



# GREEN CLOAKS

## EXPANDED PLANETARY LORE

### – ARDHEIM –



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# The Planet Ardheim: an Overview

## **Ardheim**

*Pronunciation: AARD-hime*

*Name of the people: Ardheimian (sing.) / Ardheimians (pl.)*

A planet of two very different sides, Ardheim boasts some of the most dense and richly forested areas of the galaxy around its equator, and uninhabitable frozen tundra at the poles. There is no middle ground and the one gives way to the other in stark contrast. It was colonised in 4865, after years of testing and sample-taking to ensure habitability, by the scientific team and pioneers led by Professor Matthias Blake, who landed in dropships filled with all they would need to not only survive but also build the first structures deep in the forests. As time went on they found that one genus of tree native to Ardheim had particularly hardy wood that would absorb the strikes of axes or saws and blunt their blades quickly, and once they were able to dropship more capable felling machinery to the planet they began using these trees to build their structures. They named this tree Járnrót, “*Ironroot*”.

Today, Ardheim is famed for its cities built within the forest, and it has strong alliances and trade agreements with its neighbouring smaller, colder planet Rossi. Its pioneering history has created a culture of people who place a focus on survival, practicality and loyalty. Due to its back-to-basics beginnings, the earliest Ardheimians could not rely on firepower, so instead trained with “old-fashioned” military tactics: shields and melee weapons. Although many of them excel at ranged combat, producing some of the finest snipers of the Terran Sovereignty Army, a significant number of Ardheimians excel at shieldwall tactics, skirmishing in heavily wooded terrain, and guerrilla tactics. The most famous city of Ardheim, and one of its oldest, is Kingskeep, which gives its name to several regiments that train there. Situated on the border of untamed and uncultivated deep forest, this city is home to the eponymous Keep, which serves as a military training ground for specialist units. The nearby forests will either make a person or break them, and the specialist regiments do not accept the broken.

Ardheim is a storytelling nation, steeped in a rich folklore that has developed around the discovery and habitation of the planet. Certain aspects of the planet, such as the fact that it is one of nine in that system (of which only Ardheim and Rossi are habitable), caused the pioneers to give names to things, projects and places inspired by old Norse, Icelandic and Scandinavian myth. Over time, this folklore developed into spiritual ideas and concepts of the universe, and the Ardheimian people today often speak of the great tree Yggdrasil that forms the axis mundi of their planet (though nobody has yet found the tree), though their ideas of Gods seem to reflect ideals to aspire to rather than belief in existence of them. Nevertheless, it is not unusual to find scientists who call upon Odin for his wisdom, military men and women who shout the name of Thor into the face of their enemy, or a man imagining the power of Skadi flowing through him as he takes aim at what he hopes will be his family’s next meal. Today, the founders of the planet are seen as embodying the features of these gods – such as Matthias Blake as the wise Odin – so when an Ardheimian calls on these mythic figures they are as much calling upon the virtues of the historic people who founded their nation as they are divine forces.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a pioneer nation, Ardheimians are a warm, welcoming, and life-affirming people. They are proud that they have cultivated this overwhelming planet, and they have many stories to tell and reasons to celebrate. In times of relaxation they often get together with others and share food and mead, entertaining each other with stories, song, competitions and toasts. With those they consider their friends they are extremely loyal, and they prize this loyalty amongst those who fight together in units and regiments also. To fight alongside a fellow shield-bearer makes you brother or sister to them, in a bond that is sealed in the blood spilled in battle.

Arheimians in the military utilise the same armour and weaponry as others, issued to them as standard equipment. However, they are proud of their homeworld, and often add furs and wrapped leather to their armour or clothing as a mark of where they come from. They favour camouflage gear over kit that stands out, but many of the heavier fighters prefer chainmail over other heavy armour; to reduce the metallic shine from this they sometimes blacken it. Those who fight with shields prefer roundshields painted with geometric or animal designs. Nearly all Ardheimians, whether civilian or military, wear practical clothes, eschewing flowing garments or gaudy fashions. Ardheimians also prefer to mend or make something out of old items, rather than buying something new, so sometimes their gear may look a little patchy, or might not match. But if it does the job, who really cares?

**Inspiration for characterisation:** Vikings, Iceland, Scandinavia, oral tradition, *Beowulf*, *D&D* Rangers, bushcraft, Viet Cong, Saxons, survivalists.

# 1. Timeline and Colonisation

**4774:** With the initial discovery of the Segovax cluster, a call is put out across Terra for volunteers to aid in the settling of new planets.

**4781:** Initial research into the planet to ascertain habitability takes place. There is much doubt as to its suitability due to the dense and hostile wilds, but it shows promise with its Terra-like climate (though it is colder) and geography. Due to its similarity in landscape and weather to many Scandinavian regions of Terra, researchers specialising in those areas are recruited and make the 80-year journey in cryofreeze to Delmont.

**4782:** Work is begun on an orbital staging platform for beginning the colonisation of the planet. It is from here that atmospheric readings and deep scans of the planet are taken in order to establish a basic framework of maps and topographical information for the initial expedition. Many scans fail to a catastrophic degree: what would later be named Járnrót trees, covering a vast majority of the planet's surface, deflect and distort the scanning information. It is later discovered that this is due to the extremely high concentration of ferric compounds found within these trees.

**4798:** Seeder drone ships begin distributing further scanning-based satellites throughout the atmosphere. While many inexplicably vanish, basic topographical scans are obtained. A solution to the scanning issue is proposed: scans shall be run on a near-constant basis, with the information being passed to an AI core held on the staging platform, named *Akademie*, for processing and compilation in time for the initial scientific surveys on-planet.

**4863:** Forward mission to colonise the planet arrives, led by a triumvirate of Chief Researchers: Prof. Mathias Blake, Dr. Lisebet Ingstrom and Dr. Konstantin Levcek. Their objective is to use the resources given to them to establish a permanent settlement to which supplies and manpower can be sent from Delmont upon success. They are also tasked with undertaking thorough research into all aspects of the planet to assess threats, opportunities and requirements for habitation.

**4865:** The planet is finally settled and named by Prof. Mathias Blake, who borrows from Icelandic to name it Ardheim – “hard home”. Some of the hostile creatures that pose the greatest threat to the early colonists, such as the *Jotun insecticus*, are eradicated.

**4868:** Machinery capable of felling the hardy Járnrót tree is dropshipped to Ardheim from Delmont, allowing the colonists to finally use its wood in building. This immediately revolutionises the face of Ardheim, allowing for swifter and sturdier permanent structures that can withstand the wilds. Great walled cities are built into the forest, in many cases the trees themselves being used as the supports for settlements built into the tree canopy.

**4873:** Einar Uttergard establishes the first Haldman trials for new soldiers, many of whom struggle with the wild nature of Ardheim and their own wild rage in battle. The date of Einar's death remains unknown.

**4878:** The founding of Kingskeep, which would eventually become the capital city of Ardheim and the main base of military training. Beginning as a walled settlement in the deep forests, its larger, multi-level structures are built around and among the trees. The Keep from which it gets its name is, at the time, the structure built furthest into the wilds.

**4879:** The death of Britta Meadows and the Green Plague, a wasting sickness brought back to Kingskeep that quickly spreads via grain supply to some of the surrounding smaller

settlements. A cure is eventually researched, followed by a vaccination, but the plague takes the life of Britta, who is leading the teams caring for the victims.

**4881:** Following concerns about the effect of humanity on the planet, Gundrun Ullsdottir founds the Verderer's Council, tasked with protecting and safeguarding the natural world of Ardheim from harmful and excessive human influence. Members of this council are assigned an area of Ardheim and tasked with safeguarding it from overfelling, overfishing and destruction. A few months later Gundrun disappears into the forest. Sources state that she went hunting and did not return.

**4885:** The founding of the Lögretta (law council) and the building of the first Alþing (place of lawmaking). The first goðar are appointed to stand as representatives of the law, justice and order.

**4890:** The founding of the first fully equipped hospital on Ardheim, in Kingskeep, by Silvja Brittasdottir, who names it The Meadows Healing Centre after her mother. The hospital will undergo several renovations over the years, and eventually any trace of the old building will be covered by the modern hospital bearing the same name that also becomes the most prestigious medical training hospital on Ardheim.

**4899:** Rossi, a small planet located in the same solar system as Ardheim, is colonised, with Dr. Konstantin Levcek leading the expedition, many members of which were also part of the first expedition to colonise Ardheim, including Natalya Meklin. Rich in mineral wealth but with a harsh, freezing environment, some terraforming is required. The Rossii people, with the assistance of the people of Ardheim, are quick to adapt, and the planet is soon an industrial and shipping hub of the sector.

**4907:** Death of Dr. Konstantin Levcek on Rossi. He leaves behind no descendants, but his research and advances in technology are continued by his team.

**4911:** Death of Prof. Mathias Blake, who retired from his research post in 4895. It is unclear if he had children, as sources disagree on this matter. Some suggest that he was the father of Dr. Ingstrom's first child, though this was never confirmed by either researcher.

**4917:** Death of Dr. Lisebet Ingstrom. Knowing she is dying, she passes her work onto her granddaughter, Inga Freyasdottir, who followed her into the field.

**4920:** The founding of the city of Skógrbjerg, which will eventually become a centre of learning.

**4925:** Death of Natalya Meklin on Rossi, who passes peacefully in her sleep on the day that her seventh great grandchild is born.

**4931:** The founding of the city of Storborg, the home of Swan Spaceport, the largest of the few spaceports on Ardheim. Storborg will become a centre of trade and travel.

**4970:** Ardheim and Rossi establish a trade pact, a mutual agreement to continue to complement each other's industry and expertise.

**4987:** In response to the negative impact of pollution on the wildlife of Rossi, Ardheim agrees to export some species of fauna and flora to the planet to increase biodiversity. Later in the same year, the two planets sign the Eco Treaty, creating a thriving exchange of ores, wood and other resources.

**5002:** In reaction to the enslavement of the mascen by many corrupt Terran corporations, Ardheim establishes the Sanctuary in Storborg, a place where mascen fleeing slavery may live. Ardheim extends a hand of friendship to the mascen race in the form of the Langa Treaty, which provides that any mascen may claim sanctuary and livelihood on Ardheim upon setting foot in the longhall in Storborg.

**5012:** The Segovax cluster bands together to resist the One Bakkar while also re-establishing communication and trade between Ardheim, Cantiacorum, Delmont, Durgan, Marazion V, Rossi and Tetrarch. The Green Cloaks are formed to counter the One Bakkar threat.

**5049:** The founding of Glashöfn, pronounced and written in the common tongue as Glasshaven, a seaport in the predominantly coastal area of Aegirland. Taking its name from the sea in which it is situated, the city becomes a significant intra-planetary trade hub.

**5053:** Colonisation of Ardheim is complete, with main cities established and multiple defensible outposts and settlements, such as Ravensholm, secured.

**5295:** Following a five-year food shortage and increasing economic crisis leading to mass starvation on Rossi, a great number of Rossii people immigrate to Ardheim. The already significant cultural exchange between the two planets increases, with many customs being shared. Rossii–Ardheimian marriage becomes commonplace.

**5906** – The Myr’na Embassy is established in Kingskeep following an influx of myr’na immigration to Ardheim. Strong diplomatic ties are made between Ardheim and the myr’na race.

**5962:** A shared manpower pact between Ardheim and Rossi is created as a result of Rossi’s Kologrirov Reformation, which reduced the Rossi Defence Force by 60% in order to create a smaller, but more elite, fighting force. This pact leads to an even closer relationship with Rossi, as both forces become engaged in training regimes on one another’s planets.

