is usually exhibited in the wealth and quality of equipment the family displays at House events, tournaments, and in dowries.

The most common jobs are blacksmith, tinsmith, armorer, surgeon, undertaker, apothecary, batter, squire, messenger, weaver, brewer, and male and female maid of honor.

The Revolution of the Creed

Long the most militaristic and pragmatic House, the Tornborn have recently undergone a tremendous religious upheaval. Titus Tornborn, one of the greatest heroes of Gravos, had ruled his House and fief in a traditional and conservative manner. When his daughter Eve rose to the throne, everyone expected her to rule in the same way, assuming the guidance of the father had forged a daughter with the same values. They were deeply mistaken. Eve was a glorious sword fighter, a great lancer, and a skilled and famous tactician. She seemed perfectly cast in the mold of her forbearers, but unsuspected by all, she harbored revolutionary religious ideas.

She shocked her Court and all of Gravos when, after succeeding her father, she denied the Holy Church and declared herself, not the High Cardinal, the only conduit to god.

Supported by a large group of religious revolutionaries, she exiled and excommunicated anyone who did not pledge absolute loyalty to her and the new holy text The Red Book. This threw all Lyoness into a long winter of chaos, duels, murders, and internal violence. Eve Tornborn emerged from this period secure, powerful, and almost more famous (or infamous) than her father. She personally dueled in public anyone courageous enough to challenge her, and with each victory, her glory grew, taking on a truly supernatural or even divine character. The songs describing how she overcame all adversities through this crisis describe her as the greatest Warrior Lady of Gravos. This solidified her position of majesty among her faithful. Today, Tornborn soldiers begin every assault with their commander crying, "In the name of Her Majesty!" This is closely followed by thousands of righteous swords striking unbelievers' shields.

The Lovely Bellatrix

Lady Bellatrix Tornborn did not inherit the strength, prowess, and charisma of her aunt Eve or her ancestors. As a young girl, she was mocked for her fragile appearance and was vastly undervalued. Many wondered about the future of the line. Then the child began to become a woman.

As she matured, all the Courts of Gravos began to whisper about the gorgeous flower born from the steel of the bloody feud. She came to be called "Lovely Bellatrix", and many know her by no other name. Many noblemen betrayed their lords in order to propose to her in front of the Court of Tornborn. She gracefully, delicately, and tactfully rejected all of them. In each case, Lady Eve immediately stepped in to propose suggest, as a token of friendship, that the disappointed suitor join her army and await another opportunity to press his claim. This would show their devotion, and after all, hearts do change. Even some Varahi ship captains came from the north, ready to put aside any disagreement with the Tornborns in order to have such an honor. A few Mlechcha tribal leaders made similar requests and added generous cargos of spices, food, and perfumes to their proposals.

Bellatrix did as her aunt requested. She charmed and teased all these men but denied them marriage to nourish the ranks of the House's army. The Tornborn's military campaigns and the precious virginity of Bellatrix dramatically increased the power of the family until a prodigious and attractive inventor came to the Court. Bellatrix publicly rejected him, but she disobeyed her aunt and Lady and met him again privately. Truly charmed and smitten for the first time in her life, Bellatrix succumbed to his advances.



However, when she realized that the partner of her passionate nights was none other than Draco de Babeli, she radically changed her plans. She drugged his wine and, while he slept, stole all of his notes from a secret compartment in his trunk. Along with several prototypes and models, she presented this to her aunt and begged forgiveness. No longer a virgin, Bellatrix knew her one value to her House had ended. Or so she thought. Eve Tornborn graced her distraught niece with a genuine smile. She revealed that she had arranged to bring De Babeli, the proud and ambitious seducer, to her Court. Indeed, all she had asked of Bellatrix from the very beginning had been leading up to this. She had traded the purity of her niece for a brilliant inventor's war machines; a most practical exchange.

After all, you do not win a war with swords alone.

House Bastiani



House Bastiani claims to hold the very keys of heaven. The religious fervor of the fief's population, and the zeal of the High Cardinal, does much to explain the breadth and scope of the family's power. High Cardinal Guido Bastiani not only leads his House, but he heads up the whole Holy Church as well. The unnaturally long-lived Guido claims to be the vessel of God. He has stirred the masses of religious fanatics with his charisma and oratorical skill for decades, all to expand his House's control in the name of heaven.

