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Precis
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Rune Stryders™

magic and mecha between the ages...



 BTRC

matt drake
mike fiegel



EABA Rune Stryders™ v1.0

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P.O. Box 1121
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btrc@btrc.net
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Design and

Writing: Matt Drake and Mike Fiegel
Rev. Editing: Matt Drake and Brett M. Bernstein

EABA

conversion: Greg Porter
Logo Design: Matt Drake
Cover Art: Doug Penney with colors by Matt Drake
Interior Art: Doug Penney, Calvin Camp, Jason Walton,
Ash Jackson, Matthew W. Parmenter, and Matt Drake

Special

Thanks: David Goodner, Alan Goodner, & Chris Jackson

Dedication: for Cathy

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"You're late," said the Ambassador, speaking far too loudly for his own good. It was bad enough that the overweight, oversized beast of a Divaran had apparently come straight from a ball, dressed as he was in garish shades of red and gold that screamed "wealthy noble." Now he seemed determined to call down the wrath of the Skint's inhabitants as well, which was suicidal. Pulling attention to oneself in this part of town was a good way to grow a second smile, courtesy of the sharps lurking nearby...

▼ **SHADES OF RED** - Thomis knew that all too well, had learned the hard way. As he watched several shapes shift in the shadows at the end of the alley, he nodded silently, thumb and forefinger nervously massaging the scar that ran along his neck from ear to ear; *were it not for that passing Magus...but* he shook off the memory; now was no time to reminisce.

It was time for business.

"Yes sir," he whispered in return, hoping the daft fool took his cue and followed suit. "I apologize for my lateness. I was...delayed." He indicated his swordbelt, which lacked its peace-ties, a sure sign that he'd drawn it for one reason or another in the recent past. In a better part of town, that alone would be enough to earn a trip to jail. *But not here, and not now.* "I see," said the Ambassador, more quietly this time. "I suppose I can forgive it - this time." Thomis released his breath, thankful that the fool evidently lacked anything beyond basic Runic lore.

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If he'd been better trained, he might have whispered a *Bei-ess*, might have easily discovered that Thomis had simply broken the peace-ties himself, that the sword hadn't even been drawn, much less bloodied. His lack of Runelore meant this would all go a little easier. Thomis reminded himself, however, not to let too much slide. Underestimating an employer was more dangerous than underestimating a dedicated foe. And all too often, lately, the two turned out to be the same thing when the deal was done.

"Let's get this over with, then," said the Ambassador, reaching into his coat pocket.

Thomis reacted with apparent horror. "No, not here." He quickly scanned the rooftops, half for show, half out of real caution. "We need privacy. The streets have sharp eyes, and sharper tongues." As he said this last, he drew his thumb across his throat, wincing as he did so. The wound still hurt in places, even after all these months.

"I see," said the Ambassador with obvious impatience. "Then where?"

Thomis already had a room prepared, but he paused to consider all the same. No need to let on anymore than he had to. After a moment, he seemed to brighten, and tugged the Ambassador along down the alley, past a dozen nondescript doors, stopping at one that resembled the others in every respect, save one: the dim red lantern hanging over the doorway. The Ambassador backed away, shaking his head. "I cannot allow..."

Thomis ignored his babble, busily focusing on using his right index finger to carefully trace the faint impression of a Rune beside the door. A simple *Nhet-eq*, the sort designed to deliver a deadly shock to anyone not knowing how to disarm it. Which he didn't. Fortunately, it wasn't a real Rune; it merely resembled the real thing, closely enough that (he hoped) the Ambassador wouldn't be able to tell the difference. He needed to keep his edge here, and if that meant making himself out to be a Runemaster of sorts, so be it. If the fat turd bothered to think about it, he might wonder how a building in *this* neighborhood could come by a Runic inscription like this, the price for such a carving being well beyond the reach of most individuals. Fortunately, the Ambassador said nothing, and before he could inspect the false carving more closely, Thomis opened the door and steered him inside.

The Ambassador immediately tried to push his way back out. "I cannot be seen in a place like this," he insisted. "I..."

"That's precisely why we're here," Thomis countered. "No one will see us, or hear us. I can assure you of that."

"And what about...them." The Ambassador gestured broadly, indicating the young girls lounging around in the main room. Thomis waved to several, and they returned his gesture. "They will no more talk than we will, because if they did they would bring down half the city council, including some that sit higher than you, Ambassador." This much was true, and they both knew it. "Now, shall we? I have just the room in mind."

The Ambassador scowled, but followed him in silence up to the second floor and down the hall to Room 21. Thomis noted with a smile that the Ambassador flushed slightly as they entered, but he said nothing; evidently the rumors about Room 21 were truer than he'd thought. Except for tonight, of course; as he'd arranged, the room was empty but for himself and the Ambassador, the bed and other usual "implements" having been replaced with a single table and two wooden chairs. Ignoring decorum and the chairs, he shut the door, then leapt on the table and sat crosslegged.

The Ambassador remained standing, grasping for words. Thomis helped him along. "Who's the target?" he asked bluntly.

The Ambassador flushed, cleared his throat, and reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a small envelope which he tossed on the table. Thomis made no attempt to retrieve it, maintaining eye contact. The envelope could easily be Ruined, either in the wax seal or on the vellum itself, in invisible ink of some sort. He'd check it out later, in privacy. The Ambassador paced, sweaty and uncomfortable in the stifling heat of the windowless room, stalling for gods knew what reason. "Who's the target?" Thomis repeated. "His name is Jonan," he answered. "Full name." The Ambassador hesitated. Thomis made a show of leaping off the table, reaching for the door. "No, no, don't go."

"Fine," said Thomis, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed. "Then talk. I don't work unless I know what I'm getting into." "The target's name is Jonan Marle-Thon," he began at last, and then the dam broke, and he spilled the rest. Thomis listened only half-heartedly, amusing himself with the sounds coming from across the hall. Ambassador Adour here wanted one of his opponents removed before an upcoming vote, hoping to sway the decision towards terms more favorable to his own position. He wanted this done relatively permanently, and with a fair amount of noise, hoping to scare others into backing down at the same time as he removed his most powerful opponent. Thomis had heard the entire story before. From Jonan himself, in fact, with a few of the names reversed. He'd almost taken that job, in fact. He had backed out at the last minute.

However, Ambassador Adour had deeper pockets.

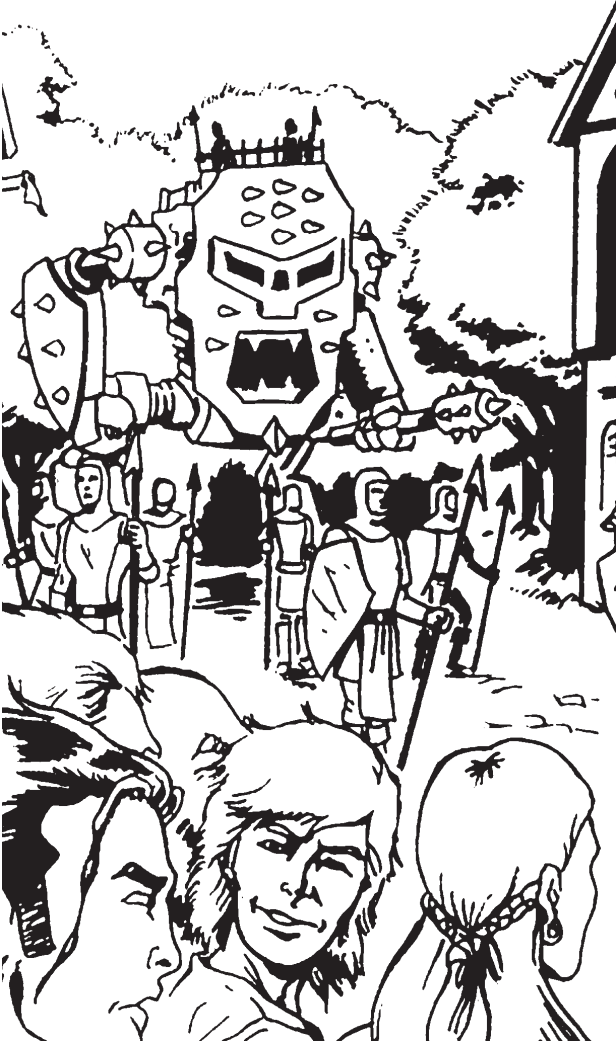
Still, a thing about this particular conversation was nagging at him, something about "the elder" and "the younger." He raised a hand, and the Ambassador broke off. "Back up a second. There are two?" The Ambassador nodded. "The father and his son, yes." This, he had to admit, was news to him. And he didn't like surprises.

"And which is the target?" The Ambassador hesitated. Thomis didn't push him to speak. It wasn't necessary. And, to be quite fair, not altogether surprising. Thousands of sons disappeared every day, some at the hands of soldiers, others at the hands of people like Thomis. This shouldn't be enough to make the old man pale, unless...Thomis suddenly recalled something about the elder Marle-Thons, something about him being the youngest Ambassador in the history of Divar. Which meant...

"Exactly how old is the target?" he asked. The Ambassador stumbled over his words, finally managing to spit it out. Thomis said nothing. He shut his eyes, pursed his lips, lowered his head, tapped his foot. He cursed silently, considered his options. The Ambassador waited, and sweated, and stank. Finally, after several long seconds, Thomis raised his head and looked the old man in the eye. "When?" he asked. "Tonight," said the Ambassador. Thomis considered. "I'll do it," he said at last, "for double the fee. Half now, half after."

"Done," said the Ambassador, too quickly, and Thomis cursed himself for giving in so easily. But even so, the fee was enough to keep him in wenches and brew for weeks to come, high pay even for killing a dangerous, well-armed, full-grown warrior. Of which this target was none of the above.

Somewhat ironically, that made it exponentially more difficult. They shook on it before he could back out. "Good doing business with you," said the Ambassador, leaving the room. "Yeah," said Thomis to no one, picking up the envelope, rolling the coins inside between his fingers, considering. It was a full ten minutes before he checked the package for Runes, slit it lengthwise and pocketed the money. Then he pulled out a charcoal stylus from his pocket and traced a simple *Ull-ess*, runes he *did* know, mouthing the syllables to himself a few times to get it right. As the envelope began to grow warm, he dropped it, quickly stepping back from the table as the contract burst into flames. There were some things even *he* wouldn't do. But now that he had the Ambassador's money, he had to do *something*. It was his head on the line now. But he couldn't do what he'd been paid to do, not ever, and if not, then what? He knew only one thing for certain. *Things were going to get ugly.*



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▼ **WHAT IS IT?** - **Rune Stryders** is a setting for a role-playing game. Like other fantasy games, **Rune Stryders** features powerful magic, exciting combat, and fantastic monsters. And like in other roleplaying games, **Rune Stryders** allows you, the player, to adopt the role of the adventurers that reside in this world, making their decisions and driving the action forward. If you have gamed before, you probably know enough about the basic concepts to enjoy and understand **Rune Stryders** as well.

