

The Grinning Reach

A Hexploration Scenario by Andrew Shields



Common Knowledge

Characters from this area know this information as a handout, as this is 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.

The Torchbearer Empire Rises

Warring city-states and petty kings were united under an emperor, so a fertile (but irritable) region came under centralized control about 400 years ago. They immediately began expanding, as all the warrior traditions were no longer bleeding out along the territorial lines within the empire and needed somewhere else to fight.

The Grinning Pacification

The Grinning Reach was a dry forested area to the southeast, ruled by the Six Stars necromancers based out of the City of Twilight.

The Magus Council of the Illuminated Order was a wizard guild patron to many bands of adventurers. During the Grinning Pacification 380 years ago, the most famous of their adventuring bands was the Portenders, who had many adventures as they rose to fame (and infamy) in the brutal war.

The city of Suntide (area 1 on the map) was liberated by the Illuminated Order after years of hard

fighting, driving the Six Stars necromancers back to their fortress in the City of Twilight (area 5 on the map). The Portenders adventurers were instrumental in assassinating the necromancer leaders as they were conducting a massive ritual there to curse the whole region; the ritual misfired, cursing only the city. Any who died there would rise again undead. Still, the might of the Six Stars was broken, and the Illuminated Order could begin to consolidate their power on behalf of the Torchbearer Empire.

The Illuminated Order settled in Suntide, and they doled out fiefs to the Portenders to reward them for their service in the pacification.

Current Affairs

Over the last century, the Illuminated Order has been sinking into decadence. In the shadows, the heirs to the shattered Six Stars have been gathering power and working to reclaim the Grinning Reach. A new leader is emerging, Wolfscar, who was born in Suntide. His mother was imprisoned in the Institute of Regret when he was young. As a teen, Wolfscar discovered his heritage as heir to the legendary Civic Enforcer (ruler of the Six Stars).

Wolfscar gathers support among the discontented settlements as the out-of-touch wizard order ruling the borderland continues neglecting their duties. Tolerance of necromancy and other disobedience is on the rise among the people. Wolfscar has taken over the Starlight, a resistance movement led by wizard necromancers, and he is also served by the Cold Grasp, unholy necromancers. As other resistance movements gather under his banner, he becomes a real threat.

The Illuminated Order has stepped up recruitment of eager young adventurers, expecting these novices to do the needed legwork and sleuthing needed to assure order in their restless lands.

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Gazeteer

1. Suntime. The City of the Illuminated Order is the capitol of the Grinning Reach borderland. The increasingly self-absorbed wizard ruling class makes extra income by welcoming nobles who are exiled from the core lands of the Torchbearer Empire and showing them a good time, including offering daily arena combat spectacles famous across the empire. Also, pilgrims come from all over the region to see the Eclipse Tree, which is black in sunlight but glows as the sun at night. The city is plagued by undead rising in the streets by night, and by sand monsters formed as the Illuminated Order's centuries-old battle magic defenses decay and misfire sometimes. Suntime is a city in decline.



2. The Institute of Regret. This tower's cells range from posh suites to oubliettes, and the Riardo family has run the prison since its founding. It was built with convict labor, and it has claimed to provide humane care (though former prisoners may not agree). Currently, the site is somewhat run down, and temporarily not accepting new prisoners due to some internal and financial issues. Can the Riardos maintain control, or will the Order replace them?



3. The Prayer Guard. The Transcendent Fist was a monk in the Portenders. He was granted title and lands, and he built this monastic tower and trained up his successors. As his power peaked, the battle monk left this world to battle demons on their own territory. The Transcendent Guardians guard their secrets, and mistrust the Illuminated Order and the various necromatic factions alike.



4. Fort Kiln. This massive crematorium was heavily warded so the battlefield casualties in the Pacification could not be raised as corporeal or incorporeal undead. In the centuries since, it has served as a colorful home for adventurers and their families.



