

# Quoth the Raven

21



A Ravenloft  
Netbook

# FRONT MATTER

Quoth the Raven #21

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# INTRODUCTION

*"Change, my dear. And it seems not a moment too soon"*

-The Doctor

Welcome to the twenty-first issue of Quoth the Raven, the online net magazine for Ravenloft and Gothic Earth. This magazine has been a labor of love, produced by fans of Ravenloft who crave a vehicle for new adventures in the Mist.

Nice to see you again, and hello it's a pleasure to meet you.

This is a new start for Quoth the Raven. For the past twelve years and twenty issues, Quoth the Raven has been the work of Stephen Sutton (aka ScS of the Fraternity of Shadows). From the magazine's early days of being a straight Word document to the more recent tome-like PDFs, ScS has been the guiding force.

Sadly, ScS decided issue 20 was his final issue of Quoth the Raven. We thank ScS for all his time, hard work, dedication (Vecna know it wasn't always easy putting up with the rest of us). And so issue 21 is a new start, with David Gibson (aka Jester of the Fraternity of Shadows) taking up the task of making Quoth the Raven. During the tenure of ScS the netbook improved issue after issue, and Jester David has big shoes to fill.

Issue 21 is themed "dark desires" and features almost 200 pages of Ravenloft content. It also contains another Sea of Sorrows FoS Report, this time on the island of Demise. We also begin a new series revisiting old domains,

We hope you enjoy.

- "Jester" David Gibson  
October, 2014

# THE CRIMINAL RINGS OF NOVA VAASA

Ravenloft Revisited

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## The Nova Vaasan Underworld

Given the Iron Faith's prohibitive bans on gambling, opium, subversive literature, magic, and prostitution, as well as the stiff tariffs on the export of horseflesh and restrictions on the sale of alcohol, it's not surprising that a criminal underworld has exploded in Nova Vaasa's cities. The domain is simply too large to be effectively policed, and the noble families keep their power centralized for fear of spreading themselves too thin. Bandits ride openly along the rural steppes, and smugglers run every commodity imaginable across the Vaasi borders. But the Lawgiver's dogma adds to the criminal class in another way: anyone who is possessed of moral degeneracy is believed to also be cursed by physical degeneracy. Thus, those with physical deformities, disfiguring diseases, or transformative magical curses are shunned as immoral. Criminals are often branded or tattooed as punishment, so that their crimes have a physical marker on their flesh. All demihuman races are seen as being physically altered by the Lawgiver's displeasure; and shapeshifters are

considered anathema to the church, as they are attempting to hide their divine punishment from the pious. The result of this is a dedicated criminal "caste" - a group of people in Vaasi society that have no means to survive except through a criminal lifestyle.

Although the core of the criminal class is made of the disfigured and the inhuman, the underworld is teeming with Nova Vaasans from every walk of life. Some have been disenfranchised by the nobility; some are in it for the thrill; some in it due to addictions and debts; still others are in it for the money. Crime is one of the only ways to get ahead in a land choked by oppression and corruption. The criminals put on a great face of being noble brothers refusing to aid a tyrannical government, citing a thieves' code to live by and a camaraderie between all thieves. In truth, the criminals kill each other more often than they kill lawmen, and the nobility is so corrupt that there is often little to differentiate the criminal from the legitimate. Smugglers bribe border guards to carry on business, criminals often have nobles and priests on their payrolls, and lawmen are given a cut of illegal proceeds from gangs in their area. Many criminals have taken over large chunks of the government, and it's not uncommon for

criminal groups to own large swaths of legitimate businesses.

Despite this congruence of the criminal and the legitimate, most of Vaasi criminal culture is built around thumbing their nose at the government, and the Lawgiver in particular. Thieves are expected to never cooperate with the government, nor betray their fellow thieves to any authority, though inter-criminal conflict is permitted and common. Criminals and those who live in gang controlled areas are expected to turn to criminal authorities for any trouble they might have, not to the nobility or legitimate lawmen. Given the nobility's general apathy and antipathy toward the poor, this is a demand that is usually adhered to.

Though the criminals squeeze as much, if not more, money out of their communities than the nobles do, they are often viewed slightly more favorably, as they also live up to their end of the bargain and protect those who pay them. The criminal groups tend to be legitimately helpful to the people they are exploiting, as it is their community and their source of livelihood.

Due to the Lawgiver's preferred punishment for crimes and antipathy toward body modification, tattoos and brands have become a particular code among the Nova Vaasan criminal class. At first the markings were simply proof that the person bearing them was really a criminal - no pious adherent to the Iron Faith would deliberately disfigure themselves. It was also an advertisement for what crimes the person had committed, and thus what

relevant skills they might have. In time, however, the criminals began to tattoo themselves as well, learning techniques from Hazlani travelers and making inks from alchemical reagents. Criminal tattoos are often a telltale shade of bluish grey, as ash is the easiest pigment to obtain in exile or prison. The tattoos are disparate but laden with symbolism, a secret code that only the criminals seem to understand. The most common symbol is that of the cat, which represents a thief or a criminal. Ironically, religious symbols tend to be very common; for instance, many criminals have the iron spear of the Lawgiver over their heart, on the back of their neck, or on their back,



both as an insult to the church and to offend any priest meting out a whipping or execution by forcing them to defile their own holy symbol. (Some fearfully pious nobles defer the punishments altogether, a reprieve for which

the criminals no doubt hope.) These tattoos make up a criminal's reputation to other criminals - if a criminal is caught boasting a tattoo they do not have the rights to wear, it is forcibly cut off. Criminals caught breaking the criminal code are also forcefully tattooed with markers of shame, in an unintentional echo of the Lawgiver's punishments.

Of particular note among the criminal underworld are the Paka, a race of cat-like shapeshifters that have an affinity for the vicious plains cats of the Nova Vaasan steppes. The Paka bear an extreme hatred of the Lawgiver and most the humans of

Nova Vaasa, claiming an attempted genocide of the Paka race generations ago. Given the Iron Faith's opinion of the Paka, this may not be an incorrect accusation - the Lawgiver's clergy is happy to return the hatred, and will brand Paka for the simple crime of their ability to shapeshift. As such, the Paka culture is completely rooted in the Nova Vaasan criminal class. Some even claim the use of the cat as a symbol for a thief is because of the Paka. Whatever the case, the near universal conscription of the Paka into crime only fuels the Iron Faith's self-righteousness at persecuting them, which in turn only fuels the Pakas' hatred of the Iron Faith. It is a cycle that is echoed among all the disfigured and non-human races.

## Tattooing in Nova Vaasa

Due to the Lawgiver's preferred punishment for crimes and their antipathy toward body modification, tattoos and brands have become a particular code among the Nova Vaasan criminal class. The symbols that criminals use have a series of double meanings, with seemingly innocuous or religious symbols meaning something entirely different in the context of the criminal underworld. A criminal's tattoos are his reputation, his resume - if a criminal has a tattoo, they are expected to have earned it or lived up to it. Wearing a tattoo without having the "rights" to it will cause other criminals to cut or burn them off. Tattoos can also be forcefully applied if a criminal breaks the criminal code: examples include selling out another criminal to official government authority, reneging on gambling debts, or harming children. Such tattoos mark the criminal as an "untouchable," bullied and exploited by his own criminal brethren. The placement of tattoos has meaning as well: for example, criminals almost never tattoo their face

unless they expect to be imprisoned or exiled for life. The exception to this is Lawgiver brands, which are often placed on the face or hands. These brands are usually treated as badges of honor, as anyone who doesn't burn them off or otherwise remove them is usually very dedicated to the criminal way of life.

## Common Symbols

**The Cat:** The cat is the symbol of the thief, usually placed on a criminal after their first successful endeavor. Common variations include the cat smoking a pipe and wearing a hat, or having a collar with a club card suit or an alchemical symbol placed upon it. Married couples often both have a pair of cats nuzzling tattooed on the same spot.

**The Plains Cat:** A forward facing head of a plains cat, snarling and bearing its fangs. Known as an oskal, or a grin, this represents the wearer "baring his teeth" at the government, and being violently opposed to authority.

**The Dragon:** While some criminals wear it simply for the glamor, the dragon has come to suggest a heavy involvement in the arcane trade, symbolizing that there are no magic components the bearer won't deal in.

**Spider:** A spider, usually in a web, is a symbol of a drug addiction. If the spider is downward it implies a desire to leave this way of life.

**Stars:** A thirteen pointed star, likely taken from Darkon, is a symbol of authority among criminals. They are either placed upon both shoulders (which means the criminal has never taken money from legitimate work) or placed on both knees (which means the criminal will never kneel before authority).

**Scarabs:** A scarab is the symbol of an arcanist.

**Skulls:** A skull usually represents a murderer. A skull with a crown, interestingly, means the bearer has some manner of arcane or uncanny power.

**Religious Symbols:** The Iron Church of the Lawgiver represents that the criminal has been imprisoned or exiled, with each Iron Spire representing a year in prison. The Iron Spear of the Lawgiver is often worn over the heart or on the back of the neck, as some church-fearing nobles will defer punishment rather than defile the symbol of the Lawgiver. The Shield of Ezra, or the figure of Ezra herself, means the criminal was first punished or imprisoned as a youth, or was born in prison.

**Chess Knight:** The symbol of the horse-headed knight piece seems completely innocuous, but it symbolizes a decapitated horse head and thus anti-noble sentiment.

**Birds:** Symbols of freedom. A golden eagle represents a monster hunter.

**Alchemical symbols:** Given the prevalence of alchemy in Nova Vaasa, they are commonly found as criminal symbols. A crescent moon on a black background means the criminal is an alchemist or has been alchemically altered. A skull with a circle and a dot on its forehead is a warning not to jilt the criminal in matters of money. The alchemical symbol for Iron represents an executioner or hitman for the criminal authorities. S.V. (the symbol for Spirit of Wine) is an acronym that stands for Syekhmaa Victorious.

**Card Suits:** A spade is the symbol of a killer, the club a sign of a thief. Diamonds are used as symbols of the government, and the hearts suit tends to be reserved only as an insult to the bearer. A knife through a playing card with a heart means the bearer will kill for revenge or money.

**Hazlani Symbols:** Criminals tend to be superstitious, and also hold a heavy

interest in their neighboring domain's culture. Criminals will often get tattoos of their birth signs, assuming their birth sign is prestigious enough. Otherwise, they will simply grab random totems to claim as their own, much to the Mulani's disdain.

**Forced Tattoos:** These tattoos are not willingly worn, but instead placed on the bearer by other criminals. A tattoo of a goat represents an informer. A heart inside a triangle represents someone who has abused young children. Anyone who reneges on gambling debts is given a tattoo by his fellow gamblers, which usually means they are incredibly embarrassing.

There are thousands of different symbols and variations, depending on geography, ethnic background, or criminal group. A half-vistani might have a tattoo of tarokka cards. Wolves and werewolves are common among criminals who have been magically or alchemically experimented on. Elvish inspired tattoos are known among smugglers in the North. In general, the code is so complex and convoluted that only criminals tend to be fluent in what any symbol might mean.

## Malken

Malken is the Darklord of Nova Vaasa. He is the head of the *Syekhmetskaya Circle*, one of the largest criminal rings in the Core.

Three things become quickly apparent upon meeting Malken: the first is that he is brilliant; the second that he is hideous; the third that he is bitter. He has a hunched build and twisted spine, with thick limbs and heavy hands. Despite this, his footfalls make almost no sound, an unsettling trait for those he sneaks up on. His fingernails are long, yellowed, and chipped, though they are trimmed and filed enough to form impromptu claws. His unruly hair and thick eyebrows are gray, and have been since birth. Malken's nose is too large for his face, and his mouth is likewise oversized, filled with jutting, snagged, crooked, yellow teeth. He tends to leer his head forward whenever he's examining something. His eyes reflect the light like an animal, and seem to glow yellow in the dark. Malken rarely dresses in any fancy manner, usually wearing a heavy dark coat that goes down to his knees, dark trousers, and heavily wrapped boots. On occasion, he will wear something that looks like a painted death-mask.

Like most Vaasi criminals, Malken bears tattoos - each finger has a ring tattooed on it, all of them with different meanings; the back of his neck has the letters *S.V.*; he has a crescent moon on the back of one hand; a roaring plains cat's head on the other; winged skulls on both shoulders; stars on his knees; the spear of the Lawgiver over his heart; and an incomprehensible code of writing and alchemical symbols on his back, his right hip, and various other parts of his body. He also has a thick, nasty scar on the left side of his neck and collarbone.

Malken is unpleasant to deal with personally. He speaks a heavy Vaasi slang



that is comprised mostly of obscenities - he is capable of crisp, eloquent Vaasi as well, much to people's shock, though he usually also peppers that with obscenities. He can be cultured, intelligent, and even charming, but doesn't bother unless he thinks it will make something go his way. Most of the time, Malken acts towards his reputation as a criminal mastermind and dangerous man - it is apparent to everyone who speaks to him that he could have them killed, and he always seem to be judging if it is worth his time to do so. For the most part, Malken does make for an effective and profitable criminal boss. When confronted with a problem, he usually solves it with an inspired, if ruthless, plan of action. If confronted with something he can't solve, however, or confronted with someone personally annoying him, he usually explodes into abusive violence. On rare occasions, if things *really* upset him, Malken just has everyone involved killed.

## Background

Malken was born a caliban, cursed with his misshapen visage from birth. His parents abandoned him on the streets to die, and he was only begrudgingly taken in by the local orphanage. The doctrine of the Lawgiver stated that spiritual degeneracy was marked by physical degeneracy, and the local Lawgiver priest ruled that there was only the barest responsibility to take care of such an evil creature. Malken's early years were marked with abuse and neglect, barely managing to steal and scrape enough food from his "caretakers" to get by. As he got older, it quickly became apparent there would be no escape from this life - no one would adopt such a child, nor would anyone respectable teach him or employ him. The child was only saved by a group of juvenile delinquents, who were young enough to find the grotesque amusing. They brought him back to their criminal employers, a small group of paka, who paid the child a paltry sum to stand lookout for them or run other errands. It was a pittance, but it was more than Malken ever had, and it kept him from freezing to death in the cold winters. It was the paka who nicknamed him Malken, due to his gray hair, and since Malken had no other name it stuck with him.

As Malken grew, however, the group began to become fond of him, and it quickly became apparent that he was incredibly brilliant. His suggestions nearly doubled the profits of the various scams and rackets that the paka were running. Malken relished the feeling of being accepted and rewarded for his talents, rather than punished for his appearance, and he began to get more and more involved with the criminal activities of his new friends. For a while, he stuck with smuggling, but when he spotted a lone noble on a horse, he couldn't resist attempting a mugging. Unfortunately for the

boy, his intended victim was Dmitri Stanov, High Constable of Kantora and one of the most famed swordsmen in Nova Vaasa. Unsurprisingly, the malnourished, thirteen year-old caliban was soundly outclassed, and Dmitri defeated him with no real effort.

Once Dmitri realized how young and weak his assailant was, he couldn't help but take pity. The caliban still lived, but had been grievously injured in the assault. As High Constable, it was his right and duty to pass down sentence - the law stated Malken was to be exiled or imprisoned. The usual place for such imprisonment was a hard, brutal labor camp, where the injured boy would almost certainly die. Malken instead served out his sentence in a small house near the Stanov estate, with a pair of armed guards and a fully trained physician. Malken's initial response was that of hostility, but he was too weak and injured to cause much trouble. Good food and proper care improved his constitution, and by the time he was strong enough to walk around, he was on decent terms with his physician and a number of the Stanov staff. Dmitri allowed the boy out, provided he was accompanied by his guard, and while Malken gave them the slip sometimes he was more curious than mischief-minded. He could often be found poking around the estate, but was most often found examining the alchemy lab in the left wing, and asking perceptive questions of the alchemists who worked there.

Intrigued by this, Dmitri bought a few books on alchemy and gave them to the boy. Malken took to them like a fish to water, and alchemy became his vocation and passion. He dreamed of finding some way to change himself into a normal human being, but all his attempts to do so faded all too quickly. He tried turning to other, more knowledgeable alchemists, but every one refused. The Vaasi church had decreed that

permanently changing a creature's form was a crime, *especially* in the case of Malken - improving the caliban's life would be defying the Lawgiver's divine judgment, and hiding his degeneracy from more worthy folk. Malken was incensed that not only he was abused because of an accident of birth, but the church had made it illegal to fix it, because it would make it harder to abuse him. His bitterness grew with every rejection he encountered.

In many ways, this made him loyal to Dmitri, who had given him a chance at a good life. When Malken's "sentence" was up, Dmitri offered the caliban a position as an alchemist. Malken accepted, serving the Stanov household faithfully for over a decade. Though Dmitri never quite treated the Malken as an equal, the two became very close - Dmitri seemed to acknowledge that his servant was quite a bit smarter than he was, and Malken even saved his master's life on more than one occasion. To Malken, Dmitri was everything a noble ought to be: just, loyal, and merciful. But Malken still brooded over the unjust Vaasi system. Every time he left the Stanov estate, he was plunged back into a world that despised him, and despised everyone like him. Dmitri was good to him, but the noble still upheld the laws and religion that had made Malken's life miserable in the first place. Malken began to start entertaining revolutionary ideas, secretly reading proscribed literature that Dmitri had confiscated.

It was while reading this verboten literature that Malken stumbled upon a fateful alchemical secret. One of the manuscripts contained a formula that could "steal" a human body by dissolving it into a potion, and then bestow that human form on whoever drank that potion. Dmitri had banned and confiscated the text the moment he'd heard of it, but Malken was

struck by the chance that he could be a normal human being. Of course, he'd have to kill someone else and steal their life, which put a damper on Malken's thoughts for a while. He could not bury his yearning, however, and eventually he became fixated on a particular plan — he would steal the form of one of the oppressive nobles, and use his newfound power to make things better for people like him. This assuaged his conscience, and the irony delighted him. Unfortunately, no noble or churchman was willing to be in his company for long, and certainly not in so intimate a capacity that Malken could carry out his operation without being caught. The only noble he could feasibly manage the switch with would be his own employer, Dmitri Stanov.

Malken loved his master, and likely would have found some other plan, or delayed his plan indefinitely, had it not been for a fateful piece of news: Malken discovered that his paka friends who had saved his life when he was young were dead. They'd been caught by local lawmen, and while the normal punishment for their crimes would have been imprisonment, because they were paka they were executed. Malken was incensed, and began to focus his rage at Dmitri, for not stepping in to prevent this (as he had with Malken), and for serving the laws and nobility that enforced such injustice. The caliban took to brooding in solitude, until he finally lured Dmitri down to the alchemy lab, on the pretense of showing off some new discovery. Dmitri had been concerned about Malken, and followed without question — he trusted Malken implicitly, and when the caliban turned on him he was too stunned to fight back. Malken killed Dmitri and chopped him into pieces, slowly feeding the nobleman's body into his alchemical concoction. By the dawn of the next

morning, Malken was now wearing Dmitri's form.

At first, it seemed to have worked perfectly. Malken reveled in his new respect and authority, but quickly discovered that both these things were dependent on serving the laws that he so hated. Change was too slow, and the more Malken tried to change the law, the more pressure came down on both him and Kantora from the other nobles. This period of clarity lasted for only a few weeks, at which point Malken stumbled onto Dmitri's personal writings and correspondence. Reading just how much Dmitri had cared for Malken caused the caliban to break down in grief.

When Malken next awoke, it was night, and he had no recollection of where the day had gone. Upon encountering a mirror, he was horrified to discover he had returned to his natural caliban form — he was even more horrified to encounter one of the Stanov household, who told him that Dmitri had been looking for him that *very morning*. Terrified and confused, Malken grabbed what possessions he could and ran, fleeing into the slums of Kantora.

## Curse

Malken shares his body with Dmitri Stanov, with their physical appearance transforming to match whichever one is in control. The two are wholly separate personalities and have separate knowledge from one another; neither is aware what the other does. Neither man has any control over when they transform into the other, nor any control over the other man's actions. So far, Malken has managed to figure this out, although Dmitri remains ignorant of his criminal alter-ego — indeed, his mind seems to subconsciously avoid any suspicion of it. It is uncertain if "Dmitri" is the actual Dmitri Stanov, or a splinter of Malken's guilty conscience, but his behavior

is identical to the original Dmitri Stanov, and he knows things that Malken doesn't. Malken is convinced that some essence of Dmitri remained behind in the alchemical potion, and is determined to get rid of it. The very concept of Dmitri still being alive and aware of his betrayal fills Malken with an uncontrolled horror.

In general, Dmitri comes out during the day and Malken at night, though this is nothing resembling a hard and fast rule. The transformation tends to take place while secluded, but nothing Malken has done has managed to prevent him from changing back. When it is time for either man to make the switch, they subconsciously move to where they cannot be seen — when Malken tries to resist this, he blacks out and loses control over his actions, sending his henchmen away or sneaking past his own subordinates. This also does not always prevent people from following either man and finding out the truth, and after a botched blackmail attempt by one of Malken's cronies, Malken does everything he can to ensure his dual-identity stays secret. He is terrified of Dmitri discovering the truth, as he is concerned his better half will kill himself to kill Malken.

Dmitri considers himself personally responsible for Malken's actions, and dedicates his life to fighting Malken's criminal activities. Malken, however, still clings to the hope of regaining Dmitri's form and taking his place, and thus he defends Dmitri's honor and position rabidly. Since Dmitri is unaware of Malken's true aspirations, he interprets Malken's defense of the Stanovs as signs that Malken still cares for him. This in turn makes his disappointment and pain over Malken that much more evident, and on occasion prompts him to return the caring sentiment, which drives a knife deep into Malken's black heart.

Both Dmitri and Malken are immune to anything — magical, alchemical, or natural — that would alter their shape, with the exception of the curse. They are too steeped in chemicals and forbidden alchemy for anything else to have an effect on them.

## Current Sketch

Malken has slowly betrayed every one of his ideals as he continues to cling to the hope that Dmitri's power and influence will someday be his. He's squashed rebellions and assassinated revolutionaries who were threatening the Stanov's influence. He's murdered trusted friends and advisors because they discovered his double identity. He's sold inconvenient calibans into slavery or used to law to execute them, because they got in his way. He's started paying bribes and tithes to nobles so he can get on with business. In the beginning, he convinced himself that it was for the greater good, and once he fixed his formula he could make it right. Now he no longer even pretends to care. He has simply sunk too much effort into Dmitri's body for it not to be his.

To this end, he secretly shores up the Stanov finances with his filthy lucre, keeping the other nobles of Nova Vaasa from bleeding Dmitri dry. He also has a vested interest in keeping Dmitri alive, given they share the same body, which means he will assassinate any threats to Dmitri's person or family. This strange chivalry on Malken's part has not gone unnoticed, but most people close to the Stanov family assume it is because Malken still cares for his former master. While this is not true in an altruistic sense, Malken still has a twisted and possessive respect for Dmitri, and Dmitri's disappointment and feelings of betrayal can unhinge Malken like nothing else can.

Malken is a criminal mastermind, and he is good at it. He has an absurd amount

of the Vaasi government on his payroll, and it's rumored that even Prince Othmar Bolshnik is in his pocket. Though he himself is bound to Kantora by Dmitri's continued presence there, his fingers reach all the way to Falkovnia. He instead lurks in the Kantora slums, working through intermediaries or anonymous messages. He controls his lieutenants via magic communications and messenger birds, but for the most part, he doesn't care what they do so long as they pay him. He himself tends to play things quietly, neatly, and efficiently. Despite his reputation for causing mayhem, Malken rarely resorts to violence as his first move. He will bribe, blackmail, discredit, assault, or kidnap before turning his hand to murder. Malken is rarely to be trusted, and he will gladly double-cross or betray other criminals, Lawgiver church officials, or nobles. That being said, he usually plays things fair in his dealings — he's considered a nasty, unpleasant bastard, but a very good boss to work for, as criminals go.

Malken spends much of his free time seeking out further alchemical knowledge, in the hopes of undoing his curse. He has failed all his attempts, but has otherwise gathered an encyclopedic knowledge of alchemy, and is probably the finest alchemical mind in the Core. He is in correspondence with a number of scholars under a pen name, and occasionally publishes papers via these connections. He is also known for publishing underground papers on a stolen printing press — the contents vary between embarrassing government secrets, forbidden alchemical formulas, obscene threats, or tips for fellow criminals.

## The Syekhmetskaya Circle

A Nova Vaasan criminal ring run by Malken, considered to be one of the largest criminal rings in the Core. The

Syekhmetskaya Circle has a presence in most major Vaasi cities, although it keeps a low profile in Kantora - a fact attributed to Dmitri Stanov's tireless efforts against them. The group is uncannily organized for a crime ring of that size, mostly attributed to Malken's brilliant mind and a number of smuggled communications magics. The Syekhmetskaya Circle dabbles in anything illegal that it can make a profit on, including art and artifact smuggling, drugs, protection rackets, horse smuggling, and human trafficking, but its real specialty is in weapons, arcane items, and alchemical components.

The Syekhmetskaya Circle is known to be territorial, and often dominates any area it gets a foothold in. Members of the circle are the de-facto rulers of their territory — stories are told of one high ranking member who cordoned off an entire street, because she wanted to eat lunch without the noise from foot-traffic. City guards or churchmen are bribed or brought into the fold, while more stubborn lawmen are either beaten or, more often, simply left alone and allowed to go bankrupt via their own virtue. This

territoriality expands to other criminal enterprises, as well, as the members do not want other groups competing with their business. Anyone caught doing business without the Syekhmetskaya Circle's permission is beaten up and tossed out. Local business owners are subject to the same treatment, and have to pay a fee to the criminals in order to keep doing business. This is more than just extortion, however. If a business is vandalized or robbed by someone else, the criminals will work hard to get the property back and bring the vandal to justice. The Syekhmetskaya Circle sees itself as providing a service, and compared to the uncaring and opulent nobility of Nova Vaasa, they are often the only form of justice that a citizen can fall back on.

The Syekhmetskaya Circle gets its name from one half of the paka dual goddess, Syekhmaa-Ubahsty. Many of the thugs adopt some of the lion-goddess' trappings — most simply consider her a symbol of rebellion against the Vaasi government, but some actually go so far as to consider themselves a part of the faithful.

# TO GRANNY'S HOUSE

## The Legend of Granny Knochen

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*"From all the liars with their manipulations and deceit, there comes none more treacherous than this. He that would make true love tool for his iniquity must surely be damned among the damned. Twice are his crimes. The first in doing, and second that his victims should love him for his abuse of them."*

– Mephestore: Prince of Darkness, Act I Scene VII

### Where

Russetheidt is a small village tucked away in Lamordia, situated right on the edge of the northern forested crags of the Sleeping Beast, where it meets the Heath of Fevered Tears. Its nearest neighbor is the slightly smaller fishing village of Lagenhaven, located on the coast just shy of due west from the Aubreckers' ancestral home. The journey to Lagenhaven varies in time based on the weather, although it's usually a matter of a few days.

The village has a small but prosperous economy. The swineherds along the marshy southern end of town make up a large portion of the working class of the village. About a fifth of the local working population belongs to a single group that harvests lumber from the Sleeping Beast and sends it on through to Lagenhaven, which serves as a shipping point to ports beyond (usually Ludendorf). The prime location between the swampy lowlands and the thick trees of the Beast make for ideal conditions to the fur industry in Russetheidt. Hunters, trappers, and furriers alike are the wealthy members

of the village, trading in beaver, muskrat, and bear with regularity.

There are no roads that come into the village. Lumber is transported away by a few hardy souls with flatboats, and the men who make the trade runs to and from Lagenhaven or Ludendorf each have their own preferred routes, which they jealously keep secret. Indeed, this isolation is part of what has managed to keep the secret of Russetheidt for so long.

### What

The first thing a visitor to Russetheidt notices, one familiar with Lamordia anyway, is how happy everyone seems. There is very little of the distrust of outsiders that one typically sees in cities of the Core. Most of the people are friendly and inviting, and work hard to create a welcoming environment in their town.

However, the most peculiar trait of Russetheidt is its romantic relationships. Visitors will be hard pressed to find more than a handful of unmarried individuals older than their mid-teens, and there are never any single villagers older than their

mid-twenties. Even couples who are courting are exceedingly rare. Perhaps more curious, there are no divorcees, widows, or widowers in town either.

Furthermore, the marriages frequently seem mismatched. It is not uncommon to find a gap in attractiveness, intelligence, or age between couples that would normally hamper a successful union. Yet, for all their oddity, the marriages in Russetheidt are good ones. This realization is often profoundly disturbing to people, but there are no unhappy marriages in the village. There are not even mediocre marriages in town. With the exception of one, every couple in Russetheidt is the picture of marital bliss.

It would appear that so profound are these bonds, that one spouse cannot live without the other. A cursory examination of the local graveyard (on the northeast side of the village, just before Granny Knochen's home) shows that nearly every headstone is part of a matched set between a husband and wife. A more in-depth investigation will reveal that nearly every couple died within days of one another, with the longest span between deaths at a meager two months.

## Why

The truth of Russetheidt is that up until some point, the village was like any other village, with couples living, meeting, marrying, (and sometimes splitting up) in their course. Until Granny Knochen. Although there are no written records of when she arrived in town, the earliest grave bearing signs of her handiwork (see below) is dated 673, but since this predates Lamordia's arrival in the Core, that date is suspect. Setting herself up on the edge of town, Granny Knochen fills the role of the local wise woman. (If she is referred to as a witch, she won't argue the point.) She

offers minor remedies for various ailments, as well as folk charms for those who believe in such things. She helps to birth local children when it is time, and when the elderly and infirm grow weary of suffering, she can release them with a painless drought. Most of her remedies are superstition, and the rest skilled herbalism. Granny does, however, have one secret that any magic-user would kill for.

Granny has perfected a True Love potion. While many (especially those in the know regarding love potions and spells) scoff at such a notion, it's entirely true, although perhaps not in the way most people think. Granny Knochen's potion does not make the object of the drinker's desire fall in love with them, rather it makes them fall in love with the person they were meant to be with. Part divination, part enchantment, the potion reveals to the drinker the individual that will love them, truly and completely, and whom they would have loved truly, if only they had known the other person's mind. The potion can even lie dormant, if the imbiber has yet to meet the right partner. The potion never matches partners who are already married, nor does it make matches that would be taboo. Curiously, it has no effect on Vistani or half-Vistani, and never reveals them as targets of affection.

By this point, every last villager depends on Granny Knochen's potion, which she offers for no price beyond whatever the recipient feels like paying. No one has met 'the old-fashioned way' in living memory. When someone feels that they are ready to settle down, they go to see Granny. The rare individual that does not find their match in town (or among the pool of regular visitors from among the traveling traders) will usually leave Russetheidt to seek their love elsewhere (and it's worth noting that most of them find it, usually

convincing their spouse to move back to the village). Very rarely, two individuals who have stayed in Russetheidt without finding true love will marry one another. These marriages usually tend to be extremely bitter, and such couples often move away from the village, unable to stand living in a community filled with blissful marriages.

Those looking to find a mystical hook, a downside to her potion, will find none. It is just as it appears. The hook is just a natural byproduct of such marriages. The horrible, awful truth is that Granny Knochen is a hag. Her potion isn't her gift to the grateful community, it's her way of stocking her larder.

When one of the Russetheidt couples dies, the intense love created by the potion leaves the victims in utter despair. The feelings are made even worse by the fact that such people know they could never find someone else: Granny's potion only works once. (And by this point, they have come to believe that only Granny's matches are truly happy.) Constant exposure to the harmonious marriages all around them eventually grind down even the most emotionally resilient of these people. Within a week, or a month, or even a year, they all come to Granny Knochen with one request: to end the pain. Granny gives them the same elixir she makes for the dying, and they slip away with the promise of being with their beloved again.

Once they're dead, Granny eats them. Her cellar is outfitted to render a human being down, and if she has killed recently it will be stocked with the gruesome remnants of her latest victim. She is quite adept at stretching her meals out, and will eventually use every portion of her kill. When all the meat and viscera is finally gone, she will grind the bones to meal and bake it into bread in order to sustain her until the next untimely death.

The ultimate horror of Russetheidt is that the village is largely aware of these secrets. Everyone knows Granny is a witch. With the exception of the recent out-of-town spouses, everyone knows about the love potion. And the vast majority of adults know that Granny devours the bodies of the slain. Her monstrous diet is considered to be a small price to pay for the decades of happiness their town enjoys. After all, it isn't as though she's killing anyone herself...

## Who

### Granny Knochen

Granny Knochen is no less evil than her hag peers. She has seen more than one creature like herself destroyed by heroic do-gooders, however, and has no desire to meet such a fate. She obeys the laws of the land, and should a party of adventurers play nicely with her, she will even act as a source of information for them, so long as they do not threaten her set-up in Russetheidt. While it might seem strange to have a hag acting as mentor to a wizarding hero, the only truly important thing to Granny is that her larder stays reliably full. If that means cozying up to adventurers, then so be it.

**Granny Knochen**, Hag Enc 7: **CR** 9; **SZ** M Humanoid; **HD** 7d8+21 **hp** 63; **Init** +6; **Spd** 30; **AC** 18 (touch 12, flat footed 16); **Atk** +6/+6 melee (1d4+2, claws) or +6 ranged touch; **SA** Weakness, Spell-like abilities; **SQ** familiar, **SR** 12; **AL** LE; **SV** Fort +5, Ref +7, Will +12; Str 14, Dex 14, Con 16, Int 18, Wis 18, Cha 16.

**Skills and Feats:** Alchemy +13, Bluff +6, Concentration +13, Diplomacy +10, Disguise +7, Intimidate +8, Knowledge

(local) +8, Listen +6, Move Silently +5, Search +7, Sense Motive +8, Spellcraft +13, Spot +5; Brew Potion, Scribe Scroll, Empower Spell-like Ability, Improved Initiative, Alertness, Combat Casting, Spell Focus (Enchantment)

**Wizard Spells Known** (5/6/5/4/3; save DC 14+ spell level, DC 16 + spell level for Enchantment): 0—all; 1st—*cause fear, charm person, hold portal, mage armor, obscuring mist, sleep*; 2nd—*blur, invisibility, tasha's hideous laughter, touch of idiocy*; 3rd—*dispel magic, hold person, ray of exhaustion, suggestion, stinking cloud*; 4th—*animate dead, confusion, crushing despair, enervation*.

**Languages:** Darkonese, Lamordian, Vaasi, Falkovnian, Goblin, Tepestani

**Possessions:** Spellbook, 756 gp, small collection of potions, curse bone (as a wand of enfeeblement, but produces no visible effect).

**Spell-like Abilities:** at will—change self, entangle, produce flame, ray of enfeeblement; CL 9th

**Weakness:** (Su) With her claws or with a touch, Granny delivers a powerful curse that saps the strength from a man's bones. Those hit must make a Fortitude save (DC 17) or take 2d4 Strength damage. Granny may only use this ability once per round.

## Appearance

Granny Knochen appears as a hunched, wrinkled old woman. She is every inch the kindly grandmother, and the smell of fresh baked goods surrounds her and her cabin.

She constantly refers to the party by sweet pet names, such as her 'dearie ducks.' In her natural form, she is even more withered, so dry that she appears ancient. Knobs of bone threaten to poke through her skin at every joint, her numerous warts are thick with bristly hairs, and an unquenchable hate shines from her eyes.

## Combat

Granny prefers to run rather than fight, since she knows the townsfolk will protect her. Although she rarely prepares animate dead, she has a horde of zombies and skeletons (up to her maximum of 28 HD worth) buried in the ground outside her home. Should she call, they arrive inside the cabin in two rounds. They can rise and attack the very next round if she calls them from the yard. Indoors, Granny uses invisibility to buy herself some time and cast more spells on herself. (Note that she typically casts mage armor whenever she spots someone approaching the cabin, friend or foe.) If reinforcements in the form of townsfolk or undead arrive, Granny will attack once she has augmented herself or weakened the adventurers.

Out of doors, she makes liberal use of entangle and her many strength draining spells and abilities. If she spies a competent fighter with little common sense, she will not hesitate to charm such an individual.

## Freya

The town apothecary, Freya has a dark secret of her own. She is Granny Knochen's daughter. She has yet to come into her hag abilities fully, but she knows the transformation will come soon. She has no desire to leave Russetheid, and would be only too delighted to see her mother removed so that she could take her place. At the same time, she recognizes her mother's power, and will not move against

her directly under any circumstances. She might point a party of PCs towards Granny with information they need, but that's usually as far as her help will extend.

**Freya**, Clr5: **CR** 5; **SZ** M Humanoid; **HD** 5d8+15 **hp** 45; **Init** +7; **Spd** 30; **AC** 13 (touch 13, flat footed 10); **Atk** +3 touch or +6 ranged touch; **SA** Spells, Turn Undead **SQ** Domains (Animal, Plant); **AL** NE; **SV** Fort +7, Ref +6, Will +7; Str 11, Dex 16, Con 16, Int 16, Wis 17, Cha 16.

**Skills and Feats:** Alchemy+8, Concentration+8, Profession (Herbalism)+8, Knowledge (Nature)+8, Spellcraft+8; Improved Initiative, Lightning Reflexes

**Cleric Spells** (5/5/4/3; save DC 13+ spell level)

**Languages:** Darkonese, Lamordian, Vaasi, Falkovnian, Goblin

**Possessions:** Herb pouch, 1178 gp, wand of inflict moderate wounds.

## Schepmeista Olin

Schepmeista Berger Olin, the peacekeeper in Russetheidt, is an unfortunate man. Granny's potion had no match for him. Disappointed, he devoted himself as an apprentice of the last schepmeista, and took the position over with little fuss. Years later, when Katrina Vertzen, ten years his junior, finally realized that the potion had no match for her either, the two wed. Their marriage is not a happy one. The couple is argumentative, spiteful, and demeaning towards one another, although ultimately each is loyal to the other. They live on the southwest side of town, directly opposite from Granny's cottage. Since they are regarded with some mistrust (at best, they are viewed as a cautionary tale of what will happen without

Granny's influence) they live on the outskirts of the village, and the mosquito-choked scum of their property serves as a grim reflection of their antagonistic marriage.

While Berger Olin has a strong respect for law and order, he also has a strong hatred for Granny, and would love to see her pushed out. He is not aware she is a supernatural monster, but instead thinks she is merely a witch. Although he alone knows Freya is Granny's daughter, he keeps this information to himself, even from the heroes, since he believes that Freya is just a normal woman who fears and dislikes her mother as much as Olin himself does. He happily provides information if he thinks it will help the party, but he will not attack her directly, nor will he help in the planning of such an action. He will not break the law in order to remove the hag.

**Berger Olin**, War5: **CR** 4; **SZ** M Humanoid; **HD** 5d8+10 **hp** 40; **Init** +6; **Spd** 30; **AC** 13 (touch 12, flat footed 11); **Atk** +9 melee (1d6+2, truncheon) or +7 ranged (pistol 1d10); **AL** LG; **SV** Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +3; Str 15, Dex 14, Con 14, Int 13, Wis 14, Cha 12.

**Skills and Feats:** Bluff +4, Intimidate +3, Listen+7, Search+4, Sense Motive+5, Spot+7; Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (club), Alertness

**Languages:** Darkonese, Lamordian, (High) Mordentish

**Possessions:** Padded clothing, truncheon (treat as masterwork club), 78 gp, pistol, 8 shots.

## How

The PCs can be brought to Russetheidt in any number of ways. They could always happen across the town by chance, or while

on another storyline. This gives the DM time to build the mystery (and the creep factor) slowly, especially if Russetheidt becomes a temporary base of operations.

Optionally, the players might be contacted by a friendly NPC, preferably one they are close to. The NPC could have a relative (a son, a sister, or a close friend) that married someone from Russetheidt. They haven't heard from their loved one in a very long time, and request that the PCs investigate. Of course, the loved one died (accidentally) some time ago, but this will lead them to the cemetery and the strange dates on the grave markers, by which time they should have more than enough information to realize something is seriously amiss in town.

A method that can be used even without any prior attachment to the campaign world is to have the PCs menaced by a random encounter in their travels. A friendly NPC comes to their aid and is fatally wounded in the process. Dying, the NPC requests the party take word of his death back to his hometown. When they arrive, they can meet his wife (a woman far older and more attractive than her husband, to the point that it should raise suspicion). Mere days after they deliver the bad news to her, she goes to visit Granny to end her pain. If the PCs investigations have led them to suspect Granny, their trip to confront her might be an ideal time to have them walking in on the wife succumbing peacefully to poison.

Freya would love to see her mother dead, but fears moving against her directly. If the PCs seek her out (she will not come to them) she will happily nudge them in the right direction, such as the cemetery or the schepmeista. If the PCs seem to be intent on solving this mystery, she isn't above arranging an unfortunate accident for one of the townsfolk. As the local herbalist, she

can easily poison one of her elderly clients in a way that would be indistinguishable from old age. After that, it's just a matter of waiting for the newly widowed spouse to seek an end to their pain, and directing the heroes towards Granny's house in time to witness the murderous deed.

This plot may pose some tricky questions for some players (especially outlander heroes from one of the more morally relativistic settings) about what to do with Granny. The town knows what she's doing after all, and they still go along with it. While her diet might be monstrous, the net result of her actions on the community has made them all extremely happy. Some heroes might feel the best solution is to walk away. At the very least, if presented correctly, there should at least be some discussion amongst the players about what to do with Granny. The Victorian morality that informs the Ravenloft setting condemns cannibalism, so allowing Granny to continue her activities (especially if they've been into her house and seen a human body chopped up in her larder) may be cause for a Dark Powers check. This can be a good opportunity to show outlander characters that they are being judged by some unseen presence, according to a set of values they may not share. Of course, if the players choose to murder an old lady without enough proof of her misdoings, that might certainly provoke a check, depending on how sure of her guilt they were.

## Aftermath

In any event, if Granny winds up dead, she will almost certainly have put up enough of a fight to bring the townsfolk. From the time Granny raises the alarm (either through screaming, or the sounds of combat) it takes seven combat rounds for a mob to arrive. If she is still alive, the



villagers will fight to the death to protect her. They will almost certainly be killed en masse, but after the first few it should become apparent to the heroes that these villagers pose them no real threat, and that fighting their way to Granny will involve butchering a good sized portion of the town.

If Granny is already dead by the point the mob arrives, then Berger Olin will arrest the party. Once her home is examined, he will explain to the heroes that Russetheidt, like several other Lamordian villages, technically has no law on the books forbidding murder (a situation likely to be rectified within the week, of course). He returns their equipment to them and releases them, explaining that they are being banished from town for the crime of 'causing a disturbance,' and that returning would be unwise, given the rancor of the townsfolk.

He even returns any items the party has looted from Granny Knochen or her home, barring one: her spellbook. Freya

lays claim to it, and since she is Granny's daughter, Olin gives her the book as she has legal rights of inheritance. While she may not be able to use the book now, it will give her a significant boost in power in about twenty years or so, when she finally masters her hag powers and begins pursuing witchcraft in earnest. She may even follow in her mother's footsteps.

If the PCs are escorted from town, their exodus is a good time to hammer home the consequences of their actions. Any friends they've made in town will turn up to curse them, or tearfully beg for an explanation as to why the interlopers would deny their children a happy marriage. While Olin keeps the crowd from violence, it should be apparent that the villagers would be happy to see blood spilled. If Freya is now in possession of Granny's book, (and the PCs have discovered she is Granny's daughter) then she will make an appearance here as well. If she feels that there is a likelihood of the PCs returning and risking mob justice, she may well taunt the PCs subtly by

referring to them as one of the same pet names that Granny used.

If the PCs do not return, there will be very few repercussions in the future. Lamordians are not by nature hot-blooded people, and aren't likely to seek vengeance. The worst the party can expect is to run into the occasional traveler from Russetheid, who will limit their anger to spitting in the PCs path and muttering a curse under their breath.

If the players do return, there is little that Olin will be able to do to stop the villagers from seeking bloody revenge, although this should be fairly clear to the players by the time they are out of the village. If they killed Granny and fought their way out, or escaped without being arrested, they will have a substantial bounty on their heads. (Significantly more if they escaped with the spellbook, courtesy of Freya.)

## Ways to Use

Russetheid and the inhabitants don't have to be just another one-off encounter. If you are trying to develop a constant or overarching theme with your campaign, it can contribute to this effort in a number of different directions. Likewise, it can serve many different story purposes for you.

If you're trying to move your PCs from one region to another, the 'NPC lost a relative in Russetheid' angle can be a good way to get them to Lamordia. On the other side of the coin, if the PCs have a problem NPC then a Russetheid marriage can be a good way to imperil or even kill them. For new players, or players of outlander characters, Russetheid can serve as a great object lesson in how things operate in Ravenloft. If your campaign needs a distant, but recurring villain, then Freya can serve as a capable spider, sending threats out to

menace the players from within the safety of her town.

Thematically, Russetheid does a good job of reinforcing themes of corruption. By taking something as pure and noble as romantic love and perverting it with her deviant practices, Granny sets up a nice example of how foul things can be under the surface, even concepts that are normally above suspicion. Doubt and dissent are good themes as well, although more party-centric. It's not only possible, but very likely for a group to leave the village unsure of whether their actions had any positive impact, or even if they did the right thing at all. The village can also serve to feed themes of isolation, since they may well find every hand turned against them by the end of events, forced to rely on one another as the only people they can trust.

# NORA METZINGER

A Burning Need for Revenge

by Andrew Snow (*aka* MDSnowman/IrvyneWolfe)  
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*"Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot that it do singe yourself"*

- William Shakespeare

## Nora Metzenger

CR 7

Female; Half-Elf; Ranger (Skirmisher) 7

CN medium humanoid (Half-Breed)

**Init** +4; **Senses** Low Light Vision;

**Perception** +12

### DEFENSE

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**AC** 20, touch 14, flat-footed 16 (+6

Armor, +4 Dex)

**hp** 50 (7d10+7)

**Fort** +6, **Ref** +9, **Will** +4

### OFFENSE

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**Speed** 20 ft.

**Melee** Bastard Sword +10/+5 (1d10+3;  
19-20/x2)

**Ranged** *Mistwood Bow* +14/+9

[+12/+12/+7] (1d8+4; x3)

**SA** Favored Enemy (Humanoids [Humans]  
+4, Magical Beasts +2), Burning Hands  
(1/day; 5d4; DC 13)

### STATISTICS

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**Str** 14, **Dex** 18, **Con** 13, **Int** 12, **Wis** 15,

**Cha** 10

**Base Atk** +7; **CMB** +9; **CMD** 23

**Feats** Deadly Aim, Endurance\*, Pass for Human, Precise Shot\*, Point Blank Shot, Rapid Shot\*, Weapon Focus [Long Bow]

\* Bonus Ranger feat

**Skills** Climb (+10), Disguise (+8/+18 to Appear human), Intimidate (+10),

Knowledge [Nature] (+11), Perception

(+12), Stealth (+14), Survival (+12),

Swim (+12)

**Languages** Falkovnian\*, Darkonese

**SQ** Low Light Vision, Elf Blood, Elf

Immunities, Keen Senses, Multitalented,

Integrated; Track (+3), Wild Empathy,

Favored Terrain [Forest] +2, Hunter's

Bond (Group), Hunter's Tricks (5/day;

Defensive Bow Stance, Hateful Attack),

Woodland Stride; Failed Power's Check

(Fiery Temper; Burning Hands 1/day,

charred hands)

**Equipment** Masterwork Bastard Sword,

Shadow Unicorn Hide Armor (+2 *Shadow*

*Hide Armor*), the *Mistwood Bow* (as

Oathbow)

## Description

Nora is a short, athletic young woman with short, curly red hair and slate gray eyes. Her features are usually set in a scowl of concentration, lending her a rather unfriendly demeanor. She dresses practically, favoring leather trousers and plain brown shirts underneath her rather distinctive black hide armor with its black, gray, and white hair collar. Her one nod to vanity is that she often wears headbands, hooded cloaks, hats, or other adornments to attempt to hide the hawk brand on her forehead. Her trademark bow, a slender long bow expertly carved from a strange, bone-white wood, is never far from her grasp. Aside from that, she usually carries a variety of basic survival tools, and a bastard sword from whatever Talon she's killed last – the previous ones inevitably being lost, destroyed, or simply misplaced over the course of her daily life.

## Background

Nora was born to an elven slave in Falkovnia. Her mother, Rowan, was a maid in the service of the house of Metzenger, a family with a rich military tradition as well as one of lordship. Growing up a slave as well, it didn't take young Nora long to recognize that the lord, Major Fredric Metzenger, was her father. Rowan remained silent on the issue, urging her daughter to keep her head down to avoid raising the ire of her masters.

That request turned out to be easier said than done. The lord's son and heir, Kristopher, took an immediate interest in the slave so close to his own age. In some lands, this may have led to friendship, but because Kristopher had been told from birth that, as a non-human, Nora wasn't a person, their interactions took the form of teasing, and eventually physical violence.

Nora wanted to lash out so badly, but the words of her mother stayed her hand and she suffered in silence for years.

As the two grew older, Kristopher's torments grew more and more violent. Eventually he forced himself upon Nora, seemingly unaware of their true relation to one another. She struggled against him, and he assaulted her fiercely. Young Nora was left beaten, battered, and near broken in a shed. The slave who eventually found her told her mother that it was a miracle she had survived, but Nora knew better. Her hate for her half-brother is what kept her from succumbing to her injuries that day.

The next few days were a blur of half-consciousness. When she finally had the strength to stand again she discovered that her mother Rowan had confronted Fredric about his son's actions, threatening to expose the family's secrets if Kristopher was not punished for his crimes. Whatever she had said, Fredric responded by killing her, right in his study. Nora was alone in the world, and still her hate grew. The Metzengers had to pay, but they were a family of trained killers, and she was an underfed slave. What could she do?

She did the only thing she could; she fled. Escaping the estate was relatively simple; she knew the grounds like she knew the back of her hands. Once she was beyond its walls, however, she was lost. She wandered the woods and by some miracle did not run afoul of a military patrol; because, by the time she was found, she was in Darkon. The man who found her, took an immediate liking to the determined young girl.

This man, Galen, was an elven archer and tracker, of unsurpassed skill. He listened to Nora's story, and decided to teach her what he could. He took Nora away to his home in Northern Darkon for

years of hard training. Galen reasoned that if an elf could master the basics of his woodland craft in ten years, a half-elf would need to work twice as hard to accomplish the same feat in a similar amount of time. He trained Nora mercilessly and, slowly but surely, she began to hone herself into a student worthy of Galen's reputation. There was just one problem – she no longer remembered what she was training herself for.

Therefore, as her final test, Galen sent Nora into the Mists. Until that day, Nora didn't remember what her task was supposed to be, but as soon as she entered the Mists, her memories came flooding back to her. She realized Galen's gambit at once. He had used Darkon's false memories to force her to be patient before embarking on her revenge. She was about to turn around and give him a piece of her mind when the Mists parted and she found herself in a strange grove. In the center stood an enormous white tree with black leaves, its branches waving in a breeze that she could not feel.

Reluctantly she approached the tree and heard a strange voice inside of her head, offering her power in exchange for carrying a bit of the tree with her into the wider world. Confused, she demanded explanations; the voice claimed to be the spirit of the tree, and that it had been apart from the world for so long that it was growing ill. Only by returning a bit of the tree to lands outside of the grove could the tree endure. Not wholly convinced, but sure she needed any edge she could get, she agreed to the bargain. One of the tree's mighty branches bent in the unseen wind, and turned into a perfectly shaped long bow. This branch simply fell from the tree and landed at Nora's feet. She took the bow and retreated back into the Mists.

When she emerged again, Galen was waiting for her. She was furious, but the old hunter simply smiled and pointed out the wisdom of his actions. Angry, but on some level understanding his motives, she left and traveled back to Falkovnia.

## Current Sketch

Nora returned to Falkovnia five years ago, and quickly learned a few things. First, Kristopher was now a highly placed Lieutenant working directly for Falkfuhrer Vigo Drakov, with a reputation for cruelty and perversion, while hiding behind the guise of a dashing knight. She wouldn't simply be able to waltz up to the family estate, kill everyone in the night, and call an end to her task. Second, Galen's training had turned her into an ideal guerrilla fighter for any resistance operating in Falkovnia. Thirdly, the wildlife in Falkovnia is nasty, especially shadow unicorns. With the first two in mind she immediately began to offer her services to any and all groups operating in opposition to the Drakov regime. Initially she hoped to gain enough friends to make a realistic attempt at wiping out the Metzenger family once and for all, but as time has gone on, she has truly come to believe in the idea of revolution in Falkovnia. She's not a wide eyed idealist. Instead, she is ready to do almost anything to bring the Drakov regime to an end. She will still pursue any Metzenger she comes across with ruthless efficiency, and attempt to make them suffer before they die. Her revenge is slowly becoming a sideline to her work with resistance groups, however. And her quest for revenge has not left her unscathed. During the course of her work, she's done questionable things and drawn the attention of the Dark Powers. The result has been the ability to launch a gout of fire from the palms of her hands once per day, however, her hands now constantly look as

though they were recently burned. She hides this deformity with gloves.

In day to day interaction Nora tends to be blunt, unfriendly, and downright rude. Nothing about her life has made it easy to trust anyone for any length of time. She tends to hide her emotions behind a wall of cynicism, sharp remarks, and threats of physical violence. She's still filled with anger at what she's experienced in her life, but her long training with Galen has given her the discipline to look before she leaps, most of the time at least. As one can imagine she's much more comfortable alone, and generally camps in the woods. When she needs to travel, she disguises herself as a human, and uses forged travel documents provided for her by her allies in resistance groups. There are a few people she cares about. The first is Galen. The lying old hunter is the closest she has to a father figure, and she takes his lessons to heart, thinking that it will in some way make him proud. The second is Jason Furst. Jason is the bastard son of a Falkovnian officer, much like herself. He eventually abandoned the Falkovnian military and joined the Freemen of Falkovnia as a double agent. She'll never admit her growing attraction to the dashing rogue, but worries constantly that he's going to get himself killed on one fool's errand or another.

## Combat

If there's one thing Nora dislikes, it's a fair fight. When combat rears its head, she'll climb a tree to get a good vantage point and attack with surprise. In circumstances where she's relatively certain she'll hit her foe, she'll use Deadly Aim. As almost all Falkovnian soldiers are humans, her favored enemy bonus makes such ambushes doubly effective. Against especially dangerous foes she'll use her Mistwood Bow's sworn enemy power (which functions as an Oathbow). In

those circumstances she'll usually use her Hateful Attacks, increasing the likelihood of scoring a critical hit with her bow. In all, her combat style relies on her putting down her enemies from a distance, and doing so quickly. She'll advocate such stealthy tactics when working with a group, and lend them her favored enemy bonus with her hunter's bond.

## Adventure Ideas

- Nora is a great NPC to use if you'd like to introduce your players to almost any of the resistance groups operating in Falkovnia. She's on good terms with most of them, and many of them count her as an unofficial member. What few realize is that she's so well connected that if she should ever be captured, she risks exposing her myriad allies to Drakov's men.
- Nora's desire for revenge and willingness to deploy violence to get it makes her a complicated character. With her failed powers checks, she's poised on the edge of a knife between becoming a Chaotic Good freedom fighter with a dark past, or a Chaotic Evil fallen hero setting fire to anyone who gets in her way. PCs may feed either outcome with their interactions with her, and have to deal with any resulting consequences.

- The Metzenger family is a large one, with Kristopher (Human Male; Summoner 10; NE) leading the newest generation. It's also a cursed bloodline. Generations ago, the Metzengers controlled significant lands outside of Stangengrad, when the area was being assailed by the fiend Elsepeth. Fredric's father fell completely under her sway, offering up his wife and mistress gladly to her, as well as opening many doors for her to do the same to a dozen or so other families. It's believed that one person whose family was ruined due to the Metzenger lord's actions laid a curse on the entire family. Since then, the Metzenger clan has been noted for producing scions who exemplify the worst aspects of both humanity and demon-kind. Kristopher surely inherited a measure of Elsepeth's charm as well as her lust. It could be said that Nora, when she loses control of herself, exemplifies the savage hatred of a demon. Whether one or both of these siblings are ripe for transposition is unclear. What is clear is that any conflict with the Metzenger family is going to be a horrific affair that may beat a blood soaked path to the legendary fiend herself.



