

Everything I need to know in life I learned from RAVENLOFT.

Even before ecstasy opened extra-dimensional doors and the settings vast metaphorical essence was unleashed upon me in waves, I was an impressionable pre-teen enamored by the misty moors and desolate gothic atmosphere. You get older and pick up more stuff along the way, realizing old concepts in a completely new way (ala Biblical proclamations of “reap what you sow”, karma or Dark Powers). Everyone who lives in a private hell of their own creation. Heroes of Light crusading forth in a world that favors Champions of Darkness. This is my new curse.

Who Me? I is him, slim with a tilted brim. You know my name, feared the initials, knew the record (3-0 and counting). The fire-truckin force behind your favorite RAVENLOFT writers’ head bouncing off a restaurant table with concussive force. But why sweat the past when there’s a new light at the end of the tunnel? Especially when that light is a 200 ton locomotive with “My Stories Dominate” tagged on the side.

For the last three years I’ve been working for 411Mania.com – the largest pop culture website on the net. Rain or shine, one week or one month later, I’ve been holding it down in that cloud of dust called ELYSIAN FIELDS forever. The topic is street shhh and all its sonic accompaniment (Hip Hop will never die). But RAVENLOFT is always found to be floating somewhere just outside the main peripheral (check my **Twisted Paranoid Conspiracy Theories**® feature or website bio). For the last three years I have also been virtually homeless. Literally – no computer to call my own. I got hooked up with a sales job driving through four states and went on a massive public library raid. From Bath NH to Bridgeport CT I hit up public libraries in the downtime, carrying my disc and spitting at the speed of light (thank my 10th grade typing class and an 80 wpm count). Oh how I longed for a personal computer, one to call my own. Regardless – I hit up these spots and continued to broadcast my message for all the right reasons. For the love (and for the publishing checks). But for three years events conspired against me, and I used the underground network like a local MC. All the while still secretly lusting after a joint to call my own.

Three years later, my wish was granted – albeit with a slight twist. Understand the madness. There are still some places in America where electricity and heat are more necessary than basic cable or video game stations. Never had them grown up and growin out didn’t bring them any closer. I’d always gotten along without cable and computers before so I never sweat it. But after I got the 411Mania gig I had to stay aboard the internet somehow. So after three years of ELYSIAN FIELDS world touring, my own joint came to me. I’ll spare the particulars, but my prayers were answered in typical RAVENLOFT fashion – my computer fell off the back of a truck. But don’t be fooled, either. Cuz I work hard for everything I have (which is virtually nothing). I am proud to say that not only do I own my own computer, I have internet access AND my own office space in the new duplex I moved my family into. But it all comes with a price.

For the last few years my entire archives have languished in storage and cramped closet spaces. I have little to no room for my music collection, never mind shelves and shelves

of D&D stuff (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 3.5 editions). So for the last few years I also wished for the time and space to unload my collections the way I see fit. My new duplex answered all of these wishes for me. A new(er) computer, and my own office space! Finally the boxes can come out! The bookshelves can go up! The CD racks can be dusted and alphabetized!

But of course, this is a RAVENLOFT column so it all comes with a price. My wishes were granted – computer, fulltime internet, unlimited space. But now I have to work THREE jobs just to support the damn place! My sons coming up on two years old, and wifey's pregnant with our second child (due sometime in February). Moving into a bigger place just makes it harder on the checkbook. So YES I have a computer! YES I have the internet! YES I have my own office! But NO time to enjoy it! I'm gone from 8:15 am to 11:00 pm EST every Monday through Friday (with a third job that will now consume my weekends as well). What little time I do have at home I spend with my son and wife. So my wishes were answered – but not without that slick RAVENLOFT curse.

Which brings me to now. Right now. I'm online late night checking my fan mail from 411Mania (which isn't always from fans) and reading up more on our HUGE Boston Celtics summer trades when all the sudden I stumbled into a time machine. This is the first time I've actually surfed the internet in years. I mean really *surfed it*. Just aimlessly drifted around with no destination. I decided to "google myself" because I've heard so much about that in the movies. One thing leads to another, and quicker than a Delorean hits 88 mph I'm back to someplace I forgot existed. I remember it like yesterday when in fact it's been three years! I read up on a couple of my old posts before the horrible truth dawned on me – I never finished my campaign log! I let it taper off after I got the 411Mania job, and it slowly shriveled back into the shadows from which it was born. I found the tattered remains and wondered what ever became of them. I'll tell you what – that was a labor of love while 411Mania pays the bills! But the more I read from these old manuscripts I remember what started my love for writing in the first place - the Domains of Dread. So I made a vow to myself that I would revisit the site of some of my greatest conquests (and bitter defeats) in an effort to firmly stamp my contribution to this scene. If RAVENLOFT can die (be resurrected) and die again, so can one man's diary of a mystical exodus.

This isn't just a campaign journal. This is a theory, an idea, a revelation. This is a saga, a passion and an escape. This is our fire-truckin *LIFE* story absorbed in three unforgettable seasons of RAVENLOFT. One definitive story arc with a beginning, middle and end that spanned five years of game time, a rotating cast of PCs and 40 months of real time. In my eyes I have woven a masterpiece. So my top priority for this project is completely selfish in nature. These three years of our life must be chronicled for posterity's sake, burned into cyberspace for generations. The next reason is greedy and selfish as well – I want this team to be a fire-truckin RAVENLOFT legend. A DM without players is just a jabroni on a single quest, and I've said for years I ride with the hardest crew of role players in the game. So for them, I record the tales that raised the game to new levels (and sickening depths).

But I'm also going to step out from behind the screen with some outtakes and bonus features that detail what goes into a campaign of this massive nature. It's been three years since we concluded my Grand Conjunction, and hindsight is 20/20 so I've got a lot to discuss. We're going to talk about the psychology behind my decisions as DM, as well as analyze the various components that make for sick RAVENLOFT storytelling. I'll be reflecting on the GOOD, BAD and the UGLY aspects of the entire campaign while also discussing my philosophy on handling mature themes in a RAVENLOFT game. I can offer suggestions on how to construct a truly enriching and horrifying experience for your players. I'll show what worked for me and what didn't, before wrapping it up with a debate on the "homebrewed versus commercial" debate. I'll give you my theories on the Dark Powers, what RAVENLOFT means to me as a DM and the very definition of deep immersion role playing. I'll even let you in on MSD's greatest DM secret ever. A secret that could ostracize and alienate me from the RAVENLOFT community forever; a community I desire to be apart of more than anything else. But this is my new curse. And this is my new mission.

In order to appreciate the end, we must know how it began. So every week I'm bringing it back Episode by painstakingly-transcribed Episode. I'll show you how three 0-level PCs grew to become saviors of an entire universe. This is one man's diabolical scheme to spread the RAVENLOFT plague to a virgin breed of role players. This is my world, and we don't just talk about – we live about it. Read on...

THE UNFINGERED HAND

*This is my own adventure using the PCs wishes to pursue Alexis' Ghostsight as the reason, a few self-generated NPCs mixed with canon ones for a result and a magical item straight from **Forged of Darkness** for the rhyme. Check the rhythm.*

Lights, camera, action.
The PCs have entered the big time.
Il Aluk, Darkon.
Capital of Ravenloft.
The equivalent of Paris, New York, London and LA.

Il Aluk, Il Aluk.
Big City of Dreams.
But everything in Il Aluk
Ain't always what it seems...

You might get fooled if you come from out of town,
But I'm down by law and I know my way around...

Too much. There's too many people.
Too much (mwah-ha-ha-ha!)
Too much. There's too many people.
And when we into serving there will be no sequel...

THE PLAYERS

Lord Alexis Darkangnon- Tortured Lord of Solyss, Gundarak who has traveled to Il Aluk to confer with a specialist regarding his cursed affliction (Ghostsight). 6th level character, 1st level Assassin.

Count Destanial Magorian- Half-vistani Count of Solyss, Gundarak who assumed his position after the fall of the Duke Gundar regime. Knows he is related in someway to Hyksosa's twisted prophecy of doom. He just doesn't know how... 6th level character, 1st level Blessed Defender.

Domingo dos Santos- NPC Monk belonging to the Order of Guardians. He serves as bodyguard to Count Magorian, to preserve his destiny of apocolypse prevention.

Professor Ellis Valdemear- A new PC created by a player returning to the table-top after a self-imposed 6-month exile. He is a professor of history at the University of Il Aluk. Works under the tutelage of his mentor Professor Myles J. Witherspoon. 5th level Wizard

Misha the Lost- Another new PC. A female who has NO prior D&D experience. She plays a rogue outlander who was "lost in the Mists". She searches near and far for those enigmatic mists that stole her away. Her only goal is to get home.

Lavernous Vernichtung- Guest PlayerCharacter: THE Q-MONSTAH! For one week my manz Q has come all the way from Germany to game with the boys. His character Lavernous has a dark secret...

Professor Kurvyn Asterlei- NPC Professor of General Relativity and Conceptual

Physics at the University of Il Aluk. Plays a small part in the intro, but this NPC becomes very important later. He too hides a dark secret...

Styrix- The Night Hag (see "RL Monstrous Compendium Volume II: Children Of The Night" for further details).

BACKSTORY

What does a night hag, a temple in Martira Bay and a professor at the University of Il Aluk all have in common? More than you could ever imagine...

*The Lord of the Dead, **King Azalin**, has been researching an escape route from the demiplane of Dread since the day he was trapped here. His plots, schemes and machinations span the decades, but have yet to bear fruit. Despite the set backs and flat out failures, the King of Darkon refuses to quit.*

*One of his past failures included the summoning of a hag from the Lower Planes of Hell. This twisted, monstrosity of a hag was named **Styrix**, and she was bound into servitude by the awesome power of King Azalin. He locked her deep within the bowels of Castle Avernus, and forced her to research the properties of the Demiplane in hopes of finding an escape. Consider this entire exercise an investment, and King Azalin poured much time and money into the endeavor. Unfortunately, after years and years of unproductive spending, Azalin finally pulled the plug on the whole deal. Styrix was unable to add anything new to Azalin's already expansive Ravenloft research. So he cut the beast loose. Unfortunately for Styrix, she too was now trapped in the Land Of Mists. But Styrix had a back-up plan...*

Azalin should have known never to trust a creature that is evil by nature. During her entire tenure beneath Castle Avernus, Styrix used the money, goods and equipment provided by Azalin to conduct her OWN studies. Her dark, forbidden knowledge was kept secret from King Azalin. SHE wanted to be the one who escaped. Still fuming over being summoned and trapped, she planned on rubbing her escape in the dead king's face. Hence, her idea for a device to be called the "Rift Spanner"...

Fast forward a few years, as Styrix has taken up permanent residence in the portside community of Martira Bay. There, she masquerades as a harmless old hermit and works to put her plan in motion. Energy is needed to power the Rift Spanner (and this being Ravenloft and all), that energy is derived from human life. So Styrix stalks the denizens of the lower west side (filled with unsavory characters) and plucks them out one by one. All the while, her infernal machine grows closer and closer to completion.

Anxious to prove her theories (and ultimately escape from Ravenloft), Styrix has ALSO set about creating an item to aid her in her life force harvesting. She is using it to speed up the gathering process. It is a wicked creation crafted from the severed limb of a hanged man. A twisted, blackened, gnarled appendage known as "The Unfingered Hand of Power" (see Forged Of Darkness for further details).

With the power of the hand (not to mention her natural Hag abilities, plus some nifty 3E class levels), Styrix is working overtime to power her escape. But the bridges she burnt in years past shall return to haunt her...



The year is 736, and for the most part, **Hyksosa** and his Hexad remain underground like the railroad. Azalin has yet to jump on the Hexad bandwagon (but he will), as he is still concentrating primarily on a scientific method of escape. He has cast his withered eye sockets towards the University of Il Aluk for answers.

There, a wizened old University professor named **Myles J. Witherspoon** has been researching the properties of something he calls "Provisional Conjunctions". If Professor Witherspoon's theories are correct, these temporal rifts are capable of ripping through the very fabric of space and time itself. Virtual black holes capable of swallowing up the surrounding landscape and any unfortunate victims that may be present. They seem to deposit them in an ever-shifting swirling vortex of mists. Where these black holes lead to, nobody knows (but King Azalin has his OWN theories about that).

This knowledge is potential Nobel prize winning material in the right hands. Of course, in the **WRONG** hands, it could spell disaster for the multiverse. And for as much light as Professor Witherspoon hopes to shine on this topic, there are others out there that seek to hoard the knowledge for their own dark purposes.

One of those men is a colleague of Myles J. Witherspoon, and a professional rival. His name is **Kurvyn Asterlei**, Professor of General Relativity and Conceptual Physics. Unbeknownst to many, Professor Kurvyn Asterlei is actually a high ranking member of the **Fraternity Of Shadows**. He's been following Professor Witherspoon's progress for quite some time, but has yet to crack the outer seal. For all the powers of intrusion at Professor Asterlei's disposal, his rival Professor Witherspoon has equal amounts of protection power, for himself and his prized research. Suffice to say, the relationship between the two men is cold and strained. But to the naked eye, they appear to be casual business acquaintances...

Like Professor Asterlei, King Azalin has been following Myles research for quite some time. But **UN**like Professor Asterlei, Azalin has better methods of infiltration. Using Myles' research as a base starting point for his own studies, Azalin has deduced that it is entirely possible to **FORCE** a Provisional Conjunction to occur. What's needed is a blast powerful enough to rip the planar fabric in an area where the fabric is already weak. Perhaps the destruction of a powerful magical item? In order to test this theory out, King Azalin calls upon his Martira Bay Kargat agent, Tavelia, to aid him in the quest...

This would then lead us **BACK** to Martira Bay, where the night hag Styrix toils in anonymity (or so she **BELIEVES**). See, King Azalin knows she's using the Fingerless Hand of Power to murder the helpless citizens of Martira Bay. He just doesn't know **WHY**. But the Hand of Power highly intrigues him, and he has decided to take the hand into his own possession. But Styrix is a powerful foe, and Azalin doesn't want to waste any good Kargat agents in the act. That's where the **PLAYERS** come in. Journey with me now on a wild roller-coaster ride as King Azalin's master plan begins to unfurl...

From **FORGED OF DARKNESS**

"The Unfingered Hand is **NOT** (as its name implies) fashioned from a hand whose digits have been cut off. Rather, the Unfingered Hand has been severed at the wrist and holds a thick, black candle in its curled fingers with a deathless grip."

I chose the Unfingered Hand as an artifact, cuz it was cool first and foremost, but it also said you need a hag to manufacture it. So I thought it would be perfect, considering I wanted to use Styrix anyway.

It says the hand must be cut from the body of a convicted criminal who has been beheaded or drawn-and-quartered. The hand is cut off using a coldforged iron-bladed knife. This gruesome operation must be conducted under the light of a full moon. They say speed is of the essence, as rigor mortis will ruin the process.

The black candle itself is made from the "rendered fat of dead men" (that's friggin nasty).

As far as what it actually DOES...well...how bout we let the story tell it, hmmm? (evil cackle) But I WILL say it can ONLY be lit by a rogue, bard or assassin. Now who's everybody's favorite assassin from these posts? Heh, heh, heh!

PS, for those who DO have this book and would like to research it further, just know I disregarded the "legend" in my campaign.

THE SCENE

July 5, 736

As the Lord and Count of Solyss, Gundarak recuperated from Ivan Dilisnya's wicked toxins (*previous adventure*), they got a chance to appreciate the beauty of Ravenloft's lands. From the rolling lowlands and golden Falkovnian grain fields to the plateaus and natural canyons of G'Henna, they soaked in the ambiance. It almost made the ever-present body wracking pain a bit more tolerable.

They stayed briefly in the Dwarven village of Corvia, where they sent word of their arrival to Aramil Kraven in Il Aluk. Alexis spent much time in deep contemplation, pondering the meaning of his ghostsight. It is an intoxicating, overwhelming rush of sights and sounds that assault his senses. It is brought about suddenly, and seemingly without reason. Yet he knows it all began with a near-death overdose. Could they be hallucinations? Hideous, nightmarish hallucinations, yet they seem so vivid and real? Alexis hesitates to admit it could all be in his mind. The thought makes him shudder.

Meanwhile, the monk **Domingo dos Santos** has served to open the mind of the young half-vistani Count of Solyss. He has filled him with a sense of destiny and purpose. Count Destanial Magorian now knows that is why his body was able to fight off Ivan's influence. Why he survived the Revolution and why the Green Eyez were unable to taint him. Because he has a destiny.

The wise words of Magda and her neice Jalise, hinting at a purpose and a greater sense of peace. The pure blooded half-breed in a greater belief. It is Destanial's purpose to prevent the Hexad from coming to pass. Prevent an event so apocalyptic, it could spell the end of humanity. He will push on with his new knowledge and greater sense of being, and delve further into the murky bowels of the Dread Realms.

But for now, these two backwood-at-heart young Barovians are preparing to enter the hub of the land's core. A veritable mixing pot of gender, ethnicity and faiths

brewing in a fantastic cauldron of a kingdom. The vast scope of which they've never even dreamed...

Brief recap of former player character turned NPC Aramil Kraven

12 year old boy.

6th level sorcerer.

Forced to leave his home in Il Aluk when his foster father (a teacher at Il Aluk U.) was arrested and subsequently vanished.

He Arrived in Gundarak to confer with a specialist regarding his ghostsight (and hide him from his foster fathers kidnappers). Returned to Il Aluk one year later with a whole new perspective. Seeks to learn the truth behind his foster fathers disappearance.

*Aramil Kraven was a young boy in appearance only. Due to the events of **When Black Roses Bloom** (related in my game to the 1st of Hyksosa's riddles) he now had the intellect of a 30 year-old specialist. A sorcerer by nature who had long since forgotten his roots after being immersed in the Darkon culture. Since the disappearance of his foster father (Professor Kraven was teacher at the University of Il Aluk) and his own subsequent return home, Aramil has lived with his foster sister Katrina. Katrina is 19-year old medical student at the University, and biological daughter to Professor Kraven.*

Old friends Alexis and Destanial were welcomed into their humble abode, just over the main street in Il Aluk. It was a small two-person quarters, that showed how far the Kraven family had stumbled since the disappearance of their patriarch. Their old estates have long since been boarded up.

The first night of their arrival was spent catching up, as Aramil and Katrina were eager to hear of their exploits as Lord and Count of Solyss, Gundarak. But unfortunately, they themselves had nothing new to report regarding Professor Kraven's disappearance. They still don't know the identity of those men who came knocking for him on that dark and stormy night.

But Aramil assured Alexis an old friend of Professor Kraven's at the University is a specialist in matters of the supernatural. He can coax and inform Alexis on the proper way of harnessing his ghostsight, just as he previously helped Aramil. His name is *Professor Myles J. Witherspoon*, and he teaches theoretical physics and engineering at the University of Il Aluk.

Brief background check on NPC Professor Myles J. Witherspoon.

World renowned scholar as a professor in his homeland of Bluspell Armantis. Youngest student to graduate from the academy and gain his teaching credentials. Began to dabble in necromancy when his mother contracted a serious disease. One night, while leaving from his mothers cottage outside the city, he was taken in by the Mists and deposited in Il Aluk.

That was close to fifty years ago, and since that day Professor Witherspoon has watched Il Aluk grow. He has lived through the violent raids on Darkonion soil by the Falkovnian militia. He has been a major contributor to the University of Il Aluk, since the days of two lab houses. He has long since forgotten his commitment to disease

prevention, but has learned of a deeper darker nature to his new lands. He became a white arcanist long before Heroes of Light were fashionable.

During his prime, he was confronted by a political conspiracy within the Universities ranks, and battled a rival professor named **Ejrik Spellbender**. Ejrik Spellbender was a founder of the Fraternity of Shadows in its fledgling days, and Myles could clearly see his goals were selfish and evil in nature. But in his battles with Ejrik and his undead minions, Professor Witherspoon met his own untimely demise. But perhaps it was his connection to the Grey Realms that prevented him from truly passing on. He arose as a Cold One, a living being who had survived a close brush with death. This incident spurned his ghostsight.

Eventually he was able to overcome the threat of Ejrik Spellbender and put him to the grave (of course, this being Ravenloft and all, Professor Spellbender's spirit inhabited a receptacle of his own wicked creation). Myles confiscated Spellbenders papers and research in the process, thus learning the rudimentary principles of orchestrating a provisional conjunction.

So essentially, study of these portals began with the Fraternity of Shadows. Witherspoon was the wild card vigilante that secreted away the knowledge, so as to prevent it from being used for evil. That was close to thirty years ago, and since that time he has fought to keep Spellbenders successors at bay. He works closely with other professors that share his vision, and with who he trusts his lifes work (amongst the few is Professor Zachary Kraven, foster father to young Aramil). Professor Kurvin Asterlei is simply the latest (and most efficient) of Ejrik Spellbenders eventual

Ok, the old new kid...

INTRODUCING the player known as "CEMETARY HOME OUTKAST" (because he used to live upstairs from an actual funeral home).

quote author=Alexus_Darkagnon 05/08/03 at 03:17:51] now to begin, today MSD is bringing in an old PC. his name will not be revealed just for the simple fact his name is not worthy enough to even make an appearance on this web-site. so for now we will call him D. umb, I. gnorant, C. lumsy, K. iller of all campaigns for short we can call him D.I.C.K.

now i know everybody deserves a chance but how many chances does a single person get before people start realizing that he does nothing positive for the game we all love.

yo i probably could go on for days about this guy but i just wanted to air out some thoughts of mine.

has anyone out there encountered a D.I.C.K. before? if you have feel free to IM me any time and it would be my pleasure to discuss it with you.

but to give y'all an open discussion, i would like y'all to express an opinion on mr. D.I.C.K. when he shows up on the posts. HOT or NOT. its been a pleasure as usual, see y'all around

Lord Alexis Darkangnon

Ellis Valdemear is a 33-year old professor of history at the University of Il Aluk. He is also a 5th level wizard. He is amongst the newer generation of teachers, yet he commands much respect from his peers. He is an apprentice of sorts to Professor Myles J. Witherspoon, who has taken the precocious and determined young scholar under his wing. Soon enough Ellis Valdemear will assume Professor Witherspoon's position on the University council.

But for now, he's stuck carrying Professor Witherspoon's bags and watering the plants in his class room. The same night Alexis, Destanial and Domingo arrive in Il Aluk, Ellis Valdemear is listening and studying closely with Professor Witherspoon, as he explains the mechanics behind a gaseous form spell. It is hours after the University has closed its doors, and the only people left are the ones that hardly ever leave.

Amongst those men is the infamous **Professor Kurvin Asterlei**. As Professor Witherspoon and Ellis Valdemear are deep in private conversation, Professor Asterlei suddenly barges forth into the room, trailed by his ever-present entourage of hanger-ons and yes men. A brief, but intense altercation between Asterlei and Witherspoon clearly demonstrates the deep hostilities they each harbor. Kurvin Asterlei seeks to steal Professor Witherspoon's precious research and pass it off as his own. The possible existence of provisional conjunctions would be a very powerful tool to the Fraternity.

The two professors argued semantics a bit before vowing to meet again at the University banquet this evening. A high-class affair accessible only to the masters of their respective scholarly fields. Player Character Professor Ellis Valdemear eagerly anticipated the day he would get the coveted gold-paper invitation.

After Professor Asterlei and his cavalcade bustled out the door, Witherspoon continued to tutor Valdemear for over an hour, as the July sun hung heavy on the horizon. Finally, when he felt his lessons were well enough received, Professor Witherspoon concluded the session. The two men gathered up their papers in silence. But as they got up to part ways, the elderly Myles Witherspoon locked the classroom door and closed the blinds on the window. The University banquet was but a few hours away, and Myles had to prepare. His first order of business was to assert his last will...

He explained to Ellis Valdemear the significance of the banquet. How professors and scholars from the finest schools and universities in the Core will be attending. He is planning on publicizing his findings on provisional conjunctions tonight at the banquet. But certain events may conspire against him in the process. Therefore, if anything were to happen to him tonight, and he were unable to share his hypothesis, PC Professor Ellis Valdemear must make certain that the original documents are never discovered.

He tells Valdemear the secret location in hushed and shifty tones: locked securely in a chest made of cedar, hidden beneath the floors of his blind illegitimate daughter's home in Martira Bay. He has warded her and her home from detection with various protection majicks. Nobody even knows of her existence.

But whatever you do, Professor Witherspoon warns, do not try to force a provisional conjunction to occur. They are bizarre and mysterious, yet they are natural events that must never be artificially duplicated. For the forces that are needed to prompt

this event are vast and uncontrollable, and could never be managed properly.

Ellis Valdemear was suprised to hear of such things from his mentor's mouth, but considered it a great honor to receive this trust. He vowed to do exactly as the good professor wished. He just didn't know how soon it would come to pass...

Myles J. Witherspoon died that night on his way to the University banquet, when a mystery assassin's bullet put an end to the Professor's exhaustive research forever. But his killers were loath to learn the notebooks and papers he carried with him were blank, or covered in ancient Bluspell gibberish. The true nature of the conjunctions would go to the grave with him. Or would they?...

Seconds after the Professors murder, his life's work came to fruition (but for a moment).

Misha the Lost

Misha is one of my good friends and a first time gamer. She's always been into the arts and drama so I knew this kind of thing would be right up her alley. This is her first D&D character ever.

In her own words:

Misha was the heir to an ever teetering throne. When she would not allow herself to be controlled by her cousins and left her homeland. She wandered the countryside for a while, making her way as an apprentice blacksmith. However, she could never stay in one place for very long, and soon left that behind and wandered her way into a thieves guild. After a few years there, she couldn't stand the restriction and endless badgering, and so taking the skills she learned she went freelance. She made her way to the hub of Bluspell Armantis, Bluspell City where things went horribly wrong...

Misha had long fantasized about pinching from the diamond jewelers shop in her hometown of Bluspell City, but the mans business was remarkably well-protected. Far beyond the means of a mere 5th-level rogue and amateur jewel filcher. But that never stopped her from dreaming. One day while gazing fondly through the shop windows, she watched a filching take place.

A small, fluffy white bunny (unnoticed by the keeper and his employees) bounded out the shop doors with a necklace in its mouth. It was such a bizarre and uncommon scene, that Misha couldn't stop from laughing, and her innate curiosity forced her to follow. The bunny managed to stay 3-4 hops ahead of her the whole pursuit, only stopping for a moment or two when Misha contemplated quitting. But the mystique of this white rabbit hopping around unhindered and unbothered with a priceless necklace in its grasp urged Misha on.

She followed the white rabbit down a darkened, grimy alley way where steam spilled forth from the sewer grates, creating a pseudo-wall of fog. The moon hung lazily in the hot Bluspell sky, but as she followed the rabbit deeper into the alley, it was obscured by the climbing mists. Soon, the rabbit was but a brief silhouette she could

only catch glimpses of. But she could still see the shine of the pearls on the necklace. And so she pressed on. Soon, she couldn't have turned back if she wanted to.

The mists began to clear, but the night was darker and the air a bit crisper. She didn't recognize the boarded up building and forsaken shacks, but freely admitted that Bluspell City was a huge place. She caught another glimpse of the infamous white rabbit. But his coat was now a smoky gray shade, as if the mists in the alleyway had permanently stained his fur. He no longer carried the necklace. Misha almost lost her balance on the bat crap coating the cobblestone alleyways. Suddenly she could hear the sounds of struggle.

Misha had unwittingly stumbled into the West district of Martira Bay, Darkon...

Moving on towards the sound, she watched the rabbit dart through a sewer grate just beneath the feet of three stocky youths. They harassed a single older man, all in a harsh language Misha failed to recognize. She watched the scene unfold in horror, as the three ruffians flashed the kerosene and apparently threatened to set aflame their victim. She could bear no more, before deciding to act.

She confronted the hoods, who stared in shock and amazement, before doubly over in mocking laughter. No doubt they mocked her inability to communicate in the native tongue, and delighted in the fact she was a single defenseless female. The ruffian she assumed was the leader was a psychotic looking fiend with a hint of elvin blood. Misha heard the others refer to him as "**Wick**", and she would always remember that name from the flaming stems he wielded with malice. She tried to get them to leave their victim alone, but she was alone herself, and thus unsuccessful. She was forced to watch as Wick and partners slit the poor mans throat, giggling manically as he gasped for breath and his blood flowed freely. Then they would turn their attention to her.

Misha turned and frantically fled into the dark, mist filled alleyways of Il Aluk's lower west side. Wick and his minions gave chase. But surprisingly, they were unable to find the girl through the twisting maze of back alleyways that was their home. They knew these twists and turns like the back of their own hands, but still the girl was able to elude them. Not to worry, there will be more like her in the future. And they will be ready.

Misha ran and ran and ran, until she could no longer hear the echoing footfalls of her pursuers. Again she was lost amongst the winding, filthy passageways. The raunchy stench of body odor was staggering on this hot summer night, as Misha passed by the rancid, rotten denizens of the west district slums. Poor, pitiful homeless folk who wallowed in filth. Misha felt uncomfortable and queasy, and desperately sought the alley she originally chased the rabbit through. Certainly this wasn't any part of Bluspell City she recognized. Yet she couldn't find that particular alley. They all looked the same.

Then, to compound matters even further, she rounded the bend where Wick and his crew had murdered that old man! She had doubled back on herself!

She almost broke down into tears of frustration and fear, as she turned away from the bloody corpse. A bloody corpse that was slowly starting to rise up behind her!

When she heard the rustling of clothing behind her, and turned to face the

staggering corpse she froze in absolute horror. Even more shocking, the corpse uttered her name in a dry, scratchy voice! It proceeded to speak with her in fluent Bluspell, identifying itself as the voice of the Wizard-King Azalin. It chastised her for defying curfew, but promised to protect her against the horrors of the night. If only she can complete one task for him: recover and destroy the evil Unfingered Hand of Power. The destruction of this evil item will instigate a temporary portal that can lead Misha back home. A minor conjunction which can only be forced by the implosion of major magical energy. And before Misha could even question what she heard, the body suddenly dropped lifelessly back to the ground. She was left with only these strange words and unceremoniously set adrift into a strange, foreign wonderland where shadows of night linger the longest...

It's a convoluted setup, to be sure. But it's essential that you understand the elements at work in this tale.

CIRCLE OF VULTURES

July 5, 736 continued

II Aluk, Darkon

Player Character Ellis Valdemear SAW the reflection of mentor Professor Witherspoon in the mirror as he prepared for bed. It was a wordless, five-second gaze that penetrated Valdemear's very *soul*, and he shivered as cold fingers caressed his spinal cord.

Through the thick sounds of silence, Ellis could hear his own heart pounding. And just as quick as that, he was once again staring at his own shaken expression.

This sighting coincided with the assassin's bullet that buried itself in Professor Witherspoons head just across town. Right away, Ellis Valdemear knew something was wrong. He grabbed his gear and darted out of the apartment, heading towards the University campus.

When he reached II Aluk U, word of Professor Witherspoon's assassination was barely 30 minutes old. The campus was in a state of somber shock. The few faculty members on campus at this late hour shuffled about in a daze, as if they couldn't believe their own ears. Everybody would remember exactly where he or she stood when they first learned esteemed Darkonian professor Myles J. Witherspoon had been assassinated.

Quote:

Originally posted by The MadStepDad

He explained to Ellis Valdemear the significance of the banquet. How professors and scholars from the finest schools and universities in the Core will be attending. He is planning on publicizing his findings on temporal conjunctions tonight at the banquet. But certain events may conspire against him in the process. Therefore, if anything were to happen to him tonight, and he were unable to share his hypothesis, PC Professor Ellis Valdemear must make certain that the original documents are never discovered.

Ellis Valdemear was scared, to say the least. Shocked, saddened and extremely scared. Who could ever do such a thing? But he remembered the last conversation he had with his mentor, and knew it was now put-up or shut-up time.

Before the vultures had a chance to pick through the remains, Ellis Valdemear was inside the University and heading for Professor Witherspoon's classroom (Ellis is one of only three people to have a key to the room).

Inside, he finds it immaculate and flawless as usual. Nary a chip in the paint or a crack in the tiles. Everything is shining with that polished gleam. But the stench of sorrow is heavy in the air, and the whole room seems vaguely ominous. Nevertheless, Professor Ellis Valdemear begins to rummage through the file cabinets and desk drawers (searching for anything his mentor might have wanted hidden).

He found a few notes, written in journal form, which included the name "Professor Zachary Kraven". Reading on a bit further, Valdemear learned that Witherspoon was awfully close with Kraven, and the two professors often worked and studied together. Maybe Professor Kraven (who Ellis never heard of) had a few answers regarding the research in question. He checked the address, and saw that the Kraven Estates were but a few blocks from University campus.

But it wasn't long before he heard the menacing footfalls echoing through the hallway outside, followed by the booming voice of the nefarious Professor Kurvin Asterlei. They were heading for Witherspoon's classroom! And here he was trapped inside, with no motive or alibi!

He saw the shadows fall across the doorway, as Professor Asterlei and his boot-lickers neared. He could hear the clacking of hands on a locked door knob. His eyes darted back and forth across the darkened classroom, looking for a place to hide.

Just as Professor Asterlei and his group entered the classroom (via magical means), Ellis Valdemear was using his newly acquired gaseous form spell to slip out the third floor window and vanish into the hot summer night.

But Professor Asterlei could sense the intrusion, and knew he had been beaten to the punch. He would find nothing of importance here in the classroom. But his shifty eyes gleamed with malicious intent, as he contemplated his next move...

BEHIND THE DM SCREEN (Interlude)

So now, a brief summary.

It is the night of July 5, 736 in Il Aluk, Darkon, and the respective factions are getting their pieces in place.

*SOMEBODY was the mastermind behind Professor Witherspoon's assassination, and I'm guessing it had SOMETHING to do with Professor Kurvin Asterlei and his **Fraternity of Shadows**.*

*But regardless of who set up and executed the hit, the fact of the matter remains: black suited men are swarming the University of Il Aluk and heading towards Professor Witherspoon's home in the same city. Undoubtedly they are related in some way to the **Fraternity**, and they are hoping to get their greedy mitts on the*

coveted research papers detailing "Provisional Conjunctions" (basically another term for minor conjunctions, detailed originally in the Ravenloft Black Box).

Player Character Professor Ellis Valdemear is the apprentice to the deceased Myles Witherspoon (who was murdered just a few hours ago) and he is in a frantic, saddened rush to preserve and protect his mentor's interests.

After learning his mentor had been murdered he sprang into action, first hustling over to Witherspoon's classroom and gathering all his documents, before heading over to the estates of a possible Witherspoon ally (he's gonna need all the help he can get at this point). Unfortunately, he learned that ally had been disposed of months ago and the stark reality of Witherspoon's research is starting to hit him hard.

*Apparently, this is some deep sh** he's involved in.
PC Ellis Valdemear is beginning to panic.*

THE BIG CITY OF DREAMS

Meanwhile, in the SAME city on the SAME night at the SAME time, my two REAL Player Characters are nice and cozy in a small apartment overlooking Main Street in Il Aluk (by REAL Player Characters, I mean my two players that started this campaign one year ago Real-Time).

Lord Alexis Darkangnon and Count Destanial Magorian continue their visit with Aramil and Katrina (children of the missing Professor Zachary Kraven). Tonight is their first night in Il Aluk, and Katrina would like to show them the sights (no doubt she is enamored by Lord Darkangnon's 18 charisma). So while young Aramil Kraven (*the 12 year-old 6th level sorcerer with the 30 year-old intellect*) stays at home, Katrina is escorting Alexis, Destanial and Domingo about town (*Domingo is the NPC monk bodyguard of Destanial*).

It was my duty as DM to PRESS upon the players the absolutely captivating beauty of the Il Aluk nightlife. I wanted them to SEE the vibrant colors and FEEL the life flowing through the city. I wanted to captivate them with descriptions of the various landmarks and architecture. I wanted to dazzle them with the fantastic and exotic people that inhabit the city. Everything from the highest ranked city official to the lowest of the homeless bums. They need to realize the importance of this city. And sense the uncertainty that seems to hang in the air. As if the people are waiting for something, they just don't know what...

Consider this an exercise in HEAVY foreshadowing, as us TRUE Ravenloft fans know the fate that awaits this city in the wake of the Grim Harvest. Yes, it is many, many years (in MY campaign) before this calamity is set to occur, but you can never foreshadow early enough sayz I.

So while the two players (and two NPCs) are moseying on throughout the city, something strange occurs. At about the same time Professor Witherspoon is being murdered across town, and at the same time Ellis Valdemear is seeing his mentor's image, Lord Darkangnon shares the same vision.

While gazing in the window of a local smoke shop, Lord Alexis Darkangnon is shocked to see an older, wizened professor appear before his very eyes in the reflection! The glimpse is but a few moments long, but Alexis feels that whirling, rushing sensation that accompanies his ghostsight. It is just long enough for Alexis

to make out the words “**scholar’s blood**” and “**Martira Bay**” (Alexus is a whiz at lip reading). Just as quick as that, the image fades away into the smudged glass panes.

Katrina, Destanial and Domingo all turn around to see Lord Darkangnon with horribly blood-shot eyes (a side effect of his ghostsight). He hesitates to tell them of the strange occurrence, but relents after much insistence on their behalf. Nobody can explain what it means or why he saw it.

Little do they ALL know, it was a clever hook created by the King Of The Dead to draw the unwitting flies into his web...

BLACK THREADS INTERTWINING

By the time Lord Darkagnon, Count Magorian (accompanied by the monk Domingo dos Santos) and their female escort for the night, Katrina Kraven, rode past the II Aluk River Walk, Professor Ellis Valdemear was already running away from the black-suited gentlemen he assumed were pouring into his home and scouring his personal records.

While the Lord of Solyss, Gundarak contemplated the meaning of his earlier vision, Professor Valdemear frantically racked his brain for places to hide, and people to help him. His face was recognized around campus and in his neighborhood. If he lingered for too long, he'd certainly be seen. Can his fears be justified? Or is he simply fleeing from specters of his own twisted paranoia? He knew he had to get to Martira Bay. But how? When? Why? What were these ominous documents, and what do they pertain? Ellis Valdemear didn't know, but his innate curiosity would force him to find out.

Suddenly, every black tunic was cause for alarm. Every sudden, jerky movement along the crowded nighttime streets of upper II Aluk brought about a frightened, skittish reaction by the normally dour History Professor. He was fleeing from shadows and phantoms that stalked him from every angle. He could see blood shot eyes grilling his leather satchel, trying to peer inside. He could feel his own blood run cold. With these emotions reaching their crescendo, a simple hand on the shoulder caused the good Professor to flail around frantically and stumble out onto the main cobblestone roadway. Directly into the path of an oncoming coach wagon (little did he know, the friendly pat on the shoulder was simply a panhandler begging for spare coin).

With his eyes and mind glued to the throbbing masses of people before him, Professor Valdemear was completely oblivious to the horse drawn carriage charging him from the rear. But luckily for him, Lord Darkagnon had chosen this night to indulge in a little Bardz Song usage (in which fresh air is of optimum importance). The potent Dementliese "liqueur" allowed the Lord to sense Valdemear's trepidation, and smell his fear. From his perch atop the carriage (next to the driver), he could see the bewildered Professor in a frozen state of shock. Shook in the middle of the street. Instinctively, Lord Alexis Darkangnon dove from his perch and tackled the Professor, both narrowly avoiding the charging carriage's onslaught.

The carriage slowed to a halt several yards up the road, as did the others behind it. The people along the nighttime II Aluk streets watched the scene with morbid fascination (no doubt hoping to see a mangled body show). All the while Lord Darkagnon stared down the frazzled, frail University Professor. He could smell his

rich scholar's blood.

Professor Valdemear was so scared and intimidated by Alexis, that when the Lord asked him his name, he totally forgot to lie. "Professor Ellis Valdemear, pupil to Professor Myles J. Witherspoon of the University Counsel". The name clicked in Alexis' head instantly.

As Count Destanial Magorian, Domingo and the lady Katrina rush to their side, Ellis Valdemear is telling Alexis that Professor Witherspoon was murdered earlier tonight. The only link Alexis had to unraveling his ghostsight was snuffed out only a few hours ago. Katrina breaks into tears. The news shocks everybody. So does the revelation that "certain individuals within the school's infrastructure seek to dismantle and discredit the good Professor's work". That these same "black-suited gentlemen" are prowling the streets and University hallways looking for Ellis Valdemear, prized pupil and heir apparent to Professor Witherspoon's chair on the Counsel. It gave them all a sense of urgency when Ellis told him the Professor's last words were to retrieve his prized research documents and protect them against these evil forces.

It was a hook for the players, and they caught on quick. Alexis and Destanial (along with Domingo) will accompany Ellis to Martira Bay, where they will seek out the works. Meanwhile, Katrina and Aramil Kraven will stay behind to gather more information, and attend the funeral of Professor Witherspoon (very close friend of their vanished father). Little do they ALL know, it's a grand hoax perpetuated by the King of Darkon (albeit a hoax serious enough to involve casualties). The work he let the mortal Myles Witherspoon gather in his lifetime will greatly benefit the King in his unlifetime. He will use the PCs to test his theory that the destruction of a powerful magical item can force a Provisional Conjunction. Of course, if that DOESN'T work, well... the King has a contingency plan for that too. A much more arcane, esoteric plan. One that involves "scholar's blood"...

BEHIND THE DM SCREEN (Interlude)

For those who missed it, or those who are just tuning in, my name is the MSD and this is my campaign. I started with three players in the summer of 2002, but that shrank down to two when one got incarcerated. For months and months my two players and I built an exhaustive campaign from the ground up, graduating our characters from 1st level commoners to 6th level Counts and Lords. Along the way, we tested out a few other players to join our ranks (a 1st Edition Fat Man and a Cemetery Home Outkast). Neither of them lasted very long (1st Edition Fat Man was kicked out, Cemetery Home Outkast saw the writing on the wall and took a "leave of absence"). Months later, I am trying to introduce yet ANOTHER new player (hopefully to make it a grand-whopping THREE players). An old female friend of mine with no prior D&D experience (but plenty of potential). This will be her first session ever. Meanwhile, during the production of this session (LOL) I received a phone call from old acquaintance Cemetery Home Outkast. He wanted to jump back in the campaign. It had been months since we last talked to him, so maybe I forgot how crappy a player he was. Forgot how boring and unimaginative he is. How his whole vibe is madd depressing. Whateva it wuz, I agreed to bring him back into the game for a "trial-run".

I knew they didn't want him back, but I promised if he didn't cut it we would axe him. And that's why he was saddled with rather humiliating character traits in the beginning. To test his mettle and see if he could adapt to this role playing hardship.

This is Ravenloft, man. Not everybody is a 15th level sorcerer/monk/fighter hurling fireballs and mantis punches. Sometimes there are mutha truckers out there with 10x ya clout and 10x ya might. It's deeper than just a game.

So basically, I'm setting up the pieces for him to fail. Sounds evil, I know, but you DON'T know Cemetery Home Outkast. You'd probably do the same thing. That's where the whole "scholar's blood" back-up plan goes into effect. But hey, I'm giving him the chance to begin with. However slim that chance may be, there is still a remote possibility he can be transformed into a passable Ravenloft roleplayer. We'll see if we can work our magic. If not... <draws finger across throat>.

*Now, their lovely NPC friend **Katrina Kraven**. You know my style by now, and almost every beautiful girl in the campaign it seems hides some kind of dark secret.*

*But NOT Katrina. Katrina Kraven falls into the same category as **Violet Ann Membrose-Darkagnon** (Alexus' new wife): good-hearted, young innocent. There are no dastardly plans for her to double-cross the players, and CERTAINLY no way she'll sleep with them. She's above all that. She's a young, aspiring medical student at the University of Il Aluk, where her biological father Professor Zachary Kraven once taught (before being kidnapped in Aramil's back-story). Now I'll tell you the reason I even introduced her to begin with: ANOTHER storyline hook.*

As you know, I'm still trying to work my players through Ravenloft's timeline from the beginning of the product line. That includes all those little one-shot "Book Of Crypts" adventures. Well, I've gone about sowing my seeds of discontent throughout the campaign setting.

For the eagle-eyed viewers here, I've already foreshadowed the events to "Bride of Mordenheim", "Blood in Moondale" AND "Feast of Goblins". How, you may ask? Well let me break it down for you...

***Blood In Moondale:** After the fall of Duke Gundar's evil empire, the domain of Gundarak began its gradual rebuilding process. One of the implemented changes was the formation of a new Level 1 province in the untamed wilderness of southern Gundarak (hence the creation of "Solyss, Gundarak"). In the wake of the Revolution, many travelers, pilgrims and entrepreneurs from across the Core made their way to Gundarak for a new start. Amongst them was highly-trained and decorated ex-soldier Alec Rapacion. With his credentials, he became Captain of the Solyss Militia. Now, without spoiling TOO much (there are prying player eyes everywhere) Captain Rapacion will play a major part in this BoC adventure...*

***Feast Of Goblins:** This is the adventure I'm running them through right NOW. We're going retro as we celebrate Ravenloft's 13th anniversary by running the very FIRST published RL adventure ever. But be forewarned: this adventure underwent heavy revision by Yourz Truly. Of course, those familiar with the quest will still find I stuck to the general gist of it. But they will also be pleasantly surprised by those ol' "Sick MSD Twists"™. I planted the seeds for THIS one the same way I planted the seed for Blood In Moondale: the aftermath of the Revolution. A kindly, certified doctor of psychology arrived in Solyss, and offered to help the shattered souls and broken minds left in Duke Gundar's wake. He opened a clinic for the mentally distressed, where he will go about trying to reverse the deep psychological damage left by Duke Gundar on his subjects. The good doctor's name is Daclaud Heinfroth...*

Bride Of Mordenheim: *THIS is where our lady friend Katrina Kraven comes in. Her back story will remain untold for now, but just know, her family relations and blood lines are a bit tangled up. It will take some serious work to unravel these threads. And ALSO know that the players COMPLETELY missed the hook this time around. But never fear, Katrina Kraven will remain in Il Aluk until the time the players are ready to accept this challenge and explore the cold lands of Lamordia...*

*Also of note, the events of The Unfingered Hand will segue beautifully into **The Cedar Chest**, before we RETURN to Borca for **Corrupted Innocents**.*

Misha tha Lost

Last time we left her, she was lost in a foreign city with strange customs and an unknown language. She stumbled blindly down the alleyways and back streets of Martira Bay's lower Westside, looking for some kind of sanctuary. Her wildest fantasies couldn't compete with this. First impressions are everything (*especially with this being her first What Would U Do? session EVER*), and the first thing she witnessed in Martira Bay was a lethal act of random violence by (an unscarred) **Wick** and his men. Followed shortly by the reanimation of said corpse, in which it then proceeded to communicate in her native tongue (proclaiming itself as the voice of the "Wizard-King Azalin"). What was the "Unfingered Hand of Power"? And how can it bring her home?

As her eyes fall upon the shoreline and docks of Martira Bay, the sun is just beginning to peek over the horizon. But it's already warm. About to get hot.

Even as the roosters had yet to crow, the waterfront was already teeming with rugged sailors and loaders (both free and dock). Misha suddenly felt exposed, and vulnerable. She could be easily spotted amongst the dingy rabble and rotting wooden shacks. Even her three years of thieves training could not prepare her for this kind of environment.

She could feel the cold stares of the sailors, as they sized her up and down. Her long black braids were frayed and battered. Her trusty crossbow was her only insurance against the wilds of this new land. The locals seemed like they were ready to devour her at any instant.

Just as she could feel the hot tears welling in her eyes, and all hope appeared to be lost (her only protection, the shadows of night, were fading with the sunrise), Misha tha Lost heard a familiar voice whisper to her...

PROPHET FOR PROFIT **July 6, 736 (wee small hours of the morn)**

No silly-heads, the voice Misha heard wasn't the voice of the Wizard-King Azalin.

It was the voice of the mysterious brown-skinned man in her dreams. The same bourbon-soaked smooth baritone that silently urged her along in the Mists. The one that she used to hear when she fanaticized about jewel heists and shop boosting. The voice that all at once warmed her and chilled her to the core.

He was here amongst the decay and squalor of the dockside neighborhoods. There, she spotted him on the stoop of a sagging brick dwelling. Whispering her name in a

heavily accented form of her native Bluspell tongue, and gently urging her over with his hands. He appeared to be doing it as quickly and quietly as possible, as if someone might be watching their interaction. He was the only sense of relief she could find. So she obeyed his beckoning command and crossed the street towards the hovel.

The brown-skinned man quickly moved into the shadows of the hallway, all the while urging her to continue in. His face forever remained blurry like in her dreams. He moved deftly from shadow to shadow, never letting a beam of sunshine fall upon it. His words were urgent, but composed. Dreadful, but reassuring. He sympathized with her as a lost soul, and knew only the "Unfingered Hand of Power" could free her (there we go with that reference again).

She confirmed everything he said as affirmative, and admitted her fear and uncertainty. She looked to him for guidance, compassion even. But there was none in his deep brown eyes. Only stoic resolve. A driven sense of purpose that was infectious in its resonance. So much so, she was filled with the desire to absorb and emulate his words. And he too spoke of this mysterious "Unfingered Hand of Power".

How the powers of the hand were capable of leading her back home. How there was a sanctuary of god within the city that sought to covet the hand, and how a royal adventuring party shall soon make the same bid. He told her to throw her lot in with the foreign wanderers, for the Church had many skeletons in the closet. Follow them closely and make sure they acquire the artifact. Only when the raw, savage powers of the hand are co-mingled with the fresh blood of a scholar, can the transdimensional vortex be opened. He who's Will is strongest shall dictate the planar direction. It was vague and abstruse, yet Misha knew exactly what the stranger spoke of.

He said follow the suns rays as they stretch across the land. The strangers will be traveling in a party of four, and will be approaching from the south-east. He told her to hurry along, for time is very valuable.

