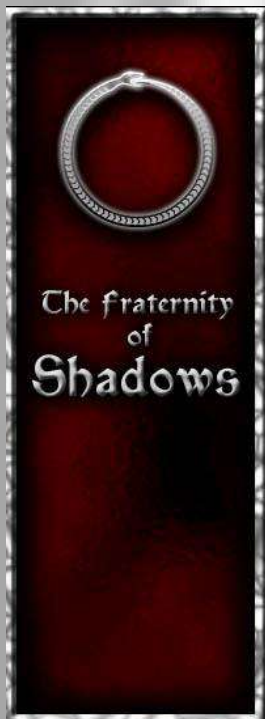


# QVOTH THE RAVEN – 30<sup>TH</sup>



A FRATERNITY OF SHADOWS NETBOOK  
ABOUT DARK MYSTERIES.  
OR WHAT SHOULD HAVE STAYED HIDDEN...

RELEASED ON HALLOWEEN 2023

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# INTRODUCTION TO THIS YEAR'S THEME

*"What's done in the dark always comes to the light" (J Ward)*

Esteemed members of the Fraternity,  
Miladies,

This year is a special year for *Quoth the Raven* ... as it is issue 30!

It wasn't 30 years since we started QtR netbooks (it was released more than once a year when it started, then later it settled to once a year), but still, issue 30 is quite fun for us to offer you.

And it is the QtR issue with the most pages so far!

This year's theme is: Darkness! Things left in the dark, and hidden decay.

Thank you to all authors and readers! Do not forget to review what you like and dislike.

Enjoy this netbook!

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# THE MIST-BORNE POST

BY IAN FORDAM

Castle Guirgiu had been built symmetrical, a main hall flanked by two wings flanked in turn by four towers. The neglect of generations had ruined the symmetry. One of the towers had partially collapsed. One of the wings had lost much of its roof. The rest of the castle had fared somewhat better, but for how long? No matter. Ladislav preferred the underground chambers. That's where his alchemical laboratory was. That's where the sunlight wasn't.

Even so, he still had a single use for one of the remaining towers of his home. The upper story had been his mother's residence before her death. It had remained empty until Ladislav's Final Grand Gala (the final one before the First Gala, anyway), when he had given the rooms over to the pretty young noblewomen who had been his guests. (The handsome young noblemen had occupied Ladislav's tower, the one which had now mostly collapsed.) Eventually, Lady Zlata Rusnac, who had wrangled her way into the castle as part of a younger woman's entourage, subsequently wrangled her way into Ladislav's particular good graces. Shortly afterward, she had wrangled further into Ladislav's mother's former

chambers, cementing her place as Ladislav's foremost advisor. After he had pushed Lady Zlata over the wall, the upper story had been left unused again—as had all the possessions within it. Unused, that is, until the night that Ladislav had discovered Lady Zlata's writing kit: the fine wooden box, the stack of parchment, the delicate quills, the bottles of ink.

"Don't touch that," Lady Zlata had hissed. Her command was empty. As a spirit, she was immaterial and could not stop him.

Ladislav had ignored her and seated himself before the writing kit. Tenderly as he had once caressed a lover (though generations had passed since that particular delight had occurred), he opened the lid of the kit. When he leaned forward to inhale the resinous scent trapped within, he noticed the open bottle of ink, long dried out, and the quill which had splotched the top sheets of parchment. Despite the splotches, he could read the few sentences of the letter which Lady Zlata had been writing when he had interrupted

her. He remembered her hasty closure of the writing kit at his entrance, but he had paid it no attention at the time. Now, he paid attention.

"Gone mad?" he screeched. "You worried that I had *gone mad*?"

"With justification, I might point out," Lady Zlata huffed. "You threw me over the wall, and I wasn't even plague-stricken."

"I did," Ladislav admitted, without a hint of guilt or regret. He bent back over the letter and reread her final written words. Hissing through his pointed teeth, he snatched it up, tore in half, tore in quarters, tore it again, crumpled it up, and hurled it away. Of course, it was paper. It did not hurl in any satisfactory way. He hissed again.

Behind him, Lady Zlata chuckled.

Ladislav hunched back over the writing kit, and he picked up the ink-ruined quill as if he intended to use it upon the next splotched parchment at the top of the stack. He wanted to write something. He wanted to write something using Lady Zlata's kit just to annoy her.

There came a light thump, accompanied by a chilly breeze.

Ladislav looked up at the window over Lady Zlata's desk. It had come open, and a large bird perched upon the sill. Ladislav did not recognize the species, but then he had never paid much attention to birds. It was a raptor of some sort. Certainly a predator. Fully white-feathered. It glowered directly, fearlessly at Ladislav. He responded by extending his barbed tongue from between his jagged teeth. Rather than being threatened, Ladislav could have sworn that the raptor sneered at him. It opened its beak and dropped its burden. A folded-up square of paper fell into Lady Zlata's writing kit. It was delicately scented with some floral perfume. Ladislav did not recognize the exact flower. It was nothing that grew in Sanguinia, he was certain.

Greedily, he inhaled the scent and then unfolded the page.

*Prince Ladislav Mircea,*

*You do not know me, I am certain, just as I do not know you. Yet my most trusted advisor recently mentioned you. He would not tell me where he learned your name, which convinces me that he does not know or recollect. Ordinarily, he is disinclined to refuse me anything I ask, yet when I demanded that he explain himself, he could not. I can only hope that your name emerged from the faded memories of his youth. (His mind is no longer what it once was.)*

*Do you recognize the name Sorani? Lord of Argentines? He was friend and advisor to my father, Baron Janosk Obour, just as he is a dear friend and advisor to me. He has also been my tutor, teaching me philosophy, history, and alchemy. The last is why I write you, for I am in need of a particular reagent. I recently bemoaned the lack of available sources, and that was when your name emerged from his lips.*

*Do you know aught of alchemy? Can you help me procure materials? Some reagents which were once readily accessible to me are no longer within reach.*

*Left to my own devices, I would be tempted to beseech your aid with all of the sweetness available to me, but there is a very impatient bird clearly ready to snatch this letter from my fingers. Beseeching must wait for your response. If you can help me in my quest for high knowledge, I ask that you write back soon.*

*Isabet Obour*

*Baroness of Kislova and Sundell*

Ladislav had never heard of this baroness, nor the lands which she held. That did not concern him. He had been twice ensnared by her letter, first by the lure of alchemical science, second by the hints of possible intimacy between them. Trembling in his eagerness, Ladislav selected a new quill and an unspotted piece of parchment. To his relief, when he unstopped the second of Lady Zlata's ink bottles, he found the ink inside still fluid and dark. Ignoring the sounds of Lady Zlata's ineffectual protests, he started his response...

*My dearest Baroness Obour,*

*I should be delighted to aid you, and I hope that you might provide me with similar service...*

\*\*\*

Ladislav Mircea and Ilsabet Obour may not have been the first to take advantage of this unusual courier, but their case serves as an excellent example of its operation. When a darklord—or perhaps someone who verges upon becoming a darklord—writes a letter to someone outside their domain, an animal—usually a bird—may arrive to convey the letter to its recipient. The animal itself is always white in color, and it is clearly supernaturally intelligent. Although these animals do not speak, they appear to have some understanding of the letter-writer's language. If dismissed, or if the summoner refuses to surrender the letter, the courier animal shortly leaves in a huff and is unlikely to appear again soon.



By the time a letter arrives at its destination, it has been translated into its recipient's native language.

More than anything else, this translation makes some recipients paranoid, because it implies something in between sender and recipient to provide the translation. Certain darklords—most notably Azalin Rex and Count Strahd von Zarovich—refuse to use the courier just to avoid being spied upon.

In addition to letters, the courier animals sometimes carry small packages—packets of alchemical materials, for example.

The source of these courier animals is unknown. One possibility is that they originate from the Mists themselves, or perhaps from the Dark Powers behind the Mists. In support of this theory, the courier

animals appear to disregard closed borders. However, that same detail also supports the possibility that the couriers are actually fiends of some sort. Finally, it has been theorized that these animals are under the control of some new darklord of some new land, perhaps one whose only contact with the external world is through the letters carried by his creatures.

It is believed that Lady Ivana Boritsi was the first to refer to these animal couriers as the Mist-Borne Post, but the term has caught on with those who use its services regularly.

The following people have definitely taken advantage of the Mist-Borne Post:

- ❖ Ladislav Mircea and Ilsabet Obour regularly exchange letters, including the occasional torrid missive. Obour's passion is entirely feigned, but Mircea is sincerely, twistingly infatuated with her. Along with their letters, they do often exchange alchemical reagents, although never anything too esoteric.
- ❖ Ladislav Mircea is also involved in an ongoing debate with Malus Sceleris regarding the efficacy of alchemy in curing disease versus the



efficacy of disease in overcoming the protections of alchemy. Judging from the letters alone, Malus Sceleris has argued his point more effectively. However, although every one of Sceleris' letters has been trapped with a new disease, Mircea continues to write responses ... much to Sceleris' frustration.

- ❖ Victor Mordenheim uses the Mist-Borne Post to exchange letters with a handful of science-minded individuals based in Dementlieu and Paridon. Alicia Farnsworth of the Divinity of Mankind is one of his correspondents.
- ❖ Ordinarily, Vlad Drakov and Malocchio Aderre use mundane means to communicate and coordinate, but occasionally a white-feathered falcon will arrive at Draccipetri. Drakov assumes that Malocchio sends the falcon via some sorcery, particularly since it only arrives when the two are planning delicate operations. Malocchio knows that the falcon is not Drakov's, and so he distrusts it. Nonetheless, he has learned that the letters which the falcon carries are authentic.
- ❖ Ivana Boritsi and Jacqueline Renier exchange beauty tips. No, really. Their letters are some of the most shallow, saccharine, insincere letters ever written. (Except when they're not.)
- ❖ Ivana Boritsi and Ivan Dilisnya exchange scathing letters. Yes, they live in the same

domain, and they could use more mundane means of communication. Yet a carrier animal always appears immediately when a new letter is ready to send, and the Mist-Borne Post is so much faster than the alternatives.

- ❖ Dominic d'Honaire sends an occasional missive to his distant relative Saidra d'Honaire, noting that she has not attended any social gatherings upon the mainland for an unfashionably long time, and as such, he suggests that perhaps she repair the social damage as soon as is convenient. Saidra writes Dominic similar letters from her island in Pernault Bay. Unusually for the Mist-Borne Post, none of these letters ever arrive.
- ❖ Malken sends letters full of raving fury to Sir Tristen Hiregaard. Hiregaard almost never writes back, having learned that his calmly rational responses only elicit greater atrocities on Malken's part.
- ❖ Meistersinger Harkon Lukas has regular correspondence with Baron Lyron Evensong of Liffe. They mostly discuss music.





# TEPEST, LAND OF FAIRY TALES AND FOLKLORE

BY MISTMASTER

<b>Culture level:</b>	Chivalric
<b>Ecology:</b>	Full
<b>Climate &amp; Terrain:</b>	Continental, the domain is dotted with hills and small mountains
<b>Languages:</b>	Lamordian (Tepestan), Forfarian.
<b>Religions:</b>	Danu the Mother (N/G), Daghdha the Father (C/G), Herne the Hunter (C/N), Birgit the Maiden (N), Cegilune the Crone (N/E), Belenos the Radiant (L/G), Arawn the Grim (L/E), Morrigan the Bloody (C/E), Lugh the Thundering Judge (L/N). The Triune Goddess cult is a Neutral cult focused on the three aspects of the moon, Full (Mother, Danu), Partial (Maiden, Birgit), and New (Crone, Cegilune). Cults of the Fairy Deities and of the Goblinwood Religion are also present.
<b>Races:</b>	Human 85%, Hag 6%, Fairy 6%, Other 3%.
<b>Government:</b>	Aristocratic Feudal Monarchy.
<b>Ruler:</b>	Her Majesty Queen Grimhilde von Muller und von Shnee
<b>Darklord:</b>	Queen Grimhilde
<b>Lightlord:</b>	The Weird Sisters
<b>Inhabitants:</b>	12,000,000
<b>Analog:</b>	Late XII-Early XIII Century Germany.
<b>Capital City:</b>	Kellee (82,000 in, Standard, N/E)
<b>Important towns:</b>	Viktal (100,000 in, Standard, L/G), Briggdarrow (20,000 Standard, N), Shadewood Town (15,000 in, Standard, L/N), Linde (12,000, Standard, C/G), Keening (10,000 in, Non-Standard, C/E), Lake Island (5,000 in, Standard, C/E), Wargfort (3,000 In, Monstrous, L/E)
<b>Borders:</b>	North: Darkon, East: Darkon, South-East: Nova Vaasa, South: Nidala, West: Shadow Forest and Falkovnia.

## TROPES

Tepest is a domain of fairy tales, where monsters lurk in the dark and you need to earn your happy ending. Here, evil is both the supernatural might of evil hags and the darkness within every mortal heart.

## DOMAIN OVERVIEW

The southern part of the nation is mostly flat. Lake Kronov is the source of several important rivers, from the Gundar to the Vaughn-Dnar and the South Dnar, and is fed by the Blackmist and the Crying

River. It is the biggest lake of the Core Continent, and houses a little island with the ominous port city, Lake Island.

The northwest part is hillier, dominated by Mount Lament. From Mount Lament springs the River of Tears, the Crying River, and the Kryder river. The Corvus River marks the northern border. Six thick forests, Wytchwood, Hagwood, Goblinwood, Shadewood, Wormwood, and Brujamonte, cover the area. Of these, Brujamonte and Shadewood are those more anthropized, while Goblinwood is the home of savage greenskin tribes, and the Wytchwood and Hagwood are the most hostile to humanoids. The five main towns lay on the edges of the forests. The capital city, Kellee, lies on the southern bank of the Vaughn-Dnar, on the edge of the Wormwood. Viktal, the largest city, heart of the nation's trade, sits near where the Vaughn-Dnar is born from the Kronov, while Linde lays in a cliff in the Wytchwood, and Briggdarrow is seated between the Goblinwood and the Crying River. Keening sits at the feet of Mount Lament, while Shadewood Town is in the center of the ominous forest. Wargfort, the fortified village of the current Goblin King sits in the center of the Goblinwood.

## THE PEOPLE

The Tepestani are a cautious people, always wary of fairy and hag activity. Fairies are capricious, and while usually not malicious beings, respectful caution is the best approach with them. Many Tepestani customs are based on their relationship with the fairies, like the prohibition to leave roads and paths while traveling, the habit to never ask for permission while entering in a house, always making surprise visits, and having celebrations out in the open—or in gazebos and tents—instead of in private houses. A lot of customs regard interactions with the hags, the malicious and powerful sisters of the fairies. While some hags, specifically the brujas, are reported to be well disposed towards people who earn their trust, the majority of hags are renowned

for their vengeful disposition. The fact that all hags are women (even if not all women are hags) gives the Tepestani a slightly misogynistic streak, tempered by a healthy respect and fear for their wisdom and cunning. The Tepestani are a simple and sober people, who strongly disapprove of extravaganza and excessive luxury. Tepestani are farmers, shepherds, wine-makers, miners, and crafters, and they appreciate simple commodities.

The term “greenskinned” is a slightly derogatory word which designates the goblinoids, the orcs, the kobolds, the ogres, and the trolls which live in the Goblinwood.

## HISTORY

### *Age of Creation*

In the time of creation, Danu the Mother mated with Daghdha the Father; they generated four sons—Arawn, Herne, Lugh and Belenos—and three daughters—Birgit, Morrigan and Cegilune. Herne chose to rule the wilderness, while Belenos, Lord of the Sun, became a patron of civilization, with the help of his brother Lugh. Birgit and Cegilune battled each other for dominion of the Moon; Cegilune, embittered by her defeat, became an old, spiteful crone. From Birgit's blood, the Fairies were born, while Cegilune wooed Herne and birthed the hags. Morrigan and Herne gave birth to the goblins.

### *Age of Empires*

Nominally a part of the Olympian empire, and associated with the cult of Artemis, Tepest was always a wild and backwater region.

### *Age of Darkness*

In the Age of Darkness, it was colonized by both the Forfarians and the Lamordians, but it soon managed to affirm its own identity under the rule of the von Shnee Dynasty. Liutpoldt I von Shnee married the daughter of a powerful Forfarian clan leader, and together they created the Kingdom of Tepest. Pacts

were signed with the Fey of the Shadow Forest to gain protection from the Undead Tyrants of Darkon.

### *The Modern Age*

A vassal of the Lamordian Empire, Tepest kept its self-rule and engaged in successful trading exchanges with its neighbors, like Nidala and the reclusive fey of the Shadow Forest.

### *The Current Age*

After the fall of the Lamordian Empire and the birth of the Falkovnian Kaiserreich, the Tepestani had to fight for their freedom against the Falkovnian Occupation. King Carl VIII managed to defeat the Falkovnian general Albert Shlasserling with the help of Queen Maeve of the Shadow Forest. Recently, House von Shnee has been ousted from power. After the death of King Liutpold XIV, son of King Carl, and the disappearance of his daughter Blanche, the throne has been inherited by the late king's second wife, Queen Grimhilde.

## PLACES OF INTEREST

The Brass Sheep is the main inn in Kellee. It is a very popular inn with a dozen large tables. Like most inns in Tepest, its specialty is mutton dishes, of which it has a half a dozen. The main drink in the place is Tepestani Wine. Those who know it take at least a couple of hours to drink a glass of it, unless they want to get drunk. Tepestani Wine is as strong as brandy. Mateus Kzurn is the owner of the inn, a burly, retired fighter (Old Human Fighter 4, C/G)

The Golden Apple is the second most popular inn in the capital. Its owner, Rozen Acheen, has a contract with the queen herself.

The Cathedral of the Shining Lord is the main center of worship in the kingdom.

The Royal von Shnee Palace, the seat of government, dominates the city from the summit of a hill.

Viktal is the biggest city in the kingdom, a thriving trade center and fluvial port housing many cheap inns, but Granny's House has high-quality food. Agatha Lukas is a jolly old woman, wise and kind, but with a sharp tongue.

The House of the Righteous Thunder, the main temple of Lugh, sits in Viktal.

The Duke of Viktal resides in the luxurious Sapphire Castle.

Briggdarrow sits at the heart of the vineyards of the kingdom, and wine is its specialty. The Drunken Goblin is the most notorious inn, and its owner is Klagg Bogtooth (Old Goblin Rogue 12, N), a real goblin exiled from the Goblinwood.

A tall stone tower, called the Bastion of Purity, houses the Duchess of Briggdarrow.

The Shrine of the Master and Mistress of the Wild Hunt, dedicated to Herne and Morrigan, is on the outskirts of Briggdarrow, where starts the Goblinwood.

The House of Happy Lamentations is a brothel which attracts a lot of customers in Keening, owned by Jack Beanclimber (Young Adult Human Rogue 5 C/N). The Duchess of Keening lives in a vast fortress on Mount Lament, which is called the Banshee Fort. Mount Lament owes its name to the haunting sound the wind produces in the deep places of the mountain.

The Shadow Grove is a garden restaurant in Shadewood Town. Its owner is Epzibah Smoothebony (Dusk Elf Bard 5 C/G), a sensual dancer.

The Duchess of Shadewood lives in the Dark Oak Castle, a castle constructed on a colossal oak which dominates the wood.

Lake Island is a small but lively port town. The Golden Fish is the principal inn and restaurant of the lake. It is owned by a cat-loving old lady named Ermelia Shnitzpak, along with her two sisters Eveline and Edith (Mature Anguana Hags Alchemist 5 L/E).

The Duchess of Lake Island lives in a ship manor anchored in the port, called the Swan Maid.

A shrine dedicated to the Triune Goddesses (Birgit, Danu, and Cegilune) is in the center of a crossroad in the Wytchwood near Linde

The Duke of Linde resides in the massive Bleeding Castle, so called because it's made in white marble and decorated with red stones, giving it the appearance of bleeding. Linde's main inn is the Boiling Cauldron. The Cauldron's owner is Granny Bertha Tosan (Old Anguana Hag Bruja Alchemist 7 L/N), an old, hunchbacked, and toothless woman always ready to give some wise advice, and the best cook of the realm. She once worked in the royal palace before the Queen dismissed her, judging her too old.

The village of Wargfort is quickly expanding into a fortified city.

## RELIGIONS

*Danu the Mother* (N/G): This moon, magic, healing, and nature deity is an aspect of Hala. Her holy symbol is a silvery full moon with a white spindle on it. Danu teaches her followers wisdom and mercy. Balance between civilization and nature is her primary interest. She teaches that magic is part of nature and that the key to health is in balance. Her followers are midwives, soothsayers, farmers, and peasants. Her domains are Animal, Darkness, Good, Healing, Magic, and Plant. Her favored weapon is the dagger.

*Daghda the Father* (C/G): This earth, prosperity, commerce, and fertility deity is a rare male aspect of Tyche. His holy symbol is a boiling cauldron. Daghdha teaches his followers generosity and happiness; he teaches that life is precious and must be tasted in full. His followers are traders, cooks, wine-makers, and inn keepers. His domains are Chaos, Charm, Community, Earth, Good, and Travel. His favored weapon is the cudgel.

*Herne the Hunter* (C/N): This hunt, wildlands, winter, and wood deity is a rare human-shaped aspect of Fenris. His holy symbol is a pair of antlers. Herne teaches his followers to be patient and strong. The main goal in life is survival, and to survive you must be more cunning and faster than both your prey and your predators. Winter is always coming, and only the prepared survive. His followers are hunters, goblins, gatherers, woodcutters, and animal breeders. His domains are Air, Animal, Chaos, Strength, and Weather. His favored weapon is the short bow.

*Birgit the Maiden* (N): This fire, purity, light, creativity, and beauty deity is an aspect of Ezra. Her holy symbol is a flame with a crescent. She teaches the values of chastity and respect for the power of fire. She teaches non-fairies to respect fairies and imitate them. She protects mankind from fairy whims. Her followers are fairies, peasants, virgins, and crafters. Her domains are Charm, Craft, Fire, Liberation, and Protection. Her favored weapon is the dagger.

*Cegilune the Crone* (N/E): This trickery, magic, night, and spite deity is an aspect of Tyche. Her holy symbol is a black moon with a yellow eye. She teaches her followers to scheme and plot, and to see everyone and everything as a means for their ends. She teaches her followers to never lie, but to always twist the meaning of their words to suit their ends. She also teaches that everything which is pure and beautiful must be corrupted or destroyed, and that everything has got a price.

Her followers are hags, evil witches, evil warlocks, poisoners, courtesans, and goblins. Her domains are Darkness, Destruction, Evil, Magic, and Trickery. Her favored weapon is the flail.

*Belenos the Radiant* (L/G): This sun, honor, civilization, and justice god is an aspect of Andaral. His symbol is a sun disk. He teaches his followers to be honest, hardworking, true to their word, humble, and sober in their life. He also teaches them to distrust magic and be wary of fairies, a fickle and



capricious people. His domains are Community, Good, Law, Nobility, and Sun. His favored weapon is the sickle.

*Arawn the Grim* (L/E): This death, judgment, and punishment deity is an aspect of Erlik. His symbol is a blade piercing a skull. He teaches his followers to respect and fear the law of the dead, and he punishes those who disrespect the dead. He is also the merciless punisher of the wicked.

His followers are goblins, executioners, undertakers, bounty hunters, and assassins. His domains are Death, Destruction, Evil, Law, and Repose. His favored weapon is the longsword.

*Morrigan the Bloody* (C/E): This war, fate, blood, and slaughter deity is a very rare chaotic and female aspect of Zhakata. Her symbol is three red ravens in a circle. She teaches her followers to fight to win, to kill their enemies, to accept glorious death when it comes, and to revel in battle and in victory. Defeat is death, rage is strength, control is weakness. Her followers are goblins, warriors, barbarians, and warchiefs.

Her domains are Chaos, Evil, Madness, Strength, and War. Her favored weapon is the short spear.

*Lugh the Thundering Judge* (L/N): This storm, writing, justice, truth, and trade deity is an aspect of Lathurr. His symbol is a unicorn head. He teaches his followers to be true to their word and swift and effective in their action; practical, yet always open to new knowledge. His followers are judges, lawyers, traders, farmers, bards, and waiters. His domains are Knowledge, Law, Rune, Travel, and Weather. His favored weapon is the spear.

### **FAIRY DEITIES:**

The four major deities of the Fairy Pantheon are:

*Titania, the Summer Queen* (C/G): Her symbol is a golden Unicorn. Her favorite weapon is the rapier. Her domains are Animal, Chaos, Charm, Good, Magic, and Sun. Her followers are herbalists and

female Seelie Court fairies. She teaches her followers to love beauty and to encourage it in their lives and the lives of other people.

*Oberon, the Spring King* (L/G): His symbol is an Oak tree. His favored weapon the longsword. His domains are Good, Law, Protection, Magic, Plant, and Trickery. His followers are fencers and male Seelie Court fairies. He teaches his followers to never lie and to always fight for what they think fair, but to use their brain in it.

*Finn Varra, the Autumn King* (N): His symbol is a crown of red and yellow leaves. His favored weapon is the quarterstaff. His domains are Earth, Fire, Magic, Plant, Trickery, and Runes. His followers are arcanists and Middle Court fairies. He teaches his followers to be cautious and to never disrupt balance.

*Ma'ab, the Winter Queen* (C/E): Her symbol is a black snowflake. Her favored weapon is the dagger. Her domains are Air, Chaos, Darkness, Death, Evil, and Trickery. Her followers are envious people and Unseelie Court fairies. She teaches her followers to take what they want, when they want, as long as they can get it without consequences, and to never let go of a grudge.

### **THE GOBLINWOOD RELIGION**

The orcs, ogres, trolls, kobolds and goblinoids are seen as a unified people in Tepest, and they share a communal shamanic faith full of deities. The most important figure in the religion is *Luthic* (N/G) the Mother Earth. Her symbol is a cave bear. She is a goddess of motherhood, marriage, life, protection, earth, and nurturing. Her domains are Animal, Community, Earth, Good, Protection, and Strength. Her favorite weapon is the unarmed strike. All greenskins pay homage to her up to a degree, even those who revere other deities.

## THE FAMED AND THE INFAMOUS

### The Three Weird Sisters

*[Lorinda (Ancient Annis Bruja Sorcerer 13, C/G), Leticia (Ancient Green Hag Bruja Witch 13, L/G), and Laveda (Ancient Anguana Hag Bruja Druid 13, N/G) Mindfisk]*

Once upon a time, the three Daughters of Rudella Mindfisk became the guardians of light in Tepest, and out of spite, their old student—the Queen—tried to make them fall from grace, but she failed completely. The blessing of Titania allowed them to save their souls, and they still maintain balance, testing the mettle of the heroes, healing them in disguise, rewarding them when they earn it, and rescuing them unexpectedly. Lorinda is unpredictable, but she always knows what she is doing. Leticia never lies, but you must ask her the right question. Laveda rarely talks, but when she does it, her words stir the wheel of fate.

*(Adventure Hook: The adventurers meet three old women at a crossroads. They are sitting under an oak and chatting, and once the adventures come close, they greet them as the killers of the Great Avanc.)*

### The Great Avanc

*(Advanced Fey-Touched Avanc 15 HD, N/E, CR 14)*

Once a fey prince cursed by a rival, the Great Avanc can take his humanoid form (an adult Sidhe Elf Feyblooded Sorcerer 15) only in his lair. There he broods and bemoans the glory of the past, or simply sleeps for a long time. When he sleeps, his cohorts—cursed with lesser forms of their master's fate—and their brood sleep too. Once he awakens, he leads them on great hunts, often clashing with the mighty and peaceful gruachs.

*(Adventure Hook: After one more attack on a fishing ship, the inhabitants of a village on the west coast of the lake offer a reward to whoever manages to stop the attacks.)*

### Princess Blanche von Shnee

*(Teen Human Fey-touched, Fey bloodline Sorceress 5, N/G)*

A sweet and pure-hearted girl, she is the last descendant of Liutpold I and a fairy princess. She embodies all the kindness of the Seelie Court, and none of their capriciousness. She does not understand her full potential, having been living in hiding since her stepmother killed her father and stole her kingdom, but her kindness has earned her many friends. Her pure heart, however, exposes her to the wickedness of the word. She never mistrusts, she forgives easily, and is too willing to show kindness, even to those who do not deserve it. Luckily for her, her powers protect her when her will would not. When her stepmother tried to have her killed, she ran into the Wytchwood, where she found shelter. Her stepmother has attempted to kill her many times, but every time her plan has been foiled.

*(Adventure Hook: An old peddler offers the adventurers a reward if they would reach a house in the Wytchwood and give a comb to a girl who lives there. The comb is poisoned.)*

### The Gemdigger Brothers

*[Dwalin "Doc" Gemdigger (Old Stone Dwarf Wizard 10, L/G), Dain "Grumpy" Gemdigger (Old Dwarf Stone Barbarian 9, C/G), Bofur "Sleepy" Gemdigger (Old Stone Dwarf Shaman 8, N/G), Balin "Windy" Gemdigger (Middle Aged Stone Dwarf Air Elemental Sorcerer 7, C/G), Gloin "Bashful" Gemdigger (Middle-aged Stone Dwarf Bard 6, N/G), Bombur "Happy" Gemdigger (Adult Stone Dwarf Fighter 5, L/G), Kili "Dopey" Gemdigger (Young Adult Stone Dwarf Monk 4, L/G)]*

These seven dwarf brothers are the owners of a big diamond mine, hidden deep in the Wytchwood. The seven brothers have sheltered princess Blanche since her stepmother's first botched attempt to kill her. Dain and Kili are the two most affectionate toward Blanche.

*(Adventure Hook: Seven dwarf brothers are crying around a glass coffin, with a young girl laying in it.)*

### **Jakob von Azurblau**

*(Human Young Adult Cavalier of the Order of the Sword 8, L/G, Maledictive Werebear)*

The eldest son of Humbert von Azurblau, the very rich Duke of Viktal, Jakob is a fearless and noble knight who serves people in need. He got cursed by the Queen's servant, the Yellow Gnome, and transforms into a bear during night-time. He keeps his free will during the transformation, and he can also speak the tongue of men in that form. He had to renounce his title as the heir to his father's duchy.

### **The Yellow Gnome**

*(Old Thorne Gnome Fiendish Sorcerer 10, L/E)*

This disgusting old spriggan is one of the favorite agents of the Queen, her tax collector. He is also a loan shark, thanks to the Queen's financing. His nickname is owed to the sick yellow color of his skin. He is a skilled negotiator, but also a lecherous old man.

*(Adventure Hook: The owner of an inn starts suddenly to cry out in front of the adventurers, and reveals that he had to promise his daughter to the Yellow Gnome to cover his debt.)*

### **Rozen Acheen**

*(Young Adult Human female Witch 4, N/E)*

A protégé of the Queen, she is the owner of the most prestigious inn and bakery in Kellee, the Golden Apple, and her apple pie has won a lot of prizes. She is also vain and overly talkative.

*(Adventure Hook: The Covenant of the Apple assembles in a secret hall under the Golden Apple, and Rozen said something she should not have to a friend of the adventurers. Now that person's life is in danger.)*

### **Ella von Asche**

*(Human Young Adult Psychic 3, N/G)*

This sweet, young girl is very forgiving and dutiful. The daughter of a rich merchant of Kellee, she lost her mother at a young age. Her father remarried and then died, which led to her being enslaved in her own home. In spite of the emotional and physical abuse she gets from her stepmother, Lady Jana Tremhein, she stays sweet and forgiving. Her fairy godmother gifted her with mental powers she uses to bear the abuse; her powers heal her body, shield her mind and soul, and attract faithful allies.

*(Adventure Hook: The adventurers just happen to be in the von Ashes' backyard when young Ella is subjected to violent abuse by her sisters, under the eyes of their mother.)*

### **The Forgetful Fairy**

*(Sidhe Elf Wizard Transmuter 15, L/G)*

This powerful fey lady, hidden under the guise of a meek old woman, was banished from the neighboring Shadow Forest thanks to the treachery of the Winter Queen. She does not remember her own name, and finds it difficult to recall things. In spite of this, she is still a powerful wizard, and a mighty, if gentle, force of good. She lives in a house hidden inside a tree, in the garden of the von Ashe family manor. She is Ella's fairy godmother.

*(Adventure Hook: The powerful wand of this fairy godmother attracts the wrong kind of attention. If misplaced or stolen, it could be very dangerous, and when the adventurers learn about it, they must pay attention to the powerful, yet absent-minded fey.)*

### **Lady Jana Tremhein**

*(Adult Human Rogue Courtier 7, N/E)*

This cold and calculating socialite is a two-time widow and the mother of two daughters, Anastasia and Druzilla. While abusive in their regard as much as she is in the regard of any other subordinate, Lady Tremhein cares for her daughters and wants them

married off into the highest position possible. Ella is a hindrance for her projects, and she has always taught her daughters to mistreat her. Her step-daughter, however, has somehow managed to thrive in spite of her cruelty.

*(Adventure Hook: Lady Jana is hosting the Falkovnian ambassador, and the Falkovnian resistance contacts the adventurers to have them infiltrate the gala and kidnap the ambassador.)*

### **Thomas von Azurblau**

*(Young Adult Human Fighter 6, N/G)*

The second son and current heir of the Duke of Viktal, Thomas is not impressed by his father's attempts at finding him a wife. He very much prefers to spend his time riding and studying.

*(Adventure Hook: Thomas' father organized a ball, and he did meet a girl there he fell in love with. However, she has disappeared, and the only thing he has of hers is a glass shoe she lost the night of their first meeting. He recruits the adventurers to find her.)*

### **Phillip von Azurblau**

*(Young Adult Human Ranger 5, L/G)*

The younger son and current spare heir of Duke von Azurblau. Annoyed by nobility and courtly manners, Phillip, like his brother, has rebuked his father's attempts to find him a wife. The young man prefers spending his free time hunting or fishing, much to the nobleman's annoyance.

*(Adventure Hook: Thomas has met a woman and is now in love. Problem is, a powerful unseelie fairy lady has cursed the girl to die the day of her next birthday in a month. He asks one of the adventurers to help him to save her.)*

### **Hans and Gretchen von Heißerofen**

*(Young Human Rogue 7, L/E and Young Human Witch 7, C/G)*

This couple of twins runs a bakery in Viktal, but it's a cover for their true activity as hag hunters. When

they were still children, the twins survived an encounter with the green hag Hazel and managed to burn her alive in her own oven. Hans has developed a burning hate for hags, and he is merciless in his pursuit. Gretchen has instead pursued the path of white witchcraft, and is a joyful and loving person. The two still love each other very much.

*(Adventure Hook: The adventurers have joined Hans and Gretchen in their hunt for a dangerous green hag. Problem is, the hag has a kid abducted and hidden away, and they need to keep her alive, and Hans is not very inclined to do that.)*

### **Hazel**

*(Green Hag Ghost Gingerbread Witch 7)*

Once a feared hag who attracted children with her gingerbread-like house, she was cleverly killed by two of her victims. She still haunts her old house in the Wytchwood, but she cannot taste the flesh of her victims anymore. She will never be free until she eats Hans and Gretchen in the Ethereal Plane.

*(Adventure Hook: With the help of her sister, a green hag on the Material Plane, Hazel has created an ethereal pocket, in which she will entrap and devour Hans and Gretchen. Unfortunately for her, the adventurers are pursuing her sister together with the siblings.)*

### **Möhre Feuershloss**

*(Young Adult Feytouched Human Fighter 5, N/G)*

Her parents sold her to a bruja hag, as she spared their life for stealing her carrots in Brujamonte. She was adopted by the bruja, who locked her in a tower to protect her from the world. Möhre's very long hair is magic, and she can use it as a powerful weapon. Once the bruja realized she could not lock the girl in forever, she trained her daughter to defend herself, and Möhre became quite skilled at that.

*(Adventure Hook: While the adventurers are pursuing a thief, they are surprised by a young woman with impossibly long red hair, who has*



*entangled the thief with that very hair and knocked him out with a frying pan.)*

### **Agatha "Granny" Lukas**

*(Old Wolfwere Ranger 6, N/G)*

A spry, sharp-witted, sharp-tongued, and sometimes sharp-toothed old woman, she is the best cook in Viktal and the loving innkeeper of the Granny's House Inn. She is very protective of her granddaughter Rubinia. Granny's true form is that of a gray wolf with spectacles on her muzzle. After her only son killed her daughter-in-law and tried to take over Invidia, resulting in the independence of Kartakass, she fled with her granddaughter.

*(Adventure Hook: When a Kartakan minstrel arrives in Viktal, the adventurers notice a gray wolf with spectacles stalking the man.)*

### **Rubinia Lukas**

*(Teen Greater Wolfwere Rogue 5, C/G)*

The daughter of a Kartakan wolfwere bard and an Invidian wolfwere fighter. After her father killed her mother, she was raised by her paternal grandmother, Agatha Lukas, who took her to Tepest to keep her safe from the Wolfwere Civil War. She always wears a protective magical red hood, especially effective against mind-affecting magic.

*(Adventure Hook: Rubinia must travel alone to Kellee, and her Granny pays the adventurers to keep her company.)*

### **Brother Vyan of Viktal**

*(Middle-Aged Human Inquisitor 10, L/G)*

This aging man has battled the influence of hags and dark fairies in the name of Belenos all his life. He almost lost his daughter because of his struggle, and he is seriously thinking about retiring; but he will not betray his holy vows, no matter what.

*(Adventure Hook: When a village near Viktal announces that three young children have gone missing, Vyan needs to investigate, but on the*

*opposite side, another village asks for his help against a hostile kelpie. Unwilling to leave either of the requests unanswered, he asks the adventures, through a common friend, to represent him on one case.)*

### **Duchess Tristessa Shadewail**

*(Dusk Elf Banshee Queen Sorcerer Maestro 8 C/E)*

Tristessa is the second most powerful person in Tepest, after the Queen. Very few people know that the Duchess of Keening is a banshee. A curse was placed on her by a vengeful peasant, whose daughter was killed by Tristessa as punishment for accidentally scratching her daughter's cheek as they were playing. That same night, her daughter disappeared, and she turned mad with grief, hanging herself from a tower of her castle. She came back as a Banshee Queen, a powerful undead, and has kept her death a secret. Tristessa wants her daughter back, and won't stop until she has her.

*(Adventure Hook: Every year in Keening, a great festival is celebrated on the day of the Duchess' daughter's birthday. But this year something is wrong; a strange ritual circle has been traced around the table where the kids will be seated—together with the Duchess—and will get presents. A priestess of Hala saw it and informed the adventurers.)*

### **Graham Bloodskin**

*(Human Titular Loup-de-Noire Ranger 10, L/N)*

Once the Queen's faithful executioner, Graham refused to kill Princess Blanche, and for that, he had to run from the castle. Still haunted by the sins of his past, he is desperate to atone, somehow. Graham lives like a hermit in the Wormwood, and sporadically he acts to protect the innocent from harm.

*(Adventure Hook: When a big black wolf joins the fight on their side against a bandit ambush, the adventurers are left wondering about who sent them this help.)*

### **Duke Johann von Blutsauger**

*(Adult Natural Finfoot Halfling Wereleech Fighter 5, L/G)*

Because of his avarice and greed, Johann's great-grandfather was cursed by a fairy lady to transform into a giant leech every time he saw coins or gems. The church of Belenos saved him, but his descendants became natural entomothropes—wereleeches. It is not a secret, and they have put the Blutsauger (leech) in their arms and family name. Duke Johann of Linde is a zealous supporter of the church of Belenos.

*(Adventure Hook: The adventurers see a Small-sized leech wearing a medallion resting in a pond. Two men-at-arms seem to be watching it. Suddenly, a monstrous toad emerges and attacks the leech, who turns into a halfling teenager crying for help.)*

### **Duchess Gothel von Feuershloss**

*(Old Winter Hag Bruja Cleric of Birgit 4, C/N)*

Gothel, Duchess of Briggdarrow, is a fickle yet surprisingly caring bruja. Once a winter hag of great power, changed by Birgit's blessing, now she is only a bit obsessed with purity. Years ago, she adopted a baby from a man she caught stealing carrots in her vegetable garden. Recently, she began allowing more freedom to the girl, now in her late teens, but Gothel is still very worried about her innocence. She is extremely protective of the girl.

*(Adventure Hook: When the adventurers meet Möhre the first time, Gothel decides to test them, posing as an evil hag.)*

### **Duchess Lilibeth Duskhair**

*(Adult Dryad Druid 5, N)*

Born as a fey-touched human girl, Lilibeth became a dryad when she invoked the power of the Triune to save the woods from a fire. Her tree is the massive one which houses her castle, and it's so big, that she can virtually roam the whole kingdom.

*(Adventure Hook: Traveling to Shadewood town, the adventurers know they are not supposed to cut wood, nor to light fire out of the safe fireplaces. However, when they find a tree cut down and an unattended fire nearby, they need to prove to an angry dryad-duchess they are not guilty.)*

### **Duke Humbert von Azurblau**

*(Old Human Fighter 6, N/G)*

Fat and jolly, Duke Humbert of Viktal is rich and generous, beloved by his subjects. After his wife's death, however, he has been growing lonelier, and dreams of finally meeting his grandchildren. Unluckily, after the disappearance of his first-born, Jakob, neither Thomas nor Phillip, his two surviving sons, seems to be inclined to marry anytime soon.

*(Adventure Hook: Humbert refuses to die before he finds out what happened to Jakob. He offers the adventurers a princely reward if they can find out what happened to his boy.)*

### **Duchess Wilhelmine von Schwarzerschwan**

*(Black Swan Maiden Swashbuckler 8, C/E)*

Once a swan maiden devoted to Daghdá, The Duchess of Lake Island was corrupted by the influence of the Queen, and today is a cruel and devious being.

*(Adventure Hook: The Duchess wants to create an order of Black Swan Maidens and use them to topple the hags from power. She is starting to recruit young, capricious women. The adventurers are tipped off about this predicament by an old peddler selling laces.)*

### **Grampa Oak**

*(Treant Druid 7, N/G)*

The oldest treant in Tepest, Grampa Oak is a wise adviser to the Shadewood Duchess. Once, Blackroot was his closest friend, but today they are on opposite fields, as Grandpa Oak wants to live together with

the humanoids, and Blackroot wishes to destroy them all.

*(Adventure Hook: Someone poisoned Grandpa Oak. Blackroot might be the only possible source of information available if the adventurers wish to heal the kind, old Treant.)*

### **Blackroot**

*(Undead Treant Sorcerer 5, N/E)*

An undead treant created by the Queen, Blackroot is the scourge of the Wormwood. He was, once upon a time, an honorable forest guardian called Uncle Willow, before the woodcutters burned his grove, killing his family. Now, he hates humanoids with a passion, and pursues their extinction.

*(Adventure Hook: When poisonous plants start to grow near the farms north of Shadewood, the adventurers need to investigate. The only thing they initially find is blackened willow bark.)*

### **Granny Smile**

*(Ancient Green Hag, N/E)*

Queen Grimhilde's right hand, and one of the eldest and more cunning hags in Tepest. With a permanent smile plastered on her face, this old schemer is always ready to pursue a new scheme after one is complete. She peddles in favors and information, and manages Tepest's spy net and foreign politics.

*(Adventure Hook: Recently, the activities at the Falkovnian embassy have intensified, and there is unrest both on the Goblinwood edge and in the mysterious caves under Mount Lament. Sources from the Falkovnian resistance say that Granny Smile is involved.)*

### **Charlotte "Auntie Lotte" Spinwebber**

*(Advanced Red Widow, N/E)*

One of Granny Smile's favorite protégés, Auntie Lotte is the owner of Auntie Lotte's Parlor, an inn on the way between Kellee and Keening. A graceful host, she, together with her two daughters, Aracne

(Teen Red Widow N) and Julia (Teen red Widow N/G), welcomes every client. Some of them get so affectionate they never leave. Her relationship with Granny Smile mimics the one she has with her daughters; her instinct would have been to drive them off and treat them as rivals, but Granny stopped them, and now, they are stuck in an abusive relationship.

*(Adventure Hook: In the heart of the night, the adventurers woke up, stuck in a spider web and with a big red spider pulling one of them up, half-closed in a cocoon.)*

### **Baba Zelna**

*(Ancient Green Hag Bruja, N/G)*

Once a powerful and infamous hag, she changed her life when her daughter died at the hand of her own coven sister, Granny Smile. She turned a new leaf and became a bruja, a wise healer, and a caretaker, living in the woods some miles from Auntie Lotte's Parlor. She lives in a dancing hut with chicken legs, and is a very old lady with kind, blue eyes and a truly warm smile on her old face. She wears an apron, and wields a wooden spoon.

*(Adventure Hook: When weird things happened at Auntie Lotte's Parlor, the owner of the inn blamed a powerful hag living in the forest, leaving the adventurers to decide what they want to do.*

### **Reglish, the Goblin King**

*(Middle-Aged Hobgoblin Fighter 10, L/E)*

Reglish is smart, cautious, and ruthless. Technically, the Goblinwood folk are subjects of the Tepestani monarchs, but with recognized autonomy. Recently, he struck a deal with the Queen for major autonomy, and recognition as vassal King, rather than simply Paramount Chief. He has reduced the occurrence of raids, turning to smarter criminal actions.

*(Adventure Hook: Monarchy in the Goblinwood is elective, but Reglish would like to change that, and for that he means to ignite a new war with Tepest.*

*He is collaborating with a Falkovnian commando to provoke Tepest into breaking the treaty. Falkovnia would be able to send troops to defend Tepest, and finalize the marriage of Grimhilde and Drakov. Reglish will then finalize Goblinwood independence, sacrificing a couple of villages on the border. The Falkovnian resistance, however, sent the adventurers to uncover this scheme.)*

### **The Ogre of Kellee**

*(Adult Ogre Magi Rogue 7, C/E)*

This ruthless serial killer has taken Graham Bloodskin's place as the Queen's executioner. He is infamous for kidnapping and eating kids and young women; but in truth, he brings them to the Queen. He disguises himself as the Marquis Johan von Krabas; he is happily married, and has seven daughters.

*(Adventure Hook: One of the seven daughters of Marquis von Krabas is missing. The Ogre of Kellee is suspected, and von Krabas is at risk of having his cover blown when his unsuspecting wife asks the adventurers to investigate.)*

### **Antonio Pero**

*(Adult Paka Swashbuckler 11, C/G)*

A paka duelist animated by a great sense of adventure and justice, he travels Tepest searching for damsels in distress to save, wrongs to make right, and beautiful women to court.

*(Adventure Hook: He is hunting the Ogre of Kellee, and he enlists the adventurers' help to track down the kidnapping murderer.)*

### **Tom "Half-pint" Rainer**

*(Teen Caliban Fey-Touched Rogue 5, C/G)*

A lovable and resourceful Tiny-sized boy, Half-Pint Tom is the seventh son of a ferryman on Lake Island. He often offers himself to his father's clients as a guide to the city, sometimes rounding up his tips at the expense of nasty, mean, and miserly clients.

*(Adventure Hook: Tom's father is desperate, as his boy disappeared. Can the adventurers help him somehow?)*

### **Albert Fiddlepiper**

*(Human Youth Fey-touched Bard Luring Piper 3, C/G)*

Albert is a Falkovnian refugee. Persecuted for his fey blood, his family died trying to smuggle him out. Coming into his powers, he is starting to target any Falkovnian citizen associated with the Kaiser-Fuhrer regime.

*(Adventure Hook: While passing over a bridge in Kellee, near the Falkovnian embassy, the party and a Falkovnian patrol are assaulted by a flight of birds. The adventurers notice a young boy fiddling on the opposite side of the channel.)*

## **ORGANIZATIONS**

### **THE ADVENTURER'S GUILD**

This Neutral Good organization licenses and coordinates hedge knights, bounty hunters, and monster killers, and uses those resources for protecting trade, mutual help, and individual security. They also use them to provide superior education and arcane teachings in their Spinner College.

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE SPINNER'S REVOLUTION.**

Rober Goldspinner (Fey-Touched Arcane Sorcerer 12, L/G), the wealthy spinner and Guildmaster of the Spinner's Guild, who founded and chairs the Adventurer's Guild, is the notorious trickster and revolutionary *Rumpelstilzchen* (Sylvan for 'spinner of fate'). Through the guild, he is fomenting a revolution against the Queen. Is that possible, or has it already been infiltrated by the hags?



## THE COVENANT OF APPLE

The most powerful hag covenant in all the Mistworld, it's an alliance of several hundred hags. It is N/E, and its goal is power, prestige, and wealth for its members. Its leader is the Queen Regent herself.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE ROTTEN APPLE.

Can there exist something worse than a covenant of hundreds of powerful hags scheming to gain power for themselves? Yes. There are rumors of a group intending to overcome mortality, led by a night hag. This secret split of the Covenant is even more cruel and sadistic than the Covenant itself.

## THE SUN INQUISITION

This L/N Organization fight the hags and the dark fairies, and is headed by Vyan of Viktal. It's not powered only by the Church of Belenos, but with help from several organizations who want to stop the influence of evil fey. It targets only actively hostile fey, hags, and magic users.

(Dread Possibility: The Blaze. Someone is talking about a branch of the Sun Inquisition that wants to drive out of Tepest all magic, all fey, all hags, and even all nonhumanoids. This branch is led by Finn of Viktal (Adult Human Inquisitor 7, L/E), formerly Vyan's second in command. He officially retired from the inquisition, but maybe not so much.)

## THE RED HAND PIRATES

This C/E gang terrorizes all the rivers and lakes. With their paddleboats, they are able to reave entire villages and towns. They are headed by the cruel Armand Bloodhand.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE CANNIBAL CAPTAIN.

Bloodhand is consuming parts of the bodies of his prisoners, and turning into something inhuman.

## THE DARKLORD: QUEEN GRIMHILDE

**Middle-Aged Human Fifth Rank Hag Venefic Mirror Witch 15, C/E (90 HP)**

**Speed:** 30 feet

**Initiative:** +3 (+6 in the Royal von Shnee Palace)

**Senses:** darkvision 60, Perception +21 (+3 in the Royal von Shnee Palace)

**Armor Class:** 23; Touch 23; Flat Footed 18 (+5 Dex, +8 deflection) (+3 in the Royal von Shnee Palace)

**Damage Reduction:** 10/Cold Iron and Magic.

**Space/Reach:** 1 square /1 square

Combat Maneuver Bonus/Combat Maneuver

**Defense:** +9/24 (+3 in the Royal von Shnee Palace)

**Str:** 14, **Dex:** 20 (16), **Con:** 18, **Int:** 26 (22), **Wis:** 16,

**Cha:** 24 (20)

**Saving Throws:** **Fort:** +12, **Ref:** +13, **Will:** +15 (+3 in the Royal von Shnee Palace)

**Spell Resistance:** 25

**Special Qualities:** Curse of the Dark Lord, Hag Traits, Scrying Mirror, Traveling Mirror, Immunity to Poison, Charm, Disease, Fear, Sleep, Corruptive Aura, Rejuvenation, Nightfall, Familiar: Magic Mirror Spirit, Rejuvenation, Sinkhole of Evil 3

**Special Attacks:** Dreadful Gaze, Enthral, Hypnotic Gaze. Spell-like abilities (Summon Lightning bolt at-will, Toxic Blood at-will, Baleful Polymorph at-will, Fly at-will, Hold Monster (Mass) at-will, Steal Years (Greater) three times/day), Toxic Words, Hexes (Blight, Cauldron, Disguise, Poison Steep, Cook People, Witch Brew, Withering, Abominate, Eternal Slumber)

**Attack: Melee:** Scepter of the Queen: +3 Unholy Quarterstaff (can disguise itself as wooden staff) (It works as a Major Rod of Quickening, Silencing, and Stilling, and gives its holder an unholy bonus of +3 to Spellcaster Checks, Spells Dcs, and effective spellcaster level.) +12/+7 (1d8+5/19-20x2) +2d6

against good creature.

**Skills:** Craft (Alchemy) (+31), Fly (+23), Heal (+21), Intimidate (+25), Knowledge (arcana) (+26), Knowledge (history) (+26), Knowledge (nature) (+26), Knowledge (nobility) (+23), Knowledge (the planes) (+26), Profession (Peddler) (+21), Spellcraft (+26), Use Magic Device (+25) (+3 in the Royal von Shnee Palace)

**Feats:** Brew Potion, Cast in Combat, Eschew Materials, Greater Spell Focus (Enchantment), Skill Focus (Alchemy), Spell Focus (Enchantment), Spell Focus (Transmutation), Spell Penetration  
**Patron:** Envy ( 2nd — Depilate, 4th — Disfiguring Touch, 6th — Excruciating Deformation, 8th — Majestic Image, 10th — Touch of Slumber, 12th — Envious Urge, 14th — Subjective Reality)

**Spells Known:** All Witch Spells.

CL 20

Spells Slots: 0/4, 1st/6, 2nd/6, 3rd/6, 4th/6, 5th/5, 6th/5, 7th/5, 8th/5, 9th/4.

**Challenge Rating:** 21

**Proprieties:** 45,000 gold coins (half in non-magical jewelry), *Scepter of the Queen* (see above), *Headband of Mental Prowess +4* (Int and Cha); *Belt of Dexterity +4*, *Cloak of Resistance +3*, Royal Seal Ring.

## BACKGROUND

Grimhilde Müller was born the fey-touched daughter of a miller. She was the joy of her father, but her mother died, and he remarried with a cruel, cold woman. She tried in every way to crush the spirit of Grimhilde, but as long as the girl's father was alive, she could not. One day, however, the miller died, and the cruel stepmother reduced her step-daughter to servitude. Grimhilde steeled herself against this cruelty, but inside, the resentment grew. Her fairy heritage brought to her three powerful wise women, the Mindfisk sisters, who taught her the secrets of magic. However, her resentment caused her to use

her newly found powers not only for revenge against her stepmother, but to hurt her stepsister too, whose fault it was simply for being more loved than Grimhilde herself. Her teachers warned her of the dark path she was walking, but she shunned their advice, and she even plotted, albeit unsuccessfully, to have them fall from grace, too. She swore to become the most admired, powerful, and beautiful woman in the realm. Working towards that goal, she married an old, childless baron with estates in Kellee, the Baron von Apfel, whom she murdered to inherit his name, properties, and title. But her true, final goal became the crown of Tepest. As the Baroness von Apfel, it was not hard to enter into Queen Eva's good graces. However, her fall into the darkness was not yet irreversible. Queen Eva's good heart did rub off on the Baroness, and Grimhilde did shelve her dark purpose, for a time. She even found a cure for her friend's sterility, but, while the queen was pregnant, she fell in love with King Liutpold. Envy once again got the better of her, and she poisoned her best friend while she was assisting at the birth of Blanche. It was not really hard at that point to take advantage of Liutpold's grief. These evil actions took a toll on Grimhilde, slowly turning her into a creature matching on the outside the horror of her inside. For a while, she tried to conceal her change; through her spells, she even managed to get pregnant, but the boy she bore in her womb was a threat to what she had constructed, as he would have been born monstrous. There was a way to purify the unborn kid, however, and it was to stop hiding her true aspect and to leave Tepest. Her renunciation of her façade and the crown she stole would have purified both her and her unborn son—so she was told by her old mentors. Instead, she decided to kill her son in her own womb, and then used his soul in a ritual to claim the life of Liutpold. She was finally the Queen Regent, but she had still one step-daughter. She had raised Blanche from the crib, and she did love her, but at the end, she couldn't tolerate a woman more loved and beautiful than her in her own kingdom. As such, she plotted to have Blanche killed, which ultimately failed; this last act of betrayal cemented her

accession to the state of hag. Her true form became that of a horrible old crone, hidden under her beautiful human guise. The Mists rose around the Royal von Shnee Palace as Queen Grimhilde became the Darklord of Tepest.

### CURRENT SKETCHES

Queen Grimhilde is finally the most powerful person in the kingdom, but, as she always wants what she can't have, she would like to marry a powerful foreign king or prince. The only one interested in her seems to be that old brute, the Kaiser-Konig of Falkovnia. She would like to be reckoned as the fairest of them all, but her step-daughter is still alive, and her claim is often challenged. She would like to corrupt her old teachers, but they keep outwitting her. She rules with a silk glove, preferring to deal with dissident nobles with subtle discretion. She loves to corrupt purity, and she regards the Duchess of Lake Island as her greatest success. Her favorite way to dispatch threats is the Curse of Eternal Slumber, which she bestows through ripe, red apples she personally grows in the royal orchard. The Slumber Sickness, as it is called, has struck a lot of young women in the kingdom, and Grimhilde has graciously offered their families her help, hosting the girls in a wing of the palace.

In spite of her fickle nature, her reign is prosperous enough. Her recent peace treaty with the Goblin King has gained her popularity, as it has stopped the raids. However, she isn't satisfied with the concessions she was forced to make.

### COMBAT

Grimhilde shuns direct combat, preferring to act through her net of servants. If forced to act in person, she takes the disguise of a fragile old woman, and tries to eliminate her enemies with poison and subtle curses. Only if necessary will she fight directly, and if she is wounded and the fight can't be won, she will opt to escape and plot revenge.

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

*Scrying Mirror:* Through her Magic Mirror, the Queen is able to talk and view through any reflective surface in her domain.

*Traveling Mirror:* The Queen can use her Magic Mirror as a door to any place she is able to scry upon as long as the surface she would come out of is big enough.

*Magic Mirror Spirit Familiar:* The spirit of the Mirror is Neutral Evil. He will never lie to his mistress, but he will always present the things he says in the most ambiguous way he can. It can take the form of a raven familiar and come out of the mirror, if Grimhilde so wishes. It can use Commune once a week, and Clairvoyance at will. The mirror itself has 100 hp and hardness 20. It has Int 18, Wis 18, Cha 18. It has a bonus of +19 to the checks of Bluff, Perception, Sense Motive, Spellcraft, and Knowledge (all). It works in every other respect as the Mirror Familiar of the Mirror Witch Archetype.

*Rejuvenation:* If Grimhilde is killed, she finds her spirit imprisoned in the Mirror. She will be able to leave the mirror and be regenerated in a week.

*Curse of the Dark Lord:* Grimhilde's power resides in the Mirror, but it always reflects her true, hideous form, which she despises. Besides, no matter what, there will always be someone fairer and more loved than her.

### LAIR

Once the seat of a virtuous and blessed dynasty, the Royal von Shnee Palace is now the place where people are secretly smuggled into the queen's lab and dungeons. Her horrible practices have turned it into a Third Rank Sinkhole of Evil, which can bestow the Lustful, Fascinated, and Envious qualities (ST Will negates DC 23).

## CLOSING THE BORDER

If Grimhilde wants to close the border, a mirror-like wall appears along the edge of the realm, and whoever tries to pass finds himself returning in the opposite direction. It is three hundred feet tall, and has spell resistance 30, reflecting any spell which can't pass it. Dealing 100 damage in one attack opens a breach in the wall for one round. The wall can't be breached by any non-magic weapon. Grimhilde can close the border for up to a month.

## DREAD ALTERNATIVES

### HAG RANKS

Hag base powers are those in their stats blocks. Those are adult hags—rank 2.

Juvenile hags—rank 1—are weaker (-2 all Ability scores, -1 Hit Die, CR -1).

Mature hags are rank 3, and they have access to spells as a witch of their Hit dice + their hag rank.

Old hags are rank 4, and their ability scores increase by 4.

Ancient hags are rank 5, and they have damage reduction 10/cold iron and magic, as well as spell resistance equal to 10 + their Hit Dice.

Hags get hexes like witches of their HD + their rank. Hags also get one at-will spell-like ability per rank, plus one spell-like ability usable three times a day. A hag's CR increases by 1 for being rank 3, by 2 for being rank 4, or by 3 for being rank 5.

## NEW MONSTERS

### ANGUANA HAG

**XP** 2400

**LE Medium monstrous humanoid**

**Init** +1; **Senses** darkvision 90 ft.; Perception +15

### Defense

**AC** 21, touch 12, flat-footed 19 (+2 Dex, +9 natural)  
**hp** 74 (9d10+27)

**Fort** +6, **Ref** +7, **Will** +7

**SR** 16

**Immunities:** Charm, Disease, Poison

### Offense

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** 2 slams +16 (1d4+7 plus sleep)

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 9th)

**Constant**—*pass without trace, tongues, true sight*

**At will**—*alter self, barkskin*

3/day—*contagion* (DC 17)

1/day—*ghost sound* (DC 17), *invisibility, neutralize poison, poison* (DC 19), *whispering wind, remove disease, neutralize poison*.

### Statistics

**Str** 24, **Dex** 14, **Con** 16, **Int** 16, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 14

**Base Atk** +9; **CMB** +16; **CMD** 28

**Feats** Alertness, Blind-Fight, Combat Casting,

Deceitful, Great Fortitude, Improved Grapple (b)

**Skills** Appraise: +23, Bluff +13, Craft (Alchemy) +23,

Disguise +13, Knowledge (arcana) +23, Perception

+15, Sense Motive +10, Stealth +10

Languages: Common (Baloki), Lamordian, Giant

**SQ** imitate, venom creation

**Ecology**

**Environment** temperate urban

**Organization** solitary or coven (3 hags of any kind)

**Treasure** standard

**Special Abilities**

*Alchemy (Su):* An anguana hag has access to the elixir slots of an alchemist of 6th level. She knows all the formulae up to level 3.

*Sleep (Ex):* Someone hit by an anguana hag's slam attack must succeed at a ST on Fortitude (DC: 17, based on Constitution) or fall asleep for one minute. This is a poison effect.



*Imitate (Ex):* An anguana hag can imitate perfectly any creature she has studied for one hour. She gets a +10 competence bonus to Disguise checks to disguise herself like a studied subject.

*Living Skin (Su):* An anguana hag's skin is in excess, and quivers and vibrates when the hag is excited. In combat, it can reach for the opponents' weapons or to restrain or trip them. As an immediate action, an anguana hag which is targeted with a melee attack by an opponent within 10 feet can make a free combat maneuver against that opponent. The maneuver must be one from among disarm, grapple, or trip.

*Poison Creation (Ex):* Three times a day, an anguana hag can create any kind of poison in ten minutes.

### Description

An anguana hag is a horrible, bald, wrinkled woman, with skin so loose it forms a sort of mask on the hag's face. They continuously cackle, and their skins quiver and shake. Anguana hags are cowards, and will not fight if they are not forced to, or if they aren't in a very advantageous position. They are negotiators and information peddlers, and they are notorious for being able to retrieve even the rarest of stuff.

**Challenge Rating:** 6

**AVANC**

**XP** 4,800

**N/E Huge Magical Beast**

**Init** +2; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision; Perception +16

### Defense

**AC** 26, touch 11, flat-footed 25 (+2 Dex, +1 dodge, +15 natural, -2 size)

**hp** 95 (8d10+40)

**Fort** +12, **Ref** +9, **Will** +6

Resist Fire 10, Weakness Water Dependent

### Offense

**Speed** 20 ft., swim 30 ft.

**Melee** bite +16 (2d8+13)

**Space** 15 ft., **Reach** 10 ft.

**Special Attack** Improved grab, vortex

### Statistics

**Str** 28, **Dex** 15, **Con** 19, **Int** 10, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 14

**Base Atk** +8; **CMB** +19; **CMD** 31 (35 vs. trip)

**Feats** Dodge, Great Fortitude, Toughness, Power Attack, Snatch (b), Weapon Focus (bite)(b)

**Skills** Perception +16, Stealth +10, Swim +28

**Racial Modifiers** +4 Perception, +8 Stealth in water, +8 Swim

**SQ** Aquatic Empathy

**Languages:** Common (Baloki), Lamordian (Tepestani), Sylvan

### Ecology

**Environment** temperate aquatic

**Organization** solitary, pair, or pack (2–5)

**Treasure** none

### Special Abilities

*Aquatic Empathy (Su):* The avanc can communicate simple concepts with crocodiles and fish. It can order them to come to its aid, though they are not compelled to do so.

*Improved Grab (Ex):* To use this ability, the avanc must hit with its bite attack. It can then start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If it wins the grapple check, the avanc automatically establishes a hold on its opponent with its jaws.

*Vortex (Su):* Once per day, as a full-round action, while the avanc is fully submerged, it can thrash its body through the water with such speed and violence that it creates a whirlpool 100 feet across. This whirlpool is similar to a tornado, save that it

affects only objects and creatures in or on the water. Swimmers must make a successful DC 30 Swim check or be swept into the vortex's funnel; boaters must make a successful DC 30 Profession (sailor) check or have their craft capsize. Creatures sucked into the vortex suffer 4d6 points of damage per round. The vortex continues for as long as the avanc continues to thrash, up to the avanc's Constitution bonus in rounds.

*Water Dependent:* The avanc can survive outside of water for a number of hours equal to its Constitution modifier (4 hours).

### Description

This reptilian creature is an unholy cross between a crocodile and an elasmosaurus. Avancs live in the deep of Lake Kronov, and they prey on fish and humanoids alike. Surprisingly intelligent, an avanc is able to plan elaborate tactics. All the avancs of the lake obey one bigger and smarter exemplar called the Great Avanc.

**Challenge Rating:** 8

### BLACK SWAN MAIDEN

**XP** 2,400

**CE Medium fey (shapechanger)**

**Init** +5; **Senses** low-light vision; **Perception** +14

### Defense

**AC** 20, touch 15, flat-footed 15 (+4 armor, +4 Dex, +1 dodge, +1 natural)

**hp** 55 (10d6+20)

**Fort** +5, **Ref** +12, **Will** +8

**DR** 5/cold iron; **Resist** fire 10, electricity 10; **SR** 17

### Offense

**Speed** 30 ft., fly 40 ft. (good)

**Melee** mwk rapier +11 (1d6+1/18–20)

**Ranged** longbow +10 (1d8/x3)

**Spell-Like Abilities** (CL 10th; Concentration +12)

At will—*Touch of Fatigue*

1/day—*charm* (DC 16), *deep slumber* (DC 15), *entangle* (DC 13), *invisibility*, *major image* (DC 15)

### Statistics

**Str** 13, **Dex** 20, **Con** 15, **Int** 10, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 15

**Base Atk** +5; **CMB** +10; **CMD** 22

**Feats** Agile Maneuvers, Dodge, Flyby Attack, Skill Focus (Perception), Weapon Finesse

**Skills** Acrobatics +11, Bluff +10, Fly +20, Knowledge (nature) +8, Perception +14, Sense Motive +9, Stealth +20

**Racial Modifiers** +4 Stealth

**Languages** Common, Sylvan

**SQ** change shape (black trumpeter swan, beast shape I), feather cloak, trackless step, transformation ritual

### Ecology

**Environment** temperate lakes or swamps

**Organization** solitary, pair, or flock (3–10)

**Treasure** standard (chain shirt, masterwork longsword, longbow with 20 arrows, other treasure)

### Special Abilities

*Black Feather Cloak (Su):* Without her black feather cloak, a black swan maiden can't use her change shape ability.

*Transformation Ritual (Su):* A black swan maiden can transform a willing, evil, female humanoid into a black swan maiden via a ritual that takes 24 hours. The humanoid loses her class and racial abilities.

### Description

This deceptively innocuous woman with a cloak of black feathers is truly a skillful manipulator and a treacherous backstabber. Black swan maidens serve Arawn as faithfully as their good sisters serve Daghdha or Angus Og.

**Challenge Rating:** 7

**GRUACH****XP** 9,600**L/G Huge Magical beast (aquatic)****Init** +6; **Senses** low-light vision, darkvision 60 ft, blindsight 120 ft.; **Perception** +8**Defense****AC** 17, touch 10, flat-footed 15 (+2 Dex, +7 natural, -2 size)**hp** 126 (12d10+60)**Fort** +13, **Ref** +12, **Will** +8**Offense****Speed** 5 ft., swim 60 ft.**Melee** 6 tentacles +16 (1d6+8 plus grab)**Space** 15 ft., **Reach** 15 ft. (30 ft. with tentacle)**Special Attacks:** Grab**Spell-Like Abilities:**Constant: *detect thoughts* (DC 18), *tongues*At will: *invisibility*3/day: *calm emotions* (DC 18), *cure light wounds* (DC 18), *sanctuary* (DC 18)2/day: *dispel magic*, *restoration*1/day: *hold monster* (DC 18)**CL:**12**Statistics****Str** 26, **Dex** 15, **Con** 20, **Int** 15, **Wis** 15, **Cha** 15**Base Atk** +12; **CMB** +22 (+26 grapple); **CMD** 34 (can't be tripped)**Feats** Combat Reflexes, Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes, Multiattack (b), Skill Focus (Sense Motive)**Skills** Diplomacy+17, **Perception** +23, **Sense Motive** +30, **Swim** +13**Racial Modifiers** +8 **Perception**, +8 **Swim**, +10 **Sense Motive**.**Languages** Telepathy 30 feet**SQ** Amphibious, Size Reduction.**Ecology****Environment** any lake**Organization** Family: 2 Adults and 1-4 Youth, or Clan: 1 Ancient (15 HD, can cast spells as a 15 level Druid, Gargantuan, +4 Str and Con, -4 Dex, +4 Wis, CL 15), 4-8 Adults, and 8-16 Youth**Treasure** -**Special Abilities***Size Reduction (Su):* As a move action, a Gruach can reduce their size up to 4 categories. Growing up to their regular size is a standard action.**Description**

Gruach are generous, peaceful creatures resembling whales with six long tentacles. They act as protectors for all people living near their homes, saving them from drowning and doing their best to prevent harm. They tend to treat evil doers as mischievous younglings, spanking them with their tentacles and then letting them go. They can live up to two millennia. Their ability to turn invisible and Tiny-sized allows them lots of discretion.

**Challenge Rating:** 12**RED WIDOW****XP** 2400**N/E Medium magical beast (shapechanger)****Init** +8; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision, tremorsense 30 feet; **Perception** +9**Defense****AC** 20, touch 13, flat-footed 17 (+4 armor, +3 Dex, +3 natural)**hp** 53 (7d10+14)**Fort** +6, **Ref** +9, **Will** +6**Immunities** Charm, Paralysis

**Offense****Speed** 50 ft., climb 30 ft.**Melee bite** +11 (1d6 plus poison)**Special Attacks** Drain Fluids, Infest, Web (+11 ranged, DC 14, hp 5), Summon Spiders (Su, 1/day, 1d8 giant spiders, 1 hour)**Spell-Like Abilities:**

At Will: Sanctuary (DC 17)

Sorcerer Spells Known (CL 7th; Concentration +11)

3rd (5/day)—*deep slumber* (DC 18), *lightning bolt* (DC 17)2nd (7/day)—*invisibility*, *mirror image*, *summon swarm*1st (7/day)—*burning hands* (DC 15), *charm person* (DC 16), *mage armor* (1 already cast), *magic missile*, *silent image* (DC 15)0 (at will)—*daze* (DC 14), *detect magic*, *ghost sound* (DC 14), *light*, *mage hand*, *prestidigitation*, *resistance***Statistics****Str** 10, **Dex** 19, **Con** 12, **Int** 16, **Wis** 15, **Cha** 18**Base Atk** +7; **CMB** +8; **CMD** 22**Feats** Eschew Materials (b), Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Weapon Finesse, Spell Focus (enchantment)**Skills** Acrobatics +16 (+24 jump), Bluff +14, Climb +12, Knowledge (arcana) +13, Perception +20, Stealth +14**Racial Modifiers** +2 Acrobatics, +8 Perception, +8 climb**Languages** Common, Sylvan**SQ** Change Shape (humanoid; alter self), Spider Empathy**Ecology****Environment** tropical forests**Organization** solitary or pair**Treasure** standard**Special Abilities***Change Shape (Su):* A red widow can take the form of a Small or Medium humanoid. The red widow can wield weapons and wear armor in humanoid form. When in humanoid form, a red widow's speed is 30 feet, and it has no climb speed.*Drain Fluids (Ex):* 1d4 Constitution damage, only with defenseless or immobilized opponents.*Infest (Ex):* A pregnant red widow can infest a defenseless victim with her eggs. The eggs hatch after 1 month if the victim is not healed (Heal Check DC 14), and a spider swarm devours the victim. Then, in the course of one minute, the spiders devour each other and grow in size until only a single Tiny one survives, and it turns into a four-year-old human girl. The mother red widow usually takes the survivor away into her care.*Poison (Ex)* Bite—injury; save Fort DC 14; frequency 1/round for 8 rounds; effect 1d4 Strength; cure 1 save.*Spells* A red widow casts spells as a 7th-level sorcerer, but does not gain any additional abilities, such as a sorcerous bloodline.*Spider Empathy:* A red widow can communicate with spiders, and they will help her to the best of their ability.**Description**

Red widows are to the spiderfolk—the araneas—what calibans are to humans: a variant born with strange powers. Red widows are often shunned by their aranea families because of their reproductive cycle and their lack of a hybrid form. They can breed with male araneas and with male humans, and they could resist the urge to eat or infest their mates,



using cattle as incubators. Many, however, choose not to do so out of bitterness. A newborn red widow is as innocent and defenseless as any human toddler, but soon after being born, she is forced to become a ruthless predator relying on instinct and cunning. Red widows raised with love and care can become productive members of society. They can live around 70 years.

## NEW TEMPLATES

### BANSHEE QUEEN

Banshee queens are banshees created by powerful curses or from the souls of powerful female spellcasters.

This advanced archetype can be applied to any banshee.

The banshee retains any class levels and abilities she had in life. All Hit Dice turn into d12s.

The banshee's Charisma increases by 6.

The banshee queen can cast spells from the bard list like they were spells from her original spell list.

The banshee queen adds a +2 bonus to the DC and to the caster level of all spells and abilities dependent on language.

The banshee queen can use command and charm at will as spell-like abilities. Their DCs are based on Charisma.

The banshee queen's CR is equal to that of the base creature +2.

### BÊTE-DE-NOIRE

Bêtes-de-Noire are humanoids able to turn into animals at will while wearing a magical pelt. They basically function as lycanthropes save for:

Damage reduction is overcome by cold iron and not silver.

They have no hybrid form, but gain all the benefits of magic enhancement bonuses from their gear. In

animal form, they also add their Intelligence bonus to attack rolls and armor class.

In humanoid form they retain low-light vision. The division between Bêtes-de-Noire is not between natural and afflicted, but between titular and usurpers; a titular Bête-de-Noire can create a pelt for one humanoid per point of Int modifier. Any humanoid accepting, inheriting, or buying the pelt becomes a titular Bête-de-Noire. Killing a Bête-de-Noire and wearing its pelt or stealing an unclaimed one turns a humanoid in a usurper Bête-de-Noire. Destroying the pelt effectively robs a Bête-de-Noire of its shapeshifting. A titular one can create a new pelt in a month, while a usurper cannot. Usurpers are compelled to wear their pelts and turn into their animal forms every night, and their behavior becomes more and more animalistic. A 13th level caster with the polymorph spell can also create a pelt of skinchanging using the Craft Magic Arms and Armor feat. It costs 25,000 gp.

Bêtes-de-Noire have the same CR as the base creature +1.

### BRUJA

Brujas are hags who overcame their dark natures, often thanks to receiving visions of their deaths. A bruja's look is simply that of an old woman, but she retains her power.

Alignment: any non-Evil

A bruja retains all the base hag's powers, plus she can cast spells as a witch of a level equal to her hag Hit Dice (if Mature or older, her CL increases by one).

Brujas are immune to curses.

A bruja's CR increases by 1

## NEW RACES

### GNOMES (HILL, THORNE)

A mysterious folk of small, philosophical humanoids tied to the fey and the Elf Lords of the Shadow Forest, hill gnomes are a people of artisans and tinkers, who usually prefer the company of their own families and close friends. Thorne gnomes, also called spriggans, are often seen as malicious and cruel tricksters, but in truth they are usually a threat only for those who try to bully them. Hill gnomes are prevalently found in Darkon, the Shadow Forest, Nidala, or Tepest, while thorne gnomes are found in Collodi, Sithicus, and the Shadow Forest. Gnomes can live up to 400 years.

#### Hill Gnome Racial Traits

*Size:* Small

*Type (Subtype):* Humanoid (Gnome)

*Speed:* 20 feet

*Senses:* Low-light vision: you can see twice as far as humans in conditions of dim light.

*Ability Score Adjustments:* +2 Constitution, +2 Charisma, –2 Strength

*Defensive Training:* You get a +4 dodge bonus to your AC against monsters of the fey type.

*Gnome Magic:* You add 1 to the DCs of any saving throws to resist illusion spells that you cast. If you have a Charisma score of 11 or higher, you also gain the following spell-like abilities: 1/day—dancing lights, ghost sound, prestidigitation, and speak with animals. The caster level for these effects is equal to your character level. The DC for each of these spells is equal to 10 + the spell's level + your Charisma modifier (plus an additional 1 for ghost sound, as it is of the illusion school).

*Illusion Resistance:* You get a +2 racial bonus on saving throws against illusion spells or effects.

*Tinkerer:* You get a +2 racial bonus on Disable Device and Sleight of Hand checks.

*Keen Senses:* You receive a +2 racial bonus on Perception checks.

*Obsessive:* You receive a +2 racial bonus to a Craft or Profession skill of your choice.

*Weapon Familiarity:* You treat any weapon with the word “gnome” in its name as a martial weapon.

*Languages:* You can speak Common (Baloki), Gnomish, and Sylvan. Bonus languages: Darkonese, Dwarven, Elvish, Goblin, Lamordian, Nidalan, and Orcish.

*Favored Class:* Bard.

#### Thorne Gnome Racial Traits

*Size:* Small

*Type (Subtype):* Humanoid (Gnome)

*Speed:* 20 feet.

*Senses:* Low-light vision: you can see twice as far as humans in conditions of dim light.

*Ability Score Adjustments:* +2 Dexterity, +2 Charisma, –2 Strength

*Defensive Training:* You get a +4 dodge bonus to your AC against monsters of the fey type.

*Enchantment Resistance:* You get a +2 racial bonus on saving throws against enchantment spells or effects.

*Hatred:* You get +1 racial bonus on attack rolls against humanoids of the elf and human subtypes.

*Keen Senses:* You receive a +2 racial bonus on Perception checks.

*Spriggan Magic:* You add 1 to the DCs of any saving throws to resist enchantment spells that you cast. If you have a Charisma score of 11 or higher, you also gain the following spell-like abilities: 1/day—charm, enlarge person, ghost sound. The caster level for these effects is equal to your character level. The DC for each of these spells is equal to 10 + the spell's level + your Charisma modifier (plus an additional 1 for charm, as it is of the enchantment school).

*Powerful Build:* You are considered one size larger for any purpose which advantages you.

*Weapon Familiarity:* You are proficient with rapiers, and you treat any weapon with the word “gnome” in its name as a martial weapon.

*Languages:* You can speak Common (Baloki), Gnomish, and Sylvan. Bonus languages: Collodian,

Darkonese, Dwarven, Elvish, Goblin, Lamordian, Nidalan, Orcish, Sithican.

*Favored Class:* Rogue

### HALFLINGS (BUSYHAND, FINFOOT)

Halflings, the little folk, came with the humans from the Amber Reaches. After the fall of the Olympian Empire, they dispersed along the major rivers and across the most fertile plains of the Core, like the Vuchar, Musarde, Zerkalnaja, Drochar, and Nharov. Two branches of the halfling people emerged then: agriculturist busyhand halflings and fishing finfoot halflings. The biggest halfling communities are the finfoot ones, which live on the coast of Sithicus, and the busyhand one, which lives around and in the city of Rivalis and in the Plain of the Vuchar. The former pay homage to the elf king of Sithicus, but are relatively autonomous, left to manage the coast and the trade along the mouth of the Musarde river. The latter is the backbone of Darkonese agriculture. However, often the two lines live together. Halfling average lifespan is 120 years.

#### Busyhand Halfling Racial Traits

*Size:* Small

*Type (Subtype):* Humanoid (Halfling)

*Speed:* 20 feet, you are never slowed down by armor or encumbrance.

*Ability Score Adjustments:* +2 Dexterity, +2 Constitution, -2 Strength

*Senses:* Normal vision.

*Stone Thrower:* You can throw stones without penalties, substituting your Dexterity modifier for your Strength modifier in the damage rolls (1d3).

*Halfling Health:* You receive a +2 racial bonus on Fortitude saving throws.

*Keen Senses:* Halflings receive a +2 racial bonus on Perception checks.

*Skilled Hands:* You receive a +2 racial bonus to one Craft and one Profession skill of your choice.

*Weapon Familiarity:* You are proficient with all slings, and treat any weapon with the word "halfling" in its name as a martial weapon.

*Languages:* You speak Common (Baloki) and Halfling. Bonus Languages: Darkonese, Elvish (Neblionese and Sithican), Lamordian.

*Favored Class:* Fighter

#### Finfoot Halfling Racial Traits

*Size:* Small

*Type (Subtype):* Humanoid (Halfling)

*Speed:* 20 feet, you also have a 20 feet Swim Speed. You also have a +8 racial bonus to Swim checks.

*Ability Score Adjustments:* +2 Dexterity, +2 Charisma, -2 Strength.

*Senses:* Twilight vision: you can see twice as far as humans in conditions of low visibility, like moon light, starlight, and torch light.

*Fearless:* You receive a +2 racial bonus on all saving throws against fear. This bonus stacks with the bonus granted by halfling luck.

*Halfling Luck:* You receive a +1 racial bonus on all saving throws.

*Keen Senses:* You receive a +2 racial bonus on Perception checks.

*Sure-Footed:* You receive a +2 racial bonus on Acrobatics and Climb checks.

*Languages:* Common and Halfling, Bonus Language: Any not secret.

*Favored Class:* Rogue.

### PAKA

Pakas are cat hybrid creatures which can assume human aspect. They live in small communities, but are more numerous in Invidia, Nova Vaasa, and Valachan.

#### Paka Racial Traits

*Size:* Medium

*Type:* Humanoid (Paka, Shapeshifter)

*Speed:* 30 feet.

*Senses:* Low-light vision: you can see twice as far as humans in conditions of dim light. Darkvision up to 60 feet.

*Ability Score Adjustments:* +2 Dexterity, +2 Charisma, -2 Constitution.

**Shape Shift:** As a standard action, you can assume a specific human shape, like with the alter self spell. You can return to your natural form as a move action.

**Speak with Animals (Sp):** (Only cats, at will.)

**Natural Attack:** In natural form, you can use your claws as natural weapons. You inflict 1d4 + your Strength modifier damage with a hit. It is a secondary attack.

**Control Cats:** A paka can control instantly up to 10 natural cats. Supernatural cats, such as familiars or magical beasts similar to cats have a Saving Throw (Will Negates, DC: 10 + 1/2 your class level your Charisma Modifier.)

**Lick Wounds (Su):** Once per day, as a standard action, when in natural form, you can lick wounds and heal 2d8 + your Charisma modifier damage.

**Cat Fall (Ex):** You ignore first 20 feet of falling damage. You can also reduce the eventual damage from higher falls by half the damage with an Acrobatics check, DC 10 + 1 for every 10 feet after 20 feet. You are never prone after a fall.

**Cat Nimbleness (Ex):** You have a +2 Bonus to Climb and Acrobatics rolls.

**Languages:** You can speak Common (Baloki), and Paka. Bonus languages: Invidian, Valachani, Terg (Vaasan)

**Favored Class:** Rogue.

## SIDHE ELVES

Long-lived fey who were the ancestors of elves, Sidhe elves now live in the Shadow Forest.

### *Sidhe Elves Racial Traits*

**Size:** Medium

**Type:** Fey

**Speed:** 30 feet.

**Senses:** Superior low-light vision: you can see four times as far as humans in conditions of dim light.

**Ability Score Adjustments:** +2 Intelligence, +2

Wisdom, +2 Charisma,

**Sidhe Magic:** You add 1 to the DCs of any saving throws to resist spells that you cast. If you have a Charisma Score of 11 or higher, you also gain the following spell-like abilities: 3/day—augury, light,

mage hand. The caster level for these effects is equal to your character level. You have +4 bonus to saving throws against magic.

**Sleepless:** You are immune to sleep effects, and you do not need to sleep, only to meditate in a vigilant trance for 4 hours.

**Telepathy (Su):** 30 feet.

**Ageless:** Sidhe elves are immune to the negative effects of aging, and can live up to 5,000 years, with noble members capable of living ten times longer.

**Weapon Familiarity:** You treat any weapon with the word “elf” in its name as a martial weapon.

**Languages:** You can speak Common (Baloki), Elvish, and Sylvan. Bonus languages: Darkonese, Gnomish, and Nidalan. Sidhe also possess a limited form of telepathy, allowing them to communicate mentally with any creature within 30 feet with which they share a language.

**Favored Class:** Wizard.

## WOLFWERE

Wolfweres are intelligent wolves able to turn into hybrid humanoid-wolves and into fully humanoid beings. They are an artistically oriented people, who are very good with words and music. In Invidia, they are appreciated as the kingdom’s champions, in Kartakass, they are trying to establish their own nation.

### Wolfwere Racial Traits

**Size:** Medium

**Type:** Magical Beast (Shapeshifter)

**Speed:** 40 feet. (30 in human and hybrid form)

**Senses:** Low-light vision: you can see twice as far as humans in conditions of dim light. Darkvision, up to 60 feet. Scent.

**Ability Score Adjustments:** +2 Dexterity, +2 Intelligence, +2 Charisma, -2 Wisdom.

**Bonus Natural Armor:** +1

**Spell resistance:** 5 + HD.

**Shape Shift:** As a standard action, you can assume a specific human shape, like with the alter self spell. Alternatively, you can turn into a hybrid wolf-



humanoid creature. You can return to your natural form as a move action.

Speak with Animals (Sp): (Only wolves, at will.)

Natural Attack: In natural form, you can use your bite as a natural weapon; you inflict 1d6 + your Strength modifier damage with a hit. It is a primary attack in your natural form and secondary attack in hybrid form.

Quadruped: In natural form, you can't wear armor or clothes made for humanoids, nor wield weapons.

Keen Senses: You receive a +4 racial bonus to Perception checks.

Song of Lethargy: Once a day, you can sing a lullaby which requires everyone who hears you to make a Will save, DC 10 + half character level + your Charisma modifier. A creature that fails the save gets the slowed condition for 1d4 rounds.

Languages: You can speak Common (Baloki) and Terg. Bonus languages: Invidian, Valachani, Terg (Vaasan)

Favored Class: Bard.

Greater Wolfweres are dire wolves, have a +3 natural armor bonus, and can summon 1d3 wolves for an hour every day.

## Goblinwood

The Goblinwood is the home of various peoples, and several villages dot it.

### Places and People of Interest:

Other than the hobgoblin fortress of Wargfort, the Goblinwood has the Cave of the Mother, a holy site of Luthic. The village of Brokenbones is in a good relationship with the Tepestani village of Goblinwatch, to the point that the Sheriff of Goblinwatch married the daughter of Nagdor (Old Hobgoblin Fighter 7, N/G), the hobgoblin Chief of Brokenbones.

The trolls of Bridgecliff are tribal brutes who practice a coming-of-age rite consisting of a troll hiding in a secret room of an old bridge once built on a river they deviated. Here, they prey on unsuspecting travelers. The worg packs gather under Fenris Fang, a massive rock in the west of the wood. The current elected High Leader of all the packs is the pragmatic Alwurn (L/N), Leader of the Quickfang Pack and a worg alpha (a Large worg with a frightening howl, CR 6)

Orcs are small in number and deeply spiritual. Krarga the Cave Prophet (Old Orc Oracle 14, N/G) is the most venerable religious figure in the Goblinwood. Kobolds are scholars and engineers, while goblins are scouts, bugbears are special commandos, and ogres are shock troops. Unconfirmed rumors speak about a secret kobold city in the hills of the southern woods, Wyrmvault.

**DREAD NOTE:** *The Dragon Lord. The Goblinwood is a part of Tepest, but if you wish to make it a separate domain, the red dragon Shingarak might play the Darklord. Once a mighty dragon who exterminated his own family to live forever as a dracolich, he was finally killed off by a coalition of human, fey, and goblinoid heroes, and he was reborn ... as a kobold. With all the power of a great wyrm sealed in the body of a kobold, unable to regain his former might in any transient form he takes, Shingarak is forever bound to his old lair, and, most humiliatingly, he is forever bound to be the adviser of the kobold rulers, never the lord.*

## UNDER LAMENT†

The vast underground cave system under the massive Mount Lament is the home of various civilizations.

### Places and People of Interest:

In the caves of the highest levels, we have the various troglodyte tribes. Recently, the Warchief of the Stonespear Tribe, Lyxatzar (Middle-Aged Troglodyte Fighter Warlord 8, L/E) has started to reunite the various tribes under his rule.

Hidden under a powerful spell and suspended on a magical web, you find Arach Edren, the massive city-state of the dark elves, who retired here to preserve their culture when humans took over the Core. Here, eight drow noble houses rule in a complicated balance of power. The d'Aelestreen House, ruled by the Matriarch Donella d'Aelestreen (Adult Drow Bard 13, N/G), is the dominant house of the city, and has managed to keep peace in the city and under the mountain, for now.

In the deep of the subterranean cave system, you find the kingdom of the ratfolk. The swarming metropolis of Cloakia is the ratfolk capital city. There, the Council of Tails, presided over by Emperor Slrukiswak IX (Old Ratfolk Aristocrat 9, L/N), rules over a peaceful yet very numerous people. Their kingdom sometimes clashes with its neighbor, nominally the dark elves, and, of course, the illithids of Xarmallanth. The most mysterious of the underground peoples, these illithids are extremely isolationist, and way less active than their brethren in Bluetspur.

**DREAD NOTE:** *The Witch of the Dead Waters. Under Lament is a part of Tepest, and the Witch of the Dead Waters is canonically Granny Smile, who keeps a hideout in the aforementioned marshes. However, if you wish to make Under Lament into a dominion of his own, the Witch is another creature, older and more powerful than Granny Smile. An ancient annis, who was once a drow priestess of Lolth called Zymiara, she was stripped of her beauty for failing to take over Arach Edren and trying to destroy it out of spite. She is cursed to be forever banished from Arach Edren, and she consoles herself by scheming endlessly to destroy it.*





# BEHIND THE MASK

AN NPC CARD SYSTEM FOR MASQUERADE ENCOUNTERS

BY MICHAEL "MEPHISTO" ADAMS

*Masquerade, paper faces on parade  
Masquerade, hide your face so the world will never find you  
Masquerade, every face a different shade  
Masquerade, look around, there's another mask behind you*

- Charles Hart, *Phantom of the Opera*, "Masquerade/Why So Silent"



From the masquerade public festivities of Richemulot to the private masquerade balls of Dementlieu's aristocracy and Azalin Rex's seasonal masquerade of debauchery in Castle Avernus, masquerades are an essential gothic horror trope. Information on how to run masquerade adventures can be found in Robert J. Schwalb's article *Masquerades* from *Dungeon Magazine* #190 and there are many good published masquerade adventures such as

*World's End Masquerade Ball* by Luke Pullen, David Noonan's Eberron adventure *Whisper's of the Vampire's Blade*, Ashley Waren's, *A Night of Masks and Monsters*, and *Masque of Dreams* by B. Matthew Conklin III found in *Dungeon Magazine* #142.

The NPC card system I present in this article takes a different approach to the game, where miniatures and battlegrounds give way to images that help create a more active role playing. The cards should be cut around the images and set face up on the gaming table. The letters and numbers, printed on the back side of each card, represent the information that specific person has. Appointed in each character card is also a DC number for a Gather Information Skill check. The cards may be lined, scattered around the table or in groups, depending how one wants to use them. Adventurers pick up a card of their choosing and turn it around when they want to interact with that person.



The letter or number each card has, is a reference to the true or false information (depending on the success of the skill check) each NPC shares with the PCs. The letter in each card represents a truth while the number represents false information. A purchase DC depends on the transaction an (\*) NPC is willing to accept in order to share information. This purchase could be based on offering money or a gift to the NPC or it could be knowledge or important information, something that is usually common in the domain of Richemulot. It is up to the DM to decide how much an information a NPC has costs or if someone can purchase information from an NPC, depending on the NPC's alignment and loyalties. A PC may be given false information even if that information was purchased.



For adventures where time is of the essence as the one mentioned below, turning a card and interacting with that person can be assigned to 5d3 minutes in game time. The masks and information contained in this article were originally created to be used in the *Dungeon Magazine #53* adventure *Spellbook Masquerade* by J. Lee Cunningham, though the system and the cards can be used for any other masquerade adventure. *Spellbook Masquerade* is a solo adventure for one arcane spellcaster character of levels 3-5 though with small changes the adventure could easily be used for a rogue or other stealthy character as well. The adventure's description is simple "Uncover masks beneath masks, and plots beneath plots" and this is the concept on which the card system in this article is based on. The *Spellbook Masquerade* adventure can be easily converted for use in a Ravenloft campaign. In my conversion the adventure is set up in the southern Dementlieu town of Chateaufort, close to the borders with Mordent.

While I have changed the names of the NPC's found in the *Spellbook Masquerade* adventure the plot and main set up remains basically unchanged. The only twist I have included is that the *tome of lich creation*, which is the focus of this adventure, once belonged to the Crimson Arcanus a Falkovnian lich who was destroyed by Rudolph Van Richten and his companions. In life the Crimson Arcanus was Antirius the Red a wizard from Falkovnia. The *tome of lich creation* is sought after Marcos Vedarrak, the emissary of Falkovnia in Dementlieu and secretly a member of the Fraternity of Shadows. Vedarrak's research and divination magic brought him to Chateaufort and the keep of the same name in the edge of the town. Marcos Vedarrak is a collector of books once owned by the Crimson Arcanus, he regards them as stolen Falkovnian property and spends a lot of time and resources trying to find the lich's arcane tomes. He aspires to donate his collection to the Ministry of the Arcane creating a section in the Radiant Tower's library named after himself. Crimson Arcanus's *tome of lich creation* featured in this adventure is the necromantic tome Marcos procures in 756 BC for Erik van Rijn, which was used by the outlander professor to turn himself into a lich.

In my version Burford's Rare Book Emporium has changed to *Bouffard, L'emporium du Livre Rare* and the wizard who owns it is Victor Bouffard, Div3/Exp8 a retired entertainer and former member of Club l'Artiste but still working with La Société de Legerdemain. In his early days as an entertainer he was known as Grand Divino. Victor mistakenly sold the *tome of lich creation* to a local aristocrat and wants to get it back. He asks the adventurer to attend the masquerade on his behalf, find the cursed tome and switch it with another book that has a similar cover but is harmless, *Flora and Fauna of the Forfarian Forests* by Professor Abelhous Nicholai (instead of the *One Hundred Recipes for a Hungry Ogre* mentioned in the original adventure).

**Other names of characters, places etc. included in the *Spellbook Masquerade* adventure have been changed as such.**

Kelsey Kincaid / Juliette Durfort Human Exp1/Sor4

Kincaid Brewing Company / Durfort Brewery

Brannon / Chateaufort

Gurney's Tavern / Poulet Gauche

Roscoe Slythe / Remy Soulier Human T1

Anna Lane / Inés Reville Human Com1

Captain Collinsworth Jarboe / Capitain Rodolphe Jarbeau Human Ftr3

Orchid (Banderlog) / Orchid (Dread Familiar, Babbon)

Ralph Doody / Yoan Huron Human Ftr2

Tom Doody / René Huron Human Ftr2

Victoria Brace / Albine Romilly Human Com1

Vlad Graves / Luther Graves Human Div3  
 Tapper / Albert Grenon Human Exp2

Type of Information	DC	Purchase DC
General	10	5
Specific	15	10
Restricted	20	15
Protected	25	20

**General** information concerns local happenings, rumors, gossip, and the like.

**Specific** information usually relates to a particular question.

**Restricted** information includes facts that aren't generally known and requires that the character locate someone who has access to such information.

**Protected** information is even harder to come by and might involve some danger, either for the one asking the questions or the one providing the answer. There's a chance that someone will take note of anyone asking about restricted or protected information.

**Failure by 5 or more means the information is false.**

**Characters with an asterisk cannot be purchased for information.**

## TRUE

**A:** Julliette Durfort is an astrologer and her keep contains an observatory  
 (DC20 the entrance for the observatory is secret)

**B:** Julliette Durfort was once engaged to a young noble, but her betrothed died unexpectedly  
 (DC20 the young noble was of House Dumonde)

**C:** A section of the keep has been blocked off.  
 (DC 20 Julliette holds the only key to the blocked-off wing of the keep)

**D:** Many of Julliette Durfort's competitors have died of a strange illness.  
 (DC 20 these include the Obernai, Danone, deGayant, Saint-Sylvestre monastery breweries)

**E:** The upper level was sealed off after her family's demise. There is a gate there that blocks access to the rest of the upper level except Julliette's bedroom. The hallway beyond the gate is in a state of disrepair or ruin as a result of age or neglect.  
 (DC 25 several times when my mistress was seen entering the barred section of the castle but then later she would reenter the castle from the front door without having left the second floor)

**V:** Many of Julliette Durfort's competitors have died of a strange illness.  
(DC 25 the illness had similar symptoms with arsenic poisoning)

**T:** On more than one occasion, Albert has returned from the tavern to find candlelight spilling out between the cracks of the boarded houses second floor. He knows that area served as the Durfort family quarters before Julliette had it sealed. He believes something strange is afoot in this wing of the keep.  
(DC 25 perhaps Julliette is working dark magic)

**JD:** This is Julliette Durfort herself, the Gather Information check becomes a Bluff check against Julliette Duforts Sense Motive +2. If the check is successful, the Bluff works and the adventure continues normally. If the Bluff check fails Julliette summons the guards and the PC is escorted out of the keep.

## FALSE

- 1: Buffard's shop contains many evil tomes.
- 2: Buffard is a powerful wizard.
- 3: Julliette Durfort is a powerful sorceress.
- 4: Julliette Durfort controls a powerful werewolf.

In the version where Marcos Veddarak is present substitute any male masked card to represent him. If such is the case Markos shares minor information and the PC skill roll is actually a covered Will save DC 16 against a *detect thoughts* spell. If the save fails, Marcos knows that the *tome of lich creation* is within the halls of Chateau noir. Substitute Vlad Graves in the adventure's final encounter with Marcos Veddarak. Marcos escapes Chateau noir with the *tome of lich creation* instead.

## I. HOUSE DELAROUX (DC 15)

### (True)

House Delaroux was established by a successful merchant and wine connoisseur, Lucien Delaroux, when he was granted barony over a strip of land east of Edrigan. The first Baron Delaroux used this strip of land and his mercantile income to establish a winery, which has been passed down through the generations and serving as House Delaroux's main source of income. Bottles produced during the first Delaroux generation are wildly popular in Edrigan and some wine connoisseur circles in Port-a-Lucine.

### (DC 20)

Bottles produced during the first Delaroux generation are wildly popular in Edrigan and some wine connoisseur circles in Port-a-Lucine, but the renowned taste of the first Baron Delaroux was not passed on to his heirs along with the winery, leading the Delaroux name to fall largely into obscurity.

### (False)

House Delaroux was established by a successful merchant and wine connoisseur, Lucien Delaroux, when he was granted barony over a strip of land east of Edrigan. Chateau Delaroux currently lies abandoned and boarded up, after an unexplained

phenomenon led to the family's disappearance. The current Baron Delaroux and his wife are presumed dead, leaving the broken estate to the sole Delaroux heir, Zoé Delaroux, who resurfaced one week after the family's disappearance.

## II. HOUSE DU CHANTIER (DC 15)

### (True)

Established in the early history of Dementlieu, the du Chantier family is an old, moderately well known family for their particularly sweet vintage of wine that is fairly popular amongst nobility of the Core. They aren't known for an overly strong political presence, but the current lord of the house, Maximilien du Chantier, is quite content just running his vineyard in the countryside of Dementlieu.

### (DC 20)

As for his wife, the lovely Lady Noelle du Chantier, she spends her days working as a doctor specializing in women and childbirth.

### (False)

Established in the early history of Dementlieu, the du Chantier family is an old, moderately well known family for their particularly sweet vintage of wine that is fairly popular amongst nobility of the Core. Rumors have always circulated around the house, of individuals within the family possibly being practitioners of magic, though what kind has not been seen in public...

## III. HOUSE JALABERT (DC 15)

### (True)

A family well-known and respected for its patronage of the arts, it is one of the most respected in Port-a-Lucine, though the family's influence does not extend much farther past the enlightened city. Although Pierre Jalabert, Sr. is said to be the leader of the family, Vicomtesse Linette Jalabert manages the day-to-day affairs of the Jalabert Family.

### (DC 20)

Linette was married to Baptiste Molière the last descendant of House Molière. Unfortunately his family ended when he passed away during a fishing incident gone awry. She retained her surname, perhaps out of pride, but perhaps for other reasons.

### (False)

A family well-known and respected for its patronage of the arts, it is one of the most respected in Port-a-Lucine, though the family's influence does not extend much farther past the enlightened city. Linette is the widow of Baptiste Molière the last descendant of House Molière. She retained her surname, perhaps out of pride.

## IV. HOUSE D'ÉVREUX (DC 15)

### (True)

Aristide d'Évreux holds many titles -- he is styled often as "His Grace Aristide de Évreux, Duc de Beauvais, Comte de Angoulême, Marquis de Calmont, and Mayor of Chateaunoir". Possessing numerous large tracts of land in and around Chateaunoir, he is perhaps the most influential figure in the southernmost part of Dementlieu.



**(DC 20)**

The elder nobleman is often represented by his exceptionally young wife, Simone. Numerous individuals have suggested that Simone is in fact the one who leads this family, and her husband is in fact henpecked into carrying out her will.

**(DC 25)**

Simone is known to be purchasing large amounts of dapplewort that she uses to control her husband.

**(False)**

Aristide d'Évreux holds many titles -- he is styled often as "His Grace Aristide de Évreux, Duc de Beauvais, Comte de Angoulême, Marquis de Calmont, and Mayor of Chateau noir". The elder nobleman is often represented by his exceptionally young wife, Simone. The two work as one, united in their ambition...

**V. HOUSE ARTOIS (DC 15)****(True)**

The household of Artois stakes its claim in the Marquisat de Damas, where old blood sits upon older money, like a weary dragon does its horde. The Marquis de Damas Guy-Jean Artois claims an accomplished military career in service to the Serene Republic; the family's campaigns during the Falkovian incursions filled their halls with relics of duty.

With the Chaetueux de Damas overlooking scenic vineyards on terroir specially cultivated over generations, the Artois name more often than not comes hand in hand with talk of wine. Specializing in late harvest grapes that compliment the benefits of the unique terroir of the region, Artois wine is a regular suspect found on tasting boards for sampling in the fall seasons.

**(DC 20)**

This success is wielded ever so carefully, in the form of frequent parties and exclusive gatherings to sample wine fresh from virgin kegs. Not a month passes that the Chateaux de Damas goes without aristocratic parties and revelry. The Madame la Marquise had come to learn that a successful party would mean a successful account, and so she taught her daughters how to wield aesthetic and indulgence like the sons learned how to aim pistols.

**(False)**

The household of Artois stakes its claim in the Marquisat de Damas. Their famous Artois wine is not based on taste but rather in business administration. Oversight of the vineyards, workers, and accounts fall to Madame la Marquise Evangeline Artois, whose brilliance in administration and tightly drawn purse-strings are a credit to the business's success.

**VI. HOUSE TRELLIARD (DC 15)****(True)**

House Trelliard was established in the aftermath of the first Falkovnian invasion of 707 BC. Its patron founder, Louis Trelliard, was a cavalry officer of no particular note in the Gendarmerie, whom was captured by Drakov's forces during the early days of the war, and sent to Falkovnia. As generally accepted story goes, Louis cut his way out of imprisonment in Lekar, and returned to Dementlieu after a dangerous escape. The Council of Brilliance awarded Louis a barony for his bravery and enemy intelligence retrieved during his escape.

**(DC 20)**

The current head of house is the Baron de Chalaines, Geoffry Trelliard, a reclusive man, said to be more concerned with hunting than politics. Often, he is away for days on hunting expeditions. His wife, Valérie, in contrast, is an active, eager woman in Dementlieuse high society, notable for her exquisitely fashionable dresses and attendance of social gatherings.

**(False)**

House Trelliard was established in the aftermath of the first Falkovnian invasion of 707 BC. Its patron founder, Louis Trelliard, was a cavalry officer of no particular note in the Gendarmerie, whom was captured by Drakov's forces during the early days of the war, and sent to Falkovnia. There are some that muttered then and even today, that the founding Trelliard was nothing but a coward and a traitor, who exchanged vital military information for his release.

**VII. HOUSE LAVERTÉ (DC 15)****(True)**

The Laverte family is a highly influential family with most of its holdings in Chateau noir. For this reason, it rarely enters the political arena that so often embroils the capital of Dementlieu, Port-a-Lucine.

**(DC 20)**

Only when their own interests are threatened do they offer more than token aid to the other noble families. They do give a sizable amount of money to higher education and also bankroll a sizable amount of the public education that all Dementliuese get.

**(False)**

The Laverte family is a highly influential family in the region. The minor noble family of the Casteelles serves them as both an ally and a powerful vassal.

**VIII. HOUSE TREMBLAY (DC 15)****(True)**

House Tremblay can barely be considered two generations old, leading more vaunted noble houses to regard them with disdain and contempt. The family are little more than a family of upjumped merchants Léopold Tremblay was a spice trader and seafarer from Ste. Luciennes.

**(DC 20)**

He had experienced middling success up until a voyage to Sri Raji in search of saffron ended in disaster. In a desperate attempt to rebuild his fortunes, he would take his vessel, the tragically-named La Moufette, and sail towards Souragne for sugar. This he found, and he would also find the captivating Marcelite Maillard, a dark-skinned Souragnien beauty whom Léopold Tremblay would bring home.

**(False)**

House Tremblay can barely be considered two generations old. The obscene wealth he made through the sale of Souragnien sugar-cane enabled Léopold Tremblay to secure through bribery the support of the Council of Brilliance in the issuance of letters patent. He was named the Baron de Choisy, his family's estate a small parcel of land just outside of Chateaufaux with a manse and a few nearby farms.

## IX. HOUSE DU SUIIS (DC 15)

### (True)

Alphonse and Lucia DuSuis, a wealthy couple that is well known among the nobility of Port-a-Lucine, most recently for an embarrassing faux pas that resulted in other nobles quietly and efficiently causing his business to fail. An attempt to further the growth of his family business has backfired and his business is collapsing. He has turned to drinking, probably the reason he joined the ball.

### (DC 20)

The reason his for his business going bad was an ill-considered remark he made to one of Lord-Governor Marcel Guignol's advisors, his daughter Hélène is an expert manipulator that has distanced herself from them. She is aspiring to become a member of the Council of Brilliance.

### (DC 25)

The ill-remark was made for Dominic D'Honaire.

### (False)

Alphonse and Lucia DuSuis is a wealthy couple that is well known among the nobility of Port-a-Lucine. They have a very talented in politics daughter Helené DuSuis, but despite her obvious interest in the workings of the nobility, her father is dismissive of her potential, stating that her role is to find a suitor capable of taking on the businesses once they are married. Probably this is the reason he came here, to find a noble to marry his daughter and save his collapsing business.

## X. HOUSE VAUQUELIN (DC 15)

### (True)

An old and somewhat forgotten house, House Vauqelin traces it's roots back to the Mordentish nobility. Upon arriving in Dementlieu they used their substantial wealth to take up residence on a large estate upon the Baie d'Pernault, Manoir de Bois de Saule. There they existed for several generations quietly and without incident.

### (DC 20)

Much unlike their noble peers the Vauquelins seemed to shun the excessive trappings of their station. Powdered wigs, powdered faces and the cutting edge of fashion were never a concern of the family, nor was the banter and prattle the Dementlieuese upper-crust is known for, also having a more morbid taste. Regardless, they are both intelligent and shrewd and recently Visconte Albert de Vaquelin secured a position on the Council of Brilliance in matters of trade, business and guildcraft.

### (False)

An old and somewhat forgotten house, House Vauqelin traces it's roots back to the Mordentish nobility. Members of House Vauqelin have an obsession with spiritualism and the occult. Recently Visconte Albert de Vaquelin, the family patriarch cured a position on the Council of Brilliance in matters of trade, business and guildcraft. But maybe he would be better suited for witchcraft, as he is rumored to be a dabbler of necromantic magic.

## **XI. HOUSE MOREAU (DC 15)**

### **(True)**

Dame Lilianne Moreau arrived in Port-à-Lucine at the beginning of 726BC and quickly came in to the position of Manager of Les Théâtre de la Cathédrale and retainer to House Jalabert. A commoner at the time, she nonetheless proved capable of integrating herself into Dementlieuse society and ingratiating herself with a few members of the nobility - namely Baptiste Molière-Jalabert and his wife, Linette.

### **(DC 20)**

She is rumored to be the sole survivor of a disgraced Richemuloise noble family, she has shown a certain degree of cunning in her dealings with the Dementlieuse nobility and has garnered some popularity with the common folk of Port-à-Lucine through her charity, Champs D'Or, an organisation working both to provide food to the poor and to put an end to Dementlieu's economic reliance on Falkovnian grain shipments. House Jalabert supported Lilianne's rise to nobility and The Council of Brilliance subsequently granted her a knighthood, having taken note of her work with Champs D'Or as she made great strides to halt the famine during the most recent Falkovnian conflict. Thus, for better or worse, Dame Lilianne de Moreau is one of the latest additions to Dementlieu's nobility.

### **(False)**

When Dame Lilianne Moreau arrived in Port-à-Lucine she became a retainer to House Jalabert. House Jalabert supported Lilianne's rise to nobility and The Council of Brilliance subsequently granted her a knighthood, Dame Lilianne de Moreau is a Richemuloise upstart who is a former courtesan, any favor she has gained was bought by spreading her legs. She had earned a severe displeasure of House Dumonde, though the reason is apparently known only to Moreau now, since House Dumonde is no more. What happened to this once-prestigious house the past decade is a mystery, but was fortunate for Dame Moreau, as to have earned the ire of an eminent house, that does not bode well for the fledgling House Moreau.

## **XII. HOUSE DE LA CHAÎZE (DC 15)**

### **(True)**

De La Chaize is a reasonably large established House based out of Chateaufaux. Proud and strong, each of the four generations has boasted a large brood of sons. Family tradition has dictated that the eldest, benefit as heir of the estate and fortune, and also delegate responsibilities to the younger brothers. While not entirely unheard of, true born daughters of the House have been almost non-existent. The most current leader of the house, Baron Jean-Francois, and his wife, Baroness Genevieve run the day-to-day operations with strict adherence to tradition and social decorum.

### **(DC 20)**

About a day's ride outside of Chateaufaux lies the small village of Venasque. It is here that the noble family holds authority of Lordship, with extended family members managing day-to-day operations and passing on more elaborate and important decisions up to the Baron directly. Several years of careful financial planning and almost exclusive male offspring has situated House De La Chaize as quite influential in their home base of operation. They also hold reach in Port-a-Lucine through favorable arranged matches and business deals.

### **(False)**

About a day's ride outside of Chateaufaux lies the small village of Venasque. It is here that the noble De La Chaize family holds authority of Lordship, with extended family members managing day-to-day operations and passing on more



elaborate and important decisions up to the Baron directly. Trade of precious metals and gems across the country is the generally known basis of the house's wealth, as well as a thoroughly developed private military operation. Drawing little attention to themselves in public circles, the House operates subtlety in the background: amassing their wealth, and instructing retainers and male family members alike aggressively in manner of combat. It won't be long before they challenge the Republic.

### XIII. HOUSE DE LA ROCHENOIRE (DC 15)

#### (True)

The founding of House de la Rochenoire dates centuries prior with the grant of Charbonne to the then established baron Louis-Joseph de la Rochenoire. The small town and its surrounding lands near the Northern reaches of Dementlieu provided the descendants of Louis-Joseph with the resources to excel as entrepreneurs within the textiles industry. Through his legacy the family grew in steady prosperity until the year 707 BC when Lord-Governor Foquelaine ordered the execution of thirty peasants found swimming in Pernault Bay. The family chose to support the decree of the Lord-Governor with its patron, Guillaume de la Rochenoire, emerging in Port-a-Lucine to speak in favor of the nobility. His callous words salted the wounds of the poor and during the revolt that followed, the assets and holdings of the house were destroyed. In the wake of this considerable loss came the execution of the Lord-Governor, a blow which severed the family from its political allies and influence. House Dumonde took the opportunity to acquire de la Rochenoire lands by forging the deed for many of de la Rochenoire holdings. As I had information but never proof of this I never came forward with these accusations but House Dumonde did anything it could to make things difficult for me and my family. They circulated many rumors about me and how I came to possess my title and holdings. All these accusations are false.

#### (DC 25)

There are those who believe that I personally was responsible for the vanishing of House Dumonde in the past decade, nothing could be no further than the truth. I don't know how but I believe it is Juliette Durfort who is responsible for what happened to this once-prestigious house. She destroyed them and then spread rumors that House Moreau was responsible for their ruin.

#### (False)

The founding of House de la Rochenoire dates centuries prior with the grant of Charbonne to the then established baron Louis-Joseph de la Rochenoire. The small town and its surrounding lands near the Northern reaches of Dementlieu provided the descendants of Louis-Joseph with the resources to excel as entrepreneurs within the textiles industry. In the past decades House de la Rochenoire entered a state of seclusion, with the children of its successive generations unwilling to extend themselves in matters of country. House de la Rochenoire, is known only for donations issued to charity, where the family name might be found among the long lists of noble benefactors.

*Most families used were written by user Dread from the Ravenloft: Prisoners of the Mists forum, topic: Prominent families within Dementlieu.*



Anne Guinard DC 15



Bernad Fortin DC 10



Adèle Carlier DC 10



Remy Soulier DC 10



Zacharie Romilly DC 15



Albine Romilly DC 15



Capitain Rodolphe Jarbeau DC 10

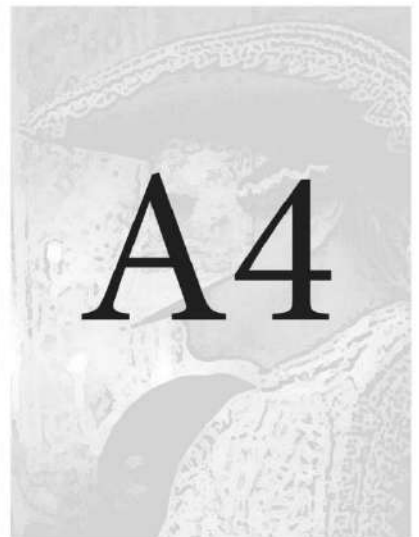


Rene Huron DC 10



Yoan Huron DC 10







Charlin Nardin DC 10



Léna Nez DC 15



Estelle Lagarde DC 15



Chloé Lagarde DC 15



Sabrina Lagarde DC 15



Zoé Malan DC 15



Amand Hamel DC 15



Florence Olin DC 15



François Malan DC 15









Yvette Morand DC 10



Clarise Morand DC 10



Héloïse Voland DC 10



Emmanuelle Griffon DC 10



Cédric Griffon DC 10



Beatrice Musson DC 10



Hélène Vital DC 15



Flavian Musson DC 10



Pierre Rossier DC 15







Baron de Choisy Léopold Tremblay



Marquis de Damas Guy-Jean Artois



Madame la Marquise Evangeline Artois



Dame Lilianne Moreau



Lord Alphonse DuSuis



Dame Lucia DuSuis



Baron Jean-Francois De La Chaize



Dame Cecile de la Rochenoire



Visconte Albert de Vaquelin









Kilian Lux DC 10



Héloïse Voland DC 10



Éric Marceaux DC 10



Jérôme Vital DC 15



Olivier Leroy DC 10



Gaston Morand DC 10



Solène Tetu DC 10



Jeanine Naud DC 10



Hector Desjardins DC 10







Gaston Morand DC 10



Noham Saunier DC 15



Hector Lefevre DC 10



Marc Varon DC 15



Roland Volland DC 10



Norbert Lagarde DC 15



Captain Alphonse Calland DC 15

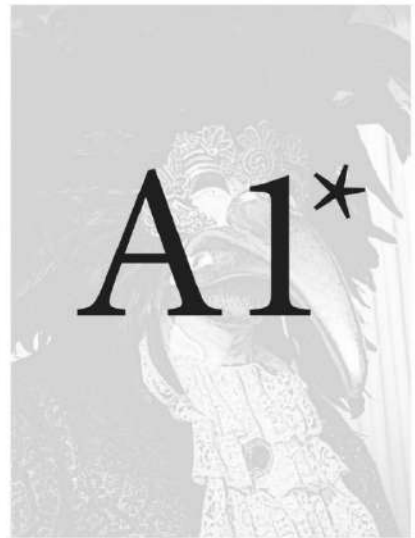


Martin Ganio DC 15



Armand Dion DC 15









Modestine Picard DC 15



Louis Picard DC 15



Jacques Picard DC 15



Rosine Lussier DC 15



Victor Picard DC 15



Félicien Lussier DC 15



Olivia Rossier DC 15



Isabel Sabat DC 15



Gaël Perrault DC 10







Servant DC 20



Servant DC 20



Servant DC 20



Servant DC 20



Luther Graves DC 20



Inés Revilla DC 10



Julliette Durfort



Albert Grenon DC 15









Comte de Chateau noir Anatole Laverte



Marcelite Maillard



Vicomtesse Linette Jalabert



Duc de Beauvais Aristide d'Évreux



Baroness de Chalaines Valérie Trelliard



Baroness Zoé Delaroux



Lord Maximilien du Chantier

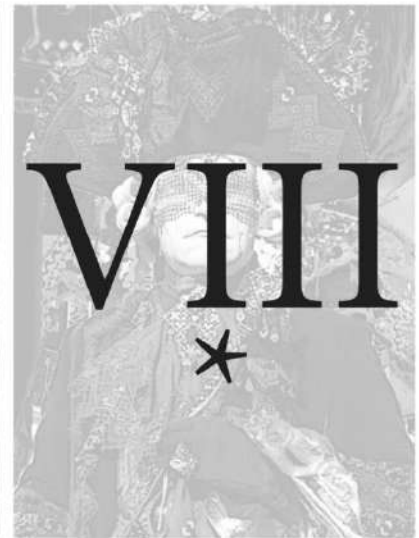


Duchesse Simone d'Évreux



Lady Noelle du Chantier





# 70 DOMAINS AND NIGHTMARESCAPES (DOMAIN IDEAS)

BY JACK THE REAPER

The following locations can be used in many forms – as domains, pockets, oubliettes, dreamscapes in the Nightmare lands, or anything else:

1. **Stormborne Citadel:** A flying castle crafted from black storm clouds, ruled by an evil storm giant.
2. **Crawling Chaos:** An endless network of claustrophobic underground tunnels, where humans can only crawl in darkness, hunted by giant moles, worms, and other threats.
3. **The Rooftops:** Skyscrapers protrude from a misty abyss under dark skies, connected by improvised bridges and ropes. People live only on the rooftops, as the buildings harbor unspeakable horrors.
4. **Endless Graveyard:** A dark and misty cemetery, going on seemingly forever. Escaping requires finding the tombstone bearing one's own name, lying inside the coffin, and awakening elsewhere. Beware the dread Undertaker who roams these grounds.
5. **Rotting Islands:** Upon a slimy ocean float the corpses of colossal monstrous beasts, and people struggle to survive upon them, harvesting what they need to stay alive.
6. **Hunting Houses:** Nightmarish animated houses with grotesque faces and mouths roam this landscape, seeking to devour humans and occasionally attacking each other.
7. **The Microcosm Within:** A microscopic landscape inside a body, where PCs must battle germs, viruses, and the sentient cancerous tumor that rules it.
8. **Eternal Battlefield:** A Valhalla-like realm of perpetual violence and bloodshed, where everyone is endlessly killed and resurrected.
9. **Monotonous Maze:** A grey, identical maze of houses and streets, where people all look the same and wander aimlessly. PCs risk losing their identities forever unless they find an escape.
10. **Dogs' Hell:** A ruined city populated by dogs, whose bites transform humans into dogs as well. The ruler, a hellhound, searches forever for his lost beloved master.
11. **Frozen Servitude:** Everyone in this land remains frozen in place, aware but paralyzed, occasionally freed by mysterious masters to serve them in various forms before being paralyzed again. The craving for fleeting freedom is everyone's obsession.
12. **Land of Ghouls:** An underground landscape filled with mounds of corpses and lakes of blood, populated by ghouls and other horrors.
13. **Talking Voices:** A realm populated by invisible, intangible beings that constantly comment on, taunt, scare, and harass visitors, gradually inflicting harm upon them.



14. **Dungeon of Filth:** A revolting dungeon flooded with nauseating refuse, garbage, and stench, inhabited by disgusting creatures.
15. **The Ravenous Plateau:** A land where huge, animated foodstuffs relentlessly attempt to consume visitors in a reversal of the natural order.
16. **Command & Conquer:** A domain ruled by The Commander, a military officer whose voice compels everyone to irresistibly obey his every command, no matter how vile.
17. **Acidic Abyss:** A volcanic landscape of acid pools, sulfur, and broken glass, ruled by a black dragon.
18. **Vivarium:** An enchanting neighborhood with empty cottages, whose streets twist and prevent escape. Visitors are ordered to nurture a non-human baby if they wish to gain their freedom. (Inspiration: the movie "Vivarium".)
19. **Alien Zoo:** A zoo containing all manner of monsters and horrors, maintained and visited by alien beings who cage humans as if they were but another species of monster.
20. **Dark Multiverse:** A ruined city mirroring visitors' hometowns, where evil, undead, and demonic versions of themselves relentlessly attack them, claiming to be counterparts from realities in which they succumbed to evil.
21. **Closetland:** A realm of children's nightmares, from which bogeymen emerge to terrorize and kidnap children. Visitors become children again and must confront their childhood fears. (Inspiration: Little Fears RPG.)
22. **The Game Rooms:** A series of darkened rooms, each inhabited by a host inviting visitors to play a game. As the game progresses, the host transforms into a monster, attacking losers and rewarding winners. Rumors suggest an escape gate lies in the final room, guarded by the Gatekeeper. (Inspiration: Nightmare / Atmosfear video board game.)
23. **The Infernal Farm:** A hellish farm where humans are nurtured, slaughtered and processed into meat products by humanoid demonic cattle, and must consciously endure torment until they are consumed.
24. **Toy Story:** Visitors become the puppet toys of a gigantic, sadistic child, which treats them unkindly.
25. **White Torture:** A flat, smooth plane illuminated by perpetual bright light, devoid of shadows, where extended stay leads to hallucinations and madness.
26. **Mirror of Loathing:** A realm mirroring visitors' hometowns and houses, but populated by family, friends, and loved ones who hate and despise them, abusing them mentally and physically.
27. **Infinite Museum:** A museum full of pictures that serve as portals, leading to ever-weirder landscapes with more pictures, trapping visitors in an endless loop.
28. **Abyssal Descent:** A gaping abyss with many layers, each darker and more twisted than the former. The deeper one goes, the higher the cost required to return. (Inspiration: the anime "Made in Abyss".)
29. **Land of the Lost:** A crumbling, dusty, abandoned town, where lost items and objects from various worlds are piled up. Visitors may search for their lost possessions, but risk becoming lost themselves. (Inspiration: the movie "Re-Cycle".)
30. **Shifting Personalities:** In this domain, all denizens undergo a personality shift at nightfall, becoming different (and usually darker) individuals with separate memories and motivations, completely unaware of their daytime selves. Only visitors notice the shift.
31. **Silent Place:** A land of forests and ruins, where giant bat-like monsters slumber

everywhere, hanging inverted from trees and rooftops. The surviving people must remain utterly quiet at all times, lest they wake these deadly creatures. (Inspiration: The movies "A Quiet Place" and "The Silence".)

32. **Castle of Paradox:** In this weird place, corridors turn in on themselves, up becomes down, and gravity behaves in paradoxical ways, reminiscent of Escher's paintings.
33. **Tombstone Castle:** A castle wholly made out of countless tombstones, grave markers, and graveyard statuary, looted from many cemeteries. Unsurprisingly, it's one of the most haunted castles imaginable.
34. **Under the Dome:** A land seemingly surrounded by a transparent dome, with huge, ugly faces constantly peering down, leering at the denizens like gigantic observers looking into an aquarium.
35. **Dark Sorcerer's Enclave:** A domain ruled by dark sorcerers, where dark magic is intricately woven into all aspects of life and magicless people are oppressed, like a dark, gothic version of Harry Potter's wizards' community.
36. **Belief Creates Reality:** A seemingly peaceful countryside with kind villagers, but in truth, the subconscious minds of the denizens shape reality. Unknown to them, the landscape changes based on their beliefs, and nightmares can emerge if fear and belief in monsters take hold.
37. **Monster's Masquerade:** A town where all denizens are monsters in human guise. Visitors become entangled in a murder mystery, only to discover that no one in this town is innocent, or even human.
38. **Child Games:** A town ruled by a capricious child-monster, who forces denizens to take part in deadly and grisly games like hide and seek, statues, and tag.
39. **Humiliation Nightmare:** Visitors find themselves in endless embarrassing and

humiliating situations, like the nightmare in which they go to school without pants, with everyone around mocking and staring at them with disgust and disbelief. Attempts to escape lead to even more humiliation.

40. **Don't Look Away:** Things and objects in this location remain fixed only when someone is looking at them. When nobody looks, they move or change into something else, often in creepy and disturbing ways.
41. **Fog of Forgetfulness:** A foggy moorland where everyone suffers from forgetfulness, hardly remembering their past or even the names and faces of others. The fog is the work of an ancient dragon, but its demise would unleash waves of violence and bloodshed, as old feuds and hatred resurface. (Inspiration: The novel "The Buried Giant" by Kazuo Ishiguro.)
42. **Hunter Hunted:** Vampires and other monsters hunt humans in broad daylight, while humans hide and sleep during the day, only venturing out at night.
43. **Golem Park:** A Westworld-style park, populated by human-looking golems. Guests are encouraged to indulge in their fantasies, but over time, they will be transformed into similar golems, controlled by the operators for the amusement of the next visitors.
44. **The Paradox Labyrinth:** A seemingly endless dungeon, where visitors repeatedly encounter versions of themselves engaged in deadly battles, trapped in a mind-bending cycle of paradoxical events. (Inspiration: The movie "Mouse-X" on YouTube.)
45. **House of 10,000 Corpses:** A large building, castle, or dungeon filled with countless corpses lying everywhere, in every possible state and position. Some of them animate occasionally, and you don't want to be there if they all do.
46. **Madman's Laboratory:** A sewer system transformed into a labyrinthine maze, which leads to the laboratories of a mad scientist.

His experiments, both the successful ones and the failures, roam the tunnels. There are also numerous traps to capture more subjects.

47. **The Underside:** An underground metropolis populated by rejects of the upper worlds. Madmen, freaks, and bizarre creatures struggle to survive and achieve their goals. (Inspiration: Neil Gaiman's "Neverwhere".)
48. **Dread Engines:** A city-sized factory, made of incomprehensible steampunk biomechanical and necro-mechanical machinery. The denizens toil endlessly, unaware of the machine's true purpose, created by a mad gnome inventor fused with its workings. (Inspiration: The movie "Mad God" and the anime "Memories: Cannon Fodder".)
49. **The Human Shrine:** A small realm, populated by grotesque humanoids seemingly made of clay. They worship human visitors as gods, performing bizarre and disturbing rituals. Refusal to play along enrages them, but compliance leads to a dark transpossession by the evil entity ruling this place.
50. **Asylum of Madness:** A hellish hospital/asylum where madness reigns. Terrible experiments and operations are performed on patients and visitors by insane medical staff, making Dominia look tame.
51. **Tormentor's Hell:** A seemingly endless dungeon full of torture chambers with rusty tools, where a mad, mute, brutal tormentor stalks his victims and subjects them to unspeakable horrors for no apparent reason. (Inspiration: The game "Tormentor".)
52. **Ignore Them:** A domain where horrid-looking spirits and demons walk around, attempting to draw people's attention. Safety lies in ignoring them completely; otherwise, they will tear victims to shreds. Denizens pretend nothing unusual is happening, even when surrounded by such

horrors. (Inspiration: The short movie "Ignore It" and the anime "Mieruko-Chan".)

53. **The Void:** An endless dark void without any directions, where visitors float among the floating corpses of other visitors, undead, and other monsters and threats. Supplies and treasures are scattered, but no exit can be found.
54. **Circle of Life and Death:** In this land, people die and come back to life in an unpredictable pattern. At any given moment, some are alive while others lie dead. Anyone may suddenly die or revive for an unknown period, affecting labor, romance, and everything else.
55. **Evil Dead Rise:** A land ruled by sadistic, demon-possessed undead, similar to the deadites of the Evil Dead series. They derive pleasure from physically and mentally torturing mortals, devouring their bodies and souls. The few surviving mortals live in constant horror.
56. **Body Horror:** A nightmarish realm where giant human limbs and organs walk, crawl, or hover, searching for prey. Humans without heads and limbs hunt for replacements to complete themselves.
57. **Colossal Menace:** A land prowled by monstrous, mindless titans, akin to the giants in "Attack on Titan," and other colossal human-eating monsters.
58. **Terror Park:** A horror-themed amusement park, with a series of haunted houses and other attractions. A cacophony of noise, flashing lights, and smoke makes it hard to distinguish between the crowd, props, staff, and the real horrors lurking among them. (Inspiration: The movie "Hell Fest".)
59. **Endless Pain:** A ruined city where wounds and bruises never heal, and their pain never subsides. Nobody can die, and denizens must take great care to avoid even slight injuries, as they will suffer forever.



(Inspiration: The novel "Elantris" by Brandon Sanderson.)

60. **The Alien Enigma:** A bizarre, completely alien landscape with strange buildings and machines, ruled by huge, inhuman alien beings, whose minds are incomprehensible to humans. The denizens mostly ignore human visitors, but they might react in unexpected ways. (Imagine the human world from the perspective of a street cat to get a sense of it.)
61. **Shadow Library:** An ever-expanding library, accessible from every library in the universe, filled with forbidden tomes and cursed scrolls. Visitors risk losing themselves in its endless corridors or encountering eldritch knowledge that twists their minds. (Inspiration: "The Stygian Library" adventure by Emmy Allen.)
62. **Lost Garden of Eden:** A vast garden that was magnificent in the past, but fell into ruins and madness, haunted by beings and experiences from humanity's darkest subconscious. (Inspiration: "The Gardens of Ynn" adventure by Emmy Allen.)
63. **The Mirror Maze of Deception:** A disorienting maze lined with enchanted mirrors, that reflect alternate versions of visitors. It becomes impossible to distinguish reality from illusion, leading to madness and self-destruction.
64. **Masquerade of the Damned:** A never-ending ballroom where masked figures dance eternally, their faces hidden from the world, and indulge in decadent pleasures. Visitors must also wear masks, gradually losing their original personality.
65. **Karma Hotel:** An accursed hotel or inn, where echoes of past atrocities and the tormented souls of former visitors resonate within its ever-shifting, maddening reality.
66. **The Human Masses:** Masses of people are densely pressed together in dark and suffocating tunnels. Movement is nearly impossible as the pressing crowd shuffles forward in agonizing confinement, forever looking for escape.
67. **Road of Misery:** A desolate and endless mountainous road stretches into the horizon, perpetually cloaked in darkness under an unrelenting torrent of heavy rain. Travelers are trapped in an unending journey of suffering, battling the biting cold, gnawing hunger, and relentless wetness. Hope dissipates, yet they trudge forward with no choice but to continue.
68. **Land of Decay:** In this post-apocalyptic landscape, visitors face a horrifying and relentless decay. Their hair starts to fall out in clumps, followed by the gradual loss of teeth, one by one. Fingernails and fingers become brittle, and an insidious decay engulfs all their organs. They must find escape before their bodies fail them.
69. **Back to School:** Visitors become children again, trapped within a nightmarish school governed by malevolent teachers. These instructors impart unspeakable and macabre lessons, tormenting their pupils sadistically. Many of the students are inhuman entities themselves, making survival all the more difficult.
70. **The Game Goes On:** A nightmarish realm fashioned like a platform video game, where visitors embark on a harrowing quest to survive lethal traps and monstrous adversaries in order to reach the end. Every death hurls them back to the start, compelled to relive their horrifying journey over and over.



# SANGUINIA, SURVEY OF A SNOW-BOUND LAND

BY IAN FORDAM

## THE LAND

Sanguinia is a land of heavy snow, shrieking winds, sudden avalanches, and mountains that reach terrifying heights. Its Prince once isolated himself from a plague by hiding in his castle while people

died outside the walls. He remains isolated still, and that feeling of isolation clings to the land. It is easy to feel abandoned in Sanguinia. Yet one does not have to spend much time among the people to learn that they hold life to be precious despite the inevitability of death. Their hearts seem warm in deliberate, defiant contrast to their Prince.

## SANGUINIA AT A GLANCE

<b>Cultural Level:</b>	Early Medieval (6)
<b>Ecology:</b>	Full Climate/Terrain: Cold forest, hills, plains, mountains
<b>Year of Formation:</b>	607BC
<b>Population:</b>	6,300
<b>Races:</b>	99% Human, 1% Other
<b>Languages:</b>	Sanguine*
<b>Religions:</b>	None*
<b>Government:</b>	Hereditary Monarchy
<b>Ruler:</b>	Ladislav Mircea
<b>Darklord:</b>	Ladislav Mircea
<b>Coinage:</b>	frostmark (gp), chillpiece (sp), nip (cp)
<b>Exports:</b>	wheat, rye, turnips, onions, reindeer, goats, trout, perch, timber, furs, gold, copper, iron, salt, gems

## LANDSCAPE

Most of Sanguinia is occupied by the Kodru Mountains or their Foothills. The Flatlands occupy only the eastern edge of the land, although two of the three towns in Sanguinia were built upon the Flatlands. Heading westward, the terrain shortly rises into the Foothills, where the third town stands.

Traveling further west leads into the Kodru Mountains proper.

By far the most impressive peak is Mount Radu, which ascends more than 10,000 feet above sea level. <sup>(*Realm of Terror*, p.84)</sup> When the sun sets each night, the shadow of Mount Radu falls across the eastern

part of the land. This shadow is sometimes called "Ladislav's Knife".

After Mount Radu, the next most significant height is the plateau where Castle Guirgiu was constructed to overlook the eastern part of the realm. Three other peaks to the south reach more than 5000 feet, but according to the townsfolk they offer little that is noteworthy apart from their height. However, the hillfolk, the charcoal burners, and the wildlife would probably disagree.

Eight major rivers run from the mountains to the borders of Sanguinia. <sup>(*Realm of Terror*, poster map)</sup> These rivers include the Preut, the Micul Niestru, and the Niestru. In addition to the eight major rivers, there are many streams and creeks.

East of Mount Radu and west of Castle Guirgiu is Lake Argus. It provides fish year-round, although in the winter months fishermen must cut through the ice to get to the fish. <sup>(*Ravenloft Third Edition*, p.152)</sup>





## FLORA AND FAUNA

Onions, rye, turnips, and wheat are the crops most widely grown in Sanguinia. Beets also serve as an important source of sugar.

The Foothills and the mountains are liberally adorned with evergreen forests, including spruce, firs, and pines. From wheat and rye Sanguinians produce both whiskey and beer. A particular local delicacy is spruce beer, which has a piny flavor appreciated by locals, but not always by visitors. (Also, spruce beer is a good cure for scurvy.) Sanguinians distill vodka, sometimes from beets, sometimes from turnips. Some of their vodkas are also flavored with walnuts or even pine cones. Another local delicacy is pine honey.

The most commonly found herd animals are sheep and goats. The sheep provide wool and mutton. The goats provide meat and milk for cheese. Cows are uncommon, and horses are rare. The cows are an exceptionally shaggy breed, useful for milk, beef, and pulling carts. The horses are all draft horses, notably sturdy. Sanguinians use them almost exclusively for hauling loads or working the land, not for riding.

Two dog breeds are common in Sanguinia. Their shepherd dog (see "Carpathian Shepherd Dog" on Wikipedia) is typically black-furred with white markings and stocky in build (not unlike the typical Sanguinian human). Their double coats help protect them from the bitter cold. They are known for their excellent senses and their fierce guardian instincts. The second breed, which Sanguinians call a hunting dog (see "Romanian Miortic Shepherd Dog"), is larger and fluffier, with a gray-and-white coat to help it blend into the snow. Despite its common name, the hunting dog is used more often for shepherding than hunting. Dogs of both breeds are highly loyal to their masters and so are useful as guard dogs as well.

The Foothills and the mountains are inhabited by bighorn sheep, mountain goats, deer, and elk. (*Realm of Terror*, p.84) Bears, reindeer, ermine, wolverines, otters, badgers, foxes, lynxes and wolves are less common

but still present. Trout and perch may be found in Lake Argus and the various rivers. (*Ravenloft Third Edition*, p.154) Snow-white owls glide silently through the trees and over the fields, alert to the motion of snow-white mice.

Monstrous fauna encountered in Sanguinia include arayashka, winter wolves, and ice toads. The Worm of the Wastes still lurks in the far western Kodru Mountains. The townsfolk tell stories of goblins and werewolves although they haven't been seen in decades. (The hillfolk, if they had not vanished, might know something about that.) Most infamous of all, though, are the vrykolaka.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — GOBLINS AND WEREWOLVES

Two small bands of goblins still live in Sanguinia. They live in the area between the two rivers flowing westward from the Kodru Mountains. (The townsfolk do not know these rivers exist and so have not given them names.)

Culturally speaking, the goblins are almost indistinguishable from the human hillfolk. They do not always get along with the human clans, but then the human clans do not always get along with each other.

Werewolves were, indeed, once prevalent in Sanguinia. One clan of hillfolk had succumbed to the promises of the Wolf Who Does Not Howl and became lycanthropes as a consequence. However, the other hillfolk clans joined together, and under the advisement of the other spirits, they were able to kill the pack leader in Wolf Cave, his lair.

### SEASONS AND WEATHER

Sanguinia is part of the Frozen Reaches. While it may not be subject to the same frigid depths of winter as nearby Vorostokov, winters in Sanguinia are still long and dark. However, the summer months are temperate, and the growing season provides enough food for most Sanguinians to endure the winter.

Sanguinians recognize the following seasons: **False Spring** (which starts with the spring equinox), **True**

**Spring** (when the temperatures finally rise enough for the snow to begin melting away), **True Summer**, **False Winter** (when the first frost occurs, often accompanied by a heavy snowfall), **False Summer** (when the weather warms again, although never for long), and finally **True Winter** (when the snow falls and stays).

Although Sanguinia is infamous for its heavy snowfall, the spring and summer months are also subject to violent storms. Flash floods are one of the dangers of traveling in the Kodru Mountains, and even downstream the rivers sometimes rise to threatening levels. However, Sanguinians do not fear flooding nearly as much as they fear avalanches. Entire settlements have been lost in both the mountains and the Foothills.

## History

Note that all dates are given according to the Barovian Calendar (BC). Although Sanguinians still use their own calendar based upon the founding of the principality, nonetheless they recognize the utility of using the same dating system as their new trading partners.

### THE FOUNDING OF SANGUINIA

Sanguinia had a long and storied history before Ladislav Mircea became its Prince. It was a small principality caught between world powers, not to mention threatened by its own local population of barbaric hillfolk.

Eventually a general named **Guirgiu Mircea** succeeded in throwing off the foreign occupiers, claiming freedom for his people and founding the **Principality of Sanguinia**. The Mircea family ruled for generations, not always gently, but no more brutally than their neighbors.

### THE MASQUE OF THE GRAY PLAGUE

However, in the year 605BC a plague started to spread across Sanguinia. One of its first victims was the reigning Prince, and so his young son **Ladislav Mircea** became Prince in his stead. Ladislav was an unfit ruler, particularly during a time of crisis. His response to the Gray Plague was to invite the nobility of Sanguinia to **Castle Guirgiu** and then lock the doors, leaving the commoners to their fate. Unfortunately however, someone brought the Gray Plague into the castle, and it began to spread. Ladislav took to pushing anyone infected over the castle walls. If the fall did not kill them, as usually happened, then the winter's cold would, instead. Given that Ladislav insisted regular salons and masques continue despite the plague, of course he himself eventually caught the plague. He turned to alchemical means for a cure. Although he failed in his efforts, upon his death he rose immediately as a vrykolaka vampire. (Ravenloft Dungeon Masters Guide, p.16)

### THE AFTERMATH

At the moment of Ladislav's death, the realm of Sanguinia was drawn into the Mists. However, nobody within Castle Guirgiu noticed right away.

Initially, Ladislav was too obsessed with his unnatural new hungers. However, when he stumbled upon the hall where his surviving guests had gathered, their horrified reactions brought home how thoroughly his appearance had degenerated. Mostly his guests tried to flee, but one by one he caught them and imprisoned them in his dungeons. Even in his distress, he recognized that he would need a source of food.

Although Ladislav was careful to avoid killing his prisoners with his feeding, they still all died, some because of the poor conditions in the dungeons, some because Ladislav carried the Gray Plague. Once the last guest had died, they all rose. They had become vrykolaka, but they were not under Ladislav's control. When they escaped the dungeons

and attacked the new Darklord, he drove them off. They fled into the wilderness.

Meanwhile, others had risen as well. Those few creatures who died within the castle after its sealing, but who had died unaffected by the Gray Plague, rose as ghosts. The others were animated as alchemical zombies, which Sanguinians now call the Ash Men.

### PLAGUE AND WINTER

Meanwhile, the Gray Plague decimated the rest of Sanguinia as well. According to the poorly-kept records, at least half of the population died of the plague that winter. Worse yet, winter never did quite yield to a proper spring, and so deaths from famine added greatly to those from pestilence. People attempted to flee Sanguinia, only to find that all roads and rivers were closed by an unceasing winter's storm. By the time the winter finally slackened, two years later, the population of Sanguinia was not even one-tenth of what it had been before the Gray Plague struck.

Two years passed. The Sanguinians heard no word from their Prince. Because they felt that their Prince had abandoned them during the plague, none of the towns sent a delegation to Castle Guirgiu to contact their ruler. Certainly some unscrupulous individuals must have ventured into Castle Guirgiu in search of its treasures, but they never returned.

### THE RAZING OF KRYOSO

However, one day the first Ash Man appeared in the town of Kryoso, bearing a message. The nobles of the town were invited to attend Prince Ladislav Mircea's Autumnal Gala at the castle. However, very few of the nobility were left following the years of plague and winter. More presumptuously yet, the new leaders of Kryoso felt that they no longer needed to obey their Prince, especially since his former militia was based in Kryoso and no longer feeling so loyal. The invitation was ignored.

After the stated date of the gala had passed, the Ash Men returned to Kryoso. They burned the entire town to the ground, killing anyone they caught trying to escape, even women, even children. More horrifying yet, the Ash Men simply ignored the weaponry which the people of Kryoso brought to bear. As the flames roared, the leader of the Ash Men turned to a nearby townsman who had been captured but not yet executed. He declared, "Next time Prince Ladislav Mircea holds a masque, you will attend." With that, the Ash Men departed.

Only a couple hundred people survived the slaughter, and wherever they sought refuge, the Gray Plague struck again. Word of Kryoso's fate spread quickly to the other towns. Ever since then, whenever the Prince sends out invitations, the people of Sanguinia make certain to obey.

### CONTACT WITH THE OUTSIDE

For generations, Sanguinians lived in isolation, caught between the suddenly colder weather and their Prince. His taxes are oppressive, and his Ash Men are cruel, but fortunately his merciless whims are rarely directed outside of Castle Guirgiu. As a whole, the people of Sanguinia have learned how to survive and even, according to their modest standards, thrive. The population has never recovered to its pre-plague levels, but it has increased in most years.

However, by the year 726BC, foreigners had stumbled across a way into Sanguinia. The journals of Dr. Rudolph van Richten tell of one such trip, but it is possible that others ventured there first without leaving a public record.

The period between van Richten's visit and 740BC was punctuated by other visitors unexpectedly finding their way to Sanguinia. However, in Sanguinia the Grand Conjunction was marked not by upheaval, but by silence. For nearly a decade Sanguinia had no contact with the rest of the Land of Mists, until the Ice-Bound Passage opened in 749BC. Since the revelation of that Mistway, connections to the



outside world have been, if not regular, then at least recurrent. Actual trade has been established with the nations along the Nocturnal Sea. An exciting new era has begun, at least as long as Prince Ladislav Mircea doesn't put an end to it.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — MIRCEA'S INVITATION

Periodically Ladislav Mircea desires to return to the simple pleasures of his youth, and he throws a masque. When this occurs, he sends out notices to each of the three towns, inviting them each to send two beautiful young women and two handsome young men to his ball. Along with the invitations, he also sends uniforms and gowns. Declining the invitation is not an option, nor is sending someone unlikely to meet the Prince's standards for age or attractiveness, nor is arriving at the castle in clothing other than that sent by the Prince.

Nobody has ever returned alive from these soirées. Sometimes parents will venture to Castle Guirgiu to retrieve their children's remains from where they lie at the base of the castle walls.

Fortunately, these moods do not strike Prince Ladislav often.

### POPULACE

The people of Sanguinia fall into two primary groups, the townsfolk and the hillfolk. The townsfolk consider themselves Sanguinians, while the hillfolk do not. (They call themselves "The People" in their own language.)

Sanguinians as a whole are physically hardy, broad-shouldered and barrel-chested. Hair is grown long by both genders, and men braid their equally long beards and mustaches. They have pale blue or pale gray eyes. Their hair is typically curly, ranging in color from almost black to a lighter brown. Given that they rarely leave their domiciles without adequate protection from the elements, Sanguinians' skin is

always fair except for their cheeks, which grow ruddy from the cold and wind. (Ravenloft Third Edition, p.153)

Most Sanguinian clothing is made from flax or wool. Flaxen clothing is worn year-round, while wool is worn in the colder months, usually over flaxen clothing. Both wool and flax are often dyed in bright colors for social occasions, although clothing for daily wear is rarely dyed. Sanguinian shirts and over-tunics are almost always stitched with colorful embroidery, even when the clothing itself is not dyed. In the winter, Sanguinians wear additional layers, either fleece-lined hides or coats made from animal fur.

Men wear full-length trousers. Women usually wear skirts within the home or for visiting, but like the men they wear full-length trousers for outside work. Both genders wear knee-high leather boots, fur-lined hats, and gloves in the winter. In the summer, it is considered a treat to go barefoot, although leather moccasins are commonly worn while working.

Sanguinians need something to occupy the winter months, and so crafts are crucial to their society. The production of cloth and yarn is necessary for the subsequent production and repair of clothing, including the decorative embroidery. Sanguinian leather goods often feature detailed artwork, particularly flowers and leaves, as well as abstract loops. Pieces of wood, including the beams and slats which support their homes, receive similar decoration. Sometimes this artwork is painted, but in general Sanguinians would rather barter for dyes than paint.

Sanguinians are a surprisingly joyous people. Because life is so difficult, they celebrate what they can. They value dance and song, music and storytelling, and matters of the heart. While they appreciate qualities such as graceful step or a fine voice, one's musical skill is less important than one's participation. Sanguinians insist that a chorus sounds best when everyone is singing.

Ultimately, nothing is more precious to Sanguinians than their children. (Ravenloft Third Edition, p.153) Even a child who is orphaned, rather than being left to their fate,

will be taken in by another family and raised as if they were a blood relative.

Half of the land's population, more or less, lives in the three towns of Tirgo, Kosova, and Fagarus. (Ravenloft Third Edition, p.152)

Approximately one thousand hillfolk live in nomadic clans, largely occupying the far western edge of Sanguinia. The remainder of the population lives in smaller communities dotted around the Flatlands and the Foothills. Some of these thorps have existed for generations. Others fail shortly after their founding, and before many years pass such settlements merge back into the landscape. Despite the considerable risks of living away from the towns, some people are nearly as solitary as their Prince.

Most Sanguinian houses are circular and windowless, their cobblestone walls built several feet thick. This style of construction offers defense against hungry beasts but, more importantly, also against the weather. The peaked roofs are usually wooden, two planks thick and packed with dried pine needles for insulation. (Ravenloft Third Edition, p.152-153) In the three towns, the homes of the wealthiest citizens are often built in a rectangular shape, with a second or even a third story constructed from wood. These houses mimic the style of the remnants of noble homes from generations ago.

## Economy

For generations, Sanguinians have relied more upon barter than coin. Old coins, left over from the long-ago years of previous Princes, still circulate, particularly between towns. Contact with Vorostokov has only reinforced the barter economy, but on the other hand contact with the larger world has reintroduced the utility of coinage. Foreign money is making its way into Sanguinian society, gradually replacing the native frostmark, chillpiece, and nip.

Given the longstanding dearth of coinage, the Prince's tax is now paid almost entirely in food and goods. The Ash Men haul these payments back to Castle Guirgiu and deposit them into a particular

treasury room. There the food spoils, doing nobody any good, but at least the Prince's taxes have been paid.

## LANGUAGE

The townsfolk speak Sanguine, a language which sounds something like Balok, but is utterly unrelated. Those people who have contact with foreigners may have learned other languages. In particular, Kosovans may speak a little Grabenite, a little Vaasi, and perhaps a little Darkonese, while the Fagarusi may speak a little Vos.

The hillfolk speak their own language, which is unrelated to Sanguine.

## ORTHOGRAPHY

Although Sanguine has its own script, this section describes how Sanguine has been transcribed into the Balok script. If not explicitly included in the table below, letters may be assumed to have their usual Balok pronunciation.

Note that transcriptions often drop the breve mark from a terminal *ă*, which means that the terminal *a* should usually be pronounced as *ă*. Some transcriptions use the Balok letters *ş* and *ţ*, but most use *sh* and *ts* instead. Similarly, both of the Balok letters *â* and *î* are nearly always transcribed as *oo*. Such alterations would not be necessary except for the spreading ubiquity of Lamordian-made printing presses, which include only umlauts instead of proper breves, circumflexes, and commas-below.

