

Velkhrun of Kyrell (The Crawlers)

Lore Article · Culture

Summary

A full cultural and historical reference for the Velkhrun -- the surface-dwelling descendants of Underdark exiles, defined by Shathahn's worship, the strength hierarchy, and their existence in the margins of Kyrell's societies. Covers origins, the flight from the Underdark, society and naming, Shathahn and the Hollow, the city Velkhrun, relations with other peoples, and racial traits.

Velkhrun of Kyrell (The Crawlers)

The Velkhrun call themselves *shadow walkers* -- those who belong to neither the underground world nor the surface world, and have made peace with that. The name they gave themselves before the surface peoples gave them one is the honest version of their situation. *Crawlers*, the word the Settled Lands uses for them, began as a description (*they crawled up from underground*) and has since become something closer to a slur meaning *vermin*. The Velkhrun use the word themselves, in dark humor, in the specific way of a people who have decided that if the world is going to call them something they did not choose, they will use it first and use it on their own terms.

They are not comfortable neighbors. Their culture centers on the conviction that strength grants the right to rule and weakness carries the obligation to follow, their society is organized around raiding and banditry as primary economic activities, and their exclusive worship of Shathahn -- an Abyssal power that is not a god but functions like one -- places them entirely outside the theological frameworks that most of Kyrell's peoples share. The Settled Lands regards them with the particular unease reserved for a people who do not want to be integrated and have not been.

The Velkhrun in the current age are not all raiders in the hills. Some are. A significant portion have established themselves in the surface cities -- Saltmere most prominently -- where the Settled Lands' most cosmopolitan environments have proven capable of doing what more conventional cities have not: finding uses for a people whose particular skills, stripped of the social context that makes them threatening in rural settings, turn out to be professionally valuable in environments where information, discretion, and movement through marginal spaces are worth paying for.

Origins: The Flight from the Underdark

The Velkhrun are not originally surface creatures. They are the descendants of a Drow population that fled the Underdark -- not slowly, as cultural drift, but in a specific historical event: a flight from an Underdark empire whose oppression was comprehensive enough that the surface, with all its light and its hostile peoples, was the better option.

The records of that empire are not available to Settled Lands scholars. The Velkhrun do not discuss its specifics. What is known is that the flight happened, that it was large enough to constitute a migration rather than individual escapes, and that the population that emerged on the surface was already organized around Shathahn's worship -- suggesting that the patron who attends to those who belong nowhere was present before the Velkhrun became a surface people, not after.

Surface life required adaptation. The most significant physical change over generations is the reduction of sunlight sensitivity -- the standard Drow vulnerability has lessened to the point where Velkhrun can function in daylight with discomfort rather than disability, a change that reflects centuries of surface exposure rather than any deliberate cultivation. The cultural changes have been slower. The Velkhrun brought their hierarchy, their relationship with Shathahn, and their conviction about strength and weakness from the Underdark and have not substantially revised

them on the surface.

The Settled Lands they emerged into was not welcoming. This surprised no one on either side.

Physical Description

Velkhrun stand around five feet tall, built lean and angular -- all points and edges, with the light bone structure of Drow ancestry retained despite generations on the surface. Skin is dusky, running from a deep grey to a warm brown-grey that catches light differently than human skin. Hair is universally white or very pale silver, worn in whatever configuration the individual finds practical. Eyes are typically pink, red, or lavender -- the light-sensitive pigmentation that their Drow ancestors carried, somewhat reduced after generations of surface adaptation but still present.

Velkhrun can grow facial hair, which their Underdark kin cannot, and this capacity has been adopted as a cultural marker: facial hair on a Velkhrun male signals surface integration and is more common in city-dwelling Velkhrun than in the rural raider communities. The connection between the beard and the willingness to integrate is loose but real enough that other Velkhrun read it.

The reduction in sunlight sensitivity is partial rather than complete. Velkhrun in direct bright sunlight have disadvantage on Perception checks that rely on sight -- they squint, they lose fine detail, they find outdoor work in full midday sun genuinely uncomfortable. They do not burst into flames. They do not have disadvantage on attacks. The Settled Lands' exaggerated accounts of Velkhrun sunlight vulnerability have been convenient for both parties: it keeps humans from understanding how functional Velkhrun are in daylight, and it gives Velkhrun a reason to operate at night that does not require explanation.

Society

Velkhrun society is organized around a single governing principle: strength grants the right to rule, and weakness carries the obligation to follow. This is not a metaphor or a cultural value layered over other considerations. It is the operating framework for every social interaction. The strongest individual in any Velkhrun group is the leader. The group is the strongest individual's to direct. When a stronger individual appears, the leadership transfers. The process is not always violent -- demonstrated capability matters as much as physical strength in many contexts -- but it is always clear, and the clarity is the point.

The structure is **strongly patriarchal** in the traditional communities. Females are not permitted to learn to read, write, or fight. This is enforced by the community rather than by any individual -- a female Velkhrun in a traditional community who attempted to learn these things would encounter the combined social weight of that community before she encountered any specific person's objection. In city-dwelling Velkhrun communities, the enforcement is looser, in the way that the enforcement of anything loosens when the surrounding culture does not share the relevant assumptions and does not enforce them.

Velkhrun live in small groups -- rarely more than a few dozen in a traditional raiding band, somewhat larger in established city communities. The small group size is partly a function of their raiding economy (larger groups cannot sustain themselves on what raiding provides in any given territory) and partly a function of the constant hierarchy negotiation that the strength-governs-all principle requires. Larger groups produce more frequent leadership contests, which are destabilizing in ways that even Velkhrun find inconvenient.