# THE MISSING PIECE

A Mad Clockmaker and his Creation

By Ron Laufer; Illustrated by `endianprime' and Ron Laufer  
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*"If I am to be a monster, it is only because he made me so!"*

– Vir Stannum

When the mind of a master craftsman unhinges slightly, his works can rise from merely marvelous contraptions to the level of great wonders. But when one of those wonders finds itself lacking, its creator's pride will sour into terror. Presented here is a pair of entwined NPCs: The Mad Clockmaker, Gustav Malvoni, and his greatest and worst creation, Vir Stannum, the Clockwork Man.

*"There comes a time when a man must measure his life in other ways than the ticks he hears from the clock. A time when he must be reckoned for the deeds he does in his short hours in the world."*

– Gustav Malvoni

## Gustav Malvoni

CR12

Male Human Expert 14

CG medium humanoid

Init: +1; Senses Perception +16

### DEFENSE

AC 11, touch 11, flat-footed 10 (+2 Dex)

hp 39 (14d8-28)

Fort +2 Ref +5 Will +9

### OFFENSE

Speed 30

Melee unarmed +7/+2 (1d3-3)

Ranged MW pistol +12 (1d8)

### STATISTICS

Str 6, Dex 13, Con 7, Int 18, Wis 11, Cha 13 (Note that these stats represent Gustav late in his life and include age modifiers)

Base Atk +10/+4; CMB +8; CMD 19

Feats Craft Arms and Armor, Craft

Wondrous Item, Exotic Weapon

Proficiency (Firearms), Master Craftsman (clockworks), Skill Focus

(Craft(Clockworks)), Skill Focus

(Craft(Gunsmithing)), Precise Shot, Point Blank Shot

Skills Knowledge (Engineering)\* +21,

Craft (Alchemy)\* +21, Craft (Clockworks)\*

+29, Craft (Gunsmithing)\* +27, Craft

(Metalworking)\* +21, Craft (Sculpture)\*

+21, Craft (Weapons)\* +21, Disable

Device\* +11, Linguistics +6, Perception\*

+17, Perform +6, Profession

(Clockmaker)\* +17

\*indicates Expert class skills

Languages Darkonese\*, Mordentish,

Balok, Vaasi, Lamordian, Falkovnian,

Tepestani

## Description

Gustav Malvoni was a kindly-looking old man, with a mop of unruly white hair and a prodigious bushy mustache of the same shade. His many years had scarcely diminished the skill of his hands or the minute focus of his eyes, though he did wear a pair of spectacles for distance in his later years. He was spry and energetic, never more so than when he was working on a new invention. He had very little personal life outside of his work, and was prone to speaking of emotions, abstract concepts, and human behavior in terms of clockworks and mechanical laws. Despite his long years away from his homeland, spent speaking multiple languages more often than his mother tongue, he was never able to (or perhaps never cared to) shake his thick Darkonian accent, marking him as an obvious foreigner in other lands.

## Background

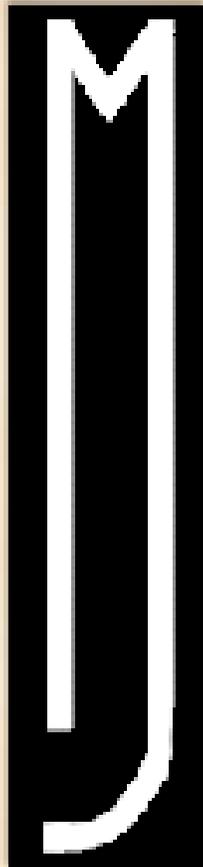
As far as most people knew, Gustav Malvoni was a talented, innocent clockmaker, making a living for himself in Sturben, Borca. Born in Darkon in 664 BC, he first apprenticed under Howard Lumley of Mordentshire, and eventually returned to Darkon for a time before settling in Sturben late in life where he sold clocks, pocket-watches, and mechanical toys to those who could afford them. Each piece bears his maker's mark, an elongated and stylized letter 'M.' Only his young apprentice knew that he had a second, more dangerous, trade. Gustav used his talent with clockworks to create some of the finest firearms in the world, but rather than taking the gold of the nobleborn game hunters of Borca, he sold them

without profit to a Falkovnian resistance movement.

Malvoni was presumed killed in 754 by an unknown group of intruders in his shop. Perhaps the Falkovnian government found out about his secret side business; perhaps the Borcan government feared that his weapons would end up in Vlad Drakov's hands; or perhaps even older enemies had finally caught up to him, for Gustav had a far stranger past than even his apprentice had known...

Gustav was adept at building more than just clocks and guns. Before settling in Borca, he had built a living man made of clockworks, who he'd named Talos. Craving a legacy greater than that of a craftsman, Malvoni had always wanted a son. Since his understanding of machines far surpassed his understanding of women, he ignored the usual methods and created his son in the workshop instead. But Talos was incomplete, soulless, and he rebelled against his creator, taking the name Vir Stannum. Vir knew something was missing within him, and was convinced that Gustav could build a soul for him. He refused to believe Gustav's protests that it was impossible, insisting instead that Gustav was deliberately withholding it out of fear. He chased his "father"

across the lands, leaving a swath of violence in his wake. Gustav searched for a way to appease his wayward creation and create the impossible: a soul for a machine. But, always strictly opposed to resorting to magic, a force which he viewed as unpredictable and dangerous, he eventually admitted defeat and tried to destroy Vir instead.



Their final confrontation was at Gustav's Darkon laboratory, originally built at the border of G'Henna, but by then overlooking the Shadow Rift. Gustav presented Vir with a device he called a Soul Engine, which was in fact nothing more than a bomb. Damaged, but not destroyed, when the bomb exploded inside him, Vir flew into a rage. They fought. Vir fell through a balcony railing and into the Rift, and Gustav thought him gone forever. Though in fact, the golem survived and eventually left the Rift in search of his creator once more, it was too late. By then, Gustav had been killed.

## Current Sketch

As far as anyone knows, Gustav is dead, but he left behind a cryptic journal full of encoded messages detailing his travels across the Lands of the Mist in search of the secret of crafting a true Soul Engine. The keys to unlock and decode the messages are hidden in many of his creations. Gears serve as code wheels, cogs line up to reveal ciphers at appointed times, and the like – each page with a different method of solution. Driven to paranoia and madness by the pursuing Talos, Gustav took the full secrets of the encrypted book to his grave.

Though deceased, Gustav may live on as a ghost, for as long as Talos remains “alive,” his final task is unfinished. Alternately, he may have faked his

death somehow and live on elsewhere in secret, still trying to find a soul for his “son,” or a way to destroy him, if saving him proves impossible.

## Combat

Gustav was not trained in combat, but did have an affinity for firearms, particularly those that he made himself. His natural quickness and steady hands served him well when pressed to fight, but he was more likely to flee any sort of danger. A dabbler in alchemy, particularly gunpowder and other explosives, he was known to use smokesticks, thunderstones, tanglefoot bags, and the like to aid in escaping battles.

*"Without the spark of life to fuel me, I am only a wind-up toy. He built me a body that could weather the centuries and still I live on borrowed time. What right had he to condemn me to that existence?"*

– Vir Stannum



## Vir Stannum

### CR12

Male Dread Mechanical Golem,  
CE medium humanoid

**Init:** +4; **Senses** Perception +9, darkvision,  
low-light vision

### DEFENSE

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**AC** 29, touch 14, flat-footed 25 (+15  
armor, +4 Dex)

**hp** 115 (11d10+10)

**DR** 10/(magic or Malvoni legacy)

**Immunities** construct immunities, immune to  
all magic except rust, and dispel magic

**Fort** +4 **Ref** +8 **Will** +4

### OFFENSE

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**Speed** 30

**Melee** *keen dagger* +24/+19/+14  
(d4+11)

**Ranged** *keen dagger* +18/+13/+8  
(d4+11) or Grapple arm/chain  
+22/+17/+12 (2d4+10) range 20'

**Special Attacks** +2 to disarm with grapple  
arm, can trip with grapple arm without  
being tripped. Crushing strike (+3d6  
damage on critical hit, Fort DC17 or  
stunned for 2d4 rounds) Improved Grab

### STATISTICS

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**Str** 30, **Dex** 18, **Con** –, **Int** 11, **Wis** 11, **Cha**  
11

**Base Atk** +12/+7/+2; **CMB** +16; **CMD**  
36

**Feats** Point Blank Shot, Far Shot, Weapon  
Focus (dagger), Quick Draw, Critical  
Focus, Lunge

**Skills** Bluff +10, Climb +15, Perception  
+9, Linguistics +2

**Languages** Darkonian, Balok, Mordentish

**SQ** Telepathic Bond

## Description

Vir appears to be a burly human male of medium height, with flat gray eyes. His black hair is always perfectly parted, as it never grows; like the hair of a well-made doll, it always rests exactly as it had been designed. His features are blunt and rounded, neither handsome nor ugly. He has the muscular build of a dock-worker and the thick fingers of a laborer, but the flawless fair skin and un-calloused hands of a nobleman.

In reality, Vir is not human at all, but a mechanical golem, a clockwork man designed by the mad clockmaker, Gustav Malvoni, and given life by his obsessive drive to leave behind a legacy. The craftsmanship that went into creating him is so complete that Vir can interact fully with even the most observant of people without betraying any hint of his nature. No visible seams mar the flexible material that forms his "skin." He speaks in a gruff, unstitled voice, befitting of his apparent form. His eyes move and blink, his chest rises and falls, his facial expressions are as intricate as those of a real man, and his fingers and limbs twitch and fidget appropriately, all driven by a myriad of unseen gears, cogs, springs and wires hidden inside his steel frame. Except in the rare occasions where he has need of stealth, he never exhibits the stillness of an automaton, never falls into the uncanny valley of the non-quite-human. It is only in near-complete silence that one might hear the faint ticking and whirring of the mechanisms that animate this mechanical marvel.

Like everything Gustav built, Vir is stamped with his maker's mark. The elongated M symbol runs down his left forearm from wrist to elbow, easily mistakable for a tattoo.

Unlike most supernatural, unliving creatures, Vir is immortal in only a very limited sense. He is powered by a discovery that would have cemented Malvoni's status as genius, even if it were his only invention: the Gem Drive. In a process never fully understood by other scientists, the Gem Drive is a mechanical engine that converts the energy released from burning gemstones into a constant physical torque. This torque spins the great wheel of the gear train that subsequently drives the preposterous array of moving parts within him that, in sum, create Vir's thoughts and movements. This engine that powers him requires constant and expensive fuel, and if he winds down, he has no idea if he will ever start back up. His knowledge of this dependence informs every moment of Vir's existence. His key emotion is a desperate impatience. He is always living on borrowed time, and can never stop to reflect long enough to plan anything but the most direct path to his goals. He relies on blunt-force tactics and any attempt at subtlety is marred by his constantly simmering rage just under the surface.

Vir was built with several access panels and secret compartments that can spring open as needed, revealing his inner workings. The edges of these are hidden beneath his hair and clothes. Of particular note, his chest cavity can open down the center, along the apparent line of buttons on his shirt.

When opened thusly, he can access the Gem Drive to refuel himself, and there is some free space in his torso that he can use as a secret storage area.

## Background

Created by Gustav in his Darkon workshop, Vir lived with his creator peacefully for the first few years of his "life." At first, Gustav thought his "son,"

Talos, as he called him, might follow in his own footsteps as a craftsman. The idea of a machine building machines had a perverse appeal to Gustav, but even his great skill could not make the golem dextrous enough for the fine work of building and repairing clockworks. His sausage-sized fingers had to be large enough to hold their own gears and so could not be small enough to fit inside the delicate casings of other devices. Once this became clear, Gustav tried to retrain Talos as a storyteller, and filled him with folktales and legends. It was then that Talos began to resent his creator and turn against him. He saw this new purpose as an admission of failure on Gustav's part, a confirmation of what Talos had felt for some time and could only now put into words: he was incomplete. He refused to perform as an entertainer, but later learned to draw on elements of those tales whenever he needed to lie.

Talos rejected the name he was given and began to refer to himself as Vir Stannum, a reference to an old Darkonian tale of a man transformed by magic into a heartless machine – a story with which Vir felt a natural kinship. He became more and more demanding of Gustav, insisting that his creator could complete him with the one part he was missing: a soul.

But try as Gustav might, he couldn't give Vir what he wanted. And worse, he eventually ran out of gems to keep the Gem Drive fed. Ignoring Gustav's pleas to simply shut down for a while to give him time to find more jewels, Vir took to a crime to keep himself alive. As the crimes became increasingly violent, Gustav feared for his life and fled. Vir pursued him across The Core, never truly believing that a mechanical soul was impossible, but rather that his father was deliberately refusing to make one. The chase lasted until their

fateful confrontation at the edge of the Shadow Rift.

As an inanimate object, Vir was unaffected by The Mists of Shadow as he fell through them and crashed into the ground at the bottom of the Rift. A fir called Waelin, master artisan of Anvolee, found him in ruins near the edge of the Rift, sunk deep in the earth. The tinkering fey fixed him, but Vir gave Waelin no thanks for his repairs, only demands. He wanted to be improved, and Waelin complied, reveling in the challenge of adding more and more complex features to an already marvelous machine. But when the fir admitted to the golem that the one thing he wanted above all was the one thing that Waelin, for all his craft, could not build him, Vir left in a rage and returned to the surface. Because of the Temporal Fugue, enough years have passed in the Rift for this part of Vir's tale to fade into legend, and the fey speak of him only as *Bréagáin -Creideann-Sé-Féin-Fear*, the Toy Who Thought Itself a Man.

Emerging from the Rift, Vir once again resumed his pursuit of Gustav. But when he learned of his creator's demise, he shifted goals and sought his journal instead.

## Current Sketch

Hoping to find a craftsman willing to do what Gustav and Waelin would not, Vir now follows the cryptic clues in the journal to piece together whatever he can about the workings of the Soul Engine Gustav withheld from him. He relies on theft to keep himself supplied with gems, resorting without a qualm to assault or murder if he encounters resistance. He does not share Gustav's distrust of magic, and is willing to make use of wizards, relics, or dark rituals in his quest if technology proves incapable.

## Combat

With the strength of a machine, Vir is a fearsome combatant. His bare hands are huge and deadly enough to the fops from whom he usually steals his sustaining jewels. But in combat with more capable foes, he makes use of one of the upgrades Waelin provided for him: a custom launcher built into his right arm, which feeds throwing daggers into his hand. The daggers are stored in his forearm and spring up from a slot in his wrist, serving to both conceal the fact that he is armed and replicate effects of the Quick Draw feat, which allows him to use a full attack to throw daggers (due to the integrated nature of this device, the daggers do not count as hidden weapons for Quick Draw purposes). In addition, the device sharpens the daggers as they are ejected, functioning equivalently to a *scabbard of keen edges*.

His left arm contains a device of Gustav's design. The left hand is detachable at the wrist, and can be fired like a projectile via an explosive propellant. The hand remains attached by a long, retractable chain, allowing it to be used as a grappling hook for climbing, or offensively, to entangle and trip foes.

As a mechanical golem, Vir is immune to most magic, and his durable steel frame and thick metal shell beneath his "skin" protect him from most damage, but magic weapons can bypass his damage reduction, as can any weapons crafted by Gustav or his "lineage" (anyone who studied gunsmithing under him, or under another who did, etc.). In the event that he does suffer some damage, it tends to be in dramatic fashion. His workings are held together in a delicate balance, and any interruptions to that balance can cause impressive plumes of tiny cogs, springs, and gears to burst through his damaged

exterior, propelled by their rapid spins and stored energy. In a prolonged battle against enemies who can actually hurt him, his façade of humanity will rapidly crumble as his inner workings become exposed, revealing him as a clockwork monstrosity. Making matters worse, he reacts to any damage with a rage beyond even his normal levels of anger. The reason for this is simple: he doesn't know how to fix himself. He will focus all his attacks on whoever damaged him, in an attempt to eliminate the threat decisively. But if it becomes clear that he is in real danger of being destroyed before he can do so, his innate fear of death will take over and he will flee by any means necessary.

Vir's *zeitgeber* is a Mordentish lullaby that Gustav sang to him as he worked on his creation. Hearing this tune will cause Vir to be stunned for 2d4 rounds.

## Adventure Ideas

- The ideal use of Gustav and Vir is to cast a PC as Gustav's apprentice. If no PC has an interest in clockworks or guns, then a friendly NPC or family member could serve this purpose. Solving the mystery of Gustav's murder can make an excellent first adventure. Finding Gustav's journal and unravelling the mystery of the sinister Talos can spur any number of further adventures, as Vir and the Party race to decode the journal and reach various potential ways to ensoul a machine.

- Once Gustav is dead, the Telepathic Bond between Dread Golem and Creator may slowly pass to the apprentice, causing Vir to seek him or her out. He will spin a tale of being Gustav's estranged son, whose daughter requires a mechanical heart to live through a terrible illness. He will try to use this story to pull out any rumors that the party make know of similar devices, which might serve as the basis for a Soul Engine.

- Gustav's contacts in the Falkovnian resistance are woefully in need of weapons now that Gustav's supply has dried up. They contact his apprentice asking for help, thus embroiling the party in their struggle.

- Vir has learned of the "Heart Chamber" that powered Lumley's Automatic Man. He seeks this artifact and may steal it from the Guardians of Mordentshire.

- Whenever Vir is in town, reports of jewel thefts become more frequent. This may cause ancillary problems, as vengeful undead may seek to revenge his graverobbing, or merciless authorities may crack down on the local peasantry in search of the thief.

- Any clockwork-themed character or locale might be linked to Gustav, as Howard Lumley was. The Engineer of Karina, The Gears of Stangengrad, The Clocktower of Ludendorf, the gnomes of Mayvin, Waelin or other fir, Abernathy Gearling of the Rue des Pisolets... any of these and more could be a source of information to which the journal leads. Once led there, the PCs can become entangled in any local adventure.

- Vir has discovered tales of The Apparatus, and is seeking it to force an unwilling soul into his own body, ideally that of Gustav's apprentice.

- A page of Gustav's journal tells of the Soul-drinker, a magic spirit-draining dagger kept safe in a remote Guardian Monastery in Lamordia. Gustav eschewed the idea of using dark magic to ensoul Talos, but Vir has no such qualms. The Guardians are woefully unprepared for a threat like Vir and the PCs have to race him to the dagger and destroy it.

# SONG OF THE GYPRESS

The Blackfields of Mordent

By Jim "jimsolo" Stearns  
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I expected the menfolk to kick up more of a fuss, if I'm honest. When mistress said she intended to join them in the swamp, I'd wished someone would try to tell her no. Not that telling mistress 'no' has ever had any appreciable effect, but I thought they would say it just the same. If I'm being completely honest, the truth is that I wish someone had told her no and made it stick.

But no one did, and we found ourselves tromping through the mud and sucking ooze out there in the swamp, trying to step from one rotted tree root-clump to another without landing a foot in the grey, hungry muck that wound through the trees. More than once it occurred to me that if I'd wanted oppressive heat, mud pulling at my boots, and fog so thick I could kick up my feet and just swim away, I would never have left Souragne.

I knew such thoughts were unkind to the Blackfields, of course. Being maid to young Mistress Blackfield was a far better profession than the sort of work I might otherwise have found without their patronage, and a damn sight better than any of the unseemly things I would have had to start doing to make a living if I'd wanted to stay in d'Elhour. I'd never had reason to complain in their employ, and it

was only the damnable swamp that bred such thoughts in me then.

Even as a little girl I'd hated the swamp. The rawness of it, the aggressive fecundity, was an affront to the senses. The odor of rot and decay was inescapable, a pall of festering death that clung to the clothes hours after one came away from the source. At the same time, a swamp is home to life; vibrant, belligerent, pestilent life. When Lord Mayor Blackfield had come through d'Elhour looking for a maid for his young daughter, I had leaped at the chance to escape the bayou for good. Although the marshes and moors of Mordent are just as filthy and uncivilized as the ones of my birth place, at least here the wetlands are a feature that one can escape. In Mordent, clean floors and dry feet are something that one can savor for more than a handful of hours, and a person might go weeks or even months without having to set foot in one of those vile swamps.

Of course, the Mistress and the men accompanying her didn't share my loathing. For the most part, they were completely ambivalent to the muck we trekked through, treating the grime as a necessary, if distasteful, part of daily life, something to hold at arm's length rather than recoil from.

A few seemed to positively enjoy the fetid landscape of the bog.

If it had been up to me, we'd have left well enough alone, and in point of fact that's exactly what had been done about the poachers up to that point.

Unfortunately, the death of a local shepherd girl necessitated a more active response from the Blackfields. Since the death of her brother Roger a year earlier, Mistress Emily had taken a more active role in the family affairs, and had positively insisted on leading a hunt for the murderous poachers. In his ailing state, Lord Mayor Phillip was hardly in a position to take her place, which left me traipsing through the mud behind the Mistress.

After the first day of searching and returning empty-handed, I'd hoped Mistress Emily would find the duty too foul for her noble sensibilities and wash her hands of the affair, but the curious work ethic that threads through the Mordentish rulers, even relatively minor landowners like the Blackfields, would not let her drop the matter. Day after day we went out with the same group of hunters, searching for the elusive poachers. So I confess that my first reaction on hearing one of the men announce that they had spotted a camp up ahead was relief rather than apprehension.

"Haloo!" cried one of the hunters to announce our approach. The cry was friendly, but we carried our firearms aloft and ready nonetheless. My mistress carried two: a hunting rifle of exquisite Lamordian manufacture, and a more modest heirloom pistol, tucked away in a belt.

The hunting party was camped in a clearing. It didn't take a genius to surmise that these men were the poachers we'd been searching for. A pile of furs lay atop a nearby cart, and three of the men were skinning fresh kills even as we approached. Their brazenness made sense, of course. At

nine to five (if I was being counted), they outnumbered us in bodies, and since neither I nor my mistress had ever had the misfortune of trading in violence with another civilized being, it was apparent that they held the high ground in experience as well.

"You're poaching," said the oldest of the men in our party, a grizzled farmer that went by the name of Adsel. Adsel had long served as a guide to the Blackfield family when one of their number had need to venture out to the marshes along the eastern portion of their property. It seemed only natural to let him serve as spokesman for the group, especially since Mistress Emily seemed all of a sudden uncertain now that we had come face-to-face with the miscreants.

"Are we now?" The largest of the interlopers stepped forward to address us. His beefy, poorly shaved features and sticky-voiced accent marked him as Dementlieuse by birth. "We had no notion, monsieur. We thought ourselves beyond the borders of the nearest lord." He waved a hand at the pile of furs. "If it would suffice the lordship, we would happily pay him the fair share of our take that he is owed."

The poachers grinned and nodded among one another. Clearly they did not fear us, and assumed that we would take their bribe and be on our way.

"That might have been possible," said Adsel. "But for the death of Mary Sheppard. So now you'll all need to be coming along with me, please." Around me, our party tightened our grip on our weapons, and the tension in the clearing bound us together like a string, sewn from hand to hand and threading up our anxious spines.

The poacher with the accent held up his hands in a gesture of peace. "Please," he said, "I believe there has been a misunderstanding. If you come, I can show

you." He shuffled across the clearing and we followed, two of the men keeping an eye on the rest of the poachers lest they try to overwhelm us. The Dementlieuse brigand led us to a tree, and gestured to it as if this explained the entire situation.

Lashed to the tree was a pitiful creature. A man of indeterminate age, his nut-brown skin was clearly ancient, gnarled and stained with the mud of the swamp. His naked body was all hard knots of bone and taut cables of sinew, as though his limbs were nothing but knobby wooden rods with aged leather strips tied around them over and over again. His frayed hair was the white of illuminated fog, and when he turned to face us, his eyes gleamed the same color, broken only by the orbs of sparkling river-blue within. His face had been tattooed with white spots, like stars dappled across his visage.

"A moor man," said my mistress. I took an involuntary step back. While the two regions shared a number of common threats, and there were many dangers in the bayous of Souragne that they'd never even heard of in Mordent, moor men were a uniquely Mordentish menace. They were a brutish race of savages, subhuman primitives that dwelt in the misty swamps and muddy heaths of Mordent, eking out whatever barbaric existence they were capable of wresting from the land without even the luxury of worked metal to aid them. If all the accounts I'd read of them were to be believed, some of their more brutish tribes hadn't even mastered the use of fire. Some were even reported to engage in that most bestial of practices, cannibalism.

The Dementlieuse poacher nodded. "Indeed, madam."

One of the other vagabonds waved a skinning knife in a lazy arc. "S'right," he muttered. "Musta been him what killed that

girl, right?" He grinned at the beefy faced leader, clearly proud of himself for playing along with what these lowlifes no doubt imagined to be a cunning ruse. The leader nodded and began rustling around in a sack.

"He tried to ambush one of our lookouts." The thick accent couldn't cover up the poacher's self-satisfaction. "So we tied him up to deliver to the proper authorities. Bien sûr, now that we know his guilt, we can just deal with him right here." The poacher stood, pulling a black braided rope from the bag. I couldn't help but notice that the rope had already been tied into a hangman's knot, from which I can only assume that the poachers had already decided the moor man's fate long before we'd arrived.

Stupid as he was, the savage had clearly construed the meaning of the noose, and began struggling against his bonds. Tethered at the wrists so that he was hugging the tree, there was little he could do but squirm to the opposite side, peering around the wood to gaze at us from within his tattooed visage. His behavior roused the attentions of the poachers, who began jeering at the creature. Several of them closed in to watch the execution. Even the hunters that accompanied us seemed less than motivated to stop the hanging. If you're investigating a burglary and you happen upon a rabid wolf, you don't spare the monster's life because it happens to be innocent of that particular crime. I, for one, thought that putting the primitive to death might give us some much needed time to formulate a plan to counteract the poacher's advantage of numbers.

"No."

Poachers and townsmen alike turned to regard Mistress Emily. Her momentary hesitation forgotten, she had crossed to the front of our group, fixing the burly leader

with a look which dispelled any illusion as to which of our number was in command.

"You'll not harm this creature," she said. She'd brought her Lamordian rifle up, sighting down the barrel.

The poacher laughed. Flexing one brawny arm, he hurled the coil of rope over one branch and began tying it off. His plan was as plain as his guilt: with the moor man dead, he could claim plausible innocence, theoretically ensuring that any lawful court would have no choice but to commute his sentence to banishment at the very worst.

"I warn you," she said. "Savage he may be, but this creature walks as a man, and is just as entitled to my protection as the girl you ravaged."

If I had any doubts to the poachers' status as the culprits of Mary Sheppard's murder, they fled when the poacher flinched. He turned to meet my mistress's gaze, to stare her down like a beast. I can't say what he saw in her eyes, but it was he who looked away first. If they had not outnumbered us, I truly think he would have surrendered. As it was, he just reached for the moor man with one thick hand, the noose clutched in the other. I saw a second's worth of misgiving crease the mistress's features when the Dementlieuse murderer called her bluff.

The moor man jerked backwards, thin wrists straining against his bindings. The red, beefy hand clasped his shoulder, and the primitive little old man gave a pitiful squawk. Despite what my mistress had said, neither she nor any Mordentish citizen considered moor men their equal. Rather, her defense of this creature was born of her own tender soul, which could not bear to see a living creature suffer. To that end, I think her own trepidation would have resolved the issue, if it had not been for that heart-wrenching squawk.

No one was more surprised than I at the gunshot. A thick horizontal plume of smoke belched from Mistress Emily's weapon, and the poacher jerked back, gasping and choking. The shot had taken him at the base of the throat, a little to the left, and his blood pumped from the wound furiously.

The camp exploded into chaos. I wish that I could give a more detailed description of what happened, but the sight of the Dementlieuse poacher collapsing is the last clear memory I have for a time. More gunshots rang out, more smoke filled the air. I heard men screaming. Later, I found blood all across the front of my blouse, so I was almost certainly close to someone as they were killed. It is possible I shot someone, although if so I am blessed by an inability to recall it. The next thing I remember clearly is crawling like an animal through the mud on my hands and knees. It was the mistress's yells that recalled me to my senses, I am sure.

"Run!" she screamed. "Lilah! Run!" I scabbled in the ooze, trying to move faster. I glanced behind me, and screamed. One of the poachers, a hideous gunshot wound in his abdomen, loomed over me with an axe in a two-handed grip, poised to deliver my deathblow.

One final gunshot rang out, hitting the poacher squarely in the head, and as quickly as the chaos had been birthed into the campsite, it died, leaving only a chilling silence. The poacher toppled sideways into the mud, his body making a soft squelch that sounded perversely biological. I staggered to my feet, realizing in some distant portion of my mind that I had soiled myself at some point within the last minute or so.

The mistress stood behind me, her antiquated family pistol still held at arm's length as she stared ahead of her. At first I

thought she was looking at me, but I soon realized she was staring at the body of the last poacher she had killed. Even as I drew near her, she did not look away. It was as though she were entranced by his corpse, staring with no shock and disgust, nor with relief or glee either. The body created no emotion in her but fascination.

"Mistress Emily?" I said, my voice cracked and weak. That seemed to break the spell on her, and she looked at me, overcome with concern for the well-being of her favorite servant.

It turned out I was uninjured, and so I can only wonder as to the origin of the blood down my front. I was far luckier than one of the men who had accompanied us, who had been killed during the skirmish, or Adsel, who had taken a bullet to the arm. Of the moor man, there was no sign. During the battle, the beast had apparently slipped its tethers, somehow, and made off into the swamp. In the brief search we conducted for him, the only thing we found was a tenth poacher, strangled to death and left face down in the mud.

\* \* \*

"She still hasn't come down," said the cook. I sighed. The cook wasn't a servant in the Blackfields' home, but rather the proprietor of the small inn in town. He delivered meals to the home in the evening, however. This was the fifth night in a row that Mistress Emily hadn't come to meet him.

"She attends her father," I lied. "I'll fetch her. In the meanwhile, you can leave it with the boy." He nodded and wandered off to find the Blackfields' servant boy, and I set off to seek the mistress. It wasn't a long search; I knew exactly where I would find her.

The Blackfield manor was fairly small compared to the dignified and magnificent plantations of my homeland, or even the weathered but stoic mansions of Mordent. Still, the ancestral Blackfields (or the nobles they'd inherited the home from) had known their construction well, and the home was quite solid, without the ever-present creaks, sagging timbers, and peeling paint so indicative of Mordentish architecture. Built upon a small hill, the rise was still significant enough to keep the worst of the water drained away from the house. The focal point of the home, and its one concession to true vanity, was the terrace. Behind the home, the veranda offered a breathtaking view of the Lightless Wood, stretching out endlessly away from the manor. Low benches allowed visitors to observe the grandeur at their leisure. The small brown bricks would have cost a fortune to import, but their expense paled in comparison to the doors. Floor to ceiling, the doors to the terrace were made from hand-width diamonds of glass, set in wooden strips. The view they afforded to those inside the home was just as beautiful as the one without.

Mistress Emily stood in front of the doors, gazing out over the wood, as I came around the corner. I paused for a moment, not quite sure if she was looking at something in particular or not. Her hands were raised, her fingertips barely brushing the cold glass. Her face was the same blank mask it had been all the way home from that bloody journey into the swamp.

"Mistress?"

She ignored me. I stepped closer to her, trying to look out in the same direction as she. Beyond, the fog had just begun rolling in through the trees. I shuddered, remembering the cold, damp embrace of the Mists on the crossing from Souragne. I was within arm's reach of the mistress

before I spotted something. At first I thought it must be a shadow, or a smaller tree, but the longer I stared the more certain I was that a slender figure lurked at the very edge of the tree line, still shrouded by the invasive fog.

"Mistress?" I whispered.

"What?!" she snapped, wheeling on me and snapping her arms down. As she turned, I drew back in fear. Her eyes were wide, and in them I saw the brief promise of indiscriminate violence. In a single blink, the turmoil inside was banished, and her face was wrought with concern.

"Is everything all right?" She glanced upwards, to the second floor. "Is something wrong with my father?"

I shook my head. "Dinner's arrived, mistress."

She nodded and headed down the hall. I paused for a moment, staring out the small panes of glass, scouring the tree line, but of the spectral figure there was no sign. Mistress Emily said very little through dinner. It had been that way since we had returned, and I was little surprised. I often found my thoughts drifting to the faces of the poachers that had died, and I cannot imagine how much heavier such events must weigh on mistress Emily's mind.

That night, while tossing in my own bed, I heard my mistress weeping softly in the next room. After a moment of weighing the value of her comfort against her dignity, I lit a candle and crept to the door, opening it a tiny sliver. My mistress did not sit up or react, and I began to close the door, sure that she was still asleep, when she spoke.

"Surprised," she sobbed. "Both looked surprised."

I sighed and pushed my way into the room, as quietly as I could. Even as I neared the mistress's bed, she went quiet, and drawing closer I could see her shoulders relaxing, the terrors of her mind

in retreat for the moment. I sighed again and turned to leave.

The fog outside of the large picture window in her room swirled violently, as if someone had been standing just outside and had fled at my arrival. A shiver clawed its way across my spine, and I returned to my own room, making sure to leave my candle lit and the adjoining door standing open.

\* \* \*

At breakfast the next day, Lord Mayor Philip seemed a little weaker than usual, although it was hard to pick out from his usual tremble. He had a faint cough, however, which was unusual for him. By that evening, he was too ill to come down to dinner.

Illness was, of course, a common occurrence, so no spare thought was given when the house maid came down with a slight cough the next morning. The Mordentish bore illness with as much stoicism as they did every other hardship. There was no complaining to be heard when the occasional ague swept through the area. I'm sure the granny women in their shacks just beyond the outskirts of town saw a profitable upswing in the number of late afternoon visitors wanting to purchase an 'herbal tonic,' but beyond that, the coughs and sniffles were born in resolute silence.

By evening, however, it had become clear that Phillip Blackfield was taking this illness especially hard. A priest arrived just before nightfall to bless the old lord as he coughed in his bed. I attended my mistress as she sat in his room, although I wished I might have been elsewhere. The ugly coughs he made were horrible. Wet and hacking, so deep they seemed to bring on a full body convulsion with each spasm of his

lungs. He was mercifully beyond his own senses, lying with half-lidded eyes rolling about aimlessly, each labored breath a promise that it would all be over so, so soon. His face was perhaps the most horrible part. Small white blisters formed around his mouth, and had spread across his cheeks and even up to his forehead. They reminded me, perversely, of the starry tattoo of the moor man, and I tried desperately to focus on the face of anyone but Lord Mayor Phillip.

The priest, Lord Phillip's maid, the granny lady who came late, late in the evening, all of them bore the same face that the Mordentish wear when confronting adversity, as though they had all donned masks carved from pale stone. Only my mistress failed to keep this mask up. She watched her father, never moving, her head cocked to one side. I didn't speak to her. Her father was dying. Other people, the very old or very young, might soon follow. When he did go, she'd be expected to step into his shoes immediately. And of course, she'd shot and killed two men recently enough that the clothes she'd done it in had yet to be laundered. There were too many feelings in her head right then, and I didn't need to be adding any others to the mix.

By breakfast of the next day, Lord Phillip passed beyond. I alone attended Lady Emily Blackfield at her dining table, while the other servants scurried through the house, covering mirrors and stopping clocks. She seemed adrift, as if she couldn't quite decide how to feel. For the entire meal, she ate in silence, thinking private thoughts. Finally, she placed her fork down and turned to me.

"Well Lilah," she said, "what shall we do now?"

\* \* \*

The late Lord Phillip's maid was the next to go. She left late that night and never returned, but three days later, a girl from town brought word that she had died in her bed, her face starred with the same white blisters as the Lord Mayor. The message was punctuated with wet coughs, but by that point a score of people around the manor and in town had developed coughs too.

Within a week, a half dozen more people had died. Whispers began circulating that Lord Mayor Phillip rested unquietly, and sought to bring his entire town with him to the beyond. By the end of the second week, they sent for a priest of Ezra to lay the spirit to rest. When the priest finally arrived four days later, half the town sounded like their chests were soggy drums, relentlessly beaten by the rhythmless hands of pestilence. Two days after his arrival, he awoke coughing himself.

There were brief rumors that Lady Emily was herself the source of the trouble. But the isolated group of malcontents who spoke such stories were found shortly thereafter, victims of an especially swift-moving case of the pox, their faces mottled white from their numberless blisters and red from the flecked blood of their own coughs, and those rumors ceased, replaced immediately by rumors of preparations for flight.

Four weeks after she had become Lady Mayor, I heard the message I'd been waiting for, and came to deliver it to the mistress. The manor was deserted, and I walked room by room, remembering the people who both lived within the house, and brought life to it, looking for my elusive mistress. After searching for her through the study and the den, I remembered the boy. The Blackfields' servant boy had been a ward of the family for some time, and when he had taken ill, the house staff had

laid him up within the manor itself. Of course, I was the last remaining servant, but I tended to him still. I finally found the lady in the boy's room.

Heavy breaths echoed from the walls as I entered. The boy was no longer able to speak, and was reduced to the same delirious eye-rolling that Lord Mayor Phillip had been. Lady Emily crouched at his side, leaning over the boy's form. At first I thought she was changing his blanket, until I realized she wasn't moving. Rather, she stood poised, her head scant inches from his chest, listening to the boy's debilitated breathing.

"Mistress?" My horror softened my voice to a whisper. With feline smoothness, my mistress craned her neck to look at me, not straightening up from her pose.

"I can hear his heartbeat," she said, her voice so low it was almost a hiss.

"I... I bring word," I stammered, gesturing to the hall.

My mistress stood and swept from the room. She did not pause in the hall to listen to me, but instead kept walking. I followed her, too stunned to know where to begin. Lady Emily finally stopped before the great doors of the terrace, staring out at the swamp and heaving a great sigh.

"He suffers," she said, touching the cold glass with her forehead.

"I know, ma'am."

She raised her hands to lie flat on the small panes of glass, her fingers making a slight squeak as she dragged them down. "Would it be a kindness, do you think, to end his agony?" She still stared at the mist rolling through the trees, made luminous by the swollen moon.

"He is young and strong, lady," I said. "He may recover yet. And civilized folk don't go about killing one another." She didn't respond, but instead smirked and stood

staring at the swamp, sighing once more. "The people are leaving," I said.

"Dying?" she asked. "I know. The priest didn't help."

"No," I said. "The healthy ones. The sick ones will go too, but they'll perish before reaching the next village."

Lady Emily sighed. "Within a day, or a week, everyone will be gone or dead. We'll leave nothing behind us but empty buildings and pox-speckled corpses." She stared for a moment longer, and then a curious smile came over her face, as if she could see something in the rolling fog that I could not. Such a smile, in such a dark time, made my skin crawl.

"Is it just me, or do their faces remind you of the moor man?" she asked.

I swallowed. That hateful old visage had haunted my dreams, as much as the men we had seen gunned down. The plague victims hadn't helped to banish it.

"They do, mistress."

"I wonder what it's like for them."

I began breathing again, touched by this familiar display of empathy. "The plague victims pass beyond reason before the end, mistress. If they feel anything, I believe it's peaceful."

"Don't be silly," she snorted. "They struggle for every breath, even as their own lungs reject it. Even in their delirium, you can see their terror. But I didn't mean them." She waved a dismissive hand in the boy's direction. "I meant the moor men."

I stood there, mouth agape, for a time. I could scarcely fathom what she was asking. "The... the moor men?" I managed finally.

When she wheeled around to face me, I felt the surge of terror I had felt the first time we had been in this situation, only this time there was no recognition in her face, no softening of her savagery. Her eyes were wide, her lips drawn back in a hideous leer.

"Yes," she said, stalking toward me. I tried to back away slowly, at the same time trying to fight the urge to bolt from her presence. "The moor men. What must it be like? To live with no demands? No weeping? Did he lay awake that night, do you think, wracked with visions of the man he'd strangled?"

My back hit the far wall, and I jumped, realizing I had nowhere left to go. "No mistress," I said. "The moor man is a primitive. He isn't enlightened like the most of men. He doesn't understand the value of a human life." My voice quavered with a fear I hadn't felt since I'd fled Souragne. Even the gunplay in the swamp paled in comparison to this, the fear I thought I had left behind with the voodoo men and granny ladies of my birth land.

Emily lunged at me, and I flattened against the wall. The mistress pulled up just short, staring into my eyes from a distance intimate enough for a lover. After a pause, she leaned her head in to one side, her lips close enough to brush my ear.

"Maybe they understand the value of a life just fine," she whispered. Inhaling the scent of my skin with a deep breath, she leaned to the other side of my neck and repeated the feral gesture. One of her hands gripped my wrist, sapping my strength to resist.

"Maybe they know the symphony of the heartbeat, the vintage of fear." She lifted my arm to her face, and I whimpered as she inhaled again, her tongue darting out to brush my wrist. "Maybe they know the value of *flesh*..."

I jerked my arm away, and this at last seemed to break her from her madness. She stared at me, cowering against the wall, and it seemed as though she couldn't even understand what was happening.

"Lilah?" she asked, her voice laden with concern. "Lilah, you're shaking. Whatever has frightened you so?"

\* \* \*

Sleep would not come, of course. I rose and paced the room, putting things aside that we must take, and consigning the things that I must leave. I'd already decided, before I knew that I'd decided. When the boy passed, the mistress and I were going to leave. We had to leave. The town had become an anchor, dragging all of us down with it. If the mistress and I were still healthy, we had to leave before it pulled us too deep to extricate ourselves.

The town falling apart had affected Emily Blackfield in a way that was as profound as it was twisted. We saw it in Souragne from time to time. We said that such people had heard the song of the cypress — men and women who lived alone in the bayou, who abandoned the twin pillars of civilization and culture. Wild eyed and crude, those who heard the song of the cypress were little better than the moor men of Mordent.

It had all started with that damned moor man, I thought. Mistress Emily had killed, had crossed the line from civility to barbarity, for one brief instant, to save that beast's life, and the experience had touched her. She couldn't forget it. And then a chilling thought occurred to me.

She had crossed the line, and found herself trapped. There is a reason that those who hear the cypress song do not just pack their bags and return to enlightened lands. There is a seductiveness, a certain lustful abandon, to be found in a life without the trappings of civilization. Perhaps that brief taste of savagery, of murderous rage unleashed, had awoken that lust within my mistress. What hell

would that create in the mind for a person forced then to return, not only to a life of civilization, but as a leader of enlightened men?

It would help, of course, if such a tormented person, torn between their heathen desires and their rational conscience, had a benefactor willing to make their decision easier. A benefactor who owed the one in torment a favor. Say, his life. If such a benefactor were able to slip through the swamps unseen, if such a benefactor could work his tainted spirit magic, he could make that decision very easy. Remove the sounds of civilization, and the song of the cypress would become overwhelming.

I dropped the dress I'd been holding and rushed from the room. I didn't know how I could help her, I only knew I had to reach the mistress before her seducer's hold became permanent. I shouldered through the door to the master bedroom in an undignified rush, before own shock brought me to a halt.

The room was in shambles. Phillip Blackfield's family portrait, of himself, his wife, and his children, had been torn from its mounting and reduced to shreds. The bedclothes lay in tatters, the furnishings turned over and left where they had fallen. Of Lady Blackfield there was no sign. I turned and ran, a dread creeping into my heart. I could only pray that I could reach the boy's room before it was too late.

When I arrived, the boy lay still and cold. The pillow over his face might hint at a vestige of mercy, but I could too easily imagine my mistress grinning, inhaling sharply with every last jerk of the body beneath her. I stumbled from the boy's

room, too horrified to even plan a consistent course for my own feet.

The veranda doors stood open, exposing the moonlit fog crawling across the terrace. I stood, staring, at the two figures cavorting in the distance. One bent and brown, visible only as a swirling imperfection in the mist. The second body bounded strong and healthy, pale skin fairly glowing in the moonlight. I stared, my blood growing cold as I watched her dance away.

I coughed.

Everyone is gone now. The healthy have gone, and the sick have gone beyond. I've buried the boy and the few bodies that were left. My cough grows worse day by day. I am the last – of course I am the last. We were true friends, she and I, and true friendship is the last bond of civilization to go.

I believe I could escape the curse if I went with her. The curse is only meant for the civilized. I think I would rather die enlightened. I hope that I pass into delirium before my will fails. Still, with every cough, I know my escape is just outside. I could slip off my clothes, could feel the cold, wet, fecund earth beneath my feet, and run into the fog with them. They would tattoo me, as they have no doubt done her, and I would run with my mistress again. We would run with the other moor folk. We'd hunt by night. Savor the taste of fear. Feast on manflesh. Rut in the muck, heedless of any eyes upon us. If my spirit remains strong longer than my body, they will find my remains in the manor, withered and rotted. If my resolve fails, I will join her, and we will dance in the fog, obeying no ruler but the irresistible song of the cypress.

# SCALIES OF THE SEA OF SORROWS

A Van Richten Files - Sea creatures previews on reavers

Joël Paquin of the FoS

*The man who has experienced shipwreck shudders even at a calm sea.*

-- Ovid

Miladies,

My name is Melano Limnetes de Louvoi. I am not a scholar, ~~far from~~ it. It is in fact, the first time I write a ~~book~~ something this long. I can't write as nice as bards, or like scholars such as those you ladies usually meet or read. So you'll understand, I was ~~very~~ surprised by your request. The friendship I had with your departed uncle is in large part responsible for my acceptance of your request to write this. But do not expect fantasy or poetry or epic tales, as I do not have this talent. I've written reports all my life, but it was under my duties as Port-a-Lucine Port Authority First Officer – just reports of plain facts and figures, very dull reports, but useful for my trade. ~~I can't~~ ~~do~~ I do not know all your fancy words, or perhaps just cannot remember them when I need to. So here's my report for you, straight and without fancies. I hope you won't be bored when reading it.

*LWF – Gennifer, monsieur de Louvoi is perhaps not a bard superbly skilled with the pen, indeed, but his writing on reavers is conceivably from one of the most*

*knowledgeable people in the world regarding these horrible sea creatures. I suggest the removal of this first paragraph of his letter to make it more formal when published in the Van Richten Files - Sea Creatures report.*

Your great uncle was right in keeping my name as a reference on the reavers, or the "scalies" as the creatures are sometimes called in Lamordia and Darkon, at least in the maritime trade.

I had a direct encounter with these scalies when I was young, and survived to tell the tale, which is a very peculiar and sad story as you'll see. I was on my older brother's fishing boat when it was suddenly attacked by a group of terrible scalies.

I'm the last of a family of eight. I was eleven ~~years~~ summers old, and my dad allowed me to sometimes help my brother Rémi when some of the sailors were missing at boarding time. I would sometimes pray to Ezra that one of them would get too ~~drunk~~ tired to get on board, so I could go to sea with my brother, and I was glad that it happened fairly often in the summer. On these days, I helped my older brother and

his crew, helping with the sails, the nets, and even sometimes taking the wheel, when Rémi was busy unloading the catch in the hold.

As you know, the fishing boats are usually back to port before sundown. That day in August, the nets were filled with rare abundance, and my brother decided to stay longer at sea, to take advantage of the bountiful catch. That day, the nets were full right when thrown in the water, and my brother saw it as a great source of profit. The overflowing nets took a long time to empty in the hold. Also, we were seeing more schools of great tasting thazards moving around the boat, their silvery shape daring us to catch them! My brother and his crew really thought providence was with us... but something more sinister was happening, and I would realize it only years later.

The boat was filled like it never was before, and it was slowly going back toward Port-a-Lucine, but it was quite late and the sunset was nearly ending. My brother Rémi was very pleased of the catch, and shared brandy with his crew. Even I could get a small sip of alcohol. Everybody sang and didn't care if our boat came back to the port very late ...

Suddenly, the scalies stormed the boat, coming at once from all sides of the ship! And within about a minute, all the men were thrown in the water by the scalies and drowned. There were maybe eight of them? The attack was awfully brutal, and I heard

the screams of fear and pain of the drowning sailors, mixed with the sound of crushed bones for those who resisted.

Then, as suddenly as it started, the scalies went back to the sea and the boat was left empty and silent. I was alone. The only trace of my brother and the fishermen was a few pools of blood on the wooden floorboard, brilliant under the first rays of moonlight.

But the scalies didn't kill me, or throw me in the water with the others. During their attack, a few came toward me, aggressively, but changed direction after looking at me with their cold fish eyes, as if they changed their mind, pushing me out of the way, hard, with their scaly bodies. Then they all jumped back into the dark sea and I was left alone on the boat, shocked. The large claw marks on the hull helped make my story believable when the boat was towed back to Port-a-Lucine the next day.

To this day still, I do not understand why those monsters spared me while they threw my brother and all the other sailors in the water with great force and brutality, to eat them I assume. But when I became an adult, now hunting scalies with vengeance, and collecting information on them, I found other persons who were astonishingly spared in similar attacks when they were young.

Within the last twenty years, I've read at least three reports of raids inland by sea



monsters (we assume those were all reaver attacks), all along the Sea of Sorrows coast, which mention the annihilation of a farm, or a camp, where everybody was killed and eaten, except young children. All the children said afterward that the sea monsters ignored them to focus their savagery on the adults. I know that it happened on boats too.

Why would they spare children? This is another mystery of the Sea of Sorrows, to which I hope to find the answer someday. When discussing with experienced sea men, and monster hunters, the most likely hypothesis discussed over the years involved some religious belief (some kind of precept such as "*do not kill the young,*" perhaps?). But the answer to this riddle is possibly something completely different. If miladies have an answer to it, I'd be curious to read it.

*LWF – Perhaps it is simply a natural principle, a cruel sense of ecology as we sometimes see in nature, or with fishermen: the reavers simply do not eat the young until they grow up, in order to have more meat to feast upon? This topic should be researched in more detail. I'll try to get these reports from previous incidents involving reavers' attacks and children.*

You now will surely understand why I have this great hatred for these creatures, which explains why I hunted these creatures in my spare time, and also helped prepare many hunters to track them. During my life, I tried to hunt them as often as I could, which unfortunately wasn't very often, as they are elusive on the Sea. But I tried to collect as much information on them as I could find. I tried to keep only first-hand information, but you'll see that I often resorted to other sources, and even recorded some wild rumors about reavers.

As a word of caution, I have to say that this essay is about those reavers found in the Sea of Sorrows. Not to say that scalies are not found in the Nocturnal Sea, they are, but the reavers encountered there are usually less monstrous in their behavior, less "untamed," as if they were a part of some kind of undersea militia. Their savagery is similar when they attack, but those from the Nocturnal Sea are said to be often led with more cohesion, often by a sahuagin sea humanoid monster, which is surprising considering the profound hatred those two species show, at least in Saragoss. There must be a reason for this different behavior, perhaps the reavers there have bigger brains, or something is perhaps able to control them? Another sea mystery, again.

Many legends (such as Uri Barak's *Scaly Devils of the Deep*) abound on the creation of reavers, calling them the degenerate offspring of sirines, former pirates cursed for their cruelty into being reavers forever, or the mad creation of an ancient civilization that drowned eons ago. I'm led to think most of these rumors are untrue, as I have yet to find any proof of them.

From now on, I will try to use the "chapters" you suggested in your letter.

## Physical description

The reavers are tall amphibious humanoids. They average 6 feet, but some can measure up to 7-and-a-half feet tall, and they are completely covered with large fish scales, except on the face. At the leg and arm joints, on the forearm, the shoulders and on the spine, these scales become elongated, sturdy and dangerously sharp, like thin steel nails or razors. Touching a reaver's body should be done



with great care. Their scale color is mostly deep greenish, sometimes with browner patches for camouflage, or occasionally with brown lines along their muscular body.

Their expressionless heads are truly horrible hideous, like that of large fishes with protuberant eyes – but unblinking, fishy, bulbous, yellow eyes that watch you with intensity and anger, or perhaps more simply, a bestial hunger. The top of the head is flat, with larger scales protecting it. Their fish-like mouth is large, always half opened (except when savagely biting prey), showing many rows of small but pointed triangular teeth, like that of a shark. The bite is very tremendously powerful.

The hands and feet of the creatures are large, especially the feet, and the ends of those are webbed like a duck's, which explains their impressive speed when swimming. But it is a weakness on land: these large webbed feet hinder the creature outside the water.

The hands end with small but strong claws that can inflict terrible wounds. I know the nasty creature takes pleasure in gutting its prey while they are still alive. Given these strong natural weapons, reavers never use other kind of weapons. They do not wear any jewels or tattoos or similar status marks, and the only thing

enabling us to differentiate them quickly is their scale color pattern and their scars. Heck It isn't even possible to differentiate males from females, as the organs that usually make a distinction on humanoids are not apparent. Examining dead bodies, the only visible difference found is that females are usually slightly smaller than males.

A reaver breathes in the water through his mouth, and fills his lungs with water. When out of the water, the same lungs are able to

breathe air and extract oxygen, but not for a very long period of time, as the reavers suffocate when their lungs get dry. The skeleton of the creature is generally built in a similar fashion to a human's, with bones and cartilage in similar structures.

Lastly, I've once seen a variant reaver that had a lower torso like a sirine's, a large fish tail instead of two legs. It would seem to give some credit to those Darkonese stories that some reavers are born from sirines mating with male humans, and having a male child (the female children are always sirines). The one of this type that I've spied within a group of normal reavers wasn't worshiped by the other reavers, nor was it scorned.

Also, over the years, I have found that their blood is red like humans'. Their bodies can exude a tell-tale fish smell, but a reaver must out of the water for more than one hour to get this fishy smell.

Reavers do not speak any human or other surface language. I've never found any report where a reaver spoke a human tongue. On land, they communicate between themselves with a harsh, clicking and hissing language that is enormously difficult for humans to try to imitate. Underwater, this strange language is

completely silent to humans, as it somehow uses the water in ways we can't hear.

## Habitat, habits, life cycle and Society

Scalies gather in clans of a dozen creatures individuals. About a third of this number will be young, but be careful, those can be as vicious as their grown-up relatives. At the early age of 7 or 8, they start following the clan on raids.

The strongest hunter among the reavers is the leader of the clan. This brutal creature does not share power with any other reaver. Infighting is frequent, as the clan leader is often challenged. Their only value is the survival of the clan, and all else is unimportant, making them often act like monsters and savages.

From what I know and have read about them, I estimate their life expectancy at about 75 years, but being brutal creatures, few of them live that long I suppose.

Reavers are not nomadic; they have lairs which they can keep for years before moving elsewhere. In the Sea of Sorrows, these lairs are located in deep places – about a hundred feet deep, often rocky holes, or coral reefs made dangerous by the incessant moving of waves. When this type of lair isn't available, they live in nearly impenetrable, thick forests of sea weeds and kelps. These lairs are usually difficult to find, as they are hidden, and very few air bubbles come from them to betray the reavers' presence. Inside, it's usually only one chamber, where they live all together. It is surprisingly not very large for a clan of about a dozen reavers. The

lair are often filled with bones and other refuse.

During the day, these lairs are always watched for incoming threats by hidden, half-asleep reavers. An unmoving reaver in underwater vegetation benefits from camouflage. From their hiding place, should these guards spot something, they can move stealthily to the lair to warn the others of incoming threat or prey. Then, the entire clan rushes out, seemingly out of nowhere, to attack and destroy this menace.

The area surrounding these lairs is also a treacherous place, with many traps ready to catch the unwary. These traps are typically floating lassos made to look like drifting sea weed, with poisoned barbs or shards of glass in them.

As I said, during the day, these creatures sleep lazily near or in their lair. They are ~~mostly~~ only active at night, from sunset to sunrise, but if they see a boat passing nearby, they can rouse sooner, as when my brother's boat was attacked. Their trips inland, however, are absolutely always in the dark.

Their sense of territoriality is very strong, and aggressively enforced: any intelligent creature in its vicinity will be



hunted and killed, or made to leave after gory accidents or a show of power. They will attack isolated farms and campgrounds, and any settlement large enough to be a threat is savagely raided by night, and in an extremely bloody and gory way, as a message to the other people living there to leave the area, and not to try to pursue them.

I've seen the results of many of these raids, and those body parts left behind uneaten are very difficult to identify; the usual bloody head stuck on a pole is also often maimed beyond recognition. The numerous web-footed tracks leave no doubt on the culprit of those terrible massacres. They are merciless and will kill anyone they find, and even the dogs and farm animals. The only mysterious exception, as I wrote, being any young child of less than 10-12 years old.

Very rarely, we also have confirmed reports of the scalies abducting people and bringing them to the sea. Why would they do that is another mystery, ~~and perhaps one we do not wish to know~~. Your uncle had a theory that they are possibly bringing food to a dying matriarch or patriarch, but I'm not sure their savage ways include caring for the old. I suspect something more sinister and savage, possibly a sacrifice to an undersea god?

