

CHAPTER 3

ASSEMBLED



THE AWKWARD TACTICIAN
THE APPEASING CUISINE
THE UNUSUAL HASTILUDES



Falthingor's bailey functions much like a commons. Farmers from the slopes enter the castle to trade their crops, meat, and dairy amongst each other. Priests provide impromptu guidance at the small shrine the lowlanders have added to the courtyard. Itinerant giants petition the Lord Ratchets for asylum. Spearmen spar, minstrels tell tales, and craftsmen peddle their wares. There are no truly public spaces in the halls of Falthingor—all chambers and halls are claimed by some such lord or guild—so despite the frigid temperatures, when commoners assemble, they do so outside.

There is always danger for those who spend their time in the bailey. After all, the innocuous seeming ward was designed for *defensive* purposes. Attackers who hope to take the stronghold by force will have to make their way through the bailey en route to the great hall, the Severed Keep, or any of the strategic bastions. Whether they scale the walls or burst through the portcullis, they will still have to pass through the bailey, all while getting pelted by arrows and harried by spearmen. If ever the Duscarn Giants levy a full assault on Falthingor, it seems inevitable that the bailey will be the site of maximal violence.

That has yet to occur. Thus far, Falthingor has stood strong against all invaders. Thanks to some combination of archery and bold defense by the spearmen, the bailey has remained a safe place for common folk and lords alike to convene and relax in the wind shadow of the curtain wall.





THE Spearmen

The largest body of Falthringer soldiers are the spearmen. Most fit adult male vassals must offer their services to the spearmen for at least a few years. These soldiers are generally ill-equipped, wearing chainmail if they can procure it and tough leather armor if they cannot. They wield modified farm equipment as weaponry, and they share a small barracks that can only hold roughly one fifth of their numbers at a time. Everyone else is expected to sleep in their homes, typically in the hamlets along the slopes below.

House Wenjansk's archers have become the most decorated force bearing the High Kestrel's flag, a position once held by the house's cavalry. Yet again, the spearmen are given little praise or honor, despite their significantly higher rate of casualty. In raid after raid, the spearmen have been instrumental in slowing the advancing Duscarn Giants. It is only the combination of their efforts that has allowed the stronghold to weather so many

unpredictable strike forces. And yet, the archers reap the glory.

There are many reasons for this, not least of all is the preponderance of low-born troops among the melee soldiers. A second cause may be the unusual tactic that has proven most effective against the giants, a tactic that many lowlanders view as comical and undignified, a tactic that has saved the lives of countless Wenjansk vassals.

The "Trip and Spike" Maneuver

Spearmen operate in platoons of six soldiers, five of whom carry billhooks and one a pike. During a giant assault, each platoon will target one giant each. The five subordinate soldiers (called "trippers") will attempt to surround the giant, reach for their legs, and ultimately bring them to their knees. Giants have incredibly thick skin that makes it difficult to fell one with a sharp blow anywhere but their soft heads. By tripping a giant, the lone pikeman (the "spiker") gains the opportunity to stab through the giant's skull and

52 into their brain. Barring that, a successful topple still slows the giant considerably and provides a window during which one of the archers above may land the killing blow while the giant stumbles to right itself.

In practice, this is a surprisingly effective tactic that impedes giant assaults and maximizes the potential of every attempted finishing strike. It works specifically because the giants tend to invade in frantic, scattered formations. Unfortunately, it means the majority of spearmen spend their battles using makeshift farming equipment in an effort to awkwardly trip the lumbering brutes. It is still exceptionally dangerous for the spearmen, even when a platoon is working in perfect concert.

Most spearmen are already quite familiar with the billhook when they start training in the bailey. After all, the majority of spearmen are farmers who dedicate roughly half of their working hours to the defense of Flathringor. There is considerable animosity regarding this arrangement. The agricultural hamlets below are relatively unprotected, while the adult men spend

time protecting a castle whose outermost wall has never been breached. Nevertheless, civilian casualties along the slopes have remained modest, even after ten years of lowlander occupation of the fortress.