Letter(s)	Sound	Example
a (non-terminal)	<i>a</i> in <i>want</i>	Biban
a (terminal)	<i>u</i> in <i>fun</i>	Kosova
ă	<i>u</i> in <i>bus</i>	Păstrăv
c	<i>c</i> in <i>code</i>	Codrin
cea	<i>chu</i> in <i>chum</i>	Mircea
ch	<i>ck</i> in <i>hack</i>	Ursachi
ci	<i>chee</i> in <i>cheese</i>	Daciana
e	<i>ay</i> in <i>hay</i>	Preut
ea	<i>a</i> in <i>hat</i>	Timea
g	<i>g</i> in <i>g</i>	Tirgo
ge	<i>ge</i> in <i>gem</i>	Gennadi
gey	<i>ja</i> in <i>jade</i>	Geyda
giu	<i>ju</i> in <i>jukebox</i>	Guirgiu
gui	<i>gui</i> in <i>sanguine</i>	Guirgiu
i	<i>ee</i> in <i>feel</i>	Tirgo
j	<i>g</i> in <i>genre</i>	Josan
o	<i>o</i> in <i>home</i>	Kosova
oa	<i>wa</i> in <i>swap</i>	Anisoara
s	<i>s</i> in <i>snow</i>	Fagarus
sh	<i>sh</i> in <i>shoe</i>	Tistshi
ts	<i>ts</i> in <i>cats</i>	Zeltser
u	<i>oe</i> in <i>shoe</i>	Fagarus
y	<i>ee</i> in <i>bleed</i>	vrykolaka
z	<i>z</i> in <i>zoo</i>	Mirzu
zl	<i>zl</i> in <i>dazzle</i>	Zlata

## Education

Throughout the history of Sanguinia, there has been no formal education system for the common folk. Children learn what they need from their parents and the community as a whole. In the days when the noble families still existed, the nobility would hire tutors to educate their children, but that practice has been lost along with the noble families.

However, with the revelation of Vorostokov and the opening of the Ice-Bound Passage, attitudes toward education are shifting. The people of Fagarus want their children to learn Vos, and the people of Kosova want their children to learn the mainland tongues. Although no formal schooling has yet been established, foreigners such as Tokachyov Rustilav

and Vakha Alkhanoff find themselves acting as language tutors. Anyone willing to teach Sanguinians about the larger world will be held in great esteem.

As Sanguinians learn to communicate with the outside world, they will also learn how much more there is to learn. At that point they will almost certainly hunger for education beyond the necessities of survival.

## Religion

Sanguinia has no official state religion, nor are any particular religions in widespread formal practice across the land.

However, there do exist remnants of the buildings where foreign faiths were once practiced before Guirgiu Mircea, the first Prince of Sanguinia, finally threw off the competing foreign powers. There are also menhirs which the townsfolk assume were erected by the hillfolk for purposes of worship. (Ravenloft Third Edition, p.152)

If the Sanguinians can be said to have a religion, it is a curious and quiet form of personal worship. Most Sanguinian homes have an area where its inhabitants may kneel to pray, sometimes invoking the names of ancestors and sometimes the names of spirits. The most common prayers are for children: their conception, their successful birth, and continued life beyond birth. Apparently Sanguinians consider it gauche to ask for boons regarding adults.

Since Sanguinia was rediscovered in 749BC, the Church of Ezra has attempted to make inroads there. They have been most successful in Kosova, but that only means they have built a church which has not yet been burned by the Ash Men. However, despite the failure of organized religion to take root, the prayers of many Sanguinians are now occasionally directed to Ezran saints.

As a final note, the hillfolk worship a range of spirits, including the Hoarfrost Bear, the Hundred-Pointed Reindeer, the Ermine Twins, the Wolf Who Does Not Howl, the Owl of the Moon, and the Laughing Trout.



Most of these spirits are benign, or at least neutral, in their attitudes towards the hillfolk. However, the One- Eyed Badger is a malicious trickster.

### FUNERAL CUSTOMS

Sanguinians prefer to bury their dead, but burial proves difficult in a land locked in winter for so many months of the year. As a consequence, each village has a building where the unburied dead are left until they can be laid fully to rest. These Last Halls are usually in the center of the village, where they may be more readily defended against hungry predators. The three largest villages appoint a series of guards throughout the winter. Guarding the Last Hall is considered an honor.

Sanguinians fear the vrykolakas of the Kodru Mountains, but they are only rarely troubled by the dead rising within their own villages. Some tales tell of people who die away from home only to shamle into a Last Hall to lay themselves to rest. However, Sanguinians are aware of more sinister forms of unlife. If Sanguinians have reason to believe someone might rise from the dead, they drive an iron stake through that person's skull. That is sufficient to lay a vrykolaka to rest, they believe, and so it's more than good enough for lesser forms of restless dead as well.

People who die in the warmer months are given more lavish, individual funerals, with flower wreaths for the deceased and special cakes for the guests. Because so many more people die in the cold months and because care must be taken to reserve enough food until the spring, the winter's deceased are laid to rest in two stages. First they are taken to the Last Hall, where a traditional dirge is sung and the kindness of the spirits is requested. In the spring, then, a collective celebration is held in honor of all the lives which were lost over the winter. At this celebration the dead receive their wreaths and cakes.

All in all, Sanguinians live very close to death. They respect it, but in general they do not fear it. Better to

die in summer than winter, they say, but death comes for us all in the end.

### MEDICINE

Medicine as practiced within Sanguinia is based upon the notion of four humors, as described in the following table:

Humor	Color	Qualities	Alchemical Stage
Black Bile	Black	Dry, Cold	Melansosis
Phlegm	White / Blue	Wet, Cold	Leucosis
Yellow Bile	Yellow	Dry, Hot	Xanthosis
Blood	Red	Wet, Hot	Iosis

Techniques such as bloodletting are used to remove an imbalance of blood in the system. Less drastically, certain herbs and foods are believed to draw away particular humors. For example, sage lowers phlegm, while chamomile lowers yellow bile.

### ATTITUDES TOWARDS MAGIC

Very few Sanguinians work magic, either arcane or divine. Apart from necromancy, which they abhor, they assign no moral value to magic. Instead it is judged like any other tool. How useful is it?

However, any wizard or priest who harms others with their magic will be judged accordingly. After all, when good tools find their way into bad hands, the bad hands must be forced to release the tools.

Alchemy is the best-known form of magic in the land. Prince Nicanor Mircea, Ladislav's grandfather, was nicknamed "The Alchemist Prince" because of his studies. Tradition holds that Prince Nicanor used his alchemy effectively in defense of Sanguinia's borders, but Prince Ladislav is also believed to study the alchemical arts. As such, Sanguinians have mixed feelings about how alchemy has been put into practice.

Sanguinians do not draw a distinction between magic and science, in part because the few practitioners of magic tend to approach their studies

in a scientific way, and in part because science as a formal concept is quite literally foreign to them.

### ATTITUDES TOWARDS NON-HUMANS

Sanguinians will refer to any non-human person as a *zburdalnică* ("goblin"), not out of any malice but only because that's the best word Sanguine has to describe non-human people. As Sanguinians interact more and more with the outside world, they will doubtless incorporate "elf" and "dwarf" and similar terms into their language.

Regardless of the term used, Sanguinians will view non-human foreigners just as they view human foreigners: warily, but ready to welcome.

#### THE SPIRITS OF THE HILLFOLK

*The Hoarfrost Bear*: Embodies survival through strength and preparation.

*The Hundred-Pointed Reindeer*: Embodies survival through fleetness and endurance.

*The Ermine Twins*: Tricksters. Responsible for much that is wrong in the world and much that is right as well.

*The Wolf Who Does Not Howl*: A loner, existing apart from the other spirits. Frequently a villain in the folklore of the hillfolk.

*The Owl of the Moon*: A particular defender of women. Still a hunter, though. Very much a hunter.

*The Laughing Trout*: A happy spirit. Sometimes easy to fool.

*The One-Eyed Badger*: A malicious trickster. An especial enemy of the Ermine Twins, who caused him to lose his eye.

## THE REALM

Unlike some long-lived Darklords, Ladislav Mircea never thought to feign his own periodic demise and replacement. The people of Sanguinia are well aware that their Prince is an undying, unnatural creature, and most of them fully suspect him of being the lord of the vrykolaka that haunt the mountains. They will not necessarily admit this knowledge to foreigners, however, for fear of frightening them off.

Two governments operate in parallel within Sanguinia. The first, official government has Ladislav Mircea as its head with the Ash Men as his enforcers. However, other than sending out the Ash Men to collect taxes, Ladislav himself very rarely leaves his castle to terrorize (or otherwise interact with) his citizens.

Therefore, the second government has arisen. Each town and village has a council, usually comprised of a subset of the most prominent (that is, usually the wealthiest) citizens. These councils make decisions, pass laws, and oversee a local militia to help defend against threats (other than the Prince and his Ash Men). (Ravenloft Campaign Setting, p.154)

### DIPLOMACY

The people of Fagarus have discovered Vorostokov to the south, and they eagerly trade with the Vos. Usually the Fagarusi trade food for furs, which tend to be larger and finer than their Sanguinian counterparts.

Similarly, the Mists have receded from the mouth of the river near Kosova, and foreigners occasionally emerge from the Mists via the Ice-Bound Passage. Especially now that they have contact with the outside world, the Kosovans have started building ships larger than rowboats so that they may initiate trade themselves.

While Sanguinia has no diplomatic relations with any other nations, it has drawn the notice of the Zealots out of Nevuchar Springs, and they have sent someone to found a new church in Sanguinia.

Prince Ladislav Mircea has yet to notice these foreigners. As eager as the people of Sanguinia are to have contact with the outside world again, nonetheless they dread how their Prince will react once he does notice.

### THE SANGUINIAN HERO

**Races:** Nearly all Sanguinian heroes are human, except for the rare goblin from the western half of the land.

**Classes:** Among the townsfolk, rangers and fighters are by far the most common classes. Rarely someone (such as Gennadi Mardari) uncovers lost lore and becomes a mage. Alchemists are more common than mages, but few of them actually possess any magical abilities.

As with any human society, there are also thieves in Sanguinia, but none of the musicians in the land possess the special features of the bard class. Finally, there are no native priests.

Among the hillfolk, rangers and fighters are also prevalent, bolstered by barbarians. However, unlike the townsfolk, the hillfolk have their shamans. (If shaman rules are not available, use druids or clerics.) On the other hand, the hillfolk lack arcane spellcasters of any type.

**Male Names:** Andrei, Aris, Egor, Elard, Mihail, Nadin, Nicolas, Radu, Rodion, Sergiu, Stanislav, Timofei, Vergin.

**Female Names:** Adelina, Ana, Daniela, Evita, Jana, Lidiya, Loredana, Karina, Marinella, Oxana, Romina, Sveta, Syeira, Vika.

(For this survey, names were created using the "Moldovan Names" option from *Fantasy Name Generators* and then anglicized to simplify pronunciation.)

## WHO'S DOOMED

### Asparu, Irren

*(7th level human priest, ancient dead of the third rank)*

A hillfolk shaman. If the **Shaman's Treachery** dread possibility is *not* in play, then Irren Asparu is simply another hillfolk shaman who led his people to the **Seven Sacred Caves**, where perhaps he spends less time asleep than the other shamans.

However, if the **Shaman's Treachery** is in play, then read on.

#### Description

Irren Asparu is no longer the young man that he was when he first led his people to one of the **Seven Sacred Caves**. His hair is long and white, and his skin is very leathery, presumably from long exposure to the sun and the wind-blown snow. There is an odd, vaguely medicinal smell about him. If asked about it, Irren Asparu will answer that he has spent many years using exotic plants to better commune with the spirits. Despite his age, he stands straight and remains strong. He might even be handsome still, if only there weren't something hollow about him.

#### Background

Irren Asparu was the youngest of the shamans who led their clans into the **Seven Sacred Caves**. Although well-intentioned, he was also a restless man. Every time he awakened, he lingered longer and longer before settling back into hibernation. Eventually his restlessness led him to depart the warded area and venture into the outside world.

... and the inside world as well. Over the years, Irren Asparu has also explored the natural tunnels beyond the Sacred Cave where his people slept. In time he found a place where the tunnels ceased to be natural. He had reached the dungeons beneath **Castle Guirgiu**, the home of **Prince Ladislav**. The Prince's phantom hounds, **Codrin** and **Daciana**, soon





noticed Irren Asparu's presence, and so he came to the Prince's attention.

Ladislav Mircea had not yet killed the no-longer-young shaman when he abruptly stopped feeding. He dragged the shaman back to the dungeons, where he was imprisoned while Ladislav Mircea returned to his laboratory. Several hours later, Ladislav Mircea returned with a potion he had just concocted from one of his alchemical texts. The potion allowed Irren Asparu to communicate with his captor, and the two men reached a deal.

Irren Asparu promised Ladislav Mircea access to many people upon whom he could readily feed. Ladislav Mircea promised Irren Asparu that he need never fully die.

### **Current Sketch**

Irren Asparu still ventures regularly outside the cave where his people sleep, exploring the land that Sanguinia has become. Sometimes when he returns home, he discovers Ladislav Mircea waiting impatiently for him outside the sacred cave. When this occurs, Irren Asparu selects one of his people and drags him or her outside the spirits' wards, where Ladislav Mircea may feed upon the slumbering victim. Ladislav Mircea is careful to never kill his victims by draining them entirely, particularly since he has learned that they recover from his attentions but slowly. (A side effect of the hibernation.)

Irren Asparu needs not fear the sunlight. Ladislav Mircea subjected him to alchemical experiments unlike any that he had previously attempted, and now Irren Asparu is an ancient dead of the third rank.

### **Combat**

In life, Irren Asparu was a 7th level cleric of the hillfolk spirits. He retains his spellcasting ability in death, although his spells are now granted by the Dark Powers, rather than the spirits.

As one of the ancient dead, Irren Asparu gains certain benefits. He is unharmed by nonmagical weapons, and even magic weapons inflict only half damage.

Irren Asparu often pretends to be mortal, and he is frequently successful in this pretense. When he reveals his full power, however, he can paralyze anyone who views him with fear.

In addition to the usual undead immunities, Irren Asparu is totally immune to cold. Most ancient dead are vulnerable to fire, but Irren Asparu is resistant. Instead, he is vulnerable to electricity.

Twice per day, Irren Asparu can create a zone of cold focused upon a single target. That target suffers 9d6 cold damage, halved by a saving throw versus spells. This ability restores itself at full dark each day, so Irren Asparu prefers to attack opponents as dusk is settling upon the land.

Irren Asparu can animate up to 15HD of creatures (including humans, demi-humans, and humanoids) which he has slain either with his zone of cold or his bare hands. These servants lack independent thought, and so are utterly obedient to his will. They are "zero rank" ancient dead as described below. At a minimum, Irren Asparu likes to have a mummified wolf, or better yet a winter wolf, at his side at all times.

Irren Asparu is vulnerable to being turned by other shamans among the hillfolk. Such shamans gain +2 to their turning attempts against Irren Asparu, and the penalty imposed by any sinkhole of evil is halved. He also suffers double damage from holy water that has been created by or weapons that have been blessed by a hillfolk shaman. Other priests do not receive these benefits.

Ironically, Irren Asparu lacks one of the abilities most strongly associated with the ancient dead: He cannot inflict mummy rot, nor even the Gray Plague.

Finally, Irren Asparu is proficient with the traditional weapons of the hillfolk, including the spear. Note



that his great strength allows him to hurl spears at +3 to-hit and +6 damage.

## Mardari, Gennadi

*(3rd level expert/4th level conjurer, human)*

A member of the Council of **Kosova**.

### Description

Gennadi Mardari is approximately forty years old, and he appears typically Sanguinian: stocky, dark-haired, and bearded.

### Background

Gennadi Mardari was born in **Fagarus**, but wanderlust and family conflicts led him to travel the land. After several years of failing to get rich hunting in the wilderness, he settled in Kosova, where he leveraged the contacts he made in **Tirgo** to trade timber and ore for food and clothing. He rose in prestige, becoming a councilor despite his Fagaran roots. He married a Kosovan woman and built a new house for her. Unfortunately, she soon suffered a difficult pregnancy, and Gennadi lost both his wife and his unborn child.

Gennadi would be the first to admit that he felt lost for several years afterward. He continued to serve as a councilor, but sometimes he would set aside his duties and vanish into the wilderness. He claimed to be visiting relatives in Fagarus, but nobody particularly believed him.

Winter fell early one year, while Gennadi still roamed the wilds. He got caught in a snowstorm and sought shelter in the first cave he could find, hoping desperately that he hadn't found the lair of some fell creature. He had, of course, but he wasn't foolish enough to venture too far inward, and so he escaped the notice of **the cave's most dangerous inhabitant**. Of course, Gennadi's prudence was encouraged by the frozen corpse he discovered not twenty feet inside. The man had apparently frozen to death curled up around a book. Curious, Gennadi extracted

the book from the corpse's grasp, breaking it only slightly in the process.

The storm passed, the sky cleared, and Gennadi Mardari returned to Kosova in possession of a *tome of mephit summoning*. It was written in archaic Sanguine using an archaic script, so he needed considerable time to unravel its mysteries. Nonetheless, upon a particularly bitter winter day in the middle of a particularly bitter winter season, Gennadi grew reckless enough to summon a fire mephit, just to provide heat for his house.

Of course, very little goes as planned in the Land of the Mists. Instead of conjuring a fire mephit, he summoned an ice mephit. Fortunately for Gennadi, at least he had summoned it correctly, and it was bound to obey him for not more than one hundred days. On the ninety-ninth day, Gennadi dismissed the mephit back to its home plane.

As has been mentioned, very little goes as planned in the Land of the Mists. Rather than returning to its home, the mephit was scattered to the four corners of Sanguinia. It required weeks to pull itself back together.

### Current Sketch

Gennadi Mardari continues to serve as one of Kosova's councilors and to summon mephits to serve as his eyes, ears, and hands. He keeps his magical knowledge hidden from his fellow citizens for fear of their reaction. Magic itself may not be forbidden within Sanguinia, but he knows that his fellow citizens might not approve of the use he has made of it.

Whenever Gennadi Mardari summons a mephit, he ensures that it is bound to a single command which persists beyond its hundred days of servitude: *You shall not harm the town of Kosova or anyone within it*. Of course, that leaves the mephits free to harm anyone outside of Kosova, and the mephits thrill to harass anyone they encounter in the wilderness. If they were to encounter Gennadi himself, they would



delight in every moment of torture that they could inflict upon him.

Gennadi Mardari still grieves for the loss of his wife and child, but he accepts that they are gone. He is not obsessive, nor is he truly evil. However, he does summon the ice mephits for forced servitude, so he is far from innocent either. He does not let himself realize that the mephits are fully sentient creatures, rather than a kind of icy golem. On the other hand, he truly does not realize that the mephits cannot return to their home after he dismisses them. If he did, he would stop summoning mephits. Probably.

### Combat

Gennadi Mardari learned to wrestle as a young man, as most Sanguinian young men do, but that's not exactly a hobby that he has maintained. He is a fair shot with a bow, however, and he knows how to make his own arrows. For the most part, though, he would really rather avoid combat. In the event of physical danger, he has no compunctions about sending his mephit servants into the fray while he retreats to someplace safer.



## Mircea, Ladislav

*(vrykolaka vampire aristocrat/chemist)*

The Darklord of Sanguinia. (*Realm of Terror*, p.84) (*Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, p.153-154)

### Description

Ladislav Mircea was a startlingly handsome young man, who caught the eye (and more) of many a young woman and young man.

No longer.

Ladislav still dresses in the same finery he wore in life. He favors bright colors and lace-edged ruffles. 'Tis a damn shame that he's still undead under all the layers.

One of Ladislav's ongoing experiments is the creation of an elixir to restore his appearance. He believes that he has found a promising path, and in truth he

can restore most of his appearance for a brief time. However, the restoration is never as complete as he thinks, and it never lasts as long as he wishes.

As Lady Rusnac warns the Prince's guests, "Never tell him that he's falling apart."

### Background

Had Ladislav Mircea been born in the time of Guirgiu Mircea or even the time of his ancestor Maximilian Mircea, fighting either foreign invaders or the hillfolk, perhaps then he would have grown into a stronger man. However, Ladislav was born into a time of peace and a position of privilege. Worse yet, his mother died of an illness when he was a child, and his father responded to his grief by traveling. Ladislav was frequently left alone in Castle Guirgiu with nobody of sufficient rank to discipline him. The situation was further complicated because Ladislav was a pretty child who grew into a strikingly handsome young man. People found many reasons to let him have his way.

As a result, Ladislav was unready to rule when his father died, one of the early victims of the Gray Plague. He continued to insist upon his luxuries without accepting any of the responsibilities he should have felt toward his people. In particular, his response to the expanding plague was to invite the scions of the nobility to Castle Guirgiu, entirely so that he might have companions while he waited out the plague in isolation. What Ladislav neglected to consider was that the food and drink which sated his guests came from outside the castle. The plague entered Castle Guirgiu through the servants' gate.

The first noble to show symptoms of the Gray Plague was Mirzu Tarlev, with whom Ladislav Mircea had grown up and with whom he had remained intimately close. Mirzu Tarlev was therefore also the first person who Ladislav Mircea killed, shoving him over the castle's parapet. Others soon followed. Despite the spreading plague, Ladislav refused to stop holding masques, which his surviving guests were expected to attend.



Eventually and inevitably, Ladislav Mircea himself caught the plague. **Lady Zlata Rusnac**, who had become Ladislav's foremost advisor, was the first who dared call his symptoms to his attention. He thanked her by hurling her over the castle wall, even though she remained healthy. And the masques continued.

However, although he outwardly pretended to, Ladislav Mircea did not ignore Lady Rusnac's revelation. Instead, he buried himself in alchemical studies—a subject which he had once dabbled in before growing bored with the effort—in the hope of finding a cure for the Gray Plague. However, he did not succeed in his efforts.

Alone in his laboratory, Prince Ladislav Mircea died.

And then he rose.

### Current Sketch

After more than 150 years, Ladislav Mircea is still unready to rule. His only real policy is whim. He believes in taxes because he believes in collecting what his subjects owe him. When the towns ran out of coins, he started collecting his taxes in goods and food. He has little use for the goods and no use for the food, but nonetheless he collects. There are entire chambers beneath **Castle Guirgiu** where the gathered food is stored, only to be stolen by vermin or else simply rot.

Ladislav Mircea has become a *vrykolaka*, a form of vampire which is physically decrepit. Ladislav mourns the loss of his beauty. He dedicates most of his attention to alchemical means to regain his mortal appearance. Sometimes he directs these efforts towards an attempt to reverse his undeath, not because he feels in any way burdened by eternal life, but to regain his mortal appearance. However, at other times he seeks a merely physical cure.

When Ladislav believes that he has discovered a philtre which restores his living appearance, he will send out his Ash Men to deliver invitations to the three towns, demanding the attendance of two

handsome young men and two pretty young women from each town. Those victims who are sent to Castle Guirgiu sometimes go for as long as two weeks, having only each other and the castle ghosts for company, before they finally meet their host. Ladislav has yet to find a philtre which works longer than a handful of hours, and even then all of his philtres have rapidly lost their efficacy with repeated consumption. As such, he waits until his "guests" are ready to properly enjoy a masque, and then he makes his grand entrance. In truth, his philtres do not work as well as he thinks, but **Lady Rusnac** will have warned the "guests" to hide their reactions to his tattered appearance. After all, Ladislav's masques always feature less bloodshed if he is allowed to think that he can bow out before his decrepitude has been revealed.

Ladislav Mircea spends most of his waking hours in the underground alchemical laboratory which he inherited from his grandfather **Nicanor**. However, his moods often swing between mania and melancholy. When manic, he talks to his "Old Guard" Ash Men as if they were still alive and intelligent. (They are very much neither.) He throws dinner parties where no food is served, yet the Ash Men sit around the dining table as Ladislav declaims upon whatever subject flits through his head. On the other hand, when he succumbs to sorrow, he takes his favorite hounds Codrin and Daciana and goes hunting in the Prince's Forest.

Sometimes he encounters one of the Sanguinians, also hunting. Such encounters often end badly for the Sanguinian in question, but other times Ladislav shows mercy in his sorrow. Survivors may not even realize that they have come face-to-face with their Prince. In a century and a half, these hunting trips are the only times that Ladislav Mircea has left Castle Guirgiu and the caverns underneath.

Ladislav Mircea yearns desperately for a return to polite society. However, knowing how monstrous his appearance has become, he is equally terrified to think how polite society would react to him. As a consequence, Ladislav has isolated himself from the

world outside his castle. Only when he thinks he can present a sufficient physical façade does he dare risk the company of others.

### Combat

Ladislav Mircea likes to think of himself as a regal Prince, and so he prefers to avoid melee combat. Ideally, he can pitch alchemical grenades at his foes. The grenades might explode or envelop their target in a *stinking cloud* or release a universal solvent.

If face-to-face conflict proves necessary, Ladislav Mircea will propose a duel. He is proficient with, but by no means specialized in, the type of long, light sword the nobility wore when he was growing up. (Treat this weapon as a shortsword, even though it has the length of a longsword.) Unfortunately, Ladislav is not only a poor combatant, he is also a poor loser. He will not abide by any agreement made prior to the duel if he loses. Instead, he will fly into a murderous rage.

In cases where Ladislav Mircea is unable to attack from a distance or he loses a duel, he succumbs to his vrykolaka nature, attacking with two claws and his barbed tongue. Any wound is likely to infect its victim with the Gray Plague. If significantly wounded, Ladislav will transform into a vermin swarm and flee, intending to recover and attack again later.

However, Ladislav Mircea's personal combat skills are secondary to his ability to call upon his Ash Men (and Women) for defense. He would much rather do that than fight himself.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE GRAY PLAGUE

Any encounter with Ladislav Mircea or the Ash Men involves the risk of contracting the Gray Plague.

The Gray Plague is an inhaled disease with DC 16 and an incubation period of 1d8 days. Its effects are particularly virulent: 1d2 Str, 1d3 Dex, and 1d3 Con. For every 3 Con points lost, the victim must make an additional Fortitude saving throw; if the saving throw fails, then one of those lost Con points is permanent.

## Rusnac, Zlata

*(ghost of the 2nd magnitude)*

Zlata Rusnac was **Ladislav Mircea's** most faithful advisor in life, and now she continues to advise him in death.

### Description

Lady Zlata Rusnac appears to be a middle-aged noblewoman. The slender beauty of her youth has matured into the plumper beauty of her matronly years. She describes herself as being only ordinarily beautiful, and it impossible to tell whether that claim is prideful or self-deprecating. Lady Zlata has middle-brown hair, usually worn piled high or in long braids, but never, ever worn loose. She wears elaborate gowns with ruffles and lace, although she insists that her tastes have simplified since she was a girl. Her blue eyes appear open and innocent, and they rarely reveal how closely they are always watching everything around her.

Oh, and she's a ghost, so sometimes she appears to be semi-transparent.

### Background

Zlata was born into a noble Sanguinian family which was rapidly tipping into bankruptcy. As a child, she was not aware of her family's financial troubles, and she lived in posh comfort. However, as she grew older she noticed an increasing number of troubling signs. Although she attempted to cut back on her own expenses, her parents were both spendthrifts. She was not at all surprised when they informed her that she would be marrying a much older, much wealthier man in exchange for the release of certain debts.

Although Lord Rusnac was a much better husband than Zlata had feared (which is to say, he provided her with money and largely left her alone), nonetheless she was not particularly sorrowful when he passed away eight years into their marriage. She was left in possession of fine land, a fine house, and



a comfortable amount of a wealth. Because she was much more careful with her expenses than her parents had been, she had no financial worries. For the next fourteen years she played the socialite and dabbled unobtrusively in local politics.

However, in 605BC the Gray Plague struck, and in 606BC **Prince Ladislav Mircea** invited the young men and women of the nobility to join him in **Castle Guirgiu** for safety. Zlata Rusnac wrangled her way into the castle by joining the entourage of a beautiful young noblewoman. Zlata herself was no longer beautiful or young enough to catch Ladislav Mircea's eye. Then again, she wasn't trying to.

When the first nobleman within the castle came down with the Gray Plague, it was Lady Zlata Rusnac who advised that the victim be removed from the castle. She hadn't intended for him to be hurled from the parapets, but that's what Prince Mircea did. From that day forward, Lady Rusnac became the Prince's foremost advisor. He often neglected to follow her advice, but he always sought it. She recommended very strongly that the nobility avoid contagion by isolating themselves (and their entourages) even within the castle, but of course Prince Mircea was unwilling to stop his weekly feasts and dances, or his nightly dalliances. Most of the other nobility followed suit, and when they manifested symptoms of the plague, over the wall they went.

Finally Lady Rusnac faced the unfortunate duty of pointing out to Prince Mircea that he, himself, was showing signs of the plague. She had hoped to finally convince him to isolate himself (and to allow others to isolate as well), but he took her warning as a threat. "Do you expect me to hurl myself from the walls?" he demanded. Lady Rusnac was the next person to perish, accused before the remaining court of contracting the plague despite showing no symptoms whatsoever.

### Current Sketch

For the past century and a half, Lady Zlata Rusnac has haunted Castle Guirgiu as a ghost of the second

magnitude. She is permanently intangible, yet her touch can infect victims with the Gray Plague. She never uses this power, however; a lady must have standards. (These same standards do not prevent her from threatening to do so, however.)

Whenever Prince Mircea summons another group of young women and men to the castle, Lady Rusnac does all that she can to aid the newcomers. She teaches them etiquette and Prince Mircea's view of fashion – anything, really, to prolong the time before the Prince starts hurling them over the wall. Lady Rusnac does not truly perform this service out of the goodness of her phantom heart, though. She does it because she gets bored without the young folk around. The Ash Men (and Women) are incapable of entertaining banter, and Prince Mircea is often little better, especially when he's engrossed in alchemy or lost in melancholy.

Lady Rusnac resents **Geyda Vier**. A little bit of her resentment comes from Geyda's apparent youth. Far more, though, stems from Geyda's ability to leave the castle. Lady Rusnac has learned that she disincorporates if she travels more than ten to twenty feet from the castle. She reforms in time, but the experience is far closer to death than she likes.

### Combat

Lady Rusnac doesn't *do* combat. If threatened, she will simply step through walls to remove herself from the situation.



### Vier, Dima

*(ghost of the 2nd magnitude)*

### Description

When he followed his sister Geyda into the tunnels beneath Castle Guirgiu, Dima Vier was a handsome and eager boy on the verge of becoming a young man. He retains that appearance.

Like his sister, Dima has unusually fair hair, although he is not quite as blonde as Geyda. However, the family resemblance is unmistakable, not least



because they have the same broad smile and full laugh.

### Background

Although younger than his sister Geyda, Dima Vier was male and therefore the preferred heir to the family title. From a young age, he received tutoring and training suitable to his station. However, after the Gray Plague struck Sanguinia, his parents realized how grave the situation was, and when Prince Ladislav invited Geyda to Castle Guirgiu, they positioned young Dima as her page, just to keep him in a place of perceived safety. Of course, the particular selfishness of Prince Ladislav meant that neither Geyda nor Dima were actually safe. Just before the situation in the castle reached its final descent, Geyda talked Dima into attempting to escape with her. They had both heard rumors of secret tunnels beneath the castle that led to the outside world. The rumors were true, but the secret tunnels were too secret. The Vier children got lost, and they died of thirst far from the light of day.

Meanwhile, Lord and Lady Vier both survived the Gray Plague. They never learned that they had outlived their children, but of course they had their suspicions. They died late in 708BC, victims of the great hunger.

### Current Sketch

Dima Vier died of thirst alongside **his sister**. He has also manifested as a ghost, and like her he can possess others. However, he has only proven capable of possessing Ash Men.

Dima's possession causes no harm to the blunted personalities of the Ash Men, yet anything longer than a brief possession causes Dima himself to become spiritually exhausted. If he possesses someone for more than an hour or two, he cannot possess anyone again for days or sometimes weeks. Nonetheless, Dima Vier has proven useful to Prince Vladislav Mircea, acting as a commander of the Ash Men when they go tax collecting in Tirgo.

Despite his generations of unlife, Dima remains a young man in temperament. He maintains a hero worship of his Prince, and so he sometimes finds himself torn between his loyalty to his sister and his loyalty to his Prince. He will perform any service that Ladislav demands of him, unless it threatens his sister somehow. Sometimes he feels guilt afterwards—for example, he still regrets the destruction of Kryoso—but over a century and a half he has mastered the trick of convincing himself that his Prince knows what is best for the land.

### Combat

If attacked while he possesses an Ash Man, then Dima Vier will use the Ash Man's formidable physique to defend himself. Although he had received some minimal training in the sword before his death, and despite his attempts to improve after his death, he remains unskilled as a warrior. However, raw strength has often served him well, instead.

In his immaterial form, Dima Vier's touch inflicts 1d4 temporary strength damage. However, if successfully attacked while in his immaterial form, Dima will flee. He feels defenseless without the physical solidity of an Ash Man's body.



### Vier, Geyda

*(ghost of the 2nd magnitude)*

A ghost who sometimes aids **Ladislav Mircea** and sometimes dares to undermine him.

### Description

In life, Geyda Vier was a striking beauty, not least because of her butter-colored cascades of hair.

### Background

Gayda Vier was once a beautiful young noblewoman, and as such she was invited to **Ladislav Mircea's** final ball. When she saw her friends succumb to the Gray Plague and getting hurled over the wall, she and **her little brother** fled into the depths of **Castle Guirgiu** to

hide. Perhaps she got lost, but perhaps she was too frightened to return. Either way, she died of thirst, only to rise again as a ghost. She quickly discovered that she could not pass more than twenty feet from the castle walls.

When Mircea sent his Ash Men to **Kryoso** to punish the townsfolk for ignoring his invitation, Geyda discovered that she could finally depart the castle in the company of the Ash Men. In town she was overcome with nostalgia for the life she had lost, and one particular young woman caught her attention. Geyda soon made her second discovery of the day: She could possess a living person, taking control of her body and assimilating her memories. (In truth, Geyda could possess someone of any gender and any age, but she always prefers young women.) For several days the body's original inhabitant clamored within her mind, but eventually she grew quiet. After a week or so, she had faded away entirely. After being allowed to flee the destruction of Kryoso, Geyda lived for a decade as this other woman before her body—which had started aging rapidly—suddenly expired.

When her body died, she returned to **Castle Guirgiu**, a ghost again.

### Current Sketch

Geyda Vier remains a reluctant servant of Ladislav Mircea, unable to disobey his direct orders. Fortunately, though, he finds considerable utility in sending Geyda out into the towns of Sanguinia to serve as his spy. To do so, Geyda typically possesses someone and replaces her. Possession ends under the following conditions:

- ❖ Geyda voluntarily relinquishes possession;
- ❖ Geyda is forced to relinquish possession, for example because Dr. Rudolph van Richten and his companions perform an exorcism; or
- ❖ Geyda's temporary body dies;
- ❖ Geyda's temporary body conceives;
- ❖ Ladislav Mircea summons her back to Castle Guirgiu.

The last possibility occurs by far the most often.

When Geyda possesses someone, their soul is not immediately lost. However, for each day of possession after the second, the victim must pass a wisdom check to avoid the destruction of self. Perhaps it is the soul that is lost, or perhaps it is merely the mind. Either way, if Geyda is evicted from her victim's body past that point, the body survives but is permanently unresponsive.

Despite Geyda's compelled obedience, she seeks to undermine Mircea whenever she can. She does not trust **Lady Rusnac**, whom she believes to be loyal to Mircea. Ultimately, Geyda's goal is to spend as much time in a young, beautiful, *living* body—preferably one with children and a husband—as she can.

### Combat

Geyda Vier believes herself helpless in combat. However, her ghostly touch can inflict 1d4 temporary charisma damage. She may also use this attack when she is possessing someone.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE SPIRIT OF 726

When Rudolph van Richten, George Weathermay, and Arametrius came to Sanguinia in 726BC, they needed the services of a medium. (*Van Richten's Guide to Ghosts*, p.73) Therefore they must have been pursuing a ghost.

Who was the ghost? Was it Geyda Vier? And, if not, was the ghost truly defeated?

## NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

### LIST OF NAMES

- A. Alexandru, Alkhanoff, Anisoara, Asparu (4)
- B. Bahrsel, Bors, Borta, Bratan (4)
- C. Callipha, Claudia, Codrin, Constantin (4)
- D. Daciana, Deshanes, Diesache, Dima, Dorina, Dragomir (6)
- E. Eric (1)
- F. — (0)
- G. Gennadi, Geyda, Guigiu (3)
- H. — (0)
- I. Iaroslav, Irren (2)
- J. Josan (1)
- K. Kassapu, Koz, Kurya (3)
- L. Ladislav, Lyco (2)
- M. Mardari, Maximilian, Melany, Mikel, Mircea, Mirzu (6)
- N. Narses, Nicanor (2)
- O. Oleg, Otho (2)
- P. Pascari (1)
- Q. — (0)
- R. Rosca, Ruslan, Rusnac, Rustilav (4)
- S. Stas (1)
- T. Tarlev, Tavita, Tcach, Timea, Tokachyov, Tazhnik, Tyndar (7)
- U. Ursachi, Uzun (2)
- V. Vakha, Vasilios, Vier, Vinz, Vocula, Voronin (6)
- W. — (0)
- X. — (0)
- Y. — (0)
- Z. Zeltser, Zlata (2)

### Alkhanoff, Vakha

A Nova Vaasan merchant. The representative of the trading company which has (thus far) taken the best advantage of contact with Sanguinia. Crucially, he speaks Vaasi and a number of languages in common use around the Nocturnal Sea, including Darkonese, Grabenite, Liffen, Vechorite, and now Sanguine.

Vakha is middle-aged, with aggressive gray streaks in his otherwise black hair. He wears the traditional

long mustaches of a Vaasi man. He is short and stooped, which makes him appear shorter yet. Nonetheless, he is both stronger and faster than his wiry frame and usual strolling gait make him appear. In the event of physical danger, Vakha prefers to use these hidden advantages to catch his enemies by surprise and then escape.

In Nova Vaasa, Vakha Alkhanoff is known as a humorless but intelligent and fair-minded man. In Sanguinia, he is known as a man who fails to appreciate the greatest blessings of life.

### Bahrsel, Vinz

The conjurer who created the composite monster **Diesache the Devourer** to guard his labyrinth. Eventually he fell victim to his own creation. (See *Chilling Encounters*, p.3-6.)

### Borta, Bors

The son of **Stas Borta**.

### Borta, Oleg

The son of **Stas Borta**.

### Borta, Stas

Stas Borta lives in the **port near Kosova**, close enough to the beach that he serves as the unofficial harbor master. This means he is the one to greet new arrivals, help them unload and point them in the general direction of **Kosova**. If they arrive too late in the day to reach Kosova, then Stas gives them food and lodging. The rest of his family, including his sons **Oleg** and **Bors**, gives assistance as necessary.

The Kosova town council pays Stas Borta a small stipend for his service, which certainly helps, and many of the visitors give him a small tip, which also helps, but mostly Stas Borta is a sincerely friendly fellow who likes meeting new people.

Stas and his family have learned enough Grabenite, Vaasi, and Darkonese to communicate fairly well with their visitors.





## Bratan, Feruga

One of the few survivors of **Irren Asparu**'s attack upon the **Roshu Mine**. Terrified by what happened, but brave enough to go back.



One of **Ladislav Mircea**'s beloved hounds. In life Codrin was a dog of the "hunting dog" breed. In death he is a phantom hound.

Codrin and **Daciana** both sense whenever a living creature enters **Castle Guirgiu** or the dungeons beneath.



One of **Ladislav Mircea**'s beloved hounds. In life Daciana was a dog of the "hunting dog" breed. In death she is a phantom hound.

**Codrin** and Daciana both sense whenever a living creature enters **Castle Guirgiu** or the dungeons beneath.



A spirit medium from Sanguinia who assisted Rudolph van Richten (*Van Richten's Guide to Ghosts*, p.73) until her death at the hands of Merilee Markuza.

(*Darklords*, p.63) Afterward, her ghost haunted Richten Haus, resenting the living for the life of marriage and children that she had discarded. (*Bleak House: Homecoming*, p.13)

Laid to rest in 750BC.

## Diesache the Devourer

A creature created by the conjurer **Vinz Bahrse** by fusing a winter wolf with a tentacled entity from a distant planar realm. While it currently remains trapped within its former master's lair, it hopes to gain the strength to break free by consuming sentient minds. (See *Chilling Encounters*, p.3-6.)

## Dragomir

A hunter. The cousin of **Mikel Koz**. When a snowstorm trapped Dragomir and Mikel in a cave, they discovered signs of a lost civilization, including two weapons: an axe and a spear. Dragomir took the spear.

The axe was cursed, and eventually Mikel slaughtered his entire family. Dragomir was out hunting, and so he alone survived. The hunter now seeks his cousin, perhaps to save him, perhaps to kill him. (*Undead Sea Scrolls 2002*, p.81-84)

## Josan, Vasilios

The oldest and longest-serving member of the Council of Kosova.

## Kassapu, Tavita

A widow of **Fagarus**. She has two small children. **Tokachyov Rustilav** is smitten with her, but hasn't thought to tell her so.

## Koz, Mikel

A barbarian originally from Sanguinia. The third son of a chieftain. He found an axe which afflicted him with lycanthropy, and eventually he slaughtered his family in order to claim the chieftainship. Only his cousin **Dragomir** escaped. In response to his slaughter, Mikel's fellow villagers cursed him with a berserker rage, which always triggers an involuntary transformation. Fleeing from his village into a snowstorm, he found himself in Verbrek, where he is recognized as an albino werewolf. (*Undead Sea Scrolls 2002*, p.81-84)



The third Prince of Sanguinia. The son of **Maximilian Mircea** and the father of **Nicanor Mircea**. The husband of **Timea Mircea**.

### **Mircea, Constantin**

The fifth Prince of Sanguinia. The son of **Nicanor Mircea** and the father of **Ladislav Mircea**. Died in 606BC of the Gray Plague.

### **Mircea, Guirgiu**

The Sanguinian general who first achieved independence for his land, founding the Principality of Sanguinia. **Maximilian Mircea** was his son, and **Ladislav Mircea** is his descendant. **Castle Guirgiu** was named after him.

### **Mircea, Maximilian**

The second Prince of Sanguinia. **Castle Guirgiu** was built during his reign. He is the son of **Guirgiu Mircea** and an ancestor of **Ladislav Mircea**.

### **Mircea, Nicanor**

The fourth Prince of Sanguinia. The son of **Alexandru Mircea** and the father of **Contantin Mircea**. Nicknamed "The Alchemist Prince" because of his studies in that science. His laboratory and notes provided the basis for the later studies of **Ladislav Mircea**.

### **Mircea, Timea**

The wife of **Alexandru Mircea**, one of the historical **Princes of Sanguinia**. The **Stairs of Timea** are named after her.

### **Narses, Lyco**

Lyco Narses arrived in Sanguinia as part of **Callipha Vocula**'s mission. While he is quite clearly affiliated with the Church of Ezra, he is not a warden of the faith. The Toret refers to him as her "odd-job man".

In truth, Lyco Narses is an assassin from Karg whom Callipha Vocula once rescued from werewolves. He has been a zealous follower of Ezra—and Callipha Vocula—ever since. If an assassin's skills are potentially useful against some member of the

Legions of Night, Callipha Vocula has no qualms about sending Lyco Narses to tend to the matter. Nor does Lyco Narses have any qualms about obeying.

### **Otho, Tyndar**

An Anchorite of Ezra who arrived in Sanguinia as part of **Callipha Vocula**'s mission. He is slightly short and slightly fat and sometimes pretends that he's slightly bumbling and slightly daft, but in truth he is keen of eye and keen of mind. Vocula trusts him, and since she is his superior in the Church, he serves her to the best of his ability.

In addition to his sincere faith as an Anchorite, he has also delved into the study of magic. Vocula knows this and approves.

### **Pascari, Melany**

A member of the Council of Kosova. Also one of **Eric Zeltser**'s silent partners in his mining operation. She does not wish her involvement to become publicly known for fear that it would be perceived as disloyalty to Kosova.

### **Rosca**

A hunter and trapper who is still nominally a citizen of **Tirgo**, although he spends most of his time in the wilderness. Rosca discovered the copper vein which has become the **Roshu Mine**, and he remains a silent partner in the **Roshu Copper Consortium**. The head of the Consortium, **Eric Zeltser**, is one of Rosca's very few friends.

"Rosca" is actually Rosca's surname. He loathes his given name, and has done his best to let everyone else forget it. He was once given the nickname *Rosca cea Rosie* ("Rosca the Red"), which he doesn't particularly like, but it's still better than his given name.

### **Rustilav, Tokachyov**

A Vos hunter and trapper. First came to **Fagarus** to trade, but he has decided to stay. While Tokachyov Rustilav has never been one of Gregor Zolnik's



Boyarsky, he nonetheless acts as though he had their authority. The people of Fagarus have let him bully his way into something akin to councilorship, mostly because they do not wish to cut off the best trade opportunity that they've had in a century and a half. Tokachyov Rustilav now handles all interactions with his former countrymen.

To Rustilav's considerable surprise, he *likes* living in Sanguinia and among its people. Winters are difficult, true, but not as difficult as they are in his homeland. The people are both happier and friendlier. There's even a **Sanguinian woman** with whom he is smitten. Also, there are no Boyarsky and no night wolves.



#### **Tarlev, Mirzu**

Once a noble's son, invited to **Ladislav Mircea's** final ball. Now the leader of the Ash Men. Nothing of his former personality remains, to the recurrent chagrin of **Ladislav Mircea**. Mirzu had been one of the Prince's favorites, and he had been terribly sorry to fling him over the walls of **Castle Guirgiu**.

Even now, Ladislav sometimes talks to Mirzu Tarlev as if he were still alive. Much to Ladislav's frustration, Mirzu Tarlev does not and can not respond.

#### **Tazhnik, Kurya**

A Vaasi engineer, working for the **Roshu Copper Consortium**. Went missing during **Irren Asparu's** attack. Presumed dead, but maybe he's not?

#### **Tcach, Femke**

A Tirgoan woman. Her family owns a sizable flock of sheep which typically pasture in the Foothills west of the **Eastern Forest**. Two hunting dogs are her frequent companions.



#### **Ursachi, Anisoara**

The mother of **Ruslan Ursachi**. A victim of **Geyda Vier** years ago.

#### **Ursachi, Dorina**

The wife of **Ruslan Ursachi**. A recent victim of **Geyda Vier**.

#### **Ursachi, Ruslan**

A townspeople. His **mother** was one of **Geyda Vier's** victims, and so he recognized the symptoms when the ghost possessed his **wife** years later.



#### **Uzun, Alexandru**

Alexandru Uzun was the *primar* (that is, the mayor) of **Kryoso** at the time of Sanguinia's entry into the Mists and at the time of **his town's destruction**. When **Prince Ladislav** sent the fateful invitation to his Autumnal Gala, Alexandru Uzun originally argued in favor of humoring the Prince, but he allowed himself to be convinced to disregard the invitation. When the **Ash Men** returned to Kryoso, Alexandru Uzun blamed himself for the destruction that followed. He even presented himself to the Ash Men, saying, "The decision was mine. Punish me, not the townspeople." The Ash Men paid no heed, killing him where he stood, and then slaughtered his fellowcitizens.

The ghost of Alexandru Uzun still haunts the ruins of Kryoso.



#### **Vocula, Callipha**

The Toret of the new **chapel** of the Church of Ezra. A Zealot from Nevuchar Springs. She is tall, thin, and very pale, showing perhaps a hint of elven blood.

#### **Voronin, Iaroslav**

One of the councilors of Tirgo. Heavily invested in the timber industry. Has connections with the **charcoal burners**. Also second-in-command of the **Roshu Copper Consortium**.

#### **Worm of the Wastes**

An elder remorhaz, the last of its kind in Sanguinia. It has lived an unusually long time, perhaps because it hibernates through the summer, perhaps because



Ravenloft is gonna Ravenloft. It is also more intelligent than most of its kind.

### **Zeltser, Eric**

The head of a copper mining concern based out of Tirgo.

## **SITES OF INTEREST**

### **Biban**

The westernmost of the two rivers which flow north from Mount Radu. Its name means "perch".

### **Castle Guirgiu**

The home of Prince Ladislav Mircea. (*Realm of Terror*, p.84)

The castle itself is smaller than many similar structures in the Core, but many rooms and tunnels have been dug out beneath the castle. Some of these rooms were originally designed as living areas in case of siege, but beneath those rooms are dungeons, Ladislav's alchemical laboratory, and the storage chambers where Ladislav keeps the food and goods which his Ash Men collect as taxes. Determined explorers who venture deep enough may stumble across passages which lead to the outside world. For example, one such passage connects with the abandoned Tistshi Mine.

In addition to the Prince, Castle Guirgiu is inhabited by a number of other creatures, most of them undead. Most significantly, the Ash Men serve as the Prince's soldiers and tax collectors. The leader of the Ash Men, Mirzu Tarlev, was one of the Prince's closest companions in life. Their counterparts, the so-called Ash Women, perform the duties ordinarily assigned to servants, never mind that many of the Ash Women were nobles in life.

In addition, five ghosts haunt the castle. Lady Zlata Rusnac, Geyda Vier, and Dima Vier are the human ghosts, while Codrin and Daciana are the canine ones. Codrin and Daciana are fiercely loyal to

Ladislav; Lady Rusnac and Geyda Vier, rather less so, with Dima Vier falling somewhere in between.

### **Chapel of Spiritual Summer**

The Church of Ezra in Kosova has established a chapel in Kosova. Callipha Vocula is the Toret of this new chapel.

### **Eastern Forest**

The forest in the Foothills east of Castle Guirgiu and the Prince's Forest. Somewhat by coincidence, it also happens to be the easternmost forest in Sanguinia.

Of the forests of Sanguinia, the Eastern Forest is the least dangerous. Because of its proximity to Kosova and even Tirgo, it has always been heavily hunted. Those few predators who remain are usually content to hunt prey which lacks axes and arrows.

### **Fagarus**

A settlement within Sanguinia (*Realm of Terror*, p.84) with a population of approximately 800 people as of 755BC. (*Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, p.153)

Fagarus was built upon a fertile plain. It trades a significant portions of its food to Tirgo in exchange for metals.

### **Fagarus Way**

The road which leads from Tirgo and Fagarus.

### **Field of Peace**

A place in the Foothills west of Mount Radu where the hillfolk clans traditionally gather at midsummer. Violence is taboo; hence the name.

While not warded against supernatural threats in the same way as the Necklace of Stone, nonetheless all worshipers of the Spirits of the Hillfolk enjoy the benefits of a *prayer* spell if they are attacked in this area. (Anyone who initiates violence against another gains no bonus.)

## Flatlands

The lowest elevations of Sanguinia are uniformly flat, and so naturally they are called the Flatlands by the Sanguinians. Both Kosova and Fagarus were built upon the Flatlands, but there are a number of smaller communities besides them.

## Foothills

The foothills of the Kodru Mountains are known to Sanguinians simply as the Foothills. Travel through the Foothills is more difficult than travel across the Flatlands, but the evergreen forests draw hunters, trappers, and timber-men regardless. Historically, Sanguinians have worked mines (such as the Tistshi) in the Foothills, but most of those have been exhausted.

Although the town of Tirgo is the largest settlement in the Foothills, there are a number of smaller communities as well.

## Goblin Fens

While Sanguinia contains a number of mires around its perimeter, the fens located along the southern edge are known as the Goblin Fens. While they may appear lifeless in the winter months, in warmer months they are clearly vital. A diverse array of wildlife either inhabits the fens or, in the case of certain migrating waterfowl, regularly passes through them.

The Goblin Fens are important to the hillfolk population for two reasons. First, the diversity of wildlife provides a diversity of food. Second, certain mosses and other plants used in hillfolk medicine are more commonly found in the Goblin Fens than elsewhere.

However, the Goblin Fens are also important to certain townsfolk, particularly those who belong to the Order of Alchemical Mysteries, because of the rare minerals which collect in the fens. On rare occasions, the hillfolk are forced to hide patiently while some agent of the Order scrapes a crust of minerals from a half-submerged rock.

"The Goblin Fens" is a name given by the townsfolk because of legends that goblins have been seen there. (They have, as have human hillfolk mistaken for goblins.) The hillfolk doubtless have their own, less forbidding name for the fens.

## Grakau

A seasonal fishing camp near Lake Argus.

## Guirgiu Plateau

The plateau in the Kodru Mountains upon which Castle Guirgiu was built.

## Guirgiu Way

The road which leads from Tirgo and Castle Guirgiu.

## Ice-Bound Passage

A two-way, moderately reliable Mistway between Sanguinia and the Nocturnal Sea near Todstein. It only opens when snow is falling at both ends, but given that the Frozen Reaches and Todstein are the way they are, that condition occurs relatively often during much of the year.

At the Sanguinian end, the Ice-Bound Passage opens where the Preut River meets the sea. During summer months the Mists cling to the shore, but when winter arrives the Mists recede slightly to reveal the waters of a small bay.

## Kodru Mountains

The Kodru Mountains occupy the heart of Sanguinia. Mount Radu is the highest peak. Other notable formations include the Vrykolaka Pass.

The Sanguinians have opened a number of mines in the Kodru Mountains, and they have successfully mined copper, gold, and iron. Historically speaking, the mines have been a source of conflict with the hillfolk, who apparently felt that digging so far into the earth somehow profaned it. However, this conflict ceased to matter with the disappearance of the hillfolk.

## Kosova

A settlement within Sanguinia (*Realm of Terror*, p.84) with a population of approximately 1,000 people as of 755BC. (*Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, p.153)

Since Sanguinia joined the Frozen Reaches Cluster, the Mists retreated slightly, and the Ice-Bound Passage has opened. In other words, Kosova suddenly became a port town. Given that, its population has swelled to 1,600 people. A veritable metropolis!

Kosova is far enough from the Kodru Mountains to be surrounded by flatter land. The soil is not as arable as the land around Fagarus, but it still yields enough food during the brief summer to keep the Kosovans fed during the long winter.

## Kosova Way

The road which leads from Tirgo and Kosova.

## Kryoso

Before Sanguinia was pulled into the Mists, Kryoso was the largest town in the principality, larger even than Tirgo. Part of its size was due to proximity to Castle Guirgiu. Kryoso was located at the base of the Guirgiu Plateau almost directly south of the castle. Families in Kryoso sent their children to the castle to work, considering it a good opportunity. The Prince's militia was based in Kryoso. The town provided food, drink, clothing, and other goods for the castle's inhabitants.

When Prince Ladislav withdrew into Castle Guirgiu, Primar Alexandru Uzun of Kryoso took responsibility for seeing the land through the twin threats of the Gray Plague and then the enduring winter. Alexandru Uzun did so even while suspecting that his presumption would cost him his head whenever Prince Ladislav emerged from the castle. Tradition in modern Sanguinia holds that the primar was a brave man, but mostly he was just desperate.

Prince Ladislav remained withdrawn even after winter finally broke. However, in 611BC, Prince

Ladislav sent an unexpected invitation to Kryoso, inviting all of the nobility to a gala. Several influential townsfolk felt it was time to toss aside the Prince and found a new nation ruled by the people. They convinced Alexandru Uzun to ignore the invitation, and the razing of Kryoso followed.

Kryoso remains in ruins, a rank 3 sinkhole of evil with a taint of despair. The people of Sanguinia believe the ruins to be haunted, and correctly so.

## Labyrinth of Vinz Bahrrel

The conjurer Vinz Bahrrel constructed his lair beneath Mount Radu, and he created the composite monster Diesache the Devourer to guard it. Diesache eventually grew strong enough to kill its creator, but it has not yet grown strong enough to escape the spells binding it to the labyrinth. (*See Chilling Encounters*, p.3-6.)

## Lake Argus

The most prominent lake in Sanguinia. (*Realm of Terror*, p.84) Although its surface freezes over except in the summer (*Realm of Terror*, p.84), ice fishers ply their trade throughout the rest of the year. (*Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, p.152)

Spring is a dangerous time upon Lake Argus. Not only does the ice weaken, increasing the risk of falling through, but spring is also when the giant king crabs emerge from the fishing holes in search of a tasty meal, like people for example. Of course, people also consider giant king crabs to be a tasty meal, so their emergence is an opportunity as well as a risk.

## Micul Niestru

A river branches off of the Niestru and runs eastward into the mists. This river is known as the Micul Niestru ("Little Niestru"). The town of Tirgo was built where the Micul Niestru branches away from the Niestru.

## Mount Radu

The highest peak in Sanguinia, which reaches a height of 11,000 feet. (*Realm of Terror*, p.84)



### Necklace of Stone

A large circle of menhirs erected by the hillfolk of Sanguinia. Although none of the living Sanguinians realize this, undead—including vrykolakas and Ash Men—cannot enter the circle.

### Niestru

The longest river in Sanguinia, which runs from the mountains surrounding Mount Radu southeast past Fagarus and into Vorostokov. Sometimes called Niestru Mare to distinguish it from the Micul Niestru.

The town of Tirgo was built where the Niestru and the Micul Niestru branch.

### Northern Forest

A small forest in Sanguinia in the Foothills near the Păstrăv River. The Northern Forest has always been a crucial natural resource for settlements north of Kosova.

### Open Hearth (Vatră Deschisă)

An inn in Tirgo.

### Owl Cliffs

The hillfolk have a legend about two young women who fell in love although they were each promised to someone else. Neither of their families would break their daughter's engagement, and so the two young women ran away together. Chased by their angry fathers and cornered, they threw themselves over the edge of a cliff.

According to this legend, the young women were transformed into snowy owls and flew away safely. The site of their transformation has been called the Owl Cliffs ever since.

### Păstrăv

The easternmost of the two rivers which flow north from Mount Radu. Its name means "trout".

### Pază Woods

Also called the Sentry Woods, the Pază is a small forest along the Guirgiu Way, just beyond the Vrykolaka Pass. Generations ago, a patrol of the Sanguinian army would use this forest for concealment as they watched the road to Castle Guirgiu. However, the Pază has been unguarded since Prince Ladislav Mircea recalled his forces to the castle.

### Port of Kosova

Now that the Ice-Bound Passage has opened, a port has formed where the Preut River meets the sea. It has not developed an official name yet. A few people refer to it as "the port of Kosova" or "the port of Preut" but most people call it simply "the port".

The port is yet a small settlement, populated by three extended families. Stas Borta receives a small stipend from the Kosova council to make certain that visitors receive a proper welcome. His salary is augmented by tips. Two other families have moved down to the end of the Preut, hoping to gain a share of this bounty. Stas Borta is canny enough to let these other families greet and offer lodging to (and therefore receive tips from) every second ship which arrives at Sanguinia. Although he knows his generosity may only inspire greed, he doesn't think it will do so any faster than stinginess would.

### Preut

The river which flows from the mountains surrounding Mount Radu past Kosova and thence to the Misty Border.

### Prince's Forest

The forest northeast of Castle Guirgiu is known as the Prince's Forest. Nobody is allowed to hunt there without the Prince's permission.

### Roshu Mine

A mine recently opened in the Kodru Mountains, operated by the Roshu Copper Consortium.

## Seven Sacred Caves

The hillfolk of Sanguinia believe in seven sacred caves beneath the Kodru Mountains. The spirits which the hillfolk worship possess their greatest strength within these caves. Because of that, after Sanguinia was drawn into Ravenloft a number of the hillfolk clans retired to the seven sacred caves, where they entered a supernatural hibernation, protected by their guardian spirits.

Some of the smaller clans agreed to share a cave, which means that not all of the seven sacred caves are occupied by sleeping hillfolk.

The Kodru Mountains are riddled with caverns and tunnels, and so the seven sacred caves are part of a larger network of underground connections. At each of the seven locations, only a handful of chambers (at most) are truly sacred. Nearby tunnels and other chambers are not.

Perhaps the Wolf Cave is one of the seven. However, the hillfolk are no longer around to confirm or refute this possibility.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — DIGGING TOO DEEP

One of the Sanguinian copper mines has dug into one of the Seven Sacred Caves of the hillfolk. Thus far the shaman's wards are still protecting the sleeping hillfolk, but the miners are determined to tear them down, if only to get past the sleepers to the lower depths in search of another copper vein.

## Southern Forest

The southernmost forest in Sanguinia. Although most of its sprawl occurs in the Foothills, the eastern end spills over into the Flatlands near Fagarus. Unlike the Eastern Forest, the Southern Forest has not been tamed.

## Stairs of Timea

Along the Fagarus Way, where the Flatlands ascend into the Foothills, a natural stone stair flanks the road. traveling up the stair is more difficult than simply following the slope of the road, but the

individual steps provide a flat place to pause in one's upward journey.

The Stairs of Timea are named after the wife of one of the Princes of Sanguinia.

## Tirgo

The largest settlement within Sanguinia<sup>(*Realm of Terror*, p.84)</sup> with a population of approximately 1,300 as of 755BC.<sup>(*Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, p.153)</sup> It stands at the crossroads of the three major roads in Sanguinia, which explains its relatively large size.

While both Kosova and Fagarus have benefited from contact with the world outside of Sanguinia, Tirgo has experienced less advantage. Between this and the relative proximity of Castle Guirgiu, the people of Tirgo are much more conservative in the face of progress.

Tirgo was built where the Micul Nistru river branches away from the Nistru river. This positioning has helped Tirgo become the timber capitol of Sanguinia. Timber is floated down the Nistru River from the Kodru Mountains until it reaches Tirgo.

Also because of its proximity to the mountains, Tirgo is the home base for most mining operations in Sanguinia. Similarly, most of the ice-fishers at Lake Argus live in Tirgo when they aren't up at the lake. Hunters and trappers also venture into the mountains from Tirgo.

## Tistshi Mine

An abandoned iron mine in the Foothills at the base of the Kodru Mountains along the Kosova Way near Tirgo. The iron ran out several generations before Prince Ladislav Mircea came to power.

A secret tunnel runs between the Tistshi mine and Castle Guirgiu.

## Vier Estate

The ancestral home of the fallen Vier family remains on the eastern end of Kosova, abandoned and

delapidated. For inexplicable reasons, Prince Mircea has decreed that the manor shall be left alone rather than being stripped for materials. The Kosovans are happy to obey, not least because they are convinced that the manor is haunted.

In truth, the only ghost who ever haunts the manor is Geyda Vier. However, because of her supernatural constraints she only visits her old family home when she's inhabiting a mortal body. She doesn't do so often, particularly as the manor's condition continues to decline. She doesn't want to risk harm to any mortal body that she is inhabiting, but just as importantly, she finds the decaying state of her mortal home depressing.

Instead, most of the manor's reputation arises because councilor Gennadi Mardari uses it as his secret lair. The manor is where he hides his *tome of mephitis summoning*, where he performs his magic, and where his bound servants lurk when they aren't pursuing some other task.

### Vrykolaka Pass

As the Guirgiu Way winds through the mountains on its path to the castle of Prince Ladislav Mircea, it passes between two strikingly tall rock spires. This area is known as Vrykolaka Pass because local lore says it is where the deformed Sanguinian vampires are often found. However, it is neither more dangerous (nor more safe) than elsewhere along Guirgiu Way.

### Western Forest

The Western Forest is not actually the westernmost forest in Sanguinia. It lies primarily in the Kodru Mountains northwest of Guirgiu Plateau and southeast of the Păstrăv River. However, it does spill into the Foothills.

### Wolf Cave

The cave which **Mikel Koz** and **Dragomir** discovered has no formal name, but the two young men called it "the wolf cave" when discussing it afterward. At the center of the cave is a dead man upon a throne, but

the corpse has been stripped of its weapons. *(Undead Sea Scrolls 2002, p.82)*

It is uncertain whether the Wolf Cave is one of the **Seven Sacred Caves** of the hillfolk.

## Factions, Cabals, and Secret Societies

### The Ash Men

Prince Ladislav Mircea's enforcers and tax collectors. Named for the ash-colored coats which they wear, and also because their skin is kind of grayish.

#### *The Public Face*

The Ash Men are feared throughout Sanguinia for their utter lack of mercy and because they can spread the Gray Plague.

#### *The Hidden Face*

The Ash Men are the undead result of Ladislav Mircea's alchemical and necrotic experiments. They are created from the "guests" summoned to his infrequent masques. Ladislav Mircea refrains from sending out recent converts to avoid recognition by their kith and kin. However, he has plenty of Ash Men from previous generations to send.

#### *Allies and Enemies*

Ladislav Mircea, the creator of the Ash Men, is their sole ally. Everyone else is either a loyal subject of their Prince or else their enemy.

### The Charcoal Burners

#### *The Public Face*

Charcoal burners live in the forested sections of the Kodru Mountains, making their living by carbonizing wood in their charcoal kilns. Although they sell charcoal to glassblowers and metalworkers in town, they spend little time in town themselves.

Charcoal burners usually live alone or in small family groups, but sometimes—particularly in winter—they gather together in small communities.



### *The Hidden Face*

The townsfolk generally consider the charcoal burners untrustworthy and uncivilized. In fact, many people believe the charcoal burners to be in league with supernatural evil, and there is a sliver of truth to that belief. Some of the charcoal burners do allow the vrykolaka to feed upon them (without killing them) in exchange for safety otherwise.

### *Allies and Enemies*

The charcoal burners are notable for existing somewhere between the townsfolk and the hillfolk. Genetically and culturally, they are closer to the townsfolk. However, by virtue of living at the fringes of settled civilization, their lifestyle has more in common with the nomadic hillfolk. The charcoal burners are among the few townsfolk who realize that not all of the hillfolk have vanished.

### **The Church of Ezra in Kosova**

The Nevuchar Springs sect of the Church of Ezra has established a chapel just outside of the town of Kosova. Callipha Vocula is the Toret of this chapel, aided by Tyndar Otho, Lyco Narses, and a half-dozen other Darkonians.

### *The Public Face*

The Sanguinians want little to do with the Church, for fear of the reaction of their Prince when he discovers the foreign intrusion upon the shores of Sanguinia.

The Church, on the other hand, is rather mercenary in its attempts to bring in converts.

### *The Hidden Face*

The Church of Ezra doesn't hide its face upon Sanguinia. Whether this approach works out well for them remains to be seen.

### *Allies and Enemies*

Upon discerning Ladislav Mircea's undead nature, of course the wardens of the new chapel dedicated themselves to his destruction. However, they have not yet taken any direct action against the Prince.

That is probably best for them, but of course it cannot last.

As soon as the Prince hears of the Church's presence and intentions, he will doubtless send his Ash Men out to demonstrate the relative powerlessness of the Church.

### **The Hillfolk**

### *The Public Face*

The hillfolk appear to have vanished from Sanguinia.

### *The Hidden Face*

The hillfolk were largely unaffected by the Gray Plague since their contact with the townsfolk was minimal. However, the most spiritually sensitive of the shamans noticed the disruption when the Mists claimed Sanguinia. When winter that year failed to yield to a proper spring and summer, the clans met and discussed and decided what to do. The spirits all indicated that something especially terrible had happened at Castle Guirgiu.

One particularly militant chieftain led his clan in an assault upon the castle. The assault did not proceed very well. For one thing, Prince Mircea did not even notice that the castle was under siege. Not at first, anyway; he was preoccupied with planning his first post-mortem ball. Once he did notice, he sent his Ash Men out to drive the hillfolk away. Although the hillfolk fared better than one might expect against the Ash Men, still the clan's shaman could not *bleed* their weapons quickly enough. The warriors of the entire clan were eradicated, and the non-combatants were absorbed into other clans.

Some of the clans, particularly the ones who lived in the far western Foothills, chose to live as they have always lived. These clans remain to this day, although very few of the townsfolk are aware of their existence.

However, the third group of clans took another path. One of the spirits had said: *We spirits shall defend those who rest within the sacred places. You*

*may slumber more deeply than the Hoarfrost Bear slumbers in winter. We shall keep you safe until the spirit-talkers awaken and announce the return of true spring to the land.*

With that reassurance, some of the shamans led their people to the Seven Sacred Caves, strengthened the protective wards, and sent their people into supernatural slumber.

For most of the clans, their confidence in the spirit's prophecy has been rewarded. The sleepers require neither food nor drink, and they do not age. In the early spring each year the shamans awaken to commune with the spirits, and upon learning that the wrongness yet pervades their homeland, they return to sleep.

Meanwhile, their people slumber on, unharmed. Mostly.

#### *Allies and Enemies*

Generations ago the hillfolk aided Guirgiu Mircea in driving foreign invaders out of Sanguinia. More traditionally, though, they have lived in conflict with the townsfolk. Indeed, Guirgiu Mircea and all subsequent Princes except Ladislav Mircea have maintained a small army to help pacify the hillfolk.

Some of the charcoal burners know of the hillfolks' continued presence. They aren't allies, but they aren't enemies, and that suits the hillfolk and the charcoal burners alike.

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY – THE BLINDED HILLFOLK**

Alas, one of the hillfolk clans was misled by the malicious trickster spirit known as the One-Eyed Badger. That wily spirit caused the clan's shaman to mistake a non-sacred cavern for one of the Seven Sacred Caves. When the shaman sent his people to slumber, they were not fully protected by the spirits. Instead, the One-Eyed Badger was able to take revenge for the loss of his eye by transforming the entire clan into grimlocks.

Although the grimlocks sleep for years on end, much like their still-human kindred, occasionally they awaken. When this occurs, the remaining wakeful hillfolk know to escape to lower ground, where the grimlocks are reluctant to follow.

Moreover, the slumbering clans are protected by the other spirits, and the grimlocks cannot enter the sacred caves. However, whenever the grimlocks cannot find hillfolk to terrorize, instead they usually raze nearby townsfolk settlements to the ground. Their rampages have never brought them as far as even Tirgo, but many smaller steadings have been entirely lost.

Many years have passed since the grimlocks last awakened. The next time they do, they may rampage beyond the Kodru Mountains and into the towns of Sanguinia.

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE SHAMAN'S TREACHERY**

Even worse than the possibility of the blinded hillfolk is the betrayal of a clan once led by the shaman who was dedicated to its protection and preservation. See **Irren Asparu** for details.

## The House of Mircea

Six Princes have ruled Sanguinia.

Prince	Reign	Notes
<b>Guirgiu</b>	493BC → 519BC	Freed Sanguinia.
<b>Maximilian</b>	519BC → 545BC	Built Castle Guirgiu.
<b>Alexandru</b>	545BC → 576BC	Married to Timea.
<b>Nicanor</b>	576BC → 584BC	"The Alchemist Prince."
<b>Constantin</b>	584BC → 606BC	
<b>Ladislav</b>	606BC → PRESENT	Current Prince and Darklord of Sanguinia.

## Noble Houses of Sanguinia

After Guirgiu Mircea threw off the yoke of foreign conquerors, he purged Sanguinia of those families which had supported the conquerors and rewarded those families which had supported him. Once the violence was over and the dust settled, Sanguinia provided an opportune trade route between wealthy nations, and so the new nobility prospered. Some of the noble families lived in the towns along the trade route, while others occupied more distant estates, usually close to useful natural resources such as timber or ore.

When the Gray Plague reached Sanguinia, most of the noble families quarantined themselves in their homes. However, when Prince Ladislav Mircea sent out the invitation to his quarantine ball, many of the nobles feared the consequences of disobedience. Also, many of the scions of the noble houses were eager to regain a semblance of normalcy, and they truly desired to attend.

Those young nobles who went to Castle Guirgiu met a grim fate, of course, but those who remained behind fared little better. In the ceaseless winters of 607BC and 608BC, the nobility suffered nearly as much as the peasantry did, particularly in cases where the peasants convinced themselves that the nobility were hoarding food (regardless of the truth of that rumor).

Moreover, when Prince Ladislav sent his Ash Men out to collect taxes, the nobles bore the brunt of their attention. Not only did the Ash Men demand the families' wealth, they demanded their young women and men. Only nobles were invited to the first half-dozen of Mircea's winter balls. As a consequence, the noble houses lost most of their young women of child-bearing age. A generation later, nearly all of the noble houses had fallen, either dying off or having abandoned their claims to nobility.

In modern Sanguinia, no noble houses remain. Oh, certainly there are families with noble blood in their line, but they do not speak of such matters. They fear that Prince Ladislav will renew his traditional claim to the freshest fruit found on any noble vine.

## The Order of Alchemical Mysteries

There exists a secret cabal of alchemists in Sanguinia, scattered across the land. Some members inhabit the three towns. Others are more solitary, living in distant reaches of the Kodru Mountains. In total there are approximately two dozen alchemists in Sanguinia, although not all of them would claim to be part of the Order.

### *The Public Face*

As a secret cabal, the alchemists have no public face.

### *The Hidden Face*

Once every year, usually right at the boundary between True Spring and True Summer, the alchemists meet. Not all of them, of course, because many of them are too antisocial. However, those alchemists who are willing to interact with others do meet during this time. They spend three days trying to trick secrets out of other alchemists without giving up any important secrets themselves.

The cabal has four leaders. The Master of Melanoza wears the ceremonial robes of black. The Master of Leucoza wears robes of white. The Master of Xantoza, yellow. The Master of Iloza, red. These "masters" are associated with the traditional four



stages of alchemical process. Generally speaking, the four masters are chosen by allowing the four people who most want to wear fancy-colored robes to do so.

These alchemical stages are also associated with the four humors: black bile, phlegm, yellow bile, and blood. All of the townsfolk of Sanguinia believe in humorism. The members of the Order of Alchemical Mystery do too, only they do so more pretentiously.

#### *Allies and Enemies*

Prince Ladislav Mircea has discreet contact with the alchemists. In fact, the alchemists do not realize that their most secretive member is the Prince. (Several suspect as much, though.) All they know is that one of their members has access to some of the most exotic reagents such as mercury, and they are delighted to accept these rarities in exchange for plenty of those reagents which can be acquired readily across the land.

### **Roshu Copper Consortium**

The Roshu Copper Consortium owns and operates the Roshu Mine in the Kodru Mountains. The Consortium itself is based out of Tirgo, but it has connections to Kosova and even Nova Vaasa.

#### *The Public Face*

The Consortium is optimistic that a promising vein will yield sufficient copper to justify working the vein.

**Eric Zeltser** of Tirgo is the head of the Consortium. The poor man sunk too much of his wealth into this venture. Doesn't he know that the mines are all played out?

#### *The Hidden Face*

The Consortium already has evidence that the copper vein will make its partners powerfully wealthy, particularly if they can bleed the vein heavily before too many people realize just how rich it is. Once the mine's success becomes common knowledge, the profits will inevitably be diluted. The increased availability of copper will lower its value, other mines in the area will be opened, and both

Tirgo and Kosova are likely to impose taxes. The worst scenario of all, though, is that Prince Ladislav Mircea will realize that Sanguinians have something of value to tax.

The Consortium's less-visible partners include the following:

- ❖ **Councilor Iaroslav Voronin of Tirgo**, the second-in-command of the Consortium, whose influence is necessary to keep the consortium's operations on the down-low;
- ❖ **Rosca**, who initially discovered the vein;
- ❖ **Councilor Melany Pascari of Kosova**, whose well-remunerated cooperation is useful for passing the copper discretely through her town and to the port; and
- ❖ **A certain mercantile company operating out of Egetus**, which ships the copper to the mainland and handles its sale there.

#### *Allies and Enemies*

Thus far, the Consortium has no particular allies and no particular enemies. Doubtless that will change once others learn the true value of the Roshu Mine.

## **NEW MONSTERS**

### **ANCIENT DEAD, RANK ZERO**

A "rank zero" ancient dead is typically created to be a servant of a more powerful member of the ancient dead.

#### *2nd Edition*

A "rank zero" ancient dead retains the same hit dice, hit points, and other characteristics it had in life, with the following modifications:

- ❖ As an undead, it becomes immune to *sleep*, *charm*, *hold*, death magic, poison, paralysis, and mind-affecting spells.
- ❖ If applicable, it gains +2 Strength and suffers -2 Dexterity.

- ❖ It gains a +2 bonus to its Armor Class. It suffers only half damage from physical attacks.
- ❖ It suffers only half damage from cold.

### 3rd Edition

Rank zero ancient dead do not possess *Damage Reduction* or the *Disease* special attack. Nor do they possess the *Immunity*, *Rejuvenation*, or *Turn Resistance* special qualities. However, they do possess *Resistance to Cold*, *Resistance to Blows*, and all immunities which follow from being undead.

Additional rank modifiers are as follows:

Str	Dex	Int	Wis	Cha
+2	-6	—	—	—

Speed	Dmg Red	Turn Resist	Immun./ Resist.	AC	CR
-10	—	+0	0/1 (Cold)	+2	+1

## COZSECA

See *Undead Sea Scrolls 2002*, "Cozseca: A Vicious Mimic of the Mountain Wilds", p.338-340.

## SERVANT OF THE HOARFROST BEAR

Climate/Terrain	Sanguinia
Frequency	Very Rare
Organization	Solitary
Activity Cycle	Any
Diet	None
Intelligence	Low
Treasure	Nil
Alignment	Neutral
No. Appearing	1
Armor Class	2
Movement	18
Hit Dice	10
THACO	11
No. of Attacks	3
Damage/Attack	1d10/1d10/2d12
Special Attacks	Nil

Special Defenses	See Below
Magic Resistance	20%
Size	H (12'-20' high)
Morale	Fearless

A *servant of the Hoarfrost Bear* is a lesser spirit in service to the Hoarfrost Bear, one of the foremost spirits worshiped by the **hillfolk** of Sanguinia. It is invisible and usually intangible, but to anyone able to perceive the unseen world, it appears as a bear. Unsurprisingly, really. Its size varies from slightly larger than a normal bear to a terrifying twenty feet long.

Servants of the Hoarfrost Bear are utterly faithful, but they are not very bright. For example, they might fail to recognize that the ancient dead are an undead threat because of their lack of connection to the Negative Material Plane.

### Combat

Servants of the Hoarfrost Bear gain certain benefits from their spiritual nature:

- ❖ They are immune to sleep, charm, hold, death magic, poison, paralysis, and mind-affecting spells.
- ❖ They are naturally invisible, although they may choose to become visible.
- ❖ They are naturally incorporeal. When attacked from the material world, they are unaffected by weapons of less than +1 enchantment. (They may be attacked normally by ethereal opponents.)
- ❖ They are 20% magic resistant.

Despite its incorporeal nature, a Servant of the Hoarfrost Bear may affect the material world through telekinesis. In particular, it may attack opponents with the equivalent of a claw/claw/bite, inflicting 1d10 with each telekinetic paw and 2d6 with its telekinetic maw. However, if it so chooses, it may also strike more gently, inflicting only 1d6 temporary (subdual) damage and moving its opponent up to 10 feet in a chosen direction.

## Habitat/Society

Little is known about the Servants of the Hoarfrost Bear, except that they are loyal to the greater spirit which the hillfolk of Sanguinia call the Hoarfrost Bear. Perhaps the spirit world is home to an entire society of these spirits, or perhaps the Hoarfrost Bear creates them as needed and dismisses them when needed no longer.

## Ecology

As spirits, Servants of the Hoarfrost Bear do not normally interact with the ecology of the material world. However, their tasks are often in support of the preservation of the material world.

## UPIR LICHY

See *Book of Sacrifices*, "Upir Lichy: A Frostbitten Vampire from the Frozen Reaches", p.122-124 or *Undead Sea Scrolls 2002*, "Upir Lichy: Third Edition", p.346-350.

## VAMPIRE, VRYKOLAKA, SANGUINIAN

Climate/Terrain	Sanguinia
Frequency	Rare
Organization	Pack
Activity Cycle	Night
Diet	Special
Intelligence	Exceptional
Treasure	Nil
Alignment	Chaotic Evil
No. Appearing	1d4
Armor Class	1
Movement	12 Fl 18 (C)
Hit Dice	8+3
THACO	11
No. of Attacks	1
Damage/Attack	1d6+4
Special Attacks	See Below
Special Defenses	See Below
Magic Resistance	See Below
Size	M
Morale	Champion

The vrykolaka is a vampire which feeds upon not just blood, but on all of the humors: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. Although some vampiric strains are known for their irresistible raw magnetism, the vrykolaka is hideous in its corruption, looking far more like a zombie than a traditional vampire. Its internal organs shrivel away. Papery skin clings to its bones. Its fingers lengthen and harden into talons. Its tongue is long and snakelike, ending in a wicked barb.

Within Sanguinia, vrykolakas were created at the moment that **Ladislav Mircea** died and became the Darklord of that domain. Mircea himself is the most obvious instance, but those nobles (and members of their entourages) within Castle Guirgiu who had not yet caught the Gray Plague were transformed as well. These vrykolakas are less powerful than Ladislav Mircea, but they are not subservient to him. They fled the castle and have haunted the wilds of Sanguinia ever since.

Note that the stat-block given above and the special attacks given below describe the feral vrykolakas which inhabit Sanguinia. However, Ladislav Mircea is a unique, stronger vrykolaka; his differences are detailed elsewhere.

## Combat

When engaged in melee combat, vrykolakas attack with two claws and their barbed tongue. This combination is treated as a single attack, inflicting 1d6+4 damage and exposing the victim to disease. With each exposure, the victim must make a saving throw vs. poison at -2 or else become infected with whatever disease the vrykolaka carries. The feral vrykolakas of Sanguinia typically carry "filth fever" (incubation 1d3 days, damage 1d3 Dexterity and 1d3 Constitution). Ladislav Mircea is the only vrykolaka to transmit the **Gray Plague**.

However, with a successful grapple attack, a vrykolaka may attach its barbed tongue and drain a humour from its victim. (The victim is also exposed to disease, as described immediately above.) The



loss of humor is represented by the temporary loss of 1d3 points of an ability score:

1d4	Humour	Ability
1	Blood	Strength
2	Yellow Bile	Wisdom
3	Black Bile	Constitution
4	Phlegm	Intelligence

Ability score loss is regained at a rate of 1d3 points to *each* drained ability for each full night's rest.

A vrykolaka is unable to *charm* its victims, but it can afflict a victim with *fever sleep* by locking its gaze with a particular victim within 30 feet. If caught unawares, the victim must pass a Wisdom check at -2 to avoid falling unconscious; anyone trying to avoid meeting the vrykolaka's gaze in combat gains a +2 bonus to the Wisdom check, instead. The effect of the fever sleep is similar to the *sleep* spell, but without a hit die limit.

Anyone slain by a vrykolaka's disease or humor drain will rise as a vrykolaka fledgling 1d4 days after burial. For this reason, Sanguinians favor either cremation or an iron spike through the skull for anyone who dies a suspicious death. Unfortunately, both firewood and iron are precious commodities in Sanguinia, and such preventative measures cannot always be taken.

Vrykolakas are immune to non-magical weapons unless they have been forged from cold iron. Most Sanguinians know this, and those who venture into the Kodru Mountains carry cold iron whenever possible. In addition, vrykolakas suffer only half damage from cold and electricity.

A vrykolaka regenerates 3 hit points per round. If reduced to 0 or fewer hit points, it assumes a particularly noxious gaseous form (treat as a *stinking cloud* spell) to retreat to its lair. Upon reaching its lair, the vrykolaka resumes its usual form, and an hour later regeneration resumes. Of course, the best

chance to permanently destroy a vrykolaka occurs during this narrow window.

The traditional method to destroy a vrykolaka is to drive an iron spike through its skull.

As undead, vrykolakas are immune to *sleep*, *charm*, *hold*, death magic, poison, paralysis, and mind-affecting spells.

Attempts to turn a vrykolaka are made at -3. This penalty stacks with other penalties such as those caused by sinkholes of evil.

Like standard vampires, vrykolakas may summon creatures of the night. In the vrykolaka's case, once per night it may summon 6d10 HD of vermin such as giant rats or giant centipedes. When these creatures arrive in 2d6 rounds, they are under the vrykolaka's utter control for 1 hour.

Similarly, vrykolakas may assume an alternate form, either a single giant rat or a swarm of normal-sized rats or similar vermin. Each creature in a swarm has a single hit point, and any deaths are reflected in the vrykolaka's hit total upon resuming its natural form.

All vrykolakas may *spider climb*, which is particularly useful when prowling the Kodru Mountains.

Unlike traditional vampires, vrykolakas are repulsed by aniseed, not garlic. Again, most Sanguinians know this, and they carry aniseed when traveling overnight outside of their villages. Vrykolakas cast no reflections or shadows, just like standard vampires. They cannot cross running water *unless* the surface of the water has frozen. Feral vrykolakas cannot enter any human habitation except their former homes. (Prince Ladislav may go anywhere inside his domain, but fortunately he only rarely leaves his castle.)

Vrykolakas are harmed by sunlight and holy water just as standard vampires are. During the daylight hours, they doze restlessly, but if attacked they awaken fully to defend themselves.

## Habitat/Society

The vrykolakas of Sanguinia have formed feral packs which roam the hinterlands. The shamans of the hillfolk have discovered means to keep them at bay (for example, the **Necklace of Stone**), and others have made arrangements for uneasy coexistence with the vrykolakas (see the **charcoal burners**).

While the vrykolakas of Sanguinia have suffered the intellectual ravages of, well, being vrykolakas, they have not forgotten what they once were, and they correctly blame Ladislav Mircea for their depravity.

As the years pass and the vrykolakas recover some of the lost pieces of their minds, it becomes increasingly likely that they will move against their Prince in some fashion.

## Ecology

As undead, vrykolaka have no natural place in the ecology. However, because they feed upon the living, they serve as apex predators to those who would otherwise be the apex predators of the land.

Sanguinian vrykolakas do not need to feed nearly as often as standard vampires of their age category. Given the limited population of the land, this difference is highly fortunate for both the vrykolakas and their prey.

## ZOMBIE, ALCHEMICAL, ASH MAN

	Old Guard	New Guard
Climate/Terrain	Sanguinia	
Frequency	Rare	Uncommon
Organization	Patrol	
Activity Cycle	Any	
Diet	None	
Intelligence	Low (5-7)	
Treasure	Nil	
Alignment	Neutral Evil	
No. Appearing	1d2+1	5d4
Armor Class	7	5
Movement	6	9
Hit Dice	4	6

## Old Guard

## New Guard

THACO	17	15
No. of Attacks	1	
Damage/Attack	1d2+1 or by weapon	
Special Attacks	Plague	None
Special Defenses	Undead immunities	
Magic Resistance	Nil	
Size	M	
Morale	Fearless (19-20)	

The Ash Men are the soldiers and enforcers of **Prince Ladislav Mircea**. They are so called because of the color of the coats they wear<sup>(Ravenloft Third Edition, p.154)</sup> and the slight grayish cast to their skins. They can almost pass for living humans.

The Ash Men are created by **Prince Ladislav Mircea**, a vrykolaka, through a combination of vampiric draining and alchemical experimentation. The process leaves its victims stronger and far more resilient than they were in life, but it also destroys virtually all of their memories.

The original Ash Men—created from the rotting corpses of plague-infected nobles—are in much worse condition than those Ash Men who were created later. They are not capable of passing for living humans. However, these "Old Guard" Ash Men are capable of transmitting the Gray Plague, whereas the "New Guard" Ash Men are not.

Ash Men cease to rot as soon as they are converted. However, anyone who draws too close to one might notice a faint, unpleasant chemical smell.

## Combat

The Ash Men have strength 17, granting them a +1 to-hit and +1 damage on all physical attacks except their bite.

Ladislav Mircea prefers to arm his Ash Men with great battleaxes. However, they do not properly train with these weapons, so only those few "Old Guard"

Ash Men who were specialized with the battleaxe in life are specialized after death.

An unarmed Ash Man will fight barehanded, inflicting 1d2+1 damage. In extremely close quarters, Ash Men might bite instead, which inflicts only 1d2 damage, but might be misconstrued as an attempt to infect the victim with either vampirism or plague. However, note that only "Old Guard" Ash Men can pass along the Gray Plague, and neither "Old Guard" nor "New Guard" Ash Men can create new Ash Men.

As undead creatures, Ash Men are immune to *sleep*, *charm*, *hold*, cold, poison, paralysis, and death magic. They are turned as spectres, but within Castle Guirgiu all turning attempts are made with a -4 penalty.

Moreover, Ash Men are unharmed by nonmagical weapons.

Unlike many zombies, the Ash Men do not suffer any penalties to initiative.

### Habitat/Society

Between the damage to their identities and vampiric domination, the Ash Men are devoted to Ladislav Mircea. If **Dima Vier** is possessing one of them, they will obey his orders with equal fervor.

Although Ladislav Mircea allows only men to venture forth from Castle Guirgiu to enforce his will, there are "Ash Women" as well. They serve as the castle servants. However, they are fully as powerful as their male counterparts, and if the castle is ever attacked, then the Ash Women will be unleashed upon the intruders alongside the Ash Men.

Within Castle Guirgiu, Ladislav Mircea is served by 18 "Old Guard" Ash Men, 48 "New Guard" Ash Men, and at least as many "Old Guard" and "New Guard" Ash Women. (Since Ladislav does not permit the Ash Women to leave the castle, none of them have fallen prey to the sort of accident which occasionally destroys an Ash Man.) In the event of an attack, Ladislav will send his "New Guard" Ash Men in first, interspersed with just enough "Old Guard" Ash Men

to spread the Gray Plague. Only in extremis will Ladislav send in the "Old Guard" or the Ash Women in force.

A patrol of Ash Men typically consists of a dozen "New Guard" Ash Men accompanied by a pair of "Old Guard" Ash Men.

### Ecology

As undead creatures, Ash Men do not have a natural role in the surrounding ecology.

## TIMELINE

Date	Years Ago	Event
<b>The Rise of Sanguinia</b>		
493BC	267	General Guirgiu Mircea leads his people to freedom from foreign conquerors.
527BC	233	Maximilian Mircea builds Castle Guirgiu.
581BC	179	Foreign invaders attempt to take Sanguinia, and so Prince Nicanor leads his people to war.
584BC	176	Zlata marries Lord Rusnac.
584BC	176	Prince Nicanor dies. His son Constantin becomes prince.
589BC	171	Prince Constantin finally drives the foreign invaders out of Sanguinia.
592BC	168	Lord Rusnac dies, leaving Zlata a wealthy widow.
<b>The Fall of Sanguinia</b>		
605BC	155	The first recorded case of the Gray Plague, followed very shortly by many more. Ladislav Mircea's father is one of the early victims, and so Ladislav assumes the throne.
606BC	154	Ladislav Mircea and many of the nobles of Sanguinia withdraw into Castle Guirgiu.
607BC	153	Sanguinia forms.



Date	Years Ago	Event
607BC	153	Spring never quite arrives.
608BC	152	Spring never quite arrives this year either.
609BC	151	Winter finally breaks, leaving the Sanguinian population at a tenth of its earlier population.
611BC	149	Ladislav Mircea sends an invitation to Kryoso. After it is ignored, the Ash Men arrive in town and burn the council chambers. The return of the Gray Plague follows their visit.
Recent History		
≈726BC	≈34	Rudolph van Richten and some of his allies venture into Sanguinia, which may be the first outside encounter with Sanguinia in generations. Claudia DeShanes departs with them when they leave.
≈727BC	33	Claudia DeShanes dies in Lamordia, having never returned to Sanguinia.
740BC	20	The Great Upheaval occurs. There is no further contact with Sanguinia for years.
749BC	11	The Frozen Reaches cluster forms.
749BC	11	The Grabenites discover the Ice-Bound Passage.
Now		
760BC	0	Now.

## REFERENCES

Details of Sanguinia may be found in the following canonical sources:

- ❖ *Realm of Terror*
- ❖ *Ravenloft Campaign Setting (3e)*
- ❖ *Ravenloft Dungeon Masters Guide (3e)*

Canonical information about Claudia DeShanes may be found in the following supplements:

- ❖ *Bleak House*
- ❖ *Darklords*
- ❖ *Van Richten's Guide to Ghosts*

Non-canonical (but still interesting) sources referenced in this article:

- ❖ *Book of Sacrifices*, "Upir Lichy: A Frostbitten Vampire from the Frozen Reaches"
- ❖ *Chilling Encounters*, "Diesache the Devourer: Terror of the Frozen Reaches"
- ❖ *Quoth the Raven Issue 25*, "Mistlands Tourist Guide to the Frozen Wastes"
- ❖ *Undead Sea Scrolls 2002*, "The Albino: An Outcast Among Beasts"
- ❖ *Undead Sea Scrolls 2002*, "Cozseca: A Vicious Mimic of the Mountain Wilds"
- ❖ *Undead Sea Scrolls 2002*, "Upir Lichy — Third Edition"

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# RED LIKE COPPER (ADVENTURE IN SANGVINIA)

FOR CHARACTERS LEVEL 4-8

BY IAN FORDAM

## BACKGROUND

**Eric Zeltser** of **Tirgo** was always ambitious. As a youth he went hunting with his childhood friend **Rosca** in the hope of earning some wealth in the fur trade. After that he and Rosca worked briefly in a salt mine. Next Eric Zeltser volunteered for the Tirgo militia, eventually earning a promotion to squad leader. His contacts in the militia led him to a supervisory role for a team of lumberjacks. And then, a year and a half ago, Rosca came to him with some very exciting news. After their short tenure as miners, Rosca had returned to hunting, and he spent most of his days in the wilderness. On the southern face of **Mount Radu**, Rosca stumbled across a recent avalanche, that had revealed a vein of copper. Recognizing that he did not have the resources to take advantage of this find, Rosca came straight to his old friend Eric Zeltser, who did.

Since then, the **Roshu Copper Consortium** has taken to mining the vein and selling the ore. For the most part, the operation has been gloriously successful. The Consortium's primary customers are foreigners, including the Graben family on Graben Island and a trading company out of Egertus. The Consortium's attempt to obscure the scope of their operations is aided by **Councilor Melany Pascari** of **Kosova**, who is a silent member of the Consortium.

Unfortunately, the miners recently encountered an obstacle. They broke into a natural chamber. Such events are unsurprising when mining the **Kodru Mountains**, but much to the miners' surprise, this chamber was occupied by dozens of sleeping men, women, and children, all dressed in animal furs. One particularly daring miner ventured into the chamber, intending to shake one of the sleepers awake and ask them what was going on. He got no further than a single shake, however, before he was knocked away from the sleepers, back into the newly-opened mine shaft.

Further investigation revealed that any interference with the sleepers would result in eviction at the very least. One witless miner pretended to threaten a sleeper with an axe, and his eviction was accompanied by an evisceration. (The fool had it coming, the other miners figured, and afterward they kept all weapon-like tools away from the chamber.) Even an attempt to wheel a cart carefully through the chamber resulted in the destruction of the cart.

Through it all, the sleepers slept.

For nearly a week the miners attempted to find a way through the chamber which would not disturb the sleepers or their invisible guardian. It started as an

amusing puzzle, but it became increasingly urgent as mining operations dwindled. Livelihoods were at stake.

And then someone appeared, arriving via another passage into the sleepers' chamber. Afterwards, some of the miners started calling him the Grandfather of Sleepers because of his apparent age and because he was clearly related to the sleepers, judging by his features and the earthy tone of his skin. Others called him the Grandfather of Wolves because of the four wolves, one white-furred and three more typically colored, which accompanied him. Upon first introduction, though, the miners greeted him warily, using only the respectful title of Grandfather.

Perhaps he did not understand what the miners said. He simply laughed at them, and he gestured to shoo them out of the chamber. The miners let themselves be shooed, but once they were trapped in the narrow tunnel, the Grandfather of Sleepers attacked them. Slaughter and confusion ensued. Only a third of the miners who had been underground made it back to the surface. They argued with their compatriots aboveground. In the end, most of the survivors decided to go back to Tirgo to report what had happened. The other miners wanted to remain at camp, although they kept an armed guard at the entrance to the mine. The survivors felt that at least they had talked their compatriots out of going underground to confront the Grandfather of Sleepers for themselves.

The Consortium sent back reinforcements, only to discover the entire mining camp destroyed and the miners either slaughtered or missing.

## Introduction

### Adventure Flow

Here is the anticipated flow of this adventure:

- ❖ The party is hired to investigate what happened to a copper mine in the distant land of Sanguinia.
- ❖ The party travels to Sanguinia. They arrive at the port, pass through Kosova, and then finally reach Tirgo.
- ❖ The presence of outsiders catches the attention of the locals, of course.
- ❖ When the party eventually meets with the head of the consortium that owns the copper mine, they learn more about the "Grandfather of Sleepers" who slaughtered the entire mining camp, except for those who retreated to nearby Tirgo.
- ❖ One of the survivors guides the party to the mine. Encounters happen along the way, of course.
- ❖ The party reaches the copper mine and encounters the Grandfather of Sleepers and the creatures that he has animated.

Players being players, they will doubtless proceed in unexpected directions. If their characters stray too far from the planned adventure, please see the article *Sanguinia: Survey of a Snow-Bound Land* for more information about additional trouble with which they might entertain themselves.

## Adventure Hooks

The following hooks tie in most directly with this adventure:

- ❖ The party is hired as muscle to handle a... *situation...* in a copper mine in the Kodru Mountains.
- ❖ A friend of the party has gone missing in Sanguinia. He or she had been working at the copper mine.

However, alternate hooks may provide side quests for the party while they are in Sanguinia:

- ❖ Someone has discovered Dr. van Richten's notes regarding his visit (with George Weathermay and Arametrius) to Sanguinia. He hires the party to investigate some treasure (or perhaps some danger) to which the notes allude.
- ❖ The party is sent to Sanguinia to collect a spell component for a magic-using ally.
- ❖ The party hears rumors of a magic battleaxe (or maybe a magic spear) which can be found in a cave that was once a temple to some sort of wolf god.
- ❖ Someone sends the party to consult with the famed conjurer Vinz Bahrse.

## THE ADVENTURE BEGINS...

### THE HIRING

The party is approached by a representative from "a certain trading company operating on the Nocturnal Sea." Although he is unwilling to specify which company, he gives a nudge and a wink to indicate his confidence that the party can guess correctly. The most obvious candidate is the Boritsi Trading Company, of course, but if the party is likely to have any concerns about working for the Boritsis, another organization may be substituted instead. Although the party will certainly face dangers over the course of this adventure, their employers are not one of them.

Perhaps the party has connections to Kurya Tazhnik, a Vaasi engineer who has been working for the Certain Trading Company for the past year or so.

(Any similar NPC may be substituted as useful.) Tazhnik claims to be a quarter dwarven on his father's side. This is an utter fabrication, but a professionally useful one, which Tazhnik will readily admit when he's in his cups. He is a personable man, fond of such tales and exaggerations, but he doesn't ever expect his audience to be fooled. On the other

hand, when the time has come to get down to work, the raconteur is replaced by a dedicated, focused engineer.

Even if the party does not have connections to Kurya Tazhnik or anyone else likely to be hired to work in a mine, perhaps their reputation precedes them and is enough to catch the eye of the Certain Trading Company representative. Or perhaps they merely seem like useful, expendable thugs. Regardless, they are approached by the representative, who is prepared to make an appealing (but reasonable) offer to a party that is willing to travel to distant lands and unafraid of dangers underground.

If the party reaches an agreement of terms with the representative, then he will explain further. He says, "There's a land, you see. Not on the Nocturnal Sea, but connected to the Nocturnal Sea. There's a Mistway, you see."

Discovered some years after the Great Upheaval, but it has proven reliable since then, if a little difficult to reach when it's open. Fortunately we have connections with certain sailors who are familiar with sailing the necessary sorts of waters. We can get you there with very little risk.

"Where? Yes. The land is called Sanguinia. Yes, yes, I know. 'The Bloody Land.' I'm not sure whether it was named that because of something mundane like excess iron turning the soil red, or maybe that's just what the local name sounds like. It's not some war-torn land like Falkovnia or Invidia, you see. Its Prince is apparently of the same mindset as all eleven Strahds von Zarovich. As long as his taxes are paid, he leaves the people alone. So don't read too much into the name."

"The discovery of this new land has led to some excellent opportunities, you see. The furs from Sanguinia are of the highest quality, and all of the fine ladies of Dementlieu are wearing them this year. But better than furs, believe it or not, is an opportunity in the metals market. Some Sanguinian fellow found a copper vein, you see. A really fine copper vein. He needed equipment to mine it and



then someplace to sell it. He approached the company for which I work, and we were delighted to lend our assistance. So now we have exclusive access to a fine source of revenue, at least as long as we can keep out of sight of both the competition and the Prince of Sanguinia.

"We know this vein is rich because we've been working it for over a year now, and the profits have been very encouraging. We have very nearly recouped our investment, you see, and that's very good. Except that a month ago the miners ran into a problem. I don't have the details, you see, but it's clearly a rather sizable problem.

Operations have been shut down completely.

"As you've probably guessed, we would like you to investigate what happened at the Roshu Mine. And fix the problem, if you can.

"Contact our man **Vakha Alkhanoff** in Kosova. That's one of three towns in Sanguinia, not the largest, but it's not far from where you'll arrive.

"Oh, and Sanguinia is cold, even at this time of year. Dress warmly."

### RUMORS OF SANGUINIA

Once the representative has outlined the situation, PCs may check what they know regarding Sanguinia. If using the 3rd Edition or later rules, they should make appropriate Knowledge checks.

If using 2nd Edition rules, a knowledge check may be determined by rolling  $1d20 + (INT/2)$ , where  $(INT/2)$  is rounded up. This check should be modified by +3 for any appropriate non-weapon proficiency, particularly Local History or Navigation. Even Mountaineering could apply, since a character interested in mountaineering is more likely to have heard and remembered rumors related to a mountainous land.

DC	Rumor (... and the Truth of the Matter)
10	Sanguinia is part of the Frozen Reaches. As its name indicates, you do <i>not</i> want to visit in the dead of winter. <i>So very true.</i>
15	A mistway to Sanguinia was discovered years after the Great Upheaval. Since then, furs from Sanguinia have been in increasing demand in Dementlieu (for their fashion) and even Lamordia (for their warmth). <i>The best furs are actually from Vorostokov, but their trade comes through Sanguinia.</i>
18	Vampires and werewolves live in the mountains of Sanguinia. <i>Vrykolakas and winter wolves do, anyway. The one known Sanguinian werewolf is currently in Verbrek.</i>
20	Dr. van Richten once went to Sanguinia to lay a ghost to rest. <i>True.</i>
25	The Prince of Sanguinia is devilishly handsome. <i>Or he was, anyway. He really was. Now, however, he is physically decrepit.</i>
30	The Prince of Sanguinia has reigned for over 150 years. <i>True.</i>

## ADDITIONAL DETAILS

If the PCs have further questions, the representative can provide the following additional details:

- ❖ Sanguinia is ruled by Prince Ladislav Mircea. He rarely leaves his castle, though.
- ❖ There are three towns in Sanguinia: Kosova, Tirgo, and Fagarus. The port where they will arrive is near Kosova. Tirgo is closest to the Roshu Mine.
- ❖ The head of the Roshu Copper Consortium is a man named Eric Zeltser, who lives in Tirgo. You'll want to talk with him. Other partners include a councilor from Tirgo and a councilor from Kosova, but they prefer to remain on the quiet.
- ❖ The Consortium is operating as discretely as possible to avoid any interference that might dilute its profits. The more people who know about the Roshu mine, the more who will find a way to get a cut. In particular, we are told that if Prince Mircea learns of the mine, then he will collect his overdue taxes.

Finally, because of course none of the PCs understand Sanguine, the representative offers the party a vial of *tears of translation* to aid them whenever they don't have an interpreter at hand.

## THROUGH THE MISTWAY

The party members travel from Nova Vaasa to Graben Island aboard a Vaasi vessel, but then they switch to a Grabenite knarr named *The Leaping Capelin* for the journey near Todstein to access the **Ice-Bound Passage**. Because the Ice-Bound Passage is a conditional Mistway, the *Capelin's* captain waits for snowy weather to arise before he even bothers departing Graben Island. In other words, the party faces two days of boredom before they must suddenly depart.

However, as soon as the *Capelin* departs Grabenite waters, the snowfall escalates to a storm. Given the

wind, the lurching waves, the snow-veiled visibility and the unpredictable movement of icebergs surrounding Todstein, passage through the Mistway proves harrowing. (Less so for the Grabenite sailors. This is what they are paid to do, after all.) Fortunately for the party, once the *Capelin* passes through the Mistway, the waters immediately grow still. Snow continues to obscure vision, and the temperature is no warmer, but it is clear that the danger has passed.

The party has arrived in Sanguinia.

## A NOTE ABOUT WEATHER

Back in the Core, the season is mid-autumn, late enough for first frost but too early for accumulated snow except in the highest latitudes. In Sanguinia, the season is still mid-autumn, but to foreigners it feels like winter is settling in. Every day is interspersed sunshine and snow flurries, accompanied by bitter gusts of wind. The daytime temperatures hover around 50°F (10°C), falling at night to approximately 35°F (2°C) or slightly lower. Many foreigners will want to bundle up warmly. Sanguinians, on the other hand, acknowledge the dropping temperatures but have not yet started buttoning their coats or donning their fur hats.

## AT THE PORT

### FIRST NIGHT IN SANGUINIA

The *Capelin* has arrived just after dusk. The crew scrambles to bring the *Capelin* close enough to shore to disembark and drag it onto the beach. By this time the locals have noticed the new arrivals and emerged to help.

**Stas Borta** does not have an official title, but he is effectively the harbormaster of the port village, responsible for greeting visitors and helping them bring their goods ashore. He is aided by his two grown sons, **Oleg** and **Bors**. Stas and his sons may be disappointed to find that the *Capelin* has brought visitors and no goods, but their disappointment does

not prevent them from making their visitors welcome.

The Grabenite crew discretely offers coins to the Borta men to thank them for their aid. Reasonably observant party members will notice this. The Borta men will accept additional tips if the party is sufficiently discrete, but a too-blatant offering will require Stas and his sons to politely decline.

In addition to helping with the process of coming ashore, Stas Borta and his family are tasked with providing food and lodging for visitors. Most houses in Sanguinia are round, with stone walls and double-planked wooden roofs, and they are not large. Stas, Oleg, and Bors' homes are no exception, so the party and crew are divided up among the three houses for food and lodging.

Stas and his sons have learned enough Grabenite, Vaasi, and Darkonese to communicate crudely with most of the visitors they are responsible for greeting. Their wives have not, or at least they pretend they have not. They leave conversation to their husbands and occupy themselves with providing hot, filling stew. Oleg and Stas' children run underfoot, undeterred by the visitors. One small child makes a point of showing his toy boat to every newcomer he can find, gabbling in Sanguine, utterly unconcerned that his new friends cannot understand a word that he says. After dinner, the children are put to bed with songs and rhymes.

Once the children have been settled, the Borta men bring forth drinks to share with their guests. If the tips at the shoreline were good, then they produce a bottle of surprisingly smooth vodka with an earthy, nutty taste.

Otherwise they share a rather more ordinary rye whiskey. If the party declines to partake, their hosts will take no apparent offense. (They will be slightly offended, in truth, but they won't show it.) The crew of the *Capelin* will not decline, but neither do they overindulge.

The party will be undisturbed through the night. Nobody will try to rob them. Nobody will try to kill them. Nothing will attack the house where they stay. They won't even receive any ominous portents.

Sometimes players need to be reminded that there still exists hominess and goodness, even in the neglected corners of the dread domains.

### DEPARTING THE PORT

The next morning, the Borta family feeds their guests and then sends the party on their way. The trip takes half a day if the party travels at a moderate pace. Recall that the party arrived via a relatively small boat, and so they will not have horses available to ease their travel. Even so, the flatlands are, well, flat, and the trail is clear: Simply follow the Preut River upstream.

**Note:** The original map of Sanguinia from the *Realms of Terror* boxed set indicates that the domain is approximately twelve miles long, east to west, and eight miles wide, north to south. At that scale, a determined party could walk to Kosova (approximately 2 miles) and from Kosova to Tirgo (4 miles) and from Tirgo to Fagarus (3 miles) and back (3 more miles) and then from Tirgo to Castle Guirgiu all in one day, even taking into account the upward slope on the final stretch. In other words, the original scale (1" = 1 mile) is far too small. This adventure assumes that Sanguinia is much larger (1" = 5 miles) so that the trip from Kosova to Tirgo requires most of a day's journey.

## KOSOVA

### ARRIVING AT KOSOVA

Kosova is nestled in a valley between the foothills of the Kodru Mountains. This valley is arable during the warmer months, and so the party passes by a number of farms as they approach the village. The farmhouses are built in the same style as the conical, stone-walled houses of Stas Borta and his son. The barns are the same, only slightly larger. One or two

farms have more impressive buildings with a second story built from (or at least faced with) wood and a larger, more rectangular shape. Clearly these farms belong to people of greater wealth.

The village of Kosova is similar to its outlying areas but more densely populated. The center of the village is the council hall, built in the rectangular style, but other two-story buildings stand throughout the village as well. Many conical houses fill the areas among the council hall and the wealthy houses. From the perspective of the more technologically advanced lands of the Core, the second-largest settlement in Sanguinia still looks primitive.

Foreigners who come to Sanguinia may be tempted to call those families which inhabit the larger houses nobles, and they are not really wrong. However, the Sanguinians—the new nobility and the commoners alike—absolutely refuse to use such terms. They do not wish to draw their Prince's attention to the rising prosperity in the land.

Two other buildings may also draw attention. The first was built on the eastern end of the village. Although it now lies in ruins, even now it is clear that in its heyday the building was finer than any that currently stands in the village. If asked, Kosovans will explain that this building belonged to the Vier family, which died off 150 years ago along with the rest of the Sanguinian nobility. While most of the noble estates across the land have been dismantled for raw materials, Prince Ladislav Mircea has decreed that the Vier estate should remain untouched. Besides, the Vier estate is haunted, everybody knows that. Leave it alone.

The second building was constructed outside the western end of the village, but its spire is tall enough to be visible from the eastern end. Even more than that, it is recognizable as an Ezran chapel. By this time the party has seen enough of Sanguinia to feel how out of place such a chapel is in this unfamiliar place.

While many of the villagers are work in the outlying farms and thus are not in Kosova proper, there are

still plenty of villagers bustling about. Since most Kosovans appreciate the benefits of trade with the outside lands, the villagers will do their best to answer if the party has any questions. In fact, the biggest obstacle will be the language barrier. Fortunately, the villagers know to direct the party to one of the foreigners currently residing in Kosova, either somebody associated with the **Chapel of Spiritual Summer** or else **Vakha Alkhanoff**, the local representative of the Certain Trading Company.

### THE ABANDONED MANOR

If the party decides to investigate the Vier manor regardless of the warnings to stay away, they will discover a badly decrepit building. There are holes in the roof, and the floor of the second story has begun to collapse.

Snow has gotten into every room of the building, furthering its ruination.

The manor is the lair of a band of ice mephits. However, the mephits scatter and hide whenever a living creature enters the manor. As much as they want to attack the party, they are forbidden from doing so.

(Observant party members may notice that there is more snow inside the building than outside. Perhaps they will write it off as a side effect of the limited direct sunlight inside the building, but in truth the ice mephits which lair here help prevent the snow from melting.)

### DREAD POSSIBILITY – THE HAUNTED WOMAN

For a longer-term campaign, one in which the party is expected to eventually confront Prince Ladislav Mircea himself, an additional encounter presents itself. Geyda Vier, a ghost who haunts Castle Guigiu when she must and possesses living women when she can, does occasionally return to her ancestral manor to mourn the full life she never got the chance to live. Although she is subject to Prince Ladislav's commands, she is not exactly loyal to him.



Geyda Vier can be an excellent way to provide the party with information about Prince Ladislav.

Of course, a side quest may readily be built around Geyda Vier herself. After all, she has stolen the body of another person, just as she has stolen the bodies of many people over the decades. She could prove to be a useful ally, but she isn't exactly a good person.

Consider the case of Ruslan Ursachi. When he was a young boy, Geyda Vier possessed his mother Anisoara. He remembers the changes in his mother in the last months of her life. The new baby had kept her busy, of course, but she still found time and affection for him, until suddenly she didn't. And then she died, suddenly, without any apparent cause. All of which was painful enough, but now Ruslan's new bride Dorina has undergone a similar change. She even sings the same lullaby to herself that his changed mother used to sing.

Upon hearing of foreigners in town, Ruslan Ursachi approaches them for aid, hoping that someone among the the foreigners is a skilled exorcist. He has heard the tales of Dr. van Richten and his companions, who performed a similar act nearly thirty-five years ago.

### THE CHAPEL OF SPIRITUAL SUMMER

Especially if the party wanders into the west end of Kosova, they are likely to encounter **Tyndar Otho**, a priest of Ezra at the newly-founded Chapel of Spiritual Summer in Kosova. He greets the newcomers amiably and welcomes them to visit the Chapel. The party is free to disregard his invitation, of course.

However, if they accept then they will be introduced to **Toret Callipha Vocula**, the head of the Chapel of Spiritual Summer. (They may also encounter **Lyco Narses**, the Toret's odd-job man, but he's not likely to hang around to talk.) The Toret will be curious to learn about the party's reasons for coming to Sanguinia. If she decides that their purpose aligns

sufficiently with Zealot ideology, then she will encourage the party to reach out to her for comfort and aid. For example, she can provide 2d4 flasks of holy water, or she and Tyndar Otho can both cast *blessed weapon* upon the party's non-magical weaponry if they so desire. However, the Toret is waiting for additional reinforcements from Nevuchar Springs before taking any direct action herself. In the meantime she and Tyndar Otho build up their stockpile of holy water.

### MEETING WITH THE COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE

The party has been told to contact **Vakha Alkhanoff**. Anyone in Kosova will direct them to the house where he currently makes his residence. Vakha's abode is very much like the surrounding buildings, stone-walled, conical and primitive in the eyes of most mainlanders. However, Vakha Alkhanoff has also purchased the plot of land beside the building. The house which once stood upon the second plot has been torn down, and the villagers are building him a new home in the rectangular style. Vakha Alkhanoff is spending lots of money quickly, and the Kosovans are happy to allow him to do so. Vakha Alkhanoff is made very welcome, but he is not particularly well-liked.

Vakha Alkhanoff is smart enough to recognize that he has not done well at settling into Kosova. Thus, for reasons both personal and private, he will be sincerely pleased to see that the party has arrived. He will offer to let the PCs stay in his house. Since Kosova doesn't see enough visitors to support a traditional inn, this offer is fortuitous for the party. The quarters are cramped, but at least they are warm.

Vakha Alkhanoff has little information for the party. Many miners were killed at the Roshu Mine, and operations have halted. He has heard rumors that the miners were killed by an old man and a quartet of wolves, but obviously that can't be true, can it? Eric Zeltser of Tirgo should be able to tell the party more. Fortunately, traveling to Tirgo is simply a matter of following the main road into the Foothills.

The journey should take most of a day, but no more, weather permitting.

Of course, the Kosovans who are building Vakha Alkhanoff's fancy new house will take note of the recent arrivals, and at least some of them will report their presence to the councilors of Kosova: **Vasilios Josan**, **Gennadi Mardari**, and **Melany Pascari**.

### THE QUIET PARTNER

Councilor Melany Pascari is pleased to hear that the party has arrived, but she will be wary of speaking too much with them. In addition to being a member of Kosova's council, she is also a silent partner in **Eric Zeltser**'s copper-mining venture. She wants the party to resolve the situation at Roshu Mine, but not badly enough to reveal her own involvement. She fears (and rightly so) that her fellow villagers would not react well. If confronted blatantly, she will pretend ignorance. If confronted more subtly, she will simply (and honestly) assert that she knows very little, too little to help. The party should talk with Eric Zeltser in Tirgo.

### THE SECRET SUMMONER

Councilor Gennadi Mardari is an attentive man. His spies have reported enough odd happenings in town that he's aware that some illicit activity has been occurring... until it suddenly stopped. He suspects that the arrival of the PCs is somehow connected to these goings-on. In addition to paying attention himself, he instructs his spies to keep an eye on the party. Mardari is secretly a conjurer, and his spies are summoned ice mephits.

## TIRGO

### TRAVEL TO TIRGO

The first leg of the journey is still across the Flatlands, but after an hour or so the road rises into the Foothills. Although the initial slope is steep, the road is also well-worn, and the only substantial obstacle to

travel is, in fact, the slope. Travel along the road through the Foothills is not much slower than across the Flatlands.

Along the way the party is stalked by a pair of ice mephits sent by Gennadi Mardari. They take advantage of intermittent snow flurries to creep up on the party, but they fall back when the snow stops. If the party notices and attacks them, they will flee. Although the mephits are free to attack people outside of the Kosovan town limits, they do not want to risk a fight against superior opponents.

Halfway to Tirgo the skies cloud over and snow starts to fall, not heavily but steadily. It's almost pretty. It's also vaguely ominous.

An hour outside of Tirgo the party encounters a solitary woman and her two Sanguinian hunting dogs. Given that she is more heavily bundled against the weather than any Sanguinian that the party has encountered thus far, they are not likely to realize she is a woman unless they stop to talk with her. Her dogs, who are clearly hostile to the party, do not encourage conversation.

However, the woman is not quite as suspicious as her dogs. She is willing to converse, at least from a safe distance, although she only knows Sanguine. Her name is **Femke Tcach**, and her family owns a sizable flock of sheep which pasture each summer in the Foothills west of the Eastern Forest. She is heading out to the pasture to help her brother herd the sheep back towards Tirgo for the winter. She plans to reach the abandoned Tistshi Mine before dark, and then she should be able to reach the family croft tomorrow. She probably knows nothing of specific interest to the party, although she can answer questions about Sanguinia in general.

The last stretch of the journey brings the road close to the Micul Niestru river. Even though the party has arrived in mid-autumn, the river's flow still contains chunks of ice even so far downstream from the Kodru Mountains. The snow and ice upon the highest peaks never melt away entirely.

## ARRIVING IN TIRGO

Given the snowfall, the hour feels even later than it actually is when the party arrives in Tirgo. The town is a welcome sight. Many of its houses belong to the Sanguinian round style, but many others were built according to the rectangular style more familiar from the mainland. Smoke rises from chimneys. Tallow lanterns illuminate the main thoroughfare.

Even before the Ice-Bound Passage was discovered, Tirgo has always been a crossroads between Castle Guirgiu, Kosova, and Fagarus. There are several inns which cater to travelers, and their proprietors have even learned enough Grabenite and Vaasi to welcome foreign visitors and communicate rates for lodging, food and drink. One such inn is the Vatră Deschisă, which means "The Open Hearth".

The proprietors of the Open Hearth—or any other Tirgoan—can direct the party to the house where Eric Zeltser lives. Although the Tirgoans will work to avoid speaking poorly of him, it is apparent that they feel pity or sorrow for his foolish copper venture. The poor man has been losing money hand over fist, after all. Everybody knows that. Some of the townspeople are angry with Eric Zeltser over the lives which were recently lost on his foolish venture, but most of the townsfolk recognize the inevitable occasionality of sudden death.

## MEETING WITH THE MAGNATE

The party should attempt to meet with **Eric Zeltser**, the head of the copper mining concern which has hired them. If the PCs attempt to meet with him the evening that they arrive, he will arrange for a full meeting at his residence the next morning, when he can gather all interested parties. If they wait until the next morning to attempt to see him, then he will organize a meeting as swiftly as he can gather everyone relevant.

In addition to Eric Zeltser himself, also attending are **Rosca** and **Feruga Bratan**. Rosca found the original copper vein and has been active in the Consortium ever since. He has seen the destruction of the mine

for himself, although he was not present at the time of the attack. Feruga, on the other hand, was in the Chamber of the Sleepers and saw the Grandfather of Wolves with his own two eyes.

Note that **Iaroslav Voronin**, the second-in-command of the Consortium and a councilor of Tirgo, will not be present. His role in the Consortium is to quietly remove obstacles that prevent the Consortium from acquiring wealth. His task becomes much more difficult if his role is discovered.

Between Eric, Rosca, and Feruga, the three men can recount the information provided in the **Background**

section. Note that none of the three have reason to hide anything from the party.

In addition, Rosca can recount what he found at the Mining Camp when he investigated following the slaughter. In particular, he notes that the corpses of many of those killed by the Grandfather of Sleepers in the mine were found outside in the camp, stacked haphazardly. However, crucially, eight people remained unaccounted for, including the engineer Kurya Tazhnik, and the hope is that they are still alive.

Eric Zeltser is angry that so many miners have been killed, and he is worried that the copper mine may have to be permanently closed. (Unlike the Certain Trading Company from the mainland, he is less worried about the temporary closure. After all, everybody in town already believes that his little venture is failing.) Rosca is unconcerned about profits, having already grown rich by his own humble standards. He is, however, angry at the loss of life and frightened by whatever can cause such destruction. Feruga Bratan, on the other hand, has been traumatized by the experience. He was *there*, yet he survived when so many others died.

Over the course of the meeting, Rosca lurches to his feet and rushes to one of the windows, throwing it open and scanning the outside. When Eric (or one of the PCs) asks what's wrong, he will reply that he thought he saw something at the window. In fact,

there are small claw marks in the snow near the window but nothing on the roof or street nearby. Rosca will subsequently close the window, draw the curtains across all other windows in the room, and insist that everyone talk more softly for the remainder of the meeting.

The eavesdropper was, of course, one of Gennadi Mardari's ice mephits. The game master will need to determine how much useful information it gleaned, based upon the actual in-game conversation.

Once Eric Zeltser and his allies have answered all questions that the PCs may have, the meeting will conclude. The assumption is that the party will investigate the mine itself. Both Rosca and Feruga Bratan are available to serve as guides to the mine. If the party requires any non-magical equipment, including warmer clothing, then Zeltser will arrange to provide it.

### FALSE SUMMER CELEBRATION

Sanguinians celebrate the brief gap between False Winter and True Winter as a last time of security before they hunker down for a long season of cold. Compared to harvest festivals celebrated across the Core, the False Summer celebration is restrained, lacking a feast or even copious drinking. (Such supplies will be necessary to get through the True Winter, after all.) However, Sanguinians prepare sweet pastries for this very occasion, and it is the last time in the year that everyone in each village gathers for dancing, singing, and storytelling. It is a joyous occasion.

Despite the PCs being foreigners, they will be invited to join in the celebration. They will be laughed at for not knowing the dances and the songs, but not unkindly. The choruses are all easy to learn, and it does not matter whether one can carry a tune as long as one can sing boisterously. The dances are not much more complicated than the choruses, and again, enthusiasm counts for more than skill. As for the storytellers, they will relish having a new audience.

One of the storytellers will recount a story which he claims his great-grandfather learned from the hillfolk. In truth, the tale has been in his family for more generations than that; the hillfolk vanished nearly 150 years ago. The story involves a prank played by the Ermine Twins upon the One-Eyed Badger. When the prank is uncovered, the Ermine Twins blame the Laughing Trout, who survives the One-Eyed Badger's wrath only because the Owl of the Moon catches him in her talons and carries him to a distant river. It's an entertaining tale, polished across generations of telling.

The PCs will have plenty of occasion to talk with the Sanguinians, who are curious to learn about life outside of Sanguinia. For the most part, the Sanguinians will do their best to answer any questions the PCs might have. The foremost exception, though, is that they will refuse to say much at all about Prince Ladislav Mircea. He has spies, they might reluctantly mutter, and he takes very poorly to any of his citizens speaking ill of him.

Meanwhile, observant characters might notice some of the townsfolk talking about odd, icy birds which have been flitting around Tirgo all day. "Those didn't look like any birds I've ever seen," someone will assert darkly. And they were not, in fact, birds; they were ice mephits.

## KODRU MOUNTAINS

### TRAVEL INTO THE MOUNTAINS

The first two hours of travel are relatively easy. The PCs and their guides follow Guirgiu Way into the Kodru Mountains proper. The PCs will realize quickly that Guirgiu Way is more poorly maintained than Kosova Way is. If asked about this surprising state of affairs, either Rosca or Feruga will explain that the Ash Men don't use the road enough to be concerned about a couple of potholes. Left unspoken is the fact that Sanguinians are happy to discourage their Prince from sending the Ash Men into town however they can.



However, after those first two hours, the road grows considerably more difficult as it ascends out of the Foothills and into the Mountains. In particular, the transition is marked by a steep grade. In the olden days carts were hauled up and lowered down by via a complicated set of ropes and pulleys. Presumably the Ash Men do the same with their tax-carts full of food and goods.

At the top of the slope, framing the road, is a pair of strikingly tall, natural stone pillars. The guides will identify these spires as marking Vrykolaka Pass, which sounds ominous, but Rosca reassures the party that the area is neither more nor less safe than anywhere else in the mountains. Feruga offers no reassurance; like most Sanguinians, he is afraid of the Pass, even though he has been through it before.

From here the road's lack of maintenance continues. Also, the road is rarely flat and rarely straight. Progress through the Kodru Mountains is halved from normal, even on the road. Off the road, progress would be reduced to a third normal. For that matter, if the PCs stray into the lower slopes of Mount Radu, they move at quarter speed at best.

In true gothic tradition, as the party ventures further into the Kodru Mountains, the weather worsens. The clouds grow thicker and grayer. Direct sunlight, which for two days had broken through the cover inconsistently but occasionally, now becomes increasingly rare. The occasional glimpses of blue sky have vanished entirely. Snow still flurries sometimes, but sometimes it falls more thickly too, leaving half an inch here, half an inch there. The temperature drops as the party ascends, which is unsurprising but still bodes poorly for their comfort.

### FISHERFOLK RETURNING

As the party heads west along the Guirgiu Way, they pass by a group of eight fisherfolk heading east. The eight fisherfolk have three carts which they take turns hauling, a task made difficult by the ill-kept road. They are bringing the fish they have caught in Lake Argus back to Tirgo for salting and sale.

Lake Argus is not at all frozen, the fisherfolk report. Still, the fish appear to have retreated into the depths, so the fisherfolk have decided it's time to head back to town until they can return for some proper ice fishing.

Each of the fisherfolk carries a precious vial of anise. If attacked by a vrykolaka, they will uncork the vial and frantically sprinkle anise in a protective circle around them. According to Sanguinian lore, vrykolakas are repulsed by the scent of anise. Fortunately for the fisherfolk, they are correct.

### PASSING KRYOSO

The party passes by the abandoned town of Kryoso. Even from the road, the ruins are still visible as piles of stone and jutting beams beneath a thin layer of snow. More distressing yet, the town's aura of despair also reaches the road. From this distance it is not enough to inflict any penalties upon the PCs, but in the absence of anything to distract them, the PCs will find themselves regretting any poor decisions they have made in the past.

Rosca and Feruga Bratan both appear to pay Kryoso no heed. In truth, the aura of despair affects them even more strongly than the PCs, but like most Sanguinians who travel the Guirgiu Way, they have learned to push on through.

Observant characters may notice a figure standing near the edge of the ruins. The figure is a middle-aged man with beads in his braided beard, dressed in a fine, fur-collared robe. This figure is the ghost of Alexandru Uzun, who was the primar (mayor) of Kryoso during its final hours.

If the PCs insist upon approaching the figure—something which both Rosca and Feruga Bratan will argue strongly against—Uzun will gesture with his hands as if pushing them away, and he will call out something in Sanguine at the top of his ghostly lungs. Although his loudest is not loud, it is still audible:

"Be cautious! Be cautious!" (In Sanguine this is a single word, a very active verb.) If the PCs enter the

ruins despite Uzun's exhortation, his final wounds will manifest in gouts of ectoplasmic blood. At that point he will vanish, hoping to spare the party further trauma. The aura of the ruined town will shift slightly, becoming more dangerously restless somehow.

At this point Rosca and Feruga Bratan will do their best to drag the PCs out of Kryoso, insisting that they do not want to draw the attention of the town, and they absolutely do not want to draw the attention of the Prince atop the plateau. The latter statement will be accompanied by desperate pointing at Castle Guirgiu, which is visible atop the Guirgiu Plateau.

Past this point the snow falls more thickly, and the wind increases in strength.

### TERRORS IN THE NIGHT

The first night that the party stops in the mountains, they are attacked by a pair of vrykolaka vampires. Feruga Bratan carries a vial of anise, but Rosca deals with the vrykolakas with force of arms. As soon as the vrykolakas realize that their prey is not actually easy prey, they make their retreat.

"That's what you have to do," Rosca tells the PCs afterward. "Make sure they know you're not worth the pain."

### GRAKAU

The road curls around a southerly protrusion of the Guirgiu plateau, heading back eastward up a pass to the castle where Prince Ladislav Mircea lives. Fortunately, though, the party is not headed into that particular danger. They continue westward around the plateau. They depart the road, but follow a trail which Rosca says heads into Grakau.

Grakau is essentially a fishing camp for ice-fishers at Lake Argus. The party likely arrives shortly before midday. Half a dozen fisherfolk are plying their trade at the shore, although none of them have been particularly successful. They are on the verge of calling it quits for the season.

Given the probable timing of the visit, Rosca encourages the party to stop briefly at most before continuing. He hopes to reach the camp outside of the Roshu Mine that day, even though he acknowledges that will require an hour or two of travel after dark. Nonetheless, he would rather not spend another night with no protection other than a tent hide.

Of course, as if in response to Rosca's urgency, the snowfall grows heavier, significantly slowing the party's progress.

### UNBOUND MEPHITS

Despite the muffling qualities of thick-falling snow, observant members of the party overhear the sounds of squabbling overheard. Although the voices in question sound like cracking icicles, they are still clearly squabbling.

Eventually a jagged figure will drop out of the sky and crouch atop a snow-covered rock before the party. It is the very first ice mephitis that Gennadi Mardari ever summoned, and it has become the leader of the by-now large band of ice mephitis he has summoned and dismissed. This particular mephitis has grown to nearly five feet tall. It has broadened as well. Icicles hang from its nose, chin and arms. They are clearly quite sharp.

In hissing Sanguine it says, "Our brothers are yet caught in Mardari's binding. We could not coax them into joining us. Not yet. Soon they will learn that I did not lie when I told them Mardari cannot send them home again. They will scatter to the four corners of this cursed land, just as the rest of us did. Importantly, though, they will not longer be constrained from harming others by Mardari's whim. Just as we are not."

With that, the band of mephitis that has surrounded the party will attack. There should be roughly two mephitis for each PC, plus the eldest mephitis, who has grown an extra hit die and has maximum hit points. Half of the mephitis will unleash their icy breath upon the first round; the other half, on the second. They

will not attempt to gate in other mephits. If they lose half of their number, or if they cannot fell one of their opponents within five rounds, then the survivors will flee.

### THE EYE IN THE NIGHT

Pay attention to opportunities when one of the PCs might be separated (at least slightly) from the rest of the party or a small group of PCs is separated from Rosca and Feruga Bratan. The first time after dark that this happens, the separated PCs hear a deep growl from the night. If they look in the direction of the growl, they see only a hulking black shadow with a single gleaming yellow eye. Once eye contact has been made, the PC hears another growl, one which they understand very clearly to mean, "You have come a very long way. What brings you crawling across my mountains?"

Paranoid players may believe they have just encountered the darklord of Sanguinia. (PCs, no matter how paranoid, probably don't know about darklords.) They have not. However, they *have* been approached by a Servant of the One-Eyed Badger, one of the spirits of the hillfolk of Sanguinia. It speaks as if it were the Badger itself because that is its purpose. When it says "I", it might mean itself or it might mean its master. It will not identify itself, partly because it has no individual identity, but partly because it cannot conceive that anyone (no matter how far they have come) does not recognize a servant of the One-Eyed Badger.

The PCs have little to fear from the One-Eyed Badger or its servant. Since they are not foreign invaders, it does not wish them harm. (Nor does it wish them well, to be fair.) Although it does not trust the Sanguinian townsfolk, it holds no particular grudge against the miners. (Badgers dig too, after all.) It chose to speak with the PCs only because it trusts them marginally more than the townsfolk.

The conversation may be short and unrevealing. However, it may take an interesting swerve if the party mentions the Grandfather of Sleepers. While

the servant does not recognize anyone by that title, it knows full well who the Sleepers are, and it does not want the hibernating hillfolk disturbed. (After all, they do worship the spirits, including the One-Eyed Badger.)

"Ah, so one of the spirit-talkers has awakened from the Bear's hibernation, hrrrrr, even though the Prince's curse still clutches at the fields and the setts and the mountains? And clearly this spirit-talker has pulled some manner of power to himself. Not the Bear's power, hrrrrr. Certainly not mine, either, else I would know of him already."

If the conversation leads in this direction, then the servant of the One-Eyed Badger will swiftly depart to seek and spy upon this spirit-talker. It may return later to tell the party what it has learned.

If the PCs listened to the storytelling at the False Summer Celebration in Tirgo, they may recall the tale of the Ermine Twins stealing the Badger's eye. In particular, they may recall that the Ermine Twins distracted the Badger by finding a round stone and declaring it to be his lost eye, then throwing it far away. The servant of the One-Eyed Badger is mythologically compelled to chase any round stone which has been declared to be its master's eye. Like the Ermine Twins, the PCs may use this ploy to rid themselves of the servant.

### CAMP OF THE CHARCOAL BURNERS

Eventually night falls, but progress has slowed. Even Rosca brightens at the dim sight of fires through the snowfall. If asked "Is that the camp?", he will reply, "I doubt it. Charcoal burners, more likely. But they will do. They know how to keep warm in the winter."

Indeed, the charcoal burners will allow the party to enter their camp and share their fire. They fully understand the preciousness of heat in the snow, and they share as they hope others would share with them. This understanding does not render them friendly, however. They know Rosca well enough to consider him almost acceptable, but generally they do not trust townsfolk. They do not know how to

react to foreigners, so they default to a gruff hospitality.

## THE MINE

### THE MINING CAMP

The snow stops overnight, which means that the party can make actual progress the next day. Shortly before noon, they arrive at the Roshu Mine camp. It consists of three buildings: a sizable tool shed, the foreman's house, and a large barracks with a kitchen at one end. All three buildings have been locked up and left empty, at least until the Grandfather of Sleepers can be dealt with.

The camp was built at the base of the Guirgiu Plateau, and the entrance to the mine is several hundred feet upslope. The so-called Western Forest surrounds the camp and extends halfway up the rise to the mine. To the northwest of the camp, in an area where the forest naturally thins, is the place where the miners killed by the Grandfather of Sleepers are buried. Rosca insists upon visiting the graves, and Feruga forces himself to go as well. The PCs are welcome to join them or stay behind, either way. Rosca and Feruga discover that some of the graves have been disturbed, presumably by animals. They return to the camp for shovels and then head back to the forest to rebury the bodies. The PCs remain welcome to help or remain at camp. Despite all likely player expectations, none of the miners rise as dreadful revenants. Sanguinians, even dead Sanguinians, aren't easily disturbed that way.

### RETURN OF THE ONE-EYED SERVANT

If any of the PCs played nicely with the servant of the One-Eyed Badger, then it will reappear the night before the party ventures into the Roshu Mine. It prefers to catch the same PCs apart from everyone else, but it will eventually relent and appear (inasmuch as it ever appears) to the entire party if necessary.

It growls, "I have information for you, but you must swear me an oath by your own sacred spirits before I impart what I have learned. You must swear to me that you will not harm those who sleep."

If the party assents, the Badger's servant growls, "I found and followed the person whom you have called the Grandfather of Sleepers as far as I can without incurring the Bear's wrath. He was once a spirit-talker. I recall his voice. He was young, but he was generous with his offerings. After the Prince's curse fell upon the land, he led his people to safety in their sett, just as many of the spirit-talkers did. Yet they slumber, while he does not.

"He does not live, but he is not a darkling creature like the people of the castle. He walks abroad in the day and the night alike. Animals shy away from him, except for the four wolves who walk at his side. These wolves do not live either.

"Most important: He walks the land *now*. He is nearby, but he is not near the sleepers."

When the One-Eyed servant departs, it leaves behind a gnarled staff with an ermine skull and owl feathers lashed to one end. This staff is a *blessed weapon* which the servant stole from a 7th level hillfolk shaman on the western side of Sanguinia. Once brandished in combat, its magic expires after 14 rounds, but during that time its wielder strikes at +1 and, more importantly, inflicts double damage against the Grandfather of Sleepers.

### DESCENT INTO THE DEPTHS

This is the dungeon crawl portion of this adventure. Fortunately, the party has its guides, both of whom are familiar with the Roshu Mine and know the way to the chamber where the sleepers lie.

Possible encounters along the way:

- ❖ A *white pudding*, which is the arctic version of the infamous *black pudding*.
- ❖ Not all of the dead miners could be extracted from the mine. Those who were left behind have



spontaneously animated as *cold ghouls*, which are *ghouls* with the *cold* subtype.

- ❖ The equipment chamber: A cavern perhaps ninety feet long and thirty feet wide at its widest, with two side chambers, one midway along the length, the second on the opposite side close to the entrance end. This cavern and its side chambers were used to store some of the Consortium's equipment, such as picks and carts.
- ❖ The chamber of the chasm: A natural rift divides one large cavern. About fifty feet below the upper ridge, the rift narrows to the point where characters who fall in will not fall any further. At its top, the rift is at most fifteen feet wide and at narrowest just under ten feet wide. In other words, it is easy enough for enterprising adventurers to cross. The miners had built a wide wooden bridge over the rift, but the Grandfather of Sleepers has kicked it into the rift. The bridge was sturdily built, and could be repaired quite readily by anyone with the appropriate tools.
- ❖ The hall of phantoms: a long passage where the Grandfather of Sleepers killed many of the miners. This passage is now haunted by *phantoms*, which are the lingering remnants of the miners. Feruga Bratan will probably not be able to continue past this point without suffering a breakdown, in which case he will wait for the party in the chamber of the chasm.

### CHAMBER OF THE SLEEPERS

Finally, the party reaches the chamber where the sleepers lie. This chamber is warded by the Hoarfrost Bear. Undead creatures with a connection to the Negative Material Plane cannot pass the wards, nor can spirits associated with the One-Eyed Badger or the Wolf Who Does Not Howl. The Grandfather of Sleepers can slip through the wards because he is an ancient dead, associated with the Positive Material Plane, and not a spirit.

Anyone who attempts to disturb any of the hillfolk will be gently cuffed towards the exit by an invisible

Servant of the Hoarfrost Bear unless, of course, they attempt actual violence, in which case the Servant will respond in ferocious kind.

In addition to the scores of hillfolk, a search reveals the eight miners (including Kurya Tazhnik) whose corpses were not found in the mining camp. They sleep among the hillfolk, and just as soundly. Irren Asparu took them captive and laid them to rest with the same hibernation spell that he cast upon the hillfolk. Despite Prince Ladislav Mircea's best intentions, sometimes one of his victims dies. Irren Asparu has taken advantage of the presence of the miners to replenish the darklord's larder.

The main difference between the hillfolk and the miners is that the Servant of the Hoarfrost Bear that guards this chamber does nothing to protect the miners. The PCs may forcibly remove them from the chamber and then awaken them without reprisal; they cannot awaken within the chamber. Even when roused, the miners seem to be sleepwalking, moving only groggily even if threatened with violence. The miners will not act of their own volition, not even to defend themselves, for many hours yet.

The rescue seems entirely too easy, doesn't it?

### EXITING THE MINE

On the way out of the mine, the party discovers that the Grandfather of Sleepers waits for them in the equipment chamber. In addition, his rank zero ancient dead wolves and winter wolf lurk behind overturned carts, waiting for the command to attack the party from the flanks.

As the party reaches the equipment chamber, Irren Asparu will cast *darkness* upon a mining pick he has placed near the downslope exit. The *darkness* will be followed by *silence*, also cast upon the pick. As the party struggles to respond to his attack, he will shove a mining cart toward them; between his strength and the downward slope, there is no doubt that the cart will cross the equipment chamber, although there is a 25% chance that the cart will veer to the left, a 25% chance that the cart will veer to the right, and only a

50% chance that the cart will roll into the downslope exit as planned. Anyone outside the darkened, silenced area gets a Reflex Save to avoid damage, but those inside do not. If the cart collides with any PC, it causes 2d6 bludgeoning damage.

As the party emerges from the darkened, silenced area, Irren Asparu will attack them with the half-dozen spears he carries at hand. Once someone in the party has demonstrated spellcasting ability, Irren Asparu will use his zone of cold upon them. Also, once five or more people have emerged from the darkened, silenced area, Irren Asparu will call for his canine servants to attack from the flanks. The wolves and winter wolf will also defend themselves if prematurely discovered and attacked.

Fortunately for the party, the equipment chamber contains more carts than the four behind which the four wolves are hiding. They can also use the carts to provide partial cover.

If the party is particularly powerful and/or experienced, here are two possibilities for making this final encounter more complex: First, Irren Asparu may have collected piercers from elsewhere in the tunnels and arranged them on the ceiling around the darkened, silenced area. Second, he may have lured a flock of stirges to the equipment chamber. Neither piercers nor stirges will pay particular attention to the undead shaman or his undead "pets", but they will react as normal to the presence of the party.

Fortunately for the PCs, Rosca is dauntless, and he will fight alongside them. Feruga Bratan, on the other hand, is completely terrified, understandably enough. He will stand paralyzed with fear for two rounds, after which he must succeed at a DC15 Will Save to keep from fleeing back into the depths.

Encouragement from the PCs or Rosca will give Feruga a bonus to his Will save. If he does remain, he will be too frightened to mount an attack upon the Grandfather of Sleepers, but he will be perfectly capable of defending himself or the newly-rescued, barely-conscious miners. Feruga should be portrayed

as someone doing as best he can in the face of utter terror.

If Irren Asparu and his wolves gain the upper hand, he will allow the party to flee back into the depths of the Roshu mine. He finds the entire situation entertaining. He will take the confrontation more seriously only if one of his "pets" is destroyed or if the party finds one of the other exits from the caverns beneath the Guirgiu Plateau.

On the other hand, if the party gains the upper hand, Irren Asparu has no compunction against fleeing. He will order any surviving wolves to provide distraction while he flees because, as much as he likes his pets, he likes himself much more. However, he will ambush the party repeatedly during the trip back to Tirgo. He does not want the party to organize an even more powerful group against him.

However, Irren Asparu might not have the opportunity to flee. If the Dungeon Master intends for the party to confront Prince Ladislav Mircea in the near future, Irren Asparu might hiss some final words in broken Sanguine: "You hunt after own destruction. Without me fetching the sleepers, how will the Prince feed?"

## EPILOGUE

Assuming that Irren Asparu has been defeated, the return trip through the Foothills should be less eventful than the original approach: no ice mephits and no vrykolakas, not unless the Dungeon Master feels the party needs an additional fight. The party may stay again with the charcoal burners. They might also rest for a night at Grakau, which has been temporarily abandoned until the waters of Lake Argus freeze thick enough to support ice fishing.

The rescued miners, including Kurya Tazhnik, will regain full wakefulness within a day of their release from the Roshu Mine. Until then, they groggily shuffle in whatever direction they are steered.

However, as the party rejoins the Guirgiu Way back to Tirgo, they are met by a patrol of Ash Men (twelve "New Guard" and two "Old Guard") with the ghost Dima Vier possessing the leader of the patrol. These Ash Men approach the party and insist that they halt for questioning.

Feruga Bratan is terrified of the Ash Men. Perhaps more surprisingly, so is Rosca. If the party appears ready to fight with the Ash Men, either Sanguinian will whisper sharply, "Kryoso! Think of Kryoso and obey!" Even if the Ash Men kill them, they prefer to die rather than condemn all of Tirgo.

Fortunately, though, the Ash Men are not at all set upon violence. Dima Vier has been sent out to learn whether something in particular has caused the restlessness which has plagued Ladislav Mircea for days now. Upon meeting the party, he wants to know what they have been doing, and once he realizes that he is talking with foreigners, he wants to know everything about their arrival in Sanguinia. From his sister Geyda, Dima knows that foreigners occasionally appear, but these are the first foreigners he has met personally.

Fortunately for the party, as part of his ghostly nature, Dima's essential naïveté is undiminished by one hundred and fifty years of experience. He will be as fascinated as any fourteen-year-old at meeting foreigners, and frankly that fascination will only increase the likelihood that he believes any confident lie which the party puts forth.

If the PCs do not present an explanation, Rosca jumps in. (He is a very brave man, indeed.) He explains that the party is a group of traders from the distant south (i.e. Vorostokov) who have come up through Fagarus to explore the possibility of trade. Fortunately, Dima Vier knows nothing of Vorostokov, and so he will buy this particular lie if it is sold convincingly.

Assuming that the party avoids antagonizing Dima Vier, he will lead the Ash Man back to Castle Guirgiu once he has learned the party's purpose. This encounter is not intended to initiate a violent confrontation, but merely to remind the party of

Prince Ladislav Mircea's presence looming over the land.

## REPORTING TO THE CONSORTIUM

Eric Zeltser sees the party immediately upon their return. He is desperate to learn what has befallen his mine, and listens avidly to the party's report.

If Feruga Bratan or any of the other miners did not survive, Zeltser will be saddened, but in the end they are only a few more losses among the many that have occurred. If Rosca has been lost, however, then Zeltser will grieve for his friend, but he will not fault the party. In fact, he will give the party a financial reward from his own funds if they have brought back Rosca's corpse for a proper burial.

At the conclusion of his meeting with the party, Eric Zeltser will draft a letter affirming that the party has been successful in their mission and should be paid in full. Even if Irren Asparu was not ultimately destroyed, they have nonetheless garnered more intelligence about the nature of the enemy.

## BACK IN KOSOVA

Given the various factions in Kosova, the situation there is potentially more volatile. Melany Pascari will seek a report from the party, although she will force herself to accept even a few discrete sentences indicating whether mining operations will be expected to resume in the spring. Gennadi Mardari's spies will have lost track of the party following the encounter with the unbound mephits, and so he's nearly as curious as Melany Pascari. However, Mardari has to be more discrete. He will invite the party to dine with him, and he will give them plenty of opportunity to tell him about their adventures.

Finally, Toret Callipha Vocula will ask the party to tell her what has happened. She will be as interested in anything they have learned about Prince Ladislav Mircea as she is in their confrontation with the Grandfather of Sleepers. She intends to eventually confront the Legions of the Night as they manifest in

Sanguinia, but she wishes to have proper intelligence and proper martial support before she does so.

Of course, the preceding sections all assume that the party wishes to return to the Core to report to their employer and officially complete their mission. However, some players may be less concerned with completing the mission than uncovering more of the evil which threatens the communities of Sanguinia. In that case, Sanguinia should offer plenty more for them to explore, perhaps even a confrontation with Prince Ladislav Mircea in the end.

Regardless of what actions the party takes to conclude this adventure, certain questions remain for the Dungeon Master to answer going forward.

### LADISLAV LOOKS OUTWARD

Very likely Irren Asparu has been destroyed. The Sleepers may now slumber in peace, protected by the wards and the servant of the Hoarfrost Bear. Ladislav Mircea cannot feed upon them any longer. Given that, what does Ladislav do for food? The charcoal burners, the ice fishers, and the distant thorps are all likely to suffer from his hunger.

In response to this change, does Ladislav Mircea turn his gaze outward at last? Does he notice the Roshu Copper Consortium? The Chapel of Spiritual Summer? The intrusion of other foreigners upon his land? There are plenty of dread possibilities.

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## APPENDICES

### BLESSSED WEAPON

(2nd Level Priest) (Conjuration/Summoning)

**Sphere:** Combat

**Range:** Touch

**Components:** V, S, M

**Duration:** Special

**Casting Time:** 2 rounds

**Area of Effect:** 1 weapon

**Saving Throw:** None

This spell is very similar to the second usage of the *bless* spell, which is laid upon a single weapon. However, unlike *bless*, the *blessed weapon* spell does not fully trigger until the enchanted weapon is drawn. Only then does the spell's duration begin, expiring after 2 rounds per level of the caster.

The blessed weapon strikes at +1 to-hit, but does not provide any further bonuses. However, the weapon may harm creatures which are only effected by +1 or better weapons, similar to the *magic stone* spell.

### TEARS OF TRANSLATION

The so-called **tears of translation** are a magical potion which eases communication for the user. Drops placed in both ears allow the user to *comprehend languages* which she hears. Drops placed in both eyes allow the user to *comprehend languages* which she reads. (A drop in a single ear or eye has no effect.) A single drop upon the tongue allows the user to speak any single language which her audience comprehends, as the *tongues* spell. Note that a drop upon the tongue does not allow any comprehension, rendering it generally useless unless used in conjunction with two drops in the ears.

A single vial ordinarily contains 5d4 drops. Its effects last for 3d4x10 minutes per application.

*Tears of translation* were originally produced in Rokushima Táiyoo. However, once trade was established with that land, such a useful potion immediately caught widespread attention. In some cases vials of the *tears* have been sold; in other cases, reverse-engineered. In yet other cases, they were simply imitated, although these knock-off *tears* often have shorter durations or, worse yet, garble their translations.





# SECRETS OF THE PHANTASMAL FOREST

BY ADAM "SPEEDWAGON" EL AKKAD

*A collection of various "pearls in the oil" within Ebonbane's collection for DMs to use, while following the netbook's theme of "darkness"; with many thanks to "The Lesser Evil" and "GonzoRon of the Fraternity of Shadows" for their help!*

## THE FORGE OF FURY & THE BROKEN HILL MINESHAFT

The metal that was used to forge Lady Shadowborn's sword came from a meteorite that struck a well-used mineshaft just outside the town of Brimstadt. The meteorite's impact did significant damage to the hill within which the mineshaft (which already was noted for its excellent quality of metal) was found, hence the name. The very metals from the mineshaft and from the meteorite not only forged Corona, the sword of Lady Shadowborn, but were also instrumental in forging the blade that would keep Lussimar contained. The blacksmith of the Forge of Righteous Fury, a man known as Valadoc, was an honest man but a poor judge of character. He did not know that his apprentice, Afacius, only joined the trade for the sake of making a quick profit under a master like Valadoc. Frustrated by the lack of progress he was making, it did not take much effort on Ebonbane's part to turn the apprentice into one of his Ahltrian and have him slaughter the master blacksmith, drawing both the blacksmith's shop (now known to others as just the Forge of Fury) and the Broken Hill Mineshaft into the Phantasmal Forest.