Traditions

The Bastianis have historically held a rich and flourishing fief. Its mild climate and excellent soil has produced fruits, wine, and cereal crops for generations—yielding more than enough to feed even its most humble tenants and provide for profitable exports. Every day, the faithful populous used their every duty to honor the God that blessed the land and its inhabitants. Under the aegis of the ancient Bastiani family and the powerful Holy Church, the population lived a life of labor, devotion, and pride.

All this changed dramatically after the falling out among the families.



In the beginning, violent storms struck the land, then gales from the sea, and finally ruinous hail that destroyed entire harvests. Scorching droughts and hard frosts accompanied the plague of weather. The newly established High Cardinal tried to blame these disasters first on his people's lack of faith, then on the avarice of the nobles, and finally he vented all his fury in a witch-hunt. The gentle people of the fief began to regard foreigners with suspicion and to look for signs of depravity in everything. Many came to consider any kind eccentricity blasphemous or even sacrilegious.

Religious fanaticism increased as conditions worsened and, over the decades, tainted every aspect of life. The final stroke fell when the Holy Church disavowed the nearby fiefdom of Tornborn. The High Cardinal granted his inquisitors the power of life and death, hired an army to fight a new holy crusade against the other fiefs, and began ruling by terror.

The most common jobs—despite the poverty and war—remain farmer, miller, vintner, shepherd, tanner, baker, charcoal burner, carpenter, merchant, shipwright, clergyman, guard of the clergy, miniaturist, sculptor of holy icons, and inquisitor.

The Ascension of the High Cardinal

From his youth, Guido Bastiani was groomed for an ecclesiastical career. He received the tonsure at seven. At nine, he was already nominally an abbot. At fourteen, the negotiations for his elevation to cardinal were well underway. Obviously he could not wear the insignia or assume the office because of his youth, but his destiny was always to succeed Bonifazio II, his grandfather. Thus he spent his early years studying theology and canon law, only to see it all apparently come to nothing in a single stroke. A vicious conspiracy, masterminded by the rival Pietrasanta family, resulted in the death of Bonifazio and forced the Bastianis to flee the capital. Less than a month later, at dawn on the first day of May, Clemente III Pietrasanta was invested as Cardinal.

Clemente immediately arranged an ostentatious event to show off his glory—celebrating in truly lavish style the marriage of his cousin Lucrezia, Duchess of Montefiorito, to the Marquis Pietro Innocenzi of Spondalta. During the wedding night, however, while the festivities continued throughout Castel dell'Angelo in the fief's capital of Auralia, a heavy fog descended over the entire city. In the murky and smoky darkness, many heard the flapping of wings, the choked screams of babies, and light evil laughter—as if from children—drift over the bastion's walls. Then nothing more.

The following morning, many panicked parents from different families close to the Pietrasantas discovered that their infants had disappeared from their beds. But those grief-stricken screams were nothing compared to the shrieks of horror from the guards and servants that entered the banquet hall of Castel dell'Angelo.

The Pietrasanta and Innocenzi families had been completely united, the pieces of one family indistinguishable from those of the other. The gore lay spread out in a thick pool of blood, wine, and food. The massacre passed into history as the "Cherub's Feast".

Guido Bastiani returned to Auralia that very day, leading what the chronicles call the "March of the Righteous". With a small army of men dressed in mourning, he captured the town from the last living representatives of the rival families. Auralia soon returned to the Bastianis, and Guido—only a little more than thirty years old—became High Cardinal in the most impressive and solemn ceremony ever seen.

Ninety-six years have passed since then, and Guido Bastiani still rules the Holy Church and his fiefdom. Even death, it seems, doesn't dare to try and take him.

The Theft of the Original Red Book

Over time, the High Cardinal grew more and more intolerant of any kind of humanist thought. With the growth of the cult of man threatening the place of God in the popular mind, his sermons became increasingly harsh and terrifying. He taught his followers both the fear and the ecstasy of grace. Many miracles were attributed to him, from terrible punishments to miraculous healing.

