



THE HOLLOWDARK OVERVIEW

The Hollowdark is a vast network of caverns, tunnels, underground rivers, ruined settlements, and natural chambers lying beneath the mountains of stone and ice. No single map has ever successfully recorded all of it, but a few very learned sages have ascertained that the entire complex of tunnels is in the shape of a spider's web.

Countless years ago, when Kthala tread upon the surface world, many folk and monster fled the surface world into the Hollowdark. Over time, fiefdoms arose, and factions began an endless war to dominate all in the deep darkness.

There is no central kingdom. There is not even agreement about whether there ever was one. Every major power possesses histories claiming that its ancestors ruled some portion of the Hollowdark before the others arrived. The problem is that these histories contradict one another, and the great archive has changed hands so many times that even scholars have difficulty determining which records can be trusted.

Nine factions now dominate the region.

The Slugocks control the wet southern caverns and the great breeding pools. The Sporeborn steadily expand through abandoned territories. The Dryders manipulate the drow houses and seek greater influence for Arakna. The Mindcrawlers haunt the deepest

tunnels, while the Mindslayers serve the ancient Bithbala and only quietly interfere in the affairs of the other factions.

The Cognards control much of the mining and metalworking trade. The Cinderkin hold the volcanic regions and produce some of the finest weapons in the Hollowdark. Between all of them run the great paths of neutral-ground protected by the Pathsworn. This Deep Road is the only safe manner of travel and trade within the Hollowdark.

No faction has been strong enough to conquer the others. That has created something resembling peace, though it is a harmony maintained through fear, treaties, marriages, hostages, trade agreements, and the knowledge that attacking one enemy may leave you vulnerable to three others.

The great Drow houses have become skilled at this sort of politics. A marriage can settle a dispute between two territories, at least until someone discovers that the bride has been promised elsewhere. A treaty may last for twenty years, only to collapse when one lord dies and his successor decides that his father's promises were foolish.

The people living beneath these powers have learned to survive accordingly. Merchants know when to change their colors. Farmers learn where to offer their mushrooms. Miners listen for soldiers before entering any disputed tunnels. Families sometimes send their children to distant settlements simply because the local lord has chosen the wrong side in a feud.

And still the Hollowdark endures. For generations, the struggle between the nine powers has remained contained. There have been battles, assassinations, and brief wars, but none has changed the balance for long. That balance is beginning to shift.

Deep below the settled regions, a secret awaits discovery which will threaten both the Hollowdark and the world above. For the first time in generations, the question is no longer simply which faction will control the Hollowdark, but which may bring forth ineffable destruction of both the Hollowdark and the realms above.

THE HOLLOWDARK FACTIONS

The Great Drow Houses



The noble Houses of the various drow fiefdoms have ruled the upper caverns of the Hollowdark for generations. They are not a single kingdom, though outsiders sometimes make that mistake. Each house maintains its own estates, soldiers, servants, priests, and merchants, and each believes its bloodline has a better claim to authority than the others.

Their power is measured more than soldiers. A house may be weakened by the death of a single heir, strengthened by a carefully arranged marriage, or ruined by a secret revealed at the wrong council table. Children are often promised in marriage years before they are old enough to understand why. Hostages are raised in rival households as a sign of trust, though everyone

understands their second purpose.

The houses rarely wage open war without reason. Armies are expensive, and a defeated house can survive for generations. Instead, they prefer quieter weapons. A merchant caravan disappears. A mining contract changes hands. An heir suffers an unfortunate accident. A letter appears in the possession of the wrong lord.

The Dryders have encouraged these rivalries for years, though few houses realize how deeply their influence reaches. Yet the Great Houses are not united against them.

Each has its own ambitions. Some seek to restore the old drow kingdom. Others want control of the Deeprood and its trade. A few dream of claiming the entire Hollowdark.

For now, they continue their ancient game of alliances and betrayals, each waiting for the mistake that will finally give one house the advantage.

Slugocks



The Slugocks live in the lowest parts of the Hollowdark, where the passages become wet and the stone gives way to great chambers filled with stagnant pools. Their settlements are not cities in the usual sense. They are collections of breeding grounds, mud-walled shelters, and winding tunnels connected by waterways that few outsiders would willingly enter.

The Slugocks themselves are squat and broad, with heavy bodies and damp, leathery skin. Their eyes sit high upon their heads, allowing them to see over the surface of the murky pools in which they spend much of their lives. They are sometimes dismissed by the other peoples of the Hollowdark as simple creatures, but those who have fought them

know better.

Their greatest strength comes from the enormous slugs they have learned to ride. These creatures move through the flooded passages with surprising speed, leaving trails of slime that can burn exposed skin and ruin ordinary equipment. The Slugocks have little difficulty in places that would stop a human or drow army.

They are especially feared for their voices. When large numbers of Slugocks gather, their croaking becomes almost unbearable. The sound carries through the tunnels for miles, making it difficult for an approaching enemy to determine how many warriors await them.