She hustled out of the old lean-to, and back into the gritty dockside streets. She didn't quite know when or why, but she understood HOW. Her return to Bluspell City is her only driving motivation.

OK.

So I know you're probably asking yourself; "Self. Who could crazy ol' MSD possibly be referring to?" Who is this mysterious voice calling out to her? Who is the brown-skinned stranger it belongs to?

You're probably asking yourself these questions, cuz they're the SAME questions my players are asking THEMSELVES.

Ya see, this "mysterious brown-skinned stranger" is the SAME "mysterious brown-skinned stranger" that's been trailing Alexis and Destanial (or is it leading?) since the beginning of the campaign! The same "mysterious brown-skinned stranger" that seduced the vistani wild-cat Natacha and stole the budding young psionic Jorge away in the middle of the night. The same "mysterious brown-skinned stranger" that had something to do with the Joson family curse and the House Daegon revelation.

The same "mysterious brown-skinned stranger" that always stays one or two steps ahead of the players, seemingly leading them on a pre-determined "wild goose chase". What are his goals? What is his motive? What are his true roots? The players don't know for certain, but they do have some Player Knowledge Theories.

And their main suspect is a guy who's name begins with "H"...

July 6 (late afternoon)

In the time it took the three players (and one NPC) to get from Il Aluk to Martira Bay, much had been discussed. The newfound traveling companions used the time to get better acquainted.

They learned that, yes, Professor Ellis Valdemear had indeed heard of the successful political coup in Gundarak (in which players Alexis and Destanial had been part of). In turn, they learned of Valdemear's background and academic achievements. They learned more about the recently deceased Myles J. Witherspoon, and his connection to the Gray Realm. It was he Alexis had sought to learn more of his ghastly visions (Ghostsight). That somehow, this dead University professor was capable of puncturing a hole in the fabric of space and time, in which one might venture into a never-ending void.

If this is possible, how can it be done? Who wanted this information so bad, they would stoop to murder? What did the player of Professor Valdemear neglect to disclose to the others? What did Alexis' player choose to keep a secret? And even hours after the Bardz Song "liqueur" had worn off, why could Alexis still smell the sweet metallic tang of the good professor's blood?...

Their journey into Martira Bay began along the main road bisecting the West and North districts. Right away, they knew this was no place to play around in. Most of the stretch is populated with long, windowless buildings, and the streets are deserted (with the exception of an occasional crate carrying wagon). The homes along the street looked like nothing more than run-down shanties. It is clear to see those along these streets are accustomed to living in squalid conditions. The odor of filth and decay is ever-present. However, Alexis had to note the lack of panhandlers and filthy urchins (having passed through the lands around Dervich, G'Henna).

The players knew what they sought lay in a cedar chest beneath the floorboards of a home here in Martira Bay. Through his discussions with Professor Witherspoon, Ellis Valdemear had inferred the elderly scholar fathered an illegitimate daughter some years ago. He didn't tell the other players of this, preferring instead to keep Witherspoon's pristine image intact. He also neglected to mention the fact she's blind.

By the time the three players (and one NPC) entered the Merchant's Quarter, they had devised a tentative plan of attack. Professor Valdemear will research any public files or records, hoping to compile a list of blind locals within the community. Lord Darkangnon will use his title and burgeoning reputation to seek admittance into the finest establishments, where he can keep abreast of the hottest local gossip. Meanwhile, Destanial would use his mahogany half-Vistani complexion to infiltrate the ghettos and street corners, looking to persuade a local to part with some information.

But as the Temple of the Overseer loomed large on the horizon, destiny came calling for the intrepid explorers...

Background Check on tha Q-Monstah and his character *Lavernous Vernichtung*

Tha Q-Monstah is an old school friend of mine who I hooked on the Game back in the day. Even though he's a few years older than me, once he was exposed to the MSD-virus, my Monstah was officially unleashed. The fires have burned hot in his belly for the decade since. This kid lives and breathes the Game.

After High School the big guy enlisted in the Army and left Broken City for good. Five years later, he's an American livin out in Germany. He chose a local girl as wifey. But Q's a true soldier, and the binds of the Circle are strong within him. He's ALWAYS stayed in touch. We discuss our respective campaigns over the phone, and when we went through the 3-year Dead Zone (where gaming was temporarily extinguished on the block), Q-Monstah was over seas hollering bout "dedication".

Well now the big guy is coming back home for a family wedding. It's been about two years since we've seen him last. He'll only be here a week, and we fittin to game TWO nights in his honor. I told my Monstah I have the perfect role for him to play in this session...

So lets take a look at the story-lines circulating BEHIND the DM Screen...

In an effort to expand our core player base, I have invited TWO potential new gamers into our Sanctum. Cemetery Home Outkast is the gaming groupie who alwayz wanted to be down with the Crew back in the day, but lacked the testicular fortitude. And Misha tha Lost, a female gaming virgin with love for Tolkein but oblivious to the dark mysteries of Ravenloft. Whereas Cemetery Home Outkast is a dice-junkie and rules lawyer, Misha tha Lost is a free-flowing, abstract poet and author with NO prior Gaming experience. BOTH of their debuts (in Cemetery Home Outkast's case, "re-debut") coincided with the Q-Monstah's overseas guest appearance.

So how to introduce THREE new player characters? One two-session guest shot (Q-Monstah), one long-term addition (Misha) and one potential write-off (Cemetery Home Outkast AKA Professor Ellis Valdemear).

Not to mention the on-going long term storylines I have fostered between the two originals (Alexus and Destanial). Anything the new cats are in involved in will have to be related in some way to the greater schemes of the originals (cuz seniority has its privileges). So I have to find a way to incorporate the fresh players into our seasoned campaign.

That's why when Cemetery Home Outkast wanted to play a wizard (despite my original objections: Strike One), I linked it to the ongoing scheme by having him related to Alexus' Ghostsight storyline. As apprentice to the NPC Myles Witherspoon, PC Ellis Valdemear was provided an easy storyline attachment to the Originals (seeing as how their whole purpose of visiting Darkon was to research Alexus' Ghostsight).

Misha on the other hand, was much easier to craft a character concept for. She

decided to be a rogue, and I felt she would be PERFECT for an Outlander role (seeing as how she's new to Ravenloft AND the Game). Her homeland of "Bluspell Armantis" is an inside joke, cuz that was the name of the home-brewed world we lived in for years (WAAAAY back in the day).

I figured I would set her immediate goal as "Escape from the Dread Realms" (as a tip o' the hat to the ol Weekend in Hell type adventures Ravenloft was born with). I knew I would tease the possibility of escape throughout the entire adventure, as that would be the fuel that drives her. But by sessions end, I also hope to build a personal attachment between her character and the others. An attachment so strong, she may even consider disregarding the portal to remain with the other players (where they could continue to fight the Children of the Night).

Q-Monstah, on the other hand, was less of a player and more of a Player-DM. I didn't want him to be a witness to the story, I wanted him to BE the story. So I told him how, in typical Ravenloft fashion, we would disguise a bad-guy as a good guy and hope to seduce the players further down the dark path.

See, our good friend Lord Alexis Darkangnon has already failed TWO Dark Powerz checks. That puts him well on the road to eternal damnation. And the Dark Powerz are hoping to entice him to continue on. That's where Q-Monstah's character Lavernous Vernichtung comes in: the Dark Powerz Temptation.

I told my friend Q to come up with the most vile, despicable, evil Player Character background he could think of. And after being immersed in German culture for five years, he chose to create an evil PC that once worked in the Nazi Concentration camps (*DM Note: I disagreed with this archetype and tried to persuade Q otherwise, but the Monstah was loose and there was no stopping him*). So Death Camp operator it is. Somehow, he came from Gothic Earth Germany when he was swallowed by the Mists and deposited in Darkon. He immediately set about trying to find a way home.

After the mind-altering effects of the land erased his prior existence, the new Lavernous Vernichtung fell into the hands of Martira Bay Kargat agent Tavelia. Nobody quite knows of the bond or link between the former death camp operator and the high priestess of the Overseer, but in the end Lavernous appeared to "see the light" and became an ordained minister of the religion. So in addition to the "dark secret" of his previous past (despite the fact he no longer remembers it), he also conceals the "kiss of darkness" bestowed upon him by Tavelia (he's a VAMPIRE!).

See, Tavelia herself is under direct orders from the King of Darkon, as she is a relatively high-ranking member of the **Kargat**. However, her goals and duties as "high priestess" of the Overseer faith don't ALWAYS coincide with the goals of her master. She TOO has a fleet of loyal followers and underlings she trusts with all her black heart. The closest of which was granted the gift of "immortality", and thus became members of Tavelia's own Kargatane branch. There are plenty of normal, evil humans who all seek to acquire the secret of immortality from their leaders, but Tavelia keeps her true nature and that of her Kargatane strictly secret. Nobody knows there are vampires inhabiting the "sacred" Temple of the Overseer.

As a matter of fact, the entire false religion was designed to attract Heroes of Light and traveling do-gooders. The Temple is simply a front for the evil Kargat to closely monitor the movements and actions of potential adversaries in its community. Many

a good-hearted individual has perished at their hands...

But whatever the bond between **Tavelia** and PC **Lavernous Vernichtung** is, nobody can deny the fact they are exceptionally close. So much so, many believe the two to be betrothed (despite explicit religious law forbidding marriage between ordained Overseer preachers).

When King Azalin sent word down to Tavelia about his plot to steal the *Unfingered Hand of Power* from Styrix the night hag, she felt there would be nobody better for the job than PC Lavernous Vernichtung (she is oblivious to the fact Lavernous subtly manipulated her to get this task assigned to him). As a Kargat agent (the right hands of Azalin), Tavelia was privy to certain secret information. Like the fact the destruction of this "*Unfingered Hand of Power*" can lead to a possible escape route from the Demiplane of Dread. And how foolish was it of her to relay this sensitive secret information to members of her OWN inner circle (Lavernous included)? Very foolish.

See, in the back of Lavernous' mind, he's STILL searching for an escape from Ravenloft back to Gothic Earth Germany (he just has no idea WHY the thought is there). So when word of this assignment came up within Tavelia's Kargatane branch, he sued for admittance immediately. While Tavelia feels she has assigned the best-qualified Kargatane agent to the task, Lavernous Vernichtung has his OWN secret motives.

An evil, wicked plot that involves the spilling of fresh scholar's blood...

CHESS MOVES

July 6, 736: Late Afternoon (continued)

Immediately upon entering the government square, the three players (and one NPC) are accosted by Overseer petitioners. These simple brown-robed folk move along within the teeming city masses, handing out their leaflets and expounding upon their philosophies. Nobody pays them much attention, but their casual countenance masks a deliberate and devilish agenda. These are the mortals seeking to learn the secrets of immortality through servitude. For they know their superiors have been "blessed" with everlasting life (*they just don't know at what cost*). And so, they scurry about the city blindly fulfilling their evil undead masters wishes.

Today, word has been spoken of a University Professor who arrives in a mahogany coach. He will be accompanied by three Gundarakian leaders, all of which seek dark, forbidden knowledge. These four travelers must be waylaid and convinced of the error in their ways. For if their ignorant plan were to unfurl, the ramifications could be dire. Overseer petitioners have been scouring the city for these four travelers since sun up.

So as soon as that mahogany wagon appears along the steamy streets of Government square, it is instantaneously spotted by a pair of prying eyes. **Thraxil**, a 20-year old aspiring acolyte makes the catch and rushes in for the kill. Certainly this find will be worth a few points within the Overseer hierarchy. Anything that can elevate his status.

Thraxil is the first petitioner to approach the moving carriage, and he's been preparing his speech all morning. "*Kind sirs, kind sirs!*" he calls out, rapping lightly

on the passing carriage windows. When his calls go unheeded (as expected), he moves faster to keep up. This time, he calls out their names: *"Professor Valdemear, Lord and Count, I beseech you! End your blind uncertainty now!"*

Thraxil slowed his jog to a stroll, as the carriage slowed down accordingly. He smiled to himself, before replacing the smirk with a grim and serious visage.

It was Lord Alexis Darkangnon who spoke to the brown-robed petitioner from his seat in the carriage. Destanial and Domingo followed his lead, while Professor Valdemear shirked away from the encounter. Alexis gave the kid a chance to speak his piece, and Thraxil's prepared speech flowed like water.

Thraxil explained to the four travelers (amidst the hub-bub of government square) that the Gods have been watching their every move. For what these four travelers unwittingly seek, will ultimately bring about their destruction...

Obviously these words intrigued the three players (and one NPC). They ASSUMED him to mean that their search for the deceased Professor Myles Witherspoon's research would accidentally doom them in-the-end. Player Character Professor Ellis Valdemear automatically took this as Truth, considering he's been paranoid about the whole ordeal since the get-go.

The players begged Thraxil to continue, but there was little more he could share with them. Right THEN and THERE... Instead, he offered to admit the players into the High Temple, where they can meet with his supervisors and spiritual advisors. These are the Knowledgeable Ones who can guide the players down the right path. Only they hold the key to the players well being...

After a brief discussion between the three players (and one NPC), they accepted Thraxil's offer to escort them to the Temple. They felt what he spoke HAD to be true. He knew their names, right? Inside his mind, Thraxil celebrates his victory. He was the one who found the travelers, and convinced them to meet with his superiors. His little games of manipulation made him smile. Little did even HE know, they were ALL pawns in a much larger scheme...

One quick thing to mention before we begin. In honor of Q-Monstah's return we decided to game twice this week. Once on our regularly scheduled Wednesday night and again on the following Sunday. But Destanial's player called in with the flu (fo real). So he MISSED the regular Wed AND couldn't make it on Sunday. So just keep that in mind, cuz for the remainder of this adventure Destanial is temporarily relegated to NPC status.

TEMPLE OF THE OVERSEER

Aiight, so I have the two players (and now two NPCs) come to "the Temple" at about 7:30 pm, with their guide Thraxil (who hopes to earn some stripes with his help in the con). It's July 6th of 736, and the hot summer sun still hangs low on the horizon. Therefore, I ruled Tavelia and her minions (PC Lavernous included) wouldn't appear for another hour or so.

So I took time to show them around the Temple a bit. I showed them some more pics I downloaded off the net (I'm big on visuals). I explained the intricate designs in the stonework and the remarkable craftsmanship of the pillars and statues. If Destanial's player had been there, I would've slipped him a note that hinted at the

sinister macabre underlying of the church. But instead, I just mentioned he shivered from a cold, unexplainable chill. The player of Alexis is blissfully unaware the church masks a deadly front, but his character wouldn't be able to detect it anyway. So it's all good. Ellis Valdemear's player, on the other hand, is thrilled to find sanctuary in a house of faith. After that good scare he got with the black-suited gentleman in II Aluk, he was happy to find some respite in Martira Bay. He listened eagerly as Thraxil continued with the tour.

I introduced Alexis, Ellis Valdemear and their NPC companions (Destanial and Domingo) to the High Cleric of the Temple, **Derakoth**. He is a graying man in his mid-60s with a wild gleam in his eyes, and a flourish as he speaks. But little do they realize... he's just a simple 1/2 mad lunatic with designed delusions of cosmic grandeur. The Martira Bay Kargat (Tavelia in particular) plucked him out of the countryside and convinced him of his "divine message". Ever since then, he's been seen as the public figurehead of the Overseer Temple.

Meanwhile, the Q-Monstah and his character Lavernous wait off stage.

After I've made it clear that the players have been expected, I set about creating the peak of the scene. This involves such as extracurriculars as mood lighting and cued musical accompaniment. The sun is setting on Martira Bay, and the High Priestess and her men shall be returning from their "journey" soon.

Finally, I described the rolling rumble of a dozen approaching steeds, and the breeze that whistled through the church, fluttering torches in its wake. Suddenly, the huge double doors burst open, and the silhouetted form of a dozen armored knights appeared. All candles are extinguished from the strong gust of wind, leaving only stout torches to light the cathedral.

The knights step forth into the chamber, all adorned with symbols of Darkon and the Overseer. The leader stepped forward to remove his helmet... and long raven tresses spilled forth. This was no man, it was the **High Priestess, Tavelia**, and her beauty was entrancing. Immediately, Lord Alexis Darkangnon was captivated. She greeted the two players (and two NPCs) and explained how grateful she was of their arrival. The stars have been aligning for their visit.

A second man stepped forth from the ensemble of armored knights. Tavelia introduced him as a spiritual advisor and guide for the players. **Lavernous Vernichtung** removed his helm, and the Q-Monstah was introduced into the Game!

Q-MONSTAH'S TIME TO SHINE

From here I turned the flow of the Game over to the Q-Monstah, as the now THREE players (and two NPCs) were settled comfortably into the Temple sitting room. Now previously, I had been switching back and forth between the players during scenes, and this scene was no exception. I have succeeded in introducing Ellis, Alexis, Destanial and now Lavernous to each other, but our female player Misha the Lost still waits in the wings. Plus, with this being her first session and all, I really wanted her to see how the pros get down. Yaknow! So she silently observes the masters at work (*referring to Alexis and the Q-Monstah, NOT Ellis Valdemear AKA the Cemetery Home Outkast*).

The night before this session was the night of Q-Monstah's return from Germany, and we stayed up all night discussing the Game. So when I turned the reigns over to

him at this point, he was well-versed on the story background. I put it in his hands to propel the Game forward.

Lavernous went on to educate the characters on something he called the "*Unfingered Hand Of Death*". He told them how the artifact was created of the purest evil, and only a chosen few can hope to destroy it. He told them the wicked magic item was crafted by none other than the good professor Myles J. Witherspoon. This was a lie, yet the players were shocked by the false revelation. That's why the players had been "chosen" for the task; due to their close proximity to the professor's research. PC Ellis Valdemear couldn't believe his ears. He had no idea his mentor's research dabbled in the dark necromantic arts and thrived on murder. That was me and Q-Monstah's goal: strip the kid of all safety blankets. No home, no family and no friends. He needed something to hold onto, and the sanctity of the Temple was enticing to him.

Lavernous told them how the evil artifact was just out of the Temple's reach when the professor was alive, but when he died so too did all his magical wards. But just as the Temple was making their move to acquire and destroy the item, it was stolen from their grasp. Now they need the players help to recover the Unfingered Hand of Power.

After a brief discussion, the two players (Alexus and Ellis) agreed to participate in the church's "divine quest". So the two players (along with NPCs Destanial and Domingo) will travel with PC Lavernous Vernichtung to discover the whereabouts of the artifact. The BELIEVE it has something to do with Witherspoon's research. The group heads down to the docks at once, where disappearances are rumored to be linked to the Hand. Lavernous warns them to be ready for the horrors of a Ravenloft night.

TEMPTATION TRANSLATED **July 7, 736 (late night)**

The westside of Martira Bay is filled with your unsavory characters and grimy riff-raff. The drunken sailors that make their way from around the core, gamblers, swindlers, con-men and the harlots that satisfy them all. Surprisingly, weapons are relatively easy to come across and taverns and watering holes are abundant. Basically, it's like a medieval Broken City.

And it's here where the three players (Lavernous, Alexus and Ellis) along with their two NPC companions (Destanial and Domingo) are canvassing the alleyways and cobblestone streets for answers.

I wanted to make sure the players got the feeling of uneasy dread, so I illustrated the raunchy filth of the Westside to my best ability. How the hot, humid weather left the putrid stench of rotting trash hanging in the air, and how the sounds of raucous revelry drifted over from every hovel and pub. The sailors were obviously a ragged, rugged bunch that eyed the players suspiciously (considering their affluent attire). But the symbol of the Overseer hanging in necklace form from Lavernous' neck kept any would-be thieves at bay.

OK, so as DM I wanted to shed a little loose weight (referring to the two NPC's in my control, Count Destanial Magorian and Domingo dos Santos). I wanted to concentrate totally on the three players, and work on incorporating our FOURTH player into the mix (female gaming virgin Misha tha Lost). One or two weeks earlier

(before the players encountered the Temple of the Overseer) they had devised a way of gathering information from the locals. One of the ways was to have Destanial and his bodyguard Domingo disguise themselves as homeless panhandlers, and comb the streets for juicy rumors and hearsay. So with the players in the heart of grime-central, I figured now would be the time to break the two NPCs away. Destanial and Domingo don their disguises and begin their prowling through the nighttime streets of Martira Bay's lower Westside. Everybody will meet back at the Temple by sun up.

This leaves three players (Lavernous, Alexis and Ellis) to continue on their search. Meanwhile, the rogue outlander Misha tha Lost watches from the shadows. Remember, she had been tipped off on their arrival by a mysterious brown-skinned man who spoke in cryptic riddles. He told her to stick with the players and prevent them from falling into the clutches of the Temple.

Unfortunately for her, as she trails the players from a safe distance (their physical depiction matched her guide's description) she notices the "saintly" Lavernous Vernichtung accompanying them. Despite the fact she is an outlander from another dimension, it's painfully obvious that Lavernous (aka Q-Monstah) is religion-related. It's too late to prevent the players from traveling with the church, but still not too late to acquire the Unfingered Hand Of Power. And so she watches on from the shadows...

Lavernous stated it would be best if he and the Professor (Ellis Valdemear) questioned a few sailors to learn more about the rash of mysterious disappearances in the area. They assumed correctly that the Unfingered Hand of Power had something to do with this. Meanwhile, Alexis would use his "masculine wiles" to draw any pertinent information from the loose-lipped prostitutes (get it?). LOL

DM Note: *The FIRST step in revealing Lavernous (aka Q-Monstah)'s true identity happens here. I just slipped Alexis a quick note that hinted at a flash of red in the priest's eyes as he led Ellis Valdemear away. Lavernous turned back to Alexis and gave him a quick wink. It made Alexis' player chuckle, cuz he already knew I had dastardly plans for Ellis Valdemear's player (he just didn't know WHAT exactly).*

So now we have two NPCs (Destanial and Domingo) off in NPC-land questioning drunks and bums, while PC Lavernous Vernichtung and PC Ellis Valdemear interview various sailors and dock loaders (using the Temple as their icebreaker). Meanwhile, Alexis moved along the steamy shoreline looking for some late night action, and Misha tha Lost is divided on who she should continue following. Obviously (using Player Knowledge) she ruled out the two NPCs, so it was either Lavernous and the Professor or the dashing, young Lord of Solyss Gundarak. She chose to follow Alexis Darkangnon (Lord of Solyss Gundarak).

THE MAN with the GOLDEN SMILE

With just a leisurely jaunt down dockside, Alexis was able to draw the eye of nearly every "working" girl in the area. There were plenty of gorilla pimps on the scene too, none of them afraid to raise a hand if the situation called for it. With his confident (some would say "cocky") stroll and well-to-do wardrobe, the Lord was an impressive sight. When a barker at a nearby watering hole hollered at him, with promises of drunken revelry and carnal carousing, Lord Darkangnon decided this would be the first place to set up shop.

When he crossed the busy nighttime street and entered the rowdy pub, Misha tha

Lost was hesitant to follow. But after disguising herself as much as she could, she crept into the crowded hall after him.

Alexus was the smooth operator, gliding through the rancid tavern halls with ease. It was apparent he was on a different level than these local yokels. There were plenty of invitations to game, whether it be coin tossing, darts or cards, but Alexis politely declined. Instead, he sauntered on up to the bar and ordered a double of their hardest izh. He kept his ears tuned to the conversations around him, listening for a clue. Meanwhile, Misha tha Lost played the cut and blended into the background of the tavern. She caught a couple mean-mugs and ice-grills from the regulars, each wondering where the fair-skinned chick came from, but no trouble came her way. She watched Alexis silently, waiting to see his next move (both in the game and in real life!)

A few die rolls here, a couple Gather Information checks there, and Alexis is swimming in stories (all of which have been heard by a prying Misha tha Lost, as well). Turns out, a few of the local brothel girls (from THIS tavern) are amongst the missing. Authorities are lax to react, as they don't consider prostitutes disappearing to be a top priority. Everybody has an idea or theory on who the culprit(s) may be. Some believe it's port authorities themselves, looking to get for free what others pay a fee for. Still others report the existence of strange sea creatures preying on the dockside residents. But the clue that set off Alexis' alarm was the story about an old lady rumored to be involved in dark, necromantic arts. He pried a bit further, and learned this old lady is a hermit who lives just outside the fishing community, and only travels into the city to get supplies. They say she dabbles in witchcraft.

And so, Alexis sought a way to procure a hand-drawn map from the locals that would lead to the approximate location of her abode. Being the Lord of Solyss Gundarak and all, he was prepared to pay handsomely for the information. It wasn't long before a few boisterous, drunken locals were arguing over the rights to draw the map.

Alexis left the tavern with a crude sketching drawn on the back of a napkin, and Misha tha Lost still trailing him from the shadows. He still had an hour or so before he was scheduled to meet with the others back at the Temple, so he decided to stick around the area and see what other trouble he could kick up...

THE VETERAN and the ROOK (aka "When Q-Monstah met Cemetery Home Outkast")

Meanwhile, the priest and professor interviewed sailors down by the dock. Their air of professionalism gave the questions a serious weight, and everybody answered to the best of their ability. For the most, nothing shady or suspicious had been reported, with the exception of an odd stalker story every once and while. Some whispered that the waterfront hides the existence of blood-drinkers feeding on the unfortunate, while others said it just isn't wise to defy night fall, period. When questioned further about the rash of disappearances striking the area, Lavernous and Ellis received a few chuckles. Some of the workers said "people been disappearing round hea for YEARS. Why you start caring now all the sudden?" Lavernous and Ellis didn't really have an answer for that one.

It's crucial to keep in mind this one simple fact: Q-Monstah (aka Lavernous Vernichtung) is straight fire-truckin with Cemetery Home Outkast's head (aka Ellis Valdemear). He drills it into him (in-game and out-game) that his mentor Myles J.

Witherspoon was an evil, evil man. The powers he bargained with for the ability to create the Unfingered Hand of Death were great and evil indeed. Only through much "personal sacrifice" and triumph over adversity can the Hand be completely destroyed. I just kept laughing behind the Screen, cuz Q knew we were gonna axe the kid sooner or later. His role-playing straight suxxx, and he's always complaining about one thing or another (either his guy doesn't have enough plusses, or the character levels are too low, or a million other munchkin complaints). He seems legitimately stumped when it comes to interacting with the locals, as he can never find the right words. Plus not to mention, his whole vibe is madd lame and depressing (the kid LIVED in a damn cemetery home for 10 years!) Granted, it must not be fun to LIVE in a funeral home, but I'll tell ya: the games we ran there were AWESOME! LOL

Anywayz, Q-Monstah was just taking the opportunity to have a little "ha-ha-wink-wink-nudge-nudge" moment at the table. We all knew Cemetery Home Outkast wasn't gonna make the cut, but the poor sap had no idea. I really don't want to come off evil and demented, but TRUST ME. You DON'T know this jabroni. I couldn't wait to make an example out of him. Sucker.

So now Lavernous has succeeded in making Ellis Valdemear extra paranoid. He can't believe he was misled by his mentor the whole time. This kid is used to your standard hack-n-slash D&D, so he automatically assumed the Overseer religion was a just and honorable one. All I had to do was describe the white clothes worn by the priests ("Dressed in white? They MUST be good guys!") He also assumed Q-Monstah was here to "help" him, when in fact we're really gonna fire-truck him over and toss him out on his azz. But anywayz, Q kept playing his little subtle mind-games, while me and Alexis chuckled to ourself. Misha tha Lost just looked on, as she wasn't in on the scam either. We were shooting over her head.

So by the time everybody meets back up at the Temple, we were ready to wrap up the sess for the night. NPCs Destanial and Domingo heard rumors of a hag living in the sewers, while Lavernous and Ellis gathered nothing of importance. Alexis presented the crude, hand-drawn map he had obtained, and they all agreed to check out the dark countryside tonight (keeping in mind the natural fear of the dark Alexis, Destanial and Domingo have as native Barovians). Meanwhile, Misha stayed outside the Temple and waited for the players to reemerge.

Next post, we tackle the players search for this old, mysterious hermit they've heard so little about... *(better known to you Ravenloft fans as **Styrix the Nighthag!***

July 7, 736 (a few hours before sunrise)

The three players (Lavernous, Alexis and Ellis) meet back at the church with their NPC companions Destanial and Domingo to discuss their findings. With the aid of High Cleric Derakoth and Tavelia, they devise a plan to go information gathering. Lavernous stays behind at the temple to "take care of clerical duties" (*in actuality, he doesn't want to take the risk of being caught when the sun comes up*). So Alexis, Ellis, Destanial and Domingo will follow the maps course into the countryside just outside Martira Bay.

Going relatively easy on the players, I simply assigned a -2 to all dice rolls made by Alexis, Destanial and Domingo (native Barovians with a fear of the dark that is waning in the year they've been away from home).

When the two players and two NPCs reemerge from the Temple, our female player Misha tha Lost is right on them (*Tavelia is aware of her presence, but neglects to tell the players so. She is curious to discover the girl's motive, so she monitors her actions silently*). Misha tha Lost will continue to tail the other players beneath cover of night.

As DM, it was my duty construct an eerie, ominous scene as the trappings of city life disappeared around the players the further they delved into the rural countryside. And although the sun has long since set, it's still MADD HOT. They can smell the salty sea breeze as they trudge over the darkened landscape.

I tried to paint the picture of a dark, desolate countryside with wild, lush vegetation. The two players (and two NPCs) were all alone in the travels (with the exception of Misha tha Lost who trails far behind the players, but not far enough to lose sight of them). They follow the maps direction by lantern, as it's the only source of light for them. Finally, I felt the sense of isolation was well established, and I set about describing the lone cottage that appears on the horizon. Nestled well off the beaten path, and almost over-run with ragged weeds and vines. It resembled the run-down shanties in the city, but this one was all alone in the wilderness. Not another neighbor in site for miles. It was far enough from city limits that any screams for help could not be heard...

With a bit of trepidation, the two players (and two NPCs) approached. Misha tha Lost watched on from the "safety" of the desolate dirt road. What horrors await the players inside the cottage? Or will they simply disturb a harmless old hedge witch?

Tavelia had armed the players with a bit of hag-hunting knowledge on the "off-chance they may need it" (and knowing FULL-well the capabilities of Styrix). I just gave them some tips and pointers out the VR Guide, but disguised them as holy suggestions. Plus it served to heighten the dread a bit.

Again, I don't really like Cemetery Home Outkast as a person (nor do I like his character Ellis Valdemear), so I wasn't going out of my way to make things easier for him. IF there had been a sorcerer character present (Ellis is a wizard), I would have noted the faint necromantic aura resonating from inside the cottage. As it was, I could only describe the seemingly sudden drop in temperature as they approached the ramshackle hut.

It was obviously deserted, and by the looks of it nobody's been through here in ages. Yet, they can still smell the remains of a smoldering fireplace, and a thin wisp of black smoke trails from the stone chimney (Alexus correctly assumed the fire was just recently squashed). The pathway leading from the dirt road to the cottage door was choked out by weeds, and the gnarled, blackened branches of nearby trees hung low (*IF a ranger had been present, he/she would have noticed the path was recently traveled and the trees bore no leaves or fruit*).

Alexus was the first to approach the shanty door (which oddly enough) was securely locked. The few windows in the cottage were dark with smudgy residue, and appeared to be blocked by bookshelves or something similar. Being NORMAL people and not super-charged munchkins, the players calmly knocked on the door hoping to arouse whoever was inside (they did NOT bash the door in and start hackin).

As expected, there was no answer and the players devised another method of entry (while Misha watches on from a distance). Alexis fiddled around with his thieves picks, while Destanial and Domingo stood watch. Professor Ellis Valdemear slipped around the side and used his precious gaseous form spell to gain entry through the cracks and crevices (Misha SAW this event transpire).

So while Alexis is breaking and entering, Ellis Valdemear is already inside mingling with the dust and cobwebs. The shack appeared to be one room, and it was extremely cluttered. Jars of incense, melted candles and beads lay strewn about everywhere. A small wooden table sat before the stone fireplace. A cauldron rested just above. He could see the ashes in the fireplace, and knew they had recently been snuffed. Ellis Valdemear continued on in gaseous form.

Heh Heh Heh. As DM, I continually hindered Alexis' efforts to gain entry into the cottage. His picks would break, his hands would slip etc... I'm just buyin some time, cuz I want Ellis Valdemear alone in the place for a little while.

So there he is in the cottage, gaseous forming around and looking for any clues or hints. I used my light dimmers and started whispering in a low, raspy voice. Suffice to say, Cemetery Home Outkast the player was starting to feel the scene. I built up the tension by describing the various herbs and home remedies, but giving them a subtle evil twist. I made it obvious to him that whoever was here knew the players were coming, and hid accordingly. He checked around the second room (the only other) and found much of the same clutter and debris. Then, I had him discover the trap door.

Whispering so they had to strain to hear my voice (as music plays in the background) I described the professors descent into the cellar. He floats down the wooden steps, so as to not make a creak. The aroma of must and corrosion is ever present. I wanted him to discover the underground chamber Styrix has constructed for her studies. And find it he did...

He slid beneath the heavy oaken door, and the sight that greeted him made the player gasp ***[Insert picture of the infamous Rift Spanner!]*** It was far from completion, yet the glowing orb in the center hummed and throbbed with bottled energy. The huge device was apparently magical in construction, and immediately intrigued the wizardly professor.

BOOM!

I shook the gaming table and screamed in the kids face!
The wrinkled old hag has appeared before you with a vicious snarl! He was busted!

I let the corny kid escape back up the stairs and into the main room before I aborted his magic spells. This left him in physical form, stumbling around in the cluttered, claustrophobic cottage. Kettles were falling on him, and he was tripping on who KNOWS what. He fell to the floor and came face to face with a smiling skull. BOOM. Failed Fear Check, and before ya know it, the witch Styrix is hovering over him! (still in her "harmless old lady" disguise). I let him get one scream out before proceeding to smash his fire-truckin face in.

Hearing the scream and sounds of struggle, Alexis, Destanial and Domingo immediately burst forth into the room, weapons drawn. Misha too followed from her

spot on the road. She crept up quietly to watch the proceeding events through the open door.

Combat rages.

There was no need to use Styrix to her full capability (her true form revealed), as the players were quickly outclassed and outmatched. Alexis was the only one who could come to the aid of the professor, as Destanial and Domingo were quickly stunned, enfeebled and dazed (I wrote out the two NPCs to save me some time behind the Screen).

Things were NOT proceeding smoothly for the players, as Alexis was quick to hit the deck too. He had been reaching for his trusty Black Razor, but it was fumbled and lost from his grasp. Just as it seemed all was lost for the players... the mysterious (and unknown) Misha tha Lost rushed in!

Her distraction gave Alexis *juuuuuust* enough time to grab the Black Razor (while Styrix took a round to lay out Misha). Misha couldn't do much combat-wise, but her distraction proved valuable. Alexis had his Black Razor and he was the party's only hope for escape.

With the wicked Black Razor working to his advantage, he quickly got the upper hand. Battle raged on. While Alexis used the blade to stave off the witch, Misha and Ellis were able to come to their senses. They scrambled around through the cottage; hoping and praying Alexis could buy them enough time. A few search and seizure checks later, and Misha hit the jackpot. A gnarled, blackened appendage that had been crafted into some kind of crude candleholder. Curiously enough (considering its description) the hand DID have five fingers. Misha scooped the hand up and Ellis used what magic he had left to smuggle both of them out of the cottage.

Alexis continued to battle the witch, but when she knew the hand had been stolen she let out a wicked shriek of anger and frustration (akin to the Wicked Witch of the West). Alexis struck her with his blade, propelling her backwards through the weak, termite-infested wooden wall. As he approached her where she lay (amidst the rubble and clutter of the cottage) she disappeared into a puff of smoke (and he saw the long, glistening form of a black snake slither away into the mess).

Styrix had been temporarily defeated, but the players knew she wouldn't stay down for long. They were beaten, battered and dazed, and they beat a hasty retreat out of the cottage while they had the chance. Everybody stared in amazement at the mysterious Misha tha Lost, who burst in suddenly to save them from certain doom.

There wasn't much time for discussion, as the players limped back up the path to Martira Bay. They now have the infamous Unfingered Hand of Power, as well as a new ally (or is it ENEMY?) in Misha tha Lost. But how long before Styrix extracts her vicious revenge?

FEEL THE BURN

July 8, 736 (wee small hours of the morn)

My group of players have been thoroughly man-handled by the mad hag *Styrix*, and seek to find sanctuary from the horrors of the Ravenloft night. The journey back up that lonesome country road seems to take even longer, and as the adrenaline rush

subsides, the pain from their mortal wounds sting even more.

Lord Alexis Darkangnon leads the party back to civilization still wielding his enchanted Black Razor. The scrap with the witch Styrix sapped a lot of strength and energy from the party, and the Lord didn't want to take any more chances of being caught off-guard.

Behind the Lord, his life-long friend and traveling companion *Count Destanial Magorian* follows. He and his bodyguard *Domingo dos Santos* felt the raw power of Styrix's evil magiks, and their heads throbbed from the force. Their minds are fuzzy, as if they have yet to wake from a bad dream.

Rounding out the party is the former University of Il Aluk professor *Ellis Valdemear*, and the Outlander *Misha tha Lost*. It is Misha who carries with her the infamous "Unfingered Hand Of Power" that they've ALL been searching for. The professor is a bit shaken up by the Blair-Witch-like encounter they had at the old cottage, and nervously wrings his hands. Misha trudges along in silence, her large-blue eyes fixed upon the severed hand she carries (see previous post: The Unfingered Hand).

While Lord Darkangnon silently leads the way (and Count Magorian and Domingo follow), Professor Valdemear is first to attempt to speak with the stranger Misha tha Lost. All were surprised when she suddenly burst into the cottage to save them from certain doom, and they wanted to know who she was and why she helped them. Unfortunately, their seemed to be some kind of language barrier, as the pretty young girl (still covered with dirt and grime) could only shake her head to say, "no comprehend".

Taking the advice of the Black Box to heart, I as DM used the awesome forces of nature against the characters at this critical junction. As they dragged their worn and beaten bodies up the deserted dirt road, the distant rumble of thunder could be heard. It would still be an hour or so before they hit any kind of main road, and they could not take the risk of remaining outside through the night. But they were so battered and beaten they could barely continue.

I built up the brewing storm clouds, and described the sticky humidity in the air (keeping in mind it's summer of 736 and it's MADD hot). I had just began to depict the first signs of civilization for the players, when **BOOM**. The summer downpour begins.

Within moments the players are soaked to the bone, and their armor and gear is weighted down appropriately. The Unfingered Hand in their possession begins to streak and run from the rainstorm.

They have traveled mostly in silence until this point, when suddenly Misha tha Lost begins to recognize the surrounding area.

Quote:

Originally posted by The MadStepDad

It was the voice of the mysterious brown-skinned man in her dreams. The same bourbon-soaked smooth baritone that silently urged her along in the Mists. The one that she used to hear when she fanaticized about jewel heists and shop boosting.

The voice that all at once warmed her and chilled her to the core. He was here amongst the decay and squalor of the dockside neighborhoods. There, she spotted him on the stoop of a sagging brick dwelling. Whispering her name in a heavily accented form of her native Bluspell tongue, and gently urging her over with his hands. He appeared to be doing it as quickly and quietly as possible, as if someone might be watching their interaction. He was the only sense of relief she could find. So she obeyed his beckoning command and crossed the street towards the hovel.

This was the neighborhood where she met the brown-skinned stranger! She pointed off the street to that ramshackle hovel he stood at. The hallway where he beckoned her in. Unfortunately, the other players had no idea what she was trying to say, but assumed she was gesturing towards the shack as a means of shelter or sanctuary. With the streets deserted and the rain pouring, the players decided to take refuge until the storm subsided (they would continue on back to the Temple at sun rise).

Misha tha Lost gleefully darted towards the old shack, eager to reacquaint with the man who'd sent her to find the Unfingered Hand in the first place. The only man in this god-forsaken realm that understood her and spoke her language. She eagerly gestured for the other players to follow, and they did.

However, to her amazement, the place was abandoned. The warm fire she had been greeted with was gone. Not a trace remained. The table she sat at was caked with dust, and stained yellow with age. The chairs were splintered and unfit to sit in. It was as if nobody had EVER been here. Did she imagine the whole meeting? Had she confused this abandoned apartment with that of the stranger's? Did the rainstorm foul-up her direction sense? Either way these were her thoughts alone, as the other players had no clue of her previous meeting with the brown-skinned stranger. They just assumed she was leading them to shelter.

Despite the cluttered, filthy interior, the players were eager to strip their clinging wet clothes from their bodies (with the exception of Professor Ellis Valdemear who was hesitant to touch anything). After settling in, the players finally had some time to catch their breath. Misha set the Unfingered Hand at the center of the tipsy wooden table, and the players instinctively formed a circle around it. Each staring at the Hand with a mixture of awe and curiosity.

Their tinder boxes were damp, as were their torches. I stressed the inky darkness of their shack, and how the shadows seemed even longer and deeper (*I did this to mess with the three Barovians: Alexis, Destanial and Domingo*). They were completely soaked, and there was no other way to get a flame sparked. Except of course, for the Unfingered Hand that sat in the center of the table. This was a candle they were sure would work.

As DM, I was able to just sit back and chill after painting that last scene. I watched the players argue and debate over the merits of lighting the hand now versus waiting until they reached the Temple. It was extra fun to watch Misha try and communicate with the other players using only sign-language and simple sounds. Keep in mind that Destanial's player was absent for this session, so he and Domingo are my NPCs for now. Only Alexis, the professor Ellis Valdemear and Misha tha Lost had a part in this scene (*the Q-Monstah: AKA Lavernous Vernichtung watched on and laughed*).

He knew the awesome powers of the Hand (cuz I told him beforehand) and he was eagerly waiting for the players to do SOMETHing, just like I was!

It was basically Alexis arguing with Ellis, saying the only way to stave off the damp darkness was to get some kind of light going. The only way they could get some light going was to spark the candle. Ellis Valdemear, on the other hand, was strictly against it. I mean, for real against it. I thought his player (Cemetery Home Outkast) was gonna have a heart-attack. But suffice to say, Alexis (the player and the character) has much more pull than Ellis, so his wishes went fulfilled.

Despite the professor's objections, Alexis sparked the candle...

In game and out of game, the mood was intense. The lights in my room were dimmed and faint ethereal music emanated from my stereo speakers. Unfortunately, Alexis was the first to try and light the candle, so the players will probably never know that only certain character classes can do this (if Ellis the wizard had tried to light it, he would have found that he couldn't).

Now, to understand the full ramifications of this scenario, you need to know a bit about Alexis. All my friends from the old posts will know the deal, but for you new cats, I summarize:

Alexis is all about The Rush. Whether it's generated through adrenaline, violence, sex or even the drugs he abuses, Alexis lives for that next high. That's what he's constantly searching for in life.

And the rush he felt as he lit the candle was one of the sharpest, most intense highs of his life (second only to the killing stroke of his Black Razor sword). He could look around, and see the seconds tick by. He could *feel* the energy surging through his body. He felt as if he could march right over to the window and snatch a raindrop out the sky. The others watched him closely, but they appeared to be moving at half speed (like they're stuck in molasses, or something). Life around him moved along in slow motion, but he still had his quickness of wit and speed of body. It was like living in a dream, but he quickly accepted it as reality. The other characters had no idea why Alexis was beaming from ear to ear with that trademark devilish smirk.

His lifelong traveling companion Count Destanial Magorian interjected (remember, I'm playing him as an NPC for now). He could sense the candle was playing a number on Alexis, and he demanded it be extinguished. Alexis just laughed him off, so Destanial moved to snuff the candle out. And guess what? It didn't go out.

He tried snuffing it with his fingers, then with a bowl. Then he tried to wet the wick. All to no avail (by this time, Professor Ellis Valdemear is going "See! See! I told you! I told you it was bad!")

But Alexis just rolled his eyes (*I slipped him a note, as the methods of the candle now came natural to him*). As the others watched him, Alexis approached the table where the Unfingered Hand rested. He procured his sharpened dagger from its sheath, and proceeded to draw a thin line across his fingertip.

The other players gasped in mock revulsion as a drop of Alexis' tainted blood dangled precariously from his finger (he has the "Unwholesome Ichor" feat, a by-product of his drug addictions). As the blood drop hit the wick, there was a sizzle and

a pop. The flame was successfully extinguished.

DM Note: At this time, I asked to see Alexis' character sheet. I took his sheet behind my screen, and everybody watched as I did some revision work. All I did was add a year to his current age, but it was MADD hilarious watching the other players analyze the sheet, looking for changes.

You see, the Unfingered Hand works like a Haste spell (only souped up considerably). The drawback is, for x-amount of time spent with the candle burning, x-amount of years are added to your life (the exact figures escape me at this point). So it took a little while for Alexis to find what I changed on his sheet, and when he did he didn't even really care (which is GOOD cuz he's underestimating the curse of the Hand). But of course, the other players still have no idea and they were eyeing Alexis suspiciously (ESPECIALLY our nosy professor Ellis Valdemear).

Outside, the storm had begun to die away, and the players decided to brave the elements as opposed to shacking up in the spooky abandoned hovel. So they gathered up their damp belongings, and head back into the nighttime streets of Martira Bay on their way back to the Temple. There, they would seek the method of destruction and save the day like the heroes they are. Of course, SOMEBODY is beginning to develop his OWN ulterior motives (Alexus, Alexus, Alexus). Ulterior motives that will be feasted upon by a devilish blood-sucker who seeks to drive the Lord further down the road of eternal damnation. What schemes does the evil Lavernous Vernichtung have up his sleeve?

July 8th, 736 (waking hours)

The three players and two NPCs arrived back at the Temple the same time the rest of Martira Bay was waking up. Their mortal bodies ached with pain, and their heads buzzed with exhaustion.

High Cleric Derakoth (flanked by a ½ dozen acolytes) rushed to the player's sides immediately. They moved to set the wounds and comfort their pain, while the players gave the specifics of their encounter. There are no magical means of healing here, so this includes a lot of salves and medicinal herbs. There's practically no magic of ANY kind in my campaign, which is how Cemetery Home Outkast earned his first demerits, insisting upon playing a magic-user (*he really, really wanted a sorcerer, but I ruled it out. I compromised by allowing him to play a wizard*). He just did it to be a jerk, cuz he knew I didn't want to allow that in this campaign. Anywayz...

High Priestess Tavelia and her men (including Lavernous) are out on a crusade to smite evil in the surrounding lands, and asked that the players rest here until night fall (the subtlety is killing me). I gave the players 14 hours between sunrise and sunset to accomplish their individual goals.

Needless to say, much of the remaining day was spent in fitful sleep.

Return to Styrix's Hut

With a couple hours to kill before sunset, the players were left to their own devices.

Lord Alexus Darkagnon found himself unnaturally drawn to the Unfingered Hand

of Power, and the rush of energy it bestowed upon him. But like the Notorious B.I.G. once said, "real bad-boys always move in silence". Nobody knew what his heart desired. Only Destanial could see the fervor in the young Lord's eyes, but he steadfastly refused to believe it had anything to do with the Hand (*remember, he's naïve when it comes to Alexis' motives AND he's an NPC for the session*). Alexis made sure to Gather as much Information about the Hand's legend as he could from the clergy men. The rumors he heard of its creation seemed to ring true, as they all harkened back to the workings of a demented old hag. When the Lord heard of the churches goal to destroy the magical item, he set about finding a way to include himself on the task committee...

Meanwhile, **Professor Ellis Valdemear** and the quiet **Misha tha Lost** pore over ancient tomes within the church library. Communication between the two players is limited, but not impossible (*I let Misha's player pick five words she could use fluently. She had to improvise the rest*). Ellis used the time to research possible methods of destruction for the Hand, but he kept finding his mind drifting back to the confines of the old hag's basement. Where he caught a single fleeting glance of that vehicle born of arcane craftsmanship and power. He had NO idea what it was, or what it did, but even in the few seconds he saw it, he KNEW it was something powerful. He was intrigued by the arrival of Misha tha Lost, but only assumed she came from somewhere over the Nocturnal Sea (he has NO clue she comes from another dimension). But her connection to the Unfingered Hand tickled his curiosity, and he questioned her about it

Another example of Cemetery Home Outkast's ineptness: his interaction with our female player. THIS guy is a perfect example of a D&D stereotype, and why the rest of the world sees us as nerds and geeks. He has NO social interaction skills. Especially with females. He came off like a clown and a joke, and I was embarrassed for the kid.

Count Destanial Magorian and his bodyguard **Domingo dos Santos** aided the church in readying for their mid-day mass. When Professor Valdemear announced his intent to return to the hag's abode (to further investigate his glimpse of the Rift Spanner), Count Magorian attempted to persuade him otherwise. But when the Professor wouldn't budge, Destanial relented. He agreed to accompany the professor and Misha back to the hag's house (during daylight hours, this time). However, Lord Alexis Darkangnon refused. Instead, he chose to stay at the Temple, to learn more of the Hand and it's dark powers (*all in the guise of studying it's "destruction"*).

Of course, when the two players (and two NPCs) arrived at the cottage on horseback, the entire abode was abandoned. Not a clue remained hinting at a former inhabitant. There wasn't anything even remotely out of the ordinary. Professor Valdemear took his time examining the empty basement (after overcoming his initial fear of entering) but found no evidence of secret passages. He was sure of what he had seen the night before (the Rift Spanner) but there was nothing to support his claims today. Rats, foiled again. The four companions mounted their horses and head back towards Martira Bay, the salty sea air stinging their noses (but stinging no more than their own wounded inquisitiveness).

They arrived back at the Temple as the sky was layered with rich red and violet hues, heralding the setting of the sun and trumpeting the arrival of the July moon. Despite the heat of the Darkonian summer, the players took note of the cool breeze wafting over from the docks. They were safe within the confines of Martira Bay, even

safer in the sanctuary of the Overseer Temple.

Safe.

Or so they all thought...

