

WE SEE IT DIFFERENTLY

BRINGING FACTIONS INTO CONFLICT

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"I IMAGINE THAT YOU HAVE BEEN ASKED TO INVESTIGATE SOME SORT OF THREAT TO THE THRONE. YOU ARE A YOUNG KNIGHT WITH PURPOSE, A STRANGER HERE, RECRUITED FROM OUT OF TOWN. AND FROM A NOBLE FAMILY, BY YOUR MANNER? THEN IT'S REASONABLE TO SURMISE THAT PERHAPS THE LORDS' ALLIANCE HAS PUT YOU UP TO THIS TASK, IS THAT SO? YOU MUST UNDERSTAND, SIR PARIS, THAT THE LORDS' ALLIANCE IS CONCERNED, FIRST AND FOREMOST, WITH THE PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION OF THE LORDS' ALLIANCE. IT IS NOT A CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION. IT IS NOT AN ASSOCIATION OF HEROES AND BENEFACTORS. IT IS A SECURITY AGENCY. AND IT IS ONLY AS GOOD AS ITS MEMBERS.

"WHEN LORD PELINDAR LIVED AND RULED, HE WAS A MEMBER OF THE LORDS' ALLIANCE IN GOOD STANDING. HE DID WHAT HE COULD TO SUPPORT HIS FELLOW NOBLES AGAINST THREATS TO THEIR CITIES. OFTEN, WHEN THE THREAT TO THE LAND WAS GRAVE, HE CONTRIBUTED NOT ONLY HIS RESOURCES BUT HIS OWN SWORD ARM. HE WAS A PARAGON AMONG HIS PEERS. NOT MANY OF THEM CAN CLAIM HONESTLY TO HAVE LIVED UP TO HIS EXAMPLE.

"YOU TAKE YOUR WORD SERIOUSLY. IT BINDS YOU TO A DUTY THAT YOU HAVE ASSUMED. YOU ALSO TAKE YOUR VIRTUE SERIOUSLY. IT TELLS YOU THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE HERE IN NEED OF BENEVOLENCE THAT IS NOT FORTHCOMING. ARE YOU BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND, SIR PARIS?"

—LORD CHANCELLOR WISHARD LOWELL OF LEILON,
MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE GAUNTLET

While monstrosities seek food and territory, giants compete for status, dragons pursue power and treasure, and aberrations are after who knows what, conflicts with humanoid antagonists typically revolve around the things we don't discuss at the dinner table: religion and politics. Factions represent the players in these conflicts.

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

In Chainmail, the tabletop wargame from which Dungeons & Dragons sprang, "alignment" meant something different from what it means now: It referred to which side a character or creature took in the eternal struggles between law and chaos, good and evil. Lawful good characters fought against chaos on the side of law, with lawful evil beings at their side—but in a battle of good vs. evil, they fought against evil in alliance with the chaotic good. A neutral good character would take the side of good against evil, but sit out a fight between law and chaos.

D&D, however, was (and is) a roleplaying game, and players began to use alignment as a guide to individual philosophy, morality, and behavior. By the second edition, this was explicitly codified in the *Players' Handbook*. The literal meaning of alignment—how one *aligned* oneself in the epic battles of yore—disappeared from the game.

While adhering to previous editions' usage of "alignment," fifth edition D&D brings back the original *concept* of alignment in the form of factions. Now, however, factions are not simple diametric oppositions. They're *messy*.

On the Sword Coast of Faerûn, fifth edition D&D's default setting, five factions predominate:

- The **Lords' Alliance** is a league of city-states committed to mutual protection and prosperity.
- The **Order of the Gauntlet** is a fellowship of individuals committed to actively rooting out evil influence everywhere.
- The **Harpers** are a secret society of lorekeepers and spies, using their accumulated knowledge to undermine tyrants.
- The **Emerald Enclave** is a circle of protectors of wild lands and creatures and defenders of the natural order.
- The **Zhentarim** is an organized crime syndicate, opportunistically pursuing wealth and power and corrupting local authorities where it can.