**6013:** Founding of the Mardok training facility, an Adept training centre in the city of Kingskeep.

**6016:** The *Jotun insecticus*, once thought extinct from the earliest days of the colony, reappears on Ardheim, quickly spreading to Rossi. They immediately become a destructive force, and a large portion of the ADF and RDF are deployed to combat the threat. In order to increase combat efficiency against the shared threat, the Skjaldborg Pact is made to combine the Ardheim and Rossi defence forces into one force under single command, forming the Ardheim–Rossi Defence Force (ARDF).

## The Founders of Ardheim

Often referred to simply as “The Expedition”, the forward mission to colonise Ardheim was formed of a large team of scientists, combat specialists and agriculturalists, all of whom had previously volunteered to undertake research on the newly discovered planets of the Segovax Cluster. The total number of expedition members at the beginning of the mission was 75, but by the end of the mission all but 24 had been lost. Their names can be found in the annals of history, and are often hung upon the Founders’ Tree each year in celebration of Founders’ Day. Seven of them are remembered today as having had a particularly important influence on the colonisation process, and are also syncretised with the principal gods of Ardheim.

**Mathias Blake**, who was the leader of the expedition and one of the Chief Researchers, was a scientist specialising in research analytics, hydroponics and terraforming. He became syncretised with Odin, the god of leadership, sacrifice and wisdom. **Dr. Lisebet Ingstrom**, the

second Chief Researcher of the expedition, specialised in geology, the natural sciences and animal behaviour. She joined the team with her brother, Anthony Ingstrom (who died just before colonisation was achieved). They were both raised by Heathen parents who believed in the old Norse gods, and her faith continued to be strong. Many of the names for newly discovered creatures or places on Ardheim were chosen by her or her brother, who were well-versed in old Scandinavian mythology and folklore. She became syncretised with Freyja, the goddess of the Omega, emotion, love and death. The third of the triumvirate was **Dr. Konstantin Levcek**, who specialised in ecology and environmental engineering. His work and research in the early days of Ardheim was invaluable in the eventual terraforming of the colder, smaller, neighbouring planet, Rossi. He became syncretised with Tyr, the god of justice, balance and discipline.

**Einar Uttergard**, who became syncretised with Thor, the god of battle, strength and contest, was a soldier who became the first Haldman of Ardheim. He led the ever-dwindling defence force of the expedition, by the end of which only five of his fellow soldiers remained, the others having been taken by the wilds. Einar is reported to have worked closely with **Gundrun Ullsdottir**, the expedition's last remaining hunter and tracker, whose knowledge of extreme environments was invaluable to the survival of the early colonists. She became syncretised with Skadi, the goddess of the hunt and the wilds.

Leading the remaining medical team of the expedition was **Britta Meadows**, the Chief Medic and the first woman to birth a child on Ardheim, which she named Silvja. She became syncretised with Idun, the goddess of healing, new beginnings and motherhood. Finally, an invaluable asset to the expedition was **Natalya Meklin**, the quartermaster, whose unwavering tenacity and belief that they would succeed brought hope and resolve to the first colonists. She became syncretised with Grandmother Rossi – although she is not a god of Ardheim (not even a god at all), many Rossii make their home on the planet.

From the earliest days of colonisation, the names of these individuals were spoken as synonymous with the gods. It is said that at the darkest time for the expedition, when all hope seemed lost and the founders were preparing to abandon the colonisation attempt, they were given aid by an expedition from elsewhere and shown that they had the capability, resilience and resources to pursue it. Once they knew they could continue, their faith in themselves ignited the flame of faith in others, and in the fertile earth of that faith the gods took root, each choosing a paragon through which to act on the new planet. It is often noted that this reminds Ardheimians of one of their most important tenets of philosophy: the gods help those who help themselves.

A great number of threats presented themselves to the first colonists, the greatest of them all being the wilds of Ardheim. The great beasts with their hunger, vast and deep forests, new diseases and almost impenetrable trees forced the colonists to fight for survival. However, from this struggle grew opportunity and a new way of life. The first colonists learned to live with the wilds rather than hide from them, learned to maintain the wilds for their wealth of resources, learned new hunting techniques from the beasts that preyed on them, and built their settlements into the trees and canopies themselves. The threats they faced that brought death to the colony gave rise to a tradition that is continued even today – unable to return to the graves they had dug for their fallen friends due to the wild beasts and their loss of territory to the wilds, the first colonists burned the names of their dead on to staves and plaques and hung them from a tree in the centre of their base.

## 2. Culture

### The Gods of Ardheim

*“The gods help those who help themselves”* – Ardheimian proverb.

The Ardheimian gods were inherited from Scandinavia on ancient Terra. Although many Ardheimians believe them to be representations of ideals to aspire to, others believe in their objective existence. Each of the principal gods has been syncretised with one of the main founders of Ardheim, who arrived on the planet (then designated SEG-331) in 4863 to ascertain its suitability for colonisation. As such, those Ardheimians that do not believe in the objective reality of the gods may feel that by calling upon them they are, in fact, calling to mind the strengths of the founders.

Owing to the large area of Ardheim that is inhabited, there are invariably regional differences about some of the gods and how they are related to. The environment in which a person lives is also likely to influence the god they most closely relate to: those who live in heavily forested areas are more likely to feel an affinity with Skadi, the huntress, while those who dwell in the large cities might find Odin and Tyr more approachable. Other factors such as profession might influence a person’s choice of god, and some might find a calling for a particular god following an event in later life.

The way the gods are revered is deeply personal to an Ardheimian. Although there are some traditional ways of making devotion to them, the everyday relationship between an Ardheimian and their god(s) is intimate. Actions may range from showy, obvious rites to quiet, simple, almost invisible acts, such as gestures, jewellery, tattoos, service to the community or an oath.

### Syncretised gods

#### Odin

*(Syncretised with Professor Mathias Blake)*

In the first years of the colonisation of Ardheim, strong leadership, wisdom and foresight was the force that held the colonists together and began to build the great civilisation. Professor Mathias Blake, the leader of the colonisation expedition and one of the three lead research scientists, quickly became associated with these qualities and is today seen as a representation or manifestation of Odin. Leader of the gods, wanderer to far lands, teacher, keeper of wisdom and guide, Odin is often given devotion by those who have a guiding or wisdom-seeking role. In civilian life he may be called upon by scientists, researchers, engineers, archivists, teachers, community leaders and students; in the military he is often taken as a patron by commanders and those in an intelligence role.

However, Odin is also seen as a warrior, equal to his brother, Thor, and his sister, Freyja. He is the commander who gives the orders and creates battlefield tactics; he is the warrior that waits for the opportune moment to strike, conserving his energy until he has all the necessary information. He is the deadly sniper and the dagger in the dark, the ambush and the feint. He is called upon by those who are disadvantaged by numbers and strength in order to give advantage in cunning and strategy.

To Odin’s halls go half of the slain of battle, so he is often given devotion in death rites and memorial services. Several Ardheimian death prayers are dedicated to him, and those who believe that a battle will be their last will often daub Odin’s rune upon their face to mark themselves for him.

As the leader of the gods, Odin is also the God of sacrifice, knowing what is needed to make the difference and protect his people. There are certain military ranks in the Ardheim Defence Force that require an oath to be sworn to Odin and a sacrifice made upon entrance to the rank. These ranks often view their death in battle as a final sacrifice to Odin.

Odin's symbol is the raven, alluding to his mythological companions, Hugin and Munin, that he sends out every day to gather information for him. He is sometimes called "Wanderer", "Grim", "Chief of the Gods", "Father" and, when all is death and battle, "Raven's Feast".

## **Freyja**

*(Syncretised with Professor Lisebet Ingstrom)*

As the goddess of all Omega users, as well as the entire gamut of human emotions and power, Freyja's purview is one of the largest of the gods. She also shares with Odin the care of the dead, choosing half of those slain in battle. She is a sister of the Valkyries, whom she sends to welcome the dead to her halls; at times, she is said to give dispensation for a Valkyrie to choose a lover from the dead and allow him/her to be reborn after a single night spent with her in the grave.

Those with a connection to the Omega call Freyja their mother, and call upon her to bless their rites and rituals. Ardheimians who have undergone the Adept Program find a strong connection to her and through devotion to her they begin to acclimatise to their powers and learn how to strengthen and control them. To this day it is rumoured that Professor Lisebet Ingstrom, seen as the manifestation of Freyja from the days of the founders, was a natural adept whose original belief in the old gods of ancient Terra planted the seed for their roots on Ardheim.

Freyja is called upon by lovers as well as those at war; her name is praised at weddings and on the several nights of the meadmoon of newlyweds. She is seen as the mistress of domestic animals, filling the gap left by her sister Skadi, the goddess of the wilds. In military life Freyja has devotees among the regiments as much as her brothers Odin and Thor: to her children she brings a welcome death and sweet release on the battlefield, shining glory and the promise of rebirth. Dying warriors welcome the Mistress of Death as a lover.

She has many names, but most often is called "Golden Haired", "Lady of the Slain", "Mistress of Magic", "Jubilant", "Fair-Tear Deity", "Valkyrie" and "Mead Woman". Those devoted to her may wear a symbol of an owl (related to her role as death-bringer and Valkyrie).

## **Thor (Brokk)**

*(Syncretised with Einar Uttergard)*

Well-known even on far-off planets, Thor is the quintessential warrior, revelling in the joy of a battle well fought and an enemy slain. His is the power of overcoming, of triumphing, but his is also the responsibility of protecting the weak, standing as the vanguard against that which would destroy and harm. All acts of aggression and defence are his. He is often seen as a well-built man bearing an axe, or hammer, and a shield made from the wood of the Járnrót tree. He is the patron of the courageous, those who would stand and fight, of soldiers of all kinds. He is also unofficially seen as the patron of Ardheim itself, representing a nationalistic pride and a promise to fight for the land against any enemy.

Unsurprisingly, Thor finds a lot of devotion in military life, though many civilians call upon him for aid also. He is called upon by those seeking protection and strength in any undertaking, by those searching for courage and by those who undertake physically demanding work. In the military, he is most commonly called upon by the lower ranks, those who find themselves in the midst of battle, fighting for their lives, rather than those in command. Because of this, he is

sometimes said to be the common man's god, as opposed to Odin who is seen as the god of rank and of leaders.

Thor is said to have manifested in the person of Einar Uttergard, who became the first to successfully undergo the Haldman trials of Ardheim, and who is seen as the forefather of all Haldmen. As such, Thor is given two faces by his devotees: one face knows battle well and uses his strength to apply force where it is needed; another face is a berserker, fighting for the sake of it, revelling in the bloodlust of killing. These faces are given the names Haldman ("Held Man") and Frihetman ("Free Man") respectively, though it is recognised generally that both may be useful at the right time, despite the dangers that the Frihetman presents. Whatever face he is given, Thor is a brutal and fierce warrior, and a whole military unit shouting his name as a war cry has been known to terrify an enemy force into fleeing without engaging.

Thor has many symbols, as he is related to by people in as many ways as they relate to their own strength, courage and battle. To some he is symbolised by the bear, a strong creature that can be both aggressive and defensive; to others he is the shield, the symbol of united strength between battle brothers and sisters; to others he is the axe or the hammer, striking the decisive blow against the enemy. He is called "Battle Cry", "Strength of Arms", "Blood-drinker", "Battle Brother" and, when the skies break and shatter with storms, he is loudly praised as "Thunderer", whose war cry echoes across the heavens.

### **Tyr (Forseti)**

*(Syncretised with Professor Konstantin Levcek)*

Tyr is the god of justice, balance, honour and truth. In his purview fall all decisions, turning points and questions of the law. He is depicted as a middle-aged man with an upraised hand, open-palmed, bearing a sheathed sword. He is seen as the patron of all law-makers and law-keepers, though he is given more subtle devotion among all those who uphold truth and honour as personal virtues. Tyr reminds people that in all things there must be balance; it is influence from his devotees that continually push against too much expansion into Ardheim's wilderness, invoking the balance between civilisation and the wilds as a necessity.