Notice it was entirely Professor Ellis Valdemear's (aka Cemetery Home Outkast) idea to journey BACK to the site of their worst butt-whooping. Lord Darkangnon knew how stupid that move would be, which is why he refused. I only had Destanial and Domingo tag along (my two NPCs for the session) in case they needed some extra fire power. Misha tha Lost went with him cuz she doesn't know any better (this IS her first gaming session EVER, after all).

In conclusion, yet another reason to hate on the "good" Professor (aka Cemetery Home Outkast). But don't worry, we get him in the end.

Read on...

A Toast...

July 8, 736 (nighttime)

Imagine if you will, the quiet chambers of a priest's private study. A place where the priest (or priestess) can contemplate in silence, and ponder his/her duties alone. Alone in the sanctity of his/her own thoughts. A place that is off-limits to most, if not all, of the churches clergymen. It is in this place of quiet seclusion that **Lord Alexis Darkangnon** prowls with deliberation.

A man of his caliber will have no problem thwarting what little defense the clergy have mustered, as his skills are far beyond those of your normal man. It took the Lord little effort to sneak past the temple guards, and even less effort to enter the chambers (all without disturbing a thing or breaking a lock). And so, he snoops in peace. He's not quite sure what he's looking for, but knows there must be more to the Unfingered Hand than he's being told. He hopes to find a way to conquer the powers of the Hand, and use them to his utmost advantage. He is confident of his abilities (some would say "cocky").

*So you can just imagine his absolute surprise at being caught with his hand in the cookie jar. When **Lavernous Vernichtung** (aka the Q-Monstah) showed up unannounced at the threshold, catching the Lord totally unawares, Alexis knew what it felt like to be on the business end of his "move silently/hide in shadows" combo. His heart threatened to jump out of his throat, but he maintained his composure as best he could (*which is quite well, considering he DOES have an 18 charisma*).*

But Lavernous didn't interrogate him. He didn't even snarl angrily, or demand an explanation. None of that. Instead, he smiled slyly and entered the room with Alexis, closing the study door behind him. Outside, the white moon shone brightly over the city of Martira Bay.

ROLE-PLAYING BONANZA!

I love, love, LOVE my players. They're the best in the world, I swear. And it's times like this I forget I'm even running the Game. I mean, I straight up chilled behind the Screen as these two cats absolutely ripped it. Just ripped it to shreds. MADD entertaining. It was great to see two old friends jump right back into the swing of

things with no hesitation (remember, Q-Monstah just returned home from Germany after three years. He will return to Germany at the conclusion of this adventure). They really made me smile, considering this IS the first exposure Misha tha Lost has EVER had to D&D, and they made the Game come off madd cool. Even Cemetery Home Outkast was caught up in the scene, watching with reverence as the two pro's worked their magic.

A transcript wouldn't do this scene justice (even if I could remember each exchange!) Basically, each played their character as being one-up on the other. Like they had secret info that only they were privy to. But only in Lavernous' case was this true... Lavernous knew Alexis was enthralled by the powers of the Hand, and subtly played to this fact. He never once asked why the Lord snuck into High Priestess Tavelia's study. He KNEW why.

So as Lavernous casually withdrew a Red Velvet wine bottle from the cabinet, and arranged two glasses, he discussed *Power* with the Lord of Solyss Gundarak. The need and want all mortals have for it. And wouldn't it be wondrous if your wish for Power could be granted? Not necessarily just Power of the body, but Power of the mind and Power over others. Alexis wasn't quite sure where Lavernous was going with this topic, but he played along. He stated that much Power came with his position as Lord, and Power DOES breed contempt (as evidenced by the numerous attempts on his life). But Lavernous wondered aloud if there was a Power strong enough and capable of ERASING this contempt. A source so potent that none would dare cross those who wield it. Was Lavernous talking about the Unfingered Hand? Alexis wasn't sure, but he liked what he heard. With both glasses set up, Lavernous poured the dark crimson Red Velvet wine. Continuing their conversation, Lavernous fiddled around with a small jewelry chest on one of the book shelves. He passed Alexis a blood-red ruby for no discernable reason. As Lavernous continued his soliloquy, Alexis examined the jewel. Remember, Alexis is a whiz at appraisal and immediately recognized the value of the gem. It was real, and real expensive. Lavernous took it back (talking about a "wealth of power").

Finally, Lavernous asked the Lord if he'd rather be feared or respected... After a moment of contemplation, the Lord replied Fear. Cuz it "lasts longer".

Lavernous chuckled...*then proceeded to crush the ruby between his fingers*, reducing it to a very fine dust. As the Lord looked on in amazement, Lavernous sprinkled the gem powder into their individual wine glasses.

Then he proposed a toast.

"To Power".

Alexis accepted.

The Webs Unraveling

We're moving into the end zone now, so bear with me. Things are gonna start coming hard and heavy, as layer after layer of the onion gets peeled. The best way to brace ourselves for the inevitable bottom-out, is to start at the top. Get ready, yo. It's a long fall.

We're in Martira Bay now and y'all know who the spider in the center of web is. **King Azalin** himself, Darklord of Darkon. He was closely monitoring the progress of the

recently-deceased **Professor Myles Witherspoon**, whose research detailed the existence of Provisional Conjunctions. A theory that Azalin was dying to explore further. He had the professor murdered, so his prized research wouldn't fall into anybody else's hands (*namely Kurvyn Asterlei and his Fraternity of the Shadows branch and Professor Witherspoon's apprentice, the annoying little gnat named Ellis Valdemear [aka Cemetery Home Outkast]*). Azalin had all the information he needed.

The final straw he needs to break the camels back is a blast strong enough to rip the fabric of reality and propel the conjunction onward. A blast from the destruction of a potent magical item. So where is he gonna get a magical item to destroy? Certainly not from his own Black Vault! Despite Darkon's strange memory-altering nature, King Azalin has a long recollection. He perused his mental archives for an enemy to exploit. That's why he chose the hag **Styrix**, who had wronged him so many years before. She was using an artifact of her own creation known as the *Unfingered Hand* to wreak havoc on the slums of Martira Bay. Wreaking havoc on Azalin's people (not that he cared, but it made for good P.R.). So he put the word out to his Martira Bay Kargatane agent **Tavelia** that she must acquire this item "by any means necessary" (*of course, he ALSO has a back-up plan in effect. Just to be safe*).

So we move further down the food chain now, as Tavelia has received word from her master of a very important mission. Tavelia has her own gang of lackies and thralls, all cleverly disguised as clergymen at her Temple of the Overseer. Her branch of the kargatane includes PC **Lavernous Vernichtung** (aka the Q-Monstah), a priest who was rumored to have been romantically linked to the vampiress. When she needs a goal accomplished, she calls on him. Little did she know, this time Lavernous was the one subtly pulling strings. Using his relationship with the High Priestess as a crutch, he eased his way onto the selection committee. So with Tavelia's task accomplished (delegating the duty to her consigliere) we move onto the next ring in the web.

PC **Lavernous Vernichtung** (aka the Q-Monstah). This former death-camp operator fell victim to Darkon's memory-altering effects many years ago. He was swept up in an affair with the wicked vampiress Tavelia, and condemned to undead servitude soon thereafter. But he never forgot his true mission: Escape from the Demi-Plane of Dread (he just has no idea WHY). Through his studies, he has learned of an arcane, esoteric (and disturbed) method of escape. One that combines negative-life forces, full moons, magick rituals and scholar's blood. But little does even Lavernous know, Azalin is fully aware of this alternate method (this is his contingency plan). So in order to steal the Unfingered Hand for himself, AND have enough pawns at his disposal, Lavernous had to pretend he was riding with Tavelia all the way to the bitter end (*but as most bad-guy relationships go, he plans on betraying her in the end*). This brings us to our unwitting pawns in today's Game: the Player Characters.

As usual there are "uncanny coincidences" riding here, and only one man holds the reigns. The wild card blind spot with his own agenda and twisted motives. That mysterious brown-skinned stranger who led Ellis Valdemear to **Alexus** and **Destanial**, united them with the outlander **Misha tha Lost**, and then led ALL of them into Lavernous clutches. WHY did he set-up the players to be foils in this elaborate plot? Only he knows, and he ain't telling (not even me!)

Lavernous Vernichtung (posing as a cleric of the Overseer) has convinced the players that the *Unfingered Hand* must be destroyed. So he's got them all revved up and rearing to go, ready to save the world.

That's where we pick up the story now. Just as Lavernous is about to lead his pack of puppets into the Darkonian wilderness, where his thirst for blood and hunger for power will drive them ALL to extreme lengths...

Sands Of The Hourglass
July 8, 736 (continued).
Late Night.
Full Moon.

*Tonight's the night I get in some sh**.*
Deep Cover on that incognito tip.

With the *Unfingered Hand* in their possession, the players continue to research its properties, and utilize the temples facilities to the fullest.

Count Destanial Magorian and his bodyguard **Domingo dos Santos** spoke further with **High Cleric Derakoth**, in an effort to link their elusive quarry (author of the Hexad) to the preceding whirlwind of events (*they know SOMETHING or SOMEBODY is out there pulling the strings; they're still trying to figure out "who" and "why"*). But High Cleric Derakoth insists there is no such thing as divine prophecies and doomsday predictions. Instead, the steady hand of Fate is drawn by one's own actions.

DM Note: *This is another running-joke at our table, although I consider it a compliment. The players are always joking that the "Sense Motive" ability never works (and Destanial especially made sure he hooked that ability up on his sheet). Every time they use it, the NPCs are telling the truth (at least how THEY see it). I see it as a testament to my story-telling ability, cuz even if the NPC is telling a bold-faced lie; he/she really and truly believes the lie is true. This is the case with Derakoth. Remember, he's just a demented old man who was gassed up by Tavelia to be the public figurehead of the church (so if anything bad DOES befall the church, this guy takes the full brunt of it). He really DOESN'T believe in Hysksosa NOR has he ever heard of the Hexad. It's True, it's damn true...*

Misha tha Lost was cared for by the clerics and acolytes of the Overseer, who bandaged her wounds (from the scrap with Styrix), and offered her the opportunity to join their esteemed ranks.

Another DM Note (I'm blazed now, so bear with me as I ramble some more): *This is another long-term goal of my campaign: Make The Ongoing Story More Important Than The Sum Of It's Parts. Meaning, the STORY is bigger than any individual character. I encourage the players to explore Ravenloft further by experimenting with different characters and concepts. If a player seeks or chooses to retire their character in favor of a new one, I'm all for it (as long as it fits the storyline, of course). For example: waaaaay back in the day when I ran When Black Roses Bloom (before the players slayed Duke Gundar and before they become Counts and Lord) the players were still low-level young commoners. During the course of the adventure, they met up with Magda and her Wanderers, which included an NPC of my own creation named **Jalise**, niece to Magda (I only did that cuz I wanted a love interest for Destanial, and Magda was too old). As I planned, he was smitten by Jalise (not the feat) and their love grew stronger as the adventure unfolded. At its conclusion, it would have been PERFECTLY ACCEPTABLE for Destanial*

*to announce he was staying behind in Sithicus to help the Wanderers rebuild. Instead, he chose to temporarily break off his relationship with Jalise in favor of a higher sense of purpose: the defeat of **Duke Gundar**, Darklord of Gundarak. Another example: during the MSD-Exclusive adventure *This Thing Of Ours*. Lord Alexis Darkangnon met the Dilisnyan mob mistress Bellizza. He could have just as easily stayed behind and fought the war alongside her, but he too felt a stronger sense of duty and moved on. This whole scene right now is another example: the clerics of the Overseer are looking to recruit the young, naïve and scared Misha tha Lost into their ranks, cuz they know she's moldable like a piece of putty. If Misha's player chose to accept their offer, her character would live on as an NPC in the Temple, and she's free to create another character concept. Ya dig? I just think it gives the world a bigger, better feel. Enough selling, on with the telling...*

Meanwhile, Professor Ellis Valdemear is researching destruction methods for the Unfingered Hand in the temple library (all conveniently placed there ahead of time by Lavernous and Tavelia). But the D.I.C.K. (as Alexis likes to call him) was all happy and stuff, thinking he learned this info all on his own. I will admit though, it WAS cool to play him through this scene cuz he caught the vibes easy. I had him learn that the Unfingered Hand must be "fed to the serpent coiled at the base of the World Tree" (*shades of the ol' 2E Dungeon Masters Guide*). This was an esoteric (and slightly chilling) revelation which (combined with the eerie music I was playing) gave the whole table chills. It DOUBLY sucks that Destanial's player wasn't present at this session, cuz his character has a strong phobia of snakes.

Ellis Valdemear ALSO discovered that the serpent only uncoils on the night of a full moon. TONIGHT is the night of the full moon. Upon learning THIS fact, Ellis' eyes widened and he rushed to tell the others of his discovery. They're going to have to make their move TONIGHT (*this is great, cuz the D.I.C.K. is unwittingly rushing into his own destruction*). He informs the others of their task, and that they must feed the Hand to the serpent tonight. While the others prepare for their sudden departure, Ellis researches the exact location.

He learns that the "World Tree" is the name of a giant fire-blackened tree located in the Many Worlds Cemetery, south of the city. They will have to move fast in order to reach the cemetery before daybreak.

They hafta travel to a Cemetery.

In Ravenloft.

On the night of a full moon.

With an evil magical item, and a vampire as a companion.

Mwhah-ha-ha-ha-ha!

The Lord's Temptation

Meanwhile, as Ellis is learning all this stuff, Destanial and Domingo confer with High Cleric Derakoth, and Misha tha Lost gains a small measure of inner peace from the Temple, PC **Lavernous Vernichtung** and **Lord Alexis Darkangnon** are out for a pleasant nighttime stroll through the streets of Martira Bay's Government Square. Despite the fact he is a native Barovian born with an innate fear of the dark, and cursed with madd superstitions, Alexis feels oddly comfortable in the company of the priest Lavernous Vernichtung. Like they can't be touched on these hard cobblestone streets.

Keep in mind this scene occurs way before Ellis even cracked open the book to learn about the World Tree, and right after Alexis and Lavernous shared the Toast to Power. Lavernous already knew how the night was gonna go down. He explained to Alexis on their jaunt that the Moment of Truth shall occur tonight. Only then can Alexis be assured of his place in the grand scheme. STILL Alexis doesn't fully grasp what Lavernous is hinting at. He thinks the Q-Monstah is trying to plug his cleric-hood, and get Alexis to join the Temple. So Lavernous wants one more demonstration to sway Alexis to his side.

They meandered on down to the dockside community (where the players were originally looking for Styrix) and made their way past the taverns and bordellos. Lavernous led him down a discreet, in-the-cut alley way behind a row of brothels. An alleyway populated by the homeless dregs of Martira Bay. Just as Lavernous assumed, one of the bums approached them with his tin cup outstretched (*he saw the Temple robes and figured it would be easy to get a handout*).

But Lavernous caught Alexis' hand as he prepared to drop a copper piece in the mans cup. He gave Alexis a quick wink, and then focused his riveting glare on the bum. He suggested the bum give THEM a free handout, and he DID! The homeless bum emptied his pockets and tin cup of all valuables and eagerly turned it over to Lavernous ("for the sanctity of the church"). Overseer Law dictates that you must cluck like a chicken in the presence of a priest, and the bum did that too! He clucked and cawed, flapping his arms like chicken wings. Alexis looked on in stunned amazement, but he too got a perverse enjoyment out of the mans humiliation. When Lavernous asked the bum who or what he was most afraid of, the man stared balefully at them before responding. "You, father!"

Lavernous smirked, and replied "excellent". With the slippery quickness of a cheetah on speed (or Alexis under the influence of the Unfingered Hand) Lavernous lashed out at the helpless bum and caught him around the throat with his steely grip. Tight enough to prevent even a peep from escaping the mans esophagus. The bum's eyes widened in absolute HORROR as Lavernous bared his fangs for him (Alexis couldn't see this part). But he DID see the "saintly" Lavernous Vernichtung viciously drain the man of his very lifeforce right before his own eyes. He watched the bum age and shrivel, and in a matter of moments he was reduced to a dried-up old husk. When Lavernous turned to face Alexis (as the bums lifeless body slumped to the street), the Lord could see an eerie, unnatural fire burning in Lavernous' eyes. The same black flames of passion that ignites Alexis' eyes during times of sinful indulgence (*and a by-product of his first failed **Dark Powerz** check*).

Lavernous asked Alexis if he'd like to have the same kind of power at his beckoning command. Power of the body, Power of the mind and Power over others. FINALLY Lord Alexis Darkangnon realized he was dealing with a more unholy force than he originally suspected. But the temptation of such Power was too much for the mortal Alexis to resist, and he accepted Lavernous' offer to tutor him further.

Lavernous made all kinds of grand promises to the Lord, and asked only one measly favor in return. A favor that only an experienced assassin with no qualms or conscious can accomplish: ***the spilling of a scholar's blood by the blade of his wicked Black Razor.***

Again, at first the Lord was a bit perplexed by this request. It was only when the Q-Monstah, Alexis and I stepped outside for a smoke break did he understand the

demand (*we had to discuss it away from the table, so Cemetery Home Outkast wouldn't hear us plotting on his character*). Right away Alexis started laughing. He knew we were planning on writing out Cemetery Home Outkast, he just didn't know HOW. Now he learned the traitorous treachery could occur at his own hands. And he jumped at the opportunity. He couldn't WAIT to backstab the annoying D.I.C.K. and lay the irritating Ellis Valdemear to rest forever.

DM Note: *Lavernous (and Azalin) know there are TWO possible ways of opening that portal (the provisional conjunction). Either destroy a magic item, which contains enough force to RIP the fabric, or spill fresh scholars blood upon the base of the World Tree (during a full moon only) that will help grease the portal doors open (in conjunction with a powerful magick incantation, of course). So they can either FORCE the door open with the Hand or EASE the door open with the blood of a scholar. Obviously, Lavernous wants to test out the blood method so he can KEEP the Hand. He just wants a patsy to do the dirty work for him (AND to hopefully ease Alexis further down the path of damnation). Make sense now? Plus we hate the D.I.C.K. and can't wait to kick his azz out..*

So by the time Alexis and Lavernous return to the Temple, everybody else is rushing around preparing for their journey to the Many Worlds Cemetery. Alexis and Lavernous just chuckled to themselves. Misha and Ellis had NO idea why these two were giggling manically and glaring at them both...

Well, it's off to the cemetery. See ya there!

EPIC CONCLUSIONS

July 8, 736 (continued)

So now we have two Player Characters who believe they are traveling to the Many Worlds Cemetery to right a great wrong and destroy an evil artifact (Professor Ellis Valdemear and Misha tha Lost).

We have one Player Character who seeks to betray all his allies and escape from the Land Of Mists forever, taking with him said evil artifact (Lavernous Vernichtung).

We have another Player Character who has been smitten by the Dark Side of the Force, and seeks to learn more about Lavernous' promises of immortality (Lord Alexis Darkangnon). How far will his twisted desires take him? Far enough to warrant another DPz check?...

And finally, we have two NPCs who are along for the ride (Count Destanial Magorian and his bodyguard Domingo dos Santos). Again, Destanial's player missed two sessions in a row so his character has been entrusted to the DM (me). Both Destanial and Domingo believe they are out to destroy an evil magic item, just as Ellis and Misha do. But the TRUTH is a bit trickier...

The recipe for success calls for copious amounts of fluffy flavor text. And if you want my advice (who doesn't?) try to memorize the text, or at least have a decent freestyle in ya. Cuz it kinda takes away from the moment when the DM is reading from a book verbatim. This doesn't apply ALL the time, just some of the time. Especially when you're trying to build tension or lead to a climatic encounter.

So there I am, standing on my throne waving my arms around like a maniac, trying

to conjure the proper kind of mood for this send-off. I got the ill 6th Sense joint riding in the background, the candles are flickering in the breeze and my four players are following along with rapt attention.

After setting the scene of these five brave souls, led by the "ordained Overseer minister" Lavernous Vernichtung canvassing the misty Darkonian countryside, I handed the reigns of the game over to the players. As they travel towards their final destination and their destinies rapidly sneak up on them, the players were left to discuss amongst themselves the importance of their mission. This would be the LAST time these four players EVER game together again...

Once they were sufficiently in the mood, I set about describing the lonesome hilltop cemetery rising up over the misty horizon. The Many Worlds Cemetery is decades old, and a new body hasn't been interred on its grounds in years. It's so obscure and out of sight (despite its large size) that it doesn't appear on any map or in any written texts. And it was here the players were led to believe they would find the infamous "World Tree", and the giant serpent coiled at its base.

Lord Alexis Darkangnon still had the **Unfingered Hand** in his possession (*I can almost guarantee that if Destanial's player had been here, the Lord would NOT be handling this evil artifact. But that's the perils of missing two sessions in a row!*)

Harkening back to the advice given in the Black Box, I turned the forces of Mother Nature loose against this players at this crucial junction. The hot, heavy and humid weather that was threatening to break ever since the players left Martira Bay finally broke. And just like when the players returned from Styrix's hut, the sudden abrupt downpour soaked them to the bone. This will play a number on encounter distance, surprise, spot and listen checks...

Upon actually entering the cemetery, I tried my best to convey a mood of ominous anticipation. Everybody knew something was gonna happen, they just had no idea WHAT. That's a good vibe to capture for Ravenloft games.

The headstones were cracked and weather-beaten. Some appeared to be so ancient that the engraved text had worn away. The trees in the cemetery were long and blackened, with twisted branches that looked like gnarled fingers. Even the leaves were an off-color green, reminiscent of a fungus or mold. The pouring rain limited vision to a few yards, and the full moon was obscured by dark clouds. All in all, it was an eerie place to be for the evening.

The group made their way over the rolling hills of Many Worlds Cemetery, searching high and low for the legendary World Tree. They knew right away when they found it. A huge, towering tree that was leafless, despite the summer season. Its thick branches waved furiously from the pounding rain, and the grass and weeds at its base reached waist-level. Taking into account the darkness, lack of light as well as the rainstorm, vision has been considerably impaired. There's NO way of telling what lurks at the base of the Tree. All the better for the devious DM. Very bad for the poor players... *mwah-ha-ha-ha!*

Leading the charge was *Lavernous Vernichtung*, who requested some cover from the storm while he poured through a "divine" tome. He convinced the other characters that a special incantation must be read to summon the "coiled serpent". In actuality, it is a clever ploy on his behalf to begin the opening of the escape portal. The only X-

factor for him at this point is the unpredictable rainstorm. Will it effect the spells requirement for a full moon? Lavernous does NOT see any of the PCs as a threat (*CLASSIC downfall for a villain*). He has asked for and received the coveted Unfingered Hand (the bad guy has the artifact! Watch out!).

Now, I'm not COMPLETELY an azz, so I gave Ellis Valdemear a slim chance of recognizing his situation (*Cemetery Home Outkast the player has NO idea he has been secretly marked for death and campaign banishment*).

So as Lavernous recites the Words, and the rainstorm slows to a drizzle, I gave Ellis Valdemear a few secret Sense Motive/Spell Craft checks. Now being a mid-level wizard and all, Professor Valdemear has a pretty good understanding of wizardly magick, but NO knowledge of clerical or divine magic. Yet still, he knew for SURE that the spell Lavernous was casting was NOT one of a clerical or "divine" nature. Instead, it sounded suspiciously like a Necromantic Summoning spell. The professor is starting to get apprehensive (with good reason). Being the one who is shielding Lavernous from the elements, he suddenly pulls his umbrella away and the reading stops as all other players glare at him (*they have NO idea what the professor is feeling or thinking, cuz I had slipped him a note*).

This is where things start to get interesting...

Professor Valdemear suddenly accuses Lavernous of practicing witchcraft, while Q-Monstah (Lavernous' player) and Alexis all glare at me. They were probably wondering WHY I gave away their little secret, but I'm trying to be fair to everybody.

Misha tha Lost is just that: Lost. She's caught up in the hype of the moment (as the music in the background builds to a crescendo) but has NO idea what to do in this situation. Again, this is only her second D&D session EVER, so cut her some slack.

My NPCs Destanial and Domingo watch on with cautious concern. I was playing Destanial as quietly wary while wearing a mask of grim stoicism (*remember, his character is DEATHLY afraid of snakes: a by-product of his Barovian upbringing*).

Alexis asks the Professor how he knows the spell is witchcraft-related, but doesn't even wait for an answer. He rips into the professor with a vicious tirade, accusing HIM of practicing witchcraft (using the "it takes one to know one" argument). All around them, the drizzle is fading and the dark storm clouds are beginning to dissipate.

Ominous shadows begin lurking just outside the players peripheral, but only Destanial, Domingo and Misha notice (I slipped her a note). Even after she tries to alert the others to the disturbance, they just ignore her and continue their argument. Lavernous watches Alexis with a smirk. By this time Alexis is up in the professors grill, accusing him of all kinds of deceit and treachery (how ironic, huh?). Meanwhile, those ominous shapes and shadows keep shifting around the players.

Suddenly, there is another **BOOM** of thunder and *FLASH* of lighting, and lo and behold...

The cemetery is swarming with shambling undead! Closing in on the players in a tight circle! WTF!?

Immediately, Destanial unsheathes the tighmaevril and Domingo dos Santos prepares for battle. Alexis watches the figures inching closer, all the while keeping his eyes on the professor. Lavernous too watches the figures approach with a mix of shock and revulsion (*Q-Monstah the player had NO idea this was gonna happen. I swerved him!*)

Before the zombies can close in around the players, they hear a shrill cackling laugh cut through the muggy night air like a thrown dagger. Another *FLASH* of lighting, and **STYRIX THE NIGHT HAG** is perched atop a mausoleum directing her undead minions forth! She threatens to make the players pay for their thievery.

COMBAT RAGES!

Now if you recall, Q-Monstah (player of Lavernous Vernichtung) is only here for a two-shot session. After that he returns home to Germany. He wanted to play a powerful character, and got his wish with Lavernous the vampire. He knew his job was to set-up the players, betray the professor and escape Ravenloft through the portal. But he had NO idea I was gonna sic Styrix on him! So this last encounter came as a surprise even to ol' Q-Monstah (*who thus far has kinda been "co-DMing" from the other side of the Screen*).

While Misha, Destanial and Domingo do their best to battle the rotting zombies, Lavernous is clashing with the mighty Styrix. Professor Valdemear, on the other hand, is scouting out the perfect opening for him to snatch the summoning tome from Lavernous. But little does HE know, Alexis is "studying HIM for three rounds".

The battle of the Many Worlds Cemetery continues with Destanial and Domingo rushing to the aid of the "priest" Lavernous Vernichtung (*Remember, NOBODY except Alexis has an inkling of Lavernous' true identity*).

So the distraction of Destanial and Domingo rushing into the fray gives Professor Valdemear the perfect opening to snatch the book of summoning away from Lavernous! Even though he's been considerably weakened by his battle with Styrix, Lavernous is still a worthy foe. And now he's heated! So without further ado, he BARES HIS FANGS for all to see and charges the professor! Yes, I called for a Fear check and yes the professor passed it. On with the show.

So now we have Misha darting through the shadows, slaying as many undead monsters as she can while avoiding their deadly grasp. We have Destanial and Domingo battling it out with Styrix, while the vampire Lavernous Vernichtung fights Professor Ellis Valdemear. All the while, Lord Alexis Darkangnon is watching from the shadows...

Even with the distraction of battling in a darkened cemetery with undead zombies charging from all directions, Ellis Valdemear held his own with the weakened vampire. The battle mainly consisted of Lavernous trying to get his hands on the book, while Ellis Valdemear did everything in his power to prevent that. It was a just and noble battle, but in the end Lavernous overcame the II Aluk professor and got the book back. Lavernous made sure his last blow left the professor directly in the path of the encroaching undead, so Ellis was forced to turn his attention to them (lest he be torn to pieces).

Now the rush really begins...

With the gloomy storm clouds completely absent from the sky and the pale light of the full moon shining down upon the graveyard, Lavernous Vernichtung once again begins the dark incantation.

After watching the preceding events, Misha has concluded that Lavernous is secretly the bad-guy and sets out to right this. She emerges from the shadows to aid the professor, who has his hands full with the shambling undead (he exhausted many of his spells in his battle with Lavernous). All the while, Lavernous is working his vile magicks, hoping to open the portal door.

The battle with Styrix is not going too well for Destanial and Domingo. She laid out the Count of Solyss, and as he struggles to his feet she floored his bodyguard Domingo.

The mood is getting real intense now as the music is blaring and everybody is rushing to get their characters actions done. Finally, Ellis Valdemear breaks free from the grasp of the undead and rushes towards Lavernous. Misha tha Lost covers his back, buying him just enough time to reach the vampire as he is finishing the spell.

"Noooooooooooo!"

Ellis Valdemear is desperately hoping he can distract Lavernous before he does whatever evil thing he's doing. The initiative rolls are made, and the professor has ONE chance to prematurely end the vampire's magic spell...

WHAM! KA-THUNK!

Lord Alexis Darkangnon emerges from the shadows and *plunges his Black Razor into the good professors back!*

The players of Misha and Ellis are shocked! WTF!? They're at a loss for words! Q-Monstah (player of Lavernous) and Alexis begin laughing maniacally and pointing at Cemetery Home Outkast (player of Ellis). He looks to ME for some kind of help or answer, but all he gets is a shrug and a "Guess you didn't make the cut".

The totals are calculated, and Ellis Valdmear is reduced to negative hitpoints (but not dead). His unconscious body slams into the base of the World Tree, completely swallowed up by the tall weeds and vines. All you can see are his muddy dress shoes poking out from underneath.

You can see his dark crimson blood slowly begin pooling at the base of the tree. It looks as if the roots of the Tree themselves are shedding tears of blood.

Styrix finally dispatches Destanial and Domingo, and makes one last desperate lunge for the Hand. But it's too late!

With a brilliant FLASH of white light, the pool of scholars blood at the base of the World Tree temporarily begins to shimmer and ripple. Another CRACK of lightning hits the World Tree, practically splitting it in two and raining shards of fiery wood down upon the players. With those ominous Mistz rising up all around the cemetery, obscuring vision and blotting out the remaining undead, Lavernous completes the incantation with a wave of the hands.

Lord Alexis Darkagnon strides toward Lavernous to collect on his debt, but the evil vampire just winks and smirks. Q-Monstah basically laughed and told Alexis he got played. You should have seen the look on Alexis' face at that point. He NEVER thinks he's the pawn until the final façade is shattered. Happens every time! LOL

With undead corpses lying scattered around them, a wild nigh-hag charging from the rear, Professor Valdemear lying bleeding to death and Destanial and Domingo laid out, Misha does the only rational thing her character can do: she follows Lavernous Vernichtung through the portal!

Styrix emits a long, harsh mournful wail as her pet creation is sucked into oblivion with Lavernous and Misha. Another bright FLASH temporarily blinds Alexis, and when the spots clear from his eyes he is able to survey the carnage.

Not a rotting, undead body remains. The Many Worlds Cemetery is as cold and desolate as it was when they entered.

Styrix's shrill screech echoes through the night, but she too appears to have vanished.

Lavernous Vernichtung and Misha tha Lost are gone.
Professor Valdemear lies bleeding on the ground.
Destanial and Domingo scrape themselves off the land and approach the Lord. They have NO idea what just transpired.

Lord Darkagnon just stands over the body of Ellis Valdemear, shaking his head in disbelief. Destanial and Domingo assume the professor was the victim of an undead attack. They do NOT suspect the Truth.

They all look at each other, and Destanial says "Well, we better get him to a hospice right away". The Lord just sighs...

THE END

Thoughts From Behind the DM Screen

Whew.

That was a hard one. Over these last two sessions I:

Introduced a completely new player to D&D. She had no prior gaming experience before falling in with us, so we put her onto the Game entirely.

- Introduced an old/new player back into the ranks (Cemetery Home Outkast) and dealt with his annoying, munchkinny, no-role-playing bullcrap the entire time.
- Ejected said annoyingly sucky player shortly after admitting him into the cipher.
- Re-introduced an ORIGINAL member of the What Would U Do Crew back into the game after a four year absence (Q-Monstah). Our boy played in both sessions before returning home to Germany.

- Ran the game WITHOUT Count Destanial Magorian, who's player missed BOTH sessions.

It was a challenge, but isn't that what drives *all* DMs?

As far as our female player goes, consider her hooked. We inserted the needle in her vein and she is officially one of us now. It is a reoccurring theme of mine as DM to get new players completely strung-out, and homegirl was no exception. She couldn't believe what she had been missing and was kicking herself for not getting into the Game sooner. Matter of fact, soon thereafter she went out and copped a bunch of 3E books and dice and stuff, so I'm ecstatic I can introduce somebody to the Game who will actually *support* it. She even runs her *own* Farscape d20 game with her *own* group of D&D newbies.

SEE GUYS!? THIS IS YOUR DUTY AS D&D PLAYERS!!! SPREAD THE LOVE!!!

Homegirl did the only thing she felt was rational for her character when she chose to follow Lavernous Vernichtung through the portal. As she described it, *"he's crazy (points at Q-Monstah), he's crazy (points at Alexis), he's dead (points at Cemetery Home Outkast) and he's never here (points at Destanial's empty chair). Therefore Misha has no incentive to stay behind with these wackos"*. Eh, it's a sound explanation, sayz I. Plus, you should know by now that I encourage these kind of character-swapping moments.

And do y'all remember this part?

(from the mysterious brown-skinned mans discussion with Misha tha Lost)

Quote:

Originally posted by The MadStepDad

How the powers of the hand were capable of leading her back home. How there was a sanctuary of god within the city that sought to covet the hand, and how a royal adventuring party shall soon make the same bid. He told her to throw her lot in with the foreign wanderers, for the Church had many skeletons in the closet. Follow them closely and make sure they acquire the artifact. Only when the raw, savage powers of the hand are co-mingled with the fresh blood of a scholar, can the transdimensional vortex be opened. ***He who's Will is strongest shall dictate the planar direction.*** It was vague and abstruse, yet Misha knew exactly what the stranger spoke of.

Well it should be obvious to everybody that Lavernous Vernichtung had a much stronger force of Will than our little lost lamb Misha. So as they both stepped through the portal, it was Q-Monstah's character that set the course of the portal. This means Misha exited Ravenloft, only to find herself on Gothic Earth Germany during the time of the Holocaust. From one Hell to the next, her tragedy continues. But never fear, folks! Homegirl will be coming back strong with a brand-new character that will only demonstrate her newfound dedication to the Game even further. Watch out now!

As far as Q-Monstah is concerned, his trip home from Germany was worth every cent. This is the kid who calls me up long-distance and talks to me for HOURS about our old homebrewed 2E world. This is the same kid that refused to hear me when I

told him 3E is waaaaay better than 2E (he's kinda stubborn and set in his ways). He refused to hear anything about this new "3E hootnanny bulls***", as he called it. But suffice to say, at the conclusion of this adventure, 3E D&D had made a new fan. He too couldn't believe the ease of the rules, and loved the options out the whazzoo. While Lavernous Vernichtung is officially retired, Q-Monstah WILL make a return. The game went soooo well, the Q-Monstah found time to return again to America four months later. So you will read about his return to the table in a short while. Be on the lookout for *Feast Of Goblins Part I*, coming soon to a messageboard near you!

Alexus Darkangnon on the other hand, could only hang his head in shame. Time and time again, he vows to NEVER be a pawn in the Game, only to find himself playing that role at the adventure's conclusion. When will he learn that Evil is never truly rewarded? He should have known better to accept the bargain with Q, even with the promise of immortality on the line. Oh well, better luck next time, pal. And for your information, he WAS forced to roll a Dark Powerz check at the conclusion of the adventure (for betraying and backstabbing his "ally" Professor Valdemear).

Luckily for him he passed, and his slow descent into darkness remains at a standstill. But how long can he count on the luck of the dice? Another important factor to keep your eye on: **The Black Razor**. When he drove it into the Professors back (at the Q-Monstah's behest) something within the sword awoke. A dark, nefarious force that will play an integral part in the next chapter. Be on the lookout for the *Cedar Chest*, hitting up messageboards near you soon!

Now, let us discuss the loser. Cemetery Home Outkast the whiny, munchkin gamer-geek. Now, it's hard to put into words exactly *why* this kid rubs everybody the wrong way. He just does. And his style of gaming is straight trash. I'm just not feeling it. But I won't diss that style, I'll just diss him. You know the type: extreme power-monger. First, he complained and whined about the lack of wizards or sorcerers as class options (*I explained it was a low-magic setting and I didn't want to allow those classes for PCs*). Then he moaned and complained about starting at 6th level, saying his character can't do anything and "this sucks, this sucks". SIXTH LEVEL! Plus he has this whole smarmy, arrogant way about him that makes you wanna murder him. Our girl thought he was a joke. I don't think he's ever seen a female before. Needless to say, I had to eject him from the campaign before ya boy MSD had another homicide to deal with.

And hoo-boy, I wish y'all coulda seen the look on his face when Alexis ran him through. It was a mix of shocked sadness and fear. But when Alexis and Q-Monstah started pointing and laughing at him, that was the icing on the cake. I said something to the effect of "sorry son, you're just not cut-out for the group. Turn in your character sheet and hit the road". I'm sure he thought we were kidding at first, until Alexis and Q stopped laughing and ice-grilled him right out the door. He hasn't come back to Broken City since then. So long, sucker!

Destanial caught wreck upon his return to the Game. So to answer your question, Brother M, yes he missed both sessions. He was punished by being forced to buy us Special Brews and blunts for the next month. I'm only sorry he didn't get to game with Q-Monstah, but he got another chance a few months later. So aside from missing out on mucho XP, he didn't get to see the reintroduction and subsequent banishment of Cemetery Home Outkast. That was worth the price of admission right there.

So that wraps up the Unfingered Hand for good. As you can see from the last installment, although Alexis successfully backstabbed Professor Valdemaer and effectively murdered Cemetery Home Outkast the player, the CHARACTER of Ellis Valdemear continues to live on. Alexis only reduced him to negative hit points, and before he could finish the job, Destanial and Domingo caught up to him. So he will be forced to endure the Professor's presence for a bit longer. But trust me, he's MUCH less annoying while under my control. Professor Ellis Valdemear does indeed play a major role in the upcoming Cedar Chest installment. After Destanial and Domingo found him breathing shallow and clinging to life, they brought him back to a hospice in Martira Bay for treatment. We will begin play that same morning. Our girl player will also introduce her new (and current) character during this chapter.

COMING NEXT WEEK – Episode #9: THE CEDAR CHEST

Straight out the Book of Crypts, circa 1991, comes The Cedar Chest. Look to see how I reworked the module to fit my campaign

OK, so we revamped the roster a bit.

Gone is the **Q-Monstah** (aka Lavernous Vernichtung) who has returned home to Germany, and gone is the annoying gnat **Cemetery Home Outkast** (aka Professor Ellis Valdemear) who got his azz booted. However, the *character* of Ellis Valdemear will continue to live on in the story lines, a constant reminder of Alexis' failure to finish the job.

Also, our female player is introducing a new character into the game after her old one slipped through the exit portal. Misha tha Lost is no more. Instead, allow me to introduce you to her newest character creation: **Alena Nurpašhi**.

For your reading pleasure here is the humble beginnings of Alena...

Alena Nurpašhi is the princess of Neblus. As such she was schooled in math, literature, fighting and especially the magical arts. The sorceress ability ran deeply through the elven house of Neblus and was an ability also shared by her twin sister. After she had finished her schooling her father took her aside and told her what he had been told when he was her age, that she would be sent out to experience the world. The theory was that only in understanding your neighbors and the world in which you reside can you truly be a good leader. After she came back her younger twin would also experience this, separate journeys to learn different things which they hoped would give them different viewpoints when they ruled together (as long as they both came back). The beginning of her journey was a frightening one (as you will soon find out) but she has a strong will and has endured... so far...

And Alena has definitely been through some very rough times since then so stay tuned..

*Signing Off....
Alena Nurpašhi*

Alena Nurpašhi was returning from a play at a local theatre house on the night of July 8, 736 when she became preoccupied by the clear Darkonian night sky and decided to take the long way back to her inn room. As the nighttime streets thinned out around her, she continued to catch glimpses of a mysterious long-coated gentleman following her. He followed her as the crowds spilled out of the theatre house, and he continued to follow her down the various side streets and walkways. Just as she was starting to feel extra uncomfortable, the figure disappeared along the way.

And as the streets of Martira Bay were emptying to their lonesome most, the stalker suddenly reappeared before her, his leering glare dangerously close to her face. Alena knew she was about to be attacked and she reacted appropriately. A brief struggle ensues, in which the man threatens her with a rusty sickle and attempts to force her to the ground. This gave her a chance to flex some of those new sorcerer abilities, and Alena successfully managed to evade her assaulter. But not before he was able to mimic the unsheathing of a large sword, and mouth the words "we shall meet again".

Drawn by the sounds of ruckus, three local Martira Bay constabularies quickly arrive on the scene. They find a frightened and shaken Alena Nurpašhi, but no sign of her elusive stalker. They escort her back to the constable station, where they can question her further...

The Near-Death Experience of Professor Valdemear

We resume the story at a local Martira Bay hospice, where (a newly-returned) **Count Destanial Magorian** and his bodyguard **Domingo dos Santos** watch over the unconscious body of **Professor Ellis Valdemear**. The Lord of Solyss Gundarak, **Alexus Darkangnon** lurks in the corner, listening to the doctor's give their prognosis. It has been over an hour since the Count and Lord brought the badly wounded body of the professor to the hospice for treatment, and dawn was still hours away. Only Destanial and Domingo remained bedside for the professor the entire time. Lord Darkangnon had excused himself from the room for a stroll in order to "ease his mind and calm his nerves". Upon his return to the hospice, he heard the doctors decree the professor was in stable condition, and was expected to survive the attack. Alexis gnashed his teeth in frustration.

When questioned about the circumstances of the attack, Destanial was purposely vague. Instead of saying the injuries were incurred during the groups midnight visit to the *Many Worlds Cemetery*, Destanial told the doctors the attack happened on a deserted side street. He also omitted the presence of the ordained Overseer minister and the nighthag that battled him to the brink of destruction. He neglected to mention the foreign girl Misha, who vanished with the minister into an otherworldly portal. A portal that opened only as the professor's blood soaked into the earth, and the dark incantation was spoken. And instead of admitting they were with the professor at the time of the attack, Destanial told the doctors the professor was assaulted while traveling alone.

Lord Darkangnon silently nodded in agreement, all the while hating himself for having to deceive his best friend (*Remember, Destanial AND his player have NO idea Alexis was the one behind the attack: that's what happens when you miss two sessions in a row!*). But even Alexis couldn't explain the overwhelming rush of anger and greed that surged through him in the cemetery. And he refused to believe the possibility the **Black Razor** was directing his attack, even though he could feel it guiding his hand as he plunged it into the professors back.

After one hour turned to two, Alexis was imploring Destanial and Domingo to let the doctors do their job so the three of them could return to their inn room beds. It was a long night for everybody. Destanial relented, and ended his bedside vigil. They would return to check the professor's status tomorrow. But before they could leave the hospice, the constabulary arrived.

Led by Captain Of The Guard **Jovis Blackwere**, the authorities asked to question the three player characters further. They reluctantly agreed.

Ironically, as it turned out, Destanial's fabricated timeline of events just happened to fit the motive operand a in a string of recent attacks throughout the city. Destanial, Domingo and Alexis were shocked by the coincidence. Apparently, the professor wasn't the only one who was set upon by this "mysterious attacker". There have been a series of unsolved homicides the last few nights that match the circumstances of Ellis Valdemear's attack. The victim was alone when they were set upon. The

killings were precise, with only one blow being needed to fell the victim. And the wounds suffered by Ellis Valdemar were similar to the killing stroke delivered to the other victims.

Destanial figured Styrix was back to her old tricks.
Alexus bought the whole series of events as an eerie coincidence.
Nobody suspected the Truth...

The Module Picks Up

Captain Jovis Blackwere asked for the players help in solving this mystery, as their reputation has preceded them. They agreed to lend their support to the constabulary.

The main room of the constable station was crowded and dust-choked, with yellowed papers stacked high upon time-scarred desks.

Captain Jovis Blackwere broke down the science of the murders. Over the last week, five murders have occurred. The murders all share a similar pattern; so much so that Captain Blackwere believes it is the work of a serial artist. Each of the five killings happened at an obscure hour of the night, when most of Martira Bay was asleep. Captain Jovis said what made the killings so savage was the fact the killer liked to "gouge out the eyes of his victims, before torturing and killing them". He was a dark sadist who "seemed to consider the killings a work of art". At each of the five murder scenes the killer left a hand-scribbled note on a piece of scrap paper. Count Magorian enquired further about the notes and Captain Blackwere presented to him the "Slips of Death".

Now I don't know bout you, but I thought some of these bars were pretty hardcore for 1991. Stuff like "she had a rapturous voice. She sung her terror so beautifully..." and "his blood seemed a perfect crimson, utterly capturing the red-hot fear and agony within him". It goes on.

Five different slips at each of the five murder scenes. All in the same handwriting and each bearing the same "tainted sentiments". The notes were signed with the initials E.S, and all five of the murders happened in the Eastern District of Martira Bay.

*So THAT'Z why Styrix's waterfront abductions didn't draw much attention from the constabulary. Cuz the victims were only drunks and *****s. But once somebody started messin with the wealthy folk, that's an entirely different matter. Captain Jovis Blackwere and his men have been heavily patrolling the Eastern District ever since that first night.*

But in all the Captains work, his men have yet to even catch a glimpse of the offender. Until tonight. This is where the players come in.

Once the constabulary were notified of the attack on the Professor of II Aluk (Ellis Valdemar), the striking similarities jumped out at them. Not only was the professor attacked on the outskirts of the Eastern District (at least that's what Destanial told them), he too bared a similar wound to the ones delivered to the previous victims. A single gaping wound like that of a sword thrust. But these fatal blows were clean, with little to no rip or tear. Captain Blackwere surmised there was no note left behind because the professor survived the attack.

He apologized for the unfortunate circumstances that have befallen Alexis and Destanial's "good traveling companion" (*snicker*), and promised to do all he could to end this wave of terror. In conjunction with the players help, the Captain is confident they can find the killer; for he believes the murderer is finally beginning to slip. Later the same night of the professor's attack, another victim was "randomly selected". But this victim managed to elude the murderer, and escape its clutches. This victim is the only person in the city who was able to catch a glimpse of the alleged killer. Captain Blackwere said they had the victim holed up in an inn with protective custody.

And so these are his leads:

* Interview the Captain's star witness who survived the attack and fled from the scene. This was the obvious choice, and the one I gently nudged the players to follow. It's pretty obvious who the lucky escapee is, what with our lady player Alena Nerpašhi watching on and the other two players already bearing witness to her encounter with the killer (via Player Knowledge split-screen gaming). So the first thing Alexis and Destanial (w/ Domingo) will do is question the surviving victim, therefore properly introducing Alena Nurpašhi into the game. Remember Alena Nurpašhi, for she becomes our lady player's main Player Character.

* Captain Blackwere suggests another good starting place for their independent investigation. A local spiritualist named Alisia who has helped Blackwere and his department in the past. Although Alisia has so far been unable to help them on this case, each of the players "bears a unique destiny that may hold new clues".

* They can investigate the scene of the most recent murder, while the evidence is still fresh. The victim was a blind woman, who lived by herself, but was supported by Old Money. Her name was Thea Gyntheos and her home is perched upon the rim of the sprawling marketplace. Her corpse still on the premises.

* They can investigate the scene of the second latest attack (two nights old). The home of Eron Nalwand, elderly scholar and teacher. Although his body has been transferred to the funeral home for a wake, his house (and the scene of his murder) is still open for investigation. The authorities have discovered some evidence that leads them to believe Mr. Nalwand may have dabbled in "dark magicks".

The Players Meet Alena

July 9th, 736 (morning of)

The two players and one NPC, escorted by Jovis Blackwere visit the *Captain Marlbrod*, where lady Alena Nurpašhi awaits introduction. After getting everybody settled in, Captain Blackwere excused himself from the room and left the PCs to themselves. The interview started slowly, as both Destanial and Alexis were intrigued by her exotic appearance. They've never seen a girl quite like this one.

The Lord and Count introduced themselves via proper title, so as to give their presentation the full effect. They questioned her about the particulars of her attack, and she described it in a hushed, scared tone. She attributed her escape to "good luck" and quick wit. They told her their goal was to catch this mysterious attacker, and make him pay for his sins.

Perhaps she was driven by a need for revenge when she asked to join them. Either way, she was able to assure the guys she could hold her own and they agreed to let her help with the investigation. The party of three has just swelled to four.

And all the while, Professor Valdemear drifts in and out of unconsciousness at a Martira Bay hospice. As soon as he becomes coherent, the Captain of the Martira Bay constabulary will have a few questions for him.

The Mystic Alisia

After a quick breakfast, the now three player characters and one NPC paid a visit to the mystic Alisia, referred to them by Captain Jovis Blackwere. The Merchants Quarter of Martira Bay was thriving on this hot summer afternoon. An exciting place filled with exotic sights and bizarre people. Almost anything you can image could be purchased or acquired somewhere within this huge melting pot. The magnitude of their surroundings dazzled the three Barovians (Alexus, Destanial and Domingo) while Alena Nurpašhi the Nebulan native cautiously scanned the crowds.

The players followed their constabulary guide closely for fear of losing him amidst the rabble and clutter of the marketplace. The place they were looking for turned out to be a rambling structure of twisted oak beams, white-plastered walls and an aggressive canopy of thatch. Their constabulary guide nodded to the big bald man who slouched on the porch. He nodded back. The guide excused himself to go back on patrol, and the four characters approached the shack. **Big Carl** with the lazy eye stood from his seat and stretched to his full height; a good three or four inches higher than the tallest character. He carefully sized them up and down, before asking them to shed their weapons. Only then will they be able to enter "the sanctuary". The players were skeptic at first, but proceeded with the formalities.

