

Epoch on the Rock: Local Knowledge

You've wound up somehow at this tavern called The Watering Hole; it looks like exactly what it is, a building on the edge of the ocean that has only been inhabited for the last six months by a motley but determined crew of about a dozen people give or take, human and Fae. Any member of this ragtag group can tell you stories of how they arrived here, transported by strange and mystical means for reasons that everyone is still speculating about. Behind the tavern is a deep and unmarked wilderness with almost no signs of life beyond the local flora and fauna, which includes the giant rats, spiders and snakes and other strange beasts that populate the region.

As far as the Watering Hole group can tell you, you are still on the island of Annwm (pronounced eNOOM or eNUM)), the name this place has had since beyond memory, and the name you would definitely know if you have lived your life here or have met a few Annwmians. It's a strange place with a reputation for strange happenings. The waters around the island are cold, deceptive, and merciless, and the Black Ocean makes travel to and from distant places difficult for all but the bravest and most skilled mariners. Yet people literally wash up on Annwm's shores with some regularity; there are some of these fortunates in every town and village. They are usually shocked to have arrived alive. This is because a great number of them died on the great landmass called The Confederacy across the waters to the West. Skae, Pyren, and Kurn tribes with access to the River Torrent or the Black Ocean itself often choose these saltwater roads to take them to the next life. Many are the people who died and were wrapped in fine cloths by their loved ones and sent off in a small craft at high tide (or perhaps knocked over the head and dumped in a harbour with the expectation that their corpses will wash away) only to regain life unexpectedly partway through the journey and then have to fight their way to Annwm's rocky shores. This is in addition to others who were shipwrecked in the regular way by ships run by mariners who were too brave and not quite skilled enough, or simply unlucky. Shipwrecks, incidentally, are major contributors to the island's economies since islanders are far too practical to let go to waste any usable item that they can harvest from a wreck. While the most common of Annwm's human and Fae wash-ups are Confederate, the Empire is also known here, and has established a settlement on one of the island's windswept corners.

Naturally, Annwm's original inhabitants form the dominant population of the island. They are a very loose and flexible conglomerate of numerous groups that have blended and re-blended over time until now they are roughly homogenous. When the Fae began to arrive in Annwm after the Plague they too integrated smoothly, with only minimal upheaval. The most warlike group are the Steadfasters from Steadfast Island where the political system remains largely feudal; the arrival of an invading Skae force ten years ago increased the level of bloodthirstiness. The Souls Landingers on the other hand are almost austere, and their practice of Nordinism is exacting and precise. The harbour town of Apple Vale is reputed to be a good place to have fun and get in trouble as well being as a hardworking person's best chance for employment outside of Ner Batin. Terms used to describe the Annwmian people include passionate, creative, fierce when necessary, and formidable, as well as dedicated to turning their differences into a source of strength. This strength has enabled them to withstand wave after wave of newcomers and invaders and stand largely intact, although often at great, great cost.

Annwm boasts a good number of settlements, ranging from hamlets with just a few families to the city of Ner Batin on the mountainous north-west corner below the peninsula, which has about ten thousand people in it. There are also countless tiny Confederate hamlets,

especially along the south coast where they tend to settle once washing up; some Confederate families have been in Annwm for generations. Still, neither of these groups of “new arrivals” are as numerous as the original Annwmians, who are (luckily) pretty good at living harmoniously with others, at least partially because of the precepts of the local religion, Nordinism. Additionally, the outpost called Empire’s Stand perches on the southwest corner.

There would have been many more people on Annwm if it hadn't been for the Devastation, the mysterious storm followed by a massive ocean wave that wracked the island in its entirety about a hundred years ago. The Devastation left about two creatures alive for every ten living creatures that had been there before: an overwhelming death rate. The first phase was a mysterious phenomenon that looked to some like natural disaster and to others like a war between elementals, but even though this was very destructive it paled in comparison to the ocean's Wave, which washed across the island destroying everything in its path and killing many times more people than it spared. There was great consternation about five years ago when the mysterious phenomena began to happen again, but these subsided almost as quickly as they had arisen and while there was another wave, it devastated only a relatively small area of Annwm on the eastern edge of its eastern peninsula. Nothing has been heard from anyone in that area since, and there have been no signs of life. Most of Annwm’s settlements have some ruins left from before the Devastation, and many colourful and disturbing tales of ghosts, spirits, and restless undead continue to circulate throughout Annwmian lore.

Settlements

Apple Vale: a small East Coast settlement of about 300 people who are sustained largely by the harbour, some agriculture, and a small but inventive group of artisans. Imagined point of departure for journeys.