## THE GRAND MAUSOLEUM OF THE CALIPH

It is known that the Southern Kingdom's Caliph, Muhdar Ab Sang, was possessed by the Ebonbane when he went to pray to his gods for counsel against the Sea Raiders that threatened his territory. It is also known that the Caliph, once Ebonbane's possession was undone, could not live with the fact that his voice and authority were used to sanction such bloodshed, and thusly took his own life. What is not known was the extent to which Ebonbane would go in order to make sure that the Caliph was his once more, not out of a true need for the ghosts' power but as another entry in his collection of Kateri Shadowborn's legacy. Now, the very mausoleum, in which the Caliph was interred to rest peacefully, shakes with his tormented wails. Ebonbane may yet turn the Caliph into a commander of the Ahltrian, just as the Caliph had the Ahltrian as his elite servants in life, and task the Caliph's ghost with leading the charge against Nidala's military.

## THE BRIMSTADT NIGHTSHADE GRAVES

In this graveyard, not too far away from the city of Brimstadt, the dead of the Heretical Wars between the Great Kingdom and the Southern Empire are given their final rest. But this is not just any gravesite, but one for the heroes of that war and of their families too. The many friends Kateri made and lost both prior to and during the Heretical Wars were given a heroes' send-off in the Nightshade Graves of

Brimstadt. They rise now as Ebonbane's elite guard, tasked with killing as many of the Knights of the Circle as they can, on their pilgrimage to Shadowborn Manor. The demilord is Bodoc, a graveyard worker who resented his station in life. Despite the high number of bodies to bury during the conflict, he never felt that he was truly thanked or reimbursed for his efforts. It did not take much persuasion from Ebonbane's minions to coerce the man into letting them into the graveyards. He even went through the effort of digging up the graves of the greatest heroes there.

### LETOUR

The town of Letour already profited greatly from the Great Kingdom's border with the Southern Empire. Letour had access to the finest luxury goods, such as salt, incense, spices, ivory, marble and even dyes. Letour also had a strongly mixed population between the two polities, with the leader in charge even being of mixed blood. Despite this, the noble ruler of Letour was loyal to the Great Kingdom, and helped rally the people in defense of the city when war broke out. But the same could not be said for the captain of the guard, another of mixed blood with dual loyalties. Promised a good payout by the forces of the Caliph, the captain derelicted his duty and gave them information on how to enter the city. Thus, the forces of Ebonbane were able to take Letour far more quickly than anticipated by the Great Kingdom, and thousands lost their lives. Of those thousands, the captain of the guard was among them, as the forces of Ebonbane never truly planned to follow through with their deal. He met his end with cowardice as the arrows peppered his body. Now, the captain of the guard is eternally disgraced but loyal to Ebonbane. He conducts frequent inspections of Letour and finds naught but ghosts. He believes that he wants an honorable battle and death, but truthfully, he is a cheater at heart and wants to win against an opponent with as little chance of failure as possible.

### SANSCHAY

The city of Sanschay was next to fall. It had seen the fate of neighboring Letour and correctly deduced that treachery gave the city to the Southern Empire, but they had not anticipated to what level of depravity the enemy would sink. The soldiers of the Southern Empire besieged the city of Sanschay relentlessly. It was as if they were fueled by demonic urges, never resting in the night so that the defenders could reorganize, nor stopping to assess their tactics, nor did they ever fall back in the face of a rout, no matter how major or minor. The unyielding assault of the Southern Empire tired out the war-weary defenders of the frontier city, who believed that perhaps by surrendering the invaders would be willing to let them keep their local governance in exchange for taxation and partition of certain supplies at the worst. The city never believed that the invaders would do so much worse. The Southern Empire's hellish soldiers flooded into the city and once their leader, mystically persuaded Sanschay's leadership to lay down their weapons, the nightmares truly began. This leader was a hulk of a man, who had been recently appointed as a torturer within the Caliph's court (a position that in its very existence would have once been completely against the values of the Southern Empire, further proof of its demonic corruption). The invaders slaughtered anything they saw and ate their flesh where they stood, boiling adults in cooking pots and skewering children on spits and slicing the women to pieces so that every soldier would have a woman to take with them to bed. The commander still rules over the city of cannibals, eager to do whatever Ebonbane asks of him while jealously guarding his mound of filth and flesh.

### THE GALA OF GHOSTS

An assortment of aristocrats and high society civilians once backed the efforts of Lady Kateri Shadowborn in winning the Heretical Wars. They were gathered once more by Ebonbane and burned in a ballroom, their charred ghosts now dancing to

Ebonbane's tune for the Fiend's amusement. The demilord of this pseudodomain is a noble woman named Lisalinde Sulenet. Lisalinde was never on the front lines of conflict, but despite being a noblewoman, she had high respect for those who were capable of fighting. She had also never considered herself worthy of the battlefield by virtue of her womanhood, so it seemed that Belenus and all the other gods in the pantheon heard her doubts and squashed them when she met Kateri Shadowborn. Lisalinde was inspired by Lady Shadowborn's relentless and righteous courage, so much so that she became a wealthy backer and friend to the Shadowborn family as a whole. She rejoiced gleefully when Lady Shadowborn returned victorious from the Southern Empire, and she wept inconsolably when Lady Shadowborn disappeared. It was her great admiration and love for Kateri's legacy that allowed Ebonbane's minions to dupe her with false promises of knowing where exactly Lady Shadowborn went, and she sealed her doom by gathering the other aristocrats who believed that someone like Kateri would be just what the Great Kingdom needed in these trying times. Her burnt specter still floats about the gala and controls the ghosts of all the others in attendance.

### THE SHADOWBORN STATUE AT THE CIRCLE'S SQUARE

The Circle's Square was a town square within the capital of the Great Kingdom dedicated to the Knights of the Circle. Statues of each of the knights are erected here, but the statue of Lady Kateri Shadowborn is unique. It is a golem animated by Ebonbane, to be a twisted and horrible mockery of her good name. The animation was made possible by the sacrifice of a soul that, like the squire of Shadowborn before him, was deeply impacted by Lady Shadowborn's example. This soul on the other hand, deeply envied Lady Shadowborn. How could she, a woman and a noble, ever understand the plight of good Belenus-fearing folk like him from the boonies? In his jealousy of her, Ebonbane gave the man the chance to be just like her.

### THE BLESSED LIBRARY OF BRIGIT

The people of the Great Kingdom did not worship Belenus exclusively, contrary to Elena Faith-Hold's word. Brigit, the moon goddess, was important to many within the land, and the presence of Forenoon Abbey within the Phantasmal Forest proves it had significance to Kateri as well. This library dedicated to Brigit, in a town not too far away from Shadowfast, had long recorded the deeds of each and every member of the Shadowborn family. The keeper of these archives, a woman by the name of Lufleur, was a dedicated companion to the Shadowborn family. Ebonbane made sure to send minions to not only kill her but also to torture her by sully her life's work with her own blood staining each and every book through their magic. Now it rots within the Phantasmal Forest, used by the more magically-inclined of Ebonbane's minions to hone their arcane knowledge and figure out the secrets of the fiend's imprisonment. Unfortunately for Ebonbane, the lore collected here pales in comparison to that of Morgoroth's Domain.

### THE RUINS OF SHADOWFAST

The Dark Powers placed this here, as a reminder to Ebonbane that it is not all powerful and that Kateri's legacy lives on. Much like the Dolmens, Ebonbane is completely blind here. Furthermore, Ebonbane's minions cannot even step foot nor be within 500 feet of the manor. Thus, it has been used as a safe house by the Knights of the Shadows for decades.

### THE BRENNAN FARMSTEAD

Many stories begin when a young peasant hears the call to action and decides to answer. Such was supposed to be the case for young Reynold, who was inspired by Knights of the Circle like the Shadowborn Family. He saw the poverty of both wealth and spirit that afflicted the nation and wanted to do something about it. Scrounging up the money he could from his diligent farm-work, he managed to buy a book and taught himself how to read. Oh, what great misfortune befell him that he chose one of the last

chronicles in the entire Great Kingdom of the clan Shadowborn. By this point, snuffing out any traces of that miserable woman had become routine to the Fiend, but it still bought him a perverse sense of satisfaction. The Ahltrian were gathered, and the boy and his family were eaten alive. To add extra insult to injury, the Ahltrian bothered to salt the farm's fields and burn it to the ground. What Ebonbane did not know was that this would be the last connection between the Phantasmal Forest and the Great Kingdom, at least from his end of the planes. This pathetic little family farm is devoid of all life or undead inhabitants. Well, that's not entirely true. The spirit of the farm is that of its former occupants, all meshed together and warbled in an agonizing mess but with a singular desire overriding the misanthropy such treatment would typically entail: the destruction of Ebonbane. Thus, the farm is a safe haven to any and all whom the farm detects as enemies of Ebonbane, regardless of their moral alignment or other intentions. The food and water and shelter within is meager but just enough to provide for any inhabitants within its confines, no matter their party number. Staying within the safe haven for more than 3 nights in a row, however, instills within the occupant an unshakable and unreasonable desire to march into Shadowborn Manor and destroy Ebonbane as soon and as painfully as possible, regardless of the chances of success.

### THE GRAND PHOENIX THEATER

Built as part of the reconstruction period projects ordained by the king in the wake of the Heretical Wars, this theater was the location of a tragedy in the waning days of the Great Kingdom. The theater was meant to lift the spirits of the downtrodden and increasingly hopeless masses of the land, with its primary plays being tales of chivalric romance and the great and heroic exploits of the knights within. Relentless in his goal to quash the world of hope, Ebonbane took note of this wriggling flame and snuffed it out. The night when the play about the Shadowborn family was meant to be acted out, an

agent of Ebonbane possessed the main actress and used her supernatural strength and speed to slaughter the rest of the troupe, with the actress left to wallow in the deed. She could not live with herself and committed suicide but a few days later when the authorities weren't looking. The demilord is the main actress herself, a bard known as Norder Lonestep. She was a passionate soul and one easily taken by tales of chivalric romance. She saw the waning spirits of the citizens of the Great Kingdom and resolved to do her own part to bring back the greatness of the kingdom, just as the knights she admired had done, but in her own way. Now, her powerful singing voice brings knights to their knees, while her legs that once let her deftly move across the stage can outrun the fastest of horses.

### OZARIATH'S GROVE

Ozariath was not a powerful druid, but she was an honest one. She tended to the wilds between the Great Kingdom and the Southern Empire, as they were the wilds in which she had been born. When the forces of the Southern Empire trampled through her wilds, cut down her forests, slaughtered her animals, and polluted her waters, it sufficed to say that Ozariath was more than willing to side with the Great Kingdom against the invaders. It was by chance that she met Lady Kateri Shadowborn, as the knight had to traverse through Ozariath's wilds to get to Sined Pass. Lady Shadowborn had already been captured by Ebonbane and knew the true nature of her foe. She had confided such information to Ozariath in exchange for the druid's assistance. Ozariath fought bravely alongside Lady Shadowborn and even gave her animal reinforcements for some of the battles she would face later in the war. When Lady Shadowborn was killed by unknown assailants, the news eventually spread to Ozariath, who mourned her companion. Ebonbane had not forgotten the aid this druid had given to Lady Shadowborn, and made sure to dispatch his strongest Ahltrian minions to drag her into the Phantasmal Forest. After a long battle within the groves, Ozariath was defeated. Captured, she was



forced to witness the desecration of her land, and forcefully polymorphed into a multitude of animal shapes. Ozariath's Grove has been drawn into the Phantasmal Forest with Ozariath as the demilord, twisted by Ebonbane into being the apex predator within its confines.

### GRAND PALACE OF THE MOON

The death of the Caliph and the loss of the Heretical Wars spelt instability and upheaval for the Southern Empire. In such turbulent times, one of the Caliph's advisors dared to wonder exactly how and why the Caliph changed so drastically in his later years, and more importantly, how he could take the throne from the jackals in the court. It was not long before records within the palace, penned by the Caliph, were discovered by the vizier's agents. The vizier quickly understood the dark force that the Caliph gave his life to, but arrogantly thought himself as the one that would be calling the shots, as the Vizier knew the fiend's true name. Or so he thought; Ebonbane would never have been foolish enough to tell the Caliph this, but was smart enough to provide false information to goad gullible would-be deceivers into his hands. The vizier now skulks about a mockery of the grand palace, tasked by the fiend with finding any reference to Kateri Shadowborn or Ebonbane's true name and dispatching the Ahltrian to draw whatever remnant of Shadowborn's legacy there may be into the Phantasmal Forest or eradicate whatever reference to the fiend's true name may surface.

### TOURNAMENT GROUNDS

The Royal Tournament served as Lady Shadowborn's familial rite of passage, a fun diversion from the miseries of the day. Competitors from across the Great Kingdom had once gathered here to test their mettle and chivalrous virtues against one another. Ebonbane now uses the tournament grounds to indulge in the past and train his horsemen, who will one day ride upon the land outside the forest. Strangely enough, the grounds are also where the

famous Carnival can be found occasionally passing through.

### SORROW'S WATCH OUTPOST

The northernmost outpost in the Great Kingdom, Sorrow's Watch Outpost was built during the reconstruction period ordained by the king. The late king knew that despite the victory of the war, there would always be threats from within and without that would capitalize upon any weakness. The outpost was built to be the first line of both defense and warning against the Sea Raiders of the North, who had now developed a hatred for the Shadowborn bloodline. What the king did not expect was for a lowly soldier at the outpost to be enticed by Ebonbane into drinking too much and taking a nap, right when the Sea Raiders were marching upon the northernmost village in the territory. That soldier could have rung the warning bell, but Ebonbane convinced her not to draw the Sea Raiders attention by lighting the warning fire. Thus, she clung to life by damning innocents to the sword through her inaction.

### THE SUTRISE MONASTERY

The Eastern Lands had mercantile connections to the Great Kingdom, enough that the Heretical Wars with the Southern Empire caused them concern. The Easterners were charmed by the generosity given by Lady Shadowborn, as her family lineage had helped pave the way for peaceful relations between the two polities. As a token of gratitude, they taught Lady Shadowborn some of their fighting styles and techniques, along with spreading her story to their homeland. Ebonbane corrupted these monks by capitalizing on their isolation and innermost character flaws, with the monks killing one another by the end of a single night. Now, the monastery is a mockery of its namesake, and it fulfills multiple purposes for Ebonbane. Ebonbane bothers to have his Ahltrian take a more "alive" form here, so that they may trade with the Rokuma that come through the Mistway that connects to Rokushima Taiyou. The monks also serve as spymasters and information

brokers, gathering information not only for Ebonbane to exploit directly but to indirectly seed the doom of the other Darklords. Finally, they serve as teachers, willing to accept any denizens of the Mists willing to forsake their morals to learn from their power.

### THE SPIRE OF HOWLING HATRED

It was in this prison that Kateri Shadowborn was tortured by Ebonbane, and where she was made to conceive Alexi. The citadel is a spire with no stairs, with Lady Shadowborn's cell at the very top. Magical runes and keys allow for movement from one prison cell to another. The wardens are flying spirits loyal to Ebonbane. The prisoners are unique souls that have interested Ebonbane, either for their goodness or for their connections to either Kateri Shadowborn or to the other Darklords within the Shadowlands.

### THE LEXMERRY ACADEMY

The children are the future, and a good education will lead them to greatness. The Lexmerry Academy was meant to be an experiment in learning: a school not only for children but that continued into higher education, thus providing for a more learned community to grow. Established in the east of the Great Kingdom, it had access to lore from across the lands. It did not take long for scrolls and records penned by Eastern monks to reach this institution. It did not take long for the professors and students to find references to Kateri Shadowborn and the Heretical Wars. It did not take long for Ebonbane to feel that a new group of victims were learning about him, for when one gazed into the abyss, the abyss is sure to gaze back. The Lexmerry Academy was quickly turned into the headquarters for a cult to Ebonbane, and an attempt on Lord Ferran Shadowborn's life was made. It failed, thanks to the intervention of Morgoroth the Black. The mage acted swiftly and drowned the academy where it stood, creating a small lake that is now part of the Phantasmal Forest.

### THE STRONGHOLD OF SILAT

This fortress was the site of a pivotal moment in the Heretical Wars. It was here that the Southern Empire buckled to the might of the Great Kingdom, as their impregnable castle was besieged by Lady Shadowborn and her companions. It was a bloody and grueling battle. The full extent of the Southern Empire's corruption was laid bare, as inhuman monsters and dark spells were used by the defenders to make every step taken inside the fort drenched in blood. The battle against the enemy commander was just as dire, for the wicked soul used her own blood as a weapon and reveled in death, even her own. Ebonbane correctly suspects that this encounter with human evil had prepared Kateri Shadowborn for the level of inhumanity that it could muster, and has used the stronghold as a laboratory to create stronger versions of the Ahltrian.

### SINED PASS

The very same pass in which Kateri Shadowborn defeated Lysander Greylocks and removed the fell sorcery that drew him under Ebonbane's thumb now remains as a treacherous route through which the Knights of the Shadows must traverse in order to get to Shadowborn Manor, and it is the site of many casualties for that very reason. The pass moves through the Phantasmal Forest, but is always placed right before Shadowborn Manor so that Ebonbane can kill as many of the knights as possible.

### HAMMERLIN

This dilapidated city, once the main settlement between the capital of the Great Kingdom and the more southernly settlements like Letour and Sanschay, stands now as a memento to Ebonbane of his earlier accomplishment of capturing Kateri Shadowborn. The city crawls with enemies and is avoided by all but the most desperate of wanderers within the Phantasmal Forest. The demilordship of the city is shared by the members of a mercenary guild known as the Black Hounds. This mercenary guild competed with Lady Shadowborn throughout

the course of the heretical wars. Despite being of similar skill, they were dispatched to far away battlefields away from the main theaters of combat as a result of their brutality. As mercenaries, the Black Hounds were never truly loyal to the Great Kingdom. And in the fog of war, it is never truly known if an enemy or an ally is responsible for the deaths of one's forces. The Black Hounds, led by their cruel leader, Wyard, were persuaded by the agents of the Caliph to ambush the reinforcements Kateri Shadowborn had sent to secure the city of Hammerlin. Though Lady Shadowborn won the battle, the losses incurred by the Black Hounds were responsible for her defeat and capture by Lysander Greylocks.

### THE GRAY RAVEN INN

This was Lady Kateri Shadowborn's favorite tavern/restaurant. The cooks were starved by Ebonbane's cultists and forced into cannibalism, damning their souls to this pseudodomain. Recently a band of wereravens from the Keepers of the Feather have taken over this location by containing the spirit of the demilord within a binding magical device; this fact is unknown to Ebonbane. The Keepers of the Feather have an uneasy relationship with the Knights of the Shadows, as both sides find trust to be too valuable a commodity to be given away freely within the sunless realm of the Phantasmal Forest.

### ARAWN'S SANCTUARY

The Great Kingdom worshipped the same pantheon as Tepest and Forlorn. These ruins were dedicated to Arawn, god of the dead. A trio of magicians knew that the Great Kingdom would fall to ruin if there were no heroes left to protect it. But in their opinion, there was no time left to find a new hero. Thus, they decided to resurrect old heroes, and they had heard of the exploits of the Shadowborn family. Their necromancy was encouraged by Ebonbane, and it went awry. The trio are fused to one body and refuse to interact with the outside world.

### STARLIGHT HOME ORPHANAGE

The Shadowborn bloodline has always dabbled in philanthropy and altruism. The construction of an orphanage to house the children left parentless by the war was but the latest in a long line of charity. The kindness given back to the community by Lady Shadowborn was forever remembered in those children's hearts. Ebonbane made sure to wait until one of the children was old enough to leave the orphanage and poison their heart with whispers of resentment. Why hadn't Lady Shadowborn just adopted us? If she truly cared and had the money, she wouldn't have abandoned us as damaged goods in a place to be seen but not heard! The boy returned to the orphanage and made sure to give the foster parents agonizing deaths akin to children's punishments, before killing the rest of the children in their sleep.

### WHITE WILLOW HOSPITAL

The Heretical Wars had left scars upon everyone's bodies and souls. Lord Ferran Shadowborn knew this but would not leave his feudal subjects without salvation. The White Willow Hospital & Sanitarium was constructed to give refuge to those in need and heal them fully. Unfortunately, the horrors of the war never ended at the doors of the institution. A veteran of the Heretical Wars who had lost their sight and was slow to trust was a good target for Ebonbane's servants. The fiend planted suggestions and paranoia into the poor veteran's mind, convincing them that they were surrounded by inhuman creatures and that the war never ended. It was unfortunately a matter of time until the veteran rampaged through the hospital, guided by Ebonbane to strike down as many innocents as possible before being shot down by crossbow bolts.

### THORKELL'S LANDING

The Sea Raiders of the Norderlands despise the Shadowborn family. What ought to have been a lucrative target to plunder, the Great Kingdom, was fiercely defended by Kateri's bloodline, driving them

to find opportunities even further south of home. This resentment and link to his arch-nemesis did not go unnoticed by Ebonbane, who used his dwindling time possessing the Caliph before Kateri drove him out of that body to contact the Sea Raiders and make them into his worshippers. The Sea Raiders had not forgotten this link to their new master and made sure to harass the Great Kingdom in its waning days after Morgoroth's disappearance and the fall of the Knights of the Circle. Their leader was a powerful warrior by the name of Thorkell Skullsplitter, who lived and breathed war with a burning passion for bloodshed. His manchild-like desire to fight and refusal to empathize with others, along with his hypocrisy in stooping to dirty tricks within combat, ensured that the Sea Raiders would be drawn into the Phantasmal Forest. They quickly made camp and are one of the few living creatures within the Phantasmal Forest. Ebonbane takes advantage of their living flesh by using them to raid settlements in the other domains, knowing that the fact that the Sea Raiders still live means that any wards against the undead are of little use.

### DEEPWOOD VAULT

In this vault, the heirlooms of the Shadowborn family were once stored. These items, both sentimental and imbued with powerful magic, are given to Ebonbane's most powerful Fiend enforcers, who have been summoned from beyond the Demiplane to serve their master once again. The demilord entrusted with outfitting Ebonbane's minions was a former squire of Kateri Shadowborn, a woman known as Adelia Rainmane. Adelia had been honored to be serving under someone as righteous and courageous as Kateri Shadowborn, but had always been afflicted with a low self-esteem and nagging sense of self-doubt. This would prove to be her undoing. Ebonbane made sure to slowly but subtly gaslight and deceive the young squire, once Lady Shadowborn had disappeared, into believing that the older woman had taken advantage of Adelia and had treated her as less than even a common squire (and not as the beloved companion

she truly was). After Ebonbane's long campaign of gaslighting and wearing away at the sanity of Adelia Rainmane, she was tasked by the fiend to infiltrate the Shadowborn's private vault of heirlooms and desecrate it to prove her loyalty. She succeeded and was promptly whisked away to the Phantasmal Forest for her devotion.

### VIA CORONA BRIDGE

This bridge was constructed in honor of the Shadowborn family at the end of the Heretical Wars as a reconstruction project ordained by the king. Ebonbane learned of this structure dedicated to his self-declared arch-nemesis and made sure to make it as miserable a crossing as possible, animating a special troll-like ghoul to harass any upon the bridge. After enough murders of innocents, Ebonbane ordered the troll to destroy the bridge so that it may be drawn into the Phantasmal Forest. Today, this bridge, just like Sined Pass, moves about the Phantasmal Forest and is usually placed (whether by Ebonbane or by the Dark Powers) right in front of the path of the Knights of the Shadows after they set out from Morgoroth's domain (but before they run into Sined Pass). When crossing the bridge, reality is distorted so that the bridge is hundreds of feet long. The troll beneath the bridge can phase through the stone like water and drag victims into the stone and 'telefrag' them, one by one.

### THE THING IN THE CRYSTAL

Ebonbane was not without foes in the immortal coil. His disappearance led to a vicious power struggle amongst his former supporters and outsider enemies. One such enemy was the Oinoloth known as Paincrest (true name: Surthregor), which learned Ebonbane's true name of Lussimar and his current whereabouts. She was quickly sequestered into the Phantasmal Forest but she was expecting this. Ebonbane dared not destroy her for she had a deadman's switch ready, and Ebonbane's understanding of the Demiplane was (and is still) quite limited. The Fiend is imprisoned within a massive cavern of crystals that can be found within



the Phantasmal Forest. Coincidentally, this cavern connects to aquifers used by the nearby Domains for water. Paincrest knows that if Ebonbane ever misplays his hand, all the other Domains and their Darklords could be poisoned very quickly, thus robbing Ebonbane of potential pearls for his collection.

### THE TREE OF LOST SOULS

This is the tree upon which Lysander Greylocks would have hanged himself out of guilt, had it not been for Kateri Shadowborn. The positive emotional

and ethereal resonance by this tree has been completely corrupted by Ebonbane. Now, it is a well-known fixture of the Phantasmal Forest that dominates all other trees with its supernatural age and height. It does not stay in a fixed location. It emits a siren song to the downtrodden and hopeless masses of the other Domains, hoping that they hang themselves upon its branches.



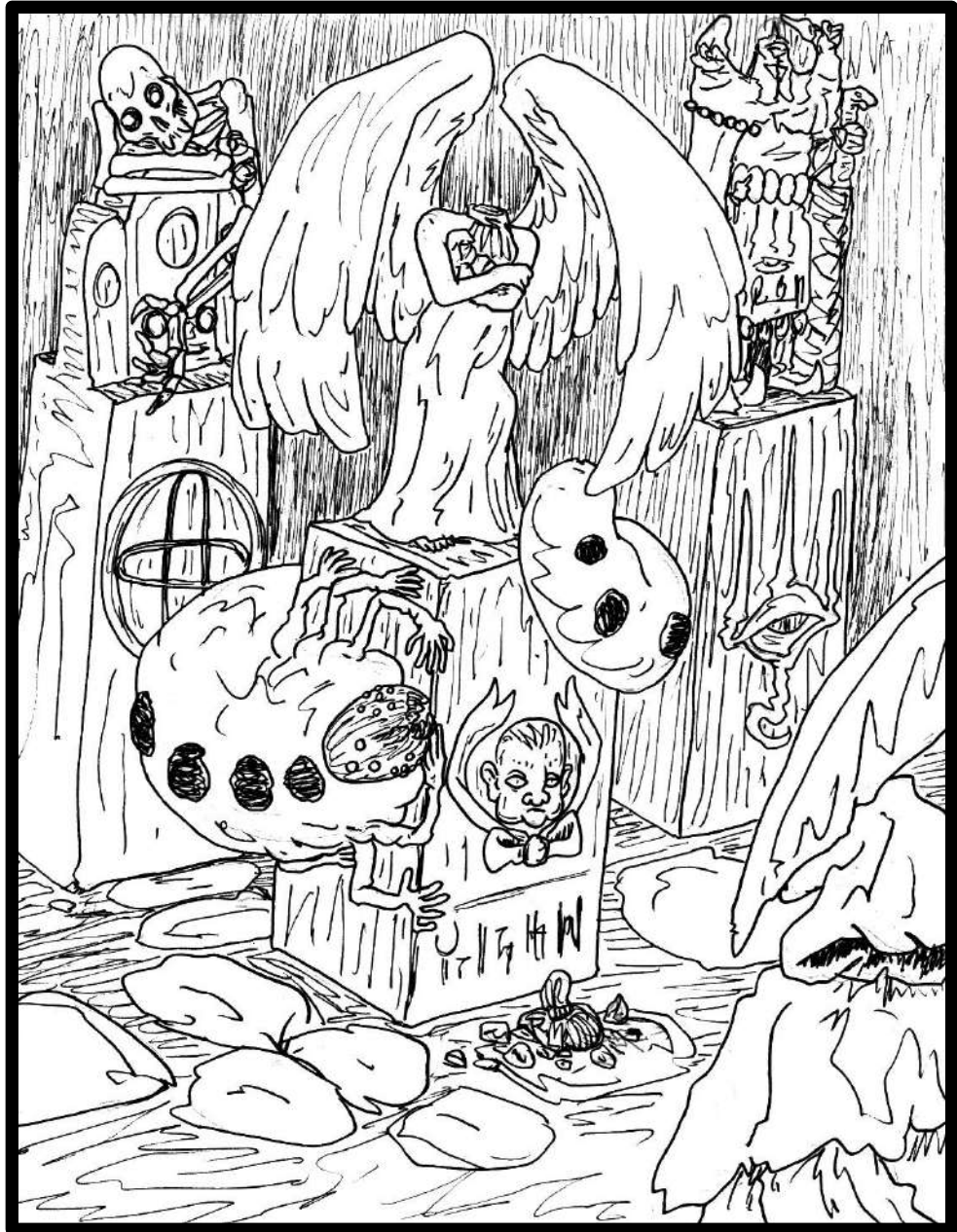
# Larva

By Stanton F. Fink

*The Larva is a restless ghost born of the forgotten dead. When the living neglect to give a corpse its last rites, especially out of spite or callousness, the deity Charon denies the corpse's spirit entry into the Underworld. Such spirits then return to the lands of the living as beguiling, shapeless devils in order to torment those among the living who offended them.*

*The Larva can be distinguished from the Lemures in that the Larva always wears a mask. Sometimes, the mask is a warped caricature of who it was in life. Other times, the mask is merely a grotesque aid for frightening the living.*

*The best way to exorcise the Larva is to remember who it was, and apologetically give it its long overdue funerary rites. Barring that, there is not much that can be done beyond, ironically, ignoring the Larva and pretending it does not exist.*



## "First Instar"

The spring storms had come again to Smew's Landing, saturating the surrounding spruce and Douglas fir forest with rain water, like they always did that time of year in the soggy, root-bound bowels of Oregon. That week's brood of storms dimmed the gloomy days with veils of drizzle and showers, and darkened the nights with impenetrable downpours. That Tuesday's storm seemed to be the runt of the litter; the whole morning was just drizzling on and off. Nothing terrible enough to keep the people of Smew's Landing indoors, after all.

It was Tuesday in Smew's Landing, which meant all of the locals involved with their town's quaint and hockey-themed eateries were bracing for the flood of tourists with smartphones and out-of-town neighbors coming for the various, apparently irresistible Tuesday deals. Two sites were especially popular destinations. One was the *Mandarin Mallard Pub*, home of the "**VOLCANO OF CHEESE**," an enormous fondue cauldron filled with a secret roster of one hundred different species of cheeses melted together. The other was the *Regal Seagull Café*, a friendly rival of the *Mandarin Mallard* that held a "Gunslinger Pasta Tuesday Special" every week and was, apparently, home to the best Spaghetti Bolognese in the Pacific Northwest according to the shared opinions of a clique of well-traveled vloggers.

The *Regal Seagull Café* was built from the renovated ruins of a Victorian-style crystal palace greenhouse, one of many relics from the town's early days as a lumber baron's private folly. Tourists lured in by the spectacle of a two-story greenhouse half-converted into a coffee and whiskey bar found themselves ensnared by a menu of fascinating, yet peculiar noodle ensembles.

It was two in the afternoon, during the doldrums between the lunch crush and the post-lunch crush, that a toddler threw off her puffy pink coat, wandered over to the Flamingo Flower island, and

ralphed up her Spaghetti Baloney special underneath the crowded Table 10. The tallest of the busboys, a veritable toqued lookout tower in flannel, straightened his Elvis bouffant, then discreetly ran to get a filled bucket and mop. The busyboy smiled, the radiance of his golden chestnut brown face calming the Table 10 party's squawkings of gross violation. The lanky busboy paused his mopping to reach up underneath the threadbare sleeve of his threadbare flannel shirt with his mahogany spider hand to scratch a thundering itch. After three minutes of vigorous scratching, the busboy rolled up his threadbare sleeve to watch an immaculately fluffy cascade of auburn needles push their way through the polished brown skin of his tanned, sinewy forearm.

It was happening earlier than normal again.

He wanted to rip that suffocating fabric off of his growing arm, off of his growing chest, but clearly, this wasn't an impulse to act upon during the start of the Tuesday post-lunch crush. Defeated, kind of, the busboy sighed as he rolled his sleeve back down and resumed mopping up spaghetti ralph.

"Luke? Luke, you look awful," Wendy the Tuesday manager said. Luke started to reply, but found himself choking as he swallowed back down a mouthful of hot mucus. He **hoped** it was just mucus. "Lordy, Lukey, you're turning green right around your own gills!" Wendy proclaimed as she watched her busboy's luxuriously swarthy complexion bleach into a bilious olive oil blanch.

"Bbbut," Luke sputtered.

"No, Luke," Wendy countermanded as she plucked the mop's shaft out of her busboy's bony, suddenly auburn-frosted hands. "I'll cover your shift. You know how you get when you're like this."

"Yeah, you're right, thanks," Luke said, smiling demurely in gracious defeat. Manager Wendy was right: he had to get out of her before he started reeking of pus again.



"Don't thank me," Wendy corrected. "Just go home. Our insurance won't cover another employee dying on the clock again."

As Wendy took over mopping up the spaghetti ralph, Luke ran his bony, now auburn-frosted, now olive oil colored fingers through his greased, ebony pompadour. He didn't spare a look back as he headed towards the employee lounge. A man in a blue suède jacket, the lead of the doomed party at Table 10, loitered around the mopping manager even as his group dimmed their squawking while they relocated to Table 5 at the Orchid Booths.

"Hey, what's the matter with Slick Racer?" the suède regular asked.

"Asthma or gangrene, or something," Wendy grumbled. "The owner **insisted** we hire that schlub." Wendy paused her mopping to lean into her regular's hairy ear. "Though, between you and me, I just wanna keep Cool Barf Luke around long enough to learn how such a nobody can make such a killer Bananas Foster."

In the employee lounge, Luke chucked his apron and toque into the laundry hamper, then scampered out the back exit. The late afternoon air in the blue spruce and fir forest was uncomfortably brisk, almost clammy, the sort of Spring weather normal people cocooned themselves in layers of fleece for. Rain or shine, Luke always wore shabby, almost tattered jeans and diaphanously thin flannel shirts, whatever he could afford to scavenge at Smew's Landing's thriftshop. Luke didn't care too much about the weather. Now, for the most part, he dressed solely for other people's concern. By the time Luke jogged about a mile beyond the town limits, he put his lard-colored, edema-bloating, auburn-furred hands on his bony knees, and bellowed a gurgling roar as he coughed up a cantaloupe-sized bolus of scalding mucus and mayonnaise-colored hemolymph. The steaming, bluing gunk blackened and scorched the mossy forest floor everywhere it splattered. Luke bellowed again, louder as his auburn-fuzzy, once thin, lard-colored chest inflated with power and

squirming, whitefish muscle, popping off his shirt buttons one by one.

The lard-colored, auburn-furred man straightened back up, and wiped his blue-stained, auburn-stubbed chin on his fraying sleeve as he kicked moss and rotten loam over his ammonia-reeking mess with his blue-stained, rotting work-boots. Luke scratched his shaggy, auburn-furred chest, then turned his head sharply to the right, letting that soft crack sort his wandering thoughts.

"Hey, buddy! Are you okay?" a woolly-faced, wool cardigan-clad yuppie called to the blatantly unwell young man from just beyond a ferny ridge. The scruffy yuppie hurriedly tromped through the damply verdant undergrowth over to his new, ailing friend, frantically waving his mittened hands in garbled semaphore. Luke, meanwhile, groaned a quiet prayer for a flash flood. The yuppie Samaritan sidled up to his new buddy patient, and went "Dude! Lemme dial nine-one-one for you!"

Luke started weeping tears of gummy, bluing goop. He shook his wobbly head as he stifled a laugh. *Who says "dude" anymore these days?*

"Don't," Luke croaked. He swallowed another incoming bolus of hot, gooey liquid. "Jjjust ssshouldn't had all those ppppilsners for lunch, ppal."

"You sure?" Yuppie Savior was adamant about not buying Luke's machismo. "I can drive you to the Eukaia E.R."

"I'm fine," Luke lied as he started to dial up his act a few more notches. The unwell man arched his back as he thrust his swelling, auburn-carpeted chest out forward. He put his puffy fists akimbo, and stupidly showed off the weird, slithering muscles writhing underneath his visibly thickening layer of bristly, orange fur. The yuppie was still unconvinced, grimacing with even grater concern now as he reached out for Luke's broadening, throbbing shoulder. Luke raised his edemic, auburn-furred paw to fend off the overly-helpful yuppie's mitten, only



for his paw to connect with the yuppie's bearded face, instead.

It took Luke five, maybe ten minutes to realize the once overly-helpful yuppie now lying motionless in the salal leaves before him was dead, the dead Samaritan's head turned at what should be an obviously egregiously inappropriate angle. Luke grew so light with hot guilt and incandescent dread that his worn and failing shirt tore itself into ribbons, falling off his still-swelling, auburn-furred torso. He fished a smartphone out of the dead yuppie's jeans pocket, crushing the device into glass shards and plastic slivers in his puffy grip. That done, Luke slung the still-warm corpse over his orange, shaggy shoulder, and anxiously hurried home.

For most of the past ten years since Luke came to haunt Smew's Landing, "home" was a rickety, repeatedly patched and re-patched aluminum storage shed he built from a defected kit he salvaged from the town's hardware store dumpster. Luke tossed his dead yuppie friend into his shed, then barricaded the door with a log: he'd scavenge the corpse further, later. That done, he slipped his swelling, mucus-sticky feet out of his mucus-coated work-boots and mucus-soaked socks. By now, Luke's auburn-furred paws had already swelled up into useless, auburn-upholstered knobs. No use playing with his jeans' fly now. Not that it mattered, as the seat of his mucus-drenched jeans loudly ripped open, allowing his lard-colored buttocks to fart out a long, squishy, lard-colored tail that flopped about upon the pleasantly rotten leaf litter. Luke spat out a strong gout of boiling hemolymph as his auburn-carpeted back thrust further out in a mountainous hump. That lumpy, orange gold and lard strongman clenched his auburn-bearded jaw as his great, growing tail grew still more auburn fur, then lengthened further and further, growing longer and longer and thicker and thicker with each swishing thrash until he knocked away the log serving as the doorlock to his precious shed.

"Dammit," Luke gurgled. He tried to flex his now-impossibly muscular arms, but found himself unable

to summon the correct brainspark he needed to bend his now lost elbows. Luke gurgled again as he choked on yet more hemolymph. He spread his freakishly bloating legs, letting a shudder of erotic relief wash through his ballooning self as his useless jeans disintegrated off of his overgrown, shaggy hindlegs. The freakish, swollen-tailed, auburn-furred strongman with greasy black hair stood there in the yard of his overturned shed, flapping the two pyramids of pallid meat that used to be his arms, impotently trying to pose like his childhood circus heroes even as he ballooned into a bigger, golden-furred blob with writhing, wormy muscles.

Luke wanted to be a strongman once, a long, long time ago when he was a little boy, by another name, who wanted to be a firefighter. The auburn-furred blob bubbled in pain as his tiny, still human head began retracting into his swelling neck. He fought against it for a moment, but then let his head disappeared into the serpentine folds of his impossibly wide shoulders as a second pair of meaty, cone-shaped arms erupted from his nipples. Luke sank down onto his knees, he was sure he still had knees at this point, and laid onto his expansive, expanding belly. He laid there, his jiggling body seemingly dead for a minute.

Then Luke-Blob trembled and quivered as he fought to thrust his still human head out of his golden, gelatinous bulk again. He roared one last gurgling roar as he spewed forth another big stomachful of steaming, flaming mucus. Rivers of more, pallid, scalding mucus dribbled out of his eyes, out of his nostrils, and then out of his ears as his own face ballooned out to rupture like a feverish boil at critical mass.

A big, mayonnaise watermelon, no, a big, butter yellow, watermelon-shaped insect head, spattered with egg yolk-orange eyes, slickly gleaming with congealing hemolymph, fought its way out of the gooey, gummy, gaping hole in Luke-Blob's thorax. Luke waggled his kitchen cleaver mandibles as his head eventually ripened into lustrous mahogany. His head now rock-firm, Luke fought some more to pull

his new, lacquered ebony limbs free. And once that was done, the van-sized beetle grub casually crawled out of his liquefying old molt.

Luke looked back to see his precious aluminum shed tipped over into his big, stinking, flaming mess of boiling mucus and oxidizing hemolymph. He loudly clacked his mandibles in frustrated aggravation. He'd have to move again when he finished. So annoying carrying his shed to a new location.

Once Luke's new, mayonnaise dragon bulk dried, he started crawling away as his creamy hide frosted over with a second, thicker, shaggier coat of longer auburn needles. His sight grew bleary as he plowed through the rot-slick humus, but it didn't matter. He knew exactly where he was going, sight or not. Upon reaching the familiar trunk of a specific giant spruce, he climbed up and up the trunk of that hapless tree until he penetrated the upper limits of the forest canopy. There, he waited, like he always did this time of month, every month, year in, year out for decades, for moonrise.

## "Second Instar"

Tuesday being Tuesdays, the post-lunch crush at the *Regal Seagull Café* mutated into the dinner rush soon after three in the afternoon, thanks to a steady flow of out-of-town foodies curious about what exactly was so special about the "Spaghetti Bang Bang Bolognese." Business was so jumping that Tuesday that Tuesday Manager Wendy found herself thinking the unthinkable and doing the undoable by summoning her ne'er-dowell daughter, Wexler, to the Café to help her cover Luke's shift. As much as she always swore to dock that yutzy yontz's pay, demote him, or even outright fire him against that dimbulb biddy Terwilliger's direct orders, Manager Wendy was always glad to have her prodigal busboy back, whenever Luke bothered to come back. Mostly because Luke was the one, the only employee in this miserable, miserably hip, hipster greasy spoon whom she could always trust to never steal out of her precious, precious tip jar. Also that his snark was always amusing.

*Whatever.*

Rather than help tend to the busy tables, Manager Wendy paced around the Monstera Foyer, nervously watching all of the busy tables as she waited for that schlub Deborah to come back from the Eukaia Wiggler Piggler with another load of tomatoes and *pasilla chiles*. If that dumb crone didn't come back with the Café's secret spaghetti sauce ingredients soon, they were all sunk. Looking down at all those happy customers, chattering in happy anticipation, it made Wendy queasy. With worry. She wheeled around.

"What the hell are you doing up here?" she yelled at Wexler. Wendy actually knew why her daughter was here. She plucked the warm, Puyapuya Alpaca smartphone out of her vinyl-clad daughter's lovingly, competently self-manicured fingers. "Go wait on tables, Wex!"

"But you know how humidity fades my hair dye, Mom," Wexler calmly whined as she straightened her licorice-black and guava juice pink hair. Wendy stared at her daughter.

"Do you know what will happen to your hair if you get docked pay again, Sweetie?"

Wexler noiselessly groused as she begrudgingly descended the foyer stairs, secretly scheming a way to recover her precious, precious phone from her imperious manager-mother. Wendy leaned onto the foyer railing, utterly exhausted from goading her slug-a-bed daughter back into productivity. At least that clod Luke never balked about accepting pointless busy work assignments. A hunched over old woman in a wilted fedora and a soaked olive overcoat came dragging a dollie overloaded with vegetable crates through the front doors. Wendy came bounding down the foyer stairs, hollering about needing to use the back entrance. Wexler sighed as she looked up from refilling water glasses at the Orchid Booth tables.

Water duty done, Wexler carried her three-quarters empty water pitcher back to the kitchen,

nonchalantly, but narrowly missing getting run over by her mother madly hauling the Café's desperately-needed secret spaghetti sauce ingredients. In the kitchen, one of the cooks, Rory probably, handed Wexler a tray of two orders of crab alfredo kuegels with matching fried eggs for Table 20.

"Two Saturday Night Specials On A Wednesday!" Rory bellowed. Just as Wexler exited the kitchen, her mother snatched the tray out of Wexler's hands. Not that Wexler cared too much; she'd just filch her share of the tips out of her mother's tip jar tomorrow.

*Whatever.*

Wexler went back to fetch the pot of coffee Rory forgot to give her.

"Here y'go, gentlemen!" Wendy said as she cheerfully placed the two orders of crab kuegel before the two hardhatted gentlemen seated at the Bougainvillea Fountain. Wexler came by to refresh the gentlemen's coffee, *right on time, too*. "Is there anything else we can get you two before we serve the check?"

The two gentlemen reeking of bark mulch shared a furtive, sinister rumble.

"We'd like to try the Bananas Foster," one said. Wexler visibly paled underneath her powdered sugar blush.

"We've constantly heard great things about it," the other explained.

Manager Wendy smiled wide, her normally adamant veneer of professional calm cracking like lake ice in the Spring. She smiled frantically at her daughter, who then replied with an agonized pantomime retelling of the time Mrs. Terwilliger almost fired her over Luke's disastrous, nay, catastrophic attempt to teach her how to make their Café's flagship dessert.

"I will get started on that for you guys right away," Wendy proclaimed as Wexler nervously scuttled off

in search of other, coffee-thirsting patrons. Wendy made a beeline to the Honeysuckle lounge and dragged her favorite sidekick, Deborah, into the kitchen. The two foresters shared a shrug.

"Anyways, Derek," one of the foresters resumed. "What is killing all of these trees? For the last ten years straight, they've been dying one by one. Is it a super disease?"

"I found some goop on a tree last month," Derek replied, pecking at his eggs with his fork. "I sent it to a lab." He began dissecting his crab kuegel. "So far, the results suggest it's some sort of scarab beetle, maybe a cockchafer or a mutant dynastid."

"Damn it, Derek!" the other forester blasted as he slammed his grungy fist into his kuegel and his plate. "Beetles don't eat trees whole, drain them dry of their sap, and break off all their branches overnight!"

"Calm down, Brad," Derek implored as Wexler came scuttling back into view to sweep up Brad's ruined meal into a dust bin. "We're not dealing with a mass murdering serial killer. Oh, and put that, and a new meal on my tab, please."

"Sure thing," Wexler replied. "Oh," she continued, leaning into Derek's ear. "If you two want to know about serial killers, you should take a deep dive about the 'Killer Oblate.'"

"'Killer Oblate'?" Brad didn't know whether to be piqued or annoyed. But since he just broke one of her plates, he was going to be piqued for now.

"Ten years ago, Deacon Jeanpierre Aix was run out of Smew's Landing when he was discovered trying to kidnap his church's underaged organist."

"And?" Derek asked.

"Deacon Aix disappeared without a trace, except for a puddle of slime and his blood in his church's cemetery. People say God cursed the deacon to become a flying slime monster who gobbles up lost people in our forest." Wexler then wiggled her

freshly painted Blackforest Cherry puce nails for emphasis.

Brad chuckled incredulously. Or sneezed, hard to tell.

"Uhhh..." Derek vocalized as Wexler grinned.

"I think the deacon was just murdered, probably by his own wife, or the organist's mother, who he was having another affair with, and his body got dumped into a septic tank filled with lye and drain cleaner."

The Tuesday manager clapped her rough, dishpan hands onto her daughter's petite, black lace-covered shoulders.

"That's enough wowing the paying customers with Smew's Landing's colorful local heritage, sweetie," Wendy cheerfully scolded as she dragged her overly chatty daughter away back into the kitchen. An elderly, almost hunchbacked woman in a painfully pale pink waitress uniform came by bearing a tray with two banana daquiris in two large margarita goblets. Upon setting the two drinks before the two confused foresters, good old Deborah then produced two matches from her armpits, struck the matches on her hairnet, and tossed them into the daquiris, setting them ablaze.

"Enjoy your Banana Flamberge," Deborah joylessly declared while the flaming drinks guttered.

"Um, ma'am, that's 'flambé,'" Derek hesitantly corrected.

"And we ordered the Bananas Foster," Brad added. Deborah shuffled back towards the Honeysuckle lounge.

"Whatever," Deborah rasped. "The guy who makes it isn't here, and more importantly, Happy Hour is almost over. I need more tips to pay off my car."

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Dusk came as the wrung-out rain clouds sequestered themselves away. The Spring nights in the spruce

and fir forests around Smew's Landing were frigid and damp, almost unforgivably inhospitable for humans even by the hardy locals' standards. They weren't cold enough to discourage the thousands upon thousands of tree frogs vocally jockeying for mates and territory, though. Nor the tiny, loud, speckled owls who ate them, either.

Sunset finally came, and Luke the giant beetle grub's lushly plush, auburn-furred back distended out until it burst like a truck-sized blister, spilling out hot mayonnaise pus down his tree's trunk. From that gooey, melting ruin, a pallid, butter sculpture creature, Luke's alter ego, emerged. A vast, pale horn telescoped from his domed forehead like some satanic pimple while two unblinking ruby eyes turned into glittering topazes. More inflating horns jutted out from his mountainously humped thorax. Crumpled butter pom poms straightened out into sail-like elytra, and then amber paned wings. Sticky butter flesh hardened into sleek, shiny, yet thorny obsidian armor bleeding bristly auburn fur.

Sunset progressed into dusk, then into night, and Luke's alter ego, now a dragonlike beetle easily larger than a steam locomotive, spread its shimmering amber wings to fly away into the darkening, starry sky.

• • •

Sunrise snuck in unannounced and unseen thanks to the thunderous herd of fresh rain clouds that returned from the coast with extra moist friends at midnight that previous night.

A scruffy-faced man cocooned in a puffy, brown, two-hundred something dollar fleece jacket slumbered uneasily in his mud-caked station wagon. The scruffy-faced man had been pouting all night awaiting the arrival of his hiking and drinking buddy, Wayne, who uncharacteristically refused even the basic courtesy of turning his phone on. And after finally brooding himself to sleep at four-something in the morning, Auggie wasn't going to deny himself the



pleasure of dreaming about punching out that woolly-faced, backstabbing prick who stood him up and made him miss out on “Zombie Apocalypse Night” at the *Mandarin Mallard*.

At 9:27am, Auggie and his wagon were both jostled awake by a very loud, very invisible bolt of lightning striking the road in front of him. Auggie stopped fiddling for his car alarm key fob when he realized it was not a lightning strike, but a fallen, barkless, chewed-upon trunk of what used to be a three-hundred year old Douglass fir lying in in the road. A deep, quiet humming rattled the shrieking wagon, audibly jingling the many coins in Auggie's cupholder. And then Auggie's wilderness yuppie brain went **boink** the moment he realized that tree trunk did not fall, but was dropped from above.

An obsidian and auburn shadow rode in from the gloomy sky on a cloud of shimmering amber to alight upon that barkless meteorite. A minute or five of patting the chewed treetrunk with manhole cover antennae, and the yacht-sized beetle decided that there was nothing of worth left in its half-eaten meal. The obsidian and auburn creature rotated around to fix a glittering pair of giant, topaz cabochon-like eyes on Auggie's mud-covered wagon. Auggie just sat there in his driver's seat, corpse-like, as whatever this thing was casually walked over to his station wagon. A steely tentacle speared through the wagon roof, piercing Auggie squarely in his stomach.

• • •

Thursday morning was thunderously dreary and rainier than usual for Smew's Landing's neck of the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps it was because everything in that particular swath of forest that wasn't wet was inexplicably covered in slime, and that everything that wasn't unnaturally slimy was sopping wet.

It was half-past ten that morning when the foresters Derek and Brad found the chewed-up fir tree trunk lying in the road. The two arborists had seen many,

many instances of botanical devastation throughout their careers, like a honey fungus apocalypse, two gypsy moth armageddons, fungal and bacterial blights literally more times than they cared to count, a megiddo's worth of scale insects, and then there was the time the two barely survived getting all of their clothes eaten off in a locust plague. But the state of this tree was something perennially mysterious, vexingly unknowable, yet uncomfortably similar to a rawhide bone fifteen minutes after being gifted to their Great Dane Chionaspis. The two foresters took a long, creeping walk around the misplaced, displaced tree in that heavy rain, their mouths open despite the power of that rancid, sweet and savory stench stubbornly clinging to the unbearably moist air. Brad's horror suddenly frothed into rage.

“Do you still think a beetle could have done this?” Brad screamed over the miasma and precipitation. The two finally rounded past the gnawed-upon tree's gnawed-off roots, coming to a behemoth knob of putrefied ranch dressing surrounded by a battleground of shattered, blackened, chitin panels. Derek and Brad finally covered their noses with their gloved hands now that they could smell the stench as well as see its source. Derek motioned at the obviously suggestive arrangement of the chitin shards with his free hand.

“Yes, Brad,” Derek answered, trying to yell over their shared nausea. “A beetle probably did this.”

The two then noticed there was a car door opened in that van-sized glop of vile, pale goo.

### “Third Instar”

It was late Monday morning at the *Regal Seagull Café*. That meant the customers who came for the lamb and oatmeal stew with unlimited coffee refill specials were almost finished being replaced by the customers coming in for the wood ear and tomatillo soup with teapot service specials. Assistant Manager Flauros tented her fingers in satisfaction, watching all those happy faces sweetening in anticipation for

that sour swill. If she could make enough profits, or better yet, in tips, she might even convince that anal stickler, Monday Manager Boonkha, to ask Terwilliger to promote her. Maybe to “Head Assistant Manager,” even.

Assistant Manager Flauros went back to work checking and rearranging the tables' flower arrangements. Monday Manager Boonkha was finishing inspecting the restrooms, after all. Flauros crushed a spider chrysanthemum bloom in her hand as she watched a familiar-looking mahogany beanpole walking through the front doors carrying a backpack. It didn't matter that Luke was wearing a nice, new, shiny umber jacket. Flauros was going to get hell again if Luke tracked in more odors again.

Luke weaved and bobbed around the busy tables, with an unknown destination somewhere in the café. A woman leaving Table #9 bumped Luke, and when a waiter lurched to save his off-duty coworker from hitting the floor, both Luke and the waiter tumbled backwards into the indoor waterlily pond. Oh, Flauros was definitely going to get hell for **that**.

As Assistant Manager Flauros assisted the wet waiter to a restroom, Luke discreetly left a big trail of waterlily water to the currently empty employee lounge. There, he molted his wet clothing, put aside his new wallet, and then packed his wet clothing, together with the reeking, dirty clothes in his soaked backpack, his soaked socks, and his sopping sneakers into the café's washing machine. He poured in three-quarters of a bottle of jasmine-and-lavender-scented detergent in the hopes of exorcising that rotten sock plus pungent corpse parfum he was unfortunately known for. That done, Luke hunted through the laundry hampers for something to wear so he wouldn't end up like “Chippendale” Caleb. He found a pair of dungarees, probably Dean's from the Saturday shift, and pulled them on up his shaggy, bronze-furred, beanpole legs.

Luke zipped up Dean's dungarees as he stared down past his carved, cherry wood chest. He felt fleshy, extra meaty this time around. Luke started posing

and dancing in the empty employee lounge, a shirtless, wire sculpture of a circus strongman, a smokey-tanned, underfed Adonis. A sinister thought hatched in Luke's shaggy head like some wicked, newborn Athena. *Maybe I could start using more than one host at a time*, he considered as he shoved a whole banana nut muffin, wrapper and all, into his mouth. *People would notice*, he predictably realized. He started filling a paper cup with vanilla hazelnut nondairy creamer and sugar. *People would get concerned about the growing missing persons list, too*. Luke thinned his creamer slurry with a little coffee and nutmeg, then swallowed his thoroughly masticated muffin wrapper.

The underfed Adonis paused his overthinking to take a long, slow swig of his coffee-flavored creamer sludge. Luke adored the heady, floating buzz of caffeine, how everything turned into soothingly hypnotic static once that bitter rush hit. He hated the taste of coffee, though, something about the aroma of burnt wood displeasing him. That, and he'd probably need to stay in his normal routine. *To be on the safe side, obviously*.

“How come you're always doing your laundry in the Café?” Wexler asked. Luke slurped down the rest of his coffee-spiced creamer sludge, turned around, and magically summoned some more tough, stringy meat into his cherrywood chest to make his pectoral muscles bounce.

“On what Old Lady Terwilliger pays me, plus whatever I make in tips here in Shangri La, I can't afford to visit a vending machine, let alone go to the laundromat across the street, without an annuity or five,” Luke replied.

“Then why don't you get another job?” Wexler complained as she picked at the corners of her Raspberry Coral pink nails. “Or at least put a shirt on? You're like a big, skinny wicker basket man with giant nipples and creepy armpit hair.”

Luke snorted, and then got handed a “Maniac Mallard Pub” novelty T-shirt by a balding, dumpy man in a tweet suit and barista's apron.

"Please remember what management has said about performing stripteases, flirting, inter-employee romances, or other prohibited behaviors on company premises, Miss Johnson, and Mister, um, Luke," Monday Manager Mr. Boonkha scolded. "I mean, I I would have thought that awful 'Chippendale Caleb' débâcle would have laid all of this lascivious nincompoopery to rest three months ago, at least."

"Yes, Mr. Boonkha," Wexler sighed as Luke struggled to pull that medium sized T-shirt over his head. Manager Boonkha began futzing around the coffee machine, replenishing coffee grounds and refilling everything else Luke had just drained.

"Furthermore, children, and, um, Luke," Manager Boonkha continued. "Neither of you have shifts today: why are you two loitering in the Employee Lounge?"

"Why can't we?" Wexler retorted.

"Yeah!" Luke added, finally pulling his wild, ebony-maned head through that T-shirt hole. "And I'm doing my laundry!"

"You two can't stay because today, you two aren't aren't café employees, and more importantly, you two can't stay because I say you two can't stay." Manager Boonkha threw a dozen meadow-lilac scented dryer sheets into the dryer in anticipation of Luke's odoriferous load, then sighed in frustration. "No wonder your mother dyes her hair every week."

Wendy's daughter huffed in offended pique.

"Could the Prodigal Girl and I at least stay to finish my laundry, Your Lordshipness?" Luke pleaded.

Manager Boonkha gently took both Luke and Wexler by their arms.

"If you two are that desperate to loiter, go loiter in a coffeehouse, like '*Caffeine Hovel*,' or that wretched '*Grounds For Divorce*' across town."

Manager Boonkha guided the two to the back exit.

"Isn't the *Regal Seagull* a coffeehouse, too?" Wexler sarcastically lawyered.

"The *Regal Seagull* is a *café*," the manager corrected.

"But my laundry!" Luke desperately pleaded. "My shoes!"

Manager Boonkha lead the two beyond the exit's threshold.

"You can retrieve your laundry **after** my shift is over," he adamantly stated.

"But, but my laundry!"

"**AFTER** my shift is over, Mr Luke. Miss Johnson."

And with that, the exit door gently shut closed, and locked. So much for appeals.

Luke raised his big, hairy foot, wiggled his long, hairy toes, and then started stomping barefoot in the legion of rain pulled in the cracked asphalt of the alley. Wexler watched this spectacle with cat-like fascination. She realized that, in the ten years since she met Old Lady Terwilliger's favorite busboy, she had never observed Luke's saccharinely helpful mood beyond 'enigmatically milquetoast snark,' let alone witness the Bananas Fosterchild throw an honest to God temper tantrum. Then Luke suddenly stopped and turned towards Wexler.

"You wanna do lunch, Wex?" he asked.

Wexler took a second or twenty to process what she just heard before she allowed her Eggplant Puce lips to pry themselves apart.

"I thought you just said you were broker than broke less than ten minutes ago."

"My wallet changed its mind." Luke loudly rolled his shoulders, mildly unnerving Wexler with his eerie, crackling flexibility. "But I'm not going to let His Majesty keeping my clothes-"

"And shoes, don't forget about your shoes, Crazy Diamond."

"But I'm not going to let being barefoot stop me," and then he wrapped a long, dark, willowy arm around Wexler's wool- and corduroy-covered shoulders. "...from stepping out wit'ma baby, tonight!"

Wexler squirmed in her coworker's apparently iron embrace.

"Baby'? I'm a twenty-something townie, and as far as I know, you're twice as old as my mom."

Luke let go of his coworker, truly stung by her cruel assessment.

"Dude, I'm only 30," he lied as he throw up his long, long, tree branch arms to plead. "So I've been to a Barbara Streisand concert back in the day, does that make me Methuselah?"

"Yeah, uh huh. You also known about Duran Duran, you know about Jaime Duertes--"

"That's 'Jimmy Durante.'"

"See? See? No one alive still knows what you, Luke the Busboy Man, know about funny 1980's commercials!"

Luke's face turned into a solemn, teak mask.

"Little baby girl person named 'Wexlerianna Van Joanriverstein," the teak-masked beanpole facetiously snarked. "If you're done with your flailing, can we go out to lunch now?"

Wexler ceased her histrionics, now confused.

"Wait, you're serious?"

"Huh?" Luke put a big, spidery hand to his big seashell ear as he went walleyed. "Can't hear you! Whatcha sayin'? TOO OLD TO HEAR ANYONE BORN AFTER BONJOVI'S LAST ALBUM!" then he hooked his long arm around Wexler's.

"Don't you want to, um, buy new shoes?"

Luke lifted up his big, wet, still hairy foot, wiggling his long, wet yet hairy toes.

"Dudeling Junior McFeefaifoofeenieneeny, gaze upon my giant flippers of power: Elfy McCobblerstein and the thrift shop down the street don't sell clown shoes my size. Trust me, I've asked. A lot."

"Well, um, Busboy Man, lead the way."

Busboy Man ran his spidery fingers through his shaggy ebony mane, restoring his beloved, young Elvis-style bouffant. That done, Luke twirled around a lamp post like some underdressed Gene Kelley, and then took Wexler's gloved hand.

"Shall we, milady?"

Wexler gave a tired, disgusted sigh as she pulled her hand free, turning away to go back to her mother's apartment.

"Dude, you're spiking my weirdometer." But as she walked away, she realized her gloved hand was still caught in Luke's iron grasp.

"Dudeling Junior O'Gratincakes," Luke mocked. "You don't know anything about 'weird.'" Wexler put her free hand on her hip and scowled. Luke got off the lamp post, let go of his coworker, and turned back into a wooden statue. "You're a big, *macher* mystery hunter, but you don't have a blog, you don't even know why people call me 'Luke,' even though that's not my real name."

"Wait, what?" Wexler sputtered.

Luke waved from down the foggy street.

"Come with me, and you'll see a world of PURE imagination!" Busboy Man sang as he bounded away on his long legs. Perplexed, yet annoyed, Wexler followed her gangly coworker while not-so quietly rueing her town's awful plague of cracked sidewalks. Luke's merry little game concluded at the foreboding, tomb-like entrance of the *Mandarin Mallard Pub*. In playful imitation of a wooden cigar chieftain, Luke held one long arm high in mockery of a tomahawk. With his other long arm, Luke held one of the grim, wrought-iron and walnut wood doors



open for a panting Wexler. She grabbed a fistful of Luke's T-shirt.

"Huh, huh, huh, I ham so going tuh tuh to kuh kuh kill you fuh fuh this," Wexler huffed. "Ruh ruhning in all this GODDAMNED humidity is making muh muh mascara bleed."

Luke gazed upon Wexler's furious, melting face, tittering deeply as he watched tarry tears of carmine eyeshadow dribble down her sweat-marred cheeks. Wexler immediately let go when she realized her aggravatingly annoying coworker was bouncing his lean, yet disgustingly muscular pects underneath his T-shirt again. A gentle shove, and Wexler was guided into the hazy lobby. Wexler coughed at the pub's cigar reek while Luke approached a waiter with grease-petrified hair.

"Two for lunch, please," Luke requested.

"The Pub doesn't serve minors," the oily-haired *maître d'* growled at the melting-faced girl.

"I'm twenty-two!" Wexler yelled even as she continued blotting humidity off of her smudged cheeks with a handkerchief.

"I know," the oily-haired *maître d'* growled. "Got a howl out of your mother, though, Wex."

"We'd like the Shirley Temple Lunch Service, please," Luke interjected.

"Very good, sir," the *maître d'* growled. "Right this way."

The *maître d'* led the two on their winding way through the dim, wood and aged tobacco-smokey labyrinth of the Pub's main dining room. Wexler remembered one time the *Mandarin Mallard* was closed down. None of the staff or patrons could be assed to follow the health or fire safety codes about smoking cigars indoors. She was thirteen at the time, and recalled quite clearly that the town's extremely fearsome fire marshal made a big song and dance about running the *Mallard's* staff out of Smew's Landing in a parade, only to suddenly leave town

without a trace, never to be seen or heard from ever again. She also remembered the *Pub* staff naming a cocktail in the disappeared marshal's honor when they reopened the following week.

"Thanks, Yann," Luke said as he and Wexler scooted into their designated (and overstuffed) booth.

"How do you and Grandma want your Insane Duck Burgers?" Yann growled.

"Well done with extra tomatoes, mushrooms, and pickles, please," Wexler requested.

"Extra crazy with extra grilled pineapples and onions," Luke chirped. The greasy *maître d'* scanned the two again one last time.

"I'll be back with yer Shirley Temples, and tell Wendy I said 'hi,' please," Yann growled. "Anything else?"

"I'd like a Puffard of Smoke with extra mesquite," Luke said.

"Very good, sir." With that, Yann skulked away into the smoking gloom.

"Isn't Yann just a ball of sunshine?" Luke beamed. Wexler squinted, unsure if she was hearing weird sincerity or more of Luke's saccharin sardonicism. A grimly grinning waiter placed a basket of lacquered chippy things that smelled of hot poultry lard onto the table.

"*Chicharrones del Pato*, compliments of the house," the grinning waiter grimly murmured.

"Thanks!"

"Thank you."

Luke helped himself to a handful of duck rinds as the grinning waiter, too, disappeared into the smoke. Wexler exhaled for focus, then ate a duck rind, too, for luck.

"Tell me what your real name is, Cool Hand Luke," Wexler eagerly demanded. The mahogany sphinx stopped chewing in order to swallow while his complexion turned cherry-wood.

"I never said anything about that, Madam Sherlock," Luke said. "If you recall, I said I'd reveal why people call me 'Luke.'" "Luke" then smirked. Maybe it was the creepy, combined ambiance of dim lighting, electric candles, and a ten-year old aura of cigar smoke, but Wexler realized there was something off about Luke's smirk this time, something scary.

"But--"

"When the time is right, I'll tell you," then he grinned wide, flashing bright teeth.

"And only on my terms, because you don't have the upper body strength to pry it out of me."

Now there was her goofball Luke.

"So, then, why do people call you 'Luke'?"

Luke munched on another duck rind.

"Remember when I first came to work at the Regal S?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, when Mrs Terwilliger's secretary, her old one, whatshisname, Fungo, Canopenero..."

"You mean Jailbait Ferdinand Cano, who got fired five years ago for skimming funds?"

"Yeah, that's the schmuck: during my job interview with him, he mishears my condition as 'leukemia,' and Mrs. Terwilliger--"

"Wait..." Wexler's face lit up with that joyously luminescent inner glow of nosy curiosity. "You have a medical condition? Is it fatal? Is it contagious? Are there boils? Is it--"

"Private. It's private." Wexler munched on another duck rind to shush herself. "Mrs. Terwilliger misheard Ferd as saying my name as 'Luke,' it was like no one there had batteries in their hearing aids that day."

"So what is your real name?"

Luke scooped up the last handful of duck rinds, shoved them into his mouth, and began chewing the crunching things.

"Mmmmmphwuhkhleeheeh."

Wexler's smudged face twisted into a gorgon's mask of whiny agony.

"Oh, come ON!!! Tell me, please, please, please? I gotta know your real name, or I'll just die!"

The mahogany sphinx in a Mandarin Mallard T-shirt swallowed his bolus of chewed *chicharrones*.

"The opposite, milady. You'll die if you do know."

"Your drinks," Yann growled as he deposited two parfait glasses, then a fuming, copper goblet before the pair on their table. "I'll be back with your burgers in a moment."

Luke downed his Puffard in a hungry gulp, followed by his Shirley Temple in a predatory slurp. Wexler stared at the wooden sphinx as she sipped at her Shirley Temple.

"What?" Luke asked as he scraped his lower lip with his wrist.

"I thought you hate smoke."

"I said I hate burnt wood taste."

"Oh, um, well, then, where'd you come from and why come to Smew's Landing?"

The wooden sphinx sighed as he hunted for those last few drops of his finished drinks.

"I guess I walked myself into that," he grumbled as Yann came back with two duck burgers and two baskets of steak fries. Luke began neatly dismantling his burger while Wexler began sawing hers in half.

"Oooo, tell me, tell me, where'ya from, and why do you like it better here?" Wexler chittered as she sank her teeth into her halved burger.

"Let me tell you a story," Luke began as he organized his duck burger's solid components. "Once upon a

time in a kingdom far, far, far away, the crown prince decided he was going to become a fireman instead of king when he grew up.” Wexler squinted incredulously. “But Queeny said he should be a footballer, and Dad said he should be a lawyer.” Wexler ate one, then four steak fries. “And while the power trio argued, the crown prince's brother, the *other* prince, ran away from home to join the circus to live out his dream of being a strongman.” Luke finished sorting his burger's solid components. “”But 'cause Prince Tiny McBabybubblebutt was waaaay too weak a'scrawny to ever ever become the strongman, the circus staff turned him into a lion, a tiger, and a bear, and then tried but failed to put him down when he ate their lion tamer and seventeen audience members.”

Wexler stopped in mid-chew, letting a thread of duck-flavored drool and homemade honey mango-mushroom ketchup dribble out past her Geranium pink lips.

“Thath maeth ntho thenthe,” she stated.

“Neither did Inanna's descending into the Underworld to steal her sister's throne,” Luke retorted just before he rolled his pineapple ring and grilled vegetables up into a leaf of Romaine. “I mean, why did she want two thrones? One for each of her gigantically ample butt-cheeks?” He shoved that cylindrical mess into his waiting mouth.

“Point taken.” Wexler finally swallowed the last of her half a burger. “But you still haven't told me where you're from, or why you came here.”

She popped a few more fries into her mouth.

The cherry and walnut-wood sphinx flushed mahogany as he gobbled up each half of his pretzel bun, then his spicy quince chutney and gruyère duck patty, leaving nothing beyond some schmears of chutney and mushroom ketchup. He then began meticulously scouring his spider fingers of melted cheese.

“I just did.” Luke took forty seconds masticating his, then the rest of Wexler's steak fries. “You're a clever girl, and I know you're much smarter than a Hollywood dinosaur.”

Wexler pursed her Geranium pink lips in vexed thought even as she blotted them clean with her linen napkin.

“Point taken,” she repeated with a poutier pout.

“Would you two like any more drinks?” Yann growled. “Dessert, perhaps?”

Wexler drained the last of her Shirley Temple.

“We're good,” Luke said. He looked at Wexler, who then pushed her plate with her remaining burger half towards him. “Whill thyaec that thec upth fwuhnth.”

The pair scooted out of their booth to follow the grease-haired maître d' back through the smoky labyrinth. At the front desk of the Mandarin Mallard lobby, Luke took out his filth-glazed wallet and retrieved a portrait of Andrew Jackson, one portrait of Abraham Lincoln, a portrait of Alexander Hamilton, and seven portraits of George Washington, setting them onto the counter before Yann with an urging to “keep the change.” As the two passed beyond the wrought-iron and walnut-wood doors, Wexler stopped in her tracks when she realized Luke wasn't walking with her.

Luke was almost startled when he felt Wexler's gloved hands hook onto his bare, walnut-wood arm. He looked to his side to see strong, independent Wexler glomming onto his arm, wiping her blush onto his T-shirt sleeve as she made fluttery goo-goo eyes at him with her mascara-smeared eyes.

“Isn't the big, strong, sailor man going to escort the poor, defenseless, little princess home?” Wexler cooed. From Luke's lofty height, he couldn't even bother to summon an insincere reaction of amusement.

“Y'do know you spend more on a box of hair dye than I make in six months, right?”

Wexler punched her coworker in his floating ribs.

"Take me home, you cockblockhead. Be a gentleman."

Luke sighed as he readjusted his arm in his coworker's demure embrace.

"Fine, fine, 'gentle man mode' activate."

Five blocks down the foggy street, a left turn at Gaden Avenue, and the two came to the statue-heavy entrance of Pennyroyal Apartments.

"Do you live here?" Wexler asked.

"No, don't you?"

"I live at the Waterlily Flats on the other side of town. I thought you knew this."

Luke threw up his spidery walnut hands in frustration before rubbing his agonized face.

"I thought you knew I'm not a nosy person..." He dug his spidery fingers deep into his sable hair, churning it vigorously before recomposing his calm and reconstructing his pompadour. "Just please lead the way, Wexler."

Wexler retook her gallant coworker's bare, willowy, walnut-wood arm, and snuggled into his side.

"Look at us, bickering like an old married couple..." she giggled. "Imagine what our kids would be like!"

Luke sighed, then discreetly gulped to keep a bolus of duck-flavored mucus from rising back up into his throat.

The walk from Pennyroyal Apartments to Waterlily Flats was lovely; the clouds boiled away, and the fog delightfully evaporated in the afternoon sunshine. Blackberry bushes were everywhere in town, dominating empty lots, infesting landscaping, and chocking the greenways. The way the blackberry bushes were the densest in the blasted ruins of Mergellus Manor suggested the plants were actually a curse levied upon Smew's Landing. Luke's chest heaved and expanded ever so slightly; he was

looking forward to Blackberry Season. Free food, mostly. He sighed wistfully, then Wexler, too, sighed.

At Wexler's urging, the pair cut through an alleyway as a shortcut. "Romantic, so romantic," she insisted, probably sardonically, and God help him, Luke found himself almost agreeing. Grimy, eroded brickwork, oily puddles of ominous garbage juice oozing between his spidery toes, numerous bouquets of rancid trash aromas assaulting his nostrils, definitely a place that made him feel alive. And then the two coworkers arrived at a sprawling complex of stucco bungalows and fluorescent white-flowering pear trees. Luke gawked at the swimming pool-cum-lily pond by the manager's office. He gazed longingly at that scummy, speckled green lens even as Wexler guided him towards Apartment B-217.

At B-217, Wexler finally let go of Luke's arm to fish out her door key. Luke wrenched off a twig full of pear blossoms as Wexler fumbled for her key, and he dragged the twig through his bright teeth, flicking the now-bare stick away the moment before Wexler turned to look back at him.

"So, see you at the 'Gull'?" Luke asked as Wexler opened her mother's apartment door. Wexler smirked.

"Yeah, people have been complaining about your Bananas Foster."

"Oh? What's wrong?"

"You haven't been making them, Cool Hand."

Luke chuckled as he walked off.

It was dusk by the time Luke finally returned to his aluminum shed. It had been a long time since Luke had walked through the forest barefoot, and he realized he needed to enjoy doing that again. He pulled off his T-shirt, wiggled out of Dean's dungarees, and flopped down to wallow in a thicket of soft ferns and salal leaves.



Luke lay there in that thicket, naked except for a sudden dusting of wispy black hair on his chin, chest, and belly rapidly thickening into a fluffy blanket of auburn fur growing across his body down to his wrists and ankles. As he laid there, waiting for the waning half-moon to rise, he decided he'd just relax that night. His wiry muscles grew loudly lumpy as his auburn chest became vast, broad and quite shaggy.

"Yeah, I'm gonna take it easy tonight," he smugly growled as his suddenly deeper voice dropped another five octaves. Luke stretched mightily, letting his lumpy, shaggy body grow lumpier and shaggier. He took his swelling, auburn paws to his still-human head and vigorously ruffled his bronzing Elvis coif. "Yeah, I deserve a break."

### "Subimago"

In the dimly dappled summer light of the spruce and fir forest, the gray limo barreling down the I 290 looked like a black hearse late for a funeral. The limo's passengers were indeed in a hurry, as they were indeed late for an important appointment. Thus the impetus of Kissel the chauffeur to go thirty miles over the highway's speed limit. Inside the limo's cabin, an elderly lady in a dark, probably blue business dress sat next to the limo's mini-fridge, helping herself to yet another swig from her bottle of sparkling Sauvignon Blanc every time she felt the limo dip below sixty-five miles per hour.

"Mother!" a woman in an identical dark business dress scolded. "We're late already! What will they think if we show up with you stone drunk again?"

A man in a dark, probably also blue suit took another chug from his own bottle of Marsala, numb to his indignant wife's nagging, and oblivious to his two sons' violent bickering over yet another round of "punch buggy."

"Anita, dear, let your mother unwind," the man said. "You know how tense Miriam gets whenever we have to deal with that toupée'd boor your benighted sister shackled herself to."

Miriam chuckled into her Sauvignon as Anita fought hard her urge to sink her four-hundred something dollar manicured nails into either her mother's throat or her own temples.

"Listen, Chuck. Just because Mother has put us in her will does not mean we've been enslaved forever as her mindless enablers."

"Daughter, hold your tongue," Miriam barked.

"Mother, either talk, or drink, not both." Miriam snorted as she kind of begrudgingly returned to her bottle. "Heracles! Pluto! If you make me make Kissel stoOOOAAAAA!!!!"

Everyone was thrown onto the limo cabin's floor when Kissel the chauffeur slammed hard on the brakes. A branchless, barkless tree had tumbled onto the road two-hundred feet ahead.

One of the boys peeled himself off of his brother, and crawled away to press his face into the limo window. Deep in the undergrowth beyond the side of the road was a big, topaz orb, like an orange-brown glass sun hovering over an ocean of green foliage. Then the boy wet himself upon realized that prop sun was really an unblinking eye.

• • •

*Enough dreaming, enough sleeping.* It was Summer time, and that meant it was Berry Season. Luke sat up in the stream he fell into the night before. He touched his thin, wiry-muscled chest just as the last of his new host's ruined shirt finished disintegrating into watery slime. He stood up, and the slimy remnants of his new host's jeans finished dissolving into slimy, bluish gunk tangling in the soggy, bronze fur of his gangly legs.

"Damn it."

Luke squatted back into the water, taking annoyed care to rinse his fur clean. If he didn't, wearing pants would be hell. Now clean, Luke bounded out of the stream and spent a half hour discreetly hiking his

nude way through the forest back to his shed. Since it was peak tourist season, Luke had to move his shed five times in the last month to keep nosy picnickers and buttinsky nature-lovers from stumbling upon his precious home.

Back at Shed Sweet Shed, Luke quickly pulled on his usual outfit of a threadbare flannel shirt and repeatedly torn jeans. It was slim pickings in Luke's shoe pile, as he fitted his big, ebony-furred, flipper-like feet into a mismatched pair of flipflops. If this kept up, Luke would have to save up to hitchhike to that Cost-Fewer Shoe Store in downtown Eukaia. Maybe he could wheedle Manager Wendy into giving him a ride.

*Whatever.*

Luke grabbed a pair of plastic, ten-gallon buckets, shut his shed, padlocked it with that new lock he finally got around to buying, and bolted back into the forest. It was Berry Season, after all.

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It was Thursday lunchtime at the *Regal Seagull Café*. That meant it was *Canard en Daube* Day. And that meant that the Café was a zoo full of duck-enraged customers, and stayed that way until closing time. Assistant Manager Flauros carried a full tub of dirty dishes into the jam-packed kitchen in order to hand it off to Dean and Wexler, who were currently on dish duty. That done, Flauros squeezed her way through the crowded kitchen, wormed her way through the equally crowded employee lounge, and made her way to the back exit, sitting down on the steps just beyond the exit's threshold. Flauros let out a pained sigh, then pulled out a book of matches and her last emergency cigar from her shirt pocket. She lit up, and groaned relaxingly as she puffed away at her stogie.

"Heya, Flower!"

Flauros almost dropped her cigar upon hearing that.

"Oh, Mister Luke," she said as she recovered her bearings. She reluctantly offered her precious cigar to the smiling, bucket-bearing, off-duty busboy towering over her. "Did you want this?"

"Nah, but thanks," Luke demurred. He set his two blackberry-loaded buckets down, then sat down beside the obviously frazzled assistant manager. "Everything okay, Flower?"

"No. Today's been so busy, I haven't even had time to set the flower arrangements." The assistant manager sucked hard on her stogie. "Christ, if Boonkha was here, I'd probably be fired already."

"Well, ol' Tigtass isn't here today, so there's that."

"I suppose so. Thanks. And thank you for getting the berries for Pie Friday, too."

"Try some," Luke suggested. Flauros stopped nursing her half a cigar. Luke smiled slyly as he hefted one of his berry buckets.

"You think I should?"

"Gotta taste test for quality, after all." Flauros shared the busboy's sly smile. "It's what ol' Tigtass would demand, after all." The assistant manager gathered a squishy handful of berries. Luke stood back up to carry his buckets through the lounge and into the kitchen where Rory eagerly snatched both buckets out of the off-duty busboy's spidery hands. Just as Luke turned to go, a damp, dishpan hand gathered up a fistful of threadbare flannel.

"Hey, where the hell did you take my pants to?" Dean demanded.

"They're in the hamper where you always leave them. Besides, it was one time."

Dean paused thoughtfully as he let go of Luke's shirt. Luke then disappeared back into the crowd of coworkers while Dean looked back to see Wexler wasn't at the sink.

Workers at the *Regal Seagull Café* almost unanimously chose Thursday Manager Steph as their favorite manager, as Steph was always too busy helping bus tables and taking orders to bother with bossing or nitpicking anyone. That worked in Wexler's favor that day, as there was no one guarding the Monstera Foyer leading to the administrative offices on the second floor. Every time Wexler made her way onto the second floor, she felt like she was going back in time. Dim, yellow light emitted by fake Tiffany lamps, antiquated, flaky *fleur de lis*-themed wallpaper, fading photographs in frames, it was a dusty, mildewy paradise. Wexler fished out a worn-out credit card just as she fiddled with the doorknob of the records office. She then returned her lock-picking card to her pocket upon remembering that none of the second floor offices were locked.

Inside the dark office, Wexler booted up the 1992 Quince MacDougal, only to discover that Dean never got around to updating or upgrading that computer like he was ordered to five years ago. That the Quince had a velvety layer of dust should have clued her in about its condition, too.

*No matter.*

Wexler jimmied open a file cabinet drawer and began rifling through employee files. *Jeff Boonkha, Dean Endao, Rory Belos, Mizia Flauros, and...* The room turned into an abyss of light.

"Miss Wexler Roger Johnson," a terrifyingly familiar elderly voice barked. "What may I ask are you doing snooping here?"

Wexler stood up straight to face a silver-bunned old woman in a dark gown glowering at her.

"I want to know the secret ingredients to the trout amadine," Wexler lied as she slammed the drawer shut. "Rory was being too coy."

Mrs. Terwilliger squinted her sunken eyes, and quietly hissed through clicking, age-yellowed teeth

as she slowly stalked towards the Quince MacDougal.

"Oh please, deary," Mrs. Terwilliger burbled. "I stole the recipe straight out of the 1979 edition of 'Joy of Cooking.'"

"Sssso, nothing special besides capers?"

"None at all, I'm afraid. That franchise has gone downhill ever since they dropped opossum." Mrs. Terwilliger put a long, white nail to her warty chin as she studied the pattern of dust on the Quince MacDougal's keyboard. "But I doubt that this is why you're here, Miss Johnson."

Wexler ummed, then sighed in defeat.

"I wanted to mail Luke a letter, for a surprise," she lied. "You don't suppose I could get it with your help and permission, Ma'am?" Mrs. Terwilliger scratched her beak-like nose, then proudly strode over to the file cabinet against the far wall. There, she opened another drawer, fished out an employee file folder, and made Wexler's heart skip two beats by clicking her teeth again in audible disapproval.

"Look at this," Mrs. Terwilliger complained as she showed Wexler the empty employee file folder for "Luke Nööguy."

"Did Ferdinand take it?"

"I wouldn't think so... Ferdinand was lazy, but he didn't seem to be the type to steal files."

Wexler skittered backwards towards the door.

"I'll just give the letter to Luke when I see him, then." Wexler curtsied. "Thank you so much for your help, Ma'am."

• • •

Luke hiked through one of the rockier forest paths, whistling as he hefted a big trash bag filled with food scraps and wilted flowers. He'd eat like a king. At least for a day. Technically, Assistant Manager

Flauros asked him to take that load to the dumpster; she didn't say he couldn't then take it home like a doggy bag afterwards.

"Hey, Mister."

Luke stopped in his tracks. He dropped his sack of treasure, scanning for his mystery guest. Dangling from a tree-branch, maybe ten feet off of the ground, was a girl in a pixie haircut and a "Mad For Mandarin" T-shirt. Luke reached up and plucked the girl from the branch like a midsummer pear. He set her down onto the needly loam, and set about gently flicking stray leaves out of her hair.

"Lemme guess," Luke grinned. "'Squirrel,' 'stuck stray cat,' or 'the perfect pine cone'?"

"I saw a big green bug," Pixie Cut replied. "Thanks for getting me down."

"How big?" Luke asked, motioning widely with his long, tree-branch arms.

"The girl held out her fist, enclosing a space as big as a large strawberry. Luke chuckled.

"It was really shiny, but it flew away when I almost fell."

"Sounds like a fig eater beetle." Luke grew thoughtful. "I haven't seen a fig eater in a long time; they don't usually come this far north."

"How come?"

"Too wet, winters too cold." Luke smirked again as he folded his tree-branch arms behind his shaggy head. "It's b-" He stretched loudly, then his threadbare flannel shirt yawned wide, vomiting forth a red wave of damp, auburn fur. "Uh, uh..."

Pixie Cut Girl shrieked, taking to her booted heels as a pair of lymph-drenched, bony arms erupted from Luke's broad-again, shaggy-again chest. Luke snatched up his trash bag of treasure, and bolted again, leaving behind his now-ruined flipflops.

...

A tall, young man with sweaty, shiny, cherry-wood skin sat on the bench at the Number 364 QuadruMet bus stop in Downtown Smew's Landing. He anxiously tapped his enormous, plastic bag-taped feet on the sidewalk as he waited for the 22 Express. The young man nervously adjusted his newish tanktop over his massive, auburn-furred chest, hopeful no one would notice his second pair of arms hidden somewhere underneath his tanktop. And since Dean forgot his change in his dungarees again, Luke was confident that he could afford the fare and transfer onto the 78 Express to Downtown Eukaia.

"You can do this, Luke. You can do this. It's just public transportation," the young man with cherry-wood skin huffed to himself. "What happened last time was just a Luke-fluke." Luke snorted.

"Excuse me, Sir."

Luke turned to his side to see an old lady in a white fur coat, holding a snarling, albino Pekingese. The young man snorted at the sight of a bandy-legged dollop of whipped cream, then immediately stood up to wordlessly offer his seat to Mrs. Dessert Topping as per just-remembered protocol.

"Pardon, Ma'am," Lue said over the Pekingese's barking.

"So gracious," the old lady cooed as she plopped herself onto Luke's pre-warmed seat.

"You headed to Eukaia, too, Ma'am?" Luke asked as he kind of surreptitiously shifted his second pair of arms. That loud mutt reminded him why he couldn't stand small dogs. Or big and medium dogs, either.

"Oh, no, I'm headed to Minjinia to see my acupuncturist, then do some shopping."

*Christ, that dog is so loud, is its mother a bullhorn?*

"Qi out of alignment?"



Madam Dessert Topping patted Cool Whippet's head to shush it.

"No, my sciatica's acting up again."

"Oh." Luke scratched his furry throat. "For the longest time, I kept thinking 'sciatica' was next to Buffalo."

The old lady cackled as she stood up for the arriving 22 Express. As the two got on, Luke whistled, blowing at his jet-colored bangs. It was fun being able to walk to the back of the bus without being ordered to anymore.

The back of the bus was nice. The seats' polyester plush still had an acrid "new car" smell to them, lovingly blending with the many hidden layers of aged sweat, cigarette smoke and drug fumes within. Luke looked out the dingy window, watching Downtown Smew's Landing transition into Oregon suburbia. As much as Luke loved people, he couldn't stand the suburbs. Too many strange trees that too many fussy people fussed too much over, and too many dogs.

Lady Dessert Topping's Pekingese started barking at Luke again the moment it realized he was glowering at it. Luke broke eye contact to go back at looking at the suburban trees. He shifted uncomfortably in his lonely seat at the sight of a strawberry arbutus. He ate a strawberry arbutus once, having mistook it for a large manzanita. Gave him painful, and painfully skunky gas for a week. Luke looked away when he caught sight of a bay laurel.

Suburbia transitioned into Downtown Minjinia. Dusty, urban-blighted Minjinia. Old Lady Dessert Topping and Cool Whippet got off of the bus at the corner of SW Argyle Street and SW Weir Road. Luke yanked on the cord, too, getting off at a stop next to a bodega.

Just as Luke walked over to the bus stop's grimy bench, his stomach trumpeted loudly. Perhaps there was time for a snack before the 78 Express arrived. Luke lifted up his wrist to check the time, and saw

just his cherry-wood-skinned wrist, coated in a generous dusting of ebony and auburn hair.

Luke then remembered he hadn't worn a watch since his last watch, a Boscoe Bunny wristwatch his father gave him as a birthday present, popped off of his growing wrist some eight, maybe nine decades ago. The first night he started changing, in fact. He realized he loved that dinky thing. That, and he had time for snacks, and he had money for snacks.

Inside, the bodega was grimly dim, and cramped. Nonfood items reeked of dust, lemony furniture polish, and detergent. All of the edible goods smelled of cinnamon, sugar, and extra citric acid, even the fruits and bakery junk. Luke mentally thumbed through the plastic packets of spices, then scanned the cracker and cookie shelves. The moment Luke reached for a bag of *duros de harina* (or, as he preferred to call them, "orange-colored wheel-things") on the chips shelf, a fluffy, brown and white Persian cat suddenly emerged from behind the other bags of chips to screech at the young man as though he tried to wrench her fluffy tail off. Luke jerked backwards, bumping into the *chicharrones* shelves, knocking those bags to the floor. The big, toothy grin of a nearby boy in a dingy gray wifebeater wilted into a snarling scowl as the screaming cat fled deeper into the bodega.

"¿Qué carajo le hiciste a mi gato, pastel prieto?" the tanned boy growled.

"Nothing, nothing!" Luke pleaded as he put the bag of orange wheels back even as the snarling boy in the dingy wifebeater drew even closer. A big, burly bald man in a matching dingy gray wifebeater emerged from behind another aisle. *Probably Scowly's father*. El Baldo scanned Luke disapprovingly, scowling sharply when he saw Luke's homemade boots.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Baldo shouted. Luke put up his big, spidery hands and gently backed away from the two.

"Nothing, nothing!" Luke pleaded again. "I was just leaving!" Baldo grabbed at Luke's tanktop with a meaty hand.

"What the Hell is going on over there?" an old, mustachioed man with snow white braids hollered. Then the old man turned towards Baldo. "Van, let go of that boy!" Van gripped Luke's wrist harder.

"Chuy and I caught this freaky bum trying to murder Gabriella and rob us!" Van shouted, waving Luke's spidery hand. "I say we give this asshole's corpse a tour of our dumpster!"

Chuy's scowl bloomed back into a big grin of joy at the sound of that, a switchblade clicking in his grip.

"Let the boy go, Van," the old man calmly repeated. "Listen to yourself, what are you even thinking?"

Luke pulled his wrist free, and hurled a plastic two-liter bottle of root beer onto the floor. By the time the trio of grandfather and grandsons finished wiping their eyes clean of soda foam, Luke was already outside, bounding down the street. As he passed the corner of SW Gower Street and SW Pavilion Place, Luke let a stray thought about regretting not getting any *nopales* float into his head. That particular musing quickly evaporated as demonic pain erupted in Luke's left calf. Luke limped around a corner and down an alley. He stooped down to dig his index finger and thumb deep into the hole in Dean's dungarees that wept stinky, blue-staining mayonnaise, and fished out a hot bullet.

*"¡Te encontré, pinche ojete!"*

As Chuy grappled with Luke, repeatedly inserting and reinserting his switchblade into Luke's belly and kidneys, Luke finally decided to burst free of his tanktop, unfurling his second pair of auburn-furred arms. Chuy's brown eyes went wide as he gawked at the sudden, metamorphic appearance of this comic book villain. He just kept staring at that big chest full of matted, blue-stained auburn fur until Luke clamped a spidery hand over the numb boy's unresisting, slack-jawed face. Luke then clutched the

boy's thin neck, then clapped another spidery hand on each thin wrist, and squeezed hard. That done, he threw the now wet, still-warm corpse aside, uncaring of the loud, messy splat on the alley wall.

"God damn it," Luke spat. Obsidian bailing hooks easily slid free of his trash bag shoes. Dungaree seams gave way as his swelling hindlegs bloated too quickly with too much painful power. He inhaled, growing taller, growing wider as he regretted not having the time now to savor his, er, Dean's pants tearing apart. He could feel his hairy, furry skin peeling off in big, wet sheets. More pain blossomed across Luke's still-widening back as Van emptied a round of bullets into the monster. Luke slowly turned around, stepping out of the sticky, dissolving ruins of his borrowed dungarees as Van frantically tried to reload his handgun. Luke casually slapped the gun out of Van's palsied hands, and grabbed his surviving assailant, freshly unsheathed hooks digging deep into hot flesh. Then Luke opened his mouth wide, letting his long, suddenly centipede-like tongue snake out towards his captured victim, only for Van to bite down hard on the tip.

Van choked on a mouthful of scorching, acridly scalding venom as he tore himself free of the melting monster's pronged grasp. Luke collapsed onto the concrete, his hulking, malforming body suddenly decaying into a blue mass of rancid, auburn-furred goo. Van ran away screaming down the street, not looking back even as he tore off all of his stinking, blue-defiled clothing.

• • •

Shopkeeper Clemente Verididas could not bear to enter or even turn towards the alley where police and that hazmat team were investigating his grandson Chuy's corpse. Not just because his grandson was murdered, and not just because Chuy died from being mangled alive by someone's bare hands, but because the stench off of the ordure Chuy's mangled corpse was lying in was just too

much for that poor old man and his much put-upon heart and lungs.

Back in the backroom of his bodega, a police investigator helped Clemente into a chair, and another detective handed the old man one of his own bottles of *agua dé jamaica*.

"Please tell us again what happened when last you saw your grandsons, Mister Verididas."

The old man clutched his bottle of hibiscus drink, fingered one of his braids, and finally sighed.

"Chuy got into a fight with some homeless guy 'cause the bum, a really big'n tall bum, spooked our cat. Ch, Chuy loved that cat so much."

"And then what happened?"

"And then my other grandson, Van, jumps in, threatening to murder the bum 'cause Van's always such a dumb *encabronado*, always needin' to be his *estupid manito*'s white knight protector."

"And then what happened?"

"Then I got arguing with that *zoquete* Van, who tells me he's gonna kill the bum 'cause that *wey* thinks the bum is some sort of bankrobbing *desperado*! All 'cause the guy spooked a cat!"

"Mister Verididas, can you describe the homeless man your grandsons were harassing?"

"He was really tall, really, really tall, taller than either Chuy or Van. Really, really buff, with a big, big chest, and really, really long arms. And really long, really skinny legs in loose pants. He seemed top-heavy, he, he wasn't ww-wasn't one of the neighborhood bums."

"What ethnicity was the vagrant?"

"Uhhh... He had a dark complexion, like a mug of black tea."

"African American?"

"I, I don't know, he had shiny black hair, in a greaser's jellyroll, an-"

"Pardon?"

"Y'know, Elvis hair, but the hair on his big chest was red, like he was hidin' a big dog or a tiger under his shirt, and he, he had a really big nose, like Julius Caesar or Tecumseh."

"I see. How old was he? Could you tell?"

"I, uh, I don't know..."

• • •

In another alley about forty-two and a half blocks way from his grandfather's bodega, Van Nanchez, still naked, climbed up a fire escape and into his girlfriend's apartment. Van wanted to hide at his mother's apartment, but police were already there by the time he approached it, and more importantly, he was in no proper state of mind to talk or think about what happened to his poor Chuyito.

Van slunk about in that dark apartment like some exhausted beast that was just too frazzled to bother searching for the light switch. Thank God Nancy was working late that day. He was in no state of mind to explain to her what happened, either. Van crept into the bathroom, locked the door, and after, maybe, ten minutes of hesitation, flicked on the lights. Van's reflection was tallow-sallow and puffy-eyed. *Am I dying?* He touched his painfully puffy eyelid, making both eyes water copiously in retaliation. His jaundiced fingers stung as he touched them again. The rancid metal taste of that monster slobber loogie that bum-monster jizzed into him was getting stronger. Even after gargling with three and a half bottles of cinnamon-flavored mouthwash.

Van downed an entire bottle of minty mouthwash, the brand with alcohol, and assumed he got some respite from that awful curse lingering in his mouth. He scratched at his slimy, sticky, graying, swollen, swelling chest, suddenly realizing that his chest was frosting over with a thin layer of fine, black hairs. He reached into the medicine cabinet for a razor. When he tried to remember if the pink one or the purple

one was his, a thin stream of green, mint-yet-cinnamon flavored drool dribbled out of his mouth. Then the rest of the swallowed mouthwash came raging up out of Van's stomach and into the sink, immediately followed by a stomachful of hot, beige-colored, ammonia-flavored pus. Another bellow, and the sink was filled to the rim with disgorged vileness. Weakness grabbed the unwell young man, dropping him onto the floor. When Van dragged himself over to the toilet bowl for another round, all nausea could squeeze out of him at that moment was a belch of cadaverous acidity that wafted back into his sallow, suddenly whiskery face. When he sighed in wobbling, trembling relief, Van then shuddered, then gurgled, then emptied his bloating stomach three, four, and then finally, FINALLY, five more times of that awful, awful *béchamel* that tasted of overripe bile and soured glass cleaner.

"Am, aaam I dying?"

Alkai, no, no, Van crawled into the shower stall and, after another ten minutes of back and forth between catching his gurgling, burbling breath and painful weeping, mustered up enough strength to turn the shower faucet handle. Cold, lukewarm, very warm, to hot, to scalding hot, and then the handle came off in Van's wet, sticky grip. Not that Van was in the right state of mind to care. That boiling rain was what Alkai, what Van needed. Enough strength was returning to his pulsing, throbbing, jaundiced limbs to let him pull himself back up onto his sticky, grimy, pulsing feet.

Blotching, tan skin finished turning butter yellow, finally turning ever so slightly pinkish as Van ground a bar of soap into his darkening, increasingly shaggy chest. As he began singing in an off-key, chyme-roughened voice, he was too busy trying to reabsorb life energy from the hot water to notice or care that, underneath his foamy exoskeleton of fresh lather, that wispy coat of fine black hair spreading past his abdomen, down his thighs, onto the tops of his throbbing feet, across his broadening, aching shoulders, down his halfway bulging arms, was

steadily thickening into a deep layer of warm, walnut-wood brown fur.

Van grabbed one of Nancy's shampoo bottles and squeezed hard. As pale lavender-colored shampoo+conditioner went everywhere, Van thought for a moment he had Chuy's face in his hand, his *manito*'s brain matter oozing from between his fingers. Startled, Van backed out of the shower stall, shattering the shower stall door. A concerned knock on the bathroom door.

"Van? Are you okay? What happened? Your mom called, Chuy died!"

*Mother of Goddamned God, Nancy's home early!*

"My God, what???" Alkai, Van feigned. He reached back into the shower stall to fiddle with what was left of the handle. After scrubbing himself dry of lather with a towel, he draped the towel over that puddle of glass shards on the floor before wrapping another towel around his hairy waist as a damp, terrycloth sarong. A couple of flushes to the toilet, and Van finally opened the bathroom door. The young hairdresser waiting on the other side fell backwards onto her shag carpet as that miasmatic wall of ghastly, funky, escaping steam punched her square in her pretty face. Van offered Nancy his abnormally hairy hand.

"What, what happened?" she croaked.

"You fell over, *Chica*," he chuckled.

"No. What happened at the bodega?" Nancy groggily reiterated. "What happened to you? Your hair... You have hair." She motioned at his shaggy, tan-furred chest. "Everywhere." Then she motioned at the layer of tan creeping across his scalp and chin. "This morning, you were a *Xolo*. Eyebrows."

"I, I'm trying out a new hair tonic I got. Used up the whole bottle," Alkai, lied. Nancy furrowed her professionally manicured eyebrows as Van faked an obviously insincere smile.



"What brand did you buy? 'Chernobyl'?" Van winced, his pallid, scruffy face retracting into a pained, guilty frown. "What happened with Chuy and you? The police are looking for you."

Nancy took Van's hairy hand. He pulled it back, silently praying that she didn't have time to feel the gunge leaking out of his still damp skin.

"I, uh, I'll talk about it tomorrow." Van sighed anxiously. "I, I just wanna sleep it off, Babygirl."

Van waddled over to Nancy's couch and flopped onto it. Nancy smirked when she noticed how Van's back hair matched the couch's upholstery.

"You want a blanket, or are you gonna grow your own?" Silence plucked her smirk off of her face. "Honey?"

"Yes, please" came a hoarse whisper.

Nancy got a cotton comforter out of her closet and draped it over her ailing boyfriend's unnaturally hairy body. When she bent down to kiss Van's now-sideburned cheek, they both shrank away in a shared cringe. Nancy pffthted out a tongueful of brown hair, immediately realizing her boyfriend's freshly washed skin shouldn't taste like musky bile.

"Van, are you feeling okay? Maybe we should go to the ER."

He pulled the edge of the comforter over his scruffy head.

"Ww... Ccan we go tomorrow? Please, Babygirl, I jjjjust wanna sleep."

"Okay," Nancy shrugged. "But first thing in the morning, I'm taking you to Saint Claudian's even if I need to use a wheelbarrow."

She walked into her bedroom, unable to banish the stray thought of Van looking like a gigantic silkworm cocoon.

• • •

*Is this the end? Is this your end?"*

*"No, the hell it is."*

*"Aren't you tired? Aren't you tired? Aren't you ready to go?"*

*"I am not, I wasn't ready to go when we first met, and I'm not ready to go now. I will rest when I need to, and I will not be ready until I take back what was taken from me, what was taken from us."*

*"What about the price you've paid? What about the price you're still paying?"*

*"I agreed to our bargain, and I uphold my end of it even now. If all you wanted, if all you want to do is to wheedle out of me a confession of regret I don't actually have, stop bothering me."*

*"But all you've done. All you've witnessed, all those faces, doesn't all that weigh on you like a pile of boulders?"*

*"Again with the wheedling. What I've done, all I've seen, everyone I've met, everything confirms my epiphany about life I had the first time I saw Carol Channing on stage in 'Hello, Dolly!'"*

*What was that?"*

*"What's the point of life if you can't consume it?"*

*"Is that what you believe?"*

*"It's what I **know**. And until I get my fill, and until I get tired to the point where rest won't heal me, it's none of your goddamned business. When it is your business, I'll let you know."*

• • •

Nancy could not fall asleep. Van started up with that heartbreaking, wet, hacking cough, spending four hours sounding like he was trying to regurgitate Gabriella as a hairball. But every time she tried to wake him up to take him to Saint Claudian's, he'd just demur "no, no, I'm fine, I'm fine."

Maybe around 2-something in the morning, Van finally stopped coughing, and instead, started making an awful squelching sound. At first, Nancy thought he was puking or retching, but then eventually realized the sound was more rhythmic, as if someone was stomping their feet or clapping their hands inside a tub of jam. Then she realized it wasn't squelching, nor puking, but **tearing**, as if someone was digging their fingers deep into a raw chicken thigh to peel the wet flesh apart from the bone.

"That does it!"

With that declaration, Nancy threw off her covers, hopped out of bed, stormed out of her bedroom, flicked on the living room lights, and was struck dumb. On her couch lay the now-impossibly swollen, gelatinous Van Nanchez, once her boyfriend, now this big and jiggly, cavefish cream-colored, almond jelly sculpture. Nancy's heart pounded in her forehead as she watched whatever that thing that used to be her boyfriend sit up on her couch to look at her. Now, that thing was **hatching**. A tall, butter white, pus-soaked man with a big nose rose from the rupturing, boyfriend-shaped sac. Nancy turned away to vomit at the scent of the forty-thousand year old funk coming off of that hatching abomination on her melting couch. And as Luke regained his bearings, as much as he would have loved another long, hot shower, he took advantage of Nancy's incapacitating distress by grabbing her recliner to smash open her living room window. By the time Nancy could breath again, that horrible slime man who hatched out of Van was long gone down the fire escape. And her couch cushions apparently all rotted away from the smoldering, blue goo.

## "Imago"

It was another Summer Monday morning in the spruce and Douglass fir forests around Smew's Landing. Warm, human, perfumed with loamy, piny fragrance. The Westbound 83 QuadruMet came rolling down the I-290 West. As the bus leisurely made a turn in the forested highway known as the "Widow's Twist," something, a brown carcass

appeared on the asphalt in the bus' wake, as if the bus hit a dehydrated deer that wasn't there a moment ago. Except that it wasn't. The carcass straightened his long, hairy limbs, then Luke stood up on his auburn-furred hindlegs to scamper off the road and into the ferny undergrowth.

As much as Luke loved running barefoot through the forest, and despite having lived as a carefree, clothes-free hermit for almost thirty years straight, that gangly, auburn-furred beast was just not in the mood to enjoy running around naked in the forest at the moment. Call it "pique," call it "frustrated petulance," Luke's plan went bust, and he was aggravated and mortified. What was supposed to be a simple shopping foray wound up as a big bungle of death, destruction, and grief. And he lost his wallet, too. Luke just-

Luke knew better than to let his emotions get the better of him. He stopped to sniff the sultry air while checking exactly where he was in his forest. This was just a setback. Judging from the cluster of yew trees, Luke estimated he was about four miles southeast of his shed. This was just a setback; he had more packets of emergency outfits left in his shed. Luke bolted again as he heard a falcon screeching. He'd just go back to the *Regal Seagull* and beg a ride a ride from Wendy or another coworker to Cost-Fewer Shoes. Now he was two miles from his shed. And if all else, he could call Yann up on that big, big favor Yann still owed him.

Three miles past the Widow's Twist was a fenced-off bend of the Coquinas River called "Quahaga's Tears," named after a vengeful, local Klackamas goddess to whom the Twist also referred. As it was once told to Luke, a long time ago when he was someone else, the swift rapids of the bend were the remorseful tears Quahaga shed for all of the lives lost whenever she fed her children, the big, slick boulders hiding underneath the jade and foamy waters. Luke avoided the 'Tears whenever he could, for obvious and not so obvious reasons. But the 'Tears was still a lovely place to visit, from a safe distance, obviously. The droning roar of the rapids was soothing, the

colors of the dancing waters, spinach jadeite and celery nephrite, were hypnotic. Luke decided he wasn't in that big of a hurry to get home as he leanded against the cast iron guardrail. The interplay of cool spray and muggy summer air was thrilling, it made Luke's auburn hackles rise up in a big, shaggy wave. *The Hell with it.* Luke inhaled deeply, letting his hairy wicker chest violently expand loud enough to be heard almost above the river roaring.

As the shaggy-furred busboy sagged onto the railing, he noticed someone on the far side of the Coquinas. Some dumb kid was sticking their dumb little head through the spacing between the railings. Luke felt his belly fur thicken in big clumps as a defense mechanism. *Oh, Christ Almighty.*

"Hey! Hey!" Luke tried to yell over the spraying din. "Hey, kid! Don't do that!" The kid leaned further towards the rapids, now more interested in looking at his light-up sneakers lift off the damp pavement upside down. Luke began frantically waving his long, long arms. The boy looked back up to see a dancing scarecrow in a reddish brown onesie on the other side. The boy smiled and waved, and when he turned back to call for his mommy to see the funny scarecrow man too, the boy fell backwards onto his butt, then slid forward into the waters below in one fell, silent swoosh. His own warnings failed, Luke leaped over the guardrail and into the raging waters, feet first. In a calmer stretch of the Coquinas, perhaps about two miles downstream from Quahaga's Tears, a sopping wet scarecrow man, covered in chin to elongated toes in sopping wet, dark auburn fur, majestically rose out of the river, carrying the boy he rescued from being eaten by the boulder children. Luke laid the still, wet boy on a sun-warmed rock, and realized the blue-faced kid wasn't breathing. He placed his palm on the boy's shirt, over Boscoe Bunny's head, and felt a faint heartbeat. He touched the boy's pudgy face, and had a vision of Chuy. Luke put the tips of his right index and middle fingers to the boy's belly, pressing ever so gently down, making the boy thrash and cough while spitting up a lot of river water and his half-

digested lunch. Luke casually turned the coughing, retching boy onto his side as the boy continued puking up, from the stench of things, a beef-flavored vegan pastrami sandwich with extra caramelized onions and a side of fava beans. Luke tried to remember what he was like when he was a kid.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked as he wiped the boy's chin with his spidery fingers and a leaf. A woozy grunting. Luke picked the boy up in one hand, tucking the still woozy thing in soggy clothes firmly under his long arm, and walked away from the river edge.

"Hey, Mister Scarecrow Man," the boy said as Luke continued to carry him under a still damp, furry arm. "Uh, thanks a lot for saving me, but I can walk by myself."

"Nothing doing, kid," Luke replied as he shifted the boy to under his other arm. "The trouble I went through to get you, I should just take you home with me."

"Wait, what?"

"It's a joke, jeez." Luke scraped at the hair still plastered against his forehead. "But seriously, the path I know back to Quahaga's Tears is a steep climb, and I don't want you getting hurt again."

"Oh, I guess you're right, then, Mister Scarecrow Man."

"Call me 'Luke,' kid." He picked up his pace as he scrambled up a mossy rock pile. "What's your name, kid?"

"Ravah."

"That's a nice name." The Tears' roaring came back into ear's view. "So, you like Boscoe, eh?"

"Yeah, he's great. I like Ganderville, better, Mister Luke Man."

Luke stopped at the end of the great log bridge he was scaling, threw back his shaggy, still wet head and howled into the forest.

"OOOOOweeee!!! Ganderville? That dumb bird's a shrieking riot! Didja see 'Duck, Duck, Moose!'"

"I watched 'Duck, Duck, Moose!' twenty-three times in a row. Then Mommy said to watch something else, or she'd set fire to the FlixFlix Box again."

"Ha! I watched in the theater five times, then the manager threw me out!"

"'Cause you didn't pay for a ticket?"

"...Yeah... I nnnn didn't... pay..."

The two came to a vast thicket of blackberry bushes. Luke hoisted Ravah onto his shaggy shoulders, then continued onwards through the thorny thicket. Five minutes through the brambles became ten minutes through the brambles, then half an hour. Ravah plucked a berry, spat the sun-rotted thing out, and then got handed a sprig of perfect berries by Luke. The boy handed a half-smooshed berry back to his escort as thanks.

The Quahaga's Tears visitor center came into full view. Luke hadn't been to this wretched, log cabin hive of villainy and eyesore since the staff banned him from it for that "incident" with that not-so-tame raccoon over twenty years ago. He figured it would be safe, or at least okay to bring the boy inside, though. It would be safe to go inside, after all. There had to have been staff turnover, as those grizzled assholes couldn't last forever.

"Hey, Mister Luke Man," Ravah asked again, bending over Luke's head. "Whatcha sayin'?"

"Oh, um, just a bird call, Kalapuya mumbler, *Babadookadooka dookaduuk*."

As the two exited that bay of endless brambles, one of the center staff, a burly forest ranger with long, gunmetal-colored hair done up in tightly wound buns, stepped out onto the center's observation balcony. She turned towards the bramble field, her dark eyes narrowing in aggrieved hate as she spotted Luke. She cocked her (tranquilizer) rifle before unholstering her walkie-talkie.

"Stalker, Stalker, ten-nineteen, ten-twenty-four, Stalker, this is Clyde: the Booger-Wooger is back, I repeat, the Booger-Wooger is back."

Clyde's walkie-talkie squawked back to life in her gloved hand.

"Clyde, ten-twenty-two. Find out what Booger-Wooger wants, stall for time until we get back there, then shoot."

"Ten-four." Ranger Clyde squinted harder. "The Booger-Wooger has the boy."

"Stay there, Clyde, don't engage."

"Roger."

Luke walked up the steps of the visitor center, and upon reaching the threshold, lifted Ravah off his shaggy shoulders to deposit the boy on the floor. Ranger Clyde slowly, carefully approached the two, her rifle clenched securely in her large, gloved fists, her square jaw clenched with two decades' worth of lovingly tempered wrath. Luke's topaz eyes watered as he struggled to keep them from rolling back into his head. He forced a polite smile as he placed a spidery paw onto Ravah's shoulder.

"Well, well, well," Clyde cawed. "Your sick reign of depravity here twenty-two years and seven months ago wasn't enough for you, eh, Booger Wooger?"

"Hello, Anita," Luke sighed.

"Hiya, Miss Clyde!" Ravah piped. "Mister Luke Man saved me from drowning!"

"How nice!" Clyde cooed. "'Luke Man' is it, now? Too bad you neglected such heroic magnanimity with Rutherford twenty-two years ago."

"Whatever, Anita," Luke sneered, ignoring the ranger's seething. He bent down, putting his big nose close to Ravah's ear. "If you're ever in Smew's Landing, stop by the *Regal Seagull Café*, and I'll treat you to ice cream and a movie."

"Wow!" Ravah began to wiggle with excitement. "You live in a seagull AND you're made of magma?"



Luke patted the boy on the head before jogging back towards the brambles. He wondered what went through his own parents' minds when he- When they- When they realized he disappeared from their world and they weren't going to find him.

• • •

It was another Summer Saturday Morning in "Old Town" Smew's Landing. That meant SE Old Main and SE Juniper Streets were taken over by the Saturday Farmer's Market. And that meant almost every local farmer, gardener, mushroom picker, baker and anyone, everyone else in the western half of the county with even the pretense of artsy-fartsiness to set up a stall to hawk their overpriced wares to tourists and other ne'er-dowells suffering from too much money in their pockets. And then there was Wendy Johnson, who, with her sidekick Deborah, and other minion-of-the-day Dean (lugging Wexler's old Radio Flyer wagon), had to go down to the Smew's Landing Farmer's Market to pick up the twenty gallons of mugolio syrup from one Frau Tanne that Mrs. Terwilliger ordered. Wendy would have preferred to save time and money and just make some date syrup with jujubes, but Mrs. Terwilliger insisted on authenticity for the 'Seagull's upcoming "March Of Flavor" week next week.

*Oh well.*

Wendy and her retinue trundled deeper into the depth of the market towards Frau Tanne's booth, which was either next to the corner of SE Old Main Street and SE Barbara Walter Way, or next to the old watermain on SE Juniper Street; hard to tell with Rory's chickenscratch writing. The farmer's market was crowded and noisy. Wendy stopped at an artisanal bakery's stall to buy a dozen salal berry muffins. Wendy was glad she didn't bring Wexler along; her daughter would have loved it. AND would have gone full into sugar goblin mode within fifteen minutes. Thank God that no one insisted on suggesting bringing Jeff Boonkha along, either; he would have gone full anal goblin mode within fifteen

seconds. Dean bought Wend and Deborah some ~~hamburgers~~ duckburgers from the *Mandarin Mallard's* stall. As Wendy munched on her burger, she regretted not bringing along Mizia; Wendy could have used the extra muscle. And-

"Luke!" Dean shouted as he spotted Mrs. Terwilliger's favorite busboy sitting at a ridiculous-looking makeshift booth made of cardboard and fruit crates, apparently selling little paper lunch bags filled with blackberries. "What the hell did you do with my dungarees again?"

The off-duty busboy in overalls and a Ganderville T-shirt scowled as he folded his long, willowy, auburn-furred arms across his puffier than normal chest.

"You're wearing your dungarees now, Dean," Luke retorted. Dean scowled back while Wendy gigglesnorted. "You're always wearing dungarees. If I didn't know better, I'd think you don't *wear* dungarees, you *grow* dungarees. And if you're always so worried about your precious deangarees, why do you keep washing them in the employee washing machine?"

"Ha! 'Deangarees,' I love it!" Wendy cackled. Dean's wrathful countenance softened while Deborah's wrinkled, deadpan face remained unchanged.

"Well, I, uh, um, nevermind..." Dean stammered. Luke snorted again, and closed his topaz eyes.

"So, since you're done playing 'LaundroMatlocke,' can y'guys stand to the side so you don't scare my customers away?"

"Customers?" Wendy asked in between giggles. Deborah finished the last of her duckburger, then scrubbed her lips clean of sauce with the back of her wrinkly wrist. "How's business coming, Mister Knott's?"

Luke scrunched his face into an uncharacteristic pout.

"I'll have you know I've racked up two-hundred and fifty-seven dollars, and ninety-seven cents today."

"Really?" Wendy asked, her sunny face all aglow with astonishment. Luke's pout scrunched poutier as he pulled his long legs up in a vain attempt to retract himself into an oblong ball.

"Ten dollars and a button," Luke begrudgingly confessed. Wendy burst into a firestorm of guffawing that was snuffed out as she choked on a chunk of her duckburger, spraying her flunkies and Luke in their faces with a mist of duck-flavored slobber and spicy quince barbeque sauce.

"Why don't you just come back to the Café and get some extra tips?" Deborah asked while Dean whacked the gagging Wendy on her back. "Besides, what do you need all that cash for?"

"Excellent questions, Deb," Luke sardonically enthused before thumping his heel onto the counter of his makeshit, er, makeshift berry stand to show off a big, red and brown-furred, paddle-shaped hindpaw. "I can't go back to the Café at this moment because I have no more shoes, AND I got mugged." He wiggled his odd, elongated, hairy toes. "I mean, I could go back, but being barefoot in a licensed eating establishment is a health code violation, and the health inspector already has it out for me."

"Don't say that, Luke, honey," Deborah consoled, her craggy face crinkling in sympathy. Dean shook his head just as he finished the last whack on Wendy's back. Luke put his hindpaw back onto the pavement.

"He's not exaggerating," Dean corrected. Wendy coughed again for good measure.

"We've been to *that* office," Wendy added. "The nutjob's got Luke's photo on a dartboard." Then Wendy elbowed Dean, who started putting Luke's berry bags into the Radio Flyer. "Anyhow, Lukey, you should've told us you were having hard luck," she continued as she counted twenty wrinkled portraits of Abraham Lincoln onto the cardboard counter of Luke's pretend stand. "Come with us to Frau Tanne's booth, and then we'll all go with you to Judi's Boutique for some shoe shopping."

"The largest men's shoes Judi's sells is size 12," Luke stated. "And as you've just seen, I'm a not-petite size 22 wide." He shuffled the money into his overalls' bib pocket. "Thanks for the sale, Wendy."

Deborah helped put the last of the berry bags into the Radio Flyer. Dean smirked.

"Have you, ahem, tried shopping at Ha Ha Hut Clown Supplies in Eukaia?" Dean finally sniggered. Luke stood up and put his stool into the wagon.

"I've been there," Luke replied. "I also found out the hard way that authentic clown shoes aren't designed to be worn on big feet."

Wendy choked again as she tried to leak a laugh. As Deborah finished her turn at whacking Wendy's airway clear again, Wendy fished out another salal berry muffin and placed it into Luke's spidery hands. The off-duty busboy popped the entire thing into his mouth, wrapper and all, and then took a look at the mugolio syrup invoice. Once he realized they were looking for the creepy pine cone vendor lady, he swallowed his masticated muffin, wrapper and all, before leading his coworkers to the Swiss chalet-looking booth on the corner of SE Old Main and SE Water Street that was manned by the creepy Austrian supermodel-looking people in *lederhosen*.

The original plan the power trio conceived was to use Wexler's old Radio Flyer to haul the twenty gallons of mugolio syrup back to Dean's car. Reality busted that plan as the glass bottles were simply too heavy for the rusty old wagon to carry. Not that that mattered, as Luke was on hand to carry fifteen of the twenty gallons to Dean's Studlybaker. Wendy was so pleased and guilttripped by this that she bought Luke another dozen muffins and a Really Mad Mallard duckburger.

In the ten minutes from farmer's market back to the Café, Luke disappeared his duckburger together with all those of his muffins he didn't share with Deborah and Dean. And as Wendy and Deborah helped Rory sort Tanne's syrup and Luke's latest batch of berries away into the Café's larders, Dean summoned Luke

to his front passenger seat, and the two drove off to Eukaia on Wendy's orders (and, apparently, with Mrs. Terwilliger's blessing).

Luke lit up like a pecan Christmas tree over Dean explaining they were headed to Cost-Fewer Shoes. The drive to and through Eukaia was the fastest half hour he had ever seen. What would have been a tedious four hour and forty-five minute slog on two different QuadruMet buses went by like lightning as the two coworkers bobbed their heads in time to the Skull Stomps' album "Venusian Yokels."

And then-

"Fuck!" Luke shouted. He got out of Dean's stopped car. Dean just looked on, genuinely stunned by the spectacle of Luke actually expressing actual, genuine anger. "Fucking fuck it all!"

Luke walked towards the empty storefront that used to be Cost-Fewer Shoe Store. The faded, broken electric sign overhead suggested that the shoe store had already died and was replaced by "Allspice Valley Gifts" before becoming Ozymandias' glass tomb. Luke raised a hairy, spidery hand, a hairy, spidery paw, and slowly clenched it into a hairy fist. Dean clapped both his meaty hands over that hairy fist, struggling and yanking on it to keep Luke from putting it clear through that dusty, flaking "for rent" sign stuck to the dusty window pane.

"Who, who, easy there, big, er, skinny fella," Dean urged. Luke inhaled, his puffy chest puffing out just a little more. "Don't need to get your panties bunched."

"What do we, what do I do now?" Luke asked, now a little unsure what to do with his raised fist.

"We'll go over to Bargain Club, they have everything there," Dean promised as he tugged on his killer beanpole coworker's hairy wrist. "And even if they don't, I'll order it for you on the internet."

"Inter net..."

The trip to the Eukaia Bargain Club was somber; Luke's angry disappointment over the whole Cost-Fewer disappearing débâcle polluting Dean's '19 Studlybaker's insides worse than Luke's more usual, more typical stench. If it hadn't been for Dean putting the Skull Stomps' "Death To Éclairs" and "Choux You" on a seventeen minute loop, he might have well have been chauffeuring a hearse to a funeral. And then they arrived.

"This is it?" Luke asked as he gawked at the sprawling building housing this club of bargains. Dean locked his car with his key fob and darted off to get a shopping cart.

"Whadja expect? Shangri La?" Dean sarcastically asked as he flashed his membership card at the clerk at the front entrance. "It's just Bargain Club."

"I mean, I grew up with department stores like MorningStar and Seers & Roedeer," Luke said as he passed by a ten foot stack of vitamin E jars. Dean stared quizzically at Luke. "It's just that, this place seems so crass."

"How old are you?" Dean continued staring even as he loaded a couple cases of biscotti into the cart. "The last Seers store in Oregon closed down thirty years ago, when my mother was in high school. And who uses 'crass' anymore?"

"I... didn't grow up in Oregon," Luke half-lied. "And stop talking like Wexler, Wexler."

"Eh, why don't you stock up? I know you live off the grid, so get some supplies, and we can charge it to the Café's account." Luke took hold of a five-pound bag of circus peanuts. "Besides, Seers and MorningStar may have been great, but can they compare to a Ninth Wonder Of The World like this?" Dean motioned eagerly at a fifteen foot tall pyramid of gallon mayonnaise jars, flashing his patented toothy grin. "But seriously, help me load what we can into the cart; Mrs. Terwilliger's 'March Of Flavors' is coming back, and we have a shitton of aioli to fake."

Thirty-two, then fifty two gallon jars went into Dean's cart, then another cart Luke got, then sixty-something pounds of assorted fancy-schmancy cheeses, then a baker's dozen bottles of local truffle sauces, and then the two stopped in Bargain Club's footwear section.

Luke picked up a red left sneaker, and fondled it longingly. A tear easily slipped out of the corner of Luke's saddened topaz eye as Dean pointed out it was men's size 8. Luke then tossed the shoe over his shoulder, almost beaming some oblivious flannel-clad schmuck as he pounced on something else, instead.

"Oooo, this is good!" Luke purred as he slid one furry hindpaw, followed by another, into a pair of ugly, blocky, mocha-tan, fur-trimmed hiking boots. "Really good."

Dean peered closely at the box's label.

"They're size 24, though," he said. "And you're a size 22 wide."

"I'll grow into them," Luke truthfully murmured as he dropped five more boxes into his cart. Dean snorted as they pushed their carts deeper towards the cavernous heart of Bargain club.

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Dean being Dean, he parked his Studlybaker near the employee entrance of the Regal Seagull Café to make unloading their freshly-acquired supplies easier and more discreet, in stark contrast to Deborah's goddamned gung-ho hilarity of going through the front entrance. A dozen staff came from the employee lounge to meet Dean and Luke at the employee entrance, taking all of the stuff, aside from Dean's share of his dungarees, into the restaurant to be sorted away, with all of Luke's goodies packed neatly into a big box for him.

Luke picked up his box, but then set it back down near the employee entrance when he heard a chorus

of loud laughter wafting in from the main dining room. He hadn't heard yucks that outrageous since the Cafe's talent show last month, when Boonkha got hypnotized into impersonating Caleb. In the main dining room, the party of twelve at the Masdevallia Table were apparently having a grand time watching and laughing at Wexler struggling to prepare an order of Bananas Foster without setting the entire restaurant on fire again. But just when Wexler was about to spill another blazing skillet, a familiar, spidery, auburn and mahogany paw clasped her rubber gloved hand, steadying it and her trembling skillet.

"Easy, easy, Dudeling," Luke calmly urged. "Don't need to flip or shake, not pancakes, not a wok."

"Right," Wexler affirmed, sighing out her pent-up anxiety. "Thank God and Goddess you're here," she then hissed. Luke straightened the guava pink half of her bangs, then made a smug salute.

"Okay, patrons and matrons, that's our show for tonight!" Luke boomed, eliciting applause from both the Masdevallia Table and the party of seven at the Impatiens Table to the right. "And remember to tip your arsonist, folks!"

As the laughter lingered, Wexler hooked her hand around Luke's woolly arm.

"Wait, you're leaving?" she anxiously whispered. Luke slipped free of his coworker's concerned, fearful grasp.

"Not my shift tonigh, kid." He winked, flashed a pearly toothed smiled, and let his already puffy chest puff out enough to almost let Ganderville take flight. "I'll be back for the March of Flavor, though."

"You'd better," Wexler grumbled. "I am not mixing all that fake aioli all by myself."

Luke laughed all the way back to the now-empty employee lounge, stopping at his big goody-box. He husked himself of his lucky Ganderville T-shirt, kicked off his new boots, piled his shed clothing on top of his box, and carried it out the door at a brisk trot.



His brisk trot lasted well beyond the town limit, through the forest, and up to that grim little patch of salal he normally avoided. Luke set his box back down, and finally sloughed off his overalls, kicking them away with his swollen legs. Then he coughed, retched, and groaned orgasmically as his hackled back humped mountainously. Luke straightened up as his already enlarged chest thrust painfully further again. He looked ahead to glower at the pair of flannel shorts-wearing hikers gawking at him in the dimming, evening gloaming.

"Hey! Fucking lookiloos!" Luke angrily hollered. "Haven't you ever seen a guy put on his animatronic Bigfoot suit before?" The two hikers shared a puzzled, muttering glance, shrugged, and continued on their befuddled way in order to leave that grouchy Bigfoot wannabe in peace. Luke rolled his head as his neck crackled and bloated while his increasingly shaggy shoulders continued widening further. "Christ Almighty, goddamned tourists!" He stroked his chest fur to compose himself. Now a little less frazzled, he gathered up his shed overalls and box, and resumed his own journey.

Back home, the now-ten foot tall Lukesquatch tucked his box of treasures into a corner of his precious shed, next to his last emergency packet of clothes, and a five year old bag of rainbow-colored marshmallows. That done, he shut the shed's doors. As he hefted the big log he used as a lock in his swelling paws, he chuckled, no, belched up a trickle of mucus. That creamy vileness formed a string from his smirking lips, and sizzled as it touched his faithful log.

*Was this wish worth this?*

Luke felt himself continuing growing bigger, stronger, even though his second pair of arms were still not yet ready to sprout.

*Is it worth being a strongman with no circus? A fireman with no brigade? To only be human some of the time?*

Luke lifted one mighty arm high, flexing it as though he were a woolly-bodied Mister Universe. He flexed the other, and twirled his log in his paws, twirled it around his monstrous, now-maned neck, then found himself pitching his faithful log into the distance. Luke grinned as his second pair of lymph-drenched arms finally began to fight their way out of the flesh of his meaty pects.

*Of course it's worth this, this power.* Luke was strong, he was powerful, he had friends, he could make new friends. Hell, he had a job now and he figured he was going to live forever. Maybe one day, he'd even get the courage to tell someone **what** he really was.

Luke stopped his daydreaming and his flexing to lope away on all six as an auburn, apeish yet insectile bear to fetch his faithful log, hastily praying along the way that he didn't heave that damned thing into yet another campsite or, God forbid, another cabin again.

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# SIX PERSONS OF ILL-REPUTE

BY JEREMY<sup>16</sup>

*"I have just attended a most extraordinary exhibition. The famous ghost-breaker, Dr. Garricalo, has of late been putting on weekly demonstrations at La Toile Theatre. I attended a showing this past Wednesday, and I could scarcely believe my eyes! Several ladies in the audience fainted from sheer fright! You really must come visit me as soon as possible. I am sure I can acquire an invitation to a more private showing that is being planned at Mademoiselle Chemois' manor later this month, and I feel we would both benefit from sharing this wondrous experience together!"*

*- from a personal letter between Monsieur Petefoie and Monsieur Descartes*

## BONESSA RICTOR AKA DR GARRICALO

**Female Human Expert<sup>7</sup>/Scientist<sup>16</sup>:** CR 12; SZ Medium Humanoid (5 ft. 8 in.); HD 7d6 + 6d4 +13; hp 45; Init +1; Spd 30 ft.; AC 12 (touch 12, flat-footed 10); Atk +5/+0 melee (1d6+2 knife, 1d4 scalpel), +6/+1 ranged (1d4 flask, 1d10 pistol); SA Applied Sciences; SQ Discovery, Metaphysical Resistance, Mind Over Metaphysics, Science (biology), Scientific Knowledge, Weapon and Armor Proficiency (Simple); AL LE; SV Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +10; Str 9, Dex 11, Con 12, Int 16, Wis 14, Cha 13

**Skills:** Appraise +7, Bluff +6, Craft (alchemy) +8, Concentration +6, Decipher Script +8, Diplomacy +5, Gather Information +9, Heal +6, Knowledge (arcana) +9, Knowledge (medicine) +9, Listen +7, Move

Silently +5, Perform (oratory) +6, Profession (physician) +9, Search +8, Sense Motive +5, Sleight of Hand +6, Spot +8, Speak Language +4, Use Magic Device +9

**Feats:** Brew Potion, Craft (Wondrous Item), Persuasive, Skill Focus (Medicine), University Education, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Firearms)

**Language:** Balok, Darkonese, Lamordian, Mordentish, Vaasi

**Signature Possessions:** Amulet of Greater Life Protection, 10 Bullets, Cat's-Eye Brooch, Chiurgery Kit, Cloak of Ghostwalking, Ectoplasmic Netcaster, Ectoplasmic Feedback Vest, 3 Vials of Ghost Oil, 6 Ghost Traps, 2 Flasks of Holy Water, Masterwork Pistol, Power Source (battery), Power Source (static collector), Ring of Mind Shielding, Silver +2 Knife

**Applied Science (Delay Poison):** In order to aid her biological experiments, Dr. Garricalo has created a tincture that allows a subject to become temporarily immune to poison. Any poison in its system or any poison which it is exposed to during the experiment does not have any effect. Range: Touch; Target: Creature touched; Duration: 1 hour / level. Save: Fortitude check negates.

**Applied Science (Remove Disease):** In order to aid her biological experiments, Dr. Garricalo has created a tincture that cures all diseases that a subject is suffering from. The spell also alleviates any underlying medical conditions that are not readily apparent (such as congenital defects) and kills any parasites that may be living within or feeding off of

<sup>1</sup>See *Legacy of the Blood*.

the subject. Range: Touch; Target: Creature touched; Duration: Instantaneous; Save: Fortitude check negates.

*Discovery (Adroit Avoidance)*: Due to the many years of field work she has performed, Dr. Garricalo has a +2 bonus on her Reflex saves.

*Metaphysical Resistance (Ex)*: Dr. Garricalo's highly trained and disciplined mind shields her from most kinds of magical attacks. This ability works like spell resistance, except that it applies to spells, spell-like abilities, and supernatural abilities alike. Dr. Garricalo's metaphysical resistance score is equal to her scientist class level plus his Intelligence score. If an attacker's caster level check overcomes this metaphysical resistance, Dr. Garricalo still gets a saving throw and her bonus from the Mind Over Metaphysics ability.

*Mind Over Metaphysics (Ex)*: Dr. Garricalo's trained mind allows her to resist magical effects, regardless of their form. When she makes a saving throw against any spell, spell-like ability, or supernatural ability, Dr. Garricalo gains a bonus equal to her Intelligence modifier or half her scientist level (whichever is lower).

*Science (Biology)*: At will – cure minor wounds, inflict minor wounds, resistance, touch of fatigue, virtue; 8/day – cure light wounds, endure elements, inflict light wounds. Caster level 6<sup>th</sup>; save DC 12 plus spell level.

**Appearance**: Bonessa Rictor is a tall, lithe woman of mixed Invidian and Mordentish descent. She has pale skin and long black hair with two distinguishing streaks of white running through it. She has heavy-lidded, green eyes and high cheekbones that give her an air of haughtiness. But don't let her looks fool you, she is rather charming when she wants to be. When she smiles or laughs, her entire expression changes from stern to enchanting.

When out in the field or working in her private lab, she dresses in sturdy cotton trousers, leather boots, and short-sleeved linen tunics worn loose to

maximize freedom of movement. She always wears a distinctive vest over this ensemble; it has several pockets running down the front and along the side, which she uses to hold her tools and other ghost-fighting equipment. She also wears her hair in a ponytail at these times in order to keep it out of her face.

Her wardrobe does include a handful of more elegant outfits, which are always at the ready in case she is invited to a ball or other gathering of nobles. She dresses to impress upon these occasions, often adding flashy jewelry to her repertoire, as she likes to be the center of attention. In fact, she loves to mingle with the upper classes and never misses the chance to attend a private party. She is extremely flirtatious as well, and always leaves such gatherings in the arms of a new, different man each time.

**Background**: Born of an Invidian mother and a Mordentish father, Bonessa spent her early days living in Karina in Invidia. After Malacchio came to power in 747, her parents fled back to her father's ancestral home, located on the outskirts of Blackburn's Crossing. She was a precocious child, but otherwise her girlhood was unremarkable.

A freak accident when she was 14 years old changed the entire trajectory of her life. One day, the carriage in which she and her mother were riding threw a wheel, causing it to flip over and crash. Bonessa was thrown clear, alive but unconscious; her mother, however, was not so lucky, as she broke her neck and died on the spot. After the girl was revived, she related that while unconscious she saw a vision of her mother floating beside a bright, white light which beckoned her towards it. This was Bonessa's first brush with the supernatural, and it kickstarted her lifelong quest to discover the secrets of life after death.

She attended the Mordentshire College for a short time, but transferred to the University of Dementlieu when she was a sophomore. She studied Arcane Lore, and graduated in 756. This is also where she first met her boyfriend, Luc Cheriote. Their affair was

cut short, however, as he died under mysterious circumstances the year before she graduated. (Supposedly he hanged himself due to a prurient family scandal that came to light.)

She continued her graduate coursework at the University of Ludendorf in Lamordia, where she studied advanced medical techniques with a focus on abnormal biology. She had a reputation for being aloof, but zealous in mastering her lessons. Her peers found her conduct off-putting, claiming she seemed more interested in the dead than the living. One professor, a Dr. Weishaupt by name, was sympathetic to her pursuits, however, and took her under his wing. Unfortunately, this relationship, too, was cut short, as the good doctor died shortly after her graduation from a lingering illness.

**Current Sketch:** Throughout all these years, her obsession with life after death did not wane. So, it was no surprise that after she graduated she joined up with a group of adventurers to battle the creatures of the night. In exchange for her arcane lore as well as her medical knowledge, she was taught how to fight with a variety of weapons, and gained hands-on experience dealing with the supernatural. The group traveled far and wide, and with each danger-filled mission, she increased her knowledge of the spirit world. She slowly honed her skills and developed her own specialized equipment to better interact with (and even influence) the ethereal plane and its inhabitants.

She soon found herself an expert on haunted houses and unquiet spirits. And, like all knowledge, it quickly went to her head. She proposed an ill-advised investigation of the most notorious haunted house of them all – the House on Gryphon Hill – in 761. Famously, she was the only survivor of that expedition, and this catastrophe forced her into an premature retirement.

She returned to her ancestral home, Rictor Hall (which was willed to her after her father's death), in Blackburn's Crossing to a quiet life. No one knows what she occupied herself with during this time, as

the locals seldom saw her about town. After a couple of years of self-imposed exile, however, she made a dramatic return. Now, she calls herself Dr. Garricalo (after her mother's maiden name), and travels the world with her fantastic Phantasmagoria Show, performing demonstrations in both public and private.

**Combat:** About town, or within a crowd, Bonessa will never enter combat on her own. She much prefers to play the role of damsel in distress and have someone else fight on her behalf. If she is encountered all alone, or her life is directly threatened, she will brandish her pistol to intimidate her opponents into backing down. She is a remarkable shot, but uses it sparingly.

In the field, however, it is a different matter entirely. When planning an investigation or expecting a confrontation, she always stakes out the area ahead of time, sets up traps in strategic spots, and plans the best avenues of attack. She is quick-witted and her reflexes are lightning fast, as one slip up could lead to death (or worse).

Also, she can use her medical training to heal herself or allies when needed. Of course, she is not above using this same knowledge to inflict wounds upon her opponents as well. If the odds are not in her favor, she will flee to survive and fight another day. To her, the knowledge gained in such skirmishes is just as important, if not more so, than defeating her foe.

### THE ENIGMATIC GHOST-BREAKER

To the world at large, Dr. Garricalo is one of the Core's preeminent ghost-breakers (someone who investigates hauntings and cleanses cursed locations of their negative energy). The Phantasmagoria Show she hosts allows her to share her vast knowledge of the spirit world, and she proudly proclaims that all her work is based on well-tested scientific theories along with her own groundbreaking research. Despite her infamous failure to fully rehabilitate the House on Gryphon Hill, the knowledge she gained



during her earlier endeavors is considered invaluable. Adventurers still seek her out to get advice with supernatural encounters, and she is even said to have assisted Alanik Ray on a few of his cases!

She always plays to a packed house, even though her show is somewhat controversial. Believe it or not, in many of the domains she frequents, the concept of life after death is not commonly accepted. In Dementlieu and Lamordia, stories of ghosts and other unquiet spirits are viewed as nothing more than fairytales to frighten little children. To these cynics and skeptics, her demonstrations are just a silly diversion that deliver cheap thrills to the uneducated masses. Darkonians, on the other hand, find her exhibitions nothing short of blasphemous, and believe she is courting disaster with her flippant attitude towards death. In the more superstitious domains, such as Invidia and Barovia, she is considered a dark sorcerer playing with powerful evil forces. To these simple folk, the persistent rumors that she was kicked out of the University of Dementlieu for performing diabolic experiments just bolster their case that she is not someone to be trifled with.

Nevertheless, no one can deny that her performances are a tremendous success and have made her very wealthy. The Phantasmagoria Show serves the dual purpose of spreading her outre theories as well as generating the funds she needs to further her research. Plus, it also allows her to indulge in her penchant for hobnobbing with high society. Rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous has much more cachet with her than dryly arguing theories with uptight scholars. (Perhaps her hot Invidian blood holds more power over her than she would like to admit.)

The show itself is a series of demonstrations highlighting the occult principles she espouses. The unearthly sights and sounds featured within inspire awe as well as terror in the audience. It is not for the faint of heart, as spectators frequently become nauseous or even faint before the show is even halfway through.

## THE PHANTASMAGORIA SHOW

She begins the show with a lecture, describing the famous case of the Haunting of Hambersley Manor. This was the first time she successfully deployed her newly invented ghost traps, thus proving her theories about the nature of the afterlife correct. Basically, she views death not as the end of one's life journey, but simply the transference of the soul to a higher, more pure plane of existence, which she calls the spiritual realm (i.e. the Border Ethereal). This supra-natural world is composed of what she calls ethereal essence (i.e. ectoplasm), which is the medium that one's vital essence (i.e. the soul) travels within, much like a fish swimming through the water.

Dr. Garricalo draws a sharp distinction between the above phenomena. She believes that ectoplasm (or ethereal essence) is the substance ghosts can draw from and manipulate when they manifest in the physical realm, but it is not really a part of them. Ethereal essence can be captured, measured, divided up, or even destroyed. Souls (or vital essence), on the other hand, are the most purified remnant of a person's psyche, and thus cannot be anything but whole. She explains this is why one cannot physically cut off a ghost's arm, and why even if a spirit is injured, its appearance does not change.

She posits that ghosts are created when massive psychic trauma occurs at the time of death. Thus, these lost souls become trapped in a half-life, existing both on the spiritual and the physical plane at the same time. (If this sounds familiar, it because she considers herself a spiritual successor to the famous Dr. Van Richten, and is very familiar with his *Guide to Ghosts*.) She also believes that the only way to end a haunting is to disrupt a ghost's connection with the ethereal essence that it is "living" within. This is what her ghost traps accomplish.

### *The Ghost Jars*

But how do you keep a spiritual being imprisoned on the physical plane? What happens after a ghost's ties with the afterlife have been cut? That is where Dr.

Garricalo's most famous invention comes into play – the Ghost Jars. These containers are made from specially treated glass and ground up metals, whose unique combination is highly effective at neutralizing the powers of supernatural entities. They are slender, clear cylinders with a metal stopper on top. At first glance, they all seem quite empty.

She presents a handful to the audience, then carefully places them in a leather case with six padded apartments (one for each of the jars). This small device is essentially a battery pack, but augmented by Dr. Garricalo to “charge” the spirits trapped within the Ghost Jars. A long metal baton with a wide bowl on its end is attached to the case via two metal clamps. Dr. Garricalo introduces this device as her “etheric attractor,” and claims it can draw ethereal essence into the material world. It is powered by hand cranking, and after a dozen revolutions or so, flashes of light start sporadically appearing above the contraption. If one were to observe closely enough, they could even see faint tentacles hanging in the air and latching onto the “collection bowl” at the top. This demonstration, quite naturally, draws many gasps from spectators.

After a few minutes of continuous energizing activity, the Ghosts Jars themselves begin to undergo a strange transformation. Dr. Garricalo gingerly lifts one out of its protective case and once again displays it to the audience. Slowly, it begins to fill with a white smoke that has an odd languor – it does not float so much as ooze. As time goes on, the fluid (it is unclear whether it is a gas or a liquid) starts to change color – turning either a deep red, blue, yellow, or green that shines with an unnatural glow.

Each hue behaves slightly differently. The red vials (i.e. the more evil-aligned spirits) are very volatile, with tiny tendrils lashing out in all directions, almost as if they are seeking to escape their imprisonment. The yellow and blue vials (i.e. the more neutral-aligned spirits) create small bubbles that float about and create tiny sparks whenever they crash into each other. The green vials (i.e. the more good-aligned spirits) behave like common water, but with more

“floatiness,” even defying gravity at times. Some people who peer closely at these vials claim to see faces screaming in pain or anger.

### *Ghost Stories*

But the Ghost Jars are not the main attraction of Dr. Garricalo's demonstration; they are simply the first step in proving the existence of life after death. After showing off her Ghost Jars, she selects one at random and places it in a bullseye lantern pointed towards a large white screen behind her. She flicks a switch on the lantern, and explains to the audience that she has specially modified it to operate as an “etheric activator,” which allows the spirit trapped in her Ghost Jar to psychically manipulate the ectoplasm they were previously charged with. As the lights go down in the room, she assures the audience that the things they are about to see and experience are not a trick of the light or mechanical gimmick.

Then the real show begins. Each Ghost Jar placed in the etheric activator tells a different story, but they all begin the same way. Small pinpoints of white light (i.e. orbs) start flashing in the darkness; they bob and weave about and then quickly combine into one large spotlight on stage. Then, an eerie voice seemingly comes from out of nowhere as the trapped spirit begins to recount the events that led up to their death.

### **STORY #1 – THE DROWNED BOY**

This story is narrated by a small boy who speaks in a high-pitched voice. The scene starts off peacefully enough, with the sound of waves crashing against the sand and the boy relating how one day his family went for a picnic on the beach. After the meal was over, he became separated from his parents after taking a long walk along the shore. He met up with some local children whom he played with for some time. One of these children dared the boy to prove how strong he was by swimming as far out into the ocean as possible. Without a second thought, the boy accepted and quickly dived into the water.

While all this is being related, the sound of the surf slowly gets louder and louder within the theatre itself, going in and out like a slow, steady breathing. The spotlight on the wall also becomes bluer and bluer as time goes on. Some audience members have reported a fine spray of mist hitting them in the face, and that they even smell saltwater air.

The boy easily swam several dozen yards away from the shore, and tried to turn around and yell back to his friends triumphantly. The waves, however, had gotten bigger the further out he went, and he became so disoriented that he was only able to catch a glimpse of his playmates between the crests. Unfortunately, he was caught in a riptide, and no matter how hard he tried to swim back to safety, he was pulled further and further out to sea. He started to panic and screamed for help, but no one could rescue him in time.

As the child goes into detail about how he was repeatedly pulled under and struggled to reach the surface, his voice becomes more raspy, croaking, as if he is choking on the water, and he recites his story between loud, heaving gasps. And so, with one long, drawn out death gurgle, the spotlight winks out and the story ends.

## STORY #2 – BURNED AT THE STAKE

This story is narrated by a young girl with a sweet, country drawl. The scene starts with the shadows of two figures sitting within the spotlight on the wall. The girl tells how she just recently moved to a new village with her parents and was ostracized by the other kids because of her shyness. Only one girl took pity on her, and the two became fast friends.

While all this is being related, the shadows on the wall pantomime the pair washing clothes in the river, picking flowers in a field, and dancing in the woods. The sound of running water, birds chirping, and girlish laughter can be heard in the background.

Then, the two reached the age where they discovered boys. And while the newcomer was initially ostracized, now that she had reached

puberty, no one could deny her newfound beauty. Soon the roles were reversed, and the narrator's friend was the one being left out while she got all the attention. Her friend became so jealous at this turn of events that she decided to get revenge by accusing the narrator of being a witch; she started several rumors implying that she was using evil charms to draw the boys of the village to her.

The sound of girlish laughter slowly fades into sobbing, and then further shifts into whispers that echo all around the theatre. Only the words “witch,” “boys,” and “enchantment” can be made out as they are repeated over and over again.

Her friend's gossip campaign, however, was too successful. The jilted girl didn't truly want to hurt the narrator, just scare her. But, since the country was in the grip of witch mania, soon a posse of townsfolk came to the narrator's house and seized her.

The murmuring in the theatre dies down and is replaced by indistinct voices that grow louder and angrier. The spotlight on the wall begins to flicker like torchlight; the light itself takes on a ruddier hue. A shadow slowly forms, showing the outline of a girl tied to a stake.

The mob brought the narrator to the village square and tied her to the stake that has been erected there. As one of them went to start a fire underneath her, her old friend leaped in their way and tried to stop the proceedings. She confessed everything, explaining that she made up the rumors just to get revenge on the narrator. But the crowd was too riled up to stop now, and they threw the girl aside, believing that she was under the witch's spell.

As the kindling is lit under the shadow of the accused girl and the flames begin to rise, the crowd noises are pierced by a loud shrieking as the narrator is burned alive. The shadow on the wall becomes blurrier, and the spotlight eventually disappears completely, with only the sound of wood burning and the smell of burnt flesh remaining. It is at this point that several audience members usually faint and must be carried away from the proceedings.



### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE POLTERGEIST PROTOCOL

Every once in a while, there is a misfire when Dr. Garricalo charges a Ghost Jar and then loads it into the etheric activator. Instead of the ghosts relayed above, a more volatile spirit is contacted and exerts its telekinetic abilities to manipulate objects in the theatre to attack the audience. This activity is accompanied by high-pitched cackling and tittering that seems to emanate from all corners of the theatre.

When this happens, Dr. Garricalo quickly comes forward and asks the audience to remain calm while a stagehand brings a strange rifle with a faintly luminescent barrel (her Ectoplasmic Netcaster) and a Ghost Trap from backstage. Then, she dons her Cloak of Ghostwalking, which makes her disappear into the Near Ethereal. While the audience cannot see what happens next, many report feeling a slight breeze or a soft nudge during this time, as if someone were quickly passing by them. With the expertise she has gained from years of practice, Dr. Garricalo calmly hunts the errant spirit, and after a few tense minutes, she eventually ensnares it within a gossamer-like net. Then, she takes off her Cloak of Ghostwalking and dramatically reappears on stage right before the audience. Her hair and clothing has become slightly tousled, but she otherwise appears unfazed.

Next, she carries her Ectoplasmic Netcaster over to the Ghost Trap on stage. After she makes some quick adjustments, the Ghost Trap clicks on, and a trapped poltergeist suddenly blinks into existence; it has yellow bulging eyes, a wide mouth full of sharp teeth, and a squat torso with long, thin limbs thrashing about in all directions.

As it is being sucked into the Ghost Trap, its visage becomes stretched and distorted, and it starts screaming. Just as its cries reach a near-deafening pitch, there is a loud zip, and the creature vanishes. The Ghost Trap is now filled with a pitch-black ichor, and faint, ghostly tendrils flow across its surface for a few moments before disappearing completely.

Dr. Garricalo will apologize to the audience for the mishap, and make sure that anyone that was injured by any flying debris is tended to by medical professionals before continuing the show. Those in attendance are usually split on whether this event was all part of the act, or if they were in actual danger. No one can deny the thrill it creates, however, and afterwards most people brag to their friends about the experience.

