

Atlas Games Presents a *Seven Strongholds*™ Preview:

THE PSITTAE

A NEW D20 SYSTEM™ CHARACTER RACE BY ROBIN D. LAWS

Have your players wandered off the beaten path yet again? Didn't have time to map out that castle? Just open *Seven Strongholds*™ to find forts, castles, and other well-fortified locations, fully detailed and ready for insertion into your game world.

Seven Strongholds is a new book in the **Penumbra** line of D20 supplements from Atlas Games, scheduled for release in late February 2002. As the title suggests, it presents seven ready-made fortresses, waiting for you to insert into your campaign world.

One of the seven locations described is the Perch. Keen-eyed birdmen zealously guard this domed lair, from which they oppress the area's population of "walkers" -- their contemptuous term for flightless humanoids. Known as psittae, these birdmen are a new species that you can introduce to your world.

Like all **Penumbra**™ products, *Seven Strongholds* gives you material adaptable to any fantasy campaign, whether it be a published setting or a world of your own creation. If you are intrigued by the psittae, you don't even have to wait for the book to hit store shelves to add them to your own game world — this free preview gives you all you need.

THE PSITTAE

PERSONALITY

Intelligent, restless, and high-strung, the psittae (pronounced as a buzzing sound followed by a hard "t") may seem distant or even cruel to mammalian humanoids. Among their own kind, they are highly social, following strict hierarchies of dominance and submission. Dominant individuals, who win their positions through ritualized combat, enjoy the best access to food, shelter, and mating opportuni-



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Requires the use of the Dungeons & Dragons® Player's Handbook, Third Edition, published by Wizards of the Coast.

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system

ties. Subordinates follow their leaders out of a combination of fear, respect, and religious obligation. Always alert to the niceties of status, psittae are quick to take offense, a habit they find hard to drop while traveling in the lands of outsiders. Having been raised in a culture where all disputes are settled by the assertion of rank, they often find it hard to compromise or negotiate. Psittae are highly inquisitive; they believe there is no more satisfying way to die than in investigating a mystery.

Many outsiders incorrectly assume that these humanoid birds suffer from claustrophobia. In fact, they're more than comfortable in caves, which many psittae colonies use as homes. Fiercely territorial, they eagerly make war with other psittae groups who encroach on their feeding grounds or nesting areas.

Contrary to the niceties of most intelligent cultures, psittae feel no sense of shame in relation to their own excrement, and are not revolted by the smell of their own ordure. Layers of the whitish guano typically coat the flooring of a psittae colony. (They might feel differently if they had to walk on the slimy, slippery stuff, but they perch high above it.) A psitta among other humanoids has to train himself not to empty his bowels with unthinking abandon. It is not physically difficult for them to use latrines or chamberpots, though many have difficulty remembering to do so, especially when tired or nervous.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Psittae are winged, feathered humanoids, with large, rounded heads and big beaks that are both hooked and curved. Various groups display different colors of bright plumage, from eye-popping crimson to vivid cerulean. The first and fourth toes of their scaly gray bird's feet are turned backwards. They're slim of build but tall, with an average height of 5' 11" for both male and female individuals. Psittae who survive to adulthood live, on average, to the age of 130 years. Although a few eccentrics may don clothes, most psittae are loath to hide the splendor of their plumage with mere rags. Psittae bones are pitted with air pockets, lightening their skeletons so that it's easier for them to take flight. Consequently, they're more susceptible to bludgeoning weapons than are mammalian humanoids.

Females lay eggs and do not nurse their young, so they lack mammalian breasts. Unlike many bird

species, both the males and females are elaborately plumed.

RELATIONS

Psittae lump all of the major humanoid races into the same category, perceiving little difference between them. They refer to them with an insulting psittan word that translates as "featherless." While world-wise psittae are probably more enlightened, individuals who spend their whole lives among their own kind tend to look on the flightless as pathetic and easily exploitable.

ALIGNMENT

With their hierarchical social structure, respect for the law is bred into a psittan's aerated bones. Although often labeled as evil by outsiders, they're more accurately described as indifferent to the welfare of creatures outside their colony structures. Even otherwise chaotic psittae usually follow the rules of the hierarchy, though they may be freedom-loving and unpredictable in other ways.

