

Ulfen

The days of raw pillage from the north are mostly over, as the Ulfen can no longer pass through the Arch of Aroden into the Inner Sea unaccosted. At the same time, the Ulfen are hired as sailors, marines, and bodyguards widely throughout Avistan, perhaps because they combine great seamanship, ruthlessness, and exotic looks. It has become quite fashionable in Qadira and elsewhere near the Isle of Kortos to hire an Ulfen bodyguard for his towering height, his pale skin and hair, and his vile stench, which is considered a mark of distinction among bodyguards in southern lands.

The Ulfen themselves scratch a living in the north. They have a reputation abroad for being strong, dumb, and quiet, as well as having strange accents and smelly furs. Most Ulfen are quite tall, with men starting at 6 feet and the women just a few inches shorter. Their skin is pale and their hair blond, straw brown, or red. Both men and women wear it long and braided, with the women prone to more elaborate braids. Men usually wear beards.

Ulfen men and women set great store by personal appearance, valuing their flowing locks, tight braids, and well-kept furs of ermine, mink, and fox. They wear necklaces of amber, carved narwhal horn, and mammoth ivory, as well as finely-worked bronze and silver in a braided style. They consider themselves the handsomest men and women in all Avistan, and the damnable thing about it, to other peoples, is that they are often right.

Ulfen men from the Land of the Linnorm Kings fulfill the stereotype of sailors and traders; Ulfen from the Irrisen lands ruled by Baba Yaga are more raiders and riders than seamen, although they share cultural ties. Both speak a variety of Skald, the tongue of the distant north, and write their language using a runic alphabet taken from the dwarves. Skald speakers and dwarven speakers can understand one another with quite a bit of difficulty.

Ulfen traditionally keep thralls—slaves whose period of service ends in a set amount of time. Children born to thralls are always born free, and thralls can file a complaint against a harsh or unfair master (which shames the master, certainly, but also runs the risk of a master's fury). Thralls are either captured in battle or condemned to service by a *thingmar*, a court of justice of the Ulfen by their peers, overseen by an elder jarl or chief. Even a chief or jarl can be condemned as a thrall if he has foresworn an oath, killed a child, or betrayed his shield-brothers.

Ulfen men are fond of competitions both athletic and alcoholic. Their athletic contests often occur at the approach of winter or the start of spring and include climbing ice walls, hurling timbers of various sizes, ax throwing, sled pulls, and races on foot and on snowshoes. Swimming is not a skill that the Ulfen value, although sailing and rowing are. The drinking competitions happen during great feasts, when the Ulfen men boast of their ability to down kegs or

even barrels of mead, ale, and cider. Outsiders tend to take away from this a view that Ulfen are boors and louts, which is not entirely true. Their boorish loutishness tends to be confined to special occasions—Ulfen men who try this approach on other than feast days find that Ulfen women mock them mercilessly. Few repeat the experience.

The women are often powerful druids and priestesses of Desna or Torag. A few maidens each year also go on the Mountain Ride, a week-long hunt to tame hippogriffs and pegasi on the high peaks of the Kodar Mountains east of Jol or the Tusk Mountains in the Realm of the Mammoth Lords. Most maidens see this as a chance to escape their parents and wander alpine meadows in the early summer before they settle down, but each year a few of them actually succeed in bringing back a tame mount. These Ulfen women are called the “wind sisters,” or sometimes simply “sky maidens,” and they are messengers, couriers, and heralds between the various kings, princelings, and jarls of the North. With their great speed, they hop even from the mainland to the many islands to the west, from Halgrim to Jol and sometimes risking the bitter skies over Irrisen to reach the few Ulfen there not enslaved by evil. Without them, the remote settlements of Ulfen lands would be even more isolated. These wind sisters also form an important defense against the arrival of dragons and linnorms, providing crucial warning time to secure livestock, prepare defenses, and take refuge against these marauders.

The men are often warriors of some sort and worshipers of Erastil, Gorum, or Torag, although they have druids and priests of Desna among their numbers as well. As a group, they are more adventurous than most—the wilderness of the Linnorm Kings and Irrisen is too thinly settled for anyone to live long who cannot prosper in the wild and find food and shelter when bad weather sets in.