Big Carl with the lazy eye ushered the players into the two-room hovel where they were greeted by the smell of tobacco smoke and sizzling bacon. The siren like wail of a boiling teapot suddenly assaulted their ears. A statue-still woman arrayed comfortably upon pillows in the center of the room. Colorful silk scarves were scattered around her, and on the floor like dutiful attendants lay her tools of divination. She knew Jovis sent them, and she knew they were relatively strangers themselves. Yet still, their "fates are strong and dark" and "bound inextricably together".

The players conferred further with the demented old lady, while big bald Carl with the lazy eye watched on from the corner. She told the players the killer had a "mind of lusts". Lust for blood, sex, lust for drugs and murder. His greatest weapons are secrecy, sleep and the shadows in which he creeps.

The mystic **Alisia** offered the Lord of Solyss a cup of tea to "cleanse his senses", and invited the lady Alena Nurpašhi to join her on the mountain of cushions. While Alexus sipped the sweet concoction, Destanial and Domingo hovered by the door with Big Carl. The mystic Alisia agreed to perform a palm reading for the fallen Elvin princess. She told her "remain ever wary" and to "fight until your strength is gone". She explained how Alena's own inner Will was the deciding factor in her battle with the killer. As long as she is ready, she shall be safe.

The mystic questioned Count Destanial Magorian about his place in the Solyss

hierarchy, and his duties as the public figure head. The newly returned Destanial (suffering beneath the yoke of his monetary punishment) espoused upon his positive virtues and personal code of Honor. Domingo dos Santos played the role of humble servant to the Count, concealing his own true identity. Because Alisia said she supported Captain Jovis in his pursuits, she would tell Destanial's future for half price.

She used small colored wooden sticks called "bones" to gain a greater insight upon the Count and his servant. Each stick was marked with a rune representing a primal aspect of man or nature. By observing the runes that land face up, and studying their position, Alisia claimed she could predict their future. For Domingo she said "suspicions hem you in like a lamb in the pen of slaughter". She told the Count of Solyss to "beware your closest friend, who may slay you at last". Destanial's player shifted an uneasy eye towards Alexis' player, who simply replied, "Watch out for Domingo".

When the Lord of Solyss was finished with his tea, the mystic Alisia examined the arrangement of the dregs that settled at the bottom. She observed the patterns and designs before chilling him with the words "Death haunts your every step: turn to look and it remains behind you". He can't escape the dark cloud that hovers over him. Negative energy begets negative energy. Alisia spoke in an ominous tone when she uttered the killer's name: Ejrik Spellbender. And he is very close to one of the players. Very close.

DM Note: The various methods of fortune-telling used by Alisia are a tip 'o the hat to the methods detailed in the original Ravenloft Black Boxed Set. Also, notice Alisia didn't point at the players and say "Ejrik Spellbender dwells within one of YOU!", as written in the Cedar Chest text. That's what they call a WWE Sledgehammer Of A Plot. I'd rather leave it inferred, not stated.

The players inquired further about this "Ejrik Spellbender", but Alisia suddenly became nervous and skittish. She refused to speak his name again, and began insisting the players leave immediately. They were confused, but complied. Just as big bald Carl with the lazy eye was escorting the players out, Alisia suddenly became stricken by guilt. Before they left, she produced a scroll and gave it to the Elvin sorceress Alena Nurpaši. She said the powers of the scroll could be used to communicate briefly with a deceased soul. Perhaps the players could use it to question Ejrik's victims. But it contains only a few uses, so "use it carefully". The players thanked her and bid farewell.

The Home Of Thea Gyntheos

With their visit to the mystic at least putting a name and gender on the killer, the players set out to learn more about "**Ejrik Spellbender**".

They next spot they decided to hit up was the scene of the last murder, barely 24 hours old. They passed through the din and odor of the marketplace, noting that the "cacophony of buyers and sellers seemed barbaric, like the sounds of a battle". They were happy leaving the madness behind. The suburbs of the Eastern quarters seemed much safer and quieter. But it is merely an illusion, as the mysterious killer Ejrik Spellbender has been successfully prowling these streets for days. Finally they reached their destination. A two-storied structure of graying wood just outside the merchant's quarter. In front of the house stood a weathered cart hitched to a plow

horse. Several men in black overcoats emerge from the house, bearing a large wooden box between them. This is the body of **Thea Gyntheos**.

The players conferred with one of the constabulary standing nearby. He told them Thea Gyntheos was a blind, mute woman who lived by herself with her Seeing Eye dog. Her coffers ran deep with Old Money, and nobody knew where it came from. The players asked to be alone for a moment with the body, and their wish was granted.

Within the dark box lay the body of the once-beautiful woman. Her paper-white face had been "robbed of its eyes" and her "long and beautiful tresses of raven-black hair are fouled with dark-brown, congealed clumps of blood". The tender flesh of her throat "bears a brutal gash, and her waist shirt is deep maroon where it soaked up the flow".

Only Alena Nurpašhi the Elvin sorceress was able to understand the arcane language spelled out on the scroll, so her presence has benefited the party already. The voice of the dead woman spoke to them in a sorrowful whisper, seemingly coming from beyond the Misty veil itself. Her tale was one of tragedy and woe. In it, she name-dropped a potential witness (**Sinara Doom**) who was with her during the first attack. Four nights ago, while her friend Sinara Doom escorted her home, the deceased Thea Gyntheos told them a "fiendish thief fell upon me, gouged out my eyes, stole the pittance of gold I had, and left for me dead". Sinara Doom fled the scene and hasn't been seen since. Thea says she would have died that night, if it were not for Ejrik Spellbender, who happened upon her and carried her home. He cared for her. Over the next few days, she admitted to falling deeply in love with him, and she says he loved her too. "At first, he would kiss me like a ravenous beast, but over time he became less and less interested in my touch".

It all ended last night. She had "never suspected the cruelty native to his heart" until he battered her, and demanded she "plead for her life". Ejrik beat her until she screamed for mercy and begged for her life to be spared. Then, "gladdened far more than my kisses could have made him", he slit her throat and bathed his hands in the blood...

Now that's hardcore for 1991. "Gladdened far more than my kisses could have made him..." Sick.

The players were starting to get a little uneasy as they learned more about their quarry. They said a quick prayer for the deceased Thea Gyntheos (R.I.P) and tipped their hat to the constables waiting outside.

The Home Of Eron Nalwand

They wanted to research the name Ejrik Spellbender further, as well as find the whereabouts of Sinara Doom (who has a very cool name).

But first, they would investigate the scene of the 4th murder (out of five). The home of **Eron Nalwand**, elderly scholar and teacher. Although his body has been transferred to the funeral home for wake, his house (and the scene of his murder) is still open for investigation. The authorities have discovered some evidence that leads them to believe Mr. Nalwand's may have dabbled in "dark magicks".

They followed the cobblestone streets past stately homes and overgrown gardens, until they reached a modest residence of whitewashed brick, fronted by a rusty iron gate. The letter N (for Eron Nalwand) was engraved upon the wrought iron filigree.

Inside the house, they found the surroundings much shabbier than the outside would suggest, and they could smell the dust and old books. The once-impressive parlor with walnut paneling was cluttered with piles of books and manuscripts. They introduced themselves to the constabulary on guard, and asked to poke around further.

It was a moderately sized house with plenty of rooms. They even found a bedroom, which had been converted into a library and laboratory. In the bedroom, they found signs of struggle. "A pool of blood, overturned furniture and a broken window". Alena was able to confirm to the others that the deceased Eron Nalwand did indeed experiment with arcane forces. They wanted to use the scroll on him, so they excused themselves from the crime scene and traveled to the local funeral home.

There, they were able to see the recently made-up body of Eron Nalwand. He was a tall angular man with a bony face. His "eye sockets lie empty" and his brow was still "knotted in anguish and his lips still parted from his dying scream". "Brutal, really" the undertaker muttered. "To drive a knife into a blind man's heart".

Again they asked for a moment alone with the body, and the raspy voice of Eron Nalwand soon spoke to them through "death-dry lips". Apparently, Ejrik Spellbender had forced himself upon the elderly mage and gouged his eyes out. In return for sparing his life, Ejrik Spellbender demanded the elderly mage help him with his work. He needed to "find the magical means of slaying his host". *Wha-wha-what?*

Ejrik grew more angry and enraged, and threatened to kill the poor mage if he didn't cooperate. Ejrik told him his magic jar went awry, and that he was trapped. He needed to break free by any means necessary. Eron Nalwand tried to flee, but there was little the blind man could do. Ejrik Spellbender fell upon him before torturing and murdering the poor soul. Eron implored the players to find the killer and avenge his death.

Now the players knew they were dealing with some kind of magical menace. They enquired further into the properties of a magic jar spell, and Alena was able to give them the basics. Apparently Ejrik Spellbender is trapped or linked to a specific item or device.

The Players Split Up

From here, it was late afternoon and the players decided to split up and cover more ground. The newly-returned **Count Destanial Magorian** and his bodyguard **Domingo dos Santos** paid a visit to **Ellis Valdemear** in the hospice, to check his status. He was still drifting in and out of unconsciousness, but in between time the Captain was able to ask a few key questions. They still have him under protection.

Alena Nurpašhi got to work researching the name Ejrik Spellbender, and came to a few exciting connections. The name matched an old professor from the University of Il Aluk, who mysteriously disappeared on one of his excursions. And while it was not clearly spelled out, Alena the 6th level sorceress could infer that most of Professor Spellbender's work dealt with arcane subject matter. So the magic jar spell could

conceivably have been one of his projects. But the years were a bit askew. If these two Ejrik Spellbenders were one in the same, he would have to be well over 100 years old...

Meanwhile... Alexis visits with Sinara Doom

Lord Alexis Darkangnon hit the streets looking for somebody named "**Sinara Doom**". He hoped to ask a few questions about the night of Thea Gyntheos' first attack. It didn't take the 18-Charisma Lord with the "golden smile" long to learn that this Sinara Doom was as distrusted as she was respected by the common folk. He heard rumors that she too dabbled in the mystic and unknown. So he picked a flower out of courtesy, and journeyed to the home of Sinara Doom.

The directions led him to a once-grand house, but large sections appeared empty and untended. The door stood open, and beyond it Alexis could see all manner of things hanging from the ceiling: mandrake roots, chicken feet, and scrolls of paper moving listlessly in the breeze. He approached with the flower in hand, when a scratchy voice cracked the silence.

"What can an old woman do for such fine young folk?" It belonged to a bent old woman with sightless eyes-"white spheres like two eggs in her head". She too was blind.

She invited Alexis in, past all the cluttered bookshelves and dusty end tables. Sinara Doom was there the night of Thea's first attack, but managed to flee from the killer. She could sense his twisted nature within him moments before the attack, and thus she was ready. Poor Thea Gyntheos was not so lucky, and he struck her down. Sinara Doom didn't stick around to see how it ended. She deeply regrets her fleeing, but admits it was a gut instinct. Due to the deep guilt she felt, she never went back to see how Thea was doing, and now it was too late. She knew it was Ejrik Spellbender who attacked her, as she could sense his vibe.

His first bizarre killing had attracted her attention, and she wondered about a mystic connection between his methods of murder. She found no immediate mystical connection, but continues to study the case as best she can, despite her age and blindness. She was able to tell Alexis that at one time, Ejrik Spellbender had been a brilliant and demented scholar who some say learned the mechanics behind a provisional conjunction. *A wha-wha-what?* A rip in the fabric of reality, which might let one slip beyond the Misty border... Alexis still didn't understand, but he didn't press further. None of that mystic-mumbo-jumbo for him.

She also told him that perhaps the deceased Thea Gyntheos was closer to Ejrik Spellbender than even she knew...

After bidding Sinara Doom a fond farewell, Lord Alexis Darkangnon decided to kill a few minutes by visiting the *Sunset Park Tavern* just outside the marketplace. It was a long day, and Alexis decided he had done enough work to warrant a little "reward". A reward in the form of a few *Nova* drops that he would administer to his mug of ale. Normally these drops would be administered directly into the eyes for maximum potency, but he was just looking for a mild buzz this evening.

Little did he know how carried away he would become...

Another Murder!

July 10th, 736 (morning of)

Count Destanial Magorian, Domingo dos Santos and Alena Nurpašhi had returned to their tavern rooms the night before, but without the Lord of Solyss joining them. After he had not returned in hours (and well after Destanial and Alena went over everything they had to share), they simply assumed he was out painting the town red (how deliciously appropriate). When they awoke the morning of July 10, however, the Lord was asleep in his inn room bed. He was obviously hung-over. Alena, Destanial and Domingo journeyed to the main room for a quick breakfast, but were soon interrupted by the frantic Captain Jovis Blackwere. "There's been another murder!" he exclaimed. Quickly, the three gathered up their gear, and knocked loudly on Alexis' door to wake him.

As the Lord was struggling through his daze to clothe and arm himself, he noticed a slight trickle of blood running down the blade of his Black Razor sword. He rubbed it dry and promptly forgot about it. "Another wild night" he figured.

Captain Blackwere and his men led the players back through the sprawling, cluttered marketplace. Apparently, the killer had branched out of his typical Eastern district hunting grounds. Sadly for the players, his recent victim wasn't just some nameless face. It was the poor mystic **Alisia** and big bald **Carl** with the lazy eye. The players were saddened and appalled by the murders.

The once-airy sanctuary beyond the door now wore the reeking aspects of a slaughterhouse. "Blood was spattered on everything". Upon the bloody pillows scattered about the floor, they immediately recognized Carl. "His empty eye sockets seem to be weeping ruddy tears". In his ponderous arms, cradled like a child, rest the woman he spent his life protecting: Alisia. She too is rubbed in blood, sightless in death. From the bloody drag streaks across their clothing and on the floor, the players could tell Carl and Alisia had been posed in this position.

Captain Jovis Blackwere, his nose covered with a rag, muttered "Happened some time last night. He left this". It was another scrap of paper with a written message.

"Such a touching pair, these two, like father and daughter they died. But as statues, they carry that elegant pathos to the grave". It was written in the same handwriting as the others, and bared Ejrik Spellbenders initials. That sick bastard. The murder scene inspired the players to move even quicker in their pursuits.

They poked around the insides of the house, while Blackwere and his men waited outside. Alena tried to use the scroll on Carl and Alisia but it didn't work anymore. It was Alexis who found the hand-scribbled note in the mystic Alisia's death grip. Apparently, she had just finished jotting down a message when the killer struck. She still held it tightly. After prying it from her rigored hand, they read the hastily-scribbled message.

"I have rethought my resolve not to help you. Ejrik Spellbender is too evil to let him roam. I remember a clue Thea Gyntheos once told me; Ejrik had given her a message to hold. A message that he forbids anyone discover. She told me she hid it in the best place she knew, an old Cedar Chest her father had given her to protect".

DM Note: Now, for those who have access to Book of Crypts you will notice I slightly modified the scenes with Sinara Doom as well as the dead mystic Alisia's last words. They're not big, radical changes, but they reflect the direction of our own campaign and thus have been changed to suit that. I'm tying Ellis Valdemear, his deceased mentor Myles J. Witherspoon, Ejrik Spellbender, Kurvyn Asterlei and his Fraternity of Shadows all together. Just follow along...

July 10th, 736 (afternoon)

* Former Player Character **Ellis Valdemear** is upgraded to stable condition. Unfortunately for the constabulary, he is not able to divulge many details of his attack. Truthfully, he too seeks to cover up the events at the *Many Worlds Cemetery*, so he insists he never caught a glimpse of his attacker. Which IS sorta true. Professor Valdemear the character had NO idea it was Alexis Darkagnon who blindsided and ran him through with the Black Razor. Last thing the professor remembered, he was charging the vampire Lavernous when he set upon at the rear by an unseen foe. He assumed it was either a living corpse or Styrix herself. He has NO clue his own traveling companion betrayed him. But as soon as he gets better he has vowed to help the city solve the recent murder spree.

Also, somewhere in the back of his mind, he still sub-consciously clings to the belief that his deceased mentor **Myles J. Witherspoon** was a just and noble man. Even after all the brainwashing by Lavernous, Tavelia and the Overseer temple, he still stubbornly refuses to believe his mentor Professor Witherspoon dabbled in the evil, dark arts. If anything, he strived to protect the world from these elements. Professor Valdemear would validate his dead mentor's name by finding that research he had referred to before his passing. The research he said was

From The Unfingered Hand

Quote:

"locked securely in a chest made of cedar, hidden beneath the floors of his blind illegitimate daughters home in Martira Bay". He had warded her and her home from detection with various protection majicks. Nobody even knows of her existence".

- The three player characters (and one NPC) have begun to put the pieces of Ejrik Spellbender together. They know he was an ex-teacher at the University of Il Aluk, the same school their "companion" Professor Ellis Valdemear taught at. They knew he dabbled in dark magic, as evidenced by his research into magic jar mechanics. They knew he lusted for and devoured **Thea Gyntheos**, and that he had tried to extort the deceased scholar **Eron Nalwand**. They knew he had the mystic **Alisia** murdered to prevent her last message from reaching them. But they still didn't know where to find Ejrik Spellbender.

They hoped this mysterious *Cedar Chest* Alisia had spoken of would hold the clue.

It would.

The Revelation

Your wish is my command, G.

So the players returned to the estates of **Thea Gyntheos**, to find the area taped off

and boarded up. But they weren't gonna let that stop them. They found their way inside and started snooping around.

DM Note: Now as DM, I'm always saying how important the dice are to the Game. I could never imagine trying diceless gaming. They deliver those truly random elements. And once again, the rolls of the dice determined the entire outcome of this adventure. I went into this final encounter ready for the worst. I knew this "cedar chest" they were looking for was gonna give the answer they needed. What they chose to do with this knowledge was on them, and I was eagerly awaiting their reaction. I fully anticipated this information to fall into the right hands, and finally the dark secret would be out. But destiny, fate and luck were heavy this night. Now, the module already says the chest will be found under a rug in the kitchen, so it is where it is.

The players enter the house and start poking around. I ask them where they wanna search first, and Destanial answers the bedroom. He wants to search through Thea's personal items. Alena wants to check the main room where the murder actually occurred. She checks the ornate wooden kickboards, moldings and marble-inlaid fireplace. There are plenty of cabinets filled with china to rummage through.

Lord Alexis Darkangnon volunteers to search the kitchen.

OK then. So while Destanial is upstairs poking through the diary of the deceased Thea Gyntheos, and Alena is looking behind paintings, Alexis is in the kitchen finding the trap door under the rug.

I gave plenty of opportunities for the others (especially Alena who is only two rooms away) to hear what was going on in the kitchen. But they didn't. They were blissfully unaware Alexis was undoing the rusty latch and opening the small wooden trap door on the floor. His nose threatened to sneeze from the clouds of dust, but he held it in. He quickly scanned the room around him, but the others were busy with their own pursuits. Alexis lift out the infamous Cedar Chest and quietly closed the trap door, replacing the rug over it. He still didn't call for the others. Instead, he used his thieves picks to force open the lock and reveal its contents...(his super-high skill checks out powered the failing wizards lock cast upon the box).

He found a leather satchel monogrammed with the initials MJW, in which was contained a portfolio of documents meticulously labeled and organized. Lord Darkangnon had no idea what these papers were or what they meant. What intrigued him more was the other worthwhile discovery sharing the Cedar Chest: *a human heart*. The odor of rot and death was unmistakable. Alexis knew that smell very well. A "tiny, stained scroll protrudes from one of the red-brown arteries". Again Alexis glanced over both shoulders, but his comrades were nowhere to be seen.

He removed the scrap of paper, and read the hastily scribbled words. "**Black Razor**".

Per rule of the module, upon this revelation Alexis was forced to make a Horror check. He failed. And of all the failure possibilities, Alexis has to roll perhaps the most deadliest: *obsession*.

Suddenly it all made sense to him. It came rushing back to him like a dam bursting. The late night visits with the vampire Lavernous, the mysterious black-outs and

haunting images of dead bodies and blood pools. The whispers in the wind that he now knew belonged to the Black Razor. Urging him on. Encouraging him. Alexis was the "host" Eron Nalwand spoke of. He now knew why Alisia had observed the black cloud of death following him. He knew he was Ejrik's unwitting pawn and suffering victim. He also knew he could tell nobody else of this...

Yes, Alexis slipped the bloody message into his pocket before calling forth the others and alerting them to his discovery. He found the Cedar Chest, and claimed all it contained was the leather satchel with the folder of papers, and a rotting human heart. What the connection or meaning was, the Lord feigned ignorance. The other players were completely stumped, in game and out of game.

See, as players they witnessed the whole scene unfolding as Alexis' player guided his character through the discovery. But when it came time for me to reveal the Black Razor revelation, I slipped the message to Alexis' player on a slip of scrap paper. The other two players never saw what it read. Therefore, their characters have no idea he found the paper, and the players have no idea what it said.

They left the premises with the leather satchel. The papers inside were dated 50-some-odd years ago, and written in two distinct handwriting patterns. The first, and most bountiful script went on for pages and pages, and the players could immediately recognize it as the handwriting of Ejrik Spellbender (from the notes he left behind at each murder). The second handwriting script flowed for pages more, and was signed off "Professor Myles J. Witherspoon".

From *The Unfingered Hand*

Quote:

Originally posted by The MadStepDad

During his prime, Professor Myles J. Witherspoon was confronted by a political conspiracy within the Universities ranks, and battled a rival professor named **Ejrik Spellbender**. Ejrik Spellbender was a founder of the Fraternity of Shadows in its fledgling days, and Myles could clearly see his goals were selfish and evil in nature. But in his battles with Ejrik and his undead minions, Professor Witherspoon met his own untimely demise. But perhaps it was his connection to the Grey Realms that prevented him from truly passing on. He arose as a Cold One, a living being who had survived a close brush with death. This incident spurned his ghostsight.

Eventually he was able to overcome the threat of Ejrik Spellbender and put him to the grave (*of course, this being Ravenloft and all, Professor Spellbender's spirit inhabited a receptacle of his own wicked creation*). Myles confiscated Spellbenders papers and research in the process, thus learning the rudimentary principles of orchestrating a provisional conjunction.

So essentially, study of these portals began with the Fraternity of Shadows. Witherspoon was the wild card vigilante that secreted away the knowledge, so as to prevent it from being used for evil. That was close to thirty years ago, and since that time he has fought to keep Spellbenders successors at bay. He works closely with other professors that share his vision, and with who he trusts his lifes work (amongst the few is Professor Zachary Kraven, foster father to young Aramil). Professor Kurvin Asterlei is simply the latest (and most efficient) of Ejrik Spellbenders eventual heirs.

The players really had no idea what the significance of the research was (as it was a side-story specifically created for Ellis Valdemear's player before his dismissal). They

just knew it was somehow related to the wounded professor, and Alexis was the first to suggest they question him further. He tried to shed some distrust on the professor, in an attempt to influence the others. They too started to become a bit wary of the "good professor" Ellis Valdemear.

And so ends the discovery of the *Cedar Chest*. Lord Darkangon alone has learned the true nature of these mysterious murders, as it is his body playing host to the diabolical Ejrik Spellbender. These sudden bursts of emotion, violence and carnage drew forth the corrupted spirit of Ejrik Spellbender to inhabit Alexis' body. The same body that wields Ejrik's magic jar receptacle: the Black Razor. How long has he been exerting his Will over Alexis? Have Alexis' twisted, selfish actions actually been directed by Ejrik? Every action driven towards the goal of freeing Ejrik from his magical prison? What thoughts were his own, and which belonged to the entity inhabiting his weapon? The same weapon he was now obsessed with.

Lord Alexis Darkangon didn't know the answer to these questions, but he did know he couldn't reveal his secret. For if he did, the very source of his power (the Black Razor) would surely be destroyed. He knew if the Count learned of the sword's history, he would take it from him. And he couldn't bear to have the sword taken from him. It was part of him. Therefore, he would need to concoct a scenario to keep the other players' suspicions at bay. He needed a plan that would explain this recent murder spree, and shift focus away from his sword. He needed a patsy.

July 11, 736

Despite still being significantly weakened by the attack two nights ago, **Professor Ellis Valdemear** has checked himself out of the Martira Bay hospice. Once he received word from Count Magorian that the Witherspoon research papers had been discovered, he pepped up immediately. He asked that the Count (with his bodyguard and Alena) take him to the work right away.

But the same morning Destanial, Domingo and Alena were with Ellis Valdemear on his release; **Lord Darkagnon** was canvassing the busy streets of Martira Bay doing his own research. He needed a scapegoat and he put his ears to the street to find one. I let him role-play out a few encounters on the streets and in the Shoppe's, and he rolled a few charisma and gather information checks. After a days study of the Martira Bay streets, I assigned Alexis three potential scapegoats.

* A loner vistani boy who had a reputation for being cruel and aloof. He was also known as a renowned wordsmith and master poet. Perhaps a few forgery checks later, and this kid could be the prime suspect.

* A dwarven weapon smith with a quick temper and foul tongue. He has been known to grumble threats of physical harm to some of his customers. Captain Blackwere and his men could find the "murder weapon" on his grounds.

* Or an old isolated hedge wizard with a shack full of arcane goodies. Alexis, bred of Barovian superstitions, figured he could drum up some witchcraft accusations against the guy and point the finger his way. The constabulary would find more *Death Slips* at his home.

But it gets better folks, wait for it...

Lord Darkangnon spent the entire day studying these things and thinking these thoughts.

This is the same day Destanial and Alena worked with the recently-released Ellis Valdemear on the Spellbender case. They went over the details and clues of the killings, while making sure the professor wasn't too exerted (he was still weak from his wounds). But the professor's main concern was the research they had recovered from Thea Gyntheos' house. He pressed Destanial and Alena further, pumping them for as much information as he could. But they had only briefly glimpsed the documents, and had no idea what they meant. Lord Darkangnon still had the papers on his person. He said he was conducting his own "study" on the works. He would report back to their inn room headquarters later tonight. At least that's what the Lord said.

And so the professor, the Count, his bodyguard and their princess waited. And waited. And waited while the Lord prowled the streets, analyzing the angles. When he returned to the inn that night, he was immediately besieged by the professor, who begged to see the portfolio.

The documents written by Ejrik Spellbender himself and completed by Valdemear's mentor Myles J. Witherspoon. Documents that contained scientific evidence which detailed the existence of "provisional conjunctions" (referred to in the Black Box as Portals). Ellis Valdemear needed the research to validate his own beliefs about his mentor Witherspoon. He believed the professor was a Hero of Light, and that his research could be used to benefit Man. Even after the subtle brainwashing employed by Tavelia and Lavernous, Ellis still believed his mentor was assassinated for his knowledge of Truth and not for any perceived demonic trafficking.

But the Lord wouldn't let him see the papers. Even Destanial and Alena were surprised. The professor even more so. What did he mean "no"? But Lord Darkangnon calmly explained (lied through his teeth) about the papers being delivered to his contact "Weinberg". This "Weinberg" character was a learned scholar of the occult, and was researching the documents at Alexis' behest. At least this was the tale Alexis told the others. Truthfully, "Weinberg" was the lonely hedge wizard he had scoped out earlier.

He was the one Alexis had chosen to be the Mark. The patsy for the Spellbender murders.

But of course, things hardly work out as planned...

Night Of July 11, 736 (continued)

So the other players sorta had an inkling of what Alexis was up to. They assumed he was involved in the Spellbender murders, they just didn't know how. But their characters had NO reason to suspect this. Alena hasn't known Alexis long enough to question him, especially with a man of Count Magorian's stature vouching for him. Destanial has known Alexis his whole life and still has an innocent naivety towards him. So we were kinda at an impasse at the Gaming Table. The players knew their characters were still searching for a killer they would never find. But they had to keep the flow going. And so their characters continued the investigation.

It was on the night of July 11, when Count Magorian (his bodyguard Domingo) and

the lady Alena Nurpashi resumed their hunt by reinvestigating the dead scholar Eron Nalwand's home. Maybe there they'd find clues they overlooked the first time.

The NPC **Ellis Valdemear** (still weak from his wounds) stayed at the inn, promising to review the handwriting samples further. It was here, as I was describing the Professor's actions in a haughty, bossy fashion, that Lord Darkangnon chose to strike.

After the other players had left for Eron Nalwand's house, Alexis was knocking on Ellis Valdemear's door. It didn't take much convincing for Ellis to grab his new walking cane and journey with Alexis to "Weinberg's" place, where they would pick up the research. Alexis told him he should have the answers he was looking for by now, and Ellis eagerly believed him. Truth is, Alexis' player was contemplating the means of laying Professor Ellis Valdemear down for good. No mistakes this time.

So while Destanial, Domingo and Alena were poking around in the Eastern District of Martira Bay, Alexis and Ellis were across town handling theirs. Alexis had peeped this area out earlier in the day. While "Weinberg" was in town getting supplies, Alexis was in the mans house scoping it out. He knew exactly how to set the pieces up and frame the old man. But now, he was having second thoughts. He had a better plan.

"Weinberg's" home was well off the beaten path, and Alexis knew that nobody would find a body here for several days. This was the same long, winding dirt road Alexis led the unsuspecting Professor Valdemear down on the night of July 11, 736.

Finally, the two of them saw "Weinberg's" small shack, illuminated by a hanging lantern outside the door. Alexis told the Professor this was the spot. But before they went inside and reclaimed the research, there was something Alexis had to tell him...

Alexis didn't *really* know this Weinberg character after all. And he never *really* gave him the recovered research. Matter of fact, Alexis had the research papers on him (he just didn't want word getting out that they were in his possession). By now, the Professor is starting to get suspicious of Alexis.

Alexis procured the research for Ellis, and lit a torch for him to read it by (no lanterns for him). Ellis Valdemear immediately recognized the handwriting of **Ejrik Spellbender**, followed by Ellis' own dead mentor **Myles J. Witherspoon**. Suddenly, it all rushed to his head. The details of the "Secret War" Myles had once told him about. The mysterious research he stole from evil necromancer Ejrik Spellbender, who sought absolute power.

Ellis Valdemear started thinking out loud. He recalled a conversation he once shared with Myles Witherspoon, when he retold the story of his enemies defeat. He said to always be prepared for the possibility of his return. When Ellis had inquired as to how he this could be possible, his mentor Professor Witherspoon said "*magic jar*". And if that were true, what would Ejrik's receptacle be?

By this time, Alexis was flashing that trademark devilish smirk, and telling Ellis there were more clues he had been withholding. He gave Ellis the "tiny, stained scroll" that was protruding from one of the "red-brown arteries" of the human heart he found in the Cedar Chest. The same "tiny, stained scroll" that revealed the identity of Ejrik

Spellbender's magic jar receptacle. The piece of paper that read "**Black Razor**".

The professor's life flashed before his eyes as he read the paper. That mighty blow that felled him in the Cemetery was no zombie, it was the vile Black Razor! Hand delivered by his own traveling companion Lord Darkangnon! The same Lord Darkangnon that was leering at him with his hand on his hilt. Ellis Valdemear gasped in horror, and Lord Darkangnon unsheathed the Black Razor.

Just then, "Weinberg's" cottage door swung open, and a small dog bounded out of the elderly man's arms. The old man was innocently letting his dog out, while right down the path Alexis was ready to run Ellis through.

Momentarily sidetracked by the distraction, Alexis hesitated and Ellis Valdemear screamed for help. Suddenly, the old man was alerted to the ruckus and his dog started barking furiously while running up the path. Rats, Alexis was foiled again. But this time he WILL finish the job.

He moved toward the Professor, and combat ensued. Unfortunately for Alexis the dice were not falling for him tonight and the weakened professor temporarily got the upper hand. All the while, that little dog is barking and nipping at their heels and "Weinberg" is at his cottage door shouting out "Who's there?! Who's there!?"

With Alexis' bad luck tonight, the fight lasted longer than he expected. The noise and ruckus (with the professor and "Weinberg" shouting and the dog barking) persisted into the night. It was drawing the attention of a constabulary patrol just outside the city limits. A patrol that quickly began approaching the scene on horse back. As Alexis struggled with the magically enforced Ellis Valdemear, he could see the constabulary lantern lights approaching. This fueled his anger further, and he could feel an extension of his rage surging through the Black Razor. And although he wanted to flee before the constabulary arrived, something forbade him. That was all Lord Darkangnon remembered. Seconds later, only "Weinberg" was still shouting. Both the dog and Professor Valdemear had been silenced.

*With a look of shock and disbelief permanently etched upon his features, **Professor Ellis Valdemear** finally met his bloody end on the cold, dark, lonely dirt trails outside of Martira Bay.*

When the constabulary arrived on the scene, they found Lord Darkangnon looming over the bloody corpse of Ellis Valdemear (and the little dog) with a dazed look on his face. His Black Razor was drawn and streaked with crimson. The constabulary grimaced at the sight, before collapsing on the Lord of Solyss and wrestling him to the ground. Alexis gave little resistance. His mind was still too cloudy to react. The elderly "Weinberg" finally shuffled to the end of the path, where he found the body of his small dog. He sank to the ground wailing and sobbing.

How can the "man with the golden smile" escape his fate THIS time?

Trial Of The Century

July 14th - August 23rd, 736 (Martira Bay)

The circus was in full effect for the murder trial of **Lord Alexis Darkangnon** of Solyss, Gundarak. He was charged with the slaying of University of Il Aluk professor,

Ellis Valdemear.

Suffice to say, there was much role-playing goodness involved here at the Trial. Lord Darkangnon chose to represent himself (banking on his 18 Charisma to bail him out). He claimed it was entirely a matter of self-defense, and that he had damning evidence linking the now deceased **Ellis Valdemear** to the *Spellbender* murders.

The prosecution worked overtime to portray Alexis as a simple, violent savage, who earned his title of Lord through battlefield victories. They claimed the murder of Ellis Valdemear was premeditated and cold-blooded.

Back and forth the two sides went, all the while Destanial's hair is getting whiter. Best believe he is riding for his dawg until the bitter end. He honestly believes with all his heart that the good Lord had nothing to do with the crime in which he was accused. Alena simply prays, and supports the Count as much as she can.

"Weinberg" (being the only other person near the scene of the crime) had agreed to testify as to what he saw and heard that night, but his body was found the day of his court appearance. He apparently died of old age.

Finally as the days counted down until a verdict would be delivered, the entire case was busted wide open...

From The Unfingered Hand

Quote:

Originally posted by The MadStepDad

Professor Kurvyn Asterlei- NPC Professor of General Relativity and Conceptual Physics at the University of Il Aluk. Plays a small part in the intro, but this NPC becomes very important later. He too hides a dark secret...

There, a wizened old University professor named *Myles J. Witherspoon* has been researching the properties of something he calls "Provisional Conjunctions". If Professor Witherspoon's theories are correct, these temporal rifts are capable of ripping through the very fabric of space and time itself. Virtual black holes capable of swallowing up the surrounding landscape and any unfortunate victims that may be present. They seem to deposit them in an ever-shifting swirling vortex of mists. Where these black holes lead to, nobody knows (but King Azalin has his OWN theories about that).

This knowledge is potential Pulitzer Prize winning material in the right hands. Of course, in the WRONG hands, it could spell disaster for the multiverse. And for as much light as Professor Witherspoon hopes to shine on this topic, there are others out there that seek to hoard the knowledge for their own dark purposes.

One of those men is a colleague of Myles J. Witherspoon, and a professional rival. His name is *Kurvyn Asterlei*, Professor of General Relativity and Conceptual Physics. Unbeknownst to many, Professor Kurvyn Asterlei is actually a high ranking member of the **Fraternity Of Shadows**. He's been following Professor Witherspoon's progress for quite some time, but has yet to crack the outer seal. For all the powers of intrusion at Professor Asterlei's disposal, his rival Professor Witherspoon has equal amounts of protection power, for himself and his prized research. Suffice to say, the relationship between the two men is cold and strained. But to the naked eye, they

appear to be casual business acquaintances...

Professor Kurvyn Asterlei, respected University Professor and city counsel man, traveled from Il Aluk to Martira Bay to appear for the defense! In a shocking twist to those who had been closely monitoring the frenzy, Professor Asterlei slandered the deceased Ellis Valdemear calling him (amongst other things) a “disgrace to the teaching profession”. He also took the opportunity to lob a few shots at his long-time (and now deceased) rival Myles J. Witherspoon, accusing him of witches work, demon trafficking and treason. He said his mentor Ellis Valdemear was a part of these works as well.

These revelations were shocking to the public, and it was no surprise when Lord Alexis Darkagnon was found innocent on all charges a few hours later.

Of course, there's more to the Trial than just that. For example, the first day of Lord Darkagnon's release, he was spotted eating lunch at a trendy Martira Bay restaurant with Professor Kurvyn Asterlei. Ya see, no money exchanged hands. But yet Professor Asterlei's involvement in the Trial DID come at a cost...

Nobody saw Alexis slip Kurvyn the leather satchel monogrammed with the initials MJW. In it, was the original research conducted by Ejrik Spellbender and finished by Myles Witherspoon. Research on portals that had once begun with the **Fraternity of Shadows**, would now end with the same group. The bad guys win this round, but true Heroes of Light can never be extinguished.

Myles J. Witherspoon is dead, his apprentice Ellis Valdemear is dead, and both their memories (as well as their lives work) have been tarnished and degraded. Lord Darkagnon is free, and Professor Asterlei has accomplished his task of recovering the long-since vanished research of Fraternity founder Ejrik Spellbender. Alls well that ends well.

The players all gave a sigh of relief, and began their return home.

Lord Darkagnon has escaped unscathed from the searing eye of the Law. His allies Count Magorian, his bodyguard Domingo and Alena are NONE the wiser. But that nasty little *obsession* he has with the **Black Razor** will continue to linger...

Continuing our journey through BOOK of CRYPTS comes another one-shot adventure. This is the story of how I made this adventure work for me...

The opportunity to segue into this adventure came when the players began their return home. Their journeys would take them back through the lands of Dorvinia. Due to the events of "*This Thing Of Ours*", the players had made mortal enemies with a powerful crime boss and his family of underlings. A ruler who was so feared, his name was never mentioned without a sign of the cross. The newly-crowned King of the Underworld, none other than **Ivan Dilisnya** himself.

Especially after the mental-taxation of the Trial in Darkon (see *The Cedar Chest*), the players were not looking for any more problems. They knew with Ivan Dilisnya's network of connects; they could be spotted within moments of entering any public locale. So they chose to take the back roads and forest paths. They would stay as far away from Dorvinia as they could. Back through the Falkovnian grain fields they go. Day and night, they got a chance to catch their breath from the Darkonian windfall they left behind. They couldn't wait to get home.

Their travels would also take them back through the forests of Borca, where the players had left on ambiguous terms. Lord Alexis Darkangnon had surely hit it off with **Ivana Boritsi**, for it was she who "blessed" him with his poison touch (actually a by-product of his second failed DPz check). It was with her he had confided his deepest desires and darkest fantasies. Would his golden smile and 18 Charisma make her rue the day she let him free? Instead of seducing him and ending it with a tainted kiss, she chose to let him live (perhaps assuming her wiles could draw him back forever). It was Ivana Boritsi who referred the party to her contact (and cousin) in Dorvinia, Ivan Dilisnya. When Alexis admitted he had thoughts of murdering his wife and stealing the fortune, Ivana said her cousin was the man to get the job done.

So before all Hell broke loose in Dorvinia (see events to *This Thing Of Ours*), the players had left Borca on good terms. Who knew what their relationship with Ivana would be like after the blow-up with Ivan. Would her relationship with Alexis supercede her connection to Ivan, like it had **Bellizza Dilisnya**? Or would Ivana see the players as enemies? Not to mention the near-death tryst Destanial almost shared with **Nostalia Romaine**. He watched a young man die by her Scintillating Touch, Damn... They had no idea how their actions in Dorvinia would be received by Ivana, and they didn't want to find out.

Much as they did through Falkovnia, G-Henna, Dorvinia and now Borca, they stayed to themselves far beyond the outskirts of civilization. So you see, this was the perfect opportunity to introduce "*Corrupted Innocents*", a Borca woodland adventure.

They were traipsing through the woods on horseback, when suddenly "cries pierce like a beacon through the thick forest". It grew stronger as they made their way through the maze of trees. It was there, they saw the child Elenia Windalla for the first time.

Now, as DM most modules undergo some kind of revision by Yourz Truly. But for whatever reason, I chose to keep this adventure pretty much intact. I just thought, "Hey. Run it as is". So this next part, while pretty cool in 1991 (I suppose) was a complete contradiction to the mood I had created since the beginning of the campaign (way back in the summer of 2002). Matter of fact, I almost lost the players to fits of laughter when I described...

...the giant evil tree that was pitching maniacally from side to side. It moved with "calculating and sentient evil". It moved around by pulling up its roots before lashing out across the clearing and sinking down again. I know treants are part of the game, but... damn. They don't mesh with the 2004 style.

The big, giant evil tree had the body of a man snagged among the high boughs. It was chewing up the man, while the girl-child **Elenia Windalla** watched on in horror. It was her whose sharp cries attracted the players.

The players played their roles like the pros they are, and within a round or two the evil treant was running away with his top on fire. They had rescued Elenia Windalla, but the man was mangled beyond recognition.

THE MAIN NPC

Elenia Windalla is seven years old with bronze-colored hair, azure eyes and an "aristocratic beauty". She is understandably terrified, but a "marked sadness haunts her features". A sadness that extends beyond the terror she has just seen.

Our female player **Alena Nurpashi** immediately took to the girl, no doubt remembering the sister she left behind in Neblus. She was able to console the shaken Elenia Windalla and calm her to the point of coherent conversation. Elenia was buggin out about the darkness of the Borca night, and she begged and whined for the players to light some torches. She said her Uncle Dory told her she'd be safe with a fire lit. Elenia tearfully told the players her mother and father were poisoned, and her Uncle Dory had come to take her away. But during their trek through the "bad woods", that evil tree had grabbed up Uncle Dory and devoured him on the spot. This was when the players interceded.

The players felt bad for little Elenia, and wracked their brains trying to think of names or faces they recognized from the dinner party they attended at Ivana's estates (see events to This Thing Of Ours). They couldn't come up with any matches, but all three of the players (and one NPC) agreed she was of some kind of nobility. Perhaps the Windalla's were a royal family.

Either way, they promised to escort the young girl through the woods to her uncle's house. They never tried to sense motive or detect evil. They just saw a young girl in need of help. So they provided it.

They traveled well into the night and when it came time to camp-out, they made sure they had a raging bonfire for Elenias benefit. She continued to go on about keeping a fire lit at all times. "Uncle Dory said it would protect me". As they slept, the three players (and one NPC) had a *Night Of Dreams*.

Night Of Dreams

Alexus had a flying dream, where he could soar high above the mountainous clouds and hang in the blue vault of the heavens. He could fly, not by wings or magical means, but by holding the hand of a child. But not just any child: it was *Elenia Windalla*. Her smile and her eyes (filled with "joy and hope") were enough to keep Alexis in flight. But suddenly, everything went terribly wrong. He sees Elenia

pitching unsteadily, with a stream of crimson flowing from her back. An arrow has been shot through her. Suddenly he too is plummeting, before the sky and world below him turned to blackness.

Alena Nurpašhi dreamt of the innocent child -Elenia- sitting quietly on a grassy hillside. When our PC Elvin princess approached the fair girl, all was peaceful and beautiful. She was inspired beyond words, and all Alena could do were weep tears of joy.

But suddenly, a "shadowy figure steals up the hillside", stalking the innocent child as she rests unaware. PC Alena Nurpašhi couldn't see the figure's face, for it was obscured by the shadows, but she somehow knew it was *Count Destanial Magorian!* He raised an "awful scythe" and slew the innocent child. With a might roar, the plateau Alena was standing on sank into the inky waters of despair, where she found herself drowning.

Meanwhile, **Count Destanial Magorian** was also experiencing a night of vivid dreams. He too dreamt of the girl-child Elenia, and she appeared to him in a deep woodland. He could see that her heart was a piece of coal. Destanial knew her secret, and she knew that. Her "child-guise peeled away", and beneath her innocent exterior was the black and poisoned fingertips of a "withered, craggy sorceress of evil". The monster swiped at Destanial, and her claws sank deeply. He felt the poison seep into his blood, and all went dark. "In the final ebb of his dying mind, he realized that *Elenia must die! Elenia must die... must die... must die...*"

Suffice to say, the players didn't sleep well that night. The next morning, the players kept their dreams to themselves, but their attitudes toward the child Elenia Windalla changed accordingly. Our girl player Alena Nurpašhi assumed the role of the child's protector, riding with her on horseback and sharing her soothing words. Lord Alexis Darkagnon was enchanted by the child's perceived innocence, and began spoiling her like a big brother. He told his little stories and made his funny faces, hoping to get her watery azure eyes lifted with smile.

All the while, Count Magorian (and his faithful bodyguard Domingo) led the way through the Borcan woods. He had readily agreed to help the lost little whelp when they found her yesterday, but after his Night of Dreams he is a bit more cautious. Even more so when he confided in Domingo the dream he had the night before, and Domingo finished the story for him. They both had similar dreams about the girl-child Elenia Windalla.

Madame Nygar

So immediately after breaking camp this morning, it was Destanial who initiated the trek to Elenia's uncles house. The girl-child said it could be found by "going towards the dawn". And so the players followed.

Even at the height of the summer noon, little Elenia insisted upon carrying a lit torch. The players humored her petty request. They traveled all through the morning and well into the afternoon, before they reached a narrow weed-choked road.

A stone's throw down the path, they could see a gypsy wagon with "canary-yellow wheels and cherry-red sideboards" that stood in stark contrast to the oppressive grays and greens of the forest. They spotted a "gnarled woman draped in a ratty but

colorful shawl" who beckoned for them to approach.

Although Elenia whimpered in mock fright, the players moved towards the wagon. As they approached they could see one of the wagon wheels had broken free. Oddly enough (from what Destanial knew of the people) the old woman was alone.

Her name was **Madame Nygar**, and she was just passing through when her wagon wheel broke. In return for the players' assistance in righting the wagon, Madame Nygar agreed to have their fortunes read.

Young Elenia Windalla whispered to Alena that her Uncle Dory "warned her to stay away from gypsies", so our female PC agreed to wait with the girl outside the wagon.

Meanwhile, Destanial, Domingo and Alexis changed the wagon wheel and moved with Madame Nygar into the cluttered wagon. It was here she produced a small crystal ball and arranged a cup of steaming root tea for the players.

All the while, the girl-child Elenia and our PC Alena Nurpaši wait outside the wagon as daylight begin to melt away.

Elenia feigns an approaching dread, and hugs Alena tightly. Her ever-present little doll rest between them. The girl-child knows what will be spoken of her by the vistani woman, and she doesn't want the boys to know her secret. So she must summon a distraction, and quickly.

The dice ruled that our PC Alena Nurpaši was so enchanted by the child's innocent facade, she didn't even notice the girl using conjure animal to summon a pack of snarling Borcan wolves.

Inside the wagon, Madame Nygar performed her dark scryings for the Lord and the Count of Solyss, Gundarak. She spoke of "*much darkness... much darkness... some among you are deceived, one among you thinks to do the right thing, but does evil... one among you, though good once and kind has been turned to great evil by this land... one among you must be slain to save the others...*"

JUST THEN the shrill shriek of the horrified Elenia Windalla ring from the woods outside. The two PCs (and two NPCs) sprang to their feet, nearly knocking over the table in the cluttered wagon. They raced to the outside, where they saw Alena Nurpaši (cradling the child Elenia in her arms) sitting high on horseback surrounded by a half-dozen snarling, drooling wolves.

Immediately, the Count, Domingo and the Lord sprang into action. Using the flashing steel of the Black Razor and Tighmaevril respectively, along with the flaming wizardry of Alena (combined with Domingo's torch-bearing hand skills) the players quickly drove back the encroaching wolf pack. The girl-child Elenai was reduced to tears upon Alena's bosom.

Surprisingly, after the last of the wolves scattered, the players saw no sign of Madame Nygar or her wagon. It's as if it were never there. Only the slightly trampled grassy hill bore evidence of its departure. Once again the players were alone in the dark Borcan forests with poor, shaken Elenia Windalla.

DM Note: *I think it's a testament to our tightly woven storylines that almost every*

piece of written **Ravenloft** literature to coincide with our campaign happenings. Many before have stated that these Book Of Crypts adventures can't be inserted into ongoing Ravenloft campaigns without serious renovations, but for the most part I have ran these adventures untinkered. I may add another layer or two of storyline, but I never change the main premise. Corrupted Innocents, as stated, was run pretty much as is. That's why I kinda had to chuckle to myself when I read Madame Nygar's "dark scryings" for the first time. "One among you thinks to do the right thing, but does evil..." sounds like it could be a reference to Destanial, for every one of his noble and honorable goals seems to degenerate into twisted parody. Revealing the existence of die Drehzahl to the **Tribe of Hyksosa**, submitting to the clutches of **Nostalia Romaine** and the Count's dealings with the **Green Eye** warriors all turned out much worse than he ever anticipated. "One among you, though good once and kind, had been turned to great evil by this land..." could be directed towards Alexis. Although I don't know how "good and kind" he once was, he most certainly has been "turned to great evil by this land". Obviously, both Alena and Alexis have been deceived.

Innocence Lost

Their second night with Elenia came as "darkness deepens among the trees" and occasionally they hear the sounds of "creatures shifting in the woods" beyond their flickering torchlight. Alena Nurpašhi could feel the young girl trembling (but from cold or fear she didn't know). Suddenly, a bestial cry rang out deep in the woods, and Elenia shrieked in horror. She suddenly insisted they light a fire. "We must light a fire! Uncle Dory said we'd be safe if we have fire!"

The players agreed, and they spent the rest of the night telling stories and sipping mead. I had the girl-child appear for the first time as giddy and carefree. As if she felt truly safe with the Count and his men. But all the while, the true evil behind her facade works nefariously to perpetuate the dark plot.