None of these factions corresponds neatly to a single alignment. However, the interests of the Lords' Alliance are generally served by lawful good, lawful neutral, and lawful evil characters; those of the Order of the Gauntlet, by the lawful good, neutral good, and chaotic good; those of the Harpers, by the neutral good, chaotic good, and chaotic neutral; those of the Emerald Enclave, by the neutral, neutral good, chaotic neutral, and chaotic good; and those of the Zhentarim, by the lawful evil, neutral evil, and chaotic evil.

BUT WHO'S RIGHT?

Much of the appeal of D&D is rooted in the power of player choice—the impact that player characters' decisions can have on present and future events in the game world. For this reason, Dungeon Masters like to present their players with dilemmas that their PCs must work through. Do they destroy the dragon eggs or bring them back to be domesticated and trained as mounts? Do they pursue the fleeing villain or rescue the captives who are in imminent danger?

Factions provide another way to incorporate moral conflict into a D&D campaign. In doing so, however, it's important that a DM present a *real* dilemma, one in which PCs might legitimately argue about which side has the right idea. Always presenting the Order of the Gauntlet as the obvious "good guys" and the Zhentarim as the obvious "bad guys" is lazy and uninteresting.

Motivated reasoning is powerful. All people (at least, those who aren't sociopaths) are inclined to see themselves as good and right and to see their own interests and values as most important. In contemporary society, for instance, one person might prioritize kindness and fairness, while another might prioritize group loyalty and deference to authority. Most people will see all of these virtues as important to some degree, but each will lean toward the ones that reinforce their particular view of the world.

A good faction conflict is one in which a member of one faction can articulate a view of the situation and present it persuasively, while a member of the opposing faction can articulate a different view of the situation and also present it persuasively—making even PCs who are affiliated with one of those factions second-guess their own views, if only for a moment.

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

For players to see both sides of a conflict, each side must be sympathetic. A faction-affiliated NPC with a likable personality can generate sympathy, but a stronger hook is showing players that the faction is facing a genuine struggle. Each faction's struggle is tied closely to its worldview—it's the faction's primary reason for existing. Lesser conflicts, such as squabbles over petty personal interests, aren't compelling enough to build adventures around, especially at intermediate to high levels of play.

LORDS' ALLIANCE: ORDER

The Lords' Alliance exists to create order out of disorder. Without firm leadership, dependable alliances, and a trustworthy legal system, society collapses into violence, treachery, and poverty. When the Lords' Alliance is involved in a conflict, there must be legitimate reasons to believe that taking the other side will result in civil disorder, damage to institutions, or other unpredictable, potentially harmful consequences.

ORDER OF THE GAUNTLET: RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Order of the Gauntlet exists to defend the innocent against corruption, brutality, and injustice. Given the opportunity, evildoers will abuse whomever they can get away with abusing, without limit or compunction. When the Order of the Gauntlet is involved in a conflict, there must be legitimate reasons to believe that taking the other side will result in direct, measurable, physical harm to victims who have no other way to defend themselves.

HARPERS: FREETHOUGHT

The Harpers exist to empower individuals through knowledge. When people are kept ignorant or are not allowed to exercise freedom of conscience, they can be subjugated by tyrants in both body and mind. When the Harpers are involved in a conflict, there must be

legitimate reasons to believe that important, potentially beneficial information, and/or ideas are being suppressed in the name of orthodoxy or tradition—or out of simple despotism.

EMERALD ENCLAVE: NATURE

The Emerald Enclave exists to protect the natural world and its processes of growth and change from destructive outside influences. When people are disconnected from nature, they extract its resources, destroy creatures' dwelling places, and disrupt the balance between predators and prey without thought or restraint. When the Emerald Enclave is involved in a conflict, there must be legitimate reasons to believe either that the threat to nature is an existential one—a place or species is facing possible destruction or extinction—or that the threat may not remain contained, and is a harbinger of much worse to come.