Even High Cardinal Bastiani's power and position did not go unchallenged, however. Among his strongest opponents was Draco de

Babeli, the brilliant son of Cosimo de Babeli and scion of a family very close to the Bastiani. The young student never hid his revolutionary ideas, leading first to his father disowning him and then to accusations of affront, impiety, and finally witchcraft. The boy narrowly escaped before the ecclesiastical authorities could catch him and took refuge in the fiefdom of Harlow, where he had powerful friends. The bounty on his head, however, went with him, and his excommunication soon followed.

These events explain the widespread astonishment when Draco openly returned, many years after his escape, with a safe-conduct signed by the High Cardinal. Defiant as ever, Draco put on an ostentatious procession to the High Cardinal's palace, and made a good show of himself until he reached the very apartments of his holiness. There, Draco personally delivered a very special prize that the Cardinal had commissioned and paid for with a pardon and a position.

After the Tornborns' treachery, Guido had contacted De Babeli in absolute secret. The High Cardinal proposed an end to the young man's spiritual and political exile. Draco had only to steal the original Red Book, the text of the new religion backed by the apostate Tornborns. In return, the High Cardinal would not only welcome de Babeli home, but he would employ the inventor in secretly building a new army of metal inquisitors for the Holy Church.

Draco jumped at the opportunity and took advantage of a party the Tornborns had organized for Lady Bellatrix to ingratiate himself in their palace. He never imagined he would find the Lady so captivating, or that he would spend so much time in her company while trying to get to The Red Book. He also never conceived that she would drug him and steal the plans and prototypes of his projects that he had brought to impress the family, but in the end everything all went well enough. The commotion around the incident allowed him to abscond with the Book, and he had lost nothing he could not recreate. He had no reason to be angry with Lady Bellatrix, really. After all, Gravos has always been a land of traitors. Perhaps, in the moment he gave up his stolen documents and fled with The Red Book, Draco betrayed not only the Tornborns but the High Cardinal as well.

House Hackett



Squeezed between the sea and the Great River Serpentine, House Hackett never controlled enough fertile lands to support itself, so it turned to trade. Possessing Gravos's greatest merchant fleet by a wide margin, the Hacketts controls virtually all commerce on the sea and rivers. Their traders reach every corner of the kingdom and even several distant realms. The greedy Lord Udo Hackett manages his House like a business venture, and profit is the ultimate goal of his every decision. He sees the other Houses as nothing but competitors to be crushed, and he will see that done with every coin and cannon at his disposal.

Traditions

The Hacketts are more than superstitious sailors, enterprising merchant captains, greedy smugglers, or disguised pirates. The fief of Namar possesses two distinct cultural identities: the seamen who settled among the cliffs and coasts, and the rugged individuals who live in the forested mountains that cover the fief's interior. The ship captains believe that the mere fact of commanding a ship means that they deserve more than a noble title. The others proudly say that without their work, there would be no ships and no glory for their House. The people of the mountains have the heavy task of providing timber for the shipyards of Whitecrest, while the sailors bring wealth and food back to support the whole population. The rivalry between

these two groups has caused significant friction over the years, but the fief somehow seems to maintain a certain balance.

This balance has persisted since Lord Theodorian Hackett, Udo's grandfather and a contemporary of Nicodemus Bastiani, decided that plentiful timber and many skilled sailors meant that the future of his fief lay in commerce. His policies and efforts to integrate his population created the mercantile empire his grandson inherited. Udo founded the Guard of the Coasts and Islands to prevent attacks from the sea. He also founded the Spices Company, which explored the most distant kingdoms to bring back exotic and valuable goods. Hackett's connection to the sea means it practices many unique customs. Marriages require that both the bride and groom swear loyalty on the beach, with the water up to their waists, and the bride wearing only a fine white net to conceal her aspect. Funerals are also celebrated on the holy waters. The dead sail on floating pyres set alight by flaming arrows.

The fiefdom recognizes the Holy Church, although the people express their faith primarily through the worship of local saints, to whom the Hacketts are very devoted, especially in Saltmere, the capital The most common jobs are carpenter, woodcutter, guide, engineer, founder, hunter, fisherman, sailor, merchant, shipwright, cartographer, artist, and messenger.

The Great Discoveries

While Theodorian Hackett built the foundations of his fief's mercantile power, Udo has, since his youth, pioneered the discovery and economic opening of unexplored territories.