Lord Ratchet Zarek Deniczik

House Wenjansk's spearmen were never given the respect they deserved, even before the house's relocation. When the Duscarn Giants raided Wenjansków, the melee infantry gave their lives in shocking numbers, protecting the High Kestrel as he and his vassals escaped Fort Wenjansk. They sacrificed themselves to ensure that lords and peasants alike could flee the burning city. As such, their ranks were in disarray once the lowlanders arrived in Faltringor.

High Kestrel Mariusz recognized early on that the archers would not be enough to protect the castle from some such a massive threat, and so he elevated one of the few surviving spearmen, a scrawny, scrappy, low-born soldier, to the rank of Lord Ratchet. Mariusz tasked this unlikely leader,

Zarek Deniczik (he/him) with re-establishing a squad of warriors who would protect House Wenjansk's new home.

Zarek is a committed servant to the High Kestrel, but he is also a deeply practical and empathetic man. He witnessed untold horrors during the fall of Wenjansków, and he swore to find a better means to confront the Duscarn Giants in the future. He devised the "trip and spike" maneuver, a tactic that many of his spearmen loathe. They believe it puts each of them at far greater danger, as it forces groups of soldiers to get close to a giant instead of poking from afar with lengthy pikes. Nevertheless, Zarek stands firm. The tactic is the only reliable way to kill a giant at close range. If the giants were free to wreak havoc on Faltringor as they did Wenjansków... well, best not to think about that.

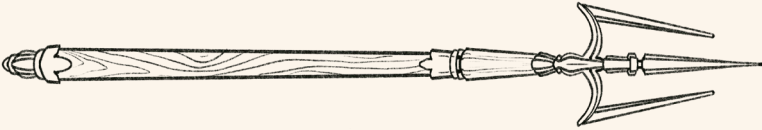
Defeating the giants means more than just strong walls and sharp arrows. It means leveraging every advantage House Wenjansk can muster. Lowlanders are nimble than the giants, and so a squad can easily flank a given invader. Zarek's forces are also more coordinated, and so targeted strikes should always be prioritized over the chaos of a free-for-all battle.

Zarek is oft-maligned by his peers and the common folk alike. They see him as both meek and knavish, a cowardly peasant who should have fallen in Wenjansków and who should never have achieved the rank of Lord Ratchet. And yet, Zarek persists.



Wodunc

While upland halflings are forbidden from joining the archers, Zarek welcomes his short-statured neighbors into his ranks. Halflings can't wield lengthier polearms, but they're just as proficient with the billhook as the lowlanders. Wodunc (they/them), a cousin of Lord Ratchet Foldet, is perhaps the greatest tripper in all of Faltringor. They can weave and bob between a giant's legs and then yank with surprising force, often toppling an invader all by themselves. Watching Wodunc assail a giant is like watching a masterful dancer. They move with grace and strength that belies their small frame. Adventurers could learn a thing or two by training with Wodunc; they'll happily spar with a worthy opponent in the bailey if challenged. On rare occasions, Wodunc may even join a team of adventurers who need additional help during a tourney.



Chevvek Jczenski

There is no expectation that the spearmen will be a cohesive, uniform military force. They are a group of oddballs, united only in their assigned weaponry and duty to protect Faltringor. Still, some spearmen are odder than others. Chevvek (he/him) fancies himself an amateur moss expert. This obsession dominates his life, and he has troubling maintaining a conversation without bringing it up. When Chevvek isn't on duty or training in the bailey, he's delving into forbidden tunnels below Faltringor, grabbing samples of the strange mosses and lichens that grow in the warm stone hallways. He believes consuming these strange plants and fungi will give him the same strength as the Duscarn Giants. After all, the ancient Duscarn only became giants after consuming arcane elixirs developed in this very castle. Perhaps some of that alchemical magic lingers in the moss of today...