In civilian life he is called upon by home guards, judges, peacekeepers and those with the power to make decisions of great national importance. He is also called to stand witness to any important decisions made, and it is upon a sword, representing Tyr, that all oaths are made. A person being tried for a crime will be asked to swear on a sword that they will only speak truth; business partners will seal a deal on the blade of a sword; those entering into a law-bound romantic union will often extend their sword-oath to drawing and mingling their blood. In military life he is seen as the patron of the Military Police, and is invoked by name in any military tribunals and trials.

Tyr is seen as being represented by Dr. Konstantin Levcek, one of the lead research scientists of the Ardheim colonisation expedition. Records state that he was Russian, and that in a time of racial tension for the colony he called for peace and balance. He held two often-warring sides together during conflict and reminded them of their common goals.

Tyr's predominant symbol is the double-edged sword, but he is sometimes given the image of a balanced set of scales. He is given the names "Honour's Duty", "Peacekeeper", "Maker of Laws", "Law-speaker" and "Falsehood's Bane".

### **Skadi (Ulla)**

*(Syncretised with Gundrun Ullsdottir)*

In the wilds of Ardheim and its challenging environment, Skadi, goddess of the hunt, wild creatures and nature, finds a natural home. She is found in the joy of hunting prey, in the knowledge that the next kill will feed one's family, in the skill it takes to track and capture. She

can be found in the harsh environment of Ardheim, from its stark tundra to its deep snowdrifts, her voice in the howling gales and lashing rain. She is the goddess of survival, of not being broken by even the harshest of winters; she girds the loins in stubborn necessity. Those who call upon her are often those who spend much of their time in the wilds: the lumberjacks of the great forests and the Járnrót tree, hunters and fishermen, verderers, and those that live on the outskirts of civilisation. She is also the particular patron of the Verderers' Council, the group of men and women dedicated to upholding Forest Law and protecting natural species, ensuring that civilisation's impact on the natural world is not damaging. Devotees of Skadi continually ask what is necessary and needful, acting as protection against ostentation, over-complication and needless luxury.

Skadi is believed to have manifested in the person of Gundrun Ullsdottir, one of the main hunters and trackers of the original Ardheim colonisation expedition. Legend has it that she was responsible for hunting and slaying a great beast that had been terrorising the expedition, and that this kill rekindled in her a love of the hunt, a keen eye, and soft footfalls.

In civilian life, Skadi may be called upon in times of need to offer her simple aid and see her devotees through difficult situations. In the military her devotees are often found among those who favour stealth tactics and guerrilla warfare, among snipers and scouts.

Her symbols are the bird of prey, with its keen eyes and hunting prowess, and the arrow. Those who call her Mother also call her "Huntress", "Woman of the Wilds", "Straight-shot", "Swift of Foot" and "The Cold Sister".

## **Idun**

*(Syncretised with Britta Meadows)*

Idun is the goddess of healing, rejuvenation, life and youth. She is seen and depicted as a young woman, sometimes heavily pregnant, sometimes holding a child, and other times holding both fire and water in each of her hands. It is said that with the water she cleanses, replenishes and soothes and with the fire she burns out sickness, renews and protects. Between her hands, between the water and the fire, is the moment between life and death, the life hanging in the balance.

Syncretised with Britta Meadows, the chief medic of the expedition to colonise Ardheim, Idun is the patroness of all medics in the Terran Sovereignty Army. In civilian life she is called upon to care for the sick, bring comfort to the dying, watch over children and protect the weak. Britta gave birth to the first baby to be born on Ardheim, giving to Idun the patronage of childbirth. Idun brings new life to war-ravaged lands, peace in conflict and relief in pain. She has many symbols, some as simple as the red cross known across most planets as a sign of aid, others as complex as interlocking circles (representing her dual nature of water and fire). Those particularly devoted to her might wear a golden apple upon their person, referring to the old stories of her guardianship of youth, represented by the apple.

To Idun's halls go those who die peacefully, those who die of old age or sickness, or those who die as victims. It is believed that these she takes into her loving arms to care for them, heal them and renew them, until they are ready to be released to the world once more.

Idun is called by many names, including "Young One", "She of the Gentle Hand", "Fair Brow", "Golden", "First Mother" and, when nothing but mercy remains to be given, "Sweet End".

## **Non-syncretised gods**

Although the most well-loved deities became syncretised with the founders of Ardheim, upon the foundation of this religion as the main belief system of the people other gods and legendary figures came to be included in Ardheimian culture, belief and story. The extent to which Ardheimians believe in their objective existence depends on the individual, but there seems to be a rural–urban divide: those in the cities tend to view these beings as representations of aspects of life or personality, whereas rural settlements relate to them in ways that suggest they are beings of manifest existence.

### **Frigg (Fulla, Lofn, Hlin, Gná)**

Frigg is the deity in the pantheon with the most names. Unlike the others she doesn't have any epithets but, dependant on what she is being called on for (and the region the devotee is in), her name often changes.

She is called upon when there is a binding of a person, whether to another person, to their word or oaths, or to hearth, home and family. She is the principle goddess invoked during traditional handfastings, and it is to Frigg that new couples will make prayers when they enter their home for the first time. As Frigg she oversees domestic bliss, as Gna she is a crafter of fine materials, as Fulla she has some similarity with Freyja in her ability as a seeress and as Lofn she protects women. Most importantly, she represents to Ardheimians a devotion to duty, so she is often given devotion by those for whom duty is everything.

### **Baldr**

Also called “The Shining One”, “Radiant Brow” or “Golden One”, Baldr is the epitome of joy, peace, diplomacy and celebration. To many he is symbolic of light and the sun, and is often given devotion as the sun rises. It is widely held that everybody loves Baldr, and that in his presence nobody can quarrel; as such, diplomats and those who rely on relations with others often take him as their patron. Although they sometimes need to use force to maintain peace, peacekeepers often look to Baldr for the strength of personality required to control crowds, talk down hostile individuals, negotiate and reason. His association with the sun makes him a god of rejuvenation, being reborn anew with every dawn. Some funeral rites may call upon him in this aspect of renewal, emphasising the renewal of the deceased and their rebirth into another form after death.

Baldr is also believed to be present at every celebration, whether it is a small family meal or a large community gathering. In this form he is a god of parties, mead and dance.

### **Loki**

To say that Loki is complex is an understatement. Ask ten Ardheimians their opinion on Loki and they'll give eleven answers that range from “the worst thing to have existed” to “better than even the best sliced bread”. He is hated and loved in equal measure and often at the same time by the same person.

He is as renowned for his lies and scheming nature as he is for teaching through trials, tribulation and stories. His tricks and schemes are often malicious and potentially deadly, but where there is great risk there is great reward. Scientists, inventors and criminals alike invoke Loki's name when beginning new endeavours, along with anyone who is trying to find an answer to a difficult or seemingly impossible problem and those seeking or going through change. He is also well-known in his role as a storyteller, so those who would teach through story often feel an affinity with Loki.

Unfortunately, Loki's negative aspects are often those that people focus on or remember, and as a result he is known by a number of names, most of which are not polite. "The Liar" or "The Disgrace" are common and his name is often used as or in a curse. "The Illusionist" and "The Teacher" are used, as well as "Changeling", but in reality any name, whether blessing or curse, can be attributed to him.

## Loki's Children

The existence of Fenrir, Jörmungandr and the goddess Hel are all attributed to Loki and nearly everything that is bad in the pantheon seems to stem from a trick or some scheme of theirs. **Fenrir** is called "World Eater", "Járnrót's Bane", "Glutton" and "The Ever Hungry. Originally described as a monstrous wolf, more recent depictions bring together the worst aspects of the terrible and dire beasts that stalk the huge forests of Ardheim into one abhorrent result. More than one researcher has noted the similarity between Fenrir and the vargen that gnaw upon the roots of Járnrót trees. The sagas state that Fenrir was captured due to the courage and decision of Tyr (during which he sacrificed a hand) and was tricked into being restrained by a single thread of the finest silk, deep within the earth, where it waits until the final times. Fenrir devours and eats everything that it can get its paws on and is said to be able to chew through an ancient Járnrót trunk with a single bite of its immense jaws. It is unendingly ravenous in its nature: everything is its meal and nothing is sacred. Earthquakes are often said to be the result of its terrible roars or thrashing within its prison, a prison that will, at the time of Ragnarök, shatter and the thread snap.

**Jörmungandr**, the "World Serpent", encircles Ardheim, sleeping within the depths of the oceans, its jaws secured upon its tail. Thrown into the deepest of the seas by Odin when Loki brought his children before him, the creature thrived and grew to its immense size and encircled the world. Jörmungandr is believed to keep the world free from some terrible catastrophe. At some point the serpent will be roused from its slumber and release its hold upon its tail. In doing so, the seas will drain and it will be free to rise up to wreak its revenge upon the gods and people who venerate them. Despite this destructive image, the World Serpent also has its lesser-known beneficial side: Whilst it slumbers it keeps the seas, and by extension the world, whole. There are those that argue that its true nature is that of a protective guardian; this viewpoint is most often found among those whose professions involve the protection of Ardheim and its people.

Like her sibling Jörmungandr, **Hel** was cast by Odin's hand from his hall when Loki brought his children before him. She makes her home deep within the world, her hall situated beneath one of the great roots of Yggdrasil. From there she plots against Idun, who she sees as having stolen ownership of her rightful dominion: the peaceful dead. Instead, her hall is where "evil" men and women go upon their death, to stay until Ragnarök to serve in her army against those who wronged her. Hel is most commonly known as the "Bitter Queen" and her name is invoked as a warning or curse by all right-thinking people. Telling someone "to go to Hel" is equivalent to wishing them dead. Only the darkest of hearts would call her for a blessing.

## A note on the old sagas

Much of the knowledge of the gods is gained from the sagas and other texts from the Scandinavian region of ancient Terra. However, very few of these texts have survived in their original language, and most are only found in the common tongue translation. Historians of ancient Terra have confirmed that a vast number of texts from this era and location have been lost in the various civil wars and due to the wear and tear of time, putting forward the references in extant texts to other, numerous texts that have not been found as proof. A notable number of commentary texts from 20th-century Terra have survived, and together with the older texts have been used to piece together missing parts.

## The Omega and the Old Ways

*“Flesh and bone, blood and piss, in Freyja’s name I curse you!”* – example of an Ardheimian curse.

Although it is clear to most people that Omega powers are granted by technology rather than nature, Ardheimians who undergo the Adept Program often dress their abilities in the Old Ways of their ancestors, weaving traditional curses into their words and calling upon the gods to direct their will. Many specialise in Omega abilities that allow them to drive terror into the hearts of enemies, evoking the ancient figure of the battle skald who could shift the tide of a war with words alone. Those who are skilled at divination and reading the emotions of others may be called *völva*, “seer”, while those skilled with Omega powers in general may be dubbed a *seethman* or *seethwoman*, a witch, or a rune singer.

The power of speech and writing is close to the use of Omega for Ardheimian adepts. They often daub runes upon their bodies for devotional purposes, prior to battle, or for rituals. They may score them in the earth and cast bones upon them for divination. Those skilled in combat may also carve or paint runes upon their weapons and shields, dedicating them to the service of the gods or making them for a purpose. A shield upon which the rune of Thor is painted gives its wielder strength and courage in battle, while Odin’s rune painted on a sniper rifle invokes his keen sight.

Many Ardheimian adepts, despite the technological origin of their powers, attribute them to the land or the gods. They may use animal symbolism frequently in their abilities and rituals. The power of blood is also recognised by these adepts, who may spill their own as payment to an Omega Sphere, dedicate a weapon or person to a cause with blood, or offer the life of an animal to show devotion or give payment.