PSITTAN LANDS

In most realms, psittae are rare creatures who congregate only in colonies of a hundred or fewer individuals. A single colony may claim a territory of several thousand acres, maintaining its boundaries with regular aerial patrols. Other humanoids who do not threaten the colony may be allowed to live in psittan territory in relative peace, though they'll either have to pay tribute or suffer periodic raids from above. Psittae have been unable to transcend their habit of making war on rival colonies, preventing the development of larger political structures like kingdoms. (GMs may, of course, choose to create exceptional places where psittae have made this leap to larger communities.)

RELIGION

Psittae recognize an extensive pantheon of deities led by the distant and impersonal Ch'gatibal the Lawmaker, a father figure too aloof and dignified to accept prayer or communicate with worshipers. Instead, most psittae direct their worship to his daughter, Ch'sunuskam the Clever, a trickster and explorer who gets into trouble but finds useful

things, like fire and the secret of breaking coconuts. Other deities include Ch'habugja Black-Robe, who sternly enforces Ch'gatibal's laws, and is Ch'sunuskam's nemesis; Ch'jahnisi the Provider, who seeds the earth with the food psittae forage for; and Ch'niththaim Taker-In-The-Night, the forbidding goddess of death and the underworld.

LANGUAGE

Psittan tongues and beaks are capable of producing a much wider range of sounds than mammalian humanoids, so their language is peppered with squawks, clicks, and mimicked sounds beings of other species find utterly impossible to recreate. Fortunately, they have no such problems with other languages, often learning Common to more precisely specify to local humanoids the detailed nature of the tribute they demand.

NAMES

Psittan names are polysyllabic, knotted with difficult consonant combinations, and invariably proceeded by a shrieking noise best approximated with the prefix Ch'. Examples include Ch'thabugj, Ch'ailmaihlkin, Ch'hausthun, Ch'arabair, Ch'un-garnjthun, and Ch'lonsfriggei.

ADVENTURERS

Psittan adventurers fall into two categories. Some are outcasts or eccentrics who have fled their home colonies to avoid a dominance duel, or after losing one. Others go out into the world as a sort of pilgrimage in tribute to the holy wanderings of Ch'sunuskam the Clever. They hope to return to their colonies one day, with the useful knowledge and magic they've acquired on their journeys. Their discoveries will allow them to challenge their colony leaders and send them shrieking from their perches. Some psittan adventurers develop an affection for the featherless and their ways, never returning to their homes.

PSITTAE RACIAL TRAITS

Ability Modifiers: +2 Intelligence, -2 Constitution

Size: Medium

Base Speed: 20 feet, fly 45 feet (poor)

Flight (Ex): Psittae have large, feathered wings and can fly, provided they begin by dropping from a height; for example, from a cliff face or tall tree. They can't simply rise into the air, even with a running start, so their flight is more limited than that provided by the *fly* spell. They'll almost never find good flying opportunities in the typical underground environment. Psittae cannot take flight while carrying a heavy load; while carrying a medium load, they can do so only by making a DC 20 Strength check. A failed check means that the character plummets to the ground, taking falling damage. Psittae wearing armor over medium weight cannot fly, but speed penalties for lighter armor don't apply to their flight speed. Special abilities such as the barbarian's Fast Movement do not affect the flying speed of a psitta character.

Awkward Winged (Ex): Because they have evolved arms as well as wings, psittae can't fold their wings down against their bodies as neatly as can ordinary birds. Even with wings folded down as far as they'll go, psittae need five feet of clearance to move comfortably down a passageway or corridor. Any passageway less than three feet across is impassable to a psitta.

Attack From Above (Ex): When entering combat against an opponent who is not in flight, a psittan's threat range for critical hit purposes increases by 1 for each previous round spent in the air, to a maximum of 3. The psittan must have been traveling in a more-or-less straight line through the air: diving or swooping are acceptable, but not circling.

The psittae have also learned to use their melee weapons in emulation of a claw attack during a dive attack: they get double damage with handheld weapons whenever they can swoop in from thirty feet (as a charge), but can't combine a critical and the dive attack damage.

Mimicry: Any psittae can purchase the Mimicry skill (see page 4) as a class skill.

Beak Attack (Ex): Unarmed attack damage 1d6; this is standard damage, not subdual, and has a critical x2 despite being a natural weapon.

Nonstandard Feet (Ex): Psittae can't wear boots, including magical ones.

Lightweight Bones (Ex): When suffering a critical hit from a bludgeoning weapon, the damage multiplier of the weapon is increased by 1 — for exam-

ple, a light mace critical is not x2, but x3.

