

North East

As one journeys east the barren tundra of the Far and Near North gives way to a vast taiga. It is in this redwood forest that the reclusive **Kingdom of Halta** rests. Its title belies the true extent of its dominion, stretching across a great part of the Northeast. Though encompassing many cities and countless more villages and tribes, the heart of the Kingdom is **Chanta**. Not only is it the first and largest Haltan city, as well as the seat of its noble council, the Wheel and the King of the Wheel it elects, it is also built around the **Oracle Tree**, the great axle of the Nation. It is here that its story begins.

Built during the High First Age, the Oracle Tree is a data gathering and analysis engine. With its roots stretching beneath nearly all of Creation little is beyond its sight. Fortunately for mankind, it is a benevolent thing, a relic of a nobler time. When the contagion hit, the Tree hid the people that lived around it within its bark, saving them from the plague and later the fae. After the Crisis ended and the world woke up to smell the ashes, the God of the Redwoods and the Evergreen Forests, Caltia the Eternal, led a surviving group of her worshippers to it. Three times they appealed to the Oracle Tree to hear them to no avail. On the fourth an entrance formed from parted bark and a man exited. He called himself one of the Chan and envoy of the Tree and told them that they were welcome guests. The pact formed that day is the foundation of the modern Haltan nation.

For the next century the newborn kingdom expanded with the help of the Oracle Tree's foresight. A time of peace and prosperity that ended with the beginning of the Linowan wars. The tribals of the Silver River were worshippers of Golden-Eye Jorst, God of Deciduous Forests and Caltia's rival. This, as well as territorial ambitions and a desire for the Oracle tree led to an inevitable clash. Though initially contained to minor skirmishes and raids, this would escalate to a full scale war by RY 149, a conflict that the Haltan army was not up to. This was not the only problem for the Kingdom. The Wardenhold Morion-Kai marched upon Chanta to take control of the Oracle Tree. This period would become known as the First Deluge. With such a crisis in their hands, the Haltans were left with no other option than to entreat the fae, a task in which, thanks to the Great Wood, they succeeded. Trading the ground for immunity from hunting and defense, the Haltans would repulse both their foes with the aid of their new "allies", an act that earned them enduring enmity. It is during the Deluge that the Kingdom of the Redwoods became wholly Arboreal, both because of trading the ground around the capital to the Fae and continuing Linnowan raids.

A long era of stalemate with the Linowan, a peace by Haltan standards, followed. Until in RY 500 a dread prophecy rang out from the Oracle Tree. A second Deluge was coming. In the North, the rising star of Iscomay would soon set its sights upon the Greatwood. In the Southwest, the Linnowan would soon face years of weal, and the resulting Golden Age would bolster their numbers to unprecedented degrees. A radical solution was needed and quick. The tree provided that too. They had time, they could get the capable fighters they needed. Thus the Wheel and the King That Spins It made a decision that would shape the Halta of today.

Across the whole of Creation there are many Martial arts and many who practice them. However, both envy and the spread of the Immaculate Faith, who scorn secular styles, had left them an often persecuted lot. Beating your enemies can only do so much, and even the greatest mortal martial artist will be hard pressed against a dragonblood. The Kingdom of Halta sent countless envoys across the width of Creation with a simple, but effective offer to Sect and solitary artists alike - wealth and privilege in return for prowess. All they had to do was defend the nation that would bestow these rewards upon them. Many accepted, as the Oracle Tree knew they would.

These Grafted Sects, as they would come to be called, would, through great sacrifice for both them and Halta, beat back their newfound foes. Both the Linowan and Iscomay are extremely and, in the case of the former, insanely valiant nations and would not back down without a serious fight. A fight the Martial artists could provide. So would Halta survive the Second Deluge.

The two following centuries would carry a steady wind of change for the Kingdom. The Grafted Sects would subsume the old nobility and become de facto suzerains of the land, and the King That Spins The Wheel would be diminished to nearly a symbolic office. The Sects now act as Great houses and their students as scions of a highborn elite. However, they are not an entirely united or wholly self-serving force, and thus the Wheel is still capable of steering the Ship of State. Despite this, some see clouds brewing on a distant horizon. The newly elected King, a young unaligned Haltan martial artist realizes the problems the overly powerful sects could cause in the future as personal interest begins to triumph over the interest of the state. To rectify this he seeks to restore power to his throne. His success is uncertain.

