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UNIVERSE • WAR • LORE • HEROES • CULTURE

Undying Legions

THE LADY OF BATS

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THE DESERT IS THE FIRST ENEMY

THE WORLD IS WRITTEN IN BLOOD AND MEMORY



Long before her name became associated with the courts of the dead, Serella lived in a small house at the edge of lands that barely considered her one of their own.

Serella had been born in a nearby village and was never welcome there.

There was something in her appearance that unsettled people. Some disliked the cast of her features. Others spoke of her dark eyes or of marks on her skin that were taken for signs of witchcraft. No accusation was ever made openly. None was needed. People simply kept their distance. Children stopped playing when Serella passed. Conversations shortened around her.

Young men found reasons to look elsewhere when marriages were discussed. Even those who dismissed the old stories preferred not to tempt chance.

In time, Serella understood what was expected of her and left. She built a small house beyond the last cultivated fields, close to the tree line, and there Serella spent much of her life alone. Serella returned to the village only for what Serella could not provide for herself, and rarely stayed longer than necessary.



Solitude became ordinary. Then, one night, someone came to her door.

The man standing outside could barely remain upright. Serella recognized the lord of those lands beneath the blood on his clothes.

For decades he had ruled from a fortress north of the valley. His house was old, his habits private, and few among the villagers had ever seen him closely. That night, much of the valley was hunting him. Rumors about their lord had circulated for years. Animals found drained of blood. Travellers who vanished. Servants who entered the fortress and were not seen again. Eventually suspicion hardened into certainty. Their lord was a vampire. The villages had risen against him. His stronghold was burning. Men had taken to the roads. He had escaped wounded and needed shelter before dawn.

Serella could have called for help. She could have gone to the village, and for once they might have welcomed her among them. Instead, Serella let him inside. The vampire quickly understood that Serella owed little loyalty to those hunting him. He also understood that he needed more than silence.

He offered her a bargain. If Serella hid him until he had recovered enough to leave the valley, he would use the arts of his long life to grant her whatever Serella desired: Gold. Land. Youth. Revenge. Serella asked for none of them. Serella wanted to be desired. The vampire kept his word.

The magic remade the face that years of contempt had taught her to hate. The features that once drew whispers were replaced by a beauty difficult to ignore. Age and sickness would no longer touch her. Alongside those gifts came the thirst of the blood he had given her.

When Serella returned to the world,
no one recognized the woman
who had once
lived beyond
the fields. For

the first time, people looked at her and did not look away. Men sought excuses to approach her. Others travelled from places Serella had never seen after hearing of the strange beauty who lived alone in the valley. They brought gifts, verses, promises, family names they believed impossible to refuse.

For a time, it was enough. Then came the first man who stayed. He lived with her for months. They ate together, rode through the woods and spoke far into the night. He saw rooms in her house that no visitor had entered and heard stories about a childhood Serella rarely mentioned.