About the format - **Rune Stryders** is designed to appeal to a wide variety of gamers, and although it is not especially designed for use by novice players, there is no reason why anyone with at least a basic knowledge of gaming cannot enjoy it, either as a standard tabletop roleplaying game, using miniatures, hex mats, and so on. The tactical combat rules are designed for ease of play in both cases.

Rune Stryders can also be used in component form, allowing you to add specific elements of the setting to your own existing fantasy roleplaying game. You can choose to add the mighty Stryders by themselves, or incorporate Runic magic as well, or even include some of the character concepts featured within. To make this easier, **Rune Stryders** has been divided up into different chapters, each of which contains information about a *specific* element of the game, and each of which can be used in connection with the others, or on its own in your own game setting. Though numbered for organizational purposes, the chapters are not necessarily meant to be read in any particular order. In general, game mechanics are presented in earlier chapters, and world or setting information comes later. While it is possible to enjoy **Rune Stryders** without playing within the gameworld provided, you may wish to read through **the World** chapter all the same, as the information contained therein does help to explain many of the concepts described elsewhere.

If you do choose to use the world of Rhun as your campaign setting, you will find everything you need here, including adventurer archetypes, skill lists and detailed adventurer generation rules.

About the setting - Rune Stryders is medieval, in the sense of being in-between two ages: a recent mythological past and an uncertain future; and fantastic, in the sense that it contains strange elements that make it very different from our own real world. **Rune Stryders** is not a traditional medieval setting. To be certain, you will find swords and armor, castles and catapults - these are the tools of war, and the nations of the **Rune Stryders** setting are in constant conflict with one another. But the peoples and places of Rhun developed in a vastly different situation than our own real world, the world upon which medieval fantasy settings are typically based. Its mythology, traditions, the origin of the world itself and how man sees himself fitting into that world, all of these are different from the world we know. All of the action in this rulebook takes place in Rhun (pronounced *Roon*), a world filled with warring city-states, political intrigue, back-alley dealings and bold maneuverings on the field of battle. The name Rhun means many things to many people, at once describing the continent, the planet and the universe within which the inhabitants reside.

It is impossible to understate the importance of all aspects of what Rhun means in the gameworld. Rhun is language, identity, place and for many, their purpose in life. It is also magic, and everyone in Rhun has the potential to use it.

The most novel feature of the **Rune Stryders** setting is the presence of the Rune Stryders themselves. These huge war machines are created by expert craftsmen, brought to life through powerful Runic magic, and manned by expert warriors trained to pilot them from within. Stryders come in many shapes and sizes, some forged from steel, others carved from stone, still others grown from living plants. All are powerful in their own right, highly prized and jealously guarded by their pilots, crews and patrons. However, the Stryders are merely immobile suits of armor without the addition of the Runes, the powerful arcane symbols that make all magic possible. Since Runes are based on language, every living being capable of speech or writing has some ability to manipulate Runes to their advantage. But only the most powerful Runic Masters can summon up forces greater than simple charms and curses, conjuring storms, hurling meteors, and, of course, bringing the powerful Stryders to life.



What you need to play - To play the game you will need these rules, pencils, paper, several six-sided dice, and miniature figures (or other tokens) to represent your adventurers on the field of battle. Since this is a gameworld for **EABA**, you'll also need that too, but you probably figured that out already. Hex mats, a whiteboard, or sheets of paper on which you can scribble will also come in handy if you are planning on playing the game tactically.

Having friends is also a boon; **Rune Stryders** is best enjoyed in gaming groups of three to six people, with one acting as the gamemaster and the others playing one or two characters each.

Using the material elsewhere - Although **Rune Stryders** deviates from the norm of fantasy rpg's in some quite dramatic ways, it is intentionally designed in such a way that you can easily alter some key facets of the setting in order to fit it more easily into existing campaigns. The most notable example of this design characteristic is in the available character archetypes. Divided into six Nations, the people of Divar are all described in human terms, and indeed, they are all very much human in most respects. Just like in our own world, people from different parts of the world have varying physical characteristics that set them apart from one another, such as skin color, hair color, height, weight, language. In other words, there are no dwarves or elves in **Rune Stryders**; there are only humans of varying sorts. Should you wish to use this material in a campaign setting that incorporates alternative races, simply swap those races in where they seem appropriate for your own campaign world. Likewise, in the case of magic, **Rune Stryders** dispatches with the oft-used mechanic of wizards in pointy hats memorizing spells. Here, the only spells are Runes, and the Runes are words, and those words can be used by anyone, without the need to laboriously memorize spells every few hours. Needless to say, such a switch makes for a different style of gaming than usual. Thus, if you are more comfortable with a more familiar mechanic, it is a simple matter to restrict the use of Runes to wizardly or sorcerous classes, or to apply other limits to them as deemed necessary.

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▼ **A CRY IN THE DARK** - The damned infant wouldn't stop wailing, half the team was missing, and there was blood on Thomis' hands. And the worst part was, he didn't know if it was his or not. *It had been that kind of a night.*

In retrospect it was foolish to consider, but he nevertheless found himself wondering if he would have been better off refusing the job. He could have said no, could have walked out and left the Ambassador out in the cold. Of course, then he'd have had to deal with the Ambassador's bodyguards, who would no doubt have tried to keep him quiet, the permanent way. But that would have been preferable to the cluster of nightmares that this job had since turned into. Besides, it would have been somewhat pleasant to wrap his fingers around the throat of that overfed, overambitious...

But it was all moot, and far too late to back out now. *The deed was done.* Half a dozen lay dead, dying and wounded (some of his own among them) and stuffed in a sack at his waist was little Jonan. All because that stinking, bloated chunk of excrement wanted to keep the infant's father from voting against him in some upcoming session about some inconsequential issue. Thomis didn't even pretend to understand the machinations involved. It was politics, and politics was in many ways dirtier, bloodier and fouler than war. Which was what he would much prefer to be doing, all things considered.

He had stopped counting alleyways when the first bolts had zinged by his head, Marle-Thon's angry guards in pursuit, the plan gone all to hell, and he was thus now quite thoroughly lost in the twisted, tangled morass of streets that abutted the Skint. He had been hoping that as he approached the neighborhood he called home he would begin to recognize landmarks, would be able to get back on course, but at this point he had given up watching for signs and just started looking for sewer caps. He might not be able to find his way any better down there, but it was a sure way to throw his pursuers off the trail.

At least long enough for him to resurface, rendezvous with the surviving members of his little collective, and then get back to the Stryders to make their getaway. The Stryders were, of course, the key to all of this. Marle-Thon's goons might pursue on foot, but without Stryders of their own they would be hard pressed to keep up with his team once they got out onto open ground. Nothing in this city could move as fast as a Stryder.

Running away, he thought. That's what I've been reduced to. Considering the circumstances, however, the thought did not fill him with regret or embarrassment in the least. There was simply no other choice. Up ahead, in the center of a broad intersection, he spotted what he had been looking for - a sewer grate, almost invisible in the street save for the faint wisps of foul-smelling steam escaping from below, glowing yellow in the faint light from the lamps hung on poles in the nearby park. Not bothering to scout the situation first, he plunged headlong into the intersection and knelt by the grate, fingers sliding into the grooves around the edge. He prayed it wasn't rusted shut, as so many were.

"Ngei-ess", he uttered, a small charm for luck, and pulled hard. With a soft sucking sound, the grate swung up and away. In a flash he swung his legs down and quickly dropped into the murky darkness below, landing with a splash in water meter deep just as the iron rang out on the flagstones above, announcing his escape. Quite inconsequential, all things considered. It didn't matter if they knew he had come down here. There was no way they would follow. He was counting on that. Few came down here any more, afraid of the ghosts of those who lived here in ages past, in the old city, perhaps fearing the wrath of some long-dead ancestors, enraged that the living now saw fit to turn their once great city into a dung heap. The real dangers were far more tangible: the streets ran thick with sludge from above, making footing unstable at best.

Shards of shattered glass and broken metal lay half buried in the muck, every step bringing with it the risk of tearing one's leg open. Though the wound might not be fatal itself, the disease-ridden filth that would inevitably seep into the wound would almost certainly be. And then, of course, there were the living that actually made the old city their home. As if summoned by his thoughts, eyes, seen and unseen, began to peer at him from the near-blackness of the sewer, a few glowing in the dim light from above, others glowing with a light of their own. He ignored them all as he picked a random direction and began wading through the foul muck, his splashes now muffling the infant's continued sobs and wails. His seeming lackadaisical attitude had nothing to do with bravado, however; inside, he quivered and shook, every instinct telling him to get back above, out of the darkness, away from the abominations which lived down here.

Rather, two things kept him moving: the fact that he no longer had a choice (a more powerful force than bravery in most situations, he firmly believed), and the Runic talisman he wore around his neck, which he had bought off a huckster just a few hours ago. He knew enough about Runes to recognize that the piece was genuine (or else he would not have bought it), but not enough to know exactly what it was capable of. The shopkeeper had insisted *Tin-ej* was proof against vermin, and still had a few months left in it. So far, it seemed to be doing the trick. He had not even felt a fleabite since donning the charm, and the rats (and worse) down here did seem to be keeping their distance. That left only humanoid enemies to worry about. Which made his odds about even.

Which was pretty good odds for him, all things considered. He had slogged onward through the muck for a good quarter hour, all of it in near-blackness, before he realized what it was he had not been hearing for quite some time - the child's cries. In a sudden (and, considering the job, inappropriate) panic, he lifted the sack from his belt and opened it, bringing the child closer to his face. Though unable to see, he could definitely hear the child's breathing, labored but steady, and he released the breath he had not realized he was holding. His sudden relief at hearing the child breathe, however, gave him reason to pause, and he stopped moving altogether, considering. He had been ordered to abduct the child, and he had done that. Unspoken, but nevertheless certain, was the fact that he had been expected to do away with the child as well. That much he could *not* do.