The recent times have been less peaceful for Halta, however. In fact, the Oracle Tree has prophesied the Third Deluge, though whence it comes it hasn't said. Nevertheless, the sects have been called to the colors and the Haltan levy prepares with desperate speed for the coming onslaught. It is not clear when or whence it comes. The Linowan have not gained a sudden supernatural boost. The Hyperboreans, the chief suspects, have collapsed into Civil War. The Realm is too troubled to remember distant barbarian kingdoms. The Wardenholds march to aid their Northern brothers. The Oracle Tree has not led Halta astray thus far, but perhaps there is a greater plan within its bough after all...

Far, far to the East, in a land so removed from the center of Creation even the Realm barely remembers they exist stand the magnificent spires of the **Eastern Wardenholds**. In their own opinion the greatest among their number, though it is not mere arrogance. Unlike the nearly subterranean Northerners and Southerners, the Bastions of the East stand as glorious fortress cities with spires reaching high into the sky as the woods that surround them. By far the most proactive of the Wardenholds, the appearance of their enigmatic forces have been a mystery for the world for many times.

The Eastern holds stand isolated comparative to even their cousins. The Wall and the Middlemarches to their east, accused Dehelsen to the West and the Felwood and the thickest

part of the Eastern jungles to their south. Their only regular overland contacts are their Northern cousins and Iscomay. However, they are enduring heirs of a First Age civilization and thus know the locations of the Cecelynian Gates. They have been prolific users of what remains of the network. Easternhold forces usually sally within Creation to seize powerful artifacts (such as the Oracle tree by Morion-Kai) and aid Celestial Empire successors. However, they are not as willing to pursue long term or risky goals abroad. Their old duty as Warden States remains. The Fae still bray for human souls from over the Wall and must be pushed back.

Even with their comparative greater size and the puissance that is associated with Wardenholds, they are not what they once were. Their population has not recovered from the losses during the Contagion and the Crusade. The Fortress Cities stand half empty, with lower tiers near entirely abandoned. Much of their First Age arsenal has fallen into disrepair and the Blood of the Dragons within their Gens is slowly but surely declining. However, that is not their greatest issue.

The Greatest battles of the Balorian Crusade occurred in the Far East. The main population centers outside the Blessed Isle were there, after all. The Wardens fought and died in their millions and still the Wall was breached across a wide breadth, creating the area known as the **Felwood**. A massive expanse of corrupted jungle, it is filled to the brim with fae courts. One of the most perilous locations on the plane, to enter it is an absolute death sentence for the mortal and extremely perilous otherwise. The Fae are, of course, not too content remaining there and thus attempt to push further. And, though their ancestors would falter against the initial incursion, the Eastern Wardenholds have stood fast, preventing any greater expansion of the Felwood, even if they do not catch every straying host.

The reemergence of the Solars puts the future and the role of the Eastern Wardenholds in question. Many had already resigned to a solemn decline as they did their duty, forgotten by the World at large. Now that could change. Many wonder, is it the time for their ancient oaths of loyalty to once more be honored, or is the return too late and the Celestial Age but a distant dream, best forgotten.

The world is soon to end, the world has ended before, these are inevitable truths. Just because they are inevitable, does not mean they should not be opposed in every measure. Such is the truth of the **Linowan**, and their faith of cyclical armageddons. The first world ended in flame and sudden violence, a torrent of white-flame that burned away nine-tenths of all things, The second world ended in illness and invasion and elemental storms. The current world is set to end, known to them by the prophecy of their founder. The Uzrh-lamokh, known to the wider world as the Oracle Tree, seeks to spread its roots through the world's foundations, devour the World Tree far to the east, and become the axle of a new world, shattering the previous Creation in the process.