She used Lord Darkagnon's own indulgences against him, using his "specially-sweetened" mead as a conduit for her sleep magicks. It wasn't long before Alexis was slurring his words and stumbling his steps. His life-long friend Count Magorian had seen him in this state before (all though never quite like this) and insisted Alexis get to sleep. The Lord offered little resistance, for when his head hit the bed roll he was magically unconscious. The others were none the wiser (not even blinded-by-affection PC sorceress Alena Nurpashi).

Not long thereafter, the players instigated their watch for the night and turned in to sleep. The wicked girl-child Elenia Windalla has successfully zapped Domingo and Alexis with sleep, and unfortunately for the players, Domingo was first watch. So as everybody is sleeping soundly by the waning campfire, Elenia is beginning to put her plan in motion...

It was the darkest hour of the night, while every party member lay absolutely still. But a slight movement caught female PC Alena Nurpašhi's eye. It was Elenia, who was clutching her little doll and sadly muttering, "I'm afraid, I'm afraid". This elicited the proper "awwww" response from Alena, and when the little girl said "the night is dark and scary, can I sit with you?" Alena readily agreed. Little Elenia told our female player "I would feel so safe to sit beside you, you're the nicest person in the group".

Perhaps **Alena Nurpašhi's** player found it a bit odd that I insisted upon role-playing

the exchange between her and child Elenia, as the conversation noticeably got creepier. The child was talking about her loneliness, her desire to be loved, and was demonstrating an overwhelming affection towards our female PC. Perhaps Alena was a bit confused about the direction of this conversation, until she felt the child's vice-like hands tighten around her, holding her secure. The girl-child spoke softly and soothingly to the now-shaken Elvin princess, as Alena continued to struggle against the kids *GI Joe Kung-Fu Grip* ®.

A brief sorceress standoff ensued, as Alena tried to protect herself from the crazed girl. When the girl-child's true form was revealed to Alena, she failed her fear check and was suitably shook by the "hoary, withered sorceress". There was little Alena could do as the once-innocent girl softly kissed her with her poisoned lips, and lay her limp body by the waning fireside. Elenia Windalla cackled with glee as she loomed over Alena's prone form.

Fortunately for the players, **Count Magorian** was unhindered by the polymorphed sorceress' magic, and he sprang to attention. Domingo, Alexis and now Alena lay unconscious around him. Little Elenia Windalla still had that innocent aura, but Destanial could feel her true vibes. He unsheathed his sword and approached the child, demanding to know why he saw her kissing Alena's sleeping lips (he didn't see their brief struggle). He walked past the child, noting her wide, frightened eyes and tried to prod Alena Nurpašhi awake. It was while the Count had his back turned, the sorceress chose to strike. She cast *ray of enfeeblement* upon the Count, and sicced her newly-animated toy doll on him. Destanial struggled mightily against the power of the doll golem, as his own strength had been sufficiently weakened.

So we watched the Count struggle in vain against the sorceress and her doll golem, as he too bore witness to her startling transformation (when he witnessed her true form). He battled to get close to where Domingo and Alexis slept, hoping to awake them from their slumber. All the while, Alena Nurpašhi drifted in and out of consciousness as the poison seeped through her veins, and Elenia Windalla and her doll golem continued their assault on Count Magorian.

Now, bear in mind, that Destanial's player has constructed an ill fighting machine in the form of the Count of Solyss. Combined with the might of the Tighmaevril sword (perhaps the most POWERFUL weapon of light in all of Ravenloft), Destanial can be damn near unstoppable. So when constructing combat encounters for him, I must prepare ahead of time. I did my homework here with Elenia and her doll-golem, and I made sure the deck was stacked in the bad guys favor (all within the framework of the rules, of course). So I had the doll-golem whooping on Destanial, while he tried to prevent Elenia from reaching Alexis and Domingo with her poisoned kisses.

It was starting to get tense, as the players were relying on Destanial to save the day but his character was beginning to falter. Sure enough, the doll golem was chipping away at his HP, while Elenia kept him in check with a few spells. Finally, Destanial was able to strip himself of the maddening doll golem, and focus on the evil polymorphed sorceress called Elenia Windalla.

To give the PCs another chance (no matter how slim), I let the dice decide how long Alexis and Domingo would remain unconscious. Luckily for the players, Alexis made the rolls (but Domingo failed and remained unconscious).

Alexis came to in time to see poor little Elenia whimpering and whining before the

fire, while an angry (and frazzled) Count Magorian loomed ominously over her. Alexis (the character, not the player) was “shocked to see” the Count extend the tip of his blade towards the child in a threatening manner.

Quickly, the Lord was on his feet and approaching the Count. Suddenly, the poor child burst into tears. Around them, lay the prone, sleeping forms of Alena Nurpašhi and Domingo dos Santos.

Alexus harshly questioned Destanial as to what he was doing shirking his watch-guard duties to frighten the little girl. Destanial was aghast, and tried to explain to Alexis the truth of the matter. But Elenia wailed uncontrollably, trying to interrupt and cling to the Lord. Finally, Destanial stiffly grabbed her and told her to stay away from Alexis, but it was too late!

Again the doll golem struck with force, sending the Count crashing to the ground dangerously near the fading bonfire. While he was disarmed and grappling with the doll (remember, his strength has been reduced significantly) the evil Elenia Windalla held the Lord in her death-grip and refused to release him.

This part is in the module, where she uses all her wiles to convince the Lord once and for all to be with her. She gives him the big sob story, saying she “just wants a daddy”. Alexis will be her father, she will be his daughter and together they will be one big happy family. Or else. So what does the Lord of Solyss do, as he gazes deeply into her enchanting azure eyes? Does he try to force her off him? Does he swing around to help Destanial who is still struggling with the doll golem? Does he try to reach his Black Razor, which is sheathed by his bedroll? NONE OF THE ABOVE!

Instead, the Lord stares intensely into Elenia’s eyes, their faces mere inches apart. A soft smile brushes over his lips, and he drops his voice to a soft whisper. “Of course we can be together, Elenia. It’s meant to be,” he gently urges.

Now as DM, this caught me a LITTLE bit by surprise. Even though the module does say to anticipate this happening. So I reacted quickly, and Elenia overcame her initial shock as well. She slipped right into “Innocent” mode, and clutched Alexis’ hand tightly, urging him to move along.

But Alexis was very kind and gentle, when he pulled back her hand and pointed towards Destanial (who FINALLY smashed the doll to pieces, but lay battered and beaten on the ground). Elenia cast a tearful eye towards the Count (who was struggling to his feet), but had no idea what Alexis was trying to say. She figured he was charmed by her innocent façade.

Instead, Alexis reared back with all his might and PIMP-SLAPPED the little girl across the face! He got real stern (and intimidating) when he told her she was a “bad girl, bad girl!” and chastised her for disobeying his commands. He distinctly told her NOT to act this way in front of company, and insisted she be punished. Then he began to uncoil his trusty whip dagger...

She began to sob and beg for mercy, as her wicked “father” closed in with the whip dagger unfurled.

Certainly Elenia Windalla knew the gig was up now, but before she could cast a spell at the Lord, Count Magorian was on her from the rear. Destanial restrained the

sorceress, and ordered Alexis to check on Alena Nurpašhi (who was still unconscious).

A few more rounds played out between Count Destanial Magorian and the wicked Elenia Windalla, as Alexis checked on Alena and Domingo. Being a near-expert on the toxic arts himself, Alexis knew Alena had been poisoned (he just didn't know how). So with his own anger building within him, he did his best to stabilize the fallen Elvin princess. All the while, Destanial is battling the sorceress.

Finally, she got the upper hand and laid Destanial on his back. There was little he could do, as his HPs were madd low as was his strength and con scores.

So imagine this scene: the silhouette of the girl-child Elenia Windalla stands before the fire, the long, gnarled shadow of her true form looming over the fallen Destanial. He begins to edge himself backwards towards his tighmaevril sword, while she threateningly stalks towards him.

Alexis rises up from beside Alena Nurpašhi, and calls out for his "daughter" to halt her advance. Again she looks towards the Lord with large, watery eyes.

"But daddy, you hurt me!" she cries out, but Alexis slips back into his calm, comforting persona. He slowly makes his way towards the child, with his hands in the air and whispering soothing words the whole while. A few rolls of the dice later, and it was decided that Elenia bought his trickery and stopped moving towards the down Count. This give Destanial enough time to grab his blade and struggle to his knees. All the while, the Lord is cajoling the little girl and getting her to drop her defenses.

Words can't do this scene justice, as I can't recall the exact transcript. But despite the Lord's appearance on these boards not too long ago, I assure you he can be an eloquent speaker when he chooses to. And tonight, his wit and 18 charisma were put to the maximum test.

"You've been a good girl, Elenia" the Lord said, still slowly moving towards her. *"You've been so well behaved tonight, that daddy has a little treat for you"*. He reaches behind him to retrieve a "lollypop for daddy's little angel".

Elenia is glowing with excitement and joyously exclaims *"Daddy, you've come home! You've come to take me away from the bad place!"*

"Yes, angel. Daddy has come to take you away." The Lord replied. *"Take you away forever..."*

Little Elenia Windalla, the corrupted innocent, outstretched her arms in a welcoming embrace.

Lord Darkagnon's right hand reemerged from behind him, but in it was not a lollypop as promised. Instead, he brandished his *single-shot dueling pistol* from Arkandale.

A single look of shock and horror washed over the child's features, before the CLAP of the pistol rocked the woods and echoed through the night.

Her once innocent child-like face shattered from the impact, and her tiny body

plunged backwards into the fading flames of the bonfire. The sudden force of her landing caused the flames to fan higher and brighter, engulfing her body and roaring over her howls of agony.

Lord Darkagnon slowly lowered the smoking barrel of the wheelock, and watched the flames swallow the little girls body. Count Magorian silently moved beside him, and without a word pitched the broken body of her doll into the fire alongside her. Elenia Windalla is dead.

Destanial moved towards the still-slumbering form of Domingo dos Santos, while Alexis bent before Alena Nurpašhi. He told the Count she had been poisoned and that they must act fast. Unfortunately, they must break their oath of secrecy and journey to the nearest village. Alena needs a professional's help, and quickly.

That night, Destanial and Alexis discussed the possibility of Elenia being a spy sent by Ivana to undo the players from the inside out. When they finally reached a hospice open at this early hour, Alexis, Destanial (and now Domingo) secured the premises tightly. They anticipated the arrival of Ivana Boritsi, or her peoples, but they never came.

Matter of fact, the rest of the night and the morning passed uneventfully. Alena will be OK, as will Count Magorian and Domingo. Although the emotional trauma suffered by Alena Nurpašhi at the hands of the corrupted innocent will haunt her for a long time. For the next two days, the players stayed low in a small Borcan village, allowing their bodies enough time to rest.

They left Borca to return home to Arkandale not long thereafter. Ivana Boritsi and her people never came.

On a side note, I specifically remember Alexis and I getting lifted after the sess and watching the local news. Them trees were pretty sweet and I SWEAR TO GOD I thought I was watching an episode of Saturday Night Live, or something. The news came off like a straight parody, but it was all real! I remember this night, cuz at the SAME time Alexis was licking a shot in the game, just down the street a convient store clerk was being shot and killed. When we watched the news update, they said the police were "looking for a black male with baggy clothes". Now that just sums it up, doesn't it?

Episode #11: The Strange Story of Darkangnon Estates

There are multiple backgrounds involved in the Tale, so bear with me as I weave them together...

Background Story #1: Joson/Darkangnon Estates

The Joson family has lived (and died) in Union Veil, Arkandale for generations. The first to really strike it rich in Union Veil, Isaac Joson Sr. was a wealthy cotton tycoon who migrated from up north (actually, he and his family were drawn into the mists when Arkandale formed in 708). The Joson family was a major and influential player in the Arkandalian upper-class for years to come. Construction of a home for a family of this magnitude began in the fall of 711 and finished in the spring of 713. At the time, it was one of the finest (and most expensive) homes in all the land, overlooking a still body of water that would come to be known as Joson's Pond. Isaac could afford to maintain an estate of this size due to the success of his cotton business (and his expansion into the burgeoning tobacco industry).

The Joson family lived off their Old Money and reputation for years, and life was grand. At least until the summer of 715. That's when something very spooky happened on the Joson estates...

The oldest of the Joson boys (at the ripe old age of 13 himself), Stephen Joson was found in his room with a gruesome collection of gashes and cuts covering his body. The little boy had a far-out look in his eye when he told his parents his "invisible friend" was responsible for the cuts. Father Isaac Joson had the stable hand whipped and beaten for "practicing dark magicks" (he had to blame it on SOMEbody, might as well be a slave).

It wasn't long before the entire house seemed to fall into disarray. There were claims of mysterious lights and fires spontaneously starting. Long, shrill screams could be heard well into the night, as could the repetitive banging of the family's grand piano. It was not uncommon to pass by the Estates at night and see the poor scarred Stephen Joson slowly rocking to and fro by the family pond. When confronted about the strange behavior of their oldest son, Isaac and his wife would adamantly deny there was anything wrong.

Finally, it all ended one night when the poor boy climbed to the top of the house and dove off, hollering "Bookraken" the whole way down. He died upon impact. The distraught family sold away (or murdered) all their old slaves and reacquired a fresh new bunch. This same summer, Suzanne Joson (youngest child and only daughter) was born. The incident with the now deceased Stephen Joson was quickly swept under the rug and forgotten by "proper" Arkandalian society. But still, some whispered behind closed doors that the poor boy had gone insane, and his brothers would follow soon thereafter.

.....

Years later, during the summer of 721, there was a minor slave revolt on the grounds of the Joson Estates. But oddly enough, the slaves didn't rebel against their owners. They rebelled against themselves. They were frothing at the mouth with a wild look in their eyes, as they viciously tore into each other with bare hands and teeth. First, the men slaughtered their own women and children, before turning on

each other with ferocious determination. Not even the overseers employed by the Josons could curtail the violence. It finally ended when the slaves barricaded themselves in the farmhouse and torched it from the inside. Everybody burned to death. No cause for the sudden implosion was ever discovered. But the Joson's did commission a priest to "bless" the grounds for them. But the craziness doesn't end here...

From *And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?*

As told by Lord Darkangnon's wife-to-be, Violet Anne Membrose:

"The Joson family was a rich and powerful influence in Union Veil for decades. Their vast plantations and mills brought a steady stream of profits into the city (as well as into the Joson coffers). Violet Anne tells how she grew up best of friends with the youngest child (and only daughter) Suzanne Joson. She speaks of a mysterious suitor who showed up unannounced one night and stole Suzanne's heart. Although Violet never met the man named Rafe, Suzanne told her he was an "adventurer seeking noble blood". Before the rest of Union Veil even knew it, young Suzanne Joson became his wife.

Trouble started for the Joson's in the winter of 735, when the patriarch of the Joson family, Sir Isaac Joson, was accosted by a "vistani wench" in the townsquare during broad daylight. There, in front of half the population of Union Veil, the wicked vistani girl cursed Isaac for some unmentioned past transgressions. Just as quickly as the curse was bestowed, the vistani girl ran away and disappeared into the forests.

From that day on, one by one, the Joson family began disappearing. First it was Suzanne's two older brothers, who disappeared one night after dinner. Then, the father Isaac Joson vanished after returning home from the marketplace. Finally, Suzanne's mother was the next to succumb to the curse, as she vanished the night after her husband (some say she went mad looking for him). When Rafe was the next to turn up missing, it shattered the fragile girl. Poor Suzanne Joson was so distraught over the curse, she drowned herself in the pond before it could claim her..."

DM Note: For those that have been following along very closely, and for my own personal records, realize the following:

"Rafe" is actually **Nathan Timothy** the (in)famous river tradesman, who was looking to expand his enterprises into Union Veil at the time. He wooed Suzanne, before killing her and her entire family and stealing their wealth. He had kept his relationship with Suzanne so secretive and away from the public eye, nobody besides Suzanne even knew who "Rafe" was.

As his time to murder the family drew nearer, Nathan Timothy (AKA Rafe) needed a cover. So he sought out a wandering clan of Vistani who "just happened" to be nearby. He propositioned them with money, and got one of the women to pronounce a fake curse on the father. So now, instead of the family mysteriously vanishing, it looks like the work of a vistani curse. His plan worked, he claimed the money, and it wasn't long before he got a strong foothold in the Union Veil money machine under his real name of Nathan Timothy.

The vistani tribe that "just happened" to be in the area, was actually in the area for a purpose. The leader of the tribe, a "mysterious brown-skinned gentleman" had

foreseen Nathan's treachery and chose to help him complete his task. The "vistani wench" that pronounced the fake curse on Isaac Joson was actually **Natacha of the Wanderers**, who Alexis had helped free from Soth's curse! (see events to **When Black Roses Bloom**)

Soon after returning with Alexis to Gundarak, Natacha "mysteriously vanished" late one night, along with the budding young psionic Jorge. In truth, both of them were recruited during the dead of the night by that same "mysterious brown-skinned" man, who wanted them on his team for some unknown reason. The pieces were put in place with the fake Joson curse for Alexis to come along later and "suffer the effects of the curse" himself. WHY did that mysterious brown-skinned man want Alexis to inherit the Joson estates? Because he knew the "true curse" the home labored under, and he wanted Alexis to share it... *mwah-ha-ha-ha!*

So that's the story of the Joson/Darkangnon Estates. But that's only the juicy parts of the legend. It seems that almost every summer since that fateful one of 715, something wild and crazy goes down on the Estates. I know the Southern summer heat can drive a man crazy sometimes, but damn - this is getting ridiculous. And now, the Lord and owner of the newly re-christened Darkangnon Estates is returning home to spend his first summer on the grounds...

Please Welcome Toneih Ellis to Ravenloft...

Background #2: Introducing Darius of Sithicus

Toneih is new to D&D ENTIRELY. He's heard of the Game in passing, but never committed to a sess. Introduced by our newest member (at the time) Alena Nurpašhi, we agreed to give Toneih a test-run (like we do with all new recruits) He and I sat down to hash out a character concept.

Turns out the only exposure he's ever had to D&D was reading the Dragonlance trilogy way back in the day. He expressed interest in playing a half-elf ranger, and I figured Sithicus would be perfect for him (seeing as how it's loosely based on Dragonlance to begin with). Unfortunately, he was unfamiliar with Lord Soth but that doesn't really matter.

The story of Darius is as thus:

Born to an Elvin mother and gypsy father, Darius was stranded at an early age. His mother perished during childbirth before she could identify the father. Of course the father was absent since day one.

He grew to adulthood amongst the orphans and waifs, but even amongst the lowest of the low he was treated disrespectfully. Darius quickly took off on his own the first chance he had. He always felt more comfortable amongst the wildlife and nature of Sithicus, thus when his freedom was earned he embarked upon a career as a ranger. He assumed a pseudo-vigilante role over the city of Har-Thelen, where he used his skills and powers to regulate from a distance.

When a string of rash, mysterious kidnappings rocked the city, Darius was quick to learn all he could about them. Several young members of the Elvin upper classes (still rebuilding in the wake of *The Cursed Knights Awakening*) were disappearing at an alarming rate; mass panic is sure to follow.

Darius was quick to learn that the work of the kidnappers was not done by “professionals” per-se, like the authorities believed. Instead, it was the work of animals. Strong, quick, lithe animals with vast intelligence and the ability to walk on hind legs.

The clues all pointed in that direction, but the authorities couldn't see it. So as he did with most matters in the city, Darius handled it solo. From afar, he begins to investigate the rumors, sights and scenes all the while patrolling the city through nightfall. The tracks or clues left behind by the kidnappers were few, but Darius is able to discern certain facts.

Whatever or whoever is using these animals to commit these kidnappings is heading north into the wild, untamed Verbrek wilderness. It is doubtful anyone could survive these harsh woodlands, led alone a pampered Elvin dilettante. Certainly if they had been brought here, they were most likely dead. But Darius didn't want to believe that. He believed the threat could be tracked and followed: persecuted to the fullest extent of his law. So he strapped himself up and foraged ahead into the strange wilderness, following a vague trail and a wild theory. He has no idea where the path might take him.

Backstory #3: Return of the Lord and all his men...

Months after their adventures in Darkon (and Borca), the three Player Characters (and one NPC) returned home. For more info on their adventures abroad, check *The Cedar Chest* and *Corrupted Innocents*. Before heading back to their province of Solyss, Alexis Darkangnon chose to return to his wife and estates in Arkandale. Destanial Magorian (his bodyguard Domingo) and Alena Nurpašhi agreed to join him.

It was late summer when they returned to Union Veil, and the community was happy to see them. When spotted in the streets, ladies would curtsy and gentleman would tip their hats. Of course, all maintained a safe but respectable distance from the players (*their reputations precede them, especially with Alexis' involvement in the duel a few months back: see And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?*)

Upon their return, each of the players had their own things to do and people to see. They spread out on their own, each knowing they would meet back at Darkangnon Estates this evening.

Above them, dark storm clouds were rolling in from the west. The sun remained shining and the sky was still blue, but it wouldn't be for long.

The Tale Begins

Firstly, Lord Darkangnon returned to his estates where he would check on his business, wife and home. As expected, the Lord was greeted with a Heroes welcome. Surprisingly however, his wife (*Violet Anne Membrose-Darkangnon*) was NOT present to greet him. One of his servants informed him that the Lady of the house has been sick recently, and is visiting with the physician. But before the Lord could even question him further, he was bombarded with bad news.

His groundskeeper (*Thomas Landry*) informed him about a web of bad luck that has seemingly besieged the Lord's manor house. Servants and workers have been

complaining of strange lights, sights and sounds (leaving some to believe the house is still haunted). Many of these workers have quit or escaped in protest, never to be seen in Union Veil again. To top it all off, a mysterious fire ravaged the Lord's stables and killed his prized steed. His wife has been ill, and powerless to put an end to these events. The estates have been crumbling in the Lord's absence. If that wasn't enough to get the Lord heated, he soon found out that the "shipments" he was supposed to be receiving from his partner **Phinean Windrider** (back in Solyss) have NOT been arriving. These highly-secretive very important packages contained money from the Lord's enterprises as well as the narcotics needed to fuel his habits. Best believe he was infuriated after this discovery. The Lord immediately set out to learn what he could about these occurrences.

Count Destanial Magorian (and his faithful man-servant Domingo) were cordially greeted by **Harold Membrose** (father to Violet Anne and wealthy tobacco and cotton baron). It was Destanial who opened trading routes between Solyss and Union Veil, making a lot of money for a lot of people. Harold Membrose was one of the guys that profited tremendously. Thus (despite his inherent bigotry towards vistani) he has always given Destanial his proper respect. Harold Membrose was elated to meet their new traveling partner, Alena Nurpašhi, and commented on her exotic beauty. Destanial assured him there is no romantic involvement: strictly business. Harold Membrose invited all three of them (Destanial, Domingo and Alena) down to the docks where they could view his newest trading ship acquisition.

As they stood dockside surveying the beautiful river and it's bobbing paddle boats, Harold went on to explain about his "business expansions" to the north. He has met some wealthy buyers from Borca and Dorvinia, who have served to give his businesses a shot in the arm. Destanial's eyes widened immediately at the thought. He knew of some "wealthy, powerful" people in Dorvinia and Borca himself. "Wealthy and powerful" people he and the Lord had run afoul of: particularly the head of the Dilisnyan crime family, **Ivan Dilisnya**. But if they were out to get the Lord and Count (like Destanial assumed) why would they enrich the Count's own business partnerships? Destanial wasn't sure, but he knew something was suspicious. He asked to confer further with Harold about these connections. Harold obliged, and the three of them (Domingo included) excused themselves from dockside and journeyed back to Harold's home. Alena Nurpašhi willingly stayed behind to soak in more of the sights.

Alena Nurpašhi has come a long way since her formative years in Neblus. Born of Elvin nobility, she had come to expect the finer things in life. Being out on her own for the first time in her life has opened her eyes to the world around her. But she has never forsaken her Elvin heritage or her appreciation for all things natural and beautiful. So she stands dockside in Union Veil, Arkandale observing her surroundings and thinking back to the home she left behind. Unbeknownst to the others, there are dark secrets that chased Alena out of Neblus, not her own "innate curiosity" as previously stated...

While Alena was alone and enjoying the sites, I had a few people drop by to introduce themselves and greet the Lord and Count's new traveling companion (I told you word travels fast in Arkandale). I only did this to butter her up, and make her believe the Lord and Count are well respected in the land. Which they are, but there are certain people in the city with a bone to pick...

It wasn't long before another roguish gentleman approached her, complimenting her

on her beauty and flaunting his own personal wealth. He introduced himself as **Nathan Timothy**, merchant and river tradesman. He works very closely with Harold Membrose (who she just met) and Count Destanial Magorian (or so he claims). Together, Nathan and Alena discussed the natural beauty of their surroundings as he pointed out various landmarks and sights. He even serenaded the clear blue river waters with a throaty whiskey-soaked baritone. He knew Alena was enthralled by the beauty Arkandale could provide, and he quickly followed up. He invited her on a personal tour, where she could see the best Arkandale had to offer up close and in person. He pimped his own knowledge of the area, as well as his credentials as river navigator. She was wooed, and accepted his invitation.

DM Note: *It is important to note that the previous exchange with Alena occurred in direct view of the other players (Alexus and Destanial). BUT, when it came time for this roguish gentleman to identify himself, I slipped Alena a private note with his name on it. I didn't want the other players (Destanial in particular) to disrupt my scheme. Mwah-ha-ha-ha!*

By the time Destanial and Harold Membrose returned to dockside, Alena and Nathan Timothy were long gone, chugging down the Musarde.

You should have SEEN Destanial's face when a local dock boy told them that the lovely Lady Alena Nurpašhi set sail with Nathan Timothy. The same infamous river tradesman that drugged and beat our favorite Count, before dumping his body overboard and moving on (*see events to And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?*). Of course, Destanial couldn't prove his allegations so the attack went unpunished. Thus far. But when Destanial heard that foul, lecherous fool was trying to dig his claws into Alena, the Count practically snapped. He excused himself quickly from Harold Membrose's company and took off, trying to find a way of catching up to Nathan's riverboat.

The Break Down

Lord Alexis Darkangnon: Conducts a private investigation of his manor house, but is primarily concerned with the absence of his packages from Solyss. He's beginning to believe his business associate *Phinean Windrider* snaked him.

Count Destanial Magorian (w/ Domingo dos Santos): Bargains their way onto a local trading ship, where they take off down the Musarde in the direction they heard Nathan was heading. Both Destanial and Domingo are aware of the dire circumstances surrounding Nathan Timothy's "gentlemanly invitation" and hope they can reach Alena before it's too late. They believe she is too fragile a flower to tangle with that wicked weed. The memories of his last encounter with the man still fresh in his mind, Destanial seeks revenge against Master Timothy.

Darius of Sithicus: The trail leads him north from Sithicus, where he engaged in a few random wilderness encounters (just to get him familiar with the 3E mechanics). Amongst other things, he discovered the ravaged, mangled body of an escaped slave. Odd, considering there are no other humans around here for miles.

Alena Nurpašhi: Role-playing bonanza. I had madd fun messing with her as *Nathan Timothy*. He was nice enough in the beginning, albeit a bit thuggish. He offered her some wine, which she graciously accepted (*Destanial's players just laughed and shook his head*). It wasn't long before she was feeling the effects of the tainted wine, and everything went blurry. Think date-rape.

But of course, as DM, I'm not gonna let it go THAT far. I just want to add some heat to the bad guy (the lusty Nathan Timothy in this case). Although she was impaired by the knock-out drug, she managed to evade Nathan for a little while as he chased her around his boat. When she got to the railing, and leaned over, he thought she was gonna puke. He just laughed and offered to "take care of her". What he didn't expect was for her to say "ciao" and jump overboard, plunging into the river Musarde. As she struggled to stay afloat with heavy limbs and sagging eyelids, Nathan Timothy angrily shook his fist and promised the river would "swallow her whole".

That was the last thing she remembered, before washing up on the shore somewhere. She knew she was hopelessly lost. All the while, those ominous storm clouds were continuing to build and the sun's rays were fading by the second.

Finally, the story continues. I'm setting up the pieces and moving everything into place for my custom-made homebrewed adventure. Check it:

Alone and soaked to the core, **Alena Nurpašhi** struggled up the muddy embankment. Looking around she could see the cool blue Musarde River behind her, with Master Timothy's boat bobbing on the horizon. Ahead of her, stretched the untamed Arkandalian wilderness. She was lost. So far away from home, so far away from anything familiar, and now hopelessly lost in a foreign wilderness. The approaching storm only made the hot Arkandalian weather even muggier, so Alena shed some of her excess baggage (which by now was soaked and only weighing her down). Meanwhile, somewhere not too far away, sensitive noses twinkle with the smell of her sweet Elvin blood and Green Eyez blaze with hunger.

OK, here's where some of the threads collided:

I had fun with Alena as I described her surroundings in warped, twisted detail. The effects of the drugged wine made her limbs heavy and her mind hazy. As she moved further into the wilderness, the skies above got darker and darker. The shadows around her lengthened while sinister shapes darted to and fro. Thunder rolled across the sky like it was chasing her. I tried to make it seem like there was life everywhere in the forest, and it was all watching her. Finally, I described the glimmering flicker of a dozen green eyez as they eagerly followed along from the darkness.

At this point Count Magorian's player jumped in with the "Ooo! Ooo!'s" as he was very familiar with these "green eyez". He wanted to know how his search for Alena was progressing. I told him he went far south in his journey down the Musarde, past dozens of other sailing vessels. Yet neither he nor his bodyguard Domingo saw the infamous Captain Nathan Timothy and his ship. But Destanial refused to quit, which proved his character to me. I rewarded his diligence and persistence with a few pricey Spot checks. An hour or so after his search began, Destanial finally spotted some random equipment scattered alongside the shore area (far, far away from any settlements). Intrigued, he peered harder from the deck and recognized the wet cloak as belonging to Alena Nurpašhi. Almost immediately he and the bodyguard Domingo were boarding their small raft and heading over to the shoreline (even after the ship's captain and his men warned them against the dangers of the Arkandalian wilderness). Destanial was well aware of the dangers.

Toneih Ellis - aka Darius of Sithicus

Meanwhile **Darius of Sithicus** is hot on the trail of those odd, feline-like markings. It is a strange combination of human footprints and large cat-paw tracks that make him think people are either riding or walking alongside these big creatures. What creature actually made these tracks Darius didn't know. But whatever they were, the notorious Verbrek wolves seemed to be giving them a large berth. That is, until Darius found some markings indicating a squabble between the two species. It appeared to be a quick, brutish battle (as evidenced by the blood-sprayed trees) but there weren't any casualties. A few successful checks later, and Darius is discovering the trail of a wounded combatant. It appeared that the injured creature straggled off after the battle, away from its flock. The cat-like markings were apparently not pursued by wolves. So Darius followed the bloody trail, hoping to catch a glimpse of these mysterious beasts.

As he continued to track the creature through the forest, he could deduce certain facts. The creature was obviously severely injured, as its progress got slower and slower. It began to struggle through the woodlands it has once passed through so gracefully. But most alarmingly, was the fact that the tracks suddenly and inexplicitly began to resemble those of human footprints! The same bare-footed tracks he was following alongside the cat-paws! Apparently these large cat-like creatures were not being rode by people – they WERE people!

Intrigued more so now than ever before, Darius continued to pursue the tracks. He pursued them all through the afternoon even as those ominous storm clouds gathered overhead (the trail was still relatively fresh, so he knew whatever he was tracking was just a little further ahead of him). Coming down through the hills, he could see the myriad cave entrances almost obscured by the tangled vines and walls of moss. Whatever the hybrid-creature he'd been tracking the whole day was, it retreated into one of these cave entrances. Darius was hesitant at first to follow, but the menacing storm clouds brewing overhead made his mind up for him. He knew the storm was about to break – and break hard.

He followed the tracks deep into the dark cave, on alert with his weapons drawn. At this point, it appeared that whatever he was following was dragging something alongside it. Deeper into the cave he went. He knew his prey was just ahead -- he could hear the hollow echo of ragged breaths being drawn.

But just then, he heard the sounds of movement back towards the entrance of the cave! The sudden sounds startled him, and he chose to disregard the trail for now. He needed to know what had just entered the cave with him...

When Alena Met Darius...

Creeping slowly so as to not draw attention to himself, Darius prepared a Sleep dart and readied the net. The image he saw at the mouth of the cave startled him. It wasn't the animal or monster he expected. Instead, it was a drenched, weeping Elvin female! She was peering out of the cave entrance, into the ever-darkening Arkandalian night with a mixed expression of hopelessness and fear. She had no idea our Ranger-PC and new player Darius (aka Toneih) was creeping up on her from the rear.

From here, I let our two newest players have the stage to themselves. Alena nearly jumped three miles when she first heard Darius' deep voice from the shadows. But

he was able to calm her and assure her he meant no harm, before she blasted him with a magic missile or something. She explained her horror of being lost in a foreign wilderness with strange creatures tracking her every step. It was obvious to Darius that the elvin female was under the influence of something, as her steps were wobbly and her speech slurred. He got her to sit down, relax and relay the events of her journey to him. She explained the drugged wine and the man who tried to force himself on her. She explained jumping, or falling overboard (couldn't remember the exact details) and washing up ashore somewhere down the Musarde. And she explained the strange green eyez that have seemingly been following her since she touched down.

(Now this is my favorite part) She gestured out the cave into the gloomy Arkandalian night. It was nearly pitch-black at this point, with those ominous storm clouds obscuring the last dying rays of sun. As she pointed out into the wilderness, Darius' eyes followed. It was dark. So dark, they could see nothing beyond the thick wall of trees. Suddenly, a single FLASH of lightning and BOOM of thunder heralded the arrival of the downpour. *And in that instant when the lightning flashed, both Darius and Alena could see dozens of long, lithe forms slinking in and out of the shadows.* Their green eyez sparkled like diamonds. There were indeed strange things following Alena. They followed her to the cave entrance, and now they continue to prowl the area. What ARE these mysterious creatures? (Alexus and Destanial were laughing and pointing at Alena and Darius like "Ha Ha! You're in trouble now!" Both of them are very familiar with the Green Eyez).

OK then. So Darius and Alena kinda resigned themselves to the fact they were trapped in the cave. If it wasn't the vicious downpour holding them back, it was the virtual army of shadowy shapes continuously shifting outside the mouth of the cave. During the periodic flashes of lightning, the two PCs could see humanoid shapes mingling with those of the Great Plains cats. Darius and Alena felt they had no choice to but to press deeper into the cave (to continue following the trail of the wounded creature Darius had been tracking). Both of them (in-character and out-character) needed to know what the hell these "Green Eyez" were.

So they followed the bloody trail further into the dark cave. Their prey was indeed dragging something alongside it at this point, but they had no clue what. So deeper into the caves they went, following the myriad twists and turns. I was trying to build up tension by describing in a low voice the sights and sounds that greeted them. Whatever they were tracking was right ahead. Are you sure you want to find it?

As they rounded the bend and emerged into a spacious opening, they gasped at the site that greeted them -- a battered slave-girl cradling the limp body of her young son. The woman peered at the emerging PCs through a head full of long, black hair (thick and matted with blood). Her eyes were watery, filled with rage and sadness. Her clothing was bare and tattered, revealing the myriad wounds spread about her taut, muscular body. Her chest heaved up and down with each rasping breath. Her eyes met with those of the PCs, and their gazes locked. The tension began to mount. Although they were across the way, and the lighting was virtually non-existent, it was still readily apparent to the players that the young boy she held in her arms was dead. But did she know that?

2 + 1 = 3 PCs

I went back and forth on this one, explaining the woman's subtle movements and facial expressions then asking the players for their reaction. Both Darius and Alena attempted to close in on the woman and maybe comfort her, or something. But instead, when Alena attempted to analyze the unmoving child further, the ragged slave woman snarled ferociously. She lunged towards the players, and they were shocked to see *claws the size of kitchen knives!* Combat ensues.

Both PCs fought valiantly, but that poor mangled slave-girl battled with her back against the wall. She was absolutely vicious, tearing into the players with aggression while hissing and grunting with exertion (never once did she speak a word).

Finally, she managed to lay both PCs down and slowly moved in on the wounded Alena Nurpašhi to finish the job. But Darius sprang to his feet and moved in to attack. That's when the slave-girl roared in his face and assumed a half-human/half-panther hybrid form. Her true self was revealed! She ripped into Darius with ruthless violence, *including a frothing-mouthed attack that clamped tightly around his arm.* He was able to pull his arm free from her grasp, but her fangs tore through his clothing into his flesh. He could feel the searing hot pain shoot up his arm.

Finally, the combined might of the two PCs was able to drive the wounded girl/animal back and force her to flee further into the dark recesses of the cave. Both players hesitated to follow.

Examining the corpse of the child (of which she left behind after fleeing), Darius was quickly able to deduce that he died from wounds suffered in a wolf attack. Odd, considering the lack of human settlements in the surrounding areas. Again the two players briefly contemplated following the creature further into the cave, but they were already pretty banged up. Darius was very concerned about the bite-wound he suffered to his arm. The scars from the attack will forever be embedded in his flesh. Both he and Alena retreated back to the main cave entrance, where a wall of rain continued to pour.

Suddenly, who should emerge from beyond the watery veil but **Count Destanial Magorian** and his man-servant **Domingo dos Santos**. Both were startled but relieved to find their lost companion Alena Nurpašhi.

DM Note: Destanial was led to this precise spot by a series of taunting voices and flashing green eyes. He received these little tidbits in note form, while I was orchestrating the battle in the cave. The Green Eyes (led by the warrior Ypowa) are always trying to flaunt their powers before Destanial in hopes of getting him to commit to their organization. In reality, it was just a DM Tool to get three of our four PCs united.

Count Magorian could quickly see that both Alena and Darius were injured. Alena explained the circumstances of her attack, and how this stranger (Darius) had come to her rescue. There wasn't much time for chitter-chatter though, Alena and Darius had to reach a hospice ASAP.

At first they were hesitant to reemerge into the thunderstorm (citing the green eye stalking that plagued them upon their arrival), but Count Destanial Magorian assured them they would be safe. They couldn't doubt the stoic, armored warrior-Count of Solyss, Gundarak. Back to Union Veil they trekked, with nary a single Green Eye to cause alarm. It was the storm itself that battered and beat them down.

Making it back to the muddy, rain-soaked streets of Union Veil, the three players (and one NPC) were able to solicit a ride from a passing coach. They received a quick stitch-em-up at the local hospice, before heading back to the manor. By the time they reached the gates of Darkangnon Estates, the storm was just reaching its crescendo.

They were greeted at the door by the manservant Thomas Landry, who quickly escorted them inside to the Great Room (where a roaring fire awaits). I did the little "housecat seems to have a fleck of intelligence in her eye" bit with our chick player Alena, but all it got were a few raised eyebrows (see **The Strange Story 3.5** module at www.FraternityofShadows.com). The players were more intrigued by the Green Eye sightings, and promptly settled in to discuss the matter further.

The purpose of getting all FOUR players (and one NPC) together at last is to get them comfortable with their characters, and the whole "role-playing" aspect of the Game. Remember, this is Darius' first D&D game EVER... The PCs got changed out of their wet clothes, and had a drink in the Great room while dinner was being prepared. They took this opportunity to get to know Darius a bit better. He is a newcomer both in and out of the game, so this warm-up is crucial in determining first impressions. He was very much into the RP-ing aspect right from the jump.

DM Note: *Darius was the FIRST to fail his check against "the illness". I ruled that Lord Alexis Darkangnon would be immune to the effect, due to his Unwholesome Ichor. Just keep in mind that the disease has spread to Darius, and it's only a matter of time before the visions begin...*

OK, some things that must be mentioned cuz they play a HUGE part in the Hallucinogenic aspect of the tale:

1) **Darius'** top priority is tracking down the mysterious gang of kidnapers who've been menacing the city of Har-Thelen the last few weeks. Unbeknownst to him (as a character AND a player) is the fact that these kidnapers are actually members of the Green Eyez tribe (see events to **And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?**). So when he started questioning the others about these strange stalkings, it was beyond simple character motivation. He really did want to know what kind of creatures they were.

Count Destanial Magorian is very familiar with the Green Eyez from past encounters with the Tribe, *but he declined to go into further detail*. I'm not quite sure why he chose to do this – maybe he forgot Darius and Alena really don't know what a Green Eye is. But for whatever the reasons, he didn't explain it further. He kinda brushed the whole matter off and began questioning Alena further about her encounter with Nathan Timothy. But right away the seeds of suspicion were planted in Darius' head. WHY WOULD COUNT MAGORIAN ATTEMPT TO DOWNPLAY THE KIDNAPPINGS? I could see the gears spinning a mile-a-minute in Toneih's head at that moment – he was concocting some elaborate conspiracy theories. Theories that would play right into my hand as the "sickness" begins to take effect...

2) **Lord Alexis Darkangnon** is heated. I mean, absolutely infuriated. He is CONVINCED that his partner back home in Solyss is snaking him. **Phinean Windrider** is a trusted companion (and fellow fiend) who fought alongside Alexis and Destanial during the Revolution. Alexis and Phinean have been through a lot together, and Alexis even promoted Phinean to assistant-guildmaster. He runs the

Solyss businesses in Alexis' absence.

Plus, both Alexis and Phinean have a little "side-business" going on behind the scenes... They maintain a lucrative money-making machine using their titles and positions as fronts for an inter-domainal drug ring. They peddle inebriants even they are not immune to. And one of Phinean's main responsibilities (his TOP responsibility if you ask Alexis) is to maintain the Silent Screamez operation and send Alexis his share every two weeks. BUT ALEXUS HASN'T RECEIVED A SINGLE BATCH OF THE NARCOTIC. So these are the thoughts sizzling away on his brain.

Not to mention the fact that his wife is "sick" -- but he automatically assumes the physicians can take care of her. But it's not that kind of illness. There may not even be a cure. But bottom-line: rage and anger are building within the Lord. He thinks he's gonna wait out the storm here in Arkandale, before immediately setting off to Solyss when it clears. The matter must be taken care of before the onset of withdrawal. Alexis is sitting on enough intoxicants to last him the next few days, but he must re-up soon...

3) **Lady Alena Nurpašhi** caught a case of the sniffles. It didn't affect her much stat-wise (I just gave her a -2 to her checks and she couldn't regain lost HPs from sleeping), but I figured it would add a lil flavor to the Game. Also, I planted the first seed of suspicion in Alena's mind when I noted the faint magical aura permeating from the house. Sorta like magical "hot spots". She wasn't able to identify or clearly locate these sources, but she knew they were there. What could be causing them?

Aiight, then. Let us begin.

After dinner, **Alena Nurpašhi** excused herself from the party and moved to the Lord's personal library (*see the map included with the module*). She settled in to read a few books, and whittle the time away. While she was all-alone in the room, I had Opportunity #2 to inflict her with the sickness (she had unwittingly passed her first check in the Great Room). So while she was reading, I had the housecat Chatruse stroll up and park herself in Alena's lap. Our chick player couldn't resist the opportunity to pet the purring cat, and I secretly made the check. **FAILURE!** Alena is next to succumb to the "illness"!

Next up: **Darius of Sithicus**. I told you how he is beginning to have his suspicions regarding the connection between the Count and the Green Eyez... well Destanial is starting to have his own suspicions about Darius! The Count is well aware of the injury Darius sustained in the battle with the slave girl/panther hybrid, even though Darius attempted to downplay it.

Quote:

Originally posted by The MadStepDad

That's when the slave-girl roared in his face and assumed a half-human/half-panther hybrid form. Her true self was revealed! She ripped into Darius with ruthless violence, including a frothing-mouthed attack that clamped tightly around his arm. He was able to pull his arm free from her grasp, but her fangs tore through his clothing into his flesh....

...Darius was very concerned about the bite-wound he suffered to his arm.

The scars from the attack will forever be embedded in his flesh.

Destanial remembers quite vividly the scene in the woods when he was strapped to the stone tablet by the Green Eyez who hoped to force their "gift" upon him (see *past events to **And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?***). But Destanial knows lycanthropy is anything but a gift – it's a curse. And if this new guy is infected with the disease... Morninglord have mercy on him. Cuz Count Magorian will NOT hesitate to lay him down.

Destanial discussed this possibility with his trusted companion Domingo dos Santos, and they both agreed that if Darius showed signs of the disease they would seek out a cure immediately. But if a cure can't be found... well, you know the rest.

So after dinner, **Darius** excused himself from the others and retreated upstairs to his own guest room (personally arranged by Lord Darkangnon himself). This gave Destanial, (the NPC) Domingo and Lord Alexis Darkangnon time to discuss the stranger alone. Yes, they think he's a bit odd and yes they question his motives. Not to mention the fact he DID get bit by a lycanthrope. But still – he played a part in rescuing Alena, so they felt they owed him a bit of gratitude. They agreed he could stay on the grounds until the storm cleared.

As Darius settled into his darkened bedchambers, I took the opportunity to mess with his head a little. Outside the lone window in his room, the storm was horrendous. But between the sporadic flashes of lightning and continuous onslaught of pounding rain, he caught a glimpse of Green Eyez twinkling in the distance. Have the monsters tracked him here? Are they prowling the estate grounds? Is it just his imagination? Darius found himself staring at the wound on his arm as he asked himself these questions. *What if Count Destanial Magorian summoned them here to finish the job?*

Alexus is nauseous. He dipped into his *Silent Screamz* stash to try and ease the pain a bit, but he couldn't find relief. His joints ached and his head throbbed. So while Destanial and Domingo were downstairs in the Great Room, Darius is locked in the guest room and Alena chills in the library, the Lord of Darkangnon Estates is alone in his master bedroom. His wife had yet to return from her "visit with the physician" but Alexis paid that no mind. He just stared blankly out the window into the raging storm.

He was jonesin' for a fix.

He moved to the liquor cabinet and removed a brandy bottle and snifter. But he found his hands shaking so much that he dropped the bottle to the floor with a loud crash! Sudden pains struck his gut like two heated daggers. He didn't feel normal or *right*. His gaze fell upon the **Black Razor** as it rested in its scabbard. It promised to make things all better again. So the Lord pulled himself together, threw on his hooded cloak and overcoat and slung the sword over his shoulder.

He attempted to slip out of the house without notice, but the servant-girl **Gurtchen** saw him about to exit. She asked the Lord where he was going in this dreadful storm – and the first thing he could think of was his wife Violet Anne Membrose-Darkangnon. So he told Gurtchen he was worried about Violet and he was going downtown to find her. He'll return with more news soon. Gurtchen just nodded and

watched the Lord disappear into the nasty storm.

Meanwhile, **Alena** was still in the library reading through some old tomes with the housecat Chatruse curled up in her lap. I wanted to hint at the former occupants of the house somehow (the Joson family), so I had her uncover some old genealogy books detailing the family tree. It was slightly odd, cuz the meticulously well kept and handwritten manuscript was never concluded. She now knew the Joson's had owned this place before Alexis, but whatever happened to them?

She closed the dusty tome, and pet the cat some more before moving into the kitchen area (where Mamma Carnatine and the girls were busy cleaning up). Alena inquired further about the Joson's, but her question was met with blank stares by the two servant girls and a look of surprise by Mamma Carnatine. She said there wasn't much to tell – they were the previous owners of the house. When Alena asked whatever became of them, she could tell by the looks on the faces of Mamma Carnatine and the two girls that something dreadful had happened. But big Mamma refused to discuss it further. Her and the girls are just “too busy to talk now”. Alena didn't press further. She went up to her own room and went to sleep.

Count Magorian and **Domingo dos Santos** sat alone in the Great Room, with their parchments, papers and scrolls spread out before them. The Hexad is an ongoing mystery that must be solved – for the sake of humanity itself. Destanial and Domingo believe that every event is somehow tied to the Hexad, and has a greater meaning. They set about finding a connection between the Green Eyez and the cryptic words penned by the mad vistani seer. Outside, the storm continues to rage.

The Return of... Ejrik Spellbender???

Time to build another solo-angle with Lord Alexis Darkangnon.

He did not set out to search for his wife as he said he would. Instead, he dressed-down a bit and visited one of the local watering holes. He ordered a couple of stiff drinks and sat back in the bare-bones tavern to enjoy them. The place was virtually empty due to the storm, but a few loyal regulars remained.

Needless to say, the potent liquor Alexis continued to imbibe placated him. But it didn't fulfill him. He was already angry, but now he's drunk – which compounds matters further. He's beginning to experience the onset of withdrawal, and he needs to feel the rush he gets from Silent Screamaz. The **Black Razor** is that solution, and Alexis is just waiting for the opportunity to use it.

He gets that opportunity, when a sloshed regular stood to his feet and announced he was leaving. The bartender tried to persuade him otherwise (considering it IS storming outside) but the drunk couldn't be deterred. He said “a little rain never stopped me”, *but he never felt the reign of Lord Darkangnon and his Black Razor...*

Despite his intoxication, it was still relatively easy for the Lord to exit the establishment without notice. He emerged into the brutal downpour, and began to discreetly follow the lone drunk – who had left only moments ago. Alexis could feel that unsettling queasiness creeping back into his stomach and that only fueled his rage further. It was as if the **Black Razor** was guiding his movements as he unsheathed the blade and pressed on. The streets were virtually empty, and Alexis and his prey were the only ones on foot. He waited for the poor mark to round the

corner before letting the Razor do its duty.

Lord Darkangnon swooped in and snatched his victim off the streets like a bird of prey. Adrenaline surged through him and for a moment he felt like he had the strength of a hundred men. The poor drunken mark didn't even get a chance to scream, but his expression told the whole story. It was as if he was facing down the devil himself – *a horribly twisted monstrosity with black flames of hell burning in his eyes*. It was a creature directly out of his worst nightmares. Those were the visions he was left with before the cold steel of the **Black Razor** ended his life.

