# **The Hillkin**

*This document provides a detailed profile of the Hillkin, a rodent-derived subterranean species known for their extreme sexual dimorphism, unique reproductive biology, and historical role as builders and companions to the Dravaknyr. It explores their physiology, caste dynamics, communication, cultural practices, and eventual extinction.*

### **Overview:**

The Hillkin were a mole-rat-derived, subterranean sapient species native to Hasdvarda, where they cohabited in deep alliance with the Dravaknyr. Small but robust, their society was defined by extremes—of form, lifespan, and loyalty. Males were dense, squat, and tusked, bred for endurance and precision labor; females were rare and highly neotenous, remaining small and childlike for decades before maturing—when triggered—into tall, willowy queens over successive litters. With sharp incisors, whiskers, dense musculature, and specialized dental ornamentation, the Hillkin were instantly recognizable.

Together with the Dravaknyr, they forged the golden age of Hasdvarda—engineers and artisans to match the Dravaknyr's vision. When Hasdvarda fell, the Hillkin fell with it. Hunted for their hides, musk, and rumored longevity, they faded from view until only myth remained.

* **Anthropomorphic Reference:** Naked mole-rat–inspired humanoids. Almost Dwarven, squat, tusk-toothed males and elfin, elongated, nearly-mustelid adult females. Mousey, mischievous young, locked in perpetual childhood.
* **Pigmentation:** Pale pink to off-white skin; sparse white fur ('rusts' with age in males). Large black eyes adapted to low-light. Melanin almost entirely absent, facial whiskers prominent in both sexes
* **Classification:** Mammalian, sapient species evolved from colonial, subterranean rodents
* **Height:**
  + Males: 3'8"–4'0"
  + Females: 4'5"–6'0" (neotenous stage <2')
* **Weight:**
  + Males: 190–220 lbs
  + Females: 100–140 lbs
* **Lifespan:** 130–200+ years (longer in females or with extended neoteny)
* **Origin and Distribution:** Native to Hasdvarda; once widespread in Dravaknyr-aligned regions. Now considered extinct
* **Diet:** Omnivorous; root vegetables, fungi, meat, and subterranean crops

**Noteworthy Traits:**

* Highly sexually dimorphic: squat tusked males vs. elongated neotenous females
* Resistant to disease, injury, and physical stress
* Iconic tusk-teeth: shaped, capped, and culturally significant in males
* Females undergo delayed development until needed—then transform into tall, fertile queens
* Identity coded through musk, tusk shape, and scent, not facial recognition
* Rugged builders, known for precision and underground adaptation
* Survivors of Hasdvarda’s golden age and its extinction

### **Physiology and Form:**

The Hillkin are a rodent-derived subterranean species marked by profound sexual dimorphism, environmental specialization, and layered caste biology. Built for endurance and resilience, their bodies are low-slung, compact, and powerful—adapted for life in tight, oxygen-starved tunnel systems. Their dermis is biologically hardened—resistant to damage and pain, particularly in males. Skin is pale and wrinkled, covered in fine white or off-pink fur that darkens in males with age. Melanin is almost entirely absent, making them dangerously photosensitive.

Their eyes are suited for near-total darkness, providing excellent night vision but leaving them prone to disorientation and partial blindness in sunlight. Navigation in subterranean spaces relies heavily on a dense array of vibrissae—whiskers along the cheeks, brows, lips, and jawline—that detect vibration, air movement, and proximity. These are paired with a sophisticated olfactory system capable of tracking pheromones, mapping emotional states, and detecting environmental changes imperceptible to other species.

All Hillkin are born genetically female. Within days of birth, over 99% undergo a biological mutation that rapidly converts them into males, bypassing the juvenile phase entirely and reaching full physical maturity in under a year. Those who do not mutate remain in a neotenous state—cherubic, small-bodied, and behaviorally childlike—for decades. Neotenous females age at a crawl, growing more cognitively developed with time, but never physically maturing unless triggered.

Selection for queenhood is determined by a colony’s reproductive needs, pheromonal balance, and existing queen stability. When ascension occurs, the chosen neotenic begins to grow rapidly, gaining height and spinal length with each successive litter. Vertebral striations form along the lower spine as permanent biological records of reproductive history. In rare cases, the youngest neotenic females may be converted to males when colony balance demands it, though this change is disruptive and irreversible.