Most Ulfen are not heroes, of course, but rather trappers, hunters, farmers, and fisherfolk, according to the season and their own family heritage. A few in each generation become skalds—half-wise, half-drunken singers and jesters to the great men and women of the tribes. These skalds tell the sagas that record Ulfen history, and they are often the most literate in a village or town. Unlike the wind sisters, they have no immunity from reprisals, although most consider it unlucky to lower oneself to answer a skald with personal combat. Defeating a skald in a drinking contest, on the other hand, is considered quite a coup.

In general, dueling and feuding are popular pastimes among the Ulfen, with great emphasis on personal honor and the value of a sworn oath. Insults are usually answered with ax and shield pushes, and while dueling is always considered purely a temporary argument, fought to the first blood and forgotten as soon as it is over, feuding is a more serious thing. In a feud among the Ulfen, entire families and clans can go to war over a conflict as simple as the proper way to mend nets or the rights to a particular salmon spawning ground. Sheep and cattle raiding are also popular pastimes.

Finally, no discussion of the Ulfen would be complete without mention of the high incidence of lycanthropy among them. Werewolves, werebears, and wereravens are most common, but selkies (wereseals), werewolverines, and even werefoxes are not unknown among them. The curse of lycanthropy is not considered an especially dishonorable state among the Ulfen, but simply a mark of favor from nature spirits. Those who suffer from it and who cannot control their violent urges are required to stay in a longhouse or spirit house during the full moon, which is barred with silver and stocked with enough food to satiate even the largest appetite.

Ulfen Singing

In the traveler's tales of visitors to the Lands of the Linnorm Kings and Irrisen, at some point the storyteller always mentions the singing. It's true that the Ulfen love to sing while they work, a trait that comes from their sailing and rowing culture, but they also sing while weaving, cooking, tanning leather, smoking fish, walking between villages, or herding home a flock of sheep.

And they sing when they fight. The Ulfen warrior's distinctive song is always completely his own. The wind sisters might sing to urge their pegasi to fly faster and guide the lance, while the berserk greataxe-wielding raider might sing of blood and a widow's tears, but each warrior knows the song that carries him through battle. Some foes find it unsettling, while dwarves seem to consider it fairly normal. If you hear songs of blood, archery, feathered death, and glory, you know the Ulfen are ambushing you.

Lands of the Linnorm Kings

During the Age of Enthronement, the dragon-headed longships of the Linnorm Kings appeared out of the Steaming Sea, and no coastal kingdom was safe from their depredations. Since then, the Ulfen people of this northern realm have settled and grown more civilized, but the spirit of adventure and the lust for plunder still burns strong in their hearts

The Linnorm Kings rule, in name at least, Avistan's extreme northwest—a frigid, rugged land of rich taiga, treacherous marshes, and great boulder-strewn moraines left by departed glaciers. The coastline is bracing and cool, and it rains year-round, with deep winter snows. Further to the east, the land grows increasingly colder, up to the frozen borders of the Witch Queen of Irrisen, who seized the eastern reaches of this domain 1,400 years ago and shows no intention of returning them.

The Linnorm Kings themselves are a collection of petty rulers who dominate the few large settlements in the region. They take their names from the tradition that only a king can carry the head of a linnorm through the city's gates. That head is usually then displayed above the king's throne as a sign of prowess and power. Given the difficulties of hunting the linnorm, the number of active

kings at any time varies, from as few as two to as many as seven.

Life is hard for the natives of this realm. What land is not frozen marsh is heavily seasoned with stones and boulders, and starvation is often a grim specter in the depths of winter. As a result, many able-bodied adults engage in trade in the summer months, bringing from the south salted fish, pelts, warm woolen clothing, and various oddities of the Inner Sea. Such travelers also pack their axes and small, circular shields, in case an opportunity to plunder presents itself. Every citizen is a Viking at heart, and distant lands are less dangerous than his cold homeland.

The land itself is dotted with small, fortified steadings and a few large stone-walled cities. Even just a few miles from the major cities does the land become wilderness. The beasts come up to the city walls themselves at night, pawing even at the gates of Kalsgard. The lands are a hunter's paradise, with herds of rich game and predators.

It is not, however, the creatures of the wild that make this land so perilous. The wilderness between the steadings is also dominated by the fey, for a rift between Golarion and the First World runs over the hills claimed by the Linnorm Kings. The faerie peoples are common here, along with gnomes, trolls, and nature spirits. There are enchanted animals that can both plead for their lives and utter dire curses against their attackers, and there are more deadly creatures as well. All but the most adventurous keep close to well-known trails and do not tempt either fate or the whimsy of the fey.