The surge Alexis felt was indescribable. A euphoria of conflicting emotions and physical ecstasy. For the one brief moment as the blade slid through that mans body – Alexis felt *complete*. When he came to, he was on both knees in the middle of the street looming over the dead mans corpse. His body still tingled with excitement, and he watched the blood wash away beneath the pounding rain. He looked down at the Black Razor and knew something was wrong... but he quickly brushed that thought away.

It was HE who controlled the **Black Razor**. The Razor didn't control him...

He quickly came to his senses when he heard the oncoming prattle of a horsedrawn carriage on the cobblestone street. He quickly ducked into the nearest alleyway, using the wall of rain for cover. He just didn't want to get spotted lurking anywhere near the dead body. But what he saw shocked him.

It was his own carriage, which could mean only one thing – his wife **Violet Ann Membrose-Darkangnon**. But that's not the shocking part. He would have even waved them down, if he weren't still buzzing off the Black Razor. The fact is, he could clearly see somebody else in the carriage with his wife.

A male figure.

As the carriage slowly rolled by, he strained to see her guest clearer. But all he could make out was the gaudy orange cloak the stranger wore. What kind of physician is this? Why would his wife lie to the servants if she really wasn't getting treatment? And what IS this "sickness" that she seems to be suffering from?

Alexis wasn't sure if it was an illness or infidelity... but he pledged to find out.

Cut Scene- The two servant girls **Gurtchen** and **Ismedla** are tidying the house before turning in for the night. As they stand in the great foyer of Darkangnon Estates -- with thunder punctuating their every word -- they discuss the recently returned **Violet-Anne Membrose-Darkangnon**. Both are concerned over her appearance as of late. Her color has drained, she has become gaunter and dark rings have formed under her eyes. Gurtchen even claims to have noticed an ethereal-like bluish tinge to the young lady's lips and fingertips. *They believe the lady of Darkangnon Estates has been cursed by the unhappy spirits dwelling within...* This segues way into a brief telling of the Black Fire story by Gurtchen.

DM Note- *The "Black Fire" story is one that Gurtchen often tells her friend Ismedla. It's about a monster with "fiery black eyes" that haunts Gurtchen's nightmares. Sometimes she sees his face watching her in the house. While it's true that Gurtchen has succumbed to "the illness" -- this tale is both fact AND fiction. Read on...*

Just then—the doors of the manor swing inward, exposing the violent storm beyond. The silhouetted figure of **Lord Darkangnon** looms in the center. The servant girls jump and gasp. The Lord of Darkangnon Estates enters the foyer and slowly shuts the big double doors behind him. He is drenched from the storm, with a soggy hat lowered over his eyes. The girls can't tell, but his pupils are the size of quarters.

He saunters past the girls without even a nod of recognition. As he passes them, the Black Razor bobs rhythmically in the scabbard upon his back. Both girls feel a chill race up their spines. Then, Lord Darkangnon pauses before turning back to face the servants.

Not a word is spoken – *but in his eyes Gurtchen sees that same “black fire” burning bright.* She is aghast and frozen in her tracks. No words escape her lips – only a light gasp. Ismedla says nothing, but can tell by the look on her friend's face that she's been spooked. Alexis just chuckles to himself and moves upstairs to confront his wife.

OK: Style-Switch. I'm gonna try to tackle this a different way. Check it –

Alena Nurpaši is newly-infected, as is **Darius of Sithicus**. Destanial makes all his saves, and I ruled Domingo (the monk NPC) and Alexis are immune. So I was playing with Alena and Darius in different ways.

For one thing, I jumped right on Darius' suspicions towards Destanial. So ya think the “good” Count had something to do with the Green Eyez – and by extension the Sithicus kidnappings-- huh? OK then, I agree. Remember, this is Darius' first D&D session EVER so I can break all my old-school tricks out of the mothballs. I really had Darius paranoid to the 10th degree. He was convinced the Green Eyez were outside stalking him through the rain. They were only waiting for their orders to storm the Estates and finish the job.

And of course, any interaction Darius had with either Destanial or Domingo was painted in a most unflattering light. They came off very shady and aloof, and it really WAS all in Darius' head! Remember, nobody has ANY clue there is even an “illness” running rampant.

To top it all off (good things happen for good DMs) Destanial began to develop a little “cabin fever” which made Darius even more suspicious. Destanial would get antsy and have Domingo accompany him out back, where the two would practice their weaponry and sword-play in the rain. Of course this only worked against Destanial in Darius' mind. This only convinced him further that Destanial was secretly conferring with the Green Eyez – and his monk companion was in on it too. But was anybody else?...

Alena, on the other hand, had a much different path. I used the ghost angle from the module (check the Fraternity site) on her. Things like the cat staring at unseen things, or weird sounds and sights that caught Alena's eye.

The first night they spent at Darkangnon Estates was similar to the “calm before the storm”. A lot of things happened -- but to the players they were just mundane or routine matters.

Little did they all know, it was all ingenious foreshadowing on behalf of their corrupt Gamez Master. Just wait until daybreak... *mwha-ha-ha-ha!*

When morning arrived, the storm was going strong. They couldn't see too far out the windows, but they could see havoc and destruction. Thick tree limbs and branches strewn about, things overturned – just general messiness. The storm persists.

Everybody is thinking about something different as they gather around the table for breakfast.

Darius spent the night before staring out his window and rubbing his wounded arm. Those bite marks from the panther/slave-girl he battled were still fresh, and worried him greatly. Was Destanial looking to infect Darius with the disease to eliminate any threats to the Count's pristine image? Was Darius the only one who knew Destanial "ran with the wolves", so to speak?

Alena Nurpašhi was concerned over the sightings she witnessed the night before, as well as the tidbit of info she came up with regarding the now-deceased Joson family. Alena's player was thinking "haunting" and wanted to investigate those faint magical "hot-spots" further.

Destanial and Domingo were concerned about the Hexad and believed this storm was a way to waylay their travels back to Solyss, Gundarak. Solyss was their main destination and anything else was just a speed bump in the road. So you can see how his sense of unexplained urgency may lead others (Darius, Darius, Darius) to see both the Count and his servant as aloof or distrustful.

Alexus on the other hand, is experiencing withdrawal. He didn't even get a chance to confront his wife last night, as when he arrived in their bedchambers – and saw her asleep like an angel – he couldn't bring himself to disturb her. He sat back in his chair with a glass of Bleeding Voices and admired her angelic innocence. Through his eyes he saw no faults in her, and fell asleep where he sat. But this morning when he awoke – his wife was already gone.

All he got was a message from Gurtchen saying Lady Violet Ann had ventured out into the storm again for her "treatment". She was escorted by Thomas Landry, estate groundsman. Alexis couldn't even bring himself to care – his stomach was burning and his bones ached. He didn't eat much breakfast with the others, and he let them carry most of the conversation. When they asked how his wife was, he just said "better".

Alexus needed doses of Silent Screamz. Badly. But there was none left. Curse Phinean Windrider and his disloyal ways! As soon as the storm cleared he vowed to learn where his assets were disappearing to.

OK, so the characters woke up the next morning to find the ferocious storm continuing. The players didn't understand why a seemingly one-night distraction wouldn't end. They didn't know why the "forces of nature" seemed to insist they stay trapped within Darkangnon Estates. So while the players may have been eager to continue along on their way to Solyss, a greater force was conspiring against them – the DM! 🐾

Anywayz, they weren't quite sure what to do next so they all volunteered mundane matters. Alexis wanted to go back to bed (his idea) and Alena wanted to crack the small library again looking for more stuff on the Josons. Darius could only curse the storm for washing away "valuable evidence". He voiced his concerns over the bite wound he received, and hinted towards nightmares that plagued his sleep (nightmares that were detailed for him in convenient note form). *He truly did fear becoming one of those creatures, but he didn't want to admit it.*

He wanted to speak with a specialist – somebody with experience in matters of this type. Darius needed to know if he was tainted. He wanted to seek out an expert. The others agreed and they all discussed it together. The only hope Destanial and Alexis could conjure was the name of a retired herbalist named Rudolph van Richten. But from what they last knew of him, his address was in Mordent and it would take several days to get a message there. They also agreed the storm would delay it further. They could only wait it out. And so Darius' mind was left to fester on that thought...

Destanial and Domingo (not infected by "the illness", mind you) are left to their own matters. Domingo dos Santos is a master chess-player, and he takes the time to school young Count Magorian in its fine art. "The game of chess", he explains, "is like a sword-fight – you must think first before you move".

Over leisurely games of chess by the window where the storm rages, these two warriors clash with brainpower. Destanial is a fast learner and soaks in the wise man's advice. They bide their time before their eventual return to Solyss, where Destanial is eager to return to his duties as Count.

Greeeeen Eyez -- Keep on watching me...

Back to Darius, as he skulks alone on the upstairs floor. Aside from Alexis (who is dead asleep in the master bedroom) there's no one else present. Not even the servant girls Gurtchen and Ismedla. So Darius decided he wanted to pry further into the Count's personal affairs. He moved towards Destanial's guest chambers and prepared to break in.

But before he could, *a single black streak jetted past the mouth of the corridor to his left.* It was but a glimpse but distinctly feline. *Another black blur suddenly bolted across the right side of the long corridor.* He was trapped in the middle of the hall like a rat ready to drown. Darius quickly reacted and unsheathed the dagger he keeps on him. A few Listen checks later and he was sneaking up the hallway towards the sound of repetitive panting. For a long time Darius followed that elusive black streak around the second floor of Darkangnon Estates.

Every time he entered a room he was prepared to see a Green Eye warrior waiting, but instead he was greeted by a sound or an image that made him think he *just* missed them. Sometimes the sounds would double-up on him -- coming from two directions at once. Finally, he had the mysterious creature he was tracking seemingly retreat into Darius' bedchambers. And when Darius slowly crept into his own room looking for it, he found his windows wide open and everything near them soaked. Automatically, Darius' player assumed that the creature he was following escaped out the 2nd floor window.

Little did he realize, those windows he had forgotten to lock the night before were

blown open by the force of the storm. So it was his own carelessness that would feed his paranoia further. But this is only messageboard ramblings – Player Knowledge. During the heat of the Game, none of the players had a clue this was anything but real.

So Darius ran to the window, almost slipping in the puddles. He looked out into the raging storm and saw Green Eyes twinkling in the distance. They seemed to be taunting him by breaking and entering with such ease. Darius feared not only for his life, but for the life of the others as well. They were all so ignorant to the true threat they were facing.

(I see dead people!)

Then I ran a similar scenario with **Alena**, only I used ghostly apparitions instead of skulking panther-men. It started when the house cat began wrestling with unseen foes, and only escalated further as Alena's mind started playing tricks on her. It didn't take long for Alena's player (still a relative newbie herself) to become CONVINCED the Estates were haunted.

Her research on the magical hotspots didn't lead to much. For one thing, I didn't want to give away the Game quite yet. Secondly, she couldn't understand why they seemed to fluctuate so much anyway. So she just assumed the faint aura she was picking up belonged to the ghostly apparitions. She wanted to speak to Lord Alexus Darkangnon about the matter, but he had "mysteriously disappeared" a short time earlier. So she turned to Destanial and Domingo and voiced her concerns.

They were well aware of the grounds back-story (*as they both were a part of **And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?***) and they both bought Alena's story as being highly possible. So Destanial and Domingo (both unaffected by "the illness", remember) asked Alena to join them in the Great Room where they finally told the tale of how Alexus came to be Lord of these Estates (*see past events to **And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?***). Suffice to say, their tale of murder, betrayal and supernatural haunting got Alena's panties all tied up in a bunch. This was the closest confirmation she could get that the images and sounds she was witnessing were "real". Destanial and Domingo even volunteered to help Alena check things out further.

The ever-lusty Ejrik Spellbender

Alexus, on the other hand, didn't get much rest after returning to bed after breakfast. He tossed and turned and his body curled in pain. He vomited uncontrollably and could feel his insides rotting away. He never felt so sick. There was only one thing that could offer him solace in situations such as this: the **Black Razor**. Much as it had done the night before (when he murdered that unlucky drunk), the Razor was calling to Alexus with soothing promises of rejuvenation. All that it asked was for the Lord to pick it up and remove it from the sheath. For that, the Lord will be rewarded with respite from his withdrawal.

How I presented this to Alexus was by clearly illustrating the trauma he was suffering, and contrasting it with the pleasures and relief the Razor offered. But I made DAMN SURE he realized the "price" he would pay would be great. If he chose to take the Razor instead of accepting the sins of his own indulgences, there's no telling what the Razor might take in return – but it sure ain't nice.

So the Lord mulled it over a bit, with the other players shaking and nodding their heads. They all knew the Razor was bad news, but figured Alexis would accept it. Plus they kinda wanted to see what would happen if he did. After a few moments of contemplation, Alexis' player smirked and said "f- it, I'mma grab it".

So he dragged his sick, weak carcass off the bed over to the bedside bureau. His bones were on fire and his cranium throbbed from exertion. He pulled himself up the bureau until his grasping fingers felt the comfort of the Razor. With the last bit of energy he could muster, and with a devilish gleam in his eyes – the Lord unsheathed the **Black Razor** triumphantly...

A scant few seconds later, the two doors to the Lord's chambers swung inwards. In strolled the servant-girl **Gurtchen**, who came to perform her daily cleaning chores. She was startled to see the Lord leering at her from across the room. He sized her up and down with lascivious intent. He ordered her over to him, and she reluctantly obeyed.

I'll leave it up to you to guess whether the monstrous, inhuman veneer the Lord suddenly adopted was real -- or a side effect of Gurtchen's "illness"...

Either way, this was not the Lord she recognized. Instead it was a snarling, raging lunatic that thrust her upon his bed before tearing her garments to shreds. He covered her pitiful screams with his hand and proceeded to have his way with her, in most despicable fashion.

This was one of those fade-to-black scenes, but the message was clearly delivered. It worked too, cuz the other players (who had been looking on with rapt interest) now turned to Alexis and sneered for his cruel decision. Alexis' player (who had NO idea this would happen) was greatly ashamed by his decision. It was one of those turning points when the fun-and-games of the Black Razor became a traumatizing reality. A reality that would only hasten Gurtchen's descent into madness...

Meanwhile, downstairs...

Alena Nurpašhi shows **Count Destanial Magorian** and his bodyguard **Domingo dos Santos** around the library area where she first saw "the ghost". Of course, both Destanial and his bodyguard are unaffected by the illness – thus they saw nothing out of the ordinary.

In the backrooms, Destanial and Domingo saw a soggy **Thomas Landry** cleaning up after the dogs. Out of curiosity Destanial asked where Alexis' wife was, and Thomas said she was still "seeking treatment".

They also delicately asked him if anything "odd" or "unsettling" had been occurring on the grounds recently. They didn't want to get him spooked, but they needed to know if Alena really was seeing these crazy visions. Thomas Landry got all hushed and whispery, as he closed the door and asked the players to sit for the tale.

From The Strange Story 3.5 Module

Quote:

"Well, sir. Yah see master, there used to be somebody owning this place before Lord Darkangnon. A rich guy, Master Isaac Joson, who had a bee-yoo-tiful wife, two

strong sons and a fair young lass-of-a-daughter. But one day, while Master Joson was right in the towns square, a vistani wench appeared from the Mistz and spit a curse upon Master Joson. His name and his family too. The vistani Master of Curses disappeared juss' as fast as she came. But her words stayed behind forever. Later that night, Master Isaac Joson was gone. Never to be seen before. His wife, and his two sons disappeared too. Even his youngest daughter and her new husband vanished at the hands of that wicked gypsy Curse. Some say, the stain remains on the Joson grounds even to this day..."

If questioned further about the tale, Thomas Landry will refuse to elaborate, citing his own discomfort. Apparently, he spooked himself out with the story. He will say, however, it was Lord Darkangnon who says he rid the house of the spirits. But (and Thomas' voice will lower to a whisper as he says it) "not even the great Lord Alexis Darkangnon has the power to cleanse a gypsy curse".

The purpose of the dialogue with Thomas was to get some of the players thinking the problems might NOT be linked to ghosts, rather the results of a wicked Vistani curse.

Alena questions Mamma Carnitine

Meanwhile, our female player **Alena Nurpašhi** was conducting her own investigation. She found Big Mamma alone in the kitchen, and tried once more to loosen the old ladies tongue. Big Mamma sighed, and hung her head. She quickly surveyed the kitchen area to make SURE it was only her and Lady Alena. They were the only two present, so Big Mamma told her own version of the story...

From the Strange Story 3.5 Module

Quote:

Well they say one of the boys in the family had a lil gambling problem, and he made a bet he couldn't keep with a wild gypsy trader. They be sayin the Joson boy was cursed to lose his family one-by-one until his debt with the vistani was paid off. And 'da family started disappearing too! One-by-one they vanished, just like the gypsy said 'dey would. But that Joson boy just kept on gambling 'derre lives away, until the curse finally swallowed him where he sat..."

The story gave Alena the shivers as she considered the possibilities. She rushed to get back together with Destanial and Domingo, where she shared Mamma Carnitine's story. They all agreed to search the basement area.

But first – Destanial needed to speak with Domingo.

Alone.

They parted from Alena and journeyed outside to the back of Darkangnon Estates (where the vicious storm continues).

And lo and behold... *who just happens* to see both Destanial and Domingo make their way outside from his second floor window? Who's been chasing Green Eyez all over the place? Who thinks Count Destanial Magorian is secretly working with the tribe of savages? Why, **Darius of Sithicus** of course. So if he needed any more "confirmation" that Destanial and Domingo were evil traitors, this secret little rendezvous of theirs behind the house is proof enough. I mean, you should have SEEN the look on Toneih's face (Darius' player) when he caught sight of the Count and his bodyguard. It was like a wicked, all-knowing smirk. Like he KNEW the

Count's secret plot – and planned to act on it. Darius gathered up his gear and made his way downstairs.

At the same time, a disheveled and shattered **Gurtchen** slowly makes her way out of Alexis' bedchambers. She wears the facial expression of a shell-shocked war veteran. She mindlessly grabs her duster and continues her duties. She is about to reach the breaking point.

A lot of things happen.

On his way to confronting Destanial and Domingo, **Darius of Sithicus** bumps into **Alena** in the hallway. They briefly interact before Darius announces he's looking for the Count. But JUST THEN, the growling of an angry dog can be heard coming from the Great Room.

The two newbie players go to investigate, and they see the Lord's two dogs staring at the wolves head on the wall. Suddenly, the two great dogs cower in fear and run from the room with their tails between their legs. As Darius and Alena watch them go, the wolf's head on the wall suddenly animates! They find themselves staring down the infamous black wolf that was pinned on the wall. He's freakin huge. So while Alexis is still upstairs buzzing off the Black Razor, and Destanial (with Domingo) are outside practicing swordplay in the storm – both Alena and Darius are battling a giant wolf all throughout the Great Room (of course, if only Destanial or Domingo looked in the window, they would see Alena and Darius struggling with NOTHING).

Searching for Violet Anne Membrose-Darkangnon

Refreshed and reinvigorated, **Alexus Darkangnon** soaks in the high bestowed upon him by the Razor. While going through his personal belongings in the master chambers, he found the remains of an old package sent to the house. *Unbelievably, the package was addressed to him and it was from **Phinean Windrider** in Solyss!* But it was already opened up and the contents removed. Now Alexis (both the player and the character) was mightily confused.

He had been CONVINCED that Phinean wasn't sending him the drugs and money he was due. He thought for SURE that Phinean was trying to snake him. But now.... he wasn't quite sure. Apparently Phinean WAS sending the packages, but who was intercepting them? Where have all the narcotics and money gone? Prying a bit further, he found an address written by his wife's hand. It was hastily scribbled on an old piece of parchment, and it was an address Alexis didn't recognize. But he knew what he had to do. So Lord Darkangnon strapped the Black Razor to his back, and slipped out of the house into the storm. He was going to check out this mystery address.

Alexus hits the road and lands at the address written on the scrap of paper. The storm threatens to blow him away, but his anger and curiosity drive him on. The address belongs to a small wine and cheese shop, where Alexis can see his wife's

carriage parked. He posts up in an alcove across the street, away from the pounding rain but positioned so he can still watch the shop.

Soon thereafter, he watches his wife emerge – arm-in-arm with that mysterious orange-cloaked patron he saw her with last time. Alexis is angry. His wife almost trips and stumbles as the orange-cloaked gentleman helps her into the carriage. But surprisingly, he doesn't enter with her. He shuts the door and watches as it slowly pulls away (back to Darkangnon Estates, Alexis presumes).

The orange-cloaked man then rounds the corner out of sight. But seconds later, as Violet Anne's carriage drives south – another carriage emerges from around the bend heading north. Alexis knows the orange-cloaked man is inside, so he decided to follow him. He knows his wife will be home when he gets there. Off he goes following the mysterious orange-cloaked man and his carriage to the north.

His Identity Revealed...

So is the Lord's wife unfaithful? Or is it something else entirely?

Like I said, the rain storm is horrendous. Using a bit of his assassin-assisted abilities, Lord Darkangnon hitched a ride on the back of the carriage – unbeknownst to the orange-cloaked man inside (or so Alexis thought). The carriage rattled down the slick cobblestone streets of Union Veil at a leisurely pace. The streets and shops around them were deserted. Clinging to the back of the carriage, Alexis watched the town begin to disappear behind them.

Despite the pounding rain, the path this carriage followed through the outskirts of Union Veil looked very familiar to the Lord. It was even more apparent when a familiar manor house loomed over the horizon. The carriage rode up the muddy embankment towards the wrought iron steel gates that circled the grounds. Alexis had been here before. He could see the giant glass greenhouse attached to the lonely manor on the hill. He saw the hedge sculptures and flower gardens.

But before the thought could register completely in the Lord's mind – the carriage rolled to a stop outside the gates. Alexis got a bit nervous as he felt the carriage door opening and the orange-cloaked man emerging into the storm. The mystery man circled around to the back of the carriage – where Alexis clung tightly. He chuckled politely at the Lord's predicament and said, *"With all your resources, you couldn't afford your own ride?"*

The orange-cloaked man was **Johnathan Atma** – gardener extraordinaire and Alexis' "business associate". But what was he doing with Alexis' wife!?!?

DM Recap – During the events of ***Episode 6: And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?***, Alexis met a new business associate who shared his interest in illegal narcotics (the manufacturing and selling of). His name was **Johnathan Atma** and he was a respected business man within the community. But he keyed Alexis in on a few endeavors he had going "on the side".

One of these included his bootleg Bleeding Voices venture – which added tremendously to his coffers. Alexis and Johnathan Atma politicked awhile before agreeing they could both make MORE money by working together. Thus, Darkangnon/Atma Enterprises was born...

Suprisingly, J. Atma seemed undeterred by the fact Alexis illegally hitched a ride on the back of his carriage. He didn't seem overly anxious or suspicious either. Instead, he graciously invited Alexis inside and away from the pouring rain. Alexis accepted.

Inside, J. Atma even offered Alexis a change of clothes (which he rejected). The two business associates sat before a roaring fire and quaffed a glass or two of Bleeding Voices. J. Atma noted that this was an odd way for the Lord to announce he had returned to Arkandale (stowing away on the back of Atma's carriage and all). He was "glad to see" the Lord returned safely, and asked about his out-of-town exploits. But Alexis cut all the crap and explicitly asked Atma what he was doing with Violet Anne Membrose-Darkangnon. J. Atma was surprised by the sudden question.

"Why, keeping her in good spirits of course!" was his reply.

Over the course of their discussion (as the storm beats down outside), J. Atma confessed to keeping Lady Violet Anne "medicated" in the Lord's absence. "Such a lovely lass – yet ever so lonely" was how J. Atma described her.

Alexis was able to deduce that the packages being intercepted at his home (the packages containing Silent Screamaz doses and laundered money) were being intercepted by his own *wife*. Wow.

This revelation was met at our gaming table by stunned silence. I mean, all four of the players were convinced Violet Anne was being disloyal. But as usual, the most common theory is the incorrect one. Alexis' player was still trying to find the connection in his mind, so I refreshed his memory a bit.

I took him back to the time they FIRST spent in Arkandale – **Episode #6: And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?** There was a scene in there where Alexis met the lovely Violet Anne Membrose for the first time. The whole purpose of the scene was to illustrate the power Alexis had at his disposal – even if he didn't realize it at the time. I mean, an 18 charisma doesn't come around every day. I vividly painted the original Violet Anne as being young and naïve – almost bordering on "innocent". And I pointed out to Alexis that he had the power to cherish this innocence, or corrupt it forever. So you know what decision he made: he and Violet Anne indulged in the cherry bombs Lord Darkangnon was so fond of. For those who don't recall, these "cherry bombs" were not natural Solyss fruit as Alexis claimed – instead they were cherries tainted with doses of *Agony* (see both the Book of Vile Darkness and **Episode #4 – Death Of A Darklord** for how I applied them to my Game). Needless to say, that was all it took. Events spiraled out of control, and by Game's end – Violet Anne became Mrs. Darkangnon the struggling fiend. So you see, IT'S ALL ALEXUS' FAULT!!! It usually is...

OK, so after the initial shock wore off (and the Bleeding Voices they were quaffing began to take effect) Alexis and J. Atma ended up having a very pleasant conversation. In Alexis' opinion, J. Atma is "just a man on his hustle". He couldn't begrudge J. Atma for supplying his wife with the narcotics – after all, it was her that requested them. After much drunken frivolity (IE: hilarious role-playing interaction from Alexis' player), Lord Darkangnon politely asked J. Atma to refrain from fueling Violet's addictions any further. The Lord would handle this matter personally.

And so that storyline thread limps to an end. Here, I was shooting for my "shades of

gray" strategy as it relates to the villain Johnathan Atma. What he was doing was bad (supplying a fiend with their inebriant of choice) but his motives were strictly monetary. It wasn't like he was out to purposely screw with Alexis or anything. It was all business... and Alexis realized that. I was kinda expecting (hoping) that this could be the seed of dissent between J. Atma and Alexis but alas --- twas not to be. Alexis was soon escorted back to his manor house by private carriage – a token of his good friend Johnathan Atma's esteem.

Meanwhile...

Back to the Estates.

Alena Nurpašhi and **Darius of Sithicus** are convinced the house is haunted. By what, they have no idea. Darius has even related to Alena his suspicions regarding the Destanial/Green Eyez link. Of course, this too gets Alena all in a tizzy. Remember, both Darius and Alena are newbies to D&D so they don't know how deep the Game gets... or doesn't get.

Out-of-game, Alena's player had read the entire transcript to **Episode #6: And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus**, so she was acquainted with Destanial's interactions with the Green Eye savages. Therefore, Darius' theory seemed highly plausible. Maybe the Count really WAS dealing with the Green Eyez. And he wanted Darius dead cuz it was obvious Darius was onto their kidnapping schemes (remember, Darius' whole hook revolves around the disappearances of Elvin dilettantes back home in Sithicus).

So now Darius and Alena are suspicious of Destanial.

Destanial, Domingo and Alexis are suspicious of Darius (after he was bitten by an infected were-panther).

And everybody's suspicious of Alexis – just because.

So with inter-party tensions building to a head, I lay the last straw on the camel's back...

From The Strange Story 3.5 Module

Quote:

"Suddenly, a shrill screech cuts through the stale night air like a knife. It is shocking in its suddenness and horrifying in its longevity. The scream carries long through the house and echoes off the walls." (assuming the players pursue the sound) "You begin to pursue the wail, it's origins apparently emanating from the kitchen area. Before you can reach the kitchen, the cry is joined in unison by a second, both of them melting into a symphony of terror. Outside, the storm continues to rage".

Rushing into Area #3 (The Kitchen) the players will be startled by the gruesome scene that awaits them. The servant girl **Gurtchen** lies dead on the floor, a single kitchen knife plunged handle-deep into her abdomen. But there's more blood in the kitchen than from a single wound.

They will also see the second servant girl **Ismedla** curled into a ball in a corner of the room, softly sobbing to herself and rocking back and forth. Alerted by the screams (as the players were) Thomas Landry and Mamma Carnitine will quickly

rush into the scene, and nearly retch from the horror. What will everyone do? The storm outside is so bad there is no way to get a doctor or a constable to the location tonight.

Now the whole purpose of the module is to feed the players' paranoia and let them convince themselves there's a murderer in the ranks. In my Game this was easily accomplished, as the whole party has been weighted down with suspicion since the beginning. The "murder" of Gurtchen only heightens that distrust. Normally, as DM this is a dangerous line to tread. Push the players too far and you might not have any PCs left by Game's end. Odds are real-life feelings can be hurt and resentment will grow between the players. But in my case, I am very fortunate to be blessed with four premo-Grade A, illmatic Role-Players. So I had no fear that the Game would carry over into real life (8 years ago and I wouldn't be so sure).

Here comes my favorite part of any adventure. The part where the scene is set and laid down so well, I get to sit back in my throne and watch the players grab the Game by the throat. So after I handed each of the players their customized clue sheet (once again, I refer you to [The Strange Story 3.5 Module](#) for further details) I sat back to watch the fireworks.

Without boring you with too much intricate detail – just know that the clue sheets I handed out were the culmination of each character's pet theories and notions. Darius' clue sheet, for example, pointed towards Destanial (or his loyal servant Domingo) as potential suspects. Alena would find further "proof" there was something darker and sinister behind the pleasant veneer of Lord Darkangnon. Alexis, on the other hand, had a nagging suspicion the killer was HIMSELF. Of course, I spread the suspicion around enough that nobody was off the hook. Destanial's clue sheet was the only one with an inkling of truth (keeping in mind both Destanial and Domingo have NOT succumbed to "the illness"). So off the players go on their investigation.

Things got hectic right about now. Somehow, Alena wound up in the basement area looking for ghosts, while Destanial and Domingo checked out the corpse. Darius took the opportunity to sneak into the Count's bedchambers and poke around – while Alexis finally confronted his wife Violet Ann, the rampant drug fiend.

His confrontation with her was especially explosive, as he found her balancing herself on the rain-slicked balcony railing as the storm continued to rage. Catching her just in the nick of time (before her artificially-inflated sense of invincibility caused her to plummet to the stone walkway below), Alexis violently shook her from her drug-induced reverie and cursed her out. It was a harsh and sudden tongue-lashing from the Lord, and it seemed to awaken a bit of the old Violet Ann. She collapsed in a sobbing heap into his arms. Perhaps feeling a bit of guilt himself (perhaps?), Alexis silently vowed to make this situation all better again.

Finally, as Darius procured some "damning evidence" from his search through Destanial's stuff and Alena was racing upstairs from the basement with tales of "ghostly apparitions and stuff", Destanial and Domingo were coming to their conclusions about Gurtchen's death.

All four of the players wound up in the Great Room where they hashed out their plots. Darius was preparing to confront Destanial once and for all about the

“murder”, before Destanial led them through a reenactment of her death.

From The Strange Story 3.5 Module

Quote:

Sane and careful investigation of the murder scene will uncover the “killers” last steps. Gurtchen withdrew into the pantry area, where she grabbed the biggest knife available (these knives were previously foreshadowed in Area 3: The Kitchen). Her first swipes with the knife occurred in the pantry area, so astute players may find a few drops of blood. Following the trail, it will lead to the kitchen where she committed most of the cuts to her arms and legs (trying to eliminate that itch). This is where most of the blood will be pooled, and the spot where she finally plunged the knife into her own gut. She collapsed on the floor and bled to death with open eyes. Only after careful study (by a SANE character only) will the players learn that the wounds were self-inflicted and the death was a suicide. Of course, even after they learn this information they must ask themselves WHY she killed herself.

Boom. After this revelation was announced – I had the infected characters (IE: Darius and Alena) roll some checks. So imagine this scene: the four characters standing in the bloody kitchen while the storm rages outside. Thunder shakes the house and lightning cracks in the distance. After Destanial announces that the servant girl Gurtchen killed herself there is a moment of silence... then Alena Nurpašhi suddenly bursts into loud guffaws. Yes, Alena Nurpašhi begins *laughing uncontrollably* as the other players stare at her with wide eyes.

Ya see, Alena failed her check and was affected by *Tasha’s Uncontrollable Hideous Laughter*. I passed her a note with the effects of her failure, and she role-played it to all hell. I didn’t expect her to actually laugh out loud, but she did. And it added tremendously to the scene. I mean, fo real. The other players were like “what the heck...?” Luckily for Darius, he passed his check – thus *Otto’s Irresistible Dance* was avoided. I’m kinda glad in retrospect, cuz if dude just started spontaneously dancing around, it would have turned this into a comic routine instead of a gothic horror tale.

From The Strange Story 3.5 Module

Quote:

Closer examination of the dead girls body will reveal several of those, tiny red bites. The same “tiny, red bites” that may look familiar to some of the players. Particularly the ones that have succumbed to the “illness”. ALL carriers of the illness bear these same red bite marks. However, in the case of infected players, the DM should take the liberty of concealing them so they’re not readily apparent. Perhaps they’re on the shoulder, or neck area. Someplace the infected players won’t notice right away. But especially after Gurtchen’s dead body was found covered with these bites, the players should become a bit wary. Perhaps an infected character will point towards another character and say “You’ve got the same bite marks on your neck!” In turn, that character can say “You do too!”

At first, the players stared quizzically at each other for a few moments before Destanial asked to inspect Darius and Alena closer. He checked out their red bite-marks (saw that he, Domingo and Alexis were free of them) and started picking at Darius’ skull. What he pried loose shocked all of them [*insert picture of the Fleas of Madness from the Ravenloft Monstrous Compendium Volume III: 2E*]. The look on the players’ faces said it all – WHAT THE F***??

The Epilogue

With the storm finally breaking, the players are free to leave the Estate grounds (the storm conveniently ends after they discover the truth). **Lord Alexis Darkangnon** orders the house vacated and secretly fumigated (you got to keep everything on the low in Arkandale – lest the whole neighborhood know your business). Also (as he alluded to in his post above) Alexis had a sit-down talk with **Harold Membrose** about Violet Ann's condition (Harold is Violet's rich father). He is disheartened and saddened by the news, and understands it must be quickly hushed up. Harold Membrose arranges for his daughter (and Alexis' wife) to "leave town" for a few weeks to clear her head. Secretly, they are enrolling her at a rehabilitation clinic where she can be cured of her addictions. So Darkangnon Estates is temporarily vacated, and the Lady sent abroad to dry out.

Darius was able to get his wounds checked out at a local hospice (unfortunately, he wasn't able to confer with Dr. Van Richten as he wished). All they could tell him was that it wasn't infected and that it would probably scar. Of course they have no idea what creature bit him, so to truly say he's not infected is a bold-faced lie. But as far as they know he's clean. But in the back of Darius' mind that doubt is always there.

He was also able to perform a bit more investigation on behalf of the missing elvin dilettantes. As a hook for the next storyline chapter (which will take place when they return to Solyss Gundarak), I had the trail Darius was following lead through Arkandale to Gundarak.

So whatever was kidnapping all these Elvin nobles was taking them directly to Gundarak. Therefore, Darius will accompany the other players when they finally return home.

Both **Alena Nurpašhi** and Darius had to undergo some treatment to reverse the effects of the fleas (all bills were footed by the kindly Lord Darkangnon). Alena was also intrigued by these odd magical creatures (this is why she kept detecting "moving magical hot spots") and set out to research them further. Luckily for me, the book they came from includes a brief history review. Alena's player thought they were wicked cool creatures.

Count Destanial Magorian and **Domingo dos Santos** could only train and prepare for their return to Solyss, as their traveling companions tried to pull themselves together. For when they return home, nothing will ever be the same again...

The End.

THE PITCH

The troops are returning home to Solyss, Gundarak after a long absence to face a community in need.

A community in need of strong leaders for these new dark times.

You see - a crisis has stricken the small hamlet of Solyss.

A crisis in the form of various unexplained disappearances and slayings.

Disappearances and killings that are steadily increasing - drawing forth the creeping tendrils of mass hysteria. The community demands resolution.

The local militia, powered by **Captain Alec Rapacion** seems powerless to stop the dilemma -- even though they extol a tremendous physical effort to do so. He points a finger towards the shady brothels and pubs where vice and sin run rampant, joining hands with corruption in a dance of macabre perversion. Who knows what sick fetishes they seek to satisfy?

Father Malachai (see *Episode #4 – Death of a Darklord* for his origins) and his small contingent of Morninglord devotees shake their heads and point to the skies. They say the energy is there, and that it flows. But the source of the power is undeniably alien and evil. They point a finger to a supernatural source of the disappearances. A true monster of the night that shall be consumed by the searing justice of the Morninglord.

Meanwhile, the abundant Solyss wildlife has dwindled to near extinction. The once vibrant, lush countryside now rests on the frosty throes of October, and there's nary a paw in the traps. To what do the community's strongest hunters attribute doth trials? A disturbance in the very order of nature. An animal kingdom thrown into upheaval. A predator too overwhelming for its prey.

Some say they are the massive wolves that haunt the Solyss nights, just outside the light of town. Others have heard tales of strange and sinister shadows that move with a lithe quickness. All can agree it is neither safe nor wise to venture beyond the limits of Solyss village. And it's only a matter of time before the predator crosses that invisible line in the sand...

And then there are those that seek to stave off the impending doom with karma of divine nature. Determined to lead the community through turbulent times, a small conclave of religious folk hope to keep the faith alive. They believe in the mythical powers of the wind, and are promoting an Oktoberrfest for the people of Solyss. A festival that shall celebrate life in all its divine forms, and perhaps sway a wayward soul toward the paths of the breeze.

The Viscount and the Magistrates hope this celebration will surge a sagging Solyss economy.

BEHIND THE SCREEN (DM Interlude)

*Also this summer we were faced with the departure of our two best new players – **Alena Nurpashi** and **Darius of Sithicus**. Both would be returning to school soon, **Darius** out of state, **Alena** out of country. So this would be our last adventure with them for a while. Individually we worked out all kind of cool little scenarios we could use to build upon their absence. **Alena** and I debated on keeping her character around as a newfound nemesis, while **Darius** thought of all kinds of sick directions we could his “possible Green Eyez affliction” angle. Of course nothing ever goes as planned when the dice are involved. But this did turn out to be the last time all five of us would play in a game together...*

THE SCENARIO

Who can you turn to when your closest ally is your secret enemy in disguise?

When the law no longer fights to protect you - but fights to protect their best interests.

A place where the guilds have evolved into organized gangs, and intimidation and influence rules the roost.

A thriving medieval metropolis, where pilgrims and peddlers from far and wide congregate in a mixing pot where neither race, gender or class are a matter of distinction.

Where the essential lumbers, grains and barleys make their way out – and the bootleg liquors, charlatans and firearms make their way in.

The dark bowels of the Solyss gutters, *where a liquid flows like molasses arsenic*. A liquid so wicked, and so vile -- one taste can taint you for life. A liquid that is worth more than money in some hands. *Worth more than life itself..*

THE SALE

Upon their grand return to Solyss, our brave party of adventurers were NOT greeted with a heroes welcome as expected. Instead, they were greeted with a somber funeral procession. Several dozen commoners walking behind pallbearers were carrying a pallet. Oddly, there was no casket – but the pallet was strewn with flowers. The players watched the procession weave its way between battered houses and dry, rotting barns.

The sad wails of the mourners floated through Solyss, and all but drowned out the music made by a group of young boys and girls who pluck stringed musical instruments. The children followed behind the grief-stricken adults.

The players silently joined the procession from the rear, and followed it to the graveyard, where they could see old friend Father Malachai Hadrian (see Episode #4: Death of a Darklord) presiding over the gravesite. The mourners stood around a flat, grassy, untouched patch of ground. Since there was no casket, there was no need for a hole. A simple, chipped marble stone marked the gravesite.

The players waited in the back while Father Malachai gave his tearful speech. The eyes of the commoners were all fastened on the priest, so they still didn't realize the Count and Lord had returned. As Father Malachai was wrapping up the eulogy, the players slipped away (to avoid being seen).

After the area cleared out, and only a few mourners were left behind, the players caught up with Father Malachai on the way back to the church. He was ecstatic to see them back, but his joy was short-lived. He told the players something wicked was transpiring in Solyss. Something undeniably evil. It was a blessing that the Count, Lord and their men have finally returned. Their province needs them. Father Malachai asked that they accompany him back to the temple where he can explain the latest circumstances, and they did.

Inside the small church, Father Malachai Hadrian escorted the players to the sitting room. There, they were greeted by the stoic faces of three clergymen. When the players were suitably comfortable, Father Malachai related this tale.

"The ceremony you witnessed was for a boy of twelve, a lad loved by all. We had no body to bury and now we have only memories."

He went on to tell them that the boy was the 12th "victim" this month. Victim of "what", the players didn't know. But they needed to find out.

So they pressed their old friend further, and he expressed his concerns. The people of Solyss are a superstitious lot - as the players all knew. Father Hadrian feared a mass panic was inevitable if the people ever thought the threat couldn't be contained. So it has been with great reluctance, that Father Malachai Hadrian has been feeding the populace tales of overabundant wolf packs that feed on stragglers. Similar to the great wolf hunts just a year ago (see Episode #5: The Beast of Solyss), Father Malachai has assured the small community the threat will be eliminated. The sudden and abrupt return of the player characters is the "sign" he needs to convince any doubters that remain. But the truth of the matter - Father Malachai Hadrian explained - was a bit trickier.

The church believes there is something far sinister than mere wolf packs at work here. They believe there is a great evil power being manifested within the expanding province of Solyss. A force of evil energy so potent and incalculable, it is undeniably alien in nature. This is Father Malachai Hadrian's greatest fear. A force not even the arcane arts or his divine blessings are powerful enough to stop.

With the Viscount's consent, Father Malachai Hadrian had commissioned two out-of-town specialists to deal with the matter. Both - it is feared - are now dead. Barely three nights ago, the two specialists had released their latest findings to Father Malachai and the church. They detailed the existence of some kind of cult that was swelling within Solyss. A cult they were on the verge of investigating further - when tragedy struck.

One of the investigators (an experienced practitioner in his own right) was murdered in a crowded tavern along the southwestern entrance road. This investigator (named *Daniel Hireman*) was said to be close to unlocking the identity of the kidnapper who abducted a teenage farm hand. Soon thereafter, he was found dead in the crowded tavern with a "quarter- inch hole that punctuated the middle of his forehead". They fear he may have been on to something deeper than a mere cult. The second investigator disappeared shortly after - without a trace remaining.

Father Malachai Hadrian pleaded with the players to put an end to the madness. It won't be long before the over-fearful public launches itself into a frenzy. They must protect their fledgling province of Solyss and act fast to prevent the menace from striking again. Returning to their seats of power, the players are ready for an adventure of vast proportions. The Count and Lord of Solyss, Gundarak are ready to die for their piece of the pie. Along with the ever-faithful Alena Nurpashi, loyal Domingo dos Santos and dangerous Darius of Sithicus, both Alexis and Destanial are confident the mystery will be solved. They just didn't know if the answer was one they wanted to find.

THE PLAYERS

Count Destanial Magorian - The newly-crowned, first ever Count of Solyss, Gundarak. Elevated to his position by Emperor Raoul Szerizia after the fall of Duke Gundar and the return of the three ruling families. Solyss, Gundarak is a fledgling Level One Province (using basic Birthright rules). The new Count (a 1/2 vistani bastard child) comes from humble beginnings - born victim to a broken home of shame and abuse. After one particularly gruesome beating, he fled home when his only 3 friends in the world promised him freedom and excitement on the road to adventure. After many trials and tribulations and much self-contemplation, young Destanial

has turned into the man he is today. A just and noble warrior of light - a blessed defender who has pledged to serve his people with pride. It was his resolve that helped him shine through his struggle, and earn the position of Count. After traveling abroad to Darkon in hopes of helping his best friend Alexis - Count Destanial Magorian has returned to find his community in dire trouble. He silently curses himself for being away from his position for too long, and considers it a personal goal to end this madness. Destanial is dedicated to the eradication of this threat - whatever it may be. He is accompanied by the ever-faithful Domingo dos Santos, of the *Order of the Guardians*. Devoting his life to the Order, Domingo has studied the rumors of Hyksosa and his doomsday prophecy with religious dedication. The end of the world is near, as the Order is aware. But there is a shred of hope – a lone beacon of light in the encroaching darkness. The Order’s own Neo: young Destanial Magorian. So Domingo accompanies the young Count in his travels, hoping to train him well enough to serve his destiny the day it comes. It is only through the actions of the “chosen one” can this dreadful fate be avoided. Until then, all eyes on the skies.

Lord Alexis Darkangnon- Born of Barovian stock, but gifted with a majestic tongue since he was young, Alexis Darkangnon always made sure he was the center of all that transpired. Perhaps his constant search for acceptance was a result of the neglect he suffered as a military bastard child. His father had little time for Alexis, so he became property of the military. It was within this harsh environment that Alexis grew to be the callous, jaded mercenary he would become. And when fortune and fame beckoned to him from beyond the border, he gladly left the squalor and depression of Vallaki, Barovia behind. Perhaps it his “golden smile” (and 18 charisma) that has kept him alive for so long – in the face of multiple threats and struggles. Or, perhaps it is because of his “golden smile” (and 18 charisma) that the forces of the night seem to flock to him. Regardless of the exact nature, it is safe to say Alexis wields much weight and power with his words and actions – even if he doesn’t realize it yet. In the wake of the Revolution, Alexis was promoted to “Lord” and chosen as head of the guild masters. But the ease in which his winning smile earns his favor has also spoiled him indefinitely. How long will his golden smile allow him to escape the traps of his own setting? Upon his return to Solyss after much time away, he sees a community in dire need of leadership. But more importantly to him – are the guilds that are losing money by the day. Particularly the hunting guild that hasn’t had game to catch in days. Lord Alexis Darkangnon will do what he can to end the rash of disappearances – but he does it for his own financial gain and reputation. Not for the people that depend on him.

Alena Nurpašhi – The Nubulan elven princess has come along way from her sheltered childhood. According to her tales, she was chosen to travel the world in preparation for her ascension to the throne – but a deeper, darker reason haunts her exile. She got caught up with the Count and Lord of Solyss while they were embroiled in their legal troubles in Darkon (see Episode #9: The Cedar Chest). She is awestruck by the power of the two young rulers, and impressed by the code of honor Count Destanial Magorian follows. She has pledged to help the Count elevate his peoples and build a new community out of the rough, untamed Gundarakian wilderness. This is the first time she has ever been to Solyss, although she has heard much about it during her travels with the two. Alena wields arcane forces beyond the comprehension of the Count or Lord. They just know she is a valuable resource for the party, and a trusted companion. What horrible fortune awaits Alena within the realm of Gundarak? A trauma that will psychologically scar her for life...

Darius of Sithicus- the half-elf vigilante loner who comes south from Sithicus hot on the trail of a kidnapping conspiracy. After watching Elvin dilettantes disappearing at an alarming rate (during a crucial time of rebuilding for Har-Thelen: see the events to Episode 4: When Black Roses Bloom), Darius has chosen to take the task into his own hands. Whoever (or “whatever”) is

kidnapping these elves has been moving north through Arkandale. The trail has led him into the company of the Count and Lord, who look upon him with slight suspicion. If his own paranoia and obsession wasn't enough, Darius has uncovered enough of the conspiracy to know it is much deeper than one gang. The trail of the kidnapers leads through Arkandale and into Solyss. So Darius has hope that the victims are still alive. But he also has a growing fear that Count Destanial Magorian himself is the man behind the grand conspiracy. Not to mention the wound he suffered at the hands of a wounded slave girl/panther hybrid. It's his worst fear to have the disease of lycanthropy coursing through his veins, and now that is a distinct possibility. So it is his own curiosity and sense of duty that forces Darius to accompany the players back to Solyss, Gundarak. A place where he hopes the trail of the kidnapers will finally end. But the question he must ask himself now, is whether or not he is prepared to handle the Truth. A truth that promises to scar his soul and swallow him whole...

HOME FROM TOUR, PLAYERS HIT THE STREETS

The characters have a few different avenues to pursue. Of course they all want to unravel the mystery, but each have their own unique goals as well. So while the entire village of Solyss is slowly lifting its head from beneath the mourning veil, and preparing to welcome back its leaders – Darius of Sithicus has chosen to forsake the festivities. Never one to party much to begin with, Darius chooses not to get too acquainted with the village. “Familiarity breeds contempt” he would explain. He wants to prowl around the neighboring woodlands in hopes of recapturing the trail of the kidnapers.

Count Magorian and his servant Domingo are well-received by **Viscount Ersatz** (who is ecstatic to see the official Count back and ready to assume the burden of leadership). Viscount Ersatz explains that the crisis goes beyond missing townsfolk – it has serious repercussions on the Solyss economy. For some unexplained reason, the wildlife in and around Solyss has dwindled dramatically. So much so, there are some that claim the animals are on the verge of extinction. How this could possibly be is anybody's guess. Even the Hunters Guild is at a loss to explain it.

Also, Viscount Ersatz went over some issues with the various guilds as well as the problems **Captian Alec Rapacion** has been having. Perhaps it would be best if Destanial conferred with these men directly. Destanial agreed, but knew he needed some rest before their return was scheduled to be announced. Alena Nurpašhi stuck closely to Destanial and Domingo.

The first thing Lord Alexis Darkangnon did upon his return was check in with old friend **Phinean Windrider**. He caught Phinean lounging at the *Parsed Lip*, which is one of the rowdiest joints in the area.

Moving past the bouncers at the door, Alexis was greeted first by **Nansen**: proprietor of the Parsed Lip. He firmly shook Alexis' hand and welcomed him home. Alexis didn't know Nansen personally, but could tell by the scars that riveted his face and the muscles bulging from beneath his tunic that Nansen was a warrior of some repute. Nansen thanked Alexis for “gracing us” with his presence, and said all drinks were on the house. Alexis moved over to where Phinean and his bodyguards sat. Phinean did a double-take and almost spit out his wine when he saw the long-absent Lord Alexis Darkangnon striding towards him. The two friends embraced.