Only one queen is reproductively active at a time, and her dominance defines the colony’s leadership. These transitions happen often—some queens reign only a few months, while others may last years. Such changes are driven almost entirely by instinct: pheromonal cues and genetic necessity override any social hierarchy. With each litter, a queen’s vitality declines, and the role eventually passes to another maturing neotenic. Frequent reproduction shortens lifespan, while dormant sub-queens may live for centuries.

Male mortality remains high due to their cultural inclination toward physical posturing, bravado, and an eagerness to test their bodies in dangerous conditions. By contrast, queens—once fully mature—can live for centuries if allowed to remain chemically dominant within a stable colony.

**Male Morphology:**

Male Hillkin are short and heavily built, with dense musculature, reinforced joints, and a broad skeletal frame ideal for bracing and hauling. They are the physical laborers, tunnelers, and craftspeople of Hillkin society, bred and built for work and confrontation alike. Their skin thickens with age, wrinkles deeply, and exudes a musky scent that stains their pale fur to a rust-red hue.

Their most iconic feature is their elaborate dentition. Two pairs of tusk-like incisors emerge **externally**, not from within the mouth. The upper pair descends from the upper lip like articulated blades. These are flattened and capable of fine motion, controlled by powerful muscles in the lip and jaw. They are used for grasping, bracing, object manipulation, and tool-stabilization—functioning similarly to a third hand. The lower pair splits outward in a broad V from the chin, fixed in place, used for defense and ornamentation. These are commonly reinforced with decorative caps, rings, or carvings, and serve as status markers.

**Female Morphology:**

Female Hillkin remain in a neotenous state for years—tiny, soft-bodied, wrinkled, and disproportionately cherubic. Sub-queens and selected males are typically assigned to guide, entertain, and contain them. Once selected for ascension, a neotenic female undergoes rapid vertical growth. Her body lengthens, her musculature shifts, and her spinal column begins to display visible **striated growth plates** along the lumbar vertebrae—each corresponding to a successful litter. These striations are permanent biological markers of queenly maturity.

While queens retain some neotenous facial traits—wide eyes, soft jaws, and faint peach fuzz—their overall appearance becomes uncanny. Adult queens retain smile lines, crow’s feet, and other aged markers that contrast against their otherwise graceful, youthful proportions.

Female dentition is markedly different from that of males. Rather than external tusk-teeth, they possess subtly oversized upper incisors, forward-facing and internally seated behind the lips. These teeth gleam with the same golden iridescence as male tusks, but appear more like enlarged buck teeth—functional but not ornamental. Their overall dental structure is far closer to a human’s in appearance.

**Clarifying Notes and Expanded Traits:**

* Skin is pale, leathery, and deeply wrinkled; highly resistant to tearing, puncture, and environmental hazards
* Pain sensitivity is low; Hillkin often fail to notice injury unless severely impaired
* Whiskers serve as critical spatial tools, detecting subtle changes in air movement and vibration
* Hillkin possess exceptional night vision, but are near-blind in direct daylight
* Their olfactory system is central to navigation, caste regulation, and environmental awareness
* All offspring are born genetically female; most undergo male mutation within days and reach adulthood rapidly
* Ascended queens display spinal striations tied to reproductive history, similar to growth rings in trees
* Sub-queens manage logistical and hormonal transitions between neotenic and queen states
* Male tusk-teeth emerge externally from lip and chin; upper incisors are articulated, lower pair fixed
* Tusk-teeth are capable of gouging stone and were highly sought by poachers for use in carving and ritual tools
* Female incisors are internal, oversized, and iridescent—but non-tusked
* Dense musculature and skeletal overdevelopment allow for powerful labor in confined subterranean environments
* Males develop rust-red fur coloration with age due to musk secretion and environmental exposure
* Female ascension triggers vertical growth and heightened pheromonal dominance within colony hierarchy
* Hillkin are notoriously poor swimmers—a trait that led to many drownings during the fall of Hasdvarda

### **Communication and Cognition:**

Hillkin cognition is deeply shaped by biology and environmental history. Male Hillkin are instinct-driven and pragmatic—clever and industrious, but not deeply reflective. Their minds are optimized for physical reasoning, tactile problem solving, tool use, and spatial memory. Language acquisition, abstract thought, and higher-order philosophy are less emphasized in their neural development.

