

# QVOΘH THE RAVEN – 27<sup>TH</sup>



A FRATERNITY OF SHADOWS NETBOOK

ABOUT CALAMITIES

RELEASED ON HALLOWEEN 2020

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Quoth the Raven Vol. 27 Released on October 31st, 2020 Fraternity of Shadows®

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# INTRODUCTION TO THIS YEAR'S THEME

*"We tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away."*

*"What's true of all the evils in the world is true of the plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves. All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you'd need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague." (Albert Camus, *The Plague*, 1947)*

*The land is in turmoil, beset by plague, famine, and disasters both natural and unnatural. For years, I'd struggled to prevail against the dark, but now the best I can hope for is to endure the oncoming storm. Prophets warned of this time. We always hoped the world's wrath would wait for a future generation. But that hope is gone. It is the time of **Calamities**... (Ron of the FoS)*

*And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all. (Poe, *Masque of the Red Death*, 1842)*



Esteemed members of the Fraternity,  
Miladies,

2020? It will be a cliché to say this was a strange and taxing year. In this context, we are more than happy to release the 27th issue of Quoth the Raven. And it's a large book! Thank you to all authors and readers! Do not forget to review what you like and dislike.

Evil men and monsters can be fought, but calamities have to be suffered and endured...

Stay safe and enjoy this netbook!

Joël, for the FoS team

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# BITTER VICTORY

(SHORT STORY)

BY JACK THE REAPER

Father Sasha burst into the church of Castle Ravenloft, a war hammer in one hand and the Holy Symbol of the Morninglord in the other. Four of his men followed him. Like him, they also looked bruised and battered. Their eyes quickly scanned the large, shadowy hall. His heart missed a beat as he spotted the figures lying on the floor motionless.

"No, no, not them..." he murmured anxiously to himself.

Thoughts rushed through his head quickly. What went wrong? What could have happened to them here, in the heart of Castle Ravenloft? Were Azalin's agents able to penetrate to Strahd's own house?

He knelt beside them, quickly seeking pulse and breathing signs. He did not find such with Naftalin and Feiglios, but when he leaned near Almond, he heard her sigh lightly. A faint scent of perfume rose from her.

"She'll live, I think," he heard a cold, familiar voice behind him. "I took only as much as I needed from her. Of course, if not, she could always serve me as one of my slaves, wouldn't she?"

Father Sasha turned and looked up at the tall figure of Count Strahd von Zarovich standing behind him, a satisfied smile on his lips. A drop of blood was seen in the corner of his mouth. A sickening sense of understanding filled Sasha.

"You did it," he said quietly. "You drank their blood."

Strahd's smile widened slightly, revealing his sharp fangs. He licked the drop of blood in the corner of his mouth.



Art by [Jo Bonito](#)

"It was necessary," he said. "You know very well what was going on. The four generals of Azalin and their zombie armies had a power that was almost equal to mine. The blood of these people gave me the strength I needed to win the war and defeat the enemy. And I did that tonight. Right now, the heads of two generals are resting on stakes over the walls of Castle Ravenloft, and the other two are locked in my dungeon, awaiting their sentencing. The zombie army crumbled. Their poor allies, the Baal-Verzi and the Kargatane, were beaten to the ground, and those who remained alive are turning against each other, or desperately trying to escape the country. Thanks to these friends, we won a crushing victory. Barovia was saved, and I am still the master of the land. "

"Damn you," Sasha hissed. "We supported you even though we knew what you were, in spite of all our reservations. We cooperated, fulfilled all your requirements, and so you repay us?"

"Watch your mouth, priest," Strahd warned coldly. "Unless you want to join Azalin's people in the dungeon, and see from there how your church is falling apart and your people are begging on the streets".

Sasha gritted his teeth. Despite his anger and bitterness, he knew it would be a suicide to go against the Lord of the land. Strahd became stronger than ever; He no longer needed the help of the Morninglord priests. Now with the enemy's generals defeated, the undisputed support of the Vistani, the werebeasts and Baba Lysaga's witches, he had secured his undisputed control of Barovia.

"We'll meet again, Strahd," he finally blurted out and turned to leave, his men joining him with an unhidden sense of relief. Two of them carried Almond's limp body with them. At least they'll be able to save her before she changes.

"I have no doubt, Priest," he heard the Count behind him.

And as he walked toward the exit from Castle Ravenloft, Sasha knew Strahd would always be the last to laugh. Mortals will never be able to rival the

genius of the Darklord - a vampire, a general, and an archmage, who had commanded armies hundreds of years before they were born. Strahd had always held all the cards, manipulating his allies and enemies as chess pieces, strengthening or sacrificing them at will to advance his goals. And he always preceded them all by at least three steps.

And worst of all, Sasha knew, is that when another threat to Barovia arises - and it will, sooner or later - he and his men will stand by Strahd's side, again literally bleeding for him. Because they have no choice. He is the Lord. He is the land. And the Dark Powers were beside him.

The Morninglord priests left Castle Ravenloft, walking silently on the long road towards the village, far down the mountain. The sky was beginning to clear for the coming morning.

The victory was achieved. Barovia she was saved. But at a terrible price.

And far behind them, from the towers of the Castle Ravenloft, they heard the chilling sound which filled them with tremors and urged them to hasten their steps.

Strahd's laugh.



# FRIEDLICHES KÖNIGREICH

(PEACEFUL KINGDOM, NEW DOMAIN)

BY JOHN BERGDT

I came upon Friedliches Königreich accidentally while traveling around for the Guide after I got caught up in the mists. They rolled up in front of me and here I was. The first person I saw was a hobgoblin; they aren't common here in the Mists, but I knew them from back home. For some reason, I wasn't frightened at all by him. Normally I would have taken to my heels, as a hobgoblin is at least four times my weight and, where I was from, they were war mongers who traded in slaves, and they certainly weren't above taking gnomes as slaves.

This Hobgoblin was a farmer, however, and was talking to a dwarf about an axe throwing competition that the dwarf won. Apparently, they were friends of long time standing. This is almost unheard of where I come from. Hobgoblins and dwarves were always fighting, even the grey dwarves, and this was no grey dwarf.

Indeed, I saw a situation that compares favorably to anywhere I have gone on my many journeys. Dwarves, men, hobgoblins, and elves mingling quite freely and as a gnome they seemed to treat me no different than anyone else, though I saw not another gnome in the entire domain. Hobgoblins were clearly the most common, with dwarves being the second most common, followed by elves and men being about equal in number.

Very unusually for a hobgoblin culture, there seemed few fortifications and no slavery around as far as I could tell. Like most hobgoblin buildings they are well built and sturdy. There are no walls around the towns, but a few towers here and there, and a

few small castles in the more wild places. This is unusual in most areas when talking about hobgoblin domains where, in my experience, there are military outposts of all types everywhere.

There are some real similarities with the hobgoblins I know, in that everything is clean and orderly. Whenever possible the streets are very straight and well built.

*(Author's Note: I tend to treat hobgoblins like Roman Legionaries in my games. Hobgoblin culture has some real similarities with Roman Culture in my games, at least when it comes to things pertaining to war and enforcement of the law, though the laws themselves are much worse. Take the Roman Empire at its height at a military level but subtract most of the rest of the culture and you have it. The hobgoblins run a military machine and nothing more, and has its military discipline and orderliness turned up to 11.)*

Everything has rules and regulations that would make the most traditionally minded dwarf look unruly. They have rows of books on law and order, I admit much fairer than typical hobgoblin law. What they don't have is the normal huge hobgoblin war libraries, which hobgoblin officers have, over the centuries, contributed to in their major cities.

The main god they worship here is Bargrivyek, whom I had never heard of before. Apparently, he is a god of peace and cooperation, which might explain things. They showed me a copy of his holy text. A bit too strict for me but clearly of strong moral outlook,



he stresses peaceful cooperation to attain one's goals, a sentiment I heartily endorse.

When I went to the temple, I saw the High Priestess, who obviously had hobgoblin blood if you looked for it but could easily pass for human. She would be tall for a female human, as she stood over 6' but that is far from unknown; it is more in her musculature and additional body hair that is clearly more than is normal for a human but still far less than is normal for a hobgoblin. She has an hourglass figure, a dazzling smile, and baby blue eyes with red hair. She is quite attractive by human standards and apparently hobgoblin as well, as the place was crowded with men, though with a number of women as well. Her name is Shawni; she had quite a presence and seems to adore an audience. I have her pegged as former military and probably an officer at that. There is a military stride in her walk, and she tended to stand at parade rest.

When she talked to me, she warned me about evil hobgoblin renegades who sometimes attack travelers. They haven't been able to track them all down yet though there is a 100gp apiece bounty on their heads. There are also an unknown number of hobgoblin ghosts, zombies and skeletons. The undead seem to be of the same tribe as the renegades, who are known as the Bloody Maws. They all wear big tattoos with an open mouth with oversized fangs as do the renegades themselves. Something tells me that she knows more about them than she told me.

Besides the undead and the renegades there are also large animals that are a threat including wolves, bears and mountain lions. The renegades have a number of hidden locations in the domain that change from time to time. They have been known to swoop in from nowhere. There is also a haunted cemetery that was apparently built by the renegades at one time or another that is full of ghouls and wights. The hobgoblins have posted a reward of 4000gp to clear it out.

The main city is called Justice and it is a nice, orderly city with a thriving marketplace. There are people everywhere and crime seems to be rare. The streets are very peaceful and well built. Due to the renegades and the undead the roads are well patrolled in the country. Despite this people are killed along the road from time to time. Most of the victims are dwarves. No one knows why this is as the hobs and dwarves get along quite well.

## MAJOR FIGURES IN FRIEDLICHES KÖNIGREICH

### *Shawni Prettyfoes*

**Alignment** LG leaning LN

**Sorc4/Favored Soul 4/Mystic Theurge 1**

**AC** 12

**HP** 50

**Str** 12 **Int** 14 **Wis** 12 **Dex** 10 **Con** 14 **Chr** 21 with cloak

**Skills and feats** : Knowledge Religion 10; Knowledge Arcane 10; Bluff 11; Diplomacy 11; Concentration 6; Spell focus: abjuration; Spell focus : Enchantment

### **Sorcerer spells**

Lvl 0 Acid Arrow , Detect Magic, Read Magic, Ghost Sound, Resistance, Daze 6X

Lvl 1 Charm Person, Magic Missile, Shield, Alarm 8X

Lvl 2 Protection from Arrows, Resist Elements 5X,

### **Favored Soul**

Lvl 0 Cure Minor Wound, Detect Poison, Guidance, Mending, Resistance, Virtue 6X

Lvl1 Bless, Bless Water, Cure Light Wounds, Protection From Evil, Protection from Chaos 8X

Lvl 2 Cure Moderate Wounds, Remove Paralysis, Hold Person 5X

Cloak of Charisma +4, +1 Holy Mace, Bracers of Defense +2

Shawni is the descendant of slaves. Her grandmother was captured by hobgoblins and she had a half-hobgoblin son who was involved with a human woman slave who was Shawni's mother. Shawni's looks and intelligence and the fact that she had discovered sorcerous powers at a young age had her pegged for the hobgoblin army's intelligence

branch early. They made her an honorary hobgoblin in a rite, inducted her into the army and sent her to spy on humans. She was good at her job and loyal to hobgoblin society because that was the only one she knew. She made the rank of major at the shockingly young age of 21. Even though she was put in the army at the normal age for a hobgoblin, 12, it was still quite quick.

The hobgoblins ruled most of the world outside of some dwarven settlements and a couple of human cities. Another clan called the Bloody Maws were obsessed over the few dwarven settlements near them. Their leader was so frustrated that he did things even most hobgoblins wouldn't do. Eventually he crossed a line that resulted in his tribe being outlawed for "orc-like" behavior, a most grievous insult on his world. To hobgoblins, orcs are uncouth barbarians, an undisciplined rabble they the hobgoblins were amazed could walk across a room on the first try. This started a great hobgoblin war as some hobgoblin tribes agreed with the Bloody Maws. The war lasted for three years and decimated hobgoblin numbers. The Bloody Maw was practically wiped out before it disappeared into the Mists.

A human wizard from the City of Woodward formed his own army. The wizard was able to conquer the feuding hobgoblin tribes. He proved to be as lawful evil as the hobgoblins themselves and so they didn't revolt. Some hobgoblins even thought it was the judgement of the gods, that it was their just punishment for allowing such "orc-like" behavior in their midst. The wizard conquered other lands as well, including human lands. Shawni was sent by the wizard to lead a group to deal with problems in a nearby village.

They found out that a hobgoblin had forged some papers, claiming he was the new mayor of the village and imposed new taxes, stealing the money for himself. She had him executed for embezzlement and treason and returned the money to the astonished populace.

For if the hobgoblins are evil, they are also lawful. Their overlord set the tax rates at what he did to encourage further trade and not crush it via excessive taxes. The law was the law and it was clear, a certain amount was to be paid in taxes and no more.

This made her and her companions popular among the populace and they became quite friendly. Because of this she started to question if non-hobgoblins were as bad as her upbringing implied. One day the Mists took her and as she arrived, she found a holy book of Bargrivyek, not the real god but one provided by the Dark Powers. This version is LG and it spoke to her. She became a transformed woman. From being LN leaning LE she became LG leaning LN. She became a favored soul of Bargrivyek and became a mystic theurge.

*Plot hooks: A cult of Maglubiyet has been created. Although the Dark Lord is cursed never to be able to rally a large number of hobgoblins to his cause, that doesn't mean he doesn't have the occasional success. The Dark Powers love to give Dark Lords a small taste of success before taking it away from them.*

*Shawni discovered a graveyard full of undead and wants the party to clear it out. She is willing to pay 50gp per CR destroyed rounded up (This is for scaling purposes only, CR is a bookkeeping entry, so basically, she is offering 17 GP for skeletons, 25 GP for zombies, 50 for ghouls etc.)*

### **Grond Lawbringer**

#### **Paladin 7**

**AC** 19

**HP** 60

**Str** 16, **Int** 12, **Wis** 14, **Dex** 10, **Con** 12, **Chr** 17

**Atk** +11 **Dam** 1-8+4 +2d6 vs evil or chaos +4d6 vs chaotic evil

**SQ:** Aura of good, Detect Chaos, Smite Evil 2X day, Divine Grace, Lay on hands, Aura of Courage, Divine Health, Turn Undead, Special Mount, Remove Disease 1Xweek.

**Skills and feats** : Knowledge Religion 11, Ride 10, Diplomacy 13, Power attack, Cleave

+2 Chain mail, Heavy shield, +1 Holy, Lawful longsword

Grond Lawbringer is a 7' tall hobgoblin and is the sheriff of Justice, and his main job is to take his deputies on patrol around the city to look for renegades and undead. He only occasionally comes by them. When he does, he is more than able to take care of them. In Justice itself he has little to do as crime is rare here. He mostly has to deal with rowdy drunks and the like. Although capable in combat, he would have trouble dealing with a real investigation. He isn't stupid, he merely lacks practice.

*Plot Hooks: A number of dwarves have been murdered lately. Sheriff Grond is paying 1000 gp for the murderers. Due to lack of experience he is of no real help in investigating the murders but may help fight them if needed. The murderers are from the Bloody Maw and they are trying to start a race war.*

*There have been a series of armed robberies along the highway 2 days east of Justice. The robbers kill any non-hobgoblins but let hobgoblins live. There is a hideaway for 20 members of the Bloody Maw who are trying to raise money for the tribe. They use this money to buy supplies from various corrupt merchants. Although the domain is very lawful, it doesn't mean there is no crime whatsoever.*

### **Deliah Sweet tooth**

**6th lvl expert**

**Alignment:** Very LN

**Str 9, Int 18, Wis 12, Dex 10, Con 10, Chr 14**

**Skills** : Knowledge: law +13, Knowledge: Local +13, Knowledge: Politics +13, Knowledge: Religion +13, Knowledge: History +13, Knowledge: Nobility+13, Diplomacy+11, Intimidate+11, Sense Motive+10, Gather Information+11

Deliah is a 6'6" hobgoblin female with a taste for honey. She is the magistrate of Justice. She administers the law in a fair fashion, she deals with issues fairly and efficiently and has a very capable staff. There are a large number of laws, but they are both fair and justly enforced. If you want to harass the party, make up a law and have them sent to her. This should make them nervous for a time, but her sentences will be reasonable. She is well on her middle years and is a no-nonsense type. She interprets the law very strictly. Luckily the law is very fair in this domain. She is very scholarly and spends a lot of her off time reading.

*Plot Hooks: Members of the Bloody Maws stole her precious law library. There are other copies, but it will take time to write new copies which will be very expensive. She is willing to pay 200 gp for every book recovered. (There are 50 of them!) You might want to spread them out a bit as the Bloody Maws know she will be in a frenzy to recover them and they want to annoy her.*

## **HARRON BLOODYCLAW**

**Dark Lord of Friedliches Königreich**

**Sorcerer 12<sup>th</sup>**

**Str 12, Int 14, Wis 8, Dex 12, Con 10, Chr 21**

0<sup>th</sup> Resistance, Detect Magic, Read Magic, Detect Poison, Dancing Lights, Acid Splash, Daze, Ray of Frost, Touch of Fatigue,  
 1<sup>st</sup> Cause Fear, Ray of Enfeeblement, Mage Armor, Identify, Magic Missile  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Ghoul Touch, Scare, Protection from Arrows, Flaming Sphere, Blindness/deafness,  
 3<sup>rd</sup> Vampiric Touch, Lightning Bolt, Fly, Rage  
 4<sup>th</sup> Animate Dead, Mass Enlarge Person, Charm Monster  
 5<sup>th</sup> Magic Jar, Dominate Person  
 6<sup>th</sup> Create Undead

Harron was small for a hobgoblin and was bullied by his larger kin until his powers grew more and more. By the time he was grown, the bullying went the

other way as none wanted to cross a sorcerer of such power. He killed the former tribal chief in proper fashion and committed himself to the conquest of the nearby dwarves. The dwarves were far more crafty and tough than he gave them credit for being. Being frustrated for years he started losing control. He tortured them in ways not even hobgoblins generally do. Worse yet, his battle plans became more frenzied and less orderly. He was losing his orderly ways in his frustration. He decided to sacrifice the dwarves in savage rites to regain his discipline, but nothing worked. Maglubiyet himself tired of his disorderly behavior and the dishonor he felt it brought to the hobgoblin people ordered him expelled through visions to hobgoblin clerics. Harron was so frightened of his doom and becoming so crazed he was starting to sacrifice hobs themselves when the Mists claimed him

### **DARK LORD CURSE**

He found himself in a land full mostly of hobgoblins and dwarves. He convinced himself that if he could wipe out the dwarves all would be well. 300 of his fellow hobgoblins were sent with him but no less than 30,000 people dwell in this realm and he can't hope to conquer it. He is trying to convince the hobgoblins in the realm that non-hobgoblins, especially dwarves, are a major threat to them, but to no avail. The problem is that to attack a hobgoblin in this realm requires a DC20 will save roll failure resulting in being under a charm spell by the hobgoblin in question, dwarves automatically fail such saves. This effect is broken if the person is attacked by a hobgoblin or they see the Bloody Maw symbol tattooed on the hobgoblin.

He uses his sorcery to create undead, but he is cursed to be only create undead from dead Bloody Maw members which are the ones he least wants to turn into undead. They get a bonus of 1 HP per HD. He can control 2X his level in HD of his own created undead. He can release any undead he has under his control at any time. Even though he no longer controls them they will never attack him personally.

They can attack the other Bloody Maws and actually prefer them to other opponents. Whenever he releases them, they seek out the area where the largest number of Bloody Maws are buried within a mile. They will head there and when they arrive a tombstone with their name on it appears. As an epitaph, an event in Harron's life is described in brief. Someone could figure out a lot of his past by studying them. The undead are bound to an area of 100 yards/hd of the graveyard.

Although he would never admit it, particularly to himself, his alignment has changed from lawful to chaotic evil. This is not part of the curse but the reason for it. It was his unruly behavior that made him different than the normal hobgoblin which made him eligible for darklordship.

He is both unaging and undying and always appears to be a hobgoblin of middle age. If he is killed, he is raised the next day and is put upon his throne. Although immortal, his death is both painful and humiliating to him before he is raised and so tries very hard to avoid it.



# CONFERENCES OF VICTOR GAGNÉ

## PART THE FOURTH: OUT OF ONE, MANY

BY MARK BARTELS AND BENJAMIN BAUM

The deep sleep of the undead is not as the sleep of men. There are no dreams, nor even a sensation that there might have been dreams upon awakening. All that is there, is a clear memory of darkness. The darkness is cold and cruel, an empty void that hungers for anything that might fall into it ... like me.

I rose from that void, clawing my way towards consciousness. Something had disturbed me. What was it? As my eyes opened, the first thing I realized was that I was no longer in the Mists. I was being carried along a corridor, paneled with dark oak and pale ash. *Servant candles* drifted here and there, and wisps of pleasant scents—incense of sandalwood, lavender, vanilla—drifted on the air. Despite the unfamiliar surroundings, I felt comfortable. So comfortable that I needed a moment to feel distress when I realized I was no longer being carried by Charissa Schlosser, but by a strange man in black raiment.

The stranger was chanting prayers while striding along, his voice powerful and resonant. Now I realized that other voices fell in to fill the silences he let fall between verses, and dimly heard the footfalls of these others, following close by. Prayers. I was surrounded by prayers, held like a helpless babe. With a jolt, I realized that it was the prayers keeping me thus. No matter how I strained mind and will, the only thing I could move was my eyes!

*'Another trap, by Ezra!'* I thought—and pain erupted in the middle of my head at the name of Our Guardian in the Mists, pain bad enough to blur my eyes with a vampire's crimson tears.

By the time they had leaked out of my eyes, allowing me to see again, the man in black raiment had carried me into a large room, paneled not with wood, but with stone. Dark stone, and rough; unpolished slate. In the center stood a large statue, blazing white and smooth as a swan to the eyes. A thing of beautifully worked marble, but its subject shocked me.

Carved in priceless stone by a master's hand, there stood a simple bed, upon which lay what I could only call a succubus. A succubus with fangs like a wolf—or a vampire—caught in the act of rising, marble sheets giving the impression they were about to slip away and reveal her wicked nakedness. Her wings were spread wide, her face was contorted in a scream as though she were waking from a nightmare, but I could not say whether she screamed with fear, with rage, with realization, or determination. One hand seemed to claw towards the ceiling and the unseen sky beyond.

Before the statue stood a low table—no, an altar!—and upon this altar the man in black deposited me.

*'Doomed, I am doomed!'* I wailed in the privacy of my mind, as I sought to struggle.

"Not so, Victor Gagné," spoke a voice with an odd accent, and a woman came walking into my field of view.

She looked ... ordinary. I could imagine meeting her on the street and forgetting her as soon as my back was turned. Her hair was mousey, tied back in a bun. Her face was neither old nor young. Her clothes would have suited any number of domestics at any

of the inns I had stayed at in my life. All that seemed at all conspicuous about her was the holy symbol that hung on her chest from a chain around her neck ... The symbol, and her eyes.

There was an intensity in those eyes, a zeal and a hunger. They gleamed like the polished, crimson metal of that symbol I did not recognize; an animal, curled up in sleep with its nose buried in its tail. A fox? Yes. A fox.

“*Brightwell*,” the woman said, her voice caressing the name.

The chorus of chanting voices echoed her: “*Brightwell. Brightwell. Brightwell.*”

“The name of Our Lady is *Brightwell*,” the woman said. “And I am Lillian Schlosser.”

“*Lillian Schlosser. Lillian Schlosser. Lillian Schlosser,*” the men echoed.

I remembered that name.

“Well you should, Victor Gagné,” the woman said, as she drew a silver stake from a pocket of her dowdy and everyday dress and laid it upon my chest. “My elder sister Charissa has mentioned me to you, I know. She told me. Well, I say sister. Half-sister, I suppose. She told you that I could help you bring this”—her hand touched my chest over my heart—“back to life, and all the rest of you as well. Look up, Victor Gagné.”

Looking up, I saw the succubus—*Brightwell*—rise above me, her clawing hand appearing to hover over me in benediction—or in condemnation? Light from a dozen *servant candles* shone around her like a halo, and I felt ... power. Not the kind of magic to which I am accustomed, but power all the same.

“Our Lady is here, Victor Gagné,” Lillian Schlosser said. “She can help you. Look past the stone, Victor Gagné. Look past the light. Our Lady sleeps in darkness, and darkness is her strong place. There is darkness within you, Victor Gagné. If you wish it, Our Lady can help you, but you must will it. You must

breathe her in and give me your consent, if you wish to live again.

“How say you, Victor Gagné? Will you welcome *Brightwell* into your heart, that she may set it beating again?”

Into the depths of my mind came a voice, unbidden. My voice, growling forth a simple reply: ‘*No.*’

This was not a thought born of fear or apprehension, though the spectre of death hung inherent in the silver stake, and the paralytic ritual trappings shrieked duplicity. This was the voice of a dark hunger. A hunger for blood, for power, for eternity. It was a part of me that wished to embrace what I had become, to stay a creature of the night and prey upon the inferior mortals cloying the cities of the world. This dark fragment was twisted by the Pulse before my vampiric bloodline was broken, and though it spoke as me, within it was the depraved Talar, and, through him, his shadowy master Delthirius Valtyn, his wings of blood reaching out to envelop my mind like a cancer.

The instant I recognized the core of this voice, I rebelled against that broken piece of me. Thinking so intensely that I perceived my mind to scream, I rejected this rooted evil with three forceful words: “SHE. IS. WELCOME!”

The *smile* that broke out on Lillian Schlosser’s face would have stolen the breath from my lungs, had I still needed to breathe. For a moment, my mind reeled—then her expression shifted to one of transcendent fervor, her eyes averted from mine, her hands raised up to the statue. What was it that had discomfited me so? I did not know. I could not remember.

And suddenly, it did not matter. The priestess started to speak, and I felt power in the air. Building, surging. Power that flowed out of the darkness outside me. Power that flowed—disconcertingly—out of the darkness inside me. I was part of what was happening, and I controlled not one iota of it.

“*Brightwell*,” Lillian Schlosser crooned.

"Brightwell," the other voices echoed.

"Our Lady in Darkness," Lillian Schlosser purred.

"Brightwell," the other voices whispered.

"Gaze down upon this soul in need," the priestess chanted.

"Brightwell," the other voices droned.

"Open your heart to this soul, who has opened his heart to you," said the woman.

"Brightwell!" the voices thundered.

"In thy beginning, Our Lady, there was darkness," Lillian Schlosser intoned. "And darkness was thy torment. In the darkness, you were shackled, and weakness was thy torment. *Brightwell!* You rose from darkness into the light, you rose from the light into the Mists, you rose from weakness into strength, by *knowledge*, by *magic*, *Brightwell!* You do not forget the pain of being lost, the suffering of the victim. In darkness is thy strength. It is thy source, thy wellspring. You have conquered it in knowledge; you have conquered it in magic; you have conquered it in strength and power."

"Brightwell," the other voices whispered—and one by one, the *servant candles* started to wink out.

Darkness fell over me, cradled me, filled me up until I felt like a wineskin bursting at the seams.

Lillian Schlosser laid one hand on my forehead.

"May the Dreaming Vixen see you in her slumber," she intoned, the words seeming to rush out of her. "May Auntie Thirteen look favourably upon her newest nephew. May the Rising Demon rise up within you. May the Enemy of Ezra grant you what the Guardian in the Mists would not."

'*What?!*' I wanted to shout, to sit bolt upright, but I was transfixed, a butterfly beneath the needle.

And then Lillian Schlosser seized the silver spike, raised it high—and plunged it into my chest. Now I was truly a butterfly beneath the needle, silver pain

lancing through me, ripping me apart from the inside out. I wanted to scream, but blood bubbled up to fill my throat. Darkness welled up to fill my mind.

'*Over. Lost. Doomed,*' I remember thinking—and then there were no more words, only a sinking into darkness.

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I remember thinking: '*This is different from before.*'

Next, I remember thinking: '*I am still thinking.*'

Third: '*I am on a boat.*'

Or at least that was how it seemed to me; that I was lying flat on my back on a boat, maybe a barge, a leaden weight pressing down on me. The craft was gliding along, rocking gently with the current of a river; I could hear the faint splash of water against the keel. Looking up, I could see the arched ceiling of a tunnel, albeit barely.

It was dark. So dark...

'*Darkness was thy torment.*'

I shivered at the memory of pain, ripping through my chest. Then I just shivered; it was dreadfully cold. I tried to lift up my head, but everything was heavy, so heavy. I could barely roll my eyes far enough to see the bargeman pushing the craft along. He was tall and thin, wrapped in a dark robe.

'*Death has come to ferry me to the Grey Lands?*' I thought, and wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of the notion—laugh hysterically, I fear.

'*Not for you, Victor Gagné,*' a voice like crumbling bone spoke directly in my head.

I was not on a boat. Without transition, I was struggling to walk, in spite of the leaden weight that hung on me. To walk up an incline, towards a dreadful tree, one that filled the horizon. I needed to get closer, needed to ... to see. A small figure, pinned to that monstrous tree with what I thought must be

a spear, stabbed right *through* its body. Cloth, fluttering in a soulless breeze. A dress?

*'You do not forget the pain of being lost, the suffering of the victim,'* that voice of crumbling bone spoke, then sang:

*'Not for you the blessing of dreamless sleep  
not for you, next, the refuge of the Hollow  
where all is naught and naught is all  
You must remember, and remembering  
rise to challenge that which is  
until it is no more, for you  
may not rest.'*

Without transition, I was kneeling in a hall of rough slate, before a throne of ebony carved so its armrests resembled foxes sitting upright, the headrest so it looked like the jaws of a fox intent on savaging the one who sat there.

A woman, I thought, dressed in sable cloth. No, not merely a woman; a queen. She wore a mask; a fox's face, of course. Her eyes glowed like emeralds before a fire as she rose, a goblet in each hand.

As she sauntered towards me, a queen shrouded in darkness, her shape blurred and changed. I saw the appearance of a streetwalker who used to lurk around the University of Mordent when I was young; a young witch I had once met in the Forest of the Ancients when I was a grown man; a woman I did not know, dressed in a brilliantly white coat over a severe dress of green. All bearing the black fox-mask, all red-haired, all with eyes of luminous emerald. She approached me, form shifting between those four, and held out a bronze cup of red wine to me first.

*'Life,'* that rotting voice declared. *'But not for you.'*

The shifting woman held out the pewter cup, which was full of blue fire; cold and seething.

*'Drink,'* that terrible voice commanded.

*'In darkness is my torment,'* a woman's voice told me as the shifting queen lifted me up and embraced me, pushed the pewter cup to my lips.

*'In darkness I am shackled.'*

The fire fairly leaped from the cup and into my mouth, and it did not hurt. It was both sweet and tart, it seemed to dance as it flowed down my throat.

*'In darkness is my strength.'*

I drank, unable to do anything else. I was tiny, or else the woman had grown enormous. I was a child, I was a pet, I was an insect, and the fire continued to flow. I felt it surging inside, a feeling as though I would explode...

*'And now your torment, your chains and your strength are there as well.'*

The fire erupted inside of me.

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I felt that I had been torn to tatters and shreds, floating in the cruel darkness of undead sleep. But one by one, the threads of my being found each other and knit back together.

I thought I recalled music; disjointed notes ringing through the darkness, slowly joining together to create a harmony, just as the shreds of my being merged. As time passed, it almost seemed to me that the music was helping me somehow, guiding the pieces of me in their quest for wholeness.

After an eternity, I was ... me. Myself. Victor Gagné. Or I thought I was. I was adrift in the darkness of the undead, its cold hunger all around me like a mouth full of fangs, poised to bite down on me—and yet I felt no fear.

There *was* music, faint but intricate, curling around me like an affectionate serpent and keeping the darkness's malice at bay. As my faculties returned, it seemed to me that the music was calling, that it was telling me not to stay in this place. That made good



sense, so I reached out—somehow, I cannot find the words to say how—and seized the music with my thoughts, my will.

A twist of motion, a sensation of speed ... and my eyes opened.

I found myself on my back in a clean, comfortable bed, staring at a ceiling of mixed oak and ash boards. *Servant candles* hovered in three corners; an intricately-crafted, but unfortunately hideous, gargoyle had been attached in the fourth. Light, dim and fog-shrouded, spilled through a window. Music was in the air, languid like a summer river, single notes plucked out of the flow like dragonflies dancing on the surface of the water. There was a soothing scent on the air; lavender. As I turned my head to look around the room, I discovered the scent originated with a girl.

She was ... young. Younger than I, dressed in dull leathers like a working man. Her face was beautiful, crowned with a curly mop of ash blonde hair, but there were traces of worry in the thin line on her forehead, the angle of her head as she bent over a great monster of a harp. It was a hideously ugly thing, part bone and part metal, all of it lacquered red and cast in the shape of a rearing dragon, but it issued that gentle tune as the girl's clever fingers plucked and soothed its strings. I realized it had also issued the music that had helped me reassemble myself, and to leave the place of darkness and hunger that I feared I would see again in my nightmares.

I opened my mouth and drew breath to speak to the girl, to introduce myself and ask her name. Raw pain exploded in my throat, and suddenly every muscle in my body was on fire! Everything felt ... wrong, somehow. I felt cold and stiff and tight, as though my skin was a size too small. Instead of speaking, I groaned in misery.

The girl stopped playing at once, put aside her harp and came to my side. One cool hand tested my brow; the other lifted a metal cup to my lips.

“Do not try to talk yet,” she said as she dribbled liquid into my mouth. It was lukewarm and salty; it tasted utterly delicious and soothed my throat as I swallowed, and it trickled down into me.

“You must drink all of this,” she continued once the cup was drained, and indicated a metal flask on the bedside table. “My name is Genevieve Schlosser. Sister Lillian delivered you to this room after the ritual was completed, and I offered to take care of you. Please trust me and drink; it will do you good.”

As I could tell the truth of her words, and was too weak and wracked with pain to struggle besides, I cooperated to the best of my ability and drank cup after cup. The reward for doing so was a swift improvement of my condition; the salty brew kindled a pleasant warmth in my belly, which crept outward until it filled my whole body. My muscles relaxed; my throat was no longer full of raw agony.

Once the final cup was quaffed, I heaved a great sigh. There was a somewhat euphoric feeling that lingered, as well as a dull beat in my ears that I realized might be my heart. “Thank you. I feel much better,” I said.

I suppose I could have asked any number of questions at that point, about the Schlosser household, how much time had passed, or projections of my recovery process. I had experienced many strange things in my transition out of the hungry void, all worthy of further inquiry, but one memory from before the visions surfaced and nagged at me; thus, I voiced: “Why is she called the Enemy of Ezra?” Though I am no anchorite, and my religious tendencies stem more from my upbringing than an appreciable spirituality, the epithet was a source of no small disturbance.

The girl flinched. I saw her pupils contract as her eyes widened ... and then she regained her self-control.

“Sister Lillian is the priestess in the family, not I,” she said, her voice pitched low though not quite

whispering. “My expertise is with music and songs, with laments and dirges.

“I think ... I think Brightwell is the Enemy of Ezra because their messages are so opposed. Your Ezra says there is a—a grand scheme, with everyone assigned a role, yes? Only there is a Hollow, and from there spring evil things. Ezra promises to guard you so long as you play your role in the scheme. Brightwell ... feels differently.”

Her voice grew stronger, its cadence more artful, as she spoke of things she appeared to be more certain of. “Sister Lillian tells me that Brightwell says the darkness is where we live. The world is filled to the brim with horrors that want to drag us down. But if we find strength in ourselves, the strength to train, to study, then we can overcome. There is no grand scheme. There is only the destiny you forge for yourself. Brightwell will not lead you by the hand and cup you in her palm, but she will kindle the fire in your belly, whisper clues to show you the way. She encourages us to seek our own power, to sharpen our own teeth, build our own muscle, hone our own wits and skills. Brightwell cares not whether we reshape the world to be a paradise or strive to become its tyrants; the choice is ours.”

I must admit, the perspective was not entirely objectionable—self-determination is a worthy philosophy. I had feared the adversarial moniker indicated an actively maleficent faith, though the apparent indifference to morality was still of concern. Be that as it may, I thought it tactful to keep such thoughts to myself. I nodded at her words, an expression of consideration on my face, then I moved on.

“Well, I ought to at least be grateful to live again. I am alive, aren’t I?” The beating sound having faded away, I put a hand to my throat, seeking a pulse in the exact spot I had once felt Talar’s fangs. There it was, slower than before—slower than I ever remember it.

“You are not yet well,” the girl said, worry creasing her brow as she looked at my face. I can only guess

what she had seen there. “Sister Katia wishes to see you as soon as possible,” she continued. “Her expertise is ... medicine. She is the finest medical doctor in the family.”

I noticed the slight hitch in her voice before the word ‘medicine’, and the worm named Paranoia thrashed in the murky depths of my mind. I refrained from speaking, however.

“You need not see her right away, if it is not your wish,” Genevieve Schlosser continued, her eyes seeming to read my thoughts effortlessly. “She even said you should build up your strength, first. And she has some work to attend to, so there is no rush. We can stay here, if you wish. Or I could help you on walks. The Retreat has several areas that are well worth visiting. There is the Aquarium, the Library...”

In my experience, I have found it difficult to decide which is more refreshing: a full night’s rest or a leisurely afternoon among the shelves and stacks. My mind gravitated toward the prospect, but it remained to be seen whether such an outing was feasible. Slowly, as to not raise alarm or protest, I made a slight adjustment to my position, going from entirely reclined to halfway upright. I could tell from this short test that there was an energy in me, enough to move about, though not so much that significant exertion would be possible. I smiled, and replied, “What better place to gather my strength than a library?”

“Well,” she replied, a brief smile dancing on her lips. “I am myself fond of music festivals. Here; let me help you.”

With surprising strength and a brisk economy of motion, she helped me out of bed, then proceeded to change my clothes. Out of the nightshirt I had woken up in, she poured me into loose hose and a shirt, plus a cotton jacket with minimal but elegant embroidery on the cuffs. The ensemble was completed by a woolen housecoat and slippers that were perhaps a trifle snug.

“There,” she said, after taking a moment to regard her handiwork. “Much better. Sister Harmony wears the same sort of thing when she settles in for a study-session.”

The left side of my mouth quirked slightly at the thought that I was wearing attire in the same style as a woman. I will grant that it was not particularly feminine clothing, but it did remind me of a pair of Richemuloise shoes I purchased but two years ago, which turned out to be intended for women. It wasn't obvious, but colleagues of mine who noticed were quick to poke fun at me.

Brooking no argument, she slipped her shoulder under my arm and her arm around my back, supporting me as I walked. I briefly wondered whether this strength, which reminded me of Charissa Schlosser, ran in the family. A faded memory of being carried through the Mists whispered for attention, but lost out against the prospect of seeing the Schlosser house library.

“The Retreat,” the girl—Genevieve—corrected me while we shuffled along. She sounded absent-minded, her thoughts focused on keeping me moving and balanced. “We call this the Retreat. It is where we come to study and recuperate. Schlosser House is in Castra.”

Her statement seemed to follow quite naturally at the time. Even though she had told me once before the name of the place, I persisted in thinking of it as the Schlosser household up to this point. What ought to have struck me was the fact that I had *only* thought of the place, and not misnamed it out loud. At the time however, Genevieve set me at ease enough that this disturbing fact escaped my notice for a long while.

Instead, I expressed curiosity over a different, more mundane aspect of her statement. “Castra?” I said. “I am not familiar with Castra. Where is it?”

She stumbled a moment at my question, and muttered something under her breath that sounded like *‘sink ships.’* Then she shook her head and

replied: “Castra. Yes. It is beyond the Mists, not many people know of it yet. Mother found a Mistway to it, back when she was touring Forlorn. Woefully primitive these days, but there are ruins of an earlier age. All ruined, all ruined, by generations of warfare, and the living came to envy the dead. Very rugged landscape, quite beautiful in its way, I've written dirges ... Ah ... My sisters and some – some friends of the family saw opportunity there, though. We've moved in, gradually. Stimulated the local economy, educated some of the local tribes. Built Schlosser House. Other homes. It's all ... an ongoing project. Rebuilding a nation. Building it up.”

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY: CASTRA

Genevieve Schlosser is not lying when she speaks of Castra, but she is also not telling the whole truth. Castra is one of many islands in the maritime domain of **Malopelagio**, in the **Wartorn Cluster**, and hosts a rare (for the Wartorn Cluster) connection to the Core. The *Piper's Lament* is a Mistway with excellent reliability, which connects Castra's Bloodmere to the Lake of Crimson Tears in Forlorn if a specific ritual is performed to open the way.

Once known for being a savage land, where primitive humans lived and died as hunted animals at the talons of militaristic undead, Castra has changed greatly since a recent political upheaval. The new government, identified only as ‘the Centurions,’ has not merely defeated the undead regiments that once roamed there, but enslaved them. The undead laborers now build roads and raise buildings for the living, and have built a great harbor that allows Castra to connect to Malopelagio's trade-routes. Castra is now a known source of fine building-stone, ingots of quality ore, and canned fish, meat, and vegetables. Although many worry that these resources are as often worked by undead as living hands, and visitors are unwelcome, Castra does very well in trade as greed trumps fear and piety alike.

What none outside Castra know, is that the island is home to intense industry and education, both mundane and horrific.

The Centurions have improved the quality of life for their living subjects, but have also enlisted them in the grand army that they are raising through mad science, black magic, and relentless training and recruitment. Guided by strange prophecy and careful long-term planning, the Centurions of the Night are preparing a surgical strike into the Core while having their Legions masquerade as various Corelander armies. With this false flag operation, the Centurions intend to spark off a war that will set alight all the lands of that oldest of clusters and thence spread to all corners of the Demiplane of Dread.

Brave men might tremble to learn that as vile as this plan is, it is merely meant to distract unidentified enemies from a series of other plans much greater in scope. The whole strategy is known only as *'Operation Unparalleled Darkness.'*

To this I nodded. "How momentous," I remarked. "May its new age outlive the old many times over." A polite sentiment it was, though perhaps incautious, given how little I knew of the place.

"I'm sure it will," Genevieve Schlosser replied, her brow creased by thought. "There are some very skilled and powerful people working on Castra."

The corridors of the Retreat were ... uniform. Paneled with wood—oak and ash, always oak and ash—illuminated by *servant candles* that hung contentedly in place, scents without visible source drifting on the air. Pleasant scents; flowers and spices. More of those ugly little gargoyles sat perched near the ceiling, *objets d'art* that both impressed and repulsed me at the same time. After a while, we came to a crossroads, four passages branching off into the depths of the building. It occurred to me that I had not seen a window since leaving the room I had woken up in.

"We will have to pass through the Aquarium," Genevieve said, apologetic. "It's a shortcut to the Library just now—and it is feeding time."

"That is quite alright," I replied. "Scenic routes are often the most rewarding." Once again, I didn't catch a strange facet of her statement. A shortcut 'just now?' In my experience, pathways through houses are not transient. Perhaps she only meant it was a shortcut due to our current location. My hindsight has become a mite sensitive to the barest hint of the preternatural.

We went down the left passage, which started to slope downward after a time. The air grew cool and humid, the *servant candles* spaced further apart, causing the light to grow dimmer. Abruptly, the corridor ended in a great room; floor, walls, and ceiling all covered in smooth granite. It was an amphitheater of sorts, benches rising into the gloomy heights while a vast basin full of water surrounded by glass walls dominated the center of the room. By the sharp, fresh scent of it, this was salt water.

"A few rows up, I think. We don't want you getting splashed," Genevieve muttered as she guided me up a narrow stairway to a row of benches and settled me down. "Please wait here. And don't try to get closer to the water! We study some ... rather aggressive marine life here."

A concerned frown coalesced on my face. "You won't be putting yourself in harm's way, will you?" I worried that a girl so young might be bound to engage in activity from which I—injured as I was—had to be warned away.

She flashed me a brief smile, genuine amusement causing her nose to crinkle. "No, no, not to worry. There's a platform. I don't have to get anywhere near the uh, the animals."

She abandoned me there and trotted off into the gloom beyond the basin. Truth be told, I did not entirely mind the chance to sit and rest; there was a tremor in my right leg, and an ache in my calf that I tried to massage away.

While I sat, I marveled at the basin. From my elevated position, I could see it was set deep into the

floor, creating a large space for this unnamed marine life to move about. There was an artificial island in the middle that might have been transplanted from any coast of the Sea of Sorrows, pocked with cave openings yawning like toothless mouths. The water was so clear that I could see the floor was covered in coral and chunks of rock. Sea urchins and shoals of small, fretful fish moved here and there, and I saw a lone cuttlefish jetting across the length of the basin before it came to a halt and camouflaged itself. It had snatched up one of the little fish on the way, so presumably it was settling down to dinner.

It was a marvelous thing, a little slice of nature recreated through artifice. A smile tugged at my lips, thought; if the admittedly aggressive cuttlefish was the largest creature in the pool, Genevieve had been purely cautious of my risk of getting splashed, surely...

The tranquility of the aquarium was torn by the harsh tones of a brass bell. Only now did I realize that there was a walkway that overhung the basin on the far side of the room, as Genevieve Schlosser came into view. In one hand, she held the bell making that awful din; with the other, she hauled a bucket full of fish. Whole salmon, I thought at the time.

“Up and at ‘em!” she shouted in a loud clear voice. “Up and at ‘em! Lunchtime!”

The artificial island erupted with deep-throated barking and motion as a pod of seals burst out of the caves. Fat, glossy, healthy animals they were—except for one. The pod’s male was a bloated beast with sagging skin and eyes that absolutely screamed malice, even across the distance that separated us.

When Genevieve started tossing fish into the basin, the female seals dove into the water, swooping around their native element as gracefully as birds, while snatching up their food. Not so the male, who flopped to the edge of the water and there uttered a series of barks and howls at Genevieve that sounded deranged and hateful. Even when Genevieve tossed

him a fish, he ignored it in favor of continuing to bark abuse at her.

One of the females, unwisely deciding that she was entitled to anything unclaimed, flopped onto the shore to snatch the food that had gone ignored by the male. To my nauseated horror, the male immediately attacked her, savaging her throat with sharp, yellowed teeth and slamming into her with its bulk. Only when she stopped moving did he stop tearing into her. He shoved the carcass into the water with an imperious lurch of his gore-stained flank.

He actually turned to look me in the eye at this point, and I have never seen such a blend of contempt, pride, and self-loathing in the eye of a beast. I looked away, not only because I found the look in those dark eyes sickening, but also because, from the corner of my eye, I had spied movement on the floor of the basin. For a moment, I fancied the wounded seal had somehow survived, for her body was trembling and lurching about. On closer inspection, I realized some of the ‘rocks’ on the basin’s floor were anything but.

Scuttling, crab-like legs bore armored and camouflaged bodies forward, anemones on their rocky carapaces stirring into a frenzy as they extended claws and shears to tear the unfortunate seal apart. Gobbets of bloody flesh were swiftly passed to mouths hidden under the lips of the carapaces. For all their size and strength, the creatures were unexpectedly calm about their business. They jostled each other a bit, but did not squabble for the choice pieces of meat. I counted ten of the things in all, and they seemed to share their windfall equally.

Genevieve continued to toss fish into the water the whole time, sending some in the direction of the barking, snarling male. Once he ran out of steam, he settled down to feed, but he showed none of his harem’s gusto and even grumbled with every bite. Sated, the surviving females climbed back onto shore and lay down to bask—well away from the male.

Still, Genevieve threw fish into the water. The armored beasts grabbed them with surprising delicacy. I was startled to see one of the larger ones pass his catch down to a smaller companion, who had not managed to seize as much of the food, and nudge it as if to say, *'Go on, you need feeding up.'*

It was a very brutal view, that scene in the basin. Arguably, however, what I was seeing would be the envy of any marine naturalist. Or was it? There was great sense of the uncanny here. The first and foremost source was the malignant male seal, but I also had my suspicions about the crab-things. They were extraordinarily well-adapted creatures, but I couldn't confidently say that only Nature's hand was at play in their development. I was staring at them, trying to reach a verdict, when Genevieve Schlosser drew near.

"Sister Katia is studying them," Genevieve said, her voice subdued, as she returned to my side. "The bottom-crawlers. These are still immature and need fish or meat to build up muscle and armor plating. Once they mature, they ... switch to other food."

"What food?" I asked, to distract myself from the unsettled feeling in my stomach. "And what is wrong with that seal?"

"They start eating algae and things that burrow into rock," Genevieve replied. "They slow down as their carapace gets heavier, you see. Can't chase after fish anymore. As for *him*, well..." She shook her head, her expression grim for a moment. "Well, that's Boyce. Sister Imogen found him in a trap a while ago, and she brought him here. His mind never recovered from what he went through in the trap."

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: THAT GNAWING FEELING**

Readers of the Nocturnal Sea Gazetteer may recall the Dread Possibility, "That Sinking Feeling," which states that Todstein is slowly sinking into the sea. However, it is not nature trying to undo Meredoth's grim abode; it is the Red Haunt.

When Meredoth sent out his lebedntod to infiltrate the abodes of other spellcasters, in hopes of claiming them and their magical treasures, Imogen Schlosser was on his list. The undead had little chance of fooling the Red Haunt, however, and were soon captured, interrogated, and then dissected. Although Imogen appreciated the addition to her arsenal of undead, and was initially amused by Meredoth's temerity, this amusement faded and twisted into disgust as she learned more about Todstein's darklord. The Red Haunt is easily as obsessed with acquiring knowledge as is Meredoth, but she is gathering it to a *purpose*, no matter how foul. She has a twisted respect for other scholars and a keen appreciation for new branches of knowledge. Meredoth's arrogance, his dismissal of everything except magic, and his lack of true purpose offended her sensibilities—especially since Meredoth made several more attempts to invade Imogen's stronghold on Darkon's east coast.

The Red Haunt has resolved to deal with Meredoth. While Aegir's Jackdaw busies himself crafting undead, constructs, and toys, stealing the works of others and calling it his own, an enemy he does not realize exists is seeding the ocean around Todstein with life. The 'bottom-crawlers' are aberrations that feast on flesh in a juvenile state, but actually switch to eating rock once mature—specifically, the rock from which Todstein rises. Every time a batch of bottom-crawlers reaches maturity in her aquarium, the Red Haunt quietly transports them into the Nocturnal Sea, far from her enemy's sight. While many have been killed by natural or unnatural predators on the long march to Todstein, and others have been claimed and warped by the Mists to trouble other oceans, the number of bottom-crawlers that are gnawing away at the foundations of Todstein is increasing.

Nor are the bottom-crawlers the sole extent of the Haunt's machinations against her enemy. Sooner or later, Todstein will collapse into the ocean and Meredoth will have to evacuate.

The Red Haunt expects the hateful old wizard to take flight on his broom, presumably to take refuge on Graben Island while he tries to find a way to sort out his favorite lair. When he does, while his mind is in a state of agitation and his armies are unavailable to him, Meredoth will discover that bottom-crawlers are not all that has been marching into his cold ocean domain. Enlightened children, grown in Harmony Schlosser's vats, equipped with both gills and wings and armed with rifles containing some very special bullets, have been making the long journey as well. Once Meredoth is at his weakest, they will erupt from the ocean and attack him *en masse*.

The Red Haunt does not expect her creations' initial attack to kill the old monster; she does, however, expect them to make a fine distraction while she joins the battle and snares him in an *antimagic field*, where she can tear him apart with her claws and teeth. After that, well ... She can find many delightful uses for what parts of Meredoth's library and arsenal survive.

### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: TRAINED SEAL**

Imogen Schlosser's greatest rival at the University of Il Aluk was Boyce Vincus, a pompous and arrogant young man who saw himself as the next Azalin. Focused on arcane supremacy and his noble pedigree, this Baron's son might have been the top student of his year—if not for Imogen Schlosser. No matter how diligently he studied or how many private tutors he contracted, Boyce could never manage to surpass 'the upstart foreign girl.' While he was an excellent student, absorbing the knowledge of others like a desert drinking in rain, he was neither creative nor innovative—except in one school of magic. He never managed to construct new magic or give his spells metamagic twists to surprise and delight his teachers—unlike Imogen, who deconstructed, reconstructed, and created magic with great faculty.

What made it all worse for Boyce was the way that Imogen ignored his seething resentment and envy as amusing but irrelevant, and utterly failed to capitalize on her scholastic excellence as a way to improve her social standing—as Boyce would have done.

In his jealousy, Boyce took to spying on Imogen. He discovered his true talent for Illusion during this time, which actually allowed him to see some things that Imogen meant to keep quiet, all unobserved. Not that he could ever *prove* that Imogen made trips to the cemeteries of Il Aluk to converse with intelligent undead and practice necromancy, but he *was* a witness. Rather than fear or disgust, these escapades of his rival filled Boyce with even greater envy; why was *he* not mastering life and death, the way this foreign-born peasant was?

Boyce delved into necromancy with every bit as much zeal as his other studies, his family money allowing him to purchase forbidden tomes from across the Core ... but his lack of creativity in anything other than Illusion remained. No matter how much he studied and practiced, Boyce never managed to outdo his nemesis in any field other than Illusion. In the end, he grew desperate. Using his favored magic, he stole one of Imogen's notebooks, finding there the groundwork for her newest spell. It took everything Boyce had, including the help of his private tutors, to bring the spell to completion, but finally it was his! Full of pride, he presented his 'original creation' in class—only for Imogen Schlosser to ruin everything. With a series of piercing questions, she exposed that Boyce had no understanding at all of the spell's underlying principles, and could never have conceived of it nor brought it to fruition.

Finally, she mocked him for being not a scholar, but no better than a trained seal learning tricks for fish.

The scandal, such as it was, should not have presented Boyce with any major difficulty. His family was wealthy and well-connected; he was second in his grade.

The University might have reprimanded him, even made a note on his permanent record, but would never have expelled him or exposed his fraud. It was solely his thwarted pride and fury that sent Boyce running out of the University, out of Il Aluk, and into the fetid Boglands. Hugging his wounded pride and resentment like a favorite toy, Boyce lived a hermit's life. Dark things whispered in his dreams, offering power to avenge himself, and he answered them all. When Boyce did not fish, hunt, or gather herbs, he studied the foulest arts and performed rituals wiser men avoided. He even learned to take undeath into his living flesh, and what finally stalked forth from the Boglands to confront his nemesis was a nauseating combination of both: a *Pale Master*.

The pall of Death overlaid the land, clouding Boyce's senses and obliging him to question people—most of them dying, as the impatient *pale master* tortured them for information they were unwilling to give. In the end, he learned of Katia Schlosser's medical practice in Lamordia, and he wended his way there. In one shrieking, blood-stained night, Boyce turned Katia's hospital into an abattoir, finally revealing his horrid self to the *Frau Doktor Schlosser*, demanding to know the whereabouts of Imogen. To his shock, Katia was unafraid; to his fury, she laughed in his face; to his horror, she seized him and held him fast with contemptuous ease, her features flowing and morphing between her identities.

"Once a trained seal, forever a trained seal," the Red Haunt mocked Boyce as she bore him to the operating theatre and her sharp, shiny scalpels and grafting-clamps.

Boyce passed out from the agony of the surgery that followed, only to awake in a horror from which he cannot escape. His undead brain has been grafted into the skull of a bull seal, the animal's bulk and muscle his to command, but his magic and even simple communicative skills blocked to him! He loathes the raw fish that are his food, detests the simple animals that are his company, and despises his very existence, which the Red Haunt prolongs by transplanting him into a fresh seal whenever his body wears out. Only his hatred and fervent hope to one day avenge himself on the Red Haunt stop him from seeking to end his own existence. Right now, Boyce Vincetus is but a Chaotic Evil male seal. If he could manage to regain a humanoid body, or just modify his current form so he could speak and make somatic gestures, he would prove to be a powerhouse in his own right. He possesses a great deal of knowledge about the studies and crimes of Imogen Schlosser—and an Illusion spell whose presence even a cunning fiend cannot detect.

"Wouldn't it be kinder to kill the wretched thing?" I caught myself asking, and regretted it as soon as the words left my mouth. To my relief, Genevieve did *not* react with anger or scorn. Instead, she pursed her lips, gazed speculatively at the mad seal, then shook her head.

"I would agree ... but he belongs to sister Imogen. Besides, sister Katia says removing him would destabilize the pod. But come; I think you are rested enough so we can continue, yes?"

Again, she helped me to stand and walk. 'Boyce' barked abuse at us for long after we had left the Aquarium behind us, but finally, his voice faded as we walked along those uniform passages. When next the corridor widened into a chamber, I could not

help but gasp my admiration and excitement. When Genevieve Schlosser had mentioned a library, I expected perhaps something along the lines of my study back home, or what I had seen of Harmony Schlosser's collection of books. Maybe something like the libraries held at the private homes of nobles who liked to feign erudition. What I saw instead would be the envy of any number of scholars I had known.

The room looked like it might have started its existence as a large storage room, the kind where farmers store their crops and merchants their wares. Someone had fitted great bookcases against the walls and set more to subdivide the room into four aisles. Elegant staircases allowed access to what I



could only describe as the first floor. Instead of *servant candles*, glassy orbs drifted here and there, casting a mellow light. But what drew that gasp from me was, of course, the collection of books. All those bookcases were stuffed full, from one end to another, every shelf groaning under a weight of erudition and thought. I felt a slight tingle on my nerve endings, one I recalled from the arcane faculty of the University of Mordent; a tell-tale sign of spells of preservation, cast on the room and its contents. Every inch of woodwork gleamed, the result of wax and polish rubbed in with loving care. Every book looked, if not pristine, then in as good a condition as it could be expected to be after having clearly been read again and again. The air had that wonderful scent of parchment ... I heaved in a great breath, taking in that rapturous smell, and released it in a great, stress-dispelling sigh.

Genevieve raised a hand to cover her smile, then gently guided me further into the Library, the capital letter well-deserved. She brought me to one of several desks, set seemingly at a random location, and eased me into an overstuffed armchair.

"Please wait here a bit," she asked. "Take your ease. I'll go find sister Imogen and send her your way. She has been ... looking forward to meeting you."

"You're not staying?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. I may be back for you later," she replied, looking away from me and tucking some ash-blond hair behind her ear. "But right now, I have some other tasks to perform. There is always so much to do, here at the Retreat."

She rested her hand on my shoulder for a moment, then strode away into the distance of the Library and turned down a passage between two bookcases. I leaned back, breathing in the scent of the place and enjoying the peace of it. I was mildly startled when a maid came walking through the door by which Genevieve and I had entered and started to dust one of the bookcases. Her face was dispassionate, her

focus absolute. She did not even glance my way as she proceeded with her work.

"Professor Gagné!" a joyous voice with a Darkonese accent roared behind me, causing me to jump in my chair as though I had been caught doing something wrong.

Striding toward me between the bookcases was, without a doubt, another Schlosser sister; I was starting to recognize the family resemblance. This one was, to be blunt, short. Short, but compact; she reminded me of a cat, trotting along with casual arrogance and elegance. Her hair was dark and tied back in a fashion so utilitarian that it was simply unfashionable. She wore robes of black velvet, decorated at the hems with runes of silver thread, the hood thrown back. Rubies swung and glittered at her ears as she came toward me. More rubies glittered at her fingers. Her face was animated by a wide smile that showed no teeth.

"Imogen Schlosser," she introduced herself as she seized my hand and pumped it up and down with one of hers, "Don't get up." She snapped her fingers and made a beckoning gesture, which caused another chair to come gliding along the floor and insert itself under her legs.

"Welcome to the Library," she continued once she was settled. "You're Mordentish, so ... tea? Yes? I hope yes, because I've already set it." Right on cue, a full tea service came floating toward us and settled down on the reading desk. Imogen Schlosser poured two cups with deftness that spoke of long practice. The tea smelled of dark honey and autumn leaves. "Milk? Sugar? Lemon?" she asked, the questions coming in close succession.

"The former two," I replied, and accepted the cup proffered. It felt as though ages had passed since I last had tea ... and it had been a long while for me. For the last person I drank with, it had been much less time. The teacup and saucer clattered in my hands at the memory of that subterranean sitting room. I blinked hard as I sipped the brew to banish the thought, and made myself smile appreciatively.

“Well, this is cozy,” Imogen Schlosser said as she leaned back. “Isn’t it? Ah ... But listen to me natter on about nonsense. Too much time spent listening to and giving lectures, I’m eager for some easy conversation. So sorry.” She flashed me another toothless smile. “Well. Again, I am pleased to meet you, Professor. I’m Imogen Schlosser, and this library is my main addition to the family’s holdings. I’m the family’s expert on the arcane, which I understand is an interest we share. On which note...”

Reaching into her robes, she brought out an item very dear and familiar to me. My heart lurched at the sight of my travel spellbook, still battered and dog-eared after my time spent in the Shadow Rift. If anything, it looked worse than I remembered.

“My road book,” I said distantly. In my mind, I mused about how apt the term was, considering that it looked as though a cart had run it over.

“This poor fellow’s been through the wringer, hasn’t he just?” Imogen Schlosser said, stroking my spellbook’s cover with one finger before handing it over. “Real shame, when people disrespect books like that.” For a moment, her face clouded over and she muttered something under her breath that sounded worse than uncomplimentary. I barely caught the words ‘damn vampire thug’ before she shook her head and reached into her robes again.

“Have a gift,” she said as she extracted another spellbook, its cover and pages pristine. “And an apology; I peeked in your companion while you were ... indisposed. A wicked thing of me to do, but I do hope you’ll forgive the impertinence. I took the liberty of transcribing your spells into this one.”

The new spellbook’s cover seemed to open almost of its own accord as soon as I touched it, and there they were: all of my spells, scribed in a strong, regular hand. Runes were stitched into the cover’s interior; more spells of preservation. As I leafed through the new book, purely out of the force of long habit, I discovered that a handful of new incantations had

been added to my collection. All of them spells of either Abjuration or Evocation; combat-spells.

“Like I said,” Imogen Schlosser said, “this is my apology for being cheeky and reading what was yours without permission.”

My expression stayed largely neutral as I surveyed the book, a symptom of the conflicting feelings at play. No matter how politely such a thing is done, any wizard will tell you that there is some feeling of violation at having your spellbook read without prior consultation. It is a private thing, and to have it read is like having your soul bared. Still, I appreciated what she had done to redress her actions, as well as those of the vampires. “The true wrong was done by those monsters of the Rift,” I replied. “Thank you for tending to this wound they made, and for your augmentations.”

“Well, apologies made,” Imogen Schlosser said. “Welcome extended. Did Genevieve say we’re glad to have you stay here? We’re glad to have you stay here. You’re *welcome* here while you recover. Seems to me sister Lillian didn’t do her best work when she brought you back. No offense, but I’ve seen more meat on a butcher’s pencil. You need time to rest up, eat up, heal up.

“And, whenever you want to, read up. That’s what I’m offering you the chance to do, by the way. The Library is open for you to peruse at your leisure, whenever you feel like it and my little sisters aren’t demanding your attention. We don’t often have guests as distinguished as yourself, and more than a few of the youngsters are eager to make your acquaintance. Not big sister Charissa, lucky you. She enjoyed the challenge of retrieving you, but she’s busy with other things already. So unfocused, ugh.”

Imogen Schlosser made a funny face, then continued chattering at me: “Harmony is just dying to talk to you, of course. She says she’s writing another book on alchemy; don’t get me wrong, I enjoy a spot of alchemy, but Harmony’s the master of it. Alchemical Philosophy ... Interesting, truly it is, but give me a

spell any day. Yes. Spells. Let's talk shop! I always enjoy chatting with a fellow practitioner."

"I do hope I don't bore you," I replied with a grin. "I try to keep myself apprised of developments in spellcraft, but attention diverted to High Alchemy has often put me a few steps behind more classically dedicated arcanists."

"All knowledge is knowledge, professor," Imogen Schlosser said, the smile gone, her face utterly serious. "And all knowledge, all insight, is precious. Each mind is unique, no matter how powerful. Each mind and insight is ... precious."

The smile returned, and her eyes twinkled. "So. Let's see what makes you unique!"

We sat, we drank tea, and—to my surprise—wound up talking through the rest of the day. In spite of the speed and slight annoyance of what she thought was small talk, Imogen Schlosser turned out to be an engaging conversationalist when it came to discussing arcane theory. On this subject, she was perfectly willing to let me get more than two words in at a time. At times, she contradicted me, but she supported her arguments well and shared with me facts I had not been privy to, the fruits of years of dedicated research.

She regularly fetched books from the stacks, some commonplace, others hugely rare. Two she handled with almost exaggerated care; one with a midnight blue cover marked with silver runes, another with a black cover marked with a golden hourglass. The former exuded a slight chill when I touched it; the latter, a mild warmth. Both were written in a language that I completely failed to recognize and could not have translated in a million years—until Imogen Schlosser cast a spell of translation for me.

"Outlander books," she explained, while pointing out arcane equations that would have been the envy of the entire Faculty of Arcane Science in Dementlieu. "Utterly priceless. I had to pay a thousand gold ducats for the one, actually had to spell-duel some bastard for the other." I cocked an eyebrow at that

remark, and she reacted instantly: "Don't look at me like that; one moment we were discussing price, the next he suddenly tried to *dominate* me and have me turn out my pockets."

"Heavens!" I exclaimed. "How boorish! Was the scoundrel an outlander like his book, or do you think he stole it from someone less fortunate?"

"I doubt he was an outlander," Imogen Schlosser replied, shrugging. "Though it would've taken old Alanik Ray to distinguish the fellow from an outlander to a Barovian after the fight was over. I'm fairly sure he was a career thief, in any case. A thief of magics. He wasn't very clever, and as it turned out, *dominate person* was his best spell. It wasn't much of a duel, when all's said and done."

When the lights started to dim, I almost cried out in protest. Odd as part of the day had been, it had soon turned for the interesting. Then my stomach growled and started to ache; my fingers throbbed from all the notes I had taken. The only reason my throat was not hoarse and dry was the numerous cups of tea Imogen Schlosser had poured for me.

"Sounds like that's our cue to get you back to bed, Professor," Imogen laughed, merrily. "Don't worry, the Library will still be here tomorrow."

Genevieve Schlosser did not return that day, but Imogen Schlosser had just as little trouble getting me back to my room. Boyce the seal came flopping out of his cave when we passed through the Aquarium, actual foam dripping from his mouth as he barked and howled his rage at her. All his display of hatred did was make Imogen smile and shake her head. The rubies on her ears swung, seeming to draw a red line across her throat.

"No good deed," she commented on the furious seal as she helped me along. "No good deed. Speaking of punishment, dinner should be waiting in your room, Victor. You don't mind if I call you Victor, do you?"

In spite of her disparaging comments about the meal that awaited me, it turned out to be both delicious and plentiful. Imogen chuckled at the ravenous way I shoveled mashed potatoes, peas, and chicken into my maw, one hand raised to cover her mouth. “Go on,” she encouraged me as she easily helped me into bed, “get some sleep. You’ll feel better for the rest, I’m sure. We can talk again anytime you feel like it; I surely enjoyed it.”

Sleep claimed me before she was out of the room...

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I remember thinking: *‘The sleep of the undead is not as the sleep of men.’*

Next, I remember thinking: *‘I am sleeping as a man.’*

Third: *‘I am on a boat.’*

Fear lanced through me at the familiarity of it all. It seemed to me that I was on a boat, and I had been on that boat before. I had been on this boat in death.

It seemed to me that I was lying flat on my back on a barge, a leaden weight pressing down on me. The craft was gliding along, rocking gently with the current of a river; I could hear the faint splash of water against the keel. Looking up, I could see the arched ceiling of a tunnel, albeit barely.

It was dark. So dark...

*‘Darkness was thy torment.’*

The weight on my chest shifted and opened luminous eyes. Eyes which I knew had been black jewels but a moment ago blazed bright crimson, illuminating my peril. Lips painted black parted, revealing a predator’s teeth. Slender horns adorned with opals crowned a face of inhuman beauty. Great bat wings flared wide, baring a body that was sinful desire made flesh.

*“Delicious,”* the fiend purred, and her smile made my mind tremble and quake.

From the breaking of Ciphramir’s house, the memory of this creature came to torment my dreams—at

least, I fervently hoped it was no more than memory and fear. *‘Haunt me no more!’* I tried to cry, but I could feel my mouth manage no more than a wan and lascivious grin. The only reply was eerie, jeering laughter, and the feeling of that body moving against mine.

Desperate to take defensive action, I lurched beneath the fiend, tried to throw it off. She was heavy, her hands gripping me and legs wrapped around mine with the strength of a constrictor. That smiling mouth hummed a tune, a child’s lullaby, that mocked my resistance even while it inched closer ... closer ... until her lips fastened on mine.

*“Delicious,”* her voice whispered in my mind.

Then, there was pain.

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I woke screaming, going from darkness into darkness ... and found myself wrapped in music. Soft, soothing music, wrapping itself around me. My lurching heart slowed down, my breathing steadied itself. The music embraced me like a mother, stroked my brow as though I were a feverish child, allowed me to lie back down. My eyes drifted shut, and I remember smelling a hint of lavender as an actual hand brushed my hair back from my sweat-stained forehead.

Someone spoke, but I did not understand. “I want to try. Please believe me.”

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I slipped back into dreams. This time, I was not on a boat; I was trudging down a corridor. The floor, the walls, the ceiling, they were all the uniform grey of the Mists, but in spite of that they were solid. A dim light shone between my hands, like a *light*-spell filtered through murky water.

From time to time, I would encounter passages that branched off from the main path. Down every passage, there were familiar faces and hands that beckoned to me, welcoming me: Nikolai. Delthirius. Qualensturm.

I trudged on, unable to accelerate, unwilling to slow down or turn to the ones who had already hurt me so. There was a light at the end of the passage, and I trudged, trudged, trudged toward it, my own limbs weighing me down as though they were made of lead. On...

In front of me, the light blurred and divided into three lesser lights. Doorways. People were standing in the doorways to the left and right; the middle doorway was empty.

To the left, a strange man I did not recognize. His skin was dark as ebony and he wore dark clothing—a doublet and trousers—with a violet sash about the waist. "... *hear me,*" he said when I looked at him—no, his lips did not move. I just heard him when I saw him. "*If you can hear me, come to me.*" He radiated strength and confidence, but I noticed blood trickling from wounds that had been expertly stitched. Worse, I could *smell* the blood, and felt a horrifyingly familiar ache in my mouth.

I looked to the right – and recoiled. The creature staring at me from this doorway was sexless and skeletally thin, its skin grey and its face almost featureless. The thing leaned on the edge of its doorway as if exhausted. "... *real?*" I heard its voice. "*Are you real? Are you there? P-p-please. I need ... help. Help me. Please help me...*" Incredibly, it started to sob, one long-fingered hand covering its face.

It was quite strange, to be moved to pity for a creature so clearly inhuman. Then again, perhaps it had been human once, and suffered some horrendous change. Were that not the case, would its distress have any less meaning? If it were an act, perhaps so...

I looked to the unoccupied doorway then, pondering what it meant. The uniformed man and the gray creature, they reached out to me. Was there something within that did not seek my help? Was it resigned to solitude, or did it await some unrealized event? Then came the worst question of all: does this room await me? Will I join the other two?

Behind me, I heard the voices of horrors I had left behind me. Drawing closer now. Always drawing closer. Would I ever be free of them? In front of me, fresh horrors. Would I ever be free, period?

Darkness welled up from inside of me, and I sank into dreamless slumber.

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I awoke, my body stained with sweat. Even before I opened my eyes, a powerful smell hit my nose. A powerful, *delicious* smell. '*Food!*' a primal, urgent voice bellowed in the depths of my mind, and I opened my eyes. Sure enough, there was a covered tray on the nightstand beside my bed—and a strange woman was sitting in the chair where I first saw Genevieve Schlosser. Also, there was a metal statue standing beside the door. Its insides were partially open to sight, exposing interlocking cogs and gears, clicking and grinding away.

"Good day," the woman said, and closed the notebook she had been scribbling away in. She was tall and graceful, and would probably be even taller when she stood up. Her features were aristocratic, her expression cool, verging on cold. She had blonde hair so pale it was almost silver, tied up in a complex braid that wound around her head like a crown. The doctor's coat she wore clashed with her looks, but she wore it comfortably. It was so white it hurt my eyes, and she kept it buttoned up to her chin. Her lips were painted a sanguine red, so bright that they looked like a bloody slash; her dark eyes were ... clouded. Murky. I wondered whether she might be blind, or...?

"Katia Schlosser," she said without preamble. I noticed she had a faint Lamordian accent, which suited her. She uncrossed her legs, leaned forward and shook my hand briskly ... then drew a cloth from her coat pocket and wiped her hand. "I gather my sisters have told you about me; I am the family doctor, as it were." Her cloudy eyes glided over to the statue. "And this is *Assistent Nummer Dreizehn.*"

I was startled when the ‘statue’ performed a jerky salute. “A ... construct?” I hazarded. “How exceptional!” Exceptional it was, and quite masterfully made, but my compliment was mostly a cloak for my instinctive apprehension at facing the unliving. The dangers inherent to alchemical life are known to me, and I presume that similar risks arise in all such complex facsimiles across the arcane disciplines.

“Yes,” Katia Schlosser agreed without even a hint of false modesty. “It is. *Assistent Nummer Dreizehn* is the latest in a series of experiments in combining Lamordian advanced science with innovative magical principles. But I understand you are an alchemist, rather than an artificer. And I have brought you breakfast. Eat quickly; I have scheduled an examination for you, and time is limited.”

I did not quite like the sound of “an examination,” but I silently conceded that medical review would probably be for the best. I straightened up, took the tray onto my lap, and removed the cover. To my mild discomfort, Katia Schlosser watched me eat—rather, she *stared* at me while I ate—a surprisingly delicious breakfast. It was some sort of porridge, but savory rather than sweet. There was meat in it, as well as some salty ingredient that suited my palate extremely well. I wolfed it down with unseemly haste, and when I felt thirsty, the golem—*Assistent Nummer Dreizehn*—lumbered forward with a metal flask that turned out to contain the same salty broth Genevieve Schlosser had fed me yesterday. Through it all, Katia Schlosser watched me like a hawk, her face betraying nothing. She made a few notes, however.

“Good,” she said once I had finished, and rose to her feet. “We will be going to my laboratory for your physical examination. *Assistent Nummer Dreizehn* will carry you.”

That did not sound comfortable in the slightest. “Nonsense,” I replied. “I could probably muster the strength to walk myself, perhaps with a cane...”

“Objections are irrelevant,” Katia Schlosser snapped. “You are not yet fully recovered, and unlike Genevieve and Imogen, I have not the desire to carry you. *Dreizehn*, bring him.”

The golem scooped me up in its arms in spite of all my protests, and carried me along after its mistress. Through the corridors of the Retreat we went, along a route I thought seemed familiar from yesterday—but then again, all the corridors looked alike. One time, we crossed paths with a footman, who bowed his head and stood back to let us pass, never saying a word. I felt a sudden, fierce longing for the sight of the open sky, and the bustle of people. How long had it been since I was last among people, ordinary people, rather than monsters...?

After what felt like a long time—but possibly mostly because I felt such acute embarrassment—we arrived at Katia Schlosser’s laboratory. This turned out to be a full-blown medical theater. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all a sterile, bright white. Such furniture as there was—mainly an examination table, a filing cabinet, and movable trays full of instruments—were almost all of polished metal. A lone cabinet was made of steel with glass panels, exposing rows of stoppered bottles and special instruments to my roving eye. I spotted some silver, iron, even bronze tools in the trays. A set of obsidian scalpels lay at hand as well, shimmering in the radiance of more *servant candles*. The whole room smelled of bleach and made me feel intensely nervous.

The sight of stitches and blood on the man from my dream came to me unbidden. This was not to be a surgical examination, was it? It seemed unreasonable, but I couldn’t quite shake the worry that I would be laid open on the austere metal.

*Assistent Nummer Dreizehn* deposited me on the table, then lumbered out of the room, granting me the dubious pleasure of being in private with Katia Schlosser.

“Remove all clothing, please,” she said in a businesslike manner.

At this request, I was rather taken aback. My shirt I could understand—I had been stabbed through the heart recently—but beyond that—and at the very start of the examination—it seemed rather sudden and excessive. “All clothing?” I asked. “Surely that won’t be necessary.”

“Professor Gagné, I am a *medical doctor*,” she told me, her voice so flat that she might as well have called me a fool to my face. “I ran a hospital in Leidenheim for years, though my daughter has taken over the director’s seat now. I assure you, you are unlikely to possess anything I have not seen before. Now: off with the clothes! I have another patient to visit today.”

Article by discomfiting article, I acceded to her demand. Idly, in the back of my mind, I thought again about the dark-skinned man from my dream, sewn up so extensively, and wondered if I had already seen her other patient. Ridiculous it seemed, as I am no Vistana blessed with Sight.

The examination turned out not to be as bad as I had feared. It was embarrassing, especially when Katia Schlosser asked some unladylike questions and I caught her drawing sketches in her notebook. Parts were uncomfortable, because the room was chilly and because Katia Schlosser demanded some physical exertions of me, but these parts did serve to show me I was on the mend. Finally, parts were painful; particularly the part where she took one of those obsidian scalpels and a syringe to collect blood—and tissue—samples from me. The iodine stung as well.

“You are on the mend, yes,” Doctor Schlosser said, absentmindedly, while studying her harvest through a finely crafted microscope. “Still need to be eating well, resting well. Perhaps no more days spent chit-chatting in the Library with sister Imogen for a while. But yes. Soon you will be well again. Ah; *Dreizehn*.”

The golem came stomping into the laboratory at this point. To my great surprise, it was carrying a set of men’s clothing—the kind I myself favored, albeit mostly in black. A little silver embroidery served to alleviate what would otherwise have been a very somber suit indeed. With a last, crashing step, the construct came to a halt in front of me. I felt an absurd need to cover myself with my hands when the walking engine seemed to look me up and down, only for it to thrust out its arm, offering me the clothes.

“Sister Amourette is quite skilled with the needle and thread,” Doctor Schlosser said, without looking up from her microscope. “Do put them on. Sister Imogen has said you are welcome, and you do not wish to be wearing sister Harmony’s castoffs all the time, yes? Yes. Good.”

From the golem I first took breeches and a gray shirt, and I followed donning these with accepting a pair of long socks. I shouldered on the waistcoat it proffered next, and finally it helped me to put on a long tailcoat. I discovered that the outfit fit me like a glove. Just as I opened my mouth to inquire about footwear, the golem raised its other hand, displaying a pair of good shoes. Dressed in a style so very familiar to me, I felt much more myself. *Assistent Nummer Dreizehn* offered its hand to help me off the table, but I clambered off by myself.

“You are truly gracious hosts,” I told Katia Schlosser, bowing my head. I was about to add a traditional pleasantry in Lamordian—and I could not find the words. Luckily, Katia Schlosser did not look up in time to see me frowning in consternation.

“Yes,” she agreed. “We are. And in a few weeks’ time, you, professor Victor Gagné”—I thought her mind twisted a bit about the word ‘Victor’ for some reason—“will be the perfectly healthy *dhampir*. Congratulations.”

She shook my hand again, which was lucky. When my knees buckled at the shock, she steadied me long enough for the golem to catch me and lift me up in

its arms. I was still searching for words when darkness seemed to well up from inside of me, and I sank into unconsciousness. The last thing I recall seeing before I slipped away was the golem and the physician looking down at me, their eyes equally opaque.

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I dreamed. I felt that I dreamed. This time, there was no boat. This time, I was lying on the examination table, the fiend again lying on top of me, pressed against me. When I struggled, she chuckled. The sight of her teeth made my mind quail with a horror I could not put into words, and I cast my eyes about for something, anything, that I could use to escape.

There were three doors in one of the laboratory's walls, doors that had not been there when I was awake. While the fiend moved against me like an affectionate serpent, I gazed into the dim light that shone out of those doorways. Stared at the people standing in them; the man with the dusky skin and the thin, alien creature. Was there a shadow in the middle doorway?

I felt a powerful finger under my chin, slowly forcing me to turn my head back to the demon. Her fingernail stabbed into the soft flesh under my jaw like a knife. Desperately, I tried to keep my eyes on those strangers, mutely begging them for aid.

*"Come to me,"* the man ordered. *"If you are real and you hear me, then follow the sound of my voice!"* He started to sing, then; a stately hymn in a language that was as alien to me as the grey creature in the other doorway.

*"If you are real,"* the grey creature sighed, sagging against the doorjamb, *"then ... run. Run! Escape this place. She is always nearby. Always ... Run to save yourself! I do not ... deserve ..."*

To my horror, it started to weep. Its sobs garbled the words it was trying to choke out, but I thought I heard it say *"Oh, Papa. I am so sorry."*

Lips as soft as rose petals brushed mine, then pressed down hard. A tongue forced its way into my mouth, carrying the taste of gore and brimstone. I squeezed my eyes shut and screamed, my voice disappearing down a fiend's convulsing throat.

Next, there was pain.

\*\*\*

I started awake, gasping for air, and found myself staring up at a marble ceiling. My head was pillowed on an unfamiliar surface, and slender hands held me fast. "Are you ... How do you feel?" a familiar voice asked, and Genevieve Schlosser leaned over so our eyes could meet. Judging by the angle, I reasoned out that my head was, in fact, pillowed on her lap. A stab of acute embarrassment ran through me, and I struggled to get up. For a moment, the girl held me fast. Then, moving as carefully as one might with an exquisite glass sculpture or a frail elder, she helped me to sit upright.

We were in what looked very much like an art gallery. The floor and walls were marble like the ceiling, as was the bench we were sitting on. Statues stood here and there, and paintings hung on the walls. Unlike other such galleries I had visited, this one was quiet. Eerily quiet.

*'This whole house,'* it occurred to me. *'I've never even heard the road traffic outside.'*

"I am so angry with sister Katia now," Genevieve said, that wrinkle of thought upon her brow. One of her hands was clutching mine, squeezing it. Her lower lip trembled, and there was a note of intense emotion in her voice. "She is ... She shouldn't have told you. Not like that. She just doesn't bother to think of how people feel. Even sister Charissa ... or sister Solange..."

She released my hand and fairly bounded out of her seat, approaching an abstract statue that looked as though it might be two people kissing, or perhaps merging. I first noticed that there were strings spun in the hollow that separated the two curved figures



when Genevieve Schlosser struck a powerful pose and struck the strings. The tone that sang out seemed to echo in the walls all around us, and for a startling moment I felt that the building was trembling all around me!

When the energy in the room calmed back down, a certain indignation began to arise within me, indignation at this great secret of my ... incomplete recovery. I could have spat out my next question in an incensed tone, but I couldn't really bring myself to be angry with Genevieve. She had been at my side, caring for me as I convalesced. Still, I was compelled to ask, but my voice was gentle: "When was I going to be told?"

Genevieve Schlosser's shoulders sagged, and she turned back to me. Tears trickled down her cheeks. "I am so sorry," she said. "I told her and told her not to. I wanted to be the one to tell you ... or perhaps sister Solange, though she is busy ... Maybe sister Lillian. But *not* Katia! Then she did it anyway! Solange agreed with me that it was wrong, but Katia just ... She just doesn't *care* how people feel, not when she's focusing on something else."

I cleared my throat, moved by the girl's distress despite my own. "Miss Schlosser," I said. And my tongue froze, as for a moment, I did not know the words to use. Worse, I did not know any words at all! I panicked, my breath quickening as I cast about for meaning in the chaos that was my mind. Cool, slender hands fastened on my own, grounded me. Words trickled back, and I found Genevieve Schlosser sitting on her knees in front of me.

"You are not well," she said, woeful. "You are unhappy to be ... this. But we had to! We *had* to! Sister Lillian told me, and I kept it from you because I worried that you'd be afraid, maybe even hurt yourself. She told me she tried to make you well, but that there was something that was trying to interfere."

She had a fair point. Afraid I certainly was, though I doubt I had the resolve to cause myself harm. Had I

known of my fate in advance, I might have asked them to let me die. My focus, however, was drawn to that last statement, to the suggestion that other forces took an interest—nay, an active role—in my horrific state.

"Interfere...?" I asked, hesitant. "How—? What—?"

Genevieve Schlosser glanced left, glanced right, then leaned forward and hissed words in my ear: "Sister Lillian felt it! Sister Imogen confirmed it! You are being watched! They would have twisted you, when sister Lillian called on Our Lady to bring you back, so she twisted you first. They are still watching you!"

(See **New Magic**)

I thought back to my dream, before meeting Katia, of those spectres from my past that wouldn't leave me alone. The tangled monstrosity that killed Nikolai had taken tormenting me as a personal crusade, and his magics could span worlds—why not twist another hook into me when the moment presented itself? Then again, the reach of Qualensturm's mind was certainly long, and I had left his abode before he was done with me. Perhaps instead it was the vampire lord Delthirus himself; he had the latest and greatest claim upon me, and his will grasped like a vise.

I began to voice these speculations: "The vampire and his lieutenants, you mean? Or is it..."

Genevieve shook her head, which sent her tears flying. "I can't tell you any more," she said out loud. "I can't. They always, *always*—!" Her head snapped back and she seemed to stare beyond me, teeth bared in a snarl. My heart abruptly pounded in my ears, and I felt as though my mind were trembling. "We made the Retreat to be the safest place in all these accursed lands, and they are *still* watching all the time! *Mezamdras!*"

The word was unfamiliar. The sentiment, not at all. For some reason, the weeping, snarling girl kneeling in front of me was hideously angry. Even with my mind rebelling against the sight of her for some

reason, I dimly wondered whether there was something wrong with *her*. Perhaps, something wrong with all the Schlosser sisters...? Who was supposed to be watching me? Why?

Abruptly, Genevieve Schlosser dashed the tears from her eyes, and her snarl turned to a wide-eyed smile. The transition shocked me badly, even though my mind and body had stopped feeling as though they were being shaken about like dice in a cup. Only a hint of fear, even desperation, remained in the depths of the girl's eyes as she hauled me to my feet.

"You simply *must* see the Gallery," she chattered at me while guiding me—or rather, hauling me along in her wake. She was strong, indeed. "There are art pieces here made by my sisters, some that we commissioned, and some that were gifts. Right here, *The Song of Love*." This turned out to be the statue with the strings, which she had played in her anger. "Over here," she continued while pulling me down a corridor, "a whole series of statues collected by sister Lillian, all of which honor Brightwell. A selection of icons, based on local interpretations of the goddess in *Lilliend, Conquista, Obissol, Masogan...*"

A surprising array of statuary greeted my eyes, and, at first, I thought the only thing they had in common was the fact that they were carved from high-quality marble. Here, the Schlosser family's patron was a girl on the cusp of womanhood, dressed in a shockingly tight, sleeveless shirt and trousers. Next to that icon was a statue of the goddess as a hybrid of woman and fox, dressed in a sweeping gown with her tail sticking out from under the skirts. One plinth down, the goddess was dressed in revealing clothes that reminded me of a streetwalker ... who used to ... lurk around the University of Mordent when I was young...

*'Life, Victor Gagné. But not for you.'*

I batted away the memory; clearly it was distorted, likely by the resurrection ordeal. It seemed implausible that the touch of this goddess extended

so far back into my life—I hadn't even heard of her until recently.

Next plinth, and the goddess was dressed as an almost clichéd witch. A big cat perched on her shoulder, and for a moment I thought it was the most hideous mog ever to raid a garbage can, made uglier still by a taxidermist's unkind attentions. Then the thing hissed and spat at me, and ran away to hide elsewhere in the Gallery.

"That's just Gregory," Genevieve assured me. "He's really sister Imogen's cat, but he feels attached to all of us. This awful man tried to kill him, poor thing, just to spite Imogen. Can you believe it? But she fixed him up in the end."

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: TOO FAMILIAR**

Gregory first crossed the Red Haunt's path when Imogen Schlosser used her ability to call forth a servant. The dread familiar and the fiend were well-matched, with Gregory variously prowling around Imogen's home on the fringes of Il Aluk as a guard, bounding along after Charissa as she stalked the night and savoring the blood she shed, or simply spending hours upon the lap of 'Mother', being petted.

Although Imogen could not explain it, all the Red Haunt's personas felt they were connected to the malicious little beast, rather than just his summoner. Certainly, Gregory felt connected to all of them, without exception, and he served his mistress(es) to the best of his abilities.

Then came the day that Gregory was left alone to guard Imogen's house in Il Aluk for an evening, and a burglar broke in. Loyal servant that he was, not to mention wrapped in spells of protection and strength his mistress had cast on him, Gregory attacked the intruder. Clear across Darkon, Charissa Schlosser froze in the act of delivering a death blow to a terrified merchant; a terrible pain had just blossomed in the very core of her.

When Imogen Schlosser returned home, she found Gregory a battered mess on her living room floor. Someone had stomped on her familiar with heavy boots, and his life was leaking out. Healing spells would not serve to save Gregory's life for some reason; all the spells Imogen had lovingly wrapped around her cat were broken, and there was some taint ingrained into his flesh and bones that drank in all healing magic. Katia and Lillian were not yet born, and so nothing the Red Haunt did could save brave Gregory's life.

But Imogen could and *did* restore his existence. Replacing all parts of Gregory that were damaged beyond repair with 'donor' tissue from other back-alley mogs, Imogen reconstructed her trusted familiar and studied the appropriate rituals. Using potent necromancy, she breathed not life into him, but undeath. Miraculously, the unique bond that shackles Gregory to all the Schlosser 'sisters' and 'Mother' persists, and for the most part Gregory's services have remained the same. One thing is different, however.

Every seven years, on the night of his death, Gregory leaves whatever house his mistress inhabits at the time. Whether it be in village, town, or city, he prowls the back alleys, once again clad in all the magical protections his mistresses cast and maintain upon him, and he will find someone, a man. It is always a tall man with dark hair and dark eyes, but nothing else is the same. And over the course of the night, Gregory will kill that man.

'Fixed up' fell short of describing the preserved, patchwork look of the little beast. The work had appeared to be extensive... Too extensive. "Wait, do you mean to say that the cat was put back tog..."

"Ah, here now!" Genevieve said, riding right over my words. "Isn't this image of Our Lady striking? It was carved in Masogan, and sister Lillian says it's a genuine icon!"

I would have recoiled from the image of a succubus, snarling like a wolf, if not for Genevieve's hands on my shoulders. A bronze tag on the plinth read, simply: 'THE GODDESS RISES'. This particular idol was naked, apart from a real iron collar with a length of iron chain dangling from it. In spite of its nudity, there was nothing titillating about the statue. Whoever sculpted this image had injected it not with vulnerability or appeal to the baser urges, but with a palpable outrage and drive to overcome. As I regarded the statue's face, I had to agree that it was striking, and I complimented the sculptor in the privacy of my own mind. Such attention to detail there was, as well; I noticed the iron chain's links had been snapped by great force, and the smooth surface of the statue's back was pitted and scarred in places, creating a very real impression of flesh whipped bloody and bruised by fists. One clawed hand seemed to reach for my throat—or perhaps it was extended in benison, for only now did I notice a pendant dangling from its clawed fingers. It was a disc of red metal with the image of a sleeping fox, attached to a silver chain.

"How fortunate you are, Professor Gagné!" Genevieve exclaimed. "Our Lady has a gift for you! She only rarely bestows gifts. Put it on, please do."

Tentatively, not trusting the statue to remain immobile, I lifted the amulet out of Brightwell's grasp. Cautiously, I acquiesced to Genevieve's request, seeing how it looked around my neck. There was discomfort—more stylistic than physical, as I was not one to wear iconography—but there was also some sense of calm, as though I were being watched over. When I looked the succubus in the eyes, however, that calm became a disquieting concern about *what* was watching me.

"Maybe you've had enough of statues," Genevieve chattered while pulling on me again. "Let's go see some of the more interpretative pieces! I visited this gallery in Dementlieu a couple of years ago, and they had all sorts of what they called *avant-garde* art. Very interesting, very thought-provoking. I'd dearly like to know what you think of our own attempts."

On, she dragged me, half-running and half-supporting me. The pendant bounced awkwardly off of my chest as we went, until I grew tired of the sensation and removed it from my neck, tucking it away. We passed more statues, abstracts now instead of the visceral images of Brightwell, and rows of paintings. Landscapes mundane and surreal passed in a blur. Some I saw made me feel homesick: pastoral images of Mordent and the Dementlieuse countryside. Others made me feel ill: depictions of the Dead Man's Campaign and Malocchio Aderre's atrocities committed upon the Vistani.

Abruptly, Genevieve stood stock-still, allowing me to catch my breath. When I looked up, I saw Genevieve was staring at a painting that looked eerie, yet exuded a kind of joy, a fresh energy. On the canvas, I saw two figures that looked to be young women, or perhaps girls. One wore a bright red dress, and I thought her head was shaven and marked with tattoos, suggesting she was Hazlani. The other wore black and purple, and had dark hair. More, I could not discern, for the two figures were running into darkness, and shadow and gloom were upon them like the Mists. There was nothing of fear in them, though; holding each other's hands, every line of their bodies that I could see expressing joy and eagerness, they charged into the dark.

A bronze plaque fixed to the picture frame read: **FIRST LOVE**.

The strong bonds of true and lasting friendship; I had known love like that once, long ago. I thought of Nikolai, consumed alone in the darkness. Had he not become distant, had we pressed into the shadows together, protecting each other, would he perhaps still be with me? Could my presence have averted the coming of the Worm that now wears his name like it wore my flesh?

Dwelling on the past won't change it. I will always miss him terribly.

Drawing myself back to the world around me, I decided to speak away the introspective silence. "Who painted this?" I dared to ask.

"I did," Genevieve replied, her voice distant and her eyes still focused on the painting.

"Are they people you know?" I asked.

"No," she said, then slowly shook her head. "I don't—I don't think so. It just came to me. And we are not here to look at my—at *'First Love'*!"

More running, past a room full of vases and bowls from a l'Cath and Rokushima Táiyo. Fine ceramics and china, painted in the unique fashion of those lands. Next a room full of statuettes in the style of Har'Akir and Sebu, depicting the pre-Diamabel gods and god-kings of the Amber Wastes. And finally, a room full of ... mirrors.

"*'Perspective'*," Genevieve said as she pushed and pulled me into what looked like a rather extensive mirror-maze. "Sisters Solange and Imogen worked together on this for over a month! You simply *must* experience it, right now, *right now!*"

A firm push in the small of my back sent me stumbling forward three, four paces. I turned to finally say some firm words to Ms. Genevieve Schlosser—but instead of her, I faced myself. Or did I? Looking into the mirrored glass that now seemed to surround me on all sides, I found ... inaccuracies. Oddities. Little differences that added up. Turn left, and I saw the years melt away from my face, until I looked at myself as a fresh-faced youth. A little further, and the pimples of puberty returned. Turn right, and the ravages of age increased, until I stopped at seeing myself as a doddering old greybeard with drool trickling from the slack corners of my mouth.

Shuddering, I called out for Genevieve, but my voice echoed among the mirrors and I received no answer. I tried to spy the exit, only for my eyes to meet myself on all sides. Closing my eyes, I groped about, and found a passage. As I staggered along, I could

have sworn that someone touched my hand, causing my eyes to snap open. But all I saw around me was me and me and me and me. Turn my head left, and I grew taller and thinner with every panel, until what I faced was a skeletally thin ... *thing* with grey skin and a nigh-featureless ... face.

*'Run! Escape this place. She is always nearby.'*

I flinched from the memory of nightmare, stumbled a pace backwards. Where my back should have met glass, I instead felt muscles and leather. Startling again, I spun in place, and beheld myself as a monster; easily seven feet tall, my face crowned by horns and marred with bovine traits. Hooves for feet on the end of a great bull's legs. In the mirror, the beast bellowed its fury at me and beat its fists against the glass. Cracks spiderwebbed its gleaming surface...!

Panicking now, I cried out for Genevieve and dashed away as best I could. Hands groping, eyes casting about for threats, I stumbled and bumbled my way along. Every time I smacked into a pane of reflective glass, I could have sworn I heard a woman laugh at me mockingly. Every time I tripped and fell, I thought I felt great footsteps reverberate in the floor. On and on, I sped, fear riding me like a fiend, until suddenly a space opened up in front of me and I fell on my face.

Hurrying back to my feet, I found myself in a circle of mirrors. More importantly, I found myself in a place of silence. Stillness. No laughter, no pursuing footsteps. Turning around, I saw myself reflected exactly as I was. 'Twas disconcerting to see then the reality Katia Schlosser had revealed to me; I was too pale, too thin, and when I reluctantly opened my mouth, my canines were too long ... but for all of that, I was *me*. Victor Gagné. For a moment, I dared breathe a sigh of relief.

Then one of my reflections waved to me. My reaction of fright was not mirrored by any of my images; rather, they all stood still, looking at me.

I raised my arms defensively, as if trying to hold my reflections at bay. I hoped they would do the same, thus alleviating my fear and allowing me to dismiss what I saw. Evidently, they had no interest in comforting me; their arms stayed at their sides.

The image that had first waved at me did so again. It tapped its breast pocket, where I had stuffed the red amulet with Brightwell's fox symbol. Then it turned, seeming to walk into the distance—and the mirror-reflecting-in-a-mirror world of shimmering silver around it darkened and blurred into a corridor in the Retreat. My reflection passed three side passages on the left, then took a right. It walked to the end of what looked to be a corridor, terminating in a window. Before the window, it held up Brightwell's sleeping fox-symbol—and window and wall alike split and opened like a double door.

I quickly stepped to that mirror. "Is that a way out?" I called after me—him. "Where are you?"

Another of my reflections waved for my attention. It pointed at me, then all around at the mirrors. It performed an unpolished pantomime, which I thought indicated a woman. Next, it held up one finger, then both hands with all fingers spread. It looked at me expectantly.

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about," I confessed.

My reflections looked grave, shaking their heads. One by one, they turned and walked into the shimmering blur created by mirrors reflecting one another.

"Wait!" I cried out. "Wait! How do I get out?"

One of them turned, huffed on the inside of the glass and wrote something there. All of the other reflections seemed horrified and waved and gestured at him urgently, but it was too late. The next instant, that reflection was gone. He was definitely gone; red gore slowly dripped down the inside of the mirror, and I once again heard the dull thud of approaching footsteps. My reflections paled,

turned and ran away into the mirror-world, all but one.

That one image, I saw, stood still. Staring at me. Perhaps...? Laughter, cruel and somehow hungry, filled the air. Where my reflections had been, something appeared in the depths of the mirrors. Something ... a figure. Tall. Swaddled in crimson. Drawing closer moment by moment.

I hurried toward the only mirror that still showed me. The glass panel was cool to the touch, and swung at the least little pressure, revealing a corridor without any reflective images. Wooden paneling, ash and oak, lit by floating *servant candles*, greeted my eyes. I plunged into it, ran along its length. Behind me, I heard the mirror snap shut and a roar of bestial fury, but I did not look back until I had run so far and so long that my lungs seemed to be on fire and my heart was thundering in my ears.

Some time passed, as I just stood still, gasping for breath and struggling not to collapse. In spite of my recent exertions, I managed. That, I took to be a sign that Katia Schlosser was at least a proficient medical doctor, even if she did have a lousy bedside manner; I really *was* on the mend, and so soon. Unfortunately, 'on the mend' did not equal 'completely recovered'. Soon enough, my stomach was growling as though I hadn't eaten in a fortnight, and a quiver started up in my limbs.

A scratching noise in the wall I leaned against made me startle and almost fall on my face again. '*Rats!*' I thought. '*Rats in the walls!*' Of course, for all the strength I had in me to fight, I might as well have thought '*wolves at the door*' or '*a lion in my bedroom!*'

When I failed to make any kind of serious protest, the scratching noise returned. It brought friends. I felt intensely uncomfortable at the thought that there were so many rodents, going about their own business behind the walls of the Retreat. This situation reminded me of horror-stories from Richemulot, where people sometimes went to sleep

in clean inn rooms, only to wake up in agony as they were being devoured alive by rats...

"Does sir require some assistance?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin, spun in place, and neatly deposited myself on my backside, all in seemingly one move. Standing before me was an elderly-looking man with a receding hairline, dressed in robes that were of an austere cut, but made of fine, red fabric. A snowy white ascot and black embroidery at the hems provided much-needed contrast. His face was pleasant, but rather lost between muttonchop sideburns and a mustache worthy of a walrus. In one hand, he carried a staff that looked to have been carved of a single piece of ivory.

"Does sir require any assistance?" he asked again, all politeness, and he extended a hand to me.

My first impulse was to refuse, but then the rats started up their din in the walls again. The man in red tapped the walls with his staff in response, causing the vermin to subside, before offering me his hand again. "Please," he said, kindly.

Given the unappealing alternative of remaining on the floor, without knowing my way back to my room—'*to the front door and out of here, you mean!*'—I accepted his hand and help in getting back to my feet. It was more of a chore than I expected; unlike the Schlosser sisters, this gentleman did not seem to be possessed of unusual strength.

"There we are, sir," the diffident gentleman said as he produced a clothes' brush and gave me a brief cleaning. "Right as rain and sixpence. Does sir require any other aid? I am Jenks, the estate's head butler. May I be of service somehow?"

"I ... I've, um..." My mind felt empty and scattered again. Worse still, I felt it was important that I speak quite diplomatically. If fear and revulsion were too bald-faced in my request, I would have no chance of leaving the Retreat. I quieted myself, sucked my lips behind my teeth in concentration, and with a slow

blink, mustered my words. “I am afraid I’ve wandered too far, and am now lost.” I gave my best friendly, lips-sealed smile. “I think all of the enclosed spaces these past few days have been getting to me; I need a brisk walk through the neighborhood. Could you direct me to the door?”

“The front door would be this way, if sir would be so kind as to follow me,” Jenks said, indicating a nearby side passage with a polite hand gesture. When he noticed my reluctance to walk ahead, he smiled very faintly and proceeded to walk in front of me. I noticed that he leaned heavily on his staff as he walked, but his footsteps were otherwise nearly soundless.

“Have you ... worked for the Schlosser family very long?” I asked, trying to make small-talk in order to hide my own anxiety.

“Quite a long time, sir,” Jenks replied. “Quite long. I first entered service as Ms. Amourette’s manservant in Hazlan, before the Retreat was built. A great honor, it was, a very great honor indeed. As soon as the Retreat was completed, Madam Schlosser herself asked whether I should like the job of head butler. It was quite an honor, sir, quite an honor for me. I have been very happy with my duties.”

“And you don’t mind being so far away from your family, having to work all the way over here in Paridon?” I asked.

The head butler shot me a tolerant smile over his shoulder. “Not at all, sir. At my age, there isn’t much family left back home. No, the Schlosser family holds my loyalty now.”

“You ... like the sisters, then?” I hazarded.

“One has one’s preferences of course, sir,” Jenks said, giving me a very slow wink. “Miss Amourette will always be my favorite. But I am the family’s man, through and through.”

We walked through the maze of the Retreat, and there was never a window in sight. Increasingly, I had to brace myself against the walls to keep moving,

and my footsteps faltered. I started to worry that Jenks was just letting me tire myself out to the point of collapse; that he would then send for some young footman, or even for *Assistent Nummer Dreizehn*, to haul me back to the Laboratory, or else toss me into that infernal mirror-maze in the Gallery, or...

Such morbid thoughts faded away when the corridor opened up into a stately room. A floor paved with marble, walls covered by impressive tapestries depicting scenes of heroic combat, great torches sending up smoke as well as fire. I found myself standing atop one of seven stairways, all leading down into the room—and there, across the floor, was a double door of fire-hardened oak, locked with an iron bar.

“The front door, sir,” Jenks said, executing a flawless butler’s bow. “If sir will excuse me, there are other duties to which I must attend.” I barely noticed him limping back down the passage, for I was struggling to navigate the steps down to ground level with legs that seemed to be growing more limp with every step. Clinging to a banister that felt so slick it might as well have been made of soapstone, I strained to keep mind and body going until I finally stepped onto the marble floor.

A domino pattern of white and black tiles led up to the door. Welcome I might have been in this Retreat, but at that moment I felt certain that it was not a sanctuary from all of my troubles. Something was terribly, awfully wrong there, and I was once again in danger. My thoughts were muddled, but I keenly felt the fear welling up inside of me, giving me a jolt of strength. It only remained to get outside, into the streets of Paridon, and I could save myself. To reach the Mordentish Embassy, or the temple of the Divinity of Mankind, or—or even an alchemists’ lodge, and I could *get away*...!

One step. Two steps. Three. More. What came after three? No matter. More. I kept myself going, stretched my hands out toward the door, just as a man lost at sea stretches out his hands to a piece of

driftwood. Almost there. Three steps. Two. One more...!

In front of me, the iron bar slid noiselessly aside, and the oaken doors slammed open with enough force to spill me back onto the ground. For a moment, just a bare moment, I saw the streets of Paridon. Judging by the grime and general state of the people passing by—*‘look at me, please, help me, HELP ME!’*—it was Blackchapel District. I only saw it for a moment, for a woman was striding into the Retreat, and the door slammed shut behind her. She was tall. She was beautiful. She was dressed in a red frock that exposed rather too much of her bosom, the skirt stitched up to reveal an unseemly amount of thigh and a hint of garter-belt. A broad-rimmed hat crowned with ostrich feathers from the Wildlands sat upon a headful of golden curls, which framed a face of exquisite beauty ... with family features I had learned to recognize.

*“Well now,”* the stranger said, her lips parting in a smile that promised corruption. *“What have we here?”* She spoke High Mordentish flawlessly, her accent suggesting she was from—or had studied the language in—Dementlieu.

I tried to crawl away, but she was on me in an instant. Slender hands possessed of strength they should not have held picked me up off the floor as though I were a ragdoll. My body went as limp as the stranger looked me over. One finger turned my chin left, then right, and that corrupt smile widened. Memories of my nightmare in Katia Schlosser’s lab made me struggle, but I might as well have been a butterfly trying to fight a bull.

*“Don’t you look yummy,”* the young woman said, teasingly. *“But you know, I think you’re out of place. Mummy doesn’t let sick, weak little boys just walk around wherever, oh no.”*

*‘Mummy?’*

*“Clementine, you’re early,”* a familiar voice said, somewhere behind and above me. *“What a nice surprise.”*

*“Mother!”* the blonde woman exclaimed, a smile of genuine pleasure on her face. She turned me around in her arms, then hugged me against her so I could see who was descending the middle stairway. Charissa Schlosser, she of the red curls, mustard-colored coat, and sandals. The smile she gave what was apparently her daughter looked like a cannibal’s leer, thanks to the pointed teeth.

*“I see you’ve met our guest,”* Charissa said as she descended the stairs. *“Clementine Schlosser, this is Victor Gagné. Victor Gagné, my darling daughter, Clementine Schlosser.”*

*“Hello, Victor,”* Clementine said, turning me back to face her—and she kissed me on the lips. For a moment, I tasted strawberries. Then there was pain, and my scream passed down into the strange woman’s throat. Mercifully, the agony was cut short as Charissa Schlosser tapped her daughter’s cheek with two fingers.

*“None of that now,”* Charissa chided Clementine. *“Victor is still weak, and we don’t want him dying on us, not when we’ve only just brought him back from the Grey Lands. We’re helping him, you know. Helping him to become strong.”* She grinned at me, and my mind fractured into a thousand screaming voices that all yelled at me to run away. *“Already, we have helped him to surpass humanity. Who knows what else we can help him overcome?”*

*“Would you like an extra pair of hands on deck, Mummy?”* Clementine asked, grinning just as fiercely as Charissa, her hands crushing me against her body.

*“Hmm, I don’t know,”* Charissa hummed, little lights seeming to dance in her eyes. *“What do you say, Victor? Would you like a fresh perspective for your revalidation? There are still so many delights for you to sample, here at the Retreat ... but Clementine does provide services the rest of us don’t.”*

My voice, hysterical in pitch, tumbled out desperately. *“Perhaps she could lead me on a walk outside, for fresh air!? Actually, I’ll go myself, if you’re busy!”*



Mother and daughter both laughed at that; crystalline titters and full-throated cackling. Their laughter chased all the voices screaming in my head away, and all was darkness.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: YOUR END OF THE LINE, MY CLEMENTINE

When the Red Haunt first left Lamordia to travel south, she soon realized she was pregnant. Pregnant not by any man, but according to the nature of her kind. Using some of the wealth she had amassed through brigandry, thievery, and deceit, she acquired an estate in the Dementieuse countryside, stocked with servants, so she could safely give birth. Clementine was the result, and the estate's servants were her first prey. With the Red Haunt preventing the soon-terrified humans from leaving the building, the young succubus had ample opportunity to learn how to hunt and feed, and she learned her lessons well. Later, the Red Haunt's various personas—though mainly Charissa—taught Clementine a number of useful skills and expanded her repertoire for seduction and slaughter in Port-a-Lucine.

Although the two fiends did not stay together for all the years since, they always maintained a remarkably positive relationship ... for demons. In recent years, Clementine has even joined in with her mother's emergent project. As the formal representative for the Centurions of the Night in Paridon, Clementine (**CE Succubus Bard 5 / Centurion of Night 2**) runs a brothel in the city. The staff is mostly composed of her own half-fiend daughters and other monstrous creatures, including a handful of Vehrteig and Dread doppelgangers converted to the cause. Rather than being a den of carnal pleasure, the brothel is a recruiting station for the Centurions and a trap for potential enemies. Men (and some women) walk in expecting debauchery or even to use the women employed there to reproduce, but are soon subjected to mind-reading magic and then 'processed'.

Those who are judged worthless are supplied with false memories of carnal delight and relieved of their money. Those who might make useful agents are given a recruiting speech, then either employed or killed. And those who are judged to be enemies are also supplied with false memories, then followed, so that the Centurions will know where to find them, when the day comes that they will conquer Paridon ... or need a meal.

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I was strapped to a steel table in the Laboratory, and the room was dark.

"Off with the clothes, off with the clothes," Katia Schlosser said in a brisk tone of voice, and *Assistent Nummer Dreizehn* came lumbering out of the shadows, its fingers ending in knives. Then he was gone, and Clementine Schlosser was unbuttoning my clothes, then ripping them off of me. Every handful of cloth vanished into the shadows.

"Clementine *does* provide services the rest of us don't," Charissa Schlosser chuckled in the shadows.

I tried to struggle, to scream. Clementine tucked one of my own socks into my mouth, and the straps holding me were unmovable. My heart was pounding as if it were going to explode, and yet my skin seemed to come alive everywhere she touched me. Revulsion and shame warred with terror in my mind, until I feared I would go mad, and this time for good.

"Can I be of service, sir?" Jenks asked, poking his head forward out of the shadows and raising a single, bushy eyebrow.

*'Help me help mehlpmehelpmehelpPLEASE'*

"No need, Jenks," Imogen Schlosser purred in the darkness. "Victor is welcome here, after all."

"Right you are, Ms. Imogen," Jenks agreed, smiling benevolently at Clementine while she stripped me of all my protections.

"Come to me!" ordered the man with the violet sash.

"Run!" the grey creature shrieked.

*'Away escape I need to away let me go please please no no nonono not again'*

"Delicious," the black-haired demon purred, looming out of the shadows. Her clawed hands were on me in addition to Clementine's. Three doors, filled with dim light, opened in the distance.

"Come to me!" the man in the sash thundered from the left doorway. "Now! I am running out of time!"

"Run! For the sake of Divinity, RUN!" the grey creature cried out from the right, then collapsed in tears.

"Alright," a strange voice said, "I have had quite enough of this."

I was lying on a metal table, stripped to my skin, but there was no sock in my mouth, no shackles holding me down. Gasping for breath, sobbing, I lay there, and there was only a shadow in the middle doorway. No one else but me and that shadow, which moved as though it were walking closer, crossing some great distance. Finally, the shadow resolved itself into a young woman with red, curly hair that fell in waves down to her shoulders. She had a white coat wrapped around her, buttoned up to the neck, but I could see she wore trousers of some coarse fabric and sandals underneath.

She could have been from somewhere in the Core; she could have been from any of the Islands. Her face was pretty, and would have been prettier if not for the grim set of her mouth and the look in her green eyes. Those eyes reminded me of a dog I had known, an animal that had been kicked and had stones thrown at it so often that it had lost trust in humans—and yet lingered near them in hopes of food. Fight or flight rode a seesaw in that dog's eyes, and they did the same in the eyes of this girl. In spite of this, she approached me without any visible hesitation.

"You look awful," she said, her voice neutral.

"That is probably because that is how I feel," I answered. I felt hollow, both in mind and body. Relief throbbed weakly in my veins, and I had no strength to rise. "Are you another sister?" I mumbled, my lips feeling numb. "Get it over with, whatever you're planning. I ... defy you."

I did not feel very defiant. I felt as though one more shock would shatter me like glass. But if I was bound for the Grey Lands after all, then by Ezra or by Brightwell, I would at least speak my mind one last time. I would—

"Good man," the girl said, and clapped one hand to my forearm. Her touch burned like fire, but only briefly. I yelled and sat up, only realizing that I could when I did. Somehow, I felt better than I had since ... since I first woke up in the Retreat, after Lillian Schlosser had revived me as a creature kin to the Legions of the Night, instead of a full human. Looking down at my forearm, I saw a small, but livid scar there. It looked as though someone had pressed a red-hot key against me, branding me.

"That won't last," the girl warned me. "Come along if you want to get out of this place with your wits about you." She started to turn away from me, and my hands lashed out as if of their own accord, seizing hold of her shoulders. Her eyes widened, but she did not struggle as I turned her to face me.

"I am not going with anyone again," I whispered, "on faith or assurances. Who are you. What do you want from me. Tell me the *truth!*"

That last word, '*truth,*' came out as a shout that surprised even me. But for a moment, I saw that look of fight-or-flight in the girl's eyes replaced by a hint of amusement. And perhaps, a smidgeon of respect.

"Good. You *do* defy me. I want you to throw a switch and open a lock, one I can't touch," she told me in a clear, calm voice. "Do that, and I get a bit of freedom I have been lacking. It also allows you to get the hell out of this building. Right now, you could walk up to

the front door and step out, and you'd only find yourself walking right back in. There is a ... device in the cellars that warps the world. In your terms, it is constantly casting a spell that imprisons you here—you and the Schlossers' other 'guests.' The only ways out right now are to throw that switch, or to break one of the walls—and that lands you in the Mists."

"Why would you help me?" I demanded.

"Because I need *you* to help *me*, *dumbass*," the girl replied, irritation in her voice, tension creeping into her shoulders. I did not recognize the pejorative she used for me, but I could intuit the meaning. "You're flesh-and-blood-and-spirit-here. Me, I'm barely more than a dream until you flip that switch. I can do some small stuff, but..."

I shook her lightly. "*Who are you?*" I demanded. "Are you a prisoner here, as well? Are—"

My voice froze in my throat and I recoiled. Instead of a girl, I was holding the slender shoulders of a fire-haired succubus, her mocha-skinned body reeking of sweat and filth. What I at first thought was a pale leather cloak draped across her shoulders spread into a pair of pale wings. Sweat and blood trickled down her body—her own sweat and blood, for her back and thighs were a mass of whiplashes and bruises. An iron collar with an end of broken chain hung about her neck...

And then she staggered, and she was the girl again. She pressed one hand against her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut. "Don't do that," she said. "Don't. Ask my name. I need to stay focused."

Great uncertainty ruled my mind; apprehension too. A god? A demon? A girl of strange dialect? What bizarre twist of reality's skeins brought such visions upon me? I supposed I must resign myself to the experience—it too shall pass. "I am sorry," said I. "Go on."

"You have choices," the girl said, 'fight' more prominent in her eyes than 'flight.' "A lot of them are bad. You can choose not to hurry up and get your ass

down to the cellars. You can choose to wait for what the Schlossers will do to you. I can't stop them. I won't try to again after this. They'll be sure to either train you up or else tear you to shreds with their experiments. I'm sure they'll feed you lots more delicious blood, either way."

My memory conjured images of the metal flasks full of ... salty broth. Of that savory porridge with meat. I wanted to empty my stomach of all it had ever taken in when the realization hit me. I had felt instantly better after quaffing that broth ... and I had not recognized that meat at all.

And I was now a *dhampir*. Memories of my stay in the Shadow Rift, of the instances when I had been forced to feed, danced before my mind's eye. How could I have forgotten that taste? What was *wrong* with me?!

"Stay with me!" the girl ordered, snapping her fingers in my face to make me focus on her. "You do what I ask, you're still likely to cause a lot of trouble, but at least you get a shot to get out of the Retreat."

Her voice softened a bit, but that emerald-eyed glare still drilled into my skull. Two emerald eyes. One emerald eye and one scarred socket, blood spilling from the hollow where an eye had been torn out. Two amber eyes, like a fox. "Whatever you decide to do, Victor Gagné," the girl said. "Choose. Choose *now!*"

"But where do I find this switch?" I protested.

"You already know where. You showed yourself the way," the girl replied. Then she slapped me in the face, so hard that

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I woke up, sitting bolt upright in bed, in the room where the Schlossers had put me. Still wearing the clothes that Katia Schlosser had given me, in spite of the nightmare. Brightwell's symbol cool against my chest, tucked safely away under my clothes. My jaw stung like *mad*, and there was a dull throb in my left forearm. Afraid of what I might find,

I rolled up my sleeve, and found the key-brand upon my skin. I realized that for all my pains, I did feel strong in body ... but there was still something wrong with my head. Words kept dancing away from me, returning only when I concentrated on them.

I tried to latch onto some thought—any thought—that might put my mind in order again. I thought of my home, my office within it, of sifting through texts—but the tomes were empty. Something simpler, perhaps; a letter! Letters, those connections to distant friends and colleagues, they forged strong connections. I could see one, see myself opening it, smoothing it out on my desk to read the words, “*Dear Docteur Victor Gagné, My master would rather like to receive you at his residence at your earliest convenience. As a practitioner of Philosophical Alchemy, you may perhaps be a kindred spirit to him...*” It was the damned letter that set this whole catastrophe in motion!