When the Adept Program began in 6012, it was those already using the “Old Ways” that were sought and chosen for it. The program sends out regular searches for such people to continue the influx of new Adepts to the TSA, and to help with this process an Adept training centre – the Mardok training facility – was founded on Ardheim by the Ardheim Defence Force in 6013 for the final stage of military training prior to deployment. New Ardheimian Adepts are sent here from Cantiacorum to learn how they can function most effectively in the regiments. In recent years, questions have been raised by Ardheimians about whether the Adept Program creates Omega power in humans, or whether it is already present and simply magnified by the program. For a culture in which divination and magic is already an important part of everyday life, this question can be both troubling and tantalising. In some areas of Ardheim, the Adept Program is forthrightly rejected, and any prospective Adepts removed from these areas are taken by force. To the people of these – usually more rural – areas, this represents the stealing of their culture’s religious and magical tradition for use elsewhere. It is also a removal of a highly valued member of a community, one whose ability to connect with the gods and mediate between them and the mundane world is greatly treasured.

# Rites of Passage and Festivals

## Adult-making

Transitioning from child to adult is an immensely important stage of a young Ardheimian's life. It marks acceptance into the adult life of the community, with all the responsibilities and rewards associated with it. It also marks the point at which marriage is possible and the individual can stand as goði. However, the age at which a person becomes an adult varies greatly. At age 15 an Ardheimian becomes a candidate for adult-making, but they must wait until enough others have also reached this age before the rite of passage can take place. This can mean that an Ardheimian may have to wait a couple of years before becoming an adult. In a few cases in very isolated areas, this waiting period has been as long as 10 years, and in these situations exemption from the inability to marry has often been granted by the settlement's goði.

The adult-making rite takes the form of a great hunt, the members of which are made up of the candidates for adulthood and a chosen guardian for each. As the skills of survival and the ability to access food and other resources by hunting is necessary for all genders on Ardheim, the hunting party will be mixed. The guardian may be a parent or another adult relative, but sometimes a trusted friend will be chosen instead. The hunt that takes place is not just a way to obtain food but also an opportunity for the guardians to impart knowledge and skills to the candidates, for whom this will be the first large hunt (prior to this, only small animals and docile creatures will have been hunted and trapped). Any candidates who are judged by the guardians as failing to contribute to the hunt will be interviewed afterwards by an elder, who will assess if the candidate can contribute to the community in some other, less physical, way. All candidates who contribute to the hunt, or those who can contribute in another way, are deemed adults.

Adult-making is tied into the Yggdrasil Festival, which is not celebrated yearly but when these rites are concluded. It celebrates the connectivity of all spheres of life, of the community, of the family. The Járnrót tree is a symbol of Yggdrasil, the great World Tree, but it does not grow alone. Just as the Járnrót of Ardheim grows in vast forests, so the Ardheimian flourishes among others. New Ardheimian adults, through the ceremonial hunt and the teaching that follows, learn that they must rely on others and be relied upon for survival, and that they do not leave others behind.

## Handfasting

On Ardheim the joining of two people is a very important occasion and a significant social institution. It is not only about people binding themselves to one another but is also the binding of their families and wider communities.

Traditionally, permission is sought for the handfasting by both individuals from the head of the family of their prospective partner. If one or both of the family heads refuse there is nothing to stop the handfasting going ahead, but it is believed that the future will be more difficult for the newly joined, as their families will not support them. Apart from this, there is very little undertaken prior to the ceremony itself. Gifts are given by each of the partners to the parents of their prospective partner and they each select someone to stand as their Second; these are often now called the best man or maid of honour. Each of the partners is also required to make or obtain their wedding outfits. Robes and dresses in white (or another light colour) with black (or dark) embroidery of images important to the person and/or the god they venerate are worn by both parties. The light colour represents a new beginning or path in life, the images a representation of who they are. A more traditionally minded couple may visit a völvu to have them perform a reading upon their binding, but it is not a requirement of the ceremony or process.

The ceremony itself (the Brudlaup) is normally quite short. Both partners are accompanied by the head of their family (or a suitable stand in) and their Second. The rite is most often carried out by a völvu, although a goði may also do so. Both of the betrothed's families (including any other partner's families) are invited to bear witness, as it is seen as the first public gathering of the two families. The völvu begins by asking the head of the first family if they know of any reason why the couple may not be bound together. If no objection is given, the völvu passes them a knife and asks them to cut themselves and add their blood to a ritual bowl. Once done, they are asked to add the blood of their betrothed family member to the bowl, usually by a cut to the upper arm. The völvu then repeats this for the head of the second family and each of the Seconds in turn. The Seconds usually cut the betrothed they stand for upon the inside of their forearm nearest their betrothed. Once this is done, the völvu conducts a ritual sacrifice, traditionally of a young deer, and asks the goddess Frigg to sanction the union. It is commonly believed that as long as the heart is pulled from the deer whilst still beating, Frigg has blessed the new couple. Other deities may be named by the couple and the völvu will call them to look down upon and bless their followers. The heart and a good amount of the sacrifice's blood is added to the bowl.

The völvu then asks the first of the couple to add their blood to the bowl, the cut traditionally made over the heart, and to recite any vows they wish to make. The same is asked of the Second. Once their blood has been collected, the ritual bowl is passed to the first of the couple to drink of the blood and to take a bite of the heart before they are to pass the bowl and heart to their partner to repeat the act. These final actions are to symbolise their acceptance of their families', friends' and Frigg's (and other gods'/goddess') blessing and the binding of themselves to the other. What follows is a feast that traditionally lasts several days; anything less than three is considered paltry.

On Ardheim, polygamy is, whilst not common, accepted. The traditional Brudlaup needs only minor modification for more than two betrothed.

## Death rites

*"Cattle die, kindred die,  
Every man is mortal.*

*But I know one thing that never dies—*

*The glory and deeds of the dead."* – traditional Ardheimian saying marking a death.

Ardheimian ideas of death and an afterlife are nebulous and complicated, reflecting the deeply personal relationship Ardheimians have with their surroundings and community. A belief in reincarnation is found among most inasmuch as the body becomes part of the earth and nothing is destroyed – it just changes form. Ardheimians might speak of a person living on in the trees, a particular animal, or the air they breathe. Ardheimians are almost always buried, though those with close ties to Rossi or a Rossii parent might be cremated. Great honour will be given to the deceased during the funeral, their name in particular being repeated and praised, with oaths taken to never forget their name and to ensure their deeds in life are told to others. After the burial/cremation, a feast follows that lasts all night, during which a great deal of mead will be consumed and stories told of the deceased by the mourners. These feasts are not solemn affairs, always giving way to laughter and joy in shared memory. The tradition of Oaths, Toasts and Boasts will often be observed.

Although the view of reincarnation into the earth is common, Ardheimians may instead – or also – believe in Valhalla (though it is not clear how many actually believe in its objective existence, as it is usually related to in a way that suggests an ideal rather than fact). Those in the military often speak of Valhalla, or the Great Halls, with reference to their own death in battle. For fallen warriors, regimental send-offs vary, but almost all Ardheimian regiments will honour them with the rhythmic hammering of the shieldwall.

After death, the name of the deceased, burned or carved onto a small stave, is usually hung upon a tree in honour of the tradition begun by the founders in the first colony. It is here, not at the site of burial, that the family and friends go to grieve or remember their beloved dead, for the name's continuance after death is more important than the remains of the body. The spouses of the deceased may also wear the names of the deceased around their neck, some for only a time, but some for the rest of their lives. This is a personal choice, which further highlights the richly symbolic emotional and spiritual landscape of the Ardheimian people.

There are various trees upon which the names of the dead may be hung. Larger families often have their own tree dedicated permanently to such a purpose; those that do not will utilise the communal tree in a prominent place in the settlement (in larger cities, there may be several such trees located in different areas). The Founders' Tree, upon which only the dead of the previous twelve months and those of the first colony are remembered, is specifically used only during the dark months of the year, beginning when the first leaves start to fall in the autumn season. When spring comes, the names of the dead are removed from the tree and may be hung from a family tree, a communal tree, or around the neck of a loved one.

It is from this practice that the symbolic link between the dead and leaves comes. Ardheimians who have lost many family members may say their family tree has many leaves, for example, a statement that is easily misinterpreted by non-Ardheimians, yet which conveys the poetic and symbolic way in which Ardheimians relate to death.

## **Yggdrasil Festival**

The Yggdrasil festival is celebrated only at the conclusion of a successful adult-making ceremony. As these do not happen every year, and can occur at any time of year, the Yggdrasil festival is not annual and has no ties with the turning seasons.

The festival begins when the adult-making hunting party leaves. Elders with a direct familial link to the young men and women being made will remain silent, and keep watch for the party's return. Only people who have successfully been made can prepare the food for the return of the party. As a hunting party can be away for as little as half a day and as long as several days, the length of this solemn vigil and preparation varies. Only when the elders catch sight of the returning hunting party do they break their silence, and will give great whooping, ululating cries to announce to all that they have returned. Yet the atmosphere will still be solemn until the kills have been presented and the survival of the hunting party ascertained.

When all have returned, the solemnities will be abandoned and joyful celebrations will begin. A feast is made using some of the meat from the hunt, and the new adults will be presented to the attendees and the community, along with any new name they have chosen to take. The feast takes place outside, and at an appropriate time the elders will call attendees together to honour the great Járnrót trees that are so important to Ardheim and its people. These trees are symbolic of the link that Ardheimians have with the land; they connect the human world with the animal world, civilisation with the wilds, nature with technology, and the mundane with the spiritual/magical. It is into this mystery of connection that the new adults are inducted during the festival, into the mystery of the connectivity of all spheres of life, of the community, of the family. Just as the Járnrót stands forever, so will Ardheimians live forever, growing and surviving in the harshest of climates, but they cannot do it alone. Járnrót trees grow in forests, not in isolation.

In celebration, this festival is marked with a great deal of consumption of mead and the tradition of Oaths, Toasts and Boasts.

## Founders' Day

Founders' Day is celebrated yearly and always at the same time: the first day of the dark half of the year, at the beginning of autumn. This festival celebrates the history of Ardheim and its people, as well as those that make it their home today. Although the festival is named as a Day, festivities may last for several days, with families returning to their ancestral homesteads for the winter and rejoicing in their reunion. Those serving in the Terran Sovereignty Army will usually return home if possible, and their arrival is often marked with processions and gift-giving, though a little sadness mars the joy as those who have fallen in battle are remembered. It is the beginning of many winter festivals that will take place over the coming months.

Traditional forms of celebration and entertainment include storytelling, dances, drinking contests and family or community feasts. The first harvests – all but the animal harvest – are celebrated and given thanks for, and those who would usually spend their days working the land or hunting take a break for a few days, enjoying what their work has given to their people. In the larger cities, schoolchildren will put on plays telling stories of the early colonists, with favourite subjects including “The Second Expedition”, “Gundrun and the Dire Bear”, “How Thor Chose Einar” and “The Discovery of the Járnrót”. In keeping with Ardheimian storytelling traditions, these stories multiply in number every year, and it is today hard to tell which narrate actual events from the first expedition.

The central event of Founders' Day, taking place on the first night of the festivities, is the decoration of the Founders' Tree with the names of the first colonists, as well as the names of the dead of the last twelve months. Like many things on Ardheim, this is at once a solemn and a joyful occasion, combining memorial and thanksgiving in one act. This tree, continuing the tradition begun by the first colonists, will continue to bear the names of the year's dead throughout the dark months of the year, the names themselves being seen as replacements for the fallen leaves. This placing of the Year Dead upon the same tree as the Founders symbolises the fact that, to Ardheimians, their planet was not just made once – it is continually made and renewed by those who serve it, live upon it, and give their lives for it. Every new day is a renewal of the world.

## Other Winter festivals

Beginning with the celebration of **Founders' Day** at the start of autumn, the dark half of the year is marked with a number of greater and lesser festivals and celebrations. Perhaps it is the bitter cold and hostile winter that drives Ardheimians to create these beacons of joy, light and community in the darkness.