What must be known is that they will consider as theirs the territory around their lair, even if they've just settled there and the human farms have been there for decades! Many people have been savagely killed in the coastal areas because of this aggressive sense of territoriality. From many reports of reaver attacks and retaliatory hunts, I now estimate this sense of territory to extend about a quarter mile to half a mile, maximum, around their lair.

At least, these attacks happen only near the coasts. I believe their survival on

land is about 12 hours, maximum, and I've rarely found evidence that they've stayed out of the water that long. After that time, they start to asphyxiate from lack of water. Their large webbed feet are not adapted to walk on land, and they are slow, their steps awkward, and the reavers leave large tracks, which makes them vulnerable to organized vengeance. For all those reasons, they prefer to raid areas located a mile inland at the most, so they can attack with lightning speed and safely retreat into the water.

Reavers can freely travel in the salty waters of the Sea of Sorrows, or in the fresh waters of the core's rivers. But their preference is definitively for the Sea of Sorrow's saltiness.

Rarely, outcast reavers are encountered inland, in fresh water rivers, in a lake, or in the largest ponds. Those scalies can swim far inland but, being alone, they are not as hostile about their territorial claims, and do not attack unless people come alone into their lairs, or cross their path. I believe that outcast reavers have either failed to protect the lair from outsider attacks, or led a disastrous raid inland. Since reaver leaders are the strongest of the clans, one should not presume that outcast are more feeble creatures. These broody, lonely creatures are less aggressive than their saltwater relatives, and often eat fish and crustaceans to survive. They only hunt people swimming in their lake, and are not usually known to hunt on dry land.

## Abilities

Like sharks, reavers have a precise vibration sense that enables them to feel the presence of other creatures in the water around them, even in complete darkness or



when blinded. They use this sense to know the number of people in a boat, and their approximate location inside the boat. They also use this sense to attack people when they are alone.

While the reavers are generally stupid and aggressive creatures, not known for subtlety, and spellcasters are unknown among them, some of them have developed druid-like salient abilities that make these individuals even more dangerous.

One of these supernatural powers enables such a reaver to animate kelp and seaweed to ensnare its prey. You understand this power is, of course, quite deadly for those who need to breathe air! It keeps you in place if you are unlucky, or slows your movement by half. Either scenario is often fatal, as reavers will use their impressive swimming speed to attack any entangled air-breathing prey.

Another of these underwater powers is to move debris from the sea floor upward, obscuring vision, but not for the reaver who can then use its shark-like senses. This surprise power can again weaken and confuse even the most prepared adventurers.

Another of their known abilities is a strange control they can exert over a school of fish. The reaver using this power summons a school of fish and controls its

movement, and may use it to remain hidden *inside* the school of fish. This is probably what the reavers did when they attacked my brother's boat. They used it to fill my brother's nets, making us extremely late and unable to reach port before the sunset, so they could attack us in the dark...

I've also had one report of reavers summoning crocodiles, but I've never been able to confirm this information. It is doubtful they can do this, as crocodiles (and also alligators) are quite rare in the Sea of Sorrows. Another report has them using sharks as mounts, but I can only guess that people confused reavers and sea-devils sahuagin.

## Threats and strategies

Scalies are evil and malevolent: they like to destroy fishing nets when they can, cut anchor ropes to let a boat drift, etc. ~~They do it just to be annoying. Few are th~~ Very few are the coastal cities and towns that do not report any problem with reavers in any given year.

A reaver can eat any kind of meat or fish, but it prefers sentient creatures, and it seems unfortunately that humans are their first choice for meals. They are not at all interested in our dry land manufactured items, but can be known to ransack a boat or a farm apparently just for the fun of it, without taking anything.

They mostly attack swimmers and small boats, but have been known to swarm larger targets after using simple strategies. They also like to hunt inland, up to nearly a mile as I wrote earlier, posing a threat to any isolated farms or settlement. At night, they may also be attracted by the light of a campfire near the water.

Reavers attack at night, and usually in the most brutal way. On land, they run

toward their target and claw them, as well as bite. Whenever they can get a good grab at their prey, they will also try to grind their victims along their spiny and sharp scales. They only stop to eat when all visible victims are dead and have been torn to pieces.

On a boat, they attack with surprise and grab their prey, then throw themselves into the water while maintaining their grab on their prey and biting/raking them with savagery. Easier prey will be simply grabbed and pinned to the bottom to drown, and then torn to pieces.

Being undisciplined, and of low intellect, they usually do not use a lot of strategy, other than being swift and brutal, but I have to report that they are sometimes known to make basic diversions when facing prey in larger amount than their number.

I've seen a reaver stand on a rock when it attacked a canoe near the edge of the sea, to give the impression that the water there was shallow. One experienced fighter was lured by it and was surprised to find the water much deeper than he had thought. A deadly mistake, as the reavers then used their remarkable swimming speed to attack and run. The man was cut into



pieces before we could do anything. It was like watching a brutal shark frenzy.

With that said about their low intellect, scabies sometimes have manifested minimal tactical planning. In 754, in Martira Bay, they cut the anchor rope of the merchant boat *Anakapalle* from Sri Raji during the night, and then dragged it out of the port to attack its crew where they could not be helped. By chance, one person realized that the boat was being moved and alerted the crew, who were able to prepare to repel the creatures.

Another time, in 756, they used the same trick to drag the passenger boat Rabrunain toward the treacherous reefs in northern Lamordia.

In conclusion, I'd like to remind would-be hunters how difficult this chase can be, as reavers will retreat to the water when facing any true threat (when facing a number of humans at least triple their own number, or when half of their force has been brought down). Chasing them into their lair is extremely dangerous, nearly foolish, and I prefer to hunt them by ambush on dry land. The creatures shun fire, so this weakness can be used against them, to push them back to the water, or to make them follow the trail where you have set your traps. Remember, these beasts are deadly, but of low intelligence.

I sincerely hope this information will be of use for you and your readers.

*Melano Limnetes de Louvoi*  
*Port Authority First Officer,*  
*Port-a-Lucine*

## Universal Abilities:

**Amphibious (Ex), Cutting Scales (Ex), Improved Grab (Ex)** – see *Denizens of Dread*.

**Camouflage (Ex)** Since a reaver's scales blend with underwater plant life, immobile reavers are able to remain unseen in this environment: it takes a DC 24 Spot check to notice its presence.

**Blindsense (Ex)** As a shark, reaver can locate all creatures underwater within a 30-foot radius. This ability works only when the reaver is underwater. While lurking under a boat for three minutes, it can also use this sense to estimate precisely how many persons are in a boat and their location.

**Water Dependent (Ex)** Reavers can survive out of the water for 1 hour per point of Constitution (after that, refer to the drowning rules of the DMG).

## Feat

### Swim-By attack [Monstrous]

**Prerequisites:** Swim speed higher than land speed

**Benefit:** When you are swimming and use the charge action, you may move and attack as if with a standard charge and then move again (continuing the straight line of the charge). Your total movement for the round can't exceed your swimming speed. You do not provoke an attack of opportunity from the opponent that you attack.

**Special:** A reaver may select Swim-By Attack as one of his bonus feats (an option to replace Cleave or Power Attack)

## Salient Abilities (rare):

**Sea weed entangle (Su)** as per the druid entangle spell, but underwater only. Range is short (50 feet) and area of effect is a 20-ft.-radius spread. Duration is 1 minute. The DC to resist the spell is 16. Swimming speed is affected.

**Obscure water (Ex)** by summoning material from the sea floor (a mix of whatever available there: mud, kelp, sand, seashell, etc.), a stationary globe of water in a 20 foot radius becomes opaque. This blocks all vision beyond 5 feet (including darkvision, but the reaver can still feel the exact location of its prey with its blindsense). Range is 30 feet, and duration one minute. In these conditions, a creature 5 feet away has partial concealment (attacks have a 20% miss chance). Creatures farther away have concealment (50% miss chance, and the attacker cannot use sight to locate the target). This ability solely functions underwater.

**Summon school of fish (Su)** A reaver using this power calls a school of ordinary fish between one inch long to about eight inches long maximum (the school of fish typically fills a space between 10' and 20' radius around the reaver) and is able to hide within it (DC to Spot from the surface is 30, and 25 for observers under the water). A reaver within a school can alter the school's movements in the direction it wishes (e.g., to approach a target unseen, or to lure a fisherman's boat with a bountiful catch).

# SENNENTUNTSCHI

A lovable monster

By Kai D. Kalix aka Kadarin  
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## Sennentuntschi

**Climate/Terrain:** Cold/Mountains

**Frequency:** Very rare

**Organization:** Solitary

**Activity Cycle:** Night

**Diet:** None

**Intelligence:** Average to High (8-14)

**Treasure:** Nil

**Alignment:** Neutral evil

**No. Appearing:** 1

**Armor Class:** 5

**Movement:** 8

**Hit Dice:** 6

**THAC0:** 14

**No. of Attacks:** 3

**Damage/Attack:** 1d8/1d8/1d2

**Special Attacks:** Charm (see below),  
poison, other attacks possible, minions  
possible

**Special Defenses:** Immune to fire, cold and  
non-magical weapons, golem and undead  
immunities

**Magical Resistance:** Nil

**Size:** M

**Morale:** Elite (13-14)

**XP Value:** Varies

*Note: The sennentuntschi (this is the Swiss  
name for the creature) is an old myth from  
the Alps.*

The sennentuntschi is a special kind of "straw" golem that can only be created by young men in the mountains, more specifically, by young herders sent to tend the livestock (in most cases, cows). It doesn't require magic to create a sennentuntschi, or at least, no more than subconscious magic. All sennentuntschi are female, appearing at first to be human.

## Combat

The sennentuntschi can change her fingernails into sharp steel claws, which she has created out of the pitchfork that was used to awaken her (2 claw attacks for 1d8). She also has a bite attack (1d2) which seems not to be very effective but can be poisonous. Against young men she can use a charm attack.

She will normally only attack men, preferably young ones, and kill them, sometimes by skinning them alive. She also has some other attack forms (see below for the glass bottles) which will not be discussed here further.

When on a rampage, a sennentuntschi will kill one of the youngsters by skinning him alive and then throwing him down the mountain-side; the others will be killed by relieving them of some vital organs. Sometimes she skins all the humans she kills, throws away the bodies, and stuffs the skins with straw. The reason for this behaviour is unknown, but it is rumored

that some sennentuntschis can awaken these figures into lesser golems, which serve her – especially when she plans to continue down the mountain. In these rare cases, a Sennentuntschi has been known to go down to the village from which the boys came, killing anyone she meets.

## Habitat/Society

Sennentuntschis exist almost exclusively in the mountains. They were first reported by rural Lamordians, living in the shadow of the Sleeping Beast, who gave the creatures their name. But they have since been spotted in other regions, along the Balinoks and the Mountains of Misery. They have no society. Although there are stories of some of them talking, or at least grunting, this has never been proven (because very few have survived an attack by a sennentuntschi, and those who did don't want to talk about it).

## Ecology

These golems are created by young men herding goats or cows on the mountains. These men use straw, cheese, a pitchfork, a sack, and between one and three glass bottles to build a simulacrum of a female, which they then lay with. On the third night, the creature awakes – as a young, beautiful, scarcely-clad, and very dangerous woman – and kills the young men. It is not known if the sennentuntschi is possessed by an undead spirit or a demon – or both.

To destroy a sennentuntschi, a priest and a wizard (or similarly gifted magic users) are needed. Unfortunately, every one of these creatures is rather unique; so it is not known which spells actually work against them. But it seems that at least turn undead and some kind of *disintegrate* spell are needed.

Don't ask about the cheese. And do not even think about the bottles.

# OL' REAPER

**You can't keep a good horse down...**

By Matt "strahsbuddy" Doyle  
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The shifty-eyed barman returned from his cellar with a dusty black bottle. The yellowed label had been printed with a skill that age could not mute. It depicted a powerful black stallion whose haunting eyes fixed on the observer with accusation. The ornate script declared the contents as "A Peated Malt Procured in the Pristine Western Muskegs by Master Distillers in 717." The two revelers stopped their conversation to look at the newly introduced inebriant. A palpable silence fell over the entire room, and the walls seemed to close in on its only three occupants, centered on the bottle. Butterflies very nearly emerged from their cocoons in the bellies of the patrons before one regained his voice.

"I say, I cannot get drunk off the looks of this bottle." He gestured toward the corkscrew in the barman's hand, "Won't you put that to good use and open it?"

"Beg pardon m'Lord," the barman replied sheepishly "but this is the most expensive bottle in the entire tavern, most likely the entire town. I hope not to offend if I might ask for its purchase to be settled before it is shared."

The first drinker choked down a scoff with a rehearsed condescendence, but his mate interrupted whatever chastising he may have had planned for the insolent tavernmaster by dropping a silk purse on the bar, met with the sound of a healthy jingling of coins. "No offense taken, my

good man. Indeed, if Ol' Reaper is as strong as I remember, you are quite prudent to take care of such business while my friend and I are still able to manipulate our purse strings!"

The barman chuckled nervously and gave an aquiescent grin to his patrons as he broke through the seal with his corkscrew and skillfully unstopped the bottle with a low, hollow thunk that seemed to bounce off the empty glasses and sounded slightly like a heartbeat. He placed the cork on the bar, exposing the bottom of it to the drinkers so they could see the genuine "717" branded on it. Nearly invisible wisps of smoky vapor wafted from the bottle as he poured, and the odor quickly filled the empty bar. Placing the bottle between the two half-filled tumblers, he politely reached for the purse. "You have an eye for value, m'Lord. I am impressed you would have even known we had this bottle here; there are not many left."

"Indeed there are not. I am thankful to you—and most likely your predecessor behind this bar—for taking such good care of it for so long." He took the bottle by the neck and rose. "Come, Maurice, let's leave our host to his duties and enjoy our special treat at that quiet table in the corner. Our tongues are sure to be loosened by the end of this first glass."

## Background

Wilfred Godefroy's suicide in 579 was mourned by few. He was arrogant even by noble standards. His servants whispered that his harsh public persona was just the tip of an iceberg of malice that he would exhibit behind closed doors. He had a reputation as a man that was truly without love. However, Godefroy did enjoy one thing above his power-mongering and occasionally miserly ways. There was indeed something that he was genuinely proud of and cared for with an almost childlike reverence: his horse.

Through shrewd negotiation and the calling in of a few favors owed to him, Godefroy purchased the rights to a colt trained by master breeders across the sea. He had spent a small fortune for the animal, not least because a horse of that bloodline had never been sold ungelded to a foreigner. Godefroy read correspondence from his breeders with a near giddiness that was well outside his character, and over the years his infatuation with the animal had reached levels of obsession before it even arrived in Mordent. He learned that the breeder called him Fahd—meaning panther—due to the horse's black color. In fact the white blaze on the animal's snout was considered so unique that the breeder demanded more money. It was gladly paid. When the letter arrived informing him that his prized steed was at last on its way to him, Godefroy paid for the renovation of the stables in Mordentshire so that they would be suitable for the mount of a king. He had decided he would rename the horse Brenin and he would indeed be treated like royalty.

Brenin earned another name during his voyage to far off Mordent. The fiery three-year-old did not take well to life in the hold of a ship, and he would rear violently when anyone came near him. Several weeks

before reaching his destination, the horse bucked his rear hooves into the chest of one of his handlers and the poor man died of his injuries. By the time Brenin put his hooves on Mordentish soil, his nickname had followed him off ship: *Reaper*.

Lord Godefroy hired a pretty young girl by the name of Charity Bliss to be Brenin's personal groom. There were whispers that the old man had such a spring in his step after his visits to the stable due to the charms of Miss Bliss. A more vulgar rumor said it was the stable's other inhabitant that entertained the old grouch from Gryphon Hill. Regardless, Godefroy proudly trotted Brenin through town almost daily. The two would gallop at breakneck speeds across the moors, and Godefroy suddenly seemed to have the vitality of a man half his age. Perhaps because of this, he began courting Estelle Weathermay, two decades his junior.

Godefroy's obstinance at the suggestion of breeding his prize stallion bothered the local ranchers. The price paid for the beast included his bloodline, and it was considered a tremendous waste for such an asset to be brought to the sleepy seaside colony and not be utilized. Kattle Lisbury in particular had the money and the mares to make such an endeavor profitable for everyone involved, but Godefroy publicly rebuffed him and sent him back to his "filthy pen in the swamp" in a rage. Lisbury tried the local thieves' guild but they would not dare act against the Lord of Gryphon Hill. Finally a foreign rogue named Malcolm agreed to take the job due to its twisted sense of romance.

Malcolm was not prepared for the ferocity of the horse, nor for the loyalty of its groom. Charity dueled the thief fiercely, but was eventually overcome, and lost her right eye in the scuffle. Malcolm rode Brenin at a brazen gallop out of town and delivered him to Lisbury at a secret location in

northern Mordent where the Ol' Reaper eventually resigned himself to his fate of studding two dozen or so mares as quickly as Lisbury could get them switched out.

In town, Godefroy was livid. He dispatched his personal guards to find Brenin and exact justice on whoever would dare to steal him. His paranoia was such that he suspected the entire colony of wanting his prized charger. He posted an enormous reward for information about Brenin, and was overheard loudly berating his future father-in-law Byron Weathermay for allowing such lawlessness in the middle of his town. A young orphan known as Tangle had pieced together the crime by eavesdropping in taverns and headed out to recover the animal.

Tangle made it to Lisbury's secret stud farm to discover an exhausted Brenin. He saddled the horse and rode him back to town, his mind full of how his life would be changing with the reward money in his pocket. Just south of Hope's End on the Mill Road, Tangle was spotted by Godefroy's guards. They pulled the boy out of the saddle and beat him to near death, not waiting for any explanation regarding what he was doing riding down the road on a stolen horse. They found a sturdy elm branch that hung over the Mill Road, made a noose, and executed Tangle for the crime of horse thievery. They left him there as a warning.

Brenin returned to his pampered life in the new stable constructed on the grounds at Gryphon Hill. Godefroy soon married Estelle, who joined him at Gryphon Hill, and in time, their daughter Lilia was born. Godefroy became more and more suspicious of the residents of Mordent. He questioned the loyalty of everyone in the colony. Tangle's execution was not particularly popular among Mordent's residents, and when Godefroy ordered that

all foals born the following spring be destroyed, his men carried out the order with considerably less enthusiasm that he'd have liked.

Godefroy had little patience for Lilia. In addition to being born female, depriving him of a "proper" male heir, she had always been a queer child, and he did not care for the patronizing way the other nobles spoke about her. Wilfred considered the girl an embarrassment. Brenin, on the other hand, loved her. He was always calm around Estelle and Lilia, and longed for the days when his master would take them all riding on the chalk cliffs overlooking the waves.

As recounted elsewhere, Wilfred Godefroy lost his temper and killed his wife and child on a stormy night that awakened the energy of the House on Gryphon Hill. Though he felt no remorse, Godefroy had no interest in being tried for murder by his own father-in-law. He covered his crime by dragging the bodies to the stable and bludgeoning them with horseshoes and metal instruments. Brenin watched with confusion as two of his favorite humans were abused in such a way. The animal had always been smarter than normal for his breed, and if he had feelings, then he must have certainly been saddened by the scene. Nothing could have prepared him, though, for his master calmly walking up to him and placing his hand on the mane and snout of his beloved steed—favorite pet, trusted companion—then putting the pistol to the horse's head and ending its life.

Godefroy ran tearfully into town to recount how Brenin had been spooked by the storm and in his thrashing killed both Estelle and Lilia when they went to calm him. Godefroy deviously spun a tale of how the animal had finally gone wild, how he had always been the Reaper that the stableboys had called him. The only thing to do with the animal was to destroy it before

it hurt anyone else. Wilfred sobbed deeply at the telling. He wept through his wife and child's funeral and then again at the pyre for the horse's corpse. He retreated to his lonely mansion on the hill and was left alone for a year. He dismantled the stable where he claimed the horrible accident had taken place piece by piece. Finally, overcome with grief, one year later, he left special instructions for his body to be interred at the Mausoleum at Heather House to keep his soul from the sadness at Gryphon Hill, then took his own life as well.

The legend of Ol' Reaper became something whispered in Mordentish taverns to spook locals. It gained credibility in 585 when an innkeeper complained of a tremendous noise of hoofbeats and neighing from an upstairs room. When they broke down the door they found their patron, a young traveler named Malcolm, dead by what appeared to be repeated blunt trauma to his chest, a look of sheer terror frozen on his face.

Over 100 years later in 699, a hobbyist brewmaster in Richemulot used the name of the legend to name his new malt whiskey. He thought the use of a Mordentish legend would help drinkers relate to the spirits that were smoked in Mordentish peat. He met with moderate success, and very little of his product is left in the world.

## Current Sketch

The ghost of Brenin is known by its nickname, "Ol' Reaper." It haunts individuals who have escaped a death sentence by letting someone else take the blame, especially if the person was a personal friend of the real criminal. The hauntings often take the form of slow distant hoofbeats which seem to get closer but stop when investigated. If the haunted individual shows no remorse for his crimes, Ol' Reaper may appear to him either in

dreams or waking hours with the accused victim in its saddle. After this, Ol' Reaper will give the haunted a chance to mount it and if the offer is accepted, it will travel to a local law agency, or another place where there is a chance to make amends. If the haunted refuses to do so, Ol' Reaper will begin nightly visitations which increase in terror and severity until the haunted is eventually killed.

Ol' Reaper is a moderately well known bogeyman in Mordent. It is completely resistant to the control of the House on Gryphon Hill or its master. It can sometimes be seen pacing around the mausoleum at Heather House, and is perfectly harmless if left alone. When it becomes aware of a potential haunting target, however, it rears up and lets out a hollow whinny before charging off into the Mists and vanishing. Ol' Reaper can be kept at bay by using his true name, "Fahd." Godefroy tends to mispronounce the foreign word with his aristocratic accent and dismisses its power over the ghost. Ol' Reaper is a tremendous nuisance to the darklord during his visits to his remains in the Heather House mausoleum, and it is one of the few spirits in Mordent that truly frightens him.

Appearance Ol' Reaper takes the form of a powerful spectral stallion with a black coat, a white blaze on the snout, and glowing green eyes. It wears a simple saddle, which can feel corporeal if the person being haunted chooses to mount it. It can choose to be completely invisible, or can appear as a billowing cloud of mist. Similarly, it can move silently or make the sound of hoofbeats on a cobbled road regardless of the terrain.

Ol' Reaper is a 3rd Magnitude ghost which can choose to radiate fear, despair, or both. Weapons of less than +2 enchantment are subject to damage

reduction, but a riding crop which has been the target of a bless spell can do 1 point of damage per successful strike.

**Legacy** Any horse that shares Brenin's bloodline will be of particularly hearty stock, and prized over all other horses outside Nova Vaasa. They are particularly sure footed, allowing efficient travel over marsh and moorland, as well as uneven surfaces such as sand or loose rock. They are intelligent and accept training readily, and also show loyalty to their trainers and masters throughout their lives.

If a descendant of Brenin is ever mounted by a fugitive or similarly closeted criminal, it will not obey any commands from the rider, even if it is someone it has borne before. If the rider has escaped justice by letting someone else take the fall for them, the horse will buck and attempt to dismount the offender, and this will also attract the attention of the ghost, Ol' Reaper.

Ol' Reaper Malt Whiskey is a mundane potion distilled from wheat and barley, which is smoked with peat and aged in oak barrels. As long as the peat is from Mordentish soil, the liquor can be used for more than just getting drunk. It effectively lowers the inhibitions of any drinker so that they no longer feel guilt or the need to cover their actions. If a person under these effects is questioned in the correct way, it is possible to find out if they are hiding any crimes or if they have benefitted from betraying their friends. This is not a well-known effect of the liquor, and may just be attributed to drunkenness in general. The

whiskey has not been in production since 726, and bottles of it are difficult to find, often fetching up to 75gp for original vintage. The method for making it is relatively easy to discover, however, and with the correct ingredients, it can be accomplished with a Craft: Brewing check at DC 30, or via the Brew Potion feat.

### **Ol' Reaper**

#### **CR 4**

NE Large undead (ghost)

**Init** +6; **Senses** Darkvision 60', Perception +6

#### **DEFENCE**

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**AC** 16

**HP** 26

**Fort** +6, **Ref** +5, **Will** +5

**Defensive Abilities** channel resistance +4, incorporeal, rejuvenation; Immune undead traits

#### **OFFENCE**

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**Speed** fly 50' (perfect)

**Melee** corrupting touch +4 (4d8, Fort. DC 16 half )

**Special Attacks** Despair Aura ( DC 16), Cause Fear (DC 16)

#### **STATISTICS**

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**Str** -, **Dex** 15, **Con** -, **Int** 6, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 16

**Base ATK** +1; **CMB** +5; **CMD** 21

**Feats** Dodge, Improved Initiative, Iron Will

**Skills** Fly +6, Perception +6; Sense Motive +6, Stealth +8

# THE ETERNAL SMITH

Not a love story

By Kadarin  
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This story is stolen. Twice. First by a friend of mine, from a self-appointed seeress (this is quite another story), then by me from my friend – but she allowed me to steal it, and I changed it enough to make it my story. And I'm the first to write it down.

That, however, is only part of the story. The other part is based on the fate of the village of Fall, in southern Bavaria; not very far from where I live.

For I.R. – wherever she is now.

When he first came to Sylphrock Valley, it was raining – a light warm spring rain. And he thought that he had never seen something quite as beautiful. The dark green woods, the light green meadows, the golden fields, and the colorful and peaceful village on the small river; all accompanied by the sound of the waterfall streaming down from the silvery-gray, white-topped mountains. He had come a long and dangerous way. And where he had come from there was nothing like this. Where he came from, were just barren, black rocks, and white desert, and dryness – and war. And blood.

All he had forged there were weapons, to shed more blood, kill more people.

His whole family had perished in that war; when the last of them – his little sister – was slain, he decided to leave his country. Forever.

As he came to this strange and foreign land, he changed his name to Orlando

Smith – because his real name was unpronounceable by the locals. And nobody needed to know. He couldn't be sure that the Empire wasn't still looking for him – he had been one of the best smiths in the realm, had even forged a blade for the Emperor Himself.

But here he was now – in the charming and peaceful (or so he thought) village of Fål. He had heard that they needed a smith, and a smith he was, and one of the best in the known world.

He went down the steep hills into the village, and proceeded to the town hall (or should it be called village hall? He didn't know; his grasp of the local language was still not very good). He noticed that all the houses had paintings on their walls; sometimes rural or hunting scenes, sometimes depicting the occupation of the owner – he thought them beautiful, and later he learned that the locals called these paintings arial painting (for whatever reason). The roof tiles were blue, yellow, green, and red, and sometimes even patterned.

In the center of the village, there was a market square, on which there stood a large, light blue stone, crowned by the sculpture of a winged faërie being – a sylph – which perhaps accounted for the name of the valley. Around it were the town (or village?) hall, the temple with its high clock tower (he never found out which deity was revered here, and he didn't really care), a

pub – the Black Dragon Inn, and the house of the fauth, easily identified by the crown of the local ruler; Orlando didn't remember what his title was, and again, he didn't really care.

Of course he was not only a stranger, but even an alien here. The people here were tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, where he was dark, stocky, and his eyes were gray, and they had a different form – as had his ears. Even his clothes must have looked weird to them. They eyed him as he made his way through the earthen streets (in the Empire, all streets were paved, by Imperial law), but they seemed friendly enough, even smiled at him, although the smaller children were hiding behind their parents' backs. Well, children.

He entered the village (or town) hall, and was received by the mayor (or mayoress?). She was an impressive woman – not of build, but of a nearly overpowering personality. But she, too, smiled at him.

"Yourr – err – Mayorressship?" he greeted her with a bow that he would have used for a lower bureaucrat at home.

"'Mayor' will suffice. I'm Carmilla Hunter. And you are?" she answered.

"I myself am Orrlando Smith. I myself am, well, a smith."

"And you are far away from your home, aren't you?"

"Yes, yourr – sorry – Mayorr Hanterr. I myself am looking for worrk."

"And I suppose, you want to work as a smith again?"

This time, he just nodded.

"Very well. In fact, we are in need of a smith. Lucky you. You can start right now – the smithy is just a short way down the river, and you can live upstairs. But I have to inform the village council, and present you to them."

"Yes, Mayorr. Thank you, Mayorr."

"I wish you a nice day."

He bowed again, turned and left the town (or village?) hall.

He liked the smithy. The roof was tiled in blue and red, and there was a painting of a smith at work on the outer wall. Mysteriously, there was a horse with closed eyes beside him.

Of course, by Empire standards, it was primitive; and he would have to make himself new, better tools. He liked the flat above the smithy, although it was also primitive. And he especially liked the garden, where there grew herbs that he could use for his Art; the previous smith had probably used them only in the kitchen. And there was a tall, old, dark-red leaved tree the locals called a "blood beech," as he learned later.

Maybe he should have taken that name as a Sign; but it reminded him of the beautiful trees at home – the home he would never see again. Only much, much later should he realize that this was one of the first hints of the things that were to come.

As he had his supper that evening, about an hour before sunset, he looked out of the window at the beech-tree; and strangely enough, he saw a symbol formed by the leaves and the light – a skull with two bones crossed behind it. He knew that symbol. It had been – white upon black – on the sails of the ship that hunted the ship he had been on. As he had asked one of the crew, he had received only a short answer: "Pirates." They had escaped the corsairs only barely.

Of course, there were pirates on the seas and rivers and lakes of the Empire, but they didn't identify themselves so readily. But to see this symbol here, far away from any body of water capable for ships, had made him laugh. Then. He would bitterly regret that laugh later.

He didn't realize that the first Sign was actually the rain that greeted him when he entered the valley. Not yet, anyway.

The next morning, he was sitting in the garden, drinking the last of his tea (these barbarians didn't have proper tea), smoking the last pipe of his tobacco (they didn't have that, either), and relaxed. The day before, he had cleaned out the house, noticed what needed to be repaired, and, well, felt good for the first time since he left the Empire.

Here, the people drank water, or, more often, beer – or mead. The beer tasted funny, it wasn't made of rice – they did not even know of rice in these parts.

The rest of the last day he had spent cleaning the smithy and estimating where repairs had to be made. He would have to speak with the village carpenter.

Suddenly, someone knocked at the front door.

"Come in," he called, "it's open."

Whoever it was knocked again.

Sighing, Orlando went to the door and opened it. Before him stood a young lad, nearly red of hair, maybe fourteen years of age, but already overtopping him. Naturally, he had blue eyes.

"Mr. Smith, sir?"

"I myself am Orrlando, and am cerrtainly not a sirr. And who arre you?"

"Please, si..., err, Orlando, I am Joe Miller. The son of Tony Miller. The miller, you know?"

Orlando thought that he had chosen his surname well.

"The mayor wants to see you," the boy continued. "The village council awaits your presence – erm – Orlando."

"Thank you, Joe Millerr. I myself will come soonest to the – hall."

Dark clouds were gathering over the village, which could have been another Sign, or only a change of the weather.

The hall wasn't as large or as high as he had expected. There were five people sitting around a rather unpretentious round table, inlaid with only barely noticeable blazons. The mayor smiled openly at him; the fauth, of muscular build and, as would have been expected, austere, looked at him inquisitively; both the priest, of dark-blond hair and hard sapphire eyes, and the sorceress, of silver-blond hair and frozen-emerald eyes, scorned half-hidden; Orlando felt that they both were not as powerful as they wanted to appear. The fifth person in the room, clad in working garb like Or-lan-do himself, and with, for this region, unusual true red hair, and very clear blue eyes, smiled friendly, nearly grinned. He was the miller. And as he closed his eyes, and opened them again, they were no longer blue, but purple. Later, Orlando should learn that the miller's eyes could take on any color.

Now millers – and, indeed, smiths – do have their own kind of magic. That's why the two 'official' magic users must look suspiciously on any of them; and that was maybe the reason the miller was so delighted to see Orlando.

After a short debate – the fauth asked him if he had left his land because of a capital offense, and the priest told him when the services were, three times on Sunday, and on Heavenday at noon – the council adjourned. He was accepted, maybe not welcomed by all, but ac-cepted, as the new village smith.

Anthony Miller invited him to a drink at the Black Dragon Inn. The name of the innkeeper was Lewis, and he insisted on calling Orlando 'Mr. Smith' and Tony 'Mr. Miller'. But he served good mead. And Tony told him not to order the game stew – "tis only for visitors," he said.

The lightning storm broke loose, and they had, of course, to stay in the tavern.

"The beer in here is no better than horse piss," the miller said. So they drank mead.

"How came that stone, and the statue, in the middle of the village?" asked Orlando. "Well, nobody knows. My guess'd be that they were here before the village, and the village was built around it. Now, tell me something of your world – err, country."

Later, Orlando, having told his own story – but not all of it – and the miller having related the myths and legends and rumors of this region (not without introducing Orlando into the political basics and the base personalities of the village), Orlando asked: "Tell me, why is it, that by all the people herre the surname is equal to the designation of their profession, or is it the other way 'round? Well, naturally not the fault, or that ... sorceress, or that priest, but why does the mayor bear the name 'Hanterr'?" – "You'll see, my friend, you'll see," was the somewhat cryptic answer of Anthony. "But as for the others, trade is kind of hereditary in these parts."

After long hours of talk, as the sun was just about to rise, and the rain and lightning were both gone – they said their good-byes, and staggered to their respective homes, not without losing the way a few times. The next day, neither of them worked.

The Sylph on the Rock wasn't the only sylph flying around. Orlando saw a few (although never together) flying over the river and the forests, sometimes dashing up the mountains or – nearly playful – the waterfall.

The next couple of months were uneventful. He made new tools for himself, for the peasants and the horsekeeper (who didn't want to be counted with the peasants), and for the other craftsmen and –women. In the mornings, he went fishing. Every evening he ate with the Millers.

Anthony Miller's wife Maryan was not as tall and not as slender as the rest of the

locals – the latter might have been a result of her excellent cuisine. The first evening Orlando invited the Millers for supper, she naturally occupied the (very small) kitchen. "Men! Can't! Cook!" she declared.

She wore colorful clothes. Very colorful. "I dye 'em m'self, m'dear," she said. "Tailor only manages shades of gray, y'see. M'family doesn't like the colors, either. But I do."

He also got to know the Millers' twins, two not-yet-teenage girls called Phoebe and Carmine, red-haired like their father, and almost always giggling.

Orlando worked in the day-time, but in the morning he went fishing at the River Torr. As he had been a fairly good fisherman in his country, he wasn't unsuccessful. And he brought all fish he caught to Mrs. Miller.

One evening, after having had supper with the Millers, and as the nights began to get colder, Orlando noticed a black cat beside his fireside, rolled up comfortably. He didn't know how she (for he was sure at the spur of a moment that this wasn't a tom-cat) had come in. As he stared at her in surprise, she opened her sea-green eyes and stared back, then closed them again and began to purr. But as he tried near her, the purring changed to a threatening 'miaow' and would, he was sure, soon change to an even more threatening hiss.

So he sat down, far away enough so that the impending hiss changed to a purr again, and watched her as she pretended to sleep.

After scarcely a quarter of an hour, someone knocked at his door. It was the sorceress. "Have you seen Moon!?" she demanded. Orlando was taken somewhat aback and felt slightly insulted. "Yes, I seen moon. It is in sky. At night." – "No! you fool! Moon! My cat!"

As harvest went by, more and more people ordered arrow- and spear-heads. First, as he had sworn never to make weapons of war again (even though scythes or sickles could also be used as effective weapons), he simply refused. Then he talked to Anthony.

"Is therre a warr in the offing?" – "A war? Hereabouts? There are wars, far in the north and in the east, but I doubt anyone here has seen a war even as a child. Why do you ask, Orrie?"

Orlando didn't like the nickname the miller gave him too much. "Cause people arre buying weapons, that's why!" – "Weapons?" – "Yea, arrowheads and spearrheads and the like." – "Orlando, my friend, they don't wanna fight a war. You'll see. Oh yes, you'll see."

And he saw. After Harvest, it was Hunting Time. And everyone went hunting. Everyone.

Men, women, children, even cripples.

Orlando sighed. The next few weeks, he would be paid in game. Well, he could count on Maryan to make something out of it. And not just something, but something very delicious.

As snow began seriously to heap, hunting season was over. And, of course, there was a feast. Peasants never miss the opportunity for a feast – they have little enough to celebrate.

It was a nice enough party. The villagers had unhinged all the doors and bucked them up as tables; wild boars, deer, and other game were sizzling over open fires, some men made what they thought was music (in the Empire, they'd have been tortured to death, Orlando thought). People were dancing nonetheless.

Orlando had a dance with Maryan and then sat down somewhat out of sight. He still felt that he was a stranger here.

Somewhere, he heard a crow, well, crowing.

Then, Orlando met Ysabeau Carpenter. And Ysabeau met Orlando Smith.

Her hair was golden. And her eyes were of the blue-gray of the sea, which he hadn't seen for so long.

He couldn't understand why he had never noticed her before. She must have been the most beautiful creature in the world – in all the worlds.

A long time, they just stood there, looking in each other's eyes – he in hers of sea-blue, she in his of jet-black.

Then, they kissed spontaneously. And then, they kissed again. And again.

Then they danced. And then they kissed again.

And then...

...then they danced again.

The bells of the Temple Tower were ringing. Orlando took this as a good sign.

It wasn't.

"You keep ya hands were they belong, m'friend! Understood!? M'daughter is no game for aliens of ya kind!" Carpenter yelled. "But I didn't... I'd nevr..." Orlando tried to answer. "Quiet!! Be warned!!"

In effect, he forbid Orlando to ever see Ysabeau again.

And that wasn't the worst. Well, for Orlando, it was the worst. But the mood in the village changed, turned against him. Except for the Millers, they all eyed him now suspiciously. As if he had raped all their daughters – whether they had some or not.

He decided to leave the village. There was nothing for him here anymore.

So he walked away, the way back he had come, only half a year before. On the crest of the hill ridge he turned and looked back. And suddenly, he felt hot ire rise within him. They had outcast him! They had dared to chase away an Imperial Smith!

This could only be answered by vengeance.

Of course, the element of the Smith is Fire. With one word, only one word, nothing would have remained of the valley but ashes and glowing coals. But as a smith, one needed discipline, so he calmed down a little bit. It would be sufficient to punish them. After all, some of these barbarians had been his neighbors, his friends. Or pretended to be. And the woman he loved was still there. And the chances were good that the water deities would not even hear him.

"Flood!" he cried out.

But even when the gods do not hear, there are always beings that do listen. Always.

It did not begin to rain. It didn't even begin to pour. Orlando thought there was no term in any language, no human tongue could have coined a word for what he was watching. There was more water in the air than, well, air. The waterfall turned into something more closely resembling a falling ocean.

Even the Earth, as if hurt by the water falling upon Her, shook; and the quake closed the valley, so the water had no place to go anymore. And it stayed.

Orlando turned away, water streaming down his face, mixed with his tears. He didn't even notice the

Mists that rose about him.

For a long time he wandered aimlessly, even mindlessly, until he discovered that he didn't know where he was. He certainly wasn't in the country he had been passing through, only half a year ago.

The trees were different. The hills were different. Even the mountains were different. And he certainly would at least have heard about the grand castle clinging to the mountain flank. For sure, he hadn't, ever, seen it before.

He took quarter at the White Heart Inn, where he had a fine supper. Then he went to bed. And dreamed.

In his dreams, he saw what had become of the valley. It was no longer a valley, but a lake, filled with dark-red water. Everyone he had known – everyone who had lived there – was dead. No, worse than dead – unliving. He recognized the smile on the face of a gigantic undead sea snake as that which had once greeted him into the village. He saw ghosts – and grimmer creatures – in the blood-tainted lake and on

the shores. He even saw his blood beech wandering around.

And he saw the sylphs again. Only, they weren't ordinary sylphs. They seemed to belong to the mists which were now engulfing the former valley. And he saw that they were evil. Even the air itself



appeared poisonous.

He awoke screaming. And crying.

The next day he left the land of the great castle.

And again, he did not notice the Mists rising about him.

He found a smithy where he could work. But the dreams returned. The third night, he saw Ysabeau. She was no longer blonde, or blue-eyed. Or even in the least beautiful. She wasn't even dead. She had become an unliving monster.

And he saw another – creature. And he knew that it was his son, even if it didn't look human. It didn't look human at all.

He even saw strange white lake ravens, shouting at the sky. And at the purple water. And at everything else. And, so it seemed to him, at him.

He couldn't stay long in one place. Although he always found work as a smith, he soon became restless. And he found out that these strange Mists would transport him to, well, other worlds, although he could scarcely control where they were leading him.

He found very strange lands. But he never found his home.

And every night he dreamt of Sylphrock.

Then he resolved to find the blood lake again. And to lift the curse he had laid upon it.

He never saw the Millers in his dreams, and he wondered why.

He came to know that he couldn't die. The first – well, hint, was when a robber tried to stab him. Orlando didn't even bleed, and the robber fled in horror.

Then he became aware that he had wandered that strange realm of Mists for more than half a century – without ever getting older. Or weaker.

Orlando found out that he had some power over the Mists. He could find the land of the big castle again, whenever he wanted. Or any other land – or world – he had visited.

But he couldn't get back to Sylphrock Valley, no matter how hard he tried. He even asked those strange mist-travelling gypsies, no, even begged them, to bring him back. They told him they couldn't. No matter what he would pay them.

He understood he could not return and lift the curse.

Never.

# DARK SHADOWS

A Touch of Evil for 5<sup>th</sup> Edition Characters

By "Jester" David Gibson  
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Mina Murray struggles to retain her humanity during her vampiric transformation, and is often cast as the reincarnation of Dracula's lost love. Seeking power and forbidden knowledge, Doctor Faust makes a deal with fiendish being. Deformed from birth, both Quasimodo and Erik the Opera Ghost are pushed to become the monster they resemble. Opium leads Franklin Blake into moral conflict as he is accused of a theft he does not remember. And an unnamed narrator confronts his inhuman lineage after a visit to Innsmouth.

In Gothic fiction, a shadow often looms over characters, an omnipresent doom marring their life and influencing their actions. Characters are often linked to supernatural forces, and it is sometimes this ability which allows them to prevail against the odds. This potential tragedy drives common folk to become heroes, as they try to free themselves from their curse, strive to make the most of what time they have, or struggle to prove to themselves or others that their corruption does not define them.

## Purpose

Dark shadows are an optional rules module designed to help you emulate some of the more common tropes and character traits present in Gothic fiction. They are designed to be complementary to your character's background, and work as a

supplementary rule to the inspiration system

Your character's dark shadow might be the reason they became an adventurer. Dark shadows are also a possible method to reflect simple curses or other prolonged conditions your character might suffer during the course of a campaign.

## Gaining and Losing a Shadow

You can choose to give your character a dark shadow at character creation, having been born with the affliction or gaining it before the start of the campaign. The source of this dark shadow should be described in your character's backstory. It might be a reason your character has taken up the life of an adventurer rather than staying close to the safety of home.

It is also possible to gain a dark shadow, obtaining an affliction during the course of a campaign. Gaining a shadow should be the result of events that occur during an adventure. For example, after suffering a vicious wound from a lycanthrope, you might take the "Bitten" shadow. You do not choose a dark shadow like you would a feat or spell, instead working with your DM to determine when your character has gained a dark shadow.

Most dark shadows can be taken at any time, but a few make the most sense if

taken at character creation (such as redheaded or reincarnated). However, with the DM's permission, is possible to discover a previously unknown shadow at any time.

Through play, it might be possible to remove a dark shadow. This should happen naturally as a part of the campaign, possibly as the culmination of a long quest or storyline. Losing your dark shadow should be an important character milestone.

You can only have a single dark shadow at a time. If your character gains a new dark shadow, this replaces the benefits of your old dark shadow. However, you can choose to keep the characteristics and temptations of both shadows.

## Using a Shadow

Dark shadows are a new category of personal characteristics. They work in addition to personality traits, flaws, and bonds. They provide additional roleplaying hooks that can be used to portray your character, giving depth to their motivation and drives. These characteristics might also allow you to earn inspiration from your DM. Shadows are both negative and positive: they are a source of strength but also a constant temptation that must be fought.

## Characteristics

Each dark shadow has suggested character traits. These are suggestions for how a shadow might influence your character's personality or motivations. You can use these suggestions or think of your own.

## Temptation

Each dark shadow pushes a character towards further corruption or negative behaviour. Temptations are suggestions for how the shadow subtly or overtly influences your character's behaviour.

## Benefit

Each dark shadow provides an additional use for inspiration that you can use instead of gaining advantage. Typically, using inspiration can only be done on your turn but does not require an action.

## Addict

You have a physical addiction to a substance such as alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, or opiates like laudanum or opium. You might be a regular user, a recovering addict, or casual user that has unknowingly become dependent on the drug.

## Characteristics

You likely have an addictive personality and respond to stress and conflict by seeking pleasure, becoming dependent on outside stimuli for relief. You have difficulty delaying gratification and may be impulsive or impatient. You might have low self-esteem or suffer from depression. Your addiction might also be a way of coping with uncomfortable feelings, such as crippling fear or impotency from being confronted by supernatural horrors.

When you are denied your drug, you become irritable and irrational, willing to do almost anything to end the physical and mental cravings. Use is often habitual, with little conscious thought needed.

## Temptation

Your temptation is and always will be your drug. No matter how much time passes, part of you will always desire the object of your addiction and a single relapse is all that is needed to descend again into full addiction. Your cravings will always be worse during periods of stress or after times of failure.

## Benefit

Accustomed to being intoxicated, if you are poisoned you can spend your inspiration to remove the condition.

Additionally, you know unsavory people and possess some underworld contacts. Even if your particular vice is legal, you have crossed paths with unseemly characters and know how to get in touch with them. You can spend your inspiration to gain information from an illicit source or sway the opinions of a disreputable individual.

## Bitten

You have been savaged by the natural attacks of a supernatural creature such as a werebeast, vampire, or ghoul. Though you've recovered from any initial assault (and any related infection), the attack has left deeper scars than the ones that mar your flesh, tainting you with unnatural magic.

## Characteristics

You experience heightened emotions and are prone to fits of passion and rage, especially when your territory or possessions are infringed upon. You feel slightly uncomfortable when alone, preferring to be with others with whom you share a bond, sometimes even thinking of them as a pack. Participating on a hunt also enflames your blood, be it a rapid chase or slow stalking, and you have difficulty walking away from prey.

## Temptation

You have a hunger, a strong desire to consume something based on the creature that infected you: raw meat, rotting flesh, or warm blood. This urge is not omnipresent and is easy to ignore when not

confronted by the subject of your hunger. However, when the subject of your hunger is present you have difficulty focusing on anything else and might become distracted or irritable.

You also possess a kinship to those of your bloodline, especially the one who infected you. This does not extend to all creatures of the same type, but those of the same lineage. For example, if bitten by a wererat you do not have a kinship with all lycanthropes or even all wererats but only wererats of the same bloodline.

## Benefit

By unleashing your inner beast, your senses become heightened, increasing your vision, hearing, and sense of smell. You can spend your inspiration to be considered proficient in the Perception, Investigation, and Survival skills for 1 minute. If the check is related to the subject of your hunger, you add double your proficiency bonus.

## Cat's Eyes

You were born with bright yellow eyes and slightly ovoid pupils, which catch the light and appear to glow in dim illumination. This rare trait is found only in folks hailing from Vaasi -speaking nations. It is most common among the Valachani, but the eyes are sometimes found in Nova Vaasans. The cause is unknown but there are many superstitions regarding this trait. Some believe a cat took some of your soul as an infant, others believe you have the blood of a werebeast, and still others believe you are the reincarnated spirit of a feline.

## Characteristics

You have feline quirks, such as a fondness for napping in the warm sun, hiding in tight places, toying with small creatures, and stalking prey. You can be

fickle and unpredictable, shifting your loyalties and affections when the mood strikes.

## Temptation

While you may bond with a small handful of people, too many unnerve you, pushing you to withdraw from society and dwell with the creatures with whom you feel a kinship. You might opt to share your home with cats, breeding them or rescuing strays. Or you might choose the wilds, hunting in the tall grass with plains cats.

## Benefit

You can spend your inspiration to speak with felines. You can communicate freely with cats for 1 minute, as if using the spell speak with animals. The cat is under no obligation to help or share information with you.

## Cold One

An undead creature drained you of your life energy, almost killing you and turning you into an unliving monstrosity. Your assailant might have been a spectral undead, like a wraith or ghost, or a corporeal one, like a wight or vampire. Since the attack, you have regained your strength and vigor, but not your humanity and vitality: some ineffable part of your soul is absent.

## Characteristics

You lack warmth, both physically and emotionally. Your body temperature is low and your skin is cool to the touch. While not entirely emotionless, you are lacking in joy and compassion and find happiness fleeting. Even your strong negative emotions, such as anger, are muted, as you lack the passion that fuels rage, jealousy, and

hatred. But you are also calm and not easily frightened or unnerved.

## Temptation

There is the continued urge to succumb to your melancholy, to sink into inaction and surrender to your crushing malaise. Without passion you have few hopes and little dreams, and it is difficult to find the motivation to continue to fight against the darkness, both external and internal.

## Benefit

If frightened, you can spend your inspiration to remove the condition.

Additionally, animated undead such as zombies and skeletons pay you little attention. You can spend your inspiration to make a Dexterity (Stealth) check against such creatures as if you were heavily obscured. This effect last 1 minute or until you take any action.

## Cursed

A malicious hag, dark cleric, or vindictive Vistani has cursed you. You might have been cursed by an evil creature for attempting to stop them, or cursed by a good or neutral individual as punishment for misdeeds. The nature of this curse varies dramatically; you might suffer from misfortune, a wasting disease, a weakened sword arm, a tendency to repulse people of the opposite sex, or any number of lesser or greater afflictions.

## Characteristics

Depending on whether the curse was warranted, you might feel either guilty or persecuted. If the curse was justified, you might feel remorseful for your misdeeds or prone to self-pity over your misfortune. If you feel the curse was unwarranted (rightly or out of denial), you might feel unjustly

targeted and unfairly judged. You likely blame others for your failings, seldom taking full responsibility for your actions. Though most curses have an escape clause, you are likely too stubborn to change your behaviour or attitude to pursue it.

## Temptation

Feelings of revenge are difficult to escape, having been judged and damned by one person. There is the desire to blame the curser rather than look inward for personal growth. The curse also becomes an easy source for blame, with personal successes being your own but all failures being the result of the curse.

## Benefit

Having been plagued by misfortune for years, you have learned to limit the impact that chance has on your actions. You can spend your inspiration before making an ability check to roll 3d6 instead of a d20. If you have advantage on the check, you instead roll 5d6 and use the total of the three highest rolls.

## Gravesight

The spirits of people and events are visible to you as vague mist-like outlines. You can see both ghosts and the imprint that strong emotions and dramatic events have left on a location. You are able to find places of ethereal resonance and witness events from decades past. This power is limited to sight and you have no special ability to hear or interact with ghosts.

## Characteristics

You cannot turn your sight on and off, and have witnessed many scenes of horror and tragedy, often without warning. At any time, you might experience a vision of the past or encounter a ghost that does not

wish to be disturbed. You are wary about entering new places, which might have witnessed uncountable horrors or be the home of several spirits. You are cautious and possibly a little nervous. You may also have grown detached, emotionally hardened after years of horror.

## Temptation

Knowing that you might be subjected without warning to horrifying visions at any time pushes you to withdraw from civilization. It's tempting to isolate yourself in safe places where there have been no death and no unpleasant memories. There's also the danger of becoming emotionally dead: cold and uncaring toward the suffering of others.

## Benefit

You can spend your inspiration to witness the ethereal resonance of a recent event. The event must have had some emotional significance and have occurred in your current location. Watching the ghostly re-enactment might offer some clue as to what happened or provide new information regarding the past. This might call for the normal Horror check for witnessing a disturbing event.

Alternatively, you can spend your inspiration to partially see an invisible undead creature. Make a Wisdom (Perception) check to locate the creature as if it were only lightly obscured.

## Haunted

The ghost of a loved one or family member follows you around, seldom leaving your side. You cannot see other spirits and no one else can see your ghost, but you can interact with the ghost as if it were a regular person.

## Characteristics

You have likely been considered crazy for seeing and hearing someone who is not there. You have grown used to not being believed and have grown tired of trying to explain who you are talking to. You might have limited social skills from spending too much time talking with the dead, especially if you were isolated due to your perceived insanity. You might seem perpetually distracted, as if listening to multiple people at once or lost in thought.

## Temptation

With a constant companion it's easy to forget the living and other friends. Listening to the dead too much is also not healthy: ghosts do not have the same concerns as the living, and their advice cannot always be trusted. Your spirit may not be too concerned for your safety, possibly believing that your death will release them or pushing you towards a goal which they think will free them.

## Benefit

You can consult with your spirit, learning otherwise unknowable knowledge. Pick one skill: History, Investigation, Perception, or Survival. Once you pick a skill you cannot change it until after you take a long rest. You can spend your inspiration to gain proficiency in that skill for 1 minute. If already proficient, you instead double your proficiency bonus.

## Hollow

You are lacking a soul. You might have been born without a true soul or lost most of your soul as the result of a near death experience. As you lack a soul you cannot be resurrected by magic, and will not experience an afterlife.

## Characteristics

You are prone to slips of morality ranging from antisocial to sociopathic. You are pragmatic, feeling little guilt for your misdeeds and no shame or remorse. With potentially no afterlife, you have fewer worries of final punishment but also no reward for a life well-lived. You might have the desire to make your actions count, or you might avoid danger to prolong the only life you have.

## Temptation

With no worry of long-term consequences, there is the potential to forgo morality and the restrictions of polite society, to live hedonistically and consequence free.

## Benefit

You can spend your inspiration to make a new Wisdom saving throw against being charmed or stunned. You can do this when it is not your turn by using your reaction. If the effect is related to emotions, you are considered proficient with that saving throw and add double your proficiency bonus.

## Lunatic

Your emotions are tied to the cycle of the moon. You grow increasingly excited and energetic during gibbous moons but become lethargic and depressive during waning moons. This lunacy might plague your bloodline, be the result of some trauma or illness, or have no understandable cause.

## Characteristics

Your emotions are not your own, tied to a force beyond your control. You often feel impotent, not in control of yourself or your own life. You might go to extreme lengths

to justify your free will and demonstrate your self-efficacy. You are also plagued by insomnia, leading you to distance yourself from the outside and the light of the moon, moving to windowless rooms lit by lamps and gaslight.

## Temptation

It is all too easy to surrender to the tides of emotion, riding them up and down with the moon. This is taking the path of least resistance, no longer fighting to contain your feelings and forfeiting all control of your emotions and letting your impulses and sudden desires drive your actions.

## Benefit

During periods of where the moon is half-full you can spend your inspiration to add your proficiency bonus to your initiative. Alternatively, you can spend your inspiration to act in a surprise round.

## Possessed

You are the victim of fiendish or undead possession. The will of another entity imposes itself on you, pushing you to take actions that are not of your choosing. The other presence cannot yet take full control of your body, and you retain your free will and independence, but it is a constant struggle. The entity cannot simply take command during a moment of weakness (such as when you are sleeping or injured): you must surrender control and give in to its desires.

## Characteristics

Waging a constant unceasing war for your soul, you are controlled and restrained, allowing yourself few indulgences and luxuries. Pleasures are few and fleeting, and you live an ascetic's life, potentially

bordering on monasticism. Because of the voices in your head or foreign urges, you often appear distracted or conflicted, unable to separate your emotions from those of the entity. You are prone to occasional outbursts or uncharacteristic behaviour as your restraint momentarily slips.

## Temptation

You are directly tempted by the entity that shares your mind, as it whispers seductions to you, offering you power, riches, or pleasures of the flesh. At the same time you are constantly denying yourself the luxuries that common folk take for granted. You wonder if indulging just once would truly hurt.

## Benefit

You can confer with your possessing spirit, learning some forbidden knowledge. Pick one skill: Arcana, History, Nature, or Religion. You can spend your inspiration to gain proficiency in that skill for 1 minute. If already proficient, you instead double your proficiency bonus.

Once you pick a skill you cannot change your choice until after you take a long rest.

