



Talabheim: a preview

This is a small sample of the background from The Talabheim Project.

The Eye of the Forest

Welcome to the great city of Talabheim, a haven of civilisation amid the dangers of the Great Forest. A city often seen as the poor relation of The Empire's four great city-states, an impression reinforced by its easterly location. The city stands in a huge crater; its edges acting as natural walls, making the city impregnable. The only entrance to the city is through the half mile long Wizard's Way, guarded by a fortress at each end. Once through the tunnel it is still some distance to the city itself although some come just to visit the great Temple of Taal or the famed Compass Monoliths located nearer to the tunnel.

It is the last safe crossing point of the Talabec until Altdorf and virtually all traffic going to and from Kislev makes its way to the city with its markets a source of varied offerings. Indeed much of the city's feel is Kislevite. Various arguments about The Agreement of Braxix, Ivan the Lunatic's attack on the city and other contentious parts of the city's history related to its dealings with Kislev occasionally flare up into heated arguments at all levels of society.

The city is very conservative, the fortifications without mirroring the attitudes within. Ancient noble families hold power, ruling from the Peer House. Indeed, the nobility's influence is felt strongly throughout the whole archaic system, with five families controlling almost everything. The current ruler, Duchess Elise Krieglitz is not yet married, although a number of politically appropriate suitors have been mentioned.

Talabheim is almost two cities in one; such is the divide between the upper and lower classes. Money rules here and the nobles have all the money. There aren't many legal ways of getting ahead in Talabheim with the nobility dominating the lucrative trade business backed by strong laws protecting their rights. Therefore, the young entrepreneur has to resort to bribes, shady deals, blackmail, smuggling and murder to get their way. In fact, so does the noble who wants to better their family's standing.

The Guilds also have some influence, making them the only voice for those outside the nobility. Again, positions are handed down on a father-to-son basis. Social justice is not a word that could be applied to Talabheim. The masked individual known as The Record Keeper records judgements in the courts and Peer House. Past judgements inform present judgements and punishments are harsh, especially on commoners. Talabheim is a city full of ritual, most stretching back centuries. These rituals dominate every aspect of life in the city and can be confusing for newcomers. To abandon these would be seen as the worst possible tempter of fate. Indeed, ignoring some of these are criminal acts. Ignorance is no defence. Religion is very important in Talabheim, with worship of Taal and Ulric strongest, both Cults dominated by heavily conservative factions. Law has a strong foothold here and the Kislevite influence of Spirits is present, but for reasons to be detailed later, not very strong. For unknown reasons Magic works sporadically here.

Talabheim is also a place of secrets, from the shady dealings of the nobles to Kancer's 'Court of Fools and Vagrant Lords'. Who built the Wizard's Way and the Compass Monoliths? Who is the Record Keeper? What is the truth behind the Festival of Gold? Why was the Old City all but abandoned? Will the fourth bell ever ring again? And why do those that question the meanings behind the rituals regularly disappear?

However, in many ways Talabheim is a city in decline. Financially, it has often been The Empire's poor relation and in recent years is struggling to find a role for itself. Laws and customs are strangling it, but few people can see this. On the streets, agitators call for reform: a call backed by Merchants and others. However, Talabheim rulers have always

reigned with a firm hand and sedition is punishable by death.

And so, Talabheim awaits. "Drink Vodka, praise the Gods and watch the wall. Then you will know Talabheim." as they say.

Entering Talabheim

There is only one route into Talabheim, and that is through the Wizard's Way: half a mile long and broad enough for two wagons to pass. At each end of the tunnel stands a fortress, and rumours abound that magical defences are also at work here. The two fortresses, Ulric Tor and Taal Tor, are always fully manned; they also act as headquarters for the military. The tunnel is reached by a single road leading up from the town of Talagraad which has grown around the deep harbour on the river. The tunnel is open only during the hours of daylight, except to those carrying the Royal Seal of Talabheim or the Emperor.

Those arriving by river are greeted first by the bustling port of Talagraad and then by a long walk to the city itself, still some miles away. To help visitors on their way, Tunnelway Coaches provide a number of services to the city. The cost of this trip is expensive, but they also run a cheaper service, cramming everyone in the back of a cart. There is an alternative service run by Hochland Crossing Coaches, but this is of dubious legality. The only other option is to walk.

Tunnelway Coaches

Coach Trip: 12GCs + 1GC for each bag/chest

Cart: 4GCs

Hochland Crossing Coaches

Passengers must pay a 2GC 1/- "training fee" in order to become "guards". They are loaned a sword and chainmail shirt and paid a fee of 1/-. The reasons for this strange business will be explained in a future issue.