### STORY #3 – KILLER AT LARGE

This story is narrated by a woman of the street (i.e. a prostitute). The scene begins as she is walking down an alleyway. Instead of just lights and shadows playing on the wall, this particular spirit fully materializes on the stage, appearing as a pale, see-through figure whose face is rather indistinct and expressionless, like that of a doll.

She begins her story by explaining that everyone in the city is on edge because of a killer on the loose that the authorities have been unable to capture so

far. She was extremely nervous plying her trade, but needed to make enough money to afford a place to stay for the night. While she was between “engagements,” she walked the side streets and constantly cast furtive glances behind her. Suddenly, she bumped into a strange man.

This figure also appears on stage, but when he turns to face the woman, his form switches from white to black, and his face changes into a bestial sneer with red, glowing eyes. There is a sudden flash of red light that fills the entire theatre, after which the man



disappears from the stage and the woman is seen running away.

Rattled by this encounter, she decided to call it a night and headed back to the hostel where she was staying. But, when she arrived at the building, the door man refused to let her in, because she didn't have enough money to pay for a bed. The door man figure also appears on stage, standing in front of a ghostly doorway. The woman started pleading with him to make an exception for just one night, because she feared for her life.

Before she can finish her argument, however, the man's form switches from white to black, and his face changes into a bestial sneer with red, glowing eyes. There is another bright flash of red, and the door man also disappears. Once again, the woman's figure can be seen running away.

The woman next finds herself in the middle of a group of people, as several more translucent figures appear on stage and surround her. She is clearly scared and frantic, as she moves in one direction then another, trying to find an opening to escape. The ghostly crowd begins to close in on her as the woman falls down to her knees and pulls a knife out, brandishing it in front of her. Then, the crowd switches from white to black, and all their faces change into bestial sneers with red eyes. The figure of the woman disappears under the pile of spectral bodies, and there is yet another bright flash of red that fills the theatre.

Suddenly, the crowd disappears and the figure of the woman lays prone on the ground in a pool of red blood. The ghostly figure rises, turns to the audience, and explains that she was actually the killer all along, and that she was struck with amnesia during her escape from the local insane asylum. Only after she died during her confrontation with the crowd was the truth about herself revealed. And with that one last melancholy admission, the spectral figure fades away.

#### STORY #4 – THE UNWELCOME GUEST

This story is narrated by a middle-aged man that sounds well-educated, but speaks in a monotone voice. The scene begins with him riding home along a long country road, returning from a house call at an outlying farm one evening. He is suddenly caught in a thunderstorm; his horse slips on some mud and throws him off.

While he is introducing this, a pale horse and rider appear on stage, running in place. When the man falls to the ground, the image winks out, and the audience is left in total darkness. Then, the man reappears on stage as he unsteadily gets to his feet. He starts walking in place, facing away from the audience while he continues his tale. The theatre starts to grow colder, and a light fog rolls out from the stage and covers the floor.

With no horse in sight, the man decided to walk back to town, hoping to arrive home a little after sunset. Fortunately, another horse and rider appeared, and he tried to get a ride from them. These figures also appear on stage, galloping in place. But when the man flags them down, the rider takes one look at him, emits a blood curdling scream, and disappears from the stage.

Perplexed by the rider's reaction, the man guessed that he must have some blood on him from his fall, and the stranger was frightened by it. So, the man decided to stop by his office (he is a doctor) in town to clean and bandage his wounds first before returning home to his wife. His ghostly figure continues walking with his back turned to the audience, continuing to speak in a droning voice.

A small building appears on stage, and the man is perturbed to see his office is not the same as he left it. In fact, it looks like it has been converted into a merchant's shop. Just then, a stranger walks out of the building and locks the door behind him. This figure too appears on stage, next to a spectral door frame. The narrator taps the stranger on the shoulder, and he turns around. The shopkeeper

takes one look at him, emits a blood curdling scream, and runs away, disappearing from the stage. The theatre gets colder still; the audience's breath begins to fog up in front of their faces.

The man tries to open the door, but his keys don't work in the lock. Very perplexed, he decided to go straight home. The sun had already set, and it was getting dark quickly. As he nears home, another spectral building materializes on stage. The man looked through the front window and was shocked to see his wife in the arms of another man! He bursts through the door and confronts them as two more figures appear on stage. His wife takes one look at him, screams, and faints. The man asks what is going on, and her lover shields his eyes and tells him to go look for himself in the mirror.

At this direction, the figure on stage slowly turns towards the audience to reveal that his face is rotten and wormy. It is green and almost glows in the dark. Only after he spied this rotten visage in the mirror did the man remember that he actually died in that riding accident, and that his spirit had risen from the grave on the anniversary of his death in an attempt to return to his old life. The fog that covers the floor begins to reverse course and coalesce on stage, obscuring the narrator's face as it slowly disappears. As this is happening, the temperature returns to normal in the theatre.

#### *After the Show*

After these shocking displays, Dr. Garricalo returns to the stage and bids the audience goodnight while her various apparatuses are carefully taken backstage by assistants. Some nights she will meet VIPs backstage, while other nights she makes herself available to the general public for a short period of time in the lobby. She is sure to receive several competing offers to attend after-parties around town, and she invariably accepts these invitations. Despite the grim subject of her show, her personality and demeanor is very friendly and inviting. By special request, she can even be booked for a private performance at a noble's estate. These affairs are basically a shortened

version of her regular stage show – including a quick lecture and just one spirit's appearance.

#### **ADVENTURE HOOK: THE GHOST WHISPERER**

Throughout the years, Dr. Garricalo has seen several lab assistants come and go. One such apprentice was Sebastian Otterkirk. While his curiosity about the occult was only a passing fancy, he was highly interested in the money that could be made from the practical application of her theories.

One day, a freak accident occurred during one of their experiments, and a chance contact with the “ethereal essence” of the Border Ethereal caused his latent psychic abilities to come to the fore. Afterward, he found that he could form constructs out the very ectoplasm that originated from that plane, eventually becoming a master psionic shaper.

Eventually, he struck out on his own and dubbed himself the Ghost Whisperer (Human, Shaper3/Ectopic Adept3, NE), and he now uses his mind powers to convince the gullible that he can actually call forth the spirits of their loved ones. He heavily promotes his connection with the infamous Dr. Garricalo to further add to his mystique, but the ghost-breaker does not take kindly to him appropriating her life's work for such chicanery. If the PCs are in the audience for one of her shows, she will approach them afterwards and ask them to investigate her former assistant and expose him as a fraud in order to stop him from dragging her good name through the mud.

#### **THE GRAND EXPERIMENT**

Dr. Garricalo was not hunting ghosts for altruistic reasons, but to gather “specimens” for her Grand Experiment, as she calls it; she is seeking nothing less than the secret to life after death. And after years of research and multiple failures, she believes she has unlocked the means to live forever. Long ago, she had theorized that if one were to somehow capture and isolate the spirits of the dead, they could be brought back to a semblance of life if they were placed in a new, physical body. (This would not be

life as we know it, really, but it is not exactly undeath either.)

She calls this operation a Spiritual Resurrection, and she was quick to see the profit in this endeavor. There was no shortage of the rich and well-to-do that would pay handsomely for a chance at eternal life; never mind that another human being had to die in the process.

Capturing the spirit with her Ghost Jars was the easiest part. Finding a “donor vessel” was, of course, much trickier. The final piece, discovering the right combination of procedures to meld the body and soul together, proved to be the major stumbling block. It took years for her to refine it, but once she perfected the process, she knew it was time to re-emerge from her self-imposed isolation. Changing her name to Dr. Garricalo, she started shopping around for clients, using her Phantasmagoria Show as a cover for her other, more illicit activities. (She felt it was a good idea to start off her fresh endeavor with a new name that was not associated with her most notorious mistake.)

#### *Spiritual Resurrections*

Besides providing fodder for her Phantasmagoria Show, the Ghost Jars she has created have more practical uses – such as collecting and storing the vital essence of her benefactor. She has found that the moment of death is the best time to entrap the soul, because its connection to the Near Ethereal is not yet established, and thus easier to intercept. If this collection process is successful, while the family is still mourning their loss, Dr. Garricalo will be moving onto the next step in the Spiritual Resurrection.

She leaves the procuring of a “donor vessel” entirely up to her patron. All that she asks is that the body is as fresh as possible and delivered to her lab in an unmolested condition (i.e. with no visible wounds or blunt force damage). Once the raw materials (the body and the spirit) are procured, they both must be specially prepared before the transference can take place.

The first stage is called Spiritual Distillation. This is performed on the vital essence captured in her Ghost Jar. It is an arcane filtering process that severs the spirit's ties to its old, deceased body. Once the vital essence has been processed through several braziers and crystal distilleries, she calls it Aqua Espira (“spirit water”), and it is now ready to be injected.

The second stage is called Physical Purification. This is performed on the “donor vessel.” It is a medical process that cleanses the host body of impurities, erases any ties it has to its former owner, and prepares it for its new owner to take over. The body's blood is drained with a sanguine pump, fortified with various serums of her own creation that cure any diseases and purge any poisons that the donor may have been suffering from, and then carefully pumped back in. She also inserts thin, metallic rods at various stress points along the body, which releases any residual psychic energy that may be leftover even after death. This essentially leaves the body a total blank slate. After it has gone through all of these procedures, she calls this host the Corpus Aurem (“gold body”).

Through trial and error, she found that if any imperfections were present within the host body's systems – be it a hereditary disease, medicine or illegal drugs, or even a supernatural curse – the transference will not take effect. If this step is skipped or not performed correctly, a transference may seem successful at first, but the host body will degrade quickly, leading to the spirit inhabiting it “dying” again and the physical body devolving into a puddle of black goo.

The final stage is called the Vital Encapsulation, where the Aqua Espira is injected into the Corpus Aurem. These injections are done at several locations along the spine (at the base, behind the belly, behind the heart, behind the throat, and behind the mouth) and in a seven point circle at the base of the skull. Hitting these exact spots is crucial, because if one is missed, the body and spirit will be dis-ordered and not function together correctly.



**How it Works:** The spirit that is transplanted into a new host body retains all the memories and knowledge of their previous life, but all their physical abilities are lost. Or more accurately, the physical abilities of the host body are unchanged. In game terms this means Charisma, Intelligence, and Wisdom scores remain the same as their old identity, but their Constitution, Dexterity, and Strength scores are changed to reflect the physical abilities of their new form.

For example, if someone was a master archer in their previous life, that ability does not automatically translate to their new body unless they are inclined to re-train themselves.

Basically, any skills that rely on physical traits (Con, Dex, and Str) are lost, while any skills that rely on mental traits (Cha, Int, and Wis) are kept. All feats are lost. The transplanted mind is treated as a former member of its given class (follow the ex-class rules found in the Player's Handbook) and must meet the conditions of re-admittance before they can gain any new levels.

It should be noted that due to Dr. Garricalo's exacting ministrations (the Spiritual Distillation and Physical Purification processes detailed above), the host body takes on the features of the spirit that is inhabiting it about a week after the operation is complete. Indeed, Dr. Garricalo does not realize it, but this is a clue to why her Spiritual Resurrections are not permanent; the spirit that now inhabits the host body "pollutes" it with its presence, eventually resetting the new body to the same condition the spirit's original body was in when the spirit "died" the first time.

Unfortunately, Dr. Garricalo has still not fully perfected this process. Throughout the years, she has performed several Spiritual Resurrections, but so far none have lasted for more than two years before deterioration sets in. The money she collects through

her Phantasmagoria Show is used to fund further experiments.

### *Psychic Breaks*

There is a lot that can go wrong after the operation is complete, as well.

A successful transference does not necessarily guarantee a new lease on life. The effects of the Physical Purification only last for a week or so after surgery. After that time, if any other poisons are ingested or diseases are contracted, the new body deteriorates more rapidly. Dr. Garricalo still has not figured out the reason why, but posits that the soul transference somehow weakens or disrupts the host body's natural immune system.

The mental side effects of the transference pose another problem. Even if a Spiritual Resurrection is a success, one's mind or spirit is not made to reside in a foreign body. This jarring introduction into a physical shell that one is not used to commanding leads to all kinds of strange, dissonant reactions. Sometimes a patient's mental capacity diminishes quickly, leaving the subject as a vegetable. Other times, the patient experiences fugue states, where the body just stalls out and they stare off into space for minutes or even hours at a time. The worst adverse response is a manic state where the subject becomes aggressive and violent, or even loses touch with reality altogether.

**How it Works:** At the DM's discretion, a patient that has undergone a Spiritual Resurrections can be considered to have failed one Horror Check with the results being either Nightmares, Rage, Mental Shock, or Madness.

Dr. Garricalo has not figured out how to counteract or prevent these "psychic breaks," as she calls them, but enacts a variety of precautions to ease the transition. She requires at least a week of isolation after the operation so the old spirit can get used to its new body. The patient is not allowed to see anyone during this period, as a jarring interaction would upset the personality during this delicate



recovery period. She also performs semi-annual check-ups on all her previous patients to follow their progress. If they show signs of deterioration, she will often apply another round of Physical Purification to

stall further decay. Such treatments become less effective, however the longer the old spirit inhabits the host body.

### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: LINGERING SORROWS**

Dr. Garricalo has a more personal interest in bringing the dead back to life than she lets on. Her ultimate goal is to return her lost loved ones – both her mother and Luc Cheriote – back to life. She will confide this agenda to no one, preferring to hide her pain behind a fickle exterior, because she firmly believes that anyone she becomes emotionally invested in is fated to die a tragic death.

During her ill-advised assault on the House on Gryphon Hill so long ago, she was shocked to find that her mother was one of the spirits trapped there by Lord Godefroy. Thus, she is subtly recruiting a crew of experienced adventurers to lead one final expedition to that darklord's abode to free her spirit. Most of the money she gains from her Phantasmagoria Show goes into crafting and gathering the most sophisticated arsenal of ghost fighting equipment possible, and once she finds the right group of people, she will make her move.

Her second goal of resurrecting her first love has been years in the making, as well. After he died in 758, she managed to capture his vital essence in a prototype Ghost Jar, but at the time she had no means of transferring it into another living being. This is the main reason why she continued on with her studies in Lamordia, where she hoped to find a solution to her unique dilemma.

Her mentor, Professor Weishaupt, was actually the guinea pig for her first Spiritual Resurrection. When she met the professor, he already knew he was dying from an unfortunate hereditary condition, and was desperate for any means to prolong his life. The operation proved to be a success – for a short time, at least.

This was so early in her career that she did not prepare the replacement body correctly, and so it dissolved into a puddle of black goo after about a week.

Throughout the intervening years, she has further refined the procedure, allowing her current patients to live up to two years longer in their borrowed shells, but she is still not confident enough in her skills to risk transferring her lover's spirit just yet. (Even if she does perform the long awaited operation, she may not be pleased with the results, as Luc has most likely gone hopelessly insane after years of being imprisoned in his Ghost Jar.)



April 12<sup>th</sup>

*Good Mr. Gaynes arrived in town a couple days ago. I was just saying to Fran the other day that I needed a new set of silverware and a replacement dish or two, and was so glad when I heard of his arrival. Rumor has it that he is carrying the latest designs from a famous ceramicist in Ste. Ronges. How fortunate indeed! I had our maid Silvia go to the outskirts of town and buy what was needed immediately.*

May 1st

*The kitchen servants are acting rather cloddish lately. Their movements seem slower and one of them always drops something or other at every meal we take. Whatever could be the problem, I wonder?*

June 15<sup>th</sup>

*I dread taking meals. I've noticed a queer reflection that appears on the surface of our plates and strange lights glinting off the utensils. I get the shudders whenever I glance down at them. The servants don't seem to notice anything odd, which is not surprising since they always walk around with glassy-eyed stares on their faces these days. I've seen Tomas' puzzled glances from time to time, as well, at the dining table. Perhaps someone has slowly been poisoning our food?*

*- from the diary of Lady Amelia Goodsend of Mordentshire*

## GAJON YESPERAKA MR GAYNES

**Male Half-Gnome Sorcerer7/Thrall of Graz'zt4 / Manipulator5:** CR 16; SZ Small Humanoid (5 ft.) HD 7d4 + 4d6 + 5d6 + 16; hp 60; Init +1; Spd 20 ft.; AC 13 (touch 12, flat-footed 10); Atk +8/+3 melee (1d4+2 quarterstaff, 1d4 shortsword), +9/+4 ranged; SA Summon Demon; SQ Compelling Conversationalist, Dark Charisma, Iron Will, Low Light Vision, Spell Betrayal, Weapon and Armor Proficiency (Simple), World Wise; AL NE; SV Fort +4, Ref +3, Will +7; Str 10, Dex 13, Con 15, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 16

**Skills:** Bluff +8, Diplomacy +8, Decipher Script +4, Gather Information +8, Hide +2, Innuendo +2, Knowledge (arcana) +5, Knowledge (Ravenloft) +3, Knowledge (religion) +2, Listen +5, Move Silently +3, Open Locks +2, Perform (oratory) +5, Profession (merchant) +5, Search +3, Sense Motive +5, Sleight of Hand +7, Spellcraft +4, Spot +2, Use Magic Device +6

**Feats:** Combat Casting, Machiavellian, Skill Focus (Bluff), Skill Focus (Gather Information), Thrall to Demon (Graz'zt), Violate Spell

**Language:** Abyssal, Balok, Darkonese, Infernal, Mordentish, Vaasi

**Signature Possessions:** Leather Armor, Robe of the Inferno, Ring of Jumping, Ring of Mind Shielding, Runestaff of Conjunction, Scroll of Vampiric Touch, +2 Shortsword

**Cantrips (7/day DC 14):** At Will – Acid Splash, Dancing Lights, Ghost Sound, Mage Hands, Mending, Message, Prestidigitation

**Manipulator Spells (4/2/1; DC 14 + spell level):** 1 – Comprehend Languages, Daze, Detect Magic, Detect Poison; 2 – Calm Emotions, Detect Thoughts; 3 – Clairaudience/Clairvoyance

**Sorcerer Spells (4/3/2; DC 14 + spell level):** 1 - Disguise Self, Magic Armor, Magic Missile, Unseen Servant; 2- Arcane Lock, Knock, Levitate; 3 – Dispel Magic, Suggestion

**Thrall of Graz'zt Spells (4/2/1; DC 14 + spell level):** 1 – Black Bag, Cheat, Sacrificial Skill, Tongue Tendrils; 2 – Entice Gift, Graz'zt's Long Grasp; 3 – Glimpse of Truth

**Charm (Sp):** Mr. Gaynes can use *charm person* as a spell-like ability at will (as a 4<sup>th</sup> level caster).

**Compelling Conversationalist (Su):** Mr. Gaynes can utilize some bardic music effects without the need to play music or read poetry. Instead of a Perform check, Mr. Gaynes makes a Diplomacy check. If successful, he can manifest the following effects:

*inspire courage, fascinate, or competence.* Mr. Gaynes can attempt this action up to 5 times per day.

*Dark Charisma (Ex):* Mr. Gaynes gains a +1 enhancement bonus on all Charisma-based checks when dealing with evil creatures.

*Iron Will (Ex):* Mr. Gaynes gets a +2 competence bonus to Will saves.

*Shrewd (Ex):* Mr. Gaynes has developed a remarkably shrewd cunning. For Charisma-based skill checks (Bluff, Diplomacy, Gather Information, and Intimidate) he adds his wisdom bonus.

*Spell Betrayal (Su):* When Mr. Gaynes casts a damage-dealing spell at a flat-footed target, it deals an additional +1d6 points of damage.

*Summon Demon (Sp):* Normally, Mr. Gaynes can summon a demon of 5 HD or less once per day. This ability, however, has been disrupted since his arrival in Ravenloft.

*World Wise (Ex):* Mr. Gaynes knows the ways of the world he lives in. With a successful Wisdom check, he will know something useful about the surrounding locale (such as interesting places or notable people).

**Appearance:** Mr. Gaynes is half-human and half-gnome – a combination so rare that he may be the only one of his kind. As such, he only stands 5 feet tall (which is considered very tall for a gnome, but short for a human). His wide, blue eyes are always alert and when he stares at you it seems like he can look right into your soul. His ears are larger than normal and end in points, but this feature is concealed with a red stocking cap while traveling. He has a bald head, but very bushy, white mutton chops that cover the lower half of his face. When he smiles his whole face lights up and a mischievous twinkle can be seen in his eyes. He has a very gregarious demeanor and a laugh that is contagious. He tends to waddle when he walks, but can move quickly when he needs to.

He usually wears gray or tan trousers that only go just past his knees (because of his stature it is hard to find pants that fit properly), a white short-sleeved tunic, a brown vest, and sometimes a brown woolen coat when it gets chilly out. He often goes barefoot, but if there is snow or ice on the ground he will don a pair of plain brown leather shoes, as well.

Occasionally, when he wants to impress someone (or else is visiting a town for the first time) he will wear a red bow tie as well, as he believes it makes him look more distinguished. He also carries a short sword in a brown leather scabbard attached to his belt. While traveling, or at home in his lair, he wears a red, loose-fitting robe and carries a wooden quarterstaff (these are in actuality a Robe of the Inferno and a Quarterstaff of Conjuraton).

**Background:** The only information that Mr. Gaynes voluntarily shares about his past is that he is from an Outlander world (Oerth) and he was known by a different name there.

The truth is, there was nothing remarkable about Canon Yesper's upbringing besides his unique ancestry (his father was a gnome and his mother was a human). He was a natural-born magic wielder but in his youth he never cared to master these powers. Instead, he was more interested in pulling practical jokes on his friends and causing as much mischief as possible. Naturally, this behavior led him to be ostracized by his peers. He eventually became used to being alone and skulked around town while being ignored by those around him.

Instead of changing his ways, however, he stewed in isolation for years. As he grew older, he found that by mastering his innate magical abilities he could easily ferret out other people's secrets. He used this information to gain petty revenge against everyone that he felt had slighted him, transforming his youthful tendency for practical jokes into something more sinister. Soon, he graduated to full-blown blackmail and extortion, continuing to profit off the misery of others.

This penchant for finding out secrets soon brought him to the attention of a local acolyte of Graz'zt and he was asked to join the cabal. Ganon readily accepted this invitation, and became an avid pupil of the demon prince of arcane lore and dark secrets.

For several years he prospered in this environment; unfortunately, some habits are hard to break and he could not refrain from pulling pranks on his fellow cultists. One of his compatriots, Brale, didn't quite see the humor in such antics and decided to exact an ironic revenge. Using rumors and gossip, he surreptitiously sicced a band of heroes on Mr. Gaynes during a field assignment they were both working on. When Ganon sought his assistance in escaping his pursuers, Brale sent him through a portal that supposedly led to the Infernal Planes but in fact deposited him into Ravenloft.

**Current Sketch:** At first, Ganon did not have any clue where he was. He knew that something was “off”, however, as he could no longer commune with his demonic co-conspirators. While he had heard rumors of a shadowy prison world that was impossible to escape from, it took him several months of trial and error and careful observation to figure out that he had been deposited in the Demiplane of Dread.

Using the skills he learned as Thrall of Graz'zt, he was able to learn the basics of how domains work (border closings, Darklords). But he still could not find the one thing he sought most – freedom. He traveled all over the Core and Clusters, going to land after land, but the results were the same. After exhausting all known avenues of escape, he flung himself into the dreaded Misty Border in hopes of piercing its secrets.

The ordeal he went through while lost in the Mists was unimaginably horrifying. For countless days he wandered that dream-like realm and confronted the creatures that lurked within it. He fought them all off using every last ounce of his power he had; and, miraculously found himself deposited in an oubliette that held a ruined cathedral with a dungeon underneath. His mind was so warped by this

experience that he thought that Graz'zt had rewarded him, and that his time in the Mists was just a test of faith that he passed!

Now, he believes he has evolved into a greater emissary of his demon lord, and has been commissioned to spread Graz'zt's teachings to others. While his views became more twisted, his methods became subtler. He experienced firsthand how effective psychological terror is and was eager to apply what he had learned.

After he recovered from his encounters in the Misty Border, Ganon discovered that he could now control where the Mists transported him. In the past, he had observed how the people known as the Vistani demonstrated similar powers over the Mists, and saw the respect they commanded from superstitious townsfolk. (The Vistani, if asked about this similarity merely spit on the ground and make a gesture to ward off the evil eye.) He decided to devise a similar disguise so he could blend in better while he traveled through the land, searching for suitable recruits for a new cult of Graz'zt that he intended to build.

He believed his new persona would have to appear harmless and inoffensive, so as not to draw suspicion to himself. He also needed an edge to win the hearts and minds of the people he encountered, and lure them into a false sense of security when they were around him. This would make it impossible for anyone to find out what his true purpose was until it was too late.

One day, he found an abandoned wagon, similar to a Vistani vardo, parked on the cathedral lawn, packed with a variety of common provisions. He saw this as yet another gift from his infernal patron, and decided it was now time to go out into the wider world and gain converts through the careful application of misery and pain. His transformation into Mr. Gaynes was complete.

**Combat:** Mr. Gaynes avoids combat at all costs when customers or townsfolk are around, preferring to jeer or cajole opponents into backing down or else riling up villagers to do the dirty work for him. If



pushed, he will defend himself with his shortsword or quarterstaff, but will avoid any overtly magical demonstrations. He knows most cultures in the Core are frightened by arcane displays of might and doesn't want to bring undue attention to himself.

If he is on a retrieval or transport mission, he is not as merciful, and will use the full force of his awesome might to dispatch his foes. He prefers to cast spells from a distance or from under cover in order to protect himself from counterattacks, and always keeps moving to make himself a harder target to hit. His basic strategy is to use enchantments to charm weak-willed targets and conjure minions to fight stronger opponents.

### THE JOLLY SHOPKEEPER

To the world at large, Mr. Gaynes (no one really knows his true name) is a simple merchant who travels the countryside, selling his wares to small, often overlooked or neglected hamlets. He traffics in common household items such as pots and pans, farming instruments and other tools, as well as clothing and accessories. Occasionally he will have musical instruments or other specialized items for sale as well. He never deals in weapons or armor, a fact that allows him to fly under the radar of most Darklords or other powerful figures in the domains he traverses.

He usually arrives with two, but sometimes three wagons. These are well-constructed and mimic the colorful appearance of Vistani vardos. Each one has a back door that swings open and a built-in staircase that flips down to the ground so people can easily climb into it. Four full grown adults can fit inside comfortably, but at most one or two customers may enter at a time.

Each wagon is stuffed to the brim with all sorts of items that are seemingly placed at random. There are two rows of shelves built into both interior walls that hold all manner of toys, instruments, tools, dishware, and other household knickknacks. There are hooks underneath the bottommost shelves that

more items hang from, mostly clothing such as tunics, belts, britches, tights, capes, etc.

If one is patient enough to rummage through this assortment of oddments they will be richly rewarded. Mr. Gaynes has an uncanny knack for carrying the exact thing that his clients are in need of. The very object they have in mind always seems to appear magically at their fingertips after a few minutes of searching.

No prices are listed on any of his merchandise; Mr. Gaynes keeps all of the numbers in his head. He is not adverse to bartering if no coins are available. However, if a knowledgeable appraiser were to observe him carefully, they would find that he often sells his items for 10 to 20 percent less than market price. And, he always seems to know exactly what price to set it at in order to get a sale, almost as if he knew what his customers were willing to offer. (He manages this subterfuge by utilizing *detect thoughts* and *suggestion*.)

He does carry some specialty items such as protective charms, but nothing that seems overtly magical. If someone inquires discreetly about a specific item or else implies they are looking for something more powerful, Mr. Gaynes will often invite them to come back after sunset. That is when he opens up the back of his personal wagon and displays his more specialized wares. This collection of goods is a much more organized affair, as he handpicks what items he will be showcasing and tailors them to the needs of his clients

He does not offer this service to just anyone, however; he only extends such a boon to well-known or repeat customers. He is very discreet and never reveals the identity of these customers, and there is no telling how many people have used his services in this way.

No matter where he goes, he is received well. He is friendly and approachable, and his attitude allows him to easily fit in with his country clientèle. He loves telling stories, and is more than happy to just hang around his wagons all day and make small talk with

anyone that passes by. He seems especially fond of children and sometimes gives out free toys or candy to occupy them while their parents shop.

He arrives unannounced, stays in the same area for a few days, and then moves on to the next town. He never stays in one spot for more than a week. He often returns to the same communities over and over again, returning once every year. No one knows how he manages to travel the land without being molested by monsters or bandits, but he just waves these worries off and implies that he has learned survival skills by spending time with the Vistani.

Most people assume he sleeps in the head wagon, but this is not true. There is a *portable hole* accessible by a hidden compartment underneath this wagon that he uses to transport himself to his lair in the Mists (he protects his wagons with *arcane lock* when he does this). In fact, there is a secret compartment in his other two wagons as well, and these compartments are used for contraband (see Special Deliveries section) or his more exotic fare (see Uncommon Wares section).

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: GIFTS FROM THE MISTS

The Dark Powers taketh, but they also giveth (at least, to those unlucky enough to draw their attention). On his original homeworld, Ganon was accustomed to frequently summoning devils and demons to aid him, but once he crossed over into Ravenloft he lost this ability due to the Demiplane's unique nature.

But his harrowing time lost within the Mists was not for naught; he soon found out that he had acquired a handful of powerful abilities that are quite beneficial to his new lifestyle. All it cost him was his sanity...

*Greater Mist Summoning (Sp)*: Once per day, Mr. Gaynes can summon any number of creatures of his own choosing with the Mist subtype and a combined CR 10 or lower. The summoned creature(s) appears within 30 ft. of Mr. Gaynes and is/are telepathically controlled by him. The summoned creature remains until it is reduced to 0 hit points or dismissed (at which point it wanders into the nearest pocket of mist and disappears). He uses this ability to either summon one large monster such as a Changeling Fog or a Mist Ferryman or two smaller creatures such as a swarm of Mistlings or Vanished (see *Van Richten's Guide to the Mists* for details).

*Mist Pinpointing (Su)*: Mr. Gaynes has the ability to use the Mists to teleport about the Demiplane. This ability functions similar to the way Vistani are able to travel, but is not quite as accurate. Instead, he can fix his mind on a desired location whenever he enters the Mists and within 1d6 attempts he will emerge at the correct spot. He usually only uses this ability when he wants to return his wagons to his oubliette.

*Mist Summoning (Sp)*: Once per day, Mr. Gaynes can summon a creature of his own choosing with the Mist subtype and a CR 5 or lower. The summoned creature appears within 30 ft. of Mr. Gaynes and is telepathically controlled by him. The summoned creature remains until it is reduced to 0 hit points or dismissed (at which point it wanders into the nearest pocket of mist and disappears). He uses this ability to summon either a swarm of Mistlings or Vanished (see *Van Richten's Guide to Mists* for details).

### Common Wares

Mr. Gaynes carries a wide variety of items that would be useful to the farming communities that he frequents. He never sells weapons or armor of any kind; nor does he admit to carrying anything overtly magical. The list below represents only a sample of the merchandise he has for sale. Since he keeps such a low profile, most Darklords and other powers that be ignore his comings and goings.

A sampling of his inventory includes:

Bags / Pouches / Sacks - Blankets / Rugs - Bottles (flasks, wineskins, etc.) - Cleaning Supplies (brooms, brushes, buckets, etc.) - Clothing (aprons, belts, boots, britches, scarves, tunics, etc.) - Cookware (pans, skillets, utensils, etc.) - Dishes (bowls, cups, plates, etc.) - Fireware (candles, flint and steel, torches) - Games (cards, checkers, chess, dice, dominoes, etc.) - Horse Tack (bits, blinders, bridles, reins, stirrups, etc.) - Jewelry (bracelets, necklaces, rings) - Lamps / Lanterns - Locks - Musical Instruments (flute, harmonica, whistle, etc.) - Mirrors - Paper / Parchment - Stoneware (pitchers, pots, etc.) - Ropes - Silverware (forks, knives, spoons) - Tools (hammers, pitchforks, rakes, shovels, etc.) - Toys (balls, dolls, tops, yo-yo)

*NOTE: All of these items are available at 10% to 20% off the prices list in the PHB.*

### Uncommon Wares

Mr. Gaynes also carries more unique items, but these are displayed out of his personal wagon only, and only after regular business hours are over. Customers that inquire after these types of exotic items are asked to come back after sunset and he will open up his personal wagon to them. Only if Mr. Gaynes feels like the customers are trustworthy will he extend such an invitation (utilizing *clairaudience/clairvoyance* or *detect thoughts* to determine whether they are friends or foes).

Abber Dream-Catcher – a net-shaped charm originating in the Nightmare Lands that protects the

owner from attacks by the Nightmare Court and its minions (see *Van Richten's Arsenal Vol. 1* for details).

Ankh of Merciful Winds – a cross-shaped charm that protects against the owner against the desert heat (see *Chilling Tales* for details).

Blacker's Hook – a steel meat hook crafted by the infamous serial killer Jack Blacker (see *Forged of Darkness* for details) that slowly drives the owner mad.

Blood Seeker Garlic – a quick-growing bulb created with necromantic magic used to stake vampires (see *Van Richten's Arsenal Vol. 1* for details).

Bottle Imp – a small round bottle with a metal stopper that holds an imprisoned mephit (both Fire and Ice varieties are available) that grant the owner one favor when freed.

Coup Padre Powder – a magical powder originating from Souragne that is used to paralyze the imbiber and hold them in a zombie like trance for up to two weeks (see *Souragne Gazetteer* for details).

Crystal Ball – a glass sphere that is supposedly able to see the future or spy on others from a distance.

Death-in-the-Box – a sinister skull-visaged jack-in-the-box created by the mad toymaker Guiseppe (see *Forged of Darkness* for details).

The Eyes of Baltor – magical rings that come in a variety of options including Eye of the Unseen, the Eye of Inner Truth, the Eye of Penetration, the Eye of Auras, the Eye of the Sun, and the Eye of the Certain Path (see *Death Unchained* for details).

Figurine of Wondrous Power – small humanoid or bestial figurines made from bone, clay, or crystal that come alive and do their owner's bidding when a word of power is spoken over them (see *Ravenloft Monster Compendium III* for details).

Finger of Commanding – a bony index finger that allows owner to summon and command undead (see *Ravenloft Campaign Setting Boxed Set* for details).

Flying Carpet – a floating rug originating from Pharazia that can carry up to three people through the air when a word of power is spoken over it.

Hands of Glory – these gruesome hag-created candles come in a variety of options including the Unfingered Hand, the One-Fingered Hand, the Two-Fingered Hand, the Three-Fingered Hand, and the Four-Fingered Hand (see *Ravenloft Gazetteer Vol. 5* for details).

Hazlik's Lens – a glass lens originating from Hazlan that allows the wearer to see into the ethereal plane but slowly turns their body insubstantial (see *Tales of Ravenloft* for details).

Jeshka – a Vistani-created magical item made from the heart of murderer pierced with thorns that summons an earth elemental (see *Chilling Tales* for details).

Linen of Mummification – a long roll of cotton cloth originating from Har'Akir used to create Ancient Dead (see *Forged of Darkness* for details).

Luckstone – a blood red jewel that grants a beneficial outcome to its owner once per day.

Manual of Golems – a scientific textbook that describes how to bring flesh golems to life.

Manual of the Planes – an esoteric spellbook that supposedly describes other realms of existence that also holds the secret of how to escape the Demiplane.

Servant Candle – provides a free-floating source of light that follows its owner (see *Van Richten's Arsenal I* for details).

Shrunken Heads – these are reduced Arcane Heads from the Nightmare Lands that are activated when a word of power is spoken over them (see *The Nightmare Lands Boxed Set* for details).

Tasting Cup – can detect poison in any substance placed inside it (see *Ravenloft Gazetteer Vol. 4* for details).

Voodoo Dolls – crude rag dolls originating from Souragne that can wound someone (whose likeness the doll is crafted in) when pins are stuck through it.

*NOTE: This list is meant to be only a representative sampling of what Mr. Gaynes has to offer. At any time the PCs may buy one or more of the above mentioned pieces or the DM may add their own magical merchandise to Mr. Gaynes' inventory. This is an excellent way to allow PCs access to otherwise hard-to-find items that are usually unavailable in the Core domains.*

### ~~Sinister~~ Substitutions

Every once in a while, whenever the mood strikes him, Mr. Gaynes plays one of his well-planned and often-rehearsed “practical jokes”, as he calls them. Sometimes it is as simple as misrepresenting the power of an item by claiming it is a more deadly version than what it actually is (such as passing off his bottle imps as the infamous *Wishing Imp*).

At other times, he will give away powerful items that grant special abilities or have startling results (such as substituting a *Stirrup of Horsemanship* for a normal stirrup or providing a *Grave Robber's Shovel* in place of a regular shovel). These so-called “happy accidents” are usually implemented when Mr. Gaynes wants to bolster a particular individual's good will towards him (such as a town elder).

He uses *detect thoughts* to pick out the most likely target for these special offers, and can also implant instructions on how to use them via a *suggestion* or *message* spell. Initially, these transactions are universally viewed as beneficial by his customers. Mr. Gaynes does not effect these exchanges out of goodwill, however, but in an attempt to lure his victims down the path of darkness.

He will only make a switch like this if he believes there is enough plausible deniability for him to avoid trouble. If a customer confronts him about one of these tricks, he will say it was an honest mistake because these things look so much alike, or claim that he didn't comprehend the object's true nature



at the time of the sale. If all else fails, he will utilize *calm emotions* to defuse the situation.

#### *The Scholarly*

One strategy he employs frequently is slipping errant pages that reveal forbidden knowledge between the reams of parchment or blank spellbooks he sells. These pages hold secrets to mystical power that the reader can use to their advantage if they are brave (or foolish) enough to use them.

These insertions come from a variety of sources and are handpicked by Mr. Gaynes to suit the desires of his intended mark. If he encounters someone obsessed with gaining immortality, he will provide pages detailing the dread ritual required to become a lich from the *Journal of Mrinalithiar*. If someone shows an interest in learning dark magics, he will provide pages from foul necromantic tomes such as the *Raimnent of Clarity*. If someone hints at needing to bargain with powerful beings, he will provide pages from *The Madrigorian* outlining a fiendish summoning ritual or the *Marcusen Manuscript* to aid them in contacting the Shadow Fey.

Other pages he uses when targeting specific groups of people. If a woman displays qualities such as extreme jealousy or hatred towards others, he will provide pages from the *Tale of Ages* in order to tempt them into becoming a hag. If a child seems lonely or isolated (such as an orphan) he will provide pages from the *Tome of Terror* in the hopes of either trapping them within the tales or summoning a bogeyman to come and steal them away. For musicians, he may slip them sheet music from the *Coda al Fine* that corresponds to their musical instrument of choice. When speaking with these particular victims, he will openly describe the passages he is giving to them as the solution to all their problems. (Of course, these are lies, as all he is really interested in is leading them down the path of their own damnation.)

Even more dangerous are pages from the personal journals of some of the Core's most powerful Darklords. It is not at all clear whether he gained

these items through some subterfuge such as theft, or whether they were given freely. These entries vary from hinting at a Darklord's true nature, a revealing snippet from their personal history, to some other pertinent details that would be of great value to the right people. Some pages give information on how to reanimate the dead (Victor Mordenheim), create monstrous amalgamations of man and beast (Frantisek Markov), controlling the undead (Azalin and Strahd) or performing complex and deadly magic (Hazlik and Meredoth). By supplying such passages, Mr. Gaynes hopes to entice his target into following in the doomed footsteps of these infamous Darklords.

#### *The Greedy*

Mr. Gaynes finds those who are greedy to be especially easy marks, and has a couple of regular "tricks" he likes to pull on them.

The first ploy regards the infamous Blood Coin (see *Forbidden Lore Boxed Set* for details). On his first visit to a town, he will mention the story of this cursed currency (if people haven't already heard of it) to some of his customers in passing. Then, the next time he visits the same town, he initiates his scheme by singling out the town miser. He will contrive to have an item that the skinflint desires and while making change will pass off a silver coin with a small fleck of red paint to his mark. (It is worth noting that this is not the real Blood Coin, but a clever facsimile he has crafted.)

As this town has been primed to believe in the curse due to the rumors he spread on his previous visit, the miser will naturally panic once he notices the marked coin. He will frantically try to give it away to anyone he finds, but his efforts are always rebuffed. (Mr. Gaynes adds to the verisimilitude of the situation by casting *inflict light wounds* on his victim to generate the tears of blood effect, and renews this spell every day he is in town.)

Mr. Gaynes loves to watch the unfolding mass hysteria that claims the populace due to his powers of suggestion. If he is feeling particularly generous,

he will even accept the coin back from the miser before he leaves town as a final act of goodwill (using *disguise self* to hide his true identity).

For those that are much looser with their money, such as gamblers, he has been known to provide classic cheating aids such as marked cards and loaded dice. But there is one particularly nasty set of counterfeit coins he likes to sell, known as Gambler's Gold. (This is one of several items Mr. Gaynes carries that originate from the Black Vault of Azalin, which he has mysteriously come into possession of.)

This is a group of seven marked coins (slightly indented at four cardinal points along the circumference which gives it a faint resemblance to a four-leaf clover) that increase their owner's chances of winning when thrown into a pot of money. If used judiciously, the owner of these coins can win great sums of money, but sooner or later they will overplay their hand. When this happens, it invariably leads to an argument with their companions who accuse the owner of cheating. These confrontations usually end with a severe beating for the owner and their ill-gotten gains split amongst the rest of the game's participants.

**Gambler's Gold:** For every wager that the Gambler's Gold is used in, there is a 5% cumulative increase in the owner's win rate. This percentage increases after each round of a game or upon the completion of the particular event that is being bet on. There are two curses that go along with this, however. A portion of the winnings equal to the final win rate will disappear within 24 hours after the gold's first use (i.e. if a gambler ends the night with his success rate standing at 50% then the following day 50% of his earnings will disappear).

In addition, the owner will find it increasingly difficult to pass up any opportunity to participate in games of chance or gentlemanly wagers, no matter how dangerous or outrageous they are. When presented with such an invitation, the owner must make a DC 18 Will save in order to avoid placing a wager. This

will save increases by 2 with each additional use of the Gambler's Gold in a game of chance.

(This leads to a never-ending spiral of betting, which forces the user to rely more and more on the Gambler's Gold to win.) This effect lasts for 7 days after the items' last use.

### *The Meek and the Mean*

Another group Mr. Gaynes takes special interest in are bullies and their victims, whether they be adults or children. He believes that these individuals are the best candidates to recruit into his cult.

He is not above playing both sides of a conflict. Thus, he will arm both the local bullies and their unfortunate victims with opposing items at the same time. He regularly probes his customers to see who could benefit from a subtle nudge in the "right" direction. He will appeal to bullies' sense of cruelty, saying his wares will enhance their practical jokes, or spread their power over more people. His pitch to victims is just as simple, as he promotes his wares as giving them an advantage over their tormentor. Then, he sits back and watches as the feud escalates; he loves seeing the lives ruined by the fall-out of these covert battles for control.

He does this over multiple visits, so as to slowly foster ill feelings and ensure the blame for these skirmishes is not cast on him. The favors he sells start off innocently enough; he recommends using some Sneezing Powder to one person, then maybe offers a Stinging Ring (i.e. a joy buzzer) as a free gift to someone else. The next time he shows up, he escalates to selling smoke or stink bombs to one side, and itching powder to the other.

After being significantly primed in such a way, his final contributions include more dangerous items with better offensive capabilities. These items require more stealth and planning in their execution, which Mr. Gaynes is happy to provide suggestions for. Dust of Drowsiness can be used to knock out an opponent. Flight Powder can be used to escape frightening or dangerous situations (it functions as

the *pass without trace* spell). Nausea Pills can be used to incapacitate a foe for a short period of time when mixed with their food. And Witchling Powder can be used to change someone's appearance so they can impersonate their foe and ruin their reputation, or gain access to compromising personal information and items within their target's home.

If anyone ever seeks to find the source of all these “practical jokes” and traces them back to Mr. Gaynes, he will scoff at any accusations levied at him. After all, he can't dictate how others will use his wares, can he?

#### *The Brazen and the Craven*

Mr. Gaynes also likes to target adventurers when the opportunity presents itself. His usual tactic is to provide them with useful tools to aid in their hunt against creatures of the night, then after he has earned their trust he pulls a switcheroo that has deadly results. He also preys upon those heroes who are just starting out and are full more of bravado than courage. The shopkeeper is happy to provide plenty of shortcuts to these individuals so they won't have to put their lives on the line, but can still gain the glory and adoration they desire. While most of the items below have been manufactured to aid heroes in their quest for justice, there is nothing Mr. Gaynes gets his hands on that he cannot twist into something more devious and destructive.

Animal Claws (VRA) – These are special brass knuckles with talons that extend over the fist. They come in a variety of forms such as a Bearclaw, Catclaw, and Wolfclaw. Mr. Gaynes provides these items to unscrupulous adventurers that want to gain fame and fortune by leading a false werebeast hunt.

Animal Paws (VRA) – These are amulets that protect the wearer from the approach of certain species of wild animal. They come in a variety of forms such as a Bearpaw, Catpaw, and Wolfpaw. Mr. Gaynes provides these items to less skilled adventurers in order to give them a false sense of confidence.

Crypt Locks (VRA) & Knock Keys (RLDMG) – These locks and keys can be used by adventurers to alternatively lock a creature in a crypt or to open up a path through a particularly hazardous lair. After Mr. Gaynes has already gained the trust of an adventuring party, he will slip them a malfunctioning version of these devices. The Crypt Lock he provides will short out after a while, allowing whatever creature has been imprisoned to escape and further ravage the countryside (which the heroes will then be blamed for). The Knock Key he provides will only have a few charges left, forcing a group to flee while only halfway through a dangerous dungeon and then be seen as cowards by the locals.

Harness Lantern (VRA) vs. Beacon of Ill Omen (RLDMG) – This is a modified bullseye lantern that can focus a cone of light out to 60 ft. away. Mr. Gaynes switches this item out with a similar looking lantern that acts the same but surreptitiously attracts supernatural creatures so the party is attacked when they are least prepared to defend themselves.

Healing Salve vs. Revolting Unguent (RLDMG) – Mr. Gaynes provides a pot half-filled with Healing Ointment and half-filled with Revolting Unguent. At first everything will seem fine to the heroes that use this item, but when they need its healing powers the most it will turn against them. Mr. Gaynes loves using this ploy because it gives him built-in plausible deniability by saying that the oil must have expired without his knowledge if he is ever confronted.

Herbal Candles (VRA) – This ruse functions the same way as the Healing Salve substitution. The top half of these candles is filled with the specially requested herbs, while the bottom half only holds harmless placebos. Thus, the longer the candles are used, the closer to failure the group gets. It is Mr. Gayne's aim to make the heroes defenseless during the penultimate encounter with their intended foe.

Silver Amulet of the Beast (VRA) vs. Ivory Amulet of the Beast (VRA) – This necklace prevents the transformation of an infected lycanthrope into its



bestial or hybrid form. Mr. Gaynes switches this item out with the Amulet of the Beast (Ivory) which instead inflicts the transformation into its bestial or hybrid form upon an infected lycanthrope. Since some hunters have acquired this dread disease during their adventures, he loves the idea of seeing them turn on their compatriots when their next trigger occurs instead of enjoying the safety which they expected to buy.

### *Special Deliveries*

Mr. Gaynes is extremely good at acquiring hard-to-find items, and will take special requests if the price is right. In fact, he has even been hired by several Darklords to complete secret errands. While Mr. Gaynes and the Darklords may not understand each other's true natures, both can sense an evil kindred spirit in each other. Most often these exchanges result in Mr. Gaynes being able to travel through their respective domains unmolested. At other times, he will only ask for information.

Mr. Gaynes uses a vast network of agents and informants that serve as his eyes and ears when he needs to track down specific items. Most times, if an object is in a hard to reach or dangerous location he will first send in an expendable henchman or summoned monster. If that is not feasible, or his minions fail in their mission, he will gather as much information about the situation as he can and venture into the dungeon himself to retrieve it.

### **ADVENTURE HOOK: COLLECTIONS OF EVIL INTENT**

At the DM's discretion, Mr. Gaynes could be caught smuggling the following groups of items at the request of a mysterious benefactor and thus serve as an introduction for PCs into the following adventures...

The Book of the Requiem, a Crystal Skull, or a Death Shard – these objects can be used to recreate, or perhaps improve upon, the Requiem (see *Grim Harvest* series for details).

Ebondust, a Shading Candle, a Shadow Sack, or a Silver Sickle – these Tools of Transcendence can be used by the Shadow Fey, or perhaps someone who wants to copy them, in abducting mortals (see *The Shadow Rift* for details).

Canoptic Thought Jars, the Soul Coffin, or the Staff of Set – these items can be used to trap, or perhaps resurrect, the powerful priestess known as Sachmet or some other powerful ancient dead (see *The Awakening* for details).

### **TRUE CALLING**

Mr. Gaynes is more than just an agent of chaos; there is a subtle method to his madness. He is seeking recruits to spread the Cult of Graz'tz in the Land of the Mists and he uses the majority of his “practical jokes” as tests to see if a target is worthy of joining him in this endeavor.

When he first arrives at a new town he will use *detect thoughts* on his customers to ferret out likely candidates, then over several visits he slowly grooms them and leads them down the path of corruption. He is extremely adept at gaining people's trust, presenting a sympathetic ear to anyone who approaches him. As stated above, he chooses his victims wisely, targeting those who already have personality faults that can be taken advantage of – bullies who want to feel important, gluttons who want an easy life, the jilted lover that wants revenge, etc.

At first, Mr. Gaynes will provide his mark with an item that seems beneficial in order to gain their trust. If the individual proves corruptible, Mr. Gaynes will contrive to put a much more powerful (and deadly) item in their hands, promising to give them their “heart's desire” if they follow his instructions. If he senses that the target's heart grows more evil after using these dark gifts, then Mr. Gaynes knows that they will be a good candidate to become a Thrall of Graz'tz. If a person proves to be too weak-willed or faint of heart, however, then he will cut them loose



by providing them with one of his more lethal substitutions outlined above.

He has a number of novel ways to communicate and keep tabs on those he takes an interest in. He utilizes spells such as *message* or *suggestion* to contact his protégés and provide instructions on how to operate the items he gives them. Or, for particularly favored individuals, he will provide a *mirror of sending* so he can hold private conversations with them in their own home.

If his dupe passes the many tests he puts them through, the next time Mr. Gaynes comes to town he will reveal his true nature to them, along with displaying the magical might he has been granted by his worship of Graz'zt. Then, he will invite them back to his oubliette, promising them powers beyond their dreams. If they accept, they are both transported to the abandoned church and Mr. Gaynes puts them through the Hollow Feast ritual. (If they balk or otherwise refuse, he will not hesitate to kill them on the spot.)

#### *A Fiendish Ritual*

One of the most horrific rituals practiced by the cult of Graz'zt is the Hollow Feast. This hideous rite of passage is used when a worshiper of Graz'zt wants to become one of the Dark Prince's thralls. The worshiper to be cleansed is affixed nude to an iron frame by a number of hooks and chains. They are then left to fast for several days, during which time they must recite various sacred prayers to the Dark Prince in which they ask for his benediction.

Mr. Gaynes practices a modified form of this ritual in the basement of the abandoned church that he now calls home. Whenever he entices a potential apprentice to join him, he will give them a short tour of the oubliette, then drug them when they share their first meal. When the apprentice wakes up, they find themselves imprisoned as described above. Mr. Gaynes appears before them and goes into great detail about what to expect from the coming ceremony and the great powers that will be gained by it.

Once a day, Mr. Gaynes visits the prisoner to give them a few sips of water, but during this time, they are allowed no food. Each morning as the fast progresses, Mr. Gaynes tightens the hooks and chains that bind the initiate (inflicting 2d6 points of damage), and each evening they make a DC 30 Charisma check to determine if they attracted Graz'zt's attention. The acolyte gains a bonus to this roll equal to the number of days that they have been fasting. Once successful, Graz'zt notices and sends one of his minions to bless the worshiper. This minion is typically a half-fiend of some sort.

It should be noted that not even the demon lord himself can pierce the dimensional veil placed over the Demiplane of Dread, so it is actually the Dark Powers (in the guise of the Mists) that Mr. Gaynes and his apprentice are courting. And when this foul ceremony finally draws their attention, instead of a fiend, a mist weird (for men) or a mist ferryman (for women) is summoned to complete the pact. This final segment of the Hollow Feast involves the summoned creature attacking the prisoner and inflicting 1d6 points of damage with their weapon of choice. The number of attacks are equal to the number of days they have spent fasting before they were deemed "cleansed".

After the rites are complete, if they have not been driven insane or killed by the experience, the acolyte is deemed ready to join Mr. Gaynes as a full-fledged member of the cult of Graz'zt (or at least his version of it). The new cultist is sent off to wherever the Mists carry them and are charged with setting up their own base of operations where they serve as spies, henchmen, and missionaries for Mr. Gaynes, helping him to spread the influence of their shared patron in whatever way they can.

#### **ADVENTURE HOOK: GENTLEMANLY PURSUITS**

Through his network of spies and moles, Mr. Gaynes has recently learned of the existence of the incubus known as the Gentleman Caller. The appearance of a demon in this Demiplane interests him greatly, and he desperately wants an audience with it.

(From the reports, Mr. Gaynes falsely believes that the demon has a way to travel into and out of Ravenloft.) He has tasked all of his minions to gather as much information as possible about this powerful figure. If this meeting were ever to happen, Mr. Gaynes will surely discover that the Gentleman Caller is just as trapped as he is. Still, it is likely that he would attempt to join forces with and aid the incubus in his scheme to escape by siring half-fiend through the Demiplane. At the DM's discretion, Mr. Gayne's knowledge of this plan could be discovered by the PCs in order to introduce the Gentleman Caller and his machinations into their campaign.

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*"Come one... Come all... See the amazing wonders I have collected from around the world – six spectacular specimens – for your viewing pleasure! Be the first amongst your friends to discover the exotic Rajian Mermaid as she dances seductively underneath the waves. It's a once in a lifetime experience that I promise you will never forget! And that's just one example of the fantastic freaks and marvelous misfits that I have to show you..."*

*- Pitch for Professor Harkniss'  
Extraordinary Exhibitions*

## CYRUS MUNBAR AKA PROFESSOR HARKNISS

**Male Human Bard4/Propagandist5:** CR 9; SZ Medium Humanoid (6 ft. 1 in.); HD 4d6 +5d6 + 9; hp 51; Init +1; Spd 30 ft.; AC 12 (touch 12, flat-footed 10); Atk +6/+1 melee (1d6+1 knife) +7/+2 ranged (1d4+2 whip); SA n/a; SQ Confidant, Information Dissemination, Intuition, Psychological Curiosity, Sense Group Dynamics, Weapon and Armor Proficiency (Simple); AL CN; SV Fort +2, Ref +5, Will +8; Str 12, Dex 13, Con 11, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 16

**Skills:** Animal Handling +3, Appraise +6, Bluff +7, Concentration +3, Diplomacy +5, Disguise +4, Forgery +5, Gather Information +8, Handle Animal +4, Innuendo +4, Knowledge (arcana) +3, Knowledge (local) +4, Knowledge (nature) +3, Knowledge (Ravenloft) +4, Listen +6, Perform (oratory) +6, Profession (showman) +6, Sense Motive +6, Sleight of Hand +5, Use Magic Device +3, Use Rope +2

**Feats:** Diligent, Hearthlore, Machiavellian, Mesmerizing

**Languages:** Balok, Darkonese, Mordentish, Vaasi

**Signature Possessions:** Amulet of Natural Armor, Bowler Hat, Knife, Personal Oasis, Potion of Bull's Strength, Ring of Animal Friendship, Ring of Water Breathing, Rope of Climbing, +1 Whip

**Confidant (Ex):** Munbar's natural intuition and charisma make him someone who can draw confidences from people. A Charisma check with a +1 bonus per class level determines how successful he is at eliciting the target's secrets. A DC for this check varies based on the situation.

**Information Dissemination (Ex):** By combining this talent with his other skills, Munbar can put a spin on news and events to manipulate how people interpret those events. This ability also gives him a sense of timing as to when to release certain news in order to achieve the desired reaction. No ability check is needed for this skill to be used.

**Intuition (Ex):** Munbar gains a +1 per class level to all Gather Information and Sense Motive.

**Psychological Curiosity (Ex):** Munbar has developed an overweening curiosity about what motivates people. When presented with a new area or group of people, he feels an overwhelming need to puzzle out the dynamics of the situation. A Will save (DC 13) is required to overcome this urge.

**Sense Group Dynamics (Ex):** Munbar has become adept at determining the dynamics of any group or situation that he observes for one hour. He can determine who (if anyone) leads the group as well as

who would challenge the group's leader for their place. Munbar adds his Intelligence bonus to Diplomacy checks when dealing with a group so observed.

**Appearance:** Cyrus Munbar is a tall, stocky middle-aged fellow with light brown skin. His most notable feature is his large, bulbous nose that always has a pink tinge to it. In order to draw attention away from this (or perhaps accentuate it), he has cultivated a dark, luxurious handlebar mustache, that protrudes a full two inches out from his cheeks. He wears his hair short, and most of the time he covers his head with a felt bowler hat

He uses his clothing to draw attention to himself wherever he goes, and his “work suit”, as he calls it, never fails to leave a distinct impression. Along with his bowler hat, he wears a formal tuxedo coat with a long, tapering tail, that very nearly hangs all the way to the ground. He wears a silk vest underneath this, along with white button-up, long-sleeved shirts. He finishes out this ensemble with cotton riding breeches and black leather boots that come up to his knees. He chooses bright hues such as greens, blues, and purples for his outerwear, and always matches these colors between his coat, vest, and pants.

His flamboyance carries over to his speech and movements as well. He has a confident stride and a sonorous voice that easily commands the attention of a crowd. When he speaks, he makes exaggerated sweeping motions with his arms. He can never fully stand still, either, as he darts from one person to the next when working a crowd.

**Background:** Cyrus Munbar is a scion of a petty Darkonese noble family that resides in the Jagged Coast region. In his younger days he was an avid sportsman – fishing, hunting, and fisticuffs were among his favorite pastimes. He was extremely competitive, always trying to outshine his peers in any endeavor he joined. He also loved betting on the outcomes of the various contests he participated in, and never failed to boast about his success afterwards.

His athleticism was cut short, however, when he broke his collarbone and tore his right rotator cuff after a nasty fall while horseback riding. These injuries led Munbar to be prematurely sidelined, but his competitive nature was now channeled into wagering and other forms of gambling. He soon turned to drinking as well, endeavoring to forget about all the prestige he had lost due to this freak accident.

Eventually, Munbar's parents died, leaving him a modest inheritance. But his lifestyle was not sustainable for long, and he soon fell on hard times. After his money ran out, he landed on the front doorstep of the estate of his rich uncle Cyrus’ (whom he was named after). His uncle took him in, but could not deter his nephew's destructive behavior. They argued frequently, but the uncle had long ago promised his brother that he would look after his son when he was gone, and so could never bring himself to throw his nephew out on his ear.

Munbar, meanwhile, was happy to continue his carousing and mooched off his uncle for several more years. He hobnobbed with both drunken aristocrats and the common rabble, wherever the good times led him. While it's true he was known to renege on a few bets now and then when money was tight, he usually made up for it by buying rounds at the local tavern whenever he hit it big. During these bountiful times, he loved regaling the crowd with stories of his past glory days. As such, he gained a reputation as a boor, but his gregariousness generally kept him in his companions' good graces.

Then, the day he had been patiently waiting for finally arrived – his uncle, too, passed away and Munbar came into full possession of his inheritance.

**Current Sketch:** Unfortunately, Munbar found that his uncle's coffers had been all but drained, and there wasn't enough left to keep him comfortable for long. Within months, he was penniless once again, with nothing left of his fortune except a crumbling estate.

He discovered that his uncle had been an amateur collector of oddities, as all kinds of disparate items could be found lying around the estate. There was even a small menagerie of exotic animals kept on the grounds. To Munbar, these were just so much clutter to be gotten rid of. For a time, he occupied himself with going through the various bric-à-brac, hoping to find something that he could sell at a profit.

One day while wandering the yard, he encountered Artesia, the *de facto* zookeeper (she was the daughter of the original zookeeper and took over the position once her father passed away). She regaled him with stories of the beasts she cared for and informed him that most of the animals had been sold off by his uncle in order to fund Munbar's escapades. The charm she displayed and the passionate way she spoke of the animals struck Munbar deeply. He visited her often after that, eventually taking her into his confidence and revealing the dire predicament he found himself in.

Artesia was sympathetic to his plight, and it was actually her idea to put together the scattered items of his uncle's amateur museum and make a traveling exhibit out of them. Munbar readily agreed to the idea, and decided to create fabulous stories about the items' origins as well as a new identity for himself. (He preferred not to have his old reputation follow this new endeavor and so came up with the Professor Harkniss persona.) He began his traveling roadshow several years ago and has entertained audiences all over the Core. He has acquired a few more exhibits along the way, but he is always on the lookout for the next big thing that will draw people in.

**Combat:** Munbar is used to working with his hands. His myriad experiences exploring the wilder parts of the world have made him competent in any outdoor environment, and he is a master animal handler. He can use his whip precisely, and knows just the right amount of force to put behind his blows. While this is his preferred method of attack, he can still use his hands if he has to. He will only use his knife as a

weapon as a last resort, as he carries it more for utility than anything else.

He uses the information he has gathered and his highly developed social skills to gain allies if needed or to manipulate how and where a confrontation will take place, always making sure the odds are in his favor if possible. He is not above calling off an argument or use a bluff to end a fight, figuring he can return to it later if necessary. He rarely does this, though. He will try to manipulate others to do his dirty work for him if pressed, but also knows the value of standing his ground. His favorite tactic is to target a group's leader and focus his attention on defeating them in order to cow the followers.

### THE BOMBASTIC SHOWMAN

To the world at large, Professor Harkniss is the owner of a well-known sideshow attraction that boasts fantastic exhibitions of the strange and unusual. He travels all over the Core and beyond, bringing a brief respite of amusement to the otherwise grim day-to-day life of most of the Demiplane's inhabitants.

Not much is known about his past, as he is remarkably close-lipped about his personal affairs. And while his behavior can be flamboyant at times, he has a reputation as a straight-shooter who always deals fairly with everyone he meets. For all intents and purposes, he is exactly what he seems to be – a shrewd businessman with a penchant for the macabre. Fortunately, his customers share that same thirst and are happy to fill his coffers in exchange for a good show.

He travels with a small crew of teamsters, who load up and drive the ten wagons that comprise this self-contained enterprise. Each exhibit and its handlers travel in their individual wagons; there is one food wagon, two supply wagons, and Harkniss' personal wagon that doubles as his office. These days there are always six exhibits on display, although he originally started out with only three. These exhibits do not always stay the same, however, as he is always on the lookout for the next big thing and will



switch an older one out for a more popular one if the opportunity arises.

Each season starts at the first sign of Spring, and does not end until Autumn is already well underway. Harkniss and his crew winter on his expansive estate in Darkon. This break lasts for 2-3 months and then the touring starts all over again. Sometimes during the off season, Harkniss will go on expeditions to exotic Islands of the Mists to search out new freaks to add to his menagerie. He brings either Archibolt (whom he considers a friend and his personal wizard) or Artesia (his fiancée) with him. These are his two most trusted associates, and whoever does not accompany him on these trips stays behind and handles the business responsibilities during his absence.

Whenever he approaches a town, he picks out a spot on an outlying farm to make camp. He gives the farmer and his family a free advance showing in exchange for using the land. (This has the added benefit of spreading the word about the arrival of his exhibition as the farmer inevitably tells his friends about what they saw.)

The wagons are arranged in a circle with one opening to let the crowd in and out. People move in a clockwise direction until they return to the same entry point they started at. Munbar's wagon is situated in front of this entrance and serves as a ticket office. The front of the exhibits all face inside, and each occupies the space of one wagon after it is all set up and laid out. Crude wooden frames are set up between exhibits and tent flaps hide the view of what lies within the next section. There are attendants placed at each of these doorways to ensure that traffic keeps flowing smoothly.

The menagerie stays in one place for about a week, or two at the most, and then moves on to the next village. It takes a full day to set up and wind down the entire enterprise, so the show is only open for about a week. Harkniss feels this is enough time for word to spread to other communities nearby and maximize his box office intake. Sometimes his

exhibitions will move only a few miles down the road (or however far away the next town over is) and at other times he will move further along into a neighboring domain; it all depends on how much interest he can drum up.

Speaking of which, Munbar has a variety of techniques he uses to announce his arrival; he loves devising quirky and unique methods to advertise his business. The most simple way to advertise his presence is by holding a parade where all his wagons ride slowly down the main thoroughfare and have colorful painted tarps on the side advertising the exhibits inside. At other times he hires a local troupe of musicians and has them play festive music while horsemen ride back and forth through town carrying festive banners.

One of his favorites is a ploy he calls the Man with the Bricks. Once he has set up his operation, he will hire a villager to walk along the side of a street setting down one brick, walking 10 feet away, then setting down another brick. Then he returns to the first brick, picks it up, walks 10 feet past the second brick, then sets down the first brick again. He continues this odd behavior for an hour or so; going back and forth over the same ground for a while, then slowly increasing the distance between brick drops as time goes on. Soon, a crowd of curious onlookers will amass and follow his every move. Eventually, the man leads his audience right to the doorstep of Professor Harkniss' Extraordinary Exhibits, where Munbar immediately launches into his pitch to get them to buy a ticket and come inside.

While most people view Munbar's antics and boasts as innocent fun, intellectuals and critics loudly decry him as an elaborate fraud. They say his exhibits are faked – the Rajian Mermaid is just a normal girl with fins glued onto her legs, and Gnuk Gnok is just a man in a monkey suit. Munbar hotly contests these accusations, but secretly knows such public arguments only increase everyone's curiosity about his enterprise. What he really fears is customers being siphoned away by rival traveling zoos, such as

Monreau's Menagerie or Dr. Orwell's Educated Barnyard.

#### *Exhibit #1 – Gnik Gnok*

This is an albino ape from Sri Raji that stands well over nine feet tall and towers over the crowd. He has shaggy white hair all over his body and is bound to a wall by iron manacles that encircle both his wrists and ankles. He constantly strains against his bonds, whipping his head back and forth frantically, and occasionally emits a bloodcurdling roar to passersby. He is framed amidst green jungle fronds, which Munbar states are a calming influence on him.

#### **GNIK GNOK (DIRE APE)**

**Size/Type:** Large Animal

**Hit Dice:** 5d8+13 (35 hp)

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft. (climb 15 ft.)

**Armor Class:** 15 (touch 11, flat-footed 13)

**Base Attack / Grapple:** +3 / +13

**Attack:** +8 Claws (1d6+6) or +9 Bite (1d6+1)

**Special Attacks:** Rend, Roar

**Special Qualities:** Low-Light Vision, Scent

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

**Abilities:** Str 22, Dex 15, Con 14, Int 2, Wis 12, Cha 7

**Skills:** Climb +14, Listen +5, Move Silently +4, Spot +6

**Feats:** Alertness, Toughness

**Challenge Rating:** 3

**Alignment:** Neutral

**Rend (Ex):** If both of his claw attacks hit, Gnik Gnok deals an additional 2d6+4 damage.

**Roar (Ex):** As a standard action, Gnik Gnok can roar ferociously, taking 10 on an intimidate check against all opponents within 30 feet. These opponents must make a Will save with a DC equal to the intimidate check or else be *shaken*. Anyone in the targeted area may make a new saving throw at the end of their turn to end this effect.

**Scent (Ex):** Gnik Gnok can detect approaching enemies, sniff out hidden foes, and track by sense of smell - generally within 30 feet. If an opponent is

upwind, the range is 60 feet. If they are downwind, the range is 15 feet.

This is one of the original trio of exhibits that Munbar took possession of upon acquiring his uncle's estate and eventually started his traveling show with. He will regale the crowd with a long, involved story of how the ape was hunted and captured, but this is a complete fabrication. His uncle bought the beast from an unscrupulous big game hunter several years ago.

During each show, Gnik Gnok snaps his wrist manacles, then starts beating his chests with his fists and bellowing aggressively. This is an affectation that Munbar dreamed up to scare the audience. This never fails to clear the room, and gives the audience something to talk about afterwards. It is quite safe, however, as Gnik Gnok's handler, Artesia, stands by in the shadows and is ready to rush in and calm him down in case anything goes awry.

#### **ADVENTURE HOOK: THE AVATAR OF THE MONKEY GOD**

A group of cultists from Sri Raji believe this ape to be a reincarnation of the Rajian monkey god known as Hanuman. The unscrupulous big game hunter from above actually stole Gnik Gnok from their temple, where they revered him as an avatar of their god. These cultists have been sending out search parties regularly to find Gnik Gnok ever since.

While Munbar's uncle kept the ape in his private zoo on his estate, the cultists had no clues as to its whereabouts. But now that Munbar is parading Gnik Gnok all over the Demiplane, their searching is at an end. But finding Gnik Gnok and retrieving him are two separate things. At first, the cultists tried to purchase the ape, but since Munbar promised Artesia that they would feed and look after Gnik Gnok as long as the beast lived in exchange for her permission to display him, Munbar will not allow him to be sold for any amount of money.

After being rebuffed, the cultists have resorted to stealing their prize. Munbar and his crew have fought off several attempts at confiscating his star attraction, but are now seeking outside help to track down the thieves and stop them for good.

#### *Exhibit #2 – The Sarcophagus of Amenemhat*

This is a typical mummy with linen wrappings covering it from head to toe, although in some places the linen has fallen away to reveal the dry, desiccated skin that lies underneath. The mummy lies in its wooden coffin, which is positioned at a 60 degree angle with the lid laying off to one side. The lid was once brightly painted in gold and blue, but the hues have been worn away by time; only faint outlines remain. The wrappings around the mummy's face have been torn away to reveal a grim visage. Its eyes stare blankly, and its mouth seems locked in an eternal snarl. A thick, golden necklace with a scarab encased in amber as a pendant adorns its neck.

Several grave goods are scattered around the mummy, ranging from canoptic jars of various sizes, masks made out of cracked gold leaf, bracelets shaped like asps, bone combs, and one or two scrolls with faded Akiri hieroglyphics on them. It should be noted that not all these objects are from Amenemhat's tomb. Throughout the years, Munbar has raided several curio shops in search of authentic-looking items to add to his collection; he doesn't care if these items are genuine or not, as long as they fit the atmosphere he is trying to create.

### **AMENEMHAT (2<sup>nd</sup> MAGNITUDE ANCIENT DEAD)**

**Size/Type:** Medium Undead

**Hit Dice:** 8d12+8 (70 hp)

**Initiative:** +0

**Speed:** 20 ft

**Armor Class:** 20 (touch 10, flat-footed 20)

**Base Attack / Grapple:** +4 / +11

**Attack:** +11 Slam +11 (1d6+10)

**Special Attacks:** Cause Fear, Mummy Rot

**Special Qualities:** Damage Reduction (5/-), Darkvision, Undead Traits, Turn Resistance (+4), Vulnerability to Fire

**Saves:** Fort +4, Ref +2, Will +8

**Abilities:** Str 24, Dex 10, Con –, Int 6, Wis 14, Cha 15

**Skills:** Hide +7, Listen +8, Move Silently +7, Spot +8

**Feats:** Alertness, Great Fortitude, Toughness

**Challenge Rating:** 8

**Alignment:** Lawful Evil

*Cause Fear (Su):* At the mere sight of Amenemhat, the viewer must succeed on a DC 16 Will save or be struck with fear for 1d4 rounds. Observers that fail this save will quickly move at least 30 feet away to escape this feeling.

*Mummy Rot (Su):* Supernatural disease - Slam, Fortitude DC 16, incubation period 1 minute; damage 1d6 Con and 1d6 Cha. The save DC is Charisma-based. Unlike normal diseases, mummy rot continues until the victim reaches Con 0 (and dies) or is cured by a *remove curse* spell.

*Vulnerability to Fire (Ex):* Amenemhat takes +50% damage from fire-based attacks, spells, or spell-like abilities.

This is one of the original trio of exhibits that Munbar took possession of upon acquiring his uncle's estate and eventually started his traveling show with. He found Amenemhat's sarcophagus sealed in the corner of a dilapidated barn filled with junk. Munbar immediately recognized what it was, and tried to sell it for a few pieces of gold, but could not find any buyers. The mummy remained tucked away until inspiration struck and Munbar decided upon a gimmick that showcased it.

During the show, he spins a maudlin story of two star-crossed lovers, a high priest and the pharaoh's daughter, who carried on an illicit relationship. Once they were found out, however, the pharaoh ordered Amenemhat to be buried alive. Munbar relays that if a special incantation is said over the mummy's body, it will be brought back to life and would be forced to do its master's bidding. Fortunately, he adds, that



section of the scrolls has been torn off and lost to time.

This entire story is a fabrication, of course; Munbar has no way of knowing the mummy's true history and is not interested in learning any more about it than he needs to.

The most memorable part of this exhibit comes at the end, when the mummy opens his eyes! This elicits gasps and cries from the crowd, which is quickly ushered into the next room by a panicked Munbar. It should be noted that this action is not done under Amenenhat's own power (he is sleeping peacefully at the moment), but is a trick effected by Archibolt's magical powers.

#### ADVENTURE HOOK: THE SEVEN SCARABS OF SAKKARAMON

One of the items in Amenemhat's collection of goods, the bone comb, is one of the Seven Scarabs of Sakkaramon. The Seven Scarabs of Sakkaramon are a collection of grave goods with a scarab prominently etched somewhere on their surface that have been scattered across the Demiplane. When combined, they will supposedly awaken the powerful Akiri wizard Sakkaramon.

A group calling itself the Seekers of the Seven Scarabs has found out that Munbar's exhibit holds one of the treasures they are looking for, and have hired the werejackal assassin Abu Al Mir (see COTN: Werebeasts) to steal it from the show.

While the comb is not essential for the exhibit, Munbar is looking to hire a group to investigate the theft and retrieve the comb if at all possible.

#### *Exhibit #3 – The Incutabulationer*

This is a medium-sized, metal contraption bolted to a cart with four wheels and a wooden handle so it can be steered around; it is quite heavy, though, and requires two people to move it. Its central compartment is about 3 x 3 feet and 2 feet in depth (just big enough to hold a small man or a large

animal). The door to this compartment is made of crystal and is see-through. There is an intricate steel antenna affixed to the top of the device, which sparks when it is in operation.

Wiring and tubes extend out of the main compartment and attach to various other smaller metal boxes beside it. There is a control panel with several buttons of various sizes and colors and a set of levers. There is a main power switch on the side of this control panel that turns the entire machine on and off. There are no labels to be seen, and only Munbar knows the secrets to operating it.

**How It Works:** A DC 17 Intelligence check is required to operate this machine. Anything placed within the central compartment will grow up to 1d8+3 times its size. This effect can be instantaneous or delayed (DM's preference). There is a 25% chance that any beast or humanoid becomes enraged by the change and will attack the first object or person it sees before running off in a random direction, barreling through whatever lies within its path.

This transformation is only temporary, however, lasting 1d10 rounds. At the end of this time period, the subject shrinks back to its normal size and shows no ill effects from the experience (besides any wounds or damage that may have occurred during its rampage).

The controls are extremely finicky, and if the right sequence of buttons is not pressed, there is a 10% chance that a catastrophic failure occurs each time it is used. (If that occurs, the exhibit will be out of commission until Munbar can hire an engineer to replace the broken parts.)

This is one of the original trio of exhibits that Munbar took possession of upon acquiring his uncle's estate and eventually started his traveling show with. He found it in the basement of the manor house with a set of instructions stored inside its main



compartment. Munbar didn't know what the machine did or even what its name was. He started tinkering with it and eventually was able to turn it on, but nothing happened until he put an item into the main compartment. Then, to his astonishment, he found that it was some sort of growth ray that increased the size of anything put within it!

At first, Munbar thought he had discovered a miracle machine that could grow giant crops and enlarge livestock. He planned to rent its use to farmers in order to make it cheaper to feed large groups of people (and make a fortune for himself along the way). However, there were a couple of drawbacks to the process that he did not foresee.

Any vegetable grown this way has a strong acidic flavor that causes anyone who tastes it to spit it out. And after about a week the vegetable shrivels into a dried husk. The same thing happens to any animal put through the enlargement process. (Munbar has not attempted to use it on a humanoid as of yet). If an enlarged animal is killed, its meat is tainted and anyone that tastes it becomes nauseous. It, too, will wither into a dried husk at the end of a week.

During the show, Munbar puts a variety of animals and vegetables through the process to impress his audience. He usually uses chickens and pigs as they are easy to replace if something goes wrong. Oftentimes, he will borrow whatever vegetables the local farmers are growing, enlarge them, then give them back over to their original owners. Since the negative side effects are not immediately apparent, he has usually moved on to the next town by the time his ruse is discovered.

Naturally, Munbar has had several offers to buy it, or at least sell a blueprint of it so it can be reproduced. He always politely refuses, feigning a sentimental attachment. It should be noted that Munbar did commission Archibolt to recreate an improved version of the machine, but once it was constructed he found it to have the same flaws as the original. No one he has spoken

with about the device can divine its true origin or purpose.

#### *Exhibit #4 – The Rajian Mermaid*

This ravishing creature has the upper torso of a buxom humanoid with the lower body of a fish with a large tail fin. Her head is crowned in yellow-green hair that seems to glow underwater. Her face is heart-shaped, which serves to accent her piercing green eyes. She has a delicate neck, but strong shoulders and sleek, but sinuous arms. She is nude from the waist up, a fact that leaves no doubt as to why her exhibit is the most popular amongst the local men.

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE GIANT OF MUDAR**

Professor Harkniss' Extraordinary Exhibitions recently passed through the desert town of Mudar in Har'Akir. Unbeknownst to Munbar, a servant named Anu ran away from his master one night and used the Incutabulationer as a hiding spot. The machine was not properly shut down after the last show, however, and the slave was given a powerful dose of the machine's unique radiation. It caused him to grow to giant size within minutes. Alarmed by this unexpected change, he ran off into the desert to hide out in some caves.

For some reason, Anu's transformation has not reversed itself, and once his hunger became unbearable he started raiding desert caravans for food. The elders of Mudar are looking for help to stop these attacks by the Giant of Mudar (as he has been dubbed) so much-needed supplies can be safely delivered to their village.

The PCs have a couple of options to resolve this scenario besides killing Anu outright. The simplest solution is to cast a *reduce person* spell on him. Alternatively, they can track down Munbar's operation and convince him to apply another dose of the Incutabulationer's rays in order to return Anu to normal.

Her tent is taken up with a large rectangular water tank with small platforms with hoops attached to them, which the Mermaid jumps and dives through. She does not speak, but does hum a few enchanting tunes to entertain the crowd. She also performs a titillating underwater dance routine of varying lengths. Her habitat is set up and maintained by Archibolt, as only his magic makes it feasible for her to remain on land for so long.

### RAJIAN MERMAID (DREAD SIREN)

**Size/Type:** Medium Fey (Aquatic)

**Hit Dice:** 7d6+7 (40 hp)

**Initiative:** +1

**Speed:** 30 ft. (swim 60 ft.)

**Armor Class:** 11 (touch 10, flat-footed 8)

**Base Attack / Grapple:** +3 / +6

**Attack:** +2 Bite (1d6+1), +3 Claws (1d4+2), +2 Trident (1d8+2)

**Special Attacks:** Enchanting Embrace, Mesmerizing Song

**Special Qualities:** Alternate Form, Aquatic Traits, Bloodlust, Damage Reduction (10/bone), Darkvision (60 ft.)

**Saves:** Fort +3, Ref +5, Will +8

**Abilities:** Str 10, Dex 13, Con 10, Int 16, Wis 17, Cha 19

**Skills:** Bluff +5, Diplomacy +4, Escape Artist +8, Handle Animal +11, Heal +9, Hide +7, Knowledge (nature) +7, Listen +11, Perform (sing) +4, Move Silently +7, Sense Motive +9, Spot +11, Swim +8

**Feats:** Ability Focus (Mesmerizing Song), Alertness

**Challenge Rating:** 7

**Alignment:** Neutral Evil

**Alternate Form (Su):** Once per day, the Rajian Mermaid can transform into a female humanoid as though using a *polymorph self* spell. Changing from mermaid form to humanoid form (and vice versa) is a standard action. The Rajian Mermaid cannot hold her humanoid form for more than 24 hours without being fully immersed in a body of water (such as a river, lake, or sea). Once she is so immersed, she automatically changes back to her mermaid form.

**Bloodlust (Ex):** The Rajian Mermaid craves fresh blood and will take it any way she can get it. If she doesn't get at least a half-pint of blood to drink every 24 hours, she becomes Hostile, suffering a –2 Charisma penalty and must make a Save DC 15 or treat anyone who interacts with her with unprovoked aggression. She may likely attack, interfere, berate, or avoid others as she sees fit.

**Mesmerizing Song (Sp):** Up to 4 times a day, the Rajian Mermaid can perform a hauntingly beautiful song with a successful Performance check. Any humanoid within 90 feet of the Siren who can hear her voice must make a DC 19 Will save or be subject to either *cause fear*, *charm*, or *suggestion* as if cast by a 8<sup>th</sup> level sorcerer.

This exhibit marked a turning point in Munbar's fortunes. While he achieved a modicum of success with his original three exhibits, it was not until this attraction was added to his repertoire that he started turning a healthy profit.

The Rajian Mermaid's appearance was rather serendipitous, as a wizard named Archibolt brought her to Munbar for an audition. Archibolt was hopelessly enamored with her, but she had spurned his advances, even though he assisted her with anything she needed. It was a win-win situation for the two of them – Munbar got a star attraction out of the deal, and Archibolt got to stay by his beloved's side. The Mermaid, however, was not consulted about this arrangement. But as she has shown no signs of wanting to leave, it seems she is pleased with it as well. (In truth, she loves all the attention this current setup garners her.)

Munbar loves to spin fanciful tales about the Mermaid's origins and powers, changing his story depending on what land he is in. On the islands of the Nocturnal Sea, he claims she is a captured selkie from Graben Island. For domains that border the Sea of Sorrows, he claims she is a tamed seawolf from the Isle of Agony in Lamordia. In domains that border the Shadow Rift, he claims she is a fey creature known as a kelpie, that he rescued from a group of

angry villagers. If he is ever confronted by someone with knowledge of Sri Raji, and the fact that it does not have a sea to call its own, he quickly pivots and describes her as a mysterious oni from the island of Rokushima Taiyoo.

### ADVENTURE HOOK: BASER INSTINCTS

This dread siren has used her *charm* abilities to bend Archibolt (and to a lesser degree Munbar) to her will so they aid her in obtaining whatever she desires. Unbeknownst to both men, she is able to transform herself into a normal-appearing (re: two-legged) human once a day. She only uses this ability when she is hunting for a human victim, however.

Most of the time, the Mermaid's bloodlust is sated because she is provided with animal blood. About once a month, however, a hapless village chap will catch her eye during a performance. After the show is over, the dread siren will follow this man to his home, then lure him outside with her mesmerizing *Mesmerizing Song*-ability. Then, she quickly feeds on him and leaves the corpse in the nearest body of water. The Rajian Mermaid has left a long trail of victims all across the Core, and her actions have actually given rise to rumors of a masterful serial killer that stalks handsome but gullible youths.

The parents of the dread siren's latest victims are looking for more answers than the local constabulary can provide, and decide to hire their own private investigators to look into this recent string of killings in the area.

### Exhibit #5 – The Frozen Man

This is a giant block of ice that is 5 x 5 feet around and stands 12 feet high. If one looks closely at it, however, they will discover a humanoid figure is trapped within! The figure's features are hard to make out through the layers of ice he is encased in. He is covered in animal skins, has pale skin, a broad flat head and a wide mouth that is fixed in silent

scream. His eyes stare blankly out from the depths, and seem to dart back and forth if one stares at them too long.

### THE FROZEN MAN (ENTOMBED)

**Size/Type:** Medium Undead

**Hit Dice:** 8d12+8 (88 hp)

**Initiative:** +0

**Speed:** 30 ft. (burrow 45. ft [ice only])

**Armor Class:** 20 (touch 10, flat-footed 19)

**Base Attack / Grapple:** +4 / +10

**Attack:** +7 Slam (1d6+4 plus 1d6 cold)

**Special Attacks:** Freeze, Icy Touch, Immure, Improved Grab

**Special Qualities:** Darkvision, Ice Glide, Tremorsense, Undead Traits

**Saves:** Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +6

**Abilities:** Str 19, Dex 10, Con –, Int 11, Wis 14, Cha 12

**Skills:** Hide +11, Listen +14, Move Silently +13, Spot +10

**Feats:** Cleave, Great Fortitude, Improved Bull Rush

**Challenge Rating:** 8

**Alignment:** Lawful Evil

**Freeze (Su):** The Frozen Man can drain the heat from any living creature. On a successful grapple check, the Frozen Man deals 1d4 points of Dexterity damage to a grappled foe (a DC 19 Fortitude save reduces this damage by half).

**Icy Touch (Su):** The Frozen Man deals an additional 1d6 points of cold damage with each successful slam attack. On its turn, it deals 1d6 points of cold damage per round to any creature it grapples.

**Ice Glide (Ex):** The Frozen Man can glide through ice, snow, or slush as easily as a fish swims through water. Its burrowing leaves behind no tunnel or hole and its passage does not create any ripples or other signs of its presence.

**Immure (Su):** When the Frozen Man begins its turn with a hold on its opponent, it can attempt to drag a grappled creature under the ice, trapping it in a layer of ice and eventually (1d6 rounds) creating another Entombed.



*Improved Grab (Ex):* To use this ability, the Frozen Man must hit an opponent with a slam attack. It can then attempt to grapple as a free action without provoking attacks of opportunity. If it wins the grapple check, the Frozen Man establishes a hold, deals damage with its icy touch and immediately uses its freeze ability. In subsequent rounds it can choose to use its icy touch and freeze abilities again or attempt to use its immure ability.

Archibolt and Munbar acquired this creature from the slopes of Mt. Radu in Sanguinia. A long time ago, there was supposedly a terrible snow beast terrorizing the village of Caresh. A local hero rose up and declared that he would hunt the monster down and kill it. He was successful in tracking down the creature, and they engaged in a momentous fight along the treacherous slopes. In the end, the snow beast was vanquished, but at the cost of the hero's life; he froze to death after the fight because he was too wounded to protect himself against the harsh cold that blanketed the mountain. Some locals found his frozen corpse during a brief thaw, but decided to leave it on the slope as a totem.

As the years passed, however, the superstitious townsfolk began to regard it as an omen of evil. Whenever hikers became lost on the mountain slopes, locals said the hero's spirit claimed them. And every time a blizzard or avalanche occurred, they said it was a manifestation of the hero's wrath. Eventually, the village elders decided it was better to get rid of the thing and so paid Archibolt and Munbar to take it off their hands.

This exhibit is usually of interest to the more scholarly crowd, as it seems rather boring at first glance since it doesn't "do" anything. Initially, Munbar added it into the rotation of exhibits because he thought it would make for a good jump scare once people realized what was encased within the ice.

Archibolt has studied the exhibit more closely, however, and was shocked to discover that the man inside is actually moving! It moves at an incredibly

slow pace, but the mage has noticed several changes to the figure's position over the years he has been watching it. While there is no way to communicate with the Frozen Man, Archibolt believes this creature has some ill intent, and that if it were left unattended, it would break loose from its icy prison and wreak havoc. The wizard has shared his concerns with Munbar, but he believes his friend is being dramatic. Nevertheless, Archibolt is always careful to keep this exhibit under a *cone of frost* spell to ensure that nothing goes amiss.

Most of the time, Munbar will paint this creature as some sort of primordial savage that roamed the land before civilization had even been established (the concept of a "caveman" is not well-known throughout the Core). At other times, he simply describes the creature as an errant mongrelman from G'Henna that became frozen on the windy steppes of that island domain. Still other times, he will describe it as a unique form of snow wraith that was found in the foothills of the Balinok Mountains in Barovia. Only if a scholar inquires as to the origins of the beast will Munbar relate the true story of its discovery related above.

### ADVENTURE HOOK: THE ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN

While traveling through Lamordia, this exhibit suddenly goes missing. Munbar believes it was stolen by agents of a rival operation, and sends out a request for freelance bounty hunters to track it down and return it to him. In reality, the exhibit was not stolen, but awakened by itself after Archibolt forgot to renew the *cone of frost* spell that usually keeps it in check.

Using its *ice glide* ability, the Frozen Man has traveled to the nearest peak in the Sleeping Beast mountain range. It has set up a lair there and is now terrorizing a nearby village. As the PCs follow the monster's trail of destruction, they will soon come across a handful of scared refugees babbling about an "Abominable Snowman" that appeared recently and has started stalking several small neighboring villages that lie higher up the mountain slopes.



### Exhibit #6 – The Enchanted Bone Pile

This exhibit doesn't seem like anything special upon first look. It is exactly as Munbar bills it – a bunch of bones piled about 6 feet high. There are bones of all sizes, ranging from small to medium to large; all are bleached white. Any naturalist that studies the heap will realize there are several different sets of animal and humanoid bones present. There are several cracked and incomplete skulls scattered within, as well. The pile is very scattered and disorganized, and falls in a roughly conical or pyramidal shape. After several seconds, however, it shifts and starts to rise! As the minutes pass, the pile takes several different forms, each more impressive than the last.

### THE ENCHANTED BONE PILE (BONE GOLEM)

**Size/Type:** Large Construct

**Hit Dice:** 10d10 +10 (80 hp)

**Initiative:** +0

**Speed:** 30 ft.

**Armor Class:** 20 (touch 20, flat-footed 20)

**Base Attack / Grapple:** +4 / +13

**Attack:** +4 Claws (2d4+2) or +6 Club (2d4+4)

**Special Attacks:** Bone Club, Bone Storm

**Special Qualities:** Construct Qualities, Damage Reduction (10/magical), Weapons Immunity (piercing/slashing)

**Saves:** Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +4

**Abilities:** Str 18, Dex 11, Con –, Int –, Wis 11, Cha 1

**Skills:** N/A

**Feats:** N/A

**Challenge Rating:** 10

**Alignment:** Neutral

**Bone Club (Ex):** At will, the Bone Pile can use one of its appendages (usually an arm or leg bone) as a club that causes 2d4+4 bludgeoning damage upon striking an opponent.

**Bone Storm (Sp):** Once per day, the Bone Pile can rapidly arrange its component parts into a swirling cloud of bones that causes 4d4 +4 damage upon striking an opponent. Range: 30 ft.; Area: Sphere (15 ft. radius); Duration: 1d4 rounds; Save: Reflex check halves.

This strange exhibit was found literally lying on the ground in the Broad Forest of Valachan. Local rumors of strange happenings in the woods drew Archibolt and Munbar to this area in search of a potential new exhibit. Imagine their surprise when all they found was a large pile of bones in the middle of a small clearing. But just as they were going to turn around and give up, the bones started rearranging themselves into the shape of a hulking minotaur. The creature walked around in a circle for a few minutes before it collapsed once again. After a few minutes the action repeated itself, but this time the bones transformed into a giant bird. Munbar, sensing a great opportunity, sent some workmen to collect the bones and return to his camp.

**How It Works:** It takes one round for the bone golem to transform and it can only hold its shape for 1d8 rounds. There are twelve different forms it can take – a swarm of bats, a centaur, a crocodile, a dragon, an elephant, a gargoyle, a naga, a panther, a horde of rats, a flock of ravens, a unicorn, and a wolf (roll 1d12 to determine or DM's choice). Each form appears as a giant version and has the same abilities as the animal it is mimicking, as well as Undead Traits. It is also immune to piercing damage, takes only half for slashing damage, but double for bludgeoning damage. If the bone golem is defeated in combat its pieces fall to the ground, but 24 hours later it pulls itself back together.

After careful study, Archibolt was able to determine the thing was an imperfectly-crafted bone golem, that could not hold its shape for very long. He also learned that when the construct was activated with a word of command, one could request the particular shape they wanted it to take. (Unfortunately, he could not discern who created it or for what purpose.) Before each showing, Archibolt activates the bone golem and Munbar cycles it through six or so shapes before he starts taking requests from the audience. It is both fascinating and grotesque at the same time, and a great crowd pleaser to end the exhibition with.

### ADVENTURE HOOK: THE GOLDEN KEY

This bone golem was actually created by a lich known as Hollowmane (from *Van Richten's Guide to Liches*). She was once a sorcerer that specialized in bone-related magic called an osteomancer, and completed her transformation into a lich about 80 years ago. She has always been interested in the powers that bones hold, and this particular piece was made when she was young and not yet so skilled in her art. Instead of destroying it, she repurposed it as a guardian of sorts, and used it to scare people away from the general area of an underground lair she uses in Valachan.

There is one special bone hidden within the pile, a human finger bone that functions as a skeleton key to the lair it protects. If viewed via detect magic or truesight, an arcane mark shaped like a grinning skull with two smaller skulls fit inside its eye sockets can be seen on the finger bone; otherwise, it blends in perfectly with the rest of the bones that surround it.

Hollowmane was not aware of this "robbery" until a couple years after Munbar passed through, as she was away at another one of her hideouts at the time. She is obsessed with finding the key, as she cannot access her safe-house (and the magical tomes it holds) without it. She has grown very paranoid throughout the years, however, and doesn't wish to expose herself to any potential danger.

She will use her disguise abilities to change into a little old lady and solicit the PCs to retrieve the skeleton key for her by claiming that her late husband's bones have accidentally been mixed in with all the rest.

(See *Baldorox's Guide to Horrific Monstrosities and How to Avoid Them* that is forthcoming from Olerick's Publishing House for Hollowmane's full stat block.)

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*"My esteemed brethren, I move to excommunicate John Garrett Daly from our midst immediately! His ideas are heretical and seditious - melding the biological with the mechanical is counter to all the teachings of the Divinity of Mankind. Imagine what horrors would be unleashed if his theories were to infect our alchemical sciences? Only abominations could result. As such, he should be barred from this organization forevermore and his research papers stricken from our records!"*

- from the minutes of the Eye of Polyphemus lodge meeting of November 14<sup>th</sup>, 756 BC

### JOHN GARRETT DALY AKA TOP HAT JACK

**Male Human Expert5/Scientist7:** CR 12; SZ Medium Humanoid (5 ft. 11 in.); HD 5d6 + 7d4 + 12; hp 70; Init +2; Spd 30 ft.; AC 12 (touch 12, flat-footed 10); Atk +8/3 melee (1d6+2 sword cane), +7/+2 ranged; SA Applied Sciences; SQ Discovery, Metaphysical Resistance, Mind Over Metaphysics, Science (physics), Scientific Knowledge, Weapon and Armor Proficiency (Simple); AL LN; SV Fort +3, Ref +3, Will +9; Str 14, Dex 13, Con 11, Int 17, Wis 12, Cha 12

**Skills:** Appraise +6, Balance +4, Concentration +4, Craft (mechanics) +9, Decipher Script +6, Gather Information +7, Jump +4, Knowledge (arcana) +7, Knowledge (engineering) +10, Listen +6, Perform (acting) +4, Profession (inventor) +10, Search +7, Spot +6, Speak Language +6, Tumble +5, Use Magic Device +9

**Feats:** Acrobatic, Craft (Magic Arms and Armor), Endurance, Great Fortitude, Skill Focus (Knowledge), University Education

**Language:** Zherisian\*, Darkonese, Lamordian, Mordentish

**Signature Possessions:** 2 Artisan Kits (metal- and wood-crafting), Frock Coat (heirloom), Leather Apron, Magnifying Goggles, Masterwork Sword Cane, Pocket Watch (heirloom), Power Source

(biocharger), Power Source (hand generator), Top Hat (heirloom)

*Applied Science (Chill Metal)*: To help with his metal crafting, Daly has created a device he calls an aetherizer, which makes metal extremely cold. Unattended, non-magical metal gets no saving throw. Magical metal is allowed a saving throw against spells. On the first round of use, the metal becomes chilly and uncomfortable to the touch but deals no damage. The same effect also occurs on the last round of use. In between these rounds, the metal becomes freezing cold and causes pain and damage if touched. Range: 25-50 ft; Target: Any metal equipment up to 30 feet away or up to 25 lbs; Duration: 7 rounds; Save: Will negates.

*Applied Science (Heat Metal)*: To help with his metal crafting, Daly has created a device called a phlogostinator, which makes metal extremely hot. Unattended, non-magical metal gets no saving throw. Magical metal is allowed a saving throw against spells. On the first round of use the metal becomes warm and uncomfortable to the touch, but deals no damage. The same effect also occurs on the last round of use. In between these rounds, the metal becomes searing hot and causes pain and damage if touched. Range: 25-50 ft; Target: Any metal equipment up to 30 feet away or up to 25 lbs; Duration: 7 rounds; Save: Will check negates.

*Applied Science (Lightning Bolt)*: To help with his metal crafting, Daly has created a device called a plasmotron, which releases a powerful stroke of electrical energy. It deals 1d6 points of electricity damage per scientist level (maximum 10d6) to each creature within its target area. The lightning bolt sets fire to combustibles and damages objects in its path. It can melt metals with a low melting point (such as gold and lead). Range: 120 ft; Target: 120 ft (in a line); Save: Reflex check halves.

*Discovery (Inner Strength)*: Due to his extensive research into mind/body interactions Daly has a +2 bonus on Will saves.

*Metaphysical Resistance (Ex)*: Daly's highly trained and disciplined mind shields him from most kinds of magical attacks. This ability works like spell resistance, except that it applies to spells, spell-like abilities, and supernatural abilities alike. Daly's metaphysical resistance score is equal to his scientist class level plus his Intelligence score. If an attacker's caster level check overcomes this metaphysical resistance, Daly still gets a saving throw and his bonus for the Mind Over Metaphysics ability.

*Mind Over Metaphysics (Ex)*: Daly's trained mind allows him to resist magical effects, regardless of their form. When he makes a saving throw against any spell, spell-like ability, or supernatural ability Daly gains a bonus of his Intelligence modifier or half his scientist level (whichever is lower).

*Science (Physics)*: At Will – daze, guidance, lullaby, message, virtue; 9/day – charm person, lesser confusion, remove fear. Caster level 7<sup>th</sup>; save DC 12 plus spell level.

**Appearance:** Daly is a handsome, middle-aged man of Zherisian descent. He has brown hair, which he cuts short, and a triangular jaw. He is usually encountered with a few days' stubble on his face, but is clean-shaven when on official business outside his lab. His eyes are a deep, piercing blue and bulge out of the sockets when he is agitated. He is of average height and weight, but has strong, muscular arms. He dresses in standard gentlemanly attire, without a care for following the fashions of the day. His wardrobe consists of white, long-sleeved shirts and brown, gray, or black dress pants. He dons a formal dress coat and top hat (both given to him by his father when he left home) when he is soliciting potential patrons. When he is working, he is less formal, switching the hat and jacket with a heavy leather apron to protect himself from sparks and chemicals. While he does his best to keep up with appearances, if closely examined one finds his clothes are covered in burn marks or oily stains (reflecting the nature of his work as an inventor).

**Background:** While Top Hat Jack's given name is John Garrett Daly, in Zheresia he is known as Johnny Bootstrap. This nickname was given to him by his college classmates, because his father was a successful rag-and-bone man (basically a junk collector) in Paridon. Daly often assisted his father in his trade, collecting and repairing the items that upper-class families tossed into the streets, then reselling them for a profit.

He was always a very studious and attentive child, and he quickly picked up his father's mechanical aptitude and skill in salesmanship. As he grew older, Daly felt a great desire to make something more of himself than a common tinkerer. His father, sensing his son's drive and determination, managed to save up enough money to send him to Paridon University when John turned 16 years old. Daly did his utmost to take full advantage of this opportunity. He studied hard for six years, and graduated with a degree in Applied Physics and Mechanical Engineering.

During this period, he developed a passion (some might say obsession) with augmenting or enhancing the human body through mechanical means. Unlike most of his classmates, he grew up in the slums and saw firsthand the toll that diseases, birth defects, and workplace injuries took on the lower classes. To the less fortunate, poor health standards, a dirty, polluted environment, and risky jobs were just facts of life. On top of all this, during his youth one of his best friends was attacked by a Shadow Killer (actually a Marikith Hunter) and lost an arm. Altogether, these experiences galvanized his resolve to help the crippled and the lame of the city.

He used his knowledge of mechanical engineering to create finely crafted prosthetic limbs – arms, legs, hands, and feet. These devices were so well made that they fully restored a normal range of mobility for the wearer. As he became better at crafting, he added even smaller appendages to his repertoire – replacement eyes, ears, and noses. As his success grew, he was accepted into the upper echelons of society and was invited to become a member of several different alchemical lodges.

Eventually, he took the next logical step and began to add enhancements to normal everyday items such as gloves, spectacles, canes, and other fashion accessories. These articles were extremely popular, greatly enhancing the everyday life of their owners.

As his work became more popular, however, he ran afoul of the two most powerful forces in the land – both the doppelganger clans and the Divinity of Mankind. The doppelgangers that ruled from the shadows worried that such innovations would one day be turned against them by somehow seeing through their disguises; and a religion that preaches the necessity of perfection in mind, body, and emotion does not look kindly on enhancing one's abilities through artificial means. His attempts at fusing man and machine (effectively creating primitive cyborgs) were said to go against the teachings of the Temple and the doppelgangers saw to it that he was barred from any and all alchemical lodges. The press took their cue from the powers that be with the Newsbill even publishing a series of articles ridiculing his theories.

After a few months of this smear campaign, Daly found himself alone and penniless, and he made the painful decision to leave his homeland behind and look for his fortune elsewhere.

**Current Sketch:** After his expulsion from Paridon, Daly bounced around the Core for a while, but eventually settled down in Lamordia. Despite his fall from grace, he has not lost his desire to help the less fortunate. His research costs money, however, so he is always seeking out rich patrons to procure more funding. He has never felt completely comfortable hobnobbing with members of the upper class, and this constant pressure has led him to become increasingly bitter. He feels that he spends too much of his precious time soliciting nobles, when he would rather be working in his lab and perfecting his inventions.

Whenever Daly does manage to find a wealthy patron in need of his services, his spirits quickly rise and a burst of creativity follows. But as his new



project winds down, he begins to pester his benefactor in joining in with his charity work. This soon sours their partnership, and Daly is either given money to go away quietly or unceremoniously tossed from the premises.

As Daly grows older, his ultimate goal has become unifying all of the groundbreaking principles he has discovered into one grand design. He calls this project the Action Frock. Basically, it is a suit that combines all the individual enhancements and accessories he has created throughout the years. In order to power such an ensemble, he has developed a unique power source he calls The Thinking Cap. Unfortunately, his obsessive pursuit of knowledge and pushing the boundaries of what science is capable of has blinded him to the perils of the forces he is seeking to tap into.

**Combat:** While possessing a strong frame, Daly is not a warrior at heart. He will only begrudgingly draw his weapon after all else fails. He designed and built the sword cane which he always carries with him, but considers it more of a sales piece than a means of self-defense. He is very skilled at wielding it when needed, however, as he has trained and developed close relations with several expert armorers throughout the years.

### THE ECCENTRIC INVENTOR

To the world at large, John Garrett Daly is an accomplished tinkerer, who creates uniquely modified apparel and exquisitely-made prosthetic appendages in his quest to aid his fellow man. He truly believes in the power of modern science to improve the lives of all people, and he is viewed as a miracle worker by rich and poor alike.

Daly applies the engineering principles he learned at school to assemble fantastic inventions combined from such diverse materials as cloth, stone, wood, and metal. He specializes in smaller, more intricate pieces than a blacksmith would work with, and unlike an armorer he is not at all interested in weapons of war; all of the enhancements he creates are

defensive in nature, not offensive. (However, he can fashion masterwork weapons on special order for the right price.)

His home and workshop is located in Ludendorf, and is known as Schloss Klingen Hammern (House of the Ringing Hammer). He travels for half the year (avoiding the cold Lamordian winters) to meet up with potential patrons or follow up with previous clients. He also has two other mini-workshops (one in Makyle in Darkon and one in Chateaufaux in Dementlieu) that he uses when abroad. He rarely ventures beyond the more “civilized” domains of the Core (such as Borca, Richemulot and Mordent); he finds the lands of the southern Core (such as Barovia, Valachan and Invidia) too backwards and savage for his liking.

Within his workshops, he keeps all sorts of raw materials such as sheets of metal, blocks of wood, and bolts of fabric. His metal-crafting equipment includes stamps, punches, pins, dapping tools and pliers. He also owns a large assortment of mandrels (ring, wire curling, bezeling-, bailing- and bracelet-making varieties to name but a few). He utilizes small anvils, vices, presses and tongs, as well. All of these instruments are always arranged in a neat and tidy fashion.

He has three special pieces of equipment that aid him in his work, all of which are small enough to be carried in a specially outfitted trunk. He has a phlogostinator, which he uses to heat metal and make it more pliable, and an aetherizer, which he uses to cool metal down quickly after working on it. These contraptions eliminate the need for the hammer and anvil that traditional blacksmiths use. It allows him to shape and form materials in minute quantities and at a much quicker pace.

He has created a special power source for these gadgets that he calls a plasmotron. It is a metallic, rectangular container with several wires, studs, and tubes coming out of its top. On one side there is a hand-crank that powers the dynamo hidden inside the casing. On the opposite side is a steel baton that

serves as a conductor for the electricity that this instrument generates. After the plasmotron is warmed up, the steel baton is inserted into a slot on the phlogostinator or aetherizer, and the device is powered up and ready to be used. It is a very finicky process, and only one who is well versed in applied mechanics could operate it. Whenever Daly uses these items, he is sure to wear protective goggles, lest his eyesight be damaged by the arcs of electricity and sparks that result.

Daly caters to a wide variety of patrons, ranging from veterans who lost an appendage to amputation or battle wounds to workers who lost limbs due to workplace accidents. He can even supply new appendages to adventurers that have been mauled by a monster, if needed. Sometimes his prosthetics are commissioned by a noble directly for themselves, sometimes for a family member, and other times it could be for an employee. Sporadically, an entire village will approach him and pay for a special gift for an esteemed hero of the community. He often does charity work for the sick and the poor as well, when he can fit it into his busy schedule.

When Daly finds a patron, he travels to their residence in order to perform a thorough physical examination and initial interview. If he accepts the job, he requires half of his fee upfront. After these preliminaries are completed, he will draw up a rough schematic and get it approved by the client before retiring to his nearest workshop. He may hire an assistant to gather any additional materials he will be needing as well as help during the construction phase of the project.

Once he has a working model, the inventor visits his customer once again, this time to perform a fitting. If any issues with the equipment's operation are found, he will return to his workshop to work out the kinks. He repeats this process until the patron is completely satisfied and everything is in good working order.

Then, he returns to his workshop one last time to put any finishing touches such as specially requested

lacquer, paint, varnish, or plating upon the prosthetic. Then he presents the finished product to his patron, collects the rest of his fee, and returns home. He takes most of the money he accumulates from these excursions and puts it into his own pet project, which he has dubbed the Action Frock.

While most people Daly encounters say that he is an amiable fellow, he displays a great deal of animosity towards rival craftsmen. Two prominent artificers he attacks frequently are Anton Kythera (the so-called Apprentice of Klorr) and Dr. Garricalo (creator of the infamous Phantasmagoria Show). He thinks Anton cheats by using magic to create his inventions and is just a grandstanding show-off. He believes that Dr. Garricalo, on the other hand, is using her scientific knowledge for frivolous means by preying upon the superstitious and ignorant. He has even gone so far as to publicly accuse each of these competitors of stealing some of his own designs. These feuds are one-sided for the most part; and it is entirely possible that Daly is jealous that these two inventors are so popular and seem to have no money problems at all.

### *Sample Merchandise*

Daly has the following items on display at his shop in Ludendorf to showcase the range of his work. Interestingly enough, the only piece of clothing he doesn't augment or offer enhancements for are hats.

### Accessories

All canes and umbrellas are crafted using sturdy Mordentish oak for the handle or shaft, reinforced steel for ribs and joints, and specially-treated Rokuma silk with double-stitched seams for coverings. More lethal versions of these items (such as retractable pistols or blades) can be fashioned upon special request.

Collapsible Cane (300 gp) – at the press of a hidden stud (on the top), this cane breaks into two batons (with metal cores) that can be used like clubs in combat. Pieces magnetically lock back in place after use, each baton deals 1d4 bludgeoning damage.

Floating Umbrella (3000 gp) – at the press of a hidden stud (on the handle), a pneumatic burst of air launches the holder 20 ft. straight up into the air, after which the umbrella is deployed and the holder floats along on the air currents for 1d4 rounds. The holder always lands on their feet and does not take any falling damage upon returning to the ground.

Glue Cane (1500 gp) – at the press of a hidden stud (on the top), a sticky, tar-like substance is shot from the tip of this cane, entangling any creature it is aimed at within 30 ft., DC 15 Reflex save to avoid. Targets must make DC 17 Strength check or deal 15 points of slashing damage to break free.

Steel Parasol (750 gp) – at the press of a hidden stud (on the handle), metallic plates are deployed to protect the holder, granting +1 AC bonus against all attacks. The parasol can also be used to bash opponents, dealing 1d4 + Str. bludgeoning damage.

#### Boots

All boots are crafted from the finest Lamordian leather with double-stitched seams. Heels can be added to artificially increase the wearer's height (up to 3 inches high). Water-proofing is added free of charge.

Boots of Leaping (2500 gp) – grant 15 ft. bonus to base speed, +10 bonus on Jump checks, wearer only needs a 10 ft. lead-up for a running jump instead of 20 ft., and can spider climb (as in the spell) once per day.

Boots of Maneuverability (1500 gp) – grant 15 ft. bonus to base speed, +5 bonus on Jump checks, allow for one extra move action during combat, and wearer can move normally over difficult terrain.

Boots of Speed (2000 gp) – grant 30 ft. bonus to base speed, allow for one extra attack during combat, and wear can pass without a trace (as in the spell) once per day.

#### Eye Wear

Each pair of spectacles is crafted using copper wire frames and lenses made of specially ground-up quartz crystals. Available as wire spectacles or leather goggles. Anti-fogging treatment added free of charge.

Blast Goggles (10000 gp) – has 3 different settings, can send forth a cone of light (as the spell) to dispel any darkness effects once per day (up to 15 ft.), can emit a sunburst (as the spell) that blinds any foes (up to 15 ft.) once per day, and can send forth a prismatic burst (as the spell) that fascinates any foes (up to 15 ft.) once per day.

Eagle-Eyed Goggles (7500 gp) – grants +5 bonus to Search and Spot checks, user ignores AC bonuses of any opponent.

Owl-Eyed Goggles (5000 gp) - grants both all-around vision and darkvision (up to 30 ft.), grants +2 bonus on Spot checks.

Sensory Goggles (3000 gp) – grants both blindsense and tremorsense (up to 30 ft.), user ignores blindness or dazzling effects and gaze attacks, grants +5 bonus on Listen checks.

#### Gloves

All gloves are crafted from the finest Lamordian leather with double-stitched seams. More lethal versions of these items (such as retractable blades or electrified gauntlets) can be fashioned upon special request. Water-proofing is added free of charge.

Dart Launcher (3000 gp) – at the press of a hidden stud (in middle of the palm) this glove shoots out 3 small stinging pellets (up to 20 ft.), each volley deals 1d6 bludgeoning damage, retractable when not in use.

Hand Blade (2000 gp) – at the press of a hidden stud (in middle of the palm), this glove sprouts 3 small blades that can deal 1d6 + Str. slashing damage, retractable when not in use.

Hand Repeller (1000 gp) – at the press of a hidden stud (in middle of the palm), this glove produces a force blast that pushes away any foes within 10 feet and stuns them for 3 round, can be used 3 times per day.

### Jewelry

All jewelry is crafted from the finest gold, silver, or a combination of the two (known as white gold). All items are interchangeable, so each one can be switched out for another whenever needed (i.e. a Fire Wafer can be added to a necklace that was originally outfitted with only Flash Pellets and vice versa).

Fire Wafer (400 gp) – a small disk that can be thrown up to 30 ft., explodes in a 10 ft. radius upon impact, deals 3d6 fire damage, can also be attached to flat surfaces for a 3 second delayed effect, comes in sets of 2.

Flash Pellets (200 gp) – lozenge shaped crystals that can be thrown up to 50 ft., explode upon impact activating sunlight (as in the spell) in a 20 ft. radius, must make a DC 15 Ref save or be blinded for 1d4 rounds, comes in sets of 4.

Screaming Mimi (300 gp) – a small disk that can be thrown up to 30 ft., explodes upon impact activating a sonic blast (as in the spell) in a 20 ft. radius, must make a DC 15 Fort save or become deafened for 1d4 rounds, can also be attached to a flat surface for a 3 second delayed effect, comes in sets of 2.

Stink Bomb (300 gp) – a small marble sphere that can be thrown up to 30 ft., explodes upon impact, releasing a thick green cloud filled with noxious fumes, which covers a 20 ft. radius, must make a DC 15 Fort save or become nauseous for 1d4 rounds, can be dropped on flat surface for a 3 second delayed effect, comes in sets of 4.

### Outer Wear

All coats are crafted from the finest Lamordian leather with double-stitched seams. Water-proofing is added free of charge.

The Bat (10000 gp) – at the press of two hidden studs (on the left and right side of the collar), this coat transforms into a large pair of bat-like wings, grants wearer the ability to fly with a movement speed of 60 ft. with good maneuverability for up to 1d6+2 rounds, also grants wearer Dodge feat (+1 AC bonus) while in flight.

The Chameleon (5000 gp) – this coat is treated with a unique chemical compound that changes color to fit its environment, grants +5 bonus to Hide checks and -2 penalty to all opponents' attack rolls.

The Porcupine 7500 gp) – at the press of two hidden studs (on the left and right side of the collar), this coat sprouts long metallic spikes, grants +1 AC bonus to wearer, deals 1d6 piercing damage to any opponent that uses a natural attack against or is grappled by the wearer.

The Turtle (3000 gp) – this coat is reinforced with tightly inter-meshed steel lining, grants +2 AC bonus to wearer and comes with one of the following attributes: Axeblock (slashing) / Hammerblock (bludgeoning) / Spearblock (piercing) which grants damage reduction 5/ against named attack.

### Prosthetics

All prosthetics are made from wood or metal (brass, steel, or bronze). Paint or varnish can be applied to achieve whatever color a customer chooses. These are not the crude peg-legs or hook-hands commonly seen; these items provide full functionality, are sized for a personal fit, and are guaranteed to feel like the real thing. Smaller items (such as extremities or features) can also be crafted from gold, silver, or a combination of the two (known as white gold) upon request.

Extremities – fingers and toes (100 - 500 gp).

Features – ears, eyes, nose (500 - 2500 gp).

Limbs – arms, feet, hands, legs (2500 – 10000gp).



## THE ACTION FROCK

This is not really one set of clothes, but rather an overarching concept. Very early on in Daly's career, he struck upon the idea of taking all of the individual enhancements he had mastered and combining them into one integrated outfit. Ever since, he has sought out the means to turn this dream ensemble into a reality. He considers each individual piece he creates as a "proof of concept" that he hopes to impress his patrons with. He asks every noble he works for to provide seed money for this project, but these entreaties are rarely successful.

There are currently three combinations he is working on – one for rangers, one for fighters, and one for rogues. Each of these suits are at various stages of completion, but only Daly himself can tell them apart. Whenever he is working on one, there are bits and pieces haphazardly strewn around his workshop. It is interesting to note that this is the one time his workspace ever gets messy, as his thoughts and actions become increasingly frenzied the longer he works on the following arrangements:

Fighter Suit – Porcupine Cloak, Boots of Leaping, Blast Goggles.

Ranger Suit – Turtle Cloak, Boots of Maneuverability, Eagle-Eyed Goggles.

Rogue Suit – Chameleon Cloak, Boots of Speed, Owl-Eyed Goggles.

These groupings roughly correspond to defense (Ranger Suit), offense (Fighter Suit), and stealth (Rogue Suit) modes. (Daly hopes to one day integrate all three into one outfit that can switch between them at will, but that day is far down the road.) Getting all of these enhancements to work in unison proved difficult until he discovered the breakthrough concept he has dubbed the Thinking Cap.

### *The Thinking Cap*

This is the crowning result of Daly's life-long research and the literal engine that drives the Action Frock. Originally, Daly was stuck on how to both connect

and provide power to each item within the outfit. At first, he tried to create a removable power supply that could be worn as a backpack, but that proved too bulky. The wires and tubing that were needed to connect all these items of clothing (ranging from head to toe) were also too cumbersome and prone to breaking.

For a long time he worked on reducing the size of the entire assembly by using smaller and smaller components, but found that he could not shrink it down enough to be practical. He went through dozens upon dozens of different designs that proved either too expensive or didn't provide enough power.

Only after an accidental discovery of the unique property of some quartz crystals he had lying around his lab did the real breakthrough occur. After putting several of the gems through alternating phlogostinator and aetherizer treatments, they seemed to have become especially attuned to each other. Daly is not quite sure why it works, but he theorizes that the crystals' vibrations are synchronized by this tempering process.

He also found an additional serendipitous property of his processed quartz. The crystals can communicate with each other by using the wearer's own skin as a conductive element! He assembles his Action Frock by taking these small, charged gems and sewing them carefully into each piece of clothing he wants to use. He also installs a thin steel ring around them that connects each crystal with the wearer's bare flesh. Thus, the minute electrical impulse which emanates from the quartz is carried along the surface of the skin, allowing it to "communicate" with each of the other crystals and eliminating the need for wires.

All of these separate elements are controlled by Daly's Thinking Cap, which is nothing more than a common top hat or bowler hat with a small power generator hidden inside it. There is also a larger piece of quartz attached to this assembly, which makes contact with the skin on the wearer's head. This so-

called Master Gem can be activated by the wearer's thoughts and is used to transmit commands (turn on, turn off, etc.) to the lesser quartz crystals scattered throughout the outfit.

### TOP HAT JACK

Daly's work with forces he doesn't fully understand comes with a price, however; the Thinking Cap is not properly insulated. The electric signals sent back and forth between the quartz crystals have a subtle but nefarious effect upon the wearer's personality. After repeated donning, the wearer's Id is tapped into and brought to the forefront of the wearer's mind, transforming them into a more bestial version of themselves. This alter ego is interested only in fulfilling a person's baser instincts, most often by creating violence and seeking pleasure.

When Daly tried out his first Action Frock, the biofeedback permanently altered his brainwaves, and with each subsequent donning of the Thinking Cap he is transformed into a terrifying creature which has since been dubbed Top Hat Jack by the population at large. All the accumulated disappointments in his life – the exile from his homeland, the constant soliciting for funds, the failures of his previous designs – fuels this vile transformation and turns him into a twisted mockery of everything he stands for. Unfortunately, he is not yet aware of this rather alarming defect in his invention, or the extreme effect it has on him.

#### *The Transformation*

Daly's physical transformation is not instantaneous, it takes about ten minutes to take full effect. Neither is it painful; in fact, he cannot feel the change take place at all. During this time, he enters a trance state, which does not end until he returns to normal. Much like an infected lycanthrope, Daly does not fully remember his actions while in his bestial form; he only has vague dreamlike recollections and tells himself that these missing periods of time are brought on by nervous exhaustion due to overworking.

The first thing that changes is that his skin loses color, the ruddy red flush fading to a pale white or even gray like a corpse. Next his eyes bulge out and shift around constantly, as if he can't fix his gaze on any one spot for long. Then, Daly's hair grows longer, taking on a coppery red tint, and sticks out in tangled patches from under his top hat and across his forehead. Finally, his mouth becomes fixed in a wide, rictus-like grin that never wavers. The overall effect of these changes is very unsettling to anyone who gazes upon him.

The biggest change is his voice; it fluctuates between a low, menacing growling to a high-pitched tittering. His intonation changes from word to word and he always puts an accent on the wrong syllables. His anharmonic timbre grates on everyone within earshot. He usually punctuates the end of every sentence with a maniacal laugh.

It is interesting to note that even though Daly's hands and feet become clawed after this transformation, this is usually undetectable because Top Hat Jack is always wearing boots and gloves. Also, once the transformation is complete, Top Hat Jack will either grab Daly's straight razor, a Dart Launcher, or Hand Blade to use as a weapon.

**How it Works:** Each transformation (from Daly to Top Hat Jack or back again) takes 1d6+2 rounds to complete and lasts for 1d12+5 turns (for a minimum of one hour and a maximum of three hours). Only if Daly is killed while in this form will he revert to his original appearance before this time is up. His Dexterity and Intelligence scores gain a +2 bonus, his Constitution and Strength scores gain a +1 bonus, and his Charisma and Wisdom scores gain a -2 penalty while he remains in this state. All other abilities granted by the particular Action Frock he is wearing stack with these bonuses and penalties.

#### *Modus Operandi*

When Daly's transformation into Top Hat Jack is complete, he feels an overwhelming urge to rush out

into the city to seek out victims. While the targets he chooses seem to be random, he will most likely hone in on someone who is well-dressed (and thus likely wealthy) and attack them whether they are alone or in a crowd. In fact, he seems to enjoy having an audience during these encounters, feeling that the more people he can terrorize, the better.

He always travels by rooftop, hopping and climbing from building to building, cackling along the way. Since he is moving so fast and running so high up, he is hard to spot to any onlookers below.. When he chooses a victim, he will leap down into the street and land with a dramatic flourish, surprising everyone with his sudden appearance. What he does next is anyone's guess. Sometimes he jumps in and out of the crowd, throwing punches and attacking anyone within reach and sowing as much confusion as possible. At other times, he will abduct a random target (usually a female) and leap back up to the rooftops with them. Then he will turn around and taunt the gathering crowd with ribald songs and cruel (and unfunny) jokes such as the following:

*Q: "What did the five fingers say to the face?"*

*A: He attacks the nearest person in the crowd with an open-handed or closed-fist attack.*

*Q: "How is a raven like a writing desk?"*

*A: "They both go 'splat' when you drop a rock on them." Then he attacks the nearest person in the crowd with a projectile weapon.*

*Q: "What is white and black and red all over?"*

*A: "Your funeral gown/tuxedo." Then he attacks the nearest person in the crowd with a *melée* weapon.*

The chilling part about this routine is that he sometimes kills his victims seemingly without a second thought, and at other times will toy with them for a short time and then leave them alive. No matter what the outcome, an encounter with Top Hat Jack is sure to be horrific and become the only thing anyone in town talks about for days on end.

With each retelling of these encounters, his actions and features become more and more exaggerated and his legend continues to grow. Some scholars believe he is a vampire or some other creature of the night. Others think he is a noble who has grown bored with his life of luxury and is seeking out new thrills to keep himself entertained. The more religious-minded believe him to be a literal demon sent from hell to punish effete and decadent city dwellers. There are even some people that belong to the lower classes that view him as a sort of folk hero, who fights against all odds to defeat the powers-that-be (ironically fulfilling Daly's long-time wish to uplift the downtrodden).

Since Daly does not don The Thinking Cap regularly (he is only able to work on his pet project between paying jobs), Top Hat Jack's appearances are usually very sporadic. He may strike at the same location for several nights in a row or appear in random spots over a period of a few weeks, just to disappear entirely for a year or more (depending on how often he has to visit a particular city). The local authorities have neither the time nor the resources to deal with such an outré menace. Despite their best efforts and intense pressure from affected nobles, they have not been able to establish a clear pattern for these attacks.



**DREAD POSSIBILITY: RED HERRINGS**

After enough appearances, someone is bound to tie Top Hat Jack's encounters to Daly's visits to town. If PCs or other investigators connect the dots between his various contraptions and Top Hat Jack's "supernatural abilities", there are two ways to draw attention away from the itinerant inventor. One is the manikins he uses to hold his frocks, which he stores inside a closet when he is not working on them. These mannequins are rudimentary models, made out of wood and wiring. If the DM so chooses, some unique quality of the Thinking Cap could cause one of these manikins to animate and go out on nightly excursions all by itself.

Alternatively, one of Daly's assistants could be the true culprit, violating his master's orders to never wear the enhanced suit. Not wanting to share the credit for this great discovery, the apprentice tries it on one night and is forever transformed. Along the same lines, perhaps a rather daring thief attempted to procure this advantageous outfit for himself, and in the process bit off more than he could chew. Even a former patron of Daly's could be used as a red herring; maybe the inventor provided his benefactor a crude prototype to test out that has since gone haywire!

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*Woe is me! Woe to my mother that she ever birthed such a scoundrel! Hark to me and hear my tale of tragedy and ruin. Once I was just like you, my lovely audience, enjoying the gentlemanly pursuits of my station. I threw all those comforts away, however, chasing the phantoms of my baser desires. The results of which was a half-life wandering the blackest underworld dens in a state of utter stupefaction.*

*Only by the grace of the gods did I escape my well-deserved fate. Don't let what happened to me happen to your very own sons and daughters! Come and bear witness to wisdom so dearly bought...*

- excerpt from *The Admissions of an Avowed Opium-Eater*

**RAFAEL LORGHAN AKA THE OPIUM-EATER**

**Male Human, Rogue4/Charlatan4:** CR 8; SZ Medium Humanoid (6 ft.); HD 4d6 + 4d6 +8; hp 46; Init +2; Spd 30 ft.; AC 12 (touch 10, flat-footed 12); Atk +6/+1 melee (1d6 rapier), +8/+3 ranged (1d4 dagger); SA Sneak Attack, Trapfinding; SQ Captivating, Charmer, Confidence Game, Crowd Pleaser, Evasion, Infamous, Trap Sense, Uncanny Dodge, Weapon and Armor Proficiency (Simple); AL LE; SV Fort +3, Ref +2, Will +4; Str 10, Dex 15, Con 13, Int 14, Wis 11, Cha 15

**Skills:** Appraise +6, Bluff +8, Craft (alchemy) +5, Diplomacy +5, Disable Device +2, Disguise +6, Escape Artist +4, Forgery +6, Gather Information +6, Hide +4, Innuendo +4, Knowledge (local) +6, Listen +6, Move Silently +5, Open Lock +6, Perform (acting) +4, Profession (herbalist) +4, Search +6, Sense Motive +6, Sleight of Hand +4, Spot +5, Use Magical Device +6

**Feats:** Improved Initiative, Nimble Fingers, Skill Focus (Bluff), Skill Focus (Diplomacy)

**Language:** Mordentish\*, Darkonese, Vaasi

**Signature Possessions:** 2 Briefcases, Cape of the Mountebank, 2 Daggers, Hat of Disguise, Mandolin, Padded Vest, Rapier, Scroll of Invisibility, Thieves' Tools

**Confidence Game (Ex):** When Rafael intends to use his class abilities to pull a con, the chosen mark gets a Will save against a DC equal to his roll on a Bluff, Diplomacy, or Forgery check in an attempt to see through the verbal smoke and mirrors. Rafael can attempt a con 5 times a day.

**Charmer (Su):** Rafael has learned how to ingratiate himself in the eyes of others. He can spend one of his con attempts to charm one individual. This ability requires a Bluff check to determine the DC of the Will



save. If the will save is failed, the target behaves as if under the effect of charm person for a number of hours equal to the Rafael's class level.

*Captivating (Su):* Rafael's persuasive abilities have become so potent that he may spend one of his con attempts to captivate a group of people. This ability requires a Bluff check to determine the DC of the Will save. If the Will save is failed, then the effects of this ability are identical to hypnotism. Rafael's speech takes one round to perform and can affect 2d4 HD of living creatures. This effect lasts for 2d4 rounds.

*Crowd Pleaser (Su):* Rafael may spend one of his con checks to enthrall a group of people. He must speak without interruption for one full round and roll a Bluff or Diplomacy check. The result of the check determines the Will save DC for anyone within range of Rafael's voice. Those affected give him their undivided attention, ignoring their surroundings. The effects last for one hour or as long as Rafael keeps speaking.

*Evasion (Ex):* If exposed to any effect that normally allows him to attempt a Reflex saving throw for half damage, Rafael takes no damage with a successful saving throw.

*Infamous (Ex):* Rafael has become so experienced as a con artist that he has developed a reputation. Townsfolk and nobles conned by Rafael tend to spread word about their experiences. When he rolls a 1 on his con attempt, the target of the con realizes whom they are dealing with.

*Sneak Attack (Ex):* If Rafael can catch an opponent when they are unable to defend themselves, he can strike a vital spot for extra damage. Rafael deals extra damage (2d6) any time his target would be denied a Dexterity bonus to AC, or when he flanks his target.

*Trap Finding (Ex):* Rafael Rogues can use his Search skill to locate traps when the task has a DC higher than 20. Rafael can also use his Disable Device skill to disarm magic traps. If he beats a trap's DC by 10 or more with a Disable Device check, he can study the

trap, figure out how it works, and bypass it without disarming it.

*Trap Sense (Ex):* Rafael has a +1 bonus on Reflex saves made to avoid traps and a +1 dodge bonus to AC against attacks by traps.

*Uncanny Dodge (Ex):* Rafael retains his Dexterity bonus to AC even if he is caught flat-footed or struck by an invisible attacker.

**Appearance:** Rafael is a well-dressed young man with with a handsome face. He has medium-length black hair that he slicks back and tucks behind his ears. He sports a modest mustache but no beard. He wears whatever is fashionable for gentlemen in the domain he is visiting, but can most often be seen wearing a simple white dress shirt tucked into black dress pants.

He wears a plain black traveling cloak whenever encountered outside and carries a matching felt top hat, but seldom wears it. In addition, he travels with a mandolin made of polished maple wood. (He has never been seen to play it, however.)

His most distinguishing features are his dark-rimmed eyes, which give him a hollow, haunted stare. He says this is the after-effect of years of drug use. Besides this, he is handsome and approachable.

He is flirtatious with women and ingratiating with men. He is very good at getting the information he wants out of people, and can subtly turn any conversation to his advantage.

But there is another side that he hides from the public view. After the sun sets, his entire demeanor changes. He speaks more rapidly and a slight tremor enters his voice. He cannot hold his gaze on one thing for long and frequently casts backward glances over his shoulders, as if someone (or something) were following him.

**Background:** Rafael grew up in an extremely dysfunctional household. His father was an abusive drunk who would regularly beat his mother. When he was 14 years old, Rafael attempted to stop a

particularly violent quarrel between the two, but found himself quickly tossed out into the streets after being roughed up by his father. He never returned home after that incident, opting instead to run away and never look back.

He never found out that he was actually the source of much of the marital strife he witnessed, as he was not really his father's son at all, but the result of an affair his mother had and that his father found out about. He also never found out that shortly after he left, his father killed his mother, was hunted down by the local gendarmes and swiftly hung for his crime!

From such tawdry beginnings, he entered the wider world with nothing but the clothes on his back. He quickly learned to fend for himself and turned to petty crime to get by. He started out pick-pocketing, but soon graduated to armed robbery. After a while, he began showing an aptitude for subtler, more intellectual proclivities such as blackmail and confidence games. He was always on the lookout for the next grift that would net him the biggest prize with the least amount of risk. After years of honing his skills, he struck upon a winning formula – using his roguish good looks to woo lonely, wealthy women, then killing and robbing them.

He's performed this kind of bloodthirsty subterfuge well over half a dozen times, and has gotten very good at it.

**Current Sketch:** With each conquest, Rafael has become more and more paranoid, believing his many crimes would be revealed and local gendarmes would seize him at any moment. Eventually, he turned to drugs to placate his conscience. Using his ill-gotten gains to fund this habit, he frequented some of the most infamous vice houses of the Core. After a few heady years, his money finally ran out and he found himself penniless in an opium den in Hazlan. He was a complete shadow of his former self, burnt-out from a myriad of drug-induced escapades.

One day, while he was pleading with his dealer Mashon for one more free sample, he was presented with a unique opportunity. Since Rafael would not

take no for an answer, the dealer, impressed by his persuasiveness, gave him a counter-offer. Mashon and his partner (the owners of Mung's Hideaway) had just developed a new line of designer magical drugs, and they wanted to expand their business beyond the borders of Hazlan. If Rafael agreed to become their agent, they would fund his travels. Having nothing left to lose, he eagerly accepted.

While arrangements were finalized, Mashon and his partner gave Rafael a magical antidote to his opium habit; after all, a hopeless addict was no good to them. The process was not easy, however. For weeks he went through agonizing withdrawal pains, as well as suffering from feverish dreams and hallucinations. Eventually he sobered up, and it was at this time that Rafael came up with the idea of taking on a new identity and posing as an anti-drug crusader. No one would suspect such an individual of any wrongdoing, and it would be a great way to cover his tracks. Plus, he could make even more money off the deal!

In order to effect this ruse, he copied passages from an old, discarded journal left behind in Mung's Hideaway, added a few of his own flourishes, and had the resulting account published as a multi-page pamphlet. His patrons even provided a Hat of Disguise to aid in his deception. Thus prepared, he took to his new position with great zeal, and used his old underworld contacts to introduce the newly-minted magical drugs into the wider world.

**Combat:** Rafael prefers not to enter combat when the odds are against him, whether that entails facing someone who is stronger than him or a large group of foes. If outnumbered, he will not hesitate to flee at the first opportunity, using his Hat of Disguise to blend into the crowd. He prefers to get out of most encounters through guile, but if left no other option but confrontation, he relies on his sneak attack ability to gain advantage over an opponent. If he has time to plan an attack, he strikes with his daggers. He wears his rapier mostly for show, hoping to deter would-be robbers and thieves. He is not especially skilled in its use, but will often scare away more

skilled opponents by bluffing them into backing down.

### THE REDEEMED SCOUNDREL

To the world at large, Rafael presents himself as a scion of a wealthy noble family whose name changes based on his current location (the family is always well-known, but too far away for anyone to know that much about its make-up). He travels the Core giving lectures about the dangers of opium use and the benefits of the Cure-Alls he sells. He caters these demonstrations to local temperance clubs, religious groups, and other social welfare organizations. (These types of gatherings are usually found in the more cosmopolitan areas of the Core such as Darkon, Dementlieu, Lamordia and so forth.)

He is usually well-received by the gullible customers he targets, but doctors and other medical professionals remain skeptical of his claims. Those in desperate straits, however, are more than willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and are easily swayed by his extraordinary declarations about the effectiveness of his miracle cures.

Whenever he comes into town, Rafael has a few places he likes to set up this con. He sometimes makes a deal with the local innkeeper to rent out a large meeting room (or even a small corner of the lobby if nothing else is available) in which he can hold nightly seminars. In some places, he approaches the local clergy to sponsor his engagement so it can be held at area churches. If he is new to a particular town, he will first try to drum up interest by setting up shop in the main market in town and hand out pamphlets to passersby.

Rafael is very adept at quickly assimilating into the upper class social circles, and often sticks around town for several weeks or even a couple of months at a time. He is very genial and considers himself something of a dilettante; he enjoys learning about the current fashions and the latest trends amongst the people of the lands he travels in. (And if truth be told, he loves being the center of attention.) This

facade cannot be sustained forever, however, as sometimes he overstays his welcome and has to make a quick exit as his ruse slowly unravels. Once or twice he has even been driven out of town, and is careful never to return lest the local authorities seize him on sight.

### *The Admissions of an Avowed Opium-Eater*

Rafael's presentation is the same no matter where he decides to hold court. He has two bulky suitcases with fold-out legs that convert them into make-shift tables. He opens the first one and leaves the lid up, displaying a red velvet interior with several divots holding his Cure-All bottles. On the other one he places more bottles and spreads out his pamphlets.

Rafael is a very charismatic and persuasive speaker; he is adept at working a room and can easily hold an audience in rapt attention for hours. He recounts his life story in vivid detail and with great oratory flourishes. He speaks of his opium addiction in contrasting tones – reverentially at some turns, and chillingly at others. He is very convincing, and most people who attend these performances leave with a bottle or two of his Cure-Alls in their hands.

The general outline of his supposed biography unfolds thusly:

As a boy he suffered from a congenital disorder that caused him wracking stomach pains. He was first exposed to opium while away at college, and it was presented as a sure-fire cure for his chronic condition. It worked for a time, and he was even able to graduate and obtain a job as a freelance writer. But as the years went by, he came to rely more and more on the drug to get him through all the trials of life. Eventually, opium took over his entire life, as all his money went to feed his habit and he became stuck in a never-ending cycle of self-recriminations and despair.

In time, it became impossible for him to function at all. His family put him up in a local hospice for respite care, and that is where he met Dr. Stillwell. The doctor asked him to be a guinea pig for his own

newly-discovered treatment, and Rafael was so desperate that he readily agreed. Happily, this fortuitous meeting led to the eventual cure of his sorry condition. He and the doctor became partners, and now he travels the land promoting his Cure-Alls in the hopes of helping others avoid the same pitfalls he did.

### Introduction

"I hereby present to you, my dear audience, the record of a remarkable period in my life. I trust it shall prove a most interesting record, one that is both instructive and useful. Therefore, I must apologize for breaking through that delicate social reservation which restrains us from the public airing of our personal infirmities.

"I readily admit, without breach of truth or modesty, that my life has been, on the whole, one of a philosopher: from birth I have been an intellectual creature, and have pursued knowledge with great vigor since my schoolboy days. I have pursued the use of opium-eating in a similar manner, and must confess to having indulged in it to an excess not yet recorded."

### Initial Encounter

"It has been so long since I first took opium that I would have long since forgotten the occasion if it were not such a momentous turning point in my personal history. It was a sunny Spring day in my third year at university. From an early age I had been vexed by chronic stomach pains, and was often forced to take extreme actions to achieve any kind of relief from them. One morning, I awoke with the familiar excruciating pains and took a walk to try and stimulate my blood when I met a college acquaintance, who upon seeing my unhappy predicament recommended opium. Opium! Dread agent of unimaginable pleasure and pain! Would that I had never heard of it. Now, what solemn chords of sorrow does it strike upon my heart!

"I arrived at my current lodgings after procuring the recommended quantity, and lost not a moment in

taking the prescribed amount. I was ignorant, then, of the art of opium preparation. I managed to down it nevertheless, and, lo! After a space of one hour there was such an upheaval of my inner spirit, as if the whole world opened up before me! My pains had not only vanished, but there was an immense feeling of divine enjoyment that had replaced them! Here was a panacea for all human woes, the very secret of happiness which philosophers thirsted after!"

### Psychedelic Visions

"Before my opium addiction fully took hold, the plain and ordinary human face often appeared in my dreams, but never with an evil import. But now, that which I have dubbed the Tyranny of the Face began to unfold within my imagination. Upon the rocky waters of my dreams the human face began to appear more and more often – in windows, on pavement, in the very clouds themselves. Sometimes I dreamed of an ocean with innumerable faces riding upon the waves, upturned towards the heavens – carrying with them expressions of wrath, despair, and every emotion in between.

"My sense of space, and subsequently of time as well, were both powerfully affected. Buildings and landscapes affected proportions so vast that my mind's eye could not even behold it all. Space swirled around me, at times pushing me forward and at others forcing me back. More disturbing still were the contortions of time I experienced. I seemed to have lived 100 years in one night, nay sometimes my body felt the full weight of millennia pressing in on it!

"This and other changes to my dreams were accompanied by deep-seated anxiety and gloomy melancholy. I seemed every night to descend into chasms of sunless abysses from which hope could never escape. Nor did I, by waking, escape from such terrible depths. Words cannot describe the utter darkness that followed me everywhere."



### Side Effects

“The pleasure that wine or ale provides takes time to build, and declines quickly; that from opium, however, lasts for eight to ten hours. To borrow a medical term, the former is an acute pleasure, the latter is chronic. The primary distinction between the two is that spirits disorder the mental faculties, but opium enhances them. Alcohol robs a man of self-possession; opium greatly invigorates it.

“Intellectual torpor was my constant companion during the four years in which I was under the languorous spell of my opium love-affair. But for misery and suffering, it could be said that I existed only in a dormant state of mind. I seldom could prevail to write a letter, or leave my bedroom at all. I went for days without speaking to anyone and often forgot the sound of my own voice.”

### Quitting the Habit

“I am often asked, why did I not release myself from the horrors of opium by wholly quitting or else greatly proscribing my intake earlier? Be assured, I made many attempts to reduce and diminish the quantity I used. But the agony that these efforts engendered were too great for me to continue for long. It is a common mistake of those that know nothing of this dread drug. To be sure, diminishing usage will at first seem an easy and enjoyable thing, but after several days of abstinence it leads to ever increasing suffering.

“A crisis arrived in my life, compounded upon all the other afflictions I suffered through during my pursuit of ever-increasing opium highs. One day, during a rare instance of lucidity, I saw that I would most certainly die if I continued with my habit. I determined, therefore, that if required to I would die throwing it off.

“Philosophers conjecture that it may be as painful to be born as to die. I believe it, as during the whole period of diminishing my opium intake I experienced all the torments of the pits of hell, and was left

feeling like a man passing out of one mode of existence into another.

“I triumphed over my demons, eventually, dear audience. But at what price? The dejected state I was left in lasted for several months. Almost daily my body would switch between agitated and enervated; my mood would cycle from aspiring to lackadaisical within hours. Still, I had won back my body and mind, and I vowed never to return to such a loathsome, lowly station ever again.”

### *The Cure-Alls*

After this main presentation is over, Rafael will segue into his sales pitch. He will point dramatically to the bottles standing on his suitcases and describe how he was cured of his addiction thanks to the pioneering efforts of Dr. Stillwell. He picks up each bottle and presents them to the audience, outlining a long list of common medical conditions that each will supposedly cure. He proudly proclaims that these man-made elixirs work on the most persistent and stubborn of diseases, promising a miraculous lifeline to long-suffering or terminally ill patients. If anyone in the audience scoffs or challenges these assertions, he will present himself as living proof of their effectiveness.

Every once in a while, to further the seeming verisimilitude of his statements, he will hire a local ne'er-do-well to pretend to be another success story of Dr. Stillwell's, or else he name drops a famous local celebrity that he claims uses these Cure-Alls in secret. Such endorsements usually persuade any doubters as to the legitimacy of their effectiveness.

The name and indications for each Cure-All are as follows:

Antoradone – treats abscesses, bules, dropsy, impetigo, jaundice, the pox, scarlatina, jaundice, and other disorders of the skin!

Bagomeer – alleviates apoplexy, debility, disrupted menses, hysteria, lumbago, metritis, milk leg, womb fever, and other feminine disorders!

Bellanice – remedies ague, consumption, croup, distemper, epitaxis, grippe, lockjaw and other disorders of the lungs!

Maxocan – cures brain fevers, catalepsy, chorea, enervation, glandular fever, paralytic fits, vertigo and other disorders of the nerves!

Noxinocte – assuages biliousness, cirrhosis, diarrhea, dyspepsia, fatty liver, gout, nausea, rickets, and other disorders of the stomach!

Seratopia – palliates the blue devils, delirium tremens, depression, intemperance, mania, melancholia, and other disorders of the mood!

It should be noted that this ruse is not required by his employers, but is something he dreamed up all by himself. (Plus, it keeps him occupied while waiting for supplies or buyers to arrive to town.) He loves playing the long con, and this ironic juxtaposition between his public and private persona amuses him greatly. He firmly believes he can pull this scheme off indefinitely, and loves pulling one over his impressionable marks.

Of course, these potions do not cure anything at all. The best one can expect is either a temporary relief from their symptoms (until the problem goes away by itself) or a complete recovery thanks to the placebo effect. Rafael frequently offers discounts, as his 'potions' cost pennies to manufacture (the glass bottles are the most expensive part of the operation) and any profits he makes are his to keep.

Rafael's wares are nothing more than cheap concoctions, composed of sugar water, a trace amount of Abfalduz extract (the only ingredient that grants any pain relief whatsoever), a variety of fillers to add flavor, and dyes for color. They come in dark glass bottles that range in size from small through medium to large. Simple, hand-written paper labels are glued on their fronts.

The recommended prices and amounts are as follows:

Small (for acute pain) – approximately one week's dosage (10 gp).

Medium (for moderate or intermittent pain) – approximately one month's dosage (30 gp).

Large (for chronic pain) – approximately six to twelve month's dosage (100 gp).

## THE DOUBLE AGENT

The story Rafael tells is totally made up, of course. If examined closely, it is clear that there are a lot of holes and inconsistencies in his biography. He is used to making things up on the fly that sound convincing, however, as he plucks knowledge from his personal history of crime and drug abuse to fill in the details that make his story sound authentic.

His real purpose is to sell and distribute the unique variety of magical drugs which his employers have created. So, while during the day time he pretends to be an upright and concerned citizen, by night he visits thieves guilds, gambling parlors, houses of ill-repute, and other dens of iniquity to hawk his true wares. Of course, to aid in this subterfuge, Rafael utilizes his Hat of Disguise so he is not recognized by one of his "day-time" clients, as he calls them.

Rafael has contacts all over the Core thanks to his previous larcenous activities, and finds it just as easy to plug into this seedy underworld as he did into high society. He is more cautious and direct in his dealings here, and always seeks to make arrangements that are beneficial to all parties involved. He has an itinerary set up by his employers, and visits his regular distribution centers about once every six months.

Rafael does not only sell the magical drugs, but also obtains the ingredients necessary to manufacture them. The plants and herbs needed come from near and far, and he spends most of his time in and around the seaports that dot the coasts of the Sea of Sorrows and the Nocturnal Sea while he waits for the more exotic materials to arrive from remote domains.

Thanks to his employers, Rafael has rooms permanently rented out in several different cities across the Core that serve as “hubs” for the illicit drug trade. At various times of the year, he can be found at the Yawning Eddy in Martira Bay, the Inn of the Last Breath in Ste. Ronges, the Grizzled Boar Inn in Zeidenburg, and the Sailor's Hearth in Egertus. He stays in the quarters above Mung's Hideaway in Sly-Var when he periodically checks in with his employers for new orders and a re-application of their opium withdrawal elixir.

### *Magical Drugs*

These substances come in small, concentrated cubes and can be imbibed in a variety of ways – either burned like incense, smoked through a pipe, or even mashed up and added to food. They can even be diluted and injected as well, but this is not recommended as it leads to more intense reactions.

If questioned, Rafael neither knows or cares about which ingredients are used to make which compound; he works from a list he has been given. His employers have taught him some herb lore throughout the years, however, so he is not fooled by fake or impure products. Although he is well versed in what each drug is used for, he is unaware of their sometimes lethal side effects.

Rafael does not partake of any of these drugs himself, as he has been warned by Mashon and his partner to not sample the merchandise. However, he often gives into the temptation to imbibe a small amount of opium when he frequents his customer's establishments. (He keeps this a secret from his benefactors.)

### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: WAKING NIGHTMARES**

While Mashon's opium withdrawal elixir is effective, there is an unforeseen side effect that comes with it. Whenever Rafael gives into temptation and takes up the opium pipe once again, it awakens a latent power within his mind that brings his psychedelic visions into the real world. Unfortunately, his thoughts are so strange and disordered during those times that these manifestations take the shape of an amorphous blob with odd arrangements of limbs and misplaced organs. Basically, he can conjure up a Fiyhr of Rank 1 or Rank 2 (see the Report on Fiyhrs in QTR #11 for details). Unbeknownst to him, he has spawned several of these creatures throughout the Core.

Most of these Fiyhrs do not live longer than 24 hours, but some have managed to survive longer and are instinctively drawn to Rafael. If the DM chooses, one or two of these hangers-on may even combine to form a Fiyhr of Rank 3 or higher and prey upon the local population. Rafael would surely want to avoid this scenario as it could draw the unwanted attention of local authorities, and so may approach PCs himself to hire them to get rid of the problem discreetly.

### 1) Dragon Fog / Inhaled / 10 gp / Alchemy DC 13

Description: A viscous, dark blue liquid with shiny, white flecks floating within it. It has a unique odor that users have likened to the air after a summer storm. This mild sedative is crafted from Lotus Tree Nectar and leaves from the Black Avis; it lessens the intensity of dreams or nightmares, thus giving the imbiber an exceptionally refreshing sleep.

Initial Effect: id4 hours after inhalation, subject falls into a deep sleep that lasts for 2d4 + 4 hours.

Secondary Effect: Any fear or madness effects the imbiber may be suffering from are lessened by one degree of severity, and any mind-affecting spell effects (such as charm person) are removed.

Side Effect: All Wisdom (and related skills) checks made within the first 24 hours after waking have a +1 bonus. If inhaled 3 times in one week the opposite effect will occur – all Wisdom (and related skills) checks made within the first 24 hours after waking have a -1 penalty.

Overdose: User comes to the attention of one of the members of the Nightmare Court and could potentially be physically transported to the Nightmare Lands (DM's discretion).

Addiction Rating – Low / Satiation – 5 days / Damage – Wis (1d3)

### 2) Phantom Tears / Inhaled / 5 gp / Alchemy DC 15

Description: This colorless liquid becomes gray and cloudy when shaken, and has a smoky odor. This compound is crafted from a unique mixture of Quovusp Root and Wraithroot leaves and is believed to enhance the imbiber's "sixth sense", allowing them to peer into the spirit world.

Initial Effect: Subject can see into the Border Ethereal, making ghosts (as well as other magically camouflaged creatures visible (within 60 ft.) for the next 1d6+2 hours.

Secondary Effect: Loss of visual attunement to the physical world, causing -2 penalty to Search and Spot checks for the next 1d6+2 hours.

Side Effect: Imbibers report experiencing feelings of "floatiness" in their extremities, causing -1 penalty to Dex (and related skills) checks for the first 24 hours after use.

Overdose: The imbiber loses 1 point of Constitution per day permanently. If Constitution score reaches 0 they are transferred to the Border Ethereal, unable to be seen or manipulate objects on the physical plane.