At the end of October, Ardheimians mark the final cattle harvest with a raucous festival, **Vildag**. The beasts that will not survive another winter are slaughtered for their meat and those that will be brought into the warm, sheltered barns (or the home itself, depending on the size of the settlement). Parents tell their children tales of the Wild Hunt at this time, a ghostly hunting party that rides across the sky, taking the slaughtered beasts into it. To some, the leader of the Wild Hunt is Odin, to others, Loki. In some of the larger towns and cities, great processions are held in which people dress up as ghostly figures from the Wild Hunt, subverting the boundary between human and animal, civilised and wild. It is considered successful if a great many children are terrified.

Greatest of all the festivals save for Founders' Day, **Jól** marks the darkest point of winter, the longest night and the shortest day, when the light is at its dimmest. This festival takes place over nine days and nights, each louder and rowdier than the last. Feasts are held, which whole settlements attend, and gifts are given among friends and family. Traditional foods are those that use up ingredients that would otherwise begin to spoil, such as rich, alcohol-soaked puddings filled with the harvest's last dried fruits. Mead and other alcohol that is almost past its

best is given new life with the addition of spices and served hot to all guests. As part of the festival, communities ensure that nobody spends a night alone – those who live on their own are given beds in homes filled with family and friends, and in particular the elderly are protected from the cold with company and food. In the larger towns and cities, the longhall is the focus of the festive activities, while in smaller settlements families take it in turns to host the celebrations in their homes.

The sixth night of Jól is the **Winter Solstice**, and although festivities continue in their rowdy manner, solemn lights and candles are left on windowsills and outside doors as symbols of the light in the darkness. Outside it may be threatening and cold, but in Ardheimian hearts and homes the light never dies.

The final night of Jól is **Modranicht** – Mother’s Night – which celebrates all women, but especially mothers. Just as the sun is reborn from the darkness after the Solstice, so woman gives birth to life. Children gather around their mothers, aunts and grandmothers and offer them small tokens as gifts, though traditionally these tokens are handmade or found in the natural world. Just before dawn, the women of every household will leave in silence, unmarked by the men or children, and perform traditional rites to Idun. Snow bathing on this morning is common among women who wish to be mothers, as it is believed to be invigorating and good for health.

## Summer festivals

Although most special days on Ardheim take place in the dark half of the year, the light half of the year is punctuated by a few festivals. The first, and most widely celebrated, is a three-day festival of contests, **Tävling**, which takes advantage of the relative warmth and mild weather as a time for numerous settlements to gather in one place. Held at midsummer, when the days are longest, each of the three days is given to a different kind of contest: the first to tests of strength, the second to tests of intelligence and wit, and the third to tests of will. Each of the days is dedicated to one of the gods – Thor to the first, Odin to the second and Freyja to the last. The nature of these contests is as varied as the imagination of their organisers, but common contests include obstacle races, wrestling, mock battles, flyting, riddle solving, archery and tests of endurance. The victors of the contests are awarded metal arm rings, which are worn with pride. Some Ardheimians win a great number of contests in their lifetimes, their arms becoming covered with the rings. It is common for the annual **Varping** to take place during Tävling, as many people have already travelled to gatherings in central locations and the goðar from the settlements are free to travel also.

## Oaths, Toasts and Boasts

*“A quick tongue, unless its owner keeps watch on it, often talks itself into trouble.”* – Ardheimian proverb.

A widely held tradition on Ardheim and wherever Ardheimians gather is that of Oaths, Toasts and Boasts. It takes place at both the most solemn of occasions – such as funerals – and the most joyful, and can be found at events of little import as well as at life-changing rites. This practice is threefold and is undertaken where alcohol is available, becoming wilder and more fantastical as the alcohol is consumed.

Those gathered ensure they have a full cup before beginning. Each person will proceed to make a toast to somebody or something – perhaps an absent friend or a beloved deity. They will follow this with a boast of something they have done – this must be an honest boast, but listeners will appreciate it more if it is told with some embellishment. Finally, the speaker makes an oath, with those gathered as witnesses, who in turn promise to hold the speaker to their oath.

An Ardheimian's oath is taken extremely seriously. Thus, before an oath is made it is carefully considered – it brings immense shame upon a person if they cannot fulfil an oath they have made; however, a person who can make bold oaths is considered great. The fine line between a clever, courageous oath and a stupid, hasty one is a path that many an Ardheimian deep in their cups has had to contend with.

## **Flyting: the Contest of Insults**

*“Amongst men and feasts there will always be strife.”* – Ardheimian proverb.

Another tradition that may be found in the longhall is that of flyting, or the contest of insults. To non-Ardheimian onlookers, it would be easy to mistake a flyting for a bitter argument between enemies, but in most cases it takes place among friends. Those entering a flyting accept that they will not only insult their friends but be insulted in return. Emotional resilience and a quick tongue are required for such a contest, as failure in either area leads to losing the contest. The term “flyting” is taken from the Poetic Edda, one of the few surviving texts from the Scandinavian region of ancient Terra. It is said that the god Loki is a master of flyting.

A flyting contest is as much about demonstrating one's prowess as a wordsmith as it is about insulting the other person. In most cases it is also done for the entertainment of others, offering up the contestants as the subjects of ridicule. The finest flyting contestants will not only create new insults to throw at their opponent, but twist their opponent's words to use against them, crafting insults from what they have been given.

The flyting contestants end the battle of wit as friends, with laughter and congratulations on both sides. However, it is not unheard of for slights and tensions simmering under the surface to be brought to light by the words spoken in such contests, and more than one friendship has been put to the test by it.

## **Hospitality**

A core Ardheimian philosophy is that of hospitality. Strict social mores and customs govern the treatment of guests in an Ardheimian home, regardless of their planet of origin. Even those who are enemies will honour the guest customs while under the same roof.

A guest will be made welcome in a home for one of three periods: three days and nights, nine days and nights, or a moon. During the agreed time, guests will be offered a place to sleep, will be asked to eat with their hosts, and will receive the protection of the household. It is a great dishonour to speak ill of a guest while they are in one's home, or to allow others to do so. This type of hospitality is not given to everybody who visits, however: the host must welcome them in and call them “honoured guest” for the customs to apply. A great number of stranded men and women have survived a bitterly cold winter as a result of these guest laws.

## Language, Writing and Naming

*“Speak needful words, or none.”* - Ardheimian proverb.

Ardheim shares a common alphabet and tongue with other Terran Sovereignty planets in the Segovax Cluster, and it is this language that is used in daily life, work and trade. However, the deeply rooted respect and understanding of their origins led Ardheimians to adopt a runic alphabet for purposes of law, tradition, art and religion.

Though a few scholars of ancient Terran history have noted that there were other runic alphabets throughout history, the knowledge lost in the civil war on Terra (4150–4600) and the nuclear war in 2209 means that the only surviving runic alphabet in the few sources left is the Elder Futhark. Children learn the Futhark from an early age, often being taught by their parents using the old sagas.

Ardheimians use the Futhark in many contexts and for a wide range of reasons. It may be used to add beauty to a text, crafted item, or tattoo, or to add a sense of gravity to a document (such as in its use in legal documents). In this alphabet oaths and contracts are drawn up, children’s names are registered and Omega users write their intentions. New buildings, such as hospitals, schools and courts, are dedicated on their opening day by an important member of a council carving into its door lintel a phrase in the Futhark that propounds the mission or vision of that building.

Although the common tongue is spoken widely on Ardheim, other languages surviving since the time of the Founders are spoken in some places, with isolated regions most likely to speak these languages daily. Forms of Nynorsk, Finnish, Ur-Swedish, Danish and Icelandic might be found in the wilder parts of the planet, and small communities keep these almost-dead languages alive. As such, Ardheimians hailing from these isolated communities may speak the common tongue with a thick accent, belying their mother language.

### Loanwords and naming conventions

Not a people to throw away anything useful and practical, Ardheimians use a great number of loanwords from Old Norse, Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish and Danish, though often they conflate the synonymous words in these languages to create a new word that is better suited to the common tongue. They use such terms in everyday speech and a formal capacity, from the name of a lawmaker (*goði*) and the law council (*lögregta*) to military terms (“*skjaldborg*” for “shieldwall” or “*huskarl*” for “skirmish”). They also continue the old Finnish tradition of naming, with a woman’s last name being her mother’s name with the suffix *-dottir* and a man’s being his father’s name with the suffix *-son*. Thus, a woman named Ieva Brennasdottir is Ieva, daughter of Brenna; a man named Carr Eriksson is Carr, son of Erik. In a small number of cases, an Ardheimian who is particularly devoted to a god or who feels that their life is dedicated to them will change their matronymic/patronymic last name for that of their chosen god, becoming, for example, Ieva Odinsdottir or Carr Thorsson. Due to the fact that some Ardheimian children are named after the god that their parents are devoted to, this has, in a few cases, led to people being known in their adult lives as Freya Freyasdottir or Odin Odinsson.

## Dress and Appearance

Ardheimians favour clothes that are practical, re-usable, warm and can be easily moved in. They reject flowing and gaudy garments and prefer to mend torn clothing or make something new out of the old. Despite their preference for practicality, Ardheimians have a sense of flair – though it is doubtful it would pass on Cantiacorum as such. In everyday life, many will wear beautiful jewellery made of a mixture of bone, antler, semi-precious and precious stones, glass beads, shells and metal. Men and women alike may dress their hair and wear jewellery. Even those in military service will allow themselves a necklace or torque with their uniform.

It is common for Ardheimians to begin gaining tattoos from an early age, with many elders bearing dozens of inked designs covering a great portion of their skin. These tattoos are not for fashion but are meaningful and symbolic for their wearer, often indicating important rites of passage, experiences, people, gods and ideals. Tattoos may be worn anywhere on the body, with those on the head, neck and other places that are frequently exposed being regarded as statements that the world must witness, and those worn in hidden locations or places only close friends and family will see being more private and intimate symbols of great value and importance. It is not uncommon to see those who serve/have served in the military with facial and neck tattoos depicting dedication to a god, an oath or a mark of protection.

The low-tech nature of Ardheim means that clothing is not mass-produced on the planet. Any such vestments are imported, but they are considered to have little value and use. Instead, clothing is handmade by the individual or their family/community, or purchased from craftspeople of other communities at trade fairs and gatherings. The vast amount of natural resources on the planet are used to great effect to create all sorts of materials that can be used in clothing, and Ardheimian children of all genders are taught traditional skills of weaving, dyeing, sewing, tanning and leatherworking. This clothing, especially in the military, is often paired with more modern imports from places like Rossi, such as tactical vests and webbing. It is not uncommon to see an Ardheimian soldier in handcrafted chainmail with a tactical webbing system, bullet-proof vest or molle over the top. Both civilians and military personnel will use furs and leathers in their clothing for practicality and to show pride in their heritage.

Although favoured colours for clothes on Ardheim are natural – greens and browns –, other dyes that are produced from native plants include grey-blue, scarlet-red, yellow and pink.

Ardheimians in the military will often mark their heritage with natural materials, such as fur, accenting their military-issued gear, as well as traditional Ardheimian tunics alongside camo gear. They wear jewellery that marks them as the devotee of a particular god, and may have elaborate hair and beard styles. Many will paint their faces before battle with runes and other designs, or use war paint to make themselves look more terrifying.

## 3. Civics

### Law, Politics and Justice

The Lögretta (a council of lawmakers and Lawspeakers) is composed of forty goðar (voting members, singular: goði) taken from all over Ardheim. These goðar review and amend existing laws, make new laws and grant exemptions from the law. They also have the power to make or agree to treaties. They are selected on different bases, depending on what settlement they are from.

In order to contribute a goði to the Lögretta, a settlement must be recognised as being sizable or important enough to warrant representation. Any goði may propose to include a settlement or strike a settlement from representation in the Lögretta, but their proposal must hang in the Alþing (place of lawmaking, the council hall) entry hall in Kingskeep for nine days and nights before being brought to the floor. In this time, it must accrue fifteen goðar signatories supporting the action in order to be brought for debate and voting. Meetings of the Lögretta take place four times a year.

