

The Red Thorns

Diana awoke concussed and thirsty. Her skin prickled from the heat of a bonfire that blazed in front of her. Lifting her head slightly, she saw the carcass of a bear nearby - most of the edible parts gone and probably accounting for the smell of underdone meat in the air. The last thing she remembered was galloping through the night trying to get away from the - 'oh merciful Aureon,' she murmured as she spotted a dismembered hoof blackening in the fire, 'not Zephyr.' She stifled her sob when she heard goblin voices nearby. And then she became aware of a hideous barking in the background - like dogs trying to speak. Instinctively she reached behind her to check for her harp. She felt a tiny moment of relief as it seemed present and whole.

Suddenly the voices stopped - they'd realized she was awake - and unkind hands were pulling her upright and turning her towards them. A skin of some sweet wine was forced between her lips and she was made to drink. Spluttering, she gazed out into the circle of firelight at her captors. A few goblins squatted in front of her, their rusty-red skin glowing in the blaze, and also, not far away, stood, sat and sprawled a pack of gnolls, black-furred with white markings - whether natural or dyed she couldn't tell. Their yellow eyes watched her hungrily and their tongues lolled. And then most horrible of all came the sound of heavy footsteps and out of the shadows strode one great stooping figure after another. Primitive faces the size of dinner-plates gawped down at her, as if confused by someone being so small. One of them dropped a handfull of small brown shapes into the light. As they wriggled on the ground she realized that they were the cubs of the eaten bear. Her stomach turned as an ogre speared one and lifted it to the fire to roast. Only dimly did she finally realize that the largest of the ogres, a hideous brute covered in thin, twisting tattoos, was pointing at her and talking. But she couldn't understand the words.

A goblin chuckled and said in perfect common, "he wants you to play something." Diana grabbed her harp eagerly, desperate to please, to live. "I'd play something cheerful if I were you," said the same goblin, one with a grim scar across its throat.

She looked out at the monstrous band, the chuckling goblins, the gnolls biting and tumbling and rutting with each other and the ugly thick-witted faces of the ogres grinning down at her. 'Something cheerful,' she repeated numbly.

The Thorns are a mercenary band from Droaam and their happy to work for the highest bidder against any enemy save for Droaam itself. One month they might be fighting against you and the next fighting with you. And it's not as easy as you might think to say which is worst. Their numbers vary as attrition takes its toll and according to the whims of the Hags that rule Droaam and occasionally deign to send reinforcements for their ragged band. At present, their complement is twelve ogres, thirty-two gnolls and five goblins mounted on Worgs. As an elite irregular strike force, the Thorns can easily tip the balance in an military endeavor.

The members of the Thorns typically have little sympathy for the common races of man and dwarf and this lends well to savage tactics such as targeting enemy towns and villages to draw back military forces or disrupt supply lines. As a relatively small warband, the Thorns are able to slip past the enemy lines and harry them from unexpected quarters. That said, they are more than capable of doing serious damage to an enemy force in direct warfare before they are beaten back.

The goblins, mounted on their worgs, operate as scouts, both tracking the enemy and warning of their approach. They are able to cover ground rapidly and have keen senses. The ogres are the bloody heart of the band and with their ability to absorb massive punishment and deal damage they can smash through most enemies. The gnolls provide both ranged combat and a more mobile skirmishing support to the ogres' charge and smash.

The Red Thorns

Thorak, Male Ogre, 4th level Warrior CR 6; Large Giant; HD8d8+27; hp 64; Init -1; Spd 30ft., AC 20; touch 8, flat footed 20; Base Atk +7 Grp +18, Melee + 14 (Greataxe 3d6+10); Full Attack + 14 (Greataxe 3d6+10); SQ Darkvision 60ft, Low Light Vision; AL NE; SV Fort+11, Ref +1; Will +2; Str 25, Dex 8, Con 16, Int 8, Wis 10, Cha 8 Skills and Feats: Climb +5, Listen +2, Spot +2; Toughness, Weapon Focus (Greataxe), Power Attack Languages: Giant, Goblin, Possessions: Large GreatAxe +1, Large Half-Plate, Potion of Cure Moderate Wounds (x4)

A brutal hulk whose scarred trunk and limbs are further disfigured by crude red tattoos that weave their barbed pattern across his coarse skin. His dark hair is long and bristling like horse hair and he wears oversized half-plate without padding, simply lashed straight onto his monstrous body. A dark two-headed axe of obscene weight and size is carried on his back.