The Slugocks share a long-term goal of expanding their breeding pools to all levels of the Hollowdark, and securing water from the surface world has been a more recent endeavor.

Unfortunately for the Slugocks, nearly everyone else wants something from the deep places they occupy.

Sporeborn



The Sporeborn are found wherever the Hollowdark has been left alone for long enough.

An abandoned mine, a forgotten battlefield, or a cavern where the dead have been allowed to remain undisturbed may eventually become home to them. They grow rather than reproduce, emerging from the damp earth and decaying remains that feed their colonies.

Their bodies are pale and narrow, resembling enormous mushrooms given the rough shape of people. Tall stalks rise from their settlements, their broad caps glowing faintly in the darkness. They move slowly, and their patience is difficult for other races to

understand.

The Sporeborn do not seek to conquer territory by force. Instead, they gradually transform it. Their spores drift through the air and settle on everything around them. Creatures who breathe too much of the dust may become confused, suggestible, and eventually obedient to the colony.

This makes the Sporeborn particularly dangerous near settlements. A merchant caravan may enter their territory and disappear without a battle. Weeks later, one of its members might return, apparently unharmed, carrying spores back to his own home.

For all their advantages, the Sporeborn have one significant weakness.

Fire. Flame spreads quickly through their colonies and destroys the fungal growth on which they depend. As a result, they favor the wettest and deepest regions of the Hollowdark, where fires are difficult to maintain.

They do not seem concerned about the struggles between the other factions. They have time. Their colonies continue to grow while everyone else is busy fighting.

Dryders



The Dryders are among the most difficult inhabitants of the Hollowdark to understand because few outsiders ever know when they are seeing one.

A Dryder can wear the appearance of another person, and some have spent years living among the drow houses while hiding their true nature. A noblewoman seated at a council table may look perfectly ordinary until she is alone with someone she trusts—or someone she intends to kill.

Their allegiance is to Arakna, the Brood-Mother, whose worship has existed in the deepest caverns since before many of the

current settlements were founded. Arakna teaches that the darkness beneath the world is not a place to hide from the surface, but a foundation from which a greater empire might eventually rise.

The Dryders have therefore become deeply involved in the politics of the Hollowdark. They arrange marriages, cultivate friendships, trade information, and encourage disagreements between rival factions. They are just as comfortable negotiating a treaty as arranging an assassination.

Their greatest advantage is that they rarely need to win a battle themselves.

A marriage can accomplish what an army cannot. A rumor can accomplish what a siege cannot. A single carefully chosen death can alter the succession of an entire house.

Recently, the Dryders have become more ambitious. With the Dreamer once again withdrawn into sleep, Arakna believes the time is favorable for expansion.

Her followers have begun moving along old passages leading upward. Some travel openly as merchants or diplomats. Others carry messages between distant houses.

The Dryders are patient. They understand that the most useful war is often the one your enemy believes he started himself.

Mindcrawlers



Mindcrawlers occupy some of the least hospitable regions of the Hollowdark, though their territories are difficult to define. They have no recognizable kingdom and maintain few permanent settlements. Instead, they move through the tunnels and great underground vaults in search of minds.

They are small creatures, walking on six legs and capable of moving easily along walls and ceilings. Their physical strength is unimpressive. A well-equipped warrior could kill one without much difficulty. The problem is finding it.

Mindcrawlers feed upon thought and memory. Those who encounter them may lose pieces of themselves without

immediately realizing anything is wrong. A name might disappear. A childhood memory may become inaccessible. A skilled craftsman might suddenly forget the techniques that once came naturally to him.

Mindcrawlers are particularly dangerous because they sometimes make use of the great tunnelling creatures found in the deep earth. These enormous beasts possess tremendous strength but little intelligence. A Mindcrawler can hide on their backs and guide the monster's movements without being noticed.

This allows a single creature to remain concealed while its enormous host does the work.

With no discernable leaders, Mindcrawlers seem to coordinate with a hivemind intelligence. They have only minor interests in political alliances, but they can make powerful allies if for some unknown reason, they favor a faction's interests. They seem to only care about knowledge, and the Hollowdark contains plenty of it. The memories of ancient priests, forgotten kings, and powerful wizards are all valuable to them.

Mindcrawlers live as solitary beings, but they seem connected toward some great unknown purpose. Some sages believe they are searching for hidden arcane knowledge that will allow them to take a direct and forceful role in the sovereignty of the Hollowdark.

Mindslayers



The Mindslayers are outsiders even by the standards of the Hollowdark.

They arrived during the coming of the Dreamer, passing through a rift that opened into Elderspace. When the Dreamer eventually withdrew, the Mindslayers remained behind. They have lived beneath the mountains ever since, although no one knows exactly how many generations that represents for creatures whose lifespans and sense of time are so different from those of ordinary races.

They are grey-skinned and thin, with unusually long hands and unsettling features. They speak quietly and rarely display emotion. Like the Mindcrawlers, they consume the brains of living creatures, though their reasons appear to

be more complicated than simple hunger.