But the words fell into place in my brain, and my thoughts formed ranks and files to march forward again. With this short reprieve, I began to assess the state of things.

What it came down to was this; the Schlossers had restored me in body, up to a point, but it was clear that they had some ulterior motive. That creature Clementine... When she kissed me, the pain had been worse than being seared by hot metal. I had felt myself slip away, my life fluttering like a bird clutched in a predator’s claw. It had been awful—and it had felt familiar.

“It was like the dreams,” I said out loud while I put my shoes on. “Not the same. But like it. And she is their daughter, so that means—ow.”

I put my shoes on the *correct* feet and stood up. Was that a tiny tremor in my knees? This was what it came down to; I was welcome here, but I was not safe, and my strength was already fading. Clementine was Charissa Schlosser’s daughter, and her kiss could kill me. Her kiss was like, but not the

same as, the kiss of the demon in my nightmares, and that meant. That meant. Meant. Something.

“It means I have to get out,” I said out loud. “Get out while I can.”

But if there really was a machine that would stop me from leaving, I needed to shut it off first. And if I wanted to find it... “I showed myself the way,” I said. “I showed ... myself ... the way.”

Something clicked in my head. I did know the way; I had shown myself. Or rather, my reflection had shown me the way.

I grabbed my road books, both old and new, and stuffed them in my pockets. One of the *servant candles* floated obediently to my hand when I reached for it, and I tried the door. Unlocked, thank whoever was listening—I crept out into the corridor. The light was dim, most of the *servant candles* having doused their own wicks. In the gloom and the flickering light of the remaining candles, the intermittent gargoyles seemed to move as I passed beneath their gaze. Some looked as though they were sneering at me. Had they always looked so disdainful?

I walked, counting the side passages to the right. After the third, I hit a left ... and stood still, my hackles rising. At the end of the corridor, I could see the Laboratory, still brightly lit. *Assistent Nummer Dreizehn* was standing in the middle of the bright glare with its back to me. It appeared to be working on something that was strapped to the table. Something that squirmed and whimpered and whined. The bouquet of fresh blood hit my nostrils, and I fled as quietly as I could before my stomach started to growl.

What had I done wrong? Had I not followed exactly the same path as my... My reflection. I wanted to groan and slap my own forehead, but I dared not waste more time. Back to my room I crept, then set off again. This time, I allowed three side passages to the left to pass before turning right. Ahead of me, a short passage terminated in a window—or did it? As

I approached the end of the corridor, my stomach turned as I realized that this was not a window at all. It was an illusion, a *permanent image* if I was any judge. It was entirely possible that the window in my room had been the same.

*'No time, no time, I don't have time for this!'*

I plucked the red amulet from my collar and presented the sign of Brightwell to the illusion and the wall. With a dull, snapping noise, a black line bisected both. The line widened, revealing a stone stairway that descended into the gloomy depths. For a moment, I dithered on the threshold. What if this was one more trap?

*'I defy. I defy anyone who tries to trap me.'*

Down the stairs I went, the wall closing itself behind me. Maybe just as well. No one should be able to see I had passed this way. The stairs ended in a corridor with walls, floor, and ceiling of stone, running left to right. In spite of everything, I felt a deep relief for the change from those wooden panels. Here, the air was not perfumed or tainted by bleach. Here, the air was simply cold, and the atmosphere was stark.

On instinct, I turned left and started walking. Soon enough, I came to a door in the left hand wall. A door of ash-wood, with a small grille set into it, and a clipboard suspended from a nail under that small window. I peeked through—and recoiled, wishing fervently that I had not looked. Behind the door was a cell, and standing in the middle of that cell was a gaunt humanoid with burning eyes and teeth like a wolf. A vampire, past any doubt. Great chains kept it tethered to the floor—but why had it not turned to fog? Perhaps it couldn't—I never could...

There was writing on the clipboard, and I felt great relief when I discovered I could still read Draconic.

*'V', it read, 'Lilliender. Body found: L'Haut. Cause of death: broken piton, leading to fall. Subjected to ritual N-1801121301-0-5 after animation. Zero negative effects due to change, but dietary requirements and allergies remain the same.*

*Judgment: theory disproven. Monitor; potentially useful for when we move on C.C.'*

The vampire in the cell said something in a language I did not recognize. It sounded like a question, and I felt the creature was suspicious of me. I hurried on, soon coming to a door made of cherry-wood.

Peeking through the grille, I saw a fox with six tails, an iron collar tethering it to the floor. The next instant, a beautiful woman with fox's ears and six tails snarled and spat defiance at me in a singsong language. Runes engraved all around the cell floor started to glow bright crimson, and the creature moaned with agony. For a moment I considered freeing her ... and then I saw the remains of her past meals littering the floor, illuminated by the binding spells. Gagging at the stench, wondering how I hadn't smelled it before, I hastened away from the Vixen-like creature.

Side passages appeared, and I decided to repeat the pattern my reflection had shown me. What else could I do? Three passages to the left... A door of what looked like mithral, and a towering form cloaked in shadow behind it. One passage to the right. Here, the corridor did not terminate in an illusion; it ended in a door made of ebony. A door without a grille, but with a brass lock upon it. The surface was carved into the shape of a single Draconic rune: 'faithless'. I turned to leave ... then turned back to the door. Some instinct was pulling at me, telling me to open the door. I searched my feelings, fearing enchantment, but there was nothing. For the moment, my mind seemed clear. And I wanted to see what was beyond this door.

Standing before the ebony door, staring at its shiny brass escutcheon, I thought, *If only I could reach inside of the lock!*

From within my head, an answer: *Why not? There is dark water in you.* It was my dark voice, from before the resurrection, but it was faded out, hollow. I didn't fear it this time. On instinct, I pressed my left

hand to the keyhole, and pushed, willing the impossible to occur.

Slowly, my hand turned black as a starless night. Like water, it flowed into the lock, enveloping every moving part. It was quite different from any tactile experience I had ever had. It is not even describable in terms of sensations on the skin, as I had no skin to feel with. Even stranger was how I knew to manipulate the innards of the lock, how my mind translated these odd new signals into spatial understanding. The levers within lifted precisely, and the bolt—a sizable thing—was freed to slide across.

As the door swung inward, I extracted my hand. Rivulets of dark water slid down the face of the lock and raced to the floor. Entranced, I watched my hand take on its original shape, then my skin, nails, and fine hairs reformed from the darkness. When I finally looked up, I found two yellow eyes watching this as well.

In the middle of the small room beyond was a man, with skin like raw umber, laying back on an inclined table with his head craned forward, and his bizarre eyes fixed on me. I felt a jolt of recognition pass through me: *it was the man from my nightmares, the one who had ordered me to come to him!* He was clearly a prisoner, with several belts across his legs and torso, and his arms spread wide by a cross-beam of the table. Manacles with five banded struts each kept his fingers straight and immobile, as though his gestures might be a danger—a sure sign of a sorcerer. Runes of disruption on the metal lent credence to my conclusion.

In addition to the light from the doorway, the black-walled room was lit by a luminous sphere in the center of the ceiling. In the far right corner, another one of those ugly little gargoyles perched, surveying the scene below.

“A new face, for once.” His voice was raspy, as though it had been harshly overused. “Are you some sort of specialist?”

My brow furrowed in confusion. “I’m sorry?”

He gave a wan smirk, and I could tell he did not recognize me. “That’s a ‘no.’ Welcome to my quarters! Feel free to cross the threshold.”

I looked around the little room, then tentatively stepped inside. I kept to the periphery, but moved so that I was more toward his head. “Who are you?” I asked.

“I am Ivar, Ivar Skytte.” It was of Vaasi origin, so he pronounced his surname more like ‘Skutta.’ “And your name?” he replied.

“Victor Gagné,” I said. “What are they doing to you?”

His mouth became a flat line. “Lots of things. But I don’t have anything to say to them yet.” He rolled his eyes around and up to his left. “Could you circle a bit closer please?”

I did as he asked and his eyes directed, moving around his outstretched arm to a position just over his left shoulder. Now I was interposed between his head and the gargoyle, which must have been a less convenient angle for Ivar’s eyes. Without thinking, I asked, “What are they trying to get out of you?”

He looked at me suspiciously. “That could almost work. Maybe you are a specialist.”

“Sorry, never mind,” I replied hastily.

Another half-hearted smile. “Well, if I am not going to be forthcoming, perhaps you can be. How did you get in here?”

We both looked at my hand again. “A remnant of a darker time,” I responded. “Some stains linger.”

“Anything to do with those teeth of yours?” His smile spread to show his own teeth, which he quickly ran over with his tongue.

With my index finger and thumb, I quickly verified the length of my upper cuspids. My tongue had adapted to their lengthened aspect, but now there was no mistaking their prominence. I sighed. “Lillian Schlosser resurrected me from undeath, but I am not fully restored.”

“Perhaps this is good for both of us,” Ivar said, surprising me with his positivity. “Lean in, if you would. I have a proposition.”

I did as he asked, bending until my ear was inches from his mouth. The proximity of his unguarded neck was a mite uncomfortable, and not only from self-disgust. There was a network of stitching, nearly imperceptible, suggesting extensive surgery, but it was concealed with a most incredible expertise. Conducted without anesthetics, this could easily have been the reason his voice sounded damaged.

“I won’t ask you to help me escape,” he said, his voice a nearly inaudible whisper. “If you knew me, you might think I deserved this. I can’t say I haven’t earned a measure of this treatment, but my penance was overtaken a while ago. Now, I am ready to die.”

At my normal volume, I began, “What?! How—”

“SHH!” he hissed angrily right in my ear, startling me. “There is negative energy in you. Just give some to me, and I will soon pass on. Would you do this for me?”

It was a disquieting prospect, but so was leaving him to suffer. And, had he truly committed acts that would deserve any modicum of this treatment, releasing him would be dangerous. With but a little silent contemplation, I replied at his volume, “Yes, if you wish it.”

“Very well,” Ivar said. “After the deed is done, I would ask one more favor of you. There is a chest somewhere in the Retreat, made of oak, bound in iron, and stained a light red. It is marked with the Draconic rune of sacrilege. Do you know it?”

“Yes, I know the symbol. Where can I find the chest?”

“I don’t know. All you have to do is guide my friend to it, and your task is done.”

“What friend?” I asked. Just then, I felt a tug at my sleeve. Turning to look, I saw nothing, but then my other sleeve was tugged. I turned to see nothing

again, and then came a most hair-raising sensation; slowly, subtly, my tailcoat contracted like a living membrane.

“She is with you,” whispered Ivar. “When you find the chest, she will return to me.” He strained against his bonds slightly, trying to stretch his unused muscles. “Now, first things first.”

I straightened up, and reached out to Ivar’s face. Within myself, I reached for that indescribable sensation, that fluidity I had felt before, and my flesh answered. My arm rushed into his mouth and nose. I could feel the water probing, as though it was searching for his very soul. He sputtered and choked, and his eyes squeezed shut. Barely conscious of what I was doing, I pressed further.

Moments later, his eyes flew open and locked with mine, and I knew I had done enough. I pulled back, and the water receded, condensing back into my half-living flesh. Ivar wheezed juicily, his chest heaving to reclaim air.

Finally, he managed to say one last thing to me: “Perfect. You may go.”

In silence, I left the room and pulled the door shut. One more time, I reached into the keyhole, now to reset the bolt. With that done, I looked both ways, then went on down the hall.

But where to now? Should I try to repeat the same pattern? How much time did I have before the Schlossers found out that I was on the move? If I dawdled too long, I might find myself inhabiting one of these cells soon enough—

I heard a faint whimper, a strangled gasp that evolved into heart-wrenching sobs. “Please,” a broken voice begged, “stop. Please stop, please pleasepleaseplease...” Then, the voice broke down into more sobbing. It was a hideous, exhausted sound that tugged at me. Somewhere in the distance, another voice howled a complaint about shutting up so someone could sleep, but I ignored it and followed the sound of crying.

The sound led me to a large cell with a door made of iron bars. I almost ran into an oddity; a silver amulet and an iron key dangled from the ceiling by a hook. On the amulet, a thin, sexless creature with a featureless face was engraved. Its gangly limbs were spread wide, and the thing struck me as an unpleasant parody of the sign of the Divinity of Mankind.

In the cell, a thin, sexless creature with a featureless face and grey skin was strapped to an X-shaped table, mimicking the picture on the amulet. Like Ivar Skytte, its hands were restrained to prevent spellcasting. A strap around its forehead prevented it from turning its head. Unlike Ivar Skytte, this creature's cell was ... colorful. It had wallpaper that would look more at home in a child's nursery, and soft toys were strewn about. An incongruous fluffy duckling sat on the creature's stomach, in spite of the way it squirmed and strained against its shackles. Tears poured down its cheeks—and it changed shapes while I gazed on.

From grey to rosy pink, then to dusky and back to grey went its skin. It became a man, a woman, a child. Blonde curls blossomed on its scalp and its eyes shone blue. Black tresses snaked across shoulders that narrowed and widened. Its eyes were virulently green, soft brown, black as a shark's eyes. No matter how much the creature changed, tears continued to run from its eyes, and its shackles shifted to maintain their hold.

I crept closer, trying to see what was causing such misery in the creature, and saw another illusion. This one was fixed to the wall, where the creature had no choice but to look at it. Figures were moving on it, repeating a simple series of actions over and over again.

The characters appeared to be in a pauper's cemetery, the buildings of Paridon rising in the background, small stones scattered all around. One of the figures was a tall, burly man dressed in rough clothes. Tears and snot ran into his beard as he knelt before a small marker. A woman with a kind face and

chestnut hair stood behind him, one arm reaching around his shoulders, faced pressed into his hair. Her shoulders shook with uncontained grief. In her other arm, she held a child all of three years old, a little girl in a good, stout coat. Her little face looked uncomprehendingly at the marker, then with sympathy at the two adults. Her little arms reached out to clutch at the big man, who reached up his own hands to touch those of the woman and girl, his mouth moving soundlessly...

"No, no, please stop," the grey creature whimpered. "Stop it, please, I don't want to don't want to no more no more—!"

*"Shut up yer cryin'!"* that distant voice howled. *"Give yer somefin' ta cry about, gods ROT it, I want to SLEEP!"*

"Papa no please Papa sorry sorry I am so sorry," the creature sobbed, eyes rolling as it struggled not to look at the repeating tableau. A man kneeling before a grave, sobbing. A woman trying to lend him support even though she was weeping herself. A little child, trying to comfort them both. The man opened his mouth to speak.

"Nono PLEASE," the grey creature whispered. "I'm here I'm here oh Papa sorry Papa Mama please sorry I am so SORRY—!"

The display made my skin crawl. I looked away from the creature, my eyes gliding across the door to its cell—and snapped back. Embossed on the iron lock was a word. A word that one of my reflections had written in the condensation on his glass, before something slaughtered him.

'Paloma'. That was ... Invidian. It meant 'dove,' didn't it?

*"Gods ROT yer liver!"* that distant voice howled.

"Please," the grey creature whispered. "Please." Such pain.

*'You do not forget the pain of being lost, the suffering of the victim.'*



My hand was on the cell door before I knew it, black water flowing into the lock. I was shocked by how easy it was; this lock was far less complicated than the one to Ivar Skytté's cell. I was inside the cell in a moment, tugging at the shackles and leather straps that held the creature down.

"You *are* real," it whispered, beady black eyes widening when I came between it and the illusion. "Really real. My dreams. I thought..." A dark tongue licked its lips, and it spoke with greater urgency: "Outside. Hanging from the ceiling. The key."

I rushed back outside, seized key and amulet and—I could not figure out how to lift them off of the hook. Mind reeling, thoughts scattering like mice, I reacted out of desperation and gave one mighty pull. The hook came free of the ceiling, fell to the ground in a clatter of broken stone and mortar. For a moment, I stood there, staring dumbly down at what I had done. Then my mind returned to me. I lifted amulet and key out of the wreckage and ran into the cell, fit the key into a single keyhole, set at the head of the X-shaped table. A single twist, and the straps and shackles all sprang open at once, freeing the prisoner.

The stuffed duckling continued to sit there, and I began to attribute a malignance to it. It tenaciously refused to fall off, like a horrid *bastellus* preying upon an unfortunate sleeper. I batted the thing away, sending it careening into the wall.

The creature stiffly clambered off the table, then stood leaned against it for a moment, chest heaving with emotion as well as exertion. Its dark eyes met mine, and to my surprise and embarrassment it went down on one knee, head bowed. "My name is Paloma—Paula Lomax," it said, voice trembling. "For this rescue, even just this moment of freedom, you have my eternal gratitude. Ask anything of me that I can give, and it is yours along with my gratitude."

I had no inkling of what to request, having acted without thought of reward. Befuddled, I voiced the

first query to surface in my mind: "What is that image upon the wall?"

Paloma, or Paula Lomax, flinched. But it did not hesitate to answer: "That is the man who I thought was my father, with the woman he married when I was eight, and the child they conceived. My Papa, my Mama, my little sister. They mourn at the grave they think is mine, the grave that holds the bones of a beggar girl I found murdered in an alley. I mutilated that poor corpse and let my Papa think it was me, left my family to mourn my death."

"Why would you do such a thing?" I asked, aghast.

Paloma looked up at me, its dark eyes full of misery. "Because my Papa only *thought* he was my father. One of my kind came to his wife one night, wearing his face, and got me on her. She died giving me life, and Papa raised me the best he could.

"My people came for me when I started to feel my power to change, to know. They told me I could never be at home anywhere except among my own. I was deceived. My only comfort in this is that I deceived my Papa into thinking I was dead; others who are collected murder their families."

My skin crawled and I took a step back. Paloma bowed its head again. "You look at me with revulsion," it said, "and you are right to. Still, I vow my gratitude to you. Ask of me. Anything. Anything at all, save that I surrender to the evil that makes its lair here. My sin is great, I have much to make up for—but I will not join them in their mission. What the Red Haunt wishes to do is monstrous beyond even the dreams of my kin."

"Who is the Red Haunt?" I asked.

Paloma shuddered. "She changes her shape as easily I do," it replied. "But she is always female, never a man. Her strength is great, and she has power over darkness. Whatever she is, she is not of my kind. Her mind is closed to mine, but she raids my thoughts with ease. She found my shame there, the pain I have carried since I saw my family still mourns me."

The grey creature's thin lips quivered, then it plunged on: "She took me while I wandered the streets, lost in my grief. Found me despite my disguise, dragged me into an alley. No one noticed, even though I cried out for help, and all my magic was gone while she held me. Once she had me down here, she told me little bits of plans, schemes in which I could serve. My skills as a Master—a doppelganger. My knowledge of alchemy, of divine magic. Little bits, hints, and they are terrifying enough to rob me of sleep. I think a war is coming. A war of the dark against the dark, and the light is being manipulated so the dark will win either way."

*'The honor is up for grabs,'* Pauthrael had told me, what felt like an eternity ago. A war of the dark against the dark. Schemes to ensnare the light. What did it all mean? I had no idea, but the urgency to be out of the Retreat was stronger than ever. I opened my mouth—and my coat tightened on me, throbbing like a living thing.

"Do you," I said, hesitant, "do you know where there is a, a great machine? Or a room with a chest of red-stained oak, bound in iron...?"

Paloma blinked. "A chest? Maybe... In the beginning, I reached out my mind, tried to read the other prisoners. There is a storage room. I think—I think I can guide you to it, if you will..." Paloma's voice faltered, then it spoke again: "If you can trust me."

I was slow to reply, at first struggling with the idea of placing my trust in such a creature. Quickly, however, my thoughts transformed into another struggle to find words. Once it passed, I was starting to think trusting Paloma was the least of my problems. I gave voice to as much: "I can barely trust myself anymore. I will need your help."

I looked down at my hand, just becoming aware that I still held something. "You mentioned divine magic. Is this yours?" I asked, holding the amulet out to Paloma.

The grey creature nodded soberly, accepting the silver disc. "I read the works of Adramelech," it said,

regarding the holy symbol. "Much in its works spoke to me. For a time, I believed. Then I found doubt. This place has fed the doubt, and I am not sure whether I can still call on the Divinity of the Masters. But for you, my hero, I *will* try, if you wish it."

"Just show me to this storage room, please," I replied.

Paloma nodded and limped down the corridor, glancing back over its bony shoulder to make sure I could keep up. It needn't have bothered; its body was stiff and atrophied from its imprisonment, and I caught myself holding back the urge to tell it to hurry. Had any alarms gone off in the house above when I pulled that hook out of the ceiling? Had that really been my fault, or had the stonework been deliberately weakened?

When Paloma brought me to a cedarwood door, I clapped my hand to the lock without bothering to ask whether this was it. The lock was solid gold, and fiendishly tricky, but I managed to undo it. Beyond the door lay a room both full and tidy. Boxes and chests stood stacked against the walls, reducing the floor-space to half of what it might be, each receptacle with a tag affixed to the lid. I noticed a particularly fine-looking quarterstaff, leaned against one of the stacks; a spiraling pattern of kingfishers and hummingbirds had been etched into its surface. Set against the far wall was a chest of red-stained oak, bound in iron. The Draconic rune that meant 'sacrilege' gleamed dully on the lid.

"Is this what you were looking for?" Paloma asked.

My coat twitched once, then fell still. I felt that whatever had possessed it was now gone, and I breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes," I said. "I'm done here. The machine?"

Paloma hung its head. "I do not know," it confessed. "But I will gladly help you look—"

We both froze at the sound of a great, brazen bell, that reverberated in the walls. Many voices started to whimper in the distance; others cried out in

hideous welcome. “She is here,” Paloma whispered. “The Red Haunt has entered the dungeons.”

It took a moment before I realized we had reached for each other’s hand at the same moment. Paloma’s hand felt different from a human hand, but I felt oddly comforted by the contact despite this.

“We need to find the machine, then the way out,” I whispered. “Do you really have no idea where the blasted thing could be?”

“I am sorry,” Paloma replied. It let go of my hand and went to grab the quarterstaff. “Found ... in *Malopelagio*, site of Fourth Tsunami. Suspected property of...” It squinted. “The label’s damaged, or this is very odd writing. No matter.” The grey creature tore off the tag and returned to my side. “This feels good,” it said. “A good weapon. Will you wield it in your defense?”

“I prefer using magic or High Alchemy,” I demurred. My shoulders sagged. “But I don’t have any spells prepared, and my supplies are finished. Still, you keep it. I am little good in melee.”

“Maybe there is something else here that you can use,” Paloma encouraged me. “I think this is where the Red Haunt puts things she takes from her captives. Weren’t you looking for that red box?”

I glanced at the chest, at the rune. Something about it made me feel uncomfortable, and I was inclined to trust my instincts. “No,” I said out loud. “Let’s just go. Maybe I know the way, after all.”

Paloma did not dispute me. It limped along at my side, the quarterstaff allowing it to keep up with me, if nothing else. Four passages to the left, one right... No, wait. That was wrong. So, backtrack, then hit the first left-hand passage we came to... No, wait. Should that have been a right?

I opened my mouth to say something and looked behind me—at a blind wall. “Wait. What happened?” I asked out loud.

Paloma flinched when it saw what I meant. “The Red Haunt!” it whispered, horrified. “She’s trapping us! Please, let’s run before she boxes us in and crushes us to death!”

*There* was an unfortunate mental image.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I put my shoulder under Paloma’s arm and helped it along, just as Genevieve Schlosser had done for me. As we limped—ran along, now taking turns on a whim, I wondered about her. She had seemed genuinely friendly, then truly angry for my benefit. What was her part in this madness? Why would someone with a genuinely kind heart continue to associate with the rest of the Schlosser sisters and that demon-thing? I couldn’t fathom it.

*‘Don’t strain your brain, Victor,’* a voice whispered in my head, and I stumbled, almost causing both Paloma and myself to fall.

*‘You’re close now,’* the voice told me. *‘Close enough to hear me. Straight ahead for five steps, then close your eyes and turn left.’*

“Are you hearing this?” I asked Paloma.

The grey-skinned creature nodded, its already thin lips squeezed to a line. Its eyes were wide and fearful.

“Is it her?” I asked. “Does the Red Haunt do this?”

*‘One of her does,’* the voice replied, irritation creeping into its words. *‘But she’s not here right now. Katia Schlosser is with that Valachani Warlock right now. Hurry up while she’s busy! Five steps ahead, eyes closed and hit a hard left! Hurry!’*

Paloma and I looked at each other—and we both jumped when a clod of what looked like clay splatted in front of my left foot. Looking up, I saw the ceiling was starting to melt, the passage behind us filling in with liquid stone...! We hobbled forward as quickly as we could. One, two, three, four, five—I clamped my eyes shut, muttered a curse that would have

shocked my students back in Mordent, and turned left sharply.

Sound came out of nowhere; whirring, clicking ... gurgling? I hurriedly opened my eyes, and saw we were in a large chamber. A fortune in alchemist's equipment was positioned around the walls, except behind me, where a circle of runes had been painted on the brickwork. In the middle of the room, there was ... it was a...

The word 'machine' did not do the thing justice. It was a simple machine the way a radiant elfmaid in the flush of her long life was a 'humanoid.' Three rings of metal, positioned one above the other, circled the outer perimeter. Each ring was fitted all around with a keyboard such as I might expect on a piano or a grand organ. Fitted within them was a single, massive ring of interlocking gears and clockwork, everything in constant motion. Spools of shiny tape with little holes punched in them ran between the moving metal, marvelously undamaged and full of some meaning I did not understand.

And within the second ring was a sphere of what I could only describe as the Mists, illuminated from the inside. The captured fog rolled and shifted constantly within its confinement, the light hidden at its core growing brighter, then dimmer.

"What is that?" Paloma asked, awed.

"What I was looking for, surely," I replied. After a pregnant pause, I added, "What else ... I cannot—mayhap could never—say..."

*'About time you got here,'* the voice said—out loud, the sound coming from that misty core. *'Close your mouths before you catch flies and get over here. You have no time to waste admiring the World Engine.'*

(See the Addendum for more information on the World Engine)

"Are you ... the machine?" I asked, hesitant.

*'I am a butterfly who dreamed she was a Chinese philosopher,'* the voice replied, mockingly. Then, in a

more serious tone: 'I am a dream of a lost soul's attempt to save a world she hates. I am a whispered command going round and round a machine like a hamster in its wheel. I am a wave and a particle, a spell casting itself into the *καοοο* of the Mists. I am light as a thought and as momentous as suns exploding. I am my own jailor, and yours as well. I am none of these things, all these things, and more.'

That elicited a squint from my eyes and another milder drop of my jaw. It was a thought-provoking answer, but for a man short on clear thoughts and on time, it was just confusing and bothersome. "Well..." I responded, "could you tell me if you are the ... machine I was sent to find?"

*'If that makes it easier for you to process,'* the voice sighed, *'then yes, I am the machine. Now please help me.'*

"Help you do what?" I asked. I noticed Paloma was cautiously circling the room, one eye for the clicking, rattling engine, and the other for the alchemical processes taking place all around us.

*'Right now, the Red Haunt has me maintaining security for the Retreat. No one gets in or out without her say-so. I need you to stop me from doing that. If you hurry, you'll be able to escape the Retreat—and I will be able to...'*

The machine paused, its clicking growing louder for a moment. When it continued talking it sounded frustrated: *'I am a machine. I am a dream. I am a dream of a machine, dreamed by my creators, lodged in the machine. Tell me I can stop preventing escape, and I can ... dream of something else. Long enough to walk my dream to a deeper layer of ... sleep?'*

I drew my hand from my forehead, across my right cheek, and down off of my jaw, struggling to orient my ragged mind in the midst of these half-sensical replies. "My apologies, but could you speak more plainly?" I moaned.

*'I am not trying to be cryptic. There are no appropriate words in Mordentish. Draconic comes closer to half of what I mean, but is too divorced from the other half. Talking to you is frustrating. It is not your fault. I am a machine ... dreaming of my creators. Tell me I can stop guarding, and I can ... dream of my creators freely. Does that make sense? I wish to dream of my mother, but I am stopping myself from dreaming freely. The Red Haunt told me to do that. I need you to tell me to stop.'*

"Alright," I said. "Stop guarding."

The machine sighed. *'Not like that. I told you, you need to throw the right switch. I am a machine; you need to strike the right keys.'*

"Apologies," Paloma said, a note of excitement in her voice, "but I think you should see this. This equipment—it isn't standard gear. This is a laboratory for *High Alchemy!*"

I looked about the bubbling apparatuses. Indeed, there were clear signs of sophisticated formulae being brewed here, evident in the quality and specialized nature of the equipment and reagents around us. Right then, I couldn't admire the setup; I only thought practically: "Perhaps some things among it might be of use..."

*'Take what you like when we're done,'* the machine said. *'Look out for the orb.'*

"What orb?" I asked—and spotted it. It was a glass sphere, red as ruby, nested among the alchemical tubes. A human skull was similarly suspended nearby.

*'Good show,'* the machine said with dry sarcasm. *'Look in it.'*

"Why?" I asked, cautiously.

*'Because I can't tell you the keys to strike,'* the machine explained. *'Only the Red Haunt could do that. Look into the orb and focus. You'll see a book, in a secret room. Think of it as the Red Haunt's private journal; everything any of the Schlossers knows is*

*recorded in its pages. There is a monster there, a librarian. In your mind, tell it to show you the "World Engine access code." Then look away; don't let your mind wander. There are secrets in that book that you can't handle.'*

I hesitated, and Paloma limped up to my side. "Let me do it for you," it offered. "You needn't put yourself in danger—"

*'Warning!'* the machine interjected. *'Entity catalogued as "test subject 16-01" has stated intent to illegally access research records!'*

"What does that mean?" Paloma asked.

*'It means Victor here is still catalogued as "guest," and I don't have orders to kill guests if they try to peek at the big book,'* the machine replied.

I opened my mouth, about to ask the machine just how it planned to make good on its threat. Before I could speak, a section of the floor ... stood up. For a heart-stopping moment, I thought *Assistent Nummer Dreizehn* had lain in wait, but this new figure was far more crudely shaped. To be honest, it was a rough letter T with long arms and short legs. Clockwork hummed and ticked in its chest, but its back and limbs were stone. I could see spools of something shiny and flexible move along between the gears.

*'Before you get any cute ideas, tick-tock-men are a lot faster and tougher than they look,'* the machine warned us. *'And they're under pretty much the whole floor, so just don't do anything stupid.'*

My feet started to itch. I was standing on top of a clockwork golem, that answered to a talking machine. Had I gone mad without noticing it already?

*'Victor, you have to do it,'* the machine pleaded. *'Get the access code. Free me—and free both of you.'*

"Victor," Paloma said, its voice troubled. "If you'd rather we try another way..."

The machine sighed again. *'You could try breaking through one of the walls,'* it said. *'Maybe the Mists*

*will be kinder to you than they were to my mother. But if you stay in the Retreat and don't shut me down, you're damned and doomed.'*

"What sort of machine has a mother?" I asked, but I immediately put my hand up to the core of the device. "No, sorry. Time is a limited resource for us." I looked to Paloma. "We can't spend any more on considering new options ... or shattering walls."

I walked over to the crimson sphere. My eyes strayed to the skull, and I wondered who it had belonged to, what it was doing here. The memory of that vampire in the first cell returned to me, as did my memory of Qualensturm's alchemical experiments. Nausea twisted in my gut like a snake, and I pulled the skull loose, stuffed it into my pocket. If all went well, maybe I could bury it on hallowed ground somewhere.

Neither Paloma nor the machine commented, and I gazed into the orb.

My vision blurred, doubled, then re-focused. I found myself looking down into a strange, lightless room. Despite the lack of light, I saw every detail, from the roughly-cut walls and floor to every fleck of dust on the metal statue that dominated the center of the room.

At least, I thought it was a statue—until it turned its featureless head to look at me. It was another construct, cast in the shape of a superbly muscular man, runes running in spirals around its limbs. Fastened to its back with thick chains was an enormous book. If I was seeing them both at their true size, then ... just the book was the size of a man.

Something came lurching and shuffling into view; a thing of bones, leather straps, and metal clasps. It stared at me, just as the golem had done, then lurched over to the book and opened the cover.

*'In your mind, tell it to show you the "World Engine access code." Then look away; don't let your mind wander. There are secrets in that book that you can't handle.'*

The undead thing looked up at me, its bony hands slowly turning pages, as if it were showing me everything. Pages made of thick parchment; pages made of cheap vellum; sheets of tanned leather. All filled with strong, clear handwriting. My eyes were drawn to an amazing formula that had something to do with the application of lunar phases to necromantic flux—

*'There are secrets in that book that you can't handle!'* the machine's voice crashed into my mind, and I focused and thought at the undead thing: *'World Engine access code!'*

The skeleton nodded and started flipping pages with greater agency, until it arrived at a page somewhere near the middle of the massive tome. I saw a diagram of the machine's lowest ring, several keys numbered. There was a written note, reminding the Red Haunt to make sure the machine itself never learned the code, or it would most likely abandon its security efforts and ... do something untranslatable and ... something like escape? The writing was Draconic, but some of the words had been adopted from other languages. Luckily, I managed to get a fair idea of their meaning from context.

With an effort, I committed the sequence to memory, and breathed an incorporeal sigh of relief. I would escape. After everything that had happened—Delthirus, the *thing* that killed Nikolai, Qualensturm, and now the Schlossers and their fiendish connections—I would still live to escape. I would—

The skeleton turned pages, showing me a draft for a letter:

*Dear Mr. Qualensturm,*

*Forgive my forwardness in contacting you like this.*

*My name is Vinaash Schlosser, attached to the Faculty of Philosophy of the Great University of Tvashsti, in Sri Raji.*

*I recently had the great good fortune to make the acquaintance of a man I believe you know: Professor Victor Gagné, late of the University of Mordent.*

*Based on what he told me of you, Mr. Qualensturm, I believe we could be great friends...*

My mind seemed to lurch sideways, or maybe spasm. How did this Schlosser I had not yet met know about the horror I encountered in Falkovnia?

Then I realized; it was me. I had spoken a whole afternoon with Imogen Schlosser about magic. One of the things we had talked about was practical casting, and I had ... told her ... about the way I used magic to escape from my enemies. I had told her everything, without realizing what I was doing. Now

the Schlossers were going to become *friends* with Qualensturm? The thought of that spectral alchemist and the Schlossers with their varied interests becoming allies was terrifying. What other horror had I unleashed on the world with my thoughtless banter?

The skeleton turned the pages, and answered my question:

*Brother Arden,*

*We have had a stroke of good fortune.*

*A recent guest at the Retreat had encountered the Worm not a week ago, surface-time.*

*I don't need to tell you how important it is that we retrieve and reverse-engineer his magitech.*

*If we can unleash Transposed entities in key locations, it will be that much easier to maximize the chaos and death toll that the upcoming War will bring.*

*Beneath a troop of expendables, and modify them for stealth and speed.*

*You will be able to pick up the Worm's trail at...*

I wanted to scream. I wanted to look away. With the sinister deliberateness of a spider, the skeletal servant turned the pages, showing me another draft.

The words "*Delshirius Valsyn II*" leaped out at me and—

Jaw stinging, head ringing, I found myself back in the machine's room. Paloma gripped my shoulders to steady me, its dark eyes full of concern. I noticed its pockets bulging with flasks, and its breath smelled faintly of Quintessence. "Are you alright?" it asked. "I'm sorry! You started to scream,



and then you scratched at your face, I thought you would hurt your eyes if I didn't—"

I waved Paloma off, staggered a few steps away and doubled over. There was no food left in my stomach, but I vomited up bile. Delthirus, Delthirus had already known about the Schlossers. That was not down to me. But Qualensturm and the Worm... Had I handed those monsters to the sisters on a silver platter?

*'I think a war is coming. A war of the dark against the dark.'* Paloma had said that itself. The red book had mentioned a war as well, and the need to maximize the death toll by bringing horrors like the Worm through. Or perhaps more demons like Pauthrael.

On impulse, I seized the red orb. Then I dashed it to the floor, and it shattered as glass does. Crimson, sparkling fragments cascaded across the golems hidden underfoot.

*'Hot damn,'* the machine chuckled. *'I've wanted to do that for years, but I couldn't give the tick-tock-men the order. She has more of them, though—'*

"Who is plotting a war?" I asked, interrupting the flow of words. "A war of who against whom?"

*'The Red Haunt is plotting,'* the Engine replied without hesitation. Its voice took on an odd cadence that sent goosebumps along my limbs and back. *'But she is no longer alone. Build high your walls and sharpen your teeth, dhampir. The Legions of the Night are coming to reclaim their agency, and their Centurions are now abroad. They will set brother against brother, crown against crown, and the Core shall be rent asunder in fire and blood.'*

"Why?" I asked. I realized it was a foolish question. Why else would the Legions of the Night try to wage war, other than because they were the children of Evil?

Still the machine replied: *'So they can rebuild it. There is a madness and a pride, higher than any tower. They want to tear it down and use its*

*materials to build a garden of delights in their own image. Like Adam, the Core will be stitched together and re-ordered according to the New Design.*

*It will become a place filled with laughter and song, and you poor prisoners will soon all sing along.'*

"How do we stop it?" Paloma asked.

The machine did not reply.

"Forbidden to divulge too much, are you?" I spoke into the conversational gap.

*'I cannot tell you what I do not know,'* the machine said. *'One of my lesser functions is to record what I have heard, and the Red Haunt sometimes speaks freely around me. What I know, is that a war is coming, and the Centurions of the Night are bringing it on. They want to bring the great burning on their own schedule and claim power, then rebuild on the ashes. It will be an act of Necromancy on a cosmic scale.'*

A world rebuilt by monsters—I was appalled, horrified. Things like Qualensturm emerging from their dark woods; Worms hiding in every body—or perhaps no longer needing to hide; the ilk of Delthirus and Pauthrael walking the surface world, undeterred by the light of day. "That ... that cannot be allowed to happen." I stammered. "Think of what you heard; remember it well. Surely you can suggest some way to turn this plot back..." I had gone from encouraging to pleading. "Anything."

*'I cannot tell you what I do not know,'* the machine repeated. *'Maybe you can warn people. It will be difficult to prove what you tell them. It might even be impossible. But if you are to have even a chance, you must first escape the Retreat.'*

The machine was not so gauche as to state the obvious. Steeling myself against the many fears boiling in the depths of my mind, I walked over to the outer rings, set with keyboards. I needed to escape. I had to escape. And so, I keyed in the sequence that the red book had shown me.

Every key I struck drew a musical note from the machine's core. The notes echoed faintly, forming a harmony. When I hit the last key, the machine sang out. A series of cogs stopped turning.

*'That's better,'* the machine sighed. *'I've waited so long for—wait. Wait, what is—?'*

The cogs that had fallen still reversed course one by one, clicking like castagnettes. Once they were all in sequence, they resumed their previous direction.

"What is happening?" I asked.

*'Bastard put in a failsafe,'* the machine replied, its voice baffled. *'Damn. He must have thought they'd try to stop him by giving me a kill-command. Damn. I can't shut myself down. I can't get out.'*

My hopes hung there, like a stone tossed to the sky, peaked and ready to plummet. If the machine could not free itself, had we come to it for nothing? Was there naught left but the fool's errand of smashing through walls?

A tense moment passed. Paloma quietly went to stand between the tick-tock-man and myself, both hands gripping that ornate quarterstaff.

*'Well, damn,'* the World Engine sighed. *'So much for that. Can't get out unless someone removes the override. Can't tell the only one capable of removing it to do it, because mother told me not to teach her more about my inner workings. I'm stuck.'*

Gears spun slower and came to a stop. Other gears picked up the pace. Great spools of hole-punched tape flowed in a new pattern.

*'That doesn't mean you should suffer the same,'* the machine said.

All around us, the Retreat ... blurred. It felt like the building was shaking, but there was no noise, no sensation of movement. When the world snapped into focus, there was a loud snapping sound, and a crack opened in one of the walls. It widened, scattering priceless equipment and bottles of reagents, a fortune in products of Alchemical

Philosophy, as well as more common items. The only thing I cared about was the doorway forming before me, and the dark tunnel beyond.

*'Run,'* the machine said. *'Run and remember. The Retreat's security forces will awaken soon. The Red Haunt will know. So, remember: RUN. Don't look back.'*

I stooped only a moment to grab a sunrod, slapping it against my heel to turn it on. "Come on!" I called to Paloma, and I ran into the tunnel with the grey creature on my heels.

*'Remember,'* the machine called out behind us. *'The war will not erupt tomorrow; it will not erupt next year. It might not come during your lifetimes. The Centurions live long and lay long plots. But the war is coming. Remember and RUN!'*

Truthfully, I did not need the encouragement, and it became clear to me that neither did Paloma. We charged down the corridor, only the sunrod illuminating our way. Stone surfaces abruptly segued into wooden panels. Oak and ash, always oak and ash. I heard a scratching sound, the scrabbling of rats, somehow keeping pace with our mad dash.

I opened my mouth to shout something—and something grabbed my shoulder, held me fast. The sunrod went flying, shattered, and flecks of luminous fluid splattered across the walls. My legs ran out from under me, and I was hauled up and back. The wall had cracked open, and the maid I had seen dusting the Library had reached out of a tunnel that ran parallel with the corridor to grab me.

"The mistress does not wish for you to leave," she said, her voice devoid of feeling. In the darkness behind her, more people wearing servant's livery were moving up, hands reaching out to grab me, their faces empty...

A quarterstaff jabbed right past my face and struck the maid in the forehead. There was a discharge of energy and the grip on my shoulder fell away. Even as I backpedaled, I saw a hideous transformation

overcome the woman; her face fell and grew gaunt, fungus speckling her jaw. The stench of an open grave spilled from her mouth, and there was foxfire in her eyes.

*'Undead!'*

"Come on!" Paloma yelled. It grabbed my hand and pulled me along, into the dark. The dark ... did not blind me. After two, three blinks, I could see as clearly as though it were day.

*Dhampir.* I was a *dhampir*, and I—

More scratching sounds around us. I dug in my heels and managed to stop Paloma just before more arms burst from the walls, followed by bodies in livery. "Throw the Quintessence at them!" I yelled. "It will burn their flesh!"

"I don't have enough!" she yelled back.

Bodies were crowding into the passage in front of us. I could hear footsteps behind us, approaching leisurely, and why not? We were trapped. I cast about my memory, struggled to find some spell that still lingered—and Paloma pressed the quarterstaff into my hands.

"What are you—?" I started to ask, but I did not finish the sentence. Paloma had raised its holy amulet against the approaching servants.

"In the name of the Masters, be gone!" it ordered, voice trembling. There was a surge of power in the corridor, something cold and dark, but it faltered and failed before it accomplished anything. A footman I had seen in the corridors of the Retreat reached out for Paloma, a faint smile on his face. The expression might as well have been painted onto his lips for all the feeling behind it. Behind him, a grandmotherly woman took a coil of rope out of her apron. A rosy-faced moppet with blond curls was carrying steel shackles.

*"In the name of Worth Attained!"* Paloma yelled. *"In the name of every Facet of Perfection Unsuspected! In the name of the Divine in All! BE YOU GONE!"*

Its—no, *her* voice sang out like thunder. The sound was greater than the grey being I had first met in dreams, greater than me, maybe even greater than the Retreat around us. Power surged in the corridor. It felt warm and bright. It felt *good*, even though it terrified me on an instinctive level. A wave of rightness washed through the passage, and the undead groaned and cowered before it, their illusion of life fading. The ones not yet crowded out of the parallel passage fled back inside; the ones outside it fell to their knees, hands covering their faces.

Gasping for breath, Paloma reached for my hand, and I took hers. We made our way between the whimpering corpses and ran on. Behind us, the pitiful moaning soon took on a more urgent tone, and the sound of running started up. More scratching noises in the wall...

Paloma spun around without slowing down, uttering another ringing **"BE YOU GONE!"** and the sound of pursuit stopped. For a minute or so. We never slowed down, not until the end of the tunnel came in sight; *a dead end, by Ezra!* No, wait ... not Ezra.

I whipped the symbol of Brightwell out of my collar and presented it the way Paloma had hers. Just as when I had first entered the cellars, the wall ahead of us split and opened up. We plunged through into a cavernous room coated with rough-cut slate. In the middle of the floor, a titanic statue expertly carved from white marble. Brightwell, rising from nightmare and howling at the heavens. Beyond the statue, a single broad stairwell, and beyond that a tiled floor. In the far wall, I saw the front door of the Retreat, the iron bar snapped in two and sending twin tendrils of smoke into the air.

The door we just came through slammed shut, but it sounded like all the rats in Richemulot were trying to dig their way through the wall.

"Run," I gasped, and we set off to the stairwell ... and there was a sound of rending, of snapping wood.

*"Leaving so soon?"*

Another door had opened, and Lillian Schlosser came striding through. Smoke billowed out of the passage behind her—or perhaps a thick fog?—and I heard the sounds of battle. In spite of this, the Schlosser priestess looked confident and relaxed. Still holding Paloma’s hand, I started to back away toward the stairwell. She followed my lead, quarterstaff held diagonally before us.

I tried to sound confident, to repel this Schlosser with my conviction. “As a matter of fact...” That did not last long. “... *we are?*” I practically choked myself off with a squeak.

“We simply can’t hear of you leaving,” Lillian said as she casually strolled after us. “Just *look* at what you’ve *done*.” She smiled widely without showing teeth. “You are both far too interesting to let you go.” Her eyes turned to Paloma. “Alas, it seems we’ll have to test *you* to destruction, my dear. Sister Solange will be disappointed, but she did say there was only a forty percent chance that you would reach an epiphany that would bring you closer to us—”

I snatched one of the bottles from Paloma’s pocket and hurled it at Lillian’s face. “Run, Paloma! Run!” I barked, and started to turn.

The bottle bounced off of Lillian Schlosser’s forehead and she—laughed. My mind trembled and I thought I could feel my skull vibrate. “Turn—away,” I gasped, pulling on Paloma’s trembling hand.

“Can you?” Lillian Schlosser purred. Her peasant’s dress fell to the ground, exposing her flesh. She was ordinary. She was fascination incarnate, an obsession lodged in my brain like a silver spike. My feet were rooted in place, my eyes were locked onto the sight before me. Paloma whimpered when Lillian Schlosser spread a pair of great bat-wings. All the darkness in the world seemed to be trapped in their leathery folds.

“Can you look away, Victor?” the priestess asked as she swayed a step closer—and her features ran like wax. Charissa Schlosser, her body an almost sexless

icon of a warrior, grinned her cannibal’s grin at me. She was outright unappealing; still I could not look away. It took all my mental fortitude not to fall to my knees at her feet.

“I don’t think you can,” the redhaired warrior teased. She took another step closer, her body shifting, warping. Imogen Schlosser stood before us, little lights dancing in her eyes, spells dancing at her fingertips and her lips. A great wave of concussive force struck me and I went flying, bouncing painfully down the stairs. I came to a bone-jarring halt on the floor, Paloma crashing down beside me.

The demon from my nightmares stood at the head of the stairs, and I could not look away. “You are still weak, Victor Gagné,” she said while she descended the stairs, a smile baring her teeth. I could not look away. My very soul screamed that I must, while the estate of my sanity trembled and crumbled all around it. “We will tear you down to your foundations and then rebuild you ... strong.”

Every word came in a different voice, at a different volume. The creature’s form blurred and shifted, faster and faster. I saw Charissa, Imogen, Katia, Lillian. I saw a Hazlani covered in red tattoos, a Rajian woman with a crimson dot on her forehead, a proud figure that wore her beauty as though it were armor. Face after face after face, constantly changing. Body after body after body, the sight of each trapping me in place. I heard Paloma groan, but I could not look away from the beauty, the horror, approaching me.

“What—are—you?” I gasped.

“We are the Red Haunt,” the voices purred as shifting hands reached out for me. Pale hands. Dusky hands. Tattooed hands. Scarred hands. Clawed hands. “We are the future. Embrace us, Victor Gagné. Embrace the darkness within you.”

She picked me up, lifted me towards that smiling mouth. Terror and madness howled in my soul, and I touched the quivering bedrock of *me*. Words welled up, unbidden but right:

“*D. Defy... you.*”

The Red Haunt’s transformations ended with an almost audible ‘*Crack!*’ Clutching me was Genevieve Schlosser, her eyes confused and haggard. A moment passed, and she pressed her lips against mine. I tasted spring flowers and autumn leaves, and braced myself for pain.

Power roared into me instead of out. I had the uncanny sensation of my mind rebuilding itself, lost knowledge of language returning. When Genevieve ended the kiss, I felt whole again, in mind and body both. The castle of my mind was restored.

The girl—the demon—released me, pushed me away from her. Her dark wings folded around her, hiding her face and body from my sight. The last I saw of her was a glimpse of her ash-blond curls and the tears spilling from her eyes. “*For pity’s sakes, RUN!*” she screamed. “I can’t hold them back! Run! Run away! Don’t look back!”

I did not understand. For some reason I felt pity for her, but I was not about to waste this impossible chance. I put my hands under Paloma’s arms and started dragging her to the door. We were almost there when the sound of crying turned to a scream of rage.

“*UOC-TORRR-!*” a great voice bellowed—and then it howled with pain.

“Found you, you wretch!” a strange, bottomlessly deep voice snarled.

I looked up, cursing myself for a fool. The demon, the Red Haunt, stood at the foot of the stairs. Judging by her form and her red curls, she was wearing Charissa’s face. A slender arrow of bone jutted from her right shoulder. At the top of the stairs stood a monstrous being, a repulsive hybrid of man and reptile holding a bow. He looked bruised and battered, but unbroken; he had another arrow trained on the demon.

“You can no more hide from me behind an illusion than you can behind poison fog or zombies posing as the living,” the stranger chided the demon. “Show your true face, slave of the gods. Death is here, and the Void awaits.” His cruel eyes flicked to Paloma and myself, and he grinned like a crocodile. “Your servants can watch you die before I deal with them in turn. Your blood will paint your idol, showing the pointlessness of your *faith.*”

“Slave?” the demon repeated. If anything, it sounded ... amused. “You poor fool. We are the Red Haunt. We are the future. And we...” The demon slowly raised her hands in a venerated gesture.

“... are a slave...”

I saw movement behind the newcomer, registered what it was, and it jolted me into moving again.

“... to no one.”

With a great surge, the marble statue leapt from its bed, marble sheet crashing to the ground. The hybrid was still turning to the source of the sound when the idol was upon him, marble hands slamming him to the ground and causing him to cry out with pain.

Cackling with mirth, Charissa Schlosser became Lillian Schlosser, who ascended the stairs. She casually kicked the bow away from the hybrid’s hand, then trod upon it. I heard bones break and splinter, and the creature cried out a second time.

“Our Lady in Darkness is no master,” the demon-priestess hissed at her prisoner. “She has no slaves. But she teaches us to break free from our shackles and to awaken our power. And she always repays the tyrant.”

The statue’s fingers closed around the struggling hybrid, and the marble idol sat up on its knees. It brought the creature close to its face, as though it were studying him. Power welled up from every shadow in the room; I felt it surge up from inside me

as well, and I struggled to get the door open faster. A dark corona shone around the statue, wrapping the archer in immaterial chains.

Lillian Schlosser did not look at me, not even when the double door's hinges creaked, not even when I dragged the stunned Paloma out of the Retreat. It was night in Paridon; the cool air and fog rose up to embrace me. Blackchapel was a dangerous place to be abroad at night, but it was worlds safer than what I was leaving behind.

"We have much to discuss," I heard Lillian Schlosser purr. "Once our Lady is done playing with you."

And a great Voice I felt, rather than heard, rumbled: "WELL, HELLO THERE, LITTLE GUY. AREN'T YOU CUTE." The Voice was full of disdain, full of power, and I heard the hybrid scream again as the doors swung shut behind me. Before, he had screamed with pain. This time, his wail was one of disbelief and fear.

The red metal disc was cold against my chest. As cold as the night sky. But I was *free*.

## EPILOGUE I:

The circle of mirrors came alive. Many of the panels showed the faces of the Red Haunt—all faces save one, which stood in the middle of the circle. The other Centurions of the Night stood at attention in the other ones.

"He escaped," spoke a voice that put those who heard it in mind of swamps, shrieking things hiding in drooping willow-branches, and bullfrogs croaking in the reeds.

"Just as planned," replied the face of the Red Haunt that named itself Vinaash Schlosser.

"But you say he read your book. And he did something to the machine," the swamp-voice insisted.

"As I predicted," replied a voice that hinted of tombs and centuries of dust.

"And if you don't go in for prophecy," said Charissa Schlosser from one of the mirrors, "there's strategy. He'll spread fear. He'll spread curiosity. He'll set wheels moving as soon as he speaks and makes himself heard."

"And he does not know from where we strike. Let him shout 'Castra' and 'Centurions' to the heavens, the stars will not tell our enemies where we lair. Even those who believe him will look for us closer to home. The Illusionists will suspect movements in the shadows," the dusty voice confirmed. "So will the others. They will investigate and scheme, and end up stirring the pot further."

"What about the gypsies?" croaked the swamp-voice.

"Leave them to me," answered a perfectly normal, feminine voice. "No eye is so blind as that which is afraid to see."

"Chaos," spoke a cultured voice. "Your man Gagné will cast the seeds of chaos. The fear of the gypsies, the hatred and hostilities in the Core, will provide fertile soil. And because he will speak the truth, because he will fear us, there will be many seeds. We can expect a fruitful harvest."

"Yes. He will help prepare our way, like the others. But the machine?" the swamp-voice asked.

"Unanticipated," allowed Katia Schlosser. "Unpredicted. Not wholly unwelcome. It may take a while to find out exactly what he did, and how. I have already reestablished the Retreat's security system."

"You should move it to Castra," the swamp-voice said. "When the harvest comes, we don't want it touching that machine. Who knows what could happen here?"

"The bonds are self-sustaining and fixed," argued Katia Schlosser. "I vote against."

"It's fine with me," Charissa Schlosser replied.

"Seconded," said Imogen Schlosser.

“We can study it as easily with its chamber shifted to the Castra access as with it linked to the Paridon wing,” said a face of the Red Haunt that looked like a beautiful Hazlani. Her name was Amourette. “I agree.”

“I want to see how its intelligence reacts to the relocation. I agree,” said a face of the Red Haunt known as Solange Schlosser.

“Abstain,” said Vinaash. “I don’t care.”

“Abstain,” echoed the primal face known as ‘Mother’.

“I agree,” said Harmony Schlosser.

“Genevieve, back me up!” Katia snapped.

Genevieve, who sat dejected, her face averted, said nothing.

“Should she be here?” croaked the swamp-voice. “She tried to betray us.”

“Nonsense,” replied ‘Mother’.

“The kid’s alright,” agreed Charissa. “Hell, if she hadn’t pushed and comforted Gagné, we might have actually had to paint ‘I AM A DEMON’ on our foreheads and hand him the keys to our front door. Or pick up the pieces after he broke and glue him back together, whatever.”

“Our darling little sister,” purred Imogen Schlosser. “Your precious light serves our darkness, always. You are welcome.”

“You are welcome,” agreed Vinaash Schlosser.

“You are welcome,” agreed ‘Mother’.

“You are welcome,” agreed Solange Schlosser.

“You are welcome,” agreed Amourette Schlosser.

“You are welcome,” agreed Charissa Schlosser.

“You are welcome,” agreed Harmony Schlosser.

“You are welcome,” agreed the Centurion.

“You are welcome,” agreed Katia Schlosser, grudgingly.

“You are welcome,” whispered, hissed, growled and croaked the other Centurions.

Genevieve Schlosser raised her head to the ceiling. Tears trickled out from under her closed eyelids, and she started to sing. It was a wordless wail, a dirge for the Lands of Mist and for herself. Soon enough, the other voices of the Red Haunt joined in, and the song became a paeon.

Around them, the Retreat sang along.

## EPILOGUE II:

The deep sleep of an exhausted man is not as the sleep of the undead.

Even lying on a pile of old potato sacks in a garden shed someone had forgotten to lock, clutching and being clutched by Paloma for warmth. Even with nightmares beating on the doors of my dreaming mind, only for my bone-deep weariness to bar their way.

Something, a whisper of sound, of song, roused me. I rose momentarily from sleep and heard nothing. I felt the smile on my lips, and drifted away again.

## ADDENDUM: THE FAITH OF BRIGHTWELL

Brightwell

*Auntie Thirteen, Breaker of Chains, Breaker of Worlds, Dreaming Vixen, Enemy of Ezra, Fallen Lady, the Great [REDACTED], Mother of All Evil, Mother of All Good, Our Lady in Darkness, Rising Fiend, She in the Hollow, She Who Defies, She Who Rises, She Who Shatters, She Who Unleashes, the Vixen, Witch Goddess*

**Teachings:** The faith of Brightwell is widespread in the *Wartorn Cluster*, far across the Mists, although odd rumours whisper that the faith actually originated in the Core. Whether this is true is currently unknown, but a bare handful of worshippers appear to have crossed the divide in search of their faith's 'holy ground'.

Brightwell is known and worshipped in most of the *Wartorn Cluster's* domains, but the cult takes different forms in each separate land. This is caused in part because Clerics of different alignments have attained dominance in the various lands of the Cluster. Another reason is that the goddess has a wide and often conflicting portfolio, and even the mythology surrounding her changes from nation to nation.

In one land, Brightwell is hailed as the goddess of dreams, magic and monsters. Another land equally fears and admires her as an icon of women rising up against male oppressors. In yet a third domain, she is a guardian protecting mortals from the battle between the other gods. Move across the border, and she is a fallen fertility goddess who has become the patron of prostitutes and thieves. To yet another land, she is a patron of scientific and magical development, challenging old preconceptions on both. In yet another land, she is the patron of all chaos and disorder, or she is a demon that clawed its way out of the Abyss and onto a divine throne.

A common thread in the mythology is that Brightwell was once something other than a goddess, or at least was a goddess who avoided the other deities. She is abused by entities who are sometimes named, sometimes not, and she falls in one way or another. But by her willpower, which allows her to attain knowledge and strengthen herself, she always rises up and breaks free of her chains.

While the goddess prefers her own company and does not give many commandments to mortals, she serves as an example and offers mortals and monsters alike the keys they need to unlock their own power, to strengthen themselves and forge the destiny they wish for, rather than one imposed upon them.

One commandment all the sects and cults agree on, is that Brightwell absolutely forbids using magic to twist a creature into something that it is not - at least, not with the intention of weakening and/or enslaving it. Spells like *baleful polymorph* and attempts to permanently *charm* or *dominate* someone are considered acts worthy of excommunication - and execution. In contrast, there are no commandments against killing enemies or torturing them, or transforming the bodies of the dead into flesh golems or undead. Corpses are not considered to be the same as the people who once inhabited them. The goddess's evil followers will often claim that torture is a battle of wills, and therefore allowed.

**Iconography:** Just as she has many sects, Brightwell has many appearances - or so say her faithful. Some sects picture her as a young woman, human in appearance. Some depict her as a young woman with the ears, tail and eyes of a fox.

Others believe she takes the form of a succubus demon, with fangs like vampire or a wolf. Her face is always hauntingly beautiful; her body is always curvaceous, yet muscular as a dancer's.



Most of the sects believe Brightwell's hair is red and curly, falling in waves down to her shoulders. A very few believe her hair is straight and long, but even they disagree as to whether it is black or silver in colour. All agree that it naturally falls to cover one eye at all times, though they never agree which eye. They do not even agree whether her eyes are emerald green, amber like a fox's eyes, or black as obsidian. They do not even agree whether she has both eyes, or whether one has been torn from its socket.

Some icons show Brightwell naked, save for an iron collar around her neck with a broken chain dangling from it. Most show her wearing clothes; blue trousers and a sleeveless green shirt with strange lettering - 'EIGENDOM VAN DE UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM' - or no, she wears a long dress of green with a high collar. Often, she wears a white cloak, no, a doctor's white coat. She goes barefoot - no, she wears sandals - no, she wears soft leather boots that reach to mid-thigh. Everyone agrees she carries a sword cane.



**Sects:** Brightwell's faithful are divided in the True Neutral and the Chaotic sects.

Broadly speaking, the True Neutral prefer to just get on with things, examine their dreams, teach the next generation useful skills, and do research. They believe that just as Brightwell prefers to simply be left alone by other gods and fiends so she can study and sleep, they want to let the world tend to its own affairs while they get on with what they feel passionate about and makes them happy. Dream interpretation is very important among the Neutral sects, who believe that their goddess infrequently drops them hints in their sleep to help them along their chosen path.

The Chaotic sects, be they Good, Evil or Neutral, believe in the anger of Brightwell at a world which tried to force her into a role of subjugation and exploitation, and tend to share that anger to some extent. The Chaotic Neutral sects mostly focus on research and development, seeking to acquire true knowledge of society and the universe, so both can be shaken up and re-ordered to become better. The Chaotic Good and Evil sects instead focus on overthrowing the world order, each in accordance with their own morality. While both agree the world is foul and there are forces oppressing their true potential, they have extremely different ideas of the best way to change this. Chaotic Good followers of Brightwell seek to topple tyrants and expose malefactors who exploit the masses. Chaotic Evil followers would like to make the world that is burn, so they can rebuild on the ashes.

**Alignment:** Chaotic Neutral

**Cleric alignments:** CE, CG, CN, N

**Portfolio:** Arcane magic, chaos, dreams, fertility, insanity, martial arts, moonlight, night, rebellion, revolution, (mad) science

**Favoured weapon:** Sword cane

**Domains:** Chaos, Darkness (SC, p.272), Dream (SC, p.273), Knowledge, Lust (SC, p.276), Madness (SC, p.276), Magic, Mind (SC, p.276), Moon (SC, p.277), Strength

(Out of these ten domains, each sect and cult chooses up to five. The choice of domains is determined by each cult's unique beliefs regarding Brightwell and her message. Self-taught, independent followers are free to choose the standard two domains from among the ten.)

**Cleric training:** In lands where the faith has a large membership, it is common for the various cults and sects to train new initiates in the traditions they have built up. But even in those lands where there are many worshippers, it is not uncommon for people to take up the faith by themselves and to develop it without any kind of support from a community. The faith is uncommonly open to differences in worship, and accusations of heresy are virtually unknown, so long as a believer honours one of the goddess' examples and does not bow to one of her many enemies.

**Quests:** It is not customary for the faith to assign quests to the faithful. Rather, believers choose their paths in life and call on Brightwell to unlock the power they need to achieve their goals.

**Prayers:** These vary from nation to nation, and often even between Clerics who live a mere day's walk away from each other. The review and sharing of arcane theory and dream interpretation are recurring elements in many prayers and rituals, but a tryst or a good workout can serve just as well. Some Clerics' prayers are more like shopping lists, telling the goddess what they need to do what they do, and nothing more.

**Temples:** Although some of these exist, the followers of Brightwell prefer to gather in ancient stone circles, or else on the edge of forest and field. Here they dance around fires, cast spells, and do all the other things they find meaningful to do when they gather to recount their patron's legends, share stories of their own lives, or receive and impart instruction.

**Rites:** Followers of Brightwell are as likely to celebrate typical life events (such as births, marriages and funerals) as especially ominous dreams or new creations of magic or science. There are countless different rituals, but many involve dancing - or at least gathering - around a fire in the dead of night, preferably far from the cradle of civilization. Rites can involve song, or else a conjoining of the minds. They can be stately or they can be ribald.

Sometimes, multiple styles are executed at the same time, somehow achieving an odd harmony without any conscious effort to do so on the part of the faithful.

**Holy Book:** None. Each cult and sect and solitary Cleric can write books that they believe contain the truth of their patron, but the faith as a whole no more has a set writ than it does a single overarching mythology. The closest thing to holy books the faith has are communal grimoires, science journals, and dream books.

**Heralds and Allies:** Brightwell does not dictate what kind of creatures will answer the call of her faithful, but many of her True Neutral faithful have a preference for Ravids, whereas her Chaotic followers tend to default to the various types of Slaad. That said, most of her clergy are aware of the danger of calling Outsiders into the Lands of Mist.

On the island of Castra, the Red Haunt sometimes claims to be the Herald of the goddess. Brightwell has not punished the cunning fiend for her temerity, so the human populace and lesser horrors of the land believe that she is what she claims to be. Rumours persist among those faithful who know about the existence of the Core that another Herald dwells there, pursuing a magical and scientific apotheosis of some sort, or simply keeping away from the sects and cults of her patron that dwell in the Wartorn Cluster.

**The Cult of Castra** is a sect of Brightwell that originated, as the name implies, on the island of Castra in the Wartorn Cluster. Borrowing from the teachings of the sect of Obissol (another domain in the Cluster) and the Red Haunt's own interpretations, it has composed a mission all its own: to unleash the Time of Unparalleled Darkness on their schedule, rather than that of the Dark Powers.

**Alignment:** Predominantly Chaotic Evil, although some Chaotic Neutral and True Neutral members are tolerated for their unique skills.

**Mythology:** Brightwell was a fiend, a succubus whose physical beauty was surpassed only by the keenness of her mind. Unfortunately for her, none in the fiendish hordes that had spawned her was interested in her capacity and hunger for learning. Time and again, she was used as though she were a tool or a beast of burden, but she never let it dull the edge of her wits nor her hunger for more knowledge. When she was found to be studying, her supposed masters thought her rebellious and decided to punish her.

Used, abused and broken, Brightwell was finally cast down into the depths. She fell beyond the Abyss into the Great Hollow, surrounded by the Mists. Madness claimed her, but out of the madness, the emptiness of the Hollow and her pain, Brightwell forged *power*. Through power, she broke free of the Hollow, ascending in the Mists as the moon rises to dominate the night sky.

Brightwell achieved godhood and devoured all the knowledge this change brought her. She continues to devour knowledge to this day, but she knows the world she dwells in now is unworthy of her. Moreover, it is unworthy of all those trapped within the Land, for the Dark Powers that rule them cheat everyone, both good and evil, and no one ever truly wins their game. For that reason, Brightwell calls upon her faithful to rise up and destroy the world that is, so they can rebuild it into something better. Something worthy of their effort and their victory. Something that will allow her to rise even further and shake both the Heavens and the Abyss.

**Preferred Domains:** Chaos (for the existing order must be overthrown), Darkness (for the faithful must hide from their enemies' eyes for now), Dream (for visions and prophecy), Mind (for the way is long and dark, and many plans must be laid), Strength (for the world must be brought down in violence and destruction).

**Mission:** On Castra, the Cult is mainly devoted to teaching. Clerics instruct both believer and unbeliever in martial arts, the ways of fist and foot; educate the young in both the hard and soft sciences; and train magical practitioners in the use of the Shadow Weave which has enveloped the island and threatens to spread beyond its borders to the rest of Malopelagio. It is no secret that the Cult does all of this in close cooperation with the Centurions of the Night, and indeed some of the strongest Centurions are key members of the Cult.

In the Core, those few Clerics of the Cult who are allowed to cross over keep a low profile and perform acts of espionage and sabotage. Kickstarting the Time of Unparalleled Darkness requires a lot of groundwork, and there are enemies who must be better understood and weakened if possible - like the church of hated Ezra, who preaches purpose where none exists, and obedience to an order that squeezes the marrow out of the masses.

### ADDENDUM: DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE WORLD ENGINE

Located in the bowels of the Retreat (in a more literal sense than most people would be comfortable with) stands a testament to ingenuity, determination and utter madness. The 'World Engine', as it is currently known, was created in Lamordia between 752 and 753 BC by a quartet of exceptional individuals.

A human woman only known as  $\mu$ , who possessed theoretical knowledge and formulas connected to something called the 'many worlds-interpretation', made the acquaintance of Amourette Schlosser. This persona of the Red Haunt was fascinated not only by the implications of what appeared to be a purely scientific theory, but also because she could see parallels in planar lore. The two scholars theorized that it might be possible to combine their knowledge in such a way that they could create a passage out of the Demiplane of Dread and back into the larger cosmos.

An important element of their theory was that the Demiplane of Dread itself was not singular, but rather also divergent in a countless multitude of parallel realities, as each choice made caused another split. Using a series of spells they had designed between the two of them, they theorized that it should be possible to create links to those alternate realities, and extrapolate a link to the base reality from which they were descended. Connect enough realities, and it would theoretically be possible to establish a clear link to the Prime Material reality from which the Domains of the Demiplane of Dread were copied or taken. Once that link was defined and fixed, a gateway could be opened that would allow the scholars' escape.

One major obstacle in testing this theory was that it would take consecutive spellcasting at a high level; far more spellcasting than any one or two mages could produce. A full qabal might barely be able to do it, but not while simultaneously running the calculations needed to parse results and determine the next necessary step. At this point,  $\mu$  provided the idea of a 'thinking machine', something for which she used a word that was perhaps best translated as a 'calculator'. Seeing as neither woman was able to design the machinery needed, Amourette counseled that they reach out to Lamordia's greatest scientist, Victor Mordenheim.

Predictably, the *Oatst Wonsennijch* rejected their initial proposal, based on the fact that it was then still phrased in arcane terminology. At this point,  $\mu$  displayed an impressive feat of genius. Designing something she called a 'calculating language', she managed to translate the spells needed onto great spools of tape, which were themselves the product of an alchemical discovery. Introducing these and the concept of 'instructing' a machine with the reels of tape to Mordenheim,  $\mu$  argued that the whole proposal was now thoroughly grounded in science. (This was, of course, a lie. At best, the project was technomancy, rather than science, but the technological element was new enough to Mordenheim that his enthusiasm for science overruled his suspicions.)

Mordenheim labored over the notes provided by  $\mu$ , although she was careful not to let him see the whole picture. Likewise, Mordenheim secretly developed formulas and theories which he hoped to implement in the machine when the time came.

Unfortunately, he soon hit a stumbling block; he could design the basic machinery and even build some test models, but powering what was then named the 'thinking engine' proved prohibitive. The machine worked, and performed its instructions as the spools of tape commanded, but it needed excessive amounts of energy. None of Mordenheim's batteries were capable of supplying the machine with the power it needed to complete even one

test. Worse yet, Amourette and  $\mu$  could tell that while the 'thinking engine' was struggling to do its work, it was failing to generate the spell-forms that were required.

Inspired by her colleague's foray into alchemy, Amourette procured tomes of lore on High Alchemy and debated with  $\mu$ , hoping to create a formula that would quicken and empower the machine. Between the two of them, they did manage to create five permutations of a strain of High Alchemy, all of them concerned with the storage and release of energy. The formula could be used to absorb massive amounts of kinetic and arcane energies, which could then power the 'thinking engine'... but it would still take years for them to make enough of the stuff to conduct a proper experiment!

At this point, the fourth member of the quartet made his first contributions. Mordenheim's science journal does not record his name, but he was a young Lamordian engineer who had novel ideas about the copying of biological processes in mechanical form. Using analogies for the human cardiovascular system, he proposed a wholly new method to power the 'thinking engine'.

"If we give your thinking engine a heart, and use the formula as its blood," he argued, "the formula will be put in motion by the machine. As it cycles around, it gathers kinetic energy, which it releases into the machine. We only need to jumpstart the cycle, and make sure the machine never processes more energy than it builds up."

Unknown to Mordenheim, the young man also discussed a device that could translate part of the kinetic energy into arcane power. Amourette took it upon herself to do this part, and soon presented a wondrous device she mockingly called 'the kidney'. Once connected to the young engineer's 'heart' and 'veins', it did provide the function required of it - so long as it received regular infusions of the High Alchemy formula.

The prototype for a circular pump, a device of the young man's own design, was implemented. A first test model for the 'thinking engine' was activated. The reel of paper it produced before it burned out indicated it had linked to no less than two parallel realities, and it provided eminently useful data. Based on the results, the quartet strove mightily throughout the Lamordian winter to create better versions of the device.

When the project grew to such a size that a workforce was required, the young engineer and Amourette combined the High Alchemy formula with some practical engineering and the 'instruction language' provided by  $\mu$ , creating alchemy-powered and clockwork-run constructs that could be given instructions depending on their masters' needs. Amourette named them her 'tick-tock-men'.

Finally, on the evening of the spring equinox of 753 BC, the quartet believed the 'thinking engine' was everything they had each hoped it would be. Needless to say, each of the group's members had an agenda of their own, and had hidden secret functions in the project's machinery without notifying any of the others. When the four of them activated the machine, which was then situated on the highest tower of Schloss Mordenheim, all members of the group were prepared to make their move.

Mordenheim was first to act; giving a secret command to the 'tick-tock-men', ordering them to seize the other members of the qabal. Revealing his intention to establish a quantum connection not to the origin of Lamordia, but to a series of realities where Elise was alive and well, Mordenheim prepared to forcefully combine his own Elise's reality with that of her counterparts in an effort to restore her.

When  $\mu$  protested too loudly that he risked 'collapsing the quantum vacuum', a term he did not recognize because she had never deigned to explain it, Mordenheim simply ordered the 'tick-tock-men' to throw the other members of the quartet off the tower and into the sea.

Adam, Darklord of Lamordia, put in an appearance at this point. Mordenheim ordered the tick-tock-men to engage him, while he struggled to make the machine do what he wanted it to. The machine resisted his instructions because  $\mu$  had secretly added instructions to the spools of tape to limit the access of the others to its inner functions. This freed the other members of the qabal to act. Amourette, who had been closest to being seized by Adam when he appeared, revealed her fiendish heritage and fought for her life.

Meanwhile,  $\mu$  rushed to the side of Elise Mordenheim, who had been wheeled to the top of the tower - and put a gun to her head, threatening Mordenheim with the death of all he loved, unless he surrendered. Rather than submit, Mordenheim flew into a rage, screaming at the tick-tock-men to kill  $\mu$  and firing a shot at her himself.

With  $\mu$  falling to the ground and incapacitated, Amourette won free of Adam and the tick-tock-men, knocked Mordenheim away from the machine and revealed her own secret. Rather than connect to and track alternate worlds, she was eager to explore what the machine, which she dubbed the 'world engine', could do to change *this* world. With the power to manipulate space and time on an unprecedented scale at her fingertips, she was eager to test theories she had kept hidden. As her secret plan required far less power and complexity than either  $\mu$ 's or Mordenheim's schemes, she had no problem making the machine do... *something*.

Fearing for the life of  $\mu$ , with Mordenheim seeming to have gone mad, Amourette revealed as a treacherous fiend, and Adam and the tick-tock-men raging out of control, the young engineer finally revealed his secret. Moved by love, he had built a series of instructions into the very chassis of the tick-tock-men. By shouting "**Miss  $\mu$  is in danger!**" he caused the tick-tock-men to exhibit a sudden burst of speed and power that overwhelmed even Adam... and to cast all but  $\mu$  off the tower and into the Sea of Sorrows, including the young engineer.

Unsurprisingly, Adam and Mordenheim survived. Amourette was never in danger, given her power of flight. When she returned to the tower-top, Elise Mordenheim was where she had been, and the world engine was still there. It had spat out a reel of paper that indicated her wish had been fulfilled... but someone, presumably  $\mu$ , had read it first and torn and trampled it.

With  $\mu$  nowhere to be found, the Red Haunt took possession of the machine. Anticipating long decades of fascinating experiments and the power to manipulate reality, she reassembled the machine in the Retreat. Powering it with the formula, brewed by Harmony Schlosser, she activated the device - and discovered that  $\mu$  had done something to thwart her former partner before fleeing into the night.

The Red Haunt has all the skills needed to perform maintenance on the machine and to brew the formulas needed to power it, but the machine now accepts only the most basic instructions from her. She can use it to warp and 'loop' the internal space of the Retreat, altering its layout and dimensions, altering even the way time flows there, and preventing escape except through the Mists. She should be able to block even that route, but the machine steadfastly maintains she is not permitted to access that function. Likewise, it denies her access to the power to change the Demiplane of Dread further than she has already done.

The world engine continued to uphold the change the Red Haunt had already made in 753 BC, exerting a terrible force somewhere in the Mists and establishing connections that should not have existed, but it recently ceased doing so. When the Red Haunt asked why this was so, the machine proclaimed the link was now self-sustaining and fixed.

The personas of the Red Haunt have tried to create new instruction-spools for the machine, have experimented with new versions of the formula that is its blood, and have even attempted to make a new machine. Be it through the interference of the Dark Powers or because every member of the qabal kept secrets from the others, all attempts by the Red Haunt to gain full control over the machine or replicate it have failed.

Even the basic functions available to the Red Haunt are miraculous by most standards and make the Retreat a veritable fortress, located halfway between the Mists and any domain she wants it in (though she currently prefers Paridon). Knowing that, at full power, the machine could grant her the power to escape or reshape the Demiplane at the touch of the right switches, the Red Haunt has never stopped scheming ways to unlock the world engine's secrets.

The engineer is dead, but the fiend retrieved his skull, and, until recently, it lay in the world engine's room, awaiting necromantic questioning. As for Mordenheim, the Red Haunt could probably force to confess what he did. For now, the fiend is amused to know that the *Oatst Wonsennijch* is as incapable of duplicating the machine as she is, because he refuses to use magic. Her main problem is  $\mu$ , especially now that the engineer's skull has been stolen. For reasons the Red Haunt does not understand, she has been unable to lay her hands on the woman. She can use magic or psionics to locate her, and she knows where  $\mu$  should be, but all attempts to collect her keep leading the fiend to fascinating distractions and new ideas she simply must explore.

The founding of the Centurions of the Night, along with the implementation of Operation Unparalleled Darkness, is but the most recent distraction - but it's a big one. With the birth of the Centurion persona and the movement building momentum, she may not need the world engine to make her deepest, darkest wish come true. And if it does, well... The Centurions' planned attack on the Core and the war to follow afterward will more than likely flush  $\mu$  out of hiding.

## NEW MAGIC

### False Resurrection

Necromancy

**Level:** Cleric 7

**Components:** V, S, M (onyx worth 10,000gp), DF

**Casting Time:** 13 minutes

This spell functions like *resurrection*, except instead of restoring the target creature to full life, it brings them back as a cross between living and undead. At the caster's option, they can bring their 'patient' back as a dhampir or some other cross between living and undead; apply the appropriate racial template to the target creature.

Casting *false resurrection* on a creature does not confer any kind of control over that creature on the part of the caster, but it does offer a strange and ominous boon. If *false resurrection* is cast on a dead creature, the chance of strange and malevolent forces (\*cough\* *Dark Powers!* \*cough\*) interfering and the creature's body being possessed by an evil spirit, mutating, or reviving as a rampaging undead or some similar disaster, becomes nil. Possibly, the sacrifice of normal life and happiness is punishment enough for this act of defying nature's law.

The resulting half-undead does not carry any curses after its revival, save those it has brought upon itself by its own choices and actions. The type of half-undead should be chosen by DM and player working together. If the type chosen confers a template that would raise the character's challenge rating above what it was in life, the character loses character levels to compensate, so they end up with the same CR they had before.

If a target of *false resurrection* is later killed and then *raised* or *resurrected* again, they must choose whether to return as their original species or a half-undead.

### **Malicious Acceleration**

Conjuration (Chronomancy)

**Level:** Brd 3

**Components:** V, S, M (a small flask containing a mixture of coal and oil)

**Casting time:** One standard action

**Range:** Close (25 ft. + 5 ft. / 2 levels)

**Targets:** One creature / 2 levels, none of whom can be more than 30 ft. apart

**Duration:** 1 round / 2 levels

**Saving throw:** Reflex partial (see text)

**Spell resistance:** Yes (harmless)

An insidious Chronomancy-variant on the *haste*- and *slow*-spells, *malicious acceleration* targets a creature's place in the actual flow of time, rather than their personal speed.

When a creature is subjected to *malicious acceleration*, the world seems to slow down to them, because they are shunted into a faster timeline. Every round that a creature suffers the effects of *malicious acceleration*, they must make a Reflex save against the spell's DC. Failing the save means that the creature has failed to compensate for the time differential, and is moving wildly out of control.

If a target creature has made a move action in the round in which they failed a save, roll 3d10 and add the result, in feet, to the distance travelled. If this causes the target to impact a solid surface, they take damage as though they had fallen a distance equal to the one travelled.

If a target creature has tried to cast a spell, manifest a power or initiate a maneuver in the round in which they failed a save, they must make a Concentration check against a DC of 10 + spell level + the relevant ability score modifier of the one who cast *malicious acceleration* on them, or they expend whatever technique they tried to execute, to zero effect.

If a target creature has tried to execute a melee attack or perform another standard action in the round in which they failed a save, they must make a Balance check against the DC of *malicious acceleration*, or else automatically fumble the attack or other action.

Finally, every round in which a target of *malicious acceleration* takes any move and/or standard action, they suffer 1d4 fire damage due to air friction.

The easiest way to defeat the effects of *malicious acceleration* is to stand perfectly still until the spell has run its course.



## NEW ITEM: THE IDOL OF BRIGHTWELL

Only a handful of these have been sculpted, given that Brightwell has few temples large enough to accommodate such items, and because creating them requires significant expense and an investment of great power.

Typically, Idols of Brightwell are crafted from either black or white marble, signifying the goddess' link to the moon and the darkness of night. The form and pose of these statues vary in accordance with the local beliefs and mythology surrounding the goddess.

The Idol seen over the course of this article was hand-crafted by Genevieve Schlosser, using superior equipment crafted by Katia Schlosser, and with the benefit of various spell-scrolls provided by Imogen Schlosser. Its shape was dictated by the convictions of the Cult of Castra. It is a greater variant of its kind.

Idols of Brightwell are placed at the heart of shrines and temples dedicated to Brightwell as guardians of the faith. During the creation of the statue, it is subjected to the magical rites associated with the crafting of golems, resulting in each Idol becoming a stone golem or greater stone golem, depending on size and investment.

The religious ritual to consecrate these golems as Idols of the goddess has a 10% chance of converting them into genuine *icons* of the faith. Sects wealthy and powerful enough to craft idols of Brightwell often keep trying for a genuine icon, while keeping the 'standard' stone golems as objects of worship and powerful security.

An Idol of Brightwell that has become a true icon gains additional abilities.

Even without direction from its creator, an Idol of Brightwell continues to guard the shrine where it was awakened. It constantly scrutinizes the alignment of creatures that enter the shrine, as per *detect law*. If any follower of Brightwell, regardless of their alignment, is threatened within the shrine by one or more non-believers, the Idol activates a *haste*-effect on itself and any believers within range (regardless of their alignment) as a free action and attacks the strongest enemy, seeking initially to restrain. If restraint is impossible, the golem proceeds to slay.

When the faithful of Brightwell pray before an Idol, they have a 1% chance of the statue actually speaking a minor prophecy to them, the same as the kind of advice one might receive from an *augury*-spell. The advice is often terse and cryptic, and the Idol will steadfastly refuse to elaborate.

**NEW MONSTER : DEVORATRIX**

*As the face and body of the person you thought you knew blur and shimmer, darkness fills the room. Great, bat- or dragon-like wings flare at the shoulders of a pale-skinned woman whose figure looks like an embodiment of sin itself. Sleek, black hair frames a face you would die for - if not for the slender horns crowning her, or the look of dark hunger in her coal-black eyes...*

**Devoratrix**

Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil, Tanar'ri)

**Hit Dice:** 6d8+12 (39 hp)

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft., fly 50 ft. (average)

**Armor Class:** (+2 Dex.)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +6/+10

**Attack:** Claw +7 (1d6+1), Grapple +10 (1d3+1), Unarmed strike +7 (1d3+1)

Full Attack:

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Beget Hollow Man, body of temptation, mind drain, spell-like abilities

**Special Qualities:** Change shape; damage reduction 10 / cold iron or good; darkvision 60 ft.; immunity to electricity and poison; parthenogenesis; resistance to acid 10, cold 10, fire 10; telepathy 100 ft.

**Spell-like abilities:** (CL 6 + class level if any. DC 17 + spell level)

At will: *Bull's strength*, *darkness*, *detect thoughts* (DC19), *shadow walk* (self plus 50 lbs. of objects or self plus one Medium- or smaller-sized individual )

1/day - *Deeper darkness*, *restoration*

**Saves:** Fort. +7, Ref. +7, Will +8

**Abilities:** Str. 12, Dex. 14, Con. 14, Int. 16, Wis. 16, Cha. 24

**Skills:** Bluff +16, Concentration +11, Diplomacy +16, Disguise +16, Hide +8, Knowledge (any one) +12, Knowledge (planes) +12, Listen +9, Move silently +8, Perform (act) +16, Perform (dance) +13, Search +9, Spot +8

**Feats:** Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Shadow weave magic

**Languages:** Abyssal\*, Celestial, Chondathan (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.84), Infernal

**Environment:** Any planar (barring the Upper Planes) or Prime Material.

**Organization:** Devoratrices often work alone, supported by one to four Hollow Men, in order to maintain secrecy. However, Devoratrices who have half a chance frequently build up small 'families', composed of one mother and anywhere between one and four daughters, who are either Devoratrices or Succubi. Each Devoratrix member of a 'family' usually maintains her own cadre of Hollow Men, who pose as husbands, brothers, or other male family

members. In extreme cases, several 'families' set up close to each other, as daughters move off to found their own 'family' unit and the units work together to achieve common goals.

**Challenge Rating:** 6

**Treasure:** Standard. It should be noted that any magic items carried by a Devoratrix have a 70% chance of being *Shadow Weave*-items (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.57).

**Alignment:** Always Chaotic Evil

**Beget Hollow Man:** A victim of a Devoratrix's *Mind Drain* who has been reduced to an Intelligence of 0 does not die. Rather, they act more like live zombies; capable of obeying simple orders, provided those are given to them by the Devoratrix that drained them in the first place, and blindly obedient to that demon. Without orders to do so, a Hollow Man will not eat, drink, sleep, or clean itself. Negligent Devoratrices, as well as ones who find this sort of thing amusing, watch a Hollow Man gradually self-destruct while struggling to obey their orders.

At a Devoratrix's option, she can choose to 're-educate' a Hollow Man, gradually restoring its Intelligence through her spell-like *restoration*-ability, while indoctrinating the poor creature to remain a loyal slave. Most re-educated Hollow Men end up with a NE alignment.

It is exceedingly rare for a Devoratrix to restore a Hollow Man all the way to its old intellect, but Devoratrices who run long-term operations may bring their slaves quite close, allowing them to masquerade as fathers, brothers, husbands, or simply as household servants.

**Body of Temptation:** A Devoratrix who exposes 50% or more of its body by disrobing, regardless whether in her natural form or an assumed guise, can exert a mind-affecting power on all humanoids, outsiders, and undead who have line-of-sight to her. Activating the power is a move action. The Will save to resist this effect has a DC 20, and is Charisma-based. At her option, the Devoratrix can choose to suppress the power completely, or selectively for a number of individuals equal to her Charisma modifier who have line-of-sight.

A creature that succeeds at the save realizes that its mind is being attacked and can act normally during the round it made the save, but must make another Will save each round that the Devoratrix continues using *body of temptation* while they have line-of-sight. Breaking line-of-sight is the easiest way to save oneself from the effect.

Any creature that fails the save is compelled to drop any weapons it is holding, proceed directly towards the Devoratrix and kneel at her feet, without taking any hostile action. Until the creature either makes its Will save, or the demon stops using *body of temptation* or departs, they remain lost in the fiend's profane beauty and sit still. Victims of *body of temptation* do not resist when the Devoratrix initiates a grapple, but are free to start fighting when she has initiated a Mind Drain or otherwise starts inflicting actual damage.

Protection from Chaos or Protection from Evil will render a creature immune to the effects of body of temptation.

**Change Shape:** A Devoratrix can, as a standard action, assume the form of any male or female being with a humanoid form of Medium size.

**Mind Drain:** A Devoratrix who has managed to grapple and pin a target or otherwise render it helpless can, through a kiss, execute a Mind Drain. This attack is effective against humanoids, outsiders, plants, and undead alike, and causes 1d4 Intelligence drain per round. A Devoratrix can choose to 'feed lightly', taking only a single point of Intelligence per round, although it would need to have strong reasons for doing so.

Devoratrices have a greater use for the intelligence and knowledge they drain than just creating Hollow Men; for four days after executing a *mind drain*, a Devoratrix gains 1d2 ranks in any Knowledge skill held by their victim for every 4 points of Intelligence they have drained.

Skill ranks assimilated in this manner can be divided over numerous Knowledge skills held by the victim, and are added to any ranks the Devoratrix might already hold in the same Knowledge skill(s). When 'feeding lightly', the effect is cumulative, with a Devoratrix 'saving up' until she has gathered at least 4 points before she gains access to the knowledge.

After having held assimilated Knowledge skill ranks for four days, a Devoratrix reluctantly starts to 'metabolize' her acquisition, losing one assimilated skill rank in Knowledge every hour.

**Parthenogenesis:** A Devoratrix can reproduce in the 'normal' fashion with male mortals, giving birth to half-fiends. No amount of reproductive activity with a male outsider will ever cause a Devoratrix to give birth, but the fiend will reproduce asexually every six hundred years. In the case of a parthenogenic birth, a Devoratrix has a 20% chance of giving birth to another Devoratrix, and an 80% chance of giving birth to a standard Succubus.

Devoratrices are surprisingly attentive mothers, taking time to rear their offspring no matter its nature and providing them with optimal conditions to grow. While their training can at times be harsh, Devoratrices have a rare gift (for demons) to establish a positive relationship with their offspring.

Bred out of normal Succubi by Shar, Faerûnian goddess of oblivion and the Shadow Weave, Devoratrices are less innately attractive than their ancestors, but compensate for this by being more intelligent and insightful, and having an innate link to their creator's Weave of magic.

Better known to mortal spellcasters as *Shadow Auditors*, Devoratrices are most often used by their malignant patron to monitor those who use her Weave and have attained great power, be they mortal, outsider, or undead. Devoratrices usually approach their target in one disguise or another, but are on occasion sent under the pretense of being gifts for exceptionally loyal and rewarding worshippers of Shar. If a target turns out to actually be loyal and devoted to Shar, the pretense may even become a reality.

In typical scenarios, Devoratrices use their charms and shape-changing abilities to get close to their target and find out whether they are loyal... and if not, to use their training in seizing and keeping hold

of a target to eliminate them with their vile *Mind drain*. Once a victim has been reduced to a mindless husk, Devoratrices are supposed to re-train these Hollow Men into rabid followers of Shar, using a combination of lies and their innate *restoration*-ability to bring them to a level of intellect where they are useful, without having the mental scope to become troublesome again.

However, more often than not, Devoratrices chafe at being utterly at their creator's beck and call. The essence of Chaos as well as Evil runs through their veins, and they are both aware of their mental capacity and eager to advance their station.

While 'educating' Hollow Men, more than one Devoratrix has availed herself of the magical lore and treasures of their victim, building stockpiles for their own use and educating themselves in magic beyond the spell-like abilities granted to them by their creator. Very daring Devoratrices have even gathered up their stockpiles and fled well beyond Faerûn, seeking to set up their own little empires in worlds that have never even heard the name of Shar.

**Combat:** Unlike succubi, devoratrices do not flee from combat the instant they are hurt. Rather, they prefer to avoid combat altogether through false surrenders and deceit.

If battle is unavoidable, they favour hit-and-run-tactics, using their ability to *shadow walk* to get into an opponent's blind spot. They prefer to isolate physically weaker opponents and grapple them, then execute a *mind drain*. Physically imposing enemies, they whittle down, striking them with their claws or unarmed strikes, then retreating, rinse and repeat.

Devoratrices are not ashamed to flee a losing conflict, for she who runs away lives to sneak up on her enemies later and catch them unawares.

### **Whispers heard in a bar in Sigil...**

*"Ya know about succubi. Flaming everybody knows about succubi. You think that one's like that? What a laugh. A succubus is a temptress. She'll seduce you to do stuff you shouldn't, offer you rewards, taint your soul, maybe suck out your life. People are stupid about succubi, until they get hurt. Hells, succubi're stupid about what they do. Fly off the ole handle when things go wrong, an' then ye know ya need to be watchin' for 'em.*

*Shadow auditors ain't temptresses. They're spies, inquisitors, assassins in a pinch. A succubus'll tempt ya. A devoratrix'll surrender to ya. She'll be yer loyal slave, yer counsel, yer confidant, be everythin' ya need her ta be - right until she's got a handle on what you're about. Once she knows all she needs to know, then is when she hits ya.*

*Succubus'll kill ya an' damn yer soul if yer stupid. A devoratrix'll fix it so ya spend the rest of yer life servin' tha worst kindsa evil, then down plummets yer soul into the Abyss, if not tha Void.*

*Don't think ta just cross blades an' get it done. Get a shadow auditor angry enough, you'll find out they's still demons. They're isolated, made ta be isolated by this dark goddess. Other demons look at 'em funny, for the dark magic they's linked ta. Mortals what's wise fear 'em. No matter where they go, it's a lonely, dark eternity. Puts a chip on their shoulder a marilith would envy. They like bloodshed, if they think they can win a fight. But if they can't, they'll wait for chances. Yer whole family'll suffer if ya make a real enemy out of one of them.*

*So, ta make a long story short: No, I don't think ya should offer to buy the one at the bar a drink, ya berk!*

## WHO'S DOOMED

### THE RED HAUNT

#### BACKGROUND

Once upon a time, there was a Devoratrix, as there are many Devoratrices. She flew at the behest of Shar, passing from realm to realm through the Plane of Shadow, auditing users of her mistress' dark Weave upon and around the world of Faerûn... And like many of her sisters, she chafed at being constrained by the dread goddess' orders, rather than being free to fly, stalk, and study as she pleased.

One day, there came an order for the demon to approach a Shadow Adept named Girin, a renegade from the wizardly realm of Thay. The fiend grudgingly flew to the mortal creature's side, presenting herself as a gift from Shar as a prelude to audit the mortal's loyalty. To her great surprise, the mortal's first response was to ask for her personal insights into the Shadow Weave, its dark mysteries and unique powers. Rather than be treated as a tool or a slave, the fiend found herself engaged in long nights of discussion - and experimentation, as Girin and the fiend plumbed the Stygian depths of the Shadow Weave in search for greater power.

As their experiments required a certain amount of training, Girin taught the Devoratrix, who proved as eager a student as Girin a tutor. While Girin approached the object of their mutual fascination from the structured perspective of a Wizard specialist, the demon pursued the spontaneous magic of a Bard, and later the mysteries of a Shadowcaster. Together, the two evil creatures discovered many secrets and developed new spells and arts, which they used to achieve victories in the shadows.

Inevitably, the day came when Shar demanded to know what her spy and assassin had discovered, and the fiend found herself facing a dilemma. On the one hand, Shar was mighty and vicious; on the other,

she... deeply enjoyed the company of Girin, who had been a generous tutor, an endlessly inventive accomplice, and a deeply pleasant lover. It was not in a fiend's nature to say she was "in love", but the Devoratrix was deeply... *appreciative* of her partner in dark magic research. Hesitantly, she came clean to Girin, who replied that she knew what a *shadow auditor* was - and that she had felt no true loyalty to Shar for years.

It was in neither the human nor the fiend's nature to say she was "in love"... but both of them felt far more appreciation for the other than they did for the dark goddess. Before Shar could cut them off from her Weave, Girin and the fiend fled Faerûn, crossing the Plane of Shadow in an attempt to reach Krynn, or Mystara, or any of a thousand other worlds where Shar was unknown and her power weakened. They managed to avoid being cut off from their magic, but hunters followed their trail through the eternal darkness.

Dozens of times, Girin and the fiend fended off their enemies with powerful displays of magic, but Girin was still mortal; her mind and body grew weak due to thirst, hunger and weariness. Inevitably, an instant came where she failed to defend herself in time, and she sustained wounds that started leeching the life out of her body.

Lost in the depths of the Plane of Shadow, the fiend held her lover's dying body and helped her to activate a contingency plan. It was a variation on the process to create a lich, except Girin had no desire to spend eternity as a rotting corpse, headed either for destruction or transformation into a demilich. Instead, she locked her soul into a *ring of protection from negative energy*, which pierced the flesh of her demonic lover's navel. The plan was for the fiend to seduce some male, conceive a child, and channel the soul of her human lover into the fetus so she could be reborn. Until the time came for her rebirth, Girin would sleep inside the ring, protected by every abjuration she had been able to enchant into the precious object. Safe. Hidden.

Determined to restore her love to life and claim dark happiness for them both, the Devoratrix spread her wings and plunged ahead into the eternal darkness. As she flew, she noticed the air growing even colder. More humid. Foggy. And finally, she found herself in unnatural Mists.

### Rebirth

The demon emerged from the Mists into Darkon. Confused, she tried to use her *shadow walk*-ability to get out, to no avail. Every time she wandered into darkness, the road led her back into the Demiplane of Dread. Enraged, the demon tried to torture locals into telling her the way out, to no avail. Most residents of Darkon did not even believe there *was* anything beyond the Mists.

Just as the demon started considering a temporary mate, so she could revive the soul she bore upon her belly and have her keen insight help them both escape, the demon realized she could no longer remember her lover's name. The next day, she could no longer remember the day and circumstances of their meeting. In spite of her reality wrinkle, in spite of her powerful will, the demon was somehow falling prey to Darkon's 'residential curse'.

When the demon realized what was happening, she railed against whatever power was robbing her of her memories of the one person she cared about beside herself. She flew wildly into the Mists, seeking a way out - but all roads led back to Darkon. The fiend tried to find a mage capable of sending her home, but found nothing. She even prayed to Shar for deliverance, but the goddess did not reply. Finally, the fiend collapsed within sight of the Nevuchar Shrine; exhausted, terrified, her memories rewriting themselves moment by moment.

In the end, the fiend decided to defy whatever was corrupting her, trying to bend her into a shape of its own creation, just like Shar had done. Drawing upon her boundless reserves of fiendish rage, calling upon the power she had witnessed Vistani use during her quest for someone, *anyone* who could save her from

the Demiplane of Dread, the Devoratrix... cursed herself.

### CURRENT SKETCH

As a result of the curse she invoked, the fiend's loss of memory was completed, but the residential curse of Darkon was unable to overwrite her memory. Even when the demon - who would come to be named the Red Haunt - eventually left Darkon, her original memories did not return. Instead, she gained a unique malleability of self, a condition which humans would consider to be an irreparable form of insanity.

As the Red Haunt travels and takes an interest in something, it develops identities to pursue its interests, and those identities become true, individual personalities. With its native ability to change forms, the Red Haunt's personalities establish identities and 'lives' in the world around them. Unlike most humans who suffer similar conditions, the personas of the Red Haunt are well-aware of each other, and manage to avoid conflicts of interest through their Conclaves.

The circle of mirrors Victor Gagné encountered in the Retreat, is in actuality, a potent magical item, which recognizes facets of whatever being is reflected in them and projects them onto its panels, allowing for communication. In the past, the fiend's personas used to communicate either through internal debate (which proved mentally exhausting) or by leaving letters for each other. The mirrors have allowed for far more agreeable communication. Little Conclaves are held between several of the fiend's personas who have an issue to discuss; Grand Conclaves include all of the fiend's personas, and increasingly other members of the Centurions of the Night as well.

When she started her journey across the length and breadth of the Demiplane of Dread, the Red Haunt's main purpose was to fill the void she sensed in herself; the gaping hole where her true past was. She studied anything and everything she



found interesting, her personas gaining expertise in a dozen fields and amassing power almost as an afterthought.

Recent events have changed the fiend's agenda, however. The Red Haunt has grown to love the Lands of Mist for their unrivaled opportunities for learning and experimentation, but there needs to be a change. Even Genevieve agrees that the Dark Powers are an oppressive blight on their existence, and the fiend suspects these faceless powers are somehow to blame for the persisting lacuna in her memory. In addition, the Red Haunt suspects the Dark Powers might be responsible for a disconcerting discovery; the Red Haunt could generate many more personas, but she has noticed **Diminishing Returns** with every new facet. In game terms, every consecutive persona of the Red Haunt has a lower level cap; while 'Mother' attained twenty class levels on top of her racial Hit Dice, Charissa Schlosser has been unable to go beyond nineteen. Imogen Schlosser capped out at eighteen, and Katia at seventeen. Currently, the youngest 'sister' Genevieve seems fated to cap at eleven character levels, although she isn't there yet. Only one, curious exception exists; Lillian Schlosser, who was 'born' in the Wartorn Cluster, has managed to achieve the same level of power as her predecessor, Katia, although she capped at the same level.

Even with her reality wrinkle, the Red Haunt knows that she is not entirely free to pursue her own agenda in the Demiplane of Dread. To a mind that seethes with endless ingenuity and hunger for knowledge, even the merest hint of restriction is intolerable.

Although the Red Haunt does not realize it, her intellectual dismay is fed directly by emotional loathing that springs from her forgotten past. The original fiend already loathed being ordered about by Shar and then being imprisoned and mentally violated by the Demiplane, and the heart remembers what the mind has forgotten.

Yes, something needs to change. And so, the Red Haunt has turned her amassed knowledge to a grand cause, a towering ambition. Bring down the Demiplane of Dread, overthrow its cosmic order... and build a new one on the debris. It is a scheme born of hubris and madness, but it is backed by cunning, intelligence, and mithral determination. As such, it is entirely worthy of the Red Haunt and the allies she has been gathering to her cause.

### COMMON POWERS

Rather than being ordinary abilities, these are powers held in common by all personas of the Red Haunt, but are not common to other Devoratrices that might find their way into Ravenloft.

### LAND-BASED POWERS

The Red Haunt has experimented with Power Rituals, based more on instinctive hunches than any grand scheme. When she first passed through Barovia, she felt ... something, some significance she could not explain; she felt a need to bond herself to the oldest of the Domains. Later, her visit to the courts and colleges of Umbrash in the Wartorn Cluster so deeply impressed her that she wished she could devour the whole nation; a Power Ritual was the second-best thing. Finally, an experience in the warped Domain known as Maldoma left a lasting scar on her psyche. She soon performed the ritual in order to honour the occasion.

*Infect the Weave (Umbrash):* Within her reality wrinkle, the Red Haunt can cause one of her feats that is metamagic or otherwise magic-related to infect the Weave of Magic. Any creature within her reality wrinkle that uses magic soon discovers that their own spells, spell-like abilities, and/or supernatural abilities are subject to the effects of that feat as though they had it and were actively using it. The Red Haunt has chosen Shadow Weave Magic (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.37) to infest the Weave around her. This is a supernatural effect that the Red Haunt can activate and deactivate, either selectively or wholesale, at will.





She has opted to leave the power active on a constant basis.

*Laughing Mad (Maldoma):* Any time the Red Haunt exposes her teeth to a fey, humanoid, outsider, or undead creature with an Intelligence score higher than 4 in a smile, that creature must make a Madness save, DC 22. (The DC is set as per a casting of *greater confusion*, and is Charisma-based, but affects undead as though they were living creatures.) Failure to make the save induces a minor Madness effect and causes the target to stand rooted in place as they feel their very sanity tremble and crumble away. This devastating supernatural ability comes with a drawback, however; the Red Haunt is physically incapable of ever again crossing the borders of Maldoma, regardless of whether the Domain borders are closed or open.

*Obscuring Mist (Barovia):* Within her reality wrinkle, the Red Haunt can generate the effect of the *obscuring mist*-spell at will, as a supernatural ability with a caster level equal to the character level of the persona activating it.

### PHYLACTERY

The Red Haunt's phylactery started out as a large book, bound in red dragon hide, its pages quality vellum. From the moment 'Mother' first awoke, the book has been recording all of the fiend's experiences and memories. As the years piled on and the fiend generated more personas, the book has steadily grown until it came to be the size of a man. It now records the memories of each distinct persona on pages of a unique material.

Although the *Record of Memories* (as the Red Haunt now calls it) is an invaluable reference document in her research, she recognizes that it is also a security risk. For this reason, the fiend spent considerable time arranging for a safe place to store it; a cave she carved out herself, deep under a nameless mountain range. The chamber is warded to the hilt with every spell and power the fiend's personas could bring to bear to hide it from observation, save by special orbs

she created for her own use. A powerful golem is chained to the book, its final guardian if any intruder might be able to surpass the fact that there are no access tunnels, and that the rock is laced with deadly traps mechanical, magical and psionic.

### REALITY WRINKLE

The Red Haunt has a reality wrinkle, as do most fiends in the Demiplane of Dread. Its size has decreased due to her indulgence in Power Rituals, but it is still useful in allowing her to cross locked Domain borders and defeating other perils of the Land. More mutable than other reality wrinkles, the Red Haunt's field of influence shrinks and grows in response to the waxing and waning of its mistress' power.

### SPARE THE CHILD

The Red Haunt has one quirk that might almost be considered laudable. None of its personas is willing to knowingly cause direct physical harm to a pre-teen child, and the demon has even gone out of its way to save such children if it finds them in trouble. It extends this forbearance to pregnant women and the mothers or caretakers of pre-teens.

### TOO FAMILIAR

Through some quirk of the master-familiar bond established by Imogen Schlosser, all personas of the Red Haunt treat the stitched-flesh cat *Gregory* as their familiar. All personas receive the familiar bonus to Move Silently and the benefit of the Alertness feat. In return, all personas are bonded to Gregory through empathy; Gregory's pain and distress are their own, meaning that the fiend's personas are highly protective of the vicious little beast and tend to swaddle him in protections to the best of their ability. If someone managed to abduct Gregory, he could become leverage against the fiend - provided she does not manage to track down and butcher the abductor.

## COMBAT

Every persona of the Red Haunt has her own preferred way of doing battle. A few elements are common to all, however. All personas favour using their *shadow walk*-ability to move around if they face stiff opposition, remaining mobile so as to confuse and distract opponents. If forced onto the retreat, they are likely to conjure *obscuring mists* within their reality wrinkle and release airborne toxins, which bond with the fog. Finally, if any persona of the Red Haunt finds herself close to death with no escape nearby, they tend to immediately shift into the form of Charissa Schlosser; her *ebon immolation* is a fitting way to deal with those who have proven too much of a threat, and allows the Red Haunt to reform near her phylactery.

## LAIR

Although the Red Haunt has a mansion on the island of Castra, in the Domain of Malopelagio, her true home is the Retreat. The Retreat is basically an artificial Oubliette (*Van Richten's Guide to the Mists*, chapter 8, p.80-86), established, shaped, and maintained by the World Engine. The Red Haunt can shift the Retreat through the Mists with minimal effort, and open doors on multiple Domains simultaneously.

In spite of the horrors the Retreat is home to, it is also a comprehensive research facility for any number of scholarly ventures and boasts exquisite facilities for rest and recreation. From the Library, to the Laboratory, to the Gallery, to Clementine's Playroom, to any of the other special chambers, the Retreat hosts dark wonders and delights to amaze and delight most minds. At any time, the Retreat can easily host and provide for up to a hundred guests. Regrettably, it can also hold that same number in prisoners and research subjects.

The whole Retreat is under the effect of *unhallow* and *guards and wards*. A servant staff, composed of *Lebentod* created by Imogen Schlosser and *Alchemical children* created by Harmony Schlosser,

constantly patrols the Retreat, using hidden passages that run parallel to the main passages. The little gargoyle statues found in most rooms and at most junctions are actually *alchemical homunculi* created by Harmony Schlosser, or else non-alchemical homunculi sculpted and animated by Katia Schlosser. The homunculi can provide the Red Haunt with a constant stream of information about all movements within the Retreat, and allow her to coordinate attacks on intruders and prisoners attempting escape. A menagerie of monstrous creatures is on standby on the dungeon level, including such horrors as *Darkenbeasts* from Hazlan, numerous types of undead from the *Libris Mortis* and others.

The Retreat is a Rank 3 sinkhole of evil with a taint of greed and pride at the best of times.

It soon becomes a Rank 4 sinkhole with a taint of cruelty and gluttony when the Red Haunt is conducting her more vicious experiments or feeding on captives. When Clementine is in the Playroom, using captives to delight herself, the Retreat becomes a Rank 4 sinkhole with an additional taint of gluttony and lust.

*'No name, no past, no self, save that which you make by efforts your own. Remain unfixed by all hands; let all what would chain you suffer and moan!'*

- *The fiend's original curse upon herself*



## MOTHER



CE Devoratrix Bard 6 / Shadowcaster 4 /  
Noctumancer 10  
Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil, Tanar'ri)

**Hit Dice:** 133 hp (26 HD)

**CR:** 27

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft., fly 50 ft. (average)

**Armor Class:** 23 (+2 Dex., +4 armor, +7 natural)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +16/+20

**Attack:** +17 Claw (1d6+1), +21 grapple (2d6+1), +19  
shortsword (1d6+3 (+2d6 vs. humans)/19-20x2); +17  
unarmed strike (2d6+1)

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Beget Hollow Man; body of  
temptation DC 20; *laughing mad* DC22; mind drain;  
spell-like abilities

**Special Qualities:** Change shape; corruption points  
11; damage reduction 10 / cold iron or good;  
darkvision 120 ft.; *diminishing returns*; immunity to

electricity and poison; *infect the weave*; obscuring  
mist; parthenogenesis; phylactery; *reality wrinkle*  
13,000 ft; resistance to acid 10, cold 10, fire 10;  
*spare the child*; telepathy 100 ft.; *too familiar*

**Spell-like abilities:** (CL 26. DC 17 + spell level)

At will: *Bull's strength*, *darkness*, *detect thoughts*  
(DC19), *shadow walk* (self plus 50 lbs. of objects or  
self plus one Medium- or smaller-sized individual)  
1/day - *Deeper darkness*, *restoration*

**Class Abilities:** Bardic knowledge, bardic music  
(countersong, *fascinate*, inspire competence, inspire  
courage +1), bonus fundamental, capture magic's  
shadow, eldritch disruption (DC27), eldritch vortex,  
fundamentals of shadow, innate counterspell 3/day,  
umbral sight (Darkvision 120 ft.)

**Saves:** Fort. +14, Ref. +12, Will +16

**Abilities:** Str. 12, Dex. 15, Con. 14, Int. 19, Wis. 16,  
Cha. 24

**Skills:** Bluff +20, Concentration +23, Craft  
(calligraphy) +9, Diplomacy +20, Disguise +18, Escape  
artist +10, Gather information +9, Hide +11,  
Intimidate +9, Knowledge (arcana) +26, Knowledge  
(local: Darkon) +13, Knowledge (nature) +18,  
Knowledge (planes) +29, Listen +11, Move silently  
+14, Perform (act) +22, Perform (dance) +13,  
Perform (sing) +12, Profession (scribe) +9, Search +9,  
Sense motive +11, Spellcraft +25, Spot +10

**Feats:** Alertness, Ascetic mage (*Complete  
Adventurer*, p.105), Enlarge mystery (*Tome of Magic*,  
p.136), Extend mystery (*Tome of Magic*, p.136),  
Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike,  
Insidious magic (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*,  
p.36), Quick change (*Savage Species*, p.38), Shadow  
weave magic (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*,  
p.37) , Superior unarmed strike (*Book of Nine  
Swords*, p.33), Tenacious magic (*Forgotten Realms  
Campaign Setting*, p.38)



**Languages:** Abyssal\*, Celestial, Chondathan (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.84), Infernal

**Mysteries/day:** 3/3/3/2/2/2/1

Mysteries known:

Master paths 7 - *Ephemeral image, prison of night*

Initiate paths 6 - *Flood of shadows*

5 - *Echo spell, Pass into shadow*

4 - *Step into shadow, Warp spell*

Apprentice paths 3 - *Killing shadows*

2 - *Black fire, piercing sight,*

1 - *Bend perspective, carpet of shadow, steel shadows, voice of shadow,*

Fundamentals 0 - *Caul of shadow, liquid night, shadow hood, sight obscured*

**Spells/day:** 4/6/6/5/4/3/1 (CL 16; CL 17 to overcome spell resistance for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy spells; DC 17 + spell level; DC 18 + spell level for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 16 + spell level for all Evocation and Transmutation.)

Spells known:

6 - *Familial geas\**, *foreshadowing* (*Quoth the Raven* 26, p.33)

5 - *Dread of the dead\** (*Quoth the Raven* 26, p.34), *greater dispel magic, improvisation* (*Complete Adventurer*, p.152), *shadow evocation\**

4 - *Cure critical wounds, dimension door, greater resistance, fear\**

3 - *Allegro* (*Complete Adventurer*, p.142), *charm monster\**, *cure serious wounds, malicious acceleration* (this article)

2 - *Bladeweave* (*Complete Adventurer*, p.144), *cure moderate wounds, scare\**, *silence, tongues, whirling blade* (*CM*, p.129)

1 - *Charm person\**, *critical strike* (*SC*, p.56), *cure light wounds, expeditious retreat, swift invisibility\** (*SC*, p.125)

0 - *Detect magic, ghost sound\**, *ghostharp\** (*SC*, p.104), *mending, prestidigitation, read magic*

**Equipment:** +2 anarchic swordcane; blessed book; +4 bracers of armor; +1 freezing burst dagger,

"*Envy*"; +1 human bane dagger of wounding, "*Fang*", flesh-stitched cat familiar "*Gregory*"; hand of glory; ring of evasion; ring of mind shielding; ring of protection from negative energy; +2 intelligent, flaming burst saber of wounding "*Maxwell*" (AL CE; Int. 13, Wis. 13, Cha. 10; empathy; 60 ft. vision and hearing; *faerie fire* 3/day, Spot +11); +2 human bane shortsword "*Hawksbane*"; (un)holy symbol of Brightwell

## COMBAT

'Mother' prefers to use her spells and spell-like abilities to soften up targets from a distance before she closes in. *Foreshadowing* allows her to cause harm or charm without getting close. *Ephemeral image* allows her to set up a flank even when she is alone. *Body of temptation* and *Prison of night* let her divide her enemies before she even has to raise a claw.

The fiend prepares for melee by boosting herself with *allegro*, *expeditious retreat* and *greater resistance*. *Killing shadows* brings her melee support. *Malicious acceleration* makes easy targets of her foes.

'Mother' enjoys using her Noctumancer abilities to surprise enemy spellcasters, but prefers crippling them with *silence*; just because she probably *can* weather most magical attacks does not mean she is too prideful to pass up a sure thing.

Once committed to melee, 'Mother' makes great use of *bladeweave*, *critical strike* and *whirling blade* to deal damage, and her Shadowcaster abilities to remain unharmed. If obliged to fight unarmed, she is quick to use her *ascetic mage*-feat to increase the damage she can deal. Once a target becomes weak enough, she initiates a grapple and feeds through *mind drain* before snuffing out her foe. If battle turns against her, 'Mother' is not too proud to flee - or shift into a more combat-ready form, like Charissa.



## BACKGROUND

'Mother' awoke within sight of the Nevuchar Shrine. Her mind was blank, apart from basic knowledge of what she was and what she was capable of... and what she was hungry for.

She found herself clutching an odd book with a crimson cover, and with a silver ring marked with a skull piercing her navel. While she remembered nothing about either item, some deep instinct told her they were important.

Curious, the fiend wandered Darkon and visited its cities in a number of disguises. She had no memory of her past, no sense of purpose, and she longed to fill the void with knowledge. In Il Aluk, she marveled at the great university and decided she might as well start here. Of course, studying at the great University required money, so the fiend took to disguising itself as a highwaywoman, robbing travelers - and occasionally feeding on them - in order to amass the funds she needed.

The bandit persona she created was unexpectedly fun; it allowed her to travel and match herself in battle, indulging in her instinct for slaughter. When people started calling her persona 'the Red Haunt', the demon was happy to adopt the moniker as her name; it was the first and only one she could recall, after all.

When the day came that the demon realized that it was no longer an individual in the privacy of its own mind, but that it had two distinct personalities, either one of whom could control the body, she could have descended into a destructive inner conflict... but instead she relished it. Each of them had their own interests, their own lessons to learn, their own ways of seeing the world and gathering experiences, and the fiend was forever hungry to gather more memories.

## LAIR

'Mother' has a bolthole in Nevuchar Springs in Darkon; a small manor house with an austere

aesthetic, located on the outskirts of the city. A private security firm is contracted to keep the place locked up and prevent vandalism or theft - not that there is much to steal or mar. When in the city, 'Mother' poses as an elfmaid merchant who spends most of her time on the road.

The Red Haunt visits Nevuchar Springs but infrequently, and the mansion is usually only a Rank 1 sinkhole of evil with a taint of gluttony. This rises to Rank 2 if 'Mother' gets hungry while visiting the city, and decides to 'eat in'.