Empire's Stand: population about 200; on Annwm’s southwest tip, about three and a half days' walk from Apple Vale along the south coast. Empire's Stand holds Annwm's largest Imperial society. They tried to claim this island in the name of the Empire but were unable to maintain any kind of hold, so they retreated to this Southwestern tip which is maintained as part outpost, part embassy, part garrison. Empire’s Stand was especially devastated by The Disaster, losing some of its barracks and weaponry in the flood but it also lost much of its wealth when the slave pens washed away. It has amassed enough companies several times in the last century to try to claim more land for the Empire, but while some miles have been gained peacefully through trade and negotiation progress is slow. Despite the many setbacks they have faced, these Imperials are fiercely proud of their civilization and heritage, holding tenaciously to the practices of the Empire. Many would say they are more Imperial than full citizens who were born, raised, and lived their lives in the heart of the Empire.

Grey Flats: about eleven days' walk from Apple Vale; a region at the very northern tip of Annwm about which little is known. While people did once live there and there are a number of strange stories about it, nothing has been heard of this place since The Disaster.

Holdfast: a very small place with an excellent hidden harbour and a tavern. About a day's walk from Apple Vale.

Ner Batin: population of about 5,000; about seven days' walk from Apple Vale. This is Annwm's largest centre: hub of trade, commerce, etc. It was devastated in The Disaster and much of the area is essentially a ghost city: ruined buildings and abandoned property loom throughout its

inland reaches, and while salvage teams continue to search these ruins for anything usable they increasingly find only their own deaths. But the city's waterfront core has been largely rebuilt and with great ingenuity so that most believe the city to be better than before, with most resources very accessible for most citizens and an economy that is the most thriving on the island. There is a large temple to Nordin here and the temple has an active membership, which may explain why each citizen of Ner Batin so consistently acquires according to her needs and gives according to her ability. Making sure each citizen has enough has resulted in a surplus of resources: there are no deficits here. Annwm's centres of learning, the Guild Houses, the Halls of Adjudication, and so forth are centralized in Ner Batin. Most people find this city an excellent place to live despite the crumbling structures at the outskirts, which have the reputation of being haunted.

Nullisia: Technically not a "settlement" but an area, the interior of Annwm is a place of mystery. Some say all the world's monsters were born here. None who have gone to Nullisia have ever come back.

The Point: a settlement of about 200 about three and a half days walk from Apple Vale.

Souls Landing: population about 1000 with a large proportion of elves; about one and a half days' walk from Apple Vale. Souls Landing is rumoured to be the very first seat of government on this earth, and judging from several ancient and impressive buildings that survived The Disaster almost untouched this could be true. The oldest structures look almost to have been made by creatures that ate the rocks, forming a vast honeycomb in the usually brittle slate and shale cliffs that are, only in Souls Landing, mysteriously resistant to damage. For centuries this small city has been inhabited by humans who turned the caverns into very comfortable living spaces, adding modifications as needed. When the elves came after the Plague and saw the strange beauty of the place they came in ever greater numbers to settle here, establishing an impressive library of elven lore here and attracting a number of fine elven artisans. They hope in the future to make it an even better haven for elves and their Fae kin and take care to live harmoniously and generously with the original human inhabitants.

Steadfast Island: population of 400 about four days' walk from Apple Vale plus sea transport; consists largely of fortress/castle and lands. Its fierce people survived The Disaster better than most of Annwm, but were conquered about twelve years ago by a desperate Confederate force which still holds power there - barely. There are constant reiver attacks on both sides and bloodshed is frequent. Charm, the chieftain-in-waiting of the Confederate force, is still missing after nine years. Chief Adamant continues to search for his son and heir. He has posted a rich reward for any news of Charm or proof of life.

Nordinism

The people here are not terribly different from people everywhere, working, playing, and sacrificing, destroying some things while building others. Some people are faithful, and others are less so. The Confederate religion has many adherents while NOSianism has distinctly fewer (see http://www.epoch-larp.ca/?page_id=217 for information on the Confederacy, the Empire, and other Epoch peoples), but the Nordinist way has existed in Annwm most consistently and perhaps longest, and its followers are the most plentiful here. There are also a great many people who follow no particular spiritual path at all, as there are those who shift among faiths

according to principles of their own, although these people risk falling afoul of their gods for their opportunistic "faith."

Nordinists venerate an ocean deity called Nordin who appears sometimes as a man and sometimes as a woman. In fact Nordin is both, a wedded couple who jointly rule the ocean realms along with some particularly ocean-influenced lands, including Annwm. The wedding rites of Norde and Norda made them each other's right hand so that each could rule with equal efficacy and in full harmony. During the handfasting, the couple clasped their right hands together, raised them up, and said the sacred words; no sooner had the words crossed their lips than a brilliant flash of light pierced the waves, the water whirled around them as it never had before, and some say a dolphin leapt over the raised hands; and in the blink of an eye the couple had one silver hand that was also two, and two silver hands that were also one. The emblem of Nordin is a silver hand that may for example hold a fish, a spear, a measure, or the weighing scales, or it may be open in greeting or clenched in a fist as befits the beliefs or intentions of the wearer. Dolphins are especially sacred to Nordin for that wedding day mystery, and now grave consequences befall anyone who harms a dolphin accidentally or on purpose. Many Nordinists will go through elaborate rituals to make amends if they think they have caused a dolphin any problems at all.