ZHENTARIM: SELF-INTEREST

The Zhentarim exists to enrich and empower its members. People need what they need and want what they want, and if they're denied legitimate means of gaining what they need and want, they'll pursue their goals through illegitimate means instead. The Zhentarim, like the Mafia, engages in many activities with no redeeming social purpose—but when the Zhentarim is involved in a plot-centric factional conflict, it must be doing some actual good in the course of its lawbreaking. More specifically, it must be opposing some other, possibly worse harm.

TEN CONFLICTS

LORDS' ALLIANCE VS. ORDER OF THE GAUNTLET

Lords' Alliance view: Rule of law vs. vigilantism

Order of the Gauntlet view: Justice vs. blind loyalty

A conflict between the Lords' Alliance and the Order of the Gauntlet will generally involve a ruler, official, or institution engaging in unfair practices in order to defend the existing social order, opposed by an individual or group defying the lawful authorities in defense of those getting the short end of the stick. For instance, the Lords' Alliance may be defending an unjust ruler against a more virtuous rival's claim to the throne, while the Order of the Gauntlet may be supporting the rival—but in so doing, undermining rules of succession that have heretofore kept even less savory contenders from pursuing the throne themselves. Or the Order of the Gauntlet may have evidence that a diplomat in a major city is a rakshasa and wish to destroy it before its schemes can take root, while that diplomat is facilitating negotiations between two warring Lords' Alliance city-states which would allow them to cease hostilities and resume profitable trade.

LORDS' ALLIANCE VS. HARPERS

Lords' Alliance view: Stability vs. rebellion

Harpers' view: Liberty vs. tyranny

A conflict between the Lords' Alliance and the Harpers will generally involve a ruler, official, or institution attempting to prevent the discovery of scandalous secret information that could lead to riots, disruption of commerce, or the breaking of an alliance, while the Harpers seek to uncover the information in the public interest. For instance, the Lords' Alliance may be suppressing the knowledge of a growing threat beneath a city's streets, caused by the recklessness of an influential court mage from an aristocratic family, while the Harpers may be trying to discern the origin of the threat, both in order to stop it and to protect the residents who live above it. Or the Harpers may be trying to bring down a powerful, universally feared spymaster who has unjustly arrested and abused hundreds for expressing dissident opinions—but who also possesses information that has kept a belligerent rival city at bay for more than two decades, and the removal of whom could result in war.

LORDS' ALLIANCE VS. EMERALD ENCLAVE

Lords' Alliance view: Civilization vs. savagery

Emerald Enclave view: Nature vs. development

A conflict between the Lords' Alliance and the Emerald Enclave will generally involve a ruler, official, or institution pursuing either resource development or rebels, criminals, or spies in lands controlled by the Emerald Enclave, while the Emerald Enclave seeks to defend its territory from the heavy hand of the Lords' Alliance, which is doing more damage than it realizes (or cares to know). For instance, the Lords' Alliance may be dealing with raiders from a traditional tribe that makes its home in a nearby forest and seeking to attack the problem at its root, while the Emerald Enclave recognizes that tribe as conscientious stewards of their part of the woods and sees the Lords' Alliance as interlopers who can afford to spare what they've lost to the tribe's raids. Or the Emerald Enclave may anticipate that a sacred stand of woods, at the heart of which is a band of awakened trees that defend the area against incursions from the Shadowfell, is threatened by settlers from a nearby city-state, which is growing and needs more farms to supply it with food.

LORDS' ALLIANCE VS. ZHENTARIM

Lords' Alliance view: Integrity vs. corruption

Zhentarim view: Survival vs. subjection

A conflict between the Lords' Alliance and the Zhentarim will generally involve a ruler, official, or institution that the Zhentarim has corrupted or infiltrated, while the Zhentarim's activities offer opportunity to an oppressed or neglected group within the city-state. For instance, the

Lords' Alliance may be seeking to identify and prosecute members of the city guard that are accepting bribes in exchange for allowing illegal activity to occur, while the Zhentarim is the only group in the city that will employ tieflings and is distributing proceeds from that activity to create a crude social safety net for the city's tiefling population. Or the Zhentarim is trying to destabilize a city-state that has been unusually successful at quashing its criminal enterprises by inciting the overtaxed citizens to rebel, while the Lords' Alliance is trying to hold the city-state's government together—and finding the effort more and more expensive, necessitating the raising of taxes.