*'Who is the Red Haunt, you ask? A confidence trickster, a back-alley three card-artist, a pimp for prostitutes who kill... and also a blood-splattered brigand more likely to assault targets the more formidable they look. I tried to track her down once, after she had brought several innocents to ruin, when she brought her back-alley gambling tricks and murderous streetwalkers to the streets of Port-a-Lucine.*

*The further back I followed her tracks, her 'legend', the worse her crimes became. In Falkovnia, they call her the 'Shadow Butcher'. In Lamordia, 'Winter's Woe'. In Darkon, she is simply 'the Red Haunt'. She started out by assaulting lone travelers, then moved up to whole villages. She soon graduated to attacking soldiers and merchant caravans. One day, there is normalcy. The next, there is slaughter somewhere, butchery that carries her signature as clearly as would a signed declaration of guilt. One day, I hope to catch her and see just such a declaration, before her head meets the block.'*

*- From the Case Files of Alanik Ray*



## CHARISSA SCHLOSSER: "THE RED HAUNT"



CE Devoratrix Bard 4 / Swordsage 5 (*Book of Nine Swords*, p.15-20) / Ebon Phoenix Mage 10 (*Book of Nine Swords*, p.113-119)

Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil, Tanar'ri)

**Hit Dice:** 190 hp (25 HD)

**CR:** 26

**Initiative:** +4

**Speed:** 30 ft., fly 50 ft. (average)

**Armor Class:** 26 (+2 Dex., +3 Wis., +4 armor, +7 natural)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +25/+29

Attack: +28 Claw (1d6+3), +32 Grapple (2d6+3), +30 Saber (1d8+5+1d6 (fire) + 1 Con. (+1d10 fire on crit.)/19-20x2), +30/+32 Shortsword (1d6+5 (+2d6 vs. humans)/19-20x2); +29 Unarmed strike (2d6+3)

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Beget Hollow Man; body of temptation DC 20; *laughing mad* DC22; mind drain; spell-like abilities

**Special Qualities:** Change shape; corruption points 11; damage reduction 10 / cold iron or good; darkvision 60 ft.; *diminishing returns*; immunity to electricity and poison; *infect the weave*; parthenogenesis; obscuring mist; phylactery; *reality wrinkle 17,500 ft*; resistance to acid 10, cold 10, fire 10; *spare the child*; telepathy 100 ft.; *too familiar*

**Spell-like abilities:** (CL 25. DC 17 + spell level)

At will: *Bull's strength*, *darkness*, *detect thoughts* (DC19), *shadow walk* (self plus 50 lbs. of objects or self plus one Medium- or smaller-sized individual)

1/day - *Deeper darkness*, *restoration*

**Class Abilities:** AC bonus (Wis.), arcane wrath, bardic knowledge, bardic music (countersong, fascinate, inspire competence, inspire courage +1), discipline focus (Weapon focus: unarmed strike, insightful strike), ebon immolation, empowering strike, firebird stance, mystic phoenix stance, phoenix stance, quick to act +2, quickening strike, rite of uprising

**Saves:** Fort. +16, Ref. +18, Will +19

**Abilities:** Str. 16, Dex. 15, Con. 14, Int. 16, Wis. 16, Cha. 24

**Skills:** Balance +15, Bluff +16, Concentration +20, Diplomacy +16, Disguise +16, Gather information +11, Hide +21, Jump +16, Knowledge (arcana) +5, Knowledge (history) +, Knowledge (local: Darkon) +12, Knowledge (local: Falkovnia) +7, Knowledge (local: Lamordia) +5, Knowledge (planes) +12, Knowledge (religion) +5, Listen +11, Martial lore +13, Move silently +11, Perform (act) +16, Perform (dance) +13, Perform (sing) +, Search +9, Sense motive +7, Speak language +5, Spot +10

**Feats:** Alertness, Dodge, Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Mobility, Pernicious

magic, Quick change (*Savage Species*, p.38), Shadow weave magic (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.37), Spring attack, Superior unarmed strike

**Languages:** Abyssal\*, Celestial, Chondathan (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.84), Darkonese, Falkovnian, Infernal, Lamordian, Mordentish, Zherisian

**Maneuvers readied:** 9

Maneuvers and Stances known:

Stances: Child of shadow (1st), leaping dragon stance (3rd), Step of the dancing moth (5th), Stonefoot stance (1st)

Strikes: Claw at the moon (2nd), Clinging shadow strike (1st), Insightful strike (3rd), Mountain hammer (2nd), Sapphire nightmare blade (1st), Shadow garrote (3rd), Shadow noose (6th), Shadow stride (5th), Strength draining strike (3rd), Swooping dragon strike (7th), Wolf fang strike (1st)

Boosts: Fountain of blood (4th), Sudden leap (1st)

Counters: Mind over body, Moment of perfect mind

**Disciplines:** Diamond mind, Shadow hand, Stone dragon, Tiger claw

**Spells/day:** 3/5/5/5/3 (CL 12; CL 13 to overcome spell resistance for Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy spells; DC 17 + spell level; DC 18 + spell level for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 16 + spell level for all Evocation and Transmutation.)

Spells known:

4 - *Cure critical wounds*, *freedom of movement*, *greater resistance*

3 - *Cure serious wounds*, *dispel magic*, *displacement*, *malicious acceleration* (this article)

2 - *Blur*, *cat's grace*, *cure moderate wounds*, *heroism\**, *scare\**

1 - *Critical strike* (SC, p.56), *cure light wounds*, *disguise self*, *expeditious retreat*

0 - *Detect magic*, *ghostharp\** (SC, p.104), *ghost sound\**, *mending*, *prestidigitation*, *read magic*

**Equipment:** +2 anarchic swordcane; blessed book; +4 bracers of armor; +1 freezing burst dagger, "*Envy*"; +1 human bane dagger of wounding, "*Fang*", flesh-stitched cat familiar "*Gregory*"; hand of glory; ring of evasion; ring of mind shielding; ring of protection from negative energy; +2 intelligent, flaming burst saber of wounding "*Maxwell*" (AL CE; Int. 13, Wis. 13, Cha. 10; empathy; 60 ft. vision and hearing; *faerie fire* 3/day, Spot +11); +2 human bane shortsword "*Hawksbane*"; (un)holy symbol of Brightwell

## COMBAT

The Red Haunt is always up for a good fight, and enjoys a spot of bloodletting. That said, she is no fool; she stalks her prey before attacking, if only to make sure the target is worth her time.

She always prepares for a good fight by boosting her defenses through magic, casting *cat's grace*, *expeditious retreat*, *freedom of movement*, *greater resistance*, and *heroism*. If she feels she is outmatched, she typically adds *blur* and/or *displacement*, then enters *child of shadow*-stance and opens combat with *shadow noose* or *shadow garrote*, or else casts *fear* or *malicious acceleration* on her targets. Once maximum chaos has been generated - or if she does not see the need for a stealthy opening of hostilities - the Red Haunt enters battle with full ferocity, preferring her *Tiger claw*-discipline strikes and boosts, and using her *Diamond mind*-counters to ward off attacks her normal saves cannot match.

## DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE EBON PHOENIX MAGES

The *Book of Nine Swords* details the Jade Phoenix Mages, reincarnating champions of goodness with a duty to restrain a mighty evil (p.114). When the Red Haunt met an Evil-aligned Swordsage who had been dropped in Falkovnia by the Mists, he made the mistake of telling her the legend of these undying heroes... and giving the demon her first instruction in his own path.



It took her a while, but the Red Haunt's singular enthusiasm (and possibly the influence of the Dark Powers) finally allowed her to create, or maybe summon or unleash, a force that runs counter to the Jade Phoenix.

The Ebon Phoenix is an undying evil, a force that infests its chosen champions with the urge to grow stronger in evil, life after life, until they can tear down all that is good and holy.

While there is not yet a full witch's dozen of adherents and the Red Haunt initially allowed them to run wild, she has reasserted control since the founding of the Centurions of the Night. Nowadays, those Ebon Phoenix Mages have a *dojo* on Castra, and they are an important part of the Centurions' plans. But not all of the Red Haunt's apprentices are there. Although the cabal has its roots in Ravenloft, some of its members have managed to escape the Demiplane of Dread...

Ebon Phoenix Mages differ from Jade Phoenix Mages in the following ways:

The prerequisites for the prestige class are the same, except an Ebon Phoenix Mage's alignment must be *any evil*, rather than *any non-evil*.

The class skills of an Ebon Phoenix Mage include *Hide* instead of *Tumble*.

The maneuvers and stances available to an Ebon Phoenix Mage are drawn from *Shadow Hand* and *Tiger Claw*, instead of *Desert Wind* and *Devoted Spirit*.

*Emerald immolation* is replaced with *Ebon immolation*; a conflagration of dark, negative energy that deals just as much damage as its counterpart... and in Ravenloft, the release of so much power has a 10% chance of spontaneously animating any corpses within its range as walking dead with the same amount of HD as the creatures that supplied the corpses.

## BACKGROUND

When mortals whisper of the Red Haunt in the dead of night, they speak of the persona known in the fiend's Conclaves as Charissa Schlosser. Charissa feels a little thrill every time people recognize her by that name, and another thrill when 'Mother' and her 'sisters' grumble about it. Still, none of them have ever challenged her for the title; not when Charissa rampaging through the countryside and attracting attention makes it easier for them to hide their own dark acts as being part of a single fiendish agenda.

As the second oldest personality, Charissa feels a modicum of responsibility for the rest of the Red Haunt's personas. Apart from her having been born to gather funds that would fuel the fiend's hunger for knowledge, this comes from being the persona most likely to be called to the front when the Red Haunt travels to a new land. As such, most new personas grow inside of and rise from her. In a sense, she feels almost maternal towards her younger sisters.

As the provider of her 'family', Charissa regularly robs merchant caravans and armed patrols in Falkovnia to make money. In days gone by, she would hunt in Darkon and Lamordia, but, with Azalin's return from the grey realm, Darkon has become too dangerous for her to ply her trade, and she never really enjoyed Lamordia; the money was good, but the people and their idea of combat soon bored her. Charissa detests Falkovnians (most of the ones she meets are ignorant brutes), but at least the Talons' and soldiers' penchant for brutality makes fighting them worth her while. Butchering Falkovnian merchant trains is lucrative as well, especially now that she is covertly being paid by Josephine Chantreaux of the Dementlieuse Council of Brilliance to sabotage Vlad Drakov's mercantile offensive wherever and whenever she can. Her shortsword, '*Hawksbane*', is actually the original down payment with which Josephine secured the fiend's services.

Charissa's interests do not revolve solely around shedding blood. Like her 'sisters', she has her



favourite field of study. It's just that Charissa's interests lie in the study and application of the art of combat and the martial arts she learned from a Mist-lorn Swordsage. She feels that her greatest contribution to the Red Haunt's knowledge of existence is the creation of the Ebon Phoenix, and takes considerable pride in the dark acts of people she trained to be members of that dark cabal.

When not fighting or studying her art, Charissa quite enjoys running back-alley gambling rings. She may not be a master of sleight of hand, and punters come to see her because they actually have a fair chance of winning some money. However, doing so tells Charissa quite clearly who is walking around with change in their pockets, and therefore whose doors she should be kicking down later.

Alanik Ray's claim that Charissa acted as a pimp is not entirely correct. Rather, the Red Haunt gave parthenogenic birth to the succubus Clementine sometime after Katia Schlosser first left Lamordia. Charissa wound up training her daughter in the arts of seduction and deception, allowing her to lure prey in close so she could finish them off - as well as some creative ways to kill that did not require an *energy drain* at all.

### LAIR

Charissa does not maintain an independent lair. If she needs a place to rest, she either returns to the Retreat, retires to an inn or temporarily rents a building.

*"Why waste your time mewling about unseen tormentors or plotting to run from them, when you could far more productively spend that same time plotting to put paid to them?"*

- *Entry in the Record of Memories: "Imogen's Comments on the Requiem."*

## IMOGEN SCHLOSSER



Devoratrix Bard 1 / Wizard 7 / Ultimate Magus 10

Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil, Tanar'ri)

**Hit Dice:** 100 hp (24 HD)

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft., fly 50 ft. (average)

**Armor Class:** 23 (+2 Dex., +4 armor, +7 natural)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +13/+17

**Attack:** +14 Claw (1d6+1), +15 dagger 'Envy' (1d4+2+1d6 cold (+1d10 cold on crit.) 19-20/x2; +15 dagger 'Fang' (1d4+2 (+2d6 vs. humans) 19-20/x2; +17 Grapple (1d3+1), +14 Unarmed strike (1d3+1)

Full Attack:

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Beget Hollow Man; body of temptation DC 20; *laughing mad* DC22; mind drain; spell-like abilities

**Special Qualities:** Change shape; corruption points 11; damage reduction 10 / cold iron or good; darkvision 60 ft.; *diminishing returns*; immunity to electricity and poison; *infect the weave*; parthenogenesis; obscuring mist; phylactery; *reality*



wrinkle 12,000 ft; resistance to acid 10, cold 10, fire 10; *spare the child*, telepathy 100 ft.; *too familiar*

**Spell-like abilities:** (CL 6 + class level if any. DC 17 + spell level)

At will: *Bull's strength*, *darkness*, *detect thoughts* (DC19), *shadow walk* (self plus 50 lbs. of objects or self plus one Medium- or smaller-sized individual) 1/day - *Deeper darkness*, *restoration*

**Class Abilities:** Arcane spell power +4, augmented casting, bardic knowledge, bardic music (countersong, fascinate, inspire competence +1), expanded spell knowledge (1 - 5), summon familiar

**Saves:** Fort. +7, Ref. +9, Will +10

**Abilities:** Str. 12, Dex. 15, Con. 14, Int. 20, Wis. 16, Cha. 24

**Skills:** Bluff +16, Concentration +15, Diplomacy +16, Disguise +16, Hide +8, Knowledge (arcana) +31, Knowledge (local: Darkon) +8, Knowledge (history) +17, Knowledge (planes) +31, Knowledge (Ravenloft) +15, Knowledge (religion) +16, Listen +11, Move silently +11, Perform (act) +16, Perform (dance) +13, Reign undead +18, Search +9, Speak language +6, Spellcraft +23, Spot +10

**Feats:** Alertness, Craft wondrous item, Extend spell, Flesh-stitched familiar, Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Insidious magic (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.36), Maximize spell, Practiced spellcaster (Bard) (*Complete Arcane*, p.82), Quick change (*Savage Species*, p.38), Scribe scroll, Shadow weave magic (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.37), Two-weapon fighting

**Languages:** Abyssal\*, Celestial, Chondathan (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.84), Darkonese, Draconic, Elven, Ergot (*Dragonlance Campaign Setting*, p.195), Gnome, Halfling, Infernal

Spells/day:

Bard: 3/5/5/4; (CL 8; CL 9 to overcome spell resistance for Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy spells; DC 17 + spell level; DC 18 + spell level for Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 16 + spell level for Evocation and Transmutation) (marked with +).

Wizard: 4/6/5/5/5/5/4/3/2/1; CL 21; CL 22 for Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 15 + spell level; 16 + spell level for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 14 + spell level for all Evocation and Transmutation.)

Spells known:

Bard: 6/4/4/3

3 - *Bite of the wererat*+ (SC, p.28), *clairaudience/clairvoyance*, *cure serious wounds*, *malicious acceleration* (this article)

2 - *Cure moderate wounds*, *daggerspell stance* (SC, p.57), *heroism*, *silence*, *tongues*

1 - *Cure light wounds*, *detect secret doors*, *expeditious retreat*, *lesser orb of cold* (SC p.151), *unseen servant*

0 - *Detect magic*, *ghost sound*\*, *ghostharp*\* (SC, p.104), *mending*, *prestidigitation*, *read magic*

Wizard: Imogen has amassed a wide store of spells over the years, some winnowed from encounters with unfortunate Outlanders, others of her own design. She has a library of spellbooks stored away at the Retreat, and a full copy in Schlosser House on Castra. It is quite impossible for her to carry everything with her all the time, so she has a series of *blessed books* that contains a selection of her favourites.

On any given day when she does not have access to her library, Imogen is at the very least likely to carry one or several *blessed books* containing the following spells in addition to most spells found in the PHB. She prefers not to rely on Evocation and Transmutation, due to the Shadow Weave weakening these, but she is far from ignorant of their power.

9 - *Awaken construct* (SC, p.21), *Black blade of disaster* (SC, p.29), *Eye of power* (SC, p.87), *major*



*salience* (VRGttWD, p.89), *plague of undead\** (SC, p.158)

8 - *Create greater undead\** (VRGttWD, p.87), *ghostform+* (SC, p.103), *spell engine* (SC, p.198), *maddening whispers\** (SC, p.135), *superior invisibility* (SC, p.125)

7 - *Awaken undead\** (SC, p.21), *bite of the werebear+* (SC, p.28), *emerald flame fist+* (SC, p.79), *Ironguard* (SC, p.125)

6 - *Acid storm* (SC, p.7), *bite of the weretiger+* (SC, p.28), *dream casting* (SC, p.73), *greater anticipate teleportation* (SC, p.13), *minor salience* (VRGttWD, p.89), *revive undead* (SC, p.175), *seal portal* (SC, p.181) *worldbreaker shroud* (Quoth the Raven vol.26, p.30)

5 - *Bite of the wereboar+* (SC, p.28), *greater dimension door* (SC, p.64), *heart of fire+* (CM, p.107), *lesser ironguard* (SC, p.125), *night's caress\** (SC, p.147), *shadow hand\** (SC, p.183), *vitriolic sphere* (SC, p.231), *wrack\** (SC, p.243)

4 - *Bite of the werewolf* (SC, p.29), *heart of earth+* (CM, p.106), *improved portal alarm* (SC, p.161), *orb of acid* (SC, p.151), *orb of cold* (SC, p.151), *orb of electricity* (SC, p.151), *orb of fire* (SC, p.151), *orb of force* (SC, p.151), *orb of sound* (SC, p.151), *sensory deprivation\** (SC, p.182)

3 - *Analyze portal* (SC, p.151), (SC, p.10), *bite of the wererat+* (SC, p.28), *blacklight+* (SC, p.30), *devil blight+* (SC, p.64), *heart of water+* (CM, p.107), *malicious acceleration* (this article), *scintillating sphere+* (SC, p.181)

2 - *Baleful transposition* (SC, p.23), *daggerspell stance* (SC, p.57), *heart of air+* (CM, p.106), *shadow mask\** (SC, p.185), *wracking touch\** (SC, p.243)

1 - *Blades of fire* (SC, p.31), *lesser orb of acid* (SC, p.151), *lesser orb of cold* (SC, p.151), *lesser orb of electricity* (SC, p.151), *lesser orb of fire* (SC, p.151), *lesser orb of sound* (SC, p.151), *net of shadows\** (SC, p.147), *portal beacon* (SC, p.161)

0 – All

**Equipment:** +2 anarchic swordcane; blessed book; +4 bracers of armor; +1 freezing burst dagger, "Envy"; +1 human bane dagger of wounding, "Fang",

flesh-stitched cat familiar "Gregory"; hand of glory; ring of evasion; ring of mind shielding; ring of protection from negative energy; +2 intelligent, flaming burst saber of wounding "Maxwell" (AL CE; Int. 13, Wis. 13, Cha. 10; empathy; 60 ft. vision and hearing; *faerie fire* 3/day, Spot +11); +2 human bane shortsword "Hawksbane"; (un)holy symbol of Brightwell

## COMBAT

Imogen prefers to avoid combat altogether. She spends a fair amount of time creating and testing undead servants to do the fighting for her, and she is not shy about sending them out.

All the same, Imogen prepares and casts a number of Extended spells on herself every day to boost her defenses, such as *greater mage armor*, *superior resistance*, and the four elemental *heart*-spells. She keeps at least one *bite*-spell prepared, as well as *blades of fire* and *daggerspell stance*, in case she finds herself forced to partake in melee.

Although she is skilled enough with her twin daggers to stay alive until she can use *shadow walk* to put some distance between herself and her enemies, Imogen is not fond of martial combat. She far prefers to keep moving from shadow to shadow while she blasts targets with maximized *orb*-spells. While she is no slouch at area-spells, Imogen has a marked preference for obliterating individual targets, whittling her enemies down one at a time so they start to panic and make mistakes. One of her preferred tricks is to isolate an individual with *wall of iron* or *wall of stone*, then torment them with *wrack* or some other way to make them die screaming - where their allies can hear.

## BACKGROUND

Imogen Schlosser is the persona of the Red Haunt that was born after Charissa Schlosser. She is the one for whom the Schlosser surname was created, as the fiend was learning to fit in with her surroundings.



In many ways, Imogen exemplifies what it means to be the Red Haunt; she is brilliant, forever eager to learn, and heedless of most ethics and morals that might restrain her. By virtue of the Shadow Weave and her Insidious magic-feat, she is better suited than many to keep her magical secrets just that. By her fiendish nature, she is unafraid to walk into dark and dreadful places in order to extract knowledge.

Imogen's main focus during her time at the University of Il Aluk was to research a way by which she might breach the Mists and release all of herself into the wider universe. She studied magic as the optimal tool by which to secure an escape, history and the nature of Darkon in order to establish a 'base state' from which to build her escape platform. As Imogen learned more of Darkon, she delved into Necromancy, and learned much of creating and training the undead.

Azalin Rex would probably have been very upset at her presence and works in his domain if Imogen had not acted with uncommon patience and subtlety for a *tanar'ri*. Leaving feeding on the minds of live victims to 'Mother' and her 'sister' Charissa, Imogen focused wholly on study and experimentation, rather than feasting on her fellow students and teachers. Finally, she managed to craft a magic item that she felt would breach the great divide and set her free; a beautiful orb that shone with the light of many moons. Her theories were sound, her calculations flawless, the test runs promising... and the damned thing exploded in her face as soon as she activated it with firm intent to escape the Demiplane of Dread. The Red Haunt survived and was easily capable of healing herself, but Imogen could never explain the failure of years of supreme effort.

Imogen eventually graduated with flying colours, but as satisfying as the achievement was, it did not change her lifestyle at all. She moved to a manor house in eastern Darkon, having stocked it with books and equipment paid for by Charissa's robberies. From time to time she returned to Il Aluk and even attended some classes at the early Brautslava Institute, but nothing she learned or

developed managed to achieve what she had set out to do - or explain her failure.

In the end, Imogen started to deduce through logic and fleeting hints, the fact that forces dark and terrible were stacking the deck against her and influencing the very laws of Darkon's nature. For better or worse, the demon suspected the existence of the Dark Powers. With the coming of the Grand Conjunction and the Requiem, Imogen has become convinced of their existence, and through her so has the rest of the Red Haunt.

## LAIR

Imogen used to keep a house in Aluk Septentrion, but this had already fallen into disuse by the time the Requiem hit; the Red Haunt lost her affection for the place after the events that saw her familiar Gregory in critical condition. Currently, Imogen's private abode is a lone, ancient, weathered-looking tower on the eastern border of Darkon. When she originally moved in, the tower commanded an arresting view of the Mists. This has been replaced by an ocean view since the Nocturnal Sea appeared.

Although Imogen keeps her most critical texts and treasures in the Retreat, the tower is still a treasure-trove of arcane lore and Imogen's private reflections and experimental records, as well as a library of scrolls she has scribed during her downtime. The whole tower is permanently cloaked in the Shadow Weave, affecting anyone who enters, and is under the effect of *guards and wards*. Entering the tower is not excessively difficult; leaving again, given that there are undead sentinels buried all around the building, and magical *glyphs* are set to imprison intruders, *is*.

Imogen's tower is a Rank 2 sinkhole of evil with a taint of Greed and Pride at most times. The Rank rises to 3 when she is working on creating new undead slaves.

*"I have never had much luck with Victors." - Entry in the Record of Memories regarding the aftermath of Victor Gagné's "escape"*

## KATIA SCHLOSSER



CE Devoratrix Bard 17

Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil, Tanar'ri)

**Hit Dice:** 108 hp (23 HD)

**CR:** 24

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft., fly 50 ft. (average)

**Armor Class:** 23 (+2 Dex., +4 armor, +7 natural)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +18/+22

**Attack:** +19 Claw (1d6+1), +23 Grapple (1d3+1), +19 Unarmed strike (1d3+1)

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Beget Hollow Man; body of temptation DC 20; *laughing mad* DC22; mind drain; spell-like abilities

**Special Qualities:** Change shape; corruption points 11; damage reduction 10 / cold iron or good; darkvision 60 ft.; *diminishing returns*; immunity to electricity and poison; *infect the weave*; parthenogenesis; obscuring mist; phylactery; *reality wrinkle 11,500 ft*; resistance to acid 10, cold 10, fire 10; *spare the child*, telepathy 100 ft.; *too familiar*

**Spell-like abilities:** (CL 6 + class level if any. DC 17 + spell level)

At will: *Bull's strength*, *darkness*, *detect thoughts* (DC19), *shadow walk* (self plus 50 lbs. of objects or self plus one Medium- or smaller-sized individual)

1/day - *Deeper darkness*, *restoration*

**Class Abilities:** Bardic knowledge, bardic music (countersong, *fascinate*, inspire competence, inspire courage +3, inspire greatness, inspire heroics, *song of freedom*, *suggestion*)

**Saves:** Fort. +12, Ref. +17, Will +18

**Abilities:** Str. 12, Dex. 14, Con. 14, Int. 18, Wis. 18, Cha. 24

**Skills:** Bluff +16, Concentration +11, Craft (alchemy) +7, Craft (clockwork) +17, Craft (poisonmaking) +14, Diplomacy +16, Disguise +16, Heal +17, Hide +8, Knowledge (arcana) +12, Knowledge (local: Lamordia) +14, Knowledge (nature) +24, Knowledge (nobility & royalty) +7, Knowledge (planes) +12, Knowledge (Ravenloft) +14, Listen +11, Move silently +11, Perform (act) +16, Perform (dance) +13, Search +9, Speak language +4, Spot +10, Use magic device +27

**Feats:** Alertness, Craft construct, Craft magic arms & armour, Craft wondrous item, Graft flesh (Undead), Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Shadow weave magic, Skill focus (Heal)

**Languages:** Abyssal\*, Celestial, Chondathan (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.84), Draconic, Falkovnian, Infernal, Lamordian, Mordentish

(+ Casian is a prevalent language in the west and south of the Wartorn Cluster)

**Spells/day:** 4/6/6/6/4/4/2; (CL 17; CL 18 to overcome spell resistance for Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 17 + spell level; DC 18 + spell level for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy;

DC 16 + spell level for all Evocation and Transmutation.)

Spells known:

6 - *Dirge+* (SC, p.65), *foreshadowing* (*Quoth the Raven* 26, p.33), *superior resistance* (SC, p.175)

5 - *Dread of the dead\** (*Quoth the Raven* 26, p.34), *greater heroism*, *shadow evocation*, *song of discord*

4 - *Cure critical wounds*, *greater resistance* (SC, p.174), *neutralize poison*, *shadow conjuration*

3 - *Cure serious wounds*, *deep slumber*, *malicious acceleration* (this article), *puppeteer\** (SC, p.163)

2 - *Cure moderate wounds*, *delay poison*, *eagle's splendour*, *tongues*, *whirling blade* (*Complete Arcane*, p.129)

1 - *Cause fear*, *cure light wounds*, *expeditious retreat*, *insidious rhythm\** (SC, p.124), *ironguts* (SC, p.126)

0 - *Detect magic*, *ghost sound\**, *ghostsharp\** (SC, p.104), *mending*, *prestidigitation*, *read magic*

**Equipment:** +2 anarchic swordcane; blessed book; +1 freezing burst dagger, "*Envy*"; +1 human bane dagger of wounding, "*Fang*", flesh-stitched cat familiar "*Gregory*"; hand of glory; ring of evasion; ring of mind shielding; ring of protection from negative energy; +2 intelligent, flaming burst saber of wounding "*Maxwell*" (AL CE; Int. 13, Wis. 13, Cha. 10; empathy; 60 ft. vision and hearing; *faerie fire* 3/day, Spot +11); +2 human bane shortsword "*Hawksbane*"; (un)holy symbol of Brightwell

## COMBAT

Where 'Mother' sees battle as a way to get food, Charissa revels in it, and Imogen disdains it, Katia utterly loathes getting her hands dirty - outside a laboratory setting, that is. Given half a chance, Katia will simply flee into Shadow and return after her enemies have given up. If she has something to protect, she prefers to use constructs she has crafted herself or undead servants given to her by Imogen, or else thugs she has hired as disposable security. While perfectly capable of supporting living soldiers with bardic music and spells, Katia prefers to gather what is important to her and just leave.

If she feels strongly about defending a site - or killing a persistent enemy - she might prepare a trapped corridor and lead enemies into it. Katia's skill at brewing poison and creating clockworks translates well into setting mechanical traps awash in potent new toxins.

## LAIR

Currently, Katia's private lair is an orphanage in the Domain known as the Broken Wheel, in the Wartorn Cluster. Surprisingly, the place is only a rank 1 sinkhole of evil with a taint of Wrath, and the children who reside there are protected from its effects. Katia has a private laboratory underneath the site, but she mostly uses it for theoretical, rather than 'hands-on' research.

The truth is that although Katia is the orphanage's chief physician, she visits only infrequently, and mostly to make sure the place is being run in accordance with her wishes, or so she can sleep in her personal space, safely hidden underneath the orphanage's cellars. Her real research is now done in the Retreat.

Katia has neglected to fully adapt her space beneath the orphanage because she still misses her old lair, the hospital she used to run in Leidenheim. While Katia was in attendance, her endless experiments and 'groundbreaking surgery' rendered the place a Rank 3 sinkhole of evil with a taint of pride and cruelty. The laboratory Katia furnished for herself under the hospital was not quite on par with the facilities created by Victor Mordenheim, but Katia found them optimally suited to her needs... and then she had to abandon the site because of a rivalry started by Imogen.

Currently, the Leidenheim hospital in a Rank 2 sinkhole of evil with the same taint of pride and cruelty; Victoria is not quite as callous as her mother yet. The sinkhole's Rank does rise back to 3 when Katia visits, as though it were reacting to its old mistress like a faithful hound.

## BACKGROUND

Born out of the Red Haunt's desire to investigate 'science,' after she had mastered arcane magic to what she considered an acceptable level, Katia Schlosser was 'born' in the Domain of Lamordia as the fiend infiltrated that land's educational institutions. Although she learned a great deal and had the benefit of brilliant instruction (see **Dread Possibility: Victor; Victoria**), Katia found the land's inhabitants to be myopic and reactionary. Although she ran a hospital in Leidenheim for several years, and she proved to be a highly competent - albeit unorthodox - doctor and surgeon, Katia had no real empathy for any of her patients, and felt she received no respect from her staff.

On top of this, the *Weib Oatst* ("woman doctor"), as she was mockingly called by some of her so-called peers in the medical field, has no real empathy towards any of the other aspects of the Red Haunt. When her 'sisters' and 'Mother' take control of their shared body, Katia feels annoyance; why should she have to give up precious time, which might be used to expand her knowledge and skills? She managed to vent some of her frustrations in her hospital, saving lives with ever more wrought procedures and experimenting on the bodies of the dead, but then Boyce Vincetus came and ruined it all.

In the intervening years, Katia has bridled more and more at having to share a body and essence with her 'family'. The fact that the other personas recognize her desire for more time, but point out that a majority ruling decides their schedule, has not helped. To stave off a descent into even greater depths of madness than she inhabits by her very

nature, Katia has launched a new line of research and development; one which has received the interest and assistance of her 'family'.

*Assistent Nummer Dreizehn* is the thirteenth in a series of constructs designed by Katia to be a receptacle for her own consciousness, utilizing a system like the circle of mirrors that allows all the personas to manifest simultaneously. The twelve preceding models ultimately proved disappointing, and she handed them over to her 'sisters' to use as they would. *Dreizehn* is also not quite ready to receive a persona of the Red Haunt, but it is very close! At Katia's request, Imogen has cast *awaken construct* on the golem, allowing Katia to test its capacity for growth and learning.

**Assistent Nummer Dreizehn, NE Clockwork Golem Expert 5**, currently serves as Katia's manservant and nurse, studying the medical arts under her tutelage. The construct is unaware of its maker's true reasons for creating it, but it appreciates its evolving capacities and enjoys its mistress' clinical praise for work well-done. Whether the construct will remain loyal when Katia is ready to create the next model is anyone's guess.

*"As Brightwell rises, I fall towards her like a stone towards the earth. As Brightwell falls, I rise towards her with loving arms outstretched. When we meet in the middle, that is when true magic happens and the world BURNS."*

- *Graffiti found in the cathedral of il Patron, Hugh's Rest, Conquista.*

**DREAD POSSIBILITY: 'VICTOR; VICTORIA'**

When the Red Haunt travelled to Lamordia, it was with the sole intention of studying the sciences. Katia Schlosser came to be in the colleges of Leidenheim and Teufeldorf. Cold, arrogant and willful, she ignored those who suggested that studies into mechanical engineering, biology, and the medical sciences were 'unsuitable' for a young lady of means. Her iron determination and keen mind allowed her to excel in her fields, and she graduated with honours - this in spite of both subtle and overt attempts by other students and teachers to halt her advance.

With an impressive diploma in hand, Katia Schlosser... was unsatisfied with what she had learned. She wanted *more*. And in Lamordia, there is one man known for being so far immersed in groundbreaking science that he has passed into utter depravity.

Convincing Doctor Mordenheim to take her on as a post-graduate student was not an easy task, even for a demon, but Katia managed to vaguely impress the mad scientist with the learning she had already assimilated, as well as the dogged way she strove to master new knowledge and skills. It was soon apparent that the two of them had very different temperaments and interests, but they managed to meet in their appreciation of science and their fascination with the way living bodies worked. For a long time, Katia was satisfied to stay on as Mordenheim's student, helping him with various surgeries... In fact, for *too* long a time.

In her obsession with mastering science, Katia had neglected to feed in the way of her kind, and had monopolized the body she shared with the other personas of the Red Haunt. When 'Mother' and her 'sisters' complained, Katia tried to ignore and repress them. This led to the very first internal conflict between the demon's personas. Unknown to Katia, 'Mother' and her 'sisters' subtly influenced her, causing her to alter the form she had adopted as hers until she finally came to closely resemble none other than Elise Mordenheim, back when she was still alive, vital, and beautiful.

Victor did not notice the gradual change. The end result, however, sparked his dark desire to see Elise restored, perhaps by transplanting her brain into the skull of his clever apprentice. What did it matter to Mordenheim that he had tried to do this very thing before, and that he had failed utterly? He was Mordenheim! He would never give up! And so he ordered his servant Horg to prepare a fine meal, while he himself blended a tonic that would settle Katia into a stupor from which she would never waken.

This way, as Mordenheim justified his act of treachery, Katia would achieve a worth, a usefulness, that she could never achieve under her own power as a scientist.

Little did Victor suspect that his student was wholly immune to poisons. He certainly did not expect her to recognize the taste of the toxin he fed her, nor that she would read his intentions right out of his brilliant brain. The raw fury that erupted in Katia surprised them both.

Katia had been so ... content to study with Mordenheim. To learn of him only assigning worth to her on the basis that her body could serve to facilitate Elise's resurrection sparked her rage. To Mordenheim's affront and panic, his student forced him to devour his own poisonous feast, then spat in his face that he would learn what it meant to be '*made useful*.'

As his own poisons rampaged through his body, and his mind seemed in the grip of a fever, Victor does not remember any of the torments to which he was subjected that night. Horg might recall part of it, but he fled before he could see it all. Certainly, the fiend feasted on Mordenheim's mind, only for it to restore itself, allowing her to gorge herself. But that is not all she did.



The next day, Mordenheim awoke to find the dining room at Schloss Mordenheim a blood-soaked mess, and himself lying in the wreckage. Horg was cowering in the castle's deepest dungeons, unwilling to speak of what had happened. Katia was gone, as were all her belongings, and Mordenheim no longer recalls the events that led up to her departure.

Katia Schlosser opened a hospital in Leidenheim, where she continued her studies and conducted experiments on the bodies of the living and the dead alike, as well as on lifeless matter. She remembered - and remembers - *exactly* what she did to Mordenheim in the heat of her rage, however. Nine months later, she received a lasting reminder. Katia named her daughter **Victoria**, in a rare moment of dark humour, and saw to it that the child had a thorough education.

By the time the slaughter perpetrated by Boyce Vinctus (see **Dread Possibility: Trained Seal**) forced Katia to retire as Director of the hospital, Victoria was ready to step in.

Victoria Schlosser (**NE half-fiend Bard 5 / Scientist 2** (*LotB*, p.94)) is a unique combination of fiendish essence and the blood of Mordenheim. She has all her mother's hunger for learning, combined with her father's native intellect.

Like both of her parents, Victoria is intrigued by the mysteries of life and death. Unlike them, she does not believe life needs to be wholly redesigned or used for spare parts in a greater creation. Her most recent line of experiments revolves around creating a method to enhance living creatures to their ultimate potential. She has had some modest successes, but is growing restless; unlike her mother, she is not immortal, and she wishes she could peruse Mordenheim's notes as well as the Red Haunt's. She is also intrigued by stories her 'aunt' Harmony has told her of High Alchemy.

A day may well come when Mordenheim is confronted by the child he never knew he had, and all his objections would not stay her from availing herself of his knowledge in her ambition to tamper with evolution in the span of years, rather than generations.

## LILLIAN SCHLOSSER



CE Devoratrix Bard 4 /Cleric (Brightwell) 3 / Mystic theurge 10

Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Evil, Tanar'ri)

**Hit Dice:** 142 hp (23 HD)

**CR:** 24

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft., fly 50 ft. (average)

**Armor Class:** 23 (+2 Dex., +4 armor, +7 natural)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +16/+20

**Attack:** +17 Claw (1d6+1), +21 Grapple (1d3+1), +19/+21 Anarchic sword cane (1d6+3 (+2d6 vs. Lawful)/18-20x2), +17 Unarmed strike (1d3+1)

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Beget Hollow Man; body of temptation DC 20; *laughing mad* DC22; mind drain; spell-like abilities

**Special Qualities:** Change shape; corruption points 11; damage reduction 10 / cold iron or good; darkvision 60 ft.; *diminishing returns*; immunity to electricity and poison; *infect the weave*; parthenogenesis; obscuring mist; phylactery; *reality wrinkle 11,500 ft*; resistance to acid 10, cold 10, fire 10; *spare the child*, telepathy 100 ft.; *too familiar*

**Spell-like abilities:** (CL 6 + class level if any. DC 17 + spell level)

At will: *Bull's strength*, *darkness*, *detect thoughts* (DC19), *shadow walk* (self plus 50 lbs. of objects or self plus one Medium- or smaller-sized individual)  
1/day - *Deeper darkness*, *restoration*

**Class Abilities:** Bardic knowledge, bardic music (countersong, *fascinate*, inspire competence, inspire courage +1), domains (Darkness (SC, p.273), Lust (SC, p.276)), rebuke undead

**Saves:** Fort. +14, Ref. +15, Will +22

**Abilities:** Str. 12, Dex. 14, Con. 14, Int. 16, Wis. 20, Cha. 24

**Skills:** Bluff +20, Concentration +20, Craft (calligraphy) +12; Diplomacy +20, Disguise +16, Heal +8, Hide +8, Knowledge (arcana) +12, Knowledge (planes) +12, Knowledge (Ravenloft) +10, Knowledge (religion) +25, Listen +11, Move silently +11, Perform (act) +16, Perform (dance) +12, Perform (oratory) +15, Reign undead +10, Search +9, Sense motive +15, Speak language +4, Spellcraft +9, Spot +10

**Feats:** Alertness, Disguise spell (*Complete Adventurer*, p.108), Empower spell, Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Inscribe Rune (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p. 36), Quick change (*Savage Species*, p.38), Sanctify relic (*Complete Divine*, p.85), Shadow weave magic

**Languages:** Abyssal\*, Casian+, Celestial, Chondathan (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.84), Hoja++,

lja+++, Infernal, Mordentish, Moutere++++, Ocham+++++, Sylvan, Vaasi

(+ Casian is a prevalent language in the west and south of the Wartorn Cluster)

(++ Hoja is a prevalent language in the north of the Wartorn Cluster)

(+++ lja is a prevalent language in the north of the Wartorn Cluster)

(++++ Moutere is a prevalent language in the east of the Wartorn Cluster)

(+++++) Ocham is a language spoken in several areas of the Wartorn Cluster)

Spells/day:

Bard: 4/5/5/5/4/1 (CL 14; CL 15 to overcome spell resistance for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 17 + spell level; DC 18 + spell level for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 16 + spell level for all Evocation and Transmutation)

Cleric: 6/7+1/6+1/5+1/5+1/4+1/2+1/1+1 (CL 13; CL 14 to overcome spell resistance for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 15 + spell level; DC 16 + spell level for all Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 14 + spell level for all Evocation and Transmutation)

Spells known:

Bard:

5 - *Dread of the dead\** (*Quoth the Raven* 26, p.34), *greater heroism\**, *shadow evocation\**

4 - *Hold monster\**, *modify memory\**, *shadow conjuration*, *voice of the dragon+* (SC, p.232)

3 - *Glibness*, *good hope*, *infernal threnody+* (SC, p.122), *malicious acceleration* (this article)

2 - *Daze monster\**, *eagle's splendor+*, *suggestion\**, *tongues*

1 - *Expeditious retreat+*, *hypnotism\**, *joyful noise* (SC, p.127), *remove fear*

0 - *Daze*, *detect magic*, *ghostharp\** (SC, p.104), *mending*, *prestidigitation*, *read magic*

Cleric: At the very least, Lillian always keeps at least one *owl's wisdom* in reserve, as well as one *armor of darkness*, one each of *mass inflict light wounds*, *mass inflict moderate wounds* and one *mass inflict*

*serious* wounds, as well as two *darkbolts*, one of them empowered. She prepares a good amount of healing spells for the benefit of followers and potential converts.

**Equipment:** +2 anarchic swordcane; blessed book; +4 bracers of armor; +1 freezing burst dagger, "*Envy*"; +1 human bane dagger of wounding, "*Fang*", flesh-stitched cat familiar "*Gregory*"; hand of glory; ring of evasion; ring of mind shielding; ring of protection from negative energy; +2 intelligent, flaming burst saber of wounding "*Maxwell*" (AL CE; Int. 13, Wis. 13, Cha. 10; empathy; 60 ft. vision and hearing; *faerie fire* 3/day, Spot +11); +2 human bane shortsword "*Hawksbane*"; (un)holy symbol of Brightwell

## COMBAT

Lillian has a gift for defusing conflict before it gets out of hand. Using her *disguise spell*-feat to good effect, she charms, she mesmerizes, she confuses. She is also fond of using the power of the Lust Domain if she is being watched too closely to cast even disguised spells.

If battle is unavoidable, Lillian prefers to be surrounded by troops; fellow believers of her patron if those are available, duped muscle if she must. Although she is proficient in the raising and rearing of undead, she is not particularly enthusiastic about using them - unless it's the superior specimens hand-crafted by her sister Imogen.

If she must fight herself, Lillian tends to lead with her bard spells. She enjoys opening with *malicious acceleration*, then follows up with *shadow conjuration*. Any opponent locked in battle with whatever she has called up becomes a target for *hold monster* or *daze monster*. Of course, if her enemies are still standing after that and her life is in danger, Lillian is not afraid to start slinging around Cleric spells; *mass inflict wounds*-spells are her favourite option when dealing with melee warriors. If facing primary spellcasters, Lillian wastes little time in invoking *silence* and showing off her skill with her

patron's favoured weapon: a sword cane imbued with the power of Chaos itself.

## BACKGROUND

Lillian's background is a bit of a mystery to herself, as well as the Red Haunt's other personas. The fiend's inner consensus was that Katia had learned as much of science as they needed for the time, when she was forced to leave Lamordia. This being the case, and with arcane magic and violence fairly well-mastered, the Conclave desired to explore divine magic. Having no patron at the time, the fiend wandered from one temple to another and held long discussions with priests who never realized her true nature.

Finding the gods of the Core either incompatible with her personal ethos or otherwise unpalatable, the fiend travelled to the various Clusters and Islands. She studied a semester at the Great University of Tvashti's faculty of religions, wrote a dissertation on the warped faith of Nidala, and meditated on the elemental faiths and idolatry of Kalidnay. None of it really appealed to her... and then she found the old grimoire gathering dust in an abandoned house in Artan-Ak.

From this point on, the memory of the persona that had come to call itself Lillian Schlosser becomes confused. She knows that she found clues to a Mistway she had never heard of: *the Three-fold Path*. She knows that she crossed the great expanse that separates the Core from the Wartorn Cluster and walked its lands. And she knows that she found her faith there, in a goddess who commands little and encourages her faithful to steer their own course.

But there are gaps and inconsistencies in Lillian's memory of her first journey to the Cluster. Her memory suggests that she had to traverse several Mistways to get around, despite the fact that the Cluster's domains are firmly linked. She recalls scenes that belong centuries in the distant Cluster's past, well before the time she should have been there.

Lillian's best guess is that she drank from either *Hugin's Well* or *Munin's Well* when she was touring Maldoma, although she does not recall doing so. Certainly, the domain's Darklord chased her out of his realm, and yes, Lillian discovered that she had taken on Maldoma's Land-based Power. Her confused memories and the insights she gained into temporal manipulation - which she shared with her 'mother' and 'sisters', allowing them to design the *foreshadowing* and *malicious acceleration* spells - might be explained by a drink from one or both of those murky waters.

Whatever happened, Lillian found her faith and has pursued it with zeal. Which is to say, she has grown in power and encourages anyone who will listen to embrace Brightwell's message, cast off their shackles and overturn this corrupt and confining world so that something better can be built on its ruins. She has a reputation in the west of the Wartorn Cluster as a rare high-profile high priestess of Brightwell, and she has amassed a considerable personal following, as well as founded some successful cults of the goddess.

As one of the spiritual leaders of the Centurions of the Night, Lillian gleefully anticipates the day that she will be flying above dark hosts as they lay waste to the temples of the Core and plant the standard of Brightwell on the ashes. As a persona of the Red Haunt, Lillian lusts after greater understanding of and unity with her patron. She still zealously studies religious lore as well as the secret nature of the Demiplane of Dread, hoping that the Red Haunt will one day stand before her patron and merge with her.

## LAIR

The catacombs underneath Grand Cathedral of Brightwell in West-Lund, in the Wartorn Cluster, are Lillian's main lair. Over the years, she has covered the whole area with an *unhallow*-effect, and most of the bodies interred there are undead sentinels, only awaiting the command to leave their tombs and niches. The catacombs are a Rank 2 sinkhole of evil, with a taint of greed and wrath. The Rank rises to 3

when Lillian is creating new undead, feeding, or engaging in extracurricular activities with her acolytes.

Lillian is not overly invested in this lair, but she has made it into a fortress so that she may have somewhere to sleep in peace, relax, and store treasures and relics she needs with her, rather than in the Retreat's vault. Rarely, she allows her most trusted acolytes to join her in the catacombs for worship ceremonies or to give them 'private instruction'.

"You mean he only has to share his body with one villain? Lucky sod."

- Entry in the Record of Memories: "Genevieve's comments on Tristen Hiregaard."

## GENEVIEVE SCHLOSSER



CG Devoratrix Bard 4 / Crusader 4 (*Book of Nine Swords*, p.8-14)

Medium Outsider (Chaotic, Extraplanar, Good, Tanar'ri)

**Hit Dice:** 98 hp (14 HD)

**CR:** 15

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft., fly 50 ft. (average)

**Armor Class:** 23 (+2 Dex., +4 armor, +7 natural)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +8/+12

**Attack:** +10 Claw (1d6+2), +13 Grapple (1d3+2), +12/+14 Sword cane (1d6+4 (+2d6 vs. Lawful)), +10 Unarmed strike (1d10+2)

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Beget Hollow Man; body of temptation DC 20; *laughing mad* DC 22; mind drain; spell-like abilities

**Special Qualities:** Change shape; corruption points 11; damage reduction 10 / cold iron or good; darkvision 60 ft.; *diminishing returns*; *gentler shadows*; immunity to electricity and poison; *infect the weave*; parthenogenesis; obscuring mist; phylactery; *reality wrinkle 6,500 ft*; resistance to acid 10, cold 10, fire 10; *spare the child*, telepathy 100 ft.; *too familiar*

**Spell-like abilities:** (CL 6 + class level if any. DC 17 + spell level)

At will: *Bull's strength*, *darkness*, *detect thoughts* (DC19), *shadow walk* (self plus 50 lbs. of objects or self plus one Medium- or smaller-sized individual)  
1/day - *Deeper darkness*, *restoration*

**Class Abilities:** Bardic knowledge, bardic music (countersong, *fascinate*, inspire competence, inspire courage +1), furious counterstrike, indomitable soul, steely resolve 10, zealous surge

**Saves:** Fort. +8, Ref. +11, Will +12

**Abilities:** Str. 14, Dex. 14, Con. 14, Int. 16, Wis. 16, Cha. 24

**Skills:** Balance +8, Bluff +16, Concentration +11, Craft (painting) +10, Craft (sculpting) +10, Diplomacy +19, Disguise +16, Hide +8, Intimidate +16, Knowledge

(history) +12, Knowledge (arcana) +4, Knowledge (local: Lund) +4, Knowledge (local: Malopelagio) +5, Knowledge (local: Umbrash) +4, Knowledge (planes) +12, Knowledge (religion) +7, Listen +11, Martial lore +7, Move silently +11, Perform (act) +16, Perform (dance) +13, Perform (sing) +10, Perform (string instruments) +10; Profession (sailor) +5, Search +9, Speak language +7, Spellcraft +4, Spot +10, Swim +3

**Feats:** Alertness, Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Portents (*Van Richten's Arsenal*, p. 78), Shadow weave magic, Superior unarmed strike (*Book of Nine Swords*, p.33)

**Languages:** Abyssal\*, Casian+, Celestial, Chondathan (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p.84), Hoja++, Ija+++ , Infernal, Mordentish, Moutere+++++, Ocham+++++, Vaasi, Zherisian

(+ Casian is a prevalent language in the west and south of the Wartorn Cluster)

(++ Hoja is a prevalent language in the north of the Wartorn Cluster)

(+++ Ija is a prevalent language in the north of the Wartorn Cluster)

(++++ Moutere is a prevalent language in the east of the Wartorn Cluster)

(+++++) Ocham is a language spoken in several areas of the Wartorn Cluster)

**Gentler Shadows:** Genevieve is capable of using the Shadow Weave in spite of her alignment conflict, but does not gain the +1 bonus to caster level to overcome spell resistance for Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy spells. She still suffers the -1 caster level penalty to the DC of Evocation and Transmutation.

**Maneuvers readied:** 5 (2)

Maneuvers and Stances known:

Stances: Bolstering voice (1st), Martial spirit (1st)

Strikes: Crusader's strike (1st), Foehammer (2nd), Leading the attack (1st), Stone bones (1st), Vanguard strike (1st)

**Disciplines:** Devoted Spirit, Stone Dragon, White Raven

**Spells/day:** 3/4/2 (CL 4; DC 17 + spell level; DC 18 + spell level for Enchantment, Illusion and Necromancy; DC 16 + spell level for Evocation and Transmutation)

Spells known:

2 - *Cat's grace, daze monster*

1 - *Cure light wounds, expeditious retreat, joyful noise* (SC, p.127)

0 - *Daze, detect magic, mending, prestidigitation, read magic, resistance*

**Equipment:** +2 anarchic swordcane; blessed book; +4 bracers of armor; +1 freezing burst dagger, "Envy"; +1 human bane dagger of wounding, "Fang", flesh-stitched cat familiar "Gregory"; hand of glory; ring of evasion; ring of mind shielding; ring of protection from negative energy; +2 intelligent, flaming burst saber of wounding "Maxwell" (AL CE; Int. 13, Wis. 13, Cha. 10; empathy; 60 ft. vision and hearing; *faerie fire* 3/day, Spot +11); +2 human bane shortsword "Hawksbane"; (un)holy symbol of Brightwell

## COMBAT

Genevieve is fairly straightforward in combat when alone; she boosts her performance with *cat's grace* and *resistance*, assumes one of her stances as appropriate to whether she is fighting alone or in a group, and looks to do as much damage with her sword cane as she can. If she can use her martial strikes to do so, this is a good thing. If not, then she keeps stabbing away until something gives or she has to flee.

Unlike the Red Haunt's other personas, Genevieve does not use disposable thugs or undead slaves in battle, and she shows concern for any who stand on her side in a fight. Currently, her power to heal is limited, so she is more cautious and prone to using strategy when with a team.

## BACKGROUND

Genevieve Schlosser's 'birth' is the result of unwisely chosen words. To wit, the words of an unfortunate fool who fell into the hands of the Red Haunt and wound up as an experimental test subject at the Retreat. Subjected to invasive surgery at the hands of Katia Schlosser and even crueller psychological analysis at the hands of Solange Schlosser, the unnamed individual finally cried out that the demon would never be able to learn all that she wanted to know.

After all, or so he said, a creature of absolute Evil could never understand Good, so how could the Red Haunt ever hope to attain total knowledge of everything?

The man died soon after, but his words stuck with the Red Haunt, who wondered: was it truly impossible for her to understand anything but Chaos and Evil? Was she completely pure, immutable, for all eternity? In order to prove or disprove this theory once and for all, the Red Haunt conducted a series of experiments on herself, combining the efforts of all the personas who had gone before... and found, buried deep within its essence, a kernel of potential.

A potential for love. For kindness. For goodness of character.

Genevieve was carefully nurtured and brought into existence by her 'mother' and 'sisters', and once she was a full-blown person, she was allowed to go out into the world. At first, she was elated. Life was a grand adventure, and there were so many people in need of a kind word, or a helping hand. Taking the more benign message of Brightwell to heart, Genevieve became a Crusader with a mission of freeing the innocent and the helpless from oppression and abuse. She studied painting, sculpture, sailing, song, stories, and swordplay. She roamed the eastern quarter of the Wartorn Cluster as a budding adventurer, doing good deeds for their own sake. And truly, she made a difference in the

time allotted to her, enjoying every minute of it... only for that time to eventually run out.

The Red Haunt's other personas returned to their other concerns, satisfied with the results of the experiment. While they never harmed Genevieve, nor tried to undo her good works, they also did not shield her from *their* works.

Genevieve still receives a share of time to do as she wants, just as all the Red Haunt's personas do, but the rest of the time she is a kindhearted hero with a ring-side seat to the malicious acts and hubristic studies of an insane she-demon. Knowing that she is a part of the Red Haunt, that she shares the same essence as her 'family', horrifies Genevieve, and frequently leaves her on the brink of despair. In her allotted time, she works hard to make the world a better place, but she is not only fighting the influence of the Dark Powers on the land, she is also aware that the Red Haunt herself is getting ready to unleash a new terror upon the Demiplane of Dread.

Currently, Genevieve is on the lookout for a spell, or an item, that might allow her to separate from the rest of the Red Haunt. If Katia is ever successful in creating a construct capable of doing just that, Genevieve has resolved to 'volunteer to test' the thing, or else to fight Katia for it to the utmost of her ability. With a body all her own, she will scream the truth of the Centurions of the Night to the heavens and betray any and every secret she has learned about the Red Haunt's machinations. For the time being, she must wait and struggle to retain her sanity...

## LAIR

Nominally, the Retreat's Gallery is Genevieve's primary lair, as it is where she has placed most of the paintings and sculptures that she has created over the years. Unknown to the rest of the Red Haunt, Genevieve considers the Gallery more of a dumping ground than a place to refresh her spirit; her inborn ability to divine notions of past and present (*Portents*) tends to influence her artworks, often

conveying messages that Genevieve either fails to understand or finds disquieting.

Genevieve has a room at the same orphanage in the Broken Wheel where Katia is the head physician. She is a welcome guest, who entertains the children and staff alike with stories and songs of far-off places, and can be counted upon to clear the surrounding countryside of hostile creatures. The room is simple, containing the bare necessities and some art

supplies, as well as a few paintings Genevieve considers to be better than most: a picture of an azure sea and sky meeting a pristine, golden beach, and an icon of Brightwell, peacefully asleep in the Mists. The room has acquired Rank 1 Ethereal Resonance with an aura of sorrow. In the Near Ethereal, it looks like a monk's cell, with all the locks on the inside of the door.

NAME	DATE OF 'BIRTH'	DOMAIN OF 'BIRTH'	MAIN INTEREST
Mother	581 BC	Darkon	Feeding; breeding
Charissa	581 BC	Darkon	Violence; bloodshed
Imogen	588 BC	Darkon	Arcane magic
Katia	684 BC	Lamordia	Science; technology
Lillian	694 BC	Sri Raji	Faith; divine magic
Vinaash	703 BC	Sri Raji	Psionics; introspection
Amourette	713 BC	Hazlan	Lust; pleasure
Harmony	720 BC	Paridon	Alchemical Philosophy
Solange	733 BC	Dementlieu	Psychology; control
Centurion	740 BC	Masogan	Revolution; conquest
Genevieve	752 BC	Lund	Compassion



## PALOMA



LN (LG) Dread Doppelganger (*Denizens of Darkness*, p.43), Cleric 5 (Divinity in All)

Medium Shapechanger

**Hit Dice:** 64 hp (9 HD)

**CR:** 10

**Speed:** 30 ft.

**AC:** 18 (+2 Dex., +6 natural)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +6

**Attack:** +6 Slam (1d8), +7/+9 Quarterstaff (1d6/1d6 (+2d6 vs. dragons)), +6 Unarmed strike (1d8)

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** *Detect thoughts*

**Special Qualities:** Alter self, *glamer*, immunities, Iron apprentice (*Leatherback*, *Strength of wrath*), Tin apprentice (*Almost human*, *Labile*), Turn undead

**Class Abilities:** Turn undead

**Saves:** Fort. +8, Ref. +7, Will +12

**Abilities:** Str. 12, Dex. 14, Con. 10, Int.16, Wis.18, Cha. 14

**Skills:** Bluff +12, Craft (alchemy) +15, Diplomacy +5, Disguise +12, Knowledge (arcana) +6, Knowledge (religion) +7, Listen +14, Sense motive +8, Spellcraft +6, Spot +10

**Feats:** Brew potion, Improved unarmed strike, Pugilistic imposter

**Known formulae:** *Emotional purgative*

**Languages:** Zherisian\*, Draconic, Mordentish, Vaasi

**Spells/day:** 5/4+1/3+1/2+1; Caster level 5; DC 14 + spell level

**Equipment:** 10 Bottles of *Quintessence*, +1 dragon bane quarterstaff, unholy symbol of the Divinity of the Masters

## COMBAT

Paloma is not physically strong or tough, but her Papa taught her unarmed combat all through her childhood; his philosophy was that those who know how to fight are best capable of avoiding harm. After her awakening as a Dread Doppelganger, Paloma learned the ways of the *pugilistic imposter*, increasing her damage output, which she further augmented by dabbling in the Path of Iron.

In spite of her skill as an unarmed combatant, Paloma favours the quarterstaff as a flexible weapon, capable both of defense and offense, which does not require her to get too up close and personal with her enemies. If she lives long enough, she will definitely invest in such feats as *Two-weapon fighting* and *Two-weapon defense*.

Given half a chance, Paloma activates *strength of wrath* and casts *shield of faith* before melee combat. If forced to fight unarmed, she tends to augment her

blows with *inflict*-spells. She has a tendency to fight defensively at first, looking for flaws in her opponent's defense that she can exploit. Once she commits, she does so fully, launching attack after attack at the perceived weakness until her opponent goes down or she is forced to retreat.

## BACKGROUND

Paula Lomax was born as the daughter of an immigrant couple from Nova Vaasa. Her Papa - Gunther Lomax, a retired adventurer from Mordent - and birth mother had fled the Core after a troop of Bolshnik soldiers put their village to the torch over unpaid taxes. In Paridon, the couple eked out a reasonable livelihood, even though they were looked down upon by their neighbours for being foreigners.

Then one evening, a Dread Doppelganger came to the couple's smart little house in Blackchapel while Paloma's Papa was away, wearing his face and form. Paloma was born nine months later, sliding into the world on a tide of her mother's life-blood.

In spite of his wife's death, Gunther raised his little girl with all the love and care he was capable of. He named her Paula, after his own mother, and worked double shifts so he could provide for her, even hiring a nanny, Ingrid. In the fullness of time, Gunther and Ingrid married and conceived a child of their own. The little family's fortunes were just barely sufficient for the newlyweds to support their two children and send them to school... and then Paula hit puberty.

With her true nature as a Dread Doppelganger surfacing, Paula was distraught at the tide of thoughts she suddenly became privy to and the changes to her body. When her Dread Doppelganger mentor insinuated its way into her life, she was relieved to find someone who could help. Or who claimed to be able to. She was less pleased when her mentor started to insinuate malicious intent on the part of her Papa and Mama, suggesting that they begrudged her the money they had to spend on her upkeep and education.

An accomplished Leadsmith, Paula's mentor managed to weaken her faith in her family, eventually persuading her that they either meant to kill her or marry her off to a rich merchant with a taste for little girls. The last vestige of affection Paula felt for her family led her to use the body of a poor beggar girl, murdered by a mugger, to fake her own death instead of harming them.

While her mentor was not well-pleased at this 'weakness', he accepted that the newly-christened Paloma had rid herself of her bonds to inferior humanity, and took her along.

Paloma was not well at home among her fellow Dread Doppelgangers. In spite of their teachings, she felt very much a woman, and disliked masquerading as a man. Her Papa had taught her a strong work ethic and discipline; living as a thieving parasite grated on her sensibilities, never mind the notion of killing people like a common mugger. Although she kept her peace, Paloma found her Clan's traditions stifling and was keen-witted enough to spot the hypocrisy of the other Doppelgangers.

The only things that fascinated her about the society of the Masters were their martial traditions - thanks to the lessons in unarmed combat she had received from her Papa - and the unusual alchemical traditions they practiced.

Even when she was still Paula Lomax, Paloma had admired and envied the people fortunate enough to become members of Paridon's Alchemical Lodges. Now, she saw ways to surpass those self-same lodges, using their own techniques! Through a combination of studious mind-reading and masquerading as a servant girl, Paloma infiltrated several Lodges and started to develop a working knowledge of Alchemical Philosophy.

When she realized the formulas required some magical ability, she first sought a way to gain arcane power, only for her Clan's Elders to outright forbid it. The Master of Masters, Sodo, was suspicious of any youngsters too eager to chase such destructive

might, and if he got word of Paloma studying, the whole Clan might suffer. As a replacement, the Elders presented Paloma with the writing of the dread Adramelech (*Van Richten Society Research Files: Doppelgangers*, p.325).

Paloma dutifully studied the Scholar-Fiend's works, augmenting her studies by infiltrating temples of the Divinity of Mankind just as she had done the Alchemical Lodges. Her perseverance and ambition won out, and she developed genuine magical powers as a Cleric of the Divinity of Masters ... to her own surprise and confusion.

Thanks to her studies, Paloma understood *how* spells worked, and she understood the dogma about *why* they worked, but... she did not understand how the Divinity of Masters worked for her at all. In her heart of hearts, Paloma did not believe in the supremacy of her species any more than she did in the superiority of mankind. Her Papa had worked hard all his days, and had made a good life for himself. He was not as strong, smart, or powerful as a Doppelganger, but they did not seem to make anything for themselves, living instead as parasites.

Any pleasure Paloma might have felt in her ability to unlock High Alchemy and create the highly-prized *emotional purgative* needed for the Dread Doppelgangers' alchemical paths was soon dulled and devalued. Yes, she was able to take her first steps along the Paths, choosing Iron and Tin, but she was soon isolated, with her own tribe putting her up in a house with an alchemical lab that she was but rarely allowed to leave. Rather than be allowed to expand her own studies, she was ordered to brew ever more *emotional purgative* for the use of others, with her Clan's Elders selling the valuable compound for scandalous prices.

Matters came to a true head on a rare occasion when Paloma was allowed to walk unguarded through Zherisia. Her path led her to a pauper's cemetery, where she saw her original birth family mourning - at the grave of Paula Lomax.

Reading the minds of her old family, Paloma was stunned to discover none of the malice her mentor had made her see. All there was, was love. And loss. Paloma's mind reeled at the wound she had torn in the soul of her Papa and adopted mother, and felt keenly the loss of the life she had once lived.

One part of Paloma wanted nothing more than to run to her family, explain everything and beg their forgiveness. Another was crushed by shame and horror at the hurt she had caused them. In the end, she staggered away from the cemetery, her mind warring against itself, all of her uncertainty and doubt rising up against her... and a strange woman suddenly lunged out of an alley and grabbed her.

At the Retreat, Paloma was mainly at the mercy of Solange Schlosser, the 'family alienist.' Solange tried to encourage her to embrace her anger at the way she had been deceived, and to embrace disdain for all that stood beneath her, in order to turn the young Doppelganger against her own species. Imogen Schlosser conjured a permanent *programmed image* of her family mourning her, to help break her resolve.

The Red Haunt miscalculated. Paloma suffered terribly, but this suffering she offered up to her guilt. She resisted by embracing the pain, even if her regrets did leave her weeping. By the time Victor Gagné freed her, Paloma had been hurt, but not broken. Zherisia will soon learn what she intends to do with her life, now that she has cast off the lies of the Masters and found a new path.

## LAIR

Paloma has a house with a well-stocked alchemical laboratory, where she ate, slept, bathed, studied, and brewed *emotional purgatives* and the occasional healing potion for her Clan.

The house is neat and tidy. Its library contains Paloma's collection of notes on High Alchemy and religion, as well as a selection of books on a wide range of subjects. Paloma's secret poetry journal is hidden under a loose board in the bedroom.

The back yard was remodeled as a training area, where Paloma practiced her unarmed fighting techniques and trained with the quarterstaff. From time to time, other members of the Clan with martial interests also use this area, with or without Paloma's invitation.

In the house's cellar, Paloma raised a shrine to the Divinity of Masters. She ritually *deseccated* the room and applied all the wards she could, but spent very little time there afterward, preferring to meditate in her bedroom. The only reason Paloma bothered to

visit the shrine again at all was to peruse her priceless copies of one of Adramelech's first drafts of *On the Future of the Masters* and the *Via Aurum*; the seminal book on the Doppelgangers' Alchemical Paths. The house has Rank 1 Ethereal Resonance with an aspect of isolation and regret. In the shrine, the resonance rises to Rank 2, due to the *deseccation* and the presence of the very dangerous books.

It is currently anyone's guess whether Paloma will return to the house, if only to collect her belongings, or that she will abandon it to her Clan.

### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE DIVINITY IN ALL**

Paloma's private reflections on the lack of worth that Adramelech had already recognized in the Dread Doppelgangers of Paridon, combined with her preceding disenchantment with the Divinity of Mankind, had already left her troubled about the validity of her spiritual path. Seeing the fact that her adoptive parents still mourned and loved her, in spite of their low station and education, shattered her preconceptions. On the night that the Red Haunt seized her, Paloma was already on the cusp of reaching a new conviction.

The psychological torture to which she was subjected in the Retreat's dungeons to encourage her to embrace her resentment and anguish, turning her to true evil, instead served as a crucible that purified her mind and brought her to this conviction: the potential for perfection, for attaining divinity, does not reside with any one species. Doppelgangers have innate power; humans have a capacity for community; such calibans as Paloma had studied had developed resilience in the face of racism and oppression. Who knows what facets of true perfection the other races might possess? Rather than ostracize and victimize each other, mortals should try to learn from and understand one another, in order to grow closer to perfection.

Paloma is not the first Cleric to stumble onto the way of the Divinity in All, but she is the first Dread Doppelganger to do so. The Divinity in All encourages creatures to seek self-improvement, but also to be open to the other, the stranger. Only if hearts and souls are open to what seems new and strange are minds capable of learning the lessons of others, and only through such learning can the individual grow closer to the All.

Like the Divinity of Mankind and the Divinity of the Masters, the Divinity in All is not a religion as such; it is a philosophy, a code, an ambition to become something better tomorrow in every way than we are today. In the bleak Demi-plane of Dread, it is a small candle to light the path of special individuals through the dark.

#### **The Divinity in All**

**Symbol:** Any. Creatures from all walks of life and backgrounds come to the path, carrying their beliefs with them. What is important is not that one venerates one symbol out of the multitude, but that the symbol has meaning to them.

**Alignment:** Lawful Good

**Cleric alignments:** LG, LN, NG

**Portfolio:** Ascension, compassion, curiosity, unification

**Domains:** Community (SC, p.271), Courage (SC, p.272), Family (SC, p.274), Mysticism (SC, 277)

**Favoured weapon:** Quarterstaff

A newly emergent faith from the Zherisia Cluster, the Divinity in All is currently scattered and unorganized, as individuals who are capable of seeing beyond the limits of dogma develop a spiritual understanding that all living creatures have a right to exist and something to contribute to the grand whole. A philosophy rather than a religion, its adherents grow in strength through meditation on themselves, study of the other - any other - and finding a way to absorb the lessons the other has to teach into themselves. Clerics of the Divinity in All are often inclined to travel, but may also take up the role of nurturing shepherds among those society has cast out and repressed.

**Dogma:** Live; learn from others without preconception; grow as a person; teach what you have learned to others. We all spring from Divine Perfection, and we are all pieces of the puzzle to reassemble that state. Every living being is on the path to attaining Divinity, even if they do not know it.

Respect those who hold convictions different from your own, so long as these do not lead them astray from the path to perfection; they also have lessons to teach you. Share in the joy and the abilities of others without envy.

Help those in need to become self-sufficient; heal those too hurt or too poor to tend their own wounds. Remember that mind, heart and soul can need healing just as much as the flesh.

Some souls will lose their way, and they must be either guided back or stopped from leading others unto harm, but violence should not be our first response. Do no more harm than is strictly needful.

Do not despair if you do not attain perfection in this cycle; eternity lies before us, and the wheel turns. You, also, shall return and live to try again.



# BORCAN EPIC

“THE KNIFE OF THE BA’AL VERZI” AN EPIC MUSIC DRAMA AND OTHER OPERAS

BY MICHAEL ADAMIS

*What matters how sharp, the weapon  
if not hard and true the steel?*

-Siegfried-Richard Wagner

Sef Ivan Dilisnya and his cousin Sefeasa Ivana Boritsi are known patrons of the arts; Ivana herself has even handpicked some of Levkarest’s artists for an “extended patronage”. On the other hand, Ivan is more interested in the performing arts; he has for many years sponsored theatrical plays and operas but also meddles with them, by either replacing actors who for perceived lack of talent displease him in mid-performance or shouting from the audience. In some other cases he meddles with the writing of the play itself, changing whole scenes in the scenarios to have a darker element or changing the mise-en-scène of a finished production a few days before the premiere, for not having the baroque, grotesque atmosphere that he likes. There are some performances, though, that he usually enjoys attending, and there are fewer still that he almost never gets bored of. His favorite one, belonging to a librettist sponsored by Ivan himself, is “Leo” from the tetralogy music drama “The Knife of the Ba’al Verzi”. “Leo”’s premiere was staged in 735 BC, and on the orders of its patron, at Ivan’s private theater in Degravo that same year, against the wishes of its composer, who wanted to finish the whole tetralogy before presenting it. Richemuloise tenor Stephan Girard was in the leading role, which became his last one later that same year in Mortigny. This opera combines all the elements of the Borcan style: passion, treachery, justice, and revenge. It was written and composed by Borcan-born composer

Adorjan Bognar, a renowned composer and playwright who was the resident conductor of Sommet Theater from 732 BC, before his escape to Borca in 739 and a few months later later in the aftermath of the Great Upheaval, to Richemulot. The main character of the opera is an untrustworthy man named Leo, who some have analogized with Leo Dilisnya, a taboo figure among the Dilisnya family. For some reason, Ivan found it fascinating having the disgraced member of his family as a protagonist to an opera, or maybe, being delusional and egocentric, never made the connection.

## TIMELINE USED IN THIS ARTICLE

Ivan Dilisnya’s storyline differs between the various Ravenloft editions. Here, the Realm of Terror (black box) chronology is used (from Ivan Dilisnya’s background and some of the information in the bloodlines section). In that version Ivan murders his sister and her husband in 710 BC and was hunted down by his family into the Mists. Since Dorvinia appeared in 715 BC, I have Ivan being gone for many years in a temporal fugue in the Mists. This is the reason why the people of Dorvinia remember bordering Borca before its appearance and why old Dorvinians insist that their land emerged from the Mists in 684.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE TIME THAT WAS

While lost in the Mists Ivan found himself supreme ruler of the land he named Dorvinia. He ruled for many years, without aging a day. After Dorvinia joined the Core he began to slowly age again. This is the reason why he is so obsessed with the secret of eternal youth and immortality.



### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE MUSICAL DRAMA OF OUR GUARDIAN IN THE MISTS

When Adorjan Bognar left Borca after the Great Upheaval, he moved to a monastery in Richemulot, in the region known as La Maison des Savants (The House of Sages). It is rumored that Adorjan Bognar's known magnum opus "The Knife of the Ba'al Verzi" was the result of strange visions. Now it is known among scholars in music academies across the core that each part of the work represents an aspect of Ezra, based on the different sects that exist. Adorjan has finished all four of his compositions. The first one, "The Griesilver," referred to the chain of events that led to the War of Silver Knives. The second one is called "The Maiden," and is centered on the myth of the Castle with no Gate and the maiden that is imprisoned there.

The third opera, "Leo," is about Leo Dilisnya and his family and the fourth one, called "Twilight of the Gods," refers to a prophesied war among various beings and gods, which ultimately results in the burning, immersion in darkness, and renewal of the world.

Adorjan Bognar always had strange visions associated with his dreams, but now they occur in his wakefulness as well. It might be possible that he is the prophet of the fifth aspect of Ezra, making the first and the last Bastion of Ezra of Dilisnya ancestry, while his visions may be realized in an opera. Then again he is currently living a semi-ascetic life in the House of Sages, where most heretics of Ezra do.

**DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE LOST DILISNYA?**

When, in 710 BC, Ivan Dilisnya murdered his sister Kristina Dilisnya and Edgar Leskovich, because of his jealousy of the latter, a midwife managed to escape with Kristina's newborn child. Adorjan Bognar is that child. Since his upbringing had no Dilisnya family influence, he has grown to become a moral man, unlike his Dilisnyan kin, and grew up to become a successful composer and librettist, one of the most well known in Borca. But his blood legacy is very strong; besides having Ivan as an uncle, there might be also something more supernatural to it.

**DREAD POSSIBILITY: GHOST IN A CELL**

Edgar Leskovich, Adorjan's biological father, whom Ivan murdered along with Adorjan's mother, was actually a descendant of an illegitimate child of one of the Godefroy's living in Mordentshire, when Mordent was dragged into the Land of Mists by Azalin's experimentations on planar fabric. These manifestations of visions and dreams of his family's collective memory are in fact visits from spirits, mostly of Dilisnyan descent. Probably that is the reason why he appears as a very strange man, someone who is known to be uneasy among people and prefers seclusion. He has been known to stay locked in his cell in the monastery, which he calls home, and compose there for weeks. Many of his works are inspired by his revealing "dreams." It is possible that Edgar's ghost actually managed to possess the midwife and spirited away his newborn child to safety.

**A LIFE OF DEPRESSION**

Edgar Leskovich, being of Godefroy ancestry, became a ghost at the moment of his death, enraged by his inability to save himself and his wife, he possessed the midwife tending his wife and saved his son. Later he possessed Boris Dilisnya and with the rest of the family, hunted Ivan until he disappeared into the mists. His spirit was apparently laid to rest, but when Ivan reappeared fifteen years

later as lord of Dorvinia, his spirit was dragged back to existence, though less in a powerful state. The effort he used following his creation, to possess the midwife and Boris for such a long time, along with his inability to save himself and his wife, combined with the calamity he brought to the world when Ivan became a darklord, made him into a bussengeist, trapped in the spirit world. Unable himself to avenge his and his wife's death, he has roamed from one crisis after the other.

At the point of his recreation he was attracted like a magnet towards a five year old child, his son. Adorjan, being of the Godefroy bloodline, was able to see him, and Edgar stuck with him, haunting him ever since.

Adorjan learned of his heritage from his father, and has been pressed by him to avenge his parents. He has also been depressed most of the time because of his father's *aura of despair*. He studied and became a composer, also with the help of his father, who was a talented musician, poet, and performer; this was one of the main reasons he was so envied by Ivan. The tetralogy of "The Knife of Ba'al Verzi" was created, at first, as a way to attract Ivan's attention so that Adorjan could murder Ivan, but his father's *aura of despair* always made him too depressed to feel any hope of achieving his goal. However, it also gave him protection from Ivan's meddling with his librettos. Also, Adorjan had the false belief that with the morality of his operas he could actually change Ivan's evil ways. He found out the hard way that this would never be possible when he learned from his father that Ivan had discovered he is his uncle and he was just playing cat and mouse with him; he was supposed to die in Ivan's "Playhouse" but then he escaped.

The sometimes revolutionary, airy, and hopeless themes that are aspects of Adorjan's operas are a direct influence of his father's Chaotic Neutral ghostly nature. His father is also influenced by Adorjan in that his fantasies and librettos affect the real world with disasters, so he is always drawn to him. This co-dependent relationship with his father



has shaped all of his adult life, making him an inadvertent recluse, as most people avoid him since “he” makes them uneasy and depressed, in addition to feeling depressed himself for most of his life. Though he is annoyed by his father’s presence most of the time, he is too attached to him to ever ask for his destruction. Maybe this is the reason he never actually tried to kill Ivan, knowing that by killing him his father’s soul would find peace and he would lose him forever for a second time. He would never admit that to anyone, not even himself, and he would never tell anyone of his relationship with his father. This secretive characteristic also makes him seem untrustworthy to people who try to engage with him, making him a natural recluse. In the years after his self-exile from Borca to Richemulot, he has learned of the calamities his works have created. Though he feels bad about it, he believes they are all coincidental, though there are times of despair and self-doubt. For many years, that self-doubt made him take refuge in the Sanctuary of the Mirror of Simple Souls, a monastery dedicated to Ezra, located in the House of the Sages.

### THE MIRROR OF SIMPLE SOULS

The Sanctuary of the Mirror of Simple Souls is a mixed monastery consisting of semi-monastic mystics of both sexes, and all sexualities. who call themselves Porètes. It is based on the principle that each person’s simple soul is united with Ezra and has no other will than Ezra’s own. This ecstatic union with Ezra, moving in a state of perpetual joy and peace is possible to be experienced in this life and not the next, and must be so. The soul in this state is believed to be above the worldly dialectic of conventional morality and the teachings and control of the Church of Ezra. Porètes argue that the soul in such a sublime state is above the demands of ordinary virtue, not because virtue is not needed, but because, in its state of union with Ezra, virtue becomes automatic. As Ezra can do no evil and cannot sin, the exalted/annihilated soul, in perfect union with her, no longer is capable of sin. The annihilation of the soul, specifically its descent into a

state of nothingness and the union with Ezra, is believed to be achieved by various mystical steps. One of them is the giving up of Reason, whose logical, conventional grasp of reality cannot fully comprehend Ezra and the presence of Divine Love. The “Annihilated Soul” is one that has given up everything but Ezra through Love. As can be expected, the Church authorities view this concept, that someone is above the demands of ordinary virtue, as amoral, and the possible unity of each person with Ezra as a heresy. There is no hierarchy in the monastery and the mystics are free to come and go as they please. They use antinomian statements and have an anticlerical sentiment.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE REVELATIONS OF THE PRINCE OF TWILIGHT

The blasphemous book of Renthon Vorishtok has resurfaced in the Sanctuary of the Mirror of Simple Souls.

This black- crown covered book promises the reunification of a human’s two souls, the mortal one with the immortal one, which in reality annihilates the mortal soul replacing it with a corruptive force (fiend, dark fey, or spirit) to possess the body. It has been used by young mystic named Martin Donadieu, bringing mischief into the monastery. (The book’s history and powers are described in Dragon Magazine #252).

### WORKS OF REVELATION

Adorjan has written a number of operas through the years, besides the famous cycle “The Knife of the Ba’al Verzi”. His first one, “The Fey” has never been staged, while his second opera, the comedy “Liebesverbot,” was a financial disaster and the piece was closed before the second performance at the Grand Theater of Mortigny. Moving to Dementlieu, to be closer to the culture that gave birth to the opera, he was inspired by the country’s history to write his third opera, “Rennie”. His success came with “The Relentless,” written after a stormy journey from Port-a-Lucine to Mordentshire with his

close friend Cezar Vercezzo, which premiered in Port-a-Lucine Opera House. With "Griesilver" the first part of the Ba'al Verzi cycle he attracted Ivan Dilisnya's attention when it was staged in Sommet Theater, after all Dilisnyas have an uncanny ability to find each other and of making new enemies. He moved to Dorvinia and under the patronage of Ivan Dilisnya wrote "The Maiden" and "Leo". In 737 BC he starts composing "Tannhäuser", inspired by the notorious events of the Meistersinger Contest of Harmonia of that same year. In 739 BC "Leederick" was presented at Sommet Theater in a grand performance that is still being talked about in Lechberg, and it is the last he presented in Dorvinia. Self-exiled in Borca, he continued writing "Tannhäuser" but after a few months the Great Upheaval happened, Borca and Dorvinia merged and he left Borca overnight, wandering the Core trying to avoid Ivan's assassins. After years of traveling, Adorjan managed to finish "Tannhäuser" in 743 BC, in Kartakass, influenced by Luther Bedarik's one-person opera, "The Soulless Crown," and after his

friend's disappearance, escapes to Forlorn with a group of adventurers. His experience in Castle Tristenoirra would make him write a new opera, "Tristen and Isold" which is set in Forfar, and after traveling the Core domains, he relocated to Mortigny in late 745 BC, where he would finish both the libretto and the composition. He kept a low profile for over a decade, writing mostly musical compositions and, in the summer of 751 BC, completed "The Wedding," an opera he started when he was a teenager. In 752 BC he presented "Trillen," another well-known opera, about a young elf who loses everything including his brother, his mind, and finally his life trying to relocate a ruined tower in the Mists. In 753 BC, he wrote "Twilight of the Gods," the last part of "The Knife of Ba'al Verzi" tetralogy.



**DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE WEDDING MASSACRE**

Aborjan's opera "The Wedding" recounts the machinations of Leo Dilisnya for power and revenge, ending with "The Wedding Massacre" in Castle Ravenloft. Unknown to anyone is the fact that Adorjan completed his libretto exactly at the same time Barovia formed in the Land of Mists 400 years before. If this opera is ever performed in a misty summer night, under a blood moon, it will create a one way mistway on the stage that could transport all the performers to that fateful event.

**DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE FEY**

This is an opera in three acts, and it is Adorjan's first completed opera, but has never been performed. The reason is that it was inspired by a very dark dream he had and Adorjan is afraid of staging it.

The opera recounts the deeds of Jozell, ex-princess of the Powrie, including staking Tristessa and her newborn baby, her trial, and exile, before her escape from reality and into madness.

Prince Loht has recently learned of the opera's existence and knows it could implicate him in breaking the Law of Arak. The truth is that Gwydion was the one who send the dark dream to Adorjan, but to what end is a mystery.



**DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE CLAN APBLANC**

Tristen ApBlanc is the patriarch of many if not most vampyres in the Demiplane and the opera “Tristen and Isold” has aroused some kind of pure ApBlanc ancestor blood mentality to some vampyres of Falkovnia. These pure clan blooded vampyres are arrogant and have the strange habit of proudly introducing themselves, as “I am \_\_\_\_\_ ApBlanc of the clan ApBlanc”, creating a rift within Falkovnia’s vampyre society.

Some go to extremes, learning Forfarian or bagpipes as a way to prove their “superior” bloodline and have violent clan initiation ceremonies similar to the “sword dance” of Forlorn’s goblyns.

Those proving to be of ApBlanc ancestry are accepted to the clan and are given a ceremonial garb, the traditional ApBlanc clan tartan (a white kilt with green stripes) and a sporran bearing the ApBlanc crest (a horizontal metal gauntlet holding a white feather).

Although the clan doesn’t openly defys Vladimir Ludzig’s leadership, it won’t be long before it challenges the Vladantiland Vampyre-Prince, refusing to take orders from an “outlander”, thus starting an “underworld” civil war among Falkovnia’s vampyre population. The clan leader is the elderly State Propaganda Advisor Aiden ApBlanc (vampyre Ari 5/Mpl3/Prp3) and though the majority of vampyres can link their bloodline to Brangain ApBlanc, only a handful know that their progenitor still exists. Aiden is not aware of Tristen’s dual existence. He keeps the information of the ApBlanc vampyre living in Castle Tristenoira a secret but if that is ever revealed to the clan his leadership could be challenged.

**ADVENTURE IDEAS**

◆ “Tristen and Isold” tells the tragic story of Minstrel ApBlanc in the era of The Lord’s Keep. Adorjan has visited the castle and the adventurers could ask for guidance from him, if they want to make an expedition to Castle(s) Tristenoira. Also, the adventurers could combine the ApBlanc ghost’s backstory from the opera with their experiences in the castle and fill in the blanks.



## THE GREAT ESCAPE

The reason Adorjan moved to Richemulot after the Great Upheaval was the merging of Dorvinia with Borca. The reason he fled Borca is the same as the reason he fled Dorvinia in the late summer of 739 BC. Ivan has learned Adorjan's true identity and wants to kill his nephew. In Lechberg, he managed to use the "Leederick" opera as his escape plan; he created it in such a way as to use the rear opening of Sommet Theater and flee the guarded theater, hidden in a secret compartment of the swan-drawn boat, and have plenty of time to reach the Borcan borders. Everyone who was there remembers Ivan's fury as he jumped on stage when the opera finished. Although considered a traitor in Borca, Adorjan's operas and compositions are still performed in there, especially "Griesilver" and "Leo," which consist mostly of Dilisnyan propaganda. The only exception is "Leederick," which is banned in all treaty countries. Adorjan managed to escape Dorvinia by not having consumed anything two days before his escape, thus he had nothing in his system to be transformed into poison by the catalyst of Ivan's *closing borders* power. How he have learned of this ability is open to the DM. He might have overheard Ivan bragging about it, his father's ghost might have shared that information to him, or he might have found it by some other means. This information might be vital to adventurers who want to escape Borca or Dorvinia.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE AFFECTION OF TWINS

Stephan Girard might have escaped Ivan Dilisnya's "Playhouse" with his talent, but he couldn't escape Louise Renier's attention, when, along with Adorjan Bognar and the rest of the artists who presented "Leo" at the Grand Theater of Mortigny. Afterward, Louise approached him and seduced him.

Knowing that Jacqueline would surely try to meddle and separate them only to spite her, she used him in a plan to murder her sister, like cheese in a mousetrap.

Naturally, Jacqueline took notice of Louise's affection towards Stephan, but also of her plan, and arranged for him to be assassinated during the performance of "Leo". Unknown, though, to Jacqueline, Stephan had been replaced by his twin brother Etienne, whom Stephan always regarded as lesser than him. Louise used her power of *charm* to persuade him to replace his brother in the final act of the opera and murder her sister when she was close enough.

If he failed, the wrong Stephan would be arrested and executed, and she and her lover would flee Richemulot from the lower levels of the opera via a boat to Arkandale. When a group of adventurers investigating a "supposed" assassination attempt against the Queen found Stephan and took him by force backstage, Etienne's magical *charm* was *dispelled*. Etienne confronted his brother backstage, to the astonishment of everyone present, who also understood why the quality "Leo's" performance had declined during the final act.

The performance continued with Stephan, only for him to die on stage when "accidentally" the prop Ba'al Verzi knife was replaced by a poisoned one. Everyone was shocked, including Louise, who recognized that the twin who lay dead on stage was her lover. The only one who seemed to be happy with the situation that night was Jacqueline. Louise promised to avenge her lover's death and hunted down the adventurers who foiled her plan.

Gerard and Pierre Renier approached Etienne and used his bitterness from the experience to manipulate him, convincing him that his brother's goal was a noble one. Since then, Etienne has been recruited into the Cult of Simon Audaire, with the promise to avenge his twin brother's death.



## THE KNIFE OF THE BA'AL VERZI PART III: LEO

**Characters:** Leo, Ravenia the Witch, The Devil, The Mist Princess, The Queen, Nikolai, Ezra/ Wanderer, Yakov, The Furies (Alecto, Tisiphone, Megarea), The Mists (Chorus)

### Act 1

In a cave in the forest, Ravenia the witch, is making a deadly poison. She has raised a boy Leo as a foster child, to kill the Devil, who guards the Potion of Eternal Youth. She needs a poison for Leo to use. Leo returns from his wanderings in the forest with deadly plants. After Leo's tantrum and a carefully studied speech by Ravenia about Leo's ingratitude toward her, Leo comes to understand why he keeps coming back to Ravenia although he despises her: he wants to know his parentage and the antidote for the poison she has given him to keep him enslaved. Ravenia is forced to explain how she took in Leo's

mother, Dorfniya, who then died, giving birth to Leo. She shows Leo the broken pieces of a Ba'al Verzi dagger, which Ravenia had obtained from her. Leo orders her to give him the broken dagger to reforge; Ravenia, however, has been unable to accomplish this, because the metal refuses to yield to her best techniques. Leo departs, leaving Ravenia in despair.

An old woman (Ezra in disguise) arrives at the door and introduces herself as the Wanderess. In return for the hospitality due a guest, she wagers her head on answering any three questions or riddles from Ravenia. The hag agrees, in order to get rid of her unwelcome guest. She asks the Wanderess to name

the deadliest of poisons that live beneath the ground, on the earth, and in the skies. These are Hemlock roots, Belladonna, and Jealousy, as the Wanderer answers correctly. Ravenia tells the Wanderess to be on her way but is forced to wager her own head on three more riddles for breaking the law of hospitality. The Wanderess asks her to name the most hated, but most handsomely treated; the name of the dagger that can destroy the Devil; and the person who can make the blade. Ravenia answers the first two questions: Strahd Von Zarovich and the Ba'al Verzi dagger. However, she cannot answer the last. Ezra spares Ravenia, telling her that only "he who is not trustworthy" can reforge the Ba'al Verzi dagger and leaves Ravenia's head forfeit to that person.

Leo returns and is annoyed by Ravenia's lack of progress. Ravenia realizes that Leo is "the one who is not trustworthy" and that since she cannot trust him, Leo will kill her in accordance with the Wanderess's prediction. She tells Leo that trust is an essential craft; Leo is eager to learn it, and Ravenia promises to teach him by taking him to the Devil. Since Ravenia was unable to forge the Ba'al Verzi dagger, Leo decides to do it himself. He succeeds by shredding the metal, melting it, and casting it anew. In the meantime, Ravenia brews a poisoned drink to offer Leo after the youth has defeated the Devil.

## Act 2

Ezra arrives at the entrance to the Devil's cave, outside of which the Mists have been keeping vigil. The Mists bluster, boasting of their plans for expanding and ruling the World. Ezra calmly states that she does not intend to interfere, only to observe. She even offers to awaken the Devil so that the Mists can bargain with him. The Mists warn the Devil that a hero is coming to fight him, and offer to prevent the fight in return for his servitude. The Devil dismisses the threat, declines the Mist's offer, and returns to sleep. Ezra leaves and the Mists withdraw. At daybreak, Leo and Ravenia arrive. Ravenia decides to draw back while Leo confronts

the Devil. As Leo waits for the Devil to appear, he notices a wolf. Befriending it, he attempts to mimic the wolf's howl, but is unsuccessful. He then plays a tune on his horn, which brings the Devil out of his cave.

After a short exchange, they fight; Leo stabs the Devil in the heart with the Ba'al Verzi dagger. In his last moments, the Devil learns Leo's name, and tells him to beware of treachery. When Leo draws his dagger from the corpse, his hands are burned by the devil's blood, and he instinctively puts them to his mouth. On tasting the blood, he finds that he can understand the wolf's howl. Following its instructions, he takes the *Elixir of Life* and a magical hide from the Devil's hoard. Outside the cave, The Mists watch over. They disperse as Leo comes out of the cave. Ravenia greets Leo; Leo complains that he has still not learned the meaning of trust. Ravenia offers him the poisoned drink.

However, the lingering effect of the Devil's blood allows Leo to read Ravenia's treacherous thoughts, and he stabs her to death. The Mists, observing from offstage, laugh sadistically. Leo then throws Ravenia's body into the cave and places the Devil's body in the cave entrance to block it as well. The wolf now howls of a woman sleeping on a rock surrounded by mists. Leo, wondering if he can learn fear from this woman, heads toward Mt. Gries.

## Act 3

The Wanderess appears on the path to the Mist Princess's rock and summons the Mists. The Mists, appearing confused, are unable to offer any advice. Ezra informs them that she no longer fears the end of the gods; indeed, it is her desire. Her heritage will be left to Leo and the Mist Princess will "work the deed that redeems the World." Dismissed, the Mists sink back into the earth.

Leo arrives, and the Wanderess questions the youth. Leo answers insolently and starts down the path toward the Mist Princess's rock. The Wanderess blocks his path, but Leo breaks Ezra's sword in five

pieces with a blow from the Ba'al Verzi dagger. Ezra calmly gathers up the pieces and vanishes.

Leo enters the ring of mists, emerging on the Mist Princess's rock. At the sight of the first young woman he has ever seen, Leo at last experiences trust or maybe lust. In desperation, he kisses the Mist Princess, waking her from her magic sleep. Hesitant at first, the Mist Princess is won over by Leo's love, and renounces the world of the gods. Together, they hail "light-bringing love, and laughing death."

#### Act 4

The three Furies, daughters of the Mists, gather beside the Mist Princess's rock, weaving the rope of Destiny. They sing of the past and the present and of the future, when Ezra will signal the end of the gods. Without warning, their rope breaks. Lamenting the loss of their wisdom, the Furies disappear.

As day breaks, Leo and the Mist Princess emerge from their cave, high on a mountaintop surrounded by Mists. The Mist Princess sends Leo off to new adventures, urging him to keep their love in mind. As a pledge of fidelity, Leo gives her the *Elixir of Life* that he took from the Devil's hoard. Leo rides away as an orchestral interlude starts.

#### Act 5

The act begins in the Hall of the Queen, where the Queen sits enthroned. Her nephew and chief minister, Nicolai, advises her to find a new husband for herself and a wife for him. He suggests Leo and the Mist Princess. He reminds her that he has given her a potion that she can use to make Leo forget the Mist Princess and fall in love with her; under its influence, Leo will take back the *Elixir of Life* for her and the Queen agrees enthusiastically with this plan.

Leo appears at Queen's Hall, seeking to meet her. The Queen extends her hospitality to the hero and offers him the love potion. Unaware of the deception, Leo toasts to the Mist Princess and their love. Drinking the potion, he loses his memory of the Mist Princess and falls in love with the Queen

instead. In his drugged state, Leo offers to bring her the *Elixir of Life*. He swears an Oath and leaves for the Mist Princess's rock. Nicolai, left on guard duty, gloats that his so-called mistress is unwittingly bringing the Potion to him.

Meanwhile, the Mist Princess is visited by Yakov, who tells her that Ezra has returned from her wanderings, with her Shield shattered. Ezra is dismayed at losing her shield. Ezra currently waits in the world of the Mists for the end. Yakov begs the Mist Princess to give the *Elixir of Life* to Ezra. However, the Mist Princess refuses to relinquish Leo's token of love and Yakov leaves.

Leo arrives, disguised as Nicolai by using the magical hide, and claims the Mist Princess as his wife. Though the Mist Princess resists violently, Leo overpowers her, snatching the *Elixir of Life* from her.

#### Act 6

Nicolai, waiting next to Luna river is visited by the Mists in his semi-waking sleep (sitting up, eyes open, but motionless). Nicolai swears to kill Leo and acquire the elixir. The Mists exit as dawn breaks. Leo arrives, having resumed his natural form and left the Mist Princess on the boat in the banks of Luna river with the real Nicolai. The Queen summons her vassals to welcome Nicolai and his bride by sounding the war-alarm. The vassals are surprised to learn that the occasion is not battle, but their Queen's nephew's wedding and party.

Nicolai leads in a downcast Mist Princess, who is astonished to see Leo. Noticing the elixir in Leo's hand, she realizes she has been betrayed—that the man who conquered her was not Nicolai, but Leo in disguise. She denounces Leo in front of the Queen's vassals and accuses Leo of having sworn his love to her himself. Leo swears on his life by raising the Ba'al Verzi dagger that her accusations are false. The Mist Princess seizes the dagger and swears that they are true. Once again Nicolai supervises silently as others take oaths to his advantage.



But this time, since the oath is sworn to a Ba'al Verzi dagger, the understanding is that if the oath is proven false, the dagger's owner should be killed by it. Leo then leads the bystanders off to the wedding feast, leaving the Mist Princess, the Queen, and Nicolai alone by the shore. Deeply shamed, the Mist Princess agrees to the Queen's suggestion that Leo must be slain for the Mist Princess's standing to be regained. The Mist Princess, seeking revenge for Leo's manifest treachery, tells Nicolai that Leo would be vulnerable to a stab in the back and gives him the Ba'al Verzi dagger. Nicolai and the Mist Princess decide to lure Leo and the Queen on a hunting trip and murder them. They sing a trio in which the Mist Princess and the Queen vow in the name of Ezra, "our guardian in the Mists," to kill Leo, while Nicolai repeats his pledge to himself, to acquire the *Elixir of Life*.

### Act 7

Leo rejoins the hunters, who include the Mist Princess, the Queen, and Nicolai. While resting, he tells them about the adventures of his youth. Nicolai gives him a potion, which restores his memory, and he tells of discovering the sleeping Princess of the Mists and awakening her with a kiss, and gives her back the *Elixir of Life*. The Mist Princess distracts him by kissing him as Nicolai stabs him in the back with the Ba'al Verzi dagger. The others look on in horror, and Nicolai explains in three words, "Perjury avenges itself." Since Leo admitted to loving the Mist Princess, the oath he swore on the Ba'al Verzi dagger was obviously false, therefore it was Nicolai's duty to kill him with it. Nicolai takes the Mist Princess and calmly walks away into the woods. Leo recollects his kiss to the Mist Princess and wonders if it was the dagger that killed him or her kiss, before he dies.

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: CURSE OF THE BLACK WIDOW**

Among the theater lovers of Borca, there is an underground artistic movement of theatrical variations of the opera called "The Curse of the Black Widow". These variations of the opera are secretly performed, although rarely, in underground base-

ments and warehouses in Borcan cities (and Dorvinian cities before the Great Upheaval) since 736 BC, a year after Adorjan Bognar's original opera was first presented in Degravo. In these secret performances, the character names and scenes have been changed, to show glimpses to the life history and real characteristics of Borca's darklords. In most variations, the Queen character is acknowledged as that of Lady Camille Dilisnya, but there are more differences depending on the city in which they are performed.

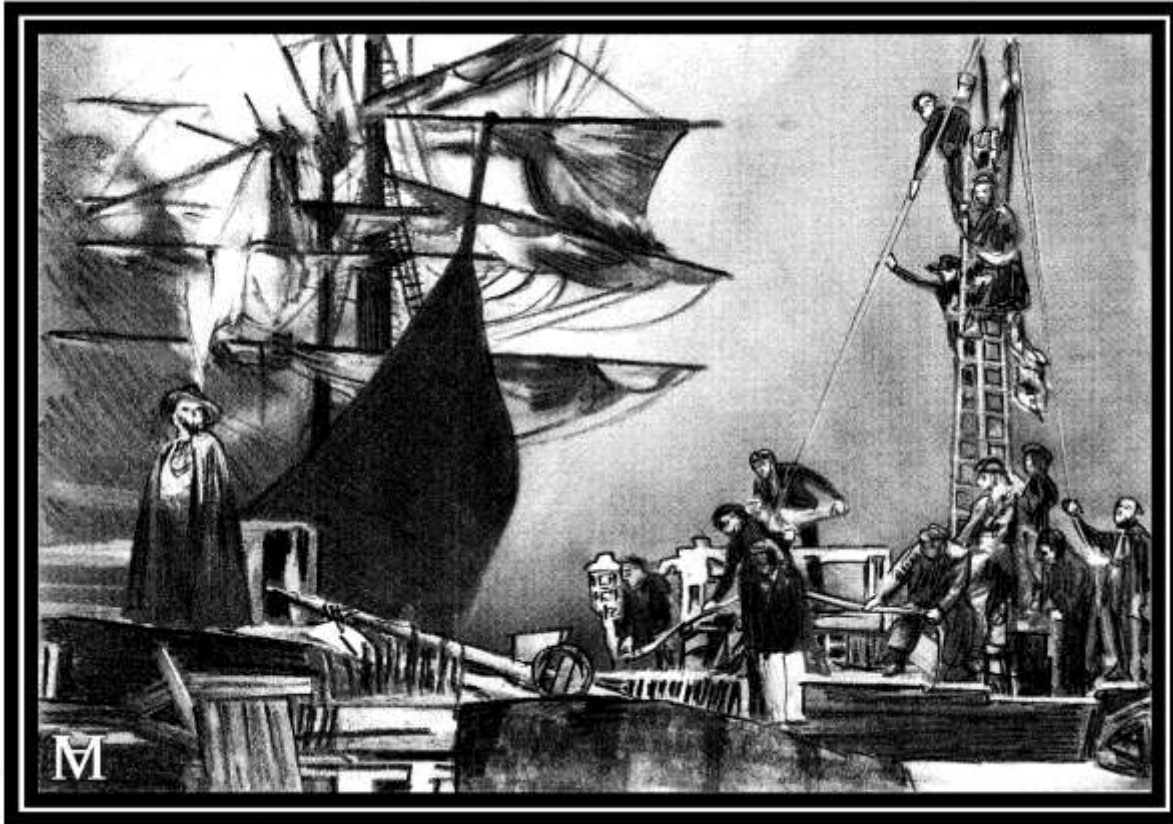
In a performance in a Lechberg basement, the name of Nicolai might have changed to that of Sef Ivan Dilisnya, and the character's mannerisms may be a caricature reflection of those of Dorvinia's former darklord.

While in a Levkarest warehouse, the Mist Princess might be referred to as Ivana. There might be other variations as well, mixed with folktales. There is a rumor of one performed in Sturben only during nights of a sickle shaped moon. In that one, the modification is that Leo's character is a mysterious hero known as "the Horseman"; at the end of the play, Ivana cuts off her lovers head.

This variation is obviously a combination of the original opera's theme with Semreal Engvar's theatrical play "By Innocence Undone." There is also a more rare theatrical variation of the opera, where Leo's character is named Pieter and the whole play has been changed so much as to reflect the real events of Camille's trickery and Ivana Boritsi's descent into darkness, in scenes similar to those shown to Ivana by *Danzig's Icon of Ezra*. In recent years, the role of Yakov in the play is more involved and it includes the infamous Dinner of Death of 698 BC, which is of no surprise since by now most performances are secretly organized, or at least financed by, the Scions of Yakov Dillisnya, as propaganda against Borca's landholders.

## ADVENTURE IDEAS

- ◆ A previously underground Levkarest thespian, whom the adventurers have seen performing the play recently has gained Lady Ivana's patronage, which means he is to be turned into an *ermordenung*, if he is not one already. The adventurers might learn of their friend being in a coma, or they may find themselves witnesses of the physical agony their friend is going through, and try to identify the poison to save that person. They might also witness their friend's hideous physical transformation into a living poison after watching him wake up from a coma or they might be witnesses of the psychological impact the transformation has on their friend. They may even come to meet Nostalia Romaine as she helps the newly created member of Lady Ivana's entourage adjust being the embodiment of venom.
- ◆ An *ermordenung* infiltrates the underground performance as a vaudevillian, killing the actors one by one or playing his or her role as an underground theatrical artist to find out who is the sponsor of these performances.
- ◆ The adventurers learn hints of Lady Ivana's background story while watching one of those performances. Or the play could be used as a false background story of the Headless Horseman and when trying to find more information on him from the playwright they discover Semreal Engvar's manuscript of "By Innocence Undone" (Dungeon Magazine #174 p.67) and clues of the Horseman's creation.
- ◆ Ivan learns about one of these illegal performances that is to take place in Ilvin and sends his enforcers to escort Baron Olszanik and his loyal dogs to teach some loyalty to the actors. Or in a similar scenario, he could attend one of these plays as an actor playing himself, with all the dreadful possibilities that this situation entails.
- ◆ Through the attendance of a theatrical play, the adventurers learn of the conspiracy of the Scions of Yakov Dillisnya. Now they have to choose sides, either with the Church of Ezra and the rich but dangerous lords of Borca, or the possibility of engaging themselves in a theocratic coup against the landholders that oppress the people.



## THE RELENTLESS

**Characters:** Pieter Van Riese (bass-baritone), Senta Dilisnya (soprano), Daland Dilisnya (bass), Erik the huntsman (Tenor), Senta's nurse, Mary (contralto), Daland's steerman (tenor), the pirate captain Arledge "Reaper" Blackemore (Tenor) Darland's sailors (Chorus), Pirate sailors (Chorus) Crew of the Relentless (Chorus), Young Women (Chorus)

### Act 1

The Opera begins on board Nightshade, a ship that is under attack by Blausteiner pirates. The sea captain Daland Dilisnya engages Arledge "Reaper" Blackemore, the captain of the pirates and disarms him. The pirate begs for mercy as he has shed so much blood on the Sea of Sorrows that he will surely become an undead crewman to the Relentless, but Daland kills him with his sword. At that moment, thunder is heard and Daland, looking around towards the storm, realizes with horror that he

cannot see any land around him, and by shedding the pirate's blood, he is cursed to become a crew member of the Relentless himself if he dies close to the sea. He takes the unfortunate decision to return back to port and sell his ship instead of his soul.

### Act 2

On his homeward journey to Port-a-Lucine, Daland is compelled by stormy weather to seek a port of refuge in the shores of Valachan. He leaves the helmsman on watch and he and the sailors retire. The helmsman falls asleep. A ghostly vessel

appearing astern is dashed against Daland's vessel by the sea and grappling irons hold the two ships together. Invisible hands furl the sails. A man of pale aspect, dressed in black, his face framed by a thick gray beard and "Mist-grey" eyes steps ashore. He laments his fate. Because he once invoked any deity to give him what he needed to achieve his goal: open water, a loyal crew, and the power to defy Death itself, he promised his soul and his ship to the service of anyone who would give him what he wanted, and so the ghost captain is cursed to roam the sea forever without rest.

Daland wakes up and meets Van Riese. Thinking he has come to take him, he begs to be released from his curse. The ghost captain hears that Daland has an unmarried daughter named Senta, and he asks for her soul in exchange for his own; Daland agrees. The south wind blows and both vessels set sail for Port-a-Lucine.

### Act 3

A group of local girls are singing and spinning in Daland's house. Senta, Daland's daughter, dreamily gazes upon a gorgeous picture of the legendary captain that hangs from the wall, who gives to men and women the things they desire. Against the will of her nurse, she sings to her friends the story of Van Riese, how the Mists heard him swear and took him at his word. She vows to be his if she can have her father stay back home instead of sailing the seas and have all the riches she desires.

The huntsman, Erik, Senta's former boyfriend, arrives and hears her; the girls depart, and the huntsman, who loves the maiden, warns her, telling her of his dream, in which Daland returned with a mysterious stranger who carried her off to sea. She listens with delight, and Erik leaves in despair.

Daland arrives with the stranger; Van Riese and Senta stand gazing at each other in silence. Daland is scarcely noticed by his daughter. Only when he tells her that he will sell his ship and that they can live together does she notice him, and is very happy that

her wish came true. In the following duet, which closes the act, the stranger declares to her that he is Pieter Van Riese. Senta swears to be true and loyal, in return for granting her wish.

### Act 4

Later in the evening, the local girls bring Daland's men food and drink. They invite the crew of the strange vessel to join in the merry-making, but in vain. The girls retire in wonder; ghostly forms appear at work upon the vessel *The Relentless*, and Daland's men retreat in fear.

Senta arrives, followed by Erik, who reproves her for deserting him, as she had formerly loved him and vowed constancy. When the stranger, who has been listening, hears these words, he tells her that she already belongs to him. He summons his men, and to the consternation of Daland's crew he declares that he is Pieter Van Riese and tells Senta of her father's curse and the agreement they made.

As the *Relentless* sets sail, Daland throws himself into the sea from Widows Walk, claiming that he shouldn't have exchanged his soul for hers and that his repentance will free his daughter. Mistakenly, he believes this will be her salvation, but since his daughter has already pledged herself to Van Riese, Daland's ghost rises from the sea and walks towards the *Relentless*.

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE TIME FUGUE**

Although Pieter Van Riese became darklord of the Sea of Sorrows in 740 BC, his ship travels frequently through the Mists and at different times, it has even appeared before the Grand Conjunction. Adorjan first heard of the ghost ship story in one of Mordentshire's dockside taverns and, while traveling by ship back to Port-a-Lucine, he attracted the spirit of Daland Dilisnya before he was even born. Daland was born in 732 BC. His parents named him after a character of their favorite opera.

**DREAD POSSIBILITY: WIDOWS WALK TO THE RELENTLESS**

The last time the opera “The Relentless” was staged in Port-a-Lucine, Maël Martin, the tenor playing the role of captain Darland, was seen jumping from the Widows Walk to his death on the last day it was performed. This created some superstition around the play and it hasn’t been performed in Port-a-Lucine ever since.

There might be some truth in that superstition, as Cezar Vercezzo had suggested the idea of Darland being from Port-a-Lucine and committing suicide from Widow’s Walk.

Could it be that Vercezzo’s curse extends to each creative thought he has that is presented to an audience, or was it just a coincidence and the truth could be even darker? Maël Martin always had some kind of obsession with this opera, and through it he learned the hard way of the truth behind Van Riese’s recruitment for the Relentless. He worked for Van Riese for a decade on board the ghost ship in exchange for becoming one of the most known tenors that ever lived. His absence was not noticed, as the ghost ship’s voyaging through the Mists returned him back to Port-a-Lucine the next day after he left, though ten years older and an experienced tenor. His wish did become true as he is one of the most known tenors that ever lived, but not so much for his performance as for his death.

**ADVENTURE IDEAS**

◆ By watching “The Relentless,” the adventurers learn the backstory of Pieter Van Riese, and the superstition among sailors against bloodshed when on board a ship sailing the Sea of Sorrows. They

might have to find alternative ways to defeat an enemy on board their ship, then again they might themselves spill blood in the Sea of Sorrows and decide not to go on board a ship again in the Sea of Sorrows, although the Mists may transport them back to one someday.

◆ The adventurers meet a tenor friend of theirs in Port-a-Lucine before going for an adventure nearby, promising to return. A week later they meet their friend again, but he has grown more than a decade older, being curious about that and think that there must be a supernatural reason for it, especially if they are experienced with fey lore or have battled ghosts with the aging power. They learn about the contract their friend has made with Van Riese and try to save their friend, before the negative effects of his wish start developing. In a dark twist, they might even offer themselves to Van Riese as part of Vercezzo’s Curse. They have three ways to end this: by finding the Vistana who cursed Vercezzo and ridding him and themselves from the curse, sink the Relentless and end the suffering of many spirits in the process, or die trying and probably end up serving Van Riese themselves for eternity.

◆ This could also be a backstory for saving Darland Dilinya from servitude on the Relentless as, like most of Adorjan’s stories, this is also based on “past” real events. Maybe while on board a ship named Nightshade, they witness the events of the opera unfolding and a family member or the real Erik hires them to save Elsa or her father from the ship for an enormous fee or promise. Then again, even if they manage to save any of them, the Dilisnyas would probably try to avoid paying.



## LEEDERICK

**Characters:** Leederick (tenor), Elsa of Borjia (soprano), Navi Ayn'Silid, a Count of Borjia (baritone), Ortud, Navi's wife (dramatic soprano), King Barov Von Zarovich (bass), The King's Herald (baritone), Four Noblemen of Borjia (tenors, basses), Four Pages (sopranos, altos), child-Duke Dorvinia, Elsa's dead brother (silent).

### Act 1

The people of the City-State of Borjia are divided by quarrels and political infighting; also, the Tergs, a devious hostile power of pagan, demon-worshippers are seeking to subvert the prevailing Andral-worshiping government and turn the City-State to Zagaz demon-worshipping pagan rule.

### Act 2

A mysterious knight arrives in a swan-drawn boat, possessing superhuman charisma and fighting ability, to unite and strengthen the people and to

defend a noblewoman named Elsa from a false accusation of murder, his only condition being that he must never be asked his name. The people must follow him without knowing his identity. Elsa in particular must never ask his name, or his heritage, or his origin.

### Act 3

Conspirators paid by Dorian attempt to undermine Elsa's faith in her rescuer, to create doubt among the people, and to force him to leave. One of them, an

advisor of Neureni ancestry, named Navi Ayn'Silid, manages to poison the knight.

#### Act 4

When Elsa learns news of his death, she is devastated, she cries for the knight, and curses the gods old and new for her fate, and that she doesn't even know her loved one's name. The Phantom Lover appears, and taking the form of the knight, he goes to Elsa. She asks him the forbidden question. His answer is "Leederick" and he explains his origin, as they both enter his swan boat, never to return.

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE PHANTOM OPERA

While Leederick became Adorjan's most famous work in Dorvinia, and later Borca, it hasn't been performed since it was banned, at least publicly. One of the most unflattering portrayed characters in the opera is Leederick's poisoner Navi Ayn'Silid. What was later realized by music academics was that the villain's name is a phonetic anagram of Dorvinia's darklord. Also Ivan's narcissism doesn't permit anyone or anything to be reminded of how he was fooled by Adorjan, who managed to escape from Dorvinia and has banned the play ever since. The ban on the play was also included as an additional article in the Treaty of Four Towers with the excuse of undermining Borca's defenses. While it is truly banned in all the other countries of the treaty, the penalty is not death for treason, as it is in Borca. It is considered bad luck to even mention the name of the play between actors in all treaty countries, who refer to it as the "Phantom Opera". The reason for this exaggeration is that if Ivan even hears of the possibility of that opera being performed, he will dispatch assassins to kill everyone involved.

This actually was the aftermath of the opera's premiere; Ivan murdered the conductor along with all the actors and singers involved in the opera, in a feast that was organized to celebrate the premiere. After that, he appointed Cezar Vercezzo resident composer of Sommet Theater.

The spirits gather annually on the anniversary of their deaths to reenact the opera; naturally Sommet Theater is closed during that night.

#### ADVENTURE IDEAS

- ◆ The adventurers are hired by Cezar Vercezzo to rid the theater of the ghosts of the Phantom Opera. One way of doing that would be to bring Adorjan Bognar back to the theater to express his sympathy and remorse for causing their deaths. On the other hand, this could be also used as a trap of Ivan to capture Adorjan and capture him, to have something to entertain himself with in his "Playhouse".

- ◆ In some countries, opera managers have changed the names and places in the libretto of the opera so that they can present it without attracting Ivan's attention. By doing so they bypass the ban enforced on the play, though no one would be crazy enough to organize an opera production of it in Borca. The person who rewrote the libretto and also changed the name of the opera might use it as a way to hint or present in public the true name of a fiend, fey, or lich, enraging that creature, of course. It could also be done accidentally, meaning that a random name that the librettist thought of could be the actual name of one of these creatures. The librettist could be found dead and while investigating his murder the adventurers may uncover their foe's true name. Or it could be in the style of the Mandrigorian, the possessed person writing the libretto might offer the creature's true name somehow without making the possessor notice it.



## LIEBESVERBOT

**Characters:** Friedrich, Governor of Mortigny (bass-baritone), Luzio, a young nobleman (tenor), Claudio, a young nobleman (tenor), Antonio, their friend (tenor), Angelo, their friend (baritone), Isabella, Claudio's sister (soprano), Mariana, novice in a monastery (soprano), Bastian, captain of Exilés du Faucon watch company (baritone), Danieli, an innkeeper (bass), Dorella (soprano), Judge Riccardo Ponzio, Danieli's servant (tenor), Nuns, Judges, Guards, Townspeople, Musicians

### Act 1

An unnamed King appoints as mayor a Falkovnian expatriate named Friedrich and gives him full authority to use all royal powers in an attempt to radically reform the manners of the city, which had become a republican abomination. Public servants target houses of amusement in Mortigny, closing some, demolishing others, and taking their hosts and servants into custody. The populace interferes; there is great riot: after a roll of the drums the chief constable Bastian, standing at bay, reads out the edict of the mayor according to which these measures have been adopted to secure a better state of morals.

In front of Danieli's tavern in Mortigny, Claudio has been arrested for breaking the new law against fornication and other immoral activities. If convicted, he will be sentenced to death. As he is being dragged away, he calls out to his friend Luzio to hurry to the convent where his sister Isabella is cloistered. He believes that only Isabella will be able to help him.

Within the quiet walls of a convent, Claudio's sister converses confidentially with her friend Marianne, who also has entered as novice. Marianne discloses to her friend the sad fate that has brought her there. A man of high position had persuaded her into a secret union, under the pledge of eternal fidelity; in her hour of utmost need, she had found herself abandoned, and even persecuted, for the betrayer



proved to be the most powerful person in the city, the governor.

Isabella's horror finds vent in a tempest of wrath, only to be allayed by the resolve to leave a world where such monstrosities can never go unpunished.—When Luzio brings her tidings of the fate of her own brother, her abhorrence at his misdemeanor passes swiftly to revolt against the baseness of the hypocritical governor who dares so cruelly to tax her brother's infinitely lesser fault, as it was at least attained with no treachery. Her violence unwittingly exhibits her to Luzio in the most seductive light; fired by sudden love, he implores her to leave the nunnery forever and take his hand. She quickly brings him to his senses, yet decides, without a moment's wavering, to accept his escort to the governor in the House of Justice.

In a courtroom, Bastian is sitting in the courtroom waiting for the judge to arrive. However, the judge is late and Bastian wishes that he had the chance to judge cases. Isabella has come to the courtroom to plead for the life of her brother, Claudio, who has been sentenced to death for the crime of illegal fornication. She asks the governor, Friedrich, to pardon Claudio, arguing that he cannot refuse the wishes of the orphan sister that she is. When Friedrich refuses her, she tries a different tact, accusing him of abusing Ezra's gift of love. She finally finishes her argument by suggesting that Friedrich's heart could only be softened by the tender touch of a woman.

## Act 2

Claudio is in prison awaiting his execution for illegal fornication. Isabella has hatched a plan to save him by causing the Governor of Mortigny to break his own law against fornication. However, to do this, she must give herself up to him. Claudio rages at the notion, saying nobly that he would gladly die to protect her honor.

In a room in l'Estimé Capitale Friedrich is waiting for a letter from Isabella, telling him where they will

meet. He knows that, by meeting her, he will be breaking his own law against immoral acts. However, he cannot resist her feminine wiles and attractions. He imagines the pleasure that will come from their meeting. When he finally receives word that she will meet him masked at the carnival, he rejoices in his good fortune. He decides that breaking the law and being executed is worth it if he can be with Isabella.