There is a significant difference between local goðar and the goðar that sit on the Lögretta. While a local goði is responsible for overseeing either an entire settlement or their share of a settlement, the goðar of the Lögretta are responsible for the day-to-day decision-making of the planetary government, headed up by the Llögsögumaður (Lawspeaker). The number of local goðar depends on the size of the settlement:

- Steading – One goði is elected. These settlements typically number 100–1,000 people.
- Township – Two goðar. These settlements typically number 750–10,000 people. These goðar usually shoulder the responsibilities cooperatively, although where this is not possible, the responsibility is divided between them by district.
- City – Four goðar are elected. There is also a fifth, a High Goði, who may exercise a veto over any motions and votes brought by the other goðar in the administration of the city. Each goði is responsible for overseeing their assigned quarter of the city, while the High Goði is responsible for overseeing the goðar of the city in the execution of their duties.

Election to the Lögretta follows the same principles, but over a much wider, pre-defined area. The planet's surface is divided into forty sectors, called velgerne, each containing a proportional amount of the planetary population. Each sector elects one goði to the Lögretta. The only restrictions on standing for election are that the candidate must have successfully completed their adult-making ceremony, or otherwise have been publicly recognised as an adult, and have completed at least ten years as a goði of their local settlement. These elections take place once every five years. At this point, the incumbent goði stands before their electorate and any may challenge them over their suitability to continue in their position. After any subsequent debate, a vote is held on whether to hold a new election in that velgerne. If this vote passes, an election is held within two months and any capable person who fits the criteria is able to stand for the position.

Once every year, the Lögretta is responsible for electing a new Llögsögumaður, whose office is responsible for overseeing the legal and political processes of Ardheim as a whole. They are typically assisted by handpicked experts from the goðar of the Lögretta, as well as promoted officials of the various governmental departments and military. However, the latter take precedence in advising the Llögsögumaður. The Llögsögumaður has no real power, with sovereignty remaining with the Lögretta. However, they are responsible for declaring aloud the laws, statements and decrees that the Lögretta has voted on, thereby passing them into law. Any laws that have not been read aloud have not been passed.

In a crisis, the Llögsögumaður may be voted emergency powers. With these, the Llögsögumaður becomes the Commander-in-Chief of the Ardheim Defence Force and gains the ability to declare temporary laws. These powers can be revoked by the Lögretta at any point and must be voted on again every three months after they have been granted to the Llögsögumaður.

Every year, all goðar – from every settlement, not just those on the Lögretta – will gather at the Várþing in Kingskeep to review and amend existing laws, or to pass new ones. It is during this annual conference that long-standing issues will also be discussed and agreements between settlements put in place to ensure adequate distribution of resources in the event of particularly cold winters, crop blights and other natural disasters.

No prisons exist on Ardheim, yet crime is responded to in a variety of ways depending on their nature. Punishment for lesser and non-violent criminal activity is delivered as payment of weregild in the form of resources or service to the wronged. The nature and amount of payment is suggested by the wronged party and mediated by the goði/goðar standing judgment over the case. In some cases the criminal may be required to undertake single combat against the wronged party or their nominated second. Sometimes, in the case of significant crimes – such as theft on a large scale – penal service may be ordered. For violent crimes, such as rape and murder, the criminal is declared outlaw and branded on their face. They can legally be killed by anybody they meet as long as they are outlaw, and will not be welcome in any settlements. Even if the criminal evades anybody that would kill them, being forced to live a solitary life in the wilds of Ardheim is usually a death sentence.

Politically, Ardheim is diverse. Although for many rural and isolated settlements the only political involvement is via one's goði, who represents the interests of the settlement at the yearly Várþing, for those in the cities meetings of the Lögretta and councils at the Alþing are an opportunity for public political discourse. It is common for those who feel strongly about proposed laws or situations to stand vigil outside the Alþing or make their feelings known through protest. Unlike some other human planets, there are no political parties that are voted into power, with the election of goðar from each settlement to form a council providing the diversity required for political discourse and representation.

In recent years, political discourse that has drawn extremes of feeling from the public and in the Lögretta is the presence of religion in government and schools. The gods are found in all areas of Ardheimian life, but for some this is a dangerous and backward notion that stunts societal evolution. A great number of protests on this issue have been observed outside the Alþing and in the largest cities.

## Education, Research and Centres of Learning

Education on Ardheim varies depending on the size of a settlement. In steadings, it is undertaken by elders and those who have the time and inclination to teach, the responsibility being shared amongst the community. Children are taught literacy, numeracy and a great number of practical skills and crafts, their lessons often taking place outside in nature. As well as the common tongue, Ardheimian children will learn to write in the Futhark, some also being taught ancient languages, such as Icelandic, Danish, Nynorsk and Ur-Swedish, if their settlement speaks them. It is not uncommon for larger steadings and towns to offer to foster children in very isolated settlements in order to facilitate their education. In such cases, the children will be sent to live in the larger steadings or towns and will make an annual trip back home for Jól. They will often live in their foster homes until adulthood or higher education.

In towns and cities, permanent schools are established and teach a varied curriculum of subjects to students, beginning at age six. Prior to this, it is expected that children will be taught several basic crafts and survival skills by their parents or guardians. Many city-based schools teach children not only the languages of Ardheim and the common tongue of the Terran Sovereignty, but also Rossi, recognising its importance for trade, travel and military training. It is undeniable that education in these established schools is far more advanced than that of education in isolated settlements, resulting in more students from urban areas entering higher education than those from rural areas. As such, parents in isolated areas often have to make a choice between giving their child a higher chance of academic excellence and watching them grow up. To some the choice is clear, as in the isolated settlements it is often survival skills that are prized over academic achievement.

Students do not undertake the rigorous testing of other planets. Instead, they choose to make a declaration of completion, called “declaring lokið”, when they feel that education has given them what they need, which is reviewed by their teachers. If the teachers agree with the lokið, the student undertakes an aptitude test and an interview to ascertain suitable next steps. Some return home to make their way as farmers, blacksmiths, hunters and fishermen; others might desire military training or further academic opportunity. Many higher education institutions and training programs have entrance examinations.

There are a number of higher education institutions available to the academically-minded. These include Skógrbjerg University and the University of Kingskeep. Those who pursue academic careers may find themselves employed in the Vitenskap Centre for Research in Kingskeep, a small but specialised unit that focuses on the planet’s eco-system and researches cures for known ailments and diseases particular to Ardheim. Other centres of research include the Skógrbjerg Botanical Institute, the Ingstrom Natural Sciences Centre, the Ardheim Zoological Foundation and the Glashöfn Institute of Science. Those who wish to pursue a medical career undergo training in the hospitals themselves, the most prestigious of which is the Meadows Healing Centre.

## Technology

Ardheim is quite low-tech in comparison with some other Terran Sovereignty planets. The abundance of natural resources, and the sustainable gathering of them, means that in most cases Ardheimians can use materials native to the planet. To enable this with greater ease, ancient techniques such as wool spinning, weaving, woodworking and tanning were adopted by the earliest colonists as most suited to the resources available. This goes some way to explaining the low-tech appearance of many Ardheimians, who will often have made their clothing themselves, or had them made by somebody they know.

The wood of the Járnrót tree is widely used in building, providing exceptional strength and resilience against the weather and wilds of the planet. The machinery required to fell and process this wood was originally developed and built on Delmont, and has since been improved with research from Cantiacorum. Now, a few Járnrót processing facilities can be found on Ardheim. It is processed Járnrót wood and products manufactured from it that constitute a large part of Ardheim's foreign trade, with skilled craftsmen producing beautiful and ornate works of art from the wood and some regiments on other planets commissioning shields from it. Any Ardheimian regiment with shield users will have enough Járnrót shields to equip them all.

Much of the other technology on Ardheim is focused on research, ecology and sustainable energy sources. Botanists and zoologists are vital to this research, as much of Ardheim is still unknown. Basic technology allows for deep sea fishing in the oceans and some exploration there, but the cold, dark seas of the planet remain a largely unexplored area.

Nearly all munitions are imported from Rossi, as there is little in the way of weapon manufacture on Ardheim. Processed metals are also imported from Rossi and Marazion V, usually for use in the research centres.

## 4. Ecology and Geography

### Landscape, Geography and Natural Resources

A planet of two very different sides, Ardheim boasts some of the most dense and richly forested areas of the galaxy around its equator, and uninhabitable frozen tundra at the poles. There is no middle ground and the one gives way to the other in stark contrast. Although this strange phenomenon has been studied for years by scientists, and plenty of theories put forward, no concrete explanation has yet been discovered.

The landscape of the planet is striking and awe-inspiring. In the poles, huge glaciers look out over often-frozen seas; closer to the equator, the forests are so verdant and deep that it is possible to go weeks in them without seeing sunlight. Where green land meets sea, stark cliffs jut out, and the mountains transition sharply between lush and snow-capped. This is a hard land, a cold land, but a land of breath-taking beauty.

The civilisation that has been built within this landscape blends into it almost seamlessly. Except for the major cities, such as Kingskeep, Skógrbjerg, Storborg and Auslo, which boast defensive walls around their perimeters as protection against the wilds, settlements and towns are built in the curves of the landscape, utilising natural geographical features. Some smaller settlements are built among the trees themselves, entire communities spending their lives above ground within the tree canopy. Most architects on Ardheim prefer to use natural materials due to their abundance and accessibility; in particular, the Járrrót tree is used to build structures that will stand the test of time, climate or the wilds.

Ardheim has a great number of natural resources that it uses on-planet and exports. First and foremost is the wood of the Járrrót tree, a giant tree that withstands most normal machinery and felling techniques. Much of the forested areas of Ardheim have soil that is rich in iron and carbon, which is used by the Járrrót trees as a source of their strength, giving them a graphene film between layers of lignin. The abundant seas are also filled with fish, and a great number of coastal settlements make their living, and their eating, on this resource and the industry it provides. The soil of Ardheim is rich in nutrients, and farming is easy there – providing the crops can be protected from hungry beasts. Many Terran species of crop were easily transplanted to the planet in the early days, and thrived abundantly. However, Ardheim's cold winters – even in the forested equatorial region – are harsh, and can sometimes arrive unexpectedly early, spoiling whole crops. When this happens, the beasts that have been tended to are assessed for their ability to survive the winter and, as humankind did in the oldest days of Terra, are slaughtered if they are unlikely to make it through. This meat, carefully preserved, allows Ardheimians to pass safely through the endless nights in the dark half of the year. For those living near the poles, there may be only a few hours of light each day during winter.

As well as the deep forests of Ardheim, vast oceans teeming with life are found on the planet. Other natural water deposits, such as deep natural cave systems, are found near the poles, and their inaccessibility means they are largely unexplored. Initial research suggests that they could be a source of great mineral wealth if technology were to advance enough to access them.

## Fauna

*“Varist skóginum” (Beware the woods)* – traditional Ardheimian farewell.

Much of the flora and fauna on Ardheim is giant, from the famed Járnrót trees of its extensive forests to the dangerous creatures that populate it. A great number of these creatures are dangerous hunters, making the forests both a treasure trove of natural resources and a dangerous death trap to the unwary. Here, dire beasts thrive.

Dire bears, with a lifespan of 130–150 years, can stand up to 8’ high on all fours and up to 18’ high on two legs. Their claws are large and vicious, taking on a natural serration from their habit of honing them on Járnrót trees. Their territory can be identified by tell-tale gouges in these trees. Although they are called bears, these beasts are genetically closer to martens and wolverines and have flatter faces, thick, strong tails, and potent scent glands.

Smaller in stature than the dire bears that live in the forests of Ardheim, ice bears can be found in the frozen, snowy tundra, with stark white fur. They generally only attack when threatened, surviving on a diet of fish.