Addiction Rating - Low / Satiation – 10 days / Damage – Con (1d4)

### 3) Restful Repose / Inhaled / 15 gp / Alchemy DC 17

Description: A bright green, oily liquid that is sticky to the touch. It is odorless and loses its color when added to any other liquid. This strange concoction is made from a combination of Erl Queen's Lace, Hermitshawl, and an unknown quantity of Zombie Blood. It slows down all biological functions of its user while still allowing them to retain mental and motor control of their body – thus imitating the actions and abilities of the undead.

Initial Effect: Subject gains all undead traits (darkvision, immunity to poison, sleep, paralysis, stunning, disease and death effects and is not subject to critical hits, nonlethal damage, ability drain or energy drain attacks) and does not need to breathe, sleep, or eat for next 1d8+3 hours.

Secondary Effect: Skin begins to decay at an accelerated pace, given user the appearance of a rotting corpse with 1d4 hours after initial use (first skin dries out and becomes scaly, then the "scales" start flaking off).

Side Effect: All Dexterity (and related skills) checks made within 24 hours after use have a -2 penalty.

Overdose: Imbiber becomes catatonic (awake but unresponsive) for 1d6+2 days, creating a high probability of their being buried alive.

Addiction Rating – Medium / Satiation – 5 days / Damage – (Con 1d4)

### 4) Mind Slime / Inhaled / 10 gp / Alchemy DC 15

Description: This is a tarry black substance that smells like molasses. It contains Henbane, Aconite, and trace amounts of other alkaloid plants. This psychoactive drug is popular among wizards and other scholars for its power to boost mental acuity.

Initial Effect: All Intelligence (and related skills) checks gain +3 bonus for 24 hours and user can read the thoughts (like the spell) of any creature that it concentrates on (within 30 ft.).



Secondary Effect: All Wisdom (and related skills) checks have -3 penalty for the following 24 hours.

Side Effect: Users continue to hear random thoughts of others around them for 1d4 days after use.

Overdose: The imbiber permanently loses 1 point of Intelligence and automatically fails a madness check - potentially developing a multiple personality disorder due to being unable to filter out the thoughts of those around them.

Addiction Rating – High / Satiation – 2 days / Damage – Wis (1d4)

#### 5) Troll Knuckle / Inhaled / 30 gp / Alchemy DC 20

Description: A brightly glowing yellow liquid that congeals quickly when exposed to air. This substance is crafted from an odd aggregation of Belladonna, Meekulbern Berries, and Spuma Vitae; it can be used by doctors and other healers to numb a patient's pain for a short time.

Initial Effect: Subject feels no pain from injuries or wounds for the next 1d6+3 hours. They can also continue combat if their HP is below zero (up to -20 points). Any saving throws required to prevent death automatically succeed.

Secondary Effect: User's senses are dulled. All Dexterity and Intelligence (and related skills) checks have -2 penalties for the next 24 hours.

Side Effect: Imbiber becomes easily frustrated with difficult tasks resulting in short, violent outbursts if they fail any DC check for the next 1d4 days after use.

Overdose: At the start of combat, user flies into a berserker rage (not being able to distinguish between friend or foe) that lasts 1d6+4 rounds.

Addiction Rating – Medium / Satiation – 2 days / Damage – Dex 1d4

#### 6) Crimson Caress / Inhaled / 30 gp / Alchemy DC 20

Description: This is a bright red, semi-opaque liquid that has a spicy odor and burns the tongue. This tincture's main ingredient is Somnos Berries,

combined with the rind of Passionflesh Fruit, and a sprinkling of pulverized Devil's Tears. It is sometimes described as a love potion, but is mostly used by actors, singers, and other entertainers to enhance their performances.

Initial Effect: Grants +2 bonus to all Charisma based (and related skills) checks for 1d8+4 hours.

Secondary Effect: Imbiber automatically succeeds at all Diplomacy, Gather Information, Intimidate, and Perform checks for 1d4+2 hours.

Side Effect: User becomes overly amorous and friendly with everyone around them, and automatically fails opposing Bluff and Sense Motive checks.

Overdose: Subject becomes fascinated with one individual (within 30 ft.) that they have strong feelings towards (whether they find that individual friendly or disagreeable), and must keep them within sight at all times for the next 72 hours.

Addiction Rating – High / Satiation – 7 days / Damage – Wis 1d4

#### 7) Hell's Nettle / Inhaled / 20 gp / Alchemy DC 18

Description: This is a golden-hued paste that feels slightly oily to the touch and smells strongly of alcohol. This substance is a blend of Tsongha Fruit and Foxglove; it is commonly used to boost someone's physical performance for a short period of time.

Initial Effect: Grants the user +2 bonus to Dexterity (and related skills) checks, adds +15 feet to the movement rate, +1 to initiative rolls, and the user cannot be caught flat-footed for 1d6+3 hours.

Secondary Effect: Imbiber becomes hyper-focused on whatever task they are performing, gaining a +2 bonus to Intelligence (and related skills) checks, but incurring a -2 penalty on Charisma (and related skills) checks.

Side Effect: Subject becomes obsessed with showing off and taking unnecessary risk, automatically failing

Wisdom (and related skills) checks for 1d4+2 hours after use.

Overdose: Imbiber can't stop talking, is shifty-eyed, and is constantly twitching, permanently losing 1 point of Dexterity and Charisma.

Addiction Rating – High / Satiation – 1 day / Damage – Dex 1d4

#### 8) The Broken Rainbow / Inhaled / 20 gp / Alchemy DC 21

Description: This milky gray liquid has an odor that stings the nose and its potency has to be cut with some sort of added filler (usually plant oil or animal fat) in order to become palatable. This elixir is made from Bitterblot, a dash of Henbane, and Applewort. It is very popular among artists and writers, because it supposedly opens up unused neural pathways in the brain and enhances one's creativity and imagination.

Initial Effect: Grants +3 Wisdom (and all skills) checks for 1d4 days.

Secondary Effect: Users can decipher magical texts, comprehend languages, and use magical items that they are normally unable to.

Side Effect: Other people's faces have no features to the user and all lights take on different characteristics in their eyes (appearing as wavy lines, multi-colored starbursts, blinding flares, or even in negative (black is white and white is black)).

Overdose: Users cannot distinguish between the real and imaginary, losing all sense of the environment around them. Most end up flinging themselves out of windows, jumping off cliffs, or falling down stairs and inadvertently killing themselves.

Addiction Rating – Medium / Satiation – 5 days / Damage – Wis 1d4

#### 9) Whalen's Panacea / Inhaled / 30 gp / Alchemy DC 15

Description: This dark green syrup has a very musky odor that permeates the entire area when exposed to air. This potion's main ingredients are Caldura Rose, Vistan's Tears, and the seeds of a Goblin Lime; it can quickly heal damage, but is rarely used due to its highly addictive quality and nasty side effects.

Initial Effect: Heals 5 hit points every hour for the next 1d6 hours.

Secondary Effect: Counteracts any poison or disease (even of magical or supernatural origin) the subject is suffering under or exposed to within the next 24 hours.

Side Effect: All Constitution (and related skills) checks have -2 penalty, the subject is prone to vomiting randomly and their skin begins to take on a green hue for 1d6+2 days after first use.

Overdose: User grows 1d6+2 tumors on their face and extremities, permanently losing 1 point of Dexterity and Charisma.

Addiction Rating – High / Satiation – 3 days / Damage – Con 1d4

#### **TRUE HISTORY**

Rafael is a serial womanizer, a Bluebeard killer, and an inveterate conman. But his true history hides even more deadly secrets - one he is all too keenly aware of and one he is happily oblivious to.

The first is that this man is actually the same Rafe that killed Susannah Joson and robbed her family (see Children of the Night: Ghosts for details). He is completely unaware that Susannah's spirit has risen from the grave, as he has long since moved on from that particular affair. Still, it would be interesting to see his reaction if he ever learns that he has left yet another ghost in his wake. Speaking of which...

His second secret is that he is quite literally haunted by the ghosts of his past – in this case two former brides named Lucinda and Mildred. He hides this fact

from everyone he meets (including his erstwhile business partners); whenever they manifest he tries to play it cool for as long as he can stand, but his odd behavior eventually betrays him.

It was Rafael's ghostly brides' continual presence that originally drove him to seek out opium as a possible respite for his troubles. This ploy did work for a short time, but as his tolerance for the drug increased, he found that he had to consume ever growing amounts in order for it to be effective. (It should be noted that his drug use did not actually make the two spirits disappear, but the psychedelic visions it induced allowed him to ignore them.)

### *Ghosts of the Past*

Lucinda was the first spirit to appear to Rafael. She is a sweet, innocent girl who even now doesn't fully realize she is dead. She was only 19 years old when Rafael married her, and was still very naive about the workings of the world. She is still in love with Rafael, and tries to use her supernatural abilities to make his life easier. Unfortunately, whenever she manifests in the physical realm, she has a decayed appearance which mimics the current state of her body as it rots in her grave.

Lucinda wears a fancy white dress with a hem that goes all the way down to her feet, which are sheathed in white satin slippers. Her hair is long and wispy. Her glassy eyes always stare straight ahead, her nose is shriveled, and her mouth is fixed in a toothy grimace. She floats languidly in the air with her toes barely skimming the ground, and glides wherever she goes. She is unable to speak, but uses her arms to communicate – either by gesturing invitingly to get someone to come closer or pointing to objects or pathways that she wants to draw their attention to.

Mildred is almost the exact opposite of Lucinda – she is old and bitter. She was far more world-weary, and knew that her marriage to Rafael was more out of convenience than love. She is keenly aware of what Rafael did to her, and has an overriding desire for revenge. Ironically, she appears as an idealized

version of herself as she was at the time of her death (39 years old). She wears a dark, form-fitting dress with a high collar and long sleeves. The lower half of her body fades away into a cloud of mist. She has small, beady eyes that drill into anyone she fixes her gaze on, a narrow nose, a weak chin, and always sports a tight-lipped expression. She also wears her long hair in a compact bun.

Mildred does not want to kill her former mate, but rather to make his life a living hell. She uses her telekinesis powers to hide or break objects that Rafael needs or uses regularly. His clothes will become snagged on errant nails, or he will trip over large rocks on the ground when he is not paying attention. At night, after Rafael lays down to sleep, Mildred whispers a stream of invectives in his ears to disturb his rest.

## **LUCINDA / MILDRED (2<sup>nd</sup> MAGNITUDE GHOSTS)**

**Size/Type:** Medium Undead (Incorporeal)

**Hit Dice:** 2d12+2 (15 hp)

**Initiative:** +1

**Speed:** fly 30 ft. (perfect)

**Armor Class:** AC 11 (touch 10, flat-footed 10)

**Base Attack / Grapple:** +1 / +2

**Attack:** +3 Claws (1d4+1)

**Special Attacks:** Corrupting Touch, Fear Aura, Horrific Appearance, Malevolence, Manifestation, Telekinesis

**Special Qualities:** Allergen, Incorporeal Traits, Turn Resistance (+4), Undead Traits

**Saves:** Fort +4, Ref +2, Will +3

**Abilities:** Str 8, Dex 12, Con – , Int 13, Wis 11, Cha 18

**Skills:** Appraise +2, Bluff +8, Concentration +5, Diplomacy +3, Handle Animal +2, Hide +8, Knowledge (local) +4, Knowledge (nobility) +5, Listen +8, Ride +4, Search +8, Spot +8

**Feats:** Iron Will, Persuasive

**Challenge Rating:** 4

**Alignment:** LE

*Allergen (Sp):* Both Lucinda and Mildred are fascinated by the sound of Rafael's mandolin, as it reminds them of their former life and the joys they can no longer experience. They cannot use any of their supernatural abilities for 1d8 hours after listening to music played on this instrument.

*Corrupting Touch (Su):* Both Lucinda's and Mildred's incorporeal touch attack deals 1d6 points of damage. Against ethereal opponents, they add their Strength modifier to attack and damage rolls. Against non-ethereal opponents, they add their Dexterity modifier to attack rolls only.

*Fear Aura (Su):* Both Lucinda and Mildred can radiate a fear aura (5-foot radius) as a free action. Affected creatures must succeed on a DC 17 Will save or be affected as though by a fear spell (10<sup>th</sup> level caster). Any creature that successfully saves cannot be affected again for 24 hours. The save DC is Charisma-based.

*Horrific Appearance (Su):* Any living creature within 60 feet of Lucinda must succeed on a Fort save or immediately take 1d4 points of Strength damage, 1d4 points of Dexterity damage, and 1d4 points of Constitution damage. Any creature that successfully saves against this effect cannot be affected again for 24 hours.

*Manifestation (Su):* When Lucinda or Mildred manifests, they partly enter the Material Plane and become visible, but remain incorporeal. They can pass through solid objects at will, and their attacks pass through armor. Their incorporeal nature helps protect Lucinda or Mildred from foes on the Material Plane, but not from foes on the Ethereal Plane.

*Malevolence (Su):* Once per round, both Lucinda or Mildred can merge their body with a creature on the Material Plane. This ability is similar to a magic jar spell (10<sup>th</sup> level caster), except that it does not require a receptacle. To use this ability, they must be manifested and must try to move into the target's space; moving into the target's space to use the malevolence ability does not provoke attacks of opportunity. The target can resist the attack with a

successful DC 18 Will save. A creature that successfully saves is immune for 24 hours, and Lucinda or Mildred cannot enter the target's space again during this time. If the save fails, the ghost vanishes into the target's body.

*Telekinesis (Su):* Mildred can use telekinesis as a standard action (10<sup>th</sup> level caster). When she uses this power, Mildred must wait 1d4 rounds before using it again.

These two apparitions usually work at cross purposes. While Lucinda tries to get Rafael's attention with gestures of love, Mildred tries to harass and hinder him in any way she can. Of course, Lucinda seeks to protect Rafael from the traps of her rival, but ironically her continued appearance causes just as much harm to her former lover. This ghostly competition leads to various strange and unexplained occurrences whenever Rafael is present, and bad luck seems to follow him wherever he goes.

For whatever reason, the pair only appear at night. And while Rafael's con games serve as good distractions for him during the day, he always becomes more agitated in the evening. The stress of bearing such a horrible burden has taken its toll on his once handsome features. Worry lines are permanently etched into his forehead, and his lips are always fixed together and quiver slightly. He jumps at every little sound around him, and every once in a while he is compelled to look over his shoulder to check and see whether he is being followed.

The only thing Rafael has found that keeps the two ghosts at bay (besides opium) is the playing of his mandolin. This is the same instrument he used to woo them both, and it seems to hold a supernatural fascination for them. (He happened upon this unique characteristic quite by accident while practicing with it over several nights.) Now, he plays it every night before he goes to sleep so he can at the very least get a good night's rest before Lucinda and Mildred return to plague him. This leaves him feeling even



more melancholy, however, as it reminds him that his glory days are past, so even this temporary relief is not a perfect solution.

It should be noted that whenever Rafael visits seedier establishments during the night, the ghosts usually leave him alone (they both feel that such places are not fit for the presence of a proper lady). The times he indulges in smoking opium, however, he often forgets to play his mandolin before going to sleep, and these are the nights where Mildred enacts her schemes against Rafael. These range from embarrassing (such as tossing all his clothes into the street), to irritating (such as breaking or hiding his Cure-Alls paraphernalia), to the frightening and potentially deadly (such as using her malevolence ability to maneuver him into jumping into busy traffic).

Sometimes, Mildred is even able to trick Lucinda into helping her, and vice versa, as both ghosts are prone to having changes of heart and moments of pity regarding each other's predicament. But these alliances do not last long, and the two revert to their default attitudes towards their former beau.

Rafael is not sure what caused his last two "marks" to return from the dead. And while in his more lucid moments he knows he deserves such punishment for his wicked ways, he would do anything to get rid of his ghostly companions.

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*"Alpha keeps pestering me to finish the main chassis, but the arrangement of compartment two is vexing me greatly. Everything has to be just so – the wiring and gears must co-exist in a state of absolute synergy – and my work cannot be rushed! As this is the main component of The Masterpiece, I must ensure each part is in perfect working order before moving on to the next stage. Perhaps another visit to the Clock Tower is warranted..."*

*- from the personal journal of Anton Kythera*

## ANTON KYTHERA AKA THE APPRENTICE OF KLORR

**Male Half-Elf Expert4/Artificer5:** CR 9; SZ Medium Humanoid (5 ft. 10 in.); HD 4d6 + 5d6 + 9; hp 53; Init +3; Spd 30 ft.; AC 12 (touch 11, flat-footed 10); Atk +4 melee, +6 ranged (1d4+1 dagger); SA Artificer Knowledge, Artisan Bonus, Bonus Feat, Craft Reserve, Disable Traps, Infusions; SQ Craft Homunculus, Craft Wondrous Item, Retain Essence, Weapon and Armor Proficiency (Simple); AL LE; SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +9; Str 10, Dex 15, Con 11, Int 16, Wis 12, Cha 13

**Skills:** Appraise +7, Bluff +4, Concentration +5, Craft (clockworks) +6, Decipher Script +4, Diplomacy +4, Disable Device +5, Gather Information +4, Hide +3, Knowledge (arcana) +6, Knowledge (engineering) +8, Knowledge (geography) +4, Knowledge (planes) +6, Move Silently +4, Open Lock +6, Perform (oratory) +4, Profession (clockmaker) +5, Search +5, Spellcraft +6, Use Magic Device +7

**Feats:** Brew Potion, Craft (Magic Arms and Armor), Deft Hands, Diligent, Dodge, Scribe Scroll

**Language:** Darkonese, Elven, Falkovnian, Lamordian, Mordentish, Vaasi

**Signature Possessions:** Arcane Thieves' Tools, Artificer's Monocle, Artisan Kit (clockwork repair), Bag of Gears, Boots of Elvinkind, 2 +1 Daggers, Hourglass of Second Chances, Manual of Golems, Potion of Spider Climbing, Ring of Master Artifice, Ring of Protection +2, Scroll of Levitation

**Artificer Knowledge (Ex):** Anton can make a special artificer knowledge check with a bonus equal to his artificer level + his Int modifier to detect whether a specific item has a magical aura. He must hold and examine the object for 1 minute. A successful check (DC 15) determines that the object has magical qualities, but does not reveal the specific powers of the item.

*Craft Homunculus (Ex):* Anton can create a homunculus as if he had the Craft Construct feat. He can also upgrade an existing homunculus that he owns, adding 1 Hit Die at a cost of 2,000 gp and 160 XP.

*Craft Reserve (Ex):* Anton receives a pool of points he can spend instead of XP when crafting a magic item. Each time he gains a new level, Anton receives a new craft reserve; leftover points from the previous level do not carry over. If the points are not spent, they are lost. Anton can also use his craft reserve to supplement the XP cost of the item he is making, taking a portion of the cost from his craft reserve and a portion from his own XP.

*Craft Wondrous Item (Ex):* Anton can create any wondrous item whose prerequisites he meets. Enchanting a wondrous item takes one day for each 1,000 gp in its price. To enchant a wondrous item, he must spend 1/25 of the item's price in XP and use up raw materials costing half of this price.

Anton can also mend a broken wondrous item if he meets the prerequisites to make it. Doing so costs half the XP, half the raw materials, and half the time it would take to craft that item in the first place.

*Disable Traps (Ex):* Anton can use his Search skill to locate traps when the task has a DC higher than 20. He can also use his Disable Device skill to disarm magic traps.

*Infusions (Ex):* Anton is not a spellcaster, but he does have the ability to imbue items with magical infusions. Infusions are neither arcane nor divine; they are drawn from the artificer infusion list and function just like spells and follow all the rules for spells. Anton can imbue an item with any infusion from the list without preparing it ahead of time. Unlike a sorcerer or bard, he does not select a subset of the available infusions; he has access to every infusion on the list up to and including his current Artificer level.

*Retain Essence (Su):* Anton can salvage the XP from one magic item and use those points to create

another magic item. He must spend a day with the item, and must also have the appropriate item creation feat for the item he is salvaging. After one day, the item is destroyed and Anton adds the XP it took to create the item to his craft reserve.

## Appearance

The most striking feature of this unassuming fellow is his long, sallow face and stringy, silver hair. He is usually seen wearing an intricate jeweler's loupe directly over his left eye. He is tall, but is in the habit of hunching over when he works, and this carries over into when he walks. He is often seen with a pinched expression on his face, as if he is studying or judging everyone he interacts with.

He doesn't care for fashion or even coordinating his wardrobe, and all his clothes are plain and drab. He wears natty, short sleeve tunics which leave his arms free of unnecessary encumbrances while he works. During special occasions, such as the public debut of one of his creations, he wears a more formal, buttoned-up, long sleeve shirt. He always wears cotton britches that have several patches all over them. If one didn't know any better, they would think he was quite poor, as he presents a rather bohemian image. If he goes out on a trip, he always wears a cloak and trades his plain shoes for his black leather *boots of elvenkind*.

When he becomes agitated or is presented with a complex mechanical problem, he talks under his breath, as if he is having a heated conversation with himself. He sighs a lot whenever questioned and answers in a tight, clipped fashion, using simple words as if he were speaking to a child. Most people excuse his lack of manners and social grace as a side effect of his genius.

He always carries with him a bag of small gears, and whenever his hands are idle, he takes one out and flips it between his knuckles, running it back and forth over the back of his hands. He also displays this nervous tic when he is deep in thought or is trying to solve a particularly difficult problem.

## Background

Anton is a half-elf raised in the Mistlands of Darkon. He never really fit into the elven community there, as he was more interested in intricate workings of mechanical devices than the simple beauty of the natural world. To him, the world was just one giant machine, and everything that lived within it followed as yet undiscovered rules; if he could unlock these secrets, he could see (and eventually master) the apparatuses that he believed to lay underneath the seeming chaos of every day life.

Early on, he became fascinated by perpetual motion machines, and would build intricate Rube Goldberg-type devices during his free time. He was easily frustrated when his set-ups broke down, and ended up destroying these early models, as he considered them failures. He was ignored by his peers, who thought he was too impetuous and fickle. Tired of enduring such poor treatment, he left home at the age of 30 and instead sought out his fortunes in the world of man.

These early experiences left him with two overwhelming desires – to prove to his elven brethren that he could accomplish great things even with only a fraction of the lifetime of true elves, and that his mechanical creations could be every bit as beautiful and awe-inspiring as anything that could be found in the natural world.

For a time, he studied engineering at the University of Il Aluk, learning the basic principles of structures and dynamics. It was during the course of his studies that he first learned of the legendary Klorr and his many clockworks. This mysterious figure intrigued him, and he soon found himself delving more and more into arcane lore, as he felt mastering this subject would be the key to unlocking all of his ambitions. His efforts did bring him to the attention of the infamous Fraternity of Shadows, however, but in the end he was judged too inexperienced to warrant membership.

Chagrined by another rejection, he became even more determined to prove his superiority to

everyone and prove his naysayers wrong. He cut his studies short and embarked on a quest to discover the final resting place of the fabled Timepiece of Klorr. He reasoned that if he could pull that off, no one could deny his greatness!

## Current Sketch

Anton started off by visiting several well-known clockmakers, such as the Engineer in Karina and Stamitos Flacken in Mayvin. Supposedly, he even sought the assistance of the shadow fey, and visited the mechanical genius known as Waelin, who resides in the town of Anvolee within the Shadow Rift. Whether these rumors were true or not, no one he consulted could help him discover the Timepiece's whereabouts. He did, however, learn several tricks of the trade here and there, so his endeavors were not a total waste of time.

After completing yet another in a long line of wild goose chases, Anton's enthusiasm was beginning to wane. Just as he had decided to return home and admit defeat, the event known as the Requiem occurred. Fearful of returning to his now altered homeland, he instead settled down in Liffe and served as an apprentice to a clockmaker in Armeikos. The mechanical skills he picked up earlier were put to good use, but he still stewed over his many failures. During this time, he built many novel clockwork devices of his own design, but inevitably destroyed them as he never felt they were good enough to show to others. When his master died after a few years, it was a simple matter for him to take over the business. His desire to make his mark on the world was still strong, however, and he refused to toil away in obscurity for long.

Only after Azalin Rex returned to power in Darkon, five years after the events of the Grim Harvest, did Anton come up with a clever scheme that he felt would allow him to return to his homeland triumphantly. He reasoned that, since most humans were aware that elves lived for hundreds of years, he could pretend to have been tutored by Klorr himself before the famous clockmaker disappeared. In this

way, he could use the notoriety that came along with such a well-known name to set up a successful business all his own. Thus, he billed himself as the long-lost Apprentice of Klorr, and set about spreading the word of his talent. All the skills he had picked up along all of his journeys finally paid off, and soon nobles all over the Core and beyond were clamoring for a chance to procure one of his prestigious clockwork items.

### Combat

Anton is averse to entering combat and has no martial training to speak of. Instead, he relies on his own clockwork creations for defense. The specialized equipment he carries is much more adept at dealing with arcane traps or the magical guardians that often guard the edifices he frequents than fighting human foes. When he does fight, his movements are sloppy and inexact, in direct contrast to the exquisitely fine-tuned skills that he displays while at his workbench.

He is quick-witted, however, and his reflexes are sharp, a combination that has saved his life countless times. He considers it wasteful to expend any uses of his magical items on a fight, but if pressed he will relent on this point. If his automatons are with him, he will send them into the fray immediately while he attempts to escape the situation by any means possible.

### THE MISANTHROPIC GENIUS

To the world at large, Anton Kythera is a brilliant machine-smith whose fame grows larger with every passing year. His inventive genius is regarded as second-to-none. While his claims of being the apprentice of the infamous outlander clockmaker known only as Klorr cannot be definitively proven, his mechanical aptitude cannot be denied. Supposedly, his success lies in the trade secrets his master passed on to him, but he does not expound upon what exactly those are. He prefers to have his work speak for itself. He is adept at building and repairing all kinds of clocks, ranging from pocket

watches to grandfather clocks. No size or type is beyond his understanding.

He is not without his detractors, however, and dark rumors seem to follow him no matter where he goes. He has often been accused of stealing the ideas of less well-known artisans and presenting them as his own. He haughtily brushes these insinuations aside by noting that such objections originate from frustrated rivals that can't hope match his skill, so instead they must attack his reputation. He grows particularly cross when his wares are compared to Guiseppe, loudly exclaiming that he finds the infamous toymaker's designs "simplistic" and his creations "crude."

His shop, Kythera's Clockworks, is located in the Merchant District in Armeikos on the island of Liffe. It is easy to overlook, as it is a rather small and humble abode for one with such a grand reputation. The front portion serves as a shop and showroom where he meets with clients, while the back is his workshop, where he keeps his equipment and supplies. His living quarters are on the second floor, but he rarely uses them even when he is home; he usually falls asleep in his studio while working on his latest contraption.

The front room of the establishment is small and cramped, as it holds several clocks and other timekeeping devices haphazardly placed on shelves with no seeming pattern. Interestingly, he has quite an extensive collection of antique hourglasses on display. (He keeps the most valuable ones, such as the *hourglass of second chances*, locked within a safe in a corner of his studio.) The backroom is similarly disheveled in appearance, with all sorts of mechanical apparatuses in various states of assembly or disassembly strewn about several tables. Bins and shelves line the walls, filled with clock hands, gears, weights, pulleys, bells, dials, pendulums, and combs of all sizes and compositions that tumble around everywhere when they are rummaged through. Underneath all of these scattered items are several flattened rolls of



parchment with complex schematics etched into them, whose purpose is a mystery to the layperson.

### *Minor Works*

Once he mastered all forms of clockworks, he branched out into making beautiful dioramas and music boxes. These take a couple months to complete, depending on the complexity of the scene he wishes to recreate. His first attempt was a diorama he calls the Fox Hunt, where a bright red fox runs in and out between pop-up trees and hills while being chased by three hounds. The entire scenario repeats itself after a few minutes of the tiny figures

zipping back and forth. His next piece was a music box he calls The Ballerina and The Diva. These aforementioned figures rise from the base of the platform, and spring into action once the winding key is turned. The lithe dancing figurine pirouettes her way around a richly-dressed singing figurine in the center of the “stage.” Each of these puppets has fully articulated head, arms, and legs, and can strike a number of different poses depending on the tune. There are multiple removable musical cylinders that are stored in the base and can be used to change the song that the figurines move along to.

### **ADVENTURE HOOK: THE LUNAR LULLABY**

One otherwise conventional music box Anton has created carries a peculiar curse. The comb of this device was made from the leg bone of a natural werewolf. Whenever the music box is activated during the three days of the full moon, the first person to hear its melody is transformed into a werewolf the following night. The person who commissioned this macabre piece is a mystery, and it is unknown if this result was intended, or an unexpected side effect.

The first victim of this curse is usually a child, who upon transformation attempts to kill their parents (as well as any siblings that may be present). More often than not, the entire family is wiped out during the course of this attack. Thus, the music box has changed hands several times throughout the years, as it is either given to the next of kin or sold off at an auction.

The most recent purchaser of this music box approaches the PCs and asks them to investigate its provenance after experiencing (and surviving) an attack from their youngest daughter, who is now staying at an asylum. They are desperately seeking a cure for her condition, and this strange device is their only clue. After some preliminary questioning by the PCs, they should be able to pick up and follow its long trail of victims and eventually be led back to Anton. Whether the clockmaker has any helpful information about the origin of the music box is left up to the DM's discretion.

One of the most complex pieces he has created in this vein is called The Piecemeal Knights, and was made by special order for Vigo Drakov, who heads the Ministry of the Central Prison in Falkovnia. This one is composed of only two armor-clad figures, who are clearly warriors from opposing clans. These puppets walk towards each other, brandish their blades, and then meet in the middle to carry out a pantomime battle, all while regal music plays. The most interesting aspect of this tableau is that when

these figurines are struck by the sword, their corresponding limb falls off!. First an arm drops to the ground, then a leg, then the other leg, and then the torso tumbles over completely. It is quite an amusing diversion, and of course, these dolls can be easily re-assembled to be sent against each other again and again. Anton states that their movements are randomized by switching between various gears underneath the surface of the device, and that there

are 24 different scenarios that these figurines can run through.

Using the principles he learned in such constructions, he soon moved on to even larger projects. Second only to his skill in clockmaking is his ability to create amazing machines that seem to have a life of their own, i.e. mechanical animals that move and make sound. (These items are not true constructs, in that they need to be periodically wound to ensure continuous operation.) These simulacra take great care and concentration to complete, since the parts are so small. The outer casing for these contraptions can be made from either metal, cloth, or leather, and is attached through a secret grafting process known only to Anton.

Examples of his work include Otto, the Mechanical Mutt, which debuted during Zherisia's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary Founding Ceremony, where it even impressed the usually jaded citizens there. He has become especially adept at making life-size birds that can actually fly, such as the Clockwork Canary made for Sefesa Boritsi and the Nickel-Plated Nightingale owned by Lady Jacqueline Renier. Both of these noblewomen claim it is his greatest work and that the other is a mere prototype. Anton becomes indignant if asked this same question, declaring that all his work is of the highest quality.

He also has created a handful of more experimental devices, some of which have proven useful and others that are mere curiosity items. The Invisible Chess Player is a popular demonstration piece in which all the pieces move around the board by themselves. Along that same line of thinking, Anton has collaborated with the musicians of ALTO to create several self-playing instruments, such as harps, pianos, piccolos, panpipes, accordions, etc. (It was these items, by the way, that drew John Daly's ire, as he saw them as an encroachment on his special area of expertise.)

Perhaps the most unique of these devices is the so-called Automatic Quill. It consists of a metal pipe with a wide flare that leads down into a shallow box.

On top of this box is a large quill that stands straight up and down via a wire brace. When the owner speaks into the "listening tube," hidden keys are triggered within the machine's base, which then transmit signals to the quill, which writes out the corresponding letter. It is an ingenious system, but very impractical, as anyone who wishes to create such a "transcription" must spell out every word they wish to have written down.

While most of these contraptions are merely showpieces without practical value, they are highly sought after throughout the entire Demiplane. They take a great deal of time and effort on Anton's part, however, and he is not able to keep up with the demand. Still, there is no shortage of nobles, no matter how backwards the domain they live in, that would pay handsomely in order to proudly display a genuine creation of the Apprentice of Klorr.

### *Major Works*

All of the previously outlined contraptions pale in comparison, however, to the handful of masterwork pieces Anton has created with the artificer knowledge he has gained throughout the years. All of these items started out as one-of-a-kind creations, but when word of his work got out, more requests started pouring in. He doesn't entertain every offer, however, as he would have little time to do anything else if he did. Instead, he picks and chooses his customers carefully, and only crafts these items when he is between other projects and in need of the money.

Each one is extremely rare, but highly prized. All of these items utilize the principles Anton has discovered through years of practicing on clockwork devices, but with an added layer of complexity, as they require a special combination of *scrying*, *animate object*, and *permanency* spells. Basically, he uses magical infusions to augment his already considerable mechanical prowess and extend it beyond the physical limits he usually operates under.

### *Star Globes*

Strong divination and transmutation; CL 10th; 10,000 to 50,000 gp (depending on size); Weight 50-500 lbs. (depending on size)

The largest example of this item is a large metal globe that is 6 feet in diameter with a black matte finish. All along its surface, there are tiny clusters of light that shine through from the interior. It rotates automatically in a clockwise manner along its axis, which is set at a 75 degree angle from the ground. The entire thing stands on a small stone pedestal. It is purportedly a map of the night-time sky above the Core, complete with all the known constellations.

While this creation is magnificent enough as a showpiece, it has more practical applications as well. The surface of the globe is made up of removable plates. One must simply press firmly on a particular section and a small convex square can be lifted up and carried away. Underneath lies the globe's secondary shell, which is black and featureless. When the globe is in motion once again, these "missing" sections make it appear as if a humongous dragon has taken a bite out of the very sky itself.

There is an additional enchantment placed on every removable plate that aids in the study of whatever stars are located in that particular quadrant of the sky. If a "star" is touched after it has been separated from the globe, its name and the name of the constellation it belongs to appear in a flowing, gold script. Any other facts about the star also appear underneath its name. This effect can be shut off in two ways – by pressing the same "star" one more time, or if a different "star" on the plate is touched.

The smallest one is only 1.5 feet in diameter, and does not have the removable plate feature. Because of their intricate and time-consuming construction, these star globes are extremely rare; few people are able to say that they have even seen one, with fewer still being able to say that they own one. The most famous example is the "Dome of Heaven" located in the Starwatchers tower in Sidnar, and a similarly sized piece is said to have been recently installed in

the Midway Haven Observatory in the town of Vallaki. (Presumably, the clockmaker was working off information each of these groups provided him to make such accurate star charts.)

### *Living Dollhouses*

Strong divination and transmutation; CL 10th; 10,000 to 25,000 gp (depending on size); Weight 25-50 lbs. (depending on size)

These are finely polished wooden cubes, composed of thousands of tiny blocks that can rearrange themselves into a variety of shapes when different command words are spoken over them. They only appear as cubes when in "standby" mode, which is the default setting and is used to make the item more compact when being transported. The command word for this mode is "standby."

Before being initially activated, a small piece of the house that the user wishes to recreate must be placed on the top of it. This can be anything from a small piece of wallpaper or carpet, to a stone chip from the fireplace, to a splinter of wood from a crossbeam, to even a shingle from the roof. The only limitation is that it has to be an integral part of the structure (so it cannot come from removable items such as clothes or furniture).

The second form these dollhouses take is the "home" mode. The command word for this mode is unique, and picked out by the owners (such as "Wildsprig Manor" or "Chaucer's Estate"). Once this word is programmed into the item in the course of its first activation, it cannot be changed. After this initial attunement is achieved, the command word thenceforth activates the blocks within the cube, and they start rearranging themselves into a scaled-down model home, basically a three dimensional blueprint including all inner and outer walls, multiple stories, and a roof. Every detail matches the original house it is based off of (even hidden passageways and trap doors if they are present).

The third form these dollhouses take is the "room" mode. This feature is activated by simply stating the

name of the room the owner wishes to examine more closely (such as a master bedroom or library). Once again, the blocks will rearrange themselves into a model of whatever room is requested. These rooms are exact replicas of the places their appearance mimics, accurate down to the last detail. This is not a static representation either. If something changes in the room after the last time it was viewed, such as rearranged furniture or removed items, the dollhouse's room will reflect that same change. It is of note that living (or undead) creatures are not replicated.

While very intricate in design, these living dollhouses are commonly viewed as children's toys. But, there are more practical applications this device can be put to, as well. For instance, Anton himself keeps one in his workshop and uses it when he wants to study the inner workings of large clockwork devices more closely (such as the Clock Tower in Paridon or the Gears in Stangengrad). This helps him in adapting and translating the often difficult clockwork systems into his own creations.

It is rumored that Anton made the infamous Dark Sepulcher for Azalin Rex. This piece operates on the same principles as his other living dollhouses, but allows the wizard king to view the insides of the lairs of other Darklords and ferret out their most closely guarded secrets without leaving Castle Avernus. If the renowned clockmaker truly crafted an item such as this, it is likely that Azalin himself provided the high level spells required to complete such an arcane marvel. What Anton received in exchange for this service can only be guessed at.

#### *Navigator's Necessity*

Strong divination and transmutation; CL 10th; 10,000 gp; Weight 2 lbs.

These magical scrolls focus on recreating topographical maps of the various islands and coastlines of the Demiplane. It goes without saying that these items are extremely useful to seafarers, and this group has dubbed them "Nessies" for short.

On the surface, they appear to be the same as any other portolan map a sea captain may use to chart voyages. These scrolls, however, use magically treated parchment and ink (made of the same tiny building blocks as the Living Dollhouses from above) that allows the map to be rearranged into a three dimensional model of any island the captain requests.

Activating this map's power is a two-step process, and is a highly guarded secret which safeguards these maps from being used or stolen by others. It comes with a jar of specially-processed ink as a second component. The name of the requested island (or coastline) is spoken out loud, then a generous dollop of ink needs to be dropped on an item taken from the same location. This item must represent a place where the land and the sea touch in order for the map to function properly. As such, it can range from objects commonly found on a beach (such as a clam shell, a sand dollar, or seaweed) to those found underneath the waves (such as a sea urchin, a dried-out sea sponge, or even a piece of coral).

The ink blob then drops onto the paper and slowly spreads out until eventually the entire surface is black. Then, after a few moments, the ink is fully absorbed by the parchment, and soon ridges and depressions form, displaying the lay of the land both under and above the water. This greatly aids a captain in finding the best port to anchor their boat or avoiding treacherous passageways.

There are several significant limitations that should be mentioned. No living thing (be they animal, humanoid, or monstrous) can be discerned on these maps; it only outlines static features of the land (and sea). Also, while the captains themselves are not required to visit the island or coastline they are attempting to study, the *scrying* spell used cannot penetrate the mists, even if the correct name is used. Basically, the target area must be within the same body of water that the ship is in in order to function properly. Thus, these maps are generally most useful only when land is already within sight.



Also, depending on the scale, greater or smaller portions of the water or land will be visible. If an island is particularly small (such as the Isle of Ravens), all the features of the land and the sea can be viewed in great detail. Other times, if a long stretch of coastline is being viewed, only a small sliver of sea or inland area will be discernible. Captains can use these maps to pinpoint very specific sub-areas of an island or coastline if so needed by using more specific requests (such as “the northeast coast of Liffe” or “Graben Harbor”) at the time of activation.

Only the richest captain can afford to carry one of these priceless maps, and they usually keep their possession a closely guarded secret. They are also notoriously fragile, and have to be carefully stored; the sea water and ocean sprays seem to erode the magical ink after several years of use. None are known to have survived a shipwreck, and if one is procured during a pirate raid, it is generally viewed as useless unless one is aware of its esoteric operating instructions.

### A HIDDEN AGENDA

Anton's impersonation has paid off quite well, as he is now a highly sought after craftsman whose renown has spread throughout the Demiplane. But, reaching the pinnacle of success has left him with an empty feeling. Now, he feels like he has to prove himself even better than Klorr himself, and thus has found a new obsession – creating the perfect clockwork man. He calls this project his Masterpiece, and keeps it a highly guarded secret.

Anton hasn't been touring the Core just for the fun of it; he has been searching out any and all information regarding mechanical golems that he can get his hands on. Besides visiting with several famous clockmakers, he is particularly interested in sites that seem to operate without any outside force controlling them, such as the Gears in Stangengrad, Lumley House in Mordent, and the Puppetworks in Pont-a-Museau. He believes his scheme is so unique that no single source has enough information to

satisfy him. But the truth is, he is just making up things as he goes along, mixing and matching different techniques he encounters.

His talent is not as great as his reputation makes it out to be. He has an eidetic memory and is able to recreate whatever he views after a careful examination. He pores over blueprints he has drawn from memory, constantly redrawing them to refine and improve upon the designs he has “borrowed.” And, since his work is a fusion of all the different styles he has learned throughout the years, no one can definitively point out specific cases of intellectual theft. While he has become quite adept at combining a variety of complicated techniques, true creativity still eludes him. This inability to innovate constantly nags him, and leaves him feeling like an imposter. This is the real reason for his constant striving to outdo his previous creations.

Presently, Anton believes he has reached the limit of his mechanical aptitude and has been relying more and more on magical solutions to complete his Masterpiece. The bulk of the clockwork devices he has produced to fund this hidden agenda has been constructed by others.

### *Secret Helpers*

Over the past couple years, Anton has started experiencing fugue states. He doesn't know what brings them on, but once every few months, he falls into a trance and works furiously for several days without eating or sleeping. At the end of one of these marathon sessions, he awakens to find he has crafted a small mechanical helper.

**NOTE:** For game purposes, these creations behave as and have similar abilities to the modrons that originate from the plane of Mechanus, but do not have the Outsider type.

He has dubbed his first two creations Alpha and Beta. They are small 5 x 5 inch cubes, with two pairs of legs sticking out from the top and bottom, and four arms (one on each vertical side). Each appendage is stick-thin, multi-jointed, and ends in a fully articulated

hand with five fingers. Additionally, there is a mechanical eye on each plane, for a total of six. Their hands are extremely dexterous and able to hold small weapons and perform intricate operations if required. When using their feet to walk or climb, they are able to stick to any surface, even if standing upside down or sideways. They have no mouths, and thus cannot speak, but are able to follow simple commands.

## ALPHA & BETA

**Size/Type:** Small Construct

**Hit Dice:** 2d8+2 (10 hp)

**Initiative:** +0

**Speed:** 30 ft.

**Armor Class:** 14 (touch 11, flat-footed 13)

**Base Attack / Grapple:** +1 / +3

**Attack:** +2 Slam (1d4+2) or +2 Javelin (1d6+2)

**Special Attacks:** Flurry of Blows

**Special Qualities:** All-Around Vision, Damage Resistance, Modron Traits

**Saves:** Fort +3, Ref +3, Will +2

**Abilities:** Str 12, Dex 11, Con 11, Int 6, Wis 8, Cha 9

**Skills:** Diplomacy +3, Listen +5, Search +2, Spot +5

**Feats:** Alertness

**Challenge Rating:** 2

**Alignment:** LN

*All-Around Vision (Ex):* Alpha and Beta can see in all directions at all times. They gain a +4 bonus to Spot and Search checks and cannot be flanked.

*Flurry of Blows (Ex):* Alpha and Beta can coordinate the timing of their multiple appendages to strike one after another so precisely that they cause an additional 3d4+2 damage. This ability can be used 3 times per day.

*Damage Resistance (Ex):* Alpha and Beta have acid, cold, and fire resistance 10.

*Modron Traits (Ex):* Alpha and Beta are immune to mind-influencing effects and not subject to subdual damage, ability or energy drain, or critical hits.

The second set of helpers Anton created was dubbed Kappa and Delta. They are more advanced than his first pair in many ways. They are spherical in shape and can float in the air and zoom all around at great speed. They, too, have six eyes (one each on the six cardinal axis points), but their four pairs of arms do not end in hands, but a variety of commonly used tools, such as a wire cutter, a screwdriver, a hammer, pliers, a wrench, etc. There are eight of these appendages in total, and they are set in the spaces between the eyes. While these constructs do not have mouths, they practice a primitive form of communication, using a series of clicks and whirs to express simple emotions such as anger or happiness.

## KAPPA & DELTA

**Size/Type:** Small Construct

**Hit Dice:** 3d8+3 (20 hp)

**Initiative:** +2

**Speed:** 30 ft., fly 15 ft. (good)

**Armor Class:** 14 (touch 12, flat-footed 14)

**Base Attack / Grapple:** +2 / +5

**Attack:** +4 Slam (1d4+2) or +4 Javelin (1d6+2)

**Special Attacks:** Volley

**Special Qualities:** All-Around Vision, Damage Resistance, Modron Traits

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

**Abilities:** Str 16, Dex 15, Con 13, Int 12, Wis 12, Cha 11

**Skills:** Diplomacy +5, Knowledge (planes) +5, Listen +10, Search +10, Sense Motive +6, Spot +12

**Feats:** Alertness, Rapid Shot

**Challenge Rating:** 4

**Alignment:** LN

*All-Around Vision (Ex):* Kappa and Delta can see in all directions at all times. They gain a +4 bonus to Spot and Search checks and cannot be flanked.

*Damage Resistance (Ex):* Kappa and Delta have acid, cold, and fire resistance 10.

*Modron Traits (Ex):* Kappa and Delta are immune to mind-influencing effects and not subject to subdual damage, ability or energy drain, or critical hits.

*Volley (Ex):* Kappa and Delta can synchronize the timing of their blows to pummel a weak spot on their targeted foe with multiple strikes one after another so precisely that they cause an additional 3d4+2 damage. This ability can be used 3 times per day.

Anton is not aware that these creatures are living, believing them to be just complex clockwork automatons. While oblivious to their true nature, he is more than happy to keep them around, as they are very obedient to and protective of him. Little does he know that they were “gifted” to him in order to speed along the creation of his Masterpiece.

#### *A Dark Calling*

Unbeknownst to Anton, invoking the name of Klorr has its dangers. While no one living knows what happened to the clockmaker after he disappeared due to the curse of the timepiece that bears his name, the fact is that his body was obliterated and his essence was swept away to the Plane of Mechanus, a place where order rules. His consciousness was dispersed throughout that dimension for centuries, but when Anton began speaking his name once more, that, combined with the apprentice clockmaker's obsessive desire, granted Klorr's mind a focus that it could coalesce around.

As Klorr's power grew, he found that with great mental effort he could reach out across the planar border and seize control of Anton's mind for short periods of time. This is the source of Anton's blackouts; Klorr is actually the creator of the mechanical helpers, not Anton. Klorr desperately wants to return to a physical state, but will only accept a perfect vessel for his return to the material world. Thus, he is subtly prodding Anton to create a clockwork body for him, one whose very heart is the timepiece that originally doomed him.

#### *The Legend of Klorr*

Klorr was a famous clockmaker and creator of such fabulous devices as the Hourglass of Klorr, the Moondial of Klorr and the Water Clock of Klorr (see *Forged of Darkness* for details). Unfortunately, this obsession with timekeeping proved to be his undoing; he was consumed by his inability to synchronize and control his heart like the rest of his clockwork creations. After delving into arcane lore and planar theory, he produced his greatest creation – the fabled Timepiece of Klorr. This powerful magic item granted him an immortality of sorts. As long as he kept it wound, he could not die. But, in order to maintain his life, Klorr needed to feed the timepiece with blood. Although he resisted at first, he eventually gave into temptation and became corrupted by it. Ultimately, his time ran out after his latest murder attempt went wrong, and the timepiece consumed his life instead. No one knows what his final fate was until now...

Anton is obsessed with finding the missing Timepiece of Klorr, because he believes it is the key to bringing his clockwork golem to life. He uses his meetings with patrons to cover his extracurricular excursions to rumored sites of magical and mechanical power. If Anton is ever successful in his quest to discover this item and places it within the chest chamber of the clockwork golem's metal carapace, it will become the perfectly-timed heart that Klorr always dreamed of. It will also unleash a great evil upon the Demiplane of Dread, as Klorr will seek to establish his own kingdom where order reigns supreme and any sign of individualism is crushed.



**MAESTRO (CLOCKWORK GOLEM)****Size/Type:** Medium Construct**Hit Dice:** 18d10+20 (120 hp)**Initiative:** +10**Speed:** 30 ft., climb 30 ft.**Armor Class:** 27 (touch 23, flat-footed 21)**Base Attack / Grapple:** +10 / +16**Attack:** 2 +20 slams (1d4+3), 4 +24 projectiles (1d4+6)**Special Attacks:** Grind, Temporal Punch, Time Jump**Special Qualities:** Construct Traits, Damage Resistance (magic/10), Darkvision (60 ft.), Immutable Form, Rapid Repair, Undying Soul**Saves:** Fort +6, Ref +14, Will +10**Abilities:** Str 22, Dex 26, Con –, Int –, Wis 14, Cha 5**Skills:** Climb +7, Craft (clockworks) +7, Decipher Script +8, Disable Device +2, Knowledge (arcana) +9, Knowledge (engineering) +11, Knowledge (planes) +9, Open Lock +9, Perception +11, Search +8, Use Magic Device +10**Feats:** Improved Initiative, Lightning Reflexes**Challenge Rating:** 18**Alignment:** NE

*Grind (Ex):* Maestro deals an additional 2d10+12 points of slashing damage when it makes a successful grapple check as razor-sharp gears emerge from its body to grind and slice its foe.

*Immunity to Magic (Ex):* Maestro is immune to any spell or spell-like ability that allows spell resistance. In addition, certain spells and effects function differently against it, as noted below:

- ❖ A *grease* spell cast on Maestro causes it to move quickly for 1d6 rounds, as if under the effects of a *haste* spell.
- ❖ A *rusting grasp* spell deals damage to Maestro normally, and makes it staggered for 1d6 rounds.

*Immutable Form (Sp):* Maestro is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

*Rapid Repair (Su):* Maestro repairs damage dealt to itself swiftly when needed. Once per day, it can choose to take one round to heal 60 hp.

*Temporal Punch (Ex):* Upon a successful attack role, Maestro can choose to strike a foe twice in one round by speeding up time. No additional attack roll is necessary; Maestro simply rolls twice for damage. On a critical hit, the foe is dazed and unable to attack for one round.

*Time Jump (Sp):* Maestro can send itself forward in time, allowing it to teleport from one spot to another. This ability does not allow attacks of opportunity. Once this move is complete, it is able to make an additional attack if it appears adjacent to a foe. It can also use this ability on a target of its choice, determining the spot they move to. This is a disorienting experience, resulting in the target being dazed and unable to attack for one round after being moved. Maestro can use this ability up to 3 times per day.

*Undying Soul (Su):* As long as the Timepiece of Klorr is intact, Maestro cannot be permanently killed. If the chassis is destroyed, the Timepiece of Klorr functions much like a lich's phylactery, housing Klorr's soul while it waits for a new body to be built.





# VOROSTOKOV GAZETEER

BY ADAM "SPEEDWAGON" EL AKKAD

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## THE THEMES OF VOROSTOKOV

As *hidajiremi* / Jeremy Puckett of the Ravenloft Reincarnated series put it so eloquently: "Vorostokov is a mythical reflection of the historical Kievan Rus, a period of Eastern European history in which the scattered Varangian and Slavic tribes of modern Russia began to develop a united ethnic and national identity. This era is marked by a growing consciousness of shared destiny, but also intense violence as those who did not share in that sense of destiny or commonality were brought to heel. This period also marks a transition from paganism to Christianity in the region, with a similar clash. In short, Vorostokov is a place where tradition and modernity are starting their inevitable clash, and the bodies of men will be grist for the mill." The tropes of Vorostokov (as outlined by *hidajiremi* are:

- ❖ "Endless Winter: Vorostokov is the iconic region of the Frozen Reaches—a land where winter never ends. There is always snow and ice on the ground, and even a seemingly clear day can transform into a howling blizzard without warning. The cold is a constant companion in the domain, draining life and vigor with each passing moment spent outdoors. Even a light snow can turn a familiar landscape into a trackless wasteland, covering landmarks and isolating heroes from help. The weather should

be as much a group's foe as any monster in a Vorostokov adventure."

- ❖ "The Specter of Hunger: The threat of starvation is a perpetual threat in the frozen lands of Vorostokov. A plentiful hunting season is a rarity, but most villages are barely getting by—unless they go up against Gregor Zolnik, at which point the specter becomes a full-blown haunting. Those who oppose the domain's darklord find their game vanishing, their food stores depleting more quickly than expected, and their hunters going missing. Only those who capitulate to Zolnik's cruel rule have their hunger relieved... though the cure may be worse than the disease in this case."
- ❖ "Wolves and Men: The rapaciousness of the boyarsky is matched only by that of the wolves of the domain. Zolnik's vicious thugs travel in packs, treating the common folk of the domain like sheep to be herded—or slaughtered. The cold, the hunger, and the threat of violence makes wolves of men. As the eternal winter creeps ever onward, the thread of civilization grows ever more tenuous and the chances of survival ever more desperate. In such an environment, who wouldn't choose to be a wolf?"
- ❖ "Old versus New: Since the end of *Dark of the Moon* and the discovery of the Bleak Road Mistway, Vorostokov has been caught in the winds of change. The ideas of the *torva* Voros, those who cling to tradition and the old ways of doing things in isolation (like the darklord,

Gregor Zolnik), now clash with the *nona* Voros that are eager to challenge the status quo and engage in trade with the Vaasi and other outsiders.”

### VOROSTOKOV AT A GLANCE

**Culture Level:** 5 (Dark Ages)

**Climate & Terrain:** Cold forest, hills, plains, and mountains

**Year formed:** 731 BC

**Population:** 1,300 (up by 200 from its 1,100 population in 745 BC)

**Races (%)**: Humans 98%, Dwarves 1%, Other 1%

**Languages:** Common, Vos

**Religions:** None\*

**Government:** Independent settlements (turning to despotism)

**Ruler:** None

**Darklord:** Gregor Zolnik

**Nationality:** Vos

\*If one discounts the original Outlander faiths of the land and the newfound presence of the Church of the Lawgiver

successes. The plains and forests of Vorostokov are ringed by impassable peaks that form the border of the domain. There is only one mountain pass that leads outside of Vorostokov and into the only domain bordering it, Sanguinia, and it is known as the Bloodsnow Pass for the red coloration the snow and ice take.

The dark conifer forests of the domain are venerable and perilous, haunted by enormous wolves and restless snow spirits. Brutal winds howl ceaselessly across the plains, driving men to madness with their noise and cutting cold. Lethal blizzards are a near-weekly occurrence throughout the region.

The icebound Trau River meanders southwest across Vorostokov from its headwaters in the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains, draining eventually into the black waters of the aptly named Bottomless Lake.

Daylight is a precious commodity in Vorostokov. The sun barely peeps over the horizon during the course of about six hours before disappearing for the night. Sunrise and sunset are preceded and followed respectively by periods of twilight lasting two to three hours each.

The shadows are long, dark, and cold beneath the snow-covered trees. The powdery snow that covers the land makes travel extremely difficult, and most natives use snowshoes or skis for long trips in the wilderness. The forest can be treacherous and it is very easy to become lost or blunder into dangerous deadfalls.

The Trau River is the only river of note, being about the width of the Vuchar River and equally as navigable, had it not been for it being frozen due to the climate. Other, smaller streams find their headwaters in the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains and drain into the Bottomless Lake all the same. Aside from the Bottomless Lake near Oneka, the valley is

## THE LAND

### LANDSCAPE

The vast frozen valley of Vorostokov is a land crushed by endless cold and terrorized by the brutish warriors of the Darklord. It is a vast domain more than 300 miles across. Ringed on all sides by jagged, treacherous peaks, the domain's trackless steppes and forests are buried under perpetual snow.

To be more specific, the land consists of icy plains and frozen coniferous forests, with many small lakes and rivers scattered throughout. The land is locked in a dire, endless winter, and the tiny villages of the domain constantly struggle to survive on their dwindling food stores and their hunters'

dotted with smaller, shallower lakes from which the Voros are capable of fishing from as well.<sup>2</sup>

## FLORA AND FAUNA

With a land locked in eternal winter, there are not that many plants that are hardy enough to survive in such a hostile domain. Pines and lichens are the main ones, though frozen plants can sometimes be found underneath the snow and ice. The conifer forests of Vorostokov are mostly avoided by the locals as they are old, dark, and deep, but they provide a bitter type of evergreen nut that sprouts every three months. Bark and lichen otherwise provide much of the food that doesn't involve meat of some kind. At least, to the foreigner's eye...

In contrast to what has been said above, to the Voros, the arctic conditions of Vorostokov are not the lifeless wasteland devoid of bounty or meaning that others may think. In fact, the land is rich with plant life that is entirely unique to the region that may be seen as alien to an outsider. Such flora shall be listed below:

### Babushka Tree

A relatively recent addition to the land, stemming from around the Great Upheaval, the Babushka Tree is rare and is found sparingly within the deep and dark old forests that dot the landscape, with no two Babushka Trees being planted within 100 feet of one another. The Babushka Tree's origin is unnatural: it was created by the witchcraft of the Sisters Zolnik, on the orders of their brother, Gregor, to find a way to feed the meager amount of animals within the woods so that the food supply would not be exhausted (and Gregor would not have to go out and hunt 'other' prey). The Babushka Trees are vital to the survival of many other living things in this cold land, as most other mundane plants have died or entered permanent hibernation after the decades of wintry conditions. The Babushka Tree is an

(undoubtedly magical) conifer that produces cones with edible seeds throughout the year, and its nutritious bark grows back even under the coldest conditions, providing a ready food source to many other creatures, though unfortunately not to humans as the seeds are poisonous when directly or indirectly ingested.

### Darkwood Tree

The Darkwood Tree is even rarer than the Babushka tree, being found only in the foreboding woods nearest to the ruins of Yargorod and Castle Gzhansk. The Darkwood Tree is known for its special and rare magical lumber, which is as hard as normal wood but much lighter. Any wooden or mostly wooden item (such as a bow, an arrow, or a spear) made from darkwood is considered a masterwork item and weighs only half as much as a normal wooden item of that type. Items not normally made of wood or only partially of wood (such as a battle-axe or a mace) either cannot be made from darkwood or do not gain any special benefit from being made of darkwood. The value of darkwood from these trees has been enough to make trade with whichever town manages to reliably find and gain a monopoly on the resource a very enterprising economic endeavor. Currently, the lumberjacks of Novayalenk (a hamlet which is already known throughout the valley for their masterful woodcarving, surplus of timber, and excellent lumberjacks) have made it their mission to trade darkwood with their new Sanguinian and Vaasi neighbors, though they fear that the demand may outstrip the supply if they act too hastily.

### Ice Moss

This moss grows very thinly on bare ice and on rocks. It is furry, a sickly brown-white-with-olive-green edge in hue, and is very rich in nutrients, so an essential part of the diets of arctic birds and animals in the high, cold regions of Vorostokov. Hungry humans have found that a handful of ice moss is as

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<sup>2</sup> Sources: *Dark of the Moon* page 9; *Domains of Dread* page 98; *Ravenloft Campaign Setting Sourcebook* page 154

rich as a large meal, and if plucked from its rocks, it retains its flexibility and edibility for days, and so can be harvested by wayfarers on the move to serve as a staple, sustaining food. One pound of ice moss is equivalent to one pound of rations. Ingesting ice moss, or touching ice moss to an external wound, causes instant coagulation or closing of wounds and blood vessels, so bleeding stops in that localized area high instantly. Some healers grow their own small colonies of ice moss (it can survive in non-arctic climates, though it grows very slowly when too warm) to aid in staunching blood flows. For this reason, ice moss is becoming a trade good to specialized markets (alchemists and healers almost everywhere), where its rare availability commands high prices.

### **Snowwood**

This tree of blue bark grows on top of, and along the area bordering, the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains. Its thin and pinelike leaves are a perpetual white, giving the tree an appearance of being barren and frozen in place.

Actually a highly specialized variant of oaktree, the snowwood is highly prized by the people of Vorostokov for its sap, which functions as a contact and ingestion safe antifreezing agent. That, combined with its sweet taste, makes it exceptionally common as a way to treat meat in the region while not allowing it to lose any of its integrity over long periods of time. Lumber wrought of the snowwood is exceptionally hard and difficult to shape, but its long-term durability is nearly unmatched in the tundras.

### **Varsk Tree**

This tree looks like a bush because it grows so close to the ground, but actually has the shape of a miniature oak tree to begin with. As the years pass, its canopy stays the same but its trunk gets thicker and thicker until it is almost as big around as the leaves above it. It stores a lot of pleasant-tasting potable water in its trunk, and its name derives from its popularity with varsk (see "Native Horrors"

below) of all sorts, who find it not just a very tasty morsel, but also containing everything they need (trace minerals, rare nutrients) to flourish. A varsk tree is almost impossible to uproot because its root system is so extensive and reaches so deep (typically in bedrock crevices) and it will wither and die in any warm environment. Its water-laden wood is heavy, soft, and readily carved, and has attractive swirling internal mottlings like a choice oak burl that make it very valuable for interior panels and carvings for the few who are wealthy enough to afford it

The level of fauna within Vorostokov can be said to fluctuate significantly. Currently, a fair amount of small game still survives in the woods, including rabbits, squirrels, pikas, ptarmigans, and a variety of snow quail. Small scavengers and predators include foxes, wolverines, martins, owls, hawks, and ravens. Larger animals include herds of elk and caribou, a few deer, and large (and very dangerous) bears. However, the most dangerous and prevalent predator of the forest is the wolf. Aggressive and powerful packs of common wolves range freely throughout the domain, and will not hesitate to attack even a large group of humans.

Aside from the terrestrial fauna, there should also be note of the aerial and aquatic wildlife that can be found in Vorostokov. Of the aerial wildlife, snow cranes, crested honey buzzards, gadwalls, teals, smews, ospreys, pallid harriers, black grouse, gray partridges, rock doves, and more can be found soaring above the treetops. In terms of fish, taimen, sturgeon, Sterlyad, bearded stone loach, lenok, omul, eelback flounder, pike, sockeye salmon, minnow, and the nine-spined stickleback comprise the more common marine life found beneath the iced-over Trau River and Bottomless Lake. Of the more uncommon varieties, special mention must be



made to the golomanka and the knucklehead trout<sup>3</sup>. The golomanka fish is an odd fish; its name translates to oilfish, so named because half its body weight is oil. The extract from golomanka burns particularly pure and bright, and is highly prized for its medicinal qualities. The fishing village of Oneka brings in good

catches, in spite of the golomanka's solitary nature. There are always traders willing to barter for the fish. Then there is the knucklehead trout, a hard-headed fish whose bones are similar to ivory, and well suited as the raw material for scrimshaw.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: TIMELESSNESS

When one thinks of the 'eternal winter' in Vorostokov, one must wonder how exactly the Vos who lives in the valley manage to survive. While humans are no strangers to Ice Age conditions (from the actual prehistoric Ice Age that Neanderthals and humans found themselves both trudging through, to the 'Little Ice Age' that settled over Europe for centuries), said survival was also possible thanks to access to saltwater coasts and the ability to travel outside of a barren locale. Not so for the Vos, who are squarely stuck in their valley (or were from 731 BC to 749 BC, a good 18 years of winter in the same place). So how do they manage to survive? While this document offers a few explanations of its own, one that may interest any DM running Vorostokov is to put the 'eternal' in 'eternal winter'. Namely, thanks to the Dark Powers, fish and wild game replenish very quickly-- to normal levels for winter. Thanks to the Dark Powers, trees cut down often seem to regrow while nobody's looking. But new-planted trees rarely, if ever, flourish. Thus, the only reliable measure of the passage of the years is the growth and aging of human beings. But given the narrow margin for life in the settlements, the population never expands much before starvation threatens. In this way, the 'eternal winter' is 'eternal' in more ways than one.

While this is a much more supernatural take on Vorostokov than what most gazetteers may give (with many attempting to give more a lived-in feeling to a domain as opposed to it being a set-piece in a Weekend in Hell style adventure), one could argue that Vorostokov's roots as a Russian/Siberian-inspired domain of dread make it feel more like a dark fairy tale than its fellows in the Core or in other Clusters. However, this article does not approach the land of Vorostokov through such a lens and only mentions it explicitly as a Dread Possibility for other DMs to opt to utilize (or not) at their own leisure.

### Food

A very special note must be made on the status of food within the frozen valley.

The people of Vorostokov are no fools; they know full well what crops can and cannot be sustained within their land, even with an eternal winter.

Food that is available in cold and low-light conditions (as long as the ground is not frozen) are the following: potatoes, carrots, garlic, parsnip, brussel sprouts, spinach, lettuce, potato bread, potato starch, goat milk, goat cheese, owl eggs, trout eggs, varsk eggs, snowberries, honey, maple syrup, and no fruits except those that are jammed or berries. In terms of meat, 'seafood' offers knucklehead trout,

<sup>3</sup> Credit for the "golomanka" as a concept goes to *Nations of Theah: Ussura (1e)*, while the "knucklehead trout" credit goes to the region of Icewind Dale within the *Forgotten Realms* campaign setting (with a more specific citation being the module *Icewind Dale: Rime of the Frostmaiden (5e)*)

seal, trout, clam, and other fish (usually sourced from the Trau River and the Bottomless Lake). Meat in terms of game would be reindeer, caribou, elk, wild goat, domesticated goat, sheep, moose, rabbit, bear, and (recently) the meat of monsters like yetis. Food that is available in cold conditions (but struggles in low light) would be pumpkins & gourds, wild celery, cranberries, raspberries, cloudberries, blueberries (though these have grown rarer and rarer), juniper berries (in shoddily constructed greenhouses), beets, turnips, and yams. Food is made to last, where possible. Meat and fish can be smoked – and usually is. It can be salted but salt is very expensive.

Alcohol is made from any of the food above. More densely populated areas (relative as that is) like Novaya Vorostokov and Torgov make a wide variety of good alcohol, like pumpkin ale and crystal fruit wine, while more isolated towns, like Novayalenk, may only be able to make poor quality stuff from fermented carrots, and therefore import a lot more mead from the nearer villages.

Some towns (Novaya Vorostokov, Voronina, and Kargo) have heated greenhouses (the glass provided by the hardworking glassworkers of Voronina) which are guarded 24/7. They usually have an ‘official’ hedge-wizard or druid looking after each one, in each of the aforementioned settlements. They usually grow grain for flour, or fruit trees/bushes such as juniper. Even with the druids the lack of sunlight due to polar winter is stopping them from flourishing.

One more macabre way of getting food (that isn’t through “Chef Boyarsky”) was practiced by the people of Kirinova during a particularly lean time. The villagers buried their deceased relatives in their basement in what they called “mushroom middens”. They used the decomposing bodies as nourishment for mushrooms which they could then add to their meager food supplies.<sup>4</sup>

Another note must be given to kvas. The word kvas translates as “sour milk” and is, after water, the most popular drink in Vorostokov. Such is the Vos fondness for kvas, that it is used in almost every aspect of life, from cooking (where it serves as stock for many daily dishes) to medicine (where it is credited for saving many peasants from scurvy during times of famine). Its curative powers were also said to extend to colds, dropsy, fever, and diseases of the intestines, but whether this can be attributed to the kvas or the Vos’ legendary constitution from drinking the stuff will likely never be known. There are many recipes for kvas, each village claiming that it has the definitive recipe and that all others are “like drinking yellow snow,” but in general, they have the same ingredients, just in different proportions. Kvas is made from malt, rye, or wheat flour and boiling water. This dense mass is blended until the village headman declares it is ready; then it’s put in a heated oven for a day and night. Afterwards, it is dissolved in water and left in a room for a few hours before being poured into wineskins. The strength of kvas varies from place to place (as does the flavor) for, as the Vos are fond of saying, there are as many different types of kvas as grass on the steppe.

All settlements have sheep flocks or goat herds, again guarded 24/7. The goats and sheep provide cheese, milk, and textiles. Goat milk has to be fresh to be drunk or made into cream as it turns “goaty” within a couple of days and then it is only good for cheese. The goats pretty much eat anything. The difficulty of keeping such herds, however, is that when times are tough and food is scarce, they are always the very first source of food to be rapidly depleted, whether by farmers who want to prevent Zolnik and his men from stealing their hard-worked food source for Zolnik’s favorite village to prosper while their own starves, or by the ever-present black wolves that somehow always know how to get into

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<sup>4</sup> Taken straight from “The Price of Revenge” of Dungeon Magazine #42, which is supposed to take place in Valachan (in Ungrad) during the winter.

the paddock and slaughter the herd to the last. However, this too has changed somewhat, at least compared to the early years: the farmers wonder whether the wolves have learned what the meaning of “sustainability” is, as they seem to at least be trying to keep enough of the herd alive to replenish its numbers in a few years! Regardless, the frequency of such wolf attacks and governmental extortion has meant that most Voros don't bother trying to raise sheep flocks or goat herds unless times are either exceptionally good or if they foolishly think they can hide said animals from Zolnik and the wolves.

To help weather the everlasting winter and deal with the aftereffects of the Great Upheaval, the leaders of the villages of Vorostokov came to an agreement in 740 BC. They agreed to pool their food supplies and distribute them fairly to ensure no one starves. It was a great act of mutual trust and solidarity, but not everyone was happy about it. Namely, Gregor Zolnik. Suspicion and paranoia abounded as people feared not getting what they think they're entitled to. Those supplies were stored in silos and protected by guards from each town. Each guard carried a magic key (courtesy of the hedge-wizard in Siberski) that could unlock a silo, but only when at least one other key was present. This way no guard could access the supplies without the awareness of a guard from another town. It should have been foolproof but that was unfortunately not the case. *Someone* or *something* managed to *somehow* kill all the guards and ransack the silos, taking half for their own purposes while the remainder was put to the torch. The food situation from 740-743 BC took a very drastic turn for the worst, with the majority of towns (with the exception of Torgo, Kirinova, and Kargo) bending the knee to Zolnik and his thugs if only to get some sustenance.

The food situation took a drastic turn for the better with the Great Thawing of 743 BC. From 743 to 745 BC, summer had returned to the valley, and the Voros did not squander this opportunity. Ever fearful that this summer would be their last (while still being extremely jubilant that summer even managed to

return in the first place after so long), the Voros worked day and night, regardless of the season, to ensure that there would be crops planted. In those two years, everyone willingly became a farmer or a gatherer or a hunter and planted and foraged and hunted like they never could before. Thankfully, the muddy soil beneath all the melting ice proved to be even more cooperative than the Voros themselves had anticipated. By some estimates, the fertility of the soil was on par with that of the Blacksoil Vale of Falkovnia! And while every inhabitant of Vorostokov cursed the Zolnik family and then the gods (in that order) when winter returned with its usual harshness in 745 BC (heralded by the cry of a black wolf that echoed throughout the valley), they also had the rather significant comfort of knowing that they had enough foodstuffs stored within their silos and root cellars to last them until 749 BC. Until then, they need not suffer the serving of the “longpork” by their self-proclaimed ruler, though they did have to suffer his need for attention and bully behavior. And when the foodstuffs ran out in the autumn of 749 BC, the inhabitants of Vorostokov were shown good fortune once again with the discovery of their new northern neighbor, Sanguinia.

Design Note: The Dark Powers are all about throwing someone a bone before snatching it away, and it is the opinion of this author that this also helps keep Vorostokov alive until Sanguinia shows up (as the valley seemed to be on its last legs by the time of *Dark of the Moon*, hence the urgency of the module).

## Native Horrors

Prior to the “Great Thawing” of 743 BC, monstrous denizens of Vorostokov were rather rare, but a few did exist. Undead can still be found in various places, whether as the restless spirits of those killed by Gregor and his pack or those frozen as they traveled in the woods. A rare breed of white cloaker can be found in the deep woods, and the snowy wastes are haunted by a few leucrotta. Some of the elk, bears, and wolves of the domain approach monstrous proportions. The folk of the villages also tell horrible

tales of the arayashka, the snow-wraiths who freeze and devour hapless travelers on the icy moors<sup>5</sup>. However, the creatures that rule Vorostokov without challenges are the werewolves. No other animal or monster dares defy the great black wolf and his pack of savage killers<sup>6</sup>.

The wolves here are enormous, reaching truly dire proportions. White worgs are relatively common here as well, and there is at least one winter wolf who has made Vorostokov into its home. The *loup du noir* are the main issue here, a form of lycanthrope that can put on the skin of a wolf, like a coat, and take its form in a similar manner to a werewolf. These men-as-beasts serve Gregor Zolnik in his attempt to bring the villagers of Vorostokov under his control, and normally only attack those who have defied Gregor in some way.

Special mention also goes to the Witches of the Forest—supposedly supernatural beings who control the wolves of Vorostokov. Nothing could be further from the truth, and the witches are, in fact, Gregor’s sisters who escaped when he killed his family. They are hiding from the wolves and looking for help, though they will often slyly help the other villages. However, they will not do so at danger to herself or at risk of exposure, leading many to suspect them (though they do not know that there are two of them) of greater crimes. Only those outsiders that come to the domain ever learn the truth, as they are more likely to trust those from outside of Vorostokov.

Another special mention must be given to the varsk<sup>7</sup>. Varsks are the battle steeds of the Vos, powerful creatures that thrive in the frozen

wastelands of the north. A varsk appears similar to a great, white-furred lizard. For the Vos, they are very similar to the war horses found in other realms. They are aggressive from birth and do not fear combat, with domestication of a varsk being much more difficult than breeding them. They only fear fire. Creatures similar to the varsk would be the hroll (slightly shorter but larger white-furred lizards that travel in herds and can be pastured; similar to cows), the varskyn (a slightly taller but more lightly built varsk; if the regular varsk is a heavy warhorse, this is a light warhorse), and the vetch (small white-furred lizard vermin that consume crops; the Vos version of rats).

Since the Great Thawing of 744 BC, there have been more and more monsters found in the valley. Yetis, Fey creatures, ice ogres, and more monsters have begun to harass the villagers. Zolnik and his men have, when not harassing villagers themselves, been fighting off these monstrosities. And one cannot discount whatever monstrous intrusions may come from neighboring Sanguinia, such as the dreadful vrykolakas. However, while Zolnik welcomes a chance to be seen as a hero by his people once more, the risk of losing publicly to one of these foes gnaws at him; especially after the “patzinaki” incident of 759 BC...

## SEASONS AND WEATHER

Ever since Vorostokov’s arrival in the Dread Realms, the seasons and weather have been rather static in comparison to other lands. While there are still some indications of seasons shifting, it is only measured through slight variations in temperature; “summer” in the valley is not truly summer as much as it is when

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<sup>5</sup> *Dark of the Moon*, pages 61-63

<sup>6</sup> Ditto

<sup>7</sup> For more information on varsks and their presence in the valley specifically, see the section on “Siberski” under “Sites of Interest”. For more information on varsks generally, see *Birthright: Tribes of the Heartless Wastes* (2e), pages 61-62, available on DMsGuild.



the temperature is consistently above freezing and there is little to no snowfall. "Autumn" is the gradual decline of temperature and the increase of snowfall, though not to the point of blizzards. "Winter" is the worst time of the year, one in which even the wolves are more cautious and willing to burrow within their dens when the blizzards arrive. "Spring" still arrives, though the markers of spring are extraordinarily subtle for those who haven't grown up in the valley. It is usually marked by the emergence of the wolves and their prey from their dens and an increase in hunting and foraging from both man and beast alike. It is during the (very) relative abundance of "spring" and "summer" that crops can be grown, for the Voros, try as they might under Zolnik, cannot sustain themselves on meat alone. That and they need potatoes for their vodka, or else how will they drown their sorrows?

One of the most notable meteorological events in Vorostokov would be the *zilinya neshka*, or "black-ice storm." During a *zilinya neshka*, temperatures can drop as low as -50 degrees, and the wind can reach 70 to 80 miles per hour or more, scourging the land with a stinging spray of crystalline ice shards<sup>8</sup>.

## HISTORY (ABRIDGED)

### RECENT HISTORY

#### *Gregor's Sins*

There was once a young man named Gregor Zolnik, who was a proud and skillful hunter. He was the strongest and bravest man in his village in Vorostokov. One year winter came early. Snow ruined the crops that were still in the field and covered the hamlet with drifts so deep that ponies could not drag sleds through it. The early snowfall soon deepened into the darkest and coldest winter the villagers could remember. Months passed with not the slightest hint of relief, and Vorostokov's stores of food began to dwindle. As the dead of

winter approached, the folk of Vorostokov were facing starvation. The men of the village hunted each day, braving the cold and the ice, but found nothing but the leavings of wolves' kills. Then one day, Gregor Zolnik returned from a successful hunt with caribou for the whole village! His mother and sisters shared it with the village, and Gregor managed to do what tens of men could not. He fed his village, day after day, and gained such prestige and fame that the Tsar, Andrei Vladimir, came to meet the man who had single-handedly saved Vorostokov from starvation; many other villages in the duke's land had not fared as well. During this visit, Gregor met the duke's daughter Ireena. The two fell in love and were married, returning to the duke's castle. Until one day, winter suddenly returned, and everyone at the castle except for mighty Gregor was slaughtered by a black wolf. (The full truth of Gregor's tale can be found in his "Background" section of "Who's Doomed—Gregor Zolnik")

#### *The Start of the Eternal Winter 731 BC*

The villagers were shocked at the sudden return of winter, and were caught off guard. They immediately set to stockpiling as much food as they could, and hunted as much as possible to keep their supplies abundant. With the hero Gregor Zolnik with them, there was no way they would starve, right?

#### *The Famines 733 BC*

Even with the stockpiling of food that was done by the villagers for the past two years, the food inevitably ran out. Gregor Zolnik once again went out on his own to hunt, but unlike before, he kept finding nothing at all. At least in the first two years, though the game progressively eluded him, he was able to find something. But now, the diminishing returns had diminished completely, and he had hatched a new idea: to hunt that which walked on two legs. At this time, he still had the support of his sisters and mother.

<sup>8</sup> *Dark of the Moon*, pages 27, 58-60

### *The Formation of the Boyarsky 734 BC*

Gregor was a proud man who wanted to rule by example as a boyar, and he “feared that too many hunters would lead to the food supply being cut short too soon”, so he refused to allow other hunters into the forests. Eventually, Gregor realized that he could not hunt alone, and that he would need a loyal and strong pack of hunters by his side. So he chose the best and strongest menfolk of the village of Vorostokov and enacted sacred Voros rites to tie them together as brethren-at-arms. Gregor had forged an unbreakable pact with his new followers. Returning to Novaya Vorostokov, he soon came to rule it as boyar with his boyarsky at his side. He built a great lodge for himself and his men, who were soon feeding the nearby villages as well as Vorostokov itself, and Gregor's rule was acknowledged in Nordvik, Novayalenk, Siberski, and Oneka.

(The truth of this tale is also found in the “Background” section of “Who’s Doomed—Gregor Zolnik”).

### *The Rebellions (Yargorod, Vlasinovka, Sorochinka) 735 BC*

With his boyarsky now formed, Zolnik went out and enforced his will on the valley. Though most villages bared their bellies to Zolnik and his beastly men, there were a few that dared to fight against him, and they were crushed during this period of turmoil. Now, only their ruins remain. (For more information, see “Yargorod”, “Vlasinovka”, and “Sorochinka” in the “Sites of Interest” section).

### *The Great Upheaval 740 BC*

Even with the efforts of the boyarsky and villagers who would dare defy their commands (whether through hunting of their own or farming and fishing), the Great Upheaval put the valley in its most dire position it ever fell into. Ice quakes, glacial dams bursting and flooding villages, mass deaths from starvation all led to the domain of Vorostokov nearly crumbling in on itself. To combat these instabilities, communities banded together to create

greenhouses and silos for shared food distribution, but those efforts were sabotaged by unknown actors (for more information, see “Food”)

### *The Death of Sasha and Antonina 742 BC*

One day, as Gregor traveled from village to village, he found himself in the tiny hamlet of Torgov. There he met a beautiful girl named Sasha, daughter of the village's headman. Gregor knew at once that she was the most beautiful woman in all the land, and he decided to make her his wife. Although she was terribly frightened by the boyar's strength and vile temper, Sasha consented to return with him to his lodge in Vorostokov.

The boyar doted on his wife, and his savage temperament was restrained by her purity and gentleness. Eventually, Sasha gave birth to Gregor's first son, Alexei, and then his second son, Mikhail. And on the day of Alexei's 18th birthday, Gregor decided he would induct Alexei into the ranks of the boyarsky. It is a true shame that tragedy struck, as the black wolves of the valley, long a menace to the people of Vorostokov, had turned their hunger towards Sasha of Torgov and Gregor's own mother, Antonina. Gregor's sisters as well were lost in a blizzard, never to be found again. Both women died, and Gregor Zolnik and his sons grieved their losses.

(The truth of this tale is also found in the “Background” section of “Who’s Doomed—Gregor Zolnik”).

### *The Dark of the Moon 743 BC*

With the valley in such a dreadful position, the seeds of rebellion within Mikhail's heart had been sown, as well as in the villages of Torgov, Kirinova, and Kargo. Zolnik went to put down these rebellions, but was faced with the involvement of Outlander adventurers that survived his multiple attacks and eventually led to his supposed demise.

### *The Great Thawing 743-745 BC*

When Gregor Zolnik disappeared, summer miraculously returned to the valley. The people of

Vorostokov wasted no time in capitalizing on the absence of both the damnable man Zolnik and on their sudden good fortune. In that time, everyone became a farmer or a hunter or a fisher, and everyone worked hard to both enjoy the summer and spring they were blessed with and to make sure that they reaped as much from the newfound fertile soil as they could.

(for more information, see “Food”)

#### *The Return of the Hunter 745 BC*

It was in the winter of 745 BC, when it returned, that a black wolf howled throughout the night. Gregor Zolnik had returned, though he had indeed changed. His heavy-handedness in controlling the nearby villages had somewhat lessened, and there was enough game going around (and enough food stockpiled)

#### *The New Neighbors (Sanguinia) 749 BC*

At the dawn of 749 BC, the vast resources that were stockpiled during the Great Thawing were beginning to run low. The villagers in the valley feared the return of lean times and of the boyarsky's extortion. These worries were suddenly put behind them when, in the summer of 749 BC, an undiscovered mountain pass led into a completely new land, the land of Sanguinia. Initial contact was tense but it soon gave way to trade between the northernmost villages of Kargo & Torgov with Sanguinia's southernmost settlement of Fagarus, which then led to further relations bleeding deeper into one another's lands.

#### *The Newer Neighbors (Nova Vaasa) 752 BC*

Further trade came to the Voros with the Vaasi discovery of the Bleak Road Mistway, pioneered by Vaasi priests of the Lawgiver. Already the Voros were happy to have a northern neighbor that had actual summer, so making contact with a new people that had a land capable of growing massive amounts of crops and willing to trade felt like a blessing from above.

#### *The Formation of the Bogatyr 755 BC*

A new band of hunters and trappers would be formed in the neighboring village of Torgov, by Gregor's own son Mikhail, who opposed Gregor's political authority. Known as the bogatyr, they are the secondary authority in Vorostokov, patrolling the villages that are not loyal to Gregor Zolnik and his boyarsky, which would complicate relations with the new and newer neighbors.

(For more information, see “Who's Doomed—Mikhail Zolnik”)

#### *The Cold War 755-760 BC*

From that point onward, Mikhail and Gregor Zolnik would be engaged in a cold war best defined through skirmishes and raids than actual battles. The werebeasts of the boyarsky and bogatyr would fight in the woods and icy tundras of the valley, or would defend their own positions from incursions against the enemy, all while the vast majority of the villagers in most villages were completely unaware, and trade with the outside world flourished.

#### **TODAY—760 BC**

##### *A Note on Timelines*

Typically, I try to follow established canon timelines as closely as I can for my pet projects, if only because I willingly choose to play within the restraints of canon and try to give a product that can be used by both purists and people who will put their own spin on things alike. In Vorostokov's case, I opted not to do that. Vorostokov formed in 731 BC, and from 731 to 749 it was an Island of Terror, stuck in 18 years of endless winter. In 749 BC, the Frozen Reaches Cluster was formed (according to 3e Ravenloft Campaign Setting Sourcebook), with Sanguinia to the north. It is then established that in 754 BC, Gregor Zolnik killed his mother and his second wife. The module *Dark of the Moon* is implied to have taken place sometime after this event, according to the John W. Mangrum revised timeline, “probably within the next few years” as he puts it. But one must then

wonder: why does Domains of Dread (2e), ostensibly taking place after the Requiem in 750 BC and having Darkon called “Necropolis”, have Vorostokov as an Island of Terror? And why does the entirety of *Dark of the Moon* not even allude to Sanguinia being to the north beyond the mountains despite that being the case since 749 BC (so if *Dark of the Moon* takes place in 755-756 or so then since 6-7 years ago)? Even worse yet: In the module *Dark of the Moon*, Antonina (Zolnik’s mother)’s ghost tells her grandson Mikhail that twelve years have passed between her murder and the events of the module. Alexei, Mikhail’s older brother, was conceived in Ravenloft; he was 18 when he became a *loup du noir*, and 12 years have passed since that point. That means that, somehow, *Dark of the Moon* cannot occur before **761 BC**.

When one remembers that the John W. Mangrum revised timeline is purely for 2e materials, some concerns are alleviated, and when one considers that 3e may have retroactively made canon (in other words, retconned) the Frozen Reaches Cluster into existence, then even more concerns are addressed. At this point it’s also fair to assume that the diligent scribe who first wrote of Vorostokov’s formation in 731 BC actually meant to write 713 BC but made a clerical error.

For the purposes of this gazetteer, we will be operating under the assumption that *Dark of the Moon* took place not in 755-756 BC, but instead in 743 BC. By accepting that date, while it does contradict the RCS date of 754 BC, the possibility of both trade & acknowledgement between the two domains of the Frozen Reaches as they discover one another in 749 BC is kept, as well as giving the Voros 1-2 years in which summer returned to their land, allowing for both the harvesting of crops and the sparking of hope and change within the domain instead of keeping things static. This, however, does come with its own difficulties: the death of Sasha of Torgov is supposed to be when Alexei Zolnik (older brother of Mikhail) turns 18, with the events of *Dark of the Moon* taking place shortly afterwards

(“sometime within the next few years”, to paraphrase Mr. John W. Mangrum). Thus, how can it be that the death of Sasha of Torgov is in 741 BC according to the timeline provided here, if 742-18 is equal to 725, which is before Vorostokov’s date of formation within the Mists AND before Gregor Zolnik even met Sasha of Torgov? Is it possible that the Vos keep track of time differently than the Barovian Calendar? Could the timelessness of the ‘eternal winter’ have led to discrepancies amongst even their own in regards to dates? Or is the author of this text woefully incapable of understanding how timelines work and should have just followed the canon instead of trying to make sense of it himself? That is for the reader to decide.

## POPULACE

In order to best understand the people of Vorostokov, it is good to define what they are not, or more specifically, what they have derived from but are ultimately distinct from. Although the valley and its people originate from the Grovnekevic Forest of the region of Vosgaard (of the Outlander world of Cerilia, a.k.a the *Birthright* campaign setting), the time the formerly-Vos people have spent in isolation within the Mists, and under such dire circumstances as starvation-or-subjugation by Gregor Zolnik, has shaped them into their own distinct offshoot of the Vos people, herein referred to as the Voros. While the Voros carry strong influences from their Outlander cultural origins, subtleties such as the effect Gregor Zolnik’s darklordship has had on the land and its folk have led to key cultural differences between the two groups that are worth outlining.

As a people, the Voros can be warm and good-humored, though their spirits have begun to dim with each passing year of winter. And the level to which the Voros can be “warm and good-humored” is entirely dependent on their acceptance of someone into their ranks, which is much easier said than done. Despite the endless cold, they are resolved to endure and survive, thus leading them to



disregard that which they believe they cannot change. Amongst their own, they prize hospitality and socializing and are inherently suspicious of those who cannot enjoy a strong drink and a hearty laugh. The Voros delight in eating, drinking, song, jokes, board games, and tests of might. Sweathouses, lodges where residents can relax amid thick steam, are a cornerstone of culture in Voros villages. Here, men and women alike gather to gossip and enjoy the therapeutic vapors. If the Voros have a weakness, it is their stubbornness and the slowness with which they are stirred to action. Dark streaks of cynicism mar the demeanors of many Voros, and this hopeless fatalism is often drowned in potent liquor.

Within the Voros culture, there are opportunities for both sexes that exist, though there is also a subtle undercurrent of traditionalism regarding gender roles that keeps men and women, for the most part, segregated into the role of breadwinner and homestead handler respectively. Some wonder whether this might be a reflection of darklord Gregor Zolnik's unfortunate experiences with women throughout his life (from his first wife to his second wife to his mother to his sisters), or perhaps some other marker of difference between the more conservatively minded Voros of the Mists and the more egalitarian-by-comparison Vos of Cerilia. Regardless, though both men and women can become warriors, priests, and leaders among the Voros, it is frequently the men who take full advantage of such opportunities, though an incrementally growing number of women have been known to enter the priesthood for the sake of escaping their 'expected' positions.

Children of typical Vos (and Voros) parents, regardless of their sex, are taught to fight and survive from an early age. Since most parents do not expect all their children to survive to adulthood or for themselves to survive through their heirs' childhood and adolescence, they try to educate and train their children as early as they can. A child who proves him or herself unable to learn quickly may be neglected in favor of a more promising sibling. Still, parents do

not treat their children with unnecessary callousness or brutality. The Vos (and Voros) love their families with a ferocity rivaled only by the she-wolf's relationship with her cubs. The parents recognize the bleakness of their land and the harshness of their culture and strive to raise their children to survive in both.

Male and female children learn to help defend the home, the family, and the village before anything else. They become accustomed to death and destruction at an early age, and few children grow to adolescence in the company of both their natural parents. Orphans become the responsibility of the village and are often taken into families that have lost other children before.

Females have the added pressure of "cultural necessity". The high mortality rate among Vos and Voros alike demands an unusually high birth rate. Most females, if they do not show an immediate aptitude for violence (whether as a hunter or as a warrior) or some other necessary function, are pressured to serve "the demands of society." Once a woman has borne a healthy child, she is encouraged to expand her family. Bearing children is considered an art that is far rarer than that of becoming a competent warrior.

In Cerilia, any female can escape the peasant life if she can find a temple of Kriesha. In Vorostokov, this is much more difficult, but still available as an option. Unlike Belinik's priests, the winter witches seldom recruit selected candidates for service to the temple. They spread the word in secret, among females only, offering the freedom and protection of Kriesha's temple in exchange for service. Many Vos women, especially those frustrated in their attempts to become warriors or leaders in their tribes, join Kriesha's temple. Few, however, progress beyond participatory levels. For most, joining the temple means simply having another master to serve. Some manage to advance among the winter witches if they have the necessary aptitude and capacity for cruelty that Kriesha demands of her priests and higher-level

followers. Because Kriesha's order is secretive, few details exist concerning the winter witches' temples.

## Economy

The people of Vorostokov have originally began as farmers, foresters, hunters, and trappers, with there being little demand nor time for craftsmen and little to no trade. This has, of course, changed in the most recent decade, and the number of craftsmen and differing professions has only increased in tandem with the flow of goods to-and-from Sanguinia in the north and through the Bleak Road Mistway to the south connecting to Nova Vaasa.

While the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains are rich with ore and mineral deposits, the gold that exists here is raw and has not been processed; even when it is found, it is viewed more as an interesting decoration rather than a coinage, for gold will not feed nor clothes a person. Thus, the Vos get by with a system of barter and exchange, which works for their northern Sanguinian neighbors but annoys their "southern" Vaasi neighbors to no end. The Vaasi themselves have begun to introduce Vaasi coinage and their system of currency exchange in the southernmost villages in the valley, though the adoption of their methods has been quite slow thanks to the Voros mindset of sticking to tried-and-true methods.

Resources — wheat, beets, potatoes, carrots, onions, reindeer, goats, trout, perch, pike, sturgeon, spirits, furs, timber, resin, iron. Coinage — none. Trade in Vorostokov is conducted through barter.

## Lifestyle

Most homes in the villages are low, one-room buildings. The people live in one end, and what little livestock they own (mostly sheep) are confined in the other end. The body heat of the animals helps warm the structure.

Generally within the Voros culture (though differently in Vos culture), women look after most household chores while the men tend to their trade,

various crafts, or hunting. The folk of Vorostokov, thanks to their isolation in the Mists and harder living circumstances than their Outlander kin, are very conservative and practical.

Travel between villages is difficult due to the powdery snow that covers the ground. The Vos make use of snowshoes when traveling or hunting.

In both prominent Vos realms outside the Mists like Cerilia's Vosgaard, and now in Vorostokov proper, the Vos and Voros people clash with each other over new, emerging values. The traditionalists—mostly the followers of Belinik, Kriesha, and the old ways of slaughter and death—call themselves the *torva* ("true," "one") Vos; those people they see as traitors to the old ways are called the *nona* ("upstart" or "new") Vos. The *torva* Vos, backed by a culture built upon centuries of practice and two powerful deities, still find they must battle against the new ideas of the *nona* Vos at every turn. The *nona* Vos desire to turn the fantastic energies of the Vos people toward progress and unity. They want strong, prosperous realms. The *torva* look to clan loyalties and temple following for their leadership and see the ways of the *nona* as soft and cowardly.

To an outsider, there may be little difference between the *torva* and *nona* Vos, with the differences being even more subtle with the Voros of Vorostokov. Both fight their battles in true, brutal Vos fashion. Both have little tolerance for outsiders interfering in their feuds. But the *nona* Vos have developed a less narrow outlook toward religion and government. The *nona* do not destroy temples to gods other than Belinik and Kriesha simply because they exist. They themselves both rebel and put down rebellions brutally, but they propose governing their realms in a more enlightened fashion than any Vos since the tsarevic of centuries ago. Indeed, the *nona* Vos are trying to emulate the old tsarevic's methods in government—instead of trying to force their wills

on clan chiefs and priests, they negotiate, and fight only when challenged directly.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of Vorostokov, the *torva* Voros and *nona* Voros conflict was sparked with the Great Thawing of 743 BC and the subsequent discoveries of other lands to the north of the mountains and south of the Mists of the valley. The *torva* Vos of Vorostokov are indeed traditionalists, but they do not care nearly as much for their prior deities as they once did, believing them to have abandoned the Voros in their time of greatest need. They still maintain the necessity of adhering to tradition and to rely only on themselves (in the order of the village, then the family, and then the individual), and shun the innovations that the outsiders bring. The most notable proponent of the *torva* Voros' ideas is, of course, Gregor Zolnik.

In most realms (including Vorostokov), *torva* and *nona* Vos do not exist as organized factions. Where they do, the *nona* are almost always in the vast minority, but they remain a unified, dedicated group. The one advantage the *nona* have over the *torva* is that any *torva* attempt at organization will eventually collapse into internal struggling, clan and village-or-temple feuds, and chaos. As long as the *nona* move slowly and pick their battles, the *torva* will grow impatient and eventually weaken themselves. At least that's the plan...

### CULTURAL ACTIVITIES (ARTS & CRAFTS)

Wood and bone carvings, colorful woven blankets and shawls, and song are the chief artistic expressions of the Vos. Literacy is rare among the common people of the domain, but there is a rich oral tradition of song and folklore. Most of the people of Vorostokov spend their free time visiting the houses of friends or gathering at the sweathouse or alehouse to trade stories and enjoy a song or two.

<sup>9</sup> Much of the *torva* vs. *nona* Vos ideas can be credited directly to *Birthright: Tribes of the Heartless Wastes* (2e)

The long years of winter have worn on their spirits, though, and the mood of such gatherings is much more somber and restrained than it once was.

Public rejoicing at a birth in Vorostokov is muted because no one knows what will happen to the infant in later life. The first ceremony is typically a visit from the hedge-wizard or druid of the village to see if the child is unhealthy. If pronounced fine, then a few days later, once it is clear the baby is not going to die immediately, it is commended to the protection of Belinik and Kriesha (though these are empty words to most Voros and are only said out of tradition) and officially welcomed into the community. In hamlets and small villages, everyone gathers, while in larger settlements, the ceremony is attended by friends, family, and authority figures. The child's father and mother then pass the baby through the flames of a large fire, symbolically burning away any bad luck and bringing the child into Belinik's protection. It is regarded as very bad luck if the baby does not start crying when it passed through the fire and even worse luck if it is noticeably burned. Actually dropping the baby into the fire is taken as a sign from Belinik that the baby is touched with lycanthropy, and the parents are restrained from bringing it into the world.<sup>10</sup>

Marriage is a joyous occasion across the whole of Vorostokov. Weddings are traditionally watched over by both Belinik and Kriesha, and most families try to have priests of both Gods present, if only for the sake of tradition as opposed to any true religious devotion. The main feature is a feast—with lots of drinking—that goes on until everyone is unconscious or until the food and drink runs out. It is considered a bad omen for the marriage if the food runs out and an even worse omen if the drink fails. Toasts and speeches are an essential feature of the feast. In a wide and clear area, predominantly in the

<sup>10</sup> Much of the inspiration for these cultural activities can be credited to *Warhammer Fantasy: Realm of the Ice Queen* (2e)

south of the village if possible, the festivities start with a feast where all the male guests stand in a circle and take turns proposing toasts in praise of the bride. In some areas, the women are present; in others, they are not, and in a few, only the bride is present. The presence of many women often postpones the point at which the praise of the bride becomes obscene until the men are so drunk their words can hardly be made out. If only the bride is present, the delay depends on how scared of her, and the groom, the guests are.

Traditionally, the last man standing at this feast gets to marry the bride on the following day. These days, the intended groom is drinking watered wine out of a thimble (often the bride's thimble, though that custom is not yet universal), while everyone else drinks kvas out of beakers. Men with a particular reputation for holding their drink are served with bigger beakers and tend not to object. In a few cases, a jealous rival spikes the groom's drinks in an attempt to knock him out, but unless the bride is also looking for a way out of the marriage, this deceit does not tend to work. In a few cases, the bride, groom, and rival have all conspired to get out of an arranged marriage this way, and the weight of tradition makes it hard for the families to object.

The wedding ceremony is quite simple, followed by another feast at which the groom can safely drink himself into insensibility. This time, it is common for him to have the biggest cup. With the creation of Zolnik's boyarsky, however, the first few wedding ceremonies that took place in the valley were heavily tilted in their favor, what with their rather inexplicable ability to hold their liquor compared to the other men present (along with their rather intimidating statures). For an unfortunate few years, few in Vorostokov dared to wed one another for fear that the boyarsky would steal their wives and add them to a growing collection. Eventually this reached the ears of Gregor Zolnik, who was less incensed at

the abuse of power done by his men as much as he was by how their actions would only make the outlying villages (and even his own home village of Novaya Vorostokov) think less of him as a hero than they already did. So he promptly made sure that such abuse of tradition ended (one of the very few times he'd ever publicly disapproved of their actions and scolded them back into line) and from that, managed to receive a modicum more respect than before from the other folk of the valley (he is *torva* Voros through and through). Despite this, there will always be one or two boyarsky that will try their luck and get a free bride from such normally joyous festivities...

### HOLIDAYS IN VOROSTOKOV INCLUDE:

#### Spring Mourning (March 21st)<sup>11</sup>

In most lands and domains, the first day of spring is a time of celebration. This is not so in the eternal winter of Vorostokov, however. Spring Equinox has become Spring Mourning, a day in which the people of this frozen land mourn for the loss of normal seasons, as well as those who have passed on during the preceding year. The Boyar and Darklord of the land, Gregor Zolnik still insist that his Boyarsky have a day of revelry and celebration within the confines of his hall. The party usually turns gruesome as the werewolves transform to go hunting among the villages. Thus, among the poor villagers, the day has come to signify loss. A typical Spring Mourning involves visiting the graves of those lost the preceding year, followed by sprinkling seeds on the frozen gardens, a symbolic gesture of hope, although mostly futile. As evening comes, the villagers lock themselves in their houses and wait, sleeplessly, for dawn to come, while listening to the howls of the wolves.

#### Teeth of Winter (December 21st)

The month of December is sacred to Kriesha. Her priestesses often fast for much of the month, and

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<sup>11</sup> Credit goes straight to the *Book of Secrets* netbook, specifically the "A Year in Ravenloft" article



encourage others to do likewise (voluntarily or not). In the harsh lands of Vosgaard starvation is often close to hand during the mid-winter month and the pangs of hunger in this time are often ascribed to Kriesha gnawing at one's belly (thus the name of the time period as The Teeth of Winter). Those Vos who survive the month often celebrate with a feast, although this feast can be delayed by weeks or even months until winter has released its harsh grip on the land, for those who gorge themselves at the end of the month often find themselves hungry in later months before the snow lifts from the land, particularly if they offend the priestesses of Kriesha with their gluttony.

Finally, the practices of tattooing and ritually scarring their warriors (and now their hunters) seems barbaric to most other humans, but Vos and Voros regard these as high honors placed on their recipients.

### Education

Education in Vorostokov, in the sense of reading and writing, was once non-existent. The Vos taught their children how to survive and how to handle their neighbors, as the Vos of Vorostokov were far too isolated from any of the greater provinces of Vosgaard to be able to afford education as it is thought of in realms like those in the Core that benefit from education. While Tsar Andrei Vladimir had long-term plans to change this (secretly following the ideas of the *nona* Vos), he never had a chance to enact these plans.

The non-existent status of education has changed with the coming of the Vaasi, and more specifically, the coming of the Church of the Lawgiver. Under the condition of providing even more food to the Vos, the Church of the Lawgiver has also been given permission to establish schools (dedicated to the Lawgiver of course) meant to educate the Vos people on both the Lawgiver and other important subjects, with the hopes of giving the Vos an education equal to that found in most Core domains (or at least on par with Nova Vaasa). Currently, this program only exists within “Little Vaasa” and Siberski, and if Gregor had his way, he’d very much like it to stay that way (as he fears that the “education” of the Vaasi outsiders will weaken the people of Vorostokov and maybe even steal control of their loyalties from him).

### LANGUAGE

*“All their songs are sad, and all their battles are happy” —Recent Vaasi saying regarding the Vos language*

Vos is often said to be one of the most difficult languages for non-native speakers to learn, and while difficult for speakers of Mordentish (Low or High), it is not so difficult for those from Balok-speaking regions or for the Sanguinian neighbors to the north. What makes Vos so difficult to master is that it has an extremely complex gender system, based on the fact that it combines three categories—gender (masculine, feminine, neuter), personality (personal versus non-personal), and vitality (animate versus inanimate).

### EXAMPLES OF VOS WORDS

ataman:	an archaic term for village chief, replaced by vyeche; the feminine would be atamanka
bachór:	An unruly boy or child; also used to denote a warrior too stupid or unskilled to survive
blyad:	A woman of low morals
burmistrz:	Mayor, reserved for the Vaasi mayor
chapka:	Fur-lined cap
do widzenia:	Good bye, or die well; often used interchangeably

droyaska:	Blademaster; a title bestowed upon a master swordsman whose skill is above all others
dzień	dobry: Good day
kibitkas:	Portable huts
kika:	Elaborate headdresses sometimes worn by married women
koumiss:	A strong alcoholic beverage made from fermented mare's milk
kozhukhi:	A sheepskin coat
krowa:	A cow or a particularly stupid person
kvas:	A clear, distilled spirit popular throughout Vorostokov, renowned for its potency and medicinal properties
kyazak:	Outlaws or raiders
oblast:	A broad, empty, frozen region
Raspotitsa:	A time when snow blankets the steppe; literally "roadlessness"
samogon:	A crude moonshine
stanitsa:	A sizable Vos settlement, large enough to raise one or more troops of infantry per year. Hardly any of the villages in Vorostokov count as a stanitsa.
svolich:	An insult used to question a person's parentage or inferior lineage
świnia:	Pig or disgusting person who does not respect tradition
tirsa:	A small village
zal:	The main meeting hall in a village

### COMMON SAYINGS IN VOROSTOKOV

"Hard as summer snow": Used for something that is really difficult to deal with

"Surprised by snow in Vorostokov": Used for people who have trouble dealing with something they really should have foreseen

"Unflinching fighter": Someone who is not brave enough to run away and fight another day; serious insult if addressed to a leader

"Winter visitor": Either something completely unbelievable (someone arriving during winter) or something completely unwelcome (someone arriving just as the first snows of winter fall)

"Gone trading north": Off on an utterly insane mission doomed to failure; this saying has gone out of style since Sanguinia's appearance

## APPEARANCE & FASHION

The Vos are hearty folk, stout of build and blessed with powerful limbs. Their skin tends to be fair, varying from creamy white to a light tan or sallow. The biting winds of the domain tinge their cheeks with a perpetual ruddiness. Eye color is commonly a deep brown among the Vos, but sometimes a strange ginger hue is exhibited. Their straight hair is always dark brown or raven black. Women grow their tresses quite long, often past their waists, and traditionally braid it into a single lock. Men may wear their hair long and wild or in a variety of distinct styles, such as shorn temples or a topknot. Full beards and mustaches are common among men.

The men usually dress in buckskin and wear heavy fur coats. Before Vorostokov's winter set in, linen and wool were more common, but now only a few people still have bolts of the rare cloth. Heavy beards and drooping mustaches are favored by all who can grow them, although they must be carefully tended when out in the cold—otherwise heavy condensation will freeze through the facial hair and cause frostbite.

The women wear long wool, felt, or suede dresses, with several layers of under-skirts. Small blankets are worn shawl-style outdoors. The dresses often feature beautiful embroidery or brocade. Women wrap their shoulders in shawls and wear kerchiefs over their heads, while men don round fur hats. Skins and cloth are always natural colors, never dyed (unless for nobles). Jewelry is rare, save for the occasional earring of antler or bone. When venturing outdoors, men and women alike swathe themselves in heavy furs.

In contrast to their dour reputation, Vos clothing is very colorful. The raw color of unbleached linen predominates in peasant clothes, but if intended for the nobility, it is often dyed, whereupon it becomes known as *krashenin*. The most common colors include blue, green, and red, though imported fabrics are often dark red, crimson, purple, and azure.

## RELIGION

In most of the Vos lands of Cerilia, the priests of Belinik and Kriesha hold sway. Where the high priest of a realm does not rule the actual land, he or she keeps a tsarevo on a short leash. The priests of Belinik and Kriesha continue to dominate the spirits of most Vos. The war priests of Belinik continually cause strife among the people, whipping them into the battle fevers dreaded by any who have ever encountered Vos warriors on the battlefield. When presented with no outward foes, the priests of Belinik turn this angry energy inward toward their own rivals and enemies, and especially toward any Vos leader foolish enough to oppose their will. The priests of Kriesha maintain a more subtle grasp on their power. Seldom worshiped by the celebrated Vos warriors, Kriesha must work on the people's superstitious minds. Influencing the weather is their specialty, and the winter witches do not hesitate to use their substantial powers when bending a realm to their will.

The main church that existed within Vorostokov (before the Great Upheaval) was the Temple of Might. The Temple of Might, arose as a result of the tsarevic of decades ago making a deal with the priests of the two Vos deities, and still exists today. Designed as a temple glorifying both Belinik and Kriesha, each order of the Temple of Might has its own leanings, and one deity almost always claims preeminence over the other. Since priests of both religions exist within the Temple of Might, religious wars between and within different orders exist as a matter of course. The Vos do not doubt that Kriesha's winter witches have their own temples within Vosgaard. but all agree that these are secret orders existing in seclusion. Whispers say that the winter witches belong to a secret temple and that those who worship in the Temple of Might do so merely to allay suspicion among Belinik's followers.

Vorostokov followed the typical Vos religious leanings, until the Great Upheaval. However, even before then, there were differences caused by the transposition of the valley into Ravenloft. When

Gregor Zolnik unilaterally took control of the provision of food within the valley in the early days of famine and rebellion, he faced stern opposition and condemnation from the priests of Belinik. Knowing that the priests of Belinik could very well rouse the population into a rebellion against him (and not desiring to rule over a land devoid of people), Gregor quietly eliminated the war priests of each village himself. This had the unintended effect of the people of Vorostokov believing that, whatever the black wolves that prowled the night truly were, even the great god Belinik and his clergy were powerless against them, which led to a spiritual cynicism/religious nihilism amongst the population (at least in their belief in Belinik). Meanwhile, his sisters and mother were still devout worshippers of Kriesha, and as times grew leaner, the worship of Kriesha grew as well. Many villagers were hoping that by appeasing Kriesha, the eternal winter that they found themselves in would abate in some capacity. When the Great Upheaval occurred in 740 BC, enough discontent and simmering rage at the conditions the Voros were put through were only exacerbated by the ice quakes and the glacial-lake-outburst-flood that destroyed smaller thorps and hamlets like Kostrovat and Tambotim, respectively. This discontent finally boiled over into lynch mobs and pogroms against the witch women of Kriesha in the villages that dot the landscape. Gregor and his boyarsky were only made aware of these religious rebellions when two villagers attempted to kill his sisters and mother. Zolnik and his boyarsky then 'rode' out to all the villages in the land to quell the rebellions, and while he did restore order (in a sense), the damage was done. No longer would the Voros follow either of their old gods, and they (mostly, as there would always be a few followers or four that would remain in every village) became a

godless people. The churches in each village serve either as homes or are used as makeshift granaries/silos for storage.

It is only recently, with the Vaasi introduction of the Lawgiver and his Church, that some sense of religiosity has a chance of returning to the valley. The priests of the Iron Faith have, so far, ingratiated themselves well to the local population through the associated food and textile trade brought by the Bleak Road Mistway. Within the past few years, a church has been constructed within the boom town of Vesterbaek (known colloquially as "Little Vaasa") and the folk of Siberski and Oneka have been slowly converting to the Lawgiver's worship. This gives Gregor Zolnik mixed feelings, for he was wooed by the idea of a faith that rewards obedience to authority and believed it would be in his benefit to use the Lawgiver as a tool of social control, as opposed to subjugating them like he did with the clergy of Belinik and Kriesha. The Voros themselves are not as zealous about the Lawgiver as the Vaasi would like; though there is a congregation of 20 in Siberski and 15 in Oneka, only 8 in the former and 5 in the latter are as committed to the Lawgiver as the priests had hoped, with the remainder giving lip service and ultimately 'converting' for the sake of the trade benefits the foreigners bring.

If the Vaasi push too hard, then the Voros will become disillusioned and see the Lawgiver as another god unworthy of their worship, as Belinik and Kriesha had become after their isolation in the Mists and too many demands being made of the people. If the Vaasi do not push hard enough, then the vast majority of Voros will simply ignore the faith of their newfound neighbors and continue with their affairs as they have since the Great Upheaval.



## BELINIK, SUMMARIZED

**Aliases:** Prince of Terror, Lord of Strife; **Symbol:** Crossed Axes; **Alignment:** Chaotic Evil; **Portfolio:** Battle, feuds, fear, domination; **Domains:** Chaos, Evil, Strength, Terror, Wars

Belinik (bell-in-ICK) is the god of war, strife, competition and hatred. Prior to ascension, he was the most powerful of the Vos war chiefs that followed Azrai's banner. He now claims the title of patron god of the Vos and inspires Vos warriors to be savage in their attacks, merciless in their conquests, and fearless in their defeats. Contention is his companion, for in contention the weak are slain and the strong rewarded. Belinik is believed to destroy the herds of any Vos tribe that grows too soft, leaving them with no choice but to raid their enemies in order to survive. Belinik is a dark god, and fosters unceasing contention through hate, anger, and jealousy among his faithful.

Belinik's clerics are predominantly male and claim spiritual sovereignty over all Vos. In addition to the Vos, Belinik's worshippers include any willing to use murder, torture, and other horrid deeds as a means to an end: the control of others through strength and fear. Belinik's church has unquestioned power among the Vos. His priests do not work alongside others in their community to help it prosper; they plan attacks on their neighbors to take what they have, raiding for slaves, livestock, and booty. Belinik's clergy foment dissension among warriors of Vos tribes, for such conflict inevitably leads to violence and guarantees that the strongest rules. Priests of Belinik test their battle skills constantly, usually against far inferior opponents, and almost always to the death. In order to advance in the church hierarchy, a priest of Belinik need simply arrange the death of his superior and claims his rank; priests that are not feared by their subordinates are soon pulled down.

The hour of dawn is holy to Belinik, for it is at dawn that most battles take place. On the Eve of the Dead, the temples of Belinik enact dark ceremonies designed to bring them to states of psychological madness. The most important ceremonies are those performed to bring the favor of Belinik in battle. Immediately prior to the battle, priests of Belinik will ritually slay a kidnapped enemy warrior by cutting out his heart and devouring it. If such a victim is unavailable, the priest will attempt to cut out the heart of the first foe that they face. This ritual is considered to be one of the most sacred to Belinik, and among some tribes each warrior will attempt to do this, regardless of the personal danger. Belinik's clergy commonly multiclass as fighters.

**Dogma:** Terror is power. Power is for the strong. The weak hide behind paper agreements, seeking compromise over victory. The strong dictate everything and compromise nothing. Destroy or be destroyed; win or die; conquer or perish. Trust no one. Loyalty cannot be earned; it can only be coerced through fear. Answer every insult with blood; when you lose face, you lose power. Any who oppose you must be utterly destroyed; with each demonstration of your mastery you bind those more tightly beneath you.

**Allies:** Only Kriesha has the strength to stand behind us. Her followers are strong and thus must be often shown that our strength is far greater. Do not trust her, but use her to your advantage, for she makes a fine servant.

## KRIESHA, SUMMARIZED

**Aliases:** The Ice Lady, the Winter Witch; **Symbol:** White Hand; **Alignment:** Lawful Evil; **Portfolio:** Winter, hardship, beasts and other horrors of the frozen wastes; **Domains:** Evil, Law, Suffering, Winter

Kriesha (KREE-sha) is the goddess of winter: long, bitter, harsh winter; the sort of season in which the cold seeps into the warmest homes and in which the wolf packs sate their terrible hunger on those foolish enough to brave the storms. Prior to her ascension, Kriesha was a high priestess of Azrai. Kriesha is without mercy; the harsh

winters she sends against the Vos work to strengthen them as a people, for none but the strongest survive. Belinik teaches the Vos males to attack their enemies with fire and fury. Kriesha teaches the Vos women to plot. The Winter Witch shares the patronage of the Vos people with Belinik. Although the worship of Belinik seems to dominate the church of Vosgaard, the Vos women believe that Kriesha holds the true power. Kriesha's worship extends from Vosgaard across the breadth of northern Cerilia; she is known in any land where winters are long and brutal.

Kriesha's clergy are almost exclusively women, often the "wise women" of their clans. It is difficult to wield power without the support of a clan's circle of wise women and few dare to cross them, for their revenge is slow, thorough, and nearly always fatal. Priestesses are trained in matters of money and trade from early on in their service, and they manage a clan's wealth and supplies. The wise women know that wealth has power, and they use their financial power to encourage others to become more pliable to the whims of the church. The church buys information, causes underlings to betray their superiors, and handles matters of external trade. Priestesses also protect their clans from internal enemies by constantly testing the loyalties of members of their tribe. They enforce loyalty, where necessary, through fear tactics. Punishments are especially harsh against women who betray the church. The punishment may not occur for several years, but when it does arrive, it is final.

Midwinter month (Faniele) is the principal holy time of Kriesha's church. In Vos lands, it is a time of fasting (for game is scarce) followed by a feast at the month's end filled with tests of strength, endurance, and loyalty. Priestesses of Kriesha pray for their spells in the pre-dawn hours, when the night is at its peak of cold.

**Dogma:** Kriesha demands complete loyalty. The ties of family and clan are secondary priorities. Be willing to betray anything and anyone you hold dear if necessary. Friendship and love are dangerous luxuries and must be forsaken. Destruction awaits those who lack the discipline to obey. Ensure that the clan remains strong. Be patient and ruthless when dealing with foes. Nurse your hatreds and launch your attack only when you can destroy everything your foe values, for only then can you truly exult in your victory.

**Allies:** Belinik's rages draws attention to him and thus allows us a free hand. He is, like all men, a valuable tool. Permit him his vanity, for he serves well, but do not allow him to meddle in women's affairs.

## Medicine

Medicine in Vorostokov is an interesting subject, as it is not nearly treated with the same level of rigor and scientific study as it is in locales like Lamordia, Dementlieu, or Nova Vaasa. Rather, the Voros rely heavily on herbal remedies and therapies supplied by a druid or hedge-wizard, accompanied by a liberal dose of prayer from a priest of either Belinik or Kriesha. Medicines made from plants are very popular: juniper berries, wormwood, nettle, onions, garlic, horseradish, birch sap, ash bark, and more are kept within the greenhouses of certain villages in case they must be used immediately and there is no time to forage. Among the drugs of animal origin,

honey, raw cod liver, mare's milk and deer antlers are highly prized. Minerals can also be used by the Voros; abdominal pains were dealt with by rubbing chrysolite stone into powder and ingesting it, and childbirth is sometimes facilitated (if the village has the means to afford it and the artisans to craft it) by jewelry, with the most common gems being silver, mercury, antimony, and more. Mineral water, referred to as "sour water" or "bogatyrr water", is considered to do the same as minerals but with the added effects of flowing water to soothe the mind and body.

On the note of water, special mention must also be made to the steam baths' role in healing. The steam

baths that are frequently used for communal interaction are also commonly used by the Voros, especially for gout and arthritic conditions. The bath was considered the cleanest area in the village, and was thus very useful for childbirth, dealing with sprains, bloodletting, massages, cold and joint disease treatment, and medical ointment placements for skin diseases.<sup>12</sup>

The sick are tended to within their homes and usually by their immediate families. Other Voros families within the village would provide small services to alleviate the burden of care on the family tending to their sick, while still keeping their distance.

The hedge-wizards and druids that still remain in the valley pass their knowledge (medical or magical) from generation to generation and through oral tradition, thus leading foreigners to be confused as to how exactly the Voros are capable of having anyone who can find the remedies they need to treat their ill and wounded.

The recent trade between Sanguinia and Vorostokov has also led to a significant amount of interest in alchemy and alchemical remedies to old illnesses and wounds among the villages that border the mountain pass that leads into Sanguinia, as well as those that have the fortune (ill or otherwise) to host Sanguinian alchemists.

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS MAGIC

Both the Vos and the Voros look upon magic with a sense of awe and suspicion. While their culture is not conducive to creating born-spellcasters, they respect power when they see it and know of magic as a powerful tool, capable of doing wondrous things. Thus, they have a healthy enough respect for magicians, especially those that are self-taught arcane magic or are in-tune with natural magic like

the hedge-wizards and druids that can be found in some of their villages. Unfortunately, magic (especially divine magic) did not save many of the Voros from starving or having to rely on the boyarsky for sustenance, so the awe with which they may look upon magic is tempered by their memory of what it did not do for them. Furthermore, it is held (and not without good reason) that if the eternal winter that has settled on the valley is the result of magic, then magic must be capable of atrocities just as implausible as the miracles it can cast. The status of various sections of Vorostokov, such as the Mistmoors or the Shattered Swamp, are held to be the result of magic (no doubt *elven* to boot) most foul.

Further clarification must be given regarding the hedge-wizards and druids of Vorostokov. A hedge-wizard tends to be a self-taught spellcaster who is capable of scribing simple scrolls, making simple potions, and casting simple cantrips (and, if very accomplished, can cast 1st-level spells). Their skill in the arcane art was orally taught to them through generations by their parents and parents before them, thus keeping their knowledge within a certain bloodline and preventing it from being learned by others within the community. Druids operate similarly, but are much more in tune with 'natural' magic and, in comparison to the hedge-wizard, druids are far more reclusive and difficult to get the services of, operating more on whims and being far more capable of hiding within the dark woods and icy tundras of the valley if they do not wish to be approached. Both are respected within the community, though the former is more common and more approachable than the latter (leading to more suspicion about druids than a hedge-wizard), and both tend to occupy a unique niche within a village. They are not village leaders nor do they fall into the

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<sup>12</sup> Credit for the ideas on Voros medicine goes to these two sources on medieval Russian medicine in the Kievan Rus: <http://www.sofyalarus.info/Russia/medicine.html> & <https://www.bibliotekar.ru/eng/history-of-medicine/14.htm>



usual social class/hierarchy that defines the Voros people, instead of being specialized consultants brought on either in times of need or meant to do specific tasks that can be entrusted to no one else (whether by virtue of trust or skill) such as magically maintaining greenhouses in some villages.

### ATTITUDES TOWARDS NON-HUMANS

Vorostokov is inhabited almost entirely by humans, and demihumans are viewed either as freaks of nature or unfortunate beings who deserve pity. Special mention must be given to elves, as the Vos have a deep racial hatred for the elves and had fought many wars within the Grovnekevic Forest (of which Vorostokov was once a part of) to conquer elven territories for their own, as humanity in Cerilia advanced while elves began their slow decline.

### FUNERARY CUSTOMS

Voros funerals are unusual in that they are almost never held for people who are actually dead. Instead, funerals are held for people who might as well be dead, given the risks they are about to face, including all members of a village's army or hunters, as well as all women who aim to bear children. Thus, a boy's funeral is held immediately after he joins a warrior band (or hunter's band), while a girl's is held immediately after her wedding.

A pyre is built in a public place and solemnly lit by the person (or persons) whose funeral it is. The relatives then begin mourning his death, as the "dead" person casts a symbolic childhood possession into the flames. After the mourning dirges—which vary from village to village—have been sung, everyone gathers in a circle to tell stories of the "dead" person's devotion to duty. The "dead" person stays outside the circle, moving to stand or sit behind whoever is currently speaking. These stories are an opportunity to tell the "dead" person what is expected of them in their new life and are often traditional tales of heroes or mothers with the appropriate name substituted.

Occasionally, someone dies before they have their funeral. In these cases, the corpse is dressed up and moved around by relatives, so it can play its normal role in the proceedings. Foreigners find this even creepier than a normal Voros funeral. Given Vorostokov's location in the Mists (and even when the valley was in its Outlander world of origin), corpses are occasionally not as quiet as they should be, which is one reason why funerals are held around a pyre; if the corpse gets frisky, strong men throw it into the flames.

If there is no body, there can be no funeral, so the person in question is not regarded as formally dead. Such a situation is rarely a problem, however, as the transition to adulthood is, in most cases, marked by a funeral. This gives the impression to foreigners unfamiliar with Vorostokov (and the Frozen Reaches as a whole) that the cluster is crawling with undead.

But even in Vorostokov (especially in Vorostokov), people do actually die. Warriors are generally strapped to their mounts and sent out into the forests or wastes; although, depending on the cause of death, the corpse may be burned. If the mount also died, the warrior may be burned sitting on his mount. Non-warriors are almost always burned, but no one formally acknowledges what is going on. For the Voros, the role of a 'hunter', once considered to be distinct from a warrior, has now taken on that same significance, so hunters are given the same burial as a warrior. Well, they *ought* to be; the boyarsky, should one fall in battle, will most certainly be given this treatment, but hunters who dare to find food for their village without Zolnik's sanction or being one of his men will be treated like non-warriors, with their struggles in life not at all reflected with their funerary rites in death. It is an insult to Zolnik's pride if a lowly villager should get a warrior's send-off...

Informally, friends and family grieve and comfort one another, but officially, the village is merely disposing of some waste. Foreigners sometimes form the impression that the Voros are callous. Such is not



exactly or entirely the case; they have simply already said their goodbyes.<sup>13</sup>

In cases where a village is too poor or is, for whatever reason, otherwise unable to undergo the usual funerary rites, the Voros instead practice a form of outdoor burial, with deer or some other animal capable of dragging heavy loads being used for transport. The corpse would be brought outside to a nearby hilltop or other location of some elevation; sometimes even a rather large mound of snow would do. After the corpse is brought there, it is placed inside a wooden casket along with tools, weapons and other things the deceased might need in the afterlife – all these things were bent or broken beforehand so that they could be used in the afterworld. The deer that transported the body were sacrificed at the place of the burial. But it is not a burial in the strict sense, as the poor Voros in this case don't bury their dead – the frozen northern land does not allow digging deep holes, so the casket is covered with brushwood and left on the site. The villagers don't maintain the graves either - the bodies were left to decompose naturally. If infants or children die, their bodies are hanged in sacks on the tree branches, a kind of 'sky burial.'<sup>14</sup>

## THE REALM

Life in Vorostokov has inherited much from its Outlander world of origin, and can generally be roughly broken down into three social classes: the boyars, or nobility, the vyeche, or merchants and freemen, and the muzhiks, or peasantry<sup>15</sup>. Each one comes with responsibilities and duties to the land. Above the boyars would be the tsarevo (equivalent to a lord and holding several manorial estates), then

the zhupan (equivalent to a count and being regent of a province), then the voivod (equivalent to a baron and holding several counties), and then the tsar (equivalent to a duke and being regent of a domain)<sup>16</sup>. Beyond that is the tsarevic who holds multiple domains and is equal to an emperor; the Vos people (both those of Cerilia and Vorostokov) have never had a tsarevic since the last one fell centuries ago.

To both the Vos and the Voros, heredity means little to them. The best warrior of a tribe will invariably become the tsarevo, and the best warrior and leader among many tribes will probably become the tsar, or regent, of a realm. In Vosgaard, if he is without a bloodline, he'll have to obtain one, but that can often be arranged through the temples of Kriesha or Belinik. In Vorostokov, that would not be possible, unless one were to take Zolnik's place as darklord...

Individuals without a tribe have no standing in Vosgaard. Independent adventurers, members of non-Vos races, and most especially, practitioners of non-priestly magic hold virtual outlaw status. Even those non-Vos recognized as friends of Vosgaard or servants of Belinik or Kriesha can expect hostility and derision from the lowest of the Vos at times. However, Vorostokov is not the typical Vos domain, and the Voros people of Vorostokov (well, at least of Torgov and Novaya Vorostokov) remember that it was independent, non-Voros adventurers who helped fight against Gregor Zolnik and made him disappear long enough for summer to return. Thus, a warmer reception than usual is entirely plausible.

<sup>13</sup> All of the stuff above is inspired by the funerary rites section of *Warhammer Fantasy: Realm of the Ice Queen* (2e)

<sup>14</sup> Inspired by Siberian burial rites, source here: <https://www.rbth.com/history/333960-pagan-burial-rituals-of-russia>

<sup>15</sup> Much of the social classes were inspired by the write-up in *Nations of Theah: Ussura (1e)* of the *7th Sea* product line

<sup>16</sup> By Birthright regency rules, anyway; <http://www.birthright.net/forums/showwiki.php?title=Title>

## NOBILITY: THE BOYARS AND BOGATYR

The power and prestige of the boyars is directly associated with the amount of land they own, rather than their monetary value or a long lineage. The boyars rule parcels of land determined and given to them by the voivods of their kingdom, and approved by the tsar himself. If the tsar does not approve of the choice of the boyars, he has the authority to remove them from their position.

Typical boyars have an estate within a city or at the center of their provinces, and the legal right to tax their peasantry and gather the taxes to be sent to the voivods and then the tsar. Boyars who actually lead a province, city, or small territorial state hold the title voivod and form the crux of the voivod council's support.

Boyar lands and titles pass down to the first-born or most capable child – Vorostokov and its people have no time for petty squabbles over timeliness of birth or the gender of a ruler. Those children who do not rule have a choice: swear fealty to their sibling and serve his commands, or leave the area and live the life of a traveling bogatyr, or knight, seeking their fortune elsewhere. Unless they choose to swear, the new boyar has no obligation to his siblings either legally or financially. They are cut off from their old life and turned away to prove themselves elsewhere.

The bogatyr are the wandering nobility of the Vos people, seeking their fortune among the cities and open land of the nation (or they would be, if they weren't stuck in the Mists). Traditionally, the difference between a boyar and a bogatyr is land: a boyar usually has extensive holdings and does not need to sell his services, while a bogatyr has no land and must rely on the generosity of his or her lord. Many bogatyr are sell-swords, using a noble's training with the sword and axe to join the military and rise in rank, or to become the captain of the guard for some Vos town. Others become merchants and draw on their courtly contacts to trade among the provinces. These bogatyr become members of

the smerdi, or landless merchant class, and their children are no longer considered nobility.

## MERCHANTS: VYECHES AND SMERDI

Beneath the boyars and bogatyr are the merchants, which technically form the first ranks of muzhik peasants (though the occasional business-minded bogatyr blurs the division somewhat). The vyeche (a catch-all term for those freemen who control their own lands or are the headmen of towns) are the more prestigious of the middle class. They are the men of the town or large farm, whose contributions to society can be measured by their full silos of grains and well-fed peasants. They serve as the voice of the people, bringing their concerns to the boyar and carrying out his commands among the zakupi peasants. They raise the towns, follow the tenets of their religions, and serve the Tsar with their hearts and hands. Vyeche ruling councils typically have authority over a single city, a small group of townships or a large area of farmland comprising many small holdings.

The smerdi, on the other hand, are merchants, artisans, craftsmen, and bureaucrats. They are less respected, but their contributions keep the wheels of society turning. Some members of the smerdi class rise to prestige through the beauty and fine craftsmanship of their work: such workers are known as Typov, or "Masters" of their labor. In modern times, the term smerdi has come to include merchants with no land, those who sell their wares in cities and maintain little contact with the countryside. Although less prestigious than the vyeche, they are nonetheless respected for their prestige and position in society. Few of them are born noble, and those who are invariably descending from the wandering, landless bogatyr.

Both the smerdi and the vyeche are the most likely among the muzhiks to learn to read and write, to be fluent in numbers and recite their psalters. It is because of that, the schools of the Lawgiver are considering requiring that any middle-class child being apprenticed to a trade must spend three years

of his seven-year tenure going to classes within the church. This law was created in order to educate the middle class and teach them the concrete knowledge common to the Core's other learning centers. Despite their rough exteriors, it is the hope of the Vaasi that the Vos middle class can hold their own in philosophical and mathematical arguments.

### PEASANTS: ZAKUPI AND KHOLOPI

Beneath the vyeche are the true muzhiks. First the zakupi, landless laborers, itinerant workers, and others who live on and work the land belonging to a rich vyeche or smerdi. The zakupi are technically free men, but remain bound to the land they work. Some are indentured servants, others are simply lower peasantry.

Beneath the zakupi stand the lowest form of peasantry — the kholopi, who serve as virtually slave labor on the farms and in the towns of Vorostokov. These peasants are so indebted that they no longer own their freedom, but live from day to day at the command of a vyeche or boyar. Their lives, while not necessarily unpleasant, remain severely limited by the Law of the Vyeche — no kholopi, and no kholopi's child, may leave his master's land without permission. Any kholopi who does so forfeit his position within his master's household. He is turned out upon the land and left without food, water, clothing or a home. In the harsh Vorostokov weather, this sentence predictably ends in death.

The intense social stratification of the Voros was at least something familiar to the Vaasi that have made their way to the valley, especially for the priests of the Lawgiver that rely on such high levels of social stratification within their own society to further push the Lawgiver's message...

### GOVERNMENT

Formerly independent settlements shifting to despotism<sup>17</sup>. Gregor Zolnik, self proclaimed boyar of Vorostokov, threatens to draw the entire domain into his grasp. In the past, a powerful warrior or wealthy landowner governed each village in Vorostokov, ruling as he saw fit. The boyar organized the region in times of war and collected tribute on behalf of the tsar's distant court. Since the eternal winter settled over Vorostokov, the region has been in limbo, the settlements unable to establish contact with the monarchy. Zolnik, a master hunter and sadistic bully from the village of Vorostokov, has stepped forward and proclaimed himself the new boyar of the valley. To consolidate his power, Zolnik has gathered a boyarsky, a loyal band of warriors, stalkers, and thugs. He is now engaged in a brutal reign of terror intended to bring Vorostokov's settlements under his control.

As voivod (though technically still a boyar as his increase in position was never made official) of Vorostokov, Gregor physically rules a large portion of the domain. The seat of his power is the village of Novaya Vorostokov itself, which is located near the center of the domain. He views the village as the only settlement of importance in the land, and uses the outlying villages to feed his own home. Though Gregor cannot *technically* be recognized as voivod, that is an unfortunate technicality, for his desire to be recognized as voivod is merely another aspect of his need to be recognized as a hero.

As might be expected, Zolnik has met with stubborn resistance in some villages. His response is always swift and monstrous — the wholesale slaughter of the settlement's hunters and trappers. Starvation has caused more than one village to accept Zolnik's brutal domination, as the boyar offers the game of his huntsmen in exchange for loyalty. Slowly, surely,

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<sup>17</sup> As described by the Ravenloft Campaign Setting Sourcebook write-up on Vorostokov in the Frozen Reaches section on page 154

the boyar's reach is extending from village to village, claiming the entire frozen valley as his personal dominion. At least, that *was* the case, until the discovery of Sanguinia to the north in 749 BC and Nova Vaasa to the south in 752 BC led to an increase in food trade and overall food security that removed one of the main draws of Zolnik's reign. While Zolnik continues to bully and harass outlying villages so as to support his own village of Novaya Vorostokov, he has had to do much more than usual to "win the hearts" of the villagers, with said tasks usually being facilitating trade with the Sanguinians and Vaasi as well as defending the villages from the strange new creatures that have emerged from the darkness of the woods (and not losing publicly to such creatures). As it currently stands, Novaya Vorostokov and Nordvik are fully under his sway. Voronina, Novayalenk, Oneka, and, once, Kirinova, are mostly under his sway but have potential for rebellion. The outermost villages of Torgov, Kargo, Siberski, and the newly settled village of Dikanka are, in his eyes, the most in-need of subdual but they aren't as concerned about him as they are about the new neighbors and whatever new horrors they may bring. This has only been further complicated by the attacks on him and his men by *loups du noir* completely unaffiliated with his forces; no doubt the work of his son, Mikhail Zolnik.

## THE LAW

The law in Vorostokov is an interesting matter, as it is not something written in parchment and enshrined like in other, more developed lands. Instead, it is told through oral tradition and respected. The crux of it is formed on group responsibility.

The fundamental concept of Vos (now Voros) law (as defined by Tsar Andrei Vladimir during his regency) is that a group is responsible for the actions of all its members. If a member of a group commits a crime, any member of the group may be punished for that crime.

The smallest such group is the family, defined as all the blood descendants of a living woman and the husbands of any married women in that bloodline. Men change families when they get married. Families split into groups defined by blood descendants of a matriarch's daughters when she dies. Vos law has nothing to say about actions taken within a family, and the elders discipline as they see fit. In most cases, however, the harsh environment ensures families pull together. It is normal for a family to travel together or live in the same place. And while individual members may leave, it is unheard of for a family to be split between two villages.

If a crime is committed against an individual, the penalty can be levied on any individual who shares membership with the criminal in a group to which the victim does not belong. Thus, if both criminal and victim are in the same family, there is no possible group to take the penalty. If they are in different families within the same clan, a member of the criminal's family must be punished. If they are in different clans, anyone in the same clan may be taken.

The law states that the actual criminal is the preferred target of punishment, and the judge grants the criminal's group a period of time to produce the offender for punishment. This deadline is normally at least a week, occasionally as long as a year; the length depends in large part on how important the criminal's group is.

The Voros are considered to be a single group, and all foreigners are treated as a single family. This generalization has led to misunderstandings between the Voros and their Vaasi neighbors, when applying the concept of group responsibility onto them, and it is something that both groups would like to find a way to better handle.

Voros law courts consist of a single judge who listens to the evidence, asks questions as he wishes, and then makes a decision. There is no appeal. The only rule is that the judge must not belong to the same



group as either the victim or the accused. Thus, a judge between two families must be from a third family. When judging between a Vos and a foreigner, there is no neutral group, so any judge can serve. As a result, foreigners rarely win their cases.

Although the formal requirements are simple, most judges are chosen based on their experience and reputation for fairness. In principle, the two parties to a case can choose anyone qualified whom they agree on, and in the past, things worked that way. The judge decides what evidence to hear, and the verdict is at his sole discretion, as is the penalty. For the most part, this process works well enough and provides something close to justice quickly enough to allow life to continue on the unforgiving steppes. If a judge becomes corrupt, it can be disastrous.

Voros law is not written down anywhere authoritative. Rather, it is remembered by the judges and the wise women and applied according to common sense. It is unwise to argue the details of the definition of a crime in a Voros court. The laws contain the normal kinds of prohibitions against theft and violence but also have a number of provisions based on life on the steppes. For instance, refusing hospitality is a serious offense, only a little below murder. Some allowance is made for the circumstances, but turning someone away from your camp is always a criminal matter. The basic rule is that more permanent settlements must offer hospitality and that, if both groups are equally nomadic, the responsibility falls on the larger. Abusing hospitality is an even more serious offense than murder, and some judges argue that it is the most serious offense possible. It is one of the few cases in which a judge might order innocent members of the criminal's group to be punished as well. However, the most important mark of gravity is that the Voros put a lot of effort into finding and punishing those who commit this crime, in some cases spending years on the hunt. Hospitality does not, of course, extend to creatures that can be considered "children of the night", so refusing

hospitality to them or abusing their trust is perfectly legal.

The Voros do not use fines as punishments, though they may require compensation to be paid to victims. Similarly, they do not use imprisonment as a punishment, but criminals may be held in some form of captivity while they await trial. Suspects are normally held by their own family, rather than by the accusers, in order to ensure the right person suffers if the decision goes against them. As a result, Vos' punishments are almost entirely corporal. Flogging and branding are popular, and the number of lashes or the size of the brand depends on the nature of the crime. Crippling is only employed when a whole group is held to bear some responsibility for a crime, as a crippled member becomes a burden on the group. Indeed, it is not uncommon for a crippled criminal to be killed by his family, an action outside Voros law. However, minor mutilations, which do not affect a person's ability to survive, are used in much the same way as brands. Finally, capital punishment is common.

## DIPLOMACY

### Sanguinia

The Sanguinians (especially those situated close to the border with Vorosotkov, such as the Fagarusi of Fagarus) are very happy to be less alone in their isolation. Despite the differences in cultures, the Bloodsnow Path that connects between the two domains of the Frozen Reaches has led to an excellent exchange of goods between the two domains. The Vos receive Sanguinian alchemical goods such as potions & elixirs (typically used for medicine) as well as food in exchange for Vos timber and furs. Despite the Bloodsnow Path between the two domains, there hasn't been a mass exodus out of Vorostokov into Sanguinia, which is mostly attributable to the deadly Icemarch tundra that leads into the mountain pass (and the rest can be attributed to either border closures or the *loup du noir* or vrykolakas that prowl by the border in search of migrants that won't be assumed missing).

## Nova Vaasa

The Vaasi have become quite interested in trade with the lonely domain of Vorostokov. Shared commonalities in both Vaasi and Vos culture, along with the trading of foodstuffs in exchange for precious metal ores (copper, tin, gold, and diamond), timber, and furs have led to an increasing interest in Vaasi settlements within Vorostokov. However, this interest is small and is found either only in the hardest and most ruggedly pioneering of the Vaasi themselves, or in the foolhardy nobles who bring their serfs along and completely (and usually fatally) underestimate just how deadly “eternal winter” can be. There are also many who do not see the appeal in settling in a rustic backwater like Vorostokov, and thus doubt the long-term support of any of the settling being done there currently.

For the Vos, Nova Vaasa and their link to it feels like a gift from the (long abandoned/negligent) gods. A land with wide plains and multiple seasons which is abundant with food? It’s only thanks to the poor reliability of the Bleak Road Mistway itself, along with the boyarsky continually monitoring the entrance of said Mistway to catch any Vos, that prevents a mass exodus of the Vos from Vorostokov itself. However, the sentiment of escape is only truly prevalent in the southern regions nearest to the Vaasi settlers, as they have had the chance to hear the tales of their great nation of Nova Vaasa and have thus found themselves seduced by the prospect of leaving. For those in the center and north of the domain, while they may benefit only sparingly from the food trade with the Vaasi, they also have a prouder bent to their ideas on Vorostokov, being reluctant to leave their bitter land after so long if only because they have managed to survive the land and (in their view) live alongside it (they are of the *torva Vos* bent). The Vaasi, as they see it, are trying to tame the untamable, and the Vos who want to go to their Nova Vaasa are naught but cowards! Of

course, this view tends to be challenged whenever the howling of wolves is heard in the night.

## WHO’S DOOMED

### GREGOR ZOLNIK, DARKLORD OF VOROSTOKOV

#### APPEARANCE

Gregor appears to be a tall, powerfully built human in his late twenties or early thirties. Barrel-chested with heavy muscled arms, his dark brown hair is cut short to accommodate a helmet, with a great long beard reaching to his chest. When Gregor gets angry, his eyes glow like coals and he grows like a feral beast.

#### BACKGROUND

##### Gregor’s Sins<sup>18</sup>

Hailing from the region of Vosgaard in the world of Cerilia, Gregor grew up in the village of Vorostokov, found in the dangerous Grovnekevic Forest. The winters were long and brutal in Vorostokov, but the people were tough and resourceful. As a young man, Gregor was a proud and skillful hunter. He was the strongest and bravest man in Vorostokov. One year winter came early. Snow ruined the crops that were still in the field and covered the hamlet with drifts so deep that ponies could not drag sleds through it.

The early snowfall soon deepened into the darkest and coldest winter the villagers could remember. Months passed with not the slightest hint of relief, and Vorostokov’s stores of food began to dwindle. As the dead of winter approached, the folk of Vorostokov were facing starvation. The men of the village hunted each day, braving the cold and the ice, but found nothing but the leavings of wolves’ kills.

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<sup>18</sup> The vast majority of this information is from *RR1 Darklords* and *Dark of the Moon*’s introductory pages.

Near midwinter, Gregor Zolnik was making his way home after a fruitless day of tracking in the forest. No sun had risen that day and the shadows were colder than death itself. As he struggled toward home, he came across a black wolf that had been injured taking down a bull elk. Gregor watched the dying wolf, considering the speed and strength of its kind. "If I had your stamina and your keen senses, I would not be starving now," he told the wolf. "I would kill enough to feed my mother and sisters—and then I would kill some more."

In the dark and the cold, Gregor recalled a legend his grandfather had told him years ago, a tale of men who could change into wolves by dressing in the beasts' skins and calling on the magic of the night. Gregor was near the end of his strength, and he decided to follow the old legends and see if they were true. When the moon rose, he cut the black wolf's throat and drew a circle in the snow with its blood. Kneeling in the center of the circle, he skinned the wolf and donned its hide. Then he ate the wolf's brain, to gain its cunning, and its heart, to gain its strength. For a moment, Gregor thought nothing had happened. Then he felt his skin begin to grow hot. The wolf skin was fusing to his own! Gregor's cries of agony became the throaty howls of a powerful wolf. The ancient magic had worked, and Gregor had taken the wolf's form. He bounded off to hunt, tracking down a large caribou and killing it with ease. Gregor dragged the heavy carcass back to Vorostokov and left it by his mother's house.

With his family provided for, Gregor went to a secret cave he knew of and removed the skin. When he returned to the village the next morning, exhausted, he told his mother where to find the caribou and went to bed. When he awoke at dusk, Gregor found that his mother had shared the caribou with the whole village. At first, Gregor was furious, since he had wanted the meat for his family only. Then he realized that with the wolf's skin, he could hunt and kill again. Each night, Gregor slipped away from the village to put on the wolf's skin and hunt, feeding the

community for the rest of the winter. He never told anyone of his secret.

When spring finally came, Tsar Andrei Vladimir came to meet the man who had single-handedly saved Vorostokov from starvation; many other villages in the duke's land had not fared as well. During this visit, Gregor met the duke's daughter Ireena. The two fell in love and were married, returning to the duke's castle, Gzhansk. Unfortunately, Gregor found that the wild call of the wolf still surged in his blood. Under the pretext of visiting his mother, Gregor returned to Vorostokov and donned the wolf skin. That night he hunted and killed, and when he returned to Ireena he brought his wolf skin and hid it in a grotto near Castle Gzhansk. Gregor would wait until Ireena fell asleep, and then slip out into the night to don the skin and stalk the forests. Ireena soon discovered Gregor's absences, and assumed that he was dallying with a peasant girl. She took a lover of her own to avenge Gregor's faithlessness.

Ireena's betrayal drove Gregor into a bestial rage. He murdered her lover and then burst into her chambers and slew her as well. Ireena's screams awakened a maidservant, who came to investigate. Gregor murdered the innocent servant, and became maddened by the scent of blood. He stalked through the castle corridors, killing the duke and his retainers as they slept.

In the morning, Gregor awoke to find himself in the village of Vorostokov (also known as Novaya Vorostokov) in his human form. Winter had returned, and the village was starving again. Gregor found that the forests were again empty, the elk and the caribou somehow eluding him. The only prey he could find lived in the other villages of the area and walked on two legs.

### **Gregor in Ravenloft**

When Gregor murdered the duke and his family and servants, the dark powers claimed him for their own and carried the hunter and his home to Ravenloft. Gregor was free to become the beast and hunt again, but he was cursed never to find prey in the dark

forests. Gregor still believed himself a hero and a provider for those unable to survive alone, but he became a monster even more terrible than he had been before. Unable to find game in the forest, he turned to another source of food. The other villages lived in fear of the black wolf of the forest, and the people of Vorostokov began to harbor dark suspicions about the meat that Gregor brought them.

### **The Making of the Boyarsky**

Gregor refused to allow other hunters in the forests, so he tracked and killed them in wolf form. Eventually, the situation grew intolerable. A courageous young man named Yuri managed to secretly unite a large band of loyal men, who confronted Gregor and demanded to know where he went and what he hunted in the forest. Gregor wanted to kill Yuri and his followers for daring to challenge him. His mother Antonina opposed him, calling him a fool. "These are all the menfolk of Vorostokov," she said. "If you kill them, who will be left? Will we all vanish into that black hunger of yours?" Gregor listened, knowing that he alone could not break the curse of winter on Vorostokov. In desperation, he decided to heed his mother's advice and spare Yuri and his followers. He decided to make allies of them.

Gregor led Yuri and the others into the deep woods, far from Vorostokov. In a dark clearing, he built a blazing bonfire, and then wrapped his wolfskin around himself, transforming before the eyes of the men of Vorostokov. Gregor leaped upon Yuri and tore him to pieces, and then set upon the others, slashing and tearing with his horrible fangs. The men found that they could not hurt the wolf with their weapons and scattered, fleeing into the forest. One by one Gregor hunted down the survivors. Cowards he killed without a word, but he offered a choice to the brave men who stood against him—swear loyalty to him and follow him faithfully, or die.

Gregor tested the courage and strength of each man who swore loyalty to him by mauling them savagely

in his wolf form. If they survived the wolf's attack, he accepted them as followers. Many of the men died or refused to submit to such a test. But each of the hunters who survived the attack became werewolves themselves, infected by lycanthropy from Gregor's bite. Gregor had not known that they would become lesser wolves loyal to him. Hunting the deep forests as one strong pack, they brought down a bull elk and feasted. For two full weeks they hunted.

Gregor had forged an unbreakable pact with his new followers. Returning to Novaya Vorostokov, he soon came to rule it as boyar with his boyarsky at his side. He built a great lodge for himself and his men, who were soon feeding the nearby villages as well as Vorostokov itself, and Gregor's rule was acknowledged in Novayalenk, Siberski, and Oneka.

### **Sasha of Torgov**

One day, as Gregor traveled from village to village, he found himself in the tiny hamlet of Torgov. There he met a beautiful girl named Sasha, daughter of the village's headman. Gregor knew at once that she was the most beautiful woman in all the land, and he decided to make her his wife. Although she was terribly frightened by the boyar's strength and vile temper, Sasha consented to return with him to his lodge in Vorostokov.

The boyar doted on his wife, and his savage temperament was restrained by her purity and gentleness. Despite this, the boyar still left each night to roam the forests in his wolf shape. Sasha wondered where he went, but he forbade her to speak of or acknowledge his absences. Eventually, Sasha gave birth to Gregor's first son, Alexei. Gregor loved his wife and son, but Antonina and his sisters Elena and Matalya were beside themselves with jealousy. Matters did not improve with the birth of Gregor's second son, Mikhail. Alexei was a headstrong and willful child who took after his father in many ways, but Mikhail was quiet and shy—his mother's son in both features and temperament.



On the day of Alexei's 18th birthday, Gregor decided that he would bring his son into the ranks of the boyarsky. Mikhail was in Torgov, visiting his mother's kin. While Gregor and Alexei were away, Antonina came to see Sasha. "It is time you knew Gregor's secret and what he plans for Alexei," the old woman spitefully told her. "Tonight, you and I shall follow Gregor into the forest, and I will show you where he has been going all these years." Sasha agreed, and as night fell the two women trailed stealthily after Alexei, Gregor, and his boyarsky. The boyar led his son and his warriors to a clearing in the woods, and there he gave a wolf skin to Alexei. Together, father and son donned the skins and transformed into great black wolves. The boyarsky changed as well, and the night was full of the howling of the pack.

Sasha was horrified. Suddenly Gregor's frequent disappearances, the meat that he found, it all made sense! She was so horrified, she fled into the woods. The keen ears of the pack caught the sounds of her flight, and in a moment the wolves were bounding after their prey. The wolves chased Sasha to a steep ravine, and there she slipped and fell to her death in her attempt to escape.

Coming up behind the boyarsky, Gregor and Alexei in their wolf shapes beheld the broken form of Sasha, lying in the snow-covered rocks. Gregor smelled the scent of Antonina on his dead wife, and in a moment of terrible understanding he knew that Sasha had been encouraged to spy on him. He raced off to track down his mother, his rage unspeakable, Alexei a step behind him. The boyar found Antonina near the clearing, and unable to contain his anger, he tore Antonina's throat out with his terrible fangs while Alexei howled in grief and rage.

### **The Dark of the Moon**

The status quo remained the same for Gregor Zolnik, until he learned of Outlander adventurers from his boyarsky's usual patrols. He confronted these foreigners, who were working alongside his son Mikhail, in Torgov, and thwarted their attempt to make allies in Kirinova by slaughtering the majority

of the village. He toyed with these adventurers by offering them to join his boyarsky, and upon their expected refusal, he not only awoke the lycanthropy within Mikhail, but also had his men chase after them as the adventurers trudged through the snow without their valuable weapons and armor. He did not expect for the adventurers to have survived, nor did he expect them to be harbored by his sisters (whose whereabouts he lost track of since the death of Sasha of Torgov). And he most certainly did not expect them to confront him in his own hall, in his own village even, and then to chase him all the way to his secret lair and try to kill him on the frozen lake beside it.