Udo used two methods of exploration. He first sent a small group of vessels along the Great River Serpentine to explore the inner part of the continent. These expeditions, led by the explorer Logan Vane, built fortified outposts on the river to conduct trade with the deep and wild west. Udo also sent a large fleet, under the command of Captain O'Malley and his ship the Frothing Hound, into the open sea to discover new kingdoms, cities, and territories.

These endeavors have secured House Hackett's long-term fortunes many times over. Vane's forays to the west solidified Udo's trading relations with the barbarian peoples of Mlechcha and Varahi. O'Malley's expeditions discovered several little and primitive settlements. Their undeveloped economies were based on slavery, but each possessed abundant raw materials. The resulting importation of exotic foods, textiles, bizarre animals, precious stones, and spices, all highly valued across Gravos, made House Hacketts fabulously wealthy. Udo invested a significant portion of that wealth in heavy warships and armaments that had no equal on the waves.



Udo also purchased mechanical troops, powerful weapons, and war machines. Nothing was too expensive for the Hacketts, and many clever craftsmen made great fortunes by providing the House with a powerful military. The fief of Namar, once considered a land without nobility and populated only by crooks, vagabonds, pirates, and drunkards, became a force to be reckoned with throughout Gravos. Udo did not wait long to take his revenge for the slights and abuses of the "ancient" Houses. Determined to eliminate his "competition", Udo personally led his ships against every port town in the kingdom. His terrible cannons leveled fortresses, sank whole fleets, and obliterated villages. The war of the Houses had finally begun, and few were so ready and eager for it as Lord Udo Hackett.

The Venom of Federico Zeffirelli

Nicodemus Bastiani had repeatedly warned the Hackett about the consequences of their naked greed. He had both softly and strongly suggested that they devote their wealth to the common good, to helping people suffering from disasters or great poverty. Udo pointedly ignored every such remark. The High Cardinal finally decided to help along the work of God by sending one of his alchemist inquisitors to the recalcitrant kingdom.

At a celebration in Port Sunlight marking the launch of the warship Silver Roar, Federico Zeffirelli, the Old Poison, managed to get to Udo. No one remembers seeing how he got so close to the Lord, and Udo's personal guards—before their executions—swore they could do nothing to prevent the act. Zeffirelli's knife slipped between Udo's lumbar vertebrae, and the poison finished the job. The wealthiest Lord in Gravos was confined to his bed with complete paralysis in his lower limbs and greatly reduced mobility in the rest of his body. Surgeons and charlatans alike flocked to the Court of Saltmere, and an incredible amount of money was spent on remedies and holy relics, hoping for a medical or divine miracle. The serum on the blade was called "Tears of Stone", they learned, and this poison combined with where the blade had struck left Udo with no chance. A single hope remained, however, and this soon came to the Court in the form of a heavily cloaked man poorly disguising the insignia of the Holy Church. Draco de Babeli—though his identity was known only to very select members of the House—arrived covered in gold equal to the weight of the man whom he claimed he could save.

Draco could not restore Udo's poisoned body, so he made the Lord a replacement of sorts. Metal plates, ticking gears, and puffing steam pipes covered Lord Hackett's spine and restored him to motion. More, Draco gave him six strong and deadly tentacles to protect him from a second attack of the terrible Old Poison. This precaution proved well founded, for the inquisitor had escaped his guards and vanished with the same dark spell or trick by which he had appeared. Lord Hackett paid his debt to the incredible inventor and renewed his attacks on the enemies of his House with even greater ferocity.



House Talbot



By all rights, House Talbot shouldn't have survived the early war of the Houses. As a minor House, they control only a small patch of land at the heart of Gravos completely surrounded by larger and stronger fiefs and families. Their continued existence, to say nothing of their prosperity and rise to power, ably demonstrates their rulers' skill and determination. Through clever diplomacy, backdoor dealings, bribery, and manipulation, House Talbot has allied with every other House at one time or another and pitted them against each other to ensure its survival and advancement. The current head of the House is Lord Charles Talbot, a man cast from the classic mold of his forbearers. An indistinct figure, Charles's reassuring demeanor and pleasing speech disguise a devilish, scheming mind.