Their true allegiance is to Bithbala the Elderworm.

Bithbala is ancient beyond any reliable history. It came to the Hollowdark with Kthala's first incursion from Elderspace and has remained hidden ever since, waiting for the return of its master.

Bithbala's plans have little to do with ruling the Hollowdark. It only seeks to maintain the status quo. Instead, it wants the surface world preserved for Kthala's return. The people above are not its enemies – rather they are gifts to maintain for another purpose.

To accomplish this, Bithbala quietly manipulates the factions below. It encourages smaller powers to challenge stronger ones and prevents any single faction from becoming dominant.

The Mindslayers therefore play a strange role in Hollowdark politics. They are one of the reasons the factions have not destroyed one another. They are also one of the reasons the conflict never seems to end.

Cognards



The Cognards are gnomes who long ago abandoned the crafts favored by their surface-dwelling cousins. Their workshops contain few toys, clocks, or decorative inventions. Instead, the Cognards build machines designed for practical purposes, particularly those involving mining and warfare.

Their underground settlements are filled with forges, workshops, storage chambers, and narrow passages built around machinery. The constant sound of hammers and pistons makes their territories recognizable long before they can be seen.

Their most famous inventions are their armored suits.

A Cognard inside one becomes a very different opponent from the small, physically unimposing gnome who entered it. The suits are constructed from iron, brass, and whatever other materials their engineers can acquire. They provide strength, protection, and a variety of mechanical weapons.

The Cognards have little interest in choosing sides in the larger political struggle. They sell their inventions to almost anyone who can afford them.

This policy has made them wealthy. It has also made them deeply unpopular.

The Dryders have purchased Cognard devices. The other factions have done the same. Some of those weapons have later been used against Cognard settlements. The Cognards seem unconcerned.

Their leaders believe the great powers are making the same mistake they have made for generations: spending fortunes fighting over territory while neglecting the people who manufacture everything needed to fight the war.

Their strategy is simple. Keep selling. Keep building. Let everyone else exhaust themselves. When the fighting finally leaves the Hollowdark weakened, the Cognards intend to be the ones with the tools needed to rebuild it.

Cinderkin



The Cinderkin came to the Hollowdark from the Plane of Fire, though their ancestors did not arrive willingly.

Long ago they were captured by fire giants and forced into service. For generations they worked in the giants' forges, producing weapons and armor for an empire that considered them property. The Cinderkin eventually rebelled and escaped through a magical passage into the Hollowdark.

They settled near the great lava lakes in the southern reaches, where the heat reminded them of the home they had lost.

Cinderkin settlements are usually built around enormous furnaces. Their people are broad and dark-skinned, with ember-

colored eyes and bodies marked by cracks that glow faintly in the right light. They are accomplished smiths, particularly when working with metals that respond to heat or magic.

Their weapons and armor are highly valued throughout the Hollowdark. They can forge blades that retain heat long after leaving the forge and armor capable of protecting its wearer from extreme temperatures.

The Cinderkin, however, are reluctant to become involved in the political struggles around them. They have already spent enough of their history fighting someone else's wars. However, they have been known to give subtle deference to the side of a conflict that keeps a greater power in check. Their main focus is a very powerful defensive posture, and no faction in Hollowdark would dare attack their settlements. Perhaps some day they could be manipulated into taking devastating offensive action if they felt their freedom was at stake.

The Pathsworn have approached them more than once seeking an alliance. On both occasions, the Cinderkin received the envoys politely and sent them away without an agreement. The Cinderkin do trade with the other factions, but they guard their independence carefully.

Pathsworn



The Pathsworn are drow who have abandoned the vile politics of the great houses and devote themselves to good and protecting those traveling on the Deeproad.

The Deeproad is one of the most important features of the Hollowdark. It connects several major settlements, and it allows merchants, travelers, and ordinary families to cross large portions of the underground realm safely without entering completely unlit territory.

The light along the Deeproad comes from strange flowering plants & mushrooms cultivated by the Pathsworn. The Pathsworn tend the plants carefully, pruning them, watering them, and replacing those that die. Their work is as much gardening as it is trail care.

The Pathsworn also serve as the road's guardians. They usually carry two swords and thus generally fight without shields. Their order accepts members from the drow houses but other folk are counted among the Pathsworn. Nearly all are outcasts from their former Hollowdark homes, as their deep sense of good has made them unwelcomed.

Their most important law in the Hollowdark is the Deep Accord.

Every major faction has agreed to leave the Deeproad untouched. The agreement has survived for roughly five centuries, largely because every faction benefits from having a commercially safe route through the Hollowdark.

But the Accord has begun to weaken. Bandits use the road. Political agents travel along it. Armies have occasionally approached its boundaries. The Pathsworn may find themselves forced to decide whether defending neutrality requires them to fight one faction or another.

The Pathsworn gave up the politics of the great houses because they believed the Hollowdark can be transformed into a place a bountiful good. And the Pathsworn brethren are a family that each member finds precious and worth protecting.