Wolves, known as vargen, vary in size from 3’ to 7’ in length and 2’ to 5’ in height. Larger variants are called dire wolves, but all known vargen belong to the same genus. These beasts hunt in packs of 2–5, led by an alpha female. Males are typically nomadic and solitary. Vargen have exceptional dexterity and strength, being capable of great speeds and feats of agility. This is supported by extremely strong muscles and light, yet dense, bones. Of particular concern is their deadly fifth claw, usually vestigial in canine species, which can grow up to 6” in length. These claws are exceptionally strong, possibly a result of ferric compounds bonding to the keratin of the beast’s claws – vargen have frequently been observed gnawing on Járnrót roots. These claws are used to deadly effect, latching onto the side of the vargen’s prey, after which even the largest of aurochs will be borne to the ground under the weight and crushing jaws of the beast.

Once believed to have been eradicated in the first year of colonisation of the planet, the giant insect-like creatures known as *Jotun insecticus* (or “jotun”, for short) reappeared on Ardheim in 6016, spreading to Rossi the same year. These creatures are ant-like in nature: they have soldiers and a queen, who controls the hive. They make their homes in warren-like networks of tunnels that they dig beneath the earth, making them hard to locate until they are on the surface. They prey upon any living creature, injecting a substance containing larval worms from their mandibles into the victim’s brain, whereupon the victim is taken over by the jotun hive-mind. Left in this zombie-like state for a few days, the victim will eventually become jotun. Until then, they exist in a state of agonising limbo. In the wake of the jotun, the planet has become wilder and more hostile, settled territory being taken back by these creatures.

Many other large beasts that populate Ardheim are sabre-toothed, most of them large enough to bring down a man with ease. They prey upon the herd animals of the planet, such as the great shaggy aurochs, the grey mares and mamnuts – large, mammoth-like creatures with heavy, dense fur. Small, docile creatures can be found in the ecosystems of the planets also, such as the rabbit-like herbivores called kanin, which are trapped by Ardheimians for their pelts and food.

Of great symbolic importance are two species of bird, the helig (owl) and the raven. The helig, associated with the goddess Freyja, is the national bird of Ardheim. The raven, unlike those found on Terra, has three eyes instead of two, and is associated with the wisdom of the god Odin. Its three eyes have led scientists to dub it *corvid trioptis*.

Little has been explored of the oceans, but sailors and fishermen tell tales of large sea creatures that sometimes surface, with serrated spines and pasty, fleshy skin. Unexplained geyser-like eruptions in the middle of an otherwise calm body of water are rumoured to be the result of some underwater monstrosity waking or feeding in a tumult of chaos. Other rumours and horror stories focus on the unexplored caverns near the poles, from which mysterious and amphibious creatures are said to surface at night. The stories call them undermen.

Many Ardheimians are taught to hunt and trap from an early age. If a particularly long winter is predicted, an auroch-hunting party may be sent out from a settlement to obtain the beast that will feed the people for the winter. These hunting expeditions are a cause for great celebrations on their return, and elders will often take them as an opportunity to put their young people through the rites of adult-making. Otherwise, only small, everyday hunting and trapping is undertaken – enough for extra meat in the belly and furs on the back. Hunting is not undertaken for sport, and even the rites of passage associated with it will bring back beasts for eating, with as much of them as possible being used.

## Flora

Ardheim is a forest planet, with 65% of the surface covered in woodland. Much of this is deep and wild. A great number of different plants can be found in these forests, and researchers are still discovering new species on a regular basis.

The Járnrót tree was one of the challenges that faced the earliest colonists, as it defied all attempts to be felled and put to use. Its strong, iron-like trunks, branches and roots turned every axe blow and damaged the machinery applied to it. Only after three years of study and development on Delmont was machinery created suitable for felling these trees, and the delivery of it to Ardheim changed the face of the planet, and the lives of its colonists, forever. It became a staple in all architecture and, eventually, the finer crafts and objects of art that became status symbols both on and off-world. With the addition of Járnrót wood to their resources, the military units accompanying the colonists began to use it for their shields, and many traditions surrounding such shields grew over time.

With the enrichment of religious belief in the old gods, the mythical symbolism of the World Tree quickly gathered itself around the Járnrót, which eventually became seen as the same tree, Yggdrasil, which formed the bridge between divine and mortal, the wild and civilisation, nature and technology. Just as the World Tree encompassed all the worlds of both the gods and men, so the Járnrót tree encompasses all of Ardheimian civilisation, holding it from the brink of destruction.

Not all the flora on Ardheim is as useful as the Járnrót tree. Alfbane is an enormous, subterranean fungus which, when grown to maturity, spews billions of spores into the air. These take root within host organisms, which are urged to gorge themselves, feeding the fungus and allowing it to gain a greater hold over the host. The host, upon nearing death, is urged to dig and make its way below ground, where the fungus completely subsumes it, growing out of its skin in spurts and branches of soft mycelium. The fungus then creates a pit around itself, establishing a woven sac within this space with a light roof of earth held up by soft branches. It then excretes a strong, sickly sweet-smelling acid, filling the sac. When any wandering creature exerts enough pressure on the roof, they fall to a slow, agonising death in this acid. These fungi can live forever, unless killed by starvation or a manufactured death. Alfbane was initially encountered in 4879, leading to the event known as the Green Plague after a mass alfbane reproductive event occurred outside the walls of the initial settlement zone during one of the first harvests, spreading throughout settlements via the grain supply. A cure was synthesised after a few months, and alfbane is now less of a concern, yet many disappearances with no apparent cause are attributed to it, and infestations are cleared out with vehement use of fungicide.

The cure for albane is said to have been further developed and improved in the labs of the Vitenskap Research Centre, and whilst it is readily available from the Meadows Hospital for those that can be treated in time, Ardheimians are closed-lipped about its origins.

Also of a secretive nature is the origin of Ardheimian mead. Its production is undertaken deep within forests, the locations of which are not given to anybody but those that must work there. The resulting mixture is sweet, but does not have such a honeyed taste as ancient blends, nor are there bees on Ardheim.

## **The Verderers' Council**

The Verderer's Council is a council tasked with upholding Forest Law and safeguarding the natural resources and landscape of Ardheim from threats such as overfelling, overfishing and similar destruction. Having seen the way in which humanity destroyed the natural habitats of Delmont, the early colonists put methods in place to ensure the same did not happen on Ardheim.

Each member of the council is assigned an area of Ardheim to safeguard. They appoint their own taskforce in that area and delegate responsibilities as necessary. After this appointment, they lose any substantial attachment to their family settlement and often go for years at a time without seeing their family members.

All places on the Verderer's Council are granted by merit; they are not hereditary, though many people choose to follow their parents into it. Those who take a place on the council find that their lives are consumed by it, so any family they have will usually be brought up in the role.

Verderers must have excellent survival skills and be able to survive for extended periods of time in some of the harshest regions of the planet. They are given some training as part of the application process for the position, during which they will also undergo a series of trials to test their skill and what they have learned. Combat skills are taught in relation to the wild beasts of Ardheim in survival and hunting situations, not for killing people.

All settlements, regardless of their size, recognise the importance of the council and, as such, keep a house or area for council members to utilise when they are nearby. The council will only convene in times of crisis; otherwise, all members of the council spend their time in the natural world. The last convention of the Verderer's Council was in June 6016, in the wake of the jotun threat.

## Cities and Population

Cities are spread out on Ardheim over large distances, and travel between them can be difficult, especially when the snows set in for the winter. They are built in valleys, inlets and on natural plains – places where construction and growth is able to take place relatively unhindered and requires little change to the natural landscape or environment. Building with nature and making the city a part of the landscape is a core architectural concept among Ardheim's builders. Most large cities have developed naturally over time due to population growth or position, and this staged growth is apparent in their layout and appearance. Smaller settlements are found both on the ground and built into the trees, life among the treetops often being safer than on the ground where they are easily accessible by the voracious hunters of the animal world. The Járnrót trees often form the foundation of such settlements. This means that large cities frequently have older areas within them that are built above-ground, and large areas of Járnrót can be found within them. An important structure for any town or city is the longhall, which functions as a communal feasting place, Alþing, law court and information exchange. This longhall is always built with Járnrót wood. On Ardheim, nature and civilisation co-exist.

This does not mean that modern technology is absent from the cities: the most important cities have outer walls and watchtowers along their perimeters, with Kingskeep having an arsenal always on watch along its walls. Each city is assigned at least one standing regiment from the ADF to guard it, and smaller towns have standing militia to defend them.

The total population of Ardheim is estimated to be around 65 million, with roughly 60% of it located in the cities, the other 40% scattered in smaller towns and settlements.

## Places of Note

Auslo – Location of the biggest Járnrót processing facility on Ardheim. It provides 65% of all Járnrót resources for domestic and foreign trade. Most of the inhabitants of this city work in the Járnrót industry.

Björnland – This region is known for having some of the largest and oldest Járnrót trees on the planet. Potential harvests here are made incredibly difficult to plan and execute by the comparatively large proportion of dire bears that seem to migrate to and from here. Logging operations have resulted in a casualty rate of around 20%.

The Forest of Teeth – A particularly dangerous area of forest spanning 178 miles in the Västerland region of Ardheim. It is unknown why there is such a proliferation of dire and sabre-tooth beasts here, and it is rife with toxic flora. It is the only area of Ardheim not overseen by a member of the Verderer's Council, as those entering the area do not come out again.

Fóstraheim – A settlement situated on what is claimed to be the site of the first colony. Located on the borders of the equatorial region, Fóstraheim is a very small steading; however, it attracts a number of visitors throughout the years thanks to its heritage.

The Great Glass Sea – It is uncertain how this sea was given its name, but some say that it is due to the glassy surface of this particularly deep body of water, while others say it can be attributed to a tale from hundreds of years ago, in which the winter was so cold that the sea itself froze over, and tradesmen could walk across it with their wares.

Glashöfn – Pronounced and written in the common tongue as Glasshaven, a seaport in the predominantly coastal region of Aegirland. Taking its name from the sea by which it is situated, the city is a significant intra-planetary trade hub. Most of Ardheim's domestic trade comes through Glashöfn, and a significant amount of foreign trade makes its way to Storborg and its central spaceport for export.

Kingskeep – Main military training city and capital of Ardheim. It is the base of operations of the Ardheim Defence Force and the Skóginum Guard. It is also a centre of law, being home to the first and main Alþing and the location of the yearly Várþing, during which all goðar will gather to review and amend existing laws, or to pass new ones. It is also a centre of learning and research, and is home to the finest medical training facility on Ardheim, the Meadows Healing Centre. It is the location of the infamous Keep in the Forest.

The Keep in the Forest – Where the most gruelling trials for military service are undertaken. These trials are far beyond basic military training, and identify those who will become elite troops in Kingskeep regiments. Not all who undergo the trials survive. Undertaking the trials is voluntary.

Mardok Training Facility – Adept training centre located in the city of Kingskeep. New Adepts are sent here from Cantiacorum for training with the Ardheim Defence Force prior to deployment with the regiments.

The Meadows Healing Centre – Built upon the site of the first fully equipped hospital on Ardheim, this Kingskeep hospital is the most prestigious medical training establishment on the planet. Due to its close proximity with the military training centres of Kingskeep, many soldiers who specialise as battlefield medics undergo their training here. The Meadows Healing Centre is also home to the Vitenskap Centre for Research, a small but specialised unit that focuses on the planet's ecosystem and researches cures for known ailments and diseases particular to Ardheim.

Skógrbjerg – The main centre of research and higher education on Ardheim, known for its several universities. It is also the base of operations for the Cyber Force, one of the three branches of the Ardheim Armed Forces.

Storborg – The interplanetary trade hub and transport centre of Ardheim. Home to Swan Spaceport.

Svarthol – Located in the forests nearer to Vinterholm, this cavern extends up to 2 kilometres into the planet's crust. This knowledge was gained through use of drone explorers – no manned expedition has penetrated more than 500 metres into the cavern, due to it being largely submerged. To be trapped in a strong current here would be fatal.