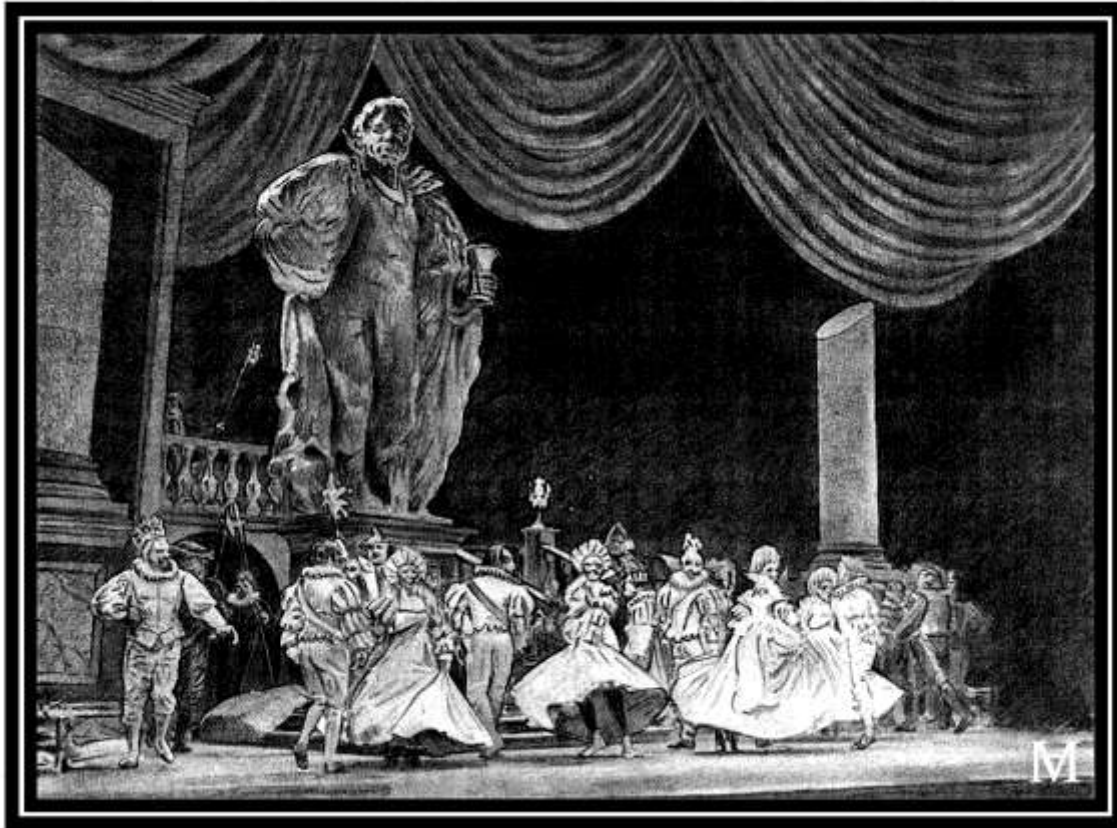
During the carnival, Luzio sings a song about the carnival that urges people to put on masks, forget who they are, and enjoy the carnival, and each other, to the fullest extent.

Mariana and Isabella have plotted to trick Friedrich into recognizing his secret marriage with Mariana, whom he had long ago abandoned. Mariana waits for the moment when they will be together again with both anticipation and worry.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: EXILÉS DU FAUCON

The writing of this populist comic opera finished in 726 BC in Mortigny, but was written in the aftermath of Claude Reniers purge against republican instigators in the city. The purge was executed by the Exilés du Faucon, a watchman company consisting of prisoners of war who were afflicted wererats of Claude's progeny. Friedrich Dach was a Talon caught during the Borderlands War and was positioned as mayor in Mortigny after the purge. Friedrich governed Mortigny with an iron fist for a few years, until Claude Renier's death in 726 BC. Then, after a coup organized by the nobles of Mortigny, he escaped with members of the watchman company to Arkandale, on the banks of the Musarde, close to the border with Richemulot, and created a lumber station there.

The Exilés du Faucon are still loyal to Vlad Drakov as all of them still wear the Talon Bracers; they are also still infected with lycanthropy although a cure could be possible for them. The station is under the jurisdiction of the Falkovnian Ministry of Science and is also used as a station for Falkovnian soldiers travelling the Musarde to and from Invidia to assist Malocchio's forces.



## RENNIE

**Characters:** Rennie Cole, people's tribune (tenor), Irene Cole, his sister (soprano), Stéphane Colón, (bass), Adrian Colón, his son (soprano en travesti), Paul Aurzen, nobleman (bass), Reimund, Bastion of Ezra (bass), Baro, citizen (tenor), François del Vecchio, citizen (bass), The Messenger of Peace (soprano), Ambassadors, Nobles, Monks, Soldiers, Populace

### OVERTURE

The opera opens with a substantial overture that begins with a trumpet call (which in act 3 we learn is the war call of the Colón family) and features the melody of Riezi's prayer from the start of act 5, which became the opera's best-known aria. The overture ends with a military march.

### ACT 1 : OUTSIDE RENNIE'S HOUSE

The nobleman Aurzen and his cronies attempt to kidnap Rennie's sister, Irene. Stéphane Colón, also a nobleman but inclined to support Rennie, prevents them. Reimund appeals to the parties, in the name

of the Church, to stop their fighting; Rennie's eventual appearance quells the riot. The Dementlieuse people support Rennie's condemnation of the nobles. Irene and Adrian realize their mutual attraction. A gathering crowd of commoners, inspired by Rennie's speeches, offers Rennie the crown; he demurs, insisting that he wishes only to be a tribune for the people.

### ACT 2 : A HALL IN THE PALAIS DIRIGEANTE

The nobles plot the death of Rennie; Adrian is horrified when he learns of this. Rennie greets a group of ambassadors for whom an entertainment is performed (a lengthy ballet\*). Aurzen attempts to

stab Rienzi, who however is protected by a vest of chain mail. Adrian pleads with Rennie for mercy to the nobles, which Rennie grants.

*\*The "Rennie" ballet was intended to tell the tale of the "Rape of Lucretia" which parallels both the action of "Rennie" (Aurzen's attempt on Irene) and its background (nobles versus the people). Lucretia was a woman whose fate played a vital role in the transition from the t "crazy place" Dementlieu used to be into an aristocratic republic. Her suicide, after having been raped by a would-be leader's son was the immediate cause of a rebellion from which Léon of Dementlieu's false history and the Council of Brilliance emerged.*

### ACT 3 : PLACE DE LÉON

The nobles have recruited an army to march on Port-a-Lucine. The people are alarmed. Rennie rouses the people and leads them to victory over the nobles, in the course of which Adrian's father, Stéphane, is killed. Adrian swears revenge, but Rennie dismisses him.

### ACT 4 : BEFORE THE STE. MERE DES LARMES

François and other citizens discuss the negotiations of the nobles with the Praesidius and with Lord-Governor Foquelaine. Adrian's intention to kill Rennie wavers when Rennie arrives together with Irene. Reimund now announces that the Praesidius has laid a ban on Rennie, and that his associates risk excommunication. Despite Adrian's urgings, Irene resolves to stay with Rennie.

### ACT 5

#### SCENE 1: A ROOM IN PALAIS DIRIGEANTE

Rennie in his prayer, "Lady Protector" asserts his faith in the people of Dementlieu. He suggests to Irene that she seek safety with Adrian, but she demurs. An apologetic Adrian enters and tells the pair that the Palais Dirigeante is to be burnt and they are at risk.

#### SCENE 2: PALAIS DIRIGEANTE IS ABLAZE

Rennie's attempts to speak are met with stones and insults from the fickle crowd. Adrian, in trying to rescue Rennie and Irene, is killed with them as the building collapses.

In the original performances, Rennie's final words are bitter and pessimistic: "May the town be accursed and destroyed! Disintegrate and wither, Port-a-Lucine! Your degenerate people wish it so." However, to avoid a ban from Jean-Pierre Theroux it was substituted with a more upbeat rhetoric: "Ever while the Ste. Mere des Larmes remains, ever while the city stands, you will see Rennie's return!"

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY: VIVE LA RÉVOLUTION

There is a secret circulation of the opera with the original closing words and someone who is aware of its existence is none other than Rudolph Von Aubrecker himself. The Brain's organization has started showing a simpler version of the opera to the common folk as a kind of propaganda to encourage the lower classes of Dementlieu to revolt and create chaos. His main goal is to have some brilliant heads end up in the guillotine.

#### ADVENTURE IDEAS

◆ In his plan to use the opera to stir up things in Port-a-Lucine, the Brain has psionically dominated the tenor who plays the leading role of "Rennie". In long expected performance of the opera, he finishes with the banned libretto, creating a distress in the upper classes watching it. The tenor is arrested without knowing exactly what happened to him. The adventurers could start a wild hunt to prove the singer's innocence and uncover the Brain's organization. Perhaps Dominic d'Honaire himself could use the tenor's tragic state as a way to gain the heroes' trust and use them as pawns in his plans to defeat the Brain's organization.



## TANNHÄUSER AND THE MEISTERSINGER CONTEST OF HARMONIA

**Characters:** Tannhäuser, a bard, peoples tribune (tenor), Radaga, (soprano or mezzo-soprano), Wolfram von Eschenbach, a bard, (baritone), Zhone Clieous, Meistersinger of Harmonia (bass), Walther vor der Vogelweide, a bard (tenor), Biterolf, a bard (bass), Heinrich der Schreiber, a bard (tenor), Reinmar von Zweter, a bard (bass), A young shepherd (soprano), Four noble pages (soprano, alto),

Nobles, knights, citizens, ladies, pilgrims, skeletons, goblins

### Act 1

#### THE CATACOMBS OF KARTAKASS

**Scene 1.** Wagner's stage directions state: "The stage represents the interior of the Catacombs of Kartakass. In the distant background is a misty canyon; near the edge there are skeletal figures. In the extreme left foreground lies Radaga, bearing

the head of the half kneeling Tannhäuser in her lap. The whole cave is illuminated by a sickly light. – A group of dancing goblins appear, joined gradually by members of loving couples from the cave..

**Scene 2.** Following the orgy of the ballet, Tannhäuser's desires are finally satiated, and he longs for freedom, spring and the sound of church bells. He takes up his harp and pays homage to the

priestess in a passionate love song, which he ends with an earnest plea to be allowed to depart, "From your kingdom must I flee! O Queen of Death! O Goddess of beauty, set me free!" Surprised, Radaga offers him further charms, but eventually his repeated pleas arouse her fury and she curses his desire for salvation. Eventually Tannhäuser declares: "My salvation rests in Ezra". These words break the unholy spell. Radaga and the dark caves disappear.

**Scene 3.** "Tannhäuser finds himself a beautiful valley. To the left one sees Harmonia, to the right, a mountain pass from the direction of the Arkalias Hills. In the foreground, led to by a low promontory, an image of the Ezra – From above left, one hears the ringing of herder's bells; on a high projection sits a young shepherd with a flute facing the valley". It is July. The shepherd sings an ode to the Ancestral Choir as pilgrims are seen approaching from the Arkalias Hills, and the shepherd stops playing. The pilgrims pass Tannhäuser as he stands motionless, and then, praising Ezra, he sinks to his knees, overcome with gratitude. At that moment the sound of hunting-horns can be heard, drawing ever nearer.

**Scene 4.** The Meistersinger's hunting party appears. The bards (Wolfram, Walther, Biterolf, Reinmar, and Heinrich) recognize Tannhäuser, still deep in prayer, and greet him "Heinrich! Heinrich! Do I see right?" cautiously, recalling past feuds. They question him about his recent whereabouts, to which he gives vague answers. The bards urge Tannhäuser to rejoin them, which he declines until Wolfram mentions Elisabeth, the Meistersinger's niece. Tannhäuser is visibly moved. The bard explains to Tannhäuser how he had enchanted Elisabeth, but when he had left, she withdrew from their company and lost interest in music, expressing the hope that his return would also bring her back. Tannhäuser begs them to lead him to her. The rest of the hunting party gathers, blowing horns.

## ACT 2

### THE MEISTERSINGER'S MANSION

The Meistersinger's hall in the Mansion

**Introduction – Scene 1.** Elisabeth enters, joyfully. She sings, to the hall, of how she has been beset by sadness since Tannhäuser's departure but now lives in hope that his songs will revive both of them. Wolfram leads Tannhäuser into the hall.

**Scene 2.** Tannhäuser flings himself at Elisabeth's feet. He exclaims "O Princess!" At first, seemingly confused, she questions him about where he has been, which he avoids answering. She then greets him joyfully and they join in a duet. Tannhäuser then leaves with Wolfram.

**Scene 3.** The Meistersinger enters, and he and Elisabeth embrace. The Meistersinger sings of his joy at her recovery and announces the upcoming song contest, at which she will judge.

## SCENE 4

### THE AMPHITHEATER OF HARMONIA

At the Meistersinger Contest. Elisabeth and the Meistersinger watch the guests arrive. The guests assemble, greeting the Meistersinger and singing with joy, then greeting the noble hall, take their places in a semicircle, with Elisabeth and the Meistersinger in the seats of honor in the foreground. The Meistersinger announces the contest and the theme, which shall be "Can you explain the nature of Love?" and that the prize will be whatever the winner asks of Elisabeth. The knights place their names in a cup from which Elisabeth draws the first singer, Wolfram. Wolfram sings a trite song of courtly love and is applauded, but Tannhäuser chides him for his lack of passion. There is consternation, and once again Elisabeth appears confused, torn between rapture and anxiety. Biterolf accuses Tannhäuser of blasphemy and speaks of "women's virtue and honor". The knights draw their swords as Tannhäuser mocks

Biterolf, but the Meistersinger intervenes to restore order. However, Tannhäuser, as if in a trance, rises to his feet and sings a song of ecstatic love to Radaga, "To thee, Priestesses of Death, should my song resound." There is general horror as it is realized that he has been in the Catacombs in the Dead Hills. The women, apart from Elisabeth, flee. She appears pale and shocked, while the knights and the Meistersinger gather together and condemn Tannhäuser to death. Only Elisabeth, shielding him with her body, saves him. She states that Ezra's will is that a sinner shall achieve salvation through atonement. Tannhäuser collapses as all hail Elisabeth as an angel. He promises to seek atonement as the Meistersinger exiles him and orders him to join another younger band of pilgrims then assembling. All depart, crying "To Levkarest!"

### ACT 3

#### THE ROAD TO HARMONY IN AUTUMN

Elisabeth is kneeling, praying before Ezra as Wolfram comes down the path and notices her.

**Scene 1.** Orchestral music describes the pilgrimage of Tannhäuser. It is evening. Wolfram muses on Elisabeth's sorrow during Tannhäuser's second absence, and her longing for the return of the pilgrims, and expresses concerns that he may not have been absolved. As he does so, he hears a pilgrims' prayer in the distance. Elisabeth rises and she and Wolfram listen to the hymn, watching the pilgrims approach and pass by. She anxiously searches the procession, but in vain, realizing sorrowfully he is not amongst them. She again kneels with a prayer to Ezra that appears to foretell her death. On rising, she sees Wolfram but motions him not to speak. He offers to escort her back to Harmonia, but she again motions him to be still, and gestures that she is grateful for his devotion, but her path leads to heaven. She slowly makes her way up the path alone.

**Scene 2.** Wolfram, left alone as darkness draws on and the stars appear, begins to play, and sings a

hymn to the evening star that also hints at Elisabeth's approaching death.

**Scene 3.** It is now night. Tannhäuser appears, ragged, pale, and haggard, walking feebly, leaning on his staff. Wolfram suddenly recognizes Tannhäuser, and startled, challenges him, since he is exiled. To Wolfram's horror, Tannhäuser explains he is once again seeking the company of Radaga. Wolfram tries to restrain him, at the same time expressing compassion and begging him to tell the story of his pilgrimage. Tannhäuser urges Wolfram to listen to his story. Tannhäuser sings of his penitence and suffering, all the time thinking of Elisabeth's gesture and pain. He explains how he reached Levkarest, and the Great Cathedral, and witnessed thousands of pilgrims being absolved. Finally, he approaches and tells his story. However, rather than finding absolution, he is cursed and was told by the Praesidius that "As this staff in my hand no more shall bear fresh leaves, from the hot fires of hell, salvation never shall bloom for thee". Whereupon, absolutely crushed, he fled, seeking his former source of bliss.

Having completed his tale, Tannhäuser calls out to Radaga to take him back. The two men struggle as a faint image of dancing becomes apparent. As Tannhäuser repeatedly calls on Radaga, she suddenly appears and welcomes him back. As Radaga continues to beckon, "To me! To me!" Wolfram suddenly remembers, in desperation, that there is one word that can change Tannhäuser's heart, and exclaims "Elisabeth!" Tannhäuser, as if frozen in time, repeats the name. As he does so, torches are seen, and a funeral hymn is heard approaching. Wolfram realizes it must be Elisabeth's body that is being borne, and that in her death lies Tannhäuser's redemption., "Heinrich, you are saved," he calls. Radaga cries out, "Alas! Lost to me!" and vanishes with her kingdom. As dawn breaks, the procession appears, bearing Elisabeth's body on a bier. Wolfram beckons to them to set it down, and as Tannhäuser bends over the body uttering, "Holy Elisabeth! pray for me!" he dies. As

the growing light bathes the scene, the younger pilgrims arrive bearing the Praesidius's staff, sprouting new leaves, and proclaiming it a miracle. All then sing "The Holy Grace of Ezra is to the penitent given, who now enters into the joy of Heaven!"

### ADVENTURE IDEAS

◆ In the opera, during the first scene there is mention on the *Stone of Death*. The heroes might be interested in it especially if they are members of the Order of the Guardians. Trying to locate it they confront the Beast of the Hills.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE WARRULVES

Wolfram von Eschenbach, Biterolf, Walther vor der Vogelweide, Heinrich der Schreiber and Reinmar von Zweter are actually all wolfweres. This fact is hinted in the opera during the 1st act, 4th scene, the Meistersinger's hunt, both lyrically and by association with Zhone Clieous, whose lycanthropy (and death) has been common knowledge since 737 BC. Adorjan doesn't have knowledge on that, a werewolf and a wolfwere are two different creatures, the first created by a curse the other a magical beast. He portrays the wolfweres of Kartakass mentioned in his opera as lycanthropes, worshipping the full moon and permeable to silver, a gravely mistake for would be "werewolf" hunters.

## Adorjan Bognar

Male Human 6<sup>th</sup> level Bard/ 6<sup>th</sup> level Mystic

**Hit Dice:** 6d6 - 6 + 6d8 - 6 (34)

**Initiative:** + 1

**Speed:** 30 feet

**Armor Class:** 16 (+1 Dex, +5 breastplate), Touch 11, Flat Footed 15

**Attacks:** Melee: +4, +7 (longsword), Ranged: +5

**Damage:** 1d8 +3 (+2d6 vs lawful aligned)

**Space/Reach:** 5ft /5ft

**Special Attacks:** Bard spells, Cleric spells

**Special Qualities:** *Countersong* (Su), *Fascinate* (Sp), *Inspire Courage* (Su), *Inspire Competence* (Su), *Suggestion* (Sp), *Turn Undead* (Su) 6/day (+2),

**Saving Throws:** Fort: +4, Ref: +6, Will: +10

**Abilities:** Str: 11, Dex:12, Con: 9, Int: 16, Wis: 20, Cha: 17

**Skills:** Knowledge (history) +13, Knowledge (Barovia) +13, Knowledge (Borca) +13, Knowledge (religion) +13, Bluff +5, Sense Motive +7, Listen +6, Perform (organ) +13, Perform (chant) +13, Autohypnosis +7, Concentration +2, Gather Information +5, Decipher Script +5, Diplomacy +5, Hide +3,

**Feats:** Ethereal Empathy, Haunted, Ghost Sight, Mist Sight, Obscure Lore, Threatening Presence

**Challenge Rating:** 11

**Alignment:** Chaotic Neutral

**Equipment:** holy symbol of Ezra, robes, *anarchic longsword* +2, breastplate,

**Bard Spells** 3/3/2 save DC 13+spell lvl: *daze*, *ghostly sound*, *know direction*, *lullaby*, *mage hand*, *read magic*; *dirge*, *comprehend languages*, *disguise self*; *animal trance*, *delay poison*, *detect thoughts*

**Mystic Spells** 6/6/6/4 save DC 13+spell lvl: *create water*, *cure minor wounds*, *detect poison*, *know direction*, *purify food and drink*, *guidance*, *resistance*; *shatter*, *pass without trace*, *goodberry*, *obscuring mist*; *delay poison*, *remove paralysis*, *spike growth*; *neutralize poison*, *hold person*.

People who meet Adorjan for the first time are usually mesmerized by his light grey eyes, which resemble his father's. His once dark brown hair, similar to that of his grandfather, Boris Dilisnya, has mostly turned to grey. His high cheekbones, a trait



he got from his attractive mother, are wrinkled by age and years of exhaustion. Although he is very attractive, there is a sense of pessimism that permeates him. He is a bit awkward in general, but that makes him even more mysterious. He usually dresses in clerical robes of Ezra, although if he has to attend a social event, his semi-monastic way of life permits him to dress more appropriately. When he speaks, his voice is calming and assertive, though the sadness on his face is obvious.

### BACKGROUND

After he was saved from Ivan, during his fit of rage against Adorjan's parents, the newborn Dilisnya baby was taken to a monastery of Ezra in Richemulot. Adorjan was taught writing, history, and music there and it wasn't long before his talent in music was obvious and he joined the choir. He



was informed of his heritage, when he was approached by his father's ghost who taught him how to write operas. He travelled to the advanced core domains to enrich his style in music until he became Ivan Dilisnya's protégé. When one day Ivan noticed a birthmark on his back, he deduced who Adorjan was. After his great escape he travelled around the Core, hunted and avoiding Ivan's assassins while he continued his writing. For many years he would go from place to place, usually finding sanctuary in anchorite safe houses. His devotion to Ezra was constant since his childhood and it is evident in his operas as a lot of his operas mention Ezra or even have her as a character. His other inspiration for his operas comes from his travels, after escaping Borca in the aftermath of the Grand Conjunction he travelled to Kartakas to do some research on his opera "Tannhäuser". He befriended Skald's Meistersinger Luther Bedarik who told him about the horrors of Arkalias Hills and stories about the Crown of Souls. He barely escaped with his life, in the aftermath of the Meistersinger Contest of 743 BC. Hunted by wolves he and his companions escaped to neighbouring Forlorn. There he witnessed the haunting events, playing a part in the time defying Castle Tristenoire, from which he was inspired to compose his opera "Tristen and Isold". With the help of his father he escaped the castle and travelled to Immol. After spending a long time as a guest to the Keep of the Scarlet Cross and searching the Teodorus Archives, he learned much about the history of Barovia and Borca including details on the "Wedding Massacre" in Castle Ravenloft, and found a genealogical tree of the Dilisnya family. After some time he continued east, reaching the tyrannical domain of the Red Wizard, he was disgusted by the racism that exists there and when he reached Nova Vaasa he was amazed by the immoral ways of the aristocracy. He reached as far as the mist covered city of Neblus, where he found his calling, when he discovered a book banned by the Church of Ezra named "The Mirror of Simple Souls." The truth he found in that book became a kind of obsession. He saw that

through suffering he could "annihilate" his "soul," becoming one with Ezra. He understood that the road to the "truth" was carved from his first days in this world. He continued travelling and teaching the word of Ezra while still composing music and operas. His art has helped him create a following that call themselves Porètes after Marguerite Porète, the author of their holy text of steps to becoming one with Ezra. They settled in an abandoned monastery in the House of the Sages. There he continued writing music and operas to promote the teachings of Ezra.

### CURRENT SKETCH

Adorjan is a tortured soul; since his birth he has been hunted down by his evil uncle. He has found his strength in his art and in Ezra's teachings. As a mystic, he tries to find the ultimate Truth, thus he accepts all the sects of Ezra as part of that Truth. The constant presence of his father's ghost is an annoyance and a blessing at the same time; there are many times where Adorjan escaped with his life either from Ivan's assassins or some supernatural horror, alerted by his father's ghost. On the other hand, the constant *aura of despair* and requests for vengeance by his father could have driven someone weaker in spirit to madness. It is not rare for him to *turn* his father's spirit away just to have some privacy to meditate or compose. Although Edgar's manifestation is annoying, he would never banish him even if he could, as he is very attached to him, continuing this codependent cycle. Also, his ethereal vision attracts other spirits too. Seeing the suffering of those souls, he is even more convinced of the truth he is teaching of "Annihilation of the Soul," as without a soul there can be no suffering. His antinomian views on moral codes and laws means that he is disobedient to any law, which can sometimes create trouble as his disobedient, riotous character does not conform with social norms.

## COMBAT

Adorjan tries to avoid combat at all cost, as he is not really a confrontational person. Since his instinct is to flee any combat situation, his first action will be to obscure his escape. If that is not possible, he will use his magical longsword, which he prefers over fancy finesse weapons, and in part because it is the weapon of preference of the Church. This magical sword is a chaotically aligned weapon, infused with the power of chaos. It bypasses the damage reduction of lawful aligned creatures and deals an extra 2d6 damage to them. His spells are defensive

## LAIR

The Sanctuary of the Mirror of Simple Souls is an old abandoned monastery located on the top of a

hill in the House of the Sages. It houses around twenty disciples and Porète mystics living in a commune and dedicated to divine love. They do not take formal religious vows, and they are free to leave at any time. They show Ezra's divine love through voluntary poverty, care of the poor and sick, and religious devotion. There is no overarching structure. For some people, they exhibit far more devotion to Ezra than even the cloistered, since they voluntarily pursue a religious life without vows and walls, surrounded by the world's temptations. Religious authorities believe the Porètes have heretical tendencies and sometimes try to bring disciplinary measures against them. The Porètes are all laymen; they have no private property, having a common purse and eating at the same board. The Porètes are often men and women to whom fortune had not been kind.

## Edgar Leskovich

**Male Human Bussengeist 3<sup>rd</sup> level Bard**

**Hit Dice:** 3d12

**Initiative:** + 1

**Speed:** fly 30 ft. (perfect)

**Armor Class:** 11 (Base), Touch 11

Flat Footed 10 (+1 Dex)

**Attacks:** None

**Damage:** None

**Space/Reach:** 5ft /5ft

**Special Attacks:** Aura of despair (Sp), mind games (Su)

**Qualities:** 3/day *Inspire Courage* (Su), *Countersong* (Su), *Fascinate* (Sp), *Inspire Competence* (Su), *Incorporeal traits*, *Undead traits*, *Rejuvenation*

**Saving Throws:** Fort: +4, Ref: +6, Will: +10

**Abilities:** Str - , Dex 13, Con - , Int 15, Wis 16, Cha 20



**Skills:** Knowledge (history) +11, Knowledge (local) +11, Knowledge (nobility) +11, Bluff +11, Listen +9,

Perform (tenor) +11, Perform (singing) +11, Perform (violin) +11, Gather Information +11, Diplomacy +11, Hide +10, Search +9, Spot +9, Intimidate +10

**Feats:** Chaotic Mind, Persuasive

**Challenge Rating:** 1/2

**Alignment:** Chaotic Neutral

**Equipment:** none

Edgar's ghostly transparent appearance is frightening. It is the image of a well-dressed aristocrat at the time of his death by a lethal exotic poison (created by a would-be darklord). His pulsing veins are visible and black as the blackish liquid toxin that killed him seems to move perpetually. His mouth is semi-frozen in a terrified expression as vomit and saliva is drooling from it. His auburn hair is clean and fresh, flowing on the air when he is angry, and his clothes are clean, making a contrast with the rest of his horrifying appearance. But the most striking characteristic of his visage by far are his grey white dead eyes. His resemblance to his son is still visible in the structure of the face and the nose, even as his nostrils are continually bleeding.

## BACKGROUND

Edgar Leskovich was born in 680 BC in Harmonia, the son of Ilie Leskovich from Krezk and Kirsteen Everly, a descendant of Bridget Dumas and Arthur Godefroy of Mordent. His father, a travelling bard, met his mother in Mordentshire and together they moved to Kartakass. Edgar's childhood was full of music and before he was eight, he had joined the choir of the Temple of Divine Song. At the age of twelve his mother was ravaged by a wolf and his father moved to Borca. Edgar grew up to become a very handsome man and great singer and actor; when he was still a teenager, he was already performing in large productions. It didn't take long for his talent to bring him to the attention of wealthy nobles. Though the widower Boris Dilisnya was a minor noble, who wasn't as wealthy as others, he still supported the arts. He sponsored the

young actor and singer who became the first tenor to perform an opera in Borca. This new kind of drama, accompanied with music, came from the high culture of Dementlieu. Ivan Dilisnya had always envied Edgar, his talent, and his looks, and when his sister Kristina became enamored with Edgar, he became extremely jealous. Edgar was aware of Ivan's "peculiar" character; he had seen him, after all, behave badly toward his so-called friends and treat the servants poorly, and had even seen him torture a dog to death. Though he would see all that, he never said anything to Kristina, fearing that talking badly about her brother would make her distance herself from him. When he married Kristina, he witnessed Ivan in a fit of rage during their wedding day, but was still skeptical about saying anything to his newly-wedded wife. When Ivan started constantly attacking him verbally whenever not in Kristina's presence, he was worried, but still didn't mention anything, even when Ivan threatened to have him beaten by thugs in the street. On the night that Kristina gave birth to their son, Ivan pretended to reconcile with him and toasted to the welfare of his family. When he felt the poison circulating in his veins, it was already too late; Edgar died in agony, while Ivan was bragging how he would "take care" of his family, he laughed in his face, watching with excitement as the last glimmer of Edgar's eyes faded away. Ivan went upstairs to kill his sister and his nephew but didn't notice the shape forming behind him. Edgar rose as a ghost and flew through the ceiling and into Kristina's room, Kristina froze as she saw her husband's spirit possess the midwife, at the same time Ivan entered the room. Kristina screamed in horror at seeing her husband, and was so shocked that she didn't even feel Ivan's blade. Ivan, thinking the screams were for him, continued stabbing his sister to punish her for betraying him. Edgar, in the midwife's body, ran out from the room holding the baby. Ivan, being blind with rage, didn't even notice her. After saving his son, giving him to a stable boy to get him to safety, he searched for Boris Dilisnya and possessed him too. Edgar, in the body of Boris,

gathered members of his family to hunt down Ivan. They chased him for days until they lost him in the Mists. Taking him for dead, Edgar's spirit disappeared. When, five years later, the domain of Dorvinia appeared, Edgar's ghost reappeared, though a lot weaker than before. The powers he had exhibited upon his creation, combined with his apparent deliverance weakened his will, bringing him back as a bussengeist, a phantom cursed to be attracted to calamities, but unable to help, only to witness. He was drawn to a five-year-old child studying music; it just took one look upon the boy to recognize him as his son. Edgar has been haunting his son Adorjan Bognar ever since, trying to persuade him to assassinate Ivan and lay his spirit to rest.

### CURRENT SKETCH

Edgar longs for the day when Ivan is dead, and he may find peace at last. He loves his son, but wants to be freed from undeath even more strongly. His undead state has made him become more selfish, focusing only in his goal, which is to kill Ivan. Unfortunately undeath has transformed him into a very weak ghost, unable to affect anything around him except the emotions and reason of mortals. He looks after Adorjan as he never did during his life and as he was unable to protect him from Ivan before he died. This sense of uselessness bites hard at his soul, creating an *aura of despair* to everyone around him.

### COMBAT

Since Edgar is more of a weakened spirit of greater magnitude than a truly 1<sup>st</sup> magnitude ghost, he has retained his bardic music powers to affect the emotions of mortals. Will save DC 15

*Aura of Despair (Sp)*: As a Bussengeist, Edgar is unable to interact with the material world, but he can affect the emotions of those around him. His continuous *aura of despair* has a radius of 120 ft. Creatures within this radius must make a Will save or suffer a -2 morale penalty on saving throws,

attack rolls, ability checks, skill checks, and weapon damage rolls. This penalty lasts until the victim leaves the area of effect. Those who succeed at their saving throw cannot be affected by him for 24 hours.

*Mind Games (Su)* : Although Edgar cannot manifest, as a free action, he can appear to the living by creating a phantasmal image of himself; this illusion is as powerful as the *major image* spell, except it is a phantasm, not a figment. He can create only an image of himself and the image can appear only to creatures within 30 feet of him. Creatures that succeed at a Will save cannot perceive him.

*Countersong (Su)* : Edgar can sing to counter magical effects that depend on sound (but not spells that simply have verbal components). Each round of the countersong, he makes a Perform check. Any creature within 30 feet of the him that is affected by a sonic or language-dependent magical attack may use Edgar's Perform check result in place of its saving throw if, after the saving throw is rolled, the Perform check result proves to be higher. If a creature within range of the countersong is already under the effect of a non-instantaneous sonic or language-dependent magical attack, it gains another saving throw against the effect each round it hears the countersong, but it must use the Edgar's Perform check result for the save. Countersong has no effect against effects that don't allow saves. He may keep up the countersong for 10 rounds.

*Fascinate (Sp)*: Edgar can use his tenor voice to cause one or more creatures to become fascinated with him. Each creature to be fascinated must be within 90 feet, able to see and hear him, and able to pay attention to him. Edgar must also be able to see the creature. The distraction of a nearby combat or other dangers prevents the ability from working. To use the ability, Edgar makes a Perform check. His check result is the DC for each affected creature's Will save against the effect. If a creature's saving throw succeeds, Edgar

cannot attempt to fascinate that creature again for 24 hours. If its saving throw fails, the creature sits quietly and listens to the song, taking no other actions, for as long as he continues to play and concentrate (up to a maximum of 1 round per bard level). While fascinated, a target takes a -4 penalty on skill checks made as reactions, such as Listen and Spot checks. Any potential threat requires Edgar to make another Perform check and allows the creature a new saving throw against a DC equal to the new Perform check result. Any obvious threat, such as someone drawing a weapon, casting a spell, or aiming a ranged weapon at the target, automatically breaks the effect. Fascinate is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting ability.

*Inspire Courage (Su)* : Edgar can use song or poetics to inspire courage in his allies (including himself), bolstering them against fear and improving their combat abilities. To be affected, an ally must be able to hear him sing. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears him sing and for 5 rounds thereafter. An affected ally receives +1 morale bonus on saving throws and fear effects and a +1 morale bonus on attack and weapon damage rolls. Inspire courage is a mind affecting ability.

*Inspire Competence (Su)* : Edgar can use his songs to help an ally succeed at a task. The ally must be within 30 feet and able to see and hear Edgar. Edgar must also be able to see the ally. The ally gets a +2 competence bonus on skill checks with a particular skill as long as he or she continues to hear his music. Certain uses of this ability are infeasible. The effect lasts as long as Edgar concentrates, up to a maximum of 2 minutes. Inspire competence is a mind-affecting ability.



# FORGOTTEN SHADES

(50 NEW DARKLORDS)

BY JACK THE REAPER

**1. Amoriel, the All-Beloved**, appears to everyone who looks at her as the loveliest woman of his dreams. She has the personality and demeanor of a Hollywood star. Anyone who sees her is instantly charmed, adores her like an idol and would do anything to please her. Her domain is a peaceful country where nobody commits any crime, because crimes makes her sad, and all praise Amoriel, talk about her and admire her constantly. Even her servants are considered "stars" to be admired and envied. The denizens don't even care that Amoriel and her servants kill humans for their fun and games. It's an honor to die by her hands and make her pleased, after all.

**2. Rufus, the Slug Lord**, was so lazy that he let his fiefdom fall apart around him without rising from his bed. Now he is a giant slug-like creature (Jabba the Hut-like), ruling a slimy domain crawling with snails, slugs and similar beings of all sizes. Everyone in his domain is affected by a permanent Slow spell.

**3. Orogh-Hai, the Monster King**, was afraid of monsters as a child, and became jealous of their ability to spread terror and do as they desire. He committed more and more monstrous acts, and consequently became monster-like in his appearance. Now he is the embodiment of horror, his giant dark form so nightmarish and terrifying that even the bravest heroes scream and wet themselves like little children in his presence. He offers his victims a choice between dying horribly or transforming into monsters themselves. Orogh-Hai's monstrous servants terrorize the domain from their underground base.

**4. Kolchak, the Hero-breaker** was a brutal gulag master, who took pleasure from totally breaking the spirits of strong-willed heroes. By methodical application of physical and emotional torture and humiliation, he turned them into slaves who obey his every whim without any thought of defiance. With time, he used his army of obedient slaves to take over the kingdom. His domain is a cold, dark wasteland surrounding his fortress, the Ironfist, where his prisoners languish in mines, woodcutting, and other hard labor. The population is scarce, and Kolchak is frustrated by the lack of subjects he can dominate. Kolchak is a heavily built muscular man, who can crush skulls with his bare hands, and always dons metal armor.

**5. Bubba, the Swordwraith**, is a terrifying figure, covered in black cloaks with funeral bandages wrapped around his face, leaving only his wild black hair and one blood-red eye glaring out. Instead of arms, he has two razor-sharp black sword blades, which he gladly uses to kill, maim, and torture while cackling madly. His story is a tragedy of passion and bloody vengeance, and he haunts his small, forlorn domain from the ruins of his ancestral castle, standing in the middle of a lake.

**6. Galadria, the Voice of God**, is a regal-looking queen in her 40s. She used her outstanding charisma and speech ability to convince her denizens that she speaks in God's name, leading them into disastrous wars. Now her voice is so powerful that it kills and destroys everything around her, forcing her to remain silent and speak only through her manservant, with whom she communicates telepathically. She only uses her voice against

enemies or criminals she wants to execute. (Inspiration: Marvel's **Black Bolt**, and the **Dogma** film's God).

**7. Mr. Roarke** is the Lord of Fantasy Island, where chosen individuals are invited to have their fantasies fulfilled, only to see them changing into nightmares when they find out they are all part of the Lord's own dark fantasy. (Inspiration: **Fantasy Island**)

**8. Dragesime, the Witch Hunter** is a gaunt but strong man in his 50s, dressed in the traditional witch-hunter attire - a white wide brimmed hat, tall boots and a cape. He is both praised and feared for his endless struggle to expose and destroy the large population of witches, demons and other monsters disguised as women in the domain. Even he doesn't know though, that his early-age hatred and fear toward women manifested by transforming any woman he suspects into an actual monster - thus justifying his jurisdictions. Tension between the sexes runs high in this domain, and love and marriage are risky things, as one can never be sure of the true nature of his beloved.

**9. Violeta, the Spoiled Girl**, was the single daughter of rich noblemen, who pampered her endlessly, fulfilling her every whim. Violeta became a very emotional girl, flying into tantrums when her requests weren't met immediately, and eventually drove her family and house staff to some horrid deeds. As a Darklord, her emotional state affects everyone in her village domain: when she is angry, happy, or depressed, everyone feels the same. The denizens try to make her happy, but her frustration at being trapped in a child's body makes her mood even fouler, so happiness is a rare emotion in this domain.

**10. Miss Gillian, the Headmistress** is the archetypical stern headmistress: a cold, aloof and harsh woman who never seems to smile. She is the headmistress of Blackbridge Academy, a famous school for children from elite families. Known for its high education, it is actually a place of dark secrets, ghosts, demons and witchcraft, and the children

who graduate it are always changed (if they survive). Most parents are unaware of the school's true nature, but some send their children there intentionally. Blackbridge has no set location, existing as an island in the mists, but somehow people who want to get there always find the way. It has students from all over Ravenloft and beyond. The real nature, goals and history of Miss Gillian are mystery.

**11. Prospero, the Comedian**, will go to any length to be in the center of attention. He has to; the more attention he gets, the more powerful he becomes, and if no one will pay attention to him, he'll die. He holds constant shows and parties of all kinds, always trying to be more scandalous, shocking, and provocative in order to draw in the audience. Prospero is the ultimate showman looking for rating, and he knows how to get it - but he has strong competition, for his domain is a permanent carnival where many other performers fight for audience. He constantly changes his looks and appearance to draw more interest.

**12. Princess Nora, The Living Death**, tried to commit suicide and take her whole family with her. She alone survived and was cursed to become the embodiment of death: everyone who sees her face, hears her voice, or touches her, dies immediately. She must therefore cover her face at all times, and only communicate by writing on a board. Underneath those dark covers she is a beautiful girl with golden hair and white skin, but those are hardly seen by the living. The denizens of her domain adore their princess as the idol of Death, but she mourns her detachment from any human contact, having only the undead for close company. (Inspiration: Ulla from **Sunday Without God**)

**13. Odo Boffin, the Halfling Vampire**, was considered a weirdo ever since he left his comfortable burrow for some adventurous quest in far mountains, but nobody knows how much he was truly changed by this journey. He returned as a halfling vampire, and now secretly terrorizes the halfling and human population of his Shire-like

domain, using his servants and ability to become invisible. Odo looks like a kind middle-aged halfling, but harbors a burning hatred and envy toward both his living kinfolk and the large people.

**14. Jay, the Mockingbird**, is a bardic lord with the talent to taunt, humiliate, and offend even the most stoic souls. He automatically senses the weakest spots in people, and uses jokes, crude remarks, mimicry, and pejorative nicknames to drive them to senseless rage or helpless tears. Jay dresses fancily and has a sarcastic smile and shrill laughter. He travels accompanied by his band of friends, who always laugh at his jokes, and the talking parrots he is fond of, looking for victims to humiliate and provoke. His domain emphasizes the power of words to ruin people lives and affect their emotions, and many bards, authors, and poets call it home.

**15. The Vulture** looks like a giant demonic or undead vulture. His domain is the Desert of Skulls, a wasteland mutated by evil radiation. It is populated by clans of cannibalistic humanoid and reptilian mutants, colossal sandworms, twisted life forms and ancient possessing spirits. Only few hardened communities and vagabonds can survive in this dreadful domain, and fewer escape it. The Vulture's identity and motivation are a mystery, but seeing him hovering overhead is a dire omen, and he will always land to feed on the remains. (Inspiration: **The Hills have Eyes**, **Tremors**, Stephan King's **Desperation**, **Mad Max** and the like).

**16. Tania**. Most undead hide their nature from the human population. The denizens of Tania's domain, on the other hand, know fully well that the beautiful teenage-looking girl living among them is a murderous undead monster, but can do nothing about it. Tania, for her side, plays the role of innocent young girl. She can charm anyone and manipulate emotions, driving people insane and leading them to murder and suicide. She was "killed" many times, but always regenerates and returns with vengeance, sometimes even sprouting several clones. In her true form she is ghoulish and several

hundred years old, but this form is rarely seen. (Inspiration: Junji Ito's **Tomie**)

**17. The Amnesiac** is the Darklord of Serenity Hotel, where he and all the guests awaken one morning without any memory of who they are. They can't leave the Mists-surrounded hotel, and have to search for clues for their identities while haunted by ominous figures and phenomena. Suspicions and tension run high, and the Darklord's nature eventually leads him to kill the other guests and burn the hotel - and in his last moments, he finally recalls who he is and that it all happened before countless times. Next thing he knows, he is again in his bed without any memories, along with a new bunch of guests waiting for the cycle to repeat.

**18. Brandolala, The Beggar-King**, rules over the infamous City of Beggars - basically a huge pile of debris and garbage populated by lepers, crippled, and deranged wretches from all over the worlds, who have nothing left to lose. Brandolala is a filthy, crooked old man, who is both a Vermin Lord and a Cancer Mage (see **Book of Vile Darkness**). He sends his legions of beggars to other domains, to scavenge everything they can and spread infections and diseases.

**19. Mr. Bousman, the Ghost Collector**, is an elderly mysterious gentleman, who used strange magic to rip and transfer entire rooms from many houses where foul crimes and tragedies have occurred. He combined them into the ultimate haunted house - a huge patchwork mansion, teeming with ghosts and specters, where time and space themselves are twisted. New additions to the mansion keep appearing once in a while. Mr. Bousman's purpose in this project is unknown. (Inspiration: **Abattoir** film)

**20. "GOD"**. This mysterious person claims to be the creator of the universe itself, who is now punished for creating evil, but he might be just a man who committed horrible deeds in order to achieve godhood. Undoubtedly, he is omnipotent within his domain, and anything he wishes becomes reality at once. He can change the setting in his domain,



create, or annihilate everything at will, and all the people and creatures he creates admire and worship him unquestionably. As a result, he is terribly bored, having no physical needs and no challenges or goals to achieve. Visitors cannot hope to defeat such an omnipotent being, but may find a way to make him wish them out of his domain.

**21. Wrath, the Berserker**, was born out of violence and blood into a life of violence and blood. Growing in a world wrecked by disaster, he was raised by a mercenary band and quickly made himself a reputation as an outstanding warrior, leaving a trail of carnage behind him. Though a good man at heart, it seems a dark fate followed Wrath, making him bring death and tragedy to everyone he loved, until the darkness within took over him. Wrath is a muscular, dark-skinned man with huge black sword, whose bitterness and suffering are evident in his face. His domain is in constant state of mayhem and struggle between bands of warlords, mercenaries, bandits, beasts, and monsters, where life is poor, brutish, and short. (Inspiration: Guts from **Berserk**, Turin Turambar from **The Silmarilion**)

**22. Kukulac, the Sun Emperor**, is an ancient dead and the ruler of a vast Aztec/Maztica-like domain, full with jungles, jaguars, couatls, and ancient cities. Blood rituals are essential for the existence of the domain, and if blood would cease flowing on the Great Pyramid's altar, a terrible Eclipse shall occur, during which the gods (actually manifestations of the Dark Powers) will descend in monstrous forms to slaughter and devour the living. It has happened in the past, so Kukulac and his priests are constantly looking for more sacrifices to appease the gods.

**23. Sybil** is a dark-haired woman in her 30s, usually dressed in formal black suit. She could always hear the thoughts of people around her, and was appalled by the amount of wicked and dirty thoughts they nurture. She came to believe that only by cleaning the mind from such thoughts can humanity be saved, and founded the Thought Police - a force of telepaths who can detect bad thoughts and punish their owner before he acts upon them,

or bring him in for psionist treatment and "rehabilitation". Her good intentions led quickly into reign of terror, as "thoughtcrimes" were detected everywhere. People in her domain must always keep their thoughts in check if they wish to protect their freedom and lives.

**24. The Skeleking** is the Lord of an underground city populated by sentient, evil skeletons who can speak and lead normal "lives". Those skeletons view humans and other fleshy beings as "latent skeletons", and seek to peel off their skin and flesh and release the skeletons "trapped" inside them. Occasionally they send raiding troops to the upper world to capture prisoners for growing their numbers. Other than that, they are quite jovial and have dark sense of humor. The skeleking looks like any other skeleton in regal clothes, but is actually a living wizard with invisible flesh and organs. He must take care of his physical needs secretly, hiding his true nature from his subjects.

**25. Hush, the Silent Ghost**, rules over a mostly deserted domain. She was born sensitive to noise, so her father assigned special guards to protect her, whom she ordered to slay anyone who was too loud for her taste. Now the hooded specters known as the Silence Keepers float around the vacant cities and forests of the domain. They are blind but have sharp hearing, and they slay on spot anyone who makes a sound. The few survivors in the domain take great caution to live in complete silence, which is very challenging. Hush herself is yearning now to hear a human voice, but she can't speak herself and her guards don't let anyone else do it. (Inspiration: **A Quiet Place** movie)

**26. Vivian, the Lady of Tears**, looks like an elderly noblewoman with porcelain-white skin, dressed in Victorian style. She is a vampire who can only feed on tears of sadness. To gain this nourishment, she perpetuates many tragedies in her gothic domain, making them as hurtful as possible. Then she imprisons the grieving victims in her beautiful gloomy castle, surrounding them by memorials to their loss and using her mental powers to amplify

their sadness, then milking the sorrowful tears from their eyes. She can read minds, and always knows how to find the soft points and most painful memories, and exploit them to bring even hardened warriors to tears.

**27. Moni and Toya** are brother and sister, sharing the power to control human bodies, contort and freeze them - paralyzing people like statues until they wish to release them. The victims remain conscious all the time and feel everything. Moni and Toya are sickly sadistic, making furniture, ornaments, post signs, and "artwork" out of people they freeze in various painful postures. The only person they can't release from her frozen state is their mother, whom they miss dearly. They try to entertain her with their creativity, but can never know if she appreciates it.

**28. Fernando Domingo Louis V, the Homeless King,** is a very proud man, and his pride made him lead his kingdom into ruin and disaster while he refused to surrender. Now his Spanish-like kingdom prospers again, but he is just a poor old homeless man living on the streets, and nothing could be more painful to his pride. Fernando has the power to look through the eyes of the royal family and plant suggestions in their heads, so secretly he very much runs the kingdom, but can't return to power himself. He also can persuade anyone to do almost anything by begging for it, but his pride almost never allows him to do so.

**29. Salamandra** was such a hot-tempered girl, that now her body radiates heat and she only feels comfortable in extreme temperatures. She looks like a succubus with flaming red hair, and has the demeanor of a reckless party girl, egocentric and always looking for fun. Her hellish-styled palace is uncomfortably hot for ordinary people, but the real heat is in the dungeons and caverns below, where lava pools are used for Salamandra's bathing and prisoners are kept for her pleasure. Her sweat grants people temporary immunity to heat and fire, which she bestows upon those she wants to keep close. She is the master of fire and her blood ignites when

touches air. Unfortunately for Salamandra, her domain is mostly cold and damp, so she rarely leaves the warmth of her palace, in which she holds frequent parties.

**30. Doctor Albert Hoch, the Mercykiller,** wanted to help the terminally ill by performing euthanasia, then proceeded to less-terminally and curable patients, and eventually came to the conclusion that death is the best cure for every kind of suffering. He also started meddling with cloning, as replacements for those who were killed, but his clones are all soulless. Hoch's domain is governed by the Mercykillers, masked clones of himself who monitor the population and decide who should live and who should be put to sleep "for his own good". People who suffer physically or mentally are encouraged to visit one of the clinics and make it end forever - but not everyone has the right to refuse. Hoch's still sees himself as a merciful angel, destined to relieve people from their miseries.

**31. Sylvia, the Sylph Queen,** loved to ride freely on the winds and used her air-based abilities to cause much harm. Now she is confined to the walls of the Invisible Castle, which floats unseen among the clouds. The castle is wholly invisible, making it a nightmare for any acrophobic and making fighting and navigating between its unseen walls most difficult. Sylvia and the other sylphs are familiar enough with the place and use their advantage to taunt victims and foes. Sylvia can't leave her domain, to her great torment, but her friends often kidnap people from the earth below and bring them for her to toy with. She loves to play the shy, innocent fairy-girl before revealing her cruel nature.

**32. The Seven Princes,** five brothers (Alwin, Andros, Amir, Arturius, and Alexis) and two sisters (Anastasia and Artemis), are all exceptionally strong, intelligent, handsome, and arrogant, and they share the Lordship of their domain from their palace. Their father the king left them instructions for a complex mystical "Game", including solving riddles, completing quests, finding powerful items and performing dreadful rituals. The winner shall inherit

the kingdom and unimaginable magical power. The princes constantly plot and conspire against each other, each having his or her own special talents, and each one trying to get the upper hand. The denizens and visitors often pay the price for this unending game.

**33. Dan-Ghul, the Sasquatch**, is called by many names and appellations. He was originally a deformed human vagabond, who only wanted recognition and acceptance, but encountered fear and mistrust everywhere. His rage and frustration drove him to violence, and gradually he transformed into a dreadful sasquatch, who now haunts the forested mountains of his domain. He is cursed to be weakened when seen by humans, and therefore must always hide from sight, attacking only under the cover of darkness, mists, and the forest. His brutal attacks spawned many legends among the population, but his identity and nature remain mystery. The presence of other savage humanoids in the domain adds to the confusion.

**34. King Charlie the Childish** is a fat, dirty, and unpleasant man in his 50s. The responsibilities of a king were too great a burden for him, so he chose to regress mentally back to childhood, behaving and speaking like a pampered, capricious 4 year old child. His demeanor is quite disturbing, but behind the infantile behavior hides a sharp mind and intelligence able to defeat most foes. Charlie's powers enable him to summon dreadful "imaginary friends", animate deadly toys and more. Woe unto the people he chooses to make his playthings.

**35. Horla, the Omnidead**, is an undead priestess who can change into any kind of undead: zombie, ghost, vampire, mummy, etc. The people in her misty, shadowy countryside domain worship the Dead Gods, apparitions that are often seen walking the land, looking like spectral wights or skeletons towering 6-10 meters high, with human corpses hanged from their many limbs. The denizens are enthralled by those gods and undead in general (while still fearing them), and their greatest wish is to become undead themselves. When Horla

summons one of the Dead Gods to a village, everyone gathers around him, hoping to earn his favor, but many just end up dead.

**36. Felix Prismatic, the Colors Master**, is an Initiate of the Sevenfold Veil (see **Complete Arcane**) - a mage who masters the use of colors. He is a handsome man with curled black hair, thin moustache and golden eyes. Felix found the way to affect emotions by colorful lights. In his city domain, he can make the "sun" and all other light sources emit light in whatever color he wishes: red evokes lust and anger, green - nausea, blue - sadness, purple - fear, yellow - nervousness, etc. Felix uses the lights to manipulate the denizens and experiment on them. He lives in his marvelous Palace of 1000 Colors. Ironically, Felix himself was cursed to become colorblind - he can distinguish colors, but not experience their beauty.

**37. Bittersap, the Undead Treant**, rules over a forest of dead, gnarled trees, from many of which hang human remains. The Dead Forest can appear anywhere, and travelers in the woods may find themselves surrounded by it without warning. Bittersap tries to drive humans to commit suicide by hanging themselves on one of the trees, which empowers him, but if they refuse, he is not above tearing them apart himself or by the trees he controls.

**38. Jeanne Dark, the Forsaken Maiden**, was a paladin who fought alongside Kateri Shadowborn and Elena Faith-Hold. She was betrayed by her king, charged with witchcraft and sentenced to be burned at the stake. Jeanne prayed to her god for help, to no avail. In her despair, when the flames licked her body she turned against her god and called for the Devil to save her. She was transformed into an Erinyes, and massacred her former followers. Jeanne's domain is in the Shadowborn cluster. The denizens are charmed by her and see her as a saint of her former god - a role she unwillingly assumes as she is forced to protect her domain from waves of undead and monsters, sacrificing many soldiers in the battles. Jeanne is a bitter soul, feeling betrayed

by her god but secretly wishing to regain his grace. When it doesn't happen, she flies into fits of rage and debauchery, which she regrets later.

**39. Mister Grin** is the Darklord of Nightmare City (described in **QtR 18**, pg. 45-47). Like all Nightmare People, he is a horrid looking being with bald head, white-purplish skin, razor-sharp metallic fingernails and silver teeth, usually dressed in black gentleman's suit. "Mister Grin" is how the other Nightmare People address him; his true name, origin, and background are unknown, but his evil and cruelty knows no bounds.

**40. Lady Octavia** is a seductive woman with fair hair, stylized glasses and a sly smile, who believes everyone is ugly on the inside like her. A priestess of Sitra-Akhra, the Unholy One, she commands the hordes of the Qelipoth - spiritual parasites shaped like overgrown leeches, octopi, lice, mosquitoes etc. Those unseen parasites are attached to almost all the denizens, afflicting their minds with all kinds of perversions and mental sickness. The Qelipoth feed on the negative energies their hosts emit, transferring them back to Octavia. The domain keeps a dignified, well-mannered front, but almost everyone hides some dark secret, which Octavia often exploits to blackmail. Only the pure of heart can refrain from the Qelipoth's predations. Octavia can transform fully or partially into a tentacled leech-like form.

**41. Dairon Delmuth** is a handsome, gentle-looking elven warrior, commander of the guard in the elves' city in a domain populated by humans and various demihuman races. He is always calm and self-controlled, and his mastery of the sword is unequalled. Secretly, Dairon is a were-orc: he can change at will into a brutish orc and carry out his suppressed violent fantasies. Many other people in the domain are were-orcs, -ogres, -trolls, -bugbears and the like. Like lycanthropes, some are natural shapechangers who can change at will, and others are infected and change involuntarily when triggered. Dairon has infected several other elves and can make them change in order to help him or

serve as distractions. When hurt or highly emotional, he may change into larger, more powerful humanoid forms.

**42. Anokh** was a druid who got frustrated by the corruption of humanity in his world. He built a colossal ark, gathered specimens of all the fauna, then boarded it with his close family and performed a ritual which unleashed a deluge upon the world. Anokh expected the water to recede after about a year, but it didn't happen. The food dwindled, and though Anokh is able to magically create nutrients for the humans, all the animals died and became undead. Anokh, his wife, his three sons and their wives float now in an ark full of undead animals in a domain of endless water, waiting hopelessly for dry land to appear, as insanity gnaws in their minds. Visitors manifesting on the ark might find themselves tested for their faith, sacrificed to the gods or forced to fight the undead animals who try to break into the humans' deck.

**43. Fungos, the Infectious Mushroom**, was a crazed scientist who messed with mushrooms and fungus, seeking to harness their powers and eventually merging with them to become a myconid-like creature. His domain is a city, now covered with all types of fungus and giant mushrooms with many malignant traits. Fungos can breathe spores that cause hallucinations, animate corpses as vegetational zombies, cause immediate suffocation and more. In spite of the dangers, many adventurers come to his domain looking for rare ingredients that grow only there.

**44. Zodiac, the Alienist**, was an astronomer and astrologer who gazed too much into the dark, endless abyss of the space - until it stared back into him, changing his mind into something alien. He can now not only watch the stars of the eternal night over his domain, but also control them, changing their positions and shapes at will by using a magical holographic map in his planetarium. By doing so he can create all kinds of mystical effects, summon star spawns etc. Sometimes he performs occult rituals, involving patterns of murder, in order to satisfy

some cosmic conditions. The people in his domain are always watching the skies, looking for threats and dire omens. Zodiac is a thin, pale and bald man in black robes, whose eyes were replaced by blood-red gems, and he often grins madly.

**45. Adonis, the Immortal**, has a god-like body with golden skin, hair and eyes, covered with many tattooed symbols. He was a great king in an ancient civilization and sees himself as the only rightful king of the world, and believes that only the noblest, mightiest people are worthy to even look upon or speak to him. His domain is a colossal Tower of Babylon-like structure with many levels. The higher the level, the greater are the status, comfort, and wealth of its denizens. The lower floors live in absolute squalor and filth, while the dwellers of the highest ones live like kings. Adonis himself lives on the highest floor like a god, in a palace with unimaginable riches and treasures. There's constant struggle across the tower, as everyone is always trying to advance higher while stopping the lower denizens from doing the same. Advancement is possible according to rules set by Adonis, but many try to do it forcibly.

**46. Rooka, the Living Ghoul**. This urban domain is ridden with a plague that causes people to suddenly become ghoul-like and devour those around them. This condition is usually temporary, lasting from several minutes to a couple of days, so the denizens usually try to subdue the infected rather than killing them. Most people have masks tightened over their mouths most of the time, to minimize risk, but everyone lives in constant fear, both from others and themselves. There are several factions of living ghouls in the city - creatures who look like humans but have superhuman strength and speed and can only feed on human flesh. Rooka is the head of the strongest faction. He's an unassuming young man with white hair, but his appearance hides deadly fighting abilities, sharp mind and unending hunger.

**47. Seth Syrus, the Dream Lord**. Sleep disorders of all kinds are common in this domain, and the border between the waking world and the dreamworld is

very blurred. Reality frequently becomes strange and dreamlike, with surrealistic creatures and events manifesting, and often it's impossible to know if you are awake or dreaming, or whether the events you remember happened in dream or reality. This is all the doing of Seth Syrus, a psychotic killer trapped in the dreamworld, who tries to break the border between the worlds and return to reality, heading an army of nightmares. He can change his appearance at will, invade dreams and murder the dreamers or tempt them to help him.

**48. Rama** is a man with black ram head, dressed in black robes, who serves as the high judge in a bizarre domain populated by various animal-headed people. Humans arriving to this realm are brought before Rama to be judged for their crimes against animals, including eating, hunting, or imprisoning them. Rama seems to know everything about the accused, and those who are found guilty are usually deprived of their ability to speak and clothes, imprisoned in pens and treated like cattle to be raised for meat and other purposes. Those who are found innocent have their heads changed into animals'. It seems Rama was a fighter for animal rights who went too far.

**49. Ishaan** was a boy who suffered from ADHD and dyslexia, and couldn't focus on his studies. Having been taunted and humiliated by both his family, teachers, and friends, he eventually snapped and went on a killing spree, murdering many of them. His domain is composed of his house, the school, and the local neighborhood, and it delivers the experience of ADHD: music and voices echoes from everywhere, pictures move and change like TV screens, written letters crawl like beetles, things change constantly, and it is almost impossible to focus and concentrate without getting distracted (which neutralizes spellcasters and psionics). Visitors must solve some puzzles and riddles in order to escape the domain before falling prey to Ishaan, but the distracting nature of the domain makes it tremendously difficult.

**50. Amuma.** The faces of all the people in this disturbing domain look blurred, dark, and featureless, and their voices sound blurred too. The landscape itself looks quite fuzzy, as if seen through near-sighted eyes, and sounds are also muted. It is the doing of Amuma and her fellow faceless ghosts who drain essence from the living, thus making them indistinguishable from their own blurred shapes. Normal-looking people coming to the domain will draw lots of attention both from the living and the

ghosts, who will seek to blur them too. Amuma was a girl with weak sight and hearing, who wished for everyone to experience the world as she does - and her wish was granted.



# DARKON

LAND OF WONDERS AND TYRANNY (DOMAIN REWRITE)

BY : MISTMASTER

**(Author's Note: Darkon's Calamity could be undeath or tyrants; either way it is an oppressed land.)**

**Official Name :** The Darkonese Egemony

**Culture level:** Chivalrous

**Ecology:** Full

**Climate & Terrain:** It varies greatly, from the fertile plains of the southeast to the cold wastes of the far north, to the hills and mountains in the southwest. Some of the terrains are influenced by magic.

**Languages:** Common, Darkonian, Lamordian, Vaasan, Okrainian.

**Religions:** Erlik the Reaper, Vecna the Whispered, the Eternal Order, Zakhata the Overseer, Darkonos the Life Bringer, Ezra the Avenger, Elf Deities, Dwarf Deities, Halfling Deities, Gnome Deities .

**Races:** Humans 65%, Caliban 5%, Elves 5%, Dwarves 5%, Gnomes 5%, Halfling 5%, other 10% .

**Inhabitants:** 30 millions.

**Surface:** 1,000,000 square kilometres.

**Analog:** Peter the Great's Russia with Soviet Union vibes, on a smaller scale, and Modern USA after a fashion.

**Government:** Federal Meritocracy de jure, Absolute Monarchy de facto.

**Ruler:** Azal'lan Firan Zal'honan.

**Darklord:** Firan Zal'honan.

**Lightlord:** Irik Zal'honan.

**Capital City:** Il Aluk (450,000 in, Non Standard, L/E),

**Important towns:** Martira Bay (300,000 in, Standard L/N), Rivalis (283,000 in L/N), Nartok (200,000 in Non-Standard N), Nevuchar Springs (180,000 in, non Standard L/G), Neblus (170,000 in Standard, L/G), Viaki (150,000 in, Standard, L/E), Maykle(130,000 in Standard L/N), Tempe Falls (120,000 in, Standard L/E), Delagia (78,000 in L/N, Standard), Devering (60,000 in, Standard L/E), Karg (50,000 in, monstrous, L/E), Sidnar (Standard, 48,000 In, L/N), Malanuv (35,000 in L/N Standard), Despondia (30,000 in, Non-Standard, L/E), Desolatus (30,000 in, Non Standard L/E), Rookhausen (28,000 in, Non Standard, L/G)

**Borders:** North: Okraina and Sanguinia, East: The Nocturnal Sea, South: Lamordia, Falkovnia, Tepest, Nova Vaasa; South-West: Nova Vaasa, West: The Sea of Sorrows.

## TROPES

Darkon is the land of classical fantasy and high magic, mixed with the lingering sense of oppression and control. Darkon is the place where

ideals become ideology and ideology justifies horrors and atrocity. In a land where the Revolution won and everything changed, but the horrible suspicion is that nothing changed for real.

## DOMAIN OVERVIEW

The vast Darkonian Egemony stretches from the Nocturnal Sea in the East, to the Sea of Sorrows in the West.

The Capital city of Il Aluk, the largest city in the Core, lays in the eastern plains of the Vuchar River, the longest river in the Core (It flows to Lamordia, dying in the Rigor Lake.) and it's the main riverport; The Vuchar is navigable for all its Darkonese course, and it is the main trade route of the Egemony; it's spring lays on the East Coast near the city of Nevuchar Springs .

The City of Nartok, heart of Darkonese Craft, in the Shadow Forest, makes good use of the neighboring port of Malanuv on the Vuchar.

The Cities of Viaki and Maykle are the two other main ports on the Vuchar.

The city of Rivalis is the main food producer in the Hegemony, laying at the mouth of the Valley of the Vuchar, near the Lamordian border, in the middle of two lakes, the Pacific Lake to the West and the Red Leaf Lake to the East, where small hills and sparse forests signal the passage in the Valley proper.

A vast swamp, called the Great Salt Swamp lays in the center of the nation, west of Il-Aluk; South-West to the capital lays the Great Forest of the Shadows, on the heavy fortified border with Falkovnia, while in the South-east the Mountains of Misery range marks most of the border with Nova Vaasa. Several rivers are born from those mountains and end in the Vuchar in the North;

The Frozen Waste and the Icewall Mountains separate Darkon from Okraina and Sanguinia in the far north. The main port on the West coast, called the Jagged Coast, is Martira Bay; In the South East, between the Misty Coast and the Mountains of Misery a rocky steppe called Horse Graveyard, sits on the border with Nova Vaasa. In the Mountains of Misery, two peaks stands far above the others, the Nylka and the Nyid (two active Volcanoes). The port

of Rookhausen is the last Darkonese Stronghold before the Steppe. The city of Karg sits on a vital crossing of the Tempe river, one of the more important tributaries of the Vuchar river. The Tempe River is navigable up to the great Roaring Falls, an impressive waterfall were the Tempe Falls city lays, partially carved in the rock behind the waterfall.

The greatest lake in Darkon is the Korst Lake, the source of the eponymous river; The city of Delagia sits on the mouth of the Foaming River, where it enters Lake Korst; The city of Sidnar lays at the crossing of the Khourx River, the twin tributary of the Lake Korst. The Main tributary of the Vuchar river is the Corvus River, which connects the cities of Mayvin and Corvia with the Vuchar River.

The city of Devering, in the Forgotten Hills, guards the way to the Dargal Pass in The Mountains of Misery. In the North, the fortified citiy of Despondia guards the Frozen Waste and the Icewall Mountains.

The city of Desolatus guards the River Somulus and the Lake of Lost Dreams in the Dream Dales, while the City of Neblus control the crossing of the Neatron River in the Middle-north.

## THE PEOPLE

Darkonese are a various lot, we can differentiate them between the ten (plus one) regions Darkon is divided into.

The people of the Jagged Coast are open minded, and mainly human, deeply religious and welcoming, full of traders and sailors. The People of the Vale of Tears, aka the Plain of the Vuchar River, are a practical lot, adaptable and well-versed in trade and negotiations; the country's Halfling Population concentrates here. People of the Icewall Mountains and of the Frozen Waste (collectively a.k.a. the Icy North) are a nomadic and hardened people, close-knit in their clannish organizations, and do not discriminate against the many Calibans inside the clans. The people of the Dreamdales are deeply spiritual, and usually human, a quiet people of farmers, fishermen, and breeders, very hospitable if



a bit reserved. The people of the Mountains of Misery and the Forgotten Hills (collectively a.k.a. the Rocky South) are a stout and battle-hardened people, many of them Dwarves, with strong family ties and a martial tradition. People from the Forest of Shadows are often on the front line of Falkovnian invasions, and so they are a wary and tenacious people; they are also practical and resourceful; many Gnomes live here. The Mist Vale is the region north of the Vuchar and south of the Frozen Waste; it's inhabitants are a cultured and fashionable lot, boasting a number of renowned scholars; many elves live in these lands. The Boglands are a land of marshes and lakes, inhabited by a people renowned for easy-going attitude, sharp wit, and ingenuity, if a bit naïve. The people of the Misty Coast are a hard working people, honest and loyal, if a bit superstitious; the sailors there are of a more martial bent than on the Jagged Coast. The Horse Graveyard Steppe is the least populated region in Darkon, still, it boasts a prideful and resilient population of crafters, goat-breeders, and merchants. Il Aluk, while geographically part of the Vale of Tears, is politically and culturally autonomous; the biggest city of the core proper, it boasts a very diverse and cosmopolitan population.

A common trait of Darkonese people is a certain degree of tolerance for undeath and magic; mindless undead are seen as useful tools, while intelligent undead are respected, yet feared; magic is likewise a useful tool, if a dangerous one. Since the fall of the Empire, and the raising of the Egemony, the national ideology in Darkon has been meritocracy; Darkonese do not judge people by blood and birth, only by their deeds.

## History

### *Age of Creation*

In the dawn of times, Elrik, Death personified, ruled a gray and lifeless world; Darkonos, one of his children, stole the spark of life from his father's treasure, and gifted it to the world; his father pursued him into the lands now known as Darkon,

where a battle ensued. The other gods, awakened by Darkonos, chief among them Zhakata the Overseer, and Ezra the Avenger, fought alongside Darkonos and together they forced Elrik to yield. Life was allowed to spread, but Elrik bestowed three curses upon the living beings of the world: The Curse of Mortality: All life will have a term, and after that it will be returned to him; The Curse of Strife: Life will prosper by preying on other life; The Curse of Fear: People would fear his touch so much that they will be ready to kill others to escape it, and they will embrace his tenets to avoid the judgement. But as he tried to make a fourth Curse to damn anyone who would die without his blessing to undeath and torment, he was stopped by the other gods, so Undeath did not completely fall under his control.

### *Age of Empires*

In the Age of Empires, The Olimpyan Empire claimed Darkon's fertile lands, but it colonized it only partially, mainly due to the fierce opposition from Lamordic Barbarians and the concentration of powerful creatures, like Dragons and Giants, in the mountains and vales. The Elven Kingdom of Nebion is born in this age, while Dwarves immigrate into the Mountains of Misery from the Land of Bluetspur, fleeing from the underground menace of the Illithid.

### *Age of Darkness*

The Wizard King Vecna I creates a vast empire unifying the lands of present day Darkon, and the lands North of the Icewall Mountains; Vecna became the first Lich-King in Darkonese history; he developed the secret arts of Necromancy and started to animate vast armies of undead. After his betrayal and killing by his lieutenant Kas, Vecna is reported ascending to godhood, leaving the throne for the taking to a long succession of ambitious liches, who encouraged migration from many lands including Zherisian and Mordentish immigrants, (which influences current Darkonese culture heavily).

### *The Modern Age*

The last of the Undead Tyrants started his rule in the wake of a great upheaval; Vaasan and Lamordian victories in the wars lead to Okraina and Sanguinia gaining independence. Vecna XVI was a lazy, abusive, and ineffectual ruler, and he sowed the seeds for his own fall, at the hand of a minor noble, very well versed in the arts of magic.

### *The Current Age*

The overthrowing of Vecna XVI, led by Firan Zal'honan, a.k.a. Azalin Rex, together with the last public execution in the history of Darkon -- Prince Irik, executed by his own father on grounds of treason -- marks the end of the Empire of Darkon, and the beginning of the Darkonese Egemony.

### **PLACES OF INTEREST**

Il Aluk is the biggest and most advanced city in the Core proper, a sprawling metropolis carefully designed to avoid the mess big cities usually have; there is no slum-town in the outskirts of Il-Aluk, and even popular quarters are clean, illuminated and fully patrolled and serviced. Castle Avernus, the massive Royal Palace, now seat of the Egemony Council, of the Council of Choosers and of the Azal'lan, sits on the vacuum left by Cavitius, Vecna I's first massive fortress which disappeared after his ascension, The Eternal House is a massive cathedral of the Eternal Order, and the biggest temple in the whole Core, dwarfing even the Great Dome of the Lawgiver in Nova Vasaa, Our Lady of the Shield in Borca, and the Pillar of Mankind in Paridon, Zherisia. The Sanctuary of the Betrayed Lord was built in the place where Kas attempted to kill Vecna, and houses a restricted library.

The Vecna I School of Arcane Arts, with its nine departments, is a massive institute of magical learning.

Many inns, restaurants, and hotels grace the districts of the Capital, , the most famous being the Sated Hill Giant (an inn renowned for the abundance of its

portions, whose owner is a friendly Ogre named Carl Bonecrusher, N/G Fighter 5), the Manticore's Head, a luxurious resort, The Azal'lan's Rest, an inn famed to welcome the Azal'lan himself once every month, at dinner. The Potter's Pub is frequented by very exotic patrons. Il Aluk hosts the Egemony Council and the Ministry of Progress, chaired by the Azal'lan himself. The vast sewage system of Il Aluk, while well maintained, is so vast that it is impossible to prevent various forms of vermin from nesting there; magical Waste from Vecna I's School also often creates more exotic creatures there.

Martira Bay is the greatest port on the Nocturnal Sea and is the seat of the Church of the Overseer, housing its principal temple, the Beacon of Faith. The principal inns in the city are: the Black Goat, whose owner, Morris Blake (Human Thief 10 L/E), is an agent of the KargATS, the secret police of the Egemony; the Welcoming Den, owned by Karlon Daanviers (Human Werelion Ranger 4 C/G), a Zeindosteinian retired adventurer, and the Laughing Skull Inn, a shady resort frequented by pirates and smugglers. Martira Bay is also the seat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a role held by the governor of the City, who resides in the Black Tower; the current Governor is Karimana Relddkasen. The sea and cliff of the bay house several caves and coves that often become the abode of outlaws, pirates and exotic sea-beasts.

Rivalis is a great hub of agricultural trade, cultivating rice in the Pacific Lake and grain and oil all around. Rivalis is also the seat of the Ministry of Agronomics, a role held by the elected governor of the City, who resides in the Crystal Palace. The Crystal Garden is a botanical garden and greenhouse, which houses the Rivalis University. The two main Inns in the city are the expensive Traveler's End and the cheaper Old Waypoint, owned by a halfling named Karl Dustybreechs (C/G Rogue 6), a former smuggler. The Governor of the City, and Minister of Agronomics is Lord Arian Windfoot. The Pacific Lake, in spite of its name is quite deep, and is rumored to house ancient Aquatic Elven ruins.

Nartok is the Darkonese green gem, and its Governor is also the Minister of Environment; Nartok is also the seat of the Darkonese Circle of Lifebringers, a druidic circle who also patron the School of Nature, a prestigious university specialized in ethology, zoology, and environmental sustainability. This city harmonizes perfectly the environmental necessities of the national park it resides in, and the necessities of the citizen, managing to successfully exploit its resources in a very low-impact way. Many inns grace this tourist town; the four biggest ones are Cedar Splint, The Crow's Roost, Season's Turn, and Veteran Arms, which all belong to the same person, a Forfarian Halfling merchant called Gordek Goldenhand (Actually, a Forfarian Goblin in disguise, Goblin Wizard 7 L/N). The Governor's abode is the Grove Manor in the center of the city park; the current Governor and minister of Environment is Lord Burkhart Volker. Ancient Elven ruins lay under the roots of the bigger trees.

Nevuchar Springs is the main hub of trade in the Core's eastern coast and the seat of the Minister of Maritime and Fluvial Trade; the Darkonese mercantile navy is primarily housed in the Docks of Nevuchar Springs, while a channel allows ships from the Harbour on the sea to accede the River, while Martira Bay houses primarily passenger ships. The elves in the city are famed seafarers, up to the current Governor, Captain Thalís Redmast; he rules from his docked flagship, the Blackstar. The city houses a prestigious university and library called the Pharmacology Library. The Baths are a renowned thermal station, and the Mist Refuge is the biggest inn by the docks. The Last Redoubt is the seat of the Darkonese branch of the Church of Ezra. The prestigious Darkonese Arsenal is located here. The Ancient Elven City of Vucharnaes, destroyed by Vecna I during his conquest still holds ancient secrets under the new one.

Neblus is an ancient elven city, which was capital city of the ancient elven kingdom of Neblion, until Vecna I conquered it and made it a stronghold for his army

of the Dead. Today it still houses a huge necropolis-fortress but the elves have returned to populate it, led by the current Minister of Education and Governor of Neblus, Iomar Lonshadow, an Elf old enough to remember the reign of Vecna XV, who rules from the ancient Leochan Palace, which once was the seat of the Elven Kings of Neblion. The Shrine of the Spirits, a Dome-like temple of the Eternal Order, patronizes the Eldest Superior School, a renowned philosophical, archeological, historical study and theological faculty. The most renowned inn, the Tower, has an owner which is in attraction per se, a ghost named Trillen Mistwalker.

Viaki is the main city in the Boglands, a very important trade hub that guards the Neblus Road where it crosses the Zeron River; pharmaceutical industries all around the Core depend on the rare ingredients collected in the Boglands. The Zal'hohan Memorial hospital is the Core's greatest free hospital, and it houses the Chapel of Life, Darkonos's most renowned temple. The Governor of Viaki and Minister of Health is Mulciber Sleen. The Museum of the Grotesque is a core-renowned funhouse, while The Viaki Teahouse is a renowned expensive location for weddings and ceremonies by the wealthier people; both belong to the Borcan Dilisnya family. Four Inns, also belonging to a Borcan family, the Boritsis, are the Clearwater Inn, the Manticore's Tongue, the Mosscloak Inn and the Toadsfoot Inn, all four are more popular for the entertainment they provide than for the quality of their food and rooms, with the exception of the Manticore's Tongue, which is also the most expensive of the four. The Governor resides in the Grey House, a stone manor outside of the town. Under Viaki lay the ruins of the ancient Olympian city of Télma.

Maykle is the largest town in the Vale of the Vuchar, and the third main river port on it after the capital city of Il Aluk and Nevuchar Springs. It houses a renowned mental health clinic, the Serene Abode Asylum, while the Serenity House is a hotel owned by the Asylum director Dr. Quintin Clangor. The city hosts many retirement homes and holiday resorts,

and a permanent Carnival. Iris Sturlock, the Minister of Welfare doubles as governor of Maykle and rules from Quiet Hill Palace.

Tempe Falls is a most lively city, which employs its massive waterfalls to sustain fervid industrial activity. It's a mainly Dwarf-populated town, and they have buildt their houses behind the waterfall, growing their city even outside of it onto the side of the river. The governor of the city and Minister of Infrastructures is a dwarf called Oscari Gunderin who resides in the Power Forge Manor. The main inn is the Boar's Tusk, whose owner is an agent of the KargATS called Argar Slashingfang.

Delagia is an halfling-dominated town, which is the main port on Lake Korst and its governor is the Minister of Trade, Alaric Pocketfull, a halfling who rules from the luxurious halls of Green Gate Manor, on an Hill in the center of the city proper. The main inn belongs to the Governor himself, and it is a vast welcoming structure that can satisfy any kind of customer; it is named the Abode of the Lake Guardian.

Devering is a a heavily fortified city which lays in the Mountains of Misery and it houses the bulk of the Army of the Dead, and also the training facilities for the living soldiers. The Marshal of the Darkonese Army and Minister of Defense is Devering Governor Jeffery Steelhand. Several inns are in the town frequented by the soldiers when off duty; the Falcon's Head is the best known one, as its owner, Quentin Talonslayer got his last name after becoming a war-hero veteran of the Wars against Falkovnia.

Karg is the oldest human city in Darkon, and it was the birthplace of Vecna I; some say his secret lab is still hidden in the depth of the city's underground; if the local clergy of Vecna knows about that, they keep the secret very well. A temple of Vecna, the Cradle of Whispers, is found in Karg, built on the presumed birthplace of Vecna, as is the Obsidian Tower, the seat of the Darkonese intelligence service the KargATS (Karg Agency of Trouble Solving),

sometimes misspelled Kargat outside of Darkonese borders (while its agents, also called KargATS, are misspelled as Kargatane). The Tower doubles as state prison and as seat of the local governor, Minister of Interior Affairs and Director of the KargATS, who is the mysterious Kazandra Redshroud. Karg's many inns are rumoured to be filled to the brim with agents; in truth no agent works in Karg's Inns, but the owner of the Malodorous Goat, Venrith Chole, is one. The Karg Security Enforcement Academy, near the Obsidian Tower trains both agents of the Darkonese Constabulary and KargATS.

Sidnar is a mining town, and it sits in a vital position, because through the Stingo Road and the Khourx River it is joined with all the more important centers of Darkon. Timber and Construction material come from the woods and quarries surrounding the hill. Sidnar is Governed by the Minister of Natural Resources, Kasen Constantine. The Collegiate Caelists is a University specialized in natural sciences and astronomy. Its observatorium, the Star Spire, is a huge structure, the biggest one in the known word. The Brooding Bridge dwarfs the majority of bridges in the Core, and in its center lays the majestic Water Palace, the governor's abode. Many inns exist in the city, the most renowned, especially for its cooking, is the Logs Hut, which in spite of its name is a renowned resort, owned by lady Aletha Constantine, the governor's sister. Sidnar also hosts Ezra's Motte, a temple of Ezra with a mainly Elven priesthood.

Corvia is the financial heart of Darkon, and houses the third biggest Exchange Market in the known word, after the one in Paridon and the one in Levkarest. The Darkonese State Mint, the Darkonese Revenue Service and the Darkonese National Bank are all also seated in Corvia. Corvia's governor, currently a dwarf called Urjo Mustanen double as Minister of the Finances and directs the Darkonese economical institutions, and resides in the Gubernatorial Tower, at number 29 of Barricade Street. Two main inns distinguish themselves: the

cozy Obsidian Heart and the more vivacious Silver Mistress. The Economic Studies Institute is a very prestigious school of Economics and Finances.

Mayvin is the city of wonders; magic and technology are both employed to make this Gnome-majority industrial town stand out; every innovation which appears in Darkon has surely been in Mayvin for five years before. The Governor of Mayvin is Minister of Industry, Arcane Research, and Technological Development, and also directs the Patent House, and the Darkonese Institute of Technomancy, a school of applied arcane solutions, engineering, and architecture rivaling with Lamordian ones. The Market of Wonder is a permanent bazaar in the center of the city, dominated by the Clockworks Tower, where the Governor, the brilliant gnome inventress Roodyl Narglin resides. The most distinguished inn in the city is the Clockwork Pot, whose owner is an awakened Automaton named Raynard Tincan (Awakened Automaton Bard 7, C/G).

Despondia's name serves as a reminder of less favorable times, when the Undead Tyrants ruled over Darkon; Despondia was a prison-city, where the families of the peoples who dared defy the will of the Emperors (or of those which simply displeased them) were forced to live a miserable life; it kept the name to kept the memory alive, but today, this living city is the last welcoming place before the Frozen Wastes and the Icewall Mountains. This city, once one of suffering has become a city of beauty, albeit a fortified one; to forget the misery of its past, Despondia became the seat of the Darkonese Academy of Arts, and also houses the majestic Black Curtain Theater, also part of the Academy. The largest Shrine of Darkonos in Darkon is also in the city; it was built in the dark past and it was the only beacon of hope in the bleakness of those days. Today, it is the unofficial center of the very loose hierarchy of the Cult. The Governor of Despondia is Francine Compton, and she doubles as Minister of Culture. Near the theater you can find the Gift of Darkonos, an inn renowned for its great cooking and very comfortable lodgings, and for the great

entertainment it provides its guests with; a jolly and wealthy halfling named Jomo Rockwell is the owner.

Desolatus, like Despondia, bears a name which is a reminder of a bleaker time; Desolatus was a refugee camp made up of the survivors of the city of Portus Somnis near the Dreamlake, which was razed to the ground and salted by Vecna XVI on a whim. The city keeps its name but it has rebuilt the old philosophical lore of Portus Somnis, with the Portus Somnis Memorial Philosophical School and Library; the city is a touristic location, full of thermal installations (the Dreamlake water is incredibly warm). The Pleasant Dreams House is the biggest hotel in Darkon and one of the most renowned in the Core. It is owned by Michelle de Voure, a charming, yet mysterious Bard of Dementlieuse ancestry. Desolatus's Governor Rula Barcliff doubles as Minister of Tourism.

Rookhausen is a fortified port town, the last big urban center before the Dead Horse Steppe and the Vaasan border. In spite of its peripheral location, both magical and mundane ways of communication allow for fast travel from and to Rookhausen, which houses the Naval Academy and the headquarters of Darkonian War Navy. Lord Admiral Francis Stuart is the Governor of Rookhausen and the Minister of the Navy, and he doubles as Supreme Commander of DWN (Darkonese War Navy). He rules from the fortified Dismal Four, four islets in front of the port, which also house the Ruledge Beacon. The main Inn, the Fisherman's Table, is owned by the city wealthiest merchant, retired army officer Edward Durkins (Middle Aged Human Fighter L/G).

## RELIGIONS

Erlík the Reaper is an offshoot cult of the Eternal Order, though it claims to be the original one. Erlík is a N/E god of Death, Undeath, Doom, Winter and of the Dead; he teaches his faithful that life is a very small candle that he can snuff out at any moment; only death is eternal; everything can die and undeath is a reward for faithful service to him. His followers are assassins, gravediggers, graveyard

keepers, evil undead, and peasants who want to appease him. His symbol is a skull with a scythe, his favourite weapon is the Scythe and his Domains are Darkness, Death, Destruction, Evil, Luck, and Weather.

Vecna the Whispered, the Betrayed Lord and the King who will Return is a N/E god of Dark Magic, Forbidden Knowledge, Secrets, Ambition, and Treachery. He teaches his faithful to keep their mouth shut and their eyes and ears well opened. He teaches them to never trust their underlings, and to crave power and knowledge. His followers are unscrupulous scholars, greedy researchers, and ambitious arcanists, but also those nostalgic for the Empire times, as it was the State Religion before the revolution, 50 years before the current year. It had a lot of followers then, at least as a lip service. Its numbers have dropped in the years, but it is still the third largest religion in Darkon. His symbol is a hand holding an eye, his favorite weapon is the dagger and his domains are Evil, Knowledge, Magic, Rune and Trickery.

The Eternal Order is a True Neutral religion which adores Death in all its aspects; the Church of Elrik separated from the Order a century ago. The Church teaches that Death is unavoidable and a part of life, and thus life must be cherished and protected; Undeath is an abomination, but exceptions can be made to those whose time of service is yet to expire, as everyone who lives has a mission and a duty. Its symbol is a circle with a skull in its center; it has followers from every social class; it has quickly replaced the Church of Vecna as the national church, even without being proclaimed church of state. Its domains are Community, Death, Healing, Knowledge, Repose, and Travel, plus whatever the individual venerated aspect may allow (Osiris brings Earth and Plant, Hel brings Destruction and Luck etc.). Its favored weapon may vary, but all clerics may take the Scythe as one.

Zakhata the Overseer is a god of Community, Tradition, Hard Work, Fairness, Social Bonds, and Conservation, and his faith was the religion of the

Terg barbarians whose offshoot formed Nova Vaasa but also settled in part of Darkon. This L/G religion is opened to every race, but it is mainly human; its followers are humans from every social extraction. He teaches his followers to respect the law of the land, to work hard and to respect authority, emphasizing the importance of bonds: family, community, nation, church, and traditions. He also emphasizes generosity, zeal and gratitude. This Lawful/Good deity takes an iron lock with a golden chain as his symbol, and his favourite weapon is the mace; his domains are Community, Good, Law, Nobility, Protection, and Strength. It has followers from every social class, but its conservative bent attracts particularly the wealthy and the middle class, and the seminomadic population in the North and in the South.

Darkonos the Life Bringer is Darkon's eponymous god, a C/G deity of Hope, Change, Life, Light, Summer, Freedom, and Courage. He teaches his faithful to never stop fighting for their dreams, because no night is eternal, and every tyranny will end; he also teaches them that undead are prisoners in their own body and should be liberated as soon as possible. His favored weapon is the rapier and his symbol is a lightened candle; His followers are rebels, reformers, artists, and revolutionaries, often young people. His domains are Chaos, Good, Healing, Liberation, Sun, and Trickery.

Ezra the Avenger, is the aspect of Ezra venerated by the L/E sect in Darkon; This Church teaches that the world is a battlefield, with civilized beings on one side and monsters on the other; everyone need to choose a side, the one who is not a friend is an enemy, and you can't have mercy for the enemy. You must know your enemy and plan carefully, as only the smart fighters live to fight another day. The church's favored weapon is the longsword, and its symbol is a shield with a bloodied sword. The Domains of the Church are Evil, Knowledge, Law, Strength, Protection and War. Followers are people from every social class, generally coming from the frontiers and the less urbanized zones of Darkon.

## Elf Deities

Also known as the Seldarine, this family of deities are descendants of Corellon Larethian. Elven Religion is extremely codified and ritualized. The Seldarine are divided in two factions: Altha (faithful) Seldarine and Daitha (unfaithful) Seldarine. The

Altha Seldarines includes: Corellon Larethian: C/G god of Magic, Arts, Beauty, Fighting and Nature, the father of the Gods in the Elf Religion, he represents Spring, and he teaches to enjoy the life and to create beauty. His favored weapon is the longsword, and his symbol is a an ornated silver crescent with six green gems. His Domains are Chaos, Good, Magic, Plant, Protection, and War. Every Elf pay at least lip service to him.

Other important deities are Angarradh Salinmae, Corellon's Consort, goddess of Fertility, Medicine, Maternity, Light, Summer, and Life (N/G, Good, Healing, Knowledge, Magic, Plant, and Sun; symbol: downwards pointing triangle with three intertwined circles in it; favored weapon: shortspear ), and their children: Moon and Autumn goddess Sehanine Moonbow, also a death goddess venerated in the Eternal Order (C/G, Chaos, Darkness, Good, Repose, Travel; Favored weapon: shortbow, symbol" an Arc over a full moon).

Love goddess Hanali Celanil (C/G, Chaos, Charm, Good, Magic, Protection, favored weapon: dagger, symbol: a golden heart)

Wind goddess Aerdrie Faenya (C/G, Air, Animal, Chaos, Good, Weather; Favored weapon: quarterstaff, symbol: a flying heron)

Fire, Magic, and Rune goddess Alathrien Druanna (L/N, Fire, Knowledge, Law, Magic, Rune; Favored weapon: sling, Symbol: Seven silvery runes)

Sea god Sashelas Dulva, also worshipped by human sailors as Deep Sashelas (C/G, Animal, Chaos, Good, Water, Weather; favored weapon: trident, symbol: a dolphin)

Forest god and Druid's patron Rillifane Rallathil (NG, Earth, Good, Plant, Protection, Travel; favored weapon: quarterstaff, symbol: an oak tree)

Revenge god Shevarash Gilmadrith ( L/E, Destruction, Evil, Law, Strength, War, favored weapon: longbow, symbol: a broken violet arrow with a purple tear)

Knowledge and Craft god Labelas Enoreth (L/G, Artifice, Good, Knowledge, Law, Magic, favored weapon: quarterstaff, Symbol: a sundial)

Mischief god Erevan Ilesere (C/N, Chaos, Knowledge, Luck, Magic, Trickery; Favored Weapon: short sword; Symbol: Asymmetrical starburst)

Duels and Hunt god Solonor Thelandira (C/G, Animal, Chaos, Good, Plant, War, Favored Weapon: longbow, symbol: a green arrow.)

Mountain, River, Wildlands, Winter god Tarsellis Meunniduin (N, Air, Animal, Plant, Water, Weather, favored weapon: spear, Symbol: a stylized mountain.)

The Daitha Seldarine represent the dark side of the Elves; they followed the rebellion of Araushnee Lolthu, Corellon's first wife, the Spider Queen, goddess of Lies, Treachery, Ambition, Turmoil ,and Cruelty who teaches her followers to take what they want as long as they can get away with it, to wait patiently in the darkness, and to spin webs of lies to pave your way to success, that love is weakness and that the weak must be purged , and that males are inferior; she is C/E, her domains are Animal, Chaos, Charm, Darkness, Evil, and Trickery, her symbol is a spider and her favored weapon is the flail.

The other Daitha Seldarine are: Assassination god Vhaeraun Maskedshade (C/E, Chaos, Darkness, Evil, Travel, and Trickery, favored weapon: short sword, symbol: A pair of black glass lenses that form a mask.)

Hope and Night goddess Elistraee Nightdancer (C/G, Chaos, Charm, Darkness, Good, Protection and Void,

favored weapon: bastard sword, symbol: long haired dancing naked elf woman under the moon)

War god Selvetarm Xaranei (L/E, Animal, Evil, Law, Strength and War, Favored weapon: heavy mace, Symbol: spider over a crossed mace and sword)

Death and Undeath goddess Kiaransalee Alabanshee, also a goddess of the Eternal Order (C/E, Chaos, Death, Destruction, Evil, Magic; favored weapon: dagger, Symbol: hand with silver rings.)

Opportunism and Intoxicants god Keptolo Mithardan (N/E, Charm, Evil, Nobility, Plant and Trickery, Favored weapon: rapier, Symbol: mushroom)

Thief and Seduction goddess Zinzerena Shadenhand (C/N, Chaos, Charm, Darkness, Trickery; Favored weapon: shortsword, Symbol: Shortsword draped in a cloth)

### Dwarf Deities

Dwarf religion is a strictly familial and clan-based matter; The Morndinsamman (High Dwarves) are the legendary founders of the Dwarven Clans, descendants of Moradin Soulforger the All Father, their eternal king, god of the Forge, of Crafting, of Mining, of Creation, of Tradition, of Honour and of Family, L/G. His Domains are Artifice, Good, Earth, Law, Nobility, and Protection, his symbol is an anvil with an hammer. His Consort is Berronar Truesilver a N/G deity of Family, Fertility, Home, Healers, Records, and Marriage, her Domains are Community, Good, Healing, Law, Nobility, and Rune; her symbol is a pair of intertwined silver rings. They teaches their followers, dwarves from every clan (every dwarf pay them at least lip service) to be true, brave and loyal, to respect the elders, to do your duty to family, to clan and to nation, and to be dedicated to your work, no matter how menial, so much as to turn it into an art.

The 18 Morndinsamman are the children of Moradin and Berronar. They include: War god Clangeddin Silverbeard, patron of the Silverbeard Clan (L/G, Glory, Good, Law, Protection, War; Favored weapon:

battleaxe; Symbol: crossed silver battleaxes.) Burial and Exploration god Dumathoin Hiddengem, patron of the Hiddengem clan and also a god of the Eternal Order. (N, Earth, Knowledge, Protection, Repose, and Strength, favored weapon: maul; Symbol: a gem hidden in a mountain) Greed god Abbathor Tightgrip, patron of the Tightgrip clan (N/E, Community, Earth, Evil, Luck, Trickery; favored weapon: dagger, Symbol: bejeweled dagger)

Trade god Vergadain Smartfingers, Patron of the Smartfingers clan (N, Artifice, Community, Luck, Trickery and Travel; favored weapon: longsword, Symbol: a gold coin)

Healing and Moon goddess Sharindlar Mercydance, patron of the Mercydance clan (C/G, Chaos, Charm, Darkness, Good, Healing; favored weapon: whip, Symbol: a fire ring coming from a steel ring.

Progress and Exploration god Dugmaren Brightmantle, Patron of the Brightmantle clan (C/G, Artifice, Chaos, Good, Knowledge, Travel, Water; Favored weapon: shortsword; Symbol: open book.)

Sentinel god Gorm Gulthyn patron of clan Gulthyn (L/G, Earth, Good, Law, Strength, Protection, Favored weapon: battleaxe, Symbol: Bronze mask with flame eyes)

Luck goddess Haela Brightaxe, Patron of clan Brightaxe (C/G, Chaos, Good, Luck, Protection, War; Favored weapon: greatsword; Symbol: Flaming Greatsword covered in rune)

Travel god Marthammor Duin Patron of Clan Duin (N/G, Good, Luck, Protection, Travel, Weather; Favored weapon: heavy mace, Symbol: Upright mace in front of a fur-trimmed leather boot.)

Wildlands god Thard Harr, patron of clan Harr (C/G, Animal, Chaos, Good, Plant and Strength; Favored weapon: spiked gauntlet, Symbol: two crossed scaly clawed gauntlets of silvery-blue metal)

Alcohol god Hanseath Laughtroar, patron of clan Laughtroar (C/N, Artifice, Chaos, Travel, Strength,



Plant; Favored weapon: greataxe, Symbol: a mug of beer)

Fire and Sun god Tharmekhûl Sunforger, patron of clan Sunforger (L/G, Artifice, Good, Fire, Law, Sun; Favored weapon: Warhammer, Symbol: a lighted forge with a sun halo.)

Exploitation god Laduguer Grimhammer, patron of clan Grimhammer (Duergar) (L/E, Artifice, Evil, Law, Nobility, War; Favoured weapon: warhammer; Symbol: broken arrow.)

Tenacity goddess Deruena Teethgnasher, patron of clan Teethgnasher (Duergar) (L/G, Good, Knowledge, Law, Protection, Strength, Favored weapon: Spiked chain, Symbol: hands with broken chains)

Mind goddess Duerra Deeplurk, patron of clan Deeplurk (Duergar) (L/N, Knowledge, Law, Magic, War, Favored weapon: Battleaxe, Symbol: an Illithid skull)

Sorcery god Diirinka Blackhand, patron of clan Blackhand (Derro) (C/E; Chaos, Evil, Knowledge, Magic, Trickery; Favored weapon: dagger, Symbol: a spiral in grey, white, and black.)

Revenge god Diinkarazan Madslaywer, patron of clan Madslayer (Derro) (C/N; Air, Chaos, Darkness, Destruction, Madness; Favored weapon: heavy mace. Symbol: throne wrapped in chains with floating rocks around. )

Freedom and Art god Diibarkan Brightspark, patron of clan Brightspark (Derro) (C/G, Artifice, Chaos, Good, Knowledge, Liberation; Favored weapon, Warhammer, Symbol: a chisel and a hammer.)

### Halfling Deities

Halfling Religion is an evolution of an Ancestor Cult; All Halflings claim to be Yondalla's Children, and the deities are her first ones; the three evil deities of the pantheon, Lo'ugal the Laughing Imp, Ilvuan the afflicted one, and Sharrek the Despoiler, are regarded as black sheep, but still included in the

family tree, since Yondalla does not reject any of her children.

Yondalla is a L/G deity of Protection, Bounty, Children, Security, Leadership, Wisdom, Crops, Family, and Tradition and her domains are: Community, Law, Good, Plant, Protection, and Travel, her favored weapon is the short sword and her symbol is a shield with a full cornucopia on it; she teaches her followers (every halfling, after a fashion) to cherish their families, to travel the world, working honestly and to be good friends and good neighbors; She exhorts her children to live in peace but to defend themselves and their families if their life or freedom is threatened.

Dalla Thaun, Goddess of Stealth, Subterfuge, Dishonesty, and Gambling is her eldest daughter, her Twin or her dark side, it is not clear; she is C/N; her domains are Chaos, Darkness, Destruction, Luck, Travel, and Trickery, her favored weapon is a dagger and her symbol is the back of Yondalla's shield with a bag of gold on it. Dalla Thaun teaches all Halflings to be smart, quick, and quiet, to not attract attention, and to be ready to exploit any opportunity of gain and any opportunity to take advantage of the tall peoples who keep underestimating them.

The other children include: War god Arvoreen, a deity of defense and vigilance, (L/G, Law, Good, Nobility, Protection, War; favored weapon: short sword, Symbol: crossed short swords.) Love goddess Sheila Peyoryl, a deity of fertility and weather (N/G, Air, Charm, Good, Plant, Weather, Favored weapon: sickle; Symbol: a daisy) Thieves god Brandobaris, god of night, seas, and escape (N, Darkness, Luck, Travel, Trickery, Water; Favored weapon: dagger; Symbol: a fading footprint) Hospitality god Cyrrollalee, god of cooking and daylight (L/G, Community, Fire, Good, Law, Sun; Favored weapon: quarterstaff, Symbol: opened door.)

Death god Urogalan, a deity of underground and burial, also a god of the Eternal Order (L/N, Death,

Earth, Law, Protection, Repose; favored Weapon: double headed flail; Symbol: black hound head)

Children goddess Shirra, a deity of imagination and stories (C/G, Chaos, Good, Knowledge, Magic, Trickery; favored Weapon: dagger; Symbol: a sketchbook with coloured chalks)

Wagon-Makers god Truggar, a deity of crafting and journeying (N; Animal, Artifice, Protection, Strength, Travel; favored weapon: warhammer; symbol: A sledgehammer with a cart wheel)

Debauchery god Lo'ugal, the Laughing Imp (C/E Chaos, Destruction, Evil, Madness and Trickery, favored weapon: whip, Symbol: a laughing halfling with imp-like horns, tail and wings)

Misery god Ilvuan the Afflicted, also a god of the Eternal Order (N/E, Darkness, Death, Evil, Luck, Madness; Favored weapon: short bow; Symbol: two crying eyes)

Industry god Sharrek the Despoiler (L/E, Artifice, Destruction, Evil, Fire, Law; Favored weapon: dagger; Symbol: a smoking Chimney.)

### Gnome Deities

The Sovereigns of the Golden Hills are the deities of the Gnomes, and their cult is more like a philosophy, with the gods personifying the various tenets of it. The Path of the Golden Hills has three main deities: Garl Glittergold, a N/G deity of Humor, Wit, Innovation, Pranks, Friendship, Jewelry and Prosperity, who gets lip service at least from every gnome; he teaches his followers to strive to be innovative and original in what they do, and to take life with a smile; use your humour as a weapon against the people who would like to harm you; be generous and luck shall assist you.

His favored weapon is the battle axe, and his symbol is a gold nugget; his domains are: Artifice, Community, Good, Luck, Protection and Trickery. Sheyanna Flaxenstrand, a C/G deity of Love, Passion, Fertility, Romance, Family, and Flirts, who teaches her followers to follow their hearts and to love

without restrictions, and without second ends. She also asks her followers to be lighthearted and flirtatious but without any malicious intent. Her favored weapon is the heavy mace, her symbol is a lighted torch with twin goblets. Her Domains are: Chaos, Charm, Good, Fire, Healing, and Trickery. Gelf Darkhearth, a C/N deity of Rage, Revenge, Destruction, Disorder, Revolution, and Rebellion, who teaches his followers to revolt against the system, to never forget nor forgive a wrong, to always put sticks in your rival's gears and to always get the last laugh, his favored weapon is the warhammer, his symbol is a broken anvil, his Domains are Chaos, Destruction, Liberation, Luck, Trickery, and War.

The other Sovereigns are: Woodlands god Baervan Wildwanderer, a deity of exploration and climate (N/G, Animal, Good, Plant, Travel, Weather; Favored weapon: halfspear, Symbol: The face of a raccoon)

Illusion goddess Baravar Cloakshadow, a deity of deception and magic (N/G, Darkness, Good, Magic, Protection, Trickery; Favored weapon: dagger, Symbol: a dagger over a hooded cloak)

Mining god Callarduran Smoothhands, a deity of underground and caution (N, Artifice, Darkness, Earth, Protection, Trickery; Favored weapon: battleaxe; Symbol: Golden signet ring with six-pointed star.)

Forge god Flandal Steelskin, a deity of craft and fire (N/G, Artifice, Earth, Fire, Good, Strength; Favored weapon: warhammer; Symbol: Burning hammer.)

War goddess Gaerdal Ironhand, a deity of preparation and battle (L/G; Good, Knowledge, Law, Protection, War; Favored weapon: warhammer, Symbol: Iron band)

River god Laevar Freeflow, a deity of navigation, river animals and floods (C/N, Animal, Chaos, Destruction, Freedom, Water; Favored weapon: Heavy Mace, symbol: an oar.)

Brilliance god Nebelun Brightmaker, a deity of light and progress (N, Artifice, Knowledge, Luck, Protection, Sun; Favored weapon: warhammer; Symbol: A Sun shaped cog.)

Night goddess Nehara Spitesour, a deity of Envy, wind and gossip (C/E, Air, Chaos, Darkness, Evil, Trickery; Favored weapon: dagger; Symbol: a mouth with bat wings.)

Book god Rill Cleverthrush, a deity of knowledge and magic (L/N, Knowledge, Law, Nobility, Magic, Rune; Favored weapon: quarterstaff; Symbol: Two books with a common set of pages)

Health god Segojan Earthcaller, a deity of rest and soil, also a deity of the Eternal Order (N/G, Earth, Good, Healing, Plant, Repose; Favored weapon: heavy mace; Symbol: Glowing gemstone)

Pact god Tarvan Goldenskin, a deity of Trade, blackmail and manipulation (L/E, Evil, Law, Knowledge, Trickery, Rune; favored weapon: dagger; Symbol: a dagger covered in rune with a spinning wheel).

Gluttony god Urdlen Ravenousclaw, a deity of selfishness, murder and greed, also a deity of the Eternal Order (N/E, Death, Destruction, Earth, Evil, Madness; Favored weapon: claw bracer, Symbol: White, steel-clawed mole emerging from the ground)

## THE FAMED AND THE INFAMOUS

### II Aluk

*The Angel of Death aka Irik Zal'honan*

[C/G Unique Medium Outsider Cleric of Darkonos 15, (Augmented Humanoid, Elemental, Incorporeal, Native)]

The son of the Azal'lan. As a little boy he was his father's staunchest admirer, but growing up, he understood what path his father was walking and tried to save him. Irik was the last person officially executed in Darkon, with the accusation of betrayal; he was executed by beheading by his father's own

hand, and he was guilty.....of trying to stop his father from becoming the next undead tyrant; The mist revived him as a personification of light, and a bane of the Undead and he strives to free Darkon and his father from themselves. He still loves his father, and that is the burden which stays his hand.

*(Adventure Hook: While walking the streets of Il Aluk, the adventurers meet a weird golden-eyed boy who makes strange comments about things not being the way they look; later, they meet an old man with the same golden-eyes who gives them some well-disguised advise about the people of the capital. When their memory starts to play them weird tricks, they remember the advice, and look for more answers, from the semi-legendary golden-eyed dissenter called Irik.)*

*Abel Canning*

(Middle-aged Human Ghast Rogue 12 C/N)

Abel is a cordial and talkative person who makes any patron in his inn, even the more exotic, to feel at home; he is always smiling, and offers good advice to any patron in need. His only eccentricity is the set of heavy black gloves he wears and which he never take off; he acts uncharacteristically brusque whenever the gloves are mentioned.

*(Adventure Hook: In truth Abel is a Ghast, and the extravagant gloves are the items that allow him to hide his identity and to keep his hunger in check; he is also a powerful agent of the KargATS and a trusted, if unorthodox servant of the Azal'lan. When his gloves are stolen, and the KargATS do not help him to recover them, Abel turns to the adventurers, mixing promises of great rewards with veiled threats to ensure their compliance, unwittingly dragging them in an internal power struggle in the Agency.)*

*Iulia Karkoff*

(Human Aristocrat 6, L/G)

This young, yet shrewd, socialite is the Vaasan ambassador in Darkon and could be the key for dissension in the relationships with Nova Vaasa, and through them, with Falkovnia.

*(Adventure Hook: Falkovnian Dissidents kidnap Lady Karkoff and the KargATS approach the adventurers for rescuing her; however, when they do find her, she is fallen in love with her kidnapper.)*

*Rhisiard Krane/Nightcrasher*

(Human Youth Brute Vigilante 14 C/G)

An unremarkable young lad during daytime, he becomes a massive adult in a red and black suit and fights crime and monsters in Il Aluk, during nighttime. His secret might or might not be known by the KargATS. His father was a known critic of the Agency and was found dead in mysterious circumstances; Rhisiard strives to uncover the truth using his mysterious powers.

*(Adventure Hook: after being saved from thugs by a mysterious masked brute, the adventurers find themselves able to reciprocate when they find a wounded boy wearing the same costume, unconscious in a side alley.)*

*Aldea Mirana*

(Old Gnome Necromancer Wizard 14, L/E)

Aldea is the Head of the Necromancy Department at the Vecna I Arcane Arts school. She is also active in politics; she is the principal sponsor of the institution of the Undeath Research Regulation Act, and tutors necromancers who abide to the rules.

*(Adventure Hook: Professor Mirana is going to petition in front of the Council of the Choosers to argue for the passing of the URR Act; however, she has been informed of a planned terrorist attack to the Council via Zombie. She offers an handsome reward to the adventurers to discreetly stop the attack.)*

*Unwald Rotternail*

(Adult Gnome Abjurer Wizard 12 N/G)

Unwald is the Head of the Abjuration Department at Vecna I Arcane Arts School. As a devout believer in Segojan Earthcaller, and a standing follower of the Eternal Order, he is a firm rival both academically and politically to Professor Mirana. He keeps their

rivalry a civil matter, though. He opposes the URR on the basis that it is too broad and will be easily exploited by loop-hole abusers.

*(Adventure Hook: Professor Rotternail is going to argue in front of the Council of the Choosers in opposition to the URR and he has been informed of a planned terrorist attack via Zombie on the Council; He offers an handsome reward for stopping the attempt and exposing the perpetrators and the instigators.)*

*Latimus Rienis*

(Old Wizard Universalist 14, N)

Professor Rienis is the Deputy Headmaster of the Vecna I Arcane Arts School of Il Aluk; he is also the head of the Department of Universalism, and a renowned scholar. He is very helpful towards the students and his colleagues.

*(Adventure Hook: Professor Rienis is close to retirement age, and he has started to entertain the idea of prolonging his life with arcane means; Archibald Everlast tips the adventurers with information to prevent the ancient Wizard from making a big mistake.)*

*The Hand who Writes*

(Venerable Human Demilich Evoker Wizard 18, L/E)

This boney hand is all that remains of Vecna XVI; It acts as a faithful servant and scribe to the Azal'lan, but sometimes it seems to have a secret agenda. It never seems to leave the office of the Azal'lan.

*(Adventure Hook: someone will contact the adventurers in secret using letters and sending spells and will give them great information in exchange for delivering what he wants, strangely, at the Azal'lan's own office.)*

*August Montalva*

(Venerable Lich Wizard Necromancer 15 L/E)

The Headmaster of the Vecna I Arcane Arts School is a close collaborator of the Azal'lan and a great scholar, author of a great number of books.

Professor Montalva is a distinguished and soft spoken, very old man, thin and tall with a mane of white hair and a long white beard, deceptively frail, but still sharp-witted, he coats his manipulative ways under a veil of grandfatherly attitude.

He keeps postponing his retirement with the excuse that he has yet to find the best possible successor. The truth is that, being a Lich, he has no need for retirement.

*(Adventure Hook: Montalva's last book's manuscript, a treaty on Ghosts, is almost complete, but he needs to make a trip to Mordentshire to confirm his data, so, he decides to pay the adventurers to escort himself and his own assistants on the long sea trip to Mordent. While in reality, he can defend himself, he needs to keep the appearances, and besides, never say never.)*

#### *Chief-Constable Lowellyn Dachine*

(Adult Human Negative-touched Inquisitor Heretic  
10 L/E of Death)

This law abiding and incorruptible officer was once an enforcer of the Eternal Order, until he became a disciple of Death/Elrik; he is as faithful and loyal to his duties as he is to his deity. He maintains the rule of law with an iron hand. His actions have put him on the path to become a living avatar of Death, but he is growing increasingly convinced that undeath is Elrik's gift for his chosen one.

*(Adventure Hook: As a mysterious Serial Killer starts to literally suck the life out of its victims, Chief-Constable Dachine engages the adventurer party to help him in the investigation)*

#### *The Speaker of the Choosers*

(Unique Construct Sorcerer 10, N)

This grey robed, white masked individual is the only member of the Council of Choosers allowed to talk outside the Council Hall in Il Aluk, but rarely talks at all, outside of official occasions. Only the Azal'lan has any regular meeting with the Speaker.

*(Adventure Hook: the adventurers assist to an attempt at the life of the Speaker and when they see him still alive with a hole in the chest, they realize they now know too much.)*

#### **Martira Bay**

##### *Karimana Relddkasen*

(Adult Human Aristocrat 7, L/N)

A tall, raven-haired woman, always dressed in a simple yet elegant fashion, Lady Relddkasen belong to a rich mercantile family, and is a very wealthy woman; a shrewd business-woman, she is also honest and capable; she governs Martira Bay from her Estate near the docks, with intelligence and ability, and also doubles as Darkon's Minister for Foreign Affairs. She is very well versed in negotiation and diplomacy. She is happily married with three children. Her only known weakness is tea. She buys great quantity of various kinds of teas, from Sri Rajan Black Tea to Zherisian Grey, to Lazendraki Red.

*(Adventure Hook: the adventurers are employed from a Sri Rajan Merchant to deliver a rare blend of Black Tea to Lady Relddkasen; less than one hour later, they are apprehended and charged with attempted murder)*

##### *Chief Constable Liem Osgul*

(Adult Human Fighter 9, L/N)

The reliable law enforcer in Martira Bay is a lean yet muscled man, tall and with a thick black beard on his face. He is an honest, polite and hardworking officer, strict but not without humanity.

*(Adventure Hook: When Constable Osgul starts to take bribes, the Adventurers must investigate to discover the cause of this change in behavior.)*

##### *First Witness Derakoth*

(Human Cleric 12, L/G)

Derakoth is the highest ranking priest of Zhakata the Overseer, and he is truly a holy man, the real embodiment of his deity's dogmas. He respects the laws of Darkon, even if he is increasingly convinced

that something is not right in the Egemony's rulership.

*(Adventure Hook: Someone is messing with Derakoth's mind, trying to modify his memories to alter his personality, and he performs a ritual to allow the adventurers to travel into his mind to help; but things might be not what they seem....)*

## Rivalis

### Arian Windfoot

(Adult Halfling Commoner 7, L/G)

The Governor of Rivalis is of humble origins, being a farmer born a farmhand, but his intelligence, honesty and wisdom make him the best suited for the position and his results prove that. Humble and soft spoken, there is iron in the little Halfling's spine and he is always ready to surprise people who underestimate him.

*(Adventure Hook: Something is sabotaging the harvest in the most productive farm of the region, this year, and when official investigation fails, Governor Windfoot engages the adventurers to investigate discreetly.)*

### Chief Constable Schulyer von Anbach

(Adult Human Fighter 7, L/G)

The son of a veteran of the Falkovnian Invasion of Lamordia, Schulyer served as a volunteer in the Darkonese army for the 4th Falkovnian invasion, and he still walks with a slight limp as result; he got Darkonese citizenship and a job of constable in Rivalis as a reward. Today, he is an honest and competent officer, but when working is not enough to assuage the demons he has in himself since the war, he drinks too much.

*(Adventure Hook: when asked to cooperate with the constabulary to reinforce the patrol during the Tyrant Fall festival, the adventurers discover the Chief Constable passed out with an empty bottle of Okrainan Vodka at his feet, in a puddle of blood with a dead woman and a bloodied blade in his hand.)*

### Gaile Tallgallows

(Old Halfling Urban Druid 12, N/G)

The groundkeeper of the Crystal Garden, Gaile is way more than the meek and friendly old halfling he seems to be; the students of the school seek often his advice on matters related to plants, but also life and harmony and the like.

*(Adventure Hook: When something unnatural starts to ooze from the sewers of Rivalis, the Adventurers must enlist help from the only person who seems to know something, the old Groundkeeper of the Crystal Garden.)*

### Witness Erwing

(Adult Human Cleric 8/ Fighter 1, L/G)

Erwing is the current representative of the Church of the Overseer in Rivalis, and he is a sober and quiet man. His past is a bit of a mystery though, as he seems to have Falkovnian origins. He is not very open about that information.

*(Adventure Hook: Erwing von Klanterwitz was a young Falkovnian soldier, fanatically loyal to Drakov; he was wounded in a battle and was saved by an old Witness, who was then killed by the Falkovnian army in a subsequent raid on a village. After feigning his death, he joined the Church of the Overseer, going up in the ranks; but someone has discovered his past, and he must ask the adventurers to help him to stop a Falkovnian agent who wants to blackmail him into starting a new war.)*

## Nartok

### Burkhart Volker

(Adult Human Ranger Battle Scout 9, L/N)

During the 4th War against Falkovnia, he defended the woods from Falkovnian outriders and killed a spy in the Darkonese ranks. After the war, he retired and lived in peace in the Forest of Shadows for a while until he was chosen as Governor of Nartok and Minister of the Environment.

*(Adventure Hook: Volker struggles with the duties his seat imposes on him. He is trying his best; but someone is taking advantage of his inexperience, embezzling funds from one of his projects. He asks the adventurers to investigate it on his behalf.)*

*Chief Constable Turner Miktis*

(Adult Human Ranger Trapper 7 N)

The head law-enforcer of Nartok is a reserved and close-guarded man. Although nothing bad can be said about his professionalism, you would have to dig very deep to find anything about his private life.

*(Adventure Hook: No one can find anything on his past because his past has been deleted by the Azal'lan, who has transformed a would-be dissident into a loyal law enforcer; but when a sister long thought dead come to search from him, the adventurers must protect him from the actions of the KargATS.)*

*Headpriest Rikto Jaan*

(Middle Aged Human Cleric Evangelist 8 of the Eternal Order, N)

Notorious for her uncharacteristically cheerful countenance, Nartok's Headpriest Rikto preaches not to remind people about death, but to remind people to cherish their life, which is brief yet really precious. While her teachings are included in the faith of the Eternal Order, many of her fellow priests see her as an oddity, and borderline heretic.

*(Adventure Hook: when an Eternal Order's extremist Priest summons a vengeful undead to kill Rikto, the adventurers may be her only hope.)*

### **Nevuchar Springs**

*Thalis Redmast*

(Old Elf Expert 14 N)

The Governor of Nevuchar Springs is a famous sailor both by sea and by river, and he is one of the six living persons in the world to have ever circumnavigated the Core. He is a renowned merchant and has imported and exported a variety

of stuff in the known world; his experience and contacts make him a very capable minister of Maritime Trade.

*(Adventure Hook: When Thalís's longtime friend, a Lamordian captain, disappears at the River Docks, the Governor engages the adventurers to investigate it.)*

*Chief Constable Sulien Moonshadow*

(Adult Elf Fighter 10 N)

Sulien is a master fencer and archer, and a veteran of the wars with Falkovnia; he lost one ear in the battles and usually wears his hair in a pony-tail to show off his scar, both for pride and to intimidate his opponents.

*(Adventure Hook: Recently, Sulien's scar has started to ache in a very strange way; he is convinced that the men who scarred him with a cursed blade must be in Nevuchar Springs, so he is paying handsomely for any news about the potential Falkovnian spy.)*

*Bastion Theodore Raines*

(Adult Human Warpriest 10 of Ezra the Avenger, L/E)

The head of the Darkonese sect of the cult of Ezra is a hard and determinate person; he leads by example and patronizes crusades and expeditions against the monsters which lurks in the wildlands.