Irmhilde the Blacksmith

Adventurers tend to conflate “blacksmiths” with bladesmiths and armorers. They find someone proficient at metalworking and just *assume* that their specialty is creating swords, mail, and the like. In practice, most blacksmiths predominately make grills, gates, nails, and most importantly: farming equipment.

Irmhilde (she/they) has spent the better part of her blacksmithing career crafting scythes, yokes, spurs, spades, and other practical agricultural tools. She was a valued member of the outer Wenjansków community, outfitting lowlander and uplander farmers alike. They had a bit of trouble acclimating to life in the majority human farmlands, but gradually Irmhilde learned the quirks of lowlanders customs: the Wenjansk vassals expected her to stick to deadlines and avoid breaking out in song and dance until *after* a transaction was completed.

After the exodus from Wenjansków, Irmhilde figured she’d have to make a few alterations to her work schedules, namely expediting the creation of shovels to dig through the thick and tainted soil. What she did *not* expect was a writ from the High Kestrel himself demanding that they assist Lord Ratchet Zarek.

Other folks can make tools for the farmers on the slopes. Exuberant Irmhilde has been tasked with outfitting the trippers. After all, she was already an expert at making billhooks for farming. How hard would it be to tweak her creations for use in warfare?

Many of their kin expected Irmhilde to bristle at this new demand. The halflings figured that they would not want to craft implements for killing after so many years working in agriculture. Irmhilde sees it differently. This writ means they never have to woo picky buyers, and that they can work behind the protective castle walls. They can collaborate with Lord Ratchet Zarek to ensure that the people of Faltringor are properly protected. Every giant felled is another hamlet safe from random acts of violence. Though the specifics have changed, Irmhilde’s craftsmanship still means that farmers can go about their days without worry.

Every once in a while, Irmhilde still gets to flex their creativity, creating unusual polearms for the spikers or for specially outfitted spearmen platoons.



D6IRMHILDE'S
UNIQUE POLEARMS

DESCRIPTION

1

Lizard Cracker

The malachite lizards of the Duscarn Range have exceedingly dense gemstone scales. This weapon has a weighty hammer at one end and a blade at the other, perfect for cracking malachite scales and then disemboweling the aggressive lizards.

2

Gold Fork

Certain bizarre alchemical entities in the tunnels beneath Faltringor abhor gold. This gold-tipped war fork keeps them at bay.

3

Giant-Slaying Scythe

Some exceptional spearmen are capable of felling a giant without the assistance of a team of trippers. It is an awkward maneuver, but it is possible to decapitate a giant with a strong swing from this reinforced scythe.

4

Upland Halberd

Silliar goblins riding bizarre beasts occasionally make their way to the Duscarn Range, where they tend to ravage halfling farms. This small-scale halberd was designed to yank goblins off their mounts and then slice their necks.

5

Sling Slicer

Duscarn Giants are at their most dangerous when they are slinging ammunition at great range. This extended sickle is perfect for tearing apart a sling in a giant's hands.

6

Glaive of the Falcon

The High Kestrel wields this mostly ceremonial glaive when commanding troops from the ramparts. Irmhilde considers it a liability. Adorned with feathers and crimson ribbons, it makes Mariusz an obvious target for Duscarn slingers. Nevertheless, the High Kestrel claims that the High Priests have blessed this weapon, and that he will be protected so long as it's in his hands.




GMING A CASTLE DEFENSE BATTLE

The war with the giants is a stalemate. The giants likely cannot muster a bold enough attack to take Falthringor, and House Wenjansk has yet to wage a proper counter-offensive.¹ Nevertheless, each giant raid involves casualties, and there is a wide gulf between a successful defense and a near catastrophe.

If you want to demonstrate to your players that the giants are a legitimate threat, it is strongly recommended that you present a giant raid soon after the adventurers arrive at the castle. If the party decides to help, they'll gain the favor of the High Kestrel, the respect of the Lord Ratchets, and the admiration of the common folk.