This realization, however, did little to solve the problem at hand. Which was, namely, that if he had no intention of killing the child, and could not return the child to its family, he was left with the absolutely untenable option of taking the child with him. A fourth option suddenly crossed his mind, a flash of dark insight so immediate and so obvious that he immediately began moving again before he thought twice about it. Now that he was in more familiar territory, it was only a few twists and turns until he found the place, one of the few areas of the sewer actually lit by *Nhet*-lamps.

The old orphanage was one of the few dry spots in the entire Undercity, having been built on a hillock beside a stream, now clogged with waste from above, that sluiced its way around three sides of the building. In a dozen years, perhaps fewer, the foundation would certainly be worn away, sending the building tumbling into the muck. For now, though, it was good enough to serve as home to... Well, he refused to think too much about that one. He could feel the stares from above as he strode up the stone dais in front of the building, placing the infant at the top in front of the building's iron doors. As the child's back came into contact with the slick, cold stone, it began once again to wail. He could not help but to take a moment to dote on it, opening the sack and lifting the cold, frail thing into his arms.



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As if human touch were enough to chase away the darkness, the child quieted instantly, peering up at him through the thick, dank gloom. "I don't know," he replied to the unspoken question. And then, tears be damned, he set the child down on top of the sack and walked away, ignoring its plaintive wails. Others were not of a similar mind. Within moments of his disappearance, the infant found itself surrounded by child-like shadows, clamoring around curiously. Three, in fact, all wasted, naked and thin, covered in filth, scab and sore. Less than a minute later, the child was gone, back in the sack, once again tracing a path through the sewers, now strapped to the back of a creature the child's mother had, ironically, sung to it about just that night. A song to lull stupid infants to sleep, and to scare older children into silence. A *lullaby*.

*Shush-a baby
Hush-a baby Sleep, now, sleep
Safe and warm
under quilt and sheet
Till the beasties come
and grab your feet
Cry not, sigh not Sleep, now, sleep
Else into your room,
Dras will creep
Your soul they'll take,
fore'er to keep*

For the first time that night, the baby slept soundly and dreamt of home, lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking and bouncing of a Draslander's uneven gait.

Remember these points, and you should be fine with the information provided for each rune combination.

▼ **Note** - In terms of **EABA** game mechanics, each rune will generally represent one or more of the standard power modifiers. So, if a rune combination has an effect and you do not see the modifier for it, that is probably the reason. For instance, the *-eq* rune is offensive in nature and does harm, and its +40 modifier cost is the same as the "lethal damage" modifier, and about the same as the "subtracts from Attribute" or "subverts Attribute" modifiers, which are also offensive or harmful in nature. Half-lethal effects using *-eq* are probably going to be at +1d, and nonlethal ones at +2d, as part of the +40 modifier for *-eq*. Or, the half-lethal damage might have a built in +10 modifier for a special effect, or a non-lethal damage might have a +20 modifier that bypasses armor. *Shrai* is a rune for "time", but the rune combinations using it generally use time as a special effect, so *Shrai* by itself is the same modifier as "special effect", or +10. *Frei* is the rune for "thought", so its +20 modifier includes a built-in factor for "can only affect things that can think". We are *not* going to list what factors into each of the runic definitions, but you get the idea.



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▼ **PRIME RUNES** - These six Runes are named for the six gods of Rhun, and represent an assortment of core concepts, some intangible, some very real. They are among the most powerful Runes, capable of creating and taking life with a sound, but are also among the most unpredictable and chaotic. As such, casters versed in their use must take extra care, for a mispronunciation could easily result in the immediate death of the caster and his allies.



Hei

Order, Law, Stability, Structure, Solid, Male (+20 cost)

Offensive(Hei-eq): The target must obey the caster. The caster may give the target of the rune one command per success, which the target must obey to the best of their ability. "The best of their ability" means like they *really* mean it, not just going through the motions to abide by the letter of the command. Each command may be only one word, though since the inhabitants of Rhun do not speak English, you can sometimes fudge it a little and allow a little conceptual leeway. Nouns can be "verbified", concepts like "rage" or "love" can be embodied, or the words "go", "do" or other short activators can be part of the command on the assumption that there may be a single word that covers the concept.

EXAMPLE: The command "leave" works, but so would "go away". "Fratricide" (an attack that kills or wounds an ally) is a noun, but the two word command "do fratricide" might be acceptable, as it is more specific than simply "attack" or "kill". Or, the gamemaster might simply say that such a specific command might require an extra success to add a word to the command.

The caster's control lasts for a default of one minute (time level of +12). Remember that the spell modifier for durations is the time level +5. The spoken version of the runecasting is below:

Type	Requirements	Cost
-	Framework base	-40
●	Hei	+20
●	-eq	+40
●	Personality modifiers	+0
●	Requires vocalization	-5
●	Takes 2 seconds to cast	-2
●	Lasts 1 minute	+17
	Modifier total	+30
	Runecasting difficulty	12

EABA

The "Personality" modifier is an adjustment to the "resisted" modifier in the framework. If the target of the runecasting has an aspect of their personality that would resist (or aid) the command given, each level in the Personality subtracts or adds to the runecaster's roll, as appropriate. Self-preservation would be a +10 to the target's Will to resist the spell, so only the most skilled of runecasters could hope to give a command that would clearly result in the death of the person affected by the runes.

For the written or inscribed version of *Hei-eq*, the caster concentrates on a single-word command while scribing this Rune. Any living creature able to see the Runic phrase must obey the command to the best of their ability. This control lasts for a default of one minute (time level of +12). If written on a living creature, the effect is only on that creature and has a default duration of one hour (time level of +24). The inscribed version of the runecasting on *soft metal* is below:

Type	Requirements	Cost
-	Framework base	-40
●	<i>Hei</i>	+20
●	<i>-eq</i>	+40
●	Personality modifiers	+0
■	Sensory targeting	+20
●	Requires gestures	-5
●	Takes 3 hours to cast	-27
●	Lasts 1 minute	+17
Modifier total		+25
Runecasting difficulty		11

The drawn version of the runecasting on a *person* is below:

Type	Requirements	Cost
-	Framework base	-40
●	<i>Hei</i>	+20
●	<i>-eq</i>	+40
●	Personality modifiers	+0
●	Requires gestures	-5
●	Takes 1 minute to cast	-12
●	Lasts 1 hour	+29
Modifier total		+32
Runecasting difficulty		13

A one-word command has to be something that is possible for the target in order for it to have any effect, and the command has to be something that the target can *voluntarily* do, so "sleep" or "die" are not valid commands, but "be apathetic" or "ignore me" *would* be valid.

Defensive(*Hei-ej*): The target is able to fight the effects of any sort of mind control, whether that control is Runic or not. The target will be able to think for himself, ignoring the effects of brain-washing or societal norms. The spell gives the target a bonus to their Will resistance roll of the caster's adjusted Fate. The spoken version of the runecasting is below:

Type	Requirements	Cost
-	Framework base	-40
●	<i>Hei</i>	+20
●	<i>-ej</i>	+30
●	Personality modifiers	+0
●	Requires vocalization	-5
●	Takes 2 seconds to cast	-2
●	Lasts 1 minute	+17
Modifier total		+20
Runecasting difficulty		10

EXAMPLE: A mage with an adjusted Fate of 2d+1 casts *Hei-ej* on a friend with a Will of 2d+0. Then, a foe casts *Hei-eq* on that person, and they have a Runelore skill roll of 5d+2. Without the benefit of *Hei-ej*, the opposing mage would roll 3d+2 to activate their *Hei-eq* (their skill minus the target's Will). But, the defensive benefit of *Hei-ej* means the opposing mage only gets to roll 1d+1 (their skill minus the target's Will plus the adjusted Fate behind the *Hei-ej*). Since the difficulty of the spoken *Hei-eq* is 11, there is no way the opposing mage can succeed with a 1d+1 roll, and their attack fails.

The inscribed version of *Hei-ej* acts like the spoken version, but affects a number of targets up to the adjusted Fate of the caster within range of the runes. If this Rune is written on a living creature, it targets only that creature, but the base effect lasts for one hour (time level of +24), after which time the Rune fades away. The inscribed version of the runecasting on *soft metal* is below:

Type	Requirements	Cost
-	Framework base	-40
●	<i>Hei</i>	+20
●	<i>-ej</i>	+30
●	Personality modifiers	+0
●	Requires gestures	-5
●	Takes 3 hours to cast	-27
●	Lasts 1 minute	+17
Modifier total		-5
Runecasting difficulty		0

Stryders are generally built primarily of wood and leather, with steel armor plates in key places. Certainly, much more powerful than any human enemy, a Stryder could decimate an enemy soldier with a single well-placed strike. But a group of smaller, more maneuverable enemies could easily swarm beneath and over even the largest Stryder. For all the Stryder's strength, it is the smallest foes who pose it the greatest danger.

Rune Stryders^{v1.0}

The Stryders of other Genres - In studying Stryders, comparisons to other, similar creations in science fiction and fantasy will inevitably be made, and thus it is first crucial to understand what Stryders are not. Stryders are *not* advanced technology capable of human agility, superhuman speed and the ability to engage in agile, highly complex actions. That they can function at all is a miracle, and they do so only because magic is the power source, and all of the complex functions that would require a computer or highly sophisticated mechanical parts are handled by the pilot-Stryder interface. For all of this, Stryders are fairly slow, a hard and jarring ride, and generally have the agility of a drunken sailor.

Mecha: The Mecha of Japanese anime and games are, for the most part, little more than giant anthropomorphic machines designed for war, or using the original definition, any sort of machine at all. Stryders are *not* machines. They are not driven by fuel, nor do they contain cogs, gears, electrical wiring or steam-driven turbines. They are magical constructs that function only by way of Runic magic and a bond with their Pilot.

Automatons: Robots and other automated mechanical creations are much like Mecha, but for the fact that they are self-propelled and capable of independent action and (depending on the setting) a degree of free will. Stryders have no cognitive ability without their Pilots. With some few notable exceptions, a Stryder in the absence of its Pilot is merely an inanimate hunk of matter, no more alive than a pile of bricks or a mound of wood.

Golems: Originating in Jewish mythology, and then translated into standard fantasy fare, a golem is a construct of clay, stone or other material that is brought to life by means of magical, divine or scientific intervention. In some cases this is the application of a rune or spell; in others (as with Frankenstein's monster), it is a mysterious brew of chemicals and other agents. While Stryders are given potential for life through the application of Runes, they are generally not self-directed or self-aware. They cannot be given orders to dumbly follow; they are not merely ignorant, they are completely lifeless and mindless without their Pilots.