Before they were uplifted by the Dravaknyr, the Hillkin were not truly sapient by traditional metrics—an animalistic people with remarkable intelligence, but no art, speech, or philosophy. When the Hillkin were brought to the surface for the first time in known history, everything changed. The sudden abundance of oxygen—compared to their subterranean origins—triggered rapid physiological and neurological growth. They became stronger, faster, and significantly more perceptive. Their capacity for long-term memory and abstract pattern recognition improved, leading to a blossoming of culture and creativity.

It was through contact with the Dravaknyr that they became fully sapient by modern standards. They learned Common rapidly, though only females and neotenics could articulate it well. Males understood speech fluently, but expressed themselves in rough, guttural tones—squeaks, grunts, and nasal muttering that many outsiders mistook for animalistic noise. These vocalizations carried tone, urgency, and social color, but were rarely articulate, especially in Common. Among fellow Hillkin and the Dravaknyr, however, their meaning was often clear. More formal or detailed ideas were communicated through a hybrid of tusk gestures, posture, and scent—especially useful during tunnel work, where tools and labor rendered verbal shouting ineffective across distances. They could and did vocalize while working, but the efficiency of their nonverbal systems remained unparalleled. Hillkin “writing” was often tactile and visual—drawn symbols in the dirt, tusk-scratches, spatial arrangements of carved objects, and coordinated movement.

Queens and neotenic females developed refined linguistic abilities. Queens in particular are known to speak with articulate grandeur, often lapsing into florid or poetic cadence. While sometimes perceived as overly theatrical, this speech style reinforced their social gravity and drew heavily on ritual and storytelling.

Their native communication system, inherited from pre-sapient days, is still in use. It blends **pheromone trails, subtle posture, vibrissal twitch-patterns, and olfactory bursts**, allowing them to communicate silently across dark, winding tunnels. These communication methods are so effective that entire work shifts could be coordinated without the need for speech. In the roaring clamor of chisels, tusk-scrapes, and hammering limbs, pheromones and posture carried instructions far better than shouted words.

**Clarifying Notes:**

* Male Hillkin are intelligent but pragmatically minded—lacking higher-order abstraction but excelling in mechanical memory, endurance tasks, and social caretaking
* Males understand Common fluently but are unable to articulate it clearly due to dental anatomy and vocal roughness
* Queens speak fluidly and often poetically; neotenics are articulate and perceptive, but their speech retains a childlike tone
* Hillkin visual and tactile communication includes drawing, symbolic carving, scent layering, and tusk positioning
* Traditional language is pheromone-based and multisensory—better suited to underground environments than speech
* Surface exposure increased cognitive performance across the species, especially in neotenous females
* Hillkin communication is communal and non-verbal by default, suited for silent tunnel operations
* Male Hillkin communicate through guttural grunts, squeaks, and nasal muttering—largely unintelligible to outsiders, but expressive and nuanced among their own
* During labor, nonverbal systems like pheromonal cues and posture remain preferred due to the environmental noise of tunnel work

### **Culture and Society:**

Hillkin society was organized around caste-based utility and cooperative survival. Each subterranean community—known as a **Borough**, a term evolved from “burrow”—functioned as a living structure of biological and cultural precision. These were not merely tunnels, but entire worlds carved beneath the earth, with nurseries, forges, gardens, and quiet halls for sculpture and storytelling. Hasdvarda was home to the only true Hillkin colony. All others—on the mainland or in far tunnels—were travel-boroughs or satellite shelters for migration and labor.

Governance was instinctual rather than political. Queens issued no speeches. Authority was communicated through **pheromonal cues and body language**, reinforced by scent trails and environmental changes. Entire labor shifts could be coordinated with minimal speech—tools thundered against stone, and instruction passed seamlessly through posture, pheromone, and well-rehearsed gesture. Sub-queens maintained balance, absorbing chemical burdens, regulating caste transitions, and managing moments of instability—especially during queenly decline or neotenic surges.

The Hillkin lived in symbiotic alignment with the Dravaknyr, their friendship forming one of Halferth’s most sacred bonds. While many outsiders viewed them as mere tagalongs—labor-pets to their wind-borne guardians—the reality was far deeper. The Dravaknyr offered culture, philosophy, technology, and protection. The Hillkin returned unwavering loyalty, architectural brilliance, and a tireless workforce whose biological specialization and communal pride made them indispensable. Both peoples revered the other; neither viewed themselves as superior.