ORDER OF THE GAUNTLET VS. HARPERS

Order of the Gauntlet's view: Means vs. ends

Harpers' view: Relativism vs. absolutism

A conflict between the Order of the Gauntlet and the Harpers will often find them fighting a common enemy, with the Order of the Gauntlet favoring a blunt, direct, uncompromising approach, while the Harpers favor a subtle approach that allows some cutting of corners as long as the goal is achieved. For instance, the Order of the Gauntlet may want to expose and slay a formerly virtuous minor lord who has fallen under a vampiric curse, while the Harpers may see more benefit in keeping his secret and recruiting him to spy on its other enemies. Or the Harpers may have an embedded agent following the threads of a conspiracy, whose work and life are threatened by the Order of the Gauntlet's aggressive determination to bring down a particularly ruthless and brutal lord whose correspondence is a key source of information on that conspiracy.

ORDER OF THE GAUNTLET VS. EMERALD ENCLAVE

Order of the Gauntlet's view: Duty vs. detachment

Emerald Enclave's view: Big picture vs. small picture

A conflict between the Order of the Gauntlet and the Emerald Enclave will typically involve a beast or monstrosity that's simply hunting for food and/or defending its territory—and in the process killing bystanders who've made the mistake of straying too close—with the Order of the Gauntlet seeking to slay the creature and end the threat, while the Emerald Enclave would rather the creature were left alone, perhaps because its presence is a check against the runaway proliferation of a prey species. The Order of the Gauntlet frames the conflict in terms of its duty to protect the innocent and deplores the Emerald Enclave's apparent indifference, while the Emerald Enclave frames it in terms of the natural balance and deplores the Order of the Gauntlet's shortsighted meddling.

ORDER OF THE GAUNTLET VS. ZHENTARIM

Order of the Gauntlet's view: Selflessness vs. selfishness

Zhentarim's view: Pragmatism vs. rigidity

A conflict between the Order of the Gauntlet and the Zhentarim will generally involve criminal activity that the Order of the Gauntlet seeks to quash but that benefits some population other than the crime's victims (if any even exist—the crime may be victimless). In this instance, the benefited group must be one for which it's possible for the PCs to feel sympathy, such as a persecuted minority, a social class with newly acquired economic mobility, or a group of rebels thumbing their noses at a repressive regime. But it may also involve the reverse: The Zhentarim may be collaborating with a brutal regime—not because it supports the regime's brutality, but for the simple reason that collaboration is *safer*—while the Order of the Gauntlet stirs up an insurgency against it.

HARPERS VS. EMERALD ENCLAVE

Harpers' view: Knowledge vs. mystery

Emerald Enclave's view: Purity vs. transgression

A conflict between the Harpers and the Emerald Enclave will generally involve the Harpers' pursuit of information or a magic item held or defended by the Emerald Enclave. The Harpers may have a greater goal in mind, such as using the information or item to gain an advantage against a foe—or they may simply claim that they do, while pursuing the information or item for its own sake. The Emerald Enclave may be committed specifically to keeping the information secret or keeping the item out of others' hands, or its primary concern may be territorial—keeping trespassers out of the place where the information or item happens to be. For instance, enemies of the Harpers may have enlisted the aid of a pit fiend to oppose their work, driving them to track down a *moonblade* sword that deals lightning damage to fiends, while the sword lies within a part of the forest of Cormanthor that the Emerald Enclave has deemed off limits to all except a single tribe of wood elves who guard other secrets as well. Or the Emerald Enclave may be in possession of a great mystery—a secret bridge to the Feywild, a unique method of resurrection, or a prophecy about a transformative event that will forever alter the races of Toril—that the Harpers are doggedly trying to discover, whatever the consequences may be.