5. The City of Twilight. The Six Stars necromancers ruled the Grinning Reach from this city, before it was broken by siege and an attack ritual became a curse. Those who die in the city rise as undead. Still, many people live in the ruins. Falgyre Stables trains undead-hunting carnivorous horses and riding emus there. Dark factions there raise and sell undead mounts. Whispers suggest there may be races between the stables, for discreet audiences.



6. The Locked Door. These strange standing stones are said to have appeared out of

nowhere, from time to time. There are many rumors about what they are, and how they got here. If anyone knows for sure, they keep the answer a secret.



7. The Beacon Tomb. The honored dead of the Grinning Pacification, and heroes who have ascended and died since, are buried in state in the Beacon Tomb. It generates a pure light in its central tomb chamber, so its champions will never lie in darkness. The tomb has fallen on hard times; instead of the honor guard of previous years, now ogre mercenaries have a contract to guard the tomb. They only allow entry if you undergo an hour long prayer ritual. The place is in poor repair, but it is a symbol of more altruistic and less corrupt times, when ideals meant more than they do today.



8. The Shamle Camp. Soldiers and adventurers can train here, as a ritual prayer to the gate skull creates undead that can be used for camp labor or skirmishing foes. The only cost to use this public service is bringing food and drink for the whole camp to celebrate. The Illuminated Order has let the place get run down lately, and it attracts fugitives (and therefore bounty hunters). The Shamle Camp has a Briory maze (9).



9. The Briory Estate. Lord Briory is an elderly scholar, and his grandfather was the one to create the Briory mazes here, in the Shamle Camp (8), and Scuttlepatch (11). Walking through the maze and solving it the first try qualifies someone to approach the Yawning Court (10), a fey enclave in the tall grass of the plains. The estate is reclusive, suffers from occasional pixie infestations, and is avoided by the local peasantry.



10. The Yawning Court. This location in the high grass of the plains is a source of fey pranks and weirdness. While there used to be disappearances, now people come out dazed and confused (but mostly intact). If you want to deal with the fey, wander out into the grass and hope for the best.



11. Scuttlepatch. This ragged country estate has been assigned as a fief to a number of nobles, but each one came to an awful end. Currently, the peasants rule with a local council. The area suffers from banditry and lawlessness, between the dry forest and the tall grass; no one cares much about it. Scuttlepatch has a Briory maze (9).



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How it Was Made by Andrew Shields

Setting Up Tools

I took an existing map to key with results from the Hexploration Sample Deck. There were 11 locations, so I used Adobe Photoshop to put in location numbers and add geographical names later in the process.

Since this is the second setting I created this way, I decided to use the SAME CARDS as I did for the Deadwind Highlands, generating new random results from them! That way I can show how there is a lot of replay value in the cards based on context, results, and interpretation.

Generating Results

I matched the locations to icons as best I could, and randomized location properties. I rolled 1d6 per question on the card, all at once, and put the dice in a line so I could quickly jot down the results. I kept the same trait cards for the same locations, generating new results. Since there are 11 locations instead of 10, I re-used the Noble's Country Fief to generate a second one.

1. Arid Trading City (Using sample deck card 01). The city is ruled by wizards. Their wealth source is exiled nobles. Their biggest threat is sand monsters. Famous pastime: combat arenas where fighters can make money, and recruiters watch for talent. Best trading partners are a merchant guild that is always trying to take over.

- **Haunted 13a.** Victims of a mass killing cannot rest. Buildings soak up the essence of the dead, and echo their pain and desires into the Material. End the haunting by breaking the force that channels the energy.
- **Expensive Taxation 14b.** Corrupt tax collectors skim a big percentage. Sumptuary laws and peace knotting have fines for violating laws.
- **Family History 16b.** Regional villain has a family history here. They grew up here. Their memories are wistful. They were a troublemaker then; people don't want them back. There is a baby there they have not claimed.
- **Guild Base 13b.** A wizard guild's top priority is to exact revenge. Their base is secret. They collaborate with smugglers informally. They set up here because of local ties, and a sympathetic populace, where it is easy to blend.
- **Pilgrimage Sites 15b.** Offer acts of service. Holy because of a plant or tree. Pilgrims seek visions. They typically induct the faithful, or reinforce member commitments through symbolic acts. People are suspicious of pilgrims because spies and criminals pose as pilgrims.