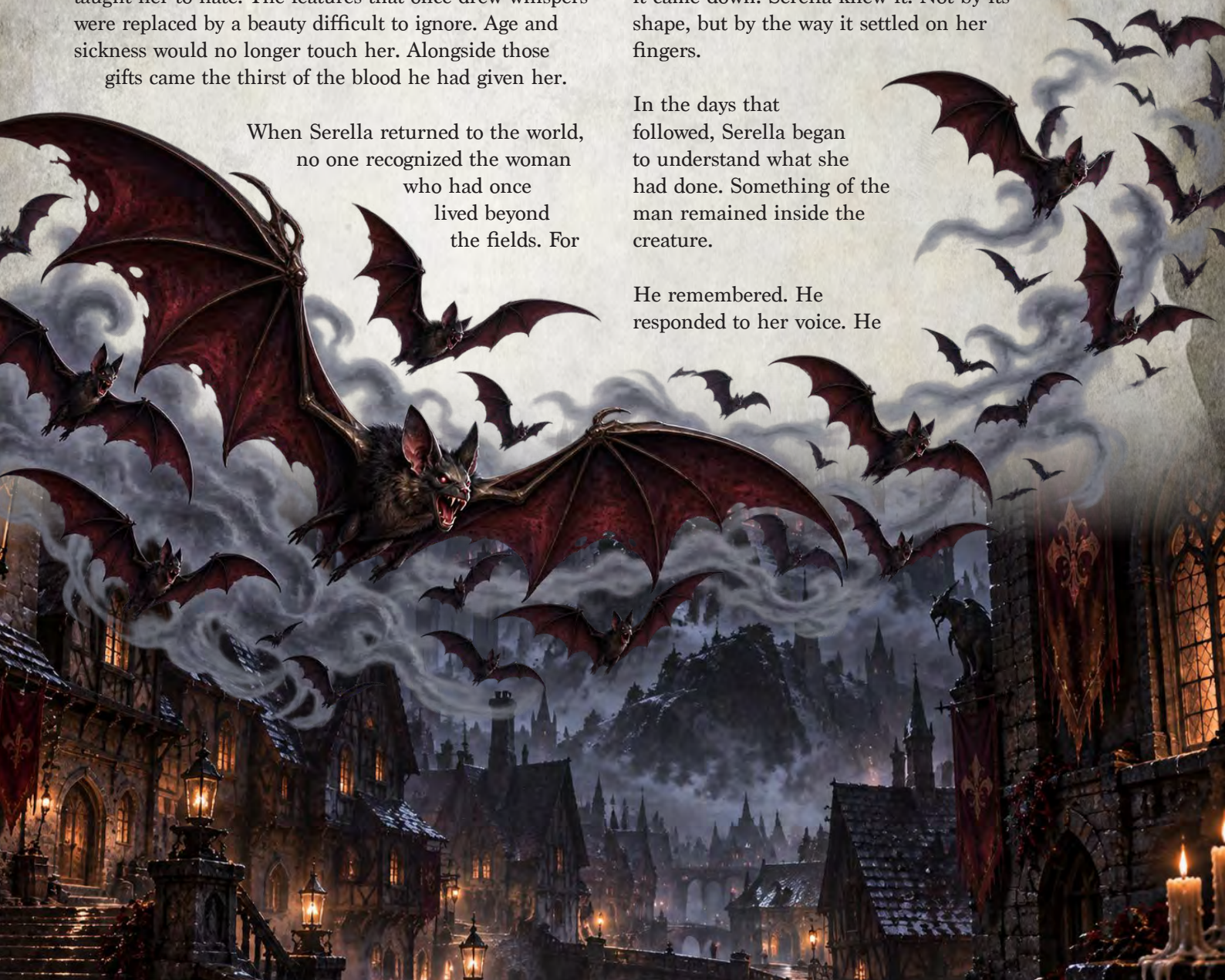
For the first time, company ceased to feel temporary. Then one morning, he told her he meant to leave. There was no betrayal. No other woman. He simply wished to return home. Serella asked him to stay a few more days. Then another week. Then another. Eventually, he insisted. That night, Serella tried to stop him.

Serella had learned much from the vampire who had transformed her. Among those teachings were rites meant to bind a soul to a place, an object, even another body. Serella did not intend to kill him. Serella only wanted to hold him there long enough for him to change his mind.

By morning, the man was dead. A bat hung from one of the beams above the room. It remained there for hours, watching her. When Serella held out her hand, it came down. Serella knew it. Not by its shape, but by the way it settled on her fingers.

In the days that followed, Serella began to understand what she had done. Something of the man remained inside the creature.

He remembered. He responded to her voice. He



reacted to familiar rooms and to objects that had once belonged to him. When Serella spoke his name, the bat turned towards her.

Then Serella discovered something else. Serella could feed from what remained within him. Not from his blood. From his memories. A face. A summer morning.

A song. Small pieces of a life, taken one at a time.

Serella never let him go. The next time was not an accident. Suitors, lovers and companions came and went over the years. Some remained for weeks. Others for decades. Some loved her. Others were drawn only by what they saw and understood too late what lay behind it.

They were free to enter. Leaving was different. Not every bat in her company was once a lover. There are musicians among them, soldiers, confidants and travellers whose presence Serella came to value. People who found a place in her life and made the mistake of believing they could leave it when they wished. Her court grew. Dozens of small bodies gathered in the rafters of her chambers. Then hundreds.

Serella knows each one. She knows which prefer the warmth near the fire. Which hide when strangers arrive. Which still answer to names they have not heard from any other mouth in centuries. The younger ones retain much of what they were. The oldest remember very little. Years of feeding have worn away

their former lives. Some no longer remember their parents. Others have forgotten where they were born. Many lost the memory of their own faces long ago Serella remains. Always the same. That is why they follow her. That is why they come when Serella calls. And that is why they throw themselves at anyone who tries to harm her. Perhaps they once hated her. Some may still. But for the oldest among them, the woman who imprisoned them is also the last thing they still recognize. Everything else is gone.