HARPERS VS. ZHENTARIM

Harpers' view: Empowerment vs. exploitation

Zhentarim's view: Predictability vs. upheaval

A conflict between the Harpers and the Zhentarim will generally involve the Harpers' efforts to disrupt the Zhentarim's exploitation of a group with less power or status, with the Harpers seeking to empower and liberate

the exploited group, while the Zhentarim argue that Harper meddling tends to result in unpredictable shake-ups of the social and economic order; the chaos of drastic change often produces greater harm to more people than the injustice that precedes it. For instance, the Harpers may wish to break the hold of a Zhentarim den in a city with an ancient aristocracy; as the Zhentarim weakens, it will no longer have the authority or the resources to keep the feuding families in line, and soon the whole city will be embroiled in a cycle of revenge-driven violence, with abundant collateral damage. Or the Zhentarim have uncovered an arcane secret that could be dangerous in the hands of a rival—of course, it's dangerous in the Zhentarim's hands as well, which is why the Harpers are after it. But once two different factions know about it, how long can it remain a secret?

EMERALD ENCLAVE VS. ZHENTARIM

Emerald Enclave's view: Preservation vs. extraction

Zhentarim's view: Prosperity vs. poverty

A conflict between the Emerald Enclave and the Zhentarim will often involve a competition for resources—at least, the Zhentarim see it as a competition for resources, while the Emerald Enclave see the resource extraction process itself as a threat. Perhaps the Zhentarim are poaching rare game in Emerald Enclave territory, have dug an illegal mine, or are timbering a nearly extinct type of tree—and in the process, bringing much-needed economic activity to a desperately poor settlement nearby. Or the Emerald Enclave, angered by the encroachment of civilization on threatened land, has begun harassing residents of a certain village or travelers on a certain road—a village or road that's part of the Zhentarim's smuggling network.

OTHER FACTIONS

If your setting includes factions in addition to or in place of these five, you can set the stage for other conflicts by giving them “personalities” the same way player characters are assigned personal characteristics in chapter 4 of the *Player's Handbook*.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

A faction's personality traits are the stereotypical qualities of its members. Lords' Alliance members tend to be conservative, cautious, and pragmatic. Order of the Gauntlet members tend to be idealistic, direct, and bold. Harpers tend to be charismatic, erudite, and flexible. Emerald Enclave members tend to be mystical, stormy-tempered, and standoffish. Zhentarim members tend to be ambitious, opportunistic, and cold-blooded. Yet members of all these factions, and of any other, share one quality in common: uncompromising commitment to the ideals of their faction.

IDEAL

A faction's ideal is its reason for being. It includes not just the values and virtues that its members hold dear but also the threats it fears and the goals it seeks to bring about (see "The Struggle Is Real," above, for examples). This ideal must be rooted in a fundamental truth for the faction to be worth supporting—but for the faction to be worth opposing as well, there must always be some circumstance in which that truth ceases to be true, or at least in which some other truth matters more.

BOND

A faction's bond is to the cultures and subcultures with whose interests it's most closely aligned. The Lords' Alliance is most strongly supported by aristocrats, bureaucrats, and merchants, and in turn, it looks after their interests most assiduously. The Order of the Gauntlet sees itself as doing the work of the gods, and it supports and is supported by good-aligned religious orders—but it also includes folk heroes and altruists of all stripes. The Harpers work in close association with those who preserve and study lore, both historical and arcane, as well as those who traffic in secrets. The Emerald Enclave is the defender of nature itself, along with the societies that live in harmony with it, both advanced and traditional. The Zhentarim is an organization of criminals, but it also commands the loyalty of folk who are mistreated by legitimate authorities and must turn to an alternative power structure for security and justice. A faction must have a social support base to be a significant player in humanoid affairs.