Naming follows a two-syllable convention: the first syllable is personal, the second identifies the clan grouping. A Velkhrun of the Dur clan might be SeiDur, VorDur, KalDur. There is no distinction

between male and female names in the naming convention itself, which produces a specific effect for outsiders who cannot visually distinguish Velkhrun individuals easily: the name tells you the clan but not the gender, which from the Velkhrun perspective is the correct priority.

Shathahn and the Shadow Walker's Path

Shathahn is not a god. This is a distinction the Velkhrun do not make and that Settled Lands theologians make carefully, because the practical implications differ. He grants power. He hears prayers. He sends the Hollow -- entities that are not quite demons and not quite divine messengers, that appear in threshold spaces and marginal moments and depart leaving something changed in the person they observed. By any functional measure he is a patron power worthy of organized worship. He is simply not part of Kyrell's divine order.

The Velkhrun relationship with Shathahn predates the surface flight. He found them, or they found him, in the specific period when they were still in the Underdark and already beginning to be what they are -- a people in opposition to an empire that defined them as subject, developing the conviction that power was the only honest relationship between people while simultaneously worshipping a power that attends to those who fit nowhere. The theology and the ethics emerged together and cannot be cleanly separated.

What Shathahn offers is recognition -- the cold clarity of being seen precisely as what one is, without the warm distortions that other peoples' patron deities provide. He does not promise salvation, community, or purpose. He acknowledges reality. For a people who have been told repeatedly that they are vermin, an Abyssal lord who looks at them and says *I see exactly what you are and I am still here* is a different kind of offer than the Settled Lands' gods make.

The **Hollow** -- Shathahn's sent entities -- do not speak. They appear. They observe. They leave. The Velkhrun who have been visited by the Hollow afterward describe a change in how they move through threshold spaces and marginal situations that is real enough to observe from the outside but difficult to quantify. Settled Lands demonologists have documented a correlation between Hollow visitations and subsequent choices that caused harm to others, without being able to establish compulsion. The Velkhrun consider this correlation to be Shathahn's point. You see clearly. What you do with what you see is yours.

The City Velkhrun

The Velkhrun communities established in Saltmere and a handful of other cosmopolitan port cities represent a genuine cultural development rather than simple assimilation. They have not abandoned the strength hierarchy or the Shathahn worship. They have translated the raiding economy into something that port cities find useful: information brokering, discrete movement of goods through the marginal spaces of harbor law, the specific skills developed by a culture that lives between defined territories and has learned to operate in those spaces with considerable sophistication.

Saltmere's Harbor Council does not officially recognize the Velkhrun community. It also does not officially fail to notice that certain categories of logistical problem resolve themselves when the right Velkhrun contact is in the conversation. The arrangement is mutually convenient and mutually unacknowledged, which suits both parties.

City Velkhrun tend toward the loosening of the most socially rigid elements of the traditional culture. Female education is more common, though still not universal. The leadership hierarchy is still functional but operates through demonstrated utility rather than pure physical dominance. The dark humor about the Crawler slur is more developed in city communities -- it has had more

practice.

The Velkhrun name for themselves, *shadow walkers*, has a more literal resonance in the city context. They move in the margins of urban society -- the spaces between institutions, between legitimacy and its absence, between the things that are officially happening and the things that are actually happening. This is not a diminished existence from the Velkhrun perspective. It is precisely the space Shathahn attends to. They are, in the city, doing exactly what they are.

Relations

The Velkhrun maintain no warm relations with any other people in an institutional sense. Individual relationships -- the Velkhrun contact who has worked with the same merchant for fifteen years, the Saltmere harbor official who has reached a genuine working arrangement with the local community leader -- exist and are valued by both parties. They do not extend to inter-community warmth.

The Settled Lands' human peoples regard the Velkhrun across a range from active hostility to pragmatic use depending on location and circumstance. Rural communities near traditional Velkhrun raiding territory are at the hostile end. Saltmere's merchant community is at the pragmatic end. Most communities fall somewhere between.

Dwarves have a specific and deep animosity toward Velkhrun that is not the ancient-discomfort-no-one-can-explain version of the dwarf-elf friction. It is direct, sourced in documented raids on dwarven surface trade convoys over several centuries, and maintained with the dwarven capacity for holding a grievance indefinitely. The Velkhrun are aware of this and tend to avoid dwarven-majority communities except when they have a specific reason to enter them, which they approach with more care than they bring to most situations.

High Elves regard the Velkhrun with the specific distaste of a people who consider themselves the proper form of elvish existence encountering a branch that has gone in a very different direction. The Velkhrun find the Halvaen position on this amusing in the darkly specific way that Shathahn's people find most things amusing.

Racial Traits

As Drow (PHB p.24), with the following modification:

Sunlight Sensitivity (Reduced): Unlike standard Drow, Velkhrun have adapted to surface life over generations. When in bright sunlight, Velkhrun have disadvantage on Perception checks that rely on sight only -- not on attack rolls or ability checks. This is a reduced version of standard Drow Sunlight Sensitivity.

Velkhrun speak Common and Undercommon. The Velkhrun dialect of Undercommon has diverged from the Underdark standard over generations of surface isolation -- fluent Underdark speakers and fluent Velkhrun speakers can communicate, but the accent and vocabulary drift is noticeable and places them immediately.

Note: The Velkhrun are presented here as a broadly antagonistic culture. Individual Velkhrun characters -- particularly those from longer-established city communities -- may vary significantly from this cultural description. The city Velkhrun in particular represent a genuine cultural evolution rather than the traditional raider profile.