

# The Deadwind Highlands

A Hexploration Scenario by Andrew Shields



## Common Knowledge

Characters from this area can have this information as a handout, as this is fairly common knowledge. Visitors may gather this kind of information as rumors, through research, or by questioning locals about specific locations and history.

## History

Here is a high-level summary of big events over the last few centuries, for context.

### Windstrider Nomads

The Windstrider Highland Nomads were ruled by a line of barbaric necromancers, the Dark Rider Kings. The first of the Kings, Clybor, was dying of thirst in the badlands when the God of the Night Wind saved him by bringing water from the deep up to the surface. Clybor left with the God of the Night Wind, ever grateful, but his thirsting shadow could not follow into the night sky. Thus the first Dark Rider King was made, a nomad vampire war leader who conquered the region and brought order. King Clybor built Fountain City (*map location 1*) in the badlands, over a massive aquifer, where he had been left behind.

The Windstrider Nomads had no stoneworking skill, but they did have wealth and violence. They recruited specialists to build their cities for them.

Fountain City was for the kings and their courts. Every century, the current king would select the next one, giving the gift of vampirism and stepping back to support the new king as a

member of the Night Chorus (former kings). The Night Chorus built themselves a fortress tomb, The Distant Past, recruiting enchanters to ward the place against all memory so they could have privacy.

Finally, the City of Hawks (*map location 8*) was built for the mortal population of the highlands to gather. Nomads came and went from the unique city, but it served as a center for agriculture and study.

In time, the Windstrider Nomads neglected their military strength and dwindled in decadence.

### Arclighter Scholar Kings (300 years ago to present)

The Arclighter Scholars noticed this territory, and eventually came with armies to conquer it. As elementalists tied to the wind and movement of air, they considered the Windstriders blasphemous in polluting the highland sky with their necromancy. They would end the perversion of worship of the God of the Night Wind, and honor the god properly in their way.

To break the Windstrider resistance, they summoned an ancient dragon to smash the City of Hawks. At this point there were five vampire kings in the Night Chorus, and the Most High Dark Rider King on the throne. Arclighter agents had already sown dissent among the weakened nomads, slowing their ability to muster, and by the time they got a proper warband together the Arclighters were laying siege to Fountain City.

Dismayed at the possibility of Fountain City being crushed by dragons, the Most High withdrew and left the nomads leaderless, and the Arclighters in command of their settlements. The elemental scholar wasted no time setting up governance and taxes on the nomads.

They built the Tower of Winds to educate their nobility and share some knowledge with those nomads who had the aptitude and ability to learn. However, this was a hollow gesture of solidarity, as there was a rigid division between the conquering Arclighters and the dominated nomads.

Unrest is common in the Deadwind Highlands. The Arclighters deal harshly with their conquered nomadic subjects, who strike back through vandalism and raids. A large-scale rebellion seems inevitable.

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## Gazetteer

**1. Fountain City.** This massive stone city in the badlands has endless green gardens due to an underground aquifer. The Deep Port also provides access to the under realm, where traders gather for commerce with the surface. The Arclight Scholars rule the city with elemental air magic and bright steel, but they generally prefer to spend their time in gardens or libraries as they network and study. The city is haunted, but the Arclighters keep the worst of the spectral manifestations in check. The Whistlegaze is an organized criminal guild made up of city nomads, engaged in acts of crime and acts of resistance. They provide a shadow government for the nomads who feel left out of the Arclighter justice system, and they may yet be the foundation for a rebellion. The Arclighters attracted many from their homeland to come on pilgrimage to Fountain City to see the Dreaming Gate, where the God of Night Winds first brought peace to mortals (based on their telling of the Ascension of Clybor). Pilgrims bring magical offerings and seek shelter from their own hungers and thirsts, sheltering in temporary or permanent oblivion.



**2. The Tower of Winds.** The Arclight Scholars brought in a dwarven clan who spent years building this magnificent college where Arclighters study architecture, lore, and magic. The dwarves left over a century ago, and some of the work is slipping without skilled maintenance. Still, the imposing building has an impressive legacy offering networking and education to the youth of the highlands.



**3. The Gazing Fairgrounds.** Nearly 200 years ago, a tremendous festival of the arts was held here; it ended badly, in fire and blood, with the loss of many artists and nobles. As a memorial, standing stones were raised, and they sing keening songs of mourning matched with a beautiful choir of the bereaved and the slain when the wind blows just so. The energy of the site draws the restless dead for miles around, and there is a bounty on disanimated undead, so hunters frequently lay ambushes there.



**4. Rushlight Spire.** Formerly a necropolis in a substantial tower over endless winding catacombs, the broken site has the decadent remnant of a once-powerful order, now calling themselves the Flirtcrafters. These artists and scholars seem to be squatting in the shadow of former glory, passing their days and nights in hedonistic abandon.