▼ **INTRODUCTION** - Stryders are massive, towering constructs of wood, metal, leather, rock, bone, or chitin, created by humanity for the purpose of waging war. Certainly, Stryders have been put to use in other, less military occupations. Lacking large beasts of burden in most parts of the world, people have used Stryders to plough fields, carry goods, tear down trees and raise the walls of homes and castles, though these non-combat roles are only possible for the wealthiest of merchants or land-owners. In other areas, Stryders have taken on an almost mythic stature, as with the Kantarin, who revere their Stryders, formed of living wood, as deeply as they revere the forest in which they dwell. Among the Myndwar, Stryders are put to the task of burrowing beneath the earth, hewing stone and steel from the ground itself much faster than human hands could manage. And for the Sivatagi, whose Stryders are very much alive, the relationship between man and mount takes on a whole new meaning. Yet despite the exceptions, there can be no doubt that the primary purpose of Stryders is waging war, whether the intent is to conquer one's enemies or defend one's homeland. These constructs are built to destroy, and to withstand destruction, and for that reason they are at once treasured, feared, loved and reviled by all who encounter them. Well-built Stryders literally carry the stench of battle with them for years, the blood and smoke of conflict lingering about their bodies long after the war has ended. No one who has encountered one in battle can ever forget the experience.

The Stryder-Pilot Bond - A Stryder without a Pilot is not a Stryder. It is merely an empty shell, devoid of life (except among certain nations), much as a suit of armor or a crossbow is powerless and useless unless wielded by an expert warrior in combat. The Stryder Pilot is responsible for initiating all of the Stryder's actions, acting as its brain, nervous system and, some would have it, its soul. But despite the common moniker, the Stryder Pilot is much more than a driver or taskmaster. If all he did was steer, anyone could hop in the seat and take it for a spin. On the contrary, becoming a Stryder Pilot involves much more than study and practice. It involves an ability to more deeply bond with the Stryder itself, achieving a symbiotic relationship in which the Pilot becomes a part of his Stryder, and vice-versa. The Pilot's own consciousness and "heart" extend to the Stryder itself, bestowing it with a sort of shared intelligence, and creating, in a sense, a new form of life that is greater than either the Pilot or the Stryder on their own. For this reason, the relationship between Stryder and Pilot is much less akin to that of a brain and its body, and more appropriately compared to that of a pregnant mother and her unborn child. Certainly, without the presence of the child in her womb, the mother would continue to exist; but she would be a woman, and not a prospective mother. The presence of the child bestows on her a new sort of identity, one in which she has reciprocal responsibilities for the child inside (protection, nourishment), without which the child could not exist.

The Stryder Pilot gives the Stryder itself existence of a sort, and in return for benefiting from that existence, the Stryder protects (and in some cases nourishes) the Pilot within, enhancing and extending the bond. The two become one. The closeness of the bond can, and often does, have a psychological effect on the Pilot, though the intensity of the bond varies depending on the technologies of the different nations. In all cases, Pilots will spend much of their spare time around and inside their Stryders, looking after the construct or enhancing the bond.

In the most extreme cases, some go so far as to remain within their Stryders for weeks at a time, emerging only to eat and perform other essential tasks. A few become so attached to their Stryders that they ultimately refuse to emerge at all, instead lumbering off into the wilderness to pursue an independent existence that can only, in most cases, end in tragedy, with the wasting death of the Pilot, and thus the gradual decay of the thus inanimate shell of the Stryder. This is a particular issue with the Kantarin people, whose bond with their Stryders is at once dangerous and addictive.

▼ **STRYDER CONSTRUCTION** - Legend has it that the Stryders were originally developed to battle the Deijin, the giants who enslaved humanity in ages past. Images and imaginings of these first Stryders bear little resemblance to the Stryders used to wage war in the modern age, these older constructs being much taller, much broader, and, as any engineer will tell you, much more impossible. Time, after all, has a way of making things larger than life. Were these early Stryders a score of meters tall, capable of tearing up mountains and bringing down the moons? *Certainly not*. But time also has a way of revealing truths, for those who choose to look. The remains of the earliest Stryders, built centuries and generations ago, can still be found, on occasion, buried beneath piles of stone, crouched in fetid swamps, submerged in shallow lakes and rivers, their legs broken and shattered, ankles and feet crushed and mangled, torsos split in two. Their flaw was not necessarily in being too large, but rather in trying to mirror too closely the proportions of the human form (i.e., eight heads high), with the center of mass where the legs met the body. Were these first Stryders made of flesh, blood and bone, they might have managed more than a few feeble steps before collapse. However, the stone, metal and wood that they were made of consistently proved too heavy for their bodies to carry, and inevitably resulted in years of wasted effort and, quite often, the death of their Pilot and/or creator. It is still a mystery how the very first Stryders managed to defeat the Deijin giants at all (see **the World**), considering that their lumbering, ungainly bodies seemed destined for collapse. Not so coincidentally, this is often one of the points raised by those who believe that the Deijin are a mere figment of mythological imagination. Allowing that the first Stryders were used to fight the Deijin, however, perhaps it was some combination of the element of surprise, as well as some ancient Rune, yet to be re-discovered, that allowed them to defy the laws of nature, and to fight as well as stand and walk.

▼ **CREATING A STRYDER** - While all Stryders are designed for war, each Nation on the continent has a somewhat different method for creating Stryders, and each uses vastly different materials and methods. In all cases, the process of creating a Stryder is a complex one, requiring anywhere from months to years to complete, and is not easily role-played in real-time. However, a group of players that includes a Stryder Pilot will also need a Stryder, and as such it is important to decide what sort of Stryder is available. The following few sections thus outline the creation of Stryders among the various nations, giving the Pilot's player some idea of what went into its making. Since the methods vary so much, it is best to examine how each race goes creating Stryders individually.



The Confederated Nations - Having built an empire spanning the continent, Divaros learned that standardization was the key to effectively equipping and maintaining a larger army. The Divaran engineering tradition was built on a process of construction, fielding, and repair that needed to be sustainable regardless of distance. Therefore, Divaran Stryders tended to be (and still are) utilitarian and uniform in construction. The Divaros have the advantage of larger forces and widely available spare parts to repair damaged Stryders. On the other hand, Divaran military engineers are dogmatic and conservative, and shun innovation outside a careful, derivative progression. After hosting the armies of Divaros on their path to conquest, as allies, and at times even as foes in battle, the Myndwar and the Zokili were heavily influenced by the Divaran way of Stryder construction.

Rune Stryders^{v1.0}

The Myndwar and Zokili learned most of what they know about modern Stryder construction from the Divaros. Many years have passed since their first Divaran-copied Stryders were built, however. While the Divaran influence is still obvious, over time both nations gradually evolved their own distinct traditions, and learned a few things on their own. Confederated Nation Stryders have in common their general use of a central body, with articulated limbs for locomotion. The Pilot almost always resides in an internal Rune Chamber, which is designed to facilitate the runic magic-based link between he and his Stryder. Confederated Nation fighting Stryders are almost all humanoid, while other types of supporting and siege Stryders often follow loosely turtle- or spider-shaped constructions. These may or may not have a head; if one is present it is mainly aesthetic. In keeping with Divaros tradition, the Confederated Nations classify all of their Stryders (and many of those belonging to others) into categories, to keep the logistics chain manageable. These four Stryder categories are organized according to basic body design, as follows.

Valley Rat: These Stryders are commonly used when tactical ability is more crucial than raw offense. The most flexible of Stryders, Rats are well-rounded, but not suited for a single function.

Meadow Fox: The agile Meadow Fox is most often used as a scout or forward spotter. Its trim design and upright stance allow it to move quickly in any direction, avoiding attacks easily and rarely returning them. They are the only Confederated configuration capable of leaping into the air.

Black Dog: These workhorse Stryders are built low to the ground, with four legs and no arms. They are designed to haul soldiers, siege engines or other heavy items, and do not have exceptional mobility. They are able to cover ground very rapidly, and often wear considerable armor to compensate for their inability to defend themselves.

Iron Wolf: These powerful, low-slung Stryders are strictly war machines, capable of punching huge stone or steel fists through enemy soldiers, Stryders, or stone walls. Built for power, not utility, they are not very useful outside of combat.

Divaran Stryders - The Divaros build their Stryders in central guildhalls known as Runehalls, where many technical and Runic experts are gathered together. Runehalls are large walled compounds containing numerous buildings including workshops, barracks, mess hall facilities, homes, libraries, pubs, and other support facilities, much like a self-contained town. Runehalls are typically isolated by distance and heavy security. The Divaros guard their technology fiercely and actively control communication. The Runehalls provide little room for inventiveness, being primarily concerned with production of existing models. A Chief Mage-Engineer oversees each Runehall, and he has nearly complete power over his charges. His main purpose is to ensure that the quality of the Stryders remains to standard. Beneath him, high-ranking Artisans and Runescribes are tasked with supervising day-to-day production and, if necessary, coordinating improvements with other Runehalls. Below them, in turn, are journeymen and apprentices with specialized, limited, knowledge, who perform most of the actual construction.

The Divaros use many traditional construction materials in creating their Stryders - mostly wood, metal, leather, and rope. A typical Divaran Stryder consists of a wooden frame, with leather skin, wood planks, or metal sheeting forming another shell, depending on type. Because parts are standardized, Divaran Stryders mostly use one of a handful of body types, with semi-modular limbs in an arrangement selected for specific kinds of missions. Divaran Stryders are still magical creations, but the Runic magic involved in their creation is used in a strictly utilitarian way. Divaran Stryders are maintained and repaired in the field by specialist mage-engineers, highly trained Runescribes who are among the workers in the army's camp followers. These Runescribes are given just enough information to make basic repairs to the Stryders, but could provide little information of use in building a new Stryder if captured. Even so, these specialists are closely monitored, and any found to learn enough about Stryders to become an information risk are quickly relocated to a Runehall. Divaran Stryders follow tried-and-tested configurations when determining size.