The most straightforward way to run a giant attack encounter is to split the action. "Off-screen," the soldiers fight the brunt of invading force. Your players just need to tackle one or two giants while the battle rages around them. Make sure you provide plenty of flavor in between turns of combat: mention the awkward efficiency of the "trip and spike" maneuver, the brutality of the violence, and the chaos of the unfocused giant tactics. Once your players complete their fight, narrate the conclusion of the battle overall. In this instance, the party's performance acts as a proxy for the whole battle. If they easily defeated the giants with superior tactics, then so too did the forces of House Wenjansk.

¹ 'Falthringor 04: Beyond' provides a plot hook that will give your party the chance to bring the fight to the giants.





If the party barely eked out a win, then the spearmen and archers faced unprecedented casualties.

There are infinite variants on this format. You can run a combat gauntlet with waves of enemies. You can have a platoon of spearmen act as one “unit” in initiative, fighting alongside the party. You can present the party with an escort mission, a fetch quest, or a chase *during* a raid. All of these options likely require limited tweaks to the existing combat mechanics in your RPG system of choice.

Alternatively, you can emphasize the large-scale tactical side of combat. The party works with Lord Ratchets Lubomir and Zarek, commanding the spearmen and archers across the castle. You can replace the normal combat rules of your system with a castle defense minigame, or else simplify the encounter to a series of dice rolls to determine success. You can swap out the player characters with full platoons, and ask the players to act like military strategists instead of a band of heroes. In many ways, this is the inverse of typical fantasy RPG combat: hordes of weak “fodder units” (i.e. House Wanjansk’s regular soldiers) are tasked with taking down a few ultra-powerful giant “heroes.”

Consider the pace of your campaign. Are your players bored of exploring the castle and do they *crave* the mechanical complexity of your system’s standard combat? Are they burnt out on adventuring and yearning instead for new modes of roleplaying combat? Maybe this is an opportunity for you to experiment with optional mechanics, or perhaps you just need a little bit of combat to heighten the narrative. Use the giant raid to create tension and to expand the scope of your story. Remember: no battle should ever be filler.





THE Kitchen

The highest nobles of Falthringor² are not expected to procure their own food, nor to cook for themselves. Breakfast is brought to each of their quarters, midday dinner³ spreads are provided in rooms throughout the castle (guild chambers and noble offices), and all of the nobles of Falthringor supper together in the great hall.

Preparing all of this food is a daunting task, especially given the discerning palates of Falthringor's nobles and the limited menu of foodstuffs available in the Duscarn Range. In the lowlands, diets were exceptionally varied: fishermen brought in great hauls from Lake Nodolny, hunters captured big game across the plains, and farmers could harvest a wide array of fruits and vegetables. Atop Mt. Endryr, the options are comparatively meager. Most meals consist of tough root vegetables, yak cheese, roasted goat, and pungent teas in various combinations.

Making do with this bounded list of ingredients requires an impressive kitchen and exceptional chefs. Falthringor has both.

The cooking facilities in Falthringor are near to the bailey. Ovens and stoves have configurable vents that allow scents and steam to be directed toward the rest of the castle or dispensed out the chimney; likely a holdover from the days when bubbling alchemical elixirs released soothing vapors. Refrigeration generally is of little concern in the cool mountains, but it can be a challenge in the castle itself, warmed by the ambient steam from the unnaturally hot cistern. Luckily, a tunnel beneath the kitchen leads to a

2 Relevant nobles include the High Kestrel, his wife, his children, the dozen or so Lord Ratchets and their immediate families, and the families of some three or four former Lord Ratchets who have been grandfathered into positions of elevated nobility. Altogether, this amounts to roughly 50 people, most of whom live within the castle itself.

3 "Dinner" refers to the main meal of the day. As most nobles eat their largest feast at midday, that meal is called "dinner," while evening's smaller courses are referred to as "supper."

wind-chilled basement room that is disconnected from the thermal network that keeps the rest of the castle warm. Different chambers within this room are used for cooling, freezing, pickling, and jerking.