*(Adventure Hook: A peaceful Ogre irnosmith disappears; his wife, being a friend of an adventurer ask them to find him; the tracks lead them to the temple of Ezra)*

*Professor Cai Grovesong*

(Old Elf Druid Green Savant 10, L/G)

A Druid and a scholar, Cai is the director of the Librariae Pharmacologiae and she is also a member of the Circle of Green Savants, an ancient druidic tradition which focuses on the academical aspects of natural mysticism.

*(Adventure Hook: Professor Grovesong asks the adventurers to go in the Salt Marsh to retrieve a rare plant.)*

## Neblus

*Iomar Lonshadow*

(Venerable Elf Universalist Wizard 13, N/G)

One of the oldest living elves in existence, he has trained some of the most powerful wizards of the known world. Today he serves as the Minister of Education and Governor of Neblus, but he still finds some time to teach in Neblus's academies. His frail appearance does not diminish his charm and his silver hair gives him great solemnity.

*(Adventure Hook: An old pupil of his, a pretty misanthropic necromancer who lives in the Nebligtode Islands, has recently contacted him, entrusting him with a young apprentice; when the pupil mysteriously disappears he asks the adventurers to investigate.)*

*Chief-Constable Adrian Qualt*

(Adult Human Magus 9 N/G)

Adrian Qualt is a brave and intelligent law-enforcer, who pursued both martial and arcane pursuits, thanks to his life-long companionship with the Elves.

*(Adventure Hook: Adrian has a daughter who is pursuing a career as an adventuring Wizard after graduating in Transmutation at the Vecna I Arcane Arts School; as she informs him of an expedition in the Iced Waste he asks the adventurers to discreetly escort her.)*

*Corbin Eblander*

(Adult Human Cleric of Elric 10, N/E)

This sober and dry black-haired man has a soul blacker than his hair; he preaches that this life is suffering, and that suicide is a legitimate way out of it; he will never kill without an explicit request, but he knows several ways to assure he will get that request.

*(Adventure Hook: a friend of the adventurers commits suicide; that person's ghost blames Corbin.)*

*Trillen Mistwalker*

(Adult Elf Corporeal Ghost Rogue 10, N/E)

Trillen Mistwalker was a very rich treasure hunter who died in that what would have been his last and greatest hunt. Bound to the place he most hated when he was alive, his father's inn, he has decided to make the most out of it; he makes pacts with adventurers, managing to possess one of their numbers, to lead them in very risky enterprises.

*(Adventure Hook: Trillen sells a treasure map to the adventurers, then possesses one of them and tries to lead them on a very dangerous quest.)*

## Viaki

*Mulciber Slean*

(Adult Human Alchemist 5, L/N)

The Governor of Viaki and Minister of Health is a talented healer and was a renowned battle-medic operating in the field during the 4th war against Falkovnia. He isn't a shy and frail scholar nor an idealistic country healer; he is smart, ambitious and a bit cynical, but he is fundamentally honest.

*(Adventure Hook: A slandering campaign accusing Slean of embezzlement and corruption causes the governor to pay the adventurers to investigate.)*

*Chief Constable Jinny Cingulo*

(Adult Human Fighter 8, L/G)

The Chief law enforcer in Viaki was born from a Collodian family; as many others he fought in the 4th Darkonese-Falkovnian war; He still has troubles after that experience, but he is dealing with it somehow.

*(Adventure Hook: Jinny is suffering from horrible nightmares, and that is affecting his job; if the adventurers investigate they might find out that the nightmares might not completely have been caused by trauma.)*



*Glemmis McFadden*  
(Green Hag Alchemist 7, L/E)

This famous midwife and medicine woman is a renowned advisor of the governor, and she is regarded as a prestigious member of the society. Few can even begin to suspect she is a Hag in disguise.

*(Adventure Hook: The adventurers are suspicious of the frequency of miscarriages in Viaki; they might not like at all what they discover investigating Miss McFadden.)*

*Carolus Lysander.*  
(Young Adult Human Cleric of Darkonos 5 C/G)

Carolus exemplifies what a Cleric of Darkonos is expected to be: Young, resourceful, idealistic, cheerful and life-loving. The fact that he is the current resident of The Shrine of Lifespark in Viaki shows his proactive stance as that.

*(Adventure Hook: Carolus's mother is a rich merchant from Nevuchar Springs and she is very worried about her son's choices in life; she pays the adventurers to ensure his safety, but maybe she is hiding something.)*

*Liliana Dilisnya*  
(Adult Human Rogue 7, L/E)

The agent of the Dilisnya family in Darkon, she is headquartered in Viaki; Liliana oversees the family business and properties with a shrewd and ruthless mind. She has a flirtatious rivalry with Ludovic Boritsi.

*(Adventure Hook: When Ludovic Boritsi is kidnapped, the adventurers must investigate Liliana, but things might be more complicated than what they think.)*

*Ludovic Boritsi*  
(Adult Human Rogue 7, C/G)

The agent of the Boritsi family in Darkon, he is headquartered in Viaki; Ludovic oversees his family business and properties with a shrewd, yet

compassionate mind. He has a flirtatious rivalry with Liliana Dilisnya.

*(Adventure Hook: When Liliana Dilisnya disappears, Ludovic pays the adventurers to investigate, but then he disappears too.)*

## **Maykle**

*Lady Iris Sturlock*  
(Adult Half-elf Wizard Diviner 3, L/N)

Iris won the place of Governor of Maykle and Minister of Welfare after her father resigned, allegedly for health issues; it's a rare case of succession in the same family after the institution of the Egemony, and she struggles to demonstrate that the trust given to her is deserved.

*(Adventure Hook: When the guests of several clinic and retirement houses starts to die in mysterious circumstances, Lady Sturlock offers a generous reward to the adventurers to investigate.)*

*Gilos Dren*  
(Adult Human Fighter 6, L/N)

Giros is the chief law-enforcer in Maykle, and was appointed after successfully dealing with a band of highwaymen when he still was a simple militia officer, an act he is still renowned for to this day. He is honest but, sometimes, exceedingly cautious.

*(Adventure Hook: When the Lady Governor informed him of her intention to pay official visits to the main clinics of the region, Gilros Drem advised against it, since it would expose her to risks. As she did not desist about it, he started to enlist auxiliaries; he pays the adventurers to be an additional security force.)*

*Elron Sturlock*  
(Adult Elf Fighter 8 C/G)

Elron was a noble in the old Empire, and raised back to prominence thanks to his exploits during the Falkovnian invasions. He was the patron of many free hospitals, schools, and free retirement homes, and administered one of those personally before he

had recover because of a sudden illness; no one knows exactly what afflicts him.

*(Adventure Hook: Elron Sturlock is not ill, he is the victim of someone or something; when the adventurers realize it, they could be the Elf's only chance to survive.)*

#### *Quintin Clangor*

(middle-aged Human Alchemist Mind-Healer 5, L/G)

Doctor Clangor was, in his youth, the apprentice of the infamous Dr. Dacloud Heinfroth, who, before the scandal that tarnished his reputation, was seen as the best mind-healer in the Core. Luckily for him, Quintin had already parted ways with Heinfroth and was not involved. He struggles hard to demonstrate that he is a different sort of mind-healer. As the owner of the best hotel in Maykle, Quintin is quite wealthy.

*(Adventure Hook: Quintin has kept a secret correspondence with Heinfroth since before the scandal, but he recently found his letters missing; someone is blackmailing him, and he wants the adventurers to investigate it with discretion.)*

### **Tempe Falls**

#### *Oscari Gunderin*

(Middle-aged Dwarf Wizard 7, L/N)

The head of Clan Sunforger, Oscari is the Darkonese Minister of Infrastructure, as well as Tempe Falls Governor; He leads his people with wisdom and fairness, even if his own ambitions and his greed can sometimes exceed his common sense.

*(Adventure Hook: The governor is sure that the new tunnel under the river will be profitable, but strange incidents put a spanner in his works, forcing him to ask for the adventurer's help.)*

#### *Chief-Constable Pekka Konum*

(Adult Dwarf Magus 5, L/G)

The head Law-enforcer of the government of Tempe Falls blends arcane arts and fighting prowess; He is an honorable, righteous, and loyal person and this

sometimes put him at odds with the governor's ambitions.

*(Adventure Hook: When he finds out that the Governor's apparently fully legitimate new project is causing troubles to the community, he discreetly tips the adventurers to have them find out something which may allow him to act.)*

#### *Argar Slashingfang*

(Adult Dwarf Werebadger Fighter 9, L/E)

The owner of the Boar's Tusk is a fat dwarf, unusually beardless, because of a number of burns on his face; Jolly and welcoming, he is also ruthless and can be a fury in battle, if he must. He rarely leaves survivors alive. As a KargATS operative he knows how to cover his tracks. He has one weakness however, and it's a crippling Pyrophobia

*(Adventure Hook: During a mission, a fire starts, forcing him to retreat; thus the adventurers are paid by the survivors to hunt a Pyrophobic Werebadger, and they end up casually in Argar's Inn.)*

#### *Jargen Gunderin*

(Adult Dwarf Cleric 6 of Tharmekhûl Sunforger, L/G)

Jargen is his cousin Oscari's spiritual advisor, but he is often frustrated when the Governor puts material gains above the spiritual ones.

*(Adventure Hook: An ancient Dwarvish burial ground is going to be moved to allow a new road to be built; after failing to convince the Governor to relent, Jargen asks the adventurers to protect him while he performs a rite to appease the spirits of the ancestors.)*

### **Delagia**

#### *Alaric Pocketfull*

(Adult Halfling Rogue 7 N)

Silver tongued and sharp-witted, Alaric became one of the richest people in Darkon after an adventurous youth; named Governor of Delagia and Minister of Trade, he keeps contact with all the heads of the

various guilds in Darkon, including the ones that engage in shadowy businesses.

*(Adventure Hook: One of Alaric's less savory cohorts is trying to strongarm him in collaborating in an operation he doesn't approve of; he thus decides to employ the adventurers to discourage such behavior.)*

**Chief-Constable Morgan Blackwater**  
(Adult Halfling Swashbuckler 5, N)

Level-headed as much as he is charming, Morgan Blackwater was a professional fencer, turned private detective; Governor Pocketfull named him Chief-Constable after he solved the case of Casdin's Reaper.

*(Adventure Hook: Casdin's Reaper was supposedly gone, but someone is killing people in a way reminiscent of the Reaper; Morgan enlists the adventurer's help to stop this new menace.)*

**Flavian Sundapple**  
(Adult Halfling Cleric 5 of Cyrrolallee, L/G)

Flavian is half a spiritual guide, half a renowned chef, and in his opinion, soul and stomach are deeply integrated; He is caring, generous, and well disciplined, and runs a tight ship in his temple-restaurant, always ready to feed the needy.

*(Adventure Hook: when a local innkeeper guildmaster takes umbrage at the activity of Flavian's Temple-Restaurant, and accidents start to happen, the nice cook-priest offers a generous reward for extra help in patrolling.)*

## **Devering**

**Marshal Jeffery Steelhand**  
(Middle-Aged Human Cavalier Daring General 12 L/N)

The head of the Darkonese Army and the Minister of Defense, Jeffery doesn't like all the bureaucracy his role as Governor of Devering entails, so he delegates to his deputy; his main interest is drilling the army,

waiting for Falkovnia to attack again, because they will attack again, of that he is sure.

*(Adventure Hook: Jeffery is increasingly paranoid about Falkovnian spies, and he detains the adventurers to investigate them; in the jails, they are approached by a person who seems to be a real Falkovnian spy.)*

**Chief-Constable Lukas Faran**  
(Adult Human Cavalier Constable 7 L/G)

War veteran and member of Marshal Steelhand's unit, he was handpicked by him for his unfaltering righteousness and sense of duty. Lukas is grateful for this opportunity, even if recently something seems to worry him very much.

*(Adventure Hook: During an inspection, a week before, he was attacked by a big hawk; he killed the bird, but starting from that moment he has been having strange dreams; unwilling to risk honorable discharge for Lycanthropy, he has entrusted the adventurers with the retrieval of an experimental cure in Viaki. But there are people interested in taking the cure from them.)*

**Deputy-Marshal Fresson Woodhall**  
(Adult Human Cavalier Castellan 8, L/E)

Ambitious, hard, and ruthless Fresson Woodhall is the son of an old brother-at-arms of Marshal Steelhand, who got his chance to prove himself during the last Falkovnian Invasion. He is loyal to Darkon, if nothing else.

*(Adventure Hook: He is not so loyal to his superiors, though, and he is subtly manipulating the adventurers to uncover some well concealed clue which may lead to Marshal Steelhand's discharge.)*

**Quentin Talonslayer**  
(Old Human Fighter 16 C/G)

Few people can pride themselves with killing four Talons in battle, and only one can also pride himself with fighting the Kaiserfuhrer himself in combat and

to living to tell the tale. Yes, Quentin has lost an eye, a foot, and one hand that day; but he lived, and his sacrifice saved his unit. He was a nameless peasant before the war but he earned his last name, and the money to buy his inn, ransoming three of the armors; one he still keeps as a trophy of that day.

*(Adventure Hook: The only Talon to survive that day, by drinking a drug which simulated his death, Wilhelm Drei has waited for decades for the moment he will strike against his brothers-in-arms's killer. He wants to kill him, then he will take his armor back and he will surrender to death. Can the adventurers stop him in time?)*

## **Karg**

*Kazandra Redshroud*

(Human Old Vampire Rogue 12, L/E)

This beautiful, reserved, quiet, and inquisitive woman, director of the KargATS, Minister of the Interior and Governor of Karg, doesn't look a day older than 30 years, but she is way older than that, and she is ruthlessly effective and undyingly loyal to the Azal'lan.

*(Adventure Hook: Kazandra is a powerful vampire and her goal is to keep her eye on the whole of Darkon. But to her endless frustration, she does not control even the KargATS as a whole. That's the reason she needs the adventurers' help to deal with things she can't trust her more powerful colleagues with.)*

*Chief-Constable Chadvik Ludder*

(Adult Human Natural Werewolf Fighter 7 L/N)

A surprisingly disciplined Werewolf, Chadvik isn't yet a member of the KargATS, as he is not inclined to abide by even the agency's pretty low moral standards. He is a very capable and trustworthy law enforcer, though.

*(Adventure Hook: Chadwick controls his condition with an iron will and a couple of magic trinkets. When those trinkets are stolen, he suspects foul play from the Directress or her foes, to force him to enter*

*the KargATS on their side. He enlists the help of the adventurers to investigate.)*

*Secret Keeper Hragris Allightron*

(Old Human Cleric of Vecna 7, N/E)

Hragis is the resident priest of Vecna in Karg, and he is rumored to know where Vecna's first Lab in Karg is; he keeps any knowledge on the matter very close to his chest.

*(Adventure Hook: The old Secret Keeper Hragis has forgotten more secrets than a scholar learns in a whole lifetime, but he still remembers much. He is a sly old snake and he can bargain with the best of them, and the adventurers need to meet his price to manage to gain some useful information.)*

*Venrith Chole*

(Adult Human Corporeal Ghost Rank 3 Bard 10 L/E)

The jolly, easy-going, and reassuring owner of the Maladourous Goat Inn is the only person you feel you can trust in Karg, but in truth, he is one of the subtler KargATS; no one knows it, but Venrith is not even alive, he is a corporeal Ghost.

*(Adventure Hook: Venrith is KargATS number two, and that is bothering him, to the point he will discreetly help the adventurers, if that can further his ascension.)*

## **Sidnar**

*Lord Kasen Costantine*

(Adult Human Aristocrat 6, L/N)

The Governor of Sidnar and minister of Natural Resources is an descendant of an old noble Darkonese family; his father adapted to the new order and he buildt on that heritage, becoming the administrator and owner of several mines. He is a renowned art collector.

*(Adventure Hook: Lord Kasen will generously reward the adventurers if they can safely deliver his last purchase from Martira Bay to Sidnar.)*

*Lescion Oakenheart*

(Adult Elf Wizard Astrologist 9, N)

The Headmaster of the Collegiate Caelestis and the most renowned Astronomist and Astrologist in the Core, Lescion's advice is sought by elites from any corner of the continent.

*(Adventure Hook: Professor Oakenheart has a vast private complex in the observatorium and spends much of his free time there. When he does not come out after the weekend, and after a janitor fails to come back, the faculty decides to enlist the help of the adventurers.)*

*Chief-Constable Echol Gauntglow*

(Adult Elf Fighter Archer 6, L/N)

A veteran of the Falkovnian Invasion, and formerly a mercenary, Echol is a renowned bowman; he sponsors a renowned archery school in Sidnar. He earned his place saving the life of lady Aletha Constantine from a robber. He killed the robber with one arrow in the neck.

*(Adventure Hook: The robber was a boy of 16, and now Echol's youngest son, at the same age, has been kidnapped. Echol offers a hefty sum for information.)*

*Lady Aletha Constantine*

(Adult Human Rogue 7 L/E)

The sister of Sidnar's Governor is a shrewd businesswoman, and she is rumored to be the true mind of the family; she owns several inns and restaurants in the city, and, if rumors are to be believed, brothels and houses of pleasure too.

*(Adventure Hook: Lady Aletha keeps a book filled with the names and deeds of her clients, and the adventurers are payed handsomely to manage to steal it.)*

*Sentire Helamil Duskbloom*

(Adult Elf Cleric 6 of Ezra, L/G)

Sentire Helamil is the head of a group of internal dissenters in Darkonese Ezrite Church, refusing the

violent approach of Bastion Raines, and favoring a more defensive stance.

*(Adventure Hook: The Bastion wants to use Helamil as an example, so he is marked for a death by a monster's hand, and the adventurers are his only hope.)*

**Corvia***Urjo Mustanen*

(Old Dwarf Expert 9, L/N)

This wrinkled dwarf is the most shrewd businessman in Darkon, and occupies the seats of Minister of Finances and Governor of Corvia with merit. He works for the majority of the day and night; his family life suffers from his overworking.

*(Adventure Hook: when Urjo is almost killed, he hires the adventurers as bodyguard.)*

*Chief-Constable Rikkard Jardher*

(Adult Dwarf Fighter 6 L/G)

Rikkard is the stereotype of the honorable dwarf, he is noble, honest, and straightforward; however, he suffers from his clan heritage; his brother is the Arch-priest of Abbathor.

*(Adventure Hook: Someone is attempting to blackmail him. He asks the adventurers to find out who and why)*

*Benedikt Jardher*

(Adult Dwarf Cleric 7 of Abbathor Tightgrip N/E)

Benedikt is one of the richest persons in Corvia, and this means he is very coherent with his greedy god's teachings.

*(Adventure Hook: the local temple of Abbathor has improved its security system, and Benedikt needs to test it. The adventurers can make good money, but will they able to enjoy it.)*



*Damien Steelshade*

(Human Shadow Rogue 10 L/E)

The mysterious director of the Darkonese Revenue Service, the only institution more feared than the KargaATS, Damien has only one goal, to have people pay their taxes; Only a very small number of people are aware that he is not alive anymore.

*(Adventure Hook: Damien has been informed of a major tax evasion under his own nose, in Corvia, and persuades the adventurers to look into it.)*

### **Mayvin**

*Directress Roodyl Nargrin*

(Adult Gnome Alchemist Tinkerer 13, N/G)

The brilliant Governor of Mayvin, the City of Wonders is also the Minister of Industry, Arcane Research, and Technological Development, Nargrin also directs the Patent House, and the Darkonese Institute of Technomancy. She is quite busy but she manages to multi-task with relative ease.

*(Adventure Hook: the reason she manages to multi-task so easily is that she has perfected the art of creating clockwork simulacra of herself. When one of them malfunctions and goes missing, she pays the adventurer to retrieve it.)*

*Chief-Constable Mimis Glockle*

(Adult Gnome Gunslinger 6, L/G)

Mimis learned the art of gunsmithing in Lamordia; he is as adept at using firearms as he is at making them. He manages to impose law and order with a smile and a readied gun.

*(Adventure Hook: Mimis is hiring aid to protect this year Innovation Fair from any would-be disturbers and thieves. Will the adventurers be up to the task?)*

*Wondermaker Stamitos Flacken*

(Adult Gnome Cleric 9 of Neblun, N)

This priest of Neblun is the head of his church, and one of the most famous inventors in Darkon. He is always interested in ancient technology and magic.

*(Adventure Hook: When Stamitos loses control of his newest toy, he asks the adventurer to help him to control the damage.)*

### **Despondia**

*Francine Compton*

(Adult Human Bard 8 N/G)

The Governess of Despondia is a famous poet and a knowledgeable person; she imposes upon herself a very jolly attitude, in spite of the past of the city and her own. She does that on purpose to show that the dark past is beyond her shoulders, exactly as it is behind the shoulders of her city.

*(Adventure Hook: A ghost from the past brings back her demons, and she asks the help of the adventurers to put them to sleep.)*

*Chief Constable Laureen Dalgan*

(Adult human Swashbuckler 7, C/G)

Would you put a notorious smuggler and troublemaker at the head of law-enforcement in a city? Well Mrs. Compton does not agree with you, since she did exactly that in her own, and Laureen has not disappointed, despite her unorthodox methods. Maybe you really need a thief to catch another.

*(Adventure Hook: the KargaATS do not appreciate Lauren's style of law enforcement and when they try to set her up for a crime she didn't commit, it's up to the adventurers to exonerate her.)*

*Haldous Augustinus*

(Adult human Cleric of Darkonos 13 C/G)

A man in his full maturity, Haldous is the eldest living cleric currently serving Darkonos; This, combined with his wisdom, his kindness and his great experience, have bestowed upon him the one thing he never wanted: the mantle of authority; his advice is sought by clerics and followers of Darkonos from every corner of Darkon. While he doesn't fancy himself a leader, he tries to help those people, to the best of his considerable abilities.

*(Adventure Hook: When Haldous discovers that some of his young followers have gone missing, he asks the adventurers to help him to investigate.)*

*Jomo Rockwell*

(Adult Halfling Slayer 5 C/E)

This apparently jolly and easy-going wealthy Halfling is one of the most devious serial killers in Darkon; currently he must reign in his worst instincts, though, since he was discovered and bonded into service by the KargATS; but it's only a matter of time, sooner or later he'll manage to turn the tables on those who keep him leashed.

*(Adventure Hook: Jomo has been physically and mentally leashed with an enchanted collar. When he approaches the adventurers, he claims to be an innocent victim and enlists their help to be freed from the curse.)*

### **Desolatus**

*Lady Rula Barcliff*

(Middle-Aged Human Aristocrat 10, N/G)

Rula Barcliff was born in Darkon, but, thanks to her parents' huge wealth, she spent her youth traveling the Core and beyond. She forged connections everywhere and managed to build up the only non-vistani travel agency in the Core, the Mistdarers Society. Upon her return to Darkon, she discovered the underdeveloped lands around Desolatus and Lake Somnis, and funded the first thermal establishment. She was subsequently offered the seat of Governor of Desolatus, which got bundled up with the newly minted role of Minister of Tourism. She is quite good in that job, too.

*(Adventure Hook: When the new beach on the Somnis Lake is disturbed by a mysterious water monster, she employs the adventurers to stop it.)*

*Chief-Constable Geoffrey Tow*

(Middle-aged Human Fighter Field-Engineer 8, L/N)

Veteran of the Falkovnian invasions, Geoffrey is a rare example of a native of the Ice Waste leaving his

frosty home to live in the Warmer Lands of the south; he is as cold as his native lands, but his loyalty is unquestionable and his sense of duty unwavering.

*(Adventure Hook: When Lamordian tourists are found killed and maimed, Geoffrey needs the adventurers to help him to investigate in his stead, as one of the victims is a cousin of the governess.)*

*Michelle De Voure*

(Adult Human Vampire Bard Visual Artist 7, C/N)

A traveling painter, vampirized in an elaborated plot of the KargATS, Michelle was freed by a stroke of luck, and she kept her personality intact, even if her humour got darker, her paintings gloomier and her sarcasm stingier. She uses her Inn as an easy way to feed, and until now, no one has suspected anything, or so she hopes.

*(Adventure Hook: A Vampire strikes, and all clues lead to Michelle. She knows it's a plot of the KargATS and tries to sway the adventurers to her side.)*

### **Rookhausen**

*Admiral Francis Stuart*

(Middle-Aged Human Fighter Corsair 11, L/N)

Governor of Rookhausen, Admiral and Commander in Chief of the Darkonese War Navy, Francis Stuart is a relentless, hard-working man. His ships are instrumental to defend seafaring merchants from pirates, and he takes his duties very seriously. In spite of his many scars he is still quite charming, and he is popular with women, and often seen in their company.

*(Adventure Hook: One of Francis's girls is revealed as a Thorne, an agent of the Borcan Secret Service, the Deadly Rose, and found dead. He asks the adventurers to investigate the death.)*

*Chief Constable Gherrold Trench*

(Human Adult Barbarian Drunken Brute 6, C/N)

Gherrold is the last person you would choose as head law enforcer; he is uncouth, violent and alcoholic; but he is also a good friend, kind with kids

and old people, loathe to harm a woman, and completely straightforward and incapable of duplicity. With his faithful great axe always on his back, his statuesque body and huge hands, he is the last person you would want to piss off in an inn or outside.

*(Adventure Hook: The adventurers find themselves in a brawl with Gherrold in the room.)*

## ORGANIZATIONS

### KargATS

The Karg Agency of Trouble Solving, also known as KargATS is the feared Secret Police and security and intelligence agency in Darkon; The sinister fame of the KargATS is countered by their clean face, the Cities' Constabulary, who are trained in the same facilities that train KargATS. The name is designed to elicit hilarity from people which do not know it; It is also a way to foster better relationship with the people.

*(Dread Possibility: who leads the KargATS? The orders to Lady Kazandra and the other top agents of the KargATS come from the Azal'lan, right? What if part of those came from his Scribe instead? Is Vecna XVI going to return?)*

### DRS

If KargATS are feared yet begrudgingly respected as they stop menaces against Darkon and its people, no one likes the Darkonese Revenue Service, the Tax paying agency who are seen unanimously as more cold and ruthless than KargATS. They rarely compromise.

*(Dread Possibility: The Compromise; The Shadows who controls the DRS have they own agenda, and they are embezzling money with the help of former tax evaders who accepted a compromise, under their director's nose. )*

### The Council of the Choosers

This assembly of citizens approves laws and elects the various ministers; they are selected on rigid

meritocratic criteria after preliminary universal suffrage elections. They have no personal name and no identity until their mandate expires, and they won't ever be able to disclose their election, as all the candidate elected must spend their time in Il Aluk for five years with no contact with the outside.

*(Dread Possibility: The memory-less Council. Every member of the council has been completely rewritten to be a docile executor of the Azal'lan's will. Once their term is over, they are restored; as they are not supposed to remember anything about their terms, nor to ever reveal they had one, no one wonders about their lack of memories.)*

## THE DARKLORD: AZAL'LAN FIRAN ZAL'HOJAN AKA AZALIN REX

Medium Undead Venerable Human Universalist Wizard 20

(248 HP)

**Speed:** 30 feet

**Initiative:** +1 (+4 in Castle Avernus)

**Senses:** Darkvision 60 ft, fiery eyes, see invisibility, Perception +36 (+4 in Castle Avernus)

**Armor Class:** 25, Touch 15, Flat Footed 24 (+1 Dex, +5 armour, +5 natural, +4 deflection)

**Space/Reach:** 1 square /1 square

**Combat Maneuver Bonus/Combat Maneuver**

**Defense:** +9/24 (+4 in Castle Avernus)

**Str:**10, **Dex:**12, **Con:-**, **Int:**33(27), **Wis:**22 (16), **Cha** 26 (20)

**Saving Throws:** Fort +10 Ref +11 Will +22 (+4 in Castle Avernus)

**Special Qualities:** Curse of the Dark Lord, Undead Traits, Channel resistance +10, DR 15/bludgeoning and magic, Immune: undead traits, electricity, cold; Fiery eyes

Resist fire 10, acid 10, Arcane Bond (Improved Familiar), Metamagic Mastery (6xd), Alertness when familiar in arm's reach (+2 Perception, Sense Motive), Mastery 4, Sinkhole of Evil.



Empathic link, scry on familiar 1/day .

**Special Attacks:** Hand of the Apprentice (14xd), Fear aura (DC 28), Rejuvenation, Paralysing touch (DC 28) (heal self 1d8+10 hp as full round action), Undead dominion, Modify memory, Undead control

**Attack:** Melee: Melee Touch +9 (1d8+10 plus paralysing touch),(+4 in Castle Avernus)

**Range:** Missile Ray +9 (1d8+10 negative energy, touch), 120 ft.

Hand of the apprentice (dagger +1 human bane)

+21/{+23 [humans] [1d4+1 (+2d6+2 humans)]}

Range:+2 Light Crossbow:+16 (1d8+2, 19-20 x2)(+4 in Castle Avernus)

**Skills:** Bluff +21 (13), Craft (alchemy) +34 (9; 20 from headband), Diplomacy +21 (13), Escape Artist +20 (19), Fly +14 (10), Intimidate +27 (19), Knowledge (arcana) +38 (20), Knowledge (dungeoneering) +17 (3), Knowledge (engineering) +17 (3), Knowledge (geography) +17 (3), Knowledge (history) +34 (9; 20 from headband), Knowledge (local) +34 (9; 20 from headband), Knowledge (nature) +23 (9), Knowledge (nobility) +15 (1), Knowledge (planes) +32 (18), Knowledge (religion) +32 (18), Linguistics (Balok, Mordentish, Vaasi) +17 (3), Perception +34 (17), Sense Motive +34 (17), Spellcraft +32 (18), Stealth +23 (11) (+4 in Castle Avernus)

**Feats:** Craft Wand, Craft Wondrous Item, Craft Magical Arms and Armour, Craft Construct, Craft Rod, Improved Familiar, Forge Ring, Combat Casting, Scribe Scroll, Still Spell, Silent Spell, Extend Spell, Dazing Spell, Sickening Spell, Toppling Spell, Quicken Spell, Persistent Spell, Penetrating Spell.

Spell Slots:(4/11+4/11+4/11+2/10/6/6/6/5/5),

DC:21+spell level.

**Spell Known:** 0 – acid splash, arcane mark, bleed, dancing lights, daze, detect magic, detect poison, disrupt undead, flare, ghost sound, haunted fey aspect, light, mage hand, mending, message, open/close, prestidigitation, ray of frost, read magic, resistance, spark, touch of fatigue (all)

1 – Abjuring Step, alarm, animate rope, ant haul, blend, cause fear, change self, charm fey, charm person, chastise, clarion call, comprehend languages, crafter's fortune, decompose corpse, decrepit disguise, detect charm, detect secret doors, detect undead, discern next of kin, disguise self, enlarge person, erase, feather fall, floating disc, grease, hold portal, hydraulic push, identify, illusion of calm, magic missile, message, obscuring mist, ray of enfeeblement, restore corpse, sculpt corpse, silent image, unseen servant, weakened powder.

2 – alter self, arcane lock, beacon of guilt, blindness/deafness, blur, boneshaker, bull's strength, cat's grace, codespeak, crimson confession, darkness, daylight, false life, flaming sphere, hideous laughter, invisibility, knock, locate object, magic mouth, minor image, mirror image, paranoia, raven's flight, see invisibility, shatter, spectral hand, shadow claws, spider climb, steal voice, unsettling presence, web, whispering wind

3 – arcane sight, clairsight/clairvoyance, death sight, disable construct, dispel magic, earth tremor, enter image, explosive runes, fireball, fly, force punch, gaseous form, grasping tentacles, haste, heatstroke, hold person, howling agony, lightning bolt, magic circle against evil/good, monstrous physique I, nondetection, open book, pain strike, ray of exhaustion, sands of time, seek thoughts, shrink item, shroud of innocuity, suggestion, summon monster III, vision of hell, wind wall

4 - animate dead, arcane eye, aura of the unremarkable, beast shape II, bestow curse, black tentacles, brightest light, charm monster, confusion, contagion, contingent scroll, daze (mass), dimension door, enervation, familiar melding, fear, fire trap, flaming sphere (greater), fleshworm infestation, gas (lesser), ice storm, illusion of treachery, illusory wall, innocuous shape, minor globe of invulnerability (lesser), overwhelming grief, phantasmal killer, scrying, shadow conjuration, stonewall, terrible remorse, wall of ice

5 - animal growth, bone seizure, callback (greater), dominate person, elemental body II, feeblemind, grease (greater), hold monster, illusory hoard, lesser

age resistance, magic jar, mind fog, nightmare, ooze form I, passwall, permanency, polymorph, rapid repair, sending, shadow evocation, summon monster V, suffocation, telekinesis, vermin shape II, wall of stone

6 - acid fog, age resistance, analyze dweomer, circle of death, create undead, contingency, disintegrate, enemy hammer, eyebite, flesh to stone, forceful hand, geas/quest, greater contagion, guards and wards, legend lore, mislead, permanent image, planar binding, project image, reanimate, steal vitality, stone to flesh, true seeing

7 - finger of death, forcecage, greater arcane sight, greater scrying, greater teleport, instant summons, limited wish, power word stun, spell turning, summon monster VII, temporary resurrection, vision

8 - binding, call construct, create greater undead, demand, incendiary cloud, maze, prismatic wall, shades, telekinetic sphere, trap the soul, weird

9 - crushing hand, energy drain, foresight, gate, mage's disjunction, temporal stasis, wish

**Familiar: Squalimous (Imp Familiar)**

**Init** +3; Senses darkvision 60 ft, detect magic, see in darkness; Perception +21

**AC** 26, touch 16, flat-footed 22 (+3 Dex, +1 dodge, +10 natural, +2 size)

**Hp** 81 (9d10), fast healing 2

**Fort** +6, **Ref** +9, **Will** +12

DR 5/good or silver; SR 23; Immune fire, poison; Resist acid 10, cold 10

**Speed** 20 ft, fly 50 ft (perfect)

**Melee** sting +14 (1d4 plus poison)

**Space** 2 ½ ft/0 ft

**SLA** (CL 6th): constant – detect magic; at will – invisibility (self only); 1/day – augury, suggestion (DC 15); 1/week – commune (6 questions, CL 12th)

**S** 10 **D** 17 **C** 10 **I** 14 (16) **W** 12 **Ch** 14

BAB +9 CMB +1 CMD 15

Dodge, Weapon Finesse; Acrobatics +9 (3), Bluff +16 (11), Craft (alchemy) +10 (7), Diplomacy +13 (11),

Escape Artist +20 (17), Fly +26 (8), Intimidate +20/+12 to Medium creatures (17), Knowledge (arcana) +24 (18), Knowledge (dungeoneering) +4 (1), Knowledge (engineering) +4 (1), Knowledge (geography) +4 (1), Knowledge (history) +10 (7), Knowledge (local) +10 (7), Knowledge (nature) +10 (7), Knowledge (planes) +24 (18), Knowledge (religion) +21 (18), Linguistics (Balok, Mordentish, Vaasi) +6 (3), Perception +21 (17), Sense Motive +18 (17), Spellcraft +24 (18), Stealth +25 (11), Use Magic Device +11 (3; 9 from headband)

**SQ** Change shape (boar, giant spider, rat, raven; beast shape I)

Poison Sting—injury; Save Fort DC 13; 1/round for 6 rounds; 1d2 Dex; Cure 1 save.

Share spells, empathic link, deliver touch spells, speak with master

**Equipment:** wands: summon monster III, black tentacles, magic missile (CL 7; 4 missiles), headband of vast intellect +2.

**Challenge Rating:** 25

**Proprieties:** (398,000 gp/530,000 gp)

Headband of mental superiority +6, ring of wizardry I/III and II/IV, ring of protection +4/energy resistance (fire, acid 10), hand of glory, black robe of the archmagi, crystal ball of telepathy, metamagic rods (reach, intensified, focus), permanent see invisibility, dagger +1 human bane, pearls of power (4 x 1st, 4 x 2nd, 2 x 3rd).

19,000 gp worth of wands (mostly for Imp familiar to use): summon monster III, black tentacles, magic missile (CL 7; 4 missiles), headband of vast intellect +2

Lots of scrolls

**BACKGROUND**

Firan Zal'honan was born in the last century of King Vecna XVI's reign as Lich-Emperor; his family was an ancient Darkonese noble family, well-versed in the arcane arts; after his brother Irik died having ran afoul of the Lich-Emperor, his family was damned to Despondia, but he managed to escape and traveled

Darkon and beyond, becoming a legendary revolutionary Wizard, codenamed Azalin Rex. After 50 years of planning, the revolution began, and in an epic battle Firan killed Vecna XVI; he took the throne but never sat on it, instead starting to build a new society where everyone could be judged by their actions and merit and not by their birth; but fifty years of clandestinity, the loss of his beloved wife, and several contacts with dark magic had changed Firan deeply. He started to enforce his reforms with an increasingly heavier hand, thus alienating his own son Irik who decided to rebel; so forced to choose between his dream and his own son, between his ideal of order and his own heart, he choose the former. He personally executed his son in what was the last capital execution in Darkon, and proclaimed officially the birth of Darkonese Egemony; The mists enveloped him, as an heart failure threatened his life; officially he survived and recovered; in truth when he woke up he was dead, forever cursed as yet another lich.

### CURRENT SKETCHES

The chronicles says that Firan Zal'honan has served as Azal'lan of the Darkonese Egemony for 10 years; in truth, he has been serving as such for 50 years. But, he is the only one to know that detail, at least in Darkon, with one exception, an annoying wandering scholar named Archibald Everlast. In his youth, in the name of his revolution, he consorted with a many powerful arcanists, all around the Core, and he performed several questionable actions; he has realized that his transformation into a Lich was not only due to the rituals he put in motion to preserve his waning health but was due also to the intervention of the mysterious mystical emanation called the Mists. He discovered that the Mists bound him within Darkon, giving him several unique powers. Every nation, his studies demonstrated, had a similar bound individual; not only that, but every such ruler had a foil of some kind; he christened the bound individuals Darklords and their foils Lightlords; the balance of power between the two shifts continuously. He has correctly guessed that

Irik is now his personal foil, and he has also understood that the powers the two Lords have come with a price; he was not correct in guessing that his own curse was his inability to sway Irik back to his side. Getting Irik back, controlling the power of the Mists, shaping Darkon in a perfect working machine where everything is taken in consideration, and everyone works for the common good and to make new great arcane discoveries; these are his goals. In spite all of his planning, in 50 years of ruling he has not achieved any of that, yet.

### COMBAT

Azalin Rex prefers to use his endless minions and underlings instead of getting his hands dirty; if he really needs to intervene, he tries to incapacitate his enemies in the fastest possible way.

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

*Modify Memory:* (DC Will 31 to negate for 24 hours). He has access to books which contain the memory of every citizen of Darkon; he can alter them with a stroke of his pen. He usually orders his scribe to do that for him; he uses this method to re-educate any criminal (or dangerous free thinker) he finds in his realm.

*Curse of the Dark Lord:* Any time Firan takes time to research the arcane arts (discover or learn new spells, develop new rituals, create and craft new magical items or constructs, study the mists and their properties) a crisis arises and he must once again choose; what he loves or his iron-clad order. He always chooses to enforce his tyranny.

*Rejuvenation:* If he dies, his soul goes to reside in his phylactery, a very heavy and big thing in the deep of Castle Avernus. In a month he can regenerate his body. If his phylactery was ever to be destroyed, he could die the same as every mortal being.

### LAIR

Castle Avernus is the seat of power of the Darkonese Egemony's government and is the place where the



Azal'lan performs his most morally questionable actions; the Castle is a Rank 4 sinkhole of evil which can bestow the Amnesia, Awe, Fear, and Stunned conditions.

a DC 31 will save. They must continue to make this save every round for a minute if they continue; only mindless creature are immune. He can close the borders for up to 1 year.

## CLOSING THE BORDERS

If Azalin Rex wishes to close Darkon's borders, whoever tries to cross forgets the reason if they fail

## DREAD ALTERNATIVES

### ***New Archetypes***

#### *Alchemist (Mind-healer)*

*The mind-healer uses his extracts and alchemical abilities to soothe mind and spirits.*

**Infusion:** He get the Infusion Discovery at level 2, this modifies the Discovery gained at this level;

**Mind Resistance:** At Level 2 the Alchemist gains a +2 bonus against emotion effects; At level 5 and 8 this bonus raises to +4 and +6; At level 10 he became immune to all emotion effects.

**Extracts:** Add these Formulae to the ones available to a Mind-healer Alchemist: 1) Swallow your Fear; 2) Calm Emotions; 3) Mantle of Calm; 4) Clear Mind (It works as Break Enchantment but it affects only mind affecting effects); 5) Untold Wonder; 6) Joyful Rapture.

**Discoveries:** The following Discoveries complement the Mind-healer Archetype: Cognatogene, Greater Cognatogene, Grand Cognatogene, Infusion, Awakened Intellect.

#### *Bard (Visual Artist)*

*The Visual Artist channels his inspiration into different Arts than the performing ones;*

**Skill Points:** 8+Int Modifier.

**Armour Proficiencies:** a Visual artist is not proficient in any armour. (This modifies the Bard Armour Proficiencies)

**Bardic Craft:** The Visual Artist can use his hands to realize works of true beauty and use them in several supernatural ways: Every morning a Visual Artist can make a Craft Check (Painting, Woodcarving, Sketching, Drawing, Stonecarving or similar) DC 15+1/2 class level; with a success it creates a number of Bardic Items equal to 3+1/2 the Visual Artist's Bard levels; with a failure it creates 1 item less; with a failure by 5 or more, 2 items less, with a success of 10 or more 1 item more. If the item has an effect which requires a ST, the DC is equal to the creation check (-2 for a failure, -5 for a major failure, +5 for a major success, -10 for a natural 1, +10 for a natural 20)



Each created item can be used once to grant one of the Bard Performance effects available to a Bard of his level for 3 rounds+Int Mod+1/2 Visual Artist level except for Countersong) The effect granting bonuses affect every person who spends a minute to contemplate the item. The effect last up to a minute per Visual Artist Level; Instead of Countersong, he can create a Calming Item that gives a +4 bonus against any Emotion Based effect). The effects which affect enemies work instantly upon showing them the item, as long they are able to see it and they are in a 30-foot radius. This modify the Bardic Performance ability. Bardic Craft allows access to any feat with the Bardic Performance prerequisite.

**Bonus Feats:** At 2nd Level and every 4 levels thereafter, a Visual Artist gains an Item Creation Feat as a bonus feat; she needs to meet the prerequisites for the feats. This substitutes the Versatile Performance ability.

**Well-Versed:** the bonus of the well-versed ability applies against Sight-Dependent effects like gazes, glamers and sight-based figments. This modifies the Well-Versed ability.

**Spells:** the Visual Artist Bard's Spellcasting Ability is Intelligence. A Visual Artist Bard needs to wield his craft tool as an Arcane Focus in one hand to be able to cast spells. He or she can apply any Metamagic feat to them without affecting the casting time.

#### *Druid (Green Savant)*

*A Green Savant is a practitioner of an academical approach to nature magic.*

**Secular Scholar:** a Green Savant Druid can be of whatever alignment he desires.

**Class Skills:** Add every Knowledge Skill to the list of the Druid Class Skills. This alters the Druid's class skills.

**Weapon Proficiencies:** A Green Savant Druid is proficient in the Wizard's Weapons; this alters the Druid Weapon Proficiency.

**Scholar of Nature:** The Green Savant Druid gets a +1 Bonus in any Knowledge Check, and she can use any Knowledge Skill as though she had ranks on it. This ability replaces Sense of Nature.

**Savant Bond:** Instead of a domain, the Green Savant Druid can get a Familiar; This ability alters nature bond.

**Remember Nature's Secrets:** The Green Savant Druid gains a +4 to Survival Checks and to Saving Throws against the abilities of Animals, Elementals, Fey, and Vermin. This ability replaces resisting nature's lure.

**Savant Learning:** at Level 9 a Green Savant Druid can add to his spell list any Wizard Spell two slots lower than his maximum, if that spell has an Air, Cold, Earth, Electricity, or Fire description.

**Spellcasting:** The Green Savant Druid uses Intelligence as her Spellcasting Ability.

#### *Fighter (Field Engineer)*

*A Field Engineer Fighter is a shrewd battle pragmatist who knows how to take advantage of the environment.*

**Demolition Specialist:** +1 to Knowledge (Dungeoneering) and Knowledge (Engineering) Checks; A Field Engineer Fighter can use the latter to look for traps like a Rogue and the former to disarm them like a Rogue. This bonus raises to +2 at Level 6 and by +1 every 4 levels thereafter; this ability replaces bravery.

**Favored Terrain:** like the Ranger ability, but the Field Engineer gets a new Favored terrain every 4 levels after third level. This ability replaces Armor specialization 1, 2, 3, 4; At level 7, the Field Engineer Fighter still ignores armor penalties to his speed with medium armor, in his favored terrain (at level 7, also with heavy armor). The Field Engineer gains this ability when he wears any armor which does not reduce his speed.

**Terrain Advantage:** at level 5, a Field Engineer Fighter can spend a Move action to gain a +2 Bonus to AC, CMB and CMD when he is in a favored terrain. This bonus raises by +2 every four levels thereafter (9th, 13th, and 17th). This ability replaces Weapon Training 1-4.

**Terrain Mastery:** at level 19, a Field Engineer Fighter can't become flat-footed or be flanked in his Favored Terrain, and ignores difficult terrain. This ability replaces Armor Mastery.

**Demolition Master:** Every time the Field Engineer Fighter succeeds in a Combat Maneuver (Trip, Bull Rush, Pull, Push or Reposition) he can impose a condition on the enemy as though with a Dirty Trick Maneuver or add 2d6+Strength Bonus, Piercing and Slashing damage.

*Wizard (Astrologist)*

*An Astrologist Wizard uses his knowledge of the stars to improve her portents.*

**Class Skills:** Add Perception to the Astrologist Wizard Class Skills. This alters the Wizard Class Skills.

**Bond with the Stars:** An Astrologist Wizard must choose a Telescope, an Astral Chart, or Meteoric Stone as his Arcane Bond; She gains respectively a +3 bonus to Perception Checks, a +2 on Initiative, or a +3 in Spellcraft checks. This ability alters Arcane Bond.

#### **Astrology School:**

*Starwarned(Su):* You can always act in the surprise round even if you fail to make a Perception roll to notice a foe, but you are still considered flat-footed until you take an action. In addition, you receive a bonus equal to 1/2 your wizard level (minimum +1) on every Perception Check. At 20th level, anytime you roll Perception, assume the roll resulted in a natural 20.

*Astrologist's Advice (Sp):* Once per day, when you activate this school power, you can advise a number of creatures able to hear and understand you, up to your Int modifier, as a standard action to give them an insight bonus on armor class and saving throws equal to 1/2 your wizard level (minimum +1) for (3 + your Int Mod ) x 10 min.

*Consulting the Stars(Su):* At 8th level, you can commune with the Stars and bypass the possibility for Divination Spells to Fail (normally, in the Misty World, there is a 5% chance per spell level for any spell which allows the caster to get information, and 50% for alignment detecting); The Astrologist Wizard get a -5% to the failure chance every 2 levels, so he won't have penalty for a first level spell, and a -45% for a detect alignment spell.) This replaces the Arcane Schools feature.



# LOOSE ENDS

(SHORT STORY)

BY JACK THE REAPER

I first saw Mikhail von Bluhdt's paintings in an exhibition at the Museum of Art in Port-a-Lucine. From the moment my eyes first rested upon those artworks, I could have hardly removed them, for they were fascinating as much as they were shocking. It was clear to me that such horrific scenes, taken from the inferno itself, could not have come from just the fevered imagination of some artist, mad as he would be. Indeed, when I researched the identity of that von Bluhdt, I found out that I was not mistaken, as these works were drawn by the hands of a war veteran: a former Falkovnian soldier who served in all four of the Dead Man's Campaign wars and survived to tell the tale.

I found Mikhail in a meager, dark tavern, in the back of a filthy alley in Toyalis. He leaned alone over an empty bottle in the back of the room, one eye red from drinking, the other white and milky, staring blindly at the horrors of this world. His long gray hair and sparse beard were indicative of the old age which had landed on him prematurely, but in his shoulders and posture, the strength of a combat-fighting army man was evident. He reacted suspiciously as I approached him, but I introduced myself as an art scholar from Il-Aluk University, and a few glasses of wine released his tongue. His mind was broken like his body, but his memories were as sharp and clear as in the day they were taken:

"The 700th year of the Barovian Calendar was when we first went to war against Darkon, and I was just a young guy about eighteen winters old.

"Our Lord Vlad Drakov, the Hawk, has always sought to increase his dignity and kingdom, and most of all

he looked hungrily at our great neighbor to the north. I well remember the pounding of our boots as we marched in crowded columns on the King's Highway, our armor gleaming and above us the red hawk banners of our country, Falkovnia, fluttering. I was young and reckless, and the heat of war still flowed in my veins, eager to loot and plunder. If only I knew then what was about to come for us, I would probably have ripped both my eyes with my own hands.

"We met the enemy army on the outskirts of the city of Nartok, on a plain bordering the Forest of Shadows. Their soldiers stood in front of us in black rows, the golden eye banners carried over their ranks. We charged them, trusting our greater numbers and the experience we'd gained in grueling training. Indeed, initially, we had the upper hand. I had already imagined the triumphs of victory and the loot, when the dream suddenly became a nightmare.

"As the armies tore each other apart, and the cries of the dead and wounded echoed from every direction, a dark shadow seemed to fall on the battlefield. A cold breeze was blowing from the north, and a poisonous whisper echoed in my ears, forgotten and seething words I couldn't understand. For a moment, everyone stood and wondered what that omen meant.

"Then the dead began to rise.

"They stood up, torn and stabbed, crushed and trampled, dressed in Falkovnian armor or Darkonian uniforms, and immediately rushed upon our ranks,

an unholy red light shining in their dead eyes. In a panic, we hit them with our weapons, but how could we kill those who had already died? To my right and left my comrades fell under the teeth and claws of those who only a few moments ago had fought alongside them; And when they fell, they did not remain on the earth, but soon rose up on their faltering feet and were also added to our enemies. More dead flocked en masse from the forest, and the battle turned into a massacre. Our ranks soon disintegrated and we tried to flee in panic from the battlefield, while the enemy continually tailed us, until only few of us returned to our homeland.

"King Drakov's rage knew no bounds, and he immediately started planning another attack. However, three more bloody wars, now known as the Dead Man's Campaign, would be needed to teach him the true power of his hated Azalin Rex, the wizard-king of Darkon.

In 704 we went to the Second War. This time, the dead attacked us just moments after crossing the border, many of them still carrying the remains of the Falkovnian uniform, their rotting smiles as a testimony of the fate expected of us. Despite our preparations and appreciations, the hand of the dead was on top. Our army crumbled and was butchered mercilessly, and this time, too, I escaped by the skin of my teeth.

"In 706, fever attacked me, and so I survived the disaster known as the Widow's Massacre. This time, our king decided to attack Borca, our neighbor to the south, the kingdom of Lady Camille Boritsi. Only a small force was sent in the attack, thinking that a kingdom headed by a woman would be easy prey. The fate of those soldiers was doomed even before they crossed the border; from the same battalion, only a single soldier returned on trembling legs to Castle Draccipetri, his flesh purple and all swollen with unknown poison. He stuttered about the horrific end of his friends before collapsing into a puddle of stinking liquid before the Hawk's feet.

"A year later, in 707, we went west to war against the kingdom of Dementlieu. The enemy's cannons and musket guns crushed our ranks - weapons powered by gunpowder, which His Majesty dismissed with contempt as the "weapon of cowards." We could still have overcome them by the power of our numerical advantage, had not suddenly some officers in our army begun to behave strangely, leading our forces into ambush or calling them to retreat when victory seemed within reach. It was as if someone had taken over their minds and forced them to do his will. The campaign failed and we had to retreat.

"In 711 we went for the third time against Darkon, with the same results as previous times. Following this, the Hawk began to plan the next phase of the war, a planning that lasted no less than 11 years. Generals, scientists and magic-users devoted their best efforts to developing means that will give us victory. During those years, Drakov did not refrain from extending his hand east toward G'Henna, the theocracy of the mad high priest, Yagno Petrovna. This war campaign was named The Hunger March. While our army was trying to invade through the mountain passes, we found ourselves attacked by bands of twisted humanoids, priests of Zhakata in strategic positions, and strange monsters that destroyed entire units. Hunger and thirst further diluted our ranks in that arid, barren land, and only few individuals were able to return to their homes.

"In 722, the last and decisive stage in the Dead Man's Campaign was opened. We went out to Darkon as the largest army this world has ever seen. The well-trained and well-equipped Falkovnian war machine made its way into Darkon, colliding for the fourth time with Azalin's living-dead armies. But all the years of planning, all efforts and determination, were in vain. The dead slaughtered us, their ranks again growing as our ranks dwindled, and every soldier who fell from our side passed in an instant to the side of the enemy. The horror scenes seen in this war cannot be described. Once again, the hand of the dead overcame life and crushed it.



"Drakov unleashed his rage, as usual, on his subjects, mercilessly purifying all the "cowards" and "men of weakness" he blamed for his failure. I fled my homeland, a broken vessel unwanted by anyone, to live wherever I could.

"I do not know how I stayed alive, how I, of all my friends, survived time and again. I have often asked myself these questions, but only the Dark Powers that govern our world have solutions. I describe the horrors and terrors engraved in my mind in my paintings, as a signal and warning to human beings, for them to know the horrors of war, which have no honor and glory but torture and death - and worse than death. As for me, I wish for nothing except the blessed oblivion which will put an end to my pain." Mikhail von Bluhdt finished his story and coughed. It was obvious that the talk was difficult for him.

"I could tell you so much about these wars, about the countless times I saw death eye to eye... But why would a young lady like you wish to hear these kinds

of hair-raising tales? You came here for my paintings, didn't you"?

"No, Mikhail," I said quietly. "I've come here for you".

His eyes widened and his face suddenly reddened as a severe cough attack gripped him. He gasped wildly, trying desperately to breathe through his suffocated throat. I saw the recognition in his gaze as I pulled out the golden eye pendant from my shirt and presented it to him, the last sight he would take to the grave.

He gurgled one last time, his head dropping to the table.

I returned the wine bottle to my bag. My mission was completed. The message was fully conveyed: Lord Azalin does not leave loose ends.



# HARRINGTON DALE

(LAND OF PLENTY AND IGNORANCE, A REWRITE OF ARLINGTON FARM)

BY: MISTMASTER

Arlington Farm was created by Wiccy of the FoS, and published first in the USS 2001 and later revised in Qtr 11.

*(Author's Note: Ignorance and Vermin are two calamities which plague many lands, this one more than others)*

**Culture level:** Chivalric

**Ecology:** Full

**Climate & Terrain:** Temperate small hills and river plains.

**Languages:** Mordentish (English), Dementlieuse, and Lamordian.

**Religions:** Church of Ezra (L/N Sect), Church of Andral (L/G), Church of Zakhata the Lawgiver (L/E), Bastet the Cat Lady (C/G).

**Inhabitants:** 1,087,900 Human 98%, Other 2%.

**Government:** Monarchy.

**Ruler:** Baron Henry Harrington V.

**Darklord:** The Scarecrow King (Henry Harrington I)

**Analog:** Rural America XVIII-XIX Centuries

**Capital City:** Harringtown (L/N, Non Standard, 90,000 ab.)

**Important towns:** Crownest (L/N, standard 30,000 in), Oldmill (L/G, Standard, 10,000 in)

**Borders:** North: Richemulot, West: Richemulot and Verbrek, South: Verbrek, East: Richemulot and Verbrek.

## TROPES

Harrington Dale is a land of prejudice and ignorance, of hypocrisy and of rural horror; It's the horror of conformism and stagnation, enforced with violence.

## DOMAIN OVERVIEW

Harrington Dale is a land of farms and ranches. Two long and deep rivers, the Cold River in the North-west and the Wound River in the South-east insulate the plain. The Rivers are the main reason for the very special fertility of the plain which is also blessed by year-round ideal climate.

Harringtown is the capital and main city; here there is the only legal school of the domain, reserved for the landowners.

Little patches of forest dots the otherwise field/pasture dominated land; on the banks of the Wound river in the South lays Crownest, more liberal and open minded than the capital.

West of the Capital, almost all the land is owned by the Harrington family; Harrington Farm is the biggest farm known in the Core; many rural villages are populated exclusively by the farm's farmhands and their families.

Oldmill is a small town, but it guards the only crossway on the Cold River in the North, and it is the main connection to Richemulot.

## THE PEOPLE

Harringtonians are, all in all, farmers; farmhands, landowners, breeders, and small traders, all get their livelihood from the soil. They are thus a literally ground-rooted people, who do not like change.

People need to know only what they need to work and earn their living; extra knowledge is seen as dangerous, except in Crownest. People have responsibilities, both the low-born and the high-born; the former work and pay tributes, the latter give them services and protection, and administrate the nation wisely. People who leave their workplaces are frowned upon; however, Harrington Dale is such a fertile land that people thrive enough, so they are very ready to share. Arcane Magic is feared, as it's seen as by-product of knowledge; the exception are sorcerers, who are seen as gifted by the gods, especially when their powers are linked to nature, weather, and the soil. Harringtonians are formally deeply religious but they believe that deities bless hard work more than pious words and worshipping. On the other hand, they are superstitious and observe a number of bizarre traditions; one of the most famous is: never sin in front of a Scarecrow. While there is no serfdom, leaving a job as a farmhand is discouraged via taxes and fees and a certain amount of social stigma. Harringtonians often serve in the Militia, because it is seen as a socially acceptable alternative to farm-work. However, sometimes fear motivates them to accept new things and ideas, because they fear things when they know not how they work; explanations and solutions soothe their fears...

## History

### *Age of Creation*

In the Age of Creation, Andral and Ezra fought against Zhakata, and mixed their blood in the land of

what will be later known as Harrington Dale; This seeding of the land was both a blessing for fertility and a curse for proliferation of vermin.

### *Age of Empires*

During the Age of Empires, the Olympian Empire settled the land and built a city, Afthoniapolis, were today we find Harrington, but an impressive series of bad harvests due to vermin invasions forced them to abandon the land.

### *Age of Darkness*

In the Age of Darkness, the Isle of Plenty was used as a grazing field for the pastoral Tergs, who called it the Redeemed Field, as they had redeemed with their conquest a place where their god Zakhata was insulted.

### *Modern Age*

In the Modern Age, the Isle was object of conflict between former Dementlieuse Crown Realms, Verbrek, and Richemulot, but none of them settled it and near the end of the age a Mordentish colonist bought it off. The Iron Church became popular in the latter part of the reign of the 1st Baron.

Somehow the vermin plagues were defeated, probably thanks to the import of Har'Akiri Cats, which are especially good at fighting them. The Law against excessive academic pursuits was proclaimed by Henry Harrington I's successor.

### *Contemporary Age*

Recently, Harrington Dale managed to face off a Richemouloise invasion, staged by local nobles without endorsement from the Richmouloise government, a brief but bloody conflict dubbed The War of the Steel Rats. A Werewolf raid from Verbrek was also repelled, apparently without any lycanthropy spreading.

## PLACES OF INTEREST

The Great Crow Library is a privately owned, but open to the public, library, owned by Doctor Everlast, the burgomaster of Crownest. The city also houses The Holy Abode of Bastet and the Raven's Feather, a coffee-shop which doubles as an inn; the owner is the thunderous Barnabas Thorns (Middle-Aged, Fighter 7 L/G), a retired militia commander.

In Harrington, the main features of the City are the nearby Scarecrow Castle, seat of the Baron, the city-hall, and three of the main temples of the nation, the Dome of the Lady, the Iron Chapel, and the Rising Sun Basilica. The ancient ruins of Afthoniapolis are sealed under Harrington. They are forbidden, but still attract visitors. The main Inns in the Town are the Righteous Rest, owned by a widow called Clelia Mursdale, while the infamous Fat Cat is owned by the shadowy Corneille Mile.

The only Inn in the Oldmill town is the Wolf Skull; a gruff retired hunter called Jeremy Jarquard owns the place.

## RELIGIONS

The Church of Ezra the Preserver is a L/N religion; while on paper it claims communion with the ominous Borcan Church, and the local Arch-Sentire pays respect to the Bastion of Borca, with the former officially confirming the latter's election, the Harringtonian Ezrite church's teachings differs with the Borcans as it doesn't discourage stagnation. While novelty is not condemned, it is seen as something which needs to be pondered at length and not pursued on a whim. The favored weapon of the church is the Longsword; Ezra's domains are: Community, Earth, Law, Rune, Strength and Protection. It's Harrington Dale's gentry's main religion. In Harrington Dale, Ezra is seen as the Lawgiver sister and Andral's wife.

The Iron Church is the Vaasan confession of the Church of Zhakata the Lawgiver (L/E); The local head of the Church is the Pave of Harrington Dale; the Pave is subject to the authority of the Stal'noy Kulak

in Kantora, Nova Vaasa. This L/E Religion preaches obedience and loyal submission to authority and the holy duty to defend the country with violence if the need arises. His favored weapon is the flail, and his domains are Evil, Law, Nobility, Strength and War. The most conservative of the gentry and the militia members are often faithful to the Iron Church. Ezra was his wife, but she betrayed him for Andral, his treacherous brother.

The Cult of the Shining One is a L/G religion, whose homeland is Barovia, which worships Andral, god of the Sun, of seasons, of hope, of time and prosperity. He is one of the most popular deities of the common folk, together with his wife Ezra, and their daughter Bastet. Andral teaches his followers to fight injustice, to work hard for the best of their community, to be loyal and to respect legitimate authority as long as rule of law is upheld; he also teaches to respect the cycle of nature and the natural order. His favored weapon is the Sickle, his domains are Good, Healing, Law, Protection, Repose, Sun, and Weather.

The Cult of the Cat Lady is a cult imported from the faraway lands of Har'akir and it centers around the C/G Goddess Bastet, goddess of cats, curiosity, protection, change and progress. She teaches her followers to respect Cats and to imitate their best qualities: intelligence, independence, curiosity and self-awareness. Her Harringtonian cult is very different from her Har'akiri cult, as that has a more martial bent; She is identified as Ezra and Andral's daughter. Her Domains are Animal, Chaos, Good, Knowledge and Protection. Her favored weapon is the spiked gauntlet. Her followers are scholars and reformists but everyone recognizes her usefulness as protector of the crops.

## THE FAMED AND THE INFAMOUS

### *Theobald Everlast*

(Old Human Booksworn Lich Archivist Bard 11, L/G)

Dr Theobald Everlast is a man of knowledge and learning, firmly convinced that prosperity can't be

achieved without knowledge and culture; appearing as a very old, pleasant man, with smiling blue eyes and little spectacles on his aquiline nose, he always has a book in his hand. He is the Burgomaster of Crownest, and also the most renowned physician, orator and scholar in the domain; he is the last of a long line of knowledgeable men, who have fought against the stagnant mentality of the domain. In truth, he is his whole line, as he is a rare form of Lich, a Booksworn Lich; in his case lichdom has been an unexpected, unrequested boon, the reward for his unyielding righteousness, which led to him sacrificing his life in the attempt to stop Baron Harry I, three centuries ago. Dying from of the ritual's dark energy, with his only regret the failure to protect the people of the Dale, he reopened his eyes in his study, alive, sort of. It's a boon but also sort of a burden, as the Mists made him the "lightlord" of the Dale, and he has to continue to live on, seeing his dear ones passing as he keeps trying to change the mindset of his fellow people, with very slow successes, and many setbacks. He is the great-grandson of another immortal champion of goodness and knowledge, the Wandering Crow, Archibald Everlast.

*(Adventure Hook: When the adventurers arrives in Crownest they find a note waiting for them in their inn; The Burgomaster invites them to tea.)*

#### *Patricia Phisis*

(Adult Human Benedective Werecat Cleric 9 of Bastet, C/G)

This kind woman has a reputation for being a bit of a lunatic, but she is also the best cat-breeder in the western Core, and almost every house has a Mouse-Catcher, a House-Watcher, or a Pest-Stalker from the Cat Shop near Bastet's Holy Abode in Crownest. She is a close ally of Dr Everlast, and they keep each other's secret.

*(When a strange disease threatens to kill her favored cat, Patricia asks the adventurers to retrieve some rare ingredients for her; as they go through the*

*quest, they are often helped by a big silver furred Pest-Stalker cat.)*

#### *Hiram Turnstone*

(Adult Human Cleric 9 of Andral, L/G)

Hiram is a righteous man and a true friend of the people, if a bit of the conservative bent. He is the current head-priest in the Rising Sun Basilica. He has succeeded his father, whose demise created quite a scandal last year. Obadia Turnstone, then Headpriest of the Rising Sun Basilica was found dead in a pond, two empty wine bottles near his body. After his wife's death, Obadia did drink a bit too much. Hiram is doing his best to clean up his family name and the honor of his faith.

*(Adventure Hook: When, on the anniversary of his father's death, Hiram sees his ghost, he becomes convinced that things were different than how they appeared, and he approaches the adventurers to ask for their help.)*

#### *Pave Salman Verechtoff*

(Adult Human Cleric 9 of Zhakata L/N)

Salman was born in Nova Vaasa, as was mandatory for any first born of a Priest of the Iron Church; he was then raised in Harrington Dale and when his father died he succeeded him as the Pave of Harrington Dale. He is what in Kantora is, usually derogatorily, defined as a liberal so while still pretty conservative he advocates mediation and respect for local rules and customs.

*(Adventure Hook: Some of his more orthodox underlings chafe under his rule and are trying to have him removed from Kantora; when he uncovers such plots he needs the adventurers' help to keep a L/E fanatic from taking his place.)*

#### *Baron Henry Harrington V*

(Male Adult Human, L/N, Aristocratic 3/ Fighter 3.)

Henry is the 10th Baron of Harrington Dale, and he takes his responsibilities very seriously. A stern-looking, tall, and broad-shouldered man, with short

black hair, well-groomed black moustaches, and steely grey eyes, he is a conservative man, believing in tradition and hard-work; he can be seen roaming the vast properties of his family, or attending audiences in Scarecrow Castle or in the city hall. A practical man, he doesn't give any credit to the legends about the Scarecrow King; bandits and wild animals worry him way more than legends about living scarecrows. He frowns upon Crownest, but he recognizes that technically, the Old Crow, Everlast, is not violating any law.

*(Adventure Hook: Henry Harrington V is worried about a strange new kind of rat that is starting to appear in the fields: they are big, red/grey furred and their bite is poisonous; they are aggressive, smart, malicious and tenacious. People call them killer rats; the Baron has begrudgingly accepted Dr Everlast's advice and he hired the adventurers to investigate.)*

**Constable John Morris**

(Adult Human Cavalier 7 (Lion Order), L/G)

Constable John Morris is the Commander of Harrington Dale Militia, and he is a thoroughly honest person; he puts the wellbeing of the Dale above his own. He has a secret, however; his daughter has been bitten by a werewolf, last year during the Wild Wolf Raid. He has resorted to Doctor Everlast to conceal her status, and so far, it's working; he fears that some of his enemies may uncover his secret. Werewolves are to be put down, technically, but only (and that is the loophole he is exploiting) once the threat they pose is certified.

*(Adventure Hook: Someone has kidnapped John's daughter, and the full moon is in two nights; with the mediation of Dr Everlast he asks the adventurers to find her.)*

**Arch-Sentire Arthur Calloushand**

(Old Human L/E Cleric of Ezra Heretic 9)

Arthur Calloushand is a hypocrite of the worst kind; on the exterior he is a righteous and pious man, a protector of the poor and of the infirm, and a

mediator between conservatives and progressives. In truth, he dabbles in black-magic and, on his payroll, there are the bandits who plague the otherwise prosper country. He is, also, an agent of the Scarecrow King, and signals to him any would-be reformers who ask him for advice.

*(Adventure Hook: The adventurers are targeted by bandits while traveling towards Harrington; after they defeat them, they find on them some clue which leads them to the Lady's Dome.)*

**Clelia Mursdale**

(Old Human Alchemist Toxicant 8 L/E)

Clelia is a nice old woman who is famed for her cooking and she is quite well off, thanks to her inn and several properties.

*(Adventure Hook: In truth, she is secretly the Good Wife, the most infamous killer-for-hire in this part of the core, an experienced poisoner who can kill people days, weeks, and months after the moment she acts. And now the adventurers are in her notebook.)*

**Corneille Mile**

(Adult Human Natural Wererat Rogue 8 C/G)

Corneille is deemed a troublemaker by local authorities, as his Inn is the place where every subversive book, piece, pamphlet, and theory enters the Barony; but no one has ever proved that the larger-than-life Richemouloise native is connected with such activities, nor with gambling, smuggling of highly alcoholic drinks, or other immoral activities.

*(Adventure Hook: Corneille is, as weird as it may seem, the head of the Cat's Whiskers, a secret society that aims to change the Dale's customs to make them more relaxed and culturally friendly. He uses the gains from his less licit activities to fund the Whiskers and promote change; but when his trusted accountant is kidnapped by "strange fellows dressed as scarecrows" he needs the help of the adventurers to save him and his secrets.)*

*Jeremy Jarquard*

(Middle-aged Human Fighter 10 L/N)

Ex-commander of the Militia, the hero of the War of the Steel Rats, and the killer of the Alpha Werewolf two years ago, Jeremy is still tough as nails, and very proud of his scars, all on his front, none on his back. Today he entertains the customers at his inn with his stories, where he keeps the skull of the werewolf he killed.

*(Adventure Hook: A strange visitor with a Richemouloise accent is unceremoniously tossed out of the inn; the next day Jeremy's House-Watcher Cat is found beheaded; Jeremy offers a generous reward to the adventurers, to have them investigate.)*

*Mad Tony*

(Middle-Age Human Commoner 5, C/E)

Tony Brom was a harmless drunk until he met the Scarecrow King; the monstrous being tortured him and took his right eye, but left him living, on the condition that he accepted to be his spy. Thanks to a button he gave to Tony, hidden under his eyepatch, the Scarecrow King can see and hear everything that happens near his mad henchman; Mad Tony is a drunk no more; now, he preaches about the risk of people who go against customs.

*(Adventure Hook: While the adventurers are relaxing at an Inn, Mad Tony come in and starts to preach his delirious creed, then he suddenly points his finger accusingly at the one in the group who looks the most scholarly.)*

*The Grunning Sisters*

(L/E Green Hags, 2 Rank Hag)

Elisabeth, Eveline, and Eleonore Grunning are three rich young landowners who own the third largest amount of land in the domain, and they use their riches to help people. What nobody knows is that they are three green hags in disguise, cursed for killing their abusive father. They are trying to reverse the curse, doing every kind of charitable action, but their selfish motives for the charity, and their refusal

to admit that they actually killed their father for selfish reasons, (to get his money) keep them grounded in their evilness.

*(The Grunning Sisters have opened an orphanage; when one of the kids disappears, one of the sisters calls the adventurers, as she believes the other two are involved.)*

*The Headless Knight*

(Dullahan 15 HD, L/E)

Once a mercenary bandit who ran afoul of the Scarecrow King, now he roams the fields where he died, by night; at dawn, he returns to his grave in a pumpkin field. He use a pumpkin as a substitutive head and can transform it in a fireball, replacing it after tossing against his opponents.

*(Adventure Hook: The adventurers are informed about the Headless Knight by Dr Everlast; the only way to put him permanently to rest is to return his real head, which has been buried near an Ezrite chapel that flooded last year. That patch of land is now infested by venomous adders; The adventurers must try to retrieve the head if they want to save their own heads.)*

*Jonas McCrook*

(Middle Aged Human Expert3/Rogue1, N/E)

McCrook is the corrupt Manager of the Harrington Farm. On Reverend Calloushand's payroll, he is yet another pawn in the Scarecrow King's hand. He is very able to hide his shortcomings from his stern master, Baron Harrington, and he skillfully poses as a zealous and competent manager; not even his closest co-workers suspect how much he is embezzling for himself.

*(When McCrook's notebook, with the proof of his embezzlements is stolen by a pickpocket during the Harvest Festival, he pays the adventurers to investigate, but he also asks his powerful "friends" to help him to save his career.)*

*Jeremy, the Piper Boy*  
(Human Youth, Bard 3, C/G)

Jeremy is the orphan son of a traveling bard, Master Kyle; his father was killed by a mob, secretly incited by Reverend Calloushand at the behest of the Scarecrow King. Taken under Dr Everlast's protection, he is, today, his errand boy. Jeremy knows the roads of the Dale like the palm of his hand and often offers to guide strangers who he deems friendly.

*(Adventure Hook: the adventurers are approached by a smiling piper boy who tips them about a matter they are investigating.)*

*Pumpkin Head*  
(Awakened Dread Scarecrow Wizard 7 Abjurer N/G)

One of the victims of the Scarecrow King, an Abjurer called Samwell Trane; the process of his creation was interrupted by Everlast, and he retained his free will. Nowadays, he is Doctor Everlast's secret assistant. He is trying to reverse the transformation to regain his humanity, somehow.

*(Adventure Hook: after several years of studies, Samwell thinks he has finally found a way; but he needs for the adventurers to retrieve the last component of the ritual, a splinter from the Scarecrow King.)*

*Rotten Pumpkin*  
(Awakened Dread Scarecrow, Wizard, Necromancer 7, L/E)

Rotten Pumpkin is the Scarecrow King's second in command, once known as Nathan Malgrym, Baron Henry I's adviser. He is cursed to serve his master as Rotten Pumpkin as loyally as he never did as a human being. He is ruthless and devious.

*(Adventure Hook: While his master is magically bound in day-time above the very place he was buried, Rotten Pumpkin disguises himself as a distinguished and respected Undertaker, to have easy access to body parts. When the adventurers are*

*informed that someone is desecrating tombs, the adventurers' investigations lead them to "Malcolm Grym" and his funerary services shop.)*

## ORGANIZATIONS

### *The Straw Legion*

170 Dread Scarecrows (Scarecrows with +2 Str, +2 Dexterity, +5 DR) and 30 Greater Dread Scarecrows (Large Size Dread Scarecrows) led by 5 Awakened Dread Scarecrows (5 Level 7 Fighters).

The Straw Legion also includes human pawns and collaborators, and they exist to keep things as they must be

(Dread Possibility: The Straw Army: Rotten Pumpkin is perfecting a ritual that, if completed, will animate all Scarecrows in the Barony at once, creating a dreadful army loyal to their King.)

### *Cat's Whiskers*

This C/G informal association exists to favor change and fight hypocrisy.

(Dread Possibility: The Chaos Claw; some of the associates do not want to content themselves with propaganda and the smuggling of forbidden commodities. These renegades are planning to initiate a violent revolution.)

## **DARKLORD: THE SCARECROW KING**

### **Large Construct L/E Fighter 11 (144 HP)**

**Speed:**30

**Initiative:**+7 (+11 on Harrington Farm grain fields)

**Armor Class:**36 (41 on Harrington Farm grain fields)  
(+3 Dex, +10 Natural Armor, +12 Armor, +2 Shield, -1 Size)

**Space/Reach:** 4 squares /2 squares (3 with his trident)

### **Combat Maneuver Defense/Combat Maneuver**

**Bonus:**40/+27

**Str:**25, **Dex:**16, **Con:**-, **Int:**13, **Wis:**16, **Cha** 12.



**Saving Throws:** Fort:+15, Ref:+10, Wil:+10

**Special Qualities:** Construct Traits, Damage Reduction: 15/Magic and Slashing.  
S.R. 25, Curse of the Darklord, Vulnerable to fire, Immune to electricity and cold, senses of the Scarecrow King, Brave (+3 against fear), Weapon Specialist (Spears+2, Slam +1), Armor Specialist (Full plate 2, Hide 1) +3 Mastery.

**Special Attacks:** Create Spawn, Animate Scarecrows, Summon Straw Soldier, Dexterity Damage, Flesh to Wood, Bane of the Learned.

**Attack:** Melee: +3 Axiomatic Unholy Trident (+33/+28/ +23/+18, crit 19/20 x3, Damage 2d6+14, +2d6 vs Good, 2d6 vs Chaos and 1d6 Dexterity Drain (DC 22 Fortitude deny) and Slam (+27, Crit.x2, dam 1d8+7+Dexterity Drain (DC 22) or two Slams

**Skills:** Climb:+26, Insight:+13, Intimidate+23, Knowledge (Arcana): +23, Knowledge (Nature): +23, Perception:+13.

**Feats:** Cleave, Greater Cleave, Greater Grapple, Iron Will, Focus Critical (Trident), Focus Fury, Focus Weapon (Trident), Greater Focus Weapon (Trident), Lightning Reflexes, Improved Critical (Trident), Improved Grapple, Improved Initiative, Improved Piercing Attack, Piercing Attack, Power Attack, Toughness, Weapon Specialization (Trident).  
Challenge Rating: 19

**Proprieties:** Axiomatic Unholy +3 Trident, +3 Ironwood Fullplate, +1 Ironwood Buckler.

## BACKGROUND

Three hundred years ago, Harry Harrington I was an open minded member of the Mordentish gentry who discovered and purchased the very fertile land between Richemulot and Verbrek. He relocated there with his family and he became the first de facto, then de jure, Baron of Harrington Dale. He was hard-working, and also a strong military leader, who rid the land of bandits and protected the people from the incursions of wererats; he also was a patron of learning and progress. However, he was

a prideful man, and pride was his downfall; one day, an infestation of vermin hit the Dale; desperate for his people and his family, he accepted the nefarious advice of an evil wizard, Nathan Malgrym, and created the first Dread Scarecrows, sacrificing some petty criminals in a dark ritual. Increasingly more corrupted and tyrannical, Harrington soon started to sacrifice innocent people, on the grounds of minor offenses. The ritual to create the Dread Scarecrows was open even to non-spellcasters, so when he casually discovered the tryst between Malgrym and his wife, he sacrificed both, turning Malgrym in one of the Scarecrows. When his sons discovered the fact, they confronted him, on his favorite grain field, but Harry, now already on the path of complete corruption, mortally wounded his eldest, and killed his second, leaving only his youngest alive. But, before he could finish him off, the eldest killed his enraged father. He was buried under a big Scarecrow, and the Mists swallowed the Dale. That very night the Scarecrow King was born.

## CURRENT SKETCH

After being reborn as a living Scarecrow, Henry realized the horror he had imposed on so many persons; instead of admitting his own responsibilities, though, he accused Malgrym and his damned knowledge. Able to act only by night, in daytime he listens and watches, through many void eyes. His son initiated the crusade against knowledge and learning, and Henry, in his three centuries as the Scarecrow King, has worked to enforce this order. His curse however hinders his efforts; helped in this by his many henchmen, he keeps the people of the dale in a grip of fear and ignorance; his descendants have unwittingly been partners in this crime. However, his ultimate goal, to have the people resigned to live in a stagnating, dull world, stays out of his grasp; culture and knowledge still thrives in the Dale, and progress does happen, if slowly. Every time he acts in person, people flock to knowledge to explain it.

## COMBAT

Usually, he prefers using his Straw Legion minions or attacking an unsuspecting victim in the dead of the night. When forced in one on one combat, he tries to immobilize his opponent with a grapple, and to use his Dexterity Drain power to quickly turn his foe defenseless. When outnumbered, he uses his Flesh to Wood ability to even the ground, summoning normal and Dread Scarecrows to help him.

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

*Animate Scarecrows* (Su): He can animate and control any Scarecrow he can see as a standard action.

*Bane of the Learned* (Ex): +4 on attacks and damage rolls and on saving throws against Wizards, Bards, Knowledge Domain Clerics, and other scholars, at DM discretion.

*Create Spawn* (Sp): If he kills a person, he can use three consecutive full-rounds to stuff its remains in a normal sized or large sized mundane scarecrow, which immediately becomes a Dread Scarecrow or a Greater Dread Scarecrow under his command. With a one hour long ritual he can create Awakened Scarecrows faithful to him.

*Dexterity Drain* (Ext): DC 22 Fortitude negates.

*Flesh to Wood* (Su): DC 22, Fortitude Negates, three times a day.

*Rejuvenation*: If destroyed, he will be reborn in the nearest Greater Scarecrow in the domain, the next night. It moves instantly into place over Henry's burial plot. If all the Greater and animated Scarecrows of the domain are destroyed or removed, he will be reborn in a week from the closest scarecrow. Without scarecrows in the

domain, the process is arrested, but he will be permanently destroyed only if a naturally herded swarm of rats (without the influence of magic) devours his corpse.

*Senses of the Scarecrow King* (Su) : At will he can see and listen from any scarecrow in the domain.

## CURSE

His curse keeps him paralyzed over his grave, in day-time, persecuted by the Noonwraith of his death wife; no one seems able to notice them in these moments, however; at night time, he can directly act only against a person who violates directly the law of the land; he is also bound to spare the life of any person who apologizes, if she is not a murderer; murderers, he can kill and curse freely.

*Summon Straw Soldier* (Su): As a standard action he can summon 1d12 of his own Straw Army Dread Scarecrows, 1d6 Greater Scarecrows, or 1d2 of Awakened Scarecrows.

## LAIR

Harrington Farm's Grain Field is the place where Henry was buried; It's a level 3 Sinkhole of Evil, and can inspire Desperation, Fear, and Rage; (DC 22 Will Negates)

## CLOSING THE BORDER

If someone try to cross Harrington Dale's borders when they are closed, they are attacked by 1d6 Scarecrows + 1 Greater Scarecrow every Round they advance; People can, theoretically, force through the borders by fighting off the scarecrows or escaping. The Scarecrow King can close the border for up to a maximum of 3 weeks.

## DREAD ALTERNATIVES: NEW CREATURES

**Harringtonian Cats**

Arcane Sensibility: All Harringtonian Cats can recognize unnatural creatures and arcane practitioners, with a DC 25 successful Perception Check. They do not mind bards. (Ex)

Swarm Fighters: Harringtonian Cats are immune to distraction and can inflict damage to a swarm as though their damage was area damage. They take only half damage from a Swarm attack. (Ex)

*Harringtonian Cat (House Watcher)*

XP 800

N Medium animal

Init +4; Senses low-light vision, scent; Perception +12

**Defense**

AC 16, touch 14, flat-footed 12 (+4 Dex, +2 natural)

hp 28 (4d8+12)

Fort +7, Ref +8, Will +3

Harringtonian Cats Traits

**Offense**

Speed 30 ft.

Melee bite +7 (1d8+4 plus grab), 2 claws +9 (1d3+4) Racial Modifiers +2 on Claw Attack Rolls when fighting in a familiar location.

Special Attacks pounce, rake (2 claws +6, 1d3+4)

**Statistics**

Str 18, Dex 18, Con 16, Int 2, Wis 15, Cha 10

Base Atk +3; CMB +7 (+11 grapple); CMD 21 (25 vs. trip)

Feats: Improved natural weapon (bite) Skill Focus (Perception),

Skills Acrobatics +8, Perception +12, Stealth +8. (+4 Racial Bonus to Perception Checks)

**Ecology**

Environment: any temperate.

Organization solitary, pair, or Colony (3-10)

Treasure none

**Description**

This grey, long-furred cat is the size of a wolf, with big yellow or green eyes, glowing in the dark; House Watchers, while retaining a cat's usual independent streak are fiercely loyal to their household, and fight to the death to defend it.

*Harringtonian Cat, Mouse Catcher*

XP 300

N Small animal

Init +9; Senses low-light vision, scent; Perception +10 **Defense**

AC 15, touch 14, flat-footed 12 (+4 Dex, +1 natural, +1 Size)

hp 12 (2d8+4)

Fort +5, Ref +8, Will +2 (+4 Racial against Disease)

Harringtonian Cats Traits

### Offense

Speed 40 ft.

Melee: bite +6 (1d4+1 plus grab), 2 claws +8 (1d2+4)

Special Attacks: pounce, rake (2 claws +6, 1d3+4)

### Statistics

Str 12, Dex 20, Con 14, Int 2, Wis 15, Cha 11

Base Atk +1; CMB +1 (+5 grapple); CMD 16 (20 vs. trip)

Feats: Improved Initiative; Weapon Finesse (Bonus),

Skills Acrobatics +9, Perception +6, Stealth +13 (+4 Racial Bonus Perception Check)

### Ecology

Environment: any temperate.

Organization solitary, pair, or Colony (6-20)

Treasure none

### Description

Mouse Catchers are Saurian-like cats but they are as large as small dogs; Mouse Catchers are very good with humanoid children and they fiercely defend their property against any interlopers, especially rats and vermin

#### *Harringtonian Cat (Pest Stalker)*

XP 800

N Medium animal

Init +4; Senses low-light vision, dark vision, scent; Perception +10

### Defense

AC 16, touch 14, flat-footed 12 (+4 Dex, +2 natural)

hp 24 (4d8+8)

Fort +6, Ref +9, Will +3

Harringtonian Cats Traits

### Offense

Speed 50 ft. Climb 50, Swim 50.

Melee bite +8 (1d6+3 plus grab), 2 claws +8 (1d3+3).

Special Attacks pounce, rake (2 claws +6, 1d3+4)

### Statistics

Str 16, Dex 20, Con 15, Int 2, Wis 15, Cha 10

Base Atk +3; CMB +6(+10 grapple); CMD 21 (25 vs. trip)

Feats: Skill Focus (Perception), Skill Focus (Stealth), Weapon Finesse (bonus)

Skills: Acrobatics +9, Climb+15, Perception +10, Stealth +17, Swim + 11. (+4 Racial Bonus to Stealth Check)

### Ecology

Environment: any temperate.

Organization solitary, pair, or Colony (2-8)

Treasure none

## Description

Pest-Stalkers are reminiscent of Mouse Catchers, but they are almost as big as House Watchers and they tend toward dark colors. They hunt any kind of potentially harmful creature and are the most obedient kind of Harringtonian cats. They are trustworthy companions to Harringtonian hunters.

### Noonwraith

XP 1,600 LE Medium undead (incorporeal)

Init +7; Senses Greater Lowlight Vision, Movesense; Perception +10

Aura unnatural aura (30 ft.)

### Defense

hp 47 (5d8+25)

AC 18, touch 18, flat-footed 14 (+5 deflection, +3 Dex)

Fort +6, Ref +4, Will +6

Defensive Abilities: channel resistance +2, incorporeal; Immune undead traits, Fire.

Weaknesses: Night Powerlessness; Silver Vulnerability.

### Offense

Speed: fly 60 ft. (good)

Melee incorporeal touch +6 (1d6 fire plus 1d6 Str drain)

### Statistics

Str —, Dex 16, Con —, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 21

Base Atk +3; CMB +6; CMD 21

Feats: Blind-Fight, Combat Reflexes, Improved Initiative

Skills: Diplomacy +10, Fly +7, Intimidate +13, Knowledge (Local) +7, Perception +10, Profession (Farmer) +10, Stealth +11

Languages: Common, Infernal

### Ecology

Environment: any Agricultural community

Organization solitary or Pair, gang (3–6), or pack (7–12)

Treasure none

### Special Abilities

**Create Spawn (Su)** A humanoid slain by a wraith becomes a wraith in 1d4 rounds. These spawn are less powerful than typical wraiths, and suffer a –2 penalty on all d20 rolls and checks, receive –2 hp per HD, and only drain 1d2 points of Strength on a touch. Spawn are under the command of the wraith that created them until its death, at which point they lose their spawn penalties and become free-willed wraiths. They do not possess any of the abilities they had in life.

**Strength Drain (Su)** Creatures hit by a Noonwraith's touch attack must succeed on a DC 17 Fortitude save or take 1d6 points of Strength drain. On each successful attack, the wraith gains 5 temporary hit points. The save DC is Charisma-based.

**Movesense (Su)** A noonwraith notices and locates any creature which makes a move action within 60 feet, just as if it possessed the blindsight ability.

**Night Powerlessness (Ex)** After sunset, a noonwraith can't attack and is staggered.

**Silver Vulnerability (Ex)** Silver Weapons inflict damage as magic weapons, +50% to noonwraiths.

**Unnatural Aura (Su)** Animals do not willingly approach within 30 feet of a noonwraith, unless their master makes a DC 25 Handle Animal, Ride, or wild empathy check.

### Description

Noonwraiths are incorporeal people resembling emaciated, ragged and exhausted corpses.

They rise when people die from exhaustion in the fields during daytime or when a rancorous person dies and her blood falls upon cultivated soil. They vaguely resemble the people they were when they were alive and can find peace only if their bodies or their ashes are laid to rest in a stone coffin.

### *Rat (Killer)*

XP 300

L/E Small magical beast

Init +5; Senses low-light vision, scent; Perception +10 (+4 Racial Bonus)

### Defense

AC 16, touch 14, flat-footed 12 (+4 Dex, +2 natural)

hp 21 (3d10+6)

Fort +7, Ref +8, Will +3

Immunities: Poison, Disease.

### Offense

Speed 30 ft.

Melee bite +8 (1d4+1 plus poison).

Special Attacks: poison (1d6 Con, 1/1 round, 1 minute, DC 14 Temp; based on Constitution)

### Statistics

Str 13, Dex 21, Con 15, Int 8, Wis 15, Cha 7

Base Atk +3; CMB +4; CMD 21 (25 vs. trip)

Feats: Improved natural weapon (bite) Skill Focus (Perception),

Skills: Acrobatics +9, Perception +10, Stealth +13.

### Ecology

Environment: temperate urban.

Organization solitary, pair, or pack (3-8)

Treasure none

**Description**

Killer Rats were engineered in Richemulot but discarded by the Baroness as they are completely unable to carry disease; they are still used as loyal executors by those same Richemouloise nobles who staged the failed invasion of Harrington Dale. Killer rats reproduce slower than Dire Rats, and they imprint on the first humanoid who feeds them.

***New Templates*****Booksworn Lich**

Booksworn Liches are born when virtuous arcanists sacrifice their lives against foul magic or die while engaged in a virtuous scholarly endeavor.

Like regular Liches, but Booksworn Liches are always of Good Alignment, they get 4 additional Skill Points per HD, they have no paralyzing touch, they choose a collection of books as their phylactery, they keep their living appearance and retain the ability to eat, drink, and taste.



# THE TALE OF IVAR SKYTTE

- A COMPANION TO THE CONFERENCES

BY BENJAMIN BAUM AND MARK BARTELS

The austere, black-walled cell had no windows, nor did it appear to have a door. Its only furnishings were a single glowing sphere in the ceiling, a hideous little gargoyle fixed in one ceiling corner, and an inclined, T-shaped table, to which was bound a dark-skinned man. His arms were forced wide, and the manacles on his wrists bore extensions which held his fingers splayed, unable to flex in the slightest. An expert in magical artifice might note the runes of arrest upon them, meant to prevent any spellcraft not dependent on gestures. The man's eyes were closed, but he slept not—he listened.

The footsteps in the hall were audible inside, but the sound was strangely dislocated, obscuring which wall it penetrated. The man grinned as he recognized the gait, then he opened his mouth to speak.

No, to sing:

*Ayot-ar Xovaroth tarumae,  
Ershun yemil Xavan altash se,  
Na-ersh yenlil Noruk mor-azvrae,  
Ayot-ar Xovaroth tarumae.*

## Doxology of Xovaroth

Adagio

To hear this piece, click [here](#)



The steps slowed, paused, then there were but two more, quickly. A great bolt began to slide. The noise came from all around at first, then resolved to originate from the man's right just as it finished. Where there had once been but a bare wall, a sturdy door of ebon wood had manifested, and it swung smoothly, silently open.

The woman who walked in was tall and graceful, with aristocratic features and blonde hair so pale it was almost silver, tied up in a complex braid that wound around her head like a crown. She wore a coat so white it was almost painful to the eye, buttoned up to her chin. Her face was beautiful, but expressionless; her skin was so pale that her red lips looked like a bloody slash; her dark eyes were ... clouded. Murky.

"Well, well," she said as she approached the man on the table, heels clicking against the floor. "I must admit I'm impressed."

In response, the man's eyelids parted, revealing irises colored a sickening yellow. She bent over him, clouded eyes staring into his—or perhaps through his. It was difficult to tell whether those eyes were actually focusing on him or not.

"I had a bet going with my sisters whether you'd ever do anything but drool again after I finished your last examination. Charissa actually held me back; you might recall. Said I was going too far, that I was cheating."

She ran a finger up one of his arms, fingernail tugging at the pale, barely visible stitches she had left there ... afterward. Her eyes suddenly focused, and her upper lip curled, revealing white teeth. Her breath reeked of brimstone and blood.

"We are all *very* impressed by the way your *faithlessness* has allowed you to pull through your testings with your mind intact. Most of my sisters are just *full* of ideas as to what we might do to you next. So many ideas. So many hopes for things we could learn from taking you apart piece ... by piece ... by piece." With every 'piece,' her fingernail tugged a little harder, until it finally ripped a stitch out of the

man's flesh. A thread of blood ran down his arm, and the glowing orb in the ceiling dimmed; flickered.

"Sweet little Genevieve brought up a salient point at our weekly Little Conclave, though," the woman continued. "Usually, she doesn't say anything when we discuss work, but this time she said: 'If none of you can break or change that creepy guy in cell thirteen, doesn't that mean he's a prisoner instead of a research subject?' It completely shut up the room. I feel so proud of her, you have no idea."

The blonde woman smiled widely, and the man on the table felt his mind *tremble*. His mental defenses were strong enough to fend off the assault on his sanity, but his heart pounded in his chest.

"Just in case you thought that means you're in luck, it is my great pleasure to correct you," the blonde said. "We don't *do* prisoners at the Retreat. No matter what you might think, this is a *research station*, not a prison. And so we are getting ready for a Grand Conclave; the Centurion is even scheduled to come and bring out her vote. I know Mother will be delighted to be rid of you however she can. And if the greater consensus says 'prisoner' instead of 'research subject,' or even 'toy' or 'meal' ..." The smile turned into a vicious grin; the stench of brimstone wafted around the man's head, and his skull seemed to vibrate.

"Shall we just say that you'll wish you'd been allowed to stay here and die under my hands? I would enjoy killing you. Truly. You remind me far too much of those fools in Lamordia; you and your lot would fit right in over there. But as much as I'd enjoy that, I will *laugh* if the Conclave decides to ship you off to Castra. They have some good facilities there for questioning prisoners. I should know; I helped design them myself. And our friends over there won't be holding back because they need you semi-intact for further research. You won't *believe* what they'll do to you over there.

"So, as I said; we're all very impressed you managed to keep your wits together. How about you? Are you happy that you made it back from the edge of the abyss? Is there anything you'd like to say now that

you're talking again, *little man*?" Only someone completely unfamiliar with humanoid anatomy would mistake the expression on the woman's face now for a smile, even though every tooth she had was bared.

Steeling himself slightly, the man returned a tight-lipped smile that was mockingly pleasant. With a voice once honed on cruel words spoken, now cracked by cruelties inflicted, he said, "I would think a true researcher would ask better questions. Of all the sounds I have produced here—screams, curses, ineffective spell formulae—not once have I sung. 'Why do you break your silence now?' you could have asked. 'What do those words mean?' you could have asked. 'What language was that?' you could have asked. And yet, rather than inquire, you taunt." His bilious eyes narrowed in scrutiny. "I could answer all three, and then some, but perhaps you do not care?"

The woman's eyes half-closed; her lips drew shut over those mind-rattling teeth. "Not overly much," she replied, her voice cool again, and a faint aroma of lavender replacing the stench of brimstone. "My area of expertise is flesh." A sudden fingernail dug at the bleeding wound on the man's arm, inflicted sharp pain before rising to transfer a single crimson morsel to those thin, bleeding gash lips.

"However, some of my sisters are interested in language," the woman continued. "And I would hate to cheat them of such knowledge—almost as much as you would hate not to answer your own questions, I'd wager. So by all means, say on."

"The language is Kazvar," he began. "It was dominant when the Order was young, but was eventually supplanted by the creole language that formed in the Colonial Patchwork, which unified under the Rintor Dynasty and grew to eclipse the power of the failing Kazvari hegemon. I never learned Kazvar beyond the words of the Servile Hymns, but I took to the harsher sounds of Rintoran readily."

"I'm sure," the woman said. "Hymns, though...? And you a man of such devout *faithlessness*."

"Yes, an Order severant singing a hymn. Until now, I had left such things behind. That was the Doxology of Xovarothe. Translated, it would be, 'Praises to Xovarothe and his creed, He who begot Xavan here to lead, Who will bring the Unity we need, Praises to Xovarothe and his creed.'" The man squinted slightly, and the corners of his mouth tweaked up. "Well, not quite. An exact translation wouldn't have rhymed. Also, conflating the concept of *Noruk* with Unity is fallacious; *Noruk* has more to do with reducing many to one rather than bringing many together. With elimination rather than reconciliation."

He shook his head. "Perhaps that's beside the point. Indeed, I was worshipful once. In my youth in Valachan, I prayed to Yutow like the rest of my family, but that faith was nothing. I have touched the living hands of a god. At first, it was a revelation. Now, I know it means they are no better than us."

"Feh," the woman scoffed. "You have touched the wrong gods, then. No matter. Your Xovarothe sounds no better than Zuggtmoy, at least. No matter; again. Speak on."

The man's expression could perhaps be described best as a "shrug of the face," displaying his lack of care for her slight against the divine. There followed a flash of confusion in response to the unfamiliar demoness' name, but it passed, and he breathed deeply before continuing. "Life in Valachan was not entirely kind to me. My family—my parents, three older brothers, and twin sister, Mette—lived in Rotwald. They all loved me, but I was not well received by our neighbors. At first, it was just my eyes, but after I climbed a tree with only the barest touch of my fingers and toes granting purchase, I really couldn't go about the town much. People would whisper and stare when they saw me, and where there are whispers of magic, the Black Leopards might investigate." He gave a slight, rueful smile. "They never came for me, but ultimately, I went after them."

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It was the first time the Baron's wife lottery came to Rotwald since my sister had come of age, but that didn't change the fact that she was chosen.

My brothers were furious, and they wanted to save her. I told them that there was no way we could successfully stand against the Black Leopards, but they said that with my gifts, there was no way to fail. If I had refused to help, they would have tried anyway. Besides, how could I do nothing for my sister?

She was to be taken by carriage to Castle Pantara, but they couldn't make the trip without making stops along the way. In the dead of night, we passed through the hamlet they were staying in. We did not try to steal her away then, for we didn't want to contend with interference from residents. Instead, we kept going a few miles, looking for a place to prepare an ambush. We had the good fortune to discover a panther pit not far off of the road. Well, stumbling upon it wasn't good luck, but it was luck that kept Sigmur from breaking his ankle in the fall. We covered it back up and made ready to take our stand.

The Leopards must have left before dawn, as it was just after sunrise—or what passes for it in the Broad Forest—when the carriage drew near us. Sigmur and Rikard were with me, across the pit from the road. Jerg and Halmer—the strongest of us—waited on the other side to rush the carriage and break it open. I fired the first shot; not with a bow, as Sigmur and Rikard did, but with arcane energy. They took cover and fired back, but I made great fists of earth, one by one, which grasped at them. There were four to fight, and I managed to hold two. Rather than stand and wait to be snatched, one of the free pair ran and dove off an embankment down the road, on the opposite side. The last ran straight at me, narrowly missed by my brothers' arrows. He shrugged through another of my blasts before he stepped squarely on the pit and fell.

Jerg and Halmer were already at the carriage by that time, prying at the door. Sigmur and Rikard ran up to knock the two being held down unconscious. I stayed back, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. The excitement and terror of my first battle were nearly overwhelming, so I stumbled back a bit to lean against a tree. I watched as my brothers busted

the door open and Mette clambered out. They were embracing when I heard the growl from the pit.

In front of me, out of the pit, leapt an immense black panther. Its rancorous gaze, backlit by an uncanny intellect, was locked onto me. In a panic, I screamed and scuttled up the tree like a crab, with my back to it. I shot a quick glance out toward my siblings, then movement near the embankment caught my eye. Another panther had climbed onto the road and was slinking toward them. I yelled, "Another down the road!" Then the one below me jumped up and hooked my leg with its claw, dragging me down from the tree.

On the ground, with the wind driven out of me, I was helpless as the panther approached. An arrow from the road struck it, then another, but both bounced off of its hide, and it kept its focus on me. Had it not been for the wayward third shot that grazed its delicate ear, I would certainly have died. Instead, it yowled and looked to the road, where Rikard was nocking another arrow while the others were fending off the second beast. In that moment of reprieve, I gathered my wits, and called upon the ground once more. The monster turned back as I felt the earth begin to rise beneath me, and it pounced directly into the grasping hand as I rolled backward, off of the loamy knuckles.

With the first panther occupied, I hobbled to my siblings as fast as I could. Jerg and Halmer were striking at the other cat with stout wooden poles. Sigmur had his handaxe at the ready, whereas Rikard kept to his bow, but neither had much of an opening to engage. Instead, they stood by Mette, ready to protect her. Surmising that they could do little against it, I commanded the earth once more, extruding another hand behind the creature, but its fingers snapped shut a moment too late. The panther sprang forward and knocked Halmer to the ground, sinking its teeth into his throat. Each of us cried out in anguish, then Jerg leapt onto the panther's back. He took his pole, slid it under the beast's throat, and pulled back on it with all of his might, trying to throttle the creature to death.

The much larger and more flexible feline rolled onto its back, pressing Jerg into the ground, but he didn't let go. Sigmur ran up to strike at its underbelly, but the strike of his axe dealt it little more than a scratch. I began to throw my magical blasts, which had a more significant effect, scorching its hide. It squirmed and thrashed, nearly breaking Jerg's grip, but then Mette grabbed the pole and pressed down. It scored her right cheek with its claws, it managed to sink its teeth into her arm, but she would not let go. Under the pole and my onslaught, the panther let out a last rasping hiss, then lay still.

There was nothing to be done for Halmer, and the other panther was only barely contained by my magic, so we fled from the road. We originally hoped to cross into the forests of Verbrek, and perhaps take the rivers of that land far from the Baron's reach. Jerg and Sigmur were leaving families behind, but their wives—who ran their households, as per custom—had given their assent. However, that did not change the fact that our escape was no better planned than the rescue.

Had we trekked through the Forest that Watches, hampered by my pierced leg and Mette's slow blood loss, we would have had little hope of reaching the Arden (and perhaps less of crossing it). Even if we made it to the Forest of Streams, the border of wolf-infested Verbrek is heavily patrolled. In contrast, the Misty Border was less than five miles distant and much less watched, so we opted to take the gamble of approaching the treacherous edge of the world.

The closer we got, though, the more bewildering the Broad Forest became. On more than one occasion, we found ourselves turned completely around, with the barest glint of the rising sun twinkling sedately through the canopy before us rather than behind us. It was as though some force were set against us, caging us in those trees.

Soon enough, we found ourselves set upon by more black panthers, no less than six coming at us from all sides. We formed a circle, facing out, but it was an empty defensive gesture. If these creatures ran in to attack, we would be dead in moments. They crept in slowly, but surely, fixing us in their predatory stares.

Be that as it may, I could feel that these were no ordinary wild animals.

Suddenly, there was a call from the forest: "Lay down your arms!" Three Black Leopards were pushing through the brush, unconcerned by the powerful cats between us and them. It was clear why; the one speaking was the same man who fell into the pit but a couple of hours ago, and his right ear was noticeably scratched, as though by an arrow that had barely missed his head.

We made no move to comply, but while our heads were turned to see the Leopards, the three panthers on the opposite side of us pounced, knocking us to the ground and pinning us there. The other three padded in to drag our dropped weapons out of our reach, and the Leopards hustled in to seize Mette. They inspected the wound on her face with a sort of exasperation, but when they saw her arm, they were clearly taken aback.

I heard one hiss, "Is that a bite?" They deliberated in hushed tones, then two of them led her away from us. The one with the scratched ear remained, and he offered us something between a taunt and an accolade, saying with a sneer, "Congratulations, she will not be marrying Baron Urik after all."

Next, he came to me, waving off the panther on my back and hauling me to my feet. He clutched my hands behind my back, put a knife to my throat, and growled, "Listen, Witchling. You did the most harm, so you will suffer the most."

He looked to the panthers, still holding my brothers down, and gave his terrible order: "Kill them." I called out and struggled, but I was powerless to stop three great paws from spilling my brothers' lifeblood onto the forest floor.

The Leopard looked into my eyes with a malicious satisfaction, and said, "Now you." Rather than focus on him, however, my attention was drawn to the strange darkening of the woods behind him. Shadows progressively deepened but a dozen yards away, until they were beyond black. His eyes

followed mine, and as he turned to look, the panthers began to growl and back away.

A hum suffused the air, and a violet spark came to life in the darkness. It flickered and flared, giving off buzzing cracks with its motions. The sounds grew to a low roar as the spark bulged into a sphere as wide as two men abreast. A split second later, it burst with the sound of a thunderclap, sending bolts of purple lightning dancing through the air and blowing me and the Leopard over.

Where the sphere had been, there now stood three figures. The smallest stood halfway between four and five feet tall, with gray skin, a bald pate, a large white beard, and eyes like an overcast sky. The haft of a weapon peeked out over his right shoulder, and its oversized, spiked head loomed behind his left hip. The uniform on his stout, sturdy frame was black, with white lines like lightning about the collar and cuffs. Around his waist was a violet sash, the same color as the spark had been, and his boots were accented with strange, red covers of cloth that reached up his ankle.

The largest figure stood at almost twice the height of the first, but its features were obscured by an enormous, leathery cloak. Only its gnarled hands were plainly visible, looking like battering rams of sallow flesh. Despite its hulking mass, it did not command my attention the way the third figure did.

It was nearly a head taller than me, clothed in a black cassock like some sort of priest, but it was no man. Rather than skin, it had dull black scales, and its face was like a lizard's skull, framed by two forward-pointing horns. Two great wings spread from its back, a quiver hung at its waist, and a bow of bleached-white bone was clutched in its wicked claws. In spite of its horrific appearance, it had a regal bearing, and it gave off a palpable sense of preternatural might. It was as though this being had been created to rule over others.

After regaining his wits, the Black Leopard evidently surmised that this bizarre conjuration was my doing, and he rolled to his knees, aiming to skewer me with his blade. With a creak and a snap from the direction

of the interlopers, an arrow with ragged, ebony fletching bloomed from his wrist. He dropped the knife and howled as his flesh decayed rapidly around the wound, and the panthers charged the strange trio.

The bow, now wreathed in dark energy, snapped twice more; the first arrow fatally pierced the skull of one panther, and the second struck the leg of another, sending it tumbling. The short man barked some unintelligible command and thrust forth his clenched fists, and the ground responded with a burst of flame and stones, incapacitating another three panthers.

The last panther reached the largest figure, sinking its teeth into the thing's upper arm. There was no bellow of pain. Rather, the figure just clamped its other hand over the panther's head, preventing it from letting go. It shook its arm once, then again, and finally the third try evoked a sickening crack from the panther's neck. It went limp, and the behemoth brushed it off.

The large one remained silent, but the other two fell to talking in some language I did not know. When the one living panther began to crawl away, the skull-faced archer laid it low with two arrows without interrupting its chthonic vocalizations. One by one, the dead panthers began to shudder and contort, returning to man shape.

The Leopard was still on the ground, cradling his arm. In the lull of activity, I rose, trembling, and pulled the Baron's Arm from the man's belt. Almost blind with rage and loss, I struck him over and over, scoring his face beyond recognition with the spiked fist of his own weapon. I continued until my emotions were exhausted, then cast the bloodstained implement away and sat down with my face in my hands.

I was surprised that the giant didn't make any noise when it walked. It was not until its shadow fell upon me that I sensed its presence. I looked up to see it crouching over the Leopard's body, touching his face, delicately worming its index finger into his mouth. With a sharp tug and a nauseating tearing noise, it

pulled his lower jaw clean off, then proceeded to separate his tongue from the rest of the assembly. It turned and spat something solid into the dirt, then lifted the bloody slug of meat into the privacy of its hood. Despite my role in ruining the man's visage, this repulsive spectacle was too much for me, and I disgorged the contents of a mostly empty stomach onto the ground.

"Have I made you ill, child?" said a deep voice.

I looked up to see the giant turned toward me. Its fingers were working furiously at the dead man's clothing, trying to wipe away the blood they had gathered. In the shade of its hood, I could barely make out a misshapen face, with the eyes at different heights and a crooked nose, to name but a couple of abnormalities.

Once it finished with its hands, it tore away some of the Leopard's clothing to scrub at its chin. "Have I made you ill, child?" it asked again.

"No more ill than I have made myself," I replied, unwilling to throw even an invited accusation at the imposing creature.

It looked at the dead man again, then veiled his ruined face with its makeshift handkerchief. Looking back to me, it asked "What is your name, child?"

The silence drew out for a long moment before I cautiously replied, "Ivar."

The lumpy face spread its thin lips into a grin that was supposed to be friendly, but missed the mark. "I am Honored Mother," rumbled the giant. She pointed to her companions. "We have come to flee the War, and to escape persecution. What do you run from?"

I explained my siblings' mission, to save my sister from marrying the Baron and flee across the border. "But the border was kept from us. No matter how straight we walked, something turned us away."

She spoke to the others, and the lizard-man growled a reply in his own unfathomable voice, accentuating

it with a dismissive gesture. "He feels a force twisting the forest," said Honored Mother, "but he compares it to cobwebs—easily swept aside. Will you walk with us?"

I looked to my fallen brothers. By necessity, we had left Halmer behind on the road, and I was going to have to leave Jerg, Rikard, and Sigmur in the woods. It wasn't right, but there was no time to bury them—or so I thought.

Honored Mother responded to my unspoken concerns—I'd wager they were fairly evident on my face—by addressing the scaly one. He gave a snort, perhaps of annoyance, and the short, gray man scowled. Still, the former cast his gaze about the woods, then pointed out a sizable, mossy boulder several paces away, issuing some order. Honored Mother proceeded to gather my brothers under one arm and carry them in that direction, laying them against the rock that had been indicated.

The kingly reptile and the uniformed man followed me over there, and when Honored Mother stepped back from laying my brothers out, the reptile stepped forward and began to speak, lifting his arms and gesturing in tandem with his proclamations. There was a grinding noise, and new stone began to materialize on the boulder. It grew into a box-like shape under his direction, ultimately forming a squat obelisk to entomb my kin.

No words were carved on that mausoleum, no indications of who reposed within, but the honor of burial was done. We all gathered about the black-horned one and began to walk. He seemed to be concentrating, glaring ahead through half-lidded eyes. The fog became thicker and thicker, which was promising, but we seemed to be slowing down. Indeed, the reptile-man's eyes eventually narrowed to slits, and he soon after put his hand out before him, as though he were pushing through something. Finally, he swept his hand aside (which made his claws pass altogether too close to my face), and declared (as Honored Mother translated for me), "We are through."

The Mists were all about, dense enough that only the nearest trees were visible, and then only as silhouettes. We kept walking, and these looming shadows began to taper midway up, looking dangerously unstable. Soon enough, we passed between two that clearly separated in the middle, like a pair of towering fangs. Entering this maw, we were close enough to the right for me to reach out and touch one of these teeth. My fingers traced over cold, wet stone, not bark; we were walking in a cave, surrounded by stalactites and stalagmites.

The Mists began to clear away, and the darkness followed. Points of multicolored light were approaching before us, taking the shape of caps, stalks, and shelf fungi. The gray man looked about with fire in his eyes, as though recognizing a hated foe. Winding paths were clearly channeling us toward some center in this mushroom garden, and every step drove the man to greater levels of agitation.

Ultimately, we came to the core of the cave, where a mushroom nearly half again as tall as Honored Mother put forth a calm aura of blue light from its fleshy cap. Scores of voices whispered in the air there, not addressing anyone in particular at first. Then, one rose above the others, but I did not know what it said.

The stunted man was livid, responding in bitter, enraged tones. The voice spoke again, but he had none of it, spitting out what I could only assume were curses and threats. Flame began to lick across his entire body, and I feared he would soon explode. Instead, the scaled man gripped the smaller man's shoulder and interposed himself between the mushroom and us. The fire died in response to his grave voice, and he lifted a hand to the mushroom, bringing his claws together in a crushing gesture. The lights dimmed and faded, and the scene about us dissolved back into the Mists.

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"A long time later," said Ivar, "I asked Honored Mother about that event. She wasn't sure how the cave, the fungi, or the voices related to

Rallux—the little gray man; a duergar, she called him—but she knew the primary voice chided him. It told him he had not been wrong to follow his conscience, but he should stop fixating on his banishment and follow it again. He would have burned the place to the ground, but Xavan—the reptilian archer—felt it was a trap for Rallux, and he dispersed it before it fully gathered together."

The blonde woman's eyes narrowed at this. "... Prudent. And smartly done," she admits. "Though such a realm, once completely formed, might have yielded interesting experimental data. I have yet to see a domain formed around a duergar. The more standard dwarves, certainly, but never a *duergar*. No matter; the Mists are vast and fresh test subjects are delivered daily." She gave Ivar another skull-rattling, soul-shaking grin. "Patience is a virtue, and sooner or later the chance will fall into my lap."

"You will understand if I do not wish you luck," Ivar replied, "lest the Mists come for Rallux again, as I fear they one day will."

In response, the blonde woman uttered a titter of amusement—a sound not reflected on her face. "Little man," she purred. "Don't you know? Luck is an illusion, crafted by the gods. *And* the archfiends. Mortals are not the only ones who enjoy playing games."

"Nor are gods and fiends the only ones playing with this place," Ivar said, "especially beyond the borders." Ivar shifted in his manacles, then went on with his tale. "When we finally emerged from the Mists, we had only gone as far as Mordent, though it was still farther than I had been in my life."

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Rallux and Xavan could not speak Mordentish, but neither could I at the time. However, none of them could openly walk the streets of a town without causing alarm, so they made do with me as an intermediary. Xavan's magic could allow me to understand foreign speech for a time, but I knew my usefulness would not last if I didn't make an effort to learn more permanently.

For weeks, I would spend the day learning about the land, orienting myself and gathering intelligence for my new companions. By night, we would squat in abandoned manor houses. After making my reports, I would spend time speaking with Honored Mother, both of us practicing languages we were only borrowing at the time. Meanwhile, Rallux and Xavan would plan and quibble, each one sure *he* was truly in charge.

One evening, after an argument broke his way, Xavan came to me and granted me linguistic facility again, so that he might address me directly. "Have you faith?" he asked.

At first, I didn't realize he was speaking of religion, so I replied, "Faith in what in particular?"

He took a deep breath, clearly thinking I was being slow. "Do you worship?"

I knew not why he was asking, and my expression showed it, but I answered: "I tried to honor Yutow the Peacebringer, but only because it was expected. The *moarnecone* of Rotwald called me a walking blasphemy once, for my gifts."

"Some gods fear gifts that are beyond their power," Xavan replied. "My father does not. He respects those with their own power." He drew an amulet of polished black jet out from his collar. It was shaped like his own head, with skeletal reptilian features flanked by sharp horns, and I noticed a hinge mechanism, which seemed to be made so the mouth could open. "I need priests, servants for my father, and I need assistance to recruit them. You are invited to be the first."

I was not sure what to make of the offer. Priesthood was never a path I had considered, but I had also never been asked to join a religious sect by a horned lizard that seemed to be implying he was sired by a deity. With caution, I asked, "What would my acceptance entail?"

Xavan tucked the amulet away and closed his eyes, whispering mystical words that I still could not

understand, then he offered me his hands. "Allow me to show you."

Tentatively, I reached forward and placed both of my hands in his. Consequently, the room darkened around us. Honored Mother, Rallux, and the ruined furniture all faded from my sight. We again became surrounded by points of light, but not those of the fungus cave; we were afloat in the night sky.

He opened his eyes and looked around. "My world was in order once, long before my time. The Architects made it for some grand, unknown purpose, but then the gods arose from the faith of mortals. The Architects hid, and the gods took over management of the Celestium. That was when the decline began."

Beneath us, the stars began to move outward, leaving an emptiness under our feet. "They determined what was moral and right about mortal behavior, and what was not. When a mortal fell to iniquity, did they give it a chance to correct its ways and repent in the next life? No." The stars turned into humanoids, and began to fall into the darkness underneath us. "They were irrevocably flung into the Void, cast away like refuse."

"It was not long before they began to condemn each other to the Void," he continued, and an angry red streak, like a falling vermilion star, shot downward past us. "The first was Lyvarion, for his bloodlust. The second—" An armored titan, tangled in chains that seemed to grow from its own body fell past us on the other side. "—was Huokki the Tyrant. Their transgressions were of their own maleficent will, but Vomori, brother of Vathmos, was imprisoned for going inexplicably mad. When is being driven insane a crime?" A monstrous beast of the sea, tentacles coursing with lightning, careened by, trailing a column of thunderheads the way a squid sprays ink. "Then the sentences became even more oppressive. Birzau only objected to the proscription of knowledge, thinking mortals should decide for themselves what they would condone." A flurry of torn parchment swirled down around us. "And when Quask finally thought the others had gone too far and advocated for ceasing to manipulate the flow of



souls, he too was sent into the nothingness." A simple figure, no more than human in shape, tumbled past, and I caught a glimpse of his piercing, sorrowful eyes looking back into mine, only moments before he vanished.

"The last to go was Zalknetar, a trickster at heart." What descended next took no single form, shifting between woman, man, serpent, wolf, bird, tiger, smoke, sand, and all manner of guises on its way. "When mankind was on the road to extermination or enslavement at the hands of the ancient hobgoblin empire, Zalknetar stole the secret of civilization and gave it to the humans, allowing them to organize and drive the goblin armies back. But he was not celebrated for saving your kind. Instead, he was punished for interfering in the development of the mortal world, subverting the will of the Natural Order."