Serella tends to them with a care few would expect from something like her. Serella feeds them, treats their wounds and lets them sleep among the folds of her clothes or in the beams above her bed. Sometimes Serella takes one into her hands and speaks a name that no one else remembers. Then Serella returns it to the swarm. Visitors to her domain usually assume the bats are trained beasts or creatures summoned through sorcery. Serella never corrects them. Long ago, Serella learned what it meant to enter a room and know that nobody wanted her there. Serella no longer enters any room alone. When Serella walks, hundreds of wings follow. When Serella sleeps, her court hangs above her. When someone comes too close, the ceiling stirs.

In the end, Serella received exactly what Serella had asked for that night in the house by the woods. Serella would never be without company again.

...And none of them would ever leave her.

SERELLA, MISTRESS OF BATS

A powerful vampire with absolute command over the creatures of the night. Serella surrounds herself with swarms of bats, using them to hunt, harass, and overwhelm those who stand in her way.





NEVERDUSK EMPIRE

THE MAKING OF A GRYPHON RIDER



Among the honours a knight of the Neverdusk Empire may earn, few are as distinctive as a place among the Gryphon Riders.

Their mounts are visible from miles away above a marching column, and even soldiers who have never seen one at close quarters know the effect of a gryphon charge from the air. The path to joining their ranks, however, begins long before a knight first takes the saddle.

It begins with an egg. Don Carlos de Zamarriaga was still a young knight when he was granted permission to undertake the final trial of his training. He had spent years in instruction, proved himself in the saddle and served alongside Imperial cavalry on patrols and exercises. None of it yet entitled him to wear the insignia of a Gryphon Rider. For that, he had to return from the mountains carrying the egg of a wild gryphon.

The trial was an old one. For generations, candidates had been sent into the high country where wild pairs built their nests. Each aspirant had to find one, reach it and bring back a viable egg intact. From that point onward, responsibility passed to the Royal Beastmasters. It took Carlos six days to find a nest. It lay on a narrow ledge above a gorge that spent much of the day in shadow. He had followed the signs left by a breeding pair for several days: the remains of prey, feathers caught between rocks, deep claw marks on shelves no ground animal could have reached.

**FAST, IMPOSING, AND DEADLY
ON THE CHARGE, THIS BEAST
BRINGS THE AUTHORITY OF
NEVERDUSK WHEREVER THE
BATTLE IS FIERCEST**

He waited until both adults had left. Then he began the climb. Years later, he remembered the descent more clearly. He had reached the nest and chosen an egg when he heard the first cry above the gorge. One of the adults was coming back. Carlos had already secured the egg against his

chest when the gryphon dropped towards the ledge. There was no time to look for another route. He went down the way he had come, shielding the egg whenever he could and clinging to the rock with one hand while the gryphon struck from above. He lost his shield first. His sword went soon after. Both vanished into the gorge.

By the time he reached the lower pass, one sleeve had been torn open from shoulder to elbow and his hands were bleeding from the rock. The egg was unbroken.

Three days later, he presented himself before the Royal Beastmasters. He returned without his sword, his shield or much of the equipment he had carried into the mountains. He handed over the egg. The Beastmasters accepted it.

Once an egg entered the Imperial aviaries, it ceased to have any connection to the knight who had recovered it. The Beastmasters oversaw incubation, feeding and training. They decided which animals were suited to war, which should be kept for breeding, and which would never accept a rider. The knight who had brought in the egg held no claim over the gryphon that might hatch from it.

Carlos received his insignia and returned to service. In the years that followed he fought as other knights of Neverdusk did: first under older officers, later with men of his own under command. He was wounded, promoted and sent from one frontier to another. He saw fortresses, winter camps and

campaigns that ended with far less glory than had been promised when they began. He never asked what had become of the egg. Some never hatched. Some produced animals unsuited to training. Even among those that reached adulthood, only a small number were ever paired with the knight who had recovered them.

Several years passed before Carlos was summoned back to the royal aviaries. By then, he was no longer the young man who had climbed into the gorge. A Beastmaster led him into one of the large training yards, where several adult gryphons were being prepared for their first assignments. Carlos did not recognise his. He only knew when the Beastmaster told him. The animal was enormous, broad across the chest, with dark feathers along its forelimbs and a thin scar near the base of its beak. Carlos stood watching it for some time, looking for something familiar. There was nothing. The Beastmaster told him that this gryphon had hatched from the egg Carlos had brought down from the mountains. He would be allowed to try to ride it. That was all.

