

# The Crucible



Red Choir

*Seek pain, let it scour impurity from your flesh and love from your soul.*

Pillarus was a hostile world, covered in volcanoes that sporadically spewed nitrogen dioxide. Every few years, populations felt the ground rumble, and watched the crimson miasma plume upwards from their nearest volcano. They would flee, leaving their belongings, the elderly, and the infirm, to avoid extinction.

Pillarus's several sentient species were forced into cramped ramshackle hamlets. Necessity would bring them together, but inevitably, their differences, and scant resources would drive them to conflict.

Over time, some among the Estrul species evolved a mutation that allowed them to predict seismic activity. They subconsciously felt the tremors and dreamt of a great maw opening to exhale red death. Soon after, a nearby volcano became active. This evolution served as an early warning that saved countless lives, and calmed a perpetual anxiety among the peoples of Pillarus. They came to worship the god that saved them from His own wrath. They called Him Stra – the many-maw of the world's volcanoes. The one who spares the faithful. The Estrul, as prophets, led the Pillari towards fertile lands where they could settle for longer, farming the nutrient-rich soil until they needed to leave for the next homeland. As they prospered, their populations grew.

Eventually, Pillarus's liveable zones became overpopulated, and resources became strained. The Estrul's gospel changed. They argued among themselves. Clearly, the Red Choir faction argued, Stra wished only His chosen prophets to live. And to deny Him the sacrifice of the others had been an ongoing and unforgivable blasphemy.

If He could grant the Estrul these visions, He could take them away. The Henophiles faction argued that His gift was for all of Pillarus, and that it had led them to a prosperous, cosmopolitan society that was rich in spirit. They reasoned that the Red Choir was blinded by fear and hubris.

The schism escalated to a holy war. The Red Choir hunted the lesser species, while the Henophiles protected them and used them as auxiliaries. The conflict developed into trench warfare, with both sides favouring the nitrogen dioxide they now called the Breath of the Divine. Mortars, flame, and poison covered what used to be Pillarus's small pockets of idyllic life.

The Henophiles had strength in diversity and numbers. Their tactics and capabilities outpaced the Red Choir. But they needed a wider variety of food, more water, more elaborate logistical planning, and more protection for their non-combatants. Meanwhile the Red Choir exterminated any non-Estrul and, when food ran scarce, ate them. They culled their own weak, and began a eugenic campaign. They used specific diets, stimulants, in-utero medical treatments, and childhood conditioning to separate themselves into an intelligent, lithe priest-aristocracy and the stockier horde of fanatic xenophobes.

The Red Choir won the war through brutal attrition. Unlike the Henophiles, their holy war had no civilians. Their trenches advanced by inches over weeks, until they broke the backs of the enemy strongholds.

As the Henophiles scattered, the war became a genocide. The Red Choir consolidated their power, and then scaled down their war machine. Their primary concerns were now order and food. Decades of total war had killed most of their experienced farmers and erased their agricultural knowledge. Worse, the war had poisoned their farmlands, and their rivers ran black with toxic sludge. Famine stalked the Estrul. The nights were steeped in the dirges of the faithful. They kept each other awake with mad improvised gospel into the early hours, while holding their starving friends and later eating them. The only life worse than being in the Red Choir's proletariat, was not being in the Red Choir at all.

The Henophiles were rounded up. Those who refused the Red Choir's dogma were gathered and offered up to Stra's eruptions. They became anonymous sacrifices, asphyxiating in the Breath of the Divine, and forgotten under a deluge of molten rock. The ones who did confess their sins were allowed to live, provided that they find other species and offer them up to Stra. Some Henophiles considered this betrayal a kinder fate than life on Pillarus. They stayed with their flocks, choking and burning with them. Those Henophiles who tried to integrate with the Red Choir were initially tolerated, but soon offered up to the Breath of the Divine. Their original xenophilia could never be erased.

The Estrul had become the only species of note on the planet. The Red Choir recovered from the famine. But with precious few farmlands, they remained totalitarian and fanatical to a fault. Doubt, discontent, and excessive joy were all considered rebellious. Henophobia had become an actively cultivated part of their society.

## Cardinal-Marshals



*You guide the willing sacrifices. So keep your faith mindless, but keep your tactics faithless. There is no salvation in defeat. There is no purity in compromise.*

Cardinal-Marshals are the heads of battlefield theocracy. Tall, graceful, and imperious, these military and spiritual leaders are clad in crimson robes, covered in the skulls of those who have doubted. Stra's Maw is emblazoned on their breastplates in gold. They direct troops in tight formations, using sign-language where necessary. More importantly, they watch for those in the Red Choir who must be made examples of. When forced to engage, they wield ornate bolt pistols and censer-staves that plume out toxic fumes.