Rather than replicate the mistakes of the past, modern Divaran Stryder engineers and mechanics have since thrown out the ancient human ratio of upper to lower body (4:4) and settled on a much more functional ratio of 3:4. This has proven stable, durable and functional, and many have gone so far as to suggest that Stryders built in accordance with it are actually superior in form and function to the obviously inferior human form. Others have even posited that the Deijin giants, or even the gods themselves, are formed in such a ratio, further calling into question the supposed superiority of humanity. The 3:4 ratio finds its way into the construction of a Stryder in various guises, sometimes appearing as a figure, proportion or calculation to guide Stryder design, in other places appearing as a general organizational theory. Divaran Pilots (known as Homunculi in the Divaran military) have little to no influence on the construction of the Stryders they will pilot. In many cases, a Homunculus might pilot several Stryders over the course of a campaign, although in some rare cases, veteran Homunculi might grow particularly attached to a specific Stryder, and refuse to allow anyone else to pilot it.

Myndwar Stryders - The Myndwar, who contributed the first Runic discoveries to the creation of the Rune Stryder, initially built their own Stryders in the same fashion as the Divaros. However, over the years their widespread cultural use of stone led to their beginning to substitute greater and greater amounts of rock in their Stryders main parts. This is not to say that their Stryders are completely made of stone. A solid stone Stryder would be an impossible feat. However, they use stone in more ways, and in greater quantities, than any other Nation. The Myndwar found several advantages in constructing stone-based Stryders. Few materials retain Runic magic as well as rock. Wood and even most metals are not nearly as sturdy over the long run.



Stone structures also support more weight than other types of Stryder bodies, and therefore can be built larger and carry more. In fact, the Myndwar boast the largest Stryders anywhere. Their legendary Mountain Guardian Stryders are nearly thirteen meters tall. The disadvantages of stone lie mainly in slow construction time, lessened mobility, and extreme weight, but because the Myndwar hold the mountains, these problems matter less than they would elsewhere. The hard ground of the broad mountainous valleys the Myndwar call home has little trouble supporting several tons of Stryder, even though such creations would sink immediately on a Divaran plain or in a Draslander swamp. Aside from stone construction, the biggest difference between Myndwar and Divaran Stryder construction is philosophy. The Myndwar are a nation with a tradition of craftsmanship, and the concept of blindly mass-producing Stryders as quickly as possible is alien to them. Additionally, the sheer durability of a Myndwar Stryder in combination with their isolationist outlook means that a Myndwar Stryder, once built, will be likely around not just for a single campaign, but perhaps for generations. While Myndwar and Divaran Stryders share common features, Myndwar do not design theirs with cheap replacements in mind. Each Myndwar Stryder is a unique piece of art, its construction a labor of love largely undertaken by the Myndwar Pilot (known as a Jacker) and their extended family over several years, even decades in the case of larger types. Naturally, in this system the Jacker must be a skilled craftsman as well as Runesmith; novice Jackers are therefore carefully apprenticed by an experienced Jacker (often a father or close relative) for many years before ever wielding their own mount. The result is an intensely strong bond between Jacker and Stryder, surpassed perhaps only by the Kantarin Stryders living bond. The destruction of a Myndwar Stryder most often means the death of the Jacker; if they somehow survive an event that led to their Stryder's destruction, they are often a broken person, never quite whole again. This bond makes them very fierce in battle, but also pragmatic. They will not stay for a lost cause, but will withdraw to fight another day.

As with the Divarans, those Myndwar who actually know the secrets of animating a Stryder stay close to home, and are never the pilots or otherwise seen abroad.

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Zokili Stryders - Zokili lack the resources in sufficient quantity to produce metal-armored Stryders like the Divaros. In fact, they are lucky to be able to spare metal for tools and weapons. Thus forced to use other materials as a substitute, wood and leather feature far more predominantly in Zokili Stryders than in Divaran types. As a result, Zokili tend to focus on agility and speed, although some of their heavier wooden Stryders can, in numbers, easily hold up to metal or stone types. Like the Myndwar, the Zokili are a nation that appreciates craftsmanship, but in a somewhat different sense. While a Myndwar sees a Stryder as an enduring piece of himself, the Zokili prefer a uniquely carved and decorated Stryder for more aesthetic and psychological aspects, which they feel are nearly as important as the Runes that animate their creations. The destruction of a Stryder is expected eventually, but is not seen as a deterrent to producing Stryders with distinct character and identity. Stryder Pilyts are known for going to great lengths to have the best artists ornament their creations, preferring fearsome and intimidating designs. Zokili have borrowed the idea of using standardized limbs from the Divaros to make maintenance easier, but have no qualms about improvising or modifying to gain an advantage. It is not uncommon to find uniquely equipped Stryders in Zokili armies, at the cost of having to abandon broken pieces and spend additional time and effort creating or adapting a replacement. Zokili engineers are more restricted in the overall shape and size of a Stryder than even the Divaros, given the materials they have to work with. Zokili Stryders rarely reach seven meters in height, and are rarely able to carry very heavy weapons.

However, as Zokili Pilyts tend to be among the shortest and lightest of the Pilots of all Nations, they can afford to whittle some of the bulk away. As a result, Zokili Stryders are generally the fastest around, their agility contested only by some Sivatagi Stryders.

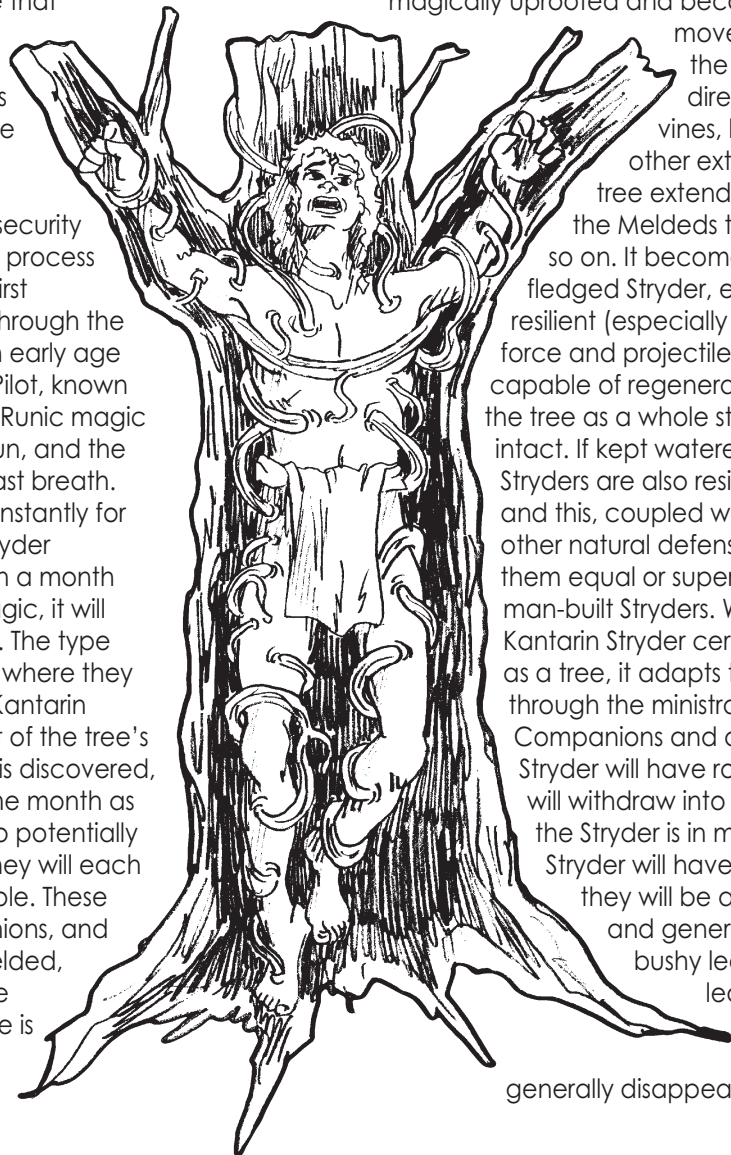
The Outcast nations - The Stryders of the Outcast Nations vary greatly in size, shape and function, straining and in some cases breaking the rules that the Confederated Nations adhere to in the construction of their own Stryders. The Kantarin use living trees as their Stryders, their Pilots (called Melded) literally bonding with the Stryder in a way well beyond what other Pilots experience. The Sivatagi do not build or grow their Stryders, instead taming and training the giant insects that roam the deserts they call home. And the Draslander make their Stryders from the cast-off materials of other Nations, putting together piecemeal Stryders that are as fearsome and unpredictable as they are likely to fall apart in the midst of battle. Many citizens of the Confederated Nations refuse to acknowledge that the Stryders of these other Nations are truly Stryders at all. For all intents and purposes, however, they are treated as Stryders, and considered as such by the people that use them.

Kantarin Stryders - Kantarin Stryders are created from a specific type of tree native to their home region, through a process the Kantarin Shapers jealously conceal both out of concern for their security and for the well being of the trees. The process is extremely special, beginning at the first sprouting of a sapling, and continues through the entire lifecycle of the tree, which at an early age becomes intertwined with that of the Pilot, known among the Kantarin as a Melded. The Runic magic involved is known nowhere else on Rhun, and the Kantarin will carry their secret to their last breath. Kantarin Shapers search the woods constantly for the specific type of tree suitable for Stryder cultivation; if the new plant grows even a month without being prepared with Runic magic, it will never grow to be suitable for a Stryder. The type doesn't grow in orchards or anywhere where they are planted by hand, and thus many Kantarin believe that their Stryders are the result of the tree's own will to become one. Once a tree is discovered, three Kantarin children born in the same month as the new sapling sprouts are selected to potentially become the future Stryders Melded; they will each train throughout childhood to fill that role. These three are known as the tree's Companions, and although only one will become the Melded, all of them are Runically bonded to the tree, and participate in its care. The tree is prepared by ritual Runic magic over a period of several years, allowing it to manifest the specific characteristics of the Stryder desired.