Government: The number of Linnorm Kings varies over the centuries, and only Kalsgard has an unbroken line of heroes stretching back before the Winter War. Each king is considered the ultimate law within his domain, and conflicts between the petty kingdoms are solved either by arbitration, the paying of wergild, or tests of adventure by the various kings' champions.

Svienn Blood-Eagle is the oldest and most powerful of the current kings, and the skalds whisper that soon he will step down and make the journey to Valenhall in faroff Arcadia. He is only waiting for a suitable candidate to come through his gates, bearing the traditional head of a linnorm. Jockeying has already begun among the younger warrior princes, seeking both allies in court and hunting the wilderness for the elusive beasts.

Kalsgard: Kalsgard, on the northern bank of the Rimeflow River, is the largest settlement among the Linnorm Kings, and the seat of government of Svienn Blood-Eagle. It is the most cosmopolitan of the Linnorm holdings, and hosts a diverse population of native Ulfen, dwarves, gnomes, and a variety of traders from Varisa and points south.

Bildt: Bildt is ruled by Ingrimundr the Unruly, a brawling, argumentative leader who publicly condemns the soft living of his southern brothers. Bildt is second only to Kalsgard in

the quality of its shipyards, and many independent captains and second sons of old families still make raids out of the city as Ingrimundr turns a blind eye to their activities and takes a share of their profits.

Halgrim: Situated on the Ironbound Archipelago, Halgrim is led by a female king (the term is used for both genders) named White Estrid, an albino warrioress with snow-white hair and pale blue eyes. Estrid does not possess the traditional linnorm head hanging over her throne, but instead has a live linnorm coiled up behind it. The linnorm does not speak, save to confirm that yes, it had been defeated fairly by Estrid, and has traded its service for its life. The creature is rarely referred to, but when mentioned, it is called simply “Estrid’s Pet.” Estrid herself led a fleet of 15 longships in a raid against the Nidalese port at Nisroch 4 years ago, slipped through a Chelaxian blockade at the Arch of Aroden, and put in triumphantly at Absalom with her plunder.

Ice Spire: For centuries, the Linnorm Kings, as well as their neighbors in Irrisen, have obsessed over an ancient ruin called Ice Spire. Rising from the frozen plains between Algidheart and Trollheim, Ice Spire was once the lair of an ancient Linnorm named Vyalldahun. While the spire rises jaggedly to a mere 30–40 feet, frozen steps lead down into level after level of monster-infested dungeons and ice caves still reeking of its former draconic occupant. No one has ever delved far enough below Ice Spire to find its bottom, although explorers who lived to tell of their experience say the deeper halls and chambers take on a vastly different, alien appearance.

Jol: Jol is one of the inland kingdoms, nestled in the rugged uplands south of the Grungir Forest. Its master is Opir Eightfingers, who as a young man stumbled into the city from a snowstorm with the head of a linnorm lashed to his back. The rotted state of the head might have been due to his travails, but certain unwise individuals whisper that Eightfingers is more scavenger than hero. As a result, his rule is more tenuous than the others, with local steadings regularly ignoring his pronouncements.

Trollheim: Trollheim has no current king, and the space above its throne is empty. Its castellan, Freyr Darkwine, is the ruler and commander of a large military force, which patrols the frigid territories along the haunted border with Irrisen. The patrols, known collectively as the Blackravens, hunt ice trolls in particular, but any natives of the Witch Queen’s lands are fair game.

Linnorms

Linnorms are the original dragons of Golarion, their positions supplanted by the arrival of the “true” dragons millennia ago. These original dragons are immense, scaled serpents, with two forward legs and rudimentary wings located directly behind the head. They are capable of magical flight and glide effortlessly among tangled pines

and over twisted boulder-strewn terrain. While dangerous, linnorms lack the ultimate power of their younger cousins.

Linnorms make their homes in the wilderness of the kingdoms and apparently move easily across the rift between this plane and the First World of the fey. In addition, although black-hearted and treacherous beasts, they benefit from good relationships with fey creatures, such that a hunter might find unexpected obstacles when questing after a linnorm.

The variety of linnorms is as yet undetermined, as the Ulfen people choose to identify them chiefly by where they were slain. Old sages speak of snow, slate, mire, and tagia linnorms, but whether these are separate species or merely the same type of creature in different habitats remains unknown.