The first attempts went badly. The gryphon tolerated its keepers, but became aggressive whenever Carlos came too close. Twice he was forced to leave the enclosure. On another occasion he managed to place a hand on the harness before a sweep of the gryphon's wing threw him into the fence. His years of service carried little weight there. His name carried none. After watching

NEVERDUSK EMPIRE WAR GRYPHON

A mighty imperial hero takes to the skies mounted on a magnificent war gryphon. Fast, imposing, and deadly on the charge, this beast brings the authority of Neverdusk Empire wherever the battle is fiercest.

Their mounts are visible from miles away above a marching column, and even soldiers who have never seen one at close quarters know the effect of a gryphon charge from the air.



several of these attempts, one of the Beastmasters finally told him what Carlos had already begun to understand. Bringing back the egg had earned him a place among the Gryphon Riders. It had not earned him this animal.

Carlos returned the next day. And the day after that. He stopped trying to mount. For several weeks he did little more than enter the yard and remain there. He learned which movements unsettled the gryphon, when it was irritated and when it simply wanted distance. He learned the difference between the stillness of a calm animal and the stillness that came before a strike.

Slowly, details began to seem familiar. The way it lowered its head before moving forward. A quick twitch of one wing when something entered its field of vision. The few seconds of complete stillness before it lunged.

Carlos had seen those movements before, years earlier, while clinging to a cliff with an egg strapped against his chest. He began to remember the adult that had defended the nest. At the time, it had been little more than an obstacle between him and the end of his trial. With distance, he understood the encounter differently. The gryphon had simply been defending its young. The day Carlos finally took the saddle was an ordinary one. There was no ceremony, and no audience beyond the Beastmasters and a handful of aviary hands. The gryphon stood still while the last straps were

checked. Carlos waited. At the Beastmaster's signal, he mounted. The animal turned its head towards him. For a few seconds, neither moved. Then the gryphon opened its wings.

FEW HONOURS ARE AS DISTINCTIVE AS A PLACE AMONG THE GRYPHON RIDERS

Years had passed since Don Carlos de Zamarriaga had carried that egg down from the mountains. Now they took to the air together.

Among the Gryphon Riders of the Neverdusk Empire, it is considered a rare distinction for a knight to serve on the same gryphon whose egg he once recovered during his final trial. Some riders keep a fragment of the shell.

The Beastmasters preserve small pieces when an egg hatches, and an old custom allows the rider to receive one at the end of training. Most are kept in boxes, family reliquaries or hidden compartments among a knight's equipment. Carlos keeps his beneath his breastplate. He does not believe it offers protection. He keeps it because it reminds him where his gryphon came from, and how long the road between the nest and the saddle really was.





THE SOLARIAN FORCE

THE DESERT IS THE FIRST ENEMY

On Kharif-9, the sand could remain suspended in the air for days.

It was not a storm in the usual sense. The finest particles lingered in the lower atmosphere, forming a red haze that reduced visibility, coated lenses and worked its way into any mechanism that had not been properly sealed.

During the Aram Offensive, Battery 17 of the Solarian Force took nine days to cross ground that would have required less than two elsewhere.

Two transports were lost to cooling failures. A third was abandoned after dust damaged its feed system. Optical sights had to be stripped and cleaned several times a day.

The enemy had not fired a shot.

For troops assigned to the driest inhabited worlds, such conditions are nothing unusual. There, the desert is not merely the ground on which a battle is fought.

It is part of the battle itself.

WAR AT LONG DISTANCE

Human expansion produced many worlds that could be called habitable only in the broadest sense.

They could support permanent settlements, mining operations, industry and limited agriculture, but little else resembled the environments in which human societies had first developed.

On desert worlds, populations tended to gather around whatever resources the planet could provide. Subterranean aquifers, extraction stations, reactors, mines, spaceports and industrial complexes might be separated by hundreds of kilometres of empty ground.

War followed the same geography.

An army could hold one city and still stand several days from the next position worth defending.

Supply routes became military objectives. Fuel depots could matter as much as fortified positions. A pumping station might determine the course of an offensive before the main engagement had even begun. Water itself had to be counted like ammunition.