**5. The Tangle Trap.** A weird corner of the badlands seems to shift the landscape around those who enter a confused zone. Locals know better than to go near; those who are lost seldom return, and those who do can't recall what happened to them—even though sometimes years have passed.



**6. The High Camp.** This hunting camp supports expeditions into the badlands and mountains to hunt spirited and unique local prey, like the firebanded wyvern. The nomads once kept it up, but the Arclighters have little use for it, and the camp is run down these days.



**7. The Distant Past.** Local legends tell of a mighty fortress with a cheeky name, "The Distant Past." It is bound up in powerful ritual magic so that it is impossible to find. Within, past Dark Rider Kings of the Windstrider Nomads race slumber until they are again called forth with their undying armies to reclaim these lands. It's probably just a legend.



**8. City of Hawks (Ruin).** Formerly the main settlement of the nomads, the city was crushed by an ancient dragon commanded by the Arclight Scholars centuries ago. Now there are some nomad families and some outlaws that have settled in the rubble, basements, and unsafe buildings. It is kind of a slum camp, but there are trade opportunities to be had there. Rumor has it there is a lot of espionage, real cloak and dagger stuff between rebels and agents of the Arclighters.



**9. The Meat Palace.** Runyon Peeleebi was a halfling adventurer, and his people built this cozy fortress as a giant smoker and kitchen to preserve and prepare hunting trophies and feasts. Three generations later, the Peeleebi love visitors and trade, and they are a base and coordinating hub for the region's bounty hunters.



**10. Lord Dirini's Estate.** The Dirini family has friendships with nomad families, and for generations they have studied the highland culture. The estate is a safe place where nomads can come to be free of prejudice and oppression they face from Arclighters elsewhere. Locals praise the Dirini hands-off management style. Be sure to go armed with silver, however, as there is a tradition of werewolf attacks in the area.



# The Deadwind Highlands

How it Was Made by Andrew Shields

This is the way I went from a map and some cards to having a structured adventure setting with some ideas for how to get a campaign started.

## Setting Up Tools

I took an existing map of several semi-random tiles to key with results from the Hexploration Sample Deck. Each card used is listed by title and card number below. There were 10 locations, so I used an image editor to put in location numbers. I can also add geographical names later in the process.

## Generating Results

I deliberately chose locations that would at least somewhat match the map markings, so I randomized the location properties to keep the results spicy. Once I picked a card, I rolled 1d6 per question, all at once, and put the dice in a line, so I could quickly jot down the results.

Also, for each location, I rolled another d6 with a 2 in 6 exploding chance there would be a trait on the location. (This may have been a bit extra, as I rolled 5 results of 1 or 2 for the very first location! Anywhere with that many traits was bound to be the starting base location for PCs.)

(We don't have to do everything in a random way. Because we picked cards we randomized the table results on the card backs. But you can randomize the cards chosen and pick the table results, or even pick what the most intriguing card or best-fitting card to use and pick the table results you find most inspiring. When there are more icons to choose between, picking cards will be less necessary.)

**1. Arid Trading City 01.** Ruled by elementalists. Wealth source: aquifer below. Biggest threat: nomads. Famous pastimes: Scholarship, accessing private libraries and museum gatherings by networking with nobles. Best trading partners: an underrealm civilization accessing the surface.

- Haunted 13a. A terrible secret is working its way out. Ghostly guides point to buried secrets. Complete an unfinished symbolic task.
- Expensive Taxation 14b. Disgruntled subjects indulge in costly sabotage. Bribes to skip extensive processing for possessions etc.
- Family History 16b. A henchman has history here, with estranged family and fond memories. They would be welcomed back, their family has important responsibilities and they could help. An old friend is in trouble, but if you're busy...

- Guild Base 13b. The criminal guild prioritizes securing secrets. Their HQ is influential. Their patron is an eccentric aristocrat. There are plentiful or elite supplies for their business.
- Pilgrimage Sites 15b. Usually offer magic items as sacrifices. Holy because a god touched the Material here. Pilgrims come to seek oblivion. Come to see (and maybe study) artifacts, phenomenon, and rare texts, consulting experts. Determined vandals keep vandalizing the site.

**2. The College of Whispers 21.** Students of architecture. Built by dwarven skill. Run by the government. Current problems: deferred maintenance, decay. Who wants control? College leaders crack down on dissent.

**3. Standing Stones 26.** A deferred ritual lies below. The stones are active when the wind blows just right. Artists raised the stones to commemorate an art festival. Monsters are drawn here, so hunters lay ambushes.