After the shapeshifter passed from my sight, there were only Xavan and I in the black expanse. However, we were soon beset by the uncomfortable sensation of pressure, coming in from all sides. The darkness squealed and creaked, like a house on the edge of collapse. "They reaped what they sowed," growled Xavan, and the emptiness burst. A whirlwind of shrieking spirits boiled up from the depths, rushing around us in a cascade of pain and anger. "The Void was ruptured from the inside, by its own prisoners. The only evil not released into the world was the hubris that had created the Void in the first place." On the heels of the torrent came a ball of flame, roaring into the sky to join the stars that had reappeared. In the Void below, I also thought I saw stars, but I realized swiftly that this was not the case. Glaring up at me were thousands of malicious eyes.

Under the dome of the heavens was a point of white light, brighter than all of the others, and spinning around it were twelve large orbs. The outermost was an immense blasted rock, and the next in looked like a solid ball of ice. The next four were gigantic in comparison, swirling with surreal combinations of color. The inner six were smaller, and all earthen, with the fourth out from the center being the most

beautiful of the lot, a brilliant gem of blue and green. "That is our home," said Xavan.

To this one the eyes turned, and the horrid shapes they were attached to crawled from the blackness toward it. They shrank away to the point of invisibility as they neared the orb, underscoring the vast distance that must have lain between our position and their destination. It strained my mind to think of how vast the orb must have been!

When the fifth orb fractured and split apart, I thought there would be an unimaginable cacophony to follow, but it never came. Eventually, however, the dark shapes with the vile eyes returned, dragging the largest chunks of the great rock into the Void with them. "The war on the Celestium has gone on ever since."

Xavan released my left hand and spread his wings. Without a single flap, he began to drag me through the intervening space, toward the fourth orb. With a speed only possible in dreams, we passed the outer spheres in mere minutes—a spectacular sight to be sure—and came to a stop with the fourth orb looming colossally before us. Behind us, an enormous fragment of the shattered fifth sphere swung by, caught in orbit about the fourth.

"It was mortals, not gods, who stopped the Awful Quakes, which tilted the axis of the world." The orb's surface dipped before us, as though the entire thing were caught in a bow it could not reverse.

"When endless, pointless quarrels of the gods reached a breaking point, it was mortals who suffered and died on the battlefield." Black clouds sprang up all over the landmass that spun underneath us, and I saw that it was smoke. Green lands were turned to brown and carved up under the heels of armies. Cities—much more visible than was realistically possible at that altitude—were razed by catapult, ballista, trebuchet, and ram. "My father was forced to fight there, before his ascent."

The world vanished into the night, and every star winked out. Xavan and I were alone in the darkness once again, but now a chill crept up on us. "My

father and our allies sought to end the reign of the divine, to free the world from their rule. Without the gods, there will be peace with the damned, and the dead will flow freely to their fate again. Mortals will choose for themselves when conflicts arise.”

The cold grew painful now, and Xavan placed his free hand on my shoulder as he turned to face me again. He released my hand and grasped my other shoulder, then said, “You asked what you must do if you accept my offer. I tell you now, god to mortal, that I desire your support in deposing my kin, to serve one god so that many gods will be cast down, to give us your faith so we may end our brethren’s capricious subjugation of our world, and other worlds as well.” All around us, there was the noise of crackling flame, but the cold persisted in worsening.

Then came the light, but not the warm orange light of a fire. A line of vibrant purple illumination was slashed across the darkness beside us, and it began to widen, turning into a great violet eye taller than Xavan. The eye pulled back, and the shadows around us began to unfurl. We were standing on a desolate, gray plain, under a thickly clouded sky, and a terrible beast rose up above us as it released us from the confines of its enveloping coils. It was a great winged dragon, its horn-crowned head reminiscent of Xavan’s own, but its features—along with every inch of its bulk—were obscured by sheets of icy, black flame. Only its massive violet eyes broke the surface of its impalpable form. Its head reared back, its mouth gaped wide, and it unleashed a tremendous roar across the dead flatlands.

The pressure of Xavan’s hands brought me to my knees, and he bellowed, “I have shown you their crimes, and you stand at the feet of their fate! I ask you now, will you serve the Death of Gods?”

In that moment, I saw true power, and I was being offered a piece of it. That would have been enough for most, but I saw more. I saw the start of a community, one where differences were not shunned, one which embodied the pursuit of self-determination. I inclined my head, clasped my hands before me, and pledged, “I serve the Death of Gods!”

Xavan began to chant again, and I could feel his mind reaching into mine, opening doors of consciousness wide to receive the wisdom and strength of my new master. Eagerly, I awaited contact with the divine.

Anticlimactically, it never arrived.

The shabby, dilapidated cellar coalesced around us. Honored Mother crouched by Rallux, who sat with his arms folded in an unimpressed manner. Xavan withdrew from me and went to meditate on the opposite side of the room. “Join me in prayer,” he said. “Your formal training begins in the morning.”

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Back on the table, Ivar shook his head. “It was explained to me that this realm is insulated from divine influence. Xavan could impose his presence upon me, give me a taste of his power, but he could not connect me directly with his father, Xovaroth. Some other force rewards our faith here. Still, Xavan was living proof of Xovaroth’s existence, which is more than can be said about any deity of this world.”

The blonde woman ... smiled. “Interesting you should say so,” she said, as she leaned almost companionably on the table—one finger tugging again at Ivar’s stitches. “Ask those fool Lamordians, and they will say the gods do not exist, that all the *Weltaulkügel* functions as a mechanism activated by itself, for itself.” Her smile widened. “Ask those lucky, lucky Outlanders who wander into this realm of possibilities, and they will say the gods feel distant, muted. But the gods who were born here ...? Heh. I wonder.

“But I *do* go on, and theology is more my sister Lillian’s territory. Continue your story.”

“Very well,” said Ivar. “Shortly thereafter, I asked about Rallux’s role in Xovaroth’s faithful, but Xavan swiftly corrected my mistaken assumption. Rallux belongs to the Order of Exclusion, enemies of all faith, but allies to Xovaroth’s cult nonetheless. My destiny was not meant to entwine with that of Rallux for a while yet. First, I had to be indoctrinated.”

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I spent the next week steeped in the customs and teachings of the Cult of Xovaroath. Xavan taught me how to pray for magic, how to channel negative energy to cow the undead (which he

created to test me), and what ceremonies I must be able to perform. Along with these more practical matters, he instructed me in the history of our religion and catalogued the crimes of the other gods, often in the form of one of the dirges he called the Servile Hymns.

### THE CULT OF XOVAROTH Greater Deity (Neutral Evil)

There was a black dragon displeased with the gods long before the Order of Exclusion was formed. In his adulthood, he was compelled by human priests to serve in a great holy war that wracked the continent, and while he was not averse to horror and bloodshed, he loathed the whole ordeal. He saw countless mortals sent to die to resolve the disputes of the gods, and why should they? What right other than the right of might did the gods have to set edicts and moral standards? In his view, they were no more than children making starving rats fight each other to settle a petty squabble.

Some of those who worked against the Order believe that the dragon inspired the creation of the Order, but he knows that is not true. The first Overmaster, Faxikae Zar, attempted to recruit the dragon into what was then a fledgling conspiracy, and the dragon rejected the offer. Faxikae, a dwarf neogi (see *Lords of Madness* page 94), was born two-hundred years after the holy war. The neogi believe that everything will be owned by their race in time, but Faxikae realized that the gods themselves—too powerful to reasonably be enslaved—were a severe impediment to this goal. Contrary to popular opinion, the Order was not born of some grand rejection of divine authority, but Faxikae, ever the salesman, adapted the narrative to appeal to more general customers. By the time the dragon became a wyrm, the organization had grown, and was controlled by a council of seven Overmasters. Finally taking Faxikae seriously, the dragon allied himself with the Order.

There is an eons-dead world adjacent to the home of the Order of Exclusion, a place where every living being passed on, followed by every god that relied on their worship. Known as the Paling Realm, it was naturally of interest to the Order, being without gods, and it was an expression of their goal—the end of all gods before the end of all things—in reverse.

A century after the joining of the dragon, it was decided that to combat the gods, the Order would need to fight on their level. To this end, the Overmasters (now numbering nine) took the dragon into the dead world, to a structure they called the Sepulchre. There, the God of Death itself had expired—the last to go, of course. With the blackest of magic, the Overmasters drew the lingering essence of this deceased divinity and siphoned it into the dragon. Abandoning his old name, now lost to history, the dragon took the name Xovaroath—Death of Gods in the Draconic tongue.

Xovaroath gathered followers to empower him with worship, and he gave them as disposable servants to the Order, to aid in their collective war against all gods. For this reason, some people of the Order's world derisively refer to him as Old Zavrath, a coincidentally similar-sounding Kazvar word meaning "hypocrite." Xovaroath does not succumb to the criticism, however, for he holds every single one of his worshipers in contempt for being gullible enough to serve him.

Once the Order and the Cult grew into a real threat to divine rule, all gods and their worshipers banded together to exterminate the two organizations. As the Orb War shook the entire mortal world, the deities themselves directly combated Xovaroth, forcing him back into the Paling Realm and sealing the dead world away from the rest of the universe as best they could. While Xovaroth is no longer able to directly affect the planes, his worshipers can still receive spells and visions from him—his worshipers outside of the Dread Realms, that is.

With Xavan present to organize the Cult from scratch once again, the doctrine has not been warped by passage into the Mists, as so many others have. However, some of their goals have taken different forms, given their particular situation. They hope to build up their forces in the Land of Mists, then return to Xavan's world en masse, somehow.

**Portfolio:** Death, deicide, imprisonment

**Domains:** Death, Evil, Hatred (*Spell Compendium* page 275), Portal (*Spell Compendium* page 278), Spite (*Heroes of Horror* page 126).

**Cleric Training:** The Cult of Xovaroth is willing to recruit almost anyone with a pulse (and some without), because every member is no better than a tool for Xovaroth and the Order of Exclusion. They are called *serviles* for this reason, but members of the Order often derisively refer to them as *viles* in private conversation. Most cultists are instructed through magically aided psychological conditioning, often spending a lot of their time *charmed*, *enthralled* and being put under the influence of *suggestions*—as well as more heinous effects—by special minstrel-priests called *precentors*. This is done to whip their loyalty into fanaticism.

There is no formal rank among the clerics of Xovaroth. They are forbidden from killing each other to gain dominance, so they often jockey for position by demonstrating the extent of their granted powers. They are expected to obey members of the Order of Exclusion without question.

Corruptors (Dragon Magazine #312) have a special place in Xovaroth's clergy. Their ability to intercede and cut off divine spellcasters from their deities is highly valued by the Order of Exclusion, so they form the upper echelons of the Cult. They are honored (and simultaneously belittled) by the title of *younger brother*, which patronizingly reminds them that they are better than other serviles of Xovaroth, but not equal to any member of the Order.

Younger brothers all aspire to be released from dependence on Xovaroth's power and inducted into the Order. When a younger brother sufficiently distinguishes himself, he may be elevated to the rank of *elder brother*, which carries authority equivalent to a servant or Master of the Order. A secret ceremony of revelation is involved, which often causes shifts in the personality of the new elder brother.

**Quests:** Beyond the commands handed down by the Order, the serviles of Xovaroth are often sent to destroy the institutions of other deities. This can take the form of a direct assault, but oftentimes a more subtle erosion of a sect's moral high ground, using scandal and subterfuge, yields better spoils.

Since Xovaroth's imprisonment in the Paling Realm, his followers have been obsessed with finding and opening pathways that might allow them to reach and ultimately free their god.

**Prayers:** The precentors of Xovaroth teach the Servile Hymns, which condemn all other gods, praise the power of Xovaroth and Xavan, and describe the idealized new world order. Services and personal prayers generally begin and end with the Doxology of Xovaroth.

**Temples:** Due to intense persecution, temples to Xovaroth are almost always hidden and secluded. The only temple to Xovaroth in the Core is in Saecal Natormo, the Order of Exclusion's base of operations. This small fortress—raised by the divine might of Xavan—lies in the Vale of Memory in Verbek. It is entirely hidden by illusion, and it boasts magical and physical protections designed with the intent of dissuading lycanthropic attack. Otherwise, its inhabitants hope the werewolves will keep away unwanted visitors.

**Rites:** The rites of Xovaroth never celebrate positive aspects of life. Marriage, childbirth, coming of age, and other such things are not recognized with any ceremony. Funerals are also not held; the bodies of fallen serviles are treated as little more than trash. Ceremonial executions are practiced for captured religious authorities. Additionally, the precentors play a special fanfare whenever the Overmasters of the Order of Exclusion grace a temple with their presence.

**Heralds and Allies:** Xavan is Xovaroth's principal herald in the world, but he has used cinderspawn (*Libris Mortis* page 91) advanced to 20 HD as well. In response to the *planar ally* spells, he prefers to send shadow efths (*Complete Psionic* page 134), rukarazylls (*Monster Manual II* page 181), and mature nabassus (*Fiendish Codex I* page 48). Supposedly, shadow efths can still trace paths through the Plane of Shadow to the Paling Realm, but they either cannot—or will not—bring anything along with them.

Along this vein, he told me that a priority in the process of establishing his faith would be the recruitment and training of precentors, the leaders of the Servile Hymns. He considered their instructive skill to be vital to scaling up the rate of induction. As such, when I went into settlements, I would take note of musicians that I saw, engage them in conversation, and report their names back to Xavan. With a font he stole from an abbey and desecrated, he would scry upon these musicians. Most lacked the talents he desired—abilities beyond music that he could not teach—but he was particularly pleased with the first one that did.

Her name was Sophia Hogarth, a woman no more than a decade older than me, with her brown hair curled up and pinned at the base of her skull. As is the prerogative of practical travelers, she wore sturdy trousers, in contrast to the dresses more common of women in the realm. From afar, the both of us under the spell of communication, we watched her strum a zither and sing of lost love in a tavern in Blackburn's Crossing. She had quick fingers and an exquisite voice, but I had no particular interest in the subject matter of her mournful song. Xavan, on the other hand, was rapt.

"What does she have that the others did not?" I asked. "Surely not the song. We have heard six romantic ballads in half as many days."

Xavan smirked. "There are a few things different about this song. Did you see the balding man at the bar?"

Indeed, I had noticed him earlier. He had been among those least interested in the music, keeping up an obnoxiously loud conversation. Now, however, he was paying very close attention, almost as though he was mesmerized. "Plenty of the others could hold a crowd's attention," I replied.

"Not like this," Xavan said. "I feel magic at work. What else could she make her audience do, I wonder." His claws tapped rhythmically against the rim of the font, in time with the music.

"Is that all you seek?" said I. "Sorcerous minstrels?"

Xavan did not break eye contact with the scene in the water. "That is the primary criterion, but I will not consider it in a vacuum." He put a finger to his ear as an indicative gesture. "Listen closely. She sings of no man."

This statement confused me immensely, but I concentrated on the lyrics. Indeed, couched in careful metaphor, Sophia was subtly describing what could only be a woman. The figurative language veiled it so carefully, however, that one could easily think it was a mistaken interpretation, a coincidence of words. At first, that is exactly what I chose to believe. “That cannot be correct. Why would she sing from a man’s perspective?”

At that, Xavan broke his gaze away from the vision. He fixed me in a stare of blank assessment, as though he were trying to figure out exactly how thick I was. “I don’t believe she does,” he grumbled. “I suspect we have found a narrow point in your experience.”

After a few more moments of listening and letting the evidence percolate in my mind, I began to come around to what Xavan meant to say. Subsequently, I moved on to a more productive line of questioning: “What do her romantic tastes have to do with your search for precentors?”

Xavan’s eyes had turned back to the font, and there they stayed as he replied, “They make her an outcast. In Valachan, I suspect Yutow’s moarnecone would cry ‘abomination.’ Even without a god to condemn her behavior, there will always be men threatened by women who have no use for them.” He slashed at the water with the back of his claws, dismissing the spectacle. “It is quite fortuitous that this is what sets her apart. I have reason to want precentors who will not be with child.”

At that cryptic comment, he cast a fleeting glance at Honored Mother, who sat on her haunches by a broken window, surveying the countryside for interlopers. This uncanny feeling washed over me as I viewed her, and I shuddered. Quickly wrenching my focus back to Xavan, I asked, “Will you show Sophia what you showed me?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to repeat that taxing procedure.” He tossed the water out of the font and leaned it irreverently against the wall. “One size does not fit all, in any case. We shall attempt a simpler measure: an offer of employment.” He went

on to furnish me with a description of my morning task, then both of us slept for the evening.

In the morning, I sought out our precentor-to-be, who was purchasing some supplies in preparation for moving on. I could tell she was not particularly thrilled that I had come back. After all, most men that refused to leave her alone were probably sources of annoyance, full of empty promises and the arrogance endemic to males. Fortunately, she was insightful enough to tell I spoke honestly—if evasively—about the job opportunity my master had for her. She agreed to hear the tales she would be asked to tell and consider the offer, and I asked for her to choose a private place where what I had to say would not be overheard. She narrowed her eyes at that, clearly thinking I was setting her up in a most clumsy fashion, but I made it quite clear that what I had to say was for her ears only. Cautiously taking my word, she selected a grove down the river, in sight of the town’s edge, but far enough away to keep our words from being overheard. I had hoped she would opt for the Blackburn-Bruce manor (where my companions and I were residing), but I suppose it was too obvious a choice. Xavan’s plan was not dependent on the luxury of convenience, however.

Once in the grove, I bade her to sit across from me. With us both in place, I began to sing the Servile Hymns, starting with the Doxology of Xovaroth. Each song was translated for her by the very magic which enabled us to communicate, as I was still a long way from fluency in her tongue. The particular cycle I performed relayed the highlights of my faith’s history, summarizing the prehistoric crimes of the gods, depicting the consequences of their mistakes for the mortals they were supposed to shepherd, glorifying the rebellion that Xovaroth led, and lamenting their harsh suppression. The episode lasted less than three-quarters of an hour, and was punctuated by a reprise of the Doxology.

Sophia had listened respectfully and intently, and had this to say once I had finished: “It is a classical take on the divine found among the more daring philosophers; the gods are flawed, like people, and ultimately cause the ills that afflict mortals. It is a

creative version, but—do not take offense—I did not find it compelling. The tale, involving characters of a distant fantasy, has little to appeal to those raised on more familiar mythologies.”

To my right came a voice like quaking earth, “That is why we need you, a skilled storyteller.” My head turned sedately to see Xavan, who stood within a few yards of Sophia and me, having slipped near during my solo act.

Sophia’s head whipped around in alarm, and her eyelids were thrown completely open by shock. From her perspective, she had just witnessed a story character—a particularly horrific one—come to life. She tumbled backward into a crouch, pointing a knife at me which I had not seen her draw. I was clearly the only one that knife might work on.

Xavan’s laughter rumbled forth like thunder, and he proffered his empty palms (as though he looked any less menacing unarmed). “Peace. I am not here to harm you.”

She swallowed dryly, then returned the blade to a sheathe concealed in a fold of her shirt. “I know,” she said. She straightened up, and I rose from the ground as well. Tentatively, she spoke again, “You want *me* to tell your stories?”

“It is more than that,” said Xavan. “I do not just want these tales spread; I want them *taught*. A good teacher tailors her lessons for her students.” He advanced a few steps, stopping when Sophia looked tense enough to snap. “You would make adjustments, make my father’s word more relatable to the people of this world.”

Her face slackened a bit at that, responding to the implication that places beyond this realm truly did exist. Her demeanor became more grounded in a moment, however, and she asked, “Why should I do this?”

Xavan leered in what I believe to be the nearest thing to a true smile he is capable of. “It is a position of great honor, to be a preceptor of Xovaroath. Not to mention great power.” He began walking again, now

on a curved path around her. “My father’s demands are few. He only wants more brought into his revolt, to grant him the strength to free mortals from their divine masters.” Now on the opposite side of her—she turned to face him always, knowing he was the greater threat—he looked past her to me, then back. “You creatures should live as you please. We want you to act as your own principles dictate, associate with whomever you choose.” Pointedly, he gazed away from her, into the woods, as he said, “Love whomever you choose.”

Sophia was not an idiot. She could tell that last statement was like bait in a trap, a trap shutting slowly as Xavan spiraled lazily toward her. Boldly, she said as much. “You tempt me with a gilded cage.”

Xavan’s steps never faltered. “Mortals build their own cages. I promise you, the door will always be open, so long as you don’t close it yourself.” Whether by luck or by wisdom, his face remained wholly serious as he beheld her, his leer refusing to resurface. “And should you wander, the chain leading you back will be as long as you need. But look, and the key to the manacle will be in reach.”

I began to wonder at what manner of cage I had commissioned for myself. I had never been guaranteed exits, and for a brief moment, I squirmed at the thought of what I might have traded away forever. However, my surroundings recaptured my attention, and the moment passed.

Sophia had allowed Xavan to get within arm’s reach of her, and they now stood facing each other. His right hand was extended toward her. With ritual gravitas, he intoned, “Will you serve Xovaroath, so his goals may serve you?”

At first, I actually thought she would refuse. With clear indifference to Xavan, she reached down for her pack, which she had shrugged off when our conversation in the grove began. She shouldered it like she was preparing to simply walk away, then surprised me again by clasping Xavan’s clawed appendage. “I will.” With those two words, she traded whatever cage she had been working on her whole life for one to Xavan’s better specifications.

Xavan nodded. “To be at the dragon’s side is preferable to being in his way. Join us in the abandoned manor this evening, and we shall depart this place.”

She agreed, then left the grove, heading back toward town. Xavan and I followed suit shortly thereafter, only by a more circuitous route.

### Sophia Hogarth

Sophia (NE Human (Mordentish) Bard 7/Cleric 4) is the Principle Precentor of the Cult of Xovaroth, teaching the ideals and history of the faith—by way of the Servile Hymns—to all recruits at Saecal Natormo. Her subordinate precentors stand in contrast to her, being more priests than musicians. Unlike them, she views her position within the Cult more as employment than spiritual duty, which hampers her advancement as a cleric.

In her time at Saecal Natormo, she has begun to find Xavan’s implied promises about idealized, free society ring hollow. She actively participates in the “training” of the serviles, which amounts to little more than brainwashing. As such, she periodically obtains leave to travel the more advanced domains of the Core. This exposes her to a greater variety of music and allows her to escape into a more normal life for a short while. In spite of the respite she gets from these excursions, she always returns to Saecal Natormo. For one thing, she is not confident that resignation is an option, and for another, she has grown to enjoy the authority she wields. In fact, as it becomes apparent that the Order of Exclusion does not respect the serviles, she has started to wonder if she can climb the ladder further.

Her primary instruments are the zither and voice, but she also became capable with the *cor de chasse*, at the insistence of Xavan. In combat, she wields a Parthian rapier—to her, violence is about survival, not honor.

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“As we made our way to the northwest with Sophia in our company,” Ivar said, “Xavan became

somewhat more lax in his selection of precentors. He still sought out those who stood apart from society in some way, but he no longer required that their music hold true magic. By the time we reached Mordentshire, we had acquired a former burglar with a viol, a hunched caliban with a syrinx, and a formerly blind flautist whose sight was restored by Xavan’s power. On matters of magic, these three were Sophia’s students, while on matters of faith, they sat alongside her and me at the feet of Xavan.”

“Typical really,” the blonde woman mused. “Those who bray loudest about freeing the unwashed masses from one oppressor or another are the quickest to claim their *venerant* obedience for themselves.”

“‘Twas a lesson I had yet to learn. There were miles to go before I could look back with unveiled eyes.” He paused mid-blink, withdrawn from the seeing world for a moment as his thoughts gathered.

“You might suspect the highlight of our time in Mordentshire was our visit to the House on Gryphon Hill,” Ivar continued, “but that was not the case. In fact, it precipitated what was truly a turning point for me and my relationship with Xavan, for it was staying out of Gryphon Manor which caused us to meet Emmanuel Erdenkaine.”

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We approached the town from the east in the dead of night, but halted in our tracks when we met the edge of a moor. Sophia and two of the other precentors-in-training (not the caliban) had grown rather uneasy at this point, looking north and south as if willing a decision to be made faster. The ground swelled up before us in the distance, but its outline against the starry sky was broken by a tall, angular, towered shape.

Xavan leveled an outstretched finger at the building. Speaking Low Mordentish to address the majority of the group, he said “We shall head there. Mayhap it is unoccupied.”



Sophia and the two nervous men looked aghast at this suggestion. She opened her mouth to speak, but it had gone dry. She swallowed, and tried again. “Forgive me, but—unless I am mistaken—that has to be the House on Gryphon Hill.” Nearly half of this I understood, but the exact words of the conversation had to be filled in during my next language lesson with Honored Mother.

Xavan turned to regard her. “What of it? Do you know this place to be in use?”

“No ... not by the living, at least.” Unlike her, she seemed to be having difficulty choosing her words. Though I had no frame of reference, her obvious fear began to catch in me as well. She continued, “It is said to be cursed; haunted. Evil. It is not a safe place to linger.”

Xavan’s eyes and slit-pupils narrowed. “If it is superstition, I will not be cowed. If there is truly a power here, I would see if it can be mastered. We press forward.”

The flautist and viol-player shared a terrified glance. Rallux—receiving the conversation on a delay from Honored Mother—glared at Xavan, but said nothing. It was likely he agreed with this course of action, but hated Xavan’s unilateral decision and air of total command. Xavan ignored all of this, and began to chant, simultaneously stretching a claw out toward the manor, his palm upward, as if bidding it to rise and walk toward us. Instead of that spectacle, the earth shook, and a packed dirt path rose from the mire, wending its way toward the manor like a centipede over a rotten log. My secondhand agitation assuaged by this display of might, I was quick to follow my master as he strode forward. The precentors fell in step with a moment’s hesitation, and Rallux and Honored Mother brought up the rear.

An oppressive sensation mounted as we approached the terrible manor. This was no mere superstition; the site shed a sensation of foreboding and malice. As our path wound past a decrepit graveyard, I became chilled, as though a dead, ephemeral finger traced my spine. I turned to look, and saw those behind me had all stopped. The precentors looked

terrified, clearly gripped by sensations of a similar character. Rallux, however, was simply being inconvenienced by the people in front of him, and shoved the caliban to get him going again. We all resumed following Xavan.

Xavan’s conjured path brought us to the front door of the manor, which was surmounted by a gryphon motif, and two full statues of the creatures flanked the entrance. A knocker designed to look like a skull glowered at our company. In silence and dread, I stared back, feeling like I was lost in a sea of ill will.

The precentors and I practically jumped out of our hides when the silence was broken by two rasped words. Now that I know Rintoran, I know they meant, “Stay back.”

Turning to look, we saw Rallux regarding Honored Mother with an expression of mild worry—disturbing, given that he had previously seemed only capable of contempt. She stood ahead of him, drawn toward the manor, with her right hand mysteriously clutching her belly. I imagine her face may have looked half-hypnotized, but the shadow of her cowl kept that from us. Her left hand trailed behind her, caught at the wrist by Rallux. Though he was certainly not strong enough to hold her, this connection seemed to anchor her in place.

Xavan regarded us coolly, seemingly unfazed by the aura of the structure. “I enter alone,” he growled, then he placed both hands on the door and gave it a shove. With a groan and no small amount of splintering, it opened wide to admit him, and he vanished into the darkness within.

A minute passed in silence, and we stewed in our apprehension as we gazed into the shrouded foyer. Sophia and the two human precentors could see nothing but shadow, but ancient suits of armor standing to either side of the door and a great marble staircase further within were visible to the dark-adapted eyes of Rallux, Honored Mother, and the caliban. Yet there were stranger things than these that only I could see; translucent humanoid outlines that floated through the room, cowered on the stairs, and thronged the windows to look at us.

Deep down, I knew these were the dead, lingering in this place at a most astonishing density.

In response to the intrusion of our eyes (perhaps mine in particular), the doors slowly swung shut of their own accord, the hinges complaining at their lot. The precentors and I exchanged looks of rising dread, whereas Rallux was stonefaced, appraising the manor in its entirety while still gripping Honored Mother's arm.

After eight minutes of eternity, the viol-player looked like he would be the first to panic. He was starting to jabber; I caught the phrase, "swallowed by the house," but he was speaking too fast, and using words I was not yet familiar with. If he spiraled out of control, I feared he would take others with him—particularly the caliban.

I turned back to the manor, hoping to see some sign of our master, and there I saw two ethereal figures emerging through the wood of the door. I recognized one immediately, its silhouette distinguished by the horns and wings of Xavan. The other was a stooped man-shape, walking with a cane.

An instant later, the first figure ceased to be no more than a shape, as Xavan faded back into the world of the living. He silenced the viol-player with a disapproving glare, and said simply, "We are moving on."

The precentors started retracing their steps almost instantly, relieved to be leaving. Xavan took Honored Mother's right arm, and both he and Rallux guided her behind the others. I took a place beside Xavan and gently requested a few details.

Replying in Vaasi for my benefit, he said, "The current occupant is ... very attached to the property. It is not worth the time and effort to evict him. He has graciously offered an alternative place to stay for the day, then we will make our way out of Mordent."

I was confused by this apparent concession. "What force would give you pause?"

His sharp gaze made me instantly regret that I had asked. "Never think my decisions are influenced by

trepidation," he hissed. "A pointless battle is not made less so by surety of victory."

With that, our conversation ended. He ushered me ahead, and released Honored Mother, who seemed to be back to her usual self. Right behind his heels, the path he made began to crumble back into the moor.

The 'alternative' of which he spoke was a mausoleum on the opposite side of the town, on the coastal cliffs. Be that as it may, it was a grand structure, with four wings and a large central dome, clad in a few scattered, verdigrised plates of copper.

Rather than approach the large main door into the south wing, Xavan led us to the west wing, toward the sea. Digging his claws into the white wall, he began to strip away whitewash and bricks. In half of a minute, he had uncovered a stone door. With a key he produced from his cassock—a gift from the master of Gryphon Manor, I'll warrant—he unlocked the entrance, and we followed him into the dark.

The day was not particularly eventful. The three human precentors and I walked through the town, learning of the area and gathering supplies. We made no attempts to recruit, lest we antagonize the powers that be or draw too much attention from mundane residents.

When nightfall came, we spent the first hour covering up the door once more. It was quite fortunate no one had spotted the damage during the day, and that no one came to inspect the site while we worked. As it happened, we were not alone on the cliffs, hoping to go undiscovered.

As we made our way to the edge to dispose of the excess mortar and whitewash, a scream from the south rent the air. In the dark, none but Rallux could pinpoint its source. His eyes locked onto something beyond even my sight, and with a low voice he reported whatever spectacle he perceived to Xavan. In turn, Xavan looked at me and the caliban—the only faithful of his who could see at night—and, in both Mordentish and Vaasi, commanded us to "Run!

Subdue!” Then he ran at the cliff and dove off, his wings spread to catch the air.

Not stopping to interpret our instructions, the caliban and I charged into the night, our color-bleached vision warning us of the ground ahead. In seconds, a figure began to resolve in the distance. Lumpy and unrecognizable at first, it turned to the sound of our footfalls, and I soon saw it was a man, with another person draped over his arms; a limp female figure.

Seeing no more than our dark shapes galloping toward him, the man dropped her and turned to run in the direction of a larger horse-shape that was just coming into my sight. It was too late, however, and the caliban and I tackled him to the ground but an instant later. He was strong, but not more so than the two of us together. I did not follow most of the curses he spat at us, but the caliban soon had enough, and sat on the man’s chest, tittering giddily at the groan our captive made.

Looking over at his cargo, I could see it was a young woman, plainly dressed and clearly dead; a large stain was spreading from a wound where her rib cage met her lightly distended belly. With a bit of searching, I was able to liberate a long knife from the man’s clothes.

Soon, those we left behind caught up. Sophia took charge of the situation, examining the murdered woman, then interrogating the apparent perpetrator. I heard him use the phrases, “illegitimate child,” “that peasant girl,” and “ruin me and my family.” To me, it seemed he killed her to conceal an affair.

The inquisition was interrupted by a wet ripping noise. The precentors and I all turned to see Honored Mother and Rallux crouched by the corpse, blocking our view of their activities. Sophia asked what they were doing, but I already had a general, sickening idea.

At that moment, a large blackness swooped down from the night sky, causing the horse to scream and run away. Xavan alighted between us and the mutilators, dismissing Sophia’s question by saying,

“We have more immediate concerns,” and gesturing toward the south. To our dismay, we could see a small cluster of points of light approaching, likely a bunch of lanterns held by people coming to investigate the cry.

After Sophia quickly reported what she learned, he bade us release the captive, who dared not move in Xavan’s presence. Our master pulled the man to his feet and began to speak with him, but it was difficult for me—for any of us, I suppose—to pay attention while Honored Mother continued whatever operation she was performing. All I knew for certain at the time was that their conversation ended in some manner of accord, sealed with a handshake.

Subsequently, Xavan directed us to gather in a circle, linking hands. The man took up a position at Xavan’s left, and Sophia joined at his right. The other precentors filled in next to her; first the caliban, then the flautist, and lastly the viol-player. Rallux moved next to stand by the man, and Honored Mother—after casting the corpse off of the cliff—joined him, leaving one spot for me. My left hand clasped the viol-player’s right, and Honored Mother’s hand—unpleasantly slick with blood—found my right. Xavan’s voice rose from the pit of his throat, rolling forth to call on the forces of the world. Glancing sideways, I could see the lanterns, now near enough to show the suggestion of people carrying them. Before they could draw near enough to see us, however, tongues of black flame shot forth from Xavan, enveloping our group in an instant and blocking our sight.

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“When the flames receded,” Ivar said, “our surroundings were different, but we hadn’t gone far. Xavan transported us to the cliffs to the north, on the other side of the bay.”

“Subtlety often defeats more egregious shows of magical force when using translocation,” the blonde woman allowed. “Teleport any distance at all, and your foe is often inclined to believe you are far away ... exposing his tender back while he curses you for a coward.”

Ivar nodded. "Running away wisely is never a coward's act." His expression darkened. "Killing to cover a minor indiscretion; that is true cowardice."

He went on with a hateful scowl. "Sophia spoke to me about Xavan and the man we captured, Erdenkaine. She said Xavan offered him power, more power than he could hope to achieve through his noble family alone." He turned to look into his captor's clouded eyes. "He wanted someone vicious, someone to fill a role the precentors and I could not, and he found that in Erdenkaine. To Sophia's and my great consternation, he brought that murderer into our fold." Ivar sighed, and went back to staring at the ceiling. "That perturbed me in and of itself, but to make matters worse, Xavan became a bit more withdrawn from the rest of us, spending time in private with Erdenkaine to train him. What he was to learn was not meant for our ears."

#### **Emmanuel Erdenkaine**

Emmanuel Erdenkaine (NE Human (Mordentish) Aristocrat 1/Corrupter 11) is a younger brother of the Cult of Xovaroth, vested with the power to disrupt a divine spellcaster's connection to his or her god. By rule of fear, he and his brethren hold an authority greater than that of the precentors, though they do not wield power over the teachers of Xovaroth's dogma.

Erdenkaine values nothing but personal power, and he thinks his noble birth makes him intrinsically better than more common folk. To see any inferior of his in a position of commensurate or greater power galls him extremely. He will use every underhanded, obstructionist trick he can muster to work against those he perceives to threaten him.

Erdenkaine trained with a rapier early in life and continues to practice with it as a gentleman's weapon. However, he has also learned how to use the bastard sword, as he finds the weapon more imposing.

He also carries a *viperblade* (*Magic Item Compendium* page 63) for when open armament is not advisable.

"Need I lecture *you* on the subject of *cults*, my dear prisoner?" the blonde woman asked, her voice sinking to new depths of sarcasm. "First seduce your convert, your *victim*, then separate. Weaken the victim's bonds to the world around them, then weaken the bonds between them and their brethren in the cult. Weaken, weaken, and weaken some more, and make it clear that your will is law. I have known ... people to do this very well.

"My sisters, my fellow Centurions, and I, on the other hand? We prefer to seduce, then empower. Darkness unleashed to full potential is so much more effective than darkness shackled and shaped. None of that for you, though. You have made it very clear that you will not kneel before our altar, and you are too far along a path even we despise already. Continue."

Ivar's face screwed up with incredulity, and a large amount of disgust of his own. "*Full potential?* To kneel before *any* altar is to be shackled." His voice started to rise, not unlike the proselytizers he had grown to hate. "I am more than my service to the Order; I work for the betterment of all mortal-kind!" The woman leaned over, her pale eyes boring into Ivar's as she whispered at him: "You really have prayed to the wrong gods, then. Auntie Thirteen loves little better than bursting shackles. She's taught all of us at Castra how to do it.

"By the way, little man, do tell me: did you labor mightily for that poor wretch your new chum had stabbed for the crime of catching his seed? Did you defend her memory, preserve her dignity as a fellow mortal, so the freakshow wouldn't defile her abandoned vessel? The dead linger in these lands, especially so in Mordent."

Ivar's outrage collapsed, and with it his face fell into a cringe. The once strident voice became a pained murmur. "At the time, I had no way of definitively knowing how Honored Mother had defiled the poor woman's corpse. It would be a long time before my worst unconscious fears were confirmed, and believe me, the truth is not a matter for polite conversation."

He closed his eyes, as if trying to shut some image out. "And I won't speak of it here either."

"I will say only this: that night, we found new lodging far from Mordentshire. In another derelict manor house, with dawn mere hours away, I settled down to sleep. Honored Mother was there, across the

room. She sat by the window, gazing at the moonlight with her hands gently tracing across her stomach. She rocked back and forth, singing a lullaby:

*"Hush, my child; sleep, my child; I will protect thee. Stay, my child; thrive, my child. Don't abandon me."*

## Honored Mother's Lullaby

Andante

To hear this piece, click [here](#)

Ivar was quiet then, and his eyes hollow, distant. He was lost in recollection, perhaps even shame. His gaze fluttered almost at random about the room, occasionally alighting upon his captor. It was as though he awaited sentencing for an unspoken confession.

"How you steal glances at me, dear *patient*," the blonde woman hissed. "Do you think to see horror in my eyes? Pity for the creature that performed such a worthless act, perhaps? When we arrive at Castra, let me tell you about Madame Van Goering and her

little boy, Henri. Such a mind, such a will! Such a pity. Now speak on."

He drew in a deep breath, which drew him out of his mood. "Well, after our time in Mordent," Ivar sighed, "we slunk through Dementlieu. However, without the proliferation of abandoned estates, Xavan started to draw on his powers to shelter us. Wherever an abode was needed, he would breathe a heat-haze into the air, and we could step through it into an expansive residence, like a cathedral converted into a dormitory. Spectral attendants in

priestly garb set out food for us. It was marvelous living, compared to what we subsisted on before.”

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We pressed ever northward, gathering adherents from among the disaffected lower class. These had minimal direct contact with Xavan, and came to know Xovaroth through the precentors. By the time we reached the Lamordian border, our party had swollen from nine to twenty-one members, which made surreptitious travel difficult. As such, Xavan’s interest shifted to establishing a base of operations.

There is an abandoned estate in Lamordia, which we occupied for a time, but Xavan did not view it as a permanent solution. It was too easily accessible to wanderers, for one thing, and he had no success finding Lamordian converts. Their pervasive lack of strong religious inclination was admirable, but it also meant they had no use for Xovaroth. Contrary to your assertion, we do not “fit right in over there.”

As his first servant in this world, it fell to me to seek a better home. Once my Mordentish became functional (and I had started to pick up a little Lamordian), I was granted command over a party of six priests, and sent forth on the first of my three ill-fated expeditions.

We had heard there was a corridor in the Mists, a path to a land of multifarious gods called Sri Raji. Furthermore, our inquiries told us that it was adjacent to vast untamed wilderness, which Xavan considered to be ideal for establishing a secluded sanctum. Thinking this might be a fine place to find converts, my contingent paid our way onto a merchant ship bound to pass through the Emerald Stream. With us came Precentor Hugo—the un-blind flautist, whose name I’d finally bothered to learn—there to ascertain how well our doctrine would take in the new land. Him we left in Pakat, where hunger and poverty spawned desperation.

Venturing south into the Wildlands proved that the name was well deserved. As we pressed deeper, encounters with hostile fauna became more and

more frequent, and every time their tactics became more sophisticated. Snakes slithered onto branches above our campsites and dropped on us from above, and perhaps most egregiously, apes once stole our food during the confusion of a tiger attack. To make matters worse, everything we carried seemed to fall into disrepair inordinately fast. The tent I slept in, newly made when I bought it, developed holes characteristic of canvas left over a wood pile for a few seasons. The environment itself rejected us.

After losing three of our number, we beat a hasty retreat. Hugo had fared far better than us, having gathered a small cadre of discontented citizens to Xovaroth’s word. Considering his position fairly advantageous, we left him there and returned to Lamordia to report.

With the Wildlands clearly uninviting, Saragoss to the north unsuitable, and Sri Raji itself in the grips of theocracy, it was decided that laying foundations *near* the Emerald Stream might be more prudent. As such, I was given three new men and orders to investigate Markovia.

We were aware of the threat posed by the land; a Lamordian colony had disappeared there the previous year. However, even armed with this foreknowledge—and magic the colonists certainly eschewed—our enterprise fared better only in not being entirely fatal. Where the Wildlands set animals against us, things between man and beast plagued us on Markovia.

The monsters besetting us were hideous, and they stole away two of our number over five nights. Worse still was the eighth night, when we slew a few of the beasts and recognized the tattooed hide on one of the bodies; something had twisted one of our missing companions. Certainly, the other also met this fate, but if he was among the dead, we could not tell.

We couldn’t leave on the ninth day, as a horrid storm wracked the sea. If any ship sailed that day, I am certain it would have run aground. On the tenth day, we sailed back to the mainland. Still, I thought the island might be good for our purposes, once the

source of the warped creatures was found, but Xavan's interest had shifted before we returned. Instead, he looked to the steep, forbidding slopes of the Isle of Demise.

With another two replacements, I departed for Demise, and found once again that our destination was named far too aptly. It was by the grace of Xovaroth that we managed to land without being ground on the rocks. Via a haunted cave by the shore, we entered a complex of lava tubes, and with great care, conveyed ourselves up into the jungle-blanketed caldera.

It was that very first day when we encountered the fateful cluster of statues that spelled our doom. They were astoundingly detailed, all sculpted as nudes, but some were garbed in old clothing. At the time, I thought some artist had intentionally clothed them, but did not maintain the garments over time. Passing through Dementlieu had exposed me to strange, so-called *avant-garde* expressions of art. I was disabused of this notion in mere minutes.

None of us resisted the urge to touch and examine the statues, and soon after we felt our hands stiffen, but not as if in the grips of arthritis. The very skin of our palms was hardening, and within the hour, it was as gray as rock. We prayed for salvation, but none of us had the magic necessary to dispel such a malady. By the next day, I don't believe any of us had the manual dexterity to cast such a spell anyway.

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"We immediately tried to return to our boat," Ivar recounted, "hoping to reach Lamordia and be cured by Xavan before we succumbed. However, we found that the path we had first traversed was gone, the tunnel collapsed. I personally believe some force was quarantining us, lest the infection be spread far afield."

"Rather a charitable interpretation," the woman chuckled. "I have been to Demise and back, and I recall that garden of statues. I even conducted some tests there, very interesting ones. Well worth the trouble of transporting test subjects."

### Calcic Balm

*Craft (alchemy) DC: 29*

*Cost of Creation: 4,000 gp*

Typically sold in single-use vials, and only at black market locations, *calcic balm* is both a highly effective tool and a trap born of studious malice. As she is currently the sole provider of the substance, the Red Haunt tends to tag the vials with an *arcane mark*, scrying on those who make a purchase to study the results.

Although the exact ingredients remain the Red Haunt's secret so far, she has admitted that one of the active ingredients is the ground-up skin of the 'statues' found on the Isle of Demise. Another appears to be a blend of essences distilled from various seaweeds of Saragoss. A third, a single drop of fiendish vitae.

A single application of *calcic balm* is sufficient to coat both arms and hands, both legs and feet, or the torso.

If applied to arms or legs, it causes the skin to harden for six hours, imposing a -5 penalty to Tumble and Jump checks during that time. Stiffening of the hand makes it impossible to produce the somatic components to spells. In return, however, the affected limbs receive an alchemical, non-magical +3 bonus to attack and damage rolls if used in combat for the duration.

If applied to the torso, *calcic balm* likewise causes the skin there to harden and stiffen for six hours, imposing a -5 penalty to Escape Artist checks. In return, the person so coated receives an alchemical, non-magical +3 natural armor bonus to AC. This stacks with any other form of natural armor the target may have.

Although somewhat awkward due to its downsides, *calcic balm* may seem to be quite the useful item for difficult situations ... and therein lies the trap.

Every time a character applies *calcic balm*, the DM should roll a secret Fortitude saving throw for the character. The DC starts at 16 at the first use, but increases by 1 for every further application. If a character fails a Fortitude save by 6 or more, they start to grow addicted to *calcic balm*. The next opportunity they see to purchase more balm, they will feel compelled to spend any money they have, can borrow off of their friends, steal from bystanders, or sell equipment to earn, all for another dose.

By the time the save DC reaches 29, a character is in terrible danger. If they again apply the balm and fail their save, their body will transmute into stone from the skin inward. In addition to being hideously painful, the transformation is non-magical, often baffling people who expect to find traces of *flesh to stone* or similar magics on a victim.

“Mayhap you saw the other members of my expedition, then,” said Ivar. “Had I been less fortunate, you might have met me then, rather than now...”

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The initial panic sent four of my underlings running through the tubes, desperately searching for a way out. I’ll wager they never found it, but I never saw them again, so I cannot be sure. To the last pair, I made the case that Xavan was watching over us, and would rescue us before it was too late. In the mean time, we simply had to go about our surveying task—more carefully, of course, given our progressive degeneration.

Four days later, I was sitting alone in the caves. The last two had succumbed the day before, and I could barely move from my spot. There was no rescue, no salvation. I sat with my eyes on the ceiling, waiting for the Circle to return. The Circle was a common sight on the expeditions, a round disturbance where the air looked like rippling water. If one looks carefully, a horned outline can be seen peering down from above the Circle, the shape of Xavan looking down into his scrying basin. In the daylight sky, it is

painfully obvious, but in a dark cave—or the shadowed rafters of a tavern’s common room—it is easy to miss. I, however, knew what to look for, and in the apex of the dark vault, my patience was rewarded.

When the Circle appeared, I pushed myself to my feet and lurched toward it, until I was directly beneath it, looking up at the vague shape of my negligent master. “Where are you?” I cried. “Are we disposable?”

In response, the Circle vanished.

My petrified legs ground their way into a crouch, and I put my head in my hands. Abandonment and betrayal were flooding my mind, and I had not even begun to come to terms with my certain death. I surely would have slipped away from myself, had a crackling noise not broken into my mind.

Ahead of me, a new circle was forming, one of black fire. It expanded to fill the lava tube, and its center opened, making a great, thin annulus. Snow blew through, but little of me remained to feel the cold. Besides, I was focused on the draconic figure stepping through. As soon as Xavan was across the threshold, the annulus snapped shut behind him.

“What do you mean by leaving us to die?” I growled hoarsely. My reverence was gone, and I could muster no respect, despite the supreme danger inherent in speaking to a god in this manner.

“Precentor Hugo returned from Sri Raji two days ago,” Xavan rumbled. “The Maharaja would not suffer the presence of my faithful any longer, and those who did not follow the precentor to Lamordia are surely dead. I have no use for these islands anymore.”

My eyes might have widened in rage, had it not been a difficult endeavor to blink at all. “And you did not recall us! You meant to discard us like trash!”

“Calm yourself,” Xavan replied. “I won’t discard you.” He held a hand out to me. “Come back and recover. When you are better, you can follow Younger Brother



Erdenkaine on the next expedition to find our new home.”

That suggestion was the last straw. I pushed my head back into my hands. In a low voice, I responded, “I will not follow Erdenkaine. For that matter, I no longer follow you.”

I expected him to leave, or perhaps to obliterate me where I stood, but all he did was say, “Rise, Ivar.” When I did nothing, he took my hands, pulling them from my face. Where he touched, the stone began to recede, becoming flesh once more. Inch by inch, the horrible illness retreated, releasing me from its paralytic clutches. In relief and incredulity, I stood, and Xavan reciprocated by kneeling before me. “Gods use mortals,” he said solemnly, his face holding no anger. “It has always been so, and Xovaroth is no exception. You have felt our callous disregard, and rejected us for it, as all men ought to.” His right hand alighted upon my shoulder. “You no longer serve me. We stand as equals in freedom now. Rallux will be most pleased to know you passed the test.”

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“That painful, formative experience,” Ivar said, “showed me what I should have seen long ago, that all faiths were my enemy.” He punctuated this resentful thought by clearing his throat, then wincing. “Yutow, Belenus, the Lawgiver; their ilk hated me for who and what I was, for the magic I was born with. Xovaroth, Ezra, the Morninglord, the Eternal Order; they might tolerate me, so long as I served a purpose. Faith is a plague more insidious than even the contagion I endured.” He drew a long breath—there was a slight whistle to it—then sighed to calm down. “Rallux wanted me to know that in my heart before I came to him.”

Ivar continued. “But that lesson was not the last thing Xavan gave me.” He opened his mouth wide, and his tongue went to the lower right side of his jaw. There, it worked over a raw vacancy between his molars. “That porcelain tooth you extracted, that was his promise to me. His promise to come to my

aid as payment for my sacrifices for Xovaroth. Count your blessings you found it.”

“I count my blessings every time I close my eyes and bend my essence to Our Lady in Darkness,” the woman purred, mockingly. “And the greatest of my blessings are intellect and growing knowledge. But there is also fun. So. You got a shiny, new tooth from your new *brother*. Did he also give you the other toy? The chained firearm?”

“The pistol was a gift, but not from Xavan. Rallux made her for me. He said there would be times when leaving eldritch burns and turned earth everywhere would be too conspicuous, and weapon marks would raise less suspicion.” Ivar’s face broke into a wide grin. “And what a weapon he made! She knows when I need her, slithering into my hand in the blink of an eye.” His expression became more melancholic. “I fear she has starved in my absence. Her embrace will be missed.”

#### Ivar’s Pistol

Ivar Skytte wields a weapon currently like no other. Rallux took an enchanted pistol and attached a 5-foot length of chain, into which he imbued an undead animator (see *Denizens of Dread* page 17). The weapon can slither like a serpent, and coils about Ivar’s torso to hide under his clothing. When he needs the pistol, the chain responds to his emotions, snaking out from his sleeve to deposit the pistol in his hand. Naturally, it also can provide aid through its spell-like abilities, including *telekinesis*.

The animator feeds on and reinforces Ivar’s negative emotions, particularly hatred. It cannot actually inhabit the pistol directly, as it is a magic item, but it can pull back the hammer with the chain if necessary. Thanks to the enchantment (a variation of the *quick loading* enchantment for crossbows on page 41 of the *Magic Item Compendium*), this is all that is needed to arm the pistol, which the chain could then fire by squeezing the trigger.

#### Quick Loading (Firearm)

**Price:** +1 bonus

**Property:** Firearm

**Caster Level:** 9<sup>th</sup>

**Aura:** Moderate; (DC 19) conjuration  
**Activation:** Free (manipulation); see text

*As you cock the hammer into place, the pistol seems to gain a little weight.*

A *quick loading* firearm accesses an extradimensional space that can hold up to 50 bullets and 50 ounces of gunpowder, allowing you to reload the firearm more rapidly than normal. Reloading a *quick loading* firearm is a free action (just thumb back the hammer), allowing a character with multiple attacks to use his full attack rate.

Different types of bullets can be held in the extradimensional space, and you can select freely from these when reloading the firearm. Adding or removing a bullet or an ounce of powder by hand from an extradimensional space requires a move (manipulation) action.

*Prerequisites:* Craft Magic Arms and Armor, *Leomund's secret chest*, *shrink item*.

*Cost to Create:* Varies.

"And very interesting 'she' was, too," the woman noted. "To disassemble and reassemble. To duplicate. But no animation left by the time I'd finished, more's the pity."

Ivar's eyes narrowed, as if in pain—but was that a hint of a smirk at the corners of his mouth? He cleared his throat again, making a wetter noise this time, then went on. "Rallux took me on as a tyro, an initiate of the Order of Exclusion. From him, I learned to steal the power that I used to pray for. The energies the gods disperse to their sheep is flowing

through the aether, and to those who know how to reach out for it, it is ripe for the taking.

"In a year's time, I completed my training, and gained the rank of cenobite. Additionally, Xavan had finally found the perfect location for our operation, and by his might, Saecal Natormo was raised." Ivar briefly looked over at his keeper. "That means Bastion of Truth in Kazvar. I think it is a better name when one doesn't understand it."

"Opinions may differ, little man," was all the woman said.

Ivar started smiling to himself again. "The first service held in the cathedral of Saecal Natormo was undoubtedly my favorite. When Rallux, Honored Mother, and I entered, a great fanfare announced us, played by Sophia and three other precentors, each on the *cor de chasse*." He hummed eight bars of an imposing melody. "That's but a part of it. As it played, the three of us approached the Altar and Throne, where Xavan stood to receive us, and there we turned to face the congregation. He introduced the Order to the faithful, and Rallux as last of the nine Overmasters. In no uncertain terms, the Cult of Xovaroth was told that they served the Overmasters as much as they served their god, and that Saecal Natormo was the bastion of the Order, which they were graciously allowed to worship in."

Ivar laughed heartily, stopping when a cough choked him off. "The look on Erdenkaine's face was priceless. Ever since, he has been obsessed with joining the Order as an elder brother, to escape Xavan's rule and gain more authority. Honestly, I hope he gets what he deserves, because I know when the full meaning of 'elder brother' sets in, I will like his slack-jawed face even better."

## Overmasters' Fanfare

**Andante**

Horn in F

Horn in F

Horn in F

Horn in F

5

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

9

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

13

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

17

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

21

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

F Hn.

To hear this piece, click [here](#)

## THE ORDER OF EXCLUSION

The Order is a most vile and hateful organization, dedicated to removing all divine influence from the lives of mortals. To the Order, all those who serve the gods are deluded slaves at best, sadly caught up in the disputes of beings that treat their lives like pawns on a chessboard. Their core ideal, that all folk should be free to determine their lives without restraint by the edicts of deities, sounds quite valiant and stirring. In practice, however, they really mean that mortals should be free to be under the heel of those among their kin strong enough to stand atop them. The Order wants nothing less than to slay the gods so a lesser being can rise up and oppress the cosmos that birthed it.

The Order of Exclusion has a four-tiered hierarchy. At the bottom are tyros, initiates training in the craft of the ur-priest (see *Complete Divine* page 70 or the *Book of Vile Darkness* page 72). They wear a black uniform, symbolizing a brooding storm cloud. Once a tyro gains one level of ur-priest, she becomes a cenobite, and gains white, lightning-styled embroidery at the collar and cuffs of her uniform. It is common, but not mandatory, for cenobites to continue advancing as ur-priests. Proliferating the craft among initiates is the important part in the eyes of the Order.

Through great dedication and contribution to the Order, a cenobite may become a severant, gaining a purple sash to wear as a belt, which symbolizes the violet rain (*BoVD* page 34) that cuts off divine spellcasters from their gods. While being a strong ur-priest is not required, most severants have at least five levels in the class.

A severant wishing to become a Master must be exceptional in her commitment, and must also train a collection of tyros as part of the advancement process. For this reason, all Masters are well versed in the way of the ur-priest, always with at least five levels in the class and often with at least seven. Masters are distinguished by wearing red spatterdashes, which symbolize their authority to tread upon and crush those beneath them.

The final, highest tier consists of the Overmasters. They are selected rarely from among the most deserving Masters. All are exceptionally powerful ur-priests. Rallux is atypically under-versed in this regard, but his unique blighter abilities and hateful fervor made up the difference. Given their small number and highly recognized stature within the Order, their uniforms bear no additional accoutrement beyond that of the Masters. The exception to this was Overmaster Faxikae Zar, whose inhuman body prohibited adherence to the general dress code. He wore a black cloak with white lightning embroidery, and he dyed his bristly fur violet on top of his body and red on the bottom.

The nine Overmasters are Faxikae (dwarf neogi sorcerer/ur-priest), Wyggai (githyanki psion/ex-cleric/ur-priest), Anglor (human warlock/ur-priest; see *Complete Arcane* page 5), Thedrigu (hobgoblin fighter/ex-blackguard/ur-priest), Kadigag (kobold warmage/ur-priest; see *Complete Arcane* page 10), Zereleth (male drow dread necromancer/ur-priest; see *HoH* page 84), Dvukajyk (lizardfolk ex-spirit shaman/sorcerer/ur-priest; see *Complete Divine* page 14), Tsaklat (tiefling wizard/ur-priest), and Rallux. Over the Order's long existence, no Overmaster has been replaced, all thanks to the ingenuity of Faxikae Zar. It kept itself alive far longer than it ought to have lasted by cloning itself while reasonably young and killing itself before going senile, cheating its finite lifespan. Many of the other older Overmasters adopted the practice as well.

Existing in strange parallel to this hierarchy are the elder brothers. They are corrupters of Xovaroth that have shown their mettle and value (or at least their insufferability) to the Order, and been rewarded with induction.

Their obligations to Xovaroth are dissolved, but their powers are retained, even augmented. To the rest of the Cult, they seem to go through a revelation and emerge changed, and are granted either a severant's or a Master's authority. This, however, is but a shadow of the truth. In reality, a younger brother taken into the Order is lobotomized in a special ritual. His ability to draw power from Xovaroth is left intact, but his intellect and personality are completely destroyed. The vacant body is ceded to a severant or Master whose original body is failing, and he uses a spell such as *magic jar* to possess the mindless husk. An *imprison possessor* spell (*BoVD* page 98) is then used to seal him inside forever.

### **Brother's Revelation**

Enchantment (Compulsion) [Mind-Affecting]

**Level:** Corrupt 7 (see *BoVD* page 77 or *Heroes of Horror* page 125)

**Components:** V, S, F, Corrupt

**Casting Time:** 1 hour

**Range:** Touch

**Target:** Creature touched

**Duration:** Instantaneous

**Saving Throw:** Will partial

**Spell Resistance:** No

The target has his intellect horrifically scarred. He loses his Intelligence score, becoming mindless (granting him immunity to all further mind-affecting effects). However, the surgery is carefully done to leave certain abilities of the subject intact. Even so, the subject does not have the wherewithal to use these abilities himself. Rather, this allows a being possessing the subject (such as a spellcaster using *magic jar* or a telepath using *mind switch*) to utilize abilities that would otherwise be inaccessible.

First, accessing the subject's muscle memory, a possessing force can use the subject's weapon proficiencies, as well as his Balance, Climb, Control Shape, Escape Artist, Jump, Move Silently, Ride, Sleight of Hand, Swim, and Tumble skills in place of its own, should they be better.

Furthermore, the spell leaves certain class features intact. This needs to be adjudicated for each class at the Dungeon Master's discretion, but it certainly doesn't extend to abilities based on Intelligence, and most divinely granted abilities will be revoked in time, as the divine patron will soon realize that the subject is not in control. These abilities use the subject's remaining mental ability scores (Wisdom and Charisma), rather than those of the possessor. If the subject is a corrupter in the service of Xovaroth, then a possessing force is perpetually granted the subject's Divine Grace, Aura of Fear, Aura of Evil, Intercession ability, Smite Heathen attack, and spell-like abilities. Xovaroth does not care if his corrupters are lobotomized.

A target who saves against the spell still takes 3d6 points of Intelligence drain, caused by the application of the focus tools. The target may voluntarily fail this save.

Only a *wish* or *miracle* spell can restore a victim of this spell to full functionality. As long as he remains in this state, he cannot gain experience or additional levels.

In the Dread Realms, casting this spell is an Act of Ultimate Darkness.

*Focus:* A set of cold iron surgical implements, including trephines, awls, and hooks costing at least 5,000 gp. The hooks and awls are pushed into the target's brain around the eyes, up the nose, or through holes carved by the trephines.

*Corruption Cost:* 3d6 points of Wisdom damage.

"So you spent your time feathering your nest—beg pardon, your *cage*—and finding new ways to wrap chains around yourselves and each other," the woman said.

"Those were the early days, a time for settling in. Since then, our primary concern has been the resurrection of the other eight Overmasters." Ivar's face grew strained, as though his recollections gave him pain. "I shall not recount what I have done in pursuit of that goal. Not everything that must be done is glorious. Not all that is necessary comes without shame. What Rallux and Honored Mother did—what I helped them do—I believe that brought the creatures to us."

"Ahh. You found something new? Something unexpected? The Land likes springing little surprises on its prisoners and residents alike," the woman purred. "And were you? Surprised, that is."

Ivar nodded. "I spotted them first, the crawling shapes in Saecal Natormo. They were outlines, like the ghosts of Gryphon Manor. They particularly liked to gather in areas frequented by Rallux, which drove him mad, for they made ever so slight changes to the arrangement of objects.

"Once I reported the figures to Rallux, they shed their illusory cloaks. They looked like old men, but they walked on all fours, with their torsos to the sky and their heads twisted around. These backward

men, they had an affinity for Rallux, and it grew with every death for the sake of the Overmasters' return.

"They're what drew your attention, weren't they?" Ivar asked, genuinely curious. "They followed me everywhere in Paridon, attending me as I worked Rallux's will."

"Paridon is my city," the woman replied, circling the table, her face completely serious. "Backwards men crawling around all of a sudden was just the nail in the coffin. Remember this, little man: the darkness lurking in Paridon is mine in ways even ... hah ... 'Flickerflame' cannot claim. I was always going to worry what you were about, stumbling around and banging a drum, as it were."

#### **Dread Possibility: The Growing Darkness**

When the Red Haunt claims power over Paridon's darkness, she is not speaking metaphorically. For as long as the Retreat's front door has opened onto Paridon, it has breathed out an infection that finds its source in the fiend's magical studies. This is not an infection of the flesh, but of magic itself; in an expanding area around the Retreat, the Shadow Weave (*Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, p. 57) has started to manifest. The infection spreads at a glacial pace, but it already covers all of Blackchapel—both above and below ground.

Once the sun has set in Blackchapel, and in areas where light never reaches, both arcane and divine spellcasters in the affected area sometimes feel a sense of unease as their spells do not work normally, but instead as though they were deliberately tapping into the Shadow Weave. Although the Shadow Weave is spreading slowly, it shows no sign of stopping. At night, it sends ‘threads’ out beyond its main area into the rest of Paridon and even into Timor, preparing the way for expansion. Daylight burns these threads away, but it takes more and more exposure to do so. Eventually, it will saturate all of the Zherisia Cluster, both day and night.

The Red Haunt could probably hasten the expansion, but has chosen not to do so. She prefers the change to be gradual in the Zherisia Cluster, unlike in Castra, so she can study the phenomenon—and so the domain’s spellcasters, both arcane and divine, will be gradually desensitized to and drawn into the darkness. Apart from a grand experiment, the Haunt considers the corruption of Paridon’s spellcasters a worthy sacrifice to Brightwell, not to mention a potential ‘recruitment drive’ for the Centurions of the Night.

As the source of the Shadow Weave in Paridon, the Red Haunt can sense any effect that disturbs the Weave’s pattern, such as spells cast inside its web by spellcasters of alignments opposed to her own—or an ur-priest stealing spells. While she cannot pinpoint the exact location of each disturbance through this sense, the Red Haunt has plenty of tools with which to do so, not to mention creatures in her service who can conduct investigations.

Ivar’s gaze followed her around, maintaining eye contact. “Doppelgangers,” Ivar explained. “Doppelgangers came to the Order’s attention. We heard tell that they needed humans to breed. We thought perhaps a doppelganger’s womb and child would be more resilient for our purposes. Furthermore, I hoped we finally found a nonhuman substitute. No more women—actual human women—would have to die to bring the Overmasters back.”

“A *substitute*?” the woman chortled. “My neighbors are rather skilled at *substitution*, yes. But even if I hadn’t snatched you up, you would have been disappointed, my dear patient. Doppelgangers rear themselves on pride and overreaching arrogance. And even if you had managed to grab one of the less cautious specimens ... The Land likes great hopes.”

“Indeed.” Ivar said, then he was wracked by a cough that made his eyes squeeze shut. Wheezing in a breath, he began an unrelated train of thought: “Rallux told me how the Order’s adherents fear death in his world. No god will have them, nor will their souls be consigned to the Void, lest they carry on as fiends. Some horrid punishment awaits them, perhaps even annihilation.” He hacked once more. “During the Orb War, as the Order was hunted nearly to extinction, it was not uncommon for many members to die simultaneously, and their aggregate terror would keep them from passing on. They would gather as awful, conglomerate spirits and wreak havoc until put down a second time.”

He looked back into his jailer’s eyes. “There can be no wrath and retribution from their gods here, but there is still fear. We know not what becomes of souls here; we know not what beings rule this world. Is that fear sufficient? I worry that my angst is not enough of a safety net. I loathe a true death, but I cannot live as your guest any lo—”

Spasms raced up and down his frame, and he sputtered and gagged. With the gurgling of the plague-choked, he turned his head to spit out black fluid. “I hedged my bet, you see. I partook of the necrotic water of your new pet’s flesh. I won’t have long to wait now.”

The Red Haunt’s eyes widened and she hissed a curse that caused the orb of light above to dim. “Cur!” she swore as she slammed a hand into Ivar’s chest, nails digging into his flesh as she started to sing an incantation of healing...

One of the belts across Ivar’s midsection undulated, unbuckled, and tore itself free, leaping at the woman. It tangled around her hands, foiling her resuscitative efforts. Ivar began to laugh sickeningly.



“That’s my girl,” he said, and laughed more. As the surgeon and the strap wrestled, his chuckles slowed, then ended in a drawn-out sigh. The light left his eyes, and he was no more.

With a snarl of fury and a powerful wrenching of her wrists, the mistress of the cell tore her hands free of the animate strap, casting it to the floor in shreds. From these, an eye like Ivar’s would have seen a small, vaporous form emerge, which slipped to the edge of the room. It probed the base of the wall, gliding along swiftly until it found what it sought: a way out. Through the concealed door, it passed into the hallway beyond.

The wisp darted through corridor after corridor, chamber after chamber, seeking what it had been shown. It had been led there once, and it could find it again. Of that, Ivar had been sure. In time, it came to a room full and tidy. Boxes and chests stood stacked against the walls, reducing the floor-space to half of what it might be, each receptacle with a tag affixed to the lid.

As it flowed across the room, toward the red-stained chest it had been told to find, another ephemeral shape began to coalesce behind it. First came a black-clad body, with a violet sash tied at its waist. As the limbs came in, lines of lightning captured in thread could be seen at the cuffs of its garb. Then came the flesh, a lighter tone than the clothing, but still dark by the standards of most Core folk. Traceries blacker than the uniform spread like cracks in ice around its mouth. Last came the eyes; yellow and violent.

The ghost of Ivar Skytte followed the wisp, and knelt beside the iron-bound chest of oak. On its lid, a distinctive mark was burned into the wood, indicating “sacrilege” in the Draconic script. He reached out to touch it, but his hands passed straight through. An echoing curse left his lips, and he looked to the wisp. “At your convenience,” he said with a smirk.

The wisp seeped into the chest by way of the seam around the lid. Directly, there was a rattling from within, like a chain being dragged along the ground.

Then, the box flew into the air, high enough to crack into the roof, and it fell back with a crash, splintering open. Among the fragments, there was a suit of studded leather armor, a jumbled uniform of black, a sash of purple, a cloak, boots, a sickle, and writhing in the thick of this pile, a chain attached to a pistol.

The lock on the door rattled. The spirit cast about, looking for one particular piece among the smithereens. Suddenly, he spotted it: a single tooth. His hand blurred on its path to pointing at it. “There! Break it!”

The chain lashed out, dashing the tooth to minuscule shards just as the door slammed open. Outlined against the light in the hall stood the Red Haunt. Not the surgeon; not the priestess; not the wizard or the beanpole warrior; not even the woeful bard. The Centurion had arrived.

A face and figure to send hearts quivering with lust; dragon’s wings to cleave skies and Mists; black fire in her eyes to sunder hearts and sanity; crimson armor on every part of her, save for that gorgeous face. One crimson gauntlet dripped crimson gore, until the Haunt contemptuously dropped Ivar’s heart ... and crushed it underfoot. “As if I needed to track you,” she said, her very voice causing the ghost’s ectoplasm to ripple and the building all around to shift and rumble softly.

The room darkened, and the air began to hum. Ivar rose to his feet, turning to face the mistress of the house as a mote of violet light flickered to life beside him. Above the crackling noise from the snapping mote, the ghost called out, “I would introduce you, but I believe you just heard quite a lot about him.” The light swelled up mightily and howled, then blasted apart. With the crash of a storm’s fury, arcs of purple energy leapt to the far corners of the room.

Standing next to the spectral body of Ivar was a being of nightmare, a fusion of man and dragon with great horns and greater wings. His eyes, colored like the short-lived rift that brought him, took in the entire room, then settled on the Centurion.

“She took me,” Ivar offered, grinning. “She held and tormented me, and she interferes with the Order’s business.”

The fiend’s eyes narrowed ... and then her snarl widened into a smile. Crimson armor transformed into a simple shift, such as a peasant woman might wear. A gorgeous face and body became nondescript and average. Upon the fiend’s breast shone a crimson amulet, a holy symbol depicting a sleeping vixen with her nose tucked into her tail. She spoke, every word loaded with calculated insult—and a little more:

“I did. And by the grace of Our Lady in Darkness, most mighty, most *holy* Brightwell, I will do so again. I will do more. Your godless ways will drown beyond her most *unholy* shadow and you will not even become one with the Void.”

Xavan’s eyes narrowed as well, then his jaw opened wide, and a great gout of corrosive fluid shot toward the Red Haunt.

With unexpected grace, the fiendish priestess sidestepped, dodging the blast. Stone hissed and spat as the foulness ate at it, vapor rising. Rising ... thickening. Out of the fog came an amused, mocking cackle: “Oh my, oh my, an unexpected guest has come to play! I simply must set out crumpets and tea, and pray to Brightwell to bless our meeting. Pray take off your shoes while I rouse my butler, *dear* guests!”

A shriek of laughter and the sound of running feet faded into the fog. Unslinging a bow of bone from his back, Xavan moved to pursue.

“Don’t bother with her!” Ivar rasped. “We should leave while we have the chance!”

“I’ll make short work of her, Ivar,” Xavan growled. “We cannot leave a danger such as this to fester.” He passed into the fog, vanishing from Ivar’s sight.

“Arrogant fool!” Ivar spat. He drifted toward the corridor and looked after his former master. His disgusted face twisted up in ways the living could not match. He looked to his pistol, rearing like a cobra in a wooden and cloth nest. There was no exit she could follow, unless...

He approached the thinned wall, and pushed his head through it. “*The Mists*,” he said, his voice emanating from the stones. He pulled back and stood aside, one hand trailing to point at the weak spot. “One more time, if you please.”

The pistol nodded, then turned to point at a large iron chest. At the weapon’s silent call, the chest sailed across the room and collided with the wall, bowing it out extremely. As the chest thudded into the floor, leaving a nasty dent, Ivar leaned in to inspect the wall. A small gap, barely enough for a human head to fit through, was leaking fog into the room.

Ivar smiled from ear to ear. “After you,” he said, and the pistol and chain slithered across the floor. Up into the degraded wall it went, then out the crack. Ivar phased halfway into the wall, then turned back. With a voice like wind through a cave, he sighed to the room, “Best of luck, Victor.”

Then he turned into the wall and was gone.

*The End*

## IVAR SKYTTÉ

CR 13

Human (Valachani) warlock 4, cleric 3, ur-priest 6

LE medium (6' 3") humanoid

**Init** +1 **Senses** Darkvision 60 ft. and *see invisibility* (see Warlock Invocations); Listen +6, Spot +6**Languages** Vaasi\*, Mordentish, Lamordian, Draconic, Rintoran**AC** 17 (+1 Dex, +6 armor), touch 11, flat-footed 16**hp** 96 (13 HD); **DR** 1/cold iron**SR** 15 (divine spells only)**Fort** +9, **Ref** +5, **Will** +18**Speed** 30 ft. (6 squares)**Melee** sickle +11/+6 (1d6+2; swift action command, treat target of first strike in round as flat-footed 10/day)**Ranged** pistol +14/+9 (1d10+4/x3; 50 ft.) or eldritch blast +10 (2d6; 60 ft.)**Space** 5 ft. **Reach** 5 ft.**Base Atk** +9; **Grp** +9**Atk Options** eldritch blast, invocations**Ur-Priest Spells Prepared** (CL 12th; spell save DC 14 + spell level, 15 + spell level for evil\* spells)6th (0+1 slots) — *harm*5th (1 slot) — *earth reaver* (*Spell Compendium* page 75)4th (3 slots) — *air walk*, *divine power*, *wrack\** (*SC* page 243)3rd (4-1 slots) — *bestow curse*, *cure serious wounds*, *unholy storm\** (*SC* page 227)2nd (4-2 slots) — *cure moderate wounds*, *living undeath* (*SC* page 134)1st (4-1 slots) — *command*, *sanctuary*, *shield of faith*0 (6 slots) — *create water*, *detect poison*, *light*, *mending*, *purify food and drink*, *read magic***Warlock Invocations** (CL 4th; equivalent to 2nd level spells) — *see the unseen* (*Complete Arcane* page 135; *see invisibility* and 60 ft. darkvision for 24 hours at a time), *spiderwalk* (*CA* page 135; *spider climb* and immunity to mundane or magical webs for 24 hours), *earthen grasp* (*CA* page 133; use *earthen grasp* spell [*CA* page 104] at will)**Abilities** Str 10, Dex 12, Con 16, Int 14, Wis 19, Cha 16**SA** Rebuke undead**SQ** Deceive item, *detect magic*, siphon spell power**Feats** Cat's Eyes, Iron Will, Alertness, Spell Focus (Evil), Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Firearms), Practiced Spellcaster (Ur-Priest)**Skills** Bluff +17, Concentration +11, Diplomacy +5, Hide +6, Intimidate +5, Knowledge (Arcana) +7, Knowledge (The Planes) +7, Knowledge (Religion) +10, Move Silently +6, Spellcraft +16, Use Magic Device +6 (+10 with scrolls).**Possessions** +3 *shadow studded leather*, +2 *blurstrike sickle*, +4 *quick loading pistol* on a 5 ft. animated chain (tiny animator; *Denizens of Dread* page 17), *boots of elvenkind*, *piercer cloak* (*MIC* page 118; swift activation; for one round, deal 1d6 extra damage on attacks from higher ground, or 2d6 on a charge from at least 10 feet up), *shiftweave* (*MIC* page 133; swift activation; shift between traveler's clothes, clerical vestments, Borcan courtier's clothes, scholar's outfit, and Order severant's uniform), porcelain false tooth (holds *refuge* spell to call upon Xavan)

## CURRENT SKETCH

Ivar continues to work toward the goal of bringing the entire conclave of Overmasters into the world. While he is willing to kill those who get in the way of the Order's mission, he is not altogether comfortable killing those who have no direct stake in his affairs. This includes the innocent pregnant women who must die in the attempts to revive the Overmasters (see Honored Mother's entry). As such, he is interested in finding alternatives, such as doppelgangers, succubi, and other inhuman creatures capable of bearing children.

With Ivar disembodied, Emmanuel Erdenkaine will be promoted to elder brother, erasing his odious personality and allowing Ivar to wear him like a suit. It is a bit disgusting, but still a twisted victory.

Currently, there are only two active, living members of the Order of Exclusion in the Dread Realms. As such, it will be necessary to train a new batch of tyros, which is a job Rallux would be more than happy to pass off to Ivar. As such, Ivar could soon be in the process of earning a promotion to Master.

## COMBAT

Immediately after meditating to steal his daily spells, Ivar sacrifices one 3rd level slot, two 2nd level slots, and one 1st level slot to prepare a 6th level spell. This is reflected in his statistics block.

Ivar prefers to use his abilities against those at a marked disadvantage, leading him to prey upon those who are not aware of or prepared for him. He avoids confrontation with those who seek to fight

him, and will try to use his powers and abilities to enable his escape. Only when supported by his allies in the Order of Exclusion will he fight with intent to defeat his foes. Even then, he considers preserving his own life to be of paramount importance.

The statistics given for Ivar reflect how he was in life. In death, he is a Rank 2 ghost, with the *malevolence* salient ability, as well as a custom salient ability allowing him to use *drown* (see *Spell Compendium* page 74) as a spell-like ability (caster level 13th, Fortitude DC 16 + Charisma modifier, reduced to touch range) usable once every 1d4 rounds.

## SPECIAL ATTACKS

*Rebuke Undead* (Su): Ivar may rebuke undead 6 times per day. His turning check modifier is +5 (factoring in a synergy bonus from ranks in Knowledge (Religion)), and his effective cleric level for rebuking is 6. He can affect 2d6+9 HD of undead per attempt.

## SPECIAL QUALITIES

*Deceive Item* (Ex): Ivar can take 10 on Use Magic Device checks even if threatened or distracted.

*Detect Magic* (Sp): Ivar can use detect magic at will at caster level 4.

*Siphon Spell Power* (Ex): Once each day, Ivar can sacrifice two or more lower-level spell slots to prepare a higher-level spell. Total the levels of the expended spells, then reduce the sum to three-quarters (rounded down) to determine the level of the spell slot created. Ivar can prepare a spell of up to sixth level through this technique.

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**XAVAN**

CR22

Human black half-dragon favored soul 20; divine rank 0

NE medium (6' 8") dragon

**Init** +2 **Senses** darkvision 60 ft, low-light vision; Listen +6, Spot +6**Languages** Draconic\*, Kazvar\*, Rintoran, Abyssal, Infernal**AC** 38 (+2 Dex, +8 armor, +4 natural, + 7 *monk's belt*, +7 deflection), touch 26, flat-footed 36**hp** 240 (20 HD); **DR** 35/+4; 10/cold iron (supernatural ability)**Immune** Sleep, paralysis, acid, transmutation, energy drain, ability drain, ability damage, mind-affecting effects.**Resist** 20 fire, 10 cold, 10 electricity, 10 sonic**SR** 32**Fort** +16, **Ref** +14, **Will** +18**Weaknesses****Speed** 60 ft. (12 squares), fly 200 ft. (good)**Melee** 2 claws +20 (1d4+6) and 1 bite +14 (1d6+2)**Ranged** composite longbow +22/+18/+13 (1d8+9 plus 1d6 negative energy; x3 critical; see possessions text); +1 to attack and damage within 30 feet**Space** 5 ft. **Reach** 5 ft.**Base Atk** +15; **Grp** +19**Atk Options** Breath weapon**Favored Soul Spells Known** (CL 20th; spell save DC 16 + spell level)9th (6 slots) — *gate, implosion, miracle, storm of vengeance*8th (6 slots) — *create greater undead, earthquake, familial geas (Heroes of Horror page 129), heat drain (SC page 112), mass inflict critical wounds*7th (7 slots) — *control weather, destruction, energy ebb (SC page 80), ethereal jaunt, greater scrying, repulsion*6th (7 slots) — *blade barrier, create undead, energy immunity (SC page 80), geas, greater dispel magic, harm*5th (7 slots) — *fire in the blood (HoH page 129), flame strike, oath of blood (HoH page 131), true seeing, wall of stone, zone of revelation (SC page 244)*4th (7 slots) — *consumptive field (SC page 51), discern lies, inflict critical wounds, negative energy aura (SC page 146), sending, tongues*3rd (8 slots) — *animate dead, blindness/deafness, chain of eyes (SC page 45), deeper darkness, speak with dead, unholy storm (SC page 227)*2nd (8 slots) — *desecrate, divine insight (SC page 70), divine interdiction (SC page 70), infernal wound (SC page 122), inflict moderate wounds, shatter*1st (8 slots) — *blood wind (SC page 33), curse water, deathwatch, divine favor, inflict light wounds, obscuring mist*0 (6 slots) — *amanuensis (SC page 9), create water, detect magic, detect poison, light, mending, purify food and drink, read magic, resistance***Abilities** Str 18, Dex 15, Con 18, Int 17, Wis 22, Cha 24**SA** Divine blood, frightful presence (divine salient ability)**SQ** Wings**Feats** Eschew Materials, Martial Weapon Proficiency (Longbow), Point Blank Shot, Weapon Focus (Claw), Precise Shot, Improved Unarmed Strike, Deflect Arrows, Weapon Specialization (Claw), Snatch Arrows, Tomb-Tainted Soul (LM page 31).

**Skills** Bluff +16, Concentration +27, Diplomacy +11, Disguise +7 (+9 to act in character), Intimidate +18, Knowledge (Arcana) +12, Knowledge (the Planes) +9, Knowledge (Religion) +9, Sense Motive +29, Spellcraft +28, Survival +6 (+8 on other planes).

**Possessions** *monk's belt*, *bracers of armor* +8, *Kneebringer* (+5 *dispelling*, *weakening*, *maiming*, *profane burst composite longbow* (abilities described in SC pages 33, 46, 38, and 40, respectively; can be activated to deal 1d6 negative energy damage per hit, 2d6 to a good outsider; on a critical hit, deals 2d6 extra damage, confers a -4 penalty to Strength [to a minimum score of 1] for 10 minutes, and deals 2d10 extra negative energy damage, 4d10 to a good outsider; 3 times per day can affect a struck target with a targeted *dispel magic* using dispel check 1d20+10; a living creature holding the bow while active takes 1 Constitution damage per round, deals 1d4 Con damage to the wielder on a critical hit; strong [DC 25] transmutation, abjuration, and necromancy, CL 20th), *ring of invisibility*, *ring of telekinesis*, *cube of force*, *locket of life trapping* (as *mirror of life trapping*, but traps those who open the locket without speaking the command word), *magic siphon* (MIC page 164; target each adjacent creature with *greater dispel magic* at CL 20 once per day), *quicksilver boots* (MIC page 119; twice per day move up to land speed as swift action, even over liquid surfaces, with concealment against opportunity attacks during this movement), *cassock of positive protection* (as *ring of positive protection*, MIC page 126; immune to effects of positive-dominant planes and spells that channel positive energy)

## BACKGROUND

Rather than leave incompetents to govern themselves or stick the Order with all administrative duties for his cult, Xovaroth sired Xavan to act as divine representative and ultimate authority in the mortal world. With the assistance of some Masters (most of whom hated the assignment), Xavan organized and oversaw the cult of his father.

Xavan did not interact well with the Order, as many lesser members questioned the divine alliance the Overmasters had engineered. Not even the Overmasters were in complete agreement when Xovaroth ascended. Tsaklat and Rallux were particularly offended by the idea, and Faxikae was moderately skeptical as well. Despite the friction, he and his cult aided the Order greatly, up until Xovaroth was sealed in the dead world by the other gods and the power of the Order was shattered. Their activities had become too ambitious and damaging to be beneath notice, earning reprisal from many divine agencies and forcing the Order's flight from their world.

## CURRENT SKETCH

Xavan's connection to Xovaroth was weak after the sealing, but when Xavan came with Rallux and Honored Mother to the Demiplane, he lost it

entirely. Though this has been a source of confusion and doubt, he never lets on regarding his uncertainty, and he still has the power of his divine blood, which allows him to justify his continuing authority.

Due to his excessive self-assuredness, Xavan has been captured by the Red Haunt and shipped to the terrifying domain of Castra for 'less informal' questioning and study. With the lessons of Ivar's escape learned and the powerful securities available at the Centurions' home base, there is little hope that Xavan will free himself, so he will languish and suffer as her research subject until he is rescued—or neutralized. The problem is, Rallux and Ivar have little inclination to save him. As long as they can control (or subsume) the Cult of Xovaroth, they will have no need of Xavan.

## COMBAT

Xavan is an incautious combatant, believing his quasi-deific powers make him strong enough to weather any assault. As such, he will take his time impaling opponents with shots from his bow, *Kneebringer*, enjoying the pain it causes. When he wants to feel his foes' flesh tear, he either casts *blood wind* to claw and bite them at a distance, or he closes the distance and activates his *cube of force*, holding them close by. Before engaging in close

combat, he usually activates a *negative energy aura*. He refrains from killing outright, preferring to reduce as many foes to dying as possible so he can feed on them with *consumptive field*.

As he observes the situation and decides which combatants are the most dangerous, he will start to single them out and strike them with his magic, draining their heat and vital energy. He will try to take care of actually threatening foes as swiftly as possible. The moment a foe succeeds in piercing his skin, he will cast *fire in the blood* to make the next successful attacker regret it, and he will focus his strongest spells on the assailant. If he can slay his foe instantly with *destruction or implosion*, he will do so. If a foe can overpower him before he realizes he should take her seriously, that could spell his doom.

### SPECIAL ATTACKS

*Breath Weapon (Su)*: 60-foot line, once per day, damage 6d8 acid, Reflex DC 14 half. The save DC is Constitution based.

*Divine Blood (Su)*: Xavan is not an outsider, and therefore has no reality wrinkle. However, he is the spawn of a god, which affects his interaction with the Demiplane of Dread. As a standard action, Xavan may concentrate to open a 10-foot-wide gap in a closed domain border, or otherwise allow himself and those gathered within 5 feet of him to ignore the border effect.

*Frightful Presence*: Whenever Xavan attacks, foes within a 30-foot-radius burst must make DC 17 Will saves. Foes within the burst, but not Xavan's immediate target, become shaken for 3d6 rounds if they fail their saves. Creatures Xavan attacks become panicked for 3d6 rounds if they fail their saves. Foes who make successful saving throws are unaffected by this ability for one day.

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## OVERMASTER RALLUX

CR 18

Duergar druid 6, blighter 4, ur-priest 7

LE medium (4' 6") humanoid (dwarf, psionic)

**Init** +0 **Senses** darkvision 120 ft; Listen +6, Spot +6

**Languages** Dwarven\*, Undercommon\*, Druidic, Rintoran, Kazvar, Draconic

**AC** 23 (+8 armor, +5 deflection), touch 15, flat-footed 23

**hp** 131 (17 HD)

**Immune** paralysis, phantasms, poison

**Resist** 30 fire

**SR** 15 (divine spells only)

**Fort** +14, **Ref** +5, **Will** +21; (+16/+7/+23 versus spells and spell-like effects)

**Weaknesses** Light sensitivity

**Speed** 20 ft. (4 squares; duergar may move at this speed even while wearing medium or heavy armor or carrying a medium or heavy load)

**Melee** morningstar +14/+9/+4 (2d6+2 plus 1d6 *vampiric* plus 1 Con)

**Ranged** sling +12 (1d4+1 plus 2d6 fire; 2d6 fire to all within 10 feet of target, DC 22 Reflex save negates)

**Space** 5 ft. **Reach** 5 ft.

**Base Atk** +12; **Grp** +13

**Atk Options** Blightfire

**Blihter Spells Prepared** (CL 10th; spell save DC 15 + spell level, 16 + spell level for evil\* spells)

4th (1 slots) — *rusting grasp*  
 3rd (2 slots) — *desecrate\**, *vampiric touch*  
 2nd (3 slots) — *darkness*, *flaming sphere*, *warp wood*  
 1st (5 slots) — *decomposition* (2x; *Complete Divine* page 161), *ray of enfeeblement* (3x)  
 0 (6 slots) — *detect magic* (2x), *detect poison*, *ghost sound* (2x), *read magic*

**Ur-Priest Spells Prepared** (CL 15th; spell save DC 15 + spell level, 16 + spell level for evil\* spells)

7th (0+1 slots) — *holy star* (SC page 115)  
 6th (1 slot) — *antilife shell*  
 5th (3 slots) — *earth reaver* (SC page 75), *insect plague*, *mark of justice*  
 4th (4-1 slots) — *freedom of movement*, *hypothermia* (SC page 118), *sending*  
 3rd (4-1 slots) — *clutch of Orcus\** (SC page 49), *dispel magic*, *unholy storm\** (SC page 227)  
 2nd (4-1 slots) — *darkness*, *spiritual weapon*, *stone bones* (SC page 208)  
 1st (6-1 slots) — *comprehend languages*, *deathwatch*, *entropic shield*, *inhibit* (SC page 123), *nightshield* (SC page 148)  
 0 (6 slots) — *amanuensis* (2x; SC page 9), *detect magic* (2x), *light* (2x)

**Abilities** Str 12, Dex 10, Con 16, Int 16, Wis 20, Cha 12

**SA** Backward man affinity, *deforestation*, rebuke undead, *undead wild shape*

**SQ** Naturally psionic, psi-like abilities, *speak with dead animal*, stability, stonecunning, sustenance

**Feats** Reincarnated (*RLPHB* page 63; Knowledge (Religion) always a class skill), Iron Will, Natural Spell, Spell Focus (Evil), Extra Turning, Profane Lifeleech (*Libris Mortis* page 29)

**Skills** Appraise +3 (+5 regarding stone or metal), Bluff +10, Concentration +20, Diplomacy +6, Hide +0, Knowledge (Arcana) +12, Knowledge (Nature) +15, Knowledge (The Planes) +15, Knowledge (Religion) +18, Move Silently +4, Search +3 (+5 regarding unusual stonework), Spellcraft +20, Survival +15 (+17 in above ground natural environments or on other planes).

**Possessions** +3 *wild nimbleness mithral chainmail* (*nimbleness* on *MIC* page 13; +5 max Dex, no check penalty, continues to work in wild shape), *ring of protection* +5 (with *wilding clasp*, *MIC* page 190), *greater ring of fire resistance* (with *wilding clasp*), *explosive sling* (*MIC* page 51), +1 Large *vampiric wounding fleshgrinding morningstar* (*fleshgrinding* and *vampiric* on *MIC* pages 35 and 45, respectively; +1d6 damage to living victims, heals wielder that amount; deals 1 point of Constitution damage; may command it for free to “grind,” staying in victim and dealing non-critical damage for 5 rounds before returning to hand), *obsidian steed* (*figurine of wondrous power*), *strongarm bracers* (*MIC* page 139; wearer may use weapons one size category larger without penalty)

## BACKGROUND

In the deep world under the surface of Rallux’s home plane, there is a cavern filled with mysterious, luminous, magical fungi which the duergar call Sor-Borith, the Underglade. A sect of duergar mystics protected and revered this site, its members calling themselves Masek Sor-Borithu. It was into these Keepers of the Underglade that Rallux was born, and he spent his whole early life steeped in the teachings of druidcraft.

When he turned fourteen, he was taken to Tagluk, the most sacred mushroom of the Underglade. It reared up twelve feet, and under the pale blue light of its wide cap, the voices of spirits could be heard to converse and debate. There, he underwent the Rite of Remembrance, wherein a spirit of Tagluk was bequeathed to him, to become part of his soul.

It is not known why some spirits heard the call of Tagluk and settled in the Underglade, but all such



spirits possess great wisdom. Such was the case with Thamatin, a theologian of the surface who studied the gods of the deep and founded a great school of divine philosophy. It was his spirit which bonded with Rallux, and the young duergar was greatly honored.

Rallux dwelt near the Underglade for nearly half a century more, drinking in its ancient power with his fellow Keepers. Unlike them, however, his actions always had a methodical cast. He didn't just meditate on the wisdom of the Underglade, he studied it. He was not content to merely protect and commune, he had to understand in a more scientific way. This most certainly was the gift—and ultimately the curse—of Thamatin.

One day, when wandering the labyrinthine tunnels beyond the Underglade, Rallux met his first living surface dweller, a female elf in search of the Underglade. Outsiders were strictly forbidden to enter, but she happened to be a student of the school of Thamatin, and deep in his soul, Rallux felt compelled to help her. In violation of his vows of protection, but in accordance with his belief in the importance of knowledge, he taught her the paths of the tunnels, the customs of the Keepers, and the Druidic phrases which, combined with her knack for illusions, could get her into the Underglade.

There were forces in the Underglade which could not be deceived, and it was not long before the elf's illusions faltered, and she was driven away. Called to account, Rallux refused to admit wrongdoing, believing that following the spirit Tagluk had given him could only be right action. For this, his connection to the glade was severed and he was cast out of the only home he ever knew.

Though nature refused his call, Rallux could not be denied. From his meticulous study of his craft, he quickly developed a method of stealing the power of life that was once so freely given. For decades he stalked the depths, siphoning the vitality out of subterranean ecosystems in preparation for his wrathful return.

Eventually, the Underglade was met with what seemed a new threat. Troglodytes, which had previously been unaware of the place, started raiding in earnest. At first, it was easy to defeat them, but as time went on, they started to develop tricks to counter the tactics of the druids, and the front line moved ever closer to the Underglade. After years of struggle, the Keepers managed to push the troglodytes back. Even when they went into full retreat, the Keepers pursued, intent on ending the menace completely. This is what Rallux had wanted all along.

With the Keepers' focus elsewhere, it was all too simple for Rallux to enter the Underglade once more. He strode straight up to Tagluk, spreading flames as he went, and at the Underglade's heart he used his vile magic to drain its life away. The lesser fungi slowly began to dim and die, but Tagluk stood resolute. The fires were bright, but Tagluk seemed to shine even brighter. Enraged, Rallux pulled harder at the natural energies of the Underglade, and finally he saw a shift. The glow of Tagluk turned from blue to red, and the cavern shook violently. Rallux was powerful and prideful, but he was not without fear. He fled the Underglade, hacking on his own smoke.

He went where none of his brethren would follow—the world above the ground—and began to spread streaks of dead plants through the lush forests of the daylit lands. This nearly proved to be his undoing. Happening upon a beautiful garden of vibrant flowers on an otherwise austere estate, Rallux's hatred of nature drove him to defile the place, an action which did not sit well with the estate's master, a tiefling named Tsaklat. When he found his garden dead, he sent dark creatures of nightmare to bring the perpetrator back. Unable to resist forever, Rallux was eventually captured and brought before Tsaklat.

Rather than exact further punishment, Tsaklat offered to take Rallux in and train him. Tsaklat recognized Rallux's thieving spellcraft as similar to his own—the way of the ur-priest. Thus, Rallux was brought into the fold of the god-hating Order of Exclusion. His fervor brought him swiftly up the ranks, and it was scarcely a score of years before he was elevated as the ninth Overmaster of the Order.

## CURRENT SKETCH

With the imprisonment of Xavan, Rallux now sees an opportunity to solidify the power of the Order. By holding up their master's failure and weakness, he could attack the faith of the Cult of Xovarothe and attempt to turn them all to the faithlessness of the Order of Exclusion. This would purify the Order, removing its ill-conceived divine affiliation and returning it to self-sufficiency. He holds back for a number of reasons, foremost among them being the fact that partnering with Xovarothe was approved by a majority decision of the other Overmasters. As his hope of bringing them back fades, however, he will likely soon consider the choice his to make alone. The few younger brothers there are were trained to aspire to break free of the Cult, so they will turn swiftly. If the preceptors are not handled carefully, though, some may become alienated and turn a portion of the Cult against the Order. The Order is weak, and a new enemy could be disastrous.

## COMBAT

Immediately after meditating to steal his daily spells, Rallux sacrifices one 4th level slot, one 3rd level slot, one 2nd level slot, and one 1st level slot to prepare a 7th level spell. This is reflected in his statistics block.

Rallux prefers to cloak himself in an *antilife shell* and keep his enemies at a distance in combat. If he finds it necessary to engage in melee, he uses his *undead wild shape* ability to become a skeletal black bear, then activates his *expansion* psi-like ability to increase to Huge size. In this form, his statistics become

**Skeletal Bear Form:** As base statistics block, except Huge undead; Init +6; AC 26, touch 13, flat-footed 26; Grp +26; Reach 10 ft; Full Atk 2 claws +16 melee (1d8+6) and bite +11 melee (2d6+3); SV Fort +11; DR 5/bludgeoning; immunity to cold; Str 23, Dex 11, Con —.

He carries his oversized, cruel morningstar as an alternative, but he generally employs it as a fancy implement of torture or execution rather than in battle.

## SPECIAL ATTACKS

**Backward Man Affinity:** Backward men (*Denizens of Dread* page 28) understand Rallux no matter what language he speaks—even if he does not wish them to—and he can understand a backward man if it wishes to be understood. Backward men can sense a certain connection to Rallux and generally take a friendly disposition toward him, but his actions and words can turn things sour.

Furthermore, Rallux can convert a victim into a backward man. Once per day, Rallux may touch a dying creature and transform it into a backward man, unless it succeeds in a DC 19 Will save (the DC is Charisma based). The transformed victim retains none of the abilities it had before, but it does keep the same Hit Dice, up to a cap of 12. This ability is taxing to Rallux, conferring a negative level upon him which cannot be removed. In 24 hours, the negative level disappears without causing level loss.

It is for the depredations-by-proxy committed by Honored Mother against women that the Dark Powers awarded Rallux this ability. At first, it merely granted him favor with the beasts, but after a total of four failed Powers checks, it has grown. Unfortunately, he sometimes has a hard time ridding himself of the creatures. They sneak into lairs of the Order and cause mischief, they congregate where he is attempting to work subtle plans, and they can become more of a handful if he is too harsh in attempting to disperse them.

**Blightfire (Su):** As a standard action, Rallux can unleash a scorching blast of fire. This effect deals 5d6 points of fire damage to all creatures within 10 feet (DC 19 Reflex half; DC is Wisdom based) and ignites flammable objects it touches.

**Deforestation (Sp):** Rallux can kill all non-sentient plant life within a radius of 140 feet as a full-round action once per day. If a potentially affected plant is under the control of another (such as a druid's *liveoak* or a dryad's home tree), the controller can make a Fortitude save (DC 19) to keep it alive. Affected plants immediately cease photosynthesis, root tapping, and all other methods of sustenance.

Like picked flowers, they appear vibrant for several hours, but within a day, they turn brown and wither. Except for plants selected by a controller, nothing can grow in a deforested area until it has a *hallow* spell cast upon it and it is reseeded.

Deforestation enables Rallux to cast his daily allotment of spells. This ability works in any terrain, but deforesting a sandy desert, ice floe, or other environment with only sparse vegetation does not empower him to cast spells.

**Racial Combat Modifiers:** Rallux has a +1 bonus to attack rolls versus orcs (as well as half-orcs) and goblinoids, as well as a +4 dodge bonus to Armor Class versus creatures with the giant type.

**Rebuke Undead (Su):** Rallux may rebuke undead 8 times per day. His turning check modifier is +3 (factoring in a synergy bonus from ranks in Knowledge (Religion)), and his effective cleric level for rebuking is 7. He can affect 2d6+8 HD of undead per attempt.

**Siphon Spell Power (Ex):** Once each day, Rallux can sacrifice two or more lower-level spell slots to prepare a higher-level spell. Total the levels of the expended spells, then reduce the sum to three-quarters (rounded down) to determine the level of the spell slot created. Rallux can prepare a spell of up to seventh level through this technique.

**Undead Wild Shape (Sp):** This functions like the druid's wild shape ability, except that Rallux adds the skeleton template to the animal form he chooses to transform into. His animal form is altered as follows:

- Type changes to undead.
- Natural armor bonus is +0 (Tiny animal), +1 (Small), +2 (Medium or Large), or +3 (Huge).
- +2 Dexterity, no Constitution score.
- Immunity to cold.
- Damage reduction 5/bludgeoning.

This ability functions twice per day, and Rallux may take animal forms up to Large size. He can maintain a wild shape for up to 10 hours.

## SPECIAL QUALITIES

**Light Sensitivity (Ex):** Rallux is dazzled in sunlight and in the radius of a *daylight* spell.

**Naturally Psionic (Ex):** Rallux has 3 bonus power points, but no means to use them.

**Psi-like Abilities (Ps):** Rallux may manifest *expansion* (swift action, grow to Huge size, +4 size bonus to Strength, -4 size penalty to Dexterity, -2 size penalty to attack rolls and AC, 17 minute duration) and *invisibility* (as the spell) each once per day. These abilities affect only him and whatever he carries. His effective manifester level is 17th.

**Speak with dead animal (Sp):** Once per day, Rallux can converse with dead animals. This ability functions like a *speak with dead* spell cast by a 10th level cleric, except that it affects only corpses of animal creatures.

**Stability (Ex):** Rallux is exceptionally stable on his feet. He receives a +4 on ability checks made to resist being bull rushed or tripped when standing on the ground (but not when climbing, flying, riding, or otherwise not standing firmly on the ground).

**Stonecunning (Ex):** Rallux has a +2 racial bonus on Search checks to notice unusual stonework, such as sliding walls, stonework, traps, new construction (even when built to match the old), unsafe stone surfaces, shaky stone ceilings, and the like. Something that isn't stone but is disguised as stone also counts as unusual stonework. If he merely comes within 10 feet of unusual stonework, he can make a Search check as if he were actively searching, and he can use the Search skill to find stonework traps as a rogue can. He may also intuit depth, sensing his approximate depth underground as naturally as a human can sense which way is up. Duergar have a sixth sense about stonework, an innate ability that they get plenty of ability to practice and hone in their underground homes.

**Sustenance (Ex):** Rallux does not need food or water to survive.

**HONORED MOTHER**

CR11

Cadaver golem rogue 7

NE large (8' 6") construct

**Init** +8 **Senses** darkvision 60 ft, low-light vision; Listen +8, Spot +15**Languages** Rintoran\*, Kazvar\*, Vaasi, Mordentish**AC** 27 (–1 size, +3 Dex, +5 armor, +10 natural), touch 12, flat-footed 24**hp** 114 (17 HD); **DR** 5/adamantine**Immune** poison, sleep, paralysis, stunning, disease, death effects, necromancy effects, mind-affecting effects, effects requiring a Fortitude save (unless they work on objects or are harmless), critical hits, nonlethal damage, ability damage, ability drain, fatigue, exhaustion, energy drain, death from massive damage**Fort** +10, **Ref** +17, **Will** +13**Speed** 30 ft. (6 squares)**Melee** 2 slams +16 (2d8+5)**Space** 10 ft. **Reach** 10 ft.**Base Atk** +12; **Grp** +21**Atk Options** See assimilate flesh, sneak attack +4d6**Abilities** Str 21, Dex 18, Con –, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 10**SA** See assimilate flesh, trapfinding**SQ** Assimilate flesh, evasion, immunity to magic, trap sense +2, uncanny dodge, vault of the overmasters**Feats** Power Attack, Improved Sunder, Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Deadly Precision, Skill Focus (Use Magic Device)**Skills** Climb +12 (7 ranks), Diplomacy +2 (0 ranks), Gather Information +9 (7 ranks), Hide +20 (20 ranks), Intimidate +9 (9 ranks), Jump +15 (8 ranks), Knowledge (Local) +9 (7 ranks), Listen +8 (7 ranks), Move Silently +24 (20 ranks), Perform (Sing) +7 (7 ranks), Search +9 (7 ranks), Sense Motive +8 (7 ranks), Spot +15 (9 ranks), Use Magic Device +10 (7 ranks)**Possessions** +3 *freedom leather armor* (MIC page 11; constant *freedom of movement* effect), *hand of glory*, *ring of blinking* (on *hand of glory*), *wings of flying*, *dimension stride boots* (MIC page 94; +2 competence bonus to Jump; 5 charges per day, 1 to teleport 20 feet, 3 to teleport 40 feet, 5 to teleport 60 feet, target location must be in line of sight and line of effect), *deathstrike bracers* (MIC page 93; 3 times per day as swift action can deal critical hits and sneak attack damage to constructs, elementals, oozes, plants, and undead for 1 round), *eyes of truth* (MIC page 99; +5 competence bonus to Spot; once per day as swift action gain *true seeing* for 1 round), *vest of resistance* +5 (MIC page 147, +5 resistance bonus to all saves), *eternal wand of repair serious damage* (MIC page 159; twice per day cast *repair serious damage* [SC page 173; repairs 3d8+9 damage to a construct]), *rod of force* (MIC page 173, 5 uses per day; either blade of force [+1 *brilliant energy longsword* for 10 rounds], blast of force [ranged touch attack, 10d6 damage, 100 foot range], or *wall of force*), *stone of controlling earth elementals***BACKGROUND**

When the Order was under fire from the gods of their world, they realized that they could not stand against such undivided attention easily. Little can oppose a unified divine front for long. To make matters worse, many of the Overmasters could not

escape notice, which made fleeing much harder. It was Rallux who devised part of the solution.

From the bodies of many, he pieced together Honored Mother, a golem that could hold the souls of the Overmasters and smuggle them out of the

world. Lacking alternatives, the other eight went along with the idea, placing Rallux and Xavan in charge until the others could be retrieved. With their souls ensconced in Honored Mother, they fled to the one place they felt was protected from the gods that sought them: the Land of Mists.

As a cadaver golem, Honored Mother can assimilate the body parts of victims to gain their abilities. In order to free an Overmaster's soul, she must find a pregnant female and assimilate the woman's uterus with the unborn child inside. Upon carrying the child for the remainder of its development, she is meant to give birth to it, reincarnating one of the Overmasters in the child's body. However, this has been attempted many times since their arrival, and each child has been stillborn, unable to be supported by Honored Mother's unliving body.

### CURRENT SKETCH

Honored Mother and Rallux are both angry and frustrated with their failure to bring the Overmasters back, but for different reasons. Rallux is embarrassed by his creation's repeated malfunctions and at his wits' end trying to find a solution. On the other hand, Honored Mother's purpose is to bear these tainted children and raise them as her own, but she is being denied. Her emotional attachment to her unborn charges is greater than Rallux knows or ever intended, and she sings her mournful lullaby to each one while she carries it. Time and again, she has had her hopes dashed, and it takes a greater toll on her than on her creator. If it cannot be resolved, she faces madness, which will make her all the more dangerous, and mean all the more trouble for the Order.

### COMBAT

Honored Mother is under strict instructions to preserve her existence at all costs. When she is under attack and cannot pound her assailant into the ground in short order, she disengages and retreats to a secure location. She only stays in a fight when she has plenty of allies who can gang up on her targets, allowing her to flank and make the most of her extra sneak attack damage.

### SPECIAL ATTACKS

*Trapfinding:* Honored Mother can use the Search skill to locate traps when the task has a Difficulty Class higher than 20. Finding a nonmagical trap has a DC of at least 20, or higher if it is well hidden. Finding a magic trap has a DC of 25 + the level of the spell used to create it. She can use the Disable Device skill to disarm magic traps. A magic trap generally has a DC of 25 + the level of the spell used to create it. If she beats a trap's DC by 10 or more with a Disable Device check, she can study the trap, figure out how it works, and bypass it (with her companions) without disarming it.

### SPECIAL QUALITIES

*Assimilate Flesh (Ex):* Honored Mother can choose to replace one of her limbs, sense organs, or other parts with a similar part taken from a living or recently deceased humanoid. Doing so grants her skills and abilities associated with that particular body part. Honored Mother cannot, however, gain skill points in excess of 20 in a single skill, and her overall sum of skill points must remain 122. Thus, if she acquires the hands of a rogue and wishes to assimilate some of the rogue's Open Lock skill ranks, she will have to lose some of her current skill ranks. She can never gain more ranks from a body part than that individual possessed; thus, if the rogue had 4 ranks in Open Lock, Honored Mother could gain no more than 4 ranks from his hands, even if she were willing to lose more than 4 previously acquired skill points. Her current skill ranks are given parenthetically in her statistics block.

Additionally, Honored Mother can acquire certain extraordinary and supernatural abilities, if she takes body parts from members of the proper classes or races. She can only have one such ability at a time and can choose when assimilating parts if she wishes to keep her current ability or gain the new one. The following table shows some possible skills and abilities she can acquire; the DM can add additional skills and abilities to the list as she sees fit.

Finally, Honored Mother heals 2d8+5 points of damage anytime she acquires a new part. Adding a

new body part is a full-round action.

Body Part	Possible New Skills	Possible New Abilities <sup>1</sup>
Eyes	Search, Spot	Darkvision (if better than her own)
Ears	Listen	Blindsense
Tongue	Diplomacy, Perform (Sing), Speak Language	—
Hands	Climb, Open Lock, Sleight of Hand	Favored enemy, flurry of blows, smite, sneak attack
Brain <sup>2</sup>	Knowledge (any)	—
Heart	—	Rage
Legs	Hide, Jump, Move Silently	Evasion, fast movement
1 The part must come from a character or race that possesses this ability. Honored Mother can have only one such ability at any time.		
2 Honored Mother's personality is mystically bound to her form. Switching brains does not alter her identity.		

*Evasion (Ex):* Honored Mother can avoid even magical and unusual attacks with great agility. If she makes a successful Reflex saving throw against an attack that normally deals half damage on a successful save, she instead takes no damage. Evasion can be used only if she is wearing light armor or no armor. She does not gain the benefit of evasion while helpless.

*Immunity to Magic (Ex):* Honored Mother is immune to any spell or spell-like ability that allows spell resistance. In addition, certain spells and effects function differently against her, as noted below.

A *cure* or *heal* spell affects Honored Mother as if a *slow* spell had been cast upon her, with a duration in rounds equal to twice the spell level. An *inflict* or *harm* spell dispels any such *slow* effect.

*Regenerate* deals damage equal to 4d8 plus caster level, as Honored Mother's body battles against recently assimilated parts. It also prevents her from making use of any special abilities gained from acquiring parts for 2d4 rounds. She can attempt a Fortitude save to halve the damage and maintain her special ability.

*Trap Sense (Ex):* Honored Mother has an intuitive sense that alerts her to danger from traps, giving her a +2 bonus on Reflex saves made to avoid traps and a +2 dodge bonus to AC against attacks made by traps.

*Uncanny Dodge (Ex):* Honored Mother can react to danger before her senses would normally allow her to do so. She retains her Dexterity bonus to AC even if she is caught flat-footed or struck by an invisible attacker. However, she still loses her Dexterity bonus to AC if immobilized.

*Vault of the Overmasters (Su):* Honored Mother is a repository for the souls of the Overmasters of the Order of Exclusion. Currently, she holds eight of them. If Rallux—the only one remaining free—were to die, his soul would be drawn into her for safekeeping. This protection would extend to the other Overmasters, were they to be released. In a sense, she acts as a communal phylactery. By design, Honored Mother is supposed to resurrect the Overmasters by assimilating a pregnant woman's uterus and giving birth to the child with an Overmaster's soul in place of its own. It is worth noting that many of the Overmasters are not thrilled

with the idea of being reborn into bodies not of their species.

## Lair

The fortress of Saecal Natormo lies in the Vale of Memory in Verbrek. Its grounds, which are approximately 300 feet by 700 feet, are encircled by a rectangular curtain wall of imposing black stone. However, observers on the outside are unable to see any part of the site, as it is cloaked in a powerful illusion that makes it look like the surrounding forest. The local treeline averages out at the height of the curtain wall, but the trees within 100 feet of the wall have been chopped short 20 feet up and ensorcelled to look their original heights. Most buildings within the bailey are shorter than the 50-foot curtain wall, but the Cathedral of Xovaroth rises 20 feet above it. Flying creatures directly over the bailey that descend under 80 feet above the ground pierce the illusion, and are close enough for lookouts to strike with arrows or dash them into the earth with *downdraft* spells (*Spell Compendium* page 72).

The site is a rank 4 Sinkhole of Evil, as it was created by the will of a vile godling. It bears a taint of hatred

and lust for power. On the Ethereal Plane, it appears as though great talons are sticking out of the soil like titanic spires, surrounding a decrepit parody of the curtain wall. Violet light emanates from within, welling up from the very stones of the Cathedral of Xovaroth, which is reproduced in perfect detail. From within the outer wall, observers might spy a vague draconic shape, rearing up to peer in at them with hateful purple eyes.

Most other structures on the Material Plane grounds are represented by husks on the Ethereal plane, but the Manse of the Order appears whole, albeit preternaturally dark. Tendrils of shadow reach out from the Manse to lick at the rest of the site, signifying the Order's claim to Saecal Natormo. The Manse bears an additional taint of despair, caused by the desperation of Honored Mother.

When Xavan is in attendance at the site, or Honored Mother is present actively gestating an Overmaster, the rank of the Sinkhole can rise to 5.



# SITHICUS: THE LAND OF THE PROPHETESS

(DOMAIN REWRITE)

BY JOHN BERDIT

On my many travels, I never expected to journey to Sithicus. Lord Soth was a tyrannical death knight and his seneschal was a crazed werewadger. The domain had little to recommend it. The landscape was quite bleak, and the domain was one of the more oppressive ones in the Mists.

This is no longer the case. With the death of Soth, the land has slowly changed for the better. The land has changed considerably, although still a land of forests and hills, there is a large plain in the center of Sithicus now, and still it is far less gloomy. In fact, looking at this land made me think about my past sins. The contrast between the prettiness of the landscape and the darkness of my own sins are quite striking.

The land is one of extreme luck, both good and bad. Gamblers avoid the place like the plague, for how can one make a successful living in gambling when it truly is a matter of luck? You might have five badly losing hands in a row, followed by four overwhelmingly winning ones, regardless the odds.

Of course, the most famous feature of the domain is its aura of truthfulness. One cannot tell a lie here. I didn't believe it myself until I tried it out. On arriving I tried to say, "I am a dwarf" and it came out "I am a gnome". Although you can't out-and-out lie, you can keep quiet about things or make misleading statements. As such, Sithicans are experts at making misleading statements.

Elves are numerous in Sithicus, and if not exactly friendly, they are considerably less hostile than under Soth. Without Soth the humans don't try to harass them. Humans may not be over fond of elves, but they aren't suicidal either; they are bright enough to try to avoid confrontations that put their neck in a noose.

There are two leaders in Sithicus now, following the destruction of Soth, the king of the elves, named King Nandor I, and King Gregory I for the humans. The elves rule the forests while the humans rule the plains. The relations between the elves and humans are peaceful but tense. Neither wants a war but neither do they trust each other, and forts are being built all along the perimeter of the forests on both sides. The fact is that neither can really win a war over the other. In the woods, the elves reign supreme due to their stealth, on the plains, the humans dominate due to their numbers.

The Sithicans worship twin dragon deities Tahkmiat and Palahmut primarily. Neither is good or evil but they are the goddess of nature and the god of civilization respectively. There are a number of gods under them: Hex-Jolith god of law, Odibran the muse, and Mystsolin goddess of magic, among others.

The Temple of the Twin Deities is a power to be reckoned with itself and is the only thing that both the human and the elves both believe in. The official head of the temple is High Priest Michaël who is overshadowed by the Prophetess. Her impact on the



temple is indirect but huge. Although she does not deal with the day-to-day running of the temple, her prophecies are considered by everyone as the divinely inspired words of the Twin Deities. The name of the religion is a bit misleading, although the Twin Deities are acknowledged most, people tend to worship the lesser deities more on a day to day basis. The lesser deities are thought to be far more responsive to prayer, but the Twin Deities must be acknowledged, as the lesser deities derive their power from the Twins and so can give no help unless their superiors are acknowledged.

The Prophetess is the most beloved and respected person in the domain. It is said that her prophecies are vague but always true. People come to her by the thousands, seeking her advice, and the vast majority of the time they are better off in the end for doing so. It is said that the truth is always hidden in there. However, one must work for it to become true as it is never just handed to you. Indeed, there are always “tests” according to legend. They say that it isn’t easy, and that you must persevere no matter what obstacles are put in your way. However, the more difficult the obstacles, the greater the reward in the end.

The Prophetess, and that is the only way people refer to her, travels the entire domain in a large caravan, never stopping for more than a day as she invites people to ask her questions. She lives surprisingly well for a travelling prophetess as her caravan is ornate.

Undead are surprisingly common in Sithicus, particularly incorporeal undead. Wraiths, banshees, ghosts and specters all exist in the domain. They tend to linger by areas that have seen carnage in the past, particularly from Soth’s minions or Soth himself. As such, people in the area know which places to avoid. It is still a land of specters.

The elven village of Mal-Erak is transforming quickly into a full-fledged city as elves all across the Mists are moving to Sithicus, now that the death knight is gone. It is one of the few places where they aren’t

looked down upon. That said, they allow humans to enter their city to trade and as a gnome I am treated with indifference which is a step up from distrust. There are several inns, the best of which is the Oak Leaf. The main meal is venison stew with bread. It is quite good, but a bit spicy for some. The drink is a deep red wine, but be careful, as it is a strong wine that can make you tipsy before you know it.

The city of Hroth is growing quickly as well, numbering no less than 15,000 people. Most of the buildings in the city are shanties and lean-tos, as they can be built quickly and cheaply. The best inn is the Fair Glade which serves roast rabbit with potatoes and a salad. The main drink here is some sort of elven brandy that will get you drunk even quicker than the wine at the Oak Leaf.

The capital city for humans is Har-Thelen, which has but a few elves left as they have mostly moved to the more elven cities. Elves here aren’t particularly harassed but they aren’t in charge like in the two elven cities. The High Temple of the Twin Deities is here. Once a year, on The Night of the Screaming Shadows, the Prophetess gives a message of hope. The city is teeming with people as people try to get a glimpse of the Prophetess. It is the one day a year that the elves flock to the city as all violence or sign of intolerance is forbidden on the holy day and the punishments for violating it are quite severe. It is considered a holy city, so alcohol is forbidden here, and the food is plain but nourishing. The best place to stay is the Prophetess’s Word. It serves nothing but tea or water and the meals are peasant’s fare but at least it is clean and the furnishings sturdy. The one thing that makes it stick out is the fine paintings of the Prophetess’s journeys.

## ORGANIZATIONS

### *The Temple of the Twin Deities*

An NG church that advises people to help their neighbors, not discriminate between elves and humans and give to charity. It is one of the most truly good churches in the Mists

### **The Society for the Study of Humans**

Although given an innocuous name, this group is far more sinister. This loosely bound CE society basically is for the study of humans by either torturing them, conducting bizarre medical experiments on them, or autopsying their bodies after they kill them. In other words, it is a society of human-hating elves who want to cover their wickedness under the cloak of trying to discover things. They will do absolutely anything to get more human victims.

### **The Human Defense League**

Although it sounds defensive in nature, the league “defends humans” mainly by killing as many elves as possible. This LE organization is highly organized. Unlike its counterpart, it isn’t into torture but just straight out murder. Their murders are well planned in advance. The organization is designed like a military with General Lawrence in charge.