The distances involved favoured movement above occupation. Units able to advance, regroup and remain operational over long periods kept the initiative. Forces tied too closely to fixed bases soon found themselves constrained by them.

On many desert worlds, holding ground was not always an advantage. Being able to leave it often mattered more.

TROOPS FOR THE EMPTY WORLDS

The first formations deployed to such planets carried much the same equipment as the rest of the Solarian Force.

It did not remain that way for long.

Dust damaged weapon actions, feed mechanisms and electronic components. Heat reduced the endurance of soldiers and vehicles alike. Exposed metal could become dangerous to handle within hours.

Adaptation began in the field.

Additional filters appeared on engines and breathing systems. Weapons were covered whenever they were not in use. Optics received protective shutters. Outer garments changed to reduce exposure to direct sunlight. Personal water reserves increased.

Eventually, these improvisations became standard equipment for units expected to spend prolonged periods in desert theatres.

Their methods changed as well.

Columns spread out to reduce their vulnerability to artillery and aerial observation. Patrols operated farther from established bases. Positions were prepared quickly and abandoned without ceremony.

Navigation, supply discipline and equipment maintenance could become as important as marksmanship.

A soldier stranded fifty kilometres from the nearest column did not need enemy fire to be in danger.

ON MANY DESERT WORLDS,
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BEING ABLE TO LEAVE IT OFTEN
MATTERED MORE

Veteran desert units developed strict routines as a result.

Every depot was logged. Every water source was marked. Every vehicle leaving a column was expected to know the next rendezvous point, even if communications failed. On those worlds, survival depended on keeping the chain between one unit and the next intact.

GUNS THAT CANNOT STAY STILL

Artillery changed even more radically.

Across open desert, there was little vegetation, urban cover or broken terrain in which to conceal a battery. A position invisible from ground level could still be obvious to aerial reconnaissance or orbital surveillance. Once the guns fired, concealment became harder still.



Early campaigns showed that a conventional battery might deliver devastating fire for several minutes and then become one of the most important targets on the battlefield.

Mobility became the answer.

Guns began travelling with the columns instead of remaining far behind them.

A battery would move into a surveyed position, deploy, calculate a firing solution and deliver a limited number of salvos.

Then it would leave.

Sometimes the vehicles were already moving before the last rounds reached their targets.

BATTERY 17 HAD LEARNED
THIS KIND OF WARFARE LONG
BEFORE KHARIF-9. ITS CREWS
CALLED IT "LONG WALK"

Ammunition and support elements travelled separately whenever possible, reducing the chance that a single strike could destroy both the guns and the supplies needed to keep them firing.

The next position might lie several kilometres away.

Then the process began again: Fire. Move. Resupply. Fire again.

A battery was no longer judged only by the volume of fire it could produce. What mattered just as much was how quickly it could disappear afterwards.

BATTERY 17

Battery 17 had learned this kind of warfare long before Kharif-9. Its crews called it "Long Walk". The name never appeared in official records, and no one seemed entirely certain where it had started. Some claimed it came from an earlier campaign. Others maintained that it simply referred to what happened whenever a gun vehicle broke down far from the column.

During the Aram Offensive, the battery was attached to a force advancing towards a chain of extraction stations in the north of the continent.

Enemy troops had fortified the industrial sites and placed observers throughout the surrounding desert.

The first Solarian units quickly learned that remaining in one place for too long invited counter-battery fire.

Long Walk adapted by refusing to stay anywhere.

For four days, none of its firing positions remained occupied for more than twenty minutes.

The guns fired from shallow depressions, rocky ground and, when necessary, directly from the line of advance. Crews loaded. Fire-control systems corrected. The order came through. The battery fired. Then the vehicles moved again.



By the time enemy fire reached the coordinates provided by its observers, Long Walk had usually gone.

All that remained were wheel marks, spent casings and empty ground.

VERY LITTLE REMAINED OF THE CAMP BEYOND TRACKS IN THE SAND. BY MIDDAY, THE WIND HAD BEGUN TO ERASE THEM

The engagement became a pursuit in which the two sides rarely saw one another. Observers located the guns. Coordinates were transmitted. Enemy artillery responded. Battery 17 was already several kilometres away.

THE LOGIC OF THE DESERT

These worlds have produced distinctive equipment, specialised troops and vehicles designed to remain functional under conditions that would quickly ruin standard matériel.