2. The College of Whispers (Card 21). Students study penitence. It was built by convicts. It is run by a noble family. They are currently closed due to government insecurity and infighting; reopening will signal stability. The alumni do not like the leaders' current direction.

3. The Usurper's Fortress (Card 03). Battle monks defend it. Its location is known, but it is heavily guarded. It contains an ancient dimensional portal. There is often thick fog, so you can climb the cliff unseen.

4. The Renegade Forge (Card 36). It was originally built to cremate the surrounding battlefield's castoffs during a war with necromancers. The odd culture of former adventurers and their families is more cooperative than competitive.

5. Inhabited Ruins (Card 10). Ruins are inhabited by refugees. The ruins were struck by a massive curse. It is remembered as a promise. Go there for experts who train exotic mounts for sale. Traces of a city-killing plague endure below.

6. Standing Stones (Card 26). Demons are imprisoned below. The stones can be turned on pivots to a pattern to activate. The stones just appeared, one at a time or in groups. Crystals set in the stones are like portholes, looking out to reveal views of alien seas from impossible angles.

7. The Necromancer's Haven (Card 19). Snide ogres guard the door. It is a tower-sized complex. The Shining Host tomb is magically lit so those interred within are never in shadow. Entry requires an hour-long supplicant ritual.

• **Shadow of Former Glory 30a.** A rival faction built it. It is currently falling apart. It highlights a fall from enlightenment and wisdom to ignorance. The dominant culture thinks it is an ancient mystery that lights imagination.

8. War Camp (Card 43). This is a decoy, a training site. The primary enemy is bounty hunters. The site is maintained by bone constructs you summon with the gate skull. You can fit in by supplying food and drink for a night of carousing.

9. Noble's Country Fief (Card 06). A hermit scholar runs it. A tragic curse victim lives there. Locals think they are the good ones, not like the others, but you do not want them to notice you; they think they own everybody.

10. The Roaring Gate (Card 39). Long ago, eldritch defenders turned an invading stone giant champion into a cursed gate trophy. Twisting tunnels lead to the underdark. Bypass the defenses with an everburning torch.

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- **Baffling Navigation 4b.** Animals get scared. Powerful ritual magic causes it. All paths lead inescapably to one site. Counter by solving a labyrinth maze set up in local settlements; solve it in one try and you are immune.
- **Fey Investment 47a.** The fey offer discount cursebreaking. Their defenses are teleporting threats away. You contact them by spilling your blood in the water. They get the firstborn of all those who benefit from their work.

11. Noble's Country Fief (Card 06). A peasant council runs it. The family of a usurped dynasty lives there. Locals say the nobles cost too much. Watch out for bandits; the place was lawless before the noble came.

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).

- **Borderland:** This is shaping up to be a border to an empire. I see wizards as the dominant ruling class, with sullen conquered necromancer heritage in the background, and some demon incursion efforts behind that. Also plucky merchants are keeping the mercantile life blood of the area pumping, pragmatic in the face of all this sour nonsense and magical preoccupation.
- **History in Broad Strokes:** the area was first settled by the empire giving land grants to successful adventurers, expecting them to protect is borderland (which was cheaper than compelling nobles to raise armies to do it). A neighboring necromatic empire conquered the area for a while, but then an order of wizards battled them back and reclaimed control. As the wizards slip into decadence, a subtle and powerful necromancer is gathering power and aiming to retake the borderland. Everything else can tie back into this structure somehow.

Finishing Touches

Time to name the settlements, name some geographical features, update the map, make a "common knowledge" document to go with it for the players to use, pick a few important contact NPCs, and gather the rest of my resources to run a game in the setting.

Setting Up a Grinning Reach Campaign

I am setting this up for a brand new group of adventurers, forming into a party with the Illuminated Order as a patron. One of the characters is Wolfscar's child, and the big bad Wolfscar will be trying to figure out who his child is and reconnect to offer them a chance to join in ruling the Grinning Reach.