The aristocracy bred the proletariat for their assigned roles, and expected all Estrul to constantly prove their hatred for the Other. But as Pillarus's other species neared extinction, the Estrul had to find the Other among their own. They turned inward, endlessly seeking rot to cleanse. Exposing the unfaithful was the holy duty of every Estrul.



## Dirge Choir



*"Should you want for your rifle  
Should you need to buy more time  
You still have your life to give  
And brother, I still have mine."  
Dirge for the Living.*

The Dirge Choir (singular: Dirge Choirist) forms the backbone of the Red Choir. Bred for subservience, they are expendable to their Cardinal-Marshals, as well as in their own minds. They dig trenches before a conflict, and are the first to charge out of them. They advance in waves and set up forward positions for their allies to shelter in. They wield bolt-action rifles and gas grenades. Lightly armoured in rusted metal armour and trench coats, they are vulnerable to assaults. If rushed, they defend themselves with trench clubs in a haze of toxic smoke where their hymns are amplified by their acoustic gas-masks.

Any heresy exposed and cleansed earned one's own salvation. For those who could not find heretics, self-flagellation was a substitute. They whipped themselves and applied necrotic gases to their own skin. They viewed their pain as proof of devotion and as punishment for failing to find the Other.

The Kennin had not been paying attention to the Estrul. The Astral Lattice had ranked Pillarus in the lower rungs of requirements for sustaining life. The few Kennin who cared to look for fledgling species had not yet begun looking so far down the lists. But once the Red Choir began terraforming their planet into an industrial factory-church, one Kennin, Jillini, took notice. Jillini targeted Red Choir members for abduction. It specifically sought to preserve the proportionate numbers of their hierarchy, and to increase the Red Choir's paranoia by taking prominent members from Pillarus.

Jillini adopted the name 'Stra' and seeded the Estrul to a country-sized rockland, dominated by a single gargantuan volcano. As their patron, Stra did not speak to the Red Choir. Rather He answered their prayers with rich veins of ore and occasional minor eruptions. Under Stra's hand, the Red Choir rapidly reindustrialised and repopulated. Those descendants who dwell in the Crucible have long forgotten the name 'Estrul'. Generations had passed in the time warp there, until there has only ever been the Red Choir in their minds. Only now they fought new enemies, and built new machines of war. The constant blaring of their gospel, alongside heavy machinery and artillery fire left many among the Red Choir with hearing loss, which only meant they needed to increase the volume of their hymns. They developed a sign language that allowed them to communicate across long distances despite the deafening roar of their hymns and artillery. Their tectonic sense allowed them to sense the shifts in no-man's land, and thereby to solidify the environments before they physically saw them. This made them the first to wander from their homeland and find the fields of war.

Similarly it allowed their expectations to subtly influence the shifts: The nebulous no-man's land often solidified slightly in their favour, gifting them entrenched positions to occupy before they even arrived. They rejoice. For clearly Stra loves them. Clearly, they descend from those who had proved faithful and could ascend to a next world. In the Crucible, they have been given an abundance of the Other to cleanse with the Breath of the Divine.

Their dual-purpose is clear: Purify the Crucible through absolute xenocide, and purify the Red Choir through pain and war. They are among the Crucible's most aggressive denizens, hunting out homelands and waging total war. To battle them, is to face indistinct shapes in a haze of deadly gas, where only the glowing emblazon of Stra's volcano maw is distinct. From all around their hymns fill them with fervour and their enemies with dread. To them, surrender is unthinkable. They are holy warriors, and their crusade has only begun.

## Canticle Cannoneers



*Hill, as Stra did. Riddle the earth with His body and His breath. Let the Other feel the fears of our ancestors, and let them know that for them, there is no salvation. No hope to be had.*

Canticle Cannoneers are the pride of the Red Choir. They are holy men, dressed in ceremonial robes, light armor and gas masks. Deafened during training, they rely most heavily on the Red Choir's sign language. In their homeland, they give sermons with their fingers, while deafening music blares from behind. In battle, their hymns to Stra are teeth-shattering vibrations from artillery fire. These war machines emulate Stra's eruptions, filling the air with smoke and the ground with gas and explosives. They double as instruments that underpin their infantry's hymns. The Canticle Cannoneers' cacophonic symphonies makes it near impossible to pinpoint where any sound comes from and fills the enemy with a dread that they are beset on all sides.

## Purifiers



*If Stra demands that you sear your own flesh, what would He have you do to the Other? Burn them. Beyond pain, beyond death, beyond the annihilation of their spirits. There is no purity for them, only purity without them.*

Purifiers are elite holy warriors specialising in close-quarters combat. They are bred for higher intelligence than the Dirge Choir. They are more tactically minded, and advance into the positions set up by a Choir, under a hail of covering artillery fire. Their heavy trench coats, reinforced plating and advanced gas masks make them durable on the assault. Once they reach their foes, they scorch them with flamethrowers and brain them with censers filled with toxic fumes.