Traditions

The people in the region of Vizantys have always prided themselves on being the closest people to the ancient monarchy. The territory is not large and cannot boast resources as abundant as those in Harlow, Bastiani, and Hackett lands. Nevertheless, the fief has always enjoyed surprising prosperity.

The huge capital city of Graalis huge hosts a population unequalled in Gravos. The ancient city's boundaries have gradually expanded and absorbed the many small villages outside the original walls into its many districts. This created an incredibly diverse metropolis, where the highest and lowest social classes and the most distant ethnic groups live together, although in a precarious balance. For obvious reasons, such a city is often more difficult to govern than a whole kingdom.

A common saying goes, "Graalis is beautiful within the walls. Graalis is frightening outside the walls." The wealthiest neighborhoods are essentially governed by local lords who seem to grow more powerful everyday. The poorest sections are left largely to their own devices; the local authorities often visit these districts exclusively for their brothels or other illegal recreations. In these neglected areas, diseases, lawlessness, and violence have become simply a part of life. Furthermore, many portions of the outer city have become ghettos—essentially autonomous, protected forts. Specific ethnic, political, or religious groups have almost total power in these districts and do not hesitate to violently enforce their rule.

Superficially, the Talbot family seems completely uninterested in the local scuffles and who holds power in their city. However, this impression is inaccurate. Those who really know Graalis say Charles Talbot has spies everywhere. Not even Charles's closest relatives really know what the patriarch is thinking, and some of his schemes are years in the making. With his attentive mind, sharp tongue, and great charisma, he manages the city better than any king ever did, and he does so in a calculating way. From the lowest pawnbroker to the loftiest official, those who advance the Talbots' interests become wealthy and powerful quite quickly. Those who seek to thwart the House or advance their own station at its expense invariably end up with their face in the mud and a dagger in their back. Graalis, in all its grime and glory, has become the symbol and center of the whole Vizantys region. For a people to whom amusement and public gatherings are extremely important, the city is the perfect nexus.

The most common jobs are craftsman, musician, diplomat, messenger, batter, innkeeper, cook, brewer, hostler, armorer, hunter, theatrical expert, games and tournaments organizer, and male or female maid of honor. Of course, the citizens of Graalis also have an incredible number of pickpockets, thieves, murderers, poisoners, spies, smugglers, counterfeiters, and usurers.



The fall of the Kings of Gravos

The Talbot's fief once held the beating heart of all Gravos. The glorious eternal city, splendid Graalis housed the seat of the government, the great market, and the Tyranhall royal palace.

The modern conflicts gripping Gravos began in Graalis. After the death of the centenary King Tyran, his successors set the city ablaze in their struggle for the crown. The famous "War of Succession" ended with the victory of Harran Ethelred, Tyran's second son, and the death of his five brothers. Sadly, Ethelred mysteriously committed suicide a few months after the coronation. These are all facts, but behind them lies perhaps the most complex political plot ever executed.

Harran Ethelred did not kill himself. The man who jumped from the highest tower of Tyranhall was a blacksmith that resembled the king and wore his robes and crown. A letter, begging God's forgiveness for the fraternal blood Harran had shed to gain the throne, was found in the royal apartments. Combined with the note, the mangled body left little doubt that the king had indeed taken his own life.

In truth, House Talbot kidnapped King Harran Ethelred and masterminded the fake suicide. The Ethelred family kept numerous secrets, but Charles Talbot was interested in one in particular. He tortured Harran until he revealed the combination to the prodigious mechanical door sealing the city's treasury. Upon learning this, Charles skillfully blackmailed the Council of Nobles of Graalis. He claimed that his daughter Kadlin was the secret favorite of the king. He said that Harran, as a token of engagement amid the ravings before his death, had revealed the exact sequence of dials, wheels, and key turns that opened Graalis's coffers. In addition, Lady Kadlin had become pregnant by the tormented ruler, and the king would have soon proclaimed the royal wedding if he had not fallen into madness so quickly.

Knowledge of the treasury's combination meant that the Talbots alone could succeed the Ethelreds. Without the coin to fund the mechanisms of government, no one could rule; noble rights and legal succession meant nothing. Charles took control of the city and the entire region of Vizantys but nothing more. Though they never discovered his scheme, the heads of the other Houses—James Harlow, Eve Tornborn, Nicodemus Bastiani, Udo Hackett, and Sophia Mallory—recognized Charles only as a usurper. The Kingdom of Gravos dissolved into civil war.