## Redheaded

Having been touched by the fey, witchcraft, or other magical forces, you possess a minor magical talent. The superstitious believe you are the harbinger of ill fortune, or that you made a pact with infernal forces. While not all redheads are touched by otherworldly forces - the majority simply have red hair - all those similarly "blessed" possess vibrant crimson locks.

## Characteristics

Being met with suspicion and whispers, you have either grown withdrawn and shy

or become defensive and defiant. You may be tired of being accused of witchcraft or evil deeds and grow angry and irate at the suggestion of impropriety. Or you may feel guilty and ashamed of your abilities, hiding them and your hair to the best of your ability. Either way, you seldom feel like you are seen for who you are and few people see you as an individual.

## Temptation

Whether hiding your hair or overreacting to suspicion, there is a desire to define yourself solely by your hair and what it symbolizes, to let being touched by the otherworldly define who you are. You might decide it is easier to become the corrupt person many believe you to be, and ally with unnatural forces.

## Benefit

You can spend your inspiration to gain the thaumaturgy cantrip for 1 minute. Wisdom is your spellcasting ability for this cantrip.

## Redeemed

After a lengthy inner struggle you have escaped corruption. Your past misdeeds were so foul as to leave a physical or spiritual stain, which you have finally managed to erase. While you can never regain your innocence or purity of spirit, you are no longer mentally or spiritually tainted.

## Characteristics

As you accepted blame for your past deeds, you are honest or responsible. You are not prone to denial or blaming others for your failings. However, you are wary of falling from grace again, overcompensating in your attempts to avoid sin, temptation, or prove your redemption. Because you

succeeded where so many others have failed, you might be prideful and prone to egotism.

## Temptation

Having given into sin once, there is always the possibility that you will return to your evil ways. You also experience strong feelings of guilt and remorse for your past, potentially accepting blame for things beyond your control. Similarly, as you redeemed yourself, you might look down upon those unable to do the same, condemning or judging them for their perceived weakness.

## Benefit

Having earned redemption once you are strong-willed and refuse to give up or surrender. You can spend your inspiration to add your proficiency bonus to Wisdom saving throws or death saving throws for 1 minute or until you fail a Wisdom or death saving throw.

## Reincarnated

Caught in a cycle of death and rebirth, this is not your first life and you have returned from the grave into a new body. You only dimly recall the events of your past life in a dream-like haze but occasionally you experience intense memories, feelings, and urges. It is also difficult for you to be resurrected by magic, as your soul is quickly reborn minutes after your death.

## Characteristics

You seem more experienced than age would suggest: wise beyond years and possessing esoteric and varied knowledge. You likely appear book smart, having more historical and trivial knowledge rather than current events. You might be thoughtful

and quiet, prone to silent reverie and introspection. You are also occasionally forgetful, calling people by the wrong name and referring to events long since past.

## Temptation

The weight of ages tugs at you to embrace elements of your past lives over the present: old friends might seem more familiar than current companions and old homes more comfortable. You experience an occasional loss of identity and sense of self. Past traumas, especially deaths, make you hesitant to do certain things or go certain places.

## Benefit

Tapping into the knowledge of a past life, you can spend your inspiration to be considered proficient in a skill or tool of your choice for 1 round.

Alternatively, you can spend your inspiration to recall memories from a past life, potentially recalling some details of a person you have never met or place you have never been.

## Second Sight

You have the ability to catch glimpses of the future, through visions, prophetic dreams, reading fortunes, or divining signs. You might rely on tools, such as bones or tarokka cards, or patterns found in tealeaves or chicken entrails.

## Characteristics

Seeing events unfold in a nonlinear fashion, you can be erratic or mysterious: prone to non-sequiturs, cryptic statements, or even confusion over cause and effect. You might be distracted or have difficulty focusing on the moment, receiving images or impressions of different times or possible

futures. You may also be fatalistic, having little belief in free will.

## Temptation

There is the potential to abuse your visions and foreknowledge for personal reasons, selfishly using your gift to gain material comforts. Seeing inevitable future tragedies or failing to alter the future can lead to depression and pessimism, believing that you cannot alter destiny and people have no choice or real freedom.

## Benefit

You can take advantage of your foreknowledge to succeed at simple tasks. You can spend your inspiration to treat a d20 roll as an 11.

Alternatively, you can use your gift to gain a brief vision of the future. This vision is cryptic and often veiled in metaphor, but useful when otherwise lacking direction.

## Shadow Touched

The darkness moves and shifts around you as nearby shadows move on their own. You have been touched by the plane of shadows and are one with darkness and the night. The shadows around you move with a will of their own, but you can occasionally exert some control, shifting or shaping the darkness.

## Characteristics

Having stared into blackness you see things in black and white. This might be a literal colour blindness, which removes all hues from your vision, depriving you of the beauty of colour, or metaphorical, as you philosophically view things in absolutes.

## Temptation

As shadows are created by light, it is easy to believe that evil is created by good.

You might see sinners and villains everywhere, or the darkness lurking in everyone. It can become hard to even believe in goodness and light.

## Benefit

Through sheer will, you can lengthen and darken nearby shadows. You can spend your inspiration to make a creature or object lightly obscured for 1 round.

Alternatively, you can spend your inspiration to shape or sculpt an existing shadow into a simple two-dimensional image. This shadow can be no larger than a medium-sized creature.



# SOUR GROUND

## Alternate Resurrections

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Assuming the party is high enough level to have access to resurrection magic, we're all familiar with the character death routine. The other players ask the player of the deceased if he wants to come back; the player in question considers whether or not it's worth playing his character at a reduced level/Constitution and then makes a decision.

The Sour Ground table is intended to take the control (at least partially) out of the hands of the dead character's player. After all, their character is dead, so why should they be involved in the decision making process? In addition, this table gives death some lasting consequences, which can make even high level characters more cautious about their mortality.

To use the table, just have the player roll a d100. It's okay to tell them that the higher the roll, the worse the table gets, but there's no need to read them their result. It may be something you want to keep secret. If the result would alter their stats in some way, the DM chooses all alterations. For games set in Ravenloft, where magic (especially magic that manipulates the forces of life) can have dire consequences, you should have the player roll twice, and let the DM choose the result.

In the short term, players may see this table as a benefitting them more than it hurts, but accumulated results can be worse than the level/Con loss they would otherwise face. This can even eventually result in a character being unplayable. It can also result in a party being unwilling to resurrect their fallen comrade. "Gee Dave, I don't know. Your dwarf's eyes glow red, you can only drink blood, and we get diseased if we touch you. I don't think we want Drognaz adventuring with us anymore." Just to make sure that balance is maintained, it's recommended that you make a note of how many times a character has been resurrected, and cap their return trips from death at no higher than their level or their Constitution score, whichever is lower.

1. No effect. The subject lucked out!
2. The character's hair turns white.
3. The character's hair and fingernails no longer grow.
4. The subject appears bloated, and her flesh is spongy to the touch. (Much like a corpse that has been left out for a day or two.)
5. The subject is plagued by flies or other swarming insects. They follow him around as if he were a corpse.

**6.** The subject develops an instinctive distrust for a race that she would not normally distrust, such as gnomes or elves.

**7.** Bad omens follow the character wherever he goes.

**8.** The character's voice becomes an evil hiss.

**9.** The subject becomes distrustful of magic, feeling that it stretches the laws of the universe too far.

**10.** The subject becomes dependent on magic, turning to it to solve all of her problems.

**11.** The subject feels uncomfortable in the presence of silver. The burning, itching sensation it creates intensifies if it touches their skin, but there is no detrimental game effect.

**12.** The subject casts no reflection in mirrors or other reflective surfaces.

**13.** The subject's skin becomes pale, his fingernails lengthen, and his canine teeth extend into fangs.

**14.** The subject's eyes become dull and milky (like a zombie's).

**15.** Any food or drink the subject carries for longer than three or four hours goes bad.

**16.** Open flames flicker when the character passes.

**17.** Candle flames in the presence of the character turn blue.

**18.** If the character stays in the same place for more than a few weeks, freak accidents begin to befall those around her.

**19.** The character hears voices. (The voices of those he has slain, his dead family urging him to join them, or any other common thread the DM likes.)

**20.** The subject's eyes glow in the dark. This light isn't enough to see by.

**21.** Intelligent undead treat the character as one of them. If there is a necromancer in the party, they may invite

her to join forces with them against her "mortal oppressors."

**22.** The subject develops an infestation of maggots, in either part or all of his body. While disgusting, this invasion has no detrimental effects.

**23.** The subject can only speak in a whisper.

**24.** Any children the character has will be stillborn.

**25.** The character develops a bond with an item. Damage to the item will damage him.

**26.** The subject becomes obsessed with starting a family while she still has the time.

**27.** Vultures and other carrion eaters follow the character constantly, as if they sense he is going to die soon.

**28.** The subject comes back with a scar from whatever killed her. This scar cannot be removed by any means.

**29.** One of the subject's feats, proficiencies, skills, or other permanent character features is exchanged for a different one.

**30.** The resurrection attracts unwanted attention. The subject is pursued by a creature that wants to destroy him. (This can be a servant of a death deity, an Inevitable, or a cleric who believes that he should never have been brought back.)

**31.** One of the subject's languages is changed.

**32.** The subject is haunted by nightmares. She must make a DC 18 Will save to get restful sleep.

**33.** The subject becomes fearful of all of the ways he could die. Due to this, he takes a -2 to all saving throws against fear.

**34.** White vapor comes out of the character's mouth when she speaks.

**35.** The subject becomes a carrier for a supernatural disease called the Greys. She develops dry, flaky grey skin, along with a

deep cough, although she takes no ability damage. Anyone she comes into physical contact with risks contracting the disease, however. The Greys have an incubation period of one day, a save DC of 16, and deal 1d3 Charisma and 1d2 Constitution damage. The subject cannot rid herself of this disease by any means.

**36.** The subject becomes vulnerable to flame. Any time he takes damage from fire (even a single point) he risks catching on fire.

**37.** The character develops a hunger for raw meat, and no longer gains sustenance from regular food.

**38.** The subject becomes vulnerable to the favored weapon of any deity with death in their portfolio, taking +1 damage from them.

**39.** The subject suffers lingering stiffness. She takes a -1 to Reflex saves.

**40.** The subject is weak and sickly. He takes a -1 on Fortitude saves.

**41.** The subject is plagued by distracting thoughts of death and dying. She takes a -1 on Will saves.

**42.** In addition to resurrecting the original subject, the spell resurrects a twin of the subject, who is of the exact opposite alignment. If one twin dies, so will the other.

**43.** Turning/rebuking attempts treat the subject as undead.

**44.** Undead sense the character. He takes a -6 on Hide checks against undead.

**45.** The character's alignment remains the same, but all spells, magic items, and magical effects treat her as if she were evil.

**46.** The subject no longer heals hit point or ability damage naturally.

**47.** The subject gains a severe, crippling phobia of a specific death symbol, which can vary by race or culture.

**48.** The character smells as though he were continuing to decompose. This stench

is enough to give him away if he is attempting to use Hide or Disguise.

**49.** The subject becomes anemic. If he takes more damage from a single physical attack than his Constitution score, he begins to bleed at the rate of 1 hp per round. Any healing or a DC 15 Heal check stops the bleeding.

**50.** The character feels compelled to change her religion. Some part of her death experience convinced her that she was following the wrong deity.

**51.** If the subject delivers the killing blow to any creature, he must make a Will save (DC equal to the HD of the victim) or be stunned for one round, assailed by flashes of his victim's life.

**52.** In order to balance the scales, the forces of the universe return one of the subject's recently slain foes to life.

**53.** In order to balance the scales, a friend or ally of the party dies. The circumstances should superficially resemble the way the raised character died.

**54.** The character becomes incapable of mercy. She may not voluntarily inflict subdual damage on any opponent.

**55.** The character develops light sensitivity as if he were a dwarf or an orc.

**56.** All Divination spells operate on the character as if he were an outsider.

**57.** The character no longer has a detectable pulse, and his breath cannot be observed.

**58.** The character requires twice as much food per day in order to stave off starvation.

**59.** The character becomes dehydrated twice as fast.

**60.** The subject becomes vulnerable to holy water as if he were undead.

**61.** The subject becomes vulnerable to garlic. The smell or touch of it causes her to be nauseated if she fails a DC 12 Fortitude

save. If she makes the save, she is merely sickened.

**62.** The character is slow to react, like a mummy. He takes a -2 to Initiative rolls.

**63.** The subject feels compelled to sleep in funerary conditions, with a shroud, in a coffin, etc. While asleep, the character is only distinguishable from an actual corpse on a DC 15 Heal check. If she cannot meet these conditions, she gets no restful sleep.

**64.** The subject must sleep in actual grave dirt. Should he fail to meet this condition, he gets no restful sleep. He may scatter handfuls of grave dirt over his bedding if he chooses.

**65.** When the character is sleeping, her body can be possessed by incorporeal creatures as if they were using a Magic Jar spell. Any incorporeal creature who sees her recognizes this.

**66.** 1d4 of the subject's ability points are redistributed randomly when they awake.

**67.** Protection from Good/Evil/Law/Chaos spells treat the character as if he were an outsider.

**68.** Animals become skittish around the subject. She takes a -2 to Animal Empathy, Ride, and Handle Animal checks. Familiars, paladin mounts, animal companions, and similar creatures are unaffected by this.

**69.** Consecrate/Hallow effects treat the character as undead. Unhallow and Desecrate effects do not.

**70.** One of the character's magical item slots is no longer available. (Determine randomly.) If this affects a slot which would normally allow two items (rings, for example), then the character can still use any magical item that requires (or allows) only one item to be worn.

**71.** The character must ingest blood rather than water to avoid dehydration.

**72.** The character becomes vulnerable to protective magics. He suffers a -2 on saves against Abjuration spells.

**73.** The character's spirit is slow to adapt to new circumstances. He suffers a -2 on saves against Conjuraton spells.

**74.** The character stands out like a beacon to magical sight. He suffers a -2 on saves against Divination spells.

**75.** The character's spirit finds it hard to throw off mental control. He suffers a -2 on saves against Enchantment spells.

**76.** The character comes back with a weak point in his spirit. He suffers a -2 on saves against Evocation spells.

**77.** The character finds it harder to separate truth from deception. He suffers a -2 on saves against Illusion spells.

**78.** The character still has one spiritual foot in the grave. He suffers a -2 on saves against Necromancy spells.

**79.** The character's spirit becomes especially malleable. He suffers a -2 on saves against Transmutation spells.

**80.** The character may only eat the leftover food of the living. Other food causes the character to become nauseated with no save.

**81.** The character comes back with no memory of her friends or loved ones.

**82.** The character's presence becomes disjunctive. At the beginning of every game session, roll a d%. On a result of 1, one of the character's magic items becomes non-magical. (Determine randomly, artifacts are immune to this effect.)

**83.** The character becomes thin and skeletal. The character's weight drops to 75% of what it used to be.

**84.** The character becomes ravenous, and her weight rises to 125% of what it used to be.

**85.** One of the subject's limbs is no longer under his control, but instead under the DM's.



**86.** Running water inflicts physical pain on the character. He takes a -10 on all swim checks.

**87.** Cure/Inflict spells treat the character as undead, as do Heal and Harm spells.

**88.** Non-sentient living beings (animals, oozes, etc.) attack the character before any other enemy.

**89.** Bane weapons, a ranger's favored enemy bonus, and similar effects treat the character as undead.

**90.** Children or animals in the vicinity of the character when he sleeps (the same village, district, etc.) may contract a supernatural disease called the Tomb Curse. This disease has an incubation period of 2d12 hours, a save DC of 12, and causes 1 point of Constitution damage on a failed save.

**91.** Any plants (not plant creatures) in the same immediate vicinity as the character (a few feet or so) for more than 4-10 hours will sicken and die.

**92.** The character feels the constant presence of the grave weighing him down. She takes a -2 on saves against effects which cause fatigue.

**93.** The character feels as if nature itself has turned against him. When the character saves against natural, non-magical effects native to the material plane, such as drowning in the ocean, but not an elemental's vortex ability, he suffers a -2 to the save.

**94.** The character becomes mute.

**95.** Every day the character goes without taking a life, she takes 1 nonlethal damage that cannot be healed until she kills a sentient being.

**96.** The character can only be awake at night. He needs a DC 16 Fortitude save to stay awake when the sun is out.

**97.** The character suffers a -2 on all saves which cause death on a failure.

**98.** The character's alignment shifts one step. If at all possible, this shift is towards Chaotic Evil. This shift will not cause the character to be ineligible for any class that she belongs to.

**99.** The particular spell used to bring the character back will never work for her again.

**100.** Roll twice, or DM's choice.

After a number of encounters with fellow adventurers suffering terrible changes following their resurrections, one necromancer invented a way to attempt to mitigate the damage by crafting a soul anchor. A wizard with a soul anchor is tethered to the material world even beyond death, and finds returning much easier.

## Anchor the Soul

### Necromancy (Evil)

Brd 3, Clr 4, Sor/Wiz 3

**Components:** V, S, F

**Casting Time:** 1 day

**Range:** Touch

**Target:** One object or willing creature

**Duration:** Permanent

**Saving Throw:** Yes (harmless)

**Spell Resistance:** Yes

This horrible spell uses the life force of another to secure the caster's own to the material world. Casting it imbues an object or another person with a tiny portion of the caster's soul, making it easier to return. For each soul anchor that a caster has, he may roll an additional time on the Sour Ground table, but must use the lowest result. In Ravenloft, the first soul anchor does not add a third die, it merely removes the DM's ability to choose the result.

However, there is a downside. If a soul anchor should be destroyed, the caster immediately loses 500 experience points per level he has. (This can result in level loss.) Even if the object or person is mended or raised, the connection (and experience points) will not return.

# THE CLAY OF HEROES

## Sample PCs for 5th Edition

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Through my travels, I've met many people: influential, wealthy, downtrodden, poor, cursed, blessed, villains hailed as saviors and unsung heroes ignored by most. Yet there were a few people that I've met through the years who I believe have potential to become something more than the common people I meet when they face the darkness of the world. Some of these persons of interest would avoid the fight, some would succumb to the temptation of evil and leave tragedy in their wake, some would meet their end at the jaws of a monster, but a few of them would shine, and make the world a better and safer place, bringing justice. But for good or for ill, I'm certain that these people, barely above the mean when I met them, are special. I'll include a few notes on them for reference, to compare what I saw in them with what I'll learn from the stories of their exploits.

I don't expect to get every detail right in these notes; perhaps I've noted the wrong weapon or made a mistake in a personality quirk. Either history will correct me or they will remain insignificant enough for the details to not matter.

### Tornuk, the Zealot

Human male, fighter 1, Lawful Good

**Background:** Tornuk was an infantryman in the service of one of Darkon's barons during Azalin's absence. In a skirmish with the Falkovnian invaders, he

nearly lost his life after a Talon left him for dead. He was found by a traveler and nourished back to health; since then he is plagued by visions of the "Gray Realm" as taught by the Eternal Order, leaving him little choice but to become a follower of that grim religion.

His "condition" and new conviction led him to the decision to leave the army, but he is still a patriot that strives to fight the horrors of the land, although he realizes the dangers and doesn't overestimate his combat prowess. Yet, barring suicidal missions, he tries to postpone the "Hour of Ascension," the time when the dead will try to reclaim the land of the living, by appeasing the restless dead that he can see in the "Gray Realm" or destroying those that walk in this world, one undead at a time.

Tornuk has grown to be a dependable man of few words, who has learned to help his fellow combatants and allies, and is ready to lay down his life if it means defending the innocent from undead.

**Strength** 16

**Dexterity** 14

**Constitution** 15

**Intelligence** 11

**Wisdom** 13

**Charisma** 9

### Personal characteristics

**Appearance:** You are a well-built man in his early twenties, of above average height, with dark hair and eyes that have

seen too much death. You have a long scar on your chest that leads to your belly, the memento left to you by the Talon who nearly killed you.

**Background:** Soldier

**Feature:** Military rank (sergeant of infantry in baronial Darkonese army).

**Personality trait:** You face problems head-on. A simple direct solution is the best path to success.

**Ideal:** Defending the world from the Hour of Ascension is what matters most.

**Bond:** You fight for those that can't fight for themselves.

**Flaw:** You have little respect for anyone that doesn't share your view-point on the undead and the Hour of Ascension.

**Dark shadow:** Gravesight. You can spend your inspiration to witness the ethereal resonance of a recent event. The event must have had some emotional significance and have occurred in your current location. Watching the ghostly re-enactment might offer some clue as to what happened or provide new information regarding the past. This might call for the normal Horror check for witnessing a disturbing event.

## Character information

**Proficiency bonus:** +2. Skills: Athletics, Perception, intimidation, survival. Tools: gaming set (dice)

**Languages:** Darkonese, Vaasi

**Saving throws:** Constitution +4, Strength +5

**Hit points:** 12 **AC:** 18

**Melee attack:** Long sword +5: 1d8+3 damage. Ranged attack: javelin +4: 1d6+3 damage.

**Equipment:** Chain mail, shield, long sword, 2 javelins, explorer's pack, a smaller version of the holy symbol of the Eternal Order and a set of clothes. 15 gp

## Class abilities

**Armor and weapons:** You're proficient with all armors, shields, simple and martial weapons.

**Fighting style:** Defense (+1 AC when wearing armor)

**Second wind:** Gain 1d10+1 temporary hit points on your turn as a bonus action. Once used, you regain use of this ability after a short or long rest.

## Sariel, the Outcast

Elf female, fighter 1, Chaotic neutral

**Background:** Sariel was born in a small community of semi-nomadic wood elves in Tepest. Sariel was never too close with her extended family and although she shared their wanderlust, she wanted more than the simple way of life of her kin; she had the spark of greed rarely encountered in her community.

When she was close to adulthood and already an excellent marksman, she witnessed an unfriendly interaction between her cousin and a couple of human hunters over some quarry. Before she had the chance to make her presence known, she spotted something on the human; a silver necklace with a blue aquamarine on it. Sariel became enamored with this piece of jewelry. As the humans raised their voice against her cousin, Sariel didn't wait for things to heat up. She shot and killed the first human on the spot and chased and then killed the other human, ignoring the protests of her shocked cousin. Thinking her cousin wouldn't notice or mind, she stole the necklace.

Returning back to the camp of her family, the news of her actions was not taken well. Her cousin related how her eyes were drawn to the jewel in the first place and that it was the first thing she stole. Her

father demanded to see the necklace, and when she produced it, he recognized it as the necklace belonging to a local noble. Sariel had killed a nobleman and the tribe was sure the humans would retaliate. The elves quickly gathered their meager belongings and left; nobody spoke another word to Sariel that night, nor throughout the trip. Her family ignored her. She realized that it was time for her to go her own way.

After several days in the wilderness, Sariel found her way to a modest town. Her exceptional archery skills and her knowledge of the wilderness were enough to secure her a position as a mercenary protecting caravans or travellers. When work was slow, she didn't mind taking the gold of criminal guilds looking for a bit extra muscle to settle their differences with opponents, although she never killed the incapacitated, women, or children. Never being afraid of the road, she didn't mind betraying the trust of her criminal employers and stealing a piece of jewelry she fancied here or there and then quickly leaving the area, settling in the role of the outcast again.

Sariel is willing to work for money even when the odds are bad, and she gets bored when things are slow. She's not above stealing from her employers though, and she's particularly fond of silver jewelry and blue-colored gems. Although she's not reclusive, she's slow to trust, although deep down she feels lonely and abandoned. Sariel doesn't make significant relationships, thinking that since her family turned her away, everyone else is even more likely to do so, so she doesn't want to give them the chance to hurt her feelings. As she matures (which for elves takes decades) she may overcome this juvenile approach.

**Strength** 12  
**Dexterity** 18

**Constitution** 12

**Intelligence** 10

**Wisdom** 12

**Charisma** 8

## Personal characteristics

**Appearance:** You are a lean elf woman in early adulthood. Your skin has a greenish tint, your eyes and hair are light brown. You wear jewelry when you can and you rarely go without the silver necklace with the aquamarine which you stole before you started your journey.

**Background:** Outlander, origin: Outcast.

**Feature:** Wanderer. You can recall the general layout of terrain, settlements etc. You can find food and fresh water for you and 5 other people provided the terrain allows it.

**Personality trait:** You are driven by appreciation of fine, expensive things and wanderlust.

**Ideal:** Change: Life changes like the seasons and we must change with it.

**Bond:** Deep down, you want your tribe to accept you back.

**Flaw:** You are slow to trust members of the other races or societies.

## Character information

**Proficiency bonus:** +2. Skills: Athletics, Perception, survival, intimidation, stealth. Tools: musical instrument (flute)

**Languages:** Tepestani, Elven, Darkonese  
Saving throws: Constitution +3, Strength +3

**Hit points:** 11 **AC:** 16 (18 with shield)

**Melee attack:** Rapier +6: 1d8+4 damage.

**Ranged attack:** Long bow +8: 1d8+4 damage.

**Equipment:** Rapier, studded leather armor, shield, long bow, 20 arrows, flute,

explorer's pack, a silver medallion with an aquamarine (worth in total 60 gp) and a couple sets of clothes. 11 sp

## Race abilities

### Darkvision (60')

**Fey ancestry:** advantage to saves against charm, can't be put to sleep

**Trance:** Instead of sleep, you go into a deep meditative trance for 4 hours.

**Fleet of foot:** Your base walking speed is 35'

**Mask of the wild:** You can attempt to hide even when lightly obscured by foliage, heavy rain, and other natural phenomena.

## Class abilities

**Armor and weapons:** You're proficient with all armors, shields, simple and martial weapons.

**Fighting style:** Archery (+2 to ranged attack rolls)

**Second wind:** Gain 1d10+1 temporary hit points on your turn as a bonus action. Once used, you regain use of this ability after a short or long rest.

## Nethesa, the Redhead

Human female, sorcerer 1, Chaotic Good

**Background:** Nethesa was born in a rural community in Barovia, into a large family of farmers. Since she was an infant, her crimson red hair was the source of whispers, even though a little red in the hair wasn't uncommon in her family. As she grew to be a child, there were rumors that when she was agitated things would happen around her – unnatural things. Her siblings have let comments slip that spooky lights may momentarily appear and flicker around her, although her parents denied any such

incidents. As she was growing up, she was more and more shunned by other children and even her family grew more distant. Strange occurrences around her were becoming less rare. By the time she was a teen, there was scarcely a person in her village that couldn't tell a story of something strange happening near her. Nethesa developed a strong personality nevertheless and wouldn't let insults slide.

As she grew from a kid to a woman, the mysterious occurrences seemed to be more focused, as if she could guide the power somehow. The most serious of such incidents was when she got in an argument with a baker and, a couple of hours later, the man slipped and broke his leg, claiming that sudden sleepiness had overtaken him. A few months later, kids started getting sick and most people in the village started accusing her openly of witchcraft. Things escalated when a couple of families confronted Nethesa in the fields, threatened to kill her, and started throwing stones at her, disregarding anything she or her family had to say. Nethesa, openly used magic to defend herself, and several people fell asleep. Horrified, the other assailants fled and Nethesa's siblings spirited her away.

Not being welcome even in her own family anymore and fearing for her safety, Nethesa got a few of her belongings and left the area, a few steps ahead of an angry mob. She managed to escape to Richemulot, where she pretended to be an orphan and got a job as a waitress. In a society more open towards magic, she found that using her power to deal with unruly bar customers actually got her respect and a raise.

She is grateful for the respect her employers gave her, but she's growing weary of being a bar wench. She considers leaving to explore the unknown whenever an opportunity presents itself. She is a good

person, even if her strong character and temperament makes her somewhat quick to anger. Ideally, she would like to help others resist persecution and prejudice.

**Strength** 10

**Dexterity** 14

**Constitution** 14

**Intelligence** 12

**Wisdom** 10

**Charisma** 17

## Personal characteristics

**Appearance:** You are a thin woman of average height in her late teen years, with red hair. You usually tie your hair into braids.

**Background:** Bartender

**Feature:** You can find work in any sizeable community, usually at an inn or tavern but possibly in the services of a noble, a rich merchant, or anyone else needing your services. At such a place, you receive free lodging and food of a poor or modest standard (depending on the generosity of your employer), as long as you work for a shift each day. In addition, while working among drinking patrons you may pick up interesting gossip or information.

**Personality trait:** You face problems head-on. A simple, direct solution is the best path to success.

**Ideal:** Prejudice is damaging to society; people should be treated fairly.

**Bond:** You want to one day be spoken of with respect and be remembered as someone good despite being born with red hair and an aptitude to magic.

**Flaw:** You have a high temperament and you are often quick to anger.

**Dark shadow:** You can spend your inspiration to gain the prestidigitation cantrip for 1 minute. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for this cantrip.

## Character Information

**Proficiency bonus:** +2. **Skills:** Insight, Persuasion, Arcana, Deception. **Tools:** Gaming set

**Languages:** Balok, Mordentish, Vaasi, Draconic

**Saving throws:** Constitution, Charisma

**Hit points:** 9 **AC:** 15

**Melee attack:** dagger+4: 1d4+2 damage.

**Ranged attack:** ray of frost+5: 1d8 cold damage

**Equipment:** 2 daggers, bone wand (arcane focus), explorer's pack, set of clothes. 15 gp

## Class abilities

**Armor and weapons:** You're proficient with daggers, darts, slings, quarterstaves and light crossbows. You're not proficient with any armor.

**Spellcasting:** Charisma is your spellcasting ability. The spell save DC against your spells is 13 and your spell attack modifier is +5.

**Cantrips (At will):** dancing lights, mage hand, mending, ray of frost

**1st lvl spells (2/day):** shield, sleep

**Sorcerous origin:** Draconic. Your innate magic comes from draconic magic that unknown to you, was mingled with your blood or that of your ancestors before they wandered in the mists of Ravenloft. You are the first in your family to manifest the full power of your bloodline.

**Dragon ancestor:** Unknown to you, you have a distant copper dragon ancestor from the time when your family was outside of Ravenloft. You can speak Draconic intuitively.

**Draconic resilience:** At 1st level, your hit point maximum increases by 1 and

increases by 1 again whenever you gain a level in this class. The magic of your blood protects you. When you aren't wearing armor, your AC equals 13 + your Dexterity modifier.

## Ernek, the Agent

Human male, Rogue 1, True Neutral  
**Background:** Ernek was one of a multitude of orphans to grow up in the backstreets of Martira Bay. An unruly child, he spent some of his childhood living in rough downtrodden orphanages or temple facilities and equal parts living on the streets begging and stealing to survive. As he grew into his late teens he fell in with a rougher crowd at the docks that didn't shy away from violence or serious theft. During these years, Ernek did things he's not proud of, but they don't include murder.

One night Ernek managed to trick a couple of dock guards, get away with a chest from a ship, and take it to his hiding place. Before he was able to break the lock of the chest though, he realized that the abandoned building where he resided with some of the gang was being surrounded. His pursuers had superior training and equipment. In the ensuing struggle a lot of his friends were overpowered but he managed to escape with the chest. Before he had gone far though, he was held still by what could only be a magical spell. After a few long seconds during which he could only listen to the sounds of struggle behind him, a hooded person approached him and retrieved the chest. He was informed that by stealing the chest before it could be brought outside of Darkon, he had performed a service for the Kargat, Azalin's secret police. The figure gave him a pouch full of gold, informed him that he was now recruited into the service of the king, whispered to him the location of a tavern

where he would receive further instructions and left. As the spell faded, Ernek turned to see that his pursuers were dead; some by magic, some by weapons.

Since that day, Ernek has been called by the Kargat to spy on various parts of Martira Bay and beyond. The Kargat have made it easier for him to evade the hand of law and are not taking too much of his time, sometimes leaving him alone to do as he pleases for weeks. So far he hasn't been asked to do anything extremely dangerous or immoral and he's being paid for his services. He has learned of more locations where he could request help or drop information, but he hasn't made a real acquaintance with anyone from the Kargat. The people that give or retrieve the information from him are just associates like him, or so they claim.

While the money Ernek receives for his services is enough to keep him out of the gutters and he's thankful for the opportunity to work for his country, Ernek holds no illusions about his place. He accepts the rewards but worries that sooner or later, the Kargat will ask him to risk his life or worse, do something that's contrary to whatever remains of his morals, and he's not sure he actually has the right to say no.

**Strength** 12

**Dexterity** 16

**Constitution** 14

**Intelligence** 13

**Wisdom** 10

**Charisma** 12

## Personal characteristics

**Appearance:** You are a nimble man in his early twenties, with fair hair and gray eyes and the features of a person who had a rough childhood.

**Background:** Criminal - Spy (Pickpocket)

**Feature:** You have a several reliable and trustworthy contacts who act as your liaison to the Kargat. You know how to get messages to and from the Kargat, even over great distances. Specifically, you know the local messengers in various professions, in and around Martira Bay and a few such persons in every major part of Darkon.

**Personality trait:** You would rather make a new friend than a new enemy.

**Ideal:** Aspiration. You're determined to make something of yourself.

**Bond:** You have done several bad things to survive in your life, some in service of the Kargat, some while living on the streets. You hope to one day redeem yourself.

**Flaw:** You turn tail and run when things turn really bad.

## Character Information

**Proficiency bonus:** +2. Skills: Deception, stealth, acrobatics, investigation, persuasion, sleight of hand. Tools: Gaming set, thieves tools

**Languages:** Darkonese, Mordentish

**Saving throws:** Dexterity, intelligence

**Hit points:** 10 **AC:** 15

**Equipment:** Rapier, studded leather armor, thieves tools, gaming set (dice), 3 throwing daggers, a couple sets of clothes and burglar's pack. 6 gp

**Melee attack:** rapier +5, 1d8+3 damage.

**Ranged attack:** dagger +5, 1d4+3 damage



## Class Abilities

**Armor and weapons:** You're proficient with light armor, simple weapons, hand crossbows, longswords, rapiers and short swords.

**Expertise:** Your proficiency bonus with thieves' tools and deception is doubled.

**Sneak attack:** Once per turn, when you hit a creature with a finesse or ranged weapon and you have advantage on the attack, you deal +1d6 extra damage to the target. You don't need advantage to the attack roll if one of your allies is within 5' of the target, your ally isn't incapacitated and you don't have disadvantage on the attack roll.

**Thieves' Cant:** During your rogue training you learned thieves' cant, a secret mix of dialect, jargon, and code that allows you to hide messages in seemingly normal conversation, which only others knowing thieves' cant will understand. It takes four

times longer to convey such a message using thieves' cant.

In addition, you understand a set of secret signs and symbols used to convey short, simple messages, such as whether an area is dangerous or the territory of a thieves' guild, whether loot is nearby, etc.

## Amenar, the Anchorite:

Human male, cleric 1, Lawful Neutral

**Background:** Amenar was born in Dementlieu, in a large village near the border, as the third son of a successful shop owner. Showing an inclination towards learning, religion, and a strong sense of duty from a young age, Amenar found himself training to become an anchorite from his early teens, with the blessings of his family. His lessons were rigorous and he trained in both religion and battle. To round his education he spent time in various different churches of Ezra throughout the western Core.

During one such travel, while in the service of a traveling anchorite cleric, a warden, his group was passing through the hardly tamed rural areas of Richemulot. They heard commotion, and a woman's call for help. Rushing to the scene, they found a small group of armed men fighting the bodyguards of a young noblewoman with dark brown hair and fear in her eyes. Amenar was immediately smitten with the visage of the beautiful, aristocratic, and seemingly defenseless girl. Amenar's troupe rushed to help the noblewoman, engaged the armed men, defeated them and before chasing the thugs into the woods, alongside the surviving bodyguards, they tasked Amenar to stay and defend the noble girl.

The next few minutes that Amenar spent with noble girl, so hopelessly above his station, so calm now that the imminent danger passed, and keen to thank him for

his help, were etched in Amenar's heart. With a smile that Amenar felt would melt his legs, the girl introduced herself as Marine Renier, niece of Jacqueline of Richemulot. About then, the others returned and proclaimed the road free. When Amenar suggested that perhaps they should accompany Marine to her destination, the warden's frown made apparent that the older cleric realized what the young apprentice had in mind and didn't approve. The Warden healed the bodyguards of the noblewoman, and the anchorite group stayed behind as she left, to bury the bodies of the fallen. The Warden reminded Amenar that his mind should be in his studies for the following years and that a noblewoman was above his station.

Amenar soon finished his studies and became an anchorite. He is anxious to prove his mettle and protect the world, as is his duty. He never forgot Marine Renier though and considers her an inspiration to make the world a safer place, where she and other people would travel the roads without fear.

**Strength** 14

**Dexterity** 10

**Constitution** 14

**Intelligence** 12

**Wisdom** 16

**Charisma** 13

## Personal characteristics

**Appearance:** You are a well-built man in your early twenties with austere features and dark hair.

**Background:** Acolyte

**Feature:** Shelter of the Faithful

**Personality trait:** You're tolerant of other religions and respect the worship of other Gods.

**Ideal:** Faith. You trust that Ezra will guide your actions and you have faith that if you work hard, things will go well.

**Bond:** You never forgot Marine, although she's so high above your station.

**Flaw:** You put too much trust in those that wield power in Ezra's hierarchy.

## Character Information

**Proficiency bonus:** +2. Skills: Insight, religion, history, medicine.

**Languages:** Mordentish, Balok, Darknonese, Vaasi

**Saving throws:** Wisdom, Charisma

**Hit points:** 10 AC: 16

**Melee attack:** longsword + 4: 1d8 + 2 damage.

**Ranged attack:** Sacred flame (DC 13): 1d8 radiant damage

**Equipment:** Shield, scale mail, long sword, explorer's pack, set of clothes. 2 gp

## Class abilities

**Armor and weapons:** You're proficient with light armors, medium armors and shields. You're proficient with all simple weapons and long swords.

**Spellcasting:** Wisdom is your spellcasting ability. The spell save DC against your spells is 13 and your spell attack modifier is +5.

**Cantrips (At will):** Guidance, Light, Sacred Flame

**1st lvl spells (2/day):** Sanctuary<sup>D</sup>, Shield of Faith<sup>D</sup>, Bless, cure wounds  
Spells marked with "D" are mist domain spells.

**Divine domain:** Mist domain

**Bonus proficiency:** When you choose this domain at 1st lvl you gain proficiency with long swords.

**Shielded mind:** Starting when you choose this domain at 1st level, you can use a bonus action to gain advantage on saving

throws against fear and against being charmed. This blessing lasts until the end of your next turn. You can use this feature a number of times equal to your Wisdom modifier (a minimum of once). You regain all expended uses when you finish a long rest.

# MIKHAIL

## A Love Story

By Kai D. Kalix aka Kadarin  
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–1 –

In the backyard of the tavern, there stand three birch-trees. Sometimes, I talk with them. I like birch-trees; they are funny. Not like other trees. Oaks are so slow – they need hours just to say hello. And I will never – ever – talk to apple trees again.

I watched him. As I watch him almost every night. In the tavern, where he spends his evenings.

Not that he ever notices Me. I am good at not being noticed. But I wished he would – sometime – notice Me. He notices all the waitresses. And flirts with them, although just, well, casually.

He is a glassmaker, by the way. And he has wonderful black hair. And beautiful green eyes.

I do hate waitresses. Especially the good-looking ones.

On this night, however, he brought a girl with him. I did not like her. It was – so to say – hate at first sight. They laughed. They touched. They kissed.

I went furious.

Then they left. He brought her to her door. Then they kissed again. And then he went home.

And I removed her.

No, not in that way. I brought her to my cellar. Where I have chains. And other things. So I chained her to the wall, and I cursed her. She would never die, except when I wanted her to.

And then I showed her how furious I was. I made sure that she would never look at Mikhail again. And that she would never listen to him again. And that she would never – ever – kiss him again. Then I did some other things – I got a little bit agitated.

I do not think she was very happy. But then, I was not, either – all that blood, and the other fluids and things.

But I liked the screaming. I always like it when they scream.

–2 –

Sergey, the tavern's house-cat, eyed Me suspiciously. But he does that with everyone, and he does it all the time. I do not like tom-cats, and do not speak with them. I like female cats, and do talk with them. They are strange, but they are funny.

Of course, Mikhail was confused and also a bit sad when she had vanished. But he got over her, so to speak, after a while – without, naturally, knowing that she was still alive. He still did not notice Me any more than he did before.

Then he brought another girl with him into the tavern.

Another blonde one. I do not like blonde girls. Especially not those with hungry blue eyes.

It was like the other night. He did not even realize that I was watching them. Intensely. Otherwise, he might have seen what was coming.

He brought her home, and I removed her, as I did with the first one. This time I used a spiked club (after applying the curse). The result was satisfying – for Me, at last. Except, again, for the blood and the other... things.

She also screamed a lot. And the first one joined her. It was almost like a duet. I enjoyed it very much.

My cellar, on the other hand, is getting a bit crowded.

But the other day, I bought some new clothes. I thought the ones I was wearing made Me look a bit – weighty. And I did not like the color anymore. Anyway, blood stains are so hard to get out.

–3 –

On this day, it snowed. Horizontally. In the middle of summer. So I looked. Into places where mere humans do not see anything. Someone was fooling around with the weather. They would have to pay the price for that; there are Powers that do not take those things lightly.

Again, Mikhail had sulked for a time. And he still did not notice Me at all. Well, I cannot make him – that is part of the curse that lies upon Me. Put upon Me by another man I found – attractive. And I want him to notice Me. And he will notice Me.

Then he brought still another girl into the tavern. By that time, I had begun to see the tavern as ours – as our special place, Mikhail's and Mine. He, on the other hand, did not seem to think so. Well, it was like the other two before.

Only, this time I did not hurt her – although I did put the Curse of Undying upon her. I just watched – out of the darkness, of course – her becoming aware of the fact that she was chained to a wall. In a cellar. She screamed. I liked that.

Then she noticed the other two creatures in the room. Which made her scream again.

And then she realized that those creatures once were human; and that she may well be made into something like them. She screamed.

And then, well, she noticed the hunger of the other two. The hunger. And that she was the only food. She was only food, to those two. Oh, how she screamed. Oh, what fun I had.

The next morning, I did my hair in the latest fashion. It looks nice.

–4 –

It was a perfect day. The sky was of a perfect blue, the sun was perfectly shining, and the things in the cellar were screaming. Especially after I showed them some of my pets. And – oh – my real form. That was when they began screaming really loudly. And with real passion.

But – there will be no fourth girl in My cellar. Even though I have room enough, it is getting too crowded. I do not like it this way.

Mikhail will be Mine.

# HEART OF THE WORLD

## The Role of Barovia

By Mikhail "NeoTiamat" Rekun  
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### Barovia in Ravenloft

#### Tropes

Barovia is sort of the quintessential Gothic horror setting—the sleepy, isolated Balkan village menaced by vampires, werewolves, ghosts, curses, and so forth. Its literary origins are to be found in Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, and Frederick Marryat (author of a werewolf short story, *The White Wolf of the Hartz Mountains*), though the imagery is most associated with the Universal Horror films of the 1930s and 1940s and the Hammer Horror films of the 1950s through 1970s. To a lesser extent, it also has antecedents in the Ruritania of Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda*, that is, in the sort of small, half-modern, half-feudal crypto-Balkan states of literature.

#### Purpose

The purpose of Barovia, therefore, is to provide the Gamemaster with an inexhaustible supply of isolated villages, ready for menacing. Originally, this was the purpose of the village of Barovia, menaced by the Vampire Strahd, but as the setting's grown, I think that is a torch better passed on to other monsters. Think of Barovia as

an archetypal setting, a blank canvas onto which the GM can apply a werewolf, a ghost, a vampire, a curse, a demon, and so forth.

Among other things, this means that painting Barovians as wretched and impoverished and unpleasant is somewhat counterproductive. Barovia should be a domain of hearty rural farmers, good people, though a bit traditional. Why? So that the players want to help them. They should be sympathetic, so that they make better victims.

#### Theme

As a result, the central themes of Barovia can be summed up as:

- Isolation. Each setting is a closed circle that locks once the PCs arrive. They cannot leave; help cannot arrive. Barovia is a very claustrophobic setting, each village isolated by a hostile environment even though the actual distances involved are rather small.
- In the Blood. The human culture of Barovia emphasizes family and kin, and the horror aspect is not different. People are punished for the faults of their ancestors. This is not about cosmic randomness. People always know why they are punished. It's about the sins of the father passing

unto the sons. This is a very Gothic theme, and endlessly applicable.

- The External Threat. The theme of many Domains is the inhumanity of man to man. Hazlan, Falkovnia, Dementlieu, Borca, are all about how cruel people can be to each other. Barovia is different. In Barovia, the horror comes from the monsters. Indeed, given that the monstrosity is 'In the Blood' (see above) for so many monsters, they might not be bad people... but they're still a werewolf or a ghost, and have to be put down. This is a good setup for the tragic monster.

### GM's Note

All of this, of course, is in service of the theme of Isolation. Given the characteristics of Barovian nature, it is extremely easy to have the road or the bridge be out whenever it is dramatically appropriate (too much snow, too much mud, a storm washed away the bridge) even without recourse to sabotage or ambush. Once the PCs arrive in a setting, they can be isolated easily... At the same time, vampires that can turn into bats, werewolves able to run as wolves, and incorporeal ghosts are all immune to constraints of mobility. Monsters are always more able to maneuver in Barovia's nature than the players are.

## The Land

### Environment

While not uninhabited like Forlorn, Barovia is not a highly-tamed land like Dementlieu is. It's a place of nature, in all of its glory, where humanity is sort of taking

advantage of it and utilizing it, but ultimately Mother Nature is still the boss here. Barovia is a mountainous area, with several mountain ranges coming together into a kind of thick region of mountains, plateaus, foothills and river valleys. This is a wild, chaotic country – the land is sort of wrinkled up, crisscrossed with impossibly fast rivers and steep ravines. The rivers here are very fast and very cold, and falling into one is an excellent way to drown or break your neck on some rocks, even though they aren't very wide or deep. The entire country is covered in a thick forest (hardwoods such as oak and beech in lower elevations, pines and spruce and fir higher up).

What does this mean? On the one hand, it means that the country is inordinately rich. The fast rivers are constantly replenishing the soil, there is timber everywhere, and all those mountains mean mineral wealth. Barovia is a very, very rich land, at least so far as natural resources are concerned.

On the other hand, Barovia's countryside is lethal. This is not the kind of flat forest where a man can ride a horse between the trees. This is the sort of forest where the ground is covered in tiny gulches, there are gnarled roots everywhere, everything's covered in (possibly thorny or poisonous) shrubs, and there are unexpected gorges and rivers all over the place. Running in this forest is simply asking to step into a rabbit hole and break an ankle within thirty paces. Nor is the fauna of Barovia particularly safe. While wolves rarely attack healthy adult humans, those same humans after they've become lost or injured are another story altogether.

Barovians do not travel very much because travel is dangerous, especially out into the wilderness. Few Barovians know what the terrain is like more than a few

miles away from their villages. Even the roads are only an imperfect solution, most being slender paths that rely on fords or rope bridges to cross the many rivers. In the winter, the roads are covered in several feet of snow, and the country essentially grinds to a halt. In the spring, sudden storms and floods can render the rivers impassable, and rain turns the dirt roads to mud in which a man can sink to his ankles. In the mountains, avalanches can block passes, and blizzards are a regular occurrence at higher altitudes, even as late as May or as early as September.

All of this means that for the average Barovian, a village ten miles away may as well be on the moon for all the chance of anyone reaching it, if the road is out. (And the road is, of course, out, whenever it is dramatically appropriate for it to be). Meanwhile, away from the roads, the country still hides a great many secrets. Ancient keeps, ruined monasteries, abandoned villages, old stone circles... one can find all sorts of things out in the woods, if one is brave enough to go poking around

## On the Choking Fog

One particular weather pattern peculiar to north-central Barovia is that of the Choking Fog. Several times a year, dark clouds emerge from the high Balinoks and float down to the area around Castle Ravenloft, carried by high winds. The clouds are composed of a fine grit that gets into everything, and those who breathe it cough for days. Nevertheless, people continue to live there because the dark soil of the region is some of the most fertile in the core.

## GM's Note

The explanation for both the Choking Fog and the tunnels of the Balinoks can be found in the fact that one of the Balinoks is an intermittently active volcano, which throws up ash into the region a few times a year – the tunnels are old lava tunnels. Ash being an excellent fertilizer, this also explains some of Barovia's legendary fertility.

in them. Curiously, many of the Balinoks are riddled with caverns and tunnels, some of which go for miles.

Barovians have a healthy respect for nature, and treat it as a kind of capricious goddess in its own right, placated with a range of superstitious acts. That said, they also treat anyone too-friendly with nature with suspicion. A hermit who lives in the woods on his own is someone who is violating the natural order of things. Barovia isn't Tepest, he's not in danger of getting burned to death, but that's where suspicion goes the moment something goes wrong. At the same time, the Vistani are distrusted because they are able to ignore the restrictions on mobility that plague regular Barovians. Vistani don't worry about bridges that are out, about muddy roads, about snow up to their waists. It's not a problem for them. Nor is it a problem for anyone travelling with them, but then, that's not

## GM's Note

You may consider the implications of the unity of Strahd with the Land. Nature in Barovia is dangerous, and Strahd has a certain control over it, by dint of ancient ritual.

really safe. Merchants are also people who ignore the constraints of mobility, but they do so in a more acceptable fashion (they still get snowed in).

## Social Geography

Barovia is actually quite densely populated, but it is a rural population, and one that the nature of the Barovian landscape serves to camouflage. Even so, Barovia is not constructed entirely of tiny rural villages.

At the edge of full urbanization are the six main settlements of Krezk, Zeidenburg, Teufeldorf, Immol, Vallaki, and Barovia Town, each with a population of ten to twenty thousand. These are market towns and trading centers, collecting goods from the countryside and offering them up to the many merchants that come to Barovia, either to purchase agricultural produce, timber, and mineral resources, or while passing through between the Western and Eastern Core.

The majority of the population lives in small villages, most of which have a population of a few hundred souls, though a handful go as high as a thousand. These villages honeycomb the country, isolated from one another by Barovia's harsh environment, but connected by networks of roads. They're primarily agricultural, though most villages will also engage in some village industry on the side – one village may have an orchard for apples or plums (and a distillery for brandy); another may engage in fishing, plant vineyards, or pursue a little logging, and some of the largest engage in mining in the higher Balinoks.

Barovia is not an urbanized, industrialized state. Even the towns are quite rural. Vallaki and Zeidenburg, the biggest, are still around 1/4th the size of

Toyalis or so, let alone Port-a-Lucine. Similarly, the towns do not have the marks of what one would consider 'high culture.' There are no museums, no universities, no large-scale manufacturing. What there will be is localized government (the burgomeisters of the towns are expected to keep track of all the tiny villages in their corner of Barovia), artisan manufacturing (most of Barovia's specialist production will be in the towns –that is, dressmakers, furniture makers, gunsmiths, etc, producing either what peasants in villages cannot, or producing a higher quality version), multiple churches/temples, lawyers and legal apparatus, and educational establishments (offering something loosely equivalent to a middle-class education in Borca or Dementlieu).

## The Folk

### Social Classes

Compared to Nova Vaasa, Hazlan, or Dementlieu, Barovia is extremely flat as a society. There's a sort of broad rural prosperity that does not much allow for either the very poor or the very rich to exist, at least in the sense that they do in other countries. This is something of a historical and geographical accident—debt peonage and serfdom never really caught on in Barovia, the practice of partible inheritance common to both gentry and peasants (wherein the land is divided among heirs in order of seniority, rather than going entire to the eldest) has kept nobles from becoming particularly powerful, and the harsh environment has limited the economies of scale that make large estates in other lands more profitable.

The most numerous social class, of course, are the peasants. Generally speaking, Barovian villages are self-

sufficient. They produce their own food, clothing, shelter, etc. The poorest peasants are just scrabbling at the edge of subsistence, but the broad majority also produce something on the side to sell to merchants, whether additional grains, hogs, apples, or brandy from small distilleries. With that money, they can then buy things, primarily various small luxuries (good cloth from Dementlieu, metalwork from Borca or Falkovnia). The great majority of Barovians own their own land, and wage labor isn't

really commonly practiced, though a few of the wealthiest peasants may have a couple of hired hands.

The next step up is that of the gentry, though the division between peasants and gentry is much more fluid in Barovia than in other parts of the Core. Essentially, a member of the gentry possesses wealth and some combination of public respect, government authority, and lineage that entitles them to the title. Really, to become gentry, one must simply convince the local

## Prominent Gentry Families

Though Barovia does not possess anything like the hereditary aristocracy that other parts of the Core do, some gentry families are sufficiently established and widespread that they may be considered aristocrats in all but name.

- The von Zaroviches: Perhaps Barovia's most infamous lineage, they have provided the Counts of Barovia since before the Tergish Invasion, and boyars bearing the von Zarovich name can be found in many of the most hostile and dangerous parts of Barovia.
- The Wachters: Risen to prominence after the massacre of 351 BC, the Wachters are some of the Count's most loyal servants, and have a proud military tradition.
- The von Holtzes: A small family, near Castle Ravenloft, but traditional agents of the Count.
- The Petrovs: Once prominent, they maintain links to the domain of G'Henna. A hereditary strain of madness runs through this family, but their fanatic loyalty (and peculiar charisma) makes up for it.
- The Dilisnya: Barovian Dilisnya, or rather the tiny handful of them that remain after their blood-feud with the von Zaroviches. They do have the same reputation for intrigue and treachery, though.
- The Katsky: An old family, they control much of the land in the higher altitudes of the Balinoks, and tend to be stand-offish and secretive about what they find in their mines.
- The apMortens: A Forfarian family of note, they provide several of the Thanes (Boyars) along the Forlorn border, and have a rather uncanny reputation for sorcery.
- The Olszanik: A merchant family risen to prominence, the Olszanik are likely the richest family in Barovia, with commercial links to all of Barovia's neighbors
- The Buchvold: A widespread family, and like the Wachters possessed of a long tradition of military service.

community that one is of sufficiently elevated status as to deserve the title. Anyone can become gentry if they manage to become successful enough as farmers and community leaders, and at the same time, bankrupt gentry can, after a generation or two, become peasants. This is important, because it means that Barovians see the gentry as being different in degree but not in kind from themselves. The title of 'Baron' is the property of the most firmly established gentry families –it marks authority over other boyars granted directly from the Count. The gentry are not exactly aristocracy or nobles (that presupposes a hereditary right to the position that the gentry lack), but the oldest and most established families are usually considered nobles.

Merchants are a class of their own, because they travel and link the different villages to one another. In truth, the merchant may be the only stranger most Barovians ever see. Foreign merchants are disliked and derided, and so are Barovian merchants, albeit a little less. That said, while everyone heaps abuse on the wealthy merchant (wealthy by rural Barovian standards), they're recognized as being vitally important to village and town life. With Barovian merchants, furthermore, there tends to be a sort of mentality that "He's a money-grubbing bastard, but he's our money-grubbing bastard."

Soldiers are increasingly prominent since the occupation of Gundarak, and are mostly drawn from younger sons of Barovian families. Essentially, Barovians practice a partial primogeniture – that is to say, the oldest son gets most of the land, the next son gets a smaller plot, and the next son gets a smaller plot still, and so forth. Many younger sons thus seek alternative career paths such as emigrating to the towns, becoming a priest or

schoolteacher, or becoming a soldier. Barovian soldiers are in for the long haul (20-year enlistment terms are common), but when the soldier finishes his enlistment, he's entitled to a block of land, which is likely to be quite a bit more than what he'd otherwise inherit. Many villages like to have a few retired soldiers around for protection, and there's been a concerted effort to settle Barovian soldiers in Gundarak as a sort of reserve. Being a soldier is a very respectable job, and a newly-retired soldier (who is going to be in his late thirties or so, usually) is considered prime husband material in most of Barovia's villages.

A somewhat unique class in Barovia is that of the rural intelligentsia. Consisting mostly of lawyers, priests, and especially school teachers (nearly every village in Barovia has a school teacher), as well as just about anyone who seems notably well-read or educated, these people have a position of influence and respect in Barovian villages as the local intellectuals. The school teacher is the person who has traveled (if only to Vallaki or Immol) and has read many books, and so whenever something out of the ordinary happens, they're called upon to explain what is going on. They tend to be the most modern Barovians, and are the main means by which technology such as new agricultural techniques are dispersed through the countryside. That said, while they're respected, they're also seen as people not at ease with Barovian traditions (like the honorable calling of the blood feud), and are maybe a little un-Barovian as a result. Keep in mind though that these are intellectuals and educated men only by the standards of rural Barovia—they have what in Richemulot or Dementlieu would be considered a solid middle-class education, no more.