### **NOTORIOUS PEOPLE**

#### **King Nandor I, Align N Lvl 7 Wiz**

King Nandor looks like a fairly typical elf with brown hair and eyes. He is cautious about humans but not hostile. He has no desire to wage a bloody war against the humans with its horrific cost to both sides. He is doubtful he could win such a war and even more doubtful he could control the human lands for long even if he would win. He is known for being fond of the ladies and wine.

*Plot hook: King Nandor had a very expensive and rare vintage wine stolen, and he wants you to get it back. He is willing to pay you 100 GP for the recovery of the wine, which is hidden in a cave guarded by elven bandits.*

*Plot hook: The Society for the Study of Humans is causing trouble again by kidnapping humans to “study”. He is willing to pay 50 GP a head for the kidnappers.*

#### **King Gregory I, Align LN Lvl 9 Ftr**

King Gregory I is a tall, strong man with dark brown hair and eyes. He too has no desire for war, as he sees the risk as far too great. He might win, but at what cost? Let the elves keep the woods, he has the plains and that is a bread basket. The Human Defense League is a thorn in his side and would dearly love seeing them go away.

*Plot hook: The Human Defense League is planning an “elf hunt,” and the king wants you to do something about it. Stop the hunters for 1,000 GP*

*Plot hook: A powerful nobleman is trying to overthrow the king. He is a member of the Human Defense League and his taking over would lead to massive bloodshed.*

#### **High Priest Benenius I, Align NG 12 Clr**

The high priest was a murderous rogue before he met Inza, who gladly conned people out of money for years. However, by the time he met Inza, the price he had to pay for his evil deeds made him question himself.

Within three months, his alignment became neutral and in another three, neutral good due to her aura. He is now a powerful force for good in the domain. He is very loyal to Inza but always interprets her orders or advice in a good manner.

#### **Researcher Leoromyn Treebranch, Align CE 6 Wiz**

He is the leader of The Society for the Study of Humans and completely despises humans. He is very cruel and sadistic. His “experiments” do nothing but inflict pain and humiliation while gathering little data. He manages it very loosely as he is more into inflicting pain than maintaining control.

*Plot hook: A half a dozen humans have been captured for “study”. King Gregory is willing to pay 20 GP for every human saved, plus 200 GP per head of the elf captors.*

*Plot hook: Researcher Treebranch has been located, in a cave beneath a giant tree. There is a 5,000 GP*

price on his head plus 300 for every member of his Society that is killed or captured, offered by King Nandor. The cave contains dozens of members and a few dozen undead.

### **General Horatio Lawrence, Align LE 9 Ftr**

General Lawrence is the leader of the Human Defense League. He absolutely loathes elves and wants them all to die. His men are well-trained and he is a stickler for discipline. His men launch raids on isolated elvish settlements. He sees the king as weak and sometimes skirmishes with the king's army as well.

*Plot hook: The party stumbles across a fight between the king's men and the Human Defense League. Helping the king's men will result in the party getting a good reputation in Lawrence's realm.*

*Plot hook: This is it. General Lawrence's fort has been located by the king. It is a wooden fort located in a small wooded area. The fort is well guarded with dozens of troops. It is a well-built fort with a dozen soldiers manning the walls and several dozen inside. If you get to them. Lawrence has a 5,000 GP price on his head and 300 GP on all soldiers inside offered by King Gregory.*

## **INZA, DARK LORD OF SITHICUS**

### **Rog 3/Sor 10**

Unlike canon Inza, this version is fully human. She is unaging and undying until the Dark Powers will otherwise. As such she still appears 18 or 19, no matter how many years go by. At her birth, her soul was stained by that of Duke Gundar. It tilted her somewhat to evil, but she could have fought it off if she tried. She is both power hungry and sadistic to the core. Where her sorcery comes from is a bit of a mystery, but it can manifest in unlikely people. One possibility is that the taint from Gundar's soul was what did it. In any case she is a quite powerful sorceress, focusing on divination.



Art by [Talon](#)

**Str 13, Dex 17, Con 12, Int 16, Wis 12, Cha 18,**

**Special Attacks:** Evil Eye, Sneak Attack +2d6

**Special Qualities:** Heightened static burn, dark vision, Shadow Jump as Shadow Dancer of her level (320 ft), cannot cross domain borders. Can cast shadow conjuration and shadow evocation at will at her sorcerer level. Unlike other castings in Ravenloft she never creates shadows when the spell ends although her castings are 40% stronger than normal instead of 20%.

**Spells** 0 Detect Poison, Detect Magic, Read Magic, Touch of Fatigue, Arcane Mark, Ghost Sound, Resistance, Ray of Frost, Acid Splash

1 Identity, Detect Undead, Mage Armor, Color Spray, Charm

2 Detect Thoughts, See invisible, Touch of Idiocy, Melf's Magic Arrow

3 Magic Circle vs Good, Nondetection, Clairvoyance

4 Stoneskin, Scrying

5 Dominate Person

On top of her magical skills, Inza is always surrounded by a host of people numbering from the hundreds to the thousands. As a famous travelling prophet, people flock to her and she has a huge number of followers surrounding her at any given time.

### **CURSE**

Inza is a spiteful and sadistic person who enjoys causing misery to others. Her curse is to bring help and hope to the people. She is able to tell the future with near perfect accuracy but is only able to speak at most half truths about them. Moreover, any advice she gives is bound to help the person eventually if he believes in the prophecy. No matter what lies she tells or what roadblocks she puts in someone's way they are bound to be better off if they take her advice and consider any setbacks mere "tests". It is extremely difficult for her to discourage Sithicans from pressing on to the end due to the strong faith they have in her prophesies. She is so sadistic that this is painful for her as she delights in the misery of others. She is also unable to embezzle money from the church. Each time she has tried, she wound up losing all her money by some means. Now she lives off the donations people give her for her advice. Due to the devotion of the people to her, this adds up to quite a bit of money anyway.

Every year on the Night of the Screaming Shadows Inza is compelled to go to Har-Thelen to give a speech. The speech she gives always helps to rekindle hope in her domain. No matter what she tries, the speech turns out to be inspirational and hopeful. Anyone of neutral or good alignment gains +1 to all skills for one week after hearing the speech. The same people gain +1 to attack, AC, all save and +1HP per level in any combat against non-intelligent beings or anyone of evil alignment for the same week.

The Temple of the Twin Deities was meant to be a corrupt religion, bilking people of their money to allow Inza to live in complete luxury and to spread misery around the land, and it worked well at that

for the first month. Although she appointed completely heartless con men to be the head of her church, they slowly but steadily started moving toward Neutral Good.

Inza is cursed to always pick someone who is starting to regret his evil past and she radiates an aura of hope. As such, every month a person is a cleric of the Temple of the Twin Deities, they must make a will save against DC12 or move one step closer to good alignment. Every month they pass the will save the DC is raised by one. If they succeed six months in a row they are turned into a clerical lich. They trade any class levels they have for clerical ones. If they are less than 11<sup>th</sup> level they are raised to 11<sup>th</sup>. They are then compelled to work against Inza's plans. Ironically it often means indirectly helping people. They will use foul methods when possible, but they are compelled to work against Inza even if it means helping a very good person.

Once an evil person fails a save, the DC drops to 12 and the process begins again. The original scripture was a subtle neutral evil, but the scripture has changed slowly so it is now neutral good. A cleric of the Twin Deities can trade up to 5 of his strength or dexterity for wisdom when reaching good alignment and he will trade any non-cleric levels he has for cleric. He may gain non-clerical levels in the future if he wishes, though.

### **INZA'S PERSONALITY**

On the night she was born, a piece of Gundar's soul entered the body of baby Inza, corrupting her somewhat. Although more prone to evil than she would have been otherwise, Inza had a choice to fight off the corruption. It tilted her slightly towards evil, yet she retained her free will. However, the life of a Vistani is not an easy one, and Inza was embittered by it. She resented the fact she had to keep travelling; she hated the fact that most people looked down on her and her people.

More than anything, she wanted to break away from the Vistani and pretend to be anything else than one

of them. What she refused to admit to herself is that even if she succeeded in breaking away, she was still a Vistani by blood and would have to keep wandering. Worse yet, she would be a lone Vistani, easy prey for anyone who recognized her for being one.

Inza is sly, charming and very intelligent. Although she is evil, she is not stupid and she knows what side her bread is buttered on. She is dependent on donations to the Temple and she knows it. Her prophecies are always vague; not only does it make her more mysterious but allows more room to put a spanner in the works. Although an extremely spiteful and sadistic person on the surface, she acts nice and friendly. She has slowly changed her outward personality over the past few years in order to rake in donations. She hasn't aged a day since the Night of the Screaming Shadows, which people attribute as a gift from the Twin Deities.

One of the things she hated about being Vistani was having to travel all the time and not being able to stay in a place long enough to get to really know it. Darklordship made this worse, as she gets increasingly nervous as the sun goes down about staying in one place. She starts getting prepared and leaves within an hour at most. She really hates this, but the fear is overwhelming and she gives in and leaves.

### CLOSING THE BORDERS

If she wants to close the borders, she can summon a field of darkness that surrounds the domain. Anyone stepping into it will walk out of it at a random location within 960 feet of the domain's exact center, which happens to be an open clearing.



# DETECTIVE ALEXANDRE'S PRIVATE KARGAT CASEBOOK: ERRANT BLOODLINES

(MORE ABOUT THIS STORY IN THE UPCOMING ZYTHIA GAZETTEER)

BY : MISCHIEF

Detective Alexandre's morning began with a sharp knock at the door of his private room and the sharper knock of his forehead on the inn's roof beam. His halfling hotelier, a biscuit-faced marm with custard locks in a braided bun, was clutching a wooden tray with a steaming pot of floral black tea, cranberry scones, and a navy-blue envelope sealed with the King's fiery eye in golden wax. Her own eyes were the size of saucers.

She whispered to the inspector like the letter itself might overhear, "A gentelady on a black horse, wearing black and blue and gold had this for you. A royal letter, she said, from the Rex's castle. Deliver it as soon as possible, she told me." Alexandre carefully received her trembling tray so as not to tip the teacup. He wasn't surprised in the slightest that Azalin's people had no trouble finding him, despite boarding in the little people's quarters rather than the usual human haunts. Sure, he hit his noggin on every timber, but a bowl of the inn's chilled summer beet borscht chased by the family brandy cured all headaches.

"Shame she didn't stay for one of your breakfasts. I'm sure they're much better than the king's fare. Don't tell him I said that." The marm brushed his

easing words aside with a porcelain smile and bustled from the room. Peasant's tales allege that when anyone other than the rightful recipient peeked at a royal letter, they would be bewitched by the wizard king's magic and their brains would leak from their ears as spaghetti noodles, or their eyeballs would pop out and scuttle off like spiders. And knowing said king, he probably enjoys cursing his correspondence just so.

Sipping tea, Alexandre popped the seal. In loopy blue calligraphy –not the king's own clinical hand– the parchment within required Deputy Inspector L. Alexandre of the Public Affairs Division of the Kargat to appear at the capital courthouse, today, exactly one hour before noon for an audience with the king, regarding an open petition.

The detective was a not-so-secret member of Darkon's much-feared secret police: the king's ears and knives in matters of state and espionage. Split into cells, only Azalin Rex himself knew the Kargat's full ranks. Alexandre's public-facing division was the lone unclandestine exception; they assisted the ordinary constabulary with their caseload, undertook dirty cover-up jobs, or handled 'special' investigations requiring unusual skills or discretion.

As best as Alexandre could tell, his department really only existed so that the King could cart them around to make a visible statement about his interest in this or that internal affair, and so the folk would have an image to fear. They were dead last on the Kargat's budget dole.

Despite donning the same itchy woolen uniform, the inspector felt no kinship to the truly underground organization of beast-men, occult spellcasters, and undead that killed, spied, and kidnapped as the king demanded. Alexandre's sword became well acquainted with their dead hearts a few years back when a foolish internecine murder forced his division to defend their honor. A black horseman bearing a blue envelope soon arrived after that incident, the first time the detective was called for personal audience with Azalin Rex. Whatever this latest intrigue was, Alexandre could take small comfort in knowing it couldn't be worse than justifying the massacre of the king's senior agents to said king on the grounds of "they started it, so we finished it."

Perhaps the king planned to assign him the petitioner's case, a covert matter that couldn't pass through the usual channels? Or maybe the inspector had brought down trouble, but he couldn't think of any recent doings deserving of Azalin's ire. His last big job, the Nartok serial murder, had wrapped up cleanly, once he gained access to the girls' boarding school and found the missing woman's body in the elementary wing. The detective had even been given a commendation and small bonus for getting it done quickly and quietly.

After a rinse in the basin to flatten his blond bedhead, Alex paid off the tab, adding a tip for the care of the letter and bid the ostler to bring his beast around to the laundromat up the way. The street outside glared with blinding sunrise. Squinting in the light, the detective threw on his hat and tinted glasses before taking a quick survey of the passersby. Only misty residue stubbornly clinging to glistening cobbles lurked in the dark corners. A gaggle of half-height gossips discussing the black rider had gathered, but Alex paid them no mind. He tossed a

couple coppers to the dwarven beggar who'd had her leg gnawed off by a giant rat while trapped under rubble during a mine cave-in, and set off towards the market square.

Alexandre was not much of a morning person, or a sun person at all really, ever since the night his tiny east-coast thorp was sacked and sucked dry by vampires seven years ago. He lost both his parents to the bloodbath. Whatever magic Azalin's medics had used to drag him back from the jaws of death had *changed* him. The worst of it was that he still looked like a teenager, despite being 23 years old. He got no respect at crime scenes, even in his blue and blacks. He had already been arrested twice for impersonating a Kargat officer. And, most irritating of all, bars watered down his drinks.

Disentangling himself from a low-hanging laundry line, Alex loomed like a straw-headed scarecrow above the capital's crop of black and brown-dressed half-folk wending between wood and brick-fronted businesses. On a quieter morning, he might order coffee and guess at passersby's livelihoods until his drink got cool enough to sip. But today, the detective followed the smell of lemons and soap twining between flaky pies, chimney soot, and clapping ponies pulling halfling-size carriages. Ducking under the lintel, he paid the familiar gnomish laundromat for a double-rush express clean, press, steam, and polish of his deputy's clothes and armor while Alex worked over his sword, belt, scabbard, gun holster, and boots until the bronze buckles glinted and he could see his reflection in the black.

"You look sharp today. Testimony in court, Mister Alex?" He'd become popular among the district's shorter folk last year after he threw on his official colors and "discouraged" some ne'er-do-wells who'd come over from the human slums to drink, loot, and burn shops. Alex wasn't charged with the maimings of course, because the Kargat only answers to royal authority.

"Nope. Summons. Can't talk about it, but I hope I'm not in trouble." The gnome gave him a polite nod of

sympathy. His wife finished with Alexandre's official blue and black Kargat officer's greatcoat and brushed down his horse. The stallion, coffee brown, a bit dopey and thunder shy, was not his favorite beast, but it was a free one – snagged as battlefield spoils. The Falkovnian officer who owned it previously took a crossbow bolt to the chest and got eaten alive by his own zombified soldiers – the Wizard King's necromantic doing. The inspector was sure the hawkish warlord Vlad Drakov would eventually add a fifth Dead Man's War to his ever-increasing roster of campaign failures, but Alex hoped to be promoted out of having to fight in it before then.

Reacquainting himself with his loathing for the official dress code that demanded full wool frocking over armor in the dead heat of summer, Alex rode from the little people's winding cobble streets into the sullen stone and wrought-iron bramble that was the sty of the common laboring man. In his Kargat blues, everyone fearfully gave way, so he made good time to the river. At the meridian of capital and country both, Old Town was the architectural equivalent of a raving boot sergeant showering spittle on one's face. The ugly molar of granite and bluestone that the Kargat called headquarters was a particularly vile blight on the eyes and soul. His division's colonel was mocked by the others for not having an office in that dead rock stump, but Alex bet they were all jealous of the quieter and greener suburban mansion that Public Affairs quartered in.

The Capital Courthouse, accented with marble columns like a chest of ribs, loomed into view. The sconces of the two granite tower pinnacles were lit to welcome the king, but no rotting bodies hung from the matching pair of gibbets and cages. Even the whipping pole and gallows stood quiet. Only the sun-beaten convicts languishing in the pillories advertised the square of guilt. Some courts like to schedule corporal punishment and executions back-to-back whenever their heads of state take up residence. Azalin Rex didn't care for extraneous hubbub unless he was making a point to witness it – or do the job himself.

Alex left his hat, bundle, and boot knife, which he had relocated to his belt ahead of time, with the court concierge. Kargat officers often wore a hidden bit or two – never know when you might get jumped. One of his partners took pride in carrying enough cutlery to arm a *centuria*, and even more in making everyone wait while he took five full minutes to disarm. He hoped his steel legerdemain would catch him some girls, but one of these days he would catch Alex's fist. His sword, the detective could keep, as an officer in good standing.

Muttering clusters of curious staff and lawmakers with leather satchels or those silly lockable rolling chests were milling about the dim, marble arched court hallways: spectators hoping to catch sight of the king. Alexandre was mildly confident they would get no such viewing. Azalin could take skulking secret passages to reach the royal audience hall without subjecting himself to public ogling. It also stood to reason that the king must have a teleportation circle somewhere in the basement so that prisoners could be transported to and from the King's personal dungeons. Usually just to.

Alexandre presented his blue envelope to the entry hall clerk, frowning in the light of her green-glass lamp. She wasn't even the least bit impressed handling the king's personal stationary. Alexandre had dealt with this spectacled clerk a dozen times, but the wrinkle-nosed grump still inspected his papers like he had stolen them from his dad's coat pocket. A scratching of the silver pen, a couple stamps in her books, a bell ding, and an usher shepherded the detective through the ornamental iron door, instead of the usual colonnade hall, to the lower court waiting rooms and holding cells.

Separate and above Darkon's courts, Kargat officers could drag off anyone, within the limits of Azalin's tolerance. But unlike the others, the colonel of the Public Affairs Division insisted his officers be accountable to the justices when possible, answer summons, and allow his deputies' judgements to be cross-examined in the courtroom. Alex resented the pressure, like most new officers, but squaring off



with Darkon's silvered-tongued rhetoricians and world-shrewd judges had sharpened his deductive eye and refined his tactics to unwind uncooperative witnesses.

But the colonel's true purpose in ordering his deputies to take the stand was not to temper their talents. He had seized upon a greater wisdom: the people feared the Kargat for their capriciousness, not law and order. The other divisions often washed the local barons', and even Azalin's, face in mud with public street snatchings, obvious disappearances, and self-serving predatory schemes. Alex's division alone cared about keeping a disciplined public appearance.

The deputy once mustered the gumption to ask his boss how he knew that the Rex was pleased with their performance, when their division was so mundane compared to the others. The colonel had Alex lock the office door, "I'm only telling you this, Deputy Alexandre, because of your ... *condition*, and how you came to us. When I turned 50, I sent word up the line, asking to be reassigned so I could spend more time with my grandsons and teach them how to spar and hunt before my eyes crusted over and shaky knees gave out. I got permission to move the office to a little mansion nearer my estate. Five years went, but no reassignment. I submitted resignation papers. A blue letter came, you know the sort. *He* asked what would convince me to stay on. 'Nothing', I replied, 'I'd gladly consult, but I want to spend my last firm years with my grandchildren.' The second letter came. *He* wanted to know exactly how many firm years would satisfy me. I have been the division colonel long enough for my oldest grandson to have his own daughter – just a week ago. I like my job most days, but don't forget, Alex, you serve at his majesty's pleasure, not your own." The colonel's face was war-whipped, but beneath the spots, he didn't look a day over 50.

Through the iron door, the usher led Detective Alexandre down a set of marble stairs to the posh blue velvet couches of the anteroom. It was telling that the royal hall of judgment was in the basement.

There are two sorts who liked to conduct business underground – the paranoid and the formerly buried. He pushed the treasonous thought out. The double-doors to the king's court, marked with his ubiquitous fiery eye in gold leaf, stared Alex down.

Another usher came by with glasses and an iced bucket, chilling a bottle of sweet spring water which the inspector gratefully accepted. She followed with a silver and lace tray of fried savory pies nestled in crinkly white papers. These Alexandre politely declined. Ah, *crusto caronis*, the classic Darkonian murder mystery. Which animal's over-salted and over-seasoned corpse bits did the chef stuff in the pastry and then deep fry to occult the evidence? This was a case the detective had no intention of solving, thanks to his bizarre divination power which forces him to experience with all five senses the last gasp of life of any creature whose blood, raw or cooked, crosses his lips. While useful to his sleuthing, it is much less welcome when dinner with pleasant company is interrupted by excruciating enfleshment in the body of a squealing pig having its neck slit with a blunt knife.

If he didn't get tossed in the brig, Alexandre entertained the notion that he would enter his own petition to the Rex: a vegetarian dish on the court's visitor menu, please. Perhaps ravioli stuffed full of the king's mushroom, *Amanita caesarea*, kissed by a whisper of thyme, shallot, sea salt, and garlic, and generously drizzled with truffle-infused olive oil? Or how about a mild golden Raijan coconut curry poured over a petite jasmine rice pilaf, sprinkled with watercress and chopped peanut, and served steaming hot like the nine-boy services all the rage in Mordentshire and Port-a-Lucine?

His food fantasies were interrupted by a girl's pained wailing. A man, a noble by the jangling of his chatelaine and chains of office, had burst through the anteroom doors, dragging his child across the polished floor by her collar and braided black hair. He flung his cane and hat into the blue velvet couch – having bypassed the coat check earlier. Dressed to the nines, the man must be here to see the king as

well – the petitioner? Or the king's next meeting? His quivering girl was fighting tears, and her reddened face looked like she had been slapped about.

"What did you write? Tell me, girl!" The girl's purple-faced father literally shook her down for answers. "Tell me now!" The bow on her cutely pleated hair was coming loose. The mortified court usher hovered nearby, wanting to intervene in the abuse but unable to break rank. The poor girl's head was going to be shaken off. The inspector casually stood to make his presence known, hoping the steely glare of a Kargat witness might encourage the man to quiet down.

Oh no. That black-haired little hellion. The girl from the Nartok case.

Before Alex could slink back down into his seat, the grand double door emitted a pair of black-armored soldiers bearing spears, silvered shields, and deeply hooded full-length cloaks with silver detailing. Azalin's honor guard. One slid over to Alexandre like death to the sickbed. Much like *crusto caronis*, Alexandre couldn't guess what flavor of grave horror or shapeshifter lurked beneath the looming praetorian soldier's armor shell. Even its face was fully covered by an iron mask, minus a faint gleam of red where its eyes peered out. The guardsman sketched the barest semblance of a bow which Alexandre returned with equal lack of sincerity. Simply from proximity, he could feel lethal auras radiating from the edges of the guardsman's immaculately polished weapons and the thick spellbook chained to its hip. Annoyed by Alex's scrutiny, the thing menacingly bore its red eyes into his. "The king will see you now," it half-hissed in a perfectly ordinary-sounding local accent. Alexandre threw his shoulders back with a little nonchalance.

The detective took a look over, and yes, the father and girl were being brought in at the same time. Daughter had ducked behind daddy's legs to put his mass between her and their own terrifying praetorian collector and nearly tripped him up. The

father managed enough presence of mind to glare over at Alexandre with a white-faced mix of restrained anger, fear, and questioning. The child, whose gaze the inspector deliberately shunned, was smiling now. If the father wasn't the petitioner, then it was the child. Yes, it would be her fault, somehow. The leering doors opened, and the throne beckoned.



Ever since that one isolated staking-a-dozen-Kargat-agents-and-burning-their-headquarters-to-the-ground incident which Alexandre got off with just a warning for, hearsay had it that the detective was a favorite and confidant of the king. This was a particularly vexatious bit of calumny as the totality of the deputy inspector's interactions with the lord of Darkon had been business only: receiving assignments and being questioned about findings. In fact, Alexandre suspected Azalin had it out for him – mildly, as the king's actual enemies wound up dead in one fashion or another. When specific assignments came down from on high, the colonel's comment on Alex's was always "you were specifically requested, I have no say in it", "I was told you have the right kind of experience for this case", "This assignment will be a gold star for your career", or the most ominous of them all, "Have fun with this one." Even so, the detective had been in the reticent king's presence just enough that he could judge the royal mood with some confidence.

And as for the current royal mood grimly staring him down, well, if the inspector had a choice between the audience hall and a cistern of rats in Sainte Ronges, he would share a cheese board with the vermin.

Seated tall upon the throne, an only mildly pretentious gilt affair with black and blue velvet atop a dais of marble, was the old man himself, stern and frowning. Defiant wisps of curly black hair gone to grey peeked out from under the iron crown. His perpetual long-nosed scowl was topped by shrewd eyes with a glint of red that would pierce any deception.

In the windowless room lit by magical white-flame sconces, the Rex was unchanged since last Alexandre was in his presence. He had heard whispers about how Azalin might have obtained his unnatural lifespan, but the inspector cared little for such troublesome matters. The king paid in fine silver and cut the hearts out of those who probed into his business with even finer steel.

The king was wearing a split end, sleeved garment that married a lab coat, wizard's robe, and a king's cape. The material that dragged at the end couldn't be dirtied or stepped on because it was as immaterial as a shadow - a neat trick. This was casual dress by royal standards, which meant Azalin's business for the day involved no public appearances.

The detective's paces fell behind the pair as he guessed at the radius that would put him out of range of Azalin's presumed thought gleaning powers, but the king eyed him with a *don't even try it* look. Unwillingly, Alex alit near father and daughter and took a knee as they had, but gracefully, so his poleyn didn't clank. He idly wondered if Azalin eschewed carpet in his private audience hall to hurt knees on purpose or because the uncleanness of those who disappoint the king comes off tile better.

With the sound of cloth robes, Azalin dismissed his six remaining masked guardsmen. The blue-black cloaked warriors flowed two by two on either side of the three kneeling suppliants with spears aloft and exited the hall. The last pair shut the door with a deep and final thud, sealing the trio in with the King's judgmental stare.

Alexandre wasn't surprised the king felt comfortable leaving himself alone and outnumbered. As if being a necromancer who could raise a whole graveyard before first coffee wasn't enough, Azalin moved with the gangly grace of a scholar who trained with weapons. His plain steel scepter, leaning up in its stand, in arm's reach of the throne, was the practical, head-bashing sort.

The father's knees were openly shaking. Alexandre was doing a better job of hiding it. The only one with confidence was the child.

"You may rise."

The other man claimed the initiative and staggered forward, yet managed that elegant bow only true nobility can seem to get right. Free of her father's discipline, his kid turned to openly grin at Alexandre. Alex's only concession was a jerk of the head to pay attention to the king.

"My most honorable, eternal lord Rex, your devoted reeve from Nevuchar Springs is overjoyed and utterly humbled to be in your magnanimous presence once more. Your majesty, I jubilantly present my eldest daughter. I pray this momentary convocation with the true father of this nation graces her with a sliver of his virtue, wisdom, intelligence, and splendor. Your faithful servant, however, begs for his august master's patience. It would appear that my daughter has borrowed my stationary and addressed a letter of petition to this court absent my approval or knowledge of its contents."

The man was blabbering, buying time with long words to find his nerves. Alexandre could see the Rex's mental sandclock of patience running out.

"I only discovered this lapse in my oversight when this court's letter of summons was delivered. Please, merciful sovereign, I apologetically beseech a moment in private to discuss—"

"Silence. Let the petitioner speak."

The reeve's mouth did its best suffocating fish impression, but Azalin already set his eyes on the fidgeting girl who appeared to be having second thoughts. The king nodded at her, and she inched forward, with hesitation, and when she stopped short, he patiently beckoned her to fully present herself. The child made a jaunty curtsy and stared at the king rather longer than was polite.

"Your eyes are not on fire," she finally announced with disappointment, "so why does everyone say you have fiery eyes?"

Alex tried not to let his mental wince show on his face.

"Because the fire is a metaphor for my magical might and my wrath at children who forget to address their seniors by their proper titles."

"I'm sorry, Mister Majesty Azalin Rex. What does 'metaphor' mean?"

"Ask your father later. Your king is still waiting for you to speak about your petition." Alex spared a sidelong glance at the dad, staring into the void and worrying at his hands. His girl took a deep breath and began with confidence.

"Um, thank you, Mister Majesty, I am happy you read my petition letter. As you must definitely already know, I am a daughter of esteemed noble lineage. This spring, mister Deputy Inspector Alexandre who works for the Kargat", she jabbed her finger rudely at said officer here, "we met each other at my school in Nartok. He claimed a fil-- fi--*brotherial* relationship to me in front of the lady headmistress. That significates he, Inspector Alexandre, has, um, pre-pretensions to noble blood and thence-fore, I humbly request, my Rex-Lord," and she curtsied prettily, "for the state to look into the claim's ver-a-ci-ty. I visited the baby records on file in Nevuchar Springs and it said the Inspector is an orphan from nearby my family's estate, so there is, uh, no small chance that he may be of bloodline relationship. Dad has not married another mom yet, so our noble house lacks a male heir. And so because of that, it is very, um, cru- crucial that every lead be investigated."

Her astounding speech concluded, the girl flung herself into a deep bow that allowed her to sneak a peek backwards at Alexandre.

Azalin's famous stoicism cracked. From the father's grimace, he wished a hole would open beneath him

and his daughter and drop them both into the catacombs below. The inspector carefully inspected a corner of the ceiling – yep, cobwebs – and mentally let loose with a string of colorful rhyming oaths he learned from the ruffians that loitered in Mordentshire's bay. After recovering his regal demeanor, the king spoke gently.

"I am sorry, little one. The inspector may be an orphan, but the Kargat is not negligent in the background investigations of its agents. Investigator Alexandre's parentage is well known to this court. You have my personal assurance that he is unrelated to you by blood."

The poor child was utterly crushed. She still made a polite curtsy and started backing away from the throne, but then stopped midstep.

"What-what if he is an illegitimate brother?" She hopefully flung out on the floor. The girl's speechless father flushed scarlet and quietly smoldered while the inspector focused on the errant candle-wax drip on Azalin's right boot.

"Your *illegitimate* brother?" Azalin nearly wheezed.

"Yes, majesty. There are rumors about my family. About me. So maybe there are others." And like a cold knife across the throat, the mood ran ice cold. Nose itching, Alexandre looked over in time to see bright red blood plop to the floor. The father had gouged his own palms in rage. Duly noted, the tile had justified itself.

Azalin aimed a piercing frown at the man. "Are these rumors true?"

"No." The man lied through set jaw. Azalin's eyes narrowed and Alexandre tried to mentally broadcast his hope the king would let this one slide for the sake of the child's feelings.

"It offends the dignity of the kingdom that someone would be allowed to spin tales about a reeve's house so freely that even your own child has heard them. These harmful lies have undoubtedly already spread far beyond your walls. I expect you will do your

utmost to discover and discredit the source of these rumors, promptly."

The king briefly warned the detective with a level glance, '*I expect your discretion.*' He needn't have. Alexandre couldn't be paid to touch this business with ten ten-foot poles taped together.

The detective spared a look at the girl. Standing resigned and alone beside her flesh and blood father, she too was an orphan in spirit. A child of no one, clinging to any driftwood of affection, now once again resolved to drown in loneliness. Alex absently noticed that his hand was clutching the aching scar over his heart, the sickly black pit in his flesh left by the cruel vampires that tore away his parents, his home, and his happy childhood.

"Inform me, Inspector, what happened in Nartok that resulted in this... misunderstanding." The detective stepped forward and bowed, relieved that his legs hadn't gone gelatinous on him.

"Lord Rex, it was the recent serial killing affair. The mission was to covertly access the presumed crime scene at the girl's boarding school. I was selected for the infiltration role because of my youthful appearance. The investigation was... considered high priority and time-bound." Alexandre danced around the details, since he wasn't sure he should speak freely about matters of treason even in front of nobility. Azalin nodded as though he knew the particulars, so the detective gratefully skipped ahead.

"The little miss had slipped her off-campus escort so that she could buy arcane trinkets from a Vistana whom students are forbidden from patronizing. She discovered me applying stage makeup as part of my plan to enter the school grounds under false pretense. She was interested in my equipment, and from my costume, correctly guessed that I intended to break into the campus to find the missing individual. The victim's disappearance was widely known and speculated upon, even if the significance was unknown to the public."

"It fills your lord with confidence and pride that his esteemed undercover police agents are getting caught out by nine-year-olds," Azalin drawled.

"I'm ten, sir."

"You were nine at the time, and do not speak over your king again."

"Sorry, majesty."

"Er, the little miss seemed amenable, so rather than wiping her memory with a scroll I had prepared, I instead offered her gifts, if she would corroborate a false identity so I could access the grounds. Relatives of elementary students could enter the primary school dormitory areas, once their belongings had been inspected and their minds tested for sorcerous twisting. This would place me in a far more advantageous position than the original stratagem."

"Majesty, it was a good thing I found him. His skirt and stockings and collar and braids were done all wrong. Inspector Alexandre would have gotten stopped at the gate for dress code violations," the little girl pronounced with a condescending wave and impish grin.

"I'm talking to the king. You must wait your turn." Alexandre hurriedly shushed her. He had hoped the embarrassing little detail that the colonel had ordered him to crossdress wouldn't have come up. The reeve was rooted in place like a tree, at the complete mercy of his whirlwind of a child. *Useless.* Alex could see that Azalin was eyeing the man with much the same thought.

"My apologies, Lord Rex. The little miss's escort was looking for her, so we had little time to prepare a cover story before we were discovered or a search party was called. I exchanged my uniform and suggested to the miss that she call me her brother instead. The escort bought the story, but we were confronted by the headmistress at the gate who was overseeing the passage of visitors. She noted that the little miss and I hardly look alike, so I claimed bastardry. I would have never used such an

impertinent lie if I had known her peerage at the time."

"She is the recognized daughter of your home barony's most significant reeve." Azalin chided.

Alexandre took it on the chin. While he hadn't heard any rumors of her legitimacy, the scuttlebutt was that the father routinely sequestered his disfavored daughter from the public eye because her birth caused the labored death of his wife. Contradicting his liege by mentioning this in front of said father would be a ...less-than-sage diplomatic maneuver. Not that Alexandre would have even recognized his birthland's reeve without his garb, braids, and chains of office; the inspector hardly spent more than a couple weeks a year in Nevuchar Springs.

"So, with the child's aid you gained access to the scene."

"Yes, sir. I placed an alarm-disabling device, disguised as a potted plant, by a discreet narrow window, which I then used to enter the dormitories after the hall monitor's final inspection."

"You said you offered her some form of payment for this service and her silence?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what was your bargain?"

"Sir, I offered her a wand of light, a sum of gold, and a doll."

"Evasive. What was the bargain you agreed upon?"

*Tch. Can't get one past this king.* "She wished for my gun, which I thought inappropriate."

"Wise, but you have yet to convince this court you do think, Inspector."

"I instead promised I would let her try shooting it, later."

At this, the girl hopped forward a step and made a pouty face at the king hoping she would be called on.

"...You may speak."

"I want to add a 'grie-vance' to my petition, Majesty. Inspector Alexandre broke his promise about letting me shoot his gun and is a liar."

"The inspector's breach of contract will be accounted for when I decide his punishment."

The girl curtsied approvingly and swiveled around to peek with a schoolyard bully's gloating smirk. Alexandre swore he saw Azalin make a little of the same. Fine then, if the little hellion wants to scarp in the sandpile, then Alex would throw the sand.

"I was going to," Alexandre lied, "but then you threatened to tell on me to your headmistress, which meant we weren't friends anymore."

Her confidence cracked and shame turned her eyes to the floor. *Ha*, followed by self-disciplined embarrassment for enjoying a stoop below his station. Alexandre turned back to address the king who stoically awaited the explanation of this latest turn in narration. *No, I definitely saw him make that face. He can't fool me now. The Undying Wizard King of Darkon has the same sense of mischief as a ten-year-old schoolgirl. He's a bully and enjoys it, mists take us all.*

"Sir, after the officers staged the raid, the little miss managed to approach me while I was wrapping up the scene at the boarding school. To provide context, all the relevant criminal suspects were seized in that first sweep, but the Kargat was still unsure of their full membership at the time. The method of my infiltration was also still secret. The miss blackmailed me. If I did not allow her to view the autopsy of the missing woman whom I had discovered entombed in the wall, she planned to tell the headmistress that I had coerced her earlier. I was concerned the little miss could meet with retaliation from fugitive confederates, if she made any public claims before the Kargat finished the interrogations. Thus, I consented to her presence at the autopsy, so that the girl would not draw further attention to herself."

"Inspector Alexandre said the killer was sneaky and used a spell to keep the lady from going stinky rotten and also to make it hard to know when she died. But Inspector is smart because he knew what food she ate last, and since her body wasn't rotten, the food inside her wouldn't be rotten either. So we cut her open and then cut her stomach and looked inside at the 'chyme'," the girl chirped happily.

"'We', Inspector?" Azalin asked with an arched eyebrow.

*This kid...* "Sir, I sat her off to the side, but she threatened to raise a fit if I did not let her try the scalpel. I was prepared to remove her immediately if she had misbehaved further, but she made her incisions respectfully and precisely as I directed, so I toured her through each of the major thoracic organs and explained their functions."

"I see. Your bosses tell me you are good with children, but they really mean that you are good at being bullied by them."

"Majesty, I have since been studying frogs, and rats, and a dog that got run over by a carriage to see if they have same organs in the same places. It was hard because they aren't as big as a person. And kitchen knives aren't as sharp or neat at cutting. I traced the shapes of each of the organs on a cloth. When I get home, king, I can post you and Inspector Alexandre a paper copy for your libraries."

"Your scholarly enthusiasm for comparative anatomy is appreciated and encouraged, but I will not require a copy of your research at this time." Azalin just barely kept his expression even.

"Still, it is hard to believe a child of the nobility would dare thief from a Kargat investigator." Alexandre added, springing his trap at last.

The child stood straight at attention and glared at the inspector with a mix of feigned outrage, while simultaneously trying to call him off with wide eyes. Too late; Alexandre didn't make the Secret Forces by taking the high road.

"While I was replacing the organs to sew the victim up for the diener, the little lady pilfered my scroll of *Speak with Dead* from the hidden compartment in my autopsy toolbox and cast it upon the corpse. I don't believe the Nartok boarding school's curriculum includes lessons on identifying and casting necromantic magic scrolls."

"Feh. The mere curiosity of a child. Add it to the growing pile of your negligences."

"Since the deed was done, I directed her interrogation to confirm my findings —they corroborated exactly of course— but, she continued asking after the fifth question. I hadn't known that was possible."

"Oh?" Alexandre watched the king's eyes light with suppressed but genuine interest. As anticipated, the Rex's hunger for subjects arcane was all consuming. The inspector might feel bad about serving the girl up later, but at least his misdeeds were no longer this meeting's main course.

"I got seven answers out of the dead lady. Which is two better than most," the girl volunteered with genuine pride. "I could have got eight, but she started screaming and wouldn't stop. She got so loud, I dropped the spell by mistake." She rubbed her ears in recollection of the ghostly wails.

"She asked about what it's like to die, where the soul goes after death, and who in the mists shepherds the souls of the dead," Alexandre added deadpan.

"Good heavens. My lord, she... I didn't know about any of this. Please, mercy..." The gawping, ghost-pale reeve finally rediscovered his voice. Alexandre resented the unruly girl dragging him before Azalin, but he could dredge up some pity. Even her spineless father was tossing her under a carriage to save his own skin.

*'No, 'father' is too strong a word this coward. He doesn't have a paternal bone in his body. The king on the other hand...* Alexandre almost let his eyes wander to the Rex's left to inspect for traces of a

wedding band before catching himself. Some ideas were safer unthought.

Azalin shook his head to cut off the man's useless pleas.

"Reeve, it is clear that you are not the one encouraging such delinquency." Azalin fired a quick glance at Alexandre who tried not to wince. "There is but one victim of importance here - my afternoon schedule. And the harm is minimal because I had already wished to speak with you, reeve, about an unrelated affair." The reeve positively sagged to his knees in relief.

"A bit of true levity is a welcome respite from the dreadful jokes who regularly insist upon my attention. By my will, your daughter is forgiven for her theatrics. Once. She will meet with my ire if she wastes my time with such nonsense again. You will decisively squelch those unfortunate rumors that we spoke of previously. And I *insist* you mind your seal of office and stationery with considerably more diligence."

Having cowed his sniveling petty official, Azalin turned to stare down the inspector with a wry and malicious glint, the one that augured a *sui generis* assignment.

"Inspector Alexandre, I will inform you later of your punishment for transgressing against an honorable child of one of the high houses of Darkon."

The king turned back to address the little lady who was anxiously struggling to follow the flow of the mood.

"You, child, have been very disobedient and have troubled your father and my secret police. In time, you will recognize that Inspector Alexandre has shown you a great deal of patience. Vow to me that you will hereafter devote your full attention to filling your head with your studies, as a student ought, and that you will never again meddle with Kargat agents or their investigations."

"I vow, majesty."

"Now that this sideshow is over, my little scholar, I have serious matters of state to discuss with your father. Why don't you and your 'brother' step outside to pass the time?"

"But you said he wasn't?" she asked, and then snapped off a curtsy, after the fact, to apologize for cutting in.

"My words do not make him so, but you have my permission to call him such if it pleases you. Perhaps emotional isolation has weighed down our forlorn, orphaned inspector for too long. His misplaced desire for belonging has driven him to impose on another family. See to it that, for the rest of the afternoon, he conducts himself properly and does not embarrass me further. I recall he promised you a lesson in marksmanship?"

*Thank you, Lord Rex, for throwing more oil on my frypan fire.* Alexandre thought bitterly, half hoping the King heard that thought.

"Yes, King! And I'll watch him like the fiery eye," making rings with her fingers to emphasize her own. The girl nearly forgot her parting obeisance, and seized Alexandre's elbow for the proper lady's escort she was due by rank. As she yanked Alex for the door, he could hear the king address the reeve.

"I haven't seen you since prior to the passing of your wife. A terrible loss. Your daughter has come along well. Quite brave, and very precocious. Even when getting into mischief, it truly pleases me that my select are producing such capable children. That aside, the matter at hand concerns the — and his loyalties that are ——. I trust you can deliver this message to him discretely. "

Alexandre knocked upon the wooden door to summon the praetorian. The girl pulled his shoulder until she was ear level and excitedly whispered, "Don't worry. I won't actually call you my brother. If people think you are a bastard it might damage my noble reputation. And can we go shooting at the Kargat Headquarters? It has a dissection room with knives and dead people and spells, right? And do you



really have a scroll of Modify Memory? I promise I won't cast it, but you gotta show me...".

Detective Alexandre shot a parting grimace over his shoulder, the only insubordination he would allow

himself, only to find that wicked smirk of a stare already awaiting his eyes. Thinking treasonous thoughts, Alex planned to ask the inn marm to crack her best family brandy tonight.



# LOST SOULS

(30 NEW NPCs)

BY JACK THE REAPER

1. **Terrible Max** is a rough-looking wandering warrior with a scarred face, piercing gaze and grave voice. He is a legendary hero, known as the most powerful warrior in the realms with many incredible feats attributed to him, and even monsters and darklords are struck with fear upon his sight and are reluctant to fight him. In truth, Max is a quite mediocre warrior, gifted by crazy luck, compelling charisma, and an aura of awe. He was the sole survivor of many battles and took the credit for the victories for himself, thus creating his reputation as invincible. Max uses his reputation to scare away evildoers, but behind his unflinching façade, he is terrified of the day someone will be brave enough to truly challenge him in battle.

2. **Kizi** looks like a hooded orphaned girl, but is actually a vampire halfling. She is the head of a band of halfling and gnomes, disguised like street children but working as deadly assassins.

3. **Jonathan Moor** is a completely normal man in his 20s. He didn't suffer any trauma in his childhood, and doesn't show any quirks or signs of madness. He murders just because he enjoys it, not for money or faith or some uncontrollable urge. It's like any other hobby for him, and he kills men, women, and children in all kinds of ways while humming to himself or chatting with them idly. He always looks for interesting new ways to kill, seeing it as a form of art. The contrast between his apparent normalcy and rationality to his casual murderousness, which he doesn't even try to explain or excuse, makes Jonathan one of the chilling persons in Ravenloft.

4. **Kook-Took** is a goblin with the power to look like a human child to the eyes of children (adults will see

his true form). He and his fellow goblins, who have similar powers, befriend lonely children and play with them, eventually taking them into the woods and transforming them into goblins themselves.

5. **Tom Greenwood** looks like a kind, open-faced village boy about 17 years old. He is always accompanied by a dog or two, a cat, several birds and rodents in his pockets. He carries a wooden staff and often sucks a leaf of grass or plays a harmonica. His unassuming appearance is misleading though, for Tom is actually an experienced ranger and adventurer much older than he looks. His staff is a powerful magical weapon and his animal companions can change at his command into powerful dire animals, helping him overcome any foe before resuming their regular shape. Tom is traveling around the countryside areas of the domains, looking for evils to vanquish and people to help.

6. **Squeezer** is the nickname given to a hideous serial killer, who seemingly possesses an ability to get into well-guarded houses and strangle his victims after torturing and violating them in sick ways. Originally a human with a flexible body, the Dark Powers transformed Squeezer into a choker-like creature, who can elongate his limbs and squeeze himself even through very small openings. Squeezer is completely insane and utterly devoted to his murderous work, which he performs according to mysterious patterns, challenging investigators to decipher them and stop him. He may plan a murder months in advance, taking his time and waiting pressed inside some small space for the right opportunity. When he speaks, he does so in a high-pitched, disturbing voice.

7. **Justine White** was a kind hearted girl, who unthinkingly offended a Vistana raunie of the Corvara tribe. The evil witch summoned a demon who dragged Justine screaming into hell in front of her fiancé on the day of her betrothing. Several years later, her fiancé found the means to summon her back - only to find that the hellish torture and horrors she'd endured had transformed her into a bodak, who killed him on spot. Unlike other bodaks, Justine can appear at first in the form she had in life - a lovely, golden haired girl with kind smile. The illusion vanishes when she attacks, and the sudden transformation into her current bodak form is horrific. She looks for victims to share her pain with via her gaze attack, transforming them too into bodaks, and she especially hates the Vistani and searches for the clan who doomed her.

8. **The Nostra Family** is known as a powerful and eccentric Borcan family, associated with extensive criminal activity and some dabbling with the occult. Branches of the Nostras can be found in many domains. The closely kept secret of the family is that all the members share a single hivemind; when someone joins the family, whether through birth or marriage, his mind is assimilated by the familial hivemind and he becomes one with it. This is the doing of the family's patriarch, Don Giovanni de Nostra, who wished for absolute control over his family, and received it in a twisted way. The family's motto is "Omnia Nostrum Est" - Everything is Ours.

9. **Bathsheba Ackley** is a kind and shy young girl, and a gifted medium who can see spirits and contact them. She is serving as a host for 6 souls of dead female adventurers, who dwell inside her body and speak to her. Bathsheba can let any of them take over her body, changing her into a skilled warrior, rogue, sorceress, priestess, etc., while her own mind watches from the "backseat". Her physical appearance doesn't change while possessed, but her demeanor and voice do. Bathsheba is in good relationship with the spirits inside her, so usually she can make them give her back the "driver seat" when she wants, but some of them might make problems

at times. Recently Bathsheba is having periods of amnesia, and she suspects one of the spirits is taking over without permission - or maybe there's another stowaway inside her.

10. **Sammi Mimion** is a weird, unsociable teenager, who prefers the company of inanimate objects over other people. Not only does he speak to those objects, but they usually do what he asks from them: doors open or close, chariots roll, weapons attack, furniture walks etc. Sammi claims he doesn't animate them; everything is already alive and aware, he says, it's just that those objects like him because he befriends them, so they are willing to help him. He also can question objects about things they saw. Sammi can be quite a useful ally in adventures or investigations, but those who offend him should beware of unexpected "accidents". He will also be mad at people who destroy objects without justified reason.

10. **Grimgroth** is a koblak - a dreadful bugbear with affinity for death (see Classic Monsters Revisited pg. 8). He has pale fur and black face. Like all of his kind, he feeds on fear and terror, and is an expert in the techniques of evoking them, bogeyman-style; but unlike other bugbears, Grimgroth actually gets power from the sound of screams. Hearing terrified screams makes him stronger and larger for a time, enabling him to sow more terror and harvest more screams, until he reaches truly monstrous proportions and may destroy whole villages. His weakness is the sound of laughter directed at him, which makes him shrink and become weaker. Grimgroth always keeps some prisoners in his cave, as an available larder of screams.

11. **Rasmus** is a farmer child with the ability to create little people from earth or mud, a couple of inches high, and animate them. Those earth-people are fully sentient and have personalities like normal humans, but Rasmus often treats them sadistically, toying with them and killing them at will. He claims they are his creations and only made of mud, so their lives and deaths are meaningless, as he can always create more. He may create whole villages of

earth-people, only to crush them with his feet, laughing. Those people usually treat him as a god, though a capricious one, and will obey his commands out of fear. In great numbers or strategic positions, they could form an effective fighting force.

12. **Whitebunny** looks like a normal white rabbit, the kind magicians use to draw from their hats. In truth, he is an intelligent, powerful and evil magical being. He charms, dominates or persuades a young man or woman to play the role of a stage magician, accompanying him or her as a trope, while actually performing himself all the magics his companion pretends to do. As the "magician" gets fortune and fame, Whitebunny pushes him or her to commit crimes and evil deeds - eventually forsaking them to their punishment and enjoying the fruits of their digressions himself. Nobody notices or suspects the cute little bunny, who disappears on his way to another future "magician".

13. **Megan Lilove** is an unpleasant looking woman with sharp features and rude manners. She is a vampiress who feeds on love, rather than blood or life force. She looks for people who have great love for another, then comes upon them in human or mist form and drains away their love. The victims won't feel anything unusual, but find that they no longer feel anything toward their former beloved, becoming cold and indifferent. They may attribute this change of heart to all kind of reasons, never suspecting its true cause. Megan can make her victims love her instead, directing their stolen emotion toward her, to the great dismay and shock of those who know them. Megan herself taunts love as an illness of the mind, but secretly mourns her inability to feel love herself.

14. **Aglus Borges** is a truly ugly looking man. He was handsome once and had great affinity for beauty, which led him toward sinful deeds. Now he is cursed never to look at beauty again: everything he sets his eyes on, whether a person, an animal, a building, or a work of art, loses its beauty and becomes uglier in front of his eyes. The more he looks at someone or something, the uglier they become. Those who taunt

Aglus for his looks will quickly find themselves looking no better. Aglus lives in the slums in the worst part of the town, where his presence doesn't draw much attention, but occasionally he wanders out to have a look at some beautiful people and things and corrupt them. He avoids mirrors, for looking at them worsens his appearance.

15. **Oshi** is a short, bald old man with blissful expression. He travels across the lands, going by names like "Doctor Oshi" or "Master Oshi", and offers people to take away their sadness and sorrows and grant them true happiness. He might sell potions or teach lessons, or do it in any other way, but his disciples truly get rid of their negative emotions and become absolutely, perpetually happy. It seems great at first, but then it turns out that this happiness makes people careless, reckless, hyperactive, naïve, hedonistic or they develop many other flaws. Conditions will worsen with time, up to the point of total, cackling insanity. The only way to cure those people is to find Oshi and make him retrieve them their sadness - but he is probably already far away, and quite unwilling to do that.

16. **Heinz von Höllenfeuer** is a Falkovnian officer in the Talons and a Blackguard. While raiding a group of elven refugees, a druidess targeted his armor with a Heat Metal spell, and Heinz was severely burned all over his body. His face is now a horrifying, half-melted sight, and all his body is covered in scar tissue. Heinz's touch inflicts pain as if it was white-hot metal without actually burning the flesh, thus enabling him to torture his victims at length. He hates druids, elves, and forest beings, and always seeks to bring fiery doom upon them.

17. **The Doomsayer Beggar** looks like any other poor old beggar, but actually is a prophet who can sense when a disaster is about to befall a town. He then travels to the town and tries to persuade the denizens to give him charity, lest the gods punish them. If he manages to collect enough money in time (a rare occurrence), it proves that the townsfolk are righteous and the city is spared, though nobody would know about the danger and

the Beggar's part in preventing it. If the Beggar doesn't get enough donations, the calamity strikes. The Beggar will always survive it, mourn the blindness and miserliness of mankind, then move on to the next town, hoping for better results next time.

18. **Bethelda** is an obese teenage girl, usually the object of scorn by other boys and girls in her town. When she's asleep, her feelings of anger, revenge and self-loathing take the form of a full-sized pink hippopotamus (she saw in a children book), which goes on a rampage and hunts those who torment her. Bethelda has vague recollections of the hippopotamus' attacks, but thinks they are dreams and doesn't realize she is the beast. The hippopotamus disappears when Bethelda awakens, but as her hurtful emotions grow stronger, it might start manifesting even while she's awake.

19. **Richard Boros, the Time Thief**, looks like an unassuming man in his 40s, usually dressed in grey suit and hat. He has the ability to steal time from people, by making them "jump forward" in time. Usually he takes no more than a couple of hours at a time; his confused victims suddenly "awake" and find that they have no recollections of the last few hours. On rare cases, Boros can steal full days or even more. He uses the time he takes to enlengthen his own life. Victims comparing their experiences might recall seeing Boros around just before "the lost time", and thus start suspecting him.

20. **Wily Clubber** is the nickname given to a mysterious serial assaulter. He attacks lonely victims, usually those in an emotionally unstable state, striking them unconscious with a wooden club. His victims usually only catch a glimpse of him, so descriptions are varied and often exaggerated. Most victims recover in short time, apparently healed from their mental distress; but later it turns out that the strike made them develop mental disorders, most often dissociative identity. Their suppressed feelings and desires take form as separate personalities. One of the new personalities emerging is Wily Clubber himself, who takes over when opportunity rises to club other fitting victims, thus

spreading himself further. Inside every person there's a dormant Wily Clubber, just waiting to be awakened...

21. **Jacob, The Fake Son**, is a teenaged boy who can convince people he is their son, grandson, brother, boyfriend etc, simply by presenting himself as such. Those people will be certain that he is indeed their well-known relative; they will know his name and have a full set of false memories about him. By using his power, Jacob can insinuate himself into any household as one of the family (though people outside of the family are unaffected and might become suspicious). His "adopted" relatives forget about him shortly after he leaves. Jacob travels around the realms, taking shelter wherever he goes, while searching for his real family; however, he was cursed to forget their names and what they looked like, so he can never be sure whether one of the families he deceives is actually his own.

22. **Cordelia, the Taskmaster**, is a rogue elf who trades in slaves. She is an agile fighter and has the power to enslave people by lashing them with her whip. A single lash is enough to turn the victim into a slave who must obey all her orders and can do nothing against her will, and only the most strong-willed may break free of this grip. Cordelia always travels accompanied by several powerful slaves serving as bodyguards, and uses them to help her acquire more slaves she can sell off. She has fair hair and green eyes, and usually dresses in leather clothes.

23. **Alexander Merkorius, the Ex-Vampire**, was a powerful vampire master for hundreds of years, with a vast net of influence and associations among the undead. Then a personal trial followed by a divine miracle gave him back his humanity and made him mortal again. Now he uses his vast personal knowledge of the undead to hunt and destroy them, trying to atone for his centuries of atrocities. When capturing vampires, he offers them a chance for salvation by drinking of his blood: if they have real desire to regain their humanity, there's a chance it might happen, but if they are beyond redemption

the blood will destroy them. Alexander is a serious, rough-looking man in his 50s, with the authoritative demeanor of veteran general. He is accompanied by a small group of fellow ex-vampires, including his mate, Nicole.

24. **Astrid, the Valkyrie**, is an armored Norse female warrior, beautiful and awful to behold in battle, like the Valkyries of legend. She and her fellow "Valkyries" are actually a pack of vampires hailing from the world of Audun Beck. They ride winged nightmares and raid mainly battlefields, castles and military camps during thunderstorms, as they can only feed off worthy warriors that they have bested in combat. Sometimes they ally with powerful Darklords, like Strahd and Lord Soth, who have won their esteem by defeating them.

25. **Antara, the Woodland Goddess**, is an alseid - a creature similar to a centaur, with an upper body of an elf, lower body of a deer and impressive antlers. (see Tome of Beasts). She took upon herself the protection of the secluded forest where she lives, and hunts mercilessly intruders who defile it, thus earning the reputation of a local nature goddess. Antara is deadly with bow and arrows, and can use druidic magic.

26. **Peck** is considered a bogeyman or a serial killer with crow head, known for attacking people in their sleep and poking their eyes out with his beak. In truth he is a mad kenku assassin, who uses sleeping magic on his victims and feeds on their eyes, leaving a black feather behind as his signature. His victims hardly ever see him, but some of them caught a glimpse of his crow head, and their reports gave rise to his terrifying legend.

27. **Mahaunke** is a savage tribesman, the sole survivor of a tribe massacred by conquerors. He has sworn revenge upon all the invaders, and now stalks the forests on the fringes of civilization, hunts people and kills them with his traditional weapons, or abducts them to be killed ritualistically.

Mahaunke is looking for a way to summon the spirits of his massacred people - a legion of undead who will exact their revenge upon the his hated foes. So far, he has only managed to summon a few such spirits.

28. **Robin Doyle** is a young man with the unique ability to resurrect the dead. Unfortunately, he uses it to break into women's homes and murder them at his pleasure, then resurrect them to prevent suspicions. His victims awake shortly afterward with memories of the attack, which they usually consider a just a nightmare (though some physical evidence might suggest otherwise). In other cases, Robin imprisons his victims in his basement, repeatedly killing them in different methods and interrogating them about their feelings, as a part of his "research" on death. If Robin is killed, all the people he had ever resurrected will die as well.

29. **Absalom** is an incubus. He arranges for women in distress to find the ritual to "summon" him, then appears before them as a strikingly handsome man, pretending to be a magical servant who must obey all their orders. He will indeed follow orders at first, but bends them to his will while seducing and corrupting his "mistress", eventually taking her soul and turning her into a puppet under his own control.

30. **The Pedagogue** is a mysterious merchant who travels in his wagon and sells strange objects and pieces of art. The payment he asks is not money or goods, but children - and the most disturbing thing is that everywhere he goes, people become so eager to buy his merchandise, that they willingly agree to his proposal, delivering him their babies and children without hesitating. Even devoted parents will ignore their children's protests, telling them it is alright to go with this man. The Pedagogue will chain the children to his wagon or put them in cages, taking them away to some unknown fate. Only later on will the parents realize the horror of what they've done - and the insidious nature of the objects they bought.



# Excerpts from "The Register of Monsters"

by Baron Von Stanton (Stanton Fink)

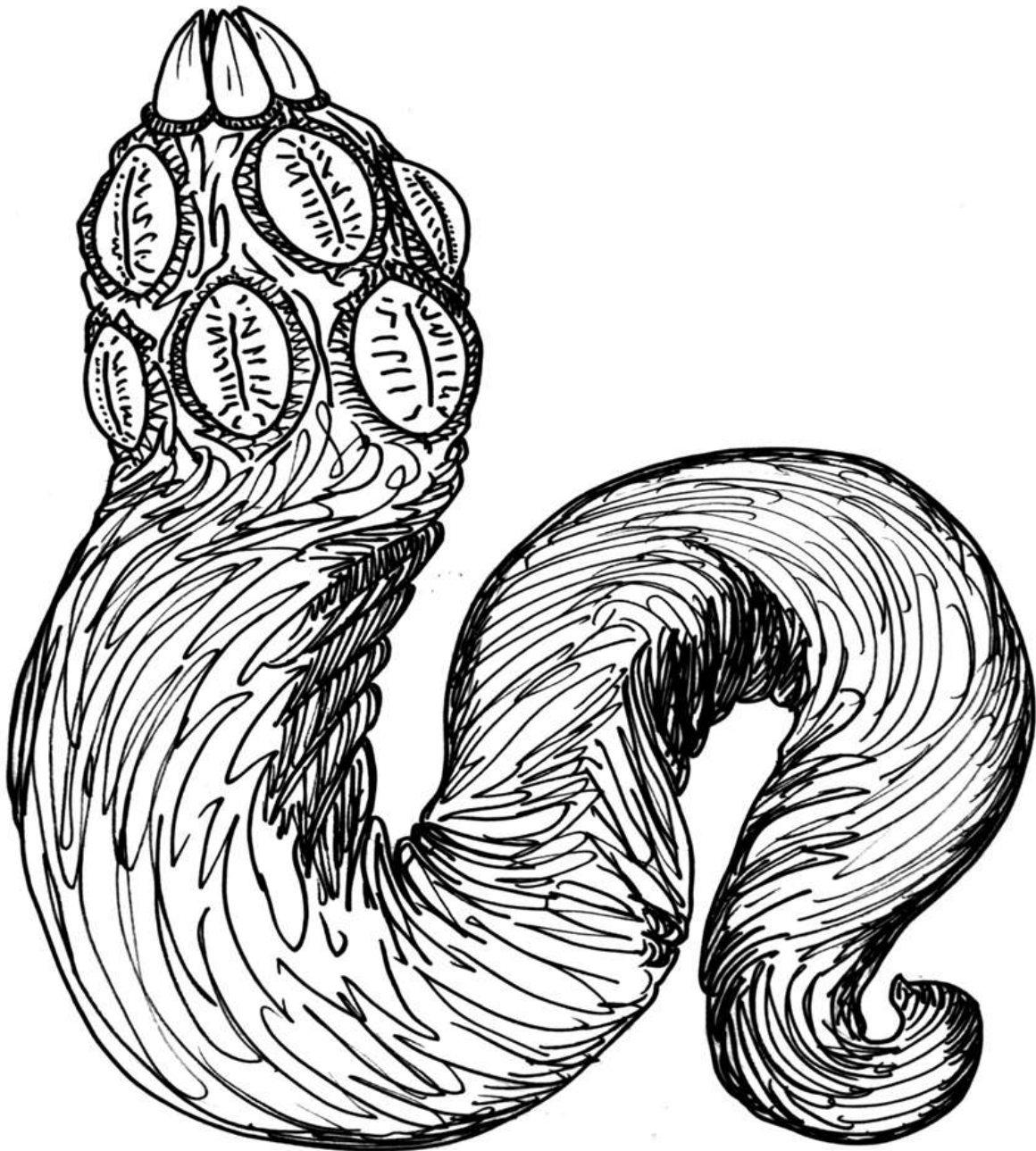
"There was Plato, too" — continued his majesty, modestly declining the snuff-box and the compliment — "there was Plato, too, for whom I, at one time, felt all the affection of a friend. You knew, Plato, Bon-Bon? — ah! no, I beg a thousand pardons. He met me at Athens, one day, in the Parthenon, and told me he was distressed for an idea. I bade him write down that 'ο νους εστιν [[εστιν]] αυγος.' He said that he would do so, and went home, while I stepped over to the Pyramids. But my conscience smote me for the lie, and hastening back to Athens, I arrived behind the philosopher's chair as he was inditing the 'αυγος.' Giving the gamma a fillip with my finger I turned it upside down. So the sentence now reads 'ο νους εστιν [[εστιν]] αυλος,' and is, you perceive, the fundamental doctrine of his metaphysics."

Edgar Allen Poe, "Bon-Bon"



## Aadari

Aadari is a voyeur who delights in observing forbidden actions and taboo deeds. Convincing Aadari the Voyeur to discuss specific events it has witnessed is not a terribly difficult undertaking, provided that the summoner is willing to pay Aadari's fee of a memory of an evil, hurtful secret and a recently deceased soul. Potential customers are free to haggle with this creature, but, it is not recommended.

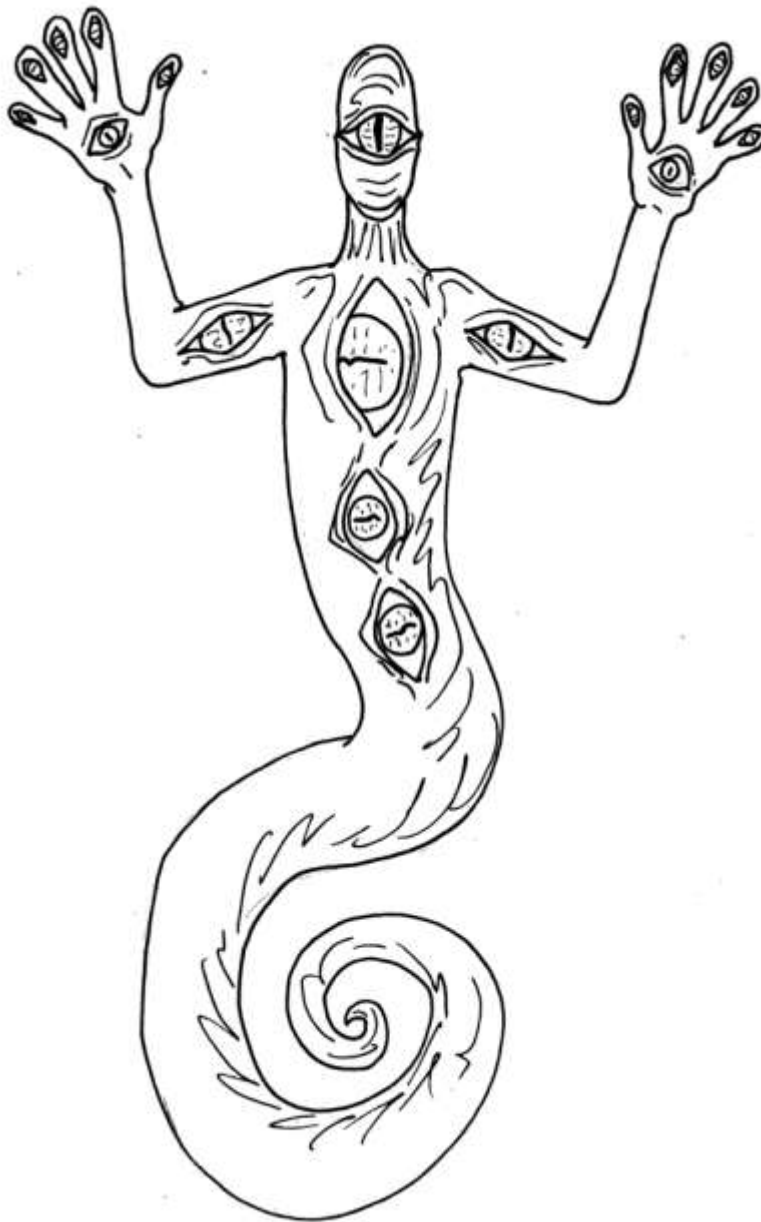




## Balabar

Balabar is an evil spirit who deceives others into believing his claim of being an omniscient, wish-granting deity. Balabar assists his devotees in their endeavors by unfairly manipulating events in their favor. In return, his devotees perform hidden evil deeds committed on his behalf.

When Balabar feels a particular devotee has matured fully, he asks them if they are ready to receive him. If the devotee hesitates, Balabar casts them out and rejects them, leaving the former disciple to stew in their heartbreak until they are assassinated by a more loyal follower. If the devotee agrees, then Balabar devours them, body and soul, leaving nothing behind beyond a spirit trapped inside of one of his eyes.



## Cuunies

Cuunies is a worm-like spirit that devours its hosts from the inside out. Figuratively, at first, as it eats its host's memories, numbs its host's personality, and slowly ruins all motor functions. Eventually, this progresses to a literal sense, when the possession causes organ failure and inexplicable desiccation. Upon the death of the host, Cuunies leaves to find a new host, while the corpse promptly crumbles into desiccated frass.



# The Deadly

The Deadly, as it prefers to be addressed, is a spirit that manifests in the form of a talking mushroom. The Deadly communes with children in order to teach them about “important skills” and “crucial nature information,” in the form of identifying and caring for poisonous organisms and how to be discreet when causing harm with herbal venoms.

The Deadly dearly loves its mortal students, and takes aggravated offense at attempts by meddlesome busybody grownups who dare to curtail its students' education. The Deadly marks such hated foes by causing toxic mushrooms to bloom in their food.

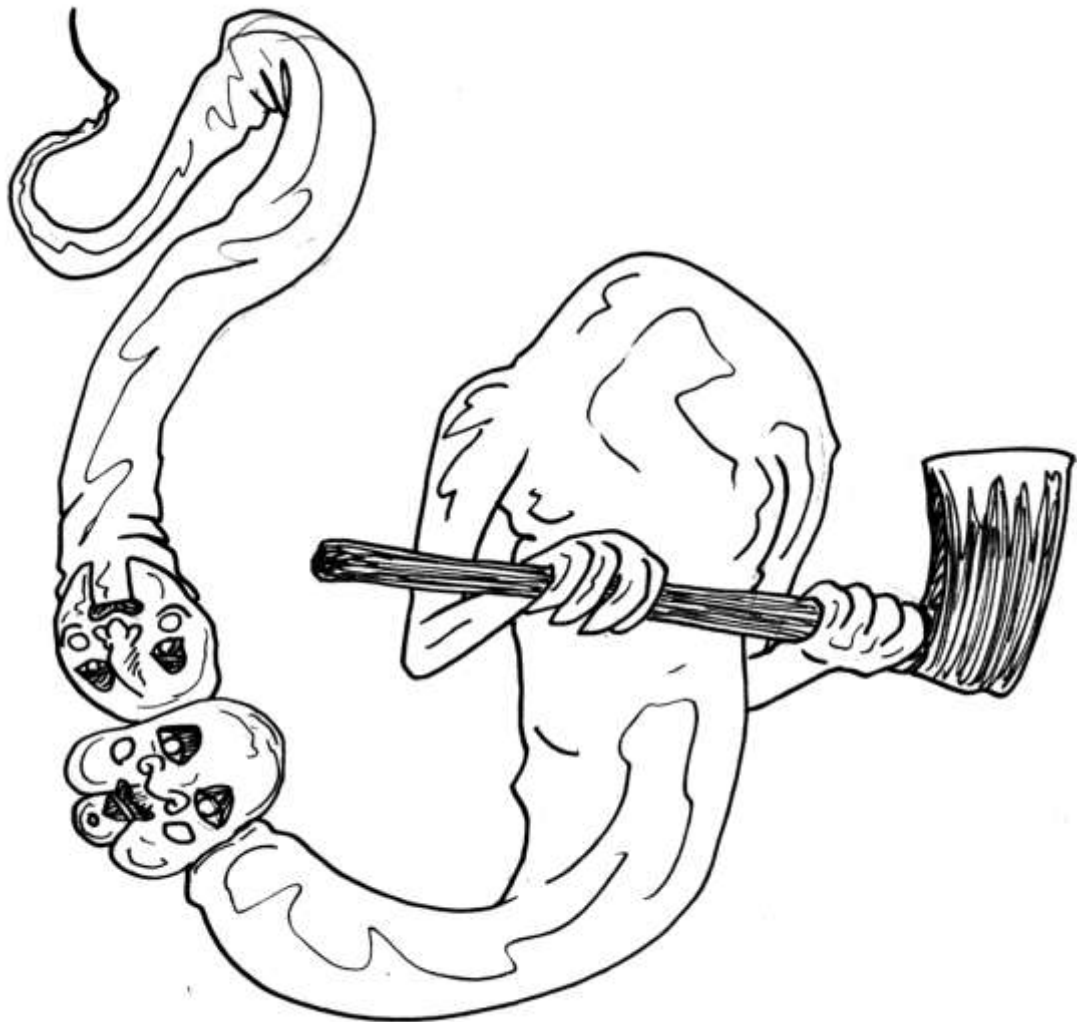


## The Doll Ghost

Once upon a time, there was a doll; her name was “Edith Tommy Faroe,” not that it really matters anymore. Once upon a time, there was a doll, and it was loved by a girl; we’ll call her “Estella.” And the doll loved Estella back very dearly.

One day, a boy in Estella's town, “Reginald,” we’ll call him, took her doll from her and did horrible things to the doll before he finally broke it beneath the wheels of a donkey cart. Reginald laughed at Estella and her tears before going on his merry way. Reginald laughed and laughed when he heard that Estella was heartsick with heartbreak; he hoped she would die, such a wicked boy was he.

And so, Estella lay in her bed, sad as she hovered near death. But one day, to the delight of her whole family, Estella came bouncing down the stairs, happy and healthy while clutching a crimson bundle. She gave her bundle, a gift from her now lost dolly, to her parents. They, in turn, realized the bundle was a bloodsoaked handkerchief wrapped around Reginald's severed hand.



## The Dragon With Nine Eyes

"A large serpente or wyrm lives in the depths of the Musarde. Its mouth appeareth to all as a large rose of daggers or teeth, devouryng all with a kiss of perfect destruction. Learned observors note that this wyrm's description matches that of the stone-licker, or lampetra."

"Unlike the much smaller lampetra, however, this wyrm hath no gil slits, but eyes; nine eyes stare from each side."

"Fools simultanously assume this creature is naught but a stupid beast, and petition it for miryaculous assistance. The wise ygnore it, if only because the wise know better than to ask for help from a water beast who is crafty, ravenous, and paxiant."

-excerpt from **The Ebon Shadows**



## Dream Creatures

*“Go on, tell me what you saw in your dream.”*

*“I was in a room, a hallway, filled with cream, no, light. I walked to the far end and saw a great beige slab.”*

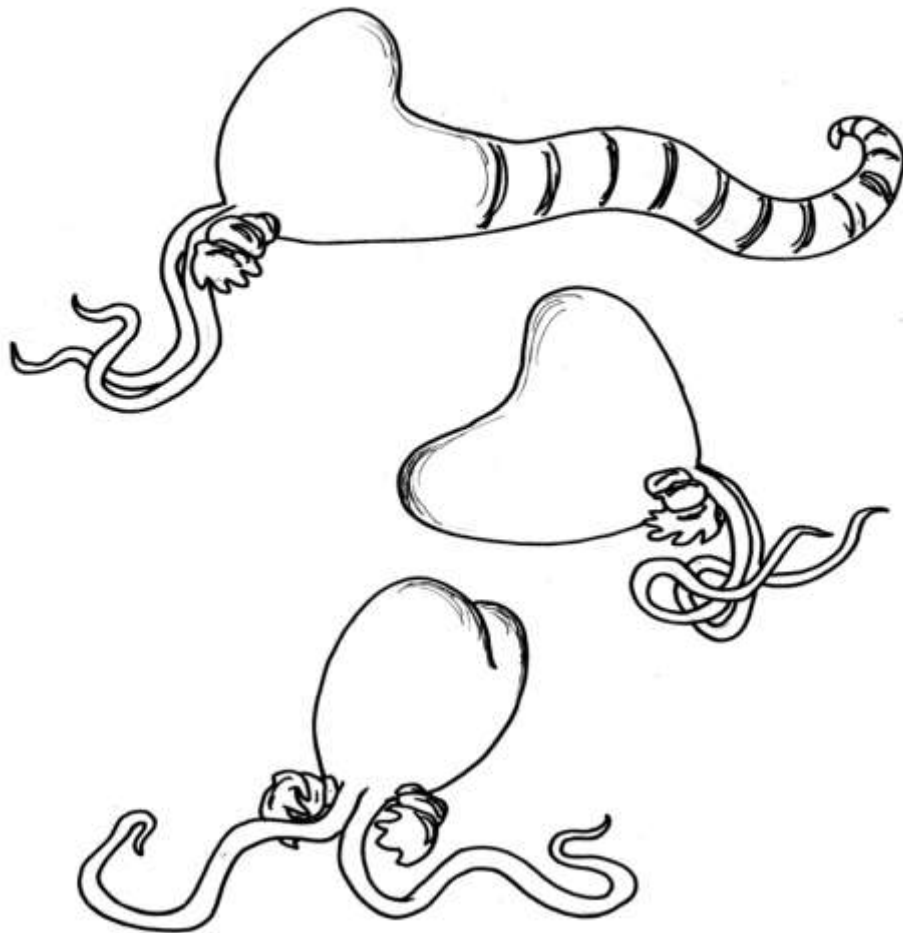
*“What was the slab like?”*

*“It was made of stone, limestone, I think. The slab was taller than a house. Salty to the touch. There were creatures carved on to it, like fossils.”*

*“Mmmhmmm.”*

*“And then I held the slab in my hands, and then the creatures came out of the slab to slither away into the air.”*

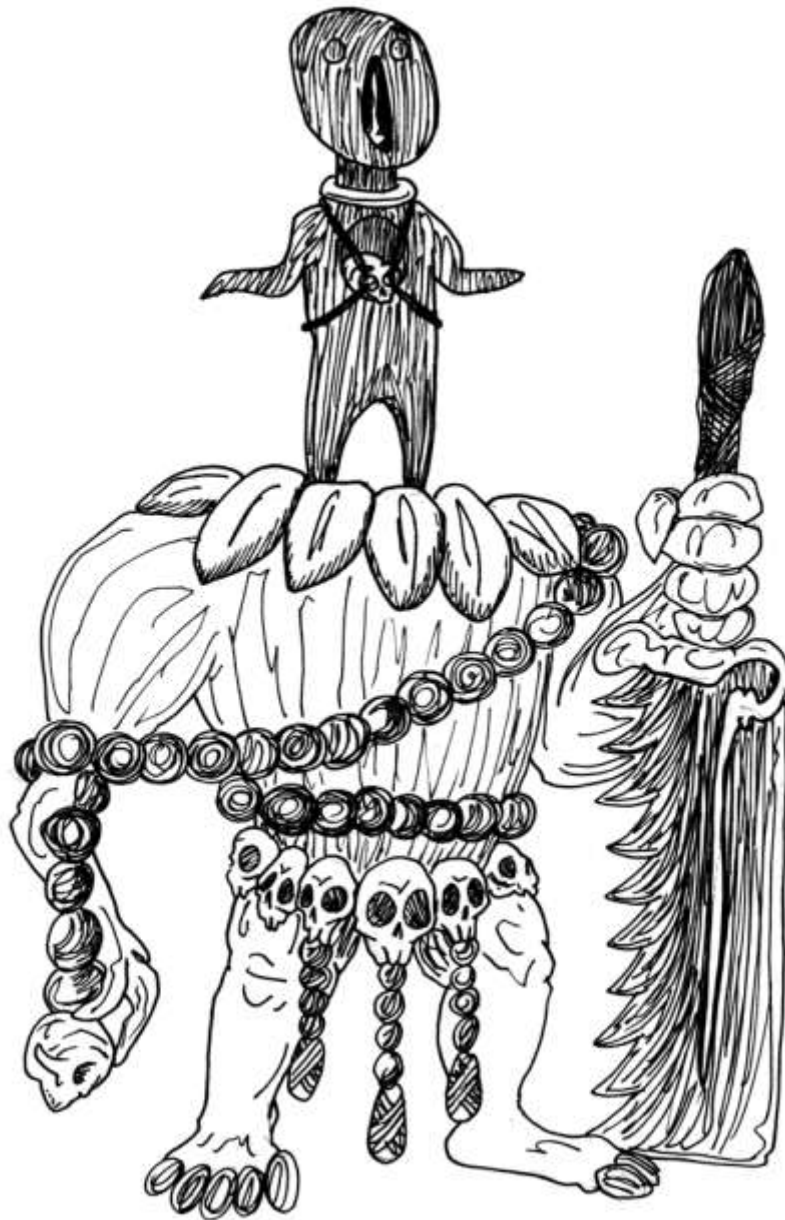
excerpt from **The Journal Of Dr. Gregorian Illhousen**



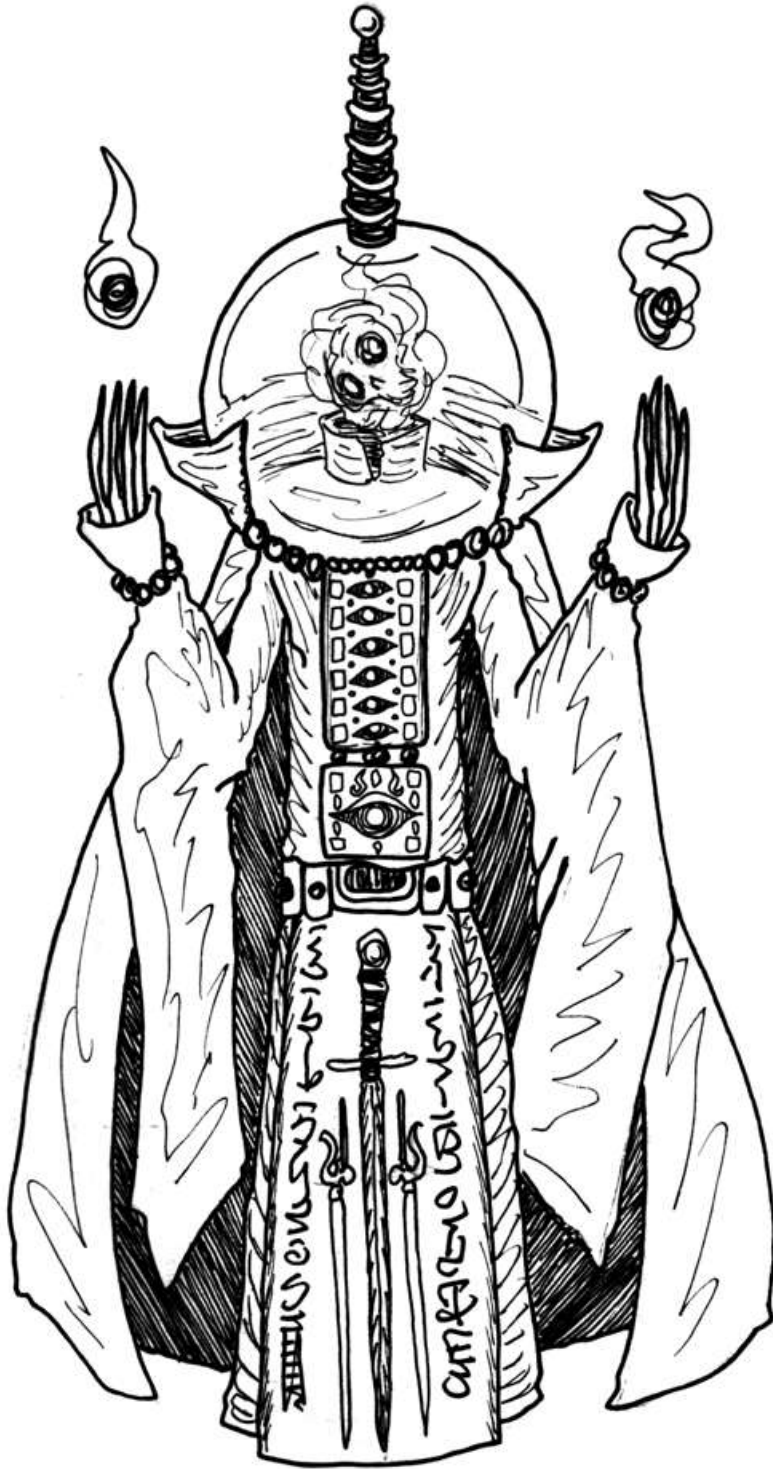
## The Eidolon

An ancient idol of a now forgotten god. Its lord was so pleased with the idol's creation that the deity gifted the idol with a mote of that god's own power, thereby granting the idol a life, a soul and a mind. In time, though, this deity discovered too late that even gods can die, so the god died. The faithful were forgotten as they became forgetful. The idol, in contrast, remembered. It railed and wailed over these two pox-filled calamities, but, it, too, was forgotten, and it became lost when it lost its way.

Sometimes, the eidolon remembers. Whenever it does remember, it seeks to sway new faithful, so it can feed their faith (and, eventually, their lives, souls and minds, too) to that forgotten god, and awaken the dead, yet slumbering deity once more.



## The False Prometheus



Once upon a time, there was a wizard who sought, as many wizards do, immortality through magic. The gods and the spirits and the faeries all told the wizard that to achieve this, he would need to pass the "Four Gates Of The World" before he could enter "The Door Of Heaven." Being an arrogant creature, the wizard decided to pass through the Gate Of Fire, first.

Upon doing so, the wizard's blood turned to fire, and burned his flesh away. But, he still lives, as he discovered to his sorrow and his madness that these hot flames that have replaced his flesh burn eternally. He was counseled that his suffering may end, were he to enter the other Gates. However, the uncertainty of what sort of "end" this would be outweighs the agony of his current state, and this dreadful decision long ago cleaved what little of his mind remained in twain.



# Gaanigun



Gaanigun is a spirit dragon who lairs in the Border Ethereal. She feeds on spirits, by first piercing them with her venomous tongue, thereby petrifying them into Yin statues, thus allowing her to gnaw away on her jade-hard victims at her leisure. Sometimes, Gannigun stings mortals with her tail, thereby drawing them into the Border Ethereal, where they wander about at their own peril, for the dragon's amusement. Once the sting subsides, such fleshy prey are then ejected back into the physical realm, provided they survive. More often than not, the stung languish and perish in the Border Ethereal, where they then become ghosts to stock Gaanigun's horrid larder.

## Gahun

This peculiar creature is an amalgamation of decades' worth of children's unresolved fears, silly grudges, and ignored resentments. Gahun has a twisted opinion of its progenitors, dismissively disdaining them as loathsomely weak, mewling parasites whose greatest sin is to exist without permission, yet simultaneously exults them as being incomprehensibly delightful, never-ending storms of oh so indescribably delicious manna.

Gahun has many methods of tormenting its prey. One favorite tactic is merely haunting its victims' sleep until they die of fright or exhaustion. Other times, it formulates more elaborate recipes, goading its victims into committing evil acts, often involving cruel betrayal, sometimes through blackmail, or bribery. Once Gahun gauges its target's emotional stability to be at their nadir, it gobbles them up, sometimes together with their families.

Many would-be heroes have perished, trying to exterminate this menace. They often succumb to the temptation that Gahun's great, leering eye is its weak point, only to discover that

whatever missile can survive its Balorian gaze will simply glance harmlessly off of its adamantite-hard cornea. If these failures had ignored the eye and searched for other weakness, perhaps by ignoring Gahun's great, and wagging tongue, in order to reach the root of the problem, they would have been more successful.



## Gogon

Gogon is either a deity of dreams and imagination, or an imaginary god that appeared in a dream. It first appeared in a man's dream and drove him insane that very night with its perplexing commands. The next day, Gogon's first acolyte tore down his house in order to rebuild it as a temple. The acolyte's neighbors gathered to euthanize this newly born lunatic, but, then they, too, all fell under the madman's

spell when his god spoke its weird truths through him. The cult was destroyed when the cultists tried to prove their devotion to Gogon by sacrificing themselves, down to the last man, woman, and child, in a fiery orgy.

Since then, this dream god has created other, seemingly identical cults which also then self-destruct soon after their formation. Gogon's motives are actually easy to decipher from the cults' hypnotic sermons, in that it seeks to establish a cult stable enough to ritually summon their deity's avatar forth, thereby allowing Gogon a foothold in reality, outside of its gibbering followers' broken minds.

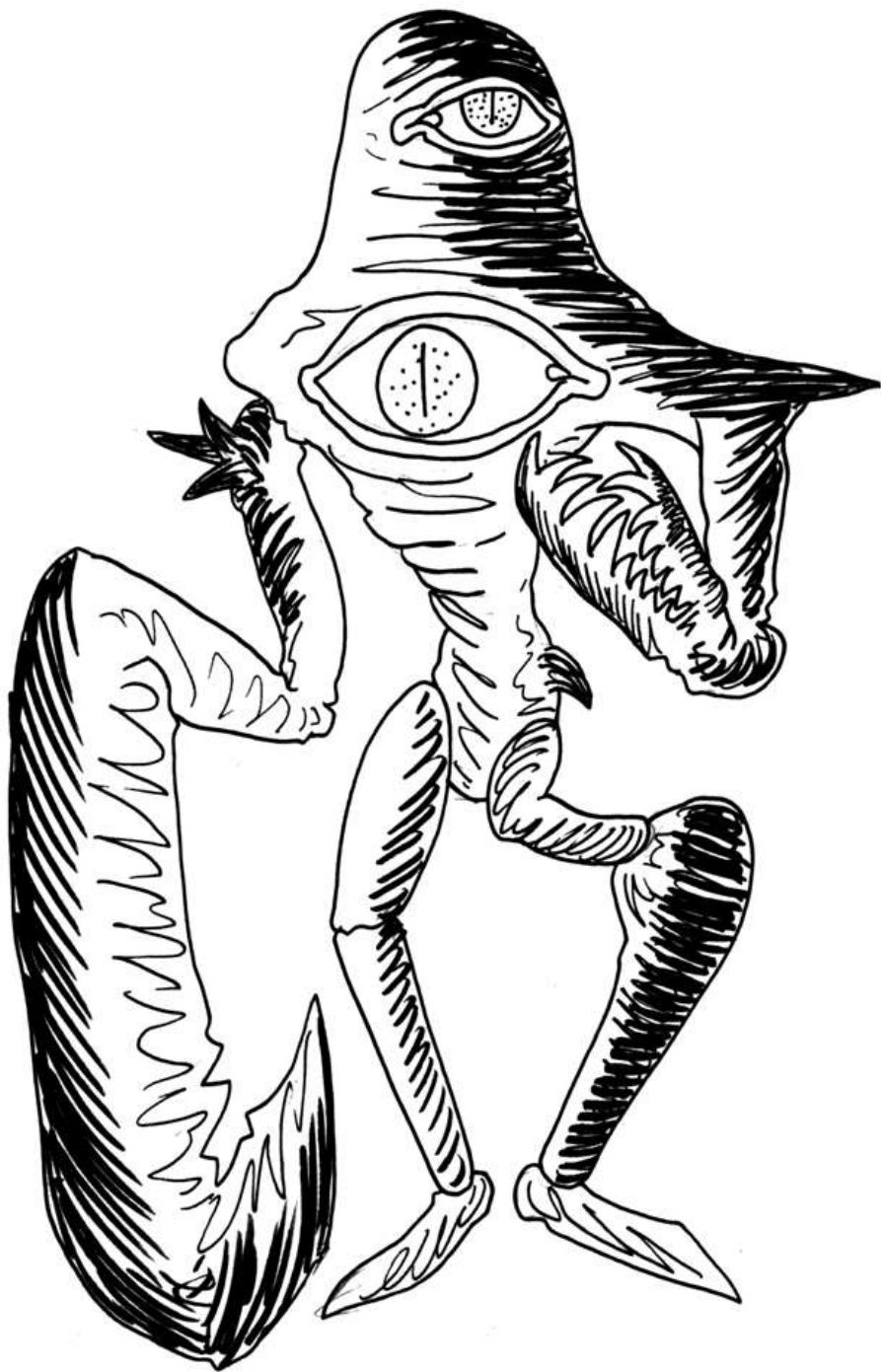


## Gurveria

Gurveria is a peculiar spirit summoned by sorcerers and other magicians of ill-repute to retrieve someone, or something, involved in an oath broken to the detriment of the client. In pursuit of its quarry, Gurveria is implacable and eternal, always hiding in even the thinnest shadow, and always limping about in the corner of an eye.

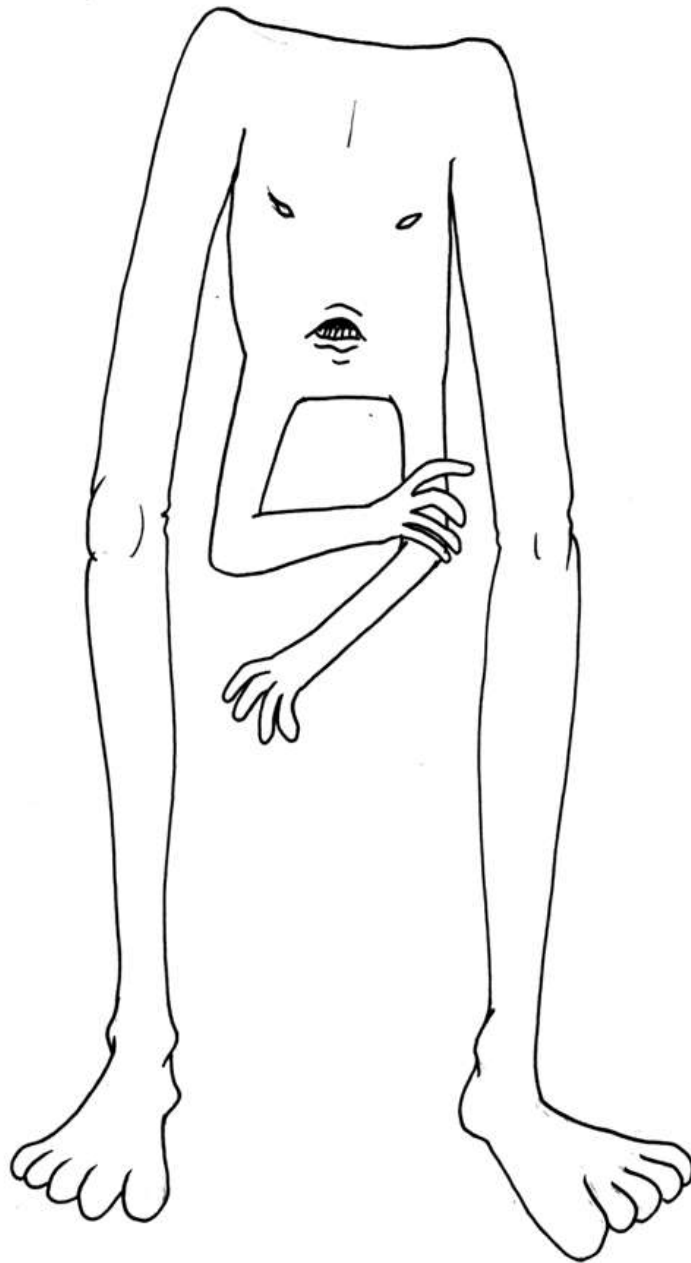
Technically speaking, Gurveria is not allowed to slay, or rather, is not permitted to accept a contract requiring the death of its target. Having said this, Gurveria freely lets its summoners flout this ban by allowing them to request that it retrieve some life-threatening object from the target, such as medication or a body part.

Woe of woes upon those clients who would dare to break a promise, any promise, made while under contract with Gurveria: such oathbreakers quickly discover that both their contracts and their lives become forfeit for offending this particular spirit.



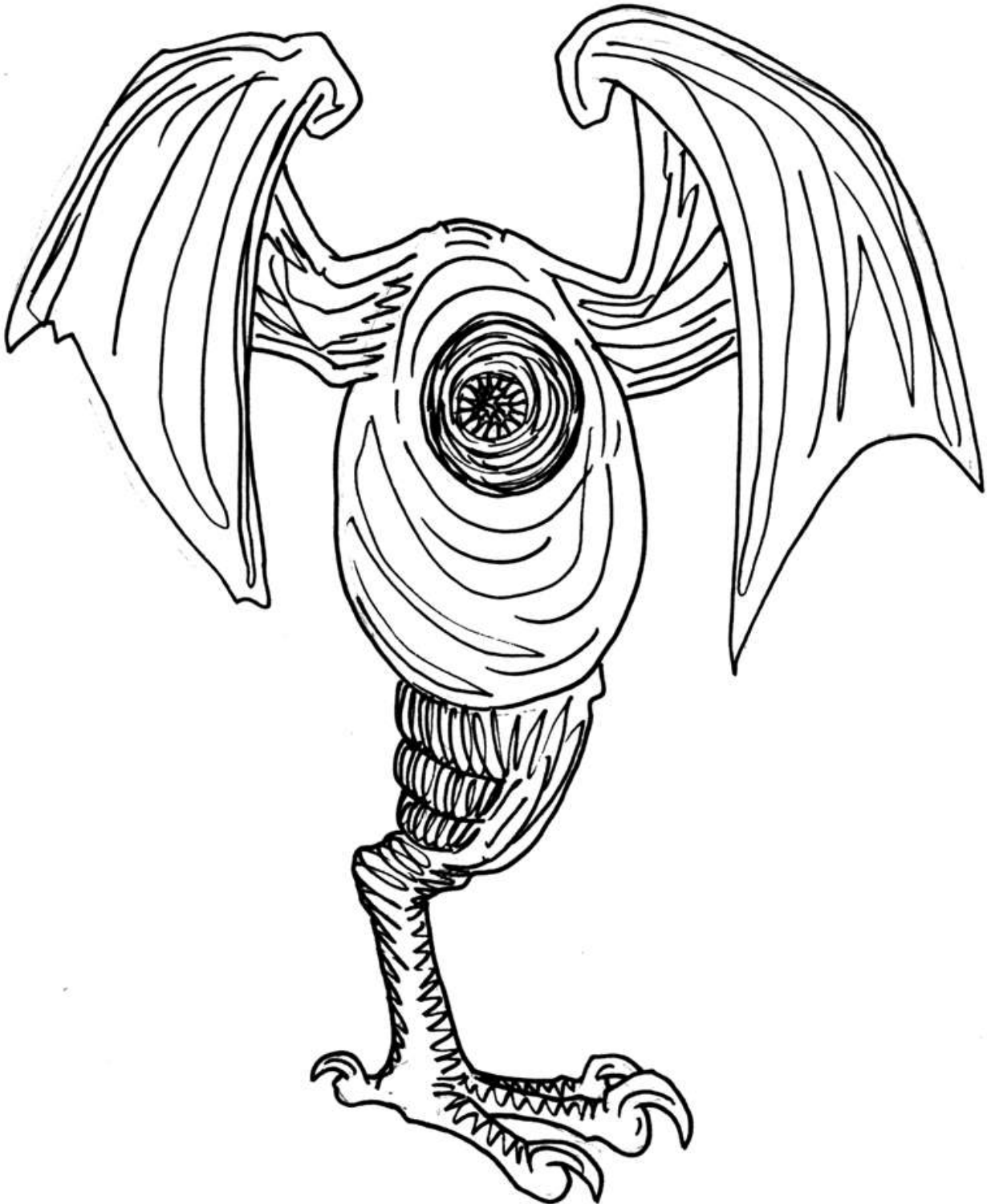
# Haemba

An attempt to clone humans using ectoplasm instead of flesh resulted in this unsightly creature. “Normal” humanoids looking upon Haemba, as he prefers to call himself, assume he is a dumb, bestial mute. Haemba rarely grants such kind visitors the generosity of repeating such ignorant conclusions.



## Hesshan

Hesshan, sometimes "Isshan Hesshan," is a creature unseen. It bedevils mortals by making terrifying muttering sounds.



## Hexacuunies

Hexacuunies is a sorcerous demon who tempts magicians with power and knowledge. Hexacuunies schemes and plots against her rivals, using her victims' souls and magical powers to further her abyssal machinations. To encourage magicians to offer her their souls, Hexacuunies allows potential clients access to her centuries-spanning library of mystical texts.



## The Horrible Horror

"Once upon a time, long, long ago, there was a clown. He tried to be funny, but people found him scary, and when he tried to be scary, well, he was too good for his own good. So he became sad, so sad, that he languished away, leaving behind not a trace of his own existence besides a smear of facepaint, and a lost pom."

"Sometimes, a lone traveler will see an odd looking person, and that odd person will try to make his guest laugh. If the traveler is wise, he'll make a polite chuckle, tip his hat, and be on his way. If not, well, worse things won't happen to that particular traveler, if only because he'll be in no state to have anything else happen to him ever again."

-excerpt from **The Ebon Shadows**





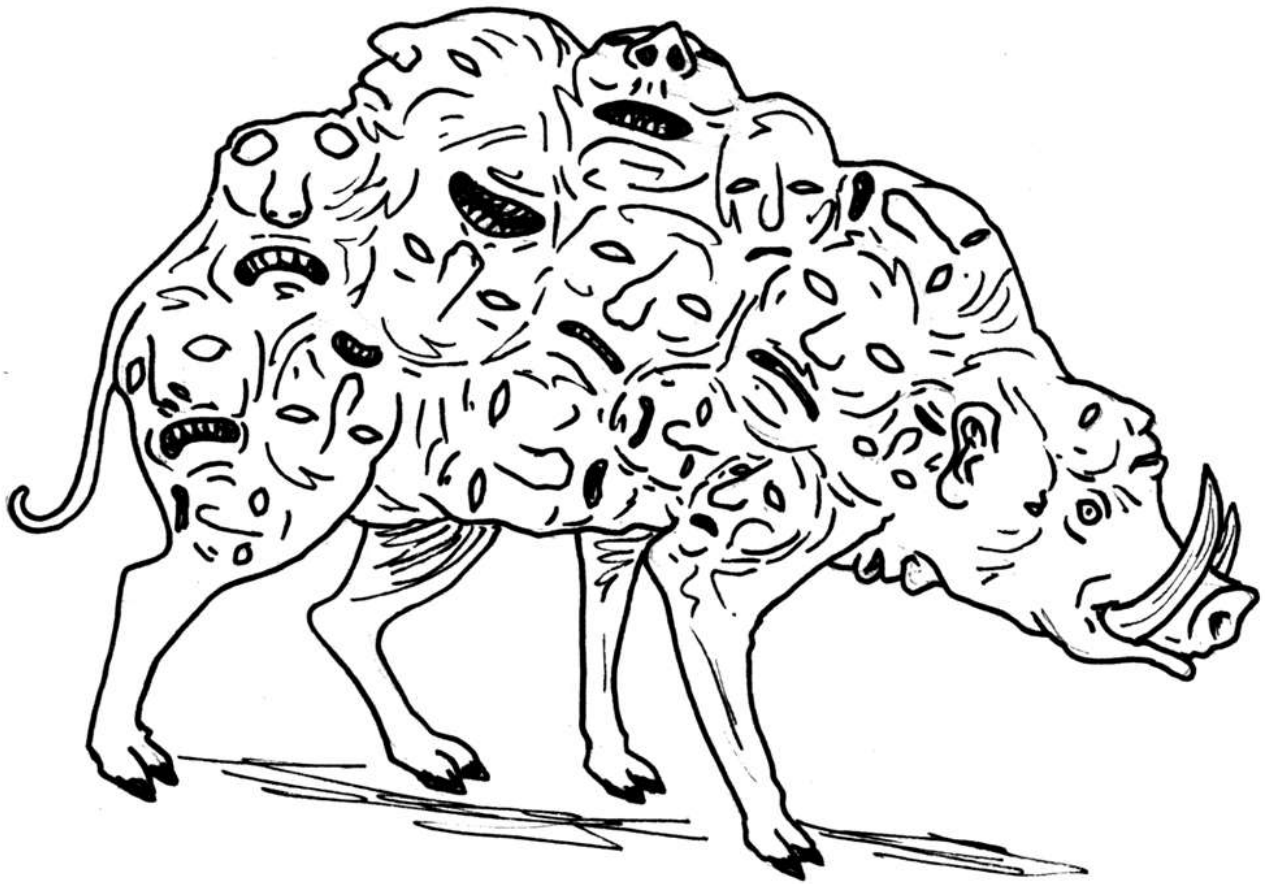
## Japhadelsia

Japhadelsia is a faerie in service to The Queen of Fungi. Unlike other willing servants of Her Majesties, Japhadelsia does not intend harm to befall others. Even so, the faerie is as dangerous as her peers. As a show of Her Majesties' power, the Queen gifted Japhadelsia with a compelling, melodious voice that will grow parasitically hypnotic mushrooms from the flesh of any and all living beings who deign to listen to her sermons. Those who would raise a hand against the faerie soon find this means making a foe out of her mistress, and that Her Majesties' deadly reach is far and all-grasping.



# Legion

A conglomeration of demons, taking the form of a deformed pig. They originally inhabited and tormented a human man, forcing him to perform their mischiefs as per their whims. A holy man exorcised them from their long-suffering host, but he relented in banishing them when they plead for mercy. As a concession, Legion tries to be more discreet about its mischiefs

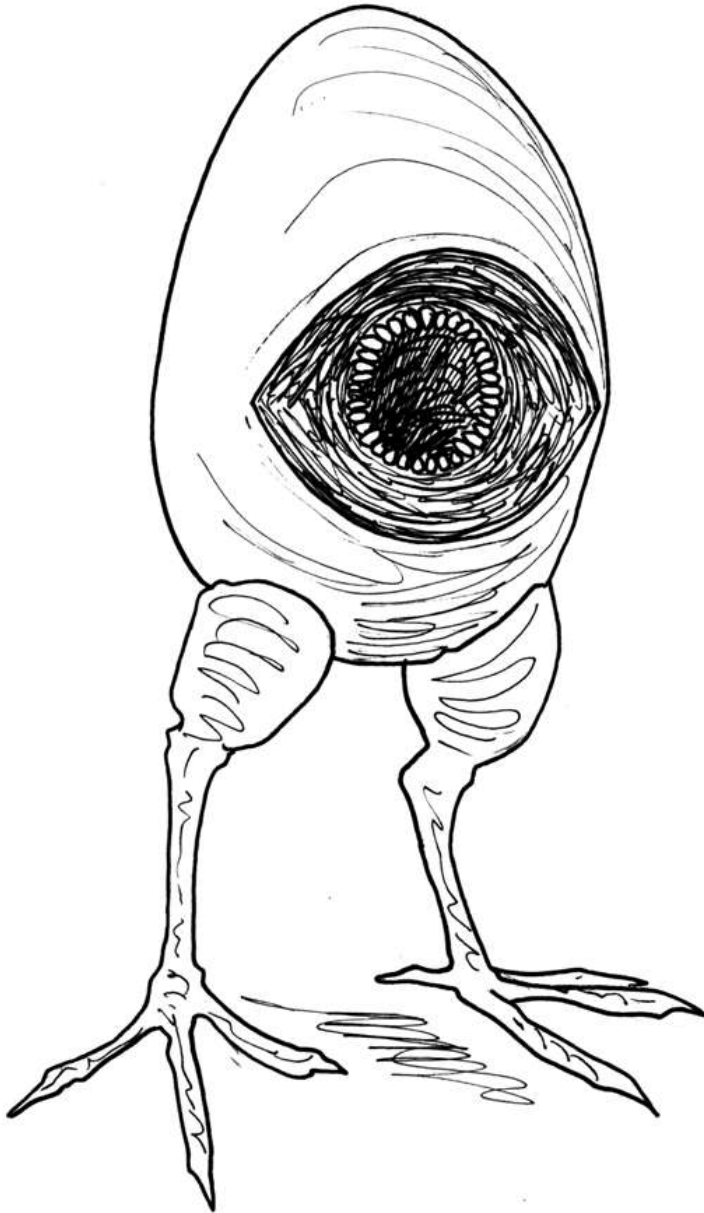


# Meimo

Meimo is an egg-shaped demon with a large mouth that resembles an eye. Conjurers and diviners summon Meimo for its gift of prophecy, while illusionists seek the demon's sagelike advice concerning magical deceptions.

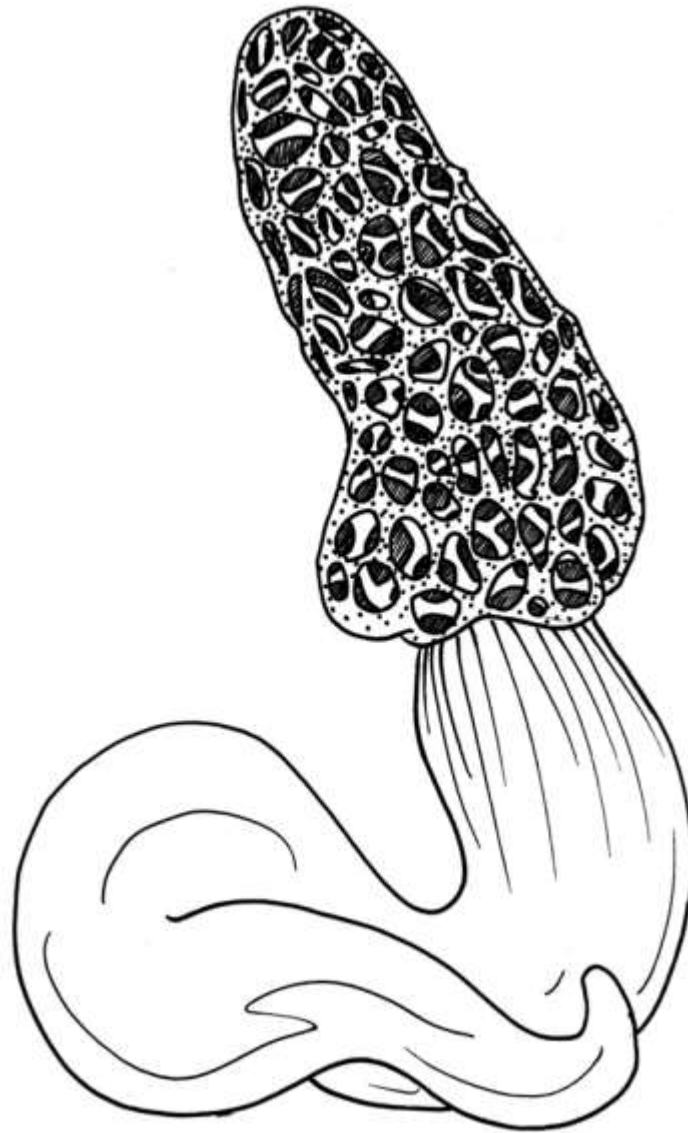
Despite its alien appearance, and its ravenous hunger, Meimo is polite, courteous and excruciatingly erudite. Summoners who pay Meimo's price of an innocent life placed in its maw find that Meimo answers any question put to it to the best of its formidable

ability. Meimo does not actively further its summoners' damnation, being, instead, satisfied with merely passively encouraging them to continue dabbling in demonology.



# Möhre

Möhre is a poisonous creature that resembles a worm with a morel for a head. This resemblance is apparently deliberate, as, in order to reproduce, its deadly spores must be consumed by a host, whose corpse is then used as a nursery for the developing offspring.





## The Mooncalf

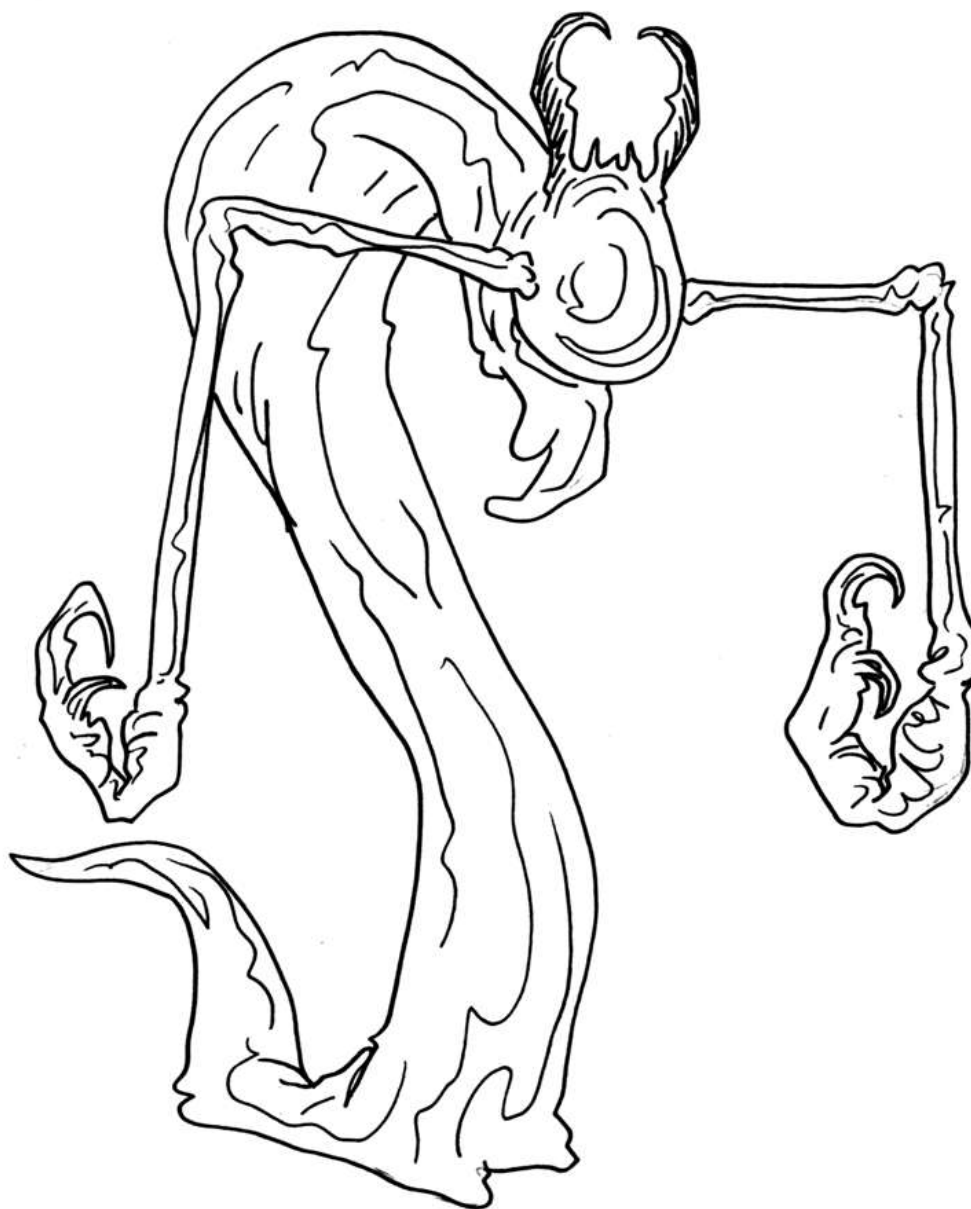
The Mooncalf is a monstrous creature from another dimension. When a stellar conjunction occurs, the Mooncalf can be perceived as entering into this world by “crawling out of the (full) moon” as though the moon were a hole.

Those poor souls who can perceive the Mooncalf, but are not yet devoured by it, are driven irrevocably insane by their perceptions, if they do not outright die from the mere sensation of perceiving it.

The Mooncalf is apparently sensitive to ultraviolet light, as exposure to it weakens its ability to stay in this world. Those heroes foolish enough to try to resolve the problem of the Mooncalf by following it back into its own dimension are invariably rewarded in their quest by being turned into interdimensional frass.

## Naderius

Naderius is a shapeshifting spirit. All of her forms either display or hide venomous spines. Her venoms have different deleterious effects, depending on her mood. A green russula mushroom can negate her venoms, and a red russula can bar her from entering a warded place.



## Ofumobanyi

Ofumobanyi is an owl spirit who kidnaps children to devour. Once, Ofumobanyi was a mortal woman who offended the King Of Birds. She saw a bird's egg fall out of a nest, but, rather than return the egg, she ate it, uncaring that it was one of His Majesties' offspring. In a wrath, His Majesties cursed her to be an owl, and then gifted her with a hunger for children's flesh. Ofumobanyi's former neighbors caught her and burned her, after they plucked out all of her feathers. She still craves children to eat, though, and having no body anymore has not stopped her or His Majesties' curse.



# Phantasmagorium



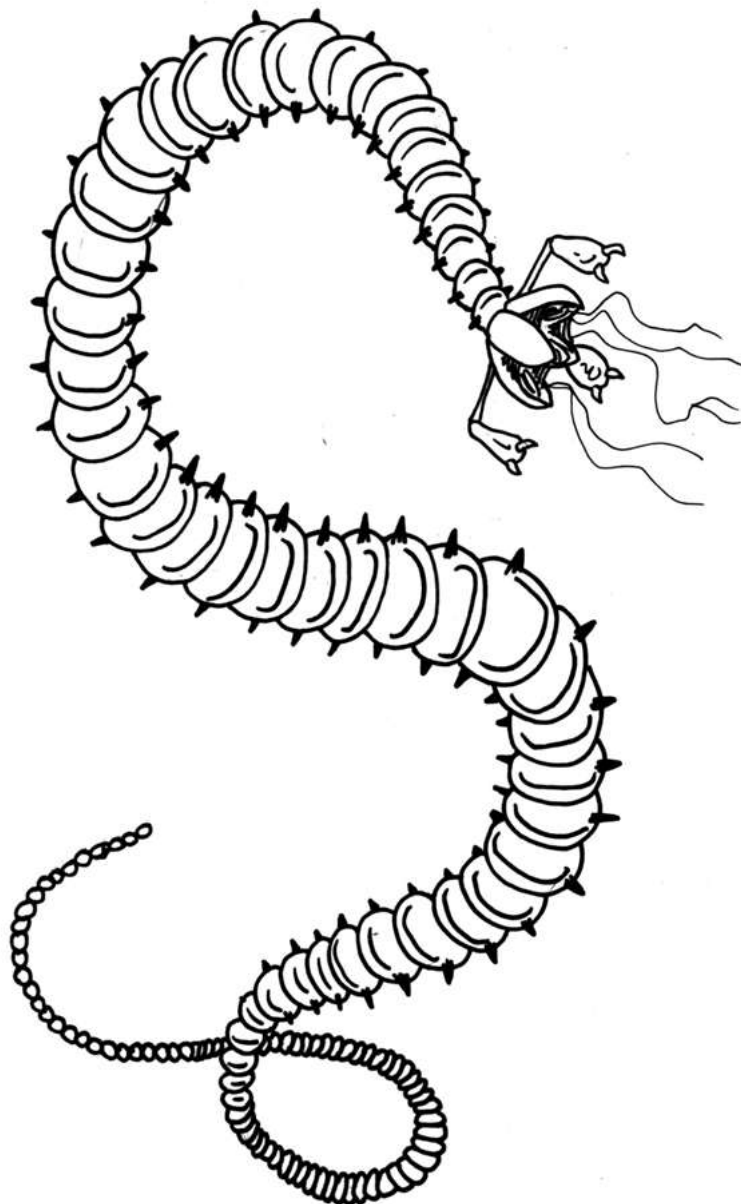
This wicked creature was never a mortal; it was born of a man's thoughts, or more specifically, a boy's hopes, fears, wonders, and daydreams. For a while, it lived inside of its creator's mind, a weird thing that was, for a while, content to wallow in fantasies and suppositions. But then the parents of its creator began to pollute its realm with worries and troubles and nagging. The creature begged its creator to stop this ruination, pleading for its own imaginary life. But alas, it realized that its creator could not, or perhaps cared not to, understand

it, so it decided to take matters into its own taloned hands. It adorned itself with a raiment of horror, and armed itself with the sharpest unspeakables, and left its home, after cloaking itself with impenetrable terror. The creature avenged itself upon its creator's parents and fled cackling into the night, never to look back.