Surely such a thing, of course, is nothing more than an excuse by the battle-crazed Linowan, who seek justification for their raiding of the Haltan who revere the Oracle Tree. No serious scholar regards such a belief as anything more than superstition and rumor, and thus the claim

is dismissed. What is true, is that their founder once traveled into the Oracle Tree and traveled out, going on to found Linowan from the disparate river-clans who lived in the less dense woodland upriver. From them she raised a mighty nation of warriors and merchants, for whom excellence is held in highest regard, and educated them in the ways of artifice and sorcery. Prized among the clans, and one of the few things their founder did not teach them, is the cultivation and proper consumption of the Szalony, a mushroom that induces a battle-madness and strength in great measure in the one who imbibes it.

The Linowan clad themselves in furs, leathers, feathers, and in all things that derive from beasts, and shun fabrics of plant and silk. Their warriors are clad in mystic runes dyed into their flesh, and war masks of sorcerous puissance, and bare skin now like hardened edifice. They make pacts with spirits of war, and offer themselves as vessels to them in strategically important battles. They partake of the Szalony, and their bodies tear themselves apart with the force of their blows, sundering men and parting even steel. The greatest warrior of their number is Champion, and bears no uninked flesh, a war-mask of the clever wolf, utter unison with their greatest god of war, and the most potent of the Szalony brews. Their current champion, Krol, bears the direct lineage of the same god who fights within his flesh, and there is perhaps no greater mortal warrior in all of Creation.

The Linowan divide themselves into two courts of office, the kingly courts of war and the queenly courts of commerce. The kingly courts manage the affairs of battle and training, and the production of all things that are used for the separating of men from their ghosts. The queenly courts manage the affairs of all other things, from mercantile pursuit to farming and fishing, and are responsible for the maintenance of the Linowan state from within. Despite their names, nothing prevents a man from holding queenly office or a woman from holding kingly office, and it is semi-frequent that the two heads of state are of the same sex. Such is the subject of much light-hearted ribbing and jests among the Linowan, who amuse themselves in clever word plays and mockery of their friends. This behavior is decidedly undiplomatic, and has caused them to lose many allies in the past due to loose insults in good spirits.

Some 150 or so years after their founding, the Linowan attempted to invade Halta, and carried torches to burn the all-despised Uzrh-lamokh to ash. They were repelled then, by the cowardly Haltans making pacts with the soul-consuming Fae. This host of supernatural warriors pushed them back, and more extreme regimes and methods for power were sought by the Linowan from then. Raids and tests of their new warriors would continue for roughly 350 years, as the Linowan perfected their ability to draw in and gut the Fae in battle, and perfected similar on men from their neighbors in constant raiding.

Soon, chance had aligned for them once more, their warriors were mighty, their bellies were full and their coffers were wealthy. Once more they marched into the Redwoods of Halta, and this time the Fae could not stop them. Laden with runes of power and masks of violence, filled with spirits of war and tonics of rage, they made for a near-unstoppable wave of spear and torch that sought the all-loathed Uzrh-lamokh. Once more, they were stopped. Not by the Fae, who parted like chaff before their might. Not by the Haltans, cowards and chattel they were, hiding in

branches and offering only token resistance. No, for the Haltans once more sold themselves to the mighty for the promise of salvation from the Linowan, and from all corners of the world did the Grafted Sects arrive to fend them off. Warriors of exotic motion and unfamiliar war-songs, the Linowan could not predict them, and so fell to mistakes made from uncertainty in battle.

They retreated once more, back to their riverside settlements, and resolved to continue what they have been doing for so long. Study their newest obstacle in great detail, and crush it utterly in the next battle. Every attempt they push just a little further into the heart of Halta, and come ever closer to destroying the all-abhorred Uzrh-lamokh. No matter how many times they must try, the end of the world must be opposed at all costs, regardless of its inevitability.

Skirmishes with the Bull of the North have only sharpened their blades and fangs in recent years, and such battles have only further honed their abilities in warfare. The much-distant Realm, revered by their founder, requested them to raid northern Iscomay and the Haslanti. In gratitude to her memory they did so, and much in the way of wealth and foodstuffs were stolen from those places. But rumors of the strange Empress of this realm abound, whispering of her disappearance, and the withdrawal of the Realm forces and supply chains which made their way to Rubylak lends further credence to this. This has delayed their plans for further invasion of cowardly Halta, but it has not stopped them, nothing shall.