Finally, tradesmen are only really found in towns. Many Barovian peasants practice

## GM's Notes

In other words, Barovian aristocrats tend to look like vampires even when they aren't vampires. This also explains why Strahd looks like Christopher Lee instead of Vlad Tepes.

some sort of minor trade, but what distinguishes a professional carpenter from a peasant skilled with his hands is that the former is able to make a full-time living off it and no longer farms. They provide a higher quality of manufactured goods (candles, clothing, barrels, metalwork) than peasants can produce, and at cheaper prices than importing from abroad. Some Barovian products are actually export goods, particularly woodwork. Tradesmen are usually a little more educated and broad-minded than the average peasant, though not necessarily any more prosperous.

## Ethnic Groups

Barovia is an absolute patchwork of ethnic and religious groups, most of which do not trust and do not like the others. One of the more important tasks of the government is to keep ethnic tensions at a low simmer, and not exploding into bloody pogroms. Of equal note is the fact that Barovia's ethnic groups cannot be subdivided into neat regions, 'Gundarakites here, Barovians here, Thaani here,' but rather they all intermix into a kind of ethnic quilt. Most of this is due to historical accident, the regular flow of peoples through the Barovian countryside resulting from migration and invasion. But moving peoples about has also been Barovian governmental policy for centuries, on the grounds that it breaks up any large ethnic clusters that might lead to rebellions. When

rebellions have occurred, the Barovian state has in the past simply uprooted entire villages and marched them to some other corner of the country, where they would be isolated and unable to cause as much trouble.

Barovians are the major ethnic group (accounting for almost half the population), dusky-skinned and broad-shouldered, with dark features and wide hips, usually with curly hair. Found throughout the County of Barovia, they are concentrated in the north-to-northwest, from Krezk to Vallaki to the village of Barovia. Because this is the most fertile part of Barovia, Barovians tend to be the wealthiest of Strahd XII's subjects, and form the backbone of the country's army and government.

Gundarakites are the second-largest ethnic group (accounting for some 30%), and are physically much like the Barovians, (stout, dark-complexioned), though certain differences in hair and eye allow one to tell them apart (Gundarakite hair tends to be more straight, and their eyes are of a subtly different shape—they tend toward epicanthic folds, in modern terms). Most scholars believe them to be descended from the intermarriage of Barovians and Tergs several centuries ago. For many years an independent duchy, they were recently conquered by the Barovians. Most dwell in the southwest, in occupied Gundarak along the Invidian border, though the Barovian policy of uprooting and transplanting entire communities has led to a second nexus

## Barovians, Borcans, and the old gentry

Traditionally, Barovians and Borcans consider themselves to be the same people, or at least cousins. A more likely ethnographic explanation is that the two are different ethnic groups with a long history of intermarriage along the border resulting in somewhat muddled appearances in the area around Krezk. Barovians, as mentioned, are mostly stocky, curly-haired, and dark-complexioned, Borcans are usually taller, paler, with slight frames and straight hair.

Of some interest is that most of the oldest Barovian gentry families, including the Dilisnya and the von Zarovich, appear to be ethnically Borcan rather than Barovian – possessed of very pale skin, black hair, and more delicate facial structure than the hearty Barovians.

Strahd has a certain control over it. by dint of ancient ritual.

along the Nova Vaasan border. Another division among the Gundarakites is that a small portion of them have actually lived in Barovia for generations prior to the conquest of occupied Gundarak, having fled from Duke Gundar. These unfortunate people, though loyal Barovian subjects, find themselves distrusted both by Barovians as Gundarakites, and by other Gundarakites as collaborators.

The Forfarians are mostly found along the Forlorn border, and are ethnically and culturally distinct from the other denizens of Barovia – they tend to be taller, more athletic, and paler, with a tendency towards

red hair and freckles. Their boyars and burgomeisters are termed 'Thanes,' they practice a separate, druidic religion, and generally stick to themselves, though after so many years together, various Barovian ethnic features are starting to creep in. Forfarians are largely loyal to the Count, at least as an intermediary step towards reclaiming their homeland, and are often treated as elite troops in the Barovian armies, though few choose to take advantage of their plots of land anywhere but along the Forlorn border.

Thaani are a somewhat curious group, with no real homeland or even consistent appearance (they can look like just about anyone, though some highly unusual features like albinism or complete hairlessness seem to recur without rhyme or reason). While there are a few Thaani villages scattered in remote parts of Barovia (more remote than usual), most Thaani live in the various towns, where they form tight-knit communities closed to outsiders. Though generally very nice people, most Barovians consider them unnatural, though given the exceedingly high instance of psionics among the Thaani, they might have a point.

Vistani occupy a rather special place in Barovian life. Nomadic merchants and entertainers, they have the formal protection of the Count, and a nearly mystical ability to brave the worst environment to reach any village. Their relationship to the rest of Barovia is a complicated one. On the one hand, they have government sanction, and provide much needed entertainment and excitement for Barovia's isolated villages. On the other hand, no one actually trusts the Vistani, and they have a (not entirely baseless) reputation as thieves and swindlers.

## Religion

Religious communities in Barovia are quite as diverse as ethnic communities – with whom they have partial, but not complete overlap. The same central location and historical movement of peoples has led to a complex religious life in Barovia. The Barovian government, unlike those of many of its neighbors, has never declared an 'official' state faith, though they've been quite active in persecuting those religions that they have seen as dangerous to Barovia. Most villages follow a single religion, while the six towns have about half a dozen different religious buildings each. Religious politics in Barovia thus tends to get quite heated. The three main religions are those of the Morninglord, Ezra, and the Lawgiver:

The Cult of the Morninglord is Barovia's native religious faith, having sprung up a few hundred years ago in Barovia town, and having since steadily migrated west, first to Vallaki and thence to Krezk. The worship of the Morninglord, with its positive, hopeful

message commands the loyalty of a slim plurality of the country's inhabitants, in part because it's also the most favored faith of a Barovian government approving of its apolitical, decentralized organization. The worship of the Morninglord is most popular among ethnic Barovians and among the peasantry, though it's made considerable inroads among Gundarakites in recent years, and several prominent gentry families have converted, either publicly or privately.

The worship of Ezra is the second largest religion in Barovia, being practiced mostly in the west of the country, near the Borcan border – Barovian Ezrans tend to follow the Home Faith. The Barovian government is notoriously hostile to any idea of a temporal church, and has resorted to every means short of violence to staunch its spread. At the same time, the creed has proven very popular with the gentry and merchant classes, dazzled by Borca's wealth, something that the canny Sentire of Vallaki, Gabriel Buchvold, fully encourages.

## The Extended Family

All of Barovia's ethnic groups place a great deal of importance on the extended family, though the particulars vary from group to group (Forfarian clans are several times the size of Barovian and Gundarakite families, the Vistani of any given caravan are all either family or treated as such, and the Thaani essentially treat all other Thaani as family). Family elders have enormous influence in Barovia's villages, and the family serves as a general safety net for its members. If a peasant has a bad harvest, falls ill or is crippled, his family supports him. If he is somehow wronged by another man, the family will get justice, either by negotiating with his family elders, or by way of vendetta. People are expected to support their family at all times, in all ways, come what may (betrayal of the family is just about the most abominable crime possible in the Barovian mind). The extended family is strongest among the peasants and in the villages, but this way of thinking, where family is all, penetrates to every corner of society, from the highest noble to the most remote Thaani hermit. To be without family, because of plague or natural disaster, is a pitiable state, and one that is usually rectified by having the lonely souls adopted into another family post-haste.

## GM's Notes

This ties into the theme of 'In the Blood.' Generally speaking, PCs are never going to be dealing with Barovian peasants as independent, isolated people. Every person they deal with will have dozens of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, in-laws, and close friends who are almost family.

The Church of the Lawgiver is the third-largest faith in Barovia, and is largely found in the south and east, along the Vaasi and Hazlani borders, and in occupied Gundarak. All of the same Barovian objections to Ezran temporal power apply threefold to the Lawgiver Church, which has demonstrated its ability to subvert and control governments. At the same time, the Lawgiver creed of order and obedience has won converts among Barovian peasants surrounded by a hostile and chaotic environment, and among boyars and burgomeisters desirous of a greater status than they possess. The status of Barovia's Lawgiver population, and in particular the establishment of a church hierarchy in Barovia, is a recurring political issue between Barovia, Nova Vaasa, and Hazlan.

At a much smaller scale, worship of Hala, the Forfarian Pantheon, the mind-faith of the Thaani, and the Gundarakite death-god Erlin also occurs in Barovia:

Worship of Hala is thinly present throughout the country. Most such worship is organized around Halan monastic communes and hospices, which are often modest landowners in their own right, and function not unlike villages, really. Generally speaking, most Barovians have a benign, pleasant impression of the Halans, and the

boyars and burgomeisters tend to think of them as being strange but loyal subjects.

The Forfarian Pantheon is, obviously enough, worshipped primarily by the Forfarrians, though it's made some inroads among ethnic Barovians near Forlorn's borders. Druidic cults worship Belenus, god of sun and fire, and Daghdha, god of fertility and chief of the pantheon, while common Forfarrians also worship Diancecht, god of healing, and Brigantia, goddess of livestock, motherhood, and blacksmithing. The god of sorcery, Math Mathonwy, is periodically worshipped as well, while the war-goddess Morrigan and death-god Arawn are mostly propitiated. The Barovian state has traditionally given the Forfarrians a fair amount of leeway, and since they tend to not cause religious strife, everyone is happy.

The same cannot be said for the worship of Erlin, a Gundarakite god of death (thought by scholars to be a corruption of a

## Alcohol

Something worth noting is that Barovians tend to drink like fish. Kvass, wine, brandy, vodka...

Barovians are both enthusiastic distillers of new beverages, and enthusiastic consumers of the same. The average Barovian adult male drinks enough to be considered an alcoholic in Mordent or Hazlan. A Barovian alcoholic drinks enough to prompt acute liver failure in peoples less able to hold their liquor. While Barovians rarely turn to the more exotic perversions of wealthier lands, drunkenness is something of a perpetual health crisis in the country, and the cause of quite a lot of trouble.

Tergish demon Irlek-Khan). Called the Shepherd of the Dead, this tricksterish being is more in the way of a folk spirit than a proper religion (some Gundarakites worship both the Morninglord or the Lawgiver and Erlin at the same time), and has had a major resurgence in recent years as a symbol of Gundarakite national pride. For obvious reasons, the conflux of death-worship and anti-Barovian feeling is not one that the Barovian state condones, and worship of Erlin is actively persecuted.

Finally, the Thaani have their own faith of The Mind Unbound, assuming one can call it a faith to begin with. More of a philosophy of personal actualization, most Barovians would be surprised to learn that the Thaani even have a religion, so reserved and private are they. Still, they do have a tradition of scholar-philosopher-priests, some of which possess quite potent psionic powers.

## Culture

Strangers from more advanced countries are often surprised to find that agricultural, still largely illiterate Barovia has an extremely active and vibrant folk culture. On reflection, the reason is obvious — the entire country is snowbound for four months out of the year, so anything to while away the winter hours is enthusiastically welcomed by the entire population. Barovians are vigorous supporters of singing, storytelling, dancing, acting, and poetry. Church and government officials alike find themselves organizing various festivals and feasts during the winter months, while during the rest of the year entertainment tends towards less strenuous fare, less draining of energies needed for carving a living out of Barovia's harsh environment.

Barovian culture is overwhelmingly oral and visual. In most villages, only about a

## Education and Literacy in Barovia

Up until about fifty years ago, Barovia was essentially a feudal land, with the Barovian peasant of the 7th century BC living much like one in the 1st century BC. However, as technology and technique have recently boomed in the Western Core, some of it has been filtering into Barovia (primarily farming techniques). As forward-thinking boyars and burgomeisters imported these machines and techniques into Barovia, however, they found that they required a somewhat higher level of knowledge and skill than the peasantry possessed, and some brought in teachers from abroad to educate the Barovian populace. This idea spread, and in 741 BC, received the support of the Count (especially since the lessons all included a good amount of rousing Barovian patriotism). Since then, a portion of Barovia's taxes have gone to paying for teachers in Barovia's villages.

Obviously this is not a quick process, but by the present day, almost all of Barovia's villages have a school teacher, though being a schoolteacher in Occupied Gundarak is a rather dicey proposition. Literacy in the countryside has gone from negligible to somewhere around 30%, mostly concentrated in the younger generation. Not everyone appreciates these new changes, but the agricultural boom they bring is hard to argue against. Of course, this also has some unexpected side-effects, especially in the rise of an intelligentsia willing and able to think about politics.

quarter of the population will have their letters (mostly the youngest), and only the school-teacher is likely to be 'well-read' by any plausible standard. Instead, Barovians have a long oral tradition, where stories, ballads, and epic poems are passed down from generation to generation. While almost no one has actually read anything but a few school books, most villages will have several people capable of reciting the entire 500-line epic ballad *The Blood of Mazonn*, about the Neureni invasion of the early 3rd century, by heart. Barovians spend an inordinate amount of time telling stories and singing songs to one another, and many villages will put on small plays or pageants about historical or religious subjects during the winter.

Nevertheless, the isolation of Barovia's villages means that most peasants are quite eager to hear new tales or songs from other places, and so travelers are often asked to regale the village with some story or another. Many oblige, especially merchants or government officials, since telling the locals some good, new stories is one of the fastest ways to be welcomed into the community. Itinerant storytellers, minstrels, and small acting troupes (almost never larger than a half dozen people) ply their trades among Barovia's villages as well, and the best can make a decent living doing so.

### GM's Notes

Barovia is loosely at the same level of development as the Balkans in the early-to-mid 19th century. It is right on the edge of both a proper agricultural revolution and a national awakening – ideas such as nationalism are beginning to percolate, but haven't reached a critical threshold quite yet.

Most winter in the towns, though a minstrel willing to brave the snows to entertain Barovia's peasants can make quite a bit of money. The Vistani, though imperfectly trusted, tend to make out like bandits in this business.

One result of this constant movement of stories is that despite Barovia's ethnic and religious differences, all Barovians share a large folkloric language. They all tend to animal fables, stories of dark fae or cursed vampires, epics of star-crossed love, and so forth. Barovia's folklore actually has a rather acquisitive aspect to it, as Barovians will gladly listen to a story of monstrous Created from Lamordia that some merchant tells them, and within a generation that same story will be all over Barovia, though set in the Balinoks instead. Several folklorists have recently taken up documenting Barovia's many myths and legends.

Barovian high culture, in comparison, is rather sparse. Vallaki and Immol have small newspapers that publish weekly, and Krezk and Teufelberg both have respectable playhouses. Nevertheless, Barovians interested in opera, more subtle poetry, or literature have to import it from elsewhere (usually Borca, which shares a language, though there's an endless demand for translated Dementlieuse novels). The few Barovians given to producing high culture usually have to emigrate, and some have managed to achieve fame – the composer Bogdan Marcek, for example, produced some very popular operas in Dementlieu, based on Barovian animal fables.

# The Realm

## Economy

While nowhere near the level of economic titans such as Dementlieu or Darkon, Barovia's considerable natural wealth and central position in the Core make it a broadly prosperous land. Most of Barovia's economy is agricultural – Barovians grow just about everything under the sun, with an emphasis on wheat, barley, and oats, though one will also find potatoes, turnips, onions, cabbages, and more recently, maize and sunflowers in Barovian fields. Technology and techniques from the Western Core (such as the use of crop rotation with legumes to refresh the soil, new plow shapes, and most recently, seed drills and threshers) have served to enhance Barovia's agricultural riches further still. Barovian livestock tends towards goats, sheep, chickens, and small, bristly hogs (cattle are too clumsy for Barovia's

fractured terrain, so most Barovians drink sheep's or goat's milk). Barovians also plant orchards of apples or plums, or small vineyards, with most of that product going to produce brandy of one sort or another. Kvass, a mildly alcoholic drink made from fermented rye bread, is also commonly produced, though it remains a purely Barovian taste.

Barovians also fell the timber of their country's many forests and excavate various minerals from the Balinoks, mostly salt, coal, and iron, though there are a few silver and copper mines as well. Barovia's size gives these industries a certain heft, though they're far less intensely practiced than logging is in Kartakass, for instance. Barovians also fish actively in their rivers and lakes – for sturgeon, trout, pike, smelt, and grey mullet.

Barovians export all of these goods in enormous quantities (particularly grain and wool), though the most famous Barovian exports are caviar, brandies (their wines

## Vendetta Culture

One aspect of Barovian culture common to all of the ethnic groups is that of the vendetta, or the blood feud. Basically, when a Barovian of any ethnic group is wronged, they and their entire extended family are expected to seek justice. If the wrong is severe enough, then that justice can only come from violence – and if the subject of vengeance has an extended family that does not agree that they deserve it, then they might seek vengeance in turn. Thus does a blood feud start. It isn't actually that easy to start a vendetta (the usual triggers are murder and rape), but once begun it is almost impossible to stop, since there's considerable social pressure to keep the vendetta going lest a family lose respect and honor. These cycles of revenge can continue until they decimate entire families, and some of Barovia's most notable blood feuds have lasted for centuries – the feud between the Dilisnya and the von Zaroviches is perhaps the most infamous example, but some peasant families have held grudges for just as long. There are actually some quite strict social norms for how a vendetta continues: one never harms women, children, or the elderly, never sheds blood on consecrated ground or on holy days, and anyone joining the army is considered exempt from participating in a vendetta until they end their enlistment, for instance.

## Communal Violence and the Vendetta Culture

Something to keep in mind is that none of Barovia's major ethnic or religious groups like each other terribly much. Truthfully, it's an aspect of the vendetta culture writ large – the Gundarakites invaded Barovia a century ago, so the occupation of Gundarak is an appropriate revenge. The most extreme case of ethnic violence is between Barovians and Gundarakites, which is a situation that regularly explodes into bloodshed, but no one is really spared from it. The Thaani are treated as strange and eerie outcasts, the Forfarians see themselves as separate, and better than their Barovian and Gundarakite neighbors, and so forth. The Barovian government has enough experience in keeping this thing under control that bloody pogroms generally do not break out, but it's always a possibility.

have never quite caught on), and carpentry – massive Barovian wardrobes and chairs, carved in floral or animal motifs, are quite popular.

Barovia is also, by virtue of its central location and the presence of the Svalich Pass, something of a trading nexus between East (Nova Vaasa, Hazlan) and West (Borca, Dementlieu, and Mordent). Tariffs collected from passing merchants account for a significant part of Barovia's annual budget. More recently, merchants have begun to form trading networks with Kartakass and

Invidia, which form a market for a variety of Barovian goods.

## Law

In most of Barovia, crime and law are not really things. Remember that Barovia is overwhelmingly rural, and crime is rather significantly a function of population density. Basically, if there are only a hundred people in a village, and Ivan steals a horse from Piotr, it is blindingly obvious that Piotr is missing a horse and Ivan has a new horse. Everyone lives in each others' pockets; there simply isn't the possibility to

## GM's Notes

This ties into the theme of 'In the Blood.' Often, a vendetta or two can be used to simply spice up quiet Barovian village life, but sometimes the PCs may find themselves on the receiving end of a blood feud. Most often, this happens if they kill some werewolf or mad necromancer and don't provide enough evidence to get the accused's family on board, though PCs that seduce the burgomeister's daughter may also find it in their interests to beat a hasty exit. Generally, leaving the village is going to be enough to escape a vendetta, but if the PCs have offended a particularly large or prominent family, they might be dodging angry peasants with knives for *months*.. and that's assuming they haven't offended a family with connections (perhaps those Thaani have a great-uncle who's a 12th level Psion, or that peasant is the bastard grandson of a von Zarovich).

conceal things. Crimes that occur are generally going to be of the 'crime-of-passion' style. Ivan learns his wife is cheating on him with Piotr, so he goes, gets drunk, and bashes in Piotr's head with a shovel. But these aren't crimes that anyone gets away with, in the sense of not getting caught. When crime (of either sort) does occur, it is usually detected by the community's small size (people will know about Ivan being cuckolded; someone would've spotted him going to Piotr's place; they'd find the shovel, and that's assuming Ivan doesn't just stand and weep there till someone finds him). The community then decides on an appropriate punishment. At low levels, this generally just includes releasing the accused to their own family, or some kind of rough fine (you steal a pig, you get fined a pig, and have to give back what you stole). At high levels, it usually means exile (even if exile is just 'move some villages over') or lynching.

Technically, the boyars and burgomeisters are in charge of law, but this is somewhat fuzzy. First, the community usually handles things on its own (that is, Ivan steals a horse from Piotr. Piotr realizes what has happened, goes to speak with Ivan's old mother, who then brings down the wrath of his entire extended family on him). Furthermore, the boyars and burgomeisters are part of the community. As such, their role is not so much to give a decision, usually, as to give that decision formal weight, and to bring the entire community on board with the decision – the goal is not so much justice as it is consensus, to try and head off any blood feuds that might erupt. The boyars and burgomeisters only get involved in a serious legal fashion when a situation is very complex and the community is divided. Some boyars and burgomeisters will make a decision then, but more likely they'll try and

kick the question up the chain, perhaps requesting a specialist in law to come from one of the towns. Given the nature of the Barovian environment, having the accused run away isn't really a concern most of the time, though in some cases flight-risks might find themselves chained up in a mill for a month or so till someone shows up from Vallaki or Krezk.

The six towns do have a legal apparatus of sorts. For one thing, they're bigger, and so have more room for criminal actions. At the same time, they've all those merchants passing through, so they need some knowledge of contract law and property law. Again, the burgomeisters of the six towns are technically the law, but most will be delegating their legal authority to some manner of judge, who is usually chosen from the ranks of the lawyers (Barovian lawyers sort of blur the line between actual lawyer and legal scholar – there isn't any sort of licensing or specific duties, it just means that you know what the law is and what the right decision should be in this or that situation). The really big trading towns will have multiple judges and multiple lawyers, but there isn't any sort of formal trial procedure. Generally speaking, a judge or lawyer will listen to a situation, look at the evidence, talk to the suspects and witnesses, and then either make a decision (if a judge), or recommend a decision to the boyar or burgomeister. There isn't really an adversarial legal system as in the Western Core.

Law derives from three sources. First, there's the edicts of Count Strahd, which are few but ironclad. Second, there are the proclamations of the boyars and burgomeisters. Law is proclaimed, and then it is law until some later boyar or burgomeister revokes it. Finally, there's tradition, which is arbitrated by family elders, and often has some of the force of

law. Law in Barovia, with the exception of the Count's Law, is extremely subjective. How things are decided depends on what the boyar or burgomeister or the community thinks about the situation. This does allow an enormous amount of favoritism and corruption to occur, but people are generally kept honest by the influence of the community, and by the fact that peasants have are always able to petition Count Strahd XII for an appeal, which though rarely granted, can lead to a boyar or burgomeister being removed from his position (and possibly his life) if too many petitions come to the Count's attention. Thus it's more like an old-boys-network than proper corruption.

The one exception is contract and commercial law, which is much less subjective and much more formal, and is mostly borrowed wholesale from Borca. Most Barovian lawyers/legal scholars have training and knowledge of Borcan law.

## Government

Formally, Barovia is a Sovereign County run by a hereditary Count, and organized along patrimonial lines (in other words, the entire country belongs to Strahd XII as his patrimony, and all other officials serve at his discretion and not because of a hereditary or elective claim to power). The reality is significantly more complex. To begin with, the 'county' of Barovia is one of the largest in the southern Core, both in terms of landmass (only Nova Vaasa is significantly larger, and it covers more area than Borca or Hazlan) and population (though rural, all those villages add up to a population equal to Hazlan's, and one that dwarfs that of either Invidia or Kartakass). Though not as advanced as Dementlieu or Borca, the country also has a significant economy, and is one of the Core's breadbaskets. Count

Strahd XII is effectively a full monarch, thus, despite his lowly title.

Barovia has what may be considered a three-tiered government. At the very top is Count Strahd XII von Zarovich, who is absolute monarch over Barovia. All authority from Barovia flows from Strahd, who then delegates it as he sees fit. In practice, Strahd delegates most of his power to various vassals, focusing only on military affairs and foreign policy. He is the one who determines when and where Barovia's armies will be used on a large scale (such as the occupation of Gundarak), and all treaties and international agreements must be submitted for his review. He also institutes a handful of formal laws, all punishable by death (trespassing on Castle Ravenloft, stealing from the Barovian Government, and harming the Vistani).

The second tier consists of those vassals who interact directly with Strahd XII, and who govern large areas of Barovia or oversee significant areas of policy. Into this category fit the burgomeisters of the six main towns, a handful of old gentry families such as the Wachters, the van Holtzes and of course the von Zaroviches, leading military officials, leading merchants (such as Jacqueline Montarri), and certain scholars or arcanists of note. Aside from the burgomeisters of the six towns, and those boyars given the title of Baron and oversight over large tracts of land, it tends to be a rather informal category, with the only real criteria being that the person in question has the Count's attention. Their duties are as follows:

- The barons, and the six chief burgomeisters set economic policy (tariffs, taxes) for Barovia, usually after consulting with experts or leading merchants. In the case of a conflict, the Count mediates.

- Diplomats and military officers are drawn from their ranks, and they fulfill the policy that Strahd XII has set.

- They are in charge of legal matters in their area, though in practice most delegate this to various legal experts.

The third and lowest tier consists of rural boyars and village burgomeisters, who basically handle all the governance that their tiny villages require (mostly, tax collection and the occasional dispute resolution). Most of them fall into the area of either one of the six towns, or of one of the baronial families, to whom they delegate thorny legal matters and to whom they send their regular taxes for storage and delivery.

Traditionally, the boyars and burgomeisters of Barovia are selected from among the gentry. Neither position is strictly hereditary, though they often become so. Rather, the boyar or burgomeister is usually simply the most popular and respected gentry in the area, assuming they're not the only gentry in the area. In theory, these people are chosen by Strahd, but in practice the community usually has a recommendation, and the Count very rarely bothers to choose someone else – in some cases it can be years before a boyar is 'officially' confirmed.

#### Military

Barovia possesses a quite formidable military – nothing at the level of Falkovnia or Darkon, but greater than any of its neighbors except Nova Vaasa and (possibly) Hazlan. For a country of farmers, Barovia has a surprisingly vibrant military culture, and can put an enormous quantity of men under arms rather quickly. Their military skill comes from a few sources:

- Tradition. Soldiering is an extremely honorable and respected trade in Barovia, and has been since the Terg Invasion. While not as militarized as Falkovnia, Barovians

are generally much more enthusiastic soldiers than most other societies in the southern Core.

- Population. Simply put, Barovia's armies are large, and as Strahd I is said to have commented, "God is on the side of the big battalions." Barovia's population means that it tends to have very big battalions indeed.

- Experience. Barovians enlist for twenty-year terms, and most of them find themselves in active combat pretty regularly, between Teg and Redcap raids from Forlorn, mercenary incursions from Invidia, and occupation duty in Gundarak.

- Leadership. Whatever else one says of them, the von Zarovich lineage has produced some extremely able generals, beginning with Strahd I and continuing down to his descendants.

Barovian military ranks are as follows:

- Voivode: Literally, 'war-leader,' the person in charge of a military campaign. The rank is only active during war however. Strahd XI was Barovia's last Voivode.

- General: (Though pronounced with a hard 'G' as in go and with the accent on the last syllable.) Self-explanatory, the person in charge of a specific military action. For instance, General Pavel Wachter is in charge of guarding the Forlorn border from Tegs and Redcaps.

- Polkovnik: Equivalent to a colonel.

- Kapetan: Equivalent to a captain or major

- Poruchnik: Literally, 'henchman', equivalent to a lieutenant.

- Narednik: Literally, 'organizer' or 'arranger into rank and file,' equivalent to a sergeant.

- Kapral: Equivalent to a corporal

- Ridov: Literally, 'rank' as in rank-and-file, equivalent to a private.

- The words 'Starshiy' (Senior), 'Mladshiy' (Junior), and the prefix 'pod-'

(Under-) denote variations. So a 'Podpolkovnik' is equivalent to a lieutenant colonel, while a 'Starshiy Narednik' is about equal to a sergeant-major.

## Politics

Due to a number of reasons, including but not limited to the fear of the blood feud, the extreme isolation of most Barovian villages, and the chilling effects of the von Zarovich stranglehold on the Count's title, Barovia never developed the kind of sophisticated political norms found in many other societies. Essentially, in other lands, the form of political strife has a certain tradition to it. In Borca, poison and debt are the chosen tools. In Dementlieu, scandal. In Falkovnia, the manipulation of accusations. No such norms have ever developed in Barovia. But people still participate in intrigues for power, and the result has been to give Barovian politics a certain amateurish, yet conspiratorial air.

For instance: In Borca, a troublesome boyar would be poisoned. In Barovia, people fear doing this because of the risk of a blood feud, or the risk of attracting the Count's attention. So instead, some ambitious merchants and rich peasants might conspire to get the boyar exceedingly drunk, then have him 'accidentally' shipped to Kartakass in a sack of grain, all of this happening right before some higher official comes to inspect the village's accounts. Then the cabal can claim ignorance of their missing chief, and hopefully have the higher official appoint one of them as boyar instead. A little later the now ex-boyar finally gets back, only somewhat the worse for wear, and the whole situation is never explained to anyone – at least till one of the conspirators gets drunk and spills the beans. Or, a group of conspirators, hoping to depose a burgomeister, might fake a series of bear attacks on the village, hoping

to discredit the burgomeister for his utter inability to stop the bears. Or they might fake a visitation from the Morninglord, with a conspirator in a disguise delivering a blistering 'divine' denunciation. Essentially, Barovia politics have a very amateurish feeling to them – they aren't stupid, but they tend to think outside the box because they're not familiar with the contours of the box.

The structure of Barovian village life, where everyone tends to know everyone else's business, also means that conspiracies hatch like weeds. Very few people can depose the local authority on their own, so most such ambitious souls recruit allies, often but not always family. And this entire feeling of amateurish-yet-conspiratorial works its way up to the top, though conspiracies among the gentry tend to be more hard-edged and murderous (though still complex and elaborate, to avoid even the appearance of blame).

The intellectual atmosphere of political life is somewhat different. There is a level of political debate and discussion in Barovia, mostly carried out between leading merchants, gentry, and rural intelligentsia, in parlors over tea and in the pages of the country's two newspapers. Barovian political thought can be loosely divided into two strains. On the one hand, you have the Westernizers, the people who think that Barovia ought to become more like the Western Core – that is to say, with more emphasis on trade and on artisans making manufactured goods in large workshops, more engagement with other nations via treaties, and so forth. On the other hand, you have the Balophilists, who think that if it was good enough for Strahd I, it's good enough for them, and that too much interaction with the rest of the Core risks diluting a certain purity of the Barovian nature, rendering the land decadent and

depraved just like everyone else is. Both sides want to parlay Barovia's enormous geographic advantage (the Old Svalich Road, the only real pass from the eastern Core to the western Core south of Darkon) into regional hegemony.

## Foreign Relations

Barovia's central position in the Core means that the land is of considerable diplomatic importance, and Barovian diplomats – usually chosen gentry – are found all across the Core. All such diplomats report back to the Count, who orchestrates foreign policy with the occasional advice of a coterie of chosen experts and gentry. Barovia's main foreign relations, going clockwise from the north are:

- Forlorn & Tepest: Basically, there aren't any. Forlorn is an uninhabitable wasteland, while Tepest has almost no government. Furthermore, the Balinoks of northern Barovia are all but impassable.
- Darkon: For a variety of solid reasons, Count Strahd von Zarovich and Azalin Rex have a cordial loathing for each other, and it is likely for the better that the only border between the two lands runs through the most treacherous part of the Balinoks. Even so, both lands maintain watchtowers and scouts there, just in case.
- Nova Vaasa: The nearest regions of Nova Vaasa are essentially ethnically Barovian, and the Barovian state has long cast covetous glances at them, which have only increased as Othmar Bolshnik slides into madness. At the same time, while there have been a few military clashes before, they've been inconclusive. Barovia can defeat Vaasi armies in the forest, but out on the steppes, the horsemen simply run down the Barovian troops.
- Hazlan: A complex situation. Immol does roaring trade with the Hazlani, and a fair amount of Barovia's trade comes from

Hazlan and points further south (Pharazia, most notably). At the same time, the quasi-chaos that is Hazlan's government instills little confidence in Barovia's own leadership.

- Invidia: Formally, Barovia claims dominance over the region of Invidia, but this has never been fully enforced, and the towns and peoples of Invidia have been locked in civil war in recent years. The current warlord, Malocchio Aderre, is a particular pest, between his encouragement of Gundarak secessionists (though most of Gundarak is in Barovia, some of that land's southern-most regions lie in Invidia), and the habit of his mercenaries of chasing Vistani into Barovia and trying to slaughter them there. This last has led to military conflicts, usually in Barovia's favor (their professional army trumps Malocchio's mercenary one).
- Borca: As with Invidia, Borca is formally a part of Barovia, and a certain amount of tribute flows into Barovia's coffers from that area, but in nearly all other ways, the Dilisnya and Boritsi families have leeway in setting up their own state. Borca is vital to Barovia – Barovia borrows a good deal of Borcan education and law, and nearly all of Barovia's western trade flows through Borca. The two lands have, as such, very close relations, despite the antipathy of their ruling houses.

## Count Strahd XII von Zarovich

The figure of the Count occupies a rather unique place in Barovian political culture. On the one hand, no one will admit to liking 'The Devil Strahd', and the Count has a ferocious and terrifying reputation in all levels of society. The persistent suspicions, among the gentry and the best-educated Barovians, that he's a vampire don't help matters. On the other hand, the Count is a good administrator and a brilliant military leader, and so many of the most intractable problems are passed up the chain to him.

By and large, the Count is only active during the summer months. During the long

winter nights, Castle Ravenloft is utterly snowed in, and only the most important and pressing matters are brought to his attention by messengers willing to risk the snow. During the summer, the Count dispatches a variety of orders and directives, approves laws and foreign policy, and settles disputes between his vassals. Even at the best of times, Strahd XII leads a reclusive lifestyle, preferring to work through vassals and agents – but when the situation is grave enough that the Count arrives himself to sort out a matter, it tends to stay sorted for a very long time.

### On Strahd

This is a somewhat more active version of Strahd – he was a famous military leader and statesman in his mortal life, after all. During the winter, when nights are long and everything is snowed in, he does his arcane research, broods over Tatyana, and so forth. During the summer, he devotes himself to matters of state, including inspections in the guise of Vasili von Holtz. Strahd is an involved ruler who has a strong sense of duty and responsibility towards his land and his people, though the centuries have given him a relaxed view of the value of human life.

Generally speaking, Strahd should not get involved in the various petty dramas that concern the PCs. For one thing, the isolation of Barovia does affect him as well - information takes time to reach the Count. Furthermore, a lone ghost, some werewolves, or a cursed boyar, while important to people, simply don't rate the Count's attention. If a matter is the sort that would logically attract the Count's attention (perhaps it involves a Kargat conspiracy, a powerful demon, or something else 'big'), Strahd will still prefer to use mortal agents (read: the PCs), possibly presenting himself as von Holtz, instead of doing things himself. Strahd didn't get to his present age by taking needless risks, and being a vampire does impose a number of logistical constraints (sunlight most of all). If Strahd does get involved in something, it should be dramatic, climactic, and not actually take any of the job away from the PCs (Strahd and his followers might come and wipe out the Shadow Fey army, but only after the PCs have assassinated their Sith warleader, or braved snow and traps and ambushes to bring the message to Castle Ravenloft).

# THE DOMAIN OF THE ENDLESS WORD

The Role of Pharazia

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*Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days  
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:  
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,  
And one by one back in the Closet lays.*

—The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

## Pharazia in Ravenloft

### Tropes

Pharazia is the world of Scheherazade and her One Thousand and One Nights, a world of flying carpets and magic lamps, where destiny turns street-thieves into sultans, all against a background of an impossibly vast and barren desert. On a darker note, it's also the world of H. P. Lovecraft's Nameless City, and of Irem, City of Pillars, which inspired Lovecraft's tale. A more modern inspiration for Pharazia would be the Prince of Persia videogame series, particularly the 2008 game that dealt with Zoroastrian themes. In all three cases, the setting conveys a sense of age and grandeur, of power and wonder, but with a feeling that there are forces beyond mortal knowledge involved. Purpose

Pharazia exists to serve a jumping off point for all sorts of Middle East-inspired gaming. Players can deal with sorcerous viziers and malign cults in the cities, but the real meat of the Pharazian adventure is to travel out into the desert, where strange and uncanny things can be found — ruined cities, supernatural tribes, ancient magics, bound djinn, and worse things.

### Theme

Pharazia is a glorious place, with the following themes:

- **Destiny and Fate:** Arabic storytelling emphasizes the importance of destiny and fate in the world. Amoral and all-powerful, Destiny can bring a virtuous vizier to ruin and death, or raise a layabout like Aladdin to riches. The heroes of Arabic storytelling are not the ones who try to thwart Destiny (such things never end well), but the ones who through cunning and verbal wit maneuver around forces they cannot

control, and finesse it to their advantage. At its most extreme, emphasizing this theme turns Pharazia into a kind of Cosmic Horror story, with a capricious and uncaring Destiny substituting for foul alien gods.

- High Fantasy, but not High Magic:

Pharazia is an exotic, magical land, a crossroads of possibility where you can find a djinn's lamp in a trash heap, or stumble across an invisible palace in the desert. It is

### Pharazia the Empire and Pharazia the Domain

Generally speaking, this article discusses the Pharazian Empire, which claims political authority over the entirety of the peninsula of Amber Wastes. This does not mean that Pharazia is the only Domain here — there are many domains in the Amber Wastes, with their own unique themes and Darklords (including, but not limited to, Har'Akir, Sebu, G'Henna, Al-Kathos, and Kamarn-Quse). Pharazia is simply the most populous and culturally dominant, for all that its power has decayed, and for all that those domains which are also political entities now pay merely lipservice to Pharazian imperialdominance.

fantastic, characterized by powerful and wondrous magic — but this magic is always the province of the past, or the inhuman, or someone other than the mortal people of here and now. The great magic of Pharazia, like Destiny, is encountered only indirectly, seen mostly by its effects.

- The Ending of a Golden Age: Once, Pharazia was the most advanced country in the world, haven of philosophers and poets,

sages and scientists. These days are gone now, passing from living memory. Pharazia lives now on old glories and old wonders, and the people are somehow less than they were in their grandfathers' day, just trying to get along.

## The Land

### Environment

The Pharazian Peninsula (called Firaz by its inhabitants, or the Amber Wastes by the poetically minded) is a large and desolate peninsula in the south of the Core, occupying a total land area some third greater than that of either Darkon or Nova Vaasa. To the north, it adjoins Hazlan, and to the west it opens up into the Bay of Valacán and the Sea of Sorrows, and to the east onto the Nocturnal Sea and the Bay of Phiraz. Pharazia is best known for its desert, the vast and seemingly-endless Nameless Quarter, but its environment is much more diverse than just desert.

Pharazian geography is best understood by going from west to east, along the prevailing winds. The west of the country is home to the al-Hajar Mountains (lit. Stone Mountains), a continuation of the Balinok mountain chain. Relatively new compared to the rest of the Balinoks, the al-Hajars are tall, barren peaks that claw against the sky, with only a few plateaus or valleys among them where enough flat terrain can be found for life. They stretch the length of the peninsula, and serve as a rain barrier that prevents the hurricanes and monsoons of the southern Sea of Sorrows from bringing any rain to the rest of the land.

Most of the country stretches east from the al-Hajars, and can be divided into desert and rivers. The desert is the Nameless Quarter, a land of dunes and sand that is considered thoroughly uninhabitable by

anyone but a few desert tribes, and even they avoid the deep desert away from the oases. Towards the al-Hajars and towards the south of the peninsula, the sand gives ways to barren expanses of rock, enormous ravines and canyons, and occasional sparse grasslands, but in all cases it is a desolate wasteland devoid of water and unfit for human habitation.

The exception are the rivers. Several large rivers flow down from the al-Hajars, most notably the mighty Simurgh river (which, though shorter, is quite a bit wider than the Musarde). All of them flow west from the mountains across the desert, until they empty out into the Bay of Phiraz to the northeast of the peninsula. These rivers bring fresh water and new soil from the mountains, and it is only along the banks of these rivers that civilized life is truly possible in Pharazia. But what life it is! The regular flooding of the Simurgh and other rivers renders the flood plains inordinately fertile, allowing the Pharazians two or three harvests per year, and supporting a significant population on a very small amount of habitable terrain. Nowadays, major engineering projects have rendered the floods less common, and irrigation replaces them — the most significant engineering project being that of the Ousserd, a huge reservoir in the city of Phiraz, which splits the Simurgh into the Chakor and Beni Massat rivers.

The Chakor and the Beni Massat flow into what is called the Simurgh Delta by scholars and the Great Marsh by everyone else. A vast array of saltwater fens, the Great Marsh occupies a territory not much smaller than Kartakass, with shifting islands and sandbars that change with each year's flooding. Keeping it navigable to ships is a full time task for all involved, but a necessary one. Most of the Pharazian Peninsula's coastline is barren and

uninhabitable, particularly to the west and south. Cliffs, rocks, and a lack of fresh water or portage mean that nothing larger than a small fishing dhow is able to set off. Towards the east, and especially in the tranquil Bay of Phiraz, this changes, as the river deltas provide for safe harbors and fresh water.

This unique environment has meant that the Pharazian peninsula has a distinctive flora and fauna compared to the rest of the Core. Most of the animal life consists of insects (including both the famous desert scorpions and spiders the size of a man's hand), snakes and lizards in vast, colorful, and venomous profusion, and a smattering of birds (including both small, burrowing owls and a variety of larger hawks and eagles) and small mammals (including long-tailed rodents called Jerboa, sand cats, large-eared fennec foxes, and jackals, all of which are popular familiars for wizards). Further to the south, as the environment gets marginally less desolate, one runs across larger animals, such herds of gazelle, baboons, hyenas, and several species of large wild cat — leopards, cheetahs, and lions. Cheetahs in particular are often tamed and kept as pets or hunting animals by the wealthier class of Pharazian. And of course, goats and camels are ubiquitous in Pharazia and form the backbone of the desert nomads' way of life.

The peninsula is also notable for its more unique fauna, possibly the result of ancient Vossath Nor intervention (the Vossath Nor had once ruled the Pharazian peninsula). Krenshar and Alzabos hunt in the foothills of the al-Hajari mountains, and both are sometimes tamed or work alongside the gnollish tribes there. Enormous purple worms dwell beneath the sands, and there are persistent rumors of dragons and rocs up in the mountains. Sphinxes are sometimes found around

Har'Akir, ancient creatures that serve as guardians or act as arcane predators.

## The Desert

While much of the information here is written on the human population of Phiraz, that civilization is limited to the rivers and northern lands of the domain. The vast majority of Phiraz consists of the Deep Desert, huge swaths of uncharted lands that only the bravest of explorers dare to venture. Occasionally, wanderers stumble back to the cities with tales of untold wonders and marvelous kingdoms – more often they come back with tales of horror, or just don't come back at all. Legends from the nomad tribes mean that the Pharazians have some inkling of what surrounds them, and how to reach certain landmarks and empires; however, there are many more things that appear with certainty only in stories, as they are found only by lost travelers, and vanish just as quickly back into the desert sands. The following notes are ideas of what might be found in the deserts of Pharazia, or of legends that might be told of the domain, be they true or not. The GM should feel free to pick and choose them as suits the campaign.

- The Jackal's Ruse, a graveyard of buried ships, taken from half a dozen nations. No one is certain how long the Ruse has been claiming sailing ships and sailors' lives, and there is likely a fortune of historical treasure preserved in the hot sands. Other, more unsavory creatures have come along with it - undead sailors, undead sea monsters, and metaphysical scavengers drawn by the sinkhole of suffering.

- Al-Kathos, the mysterious land where animal-headed men roam as freely as any people. The most commonly seen by average Pharazians are the Qitah, a polite and fastidious race of cat-headed people who sometimes venture out to trade. There are also the jackal-headed men of the

desert, who steal eyes from hapless travelers, the falcon-headed nomads who wander across the sands, the bizarre insect-peoples who form mind-linked hives and use strange magics, and the hyena-headed tribes of woman warriors. The land is ruled over by the Sorcerer-King Malbus, a goat-headed abomination who conjures djinni to his side as servants, and lives within his Burning Citadel.

- The barren and foodless mountains of G'Henna, where eating more than the barest minimum to survive is blasphemy, and starving oneself to death is seen as the highest sign of devotion to the god Zhakata.

- The ruins of Assayad, a former empire that collapsed centuries ago. Huge stone cities, perfectly preserved, lie covered in sand. Statues of bulls, lions, and winged centaurs are still easily visible, larger than houses. Nomadic tribes of centaurs still run through these ruins, performing strange rituals of reverence in honor of the fallen city.

- The Sea of Glass, an area of desert near an active volcano that is so hot the sands have melted into glass. At night, the lake cools down through mysterious means, and can be walked across. Skeletons, artifacts, and other strange relics are sometimes entombed beneath the glass, visible to those who pass them above. Travelers whisper that the crater of the volcano itself is actually home to an island of luscious greenery, surrounded by crystal clear waters.

- The Obsidian Palace, a shattered black palace that floats in mid-air, surrounded by flying rivers of golden sands and floating chunks of the ruined palace. Those who enter it are said to be able to run through time, but are highly in danger of becoming lost within it, as the sands of time are treacherous and unpredictable.

- A marble palace paradise in the mountains - with no people, no writings, and no sign of who built it or who might

have once lived there. At night, anyone who sleeps there is wracked by terrible dreams, that the marble pillars in the great hall are all people, trapped in the form of stone but unable to see, speak, or move.

- The Kingdom of al-Naar, a civilization buried in the heart of deep mountains, filled with strange, gem-eyed creatures that tame salamanders, forge strange wonders out of living gems and metals, and have never seen the sun.

- The Tomb of Iblis, a buried temple that can only be opened when the moon passes through two specific constellations, where a thousand and one evil djinni are said to lie bound by an ancient king.

- The Seven Pyramids, a group of strange step pyramids that share some similarities with the pyramids of Har Akir, save that the carvings and statues all depict wemic-like creatures.

- The Scirocco, a massive creature with the body and head of a horse, the neck and feet of a camel, six sets of horns on its head, and six feathered wings on its back. Both its breath and wings are able to summon a cutting wind and blow it across the desert sands. It wanders through the desert at random, and is said to be able to speak, approaching only those it judges pure of heart.

## Social Geography

Ninety-five percent of Pharazia's population lives on three percent of the land. Basically, all Pharazians, with the

exception of the desert tribes, live on the banks of one of the rivers. They may live near the river's source up in the al-Hajars; they may live in the deltas and marshes; or, as most do, they may live on the fertile banks, but without the rivers there can be no life in Pharazia. As such, Pharazian civilization can be said to be a thousand miles long and three miles wide. There are a few oases in the desert that can support settled life as well, and the nomadic desert

tribes dwell away from the rivers, but by and large, the division between the inhabited rivers and the arid Nameless Quarter is stark and clear.

A consequence of this is that in the habitable areas, Pharazia is actually very densely populated. There are over a score of cities with populations of over twenty thousand, and the largest of these, mighty Phiraz itself, has a population of nearly a quarter million. Even outside the cities, the river valleys are thick with villages, farms, and

fortresses, dense networks of people all tied together by river trade. Pharazia is quite heavily urbanized, a consequence of both the fertility of the land and the trading networks that go down from the mountains and into the Bay of Phiraz and points east, and the cities are usually located in commanding locations on places where the rivers can be forded, or where they fork or flow together.



## GM's Note

In other words, the Pharazian peninsula has a plentiful supply of dungeons of all sorts, complete with convenient sandstorms to let them be discovered after centuries or millennia of being lost.

Another point of mention is the large number of ruins to be found on the Pharazian peninsula. Scholars sometimes claim that the Amber Wastes have been inhabited longer than any other part of the Core, and while this may or may not be true, they have certainly been inhabited for a very long time. Furthermore, due to the harshness of the Pharazian environment, quite a few of these ancient cities have been abandoned for one reason or another – the most common reasons being either that the oasis on which the city relies dries up, or else avalanches in the al-Hajaris change the course of a river. To these reasonably comprehensible disasters one may add earthquakes, enormous sinkholes (legends speak of sinkholes that swallowed up entire cities), and all manner of arcane disasters – Pharazia had been home to the Vossath Nor for a very long time.

Nor are cities the only things found in the desert sands. Vile cults may have met (or may still meet) in hidden caverns, fortresses and watchtowers from bygone conflicts may have been abandoned, ancient tombs, temples, and burial grounds may all have been swallowed up by the sands, and wizards have long ago built towers away from inhabited lands, only for them to fall into disrepair with their deaths.

Many of these ruins are the sites of active scavenging attempts. At the most basic, Vossath Nor ruins are a ready source of building material. Their stone structures are easily disassembled and carted off to

build the home of some local worthy, and even poor fellaheen may try to drag some cornerstones away. Smaller objects are also often preserved by the desert sands, and it's not entirely uncommon to come across a farmer using a bronze pot or desiccated wooden furniture uncovered from some ruin nearby. Most such salvage consists of simple objects, though often more durable than one might expect, but magical artifacts are also found. The most common are simple glass globes that burn with an everlasting light, but some of the artifacts are more dangerous than simple magelights. Cursed treasures, supernaturally-potent weapons, objects with corrupting or transformative auras — for these reasons, both religious and secular authorities in Pharazia try to clamp down on scavenging, though this is imperfectly enforced at the best of times.

Over the centuries, many ruins have been picked to the bone by generations of scavengers, but the Vossath Nor had a love for hidden chambers that ensures that new finds are being discovered all the time. More rarely, entire complexes are uncovered by the shifting sandstorms of the desert, or lie too far away from the rivers to make active salvage practicable. These untouched ruins lure treasure hunters from all across the peninsula, despite the danger. Some of them still have active defenses, which can range from being merely fatal to trespassers to being fatal for everyone in a several mile radius when triggered.

## The Folk

### Social Classes

Despite representing a host of different ethnic and cultural groups, almost all Pharazian societies are organized along clan lines. The extended family is the

fundamental social unit in Pharazia. The tribes of the desert nomads or mountain peoples are essentially large extended families, whereas in the more settled parts of the peninsula the clan remains the most powerful institution in society despite being informal. In all cases, the clan performs a few important functions. First, it serves as a safety net and welfare network for those who need it, and moves around wealth and capital to where it can do most good. When a young couple marry in Pharazian society, the clan showers them with wedding gifts enough to see them on their feet financially, with the understanding that they will do the same later on. The clan provides for the elderly, makes sure that orphans have a place to go to, and so forth. Secondly, the clan provides protection in the form of the threat of blood-feuds and vendettas. A man who harms another man risks retribution not simply from his victim, but from all of his victim's kin-folk. Finally, the clan serves as an intermediary between the common people and other institutions in society. Clan elders will intervene on behalf of their family members with judges, tax collectors, and Laerer.

Most clans will inhabit a specific niche in society. The majority are *Fellaheen* (sing. Fella), or farmers. Others may be merchants, artisans, government officials, sages, or even soldiers — there is a tendency for clans to have the same professions because an established clan-member is expected to find jobs for his less fortunate kin. Thus, if a man becomes a wealthy merchant, he'll soon have half a dozen nieces and nephews circling about like sharks, looking for sinecures. The nepotism encouraged by clans can and does have a braking effect on socioeconomic mobility (a merchant forced to provide for too many useless kinfolk will soon run into trouble), but on the other hand, once a clan

is established in a certain niche, it can be very effective at keeping its members from falling through the cracks. Still, one result is that those people who are most interested in social advancement find it easier to travel to another city and try to join society there, ideally marrying into some other clan.

Pharazia lacks anything that can really be called a hereditary aristocracy or a hereditary class system. Social distinctions thus are arranged in three lines, each of which will impact the status of the person — his own personal position, his clan's position, and his position within the clan. Generally speaking, in Pharazian society, farmers are at the bottom, soldiers, artisans, and bureaucrats are towards the middle, merchants and senior government officials are a bit higher up, and sages and artists are at the very top. Pharazia is a peaceful society, and so the scholar and the poet is considered the greatest of men, and the canny merchant is respected (so long as he is honest and charitable), while military men are seen more as a particular class of professionals, a respectable job but not so very high in status. A clan's position is the sum and average of the positions of all of its members, modified by its age. A merchant from a long-standing family of merchants will be considered a more important man than a merchant newly risen from the farming classes (though Pharazians love a good rags-to-riches story). Finally, the heads of a clan are generally seen as more important and higher status — an old man may be a farmer, but if he is also the elder and leader of his extended family, even more important people will tread cautiously.

As such, the people who would be considered essentially 'nobility' in Pharazia are those people who are the heads of important or wealthy clans — such people are known as sheikhs. One other curious

result of this system of social standing is that anyone with pretensions to status will endeavor to become a poet or scholar in some way. Even powerful magistrates or judges will fancy themselves religious scholars or will make efforts to write poetry, which they will then inflict on anyone within reach.

Slavery is well-established in Pharazia, though the institution is somewhat different than what most peoples of the Core think of when they hear the term. The end-point for most slaves is the cities of the Lowland rivers, with all of the tribal societies taking active part in the slave trade. Pharazian law holds that it is illegal to enslave a worshipper of the Lawgiver, and so most slaves come from elsewhere — the Beyri desert tribesmen launch periodic slave-raids into the southern parts of Hazlan, while enterprising traders make deals to bring in Vaasi serfs from Nova Vaasa (they're all heretics, so they don't count as Lawgiver-worshippers). Though Rashemani and Vaasi make up the bulk of the slave population, one also finds the occasional Valacáni, Shri Rajians, or even certain tribal peoples such as the Hajari mountain folk or the Valezians across the mountains. Adding to this unruly mixture are the occasional enslaved non-humans (primarily gnolls and wemics), and also people captured on pirate raids all across the Sea of Sorrows. All told, about ten percent of the Pharazian population is composed of slaves.

Most slaves are field hands or household servants belonging to the middle and upper classes in Pharazian society. Quite a few of them are eunuchs, serving as harem servants and guards. There aren't really any hard rules about what a slave can or cannot do, and so one does encounter slave soldiers and slave officials (since they are partially removed from clan politics, they are often actually considered more

independent and fair-minded than free soldiers and officials), and even slave scholars or poets. All slaves, however, serve at the whims of their masters, and so even a skilled slave in a position of authority is still subject to whatever his owner decrees.

That said, the expectation is that the better class of owner will treat their slaves as part of the extended family — the assumption is not only that the slaves would be eventually freed, but that their old owner would set them up with some kind of property or money, or at least see them settled in a useful trade. In return, the freed slave is expected to remain loyal to their former masters. In fact, some freedmen have risen to significant ranks in Pharazian society, becoming prominent civil servants, even government ministers. Free men are allowed to marry slave women or to have slave concubines, and in both cases there was an expectation that this would result in manumission at a later date — the acknowledged children of either union would be free. Of course, not all owners were quite so generous, and the life of a slave belonging to a cruel or sadistic master was liable to be brutal and harsh. Still, there are legal limits to how much an owner can mistreat a slave, and causing the death of a slave can have a man brought up on civil and criminal charges.

## Gender Relations in Pharazia

The stereotypical view of Pharazia is as a hotbed of sexist oppression. While this isn't completely inaccurate, the situation is, as always, a bit more complex. Pharazia is a patriarchal society that heavily emphasizes modesty and propriety — for both men and women, however. Both men and women are expected to be covered up, though the extent of this can vary from place to place. Most respectable women wear veils, though this can range from incredibly gauzy, see-

through scraps of silk that are veils in name only, to heavy coverings that reveal nothing but the eyes. Young people being as they are, form-fitting gowns that accentuate the figure while still technically covering everything up are common in the less strict city-states.

Likewise, Pharazian society is polygamous. A man is allowed to have up to four wives, and can theoretically claim an unlimited number of slave-consorts and concubines in addition. The catch, of course, is that he needs to be able to support all of his dependents, and pay a dowry for each of them. The practice emerged from the more warlike origins of the Pharazian society, when there were a great many young widows and not very many men around. Pharazian society practices arranged marriages, but families are strongly encouraged to get the consent of the couple. Romantic love-matches are known to occur, and not just in poetry.