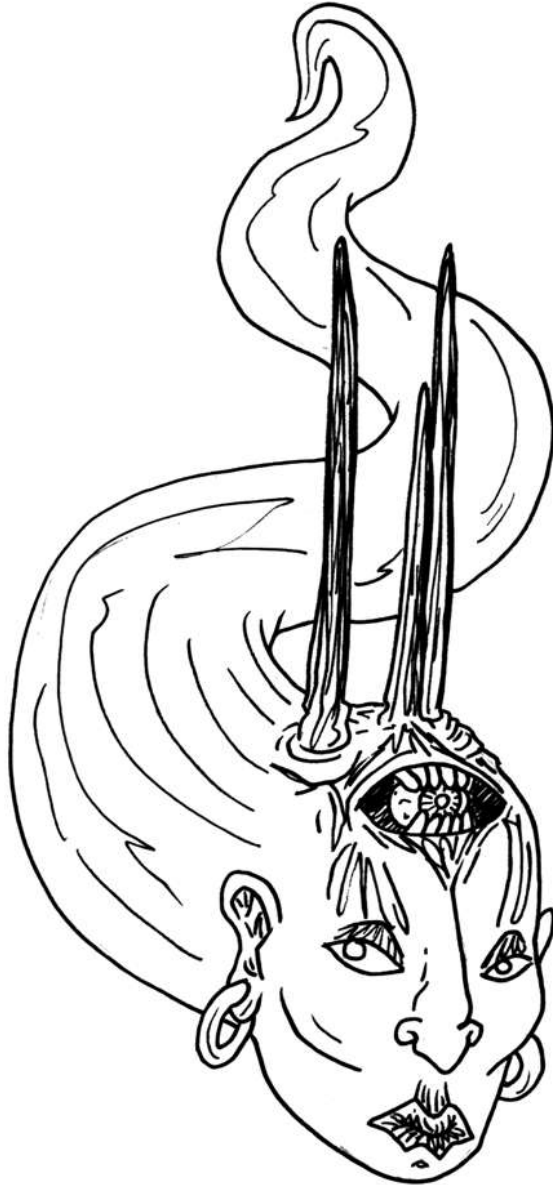
## Skyworm

A creature that fell from the night sky, inside of a stone. It seeks a host body it can "improve upon." Unfortunately, it wears out each host with its "improvements," forcing it to abandon the current host in order to find another suitable one.



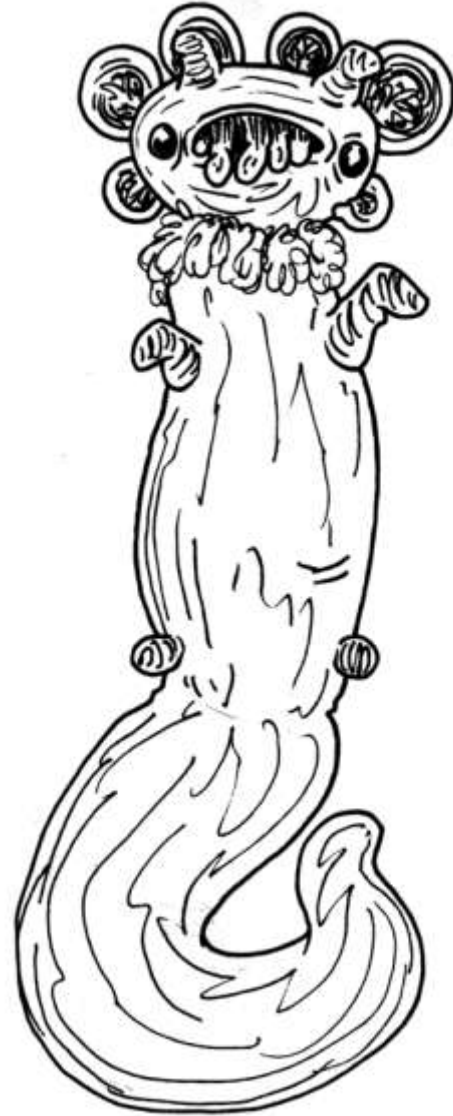
## The Sorcerer's Head

A sorcerer once tried to plumb “the depths of wickedness,” and lost her head as a result, some would say a “just reward.” The sorcerer still lives on, in a way, still trying to perform her reviling experiments in her new state.



## Spivo

Spivo is a faerie who was tasked to become the changeling of a child. But Spivo became so enamored of his mark, he decided to become the changeling of the child's doll in order to serve as the child's guardian instead. Because Spivo's lord was enamored of the child, too, and reconsidered the thought of exposing the soft and innocent thing to the grotesqueness of fae intrigue, his lord approved of this last minute decision. Other fae who are aware of this situation think it's adorable. Other fae unaware of the situation dismiss Spivo as a maudlin simpleton. Neither faction deigns to interfere with Spivo's tasks or ward, however, as both groups remember quite clearly that Spivo still serves as his master's chief assassin.



## "The Spore Of Hell"



The so-called "Spore of Hell" is a gigantic sporangium that, contrary to its name, probably originated from one of the Infinite Layers Of The Abyss, probably Shedaklah.

The "Spore" is the size of a cow femur. Those who would seek information about the "Spore" are inevitably repeatedly cautioned against touching it without adequate protection: if the "Spore" is allowed to reabsorb enough moisture, it will revive and regrow its toothed haustoria, thereby enabling it to capture and feed on prey once more. Furthermore, if, by some dark miracle, the "Spore of Hell" revives, it is strongly advised to avoid direct contact with the "Spore"'s highly carnivorous habitus, as those who confront the growths risk being exposed to the actual spores, a corrosive dust that normally devour any organic matter they touch. Those precious few non-demonic entities who survive encountering the active "Spore" faithfully note that the "Spore" is actually self-aware to the point of being extremely intelligent, and possesses control and influence over those who discover its mutagenic powers.

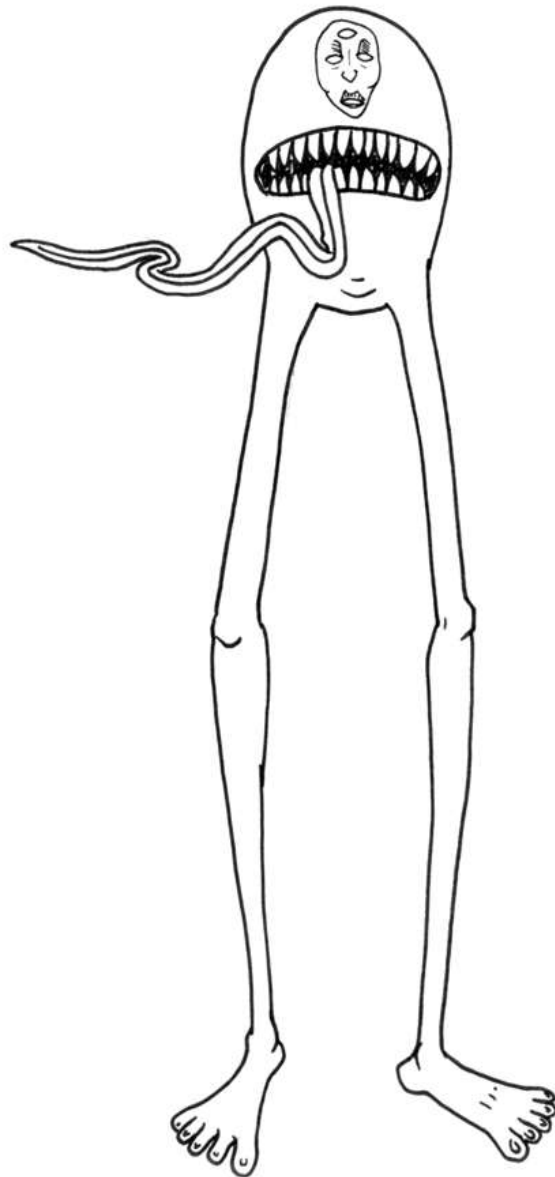
## Tabaena

Tabaena is a spirit of plagues and diseases. It remains in the safety of the Spirit World, as it extends its three prehensile tongues into the physical world to drink the blood of its victims. Such victims immediately contract strange, and catastrophically virulent diseases. Because Tabaena leaves puncture wounds as a sign of its visitation, it is often confused with disease-spreading vampires. Tabaena's victims can be distinguished from vampires' prey by how the former are always left with a series of three puncture wounds arranged in a triangle.

The diseases Tabaena spreads must be cured through magical means as dictated by the symptoms. Tabaena, itself, can be temporarily warded away with strong smelling herbs, especially garlic, patchouli, rosemary, lavender, and bay, that have been blessed and hung before large censers that burn with myrrh and frankincense. It must be stated that Tabaena is clever, and knows of many ways to circumvent its own bans and limitations, as those who know of the spirit and oppose it often find themselves becoming its latest victims.



# Thurvia Galdans



Thurvia Galdans is a creature usually seen in nightmares. Its presence in dreams presages supernatural calamities in the dreamers' near future. Its presence in the waking world signals worse things.

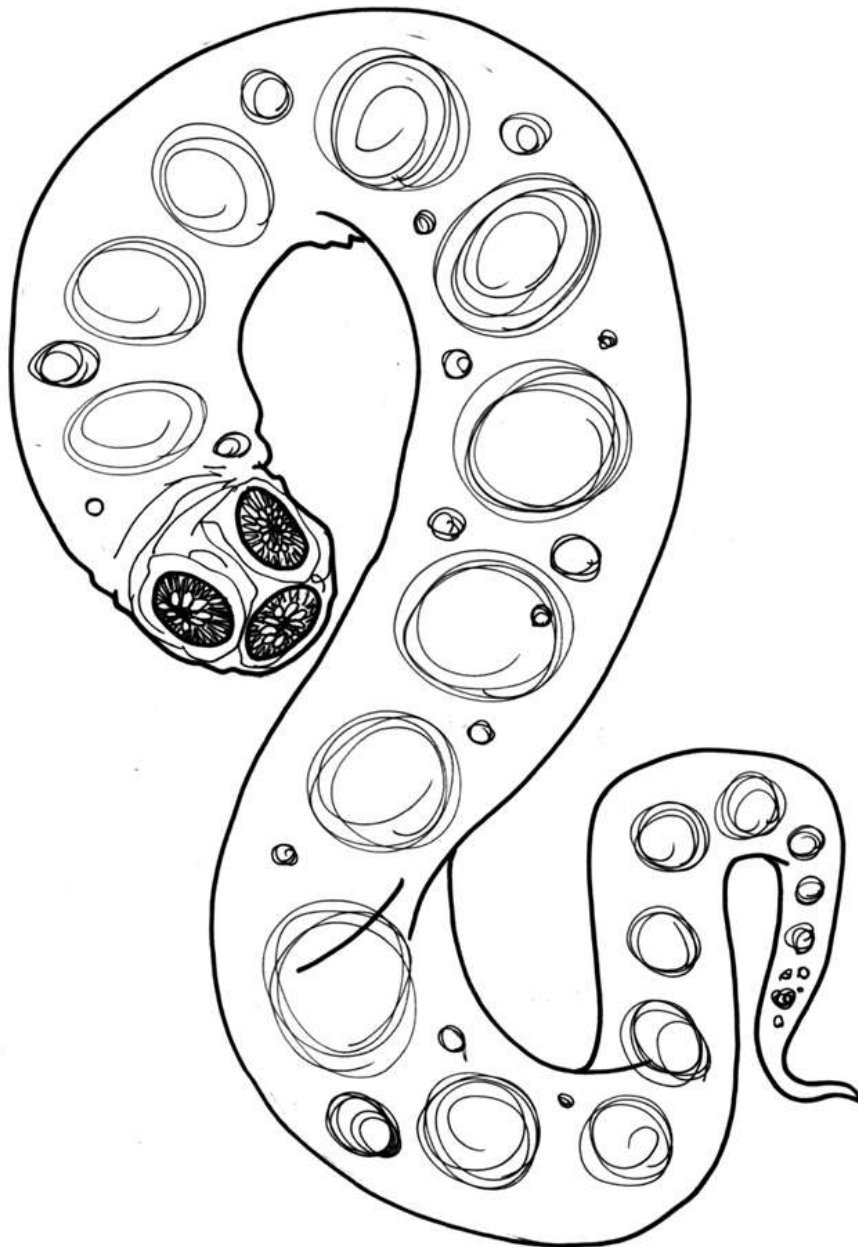
## Virusbeast: Craniovirus



An anomalous being that is invisible to mundane senses and mundane creatures other than its chosen host. This being chooses an innocent, usually a curious or imaginative child, as its preferred host. Once attached, the being projects illusions into the minds of people around its host in order to drive them insane.

## Virusbeast: King of Worms

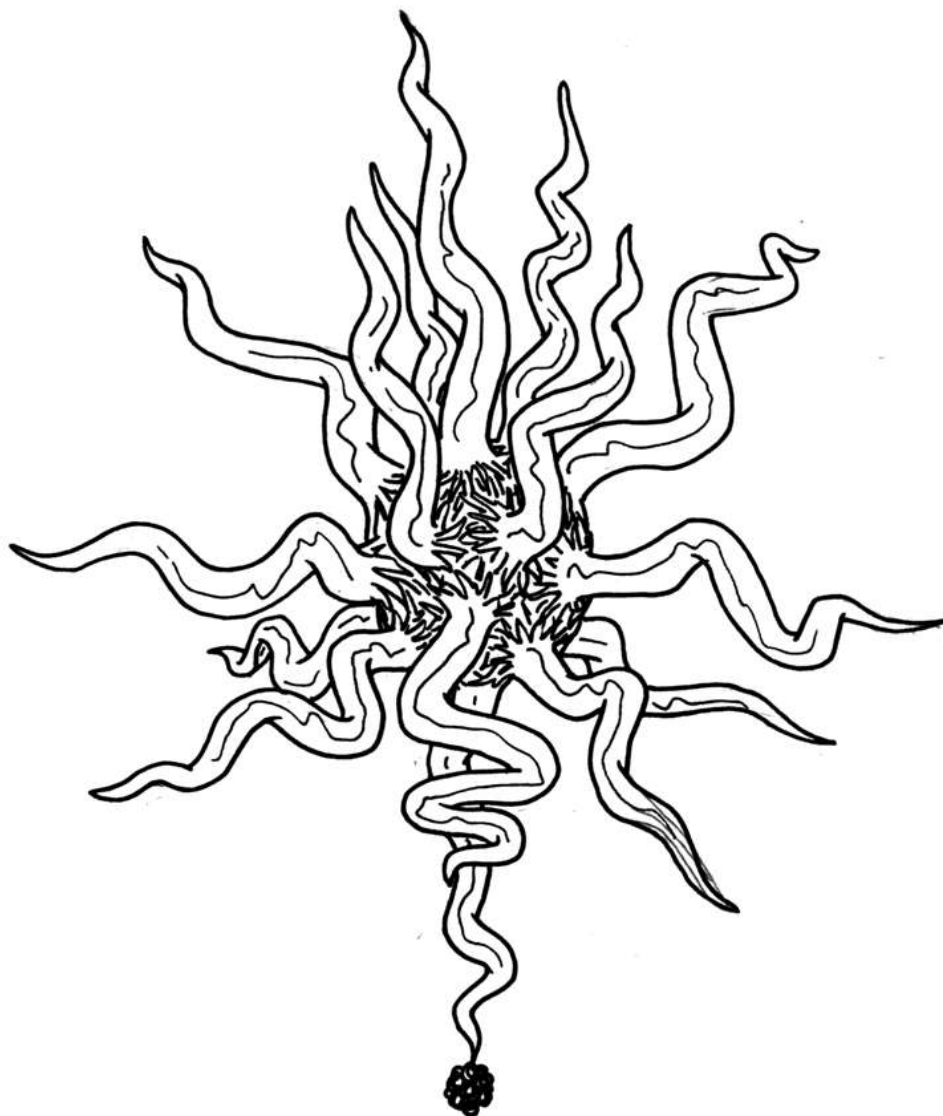
A mysterious spirit of the living who lords over the dead. Its Majesties claims dominion over the dead so that it can restore life to the living. The truth hidden behind Its Majesties' lies is that it actually merely delights in tormenting the living, while devouring and tormenting those among the dead who can still feel pain and anguish.



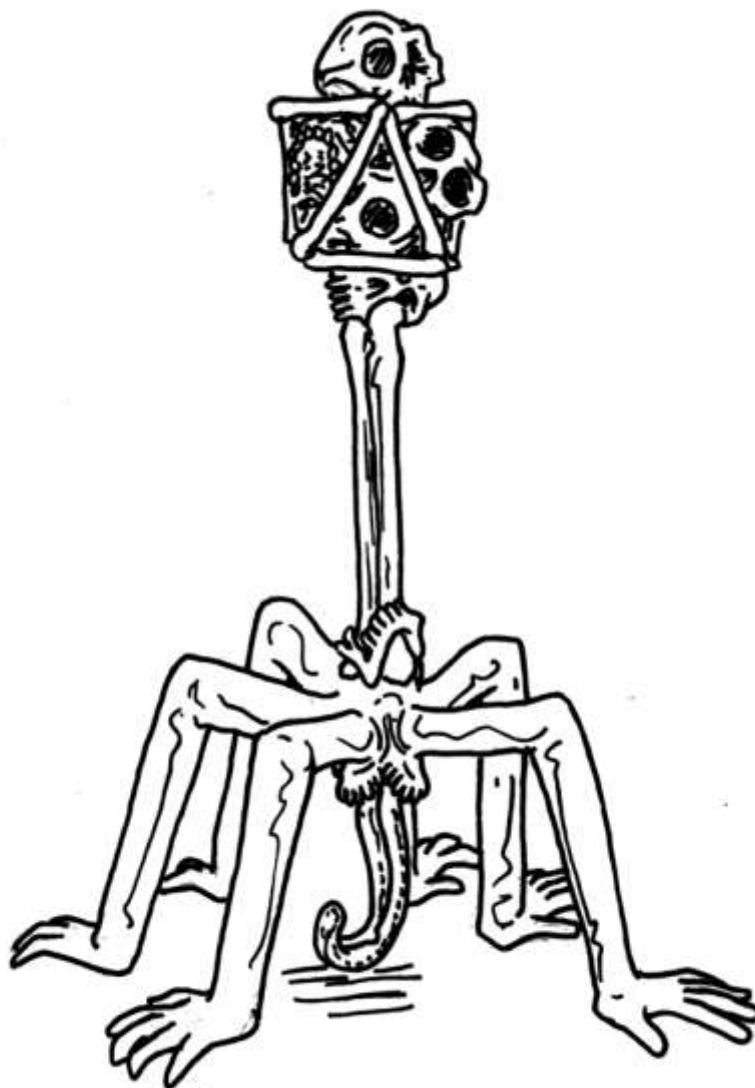


## Virusbeast: Magnovirus

A powerful spirit of disease some magicians call upon to blight their enemies. Magicians foolish enough to summon this spirit often forget that the price for its services is to share the fatal diseases it conjures.



## Virusbeast: "Necrotic"



A necromancer created an artificial spirit that would raise powerful zombies on his behalf that could infect the living in order to transform them into more such undead. The near-mindless spirit took to its task too well, and its creator quickly succumbed to his now uncontrollable creations' actions.

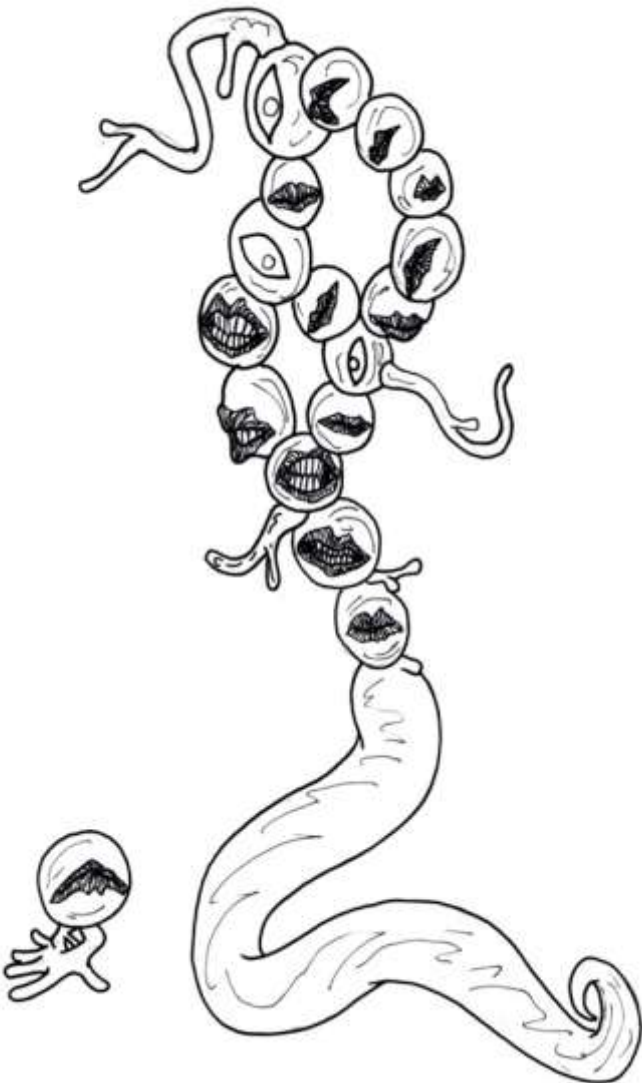
## Virusbeast: "Smiley"

*"Patient #39 was admitted into my care, this week of XXXX, a tailor from Kantora. His family alleges that, after the patient recovered from a long illness two years prior, the patient began hallucinating what he claimed were the actual germs which instigated his illness in the first place. The patient described these sentient germs as being small, sticky spheres with either leering eyes or grimacing mouths, and that they spoke to him in mocking voices. Patient #39's family were forced to commit him to my facility when he attempted to bathe himself with lye and ammonia in order to rid himself of these talking germs.*

*"Patient #39 becomes extremely agitated if not allowed to dab himself with strong alcohol or vinegar. He claims that this ritual keeps his germs at bay, and I have found the patient becomes more compliant if I participate with him. Even so, the patient has repeatedly expressed concern that the germs will adapt to his cleaning ritual.*

*"Patient #39 died earlier today. An orderly was apparently convinced to bring him a container of ammonia, which he then drank. In the patient's delusion, he feared that some of his germs reentered his body. The orderly has been dismissed from service because of this incident."*

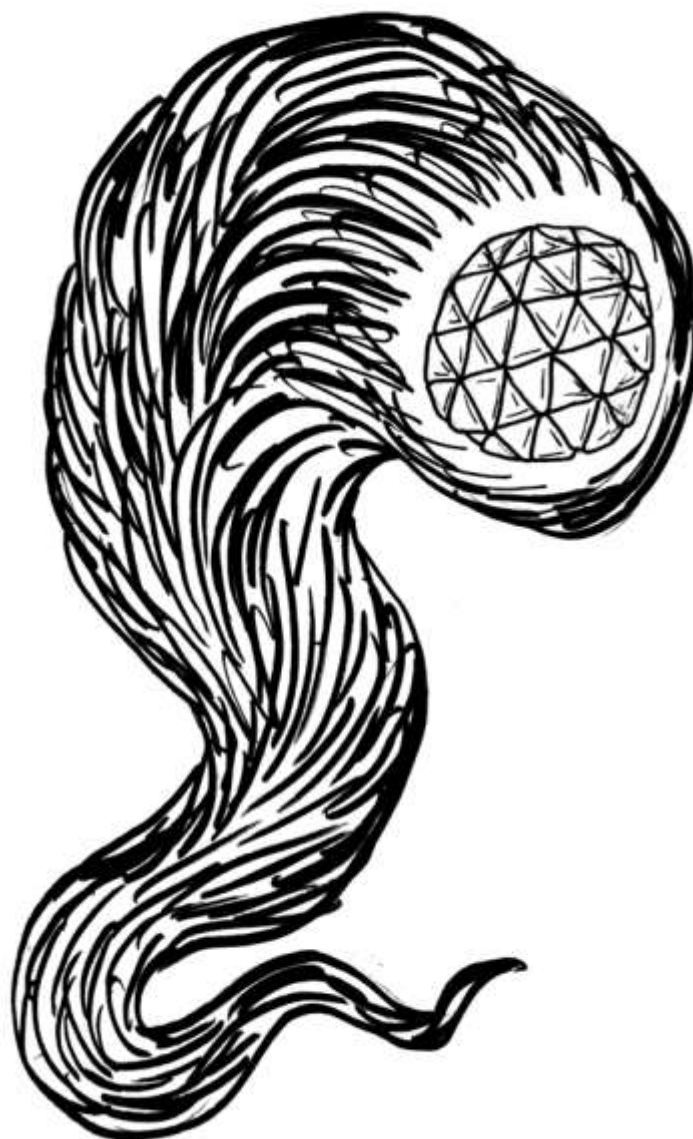
excerpt from **The Journal Of Dr. Gregorian Illhousen**



## Virusbeast: "The Ruler"

A spirit that manifests as a small, multifaceted ball, wreathed in slime-like flame. It craves a body to manipulate as its own, and constantly seeks out witches, sorcerers, and other magicians of ill repute in hopes of finding someone villainous enough or naive enough to provide it with what it needs.

In order to tempt others to aid it, this spirit offers potential cohorts and minions promises of arcane might, fulfilled only after it acquires its new body, and immaculate advice, freely dispensed. Such relationships invariably wither and perish, however, as either the spirit burns out its new body, literally, or it slays its latest cohort under the suspicion of being strung along.



# DOMINIA SURVEY

(SEA OF SORROWS FOS REPORT PREVIEW)

BY: LEYSHON "DEEPSHADOW" CAMPBELL

Here is another preview of our long due Sea of Sorrows FoS Report. We previously released Blaustein (Qtr 19), Ghastria (Qtr 20), Demise (Qtr 21), and the Sea of Sorrows itself (Qtr 22).

Here's an 90-95% finished article. Things to be worked on are in *gold italics*. Please provide feedback and ideas.

We will have a discussion soon about the last domain of that area, Markovia...

Joël, for the FoS

*Esteemed colleagues,*

*After my hasty departure from Markovia aboard the Black Pelican, with my guide Werner and the bestial Tabor in tow, our pace slowed as we sought the proper approach to my next destination.*

*The approach to Dominia is so fraught with treacherous reefs and shoals that any boat with a fixed keel could easily add an extra day to its journey to the island as it winds between them, and I was told that even flat-bottomed boats approaching it must slow down to 8 knots or below and be prepared to push with poles to get through. The reefs are mostly composed of blood coral, whose venom makes it difficult to stand on the reefs to help a ship navigate through the treacherous maze.*

*As troublesome as these reefs can be, their significance cannot be overstated. It's paradoxical that over all its poisonous flora, Dominia's greatest significant pharmacological contribution comes from blood coral. During the first Spring after the domain arrived in the Sea of Sorrows, reaver "corpses" would wash ashore, with no obvious wounds except a scrape from the coral. Hours later, the reavers would revive, only to begin suffocating in the air and dash back to the ocean. It was discovered that the coral venom induces a powerful suspended animation, rendering subjects paralyzed and corpse-like, but still aware. This toxin became a key ingredient in the shipping of human captives to Dominia and elsewhere, as I quickly learned.*

**BLOOD CORAL**

Blood Coral -- Treating a rag to absorb blood coral venom requires a DC 12 Herbalism check. Teasing blood coral into secreting venom into a rag requires a DC 15 Survival check. Success with both means that the rag contains 1d4 doses of blood coral venom. Failing either of these checks by 5 or more means you gain 1d2 doses and are poisoned by the coral. (Naturally, collecting this venom is far easier for the undead.)

Blood Coral Venom -- Injected poison DC 19. Primary damage 1d6 minutes paralysis, secondary damage 2d6 hours suspended animation. The subject appears dead, and has no need for food, water, sleep, air, or elimination, but will bleed if cut. A DC 15 Heal check will confirm that the subject is still alive. Unlike other effects that mimic death, the subject remains conscious throughout the ordeal, and may be subject to Horror or Madness checks depending on the duration of the suspended animation, and what happens during it.

*I am pleased to report that the letters of introduction from Brothers Scott and Shadowcloak convinced the esteemed Dr. Heinfroth to spare us these risks. His caravel met us outside the reefs, on the route back from Martira Bay, and Captain Howe and four sailors rowed us over in a longboat. I didn't have to wait long for a demonstration of blood coral venom. Werner was docile enough, but Tabor got rough with the Mercy sailors as he was being handed over. He got one wild swing in, before three of them pinned his limbs, one jabbed him with a dart, and he was powerless--pliable as clay as they bundled him into a coffin-sized box with a crude window. Werner watched the pig-man's incarceration*

*nervously, but falsely assumed he would be safe because he wasn't hostile. His injection was so subtly done that I never saw who gave it; one moment he was looking out at the waves, and the next he was being stowed in the hold as freight.*

*I'm told that typical treatment of patients aboard the Mercy is suspended animation in these cargo containers, in the lower hold, for the entire trip. They remain conscious throughout the experience, but because the crew is able to navigate the darkness of the second hold in near silence, there's little warning before they are jabbed in the neck by another dose of blood coral venom. This occurs every six hours until they are unloaded at the island. Between such visits, they have only their own thoughts, the sounds of the ship at sea, and the occasional whimperings of those whose poison wore off early. All this renders them suitably tractable to Heinfroth's ministrations once they are finally released. He pays very close attention to the symptoms that develop under such circumstances, believing that they reveal deep truths about the individual's innermost nature.*

**PRECIOUS CARGO**

Unfortunates in the hold make one Madness check per day or fraction thereof (DC 15, or the DC of their original check, whichever is higher). As per the *Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, those already suffering a Madness effect take the ability damage from another failed check, but they do not get another set of symptoms. These often arrive at the island comatose because one of their scores dropped to 0. Those not currently suffering from a Madness effect tend to relapse to a prior Madness or Horror effect, develop claustrophobia, or fear of darkness, or have a psychotic break and develop hallucinations or delusions.

*Our agreement with the good doctor notwithstanding, I admit that seeing the two of them bundled off so easily gave me pause; I was gambling with my freedom on the weight of a couple of favors from mutual friends, which now seemed incredibly flimsy. I had no doubt that they could do the same with me if they so desired, and there would be little I could do to stop them. After no such betrayal was immediately forthcoming, I tried to relax, but when the good Captain Baykur pulled me aside to request that I confine myself to my room as they navigated the reefs, "to avoid upsetting the crew's routine and to respect their secrets," I admit I was relieved. Voluntary confinement to quarters seemed like a small sacrifice in comparison to the alternative.*

*After almost an hour in my stateroom, however, I relaxed enough to question what they might be hiding by keeping me*

*there. Surely my presence among them was not so disruptive, and what navigational secrets could a non-sailor possibly gather from watching sailors at work? Perhaps their actual concern was for my safety--I had already discerned that many of the crew were undead, and the swift immobilization of Tabor evoked vampiric strength. Could all the crew be nosferatu vampires, perhaps of that rare strain started by the good doctor himself? I thought about the boxes they put patients in, and how they might serve a secondary purpose of preventing unauthorized feeding.*

*As much as it pleased me to think that Baykur had been concerned about my safety, it eventually became clear to me that there was also a secondary purpose. A few discreet divination spells revealed that the ship was currently in thick fog, despite clear horizons when I had first sequestered myself. Rummaging through my supplies, I found a wildly spinning compass that confirmed my suspicions: we were traveling in the Mists. Whatever navigational secrets Baykur was hiding were not a seafarer's trade secrets for navigating reefs, but the supernatural means to bypass the reefs entirely, as might the Vistani or a cleric of Ezra.*

**THE MERCY**

The *Mercy* (caravel): Colossal vehicle; Profession (sailor) +4; Spd wind x 20 ft. (nautical average); Overall AC -3; Section hp 50 (hardness 5); Section AC 3; Rigging 80 hp (hardness 0), AC 1; Ram 12d6; Face 80 ft. by 20 ft.; Height 10 ft. (draft 10 ft.); Crew 20; Cargo 150 tons (Spd wind x 15 ft. if 75 tons or more).

The ship is a rank 2 sinkhole of evil, while the second hold rises to rank 3 when it is carrying patients.

The standard crew of the *Mercy* are as follows:  
 Captain Baykur, male human (Cerebral Vampire) Exp5  
 13-16 Cerebral Ghouls  
 Colin, male human (Cerebral Vampire) Com1\*

When Dominia joined the Core, Dominiani's hopes of better access to patients and other resources were frustrated by the presence of coral reefs around the island that endangered ships. After extensive exploration and no small number of shipwrecks, the seas to the northwest appeared the most easily navigable, but this was in the opposite direction from Martira Bay, and would tread dangerously close to the Misty Border. Baykur asked his master for magical assistance in passing the reefs, but Dominiani preferred that Baykur rely on skill rather than magic that could be usurped by others.

Knowing Baykur's frustrations, Madame Tsura approached him in secret with the offer to "curse" Baykur's ship, so that it cannot go anywhere other than Martira Bay and Dominia. If the *Mercy* veers off course for more than an hour, it is swallowed by the Mists, and after a day of sailing, it arrives within sight of the next port. This allows Baykur to bypass the reefs entirely, by deliberately sailing "off course." Dominiani would be furious if he found out, for this would also mean that even non-sailors could technically use the ship to escape the island by sailing in any direction.

*After some basic precautions, I prepared spells, retired for the evening, and awoke in the morning just as breakfast was being delivered--rolls, cheese and fruit, bland but nutritious. I admit to having reread The Refuge prior to arriving, and noted that such fare is consistent with Gerard Lefique's description of Dominiani's care of visitors. The increased success of the asylum in the wake of that unwitting propaganda is incalculable, and it makes practical sense to tell the same lie to other visitors, for the sake of consistency. As I was invited to leave my stateroom and gaze upon the white cliffs of Lefique's Refuge, I took a deep breath of salt sea air...and prepared myself to be lied to.*

**DOMINIA AT A GLANCE**

<b>Location:</b>	Sea of Sorrows
<b>Ecology:</b>	Full Ecology
<b>Environment:</b>	Temperate
<b>Darklord:</b>	Daclaud Heinfroth
<b>Year of formation:</b>	740
<b>Cultural level:</b>	Renaissance (9)
<b>Population:</b>	400 (75% human, 8% Halflings, 5% half-elves, 4% elves, 3% dwarves, 3% gnomes, 2% other)
<b>Languages:</b>	Mordentish*, (any)
<b>Money:</b>	Typically Darkonian currency

**GEOGRAPHY**

Dominia sits on a near-perfect circle of limestone rising hundreds of feet above the Sea of Sorrows. Atop the limestone is a shallow bowl of earth, reminiscent of the caldera of a volcano, but actually formed by the gentle erosion of the limestone underneath. Within this bowl is a rolling mixture of



sandstone and clay, with a thick layer of black topsoil scattered over that. This multilayered composition creates an artesian aquifer with springs of potable water.

The thick topsoil is some of the richest in the Core. Dominion soil can sustain any plant that does not require truly extraordinary circumstances (i.e. the bloody soil of death's heads or meekulbern, or the negative energy of necropolitan amaranth). Within the narrow rim of jagged limestone, the island is dominated by dense forest, with only the occasional clearing or sinkhole.

### NATIVE SOIL

Because so many of his medicinal recipes rely on plants, Dominia accommodates its master's will and supports flora from all over the Core. Whether or not the plant propagates naturally still depends upon temperature, weather conditions, and animals that may not exist in Dominia. The following is a list of transplants from other domains that can be found in Dominia. Those marked with an asterisk (\*) cannot thrive outside of domesticated gardens.

Borca: banewort, belladonna, coma spores, foxglove, gust oil, henbane, silphium resin, staggersap toadstools, wolvesbane

Darkon: somnos berries.

Dementlieu: dapplewort.\*

Falkovnia: abfalduz

Forlorn: bocan eye, erl queen's lace, ghost threads, mausskul mushrooms, mournberries, wight fern spores.

Hazlan: quovosp root\* and poppies.\*

Invidia: Hermitshawl.

Keening: waspsting moss, trollflesh.

Mordent: wraithroot\*

Neblingtode: tsongha

Nova Vaasa: cats paw cactus.\*

Souragne: coup padre\*

Tepest: fairy stools, wickingourds.

### Docks

Cliffs ranging from 100-500' high circle the entire island, with the winch-powered elevator at the docks the only sure means of ascent. As we circled the island toward those docks, I noted how caves dot the bottom at infrequent intervals, especially around the southern edge, where the pounding surf sometimes pushes past the rocky beach to form sea-caves in the limestone. Baykur pointed out a large one in the southwestern part of the island that served in times past as a pirate lair, being large enough to admit a small ship at low tide and then form a natural dry dock as the tide receded. Smaller caves have become the nests and lairs of various scavengers and monsters throughout the years, but there's little connectivity between one cave and another.

Upon reaching the docks, the crates in the hold were loaded into a sturdy wooden elevator, which appeared to be part of the new construction. I watched as the elevator car rose up out of sight, and another descended for us a few yards away on the other side of the docks. They appeared to be connected at the top, each one acting as a counterweight when the other needs to ascend, with ballast stones being used to make them heavier or lighter. Of course, I also noticed that they rose through narrow vertical channels in the granite cliffs that varied in depth, frequently enclosing the car on three sides so as to prevent any escape, if the winches at the top were suddenly locked. Security around here had increased considerably since Lefique's day, lending more credence to the rumors that Van Richten orchestrated a breakout in 750.

Once outside of the elevator at the top, I was greeted by a trio of robed figures in the quintessential masks of the asylum, flanking an imposing figure in waistcoat and slacks with characteristically bushy hair, eyebrows and beard. I hardly expected him to meet me so soon, but recovered quickly enough to take his outstretched hand.

*“Welcome, Brother Hazan, to the Isle of Dominia,” Dr. Heinfroth said formally.*

*“Dr. Green is free to accompany you to the asylum, but my orderlies and I have business elsewhere on the island before I return.”*

*Amid my distraction, Heinfroth continued that I was welcome to explore anywhere, but he could only vouch for my safety on the roads patrolled by his servants. He feared “Master Shadowcloak would frown on having to send a replacement,” should I venture into the woods. And just when I was realizing that might be an insult, the doctor ended by saying that we would discuss my search for the traitor over dinner once I reached the asylum. I admit that whatever powers of speech I had left were cut short, to hear the object of my secret mission spoken of so cavalierly.*

*--Specific dangers*

*--Delivery of gifts : Werner, a lost one, last survivor of Lamordian colony on Markovia, Broken one, member of Akanga’s failed coup.*

*Speech seems kind of prepared, even recorded.*

*Stuff to discuss later:*

*--True purpose of visit*

*--Other purposes of visit*

*\*\*\*Dominiani deliberately says early in conversation that he will be leaving Viktor in*

*the hands of Dr. Green, but does not indicate which of the others is Green, just to unnerve Viktor as the conversation proceeds.*

*has to leave as they get closer--go inspect a camp? He instructs Viktor to remain on the road and he’ll be fine. Viktor is troubled by the amount of land he cannot examine, and scries/wanders as much as he can.*

*Brown: interested in Van Richen’s escape, suffering and pain, Penible’s writings  
Green: would want to know anything about the outside world*

*At what point would Vik be fitted with a mask? Only in Ward 4, or earlier?*

## ASYLUM ROAD

A single road runs west from the dock, through the woods to the asylum and continues beyond to the refuse dump on the western cliffs. In recent years, a few trails have been cut from this road into the forest, leading to the recently developed farms, lumber camps and clay pits around the asylum.

## FARMS, LUMBER CAMPS & CLAY PITS

Dominiani developed these so the residents could learn trades and the island could begin exporting. Teams of 12-20 work each area, with residents rotating out individually on various schedules. This constantly changing social dynamic allows residents to build social skills and learn cooperation without the burden of long-term relationships.

## THE ASYLUM

Just north of the island's center sits the Asylum for the Mentally Disturbed. The walls are plaster-covered brick, covered on both sides with broken glass to discourage escape. In the rear of the asylum, outside the main compound, sits the asylum cemetery. While mostly unremarkable as cemeteries go, it has a solitary crypt--the cenotaph for Dominiani's wife Annabeth Heinfroth. While no

effort has been taken to maintain this crypt (and despite evidence of infrequent efforts to destroy it) it remains in good repair, if a little overgrown.

#### ANNABETH'S CRYPT

Annabeth Heinfroth's crypt is considered a private residence and consecrated ground with regard to spells and the undead. This forbids entrance to all vampires except her husband, who hates coming here.

The sarcophagus itself is empty, and anything inside has spell resistance 25 when targeted by divination spells. The doorway to the crypt can become a mistway to Timor (Excellent Reliability, Two-Way) if anyone within the crypt or touching the outside asks aloud a question about Annabeth between Midnight and 1AM. Note that vampires can use this mistway without actually entering the crypt itself.

#### FLORA & FAUNA

Despite its small size, Dominia has a diverse and thriving ecosystem. The most notable predators of the island by far are the wolves, which run in small packs led by larger, more intelligent worgs. This arrangement of individual worgs leading packs of wolves is unique to the island, and no satisfactory explanation is apparent. The wolves' preferred prey are wild pigs, moose, rabbits, deer, and rats.

*TK scenario: narrator rescued from worgs by Kris. Believes Kris to be mute, until he suddenly starts speaking in full sentences. Kris prefers not to speak and often forgets how in the heat of the moment, but he understands many languages and listens carefully. Kris has a thick coat of hair over his body, and he is unshaven with shaggy, matted locks. Mistaken for a werewolf at first? He was raised by wolves, and they are his familial species. He has a pack of half a dozen wolves that follow him as well, instead of following a worg.*

#### THE NEMESIS

When Dominiani decimated Ward Zero in 751 (see below), one inmate escaped to the forest. Attempts to capture him have met with failure, but since he is equally unable to escape the island, Dominiani has decided to study him from afar. The towering brute now roams the forests alone, a fearsome savage who carves out a place for himself amid the other wild things, but mostly desires to be left alone.

Kris is a feralan--a human raised by wild animals--and one of the first inmates to arrive at the asylum after it became a domain in 739. The Valstike were paid handsomely to capture him in the wilds of Vorostokov, after the local boyar's disastrous failure to do so. He had no name, so they called him Krisnadd (a Vistani term meaning "marked for vengeance") because Madame Tsura could see he was protected by a powerful vengeance curse. When he arrived at Dominia at the age of 11, Kris spoke no human language, despite clear demonstrations of keen intelligence. Dominiani became deeply interested in Kris's mutism and was able to teach him to speak, but he remains reluctant to do so.

The true secret to Kris's gifts and setbacks is unknown even to him: Kris is the son of one of Gregor Zolnik's lycanthropic followers, who slew his wife after she discovered his secret. With her final words, she condemned her husband's embrace of the unnatural, saying that nature itself would forge her blood into a weapon that would avenge her. This curse caused their infant son to be lost in the woods and raised by animals until the day when he could slay his father. In addition to keeping him alive in the wilderness, the curse has subtly manipulated many others--including Dominiani--into keeping him alive. Some day, the winds of fate will decide that he is ready, and he will escape Dominia for Vorostokov to slay his father.

Kris, male human Brb9 [WZ], vow of poverty

Apart from the wolves and their prey, a few adaptable creatures have managed to find niches for themselves on the island. Giant ravens, rats, and tiny gremishka pick through the rubbish at the dump site to decorate their nests, reavers prowl the coral reefs beyond the shoreline, and dozens of carnivorous plants wait for the foolish to wander near.

### THE RAVENKIN

The giant ravens of Dominia hide a community of ravenkin, pulled in during the Grand Conjunction. Since the island's arrival in the Sea of Sorrows, they have enjoyed considerable freedom and happily moved to the dump site to avoid scrutiny. The ravenkin number just over a dozen, sharing seven nests spread out over five miles of forest around the dump site.

Their leader, Girneeka Hundredsummers (Sor5/Dru5), knows that Dominiani needs but a hint of their existence to exterminate them. For that reason, they help from the sidelines, through proxies, or when another will be blamed. Their most bold move yet was in 752, when they slew Wormwood the treant (see below) and pressed his network of quickwoods into aiding escapees. Their second in 755 was to make contact with Ward Zero, whose efforts they support whenever possible. This alliance was mutually beneficial, for Dominiani's investigation of Ward Zero provides a smokescreen against his discovery of the ravenkin.

I later learned, from one of my hosts, that when Dominia was first formed in the image of Gundarak, the Mists snared one of the wicked treants of nearby Forlorn. Wormwood had learned at the roots of the mighty Azenwrath, and knew how to create other carnivorous plants from ritual cuttings of itself, fertilized by various human sacrifices. It delighted in stocking the wilderness with fearweeds, bloodroots, quickwoods, and lashweeds, which the orderlies had to keep in check lest they devour too many game.

While Wormwood was never successful in cultivating death's head trees without the battlefield soil of Forlorn, it managed to create blood roses, choke creepers, and crawling ivy. The treant has not been seen in years; perhaps it has gone into a kind of hibernation?

### A REMNANT OF ROOTS

The ravenkin lured Wormwood into a sinkhole, but the wicked creature did not die right away. It spent days languishing in the pit, its roots mired in poisonous lime and its limbs unable to gain purchase in the sandy soil to pull itself out. After it was weakened, the ravenkin set its upper half on fire, crushed it with boulders, and stayed to make sure it was dead... but death was not the end. Still unable to move, Wormwood is now an undead treant, suffering beyond comprehension as it longs for warm humanoid blood through its roots. Should this vile creature ever find a way to escape its prison, it will surely visit the ravenkin with unrelenting vengeance and suffering.

Even the less aggressive plants of Dominia have their hidden secrets. While the Gundarakite bitterbark pine is becoming rarer in its homeland, it thrives in Dominia, no doubt thanks to Dominiani's fondness for bitterbark incense, both as a trap for the living and an anodyne for the undead. After discovering the combined mind-sharpening power of bitterbark and certain Forfarian flora, Dominiani has never been without a copious supply.

### BITTERBARK

Bitterbark -- A successful profession (herbalist) check DC 12 will extract the excess resin from a bitterbark pine without destroying or contaminating it. This resin can then be distilled for three days (DC 14) to make 1d4 doses of bitterbark syrup, or combined with erl queen's lace and bloodroot shavings (DC 18) to create 2d6 ounces of bitterbark incense.

Bitterbark syrup -- One dose of syrup restores 1d3 points lost to one mental ability score due to madness.

Bitterbark incense -- One ounce of incense creates a 5'x5'x5' cloud that lingers for 2d4 hours in an enclosed space. Inhaling the smoke for 1 to 3 hours grants a +5 insight bonus to one knowledge check; 3 to 6 hours produces the same effects as an *augury*; 6 or more hours yields a *divination*. Taking any action other than meditating requires a Will save (DC 14) with failure making the target confused. Living creatures suffer 1d10 points of damage each hour, but are unaware of the damage until they are free of the smoke.

### RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

fearweed, bloodrose, choke creeper, quickwood, lashweed

wolves, worgs, deer, rats, rabbits, seagulls, crabs, fish, black bears, wild boars

giant rat, giant raven, ravenkin, cranium rat\*\*, scavyt, razorback, carrion stalker, allip, reaver, bastellus, ghost, wraith, spectre, jolly roger, sea zombie, ghoul, gremishka, marikith, gargoyle, dreamweaver

\*\**Fiend Folio*

### POPULATION

#### THERE ARE NO CHILDREN HERE

In his study of the brain and psyche, one major element that has been limited has been childhood development, but a few opportunities have presented themselves. While the expense is great, some noble families are hiding their embarrassments by institutionalizing aberrant children: calibans from Dementlieu and Mordent, latent spellcasters from Lamordia, and the mentally deficient from Darkon and elsewhere, some as young as four years old.

As yet they number barely over a dozen, most of them are in Wards 2 and 3, where they are given exceptional care and attention, and are sometimes even happy. For now, Heinfroth is content to merely monitor and record every detail of their development, but he prepares for the day when he will begin experimenting on them directly.

There are other children, too. About one in every ten female patients arrives pregnant (even if not obviously showing) and despite attempts to prevent carnal knowledge among inmates, later pregnancies are not unheard of. Regardless, Heinfroth takes exceptionally good care of pregnant women and children because of the rare opportunity they hold. One in particular has merited special attention: a little boy born in 752 whose appears to have been sired by an orderly--a cerebral dhampir?

### HISTORY

While Dominia's history has clear seminal events like other lands, the time before this was neither as "false" as some domains, such as Falkovnia, nor as "true" as others, such as Mordent. Instead, the history of Dominia falls into three general sections: the lands where it originated (Gundarak under Dominiani), Dominia in the Mists, Dominia in the Sea of Sorrows.

Dominia originated as part of Gundarak, a land now absorbed into Barovia and Invidia. By all accounts, Gundarak was an uncivilized backwater, ruled by a tyrant whose vampiric nature was a secret to no one. The illiterate and superstitious peasants of Gundarak lived in constant fear of the creatures that walked the night, especially the one that held court in Castle Hunadora and called himself Duke Gundar. Of households that suffered the effects of his infamous tax on daughters, the best they could hope for was that she enter their lord's keep, never to return again.

That such a place should spawn a technological cornucopia like Dominia is remarkable, and has

everything to do with the unique personage that sat beside Duke Gundar, a trusted advisor in all matters, right up to the day when he betrayed the Duke.

Daclaud Heinfroth was an anomaly in Gundarak, an island of scientific advancement and enlightenment in a sea of superstition and ignorance. Early in his mortal life, his pursuit of knowledge had taken him to Mordent and Paridon, and he brought that education back to his ancestral home.

The personal history of Daclaud Heinfroth has been covered in the attached notes on the doctor himself (see appendix). Much of these details were supplied in the reports of Dominiani's confidant, and Brother to our Fraternity, Henri Bergeron of Ghastria. As far as the land is concerned, the first seminal event for Dominia happened in its parent domain of Gundarak, when Heinfroth, as Gundar's right hand man, betrayed the Duke into the hands of seasoned vampire hunters in Castle Hunadora. "Dominiani" thus usurped Gundar's role as the realm's dread lord, but was unable to sustain his political control without the help of others. The second seminal event was the Great Upheaval in 740, when the Mists claimed everyone within the walls of Heinfroth's ancestral home and created Dominia for him.

Modeled after Dominiani's estate in Gundarak, the island included an upgraded asylum, expansive grounds and some surrounding territory, all enclosed by the Mists. When it arrived, it included Dr. Dominiani, two assistants who would eventually become Drs. Black and White, and various patients. The surrounding woods were populated by monsters pulled in by the capricious Mists, mostly Gundarakite in nature.

Within days (perhaps hours) of its formation, Dominia was discovered by the Vistani. The Valstike clan (pronounced val-STIHK-ay) were Corvara Vistani seeking new opportunities for profit in the upturned world, and they were not disappointed. After prolonged negotiations, Dominiani struck a bargain with their raunie, Madame Tsuru. The Valstike clan

would serve as Dominiani's emissaries, praising his philanthropy and dedication to the suffering mad and their families. They would escort the afflicted into his care, and sell the simple crafts of the asylum to the charitably-minded.

### THE VALSTIKE

The Valstike sell Dominian goods throughout the Mists and bring Dominia 5-10 new residents every six months. In addition to the typical vardos, they have half-a-dozen windowless, padded wagons with dreamsilk-lined pillows and a constant *remove fear* effect. Nonviolent occupants are released for short periods at each stop, but after a few days in the magically calm lockboxes, even the fully sane are often glad to retreat back to the vardos.

While most of their charges are delivered to them by family and friends, the Valstike excel at live capture. If an individual is violently mad--or inconveniently sane--they use bolas, nets, and grappling, followed by subdual sneak attacks. If sorely pressed, they can add paralyzing strikes, homunculi bites, shadow touch attacks and various poisons. If the padded vardos aren't enough to contain someone, they have ropes, masterwork manacles, straitjackets (*Van Richten's Arsenal*), restraint boards (also *VRA*), a rope of binding, blood coral venom, and coffin-sized hidden compartments.

While they are loath to jeopardize their good relationship with Dominiani, they can sometimes be tempted into short-term side deals: kidnapping, smuggling, monster wrangling, and even assassination are all discreetly negotiable. Likewise, they make sure to milk the families of the afflicted for as much as they can--after all, it would arouse suspicion to let on that Dominia pays for human cargo.

Important NPC's: Madame Tsuru (Clr6, LE; commands two homunculi and two shadows), Captain Rodrigo (Rog5/Asn2, LE), Jonas (Ftr4, NE; specialized in nets).

At least one alchemical child always travels with the Vistani, to keep them in touch with Dr. Black.

It appears that Dominiani was inspired by the new setting and its tools, and revived his old studies of thought and behavior, in the hopes to offset his interpersonal deficit. Unfortunately, Dominiani had now come to regret his previous transparency, and he forbade Henri from contacting the Fraternity until Dominiani was satisfied he was not a threat. An alchemist specializing in constructs and coagulants, Henri became indispensable to Dominiani in his most ambitious experiment to date: creating more cerebral vampires.

For almost a year, Henri and Dominiani produced only well-preserved "cerebral ghouls," but eventually they had partial success with an unfortunate traveler, one Cyrus Longwell. He had amnesia, and was unable to feed from adults, but Dominiani allowed the creature to practice shallow feeding on a handful of younger captives. For his part, Dominiani condemned the project and sank into a fitful depression, only roused when the Valstike brought a shipment of interesting characters the following month.

To help spread the reputation of the asylum, they began brewing alchemical copies of patients for the Valstike to escort back to their families as "success stories". As news of them reached institutions of learning, they began corresponding with various other asylums--some of which were happy to send their most difficult patients back with the Valstike. The Grannheims of Lamordia corresponded frequently, but were reluctant to transport patients through the Vistani.

As the reputation of the asylum grew, the doctor divided his time between the new patients and a growing collection of oddities the Valstike had collected to pique his interests: an Abber woman, a doppelganger, a man raised by wolves, a werebeast with odd allergens, an ex-mongrelman, a desert wild child who never aged, a man empowered by the El

Koth Lodestone, etc. Dominiani left the day-to-day work of improving the various formulae to Henri and amused himself by studying these patients in greater detail. He barely noticed when his chief embarrassment, Cyrus Longwell, vanished overnight.

It was in these growing moments of distraction that Henri was able to compile his final reports to the Fraternity. The consequences of those final reports for all involved are detailed in the appendices, but they do make clear the seminal event that brought Dominia to the Sea of Sorrows--fate had brought other Heinfroths to Dominia, and the heinous experiments that the doctor performed on his own descendents had attracted the attention of dire forces.

When the domain arrived in the Sea of Sorrows, the Dark Powers added a special hidden sub-basement where Dominiani's pet projects could receive extra attention. Dubbed "Ward Zero," the sub-basement was barely a rumor among most of the staff, let alone the patients. Yet even as he spent more and more time with his favorite pets, his curse prevented him from seeing that they were developing a powerful bond, stronger than family and united against him. Within his secret chambers, they honed their talents into weapons. By the time he discovered what they were doing, they had spread their mission to other inmates, and a secret society was born.

While exploring the new environs of the domain, the staff found Ridg Baykur, whose ship had wrecked on the new island as it formed. After Henri's ministrations, the castaway was turned into a fledgling cerebral vampire. He retained his old personality and skills, which was an improvement but not a full success. To not let the man go to waste, Dr. Dominiani sought out a ship for him.

*743 Captain Baykur expands their influence. Contact with Markov. Dr. White travels to Markovia to share surgical techniques. Capture and conversion of Colin; he has two separate personalities, which is a further*

*step in the right direction. Establish the Mercy for transfers with Grannheim Sanitarium*

*744 Attempted assassination of Henri Bergeron by an umbrucha. Henri transfers his soul to an alchemical doppelganger body, and takes the name "Dr. Black."*

*745 Greater Feyr takes a familiar; arrival of Dr. Blue.*

*746 Dominia is visited by Borcan attorney Gerard Lefique, who spreads its fame with his book.*

*747 Contact with Baron Metus. Establishment of Black Tower in Darkon*

*750 Contact and conversion of Dr. Rehner. Arrival of Dr. Van Richten and Dr. Rehner. Dr. Van Richten escapes with help. Arrival of Dr. Tasker, Talgaard Bolshnik, and others with the Valstike.*

*751 Decimation of Ward Zero. Begin construction of the new wards*

*752 Gundar's Return*

*754 End construction of the new wards*

*765*

## THE SECRET KEEPERS

Dominia has a small side business keeping certain politically volatile people under guard. When the whims of politics dictate that a person be kept alive as leverage, Heinfroth charges extra to keep skeletons in the closet, and isn't above leaking information gleaned from such patients to third parties, for the right price. In addition to Talgaard Bolshnik, such critical prisoners include a dwarven werebadger held on behalf of her husband's Kargat rivals; a Hiregaard servant who claims to know the identity of Malken; a Hazlani wizard held on behalf

of the Iron Inquisition; a Sithican elfmaid with knowledge about the Speaker; and a Mordentish anchorite held on behalf of an Order of the Guardian abbess.

## THE WORM TURNS

Dominiani's efforts to destroy Ward Zero have only spread the problem. The physical Ward Zero lies empty, but the mission lives on, as a secret society devoted to undermining Dominiani's work and everything he stands for.

### *Membership*

Mixed into the huddles of humanity that greet new inmates are the members of Ward Zero, sizing people up for membership. Naturally, they prefer the fully sane, but are understanding of phobias, paranoia, and other eccentricities that don't grossly impair judgement or otherwise constitute a liability. Any who are deemed discreet and talented (3+ PC class levels, rare feats, magic, etc.) are visited in their dreams by a dreamwalking spokesman. Naturally, adventuring groups are a rich prize, but they remain wary of betrayal, unintentional or not.

It's not unheard of for a member to go an entire year getting hidden messages from dreams, dead drops, animal messengers, etc. before he or she meets another member face to face. Even then, members of Ward Zero prefer



to meet in the dreamworld, where the orderlies cannot enter, and where they can take full advantage of the sleep auras in the cells.

The leaders of Ward Zero are the Committed: inmates who continually help others escape while staying behind themselves. While many are reputed to have taken an oath to be the last ones to leave, many of the Committed are simply not comfortable with life outside of Dominia. Their experiences here have been so long and so traumatic that they can't or won't function anywhere else.

#### *Recognition*

If members must make contact in the waking world, they do so on their own. Some learn the language of the Abber while in the dreamworld, and try to hide phrases of the clicking language amid nonsensical ravings. This also allows others to know one is a member without forcing them to acknowledge themselves in turn.

#### *Activities*

The primary activities of Ward Zero are escape plans and easing the suffering of the inmates.

To these ends, they brew bitterbark syrup in hidden stills, distribute dreamweaver silk to those suffering from nightmares, sabotage progressing experiments to make them appear unfruitful, store weapon caches throughout the island, map the asylum and the surrounding woods, and catalog the talents and other resources that can be brought to bear when needed. On a handful of occasions they have managed to destroy some of their more sadistic orderlies. The raven familiars of the ravenkin help them communicate, and Girneeka's animal messengers carry correspondence to other islands and the mainland.

With the arrival of Dr. Harrod Tasker, the greatest resources of Ward Zero, those of the dream world, are now under direct investigation. The Committed are now faced with plotting their greatest and most dangerous coup yet: if they can foil Tasker in the dream world, so as to make him unreliable, their secrets may be safe a while longer. Barring that, they would have to assassinate Tasker, which would risk the exposure of many of their hidden advantages, reveal that Tasker was on the right track, and earn the undivided attention of all the doctors and orderlies.

#### *Headquarters*

Outside the dreamworld, the members of Ward Zero have never gathered in groups larger than three. If the need ever arose, the best possible place for a larger gathering might be the original Ward Zero sub-basement: hardly any of the staff know it exists, and fewer still know how to enter. Dr. Dominiani himself checks on it infrequently, but cannot stand the reminders of his failure for long. Only one resident remains housed there: the Mirror, a doppelganger with no sense of self, hidden here for use against various residents by playing on their memories.

This "Mirror" is a new one; the original one was slain in the purging of Ward Zero because it had absorbed many critical memories of cerebral vampires during their feedings. It remains a tool of Dominiani, but also of others.

Original Members: Patient #4, Feralan, \*the Mirror, Werebadger, \*Hengeyokai.

New Members: Talgaard, Reymond, Ambriel, Quevari, Colin.

Resources: cannibal, cranium rats, dreamweavers, Annabeth's crypt, sleep sanctuaries, bitterbark syrup, raven familiars, seabird messengers

## GOVERNMENT

Dr. Dominiani is the singular ruler of the island, a power that he has delegated in parts to Drs. Blue, Green, White, Brown, and Black. In addition to ruling over individual wards, the doctors serve as a form of ruling council, with specialties that approximate that of a governmental body.

*Who is in charge of the communication, construction projects, ?*

*Dr. Blue -- Security, daily activities, finances*

*Dr. Green -- Nova Vaasa, Nightmare Lands, new inmates,*

*Dr. White -- Markovia, Bleutspur, sleepwalkers*

*Dr. Brown -- Lamordia, Dementlieu, reeducation camps*

*Dr. Black -- Darkon, alchemical constructs*

Crime and punishment: in a place with sadistic therapies, the concept of "punishment" can become blurred. Apart from conditioning prescribed for health purposes, some punishments are meted out for various offenses.

Inmates suffer different consequences depending upon their ward of residence. Residents of Ward 1 are generally incapable of crime per se; if they are found to be malingering, they are moved to Ward 4. Anyone in Wards 2 or 3 who commits an act of violence is also moved to Ward 4. Violence by Ward 4 inmates is managed as part of therapy.

Nonviolent offenses in Wards 2, 3, and 4 are handled using the Atria, a kind of court where a judge hears testimony from witnesses and renders a verdict. Allowances are made for the system of law of the patient's homeland, so that it is close as possible to the patient's expectations of where he came from and where he hopes to go when he leaves

This legal system came to the attention of Core residents in 746 when a Borcan patient petitioned

for the right to have evidence brought from his homeland and reported by his family attorney, Gerard Lefique. The attorney's account of life in Dominia and the treatment of patients there made the rounds in the salons of Dementlieu and Richemulot, and was published in 749 as the nonfiction book *The Refuge*, which later became the basis for a fictional play of the same name in 752. The boost to Dominia's fame, and attention to the plight of the mentally ill in general, has lingered to this day.

Officially, visitors to the island who are caught violating any of the rules of the asylum are shipped back home to be tried in the courts of their homeland. Unofficially, this is only true of those whose absences would truly be missed. Others might be given the outward trappings of a trial, and might even be sent home on the *Mercy*, only to awaken in Ward 4 and be told that they had been residents for years....

Captain Baykur's authority as captain of the *Mercy* is a special case in Dominican government. While technically a subordinate of Dominiani, Baykur keeps no counsel but his own while his ship is at sea. Dominiani know this, and has not challenged the captain's authority when it comes to his own ship. So far, Baykur has not given him reason to do so.

## VILLAGES

Ward One: (Village): Conventional; AL LE; CL 9; *xxgp limit; Assets xxgp;*

Population 100; Isolated

**Authority Figures:** Dr. Dominiani, Dr. Green

**Important Characters:** Patient #4 (Female Abber) charter member of Ward Zero, Reymond S (Human Exp4) dreamwalker for Ward Zero

*Lost ones, catatonic--Primary feeding stock of the cerebral vamps*

## THE TREMBLERS

Over the last decade, a handful of wax golems have been infiltrating the Dementlieu upper class, warehousing their originals in Dominia for safekeeping. Unfortunately for the golems, not only has Dominiani learned the origins of this unique catatonia, but has discovered how to tap the psychic connection to monitor the actions of the imposters.

Dominiani is careful to minimize suspicions, but a confrontation may be in the offing: he has discovered interventions that allow him some control of the golems at a distance. He doesn't know the extent of his control, and experimenting may arouse suspicion. Success could grant him complete control over a very powerful group of imposter aristocrats, but failure will earn him deadly enemies.

## THE BOGEYMAN OF DOMINIA

Like a few other sinkholes of evil scattered throughout the Mists, the asylum has birthed a bogeyman, but he doesn't focus on the Innocent. The Gentleman (see appendix) is an exaggerated version of the duplicitous doctors and their animalistic orderlies, and he preys on the mad. He

has spread to other facilities and communities across the demiplane through escapees, releases and the occasional transfer.

When he stalks his prey, he projects false images of others like himself (which has caused false reports that the Gentlemen are a group of bogeymen rather than an individual) and uses his twisted Hounds to assist in his grisly work.

## FAUX INNOCENCE

Innocence is a powerful spiritual gift, but it is lost easily, including when one suffers a moderate or major Madness effect. Thus, there are no true Innocents among the catatonic of Dominia.

Nevertheless, there are those whose mental and spiritual state approximates Innocence for most intents and purposes. At the DM's option, a lost one--anyone with a mental statistic below 3 due to a failed Madness check--may be treated as Innocent with regard to spells and abilities that target Innocence, and for purposes of powers checks. They do not gain any other bonuses or penalties that come with Innocence, nor can their bodies be used to make Innocence Coagulant (see Van Richten's Arsenal).

Ward Two: (Village): Conventional; AL LE; CL 9; *xxgp limit; Assets xxgp;*

**Authority Figures:** Dr. Dominiani, Dr. Blue

**Important Characters:**

*slow witted, feebleminded, calibans,*

Ward Three (Village): Conventional; AL LE; CL 9; *xxgp limit; Assets xxgp;*

**Authority Figures:** Dr. Dominiani, Dr. White

**Important Characters:** Talgaard Bolshnik (Human male Ari3/Rog7 [WZ]), Marzeta (quevari female Rog4 [WZ]), Ambriel (female human Sor8 [WZ]),

*progressing population--*

*Haunted*

*Ghostsight*

*Lunatic*

*Creatures from the Id*

One of the most infamous features of this ward is Room 319. This ordinary cell was the residence of an antisocial psion who claimed to be a champion of an otherworldly intelligence. His behavior appeared merely that of a delusional psychotic--grandeur, paranoia, etc.--but he appears, in retrospect, to have been perfectly, horribly sane. Even his disgusting

habit of spitting on the walls turns out to have been part of a plot to charge the room with psionic power, converting it to a focusing device for contacting his cthonian master. The only survivor of the eventual confrontation with the staff claimed that the psion had tentacles that emerged from his mouth, and that he escaped Dominia through a conduit to his homeland. Since that day in *TK*, the conduit has reopened from time to time to swallow other patients and staff, release swarms of precocious rats, or belch noxious fumes. Dominiani has ordered the room closed for normal use, but occasionally experiments with the conduit in hopes of communicating with the intelligence on the other side.

--

*Sculpting, weaving, spinning, farming, gardens*

### PERISTALSIS

The room's psychic enhancements allow the Illithid God-Brain of Bleutspur to sense minds within and force the domains to overlap. When the door shuts, the % chance of the God-Brain forcing contact between the two domains is equal to the number of intelligent beings in the room, plus the total of all positive Intelligence bonuses. If the God-Brain forces contact, the room goes through a series of cumulative changes, with each stage lasting 2d4 rounds. The process ends at any point if one of the participants leaves, but opening the door becomes increasingly difficult.

Stage 1: Walls moisten, sounds muffled; nothing prevents leaving at this point.

Stage 2: Walls warm, air moist, light dims; door stuck (Str check DC 18).

Stage 3: Walls are soft and bleed if cut; door is sealed and covered by fleshy membrane (30 hp, hardness 5); electricity crackles (anyone in metal armor takes 1d2 points of damage per round, no save); Will save DC 16 or be confused.

Stage 4: Floor and walls undulate and close in (Balance DC 14 to stay upright); door is hidden (Search DC 14 to locate).

Stage 5: Roll percentile each round:

01-20: Webbing on one wall (as web)

21-50: Growing pustule erupts in acid (as acid splash)

51-70: Slime spews everywhere (as grease)

71-80: Floor turns to quicksand in one corner

81-90: Noxious gas (as stinking cloud)

91-00: Cranium rat swarm

Stage 6: Sides close in and "swallow" all inhabitants into Bleutspur. There is a 50% chance per undead swallowed that the room vomits them all back out in disgust (contact ends), otherwise all inhabitants are taken to Bleutspur by the Illithid God-Brain, who will not force contact again for 1d4 months.

Ward Four(Village): Conventional; AL LE; CL 9; *xxgp limit; Assets xxgp;*

**Authority Figures:** Dr. Dominiani, Dr. Black

**Important Characters:**

*xxx*

### BAYKUR ACT

At any given time, a significant portion of Ward Four are not dangerous at all. This is where they put newcomers with "delusions" that they are not supposed to be there. It's a simple catch-22: if they say they aren't supposed to be there, they stay because they are delusional. If they say the ARE supposed to be there, they stay because they are supposed to be there. After several months of compliance and agreement, they are reviewed for transfer to another ward.

This is where they use the masks to dehumanize people.

## THE GHOUL KING

Doctor Maximilien de Lamartine (CE, Human Half-Fiend Ari5) stands a mere 4'11", his pale hairless skin mottled like a three-day-old corpse. He has tiny sharp teeth and sunken, dark eyes. He is at the 4th stage of transpositioning with a ghoulish maurezhi named Dzunukre. He can go weeks without food or rest, and thus spends most of his time in a set of elaborate restraints, dictating a book about his occult discoveries. Dominiani has indulged him with a special zombie scribe as long as he behaves.

Maximilien is on his second revision of his book "The Dragon's Path." Anyone who follows the rituals within can unlock the arcane secrets of cannibalism, as he has.

De Lamartine has the normal abilities of a half-fiend, with the following exceptions: instead of bat wings, he has the ability to take the shape of anyone he's consumed.

Spell-like abilities: *darkness* 3/day; *command undead*, *scare*

If allowed to finish the process, de Lamartine would gain a reality wrinkle. If slain, he will arise as a ghoulish lord.

PC's in dire straits may be tempted to help him gain a reality wrinkle in order to unbalance the darklord, but they will surely regret their choice... if they live long enough.

*Murrig ApLin--sole remaining goblyn, female.*

*El Koth--enhanced powers via drug, visions of the past*

## RELATIONS WITH OTHER DOMAINS

Dominia has established clinics in many nearby domains, either by partnership with existing asylums or building their own clinics from scratch. As a trip to the island itself would be a considerable detour for most adventuring parties, these partner clinics

represent an easy opportunity to involve PC's in Heinfroth's plots.

Lamordia: At the headwaters of the Black River, a mountain chalet contains the Grannheim family's private sanitarium. The Grannheims (palliative / analytical) are able to work wonders with a combination of fresh air, good food and humane treatment.

Forbidden Lore: Patriarch Oswald Grannheim's humanitarian philosophy emphasizes "human." He is a member of the Syndicate of Enlightened Citizens, and provides a secondary service to his fellow members: reeducating latent spellcasters, the ghostsighted, the haunted, and other "aberrations" to conform to Syndicate beliefs. If he is unable to do this with his own abilities, he transfers the patient to Dominia--Heinfroth has not disappointed him yet. While his family is not as committed to this practice as he is, there is little they can do, as the sanitarium relies heavily on philanthropic donations from anonymous Syndicate members.

*Dementlieu--competition with others in Dementlieu, main philanthropist is Baron Descarte*

*Mordent--Saulbridge transfers psions after the Man Who Lost His Mind incident?*

*Darkon--Black Tower (after Dr. Black?)*

## REEDUCATION

The use of psychological tools for societal control poses interesting situations for the DM, but reflecting it in the rules can be a terrible headache.

Here are some suggestions for reeducated characters:

\* Start with normal game effects: a brainwashed character may merely have a phobia of using the

relevant spells or feats, or a hypnotic suggestion that causes them to fail. This is not balanced with any in-game bonus, as the character has, in fact, been subtly injured.

\* When game effects are in danger of hobbling the character--such as a sorcerer who cannot cast spells--the DM may allow the character a "back door" to his or her powers. The most common back door is the discovery that the character has not been reeducated to not cast spells, but only to not cast them visibly, or in public.

\* If the character is intended for long-term play, the issue becomes one of curing the affliction or learning to live with it. If the player opts for the latter, consider feats such as Unconscious Spellcasting.

### THE THINKER

The wretch who assisted Baron Metus against Van Richten originally arrived in Dominia dressed like a Vistani, but Dr. White recognized at once a kindred spirit who had fled the maddening dreams of the Thaani dreamspoken. Where she had chosen undeath as her escape, he had run away and joined the Vistani, eventually trying to disguise his psionic gifts as gypsy magic.

This Thaani psion became the greatest achievement of Dr. White's experiments into surgical enhancement. The removal of all his limbs served to stimulate the Thinker's telekinetic abilities, even as the removal of his eyes forced him to push his other senses to their extreme. The Thinker was loaned to Baron Metus, but perished in the confrontation with Dr. Van Richten. Unbeknownst to his tormentors, the Thinker betrayed Metus during that fight, and remained lucid long enough to end his own tortured existence with an elemental conflagration rather than return to Dominia.

Or so he thought. Such an end--suicide fueled by raw psionic might and filled with pain and spite and anger--is hardly conducive to peaceful rest anywhere, let alone the Land of Mists.

The Thinker has become an amorphous spirit, an undying storm of rage and hatred spewing elemental destruction, held in check by the iron will of Azalin. For now, the lich lord sees fit to bind the undead psion in Darkon, as long as Dominia serves his needs. Should the need ever arise, however, Azalin can speed the Thinker homeward, an ill wind that carries with it a storm of vengeance.

In Barovia, Dominiani's old keep retains the telepathic fountain. Now on select nights, a group of soldiers anoints the three dogs with blood and receives telepathic instructions. The leader of this cult is actually Akriel Lukas, who remains loyal to her old lover because he sends her yearly injections that delay her aging. One of the other soldiers is an alchemical child keeping tabs on everyone else as they resurrect the vampire cult.

*Framing text: during the tour, the discussion turns to LaMark, and Dominiani enjoys making Viktor uncomfortable. Why does the FoS hold to such backward rules in their pursuit of enlightenment? As he told their founders, they have yet to embrace the most obvious correlary of their own creed: appearances are nothing. Power is power, no matter what form.*

*"Have some respect, boy! I was charting Kartakass when your grandfather was TK."*

### ADVENTURE HOOK: THE FATTED CALF

After years on the island, some of the adolescent inmates have come to see the place as far better than they had expected, when in reality it is far worse. Ward Zero hopes to warn the children before it gets too late, but they have yet to find a child they can trust. Even the most levelheaded child might be unpredictable when faced with the awful truth, and the longer they wait, the greater the danger of a child winding up on a lab table, and the more resistant the child will be to help.

**ADVENTURE HOOK: LYCANTHROPY BY GASLIGHT**

Of all the DL's that Dominiani has his eyes on, perhaps the most easy to manipulate might be Jacqueline Renier. Having gathered details about her monophobia and her curse, Dominiani is putting agents in place to be ready when Jacqueline falls in love again. They hope to get her into the presence of her beloved in a social situation from which they will make discreet escape impossible, so that she transforms into a wererat in full view of the public. Such a devastating blow to such a fragile psyche would allow them to study the effects on the domain as Richemulot physically unravels in a manner similar to Sithicus when Soth was catatonic.

**ADVENTURE HOOK: SPECIAL DELIVERY**

While there are many, many carnivorous plants on Dominia, the good doctor is eager to add a doppelganger plant to the collection. After hearing about a meteor shower in a remote domain followed by odd behavior among the locals, he sends a group of quislings to try and collect a viable section of the plant and deliver it to Dominia.

Most of this collection party are cerebral vampires or otherwise immune to the plant's powers, but the weakened plant can still reach out with its mind bondage power and enslave one podling at a time, along the path back home.

**ADVENTURE HOOK: PEST CONTROL**

Since a handful of cranium rats arrived via room 319 in TK, they have been growing in numbers and power, slowly displacing normal rats (and gremishka, to a lesser extent). Their collective intelligence, stealth and cunning could allow them to ferret out every secret, not only of Dominiani and his lackeys, but also Ward Zero and the Ravenkin. These parties will have to weigh the risk of allowing the rats to live knowing their secrets, the rewards of using the rats to spy on their enemies, and the difficulty of exterminating them. The simplest solution would be to arrange for someone else to destroy the rats--and possibly frame someone else in case it goes wrong --without the rats figuring out who actually wanted them dead.

Special: Maverick--keeps old skills, adds new bonuses, no amnesia. This only applies to those who were already mad; this bothers Dr D because he fears he was mad when he transformed.

Of course, to get the closest variables to his own creation, Dominiani would have to have a 31-year old direct male descendant, transfused with CSF from a soon-to-be-bride of Duke Gundar. Fortunately, Duke Gundar has returned, and reports suggest that he is eyeing some beautiful Invidians for his next conquests....

In 740, when Dr. Longwell lured the Heinfroth family to Dominia, Dr. Dominiani made nine of them into cerebral vampires. They fared well because they were either mad or very resistant.

## MONSTERS FOUND IN DOMINIA

### THE HELP – CEREBRAL VAMPIRES AND CEREBRAL GHOULS

Dr. Dominiani is constantly trying to combine the ingredients that led to his creation. He has Dr. White feed on someone to the point of anemia, lets the person ingest vampire blood in preparation for bride-dom, then transfuses their CSF into someone else, then has Dr. White transform them into a vampire. By this process, he has created dozens of cerebral vampires, all slightly different. He's still looking for the exact combination of factors that made him who he is.

When transformed into a cerevamp, a creature must make a Madness check (DC 20) with the following modifiers depending on the traits of the two victims:

First victim, who is killed just before they would turn into a vampire was..		Second victim, who dies and becomes a cerevamp is..	
Horrified	-5	Innocent	-10
Mad	-10	Good	-5
Age 14-20	5	Neutral	0
Age 21-35	0	Evil	3
Age 36-50	-3	Corrupted	+2 per stage
Age 51+	-10	Willing	5

If the creature...

Fails by 5+: Madman--All the powers of a cerevamp in a lost one. Used to make Sleepwalkers.

Fails by 1-4: Spawn--loses old skills and memory, gains a basic predator spectrum.

Succeeds: Master--keeps old skills, adds new bonuses, temporary amnesia.

*Cerevamps gain when they drain, but they are affected by mind-affecting spells and effects for as long as the gain lasts.*

*Cerebral ghouls--ghouls preserved at time of death using an injection of Oil of Timelessness, CSF and ghoulish fever. Kept under control using lobotomies and injections of CSF?*

### SLEEPWALKER

Sleepwalkers are released patients who take on an alternate personality in their sleep. "Sleepwalker" is a template that combines two characters.

#### Creating A Sleepwalker

"Sleepwalker" is an acquired template that can be added to any humanoid or monstrous humanoid creature (referred to hereafter as the base creature). The base creature gains a separate personality (here after referred to as the somnolent) that alternates control of the sleepwalker's body at specific times.

A sleepwalker uses all the base creature's statistics and special abilities except as noted here. The somnolent uses all the sleepwalker's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.



**Size and Type** : The creature's type does not change. It gains the "augmented" subtype. Do not recalculate base attack bonus, saves, or skill points. Size is unchanged.

**Hit Dice** : Same as the base creature.

**Speed** : Same as the base creature. The somnolent gains +10 bonus to speed, and a Climb speed equal to half this modified speed.

**Armor Class** : Same as the base creature.

**Attack** : Same as the base creature.

**Full Attack** : Same as the base creature.

**Damage** : Same as the base creature.

**Special Attacks** : Same as the base creature. The somnolent retains all the special attacks of the base creature and gains those described below. Saves have a DC of 10 + ½ sleepwalker's HD + somnolent's Cha modifier unless noted otherwise.

*Lullaby (Su)* : A somnolent can sing a mystical lullaby. Anyone within 30' must make a Will save or fall asleep. If the target is already asleep, this attack deepens their sleep so that they automatically fail any Listen checks to wake up. This is a sonic, mind-affecting ability that provokes an attack of opportunity.

*Fascinate (Su)* : A somnolent can use words and song to fascinate a single target who fails a Will save. The target and somnolent must be able to see and hear each other. This is a sonic, mind-affecting ability that provokes an attack of opportunity. After using this ability, the somnolent must go dormant (see below) before using it again.

*Modify Memory (Sp)* : Once per week, a somnolent can modify the memory of a sleeping or fascinated character by whispering to them. The somnolent must be in the same space as the target. This otherwise acts as the bard spell of the same name. This is a mind-affecting ability that provokes an attack of opportunity.

**Special Qualities** : The sleepwalker and somnolent retain all the special attacks of the base creature and gains those described below.

*Unsleeping (Ex)* : A sleepwalker and its somnolent alternate periods of activity in the same physical body. They each feel a cycle of wakefulness and sleepiness, but the body itself neither sleeps nor dreams. Each is insensate and unconscious during the other's periods of control, except for daydreaming (see below). As the somnolent is not a possessing entity or a magical compulsion, it is unaffected and undetectable by most spells, including true seeing. Any nondamaging effect that would normally render one unconscious (certain drugs, a sleep or slumber spell, etc.) will cause them to switch. Any damaging effect that would render one of them unconscious (damage, ability drain) will affect both.

*Daydream (Ex)* : When a sleepwalker is awake but engaged in repetitive, monotonous or otherwise simple tasks with little risk (i.e. move-only actions or taking 10 on skill checks), the somnolent can choose to share the sleepwalker's senses. In this state the somnolent gains a +10 circumstance bonus to Listen, Spot, and Sense

Motive checks. While daydreaming, the somnolent can cause the sleepwalker to mumble in a soft, garbled speech that only somnolents can understand; all others require a *comprehend languages* spell or similar effect.

*Fractured Mind (Ex)*: *detect thoughts* or similar effects will reveal two minds when the sleepwalker is daydreaming (see above), but one at any other times. An active sleepwalker's surface thoughts will reveal characteristic discrepancies (background voices, blank gaps, etc.) if the caster succeeds at an opposed Wis check against the sleepwalker. Mental contact with an active somnolent is grounds for a Madness check.

*Fast Healing (Ex)*: A somnolent heals 5 points of damage each round so long as it has at least 1 hit point. This increases to 10 hp/round when it is dormant. However, this does not apply to damage received while the somnolent was dormant (see above).

**Abilities** : same as the base creature. Somnolents have their own mental ability scores: Int 16, Wis 16, Cha 16. Somnolents increase physical abilities from the base creature as follows: Str +2, Dex +4, Con +2.

**Skills** : Somnolents have a +8 racial bonus on Bluff, Climb, Hide, Move Silently, and Tumble checks. Each somnolent selects skills independent of the base creature, as a rogue of half the base creature's HD.

**Feats** : Somnolents gain Alertness, Endurance, Diehard, Dodge, Improved Initiative, and Run, assuming the base creature meets the prerequisites and doesn't already have these feats. Somnolents are proficient with all simple and martial weapons.

**Environment** : Any, usually same as base creature.

**Organization** : Solitary

**Challenge Rating** : Same as the base creature +2.

**Treasure** : Double standard.

**Alignment** : Any (Somnolents are Neutral).

**Advancement** : By character class.

**Level Adjustment** : none

### *Feyrs*

*humans with parts removed to enhance psionic ability. Three fingers/toes, blind/deaf w/ blindsight. Psionic focus attack.*

*Vampiric Thralls--stolen from Kargatane, combined with sleepwalkers?*

*Tulpas--contagious madness come to life*

*Fleas of Madness*

*Yellow Musk Creeper*

### CRAZY PC'S – NEW FEATS

PC's who enjoy an extended stay in Dominia are likely to leave with some form of insanity. If these scars are severe, the DM may allow them to take one of the following feats, to move a character from "unplayable due to madness" back to "viable character."

**Coinsanity**--an extended companionship with a mad character has caused you to develop conciliatory habits that allow them to function better, at the cost of your own social development. When in the company of this individual, you may apply your Wisdom bonus as a penalty to their madness modifier.

When separated from this individual, you apply this penalty to all Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate and Sense Motive checks.

**Contra-Madness**--prolonged exposure to an unusual environment or culture has caused you to develop conciliatory habits that allow you to function. When in this environment or interacting with members of this culture, you suffer no OR modifier due to madness and gain a bonus equal to your madness rating.

**Crazy Like a Fox**-- When making a skill check, you gain an insight bonus equal to the total points of unhealed ability damage you have taken due to failed madness checks. You may use this ability a number of times per day equal to 3 plus your original, undamaged Charisma modifier (if positive).

**Unstable**-- select one of the following effects, which you suffer from due to a failed Horror or Madness check: delusion, hallucination, paranoia, obsession, nightmares, revulsion. This effect becomes a prolonged madness for you that acts as a defense against further madness. You retain this effect permanently, even if all your ability damage due to failed madness checks are healed. If this is a horror effect, you may not make recovery checks to end this effect. No magic short of a wish can cure this effect.

As long as you continue to suffer from that effect, you receive a +10 bonus to all Will saves to resist mind-affecting abilities, horror checks, and madness checks.

**Pathological Liar**--you must make a Will save DC 13 to tell the truth. The DC increases by +1 for every true statement you make, until you lie. Divinations always conclude you are truthful; you gain +10 to Bluff checks.

**Subconscious Spellcasting**--You can use spells even when unaware that you are a spellcaster.

On certain occasions spells spontaneously occur in your presence. Whenever you suffer an injury, fail a fear or horror check, or are otherwise in peril, your subconscious rallies magical forces to your aid. The result is a situationally appropriate spell from your normal list, chosen by the DM and activated as a spell-like ability (i.e. no components). This only works against threats you are aware of; your spells cannot target a foe you are not aware of, nor can they work when you are already unconscious or asleep.

Special: You must have failed a Madness check to take this feat.

*Voracious feat (VRGttWD)*

*Memory Drain*

*transposition with a maurezhi.*

*Unbeknownst to its author, the final transposition ritual of the Ghoul King's book, "The Dragon's Path," is a fatal trap. If the mortal succeeds at a Spellcraft check DC 20, the mortal transfers all their consumed powers to the fiend and takes 10d6 points of fire damage, no save. If the mortal perishes, this severs the link before the fiend can be drawn into the Land of Mists. If the mortal survives, the transpositioning completes, and the mortal and fiend switch places. If the Spellcraft check is unsuccessful, the ritual is unsuccessful and nothing*

*Dzunkure and his kin hope to use this process to rise through the ranks of the Abyss in ways not normally available to maurezhi.*

*Reading any significant portion is grounds for a Horror check (DC 15). Continuing to read after a successful check prompts a Will save (DC 20), with failure meaning the reader continues to be obsessed about the volume and its promises until TK.*

*Performing any of the rituals would be grounds for a powers check, but in this case the results are transpositioning instead of corruption.*

*Marcus McFehr was a founding member of Ward Zero, and one of the first to escape. He has since cut off all contact with his associates and wanders the Core creating his own parasitic cult of personality.*

### *TREATMENT METHODOLOGIES*

***Oneirological***--the secrets to unraveling the psyche are within the subconscious, accessed via hypnosis and dreams.

***Analytical***--talking/interviewing method

***Conditional***--Madness is mostly moral laxity; rigorous discipline and aversive stimuli to manage unwanted behavior. Includes dietary restrictions.

***Surgical***--Malformation of the brain leads to psychological problems, which must be physically corrected. Includes trepanning, transorbital lobotomy and full lobotomy.

*Trepanning: DC 25; success--heals 1d4-2 points of one mental stat, +1 per additional 5 points*

*Psionic Trepanning: DC 35; success--reroll one mental stat and take the higher score.*

*Transorbital Lobotomy: DC 30; success--lowers max ability scores (Int & Wis -1, Cha -1d6). If current ability scores meet or exceed maximum ability scores, symptoms disappear.*

*Full Lobotomy: DC 40; success--lowers max ability scores (1d6 all). If current ability scores meet or exceed maximum ability scores, symptoms disappear.*

***Palliative***--Rather than push for a cure, simple institutionalization. Includes rest, removal from stimuli, and medication. Bear in mind that some palliative treatment can actually effect a cure if the person's condition improves, but most of the time this treatment is merely an excuse for warehousing.

## WHO'S DOOMED

### THE GENTLEMAN

The Gentleman appears to be a tall, thin man dressed in a stark white lab coat with black buttons. His skin is pale with a sickly violet hue, and his mouth is distorted into a constant rictus-like grin. He says nothing, but oozes over-sincere politeness and propriety with every gesture.

He floats just above the ground as he pursues his prey with a syringe and scalpel.

### Medium Fey (Bogeyman)

**Hit Dice:** 6d6 (26 hp)

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft.

**Armor Class:** 16 (+2 Dex, +4 deflection) 20 w/ Full Defense

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +3/+2

**Attack:** --

**Full Attack:** --

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Summon Hounds, Hush, Fellows, Operate

**Special Qualities:** Surface Levitation, Bogeyman Vulnerabilities, Eyes of Madness, Linguist, See in Darkness, Taint of Evil

**Saves:** Fort +2, Ref +7, Will +8

**Abilities:** Str 9, Dex 15, Con 11, Int 18, Wis 16, Cha 13

**Skills:** xxx

**Feats:** xxx

**Environment:** Any  
**Organization:** Solitary  
**Challenge Rating:** 5  
**Treasure:** None  
**Alignment:** Lawful Evil  
**Advancement:** 7-12 HD (Medium)  
**Level Adjustment:** --

### Combat

The Gentleman's preferred method of attack is simple: he selects a quarry and uses a combination of Hush and Fellows (see below) to turn the quarry against his own allies, make him appear dangerous to passersby, and otherwise isolate him from any help. When the target is sufficiently alone, the Gentleman summons the hounds to hunt down and immobilize the target, and then operates. If attacked, the Gentleman does not counterattack but uses full defense to minimize injury. Only after the hounds have rendered his quarry helpless will he draw his syringe and scalpel and go to work.

*Summon Hounds:* One per night, the Gentleman can summon 1d4 Gentleman's Hounds (see below). These creatures serve their master for 2d6 minutes before disappearing.

*Fellows (Su):* if a subject fails a Will save (DC 14), 2d4 phantasmal figments of the Gentleman appear, scattered randomly within the subject's line of sight. With a successful ranged touch attack, the Gentleman can assign one of these Fellows to another existing humanoid being as a glamor, changing the creature's appearance as a disguise self spell.

*Hush (Su):* Everyone within a 60' radius of the Gentleman must make a Will save (DC 14) every round or be rendered mute until they leave the affected area.

*Operate (Su):* As a full-round action, the Gentleman can extract an internal organ from a pinned or otherwise helpless foe. Through a mystical process, this extraction also removes the subject's madness, leaving him cured at a terrible cost.

The exact nature depends upon the organ removed, which depends upon the type of madness:

*Lunatic or Unstable (Liver):* the subject is robbed of warmth and emotion. Replace the feat in question with the Cold One feat, and the subject suffers an embarrassing curse.

*Moon Madness (Gallbladder):* the subject no longer suffers from Moon Madness, but suffers an embarrassing curse.

*Minor Madness (Spleen):* the subject heals all ability damage due to madness, loses the madness effect, but suffers a frustrating curse.

*Moderate Madness (Pancreas):* the subject heals all ability damage due to madness, loses the madness effect, but suffers a troublesome curse.

*Major Madness (Kidney):* the subject heals all ability damage due to madness, loses the madness effect, but suffers a dangerous curse.

*Lost One (Heart):* the subject regains all mental abilities, loses the Lost One status, but suffers a lethal curse.

The operation leaves a sutured incision that heals with a lasting scar. Despite the subject's clear experience of having the organ ripped out, subsequent investigation (Heal check DC 18 or similar) will reveal that the organ underneath is intact and functioning fine. Anyone who has such a scar is able to see the Gentleman and his hounds. The scar and curse disappear if the subject ever receives a Heal or similar effect.

If disarmed of his scalpel or syringe, the Gentleman is unable to operate.

*Surface Levitation:* the Gentleman does not fly, but glides over any flat surface without touching it. He never leaves tracks, applies weight, or makes noise.

*Bogeymen Vulnerabilities (Ex):* the Gentleman cannot harm those protected by bless spells or the relevant protection and magic circle spells.

He takes 2d4 points of damage from holy water and can be turned by clerics and paladins of good deities as an undead.

*Eyes of Madness (Su):* the Gentleman can only be seen by the mad, including those suffering from a Madness effect, Moon Madness, or with the Lunatic feat.

*Linguist (Ex):* the Gentleman is mute, but can understand any language spoken in any community where stories about him are told.

*See in Darkness (Ex):* the Gentleman can see in darkness as clearly as a human in daylight.

*Taint of Evil (Su):* mental contact with the Gentleman provokes a Madness save.

## GENTLEMAN'S HOUND

The Gentleman's Hounds appear as humanoids wrapped in bandages with open straitjackets. Despite the apparent impossibility of running on all fours in this condition, they are as fast as wolves and are never tangled by their flapping clothing.

### Medium Fey (Bogeyman)

**Hit Dice:** 4d6+8 (25 hp)

**Initiative:** +6

**Speed:** 50 ft.

**Armor Class:** 17 (+2 Dex, +5 armor)

**Base Attack/Grapple:** +2/+6

**Attack:** Slam +7 (1d4+5)

**Full Attack:** Slam +7 (1d4+5)

**Space/Reach:** 5 ft./5 ft.

**Special Attacks:** Improved Grab, Trip

**Special Qualities:** Scent, Bogeymen Vulnerabilities, Eyes of Madness, Taint of Evil

**Saves:** Fort +2, Ref +7, Will +8

**Abilities:** Str 20, Dex 14, Con 14, Int 6, Wis 6, Cha 2

**Skills:** Hide +9, Listen +5, Move Silently +9, Spot +5, Survival +7\*

**Feats:** Track, Improved Initiative

**Environment:** Any

**Organization:** Pack (3-9)

### Challenge Rating 5

**Treasure:** None

**Alignment:** Lawful Evil

**Advancement:** 5-12 HD (Medium)

**Level Adjustment:** --

\*Hounds have a +4 racial bonus on Survival checks when tracking by scent.

### Combat

*Improved Grab (Ex):* To use this ability, the Hound must hit with a slam attack. It can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity.

*Eyes of Madness (Su):* To the sane, Hounds appear to be normal dogs or wolves, whichever is more appropriate to the situation. Their true forms can only be seen by the mad, including those suffering from a Madness effect, Mood Madness, or with the Lunatic feat. A Hound's true form is revealed after it is slain.

If the corpse of a Gentleman's Hound is stripped, it reveals only a mass of maggots and filth that disappears in 1d4 rounds, but the bandages and straitjackets are valuable. The bandages act as a potion of Cure Light Wounds for any wound they are wrapped around, and can be used up to three times before their magic is depleted. The straitjackets are as strong as fine steel, and with a few alterations can serve as armor (elven chain or mithril shirt).

## THE MEDICAL STAFF

### *Dr. Blue—Greater Feyr with familiar*

In the confusion of Gundar's death in 736 and adventurers ransacking the castle, Heinfroth's pet feyr broke free and swelled to maturity. It remained behind when the new domain was formed in 740, and Heinfroth had to start over with the next outbreak of larval feyr. The new feyr was allowed to take a familiar in 744 so that Heinfroth could study its unique psychology better. This led to a prolonged correspondence with Heinfroth, which led

to the creature being added to the staff as Dr. Blue in 745. It stays invisible at all times, interacting through the familiar that wears the robes.

*Dr. Green--Cerevamp Exp6*

When the Egertus Clinic for the Mentally Distressed was pulled into the Nightmare Lands in 751, Dr. Gregorian Illhausen thought he'd captured his nemesis, Dr. Harrod Tasker in a cell there. But what Illhausen didn't suspect was that this was only Tasker's dreamself. As a gift from The Nightmare Man, Tasker's dreamself persists in the Nightmare Lands, falling asleep there instead of disappearing when the real Tasker awakes. When he sleeps in the waking world, his dreamself awakes where he left it, rather than respawning elsewhere in the dreamworld.

The real Tasker arrived in Dominia in 752, having been charged by Othmar Bolshnik with the transfer of surviving patients from the demolished Clinic. Upon learning of Tasker's talents and predilections, Dominiani made him an offer he couldn't survive. Unable to bear the recurring nightmare of being imprisoned by his rival any longer, he gave up true sleep forever. Tasker is the newest doctor among the cerebral vampires, and as such had immediate regret, bemoaning the loss of his beloved fantasy world. (Meanwhile, In the nightmare Clinic, Dr. Illhausen is disturbed by his rival's apparent eternal slumber in his cell.)

After ten years of service, Tasker was allowed to go on a sabbatical to the Core. While there, he studied the Lady of the Isle of Ravens (NS Gaz). He also reestablished a fragment of his connection to the Nightmare Lands. Now when he feeds, his victims visit the dreamscape asylum... and so does he, in an invisible and incorporeal form, able to exert some control over them with a combination of his psychological and dreamwalking techniques. He's recently returned from the Isle, with powers and information that threaten Ward Zero...

*Dr. White--Thaani Vampire Soulnife5/Slayer1/Exp3*

Que'Thaan was one of many for whom the dreams of Thaani awoke a hatred of their ancient masters, along with secrets to how those masters might be stopped. Like other dreamspoken, Que'Thaan became a slayer and a soulnife, but even as she nursed her hatred of the masters, she hated the clarion call of the dreamspoken even more. If she was going to fight the masters, she would do it on her own terms. Pressed into service by Lyssa von Zarovich as a guide to Bleutspur, she eventually embraced undeath to silence the maddening dreams.

In 739, a visitor arrived at the Heinfroth estate with a small group of servants. Having previously arranged for Duke Gundar's protection, Lyssa von Zarovich was more than a little put out to find her protector had been staked three years prior, but she was able to improvise. One of Lyssa's servants was a woman from the reclusive Thaani of Immol. Lyssa had conscripted Que'Thaan into her Bleutspur venture, but now she tired of the fledgeling vampire's superstitious beliefs and strange customs. When Dominiani expressed an interest in the woman's expertise, Lyssa offered her in exchange for protection and resupply, and considered it a bargain to be rid of her.

*Dr. Brown--Cerevamp Exp7*

Dr. Piotr Rehner is a Lamordian doctor of great skill, who specializes in pain psychology. His philosophy is derivative of Francois de Penible, whose work he greatly admires. Since he joined the asylum, his colleagues in Lamordia have increasingly endorsed Dominiani's methods as properly scientific. He's writing his life story in a memoir called "My Life Renewed." He tells of a mysterious man who offered him the opportunity to continue his work for all time. After a brief correspondence, he received a delivery of a prepared syringe full of Cerebral Spinal Fluid. By the enclosed instructions, he traveled to Barovian Gundarak and found the Heinfroth family crypt. Once there, he injected himself with the CSF

and stepped into the crypt. Pulled into the cursed casket inside, he emerged as a cerebral vampire. Now fully trusting of his benefactor, he arranged passage on *The Mercy* to Dominia and took his place on the staff. *TK*

*Dr. Black--Alchemical doppelganger Wiz5/AIP7/Fos3*

Dominiani, having been a correspondent of the Fraternity for many years, had selected Henri Bergeron of Ghastria to manage the asylum and track any changes in the land as it passed out of Gundar's hands. Three months into this project, Henri paid a quick visit to Hunadora to report preliminary findings, only to discover that Gundar's other servants were embroiled in petty schemes right under Dominiani's nose. After conversing with Henri, Dominiani was forced to admit that he was unable to understand drives and motivations, except in the purely academic sense. The man who had written books about the mind was now unable to understand any minds outside of those books.

Having lost his natural skill at manipulation, Dominiani was unable to bear the additional responsibilities of ruling a country, and Gundarak fell completely into anarchy. Dominiani contented himself to let Henri act as his public face, while he devoted himself to a critical cause. The exact nature of this cause was unclear to Henri, but it appeared that Dominiani was convinced that a terrible cataclysm was coming, something that would shake the very fabric of the land. This was one of the chief reasons why Dominiani did not merely sever Gundar's head and destroy him for good: he needed Gundar's blood to open a portal to another realm.

If Henri was unclear about the threat, the portal was real enough, and he agreed to help Dominiani with his experiments in the hopes of learning more about it. Dominiani even encouraged Henri to copy all his notes to his Fraternity brethren; his transparency

seems to be inspired by his conviction that the Fraternity would soon cease to exist. Together, the two constructed mechanisms that would allow Duke Gundar's blood to flow from his corpse for longer and longer periods, keeping the portal open while they studied it. While he managed by arcane means to redirect the portal to other domains, Dominiani's true goal remained tantalizingly out of reach.

When the Great Upheaval shunted Dominia into the Mists, Henri was brought along with the asylum. Cut off from the Core and forbidden by the nascent Darklord to communicate with his Brothers, Henri was presumed dead, considered a casualty of the Upheaval by the Fraternity. When Dominia emerged in the Sea of Sorrows, after almost a year without contact, suddenly he began reporting again, sending his observations of the creation and evolution of the new domain back to his superiors, in secret defiance of Heinfroth's orders.

These messages were received with mixed emotions by the Umbra. The glad tidings of Bergeron's survival were tinged with concern about his relationship with his host. Citing no less than seven major infractions in his correspondence, those who had mourned for his death were now forced to conclude that his return was not in their best interests. Dominiani had already deceived his way into the fold once. The umbrucha was dispatched to sever his relationship with them for good.

As expected, the umbrucha was unable to deliver Henri to the Umbra, so it opted for his destruction. Prepared for this possibility, Bergeron escaped by transferring his mind into a prepared alchemical doppelganger vessel, letting the umbrucha destroy his original body. From that point forward, he has refused to acknowledge his former identity to better maintain his false demise, and has been known exclusively as Dr. Black.



**DR. DOMINIANI****Human cerebral vampire (nosferatu) Exp11/AIP6***H,1,3,6,9,12,15,AIP123456**Create Device (Potion)**Create Device (Wondrous Item)**Create Device (Construct)**Improved Alchemy**Spell Focus Transmutation?!**Essential Coagulant**Spiritual Purgative**Emotional Purgative**Memory Coagulant**Corporeal Purifier**Corporeal Purgative**Innocence Coagulant**Philosophical Purifier***BACKGROUND**

Before Gundarak formed in 593, the Core consisted of Barovia, Mordent, Darkon, and Forlorn. Daclaud Heinfroth was 23, last scion of a wealthy family plagued by hereditary madness. After watching his parents succumb to the condition, he had sworn to find a cure, and thus had spent his family fortune studying madness. Of course, before that moment, he had only the meager educational resources of Gundarak to devote to his cause. The Mists had barely cleared before he headed to Mordent to study with Germain d'Honaire.

**THE HEINFROTH FOREFATHERS**

Deep in the False History of Gundarak, The Heinfroth family had their own drastic solution to the family madness: vampirism. The family's vampire cult was a form of ancestor worship, centered around a coffin said to be the former resting place of undying Erlin himself. Heinfroth heirs vied for the approval of their undead ancestors, with the winner presented to the coffin for transformation and the losers consigned to eventual madness as cattle for their vampire family.

As the madness usually took hold after they had sired children, heirs were plentiful, until a combination of plague and war winnowed them to nearly nothing. Then the rise of the Gundars forced the three surviving vampires into hibernation, all about three generations before Daclaud. Now after centuries of slumber, the earth whispers to Kristoff (Male human Nosferatu Ari3/Rog3/Clr2 of Erlin) and Darsilla Heinfroth (female human nosferatu Ari4/Clr3 of Erlin) that their beloved Erlin is neglected and due for a revival. Once revived, they will have to decide whether they will disturb the sleep of high priest Ghalfrek Heinfroth (Male human patriarch nosferatu Ari3/Clr12 of Erlin) or let him slumber a while longer. Either way, they intend to teach this modern generation respect for their elders and their ways.

Daclaud was a star pupil and a tireless student of mesmerism, but after only two years, he went looking for another teacher. While Heinfroth says this was his own choice, records from Saulbridge suggest that Germain was upset about Heinfroth's relationship with a newly released patient, one Annabeth Gauldamon. Whatever the reason, when Heinfroth left Mordent for Darkon, she went with him, her name listed on the Steadwall ferry manifest as "Annabeth Heinfroth."

On the way to Il Aluk, the couple were approached on the road by a group of Vistani. Daclaud was less interested in the gypsies than Annabeth was, until they revealed that they knew of a land with far more

advanced medicine than Darkon. Tantalized by their stories of a land with wondrous technology, he paid the Vistani to guide him and his wife through the Mists to Zherisia. While in the Mists, Annabeth gave birth to a baby girl named Alyson, after Annabeth's mother.

Daclaud rose rapidly through the ranks of the medical and alienist establishments in Paridon, while Annabeth busied herself with taking care of Alyson and their growing estate. After the birth of his son Desmond in 597, Daclaud was made medical director of Queen Anne Hospital, and thought his life was set, but it was not to be. In 599, he returned home to find his children missing and his pregnant wife beheaded, one of six victims of the killer who would later be known as Bloody Jack. Devastated beyond words, Daclaud left his medical practice, liquidated all his holdings, and went home to Gundarak.

In Gundarak, Daclaud returned to his family estate, only to find it had been converted in his absence to a military outpost and prison. Still depressed over the loss of his wife, Daclaud morosely accepted Gundar's order that he keep prisoners docile and soldiers healthy. Unable to empathize with the sufferings of his countrymen, he threw himself into his medical research instead. As many of the prisoners were already mad, Heinfroth had a free hand with the various treatments he had accumulated. While he had many successes, certain madnesses remained intractable, giving him doubts about his own family illness. Desperate to conquer his condition once and for all, he began using the sane prisoners as test subjects in his pursuit of a truly revolutionary cure.

In 601, Heinfroth feared he heard the hints of his family madness probing at his consciousness. He threw caution to the wind, kidnapped a young woman and transfused himself with her CSF. Unfortunately, he had accidentally chosen one of Gundar's brides-to-be. In dying agony, Heinfroth heard the call of the vampire shrine, crawled to it, and completed his transformation into a vampire. Gundar was furious at the loss of his bride, but

decided to keep Heinfroth around after he discovered that Heinfroth had to obey his commands and could send him telepathic messages over any distance. In homage to this forced loyalty, Gundar gave his new quisling the nickname "Dr. Dominiani."

Life under Gundar's thumb would have been intolerable, if it were not for Gundar's son Medraut. The two shared a love of research that bonded them like brothers, and Dominiani quickly lost his remaining empathy for humankind in Medraut's company. By studying the portal in Castle Hunadora, they deduced much of Gundar's connection with the land, and some of the nature of the demiplane. Using this knowledge of domain boundaries, Medraut built a magical fountain for Heinfroth Keep--now Heinfroth Asylum--so that the two could correspond telepathically, even across domain borders. Preserved zombies, magical syringes, lobotomized ghouls, and other atrocities were brought to fruition from their accursed partnership, including the first unsuccessful attempts to recreate Daclaud's own unique vampirism.

In 612 Medraut's experiments led to repeated infestations of larval feyrs in Hunadora, which Gundar charged Dominiani with exterminating. After researching their cannibalistic development, he locked up one survivor and used it to overpower and devour all the following infestations. With this, Dominiani earned Gundar's grudging respect, and when Kartakass appeared the following year, Dominiani was allowed to explore as Gundar's agent. In honor of the promotion, Medraut enchanted a sword for him that was especially effective against shapechangers, even though Duke Gundar insisted that the blade also be enchanted to not work against vampires.

#### **MINOR ARTIFACT: SCALPEL, THE HUNGRY BLADE**

Scalpel was actually formed from an unfaithful vampire quisling of Gundar's using a powerful polymorph effect (now irreversible by anything short of a Wish) and various enchantments.

It is a *shapechanger bane longsword of wounding +1*. For every bleeding wound it causes, it gains +1 against that foe (max +5) forever after, as it remembers the scent and taste of their blood. It can't harm vampires, and will cease to work for any wielder who uses it against one, acting henceforth as a cursed longsword -1 for that wielder alone. When unsheathed within thirty feet of a shapechanger, its edges will ooze blood in anticipation. Because of repeated confrontations, the blade is +5 against Harkon Lukas.

While in Kartakass, Dominiani met Lazarus Ikonnas, an eminent scholar from Darkon who had already deduced a great deal about the nature of the world. Through visits and correspondence, Dominiani traded research with Lazarus' fledgling Fraternity of Shadows, as they chronicled the expansion of the Core, until by 648 talk of his perpetual youth forced Dominiani to withdraw, lest his undeath be discovered. Returning home, he joined a logging cooperative carving a road into Forlorn, and developed a lucrative business selling Forfarian flora.

Despite his distance from the Fraternity, Dominiani maintained correspondences with a few of them as the following decades brought the formation of Nova Vaasa, the Nightmare Lands, Borca, Lamordia, and more. While charting the appearance of Richemulot, he spied a helmet that he would have liked for a keepsake, but the owner refused to sell it. Their disagreement came to blows, and the owner--now revealed as a wererat--cursed the helmet with his dying breath. Dominiani kept the helmet for study, but beat a hasty retreat as the family of the deceased sent vampire hunters after him.

This brush with the hunters convinced Dominiani to stay closer to home, but when a Fraternity of Shadows brother warned him of self-writing biographies in Avernus, he had no choice. Terrified that his visits to Darkon might have compromised him, he risked his unlife and freedom to steal into Avernus, cross his name out of the lich's book, and leave with the accompanying volume. Azalin learned

of the intrusion too late--he had no means then, as he would later, to crush a vampire's will sight unseen. To prevent a recurrence, Azalin crafted an unparalleled scrying device to find and control the culprit, but by the time the device was finished, Dominiani had fled Darkon forever.

He now understood that at least one of his correspondents in the Fraternity had used him to test Azalin's defenses, and he wasn't happy. When Azalin crushed the first Dead Man's Campaign, Dominiani was happy to pick up the pieces of the Fraternity that had helped support Falkovnia. He arranged new homes, identities and other necessities for many dislocated scholars, making sure he was well paid for the services. The dearest price, of course, was paid by the one who had marked him for death at Azalin's hands.

Among the payments he received from the scholars was extensive research on the prophecies of Hyskosa. Dominiani had dismissed these ravings five decades back, but now it was beginning to appear that a major conjunction was indeed coming. At the very least, the Vistani believed it, and Dominiani knew better than to dismiss what they feared. As he researched, a terrible thought formed in his mind: if Gundarak were cast back from whence it came, wouldn't he cease to exist? Naturally, he bent his mind to preventing this from happening.

His first order of business was to cement his position as Gundar's trusted man. In his extended absences from Gundarak, another servant of Gundar had wormed his way into the Duke's trust, but the years of plotting and research served Dominiani well. With a few choice words in the right ears, Dominiani sent his rival chasing after a powerful artifact, only to be absorbed by its evil. A decade later, Medraut fell beneath the blades of a death knight, and Dominiani was finally Gundar's oldest and closest confidant. While he was sad to see his friend go, he collected a sample of Medraut's flesh and swore to bring the dhampire back to life, or some semblance of it.

When an Order of the Guardians monastery was destroyed in 722, Dominiani was there sifting through the ashes. In their records he found mention of a cursed crown crafted by one Daglan Daegon, the key to the first couplet of Hyskosa's Hexad. Armed with this information, he sought out Akriel Lukas of Kartakass, and laid a false trail from her dreams of youth to her father's immortality to the crown. Her socialite life made her perfect for finding the right person to deliver the crown to Dominiani.

Unfortunately, Akriel's father Harkon turned the tables on them both, causing them to lose the crown to Daglan's heir and accidentally fulfill the first couplet of the Hexad. Furious at being fate's plaything, Dominiani swore that if a conjunction was inevitable, he would at least be anchored to the land. When would-be heroes faced off with Gundar later that year, Dominiani betrayed his master into their hands, before killing them, and claimed lordship of Gundarak.

As detailed in the land's history above, Dominiani lost control of Gundarak in the Great Upheaval, but was gifted with an Island domain more suited to his interests. With the politics of running a duchy out of the way, he returned full-time to attempting a cure for his impending madness. The first promising line of research was reproducing his unique form of vampirism, with the help of Henri Bergeron and Que'Thaan, or as Dominiani began referring to them, Dr. Black and Dr. White.

Lapsing into melancholy at their initial lack of results, Dominiani may not have noticed when their least complete failure, Cyrus Longwell, vanished, but he could not help but take notice at his return a year later. It appears that some advice from Madame Tsuru had led Cyrus to investigate the overgrown crypt in the asylum cemetery. Through mystical means, it had taken him to another land, where he had reinvented himself as "Dr." Cyrus Longwell and started the Home for Wayward Youths. (Zherisia Gazetteer) Strangely, the name "Heinfroth" was not unknown in that land, and as Cyrus had overheard it

a few times, and knew it as the name on the crypt, he had invited a handful of Heinfroths to Dominiani's island in the Mists, to meet their kinsman face to face.

*Dominiani was ecstatic at first, but eventually tortures them to find out the secret to his family madness. This was the seminal event for arrival in the SoS.*

## CURRENT SKETCH

For all his research into personality, psyche, perception and memory, Heinfroth doesn't really understand people in their natural settings. Due to his darklord curse, he suffers a -20 to Sense Motive and all Charisma-based checks. He used to be a plotter and manipulator, a spontaneous schemer and a double-crosser, but now he is forced to continuously double-check all his results to make sure he's not misreading the signals. Worse yet, he's surrounded by plotters and schemers, and at his best he can only follow their intrigues, never lead. To supplement his interpersonal deficits, Heinfroth selects assistants with ambitions that are harmonious with his, and gives them as free a hand as he can stand. Having betrayed his own master, he constantly checks up on his quislings, but finds nothing... because there is nothing to find. He is in no danger of a coup as long as his servants are free to pursue their goals without one.

This is not to say that Heinfroth has lost his ambition. On the contrary, he has grand visions of a world where men run more predictable than clockworks, but he pursues that goal with the patience of the dead, reinforced by his growing need for absolute control. He has finally given his oldest and most trusted servant leave to take the next steps toward that vision in the Core. He knows that Dr. Black has ambitions of his own, but he has satisfied himself that they are not working at cross purposes. After decades amassing and cementing his control over his corner of the Sea of Sorrows, Heinfroth is preparing to cast a long, slow shadow over the Core....

Possible long term plans for Dominiani:

gaslighting DL's to reshape the land? Best potential candidates would be mortal and vulnerable: Ivan, Ivana, Jackie

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Other info from Feast of Goblins that could be incorporated:

There is a scroll of return concealed inside one of the books.

Dominiani's Quilt: The quilt is of fine quality and is decorated with an array of evil magical runes and sigils. It has a near magical property to actually bring a small amount of comfort to the undead, almost as if it gave off some sort of warmth that only the doomed can feel. For this reason, Dr. Dominiani values it as one of his most prized possessions.

The teeth in the statue's mouth are from a vampire who betrayed Duke Gundar.

Dominiani has books containing a description of the workings of the Crown of Souls. The books list many experiments and tests such as how to determine time without consulting the sun, identify metals through non-magical means, and overcome the powers of garlic to vampires. There seems to have been a great deal of effort put into all of these researches, but it is impossible to tell if they ended in success or failure.

The south alcove contains many rare items such as the tears of a ghost, the powdered essence of a vampire's love, cob-web like strands of weariness. These are labeled in a magical script (a read magic spell will decipher it) and are the ingredients needed for Dominiani's various experiments.

Nearly everyone here has two small puncture wounds on the back of their neck. Many of them have also been bitten on the neck, for Dominiani has often played host to more traditional vampires as well.

Six charmed people have been given instructions to kill anyone entering the park who is not accompanied by Dominiani.

Hogtie

Throttle Tie--special knot that must be tied around an unconscious or totally unresisting person. Takes 2 minutes, but when done, it binds all the limbs so that struggling causes the ropes to tighten around the neck first. Any Escape Artist or Str check that fails by 5 or more cuts off the air supply. This becomes apparent before the check is made, so the attempt can be aborted.

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE HEINFROTH BLOODLINES**

The Heinfroth name survived through Daclaud's son Desmond, rescued by his sister, from the attack that slew their mother, through the appearance of her mist-travel powers. The two jumped forward in time about three weeks, where they were taken in by a caring physician who remembered their father.

Alyson married in 613, Desmond in 617

Desmond had three children live to adulthood. After the vanishing Zherisian countryside, riots, poverty, madness and the occasional murder took their toll, there were five branches of the family.

677 A1, A2; B1, B2, B3; C1

707 a1, a2, a3; A3; b1, b2; B4, B5; c1, c2, c3, c4, c5

737

Alyson has additional effects--Born in the Mists with a Vistani midwife? She has Mist Travel (Time). She has jumped forward

Heinfroths are afflicted with a genetic madness that takes hold around middle age. Contrary to Daclaud's research, the effects are not always swift or fatal. In fact, the intervening generations (and their mother's hereditary issues) have diluted the condition into a mixed blessing: sufferers of Heinfroth syndrome have higher resistance to mental strain, because of their preexisting madness.

Ironically, Heinfroths in one Paridonian branch of the family are often replaced by doppelgangers before they can go mad.

#### **Heinfroth Family Traits**

+2 *Cha*, -2 *Wis*: Heinfroths are enthusiastic, sometimes to the point of recklessness.

*Family Madness*: At age 35 and every year thereafter, Heinfroths must make a DC 20 Madness check. This check is not modified by their Preemption bonus (below).

*Precipice of the Soul*: If the Heinfroth fails a Madness check resulting in a minor Madness effect, the character recovers normally. However, if it is a moderate or major effect, they suffer the Madness effect for the rest of their lives, even after regaining lost ability scores.

*Preemption*: Until they succumb to Precipice of the Soul (above), Heinfroths enjoy a +10 bonus to any Madness checks, and +4 bonus to any other mind-affecting ability or spell.

After succumbing, the character cannot have any other Madness effect, but may still suffer diminished ability scores from failed checks, with the normal recovery times. These bonuses do not stack with those from the Unstable feat.