**4. The Necromancer's Haven 19.** Snide ogres guard the door. Inside is a sprawling necropolis. Most famous occupants are the Flirtcrafters, an oddly-named order of slightly mad sculptors, masons, writers, and artists. You must check all weapons and magic at the door to enter.

• Shadow of Former Glory 30a. An oppressed faction built it. It was destroyed recently. It highlights decline from military might to threatened decadence. The dominant culture doesn't care about it and wants it razed.

**5. The Roaring Gate 39.** A god sent a cosmic servitor to sacrifice itself, creating an escape for the Chosen One. The gate opens to a primitive barrow complex. It can be opened by repainting the stones' runes to activate the gate.

- Baffling Navigation 46b. You get dizzy, because an artifact is within. The landscape is remixed around you. You can counter the effect with a locally enchanted travel amulet.
- Fey Investment 47a. Fey will let you join epic carousing. They defend themselves with amnesia dust. You can contact them by drowning in a mushroom circle and meeting in a dream. The fey use the gate to access other worlds.

**6. War Camp 43.** Trophy hunters are based here. The site is crumbling, increasingly disused. The site is maintained by families of the hunters and warriors while they go out. You can fit in by putting in the work to maintain and rebuild without complaint.

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**7. The Usurper's Fortress 03.** Vampires defend it. Magic makes people forget where it is. It controls access to political prisoners, including heirs to the throne. You can pay a corrupt sergeant a bribe to get in or out.

**8. Inhabited Ruins 10.** People live here to loot the ruins. The place was flattened by a dragon. People remember this place as fearsome, before the fall. You may need to go to stop the inhabitants from toying with dangerous powers that may release doom. Criminals and foreigners base spies here.

**9. The Renegade Forge 36.** A halfling explorer built this "meat palace" to smoke and preserve hunting bounty and trophies. They are delighted to get visitors, and love to trade.

**10. Noble's Country Fief 06.** A retired general runs it. A disgraced alchemist is an important resident. Locals love their hands-off management style. Watch out for plentiful werewolves.

## Take a Step Back: Big Picture, Connections

Reading over all the results with an eye on the map, I looked for overall trends and key outcomes that would affect telling a story about this place (and motivating adventurers).

- The Arid City (1) sets up three factions in tension; elementalists ruling the city (and the area), nomad plainsmen with a big grudge, and an underrealm race. They can disagree on matters of overworld access, water rights, and pilgrimage. I can tie the nomads to the prominent criminal guild in the city, and also to the ghosts; the matter of the pilgrimage site can also tie in to the struggles between the nomads and the scholars, with elemental and divine magic in play.
  - The pilgrimage site is a tourist trap, a recreation. The ACTUAL site is location 5—and that's a pretty great investigation for PCs.
- There is a significant undead representation here: the Arid City (1) is haunted, there is a crushed Necromancer Haven (4), and there is a fortress guarded by vampires, ogres, and magic (7).
  - Once and Future Necroking: the nomadic plainsmen were ruled by mounted necromancers once, based out of the Usurper's Fortress (7). Each king was made a vampire and ruled for a century, then went to the fortress for contemplation to make room for the next king. The culture fell into decadence, the necromancers congregated

in the Necromancer Haven (4) and lost touch with their obligations, and the area was conquered by armies followed by the elemental scholars who set up to rule. The vampire kings believe if they are destroyed the souls of all those they consumed will be lost to the world, so survival is crucial; they will not ride out in open battle, and they hide in their ritually masked fortress. The once-proud necromatic tradition was pounded into something that the scholars felt they could safely ignore and left in their trashed tower. However, loyalists to the Dark Rider Kings of old stir up ghosts and hauntings in the city that belongs to the nomads, where the scholars rule.

- Now that the necromancers are weak and undead are in short supply, the Flirtcrafters (4) have resorted to ogres to defend them. The traditional espionage agents of the vampire kings, the werewolves, are mostly settled around the Noble's Country Fief (10) but they know how to find the Usurper's Fortress (10) and have a different view of history than the scholar rulers. The nobles running the area were "encouraged" to be hands-off by the independent-minded werewolf enclave hidden among the villagers.
- Potential rebellion or revolution simmers, with leaders in the Inhabited Ruins (8) which was once the capitol city of the Dark Rider Kings, conquered by the scholars and left to decay (since they wanted the water and intact defenses of the Arid City).
- The Inhabited Ruins (8) is a lightning rod where plainsman spies and scholar spies mingle and jab at each other, struggling to organize or prevent revolt. So far the plains faction has not revived any of the ancient necromancy built into the former capitol city ruin, but it's only a matter of time. If the plains nomads successfully deploy necromatic magic on a wartime scale, the scholars will summon a dragon again, as they did to flatten the former capitol (8).