In certain other ways, Pharazian society is actually quite egalitarian. Divorce is reasonably easy to obtain, for both men and women, and women (especially widows) have both inheritance rights and control over their own property, and can speak for themselves in legal matters. The trope of the cunning, pious widow defeating all manner of greedy interlopers is a common one in Pharazian literature and poetry.

## Ethnic Groups

Pharazia's people are staunchly independent, and the whole idea of an "ethnic" group or "nation" hasn't really percolated into the Pharazian consciousness yet. People identify with their tribe, their clan, or their city-state first, and will have only a fuzzy concept of any greater unity. Nevertheless, while Pharazia is a land with a multitude of peoples, for socio-cultural purposes they can be loosely divided into

## GM's Note

This does not include the people such as the Har'Akiri or the G'Hennans, who are better covered in their own sections.

two over-groups, the Lowland Pharazians and everyone else (sometimes referred to as the tribal or nomadic Pharazians). The Lowland Pharazians are a settled, heavily urbanized, society of city-states nominally united into an empire, whereas the other Pharazians live in independent kin-groups led by elders or elected tribal chiefs, and are most often occupied with herding.

The bulk (80% or more) of Pharazians are the **Lowland Pharazians**, the people of the rivers. They are what people usually think of when the word Pharazian comes up: small, dark-skinned folk, neat and fastidious. Though the dominant ethnic group by far, they're actually relatively recent, descended from desert tribesmen who settled in the valleys after the Vossath Nor vanished. As such, much of their culture is derived from that of those tribesmen, filtered through a lens of Lawgiver-worship and the unique literary and poetic traditions of the Lowlanders. The great majority live as farmers along the riverbanks, though a sizable proportion dwell in the cities as artisans, traders, and the like. Despite living in the desert, their culture emphasizes travel and trade, and Lowland Pharazian merchants can be found as far north as the coast of Darkon. They're an un-martial people, and prize cleverness and quick tongues above all else.

The Pharazian practice of slave trading and the subsequent manumission of slaves means that there are significant Vaasi and Rashemani populations, mostly living in their own quarters in the cities, and certain other foreigners can be found as well. One

of Pharazia's greatest poets, Ibn Morai, is said to have been half-Valacáni. Depending on whether or not they've converted to 'proper' Lawgiver worship, these communities may be treated as Lowland Pharazians in everything but name, or may have certain special privileges and restrictions (usually, higher taxes coupled with loosened restrictions, notably in the realm of usury and banking).

The various tribal societies, meanwhile, can be subdivided into the Valezians, the Hajari, the Beyri, the Alreg, and the Marsh Folk. These societies aren't really related, in the sense of being ethnically close, but they do share certain similarities in how they organize themselves.

On the west coast of the Pharazian Peninsula are the **Valezians**, a dark-skinned race that lives in tiny fishing villages against the storm-battered mountains. Their populations are small, rarely if ever reaching above the village level, and they are culturally and ethnically closest to the Valacáni across the Bay of Markovia. Many worship the same old gods that the Don has destroyed in Valacán, keeping the old ways alive. A few particularly entrepreneurial Valezians do cross the mountains to trade with the rest of Pharazia, however, carrying goods from Valacán or places further west.

Up in the mountains one has the **Hajari**, also called the Mountain Peoples. Hajari are usually short, stocky, lighter-skinned than most Pharazians (usually a sort of light brown), and are famous for their extravagant mustaches and bristling beards. The Hajari are mostly goatherders and farmers up in their mountain valleys, but they also control the gold and gem mines of the al-Hajars, making them quite wealthy. This has led to endless conflicts with Lowland Pharazians greedy for gold — short wars where the superior resources of the lowlands are pitted against the guerilla

fighters of the Hajari, with results that have gone either way — resulting in significant distrust between the two peoples. That said, the Hajari are respected as some of the best and most eager fighters in Pharazia, and often find their way down into the river valleys as mercenaries.

The oldest peoples of Pharazia are the desert tribes, who were here before even the Vossath Nor. They are divided into two great super-tribes linked by blood and marriage, the **Beyri** of the northern desert and the **Alreg** of the south. Nomads and goatherds as well, they live a lifestyle of constant movement from oasis to oasis, trading and fighting with more settled peoples in equal number. The desert tribesmen are known for having a prickly sense of honor and an extremely martial spirit, and tend to consider the desert to be theirs — anyone else there is just trespassing. On the other hand, they know the Nameless Quarter better than anyone else, and can be persuaded to act as guides, for a suitable monetary recompense. Of the two, the Beyri may be said to be more 'civilized', so to speak, as they have a certain proprietary interest in the trade routes going across the desert from Hazlan to Pharazia, and so are as often merchants as they are raiders. The Alreg, meanwhile, are a less friendly folk, and war regularly with the river-folk.

Of special note are the **Marsh Folk** or Marsh Pharazians who dwell in the Great Marsh — while ostensibly settled and related to the Lowland Pharazians, they maintain a tribal, clannish society rather like that of the other tribal groups. The Great Marsh is a dangerous environment, where it's easy to get lost and very easy to fall victim to some vile fever or plague (malaria is rife in the marsh). The Marsh Folk, then, are both isolated and isolationist, focused primarily on their fishing for survival. Their

disease-ridden home means that the Marsh Folk tend to be small-statured even by the already diminutive standards of the Lowland Pharazians, but they are also an extremely tough people, hard-living and resilient.

Pharazia also has several populations of creatures which ape the ways of humanity, but are not even demihuman. They too can be loosely grouped into settled folk and tribal nomads. Among the former, one counts a handful of small **vishkanya** city-states in the deep desert, where the serpent-folk live partially subterranean lives around key oases, trading with the most intrepid of merchants. Likewise, small societies of **cloud giants** live in the tallest mountain peaks of the al-Hajars, where they build palaces to rival that of any sultan. Among the latter, there are tribes of **wemics** in the deep southern desert, where they raid oases and hunt certain large animals, maintaining good relations only with the Alregs. Animal-headed folk are not unheard of, such as the cat-headed **qitah** merchants; hyena-like **gnolls** live in matriarchal tribes in the foothills of the al-Hajars, trading slaves and offering themselves up as mercenaries to those who are interested. All of this is before one counts the many, many **djinni** who live in secret palaces hidden from sight all over Pharazia — **marid** dwell at the bottom of the Bay of Phiraz, Ifrits construct palaces of smokeless fire invisible to mortal eyes, gemmed dao carve mighty halls from the living rock, and so forth. Nor is this an exhaustive list. Most of these inhuman creatures are unfriendly to the Pharazian people, but not always, and it is not unheard of to see cloud giant traders in the bazaar of Phiraz, or for a gnollish shaman to offer her services to the highest bidder. Uncommon, certainly, but no more.

Pharazia also, as a result of all these peculiar natives, is home to a very large

## GM's Note

Basically, Pharazia is the land of High Fantasy, and it is one of the few places in Ravenloft where things like wemics or giants can be logically found without breaking the mood. Such creatures shouldn't be common, but they should be used to add a dash of the fantastic to a place, and encountering a gnollish tribe or a Vishkanya city-state can make for an interesting and unusual adventure.

number of people with inhuman heritage — most common are the Genasi born of unions with djinn and man, though tieflings, aasimar, dhampires (usually born of ghouls instead of vampires) and fetchlings can all be found. These are treated no differently than other people, though they may be considered to have a unique or awkward history.

## Banditry and Piracy

The various tribal Pharazians such as the Beyri and the Hajari have well-deserved reputations as bandits and raiders, and have for centuries. While some have simply been regular criminals, the fact is that inter-tribal and inter-clan raids are an expected part of life, with people stealing camels or goats from one another all the time — a cunning tactician who can get away with another tribe's best camels will be much admired. Furthermore, the tribal societies are fond of the fruit of lowland agriculture, but consider such agriculture to be beneath them (making raids against those they see as inferior quite acceptable). Finally, the desert tribesmen and the Hajari regard their deserts and mountains as their territory, and others as trespassers who should pay a "toll." Even the settled Pharazians of the

lowlands tend to have laxer views regarding the acceptability of banditry than one would expect of an urbanized folk, and Pharazian pirates are quite infamous in the southern parts of the Sea of Sorrows.

That said, Pharazian raiding tends to be ritualized and formalized to a certain extent. Violence is minimal, and it is considered enormously shameful to murder or abuse a prisoner. They are to be robbed, or perhaps held for ransom or sold off into slavery (which while hardly pleasant, in Pharazia is not quite the death sentence it is in other lands). Raiders who shed more blood than absolutely necessary gain the hatred of both other tribes and of the settled peoples, and while the Emirs of lowland Pharazia accept a certain amount of banditry, massacres will attract lethal attention from both the settled folk hungry for vengeance and from other tribes eager to police themselves and so gain honor. Furthermore, there is a tradition of only robbing those who can afford to defend themselves and have something worth stealing — indeed, the Hajari and desert tribesmen are famously charitable towards pilgrims or poor travelers that they come across. After all, if they're not trespassers, then they're guests.

## Religion

The dominant faith in Pharazia is that of the Lawgiver, but his worship on the peninsula differs significantly from that practiced in the northern lands of Hazlan and Nova Vaasa. Pharazia came to the worship of the Lawgiver late, when Hazlani missionaries converted them several centuries ago after the fall of the Vossath Nor. Their preaching was filtered through the native spirit-worship and tribal petty-democratic traditions to create a unique faith, radically different from its origins. The Church of the Lawgiver in Nova Vaasa has not accepted the Pharazian worship as

legitimate, and thus despite the common worship between the two countries, the two religions are essentially separate.

The central point is that in the Pharazian Lawgiver tradition, spiritual authority is reserved solely for the Lawgiver, and no man may claim to be spiritually superior to any other man. While still aspiring to order, the Pharazian Lawgiver tradition is non-hierarchical — an anti-priestly faith that considers the organized churches of the north to be blasphemous and idolatrous. By and large, the Pharazian Lawgiver tradition is more harshly ascetic than that of the north, but it's also a very simple religion. So long as the worshiper proclaims that he gives his soul over to the judgment of the Lawgiver and no other deity, prays when he wakes up and before he goes to sleep and at each meal, and remands such money as he is able over to alms for the poor, no one can say he is not a worshiper of the Lawgiver (he might not be a very good worshiper, but that's a separate matter).

Instead of priests or dommers, the Pharazian faith has the institution of the Laerer, a derivation of the Old Vaasi word for teacher. The Laerer is an individual who has studied the holy books of the Lawgiver along with the commentaries to them that have collected over the generations (these commentaries are called the Laerde Kommentat. Formally, a Laerer has no authority over his flock. He is not a priest or judge — these roles are given over to the Lawgiver. Rather, it is accepted that the common fellah or merchant simply doesn't have the time to delve deeply into the lore of the Lawgiver, and so it is a Laerer who interprets and explains it for them. In theory, the people are under no obligation to accept the Laerer's interpretation, though since a Laerer is usually an influential community leader, people who disagree

with them usually keep it to themselves, at least till they can find another Laerer. This system is loosely regulated by the fact that Laerer have a system of internal seniority – with the “advice” of an elder and more learned Laerer being given more weight to one just reading the Books of the Lawgiver – the seniormost Laerer in a given region is called the Salvey Laerer (Sage Teacher) and is considered the ultimate authority for thorny religious problems.

That said, aside from asking the common folk to avoid a specific false minister, the other Laerer have no real means of forbidding a rogue sage from preaching. This means that the non-hierarchical system Pharazian Lawgiver tradition is enormously prone to schisms and heresies, and a sufficiently charismatic Laerer, particularly if he is able to gain the support of the local secular authorities, can basically set up his own little religion. This means that what the worship of the Lawgiver consists of from village to village and city state to city state can vary widely. The nature of the local Lawgiver worship is all over the map. At one extreme, the most ascetic and puritanical Laerer enjoin their listeners to avoid all drink, music, dance, gambling, impious statements, unclean food or behavior, and so forth. At the other extreme, some Laerer simply act as rubber-stamps and soothe the consciences of the wealthy in exchange for a decidedly un-ascetic lifestyle. Most are in between, striving to act as guardians of public morals and as benefactors of the poor, but realizing that their worshippers are human, and subject to the faults of the flesh.

Complicating the situation still further is that Pharazia is absolutely rife with cults. The dark wonders of the Vossath Nor and the mysteries of the Nameless Quarter tempt the faithful away from the Lawgiver, and Laerer are forever warning against false

gods. Many of the cults are relatively benign, simple spirit-worship and superstition. But when these cults stumble across something of true power, the results can be dangerous in the extreme. A sampling of these cults would have to include:

- Most common, to the point of being barely a cult, is various **spirit-worship**. The ancient Pharazians ascribed special powers to the natural world, much like the Rashemani, and have similar traditions of place-worship and animal gods. Generally speaking, the Laerer look the other way with regards to these superstitions, aware that rooting them out would be next to impossible — though some try nevertheless. The problem is that such benign spirit-worship can easily morph into one of the darker cults...

- ...such as that of the **Djinn Cults**. A djinn is not a demon; it is not an inherent creature of sin and evil, but it is a powerful being with its personality magnified tenfold — and that includes its sins. A wrathful djinn will level an army in its rage, a gluttonous one will devour all the food in a village, a proud djinn will accept no authority greater than it, not even the Lawgiver. Djinn cults are something of a misnomer, as the djinn are rarely worshiped. Instead, they accept tribute from their followers in exchange for using their powers to benefit them. Such tribute is rarely easy or safe, and often requires human death or enslavement (the victims being murdered for cannibal feasts or given over into eternal slavery). The Djinn Cults have a thousand forms, but they're primarily a rural phenomenon, and often arise in the wake of some natural disaster. When a sandstorm destroys a crop and threatens the community with starvation, suddenly appealing to the Ifrit living

beneath the burning stone becomes much more plausible.

- A less forgivable cult is that of the **The Society of the Six-Score Kings**. This is an old, widespread cult found among the wealthiest and most powerful families of Pharazia, united by their belief that the relics and ruins of the Vossath Nor can be used to gain power in the present day. The self-titled Kings fund expeditions into the Nameless Quarter and experiment with ancient artifacts (or, since most of the Kings are merchants and not wizards, pay other people to do so), and then hope to use these artifacts to become the rulers of Pharazia one day. The cult is well-represented in the courtly cliques of Phiraz itself, and the Kings have had some notable success, as well as some quite notable failures. It is said that the destruction of the City of Benzar, swallowed up by an enormous sinkhole, was the result of a failure of the Society.

- **The Acolytes of the Faceless God** are a disparate cabal of nomads, merchants, and mercenaries who have stumbled across an enormous obsidian statue of a faceless sphinx in the Nameless Quarter. Consumed by nightmares and dreams of the thing, the Acolytes are less a cult and more a kind of contagious dream-born madness, desperate men and women who believe that they do the will of the Faceless God. Some build shrines to the black sphinx in the cities and deserts, creating effigies of obsidian and harvested bone. Others sacrifice to their nightmares, poisoning wells or going on bloody rampages through the city streets, in hopes of making the dreams go away at least for a little while. One old cultist in Phiraz known only as Abu Al Mawt (Father of Death) has been an active serial killer for over forty years.

- The Cult of the Morning Star is a more harmless cult, which believes that Diamabel is the Lawgiver incarnate, who conquers Mytteri each day in mortal form. A sub-branch believes that Diamabel is an angel of the Lawgiver who instead declared himself a god, and was cursed with his nightly form for it. These cults are generally shunned but not otherwise oppressed, though some notice that Diamabel appears most often where the Cult of the Morning Star can be found. Perhaps a coincidence, perhaps not.

- Another cult, primarily found in Pharazia, is the Sisterhood of the Great Devourer. Originating when certain high-born women acquired a handful of arcane songs of either Ghul or gnoll extraction, the Sisterhood practices a unique form of magical shapeshifting. By cutting out and devouring certain key organs while their victim is still alive, the Sisters are able to take their victim's physical form, gain access to all of their skills, and their memories, for as long as they desire. This power comes at a cost though, as the Sister is then plagued by unholy hungers, and some of the most far-gone cases began to transform spontaneously into a huge, hyena-like beast with crimson fur (an Alzabo). The Sisterhood is an organization devoted to advancing their members in a male-dominated society, though they also work to hunt down any members who have lost control of themselves (which sometimes means hiring mercenaries to hunt down huge shapeshifting Alzabo).

- The **Assassins**, a heretical Lawgiver cult dedicated to holy murder, about whom more will be said below.

## Culture

Poetically-minded Pharazians sometimes call the Peninsula "The Domain of the Endless Word," which is a succinct

description of just how important storytelling and literary culture is to the society. Storytelling is the art form of the Pharazian culture. Professional storytellers called rawis can make a good living telling stories at coffeeshops and for wealthy patrons, and being able to spin an entertaining tale is considered a vital social skill. Laerer often use parables to get their points across. Pharazian storytelling has certain unique aspects, most notably that the religious mandate against lying means that most stories get prefaced with the formulae "It is said – but the Lawgiver alone knows the truth – that such-and-such a person once lived." In other words, the story might be true, since no human being can know the perfect truth.

The high society version of storytelling is poetry, and just as there are professional storytellers in folk culture and every decent man should be able to tell a story, so does every court have a few poets, and every man of high pretensions needs to learn how to turn a verse. The very best of poets are accorded higher status than Emirs and Sultans, though it has been centuries since Pharazia has produced anyone quite that good.

Another notable element of Pharazian cultural life is calligraphy. The Pharazian lawgiver tradition frowns on representational art, though it does survive around the edges (miniature painting, notably). But this has led to calligraphy being used as decoration as well, most often with some scriptural or poetic phrase being reworked into art, often to the point of losing legibility. This has also led to a long and semi-honorable tradition of hiding both secret messages and spell-symbols in calligraphy inscriptions.

## What's in a Name?

Names are enormously important in Pharazian culture. The present Pharazian naming system originated from the desert tribes, but has proven one of the most fast-spreading elements of Pharazian culture. Even distant Hajari folk, savage gnoll tribal warriors, and visiting Shri Rajian merchants will "Phiraz-ize" their names. Pharazians are notorious for having long and complex names, composed out of as many as five separate parts — though blessedly, very few people will bother with all five names. A Pharazian name begins with a given name such as Hassan or Khalil, given by one's parents. This is followed by the father or mother name, given after the birth of one's first child — Abu-Hassan means "Father of Hassan," and Umm-Aisha means "Mother of Aisha." Third comes the family name, which goes "Ibn-Hassan" or "bint-Hassan," Son or Daughter of Hassan respectively. Depending on the family, Hassan may simply be the individual's father (in which case an individual may have more than one Ibn-name, giving one's father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and so forth), this being common among the desert tribesmen, or it may be a more generalized surname, indicating one's clan, which is more common among settled folk. Fourth is the locative or relational name, which is structured al-, and gives one's tribe (in the case of the nomadic Pharazians) or one's village or city-state. Al-Phiraz means one comes from the great city of Phiraz, for instance. Finally, there is a nickname or honor name, usually given by friends, sometimes by a ruler, or possibly simply indicating one's job — Khayyam, as in the famed poet Omar Khayyam, simply means "Tent-Maker," and so he was probably the son of one. Nicknames can range from the

silly (Al-Jahiz, meaning Goggle-Eyes) to the dramatic (Sitt al-Husn or Lady of Beauty).

Names have immense metaphysical importance. This derives from an old folk belief that names have power, and that a name will define, and even alter, that which is named. Folk theology holds that the Lawgiver's Book contains the true name of every speck of sand and shining star in the universe, and that by rewriting their names he so alters the universe. This is seen as variously an apt metaphor for the Lawgiver's power, or else borderline blasphemous, depending on the city. Powerful wizards and djinni are said to be able to alter reality by the act of speaking names. While mortals lack the ability to bring things into being with their naming, it's still considered auspicious to name something fortunately (a ship will be called 'Swift', or a babe 'Blessed' in some old Pharazian tongue), in hopes that it attracts some beneficial destiny.

This explains, in part, the extravagant styles of praise and insult used by the Pharazians. Poets give their patrons long and flowery titles and names, and the Lawgiver is said to have a hundred sacred names. Insults, meanwhile, tend to be about giving someone an unfortunate title or name such as "Son of a Baboon and Grandson of a Drunken She-Camel." The word Nameless, therefore, is a serious insult, as a place or person that is nameless lacks a fundamental identity, is undefined in some important fashion (hence the empty and barren Nameless Quarter). To be called nameless is to be denied legitimate existence. Worse is to be Unnameable, for while something nameless can yet gain a name, to be Unnameable is to be eternally other, to be forever undefined and alien. The darkest demons are called the Unnameable, or the most blasphemous and

malevolent warlocks. It is not a word used lightly.

## Pharazian Science and Technology

Before governmental dysfunction brought it down, the Pharazian peninsula produced some of the most advanced scholars in the Core. These scholars were driven by an urge to understand the world of the Lawgiver, and this gives their work a decidedly religious styling, but it also led them to develop significant advances in mathematics (providing the idea of zero), physics (especially optics), astronomy (there is a great deal of interaction with Hazlan to the north in this field), chemistry (by way of alchemy), and so forth.

Medicine is the most respected of Pharazian sciences, and to this day, Pharazian doctors rival those of Lamordia as among the very best in the world. Pharazian physicians take a holistic, semi-mystical approach, with a heavy emphasis on pharmaceuticals (opium, for instance) and what might be termed early psychology. A Pharazian doctor might try to get a patient angry so as to speed up metabolic effects, for instance. One of the best ways for a non-Pharazian to become accepted in Pharazian society is to be a doctor, and the personal physician of Sultan Daud II is a Mulani woman, from House Voss.

## The Realm

### Economy

More than anything else, Pharazia is a mercantile society, and the key to its commercial networks is found not in the deserts, but in the Bay of Phiraz. Essentially, the great, placid Bay of Phiraz provides some of the best port facilities on the

Nocturnal Sea, and the Pharazians have a naval tradition much older and much greater than that of their more northerly competitors — the Vaasi, the Darkonians, and the Hazlani. Their knowledge of astronomy means that the Pharazians are excellent navigators, and their lateen-sailed Dhow are among the fastest ships in the sea. The desert folk's vessels are a common sight in Vechor and Rokushima, and Pharazian merchants have a near monopolistic grasp on the Shri Rajian trade. Silks and spices, sandalwood and from the East flow through Pharazia's markets, to be carried by caravan north into Hazlan and then points further west.

Locally, the Pharazian economy is primarily agricultural — the fertile river valleys producing a host of beans, lentils, and grains — and is notable especially for its fruit orchards. The al-Hajari mountains are quite mineral rich, and the Hajar clans there often mine gold, silver, and gems from the rock there. The mountains are also home to plentiful iron deposits and still other useful minerals, but their remote location and harsh conditions have made most such pursuits unprofitable so far. Finally, the Pharazians have a burgeoning textile industry, using Shri Rajian cotton to produce clothing for trade, and of course, weaving rugs out of animal hair or flax.

Pharazian society, ultimately, is a rich one, with enormous amounts of wealth sloshing about in the river valley cities. The bazaars of Pharazia's cities, especially the Great Bazaar of Phiraz, attract merchants from all over the world. It is said that if you cannot buy it in Phiraz, then it cannot be bought with mortal coin. The many bazaars are also the best place to buy goods scavenged from the many ruins of the Nameless Quarter, though caveat emptor is the order of the day when dealing with such things. Formally, trade in Vossath Nor relics

or Djinn-craft items is forbidden by both secular and religious law, but there are always some people who are willing to break those laws in order to turn a quick profit. At the Great Bazaar one can buy...

- The feathers of a Roc, golden-brown feathers as big as palm fronds.
- Needle-Cloaks, strange garments found in certain Vossath Nor ruins that seem to be crafted from thousands of sharp grey spines like scalpels, though they never pierce the owner.
- Ever-shining gems from the Kingdom of al-Naar, said to be alive and to glow with an internal fire. Of course, assuming they aren't simple pieces of glass enchanted with a petty spell.
- Sword-Wheels from distant G'Henna — massive cart-wheels to which eight sharpened swords are attached. With the right spells, it is said, the wheels come alive and cut down one's enemies in a whirl of blood and metal.
- Jackal-headed masks, as worn by the ancient cult of Anubis, most of which seem to have been made in the last fifteen years by some enterprising fellow named One-Eyed Faruq.
- Small rods of shining blue metal, found in the oldest of Vossath Nor ruins, which seem to cause insects to sicken and die around them — though too close contact may injure camels and men as well.
- A Scarf of the Nine Colors, a rainbow-like length of cloth, sometimes found hanging from palms in remote oases, that when wrapped about oneself lets one see the Truth of things. This is rarely to the owner's happiness.
- Little cobalt-blue glass jars of water from the source of the Simurgh, said to grant a drop of wisdom in each drop of water. How one measures wisdom is left undetermined.

## Pharazian Rugs

Of special note in the Pharazian society and economy is the rug. Pharazians produce a lot of rugs, and even the poorest family will have a few of them lying around their hut, while the richest, most beautifully embroidered rugs are worth a sultan's fortune. To a certain extent, the prominence of the rug in Lowland Pharazian culture is a hold-over from their nomadic days. To the desert tribes, the rug was the indispensable object of furniture. It could be used to provide a 'floor' for a tent on the sand, it could provide a partition inside a tent or a tent 'doorway', a saddle cover, it could be used as an extra blanket on cold desert nights, and when the nomad moved on, it could be rolled up for easy storage, or even used to wrap more fragile objects. And of course, a decorated rug could provide a bit of beauty in the otherwise spartan existence of the nomads. It's not really surprising that magic carpets and rugs are a recurring element in Pharazian folklore and magic.

## Law

Pharazian Law is primarily based on the commandments of the Church of the Lawgiver, the same as in Hazlan, Nova Vaasa, and Valacán, and on the edicts of Abu-Phiraz and his successors, to the point that a shared legal code remains one of the few things still binding the disparate Pharazian city-states together. Pharazian law is savage and bloody by the standards of more Western countries, but the violence is there for a reason — to satisfy those wronged and to prevent outbreaks of the blood feud and the vendetta, which can tear apart entire cities if allowed to grow unabated. As such, it may be most useful to think of Pharazian law as a complex, religious legal tradition overlaid thinly above

a system of tribal violence, and always trying to control it.

In fact, the key idea of Pharazian law is that of restraint — that is to say, the punishment should fit the crime, and should injure no one but the criminal. Punishment is distributed on an eye-for-an-eye basis, and tends towards the corporal, as few Pharazian cities, let alone tribes, have the resources to imprison people for any longer than it takes to get them to a judge. Instead, one has whippings, brandings, the loss of limbs (usually noses or fingers, sometimes hands or feet), and in cases of murder, execution. Theft is a major problem for the Pharazian legal system, given the prevalence of banditry and piracy among just about all levels of Pharazian society, and is punished heavily.

That said, a criminal could be given an opportunity to make amends if he showed true remorse (as determined by the Judge). In this case, he might be compelled to compensate the victim or the victim's family with money or, in cases of a poor criminal, may be sold into slavery or handed over to the victim for their own punishment. In all cases, Pharazian law stresses that forgiveness is a virtue, and that once the punishment is carried out or the blood money is paid, then the crime should be expunged from mortal memory, as the Lawgiver's books have been balanced.

Law is enforced by the city watch and administered by independent Judges, who are legal and religious scholars (often Laerer, actually), appointed by the Sultan or the local Emir. When a crime occurs, it is first reported to the city guards, who catch any obvious criminals (people holding bloodstained weapons in their hands). The crime would then be reported to a Judge, who would then investigate and render judgment, which is legally binding but could be mitigated by the Sultan and the Sultan

alone (though many Emirs issue pardons of their own, despite this being illegal). A Judge has the right to compel testimony from any individual short of an Emir, and to requisition assistance from local temporal authorities. Many Judges gather staffs of particularly useful individuals, creating a sort of private detective force. Though each Judge is considered competent to deal with all crimes, in the city-states where there is more than one Judge, a system of division of labor often develops, with one Judge specializing in merchant issues, another in criminal matters, and so forth. Other Judges preside over large stretches of the river valleys, travelling in great circuits across Pharazia to hear the troubles of the Fellaheen.

Respected Judges, especially when they are also Salvey Laerer, can become extremely powerful and influential individuals, and their fame can spread the length and breadth of Pharazia. In some cases, when a city state or village has a legal or criminal issue that seems utterly unsolvable, they may ask for the aid of some distant Judge, making them one of the few elements of the Pharazian Empire that is still in place.

All of this applies to the lowland Pharazians, of course. In the tribal societies, crime tends to be less of a problem due to the very small populations involved (when there are only fifty people in a tribe, all of whom are related, it becomes very hard for any actual criminal to hide), but when it does occur, the local Sheikh renders judgment, based on nothing but his own discretion. Still, one does occasionally have situations where desert tribes seek out noted Judges when they are confronted with problems beyond their abilities.

## Banu Sasan

Pharazia has been settled and heavily urbanized for almost a thousand years, and in that time it has developed its own unique criminal underworld, the Banu Sasan. A fraternity of professional burglars, bandits, beggars, murderers, camel thieves, con men, false Laerer, and other miscellaneous rogues, the Banu Sasan are united by a shared style and a shared criminal argot, and an almost uniquely cosmopolitan aspect. A given Banu Sasan might include a Pharazian physician fallen on hard times, an outcast Wemic, a runaway Rashemani serf, a Hajari tribesman looking for some spare coins, and a pair of Beyri camel thieves separated from their tribe. Situated upon a nexus of trade, the Banu Sasan are a very inclusive society, an amorphous and free-wheeling brotherhood with no proper structure and with leaders commanding followers on the basis of sheer charisma — the greatest Banu Sasan criminals are called the Princes of Thieves.

Compared to other criminal underworlds in the Core, the Banu Sasan are among the most intelligent and innovative of criminals, having had centuries to polish their trade. Their jewelers know forty-seven ways of manufacturing false emeralds and diamonds, and their alchemists know three hundred compounds to change a man's appearance. Money-changers who are a part of the Banu Sasan wear magnetized rings that can be used to alter their scales, or used rigged balances filled with mercury, so as to make gold placed on the scales seem heavier. One man, known as the Prince of Camel Thieves, would release a jar full of ravenous camel ticks at the edge of an enclosure, and then steal the animals in the ensuing chaos — to the watchdogs he would feed a concoction of honey and hair that would gum up their

jaws completely. Burglars and house-breakers have no fewer than six hundred stratagems. Often, they would use drills to break through the mud-daub homes of their victims, and then release a turtle with a candle on its back inside the house, using its light to scout out the interior. A burglar may have in his mouth a concoction of beans and dried bread crusts, which he could chew on during the robbery to conceal any noise he made, so that the home-owners would simply think it was a cat eating a mouse or rat.

The Banu Sasan run the gamut of criminal types. On the one hand, there are a host of different kinds of thugs and killers, such as the sahib ba'j, the "disemboweler and ripper-open of bellies," and the sahib radkh, the "crusher and pounder," who'd join and befriend a lone traveler, wait until the victim was at prayer, and then crush his quarry's head between two heavy stones. At the other extreme, there are con artists and tricksters who pretend to be travelling Laerer or poets, and freeload food and drink from easily-impressed Fellaheen. Like their more courtly and legitimate counterparts, the Banu Sasan have their own pretensions to poetry, and many of the Princes of Thieves are cunning and witty men skilled at turning a verse.

## Government

Those familiar with Pharazia say it is a corpse that does not know it is a corpse, nibbled by vultures and torn at by jackals, yet still it strides forth. The modern Pharazian state was founded by Abu-Phiraz, a desert nomad who united a dozen tribes behind him and toppled the last of the Vossath Nor kings in Pharazia, approximately eleven hundred years ago. Abu-Phiraz founded a great Pharazian empire, and he and his heirs stretched it

### GM's Note

For a campaign based in the Pharazian city-states, having the players be the staff of a Pharazian Judge is a useful way to gather a very peculiar group of individuals together and give them an excuse to travel all over — solving crimes, venturing out into the desert in pursuit of bandits or to aid desert tribes, meddling in courtly politics, and so forth.

from the Bay of Phiraz to the Al-Hajari Mountains, founded the great city of Phiraz at the splitting of the fork of the Simurgh River, and led the empire into a golden age of enlightenment and military prowess. The empire reached its height roughly around 250 BC, under the Sultan Shaddad the Great, when the great city hosted scholars, astrologers, doctors, poets, inventors and mages in a court that was the envy of the known world. The Pharazians to this day call Muqla ibn-Idris's reign the Years of Honeyed Dates, when life was good and beautiful. It's been more or less downhill ever since.

Ostensibly, the Sultan Daud II still rules from the White Palace in Phiraz, while his governors (Emirs) rule the other cities and river-valleys of the Pharazian Peninsula. The Sultan, however, is only fourteen years old, and his court is torn asunder by power-cliques and clan politics, with the Grand Vizier Ibrahim ibn Idris and the General Rashid al-Muqtari leading the two most powerful factions. Daud, a very intelligent and well-read boy, does his level best to do absolutely nothing that might anger the factions at court (which means doing absolutely nothing, period), since his father died by choking on a fishbone a matter of months after Daud was born. Daud would

like to live to see his twenty-fifth birthday, all else being equal.

Not that what he does matters all that much. While Phiraz is still the greatest of the peninsula's cities, the Pharazian Empire hasn't been an empire in anything more than name for some two hundred years. The other city-states still claim to obey the will of the Sultan, and Daud can still call on them for taxes and military support, but most city-states haven't paid anything but lip service to the empire in years. Certain city-states are four hundred years in arrears on their taxes. They still call their leaders "Emirs", but they are self-appointed now, and often hereditary, though a couple still let Daud pretend to appoint them so long as he sticks to a script. Pharazia's city-states war with one another regularly, conduct their own trade and foreign relations, and on a few occasions have even tried to sack the city of Phiraz itself. Once, they even succeeded, when the sorcerer-king Malbus stormed the city with his legions and had molten gold poured down the throat of Daud's great-great-grandfather.

As such, Pharazian society is composed of autonomous city-states, each of which lays claim to a certain area of territory surrounding it. They derive their power from their locations as strong points along the river systems, which lets them control trade up and down the rivers. Phiraz, located on the largest of the rivers and the most defensible, is thus the strongest. Internally, the city-states differ in how they are organized, but one usually has a local ruler (generally an Emir, though other titles are used) presiding over a small mercenary guard and a bureaucracy that handles things such as taxes and law.

## Military

Once upon a time, the Pharazians boasted a great and potent army, but those

### GM's Note

One easy way to organize a Pharazian campaign is to have the PCs as a particularly small, elite group of mercenaries, who are then hired by a succession of Pharazian chieftains and city-states to solve problems.

days are long past. As Pharazia's empire has decayed, so too have its armed forces, and many of the settled cities now rely entirely on mercenaries from the desert tribes, the Hajari mountain clans, or from inhuman gnolls or wemics. The Pharazians still boast an excellent reputation as cavalry, quite nearly as good as the Vaasi horsemen, but while Pharazians are said to make excellent warriors, their soldierly discipline is sorely lacking.

That said, the Pharazians are also both protected and constrained by the desert. No large army has ever invaded Pharazia, nor is it ever likely to, since to do so would require crossing a hundred leagues of desert sand — and while the oases are quite sufficient to provide for a caravan of a few score people, an army of thousands would swiftly perish. Even along the river valleys, there just is not enough food in any one place to allow for large armies to maneuver and live off the land. This also means that the Pharazians are enthusiastic fortress builders, since any besieging force will run out of food long before the prepared defenders.

Thus, between the constraints of the desert and the prevalence of mercenaries (who cost money), Pharazian military engagements tend to be very small-scale compared to the wheeling battles of the rest of the Core. An army of a thousand men is considered a large and potent armed force, and most armed conflicts take place

between a few hundred men on each side. Most Pharazian cities will have a small city guard raised of a few hundred men who serve as soldiers, and will usually have some tribe on retainer as mercenaries – desert nomads or such. Pharazian conflicts also tend to be relatively bloodless, as mercenaries much prefer to fight a little bit and then live to get paid, and so one rarely has suicidal charges or last stands, with brief clashes followed by surrender common.

Money is vital in Pharazian conflicts. Most obviously, more money means that a city-state can afford better fortresses and more mercenaries. But it can also be offensive — many a Pharazian war has ended when the mercenary captains of one side received a better offer and turned coat in mid-battle, and while Pharazian fortresses are rarely taken by siege, they are often taken when someone is bribed to leave a postern gate open.

## Politics

Pharazian politics are anarchic and ever-shifting. At its heart, it's clan politics, the endless struggle for familial power. Individual clans fight to gain dominance over one another in their city-state or tribe, and then once a family finally does come to power, they struggle with other city-states and other tribes. Pharazian politics is, by the standards of the Core, singularly bloody. It is considered only good sense to wipe out the entirety of an opposing clan when one comes to power — merciful leaders will simply have their rivals banished, but Pharazia's darker stories and poems whisper mournfully of brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, grandparents, nephews, cousins, all being put to the sword or cast out into the desert.

Pharazian politics are rendered yet more anarchic by a curious scriptural

footnote in the Pharazian Lawgiver tradition. It is the duty of every right-thinking member of the faithful to fight tyranny and to ensure that law and order is observed on earth. When a tyrant comes to power, it is considered a noble and just act to assassinate him, so that he cannot oppress the people any longer. Those killed in such assassinations are martyrs of the Lawgiver, and can expect a joyous afterlife. The problem is that the Lawgiver tradition in Pharazia is a bit vague on how one decides if a given Sultan or Emir is actually a tyrant. So, any poor artisan or uneducated Fellah, confronted with something they consider an intolerable injustice, may decide that they have a holy duty to slay their oppressor. This is one particular genie that secular rulers of Pharazia would very much like to put back into its bottle, but the sermons of their tame Laerer have had little effect.

Were clan bloodshed and assassination insufficient, a further complication is added in the form of the Pharazian literary tradition, and more specifically, the Pharazian arcane tradition. The poet and scholar is the paragon of Pharazian virtue and status, and so many politically minded individuals immerse themselves in books of obscure lore or distant sons to give themselves a sheen of learning and wit. From there, it is often only a short leap to learning spell-work, and if one is of sufficiently immoral mindset, bargaining with djinn. The powers so gained can be used to overthrow an existing ruler, or to become a power behind the throne, a puppetmaster using sorcerous strings. The idea of the Vizier (chief advisor) as evil wizard is firmly embedded in Pharazian storytelling and legend, but really anyone at the Emir's court might be a secret wizard, whether viziers, Laerers, eunuchs, concubines, court poets, Judges, or dissolute heirs.

Pharazian political life may thus be characterized as a constant succession of assassinations, palace conspiracies, coups and counter-coups, whose main virtue is that it rarely spills out into the city streets. As far as the common people are concerned, politics is a singularly dirty, bloody business, and those who wish to advance themselves are better off turning to scholarship or the arts. Not that there's ever a lack of adventurers interested in seizing power from a weak Emir — even if meddling in Pharazian courtly politics risks the assassin's blade and the sorcerer's pet demon.

## The Assassins

Not all the holy killers of Pharazia are poor farmers driven on by sheer faith. The Assassins (the word is a corruption of old Pharazian hashishiyya, meaning “without any explanation”) are a special cult of Lawgiver heretics who take the above tradition of fighting against oppression to extremes. Supported by certain merchants and anarchically-minded Laerer, the Assassins train in remote fortresses in the al-Hajari mountains, practicing the arts of disguise and secret murder. In exchange for their devotion, and because an Assassin is rarely expected to actually survive their mission, the Assassins are exempt from all other laws governing the followers of the Lawgiver. They ascribe to themselves a special morality, on without limits or restraints. No one knows who leads the Assassins, though rumors speak of immortal, skeletal Laerer or strange sphinxes that phrase their orders as riddles, to be interpreted by their followers.

Despite popular legend, the Assassins are not in fact drug-users (at least not on missions — opium use is quite common at other times though), and instead rely on considerable talents with disguise and a

certain amount of magical training. They are expected to be very good with weapons and poisons, and to be able to blend in perfectly with any population. Their most feared quality, however, is that they are deep-cover infiltrators. An Assassin may spend years working their way into the entourage of an Emir, and years more waiting there, until the order is given to strike. Actually, very often the target need only be given a warning, most often a rose upon their pillow, to let them know that they are in the hands of the Assassins, before the target is willing to do whatever is required of them.

## Foreign Relations

Though it has been centuries since Pharazia spoke with one voice in other lands, Sultan Daud II still sends emissaries to other lands, and despite its weakness people still pay attention to what the Pharazians have to say. United by culture and ethnic ties, Pharazians abroad are far more unified than they ever are back on the Pharazian Peninsula. Furthermore, while the Pharazian military, government, and culture are all decayed from their glory days, their commercial skills are still strong, and Pharazian merchants are enormously influential around the southern Nocturnal Sea. Those ambassadors of the Sultan that are not too proud to focus on matters of money can carve out a niche for themselves in the politics of other lands.

**Shri Raji:** Pharazian merchants have a near-monopoly on trade going to and from Shri Raji, and there are significant expatriate Pharazian enclaves in the coastal cities of that jungle-filled land. Generations of close commercial relations has resulted in a high degree of cultural mixing and religious syncretism, and while there are regularly political squabbles over trade

issues, the two lands are as closely allied as one can expect.

**Hazlan:** Relations with Pharazia's neighbor to the north have been more complex. On the one hand, both Hazlan and Pharazia are reliant on trade with one another for their economic well-being, and they share a history with the Vossath Nor. Cultural intermixing, especially in the south of Hazlan, is very high. At the same time, their worship of the Lawgiver could not be more different, and the Pharazian habit of slave-raids into southern Hazlan does little to endear them to their northerly co-religionists. Ultimately, Hazlani-Pharazian relations can be best understood through the idea that 'good fences make good neighbors', as the hundred leagues of desert between the two lands keep them from really being able to do much more than send sharply-worded notes at one another.

**Nova Vaasa:** If Pharazia's relations with Hazlan are tense, then the Pharazian relationship with Nova Vaasa can be best considered to be one of mutual loathing. Without the requirements of trade to urge cooperation, Nova Vaasa and Pharazia tend to have small, nasty naval wars every generation or two, with occasional amphibious landings and the sacking of coastal cities. Separated by Hazlan and the desert, the two states are too massive to actually permanently hurt one another in this fashion, but it does make travelling in the Nocturnal Sea quite exciting.

**Darkon, Vechor, Rokushima, Graben:** Pharazian merchants can be found all over the Nocturnal Sea, and a few very hardy souls even reach as far north as Graben Island, though most travel no further than the southern reaches of Darkon or Vechor. Both of those two lands have small trading enclaves of Pharazians, and even the isolationist Rokuma see a few

traders every season. Distant as they are, political relations are cordial but perfunctory, with the local emissaries of the Sultan mostly being concerned with keeping the merchants happy.

## Diamabel

Diamabel is a highly ambiguous figure to all the people of Pharazia. During the day, he appears as a Pharazian man of soul-searing beauty, with black hair, emerald green eyes, and a pair of vibrantly colored wings upon his back. He dresses in fine clothing of blue and gold, and holds a strange aura of brightness around him - colors are stronger when Diamabel is near, sounds more musical, scents sweeter. He is known to be a being of peerless wisdom, generosity, and kindness. He heals the sick and crippled, gives charity to the poor, and is known to be the councilor of kings. At night, his demeanor and appearance changes: his entire form turns black as ash, his eyes burn like fire, and his body is covered with strange, gold-glowing patterns. In this guise, he is an agent of unbridled fury, turning his wrath against any unfortunate enough to cross his path. Entire tribes have been destroyed by Diamabel, cities have been razed, rulers cast down, croplands burned. Fortunately for most, Diamabel tends to stay in the Nameless Quarter or atop the peaks of the al-Hajari mountains. His presence is always greeted favorably during the day, but this joy is always tempered by the concerns that this may herald his return at night.

While most Pharazians are aware that the two Diamabels are one and the same, his motives, nature, and past are complete unknowns. Diamabel rarely answers questions about himself, and when he does, his answers are ambiguous or unclear. The peoples of Pharazia have thousands of

stories, legends, and theories about him, many of them conflicting. Some think him a very powerful djinni. Some think him an ancient and cursed king. Some think he is an angel of the Lawgiver, and those who fall victim to him are meant as warnings of the Lawgiver's displeasure with mankind. Some think he is both the Lawgiver and Mytteri incarnate, combined in a single form. Some whisper that he was once an angel of the Lawgiver, but committed the ultimate blasphemy and declared himself a god: these people tend to be punished under Pharazian law, ostensibly for blasphemy, more practically to avoid invoking Diamabel's wrath.

A curiously common legend is the prophecy that a "black-eyed rascal" will one day be Diamabel's undoing. Dark eyes are exceptionally common in Pharazia, but some people, such as those with aniridia, are viewed with certain amounts of suspicion by the general populace.

## On Diamabel

The classic presentation of Diamabel was rife with unfortunate implications due to the fact that the only Muslim-

themed Darklord was a religious fanatic pretending to be God. This article therefore offers a reinterpretation of Diamabel, diverging both from his old origin story and from the classical conception of what a Darklord is at the same time. Diamabel is a figure of mystery: he may be a fallen angel, a stray Dark Power, or an ordinary man, but the truth of him is unknown to anyone in the domain of Phiraz. He is the incarnation is the living embodiment of the Pharazian theme of Destiny. He is the hand that moves the pieces, that brings them into play and lays them back into the closet when the game is done. It is Diamabel who tells the beggar boy where the magic lamp can be found, and it is Diamabel who rains fire and death upon a city that blasphemes against the Lawgiver. His are the wings that blow away the sand from the ancient ruins, and it is Diamabel who tells the storytellers of the market about heroes lost and dead. He may or may not be a Darklord, and may or may not have been human once, but that is mostly irrelevant to his role as the agent of destiny in the Pharazian story.



# DEMISE

## A Sea of Sorrows Gazetteer Preview

By Ron Laufer

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**Size and Reach:** 6x3 miles of island, 1-2 miles of surrounding seas

**Darklord:** Althea

**Ecology:** Sparse Fauna, Full Flora

**Climate/Terrain:** Forbidding Temperate Mountains, Dense Tropical Forest

**Year of Formation:** 685 BC

**Population:** 20 Alven, 1 human, 1 maedar, 1 glyptar, 1 medusa (Althea)

**Cultural Level:** 3 (Iron Age)

**Races:** See Population

**Languages:** Unknown\*, Lamordian

**Religions:** None

**Government:** None

**Ruler:** Althea

\*Althea's native language is known only on her own world, and is incomprehensible to anyone native to the Lands of the Mists

The Isle of Demise may seem to be a strange locale to spend my precious time cataloguing, and indeed most know it only as an inhospitable rock to be avoided on the way to or from the coast of Darkon. But there is more to Demise than first meets the eye and I would be remiss to have neglected it, in light of a certain journal, recovered from a keg adrift in the sea. One copy of this journal, the account of one Johann Wehner, now resides in the library at the University, where I was able to

peruse it. Wehner's story seems fantastical, but if there's one thing I've learned thus far in my travels, it's that most fantastic stories hold a nugget of truth.

This Wehner, a Lamordian, was the captain of the merchant ship Doma Ordana, which sank nearly eighty years ago en route to Martira Bay. The captain's journal details how he and his crew washed up on the shores of Demise and explored the island, where they were drawn into a peculiar labyrinthine structure, infused with powerful illusions. If the account is to be believed, his crew each succumbed in turn to a creature whose visage held the power to turn those who view her into stone. When only the captain remained, he blindfolded himself so he could not see above his waist and went after the beast. The creature took the form of a beautiful woman and nearly seduced him. He managed to lash out and wound the creature, but in retaliation, she ripped the cloth from his eyes and hurled some sort of caustic fluid into his eyes, blinding him forever. This "woman" threatened vengeance as he fled the maze. He later committed his tale to paper and entrusted it to the sea.

And so, while it may at first seem unlikely for the traitorous Van Rijn to be hiding out on this remote island, no wizard worth his spellbook would pass up an opportunity to study the powerful illusions Wehner describes. Though he has embraced the foul arts, Van Rijn may yet

feel the lure of other spells, and no doubt the transmutation of flesh to stone would fall in line with his early interests as well. We cannot ignore the possibility that our quarry has read Wehner's tale and gone in search of the secrets of Demise.

With at least a hint of the dangers I would face on the Isle, I made certain to prepare myself thoroughly. I petitioned several of our Brotherhood for the loan of a gem of seeing, and was granted the use of one by Brother Zoltan, whom I must thank here for its invaluable use, and reassure that the gem is safe. As soon as we reach port again, it will be sent home to him via a mutually trusted courier. I also delved into the library at La Maison Soulombre in search of any spells that might be of use in this endeavor, and found a fascinating trick to produce a "shadow mask" that should grant me immunity to the gaze of the creature.

Captain Howe was substantially less excited than I to approach Demise. The place has quite a bad reputation among sailors, and most give it a wide berth. Some say that beautiful songs have been heard drifting from the island: a temptation to approach for a green deckhand, but for a seasoned mariner, as sure a sign as any to stay far, far away. Howe would not risk the Black Pelican itself, as the island has no harbors and rocky shoals and sandbars are known to hide beneath the waves nearby. So once again, I found myself in the dinghy, secured to the ship by as long a rope as the crew could find.

## Geographical Survey

On initial approach, the Isle of Demise appears as a steep cone of dark rock thrusting up from the sea. The cone is slightly oblong, with the longer cross-section running from the northeast to the

southwest. It is surrounded by lesser peaks of jagged rock that would seem exceedingly difficult to navigate in anything larger than a sloop and even then, a skilled sailor would be indispensable. From the journal, we knew the general layout of the island: a rocky, steep volcano, apparently dormant. Inhospitable badlands stretch from the edge of the peak to an inactive crater at the center, improbably filled with lush jungle, and the mysterious stone Maze rests in the middle. We first circled the island on the Pelican and noted no distinguishing features visible at our distance from any angle, though it's possible that something was blocked from view by the surrounding rocks. Surely, I thought, before setting out in the dinghy, Wehner's crew had to wash up on the Isle somewhere, so perhaps a safe approach would be hidden among the rocks.

Alas, there is a strong current as well, that several times threatened to pull my tow line across one sharp rock face or another, severing me from the ship. I did not hear the singing I'd been warned of, though whether that was a good omen or ill, I did not know. It soon became clear that the rope was not long enough, and the good Captain showed no willingness to move the Black Pelican any closer than the anchorage he'd chosen. It was just as well, since I didn't relish the idea of landing the dinghy in the crushing surf that continually pounds the base of the island.

So, casting a fly spell, I took my leave of my small vessel and made for the island proper. Regrettably, my distance from the shore, and the short duration of the spell, did not allow me to risk any detailed surveying, so I flew directly toward the apex of the steep, cliff-like mountain. The details of my landing, on the mountainside instead, I will save for somewhat later in this report. From the base to the peak, the island

appears to rise nearly fifty feet at the lowest edge, ranging perhaps as high as seventy feet at the higher side.

I saw as no beach to speak of, only a thin stretch of flotsam-covered pebbles in some places, but for the most part, the dark cliffs plunge straight into the sea, and offer precious little respite from there to the summit. To make matters worse, the mountainside seems to be perpetually crumbling. Climbing is exceptionally dangerous, as seemingly solid foot and handholds can disintegrate at a moment's notice. Wehner's account does not do justice to the difficulty of this ascent. Without magical assistance, I would surely

The Climb DC to scale the cliffs of Demise is 28. Even creatures with a climb speed (such as spellcasters using *spider climb*) risk pulling off chunks of rock and falling. Each round in which such a creature moves on the cliffs, it must make a DC 15 Spot check to avoid unstable ground, and failing that, make a DC 15 Reflex save to avoid falling.

never have reached the top, and even so, it was treacherous.

As it turns out, the cliffs are not entirely featureless. I later discovered scattered mountain-side caves along the coastline, only visible on close inspection. Most of these turned out to be shallow dead ends, but some lead deeper into the island, connecting into what appears to be an elaborate network of caves and lava tubes. Many of the dead ends were blocked by rubble indicating that they once ran deeper. This complex of caverns extends upward and has outlets in the badlands of Demise's rim, as well as in the jungle caldera. These passages provide an alternative to scaling

the cliffs, but would take years to map fully. And, as the stability of the rest of the mountain implies, collapses are common, rendering any map only temporarily valid. Indeed, there are enough dangers in these caves, living and otherwise, that the ascent of the mountain remains a viable option.

The stretch of desolation at the edge of the crater is as bleak as Wehner's journal describes it. There are no plants, but a few insects, and only a stretch of porous black-gray rock, ranging from less than a mile wide to nearly two along the major axis of the island. The only source of water here are small pools of fallen rain that collect in the low points of the uneven terrain. Though it should be only a short walk to cross this barren waste, a layer of fog often settles on the badlands, making it difficult to keep a sense of direction. The desolation has few natural landmarks, and it would be all too easy to wander this small stretch of land for an unexpectedly long time, or worse, wander too close the edge and slip back down the steep and fragile slope. Turning one's ankle or slicing one's hands on the uneven stone floes are dangers with every step. And worse dangers lurk as well, those of the supernatural kind, which I will describe fully later.

It is a welcome sight indeed when one finally reaches the habitable area of the caldera and the dense tropical forest within. Note that I carefully say "habitable" and not "inhabited." The immediate impression of the forest is that of a lush ecosystem, but one instantly detects a wrongness about the place. It takes some time before the reason for this unsettling feeling becomes clear. The usual sounds of such a forest are utterly lacking. No bird calls, nor rustle of woodland critters, nor buzz of insect swarms mar the silence of this vast oasis. In my time on the island, I did see some evidence of tiny amounts of animal life

within the caldera, but at levels that seem extremely sparse for this otherwise lush environment. It is clear that something (or someone) keeps the wildlife at artificially low populations.

The caldera is closer to circular than the full island and measures approximately three miles in the longer direction and two in the shorter. I had expected a warmer temperature here, fueled by the hot springs that Wehner reported, but was still taken aback by the hot and muggy climate. I cannot emphasize enough the extent of the contrast in weather between this pocket of sultry vegetation and the surrounding wintry expanse in the rest of The Finger. It will come as no surprise that I was reminded of our "home," though the weather here combined the heat of Souragne's summer with the dampness of its rainy season, all in one horrifically uncomfortable package. My coat was stifling, so I surveyed much of the island in my shirtsleeves, until even that became unbearable and I laid my modesty aside along with my soaking shirt. Rains come frequently here, filling small pools and streams and turning any bare surface to thick mud. Over parts of the forest, the canopy is so thick that it is difficult to see the clouds above, and light sprinkles can become a deluge with little notice.

The traveler on Demise must contend with water from below as well as above. (I have little doubt the land would have thrown water at me from the sides as well,

Demise's geysers erupt for 1d6 rounds every 1d20 minutes. A creature caught in a geyser must take 5d6 heat damage per round or make a DC18 Reflex save for half damage. Creatures splashed by the boiling water take only 1d6 damage and may save for half as well.

if it could have found the means to do so.) Hot springs boil up from the earth, and sulphurous smelling steam fills the air in the surrounding area. When the pressure from these springs builds, the boiling water can erupt in geysers dozens of feet in the air, much like the hellspouts of Borca. Steam from these vents rolls across the tops of the vegetation in voluminous cloud banks.

Scattered throughout the jungle are small pockets of chilled air that I could not readily explain. Without warning and in just moments, the sweltering heat disappears and coolness envelops a small area. It is not a breeze as such, but radiates in all directions. Then, as suddenly as it arrived, it passes. The coolness is small comfort, however, since the feeling is quite eerie and unnatural. It almost feels as though some presence is watching, with a cold, dead, piercing stare. My best guess is that the phenomenon may share some similarity to Darkonian scatabrae, though those remain equally unexplained.

Still, for all its dangers and discomfort, the jungle has an alluring quality. This forgotten world, hidden from all civilization, evokes the wonder of a lost time. Nature's bounty flourishes here, untouched by humans, or even the creatures of the wilderness. Huge clusters of exotic fruits dangle untouched from trees that may never have existed in the lands of men, or at least not since long before those lands belonged to men. Crystal clear waters fall into secluded glens, the warm, humid nights hold no wild beasts, and there is a blissfully small amount of stinging and biting insects. An unwary visitor might be seduced by this verdant paradise, but clearly, there are very good reasons why the forest remains so unpopulated.