Head Chef Tola Heddek

As Lord Ratchet Zarek had to fundamentally reimagine infantry in the war against the giants, aged head chef Tola (she/her) has had to innovate in the realm of cuisine. Though she has served the High Kestrel since he was but a toddler, she is only now coming to appreciate the cultural and political significance of expert cooking.

Theoretically, the only thing explicitly keeping House Wenjansk in the mountains is the giants. Without the threat of giant raids, they would likely return to the lowlands, either to reclaim their former capital, or else to found a new city in environs more hospitable. As it stands, that *seems* impossible, but it *probably isn't*. The entire great house could relocate again, call on allies for aid, and return to some sense of normalcy. A return is possible. So why don't the noble

lowlanders retake their home?

Some would say that the war ties up the house's resources. Others might make the credible claim that certain leaders in the community seek to learn the secrets of the ancient Duscarn. Still others might suggest House Wenjansk has always been isolationist, and that this long-forgotten castle actually suits the great house.

Tola would argue otherwise. She would say that the people stay because the nobles are well fed. The High Kestrel, the Lord Ratchets, and all of the noble families are cared for and they need not worry about their next meal. Their diets may have changed, but the exceptional quality of their meals has not. Few nobles contemplate the merits of insurrection or desertion. There is peace and stability because those in charge are sated. Tola is proud of this fact. Her cooking is instrumental in providing the stability that House Wenjansk desperately needs.