FLAW

Every faction has an ideal, be it noble or petty; every faction also has a blind spot. The Lords' Alliance takes its own legitimacy for granted, and by extension, it also takes for granted that all its activities and decisions are legitimate as well. The Order of the Gauntlet tends to believe it has a monopoly on virtue and has difficulty imagining that its priorities might be out of order. The Harpers are heedless of the truth that some knowledge is better kept under wraps, whether for the sake of public safety or simply for the sake of an individual's privacy and dignity. The Emerald Enclave, as it proclaims the importance of the natural order, often fails to honor the equal importance of the lives of those who dwell in settled civilization. The Zhentarim concocts elaborate rationalizations to justify its activities as somehow beneficial or necessary to the functioning of humanoid society, but behind these sophistries, it's aware that its activities harm the social fabric—and simply doesn't care. A faction's flaw gives rival factions openings to criticize it, challenge it, and offer competitive alternative viewpoints and courses of action.

SAMPLE FACTION: THE SILVER RAVENS OF SEMBIA

The Silver Ravens, established and originally commanded by a onetime adventurer named Miklos Selkirk, are an armed company dedicated to the defense of the land of Sembia. Numbering too few to constitute a conventional army, the Silver Ravens are a combination of elite soldiers, whose function is to burnish Sembia's reputation through open displays of valor, and spies and hired adventurers, who pursue the nation's interests covertly by gathering information and acquiring items of arcane power.

Personality Traits. Silver Ravens are patriots, loyal to Sembia above all other ties. The faction's warriors are justly renowned for their skill and valor—and equally justly giped for their vanity. Its plainclothes members are known within the company for their matter-of-fact efficiency, resourcefulness, and focus; outside it, they're not known at all, and that's how they like it.

Ideal. The Silver Ravens are committed to the interests of Sembia. A country once subjugated by the Netherese and ravaged by war with neighboring Cormyr, formerly wealthy Sembia has struggled to get back on its feet and regain control over its outlying cities and their hinterlands. The Silver Ravens are motivated by a desire to see Sembia reunited and prosperous under the rule of law; the chaos of the status quo, with secessionists, pirates, and cultists running amok, is intolerable.

Bond. The Silver Ravens are an arm of the ruling aristocracy of Selgaunt, the seat of power in Sembia since the destruction of the former capital city, Ordulin. They are strongly supported by the merchant class, but they also enjoy broad popular support among loyal Sembians of all social classes, for whom the Silver Ravens are a source of pride. If you ask a Silver Raven, they'll say they're devoted to all the people of Sembia, high and low, and most of them truly believe it.

Flaw. The Silver Ravens aren't without honor, but when it comes to pursuing the interests of Sembia, honor is immaterial. If dishonorable methods are more effective than honorable ones, Silver Ravens will employ them. If an ally holds valuable information, Silver Ravens will spy on that ally. If an ally possesses an artifact that would benefit Sembia, and Silver Ravens are ordered to steal it, they won't question the order or hesitate to follow it. All that matters is what strengthens Sembia.

SAMPLE RIVALRY: SILVER RAVENS VS. HARPERS

Silver Ravens' view: Sembia vs. its enemies

Harpers' view: Knowledge vs. censorship

The Harpers operate in Sembia, but only clandestinely: the faction is banned by law, and membership is considered treason. A conflict between the Silver Ravens and the Harpers will generally involve a competition for intelligence, arcane secrets, or a powerful magic item, with the Silver Ravens seeking to advance the interests of the Sembian government and the Harpers pursuing

the information or item for its own ends. For instance, the Silver Ravens may be gathering information and/or resources that will help Sembia bring the breakaway city-state of Urmlaspyr back under the central government, while the Harpers may be aiding the forces seeking to maintain Urmlaspyr's independence out of respect for the principle of self-determination. Or the Harpers may be digging up secrets that cast doubt on the legitimacy of a key figure in Sembia's leadership, while the Silver Ravens seek to protect that figure because their removal could weaken the already struggling government even further, making it easy prey for hostile neighbors.