Thorak is the ostensible leader of the Red Thorns. It is he who leads them into battle and he who claims the greatest share of the spoils. However, the fear of the Hags of Droaam has managed to drive a few simple facts into even his dull brain. Foremost of these is that he shouldn't fight against his own people, by which they mean others loyal to Droaam. Closely following this however, is that he should defer to Yaasha and Yeegul in matters of employment and tactics. And in the unlikely event that he should get any ideas, it has been impressed upon him most serverly that at least one of the two gnolls is to come back with him to Droaam.

11 Ogres; CR 3; Large Giant; HD8d8+19; hp 56, 55, 60, 48, 58, 57, 52, 67, 50, 51, 52; Init -1; Spd 30ft., AC 16; touch 8, flat footed 16; Base Atk +3 Grp +12, Melee + 8 (Greatclub 2d8+7); Full Attack + 8 (Greatclub 2d8+7); SQ Darkvision 60ft, Low Light Vision; AL NE; SV Fort+6, Ref +0; Will +1; Str 21, Dex 8, Con 15, Int 6, Wis 10, Cha 7 Skills and Feats: Climb +5, Listen +2, Spot +2; Toughness, Weapon Focus (Greatclub) **Yaasha**, Female Gnoll, 2nd Level Ranger CR 3; Medium Humanoid, HD4d8+4; hp 23; Init +2; Spd 30ft.; AC 17, touch 12, flat footed 15; Base Atk +3, Grp +5, Melee +5 (Scimitar 1d6/18-20x2) or shortbow +3 (1d6/x3); SQ Darkvision 60'; AL CE; SV Fort +7, Ref +5, Will +1; Str 14, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 14, Wis 13, Cha 12; Skills and Feats: Listen +2, Spot +3, Move Silently +3, Hide +3, Rapid Shot, Tracking, Point Blank Shot, Stealthy, Favoured Enemy Humanoid (Man)

Yeye, Fiendish Hawk CR 1/3, Magical Beast, HD 1d8; hp 4; Init +3; Spd 60ft. (average); 17, touch 15, flat-footed 14; Base Atk +0, Grp -10, Melee +5 (Talons, 1d4-2); SQ Low Light Vision, Dark Vision 60ft, Smite Good, Fire / Cold Resistance 5, SR 5; AL CE; SV Fort +2, Ref +5, Will +2; Str 6, Dex 17, Con 10, Int 3, Wis 14, Cha 6; Skills and Feats: Listen +2, Spot +14, Languages: Gnoll.

A slightly smallish gnoll at a mere 7ft., she nevertheless looks fierce. Her long brown hair is dyed with bands of red and she wears a leather pad upon her shoulder where an evil looking hawk with grey and red plumage sits. A well cared for bow is slung across her back and a scimitar hangs from her hip. There are many notches gouged into the flat of the blade, and many of them look recent.

Yaasha is the most tactically minded of the Red Thorns and together with Yeegul, handles most of the negotiation with clients and the strategic thinking. Left to his own initiative, Tharok would soon run the Red Thorns into the ground with ill-chosen battles. Yaasha does not shirk battle however and leads her Gnolls with every bit as much ferocity as Yeegul. Typically however, she prefers to soften up an enemy with a few good volleys of arrows. This is followed up with the ogres and only then do the gnolls break cover to attack from the rear and flanks.

Yeegul, Male Gnoll, 4th Level Warrior CR 2; Medium Humanoid, HD5d8+10; hp 33; Init +0; Spd 30ft.; AC 15, touch 10, flat footed 15; Base Atk +4, Grp +7, Melee +7 (Battleaxe 1d8+3/x3) or shortbow + 4 (1d6+2x/3); SQ Darkvision 60'; AL CE; SV Fort +7, Ref +3, Will +0; Str 17, Dex 10, Con 15, Int 12, Wis 11, Cha 8; Skills and Feats: Listen +2, Spot +3, Power Attack

A hulking gnoll over eight feet tall. His fur is dyed almost entirely red, save for a dark mane that runs from between his ears down to his tail. He wields the heavy battleaxe he carries with impressive ease.