## Flora and Fauna

As mentioned, the forest of Demise holds a cornucopia of plant life, many found nowhere else in the world. A determined herbalist who is able to climb the rocky peak or navigate the caves to reach the valley, and then able to resist entering the dread Maze, could make an unsurpassable harvest of interesting items. Alas, I am not an herbalist, but I did meet several here on the island, who were most helpful in documenting some of these wonders. The herbalists in question were not human, but Alven. Indeed, a clutch of these reclusive fey are the major civilization of Demise. I will detail my dealings with them later in the report, but I mention them now only to document my sources.

Ferns and Bromeliaceae grow on every available patch of ground and even rooted upon other plants. Orchids bloom in a cacophony of different shapes and colors, and ensuring the pollination of these ubiquitous flowers seems to be the chief task of the Alven. The fern fronds twine and tangle with creepers and vines, making a stout blade a must for speedy navigation (though never in sight of the overprotective carrot-tops!). Assorted lianas, a particular type of thick, woody, climbing vine, enshroud many of the trees. The trees themselves consist mostly of mangroves, tualang, and the majestic, umbrella-shaped kapoks. My hosts pointed out a few durian trees, the only trunks not wrapped in parasitic climbers, as they shed their bark often. I was warned to beware the falling fruit of those trees, which resemble the head of a spiked mace, but of a size larger than a man's head. I would further warn my readers to beware when these fruits crack open, for the smell is one of the most horrific things I've experienced in my travels. If one is looking for fruit to eat,

### Dread Possibility: Stone's Icy Chill

Like all medusae, the power of Althea's gaze extends into both the material and ethereal planes. Her gaze can only petrify living creatures, so while ghosts are immune, the subjects of a *blink*, *ethereal jaunt* or *etherealness* spell, users of the *Transubstantial Halo*, or monsters such as ethereal filchers or marauders and phase spiders can all be petrified while remaining ethereal. While individually, each of these things would be a rare occurrence, over the decades, enough of them have fallen victim to Althea that a handful of petrified objects float chaotically through the near ethereal of Demise.

This "Spirit Stone" is found in two known places in Ravenloft: Demise, and the lair of the Spiriteater Basilisks owned by The Order of the Guardians branch based in Mordentshire. The substance can be seen by ethereal or Ghostsighted individuals, but to anyone else on the material plane, it can only be perceived as an eerie coldness when passed through. To ethereal creatures, Spirit Stone is solid and impassible. If a suitable tool was enchanted with the ghost touch enhancement, these statues could possibly be broken or carved, and fashioned into barrier or cage suitable for ghosts or other ethereal creatures.

there are many better options. Figs, coconuts, red jambu, bananas, assorted citrus, mangoes, papaya, guavas, tree nuts, avocados, and spicy peppers are all available for the taking. While the ground is littered with mushrooms and other fungi in some places, I would not risk eating any without an Alven guide, and perhaps not even then.

There are a few exceptionally unusual plants that deserve special note. One is an exceedingly rare bloom called the apetros orchid. I never saw the plant myself, but I was told it has yellow and purple petals with distinctive veins of sparkling silver. If the flower is softened in boiling water and mashed into a pulp, the resulting salve can offer a cure to those unfortunates that have been magically turned to stone. The cure is not perfect, it seems, as the recipient's skin will remain stiff and firm, though even this would seem a miraculous improvement over death by petrification. One wonders what further use this plant might be put to in the hands of a skilled herbalist or alchemist. Another plant of note is the so-called "fiery bertholletia," the seeds of which contain two gooey pastes separated by a thin wall. When the seed is squeezed just right, the wall cracks, the pastes combine, and extreme heat is generated, building inside until the entire seed explodes in a dangerous, albeit exhilarating, display. A careful extraction of these pastes without mixing them would have obvious application to crafting explosives.

The mundane carnivorous plants such as flytraps and pitchers seem to subsist on the small amounts of insects that crawl and burrow in the forest floor. There seem to be very few, if any, flying insects, and the eerie silence of the jungle is never marred by the drone of crickets, locusts, cicadas or the like. There are however, much fiercer and more dangerous plants that hunger for the

rare treat of human flesh. My little guides warned me that Assassin Vines and Shambling Mounds have been spotted in the thickest parts of the brush, and the dreaded Oblivix, with its power to devour memory, is one exotic sight I wish to have no part of.

As noted, Demise's jungle holds no birds, no wild beasts, and no flying swarms, and the same is true for the badlands that surround it. Though, if one digs deep enough, the signs of small pockets of animal life can be found. I once found a nest of some sort of small rodent, and one of the Alven reported a lonely lizard munching on the leaves of her precious shrub. It is clear that something unnatural has befallen the animals of Demise, since it would seem that the settlement of even these few animals would otherwise cause the forest to rapidly fill with their spawn.

Beyond the caldera, there are indeed some interesting native creatures, however. I have already noted the Alven that live underground in the cave complex, and they are not alone there. While traveling the caves, I espied or encountered several other subterranean monsters, including assorted elemental creatures, of the earth and fire varieties, various oozes, and unintelligent burrowing beasts. And, as preposterous as it may sound, down one darkened cave, I was attacked by a small but determined group of skeletons, wielding swords, spears, and enameled bronze shields. Whether these undead warriors were the remains of a party that died exploring the island, or the minions of some necromancer making his home there, I cannot say, but they did not seem to match the traitor's sense of style, so I did not pursue their origin. But given the extent of these caves, a more thorough search with a large party may be in order to be completely sure the lich does not lurk here.

If (literal) fairy tales are to be believed, intelligent undead have taken up residence in the caves from time to time, as Demise holds little danger for them, and they can plot and scheme in relative peace.

Further, there are some incredible monsters roosting upon the mountainside. I have refrained from mentioning until now how I landed on Demise, for the tale involves one such of these creatures. As I neared the peak of the island, held aloft by spellcraft, suddenly, I was engulfed in shadow. Looking upward, I saw that the sun had been completely blocked above me, and a massive looming darkness was expanding across the sky. No, I realized, it was not expanding, but approaching me quite rapidly. A bird, the likes of which I had never imagined, over thirty feet long, was diving at me, talons extended. I fled from its path, and it pursued. I was more maneuverable, but it was faster, and my spell was nearly spent, so I was forced to land in a nook on the crumbling mountainside. A mighty warrior might have fought off the creature, clinging tenuously to the cliffs with one hand and swinging his sword at the enormous beast with the other. But I am no warrior; so instead, I concealed myself with an illusion and waited for it to leave. As I watched the puzzled monster search for me, its huge head turning jerkily and its vast wings beating gales against the mountain and the sea below, I wondered what the thing must eat when it can't get tasty professors. I surmise that it (and any brood it may have) must survive mostly on fish, maybe even small whales, or perhaps it snatches the occasional crew member off the deck of passing ships. I do not know how far the creature ranges from Demise, or if it might be migratory and have homes on other remote islands. In any case, it eventually

## Flora

A few examples of the unique plant life that might lead a party to make a deliberate journey to Demise include:

**Apetros Orchid salve** - Profession (Herbalist) DC 15 to make. Acts as *stone to flesh*, but the recipient loses 2 Dexterity permanently, and his or her natural armor bonus increases permanently by +2. (If he or she has no natural armor bonus, consider it to be +0.) Depending on the length of time spent as stone, the character may need to make a Madness check at the DM's discretion.

**Apetros Orchid tincture** - Profession (Herbalist) DC 18 to make. Ingested, initial damage: 1d4 Dex, secondary damage: special - the poisoned character is subject to the effects of a *stoneskin* spell, as cast by a 7th level caster. This effect is Extraordinary and cannot be dispelled. Market Price 1650gp per dose.

**Fiery betholletia seeds** - Profession (Herbalist) DC 15 to harvest safely. When activated by squeezing and thrown or slung, the seeds act as a *magic stone* spell, except that the damage is 1d6 fire damage plus 1 point of bludgeoning damage, and unlike stones enchanted by the spell, the seeds do not inflict double damage against undead.

lost interest in me and left, and I began the torturous climb to the summit.

## Encounters on Demise: Wildlife

CR 1/10: Bat(MM1)\*\*

CR 1/8: Rat(MM1)

CR 1/6: Lizard(MM1), Raven(MM1)\*

CR 1/4: Owl(MM1)\*

CR 1/3: Dire Rat(MM1)\*\* , Hawk(MM1)\*, Snake, Tiny Viper(MM1)\*\*\*

CR 1/2: Eagle(MM1)\*

CR 1: Dire Raven (Ga1)\*

CR 2: Dire Bat(MM1)\*, Dire Hawk(MM2)\*, Giant Lizard (MM1)\*\* , Giant Raven (Fro)\*

CR 3: Dire Eagle (RSt)\*, Giant Eagle (MM1)\*

CR Varies: Monstrous Spider(MM1)\*\*

(All wildlife in the Jungle is vanishingly scarce, due to a combination of Althea's siren song and gaze and outbreaks of the petrification virus.)

## Encounters on Demise: Monsters

CR1: Carrion Bat(DoD)\*\* , Darkmantle(MM1)\*\* , Dread Plant, Fearweed(DoD)\*\*\* , Oblivix Mossling(Dra#355)\*\*\*

CR2: Dread Plant, Crawling Ivy(DoD)\*\*\* , Oblivix (Dra#355)\*\*\* , Thoqqua(MM1)\*\*

CR3: Ankheg(MM1)\*\* , Assassin Vine(MM1)\*\*\* , Bone Rat Swarm(LiM)\*\* , Dread Plant, Bloodroot(DoD)\*\* , Phantom Fungus(MM1), Shadow Fey, Alven(VRGSF), Violet Fungus(MM1), Wight(MM1)

CR4: Carrion Crawler(MM1)\*\* , Corpse Rat Swarm(LiM)\*\* , Dread Plant, Lashweed(DoD)\*\*\* , Gray Ooze(MM1)\*\* , Harpy (MM1)\*

CR5: Gibbering Moulder(MM1)\*\* , Ochre Jelly(MM1)\*\* , Petrification Virus (See Appendix), Wraith(MM1), Udoroot (EPH)\*\*\*

CR6: Chelicera(MM3)\*\* , Dread Blossom Swarm(MM3)\*\*\* , Shambling Mound(MM1)\*\*\*

CR7: Black Pudding(MM1)\*\* , Maedar (Leftheris) (Dra#355+see Appendix), Medusa (Althea) (MM1+see Appendix)\*\*\*\* , Phasm(MM1)\*\* , Stone Spirit (see Appendix)

CR9: Arcane Ooze(MM3)\*\* , Roc (MM1)\*

CR10: Greenvise(MM2)\*\*\*

CR11: Stone Golem (Stelios) (MM1+see Appendix)\*\*\*\*

CR varies: Animated Object (MM1)\*\*\*\* , Earth Elemental(MM1)\*\* , Ghost (MM1, DoD), Geist (DoD), Living Spell(MM3)\*\*\*\* , Lich(MM1), Revived Fossil(LiM), Skeleton(MM1), Vampire(MM1, DoD), Zombie(MM1)

\* Only on Mountainside cliffs

\*\* Only in caves

\*\*\* Only in jungle

\*\*\*\* Only in maze

Along the way, I spotted other winged creatures nesting there, but thankfully they did not spot me. Concerned with making the ascent, I had no time to carefully study them. Doubtless they were more birds, of the normal or dire variety, though for a moment I was convinced that one group had humanoid heads. Surely the exertion was affecting my senses. When I finally reached the top of the mountain, I was exhausted, and thought my wits might be permanently impaired, for here the very stones of the earth rose up against me. Clearly some enchantment had been wrought on the three boulders that barreled directly toward my person. I can think of no other explanation for the animate faces of the rocks that bit at me with their flint-sharp stone teeth. These strange rock monsters would be the last of the "natural" dangers this forgotten land would threaten me with, though of course, as in most places, the intelligent denizens would prove far more hazardous.

## History

Given Lamordians' cultural distaste for history, it is difficult to pin down exactly when Demise emerged to take its place at the far end of The Finger. But there is no dispute that the earliest written description of the place is that of Captain Wehner, and records at the Ludendorf harbormaster's office place the last voyage of The Doma Ordana in the summer of 686BC. Lamordian mariners' maps dating even a decade earlier than that show only the sea where the island now sits. Since there are obviously no trade nor formal relations with Demise, it appears in few official records, but the sailors of the Sea of Sorrows have their own tales and legends of the place. The sea shanty, "Her Voice from the Black Isle," certainly has enough parallels to Demise to

convince me that it was inspired by the place, and reference to that song appears in multiple books dated near the turn of the century. Since its appearance, Demise seems to have been mostly stagnant. I found it to be much the same as Wehner described it. Few visit the place deliberately, fewer leave their mark, and fewer still return.

## People

As I have previously mentioned, the vast majority of sentient inhabitants of Demise are members of the breed of Shadow Fey known as the Alven. These reclusive fair folk number approximately twenty and live by day in a cave complex deep within the mountain, which they call Molten Hollow. By night, the Alven pour from the cracks in the caldera floor and tend to the jungle plants continuously until just before dawn, when they flee the deadly (to them) light of the sun. They ostensibly follow a leader named Prince Galaindril, though by my observation, they regard his orders more like suggestions. The Prince and his subjects rebuffed all my attempts to determine why exactly this particular group of faeries had left their former homes and become the caretakers of Demise. But so long as I did not interfere in their work, they were content to answer most other questions and were particularly effusive when describing the local flora.

As ever when dealing with the fey, it pays to be cautious and keep in mind that no matter how friendly they seem, they are inherently inhuman and prone to dangerous changes in mood. Hence, I did not linger longer than necessary with them, but during my brief visit, I made sure to ask them what they knew of the mistress of the maze. The tale I was told, by an elder called "Gray Donald," was one of unrequited love: that a

man whom the lady fancied spurned her for being ugly and that with the help of a Zelldrow artifact, she tried to force herself on him and killed him by mistake. For this sin, she was cursed to roam the maze, and the man was turned to a walking stone statue that will not speak to her or return her affection. Even as I listened, I suspected from the twilight folk's glee that the story was embellished. While they all seemed to know the basic tale, parts of it seemed added or enhanced. In particular, the inclusion of the personal "bogeymen" of the Arak, the Zelldrow, seemed new and tailor-made to garner applause from the Alven audience. I couldn't shake the feeling that they take turns with this tale, twisting it one way or another to amuse themselves or their rare guests, though there might have once been a kernel of truth to it. Perhaps, had I visited on a different day, I might have instead gotten an account closer to the one I was to learn later in my journey. But then again, although that variant would come from a kindred source that I trusted more than these charmingly playful creatures, I have no solid proof of its veracity either. The fey are often inscrutable, and what I interpreted as fancy could well be the truth after all.

The Shadow Fey may have been the most prevalent inhabitants of the island, but by no means the most unexpected. On my final day on Demise, I explored the caves, searching for one of those that opened up on the shoreline. Seeing daylight ahead, I approached the cave mouth, and was startled to hear a hoarse voice call out to me in Lamordian. After making my peaceful intentions known, I came closer and to my surprise saw an elderly, weather-beaten man in a ragged loincloth holding some freshly caught fish. He was making his way back into the cave, brushing a hand on the

wall for guidance, for the man was clearly blind.

"Captain Wehner?" I asked, "Johann?" He dropped his fish and reached for a dagger tied to his calf. He seemed as shocked to meet someone who knew his name as I had been to find him still alive. To have survived alone and blind to such an elderly age in this inhospitable place seemed impossible. I calmed his fear and spoke with him for a time, helping him to build a fire to cook his fish. I first spoke about his catch, as one angler to another, easing him back into conversation. He seemed welcoming, though perhaps not as thrilled as one might expect to meet an outsider after what must have been decades alone. As I moved the conversation to more relevant topics, regarding the island, and the changes in the world at large, he became more agitated, and less coherent. It was clear the time here had taken a toll on his sanity. Before long, he started spouting cryptic ramblings, and breaking out into ancient sea-songs, though I couldn't help but feel as though this babble was suffused with riddles, if I could only decipher them. This pitiful hermit surely holds secrets that no living human does.

### **Dread Possibility: The Spirit of Demise**

Johann Wehner - 2nd Magnitude ghost human Ftr1/Exp5 (Sailor).

Treasure: a +1 dagger inherited from his mother. The dagger's possessor continually feels at ease; gripping the dagger allows the possessor to make a new Fear Save to negate an existing fear effect, and gives a +2 morale bonus to future Fear Saves.

It was only when I sat myself along the cave wall to share the cooked fish with Wehner that I realized how true that thought was. Lowering myself to the cave floor, I felt something sharp beneath me. Squinting in the light of the small fire, I recoiled to see that it was a bone, part of a rag-clad human skeleton that lay in a small alcove. Bound to its tibia was a dagger, the hilt a match to the one the old man wore. As I looked across to Wehner hungrily devouring his fish, the truth was clear. It was, in fact, impossible for him to be still alive. I was not surprised to look down at the meal in front of me and see only bones, the remains of a grouper eaten long ago. Wary of angering the shade, I tiptoed past him to the mouth of the cave, quietly summoned a phantom steed and rode across the surf, back to the Black Pelican.

The only other denizens of the island that I am aware of are the lady of the Maze herself, and the mysterious Stealer through Stone, both of whom I will detail later in this report.

## Settlements

### Molten Hollow

The only place on Demise that could reasonably be called a settlement, Molten Hollow is the name the Alven give for section of the caverns that they have taken as their home. Trickle of lava still run through these caves, no doubt giving the place its name, and many of the chambers glow with the lava's ruddy light. I would not have found the place on my own, hidden as it is deep within the mountain. I first had to befriend the Alven on the surface and convince them to let me follow them home at dawn. The tiny denizens have made most of their furniture from fallen branches, intricately woven together, and spend the

**Molten Hollow (thorp)** Conventional; AL CG; CL 7; 40 gp limit; Assets 40 gp; Population 20; Isolated (Alven 100%)

*Authority Figure:* Prince Galaindril male Alven Rgr5

*Important Characters:* Gray Donald, male Alven Drd7 (Elder among the Immortals; The Marked One), Priestess Claricimae, female Alven Clr4 (Voice of the True Fey)

majority of their time here in recreation. Not needing to sleep as we do, they dance, tell tales and feast until their work begins again at nightfall.

The Alven have chosen caves that suit their own size, and visitors of human height must be constantly ducking and crouching. Indeed, some parts of the complex are simply impossible for a grown human to enter. Passages from Molten Hollow lead to all parts of the island, and the fey seem to know them all. If approached during their daytime break, they might be convinced to act as guides, though the standard warning about fey bargains applies.

*Accommodations:* Visitors who befriend the Alven may be allowed to sleep in the "Big Cave," a relatively cozy chamber of roughly five by ten feet. Care must be taken not to roll too close to the red hot stones on the far side of the cave.

## Locales of Interest

Lacking any civilization apart from Molten Hollow, Demise still harbors sundry places of note that I shall detail in the following.

## Wehner's Cave

The caves are extremely extensive, and my attempts to explore them were cut short, lest some further calamity befall me and my notes be lost forever. But I will note that the cave where Johann Wehner lived and died is the most likely entrance for a return expedition. The cave faces the southward side of the island, and a small spit of pebble beach juts out from the mouth at low tide. The cave is blocked from view by three large rocks that thrust from the sea, forming a barrier resembling three upturned fingers from a giant's hand. The ghost of Wehner haunts the cave, going about the same tasks he did in life.

## Statuary gardens

In at least two places in the deep jungle, small clusters of stone figures stand. Mostly human in form, with a few demihumans interspersed, the statues share a look of agony carved on their faces. This was my first glimpse of the promised stone victims of Demise. But I was surprised to see them here, outside of the maze, when the Alven agreed that the lady of the labyrinth was trapped within. My first guess was that some creature had hauled them out here for an unknown purpose. But as I was about to examine the statues, I noticed something that may have saved my life: the statues were nude or dressed in rotting rags, and one statue still wore an intact silk blindfold. There was no way this one could have been petrified by the creature's gaze. Groping for an explanation, I recalled a paper by an Invidian doctor regarding a petrifying disease, spread by physical contact. I quickly backed away from the stone people lest I become infected. If indeed these clusters of lost folk are victims of the petrification virus, I do not know why they seem to have banded together. This

paper described succumbing to the disease as a slow process. Either this strain is more virulent and spreads very rapidly, or something immune to the virus brought them together after their deaths. Or perhaps the victims, in their last throes of illness, seeing no way to find treatment in time to be cured, felt the urge to seek out fellow sufferers with which to spend eternity.

## Labyrinth

Of course, the locale of most interest is the mysterious Labyrinth itself. I could not consider my trip complete without investigating this strange structure at the center of the jungle caldera. Taking no chances, I invoked a shadow mask, obscuring my face in darkness, and readied Brother Zoltan's gem of seeing. The maze is an enormous circle, about a mile in diameter and fifteen feet tall, with walls of white marble. Due to its size, the maze can be found quite easily. From the cliffs above, the structure seems to be topped with a featureless and flat stone roof of the same substance as the walls, giving the place the appearance of a giant ivory coin dropped in a garden.

There is only one visible entrance, an open arch on the southward side, marked with runes on the wall above. These runes proved an enigma, as they are written in no language I could recognize, even via magic. Perhaps they are not actually language, merely an aesthetic touch carved by the builder of the structure. Taking one last check of my spell components, and a deep breath of the muggy air, I walked through the archway.

Immediately upon entering the maze, the unprepared traveler would be lost. Looking backward at the entrance, an illusion of forked passageways stretches into the distance, giving the impression that

## Dread Possibility - The Sculptor's Secret

The works of Astor Minard have become scandalously fashionable in the salons of Port-a-Lucine. His medium is stone, and his works share a disturbing theme: the human form in the throes of terror. Each piece is a bust or full statue, perfectly sculpted, with a face frozen in horror, and demand for his work is soaring. While he basks in his recent success, Minard also fears that the truth will be revealed: he is a fraud. In reality a petty thief from Nartok, the man now known as M. Minard was fleeing the constabulary, and had booked passage from Martira Bay to Port-a-Lucine when a shipwreck stranded him on the Isle of Demise.

Exploring the island, he eventually entered the maze, along with the only other survivor of the wreck, the first mate Dalara. By nightfall, Dalara had succumbed to Althea's gaze, and while Minard caught only a hint of Althea's presence, he deduced that some creature of the maze was responsible for petrifying her. Many years ago, he had "acquired" his most prized possession, a bag of holding, from a Darkonian noble and it had served him well in smuggling the spoils of his trade. This treasure survived the shipwreck with him, and was quickly employed to snatch the heavy sculpture that was once Dalara. Having been born with a knack for escape and love of puzzles, he miraculously escaped the labyrinth without further contact with Althea, eventually fashioned a raft, and sailed to the mainland.

Minard's masterpiece, "Dalara," became all the rage of the Port-a-Lucine art world, and he is making quite a name for himself as an "artist." He has since traveled back to Demise with a sturdier boat and plundered some more works to sell and exhibit. But now, he's started to receive requests. The idea occurs to him that he can fulfill those requests... provided he can lure the proper subjects to Demise for a "visit with his muse." Althea, for her part, is outraged that parts of her collection are missing, and if the thief is ever caught, he is sure to share the fate of his "works." Alternatively, if he ever stumbles on the statues in the jungle, he might inadvertently bring home an epidemic of the petrification virus.

one has been wandering the maze for hours. If one were to walk even a few moments before turning around, it would be nearly impossible to discern the true passages from the illusory ones. Luckily the gem revealed the trick, and I could see the exit clearly with its help. The maze is lit by *everburning torches* at forty foot increments, and the walls are otherwise

featureless stone. The stone has an insulating effect, and the torches shed no heat, so the temperature is quite a bit cooler inside the maze than out, but the moisture that is humid outside is dank within.

I had come prepared with several wands of arcane mark to leave myself an invisible trail back to the entrance, and I set

to making marks as I walked, each spaced within easy view of the previous one. Other than the torches, the halls are mostly featureless, and as Wehner had recorded, the stone walls are impervious to scratching, so the mystic marks would prove invaluable. Scattered throughout the labyrinth are the expected statues, each with its face twisted in horror. The illusions are indeed intertwined ingeniously with the maze itself. I studied them at length, with and without the gem. Passages seem to twist back around on themselves without the sense of turning. Some halls appear to go on forever, while others shift and bend maddeningly before one's eyes. The force of gravity seems to wrench sideways or upside down in places, and some chambers have shapes which simply cannot exist.

While the structure is only one story high outside, stairs, ramps, and pits do descend below. I confined myself to the ground floor for the time being, with the intent to explore downward later. But without my magical assistance, I might have been lured deeper without even noticing. In one large room, the stairs seemed to run in three different directions. Above, I could see an image of myself dangling upside-down from a entirely different staircase than the one on which I stood. In another room, the stairs that ran downward before me turned around in a square and somehow, impossibly, connected to the ones that ran upward behind me. Brother Zoltan, I owe my life to your generous loan of that steadfast revealer of truth.

A few larger chambers dot the maze, with purposes I could hardly guess. No doubt the lady has her reasons for keeping them as they are, but to me the contents were bewildering. It was while inspecting one of these, an array of pebbles laid out in rows, that I became hopelessly lost. When I

emerged from the room, the mark I'd left beside the entrance was gone. I could see none of my marks in any direction, and worse, the layout of the corridors was not as I remembered. The gem showed that this was no illusion. Either I had carelessly fallen prey to a subtle illusion on the way into this chamber, or the maze had truly changed around me. Stifling the urge to panic, I set out again, continuing my markings and attempting to head towards where I thought the exit must be.

There was no direct path back, and in the course of my wanderings, I reached what appeared to be the center of the maze: a circular chamber, open to the sky. Apparently, the roof in this area is a one-way illusion. From above, I had seen no holes, but from below, one can see clearly out the opening. It's possible that there are other such open areas elsewhere in the maze, but I decided that a later excursion to view the building from above with the gem was not worth the effort. Of course, I was elated to find an exit to the maze in the form of this skylight, but with that need met, I first examined my surroundings. Within this chamber was a meticulously kept garden, with fountains, pools, couches and pillows. It seemed that someone might live here comfortably, and yet, the area held a large concentration of the ghastly statues I'd seen elsewhere in the maze. My hopes soared that I might perhaps meet the isle's ruler in person, here in what must be her home. I had many questions about the illusions I'd seen, and I hoped that if Van Rijn were here, he might have had some contact with her.

I turned to see that I would have my chance. From the shadows at the far end of the gardens she came, a thing of nightmares. She had a woman's form from the neck downward, and a shapely one at that. Contrary to my prior assumptions, I

concluded this was her true form, and no illusion, because if any monster wished to masquerade as a human woman, why would it take on that hideous face? In place of hair were dozens of writhing, spitting serpents. The sunken eyes were coal-black beads, and a forked tongue flicked from her lipless mouth. Her skin was covered in reptilian scales, rough textured and alien. But my descriptions of the parts cannot do justice to the horror of the whole. At last I knew why her victims died with terrified screams on their lips. The *shadow mask* held, however, and I extended my hands in a gesture of peace, calling out greetings in several tongues.

I approached slowly, and she warily, for I fear she was taken aback by my immunity to her gaze. She spat back in heavily accented Lamordian, "What trickery is this? Show your face, creature! What manner of beast are you?" "I am merely a human," I said, "A teacher by trade, but also a student, of the arcane arts. I have many questions for you, if you can spare some mome—" But it was too late; I had hit a nerve, it seems. She screamed, "Warlock! Conjurer! Betrayer!" and the like, as she attacked me with a sword, as well as her hissing and spitting snake appendages. When it was clear that I would get no civil answers, I decided to make my escape. Casting a fly spell, I fled upward toward the open sky ... a fatal mistake. As I crossed the threshold of the illusory roof, I saw a momentary flash of violet, and my momentum faltered. I felt the sickening feeling of a fly spell coming to an untimely halt. My magic melted away like wax, and I drifted downward, tumbling end over end and crashing onto a potted plant and divan. I sprawled on my back, legs tangled in the plant, with my head hanging inverted over the edge of the couch. I had but a moment to realize that my *shadow mask* was gone

## No Exit

There are several gaps in the roof of the maze, but they are all covered with a deviously nested enchantment. The top layer is an illusion of stone that matches the surrounding rooftop, facing upward. The lower layer is an illusion directed downward, matching the sky above precisely. If a cloud or flying creature were to pass over this "skylight," an exactly matching one would be seen by those below, within the maze. Between the layers is a permanent dispelling screen (Spell Compendium), as cast by an 11th level wizard. This combination effectively makes the dispelling screen invisible to anyone not passing through it, and prevents magical egress from the maze. It might be possible to climb out of the maze this way by standing on furniture or using a grapnel, but the maze might also respond by quickly sealing the opening with stone.

before the creature came into view, and all thought ceased, as I turned to stone.

It should come as no surprise that I was rescued, since otherwise I would never have been able to write the preceding account. I didn't know at the time how long I'd been petrified, but when I returned to the Pelican, Howe and I agreed on the date, so it could not have been more than a day, and by the change in the position of the sun, I estimate perhaps eight hours. When I lived again, the she-devil was gone. In her place was a muscular man in nothing but a loose skirt. Seeing his bald head and distinctive markings, I took him for a Hazlani, and greeted him in Vaasi. But he showed no comprehension, and instead spoke in halting Lamordian as he helped me

up into a more dignified position. "We must leave," he said urgently, "Althea is making her rounds, but she will soon return." He took me to another chamber, and we spoke for quite some time.

My rescuer said he was called the Stealer through Stone, though I could not determine if that was a name or a title, or perhaps even a species, for he claimed not to be human at all. He said that both he and Althea lived in the maze, though she is not aware of him, and he is not trapped as she is. He had taken note of my spellcasting, and seemed very interested in illusions in particular. I asked him if he was responsible for the illusions of the maze, and he answered cryptically, "not yet." I'm not certain this fellow was entirely sane. He seemed awkward and unaccustomed to conversation. A few times I noted that he seemed to speak to himself in an unfamiliar language, and his words were followed by equally unfamiliar patterns of runes appearing inscribed on the stone wall, but it did not appear to be any form of spellcasting I could recognize... perhaps some sort of scrying through the stone. He was quite proficient with more traditional magic as well, and showcased some of his talents, hoping, I believe, that I might share some of my own with him.

I had no desire to linger here long enough to teach him any spells, but when he offered to share the lady Althea's tale with me, I relented and showed him a few pages from my spellbook. Thankfully, he had some method of quickly copying them onto the wall, so I was spared the usual time it would have taken him to scribe them. The tale is still a bit vague, but from what I gathered, Althea is not a unique creature, but one of many in a distant land, and she is entrapped in the maze for rebelling against the customs of her people, by committing their ultimate sin: killing her

mate. This mate had done nothing other than love her, but she blamed him for their lack of a child living past infancy. A more complete account of what I believe is the truth about Althea can be found in the Attached Notes. Needless to say, I took the word of a fellow wizard, even a strange one, over that of the fey. Moreover, the Stealer through Stone seemed connected to Althea and the maze in a way I could not pin down precisely.

At the conclusion of our little chat, he showed me the meaning behind his name, as he grasped my hand and led me out of the maze by pulling me through seemingly solid stone! When we were safely back in the jungle, I bid him farewell, with a promise of future contact and knowledge sharing. I do owe him a debt; I have no doubt my Brothers would have come to rescue me eventually, if only to be sure my disappearance was not the work of Van Rijn. But this strange chap did save me the embarrassment of being found petrified in a most undignified pose, and allowed me to continue my work with minimal delay. Moreover, while I disliked his secrecy regarding his own connection to Althea, he was an amiable fellow and a prodigious arcanist. I intend to honor my promise and find some way to keep in touch with him. Perhaps one day he might come to the mainland for collaboration, and may even prove worthy of induction into the Fraternity.

And so, with most of my curiosity satisfied, I took my leave of Demise, as described earlier, through the haunted cave of the late Captain Wehner. Though no sign of the traitor presented itself, perhaps my first contact with the denizens of the island will prove of future use to us. Howe was more than happy to leave sight of the cursed Isle, and we sailed onward to our next destination.

# New Monsters

## Stone Spirit

*This ungainly boulder seems to have a horrid face carved into it, complete with a leering maw of jagged stone teeth. It rolls rapidly, changing direction with no visible means of propulsion. The stone lashes out with a bone-crushing bite, though its sculpted eyes seem mournful and almost pitiable.*

CR 7

CE Medium Undead

**Init** +3 **Senses:** darkvision 60ft Listen +8 Spot +8

### DEFENCE

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**AC** 21, touch 11, flatfooted 21 (-1 Dex, +10 Natural, +2 Deflection)

**hp** 59 (7d12+14)

**DR** 5/adamantium; **Immunities** electricity, non-magical fire; **Resistance** magical fire 10; **Vulnerable** cold (double damage)

**Fort** +2 **Ref** +1 **Will** +3

### OFFENCE

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**Speed** 30

**Melee** 2 bites +9/+3 (2d6+6)

**Special Actions** Alternate Form

### STATISTICS

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**Str** 22, **Dex** 8, **Con** -, **Int** 10, **Wis** 6, **Cha** 14

**Base Atk** +3 **Grp** +3

**Languages** cannot speak; understands languages it knew in life

**Feats** Improved Initiative

**Skills** Spot +8, Listen +8, Hide +9, Tumble +9

**SQ** undead traits; immunity to electricity, non-magical fire, cold vulnerability, magic vulnerability

### ECOLOGY

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**Environment** Any Rocky

**Organization** Solitary, Clutch (2-4)

**Treasure** none

**Advancement** 8 HD (Medium); 9-15 HD (Large)

**Immunities (Ex)** The Stone Spirit is immune to electricity and non-magical fire. It channels electricity into the ground, and is only slightly blackened by fire.

**Alternate Form (Su)** The Stone Spirit can take the form of an ordinary rock as a standard action. It can manifest its face and extend crude legs as a swift action. In inert form, the Stone Spirit gains a +10 racial bonus to Hide. A stone shape spell can force the Stone Spirit into any shape the caster desires, but the spirit can take either of its normal forms on the next round.

**Cold Vulnerability (Ex)** Cold attacks form ice crystals that expand in the cracks of the Stone Spirit's stone form and inflict double normal damage.

**Magic Vulnerability (Ex)** If *passwall* is cast upon a stone spirit, the creature must make a Will saving throw (at the DC that the spell would normally have if it allowed a saving throw) or the stone it inhabits is destroyed. When this happens, the spirit within the stone becomes a normal 1st magnitude ghost. Stone spirits are slowed by a *transmute rock to mud* spell for 1 round/caster level. (A *transmute mud to rock* spell can heal the stone spirit to full hit points, if sufficient mud is nearby to fill in its "wounds.") A stone to flesh spell strips the creature of its Natural Armor bonus to AC for 1 round/caster level.

The Stone Spirits (sometimes called Grave Stones) have only been seen in the

badlands of Demise. They are rocks, four feet or more in diameter, infused with the spirits of creatures who have died by petrification. Dwarves and Gnomes are especially prone to become Stone Spirits if they succumb to petrification. Stone Spirits hate the living and attack on sight. They lay inert, appearing as a normal rock, until the living approach, and then attack fearlessly with their stalactite teeth.

## Virus, Phagian

The Land of Mists is home to many terrible diseases. Some of these, such as the infamous crimson death of Darkon or white fever of Valachan, have claimed countless lives over time. But of all the lethal plagues in Ravenloft, only the hideous, quasi-living viruses of Phagius the Unclean are spoken of in the hushed tones of those afraid that their subject will overhear—and respond.

Phagius the Unclean was a wizard who lived in Invidia under the rule of Bakholis. Early in the seventh century, his wife bore him six children before finally dying in childbirth. Choosing to focus on his arcane research, Phagius paid little attention to his brood, but he did demand from them total obedience, bordering on worship. Over the years, Phagius grew elderly and embittered, turning more petty and tyrannical all the while. Treating his children like slaves, he refused to allow them to marry or apprentice themselves to any mages other than himself. Finally, his desperate offspring concocted a lethal poison and slipped it into his evening meal, hoping to finally be free of their sire. They succeeded in taking their father's life, but not before he had his revenge.

Phagius had spent years secretly developing a number of deadly potions, each one a highly infectious, supernatural

disease. With these plagues—and the cures he had simultaneously developed—Phagius hoped to seize control of Invidia, giving its populace the choice of obeying him or dying in agony. But now, with the poison coursing through his veins, Phagius knew he had but moments to live. Cursing his children, he drank each of the infectious potions, then hurled their respective cures into the hearth fire along with all of his research.

As the aged wizard collapsed onto his bed, his body transformed. The supernatural diseases mixed inside him, further mingling with the malign power of his dying words.

After the sounds of Phagius's final tantrum died out, his children crept up to his room to witness the result of their betrayal. When one reached out and tentatively touched the body to ensure Phagius was dead, the corpse instantly collapsed into dust, filling the air with an infectious taint.

Horrified and choking, Phagius's six children fled from his house, now bearing his dying gift to the world: Phagian viruses. Each child became the carrier of a quasi-living disease, involuntarily spreading the evil legacy of Phagius the Unclean for the rest of their days.

## Combat

Phagian viruses are magical, mindless, microscopic, quasi-living aberrations, too small to be seen or battled directly. At their core, Phagian viruses are just supernatural diseases and are largely treated as such. However, unlike even the most virulent supernatural disease, a Phagian virus possesses an independent will to survive and spread, and it uses that will to resist attempts at a cure. Like traps, slimes, and molds, Phagian viruses have Challenge Ratings, and characters should earn XP for encountering them.

The Phagian viruses presented here use the following format:

**Infection (Ex)** The disease's method of delivery. Phagian viruses are all spread by contact, though the means of contact varies from one virus to the next. Unless noted otherwise, contact diseases can also be inhaled or ingested.

A Phagian virus exists in one of two states: dormant or active. Viruses are infectious only in their dormant state. Once a virus infects a living creature, it switches to its active state and manifests symptoms. An active Phagian virus cannot survive outside of a viable host, so ironically, a living victim currently infected with a Phagian virus cannot infect others. Each virus description below details how the disease can be encountered in its dormant, infectious state.

Any creature immune to supernatural diseases cannot be infected by Phagian viruses or become a carrier.

Like other diseases, each virus allows Fortitude saving throws to prevent infection when exposed, to prevent each instance of repeated damage once infected, and to recover from the disease. The saving throw DC is based on the Constitution of the creature spreading the virus (in other words, the previous victim or carrier) at the time of infection. Fortitude DC 10 + 1/2 carrier's HD + carrier's Con modifier.

**Incubation Period:** The time before damage begins.

**Damage (Su)** The effects the virus imposes on its host after incubation and each day afterward. Phagian viruses have more complex symptoms than most diseases, with their effects organized into three phases.

**Phase One:** Phase one begins when the incubation period ends and the victim fails her first saving throw against the

disease. The virus sets in by imposing troubling but largely cosmetic symptoms.

**Phase Two:** Phase two begins when the victim fails her second saving throw against the disease. The symptoms grow more severe, often imposing penalties or dealing ability score damage.

**Phase Three:** The effects typically turn fatal.

The effects of each phase of each virus are detailed below. Typically, a virus develops from one phase to the next after the victim fails a certain number of daily Fortitude saves; see the individual entries for details.

**Recovery:** If a victim is cured before the virus kills her, she recovers at the rate detailed here. In general, a cured victim slowly recovers by reversing the effects of one failed save against the virus each day until she returns to normal.

**CR 5:** As with other hazards, characters earn experience for overcoming a Phagian virus (either by curing it or merely surviving infection).

## Carriers

The first time a living creature is exposed to a given Phagian virus, if it succeeds on its initial Fortitude save to resist infection, it must immediately make a second Fortitude save at the same DC. A subject that fails this second saving throw becomes a carrier. Conversely, if this second saving throw succeeds, the subject does not and can never become a carrier of that kind of virus.

A carrier is infected with the virus, but the virus remains in its dormant state. This means that the carrier suffers none of the virus's symptoms, but the virus remains virulent and can spread to others. Once a creature becomes a carrier, it cannot be infected again by that type of virus (effectively becoming immune to it) until

the disease has been completely eliminated from its body (see Treatment, below).

Creatures immune to disease (such as constructs and undead) cannot become carriers, though in some cases they can physically carry dormant viruses and spread them with their touch. See below for details.

## Diagnosis

Diagnosis of a Phagian virus is usually quite difficult. Regardless of their form or current state, Phagian viruses emit a weak necromantic aura. *Detect magic* and similar spells can detect this aura on infectious materials and infected creatures, even before symptoms begin to develop. (This may fool observers into believing that the virus's bearers are actually magic items or under the effects of a necromantic spell.)

Once symptoms begin to develop, a successful DC 15 Heal check can identify the virus (see Phagian Virus Lore, below). The Vistani have incorporated Phagian viruses into their cultural healing lore and are reputed to possess several cures, though they rarely share these with giorgios. Those raised within Vistani tasques gain a +2 insight bonus on Heal checks to identify these diseases. Vistani-blooded characters have no special immunity to Phagius's creations, but they do gain a +2 racial bonus on Fortitude saves to resist them.

## Treatment

Mundane forms of treatment are of little help against Phagian viruses. Although successful Heal checks can help an infected creature resist the virus's effects, a Phagian virus—like many supernatural diseases—continues until it kills its victim or is cured, no matter how many successful Fortitude saving throws the victim makes to fight it off. Magic is the only effective means of countering a Phagian virus.

If cast on a dormant virus while it is outside a host (see the infection examples below), spells such as *dispel magic*, *break enchantment*, or *purify food and drink* instantly kill the virus within the spell's area, without a saving throw.

*Heal*, *remove disease*, and similar spells and effects are effective against Phagian viruses, but the virus is entitled to a Fortitude save to resist the cure. A virus's Fortitude save bonus is +2 per failed save the host has made to prevent the virus's damage. For example, if a host infected with a combustion virus has failed three daily saving throws to resist combustion, then the virus uses a +6 bonus when it makes its Fortitude save. If the virus fails its saving throw, it is destroyed.

## Combustion Virus

*Led by her dark dreams she came to the seaside and found the beached whale, its immense and steaming bulk covered with lesions. With a terrible groan and a frightful whoosh the creature exploded into flames. In its ashes she covered herself and set forth to raze from existence all 'intelligent' life.*

—"Le culte de la nature,"  
L'encyclopédie des croyances

A combustion virus causes the cells in the body of its host to continually increase their levels of activity until they grow wildly out of control. Unless cured, the victim begins to literally smolder and, ultimately, dies an agonizing death as she burns from the inside out.

### **Infection (Ex)** Contact or inhaled.

When an infected victim spontaneously combusts, all that remains is a pile of highly virulent gray ash. Any contact with this ash risks exposure to the virus. This ash is easily scattered by the wind, risking not just physical contact but accidental inhalation as

well. Evil spellcasters have been known to sprinkle this ash on their undead minions, making even lowly skeletons deadly to the touch.

**Incubation Period:** 24 hours.

**Combustion (Su)** A combustion virus slowly builds the internal temperatures of the host's body until the victim literally bursts into flame.

**Phase One:** The victim develops a high fever and sore skin. This imposes no penalties, however.

**Phase Two:** When the victim fails her first saving throw to resist the disease, she suffers 1d3 points of Constitution damage and her skin develops painful, bloody lesions. The victim is continuously, uncomfortably hot, but she gains resistance to cold 2 as an extraordinary special quality. If the victim already has resistance to cold, it stacks with the virus's effects. Each additional failed saving throw deals another 1d3 points of Constitution damage and increases the victim's resistance to cold by a cumulative +1. When the victim's Constitution drops to half or less of its normal score, the victim becomes painfully hot to the touch and gains vulnerability to fire.

Phase two continues until the victim's Constitution reaches 0.

**Phase Three:** When the victim's Constitution reaches 0, she spontaneously combusts, dealing 3d6 points of fire damage to everything within a 10-foot-radius burst and igniting any combustible materials. A Reflex DC 15 is allowed for half damage. The victim is automatically killed and reduced to fine ash.

**Recovery:** If cured before combusting, the victim regains 1 point of Constitution and loses 2 points of cold resistance per day until all scores return to normal. When her Constitution is again at least half of its normal total, she loses her vulnerability to

fire (assuming she doesn't normally have that quality).

## Crystal Virus

*"Trust me my good doctor, music is what these patients need. And you say that they are crystalizing? The ever-righteous Lord Esben turning to glass? Tend to your other wards. Setting bodies arringing, striking the right note, liberating shackled spirits, 'tis bard's work."*

—Baron Evensong, "The Shattering,"  
Murders by Music

A crystal virus spreads more slowly than other Phagian viruses, but its effects are just as monstrous. Victims of this disease slowly crystallize, suffering through a slow death as their lungs lose the ability to take in air and their blood hardens in their veins.

**Infection (Ex)** Contact or ingested. The crystalline remains of a slain host are highly virulent. Curiously, the crystals are safe to handle so long as they remain completely dry. However, exposure to even the smallest drop of water—including sweat—dissolves the crystals into a highly infectious fluid. (If drenched and then allowed to dry, a crystallized victim is reduced to a sandy heap.) Assassins have been known to slip this water-soluble powder into their victims' drinks.

**Incubation Period:** 48 hours.

**Crystalization (Su)** A crystal virus slowly worms its way through its host's body, forming complex crystalline threads that gradually bind the body's cells together.

**Phase One:** The victim suffers from aching joints, fever, and patches of numb or tingling skin. None of these ailments inflict actual penalties, however.

**Phase Two:** When the victim fails her first saving throw against the disease, her soft tissues begin to crystallize, resulting in

sharp pains whenever she moves. For each failed saving throw, the victim suffers 1d4 points of Dexterity damage. However, as her eyes crystallize into intricate lenses, each failed saving throw also grants a +1 competence bonus on Search checks and Spot checks. Starting when the victim's Dexterity drops to below half of its normal total (round down), her eyes function as *lenses of detection* and she gains vulnerability to sonic energy.

Phase two continues until the victim's Dexterity reaches 0.

**Phase Three:** When the victim's Dexterity reaches 0, her body completely crystallizes, killing her. Within hours of the victim's death, the resulting crystalline structure crumbles into fine red, highly virulent sand.

**Recovery:** After being cured, the victim regains 1 point of Dexterity per day until it returns to normal. When her Dexterity is again at least half of its normal total, her eyes cease acting as *lenses of detection* and she loses her vulnerability to sonic energy (assuming she does not normally have this quality). The competence bonus to Search checks and Spot checks is reduced by 1 point per day until it fades completely.

## Petrification Virus

*"Where the Nightmare Lands had once stood we found a roiling wall of mist and something hardly less strange, a forlorn statue of a man dressed in rotting cloth. The figure was lifelike in its every detail and was akin in appearance to the tattooed men said to wander that accursed realm. Our amazement only grew when a raven tore itself free from the stone and spoke. It said that disease had petrified its companion. It insisted that he still lived, offering disturbing evidence to that effect. And it beseeched us*

*to save him. That, however, proved to be beyond our power."*

—Juno Luteum, Darkonian adventurer

A petrification virus slowly calcifies its victims into a hard, stonelike material. Disturbingly, survivors of this disease have claimed that they remained conscious for months after their bodies had completely petrified.

Casting *stone to flesh* on a victim infected with a petrification virus removes all of the virus's effects (returning the victim's Dexterity, natural armor, and weight to normal), but this is a temporary remedy, not a cure.

**Infection (Ex)** Contact or inhaled. The statue created from a dead victim's body is composed of incredibly virulent stone, which remains infectious even if ground into dust (which is equally infectious if touched or inhaled). At least one madman is known to have used this infectious stone to create a deadly sculpture garden of his enemies.

**Incubation Period:** 1d6 minutes.

**Petrification (Su)** A petrification virus slowly spreads through its host's body, turning all the tissues it contacts into stone.

**Phase One:** The virus first makes its presence known at the very point of infection. Within minutes of infection, whatever spot of skin touched the dormant viruses becomes noticeably stiff. Within half an hour, that spot (usually about the size of a coin) completely hardens and discolors into a veiny gray similar to marble.

**Phase Two:** When the victim fails her first saving throw to resist the disease, the hardened tissue begins to spread across her body. For each failed saving throw, the victim suffers 1d3 points of Dexterity damage, but her natural armor bonus improves by +1. (If a victim has no natural armor bonus, consider it to be +0.) In addition, the victim's increasing density

causes her weight to increase by +10% for each failed saving throw.

Phase two continues until the victim reaches 0 Dexterity.

**Phase Three:** When the victim reaches 0 Dexterity, she turns to virulent stone as if the subject of a flesh to stone spell. Although completely petrified, she is still alive. She cannot take any actions, sense her surroundings, or even feel pain, but she can still think. While so petrified, the victim takes 1 point of Constitution drain per month (30 days). When the victim's Constitution reaches 0, she dies.

**Recovery:** If a victim is cured during phase two, then for every 24 hours that pass, she regains 1 point of Dexterity, her natural armor bonus drops by 1 point, and her weight lowers by 10% until all scores return to normal.

If a victim is cured during phase three, then she regains 1 point of Constitution each day until it returns to normal. Once her Constitution is restored, she reenters phase two and recovers as detailed above. The character can move and take actions again as soon as she has at least 1 point of Dexterity.

Casting stone to flesh on a cured victim rids her body of the virus's lingering effects, instantly returning her to normal.

## Phobia Virus

*Something is very wrong in her dreaming. It is not a presence, not a consciousness, not so much as a pale morph. It is an imperceptible weight, a silent gnawing, nothing so articulate as the hunger of a wolf; rather an unconscious—better perhaps, a proto-conscious—lust and menace. And what is more, I am beginning to know it well, for it now plagues my dreams.*

—Note of Doctor Gregorian Illhousen

The phobia virus is the only one of Phagius' creations that is not necessarily lethal to its host. This disease attacks its host's mind, causing the victim to develop crippling fears. Although the virus cannot kill by itself, the insane fear it breeds in its host may lead to desperate behaviors that are all too fatal.

Spells such as remove fear and similar morale boosts can offer temporary relief from this virus, but the symptoms return the moment the relief ends.

**Infection (Ex)** Contact. The corpse of any creature that dies while infected with a phobia virus remains highly virulent.

**Incubation Period:** 12 hours.

**Phobic Psychosis (Su)** A phobic virus rewrites its host's mind, eventually driving the victim mad with fear.

**Phase One** The victim develops a slight fever and feels generally nervous, but otherwise suffers no ill effect.

**Phase Two** The first time a victim goes to sleep after failing her first saving throw against this disease, she suffers vague yet unsettling nightmares. These fearful dreams interfere with her rest, so she cannot heal naturally and she suffers a –1 penalty to Strength and Dexterity. After two failed saving throws, the nightmares' intensity increases and the victim is fatigued. After three failed saving throws, the character can barely close her eyes and is exhausted. (These fatigue penalties do not stack.)

Phase two continues until the victim is exhausted by her nightmares and fails a subsequent saving throw against the virus.

**Phase Three** When the victim fails her fourth saving throw, her nightmares coalesce into a crippling phobia. She no longer suffers from nightmares, so she can again gain the benefits of rest. However, she now develops a crippling phobia of some common aspect of her surroundings—

something she typically encounters every day. Whenever the victim encounters the subject of her phobia, she must make a Fear save. The DC is 10 +1 per failed saving throw made to resist the virus –1 per successful saving throw made to resist the virus. There is no effective maximum to this DC.

**Recovery** After being cured, the phobia's Fear save DC is reduced by 1 each day. When the DC reaches 0, the phobia fades away entirely. Any lingering fear, horror, or madness effects caused by failed Fear saves exist independent of the virus and must be cured by the standard means.

## Psionic Virus

*"Swiftsinger afforded us a most dangerous means of improving our chances against his erstwhile master. There was a sickness of fell Invidian creation that would open to us unimagined potentialities of the mind. And so behind our eyes an ever growing power was kindled. It came at the price of blinding headaches, which lengthened like the shadows of the dying day. We faced, thus armed, and undid, by the skin of a worg's fang, the mentalist lich, an old flourish of mine being the difference. Arrangements had been made for us to be cured, but the disease had a lover's hold over me and I had no wish to forsake the strength swelling within my head. And so my mind exploded. An experience, I assure you, not to be repeated."*

—Harkon Lukas, in pleasant conversation before dinner

A psionic virus continually restructures the synapses of its host's brain, opening new pathways in the victim's mind. In the short term, a psionic virus can be empowering, since it causes the victim to develop psionic gifts, even if she never possessed them before. However, the

infection inevitably continues until even the strongest mind can no longer withstand the psionic pressure building within it.

**Infection (Ex)** Contact or mental contact. A psionic virus can spread through either of two methods. First, the corpse of any creature infected with the virus remains highly virulent. Any creature that touches the corpse is exposed to the virus. Secondly, any creature that makes mental contact with an infected victim (such as with a *detect thoughts* spell, an empathic link, dream contact, or similar spells, effects, or psionic powers) is likewise exposed. For the purpose of exposure, it does not matter whether the infected host is being contacted or is making contact.

**Incubation Period:** 24 hours.

**Psionic Overload (Su)** A psionic virus continually fills its host with psionic energy until, like a bladder filled with too much water, the host's mind finally bursts.

Phase One: The victim begins to feel strangely disoriented, which develops as a buzzing in her ears and a sense of light-headedness. These ailments are not severe enough to impose penalties, however.

Phase Two: The victim slowly gains psionic abilities. After the victim fails her first saving throw against the disease, she gains the power points and manifesting ability of a 1st-level psion, including the ability to take psionic feats. If the victim already has levels in psion, they stack with the effects of the disease. For example, after failing one saving throw against the effects of a psionic virus, a 4th-level psion would have the manifesting ability of a 5th-level psion. Each subsequent failed saving throw against the disease increases the victim's equivalent manifesting ability by one level.

However, whenever the victim fails a saving throw to resist the disease, she also is also struck by a crippling headache that

lasts for a number of hours equal to the total number of failed saves. The victim is nauseated while the headache is in effect. When the headache ends, the victim must make a Madness save with a DC of 10 + number of effective psion levels.

For example, when a victim fails her third Fortitude saving throw against a psionic virus, she gains (in total) the power points and manifesting ability of a third-level psion. She also suffers from a nauseating headache that lasts three hours, and must make a DC 13 Madness save at the headache's conclusion.

Phase two continues until failed Madness saves drive any of the victim's mental ability scores to 0. Regardless of how long the disease progresses, this virus can grant only a total number of 20 levels of psion, including those that the victim may already possess.

**Phase Three:** When any mental ability score reaches 0 due to the effects of a failed Madness save, the victim's brain explodes, instantly killing the creature. If the victim has multiple heads, they all explode.

When a victim's head explodes, it sprays virulent blood and brain matter in a 10-foot-radius burst. All creatures within this area must make a DC 15 Reflex save or be exposed to the dormant virus.

**Recovery:** After being cured, a victim loses 1 level of psion every 24 hours until all virus-granted psion levels are lost. She continues to suffer a headache each day, but each subsequent headache lasts 1 fewer hour until they stop completely. These headaches still cause nausea, but they no longer provoke Madness saves. Madness effects gained from failed Madness saves exist independent of the virus and must be cured by the standard means.

## Shadow Virus

I could not bring myself to share *Drakov's enthusiasm*. *Darkon, even if the Rex was gone, was not a fruit ripe for the picking. As ever, the conflict began well enough but soon took the grimmest of turns. The sun that we fought under was blotted out as a storm gathered at the enemy's back. And at its head, reaching far into the sky, floating towards us upon the wind, was a shadowy horror the likes of which none of us had ever seen... or even imagined in our most twisted dreams. I learned subsequently from a Lamordian doctor that it was, or at least had the shape of, a sea monster, supposedly of sailors' invention, whispered to be able to drag whole ships down to their doom. He named it a kraken. Our ranks did not break before it, though it might have been better that they had. The thing bore down upon me. Its presence drove my charger mad. Then it struck with one of its immense, intangible tentacles. The chill of death pierced my heart and my armour was as chains hung about a drowning man. I crashed to the ground, unable to lift myself, even as the terrible spectacle unfolded above me. My lieutenants were similarly laid low. The storm was then upon us, mercifully banishing the abomination from sight, but the rain nearly drowning me and the winds sweeping away my army. A lieutenant, himself badly weakened, found me and dragged me away. But he now lies dead beside me, by his own hand, and I will likewise join him. For although our strength returned, we soon realised that our shadows were dissolving. And this was followed implacably by our very flesh.*

—From the last will and testament of  
General Demietri Kreig

Perhaps the strangest of all of Phagius' diseases, this virus exists partly in the

Tenebral Curtain. The infection begins by destroying the host's shadow, then converts the host's body into yet more shadowstuff. If the virus is left unchecked, the victim becomes an undead shadow herself.