Nordin (they are now both known by only one name whether in male or female form, and whether appearing singly or together) rules all things ocean, from the darkest depths to the lightest mists, from the currents to the coral reefs. Nordin grants and withholds the ocean's bounty, controls the weather, and guards the passageway between the realms of life and death, body and mind, darkness and light, and presides as well over the magical. Perhaps because of Nordin's unique nature as two in one and one in two, Nordin is also a trickster who can seem open-handed and generous at one moment and vengeful or cruel the next. Many of the most faithful consider the Wave of a hundred years ago to have been a deliberate act of Nordin's to sweep away the dissent infecting Annwm. Nordin values devotion, however, and especially values such signs of devotion as monuments, altars, temples, and shrines, and blesses those who raise such monuments with the best fortune possible, although sometimes this fortune seems like misfortune to those experiencing it. Nordin is the first deity, but has as many divine brothers, sisters, and children as there are waves in the sea, for which reason the waves are often called Nordin's kin.

There are several powerful items connected with Nordin, including the magical sword The Answerer which grants victory to whosoever holds it with Nordin's blessing and which also compels the truth from anyone at whom the blade is pointed. There is also a metal-worked box called The Peacekeeper that was shattered long ago, and Nordin is the only one known to have any piece of it, specifically the lid and the key. There are many stories about how the box was shattered and which of the gods might have a piece of it secreted away. The Cauldron, though, is still intact, which is good because this is where the dead regain life; without it, Nordinists say, the first death would be the final death of all living people whether human or Fae. The Rod, finally, shows the right path and is the finder of the lost, the hidden, the veiled, or the never known.

One of the main stories about Nordin is the hostage story. At one point after the Peacekeeper shattered the gods required a hostage to secure peace, and Nordin volunteered. Initially the unrest grew worse now that there was no-one to oversee the ocean's harvest, the weather, or the passageway between life and death, and magic itself was out of control. But a fish came to Nordin to offer insight and slake Nordin's hunger, and when Nordin had finished eating the fish of wisdom he perceived that only he could restore the balance. So Nordin emerged and climbed again upwards. Wanting to see the aftermath, Nordin looked down at the

desperate upheaval below, was overcome with pity, grief and anger, and pulled down a shaft of lightning that tore her body apart and showered it and its divine powers all over the land, restoring life, peace, and bounty. With the great energy produced by this healing Nordin regenerated and continued his ascent: when much is given much is gained. Thus every year at the summer solstice Nordinists give gifts to the sea of food, of treasure, and also of brightly bound sheafs of reeds and yellow, red, or blue wildflowers, to show gratitude for Nordin's gifts and to promise to keep the balance. In many places in Annwm this ceremony takes place halfway through a ten-day festival.

Nordin's most well-known child in these parts is the god Sallas, who as a favoured daughter of Nordin is the overseeing ruler of the island of Annwm. Sallas is the owner of a magical herd of sheep which regenerates every day after she feasts on it every night; on some days these sheep mingle with Nordin's undersea cattle, which sometimes come to land to eat sweet grass. Sallas is a merry-maker who inherited much of her father's tricky nature; her favoured city is rumoured to be Apple Vale even though Ner Batin has a better Sallasian temple. She also owns a magical goblet made from the same materials that made the Cauldron, the Answerer, and the Rod. Under certain conditions the goblet compels truth, restores life, and brings to light the never known. Sallas' cloak of mist grants invisibility, and when she sees invaders or evil-doers approaching she wraps Annwm in her cloak of fog and hides it. She has the power to craft an illusory warfleet by sprinkling grass on water, and with this she has so far frightened off all enemies that were not obstructed by the mists.

Balance is the most important precept of Nordinism, which teaches that as the tides surge and recede while neither taking from nor adding to the volume of the oceans in the world, so it is necessary for those who have the most to give the most, while the most is owed to those who have least in the world or who have suffered greatly. While this principle seems brazenly clear it is not uncommon for specific Nordinist sects to interpret it so that those who have the most poverty are enjoined to give the most, or that those who have the least health are sent the most sickness. Luckily these sects are in the minority, but it behoves the faithful well to be careful about blindly following a Nordinist priestess or priest as not all interpretations of balance are equal, and the trickster face may emerge at any time. Priestesses of Nordin tend to be slightly more common than priests, and both are often gifted seers, but in exchange for a glimpse of one's future they require a fragment of one's past. Meanwhile, Nordinists who make their livings by the sea, such as merchant traders, fisher people, buccaneers, and the like will often have special rituals and practices to ensure Nordin's kindness. These are too varied in kind and method to list here.