As usual, I will not plan what the characters are going to do. Instead, I will plan what Wolfscar is up to (and other NPCs as we go) and position the characters to get involved, choosing sides and tactics as they see fit. The adventurers will meet up and sign on to serve the Illuminated Order in Suntide, but they may be from a number of places across the reach gathering here to begin their careers.

Wolfscar is getting powerful as he gathers factions under his control, but that power is shaky as there are rivals and agitators in the ranks, as well as old grudges that are hard to suppress. This gives us a combination of strength and vulnerability that can be dynamic as the characters get involved to prop him up or take him down.

At this point, I am filling in the Gazetteer to supply names and specifics, but also filling out my campaign plan as I nail down some behind-the-scenes adventure possibilities suggested by results generated from the location and trait cards.



The Starlight. Suntide (1) has a wizard guild with a hidden base that is determined to exact revenge, and has connections with smugglers. They have local ties, and it is easy to blend with a sympathetic populace. This is the Starlight, a resistance guild of wizard-style necromancers. They have a secret sign, and perhaps a magically concealed tattoo they can reveal. They have

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infiltrated the Illuminated Order, comfortable among other wizards even as they take steps to reclaim the city from their peers. Get some court intrigue, noble conflict, secret cult, and coup stuff going on.

In addition, they are using rituals to resonate in some of the hidden shrines in the city (from when the necromancers controlled it) to cause undying unrest in the streets by releasing clusters of corporeal and incorporeal undead. The Illuminated Order cannot stop this threat, even in their home city, and the people resent them. The leader of the Starlight reluctantly bows to Wolfscar because Wolfscar can unite enough factions to retake the Reach, but as soon as that is done, the Starlight will betray him and seize power. Wolfscar knows that, and is careful as he plays the factions against each other.

A big theme in Starlight is that no one can be trusted. The necromancers are among their enemies plotting against their peers. There are scoundrels among the pilgrims, those tasked with stopping the undead may be creating them, the tax collectors are skimming, the people are hypocrites, and this rich civilized educated city acts with a poverty of integrity, plenty of ignorance, and bully malice and greed.

The Cold Grasp The Freedom Estate (11) has been taken over by the Cold Grasp's leading family. They rule from behind the scenes, supporting the peasant council that's supposed to be in charge with the untimely death of the cruel noble the Illuminated Order sent to run the place. While the Cold Grasp offer some useful necromancy for hard field work and defense, they also claim the bodies of those who die here, so the people are ambivalent about sheltering the necromancers.

The Briory Estate (9) was founded by an adventurer in the Portenters, part of the fief reward. For centuries, the family has had an affinity for fey relations. When the current noble, a hermit scholar, dealt with the Yawning Court (10) he persuaded them to break many of the curses his adventuresome bloodline collected over the centuries. As a result, while his other children matured curse-free, his first-born got infected with many fey influences and is locked up in a secret room in the sad old noble's estate. ("I guess generational trauma will stop with YOU.") If my game group is OK with it, I can roll on mutation charts, take inspiration from fiction, or make up some startlingly awful fey alterations to pile on the firstborn.

The Briory family has had relations with the Yawning Court for centuries. They were the ones who convinced the Yawning Court to downgrade their fee of taking the firstborn for breaking curses, and lighten it to "inflict fey energies on the firstborn to make them weird" as a lesser cost. Why? Because the Torchbearer Empire's subjects freed the area from necromancers, making life better for everyone. Briory knows lore about the fey, including the way to contact them; you pour water on an injury to wash blood off when in the tall grass, and that gets their attention. (He also knows the royalty and nobles of the court, so that can be filled out.)

How to use this? At some point, Wolfscar's diplomacy with a faction of under realm liches will be settled. The liches will send him some custom elite undead reinforcements through the Yawning Court (and the fey will NOT stand in the way), until Wolfscar calls for the liches to ride forth personally at his side to retake the Reach. Anyway, characters will be tasked with figuring out where these elite undead are coming from. They can trace the trail back to the Yawning Court (what do fey have to do with it?) and figure out how to get past the fey to go to the under realm to investigate. This will point them at an expert on the Yawning Court (and what lies beyond it), which is Sir Briory. Alternatively, Wolfscar will decide Briory knows too much, and will kill him. Whether characters stop the attack, find out about it after the fact, or are sent to do the deed, this can involve them in Briory's tragic story. I would probably save this for a little later, when the characters are more powerful and savvy, and Wolfscar is getting closer to launching his coup.