Adventurers who wander into the kitchen can learn unbelievable secrets from Tola

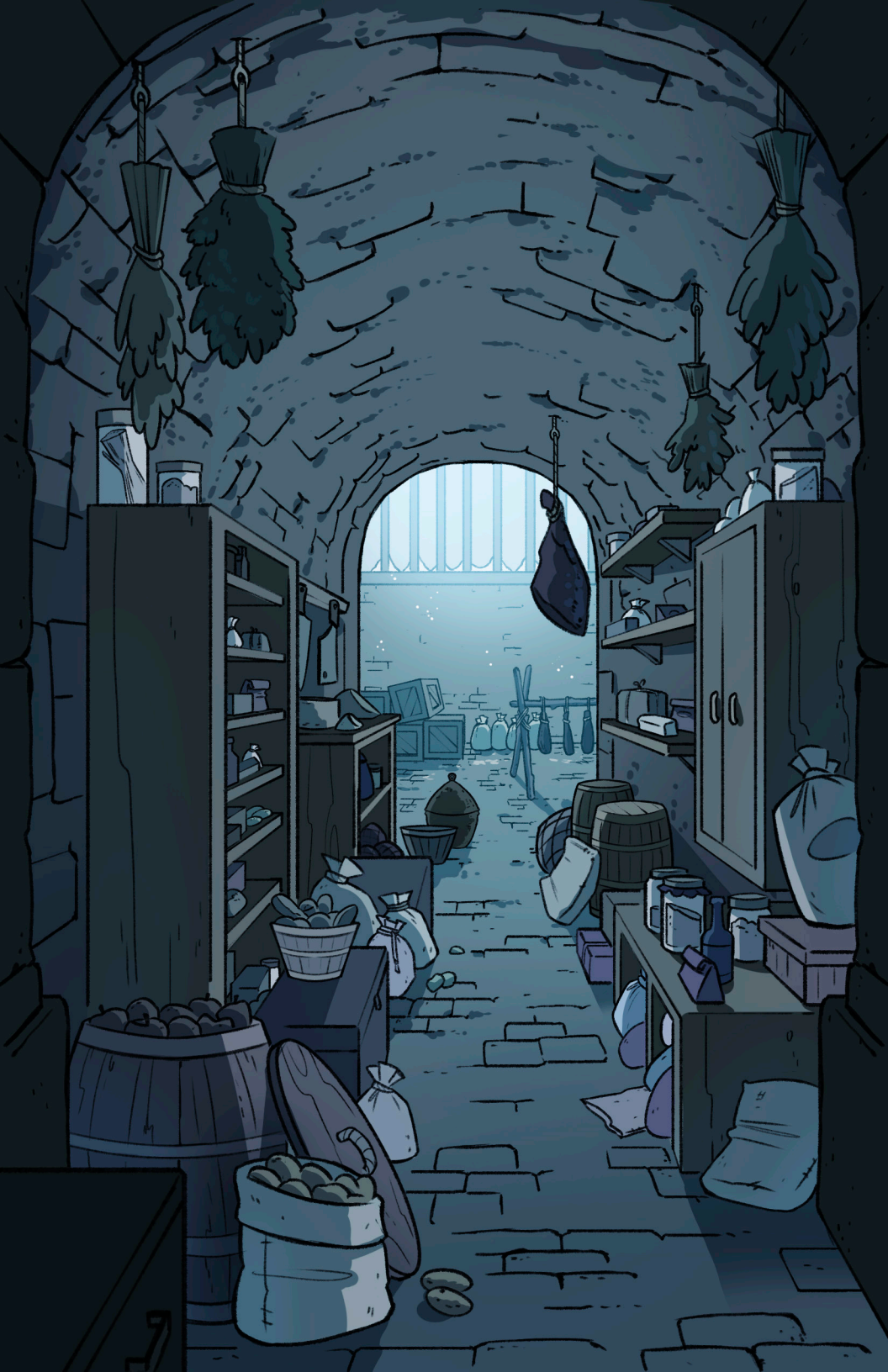


while she is distracted. As a rule, whenever the head chef is focused on preparing a spice blend or perfecting a stew, she will blabber without exerting any control over what comes out of her mouth. Parties seeking gossip would be wise to interrogate the loose-lipped chef.

Cola's Staff

As Falthringor's kitchen staff works directly for the nobles, they do not belong to their own guild. Instead, Tola is in charge. She has hired a team of seven Falthringor residents to run the castle's food operations. Note that there are additional servants—mostly maids and footmen—who will occasionally help Tola, though they do not work directly for her.

- ♦ **Emelrich** (they/them), upland halfling, age 17, sous-chef. Quiet, diligent, unusually stern and serious for a halfling; hopes to become head chef when Tola retires.
- ♦ **Franciszka** (she/her), lowlander, age 14, assistant chef. Niece of Lord Ratchet Feliks, though she is technically not a noble herself.
- ♦ **Leszek** (he/him), lowlander, age 35, butler. Has direct access to the nobles when they are at their drunkest; a trusted confidant of the High Kestrel.
- ♦ **Sigdag** (he/they), upland halfling, age 45, pantler. Responsible for maintaining the basement storage spaces, and thus the food supply for the entire castle.
- ♦ **Dorota** (she/her), lowlander, age 24, baker. One of the High Kestrel's mistresses, though she has luckily yet to birth him another illegitimate child.
- ♦ **Lidia** (she/her), lowlander, age 22, larderer. Dorota's sister, exceedingly pious, cheerful, and extroverted.
- ♦ **Aloxæris "Spit"** (she/her), giant, age 18, confectitioner. Creates bizarre candies with beets and rare mountain herbs, a delicacy of the giants.