The individual aspects of the tree combine with the Runes to determine what kind of Stryder the tree will grow to become. Certain trees are raised to become light and agile; others are cultivated for strength. Various types of natural defenses are encouraged to grow such as carnivorous trap-flowers, thorny vines, thick spikes, shooting quills, poisonous saps, heavy limbs, or other such protection. After a period of fifteen to twenty years, the tree is large enough to begin the process of symbiosis with the Melded. Each of the three Companions stands around the tree, and one of them is chosen (some say by the tree itself). This one, the Melded, then undergoes an excruciatingly painful ritual whereby the plant extends tendrils under their skin. Subsequent separations and reunions with the Stryder, while not as painful as the initial bonding, still hurt intensely. However, the resulting euphoric warmth and sense of completeness the Melded feels while connected to the tree always makes him advocate the ritual as well worth the cost. While joined, the tree and the Melded are essentially one being. The tree is

magically uprooted and becomes able to

move around at the Melded's direction. The vines, limbs, and other extensions of the tree extend and swing at the Melded's thought, and so on. It becomes a full-fledged Stryder, extremely resilient (especially against blunt force and projectile attacks), and capable of regeneration as long as the tree as a whole stays relatively intact. If kept watered, Kantarin Stryders are also resistant to fire, and this, coupled with their many other natural defenses, make them equal or superior to those of man-built Stryders. While a Kantarin Stryder certainly begins as a tree, it adapts to its new form through the ministrations of its Companions and a Shaper. The Stryder will have roots, but they will withdraw into the legs when the Stryder is in motion. The Stryder will have limbs, but they will be articulated and generally free from bushy leaves. The leaves at the crown of the tree will generally disappear or fall off.



The trunk is no longer straight and thick, it narrows and reforms to allow for a flexible and agile form. The Kantarin Stryder grows to be sleek and deadly, and is rarely mistaken for a tree once it uproots and begins its existence as a Stryder. The Melded can stay connected with the Stryder for only so long before he must be removed/severed, really to be fed and recover from the symbiosis to prevent risk to his body and mind.

The Melded cannot do this himself, and requires assistance from Kantarin Shapers or from the Companions. Runes protect the Melded from ill effects for awhile, but if he is not eventually separated, the Stryders own life-force will eventually overcome him and he will go insane as the suppressed natural needs of the tree become dominant and guide his will. If the Melded is ever killed while joined to the tree, it also results in the death of the tree. As the separation process is painful and the bonding process so addictive, Kantarin Melded must struggle to separate, but the potential death of the tree provides a powerful motivation. At the same time, the Stryder still requires nourishment and sunlight as other trees do, albeit less frequently than normal flora. After the Melded is severed from the Stryder, the Stryder re-roots to feed until rejoined with its Melded. In this phase the tree can be killed without physical risk to the Melded, although the Melded (and the two other Companions) will experience emotional anguish as deep as the loss of any human loved one. However, if the Stryder is killed while the Melded is joined, the Melded will also die. In return for their sacrifices, the tree provides all three Companions with long life; a Kantarin Stryder can live for as long as two-hundred years and the Companions can live out their natural lives or until the tree dies, whichever lasts longer. Their health is intertwined with the trees health from the point of the Meldeds first joining with the Stryder, and if the tree becomes diseased or is injured seriously, the Companions will experience fatigue and malaise accordingly, in a way that Rune Scholars have yet to adequately explain (conventional Rune Scholars dismiss the notion that the Kantarin Forest is in some way a single living entity).

Rune Stryders^{v1.0}

Sivatagi Stryders - The Sivataji follow a sharply different tradition in their Stryders than the other races. They have subjugated the large insect races of the desert and have adapted them for uses including domestic labor and combat. This development stems from the necessity posed by limited conventional construction materials available in their desert homeland and from their tradition of utilizing things on hand.

The Sivataji use three main breeds of insect as Stryders. The Horlac, a kind of giant beetle, is the least common of the three but prized because of its nearly impervious carapace. The Sindle, a burrowing, nesting insect, is individually not very dangerous but fast and deadly in numbers. The Shmul is a swarming bug with stinging barbs on its front limbs and razor-sharp mandibles. All three are raised on farms by the Sivataji Reavers, and with the exception of the Shmul, are also used (especially with smaller varieties) for a wide array of domestic purposes. The smallest of the three, the Sindle, is over two meters long and a meter high. The Horlac are even larger, about the size of a small horse cart. The Shmul is the largest of the three, growing as big as five meters tall and ten meters in length, though most adult Shmul are about three meters tall. All the species are extremely strong, capable of moving weight many times their own mass, and must be dealt with cautiously, even by their masters. All the Sivataji insects rely on a pheromone-based method of communication and possess little intelligence of their own. They would be just ordinary bugs were it not for their size. While the Sivataji carve Runes on their insects carapace in order to subdue them for use as Stryders, most of the time the Sivataji simply use herding tactics involving either following instincts or natural plant essences that repel or attract each species to control them. Sivataji Reavers know these creatures in and out, and are experts at selecting the best of the breed to be Stryders. The biggest single advantage to using the insects is the ability to breed them by the dozens. From gestation to hatching, a brand new Stryder insect is ready in mere months, not years as the other nations Stryders require. The Sivataji Reavers have the least amount of connection with their mounts of any Pilots on Rhun, a fact reflected in their un-enhanced bareback riding position.

Insect Stryders are considered expendable, especially because the natural life cycle of the insects ranges only from a few months (Sindle) to a few years at most (Horlac and Shmul). Sivatagi Reavers on Rune-carved insects do have a mental bond with their mounts, but at a much more superficial level than do other kinds of Stryder Pilots. They can do little more than lead the direction their mounts travel and provoke the creatures natural instincts, although the insect's instincts do include some useful skills.

Sivatagi Reavers are still a trained elite. They are skilled in combat tactics and taught every nuance of their insect's behaviors, making up for many of the disadvantages of riding their Stryders exposed. The key tactic of the Sivatagi Reaver is to use a Stryder insect to command a larger group of the same species, multiplying the effectiveness of a single insect. Facing down Sivatagi insects on foot is a terrifying (and probably fatal) experience for any opponent foolish enough to do so. Even in armored, enclosed Stryder, the prospect of being eviscerated by a swarm of giant bugs worries those who know what is good for them. Since Sivatagi Stryder breeds are insects, there is not much one can do to customize their construction. However, the ever-resourceful Sivatagi have developed a few types of equipment and weapon packs that can be harnessed to the insects. Many of the add-ons include simple spikes and blades that attach to the insect's limbs, enhancing the creatures natural fighting abilities, while the most complex add-ons include heavy weaponry designed to be carried on the back of a Horlac, making it a mobile siege machine. Even without them, however, the insect's own inborn defenses are as formidable on the offense.

Draslander Stryders - Having no permanent settlements, trained engineers, refining or finishing facilities, or anything else the Confederated Nations might consider essential to Stryder construction, the Draslander are forced to rely on salvage to build Stryders. Fortunately, the swamp conceals many wrecks, pieces, and even whole Stryders stuck in the murk or washed downriver. Through the bounty resulting from centuries of combat across the continent and uncounted attempts to subdue the swamps, the Draslanders always seem to find just enough. An aspiring Dras Pilot (called a Stomper) does not have many options. Though the Dras know that Stryders are required if fighting is to be done with any modern force, the Stomper is still essentially stuck with whatever he or she can find. Therefore, all Dras Stryders are by necessity misfit creations, and the Dras are skilled at improvising and lashing together whatever they find.

Choice in construction usually boils down to whether to give up using the one piece found by exhaustive searching and trade it to someone else, or somehow make it work by adding in something else either begged, borrowed or stolen. Rune Chambers are usually designed for people a fraction of a meter taller than most Dras, so most often the Rune Chamber will have a handmade basket for the Stomper to ride in. Dras Stryders rarely move the way the parts were originally intended to move, and it is usually anyone's guess how they get around, but somehow when the Dras actually do manage to get a whole Stryder together, they make it work. They may not be pretty, but Dras can come up with some pretty inventive methods for getting Stryders to function. One unique feature of Draslander Stryders is the use of bones in some of their Stryders. While there are no large domestic herd animals in Rhun, there is no shortage of large predators in the swamps. While constructing a Stryder totally out of the bones of such creatures is unlikely, using bone structures like limbs or entire jaws is not unheard of, particularly for weapons or for structural effect. Among the Confederated Nations, stories circulate of skeletal monsters running off with children in the night. Chances are, these old wives tales, minus the children, were based on encounters with these nightmarish Stryders. A chomping reptilian skull attached to a marauding war machine will test the mettle of *any* opponent.

Since they are so hard to come by, Dras Stryders rarely get used except for surprise attacks and emergencies. Usually, that is the moment when an overconfident fighter thinks he has just about wrapped up his raid on the hapless Draslanders, only to find his force suddenly demolished by an impossible contraption appearing out of nowhere.

*Before life, before time, before anything,
there was Xhei, she called Chaos, raw and
primal and shapeless, formless and conscious
of one thing only – that she was alone. In the
supreme act of self-sacrifice, Xhei tore herself
asunder, and existence as we know it began
in earnest as from the countless came the
counted, from infinity came the finite, from the
one-who-was-many came one. Hei, he called
Order, leapt into existence, becoming the
consort of Xhei, and with him came law, and
language: "Rhun"... the very stuff of creation.*

▼ **INTRODUCTION** - Much enamoured with one another, Hei and Xhei spent millennia in each other's arms, and before long they brought forth twin offspring who Hei named Mheta, the daughter called Matter, and Nheta, the son called Energy. Xhei embraced her children and doted on them to the exclusion of all else, occupying their time with games and play, forgetting, for a time, her consort. Hei grew furious, and desperate to regain the attentions of his beloved, he decided to give the twins a playground with which to occupy themselves. *So was created the Universe.*

The two god-children were quite pleased, and quickly scurried here and there, creating and destroying for their own amusement. Soon they grew bored, however, and in a desperate attempt to regain the attention of their parents (who had resumed their amorous activities), they engaged in a competition. Mheta took a shapeless sphere that had been a toy ball and created a planet, and Nheta created the sky around it. Mheta created oceans, and Nheta condensed them into clouds. When their game had finished, the god-children disobeyed Order. Eager to demonstrate what they had created, they intruded upon their parents.

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Mheta, by far the braver of the twins, boldly strode into her parents' abode, interrupting the two in the middle of their creative couplings. Hei, furious at the intrusion, leapt up with a roar, inadvertently splashing his daughter with the primordial stuff of Creation. He chased her across the Universe, right down to the world that she had created in order to please him. The pursuit was long, and by the time they touched down, Mheta was quite pregnant, and gave birth to a son just as Hei reached her side, intent on destroying her. Overcome with compassion at seeing his offspring, however, he instead named the child Lheta, he who brings Life, and left mother and child to fend for themselves as he returned to his beloved.

Unbeknownst to any of them, Nheta had remained behind in his mother's presence, and when the others left, his mother called out for companionship. Nheta, desperate for attention, disguised himself as his father and entered her presence. When he ultimately revealed his true nature to his mother, she feared for his life, knowing that Hei would surely kill him. She urged him to flee where his father would never find him, giving him a handful of his father's Rhun to protect him. And so he fled, hiding himself beneath the surface of the world he and his sister had created, sulking in misery and solitude while on the surface his sister and her son brought Life to the world: plants, animals and other living beings. This was the Twilight age, before the sun, before death, before misery, when the world lived in peace and eternal life.