Male Hillkin forged lifelong bonds through tactile ritual. Wrestling, grooming, co-sculpting, and tusk-maintenance were their languages of affection. Each male saw himself as a father to all who came after him, regardless of biological link. Sub-queens led the rearing of neotenous females, but countless males served as caretakers, buffers, or play-partners to the unruly young.

Hillkin cultural memory was preserved in object and gesture. **They carved, they sculpted, they adorned.** Their stories lived in stone, in ivory, in layered pantomime. Tusk-teeth were decorated with caps, bands, and etchings—both individualistic and symbolic. Communal sculptures were crafted by entire work-crews, often abstract in form but rich in shared meaning. Their greatest relics were the **lumbar vertebrae of deceased queens**—striated bone segments engraved and preserved as genealogical records, held in reverence as both lineage and legacy.

**Bullet Points:**

* Boroughs were caste-based, self-regulating subterranean cities rooted in ecological equilibrium
* Hasdvarda was the only true Hillkin colony; all others were travel boroughs or satellite shelters
* Dravaknyr-Hillkin symbiosis was foundational to Hasdvarda’s golden age; their bond was emotional, spiritual, and practical
* Pheromonal governance enabled queens to command without speech; chemical trails controlled caste behavior, labor cycles, and emotional tone
* Tactile ritual replaced verbal intimacy: males formed bonds through grooming, wrestling, and collaborative sculpture
* Cultural expression centered around object, sculpture, pantomime, and tactile storytelling
* Male Hillkin saw themselves as fathers to the entire colony, not just progenitors
* Sub-queens served as crucial stabilizers, managing unruly neotenics and regulating colony health during transitions
* Queen vertebrae were preserved as sacred genealogical relics—etched spine-bones marking matrilineal history
* Outsider perceptions reduced the Hillkin to stunted laborers or “ratfolk,” erasing their true cultural depth
* Colony population could reach thousands but never exceeded ecological carrying capacity; expansion was forbidden by cultural instinct

### **Extinction and Legacy:**

The fall of Hasdvarda was the near-total extinction event for the Hillkin. As the Sea-Claimed Kingdom of Nyrsk collapsed, so too did the network of Hillkin Boroughs rooted into its rock. Entire tunnel systems were crushed or flooded. The sudden geological destruction claimed the lives of thousands of males—and, more tragically, the vast majority of neotenous females and queens. Those not entombed drowned in the surge.

Some Hillkin survived—on the mainland, in travel boroughs, or away on assignment. Many attempted to return home, swimming toward Hasdvarda with no ships willing to ferry them. Most drowned. Others followed the surviving Dravaknyr to the Twisting City in search of sanctuary. When that sanctuary became a slaughter, the Hillkin died beside their companions—unarmed, unarmored, and entirely loyal.

The remaining Hillkin—few and scattered—did not last long. They were hunted, poached, or starved. The H’Rask overtook Hasdvarda’s remains, claiming its tunnels as ancestral hunting grounds. Mainland Boroughs were looted, caved in, or repurposed. Rumors of Hillkin longevity drew biothaumatologists seeking their blood and marrow. Their leather, ivory, and bones became trophies. Some, unable to bear the loss of their kin, walked into the sea to join them.

While the Dravaknyr became mythologized—wind-warriors and thunder-callers—the Hillkin were quietly forgotten. Tales of their strength and loyalty faded. Their sculptures were misattributed. Their relics vanished. Their stories now survive only in Keepers’ memory, in children’s tales, and in the faint scent of rusted musk lingering in a collapsed tunnel where something once lived.

**Bullet Points:**

* The destruction of Hasdvarda crushed and drowned the majority of the Hillkin population, including most queens and neotenics
* Survivors who sought refuge were either refused, drowned trying to return, or killed during the Twisting City betrayal
* The H’Rask claimed Hasdvarda after its fall, erasing Hillkin presence from their homeland
* Mainland Boroughs were stripped of value and collapsed; no secondary colonies ever formed
* Hillkin remains—particularly ivory and bone—were harvested for use in tools, charms, and trophies
* Their rumored longevity drew biothaumatological interest, leading to abduction and vivisection in later years
* Many surviving Hillkin chose suicide or walked into the sea, driven by grief and disconnection
* Today, Hillkin are seen as extinct, misremembered as stunted “ratfolk” caught in the legends of the Dravaknyr