The greater change, however, has been doctrinal. The desert punishes immobility. It punishes unnecessary weight. It punishes careless logistics. It punishes any force that depends too heavily on communications that may vanish in the middle of a storm.

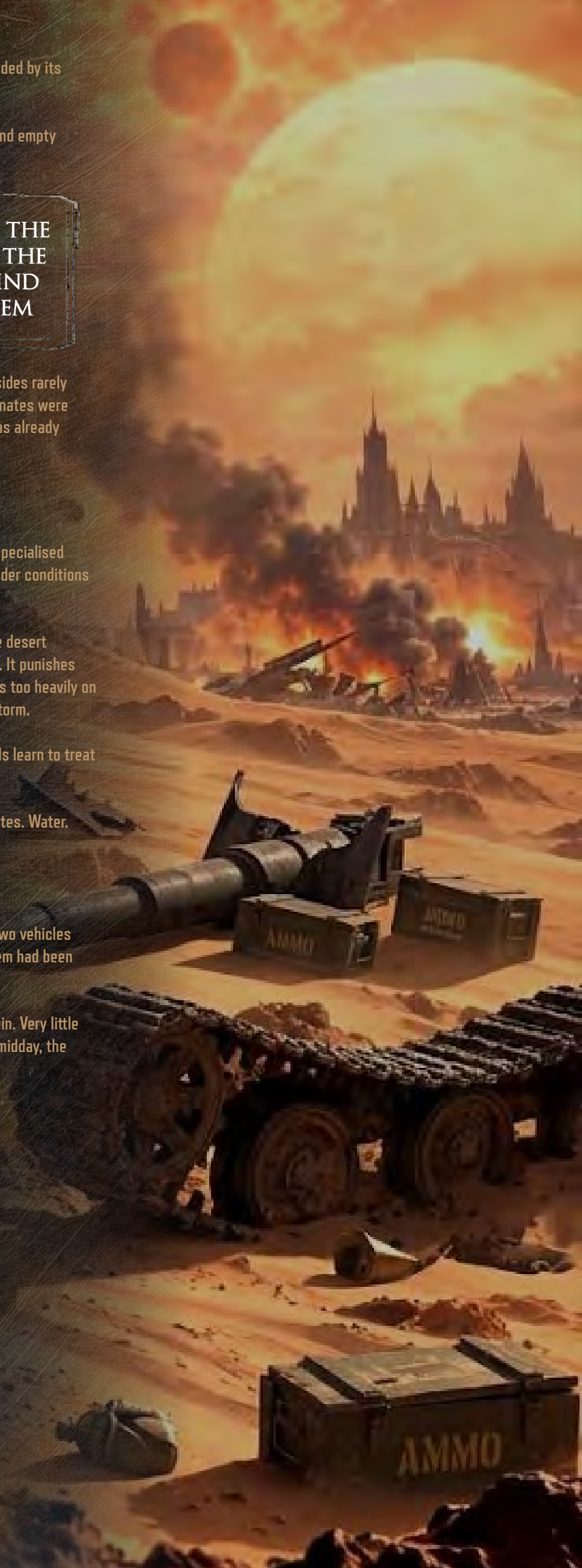
Units that survive repeated campaigns on such worlds learn to treat territory differently.

They do not try to hold every kilometre. They hold routes. Water. Fuel. Information... And the ability to keep moving.

Battery 17 continued north after the battle of Aram.

Its guns had fired for six days without interruption. Two vehicles required major repairs, and nearly every optical system had been dismantled and cleaned more than once.

At first light the next morning, the column moved again. Very little remained of the camp beyond tracks in the sand. By midday, the wind had begun to erase them.



TSF DESERT TROOPS



TSF DESERT TROOPS

Trained to operate in extreme heat, dust, and hostile terrain, the Desert Troops are seasoned warriors accustomed to fighting where others struggle simply to survive. Their endurance and adaptability make them invaluable in the harshest theatres of war.



TSF DESERT TROOPS COMMAND SQUAD

Veteran officers and specialists lead the Desert Troops through the most unforgiving operations. The Command Squad brings discipline and coordination to these hardened soldiers, keeping the unit effective even when conditions turn against them.



TSF HECATE

Heavy firepower is now on the move. The Hecate is a mobile artillery vehicle designed to support advancing Solarian forces with devastating long-range bombardments. Able to reposition as the battle develops, it brings destructive fire exactly where the front line needs it most.

ONE SIN FOR SEVEN KINGDOMS

STARS A FLAME



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