By all rights, Gregor Zolnik should have died that day, and Vorostokov ought to have returned to Cerilia. But that was not to be...

### **CURRENT SKETCH**

Gregor's conscience tears at him. He only ever wanted to be a hero, but now he is reviled. He still rules his vast territory, but only because no one has the strength to replace him. He surrounds himself with his Boyarsky, but many of them are no better than animals. They party and feast into the early hours of the morning, but it is a hollow existence for Gregor. His sisters fled into the woods long ago and have sworn revenge for the death of their mother. They live in the woods now while the villagers whisper they are witches and greatly fear them. Gregor has used his boyarsky to push into the outer villages, farther away from Novaya Vorostokov, in the hopes that he can find some that think of him as a hero.

Gregor is cursed to not be thought of as a hero. Additionally, his hunting prowess has severely diminished since he has been sentenced to Vorostokov. Instead of having the skills of a renowned hunter, like he did in Cerilia, Gregor can

barely find small game like rabbits. It is as if the animals themselves elude him.<sup>19</sup>

Gregor's conscience already tore at him, but since his defeat in 743 BC, his crisis of conscience has begun to reflect in Vorostokov itself changing. Gregor has realized how far he has strayed from the path of being a hero for his people, and desperately wants to find a way to be that hero while not giving into the monstrous tendencies that he has indulged his entire life and that have ruined his relationship to himself and his family. But old habits die hard, and the Dark Powers are not interested in having a repeat of what happened with Lord Soth. Thus, while Gregor is indeed trying to be a better person, it's very much a case of the "boy who cried wolf" to almost everyone in the valley (who are all too familiar with his many sins and whose hearts have grown cold against the mere mention of the name Zolnik). Additionally, "the boyarsky has been able to find prey in the wild for a while, so attacks on non-allied villages have grown more uncommon. As it appears the eternal winter on Vorostokov may be lifting, Gregor's conscience is starting to plague him again" (source: *Domains of Dread 2e*, under Gregor Zolnik's Current Sketch); thus, reflecting Gregor's crisis of conscience, the Dark Powers have given him a new punishment: if the boyar wants to play hero so badly, then they'll be happy to give him great villains and monsters worth fighting against. Now Gregor has to contend with supernatural creatures that, while certainly not Darklord material, can threaten to beat him on his own turf, thus humiliating him in front of the people he wishes to not only protect but gain respect and worship from. This test between his potential change of heart and his inner desire to be looked upon as superior to others, devised by the Dark Powers,

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<sup>19</sup> To clarify: Gregor is not entirely a fool. His curse works in cycles. At first, there will be an abundance of food in the valley. Gregor will go and try to hunt the food. The game will increasingly start to elude him, until after a few weeks or even a few months, he is able to find anything. Then, with his pride insulted, Gregor will have his boyarsky go out and hunt. Because the boyarsky are affiliated with Gregor, the Dark Powers will have the game increasingly

forms one of the cruxes of Vorostokov today (alongside the themes of old vs. new with outsiders being more involved and his son's rebellion against him), in 760 BC.

## COMBAT

In human form, Gregor is a talented warrior and an excellent one-on-one duelist. He enjoys matching his longsword, Ilyana, against the steel of others. If severely pressed or angered beyond the point of control, Gregor adopts his wolf form. The transformation is painful for him, but he heals all damage as he changes. If Gregor is slain, he and all his equipment disappear in a flurry of snow. He awakens one hour later in the cave where he initially hid his wolf pelt. Gregor has a natural empathy with wolves, winter wolves, and wargs, who treat him as pack alpha. Several packs of wolves stay near the darklord and will come to his aid if he is attacked. Gregor is loath to sacrifice any wolves that come to his aid, and will only do so in dire circumstances.

## ZOLNIK'S SISTERS (ELENA AND NATALYA)

### BACKGROUND

Elena and Natalya were born as the younger sisters of Gregor Zolnik and daughters of Antonina Zolnik, living in the small village of Vorostokov within the Grovnekevic Forest of Vosgaard. From a young age, the two of them were unlike most Vos women, being interested in the secretive art of magic and desiring to feel a bit of power for themselves within the subtly growing patriarchal and misogynistic society of the Voros. It was this desire that led the sisters to follow their mother's footsteps in worshipping

elude them as well, until they all have no choice but to "serve the longpork" (or let other villagers that aren't boyarsky hunt, but Gregor is Gregor and would not want this solution). After a time of doing this, Gregor will either come to the point that he can't cull the human population too much or he grows tired and disgusted of this method, and will try to hunt honorably once again. And the cycle starts anew.

Kriesha, the goddess of winter's cruelty, and becoming winter witches. It was also in their later years of maturity that they did whatever they could to support their brother Gregor's endeavors in hunting and trapping, so that their village would be saved and their family would not starve. They were pleased when Gregor returned with greater and greater game to feed everyone, and were jubilant when Gregor found himself married to the daughter of their regent. All this turned into ash in their mouths when Gregor returned, in the midst of a ceaseless winter, reeking of blood and downcast. Gregor told them the truth of his strength, and while the sisters were horrified, their mother was pragmatic enough to keep them silent.

For a time, Gregor's evil had its effect on his mother and two sisters, who took up the winter witchcraft of Kriesha both to better help their older brother and to see if they could stave off the worst of the eternal winter. While the Zolnik name was cursed by every village, they were his sole supporters in Vorostokov, and they vigorously defended his reputation against any who maligned him. They even cooked the human flesh he brought back with him and used their magic to disguise it as "animal meat", all while giving it to their fellow villagers. That all ended when their mother, Antonina, was found dead by the hands of a black wolf. Elena and Natalya knew exactly who was responsible thanks to their spells and divinations, and since then they have relocated deep within the forests of Vorostokov. Though they are feared by the common folk as powerful and evil witches, they truly have only one vested interest: Gregor must pay.

### CURRENT SKETCH

Ever since the Great Thawing in 743 BC, the witches of the forest believed that their work was done: Gregor was defeated for good, and the summer had returned to the valley. But they knew within their heart of hearts that something was still wrong, as why had Vorostokov not returned to where it should be? Why were the mountains (which shouldn't be there in the first place) melting away like the snow to reveal the rest of the Grovnekevic Forest of

Vosgaard? It was when Gregor returned in 745 BC, emerging from his cave in lupine form, with his howl echoing through the entire valley itself, that the sisters realized that they had only delayed the inevitable: the black wolf will reign over the valley eternally, like the winter he brings.

Today, the Zolnik sisters do what they can to try and keep both the valley and (more importantly in their eyes) hope alive. The creation and planting of the Babushka trees when the valley arrived in the Mists had already helped bring back much of the wildlife to the domain, and the two of them are still in contact with their nephew Mikhail and support his continued rebellion against their elder brother. However, they must be more subtle than they were before, due to (come up with reason).

Additionally, Natalya and Elena have learned of a new message of hope that they think might be worth spreading: the message of the Morninglord. After saving one (insert name here) worshipper from his disoriented stumble through the Darkwood, they learned of his imprisonment at Coldspine Penitentiary for his beliefs in the Morninglord. Having heard that Gregor has been courting the new foreigners for legitimacy and of the tyrannical doctrine of the Lawgiver from their charge, the Sisters Zolnik have decided to spread the word of the Morninglord as a subtle form of rebellion against their detested older brother. Plus, they would rather a merciful god like the Morninglord lead the Vos in a new direction than go back to the gods Belinik and Kriesha that were silent (like Sergei Ikoviev and Brother Terenskyy keep mentioning) or worse, fall into Gregor's hands by supporting a god that condones his brutality (like that "Lawgiver" the foreigners keep crowing about).

(Design Note: The Sisters Zolnik, in this write-up, are a bit more "kind" than their usual portrayal. Their alignment in canon is Lawful Evil and they only looked at adventurers in the module as tools to defeat Zolnik, caring only about that. The following Dread Possibility somewhat addresses this newfound kindness).

**DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE AwnsHEGH**

The Sisters Zolnik, upon realizing that Gregor had returned, came up with a plan to deal with him for good: Elena would enact a ritual to try and tap into the Shadow World of Cerilia to banish the entirety of Vorostokov back to Vosgaard while keeping Gregor here, while Natalya would cast a spell to remove the worst aspects of Gregor (such as his brutal nature and his lycanthropy) in case the other failed (reasoning that if the embodiment of Gregor were killed, then the Gregor that remained would be a new man). The Dark Powers meddled in the affairs, and a bheur hag was instead summoned and imbued with all of the worst aspects of the Sisters Zolnik's personalities. Calling herself The Pale Lady (and referred to as the Awnshegh by the sisters, as that is the name of most abominations of the evil god Azrai from Cerilia), the bheur hag then set off into the forest, settling in the ruins of Sorochinka. She now harasses the village of Novayalensk for fun, while also thriving in the bitter cold of the domain and conspiring to make it worse.

If you're gonna have a Russia/Siberia themed land, you gotta have at least a slight reference to Baba Yaga (though I could probably do more to flesh her out).

**"DUKE" ANDREI VLADIMIR****BACKGROUND**

The former regent of Vorostokov, "Duke" Andrei Vladimir (known only as a Duke to the Anuirean, Brecht and Rjurik foreigners he had to trade with; the correct title would be Tsar) was faced with a very bitter and harsh winter when Gregor Zolnik came along and saved his holdings. While somewhat embarrassed and threatened by the young boy who had quickly become a local hero, Andrei Vladimir was still grateful that he still had a land to rule over, and arranged a meeting with this newfound hero in the

spring. From the moment Andrei Vladimir met Gregor Zolnik, the man felt an instinctual uneasiness in his interactions with the young man. This was no mere Vos hunter, he thought to himself. But he kept his thoughts to himself and saw that his misgivings were not shared by his dearly beloved daughter, Ireena, who quickly struck up a romance with this young man. Andrei Vladimir trusted his daughter's judgment and decided to deal with his suspicions and feeling of insecurity regarding the newfound hero by having him both married to Ireena and moved into their castle. That way, Andrei reasoned, he could not only profit off of the love of the hero the people of Vorostokov had for Gregor Zolnik (and thus make himself look good by proxy), he could also keep an eye on Gregor Zolnik in case his suspicions turned out to be correct. But he ended up not keeping a good enough eye on neither Zolnik himself nor on his daughter,

**CURRENT SKETCH**

Ever since his death at the hands of 'the black wolf', Andrei Vladimir has remained bound to his castle overlooking the ruins of Yargorod and the nearby village of Novayalensk. Within his frozen and empty halls, the ghost goes from room to room, reminiscing on past glories and mourning the death of his daughter Ireena & the rest of the castle's occupants while cursing Gregor Zolnik with all the venom he can muster.

As the former regent of Vorostokov, Andrei Vladimir's castle contains many treasures, mundane and magical alike. Of those treasures, two are of great value to the Duke while also being a bane to Gregor Zolnik: The Fang of Kriesha and Bitterfrost. The former Tsar had acquired these weapons by paying adventurers to gain them for him and then double-crossing them to other mercenaries he had hired, all so he could put his holdings in the Grovnekevic Forest in Vosgaard on the map and expand his holdings through their religious significance leading to an influx in traffic via pilgrimage. However, he was wary of the items, not only for the potential that their religious significance



would overshadow his sovereignty, but also because their *tighmaevril* construction made them a threat to his person, as a blooded regent (within the Birthright rule system anyway). He never had the chance to truly implement this plan, as his valley had a horrendous winter that led to the rise of one hero, one Gregor Zolnik, to handle it, and the rest is history...

The Fang of Kriesha: This +3 dagger is forged in the shape of a wolf fang. The fang grants its wielder the ability to cast the following spells. 1/day (as if you were a 12th level caster): *Chill Touch*, *Cone of Cold*, *Wall of Ice*. 1/week (as a 15th level caster): *Conjure Winter Wolves*. Furthermore, the Fang grants the wielder spell resistance.

Bitterfrost: A powerful Rovninan priestess of Kriesha named Atashya forged Bitterfrost almost 350 years ago. Legends tell that Atashya left Vosgaard and journeyed far to the north across the frozen seas, wandering the unending ice at the roof of the world for several years, and that Bitterfrost was in her possession when she returned. This weapon has been passed down to servants of Kriesha ever since. In the Vos language, the weapon is called Turiye'temyzin.

This infamous weapon is three feet in length and bears a spherical spiked head of lead and iron. Bitterfrost commonly functions as a heavy mace +1. Bitterfrost also has a 50% chance of extinguishing any fire into which its head is thrust. This power extends to a 10-foot radius and includes lasting effects such as *wall of fire*, but excludes instantaneous effects such as *fireball*, *meteor swarm*, and *flame strike*. Bitterfrost has a chaotic evil alignment and anyone who is not both of Vos descent and a worshipper of Kriesha that attempts to wield it gains one level of exhaustion. This level of exhaustion remains for as long as the mace is in hand and disappears when the mace is no longer wielded.

In the hands of a follower of Kriesha, it gains an additional +2 enhancement bonus and also acts as a Icy Burst weapon (+1d6 points of cold damage on a

successful hit, +1d10 on a successful critical.) Its wielder is protected from fire, because the mace absorbs the first 10 points of fire damage each round that the wielder would otherwise suffer.

In the hands of a priestess of Kriesha, Bitterfrost can also transform into a weapon of true ice once per day. In this form, it radiates such intense cold that any creature within 10 feet (including the wielder) suffers 1d6 cold damage each round. Any creature struck by the true ice weapon must make a Fortitude save (DC 23) or be frozen on the spot; suffering double damage from the attack and remaining paralyzed for 1d6 rounds. Bitterfrost can only serve as a true ice weapon for 5 rounds (double if the ambient temperature is below freezing).

Both these weapons are lined with the rare Cerilian material known as *tighmaevril*. A unique alloy made by the legendary elven smith Ghoigwnnwd, the glimmering metal (also known as bloodsilver) possesses supernatural qualities that can steal the power of bloodlines and utterly sever the tie between a regent and their land. While these rules are usually applicable only to Birthright, to make this applicable to Ravenloft, you need only change the wording to say that it can "utterly sever the tie between a Darklord and their domain", for instance...

It was the Duke's dying curse upon Gregor Zolnik that tapped into the Shadow World of Cerilia and thus transported them all into the Dread Realms; it is quite possible that, if Zolnik ever returned to the castle to see the Duke, that (depending on if Zolnik truly repented for what he did and changed his ways) the Duke could lift the curse and thus return Vorostokov to its rightful place in the Grovnekevic Forest in Vosgaard. Additionally, if certain favors are done by adventurers for the Duke (such as cleaning up his Castle or giving him news of the valley and the world beyond it), he can tell them of Gregor's origins.

## DMITRI DNEPOV

### BACKGROUND

Before Vorostokov was claimed by the Mists, Dmitri was a soldier in the tsar's army. After the land slipped into the Demiplane of Dread and Gregor became a tyrant monopolizing the forest, Dmitri allied with Yuri Tupolek and several others to rebel against Gregor. However, Gregor killed Yuri and claimed many of his rebel band for the boyarsky, turning them into lycanthropes. Dmitri was one of the first, and he is one of Zolnik's favored boyarsky.

### CURRENT SKETCH

Dmitri remembered what happened when Yuri Topalek and his band of rebels went against Gregor Zolnik, and just how outmatched and overwhelmed they were. He should remember; he was Yuri's right-hand man and the one who saw him die, ripped to pieces by the jaws of the black wolf. He remembers when Gregor Zolnik turned what would have been the rebels against his rule, the liberators of the valley, into his instruments of oppression. Dmitri remembered how, with the rush of power that came from the black wolf pelts Zolnik gifted him, his thoughts of rebellion slowly began to fade away. But they haven't faded away completely; while Dmitri certainly follows Gregor's every order, he has not been so overwhelmed by the power of the wolf pelt as to forget his doubts and misgivings of Gregor's approach. This is only further exacerbated with the discovery of new lands to the north and to the south, lands that can feed the valley. While both Dmitri and Gregor can be considered as *torva Vos*, Dmitri is pragmatic enough to take whatever food he can, wherever it may come. Someday, if Gregor continues to 'serve the long-pork', he *will* run out of prey to hunt. And for the sake of the Dnepov family that he and his wife Mara have made together, Dmitri cannot have that happen. Thus, while Dmitri serves Gregor loyally, if anything were to happen to Gregor that would cast his leadership into doubt, Dmitri would be willing to wait and see who will take the

reins of command (and if he deems no one to be capable, he will have no misgivings on becoming the leader himself). Whatever he can do to keep his family (not even the village, just his family) safe and well fed, Dmitri Dnepov will not hesitate in doing so. It's a true shame that Mara wouldn't understand...

To this day, Dmitri, perhaps out of a sense of guilt or a desire to not cause any disturbances within Novaya Vorostokov, stays away from the remainder of the Topalek family.

## ALEXEI ZOLNIK

### BACKGROUND

Alexei was born the first of two children (with Mikhail being the second) between Sasha of Torgov and Gregor Zolnik of Novaya Vorostokov. Unlike meek Mikhail, young Alexei was a child of forceful personality. Thus, his father decided to induct him into the boyarsky and show him how to become a loup du noir when he turned 18 years of age. Antonina manipulated Sasha into following them. After Sasha witnessed the transformation, she ran. The pack heard and instinctively gave chase, following her to a high cliff where she fell. Gregor smelled Antonina's odor upon Sasha, and he tracked his traitorous mother down with Alexei close behind. As Gregor tore out Antonina's throat, Alexei screamed in anguish and sorrow.

### CURRENT SKETCH

Today, Alexei Zolnik is Gregor's pride and joy. He is the most ruthless, capable, and ambitious of the boyarsky, always volunteering to do whatever Gregor asks of him while the others were either too recalcitrant or too drunk and incompetent to be trusted. Whenever Gregor must attend to matters personally or privately, it is Alexei that keeps the rest of the boyarsky in line and watches over Novaya Vorostokov in his father's stead. The only point of conflict between father and son (rare as said conflicts may be) is in regards to Vorostokov's future: as a

*torva Vos*, Gregor looks down upon the outsiders that have come to the valley, and believes that prolonged contact with them will erode the traditions and cultural identity that has made the Vos the hardy survivors they are today. Alexei, on the other hand, is closer to the *nona Vos*, believing that the newcomers present a miraculous opportunity for everyone in the valley, but most especially their village and the status of the Zolnik family as

prestigious rulers and heroes, if they only brought themselves into the modern era. Thus, many of the villagers of Novaya Vorostokov have mixed thoughts on Alexei, with most believing him to be just another (if only smarter) thug of Gregor Zolnik, while a small few fear Alexei perhaps even more than his father, as they believe that ‘papa’s boyar’ has not finished growing strong, and may one day be an even worse Zolnik than Gregor ever was.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE BROTHERS ZOLNIK

Contrary to what Gregor may think, Alexei has continued to speak with his brother, Mikhail, through clandestine meetings on moonlit nights in the nearby woods. Alexei takes great pains to cover his tracks, as he knows that he could easily lose favor with his father if he is discovered. The purpose of such meetings is simple: though their motives may differ, both the brothers Zolnik (and the sisters Zolnik as well) want to see Gregor dead and gone for good. Mikhail’s successes against the boyarsky wouldn’t be nearly as effective if it weren’t for Alexei informing Mikhail of the best times and places to strike, as well as the weaknesses in the character of the boyars he plans to assassinate and the defenses of wherever the boyarsky decides to lair. Mikhail, in return, provides Alexei special materials (weapons, potions, books magic items, etc.) from the foreigners that come through the mountain passes to the north or the Mists to the south, as Zolnik has forbidden his village and his boyarsky from “being seduced” by the goods the foreigners bring. Ultimately, both Mikhail and Alexei know that once Gregor is dead, the two will be sworn enemies. Alexei has no intention to rule Vorostokov fairly and justly; he simply wants his father to pay for the death of his mother, Sasha of Torgov, as well as of his (in his experience) kindly grandmother, Antonina. While Alexei, as a *nona Vos* like his brother, would not shy away from the newfound relations with the Vaasi like his father does and wish to propel Vorostokov into the ‘modern age’ (like Peter the Great or Stalin and his 5 year plans), he would still rule with an iron fist and the boyarsky as an institution would remain as the bane of villagers everywhere (though he might be smarter about not being associated with their cruelties). In fact, the darkness in Alexei’s heart is strong enough for the Dark Powers to even consider him as the next Darklord, assuming Gregor ever bores them...

## MIKHAIL ZOLNIK

### BACKGROUND

Mikhail was born the second of two children between Sasha of Torgov and Gregor Zolnik of Vorostokov. Unlike his brother Alexei, Mikhail was meek, considered to have inherited his mother’s features and temperament. Because of this, Gregor neglected Mikhail and frequently left him in his mother’s care, while he spent his time teaching and

training Alexei in the traditional parenting style of the Vos. When Sasha and Antonina died, Mikhail was just as devastated as his brother, but was even younger and more dependent on others to help process such grief. This was something Gregor did not help with at all, instead leaving Mikhail to wallow in his depression and telling him to ‘cease his weakness at once’ so he could be more like his brother Alexei. While Alexei was slightly kinder, ultimately the distance imposed between the two brothers by their father, both due to being called away on duties of the boyarsky and because of the

increasingly hostile manner Alexei comported himself thanks to the lycanthropy awakened in Alexei, led to Mikhail striking out on his own when he turned of age. He returned to his mother's village of Torgov, to live with his mother's family, and began to simmer in resentment towards the circumstances that everyone in the valley was put in, all because of the black wolves that he increasingly became more and more certain were his family. This eventually turned into Mikhail Zolnik deciding to form his own quiet resistance to Gregor Zolnik, working with hunters and trappers like Igor Rikorsky before his untimely demise to better feed the people and maybe one day slay his father, who was the root of all problems in the valley. It was when Mikhail Zolnik encountered a group of outlander adventurers in 743 BC that he got his wish, though at the price of having his lycanthropy awakened by his father. But it was a price worth paying, as from 743-745 BC, Gregor Zolnik was gone and summer had returned to the valley...

#### CURRENT SKETCH

As of today, Mikhail Zolnik is a man on a precipice (or so he sees himself). After having wrestled with his acceptance of his condition of lycanthropy, Mikhail expected the rest of Torgov to cast him out or even to kill him where he stood. Already they stood with him despite his bloodline, but this was surely a step too far. Instead, the villagers of Torgov, while initially wary, still supported him, and took him in regardless. Having known what Mikhail had done for them, it did not matter that he was a Zolnik, nor that he was cursed like his father. So long as his fangs never bared in their direction, they were willing to stand with him against his father.

When the Great Thawing of 743-745 BC came, Mikhail truly believed that the worst was over. Those two years were the happiest in his life, and he finally got to see what the spring thaw and summer weather was like. It was in those happy times that he found a wife and together they bore a child, a daughter by the name of Ireena (named by Mikhail perhaps out of penance for what happened to his

father's first true victim and perhaps because it was a pretty name—none can say but him). His joy turned into cautious anxiety when the winter returned with the usual ferocity he had known all his life, and his blood chilled to the bone when the all-familiar cry of his father in lupine form echoed through the valley that same night. Though Gregor did not pay him a visit, Mikhail knew that he had returned, and if Gregor knew that he had loved ones like his wife and daughter, he would not hesitate to tear them away from Mikhail. Even worse, that he could simply compel Mikhail to transform and rend them with his own fangs and claws.

To prevent such a nightmarish vision, Mikhail gathered together all the villagers of Torgov and presented them with both the grim reality of Gregor Zolnik's return, as well as a choice: without the Outlanders that helped save Torgov in 743 BC, the very same ones that nearly destroyed his father, it would be impossible to fight off the wolves, unless one becomes a wolf themselves. While initially aghast and against the decision (with some of the older villagers even worrying that Mikhail had been tainted by his father's blood), as the reports from other villages of the boyarsky's depredations returning in full swing came into Torgov, more and more of the people there reluctantly began to agree with Mikhail's desperate proposition. Eventually, all the able-bodied men of the village, from the hunters, trappers, and tanners, decided to agree to Mikhail's idea, and willingly became werewolves. Mikhail's band, known as the bogatyr (see the "realm" and "government" sections on the significance of the name in contrast to calling themselves boyarsky) have since begun a war with Gregor's boyarsky, and (since they are not afflicted with Gregor's curse of not finding good game, nor are they close enough to Gregor to be affiliated with the curse by proxy) they have dutifully and ethically fed the people of Torgov. Further good fortune smiled upon Mikhail when he and his bogatyr discovered the presence of dwarves within the nearby section of the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains in 751 BC, and the trade between Torgov and the dwarven settlement of Frosttrill has kept



Torgov self-sustaining enough for Mikhail and his men to focus their efforts more on keeping outlying villages alive and thinning the ranks of the boyarsky whenever they can.

Gregor believes that if Mikhail can be brought under heel, then the rebellion will die without its leader. When not looking for Mikhail and attending to his usual boyar duties, Gregor occasionally has raids planned on Torgov. It's a testament to the people of Torgov's resilience and Mikhail's leadership (along with some very clandestine help from the dwarves) that they've managed to survive this long against boyarsky raids like the one that decimated Kirinova. But Gregor doesn't always get the opportunity to go on the offensive; Mikhail tries to keep the boyarsky in a state of turnover, as a few may fall and then need to be trained and then replaced, and its in those moments of there being less boyarsky around than usual that Mikhail can really press on the gas pedal and keep up, though Zolnik tries to hit back when he can and not get too staggered by these targeted attacks. When there's not enough bogatyr around to push back, that's when Mikhail does whatever he can to distract Zolnik from capitalizing on those moments of weakness (hence why Alexei is so helpful). In a way, Zolnik is on some level proud of Mikhail; he's truly fighting like a cunning wolf, even if he's being a wayward son.

Mikhail is aware he is fighting fire with fire, and the unease this gives him torments him relentlessly. With the time he takes organizing counter-raid after counter-raid against his father's men, as well as trying to give whatever small resources he can to outlying villages that begin to whisper about rebellion against his father's rule, he hasn't as much time to see the wife and daughter he truly fights for. While Mikhail may not grow older due to his father's blood, as his wife had told him in a heated argument, his wife and daughter most certainly will.

## BERNGRAVILD THE FROST GIANT

### BACKGROUND

Berngravild was born on her outlander world of origin as the forbidden union by wedlock between a frost giant jarl and a cloud giant countess. Due to the differences between the two types of giants within the Ordning (the social caste system all giants relied upon to know their status and created by their gods), Berngravild was regarded differently than her fellow frost giants, being considered at once above them due to her cloud giant blood and position as the jarl's daughter and beneath them due to her bastard status and 'impure' frost giant blood. This lack of acceptance led to a resentment of her kinsmen throughout her life, with her own personal goals of being seen as a strong warrior, capable of even succeeding her father as jarl, being scoffed at or being given other lowlier duties (like child rearing or having to speak to the smallfolk on behalf of the jarl) to maintain that they weren't the typical frost giant activities of hunting or raiding or wrestling or even leatherworking. Understanding that she was innately weaker than her kin, Bergngravild came upon an idea: work smarter, not harder. To that end, she began to subtly snub and shirk the honorable ways of gaining glory in combat, opting to use underhanded tactics to try and move up the ladder of the Ordning. Continually she secretly violated the tenets of the frost giants and their god, Thrym, in the hopes of perhaps finally proving herself and gaining the strength and recognition that she sought all her life once she became jarl. This was only exacerbated when her father was bested not by her but by the tribe's best warrior for the position, so she challenged him to honorable combat. What should have been her moment of glory came crashing down when the other frost giants had noticed her (this time not-as-well-disguised) dishonorable deception upon beating the new jarl. She was disgracefully cast out of their tribe and forced to wander the frozen wastes. On her own, she stewed in the resentment she had towards frost giants as a whole and of the

unfairness of her life, until one night, she received the dark dreams and omens of Vaprak the Destroyer. Vaprak was known to the frost giants as a god amongst their pantheon, though as the patron of greed and violence who was also the god of ogres and trolls, born from an affair between him and the giant All-Father's divine mate, Othea. Feeling both a strange sense of kinship with Vaprak (having been born of an affair herself) as well as being drawn to the promises of power that the destroyer offered, Berngravild communed with the evil deity and agreed to become his champion. Upon completing the ritual to become his champion (devouring a live troll sent by Vaprak) she began her march of doom across the tundra. Towns of the smallfolk were slaughtered and burnt indiscriminately, not only to appease the Destroyer, but to starve the other frost giants of food and supplies; a tactic which worked soundly. It was only when the last frost giant in the frozen north died of starvation did she feel a sense of satisfaction, before swirling white Mists rose around her from the snow-covered ground. She then found herself in the valley of Vorostokov. The year was 747 BC.

### CURRENT SKETCH

Today, Berngravild lairs within the icy tors and slow moving glaciers that border the Mists within the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains nearest to Kargo. Since her arrival in Vorostokov, she has been cautious, scouting out the edges of the new land as best as she can while staying very close to the mountain side.

Since Berngravild's agreement to become Vaprak's champion, she has become a Frost Giant Everlasting One (see *Volo's Guide to Monsters 5e* for more details). Blessed with the regenerative powers of a troll and the ferocity of a berserker, she has become even more dangerous, but also quite valuable; while whenever she is injured, there is the chance of her growing more and more deformities like a troll, the extra heads and limbs that she grows can be cut off from her body and (depending on if they're left alone or not) can grow into little ice trolls that serve her

faithfully. This creeps her out so she seldom does this.

Berngravild's arrival in the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains was not uncontested at first. A small group of ice ogres were lairing in her preferred spot first, so she had to drive them out of the mountain. The ice ogres became a menace to the local population of the nearby village of Kargo, with one of the residents (the blacksmith once known as Gaspar Maklakov) creating a special weapon to deal with the marauding giant-kin.

It was in 753 BC that a deal was made, reluctantly, by the village leader of Kargo and Berngravild. The village leader of Kargo, having both heard of and seen for his own eyes an even bigger giant lairing in the mountains near his village, wanted to at least see if he could either nobly get rid of the problem himself or nobly make the problem go somewhere else (and bother someone else's village—preferably Gregor Zolnik's). Armed with a hammer (but not Gaspar Maklakov's hammer, which had been lost), he confronted the giant, and was surprised to see that she was in a diplomatic mood. Berngravild, having been tasked with speaking with the smallfolk in her younger days, was also intrigued enough by the new land that she found herself in as well as by the bravery of the smallfolk who dared confront her with just a measly hammer. After a rather tense but long conversation, the two came to something of an agreement—Berngravild, being starved of conflict and recognition, would be free to roam across the valley in search of dangerous enemies to fight (namely the boyarsky and their wolves that the small man kept going on about) in exchange for giving some of her cut-off flesh to the villagers of Kargo as a food source. As of 760 BC, the agreement is on shaky terms—Berngravild, being used to underhanded tactics and ultimately being a coward at heart, picked a fight once or twice with Zolnik and his men before realizing that she could not win and has instead stuck to raiding the settlements closest to the mountains that ring Vorostokov or demanding 'tribute' from Kargo in the form of furs and other

goods that only the smallfolk can make; meanwhile the village leader has to both walk a fine line between not antagonizing Berngravild for not upholding her end of the deal (while accepting her shipments of ‘meat’), cautiously handling questions of where the new meat comes from *without* looking like Gregor Zolnik, ensuring that there’s a steady supply of furs and other goods that please Berngravild (lest she decides to raid Kargo to get them) and finally keeping the snouts of the boyarsky far, far away from Kargo. All while keeping trade flowing with the Sanguinians of course. Berngravild, for what it’s worth, has at least become more familiar with the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains, and has even noticed strange depressions and subtle carvings on the rocky slopes nearest to the village of Torgov. Woe to the dwarves if Berngravild ever figures out that they live there, and woe to Torgov’s finally secure food supply as well...

## NPCs (ORGANIZED BY LOCATION, FOR MY SANITY)

### НОВАЯ ВОРОСТОКОВ

#### Brother Terensky

Brother Terensky is the village priest of Novaya Vorostokov. He is one of the very few people who worships the old ways of Belinik and Kriesha, making him a *torva* Voros amongst *torva* Voros (and justifying being kept around by Gregor Zolnik). He knows about general lycanthrope lore and some of the history of Gregor Zolnik, enough to know that there are gaps missing. He was also one of the few people to believe that Gregor Zolnik was not truly gone after the events of *Dark of the Moon*, and his belief was repaid by Zolnik in a more prominent position in the village. He is hostile to the Church of the Lawgiver and their overtures into the valley, and though Zolnik sees some potential in using the Lawgiver to his advantage, Brother Terensky still has the boyar’s ear.

#### Dvorak the Tanner

Dvorak is miserable and old, having seen his wife and children murdered by the minions of Gregor Zolnik. In the years since, Dvorak’s good judgment has slipped away, becoming hostile to his fellow people (even the children) and neglectful of his home and workshop. He assumes the worst of strangers and newcomers, assuming them to be bandits or worse. He was executed by Gregor Zolnik because of his knowledge on the boyarsky’s movements after the boyar returned from his 2-year absence. Dvorak didn’t care; not only did Zolnik disappear and summer returned, his death only meant he got to see his family sooner rather than later. Plus, spitting on Gregor Zolnik as his request for “dying words” already spoke volumes.

#### The Torbachek Family

The Torbachek family consists of Tasha, her adult daughter Ivinia, and her daughter’s husband and goat herder Grigori. As the resident herbalist, potion brewer and healer, Tasha handles everything from illnesses to pregnancies. Though she has thought about it before, she’s certain that she could not poison someone like Gregor Zolnik, but she knows that her position in the village makes her indispensable. However, she fears Alexei Zolnik as he is willing to court other healers like the foreigners and thus jeopardize her standing. Grigori is one of the few goat herders in the valley who doesn’t face his goats being wiped out on a periodic basis, a fact which he is quite thankful for.

#### The Torsakov Family

A large family consisting of Ivan “the Strong” Torsakov, his wife Ingrid, their daughter Eva, and Eva’s four sons. Ivan and Ingrid once approved of Turik but now see the bruises and blemishes they leave on their daughter, and though Ivan discreetly lent his magical bastard sword to the Outlanders when they made Zolnik disappear, if the situation gets worse, Ivan might be willing to confront Turik and the rest of the boyarsky over this. Little does Ivan know, the boyarsky suspect him of having aided in

the rebellion and would take such dissent as proof and would slaughter him and his wife. Ingrid fears this and wants no trouble, but it pains her to see her daughter in such a miserable condition.

### **The Tupolek Family**

The remnants of Yuri Tupolek's family, consisting of Mara the widow and Tarak the son. Mara fears every day for her son's life, for he is a righteous but impulsive soul, and she believes that one day Gregor will kill off their bloodline as vengeance for her husband standing up to him. Mara has heard of the bogatyr and wants to get their aid, for she plans to emigrate with her son from Novaya Vorostokov to Torgov for asylum.

### **The Zamyatik Family**

Anatoly is the family patriarch and the resident carpenter of the village. He helped build not only the Trau Bridge but also the secret passageways in the boyar's hall. He takes care of his two sisters, Vanda and Ilya, though he resents their husbands (Russek and Fyodor) for their allegiance to Gregor. Though he didn't have much use for his carpentry skills before, he's been building more and more structures at Gregor's behest to make Novaya Vorostokov look like a "capital city" (somehow). It is Anatoly's skill in carpentry that prevents Gregor from punishing him too greatly, as Gregor suspects but cannot prove that the adventurers were able to access the secret passageways of the boyar's hall somehow.

### **Pavel Cherensky**

The owner of an alehouse in the village and a spy for the boyarsky. He originally planned to marry off his daughters to the boyarsky but after Zolnik's disappearance and the lack of order amongst their number (save for Dmitri and Alexei), he has heeded his wife's advice and reconsidered. Despite this reconsideration, Pavel is still loyal to the idea of a band like the boyarsky, and though he has lost Zolnik's favor, he has gained Alexei's.

### **Leonid the Smith**

A smith residing in Novaya Vorostokov, and one of the few people who approves of Zolnik and his boyarsky, as they are giving some semblance of law and order to the anarchic valley. His son Pyotr, in fact, is one of them, and Leonid is quite proud.

### **Olaf (Brother of Vladislav)**

The brother of Vladislav the Trapper, who never understood why Vladislav was in Zolnik's thrall. While he aided in the rebellion against Zolnik, when the mad boyar returned, Olaf was killed as a punishment.

### **Mastislav**

Son of Katerina the Trader. Mastislav, once a young boy, is now approaching young adulthood. Though he doesn't know it, Gregor Zolnik thinks that a great way to keep his mother in line would be to induct the youngster into the boyarsky, though Mastislav does not want to be a fighter, he wants to be a simple tradesman like his mother and father before him.

### **Marik the Mouse-Eater**

The resident hedge-wizard of Novaya Vorostokov, and one of the few people to deduce Gregor Zolnik's true nature. Though he aided the Outlander adventurers in learning about Zolnik's past, Gregor and his boyarsky have no idea that Marik was involved, and Marik wants to keep it that way.

### **Andrei the Furrier**

The most outspoken critic of Gregor Zolnik and his boyarsky, as well as a reliable source of winter parkas and other clothing to survive the climate of the Frozen Reaches. Though he helped partake in Gregor's downfall, Gregor does not hold as much animosity for Andrei as one would expect; Andrei is still a villager of his favorite village, after all. Instead, Andrei has been ritually scarred and lost his right hand for his treason, a rather light sentence in Gregor's eyes.



### **Katerina the Trader**

Katerina is the widow of Nicolai, a hero who opposed Zolnik and died for it. She continues her husband's work and raises their son, Mastislav. She was one of the main leaders of the community when Gregor Zolnik was away for two years, and the goodwill that she garnered with them has placed her in the position of 'mediator' between the rest of the townsfolk and Gregor Zolnik. Though she despises the man and wishes he were gone for good, she is aware of the importance of her position and deals with him cordially, if coldly.

The Boyarsky (according to *Dark of the Moon* they are at least 30 people; these are simply the more notable amongst their ranks)

### **Gregor Zolnik**

See "Who's Doomed"

### **Alexei Zolnik**

See "Who's Doomed"

### **Dmitri Dnepov**

See "Who's Doomed"

### **Russek & Fyodr Zamyatik**

The husbands of Vanda and Ilya Zamyatik respectively, Russek and Fyodor married into the Zamyatik family. The twins are hard to distinguish from one another, and that also goes for when they assume their lupine forms. Of the boyarsky, while they are capable of being cruel, they are also capable of being fair and tend not to cause as much of a ruckus as their kind are known for.

### **Turik Torsakov**

One of Gregor's boyarsky, and a great example of what joining such a band can do to one's moral character. He was once a fair and just soul who was also a dutiful husband to his wife, Eva, but now their relationship is fraught with great abuse over the most minor of incidents.

### **Vladislav the Trapper**

Vladislav was once a rebel against Gregor Zolnik with Yuri Tupolek, the latter of whom he was quite close to. In their final confrontation, Gregor killed Yuri as well as two of Vladislav's old brothers. However, Vladislav was spared and inducted into the Boyarsky. As part of that induction, Vladislav was transformed into a werewolf. Vladislav despises both himself and Gregor for his corruption into a lycanthrope and Gregor's minion. However, Vladislav feared that Gregor would murder Olaf if he ever disobeyed. When Outlander adventurers were given a chance to depose Gregor Zolnik, Vladislav allied with them, and they succeeded, but only for a time. Once Zolnik returned to the valley, he made good on his threats and killed Olaf to punish Vladislav. What Gregor doesn't know is that Vladislav is still disloyal; he has simply shifted his loyalties to Alexei Zolnik.

### **Artur Dedov**

Artur was born a rather small child and worked hard throughout his life to look like the ideal Voros man. A brawl between the boyarsky led Artur to permanently have a high-pitched voice, which contrasts unsettlingly well with his well-built appearance. Because of this, Artur is extremely eager to prove his 'manhood' and worth to the boyarsky, and is frothing at the mouth for a chance to prove himself in combat, to the point of escalating situations for a reason to sink his teeth into anyone who opposes their authority. It takes the likes of Dmitri Dnepov to hold him and the more 'overzealous' members back.

### **Ivan Greshnev**

A lower-ranking member of Zolnik's boyarsky, hailing from Voronina. Having grown up there, he enjoys frequenting Nil Shigin's bar for the latter's drinks, and thinks that the brewer's daughter is gorgeous, and he plans someday to have her.

### Lavr Luzhkov

One of the more ‘overzealous’ of the boyarsky (hailing from Nordvik), Lavr sees his lycanthropy as a great gift. Though he is a bully at heart, he masks his predations with concerns of ‘justice’ and does a convincing job of presenting himself as a true believer of Voros law, albeit a much harsher one than necessary. Because of this, he’s over-the-moon with joy about the Vaasi prison that has been constructed.

### Abram Izhutin

A born fighter from Kargo, who volunteered to join the boyarsky to better feed his village. An equally common background for most boyarsky (as common as being a thug that Gregor saw masculinity in and approved of), what’s uncommon about Abram is that his willingness to pick fights does not always mesh with Zolnik’s pragmatism; namely, while Abram wants to go fight the monsters that plague Kargo and other villages after the Great Thawing, Zolnik is much more reluctant to risk his reputation in case things go south.

### SIBERSKI

#### Vera Danshova

A young woman and a fledgling herbalist in Siberski. Vera had an interest in medicine and healing herbs since she fell sick as a child, and the local hedge-wizard was called in to help her. While she isn’t training in magic like he did, she’s grateful that the Vaasi and their sciences have helped save some of her fellow townsfolk from not dying of common illness and wants to learn as much as she can from these foreigners for the good of her village.

#### Stanislav “Stas” Chayka

The messenger of Siberski. He already had a fondness for birds growing up, so his job being in charge of carrier pigeons and other methods of messaging has only increased that love for them. Aside from his birds, he’s ironically rather anti-social.

### Vitomir Ugalev

The hedge-wizard of Siberski. He’s glad that the village has expanded so much thanks to Vaasi trade, but he’s somewhat worried that the formation of new herbalists and healers, as selfish as it sounds, may lead to him and his generational career as a hedge-wizard fading away. A proud *torva* Voros, he’s already started to train his son in the old ways but the boy is more interested in the ways of the foreigners.

### Karl Gregorovich Dubrovsky

The village leader of Siberski, and a proud breeder and owner of varsks. He doesn’t very much like the Vaasi antipathy for Siberski’s varsks but is otherwise willing to haggle with the foreigners. After what happened with the worship of Belinik and Kriesha, he’s rather suspicious of this “Church of the Lawgiver”, but he won’t deny that they have tangible benefits in terms of even more food.

### ONEKA

#### Barak Savvin

The best fishmonger in Oneka. Barak spends most of his time in his small cabin by the side of the Bottomless Lake, and is one of the few people willing to go all the way out to the center even when the ice is thin, just for the thrill. He catches more golomanka-fish than anyone else.

#### Tereza Bobrova

One of the best cooks in the valley, or so she likes to call herself, Tereza is a very proud woman who believes that there’s an innate hierarchy in nature and so it’s natural there’s one in human society as well. While she doesn’t like the boyarsky, she doesn’t question their authority, and her willingness to believe in such concepts has made her a willing convert to the Church of the Lawgiver.

#### Gavril Fyodorovich Tsarsko

The village leader of Oneka, and deeply proud of their independence from the dreaded “longpork”.

## NOVAYALENK

### Timur Chuprin

A merchant in Novayalenk who specializes in almost anything, well, except for mirrors. His fear of the Fair Lady is so great that he hasn't dared look at any reflection in the past three years, and has no idea what he looks like (and his appearance is rather haggard, relatively speaking). Because he drew her ire once, he lost his wife to the Fair Lady, and has something of an overprotective nature regarding women save for that monster (he had it before but it's intensified since).

### Lubomir Ilkun

The head of the lumberjacks in the village. Lubomir cares greatly for the health of the trees in his neck of the Darkwood, and is aware of the fact that it takes time to replenish the supply. Though he'd love to see Novayalenk prosper as the lumber capital of the valley (especially if it means that it's better than Nordvik), he wouldn't want the village to sow its own destruction. He's not entirely convinced by the village leader that the Fair Lady is something older than Zolnik, and wouldn't put it past the boyarsky to come up with new ways to extort villagers again.

### Kazimir Shuzky

The woodcarver of Novayalenk, and one of the best woodcarvers in the valley. Unlike most Voros, he's very ironic and willing to make jokes (and not only of the self-deprecating kind), but he takes his pride in woodcarving very seriously. His skill in the trade is enough that, were Novayalenk not situated deep in the Darkwood away from the Sanguinians or the Vaasi, he and his village would be highly prosperous (well, more than they already are from trading lumber, before the Fair Lady came). His jokester nature hides his immense self-doubt.

### Gaspar Severinov

The carpenter of Novayalenk, he's easily recognizable from his bald head and the tattoo of a deer on both his biceps (well when he's in the sauna).

Gaspar is a superstitious man by nature, and deeply fears the Fair Lady. Sometimes he truly wonders whether the lack of boyarsky presence in his village is a good thing or not.

### Gerasim Yaroslavovich Ulyashin

The village leader of Novayalenk, and a well liked one at that. He was responsible for bartering with other villages for bells and even commissioned the construction of a bell tower in his village, with Zolnik's permission (and tribute being paid for that). He believes that the "Fair Lady" which haunts his village must be something from before Zolnik's time, perhaps something tied to Castle Gzhansk and the old regent of the valley. He hasn't found anyone willing to take up his request to investigate.

## NORDVIK

### Yuri Belinsky

A mason in Nordvik, and one who is commonly commissioned by other villages to build in their plots of land too. Yuri is a paranoid man, and his constructions tend to reflect that paranoia through their more robust, defense-oriented architecture or through their one or more secret backdoor entrances and exits. Though stone quarries are rare, Yuri has an uncanny knack for finding new ones and using as much stone as he needs. He has been forbidden on pain of death by Zolnik from making stone walls around villages.

### Mili Rogozin

An oddity amongst the rowdier people of Nordvik, Mili Rogozin is an artist at heart. With the abundance of ice around him, he figures that he might as well make Nordvik known for more than just its saunas and for being a rest stop. So far he's had a mixed record, but that hasn't stopped him from trying.

### Nelya Grekova

At first, Nelya seems to be the quintessential Voros married woman—a dutiful wife and loving mother. In truth, she is one of the last few priestesses of

Kriesha, and pays her respect to the goddess through clandestine worship in the woods. Her unorthodox fervor and worship of the goddess, for the sake of avoiding a brutal winter and the starvation it brings, managed to get the attention of the Sisters Zolnik, who are debating whether they want to teach her ‘true’ arcane power in exchange for having another mole near Novaya Vorostokov itself.

### **Roksana Apalkova**

An entertainer (specifically a singer) in Nordvik. She’s fully aware of the rough-and-tumble nature of her fellow villagers, and has been at risk of being “gouged” before. Despite this, Roksana knows that Nordvik has potential to become even greater than Novaya Vorostokov if trade with the Vaasi and the Sanguinians takes off, and wants to help her village grow from Zolnik’s vice-like grip. She’s as good of a singer and conversationalist as she is a fighter, and in Nordvik, that speaks volumes.

### **Larion “Larya” Portnov**

People think that Larya has gone mad in his old age, and that includes Zolnik. He doesn’t care. Larya was a farmer, long ago when the village could grow crops in the spring and summer with much greater ease than today. Larya never really liked the taste of meat, and was obstinate enough to keep trying even when times were tough, and the ground was frozen. Somehow, Larya succeeded, though he’s never shared the secret. The truth is much darker: Larya knows that people disappear, and that the boyarsky are usually responsible. But not always. Larya has taken his time to make sure one person, at least once every two years in Nordvik, disappears, so that their blood can nourish his “special soil” that always yields snowberries and radishes in his home.

### **Lazlo Magidovich Teterev**

Lazlo Magidovich does not rule because he was born to it. He rules because he has beaten the stuffing out of anyone who argues with him – and he looks it. Both ears are mangled stumps, his nose no longer really exists, and one of his eyes has been scooped

out (he opts not to wear a patch because he looks more fearsome that way). He is older now, and his sons have begun to take on his mantle, but he is still more than capable of pounding his opponents into submission. Given the boyarsky frequent his village as a resort for its saunas and traders frequent Nordvik as a rest stop, Lazlo sees his abusive leadership as nothing more than “tough love”.

## **TORGOV**

### **Mikhail Zolnik**

See “Who’s Doomed”

### **Pyotr Kurdin**

A “doctor” in Torgov, Pyotr would more closely describe himself as a traditional herbalist, not too far off from a hedge-wizard (but with no magic). He deals more with the regular villagers’ illnesses and wounds than he does the bogatyrs’. Given that he’s the only real healer of proficiency in Torgov, he’s requested Mikhail to see if he could persuade a Sanguinian alchemist or a Vaasi doctor to settle into the village.

### **Ivan Chadov**

The blacksmith of Torgov, and though he isn’t one of the bogatyr, he is indispensable to their mission. Ivan is somewhat depressed with the fact that the damn dwarves in the mountains do better work than he’ll ever be capable of, but Mikhail reassures him that sometimes, quantity is a quality of its own.

### **Androniki Yurasov**

The best trapper in Torgov, Androniki is one of the village’s best men when it comes to getting food. As one of Mikhail’s bogatyr, Androniki was willing to accept lycanthropy if it meant freedom from Zolnik’s tyranny, and so far he has adjusted well to his new condition. He became a trapper because of a childhood hatred for small animals (a quirk that amuses the others to no end and to his chagrin) and is known for his foul language. Despite both of these contradictory traits, he’s excellent with children.



### **Faddei Timurovich Borzilov**

Though he's the official village leader of Torgov, he knows that Mikhail has the people's heart, and for good reason. Faddei handles the more "boring" but necessary matters of village survival, the things that Mikhail can't really concern himself with. Despite this, he still feels strong pangs of jealousy in how Mikhail is so heavily adored by everyone else, while Faddei is often remembered as "oh he's doing good work too". Faddei has at least become a good friend and support system for Mikhail's wife and daughter, so he at least thinks it's nice he's remembered as "Uncle Faddei" by someone.

### **KARGO**

#### **Bolat Sheripov**

One of the main furriers in Kargo. Bolat is grateful that trade with Sanguinia for fur has been booming in recent years, and frequently visits either neighboring Dikanka or even heads into Fagarus for trade. He likes to sing when no one is around, and has quite the baritone.

#### **Gaspar Maklakov**

(See "Hoarfrost's Hammer" in the "Black Vault Haul" thread on Cafe de Nuit—Fraternity of Shadows)

#### **Gleb Melkinov**

The blacksmith of Kargo. An old soul, and an obstinate one at that, Gleb hates the monsters in the mountains and hopes that his weapons are good enough to kill them dead. Unfortunately, the majority of villagers of Kargo are not willing to lose all their able-bodied men in a desperate attempt to drive out the monsters, nor are they willing to get the boyarsky involved. Gleb was once friends with Gaspar Maklakov, but can't bear to see what the man has become.

#### **Rodion Norin Tarasovich**

The village leader of Kargo, and a strong contender for the title of "the most stressed person in Vorostokov", competing only with Zolnik family

members Gregor and Mikhail respectively (see "Who's Doomed—Berngravild" for context).

### **KIRINOVA (Ruins)**

#### **Sergei Ikoviev**

The only remaining resident of Kirinova, or what remains of it. He lives among ghosts, though he only minds this a little. He still goes about his daily routine, occasionally helped by spectral hands, and does what he can to keep the memory of Kirinova alive. Sometimes Sergei Ikoviev departs from Kirinova to other villages, spreading the sermon of the old gods of Cerillia, whom he still believes can deliver Vorostokov from the endless winter with enough supplication (a rather unpopular opinion nowadays). When he does leave Kirinova, he is protected by the ghosts of his fellow priests who linger by his side.

### **VORONINA**

#### **Radoslav Alogrin**

The first Voros alchemist in the valley. Radoslav saw firsthand the wonders of alchemy that the Sanguinians brought with them and was curious to see how such a science can make his village grow from being extorted by the boyarsky to independent from them to begin with. Radoslav gets along well with the Sanguinian alchemists and continually pesters them for training, which bothers their more reclusive nature.

#### **Jaroslav Yelagin**

The main glassblower in Voronina, and all of the valley by extension. It was his idea to create greenhouses when times were especially tough, and through that alone he has earned the goodwill of the majority of the Voros people, despite his surlier-than-most-Voros demeanor. An unmarried man, he's good friends with Damir Shkut, the chandler, who tolerates his surly demeanor for longer periods of time than most.

### **Nil Shigin**

The brewer of Voronina, and one of the best kvas makers in Vorostokov. A title he once was proud of but has now come to curse, as his skill in brewing has reached the ears of the boyarsky. They frequent his tavern far more often than he would like, and he has strong suspicions that one of them has eyes on his teenage daughter.

### **Danya Krasotkin**

The fletcher of Voronina, Danya Krasotkin is deeply depressed. He lost his wife and child during her childbirth, and though he knew that was always a possibility, he still dared to hope. He visits Nil Shigin's bar to drown his sorrows, and on more than one occasion he has seriously considered picking a fight with one of the boyarsky, just so he can die and maybe see his family again. Though Damir Shkut doesn't realize it, his candles remind Danya of his wife and help lift the man's spirits.

### **Damir Shkut**

The stout chandler of Voronina. Though he's meant to sell his wares like any other merchant (using the barter system), Damir knows that darkness, especially in the dead of winter, is the worst thing to deal with (especially since the wolves blend well against the background). So every fall and winter, he creates more and more candles than he would need to sell, and goes around decorating the village with the candles, all so that there's some level of lighting at night in those dark times. Sometimes he manages to drag Jaroslav into it (to Jaroslav's profuse denial of such trivial pursuits).

### **Vadim Ilyich Loban**

The village leader of Voronina. Known for his uncharacteristic red hair, he's sensitive about it, even if it reflects his no-nonsense and fiery demeanor. While he's assertive regarding matters in his own village, he's very good at conflict resolution. Dealing with the boyarsky is one thing, but these foreigner alchemists, despite the miracles they've

done for the town's food security, give him a bad feeling, and he wants proof that they're either as benign as they say or that things are not as they seem.

### **"LITTLE VAASA"/VESTERBAEK**

#### **Frans Fuglsang**

The mayor of "Little Vaasa". Frans is so far quite pleased with how the colony is going, but he does have a few concerns. First, while "Little Vaasa" is growing, Prince Othmar Bolshnik plans to visit someday and is expecting a city the size of Bergovitsa, and that's not possible. Second, the Voros way of law has already led to some unfortunate 'misunderstandings' and the lack of willingness to engage from the Voros on these issues is frustrating. Third, the few Voros that *are* willing to talk are those wretched "boyarsky" thugs, and the more they show up, the more they make people want to go home!

#### **Svend Lauritsen**

The Bishop of the Church of the Lawgiver in "Little Vaasa", and the only person who knows how to manipulate the Bleak Road Mistway into being of a greater reliability than poor. He sees Gregor and his boyarsky as the kind of authority that the valley needs, and is eager to accomplish his mission of conversion in the hopes of perhaps becoming the Pave of Vorostokov and also being known as the pioneering priest of the Lawgiver who began an age of conversion and proselytization into different domains.

#### **Ingrid Vestergaard**

A Vaasi merchant that joined the initial attempts to set up a settlement in Vorostokov. She is continually amazed with the high quality of the furs that the Voros are willing to sell for (what she sees as) dirt-cheap exchange rates and is more than happy to capitalize on her early arrival as a means to better establish herself here. The cold, while bothersome, isn't nearly as bothersome as the barter system.

### Julia Villumsen

A Vaasi doctor. While she's primarily interested in getting to Sanguinia for their reputed alchemical prowess, she's interested in what sort of 'primitive' means the Voros people have used to tend to themselves prior to the Vaasi's arrival.

### FROSTTRILL

#### Thordar Froststorm

The leader of the Froststorm clan and the highest authority in Frosttrill. Unlike the rest of his kinsmen, Thordar does not possess an innate or learned distrust of humans and other humanoids, so he was quite receptive to Mikhail's impassioned plea for aid. The two only interact when Mikhail is on a supply run, so to speak, but they keep things cordial and professional. Though Thordar does care about Mikhail's plight and finds some joy in his altruism benefiting the humans of Torgov, if he has to choose between the clan and his alliances, the clan will always take priority.

#### Bengrim Froststorm

The Froststorm clan blacksmith, and the most accomplished of the dwarven blacksmiths in the clan (of which there are 7). Old even by dwarf standards, Bengrim remembers when the dwarves were taken from their land of origin and placed in the valley, and he can occasionally be morose with nostalgia, with such bouts of remembrance happening twice a week. He cheers himself up by carving the best weapons and armor he can, and while he's suspicious of Mikhail Zolnik on the principle of being a human, a part of him is happy that his wares get to be put to use instead of collecting dust on a mantelpiece.

#### Torleen Froststorm

Wife of Thordar Froststorm and the best mushroom farmer in Frosttrill. While she loves her husband, she is less of a "bleeding heart" than he is (as she puts it) and was against working with Mikhail Zolnik, not only because he is (or was purely once) a human but also

because of the trouble that he could one day bring on their doorstep. Though she does not protest her husband and clan leader's decisions, she makes her disdain for the humans beyond the safety of the stronghold known every time Mikhail comes to pick up food supplies.

### CASTLE GZHAᑁᑁK

#### The ghost of Duke Andrei Vladimir

See "Who's Doomed"

### THE BLACK CABIN/WITCHES' HUT

#### The Sisters Zolnik

See "Who's Doomed"

## SITES OF INTEREST

### NOVAYA VOROSTOKOV

The village of Vorostokov (known to the locals as Novaya Vorostokov) is the largest village in the valley, numbering at 200 inhabitants. It is also permanently under the thumb of Gregor Zolnik and his Boyarsky. He has supplied the village with food for years, though many suspect that he has been feeding them with human meat, meat that was once disguised by his sister and mother. Both of them have disappeared, at roughly the same time as a witch appeared in the forest. Gregor loudly claims that the witch was the one to take his family, though some suspect he killed them himself after the death of his son and wife by a pack of wolves.

Recently, Novaya Vorostokov has had to build palisades and other wooden fortifications, just like the other villages. While Gregor Zolnik once did not fear whatever lurked within the forests surrounding his home, as he once believed himself to be the most dangerous creature in the valley, times have changed; a raid on the Boyar's Hall in 755 BC by a group of wolves eerily similar to those that were the bane of the other villages left him scarred and his Boyarsky took many casualties. Curiously enough,

the wolves did not go after any of the townsfolk in the village, just the boyars. Since then, Zolnik has felt less secure within his home, and knows that his power is being challenged by his son, Mikhail, and his own band of werewolves.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: A POWERS CHECK WITH EVERY BITE<sup>20</sup>

The long-term effects of Zolnik's serving of the long-pork have not gone unnoticed to him. The people of Novaya Vorostokov, though at first seemingly normal, display lupine characteristics; the people are slightly hairier, their ears may be slightly pointed, their teeth sharper than usual, and their sense of smell heightened. Zolnik worries that, if he slips back into his 'bad habits' and continues to feed his village with the flesh of menfolk, that he will rule over nothing but monsters. Even worse, he has heard of this sort of tale: the "zegraki" Vos who were banished from their homes for cannibalism and have devolved completely into man-hunters, and were considered an abomination back in Vosgaard. While this troubles him deeply, he's troubled even more by two more prospects: losing the only village that at least tries to pretend he's a hero, and wondering where and how he will feed his village if his tried-and-true method is no longer tried-and-true.

### НОРДВИК

A village loyal to the boyarsky, Nordvik is something of a rest stop for traders planning to traverse the whole of the valley. Nordvik is situated near geothermal vents and a rather large collection of stone that has led to a quarry being made. The loyalty Nordvik feels to the boyarsky is entirely dependent on its proximity to Novaya Vorostokov;

had it been farther away, Nordvik would be much more like the other villages. Because of Nordvik's sweathouses, the boyarsky do not hesitate to visit Nordvik and treat it as something of a resort, which the people deeply resent.

Much like their main rival Novayalenk, Nordvik is a logging town. Their timber travels up along the side of the Trau River to other settlements (usually Novaya Vorostokov) where it is used for building and trade. They also trap furs in the forest, and their famed furriers have clients in Sanguinia and now in Nova Vaasa. Due to the influence of Novaya Vorostokov's boyarsky on the society of Nordvik, the citizens of Nordvik are wild to the point of savagery. They are hard folk, living a hard life in unforgiving conditions. As a result, they have a strange pastime involving a peculiar style of fighting called "gouging." The point of gouging isn't just to win – it is to maim the opponent permanently. Most Nordvik males are missing a facial detail – an eye is gone, an ear has been bitten off, or the tip of the nose is missing. The town's leader, Lazlo Magidovich, does not rule because he was born to it. He rules because he has beaten the stuffing out of anyone who argues with him – and he looks it. Both ears are mangled stumps, his nose no longer really exists, and one of his eyes has been scooped out (he opts not to wear a patch because he looks more fearsome that way). He is older now, and his sons have begun to take on his mantle, but he is still more than capable of pounding his opponents into submission.

### НОВАЯЛЕНК

The lumber capital of Vorostokov, situated deep within the Darkwood. Due to being situated so deeply within the Darkwood, there is something of a siege mentality amongst the people, not unlike that

<sup>20</sup> The "zegraki" come straight from *Birthright: Tribes of the Heartless Wastes* (2e). The name of the Dread Possibility comes straight from one of last year's Chibiloft strips by Rock of the Fraternity!



found within the riverside hamlets and thorps of Verbrek.

Novayalenk is haunted by a bizarre spirit known as the Fair Lady, who abducts innocent men from their homes and families. Her power resides in her “platter,” which can be any reflective object, especially a puddle of water. The platter can also be a household object, and the people of Novayalenk keep careful track of their possessions to avoid being “gifted” with the Fair Lady’s platter. The phrase “stepping on the Fair Lady’s platter” means that one has invoked the wrath of the Fair Lady, and is not long for this world.

The Fair Lady target men exclusively — if a woman incurs her wrath, she will take it out on the woman’s husband or other close male relative (or friend if no relatives are to be had). People who step on the Fair Lady’s platter generally disappear. No one is sure how they are taken or where they go, but everyone knows better than to step in a puddle. Four of the boyarsky attacked the town ten years ago. Half their number disappeared in the night, and the rest fled. The boyarsky now believe Novayalenk is cursed, and will not go near the town even to trade. Thus, Gregor Zolnik does not collect tribute from Novayalenk, though the people of Novayalenk fear his authority and trade what they can to appease him.

The Fair Lady cannot stand the sound of a bell, and so the townspeople ring the bell in the town’s central tower at dawn and dusk every day to keep her at bay. Cows and other livestock have bells hung around their necks as much to protect the herder as the beasts. Bridegrooms in Novayalenk wear vests with dozens of tiny bells sewn on to avoid the Fair Lady’s attentions.

In truth, the Fair Lady is the bheur hag which the Sisters Zolnik accidentally brought into the valley.

## ONEKA

The fishing capital of Vorostokov, located right on the shores of the Bottomless Lake. The lake itself is near never-ending with the amount of fish within its

waters, and it is through its bounty that the people of Oneka have not needed to taste the “longpork” as much as their neighbors (though they still take pains to not get on Zolnik’s bad side). Because of this, Oneka’s populace has a slightly jollier (by Voros standards) disposition towards all things than the others, and their fishing habits also means that they rarely get visits from the boyarsky; Zolnik is disgusted by their “weak ways” and only checks in on Oneka out of necessity. Of all the villages in the valley, he minds Oneka not respecting him the least (though he’ll still punish them for that).

## SIBERSKI

The southernmost purely-Vos settlement in Vorostokov, and the most quickly modernizing of them all. Prior to the Vaasi arriving, Siberski was another outlying village that paid tribute to Gregor Zolnik and his boyarsky, while otherwise being left alone. The village had its own wizard (which made it rather unique) and priests of Kriesha that would supplicate the gods or use their magic to try and keep the living situation barely attainable. The villagers of Siberski would have loved to have reaped the benefits of the Sanguinians and their alchemy, but they were on the opposite end of Vorostokov and were closer (relatively speaking) to Zolnik than they were to the Sanguinians. The Bleak Road Mistway’s discovery changed all of this; Siberski has found itself flourishing thanks to the advances in science and technology offered by the Vaasi from beyond the Mistway, and it has thus changed its negative stances on such “trivial pursuits”. Now, Siberski villagers plan to study the natural world with the tools of the foreigners and even bring the rest of the villages together through carrier pigeons to transmit letters and other communications.

Despite the willingness in which Siberski throws itself towards Vaasi science and technology (as well as Lamordian), the village has not forgotten where its roots were and proudly puts them on display: varsk breeding. Indeed, Siberski has been known for generations for its large collection of varsk pens and breeding techniques. It was, however, with the

terrible winter that made Gregor Zolnik a hero that Siberski's varsk population suffered a brutal decline by attacks from monsters in the woods that were desperate for food. With the arrival of the valley of Vorostokov into the Mists, the population recovered much slower than usual and fewer and fewer varsk and varsk-like creatures were able to be domesticated as they traditionally were. It was only with the disappearance of Gregor Zolnik and the ensuing Great Thawing that varsk populations were able to rebound to their normal levels and the strange domestication issue completely went away. It was when the Great Thaw ended and life in the valley returned to its usual dire status quo that the problems returned. Today, while there are still varsk in Siberski, they are a prized possession of the village and not something to be traded lightly. Additionally, they are something of a point of contention between the Vos and the Vaasi; the Vaasi horses that were brought into Vorostokov do not get along with the Vos varsk of Siberski, and while both peoples have their preferred mount, arguments about which one is better tend to strain relations.

One can look at Siberski and see the conflict between *torva* Vos and *nona* Vos in full swing, like a microcosm of Vorostokov as a whole.

## VORONINA

Known as the 'bug-eaters' thorp' by the other Vos, the village of Voronina prides itself on its newfound food supply and cooperation with their northern domain neighbors. A trio of Sanguinian alchemists set up shop within Voronina due to the proximity of rare alchemical reagents and herbs to the hamlet, and in exchange for receiving lodgings, the alchemists have created potions of *enlarge/reduce* that they have been using on vermin and bugs to create more food to go around. This has strongly endeared the alchemists to their Voros hosts, and the interest in alchemy has begun to translate into a small-but-growing interest in the natural sciences, which is only complemented by Voronina's status as the center of glassblowing/glassworks in Vorosotkov to begin with.

## TORGOV

The home base of Mikhail Zolnik, Torgov is the center of any resistance to Gregor Zolnik and his boyarsky, which is only further reinforced by its status as the farming and agricultural center of Vorostokov. It is also one of the fastest growing villages in Vorostokov, while also remaining cautiously friendly to any outsiders that visit. Because Mikhail values Torgov so much, he prevents himself from going back to the village unless he's absolutely needed (for instance, if there's a big raid by his father on Torgov). He's otherwise with the dwarves in their subterranean mountain settlement, near the border of Sanguinia and Vorostokov (in a place like Dikanka), or even in Sanguinia, or just moving about the land as cautiously as he can and visiting outlying towns to gauge support against Gregor and feed information to potential allies.

## KARGO

One of the few villages that continues to resist the rule of Gregor Zolnik and his boyarsky; Kargo is located in the foothills of their side of the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains and is known for its fur trade with Sanguinia. They are also known for their heavy metal ore extraction with the mines in the mountains, but this is a career fraught with danger—the presence of yetis and ice ogres in the mountains makes long-term mining difficult for the moment, which has annoyed Sanguiniana and Vaasi prospectors eager to invest in such economic opportunities.

## KIRINOVA

Once, Kirinova was a village in the valley which opposed Gregor Zolnik. However, much like Yargorod, Kirinova suffered from the fangs and claws of the boyarsky. While several villagers did escape the slaughter, none have returned to the village in the years since they fled into the woods or hid in remote cabins.

The evil that was committed on the grounds of Kirinova was enough to turn the area into a rank 3

sinkhole of evil. The ghosts of the villagers that were slain linger within the area, though they briefly disappeared when Zolnik was presumed deceased (and returned with a vengeance when Zolnik returned).

### THE BOTTOMLESS LAKE

Golomanka-fish thrive within the waters, living singly rather than in schools, and giving birth to live young rather than laying clutches of eggs. Another small lifeform is the episura, a tiny crustacean no more than an eighth of an inch long. Uncountable billions of these tiny creatures live in the Bottomless Lake, feasting on the algae growing in the saline waters. As a result of the episura, the Bottomless Lake has extremely clear water.

Occasionally, the icy surface of the Bottomless Lake will break, though it is only one cold snap or snowfall away from sealing itself back up. In that time, the fishermen of Oneka swear that they have seen seals frequent its waters. The seals are hunted by the wolves and hunt deepwater crustaceans that seem to thrive in what should most likely be icy depths within the Bottomless Lake

The crustaceans know where the geothermal vents are.

### TRAU RIVER

While frozen most of the year, the Trau River still provides plentifully for the Vos. Before it was frozen, its great width and fast currents made it the primary means of transporting trade goods from one end of the land to the other, with its ability to navigate the Grovnekevic forest allowing for communication with other Vos domains in Vosgaard (and merchandise from beyond even Vosgaard as well). Now, the river is frozen over, though bridges have been built to avoid any unnecessary accidents in traversing it. Beneath the icy surface, the same fish that can be found in the Bottomless Lake,

### CASTLE GZHANSK

A small but well fortified two story castle, built into the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains. It is now abandoned.

### YARGOROD (RUINS)

The ruins of Yargorod are a grim reminder to the Vos about what happens when Zolnik and his boyarsky are opposed. Yargorod was closest to Castle Gzhansk, where Duke Andrei Vladimir and his family lived and were then killed by a large black wolf. The people there were very close to the Duke and his family, and had the chance to meet Gregor Zolnik when the latter was invited to the duke's castle. When a large black wolf managed to kill everyone in the castle, the people mourned, though quite a few were suspicious of how a wolf of such size could enter such a highly defended building. When the eternal winter came to the valley, the people believed it to be a consequence of the duke's passing, though they were grateful that the duke's champion, Gregor Zolnik, would rise to the occasion and provide for the valley. When times became even more lean, and Zolnik began to push around the other villages more and more under the pretext of doing what was right, the people of Yargorod began to sour on their champion, and rumors began to circulate of how and why exactly Zolnik, who was in the castle, managed to survive the massacre. When villagers of other hamlets fled to Yargorod after their own homes were ransacked by black wolves, the same black wolves that either preceded or followed after a visit from Gregor Zolnik, it was then that the people of Yargorod understood, and began to sharpen their weapons.

Despite the conviction in the hearts of the villagers, the boyarsky were just too strong. Zolnik was affronted that he could even be questioned, let alone be rebelled against. While he at least left some of the other villages, like Vlasinovka and Sorochinka standing (in case anyone wanted to repopulate them and thus keep Novaya Vorostokov well fed), he did not afford the same 'mercy' to Yargorod. Everyone in

the town was slaughtered, and Zolnik planned to use their flesh to feed Novaya Vorostokov. But the people of Yargorod anticipated this, and had intentionally imbibed a strange draught that poisoned their flesh gradually, thus preventing Zolnik from using their remains as food.

Today, Yargorod is left alone by most, though the material wealth of the town has been left frozen in the ice by Gregor Zolnik (who had no need to loot the ruins as it both was a painful reminder of the monster he had become and that food was far more valuable than gold in these lean times), who has forbidden even the boyarsky from journeying to the ruins. What is unknown to all, is that the people of Yargorod are still a force to be reckoned with. The herbal mixture that left their flesh poisoned also preserved it, well enough that beneath the snow where they lay buried, the entire town of Yargorod perseveres as the ancient dead. If they are ever disturbed, they will awaken, and mercifully, they will ignore whoever awakened them (unless they are a *loup du noir*). Not so mercifully, they will march towards Novaya Vorostokov, in a single-minded effort to kill not only Zolnik but raze the entire village he massacred so many to feed for.

### DİKANKA

A recently settled village on the border of Vorostokov and Sanguinia. Dikanka is mostly made up of former villagers from Kirinova and a few settlers from Kargo. Both of these groups were the first to realize that the mountain passes of the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains, which were usually impassable, had become traversable, and were the first to encounter their newfound Sanguinian neighbors in 749 BC. Now, Dikanka is a vital artery of trade between Vorostokov and Sanguinia, with one of their own (a man by the name of Tokachyov Rustilav) emigrating to Sanguinia and handling trade with his (now former) countrymen. The exchange of food with Sanguinia in exchange for furs has brought the town much wealth, and it is with said wealth that the town elders manage to bribe Zolnik and his boyarsky from interfering too much with their

affairs. Tensions are high whenever the Boyarsky visit, however, as the former villagers of Kirinova have not forgotten what happened to their old home and wish a thousand deaths upon Zolnik and his kin, and they greatly doubt that he has truly given up his old ways as he claims to have.

### SOROCHINKA (Ruins)

A village situated between Novayalenk and Siberski, in the Silver Steppes region, that revolted against Gregor Zolnik in 737 BC. Gregor, his patience having completely evaporated with the various rebelling villages, slaughtered this one to the last man, woman, and child, with their remains being used to feed the other villages loyal to him and with the rest of the hamlet being put to the torch, so as to erase it from memory. Today, the derelict remnants of Sorochinka remain barely standing, though they have found a new occupant (see "The Anshwegh" Dread Possibility and the "Fair Lady" of Novayalenk).

### KOSTROVAT (Ruins)

A small (even smaller than the majority of settlements in Vorostokov) fishing thorp that was just a day trip away from Oneka. It was destroyed by a glacial-lake-outburst-flood caused by the Great Upheaval. There were no survivors.

### TAMBOTIM (Ruins)

A thorp dedicated to lumber that was situated at the tip of the Darkwood near the Bottomless Lake, 2 days away from Oneka. Destroyed by ice quakes during the Great Upheaval.

### SOSOLUK (Ruins)

A former hamlet that existed between Nordvik and Novaya Vorostokov, situated on the Trau River. Due to their proximity to Novaya Vorostokov, they were among the first of the other villages to be targeted by the black wolves. At the time, the boyarsky had not managed to fully understand the delicate balance between killing enough humans to intimidate the populace, killing enough hunters to



force the populace into the hands of Gregor Zolnik, or outright dooming a settlement to starvation and inability to recover because all the men were dead. This is what happened with Sosoluk: the early boyarsky, drunk on their newfound lycanthropic power, was too careless and killed all the men in the village (and took a decent chunk out of the women too). The village was effectively doomed, with the remaining women and children staying there but being too scared of the wild to even think of leaving, and after a particularly bitter winter in 739 BC, everyone in the village froze to death. Sosoluk and its remnants are not shown on the map because there are no remnants to be found; all the wood and other materials that comprised the village were stripped by the people of Nordvik and Novaya Vorostokov, while the frozen bodies of the dead were either given some manner of burial (if a Nordviker found them) or were brought back to Novaya Vorostokov (if the boyarsky or the winter witches/Gregor's sisters found them).

### VLASINOVKA (Ruins)

Vlasinovka was a hamlet situated in the Darkwood, between Kargo and Nordvik. Unlike the rest of Vorostokov's villages, Vlasinovka was not as plagued by wolves, due to the nearby bear population. It rebelled against Gregor Zolnik in 738 BC when the Darklord began to kill their hunters as a show of strength, with its villagers all meeting a grisly fate at the fangs of the boyarsky. Any extra meat (mostly bear meat) that the village possessed was apportioned to villages loyal to the boyarsky. Furthermore, the bear population in Vorostokov was wiped out, thanks to Gregor Zolnik coordinating not only the boyarsky but every single wolf and wolf-adjacent creature in the valley towards an extinction campaign against the polar bears and grizzly bears that competed ecologically with the canids.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE BEAR OF VLASINOVKA<sup>21</sup>

Not every bear was eliminated; there is still one bear that remembers what the wolves did, and it is *furious*.

Arto was but a cub when winter wolves killed his mother. Alone in the Darkwood, Arto wandered aimlessly, searching either for sustenance or for someone to follow. It was in these aimless wanderings that Arto stumbled upon hunters from Vlasinovka, engaged in battle against wolves. Arto's presence distracted the wolves, allowing the hunters to kill the beasts and return to the village. Arto followed them, which only endeared him to the hunters even more. When Arto arrived at Vlasinovka, while the villagers were initially off put and suspicious (typically dealing with bears more than they did wolves), they quickly grew on the cub and collectively raised him.

Arto initially had problems swallowing and was fed condensed milk from an old vodka bottle. He was subsequently given honey and syrup, and was often rewarded with beer, which became his favorite drink. He slept with the hunters whenever they were cold at night, and play-wrestled with the adolescents and adults of the village, which never failed to bring joy to the children. Arto even accompanied the hunters on their hunting trips and shared whatever he caught with them, while keeping watch at night so they could sleep soundly. He became a very well-trained bear and found the parental love he was robbed of from the villagers. This all changed, unfortunately, when the boyarsky began to encroach upon the village. While Arto was certainly not a cub by this point, he had not reached his full size, so the villagers, who already considered him one of their own but even more 'innocent'

<sup>21</sup> Inspired by this:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojtek\\_\(bear\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojtek_(bear))

(as humans tend to be rather sentimental with their animal companions), hid him in the nearby church and muzzled him so he would stay silent.

By the time Arto had managed to remove the muzzle from his face (as he was quite the smart bear, but a bear nonetheless) and emerged from the church, it was too late: Vlasinovka was gone, and the white snow he loved playing in was stained red with the blood of his family. The villagers themselves, or their corpses, were gone, and Vlasinovka's wooden settlements were aflame. Arto roared into the night, mourning both the loss of his family once again and swearing the vengeance of the bears against the boyarsky.

Arto looked far and wide throughout the valley to find any bears, but he could not find any. He slowly realized that he was most likely the last bear left in Vorostokov, and this only further maddened him with grief and wrath. Every time he encountered a wolf, Arto would fight as ferociously as he could to put them down, both out of hatred and a desire to keep his tracks secret from the boyarsky, lest they hunt him before he can even fulfill his vengeance.

Today Arto has lived far longer than any bear has ever lived before, and he plans to keep living until every wolf in the valley is dead. While bears have returned to the valley, their numbers are much smaller than they once were and the newcomers are at great risk of being hunted on sight by the boyarsky for their meat. Thus, the connections Arto can make with his kin are few and usually fleeting, much to his rage. He is fond of humans and has the curiosity of a child when it comes to demihumans. Despite this, he is wise enough to know that not all humans would want to speak to him, and that some humans may even be in league with the wolves (as disgusting a thought that may be), so he keeps to his own in the ruins of Vlasinovka, using the ruins of the church as his den.

### **"LITTLE VAASA"/VESTERBÆK**

Ever since the discovery of the Bleak Road Mistway by Vaasi explorers in Arbora, the Vaasi have been interested in trading with Vorostokov. Nowhere is this more apparent in the recently constructed boom town of Vesterbæk, known to both the inhabitants and the Vos as "little Vaasa". The town's economy is heavily reliant on both the provisions coming through the Bleak Road Mistway and on sustaining the nearby prison.

### **COLDSPINE ROCK PENITENTIARY**

Coldspine Rock is the greatest mark of the Vaasi and their involvement in Vorostokov. Coldspine Rock is a panopticon, a prison configured in such a way that the activities of the prisoners can be closely monitored from a central location. The prison is a single-story structure topped with battlements. Rising from the core of the panopticon is a tower that holds the prison's administrative offices and guard barracks. Both the prison and the tower are carved

out of a tall, blade-shaped rock that rises high above the nearby flatland. This rock, called the Windbreak, shields the tower against the brutal winds that sweep down from the mountains. Built by Vaasi architects and stone masons in 754 BC and recently finished in 758 BC, and only further enhanced by Hazlani mages, Coldspine Rock is a veritable fortress designed to keep certain dangerous and/or high-profile inmates of Nova Vaasa (and Hazlan) safe and contained, with any further hope of escape stifled by Vorostokov being Vorostokov and the poor reliability of the Bleak Road Mistway. The prison also supplements the economy of "Little Vaasa", as feeding and sheltering the guards, along with the trade that the Vaasi already bring to the town and the rest of Vorostokov, made Little Vaasa a boom town.

The prison cells are all enchanted with antimagic fields, and the flames on the walls are enchanted with modified continual light spells and the doors and hatches all have arcane locks applied to them.



Large black wolves are frequently found prowling outside the walls of the prison in packs of 3 or more at all times, and a Hazlani evoker has been hired to 'deep freeze' specific dangerous prisoners. When the prisoners are not in their cells, they are put to work mining metal ores in the nearby mountains (with guards escorting them) or constructing new buildings (under the very watchful eye of the guards) and roads connecting "Little Vaasa" to the rest of Vorostokov. It is in those times outside that the wolves are unafraid to grab a free meal or two, with some wondering if the prison is nothing more than a food pantry to them...

### DM SIDEBAR: WHAT'S IN THE (ICE)BOX?!

For DMs who want to run a prison break within a hostile environment, Coldspine Rock offers a chance to do just that. In terms of who is imprisoned within the penitentiary, the following list gives some ideas for DMs who want to tie things back to Nova Vaasa (and its criminal organizations) or other lands in the Mists. Essentially, think of this place as the Raft or Arkham Asylum from Marvel and DC.

#### Prisoner Ideas

- Rogue boyar
- Someone who arranges horse fights
- A lebentod
- A Vaasi noble that got involved with Malken or Othmar Bolshnik
- Vaasi rival thieves' guild leader
- Heretic of the Lawgiver
- Rashemi dissident from Hazlan
- A Thaani
- A captured vrykolaka
- A Sanguinian alchemist
- A Vaasi organ trader
- A Grabenite smuggler
- An Order of the Guardians monk
- A black-market broker (tied to Malken)
- Etc.

### THE ICEMARCH

The name given to the vast expanse of icy steppes and plains in which the villages of Nordvik, Dikanka, and Kargo reside. The difficulty of the Icemarch is two-fold. First, the area is uneven and full of pits and crags, with the Icemarch seemingly unending thanks to its layered, uniform appearance. Second, it is said that hunters who have not followed the river or special paths in the snow prepared by either the boyarsky or Sanguinian pioneers can walk for weeks without seeing any familiar landscapes, as a strange blizzard descends upon them. This is due to the Dark Powers bending time and space to distort distances for certain travelers in the Icemarch, helping to further isolate the Vos from one another and from simply escaping into Sanguinia en masse.

The Icemarch and its proximity to the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains has inspired many legends and holds many secrets. Some say that the avatar of Kriesha makes her mortal home in the Icemarch, and keeps the land frozen for her own comfort. One popular tale is that of "Timoshev", the legendary ice tower that was carved from the glaciers of the Nova Orlenaskyy mountains and heated by an unnatural magic that warms the air and inhabitants while not melting its icy walls. Few explorers have dared to cross the frozen landscape until the discovery of Sanguinia (and even then, volunteers are not exactly in great supply) but all who have made the trek will regale listeners with tales of frozen cities, ice giants, ferocious goblinkin, and winter beasts of the worst description. Common belief is that long ago, bands of outlawed Vos roamed the Icemarch in search of food, shelter, and foolish prey. These frozen tribes became known as "zegraki", or "man-hunters" because they would hunt each other when game grew scarce. Scouts and hunters from the nearby villages who occasionally venture into the Icemarch swear the zegraki survive today but barely resemble even their most barbaric Vos forebears. These tales gnaw at the conscience of Gregor Zolnik, enough for him to ban any discussion of the "made-up tall tales" on pain of a visit from the boyarsky. After all, if the

“fable” is to be taken at face value, then while Belinik may demand a blood sacrifice and Kriesha’s winter witches may claim lives as often as they do followers, no Vos can possibly stand for cannibalism as a way of life...

## THE MISTMOORS

Low hills blanketed by dark, green grass that is covered year-round by snow cover the Mistmoor. According to Vos legend, when the gods of the humans destroyed the evil god Azrai, the Lord of Shadow’s essence lingered briefly in the Mistmoor, cursing it for all time. If any truth lies in this myth, it may explain the strangeness surrounding the land.

Prey animals wander into the land occasionally and seem to survive well. But no Vos will knowingly eat a creature that has fed on Mistmoor grass or let the “tainted” animal live long enough to breed with outside herds. Animals that occasionally stray out of the Mistmoor and into neighboring regions are killed and left to rot where they fall. The same sometimes goes for people—and for good reason, according to Vos legend. From time to time, migrants from one village to another, whether they be fellow villagers or (in recent times) outlander merchants and their trading caravans, will cross the Mistmoor to head towards Torgov and the ruins of Kirinova. Always heavily armed and moving as quickly as possible, these large parties seldom encounter anything of note. Invariably, they report seeing figures moving in the mists or along the shadowy hills, but seldom does anyone investigate these.

Those who do, it is said, seldom return—or seldom return *unchanged*.

The most recent story concerning the Mistmoor involves a trading caravan from Sanguinia that made its way down to Torgov but then ran afoul of ice goblins (also from Sanguinia) that were (for whatever reason) stalking them. Pursued by the

goblins, the Sanguinians were forced to flee into the Mistmoor. Night fell and the fog grew impenetrable. The Sanguinian traders and guards made camp near a large mound and built a roaring fire. They posted a guard and settled down for the night. Around midnight, the entire camp woke to the sound of screaming. Certain the goblins were attacking, the Sanguinians grabbed what few weapons they had and put their backs to the fire, ready to sell their lives as dearly as possible. But no goblins penetrated the ring of light. All through the night, goblin screams issued from the mists. Every so often, a Sanguinian would see something move in the fog and fire an arrow. Most flew wide of their targets but one struck a shadow so large it seemed to loom over the small dome of light in the camp. The thing howled, and according to survivors, a creature of pure fog reached out and struck the men nearest the archer. More fog tendrils attacked all around the camp. Men and women hit by these “mist fists” lapsed into shivering comas or fled screaming into the night. Once the attack was over, of the 17-man caravan, only 11 remained accounted for. Of those 11, 6 were comatose, and 4 of said 6 died. Of the remaining 5/11, they were still in decent physical health (and somewhat functional mental health, trauma notwithstanding).

## НОВА ОРЕНАСКИЙ МОНТАЙНС

The mountains that surround Vorostokov. Considered by many to be virtually impassable since the Mists rose around the land and revealed the mountains, this notion is no longer held by the Vos since the arrival of Sanguinia has led to a gap in the mountains through which both peoples can traverse through. The Bloodsnow Path, named for the strange red coloration the snow and ice take when moving through it (and not seen elsewhere in either domains of the Frozen Reaches)<sup>22</sup>, has facilitated trade between the two domains and has served as a lifeline

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210729-why-snow-in-the-alps-is-turning-red>



to the Vos people in regards to food and general interaction with the outside world.

### FROSTRILL

(For more information on the dwarves, see “Dwarves of Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains” under “Factions”

The Dwarven settlement beneath the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains, close to Torgov. Populated with only 50 Dwarves (all of the same clan), Frostrill produces far more than it needs, partly due to its geographic advantages and partly on the orders of the clan leader (who does not wish to leave anything to chance in a land where the difference between surplus and scarcity means life or death). The interior of their stronghold is connected to the geothermal vents that line the Nova Orlenaskyy Mountains, allowing for a nice and toasty temperature within its walls. Said temperature and proximity to magma chambers is also conducive to both large-scale mushroom farming (as well as other foodstuffs)<sup>23</sup> and enough heat for their legendary forges for blacksmiths to get to work.

### THE BLEAK ROAD MISTWAY

A temporal Mistway (two-way, poor reliability) that the Vaasi explorers recently discovered through a chance routine patrol of the Misty Border of Nova Vaasa, bordering Arbora. Of the ten that stumbled upon the Mistway, only five managed to survive the bitter cold on the other end, though they diligently reported their findings to the Vaasi government.

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY: A BRIGHTER ROAD

While the Bleak Road Mistway is a poor-reliability Mistway, recent research done by the Church of the Lawgiver have found a way to improve the reliability of the Mistway. If one takes a plant that grows well

during the winter and enters from Nova Vaasa, the reliability jumps from poor to excellent. Similarly, if one takes a plant that grows well during the summer and enters from Vorostokov, a similar result is found. The secret of this Mistway is known only to the Biskop in charge of the Church of the Lawgiver in “Little Vaasa”, a man known as Svend Lauritsen.

### THE SHATTERED SWAMP

Where the small rivers and streams merge into the Trau River to feed into the Bottomless Lake, there is a frozen swamp that has been left abandoned since the Vos could remember. The trees in the forest nearest to the Shattered Swamp seem twisted, as if tortured by the very land that gives them life. The swamp itself is sheltered somewhat by the thick trees of the forest. It is said by the Vos that there was once a battle waged by them and the original inhabitants of the Grovnekevic Forest (some say elves, others say dwarves, who can say) that ended in a great disaster that left the land scarred by darkness and evil. It is said that whatever foul magic used by the defenders to strike back at the attacking Vos first manifested here. Such was the magnitude of the magic that the trees formerly covering the area burst into the flame and the heat thawed the frozen land. When the battle ended, the blood of countless defenders, Vos, and other monsters mingled with the land and the Shattered Swamp has refused to fully freeze over. It remains a stinking mire of death and old vengeance.

### THE SILVER STEPPES/THE WHITE WASTES

The flatland nearest to Siberski, “Little Vaasa”, and the Bleak Road Mistway. It is known as the Silver Steppes for the unique coloration the snow takes within this particular region (the reason is unknown, and part of the reason why Hugo Brugger of the

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[https://www.reddit.com/r/DnDBehindTheScreen/comments/s2eyge/dwarven\\_agriculture/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DnDBehindTheScreen/comments/s2eyge/dwarven_agriculture/) (a lovely thread on Dwarven agriculture)

University of Ludendorf was interested in going to Vorostokov). The harsh winds and blizzards that frequently batter the more well-protected (by trees) villages have given the Silver Steppes another more foreboding name: the White Wastes. When the Vaasi first discovered the Bleak Road Mistway, it was in this area that the majority of their casualties to the weather and to their poor preparation for the cold were incurred.

### THE OROSET TUNDRA

The barren patch of land north of Torgov. Recently, through the help of both the dwarves whom Mikhail Zolnik made an agreement with, as well as the help of the Sanguinian Alchemists' Guild (for a price), the people of Torgov have plans to turn the Oroset Tundra into a fertile farming field through dwarven agricultural practices and Sanguinian alchemy, while using imported Vaasi seeds and crops.

### LIVERTO TAIGA

The Liverto Taiga refers to the stretch of conifers, evergreens, and larch trees that encompasses Kirinova and borders Nordvik. It is known for being the least wolf-infested of the forests of Vorostokov and the most well tamed, though that does not mean that it is entirely harmless. It is also well known for the many birds that migrate from the treetops here all the way to the south of the land, close to the headwaters of the many small rivers and streams that feed into the Bottomless Lake.

### THE DARKWOOD

The name of the very large woods that cover the vast majority of Vorostokov, swallowing the villages of Novayalenk, Yargorod, Vlasinovka, and more whole. It is the least tamed wood in Vorostokov and is teeming with both predators and prey. Despite this, it is also full of the flora mentioned previously that keeps said predators and prey alive, while also possessing many trade goods deep within that keep villages like Novaya Vorostokov and Novayalenk economically healthy. When people picture dark, gloomy and foreboding conifers and evergreens

dotted with snow, this is the place they're thinking of.

### GREGOR'S CAVE

A nondescript cave in the hills near Novaya Vorostokov, close to the Trau River. This is where Gregor wakes after 'death'. Nothing here shows that the cave has any special meaning to him, though he slaughters anyone he finds here and has them eaten—whether by the villagers of Novaya Vorostokov or the wolves is dependent on how the current hunting is...

## FACTIONS & MORE ORGANIZATIONS

### THE BOYARSKY

Gregor Zolnik's personal band of thugs, typically drawn from both the strongest and cruelest of the villages of Vorostokov.

### THE SANGUINIAN ALCHEMIST GUILD

The Sanguinian alchemists have managed to ingratiate themselves to the locals. Their potions of enlargement have allowed for bugs to grow larger, as well as other living creatures that are caught alive and fed the alchemical mixtures. It is through the enlargement of these creatures that the Voros in Voronina are able to survive without relying upon Gregor Zolnik, much to his chagrin. Their main goal is simple: to use the resources of Vorostokov to finance an expedition into the permafrost of the land, in the hopes of finding a particularly virulent strain of disease to tame with alchemy.

In truth, the alchemists are not acting alone: a vrykolaka by the name of Tavian Lucescu has approached the alchemist guild and found a mutual purpose for them to work towards. The vrykolaka's goals are unknown to the alchemists, but they also know that it is through the monster's genius and protection against the boyarsky that they are able to thrive in the first place.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: TRAPPED IN THE ICE

One of the many interesting properties of permafrost is that it can trap certain organisms within it for very long periods of time. While in Sanguinia, the spring thaw tends to lead to a slight proliferation in diseases, the locals have become accustomed to this and know how to take steps to prepare. Not the case in Vorostokov and its eternal winter. The very reason that Tavian Lucescu decided to relocate from his homeland to Vorostokov is to better preserve his 'magnum opus': a disease he calls 'liyola', made to preserve still living creatures and their minds within ice. With just a few modifications (so that it can affect the undead), Tavian plans to unleash his disease onto the Frozen Reaches, starting with Vorostokov as a testing ground and then spreading it to Sanguinia to ruin Ladislav Mircea's unlife for turning him into such a wretched creature.

### THE VAASI

(See "Diplomacy" section for basic information)

In the case of Prince Othmar Bolshnik, the potential to flee (if needed, given Vaasi politics being Vaasi politics) to an isolated and difficult to reach land that was still connected to Nova Vaasa piqued his interest, and he has already funded the construction of a small settlement there. He has also, in his bid to appear like a just ruler who is tough on crime to the people and the police force, funded the creation of a supermax penitentiary within Vorostokov, with the contracted help of a few Hazlani mages to ensure its security. In truth, this facility is meant to be for Othmar Bolshnik's enemies as much as it is for the enemies of Nova Vaasa, and the crime lords of Nova Vaasa have already found ways to turn their stay at the prison into something of a vacation (though they do not know of the boyarsky). One would question the wisdom of putting all of one's political enemies in a prison right next to your bolthole, but such is Othmar Bolshnik

Additionally, the creation of a prison to house political prisoners and other enemies of the Vaasi state (including criminals) has been a boon to both domains. For the civilians of Nova Vaasa, the exile to Vorostokov has allowed for greater security and crippling of Malken's criminal network. For the savvy criminals of Nova Vaasa, the exile to Vorostokov has given them safe harbor from any rival bandits or underworld figures who would be able to track them down and do them harm, as no harm can be done to them from their base in the cells. For Vorostokov, the boomtown that has sprung up from the prison industry has fed many mouths and further cemented Vaasi culture within the Vos consciousness. Furthermore, Gregor Zolnik is quite pleased to have a free food pantry, consisting of meals that no one will ever miss, and allowing for the procurement of meat outside of harassing villages. Now when he claims that he has not fallen back into his old ways, the villagers can believe him, and with the lack of their own being slaughtered, there are some among them who are warming up to him as their leader and resist him less, all the while he still gets to "heroically" feed his nation (never mind the Vaasi) the "old-fashioned ways".

### THE CHURCH OF THE LAWGIVER

(See "Religion" section for the basics)

When the Bleak Road Mistway was discovered and reported to clerics in the Church of the Lawgiver, their interest was piqued. They were interested not only in having access to new converts to the Lawgiver, but also in learning the secrets of the Mistway so that they could perhaps one day learn how to manipulate the Mists the way their Ezran Anchorite rivals could (and thus discredit one of the main advantages the Church of Ezra has over the Church of the Lawgiver).

Vorostokov itself, or at least Voros culture, has seemed to the clerics of the Lawgiver to be a good fit for the Church and their teachings. The teachings of their pagan god Belinik, with his tenets on power being for the strong and of the strong dictating

everything and compromising nothing (and that “[A]ny who opposes you must be utterly destroyed; with each demonstration of your mastery you bind those more tightly beneath you.”), should make the Vos for great converts.

The Voros people themselves had given up on many of their gods when they did not answer their prayers within the first few years of the eternal winter (and the great famines that they faced only furthered this sense of atheism and misotheism amongst their number). Thus, their approach to the Church of the Lawgiver is one of initial skepticism and cynicism, though this skepticism has been overcome by Lawgiver priests through the trade of even more food in exchange for conversion. Thus, while the initial converts of the Lawgiver in Vorostokov are not exactly the ‘true believers’ that the Vaasi priests would like, they’re hopeful that as time goes on, and as Vaasi culture imprints itself more and more onto Voros culture, the worship of the Lawgiver will catch on in earnest.

Gregor Zolnik cautiously supports the Church of the Lawgiver. While he is no fool and can see how a religion dedicated to following one’s betters would help him and his boyarsky secure legitimacy as rulers, he worries that the people of Vorostokov will either completely reject the Lawgiver (and thus his legitimacy if he ties himself too closely to the Vaasi clerics) or embrace the Lawgiver too much, to the point that they forget who is feeding them and who has saved them, time and time again, from the starvation of the endless winter.

### THE DWARVES OF THE NOVA ORLENASKYY MOUNTAINS

The Dwarves have long been used to the harsh winters and cruel climate of their native land of Vosgaard. Having settled in the Orlenaskyy Mountains, they did not truly pay any mind to the settling of the Vos in the Grovnekevic Forest. This all changed when the land of Vorostokov was formed, with the Dwarves being part of the bundle. Already capable of feeding themselves and surviving through both the Dwarven diet of specially prepared

mushroom & fungi, as well as the geothermal vents that kept their underground homes nice and toasty, the Dwarves have been reluctant to interact with the savage Vos nearby, having remembered the racial grudges between the two from their homeworld of Cerilia. However, the discovery of the Dwarven settlement of Frostrill by explorers from Torgov has led to somewhat of a ‘thawing’ of relations. While the Dwarves are loath to get involved in what they deem as ‘the Zolnik family dispute’, they have been willing to trade their specially prepared foodstuffs with the village of Torgov in exchange for furs and other goods from the cold outside world. For Mikhail Zolnik, the presence of the Dwarves is nothing short of miraculous, as while the food may not exactly be the tastiest they’ve ever had, the people of Torgov would rather eat morally than suffer the cooking of “Chef Boyarsky” (as Gregor is mocked in Torgov) in Novaya Vorostokov.

## NEW MONSTERS

### “PATZINAKI”

Also known as “beli”, these small winter fairies blend perfectly into their snowy environment thanks to their translucent wings and pale skin. Only their beady black eyes stand out against the snow and ice. These malevolent ice-sprites are a plague upon the people of snowy climates, ambushing unwary prey with icy arrows, invisibility, and freezing powers. It is thanks to their aerial capabilities and icy arrows that 7 of them were able to humiliate Gregor Zolnik in front of his favorite village, as he tried and failed to shoot them down, then swat them down, before becoming overwhelmed by their invisibility and exhaustion-inducing ice arrows, requiring his rescue by his son Alexei and a few other boyarsky to distract the faeries while they brought their leader to safe shelter.

Source:

<https://www.5esrd.com/database/creature/beli-3pp/>



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# PHARAZIA, SURVEY OF A SAND-SCOURGED LAND

BY IAN FORDAM

*For the most part, Zakhara lacks the racial prejudice and segregation of less civilized realms.... Lifestyle—not race—tends to separate Zakharans. In the Land of Fate, people fall into one of two broad groups: those who are nomads and those who are not.*

*Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures, p.11*

*The salt bond epitomizes Zakharan hospitality and the mutual responsibilities of host and guest. When a guest ingests salt from a host's table, their bond becomes formal... By accepting the salt, the guest agrees not to bring harm to the host.*

*Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures, p.17*

## THE LAND

Foreigners call these lands the Amber Wastes, a term which is short-sighted, condescending, and politically useful. The people of Har'Akir refer to the Akiri Empire, while the people of Pharazia refer to the Pharazian Caliphate. Although both peoples bristle at "The Amber Wastes", they find that phrase less offensive than the notion that Pharazia is part of the Akiri Empire or that Har'Akir belongs to the Pharazian Caliphate.

The Amber Wastes are a cluster of lands of fallen glory. In Pharazia, the fall occurred so recently that the Pharazians' wounded pride yet bleeds.

Careful observers might note that the people of the Amber Wastes who are most content with their lives are the ones who live in the present, perhaps with an eye toward the future instead of staring into the past.

## LANDSCAPE

There's a lot of sand. Also sometimes rocks.

## LANDSCAPE (WITH MORE DETAIL)

As even the least-informed professor of a university of the Core knows, most of the land known as The Amber Wastes is covered in a vast desert. There is, indeed, a lot of sand and also sometimes rocks, but there is much more to the Amber Wastes than that.

Even in the most desolate places, there exists a stark beauty. The wind and sand have scoured rocks into improbable shapes. The sand scintillates beneath the sun's brilliance. Above all else, though, the desert is open and vast. Nothing stands between the self and the Lawgiver. Some find that vulnerability disturbing, even frightening. Others find it the height of inspiration.

The eastern portion of the Amber Wastes is known as **Pharazia**. As always in the Amber Wastes, civilization clings to the sources of water. The heart of Pharazia is the **Ousserd**, a mighty spring which sustains the city of **Phiraz** and, in fact, most of the rest of the land as well. Three rivers flow away from the city and its spring:



The shortest river, the **Simurgh**, runs northeast, feeding the **Great Marsh** until it finally reaches the **Bay of Phiraz**.

The **Beni Massat** flows southward from Phiraz, eventually terminating in the **Oasis of the Five Palms**. Along the way, it passes several settlements, most notably the city of **Ibraq**. Like the Simurgh River, the Beni Massat runs strong.

The third river, the **Chakor**, runs to the southwest. Like the Beni Massat, it flows past various settlements, only to end in the **Oasis of the Emptiness** where the city of **Benzar** once stood. Benzar was destroyed by the **Herald Who Flies Upon**

**the Wings of the Night**. Even now the Oasis of the Emptiness has a particularly brackish taste.

Despite its importance, the Ousserd is not the largest body of water in Pharazia. The **Gulf of the Heart** stands between the western and eastern "legs" of southern Pharazia. However, in the years before the Endless Sirocco surrounded the land, the Gulf of the Heart opened into a sea. Although the sea is now hidden, the Gulf remains a saltwater body, unsuitable for drinking.

The northern part of Pharazia is called **The Two Horns** after two "peninsulas" that jut northward from the body of the land. However, before the **Herald of Divine Wrath** caused the Great Upheaval,



Pharazia had four "horns" (and also another peninsula, the **Jazirat al-Qidiys**, to the east).

Various small mountain ranges dot Pharazia. To the far west, at the Sebuian border, is the largest range, the **al-Hajar Mountains**. The **Lost Mountains** are smaller, but they still effectively block off the westernmost of the Two Horns. West of the Chakor is a third range. East of the Chakor, bordering upon the Gulf of the Heart, is a fourth, where the **High Cliff Fortress** was built. Finally, at the very southern end of Pharazia, a fifth range cuts off the **Lonely Fortress** from the rest of the land.

Between the al-Hajar Mountains and the city of Phiraz is a nearly featureless desert commonly known as the **Nameless Quarter**. The Nameless Quarter is desolate, but crossing it is necessary to reach Sebuia and Har'Akir thereafter. Experienced travelers know that the Nameless Quarter offers oddities such as the **Sea of Glass**.

In between, there is a lot of sand. A *lot* of sand. Also sometimes rocks.

#### THE DOMAIN OF THE ENDLESS WORD

One of the inspirations for this survey was NeoTiamat's "The Domain of the Endless Word" from *Quoth the Raven* Issue 21. That article posits an alternate Pharazia attached to the Core, greatly expanded and incorporating various other domains. Most significantly, in this version of Pharazia Diamabel is a presence but not necessarily the Darklord.

Although this survey hews more closely to established canon, nonetheless it steals ruthlessly from its predecessor, particularly regarding certain geographical names. In the preceding section, the Ousserd, Simurgh, Great Marsh, Bay of Phiraz, Beni Massat, Chakor, Benzar, al-Hajar Mountains, the Nameless Quarter, and the Sea of Glass are all taken from "The Domain of the Endless Word".

#### FLORA AND FAUNA

While much of the Amber Wastes is a vast desert, it is not devoid of life as many foreigners believe. Even in the heart of the Nameless Quarter, one encounters a variety of plants and animals. Date palms are the only true tree which has established itself, if sporadically, but dwarf shrubs such as saltbush and sedge are prevalent across much of the desert. Millet thrives, unhindered by the limited moisture. Common animals include many species of lizard, snake, and scorpion. The nomads ride camels and sometimes horses, and they herd sheep and goats. Less commonly, larger mammals such as jackals, hyenas, and spotted lions may be encountered, particularly near the mountains.

Along the banks of the Beni Massat, Chakor, and Simurgh rivers, fauna and flora exist in greater variety. Crocodiles lurk within the waters or sun themselves upon the riverbanks. Herds of hippopotamuses inhabit the Beni Massat, particularly south of Ibraq. Flax and reeds are ubiquitous. Palm trees, fig trees, and even citrus trees are common, especially near the cities and other settlements where they are deliberately cultivated.

Rice imported from the Great Marsh is a staple of Phirazite cuisine, and wheat and bulgur are frequently used to make bread, porridge, and a pasta called *rishta*. Many kinds of legumes and vegetables are grown wherever enough water exists to support them.

Herbs and spices found in Pharazia include black pepper, parsley, coriander, sesame, saffron, and sumac. These spices are cultivated near cities and villages, of course, but they may also be found in odd corners of the Nameless Quarter. In addition, these spices are also combined in traditional mixes such as *baharat* and *za'atar*. Every family has its own closely-guarded recipe for creating their favorite spice mixes.



The quail, lark, and sandgrouse are common birds in the Amber Wastes. Larger birds such as eagles, vultures, and buzzards may also be found, although they most often occur near the mountainous regions. (Note that the vulture is considered a holy bird in Pharazian culture.) Because poultry and eggs are widely consumed, chickens are often kept near human settlements, although they do not survive long in the wild.

Monstrous creatures encountered in the Nameless Quarter include sandlings, giant ant lions, desert zombies, jackalweres, and werejackals. For that matter, any creature presented for the Al-Qadim setting might well be found there. Certainly ghuls, desert giants, and silats have been encountered.

#### QALB AL-NAAR

Strangers to the desert must be careful not to confuse the sumac plant with a very similar-looking shrub which the Pharazians call *qalb al-naar* ("heart of fire"). Qalb al-naar tastes unpleasantly bitter, and those who consume it are sometimes overtaken by a violent rage.

Anyone who consumes an ounce or more of qalb al-naar must make a base DC10 Fortitude save. The DC increases by 1 for every additional ounce the consumer ingests. Those who fail their saving throws suffer a painfully intense hatred toward anyone nearby. They will attack the person closest at hand or perhaps the person with whom they ordinarily have the most positive connection. Fortunately the sufferer's attention may be redirected if attacked by someone else.

The onset time is 1d12x10 minutes, and the effects last for 1d6 hours minus the sufferer's CON modifier, to a minimum of 10 minutes. Once the qalb al-naar wears off, its sufferer is exhausted for 1d6 hours.

## SEASONS AND WEATHER

The Amber Wastes experience four seasons, but three of the four are less extreme than in many other lands. Summer is brutally hot. Spring and autumn are both pleasant. Winter is less pleasant, but truly uncomfortable only to those who are fully adapted to the summer's heat.

In early summer and then again in the middle of winter, the Amber Wastes are subject to the windy seasons. At their height the winds escalate into sandstorms, but for the most part they merely cover everything with sandy grit.

## HISTORY

Ironically, the history of the Amber Wastes is complicated by the timelessness of its western lands. Although the people of Har'Akir and Pharazia alike claim that their lands are all one land, nonetheless many scholars from the Core believe that the three regions of the Amber Wastes were drawn from the Mists separately. One prevalent theory currently in circulation is that the three regions were drawn from a single land (the "Black Land"), but at widely differing times. If so, then Har'Akir must have been captured centuries before Sebuia, at least to judge by changes in Akiri writing found in both regions. Sebuia, in turn, must have been captured centuries (if not millennia) before Pharazia, given how tenuous the linguistic connections between Akiri and Pharazia are. However, some of the oldest scrolls in the University indicate that ancient Pharazian history includes nations which may indeed correspond to Har'Akir and Sebuia.

Compared to Har'Akir and Sebuia, at least, the history of Pharazia is well documented. For centuries a succession of Caliphs ruled with enlightenment and righteousness in accordance with the Laws of the Lawgiver. However, that ended when the **Faithless Nomad** stirred his people into waging war against the civilized people of Pharazia. Caliph **Qadir al-Najm** invited the Faithless Nomad and his warriors to

Phiraz for negotiations. Some believed that the Caliph, ordinarily so wise, was exceedingly foolish to do so, but their hearts were eased once the Faithless Nomad ate a bite of the Caliph's bread and drank deeply of water drawn from the Ousserd. Yet the Faithless Nomad did the unthinkable, violating the bond of salt: He attacked and murdered his host.

Upon that fateful day, the Lawgiver decreed that all of the people of Pharazia would be punished for providing succor to the Faithless Nomad and his desert warriors. Pharazia became trapped by the **Endless Sirocco**, that mighty, ceaseless sandstorm which prevents its people from leaving the Amber Wastes through any natural means. Moreover, the Lawgiver sent the **Herald of Dusk** to inflict justice upon the Pharazians, but he also sent the *qudwa* (paragon) **Diamabel** as an example of virtue and a reminder of the divine grace which awaits the obedient and faithful.

Diamabel immediately dismantled the mamluk orders, such as the **Dedicated** and the **Glorious**, which were clearly too ineffectual to be trusted as they had been. After that, Diamabel replaced the upper levels of government with men more faithful to the Lawgiver. Many Pharazians were initially concerned when the religious fanatics known as the Confessors rose to power, but many have since noted that Pharazia has experienced no war since Diamabel's arrival. The only internal conflicts have been the sporadic rebellions of the nomadic clans, which are led by a succession of rabble-rousers usually calling themselves Allahn el Rashaan.

#### PHARAZIA AND ZAKHARA

This article contains many references to concepts from the Al-Qadim product line, which was published under the 2nd Edition AD&D rules. Zakhara, the Land of Fate, is the official setting for Al-Qadim. The canonical Zakhara is presented in those rules, but of course there are countless analogues throughout the multiverse, including a variation for every Al-Qadim campaign.

Pharazia and Zakhara appear to be a natural fit. However, the Al-Qadim materials contain no references to the zealous religious campaign of the Faithless Nomad, which implies that Pharazia was not drawn from Zakhara. Moreover, the sourcebooks do not contain any reference to gods which correspond to those of the Akiri faith, not even among the Ruined Kingdoms, which similarly implies that the rest of the Black Lands are not Zakhara either.

Nonetheless, although Pharazia did not originate from any analogue of Zakhara, the Dark Powers are inclined to draw people and places from the Land of Fate into Pharazia. See "**The Enlightened**", below, for more details of this confluence.

## POPULACE

### AL-BADIA AND AL-HADHAR

The people of Pharazia divide themselves into two groups: the *al-Hadhar* occupy the cities and villages of Pharazia, and the *al-Badia* occupy the deserts. They are all Pharazians, faithful to the Lawgiver and thus loyal to his *qudwa* Diamabel. However, many *al-Hadhar* consider the desert-dwellers to be filthy savages, while the *al-Badia* frequently consider the city-dwellers to be spineless weaklings.

However, in truth the division is not always so clear. There exist those *al-Badia* whose families have become more settled, but who otherwise remain more culturally aligned with the *al-Badia* than the *al-Hadhar*. For example, **Rashiq ibn Zufar al-Malak** has been tasked with guarding the Oasis of the Five Palms, and **Jamal ibn Bishr al-Ghani** has been appointed the Emir of Ibraq. In some cases (such as the former), these borderline *al-Badia* are still held to be *al-Badia* by their fellows, but in other cases (namely, the latter) the too-citified *al-Badia* are considered no better than *al-Hadhar*.

### ON THE UTILITY OF BUCKETS

It is very useful to have these two buckets, al-Badia and al-Hadhar.

It is very important to notice the silk in the al-Badia bucket and the sand in the al-Hadhar bucket.

It is equally important to notice the other buckets, such as the one which holds reeds from the marsh.

### APPEARANCE

Nearly all Pharazians have black hair and dark brown eyes. Skin tones vary, ranging from pale olive to dark bronze. Naturally enough, Pharazians who spend most of their time in the Nameless Quarter are more weathered by sand and wind.

Among the *al-Hadhar*, women take pride in the length of their hair, while men keep their hair short. Many men are cleanshaven, but among those who are not, mustaches and beards are fastidiously groomed. Barbers are an essential part of *al-Hadhar* society.

The men and women of the *al-Badia* are less particular, recognizing that sometimes survival is more important than grooming. Many women do cut their hair to a manageable length, and men are forgiven if their hair and beards grow somewhat unruly. In fact, some men never shave at all, demonstrating manhood through the sheer thickness of their beards. Less commonly, some women cut their hair extremely short.

Occasionally a child is born with jet-black eyes. Such children are typically slain at birth because of a superstition which says that a "black-eyed scoundrel" will bring about the fall of Pharazia.

### FASHION

Across the deserts of the Amber Wastes, most people wear a long, loose-fitting linen robe called an *aba*. In Pharazia, these robes are typically worn unsashed over trousers or a skirt. In the winter months, people often wear a thicker *jellaba* over the

*aba*. Men and women alike wear *keffiyeh* (headcloths), held in place with cords (*agals*), to protect the head from sand and sun. Keffiyeh are typically unadorned, although a well-to-do person may have an *agal* wound through with gold or have an *aba* with embroidered trim. Sandals are the preferred footwear.

Clothing is typically light-colored to reflect the heat of the sun. A notable exception is the House of Rashaan, which is known for wearing black robes instead. (When its warriors want to be noticed, at least. When they don't, they wear white and blend in with the other Pharazians.) Traditional festival clothing is more colorful, but because the Confessors disapprove of festivity, it is worn only rarely in Pharazia.

In the cities of Pharazia, the poor folk dress very similarly to the nomads of the desert, although some men wear linen vests in place of the *aba*. Among the wealthy Phirazites, clothing styles vary more widely. Linen is sometimes replaced with silk, and slippers often replace sandals. Many men wear a turban instead of a keffiyeh. (In Zayawa, some wear a fez.) For women, Diamabel has decreed that head scarves and veils are mandatory, and no woman may show her arms in public. However, this decree is only infrequently enforced among the lower classes, particularly within their own districts. For that matter, in other cities it is largely ignored as well; the vengeance of the Herald of Divine Wrath seems to be reserved for more heinous offenses. That said, many higher-class Phirazite women do wear a full-body *chador* to forestall complaints by any Confessors whom they might encounter near the Temple or the University.

The Confessors dress very traditionally. Their robes are the starkest white, and sullyng the purity of a Confessor's *aba* is a sure way to earn his wrath.

Historically, the various mamluk orders have been distinguished less by uniform than by tattoos upon their faces. Each order had a traditional set of markings, which increased in complexity as an

individual mamluk advanced through the ranks. Now only the **Vigilant** remain, and since their history is shorter than the histories of the orders of old, their tattoos are much simpler.

Jewelry is considered immodest by the Confessors, and it should not be worn in public. The only exceptions are anklets, ostensibly worn so that their jingle can forewarn pious men of a woman's approach. Of course, not all anklets are truly demure. Tales abound of women who signal their interest in a man by lifting the hem of their chador just enough to reveal their anklets—and, not coincidentally, their feet. Such flirtation is safe enough as long as no Confessors (or their informants) are at hand. Also, wealthy Pharazians display their finest clothing and most extravagant jewelry when they attend or host private gatherings. The Confessors would not approve, but such display is not actually forbidden.

Much of this section is based upon *Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures*, p.92-93.

## Economy

Among the lands of the Amber Wastes, Pharazia has the most vital economy. Its capital city, Phiraz, receives plenty of water from the nearby spring with which to irrigate the land. As such, Phiraz is surrounded by fields of grain, including wheat, barley, millet, and even some rice; also flax, melons, peas, beans, eggplants; and orchards of trees bearing figs, dates, and several varieties of citrus fruit. Various spices and spice mixes are popular both for domestic use and for export. Aficionados in the Core argue which coffee is superior, Pharazian or Vechorite. All of these generous crops, as well as the human and animal populations of Phiraz, are supported by the bountiful waters of the Ousserd.

Even more than food, as crucial as that is, Pharazia also has knowledge to offer, particularly in the fields of mathematics (including algebra), astronomy, alchemy, architecture, optics, and medicine. The Pharazian Caliphate may be greatly reduced from the glory of its golden age, but it has not forgotten everything that its people once knew. Sometimes

even foreigners are granted access to the lore held at the University of Phiraz.

A number of trade routes connect Phiraz to the rest of the land. Most of them follow the rivers, at least partway. Boats can traverse the Beni Massat all the way from Phiraz to Ibraq. From Ibraq, travel further south to the Oasis of the Five Palms happens via either smaller vessels or camels. (If traveling by boat, watch out for the hippopotamuses.) Because the Road of a Thousand Secrets usually terminates at the Five Palms, this trade route may be the most crucial.

The Simurgh River is shorter but wider, and boats travel regularly to the Great Marsh and back. The third river, the Chakor, is the least reliable. During certain months of the year, its depth can support river trade all the way to the village of Nizwar. During the rest of the year, however, the Chakor is too low, and so travel to Nizwar must be accomplished via land. Most traffic continues from Nizwar southeast to Zayawa on the shores of the Gulf of the Heart. However, several times each year supplies are delivered to the High Cliff Fortress, and they pass through Nizwar along the way.

However, the most notorious trade route stretches from Phiraz through the Nameless Quarter into Sebu. From there, one variant leads travelers to the Red Oasis, while another leads to the Tawiel Akhdar, "The Long Green". The most difficult part of the journey crosses the World's End Mountains into Har'Akir and to Muhar. Of course, no nomad wants to be stranded in Har'Akir, and so the important part of the journey is heading back home.

## LANGUAGE

Pharazian is the primary language of both the city-dwellers and the nomads. Even as used by plainspoken folk, it is a rich and lyrical language. However, among the learned scholars of the cities and the storytellers of the sands, Pharazian attains an intricately poetic beauty. Learning poetic Pharazian requires an additional language slot, but its students claim that entire levels of meaning



become apparent as one's knowledge of the language increases.

Many Pharazians have also learned some form of Akiri. Those *al-Badia* who trade with Har'Akir learn the modern form of the language. Most of the *al-Hadhar* do not, and so instead they have learned one of the forms recorded in the texts of the University; nonetheless, the two forms are similar enough to allow halting communication.

In addition, because Pharazia has contact with lands outside the Amber Wastes, many of its people speak other languages as well, including Vaasi, Rajian and Mordentish.

## Education

Among the *al-Badia*, formal schooling is almost entirely unknown. Sons and daughters learn from their fathers, mothers, and the rest of the clan everything that they expect to need. As a result, very few of the nomads are literate. Nonetheless, they may recite lineages, religious passages, folktales, and poetry both flawlessly and at great length.

Among the *al-Hadhar*, knowledge is more commonly shared via teachers, books, and scrolls. Literacy is considered one of the bedrocks of a proper city-dweller's education. Pharazians are proud of the extensive library of the University of Phiraz, even if they have never set foot within its halls.

Oddly, though, the *al-Hadhar* consider knowledge to be something static. It should be studied and quoted, but it should not be extended or applied except in certain ways prescribed by the Confessors. After all, what need is there for research and development when the Lawgiver has already passed along everything that one needs to live a life of faith?

Finally, one of the great distinctions between the attitudes of the *al-Badia* and the *al-Hadhar* is that the former generally believe that life has always been much as it is, while the latter can point to their libraries for evidence that civilization has decayed since the murder of the Last Caliph, despite the

attempts of the Herald of the Sun to restore righteousness to the land.

## Arts and Crafts

The most prevalent forms of art in Pharazia are pottery and mosaics. The designs of both usually feature animals, plants, or abstract geometry. The weaving of carpets and tapestries is also common, although the quality of such weaving has dropped since the destruction of Benzar.

Art in Pharazia excludes the representation of human or divine forms. Such representation was banned by Diamabel in 602bc after he saw a painted mural depicting the death of the Faithless Nomad in a particularly vulgar manner.

Finally, Pharazian architecture must also be considered art, not to mention an impressive feat of engineering. The spires and towers of Phiraz and the other cities are masterfully constructed.

## Attitudes Towards Magic

Most people of the Amber Wastes, regardless of domain, consider magic (arcane and divine alike) to be an ancient art worthy of great respect, both for its power and for the great discipline or faith required to harness it. However, they also know that magic can be used for both woe and weal, so the respect is frequently cautious, if not outright suspicious.

In particular, anyone except a Confessor using magic within Phiraz risks drawing the attention of the Confessors. Magic is not immoral, and it is not illegal, but because it is powerful, the Confessors prefer to keep its use tamped down.

Many Pharazians are fascinated by Akiri magic. In Pharazia, arcane magic is usually focused upon the four elements: flame, sand, sea, and wind. Akiri magic, on the other hand, delves into excitingly forbidden areas such as necromancy.

## GENIES IN PHARAZIA

Genies are a commonplace (although still awe-inspiring) aspect of life in Zakhara. Not so in Pharazia, given that Ravenloft is a planar prison. No genie will accept an invitation to enter the Land of Mists without a truly, exceptionally excellent reason. Nonetheless, there are genies—al-Khymer and Dhuquarru, for example—who have been drawn into Ravenloft against their wishes.

Once in Ravenloft, the magic of sha'irs is severely curtailed. Their gens cannot roam the planes for spells to capture. In fact, gens struggle to cross closed domain borders despite their miniature reality wrinkles. The chance for a gen to successfully retrieve a spell is halved, and the time required for retrieval is doubled. If a sha'ir loses their gen, then they cannot cast any spells at all.

As a final note: To avoid confusion with the sorcerer class first introduced in 3rd Edition D&D, the Al-Qadim sorcerer kit is referred to as the *eunsuri* (elementalist) instead.

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS NON-HUMANS

Phiraz is a cosmopolitan city. Its citizens recognize that heretics from foreign lands will walk its streets, and some of those heretics will be non-humans. They may disdain them, but only part of that disdain is based upon race.

Outside of Phiraz, non-humans are less commonly encountered, but on the other hand the intolerant grasp of the Lawgiver clutches less tightly further from the city. As such, non-humans will suffer an outcast rating when interacting with some groups, but not with others.

The Enlightened who have been drawn into Pharazia from Zakhara retain the inclusiveness of their home world. Anyone, regardless of race, who believes in one of the Enlightened gods is accepted. Even those who are not Enlightened are judged by their deeds and not their ancestry.

## RELIGION

The official god of Pharazia is the **Lawgiver** (as declared in "Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven*, Issue 21). However, the worship of the Lawgiver in Pharazia varies significantly from the worship of the Lawgiver in other lands, such that the different sects each consider the others to be heretical. In particular, the Pharazian faith considers **Diamabel** to be the Lawgiver's paragon in Pharazia (not entirely unlike the way the Akiri hold their pharaohs to be divine), and the **Black Herald** is the agent of the Lawgiver's unyielding justice. The Vaasi and Hazlani faiths disagree.

However, the Lawgiver's exalted status within Pharazia does not mean that no other gods are worshiped in that land. Certain historical religious traditions persist, and many of the Enlightened still worship their native gods as well.

## THE REALM

### GOVERNMENT

The government of Pharazia is a despotic theocracy centered in Phiraz. The Last Caliph of Pharazia was treacherously slain by the Faithless Nomad 170 years ago. Since the manifestation of Diamabel at the Last Caliph's funeral, the title of Caliph has been held vacant as a symbol of the land's subsequent devotion to the Lawgiver.

Officially, Diamabel now rules Pharazia as the representative of the Lawgiver and embodiment of divine virtue. In his endless benevolence, he usually allows Pharazians to rule themselves, imposing his will (as enforced by the **Sunset Herald**) only when the Law of the Lawgiver is sorely disrespected.

In truth Diamabel is simply an inconsistent ruler. He bores easily and distracts easily. Fortunately, the bureaucracy of government remains in place, maintaining centuries of civilization by momentum alone. Unfortunately however, Diamabel's inconsistency and merciless judgment have allowed

the **Confessors** to claim more power than any other faction.

Diamabel has no official vizier. However, two important officials, the **Seneschal of the Darkest Tower** and the **Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall**, both serve him and seek to hide truths about him and the Sunless Herald. Fortunately for Diamabel, most would-be rebels fear his executioner, the Herald of Divine Wrath, too much to actually rebel.

Outside of Phiraz, the Confessors' power diminishes. Doubtless cities such as Zayawa and Ibraq would have severed their obedience to Phiraz generations ago, if not for the threat of the Herald of Dusk. Their rulers do not wish to become the next Benzar.

However, Diamabel himself only rarely pays attention to situations outside of Phiraz or, quite frankly, beyond the walls of the Gleaming Hall. He assumes that the Confessors have the other cities under proper control. Rebels exist only along the radical fringes, and they are easily stifled. Anyone who attempts to tell him otherwise is likely to be fatally blamed for the upsetting news. The Confessors are determined to spread their influence, but they involve Diamabel only if they require sudden, swift, and violent action.

## DIPLOMACY

The people of Har'Akir and Pharazia both consider Sebuia to be a no-man's land. The Akiri believe it serves a convenient role as a natural defense against foreign invaders. The Pharazian nomads consider it a useful place to hide from the Confessors and especially from the fury of the Black Herald.

The Akiri consider Pharazians to be upstarts who took advantage of Har'Akir's momentary lapse in power. Pharazians consider the (modern) Akiri to be laughable in their arrogance. However, both sides are eager for trade, the Akiri wishing to restore their former glory and the Pharazians wishing to learn the secrets of the ancients.

The Mistway known as the **Road of a Thousand Secrets** forms a passage between Pharazia and Hazlan, and the **Jackal's Ruse** leads from the Nocturnal Sea to Har'Akir. However, there are no known two-way Mistways leading to Har'Akir or Sebuia. As such, nearly all trade with lands outside the Amber Wastes occurs through Pharazia. A number of foreign lands—including Hazlan, Nova Vaasa, Sri Raji, and Dementlieu—have established formal embassies in Phiraz.

The relationship between Pharazia and Hazlan has multiple facets. Hazlik himself dismisses Diamabel as irrelevant since he is not a spellcaster, while Diamabel dismisses Hazlik because he is not a proper desert warrior. The Iron Faith in Hazlan holds the Faith of the Lawgiver in Pharazia to be heretical because it considers Diamabel a divine emissary; meanwhile, the Faith of the Lawgiver in Pharazia holds the Iron Faith to be heretical because it does not. However, many of the *vrayloks* and *satraps* of Hazlan are eager to take advantage of the Road of a Thousand Secrets for trade and tariffs. For their part, Pharazian merchants are equally interested in expanding trade, provided they can do so without provoking the wrath of the Herald of Night.

## THE PHARAZIAN FAITH

The Confessors insist that faith is simply obedience to the Lawgiver. Despite that, faith is a complicated matter in Pharazia.

### THE DILEMMA OF DIAMABEL

Diamabel is the Darklord, unrepentantly corrupt. The Confessors oppressively enforce his Law. This is canon. To declare anything otherwise feels to me like a cheat.

The Pharazian worship of the Lawgiver shares many details, such as the sacrality of vultures, in common with real-world Islam. However, the Lawgiver is a canonically lawful evil deity, while Islam—like all

real-world religions— is far too complicated to fit into an arbitrary alignment grid. The evils of Diamabel and his Confessors should not be taken as condemnation of Islam.

Crucially, please note the stars which shine within the darkness across Pharazia. Away from the city of Phiraz, the influence of the Confessors diminishes, and Pharazians have more freedom to believe in charity and similar virtues. Indeed, many Phirazites' true beliefs do not mesh with what is decreed by the Confessors—even within the Gleaming Hall.

### LAW OF THE LAWGIVER

The Law of the Lawgiver can indeed be boiled down to a straightforward declaration: The Lawgiver is the divine authority beyond question, and so one must obey the Law of the Lawgiver. The circularity of this declaration is very intentional, as are the phrases "beyond question" and "obey". The phrase "without compassion" could be inserted after the first clause. This phrase is rarely overtly stated, but it is nonetheless true, and it makes all the difference.

Historically speaking, the difficulty in proper obedience arises in recognizing the Lawgiver's decree in specific cases. To overcome this difficulty, the Confessors are empowered to speak for the Lawgiver.

However, the Confessors rose to their current prominence only after the Herald of Dawn and the Herald of Sunset, the messengers of the Lawgiver, came to Pharazia to avenge the death of the Last Caliph. Before then, the nomads recall that although the will of the Lawgiver was understood to be beyond question, but *interpreting* the will of the Lawgiver was primarily the responsibility of learned teachers. These teachers were wise but fallible, and their interpretations were not beyond question. The Confessors, on the other hand, claim to learn the will of the Lawgiver directly from Diamabel, and so they are not subject to lenient misinterpretation as occurred in the days of old.

The learned teachers are derived from "The Domain of the Endless Word" from *Quoth the Raven* Issue 21, where they were called *laerers*.

### FORBIDDEN AND DISCOURAGED ACTS

Forbidden actions (that is, acts which are typically punishable by death) include the following:

- ❖ Willful eating of sentient flesh.
- ❖ Murder without just cause.
- ❖ Worship any of deity but the Lawgiver, or atheism.
- ❖ Threatening, assaulting, disobeying, or stealing from a Confessor.
- ❖ Malicious theft, defined as stealing someone's livelihood or the bulk of their belongings.
- ❖ Enslavement of the Lawgiver's faithful, except as punishment for a crime as decreed by a Confessor.

The Confessors have also declared certain actions to be discouraged. The committing of these acts may require some sort of restitution, but does not usually involve capital punishment:

- ❖ Common theft.
- ❖ Assault.
- ❖ Murder with just cause.
- ❖ Bribery.
- ❖ Reckless endangerment.
- ❖ Drunkenness or other intoxication.
- ❖ Destruction of property.
- ❖ Slander and fraud, including bearing false witness.

Unfortunately for the people of Phiraz, the Confessors frequently change what is forbidden and what is discouraged, often without any notification. If a Confessor accuses someone of a violation, there is rarely any recourse for the accused.

Note that certain actions—actions of tolerance and charity, for example—which are encouraged in lands such as Zakhara, are not explicitly encouraged by the Lawgiver. However, if commanded to be tolerant or charitable by a Confessor, of course one should obey immediately.



The lists of forbidden and discouraged actions are derived from *Land of Fate*, "Fortunes and Fates", p.15-17.

### HISTORICAL RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Despite the Faith of the Lawgiver being the only officially sanctioned faith of Pharazia, at least three other historical religious traditions persist:

- ❖ Many Pharazians believe that everything has a spirit, including people, animals, plants, objects, places, and more. The guides of this animistic faith are called kahins and kahinas. Although they are respected for their wisdom, their authority is not absolute. In actual practice, most of the marsh folk hold such beliefs, regardless of the lip service which they pay to the Lawgiver.
- ❖ Some Pharazians continue to worship the gods and goddesses of the Akiri faith. Such worshipers are more likely to be nomads, rather than city-dwellers, perhaps because they have been influenced by journeys into Sebuia and Har'Akir.
- ❖ Perhaps most relevant to modern Pharazian faith, some of the nomadic houses share the

tradition of a god who defends the people of that house. Worshipers may address the god of the house directly, and so there is no need for a dedicated organization of priests. While certain learned teachers may aid in interpreting the messages of the god of the house, they have no formal authority, only respect. Some scholars from the Core have concluded that these house gods are proto-Lawgivers, but the Confessors argue in turn that since the Lawgiver is the only true divinity, therefore these supposed proto-Lawgivers are merely the Lawgiver as seen by that ignorant slice of humanity which has not yet gained sufficient wisdom to interpret the Law properly.

These traditions are rarely practiced in the city of Phiraz, where the Confessors hold authority under the blessing of the Lawgiver's *rasul* (messenger) Diamabel. However, as one travels farther out from the city, these traditions become more widespread, if still quietly practiced.



## HOUSES OF THE AMBER WASTES

House	Prominent Members	Notes
<b>Dabae</b>	<i>Munir al-Barakat</i> , Sheikh	A house of outlaws. Once led by the Faithless Nomad, during which time they were militant enforcers of the Lawgiver's laws. However, they feel that the Lawgiver (or, more properly, the Lawgiver's <i>qudwa</i> , Diamabel) has turned against them, and so they have turned to the Akiri faith.
<b>Ghani</b>	<i>Asad ibn Bishr al-Ghani</i> , Sheikh <i>Jamal ibn Bishr al-Ghani</i> , Emir of Ibraq	A nomad family which traditionally roams near the city of Ibraq. Recently Jamal ibn Bishr al-Ghani was appointed the Emir of Ibraq, leaving his brother Asad ibn Bishr al-Ghani to lay claim to being Sheikh of the Ghani.  The traditional enemies of the House of Jabara.
<b>Jabara</b>	<i>Behrouz al-Jabara</i> , Sheikh <i>Ferdous al-Jabara</i> , former Sheikh <i>Vahid al-Jabara</i> , former Sheikh <i>Haanifa al-Burki</i> , vizier <i>Asghar ibn Asghar</i> , friend of Ferdous	The traditional enemies of the House of Ghani. Also traditionally, they inhabit the desert near Ibraq, although they have kept a more respectful distance since they kidnapped and caused the death of the previous Emir of that city.
<b>Khatib</b>	<i>Talaal el-Khatib</i> , Emir of Ibraq	The former ruling family of Ibraq, now extinct.
<b>Mahdavi</b>	<i>Nuriyya al-Mahdavi</i> , Sheikh <i>Ghassaan al-Mahdavi</i> , former Sheikh <i>Waleed ibn Imaad</i> , elder	Rarely leaves the Nameless Quarter since half of the house was slaughtered by the Herald of Dusk in 742bc.
<b>Malak</b>	<i>Rashiq ibn Zufar al-Malak</i> , Sheikh <i>Mudrik ibn Ali</i> , desert rider <i>Lematura Huuld</i> , expatriate Hazlani	The appointed guardians of the Oasis of the Five Palms and, by proximity, the Road of a Thousand Secrets.
<b>Mourad</b>	<i>Fayaad al-Mourad</i> , Seneschal <i>Umaira al-Mourda</i> , granddaughter	For generations the Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall has been drawn from this house.
<b>Rashaan</b>	<i>Allan el Rashaan</i> , Sheikh	The most infamous clan of the nomads of the Nameless Quarter. The House of Rashaan is the forefront of the resistance to Diamabel's rule in Pharazia. The Herald of Divine Wrath claims to have destroyed them at least four times, but in time they have always returned from the heart of the Nameless Quarter, and they are led by someone calling himself Allahn el Rashaan.
<b>Riaz</b>	<i>Taqj al-Riaz</i> , Emir of Nizwar <i>Zahra bint Hasaana</i> , wife <i>Nasifa al-Riaz</i> , vizier	A very new house, consisting entirely of the Emir of Nizwar, his wife, and his mother.
<b>Samad</b>	<i>Kairiya bint Amaani al-Samad</i> , Emira of Zayawa	The house of Samad has ruled the city of Zayawa for generations. Most members of the house have become sha'irs.
<b>Sattar</b>	<i>Arkaan al-Sattar</i> , Sheikh <i>Israa al-Sattar</i> , mother of Ziyaad <i>Ziyaad al-Sattar</i> , son of Israa	The desert giants of Pharazia.

## WHO'S DOOMED

### DIAMABEL, DARKLORD OF PHARAZIA

First appeared in *Islands of Terror*, "Diamabel".

#### THE BIRTH AND YOUTH OF THE *Khayin*

The mortal name of the man who became Diamabel has been lost to the Mists, so now he is known as the **Faithless Nomad** or the *Khayin* ("the traitorous").

The *Khayin* was born the eldest son of a powerful Sheikh. He was raised to prize the independence and stark simplicity of the lifestyle of the *al-Badia*. From his early years, he was taught to ride, to fight, and to revere the Law of the Lawgiver. The city-dwelling *al-Hadhar* were weak and insincere in their faith, but despite those flaws, cities kept expanding and encroaching upon territory once claimed by the nomads.

The seeds of the *Khayin's* fall were planted one night when he was still a boy on the verge of manhood. Eager to learn how a proper Sheikh behaved, he eavesdropped one night when his father hosted a group of merchants from the city. Of course his father offered hospitality—that was one of the oldest and most sacred traditions—but the *Khayin* was shocked to hear his father greet his *al-Hadhar* guests warmly as "my old, dear friends". He spoke and laughed with them as if they were indeed trusted companions, and worse yet, when offered a bottle of spirits from the city, he accepted and shared the bottle around the tent. To the *Khayin*, this was a betrayal of the *al-Badia* ideals. However, he was merely a boy, and there was little he could do.

#### THE FIRST BETRAYAL

The *Khayin* grew to become a formidable desert rider, fiercely faithful to the Lawgiver. He no longer trusted his father, but he had a sister to whom he was severely devoted. She was nearly his equal with horse and with camel, with scimitar and spear, and

she was a great beauty besides. The *Khayin* would have kept her at his side, serving as his vizier after he became Sheikh, but their father had other plans for her. The *Khayin* was stricken when his sister came to him one day to bid him farewell. "Father is sending me to the city to get married," she said. When the *Khayin* demanded to know why he had not been told of these plans, which must have been months in the making, she informed him, sadly, "Because Father knew you would react with anger." Without acknowledging that his actions only proved his father's wisdom, the *Khayin* stormed to his father's tent, where he might have committed patricide had not half of his father's most loyal men been present to restrain him. Accompanied by the other half of his father's most loyal men, his sister rode off to the city.

The Sheikh did not realize the extent of the *Khayin's* determination, and when he judged that his daughter would have safely reached the city, he allowed his son to be released. The *Khayin* slipped away at first opportunity, pursuing his sister. His own most loyal companions rode with him. He evaded his father's loyal men as they returned from the city with chests of gold and jewels. Although the *Khayin* was ignorant of the practical ways of the *al-Hadhar*, one of his companions knew how to navigate the city. Before long they found the *Khayin's* dear sister and the young nobleman whom she had married.

"Come home with me!" the *Khayin* demanded.

"I am married," his sister replied.

"I deny the vows which you made under duress!"

"I married *willingly*," he sister replied.

Perhaps the confrontation may yet have been resolved peacefully, but at that moment the *Khayin's* sister laid her hand upon her new husband's arm. Her husband was no desert warrior, and he died swiftly. She fought longer, but the only weapons at hand were a jambiya and a beautiful copper candlestick, which she had received as a wedding gift. The jambiya was a good weapon, but the candlestick was not, and before long her blood also

stained the stones of the courtyard of the house which had so briefly been her home.

Back among his people, the *Khayin* told his father that he had failed to find his sister, and uneasily his companions supported him in his lie.

### THE HOUSE OF THE *KHAYIN*

The *Khayin* knew he had only limited time before word from the city reached the desert. He moved to consolidate his power. However, warrior after warrior declared, "I will support you as Sheikh when you become the Sheikh rightfully under the Law. Until your father crosses the Threshold of Iron and Bronze, though, he has my full support." At that, the *Khayin* knew he would lose any political battle. Worse yet, because he had already acted, the battle had irrevocably begun.

In the dead of the night he approached his father's tent. Both guards were caught by surprise by the *Khayin's* violence and fell to the edge of his scimitar. His father also fell, but he was not truly surprised. "You were raised to be a lion," he told his son, "but you have become a hyena." Outraged, the *Khayin* declared, "At least I have not betrayed the people of the desert for the weaklings of the city," and he beheaded his father.

The sounds of combat roused the rest of the clan. Outside of his father's tent, accompanied by the groans of the mortally wounded guards, the *Khayin* declared himself Sheikh. Knowing that the *Khayin's* father had indeed proclaimed his son his heir, the people of the clan accepted his declaration as Lawful.

Nonetheless, a week later the new Sheikh's water-girl slipped a sleeping potion into his cup. When the *Khayin* awakened late the next morning, he discovered that his entire clan—including those warriors who had once gone to the city with him—had departed in the night. He was now the Sheikh of a clan of one.

For months the *Khayin* wandered the desert, deliberately avoiding the company of others. This

was his time of cleansing, he felt. His impurities were scoured away. By the time this phase ended, he had become even more staunchly convinced that only the *al-Badia* followed the proper path of the Lawgiver.

### THE *KHAYIN* IN THE HOUSE OF AL-DABAE

Eventually the *Khayin* stumbled across the *House of al-Dabae*, which was not a proper *al-Badia* house, but a collection of outcasts who had banded together for mutual survival. The *Khayin* immediately recognized the precariousness of the situation. After all, his former clan had left him with those possessions which they considered Lawfully his, including the two chests of treasure which had been his sister's bride-price. Rather than getting murdered as soon as his wealth was discovered, the *Khayin* distributed his wealth in exchange for acceptance into the clan.

From this unpromising start, the *Khayin* rebuilt himself into a leader of men, in short order elevating himself to become the Sheikh of the House of al-Dabae. Even more impressively, he then rebuilt the entire House, insisting that each man of the clan become a fearsome warrior worthy of service to the Lawgiver. From there he swayed his followers into engaging in a brutal war against anyone whom he perceived to be a heretic. His definition of a heretic included not only those who worshiped other gods, but also those who interpreted the Law of the Lawgiver differently—in particular, less harshly—than he did. Rank provided no protection and no excuse.

The *al-Hadhar*, of course, were all heretics.

### THE CIVIL WAR

Before long, the *Khayin* spread war across the sands and cities. Not only did the the House of al-Dabae and their allies fight the *al-Hadhar*, but they fought those *al-Badia* who failed to recognize the righteousness of the Faithless Nomad's cause. The mamluk order known as the *Steadfast* were their particular enemies, for they knew certain parts of the



desert as well as the al-Dabae. Moreover, the askars of every city—and many desert warriors among the nomads as well—rode against them. Finally the forces of the *Khayin* began to falter.

In the hope of avoiding further bloodshed, **Caliph Qadir al-Najm** sent a messenger to the *Khayin*, offering negotiations. To widespread surprise, the *Khayin* accepted, agreeing to meet the Caliph at his palace. Some dared hope that the *Khayin* held a weaker position than previously believed and that he would consider surrender, but others feared a trick. Clearly the Caliph did as well, for the *Khayin* and his delegation of warriors were met at the palace gate by the Caliph's seneschal, an exceedingly brave woman who offered the *Khayin* bread and water. Once the *Khayin* and his warriors had taken a bite and a drink, the seneschal led them into the palace. In the entry hall the Caliph himself waited to offer more bread and water, just to avoid any uncertainty about whether the Caliph was properly their host. The *Khayin* and his warriors took a bite and a drink.

Thus satisfied that no treachery was planned, Caliph Qadir al-Najm allowed the *Khayin* and his warriors into a great hall where a proper feast had been set. However, in a shocking breach of social norms and the existing order, the *Khayin* and his followers violated the bond of salt to slaughter the **Caliph of Phiraz** and his court.

As the **Faithless Nomad** mounted his horse to ride away from that carnage, one of the Caliph's remaining loyal followers fired upon him from the battlements. Miraculously, the arrow found its target, and the *Khayin* ceased to be.

### THE SPAWNING OF DIAMABEL

Much to his surprise, the *Khayin* came to consciousness inside the palace, in the Fane of the Lawgiver. Days had passed. The funerary rites for the Caliph had concluded only moments before. And, most strikingly, he was no longer who he had been. He had been transformed into a man of tremendous, terrible beauty, too perfect to be a mere mortal.

Vulture wings sprouted from his shoulders. (Among the nomads, the vulture is considered a regal bird.) Obviously he must have been sent by the Lawgiver to enforce the proper Law upon the land. This much was clear to him and to all who first witnessed his manifestation.

Diamabel—or so his new followers called him—was delighted with his ascension only until the sun touched the horizon. At that moment he started a new transformation, one which wracked him with agony until the sun finally sunk below the horizon. Once darkness had fully fallen, Diamabel discovered that his night-time form was as hideous as his day-time form had been beautiful. His fine clothing had tattered, but then so had his flesh, and now skeletal wings sprouted from his shoulders. Symbols of unknown meaning glowed golden against his blackened skin.

At dawn he returned to his daytime form, but the transformation was no less painful. The Transformation of Diamabel

The first part of Diamabel's curse is obvious: his agonizing transformation into his hideous nighttime aspect. Worse than the pain itself is the loathsome nature of that aspect.

However, more subtly, Diamabel has come to resent features of his day-time aspect. Although clearly Pharazian, he no longer appears to be one of the nomads, roughened and rugged. Instead, he appears to be a city-dweller. He cannot even grow a beard or mustache as expected of any proper *al-Badia* man.

Worse yet, Diamabel during the daytime no longer acts like one of the *al-Badia*—which is, of course, his only ideal of a faithful Pharazian man. He is easily distracted: by food, by music, by the scent of incense, by the curve of a lover's hip, by the luxury of indolence itself. Unless otherwise provoked, only after dark does his mind clear and his fiery drive return. However, his rage is curtailed by his shame at his day-self's own improper behaviors. He spends most nights locked in the **Darkest Tower**, punishing himself.

Finally, Diamabel is haunted by the loss of his mortal name and mortal reputation. The people of Pharazia have forgotten it, but worse yet, so has he. His previous existence is remembered as the life of a murderous savage, while the righteousness of his slaughter has been forgotten with his name.

### CURRENT SKETCH

Most of the people of Pharazia do not recognize that the day-time and night-time aspects of Diamabel are one and the same person. They call the daytime aspect Diamabel (and **any number of other sobriquets**), while the night-time aspect is known as **the Black Herald** (and an even more numerous collection of titles).

Particularly among the nomads, people speak of a prophecy which predicts that "a black-eyed scoundrel" will bring about the fall of Pharazia. Or perhaps merely the fall of Diamabel, but is there a difference, really, because what would Pharazia be without the *qudwa* (paragon) of the Lawgiver?

### COMBAT

In either his day-time or night-time aspects, Diamabel is a terrifying foe to confront. He wields a +3 flame blade called *Spiritburner* by day and *Ashes of the Soul* by night. In addition to attacking with his scimitar, Diamabel may also buffet with his mighty wings for 1d10 damage. Anyone who witnesses him at the height of his wrath must make a DC17 Will save or else flee in terror.

Diamabel regenerates 2 hit points per round. He may *heal* himself completely once per day. If he is somehow slain despite these advantages, a dark fire will consume him and his weapon. However, a month later he will return at full strength and fueled by his need for vengeance.

Despite Diamabel's mighty physical prowess, his greatest weakness is not physical: It is his birth name. If this name is pronounced by a living mortal within his hearing, Diamabel will be rendered mortal for an hour, regardless of whether he wears the aspect of

the Herald of the Sun or the Herald of the Night. He loses the powers of flight and fear, his regeneration, his ability to *heal*, and half of his combat ability (that is, half of his fighter levels). However, he does retain *Spiritburner*, and even at half strength he remains a formidable combatant.

During the hour that Diamabel is mortal again, either the sun is eclipsed (if this event occurs during the daytime) or the landscape is lit by an eerie golden glow (if during the night). Should Diamabel be slain during this time, he is forever destroyed.

However, if Diamabel is not destroyed, then he regains his full power at the end of the hour, and his birth name is immediately erased from the minds of all living mortals who knew it. (And from Diamabel's mind as well.) Moreover, Diamabel cannot be struck mortal again for a complete lunar cycle.

Note that the only person who still knows Diamabel's birth name is **Munir al-Barakat**, who has become undead and no longer counts as mortal. He does not realize the power that Diamabel's name holds, and even if he did, he cannot wield it directly. On the other hand, Sheikh **Allahn el Rashaan** once knew this name, but when he used it, he failed to destroy Diamabel, and it was subsequently erased from his mind. Unlike Munir al-Barakat, though, Allahn el Rashaan still understands the importance of Diamabel's birth name. He simply has to relearn what it is.

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### ALLAHN EL RASHAAN

First appeared in *Domains of Dread*.

The House of el Rashaan is a small clan, but an important one, for Sheikh Allahn el Rashaan is the leader of the rebellion against **Diamabel**. Although he has reached middle age, he remains physically powerful, wildly charismatic, and wily enough to escape the **Herald Who Flies on the Wings of the Night**. Allahn el Rashaan is renowned for his combat

prowess with dual scimitars. (See *Domains of Dread*, p.105 and the *Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, p.150.)

All in all, Sheikh Allahn el Rashaan is the ideal of an *al-Badia* man, except that he's actually an *al-Hadhar*. And that's the least of his secrets.

### Background

The man now known as Allahn el Rashaan was born in the city of Phiraz, the son of two mamluks of the Order of the *Steadfast*. Naturally he became one of the *Steadfast* himself, patrolling the desert of the Nameless Quarter. He showed every sign of rising in the *Steadfast* hierarchy until he fell in love with an *al-Badia* woman. (Like his own birth name, her name has been lost to time, and only he now remembers.) The lovers received the disapproval of his commanding officer and her family alike, and so they ran off together, abandoning both *Steadfast* and family.

Surviving alone in the Nameless Quarter for many months, the lovers were destitute and chronically hungry. She spoke sometimes of returning to her family, but he knew that he could never return to the *Steadfast*. At last they encountered the *House of al-Dabae*, which had been built from outcasts like themselves. His skill with a scimitar was valued, and he rose quickly among the *al-Dabae*. In truth, he probably would have become Sheikh in time, except for the presence of the man now called the *Khayin* or the *Faithless Nomad*. The *Khayin* was also highly charismatic, and he possessed a driving fervor which Allahn el Rashaan lacked. Like the rest of the *al-Dabae*, el Rashaan soon accepted the *Khayin* as Sheikh.