Thorsaeti – Once a thriving city, now razed to the ground following jotun invasion in 6016. Rebuilding efforts will take years.

Vinterholm – The location of the New Hope Hospital, built in 6016. New Hope Hospital is currently the largest medical facility on Ardheim.

## 5. Military

*"In times of peace, prepare for war."* - Ardheimian proverb

### Structure

The Ardheim Armed Forces is the military organisation responsible for the defence of Ardheim. It consists of three branches: the Ardheim Defence Force (ADF), Skóginum Guard (SG) and the Cyber Force.

The Ardheim Defence Force consists of two large units and two smaller units:

- Armed Forces operational regiments
- Ardheim Luftforsvaret (air, navy, space) (AL)
- Kingskeep Military Academy (KMA)
- Operation Support Detachment (OSD).

The armed forces are subordinate to the Field Marshall, currently Hjalmar Ivarsson. The Field Marshall appoints members to the Military Council from a wide range of areas, who act as advisors and have voting power on any issues debated. This council is separate to the Lögregta, though any military laws it wishes to pass must also be voted on and approved with a majority by the Lögregta at the Alþing. The main headquarters for both the ADF and SG are based in Kingskeep, with the Cyber Force in the city of Skógrborg.

An organised military was first assembled upon colonisation with the need to tackle the first threats of the great beasts and harsh wildlife. Led by Einar Uttergard, the initial defence force evolved into an aggressive force from which came the Skóginum Guard and the tradition of the Haldman. The SG is a counter-terrorism and Spesialkommando for home defence, often operating deep in the Ardheimian woods as a pre-emptive attack force to protect future deployments. Anyone who has completed a tour of duty in the ADF can apply to join the SG, and once a trooper joins the SG they remain until retirement. The Skóginum Guard never leaves the planet. It is important to note that formally the SG and ADF report to the same commanders and both have immense respect for one another. The SG is often seen as a respectable, honoured retirement route for those who want to remain in military service.

The Ardheim Armed Forces are often deployed to fight in deep forest conditions, and are comprised of a variety of specialised forces with a wide array of specialisations, including light infantry, heavy Infantry, mechanised forces, paratroopers and unconventional warfare.

The Ardheim Luftforsvaret (AL) are often utilised as support, logistics and transport. Rarely are the AL forces called for direct engagement. The AL are respected and referred to as "the Warrior's Haft", for without a haft, an axe is useless.

The Kingskeep Military Academy (KMA) is the first port of call for all fresh recruits and is regarded as one of the toughest places for training, churning out elite forces with a low pass rate of 30%. The Kingskeep Citadel is the headquarters, thus lending its name to all Academies across Ardheim, regardless of attached regiment.

The Operation Support Detachment are the voices on the radio, intelligence battalions, the administration, artillery battalions, signals, and civil services.

The Ardheim Cyber Force was established soon after the city of Skógrbjorg took its focus on research. Responsible for the military communications and offensive cyber warfare. The ACF operate from command bases or command ships, relying on engineers in regiments to act in proxy for ground missions.

In 5959, when the military faced a lack of manpower and logistical difficulties allowing the Skóginum Guard freedom for long deployments deep in the woods, the armed forces were officially restructured, introducing the Kingskeep regiments and Ardheim Luftforsvaret upon instruction of General Agata Brennasdottir. The Kingskeep Military Academy was officially formed and tasked with increasing military personnel and careers.

In 5962, General Agata Brennasdottir and Field Marshall Ulfar Ragnarsson established an agreement of shared manpower with Rossi, known as the Kologrivov Reformation. This led to a tighter relationship with Rossi as both forces engaged in training regimes on one another's planets. The increased exposure to Rossi military on Ardheim increased interest in military careers.

In 5963 a year-long temporary mandatory military service was enacted to bolster Ardheimian forces. This was met with conscientious objection.

In 5981 General Bruun Haakon-Hanssen enacted the Haakon Reformation following reinvigorated interest in military service. The second restructuring of the military split the training academies and the Operation Support Detachment from the ADF into two separate sub-units.

In 6016 the RDF and the ADF were merged under the Skjaldborg Pact to face the Jotun insecticus threat and currently serve together as the ARDF, led by Field Marshall Hjalmar Iwarsson.

It is important to note that the initial fifty regiments in the Ardheim Armed Forces are comprised entirely of Ardheimians. Regiments above these, including the Kingskeep 98th, are a mix of both Ardheimians and Rossi as a result of the Kologrivov Reformation.

## **Notable Forces**

Storborg 102nd Mechanised Infantry – In November 6016 this regiment was involved in the battle against the jotun in Thorsaeti, which earned them the nickname 'Rapidstrike', due to their almost immediate response to the enemy invasion. Leading an armoured spearhead in a counter-charge, Colonel Bjornsdottir bought the evacuation a critical hour in which hundreds of civilians were safely evacuated.

2nd Skjold Luftforsvaret (AL) – Known as the Failed Garmr, in 6012 2nd Skjold took to the skies, conducting the longest and largest airlift operation on Ardheim, rescuing and evacuating three entire towns after a large wildfire cut them off. The villages were lost but the inhabitants saved, the only loss of life being one pet dog (*garmr* in the old language).

3rd Stormeskadron (SG) – Known as Thor's Storm, in June 6016 the regiment had reported contact with a jotun force three times their number. After comms went dead, they were announced KIA. Kingskeep 55th were tasked with search and rescue, but upon arrival they found the jotun dead, with two entire nests eradicated. All that remained was jotun body parts laid out to spell "Thor was here". The 3rd Stormeskadron are now MIA.

Kingskeep 19th "Ghost Runners" – This regiment earned its moniker during the initial One Bakkar war, whilst the Segovax cluster was isolated from the rest of the Terran Sovereignty. They proved their worth on multiple fronts, infiltrating behind One Bakkar lines and performing covert boarding actions onto enemy ships, inflicting grievous casualties and damaging tonnes of war-critical material. As such, they have earned a feared and respected reputation that persists to this day. Their current location is unknown outside of TSA command, being on extended deployment.

Kingskeep 54th – Now disbanded, this regiment is known for its revival of the term “valkyrie” to refer to medics, creating a tradition of taking an oath to be a Valkyrie to one’s fellow soldiers, healing them and bringing them back from the battlefield. After a failed mission to capture and study jotun on Zennor in August 6016, the last three surviving Valkyries retired, passing the tradition to another Kingskeep regiment.

Kingskeep 98th – An elite regiment in the Green Cloaks taskforce fighting on the frontlines, Kingskeep 98th is a rapid response, special reconnaissance regiment comprised of small units of highly trained military personnel, including special forces, psy-warfare and military intelligence. They generally operate behind enemy lines, utilising guerrilla tactics and unconventional warfare. They have a reputation for brutality and cold efficiency.

29th Explosives Ordnance Detachment – This force is known amongst the Ardheimian regiments as being made up of some of the most insane individuals permitted to serve. This is largely down to the apparent disregard for their own safety when it comes to performing dangerous close-combat demolitions and tactical deployment of explosives. However, if you ask them, it is down to the rigorous recruitment standards for this regiment prescribing mathematical skill at near genius levels, meaning that every precision use of explosives can be expected to have a finely calculated result already planned out.

## **Military Traditions and Customs**

### **Haldrmen**

Ardheim is still a largely untamed and wild place, and the survival training undertaken by most warriors involves spending a lot of time in the wilds, forests and tundra. Here, warriors have been known to start letting bloodlust take them over, and in battle they become raging beasts, unable to stop once the blood starts flowing. They can become a danger to themselves and their fellow soldiers, their love of killing overtaking any sense of strategy or self-preservation. Very quickly, a tradition called the trials of the Haldrman (“held man”) developed: a person who notes themselves beginning to succumb to these sorts of bloodlusts and love of killing will volunteer to undertake a period of holding themselves back during battle. They will still fight alongside their fellow soldiers, but will maintain a purely defensive or strategic role. They will deliberately put themselves in battlefield situations so as to continually test their resolve and train the bloodlust out of themselves. A trainee Haldrman will be sponsored by a fellow soldier they can trust to put them down should they give in to this bloodlust. The sponsor will act as a mentor and brother/sister during this time. Often, this sponsor has undertaken the Haldrman trials previously.

Those that pass this trial are known as Haldrmen, Held Men (or Women), referring to their ability to hold back. They will be allowed to engage in battle as usual, and are often particularly noted as cool-headed fighters who use technical skill alongside strength and instinct to best their enemy. Those that fail are called Frihetmen (Free Men), but this freedom is not desirable. Frihetmen are usually discharged from military service and often go crazy in civilian life. Many escape to the forests to be where the other wild things are and are never seen again.

## The Soemrlingr trials

Some soldiers will choose to undertake the Soemrlingr trials, which, on the surface, test their skill, self-reliance, knowledge of the wilds and combat ability. The objective of the trial is simple: to locate a suitable Járnrót tree and from it craft one's new shield. Those who undertake the trial will be sent alone into the darkest, most dangerous parts of the forests and will not be allowed to return until they have achieved the objective. As such, these trials can be deadly, and many have been lost to exposure, beasts and disease. There is also a matter of pride in these trials – for what Ardheimian would admit failure and return empty-handed?

The true test of the trials is completely different, and one that plays on this Ardheimian pride. The Soemrlingr trial is one of letting go of one's pride and accepting humility – how long will it take for a person to realise that it is impossible to cut down the Járnrót and craft a shield from its wood on their own? How long will it take before they return and ask for help? The time spent alone in the forest before this realisation is arrived at emphasises how much Ardheimians need others. That is what the shieldwall is about: people who you're protecting and who are protecting you. The trials make soldiers appreciate their shield brothers and shield sisters, and encourage resourcefulness beyond self-reliance.

## Battlecries and pre-battle preparation

*"You are the hunters, you are the predators! [Enemy] is the prey. To Valhalla!"* – Traditional Ardheimian battle cry from a commander to their soldiers

Many Ardheimian regiments pride themselves on striking terror into the hearts of their enemies. When you have won the battle of courage, the rest follows. Tales of Ardheimian battle prowess are encouraged and embellished in order to maintain this view, and any Ardheimian soldier will attempt to add to these tales with their own battlefield achievements. Many Ardheimian soldiers will paint their faces and/or their bodies in stark colours – black, red, white – to make their visage more terrifying; some may enter combat coated in the blood of an animal sacrificed to the gods for victory; shields are painted with bright designs or monstrous images. It is the use of sound, however, that Ardheimians excel at. The ability of a shieldwall, striking their weapons on their shield bosses rhythmically, is well known to disorient enemies, and unless the regiment is one of stealth or the operation guerrilla, Ardheimians will be noisy in battle. With each kill they roar their victory, often dedicating it to a god. Across the battle lines they may choose an enemy and make eye contact, vowing aloud and aggressively that they will destroy them, often describing in gory detail how they shall do so. The commander of any Ardheimian regiment is able to project their voice across a vast distance to give commands, this itself being an impressive feat. Soldiers that specialise as snipers or in stealth bring a different type of terror in their wake, bringing silent, unseen death swiftly and never being found. It is not unknown for soldiers on such missions to spend days buried in the undergrowth waiting for their target to come into their sight, even sleeping in trees or rivers to get the shot.

However, the noise and rage Ardheimians may exhibit in battle does not mean they are undisciplined. It is only through discipline that they may put on this show and still retain the precision and power of their combat prowess. It is very rare that an Ardheimian will desert or run in fear, as the promise of glory and honour even in death is far more desirable than returning home having abandoned one's battle sisters and brothers.

Prior to battle, regiments may identify themselves as predators hunting prey, or may dedicate themselves to the gods and Valhalla in case of death. Songs and rhythmic, aggressive dances or call-and-response chants may be used to build up energy and work the soldiers up for battle.

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