Yeegul is usually the second in command of the Gnolls. Sometimes he's first in command, but usually Yaasha manages to keep just ahead of him in the dominance games due to her superior ability to plot and play the gnolls off against each other.

30 Gnolls; CR 1; Medium Humanoid, HD2d8+2; hp 11; Init +0; Spd 30ft.; AC 15, touch 10, flat footed 15; Base Atk +1, Grp +3, Melee +3 (Battleaxe 1d8+2/x3) or shortbow +1 (1d6/x3); SQ Darkvision 60'; AL CE; SV Fort +4, Ref +0, Will +0; Str 15, Dex 10, Con 13, Int 8, Wis 11, Cha 8; Skills and Feats: Listen +2, Spot +3, Power Attack

All of these Gnolls are armed with bows and prefer to use them prior to melee when possible.

5 Goblins, Rogue 1 on Worg Mounts.

Goblin Scouts; CR 1; HD 1d8; hp 8, 6, 7, 6, 7; AC 15; Init +2; Spd 30ft., AC 16, touch 13, flat-footed 14; Base Atk +1, Grp -3, Melee +2 (short sword 1d4 - 19-20/x2); SQ Darkvision 60ft.; SV Fort +3, Ref +4, Will -1; Str 11, Dex 13, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 6 Skills and Feats: Hide +5, Listen +2, Move Silently +5, Ride +4, Spot +2, Sneak attack +1d6, trapfinding

Worg Mounts; CR 2; HD 4D10+8; hp 30, 28, 32, 35, 30; AC 14, touch 12, flat-footed 12; Base Atk +4, Grp +7, Melee +7 (Bite 1d6+4); SA Trip; SQ Darkvision 60ft., Low Light Vision, Scent; SV Fort +6, Ref +6, Will +3; Str 17, Dex 15, Con 15, Int 6, Wis 14, Cha 10; Skills and Feats: Hide +4, Listen +6, Move Silently +6, Spot +6, Survival +2, Alertness, Track

A wolf, dark grey, streaked with black and easily large and powerful enough to run with the goblin mounted on its back. An evil intelligence shows in its yellow eyes as they flicker to your throat. Rider and mount alike lick their lips in anticipation of your blood.

The goblins scout wide and make sure that the Thorns are always well informed about encroaching enemies. With their scent, their speed and great stealth, little can remain hidden from them for long.

Adventure Ideas:

Note: The Red Thorns are very much an elite fighting force, above the common run of soldiery. Their role in an adventure should reflect this and they are more suited as a threat to most PCs than as something to be overcome in combat. Remember, they are a military force and fight as such. The PCs won't be able to pick and choose which ones they want to fight first.

A valuable magical item has been unearthed in a neighbouring kingdom and the PCs are hired to retrieve it. They are not the only ones however. In addition to the existing challenges to overcome, they become aware that a rival to their patron has hired his own group, one that is more than capable of doing the job if the PCs don't make it there first. And if they do, they still have to avoid those who would take it from them before they can return to civilization. In this game, a mounted goblin isn't a minor threat to be dispatched, but a scout that could spell the very end of them if he alerts the rest of the warband. An initial near miss or the discovery of the Thorn's previous work (e.g. plundered trade caravan with near-dead a survivor) can serve to warn the PCs what is out there.

Did Allana d'Deneith, Illusionist and dragonmark heir, pay the Red Thorns to raid a Brellish trade caravan to the Shadow Marches? And if so, was it to undermine confidence in House Tharashk's ability to maintain order in the region, maybe in revenge for the half-orcs stealing away a lucrative security contract? And supposing, just supposing that she did, could the PCs get the letter of credit from the Thorns and somehow prove that it was issued by her?

Victory is near and the PC's enemy is nearly run to ground. And then he does something most unsporting

and uses his wealth to hire additional muscle. Perhaps the PCs are in the final days of pursuit when the villain bolts for the wilderness where he knows he can find support for sale; or maybe he has hitherto unknown allies in Droaam. In any case, it seems the PCs are up against more than they realized and suddenly everything is hanging in the balance once again.