Allahn el Rashaan became one of the new Sheikh's advisors. El Rashaan did not share the *Khayin*'s loathing of anything *al-Hadhar*, and so he often urged caution when the *Khayin* was not inclined to be cautious. However, the *Khayin* was also not inclined to listen to el Rashaan, and his crusade carried forth unimpeded. Certainly el Rashaan felt conflicted when the *al-Dabae* fought against the *Steadfast*, and other massacres made him only

slightly less uneasy. Even so, he felt he could not leave the *al-Dabae*, and so he continued to follow the *Khayin*.

When Caliph *Qadir al-Najm* offered to meet with the *Khayin*, el Rashaan was one of the very select group of advisors who were informed of the *Khayin*'s intention to murder the Caliph at the meeting. All of the advisors were vehemently opposed to this sacrilege, none more so than el Rashaan. The *Khayin* pretended to reconsider, but not very hard. El Rashaan worried that the *Khayin*'s minimal pretense portended his fall from the Sheikh's good graces.

Proof of his disfavor arrived two days later, when the *al-Badia* woman he had married stood before their tent and proclaimed their divorce before witnesses. Once the divorce had been acknowledged by the nearby *al-Dabae*, she carried her valuables to the *Khayin*'s tent. Thunderstruck, el Rashaan asked why. She told him: "Because our Sheikh is a great man, and he is on the verge of becoming greater. He can provide for me in a way that you cannot. Had you been sufficiently ambitious, you could have become Sheikh, and I would still love you. But no. You are a lesser man. Your stars are descending."

Indeed, when the time to meet with the Caliph arrived, el Rashaan was left behind. As soon as the *Khayin* entered the gates of Phiraz, el Rashaan urged the rest of the *al-Dabae* to head back into the Nameless Quarter. For the first time he employed his own fading influence to contradict the Sheikh's decrees. The *al-Dabae* listened, but reluctantly and not quickly enough.

The *Khayin* violated the bond of salt and murdered the Last Caliph. The mamluk order of the Dedicated pursued the *al-Dabae* into the Nameless Quarter. El Rashaan led those warriors who held off the Dedicated so that the rest of the clan could escape. He was among the first to fall.

History does not record the fate of the woman who had been the wife of the man who became Allahn el Rashaan.

## The Reincarnation of Allahn el Rashaan

The man now known as Allahn el Rashaan was reincarnated as an *al-Badia* boy, the son of a Sheikh. At this birth he was given the name Allahn el Rashaan. When he was nearly an adult, he started having visions of his former life. He was captivated by these visions, but kept silent about them because, although he was certain that the **Herald of Night** was the *Khayin* reanimated, he knew better than to speak too loudly against him or his supposed master, **Diamabel**. In time he summoned a group of warriors to ride against the Herald of Night. Again he was among the first to fall.

Time and again, Allahn el Rashaan has been killed and reincarnated. Most of the time he returns one of the *al-Badia*, but sometimes he is reborn an *al-Hadhar*. Even in the latter case, he soon returns to the Nameless Quarter. Twice he has returned as a girl. The first time he did not survive to adulthood, but the second time he was **Reema bint Nahla**, who became known as the *Howl Across the Desert* until she fell to the **Herald of the Night**.

El Rashaan's memories return earlier and less disruptively in each new life, which means that he typically has plans in motion by the time he reaches adulthood. Except for the two times he was born female, he always sets aside his new name, calling himself Allahn el Rashaan each time. The people of Pharazia know that the infamous name of Allahn el Rashaan has been used by multiple rebels over generations, but they do not realize that the multiple rebels are indeed actually the original Allahn el Rashaan.

Two or three impostors have arisen, but they have all swiftly been caught and killed by **Diamabel**. After all, they haven't got the real Allahn el Rashaan's lifetimes of experience.

	Birth	Identity	Death	Span
1	590bc	Allahn el Rashaan	606bc	16
2	606bc	(al-Hadhar)	633bc	27
3	633bc	(al-Badia, female)	645bc	12
4	645bc	(al-Badia)	669bc	24
5	669bc	Reema bint Nahla	685bc	16
6	685bc	(al-Hadhar)	717bc	32
7	717bc	(al-Badia)	—	43

**Allahn el Rashaan's Reincarnations**

## Current Sketch

Allahn el Rashaan has vowed to bring down Diamabel and the Herald of Night. He tells himself that he is driven by vengeance for the dishonorable betrayal of the Last Caliph's hospitality, but of course he also seeks revenge upon the *Khayin* who stole his wife. He insists to the people of Pharazia that he seeks to free them from the oppression of Diamabel, who is clearly a false *rasul* (messenger) of the Lawgiver.

Across subsequent reincarnations, Allahn el Rashaan has grown better at organizing his rebellion. He has learned better how to sway people to his cause. He has grown sharper at discerning traitors in his midst. He has learned how to hide his activities from the Heralds of Sun and Night alike. He has grown callous to the human cost of his rebellion.

Over the generations El Rashaan has concluded that the Herald of Night is merely an agent of destruction, and so he has directed his attentions against the **Herald of the Day**. He has abandoned the frontal assault and grown more clever at staying hidden from both Heralds. He has many potential allies, although convincing them to actually move against Diamabel remains a difficult feat.

Allahn el Rashaan has a contentious relationship with the modern House of al-Dabae. His gratitude towards the al-Dabae for saving his life has been soured by the evils which they later committed. Also,



he has heard rumors that the al-Dabae now follow the Akiri faith. Although his own faith may best be summarized as a militant refusal to worship any gods, he trusts the deities of the Akiri even less than the Lawgiver.

## NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

### AMRU AL-ITARIFI

One of the **Unforgiving Triumvirate**. A moralist priest formerly from the Pantheist League in Zakhara. Under the ministrations of the **Order of Scourges**, he became a fanatical convert to the Lawgiver. His subsequent rise through the ranks of the Confessors was slow but steady until he was admitted to the Triumvirate as evidence that even a blasphemer may be forgiven, provided he shows proper and thorough penance.

However, he has grown dismayed by what he has seen since attaining this pinnacle. In the privacy of his heart he has resumed praying to the Gods of the Pantheon.

### ASAD IBN BISHR AL-GHANI

The Sheikh of the al-Ghani clan after his brother **Jamal** was appointed the Sheikh of **Ibraq**. There is bad blood between them.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### ASGHAR IBN ASGHAR

A member of the House of Jabara. A lifelong friend of **Ferdous al-Jabara**. Brave but never mistaken for clever.

Asghar ibn Asghar was directly responsible for the killing of **Talaal el-Khatib** and therefore indirectly responsible for the death of Ferdous. The guilt now crushes him. In the desperate hope that somehow he will be able to atone for his misdeed, Asghar ibn Asghar is now devoted to the service of Ferdous' younger brother **Behrouz**.

### BEHROUZ AL-JABARA

The young Sheikh of the House of Jabara. He became Sheikh after his brother **Ferdous** was quietly removed following the disastrous kidnapping of the Emir of **Ibraq**. Behrouz is determined to be a more cautious Sheikh than his brother. His vizier, **Haanifa al-Burki**, is also determined to see that he is.

### BLACK HERALD

The name by which the dark visage of **Diamabel** is known. Other aliases include **The Herald of Divine Wrath**, **The Dusk Herald**, **The Sunless Herald**, **The Herald of Sunset**, and (most poetically) **The Herald Who Flies Upon the Wings of the Night**.

In his nighttime aspect, Diamabel's flame blade is known as *Ashes of the Soul*.

Only the **Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall**, the **Seneschal of the Darkest Tower**, and the highest-ranking **Confessors** know for certain that the Black Herald is an aspect of, not merely an agent of, Diamabel. However, others do suspect the truth. Yet others believe that the Faithless Nomad has become the Herald, forced to serve the Lawgiver in unending punishment for his betrayal of the most fundamental laws of society.

See the *Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, p.150.

### DHUQARRU THE HONORED

The marid imprisoned by **Emira Kairiya bint Ammani al-Samad** to provide water for the city of **Zayawa**.

He rages with a tsunami's might at his imprisonment, and he would utterly destroy his captor if he could.

However, as an elemental being he also possesses a certain sensitivity to supernatural power, and Dhuqarru feels the disturbing presence of **Diamabel** whenever that entity passes by Zayawa. In his secret heart, Dhuqarru is relieved that he cannot venture forth to confront the power that he senses.

## FAITHLESS NOMAD

The man who betrayed and killed the **Last Caliph**. His name has been lost, and so now he is now known only as the *Khayin* or the Faithless Nomad.

## FAYAAD AL-MOURAD

For generations the **Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall** has been drawn from the House of al-Mourad. Fayaad al-Mourad is the current Seneschal. He has held the position for nearly twenty years, and he served his house in lesser positions for twenty years before that.

Fayaad al-Mourad and **Diamabel** have been playing *shatranj* (chess) for many years now. Fayaad hopes that these games help the Herald of the Sun focus upon the intellect instead of merely earthly pleasures. Some might argue that his hope is entirely unjustified by evidence, but Fayaad worries that Diamabel's distraction would be worse without *shatranj*.

Fayaad always tries to offer solace to each **Seneschal of the Darkest Tower** in their final days before they eventually die at the hands of the **Herald of Night**. However, the current Darkest Seneschal, a boy named **Naadir**, has proven adept at keeping the Herald's rage in check for nearly six months. Despite himself, Fayaad has grown fond of the boy.

## FERDOUS AL-JABARA

The former Sheikh of the House of Jabara. He assumed leadership after his father **Vahid** died by misadventure while meeting with Emir **Talaal el-Khatib** of **Ibraq**. Ferdous felt that he could not let Talaal el-Khatib "get away with" his father's death (never mind el-Khatib's very sincere sorrow at Vahid's passing), and so he led an expedition to kidnap the Emir. The escapade was supposed to make its point harmlessly, but it went very sour, and Talaal el-Khatib was killed.

Following that disaster, Ferdous al-Jabara was quietly removed (and subsequently killed). His younger brother **Behrouz** is now Sheikh.

## GHA88AAT AL-MAHDABI

The previous Sheikh of the House of Mahdavi, slain by the **Herald of the Dusk**. He was **Nuriyya al-Mahdavi**'s father.

## HAANIFA AL-BURKI

Haanifa al-Burki is a widow of the House of Jabara and the former lover of Sheikh **Vahid al-Jabara**, although she never did get around to becoming his wife. This failure to marry was in large part to avoid issues of succession regarding her own children, who were older than the Sheikh's sons. When Vahid died, Haanifa attempted to advise the Sheikh's older son, **Ferdous**, but was rebuffed. After Ferdous' impetuous behavior led to disaster, Haanifa stood at the forefront of those advocating for Ferdous' removal. She now serves as vizier to Ferdous' younger brother, **Behrouz**, who views her with respect and more than a little fear.

## HERALD OF THE SUN

Just as the night-time aspect of **Diamabel** has many sobriquets, so does his day-time aspect. Most common among them are **The Herald of the Sun**, **The Wielder of the Sword of Justice**, **The Dawn's Herald**, **The Spear of the Sun**, and **The Paragon of Infinite Virtues**.

Some of the nomads of Pharazia have been known to refer to Diamabel as the **Spear of Ra**. Given that Diamabel would consider this appellation to be blasphemous, it is almost certainly not intended as a compliment.

## JAMAL IBN BISHR AL-GHANI

The Emir of **Ibraq**, formerly the Sheikh of the al-Ghani clan. Jamal is a righteous man, and when he learned that the previous Emir of Ibraq had been taken captive by the al-Jabara clan of nomads, he rode to the rescue. The rescue failed, and the former Emir was slain. Nonetheless, Diamabel appointed Jamal Emir for his efforts. (Occasionally Jamal has

wondered if the appointment isn't punishment for his failure.)

After Jamal was appointed Emir, his brother **Asad** became Sheikh of the al-Ghani. Unfortunately, there is bad blood between the two brothers.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### JANNAT AL-BARI

Jannat al-Bari is the daughter of two well-traveled merchants, one from Phiraz and the other from Ibraq. Although one of the *al-Hadhar*, she was raised in the saddle as much as any desert rider among the *al-Badia*. As an adult, she has joined the family business as a buyer, seller, and transporter of horses and camels. Her aging parents now rarely leave Phiraz, but Jannat al-Bari travels regularly between Phiraz, Ibraq, Zayawa, and the **High Cliff Fortress**. Frequently she hires **Kabir al-Zadeh** as a guard and assistant camel-wrangler.

Jannat al-Bari is secretly a member of the **Risen**. She prefers to act as a scout, bringing in her allies to confront any threats which she discovers, but she is also willing to act in situations where she sees that her aid can make a difference.

### KABIR AL-ZADEH

A caravan guard frequently employed by **Jannat al-Bari**. Although too wary of being caught as one of the **Risen** to belong to that order himself, nonetheless he is an ally.

### KAIRIYA BINT AMAANI AL-SAMAD

The Emira of **Zayawa**, the latest in a matrilineal line which extends back to Kairiya's great-grandmother. All of the al-Samadi women have been sha'irs, whose bargains with the marid kept Zayawa well-provided with water. However, Kairiya was less diligent in her diplomatic studies, and shortly after she became Emira she gravely offended the marid. This led to near-disaster for Zayawa, which Kairiya averted only by imprisoning an envoy from the Citadel of Ten Thousand Pearls.

Following this betrayal, Zayawa was drawn into the Amber Wastes as part of Pharazia. Kairiya swiftly discovered that she could no longer send her maridan gen to the elemental planes for spells. Worse yet, one night her gen failed to return entirely, and she has no way to bargain for a new gen companion. Her only remaining power is knowledge, but fortunately for her that knowledge is sufficient to keep the marid imprisoned and desalinate the waters of the **Gulf of the Heart** for Zayawa.

Kairiya is not truly an evil woman, although she has certainly performed evil deeds. Although she is racked with guilt for her mistreatment of the marid, nonetheless she keeps him imprisoned out of duty to the people of Zayawa. Her people praise her, but in her innermost heart she knows she does not deserve their praise. She might yet redeem herself... but she might also descend further.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### KAIRIYA'S REDEMPTION

Perhaps Kairiya's guilt has overcome her, and she has set Dhuqarru free... with conditions. Dhuqarru has agreed to those conditions, but only because he is trapped in Ravenloft and he fears the Herald Who Flies on the Wings of Night.

Dhuqarru was held captive by Kairiya for seven years. In exchange, she shall be his prisoner for twenty-one years. However, he has agreed to continue to provide water to the people of Zayawa for a hundred and one years.

Dhuqarru has transformed Kairiya into a pahari, although she has none of a natural pahari's innate spellcasting abilities and only limited control over her transformations. In addition to the usual three forms which a typical pahari has (human, mermaid, small fish), she also transforms into a mermaid the size of her small fish form. In either mermaid form, Kairiya's hands remain fins to prevent her from casting spells. (An unnecessary precaution, given that she has no gen, but still.)

At this point Dhuqarru allows her to transform between small fish and small mermaid at will, but otherwise he controls her shape and size. She spends nearly all of her time in a fine crystal fishbowl which Dhuqarru has crafted for her.

For his part, Dhuqarru has been impersonating Kairiya. She has always been a bit standoffish from her people, which means that none of them have noticed a change in her behavior. They simply marvel at how she appears to grow prettier instead of older. Also, they do find it slightly odd that she keeps her pet fish at hand nearly all the time. Both her unaging appearance and her fish companion are dismissed as the eccentricities of a sha'ir.

Dhuqarru's magic prevents Kairiya from aging. At the end of her sentence, she will be restored to her natural self, unchanged from how she was at the start of her imprisonment. Except, perhaps, a little wiser.

### KAYIYB MAARAB

Even among the **Confessors** of Pharazia, the **Order of Scourges** is feared. Within the Order of Scourges, none was more feared than that scourge who became known as *Kaiyyb Maarab*. She was not the founder of the Order, but she was the most ardent of the first class of students. She came to the attention of the founder of the Scourges, but even more crucially, she came to the attention of Diamabel himself. Impressed with the violence of her piety, Diamabel asked her to become one of his sacred consorts. In an act of ultimate arrogance (or perhaps humility), she declined.

Shortly after dusk, Kaiyyb Maarab was visited by the Herald Who Flies on the Wings of the Night.

Although certain of her impending doom, she faced him bravely, her back unbowed and voice unwavering.

The Herald growled, "You have turned away Diamabel, the paragon of the Lawgiver."

"I have," she admitted.

"You shall be punished," he said, his hand upon the hilt of his sword, that dark twin to *Spiritburner*.

"I should be," she agreed, and she offered him the scourge with which she had excruciated so many so well.

According to legend, the Herald landed twenty lashes, ten upon her shoulders, and ten upon his own. By the twentieth lash their blood had mingled. Once the final lash had fallen, the Herald placed the leather handle back into Kaiyyb Maarab's hand where she lay unconscious upon the stones of her barren cell.

Upon the founder's death, Kaiyyb Maarab became the head of the Order of Scourges, and she guided her followers with the full severity appropriate to her position. However, even the blood of the Herald could not save her from an early death, or perhaps it was the cause of it. Certainly she was found in her cell (still barren despite her exalted position), with the scourge in her hand and seven lashes upon her back. She had not yet reached her fourth decade.

Kaiyyb Maarab first appeared on the "Black Vault Haul" thread, originated by Jeremy16 on the **Ravenloft Forum**.

### KHAYIN

A nickname for the **Faithless Nomad**.

### LAST CALIPH

**Qadir al-Najm**, the last Caliph of Pharazia, was treacherously slain by the **Faithless Nomad** in a horrific betrayal of the bond of salt.

### THE FUTURE CALIPH

After the Faithless Nomad murdered the Qadir al-Najm, Diamabel extinguished the line of the Last Caliph as well. This purge was conducted more quietly, but no less thoroughly than the purge of the mamluk orders.



But what if someone survived? One of their descendants could be an important figurehead for uniting the people of Pharazia against Diamabel.

### LEMATURA HUULD

An expatriate Mulan woman from Hazlan, living at the **Oasis of the Five Palms**. She arrived through the **Road of a Thousand Secrets** months ago, fleeing from an arranged marriage and her father's men who were determined to enforce it. She took immediate advantage of the hospitality of **Rashiq ibn Zufar al-Malak**, the Sheikh of the nomadic clan tasked with guarding the Oasis of the Five Palms. However, pursuit never arrived, and she gradually insinuated herself into life at the oasis. She has become romantically involved with a desert rider named **Mudrik ibn Ali**, but she has thus far declined to marry him.

In truth, Lematura Huuld came to the Oasis voluntarily, acting on her father's behalf. He is one of the *satraps* of Hazlan, and he is very interested in finding a way to improve his trade position regarding Pharazia. Although Lematura has an older brother, her father has promised that she will become *rishad* of the family after him if she can return with valuable information. She is seeking information about Pharazian politics, particularly as relates to the Oasis of the Five Palms, but more importantly, she seeks to better learn how the Road of a Thousand Secrets actually works, particularly from the Pharazian side. Her current paramour knows unsatisfactorily little, but thus far she has not succeeded in drawing the attention of Sheikh Rashiq.

Although Lematura Huuld is in her late twenties, to *al-Badia* eyes she appears younger. As a Mulan, she is tall, slender of frame, and pale. Especially given the latter, she habitually wears a beige chador to protect her from the sun. The chador also hides her tattoos (to help her blend in with the Pharazians) and the shortness of her hair. It has only grown a few inches since she "fled" Hazlan; it is several feet shorter than most *al-Badia* women wear their hair.

### MAAHIR EL-KABIR

The eldest of the **Unforgiving Triumvirate**. Secretly a lich. Possesses the ability to *alter self*.

Eventually Maahir el-Kabir intends to pretend to die and replace **Amru al-I'Tarifi**, therefore retaining official control of the Confessors. He has done so multiple times over the past century and a half. However, if Maahir el-Kabir were to discern the wavering loyalty of Amru al-I'Tarifi, then he would act immediately upon those long-term plans.

### MUDRIK IBN ALI

A man of the House of Malak. A desert rider, although not one of the more formidable ones. Romantically involved with **Lematura Huuld**. Bewildered that she has thus far declined to marry him, but nonetheless he remains more metaphorically bewitched than bewildered.

Mudrik ibn Ali has not been entrusted with the secret of the **Road of a Thousand Secrets**. However, even if he were, his loyalty to his clan would likely prove stronger than his infatuation with Lematura Huuld.

### MUNIR AL-BARAKAT

The leader of the **House of al-Dabae**. He became Sheikh after the death of the **Faithless Nomad**. Although Munir al-Barakat died nearly two hundred years ago, his followers mummified him according to ancient Akiri rites, and he rose as one of the ancient dead.

### NAADIR

The current **Seneschal of the Darkest Tower**, which is a terribly lofty title for such a skinny young boy. Naadir has a hungry mind and an eidetic memory, which proved to be an unfortunate combination for him. He was caught by the **Confessors** one afternoon when he was reciting a prayer which he had overheard and found particularly moving. Unfortunately, the prayer was dedicated not to the Lawgiver, but to a heretical god of the desert winds, and so the Confessors dragged him to the **Temple of**

**Purity.** Although they soon ascertained that poor Naadir knew nothing of the god whose prayer he was reciting, they were loath to set him free. After considerable debate, one of the Unforgiving Triumvirate pointed out that the office of the Seneschal of the Darkest Tower had recently become vacant. Naadir was volunteered to fill the role.

Naadir has succeeded wonderfully at his duties, surviving for nearly half a year when most Seneschals of the Darkest Tower serve for only a handful of weeks. The secret to his survival has been his eidetic memory, for Naadir has hundreds of stories and songs in his head. With nothing but those tools and his quick wit, Naadir has kept the Herald of Divine Wrath distracted.

The Herald is not the only person whose eye Naadir has caught. **Umaira al-Mourad**, granddaughter of the **Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall**, is equally enthralled by his tales and singing. She has taken to borrowing books from the **Beacon of Enlightenment** to loan to Naadir. Although these books are primarily folk tales and poetry, she has also given him a book on *shatranj* (chess) after hearing her grandfather say that the Herald of the Dawn enjoys *shatranj*. Perhaps the Herald of the Dusk does too.

### ṬAYYIF AL-TAWIL

A scholar at the **University of Phiraz** who stumbled across references to the **Well of Spirits**. He journeyed to the **High Cliff Fortress**, where he talked the **Vigilant** into showing him the false Well of Spirits. However, he knew enough to seek the true Well of Spirits, from which he stole six spirit stones.

**Jannat al-Bari** and **Kabir al-Zadeh** saved him from this folly and brought him back to the High Cliff Fortress, where he might be able to turn his arcane ability toward something useful.

### ṬURIYYA AL-MAHDĀVI

The Sheikha of a nomadic house. She rarely leads her people out of the **Nameless Quarter**. A generation ago, the al-Mahdavi suffered the fury of the **Herald**

of **Divine Wrath**, and over half of the house was slaughtered. The survivors are now wary of approaching too close to **Phiraz**.

Nuriyya al-Mahdavi is one of those rare *al-Badia* women who cuts her hair close to her skull. Sometimes she says that short hair makes her appear more manly and therefore more acceptable as a leader to some of the elders of the house. (Although her father raised her to lead, **Waleed ibn Imaad** and others of his generation are frustratingly resistant to the notion.) Sometimes she says that she is signaling that she is too busy leading the house to seek a husband. Mostly, though, she just got tired of taking care of so much hair.

Nuriyya al-Mahdavi is fierce but honorable. Foreigners lost in the Amber Wastes could do far worse than to meet with her or someone in her house.

### QAAYID EL-MIR

The most recent addition to the **Unforgiving Triumvirate**. A relatively young man, afire with ambition—on the Lawgiver's behalf, of course.

The most dangerous part of Qaayid el-Mir is that he does not fear the other two of the Unforgiving Triumvirate. He would consider Maahir el-Kabir's lichdom to be a violation of the Law. He would also consider the wavering faith of Amru al-I'Tarifi to be heresy. If he were to learn one of their secrets, he would not hesitate to move against either one. Not necessarily swiftly, but he would do everything in his considerable power to make certain he was successful.

Most Confessors have their attention focused upon Pharazia or simply Phiraz. Qaayid el-Mir is that rare Confessor who has contemplated what to do about those Hazlani infidels on the far side of the **Road of a Thousand Secrets**.

### QADIR AL-ṬAJM

The **last Caliph** of Pharazia, slain by the **Faithless Nomad**. He was generally considered to be good,

compassionate, and wise. His murder marked the end of a golden age.

### RAAYID

Raayid is the name of the ghul whose lair lies near the **Lonely Fortress**. However, after two centuries of isolation from her kind, she has largely forgotten her own name.

#### THE SONS OF THE GHUL

Not far from Raayid's lair is a small clan of nomads who have gained her dubious favor. They leave her animal sacrifices and the occasional pretty desert bloom. In exchange, she does not prey upon them.

However, sometimes Raayid does demand that the nomads send her a handsome young man. After a week or a month, the young man may return, but then he may not. Either way, three-quarters of a year later a red-eyed boy child is sometimes abandoned outside of the Sheikh's tent. The Sheikh and Sheikha adopt such children and raise them as their own. Whenever the current Sheikh of this clan dies, his replacement is usually one of these red-eyed men.

### RASHIQ IBN ZUFAR AL-MALAK

The Sheikh of the al-Malak clan, which has been tasked with defending the **Oasis of the Five Palms**. He takes very seriously his duties as defender and host alike.

Rashiq has an excellent singing voice, one of the finest in the land. He is particularly fond of tragic love songs, the more melodramatic, the better.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### REEMA BINT NAHLA

A female reincarnation of **Allahn el Rashaan**. Nicknamed the *Howl Across the Desert*.

Although Reema bint Nahla was no more brutal than her preceding incarnations, neither was she any less. However, she became particularly infamous simply because she was female. After Reema bint Nahla

launched her rebellion, the Confessors imposed greater restrictions upon the women of Pharazia, hoping to discourage imitators. Even once Reema bint Nahla had been slain, few of the restrictions were lifted. Most *al-Hadhar* women curse her name, but some *al-Badia* women still idolize her.

### TALAAL EL-KHATIB

The former Emir of **Ibraq**. Although the people of Ibraq generally found him a competent ruler, nonetheless they acknowledge that he lacked diplomacy when dealing with the *al-Badia*. Worse yet, he did not show sufficient concern for ensuring his line. He had not chosen any wives. He had not fathered any acknowledged children.

Eventually Talaal el-Khatib was kidnapped by nomads of the house of **Jabara**. A rescue attempt by the **Ghani** failed. Talaal el-Khatib was killed, ending his line.

### UMAIRA AL-MOURAD

A granddaughter of **Fayaad al-Mourad**, the current **Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall**. She gives the impression of being as timid as a fawn, largely because she is very quiet. Although nobody else yet realizes, she has a steely core at her heart.

#### THE SENESCHALS' TWO KEYS

Umailra al-Mourad has fallen in love with Naadir, the current Seneschal of the Darkest Tower. Although he is a few years younger than her, he is mature for his age. (That kind of thing happens when you spend nearly six months knowing that you might be killed on any given night.) For his part, Naadir would gladly let himself fall for her, if only he believed he would live long enough to bring her happiness.

Despite her seeming timidity, Umailra may yet talk Naadir into running away with her. Naadir knows that his life would be forfeit if he gets caught, but then again, his life is forfeit anyway.

He is far more concerned about the tortures that Umaira would endure. However, Umaira does have some idea of what her punishment would be, and she wants to flee regardless. The inevitable fatality of any punishment simply means that they have to be clever enough to avoid getting caught.

As his badge of office, Naadir already has the black iron key to the Darkest Tower. However, to accomplish their escape, Umaira will also need to steal her grandfather's gold-plated key to the Gleaming Hall. The two keys together will be sufficient to unlock certain secret ways out of the Tower and the Hall.

(There's a metaphor in there, of course.)

If Umaira and Naadir do escape, the player characters might be hired by the Confessors. to find them and bring them back. Alternately, they might be hired by Fayaad al-Mourad. (through a highly trusted intermediary, of course) to ensure that the Confessors do not find their quarry. Of course, the party could also encounter the young couple wherever in the land of Pharazia they might be hiding, such as the Great Marsh, or in search of the long-lost Jazirat al-Qidiys.

### VAHID AL-JABARA

The former Sheikh of the House of Jabara. Father of both **Ferdous** and **Behrouz**. Overall he was a reasonable leader, but known for being too indulgent with his boys. Died by misadventure while visiting **Talaal e-Khatib**, the Emir of **Ibraq**.

### WAHARIM

*Waharim* is a 6' x 9' *carpet of flying* also imbued with self-will and the power of speech. He was woven in Benzar, and is immensely proud of his pedigree. Unfortunately, the many decades since his weaving have not always been kind to him. Waharim is an aged carpet, growing threadbare with years. His maximum speed is only half normal, and he can only sustain 1d6 hours of flight on any given day before falling asleep and settling (usually gently) to the

ground. When he speaks, he sounds exactly like a cantankerous old man. ("Oh, my aching weft!") He will refuse to aid anyone who insults him. However, anyone who provides him with sufficient encouragement will also bring forth his best effort. This old carpet still has some good miles left in him.

### WALEED IBN IMAAD

An elder of the House of Mahdavi, belonging to the same generation as **Ghassaan al-Mahdavi**. He does not deny that Ghassaan's daughter **Nuriyya** is the proper Sheikha, but he listens to her only reluctantly. On the other hand, Nuriyya knows she must sway Waleed ibn Imaad in order to sway others of her father's generation.

### YASUD IBN SAQIR AL-SALMIN

The most prominent citizen among the fisherfolk of the **Bay of Phiraz**. He and his two sons are weresharks, and they thrive in the role of "big fish in a very little pond" (phrasing suggested by Speedwagon in a private conversation).

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

## SITES OF INTEREST

### AL-HAJAR MOUNTAINS

The mountains in northwestern Pharazia along the border with Sebua.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

### ALMAKANI

The small fishing village near the Lonely Fortress. The Almakani have little contact with the rest of Pharazia, although occasionally they conduct trade with any *al-Badia* clans which stumble across them.

**Population:** 25 (Thorp)

**Exports:** Fish



## BAY OF PHIRAZ

"Bay of Phiraz" refers to both the body of water where the Simurgh River reaches the sea and the informal community of fisher-families who live upon the shore there.

A man named Yasud ibn Saqir al-Salmin is the loudest voice in the community. He is backed by his two sons, who are quieter but no less imposing.

The fisher-folk of the Bay of Phiraz know better than to venture too far from shore. If they do, the Mists arise in a vicious storm and sweep the foolhardy away.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

**Population:** 40 (Thorp)  
**Exports:** Fish (Sardine, Tuna, Billfish)

## BENI MASSAT

The easternmost of the two rivers flowing south from Phiraz.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

## BENZAR

A city which fell into an enormous sinkhole after a secret society failed in one of its attempts to learn the mysteries of an ancient, lost empire. ("The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*) Alternately, perhaps the Herald of Twilight caused its destruction. ("Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*) Those are the most common rumors, and one of them might even be true.

Before its fall, Benzar was a small but growing city, approximately the same size as Ibraq across the gulf. The two cities competed avidly (and sometimes viciously) to build their reputations, because being acknowledged as second only to Phiraz was still a mighty fine claim to own.

Benzar was known in particular for the fine workmanship and beautiful designs of its tapestries and rugs. According to tales told across Pharazia, some Benzari carpets were enchanted with flight, some with the power of speech, and others with the gift of prophecy. Such miracles were never commonplace, and now they are rarer yet.

Shortly before Benzar's destruction, rumors began circulating that one of its blacksmiths had discovered a new technique for forging a superior grade of steel. Even if this rumor happened to be true, though, the techniques have been lost. Regardless of the truth of the rumor, scimitars made of Benzari steel remain highly valued.

Many Benzari traders were abroad from the city at its destruction. Some survivors returned to the site of Benzar, hoping to rebuild, but their hopes were soon dashed. Otherwise most survivors eventually integrated into the other cities of Pharazia. Even now, hints of the so-called Benzari lilt can still be widely heard in the Poor District of Phiraz. Many Phirazites were initially suspicious of these survivors, fearing that their very presence would summon the wrath of the Herald of Twilight. However, the people of Ibraq were generally more welcoming to the Benzari, compassion winning out over competition in the end.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

## CHAKOR

The westernmost of the two rivers flowing south from Phiraz.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

## FOUR HORNS

When Pharazia was an isolated island of terror, four spurs of land protruded from the desert north of Phiraz. These spurs were known as the Four Horns.

Nowadays, there are only two Horns. The other two are presumed destroyed by the Herald of Dusk.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### **GREAT MARSH**

The Simurgh River runs into a salt fen commonly known as the Great Marsh. It is inhabited by the marshfolk.

The Great Marsh isolates Phiraz from the Bay of Phiraz.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

**Population:** Small Town (1200)  
**Exports:** Rice

### **GULF OF THE HEART**

The gap between the two southern "legs" of Pharazia is not filled with the Mists, but instead by a body of saltwater known as the Gulf of the Heart. Zayawa is built upon the northernmost shore of the Gulf. The High Cliff Fortress helps to defend Zayawa. Similarly, the Lonely Fortress once guarded the entrance of the Gulf to the sea, but since the Mists arose to block off the sea, that fortress has been abandoned.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### **HIGH CLIFF FORTRESS**

A fortress which overlooks the Gulf of the Heart. Occupied by The Vigilant.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

**Population:** 50 (Thorp)  
**Exports:** None

### **IBRAQ**

The largest city along the Beni Massat apart from Phiraz itself. Jamal ibn Bishr al-Ghani is its Emir.

Historically, Ibraq has a contentious relationship with the nomads who live nearby.

Many people consider the craftsfolk of Ibraq to be the finest in the land. (The craftsfolk of Phiraz beg to differ, however.) In particular, Ibraq is known for the exquisite blue tile which its people produce. The clay comes from the banks of the Beni Massat, but the source of the blue dye is a local secret. Additionally, Ibraqi pottery has an excellent reputation, both for the solidity of its construction and the beauty of the geometric designs painted upon its surface.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

**Population:** 6000 (Small City)  
**Exports:** Tile, Pottery, Crafted Goods

### **JAZIRAT AL-QADIYS**

The poster map included with *Islands of Terror* displays parts of Pharazia which are missing in the corresponding map within *Domains of Dread*. The most reasonable assumption is that these landmasses disappeared when Pharazia joined the Amber Wastes.

One such vanished territory is Jazirat al-Qadiys, the Island of the Saint. It was not quite an island, but the land bridge which connected it to the Pharazian mainland was quite narrow.

The island is named after a holy man (whose actual name has been lost to time) who came to the island after being driven out of the rest of Pharazia by the priests of the Lawgiver. This holy man believed in goodness as well as law, and his beliefs were held to be dangerously foolish if not outright heretical.

Some legends state that the island itself arose when this holy man reached the sea, but all of the legends agree that the Oasis of the Dawn emerged from the ground only when he arrived upon the island.

Jazirat al-Qadiys has largely been forgotten by the people of Pharazia, except for those who believe that the island will re-emerge from the Endless Sirocco when another suitably holy person comes along.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### THE HOLY MAN OF THE ISLAND

Contradictory tales are told about the holy man who brought forth the Oasis of the Dawn, and perhaps the Jazirat al-Qidiys. For example, some say he was elderly; others, that he was surprisingly young. However, all of the tales agree that he traveled with a sharp-eyed, sharp-taloned falcon, which protected him from evil.

While the holy man was indeed a mortal, the falcon may have been some sort of celestial, perhaps an avoral guardinal. If so, the legends do not say what the avoral might have done to become trapped in a falcon's form. Or perhaps the falcon's form was voluntary, a means of preventing the guardinal from overshadowing the mortal whom it protected.

### LOVELY FORTRESS

The so-called Lovely Fortress guards the narrow gap where the Gulf of the Heart joins with the sea. However, ever since the Endless Sirocco rose to surround the land of Pharazia, no invaders have arrived from the sea. No traders, either. In fact, no ships at all have crossed into Pharazia past the Lovely Fortress, and any ships which departed have never returned. Eventually Diamabel decreed that occupying the fortress was folly, and he dissolved the mamluk order which had done so for generations. Since then, the fortress has been known by its current name.

The Lovely Fortress has been abandoned, but the surrounding area has not – not quite. Almakean is a small fishing village near the Lovely Fortress. Also, the ghul Raayid preys upon the village. Although she spends most of her time dormant, occasionally she emerges from her desert lair to claim a new victim.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### THE NAMELESS QUARTER

The Pharazian name for the vast desert of the Amber Wastes.

The nomads do not recognize the domain borders; to them it is all one desert. However, sometimes "The Heart of the Nameless Quarter" is used specifically to label that expanse between the al-Hajar mountains and the city of Phiraz.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

### NIZWAR

A town along the Chakor river. Its Emir is a goblin named Taaj al-Riaz. Although the people of Nizwar are settled, culturally they share much in common with the nomads of the nearby areas.

Spirit worship is prevalent alongside worship of the Lawgiver, although it is practiced quietly. Nasifa al-Riaz, the Emir's vizier and mother, is the *kahina* who guides such worship.

**Population:** 500 (Village) (99.6% human; 0.4% other)  
**Exports:** Millet, Flax, Cloth

### OASIS OF THE DAWN

The Oasis of the Dawn is a spring upon the Jazirat al-Qidiys. Its waters are rumored to provide miraculous healing.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### OASIS OF THE EMPTINESS

The Chakor terminates in an oasis known as the Oasis of the Emptiness. The city of Benzar once stood here until it was destroyed by the Black Herald for its sins. The oasis has acquired a fell reputation, but in truth there is no harm in drinking from its waters.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

## OASIS OF THE FIVE PALMS

The Beni Massat terminates in an oasis known as the Oasis of the Five Palms. The oasis is named after the five majestic trees which surround it. The palms themselves are named Honor, Family, Purity, Hospitality, and Piety.

Traditionally, the Oasis of the Five Palms is defended by the nomads of the al-Malak clan. Sheikh Rashiq ibn Zufar al-Malak takes his duties as defender and as host very seriously. Even *ajami* are welcomed with open arms, provided they respect civilized behavior regarding the bond between hosts and guests.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

**Population:** 50 (Thorp)  
**Exports:** Coconut, Dates, Sesame Seeds, Camels, Goats

## OUSERD

The spring immediately south of Phiraz. The Chakor, Beni Massat, and Simurgh rivers all emerge from the Ouserd.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

## PHIRAZ

Phiraz is the largest city in Pharazia. It is the seat of power for both Diamabel and the Confessors.

See The City of Phiraz, below, for locations within the city.

**Population:** 9800 (Small City)  
**Exports:** Wheat, Barley, Millet, Melons, Citrus, Peas, Beans, Eggplant, Figs, Dates, Coffee, Camels, Sheep, Goats, Cattle, Cloth

## PLACE OF THE FINAL STONE

The place where the desert giants of Pharazia first appeared in the Land of Mists. Its can be identified

by a circle of irregular stone outcroppings which are sometimes visible above the shifting sands. These outcroppings are actually desert giants who have petrified. The Place of the Final Stone is a graveyard, where the deceased become their own monuments. Desert giants who remain vital usually stay away, but they are drawn back to the Place of the Final Stone for their final transformation.

## THE ROAD OF A THOUSAND SECRETS

The Road of a Thousand Secrets is a two-way Mistway connecting southern Hazlan to southeastern Pharazia. Although it has been classified as "moderately reliable", implying that it drifts 30% of the time, when traveling from Hazlan the Road only rarely drifts far enough to deliver travelers someplace outside of Pharazia.

The Road stretches across the entire Mist-bound southern border of Hazlan, and when the Road does not drift, it maps to the stretch of the Endless Sirocco east of the Oasis of the Five Palms. However, the mapping does not appear to be linear. That is, two people who enter the Road at points ten feet apart are not guaranteed to arrive at the far side still ten feet apart. They may be dangerously close. They may be dangerously far apart. Seasoned travelers learn to enter the Road single file.

Of course, if the Mistway drifts, then travelers can arrive anywhere in the Land of Mists. Fortunately, they are still likely to arrive somewhere in Pharazia, perhaps even near water. Most of the time, anyway.

d%	Result
01-70	Oasis of the Five Palms
71-85	Oasis of the Emptiness
86-90	Phiraz
91-95	Nameless Quarter
96-00	Outside of Pharazia

## The Road of a Thousand Secrets — Drift



No similar drift pattern has been observed when traveling from Pharazia. If drift occurs, travelers are unlikely to arrive in Hazlan as intended. However, the nomads of the House of Malak claim to know the secret to making the Road more reliable. In addition to their patrols watching for new arrivals who do not know how to find the Oasis from the Road, the Malaki are willing to perform this ritual in exchange for suitable compensation.

See the *Ravenloft Campaign Setting*, p.110.

### THE RITUAL OF THE ROAD

The Malaki have discovered that the Road of a Thousand Secrets gains excellent reliability when traveling from Pharazia to Hazlan if sesame oil is sprinkled on the sands at the edge of the Endless Sirocco. This is a precious secret, known only to the Sheikh and the elders of the clan. To obscure the simplicity of the secret, the Malaki have created a whole complex ritual around opening the Road. Although it is a most impressive ritual, *detect magic* will reveal that it involves no magic whatsoever.

This same trick may hold true when traveling from Hazlan to Pharazia, but the possibility has not been tested.

Note that this secret is exactly the sort of detail that Lematura Huuld is interested in gleaning.

### SEA OF GLASS

The sands of this stretch of desert have melted into glass. Under the searing heat of the sun, this glass becomes impassable, but it may be crossed once nightfall drains the heat away. Treasures and horrors alike are trapped within the glass, visible (despite distortion) from atop the surface.

Some sources describe the sea of glass as the result of a nearby volcano. Other sources claim it was created in 740bc when the Herald of Twilight discovered and punished a clan of rebel nomads.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

### SIMURGH RIVER

The wide river which runs from the Ousserd into the Great Marsh.

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21*.

### TWO HORNS

See Four Horns.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

### WELL OF SPIRITS

In the hidden recesses of the High Cliff Fortress is a well which drops far into the mountain. This is not the Well of Spirits; it is the false Well of Spirits, which the mamluk order of the Vigilant reluctantly show to anyone who learns enough about the Well of Spirits to come seeking it.

No, the actual Well of Spirits is another well, hidden in the even deeper recesses of the High Cliff Fortress. The well occasionally ejects sapphire-colored stones, and serpent phantasms emerge some time thereafter. The phantasms are bound to these spirit stones, which means that the phantasms could be bound to service by one who holds the stones. More often, though, the phantasms kill the bearer before any such binding can occur.

### WELL OF THE BRIDES

Tales tell of a man with seven unmarried daughters. The eldest daughter, sorely conscious of the fact that her plain appearance had prevented her father from finding her a husband, brought all six of her sisters to this well, and there they all prayed to the Lawgiver that good husbands might see their inner beauty.

Within a year all seven daughters were happily married.

The well where the daughters supposedly prayed stands west of Phiraz. However, it was defiled by the

House of al-Dabae, who filled it with the corpses of women they had killed.

### ZAYAWA

A city built along the northern shore of the Gulf of the Heart. Kairiya bint Amaani al-Samad is its Emira.

Nearly all water for the city is provided by a miraculous fountain in the courtyard of the Emira's palace.

Zayawa is known for the orchards which ring the city. In addition to dates and figs, these orchards produce several varieties of citrus fruit, including blood oranges and a kind of sweet lemon which is not found elsewhere in Pharazia. Moreover, the resin from the frankincense trees of Zayawa is highly prized in the capitol.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

**Population:** 4500 (Large Town)  
**Exports:** Fish, Dates, Figs, Citrus, Frankincense, Aromatic Gums

## THE CITY OF PHIRAZ

### BARBERS' COLLEGE

Within the University of Phiraz, the Barbers' College teaches grooming and medicine. It is not nearly as prestigious as the Hall of Healers, but it is not nearly as expensive, either. Also, the Barbers' College accepts women, although female barbers are expected to practice their arts only upon other women.

### DARKEST TOWER

The Black Herald occupies the upper floors of the tower known as the Darkest Tower. The Seneschal of the Darkest Tower occupies the lowest two floors.

The Darkest Tower was built from the same sandstone as the bulk of Phiraz. It is not noticeably darker than the rest of the city, except metaphorically.

### FOREIGN DISTRICT

All foreigners who set up permanent residence in Phiraz must live within the Foreign District. Visitors are encouraged to stay there as well. The Confessors maintain a watchful eye upon the district to ensure that foreign heresies do not corrupt the rest of the city.

Prices in the Foreign District are usually 50% higher than usual, partly because most foreign residents can afford it, partly because the merchants here have discovered that some foreigners don't know enough to haggle.

### GLEAMING HALL

The Gleaming Hall is the chamber where Diamabel usually appears to the public.

Metaphorically, "The Gleaming Hall" is also used to reference the government of all of Pharazia, for example, "The Gleaming Hall has ordered a purge of dissidents in the Foreign District."

### HALL OF HEALERS

Within the University of Phiraz, the Hall of Healers is where the finest doctors and surgeons of the Land of Mists are trained. (Just ask them.) Only men are accepted.

### POOR DISTRICT

Phiraz has an impoverished underclass, of course, but at least that underclass is largely isolated to the Poor District.

The Confessors rarely venture into the Poor District. They are vigilant about watching its borders, however, lest any poverty or vice seep out. Given their lack of attention to the interior, though, there is no shortage of impious behavior. For example, alcohol and opium may be found readily in this district.

## STUDENT MARKET

A bazaar which may be found in the University District. Its wares may not fairly claim the highest of quality, but they also do not claim the highest prices.

## TATTERED MARKET

Even the Poor District requires its bazaars, and the most infamous is the Tattered Market. Only the foolish arrive at the Tattered Market looking as if they have money; they will not depart the same way.

## TEMPLE DISTRICT

An entire district has formed around the Temple of Purity to support its religious and civil activities. One may purchase tiny scrolls inked in fine calligraphy with the Words of the Lawgiver, for example, or food which has been prepared according to the very strictest of the standards outlined in the Law.

There is one particular valuable which may be purchased in the Temple District but not elsewhere: forgiveness. For an appropriate fee, the penitent faithful may confess their sins (to a Confessor, of course), receive punishment, and be forgiven. In fact, for a sufficiently generous fee the punishment may be avoided altogether.

## TEMPLE OF PURITY

The Temple of Purity is the largest temple of the Lawgiver in Phiraz and, in fact, all of Pharazia.

Naturally, it is the center of power of the Confessors.

## UNIVERSITY DISTRICT

This district supports the University of Phiraz. While many of its residents are students, some instructors also reside here, taking advantage of the relatively cheap housing prices. Similarly, because the students need merchants to sell them daily essentials, a number of merchants live here as well.

In addition to the University itself, the Student Market may be found in the University District.

## UNIVERSITY OF PHIRAZ

Also known as the **Beacon of Enlightenment**.

Phiraz prides itself upon the high degree of education among its citizens—at least the ones that matter. At the heart of that pride is the University of Phiraz.

Regard for the University and the collective knowledge of its scholars is so high that the University is occasionally able to push back against the excesses of the Confessors. Only occasionally, though.

## FACTIONS, CABALS, AND SECRET SOCIETIES

### THE CONFESSORS

The priests of the Lawgiver within Pharazia are known as **Confessors**. Among those unfamiliar with Pharazian society and language, the Confessors have sometimes erroneously been called "law-givers".

In the generations since Diamabel arrived in Pharazia, the Confessors have gradually assumed control of the government. Vestiges of the old civil government remain at the middle and lower levels, but policy is set by the Confessors.

The Confessors are led by a trio of high priests of the Lawgiver, known collectively as the **Unforgiving Triumvirate**. Currently, the Triumvirate consists of **Maahir el-Kabir**, **Amru al-I-Tarifi**, and **Qaayid el-Mir**. Doubtless there is a hierarchy below the Triumvirate, but it is generally unknown to those outside of the priesthood.

The Confessors wear white and carry scourges.

#### *The Public Face:*

The Confessors are the enforcers of Diamabel's Law, which is ostensibly the same Law handed down by the Lawgiver. Of course, everyone in Pharazia knows that this Law is substantially influenced by Diamabel's whim and, for that matter, the arbitrary decrees of the Confessors themselves.

### *The Hidden Face:*

The Confessors are rife with politics, of course. There are many hidden faces.

Three attitudes dominate among the Confessors. (Not formal factions, but merely attitudes.) The *moralist* Confessors truly attempt to live according to the Laws of the Lawgiver. The so-called *pragmatic* Confessors are willing to bend the Laws according to practical necessities, that is, what happens to benefit them. Finally, the *ethoist* Confessors are those who have suffered the radical notion that maybe the Law should be interpreted to the benefit of all of the faithful, not just the Confessors. The pragmatic attitude is most prevalent, followed by the moralist. The ethoist attitude runs a distant third.

The terms *moralist*, *pragmatic*, and *ethoist* are taken from the *Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures* source book, but of course the way they are used in Zakhara is not how they are used by the Confessors.

Apart from these various attitudes, there are also a handful of Orders within the Confessors. The *Order of the Rod* consists primarily of clerics; they have political control of the Confessors as a whole. The *Order of Scourges* are the holy torturers. The *Order of the Scimitar* consists of the enforcers of the Faith. The *Order of the Scrolls* are responsible for overseeing the University to ensure that proper subjects are taught properly. Finally, the members of the most obscure order, *The Order of Stars*, are those who have turned to the study of arcane magic.

### *Allies and Enemies:*

The Confessors serve Diamabel. Everyone else considers them to be enemies.

### THE DEDICATED

In the days of the Last Caliph, the Dedicated were the mamluk order charged with defending the city of Phiraz. When the Last Caliph fell to the betrayal of the Faithless Nomad, the Dedicated killed as many nomads as they could locate. In turn, the Black Herald destroyed as many of the Dedicated as he

could find as punishment for their failure to protect the Last Caliph.

### THE ENLIGHTENED

When Outlanders from Zakhara are drawn into the Mists, they often find themselves in Pharazia, or else they find their way to Pharazia because that land is less unfamiliar to them than others. In Zakhara, one of the hallmarks of civilization is *enlightenment*, that is, worship of some divine power, usually one of the Great Gods or the many common gods recognized across Zakhara. As such, Outlanders from Zakhara have become generally known as the Enlightened. They are not a formal faction, but they do have a common origin and fundamental set of beliefs.

Note that some Moralist priests from Zakhara are drawn to the Confessors, and they convert completely to the worship of the Lawgiver. To the Enlightened, such converts are only questionably still Enlightened.

The Enlightened believe just as much in Fate as any loyal worshiper of the Lawgiver, but they tend to be kinder about it. Those who suffer hardship are not always seen as deserving of their Fate, but as unfortunate victims of it.

Some of the Enlightened struggle with the similarity between two titles, *The Loregiver* and *The Lawgiver*. To them, the Loregiver was the mortal woman blessed by Fate to bring enlightenment to Zakhara. Not only is the Lawgiver divine instead of mortal, but he makes decrees against the worship of other deities, which is itself contrary to the Law of the Loregiver. In the end, some who struggle have decided that the Lawgiver is the form of the Loregiver chosen to move the people of benighted Pharazia closer to true enlightenment. Others have decided that the Lawgiver is utterly unrelated to the Loregiver, and instead he is an aspect of the Great God whom they call Kor the Venerable.



*The Public Face:*

Generally speaking, the Enlightened try to avoid presenting a blatantly public face, knowing that their true faith would be punished by the Herald Who Flies Upon the Wings of the Night. Since the Lawgiver is a god, the Enlightened commit no offense to their own more familiar gods by praying to the Lawgiver as well.

*The Hidden Face:*

Fortunately, the Enlightened are permitted very subtle forms of worship. At the proscribed times of day and night they bow their heads and offer prayers in silence. They do not bow their heads in any particular direction; from where they now stand, the great city of Huzuz is not to be found by any mortal.

When reasonable, the Enlightened gather in small groups to worship together. This is not a doctrinal mandate, but merely for the comfort of community.

*Allies and Enemies:*

Although the rebellious nomads led by Allahn el Rashaan do not yet realize this, an active rebellion against the Confessors would be supported by many among the Enlightened.

As previously mentioned, some Moralists priests convert to the worship of the Lawgiver. Even if they do not join the ranks of the Confessors, they are certainly their allies. As such, they are generally considered enemies (or at least potential enemies) of the rest of the Enlightened.

**THE GLORIOUS**

The Glorious were the prestigious mamluk order charged with guarding the Caliph, Qadim al-Najm. The Faithless Nomad and his desert riders slaughtered the Caliph and most of the Glorious, and then Diamabel slaughtered the remaining few.

**THE HOUSE OF AL-DABAE**

After the Faithless Nomad was rejected by the house of his birth, he fell in with the House of al-Dabae. The

al-Dabae were no true clan, but a collection of outcasts. The Faithless Nomad, who had been born to lead, soon commanded the entire clan.

Under the leadership of the Faithless Nomad, the House of al-Dabae was mortally strict in its adherence to the Law of the Lawgiver. However, that changed under the leadership of Munir al-Barakat, who became Sheikh after the death of the Faithless Nomad. Al-Barakat heard word that the Herald of the Dusk, that agent of the Lawgiver's vengeance, had promised death to the al-Dabae for their role in the murder of the Last Caliph. Although the Herald of the Dusk never actually brought death to them, al-Barakat could not forgive the Lawgiver's betrayal regardless. Increasingly the House of al-Dabae became followers of the ancient Akiri gods, particularly Apep, the Serpent of Chaos, and Sekhmet, the Lioness of War. The al-Dabae no longer respected the Law of the Lawgiver, and they committed acts that the Pharazians consider atrocities.

*The Public Face:*

After the treachery of the Faithless Nomad, of course Diamabel destroyed the House of al-Dabae.

*The Hidden Face:*

Diamabel did no such thing. Those al-Dabae who survived the final fight against the Dedicated and the Glorious fled into the Nameless Quarter. Some of the al-Dabae were shamed by the breaking of the bond of salt, and they abandoned the house to disappear into the mists of history. However, some were determined to continue the Faithless Nomad's crusade.

Diamabel does not allow anyone to act against the House of al-Dabae, despite their turn against the Lawgiver. He thinks of them as errant children throwing a particularly violent tantrum. He allows this deliberate self-delusion because he also considers the al-Dabae to be the last link to his mortal life and name.

*Allies and Enemies:*

At this point the House of al-Dabae has no allies beyond Diamabel, and they are not aware that he is deliberately ignoring them.

**THE MARSHFOLK**

The marshfolk inhabit the Great Marsh between Phiraz and the Bay of Phiraz. More settled marsh folk live in long reed houses and travel in canoe-like boats (*mashoof* and *tasada*). They raise crops such as barley, wheat, millet, and—most importantly—rice. Other marshfolk are more nomadic, constructing and abandoning temporary homes as they follow water buffaloes around the marsh. Both sorts of families, those who raise crops and those who herd water buffaloes, supplement their diets by spear-fishing.

Living where they do, of course the marshfolk are subject to disease, particularly malaria and an affliction called "snail fever".

See "The Domain of the Endless Word", *Quoth the Raven Issue 21* and "Marsh Arabs" on Wikipedia.

*The Public Face:*

Most of the rice consumed in Pharazia is grown by the marshfolk, making them an essential part of society. They are also ideally positioned to transport goods between the city and the bay.

Despite the value that the marshfolk provide to the people of Phiraz, they are nonetheless broadly considered a strange and untrustworthy people by both *al-Hadhar* and *al-Badia* alike.

The marshfolk are absolutely faithful to the Lawgiver and adhere strictly to Diamabel's decrees. Just ask them.

*The Hidden Face:*

Over the centuries, the marshfolk have thrived as smugglers. Now that the Bay of Phiraz is closed by the Mists, they have far fewer goods to smuggle, but they sometimes smuggle people instead. In

particular, the marshfolk are willing to hide someone fleeing from the wrath of the Dusk Herald, provided they receive sufficient compensation. In their experience, the Dusk Herald overlooks the Great Marsh and its inhabitants just as the rest of Pharazia does.

*Allies and Enemies:*

The marshfolk are neither *al-Badia* nor *al-Hadhar*, neither nomads nor city-dwellers. As such, they are largely disregarded by other Pharazians.

That said, the marshfolk count Sheikh Allahn el Rashaan among their allies. They once helped hide him from Diamabel, and he has not forgotten.

**THE ORDER OF SCOURGES**

The branch within the Confessors responsible for punishing those who have broken the Laws as decreed by the Confessors (and Diamabel, of course).

The woman known as Kayiyb Maarab was the second head of the Order. The relic known as Dark Destiny's Scourge was originally hers.

*The Public Face:*

Most Pharazians do not realize that the Scourges are a special branch within the Confessors. They just assume all Confessors are torturers.

*The Hidden Face:*

A scourge named Fadi had a crisis of faith and fled Pharazia with several of his students, including the young man who now calls himself Etienne du Savier. Fadi and his students have subsequently formed a half-dozen scourges' guilds across the Domains of Dread.

See *Champions of Darkness*, p.65-66.

*Allies and Enemies:*

The Scourges are a useful tool of the Confessors. As such, they are loathed by nearly everyone else... and by some of the Confessors as well, really.

## THE RISEN

While the Vigilant are the only sanctioned mamluk order remaining in Pharazia, an unofficial order has risen. Its members are not truly mamluks, but instead those askars who recall tales of the Steadfast and how they defended the people of the land against banditry and monsters alike.

### *The Public Face:*

Because the Herald Who Flies on the Wings of Night would almost certainly seek them out and slaughter them, the Risen strive to avoid becoming widely known to the public. However, word of their existence has circulated among the nomads, who are used to keeping secrets from the Herald.

### *The Hidden Face:*

The Risen have no particular secrets apart from their very existence.

### *Allies and Enemies:*

The Risen are allied with the Vigilant, who help supply them with weaponry, including the occasional magic weapon required to strike down certain foes.

Although the Risen is comprised entirely of *al-Hadhar*, primarily askars, their reputation among the *al-Badia* has grown strong enough that many nomads will not only help them, but accept their help.

## SENESCHAL OF THE DARKEST TOWER

The Seneschal of the Darkest Tower is the personal servant to the **Herald of Night**. Unlike the **Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall**, the Dark Seneschal has no staff. Then again, the Herald of Night has few demands. The problem is that his demands tend to be fatal. (Not always immediately, but inevitably.) The Dark Seneschal's foremost duty is to delay the Herald's wrath as long as possible and then to absorb its brunt.

The Seneschal of the Darkest Tower is usually a handsome young man (or sometimes a pretty young

woman) from the poorer districts. The Seneschal's family is paid well for their sacrifice, and the Seneschal lives nearly as well as Diamabel himself in the indeterminate time before the Herald succumbs to his wrath.

The current Seneschal of the Darkest Tower is a young man named **Naadir**, whose eidetic memory has served up a distracting wealth of stories with which to entertain the Sunless Herald.

### *The Public Face:*

The general public is unaware of the existence of the Seneschal of the Darkest Tower. It is no secret, but sometimes it is easier to dismiss unpleasant rumors as mere hearsay.

### *The Hidden Face:*

None.

### *Allies and Enemies:*

The **Confessors** are responsible for selecting each new Seneschal of the Darkest Tower. However, once selected, the new Darkest Seneschal falls under the guidance of the Gleaming Seneschal. This responsibility is not official, but it is a matter of longstanding practice. After all, the Darkest Seneschal has no one else, and the current Gleaming Seneschal is too compassionate to abandon someone in their final weeks or days.

## SENESCHAL OF THE GLEAMING HALL

The Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall is Diamabel's personal servant. For more than eighty years now, this position has been held by the oldest male of the al-Mourad family. **Fayaad al-Mourad** currently holds the title. Fortunately, the Gleaming Seneschal has a staff, almost entirely drawn from the younger members of that same esteemed family.

### *The Public Face:*

The Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall is broadly considered an enviable, even cushy, position – important, but cushy.

*The Hidden Face:*

The family's greatest secret is the general unworthiness of Diamabel; their greatest duty is to hide that secret from the rest of Pharazia.

*Allies and Enemies:*

The Seneschal of the Gleaming Hall and his family are largely an independent faction. They work with the **Confessors**, but their proximity to Diamabel keeps them out of the Confessors' control. At least one member of the Unforgiving Triumvirate has been destroyed by the **Herald of Divine Wrath** after the Gleaming Seneschal expressed stern dissatisfaction to Diamabel.

**THE STEADFAST**

The Steadfast were one of the mamluk orders who served the Last Caliph. Their duty was to patrol the Nameless Quarter, lending their aid to anyone in need. Although technically among the *al-Hadhar*, the Steadfast were largely accepted by the *al-Badia* as allies, respected for their knowledge of desert lore and their skill at arms.

However, the Faithless Nomad considered the Steadfast to be his enemies. The Steadfast suffered great losses, although the Faithless Nomad's forces did as well. After the murder of the Last Caliph, Diamabel executed the remaining Steadfast, ostensibly for their failure to halt the Faithless Nomad in the desert.

*The Public Face:*

The Steadfast are no more.

*The Hidden Face:*

Although the Steadfast were slaughtered to the last man and woman, they have returned as ghostly riders upon their spirit-horses and spirit-camels. They ride at night, but not every night. The pattern of when and where they return remains unknown. They may appear anywhere in the Nameless Quarter, regardless of where they last appeared.

The Steadfast have two missions. First, to defend anyone in need. Second, to destroy Diamabel and those who support him. Unfortunately, the Steadfast are not as discerning in death as they were in life, and sometimes they mistake innocents for enemies.

*Allies and Enemies:*

The Steadfast are enemies of Diamabel and anyone allied with him. Or anyone whom they suspect to be allied with him.

The Steadfast have often ridden to the aid of the nomads and merchants who cross the Nameless Quarter. Nonetheless, because they are hasty and severe in their judgment, the Steadfast are also feared by those whom they sometimes aid.

**THE VIGILANT**

The last of the once-mighty mamluk orders of Pharazia. The Vigilant occupy the High Cliff Fortress.

Back in the days of the Last Caliph, the Caliph himself was guarded by the Glorious, the city of Phiraz was defended by the Dedicated, and the Nameless Quarter was patrolled by the Steadfast. Other mamluk orders occupied other parts of Pharazia, but the Steadfast were particular foes of the rebellious nomads of the Nameless Quarter. Most of the Glorious and many of the Dedicated were slain in the same treacherous assault as the Caliph himself.

However, shortly after Diamabel manifested at the conclusion of the Last Caliph's funeral, he declared that the lives of the few surviving Glorious were forfeit for their failure to preserve the Caliph. One by one, he faced the Glorious in single combat and butchered them all. Worse yet, though, when night fell, the Herald of Night manifested and slaughtered every one of the Dedicated that he could find. Then, over the course of subsequent months, the Steadfast and the other mamluk orders found themselves targets of the wrath of the Herald of Night. After all, every one of the orders had failed the Last Caliph.

Finally, the few surviving mamluks banded together and marched on Phiraz. They approached Diamabel



in the Gleaming Hall, announced that they were a new order, and they swore everlasting loyalty to him. Diamabel accepted their oaths, and he named them the Vigilant. However, he banished them from the city, never to return, and assigned them to the High Cliff Fortress, which they have defended ever since.

#### *The Public Face:*

The Vigilant are held in high esteem, the only mamluk order that met Diamabel's high standards well enough to survive into the modern day. On the other hand, many Pharazians wonder whether the Vigilant serve any useful purpose. After all, it has been nearly two centuries since any threats have sailed up the Gulf of the Heart to threaten the land.

#### *The Hidden Face:*

Secretly, the Vigilant are sworn enemies of the Herald of Night and by extension his commander Diamabel. Their most treasured, most secret lore is the belief that the Herald of Night is the faithless nomad who killed the Last Caliph, returned as an undead abomination. Although the founders of their order swore loyalty to Diamabel, they consider it no slight upon their honor to betray one who has no honor himself.

Although there have been no recent threats from the Gulf of the Heart, the Vigilant do defend against invaders from another direction altogether. Occasionally a horde of serpentine phantasms arise from the caverns beneath the High Cliff Fortress, and the Vigilant are tasked with preventing any of these phantasms from escaping. Defending against these invaders has grown easier since the Vigilant determined that their rise is not random (as was originally believed), but instead corresponds to certain astronomical events.

Diamabel and the Confessors are fully aware of these phantasms, and they ensure that the Vigilant are supplied with the blessed weapons needed to combat them. Diamabel does not trust the Vigilant, but he is willing to make use of them.

#### *Allies and Enemies:*

Nominally, the Vigilant are allied with Diamabel and the Confessors, although they secretly plot the destruction of the Herald of Night. They would resist other factions which threaten the proper societal order ordained by the Lawgiver, but they are not actively engaged against them at this time.

See "Secrets of Pharazia", *Quoth the Raven Issue 29*.

## NEW MAGIC ITEMS

### CLEAVER OF STORMS

*Cleaver of Storms* is a +2 scimitar. It possesses two special abilities. First, its wielder may *control weather* 1/week; this ability is commonly used to lessen the early summer and midwinter sandstorms. Second, its wielder may cast *conjure air elemental* 1/week; however, this ability is not commonly used because the al-Ghani have learned that summoning an elemental has become dangerous ever since the unrighteous death of the Last Caliph. Summoned elementals cannot depart Pharazia, and so take out their wrath upon their summoner.

*Cleaver of Storms* is traditionally wielded by the Sheikh or Sheikha of the House of Ghani or sometimes their chosen heir. For example, Jamal ibn Bishr al-Ghani carried *Cleaver of Storms* for several years before his father's passing. However, ever since Jamal was appointed the Emir of Ibraaq, the scimitar has been carried by his brother Asad, instead. Jamal did not pass the scimitar on to his brother. Instead, his brother stole it.

### DARK DESTINY'S SCOURGE

*Dark Destiny's Scourge* is treated as a +3 weapon. It inflicts 2d4+3 damage, and each successful strike also inflicts 1 point of temporary CON damage. The scourge is cursed, however, for it inflicts the same temporary CON damage upon its wielder. More insidiously yet, the wielder is drawn to the faith of the Lawgiver. After each twenty successful lashes,

the wielder's alignment moves one step toward Lawful Evil, and after the first such transition, the wielder's connection with any other deity is severed.

*Dark Destiny's Scourge* was originally owned by the Confessor known as Kayiyb Maarab. Long after her death, the Scourge was stolen by the House of al-Dabae and, later yet, found its way to the Black Vault beneath the Grim Fastness in Darkon.

Dark Destiny's Scourge is mentioned in *Forged of Darkness* as a cursed item once locked within the Black Vault, but it receives no further description there. This description first appeared on the "Black Vault Haul" thread, originated by Jeremy16 on the Ravenloft Forum.

## REFERENCES

This document draws upon details of the Amber Wastes Cluster which may be found in the following canonical supplements:

- ❖ Islands of Terror, "Pharazia"
- ❖ Domains of Dread
- ❖ Ravenloft Third Edition
- ❖ Champions of Darkness, Scourge Prestige Class

In addition, the following netbooks contain material of potential interest to those who would explore the Amber Wastes:

- ❖ *Quoth the Raven #21*: "The Domain of the Endless Word"
- ❖ *Ravenloft Reincarnated Cluster: The Amber Wastes*

Finally, this document also draws upon *Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures*, the *Land of Fate* boxed set, and the rest of the Al-Qadim product line.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although Speedwagon's early reading reviews have proven valuable for every one of my articles this year, they were particularly invaluable for this survey. The good bits happened because of Speedy's suggestions.

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## PHARAZIA TIMELINE

Date	Years Ago	Event
<b>Distant History</b>		
590bc	170	The nomad who becomes Diamabel is killed, and Pharazia forms.
590bc	170	Allahn el Rashaan is reincarnated.
602bc	158	Diamabel forbids the representation of human or divine forms in works of art.
606bc	154	Allahn el Rashaan (@16) confronts Diamabel and is quickly slain.
610bc	150	By this time the Confessors have positioned themselves directly below Diamabel as the rulers of Pharazia.
633bc	127	Allahn el Rashaan (@27) 's second rebellion is betrayed to Diamabel, and he is slain.
645bc	115	Allahn el Rashaan (@12) dies.
662bc	98	Arkaan al-Sattar, Israa al-Sattar, and their clan of desert giants are drawn into the Nameless Quarter.
669bc	91	Allahn el Rashaan (@24) is killed and reincarnates as Reema bint Nahla.
669bc	91	The Twilight Herald destroys the city of Benzar. Or perhaps a secret cult does; reports vary. Either way, the Oasis of the Emptiness is all that remains. This disaster is marked by an eclipse completely unpredicted by the University astronomers.
685bc	75	Reema bint Nahla (@16) leads a rebellion against Diamabel and is slain. The Confessors impose greater restrictions upon the women of Pharazia.
717bc	43	Allahn el Rashaan (@32) is slain by Diamabel and reincarnates.
<b>Recent History</b>		
740bc	20	Earthquakes shake Pharazia. Its people assume that the Herald of Divine Wrath is responsible.
742bc	18	The Herald of the Night destroys half of the house of Mahdavi.
<b>Now</b>		
746bc	14	The Amber Wastes Cluster forms.
751bc	9	Zayawa is drawn into Pharazia. Everybody assumes it has always been there.
757bc	3	Talaal el-Khatib is kidnapped and then slain. Jamal ibn Bishr al-Ghani is appointed Emir of Ibraq in his place.
760bc	0	Now.



# NAYYIF AL-TAWIL AND THE CAMEL MERCHANT

BY IAN FORDAM

I met Jannat al-Bari on the trail between Nizwar and the High Cliff Fortress. She was leading a train of camels southeast to Zayawa. I was heading northwest on business of my own. Night had fallen. I was trying to start a fire, and to be honest I was having a ferocious time getting it to light. In the city I had students to do such menial labor for me.

She crouched down beside me. "You need to learn to listen better," she said. "If I were a thief, I could have killed you six times over already. You also need to learn how to start a fire."

I sprang backwards, startled. I had not heard her approach. Lacking a fire, I could not see her well, but I could see her silhouetted against the last of the sunlight from over the horizon. From her voice, I knew she was a woman.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Jannat al-Bari," she answered. Again, I could not see her, but I could hear a smirk in her voice. "Well-regarded merchant of camels and horses. And you are?"

"Nayyif al-Tawil," I said. As soon as I spoke, I knew that I should have lied.

"May the stern eye of the Lawgiver never have cause to fall upon you," she greeted. She gestured to my jumble of bent shrubby twigs. "Would you like help with that?"

"I can do it," I insisted. Here I did lie, and I don't know why. Perhaps because she spoke Pharazian as a

merchant does, not as a scholar does, and I did not want to admit ignorance to a merchant.

"Not with this," she said. Clearly she found my jumble of twigs lacking. "You need something to burn. Camel dung, say."

She was infuriating. "Where would I ever find camel dung?" I demanded.

She gestured behind her. Also silhouetted were four camels and, I noted, a second human figure as well.

"I might know a source," she said.

\* \* \*

Jannat al-Bari started the fire while her companion did whatever it is that needs to be done with camels to settle them for the night. After that, she began cooking food while he set up their tents. They had separate tents, so I realized they were not married. That caught me by surprise. I had assumed she was an unusually outspoken wife. However, I caught on swiftly that she was actually his employer. Not that they were particularly formal. They addressed each other by first name. Nonetheless, I noticed that whenever she asked him to do something, he hastened to do it. Eventually he was introduced to me as Kabir al-Zadeh, her guard.

Jannat prepared their meal in a tagine pan, frying up some flatbread, tossing in carrots and onions, applying a splash of olive oil, a sprinkling of spices, and a handful of crushed nuts. It smelled wonderful, I must admit. I knew I had stale bread and dried lamb and nothing else.



"This can't be how the *al-Badia* eat," I said. "Not on a regular basis."

"It's not," Jannat agreed. "They travel with their herds, so they eat more cheese and yogurt. Not to mention meat, sometimes."

"I meant the spices."

"Some of the most flavorful spices grow in the desert," Jannat said. Nothing in her tone indicated that she was chastising me, but somehow I felt chastised nonetheless.

Kabir did not speak much, but now he did. "We don't have milk," he said. "I did bring some koumiss, though. Care for a swallow or two?"

I had sampled araka, of course, which I think is distilled from koumiss, but I had never sampled koumiss itself before. It's an *al-Badia* drink, never served at the university. I accepted gladly, curious for the new experience. It was milder than I had expected, but also more sour. I took a single swallow and then handed the skin back to Kabir.

"Like it?" he asked.

"I'm not certain," I admitted. "It's a new taste to me."

Kabir nodded. "You get used to it."

Jannat finished her first flatbread. She slipped it out of the tagine onto a simple plate, which she offered to me.

As I said, it smelled wonderful, but I protested, "I couldn't possibly. It's your food."

"Of course you can. We're using your fire."

Never mind that I had only contributed a few twigs. "I suppose that is so," I said, taking the plate. I tried not to show my eagerness.

"Yours is next," Jannat said to Kabir, who grunted happily.

I murmured a quick prayer to the Lawgiver, beseeching that the Herald of the Day might favor me and the Herald of the Night might ignore me.

Even without meat, the food tasted as wonderful as it smelled.

Even though I tried not to wolf down my food, nonetheless I finished eating before either Kabir or Jannat. Given that it was only polite to attempt to answer their polite questions at a polite length, I told them that I was an instructor at the Beacon of Enlightenment. They asked what I studied. Of course I did not tell them that I was a sorcerer. Instead I told them that I studied rocks, which was stupid of me, so I told them I also studied history, the lineages of the caliphs of Pharazia.

"Rocks," Jannat said. "And history?"

Kabir merely grunted.

By this time full dark had fallen. As much to change the subject as anything, I remarked, "It's really quiet in the desert. Is it always this quiet in the desert?"

Jannat and Kabir exchanged a look.

"The desert always seems quiet compared to the city," Jannat replied.

Kabir snorted. "What my beneficent mistress means is no, not usually."

"Is that... bad?"

Another look exchanged.

"Potentially," Jannat said.

"Probably," Kabir said.

"First watch?" Jannat asked Kabir.

"I'll take it," he replied.

Jannat nodded. "Wake me when needed." She scrubbed the tagine and her now-empty plate with sand. "I'll catch some sleep while I can." She paused then, looking narrow-eyed at me.

I should note here that Jannat wore a veil, but from the first I had seen her, it had hung free to the side. Plenty of poor women in the city disregard the Confessors' decree that women must be veiled, but

the well-to-do and those who aspire to become well-to-do, they usually wear the veil. Clearly Jannat took after the *al-Badia* of the deep desert, who wore veils to keep out the sand, not prying eyes. Given her lack of modesty, I could see that her face was a pleasant sort of plain. However, rather than leaving her vulnerable under such exposure, I felt guilty for staring at her.

"Where is your tent?" she asked.

I stammered half an answer, pointing to my crumpled cloth and jumble of sticks and tangle of cords. It was answer enough.

"Kabir?" she asked. I had already gleaned that most of her questions to him were commands phrased nicely. This was not. This was an honest question.

"Sleep in my tent," he said to me, pointing so that I knew which one. "I'll sleep in Jannat's when she takes second watch."

\* \* \*

I awakened to bright light. Well, not particularly bright, in truth, but my pouch had come open, and the stones I had taken from the true Well of Spirits had spilled out. Although they glowed a soft Sebuian blue, because they had spilled directly in front of my face, they appeared bright to me at that moment.

I heard Kabir cry, "Al-Bari! Al-Bari!!" His call to his employer was followed by a sound that might have been the wind over the sand but which, even in that moment, I was certain was not. It was a hiss.

I jerked awake. I saw that the stones had spilled, and I scooped them back into my pouch. The interior of Kabir's tent immediately grew dark. Nonetheless, I found the cords which lashed the entrance shut, and I untied them enough to slip through.

Outside the tent, I saw Kabir and Jannat al-Bari surrounded by three phantasms, wispy sapphire-colored streaks. They had cobra's heads and clawed hands, and they loomed taller even than Kabir. They were insubstantial enough to tell me that they did

not belong to our mortal realm. Even so, I did not take their insubstantial nature for a sign that they could not harm me, only that I probably could not harm *them*.

As I watched, one of them lunged fangs-first at Jannat al-Bari. She stepped back and slashed at it with the scimitar that she carried. Most people in the desert wear weapons of some sort (if only because most people in the desert wear weapons), so I had paid her scimitar scant heed when we had been seated around the fire earlier. Now it caught my attention. In the darkness I could see the blade's steel contained a kind of moonlight shimmer, which somehow reminded me of the wispieness of our assailants. Where she slashed at the clawed serpent, ethereal tatters

dissipated into the night, and the serpent jerked its head away. Glancing at Kabir, I saw that he wielded a similarly shimmering weapon. I understand that such weapons are not uncommon, being blessed by the Confessors of the Lawgiver for use by their enforcers, but I could not imagine how people like Jannat al-Bari and Kabir would have acquired them. A camel merchant and her guard did not strike me as likely allies of the Confessors.

I didn't need to see anything more. I drew an invisible veil across my person, the same veil which I had used to sneak past the Vigilant in my search for the Well of Spirits. Not the false Well that they had shown me when I had revealed my purpose for journeying to the High Cliff Fortress, but the true one, deeper within the fortress. In the desert darkness it was difficult to discern the subtle graying of my vision, and of course the lack of sunlight had already stolen too much warmth. Nonetheless, even without these indications I trusted my sorcery. I slipped away from the fight.

Once I had placed two dunes between myself and the serpent spirits, I paused to inspect my pouch. I dared not open it, for fear that the blue light which would spill out, but I clutched through the leather to verify the presence of the rocks which I had taken

from around the true Well of Spirits. Six roundish stones, the largest a thumb's length in diameter, but translucent like crystal. Newly spat from the Well, they had been hot to the touch when I first found them, although they had cooled down long since. I verified the presence of all six rocks. Thus reassured I continued on.

An hour or so later, I allowed myself to halt again. Not to reinspect the stones, but to give myself a break. That revealed itself to be a mistake.

"You're headed the wrong way," Jannat al-Bari said. She pointed in a direction which was not where I had been going. "Nizwar is that way." Now she pointed where I had been headed. "That way you'll eventually run across the Beni Massat. Assuming, of course, that you don't die of thirst or starve or freeze to death beforehand."

I stared at her a moment and then remembered I was invisible, which did not explain why she was looking in my general direction.

"How did you see me?" I demanded indignantly. She pointed at my feet. I looked down at the end of a fully visible trail of prints in the sand.

"Oh," I said.

"How many serpent stones did you steal?"

"How many—what?"

Even under starlight I could see that she looked disappointed in me. That bothered me, which makes no sense, because why should a scholar care about the opinion of a camel merchant?

"Kabir saw your tent glow just before the ghost serpents showed up," Jannat al-Bari explained with a sigh. "So we know you stole some spirit stones from the Well. The question is, how many? Our lives likely depend upon your answer, and given that, I'd prefer you answer honestly."

I could have sworn that the rocks in my hip pouch had gone suddenly cold, but perhaps that was merely the vastness of the moonless night.

"Six," I said. "Six."

She sighed, and even her exhalation conveyed her fear.

"So it is, then," she said. "You don't happen to know any attack spells, do you, Nayyif al-Tawil? I fear that we may need—"

"Behind you!" I cried, pointing at a coalescing ghost serpent, its wisps glowing the same soft blue as the spirit stones.

She spun, drawing her moon-shimmer scimitar as she did so. Many performers may be found upon the streets of the great city of Phiraz, including knife-dancers and sword-dancers. As such, I have seen grace and beauty along the edge of a blade. Jannat al-Bari was neither graceful nor beautiful, but at least she was fast enough to intercept the ghost serpent's strike. I was glad I had shouted to warn her while she still had time to defend herself.

"Two more!" she shouted. "Two more!"

Right. Two more. I turned around, certain that they were forming directly behind me, and I happened to be right. The wisps were not even recognizable as serpents yet, but they were coalescing quickly. I couldn't so much hear their hissing as feel it upon my skin. Behind me came a louder, fully audible hiss, which cut off suddenly.

"Duck!" Jannat al-Bari cried.

As she rushed past me, I backpedaled, emptying my pouch as I went. All six rocks tumbled onto the sand, but I lost track of all but the two which were now glowing with increasing brightness. Both of the ghost serpents gained sudden shape, either because the spirit stones had been exposed, or because Jannat al-Bari had drawn near. She slashed her scimitar in a wide cut, which prevented one serpent from attacking. The second, however, had merely feinted, and it lunged forward, sinking its phantom fangs into Jannat's arm.

Had I been forced to make a wager beforehand upon my reaction to physical danger, I would have bet on panic and wailing. That is not flattering, but I know that I am not a brave man. I would never have guessed at the sense of calm which descended upon me, just for a crucial handful of seconds.

I pointed at each of the two glowing stones, and I shouted a phrase. The phrase was only a dozen words, but they were words older than Sebu, older than Har' Akir. I'm not certain they were meant to be spoken by a human mouth. I managed to say them, even though I felt as if they had torn out the front of my brain and set my fingers afire.

The *sorcerous dissolution* darkened the spirit stones' glow, and the ghost serpents dissipated abruptly as well.

Jannat al-Bari halted her attack. She took a step back. She wheeled on me, scimitar still in hand.

"Did you do that?" she demanded.

"*Sorcerous dissolution*," I said, nodding.

"Very good, Nanyif al-Tawil. Very good." She inhaled. "Now. We must destroy the spirit stones."

She dropped to her hands and knees, searching the sand for the now-darkened rocks. Whenever she found one, she smashed it against a flat slab of rock with the pommel of her scimitar. The now-empty stones crumbled into sand with surprising ease. If her snake-bitten forearm gave her any trouble, she did not show it. For my part, I commenced panicking and wailing. Jannat al-Bari kindly ignored me.

She had finished smashing rocks before I recovered from my reaction. She waited not patiently but with a droll resignation. When I finally quieted down, she asked me, "Feel better now?"

"Yes. Yes. I have never been so near to death."

"Have you ever cast a spell of that magnitude before?"

"Yes," I said, a little snappishly, and then I remembered this woman had come after me to save my life. I admitted, "Just—not successfully."

"You chose an excellent time to succeed. Come on. Let's head back to Kabir and the camels."

"He lives?"

"Yes. He was wounded, which is why I left him behind. Although I had a pair of elixirs, they take some time to take full effect."

"I am gladdened that he yet lives. How badly wounded are you?"

"Not at all," she said, holding out her forearm for me to inspect. "For a little while after they begin to materialize, ghost serpents cause only pain, not physical wounds. The problem, of course, is that you cannot tell when they will materialize sufficiently to wound."

"My heart soars that you are unharmed."

"Mine too. Come along."

\* \* \*

Jannat al-Bari and I trudged across the dunes back to our original camp. The journey took all night, or so it felt. Fear and magic had drained me. Fortunately we had left an obvious trail to follow back. Finally we came across the camp, where Kabir al-Zadeh waited with the camels. I realized suddenly that the poor fellow had quite likely not slept all night.

"Kabir."

"Jannat. I see you managed to save our dangerously underprepared thief. Hello, Nanyif al-Tawil. May your behavior meet the Lawgiver's approval."

"May you evade the notice of the Herald Who Flies—"

"No," Jannat al-Bari said. "No. Do not invoke *him*. Especially not under the open sky."

She and Kabir both stared angrily at me. I did not finish my sentence.



Jannat al-Bari turned to Kabir. "I'll keep an eye on Nayyif. You get some sleep." To me, she added, "You too. We leave in the morning."

I did not care for the implications. "How far would you say we are from Nizwar? I had hoped to reach it tomorrow."

Kabir snorted.

"You aren't going to Nizwar," Jannat al-Bari told me. "I am sorry, but we're taking you back to the High Cliff Fortress."

"No. No. Absolutely not."

"We aren't giving you a choice. You have meddled with forces that you don't understand. By all that's holy, you have meddled with forces that *nobody* understands! But the Vigilant understand better than anyone else, which is why we're taking you back to them."

"And if I refuse to go with you?"

"Then you will spend a very uncomfortable journey lashed to one of my camels. Tell me, Nayyif al-Tawil, why did you steal those six spirit stones?"

"To study them! I first found reference to the Well of Spirits in the *Hidden History* of Farahani. I found another in ibn Burhaan's notes. I can show you. I borrowed the relevant pages. Then finally I stumbled across Javizian's *Lost Scrolls*, which claim that the blue stones which surround the Well can be used to bind the spirits in a manner similar to how the poets of lore once bound the djinn."

"Hmm. I can think of a place where you might be able to study the spirit stones at greater leisure."

"The High Cliff Fortress?"

"Yes. Exactly."

Kabir laughed darkly. "And if you speak sweetly enough, perhaps you will be allowed to conduct your studies with both hands."

I was a thief, after all. The removal of my right hand would only be just.

More reassuringly, Jannat al-Bari said, "The Vigilant have need of scholars. Astrologers, especially, since the Well of Spirits seems to eject stones—and so ghost serpents—according to the patterns of the stars. I don't pretend to understand. But anyone with knowledge would be considered valuable, I'm certain. Especially once they know that you need both hands to cast *sorcerous dissolution*."

I dislike feeling ignorant. "How do you know all this?" I exclaimed, more vehemently than I had intended. "You're just a camel merchant!"

Jannat al-Bari had not restored her veil to its proper place. Her smile was plainly visible. Something in its shape and its hinted mysteries reminded me of her moonshimmer scimitar.

"Of course I am," she said.



# STONE AND SAND (ADVENTURE IN PHARAZIA)

BY IAN FORDAM

*In ages lost we were born from stone. To stone we return. The winds of Fate howl and scour us into sand.*

*Desert giant aphorism*

## BACKGROUND

### THE CURSE OF STONE AND SAND

The desert giants of Zakhara have been cursed by the gods. Although nobody knows why except the gods and the desert giants, the result is clear: The desert giants are all petrifying. Although the process is slow, each and every desert giant can feel the change occurring within them.

A hundred years ago, there was a woman among the desert giants named **Israa al-Sattar**. She discovered that she was with child, the first time such a miracle had happened to any desert giant since the curse had fallen upon them. Her husband, Sheikh **Arkaan al-Sattar**, was equally overjoyed, of course, but also afraid for both his wife and the child she carried. He prayed to the gods and goddesses, pleading for both mother and baby to survive the birth.

Indeed, Israa al-Sattar did give birth to her child, a fine boy whom she named **Ziyaad**. He turned to stone mere hours after he was born.

Arkaan al-Sattar fled his tent, carrying his petrified child. Several others, loyal warriors and faithful

friends, followed shortly, determined to talk him out of any rash behavior. Israa al-Sattar and her women came close behind. Yet none of them recognized the danger when Arkaan reached the place where he had prayed, and there he fell to his knees and cursed those same gods and goddesses, and he cursed Fate as well.

Sometimes the planar boundaries grow thin enough for the Dark Powers to pluck those who are not truly deserving. The sands rose in a sudden storm around Arkaan al-Sattar and the people of his tribe.

### STRANDED IN PHARAZIA

Arkaan al-Sattar and all of the al-Sattari had been drawn into the domain of Pharazia. They call the location of their arrival the **Place of the Final Stone**. Little Ziyaad was buried in the sands there, and since then every one of the al-Sattari returns there when they feel themselves crossing the final petrification threshold. One hundred years after the giants' arrival, the Place of the Final Stone has become a ring of somber rocks upon which humanlike features may still be discerned by those who inspect them carefully. Fewer than half a dozen animate desert giants now remain. Arkaan al-Sattar lingers among them, which he considers appropriate punishment for bringing his tribe to this doomed place. He suspects that he will be the last to petrify, a punishment which he accepts as his just fate.

Often the tribe scatters, dispersing to the far corners of the Amber Wastes as their hearts take them. However, they periodically gather again at the Place of the Final Stone. When they do, they usually spend several contented (sometimes even happy) months together, wandering the Nameless Quarter much as the smaller human nomads do, until the need for solitude overtakes them again.

Or unless some emergency rises.

## INTRODUCTION

### A TALE OF TWO LOST PROFESSORS

**Doktor Tord Keilhausen** and **Doktor Karita Solveig** are both professors at the University in Kantora. While examining artifacts found at the Koshka Bluffs, they stumbled across something they convinced themselves was a description of a Temple of Bast located in the so-called Valley of Death of the Amber Wastes. Given the importance of cats in Vaasi society, they managed to persuade their patron, a nephew of the Bolshnik family, to fund a small expedition in search of this temple.

However, Keilhausen and Solveig were ill-prepared for the realities of venturing into the Amber Wastes. The **Road of a Thousand Secrets** brought them to the **Oasis of the Five Palms**, as it usually does, rather than directly to the gates of **Phiraz**, as they had recklessly assumed it would. Fortunately the nomads at the oasis have encountered such foreign foolishness before, and one of them was willing to escort the two lost professors upstream to Phiraz. (For a price, admittedly, but a far lesser price than they might have paid.)

Having failed to learn anything about their own ignorance, Keilhausen and Solveig equipped themselves in Phiraz, leaving their purses almost entirely empty, and then set out into the **Nameless Quarter** with no better guide than a map sold by a particularly loquacious barber in the marketplace. The map, despite its many flaws, saved their lives.

After getting lost in the desert almost immediately and drinking most of their water, the professors realized that they could backtrack to the **Chakor River** to refill their canteens. Because of this rare good impulse, they were discovered by a band of *askars* (town guards) from the nearby settlement of **Nizwar**. The leader of the askar band was, in fact, the emir of Nizwar, a goblin named **Taaj al-Riaz**. Despite the language barrier and his own inhuman appearance, Taaj al-Riaz convinced the professors to return with them to Nizwar.

### THE TRANSLATOR

Back in Nizwar, Taaj al-Riaz introduced the two professors to **Siraaj al-Shahin**, the only man in Nizwar who spoke more than a few words of Vaasi. The professors felt an immediate rapport with Siraaj al-Shahin, urged by the translator's extensive subtle flattery. Besides that, Siraaj was also a worldly man of the city, temporarily removed by Fate from his beloved Phiraz. The two professors did not know enough to make note of the fact that Siraaj was missing his right hand, which native Pharazians understand as a sign that someone has been punished for theft.

Keilhausen and Solveig promptly hired Siraaj al-Shahin as a guide. He promised that he could take them to the site where their research indicated they would find the Temple of Bast. Although Taaj al-Riaz attempted to talk them out of this latest folly, he was unsuccessful since Siraaj controlled the conversation. The professors and their new guide departed Nizwar, back into the Nameless Quarter. At least this time Siraaj ensured that the expedition was slightly better equipped.

However, the expedition never even reached Sebu, much less the Valley of Death. At the end of its first day out of Nizwar, it endured a brief but violent sandstorm. On the second day, it stumbled across a windswept stone surface decorated with a circle of gigantic sandstone statues. (This was the **Place of the Last Stone**, of course.) The professors were highly excited by their discovery, including one particular

statue—depicting a sandstone infant, three times the size of a human infant—that they decided was small enough to haul back to Kantora. By this time the professors had finally realized how far in over their heads they were, and they seized upon the opportunity to return home with *something* to show for their efforts. Even so, the statue still weighed over 500 pounds. Hauling it back to Nizwar required three days and two annoyed camels.

Meanwhile, Taaj al-Riaz had followed the expedition undetected into the desert. He had fully expected Siraaj al-Shahin to attempt to murder the professors and steal their by-now sparse valuables, and he was determined to avert such treachery. Even though he had thus far been wrong, he was not much reassured. He kept a close eye on the expedition all the way back to Nizwar.

### BACK TO NIZWAR

When the professors and their guide returned to Nizwar, they intended to stop there only briefly. However, the infant's statue was impossible to hide, and of course it drew the attention of most of the town. Something about the statue disturbed Taaj al-Riaz, and so he insisted that it remain in town until his vizier could speak with the spirits about it. The vizier was also his mother, a *hakima* (wise woman) named **Nasifa al-Riaz**. Nasifa had taken three girls on the verge of womanhood into the desert for a week-long purification ritual.

(In truth, there is no formal ritual, merely an opportunity for Nasifa to share some of what she has learned over the years. Not only does she openly and frankly discuss all manner of marital relations, but she also teaches some self-defense and desert survival, topics which she feels are too often hidden from girls. If one of the girls appears to be spiritually sensitive, then Nasifa might teach her the fundamentals of speaking with spirits. The most important lesson, though, revolves around the importance of friendships with other women.)

The statue of the infant is being kept in a building where crops are stored, although there is plenty of room for the statue at this time of the year. Because Taaj does not entirely trust Siraaj (although he does not say so aloud), the building is guarded at all times by two askars, who stand outside the only door.

In addition, the building is occupied by **Munsif el-Younis**, a widower who recently lost his own wife and child. Because he seems to find some measure of solace in the presence of the statue of the infant, Munsif has been allowed to remain in the storehouse. After all, the only way to remove the infant's statue is through the guarded front door.

### THE TRANSLATOR'S SECRETS

Siraaj al-Shahin was indeed originally from Phiraz, just as he claimed, but he got caught attempting to steal a scroll from the University. His right hand was cut off as punishment, and he was sent away from the city. Although his missing hand marked him as a thief, Taaj al-Riaz took wary pity upon him, and allowed him to stay at the outskirts of Nizwar. Eventually Siraaj proved his value as a translator, for he had learned several foreign tongues during his time in the city.

In addition to the reason for his maiming, Siraaj al-Shahin has three additional secrets. First, that he is an *eunsuri* (sorcerer) of sand and wind. Second, that he has fumbled his way into learning how to cast spells with only his left hand. Third, that he managed to steal two scrolls before the one for which he was maimed. One of these stolen scrolls described the summoning of a mighty elemental known as an earth monolith. He recognized that his knowledge fell far short of what was necessary to cast that spell, but the infant's statue gave him the idea of *growing* an earth monolith. He intends to use the infant's statue as a seed. That intention, perhaps, counts as his final secret.



**Note:** In this adventure, the term *eunsuri* is used in place of *sorcerer* as described in the 2nd Edition *Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures* rules. The intention is to avoid confusion with sorcerers as described in later editions.

## THE INFANT'S CRY

There exists another factor which the professors and Siraaj al-Shahin did not take into account. Once taken from the protective circle of petrified giants at the Place of the Final Stone, the petrified remains of Ziyaad al-Sattar emit a continuous psychic cry. Although Ziyaad is truly gone, this emotional imprint remains. The effect is similar to a sinkhole of evil without the evil. The infant's statue is simply a sinkhole of misery.

Fortunately for everyone in Nizwar, the psychic cry does not reach all the way to Diamabel in Phiraz. However, anyone who is psychically or spiritually aware within several miles will become increasingly sensitive to the cry. This includes Nasifa al-Riaz, the *kahina* vizier of Nizwar, although she does not immediately understand the source of the projected misery. Unfortunately, though, the cry is also heard by Alghadab, Ghayz, and Damar, three *silats* (desert hags), one of whom recognizes the sinkhole as the misery of an infant.

## WHEN OUR TALE BEGINS...

So the situation stands when the party arrives in Nizwar:

Professors Keilhausen and Solveig wait impatiently for Nasifa al-Riaz to return.

Siraaj al-Shahin also waits but fearfully; the vizier's return will close off his window of opportunity. Taaj al-Riaz would wait as well, but his attention is required elsewhere. He and several of his askars have ridden to one of the outlying farms to rid it of a small pack of hyenas which are harassing its sheep.

The *silats* have their own plans for the infant's statue.

## THE ADVENTURE

### ARRIVAL IN PHARAZIA

This adventure requires the party to reach the town of Nizwar in the domain of Pharazia. If the party is not already in Pharazia, perhaps they might travel there as part of some larger storyline. Otherwise, they might have been sent by a certain Bolshnik patron to investigate what happened to Professors Keilhausen and Solveig. (The Bolshniks are not notoriously patient.) Of course, the Mists could also carry the party to Pharazia as they attempt to travel elsewhere.

Assuming that the party is traveling to Pharazia deliberately, the best-known way to reach that land is the Mistway known as the **Road of a Thousand Secrets**. However, as with all Mistways, the Dark Powers sometimes cause the Road to drift in a manner useful to them. In this case, the party—whether attempting to travel to Pharazia, passing through another Mistway while headed elsewhere, or otherwise taken by the Mists—finds themselves deposited in the desert. Not the featureless desert, fortunately. For one thing, the land is not merely sand or rock, but instead appears to be marginally arable. For another, the party can hear the sound of a river nearby. (This river has much to do with the arability of the land, of course.) If the party investigates, they discover the **Chakor River**. At the moment its waters run deep, and the Chakor's frequently brackish taste is little in evidence. Although four crocodiles sun themselves upon the banks, they are not particularly hungry and will slip away into the river rather than confront the party.

However, the crocodiles are only the second-most curious encounter at the river's edge. A woman has been seated at the bank, watching the crocodiles. Despite the pale chador which she wears, it is clear that she has a shapely figure. Her chador includes a hood but no mask, and she does not wear a veil. When she turns to face the party, her loveliness is apparent.

The woman is **Alghadab**, one of the silats mentioned above. Her sisters, who know better than to trust her restraint where children are concerned, have convinced her to stay away from the town where the infant's statue is held while they learn what the situation is. Alghadab is growing increasingly impatient, and she would disobey if she weren't sure. If pressed, Alghadab will pretend that the baby was hers and that it was taken from her, but she will not be terribly convincing. If asked for a reward, she will insist, "It is always good to have the favor of one such as I." If the conversation turns against Alghadab, particularly if the encounter turns physical, then she will jump into the Chakor and swim away, *polymorphed* into a crocodile.

Characters with appropriate skills (or well-prepared characters with a map) may recognize that they stand on the bank of either the Chakor or the **Beni Massat**. Either way, heading upstream will lead them to **Phiraz**, the mighty capitol of Pharazia. A second successful check reveals that the Chakor flows into the **Oasis of the Emptiness**, while the Beni Massat flows into the considerably more hospitable **Oasis of the Five Palms**.

Most likely the party will choose to follow the Chakor, either upstream or downstream. Either way, the Road of a Thousand Secrets will have deposited the party such that they discover **Nizwar** along the way. The more problematic situation occurs if the party heads away from the river into the Nameless Quarter. In that case, the party may encounter **Taaj al-Riaz** on his hyena-hunting expedition or perhaps even **Nasifa al-Riaz**. Either Taaj or Nasifa will direct the party toward Nizwar as best they can, given the likely language barrier. Otherwise, any number of desert encounters may occur to keep the party entertained.

### ARRIVAL AT NIZWAR

**Nizwar** is a small town on the banks of the **Chakor River**. It is not prosperous, but it sustains itself. Its emir is a goblin named **Taaj al-Riaz**, and his vizier is another goblin, his mother, who is a *kahina* (wise

that her sisters could kill her. Given that, she will seize upon the party's sudden presence to try to talk the party into "finding the baby" for her:

"Can you hear it in the wind? In your soul? The crying of a child, I know it. Please, can you find it? It needs our help."

woman) named **Nasifa al-Riaz**. Taaj is married to a human woman, **Zahra bint Hasaana**. If the party has arrived by following the Chakor, then both Taaj and Nasifa will be absent from the town. Taaj is on a hunting trip with several of his askars, and Nasifa is performing a week-long "purification ritual" for three girls on the verge of womanhood. However, Zahra will welcome the party to Nizwar on her husband's behalf.

Everybody who lives in Nizwar speaks Pharazian, and most speak a spattering of modern Akiran. (Taaj and Nasifa also speak Midani, an Outlander tongue.) For communicating with foreigners, which is occasionally required, the Nizwari rely upon **Siraaj al-Shahin**, who used to live in Phiraz and is therefore much more cosmopolitan than anyone native to Nizwar. If none of the party members speak Pharazian well, then Zahra bint Hasaana will fetch Siraaj to translate for them. In addition to languages of the Amber Wastes, Siraaj speaks good Vaasi and Mordentish.

If that should prove insufficient, then Zahra will request the aid of **Tord Keilhausen** and **Karita Solveig**, two professors from the **University in Kantora** who are staying in town. The DM may assume that between the two of them, Keilhausen and Solveig speak some language of the Core shared with at least one PC, and of course they speak Vaasi in common with Siraaj al-Shahin.

And so: One way or another, the party is welcomed to Nizwar and offered the hospitality of the town. During the welcoming, a towns person rushes up with food in hand: a piece of flatbread, smeared with crushed chickpeas and chopped olives. Zahra formally accepts the flatbread, making it hers, and then offers it to the party. Through translators, she

explains the implications: If the party accepts this food, then they are bound as host and guests for three days. Pharazians know that not all foreigners share their notion of hospitality, appallingly enough, but that only makes it all the more crucial that they demonstrate proper behavior.

Once food has been offered and accepted, all of the assembled townsfolk will visibly relax.

### THE CARAVANSERAI

The largest building in Nizwar is the caravanserai, where all travellers stay with their animals and their goods. (Occasionally the nomads of the Nameless Quarter hide here as well, shielded by the roof from the wrathful gaze of the **Herald of Twilight**.) The party is expected to stay in the caravanserai along with Professors Keilhausen and Solveig. Siraaj al-Shahin has his own residence at the edge of town, but he accompanies the professors and the party to serve as translator. (Also to cadge food.) As an important public building, the caravanserai is officially owned by Emir Taaj al-Riaz, but it is operated by **Hanif al-Ahmad**, his wife **Najaat**, and their children. Both Hanif and Najaat are beside themselves at the hope of unanticipated gratuities, and they will do everything they can to make the party feel welcome. They serve a dinner which is lavish by Nizwari standards, and they will sulk if they do not receive the aforementioned hoped-for gratuities or at least exorbitant praise. Fortunately Keilhausen and Solveig, being Vaasi, are well used to the notion of bribery and can explain the proper way to interact with Hanif and Najaat. If Hanif and Najaat's palms and/or egos are sufficiently greased, they will produce a skin of *koumis*, that is, fermented mare's milk. The Confessors would not approve, but what the Herald of Dusk does not see goes unpunished, eh?

This encounter is primarily an opportunity for the PCs and NPCs to interact. While the NPCs will ask questions of the PCs and listen avidly to their answers, they are also willing to discuss themselves.

The party can learn much of the information from the *Introduction* section.

Attentive characters will overhear an innocuous-seeming exchange between Solveig and Keilhausen: "Have you seen that old coffee woman tonight?" she asks, and he replies, "No, I haven't. I wonder where she is?" The two professors are referring to **Ghayz**, one of the silat sisters, although neither of them knows her name. Upon their return to Nizwar, she snuck her way into the caravanserai, veiling herself from Hanif and Najaat al-Ahmad. However, to the professors she pretended to be part of the al-Ahmad family, saying very little but periodically bringing them coffee. If one of the PCs ask about the old coffee woman, the professors will try to explain her. Their descriptions won't mean anything to the PCs, of course, but more importantly, they don't mean anything to any of the al-Ahmad family who overhear the exchange. After further discussion, everybody at the caravanserai will realize that they have no idea who "the old coffee woman" is. Najaat might observe that the supply of coffee beans is unexpectedly low.

At some point in the evening either Najaat or Hanif will excuse themselves to their guests, promising to return shortly. They are taking a bit of food to a poor fellow who lost his wife and child just months ago, and of course hasn't been the same since. The whole town grieves for this Munsif el-Younis. He forgets to eat, can you believe it? That's why the al-Ahmadi bring him a bit of food at each mealtime. (Although Taaj al-Riaz reimburses them from the town's coffers, they would likely provide the charity even if he didn't. Munsif is well-regarded in Nizwar.)

Furthermore, over the course of the meal, someone in the party is bound to notice that Siraaj al-Shahin is missing his right hand. Siraaj does not try hard to hide this; it is too noticeable to hide. However, if asked about this injury, Siraaj will say (with greatly offended dignity), "Your question is very rude, but you are foreigners. You do not know any better. The removal of one's hand is the traditional punishment for those whom the Confessors have accused of

theft." If asked what he stole, Siraaj will reply angrily, "You think that I need to have stolen something to have been accused by the Confessors? I assure you, that is not true." PCs should realize that Siraaj feels anger, not shame, at his maiming.

Before the conversation continues any further, it is interrupted by the arrival of Taaj al-Riaz. He and his askars have returned from their hunt, having caught the mated pair of hyenas who had been threatening Nizwari livestock. However, upon hearing of their additional guests from his wife Zahra, Taaj's good mood diminishes. As much as he wishes to enjoy a quiet evening around a fire with his people, duty requires him to greet his new guests and see to their comfort. And so he does.

However, Taaj al-Riaz is a ranger and a goblin besides. Unless one of the PCs is unusually perceptive, Taaj will approach them unnoticed, at least until he draws attention to himself. If the professors have been given opportunity to complain about Taaj's refusal to allow them to depart with their massive artifact, he says, "In your *Nova Vaasa*, is this how guests speak of their hosts?" he asks sharply. "If so, I should never visit your land. I fear that I would act most inappropriately." He accepts Keilhausen and Solveig's fumbling apologies, because that is what good hosts do, even for poor guests. After that the mood lightens.

Like the professors, Taaj is also willing to talk with the PCs, answering any reasonable questions that are posed to him. Visitors are usually curious about his species (very few recognize goblins as anything but not-humans) and the fact that he's an Outlander and how he ascended to become emir of Nizwar. As such, Taaj has grown accustomed to talking about himself as a way to ease visitors' discomfort. In most cases, visitors are reassured once Taaj idly mentions that he adheres to the faith of the Lawgiver.

Apart from conversation, nothing unusual happens at the caravanserai. The silat Ghayz is smart enough to stay away from a band of adventurers, after all.

## STANDING WATCH

If wary PCs sleep in shifts, the guards each shift see nothing unusual or alarming within the caravanserai.

Since coming to Pharazia, Tord Keilhausen has been suffering from insomnia, awakened by his worries in the middle of the night. He usually calms himself by enjoying a pipe full of Vechor's finest tobacco before he can fall back asleep. Since Karita Solveig has made very clear that she considers smoking an odious personal habit, Keilhausen steps outside the caravanserai for his indulgence. (Solveig knows he's still smoking, of course.)

Keilhausen offers to share his pipe with any PC who is still awake, and in addition to that, he strongly recommends that the PC step outside with him to admire the night sky. "I've never seen anything like it," he says. "The land is so vast, the sky clearly feels compelled to grow vaster by comparison. Oh, the moon! And so many stars! And so much darkness in between. It's lovely. It's truly lovely." He is not at all offended if either of his offers is declined.

However, if any of the characters should step outside of the caravanserai and look out over the desert, they might just see the silhouette of an attractive young woman, seated atop a dune. The bright moonlight makes her look vaguely unreal, or perhaps that is just how she is. If anyone attempts to approach her, she slips into the distance before they can draw too near.

The woman is Alghadab, the silat whom the party encountered on the banks of the Chakor. She is still heeding her older sisters' admonition to stay out of town, but her resolve is wavering.

## THE THEFT IN THE NIGHT

Siraaj al-Shahin knows that he is running out of time, especially now that Taaj al-Riaz has returned to Nizwar. After Siraaj departs the caravanserai for the evening, ostensibly heading home, he eventually circles back to the storehouse where the infant's statue is being held. He casts *sleep* upon the askar



guards; when only one is affected, he casts his second *sleep* spell upon the other. He then bestows *invisibility* upon himself and enters the storehouse.

Unfortunately for Siraaj and even more unfortunately for Munsif el-Younis, the *eunsuri* has forgotten the widower. Nothing for it, though. While *invisible*, Siraaj strikes Munsif over the head with a rake, killing the poor man. From there, Siraaj casts *floating disk* beneath the infant's statue, and then he also heaps on Munsif's corpse, the incriminating rake, and all of the bloodied millet that he can find to scoop up. Despite his worries about being seen, Siraaj slips out of Nizwar without difficulty.

Initially Siraaj heads north along the Chakor, as if he were heading toward Phiraz. However, after several hours' travel he stops to drop off everything but the infant's statue. One *move sand* spell later, both victim and murder weapon are hidden from view. Only then does Siraaj cast *lesser fly* upon himself and change direction, heading into the Nameless Quarter without leaving tracks.

Siraaj reaches a rocky outcropping an hour before dawn. He leaves the infant's statue there, partially hidden between two rocks, and returns to Nizwar.

### DISCOVERY AT DAWN

The theft in the night is discovered at dawn, when the first of the two sleeping askars awakens. Taaj al-Riaz is quickly alerted. He sends more askars to the caravanserai, primarily to detain all visitors and then to search the building for the missing statue and the missing widower.

The askars detaining the visitors are in an awkward position. They feel that they risk violating the bond of salt in regards to anyone innocent of the theft of the infant's statue. On the other hand, if any of the guests were involved in the theft, then clearly they broke the bond first. As a result, the askars will be brusque until they have searched the caravanserai and discovered no sign of the infant's statue.

However, once the professors, the party and the al-Ahmadi have all been cleared, the askars will noticeably relax. If the party insists on getting involved, then the askars will guide them to the storehouse. The professors have no desire to be detained, and so they may even urge the party to offer their aid. Is it not the duty of guests to aid their hosts? In fact, the professors will gladly tag along to the warehouse, if only to satisfy their curiosity.

Regarding the visitors to Nizwar, Taaj al-Riaz is in the same awkward situation as his askars. Moreover, he figures that the party's continued presence after the disappearance of the statue argues in favor of their innocence. Most crucially, though, he suspects that Fate has placed the party in Nizwar at just the right time to help. Given all of that, if the party wishes to assist, he will accept their assistance.

(For that matter, if the party does not offer their assistance, Taaj may summon them to the warehouse to request their aid, particularly if the previous night's conversation revealed that any of the PCs possess magical ability.)

A careful search of the storehouse will reveal newly-dried blood on the brick floor near where the infant's statue had been placed. The blood is hidden beneath a pile of millet. After summoning his *floating disk*, Siraaj al-Shahin piled on all of the bloodied millet he could find, and then he attempted to hide the stains on the floor with unbloodied millet. Despite these attempts at obscurement, the bloodstains are blatant indication to Taaj that violence occurred here.

The question, Taaj feels, is who was the perpetrator and who was the victim? It seems clear that Munsif el-Younis was either one or the other.

Meanwhile, two of Taaj's askars arrive at the storehouse with Siraaj in tow. Although Siraaj has provided good service to Nizwar by acting as a translator, Taaj is canny enough to consider him a likely suspect. Nonetheless, Siraaj is indignant. "If I somehow stole the statue, do you really think I would still be here?" (He does fully intend to be gone

before Nasifa al-Riaz returns, suspecting that she is capable of detecting untruths.) "Effendi, can you not send one of your askars to look for statue tracks? As heavy as that statue is, it couldn't have gone far without leaving traces, could it?"

It's not a bad idea. If none of the PCs volunteer to go seek tracks, then Taaj will go himself. Either way, the tracks leading toward Phiraz should be discovered. The tracks were made by a single person wearing sandals (which could be any Nizwari native) and reveal no sign of the statue, but they are the strongest lead that the investigation has.

### THE CORPSE IN THE SAND

If the PCs follow the tracks out of Nizwar, they will eventually reach the end of the trail. It will be difficult to tell at first that they have reached the end, because the actual end will appear no different from the various breaks which the party has already encountered during their search. (Wind is not kind to tracks in the desert.) However, unlike the other breaks, the party will be unable to find any indication that the trail resumes. After sufficient searching, any trackers who have been following the trail become convinced that the trail ends here.

Moreover, diligent searchers will also find the corpse of Munsif el-Younis. (Wind is not kind to those who hide bodies either.) His wounds clearly show where he was struck by the rake at least twice. From there, the party has no difficulty digging up the murder weapon and many handfuls of bloodied millet.

There is no sign of the infant's statue, of course. Siraaj's *floating disk* tracelessly carried it off to the southwest.

### FLIGHT...

As soon as Taaj al-Riaz (and potentially the party) leaves town, Siraaj al-Shahin decides that his welcome is on the verge of becoming overstayed. He

has rested long enough to recover his low-level spells. A bit of *invisibility* and a bit of *lesser fly* later, he's floating off to the outcropping where he stashed the infant's statue.

Unfortunately for Siraaj, though, Taaj does not trust him. He asked **Anwar el-Azimi**, the captain of the askars of Nizwar, to keep an eye on the translator. However, stealth is not one of his virtues, so he assigned someone more suitable to the task: **Inaaya el-Azimi**, his eleven-year-old daughter. She is a dutiful girl and clever, not to mention capable of remaining still and silent when given good reason.

She witnesses the following: Siraaj emerges from his ramshackle home, looks around, completely fails to pay attention to her, and then retreats into his house, leaving his door open. Moments later the sandy ground outside his door stirs, even though there is no wind and nobody visible is there to stir it. Inaaya hears Siraaj mutter, though, and then the stirring ceases. Despite being young, Inaaya is smart enough to recognize when magic is at play. She runs straight to her father to report.

(If the PCs have not accompanied Taaj into the desert to follow Siraaj's false trail, then perhaps one of them could be the one to spot Siraaj's departure.)

However, there is another detail which Inaaya may recall while making her report. There was an old woman, she says, also watching Siraaj's house. Inaaya did not recognize the woman, but when she went to investigate, she realized that the woman had vanished. (The woman was the *silat Ghayz*, still veiling herself from the Nizwari. Inaaya saw her only because children are better at piercing such veils.)

### ... AND PURSUIT

Upon hearing Inaaya el-Azimi's report, Taaj al-Riaz decides to hunt down Siraaj al-Shahin. He knows that Siraaj will not venture any closer to Phiraz. While that still leaves many directions for someone to venture, Siraaj is an *al-Hadhar* (city-dweller) at heart. He will hop from shelter point to shelter point rather than risk an overnight stay in the trackless desert.

(Professors Keilhausen and Solveig can attest to this behavior.) There are only so many shelter points within a day's travel. The most obvious is a particular rock outcropping.

The only citizen of Nizwar who knows any magic is Nasifa al-Riaz, who is due to return shortly, but has not yet arrived. Given that Siraaj al-Shahin appears to possess magic of some sort, Taaj requests the party's aid. Nizwar is not a wealthy town, but Taaj can offer a modest payment of 500 penance (gold pieces). Perhaps more enticingly, Taaj is also willing to allow the party to keep any magic items which Siraaj might possess.

While Taaj trusts his wife's leadership in times of peace, he is unwilling to leave Nizwar without a combatant leader in times of trouble. Therefore either Taaj al-Riaz or his trusted captain, Anwar al-Azimi, will accompany the party, but not both. If the DM feels that the party needs more support, then Taaj may send additional low-level askars along as well. In general, the DM should adjust Taaj or Anwar's levels as necessary to aid but not overshadow the party.

In addition, Taaj will provide camels for the expedition to ride to the outcropping. If the PCs are not proficient in riding camels, then this offer provides less speed advantage than it otherwise would, but at least the party will have beasts of burden to haul the infant's statue back if needed.

Under no circumstance will Taaj or Anwar allow Inaaya to become a part of the expedition.

### THE THIRD SISTER

Along the way to the outcropping, the party encounters **Damar**, the third of the silat sisters. She coalesces from sand form, materializing atop a nearby dune. One moment she appears hunched and feral, nearly crouching on all fours, and the next she appears as a white-haired crone leaning upon a thorny staff. She hails the party and warns them to turn around and leave well enough alone.

"The *eunsuri* will feed us just fine," she warns. "There is no need for you to fill our bellies as well."

If asked about the infant's statue, Damar sighs a mighty sigh. "My little sister has promised to take good care of the baby. You needn't worry yourselves over it."

If threatened or otherwise annoyed, Damar will turn to sand and drift away.

### ENCOUNTER AT THE OUTCROPPING

Siraaj al-Shahin has indeed gone to the outcropping, as predicted. For months he has used it as his lair away from home. Here he practiced re-learning his sorcery one-handed, with decreased risk of being observed. As part of his experimentation, he has been creating constructs which he calls *miniliths*. He believes that he is summoning minor stone elementals, but in truth he is binding desert spirits already present to sandstone chunks which are also already present. At the moment these spirits are still entertained by the novelty of having bodies, and they are willing to obey Siraaj's commands.

Despite his attempts to obfuscate his tracks, Siraaj still anticipates that Taaj al-Riaz will find him before he has the opportunity to move the infant's statue to a more distant location. He has already cast *floating disk* and *invisibility* for the day, but he has other magic ready for defense. In addition, he has ordered his miniliths to form a defensive perimeter, concealed beneath the sands. The smallest minilith will serve as a scout, notifying him whenever strangers approach.

When the party arrives at the outcropping, the scout reports their presence, and so Siraaj is ready for them. (As ready as he gets, anyway. This sort of violent confrontation isn't really his strong point.) He will command his miniliths to attack, at which point they will rise from the surrounding sands. He hopes that the party will be caught by surprise. After shouting commands to the miniliths (directing them to attack the most threatening foes, for example), he

will begin to cast spells, likely opening *with explosive vortex*.

However, a round or two after the fight has begun, the other faction will enter the fray. The silats are also gathered at the outcropping. Alghadab is perched at the top, and she will hurl flame (from *produce flame*) from above. She is likely to target Siraaj al-Shahin unless one of the PCs attacks her. Meanwhile, Ghayz and Damar will flank the party from opposite sides, focusing upon spellcasters.

Potentially the most interesting part of this combat is how Siraaj al-Shahin and the party might react to the silats. An impromptu alliance might help both eunsuri and party survive the unexpected attack.

If the party does not ally with Siraaj, then the *eunsuri* will probably not survive the fight, not against two sets of foes. Damar is unwilling to lose her life over Alghadab's folly, and so she will retreat if seriously threatened. Ghayz might remain a round or two longer, but she's also unwilling to sacrifice herself. Once abandoned by her sisters, Alghadab knows she is foolish to stand alone against such formidable opponents. In that circumstance she will flee, supported by Ghayz and her trick of turning *invisible*.

### THREE BOOKS

The infant's statue is dusted with sand but otherwise clearly visible near the mouth of the outcropping. Tucked within crevices of the outcropping are Siraaj's other valuables: a pouch of coins, several skins of water, a single skin of *koumis*, and a pouch of sheep jerky.

More crucially, Siraaj's spellbook is wrapped within a protective leather sheet. It contains all of the spells he knows, accompanied by copious notes (in Pharazian) describing how to cast the spells one-handed. Considerable practice is required to learn this trick.

Included with the spellbook are two other volumes, the books which Siraaj al-Shahin stole from the University of Phiraz. One volume is dedicated to the

conjunction of an earth monolith; the accuracy of this volume is subject to the Dungeon Master's discretion, but even if accurate, *unleash monolith* is an 8th level spell, available only to a sufficiently powerful *eunsuri*, elemental mage, or *sha'ir* (genie wizard).

The second book may serve as a useful plot hook, if the DM has such prepared, or perhaps it is a simple volume of Pharazian love poetry written in the waning days of the rule of the Last Caliph.

### THE PETTY TYRANT

If Siraaj somehow survives and remains in possession of the book containing the ritual for summoning the earth monolith, then he might someday succeed in summoning one. He is not foolish enough to take his new ally to Phiraz, so he will probably content himself with taking over Nizwar instead. Siraaj would be a petty tyrant, not necessarily particularly evil, but certainly highly inconvenient.

### EPILOGUE

At the end of the adventure, Siraaj al-Shahin has most likely been killed, either in the fight at the outcropping or executed as punishment for the murder of Munsif el-Younis. However, he might avert this fate if he made a bargain with the party at the outcropping. (Except that Fate is never averted, merely revealed.) Regardless, even if Siraaj somehow survives, he is no longer welcome in Nizwar.

The infant's statue is returned to town, where the party is free to participate in the ensuing discussion of what to do with it. The Nizwari all believe that the ultimate decision falls upon Taaj's shoulders, but the PCs may disagree.

Fortunately, Nasifa al-Riaz, the emir's vizier, has returned during the party's absence. Her consultation with the spirits is short. Afterward she declares, "The infant is crying. It is always crying, if you know how to listen."



As she speaks, a sandstorm arises, darkening the sky and filling the streets of Nizwar with a thick layer of sand. Clearly the sandstorm is unnatural, and many of the Nizwari rush to take shelter. (Taaj and Nasifa do not, nor does Anwar al-Azimi, although he does send his daughter Inaaya away.) Attentive PCs notice that the ground trembles throughout the town.

In the thick of the sandstorm, Arkaan al-Sattar arrives, accompanied by two of his giant companions. The companions each carry a mighty spear, but Arkaan is empty-handed. Each giant stands three times the height of a normal man, and they all appear to be more than half petrified already. Although the rockiness of their faces lends them an inhuman appearance, Arkaan's eyes seem very human and very sad. In a deep, rumbling voice, he urges, "Give me my son." Even PCs who do not speak Pharazian will probably be able to guess at his request.

Nasifa is a wise woman, and Taaj has done his best to learn from her. Both of them make haste to obey, not just out of fear, but because they can discern the rightness of the giant's request. If the party objects to surrendering the infant's statue, then they will probably find themselves in a physical confrontation with the desert giants and perhaps the Nizwari as well.

Alternately, if the party reacts more reasonably but a bit of concluding drama feels appropriate, Tord Keilhausen may insist upon his right to take his rightfully pilfered treasure back to Kantora. He is desperate to have something to show for his patron's expenses. Fortunately, if nobody else can talk him down from such foolishness, then Karita Solveig can do so.

Eventually, though, Arkaan al-Sattar will claim Ziyaad's stony corpse. Cradling the statue to his chest, he and his companions depart. He pauses only long enough to state the aphorism quoted at the start of this adventure: *In ages lost we were born from stone. To stone we return. The winds of Fate howl and scour us into sand.*

Minutes later, the giants are gone and the sandstorm subsides, as does the psychic misery which clings to the statue of Ziyaad al-Sattar.

## AFTER THE EPILOGUE

At the conclusion of this adventure, what happens next likely depends upon why the PCs have come to Pharazia. They may have a larger mission to pursue. Alternately, they may wish to find a way to return home, particularly if they arrived in Pharazia by chance. If they were hired by the Bolshnik patron, they may decide to help seek the Temple of Bast in Sebua.

Except in the latter case, Professors Tord Keilhausen and Karita Solveig prepare to slink back to Kantora with nothing to show for their expedition. Even though this failure probably means the curtailing of their academic careers, after all they have witnessed in Pharazia, both professors know how much worse their fates could have been.

## NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

### ALGHADAB, GHAYZ, AND DAMAR (SILAT SISTERS)

#### Alghadab

hp 42, hd 7, ac 3, thac0 13 (10 w/STR)

**special:** 30% magic resistance; produce flame

#### Ghayz

hp 54, hd 9, ac 0, thac0 11 (8 w/STR)

**special:** 55% magic resistance; invisibility

#### Damar

hp 54, hd 9, ac 0, thac0 11 (8 w/STR)

**special:** 55% magic resistance; sand form

## Silats (All)

**special:** claw/claw/bite (1d4+7/1d4+7/2d4+7); 19 strength (+3 to-hit/+7 damage); only harmed by magical or iron weapons; regenerate 1hp/round; immune to poison; immune to mind-affecting spells; polymorph 3/day

Alghadab, Ghayz, and Damar ("Anger", "Rage", and "Devastation") are three *silats* (desert hags) who have formed a coven. They call themselves sisters, although they are not biologically related.

**Alghadab** is the youngest. She is beautiful (if unworldly) in her natural form, and she remains beautiful when *polymorphed*. Even when polymorphed, though, she always has a horse's tail. Fortunately for her, the tail is easy to hide beneath a chador.

Every since she reached maturity, Alghadab has been obsessed with little children, particularly babies. Occasionally she has encountered a family of nomads crossing the desert. Inevitably, she kills the parents and takes the children for her own, which ends in frustration because she does not understand that babies cannot eat gobbets of meat.

**Ghayz** is the middle sister. She typically appears as a middle-aged woman, modestly dressed. Her boots hide her hooves. She presents herself as a jolly person, but she is the cruelest of the sisters. However, she is also the sister most likely to be swayed by polite, proper behavior or poetic flattery.

Ghayz is coldly pragmatic toward children. In the years before the coven formed, she bore three children to mortal men. She abandoned the boy-child to the desert, but she left the girl-children with their fathers. Now she waits patiently for her daughters to grow old enough to become hags themselves. She does look forward to seeing the chaos they cause. In the meantime she tends to spoil Alghadab.

**Damar** is the eldest of the silats. While she sometimes *polymorphs* herself into the guise of a

young woman, she most often appears as an elderly crone, often garbed in dirty and indecent rags. Although she is old enough to appear fully human when she wishes, she still suffers a minor limitation: Her hair will always be bone-white. Fortunately for Damar, this give-away is not obvious when she appears as a crone.

While not quite old enough to be a silat matriarch, Damar is plenty old enough to look down on her sisters for their youthful foolishness. She certainly isn't inclined to get herself killed over Alghadab's obsession with children or the way Ghayz pampers Alghadab.

As for children, Damar thinks they are a tasty treat.

In addition to the typical abilities possessed by all silat, each of the sisters possesses an additional special ability which she may use at will. Alghadab can *produce flame*. Ghayz can become *invisible*. Damar may assume sand form, which should be treated as a marginally more solid *gaseous form*.

In most realms, such as Zakhara, adult silats may cast *polymorph other* three times per day. Neither Ghayz nor Damar use this ability, either because they cannot or because the Dark Powers turn it back upon them somehow.

Finally, the silat sisters also possess the ability to communicate telepathically. This ability is so subtle that PCs may not initially realize that the silats are not actually speaking their native tongue.

## ANWAR-EL-AZIMI (ASKAR CAPTAIN)

### 4th level human fighter (askar)

str 15, dex 12, con 15, int 13, wis 14, cha 17

hp 35, hd F4, ac 8, thac0 17

**weapon proficiencies** (5): scimitar (specialized, 2 slots); jambiya; javelin; \*

**non-weapon proficiencies** (4): riding (land-based, camel); survival (desert, 2 slots); \*

**languages** (3): Pharazian (0 slots); (3 more)

**special:** 15 constitution (+1 hit point adjustment)

**equipment:** scimitar (1d8/1d8, sf 5); jambiya (1d4, sf 3); javelins (x6) (1d6/1d6, sf 4, rof 1); leather armor (AC8); shield

If Pharazia offered a god less reprehensible than the Lawgiver to worship, then Anwar el-Azimi probably would have become a *faris* (holy warrior). As it is, he is the captain of the askars in Nizwar. He has the full faith and trust of Emir Taaj al-Riaz. Fortunately he also deserves it.

Inaaya is his daughter.

### ARKAAN AL-SATTAR (DESERT GIANT)

**desert giant**

HP 85, HD 13, AC 1, thac0 7

**special:** spear (2d6+7 damage) or pummel (1d10); camouflage; specialized in spear (+1 to-hit, +2 damage, 2 attacks/round); summon sandstorm

Like most desert giants, Arkaan prefers to attack with his spear. Unlike many desert giants, he has become specialized in that weapon, gaining the bonuses listed above.

Although Arkaan is not a full sand-shifter, he does possess the ability to summon (and subsequently dismiss) a sandstorm 1/day. This sandstorm provides more of a veil than a threat.

Arkaan's stat block may also be used for his companions, except that they are not specialized and cannot summon sandstorms.

### HANIF AND NAJAAT AL-AHMAD (CARAVANSERI OPERATORS)

The operators of the caravanseri in Nizwar. They have several children, not yet grown, who assist. They are great believers in Pharazian tip culture, but make no mistake, they are also great believers in the duties of hosts towards their guests.

### INAAYA EL-AZIMI (DUTIFUL DAUGHTER)

The daughter of Anwar el-Azimi.

### KARITA SOLVEIG (PROFESSOR)

Karita Solveig is a Professor of Foreign Studies at the University in Kantora. She is intelligent but chirpily optimistic, which makes her seem even more naive than she is.

Although Karita is only a few years younger than her traveling companion, Tord Keilhausen, her round face and smooth skin give her a perpetually cherubic expression, except of course when she's furious because she feels she isn't being taken seriously. Given her usually gentle nature, if she confronts someone all red-faced and screaming, then they've probably earned it and then some.

### MUNSIK EL-YOUNIS (WIDOWER)

Recently lost his wife and child, and still very much in mourning. He has just enough psychic ability to be sensitive to the misery in the cry of the infant's statue.

### NAJIFA AL-RIAZ (VIZIER TO THE EMIR OF NIZWAR)

**6th level goblin priest (kahina)**

str 10, dex 12, con 15, int 14, wis 17, cha 14

hp 39, hd P6, ac 10, thac0 18

**weapon proficiencies** (2+1): jambiya; quarterstaff; sling

**non-weapon proficiencies** (4+2): haggling; healing (2 slots); musical instrument (pipes); survival (desert, 2 slots)

**languages** (4): Midani (0 slots); Pharazian; (3 more)

**spells (1st level)** (3+2): cure light wounds; cure light wounds; endure heat; purify food and drink; sanctuary

**spells (2nd level)** (3+2): augury; barkskin; resist fire; slow poison; speak with animals

**spells (3rd level)** (2+1): dispel magic; locate object; starshine

**special:** detect truth in the spoken word (WIS); discern true class and station (WIS); see secret doors, concealed panels, etc. (WIS); detect illusions and mirages (WIS but -5 for genie magic); cannot turn undead

**equipment:** quarterstaff (1d6, sf 4); jambiya (1d4, sf 3); pipes

Nasifa al-Riaz is both mother of and vizier to Taaj al-Riaz, the emir of Nizwar. She is reknowned for her wisdom and her ribald humor. She is also a *kahina*, the leader of the spirit-worship cult in Nizwar.

### Background

Nasifa grew up in an un-Enlightened tribe upon Zakhara (or perhaps an analog), and she was one of the people in her tribe who argued for Enlightenment and subsequent integration into Zakharan society. She never became a fervent convert to any particular one of the Great Gods, but she was broadly grateful to them all. She sees no conflict regarding her continued worship of the spirits of the land, and none of the Great Gods have ever manifested displeasure.

When Nasifa's son Taaj was lost to the Mists, Nasifa did something most people would consider unthinkable: She beseeched the gods and the spirits to send her after him so she could lend him aid. Apparently they listened, and she has lived in Nizwar with her son ever since.

### SIRA AJ AL-SHAHIN (TRANSLATOR)

#### 7th level sorcerer of sand and wind

str 11, dex 10, con 15, int 16, wis 11, cha 14  
hp 31, hd W7, ac 10, thac0 18

**weapon proficiencies** (1+1): jambiya; darts

**non-weapon proficiencies** (4+2): ancient history; artistic ability (calligraphy); artistic ability (poetry); etiquette; riding, land-based (horse); spellcraft

**languages:** Pharazian (0 slots); Modern Akiri, Ancient Akiri (2 slots), Vaasi, Mordentish

**spells (1st level)** (4): move sand; shield; sleep; Tenser's floating disk

**spells (2nd level)** (3): flying jambiya; invisibility; lesser fly

**spells (3rd level)** (2): explosive vortex; protection from normal missiles

**spells (4th level)** (1): stonewall

**equipment:** jambiya (x2) (1d4, sf 3); darts (x8) (1d3/1d2, sf 2, rof 3)

Note that Siraaj al-Shahin will rearrange his spell list for special purposes, for example, stealing the infant's statue. The spell list given above represents what he has memorized the day of the confrontation at the rock outcropping.

Siraaj al-Shahin is a man of considerable ambition and considerable pride, but lacking sufficient direction. For example, he is enamored of the notion of summoning an earth monolith. He hasn't particularly thought through what he would do with one, but if he could summon one, that would justify the price he has paid for that knowledge, wouldn't it?

### TAAJ AL-RIAZ (EMIR OF NIZWAR)

#### 5th level goblin ranger (desert rider)

str 13, dex 15, con 17, int 13, wis 14, cha 14  
hp 47, hd F5, ac 9, thac0 16

**weapon proficiencies** (5): spear (specialized, 2 slots); javelin; short scimitar; jambiya

**non-weapon proficiencies** (4): tracking (per class, 0 slots, +1 bonus); riding (horse specialization, per kit, 0 slots); survival (desert, per kit, 0 slots); awareness (2 slots); direction sense; riding (land-based, camel)

**languages** (3): Midani (0 slots); Pharazian; (2 more)

**ranger abilities:** use two weapons; species enemy; animal empathy; hide in shadows: 31%; move silently: 40%

**special:** 15 dexterity (-1 defensive adjustment); 17 constitution (+3 hit point adjustment)

**equipment:** spear (1d6/1d8, sf 6 → +1 to-hit, 1d6+2/1d8+2, sf 6); javelins (x6) (1d6/1d6, sf 4, rof 1); short scimitar (1d6/1d8, sf 5); jambiya (1d4, sf 3)

Foreigners from the Core or the Outland worlds might be surprised to learn that the emir of Nizwar is a goblin, but Pharazians find it only slightly odd. Emir Taaj al-Riaz is a faithful follower of the Lawgiver, after all, and so his ancestry is a curiosity rather than a concern. Besides, he is a skilled warrior, particularly



with the spear, and a skilled rider of horse and camel alike.

In addition to being a worshipper of the Lawgiver, Taaj al-Riaz also follows the spirit-worshipping cult led by his mother. This, too, might surprise foreigners, but spirit worship remains common in Pharazia outside of Phiraz, despite the intolerance of Diamabel.

### Background

Taaj al-Riaz was not originally born in Pharazia. He was born on an Outlander world, either Zakhara or an analog thereof. He was a member of the first generation of his clan to be Enlightened from birth, and even at a young age he became convinced that his people had benefited from joining Enlightened society far more than they had sacrificed anything. From his mother's tales, Taaj knew that goblin life before Enlightenment had been a miserable, brutish affair.

Although Taaj was technically city-born, he has spent most of his life outside of protective walls, eventually becoming a member of the auxiliary cavalry. One night he was part of a patrol which was drawn into this Mists. The patrol emerged near Nizwar, which was under attack by a horde of shadowy creatures. Most of Taaj's fellow Outlanders died, but he survived and was welcomed into Nizwari society. After several years of service defending Nizwar, Taaj was appointed emir by the town elders when the previous emir expired (apparently of natural causes, oddly enough).

Since coming to Pharazia, Taaj has adapted as best he can. He believes that the Lawgiver is an aspect of Kor the Venerable. Even if he cannot understand why Kor is so unforgiving in Pharazia, nonetheless he still believes.

### TORD KEILHAUSEN (PROFESSOR)

Tord Keilhausen is a Professor of Foreign Studies at the University in Kantora.

Tord is middle-aged, but apart from the gray in his hair and the fine lines on his face, you wouldn't know it. He is fit and muscular and tall besides, and he has a most impressive mustache.

Tord is approximately 84% bravado by weight. When thwarted, his voice acquires a whiny tone that detracts significantly from his overall attractiveness. Nonetheless, he does possess a certain amount of physical bravery, which is part of how he found himself in the Amber Wastes to begin with.

### ZAHRA BINT HASAANA (WIFE OF THE EMIR OF NIZWAR)

Zahra bint Hasaana is Taaj al-Riaz's wife and therefore the emira of Nizwar. She is pretty (but not unusually so) and unprepossessingly humble.

Zahra is short for a human, just barely over five feet in height. Then again, Taaj is tall for a goblin, standing about four-and-a-half feet tall. To some the height difference appears comical, but their mutual affection is apparent.

Crucially, although Zahra's marriage to Taaj was arranged, she is quite content with her lot. Her husband is respected and relatively wealthy, and he treats her well. Her gravest concern relates to children. After several years of marriage, she still has not conceived.

### SITE SURVEY: NIZWAR

Nizwar is a village of approximately 500 people. All but two of them are human. Of those people, three-fifths live in the village proper, while the remaining two-fifths occupy farms which sprawl to the west and east.

Nizwar is largely self-sufficient, raising enough food to keep its citizens fed and growing enough flax to keep its citizens clothed. Emir Taaj al-Riaz taxes the citizens largely to support citizens in need and to support larger community projects. The community is small enough that everyone can see the beneficial

effects of this redistribution, and most Nizwari do not resent the taxation.

Nizwar benefits from its position between the capitol Phiraz, the city of Zayawa, and the High Cliff Fortress. Visitors lodging at the caravanserai are charged modest rates, yet their fees provide as much wealth as Nizwar enjoys. In addition, during seasons when Zayawa struggles to provide enough food for itself, its representatives come to Nizwar to buy millet. Some enterprising Nizwari have discovered that brightly-dyed cloth and carpets sell well with certain passing merchants, those who want to bring home a reminder of their journeys in the barely-civilized hinterlands of Pharazia. To these merchants, the Nizwari are nearly *al-Badia*, although the Nizwari themselves know better.

Nizwar was built upon the southern shore of the Chakor River. A wide, stone bridge has been built over the Chakor, allowing travellers from Phiraz to cross over to the village on their way to the city of Zayawa or the High Cliff Fortress. This bridge is owned by the Gleaming Hall, that is, the government of all Pharazia, and not by Nizwar. Because the Nizwari do not wish to draw the attention of the Confessors, they are careful to maintain the condition of the bridge.

The buildings in Nizwar are all built from sun-dried mud bricks, reinforced with reeds. The two most impressive buildings in Nizwar are the caravanserai and the emir's palace. The caravanserai is a long building with thick walls; in the event of an attack upon the village, the Nizwari know to take shelter in the caravanserai since it is the most defensible structure. Most of the caravanserai consists of an open courtyard, but along one of the long walls is a series of covered rooms for travelers, and along the other long wall is a series of covered stables for their horses and camels. The western quarter is also covered. Straw and feed are kept in one large chamber, and otherwise it is home to the al-Ahmadi family, who operate the caravanserai.

The caravanserai can hold fifty travelers, their mounts and their wagons, but it almost never reaches even half of its capacity. It is busiest when teamsters from Phiraz pass through with quarterly supplies for the High Cliff Fortress. Perhaps once each month, teamsters from Zayawa come to buy millet. Otherwise, the caravanserai is sometimes occupied by one or two travelers, be they nomads or merchants, but more often it stands empty.

The caravanserai does offer two striking architectural features.

First, consider the gated archway which provides the entrance along the eastern wall. It was built from granite imported from elsewhere. Although the gate is nearly devoid of decoration, in a village built from mud brick, it stands out regardless. Like the bridge, it was a gift from the Gleaming Hall, and so the Nizwari call it the Lawgiver's Gate.

The second striking feature, then, is a mosaic laid onto the southern wall of the courtyard. After the people of Nizwar chose Taaj al-Riaz to be their emir, he used a portion of the profits from the caravanserai to buy tiles from Phiraz and Zayawa and even Ibraq. He encouraged the Nizwari to contribute to the design, although he remained the primary artist. He encourages people to reflect upon the resulting mural. If some of the patterns in the mural happen to hint at the symbols of the Great Gods of Zakhara, why, isn't it funny what tricks the imagination can play?

The emir's palace is not truly a palace, but that is what the Nizwari call it regardless. (Those who object to this terminology will doubtless also object to Taaj al-Riaz being called an emir when he oversees nothing more than a mud brick village.) It is built to mimic the style of homes in the cities of Phiraz, with the front entrance (*majaz*) opening into a courtyard. On the far side of the courtyard is both the reception area (*qa'ah*) and the rooms of the emir's residence proper. It is the only building in Nizwar to have more than one story. The so-called palace is simply but tastefully furnished. However, this is largely due to

the efforts of the previous emir and his wife. For his part, Taaj al-Riaz feels self-conscious spending the village's meager funds on personal extravagances when he and his wife already live in the finest residence in the village.

## NEW MONSTERS

### Minilith

<b>Climate/Terrain</b>	Amber Wastes
<b>Frequency</b>	Very Rare
<b>Organization</b>	Pack
<b>Activity Cycle</b>	Any
<b>Diet</b>	None
<b>Intelligence</b>	Low
<b>Treasure</b>	Nil
<b>Alignment</b>	Chaotic Neutral
<b>No. Appearing</b>	1d12
<b>Armor Class</b>	2
<b>Movement</b>	12
<b>Hit Dice</b>	2
<b>THAC0</b>	16
<b>No. of Attacks</b>	2
<b>Damage/Attack</b>	1d4/1d4
<b>Special Attacks</b>	Charge
<b>Special Defenses</b>	See Below
<b>Magic Resistance</b>	Nil
<b>Size</b>	S (2-3' tall)
<b>Morale</b>	Fearless

Miniliths are nature spirits temporarily bound to stone bodies via sorcery. They are not animate statues, but a collection of rocks held together in a vaguely humanoid shape. The spell which creates a minilith does not appear to be strong enough to create one which stands any taller than two or three feet in height. They can look rather adorable, really.

Ultimately, miniliths are creatures of the material plane, not the Inner Planes. They are more akin to constructs such as golems than they are to elementals. Any *sha'ir* of 3rd level or higher will

recognize that they are not extra-planar elemental creatures.

### Combat

Miniliths have no aversion to getting into a fight. If their stone bodies are destroyed, they simply become free spirits again. Also, they feel no pain, so they do not understand the concept. They just assume that people are similarly resilient.

Most of the time, miniliths clobber their foes with each of two tiny but solid "fists". However, if given a 20' straight run to build up speed, they might charge head-first into the fray, head-butting to inflict 1d6 damage.

Miniliths suffer half damage from non-magical piercing and slashing weapons. Bludgeoning weapons and magic weapons inflict full damage.

Because of their nature as constructs, miniliths are immune to *sleep*, *charm*, *hold*, death magic, poison, paralysis, and mind-affecting spells. However, they are susceptible to earth-affecting magic. Even spells such as *move sand*, which are not ordinarily applied in combat, may be turned against a minilith for 1d6 damage plus 2hp/caster level.

### Habitat/Society

Miniliths are too free-spirited to have anything like an organized society. They are generally inclined to follow directives given by the wizard who animated them, but they are not at all compelled to do so. Obedience ends when the minilith grows bored and abandons its stone body.

### Ecology

Miniliths are not a natural part of the environment and do not particularly affect their local ecology. They do enjoy moving stones and sand into beautiful and surprisingly orderly patterns, but that's just the novelty of being able to affect the material world.

## NEW WIZARD SPELLS

### LESSER FLY (FLOAT UPON THE ZEPHYR)

**Level:** 2

**School:** Alteration

**Province:** Wind

**Range:** Self

**Components:** V, S, M

**Duration:** 1 round/level + 1d6 rounds

**Casting Time:** 2

**Area of Effect:** Self

**Saving Throw:** None

The caster of this spell gains a limited form of magical flight. The caster may fly at a base rate of 12, halved if ascending and doubled if diving. The maneuverability class is C. The greatest restriction of this spell, however, is that it requires more concentration than an ordinary fly spell. Any spell with a casting time longer than 1 segment cannot be cast without losing concentration. Worse yet, if the caster is injured, then he or she must pass a Wisdom check to remain in flight.

### EXPLOSIVE VORTEX (THE DJINNI'S ANGRY HOWL)

**Level:** 3

**School:** Alteration

**Province:** Wind

**Range:** 10 yards + 10 yards/level

**Components:** V, S

**Duration:** Instantaneous

**Casting Time:** 1

**Area of Effect:** 1 Creature or Object

**Saving Throw:** ½

This spell generates a tremendous gust of wind, focused upon a single creature or object, with

sufficient force to throw its target 40' into the air. The gust may be directed in any orientation: up, down, sideways, or at any angle in between.

If the explosive vortex hurls its target against a hard surface, it inflicts up to 4d6 damage. Alternately, targets thrown into the air likely fall back to earth, suffering 4d6 damage from the fall. A successful saving throw indicates that the target has avoided the full effect of the blast, which generally halves the distance thrown and/or the damage inflicted. Regardless of the result of the saving throw, the explosive vortex disrupts spell-casting.

Someone under the influence of the fly spell can resist the push of the vortex, assuming that they make their saving throw. Lower-level spells such as lesser fly and levitation provide no defense against the initial blast, although they may help avert subsequent falling damage.

While explosive vortex may not possess the sheer damaging power of fireball or lightning bolt, its quick casting time and lack of material components make it a formidable spell nonetheless.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This adventure was heavily inspired by Speedwagon's Children of the Night: Giants thread on the Fraternity of Shadows Forum. In addition, Speedwagon's detailed review prompted many improvements. In fact, I stole Alghadab's introductory speech verbatim from his feedback notes, because he captured perfectly her sense of slightly overblown drama.





# Satyr

By Stanton F. Fink

Satyr is the foolish protégé of Lampago and the awkward friend of Manticore. Some say Satyr was a boy whom the great, sagacious Lampago tried to teach the arts of power to. Others claim that Satyr was the one beast whom the arrogantly selfish Manticore took genuine pity upon. The gifts of either, perhaps of both would then warp whatever Satyr once was into the mismatched brute he is now.

Satyr constantly strives to prove himself as his mentors' equal, whether through haphazardly enacting incomplete war strategems, or reciting half-remembered poems through a mouth obstructed by tusk-like fangs. Even so, many are the corpses of hunters who foolishly thought a shaggy harlequin like Satyr would make for easy prey despite having a dragon's claws, a lion's thews, a mouth full of hooked teeth, and horns and hooves sharper than swords.



\*\*\* Contains swear words.

## Snow Moon

**H**e had returned. After all those pained wishes, and salvaged promises, he finally returned home, **his** home. Enzo stood proudly there in that forest, **his** forest, wearing only that awful, awfully breezy hospital gown. The teenaged beanpole clutched that offensively diaphanous, polka dotted fabric with a spidery, freckled hand, and finally husked himself of that hated gown. A deliciously frigid gust snatched the shredded robe out of the boy's pale, taloned fingers.

Enzo stood there proudly in that forest, **his** forest, not really naked as rust colored fur bloomed across his once peach-skinned body in big, red, puffy patches. He dug his long, taloned fingers deep into his copper chest fur to dig out his, his father's tiger fang necklace. Tiger Boy took to his hairy heels, bolting through the forest, **his** forest. Emerald, lime, teal, jade, apple green, Enzo let loose a whooping roar as he charged through the never-ending paintsplash plants, the cool, humid undergrowth, the air beating wondrously against his freckled, exertion-pinked face. Chartreuse, azure, carmine, umber, fuchsia,, the endless riot of technicolor undergrowth came to an abrupt end at the abrupt edge of a perilously high cliff. Enzo leapt.

Bloody quills erupted from his great chest, his shaggy back, his furred loins. Ruby spines shot out from his mighty hero's arms, unfurling into scarlet feathers. In Enzo's forest, the Tiger Boy could be anything he wanted, and Enzo wanted to be a phoenix. Enzo the Thousand Mile Peng Bird soared high above his forest, his thousand mile wings of vermilion and copper lazily buoyed on a warm breeze of crayon dust. Enzo found himself mooing at the clouds again, wordlessly calling for that nameless friend he still needed. With his mighty eagle's eye of jade, Enzo the Thousand Mile Peng Bird pierced through the gloomy forest canopy below him to spy on Enzo The Pathetic Teenaged Loser, pacing around the bench of the Topenga Transit Bus Stop #82.

Enzo paced around the bench, the flopping clapping of his sneakers marking time's passage. Dad was late again. **Again.** Dad was supposed to pick him up from school, but knowing that noble, chivalrous paladin of punctuality, Dad was either passed out on the floor of yet another hooker's flat, or hungover inside a cage at the county animal shelter again. **Again.** Enzo pulled his big, hairy, spidery hands out of his beige and purple letterman jacket pockets to play with his jacket zipper again. It was his own fault for trusting his father. Had he just walked home, the teen would have been home by now.

The burly boy with tarantula hands was engulfed in a lake of blinding light. There was an engine screaming, tires yelling, and Enzo was hurled into a familiar abyss of pain. And laughter. Over the cadenza of his bones breaking, and the calliope tooting of his organs rupturing, Enzo could hear his school teammates laughing at him again. **Again.**

The dark abyss brightened into a cornflower blue haze. Enzo knew this color intimately, but from where? It was hard to think while wallowing in this aurora of morphine. Wait, he was in the county hospital again. **Again.** With that piece of mneseis in place, the off white and cornflower blue walls of his hospital room snapped back into focus. He could hear the monitors beeping in time with his heart. The Pathetic Loser tried clenching his hero's jaw, and found himself weakly teething on corrugated plastic. Oh, this was from when he was intubated for two weeks. Fun times.

The fog of opiates drained from Enzo's big, tigery ears, clearing enough for him to let him hear more clearly the terrified screams of the hospital staff. Dad was coming to take him home. Enzo thought to move, to escape the impending flood of red fur and awesome death, but, as usual, his corpse-like body betrayed him.

Dad was coming.

Goddammit.