It was not to last forever, however. The secret tryst of mother and son could not go long hidden, for Xhei soon became pregnant herself, and gave birth to a sickly, squealing baby girl. She attempted to hide the child beneath her bedcovers, but Hei's amorous attentions soon shook the baby from her sleep, and she cried out with great zeal. Hei tore back the bedsheets in a rage, grabbed the infant, named her Dheta (the Dead god), and hurled her down to earth, where she plummeted underground, shattering the hiding place of her father and brother, the wayward son Nheta. Mountains split and spat fire, the earth cracked and shook, and millions died instantly as Death entered the world. The child god wept for his fallen offspring, then left behind his father's stolen Rhun and leapt skyward, determined to kill his father. His sister Mheta and her child Lheta followed behind, realizing that his assault was in vain, and that he would be destroyed.

EABA

Indeed, the battle between father and son, Order and Energy, was brief and brutal, and it was only through the combined intervention of Mheta, Lheta and Xhei that Hei's hand was stopped. Hei allowed himself to be convinced that his children should not be destroyed. Determined to keep them from causing future trouble for anyone, divine or mortal, he set them in place around the world they had created, able to look down but unable to meddle in affairs above or below. Hei, the fiery son, was set in the day, and mother and child were set as guardians of the night, becoming the planet's two moons.

Ceaselessly, they chased each other through the sky, bickering and squabbling with one another, while their children did the same on the surface. And forgotten below the earth, where the dead god called Dheta slumbered eternally amongst her brother's stolen Rhun, lay those who survived the apocalypse that brought her to them. Worshipping her lifeless form, ignorant of the meaning of the powerful Rhun that surrounded her and them, these Deijin, the giant children of Death, built up their strength, and let their anger, impatience and fury fester and boil as they waited for release.

Thus began the Age of Mortals, and the dawn of recorded history.



HISTORICAL TIMELINE

-5,000DR (Divarosh Reckoning): The Myndwar inadvertently awaken the giant Deijin who, though they only number in the thousands, enslave the smaller, more peaceful races. Historical records of this period are sparse at best.

-2,300DR: Amidst thousands of years of slavery and heartache, some among the small races (led by the Myndwar) seek refuge below the earth, and stumble upon the secret writings of Hei known as the Rhun. They are soon able to learn what even the giants cannot. But even the power of the Rhun is not enough. The small races cannot stand up against the large Deijin without an equalizer. They get to work.

-2,250DR: The smaller races trick the giants by constructing a tribute: large statues arranged around a great stadium, where the lesser races propose to fight and die to amuse the giants. On the Day of Reckoning, the giant Deijin gather to watch the smaller races. The statues are unveiled to great fanfare. Suddenly, the smaller races clamber inside the heads and chests of the giant creations, and the statues come to life. Though highly primitive and capable of only limited maneuvers, they are the first true Rune Stryders, having been created in secret by the Divaros, piloted by the Zokili, and powered by the Myndwar Rhun. Although the Deijin win the battle, the smaller races learn from the experience and build better, faster Stryders. The tide gradually shifts in their favor. The Great War has begun.

-2,000DR: After nearly two-hundred and fifty years of war, the lesser races defeat the last of the giants. From the skies above, they receive a terrible punishment. Nheta, furious that his own Rhun have been used to defeat his giant Deijin children, bakes the earth with heat, bringing forth a great famine and melting the glaciers. The heart of civilization is lost beneath the rising waters of what will become the Inner Sea, and the surviving members of the smaller races are scattered across the land. Knowledge of the Rhun are lost. The sun's fury lasts for only a few months, a single season, but the suffering that ensues lasts for two thousand years.

-175 DR: The races crawl out of a second dark age. Knowledge of the Rhun (now called Runes) begins to resurface. National boundaries are laid. The Old Divarosh Calendar counts this as year one, based on the election of their first king, Pietr Jyoldenshire, a brutal warlord who unites the country with the promise of conquering the world and making the Divar the strongest people on earth. *He keeps his word.*

-150DR: The Divaros, ever expanding, wage war against the nation of Kator, wiping out most of its people. Under the leadership of the Druid Kantar, who claims to be descended from the god Lhei himself, the survivors retreat into the jungles to found a new civilization. In the Kantarin calendar, this is year one.

1DR: The Divaros and the Sivtagi struggle for power. The Sivtagi are defeated, driven across the mountains and into the desert wastelands. The Sivtagi count this as year one in their calendar. The Modern Divarosh calendar calls this year one based on the significance of the defeat. The Myndwar and Zokili also accept this year as year one as part of their agreement to form the Confederated Nations with Divar.

100DR: After centuries of exploration, ten Runes are finally recovered in some form, including some of the ones that allow Stryders to be rebuilt and reactivated. Using this newfound strength, the Divaros drive the Draslander into the swamps. The Draslander people call this year one, and mark the occasion with tears.

295DR: The Divaros fight the Myndwar, but are defeated when the Myndwar and Zokili join forces with the Kantarin to keep the Divaros in check. The Confederated Nations nearly fall apart. Many years of war follow. Detailed records from this era are mostly lost, due in part to historical cover-ups, and in part due to the burning and scouring of several prominent libraries and record halls.

335DR: The Divaros broker a peace deal with the Kantarin. The Zokili and Myndwar vote to include official homelands for Draslander and Sivtagi. The Divaros refuse. Several rebellious Divar countries break out of the union. Struggles for power remain as local politicians are killed and militias formed.

341DR: The present day. Year 341 in the Divaros calendar, year 241 for the Dras, and year 491 for the Kantarin. Forty-five runes are known. Many maintain that there are many, many more to be discovered. Parts of the Divaros empire are in open rebellion. War looms on the horizon.

▼ **Note** - It is worth noting that the table on page 3.7 has fifty runes, so it could be that five of the runes in that chapter are not yet accessible to Rhun's inhabitants. This is especially useful if the gamemaster thinks one or more of them may be unbalancing.

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▼ **GEOGRAPHY** - Our own planet Earth has been roiling and boiling for millions of years, and has had plenty of time for continents to shift, mountains to rise, and oceans to fill. However, the world of Rhun, and the universe in which it exists, is very young. Only several thousand years old and created rather than naturally formed, Rhun's geography does not follow traditional "Earth-based" models.

Mountains: Rhun's mountains were not created by two large continental masses colliding, but rather by the whim of the gods. They are relatively small, with broad valleys between them, as befits a younger, single-continent planet. The tallest peaks on Rhun (perhaps a half dozen) are less than three-thousand meters high. However, the air at the top of these low peaks is still too thin to breathe, so passes through the mountains are the only real way to cross them. Most of the world's mountains fall within the central Spine that runs down the center of the main continent. Once a rough cross (its southwestern leg shattered in the cataclysmic events of the past), the Spine now more or less bisects the world, dividing the most civilized and prosperous societies of the north and west from the frontier lands of the south and east. Smaller ranges can be found on the islands of the southwest.

Highlands and Hills: The high, frigid plateaus of the north are home to the heart of society, split roughly in two between the Divaros to the west and the Zokili to the east. War, fire and civilization have long since cleared most of the greenery away, and the lands are subject to erosion in times of drought. Luckily, their northern placement and several large rivers allow irrigation to keep farmlands fertile enough to grow staple crops. Lower plateaus on the continent's southern tip offer a less bleak lifestyle, as befits a temperate climate.

Lowlands and Swamps: The lands along the continent's southwestern edge, ringing the Inner Sea, are generally swampy, ever covered by a few meters of water, with tidal forces inundating some areas beneath several meters of water several weeks out of the year. Areas further to the north tend to be nearly impassable, filled with all variety of strange plants, biting insects, venomous reptiles and the Draslander. Further south and west, near the Kantarin sub-continent, the waters grow too deep for all but the tallest trees. However, the presence of sand bars and small islands (which prevent ships from sailing in all but a few areas) make it *theoretically* possible to walk a Stryder straight across the sea.

Forest and Jungle: Vegetation of some sort is present in every part of the continent, ranging from scrub grasses and small hardwoods to the north, to copses of citrus to the southwest and east, to tough cacti and burrowing trees in the Desert. In higher elevations one finds clumps of evergreens (conifers to the north, willows and the like to the south, nearer the swamps). But there is truly only one large forest to be found - the Kantarin Rain Forest. Covering nearly all of the Kantarin sub-continent, the thick canopy of these one-hundred-fifty meter tall trees covers the land below in perpetual darkness and mist. To the east and north, the living forest actually sends roots beneath the Sea, spreading its grasp to the main continent and making shipping a nightmare in some areas. The Kantarin people who live within the forest say that the entire area is one living creature.

Desert: As if balancing the lush vegetation of the Kantarin rain forest, the desert home of the Sivtagi, known only as The Desert by the people of Rhun, is the only true desert on the continent. Covering nearly a third of the eastern continent, it is a dry and harsh realm of venomous creatures and savagery. The northeastern part of the desert is home to several mountainous outcroppings, including the fortresses the Sivtagi call home. To the west, ringed by mountains, rivers and lakes turn portions of the desert into oases for much of the year, making the area a prime target for battles waged over resources.

Waterways: On an older planet, rivers and rainwater would have time to erode the land, breaking down minerals and salts that then make their way to the oceans which, over millions of years, become salty. On Rhun, there has not been enough time for this to happen. Thus, the rivers, flowing down to bring salty deposits from the mountains, are rich in minerals (and, in some higher elevations, too salty to drink safely), but the oceans are still mostly fresh and generally safe for drinking. As such, coastal settlements have plenty of fresh water for their people, but inland areas (particularly to the east) tend to be more arid and less densely populated. Irrigation pipelines are just as likely to run inland from the ocean as they are to run downhill from higher elevations.

▼ **COSMOLOGY AND TIME** - Rhun's solar system consists of a single sun (called Ntheta), around which the lone planet of Rhun revolves. Rhun itself is approximately 8,000 kilometers (5,000 miles) in diameter at the equator, compared to our own solar system's Earth ($\approx 13,000$ kilometers) and Mars ($\approx 7,000$ kilometers) in size. The world's sole continent (along with its sub-continent) stretches about 5,600 kilometers from north to south, and 4,000 kilometers east to west at its widest point.