Kadlin and the bastard son of Ethelred

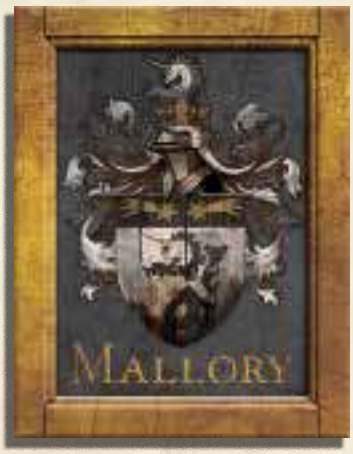
Lady Kadlin, daughter of Charles, was never beautiful or charming enough to make men fall at her feet. The story that Charles told the Council of King Harran's mad love for Lady Kadlin convinced no one familiar with the workings of the Court. Nevertheless, some obtuse observers and the general populous widely accept the lie. The child, however, is real.

Charles tortured and psychologically destroyed Harran, but he never greatly damaged the king's body. Harran drifted continuously in the hallucinogenic haze of vapors from the black lotus, and Charles pushed his daughter into the king's arms. Sometimes she used her real name, but soon she began using names of other Court ladies. Then she discovered the king's secret affection for a young girl that had died several years before of black fever. She assumed this guise long enough to ensure that Harran really did make her pregnant.

As soon as the news spread, assassins came from even the most remote parts of Gravos to kill Kadlin. To protect all he had worked for, Charles locked her in the tower from which the false king had jumped until she delivered the child. As silent killers from the desert laid siege to the tower, however, someone penetrated the dungeons of Tyranhall, freed the mutilated body of King Harran, and disappeared with him into nothing. Not even Charles Talbot had predicted that anyone could achieve such a thing. No trace of either prisoner or rescuer remained, apart from the sleeping guards and an incredible invasion of moths.



House Mallory



One of the oldest families in the kingdom, House Mallory controls the largest portion of Gravos. Their power is rooted in mysticism, and the people of their land fear and worship them in equal measure. Rumors say the young Infanta Sophia Mallory performs dark magic rituals to strengthen her position and looks for omens and auguries to lead her to a decisive victory. The other Houses regard her as a lunatic. Her people know better.

Traditions

The region of Qualthir seems to have gone unchanged for many centuries. Entering from Vizantys in the west, the semi-desert lands give way to green and humid hills that continue to the trade citadel of Melwast. To the north rise towering mountains, some over 2,500 meters high, with bold peaks, large snowfields, black woods, impressing waterfalls, and many lakes. The huge and impenetrable forest called Mother Mòr spreads its eves to the south. This region alone, full of centenarian trees digging their twisting roots deep into the black earth, covers an area larger than the whole fiefdom of Vizantys. Spongy, thick, and wet moss covers the trunks and branches and tinges the heavy darkness with rich green. Wise travelers avoid this dangerous place. The people of Qualthir have always lived in fear of the mountains and the forest. Most of the region's folklore and traditions revolve around these two areas.

Seasonal festivals, travelers' prayers, stones placed at every crossroad—these and a thousand other practices strive to mitigate the harsh nature of this land. The Holy Church has tried to provide Qualthir's people with the strength to overcome this fear, but its followers here are a minority. Most natives believe that only the Mallorys can protect them in this life and the next.



The legend of House Mallory began centuries ago, when Lord Francis Gregor Mallory, the Starcrossed, Lord of Arigart, fought the witch that haunted the forest. Stories tell how Hultaria the Terrible, who had cursed Lord Francis, cackled from shadows and took to the skies. But he caught her and dragged her body to his Court, plated her bones with gold, and fashioned them into his crown.

The Mallorys have ruled Qualthir's people and its land since. They bless festivals, placate the forest or the mountains when these demand a sacrifice, and solve every "strange disappearance" or "bizarre murder" with extreme efficiency. It seems only the Mallorys may walk without fear through this land of terror and fell creatures neither human nor animal.