Creatures that cannot cast a shadow (such as vampires and entities native to the Plane of Shadow) are immune to this virus.

**Infection (Ex)** Incorporeal contact. Undead shadows created by this virus are highly virulent. Whenever the shadow touches a living creature (such as when using its incorporeal touch attack), that creature is also exposed to the virus. Fortunately, like other incorporeal undead, an infectious shadow that is destroyed leaves nothing behind, eliminating the threat of the virus it carried.

**Incubation Period:** 24 hours.

**Umbral Rot (Su)** A shadow virus dissolves the delicate planar balance inherent to all creatures capable of casting a shadow. The umbral rot first destroys its host's shadow, then converts the host's tissue into shadowstuff in an attempt to compensate.

**Phase One:** The victim feels a slight tingling in her scalp, and develops a slight fever. These symptoms are far too mild to cause any real problems, however.

**Phase Two:** After a victim fails her first Fortitude save to resist the disease, her shadow seems to fray around the edges. After two failed saving throws, the victim's shadow appears distinctly faded and tattered. After three failed saving throws, the victim's shadow fades away entirely.

**Phase Three:** When a victim fails four saving throws to resist this virus (in other words, one failure after her shadow disappears), she suffers 1d4 points of Strength damage. In addition, her body coloration noticeably darkens, and although she does not visibly seem to grow thinner, her body weight drops by 10%. Each

subsequent failed saving throw carries the same effects. When the victim's Strength reaches 0, the victim dies and becomes a virulent, undead shadow. This shadow has none of the memories or abilities of the original creature.

**Recovery:** After being cured, a victim regains 10% of her body weight and 1 point of Strength every 24 hours until she returns to normal.

## Phagian Virus Lore

Characters with ranks in Knowledge (arcana) or Heal can learn more about Phagian viruses; if using the Heal skill, add +5 to the DC. When a character makes a successful skill check, the following lore is revealed, including the information from lower DCs.

**DC 15:** This strange ailment is the result of a Phagian virus: a supernatural disease that possesses a will of its own. Without magical assistance, the victim will eventually succumb.

**DC 20:** Phagian virus infection generally passes through three phases. The first manifests disturbing, but not particularly harmful symptoms. The second phase manifests painful and damaging effects, sometimes with bizarre or even supernatural side effects. The third and final phase is invariably fatal. This result reveals the basic symptoms of each phase.

**DC 25:** This result reveals the means by which the virus spreads and the specific recovery methods.

**DC 30:** The Vistani have incorporated cures for Phagian viruses into their healing lore, and may be able to provide infected victims with improved odds of a full recovery.

# Who's Doomed

## Althea

(Darklord of Demise)

**Medusa CR7**

LE Medium Monstrous Humanoid

**Init** +2; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft, Spot +8

### DEFENCE

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**AC** 15, touch 12, flat-footed 13

**hp** 39 (6d8+12)

**Fort** +6, **Ref** +10, **Will** +9

### OFFENSE

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**Speed** 30 ft. (6 squares)

**Melee** Masterwork Short Sword +9/+4 (1d6/19-20) and snakes +3 (1d4 plus poison)

**Ranged** Shortbow +8/+3 (1d6/×3 plus poison) or Venom spit 10' +8 (poison, blindness on critical)

**SA** Petrifying gaze, poison, siren song

**Str** 10, **Dex** 15, **Con** 12, **Int** 12, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 15

**Base Atk** +6; **Grp** +6

**Feats** Weapon Finesse, Point Blank Shot, Precise shot

**Skills** Bluff +9, Diplomacy +4, Disguise +9 (+11 acting), Intimidate +4, Move Silently +13, Spot +8

**Languages** Lamordian w/accent, Unknown language of her homeworld

**Possessions** Fang (Masterwork Short Sword), cloak of resistance +3, efficient quiver, boots of elvenkind

**Petrifying Gaze (Su)** Turn to stone permanently, 30 feet, Fortitude DC 17 negates. The save DC is Charisma-based, and includes a +2 profane bonus granted by the Dark Powers.

**Poison (Ex)** Injury, Fortitude DC 16, initial damage 1d6 Str, secondary damage 2d6 Str. The save DC is Constitution-based, and includes a +2 profane bonus granted by the Dark Powers.

**Siren Song (Su)** Sonic, Mind-affecting compulsion to enter the maze, audible throughout the domain, Will DC 17 negates. The save DC is Charisma-based, and includes a +2 profane bonus granted by the Dark Powers.

**Venom Spit (Ex)** 10' Range, poison. On a critical hit, the target is permanently blinded. A successful Fortitude save against the poison reduces this to dazzled for 1d4 rounds.

## Background

Althea was born in a world where truly inhuman monsters are much more common than in the Lands of the Mists. While she is likely the only one of her kind in this world, medusae like Althea are common enough in her home world that they have formed their own loose society, with a culture and morality distinct from those of humanoids. It is for breaking the deepest taboos of her own culture that Althea finds herself as the darklord of the Isle of Demise.

Medusa culture on Althea's world revolves around the unique reproductive cycle of the species. Medusae who manage not to turn their prospective mates to stone produce medusa eggs by mating with human males. However, upon mating with a maedar, the extremely rare male form of the medusa species, a medusa usually births a human infant, who sadly petrifies at the first sight of its monstrous mother. Only in a tiny percentage of cases does a maedar/medusa pairing produce a living child: a baby maedar. Despite this seemingly tragic scenario, maedar are revered in medusoid society, and a maedar

mate is the aspiration of every young medusa. Once bonded, the two will be fiercely loyal and monogamous, and since humans are regarded as little more than breeding stock (and sometimes merely meat), the tiny chance at the honor of bearing a maedar son far outweighs the minor disappointment of the many human births (and deaths) that precede it. At least, for most medusae...

Althea was different from the rest of her clan. From her youth, she'd constantly questioned her society's obsession with maedar. When she voiced her concerns, she was rebuffed by the clan elders. She protested that the medusae didn't need the maedar, that the maedar simply used medusae to perpetuate their own species exactly as medusae used humans to perpetuate theirs. But she was told she would understand when she was older, that a maedar mate was the greatest blessing a medusa could hope to achieve. The maedar touted that their mates never went hungry, that they smashed their medusa's petrified victims and transmuted them into flesh. But Althea, like many of her sistren, was an accomplished archer, and adept at fighting with her venomous snake hair, even while veiled, so she had never lacked for unpetrified food. She took comfort in the fact that with so few maedar to go around, her chances of ever having to wed one would be slim, but the arrangement still seemed unfair to her.

Her comfort was short-lived, however, for when she came of age, a maedar named Stelios took a liking to her and petitioned for her hand. Despite her misgivings, she bowed to cultural pressure and pair-bonded with him. Refusing a maedar's request was simply inconceivable among medusae. While her sisters looked on with jealousy, her heart held only dread, but as she grew to know her new mate, a glimmer of hope

returned, for Stelios was seemingly as unlike other maedar as Althea was unlike other medusae. While most maedar honed their bodies into weapons, Stelios had honed his mind, in the study of magic, specifically illusion. Althea began to see something of a kindred spirit in this rare intellectual maedar, an iconoclast like herself. Whether she had finally succumbed to the mysterious maedar allure that held sway over her species, or whether the two truly fell in love, one thing is certain: for a time, the two were happy... until their first child was born human.

Althea had been looking forward to becoming a mother her whole life, and while knowing the odds, she'd convinced herself that they'd have a maedar son immediately, and the truth was devastating. She wailed in grief, cradling her petrified child, while Stelios comforted her. She begged him to use his stone to flesh power to revive the boy, but he refused. To do so would be a mockery of the medusoid way of life, he claimed, but they would try again, and again, he promised her, for as long as it took to have a living son. And so they did, though each human infant that emerged from her eggs broke Althea's heart, driving her further and further into madness. Unlike his mate, Stelios felt no grief, only minor disappointment, at their deaths. After all, they were only human. Despite his love of illusions, he was at heart a realist, and expected a long path toward a true son—a maedar son. These by-products were just part of the process.

But Althea became increasingly distraught, as he continued to rebuff her pleas to revive the petrified "stillbirths." She had never had any love of humans before either, but she began to resent Stelios for his callous dismissal of their own flesh and blood. At last, she could bear it no longer, and before her next egg hatched, she

began to veil herself constantly. When a human baby emerged once again, she made every effort not to reveal her face to her. There was no reason she couldn't keep this one and raise her indefinitely, so long as she remained covered, and so long as they stayed secluded from the rest of the clan. She stole away from her homeland and settled in the lava tubes beneath a dormant volcano. Overlooking the slight of her leaving without telling him, Stelios tracked Althea to her new home and joined

her there. He humored her for a time, showing the girl no affection, but making no demands for Althea to cease her foolishness. For a few months, she was happy again, but fate would not allow such circumvention, and when the child's playful flailing unexpectedly ripped her mother's veil from her monstrous visage, once again, Althea was childless.

Stelios hoped that the futility of her efforts would become clear, and that they could rejoin their clan. But Althea was

### **Dread Possibility: Omega**

The party who attacked Althea included a cleric who was able to heal the child and restore his sight, though he was forever marked with a horizontal scar across his face, resembling a blindfold. The aging cleric, who had already raised three children of her own to adulthood, took pity on the baby and adopted him, naming him Omega, as she was certain this son would be her last. Living among an adopted "family" of adventurers, Omega aspired to the life of a hero, and particularly the study of magic. Having heard from a young age how he'd been saved from marauding monsters as a babe, he was drawn to the school of abjuration. He is known to have created several unique protective spells.

Aside from his facial scar, Omega (Male Human Sor1/Abj13) has one other distinguishing feature: he lacks a navel, due to his birth from an egg rather than a womb. No cleric or sage has ever been able to explain this oddity, since Omega is the first human born of a medusa to survive to adulthood, and he has spent much of his life searching for his origins. His supernatural heritage has also left the mark of sorcery in his blood. While most of his magical talents were developed through study, he has always had the innate sorcerous ability to cast color spray and cause fear without the aid a spellbook. These powers manifest as emanations from his constantly bloodshot eyes.

After a lifetime of searching for his true parents, a gypsy fortune teller told him that the answer could be found in the place where he was saved by his adopted mother and her friends. Seeking the volcano of which she had told him, he found only a mist-filled crater. When he stepped down into the crater, he emerged from the Mists on Demise. While his fate remains unknown, his spellbooks were either lost or stolen and found their way to the mainland, and are now in the possession of the Valachani gnome, Perseyus Lathenna, who presumes their owner to be long dead.

devastated at the loss, and outraged at her mate, who could have revived the child with a simple touch, if he could just find the courage to defy their clan's pointless rules. Althea's madness grew, and with her next human son, she took even more drastic measures. She once again veiled herself tightly as the egg hatched, and made sure that her claws and not her face were the boy's first (and only) sight of his mother, as she blinded him. But the child's screams caught the attention of a passing group of heavily armed adventurers. They stormed the cave and, in an attempt to save the child, whom they assumed had been abducted by monsters, the adventurers attacked Althea and Stelios. Unarmed, and unable to get her over-secured veil off quickly, Althea was nearly helpless, and Stelios quickly took her by the arm, and stepped through the stone cave wall with her to escape, abandoning the child to his rescuers.

Althea was enraged that Stelios would leave their child behind, and her old hatred of all maedar returned in full force. Even when her latest grief had dulled, the rage and hatred remained. Rather than return to Stelios's bed, in defiance of ancient medusa tradition, she attempted to cuckold her maedar mate, veiling herself and seducing a human man. It took all her willpower to throw off a lifetime of ingrained cultural belief, but tradition be damned, she would have a living medusa daughter as her sisters had. But Stelios had suspected she might try this, and the "human" she found was actually Stelios in an illusory disguise. He revealed himself to her, and with gentle words soothed her anger, convincing her to try once more for a proper maedar son. Or so he thought, since she had only feigned acceptance of his truce, and that very night, as he slept, she aimed an arrow at his throat from inches away, and fired. He

awoke in excruciating pain, unable to speak the words of any of his spells, or to talk her out of her rage, or even to beg for his life. As she nocked another arrow and aimed it between his eyes, all he had time to do was reach his fingers past the edge of their sleeping mat, touch the rocky floor of their cave, and transfer his life essence into the earth. When Althea fired her second arrow, the Mists rose around the volcano and drew it into the Sea of Sorrows as the Isle of Demise.

Down through the stone Stelios drifted until his soul was drawn to a large amethyst embedded beneath the mountain. Drawn into the crystal, he lived on as a creature known as a glyptar. Exerting his control over the stone of the mountain, he fashioned a labyrinth out of smooth, white rock and pulled their cave, along with Althea and all their belongings, up from beneath the ground, letting it burst into the center of the maze like a bubble rising from the sea. As the walls rose up from the earth, he infused them with his illusions as well, creating a labyrinth full of seemingly impossible structures.

For her part, Althea saw the maze as a test, set forth by the medusoid deity, Skoraeus the living rock, and the gods of fate. Never understanding that Stelios lived on and that her mate had entrapped her, she attempted to escape for a time, but eventually felt the urge to make herself at home. Little did either of them know that at the time she killed Stelios, Althea held within her the living child she'd always desired: a maedar egg. Their final tryst on the night she'd killed him had been a productive one. Her nesting instinct was emerging, and she restored the site of their former cave into a garden at the center of the maze, where she laid their final egg. When the baby hatched, she was ready to blind him, should he be human. But seeing

a maedar infant, she stayed her hand, and laughed at the irony of fate. She named the child Leftheris, and waited for the maternal love she'd longed for to blossom.

She soon realized that something was amiss, and rather than love, she felt only resentment for Leftheris and all he represented. His resemblance to his father was great, and looking upon him, she remembered bitterly Stelios's callousness. Try as she might, Althea was unable to love the maedar infant; he was the very thing her other offspring had suffered for not being, and she could not forgive Leftheris for that, as if he'd personally cheated her of her previous children's love just by existing. He was her child, as she'd always wanted, but he was also a maedar, the object of her hatred. The answer was simple. He would not be the first of her children to die for what he was.

As she'd done with Stelios, she took up her bow, aimed and fired at Leftheris. But Stelios's spirit now infused the labyrinth, and he had been watching, waiting to see if Leftheris would inspire Althea to repent. As the arrow took flight, the glyptar spirited his son away to safety, wrapping him in a cocoon of stone and sequestering him from his murderous mother elsewhere in the maze. And Stelios was not the only one watching. At this moment, the Dark Powers bestowed their "gift" upon Althea, making her darklord of Demise.

## Current Sketch

Like her small speck of a domain, Althea has become a pitiful creature, forever isolated and lonely. Her ordeals and subsequent isolation have left her with the mental scars of madness. Her mind races nearly constantly with intrusive thoughts. The subject matter shifts, from the determination to pass whatever test the gods of fate have placed upon her, to

reliving the deaths of her children, to the lament of her persecution at the hands of the maedar and medusae of her homeland, and above all, the intense urge to mate and bear a living child. At times the mating urge drifts into thoughts of Stelios: the feel of his hands, the coolness of his skin, and for a few moments, she recalls the love she once felt, but these thoughts inevitably turn to anger at his betrayal of her. These obsessions are so strong that she will do nearly anything to drown them out, and she tries to occupy herself with meaningless tasks, such as inspecting and sharpening her weapons, arranging and cleaning the furnishings of her garden, or futilely counting the number of paces down each corridor of her constantly changing lair.

Unable to leave the maze, she has made it her home, attempting escape only rarely. Despite Stelios's illusions and constant reconfiguration of the labyrinth, Althea has learned to navigate the winding corridors with relative ease. A boon from the Dark Powers, this ability allows her to track intruders in her abode, and to find her way to and from the garden at the center, as well as several other pockets of stability within the maze that Stelios either can't or won't move or destroy. With a moment of purposeful concentration, she can see through any illusion that Stelios spins. But when not actively trying to do so, she sees them as others do, and occasionally, when distracted or careless, she finds herself deceived by his tricks for some time before noticing. This power does not extend to finding a way out of the maze, nor can she use it to find Leftheris. And while she can get nearly wherever she wants to go, she takes acute notice of the slightest change to the ever-shifting paths, and each alteration to the maze provokes in her an intense anxiety and fear of being forever lost, unable to find her few stable sanctuaries.

## Dread Possibility - Balm of Blood

If Althea is ever killed, her blood would take on a medicinal property. When properly prepared and applied, an ointment made of her blood can be used to de-petrify her victims. Blood taken from her while she still lives does not have this power, and the power is lost one week after her death. With a successful DC20 heal check to create the ointment, it acts as a stone to flesh spell. (Under 4th Edition rules, this is a property of all freshly slain medusa blood, but under 3rd Edition rules, it is unique to Althea.)

Not wishing Althea to die before she repents, Stelios uses his stone to flesh ability to provide food for her. Though she doesn't know the source of the food she finds this way, she has an innate distrust of it, and prefers to find her own food when possible, but resorts to the mysterious meat when hungry. She often eats fruit that falls from trees overhanging the open areas of the maze. And though wildlife on Demise is exceptionally rare, she has been known to veil herself and hunt any creatures (or explorers) that wander into the maze, aside from prospective mates.

Though Althea is forever set on mating and having a child, the Dark Powers have cursed her never to be a mother again. She is not physically barren, but every time she tries to reproduce, some seemingly random twist of fate ruins her plan. Once, a bird snatched the blindfold off her mate at the wrong moment. Another time, she found a blind man in the maze, who even seemed to enjoy her company, but when she found he

was an escaped eunuch from Al Kathos, and therefore useless to her, she killed and feasted on him. Most recently, she successfully mated with a shipwrecked sailor out of Martira Bay, but the egg cracked before it developed, and the Darkonian tried to escape the maze, stumbled into a pit, and fell to his death. Over and over again, fate conspires to keep her childless, while giving her enough hope to keep trying.

## Combat

When Althea sings to her lost children, her siren song ability projects the sound throughout the domain. Living creatures who hear the song and fall under the compulsion are drawn into the maze. Once inside, the song can still be heard but has no further magical effect.

Her tactics vary, depending on her current goals. While she suffers with madness, she remains a crafty and intelligent foe, aware (intensely, acutely aware) of her surroundings, situation, and needs. She is in fact even aware of her own madness; she knows when her behavior is irrational, and is able to suppress her compulsions long enough to fight strategically. If she is hunting for food, she will snipe and run with her short bow, using arrows coated with her own venom. Once the prey is weakened, she will use her mastery of the maze to approach from behind and finish it off with her sword and bite before it can turn and catch her gaze. Her short sword, Fang, is ornate and valuable, though non-magical, taken from some long-forgotten foe on her homeworld.

She will employ her petrifying gaze when defending herself, or against unsuitable mates. When encountering a potential mate, she will first kill his companions by whatever means necessary. Then, once she has isolated him, she may

veil herself to approach him, or if necessary, have her snakes spit their poison in his eyes, as she did with Johann Wehner.

Any foe that escapes the maze has effectively escaped Althea, since she cannot leave the labyrinth, and has no ability to close the borders of her domain. Her siren song might bring an escapee back into the maze, but she doesn't know about the magical effect of her song, and would only sing to her children when the mood takes her, not deliberately to retrieve lost prey or attract new ones.

## Lair: The Labyrinth

Althea's Labyrinth is as much illusion as maze. Stelios is in complete control of the structure and the illusions within, and can see and hear anything that happens inside. The illusions create impossible seeming structures to trap the unwary and lead them further into the Labyrinth. From the outside, the maze appears to be a one-story, solid structure with one entrance, the runed archway. Stairs and ramps lead downward to lower levels, but it is unknown how deep they go, or if there are any exits into the cave network that honeycombs Demise. As described in the "No Exit" Sidebar on page 16, some chambers of the maze, including the central one that is Althea's living quarters, have open ceilings, only visible from below. Stelios constantly alters the configuration of the maze by slowly shaping the stone, but rapid changes are rare.

The positions of some select chambers never change, though the routes to and from them shift continually. One of these sanctuaries of stability is Althea's "nursery," where the petrified remains of her human children are displayed in neat rows on a marble shelf. Althea has managed to procure a rocking chair and a bassinet in a bargain with the fey of Molten Hollow and she leaves them in this room. On most

days, she will spend some time in this room, cradling one of the children as she rocks and sings to it, or simply wistfully watching the statue "sleep" in the bassinet. (As she croons to the stone children, she unwittingly draws living creatures toward the maze with her siren song ability.) She is not delusional, and knows her children are dead, but she believes but she believes that wherever their souls have gone, somehow they know that she is caring for them as she couldn't in life. Though seeing her children in this state does sadden her, she also feels soothed by their presence, and while she cares for their stone corpses, her raging thoughts are quieted for a time. At a bare minimum, she visits daily to dust the tiny statues and make sure they are properly arranged, in birth order. If one were ever out of place, she would be intensely upset, and be compelled to correct the mistake immediately. As often as she can, she leaves the petrified children with little gifts—flowers, colorful pebbles, seashells, tiny petrified animals or insects and the like. Searching the maze for presents they might "enjoy" takes up much of her time each day. When old gifts are replaced by new ones, she stashes them away in other stable pockets of the labyrinth, which she thinks of as storerooms. In the storerooms, thousands of wilted blossoms and stone trinkets are carefully arrayed on the floor and shelves, sorted by type, size, and color. Althea keeps the treasure of her victims in another stable chamber, which she calls her vault, though it is protected from theft only by the difficulty in finding it.

## Dread Possibility - The Stone Sisters

Among the unfortunate humans that Althea has left petrified and scattered around her lair over the years, there are also a handful of medusa statues in the dark corners of the labyrinth. These horrifying figures, with expressions of outrage, condemnation, and betrayal, appear where Althea least expects to glare vindictively at her. Visitors in the maze are often startled by these statues, silhouetted in the shadows, thinking momentarily that they've stumbled on Althea, then are relieved to discover that they remain flesh and blood, while the medusa is only stone herself. These mysterious figures exist despite the fact that medusae are typically immune to the gaze of others of their species. It remains unknown whether these are real medusae of Althea's past that have been petrified in some way as penance for their treatment of her, or images of the wished for medusa daughter she'd never birthed grown to adulthood, or simply the product of Stelios or The Dark Powers taunting her.

## Stelios

Male Glyptar III11 LE

(Statistics for glyptars appear in *Dragon Magazine*#355. If this source is unavailable, use a Small Animated Object with DR 8/adamantium and the SLA of *animate objects* at will instead. )

In life, Stelios was a rare maedar illusionist, taking more joy in learning the secrets of magic than the tactics of a

warrior or ranger. But he never saw himself as a rebel as Althea did. Perhaps he had different interests than most of his brethren, but he still believed in their ways. Many other medusae had vied for his affections, but once his heart had settled on Althea, it was set in stone. He admired her spirit, and assumed that her anti-social ideas would become tempered with marriage. Having manipulated the fabric of reality itself, he was certain he could sculpt a proper wife out of a fiery medusa. When her obsession over their human children began, he was troubled, but remained confident that with his guidance, their love would overcome these setbacks and that once she bore a maedar child, all would be well. Even when he picked up on the signs that she meant to break her vows and mate with a human, he was still certain that he could win her back with some honeyed words, so her final betrayal took him by complete surprise.

Provided he has enough warning of his own impending death, any maedar can transfer his life-force into nearby stone, where it seeks out a crystal and resides there, becoming a glyptar. Stelios was lucky that Althea's first arrow didn't kill him immediately, and his spirit was able to steal through the stone one last time, coming to rest in a vibrant purple amethyst deep within the foundation of their volcanic home; he now lives on as a glyptar. Typically, a glyptar remains dormant and trapped until it is unearthed. Once set into inorganic items such as weapons and statues, glyptars can exert control over that item. However, due in part to the volcanic activity within Demise, and in part to the influence of the Dark Powers, Stelios found that he can use his control over stone more easily than most glyptars. The unstable magma within the island became his "body," and he had no need to be dug up to

animate the earth of the caldera. Viewing this as a power granted by Skoraeus to enact justice on Althea, he reached out his consciousness to build a maze, entrapping his erstwhile mate. While he refused to stoop to her level and kill her, he would see to it that Althea would never poison her clan's ways again, and hoped someday she would see the profanity of her acts.

When Leftheris was born, Stelios grew hopeful that the boy would be a catalyst for Althea's redemption and through the walls of her prison, he watched carefully. When Althea proved this hope false and tried to murder the baby maedar, Stelios leapt into action and swept the boy to safety. In a pocket deep within the maze, Stelios mustered all his power to form a humanoid body for himself out of stone. This golem was shaped in Stelios's living image, though it could be easily mistaken for a muscular human male. In its right eye sat the amethyst that housed his spirit. He used this form to raise and care for the child, while always keeping some part of the statue in contact with the floor or wall of the maze, lest he lose control over it and accidentally free Althea. Though glyptars cannot talk, he was able to use his sonic illusions to simulate speaking, so that Leftheris would learn to communicate.

Since Demise was transported from Althea's world to the Demiplane of Dread, it has been deprived of its lava supply and the volcano is slowly cooling and going extinct. While it will be many more years before the island is fully stable, Stelios has begun to feel the effects of this shift and it has become increasingly difficult for him to manipulate the stone at a distance. Fearing that he might lose control over the maze and let Althea free, he retreated from his stone golem form when Leftheris was nearing adolescence. The crystal that is his glyptar body sank into the ground beneath

the labyrinth, and his stone body became one of the many statues scattered within. (Thus far, Althea has never stumbled upon this graven image of Stelios. If she ever did, she would likely react violently.)

As the earth with which he has merged has solidified, so too has his mind. While the first symptom was his difficulty in controlling the stone, he has begun to lose control over his illusions as well. At times, they will sputter out temporarily or flail randomly in a madness-inducing display. A few of his illusions have even taken on a life of their own as Living Spells. Focusing most of his efforts on maintaining the maze, since the day he vacated the golem, he has only communicated with his son by engraving messages on the labyrinth walls. If a great need presented itself, he might be able to focus long enough to cast any of his old spells, speak again through sonic illusion, or even to return to his inert stone body, but as yet, this has never happened. For now, Stelios exists only as the Maze, and the distinction is beginning to blur, even to himself. The details of his life are gradually slipping away, leaving only his twin desires to protect Leftheris and to punish Althea.

If the cooling of the island continues, and the Dark Powers do not intervene, Stelios will one day become a normal glyptar, losing all influence on the maze and any ability to affect the world above unless he is unearthed. Stelios can sense this possibility, and has been preparing Leftheris for assuming the mantle of his mother's keeper, teaching him all he knows of illusion, as well as their family history, albeit from his own perspective.

## Leftheris

Male Maedar III8 LE

(Statistics for maedar appear in *Dragon Magazine*#355. If this source is unavailable, use medusa statistics instead. Replace the

ranged attacks with an adamantine slam, and all Special Attacks with a stone to flesh SLA 3/day and the Earth Elemental's earth glide ability. Maedars tend to be stronger and less charismatic than medusae. Leftheris is more intelligent and slightly less strong than the average maedar.)

Leftheris appears to be a hairless, muscular human male of approximately 25 years of age. Swirling patterns resembling tattoos cover his body and head, and he typically wears a loose robe similar to a Hazlani zarong. Growing to maturity under his father's tutelage, Leftheris has become a skilled illusionist in his own right. His father has attempted to fill him with fear and hatred of his mother, Althea, drilling him constantly with a litany of her sins. But since the day that Stelios retreated into the maze, Leftheris has seen that his father is no innocent. He now bitterly resents his abandonment by both parents, and has come to chafe at Stelios's grooming him to become Althea's gaoler. He wonders if perhaps his mother was right about the need of all maedar to control others, and is determined to leave them both to their pitiful shared existence once his father has taught him all he can of magic.

Stelios has never told Leftheris about his impending ossification, so Leftheris

doesn't understand the reasons for his neglect, nor the urgency with which his father's scrawlings on the wall constantly warn him to be ready to assume his responsibility as keeper of the maze. In turn, Leftheris has never voiced his desire to leave Demise, so Stelios allows him to roam freely and even to leave the maze, trusting him to do his duty. Leftheris has thoroughly explored the caldera, and on the few occasions that he has met outsiders or Alven, he has conversed hungrily with them, craving the personal interaction he has been denied by his parents. If he is encountered in the jungle, he may offer his services as a guide, but will use his magic to extend any excursion, more interested in the conversation along the journey than reaching any desired destination. Once he tires of his companions, he feels no qualms about killing and eating them. Raised with his father's views, he sees humans as only worth whatever benefit they can provide him, and human flesh is a staple of the maedar diet. But Leftheris is not bloodthirsty or a crazed killer. In the rare case that a human might have something more valuable to offer alive than as a meal, he would happily let the human go.

# FEY LOST

A Ravenloft Adventure

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This is a character driven story rife with potential for tragedy. Everyone in this story is driven by strong desires, some less pure than others. Some in this story are driven by a lust for power, others a desire for redemption and some are even motivated by love. While there is a chance for a happy ending, that's not how the Dark Powers weight the dice....

This adventure is designed with characters of lower level in mind, about 4th. It's easily scaled, though characters of too high a level might give players the ability to circumvent parts of the adventure with certain abilities or spells. This adventure is highly role-playing driven.

## Background

A sylvan fey has fallen in love with a boy who possesses extraordinary skills with the paint brush. However, these same skills have drawn the attention of a shadow fey, who desires to rip out the artistic part of the boy's soul. To make matters even worse, a brutish Inquisitor has come looking for collaborators to stone.

The story is presented with the NPCs first. By knowing the NPCs well, the story teller will be able to improvise and react to the choices the PCs make.

Not familiar with Tepest? Here's what you need to know.

- Tepest is a heavily forested domain. The human inhabitants live mostly in small hamlets, and are uneducated peasant types.
- The primary faith of Tepest is worship of Belenus, a benevolent sun god.
- The population lives in fear of the fey, mystical creatures of the woods.
- There is an Inquisition out to hunt fey. The members of the Inquisition are not experts on the fey and rely mostly on superstition.
- Sylvan fey are natural fey. While they can be dangerous in their own right, they are extensions of the natural world.
- Shadow fey have been contaminated by the energies of the Shadow Rift, and are more likely to be dangerous.

## A note on terminology

A major part of this scenario hinges on what Van Richten's Guide to Feythe Shadow Fey refers to as a changeling. However, this can cause some confusion. In one version of Ravenloft changelings are a player race, the daughters of hags. In popular lore, they are children switched out for fey themselves. So, this adventure borrows one of the other terms from the book instead—they will be henceforth referred to as "elf-shot."

Understanding this process is important to the scenario, so it is summarized here. First, the victim eats a bit of enchanted cake. Then a black candle is lit. While the victim is paralyzed by the magic of the

candle, the fey uses a magical sickle and cut outs the part of the soul they want, putting it into a magic bag. Then they take it back into the Shadow Rift. In the Shadow Rift, the victim basically becomes an enslaved ghost, while the body left behind is more-or-less lobotomized.

People familiar with the book will note that this summary has simplified the process. If they wish to alter the scenario to more accurately reflect the source material, it should not have any major bearing on the plot.

## Principal Characters

### Father Onghus, Cleric of Belenus and secret father

#### Appearance

Onghus is a man in his late thirties, though his past has aged him a bit faster than normal. He has a short, well-trimmed beard and a balding head. He likes to joke that looking after Cuinn did away with his hair. He is usually seen wearing a farmer's outfit and holy symbol of Belenus.

#### Background

Father Onghus was born in Tepest and had a fairly typical childhood, growing up into a devout follower of Belenus. Things turned interesting when he became an adult and took his vows of priesthood. One day, some Vistani rolled into town. The temptation of their dancing girl was too much for him to resist. A torrid, but discreet, affair followed. Onghus was devastated when the Vistana girl revealed she was pregnant. A greater blow came when her father forbade him from ever approaching his daughter again, threatening blackmail if he tried.

Onghus didn't know exactly what was going through his head when he bought the pistols. He tried telling himself that it was to protect him from the goblins and the fey in the woods, but he knew he was lying. When he went to the Vistani, they had gone, leaving only mists. He tried to find them, but had no luck. However, nine months later he found an abandoned infant crying on the steps of the church.

Onghus named the child Cuinn and has raised him as a ward of the church. He has revealed to no one his affair with the Vistana or that Cuinn is his child. Onghus loves Cuinn, and has been a father to in him in all but name.

#### Current Sketch

Father Onghus is quite popular in the village, owing to his good charm and devout nature. He works tirelessly to help the village both in spiritual and practical matters. Some people feel he spoils Cuinn a little, but the boy is popular as well, so few hold it against him.

Onghus is attempting to make a book to prove the legitimacy of the new Tepestani language to outsiders, which is how he discovered Cuinn's talents as an illustrator. He has become entranced with Cuinn's skills as an illuminator and spends a great deal of money to keep him supplied in materials. While he doesn't spend more than he has, he saves very little for himself.

He fears the intervention of the Inquisition. He clearly remembers the time they burned an elf-shot in his village, giving him both a dislike of the Inquistors and some knowledge of the elf-shot. He fears the fey as well, and his two pistols are always loaded with cold iron.

#### Onghus's abilities

Onghus is a devout priest, but has seen little adventuring. He functions best as a low level cleric with decent scores. If

combat or disaster strikes, he focuses on trying to save lives or heal injury, not to add to the carnage. Despite owning two pistols, he is not proficient with them.

## Cuinn, the Child Prodigy

### Appearance

He is a ten year old boy. Cuinn has a great deal of irrepressible energy and he bounds around with visible excitement. His skin is slightly darker than the typical Tepestani, and his hair is brunette.

### Background

He knows he was left on a doorstep by Vistani, but does not know his father is Onghus. Onghus has been a good father to him, and Cuinn loves him dearly in return. Growing up, he dabbled in many crafts and arts, but eventually found his calling in illuminating, or drawing illustrations in holy books. Encouraged by Onghus, he applied himself and soon became highly skilled. One day, when he was out foraging for berries, he met Ellie. She was singing to her forest as she was wont to do. While at first wary of her obviously fey nature, he complimented her on her singing. She complimented his art, and a friendship had begun.

### Current Sketch

Cuinn is humble, good-natured and naïve. He likes to think people are basically good, and has yet to experience the depths of cruelty they can sink. This is why he was willing to befriend Ellie, as he simply cannot imagine her being willing to do others harm. He also lacks the worldliness to realize his feelings for Ellie might be something more than friendship. Cuinn also possesses the bravery of youth, part of the reason why he was unafraid to pursue a friendship with Ellie.

With no real basis for comparison, he believes he is a good illuminator and assumes everyone else is just flattering him when they say he is a master. While he is still a novice in the faith, he is sincere in trying to follow the dictates of Belenus.

### Cuinn's abilities

Cuinn is a non-combatant for the most part. He doesn't know how to hurt people, even if he could bring himself to do so. He's best built as a half-Vistani with levels in the expert class, focusing on art skills and some survival.

## Ellie, the Dryad

### Appearance

At first glance, Ellie can be mistaken for a child of about ten or so. Closer examination reveals some incongruities. Her hair is a rich mixture of autumn colors, like brown, yellow and orange. It flows down to her ankles, but mysteriously never gets caught in the brambles or branches of her home. Slightly pointed ears are hidden by her hair. Ellie's wide eyes are a startling green hue. Her skin is lightly tanned, in the manner of someone who spends all her time out of doors. She wears a simple brown smock, tied around the waist with a rope and bare feet.

A curious element to her is her movement. She moves easily, in an animal-like fashion, without needing to change form in anyway. She can climb like a spider or squirrel, run on all fours or even hop like a frog with ease.

### Background

Ellie's story is actually much older than she is. She is the last of a line of fey in her area. There used to be many more. However, the land of Ravenloft was not kind to her people. Mostly through machinations of a shadow fey name Arwyn, her people

drifted away and joined the Shadow Rift, some willingly, others not. Ellie does not understand the particulars, but knows to fear the shadow fey and dreads joining them in the Shadow Rift. Having spent a long time alone in the same place, Ellie is bored, curious and lonely. It is this loneliness and curiosity that drew her to Cuinn.

## Current Sketch

While Ellie is older than the eldest human in the village, she is still very much a child both in body and mindset. She is accustomed to viewing humans as enemies, but having had no actual hostile encounters with them, she is content to scare off people who get too close to her tree. She is not normally violent, but has not been truly tested in this regard.

Ellie enjoys frolicking in nature, but loneliness drove her to give Cuinn a chance to speak to her. She dearly misses intelligent people to talk to, though she is loath to admit it. This can create an apparent contradiction, where she'll insist that Cuinn is a silly little human but will grow considerably agitated at his absence.

Ellie is quite vulnerable in many ways. Having rediscovered companionship, she is fearful of losing Cuinn and will take extraordinary risks to protect him and their relationship. She possesses a mortal terror of the shadow fey and the Shadow Rift. She also naïve of the ways of humans and can be tricked or manipulated.

## Ellie's abilities

Ellie is tentatively identified as a dryad, owing to her connection to her tree and general appearance. However, she is substantially different from a typical dryad. She can travel some distance from her tree without trouble and also possesses a mélange of abilities typical dryads do not, while lacking some of their key

characteristics. Some of her abilities include the ability to communicate with animals, command plants, mystically mislead people in her forest and turn invisible (though she can be seen in reflections). She also possesses extraordinary mobility. She cannot fly and cannot teleport through trees.

It's important to remember she is not shadow fey. She does not have any issues with sunlight or holy ground. She is vulnerable to cold iron. Also if her tree dies, so does she. Finally, it is worth noting that while the night poses no limitations on her abilities, she fears it and tries to avoid operating in it.

## Bragnah, the Inquisitor bully

Loud and imposing, Bragnah demands to not only be the center of attention, but to dominate it. While she is barely five foot, she is very broad, something she will use to her advantage by shouldering others aside. Her hair is a reedy yellow pulled back tightly in a severe bun. Those out of earshot describe her watery blue eyes as beady, though they light up when prosecuting someone, which is often. She is never far from her shillelagh, an enchanted club that does enhanced damage to fey. Creatively enough, she calls it Fey Crusher. Ironically, she doesn't realize it's enchanted. It's just her favorite tool of punishment.

## Background

Bragnah was born into an abusive household, where the beatings came daily and hard. Sharing space and food with too many siblings, she took the wrong lessons from her parents, and used bullying to get what she wanted. As she grew older and turned her aggressive tendencies to those outside her family, she found that some people were willing to push back. Then she found the Inquisition.

Her ability to browbeat and intimidate others has proven quite valuable in her profession. She quickly added rhetoric to her repertoire, and then recruited an escort. She was careful to choose men more interested in causing pain than seeking justice. She has gotten many convictions in her "crusade," rooting out fey and their collaborators. Most often, she is simply turning fear and self-doubt in others into convictions.

## Current Sketch

Whatever the faults of most Inquisitors, one can allow that they at least believe in their faith and act out of a desire to protect their community. No such thing can be said of Bragnah. She is a hypocrite, barely understanding the tenants of the faith she is supposed to represent. She is a power hungry bully and sadist. She relishes exercising control over others, even to the point of torture and execution. The primary reason she travels from community to community is to find people willing to stand up to her and then crush them.

For all the terror and raw physical power she possesses, she does have some glaring weaknesses. She is, at heart, a coward and avoids confrontations that she may actually lose. The players represent such a group. She will try to hide this by pretending to be reasonable or bidding her time. She is also a hypocrite. If grilled intensively about her faith or knowledge of fey, she will reply by bellowing out hymns and treat the offender like a heretic.

## Bragnah's abilities

Bragnah is physically powerful, and has a high strength and constitution. Her shillelagh is not going to aid her much against the party, but if they gain it, it could certainly help them if they face off against Arwyn.

Whether or not she has any spellcasting ability is up to the story teller. Most of her character qualities would suggest a low Wisdom score and she does not actually believe in Belenus, so it would be in character for her to not have any spells and simply be a fighter-type. However, the Dark Powers do sometimes channel through people who corrupt their own faith. The story teller should decide which build presents the best opposition to the party.

## Arwyn, the Sith

Arwyn is a sith, a tall, thin shadow fey, associated with death. His skin is a pale white and he wears flowing black clothes. His preferred weapon is a long sword.

## Backstory

Arwyn has existed in various forms for centuries. To stave off the boredom that plagues his kind, he has taken to collecting. At first he targeted sylvan fey living on the surface, trying to induce them to become shadow fey. Eventually he tired of that, and turned to artists. He has gathered from various realms – sculptors, painters, carpenters and more. In all cases, wanting was not as great as having, and he gives away his toys in short order (a century or two).

Arwyn expected Cuinn to just be like the others, but an unusual complication cropped up. According to the Law of Arak, he cannot claim a mortal already claimed by another fey. Ellie's actions have unknowingly laid claim to Cuinn. Rather than be discouraged by this, he finds himself intrigued by the obstacle.

## Current Sketch

Arwyn's plan is simple. He thinks it's impossible for fey and humans to live in harmony. In Tepest, he may well be right. He plans to engineer events so that Ellie will either be killed or to drive her to seek his

aid, allowing him to corrupt and manipulate her. He sees the players and the Inquisition alike as tools to this end.

His attitude is a mixture of arrogance and cold indifference. He completely believes that he is vastly superior to everyone in the scenario, even fellow fey Ellie. Their wants and desires are relevant only in how they advance his goals. The same is true of their suffering.

He rarely shows emotion beyond boredom or ennui. The most egregious insults are not worth getting excited about. Even if he gains complete victory (corruption of Ellie and an elf-shot Cuinn), he simply accepts it as his due. The only thing liable to get him to react emotionally is anything that could challenge his sense of superiority. Words alone would not accomplish this. Inflicting harm on his person or foiling his schemes certainly would. Violent rage is the result of that.

### **Arwyn's abilities**

Arwyn is a sith, which is a shadow fey with a Challenge Rating of 5. Depending on the strength of the party and how well prepared they are, you can make him more challenging by including some undead bodyguards or subservient shadow fey. He is essentially a fey noble, who excels in swordplay and necromancy.

He does have weaknesses. Sunlight burns him, so he only operates at night. He can also be harmed by cold iron. He is an unholy creature so he cannot enter sacred ground and can be harmed by things like holy water. Arwyn stringently follows his word, though he is extremely reluctant to give it out.

His biggest flaw is his arrogance. He can come off as being very rude to those he is trying to manipulate. His arrogance has never led him to underestimate a mortal

before. Whether that happens in this story is up to the players.

## **Most likely chain of events**

This details a rough outline of how the adventure might go. This is not meant to railroad the players or GM. Rather it's there to help illustrate various dramatic possibilities and help with pacing. You should be alert to opportunities to adjust according to player actions. The principle NPCs have been fleshed out in detail to help you adjust on the fly. Certain key events (the Stoning, the Church, The Menhirs, Ellie's Hold) are important as they introduce key characters and help inform the players of the situation.

## **Introduction**

There are two most likely reasons the players are in the area. They may have been contacted by Onghus via letter asking them to help find the missing Cuinn. Alternatively, they are just passing through and get embroiled in the events. Also, characters who watch out for children, resent authority, or who value true love will find that this adventure ties into those motivations.

## **The Stoning**

Purpose: Learn about the Inquisition, elf-shot victims, set the tone for Tepest.

The party is travelling along a path when they get to a crossroads. A large crowd of villagers has gathered. Most are watching an odd individual. He is a local baker, named Chancery. He is drooling out of one side of his mouth, eyes gazing emptily. He keeps miming the motions of baking over and over. One foot is tied to a stake, keeping him from going anywhere. If the party stops to ask questions, they can get the following answers.

What's wrong with him? "He's elf-shot. That's when the fey take a fancy to a part of you. They take it out of you. Leave the rest behind. In this case, Chancery was a cook too good for his own good."

Why is he staked out like this?

"Inquisitor Bagnah declared he was a consort of the fey. So we've taken him out to get stoned by his family."

His family? Why do they have to stone him? "They hid him for too long. When they found him with the black candle still burning, they hoped they could catch the fey and take his soul back. No luck there. So they tried keeping him secret and comfortable. That doesn't look good in the eyes of the Inquisition. So they'll help with the stoning, so they won't be seen as collaborators."

Black candle? "Getting elf shot requires all sorts of tools. Some say things like a sickle and a bag. Others say a bit of cake. But most agree the black candle is the most important. So long as it's still burning, a person can be saved. It doesn't burn for long."

When it's time to wrap the scene up, Bagnah arrives with the family and her thug patrol. After some build up, the father throws the first stone. The mother bursts out into tears as the crowd starts hurling stones of their own. Eventually, Bagnah crushes the skull of the twitching body, finishing it. When Chancery is buried, players may notice many other such graves.

## Meet Fallborough

Purpose: Learn about Cuinn, the village, and Onghus.

Fallborough is a mostly typical Tepestani village. Its population is all-human, illiterate, and close knit. They are off the beaten path and are surrounded by forest. A brook flows through the village, providing them with their water, and keeps

the village mill moving. No village NPCs are provided here. The story teller should create them on an as-needed basis. Be sure to give them names and personalities. Some of the drama in future encounters revolves around players seeing them as people, not a faceless mob. For the most part, they are gregarious and have only nice things to say about Cuinn and Onghus.

Onghus has a modest home, a short walk from some old stone ruins. The ruins themselves are little more than stone foundations, and he uses them as an open air temple. He is very relieved to see the players. He offers them food and shelter. In addition, if the players are expecting pay, it's going to be from him. He can answer most questions players may ask about Cuinn. Other possible questions are below.

What do you need from us? "My ward, Cuinn, has gone missing. He's good at woodlore and foraging so I thought nothing of it when he went out to collect berries. He's been gone over a week now! Everyone in Fallborough chipped in, but we've had no luck. It's like he vanished!"

Do you know of any monsters in the area? "This is Tepest, my friends. Trees that walk, goblins, hags and fey all lurk about. Still, we haven't seen any of that for a good long time. Certainly, nothing prior to this gave us cause for concern."

Why contact us, and not the Inquisition? "I don't know if the fey are actually involved yet. Also, the Inquisition has a bit of a 'burn first' policy. I'd prefer to disrupt things as little as possible."

Onghus will also find a way to work the book that he and Cuinn are working into the conversation. He can't help himself, and will crow about Cuinn's skill at illustration.

## Through the Woods

Purpose: Get lost. Possible combat encounter.

While the players may well investigate the village, sooner or later they will have to go looking in the woods. Ellie is well aware of their intrusion and subtly changes the woods to ensure they can never find her. Trails twist back and forth, trees move, etc. Canny players should eventually realize that something is clearly blocking them from advancing. This becomes especially obvious if they turn around to go back to the village. They always get there with just minutes of walking.

This is also a place where the story teller can put in a combat encounter for players with itchy sword hands. This can be dire beasts or goblins that just moved into the area. Be careful to establish that these enemies do not have Cuinn, alive or dead.

## The Menhirs

Purpose: Meet Arwyn and find a way to Ellie's tree.

One way or another, the players will find themselves in the woods at night. If nothing else, assume they get so lost they lose track of time. Remember, sunlight burns shadow fey, so this will not happen in the day.

The PCs emerge into an opening in the forest, populated by menhirs. Left over from the mythical days of the Axe Lords, their carvings have long since weathered away. Some of them are stacked in such a way as to form an arch. Arwyn emerges from the darkness beneath them. He wants the players to find Ellie and Cuinn, and to do that they need to take his Wayfinding Medallion. His first choice is to play it up as a way to get them out of his hair ("If I show you how to find them, will you leave?"). Depending on the actions of the players, he might let them bargain the Wayfinder from him or even pretend to flee from combat and drop it.

Allow the players to interact with Arwyn as much as they like. He's immortal, and while he finds them incredibly dull, he's patient and willing to humor them.

## Ellie's tree

Purpose: Meet Ellie and Cuinn and learn about their friendship.

Following the Wayfinder Medallion does take the players straight to Ellie. Ellie, however, will seek to intercept them. She will start by calling out from places unseen, telling them they are unwelcome and should go away. So long as the players are not violent or obviously bent on evil intentions, most any attempt to be diplomatic should work with Ellie.

Ellie is child-like in her interactions. Despite herself, she is curious about the players and is naïve. It should not be terribly difficult to get her to trust them, at least enough to see Cuinn. She leads them to her tree. It's an ancient oak, and her den lies within, through a hole in the roots. Inside, Cuinn is busily scribbling away on some pages, practicing for his book. He is unaware that he has been gone for so long. Time flows differently inside the tree. Assume about an hour inside for every day on the outside. When he learns about how long he's been gone, Cuinn will be alarmed and want to go back immediately. Ellie will be upset, but allow it.

When questioning or talking to them, it should become apparent that there's no foul play evident. Ellie will deny kidnapping or enchanting Cuinn, though she will admit to forgetting about the time dilation. Cuinn will also insist they're just friends.

In their interactions, portray them as children playing at being girlfriend and boyfriend, without understanding the implications of their relationship.

## Return to Fallborough

Purpose: Get the PCs, Cuinn and Ellie back to Fallborough. Learn that Bragnah is in town.

Unless the PCs seriously mishandled the previous encounter, travel back to the village is quick and painless. Cuinn is also curious about the PCs and a bit of a chatterbox, and Ellie shadows them the whole way, constantly making her presence known.

When the players emerge back into the village, they learn that Bragnah came while they were away. She knows Cuinn has been gone and that the PCs were sent to retrieve him. Onghus meets them first, begging them to deny any fey involvement. Bragnah then confronts them. Assuming the players make up an even half-reasonable cover story, Bragnah will make a big show of playing along. In reality, she's hesitant about confronting them until she's sure she can get a mob at her back.

## Ellie has some fun

Purpose: Goofy fun, hints of worse things to come.

Ellie has followed the party back, mostly because she wants to be with Cuinn. Now that she is here, she is curious... and mischievous. Ellie is able to be invisible at will, but she can be seen in reflections. She uses this ability to move about, first observing, and then pranking people. Her pranks are never meant to harm, though they certainly cause trouble.

Her fear of the night prevents her from doing any pranks at night. However, Arwyn will do tricks instead, hoping to stir the pot. His "pranks" are far more vicious, often involving harm or at least terror.

These combined should make the PCs sweat. They have a vested interest in not giving Bragnah fuel for the fire. Some

scenes of Bragnah trying to connect Ellie's activities into a fey conspiracy, with the PCs playing Devil's advocate, will help drive this home.

With this next scene, the story teller should be careful. It features a child being hurt in a gun accident. This is something that people in your group might have personal experience with. If anyone could be uncomfortable with this, consider rewriting this scene or even having it happen "off camera."

It is dusk and Ellie is hanging out with Cuinn at Onghus's house. The PCs find her playing with one of his formerly hidden guns. She genuinely doesn't know what it is. She accidentally sets it off, wounding herself in the shoulder with a cold iron bullet. She lets out a peal of agony and flees into the village using magic.

## The Execution

Purpose: Major confrontation with Bragnah, possible death of Ellie

Ellie will race about the village, shrieking noisily, her flight reflex triggered. More due to luck than anything, Bragnah will strike Ellie with Fey Crusher, bringing her to her knees. Thinking quickly, she will bind Ellie in cold-forged chains and drag her into the center of town.

What follows is Bragnah showing off the captured Ellie to a hastily gathered mob of people. While some hesitate due to Ellie's child-like appearance, her obviously fey nature makes her a prime target for killing. Ellie is terrified beyond reason and not able to form a sentence, much less defend herself.

Cuinn will step forward and defend his friend. He'll insist that she's a good person and wouldn't hurt anyone. He won't find a ready audience. Whether Ellie lives or dies is up to the players. Allow any reasonable plan on their part to work. Remember that

Bragnah is a coward, but also afraid to look weak.

If the players fail or do nothing, then Bragnah strikes Ellie's with Fey Crusher. In defiance of how it normally works, Ellie's head simply pops off and lands on the ground. Cuinn will dash forth and grab it. Ellie will say a few words of goodbye then disintegrate into autumn leaves.

If the players succeed or at least make a good attempt, Ellie escapes. She gives an enraged speech about how much she's been hurt and frightened, before disappearing entirely. The players may be having second thoughts about their choice, and Bragnah will have certainly pegged them and Cuinn as fey sympathizers at this point.

## Cuinn is elf-shot

Purpose: Ellie steals Cuinn's soul, forcing the PCs to protect Cuinn from Bragnah

Ellie is distraught and terrified. She's afraid of losing Cuinn and being alone again, but just as frightened of the people in the village. During this vulnerable moment, Arwyn approaches her with a solution. He explains that there is a way for Ellie to keep the part of Cuinn she loves, while leaving a copy for the villagers. He can be in both worlds, and everyone gets what they want. He leaves out some of the nastier details, like having to descend into the Shadow Rift to complete the process. Believing she has stumbled onto a solution to make everyone happy, she accepts.



If Ellie is dead, Arwyn no longer needs to worry about a previous claim to Cuinn, and does the deed himself.

She claims Cuinn at some time when the PCs aren't watching over him. When dramatically appropriate, the PCs find him elf-shot and presumably prepare to mount a rescue. However, they are intercepted by Bragnah and her goons. She wants Cuinn stoned for being a fey collaborator, and expects the PCs to "exonerate" themselves by throwing the first stones.

If the story teller wants to complicate things further, then a drunken Onghus emerges, wielding his two pistols. He confesses that Cuinn is his son by blood and won't allow harm to come to him. He could save the day... or just get himself killed.

Unlike with Ellie, the village is far more divided on this. Cuinn is much beloved, and if the PCs argue that he can be saved, it's a chance many are willing to take. Backing

down a second time is not something Bragnah is willing to risk, and will attack with her loyal thugs if things do not go her way. Give the PCs a satisfying fight. If possible, Bragnah will flee if things turn against her. Her sanity hanging by a thread, she'll plunge blindly into the woods, leaving Fey Crusher behind.

## Confrontation

Purpose: Find out why Ellie did it and confront Arwyn.

After dealing with Bragnah, the most likely course of action for the PCs is to use the Wayfinder to guide them to Ellie. If they don't have it anymore for some reason, Ellie is too weakened to hide her tracks effectively. The players find her by the menhirs, anxiously waiting for dusk. The players can confront her here. Ellie doesn't believe she's done any harm, and will want to convince the PCs of that. If they explain to her what being elf-shot has actually done to Cuinn, she will be distraught, but insist that Arwyn can make it right.

When the light has faded, Arwyn emerges tells Ellie it's time to enter the Shadow Rift and complete the process. Allow the players to deal with this as they will. This is the climax. If it fits, it can simply be role-playing, convincing Ellie to turn back and return Cuinn's soul. Perhaps they challenge Arwyn to a game, with Cuinn as the stakes. Or maybe they try to end his evil through a fight.

If you want a complication, Arwyn will have sent a servant to guide Bragnah to Ellie's tree. Armed with axe and fire, she

starts attacking it. PCs will have to race to the tree to end Bragnah and save Ellie.

Saving Cuinn is as simple as opening the bag containing the stolen part of his soul, though it will add to the excitement to make the players sweat about how much time they have.

## Epilogue

Given the number of characters and possible outcomes, it's easiest to just look at the surviving characters and take their experiences into account. Did Cuinn learn about his true paternity? Did his father survive? Did Ellie live or die? Did the players encourage them to be together or try to drive them apart?

Other possible consequences abound. It is very likely the Inquisition will mark them as fey consorts, making all of Tepest a very unfriendly place. Also, if Onghus and Cuinn complete their book, it may have ramifications beyond being a pretty book.

## Inspiration/References

- The big inspiration for this is the movie *The Secret of Kells*. A highly recommended watch.
  - The Book of Kells is also a good resource. Printing out some pages as a demonstration of Cuinn's skill would certainly catch players' eyes.
  - The relationship between Call and Newt from *Lonesome Dove* inspired elements of Onghus's and Cuinn's relationship.

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# Quoth the Raven



Return once again  
to the Land of the Mists.  
Take a long look into desires dark  
and unnatural. Explore the island of  
Demise in a fragment of the long lost  
Guide to the Western Sea, pulled  
from the hidden archives of the  
Fraternity of Shadows