Rhun has two satellites, or moons: Mtheta (the larger) and Ltheta (the smaller). These two objects are the only sources of light in the night sky; the gods have not gotten around to creating other solar systems yet, and as such there are no stars in the sky. Needless to say, this makes practices such as astrology entirely unheard of, and navigation a bit trickier (it is still accomplished by observing the positions of the moons relative to one another and prominent landmarks).

Rhun's day and year are approximately the same length as in our own world. The planet completes a revolution of the sun every 350 days, within which are ten months of thirty-five days each (each month divided into five weeks of seven days). A month is determined based on a complete cycling of the larger moon, Mtheta, since the smaller moon has a somewhat erratic cycle not in line with an easy division of day and night. The New Year is observed on the first day of the month Mhetite (literally, Month One), named after the Rhun of the Beginning and the End. Other months are named for various number Runes (Mhetiin, Mhetaan, Mhetawn, Mhetahn, Mhetain, Mhetean, Mhetenn, Mhetoun, and Mhetott).

The day (based on a single rotation of the planet around its axis) is divided up into twenty-five hours, the division of hours into minutes and seconds corresponding to that in our own world (i.e., sixty minutes per hour, sixty seconds per minute) as decreed by Pietr Jyoldenshire, the first Divaran king. Each day begins when the sun rises over the Divaros capital city, and as the hours are counted from that point, which shifts throughout the year, the keeping of time across the world is rather arbitrary and hardly an exact science. There are no time zones, so the start of the day is only at sunrise in the regions directly north and south of the capital. Again, since timekeeping is usually an approximation, this is seldom a concern.

▼ **WEATHER AND CLIMATE** - Due to the lack of a planetary tilt, there are no seasons as such on Rhun. Northerly climes tend to be cold year round, those near the equator much hotter all the time. Weather patterns and tidal forces do sometimes bring snows further south, or droughts further north, but for the most part weather patterns are predictable. There are no growing seasons, no autumn or winter. What lives in a given region is adapted to a year-round climate of that type, wet, dry, hot, cold, whatever. In the wild, animals breed and plants tend to bear fruit in particular months for no reason that has yet been determined, but those domesticated by man can have these cycles adjusted. Most crops are planted, grown and harvested year-round, each field in a different stage of development.

Snow falls year round in the higher elevations of the northern Spine and across the northern highlands, rarely reaching further south except in rare occasions, and only melting when it slides down to lower elevations. As a result, many areas are permanently buried under snow and ice, with glacial expanses and regions in which long-term habitation is all but impossible, as there is nothing but snow and ice, and no growing season. Those who live near such areas have long-since learned the paths of avalanches and their warning signs, and know well to avoid them. Temperate climes are generally found across much of the central continent, growing steadily hotter towards the equator, where the thick forests of the west eat up most of the moisture, leaving the dry eastern Desert to bake beneath the sun, surviving only on the infrequent and unpredictable downpours of the region. Southern climes are similar to those of the north, though more temperate and generally more rainy than snowy, though higher elevations may have snowcaps.

Tidal forces and the rare hurricane bring frequent flooding to the lowlands of the southwest and parts of the southeast, although even these are predictable enough that those living in such areas can prepare for them ahead of time. Rhun is, however, subject to unpredictable earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, particularly in the southernmost parts of the Spine. Such rumblings are often attributed to Deijin, trapped beneath the earth, or the Dead God coming back to life to seek vengeance on the living.

▼ **RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY** - As the world of Rhun was created and populated only a few thousand years ago by a family of divine beings, history and mythology is essentially the same thing in Rhun. There is no guesswork when it comes to who's who in the heavens, and as such there is no belief in a single deity, nor in a hundred different gods for every aspect of society and nature. There are six gods and goddesses, and everyone knows their names.

Since religion is typically based on faith and belief, and the people of Rhun do not need faith (they know for a fact that the gods exist, because not all that long ago those gods walked the earth), there are no large organized religions. Power in the form of runes is at hand for *all* people, no matter what they believe, so there is little reason to worship divine powers. This line of somewhat apathetic thinking is exacerbated by the fact that the gods are not the sort of deities who demand attention, respect, sacrifice and worship. There is little point in asking for favors, begging for forgiveness, or cursing your enemy; the gods are otherwise occupied.

The net result of all this is that there are no real clerics, priests or religious leaders in Rhun, nor any sort of organized state religions. Even the druids, who once emphasized reverence of nature and life, are mostly a part of mythology now. There are minor superstitions about the Deijin. While historical, no one is really sure if they are extinct, imprisoned in the earth or merely biding their time, but most people have more pressing things to be worried about, and tales of the Deijin are mostly used to frighten children. To be certain, there are rogue cults, atheists and other fringe groups who purport to gain power by the worship of the gods anyway (the worshippers of the dead god Dheta in particular), but they are mostly viewed as kooks and troublemakers by the powers that be. Most of these cults are quickly done away with as soon as they crop up, as they often represent a nucleus for dissent in an already chaotic society. *And nobody mourns their passing.*

▼ **THE NATURE OF WAR** - If Rhun has a religion at all, it is the religion of battle. The political and geographical landscapes are littered with the corpses of the warriors who died in the service of their employers, warring over resources, boundaries and many more petty concerns.

These are not the mounted French and English knights of the latter half of the Middle Ages, as popularized in film and fantasy fiction. Nor are they the heavily armored spearmen and longbow archers who turned the tide in many battles of that period. A far better analogy for the mercenary companies of Rhun would be the smaller bands of warriors who did battle in the early Middle Ages, before the development of heavy plate armor and more powerful weapons. Here, there were few who called themselves professional warriors, and these relied more on tactics and the element of surprise, and less on heavy armor and weapons. Leather and mail armor was common enough, but to arm oneself head to toe in custom-fitted plate mail would have been beyond the reach of any but the wealthiest lord.

In the true medieval period, these warrior companies evolved technologically to keep pace with their foes, using the developments they had available to wage war more effectively. The presence of horses, and the development of the saddle and stirrup, made cavalry possible. Heavier suits of full plate armor, developed to a great extent in reaction to the dangers posed by ever-stronger crossbow and longbow technology, helped bring the knight as we know him into being. And of course, the presence of a strong, unifying religious force, and the centralization of power and money in the hands of a powerful few, throughout this period cannot be understated.

Rhunic mercenaries, however, lack *all* of these things. As all except the Sivatagi lack suitable large mounts (there are no horses), mounted warriors and cavalry tactics are unheard of. Lance charges, mounted archers and the like are nonexistent, for the most part, as are heavy suits of full plate armor. Certainly, there are dangers on the battlefield, but without the need to wrap oneself in sheets of steel, plate armor technology has been restricted, for the most part, to wrapping the torso with a breastplate (and even this is quite limited and expensive for most warriors). Heavily armored military forces numbering in the thousands are a completely fanciful idea in Rhun, and would be unlikely to work even if someone were to field such a force.

Rune Stryder Tactics - The general availability of Runes to all members of the population acts as a great equalizer, giving power to anyone with the devotion and interest in studying and learning to master its power. Battlefield injuries that might have been crippling or fatal can, in many cases, be cured with the correct application of a Rune at the right time. And the importance of using Runes as part of battle cannot be overemphasized.

At the center of any major battle are the Rune Stryders themselves, giant constructs standing, on average, between five and ten meters in height. Layered with heavy armor, guarded by Runes, and armed with giant weapons of war, they storm across the battlefield to do battle with one another and an opponent's troops.

Surrounding the Stryder, right in the midst of the battle, are the Stryder's support team, typically consisting of between ten and twenty individuals whose job it is to keep enemy troops away from the Stryder, so that the behemoth can do its damage. Several of these individuals carry massive shields and spears, keeping enemies at bay so that the lightly armored, quick-moving archers with crossbows and war bows can scurry around into position and snipe away at their foes. Along with them are one or more Runescribes, whose job it is to maintain the Runes that adorn the Stryder inside and out, keeping the magic flowing and the Stryder alive. And thrown into the mix are several more heavily-armored (but still quite mobile) warriors with axe, club, and sword, doing their best to destroy the support troops at the feet of the opponent's own Stryder. And all of these people may have some minor runic talent of their own.

An entire mercenary company may consist of between two- and five-hundred individuals, with a ratio of one Stryder to every forty or so fighters, with about one support person for each ten fighters (cooks, doctors, various craft professionals, etc). For companies with fewer Stryders, tactics necessarily shift, with some companies preferring to keep men back to provide missile and siege engine cover for their front lines, others focusing instead on stealth and trickery, sending cloaked and dangerous Magi behind enemy lines. The ratio of fighters, Stryders, Magi, scouts, camp followers and so on really depends on the terrain, the major nationality of the force and how well-off it is. Mercenary companies are, after all, a business. They have to charge enough money to pay all their soldiers, not just for a given contract, but with enough to tide them over to the next contract and cover their expenses. The person running the show must be a shrewd businessman as well as a military leader.

Of course, even the most novice mercenary groups realize that sometimes the best way to win the battle is not to be there at all. Many work with saboteurs, spies, and even politicians and diplomats to help wage the war off the battlefield, assaulting the enemy with political machinations, kidnappings, assassinations and sabotage.

Understanding exactly why warfare is fought in this way requires one to have a good overview of the political landscape as it exists at the present time. The following pages lay out the major players, and point out many of the current trouble spots.



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▼ **THE NATIONS OF RHUN** - The world is split into two camps, roughly divided between north and south (with some exceptions) by the mountainous Spine. The Divaros, the Myndwar and the Zokili, collectively known as the Confederated Nations, primarily control the northern lands. In the scattered lands to the south, large parts are held by the Kantarin, Sivatagi and Draslander, known as the Outcast Nations, so called because their inhabitants were long ago driven from their homelands into lands then deemed uninhabitable.

However, the actual truth of the matter is that things are not nearly as clear-cut. Spying, political machinations, roguery, assassination and unofficial military strikes against neighboring countries mean that the Confederated Nations are not nearly as united as their lofty name might suggest. And the Outcast Nations are hardly mere victims and refugees, representing a political, economic and military force to be reckoned with, individually and collectively.

National and state borders generally follow natural boundaries (mountains, rivers, coastlines), and in some cases the lines are more theoretical than realistic. Those living closest to the borders are generally the least concerned with them in times of peace (though most concerned in times of war). One might easily find borders shifting as easily as allegiances do, sometimes as much as hundreds of miles, as fits the whims of the world's leaders and diplomats.