Alexis casually mentioned the *Silent Screams* doses he was supposed to be receiving at his estates in Arkandale (see Episode 11: *The Strange Story of Darkangnon Estates*) and his worst fears were confirmed. Phinean WAS sending the narcotics and money to Alexis – but Alexis' wife was intercepting the deliveries. Alexis did NOT want to tell Phinean he had been

bamboozled by his own wife – so he just said “thanks and good job”. The two partners chilled for a little while and played darts with the patrons.

THEIR OFFICIAL RETURN, AS WELCOMED BY THE PROVINCE

Less than 24 hours later, the dirt roads of Solyss were lined with spectators. A ticker-tape parade greeted the Lord and Count, as they rode high atop their horses (with Domingo and Alena in tow). They rolled through the streets waving at the jubilant throngs, all who were happy to see their leaders return. Certainly the disappearances will come to end now. But for all the joy the peasants derive from the return of their leaders – there are others that seethe with rage.

A small celebration is in order at the Count’s manor, and most of the Solyss hierarchy attends. It was during this role-playing bonanza that the players got to pick up on a few leads and clues (keeping in mind, Darius chose NOT to attend the function).

Amongst other things, the players learned that *Baron Haberveen’s* cattle farm is doing exceedingly well (with all the disappearing wildlife and whatnot). It seems the rash of disappearing animals in the area has driven Baron Haverveen’s cattle prices through the roof.

They also heard that despite the shortage of wild game, the monastery seems to find a few animals now and then. The “monastery” they refer to, is the *Temple of Weeshy* that sprang up in the players’ absence. This is the same temple that petitioned the Solyss hierarchy for the right to promote *Oktoberfest* – an event the Temple of Weeshy hopes would become an annual occurrence. Roasts and various other meats are expected to be available during the festival. Their request for a celebration was accepted for two primary reasons – one: the administration hopes it will take the peasant’s minds off the catastrophes as of late. Secondly, they hope it will bolster the sagging Solyss economy. The celebration is scheduled to go off in less than a week.

They heard that **Baggs** (one of the towns wealthiest merchants) took a big hit to his business when his hemp fields were mysteriously torched a few nights ago. They fear that one of his missing stable hands might have been in the field when it caught fire. But none are too certain. Poor Baggs has practically lost his business, but the loss of that poor young stable hand saddens him even more. Some people even joked that the peasants are now claiming the torched hemp fields are “haunted”.

Also at the celebration, Count Magorian had the opportunity to introduce Alena Nurpašhi to their old friend (and former traveling-partner) **Luci Lanns**. For those who don’t remember, Luci Lanns is a young female bard the players met during their VERY FIRST adventure in Barovia! (see Episode #1: *The River Ivlis Bandit*). Luci has come along way during the Game – considering I once tried to dramatically write her out of the script before players saved her life. Luck of the dice and all. She even went on to marry their Gundarakian ranger friend **Gavin der Stahlzah**. Now she supervises the intellectual rebuilding of the province, and was responsible for opening the first library in the village (albeit a very small one). Her bubbly, confident persona contrasted with the more reserved Alena Nurpašhi, but the two girls hit it off right away. Luci even invited her to a show she’ll be hosting at the *Boar’s Rest Tavern* tomorrow evening. Alena was happy to be making new friends and gladly agreed.

THE SHAKEDOWN

During most of the celebration, Alexis kicked it with **Phinean Windrider** (and his massive bodyguard *Zex*). He could feel a few of the wealthier merchants eyeing him from across the room, but paid them no mind. It wasn’t until he drifted away from Phinean in an unrelated discussion that the merchants chose to approach him.

The merchants requested to speak with Alexis, which he granted. In hushed, low tones they described the horrors that have befallen the guilds during the Lords absence. Apparently, substitute guildmaster (and the Lords right-hand accomplice) Phinean Windrider has been running a little Black-Hander extortion ring. With the aid of his thugs and mercenaries, Phinean collects a “protection tax” from the guilds and shopkeepers in return for their shops safe-keeping. Phinean has explained to them it is due to the lawless and uncontrollable nature of province expansion. As long as these taxes are paid, they will be protected from the “looters, savages and outlaws”.

But recently (after one of the shopkeepers disappearances) the taxes have gone up again. They are asking Lord Darkangnon to step in and do something about this before Phinean drives them all into bankruptcy. Before they could go into more detail, Phinean himself moved across the room and joined their conversation. The two merchants promptly shut up and Alexis could see them steadfastly avoiding eye contact with the slightly-inebriated half-elf Phinean Windrider. Phinean asked if there was a problem, and everybody was like “*nooooo, no problems here, sir!*” The merchants tipped their heads towards Alexis and gave him a fearful, knowing glare. Then they left.

Phinean asked Alexis what that was all about (knowing in his head what they were talking about), but Alexis just smiled and said “nothing”. Phinean smiled too when he saw the Lord’s smirk, and patted him on the shoulder. “That’s what I thought” he replied

SOLITARY OUTKAST

Meanwhile, **Darius of Sithicus** had been prowling the Solyss byways and surrounding woodlands, seeing for himself what the locals have known for days – the woods really ARE bare. It was the oddest, most unsettling thing Darius had seen in a long time (at least since the slave-girl/panther thing bit him). Even the wolf tracks were scarce. But the further he moved west (towards the borders of Arkandale – and where the players just came from); he started to find those old cat paw tracks. The same ones he followed right out of Sithicus, through Verbrek and into Arkandale (see Episode #11: The Strange Story of Darkangnon Estates). So these strange cat-like kidnapers WERE taking their captives into Gundarak. But why? And where were they ending up? Darius would investigate further.

The players rested relatively well that night, despite the chaos bubbling around them. Despite their travels and trials, they were glad to be home – sleeping in their own beds. Destanial could be caught on his balcony, watching over the village and enjoying the natural, rustic beauty of his new homeland. But the silence was creepy. Something was going on in Solyss, and the Count would find out what.

THE NEXT DAY

The next day, everybody knew the Lord and Count were back. So they were free of the diplomatic pleasantries, and ready to proceed with their investigations.

Darius wanted to check out the surrounding woodlands further, and volunteered to go solo. But Destanial politely shot that idea down (claiming it was “unsafe”), and instead offered to link Darius up with the Solyss Marquis Gavin der Stahlzah and his men. They were experienced, trained woodsman whose job was to watch over the frontier and guard the Solyss borders. They could help Darius pursue this angle. And despite initial objection from Darius (he’s ALWAYS trying to pursue his goals away from the group – he is a D&D novice after all), he eventually relented and agreed to meet with Gavin.

In preparation for tonight's festivities (the invitation she received from Luci Lanns last night), Alena Nurpašhi wanted to check out the Boars Rest Tavern. For the readers who may not recall, The Boars Rest Tavern was the very first of its kind in Solyss. It made its debut appearance during Episode #5: *The Beast of Solyss*.

Also, for the readers who have access to Book of Crypts and are following along with the module: I DID use the map included in the *Rite of Terror* adventure for Solyss. With a few changes of course. Namely, I made Location #11: The Yearning Goblet the spot where the Boars Rest Tavern is located. I kept the modules description of the establishment, but I changed its name and its owners. But it's still the premier rumor-mill in Solyss, so Alena was about to get inundated with mindless chatter and gossip.

Darius of Sithicus traveled southeast out of Solyss to meet with **Marquis Gavin der Stahlzah** and his men -- just a hundred yards or so from the ever-expanding Solyss cemetery. Since the players arrived have arrived, the fast approaching Oktoberrfest has been the talk of the town (aside from the mysterious disappearances of course). So all along Darius' journey down the well-traveled byways he saw bands of pilgrims and wandering minstrels. He saw gaggles of ruffians looking for wine and dance, and merchants peddling their wares. It appeared that the Viscount was correct in assuming many would come to celebrate the Oktoberrfest (an event born of the Gundarakians recent liberation and continuing struggles).

Passing through the crowds like a breeze, Darius was able to capture whispers of nervous conversation. Murmurings of the recent string of misfortune that has greeted Solyss as of late. The recent disappearances of the local wildlife and now the people that have come up missing. He even saw brief hand-gestures being made, indicating a superstitious ward. But as his usual MO, Darius played the cut and kept to himself. Virtually indistinguishable amongst the dozens of other hooded strangers.

He met Gavin and troops by the old guard posts watching over the main road. The guard posts were once used by Duke Gundar to keep watch over the hills and river of southeastern Gundarak. Upon his defeat and subsequent upheaval, many of his old fortresses and towers were cleaned out and renovated for use by the new army of Gundarak. But even cleansing the land of Gundar's vile taint wasn't enough to erase the stains of his past atrocities. And so a somber, melancholy air rests over every piece of his property to this very day. Even the gaily-decorated towers that now welcomed travelers into Solyss' arms still looked ominous and foreboding.

Darius introduced himself to Gavin, and the rangers dour and stoic demeanor matched his own. Gavin provided Darius with a horse, and the group of men trod off into the forests. Gavin spent a little while shooting feelers towards Darius -- getting to know his past and his relationship with **Count Destanial Magorian**. When he felt Darius was suitably genuine in his efforts to unravel the mystery, Gavin let him into his confidence.

As Marquis he resides over a smaller unit of highly-trained woodsmen and rangers. These guys are in charge of Solyss' borders and public roadways. They also work independently of the local militia - captained by **Alec Rapacion**. In their duties as of late, the Marquis and his men have witnessed many odd occurrences. As they detailed the sightings to Darius, he was amazed by the similarities. Strange, foreign cat tracks have been discovered by the western border. They stretch several miles further towards the province of Solyss. But most alarming to Darius, was the story Gavin told about the smuggler.

Gavin explained that the state defense had been upped as a result of the influx of new travelers. Two nights ago, a horse-drawn carriage found to be carrying slave labor was detained. They were attempting to smuggle two Elvin paupers into Solyss territory -- Morninglord knows for what. Darius shivered when Gavin described them as "paupers". These proud elves had been once been missionaries and dilettantes. Not mere paupers. The trials their kidnappers had forced them to endure must by quite terrible for the Marquis to make that mistake. Darius asked where the slave-trader was now, and Gavin told them he was locked up in the jailhouse. He refused to talk. The Elvin "paupers" were cleaned up and quickly released.

At least Darius' theory that the kidnappers were keeping their captives alive was true. But why were they smuggling them all the way to Gundarak? What was making the cat tracks and how was it related to the kidnappers? Darius thought they might be mounts of some type -- quicker and faster than any horse. Although Gavin may not have had much luck interrogating the smuggler, Darius felt confident he could extract some information. So he bid farewell to Gavin rode back into the village. He was going to the jailhouse.

Meanwhile at the *Boars Rest Tavern* (Location #11 on the map), Alena Nurpaši stopped in for a mid-afternoon glass of wine.

When the barmaids (two twin sisters) recognized Alena from accompanying the Lord and Count in their parade, they joyously greeted her. This was Katrina and Ivana Svernova -- twin sisters branded with the hawk of Falkovnia. They first made their debut in Episode #5: *The Beast of Solyss*.

It was a minor spectacle for Alena as she quickly came to be the center of attention Katrina and Ivana Svernova peppered her with friendly questions about her nationality and homeland. As refugees of Falkovnia, these two twin sisters had come very far in their journeys as well. They asked her relationship to the Count, and confirmed to Alena that he was indeed as honorable and just as he portrays himself to be.

But soon enough, Katrina and Ivana asked Alena if she was here to help solve the mystery as of late. Alena hesitated, before answering "yes". From there, both Katrina and Ivana went off on a gossiping tangent -- detailing every obscure conspiracy theory they heard.

Amongst other things, Alena learned that the proprietor of the Parsed Lip tavern (Nansen: introduced earlier in this story) was a confirmed murderer. "But don't quote me on that, I don't want to get killed". She also heard the *Temple of Weeshy* was preparing a banquet rumored to include various meat dishes, and that the Oktoberfest festival was drawing the wrong crowd. The village was now swelling with "no-good, ruffian out-of-towners hell bent on squeezing the last copper piece out of Solyss".

Alena finished her glass of wine, and thanked the sisters for their accommodation. She told them she'd back later tonight to watch her new friend Luci Lanns perform. With that, Alena Nurpaši exited the Boars Rest establishment

Lord Alexis Darkangnon spent most of the morning (and early afternoon) alone in his bedroom -- recuperating from the festivities the night before. But he was used to feeling like a zombie the next morning, so he just slept it off. Unfortunately for the Lord, an angry pounding on his bedchamber doors - followed by argument curse words - interrupted his rejuvenating slumber. Before he could even slide out of bed and throw on his robes, the angry pounding persisted.

Finally, with eyelids hanging low and hair a mess, Lord Darkangnon answered the pounding on his bedchamber doors. He saw a few of his measly servants trying to hold back two angry gentlemen. They were dressed appropriately, so Alexis knew right away they were important. The red-faced anger of the two men matched Alexis' irritation at being awoken. Despite the squeaky reservations of the servants, these two men barreled right into the Lord's bedchambers and confronted him face-to-face.

They were wealthy and influential members of the guilds. They both had a lot of time, energy and money invested in the Solyss economy. Alexis even remembered personally OKing one guy's business venture many months back. Now, they were very upset. Their angry proclamations brought Alexis back to the night before, when they mentioned the extortion racket his partner **Phinean Windrider** was running.

These two angry merchants were now in Alexis' face (in his private bedchambers) and DEMANDING resolution. They want Alexis to act NOW – or face the wrath of the organized guilds. They are giving Lord Darkangnon 24 hours to meet their demands, or the authorities will be notified and strikes will be organized. Alexis continued to rock his stoic poker face, but knew the merchant's demands were serious. If the Count or the magistrates were to hear about the extortion ring, Alexis could be forced from power. This was something he could not have.

So Alexis used his 18 charisma to it's fullest extent, and managed to get the merchants calmed down a bit. He assured them he knew nothing of this racket, and that he would promptly put an end to it. He asked that they kindly refrain from exploiting the situation further by discussing it with outside sources. Once the merchants were suitable placated, Alexis politely dismissed them.

But when they left, Alexis stared hard at himself in the mirror. His eyes were still bloodshot from the night before, and his vision felt blurry. His head ached with dehydration. Yes, the Lord would take care of this matter personally. He had given his guarantee. Alexis readied himself for the day and prepared to confront Phinean. He would end this problem today.

FROM EXTORTION RACKETS to SMUGGLING RINGS

Darius of Sithicus strode forth into town high atop a black steed. The streets were lined with revelers, and multi-colored streamers hung from every tree. The brilliant colors of their leaves in fall looked like nature's own fireworks display. Darius could see the children running amuck with their pumpkins, while the merchants busily attended to their duties. The town was swelling with anticipation of the fast-approaching *Oktoberfest* (hosted by the Temple of Weeshy).

Darius reached the jailhouse at the time Count Destanial Magorian and Domingo were leaving. The companions briefly conversed, and Darius told him he wanted to speak with an inmate. He just said he had "a hot tip". So Destanial arranged for Darius to interview the prisoner he wanted (the smuggler he had been put on to by Gavin – see the earlier post).

Walking down the hall past the crowded jail cells, Darius found the smuggler in the last one on the row. He was dressed in modest black and greens, and his face was expressionless. He was curled into a ball in a darkened corner of the cell. His eyes were slightly glazed over and bloodshot. Darius stood silently before the bars, until the stranger he watched spoke first. "What do ya want?" the smuggler barked out.

Now keeping in mind the fact that the player himself (Toneih) can be quite chilling – his character is a roguish dark-skinned half elf – and his veneer is manufactured to be ominous and foreboding – Darius of Sithicus had little problem intimidating the smuggler into revealing some

crucial information.

Without delving into specifics, or his exact methods – Darius learned what he needed from the smuggler lackey. The pawn in the jail cell with which he confers is nothing but a low-level middleman. He claims that a “tribe of savages” brings the stock (that’s what he calls the missing Elvin dilettantes: “stock”) just over the Arkandalian border. It’s the smugglers jobs to take the slaves and administer payment to the savages. From there, the kidnapers jobs are done.

Darius knew the “savages” the smuggler made reference to HAD to be the mysterious Green Eyez: the darkskinned half-panther hybrids Darius had only caught glimpses of. He rubbed the scarring bite wound he received on his arm – courtesy of one of their wounded warriors. He asked the smuggler what the Green Eyez were receiving in return, and the answer frightened him. “*Firearms*”. That’s the LAST thing the Green Eyez need to get their hands on. Now they’ll have firepower to compete with the white man and his thundersticks.

Darius asked the smuggler who was receiving the slave labor, but the smuggler legitimately didn’t know. All he knew was he got paid to bring the “stock” to checkpoint someplace to the east – just beyond the village of Solyss. Who or what was taking the elves from there would remain a mystery – for now. The smuggler has heard rumors of old liquidation towers used by Duke Gunder but he didn’t know for sure.

Darius also learned that the smuggler made little in actual monetary value from his involvement in the smuggling ring. Apparently he was being comped with various narcotics that he needed to fuel his habits. Habits that were steadily eating him away as he sat rotting in his jail cell. Apparently that’s why this guy didn’t talk or move around much. And why he stayed confined to his small little corner, clutching his stomach – the guy was experiencing withdrawal. But Darius felt no pity.

After squeezing the poor sap for all the info he could, Darius left the jailhouse discreetly. He took a long hard look at the bustling village around him, and contemplated his options.

These “liquidation towers” or “checkpoints” needed to be investigated further. Darius could feel his search nearing its conclusion. He now knew the Elvin nobles he tracked were indeed alive – at least this long. Green Eye savages who used their lycanthropy to their advantage were stealing them away in the night. They would smuggle their elvin captives north east into Gundarak, where somebody was footing the bill. Who or what was smuggling them in – and for what – were questions that remained unanswered. And Darius had to know.

So he decided he would do a little investigative research – by himself – to familiarize himself with the situation. THEN he would inform the others of his findings. But for now, Darius of Sithicus will make the lone journey out of Solyss to the east. He’s hot on the trail of the smugglers ring, and he needs to know where that trail ends. So off he goes into the untamed Gundarakian wilderness. Alone.

BEHIND THE SCREEN (DM Interlude)

It is important to note that sometime between this point and Episode 11: The Strange Story of Darkangnon Estates, Darius of Sithicus leveled up. His first level gain EVER as a D&D player.

Now we played this adventure waaaay before G4 was released, so at this point I had EVERY Ravenloft product –past and present, 1E to 2E to 3E. Not to mention a massive library of generic 2E handbooks (all kits which can be easily converted into PrCs) and a big 3E collection. My

point is: when it came time to choose a Prestige Class for his character, Darius had all the options in the world. And what book reached out and grabbed him by the throat? Which PrC did he fall in love with after reading the description? Which PrC did Darius think was the coolest of them all?

Why, the Solitary Outcast from Champions of Darkness of course! And as he reviewed this option, and we reflected back on his characters past actions – the pieces all fit together. He really WAS a Solitary Outcast, and Darius had been roleplaying him as such since the beginning. And now with his decision to journey into the wilderness ALONE, it was like that PrC was made for him. So Darius took his first level in a prestige class – the controversial Solitary Outcast.

It's also important to note that Darius made his latest decision (to travel alone into the woods) despite much objection from the others. Out-of-game, Alexis and Destanial (my two longest-tenured Ravenloft players) warned Toneih of the inherent dangers of traveling alone through the Gundarakian woods. Especially in search of an elusive slave smuggling ring that's backed by somebody pretty powerful and influential. I mean, they MUST be powerful and influential to be able to pull this off. But Toneih just nodded and smiled at the warnings. He had his own plans. The other players just shrugged and laughed it off. They didn't know how true their warnings would be.

So without telling the other PCs ANY of what he had learned, Darius set off on horseback to the approximate location the smuggler had given him as "check point". What would he find waiting for him? What horrible truth will he uncover? What tragedy will befall him? Only the Dark Powerz know for sure... mwah-ha-ha-ha!

BEHIND THE SCREEN (continued)

Players propel the game

Out-of-game, the players discussed which angles they wanted to pursue. When Alexis first heard about the "haunted" farmyard (Baggs' estate – see previous posts), he wanted to be the first person to investigate. He still does - but first he must find Phinean and put an end to the merchant problems as of late. Alexis knows Phinean will be found in his usual digs -- the Parsed Lip tavern located in the heart of Solyss. So Alexis gears up and prepares to make his grand entrance. Resolution tonight.

Meanwhile just across the way at Count Magorian's manor house, player character Alena Nurpashi primped herself as well. She too was attending a function - albeit one not a quarter as dastardly as the one Alexis planned to crash. Hers was of a more light-hearted, frivolous nature. The boy's old friend **Luci Lanns** is hosting a little shindig at the Boars Rest Tavern - a sizable establishment located on the corner where the merchant aves meld. With Oktoberfest fast approaching, the place is guaranteed to be packed. Alena would soak it all in - finally happy to be amongst such celebration. Recently she had little to look forward to, but now her hopes looked up.

Darius of Sithicus, of course, had his own leads to pursue. Slipping out of the village before nightfall he was able to bypass the Counts curfew. It wasn't hard for him to stray beyond the sight of the guard towers and leave the roads behind. His travels would take him far beyond the protective veil of Solyss - into the untamed wildness of southern Gundarak. A place where even lawmen feared to step. Darius had discovered a possible checkpoint just north of Solyss - where Duke Gundars torture chambers were once so fertile.

And still, dark mechinacations grind in the background. The Parsed Lip and Adventurer's Rest crowds fight underground wars for profit. The law fights just as hard - if not more so - for their piece of the Solyss pie.

DM INTERLUDE (continued)
“The Gangs of Solyss” subplot

The side angle that was sure to hook Alexis’ character ultimately failed to materialize. During the production of this module, I included a link to the growing underground criminal scene which I was sure Alexis (or at least Destanial) would follow-up on. But I guess it’s a testament to the numerous other side-angles I constructed that this one fell through the cracks. This would have been one of my favorite little side treks had it appeared. Check it:

As noted previously (as far back as Episode #5: The Beast of Solyss), I have been planting seeds for the Blood in Moondale adventure included in [Book of Crypts](#). Of course it will be reborn as Blood in Solyss so I needed to previously introduce the main NPCs (as the adventure suggested). Therefore, you will see Dante Lysin and his Adventurer’s Rest tavern as well as Captain Alec Rapacion make appearances well before they’re actually called on.

The side angle I was referring to is the ongoing Solyss lawman VS. Solyss outlaws war that rages on. Solyss is a raw, rugged little level one province in the untamed wilds of Gundarak. With the expansion of the village (and the opportunities that continue to arise), more and more of the unsavory types have permeated the area – no doubt drawn to the sleazy practices of the lands Lord. So as they peddle their bootleg goods and black-market contraband, this naturally causes friction between them and those that uphold the law. But of course, Captain Alec Rapacion (*who harbors a dark secret himself – Book of Crypts readers holla!*) upholds the law in his own twisted fashion. I even laid it out crystal-clear for the players when I ran Destanial through a suspect scenario.

Destanial of course met with Gavin der Stahlzah and understood the possible Green Eyez connection. That was why he recommended Darius meet him. So after conferring with Gavin and his men - ordering them to virtually seal the borderlands between Arkandale and Gundarak - Destanial met with deputy Wellis Andreman. After ruling there would be a nightly-curfew reinstated (in the nights leading up to Oktoberrfest) Destanial wanted to make sure his ruling was enforced.

So he doubled up on security in and around the village limits - hoping to deter the kidnapppers from striking again. The Count's rule was subject to much complaint - limiting the amount of time people could socialize just as the big Oktoberffest social event was approaching - but Destanial stuck to his guns. It was only temporary and would be nullified shortly before the day of the event. He also said it applied mainly to the back roads and outer byways - roads that would be off-limits after nightfall. So the heart of Solyss itself would remain boisterous and celebratory.

Once these individual matters were settled, Destanial and his bodyguard Domingo donned the trappings of a wanderer and mingled with the populace. Some of the minstrels and performers that came north from Kartakass brought with them stylized masks and other flashy accruements. Wearing a few simple masks doubled as disguise for the Count and right hand man. They wanted to see what was going on from the inside out.

Destanial and Domingo were mingling with the crowds in Solyss center, as they dwindled in the fading sunlight. They were happy to see such a joyous occasion, and the happiness it brought to

the people. But they hated the dark cloud that hung over the event, as the mystery of the kidnappings deepened. Still undercover in their partygoer outfits, Destanial and Domingo were on hand when two patrolman warned a third about a bust in progress. So obviously Destanial's player wanted to check it out. But he and Domingo didn't go as the Count and cohort. He wanted to continue the vagabond charade – so they saw things a lot differently than if they had been official.

The soldiers had mentioned a cart had being confiscated on the northwest exit road - but don't worry because Captain Rapacion has it under control. Destanial and Domingo overheard this and head over to the location. They got there when the roads were being closed up, forcing all commoners off. Instead of removing their masks and proceeding as Count and assistant, Destanial and Domingo stole off into the woods and stellyly moved into place. A few checks later and both of them are positioned comfortably in the extended tree branches, far and high away.

They can see a ring of Solyss soldiers surrounding a small covered cart. The donkey that pulled it stood to the side, and two black-cloaked occupants lie on the ground. They lawmen did make a bust – Destanial could clearly see that. But while the prisoners were detained – the goods were never properly secured.

Matter of fact, it appeared to Destanial and Domingo (still safe on their perch) that the confiscated chests were being hidden away. What was in the chests (or why Captian Rapacian smiled wickedly when he saw it) would remain a mystery.

Instead of pursuing this angle further, Destanial kinda brushed it off. He was too concerned with possible Green Eye connections, the disappearances of the locals, the upcoming Oktoberrfest as well as his courting of the recently arrived **Kivla Sablemourne** (*of which Destanial has become quite smitten – I'll tell ya later*). So after I alluded to some shady, underhand dealings in the previous scenario – Destanial still didn't bite.

If he had he would have found it funny that the confiscated chests never arrived at the station – nor did the prisoners to their cells...

Anywayz – my point before going on that tangent was to illustrate the tension between the lawmen and the outlaws. But of course, no self-serving evil can ever collaborate or even co-mingle. So there's just as much drama between the criminals and their respective organizations. THAT'S where **Dante Lysin** (his Adventurer's Rest) and **Nanson** (with his Parsed Lip) come in. They're on opposite ends of the criminal spectrum.

Dante is my murky anti-hero. The “hurt no women and children” type. Matter of fact, Dante and some of his boys have heavy Dark Sun ties – all but a few of them are Outlanders.

Nansen, on the other hand is the cutthroat, sell-ya-mamma-for-a-dollar type baller. Their respective establishments mirror this.

So then it's no surprise that Phinean Windrider and his ilk have taken a liking to the *Parsed Lip*. That's their scene. I've been dropping little hints like crazy about these turf wars – and possible connections to the disappearances – but none of the players pursued them. Everything from deputy Wellis Andreman telling the players “*The bouncers for the Adventurer's Rest and Parsed Lip are some of the roughest customers I have seen in a long while. At night, I have seen them prowling the city. When I have confronted them, they claim they are looking for the criminals responsible for the disappearances*”... to overheard rumors of weapons stockpiling taking place

within the backrooms.

So why were these guys prowling the streets? What were they rumored to be stashing? What was their connection to the disappearances? The players would never know.

But I can tell you!

The gangs were instated as a diversion for the players – just like the million other angles subtly seeded about. I wanted them to think the gangs might be involved in the kidnapping ring, or at least knew who was responsible.

As they got closer to these outlaw savages, they would learn the differences between the two competitors (see above).

While Dante and his *Adventurer's Rest* dabble in the taboo (with exotic dancers, and backroom drug deals – not to mention the occasional hardcore underground pitfight – they also have a legitimate love for Solyss as a home. And when these mysterious kidnappings started rocking that village – THEIR village – they reacted like they would whenever somebody messed with their stuff: they went to war. So if goons from the *Adventurers Rest* were seen stalking the nighttime streets of Solyss – they really WERE looking for kidnappers and boogie monsters. Just like they told Deputy Wellis Andreman. It wasn't a ruse or a hollow alibi.

On the other hand, you can't count on a *Parsed Lip* goon to have the same morals. He would be the one trying to take advantage of the situation, perhaps offing an extra enemy or two and blaming it on the kidnappings.

The rumors of stockpiling are actually fact – and were designed to spook the players into believing something bigger was afoot. Alas, the *Adventurer Rest* guys were just getting more firepower in anticipation of an all-out war against the kidnappers. All these angles were left dangling with the players, to be explained away in out-of-game conversations

THE STORY CONTINUES

“Truth ABHORRED”

That night at the *Boars Rest Tavern* - amidst the friendly hubbub and revelry - Alena Nurpašhi had a vision. More like a revelation, in which she saw the utter defenselessness in those around her. Like they were all chickens in a coop praying the fox wouldn't come tonight. Being a practiced sorceress herself, Alena knew the peoples simple minds could never quantify her powers. But there was something else here, an outside force. An ever constant pulsating drone. She could feel it lightly in the air - just out of minds eye reach.

Perhaps also it was the bizarre rumors Alena heard throughout the night that fostered her paranoia. Tales told by upper middle class families about secretive groups that seduced children away. Some say the missing teens in the village weren't kidnapped at all - they disappeared to join a cult. These nervous murmurings persisted - even as the nights entertainment rode on in the background.

By the time Luci Lanns finished her set, late into the eve - Alena was ready to go. She had brooded silently in the corner for the past hour or so, even turning down a dance from a sharp young gentleman. Alena was like that - friendly but not inviting, social yet secular. Alena praised Luci for her renditions before politely declining an invitation to an after party. She was partied

out. So she left Luci to the throngs of fans and exited the Boars Rest sometime in the wee small hours of.

The night streets were chilly, and eerily desolate. So unlike she had just seen just a few nights ago upon their arrival. The Counts curfew was in effect, and looked to Alena like the people didn't mind obeying. Aside from the occasional wanderer, or worker the streets were empty. The roads were dimly lit and Alena could see soldier's patrolling.

What compelled our young lady player to suddenly depart from the safely secured streets of Solyss? What drew her from the illuminated cobblestone walkways to the dusty backroads of Solyss where the old bridge crosses the river? Maybe because it's a D&D game and everybody wants some action. But I was able to subtly nudge her in that direction by promising grand descriptions of natural splendor and rustic beauty contained within the native woodlands.

As DM I'm always harping on the stunning magnificence of the various domains and lands. And I guess chicks dig that stuff.

So off Alena goes down the hill and through the valley – dazzled by twinkling stars and warmed by the October chill. She was just going to take the round-about-way back to her quarters. She has appreciation for natural beauty and stuff like that. The vivid portrait of a countryside during fall. She is drawn towards the calming rush of the river that runs past. So it was amidst this peaceful tranquility I chose to strike...

At first it was just a few bobbing shadows slinking past her peripheral. Then it was the unsettling sounds of heavy breathing and twigs snapping. She called out "*who goes there?*" but got no response. It was obvious she was being followed. But by who or what? She glanced back toward the village, but could quickly tell she was at the mercy of the wilds. There was nobody else in sight.

Then... *they* started popping up. Slimy little critters with bulging eyes and bulbous bellies. They leered at the Elvin princess from the shadows. She thought she saw spear-tips dipping over the tops of the bushes. She gasped upon seeing another one of these creatures high up in his treetop perch. But this little fellow was blue – as opposed to the mottled green hue the others had.

Alena reacted quickly and readied herself for the worst. But it was not to be. Instead, a cloaked figure wobbled out from beneath the bridge and beckoned her forth. It kept its face concealed, and emerged only far enough from its hiding place beneath the bridge for Alena to make out its apparent humanoid appearance. It spoke out in a raspy voice, imploring her to approach him. Around her, those crazy little creatures continued to watch. Especially that bluish one in the trees above, whose eyes hinted at an understanding beyond his bestial appearance.

Of course Alena hesitated – who wouldn't? But when the mysterious man called her by her full name AND mentioned her younger sister... her curiosity was piqued. She approached. He told her not to worry about the prying eyes, for they rolled with him. She glanced back up towards the bluish orc but he had vanished from his perch. She could clearly see a dozen or so of the little green creatures still watching on.

The mystery-man told Alena that the "*air is watching and the seeds are listening*". He implored her to journey beneath the bridge to his special den – complete with "guardian wards and protection magiks". This place is not safe... SHE is not safe. For the eyes of the squid are upon you.

I was able to convince Alena's player of the seriousness in his pleas, and she reluctantly agreed to slip beneath the bridge. Probably assuming her sorcerer's abilities would be able to protect her. But down below the bridge, similar to a troll's lair, the man had crafted makeshift holding devices. Manacles, leather straps and chains adorned the muddy embankment. Some of which reverberated with restriction magiks.

Alena whipped around to meet the cold stare of a man possessed. His dilated pupils swirled with concentrated fury. With a face that was hideous – yet oddly comforting at the same time. His leathery skin glistened with inkings – or were they branding scars? Alena felt the power in his hoarse voice as he spoke to her, removing his hood simultaneously. The brief flash of recognition chilled **Alana Nurpašhi**.

DM Note – Backtracking a bit, it is important to note the foreshadowing of this characters arrival. The haunting lullaby that seduced Alena to sleep the past few nights – the same tune she unconsciously found herself humming during the day. The same piercing eyes that spoke out to her countless times amidst the revelry and carousing of crowded Solyss streets. The silent warnings enveloped in urgency and sealed with encroaching dread. The 3rd eye's mind that was striving to make contact. This was the man she had seen in her dreams – the twisted, hunchbacked body and gnarled fingers stained with age. The utter personification of the very words he spoke to her through her thoughts: “He who is shunned and Abhorred shall lead the blind masses to salvation”. This was that man – that creature. He who is Abhorred.

I had been hyping this “abhorred” thing since the player's arrival in Solyss. Whether it was an event, or a new character the players didn't know. But now they did – and it elicited the reaction I wanted. Especially after Alena remembered the conversation she overheard about an escaped patient from the mental ward (the good Doctor Heinfroth's sanitarium). A patient they called “**Gorthaur**”.

So there we are. Alena is face to face with the one called **Gorthaur the Abhorred**. He's talking all weird and demented like Timothy McVeigh's brother in *Bowling for Colombine*. He says “the squid brain” has “corrupted” her thoughts. It is his honorable mission to purge the helpless victim of the brain's wicked powers. One by one he must scour the putrid stain from the psyche of the populace. And tonight his crusade continues – as he attempts to purify Alena.

Combat ensues.

Despite his slovenly appearance, Gorthaur remains remarkably agile and deceptively strong. His indomitable will and unconquerable concentration were evident as he fastened on his victim like a pit bull. He tried to muscle Alena further down the banks towards the restraining devices – all made easier by slippery, muddy slopes.

After failing to force her down, he grabbed her by the hair and flung her effortlessly towards the flowing river. They struggled alongside the current as it raced mere inches below their heads. Whatever Gorthaur was trying to do, it ain't nice. He keeps talking about “flushing the tentacles out” and “cleansing the mind”.

After one particularly intense exchange, Gorthaur wrestled the young sorceress to the ground and forcefully submerged her face in the river. Over and over again as she struggled to free herself and gasp for breath he powered her into the cold water.

Finally, through the sheer strength of her own willpower (and madd lucky dice rolls) Alena again momentarily escaped his grasp and fled up the bank towards the bridge. He caught her just as she emerged. Alena's player was thinking "set-up" the whole time, what with those weird little goblin-things stalking her around the bridge. And she was correct. For as soon as she struggled and scrambled her way back up to the bridge, the group of goblins was waiting for her. So now Alena has to contend with the maniacal Gorthaur the Abhorred as well as his grotesque gang of minions. All the while that bluish one watched on from the treetops.

So after wearing down Alena a little and making her struggle, I put in a situation where she could freely use her awesome sorceress abilities and just wreck stuff. So while evading the grasp of Gorthaur, she mowed down the half-dozen or so unlucky creatures. Flinging goblins into trees, zapping them with electrical currents (watching their twitching bodies plunge into the river) and frying them with magic missiles gave Alena a perverse enjoyment. But after she had a little fun, Gorthaur struck her down again before she could flee. Meanwhile the blue one watches on (he never once entered the fracas – but Alena saw him levitating down at one point in the fight).

So we enter the end game. The battle winds down as both Alena and Gorthaur have been exerted. Somehow, he has been able to match (if not blatantly overcome) her magical arsenal – all without magic of his own. It was as if his steely concentration could move boulders. This is where we cue up the Dice Arena™ and all rolls are made in public. Match for match and roll for roll Gorthaur and Alena go. Magic VS. Psionics. Will VS. Concentration. Mind VS. the Wand. Gorthaur has pledged to purge Alena's psyche of the grasping tentacles, which evidently means "hold her underwater until she drowns".

Honestly it could've gone either way. I had perfectly imagined Alena succumbing to the might of the Abhorred and being forced into captivity. She could've been killed, but most likely she'd have been held hostage (I know – I'm a softie). Ironically, defeat in this case might have actually BENEFITTED her in the future, as you will soon see. But for now, Alena Nurpašhi got lucky (or so she believed).

Getting a streak of hot dice rolls at a crucial moment, Alena sent Gorthaur the Abhorred crashing backwards over the bridge where his rotund body splashed loudly into the river. Using this brief second of respite to her advantage, Alena turned to flee back towards the village of Solyss. She caught the resolute glare of that bluish-goblin, and for a moment she thought he might attack. But he didn't. He just watched her as she ran back home and Gorthaur dragged his soggy carcass out of the river.

Brief Cut-Scene

A perturbed **Gorthaur the Abhorred** licks his wounds and confides in his companion **Trillian** (the blue-haired goblin). He says they may have failed today, but the crusade will continue. Alena has been infected by the vile tentacle and he won't rest until the menace is eradicated. Perhaps out of spite, Gorthaur orders Trillian to release their groups' findings.

See, ever since Gorthaur's escape from Heinfroth's ward a few nights back he has been steadily building his following of brainwashed minions. He also collaborates with a very powerful force in this region. A very powerful and EVIL force that Gorthaur has overlooked in his blind mission to cleanse the populace. A force that will most certainly be happy to learn an intruder is preparing to invade its territory.

Gorthaur's goblinoid allies have spotted Alena's traveling companion Darius of Sithicus entering some very dangerous and forbidden grounds. Territory ruled exclusively by this powerful evil force. Gorthaur has given the order to alert this evil of the approaching Darius. This incident becomes VERY important VERY soon. Read on...

LORD DARKAGNAN vs THE GUILDS of SOLYSS

Meanwhile, we join the party in progress down at the *Parsed Lip*. As stated earlier, **Lord Alexis Darkangnon** has been getting an earful from the merchant's guilds about the extortion racket perpetuated by his associate Phinean Windrider. He promised the merchants he would "take care of the problem tonight". So here he is.

The unsavory types that permeate the establishment roundly greeted him. **Nansen**, the tavern proprietor (introduced earlier) gave the Lord a hero's welcome. He knows that without the Lord's influence, he wouldn't be able to get away with a lot of what he gets away with. Suffice to say, Lord Darkangnon is feeling the love in what is arguably one of the most hardcore establishments in the village.

He spots Phinean seated in the back, surrounded by associates and other yes-men. Of course he's flanked by Zex (Phinean's big-azz fiendish bodyguard). When Phinean sees Alexis approaching, he stands and broadly motions for the Lord to join them. As all eyes at the table turn to see the approaching Lord of Solyss Gundarak, Phinean launches into a soliloquy of praise – extolling the virtues of their fearless leader. His speech is only slightly slurred from the amount of alcohol he's already consumed.

After gassing up the Lord (the others at the table all politely applaud him as he takes his seat) Phinean offers to buy Alexis a drink. Which he accepts. Which also turns into another three or four more. All the while the whole table is conversing, discussing and guffawing.

Later into the night (after the herd had thinned a bit) Alexis gets to discussing the important extortion issue with Phinean. The two friends lingered around the back of the tavern after Phinean dismissed his bodyguard Zex. There, amidst the cobwebs and shadows, the guild master and his assistant touched on the subject.

Alexis told him how he was accosted by two angry merchants threatening to take their charges to the authorities if something wasn't done soon. This was indeed a serious charge – one that might even call forth Emperor **Raoul Szerezia** from Zeidenburg to deal with it personally. Think of the shame, the humiliation and of course – the punishment.

Both Phinean and Alexis agreed this was bad news and they couldn't let it get that far. So how do they go about stopping this threat to their rule? Do they shape up and ship out? Does Phinean lower the tax so as to not draw the ire of the merchants? Or does Alexis ban the tax outright? Well, you should know Alexis' character by now and you should know that he chose Option D – None of the Above.

The only way Alexis and Phinean could figure out how to stop the damning words from reaching their final destination was to cut them off at the throat. Yes, that's right – *they won't give those merchants a CHANCE to contact the authorities*. They're gonna be all over the complaining merchants like flies on sh**. It was after much liquor and other inebriants had been consumed that Phinean and Alexis came to this conclusion. They are suitably zooted, flagrantly faded and looking for some serious drama.

The two decide to get all “retro” and return to their roots as Smoke team revolutionary assassins. They slip out of the *Parsed Lip* without anybody noticing and head out into the inky black night. They have bad intentions.

That night, those two merchants disappeared from their home. They were never seen again. All that could be seen on that cold dark night was a lone carriage rocking back and forth beneath the pale moonlight – just past the outskirts of Solyss. The horrible song of depraved torture and acute suffering can be heard emanating from within. Both Alexis and Phinean (caught up in the rapture of their drug-induced euphoria) catch an even bigger high as their torturing of the poor merchant goes well into the early morning hours. Faces splattered with blood, and wet instruments of torture at their feet, Alexis and Phinean make certain that their little secret stays within the circle.

DM Note- I'd like to hear your opinions on this one: Act of Ultimate Darkness or not? As stated many times prior, I'm kinda lenient when it comes to my Dming and I alwayz try to give the players a chance – no matter how small or big. So instead of instantly damning Alexis (and Phinean) with an automatic DPz failure, I gave him a percentile roll instead. I set the figure at 9%, which he easily passed (I rolled for Phinean who passed too). What do you think? Too lenient? The only time I ever called for an AoUD was way back in Episode #7: This Thing of Ours when Alexis assassinated a mother and her two young children.

DESTANIAL versus THE CULTISTS

OK – back to the module. Count Destanial Magorian and his bodyguard Domingo are still out on the prowl, combing the nighttime streets of Solyss for some kind of answers. I had some more clues come their way. While investigating the surrounding woodlands (sight of the latest disappearances), Destanial and Domingo emerged upon a disturbance – a chase to be precise.

First, they caught a glimpse of a black male wearing nothing but tattered rags race past them with horror in his eyes. Before they could even comprehend what they just saw, the thunderous approach of a dozen horses could be heard. Just as quick as that, a good three or four horses shot past them after the slave. The riders all wore *black robes embroidered with tigers, lions and other wild animals*.

Destanial and Domingo knew the riders must be up to no good, so they quickly gave chase. Somehow (details are a bit foggy to me) Destanial wound up on the back of one of the horses – able to catch up with the chasers but leaving Domingo behind in the process. It really was a thrilling interlude, as we role-played the horseback chase. Destanial caught up with another rider, and after a brief but tense encounter he forced the rider off his horse and crashing hard to the ground below. Destanial kept after the others while Domingo (still on foot) brought up the rear and captured the unlucky rider Destanial forced off.

By the time Destanial caught up with the remaining three riders, they had captured their prey – the lone, shivering Arkandalian slave. What the HELL was he doing way up here in Solyss?? At first Destanial was all ready to unsheathe his tighmaevril blade and rescue the slave – but then thought better of it. Instead, he dismounted and found a little spot in the cut where he could watch the riders in action.

The three riders ominously circled the slave, as he whirled around looking for an exit. They had the slave surrounded and made a big show of letting him know it. Finally, two of the riders quickly dismounted and wrestled the slave to the ground. The third rider began to hastily build a fire in the middle of the clearing. Destanial continued to watch on as they grabbed up the slave, leaving him to scream for mercy and struggle to no avail.

Just then, a FOURTH rider strode out from the surrounding foliage – he too wearing the black robes with gold stitching. Just from the aura of power and influence that radiated from him, Destanial knew this guy was in charge of the hunt. But what were they doing with their captive?

I described the scene to Destanial as ominous and foreboding, with tendrils of mist occasionally obscuring his view. And once the fire got going, the black smoke blocked even more of his vision. He watched the three riders drag the struggling slave towards the fire, where the fourth rider (still on horseback) continued to solemnly observe. They apparently tied or strapped the slave down, cuz he couldn't struggle any more. Then, the three riders began to do this strange, tribal dance in a circular fashion around the slave and the fire. All the while, that fourth rider (still on horseback) begins an eerie chant.

But before Destanial can see what vile forces are at work here, he is spotted by one of the cloaked riders! The rider calls out “*intruder!*” and points in Destanial's direction, dashing the ceremony in progress. Instantly the fourth rider (still on horseback, obviously the leader and the one presiding over the ritual) has the slave handed off to him by the others and races off into the darkened woods – leaving his three lackeys behind to crush “the intruder”.

Destanial's number one concern is keeping up with and catching the leader (who just took off with the slave). He tries to race off after him on his horse, but the other three block him.

Combat ensues.

Destanial struggles a little bit against the combined might of the three cloaked riders, but the odds are evened when Domingo suddenly emerges on the scene. Soon enough, Destanial and Domingo have taken a second prisoner – and the remaining two riders scrambled off into the woods. All that's left is Destanial, Domingo, a small fire in the lonesome clearing, one horse and two captured prisoners.

Angrily, Destanial and Domingo forced the hoods off the prisoners, thus revealing their faces. They are shocked by their discovery. *Both of these two cloaked cultists are respected members of the Hunting Guild.* Destanial even recognized one of the guys from attending a Weeshy service the night before (Destanial and Domingo had stopped by the newer Temple of Weeshy to introduce themselves – the faith sprang up in their absence from Solyss).

The implications of their discovery chilled them. WHY were these guild members caught up in this mess? What were they doing with the slave? HOW did they get the slave? Who were the riders that escaped, and where were they heading (with the poor slave as their captive)? Whatever the answers may be, Destanial wasn't getting ANY from his two prisoners. They steadfastly refused to speak, even when threatened with incarceration.

Destanial and Domingo rounded up their captives and began the trek back to the heart of Solyss – where they fully planned on locking up and interrogating the hunters. Destanial would get his answers. *He even ordered the village watchman to round up ANY black-cloaked stragglers that are found after curfew.* This too becomes VERY import VERY shortly. Read on...

THE DEATH of DARIUS

So as I alluded to earlier, two PC actions played a significant role in the fate of Darius from Sithicus. #1 was the escape of Alena Nurpašhi from the grip of Gorthaur the Abhorred, and *subsequent releasing of Darius' secret whereabouts.* Gorthaur's crooked eyes (the horribly

scarred, monstrous goblins that follow him) saw Darius stalking the woodlands beyond Solyss – stretching into dangerous grounds. Dangerous grounds that are fiercely protected – a place where few tread because of the bitter memories entrenched within. Acting as a sort of eyes and ears to this forsaken land are these half-mutilated goblinoid creatures. Some way or another, after his escape from Heinfroth’s sanitarium, Gorthaur was able to draw a few of these creatures his way (finding them easily controllable and reliable). Truth is, it was less Gorthaur’s “charms” – so to say – then it was this evil force LETTING Gorthaur borrow a few. That’s where the blue-haired one called Trillian comes in. Trillian is a creature I got out of the 3E Psionics book (*the little blue thing in the back – name escapes me*) that is utterly loyal to this thus far unseen “evil force”. He’s only making it look like he (and his distorted goblin brethren) are under Gorthaur’s control. Gorthaur is so blind to his whole “crusade” (which ironically holds all the merit in the world – read on) that he has overlooked this benevolent (but richly evil) ally he has acquired. He just wanted to hurt Alena a little by tattling on her ally – he never suspected the true evil he was unwittingly involved with.

#2 was **Count Destanial Magorian’s** most recent ruling that *all black-cloaked stragglers found after dark are to be detained for questioning*. Out-of-game (when Destanial’s player first made the rule) I immediately thought back to the time we had just finished playing through Episode #10: Corrupted Innocents. That was the adventure from Book of Crypts with the emordenung assassin disguised as a little girl. In the end Alexis finally killed her with a single shot to the head from his pistol. After the Game was over – just me, my girl and Alexis’ player were left. We were watching the News and about an hour earlier (just about when Alexis was peeling the cap of little Elenia) a Broken City convenience store clerk was shot and killed in a robbery. The news boldly proclaimed that Broken City police were “*looking for a black male in baggy clothing*”... which is abso-friggin-lutely EVERYBODY in the city! For some reason when Destanial made the rule that all black-cloaked stragglers are to be detained, that was what I thought of. And I wished for some kind of way I could twist that ruling back around on him. Unbelievably, I would get my wish in just a little while. Read on...

Darius of Sithicus is a ranger at heart; so dealing with his character was way different than dealing with the other more urban-dwelling characters. I really tried to accentuate the difference in character archetypes by taking the time to vividly describe Darius’ attunement with the land. Not a physical connection or anything, just the way he was able to harvest the lands for information and answers - like nature could communicate with him. So I was at my finest as I described the land’s palpable descent into corruption around him – a sense that only his character would be able to derive. Any other character would spot no noticeable differences. Only experienced woodsmen. Make sense?

So as Darius descended further into this deserted hotbed of wickedness – even despite the already absent wildlife – he could tell something was just wrong about this area. The grasses and fields faded in color and vibrancy until they gradually crumbled into dust beneath his heels. The trees became noticeably darker. Caked with grime with no remaining leaves to speak of – stripped bare of their bright October colors and replaced by a dismal grayish hue. Even by cover of night Darius could make these distinctions.

Then, it started snowing.

I’d like to take you back in time for a moment to a point in our campaign’s nexus. All the way back to *Episode #4: Death of a Darklord*. It was at the phase between writing out Episode 3 (*When Black Roses Bloom*) and writing in the new adventure. As the players crossed over into the realm of Gundarak (after their misadventures in Sithicus) they were greeted by a falling snow.