PLOT HOOK

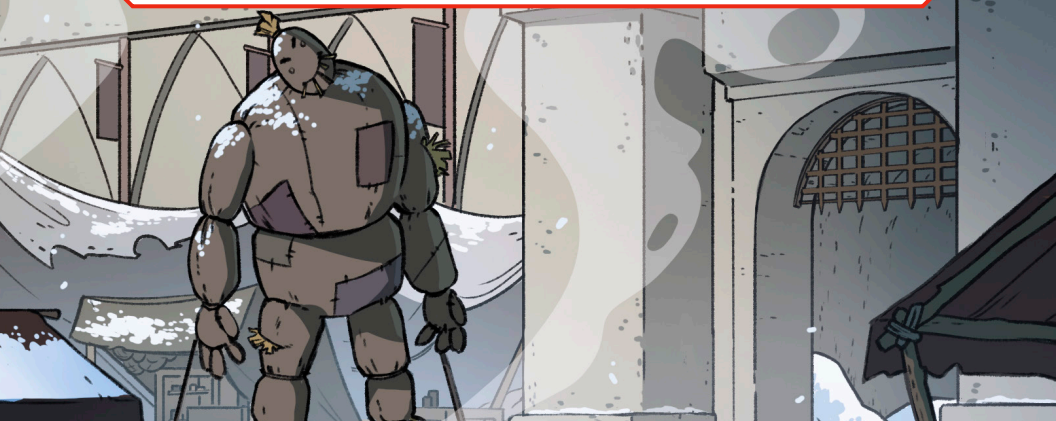
Win the Tourney

The people of Faltringor need entertainment, and the spearmen need practice. As such, Lord Ratchet Zarek hosts tourneys each season as a way to motivate his soldiers' practice as well as perform for the common folk. These tourneys take place in the bailey, and all are welcome to watch and participate.

House Wenjansk has always maintained a strong tradition of hastilude, though most martial games were on horseback prior to the destruction of the Wenjansków. Faltringor has few horses, and so jousts and horse races are now relegated to the history books. Instead, tourneys are all-day affairs that encompass a wide variety of more unusual competitions.

Spearmen—or occasionally: civilians and travelers—enter in teams, though most events are 1-on-1. The winner of an event wins three feathers, and second place gets one. Whichever team holds the most feathers by the end of the day is declared “the Harrier’s Favored,” and a party is held in their honor.

GM NOTE: While you *could* prepare a rigorous tournament bracket or round-robin schedule it is *far* easier to just ask the players to beat one to three opponents in order to win a given event. Don’t keep track of the other competitors’ feathers; just decide ahead of time how many the party has to amass in order to win. As with many details in tabletop gaming, striving for maximal realism provides diminishing returns, and doing so will likely bring the pace of your session to a halt.



Events

Most tourneys involve just a small subset of these events.

CROSSED STAVES: 1-on-1 duel in which competitors are given wooden staves. First to yield or let their shoulder hit the ground loses.

YAK JOUST: Even at full speed, a yak is not a terribly quick beast. Yak jousts are thus more about landing a perfectly aimed blow and keeping a firm grip than it is about speed or strength.

DYE SLAP: Each contestant is given a pike dipped in dye. Whoever can place their dye highest on the wall (with a jump, a vault, or a risky “wrist slap”) wins the event.

SPIKE THE GOURD: A colorful squash is placed in the snow beyond Falthringor’s walls. Contestants compete to see who can throw their spear furthest while still piercing the gourd.

PASSAGE OF ARMS: Entrants take turns guarding the gate to the bailey. Whoever lasts the longest without another entrant passing through wins.

THE LONELY SHEPHERD: Each entrant stands within their own 10-foot radius ring of rope which they must not exit. Dozens of goats are released into the bailey, and the entrants must attempt to corral as many as possible into their ring using only a shepherd’s crook. The winner is whoever has the most goats in their ring after one minute.

BUCKING GIANT: Contestants are placed on a giant’s shoulders and attempt to hold on for as long as possible while the giant writhes, shakes, and rolls. Many decry this event as humiliating or dehumanizing for the refugee giants, but the High Kestrel loves watching the event and requests it every tourney.

NICK RED: Lord Ratchet Foldet hides the Wenjansk flag somewhere along the ramparts. Contestants must race to find the flag and then bring it to the front gate first. There are few rules, and dirty tactics are not just allowed but encouraged. Many contestants simply wait by the portcullis in an effort to steal the flag at the last minute.

SUMMIT THE TORRENT: The High Kestrel begins counting down from 60, and every entrant begins to climb the *torrent opus*. No contact is allowed, but that’s rarely a concern as most climbers can barely get off the ground. Whoever is highest when Mariusz reaches 0 is the winner.