Ulric Tor

The first gatehouse is heavily fortified and armed. Built across the entrance of the tunnel, huge statues of Taal and Ulric flank the gate itself. The garrison here is large, their lives regimented by sets of customs and traditions. The Excisemen also have their headquarters here.

Each morning a soldier is lowered over the wall. He then walks the winding road down to the bottom of the crater, checking the road is clear of all traffic. When this is confirmed he blows the 'Dawn Horn' and the gates are opened. It is also a signal for the traffic, waiting at the foot of the road, to begin the crawl upwards.

Meanwhile, the Ceremony of the Gate is taking place. The three Keepers of the Key approach the gate to be met by the garrison commander. The main gate has three keyholes but there is only one known key and the senior Keeper carries this. The garrison Commander steps forward and requests the three keys in a ritualised exchange. The origin of this tradition is lost.

Commander: "Pass forward the three Great Keys so Talabheim can be open to the Forest."

Keeper: "We cannot. Only one key is held."

Commander: "Where are the other two?"

Keeper: "They are missing, presumed lost. Forgive us our failing and take the last key." (He hands over the key and then all three Keepers kneel)

Commander: "I take the last Key of the Gate. If the gates do not open you will be killed where you kneel." He turns and hands the key to a Sergeant. The Sergeant then walks to the three keyholes and tries the key. Only on the third hole does the lock open. He returns the key to the Commander who hands it to the Keeper.

Commander: "This is the first key to open the Gate. Guard it well."

They wait until the sound of the Dawn Horn. The gates are then unbarred and the portcullis raised.

Tolls

The Excisemen men are an efficient and generally unbribeable department. Of course, part of the reason for this is the penalty of death for an Excisemen accepting a bribe (as recorded in The Book of Records against Mikhail Alcock). They examine each cart quickly and calculate payment, which must be paid immediately. Those that disagree with the evaluation can appeal or turn back. Appeal takes between three and five days during which time all

goods are impounded.

Market Goods: 5% of Price

Per Leg: 2/- (human or horse)

Per animal: 1d to 1/- depending on size.

Per Wheel: 5/-

Clerics of Taal & Ulric are excluded, as are the one hundred and fifty Premier Families and those carrying the few appropriate Guild passes.

"We don't like change around here."

In addition, the following items are actively discouraged from being used or displayed within the Crater: chainmail, shields, all weapons apart from swords, daggers and staves.

Additionally, crossbows (of all kinds), longbows, all gunpowder weapons and plate mail are completely illegal. These restrictions don't apply to those wearing colours of the military orders.

Taal Tor

Sometimes known as 'Taal's Tower', this fortification is the only interior building visible from the forest outside. As well as the inner gate, it acts as a watchtower for the surrounding area. A large pyre waits on top to be lit as a warning beacon to the city itself. The guards use large brass telescopes, imported from Marienburg, although it took 32 years of argument to implement this innovation.

Taal Tor is not as heavily defended as Ulric Tor but is still solid enough to slow down would-be attackers. In fact, part of the tunnel is blended with the fortress, providing a killing ground as the enemy attack the gate. This has long been known as The Bear's Mouth.

High up in the tower are four small prison cells, although three are now used as storerooms. The fourth is known as 'The Baron's Cell'. On the three nights before the coronation of a new Duke/Duchess, the incumbent-to-be must stay here, setting forth to the Temple of Ulric on the dawn of the Coronation. This celebrates the freeing of Duke Otto Dissell and his subsequent victory over Duke Ludwig the Deranged.

However, the actual cell is not the same. This was quietly changed after the discovery of a secret door, not to mention the cold body of the Baron (who was soon to be Duke) Mikhail von Kliest. It was this that allowed Marquis Otto Dissell IX to rise to power, although nobody ever dared suggest he was actually responsible for the assassination.

Wizard's Way

This is the only entrance to the city. It is a very simple round tunnel, the bottom of which is filled with a thick matted carpet of straw and mud. It is wide enough for two wagons to pass side by side. Two lines of lanterns line the tunnel; these are kept lit by the oil-boys - twelve teenagers, organised by a Guard Sergeant and responsible for keeping the lamps cleaned and burning. Fierce winds continually blow through the tunnel.

No magic is used to guard the tunnel, in spite of its name - although that doesn't prevent common belief from attributing all sorts of magical powers to it. Rumour also has it that a little-known group of Dwarfs named 'The Last Line' maintain a store of gunpowder under the tunnel so that, should they ever need to collapse the tunnel, they can do so in an instant - at the cost of their own lives. If such a group exists, though, they do a good job of keeping their members secret.