Racial Modifiers: +2 racial bonus on Climb checks on natural surfaces, like cliffs and trees; -2 racial penalty on all Diplomacy checks.

Automatic Languages: Common and Psittan

Bonus Languages: None

Favored Class: Barbarian

THE PSITTAN PANTHEON

CH'SUNUSKAM THE CLEVER

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Domains: Knowledge, Trickery, Luck

Typical Worshipers: Any psitta

Ch'sunuskam is the psittan hero who tricked the older gods into bringing them the vital gifts of civilization, including fire, speech, and the secrets of dome-making. The myths depict her as a carefree wayfarer whose curiosity gets her into trouble, and whose ingenuity gets her back out of it again. She is a patron to blacksmiths and an encourager of troublemakers.

Ch'sunuskam is depicted as a bright-eyed, colorfully feathered psitta, always in a dynamic pose. Her symbol is an anvil; her favored weapon is the longpear.

CH'HABUGJA BLACK-ROBE

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Domains: Law, Protection, War

Typical Worshipers: Fighters and rangers

The enigmatic Ch'habugja Black-Robe is the war-maker of the gods. He is celebrated for slaying the ancestral foes of the psittan gods, including Kwathaa the Undulating Serpent and G'gobi Egg-Stealer. In many stories, he either captures and punishes Ch'sunuskam the Clever, or is fooled by her, depending on who tells the tale.

He is depicted as a stern-looking psitta covered in a mantle of black feathers. His symbol is a feathered fist; his favored weapon, the longbow.

NEW SKILL:

MIMICRY (INT, TRAINED ONLY)

Use this skill to imitate sounds: you can duplicate specific voices or realistically copy noises. If you also allot a rank of the Perform skill to the task, you can entertain others with amusing vocal impressions of people they know. Mimicry of animal cries or other natural sounds can be used to signal your compatriots without alerting sentries. You can also use these imitations in hunting, to attract beasts of the wild.

Checks: Use the difficulties below when your artifice is showing; that is, you're not trying to fool people as to the origin of the noise, but just show them how good you are at mimicking a sound. When you seek to deceive, make an opposed check against the target's Listen skill.

DC Attempted Sound

- | | |
|----|--|
| 10 | The cry of an ordinary animal |
| 13 | Speech with a specific foreign accent |
| 20 | Imitating a particular individual's speech |
| 23 | The cry of a monster or exotic beast |
| 25 | A noise or sound effect: a breaking dish, howling wind, the scraping of a sword on whetstone |

Retries: These are generally not possible; once you've broken the illusion, you can't recapture it.

This is a class skill for bards, rangers, and rogues.

CH'JAHNISI THE PROVIDER

Alignment: Lawful Good

Domains: Good, Magic, Plant

Typical Worshipers: Paladins, foragers and crazy idealists

The merciful Ch'jahnisi seeds the earth with fruit and nut plants for psittae to glean from. She is noted for her forgiving nature, which sometimes

angers the other gods or leads to trouble, as in the story in which she takes pity on G'gobi Egg-Stealer and brings him back from the dead.

Ch'jahnisi the Provider is shown as a large psittan female with a fringe of white feathers around her neck. Her symbol is the papaya, and her favored weapon is the net.

CH'NITHTHAIM TAKER-IN-THE-NIGHT

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Domains: Death, Destruction, Earth

Typical Worshipers: Barbarians and fighters

Although Ch'niththaim Taker-In-The-Night is generally loathed and feared by ordinary psittae, she is not so much an enemy of the gods as a terrible relative whose presence must be suffered. Her dread laugh rattling around her dry and dusty throat, she sweeps the souls of the slain off to the loamy underworld, meting out the judgements that determine one's eternal perch in the great celestial dome.

Some fighters and barbarians dedicate themselves to her grim cause, ensuring that their fellows may fear, but never love, them.

Ch'niththaim appears as a skull-faced psitta with only a few ragged feathers dangling from her spindly frame. To make her symbol, string a dozen songbird skulls on a circular wire frame. Like most psittan deities, she favors the longspear.

CH'GATIBAL THE LAWMAKER

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Domains: None

Typical Worshipers: No direct worshipers

The distant patriarch of the psittan gods is not directly worshiped, has no priests, and does not deign to provide magic or guidance to those foolish enough to seek these from him.

Unlike the other members of the pantheon, he is not depicted as an anthropomorphic figure; instead, he appears as a stylized sun. If he had a favored weapon, it would be the longspear.