BLACK snow. Upon closer observation of course, the black snow was actually ash. Ash raining down upon the region from the furnaces of their mad leader Duke Gundar. When I first saw the movie *Schindler's List* (at the movie theater in JUNIOR HIGH!) that scene really burned into my memory. I'm still shocked by it 10 years later! So much so that I couldn't help but bring it back ONCE more as Darius of Sithicus continues his trek...

Of course describing this scene at the table, the other players (Destanial and Alexis) immediately thought back to the same picture (it WAS a highly memorable adventure after all). So suddenly THEY got all nervous in their chairs (thinking this is too eerily-similar to Duke Gundar's reign), which in turn made Alena and Darius' players more nervous! And they didn't even know why! But I mean seriously – if a sky fall of falling ash isn't a harbinger of foul things to come, I don't know what is. Even after all the signs pointed in the wrong direction, Darius chose to continue on.

Now I'll be the first to admit it – I can be a softie sometimes when it comes to Dming. I have a soft spot in my heart for fully developed characters that I'm just really FEELING. And sometimes MAYBE there MIGHT be a little bias when it comes to the PCs. Nothing blatant or obvious – you'd probably never be able to even tell. But I'm not out on a mission to mess with the players or teach them a lesson. But tonight... I may just have to reconsider.

See, Ravenloft is a scary-azz place! Probably the scariest of ALL the old-school TSR worlds. I've succeeded in creating and fostering this genuinely frightening gaming environment for my players to enjoy. The players have indeed been in some very tight situations before, but they've always managed to evade the hangman's noose. With the exception of their old friend Solyss (the actual PC – not the village), they haven't lost anybody close to them.

What am I trying to say? Well folks, let me just put it this way – when people say you shouldn't mosey around after dark in Ravenloft – you should probably sit down, shut up and listen. Cuz eventually, even the most generous DM will be forced to *let the dice roll where they may...*

The warning signs persisted but Darius continued to ignore them. This time, the warnings came in the form of various home-brewed traps and springs set up in the area. Most likely, any other character would have set off at LEAST one trap but Darius is no ordinary traveler. He's a very experienced ranger and woodsman. So he has a higher chance of noticing these things. And notice them he did. Wicked, vile traps – beyond the comprehension of most savages, he would presume. Whoever crafted them had to have at least a smidgen of intelligence – albeit very sick and twisted. And STILL Darius persisted! Didn't he get the freakin clue? Even Alena's player was saying “*Uhhh, Toneih? Maybe you'd better reconsider...*” But on he pressed. Looking for answers, channeling forth the Solitary Outkast spirit that dwells within him.

Remember the scene a little earlier when Alena Nurpašhi was on her little night-time stroll? The part where she was stalked and surrounded by a bunch of mutilated goblins? I basically replayed the same scene over with Darius right now. But THIS time, it took on a darker, more twisted fashion...

These horrible little monsters that skittered in and out of the foliage around were terribly mangled just like the ones Alena had encountered. Horrible scars, missing eyes and limbs, puss-filled wounds and lice-ridden clothing. But there was something even worse about the variety Darius encountered.

Like I said, his attunement with the land is strong – so much so that he can feel the life around him. That's why he could feel the land slowly dying as he continued with his journey. But

THESE things... these goblinoid things – don't even register on his radar. They are oddly cold and an affront to natural life itself. Unlike the goblins Alena had battled, THESE monsters were worse. They were fiendish undead.

When this realization was publicly broadcasted, the reaction at the gaming table was appropriate. Alexis just whistled while Destanial's player chuckled with anticipation. Alena was all like "whoa, dude. Better get a move on". Toneih had that "*oh-crap-I-went-too-far*" smirk and smack on the head. Oh well, too late now. Darius of Sithicus drew his weapons and readied for the ambush. It came.

Combat Ensues

Fiendish Undead is MY own unique template and I added it to a few goblins. It has a deeper purpose – believe me. But just now, they fought very viciously against poor, outnumbered Darius of Sithicus. He did best, believe me. But these weren't the little schmucks Alena was chucking around earlier. These were the real-deal. They were representations of this whole foul area. Like the three-eyed fish in the Simpsons that lived too close to the nuclear plant.

At first Darius tried to stand his ground, but soon enough retreat was the only viable option. But f-it. I figure if I as DM have gone this far – I might as well go all the way. So instead of letting Darius escape right away, I actually push him closer to his original destination. For just over the next hill – resting on the horizon – are the old liquidation towers once used with extreme malice during Duke Gundar's reign. And guess what? *A thin plume of black smoke can be seen rising from the chimneys.*

So of COURSE Darius' player can't turn back now! I mean - this was what he was looking for the entire time! After what seemed like endless road blocking and hesitation on my behalf as DM, maybe Darius' player was thinking I didn't WANT him to reach the towers. But the truth was I was trying to WARN him about the towers! So now, even after being physically throttled by the undead goblins (with more attacks eminent) Darius felt he couldn't turn back.

Maybe things would've been different if he did turn back. Maybe not. Maybe those undead beasts would have given chase and staked him to the ground he fell on. Maybe he could've lived to flee back to Solyss. As it is, Darius chose to flee from the creatures in the OPPOSITE direction – towards the old liquidation towers.

And all the while those things continue to ambush him. Blow after foul blow rained down upon Darius as he tried desperately to escape their grip. Nothing could be done, it seemed. For every undead goblin that fell, another would take its place. And even those whose fingers or limbs were severed by the blade of Darius continued to fight on – their limbs still twitching on the ground. They were ferocious, unholy monstrosities that carry plague and disease with every strike. Wicked, evil and very contagious diseases.

Darius made it to the towers.

Matter of fact, he made it all the way past the gates and almost to the actual towers themselves before being struck down. The tree limbs and overhangs he counted on to keep him alive laughed and crumbled on him. He had come so far – he saw the towers. Knew the legends were true – new evil was churning forth from within. But WHAT'S INSIDE THE LIQUIDATION TOWERS? What's going on? Who's behind it all? Darius of Sithicus would never know.

He died that night...

ALENA and the TEMPLE of WEESHY

Alena Nurpašhi did the exact thing **Gorthaur the Abhorred** was trying to WARN her against (in his own, twisted fashion). She fled to the Temple of Weeshy.

After her late-night scare with the madman Gorthaur, she needed some kind of respite. Instead of choosing to find her companions, she sought sanctuary at the only kind place she could think of – the temple of Weeshy. Truthfully I just think her player wanted to investigate the Temple further, and was using this as an excuse. Clever girl.

Unfortunately a few details are a bit hazy here; perhaps Alena herself can step in with some clarification. But somewhere between fleeing Gorthaur and arriving at the Temple's doorstep, Alena had summoned a few city guardsmen to accompany her. But through one remarkable coincidence or another, each guard had to leave her side before arriving at the Temple. I was trying for that same vibe that permeated Darius' last scene - one of ominous apprehension. Kinda like I'm daring her to head to the temple alone. And she did.

Alena bravely knocked upon the chamber doors of the Temple that dark and lonely October night. It was answered by a few of the blue-robed acolytes, all eager to usher the frazzled Alena out of the night.

This is kind of tricky, but while Alena's PLAYER chose to infiltrate the temple with her sob story, her CHARACTER was legitimately shook. The player chose to take this route, truly role-playing her character as being frightened from the attack. So she was receptive to the clerics as they comforted her, and extolled the virtues of the wind.

But of course, the Temple holds a darker truth. A truth Alena's player knew must be out there – she just didn't know WHAT it is. So she played her character as blindly stumbling towards a fate she KNEW was coming, just not HOW it would arrive.

At the time of this production, we were well into the summer of 2003 – so we were playing this session outside by candlelight, with my boom box softly playing in the background. The city sounds can be somewhat distracting, but the cool breeze more than makes up for it.

Basically, I was weaving Destanial's climatic chase against the cultists with Alena's arrival at the Temple. Slowly hinting at a chilling revelation. The Weeshy clerics were polite as they brought Alena along on her tour, describing the portraits and statues – each with a deep, convoluted meaning. But as they got deeper into the bowels of the Temple, closer to the sacrificial room, the conversation took a darker turn. And then she saw it. The same slave Destanial spied being chased through the forests was tied down to a sacrificial slab, covered with intricate symbols and designs. Alena was frozen in horror (no check necessary – she CHOSE to roleplay it). She witnessed the dark ritual of turning the poor man into a wild ANIMAL – before sacrificing it some dark god. Alena was horrified.

Then you wanna know what I did? I asked Alena's player to grab her dice bag and step away from the table. Yes, after leaving the other players with that last tense cutscene, I took Alena's player away from them. Not even the other players will know how this one ends.

I took Alena's player away and described the cult leader (the one presiding over the ritual, with

the dark robes and animal stitching) as “he” removed his hood – it was a mind flayer. I showed Alena’s player a picture of an illithid. She was disgusted.

Combat Ensues

Alena the sorceress VS. The priestly psionic illithid cult leader **Malisha**. Now Alena had already used most of her spells against Gorthaur, so she was hardly a challenge. Malisha whooped her pretty thoroughly. But it’s what Malisha did to Alena in victory that rewrote the direction of the Game. I trusted Alena’s player to know how to role-play such a drastic endeavor. What happened? Well, you the reader must wait - just as the players at my table had to...

OKTOBERFEST DRAWS NEARER

The Next day, dawn approaches and the grand Oktoberrfest nears...

Everybody in Solyss Gundarak was ready for the festival. Streamers and jack-o-lanterns lined every dusty street, and the marketplace was swarming with business. Beneath the lingering dread, was a genuine excitement within the community. As far as the people were concerned, the Temple of Weeshy had performed a just and noble act by promoting the event.

Word was filtering through the streets that the Temple was preparing a “big surprise” for the first night of the festival...

So now where do we start? This was a new day and a new session.

When we last left off, Darius was dead and who KNOWS what happened to Alena. Alexis and his boy Phinean went on a drug-fueled murderous rage, while Count Destanial Magorian was putting the lock down on all “black-cloaked travelers”.

So you know what I did? I started the whole game by giving Alexis and Destanial’s players new character sheets.

They were sheets for two low-level city guardsmen, both young men who knew each other and served Solyss with pride. We had some goofy fun for a few minutes as Alexis and Destanial’s players got into the mood - clowning around with the new characters. Nobody knew where I was going with this.

But as the two young guards patrolled the early morning streets, I had them called to duty. They found a beaten, apparently drunk vagabond in a cluttered alleyway. But when they approached to help, he flew into a frenzy. Now D& A are good players, so they took their little low-level dudes as far as they could. They tried to combat the villain using smart tactics, and even attempted to flee when they weren’t faring well. But they could do nothing to combat the sick techniques of the villain, who seemed to focus his energy through a jewel-encrusted black sword.

See where this is going yet? The players started getting that look in their eyes...

This foe was well beyond the capabilities of the two young men, and they tried valiantly to summon help. But ‘twas not to be. The bloodthirsty killer finished the boys off in most horrible fashion – finally revealing his face just as they died. It was the face of the Lord of Solyss, Gundarak – Alexis Darkangnon. Apparently he blacked out and the Razor took control – a byproduct of his torture session the night before. All four of my players were like “wow...”

WHEN ALENA MET MALKEN

Alena Nurpašhi started the day off at the Temple of the Morninglord, with former PC-turned NPC ally **Father Malachai Hadrian**. I used the week leading up to this session to plan this role-playing conundrum for Alena's player.

See, Alena's PLAYER was now privy to the inner workings of the Weeshy temple. Alena's player knew the REAL deal behind the scenes. But her CHARACTER was none the wiser... or something worse. So although Alena's player knew the truth and would probably jump at the opportunity to destroy the false temple, her CHARACTER was forced to act in the total opposite manner. This separates the regular gamers from the role-players. On with the show.

At the temple that morning, Alena was introduced to a dashing, young gentleman from Dementlieu – complete with charming French accent. He had wavy hair and piercing blue eyes that seemed to caress her very soul. While he was friendly and cordial to Alena, his countenance masked a dogged and cold determination to complete his task. Monsieur **Malken Ezekiel**, as Father Malachai Hadrian introduced him, is on a mission.

He's here in Solyss to investigate the mysterious death of compatriot **Daniel Hireman** (who, if you recall, was slain in a tavern hall not too long ago per the written module). Seems that the deceased Mr. Hireman's own research had gotten him too close to a terrible truth. A terrible truth he was murdered to conceal. Now **Malken Ezekiel** was here to pick up the pieces, and finally lay this mystery to rest. The priest Father Malachai Hadrian knows the source of Solyss' woes is an unnatural and evil one. That's why he outsourced Daniel Hireman to investigate the matter. The deceased Mr. Hireman and Malken Ezekiel belong to the same elite investigative unit, located in the capital city of Dementlieu.

The debonair Monsieur Malken Ezekiel wanted to ask the Elvin princess a few questions. She complied, and Father Malachai Hadrian let the two be.

I'll refrain from transcribing the entire exchange, but I'll give you the gist of it. In light of recent events (Gorthaur's strange attack, the incident at the Temple of Weeshy) it's expected that Alena Nurpašhi be a little wary. I wanted to play up on her paranoia. So I tried to paint Malken as vaguely ominous, and very mysterious. There was just something about his *eyes* that hinted at something deeper. Alena couldn't tell if his questions were designed to learn more about the disappearances (and the Temple of Weeshy) or if he was unraveling her inner thoughts.

He asked some tight questions, and seemed to be probing her mind while she answered. He was clearly leaning towards the belief that the Temple of Weeshy is somehow involved (which Alena's player now KNOWS) but her character has to purposely mislead the good detective. Cuz Alena Nurpašhi the character has had only positive experiences with the Temple (snicker).

So Alena met Malken and the two enjoyed a lengthy conversation. Although Malken declined to give out the particulars of his assignment (when pressed by Alena), he did ask that she "trust" him and his vision. I did this deliberately cuz I knew she'd have a hard time trusting ANYBODY after Elenia Windalla turned on her in Episode #10, and most recently Gorthaur the Abhorred tried to drown her. Heh, heh, heh.

Malken left to rejoin the discussion with Father Malachai Hadrian, but before he did he told Alena to come to him with any problems or dilemma's she may be having. He was here to help. She thought this was odd – but the truth is, Malken is pretty damn close to the Truth here. He knows Alena is somehow involved, he just doesn't know how. His gut instinct (correct, in this

instance) is that Alena is an unwitting pawn in whatever scheme the bad guys have cooked up. So Malken will be keeping a close eye on the former Elvin princess.

Believe that.

THE NEW IZH – So dope it makes you jones beyond the grave

Darius of Sithicus awoke with a jonesin in is bones. Where he was, he knew not. How he got here or even when day it was he could not answer. He just the felt the cold, hard ground beneath him and saw crisp October leaves through blurry eyes. Suddenly, flashbacks sliced through his mind-eye like razors. Wicked nightmares of vicious, bug-eyed monsters and savage creatures - eagerly jabbing him with rusty spears and gnawing his flesh with crooked teeth. It could have been hell, for Darius felt the pain of a hundred deaths. But as the monsters dragged him down like a pool of piranhas, he quickly found himself soothed by the encroaching curtain of darkness. His own mortal death.

But now, he was awoken. How he could not fathom. Instinctively, his ranger-mind searched for clues around him. Footprints, tracks, broken twigs – anything. But there was nothing but his own ragged boot marks. This led him to believe he had somehow stumbled to this secluded location, before collapsing from his wounds. He glanced downwards and quickly patted his body. There were no injuries. Nary a nick or scrape. But how? He could feel those monsters tearing his flesh and severing his digits. How? Then, he felt that sharp stab in his gut.

The one that nearly felled him where he weakly stood. The second successive strike forced him to crumble, his eyes falling upon the frayed canteen that lay at the base of the tree. It wasn't a hit or a strike from some object or person, but instead from within – like a giant tumor throbbing. But when his eyes fell upon the worn canteen (one he had NEVER seen before) he knew it was for him. It called out to him, and whispered words of rejuvenation. Now Tonieh is an ill role-player (even though at this time he's only been gaming for a few scant months) – so I didn't hafta bust out with a Willpower check or anything. When presented with the canteen and its foul-smelling liquid that called out to him, Darius willingly imbibed the formula. *It was an invigorating rush the likes of which he had NEVER felt before.*

With his head still swimming from the sudden charge, he completely missed the cavalcade of decorated Solyss soldiers emerging over the horizon on horseback. These were the men Count Destanial Magorian had dispatched to comb the countryside. The same soldiers that knew BY LAW (orders from the Count) that “*all black-cloaked stragglers found after dark are to be detained for questioning*”. And of course, what color cloak is poor Darius wearing as he staggers by the roadside path like a drunkard? Black of course. Players choice. Re-read the story and you'll see how Darius has been aloof during his entire tenure in Solyss – Solitary Outkast, holla! He's never been formally introduced to anybody in the village – especially the soldiers. So when they find this blatantly-intoxicated stranger slurring and stumbling about, his words about “being the Count's traveling companion” hardly register. Without delay Darius is forcefully shaken down and detained, to be held in the Solyss jailhouse effective immediately. And when he's thrown into that small, dark cell he's deprived of all his personal belongings – including his newly-found lifeline, the canteen with the mysterious fluid. Slowly, but surely Darius' undead body begins to wither away without it. A second, slower – far more agonizing death awaits Darius now. Alone in the dark corner, curled up in fetal-position. The stench of the rotten cell and the mold on the stone walls his only companions. Inside, that hunger raged and oh how he wished to sate it. But he could not. He was powerless – trapped within the stone walls of the mans prison. Separated from what he wanted – what he *needed* – The Big “O”. It was only after he was visited cell-side by none-other than Count Magorian himself – and he was further DENIED his precious

fluid! – that Darius’ resolve hardened. There he sat, literally rotting away in the cell. Then – the *voice* spoke to him.

Enter the Manchurian Candidate part of the Game...

MEANWHILE...

Lord Alexis Darkangnon awoke with a blinding headache. One so pronounced, he was certain his skull was cracked – revealing its contents to the world. But that was not the case. As it is, the depraved Lord finds himself on Persian cushions amidst flakes of dry blood. A slow gaze reveals his whereabouts to be the parlor room of Windrider manor (owned by his steadfast partner-n-crime Phinean Windrider). Alexis slowly comes to in time to see the last rivulet of blood dripping from the unsheathed blade of his Black Razor. A small pool ripples on the hardwood floor. As his mind is still caught within the netherworld region of the dreamscape, Phinean Windrider himself makes a boisterous entrance.

Already coifed to an immaculate degree, Phinean playfully chides the Lord for his unflattering appearance. Phinean forcefully opens the blinds and Alexis squints from the assaulting sunrays. But it is not the coming of another day; it is the last fading remnants. Alexis has awoken from his slumber just in time to greet the sun set. Phinean urges him to ready himself for the evening – a meeting has been arranged. But before Alexis can hazily question him further, Phinean throws some garments in his direction and excuses himself from the room. Alexis has but a few scant hours before his appointment with destiny.

MALIKA versus MALKEN

“Race to Revelation”

Meanwhile, dark-cloaked cultists gather deep within the bowels of the Weeshy sanctuary. Together they are praying to dark gods, hoping to strengthen themselves further for the final assault. One that will bring the fledgling community of Solyss to its knees.

Malisha – the cults engaging leader – speaks privately with her council. Their words are short and hushed, as if praying. But they are plotting. The last chess piece will be moved into place on this day of the Oktoberrfest. When temple representatives take the stage to officially bless the crowd and the event, a deadly mind-controlling element will be released. One that will be personally administered by Malisha and her assistant.

So while the small congregation exits from the temple after another fulfilling and enriching sermon, it could hardly be seen as odd that the words on everybody’s lips this evening were “self-sacrifice”. It was to be taken in a metaphorical sense, instilled in the listeners by Malisha’s take on the whole “wildlife crisis”. That everybody must pull together to overcome this obstacle. In reality it had a much more literal meaning. Malisha did indeed intend to make sacrifices – ones she hoped would appease the Beast God to which she prayed. But one member of the exiting crowd was immune to such tactical advances on the human psyche. One member of the crowd felt the uneasy tension in the air –felt the constant drone that seemed to buzz throughout the temple. His suspicions had brought him here, for reasons only he could explain.

But private investigator **Malken Ezekial** didn’t make a habit of explaining his motives to anybody. He knew that without walls of steel and precision concentration, a weak mind could be flushed for answers like a washbasin. And it was answers he was after. Although financially motivated by Father Malachai Hadrian and his church, Malken is personally attached to the matter by the death of his partner Daniel Hireman. They both hail from the same undetailed unit in Dementlieu that investigates paranormal and supernatural matters. One that answered the

churches calls for help and dispatched an agent to investigate further (Daniel Hireman). His mysterious death only strengthened the unnamed units involvement further. Now Malken was here, and he was picking up right where the departed Hireman left off. At the Temple of Weeshy.

Malisha knows of this strange outfit. She could feel the affront when Daniel first showed up in Solyss, probing the disappearances. She could feel the psychic energy bearing down upon her, and she was able to pinpoint its exact location. Which is why Daniel Hireman was later found dead with a hole in his forehead – skull drained clean. Now – in more recent times – she feels that same disturbance. A coincidence it would spring up again upon Malken Ezekial’s arrival in the village? Malisha would never know – she could only detect this presence, not locate it. And it is this maddening uncertainty that has pushed Malisha even further down her dark path. Now she has taken the grim responsibility of finding a suitable replacement for herself – one that can carry on the cults dark goals in her absence. Just in case she’s not around to see the plans come to fruition.

Malisha has chosen her disciple and taken every precaution to protect them from the probing eyes of those that seek to unravel her. Her replacement will remain hidden until the time calls for them. Until then, private **Malken Ezekial** inches closer to the source of this foul energy – while Malisha in turn is close to discovering him. Quiet weapons for silent wars, quiet weapons for silent wars...

DRIVEN by DESIRE

Meanwhile, Darius of Sithicus found himself on those same rustic back roads as the night before. The same roads where he met his own grisly demise. But now, here he was again – striding forth with a newfound focus. The preceding few hours was a blur. After accepting that mysterious offer of nourishment, he could barely calculate the events. But regardless of how it actually transpired, the simple fact could not be denied – he was free from the cramped cell and with a renewed sense of vigor. He couldn’t bring himself to question the methods. He only knew he had a goal. One that has been subconsciously burning inside him since his search for the missing Elvin dilettantes began. A goal he must accomplish if he wishes to receive this life-supporting sustenance any further. A goal instilled in him during life, but cemented in death. Now he was *certain* his suspicions were correct. He knew who was responsible for the missing Elvin nobles – and the subsequent slave-trading that resulted. The same man who lied about his involvement with the Green Eye savages and promoted an underground railroad of slave trafficking. The same man who had Darius locked up when he stumbled closer to the truth. Now Darius of Sithicus knew what must be done to remedy the situation.

Count Destanial Magorian must DIE!!!

Darius already knew of the plan, he awoke with the blueprint burned into his memory. The assassination was to take place at the culmination of the Count’s speech at Oktoberrfest, welcoming the community into a new age of prosperity. How deliciously ironic, Darius thought, that the devious Count would finally be exposed just as the very people he deceived celebrated his “just and honorable” rule. Darius prepared to do the deed, and was almost relishing his newfound opportunity. But first – his lone lingering doubt must forever be put to rest.

So despite the nagging suspicion that he’s wasting time, or worse yet – casting doubt on an already-concrete theory – Darius continues on the last mission of his life. That journey through the desolate fields of Solyss where the old liquidation tower of Duke Gundar still churns with life. Why he needed to see what was inside, Darius could not answer. It was a question he asked in life, but in death he could no longer remember why. Regardless – Darius pulled himself together

and continued his dark journey towards the tower. All of this despite the best-laid manipulations of his new puppet master...

OKTOBERFEST DAY

The events of Oktoberfest were a blur. So much activity transpired words could hardly do it all justice. It was a fast-paced assortment of scenes that rushed from plot to plot, hardly giving the players a chance to breathe. By sessions end, it even had a few players nearly cracking from the pressure.

I'll try to recount the events exactly as they happened – but I'm hoping my players can come through with some clarification.

Darius of Sithicus and Lord Alexis Darkangnon were unwittingly converging upon the same location – the “deserted” liquidation towers of the former ruler, Duke Gundar. Alexis thought it was a bit odd when Phinean had them chartered away from the busy Solyss streets and into the autumn-speckled backwoods – but he trusted this “meeting” Phinean arranged would be most worthwhile. Little did Alexis know, he was riding shotgun with the same man Darius of Sithicus has been hunting for since Day One of his characters creation. Darius had erroneously assumed the leader of the kidnapping ring had been revealed to him in death. But the fact is – his puppet master (the one who distills the precious fluid Darius now needs to survive) – has implanted this false notion in his head. The true mastermind behind the grand conspiracy (which involves Green Eyez, elvin nobles turned slaves, money, drugs and lots of guns) has orchestrated a convoluted plot to place all suspicion upon the righteous Count of Solyss, Destanial Magorian. Once the Count has been executed on the public stage (by one-time-friend-turned-bitter-rival Darius of Sithicus) his “part in the plot” will be revealed – IE: framed in death. But despite the evil mechanizations of this mysterious puppet master, Darius still roams with a modicum of free will. That is why he travels to the towers although he doesn't know why. The exact thing his new controller DOESN'T want him to do.

So Darius of Sithicus makes all the right rolls (his abilities bolstered in undeath) and breaks into the Towers – at exactly the same time Phinean and Alexis are pulling up outside.

“THE NEW IZH” Revealed

Phinean Windrider is a fiend. He is violent, vindictive and very deeply emotionally scorned. But he's still a fiend. A living fiend at that, but a fiend nonetheless. Which means he too is under the same control Darius has unwillingly found himself under in death – a slave to drugs. And like Darius, Phinean still clings tightly to the false-illusion of self-control. Even if confronted with the fact he is but a slave to the drugs he imbibes, he would steadfastly refuse to believe it. And probably cut out the tongue of his accuser. And also like Darius (and the countless others who have fallen victim to a drugs bewitching spell), Phinean is a pawn. A pawn to his TRUE master. The evil brains behind the ever-expanding Solyss drug trade. The mastermind behind the entire elvin dilettante kidnapping ring. The same evil mind behind the slaying and subsequent resurrection of Darius. One time servant to Duke Gundar, and all-around evil force – ***The Black Sorcerer!***

And the Black Sorcerer has used Phinean's own evil bent to his advantage. You see, Phinean Windrider is a half-elf from Sithicus. You know the typical half-elf story – not wanted or loved by either side, and is set adrift into a world he can never truly call his own. Well this same sad story of woe warped Phinean Windrider. And of course the drugs only amplified his dark yearnings for revenge. The hate in his heart for the elvin kingdom that scorned him has burned hot and bright since the day he left Sithicus to find himself. What he found was a raging drug-

addiction that forced him to the brink of death on multiple occasions. Now, in his new seat of power (bestowed upon him by Lord Darkangon) Phinean has finally made moves to enact his long-festering plan of revenge. A plan that was actually fed to him by his master, the Black Sorcerer.

Using the Green Eye savages as mercenaries (and middle-men), the Black Sorcerer paid to have the elvin homes of Sithicus raided and their occupants brought back to Solyss – alive. Some were, some weren't. Those that didn't survive the torturous journey were brought back for a second ride of terror. The fact that the city of Har-Thelen was still rebuilding from the Cursed Knights awakening (WBRB, which I moved to an earlier date in my campaign) made it much easier for the kidnapers to operate. Once the Green-Eye warriors captured their prey and brought them to the Solyss checkpoint, they were paid off with *firearms* and expelled from the equation. From here, the Black Sorcerer's henchmen would take over.

But despite the players' best theories, these kidnapped elvin nobles are NOT being used as slave-fodder. In fact, their ultimate fates are much worse. Much, much worse. A horrible and twisted experience that Phinean Windrider relishes with joy. Matter of fact, he's so elated over this newest venture that he just HAS to show Alexis – who's he sure will enjoy it as much as he does. Which is why he brought Alexis to the plant tonight.

Remember *Agony*?

It was the liquid essence of distilled pain, captured in the torture chambers and dungeons of Castle Hunadora during Duke Gundar's reign. He used the drug to not only torture his foes (and subdue his own people), but to raise funds for a war the increasingly paranoid Duke was certain would come. Well despite the Duke's death, the apparent exile of his chief-assistant the Black Sorcerer, and the subsequent cleansing of the dungeons and torture chambers – the Agony recipe continues to thrive. With *flair*.

A fact that becomes readily apparent to both Darius and Alexis as they make their separate journeys into the plant. What they witness is cause for a Horror Check x10.

This plant manufactures that NEW STUFF Alexis had been hearing so much about. That potent, extremely-addictive narcotic that was nearly twice the strength of an agony-dosage. The same stuff a whole community was strung-out on, and Darius needed to survive. A drug culled from the horrible sexual abuse and torture of the kidnapped elves from Sithicus.

Something the streets are calling *Orgazm*.

I'll let your imagination do the rest. Just know, that when Darius and Alexis stumbled upon this horrendous scene – where the drug was actually being manufactured – the players themselves nearly retched from the idea. Even without going into graphic and disgusting detail, the picture is pretty f*****g clear – these poor elves are being actively raped and tortured to produce this succulent fluid. The fluid both Alexis and Darius have found themselves addicted to. This revelation SICKENS and HORRIFIES them.

Even more so for Darius when after wondering aloud who could be responsible for such heinous actions, he witnesses Alexis and Phinean enter the building. Remember, Alexis was an invited guest of Phinean and had no idea what to expect. But Darius the character doesn't know that! As far as HE knows, Alexis MUST be in on it! Why else would he be strolling in on the operation with his assistant Phinean Windrider!? Excellent question and wonderful roleplaying by Tonieh

(player of Darius) at the table. So it wasn't Count Magorian – it was Alexis Darkangnon! The anger of being duped suddenly raged within Darius, and he sought to take action. So from his perch hidden high up in the shadows of the ceiling beams, Darius followed Alexis and Phinean through the plant of mass torture.

But he was quick to learn that not even Alexis was privy to these atrocities beforehand.

Whereas Darius was seeing this scene with a birds eye view, Alexis was *right on the floor*. He was right NEXT to this horrible torture and anguish. He could hear the cries and shrieks – he could see the horrible ogre-like brutes that conducted these terrible acts of perversion. The scene stunned him. Even more so when he saw that malicious, s**t-eating grin of Phinean's as he walked alongside the shocked Lord. Phinean was behind this – and he was *enjoying it!* That alone was enough to make Alexis vomit, but when he realized Phinean had cheerfully brought him along to *partake* in these vicious torture sessions, he could barely stand. He saw an elvin victim tethered and bound, and watched her be set upon by three of those gruesome brutes – all the while he cries of agony are ignored. When Phinean began removing his own garments and encouraged Alexis to do the same (so they could “understand the creation of the O firsthand”) the Lord of Solyss could stand no more. With Phinean's bewildered calls fading into the cries of torture behind him, Alexis made a beeline for the nearest exit and vomited uncontrollably into the bushes. For now he was alone outside the fire-crusted building, but he couldn't shake the cries of pain that resonated in his ears. Cries of pain and sights of torture that would haunt him forever.

Darius and Alexis – Orgazm revealed

Malken – Alena – Malisha

The Count **Destanial Magorian** was beleaguered with administrative duties once the connection between the cultists and the hunters guild became clear. A revelation that he and his assistant were privy to only – but one he didn't hesitate to reveal in the name of the Law. D's player is really holding it down now, Elliot Ness-style with his character. It was a direction that perfectly complimented Alexis' stray into the darkside. So even though he knew the pressure would be magnified if this connection was exposed, he still did it for the good.

That's one of the reasons Destanial could do little to help Darius. Once the word had gone forth, it was hard to recall it. So Darius was forced to sit in that cell until proper precautions had been made. And now, the work of putting the hunter-turned-cultists to prison and keeping them there, combined with the investigative work of learning where the cultists are even coming from – Destanial was besieged with work. But there were also distractions for the young Count of Solyss. Romantic distractions.

ENTER KIVLA SABLEMOURNE

I'm at the Broken City public library, time is tight and I don't have my books. So I can't remember which book their in – somebody drop a jewel. I'm talking about the *paka* race of cat-like humanoids. I'll bring my book next time and illustrate how I meshed their written habitats and rituals into the Solyss culture, but for now just know – the Paka's are thriving in the level one province. And the crown jewel of the paka clan – a bewitching and beguiling daughter-of-a-famed-hunter – Kivla Sablemourne. She's fiya. The Count first noticed her at his official welcome back party, and his courting has been on ever since. I just got it like that with D's player – always have over the years. I can telegraph his moves (most of the time). So I knew when he was presented with a possible romantic interest of this caliber (pedigreed, cultured and honorable *snicker*) he would follow up on it. And follow-up he had. The two spent many a night together

– under the guise of “studying the cultists attack patterns” – but everybody knew what they were doing. Even Domingo who nonetheless remained silent to his students antics. But he knew something *wasn't right* about this whole thing. That malicious twinkle he saw on occasion within Kivla's eyes. That lusty, catty glare whenever she threw her head over Destanial's shoulder. She licked her lips as if she would devour him.

But these were just little NPC-side angles that were explained to the chosen few over blunts of mystic haze (IE: I talked to Alexis' player about it during our after session smoke sessions). I didn't want to clue the other players (particularly D's player) that her intentions were anything but pure. To everybody's knowledge – D too – Kivla and her rich family were out to support the fortunes of Solyss. They threw their lot in with the Count and his men in an effort to bring an end to the kidnappings. It's a shame that this same tactic failed for Dante Lysin and his Adventurer's Rest crew.

While Kivla and her family masqueraded behind the mask of faithful patriots (a façade which was bought hook-line-and-sinker by D's player) – the REAL patriots were being oppressed. I'm talking about that side-angle I referred to earlier with the gangs of Solyss. In particular Dante and his boys. That was the missing hook the players never grabbed on to (a testament to the story, I suppose, cuz there were SO many possible hooks). I wanted them to see why the gang members were prowling the streets. Why rumors of weapon stockpiling were occurring. Like *maybe* the gangs are killing the victims and buildings towards an all out war with the constabulary. Something like that. But the players never pursued, so this was relegated to background dressing. My point was – while Kivla was pretending to want to unravel the mystery, she was really feeding the Count's progress back to Malisha the evil cult leader. Helping to keep the cult one step ahead of the law. That's one reason Malisha accelerated her plans and chose Alena Nurpashi as her minion.

So as the day of Oktoberfest arrives, the Count is still working to put away the corrupt hunters guild members well into the night. But by the time Darius was being whisked out of the prison that night – the TRUE patriots (Dante and his boys) were being rushed IN. On the eve of the Fest, Captain Alec Rapacion (Captain of the Solyss militia) and HIS boys took the opportunity to bumrush the gangs headquarters. They were busted with all kinds of bad stuff and violently taken down and subdued. They arrived to the jailhouse and it was a near-riot trying to contain them. Somewhere in the fracas, Darius had escaped. At about the same time Destanial has finally made it to the public celebration, his companion Alexis (conspicuous by his absence) is getting ready to see the O plant (see earlier posts). Darius is in jail and Alena Nurpashi is conspicuous by her absence as well.

And maybe most conspicuous of the night, Kivla Sablemourne – who is to meet Destanial at the grand feast. A celebration that came and went without a sign of the exotic beauty. Destanial's character was concerned with the absences all the while studying the celebration for signs of a terrorist attack. He was starting to crack from the pressure when the jail house riot was revealed to him (and subsequently, Darius' disappearance). Alexis STILL couldn't be found, and still no word from Kivla.

When the big Weeshy surprise of the night is to announce Alena Nurpashi's official conversion into the church as an ordained minister – D's player nearly broke. NOW what does he do? Find the missing Darius or locate Kivla? And where's Alexis?

THE EPIC CONCLUSION

The next few scenes race by quick like cut scenes from a movie, all set against the backdrop of Count Destanial Magorian's confusion as the fate of his friends and his province collapse around him like bridges in Mississippi.

- **Wellis Andreman** and the constabulary struggle mightily against the rival gangs of Solyss, as the small prison erupts in a riot. Using the forces of mass distraction to their advantage, Darius' new master secrets him out of his jail cell where he will be drawn into assassinating the Count of Solyss. But before he can, Darius must know what's inside the Towers. The prison riot breaks from the jailhouse at Location #17 and surges towards the main square – where the heart of Oktoberfest beats unaware.
- **Lord Darkagnon** wretches uncontrollably by the same Towers Darius penetrated. The visions of **Black Sorcerer's** narcotics manufacturing plant still stain his mind. With Darius lurking secretly in the rafters, **Phinean Windrider** bursts out into the cool October night behind the Lord – mocking him the entire time for his weak stomach. But along with revulsion came a startling realization.
- All the while, **Malisha** and her cronies preside over the main stage of Oktoberfest. With Count Magorian and his loyal aide **Domingo dos Santos** watching from the audience, Malisha formally announces **Alena Nurpashi** as her successor and administrative assistant. Alena relays happiness and elation at this decision, yet her face is hauntingly devoid of any true emotion. Detective **Malken Ezekiel** watches on from the crowd in horror as the false Weeshy priests begin a mass polymorph spell on the unsuspecting province of revelers.
- **Kivla Sablemourne** meanwhile, makes her intentions known in a separate Player Knowledge cut scene. Reporting back to her family with news of her progress, she pats her tummy with the grin of a cat that just devoured a parakeet. Her task has been completed, the family can begin their next move. She has taken from Count **Destanial Magorian** something that can be used to further her prides expansion goals – his seed. Remember, there is something hidden deep within in Destanials bloodline – something even he is not aware of his. But his old rival and leader of the Green Eyez were-panther tribe certainly is. **Yopawa** moves into the picture and sweeps Kivla into his arms. It was his plan all along to have her masquerade as a dilettante and seduce the young Count. Now she will give birth to a warrior that will lead his tribe to even greater heights...

CLASH of the FIENDS

Back at the towers, **Alexus Darkagnon** finally has a long overdue confrontation with Phinean **Windrider**. He told Phinean he was insane for pursuing their addictions this far. But Phinean reminded the Lord it was he who commissioned its creation. But Alexis didn't know it was going THIS far! He ordered these practices to be conducted on the grotesque goblins that roamed the countryside only! But these new narcotics were so powerful no mere mortal could contain them. They were so potent and addictive, addicts came BACK from the dead to have them! (hence the creation of my Fiendish Undead template that had overtaken so many of the tortured goblins – and now **Darius**). Tensions bubble over into a fistfight between the Lord and his right hand man. As they struggle, the name "**Black Sorcerer**" is first uttered to **Darius** – still watching silently from his perch. This triggers his addiction further, and he sets off to retrieve the dosage that's waiting for him (along with a bolt of slaying with **Destanial Magorians** name on it).

VILLAGE SQUARE BURNS UP LIKE A JACK-O-LANTERN

In the village center, **Malisha** and her Weeshy followers continue their mass spell under the guise of blessing the harvest season. But suddenly, the village center is afire with the sounds of violent rioting – **Dante Lysin**'s gang and **Nansen**'s crew from the *Parsed Lip* continue their clash from the prison break! All the while, overmatched constabulary (led by **Wellis Andreman**) try haplessly to corral the mob. **Captain Alec Rapacion** is conspicuous by his absence. Count **Destanial Magorian** is about to enter the fray, when chaos breaks out further on the main stage (dominated by **Malisha** and her Weeshy followers). **Malken Ezekiels** voice breaks out over the anarchy – “Alena’s been kidnapped!” Destanial follows the sound to see **Malisha** and her cohorts tussling with Alena before fleeing the stage area. Destanial and Malken meet in the middle, where the Detective tells the Count they’re heading back to the Temple to complete their evil spell. **Malken Ezekiels** tells the Count his suspicions were correct – **Malisha** is attempting to polymorph the townsfolk into animals! Together they must hurry to the temple, rescue Alena and disrupt the ceremony. Destanial orders **Domingo dos Santos** to stay behind and help Wellis cage the rioters.

Count Destanial Magorian and **Malken Ezekiels** chase the cavalcade of Weeshy carriages while on horseback, but the main cab (containing **Malisha** and the brain-washed PC **Alena Nurpashi**) is too far ahead for them to catch. But **Destanial** does get a chance to participate in some horseback-to-carriage combat scenes alongside Malken, which he thoroughly enjoyed.

Meanwhile **Alena Nurpashi**'s player has done a masterful job at role playing her predicament – not surprising considering her resume in live theatre. But as DM I'm thinking enough is enough; lets get her back on the right side of the table. So as the horse drawn carriage she was riding in (with cult leader **Malisha**) pulled up outside their Weeshy sanctuary, I gave her one last chance to crack the dice. Amongst the crowds that assemble outside these places with regularity (this time oblivious to the riot happening in the village center) I staked a plant. With Alena being rushed into the temple by her handlers (where she will no doubt be polymorphed and sacrificed) one of these nearby worshippers withdrew his hood and made eye contact with our Elvin sorceress. It was the unmistakably steely stare of **Gorthaur the Abhorred**. Suddenly his voice flashed back in her mind – the sight of **Malisha** unmasking herself flooded her brain – suddenly it all made sense. Alena's player hit the right code with the dice and snapped back to reality. **Malisha** sensed it too, and ordered her cronies to seize the Elvin princess. This gave Alena's player the long-awaited chance to exact some sizzling revenge – sorceress style. It also gave Destanial and Malken precious time to catch up to them at the temple.

ALEXUS and the BAGGS FAMILY FARMHAND

It's time to swing all the players back from their side treks into the main body of the module. Last we left the Lord, he was stumbling away from the Towers stained with his own blood and vomit. He had throttled Phinean in hand-to-hand combat, but the fiend managed to flee – promising that if he fell, Alexis would come with him. I used this opportunity to finally unleash the events of Location #1 as written in the module, something Alexis had originally wanted to do before being sidetracked. I had him emerge into the fields of Location #1, which is the small family farm owned by Baggs. Stumbling through the fields high as hell and sick to his stomach, the Lord was stricken by the sight of a ghostly figure rising from the dark soil, wailing her sad melody of pain and misery. This is the ghost of **Dara**, as written in the module. *“I was killed by an evil man who sought to ruin this field... I now search for my murderer so that I can rest”*. Alexis was half out of his mind, his eyes bloodshot red (the unfortunate side affect of his Ghostsight). I used this scenario as a reason to get the Lord in on the action unfolding at the Temple of Weeshy. The Lord tried to clear the fuzz from his brain as he stalked off towards the Temple, his Black Razor thirsting for death.

At the Temple, combat ensues.

Alena Nurpashi gleefully dispatches some of **Malisha**'s disposable followers, but gets swept up by the cult leader and forced into the temple. These events happen just as **Malken Ezekiel** and **Destanial Magorian** race up on horseback (having destroyed an entire carriage of cultists themselves). They fight their way towards the temple, but are detained by the heavy oaken doors that seal the main entrance. Everything is crazy, as the townsfolk and Weeshy followers wail and lament the carnage unfolding before them. All the while Fiendish Undead **Darius of Sithicus** has crept upon the scene, cradling his bow and bolt of slaying which is meant to meet Destanial's brain matter. His player **Toneih** is reveling in the drama, portraying his characters actions with much mystery and suspense. As Destanial and Malken break down the doors and storm inside, Darius uses much more subtle methods to slip in and watch the madness from the rafters, much like he did back at the Towers. To further strengthen the allure of playing a powerful undead character, I let **Darius** unleash some of his newfound abilities on a few straying cultists. Awesome stuff indeed.

The PCs fight their way to Room 4, the Altar Room where these sick cultists perform their depraved unholy rituals. Alena struggles mightily against **Malisha**, who seeks to disable the sorceress more than slay her. Finally **Malken** and **Destanial** emerge into the room to see the hooded **Malisha** incapacitating Alena with her powerful psionics. This gave the players time for some tense role playing, as they unraveled the cultists plot (kidnap the locals, polymorph them into animals, and sacrifice them to the Beast Lord) and learn **Malisha's** true identity as she removes the hood to reveal herself as an illithid. The remaining players gasped at the revelation, with only Alena being privy to this information earlier in the game. Now the mind control tactics and psionicism made sense to the players on a meta-gaming level.

Combat continues.

At one point, **Malken Ezekiel** falls victim to a brutal **Malisha** assault. But before she can finish the detective, **Alena Nurpashi** swoops in to save him. Amidst the chaos, she cradles him in her arms and the two seek cover. They share a brief moment and a kiss before springing back into action alongside **Count Destanial Magorian**. All the while **Darius** is setting up in the rafters, preparing to deliver his fatal blow. Great interplay between him and Destanial's player at the table too, very funny. **Malisha** is still a very formidable foe, even with most of her henchmen already being dispatched. As the adrenaline rush peaks, **Lord Alexis Darkagnon** finally bursts on the scene, *Black Razor* in combat position. For **Darius of Sithicus** it was time to draw the line. Toneih (Darius' player) took the stage from here, detailing the psychology and circumstances behind his final dramatic decision. Knowing he had but one chance to complete his artificially installed mission (to assassinate the Count) or die trying, Darius unwound his tightly woven prejudices towards Destanial (see *Episode #11 – The Strange Story of Darkagnon Estates* for how it all started) and came full circle. The Count was NOT an evil mastermind. He was NOT behind the Green Eyez slave trading after all. He was in fact, a just man bent on protecting his people and his land. **Darius** now knew the force behind this perversion – the same one who drove him into unlife with his foul narcotic toxins. The same one who now dragged **Darius** around by the nose, a slave to his own addictions. The one and only **Black Sorcerer!!!** (see *Episode #4 – Death of a Darklord* for more information on how this “homebrewed” NPC came to be – and wait to see what he becomes! *Episode #16 – The Queen's Embrace* coming soon!!!)

Darius holds the trigger knowing he has just doomed his own existence. He bolt of slaying drops back in the quiver. He will save its death touch for only one person – the **Black Sorcerer** (or himself!) He was supposed to go out like **Lee Harvey Oswald**, but instead chooses the destiny of **Jander Sunstar**. Pretty poignant moment and an interesting twist on the subject. I almost half-expected the two PCs to finally engage in the combat they teased since **Darius**' arrival. Tonieh has left me with myriad possibilities for his old PC in the future, but for now he is deceased. A conscious decision made on his own behalf to salvage that last bit of humanity and dignity in his characters cursed condition. Bravo, Tonieh. Bravo.

Back to the tale. With **Alexus Darkagnon** and **Destanial Magorian** together, **Malisha** was quickly overwhelmed. **Alena Nurpašhi** struck the death blow, earning closure for her own character as she stared hard into the dilated pupils of her dying tormentor. **Malken Ezekiel** rushed her into his arms and off the evil slain priestess. Their war was over, **Malisha**'s infestation eradicated. But there's still the problem of her existing cultists (including former members of the Solyss Hunters Guild who escaped during the jailbreak). The constabulary has broken the gangs of Solyss, but how long will **Nansen** and **Dante Lysin** continue to share the same territory? And what about those damn Towers??? These dilemmas must be faced – as the players take a Domain Turn (a three month round I learned from *Birthright*).

THE END

BEHIND THE SCREEN (DM Interlude)

The Outro

During the three months of Game Time, the PCs wrote their own epilogues. **Count Destanial Magorian** (along with his faithful guide **Domingo dos Santos** and appointed Marquis **Gavin der Stahlzah**) swept into the Towers with small, highly-trained units of Solyss soldiers and cleared out their depraved occupants. Some soldiers would go on to be cursed with flashbacks of those dreadful sights, while the main proprietor the **Black Sorcerer** has vanished again. **Phinean Windrider** returned to his roost as guild master, albeit with a slightly more depraved, fiendish countenance. Without his main supplier he slowly went mad from withdrawal, and was removed from his position by a committee of his peers. His whereabouts currently remain unknown. At the conclusion of the Towers raid, **Domingo dos Santos** bid farewell to the Count and returned home to Barovia where he will meet again with his Order of the Guardians compatriots. There they will continue to research the Hexad, and the ominous doomsday it pertains.

Lord Alexis Darkagnon meanwhile, announced an overseas tour for “professional reasons”, when in fact he was so shook up by the events at the Towers he was checking into rehab! His intentions were pure but remember, Alexis ain't cursed with Unwholesome Ichor for nothing! One week into his stay, he met a former Gundarakian soldier who was recovering from his own *Agony* addictions. He taught Alexis how to cook the liquid into a solid form, where they dropped them into pots of steaming water. They inhaled the noxious fumes and all of Alexis' “pure intentions” for staying clean went up in smoke. Meanwhile, during one of these all-night benders his pride and joy the *Black Razor* was stolen from his room! The job was clean, and all his precautions were clearly overcome – and Alexis was too inebriated to comprehend how.

Meanwhile **Alena Nurpašhi** never became the nemesis we imagined, instead she remained a faithful ally. She linked up with **Malken Ezekiel** on the romantic tip, and returned home with

him to Dementlieu where she will study psionicism along with her native sorcery. Multi-classed character here we come!

Darius of Sithicus was never seen again. But his player Tonieh would return soon! Next up, we tackle the third stanza of **Hyksosa**'s prophecy as *Feast of Goblins* arrives! Also, the gaming table will swell again with the addition of two more players.

Enamored by his earlier visit to America (and the RAVENLOFT gaming tables of the notorious **MadStepDad**), my **Q-Monstah** was coming back from Germany for one more visit. He said it was for his sisters wedding, but I know the real – dude was fiending for some more of that new izh! He would quickly find that as he returned to the table for one more session in the saddle. Meanwhile, another 10 year veteran and pseudo-original member of the *What Would U Do Crew*, **LocdOut** was returning to our midst after hearing of our revival. He was an old time player, and an old time friend, but all's fair in love and RAVENLOFT. So he would have to test-drive a PC in order to earn our acceptance, just like EVERYBODY else who dared game with us. Look for both of them to appear in our next installment entitled *EPISODE #13 – The Feast of Goblins Begins*. Part one of an epic trilogy! Stay tuned!

peace,

MSD