The most common jobs are shepherd, hunter, tanner, miner, guide, woodcutter, engraver, brewer, innkeeper, horse breeder, craftsman, librarian, illuminator, finder, and smuggler.

The Brides of the Mallorys

Lord Francis radically changed the way his people lived their lives and saw their rules, and the way the Mallorys saw themselves. He lost all human connotations and became essentially an incarnated saint. Statues and squares were consecrated to him. Illuminated books and the stained glass of sanctuaries described his amazing deeds. Virtually all such depictions include the witch or her head, with Lord Francis ready to stab her. With Mother Mòr Wood freed from the supernatural threat, the Mallorys began to believe that their blood flowed with both holiness and mystic force. According to them, Lord Francis had not simply killed the witch but also absorbed her powers. The House gradually stopped arranging marriages with nobles who possessed no Mallory blood. Consanguineous union is a blasphemy, and with good reason. The Mallorys had ample precedent, however—Lord Francis had married his cousin, and so did his son, and the son of his son. The curses of inbreeding, such as albinism, soon arose, and the family quickly came to resemble many of the wild and varied legends told about them. These tales mostly focus on the women. One story claims that all Mallory brides dream of their husband's death on their wedding night.

Another describes how, when seated before an operating spinning wheel, they can leave their body and observe events near and far. For centuries, trances, divination, and consorting with spirits were just some of the strange qualities attributed to Mallory women. Their fame soon transformed into a kind of superstitious veneration.

The current scion is no exception. Still unmarried, the young Lady Sophia—known throughout Qualthir as "The Infanta Sophia"—showed the mystical gifts of her foremothers in childhood. Her people carved votive statues of her, painted icons in her image, and made amulets bearing her name. None of this veneration, however, could heal the girl's melancholy. Only when her father Lucian died after a terrible illness did the cloud over her lift. Her powers grew still greater, and Sophia became a strong and silent witch—just like the one Lord Francis had slain.

Sophia and the Heart of Harran

Sophia dreamed of the fall of the King of Gravos but told no one. When the Talbots kidnapped Harran, the last descendant of the Ethelreds, she saw it in the bowels of a crow. Such news would have upset the balance of power across the kingdom, but she kept it to herself. When Harran impregnated Lady Kadlin Talbot, the spirit of a nurse whispered the fact in Sophia's ear before even Kadlin knew it. The Infanta decided the time had come to act. Calling on her years of study and the power of her blood, she transformed into a massive swarm of albino moths and flew to the royal palace, like a cloud of shining souls seeking heaven. Sophia reached Graalis under cover of darkness, just as silent desert assassins attacked Tyranhall. The moths descended into the dungeons and used the dust of their wings to send the guards to sleep. She freed the tortured king, turned him as intangible as a ghost, and brought him from the castle on the wings of the swarm. Once she resumed her true shape, she assured Harran he was safe. She healed his wounds and hid him in her apartments until he recovered and the new moon came. Then the Infanta Sophia completed her dark workings.



The king never felt the blade that cut his throat—he only heard an ancient dirge in his sleep before meeting death. Sophia had carefully healed Harran and filled him with hope. She knew that the meat of the lamb sours if tinged with fear, and she needed the heart of a king both strong and full of life. She removed the still-beating organ, set it in a case, and replaced it with a terrible mechanical device. Many other bloody operations, grafts, and endless invocations later, Sophia finally revived the body of the sovereign she had slain. Harran Ethelred was dead forever. In his place stood the Nameless Conqueror; a loyal golem of flesh and blood and iron made to lead the armies of Qualthir and conquer all Gravos. Moreover, in its casket, the royal heart had become hard and as glittering as a ruby. Sophia laid a powerful curse on it, allowing her to use it to arouse any emotion she desired in anyone she met. Playing with such dark power has consequences, however. Lost in her black magic, the Lady of Qualthir missed first signs of independence in her golem, and she suspected nothing until he vanished without a trace one night. Questioning her castle's spirits, Sophia discovered that a cloaked man had penetrated her walls. With treacherous whispers, he convinced her creation to flee. She learned the man's name—Draco de Babeli, of the House of Bastiani—and began preparing her revenge. She would pit centuries of subtlety and ancient magic against legendary cunning and modern knowledge, and all Gravos would tremble.