Also, one or more of the PCs could be members of Briory's family, either children or grandchildren. The question is whether to tell them about his eldritch firstborn, and task them with keeping the secret, or letting them find out in play. It could be fun either way.

Scuttlepatch (11) This could happen right away, mid-campaign, or as part of the end, but at some point characters will offer distinguished service. One of them, probably the leader unless one of the others has done a great job getting support, will be granted lands and a title. They will be given Scuttlepatch to rule.

The local peasants will resent them, the outlaws will target them, and the hidden work of the Cold Grasp will try to recruit or destroy them. If they are working with Wolfscar as allies, then the Cold Grasp will be a thorny issue to work out; side with

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them, or against them, and what might they do to try and get leverage either way?

Having a domain to look after, protect, build up, and win over could be a great sub-plot through the campaign.



Fort Kiln (4) is a great hometown for characters, as any adventuring race or class can be found there. Also, they have reason to go there during the game; they can recruit, look for lore and answers, get adventuring supplies, or even just visit home. Meanwhile, I can use that location as a clearinghouse for rumors and clashes, since adventurers are mostly not on board with the return of the necromancers. However, there can also be spies and traitors among the adventuring families, which may cut deep physically and emotionally. (This is a great settlement to round out with some NPCs from the Inkwell Ideas NPC decks.)

The Institute of Regret (2) Some characters' family members may be inside, or may help run the place; a character may even be from the Riardo family. (If you have someone with connection to a prisoner, and someone with connection to the jailor, in the same party, that's sparks!)

Wolfscar will, at some point, take over the tower with assistance from both a turncoat faction in the Riardo family and also from prisoners. There are a lot of necromancers, and sympathizers, that can bolster his forces. Also the tower may have other secrets within.

Involving characters in stopping this coup, finding its aftermath, or being sent to run it by their dark master could all be great ways to make the Institute a major milestone in the campaign. Also, characters could be captured at some point, and while imprisoned in the tower they could be in the middle of the coup.

The Transcendent Fist (3, 6) The Transcendent Fist gained power from magic and alliances, every demon he bound was forced into a standing stone, imprisoned on the Material. (That's the Locked Door in 6.) His portal to move to the Demon Realms is hidden deep in the Prayer Guard (3).

One or more characters could be Guardian Fists, or family members. They might know about the mission to battle demons, or maybe they find out more of their heritage as the game goes on. Anyway, agents of the Fists could be investigating necromancers, or anything else the characters are working on, so they could cross paths as friends and/or enemies. The characters might shelter in the Prayer Guard, or run from its agents, or be imprisoned there.

Wolfscar might get peeved enough with the characters to use his power, and that of his followers, to crack one of the demon prisons (6) and task its wicked inhabitant to hunt and destroy the characters. Another possibility is that a stone is cracking, and the Illuminated Order won't help, so desperate people pull the characters in to either reinforce the binding or slay whatever comes out. (These could be the same plan...)

The Beacon Tomb (7) is a symbol, so Wolfscar will eventually crush or occupy it. Also, the necromancers may easily outbid the Illuminated Order to gain the loyalty of the ogres; maybe adventurers will need to re-take it from the necromancers, or infiltrate it to find out what they are up to in there. That could be a great base for one of Wolfscar's captains, or for him.

There may also be secrets, lore, or artifacts in the tomb that are needed for the coming clash.

In conclusion, there will likely be a clash in Sundide for the governance and soul of the reach. Characters could side with the Illuminated Order, or Wolfscar, or try to replace either of them. Tensions should build until the outcome is either decisive, or plunges the region into war. Let the factions come up with their plans, and adjust based on what happens, and keep the characters in the thick of it!