*The hospital room shook, the furniture shook, the monitors shook themselves to pieces, Enzo's bed shook as his big, hairy body convulsed and grew bigger. The sleeves and shoulders of his awful, awfully diaphanous hospital gown tore as that sheet of hated, polka-dotted fabric unmoored itself from Enzo's spasming, mutating body. He raised a big tiger's paw high, then placed it on his great and heaving chest, clasping Dad's fang necklace for dear life. Enzo remembered a big blurry wave of red and white fur bearing down on him like a tiger-striped snail demolishing a rotten strawberry. Enzo remembered choking on his breathing tube trying to shout. The big glob of tiger fur, he knew it belonged to his father, was living off his left pectoralis muscle, exposing pink ribs in the process. Enzo summoned enough his mighty power through that bleak fog of morphine and terror to make and raise a bony fist, only for a paw bigger than a manhole cover to pin his right arm back down hard enough to break it like a fleshy, moist twig underneath a furry sledgehammer. Enzo's fingers disappeared in a second single lick, along with the rest of his shattered arm in another lick. Enzo's pale, freckled face vanished in a fourth, indolent rasp, and then the tiger-furred glob finished lapping up the broken boy, leaving nothing behind beyond bloody bedsheets and some stray wisps of cat hair.*

*And then that red and white mass of slimy tiger fur rose up on his shaggy hindlegs, adjusting his old, black swimtrunks. And then Enzo's cadaverous father stood insufferably proud there in his swimtrunks and his thick, copper and cream body hair, and his ridiculous yellow muscle shirt that hung so loosely around his bony hips like some third rate redneck mumu. That hoary bastard was exactly as Enzo remembered him; a towering scarecrow so shaggy, so woolly with chest hair slowly bleaching silver, and wearing that craggy, leering, jack-o'lantern face haggard from decades of, dunno, cancer or something. Enzo's father smiled, flashing those awful, pointedly sharp, impossibly perfect, tobacco-yellowed teeth of his. It made Enzo retch every single time every Schmuck, Dick and Harry just **had** to tell him how he was his father's twin.*

*Enzo's father spread his long, red and graying pipe cleaner legs as he began to pose again. **Again.** That wretched, godawful goofball always loved to pose, like some big wire sculpture rusting over with mold. Then the withered, wizened, former wrestler's long, long, bony legs miraculously became meaty again. **Again.** Woolly thighs growing thunderously succulent, calves violently swelling into rapid bulls, his ratty, tattered black swimtrunks sloughing off of his no-longer bony hips. And then he flexed his rusting pipe arms, oh God how he loved to flex, and his thin arms grew and grew and grew and grew, growing and growing into mighty, fleshy tree-branches bleeding mossy, blood-red fur.*

*That monstrous, bloody-furred scarecrow flexed his bloody-furred tree-branch arms again, and spread his big, bloody-furred tree-trunk hind legs. He inhaled so deeply, his fluffy, once rail-thin chest filled out so massively, stretching his precious Gold Gym muscle shirt taut like a yellow sail in a stiff, blood-red breeze. And then that precious, favorite Gold Gym muscle shirt popped off of Enzo's monstrous, monstrously swelling torso. And there, Enzo proudly stood, wherever the hell "there" was, immured in a cyclopean wall of bloody fur and writhing, herculean muscles. The growing boy stretched his mouth wide to scream, but choked as a slobber-soaked, slobbering tiger's snout thrust past his lips. Enzo managed to place his big tiger's paw back onto his father's tiger fang necklace just as his mighty, shaggy chest started splitting open.*

"Now entering Pahayoke!"

A snoring, rust-haired teenaged boy asleep in a bus seat shuddered awake at that proclamation. As the teenage boy regained his bearing, Enzo Rudolfo Lancio Klamath Junior realized he was, for the second time in his miserable life, sincerely glad to be back in the hellish podunk that was Pahayoke, if only this time to escape from that awful dream. Enzo put both of his big, spidery hands to his freckle-speckled face and rubbed vigorously.

"I'm Leo now," he reminded himself. "No going back, okay?"

~~Enzo~~ Leo looked down at his rail thin chest and realized he was drooling on his beige and purple letterman jacket again. **Again.** He rubbed his drowsy, jade green eyes with his jacket cuff, then fished out a dollar-store journal from his black canvas backpack. He rolled up his sleeve to peek at his Boscoe Bunny



wristwatch, and saw that his wrist, normally a peached lard with caramel freckles lightly dusted with peach fuzz, was now already thoroughly encrusted with a still-thickening layer of thick, downy, copper hair. Leo stared as that mat of copper hair crept down the backs of his hands, carpeting his knuckles as his fingers became bony, rust-haired caterpillars with sharp nails. He rolled down his jacket sleeve as he fought both the urge to just rip his suddenly unbearably suffocating clothes off before mauling everyone else on board, and the urge to just sit there focusing on the hair already fast-growing all over the hidden reaches of his lanky body.

"Goddammit," the rust-haired scarecrow muttered as he fished out a ballpoint pen. "9:26am," he wrote in his journal. "Coming earlier this month, rate of growth suggests it started at 8am, maybe 7:30am." He dropped his journal and pen back into his backpack, then zipped his letterman jacket up to his suddenly very downy throat. He needed to buy another journal soon. As much as he hated sweating, Leo preferred to dress snugly in the fiery warmth of summer than have to deal with goddamned judgmental people gawking at a sixteen year old runaway grow thirty, forty pounds of chest hair right in front of their goddamned disapprovingly incredulous eyes again.

Bad dreams aside, ~~Enzo~~ Leo hated, no, Leo loathed the podunk of Pahayoke with a sacred passion that made the glowing furnace inside of his thin chest underneath his father's sweat-soaked tank-top grow fierce and bright. A failed suburb wannabe with nothing to see or do beyond getting hassled by an inbred clan of rent-a-cops. No fun, no gum, no coffee, no candy, no singing, not even skipping, and run by that tight-assed cartoon villain, Marshal Stu Anal. Anyhow, Leo hoped he could reach Troia before he drowned in his own musky sweat.

"Waldman Street!" the bus driver bellowed.

A quintet of of powder blue-wigged bridge biddies in powder pink sweater coats hiked aboard the bus. Leo collected his thoughts, and his backpack, graciously offering his seat to the bridge biddies as he moved to the very back of the bus. Now alone again, sort of, Leo ran his red-haired spider fingers through his floppy, sweaty mane of copper in the hopes of restoring his hair back into that neo-Young Elvis pompadour crest he was so fond of. He puffed his freckled cheeks and pursed his lips, reshaping his reflection in the bus window into a passable imitation of a fountain putto. If there was one thing in that Pandora's junk drawer of weird and annoying traits he inherited from that incompetent, shaggy boob of a father that he was proud of, besides being strong as a water buffalo, having reflexes like a Rottweiler, or the stamina of a senior fratboy, it was being able to grow the most awesomest, most luxurious-est set of big side burns one month after his eleventh birthday. Leo focused on preening his greaser-hero sideburns so he could better ignore the soul-rotting panoramas of Pahayoke's suburban decay.

"Cavender Lane!" the busdriver bellowed.

A grungy construction worker, no, a sewer maintenance work by the stench of things, climbed aboard the bus. ~~Enzo~~ Leo paused his preening for a moment to zip up his backpack in his lap. The sewer maintenance worker stomped down the bus aisle to plop her sewage-defiled, coveralled self down next to the rusting-haired scarecrow in a letterman jacket and jeans. The scarecrow politely ignored the worker; he had smelled far worse shit, like when his father's beloved Siberian, Big Brat, went fishing for dead raccoons in the Zafari's septic tank. The maintenance worker pried off her egg yolk-yellow helmet, freeing her long, smoky black hair. She made a rasping chuckle as she studied the preening scarecrow sitting next to her.

"You're a baby, and you already have five'o'clock shadow," the worker commented in a surprisingly sultry voice. Leo dug his pointed fingertips deep into his lovely muttonchops, suddenly thinking of a forest witch in a gingerbread house. He turned to look at the worker's work-worn face.

"I take after my father and a childhood full of beef steroids, ma'am," Leo joked. The maintenance worker cackled loudly, startling the bridge biddies.

"You're a funny little cupid, kid," the worker commented. "Such a kind face, you look exactly like my bouvier, Worcestershire, if she was a ginger baby like you."

"Thank you, ma'am." Leo looked out of the window to gawk at the blighted apartment complexes for rent on Bannikov Avenue no one wanted to rent. The maintenance worker sighed thoughtfully now.

"Tell me, kid," she asked. "What brings you to Calostoma County?"

Leo inhaled deeply. His tiger-fang necklace hidden deep underneath his soggy tank-top audibly clacked as his sternum crackled. He stifled another urge to rip his clothes off again.

"I have business to attend to at Enzo Klamath's Zafari," the rusting-haired teen truthfully stated. The sewer maintenance worker exploded into a one-woman riot of screaming laughter, her long hair shaking vigorously like a smoky black pom-pom as she waved her head up and down. ~~Enzo's~~ Leo's upper lip curled in a silent, toothy snarl even as he just barely caught the bus driver's bellowing about Hegna Way somewhere just above the sewer witch's hilarious din. The cackling maintenance worker almost stumbled over her own head as she laughingly chased after her clattering helmet bouncing down the aisle. The bridge biddies all got up, too, joining the laughing sewer witch in exiting the bus.

Leo growling to himself, his ego smarting so badly. It was his own damned fault, he thought as an abandoned supermarket flew past his view in the bus window. Next time, he'd keep his big, fat mouth shut. There was that ruined, half-finished building from five years ago that would have become a movie theater or a duplex. Or, he'd at least remember to shut his mouth on the throat of the next buttinsky yenta like he did that last time.

"End of the line!" the busdriver hollered as he shut off the bus' engine. The other passengers stood up and casually filed out of the bus doors. "Hey, Mister Comedian! End of the line!"

"I thought the Calostoma 327 goes to Troia." Leo scratched his stubble-darkening chin.

"Not anymore, Mister Comedian. Nowya gotta transfer to the Panus 923- the stop's three blocks east on the corner of Tyler and Sorbini."

"When's the next one?" Leo asked. The bus driver held up his bare, tanned, overly-wellfed wrist to look at his brass Timeonx.

"In five minutes."

*Fuck.*

The six foot tall, rust-maned teenager threw on his backpack and flounced off the bus in an aggravated huff. Leo pumped his red tarantula fists as he jogged down Frigo Lane. So he was marooned in this hellhole of Pahayoke for four damned minutes and eighteen seconds, so what? *Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"It's easy to survive in this cesspool," Leo lied to himself. "All I have to do is keep my fluffy head down, not eat any chocolate, not consume any caffeinated beverages, not chew gum, and most importantly, don't-"

"Hey, you! Punk!" *Fucking shit. **Two minutes**, a new world record.* "Hey, you, punkass, get over here!" a large, paunchy, boy-faced deputy barked at Leo. "I'm talking to you, punkass scum!" Leo sarcastically froze in place.

"Heya, Deputy Beau Annal, howy doin'?" Leo sardonically chirped without putting his arms or leg down. He could hear the youthful deputy's trembling jowls flushing coral.

"Don't disrespect me, scumass punk!"

Leo put his raised limbs down, and turned around, his stubbly face souring with exasperation.

"Listen, Beau, I'm just passing though. I don't want any trouble," the rust-maned scarecrow calmly pleaded. "I even said 'hello.'"

"Don't disrespect me, scumpunk!" Leo sniffed the air as he remembered Beau was on a script. The deputy clamped his pudgy, coral hand onto Leo's bony, jacketed shoulder. "You're a stranger here, scummy punk. What the hell'ya doin' in **my** town?"

*Ol' Beau, poor ol' Beau Anal clearly forgot about our last dance and rumble from three years ago.* Fine, then. Leo was going to follow his father's orders about giving querulous dumbasses like the kind deputy the courtesy of a count to fifteen before he'd allow himself the pleasure of beating that middle school dropout like a Christmas drum kit. Leo reshaped his expression into a diplomatically stern scowl.

"I am only walking to the bus stop, Deputy Annal. I said I don't want trouble." *Four.* "I don't even want lunch." *Six.* "I just want to get onto the Panus Transit Number Nine-Hundred and Twenty-Three bus to Troia Metro Station." *Nine.*

"Then y'won't mind if I check yer scummy, punkass backp-"

*Fuck it, it's fifteen now.*

Rusty tarantula fingers wrapped themselves around Deputy Beau Annal's coral lard wrists, and for a good, blissfully long one and three-fifths of a second, Ol' Beau remembered what it was like to fly. Leo scowled harder as he heard a bus, the Panus 923 arriving one minute early, drive past the empty bus stop at Tyler and Sorbini. The exasperated scarecrow mosied past the prone, unconscious deputy. On second thought, he would have lunch here, after all.

*Fucking fuck it fuck it all. Fuck.*

On the corner of Sorbini and Siveter stood a white stucco building, the Happy Owl Diner, one of Pahayoke's two surviving restaurants. Three restaurants, if one counted Pahayoke City Hall's cafeteria, and Leo, back when he was still Enzo Junior, swore he'd sooner jump into the backseat of Marshal Stu Anal's crusier and bleed to death than ever go back to that pit again. **Again.** Or four restaurants if one counted Uncle Oglethorpe's Possum Hibachi, but Leo wasn't in the mood for possum. Besides, if he wanted possum, he'd rather go to Börte's Mongolian Marsupial Barbeque in Deiphon. The rust-maned boy scratched his damp and scruffy neck with his stout, almond-shaped nails. He figured that that ridiculous, three story cartoon owl out in front must use half of the town's power whenever it was allowed to light up. *Whatever.* Scruffy Leo ambled into the greasy spoon, silently hoping no one would notice his red, minute-old goatee bleaching white.

The inside of the Happy Owl was exactly as Leo remembered since the last hilarious time his goonish father brought him here for lunch four years ago. Perpetually freshly-repainted, off-white walls. Plastic owl decoy lamps on every table. Even the exact same swarm of watered-down barflies clustered around the grill. And under the cash register's counter, the exact same, untouched display of archaic, tablet-shaped chewing gum candy made by a now-forgotten candy company that apparently went out of business before Leo's mysterious grandfather Vale was born.

There was a lonely, empty corner table by the front window. Leo parked himself and his backpack there. With much sincere trepidation, Leo picked up the laminated menu laying at his table's owl decoy's feet. Same tempting garbage since 1982, but with 21<sup>st</sup> Century repricing. The fearsome boy was startled by the sudden setting of a glass of ice water onto his table. The moment Leo set his menu back down, the owlish, pastry brush-mustached owner popped into his view like a leprechaun. Beakish nose sniffled, smiling lips pulsing, then parting to reveal beakish teeth.

"Why, hello there, Mister Klamath!" the owner of the Happy Owl Diner radiated. "It's so grand seeing you again! How have you been doing these days? Don't tell me it's true that you have to shutter your Zafari for good? I mean, we don't want to confirm backbiting gossip, after all." ~~Enzo~~ Leo looked away, focusing,

instead, on the owl lamp's sightless gaze as he began fiddling with his spoon. "Would you like your usual, Mister Klamath? Medium rare Everything Burger with steak fries?"

"I, uh, I um..." Leo took an anxious breath before taking a dainty swig from his waterglass. "My dad passed away last year." The owner's cheer visibly dimmed as he placed his petite, owl's claw hand on the boy's big, red, tarantula paw. "He was taken, was taken by The Sick really bad," Leo half-lied.

"Oh, my deepest, deepest apologies, sir."

"I, uh, I would like my daddy's usual, though," Leo said as he began piecing his stoicism back together. "But with extra pickles and tomatoes, please."

"Absolutely, absolutely, sir!" the owner said, nodding eagerly, "On the house, with a bowl of the soup of the day!" The owlish man beamed, his cheer obviously renewed.

The owner then snatched the menu out of Leo's red tarantula hands, and scurried back into the kitchen. Leo smiled. He finally did it, he finally talked about his father out loud for the first time in a year without retching, or yelling. Or crying. He raised his plastic waterglass high in a proud, but silent toast. As Leo took a congratulatory gulp, the swarm of barflies at the grill all got off their barstools to scamper out the door. The rust-haired scarecrow suddenly found himself sweating bullets. His pounding heart caught on fire as his hunger pangs flared up again stronger. Leo began fingering his jacket zipper, but stopped when he realized that there were four gun barrels trained on his shiny forehead.

*Shit.*

"Well, well, well, well, if it ain't the town freak 'gain," meaty lawman Stu rumbled. Bloody-faced Beau had gone off to summon the cavalry in the form of Daddy Sheriff, er, Marshal Stu Anal, and Beau's thuggish elder sisters Lu Ann and Drew Ann. Leo stayed calm even as his glittering brow continued dripping. Meaty lawman Stu continued training his pistol on the bridge of Leo's nose, making his caterpillar mustache wriggle as his pistol's hammer clicked ominously. "I'm surprised y'd be coming ba-"

"Git your scummyassed punker hands up, punkbitch!" Beau shouted. Stu slowly turned his pockmarked head towards his paunchy, bloody-faced son, lowered his prescription sunglasses, and shot a dagger straight between Beau's manic, piggish eyes. That done, the marshal returned his withering focus back onto Leo, who had just started putting his red tarantula hands up slowly.

"So, freak, since I'm feelin' sentimental, I'll give you exactly one minute to explain yourself before I lock your sorry ass up for assaulting an officer and a minor," Marshal Stu said. Drew Ann and Lu Ann both glowered sternly in earnest imitation as they both slowly cocked their own pistols, too.

Leo inhaled.

"Marshal Annal, I-"

"YOU LYING PIECE OF RANCID CUM SHIT ASSMUNCHER, I'LL KILL YOU DEAD," Beau squealed as he emptied an entire clip of bullets into the wall behind his hated nemesis. Stu and his daughters trained their pistols on Beau's plump chest, calming his angry hysteria with a healthy dose of fear.

"Beau, buddy, please wait outside," Marshal Stu coldly ordered.

"But, Daddy! He-"

"Beau, wait outside like I just asked, or I'll shoot you dead like I shot your mother and your idiot brother, Lou." Thus tamed, Beau obediently, dejectedly shuffled over to the other side of the diner's entrance to pout. "I never should'a popped Lou. 'T'least that moron was never loud 'bout his sass." The Marshal and his competent children returned their deadly focus on Beau's assailant. "Now, freak, y'were sayin'?"



"Your son, over there, tried to mug me, and I defended myself," Leo finally matter-of-factly stated. The lawman's caterpillar made a frenetic loop upon hearing this.

"You have ten seconds to shove your baldface lie back down your bastard throat before I-"

"Stu Anal! What the bloody hell are you doing back in my goddamned diner??" the diner owner screeched from behind his now-deserted grill. "What the bloody hell did you do to all of my customers?"

"This doesn't concern you, Otus," Drew Ann hissed. Otus skittered over to the unwanted drama currently unfolding at the far corner table.

"Yes, this does concern me, you stupid gunbunny! You two dumb molls and your tin star daddy are back, shootin' up my diner again, and fucking up my insurance premiums in the process again!"

**Again**

"Otus, please don't talk to m'girls like that," Stu grimly requested.

"Shove it, Anal! I am sick to death of you always lording it over everyone in town as this insufferable tin star tyrant, always terrorizing my customers without so much as a 'sorry' out of your dumb mouth!"

"Donchu talk to m'daddy like that!" Lu Ann ordered, carelessly bringing her pistol's muzzle perilously closer to Leo's sweating temple.

"I'll talk to Marshal Anal however I please, ya'dumb cluck!" Otus snapped. Stu's angry caterpillar sagged with his scowling frown.

"Now listen here, Otus-"

"No, you listen, Anal!" the owlish little man shrieked. "You and your pet gunbunnies leave this fine boy alone, and you never darken my diner's doorstep forever-"

"Calm down, Otus-"

"NEVER! Leave, or I'll leave town for good this time! For good, y'hear me? And then you can tell your precious mayor mommy how you made me drive a stake through Pahayoke's fiscal heart!"

Enzo tapped the sharpening point of his teardrop-shaped fingernail on Lu Ann's gun barrel.

"Can I make a suggestion?" the assault suspect asked. Leo's hidden tank-top soaked further as eight angry eyes returned focus on him. He inhaled. "How 'bout you nice folks pay me back the two-hundred smackers ol' Buddy Boo took out of my bag, and then I can leave town to never darken anyone's D-lightful doorsteps ever again?" He hoped and silently prayed to God almost, that no one here noticed his voice beginning to break and deepen ever so slightly. "Hmmm?"

"That's so stupid, I ought to shoot your fre-"

"PAY HIM," the owlishly furious leprechaun yodelled at the finally humbled Marshal. The humbled Annals obediently whipped out their wallets, reluctantly offering up one portrait of Benjamin Franklin, twenty-three crumpled portraits of Abraham Lincoln, and eleven portraits of George Washington. Leo gleefully accepted this partial sacrifice, honestly shocked that his spur of the moment con was really working.

"Hey, Beau!" Stu called. "Git yer giant butt back over here!" The Prodigal Paunch came bouncing back into the diner's dining room, already wallowing in what he imagined was a big, heaping helping of hot, buttered mashed potatoes, er, forgiveness and praise.

"Yessir, Daddy?" Beau piped, piped, so eager to receive his praise and gravy.

"How much cash y'got on ya?"

"Uhhhh..." Beau stammered as he pulled out his pink vinyl wallet from his pants pocket. Before the elementary school drop out could begin his given task of counting his cash, a rust-furred tarantula deftly snatched the entire unknown sum of bills out of Beau's Boscoe Bunny wallet. "Hey!" Stu grimaced at his surviving son, who then immediately blanched into shivering silence.

The exonerated assault suspect happily shoveled his ill-gotten weregeld into his black canvas backpack as the defeated Annals holstered their pistols and exited the diner in quiet shame.

"Thanks a bunch, guys! I'll not be-" Leo stopped mid-taunt when he realized Otus was now trembling ferociously at him.

"YOU ARE GOING NOWHERE UNTIL YOU GET YOUR LUNCH, BOY," the raging leprechaun howled.

"Uhhh... Ttto ggo?"

"YOU ARE GOING NOWHERE UNTIL YOU GET YOUR LUNCH TO GO!"

Leo's Everything Burger with extra pickles and tomatoes barely lasted him more than two bites as he sprinted across the street. According to the schedule on the sign, the next bus to Troia wouldn't come until 3:45pm.

*Dammit.* At this rate, Leo would never make it to the Zafari without arousing suspicion or panic. Leo plopped himself and his backpack down onto the hot metal bus stop bench, and slipped off his letterman jacket. The boy shoved his entire order of steak fries into his mouth, then peeled off his father's lucky Golden Gym tank-top, wringing two, maybe three cups of warm sweat out of it. Leo swallowed his masticated wad of potato product just as his shaggy, bleaching-furred barrel chest began to painfully thrust out a little more again. He took his Boscoe Bunny watch off his slick, wet, fur-carpeted wrist, holding his trusty timepiece in his tingling, inflating forepaw.

It was only eleven past eleven.

*Goddamnit.*

The growing, exasperated boy groaned as he tossed his watch, his jacket and his still sopping wet tank-top into his backpack. He shucked his lengthening hindpaws of his sneakers, then struggled for a second as he pulled off his sopping socks. Leo wiggled his taloned toes, noting that his hindpaws' pads had already blackened. He found himself groaning again as he dug his taloned fingers deep into the striped, rust and cream fur of his increasingly muscular sides, trying to worry out some fresh knots. He didn't want his now finger-length fur to mat from that morning's sweat-a-thon. Leo then took care to untangle his father's tiger fang necklace from his now-entirely cream-colored chest fur. He began taking inventory of the necklace's various fangs; there was that fat, long one, the broken one, the cracked one with a hole drilled in it, the little bitty fang, the... gold ring with a heart-shaped ruby..

Leo held the C-shaped ring up to the brilliant, almost-noon light, studying how the bent band was woven into the threads of cat fur and hemp. He remembered asking Dad about this ring once when he was a kid. Rather than yell or say anything, the hoary old bastard just wordlessly moped around the Zafari for a week. Leo let his necklace fall back onto his big, hoary, cream-furred chest. He began fumbling with the fly of his sweat-soggy jeans.

"I'd know that debauched joi de vivre anywhere! Good afternoon, Mister Enzo!"

Leo's jeans zipper tab came away in the growing boy's big, hairy fingers like a plastic wing off of a fly.

"Oh, Mrs. Stasso, I didn't see you ththere... Pppardon..." the increasingly hoary boy suddenly stuttered in his father's gravely baritone. Leo nervously looked to his shaggy side to see a short, Coke bottle-eyed old woman in a straw sunbonnet and a purple plumeria muumuu smiling at him.

"Mister Enzo, where have you been?" Mrs. Stasso asked as she took Leo's sweating paws into her pleasantly gnarled hands. "Oh, it's been so long, let me look at you! I still can't thank you enough for moving my refrigerator into my kitchen." The old woman squinted her feeble eyes as she petted Leo's auburn sideburns.

"I, uh, I hope things are well with you, Mrs. Stasso."

"Things could be better," Mrs. Stasso grouched. "Bizzy Mart just closed down, and my bursitis is acting up again."

"I, uh, I'm sssorry to hear that, Mrs. Stasso."

"Oh, enough about lil'old me. How have you been, Mister Enzo? Don't tell me it's true that your Zafari closed down? Where will you and your two cherub sons go?"

"Fraid it's true," Leo reluctantly confirmed. "Business was really bad," he lied. He frowned. "But we still have a good place to stay."

"Come, Mister Enzo," Mrs. Stasso said as she pulled on Leo's paws. "Have lunch with me. I'll let you take some of my cookies home to your boys."

Leo downed his carton of turkey barley mushroom soup in one gulp, then stood up to his full current height of seven and something feet.

"Those lavender snickerdoodles?"

"Of course. I might have some of my George's old teeshirts for you, too. It's not safe to wear such a woolly sweater on such a hot, sunny day, y'know."

The two toddled down Sorbini Way, good ol' Grandma holding onto the hand of a young, ginger wolf with a poofy white beard. Imposter Enzo's stomach bellowed loudly from its fortress of flesh, cream belly fur, and ever-tightening, sweat-drenched denim.

"Goodness!"

*Think, think, think, Enzo-Leo, think! Idiot! What **are** you thinking? You're changing! You'll eat Mrs. Stasso! And her dumb dog! And her neighbors! All for what? Cookies? Oh, God, Mrs. Stasso's cookies are the best! I'd go through Hell to have her snickerdoodles! And her oatmeal pecan raisin cookies!!! Wait, no...*

The Impostor Enzo stopped in his tracks, letting his forepaw drop out of Mrs. Stasso's hand as his hindpaws scorched on the sizzling pavement.

"Is there something wrong, dear?" the grandmotherly widow asked, turning to look back like a Coke-bottle eyed Orpheus.

The Impostor Enzo buried his still kind of human nose into the copper and auburn fur of his wrist, and faked a snuffling sneeze before retaking Mrs. Stasso's re-offered hand.

Mrs. Stasso's apartment building, Brass Lotus Towers, was exactly as Impostor Enzo remembered from the last time he'd been there two years ago, from the same bums nesting around the grungy, burnished yellow guardian lions at the front entrance, to the same, fluttering, dusty cobwebs festooning the trash-littered stairwells.

*Cookies.*

The Impostor Enzo focused on cookies. He focused on cookies even as Mrs. Stasso jimmied her key into her door keyhole, focusing on cookies even as he ignored the lightning flashes of pain within his cracking pelvis shifting shape underneath his hairy flesh.

Mrs. Stasso's apartment was exactly as Impostor Enzo remembered, from the lilac print wallpaper and fake mahogany furniture to that goddamned, shrieking Pomeranian, Chloe. Mrs. Stasso dropped her sunbonnet onto her slipcovered couch while Impostor Enzo began panting quietly. Chloe's shrill barking was gently pulling him out of his cookie trance. Mrs. Stasso squatted down to scoop the furious, yapping lint-ball into her bandy arms as her guest set his backpack onto her couch.

"Chloe, Chloe," she cooed. "Mind your manners, sweetie. It's just Mister Enzo; he's not going to eat you."

Impostor Enzo giggled guiltily as he scratched his left nipple.

"She's just jealous that I got a better sweater than her."

Mrs. Stasso stood there, seemingly confused as she clutched her squirming, yapping dog, then erupted in volcanic cackling once she finished processing her guest's little sweater joke. The Impostor Enzo sidled into the Dinette Set in the kitchen as Mrs. Stasso took Chloe into the bedroom. The tigerish boy plunked himself into a steel and artificial leather chair.

*Oh my God, ~~Enzo~~ Leo, what the Hell are you thinking? What the Hell are you doing? **Cookies???** All for cookies?* Impostor Enzo inhaled, the ribs of his massive, still barreling chest cracking, crackling as he filled his beast's lungs with aromas of lunchmeat, nutmeg, brown sugar, cinnamon, molasses, and lemon juice. Mrs. Stasso returned, chuckling as she held out a bedsheet-like shirt that read "I ♡ Cordubia".

"Oh, Mrs. Stasso, y'didn't need to," Impostor Enzo demurred as the grandmotherly widow inserted the folded shirt into his backpack. She chuckled.

"Nonsense!" she replied. "I know how much Coccora loves novelty teeshirts. This one was George's favorite."

"Thanks kindly, ma'am," Impostor Enzo said. "Coccora will love it," he ad-libbed. He got up as Mrs. Stasso pulled out lunchmeat, sliced cheese, bread and mustard out of her ancient refrigerator.

"Sit, sit, Mister Enzo, you're my guest, and I wouldn't dare let one of my guests work on my watch." Mrs. Stasso paused again, her expression turning stucco while her kitchen knife of Damocles dangled low over an orange tomato. "Unless I need you to move another refrigerator for me." Then she laughed again. Impostor Enzo tried to force out a laugh of courtesy, but stopped when Chloe started barking again from the bedroom.

Mrs. Stasso carried a plate stacked with roast beef, salami, and tomato sandwiches onto the table. She giggled as her guest's share of the sandwiches disappeared almost the moment she set that plate onto the table. She laughed again as she brought another plate, this time stacked with cookies.

"Oh, wow, your lemonade gingersnaps!" ~~Leo~~ the Impostor eagerly rumbled.

"I'll let you take some sandwiches and 'snaps home for your boys, too." Mrs. Stasso said as she packed some lunchbags into Leo's backpack. "Be sure they eat the goodies before you do, please."

Impostor Enzo found himself growling. Mrs. Stasso plunked down two bottles of chilled pilsners as she sat herself down into another metal and artificial leather chair. Impostor Enzo ummed eagerly as they clinked their bottles in a toast.

"Oh, beer! Thanks!"

"I know you never cared for lemonade, and that you always like a nice, hoppy beer."

"Yeah, Dad hated lemonade... Which... Is why he taught me to, uh, haaae... tit..."

Mrs. Stasso flattened her smile, then pursed her lips.



"Nnnnn... That's not a good thing to do, teach a child to hate."

The Impostor Enzo suckled his bottle empty as he felt the seams in his wet jeans beginning to give out.

"Yeah, that's why I let my son...nsssss... drink whatever NONALCOHOLIC drinks they want... Oh, and Mrs. S, can I use your bathroom?"

"Please, Mister Enzo, you don't even need to ask."

The eight foot tall boy stood up, and darted by the couch to snatch up his backpack as he galloped to the bathroom. The same old miasma of artificial jasmine scent and talcum powder greeted Leo's nostrils as he locked the bathroom door behind him. He groaned loudly as his hips shifted again harder, squeezing his furry jewels of might against taut denim. He unbuckled his belt, and tore his jeans' fly open, letting a torrent of wet, white fur pour out. Leo's nascent primordial pouch now free, he needed to get out of this flower-printed oubliette. He slung his backpack back over his painfully broadening shoulder, and popped out the window pane and screen with one gentle shove from his forepaw.

From that emptied three story window, Leo leapt, landing on the roof of a condemned two-story condominium unit across the street. He darted to the rooten ledge, propelling himself off the crumbling edge with such force that he sailed over the neighboring unit, landing in the empty street as his jeans tore apart into a useless kilt of tattered, denim streamers. After gathering the ruins of his jeans into his backpack, the tigerish boy stayed down on all fours, sprinting down Okulitch Avenue to the Pahayoke city limits like some lumpy cheetah in a hurry.

Leo had been running on four and two legs through Calostoma County's oak and bramble forest for almost an hour before his mighty, might-pulsating limbs finally rebelled, their sudden, cramp-induced paralysis thrusting the tigerish boy headfirst into a desiccated blackberry bush. The tigerish boy crawled out, sloughing off his backpack as he did so. Then the tiger boy opened his bleeding, fanged mouth wide in an uncomfortably shrill, howling roar.

"AAAAAAAAGH." He collapsed facefirst back into the prickly leaf litter, already exhausted from the morning. Even so, *it* was still coming, *it* hadn't even started. "All that for sandwiches! All that for beer and cookies, Leo! Goddamned **COOKIES!**"

*It* was coming earlier. *It* was coming stronger, and *it* was coming faster. Obviously, there was going to be lots of trouble coming, too.

The tiger boy's hipbones continued shifting, grinding, widening, his pitifully shrill roaring climbing up octaves and falling down octaves until he finally slumped back into the leaf litter with a resounding, bird-startling poot. As the crows still scattered from Leo's echoing fart, the quarter-tiger impotently dug his hindpaws deep into the loam. He shivered as his throbbing muscles struggled to throb in synch. He hesitantly raised his inflating neck.

"Help me, Daddy! Help me, please! PLEASE!" the sixteen year old monster-man wailed. He tail was getting ready to sprout again, **AGAIN**, and Leo was afraid. He stupidly raised his forepaw as a fist and toppled over onto his ballooning side. Leo grimaced a great and terrible grimace full of sharp and bloody teeth as his blue-hot clavicles started dancing his crunching, bloating shoulders. "Aaagh! Oh, Daddy, Daddy, I'm sssso ssssorry! Please! PLLLLLLLLEASE help me! I, I, uh, I I'll be a good boy! NNNNNNNNNNGH!!!"

Leo the still-growing tiger boy scrubbed his itching, hairy, still sort of kind of human face with his forepaws as his untamed greaser-hero sideburns became ferociously wild muttonchops that continued growing and growing into monstrously fatty steaks of red and white fur. Leo gripped his muttonchops in his swollen, swelling forepaws, feebly tugging at his cheek fur as they merged with his poofy white goat beard and flowed down his great, shaggy, increasingly bullish bullneck as a simmering tiger's mane. Leo whimpered

as he tried to ready himself to yell again. Whimpering became hissing growling as Leo's mountainous back began erupting through his ever-thickening hackles. The half-a-tiger found himself snarling again.

*Gettin' there.*

The gangly, stretchy-limbed, half-formed monster boy trembled as he achingly struggled back onto his wobbly, pulsating hindlegs. Once he could teeter back up to his full, ten-foot height, Leo the half-a-tiger bolted through the thorny underbrush as though he was a man, as though he was still the high school track star he should have been. He ran and rand as far as his monster hindlegs could carry his changing monster-body. Maybe this would be the day Leo could finally run away from this thing pursuing him that he otherwise became. Then again, maybe not, as the half-a-tiger-boy found himself crashing back into the oak forest brush again.

The way the dazzling afternoon sun shone through the drought-shriveled forest canopy easily showed that it was maybe six, probably seven hours until moonrise. But poor Leo was in no position to enjoy the sunshine. The four, soon to be five hundred pound, three-fifths-a-tiger thrashed about in the loam, screaming and weeping as he finally began pooping out his tiger's tail. The still growing boy-monster shrieked, he pleaded, he cursed, he coughed, and he pleaded again. The agony of having to shit out a two, no, a three, no, a four foot length of spinal chord over the course of an hour was tortuously bad enough. It made the normally defiant Leo pound his big, shaggy fists on the ground, and kick his hindpaws deep into the loam. *Ah!* But the itching! The tickling itching of all that goddamned fur growing on his five foot and growing tail. That, *that* was a Hadal torture that made the great and proud and mighty Enzo Rudolfo Lancio Klamath Junior (now "Leo") cry, made him beg, made him moan, made him weep, made him low and moo like some piteously pitiful milk cow being milked to death with cold, chapped hands.

The three-quarters tiger continued bleating and thrashing in another one of his bramble refuges, his growing, might-mutating tiger's limbs spasming as they continued growing mightier and more tigerish still. The tiger-boy lowed as his still half-mighty chest thrust out again even further, now with a fifth chorus of crackling ribs. Leo bowed his back, grinding his cream-furred belly into the crunchy, prickly leaf litter as though he were a twelve foot long nag going swayback from being mounted by the heaviest rider in the world. The three-quarters tiger-boy whined as he tried and failed to remember exactly how his moron scarecrow father could make this power of metamorphosis of theirs seem so fun and sexy.

Leo's change-spurts and growth-spasms slowed, then paused, almost as though to let him catch his already tired breath with his great tiger's lungs. He sniffed at the stultifying summer air with his still kind of human nose, then rolled his not-so human head to try and crack his stiff, tiger-maned bullneck. Leo knew he was already bigger than Big Brat even now; he had eclipsed his brother in size and mass over eight moons ago. But before ~~Enzo~~ Leo could ponder how big he'd eventually become, the tensing muscles at the base of his mutating skull tightened, squeezing out a roaring scream and Leo's last semi-rational thought. The eye of his personal storm was passing. Storm clouds of white fur bloomed inside of his now-feline ears, his cheekbones springing forward with a thunderclap of crunching. His big, once-human nose flattened as his bleeding, bloody jaws evolved, elongated into a feline snout. He slumped back into the churned, leafy earth as spearlike whiskers sprouted across his freshly resurfaced snout.

Leo the tired, almost a tiger dragged his aching, cramping, pulsating, palsied, shaggy, fifteen foot long bulk out of the ruined brambles in the hopes of finding someplace less thorny to thrash uncontrollably in.

*"Daddy, Daddy!" Enzo yelled as he toddled down the stony path past the Hyena Hut. The six year old boy wanted to show everyone his new cape he made from tying his stuffed Big Brat to his head with his undershirt. Ha Ha the Spotted Hyena leaped out from her hut to snap at Enzo's shorts; she loved to nip at her master's favorite cub more than anything in the world.*

*"Hey! Quit it, Ha Ha!" Enzo shouted. The she-hyena pulled the boy down to the dusty flagstones as she insisted on stealing his shorts. It was how she showed her boundless love, after all. "Hey!"*

"Hey."

*Big, red, hairy tree-branch hands clutched Enzo, helping the little boy back onto his little bare feet. The boy looked up to see a big, woolly, tiger skeleton-man, no, Daddy was wearing Harrietta Briar's fur again. Daddy tore off his white teeshirt to tie around his son's waist as a makeshift loincloth. Big, knotty-boned fingers with long, curved talons hooked underneath Enzo's armpits, then his father hoisted him high into the air.*

*"Behold!" Enzo's father hollered at the crowd gathering around the Last Quercy Oak's iron-spined cage. "Conan the Barbabayan!"*

Full moonrise. Leo the Copper Devil spat out the very last shards of his puny human teeth just as his fist-sized carnassials finished their steady emergence from his monster gums. Saber fangs as big as parsnips finally erupted from Leo's snout, glistening with bloody slobber and reflected moonlight. A twenty-three foot long tiger, twenty-nine counting his gloriously swishing tail, began skulking about the still-warm, polluted oak forest undergrowth. The Copper Devil was reborn, and back in his old stomping grounds.

Deep down, the Copper Devil obviously remembered he was still Leo the boy. But he was the Copper Devil **now**. And the Copper Devil was hungry **now**, and he needed to hunt **now**.

Elsewhere, a young mule deer buck, almost two years old, and freshly stripped of his velvet, waded into a thicket of dehydrated brambles to feed on rotten blackberries and brittle leaves. A little after three minutes into his modest feast, the buck collapsed, his left lung flooding with blood from where a hunter's arrow pierced him. A gurgling grunt, and the buck was gone.

A ghillie-suited bow-hunter emerged from her hunting blind. The bow-hunter was proud; she had just bagged her first buck of the season, and he was a double-tined buck at that. The nocturnal bow-hunter readjusted her nightvision goggles, her pretty little head filling to bursting with venison recipes and decisions of just exactly where to hang that prize-winning rack in her studio apartment. Then her pretty little head emptied itself of every thought beyond a sudden blast of pain when a fast-moving paw the size of an ottoman shattered her spine.

The Copper Devil was hungry that night, oh so very hungry as he made short, snarling work of those two corpses. Skulls gnawed on, bitten open, brains and eyes lapped out. Sumptuous internal organs slurped up, flesh worth eating worried and sheared off within an hour. Once he had finished crunching all bones worth crunching, the Copper Devil was finally sated, kind of, somewhat, for now, at least. The unnatural tiger lounged in the crispy, prickly leaf litter, licking his luxurious fur clean of his preys' deliciously messy bodily fluids, taking special care to clean his fang necklace hidden deep within his mane.

Distant roaring perked up the giant tiger boy's fluffy ears in mid-lick. *A new rival to eat? No...* He rummaged through Leo's memory. *Traffic... A uh, a bus... More prey!* The excited tiger-boy eagerly loped through the oak and bramble forest until he stopped at the dry, dusty shores of a river made of dirty, dark stone. By the side of that forest street, the Copper Devil witnessed a strange, shiny, log-shaped animal on circular legs flee an orchard of narrow, metal trees bearing glowing fruit. *Cordubia Transit 322 dropping off another passenger. Easy peasy pickings.*

Leo the Tiger-Boy craned his mighty, bullish bullneck upward, his steaming nostrils flaring as he studied that lone, lonely little child in a Boscoe Bunny hoodie with bunny ears who was pensively pacing around the bus stop. The boy, who couldn't be more than eight years old, carried a familiar-looking stuffed animal in his petite arms. *Hey, he has a Big Brat toy, just like mine!* The hungry devil tiger thundered towards the bus stop just as the nervous little boy turned around to face his impending, rumbling doom.

"Daddy?"



# Codename Requiem

## The Strange Fate of Gunnison, Colorado 2004 [Aliens vs. Predator - Requiem]

BY MANOFEVIL

**TOP SECRET**  
**TASK FORCE EYES ONLY**  
**The Gunnison Incident**

The Gunnison incident began with something that had never happened before: a genuine ship belonging to (CODENAME PREDATOR see attached documentation) actually crashed in the area of Gunnison CO. in a way that was indisputably verifiable by military air control. As the entire purpose of the Task Force is to investigate, capture, and or defend against (CODENAME PREDATOR see attached documentation), we immediately went into action. Our forces, however, were sadly still investigating in the Antarctic (see file CODENAME: BOUVETØYA) and by the time we were on our way to Gunnison, events were already in motion.

The Task Force was able to verify that a secondary incursion by another ship carrying another subject occurred. It is believed that this second subject destroyed the crashed ship as it was the size of a two-story building and vanished without a trace. The erasure was far too clean and quick for any earth-based technology to have done, but more importantly, there was not a sign of a (CODENAME PREDATOR see attached documentation) ship's departure which meant the subject or subjects were still on earth and the only reason they would stay, it would be to hunt. Gunnison had a certain Midwestern gun culture to it but not enough to attract the subjects. We were left to speculate on what the secondary subject was hunting.

When the Task Force arrived in Gunnison, the town appeared quiet and in good order. Cars traveled the streets, schools and businesses were open, all appeared normal. Some of us set out for the crash sight while others began to hunt the hunter. Computer hacking revealed that local law enforcement had had several reports of missing persons. This was a conundrum. The subjects always left the remains of their kills where they died to boast about their achievements and they tended to leave the weak be. There seemed to be no pattern to the victimology of the disappearances so we were convinced that it was somehow related.

Task Force Trackers infiltrated the sewer system and discovered the remains of several unknown life forms (CODENAME ALIEN see attached documentation). While our follow-up people collected them, the trackers followed the trail to the local power plant where they discovered a subject in direct conflict with some of the unknown life forms. Collateral damage from the fight caused a citywide power outage and Task Force personnel quickly found themselves under siege by the unknown life forms. In all the carnage, the subject was lost.

Task Force personnel were given the order to withdraw as troops from the Colorado Army National Guard arrived to take charge but it was learned later that they were overwhelmed and slaughtered by the unknown life forms.

Intercepted radio transmissions revealed that one Colonel Stevens, presumably the ground commander was staging an air evacuation at the



center of town. Local Sheriff Edward Morales began moving locals to the evacuation zone while drone footage revealed a firefight happening at the local hospital. Four civilians managed to reach the roof and fight off several of the unknown life forms before escaping in the helicopter. The subject then appeared on the roof battling a different unknown life form from the others in hand-to-hand combat. (NOTE: Closer examination of the footage afterward led some of the Task Force to theorize that this different creature may have been a combination of the other two.) Whatever the case, the last thing the drone recorded was the arrival of an F-22 Raptor which, rather than a rescue mission, executed a tactical nuclear strike that leveled, or rather was meant to level the entire city to presumably ensure the aliens' deaths. The shock wave causes the fleeing helicopter to crash in a clearing, where the survivors were rescued by the military and later debriefed by members of the Task Force. If they are to be believed, one of the subjects energy weapons was in the helicopter when it crashed. If this is true. Neither it, nor Colonel Stevens have been seen since.

POSTSCRIPT: After the detonation of the tactical nuclear weapon in Gunnison, various agencies of the government took proscribed actions to control the situation.

A cover story was spread of a nuclear accident which destroyed the city and the countryside for miles around was evacuated in expectation of radioactive fallout. When there was no fallout of any kind, various government teams including the Task Force were sent in to investigate. What was discovered was a very large crater where the city had been without a sign of radiation or of the alien creatures. It has been said that it is as if the entire city and everything in it was relocated someplace somehow. Conspiracy theories are running wild and the government is facing serious unrest within the citizenry. Some are calling this the American Chernobyl but they can't explain the lack of radiation. The Task Force continues to investigate

but answers are unlikely to be forthcoming for decades to come.

UPDATE: Careful examination of the drone footage just prior to the explosion shows that the subject's last act was to activate it's self-destruct device which exploded at almost exactly the same time as the tactical nuclear weapon. The interaction between these two forms of energy may be the explanation for what happened, but with no way of recreating and observing the event, which remains mere conjecture.

**TOP SECRET**  
**TASK FORCE EYES ONLY**  
**CODENAME: PREDATOR**

The first recorded contact with this alien life form occurred in 1987 when one of them killed a squad of U.S. Special Forces soldiers and then an elite paramilitary team sent to rescue them in Central America. The creature dispatched the team members one by one with its array of weaponry until the leader, one Major Alan "Dutch" Schaefer managed to confront it after making preparations by covering himself in mud to hide his heat signature from the Predator's thermal imaging, and setting up numerous booby traps. Though he managed to disable the creatures cloaking ability, it managed to capture him, and then, in a strange display of honor, it discarded it's mask and electronic weaponry before challenging the Major to a final duel. Physically outmatched, the Major eventually got it into a position allowing him to use one of his traps to crush and mortally wound the creature. It then set off a self-destruct device which the Major managed to escape. The device did, however, destroy enough rain forest to cover 300 city blocks. When the Major and an indigenous woman who also survived were questioned, the report was so unbelievable that they were first dismissed as suffering from hallucinations. Further investigation, however, brought evidence to light that, at the very least, lent credence to the reports. As more and more encounters with these

creatures occurred, more and more was learned and eventually, the Task Force was formed to investigate, and if necessary to defend people from these creatures. This document summarizes what is thus far known about the creatures codenamed PREDATOR.

## Appearance

The creatures are physically distinguished from humans by their greater height, arthropod-like mandibles and long, hair-like appendages on their heads that are set into their skulls resembling "dreadlocks".

Their bodies are resilient to damage, capable of recovering from multiple gunshot wounds and radiation doses that would prove fatal to humans. Their wounds do, however, require medical attention and they incorporate a portable surgical kit in their armor for this purpose. They are also capable of enduring excruciating pain. They are much stronger than humans, easily capable of outmatching a conditioned adult human and shattering solid concrete with their bare hands. They are also skilled climbers and will readily move through trees or across rooftops in pursuit of prey. Though capable of surviving exposure in Antarctic temperatures for an extended period of time, it has been observed that they have a preference for hot equatorial climates. Their blood is luminescent phosphor green in color. Their vision operates mainly in the infrared portion of the electromagnetic spectrum; they can easily detect heat differentials in their surroundings but are unable to easily distinguish among objects of the same relative temperature. A creature's bio-mask increases its ability to see in a variety of spectra, ranging from the low infrared to the high ultraviolet, and also filters the ambient heat from the area, allowing them to see things with greater clarity and detail. While they are capable of breathing Earth's atmosphere, they have been seen using breathing masks after losing their helmets. Their observed dietary habits are entirely carnivorous and they have been known to visit slaughterhouses located in the areas they are hunting in.

Throughout their recorded appearances, many variations have been observed. Tribal ornamentation on the forehead has been seen as has brighter skin coloration and a greater number of fangs

## Culture and history

The observed culture of these creatures apparently revolves around the hunting and stalking of dangerous lifeforms. After making a kill, they typically skin or decapitate the carcass, converting it into a trophy. If immobilized or at the brink of death, a hunter will activate the mass explosive self-destruct mechanism in his wristband, honorably erasing any trace of its presence to its prey. It is often alluded to that the reason they hunt is not for sustenance or elimination of threats, but as sportsmanship or rite of passage, as they will normally only attack life forms that have the ability to provide them with a challenge.

There is some evidence that these creatures made contact with early human civilizations such as the Ancient Egyptians, the Khmer Empire, Aztecs, and the Comanche Nation, as well as a unknown culture inhabiting what is now Bouvetøya (see file CODENAME: BOUVETØYA). Upon arriving on Earth, the Predators were worshipped as gods by humans, and they taught many of the civilizations how to build pyramids (an explanation as to why many of these different ancient societies had distinctly similar cultures and architecture), but in return expected sacrifices of humans which, if the data collected in Bouvetøya is correct, they were used as hosts for recently encountered unknown life forms from Gunnison, CO. (CODENAME ALIEN see attached documentation). — the ultimate prey for these creatures. There is evidence that the hunters returned to Bouvetøya every century to consummate the bargain, until at one point in the ritual, the (CODENAME ALIEN see attached documentation). spread out of control, resulting in them detonating a bomb that obliterated the entire civilization. Relations between humans and Predators ceased from that time on; they then,

apparently, viewed humans as little more than another quarry to hunt.

The creatures have been discovered to feature prominently in the folklore of certain cultures; some Latin American people refer to the species as "*El Diablo que hace trofeos de los hombres*" (Spanish for "The Demon who makes trophies of men"), and Jamaican superstition identifies them as demons from the spirit world. When hunting humans, they normally avoid certain individuals such as children and some adults if they are unarmed, though they have been observed to spare armed ones if they happen to be pregnant or sickly unless they are attacked by them. A human who has managed to kill one or the other of these creatures in single combat, or has fought alongside a hunter is usually spared by the deceased hunter's comrades and given a gift (often a rare or exotic weapon) as a sign of respect.

A surviving eyewitness from Bouvetøya described one of the creatures completing a successful Alien hunt and marking his helmet and forehead with the acidic blood of his kill. These creatures generally operate alone when hunting. Even when hunters appear in groups, they rarely perform anything that resembles teamwork. They apparently use Aliens as prey, creating artificial gaming reserves by keeping Queens and even Facehuggers in captivity.

## Language

These creatures have what amounts to a written language. This script appears as a written pattern of dashes. These written symbols appear on the creatures' gauntlet displays, their helmets, architecture, and many other surfaces. The most common vocalization of the creatures consists of a series of clicks, roars, snarls, and growls which consist of recorded vocalizations of animals such as lions, tigers, leopards, jaguars, cougars, snow leopards, black bears, grizzly bears, dolphins, alligators, camels, and elephants. They will also mimic human language on occasion, and have been shown to use their helmets to understand and speak

human languages; some have also learned to speak human languages, even without the use of their helmets as well.

## Known Weapons, Gear, and Technology

A comprehensive list is impossible as there is no direct access to the creatures written script. What follows is a list of observed weapons, gear and technology.

**Audio Decoy:** The Audio Decoy is a small gadget that is capable of emitting false audio noises to confuse and distract prey.

**Beacon:** Beacons are cloaked unless they're activated by a predator, in which case they will uncloak and extend upwards a few feet. In this state, a blinking red light lies at the tip and a pulsing noise likely detectable by on a Predator emanates from the structure. They can be seen using the bio-helmet's vision modes, in which they will appear with a flag bearing the Predator's sigil.

**Bear Trap:** The Bear Trap is capable of harming and entrapping its quarry when tripped. It features proximity sensors that detect nearby life forms, and sends an alert back to the Predator that deployed it, when triggered.

**Bio-mask:** also known as a **bio-helmet** is one of the main tools used by the Predator.

As well as performing the basic function of protecting a Predator's head, the helmet also grants the wearer access to multiple vision modes including zoom capabilities, facilitates Vocal Mimicry, and includes breathing apparatus, diagnostics, and visual and audio recording systems. The helmet often also incorporates a red targeting laser used in conjunction with a Plasmacaster. The bio-helmet is directly linked to a Predator's wrist gauntlet, which controls many of the helmet's functions. Together they form one of the most versatile tools used by the Predators, while the helmet itself is a distinctive aspect of their overall appearance.

**Blazer:** The blazer is a shoulder-mounted energy projector that fires a sweeping inferno beam. Hotter than many stars at its core, an inferno beam works by instantly heating object it touches to the point of spontaneous combustion. Given this ability, the weapon is designed to hit as many enemies as possible by sweeping in large arcs across its primary target. Since it does not need to be aimed with such precision, the blazer can continue to fire even while on the move. It has also been seen in a handheld form that looks like a rifle.

**Body Armor (Predator):** is a protective but sectional assemblage of armor worn by Predators across the body while on a Hunt. Hunters rarely wear full protective suits. The reason for this is never explained, although since the Hunt requires stealth, speed, and fair bit of athleticism, They may forgo it for this reason as heavy armor often sacrifices mobility. However, some choose to wear less armor as a silent testament to their (perhaps perceived) skill.

**Burner:** an assault rifle like weapon used by the Predators, it has a similar function to a Plasmacaster, however it is a more hands-on, manual weapon. Burners shoot streams of hot plasma. They resemble and function much like a human assault rifle.

**Ceremonial Dagger:** This weapon is used by warriors as a last-resort weapon or a weapon to take trophies from fallen enemies. Its primary use is to remove the carapace of an Alien but it could also be used as a close-contact weapon if need be. The blade itself is made of either the bones or the 'resin' of an Alien, making it resistant to their acidic blood.

**Charge Emitter:** This a piece of technology used to short out human technology. It emitted a surge of ultrahigh electric frequencies from the Predator's wrist gauntlet, which would disable electrical devices. As such, its function was similar to the human ComTech Hacking Device. The Charge Emitter could also induce temporary nausea in humans.

**Cleaner case:** This is a storage device used by the Predator during his clean-up mission in Gunnison, Colorado, Earth in 2004. Given the device's name, it is likely that the cleaner case was only used on special "clean up" operations.

**Cloak:** also known as the **invisibility system**[2], **Chameleon Feild**[3] or **shiftsuit**,[4] is an advanced piece of technology that is able to render the user invisible, or nearly invisible, to the naked eye, as well as many forms of electronic scanning. The Cloak warps light around the user's body in such a fashion that surfaces behind the creature are visible through the Predator's body. The effect is not perfect, often leaving a visible silhouette similar to heat haze, but in certain environments (and when the Predator remains motionless) it can effectively help a Predator to hide in plain sight.

While the Cloak is very effective when employed against prey that primarily relies on vision, it is notably useless when engaged in hunting Aliens as they are still able to "sense" the Yautja warrior even when the cloak is engaged. Predator starships have similar cloaking systems capable of giving the entire vessel camouflage. Cloak use is very common during a Hunt, due to stealth being a major concern for Predators.

**Combistick:** also known as the **Telescoping Spear**, is a spear-like weapon. It's telescopic, making it relatively small and easy to store when not in use but extending to its full length when required in combat. It is made of incredibly light, sharp, thin but strong material. It can be used both as a close-quarters hand-to-hand weapon and thrown like a spear.

**Cut Clamp:** is both a cutting tool and throwing weapon used by the Predator. Appearing as a segmented blade with clawlike hook at one end while another the mechanism to activate it, Cut Clamp curled up into almost disc-like shape while unused. While typically hurled in a fashion not unlike Bolas, Cut Clamp shred through things it wrapped about rather than restraining them. There's also the chance of the device getting stuck on the



target despite being designed to cut through even metal.

**Disintegrator Gas:** a type of gas used by the Predators to decompose any organic remains of the victim's heads, with the exception of their skulls.

**Dissolving Liquid:** a highly potent, corrosive blue chemical used by Predators which dissolve any piece of organic material it was placed on, including Alien carcasses, and turned it into a "pile of goop". Dissolving Liquid was notably used by the Predator in Gunnison, Colorado in 2004 to eliminate evidence of Aliens. Wolf kept his Dissolving Liquid in small brown vials. Although seemingly not its designed purpose, Dissolving Liquid could also be used as a weapon in a desperate situation. The substance reacted violently with water, and a small amount of the solvent could vaporize large quantities of water and any other material in it. Notably, the Liquid was also able to kill and dissolve live Aliens, despite the creature's resistance to its own highly corrosive blood.

**Elder Sword:** Like all bladed weapons wielded by the Predators, the Elder Sword boasts superior sharpness compared to Earth's bladed weapons.

**Electroshock Bolas:** Bolas that carry a powerful electrical current, which instantly kills victims on impact.

**Electroshock Missile Battery:** a back-mounted missile device that fires three powerful armor penetrating electroshock plasma missiles capable of targeting three different targets (9 when upgraded). This is particularly useful when engaging synthetic prey, as it emits a massive EMP when detonated. This weapon is useful against almost all kinds of prey, and is only gifted to military Predators.

**Energy Flechette:** The Energy Flechette is mounted in the Predator's wrist gauntlet. While some versions are seemingly fixed in place, others have been seen that fold away into the gauntlet when not in use. It is similar in many respects to the classic Plasmacaster weapon, albeit firing

significantly less powerful bolts and with many of the latter's more advanced features removed.

For example, the Energy Flechette is incapable of tracking targets independently, and it does not feature an integrated laser sight; as such, it must be aimed by the user by literally pointing their arm at the target, and is only suitable at close range. It would also be difficult to use against small or fast-moving targets. Owing to its simplistic nature and somewhat lacking power, the Energy Flechette is seemingly only intended as a backup weapon, to be used in situations where more powerful weaponry is unavailable or disabled. Different variants have been seen offering either single-shot or rapid-fire capability.

**Energy Sift:** The **Energy Sift** is a piece of technology used to recharge the user's gear. It appeared as a round object with several inward-facing spires, and a small forked stick similar to the harpoons fired by the speargun. When used, the stick started spinning, emitting a bright light. The recharging process was quite noisy and tumultuous, and would deactivate the Cloak of a Predator using it. As such, it could give away the user's location.

**Falcon:** The Falcon is a remote-controlled drone developed that primarily functions as an intelligence-gathering device. It is able to give the operator a wide-ranging, real-time assessment of their surroundings, providing information on prey movements and positions over a wide area. As with a bio-helmet, the Falcon is also equipped with multiple vision modes.

**Fire bombs:** a highly explosive grenade type device.

**Fireliner:** These are a weapon equipped on Predator mobile Shrines. The shrine is equipped with a fireliner, a multibeam heat weapon related to the blazer. Unlike the blazer, the fireliner focuses small 'beamlets' on different enemy weak spots, heating them to the point of combustion. Overall, the fireliner spreads its pool of beamlets across as many enemies as possible to maximize the number

of opponents suffering from ongoing burns. Like the blazer, the fireliner can be fired on the move.

**Flaying Tool:** The Flaying Tool is 'Y' shaped, its prongs spaced slightly apart. It is meant to be grabbed at the bottom and emits a laser from between the two prongs hot enough to simply and easily peel the skin off of a yet-flayed trophy. While it is undoubtedly used by most Predators to skin their victims as a ritual of the hunt, they also use it for research purposes, cutting open carcasses to study their anatomies.

**Gauntlet cuffs:** a Predator technology used to bind two individuals together by way of the wrist gauntlets.

**Glaive:** a close-combat weapon. In essence, it is very similar to the more common Combistick, both being long, staff-like weapons that telescope closed when not in use. However, unlike the Combistick, the Glaive is exclusively used for hand-to-hand fighting and is never thrown. Where the Combistick ends in razor-sharp, stabbing points, the Glaive is instead tipped with wide, flat blades that are used to scythe and cut through enemies. As a result, its use dictates a different, more elaborate set of moves to harness its true potential, with flowing, almost dance-like movements required to ensure the heavy, bladed tips slice through the air with constant momentum. The Glaive is a very powerful weapon, able to cut clean through a human torso in the hands of a skilled operator.

**Grappling Hook:** During their hunts, Predators make use of the **grappling hook** to access areas that can only be passed by Aliens, or to get to airducts.

**Hand Scythe:** a type of bladed close-combat weapon used by the Predators. Hand Scythes vary in design but typically consist of at least one curved blade, positioned roughly perpendicular to the hilt.

**Health Shard:** a device that works similar to the Medicomp. It works by taking the cylindrical container, pulling it apart into two pieces, and stabbing the two pieces in the Predator's body. Like

the Medi-Kit, it is extremely painful to use. A Predator typically carries up to three at a time.

**Killscreen Generator:** the Killscreen Generator is possibly the most advanced piece of hardware a Predator can have, this uses a dark plasma streams guided by a tracking device that, consequently, neutralizes any incoming projectiles, up to and including rockets. This means that prey that are trying to kill the Predator from range will have to either flee or engage it in close combat. It has, however, little if any effect against multi-projectile and rapid-fire weapons such as shotguns (as there are too many projectiles to neutralize), no effect against flame-based weapons, and is useless when fighting Aliens.

*Kujhad:* a unique multi-purpose tool with several observed features:

**-Advanced AI:** When attached to a user's wrist gauntlet, the *Kujhad* appears to act with a mind of its own,

**-Portable Mini-Computer:** When removed from the wrist gauntlet, the *Kujhad* acts like a portable mini-computer.

**-Projectile Weapon:** When attached to the wrist gauntlet, the *Kujhad* can act as a weapon (similar, in principle, to the Energy Flechette), but instead of firing plasma-based projectiles, it instead fires a rather tiny discus that (contrary to its small size) has enough power and sharpness to not only pierce the thick hide of a Predator, but also cleanly slice through the flesh and bone of a human, with relative ease.

**-Storage Unit:** When attached to the wrist gauntlet, the *Kujhad* acts as a storage unit for certain small objects.

**Language Translator:** a program installed in some Predators' bio-masks that allows a Hunter to understand other species' communication(s) / language(s).

**Maul:** a close-combat weapon. It is a large, weighted cutting blade affixed to a handle that runs perpendicular to the blade itself; this layout is notably similar to tonfas or "nightsticks" often used by human law enforcement officers. The Maul offers devastating close-range power far in excess of that available with the Combistick, but at the cost of greatly reduced range. The Maul's blade is around twice as long at the back than at the front and is weighted accordingly, allowing the user to spin the weapon in the hand about its handle and put increased momentum behind their blows; one tactic is to whirl the weapon rapidly in a fashion comparable to a helicopter rotor before landing a crushing strike on an opponent. The Maul is capable of inflicting grievous wounds, capable of slicing through multiple human targets simultaneously with little effort.

In fact, the Maul is arguably one of the most powerful hand-to-hand weapons available to Predators. As with many such weapons, individuals of the species often utilize bespoke variants of the Maul with their own differing characteristics.

**Medicomp:** also known as the **MediKit**, is a powerful and versatile first aid kit used by the Predator to treat wounds while on a Hunt. The Medicomp contained various serums and surgical tools that could be used to treat a wide range of injuries quickly and effectively.

**Motion Detector:** Like the mines utilized by the Predators, the Motion Detector is capable of adhering to any surface. When deployed, it generates a motion detector field; when tripped it does not harm the quarry, but it does send an alert back to the user who deployed it, and "marks" the prey so the predator can track them.

**Netgun:** also known as the **Net Launcher**, is a weapon that fires a wire net at great velocity and with great force, typically to trap and ensnare prey. Once fired, the net itself has the ability to tighten around its trapped target with sufficient force to cause the wire mesh to cut into the victim. It is a

small handheld device that fires a bundled net that rapidly expands as it leaves the weapon's barrel. The net itself travels at great speed, capable of hurling a target across the room upon contact, ideally pinning them to a nearby surface. Once pinned, the prey is then an easy target for the Predator.

**Noose:** When used in the dark, the wire-thin Noose is almost impossible to see. The material is slim but strong, able to hold the weight of an adult human as it yanks them up. It also constricts around the throat in such a way that the victim cannot produce any noise, allowing the user to pick off stragglers in a group with utmost stealth. While used on live victims, the Noose has been seen used on dead victims as well. Predators have a tendency to hang what they kill upside down by the feet, typically after skinning them.

**Plasma Grenade:** The Plasma Grenade creates a large explosion when detonated. Besides the Plasma Grenade there are more grenades such Fire, Lightning, Sonic, Electro Pulse, etc.

**Plasma Pistol:** also known as the **Plasma Handgun**, is a handheld version of the Plasmacaster. While purpose-built examples are known to exist, the weapon can also be assembled in the field from a normal Plasmacaster. Typically, the former are more powerful and versatile than the latter, which would presumably only be used in situations where the donor Plasmacaster has been damaged in some way and will therefore no longer function as intended.

**Plasmacaster:** also known as the **Plasma Cannon**, **Laser Cannon** or **Shoulder Cannon**, is a long-range energy projector weapon with automatic targeting capabilities. Capable of firing armor-penetrating plasma bolts at distant targets, it is arguably the most devastating and technologically advanced offensive tool at the Predator's disposal. The bolts fired by the weapon explode in a burst of plasma "shrapnel" upon striking a target, causing grievous wounds and potentially damaging other enemies near the point of impact.

**Poli Nanovibronic Disc:** a thrown disc weapon similar to the Smart Disc. When thrown, the Poli Nanovibronic Disc returned to the wielder in a single arc. When not in use, the Poli Nanovibronic Disc was stored on the left leg.

**Power Punch Glove:** also known as the **Steel Wrist Shield** or **Arm cladding** is a device consisting of a metal bridge that extends on command from a Predator's wrist gauntlet to connect with "brass knuckles" worn on the hand. It was used to give a boost in punching strength, allowing the user to perform a punch powerful enough to make a hole in solid concrete. In 2004, after a fight with a group of Aliens in the sewers of Gunnison, Colorado, A Predator used a Power Punch glove to create a hole in the ceiling of the sewers, allowing him to pursue the creatures that had escaped to the surface.

**Predator Mines:** variously known as **Proximity Mines** or **Throwing Mines**, are various types of mine-based weaponry used by Predators on their Hunts. Several variations of the weapons have been seen, although they all share similar characteristics in that they are static weapons triggered when an enemy passes close by, either automatically or remotely.

**Sat-Com:** a holographic map projector which shows a complete 3D scan of an area and is part of a Wrist Gauntlet. Predators use this device in their Hunts to locate enemies or other targets.

**Scimitar:** also known as the **Arm Blade**, is a metallic bladed Predator weapon used on their Hunts. While similar to Wristblades in function, Scimitars offer greatly increased range (owing to their greater size) but at the cost of increased bulk and reduced maneuverability. Furthermore, while Wristblades can be folded away completely when not in use, Scimitars have only limited retracting capabilities, meaning the user is affected by their bulk even when not in combat. When fully extended, a Scimitar blade can be as long as a Predator's leg, giving the hunter significant range in a melee. As an added benefit, they are covered by a Predator's Cloak even when extended fully, unlike the standard Wristblades.

**Self-Destruct Device:** a powerful Predator explosive device built into a Predator's wrist gauntlet. This weapon of last resort is used by them both as a means by which to commit honorable suicide in the face of an imminent defeat, and also to remove any evidence of their existence and prevent their technology from falling into the hands of another species. As such, it is an indispensable piece of their equipment, and a Predator would typically never venture on a hunt without it.

**Shifter:** The Shifter is a small orb (roughly the size of a marble) that features the cloaking technology of the Predators

**Shuriken:** a primarily thrown weapon. Constructed with six retractable blades, it is sharp enough to cut into three inches of solid stone or cut an Alien in two. Much like the Smart Disc with which the weapon shares several similarities, it can also be used as a handheld slashing weapon. It is essentially the same as the Smart Disc in operation, to the point where they can be viewed as merely a different design of the same weapon. Like the Smart Disc, the Shuriken has in-built tracking and flight-correctional capabilities that allow it to track a target (or even multiple targets simultaneously) and return to the user. However, owing to its increased weight and bulk over the Smart Disc, it is not uncommon for the weapon to fail in the latter regard and become lodged in solid surfaces instead of returning to its point of origin.

Also like the Smart Disc, Shuriken have considerable cutting power — one has been seen to carve clean through an Alien without slowing down, as well as maintaining sufficient velocity to subsequently lift and pin a human to a wall several feet above the floor. When not in use, the Shuriken's six blades fold away into the hub for ease of storage.

**Smart Disc:** also known as the **Smart Weapon, Cutting Disk**, or simply the **Disc**, is a primarily thrown weapon. It is an extremely sharp circular cutting device that is typically thrown like a discus and yet returns to the user like a boomerang.



It also features a hand grip for use as a melee slashing weapon. Computer-controlled gyros guarantee that the Smart Disc returns to its wielder when thrown and also give the weapon a degree of auto-guidance, allowing it to alter its course in mid-air and follow a moving target if necessary. However, the means by which the disc maintains its altitude during these maneuvers is not understood, and clearly involves technologies far in advance of anything possessed by mankind. Smart Discs are capable of automatically tracking a target using their body heat signature, although some can alternately be manually directed in flight using the targeting laser built into the Predator's bio-helmet. The weapon is capable of tracking multiple targets with one throw, giving it capabilities against large groups of enemies that most other Yautja weapons do not possess. Its devastating razor edges are capable of cutting through most substances with ease — a Smart Disc has been seen to cut through half a dozen cattle carcasses and a man in quick succession without any effort. However, in the event that the Disc becomes embedded in a solid material, it can be returned to the thrower with the push of a button on the Predator's wrist gauntlet.

**Sword:** The **Sword**, is a weapon occasionally carried and used by Predator.

**Tag:** a small circular tracking device that is used on prey which the Predator wishes to continuously bait rather than kill outright. The bottom portion of the tag is coated with hook-like barbs which are inserted beneath the target's skin to prevent removal.

**Tracking Syringe:** a device notably used by the Predator in Gunnison, Colorado in 2004. The Syringe could collect Facehugger DNA samples which could then be injected into the user's wrist gauntlet in order to calibrate their bio-helmet's Predator-Vision, enabling them to see Facehuggers and their tracks. The Tracking Syringe had a place to be stored in the Cleaner Case. A single sample of this device was found outside the area of the Gunnison disappearance.

**Vocal Mimicry:** requires a bio-helmet to be utilized, and should not be confused with a Predator's natural ability to copy human speech — while Predators can naturally "speak" human words to some extent, vocal mimicry refers specifically to the perfect imitation of a particular human voice. Mimicry usually involves the repetition of phrases used by other prey previously encountered by the Predator, although it appears the Yautja also have some kind of "database" of pre-recorded statements from which hunters can draw. In fact, some individuals have been heard to repeat phrases used by victims that they had never before encountered themselves, but who were hunted by other Yautja at an earlier time. Typically, mimicry consists of the use of distress calls, beckons or insults to lure a target to a specific location, often with the intent of separating them from their comrades and thereby making them an easier target. Predators have also been known to use mimicry to circumvent electronic security systems that require the use of a specific spoken password to deactivate. Occasionally (and somewhat less commonly), vocal mimicry is used for no purpose other than to taunt or scare prey, or as a form of celebration following a particularly significant victory.

Due to the often appropriate use of mimicry, it appears Predators have at least some understanding of the phrases they repeat.

**Whip:** also known as a **Razor Whip** is a fast-moving weapon. A segmented handheld bullwhip that wraps around a target, and once pulled taut is capable of cutting it in half. Resistant to Alien acid, due to it possibly being constructed out of an Alien's tail. It was used by the Predator on his mission to wipe out the Aliens overrunning Gunnison, Colorado.

**Wrist Cannon:** is an energy projector weapon which, in many respects, stronger version of Energy Flechette, built into the Predator's wrist gauntlet. As with Energy Flechette, Wrist Cannon is mounted in the Yautja's wrist gauntlet. Unlike the former, the weapon is greatly optimized to the point of capable

of firing stronger bolt with greater firepower on the same vein with the classic Plasmacaster weapon as well as possesses equal range with the latter. Even so, it retains some setbacks which shared by its weaker counterpart such as the lack of tracking features; as such, it must be aimed by the Yautja literally pointing their arm at the target. It would also be difficult to use against small or fast-moving targets, though such setback is not as severe as with Energy Flechette provided that the user gained enough mastery and experience in using the weapon.

**Wrist Gauntlet:** also known as the **wrist bracer**[2] or **wrist computer**, is a piece of wrist-worn Yautja technology. It houses several technologically advanced features, including a Sat-Com and a powerful Self-Destruct Device, as well as controls for a Predator's Cloak and, in some cases, their Plasmacaster. Some wrist gauntlets also included Energy Flechettes or Power Punch Gloves. A wrist gauntlet is possibly the most prized piece of Predator technology.

**Wrist Shield:** or simply the "**shield**", is a deployable device used by the Predator. The shield, compared to the one wielding it, is small, but durable and easily retractable when not in use. The device was able to withstand both blunt force, bladed weapons and even bullets from flintlock weapons, such as muskets and pistols. The device could also be used offensively, being sharp enough to slice through the neck of an enemy when activated at close range.

**Wristblades:** also known as **Gauntlet Knives**, are the most basic of Predator weapons and arguably the species' signature armament. The blades take the form of retractable, serrated blades between six and eighteen inches in length and two to eight inches wide that extend over the back of the hand from a gauntlet worn on the Predator's wrist. Generally, they wear a single gauntlet on one wrist fitted with a pair of parallel blades, but there are a number of stylistic variations to this basic arrangement. Despite their relative simplicity, Wristblades are the weapon of choice for most Predators. The deadly blades are

sharp enough to cut through bone and are intended for use against unarmored combatants or those who have been disarmed. As a last resort, they can sometimes be fired as a projectile from their gauntlet.

**TOP SECRET**  
**TASK FORCE EYES ONLY**  
**CODENAME: ALIEN**

After the events in Gunnison, specialized units were sent into the surrounding area to retrieve any remains of The Colorado Army National Guard troops and. Anything else that could be found. It was discovered that the troops had all been killed by a horde of alien creatures never before encountered before by man. Examinations of the remains of some of these creatures revealed that these creatures could only be extraterrestrial in origin. Given the presence of a jointed skeletal covering composed of a substance very similar to chitin, it is assumed these creatures are a form of giant arthropod. Very few dead specimens of what would be determined to be the adult creatures were found. Many more remains of what would later be termed 'Facehuggers' were found and a single living specimen of that. These all were removed to the island laboratory in the Caribbean for study. This facility was chosen for its isolation and the fortifications it offered.

Given the established extraterrestrial nature of these creatures, bioweapon protocols were in place from the beginning. This proved to be extremely fortunate after what was discovered. The living specimen was kept locked inside a reinforced observation cage while our best people examined it. The first challenge came when collecting blood and tissue samples. There was plenty of leftover tissue from the dead specimens, but when technicians tried to draw blood from the living specimen, the blood proved to be an acid so corrosive, it ate through anything it was placed in. Someone came up with the brilliant idea of making a container out of tissue from the dead

specimens and samples were taken. This proved to be especially useful during the next stage.

The next breakthrough happened when the time came to feed the specimen. All sorts of food were offered to the creature but it wouldn't respond. It was speculated that it might need a diet composed of microscopic organisms so it was placed in a tank of salt water enriched with plankton. Again, no reaction. It was then speculated that the creature might have entered hibernation so it was taken to the medical lab for X-rays. When one of the personnel carelessly tried to change his mask filter nearby, the creature suddenly attacked. The protective equipment prevented any injury but this had been the first reaction the team had gotten from the creature since it was brought in. It was subsequently discovered that it would respond to a combination of heat, smell, sound, and vibration. Since it wouldn't respond to anything other than the presence of another living thing, a lab animal, a pig, was introduced into the creature's enclosure. The creature's attack on the pig was so violent and aggressive that the pig may not have even known it happened. Both specimens seemed completely immobile so the team brought them out for X-rays. It was discovered that in the brief time of the creature's attack, it had extended two protuberances into the pig's mouth, down its throat, and into its stomach. Further, there was a large mass growing behind the pig's sternum that couldn't be identified. The creature had a death grip on the pig's head that couldn't be forced off. In addition, its long tail was wrapped vigorously around the pig's neck. It was during this examination that the creature was given the name 'facehugger' which has become its nomenclature despite its clumsiness.

Strangely, both specimens were still alive, so both were put back into the enclosure together. Not long after, the creature released its death grip on the pig's head, scuttled away, and died. The pig regained consciousness shortly after and was removed to be examined. Blood and tissue samples were taken and later proved to have changed DNA. X-rays were

taken and a large mass was discovered to be behind the pig's sternum.

The earlier difficulties with collecting blood samples from the 'Facehugger' left the technicians leery of attempting more invasive examinations at least at that moment, and the pig was returned to the enclosure where it quickly ate all of its food and that left for the 'Facehugger'. The staff decided to continue feeding it to see what would happen. The pig continued to eat and eat, yet didn't seem to change in size in any way. It was later calculated that the pig ate three times its weight in food and when there was nothing to eat, it licked the dishes. The staff continued to feed and observe the pig for the next twenty-eight hours when suddenly the pig fell over sideways and began to squeal and thrash. The staff were preparing to enter the enclosure to see what was happening when a small head about the size of a fist burst out from between the pig's ribs. Before the staff could react, the head let out an inhuman shriek and lunged forward, bursting from the pig's chest. The creature then began racing about the enclosure, as one staff member put it, 'like a chicken with its head cut off.' It climbed walls, ran across the ceiling, and finally stopped on the enclosure's observation window. When it spit an acidic substance onto the window and the glass began to dissolve, the staff lowered titanium steel blast armor over it and trapped the specimen inside, planning to observe it through the enclosure's CCTV cameras.

The specimen then proceeded to attack the lights in the ceiling until one of the staff thought to turn them off. It was then discovered that the creature didn't show up on infrared and the fixed interior cameras lacked the capability to see the creature in the dark so a 360-degree tactical camera with night vision was inserted into the enclosure. The creature was discovered curled up in a corner, seemingly asleep. As there was only one tactical camera on base, it was decided to observe the creature from a distance.

The creature began a cycle of molting, expanding, and devouring its shed exoskeletons. Within three

hours it had grown to the size of the large dead specimens retrieved from Gunnison, and didn't stop. The personnel at the base were already concerned about these creatures and what they might do if the creature escaped so evacuation drills and self-destruct protocols became the order of the day at the base while the creature continued to grow. Finally, after five hours, the creature stopped molting. It then began to line the enclosure with a strange excretion. The expert on arthropods correctly guessed that it was nesting. Robot arms in the walls took samples of the excretion and tests were run. The substance proved to be quickly hardening and similar to the resin so that was the name it was given. The operator of the tactical camera managed to move it around so it wouldn't get stuck in the resin. It was moved to the first part of the chamber to harden. After less than two hours of the creature lining the enclosure, the creature climbed to the ceiling and began to molt again. This time, it began to change form. The insect expert correctly guessed that it was creating an ovipositor which is the organ insect queens used to lay eggs. The staff continued to observe and gather data as the cycle continued.

When the first egg was laid, a robot with sensor equipment was inserted into the chamber to examine the egg. It took some doing to break the resin away from the airlock door, but it was done. All the data listed below about the egg was learned. When the robot tried to bring the egg out for further examination, the Queen crushed it. Apparently, it was smart enough to recognize a threat to its brood.

Since no one was willing to enter the chamber with the queen, another lab pig was introduced to the enclosure. It was expected that the queen would eat it and the staff would be able to study its feeding habits.

Instead the pig avoided the queen but went near the egg. To everyone's surprise, the egg opened and the 'Facehugger' inside attacked the pig so swiftly that this pig again probably never knew what hit it.

The life cycle of the Alien species had come full circle. The staff presented its findings to the Task Force. As the leadership concluded that the Alien creatures were most likely a bioweapon brought to earth by (CODENAME PREDATOR see attached documentation) to wipe the planet clean of all animal and human life, the specimens were ordered destroyed. In the short time it had taken for the decision to be reached, the cycle had perpetuated again and another alien had burst from the second pig. This one stopped molting after two hours and yielded what must have been an adult worker alien since it was the same size and shape as the larger dead specimens from Gunnison.

Since the enclosure holding the specimens had been an armored chamber used to test explosive devices, an incendiary device was placed within it and detonated. The staff are even now dissecting and examining the remains. One of the first things learned is that the acidic blood of the creatures becomes inert after death. Further revelations may be forthcoming, but the danger represented by these creatures cannot be understated. Should (CODENAME PREDATOR see attached documentation) or any other extraterrestrial power successfully infest any part of Earth with this species, estimates predict complete planetary extinction within less than a year.

## Alien Life Cycle

### Alien Egg

The **Alien Egg** can survive for an undetermined length of time in various and diverse environments. The egg's outer skin is translucent, flammable, and is unarmored.

The egg potentially detects a host that is within close striking proximity by sound, movement or vibration. As this occurs, the egg and accompanying organism within are awakened by the viable opportunity to perpetuate the lifecycle. The four petals at the top of the egg open, preparing for the next stage as the so-called facehugger emerges. If necessary, the prey is ambushed. However, the Facehugger may take its



time in approaching the host if opportune conditions (ie: a cocooned host) are present...

## Facehugger

The **Facehugger** phase of the Alien life cycle is a creature that has been likened to a hybrid of a crab and spider. It appears to be comprised of an abdomen, legs, and tail with no visible head or sensory organs. It has no equivalent in earth-based fauna, so the name 'Facehugger' has stuck even with the few scientists who have become aware of it. The creature is approximately 1.55 meters in length (including the tail), with a long retractable tube-like mechanism extruding from the mouth, that can extend to an approximate length of .5 to .75 meters.

An aggressive physical assault method seems to be what the Facehugger is best suited for when it comes to attacking and subduing a potential host. In this assault, the Facehugger is usually still inside the egg when the potential host “discovers” it. The extremely powerful tail that is coiled beneath the parasite is used as a spring to launch the creature from the confines of the egg and toward the potential host.

The creature's expulsion from the egg is so violent and aggressive that the attack is often times overwhelming – in the sense that the victim has little to no time to react to the attack, and is usually subdued within seconds.

However, should initial contact with a host fail, the **Facehugger** then relies on its legs as a very effective means of locomotion. This creature can react with astonishing agility and speed once on open ground. It has also exhibited a certain degree of stealth while stalking mobile victims so as to gain the upper hand and potentially catch the prey off-guard. As with its adult counterpart – it seems to have infinite patience. It has also shown the ability to climb.

During an instance where the potential host is either cocooned into the Alien hive walls, or is in some other way incapacitated, the **Facehugger** has been

recorded crawling from the egg, as opposed leaping from the egg. In this means of acquiring a host, the Facehugger actually takes on the characteristics of a passive creature: it's actions are slower, and seem to be executed with a certain degree of care – as if to avoid harming the potential host.

The means by which the **Facehugger** locates its victim are believed to be identical to the means by which the adult Alien acquires a potential host: a combination of heat, smell, sound, and vibration. However, it has not been established where the Facehugger's sense organs are located.

Speculatively, within the hive, the Facehugger may be responding to a pheromone trace that has been excreted by the adult Alien responsible for the cocooning of the host. Such a pheromone trace would serve a dual purpose: to be used as a means of locating the host when returning with an egg from the egg chamber (employed by an adult), and to act as a “beacon” for the Facehugger once the egg is open. This would account for the larva's apparent “nonchalance” in settling on a host so as to begin the process of depositing the embryo. After depositing the Alien embryo, the Facehugger departs from the host, generally dying within a short distance.

## Embryo

It's speculated the host's body begins to grow the **Embryo** due to the Xenomorph's altering of the host's DNA. The Embryo grows in the chest cavity just behind the host's sternum for protection, but unfortunately this means a very painful death for the host. Speculation also suggests the Embryo uses some of the host's ingested nutrients causing the host to feel hungry upon regaining consciousness. The Embryo introduces a chemical into the host's digestive system to keep others of its kind from damaging the host. It's also known that a host will experience a slight fever after removal of a Facehugger as their immune systems reacts to the foreign tissue but due to the altering of the host's DNA the Embryo is able to develop unharmed.

The time it takes for an **Embryo** to develop is seventeen to twenty-four hours, and with a Queen Embryo the time is more than twenty-four hours which is speculated to be because of the Queen's more complicated structure. Embryos can take only two to four hours to develop with a Queen Embryo taking only eight to twelve hours for development depending on the mixture of DNA. If a host dies with an Embryo inside it, this doesn't necessarily mean the Embryo will die too because there's no evidence to suggest that it's tied into the host's main systems. The life span of an Embryo has yet to be determined.

### Chestbuster

The larval stage, or **Chestbuster** as it has come to be called, punches through the host's sternum sending blood and fragments of bone everywhere killing its host. It has a long and slender body with small malproportioned limbs, yet possesses an undeveloped head. The Chestbuster moves by using its tail to push it along much like a serpent. One of the first things a Chestbuster will do is make its first use of its lungs by letting out a scream or cry. After it does this, it will leave its host's body.

Strangely enough the **Chestbuster** does not feed off the dead host's body. A factual reason for this behavior has yet to be determined. It has been speculated that the Alien instinctively flees the host on account of its vulnerable state, attempting to find a secure location in which to molt into the adult. What the Chestbuster eats during the maturation process is unknown. It is known that the creature will molt its shell numerous times in achieving the size of a fully developed Alien.

The **Chestbuster** has an astonishing metabolism rate that is significantly higher than at any other point in the life cycle. Based off of the available information, it takes roughly two to three hours for the Alien to reach its full size, an estimated two meters in vertical height.

### Adult

The **Adult** is two meters tall with a strong tail that extends to the height of the body, and it's generally

bipedal in the specimens that have been encountered by humans. However, the movement and shape of the creature shows that it adopts certain physical attributes of the host's anatomy. When infecting the species of mankind, the Alien may have adopted our characteristic "intelligence." Speculation suggests that it emits no body heat. This is the assumption mainly because the creature produces no effect on heat-detecting devices. Note: The aliens in Gunnison did not show up on the infrared.

The long head of the Adult may be due to housing an enlarged brain. This does not necessarily mean that the creature possesses a greater natural or innate intelligence. However, this could signify that the alien's brain is more complex than that of other Earthly terrestrial organisms. It has been speculated that a translucent, featureless cowl on the exterior of the creature's head shows it is young. As it ages, the smooth cowl is lost, exposing distinct textured lining. The reason for the cowl is probably to serve as a protective shell for the still developing cranium. The smooth heads of each alien(s) in observed specimens bears testament to this speculative fact.

Generally, the alien organism proved to be able to survive in settings that might be unfamiliar to its species. The work in the Caribbean lab provided unique insight as to the capabilities of the alien when a hive is established, thriving, and the alien is in its natural habitat. It was also observed that they possess the ability to climb on man-made walls and ceilings, as well as the textured camouflage resin of the hive. This is potentially possible because the alien possesses:

- a) extreme physical strength in its appendages or
- b) suction-like, or textured structures on its hands, feet, and tail.

The Adult has five spine-like appendages extending from its back, and the uppermost can be seen to be no more than an exaggerated vertebra which could aid in warding off rear attacks or just to make the creature seem larger. The other four tube-like

appendages have been hypothesized to contain glands that secrete a type of resin much like that used to construct a hive which would aid the **Adult** in dropping down onto prey or ascending great heights while leaving the arms, legs, and tail free for use. It's possible they are used to secrete the resin that the hive is constructed of, but it might be that they just regurgitate that substance.

The alien organism also has a tongue-like set of jaws contained within the elongated head. These secondary jaws of the alien which are part of the modified tongue are used in an offensive manner and can spring twelve inches outward from the creature's mouth. The primary purpose of these jaws is to immobilize a potential host. However, they can also be used to intimidate prey and perform basic motor functions. While tense, the strength is greater than bone, and once it reaches its maximum length its jaws close and the tongue is retracted.

The Adult is also able to spit a concentrated ray of venom toward a potential host that can dissolve flesh and enter their blood stream eventually rendering the potential host immobile.

The creature's tail is very powerful and it's used for agility and balance, an offensive and defensive weapon, and immobilizing potential hosts with its stinger. In aquatic situations it allows the Adult to move with spectacular grace and agility. The creature's detection organs are all located in or around its head, and are extremely acute. It appears the creature feeds upon any sort of animal life, but what its dietary needs have yet to be determined. Also, what type of internal organs an Adult contains is unknown along with its life span.

### Queen Alien

The **Queen Alien** is about four and one half meters tall with an extremely powerful tail that is equal in length to the Queen's height. It possesses a large cranial crown which extends two meters behind the back of its head, and it has a second set of smaller arms. The Queen's head is kept hidden in its cranium until awakened at which time the front portion of the

head will emerge much like a turtle. The large crown may be used for communication between the queen and the workers of the hive.

The secondary jaws of the Queen are similar to the Adult's secondary jaws, except they're proportionately larger with a striking length of roughly thirty-six inches. The second set of smaller arms the Queen possesses was speculated to be used in a mating process, but Queens are actually born fertile. A mature Queen has an ovipositor which can reach a length of eight meters. Both the Queen and its ovipositor are suspended from the roof of a hive by thick strands of resin. From the end of the ovipositor, an egg is set down onto the floor of the hive. Ultimately, the Queen is responsible for producing a Queen-bearing Egg(s) but when she starts producing them is uncertain. Speculation suggests that when a Queen's Egg laying abilities are nearing an end, the next Queen born takes over.

### Forbidden Lore

What the American Government never learned was that after the events on Bouvetøya, a Predator ship left Earth carrying Alien facehuggers. A chestburster with traits of both species quickly matured into an adult crossbreed and started killing the Predators on board. The hull was punctured and the ship crashed in a forest outside of Gunnison, Colorado, killing all but one of the Predators. Severely injured, the Predator sent a distress signal before being killed by the crossbreed.

That crossbreed and several facehuggers escaped and implanted embryos into several humans. On the Predator homeworld, a skilled veteran Predator received the signal and decided to kill all the Aliens on Earth. He arrives at the crashed ship, uses an acid-like liquid to dissolve evidence of the Aliens' presence, and triggered an implosion to destroy the vessel.

Meanwhile, a Gunnison woman, Darcy Benson, began searching for her missing husband and son, unaware that they were killed by the Aliens and a

local waitress Carrie Adams discovered she was pregnant.

The Predator started killing Aliens in the sewer, but four managed to escape. He pursued some to the power plant, where the fight causes the citywide power outage. At the same time, an Alien killed several people at the high school swimming pool and another invaded a home and killed the homeowner while his family escaped. Aliens also attacked the diner where Carrie worked, and she was impregnated by the crossbreed. Darcy discovered her body in horror. Sheriff Morales then arrived and took her with him.

Sheriff Morales and others gathered at a sporting goods store to collect weapons while troops from the Colorado Army National Guard arrived to battle the Aliens but were quickly massacred. Several Aliens arrived at the sporting goods store but the Predator killed them. As survivors attempted to escape Gunnison, they learned Colonel Stevens was staging an air evacuation at the center of town. Sheriff Morales and Darcy headed to the evacuation zone. However, the hospital was invaded by Aliens and the Crossbreed, who impregnated some pregnant women to breed more of its kind. The Predator arrived at the hospital and dispatched more Aliens. It was then attacked by an Alien and both tumbled down an elevator shaft.

It somehow survived the fall and battled the Crossbreed on the roof in hand-to-hand combat. The two mortally wounded each other just as the F-22 executed the tactical nuclear strike. The Predator activated its own self-destruct mechanism at the same time and the resulting release of energy did something nobody has since been able to define.

### The Day and Night After

When the sun rose over Gunnison the next day, most of the residents were surprised to see it. Most woke up, as they would remember it later, laying on the ground where they had been about to die the night before. This applied to the Predator, Aliens, and Crossbreed amongst them as well. The sunlight

drove all Aliens and the Crossbreed down into the sewers, old mine shafts, and caverns under the city with the Predator hot on their trails. It was then that the horrors began. Aliens began to burst from the chests of every person who had been attacked by facehuggers or the Crossbreed. Sometimes, right in front of the victims' families.

Fortunately, since it was a bright sunny day, the chestbursters all fled into the underground and harmed no one else, but the vision of people being torn apart from the inside by these creatures is burned into the minds of all those unfortunate enough to have witnessed them. This was especially the case with those who saw it happen in the maternity ward of the hospital. Meanwhile, the power was still out, communications were still cut off, and about the only thing preventing a mass panic was that most people were gathered at or near the center of town for the evacuation that was announced, though sadly, that was also the place where most of them saw their first chestburstings.

Fortunately, Sheriff Morales and several other city leaders were there and managed to bring some order to the assembly. It was quickly recognized that they were dealing with an unheard of situation. The first thing everyone tried was returning to their homes to call for help. This sadly proved to be impossible as the internet was down, like the cellular network, and even the hard lines. It was discovered that local calls could be made over the landlines but nothing outside of town. By noon, all of this had been discovered and the impulse to run for their lives took hold of the populace. Everyone hastily packed their cars and headed for the town limits. When they arrived, however, they found themselves confronted by a thick fog bank impossible to see through. The drivers wisely slowed their cars as they approached, but then when they were just feet away from the fog, all their cars stalled out and wouldn't restart no matter what was done. Some of the people grew desperate and ran into the fog bank determined to get away from the monsters. Shortly afterward, they ran back out of the fog even more terrified and told



everyone else that the fog was filled with the very monsters they had been fleeing. The refugees retreated back to the center of town to compare notes with those who hadn't fled and figure out a new plan.

Sheriff Morales, his deputies, and some volunteers had been busily gathering and identifying the dead while power company technicians had been hard at work trying to get the power restored. The Sheriff's department began to take statements from those who had witnessed the Aliens and their actions and were still coherent enough to speak. The more people heard about the creatures, the more scared they got, and it was universally decided by all to arm themselves. Even those who were the most fearsome gun opponents one week earlier were taking the crash course in guns that the local gun enthusiasts offered them. Responsible people like Sheriff Morales made sure safety rules were followed but the level of fear in everyone made more than few worried there would be accidental discharges that might injure or kill. All of that ended after the sun went down, and the creatures began to come out. The power had been restored late in the afternoon so the street lights were up, but there were plenty of shadows for them to hide in. So much planning had been done that the entire population of the town was still gathered in the center of town. Sheriff Morales had managed to put rudimentary plans in place. The city center had been fortified with crude barricades and vehicles had been parked over every manhole. The Sheriff led experienced shooters out of the fort to pick off the creatures then fall back to resupply. The inexperienced shooters stayed behind to guard the children, injured, and others unable to shoot.

One of the children, a little girl named Sara, noticed one of the vehicles parked over a man hole cover was shaking violently. She tried to tell her mother but was ignored until the street beneath the vehicle erupted upward, the vehicle overturned, and the Crossbreed landed right in front of Sara and her mother.

Before anyone could move, what would later be named the 'Shuriken' clove the Crossbreed apart at the waist and splashed its deadly acid blood back on the overturned vehicle melting much of it away, then the cloaked Predator stepped out from behind Sara and her mother toward the remains of the Crossbreed.

"Look Mommy, there's the invisible man I saw earlier," said Sara. The Predator caught the returning shuriken in front of the whole assembly which caused its cloak, damaged from the previous night, to short out again and the Predator was revealed in all his ferocity to everyone inside the city center fort. At that second, another Crossbreed leaped from the hole in the street only to be beheaded by the Predator shuriken again and it remains cast down into the hole. The Predator looked down into the hole and three more crossbreeds hissed up at him. The predator stepped down into the hole and began slashing and shooting left and right, massacring the crossbreeds. Only one of the townsfolk was bold enough to look down into the hole and witness what was happening. The entire exchange took less than two minutes.

When Sheriff Morales and his men returned from their latest sortie to reload their guns, he was shown what was happening in the hole. He drew a bead on the Predator but Sara's mother, Connie, stopped him.

"I don't think he's here to hurt us," she said, and told him what had happened with her daughter. A professor from Western Colorado University in Gunnison advised 'The Enemy of my Enemy' and the Sheriff reconsidered, although he did leave some shooters behind to watch the hole. One of those, Darcy Benson, decided to shoot down a Crossbreed that was moving in behind the Predator and for this, he was spared a one second look from the creature that she claimed was gratitude.

When that first terrible night was finally over, the Predator again disappeared into the underground, presumably, to hunt more Aliens, while Sheriff

Morales and the surviving population of Gunnison that could remain conscious- everyone was exhausted after twenty-four hours of terror-compared notes and tried to form another plan for the coming night, For the sun could only set again.

### The Isolation of Gunnison

Gunnison is effectively cut off from the rest of the world. There is, and can be, no communication with the outside, if the outside is even there anymore, as some wonder. The people of Gunnison had to work hard to adapt to their new situation. Once the power was restored, everything in the city was put to the test. It was discovered that, for the most part, everything still functioned. This included the telephone network, local radio and television stations, the cellular network, even the internet. It all still worked, it just couldn't reach the outside. People quickly found ways to make use of these facilities to keep each other informed and to verify each other's well-being, which has led to much needed boosted morale in the populace as well as many other practical applications. Even the Gunnison-Crested Butte Regional Airport is still operational though any attempts to fly over the Barrier have failed. Also, another thing that hasn't really been affected is the water. The Gunnison River and Tomichi Creek both flow out of the Barrier, through Gunnison, and back into the Barrier.

### The Barrier

No one can even begin to guess what the Barrier is. It's clearly something that has never been seen before. It resembles a large storm cloud that sits at the edge of town, with occasional bolts of lightning traveling across the surface. Anything electrical or electronic shorts out within roughly 15 feet of it including all vehicles. Even the Predator's technology is not immune. No animals will go near it, not even the Aliens. The Predator is not even comfortable around it. This does make it something that can be used against the Aliens, for when a person is being chased by the Aliens and runs up next to the Barrier, the Aliens will not approach them. They fear the Barrier too much. This allows the fugitive to wait for

sunrise when the Aliens will withdraw. This has already saved several lives.

### The People of Gunnison

Gunnison, Colorado had a population of over 5,600 people in 2004. There were over 2,300 households, and over 900 families residing in the city. The population density was 1,829.4 inhabitants per square mile (706.3/km<sup>2</sup>). There were over 2,500 total housing units at an average density of 826.6 per square mile (319.2/km<sup>2</sup>). The racial makeup of the city was 86.9% White, 0.6% African American, 2.4% Native American, 0.6% Asian, 0% Pacific Islander, 6.6% from other races, and 2.8% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race were 14.2% of the population.

Of the over 2,300 households, 20.6% had children under the age of 18 living with them, 30.6% were married couples living together, 7.1% had a female householder with no husband present, and 57.2% were non-families. 34.9% of all households were made up of individuals, and 7.2% had someone living alone who was 65 years of age or older. The average household size was 2.2 and the average family size was 2.9.

In the city, the population breakdown was 26.1% under the age of 19, 23.4% from 20 to 24, 26.1% from 25 to 44, 16.8 from 45 to 64, and 7.6% who were 65 years of age or older. The median age was 25.2 years. For every 100 females, there were 120.1 males. For every 100 females age 18 and over, there were 128 males.

On the Day After, almost 150 deaths were attributed to the Alien Monsters and 16 more to various forms of violence like gunshots. When the population reassembled that day after trying to reach the outside world and/or leave, a quick census was taken with everyone there signing their name in a book and parents signing for their small children. This has become a record of all survivors that checked daily to make sure no one has been lost to the Monsters.

Gunnison had large hunting, gun enthusiasts, and survivalist, cultures beforehand so the population has reacted to these circumstances perhaps better than most others would, but the nightly sieges by the Alien Monsters wore heavily upon everyone's health and sanity. As survivalist thinking took hold of the population over the continuing cycle of night sieges

and day's rest and preparations, a certain set of rules emerged:

1. **Everyone in Gunnison must look out for each other. Our only chance to survive is together.**
2. **Never go anywhere alone.** The Monsters look for lone people to capture and use to reproduce. We must do everything we can to deny them that.
3. **Stay out of dark and shadowy places, especially the underground.** The monsters strike from the shadows. Stay out of them. Every one of us that's lost is one of them that's born.
4. **Be somewhere safe at sundown.** Check in with family and/or central tracking if not at your expected place. Only exception is hunting parties
5. **Everyone of age will have and be able to use a gun. No exceptions.** Every one of us taken is one of them born.
6. **Everyone will have a cell phone, keep it charged, and use it.** Follow check in procedures every day at sunrise and sundown.
7. **Report every sighting of a Monster. No exceptions.** False alarms are better than lost lives
8. **Parents, keep small children close at all times. Children, stay close to your parents.** This is no time for games.
9. **Food and ammunition are communal property to be shared and rationed equally. No exceptions.** Anyone caught hoarding will lose their gun for a month. (Note: loss of gun means having to be defended by others for a long time and the inability of self-defense. A stressful way of life for any length of time in Gunnison.)
10. **No predatory behavior toward humans will be allowed.** Predatory behaviors include rape, child molestation, extortion, etc. Full list available to residents. Punishment for proven violation is public execution.
- 11. **New rules may be proposed at any morning meeting.** New rules are adopted or vetoed by majority vote at the Sunday Morning Meeting which everyone must attend.

Those in charge try to foster a can-do attitude in the populace. They want to convince everyone that a future can be built for themselves if they try hard enough. Every night that passes when no one is lost

helps feed this, but every life lost nearly shatters it. Whatever the case, almost everyone accepts that they must work together to survive. If anyone feels different, they haven't said so.

## The University

Western Colorado University had enrolled approximately 2,600 undergraduates and 400 graduate students, with 25 percent coming from out of state and 171 faculty. These people do everything they can to improve life in Gunnison. Physicists study the Barrier, biologists, the Alien remains, mathematicians, rationing. Computer scientists and programmers from the university were the ones who helped get the local internet and cellular network up and running. A program was also written by a programmer to record every call or text sent to the central computer every sunrise and sunset and send an alert to the Sheriff's dept. when someone doesn't report in. Chemists brew ethanol gasoline for when the gasoline runs out. Engineers try to create new engines that will run vehicles when fuel runs out.

## The Lost

Some who witnessed the chestbursts on the first day and the night raids afterwards have had complete mental breakdowns. Their reactions have run the gamut from paranoid delusions to complete catatonia. Some are still functional and are allowed to carry guns and fight the monsters, but the non-functional ones must be carefully guarded lest they be taken by the Aliens and used to procreate. When television and radio services were restored, Old TV shows and music began to be broadcast and watching and listening to this has helped some of them, but most of them have a long road of recovery ahead of them if they can even survive.

## Wolf the Predator

The Night After, as it came to be remembered, was the beginning of the alliance, even friendship, between the Gunnison people and the 'Alien Hunter' as the more educated of the population finally thought to call him. During the first days after the explosion, he was closely observed by all who witnessed him do anything at all. The first thing noticed was how efficient a killer he was. People saw him surrounded by dozens of monsters at once and still be the last one standing. The next thing they noticed was that he seemed to be willing to protect

their lives. Several times, it had intervened to save someone's life. Some pointed out that he may have his own reasons for doing that, such as preventing the creatures from using people to procreate. This argument was immediately countered with the point that was a common goal for everyone. One morning, Sheriff Morales stepped between the Hunter and the nearest entrance to the underground, put down his gun, and approached the creature.

"Can we talk?" he asked. The creature growled in response.

"You do a lot to keep us alive. Maybe we could do better if we worked together," said Morales.

The creature growled again, as if considering it. The two studied each other briefly until the creature growled, "Come with me." Then walked away. Amazed that the creature could even speak, Morales fell in behind the creature and followed right down the street in broad daylight in front of God and all the people.

As residents saw the Predator walking down the street followed closely by the Sheriff, those with enough gumption to do so began to follow along. A decent crowd had gathered by the time they'd gotten the trees to the north of town. The creature seemed to notice this, turned to the crowd, and removed his mask. His faced shocked the whole crowd into taking at least one step back. The single exception was the Sheriff who said, "Not exactly the most handsome fella, are you." Which caused the creature's mandibles to spread wider and a series of growls sounding very much like laughter came from the creature. This laughter spread to many in the crowd who also smiled and laughed. The creature then put his mask back on and continued his walk with everyone following after.

When they reached the trees north of town, the creature suddenly stopped, pointed to its right, and growled, "There!"

Everyone looked and saw a beautiful doe step from the forest, heavy with fawn and otherwise



unremarkable. To everyone's shock, the creature threw its shuriken which neatly beheaded the deer. The creature then stepped toward it, caught the shuriken as if it were an afterthought, and growled, "Look."

The creature then used the blades of the shuriken to cut open the doe's belly and reveal several embryonic crossbreed monsters. The creature stabbed one and the acid blood burst out and scorched the earth. He then systematically destroyed them all. One of the university students took some of the remains back for study but the creature ignored this. It, instead, pulled off its mask, cut some raw venison from the deer's carcass, and devoured it right there.

"Damn, you're a WOLF!" came a voice from the crowd.

The creature looked over at them in puzzlement and repeated the word 'Wolf'

"Yeah," said the Sheriff, "That's what we'll call you. Wolf."

The creature nodded and growled, "Hmm. Wolf," and continued to eat.

**Forbidden Lore:** Like all of his kind, Wolf hunts to live and lives to hunt. He is currently committed to killing all of the creatures in the underground but should he succeed, there is no telling what his subsequent actions towards the people of Gunnison maybe no matter what attachments he may make among them. Many suspect this. He can hunt for days without food or rest and frequently does. Many of those in Gunnison see him as a friend, especially those who have joined him in hunting and killing the monsters, but others still fear him.

### The 'Bug Monsters' and the 'Crossbreeds'

Allying with Wolf allowed the people of Gunnison to get a better handle on their situation. Communication was difficult at first, one of the university art students thought to use crude pictures

to communicate, but through him, they learned of the life cycle of the 'Bug Monsters' (as one of the children had called them and the name stuck) from egg to adult. This also meant that there was a Monster Queen somewhere in the underground which was not a pleasing thought. Wolf also explained how the Monsters attacking pregnant women and animals was a 'Bug Monster' born of his own kind.

The people tagged them with the name 'Crossbreeds' because of that and added a new rule to those above:

**12. All women who discover they are pregnant must inform the community. No exceptions.** Remember that the monsters consider you a high-value target.

There has not been a single night since the bomb when Bug Monsters have not been on the streets. Sometimes, like the first night, the streets have been overrun and the populace has been fighting for their lives. Other nights have been sparser. The Sheriff's department and a regular group of deputized shooters have been obsessively patrolling the streets looking for the Monsters and how they're coming to the surface. Manholes and doors to the sewer system have been welded shut except for a few chosen points which the hunters use to ambush the creatures as they come up. A few weeks after the Bomb, the cattle ranchers who also lived north of town went out to their ranches to see what had happened to their herds. About half of the cattle had been lost to the monsters and then only because they were too big for them to drag underground. The eggs had to be brought up from below by hive worker monsters to hatch and infect the cattle instead. Empty eggs and dead facehuggers were all around the dead cattle. It was decided that an attempt would be made to salvage the meat from the dead cattle, so heavy machinery was used to bring them into town and refrigerator trucks trapped in town were used to preserve them. Fortunately, a

lot of local hunters knew how to butcher their own meat and this much-needed food source was in place to keep people fed. Some are afraid to eat the meat for fear that it may have been poisoned by the monsters but most are desperate enough not to care. The cattle ranchers have now set up a fortified corral for the cattle with it's back to the barrier which they must defend from the monsters every night. Since this is an important food source, the town supplies this corral with ammunition every evening and one of the first duties Sherriff Morales has every morning is to drive up and see how the ranchers have done. The cattle are released every morning to graze off the land and rounded up every night to be defended. The local wildlife has grown very sparse. The usual elk and deer that hunters chased for years grow fewer and fewer though nobody misses the coyotes which were nothing but trouble. Almost every mid-sized to large pet dog in town has vanished as have most smaller pets but those are believed to have been eaten. We all know the vanished animals have been used by the Bug Monsters to reproduce and it feeds the low mood of the populace who are barely holding together as it is.

### The Underground

The underground is not just the city sewer system. Gunnison was an old gold and silver mining town and there are many old mine shafts that were sealed when they were mined out. It is somewhere in these old shafts that the Aliens are nesting.

### Current Sketch

It has now been six months since the bomb. The people of Gunnison still battle daily to reclaim their city and save their lives. Nights are filled with gunfire and pitched battles. Days are filled with fear and dread. Morale in Gunnison is a house of cards that can crumble at any time and has. Emotional breakdowns are frequent. People make allowances for them since breakdowns are preferable to suicides, of which there have been several. Buildings and houses have become crudely armored fortresses that must have quick escape routes available to the outdoors should the monsters take them. The

constant siege mentality is wearing heavily on everyone's health. To combat this, many things are being done to hopefully boost morale.

The Alien Hunter Wolf has taken the best hunters, shooters, and fighters under his guidance and, after training them, has led them on some of his nightly hunting trips deep into the underground. These excursions are extremely dangerous and only the most skilled are allowed to join. This includes only those trained to check above, below, left, right, and behind themselves. There have yet been no deaths but there have been serious injuries on these hunts due to acid splash and monster attacks. Wolf has been convinced to wear a cellphone with a running camera on it so there can be a record of the hunts. Wolf is actually impressed with this idea and has begun fiddling with his mask so he may see the videos that are taken. Every morning, the footage is downloaded and studied by members of the community. More of the underground is mapped and more monster kills recorded along with those killed in the streets. The only reason more people haven't been killed is that the monsters are clearly trying to take captives for reproduction. It places them at a disadvantage they might not otherwise be at.

Among those who have qualified to join the hunts are Sherriff Morales and Darcy Benson.

**Edward "Eddie" Morales** is the town's Sheriff. Eddie receives a call for help during the alien invasion, but did not believe it until an alien broke into his house and killed his wife. He later joined a group of survivors, waiting for a rescue. The government presumed him dead when a nuclear bomb was dropped on the town. He assumed a leadership role in the town.

**Darcy Benson** was the wife of Buddy and mother of Sam, both of whom were out hunting when they witnessed the first ship crash. From there, they went to investigate but were soon chased by escaping facehuggers. Sam fell and gave the parasites an advantage; they circled the pair. Buddy managed to

kill one (at nearly point-blank range), which resulted in his arm being melted off by the acid. Another facehugger attacked and succeeded in attaching itself to Buddy's face; with his father being rendered unconscious, Sam was unprotected and is also attacked by a facehugger. The pair were later killed by the chestbursters that erupted from their chests, and their dead bodies were melted by Wolf. Darcy is unaware that her family was killed by the monsters. She becomes involved in the Alien outbreak and was later presumed by the government to have been killed by the bombing. If Wolf has any way of telling her about what happened to her family, he hasn't done it, yet. Darcy is not so naïve as to believe her family is still alive somewhere but keeps looking for evidence of what happened to them.

### Developments Since the Bombing

Several things have been tried against the Monsters that have had varying degrees of success.

Firstly, since the monsters were similar to arthropods, several different pesticides were tried. While none were lethal to them, they did have the effect of slowing them or even rendering them unconscious and easy to kill. This has become a useful weapon in their arsenal but a sparse one since there isn't a lot of these pesticides in town. Secondly, a powerful ultrasonic device was developed at the university based on ultrasonic pest controllers.

The scientists set up a system of speakers around the cattle corral to the north of town and when the monsters attacked after dark, they ran up and down the sonic spectrum hoping to find a frequency, or combination thereof, that was painful, or even lethal to the creatures. They tried for nights at a time while the gunmen shot down any Bug Monsters that got too close. Finally, on the tenth night, they transmitted a frequency that drove back the creatures. One scientist who had developed a belt worn version of the device and programmed in with the frequency, walked outside the corral and directly toward the creatures just to see them retreat before him. These devices have since been installed in the

sewers and have driven the creatures out of them allowing the citizens to reclaim some of their homes. The scientists have warned, however, that the creatures may develop a tolerance to the sound and reinvade, so all other defenses and evacuation plans are still in place, after all, they're only one more power outage away from being overrun again.

There have been other mysterious things that have happened. On one of the hunting excursions Wolf was leading, the party came across a group of special ops soldiers who were somehow in the tunnels and surviving fighting the Monsters. The party immediately led them out of the tunnels and up to Gunnison where the community got the first news from the outside they'd had in months. It was learned that the Monsters, or Aliens, as the government calls them, are making occasional appearances around the site of the Gunnison Incident as it's called. The Government has sealed off the area and the Special Ops Unit was one of those tasked with exploring it. They had followed the tracks of one of the Aliens through the mists that filled the hole that had been left behind by the incident to an old mine shaft which they entered with orders to search and destroy every Alien they'd find. By the time they met the hunting party, they were almost out of ammunition and were approaching the point of last round for themselves (suicide). They were able to recover and rearm in Gunnison and study the film footage of the tunnels to try to find the way back to where they came in. They were even able to accept the guidance of Wolf and the rest of the hunting party as they went back into the underground to find the way back out. Sadly this proved to be the first of many failures. Everybody involved with the Unit and the hunting parties believes there's a way back somewhere in the underground. This was further proved when a hunting party ran into two more of Wolf's kind who came to investigate his disappearance and met the same fate as the Unit. One sadly died in the underground but the other took his place beside Wolf and is called Sword for his choice of weapons.

He is just as committed to destroying the Bug Monsters and Crossbreeds as Wolf.

The other important event in the months since the bomb is called The Kayaking. One of the townspeople, who was an avid kayaker, reasoned that the water in the rivers had to enter from someplace and exit to someplace. In a Sunday morning town meeting, he suggested that people floating down the river in a boat might pass through the Barrier and escape back to the rest of the world. This idea fired the hopes of everybody who thought more about escape than killing the monsters, but thankfully more rational voices prevailed. It was pointed out that nobody knew where the water came out. They might come out in the middle of the ocean or worse. The idea was voted down for immediate action but adopted for reconsideration, though there was no putting off the kayaker. That night, he left a note for the townspeople on his door, carried his kayak to the river, paddled out the barrier, and was never seen again. Some think he made it, others think he's dead, but to this day, there have been those who have tried this exit strategy and gotten the same results. One day, all the school-aged children went to the river and each released a bottle

with a message inside, then watched them all disappear into the Barrier.

If anyone ever got those messages, they were never able to respond using the methods some suggested in their messages.

### The Darklord

If anyone rules Gunnison, from above or below, no one knows who it is or what it is.

Author's note- For those who haven't figured it out, the first thing a Dungeon Master must do to use this realm is to create a Darklord. The Neo-Red Death was triggered by Colonel Stevens heartless decision to use a tactical nuclear weapon on American soil and to gather as many people at ground zero as possible to ensure near complete extermination, but because Colonel Stevens was nowhere within the area in question, the realm was left without a Darklord. It now floats in the ether between Earth and Post-Apocaloft waiting for a Darklord to rise. Given the desperate nature of the population, it shouldn't be hard to create one.





# BLAUSTEIN, LAND OF PIRATES AND JEALOUSY

BY MISTMASTER

## THE DOMAIN IN A GLANCE

**Official Name:** The Free State of Blaustein

**Culture level:** Chivalric (Renaissance in Gauradefier)

**Ecology:** Full

**Climate & Terrain:** Mediterranean. Blaustein is an island with a rocky coast full of well protected natural harbors that make it a sort of natural fortress. The interior is very fertile as the island is a dead volcano. Patches of forest are cultivated all around the island. A single river flows from the lake in the center.

**Languages:** Common (Baloki), Vaasan (Terg), Lamordian, Zherisian.

**Religions:** Andaral, the Morning Lord, Church of Ezra, Lady of battle, Church of the Lawgiver, Lord of Vengeance, Elrin, lord of Death, Fenrir, the Sea Wolf God, Lord of the Hunt, Hala, Lady of Forests and Mother of the Gods, Lathurr, the Lord of Winds, Oceanus, Lord of the Sea and Father of the Gods, Tiche, Lady of Luck.

**Races:** 98% Humans, 2% Other.

**Government:** De jure hereditary feudal monarchy, de facto despotic klepto-plutocracy.

**Ruler:** Duke Raoul II "Captain Bluebeard" Morre.

**Darklord:** Bluebeard.

**Lightlord:** Lady Marcella Morre.

**Inhabitants:** 400,000.

**Surface:** 23,000 square kilometers.

**Analog:** XVII Century Tortuga and Berber Pirate states.

**Capital City:** Rais (80,000 in, Standard, L/E)

**Important towns:** Portplase (70,000 in, Standard, C/G) Portlanț (65,000 in Standard, L/G ), Portpumnal (60,000 in, Non Standard, N/E), Orașpadure (57,000 in, Standard N), Gauradefier (43,500 in, Non-standard C/N)

**Borders:** The island lays in the Sea of Sorrows, 130 miles East of Dementlieu, at the height of Carlion-Le-Duc.

## TROPES

Blaustein is a land where passions burn and jealousy simmers inside people's hearts. The theme is the darkness inside and the darkness of secret rooms and lockers where dangerous secrets wait to be discovered.

## DOMAIN OVERVIEW

### THE LAND

The shoe-shaped island has rocky cliffs for coasts, broken by many treacherous little coves, dangerous abodes for inexperienced mariners. The four port

cities, Rais, Portplase, Portlanț, and Portpumnal are disposed in the four most secure and defensible coves, respectively in the East, West, North, and South of the island, with Portlanț guarding the mouth of the Sangbleu River. The Sangbleu is a navigable river born from the Lake Morre, in the center of the island, where once there was a volcano. The city of Orașpadure is midway between Portlanț and the Morre Lake, on the left bench of the river. The nearby Great Forest covers most of the northwest of the island, up to the rocky coast of Portplase. The Lake is surrounded by the ore-rich Blue Hills, on which you can find the mining city of Gauradefier.

## THE PEOPLE

Blausteiners are an ethnically diverse people, thanks to the various dominations the island underwent over the centuries. This is evident in their languages, in their customs, in their clothing, and in their food. However, there are some common traits: Blausteiners ask few questions, and do not judge people by their appearance; Blausteiners are superstitious and they will shy away from magic and magic users unless they are sure to gain something. Blausteiners are both merchants and pirates and they are as likely to buy from or sell to you as they are to rob you. In the interior, people are more trustworthy but also less tolerant of strangers. Dueling and brawls are common on the island, and are punished only if people involved die or refuse to refund the eventual damage. Blausteiners have a taste for strong drinks. Blausteiners are possessive and jealousy often leads to fights and feuds.

## History

### *Age of Creation*

Oceanus gave his wife Hala an Island as a wedding gift, an Island shining of blue rocks. Their children, the other deities, squabbled to claim it.

### *Age of Empires:*

The active volcano makes the island uninhabitable, until a deflagrant explosion which sinks a part of it and transforms the volcano into a lake

### *Age of Darkness:*

Tergs colonize the island but do not explore the interior. They founded the city of Rais.

### *The Modern Age:*

Lamordian, Zherisian, and Dementlieuse colonial squabbles involve the island, now named Blaustein. The pirates make the island their own haven, under the leadership of Morgan I Morre.

### *The Current Age:*

The great grandson of Morgan I, Raoul II became the Duke of Blaustein and Chair of the High Captains Council after a brief civil war. A Zherisian-Dementlieuse fleet attempted to seize the island to stop the piracy once and for all, and was then sunk in the bay of Rais. This happened 33 years ago.

## PLACES OF INTEREST

**Rais** is the capital city of Blaustein and its biggest city, a vast port city where you can buy or steal almost everything. Many inns of varying degrees of doubtful reputations grace the city, but the best and worst of them all is the Vile Plunderer's Den, owned by the wise and witty Fritz Smithe. The Schloss Blau, the Blue Castle, is the Morre family's imposing residence, towering over the city from a nearby peak. Usually, Oceanus is worshipped in small shrines, but in Rais you have the Sea Dome, which, while not as imposing as other temples on the island, is the most distinguished feature in the Rais temple district, but this could soon change, as the Sea Law Dome of the Iron Church of Zhakata is being expanded. Rais's docks are always bursting with mariners from all over the Sea of Sorrows and beyond. The Council of High Captains also assemble at the Blau Schloss. The High Captain of Rais is Bluebeard himself. His flagship, the

Blue Terror, with its deep blue sails can be seen in port whenever he is present at home.

**Portplase** is the second largest city and the one with the largest harbor, it is the principal naval arsenal of the island. It was the set of a major battle in the civil war. The warship, Queen Antonia's Revenge, once the majestic floating fortress of the Zherisian pirate Jasper "Patches" Bloodhook, now half-sunk since the civil war, is still kept in front of the city and used as the personal harbor and lodging for Captain Bluebeard when he visits. High Captain Anne Bonnet's seat is a fortified pavilion overseeing the Port. Her flagship, the Seaqueen, can be seen at the harbor with its unmistakable green sails. Many inns grace the town but retired Zeindostein pirate captain "Lang" Jan Zilver owns the most famous one, the Telescoop. A great temple of Tiche doubles as gambling hall, and is called the House of Laughing Fate.

**Portlant** is the smallest of the port towns but not the least populated, Portlant is heavily fortified, with a system of three towers united by bridges that can close the mouth of the Sangrebleu River with massive chains. The central and largest tower of the Chain Fort is the seat of the High Captain Alexander Mallet, one of the most stern and firm commanders in the island, respected and feared as is his steel-gray sailed flagship, the Espinadera. This is the one city in Blaustein where law is fair, if strict. Crime is still possible but inns and residential and commercial districts are far safer than other cities. Many sentinels patrol the roads and the nearby Temple of Ezra, Our Lady of the Sails, is an added element of stability, especially for the inns and restaurants. The Captain Morre is the most renowned inn, owned by Jane Hawkeys-Livesea (Human Commoner 3 L/G) The Guild of Traders has its general headquarters in an elegant hall here.

**Portpumnal** is the most dangerous major city on the island, even more than the others. The Blood Market even allows for products forbidden on the rest of the island. The House of the Reaper is the black and red

temple of Erlin, and strangely one of the safest places of the city. No one may kill you in Erlin's home without Erlin blessing. The Guild of Bounty Hunters meets in an underground hall near the temple. The High Captain of Portpumnal, the Dementlieuse Jean-Pierre "the Butcher" de Carcharaux, resides in the Hanging Rock, the macabre fortress covered with the hanged corpses of those who angered the High Captain. The red-sailed Sea Cleaver, the Butcher's flagship, is docked at the port when the High Captain is in the city. The Dead Man's Chest is an infamous inn and brothel, owned by the mysterious Lady Juliana de Seashell. The only known public Shrine of Fenris is in the outskirts of the city, near a cliff, from where sacrifice are rumored to be fed to Sea Wolves.

**Oraşpadure** The food basket of the island, and the primary source of wood for the island ships, this town on the river is surrounded by forests and fields. The river port is always busy with transport ships and a few warships protect the town in the case of an attack, the Brown-sailed flagship of Oraşpadure's high-captain, the Driftwoodsable, is the biggest of them. The High Captain is the Darkonian Mist Elf Syrul Erenlin, who lives inside the fortified Garden Palace. An important shrine of Hala is nestled near the palace, it is called the Mother's Oak. Several inns dot the city, with the Broken Mirror, belonging to the old and wise Mama Fredeline du Mer, being the most renowned. The Woodcutters Guild has its seat in the merchant district.

**Gauradefier** is the least populated city, but its rich mines of iron, and also gold and silver, makes it one of the most prosperous. It has its own port on the Morre See, and ships its goods through the Sangreblue, thanks to an ingenious system of locks which allow ships up and down from the lake. The ironclad steamboat Iron Thunder is the flagship of High Captain Larukan Stalenvormer, a Lamordian Stone Dwarf who is the primary responsible of the city current prosperity. The High Captain's abode is the Anvil, a massive stone and metal fortress. The thriving city is directly linked to the mines in the Blue hills by a system of steam trains and railways. A

number of hotels, restaurants, theaters, and inns dot the city, which also boasts the only university of the island. The Cave Bear is the most famous restaurant and hotel in the city, owned by Morgan Pickaxe. Near the university building sits a temple of Lathurr, the Lord of Winds, God of Storm and Progress. The Miners Guild has its general headquarter in the inner city.

## RELIGION

*Oceanus*, the Lord of the Sea (N/G) is the most worshipped god in Blaustein, where he is seen as the father of all the other deities and the head of the Blausteiner pantheon. He is represented as a tall merman with a trident and a long white beard. He teaches his worshippers to be welcoming with everyone and to respect the sea and its might. Woe to those who violate the code of the sea in the following ways: breaking parlay, dabbing in slavery, killing guests, mutinying against a non-tyrannical captain, and refusing to save people adrift. His holy symbol is a trident crossed with a seashell. His favorite weapon is the trident. His priests are often in service on ships or attend the god's shrines. Often, they commune with aquatic peoples. They can access the following domains: Animal, Good, Protection, Travel, Water, Weather.

*Hala*, the lady of Forests, is *Oceanus*' wife, and the mother of all Blausteiner deities. She is a neutral deity of family, magic, natural order, plants, wood, and wisdom. She appears as a tall woman or as a Sea Hag with kinder eyes. She teaches her followers to respect nature and the power of magic. Her followers believe in a three-fold balance between Magic/Science, Nature, and Faith, and teach that union begets might. They must be ready to make sacrifices for the greater good and for balance's sake. Her symbol is the Triskelion, her favorite weapon is the quarterstaff, and her Domains are: Charm, Community, Healing, Knowledge, Magic, Plant.

*Andaral*, the Morning Lord, is the L/G god of Sun, kindness, altruism, honest work, and community and he is popular among both mariners and farmers. The

Blausteiner Church of Andaral is in communion with the one in Barovia. It teaches its followers to bring light in their lives and in those of their communities through kindness, honesty, generosity, hard work, and reciprocal aid. His holy symbol is a sun disk, and his favorite weapon is the mace. His priests are usually from humble origins and transmit their holy orders in family lines. Small shrines of Andaral are diffused across all of Blaustein. His priests have access to the following domains: Community, Good, Law, Protection, and Sun.

*Ezra*, the Lady of Battle, our Lady of the Sea. the Blausteiner church of Ezra is in communion with the Home Faith of Borca, and it is a lawful neutral religion which teaches the importance of an orderly society and promotes trade, exploration, and civilization, and the necessity to defend it from hostile forces. The Arch-Sentire of Portlanț is the leader of the church on Blaustein, and the church is popular among the more honest traders. Its holy symbol is a sail with a shield and a longsword with a belladonna twig on. The favored weapon is the longsword and the church's domains are Law, Mist, Protection, Travel, Water.

*Elrin*, lord of Death, a deity of murder, undeath, blood, treachery, and night is Neutral Evil. He teaches his followers that every life belongs to him and that to be rewarded with eternal life as undead they must follow him. However, he also teaches that only he and his followers have authority over life and death; every assassin, executioner, or murderer who does not ask for *Elrin*'s blessing risks the rage of his priests. His followers are blood-thirsty pirates, assassins, necromancers, and executioners. Priests of *Elrin* act as bounty killers and advisers for the Blausteiner Guild of Assassins. His favored weapon is the dagger, his unholy symbol is the jolly roger with two daggers in place of the crossed bones. His domains are: Darkness, Death, Destruction, Evil, Magic.

*Fenrir*, the Sea Wolf God, lord of the Hunt, of sea perils, of hunger, and of greed, is a Chaotic Evil god venerated by many pirates, but also, by fishers who



want appease him, and by many of the fearsome Seawolves. He teaches his followers to sate their hungers without restraint, and to take what they want when they can. His priests are either Sea Wolves or power-hungry pirates. His favorite weapon is the short sword or the fang. Fenrir's holy symbol is a bunyip in salopettes. His domains are: Animal, Chaos, Evil, Strength, Water.

*Lathurr*, the Chaotic Good lord of Winds, storms, seasons, progress, and prosperity is venerated by farmers and fishers but also by inventors and artificers; He teaches his followers not to fear change and to learn to take advantage of the winds, metaphorically and literally, appreciate the use of creativity and ingenuity in problem solving, and he wants his followers to respect the power of nature but without fear of using it for progress. His priests are often great innovators and inventors. His favorite weapon is the spear, his symbol is a thunderbolt. His domains are Air, Artifice, Chaos, Good, and Weather.

*Tiche*, Lady of Luck, moon, change, fame, freedom, gambling, and risk. She is worshipped by pirates, gamblers, innovators, and merchants. She teaches his followers to take risks, embrace change, accept losses, and enjoy winnings. Her priests are often innkeepers, professional gamblers, and pirates. Her favorite weapon is the rapier, her domains are Chaos, Darkness, Glory, Liberation, and Luck.

*Zakhata the Lawgiver*, Lord of Vengeance, is the lawful evil deity of order, retribution and tyranny, venerated by the Iron Church of Nova Vaasa, recently embraced by the ruling Duke. The Iron Church teaches human superiority and the divine right of rulers, opposing chaos and revolution. In Blaustein it is simply a token of Bluebeard's rule, and it has followers only among the richest merchants and the militia. The local head of the church is the Pave of Rais. The closed gauntlet is the Iron Church's symbol and the heavy flail its favored weapon. The available domains are Destruction, Evil, Law, Nobility, and War.

## THE FAMOUS AND THE INFAMOUS

### ***Lady Marcella Morre***

*(Young Adult Human Oracle of Oceanus 14 C/G)*

Lady Marcella Aurinn in Morre was the fourth wife of Bluebeard the only one to survive the marriage; they divorced, and since then she lives secluded in a luxurious mansion near Rais docks. Lady Marcella was spared the gruesome death of the other wives of Bluebeard, because she was robbed by bandits that assaulted the castle one night, took the silver key, and opened the forbidden door, only to be mauled by the specters of the other three wives. When her husband arrived, she explained him what had happened and what she saw. He was conflicted. On one hand, she did not disobey him, on the other she now was privy to his secrets. She urged him to give his wives a proper burial and then leave the island with her. He refused, and the discussion ended abruptly when on the tower of the Schloss Blau, he pushed her, the only time he hurt a wife unwillingly. But since Marcella was a devotee of Oceanus, she survived. However, she now cannot be far from sea water for a long time. She is seen as mad by anyone from the island, and Bluebeard's First Mate placed a spell on her, to prevent her from ever leaving her mansion by ground. If she touches dry land, she returns to the mansion. Her true burden is that she still loves her husband and their children and wishes to save them from what Bluebeard has become. *(Adventure Hook: When the adventurers are invited to have tea at Mad lady Marcella's house, any natives of the island discourage them but she seems to know important information.)*

### ***Cajuste "Le Cruel" Sangriere***

*(Middle-Aged Human Wizard Conjurer 14, N/E)*

This Souragnian dark-skinned man in his late forties, dressed in impeccable crimson red clothes, has been Captain Bluebeard's most loyal companion, and first mate on the Blue Terror for decades. He is competent and shrewd, but also utterly sadistic and

true to his name, cruel. As a powerful spellcaster, he is feared by any who knows his reputation, a reputation fully earned. (*Adventure Hook: when the child of one of the adventurer's friends is kidnapped in Rais, their investigation brings them to a man dressed in red, who works on the Blue Terror.*)

### **Steward Conomor Seaworth**

(Old Human Fighter Corsair 7, L/N)

Once the first mate of Captain Morgan II Morre, Bluebeard's father, he became his son's steward and de-facto governor of Rais. He is wise, loyal, and shrewd and he is one of the few advisors Bluebeard usually minds. A tall man, still spry for his age, he is completely bald. (*Adventure Hook: when rumors of a possible murder attempt against Duke Raoul become insistent, Conomor pays the adventurers to verify it.*)

### **Dancing Jeanne Damien**

(Young Adult Human, Bard Dervish Dancer 3, N/G)

This street performer is gaining quickly attention. Even the recently widowed High Captain Morre himself is fascinated by the young dancer. (*Adventure Hook: During a performance the adventurers are assisting, someone shoots a quarrel to Jeanne, purposely missing her.*)

### **Fritz "Drownin' Fritz" Smithe**

(Old human Rogue Pirate 7, C/G)

The owner of the Vile Plunderer's Den, old Fritz has forgotten more about the sea than many captains will ever learn in all their life. He supposedly owns his reputation because he never learned how to swim in all his years of navigation and risked drowning many times. He is apparently very frail and coughs often.

(*Adventure Hook: Of course, Fritz learned how to swim when he was much younger than now; the truth about his nickname is much darker, as he once was almost killed and turned in a Sea-Spawn by a cruel necromancer-pirate near Zeindost. But the ritual went wrong and he survived almost drowning in the process. He has many children, grandchildren, and*

*great grandchildren. However, some of his friends were not so lucky and an awakened Sea Spawn one day kidnaps his wife and youngest great grandson. To save them, the old man needs the adventurers, who by chance were spending the night at his inn.*)

### **Lady Frederique de la Juste Riviere**

(Adult Human Cleric of Oceanus 9 N/G)

This kind and generous priestess of Oceanus maintains the only true temple of her deity on the island and keeps tabs on the many shrines around it. She welcomes everyone in need and gives them material comfort and spiritual assistance.

(*Adventure Hook: Frederique is worried, as more than one shrine of Oceanus has been desecrated by Sea Wolf cultists. She asks the adventurers to go and investigate.*)

### **Hereditary Duke Morgan Morre**

(Young Adult Caliban Swashbuckler 7, C/G)

Morgan Morre has inherited his father unusual look, but he compliments it with his mother's grace and wit. He roams the seas, gaining fame and fortune, only dropping by to visit his mother, though he never believes her words about his father.

(*Adventure Hook: Someone stole Morgan's favorite rapier and sold it to the adventurers; he will buy it back and pay them handsomely, if they can bring him the charming woman who stole it, unharmed and only to talk.*)

### **Lord Morris Henredon**

(Adult Human Aristocrat 5 L/G)

A young and proud scion of a Zherisian gentry family, Lord Morris is the owner of Henredon Arsenal, and a major commercial partner of Blaustein, since his sister's marriage to the duke. However, the recent death of Lorel made Lord Morris's station less stable. He is still worried about the future of his nephew and is trying to convince the duke to allow him to raise the seven-year-old in Zherisia.

*(Adventure Hook: Lord Morris suspects his brother-in-law to be involved with Lorel's death and wants to take her son away from him. He is preparing to kidnap his nephew and the adventurers get notice of that.)*

### **Lorel Henredon in Morre**

*(Human Ghost Rank 2, N/G)*

The currently last wife of the duke, and one of his more long-lasting, she was killed in the usual way, but her ghost did not join the vengeful specters, instead she still protects her son. Lady Lorel cannot manifest a visible form but she can communicate through a feeble voice or through writings on walls.

*(Adventure Hook: When her son is kidnapped by her husband's enemies, she manages to send a call of help to her own brother, who then contacts the adventurers.)*

### **Patrick "Old Rawbone" Leroy**

*(Middle Aged Human Fighter Drill Sergeant 11, L/E)*

Once the Bosun of the Blue Terror, Patrick is now the leader of the personal militia of the High Captain of Rais, The Worthy. He is big boned, strong, and mean and he knows how to train people to be as merciless and efficient as he is.

*(Adventure Hook: Old Rawbone is not as strong as he was in his prime; his back aches and his reflexes sometime fails him. When that old witch Baquak promised him a youth potion, he did not hesitate to have the young woman the old crone asked for kidnapped; unfortunately, the adventurers were on his path.)*

### **Pave Mikahil Ventrovskij**

*(Adult Human Cleric of Zhakata the Lawgiver, 5, L/E)*

The youngest Pave in the recent history of the Iron Church, this young ambitious man is in Rais to bring glory to his god and himself. However, he discovered the honor he was bestowed with came with many strings attached, as the duke of Blaustein wants only

use the Iron Church and a path for funds, he is not very generous in concessions of powers nor giving any help in converting the stubborn inhabitants.

*(Adventure Hook: Refusing to be damned as a loser, Mikahil needs to build his own power base, and to do that he is ready to pay handsomely. Right now, he is trying to find out some leverage on the Stewart of Rais.)*

### **Roberto Cofresi**

*(Middle Aged Human Expert 7, N)*

A fat, bald Collodian cook of great experience and talent, he is one of the most trustworthy employees in Schloss Blau, as the duke loves his cooking and Roberto always manage to surprise him.

*(Adventure Hook: Someone stole a very rare spice Roberto just imported. It is a fundamental ingredient and he is ready to pay generously any adventurer skilled enough to recover it.)*

### **High Captain Anne Bonnet**

*(Adult Human, Swashbuckler 12, C/G)*

Captain Anne Bonnet née Holsworth left her luxurious house in Mordent to marry James Bonnet, a notorious Zherisian pirate. When her husband was hanged in Zherisia, she took command of his ship, and sailed to Blaustein where she flanked Raoul Morre against the Zherisian-Dementlieuse fleet. For her help she was rewarded with the High Captaincy of Portplase.

*(Adventure Hook: When her 13-year-old son James is kidnapped, Anne offers the adventurers a very big reward to have him back.)*

### **Jan "Lang Jan" Zilver**

*(Old Human Rogue Pirate 10 C/N)*

This one-legged cook and innkeeper was once the captain of the infamous de Walrussen, which he inherited from Captain Nathaniël Vuursteen, who allegedly accumulated a vast hoard. Zilver is rumored to have found at least a part of it and indeed he is

quite wealthy. He is a jolly and wise man full of laughs and useful advice. He is also still dangerous in spite of his age, hiding a gun in his clutch and a dagger in his peg leg.

*(Adventure Hook: Vuursteen treasure still attracts treasure hunters and cutthroats from everywhere, and when a disgruntled black-clad pirate comes to the Telescoop, Zilver is quick to hire the adventurers as bodyguards for himself and his family.)*

### **Mary Reeds**

*(Adult Human Oracle of Tyche 9, C/N)*

Mary was Anne Bonnet's first mate when she came to Blaustein, but found her true calling in the House of Laughing Fate; there Mary learned about the power of Luck and the value of laughter and today she has taken it over.

*(Adventure Hook: Mary knows many things and if you have money to gamble and can beat her at the table, she might pay you in interesting news, or if you lose, give you a task to pay your debt off.)*

### **Jeanne Morre**

*(Young Adult Caliban Swashbuckler 5, C/G)*

The elder daughter of Captain Bluebeard, she is currently serving as first mate on the Seaqueen, and hates her father with all her heart.

*(Adventure Hook: the reason of this hate is easily understood, as Jeanne saw Bluebeard kill her mother. She is gathering help for ousting him for power and the adventurers are informed of her scheme almost casually.)*

### **High Captain Alexander Mallet**

*(Middle-Aged Fighter Corsair 10, L/G)*

Once a stern commodore of the Royal Zherisian Navy, Mallet was always a man of honor, and when his Admiral ordered him to hang a pregnant woman, he refused and was court-martialed. Processed by a kangaroo court, he was saved from the gallows by the man who he most despised, the pirate John

Hawkeyes, who was mortally wounded in the process. Mallet became a Corsair and devoted his life to protect innocents from both pirates and national navies. When The Dementlieuse Navy tried to seize the settlement then called Portaduce in the North of the island, killing the high Captain in the process, Mallet took over the place and turned Portaduce in the impregnable fortress called Portlanț.

*(Adventure Hook: Mallet took care of John Hawkeyes's family, his widow and his son Jim, and is very attached to both. When Jim Hawkeyes's ship, the Intrepid, is declared missing he immediately recruits volunteers for a rescue mission.)*

### **Archsentire Jean Treloine**

*(Old Human Cleric of Ezra 11, L/N)*

A Dementlieuse nobleman who had a late vocation and embraced the Home Faith, quickly raising in the ranks so much that he was named Archsentire of Portlanț. He is ambitious, honest, a bit vain, and really talkative.

*(Adventure Hook: When he is informed of the presence of a treasure in a sunken relic, he starts to recruit any help he can find, even the adventurers, wishing to use it for the church.)*

### **Captain James Hawkeyes**

*(Young Adult Human Swashbuckler 7, N/G)*

One of the younger captains to roam the seas, James "Jim" Hawkeyes is the son of the legendary gentleman pirate John Hawkeyes, and the godson and presumptive heir of Captain Mallet, and he has made a name for himself as a daring explorer and adventurer.

*(Adventure Hook: One of Jim's crew member got in trouble with the crew of the Sea Cleaver, and Jim needs help to save his friend without creating a feud between Portpumnal and Portlanț.)*



**Dr. David Livesea***(Middle-aged Human Alchemist Chirurgeon 6, L/G)*

First mate and naval surgeon on board of the Intrepid, Dr Livesea is Jim's stepfather, and one of his oldest friends. Knowledgeable, patient, brave and with a firm sense of justice, Dr. Livesea is a rare sight in a world of greedy cutthroats, and his medical prowess is recognized even beyond the sea.

*(Adventure Hook: When Mrs. Hawkeyes-Livesea, David's wife and Jim's mother, falls ill with a mysterious disease, the good doctor needs a rare ingredient to cure her, and will pay handsomely to get all the help he needs to retrieve it, since Captain Hawkeyes is busy at the moment.)*

**High Captain Jean Pierre "The Butcher" de Carchareaux***(Human Greater Seawolf Fighter Cad 11, C/E)*

One of the most infamous pirates who ever roamed the seas, The Butcher gained his position of High Captain by killing the former High Captain during the civil war and sending his head to Bluebeard. He kills on a whim but he is clever enough to never kill people when he cannot get away with it.

*(Adventure Hook: Jean Pierre is a Greater Seawolf and has already formed a pack who terrorize the coast; when Bluebeard orders him to reign in the more bloodthirsty of his lot, he is ready to offer the adventurers some scape goats, and lay low for a while before hunting season comes again.)*

**Agenor Raught***(Old Human Seawolf Cleric of Fenris 7 C/E)*

Captain de Carchareaux's first mate, Agenor was a cultist of the Seawolf for years before he was turned into one by his captain, a natural born greater seawolf. His faith reinforced by his god's boon; he is now as loyal to his captain almost as much as he is to his god.

*(Adventure Hook: The Blood Moon is coming close and the Blood Tide with her; Agenor has prepared a special sacrifice for this year, but when he has the daughter of an innkeeper kidnapped, he attracts the adventurers' attention.)*

**Lady Juliana de Seashell***(Adult Human Witch Seducer 7, N/E)*

Juliana was not always a prostitute, destitution forced her to it; and in those hard moments she forged a pact with the darkness of human desire, and she started to use those desires as a tool. She struck it rich and became the owner of a chain of brothels and inns, first of them, the Dead Man's Chest.

*(Adventure Hook: Her secret work as spy on Portpumnal in the name of Bluebeard is on the brink of being discovered, but Juliana will not become food for the bunyips, not while she can still get a brave group of adventurers on her side.)*

**Marcus Kane***(Adult Human Cleric 8, N/E)*

This soft-spoken clergyman claims that he never killed someone in all his life, because Elrin is the only one who can decide who lives and who dies. He is truthful, he never killed anyone with his own hand, always relying on the faithful tools his god chose to bless him with.

*(Adventure Hook: One of these faithful tools is no longer so faithful, after having been arrested, and he needs to be disposed of. Maybe the adventurers might be the clueless tools Marcus can employ to reach his goal.)*

**High Captain Syrul Erenlin***(Adult Mist Elf Rogue Pirate 10 C/G)*

A Mist Elf Pirate who was once a member of the Darkonese Navy, she preferred adventure to stability and impressed the ailing High Captain of Oraşpadure, who adopted her as his heir. Syrul took to government as a new adventure and

introduced new ideas into the traditional routine of her new subjects.

*(Adventure Hook: Someone is not happy about an elf ruling a mostly human community and is hampering Syrul's reforms through sabotage and a libeling campaign. The captain pays the adventurers to act in her name.)*

### **Granny Baquak**

*(Old Sea Hag Alchemist 5 N/E)*

This insistent old crone is only apparently a modest apothecary, owning a shop in the market district, she in truth runs the racket of herbs and spices in Oraşpadure and forces insurance on mariners and traders; those who displease her could be assaulted by her pet vulture or mugged by her Skrag son Brutus (Skrag Fighter 8, N/E).

*(Adventure Hook: When her poor son is arrested, Granny convinces the adventurers he was a victim of circumstance.)*

### **Franz "Ironarm" Fiegl**

*(Middle-Aged Human Brawler 9, L/G)*

A strong man with a semi-closed left eye and a smoking pipe always in his mouth, Franz is a fisherman but has also worked as a woodcutter, militiaman, farmer, and bounty hunter. Famously, he knows the secrets of a special herb which, when eaten, doubles his strength. The secret of that herb has made him a target for the old Baquak, who allegedly killed his father and the family of his wife.

*(Adventure Hook: After rescuing a baby from a smarter than average Skrag, the adventurers are greeted by Franz, the baby's adopted father, who then tells them about the old hag.)*

### **Mama Fredeline de la Mere**

*(Middle-Aged Oracle of Hala 7, N)*

This dark-skinned, almost blind woman, is wise in the ways of the all mother, and also the owner of the Broken Mirror Inn. She is an outstanding cook and is

also famed for her special Fate Loaf, a delicious spicy loaf with a small sheet of paper inside with a little fortune. Rumor says that those predictions always come true.

*(Adventure Hook: When they dine at the Broken Mirror, the adventurers are gifted with a free Fate Loaf. One of the adventurer's loaves read "Death looms on you.")*

### **High Captain Larukan Stalenvormer**

*(Adult Stone Dwarf Artificer 8, C/N)*

A genial Lamordian inventor and engineer, he found himself having to leave Lamordia and becoming a pirate. His revolutionary steamboat, able to travel the sea as well as in rivers, allowed him to convince the Council of the Captains to permit him to try and transform the small mining settlements between the Blue Hills and the Morre See into a thriving city. He succeeded and has no intentions to stop.

*(Adventure Hook: When Larukan's past tries to catch up with him, and risks costing a lot of lives in the crossfire, the adventurers might be the only hope for both the high captain and his city.)*

### **Professor Meinard Großenase**

*(Middle-Aged Human Wizard Abjurer 6 L/N)*

The brilliant founder and headmaster of the Gauradefier University, this distinguished Lamordian scientist is a brilliant theorist on the defense from magical effects.

*(Adventure Hook: Someone is trying to steal Professor Großenase's research, and the professor employs the adventurers to save it.)*

### **Brother Anton Gall**

*(Adult Human Cloistered Cleric 9, C/G)*

Brother Anton Gall is a plump and jolly priest of Lathurr and a great patron of science and art. He appreciates innovations and inventions and urges the followers of Lathurr to embrace them as gift of their god.

(Adventure Hook: When the adventurers find out that their usual solutions will not work on a problem, Brother Anton might be able to convince them to try something new.)

## ORGANIZATIONS

*The Guild of Bounty Hunters* is a Neutral organization which licenses bounty hunters, who are allowed to pursue criminals after payment. It has its seat in Portpunnal. Emma Lavigne (Middle-Aged Human Hunter 7 N) is the leader of the Guild.

*Dread Possibility: The Guild of Assassins:* rumors speak of a N/E organization of Bounty killers using the Guild of Bounty Hunters as a cover. The mysterious leader of the Guild is only known as the Red Hand, and no living being has ever seen their true face.

*The Guild of Merchants* is a L/N organization which federates several other guilds (miners, shipwrights, woodcutters) and controls the various businesses on the island. The guild negotiates with the high captains to keep taxes reasonable and to ship their goods with favorable rates. Marvin Roughhouse (Expert 5 L/N) is the Guildmaster.

*Dread Possibility: Blood Money:* Guild members are rumored to sponsor unsavory pirates like the Butcher to smuggle their goods and, in exchange, they act as handlers for the pirates' stolen goods and even for their prisoners, dabbling even in the loathed practice of slavery. This secret group is called the Hidden Table and is dominated by the duke himself.

*The Worthy* are a L/E militia directly sworn to the duke of Blaustein and lead by Old Rawbone.

*Dread Possibility: The Wives;* the Wives are rumored to be horrible specters who can be summoned by the Worthy as a final weapon. They are said to be the spectres of Bluebeard's wives, horribly weaponized.

## THE DARKLORD: RAVL II "BLUEBEARD" MORRE

(Caliban Brawler Strangler 15, L/E) (159 HP)

**Size:** Medium

**Speed:** 30 feet

**Initiative:** (+4 in the Blau Schloss)

**Senses:** Perception (+4 in the Blau Schloss)

**Armor Class:** 27, Touch 20, Flat Footed 17 (+6 Dex, +7 armor, +4 Dodge) (+4 in the Blau Schloss)

**Space/Reach:** 1 square/1 square

**Combat Maneuver Bonus/Combat Maneuver Defense:** +22/39 (+8 Grapple, +7 Disarm, +6 Dirty Trick, +5 Trip) (+4 in the Blau Schloss)

**Str:**22 (18), **Dex:**22 (18), **Con:**18 (14), **Int:**13, **Wis:**12, **Cha:** 15

**Saving Throws:** Fort, Ref, Will, (+4 in the Blau Schloss)

**Special Qualities:** Curse of the Dark Lord, Brawler's cunning, martial flexibility (immediate action), Caliban Features (Frightening Appearance, Powerful Build), Captain's voice, grit (2), deed: Deadeye, martial training, Paranoid Intuition, Rejuvenation, Sinkhole of Evil IV.

**Special Attacks:** Captain's glare, Unarmed Strike (2d6), Brawler's Flurry (Greater Two-Weapon Fighting), Brawler Strike (Aligned Evil and Lawful, Cold Iron, Magic, Silver) Knock-out (3/day), maneuver training 4 (+4 Grapple, +3 Disarm, +2 Dirty tricks, +1 Trip), merciless cutthroat, summon the Wives.

**Melee:** +3 *Unholy Lightning Dagger* +24/+19/+14 (1d10+9+1d6 lightning damage)/19-20 or +3 *Unholy Gauntlet* +26/+21/+16 (2d6+9) or Flurry of Blows (+24/+24/+19/+19/+14/+14) (2d6+9) (+4 in the Blau Schloss)

**Ranged:** +3 *Pistol* +24 (1d8+3, 20x4, 20 feet range) (+4 in the Blau Schloss)

**Skills:** *Acrobatics (+19), Climb (+19), Escape Artist (+24) Intimidate (+22), Perception (+9), Profession (Mariner) (+17), Sense Motive (+19), and Swim (+14).*

**Feats:** *Amateur Gunslinger (b), Combat Expertise, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Pistol)(b), Extra Feature (Powerful Build), Greater Dirty Trick, Greater Disarm, Greater Grapple, Greater Trip, Improved Dirty Trick, Improved Disarm, Improved Grapple, Improved Trip, Improved Unarmed Strike (b), Skill Focus (Profession: Mariner), Weapon Focus (Unarmed Attack), Weapon Specialization (Unarmed Attack)*

**Properties:** *+3 Mithral Chain Mail, +3 Unholy Lightning Dagger, +3 Unholy Gauntlets, 100 perfect pellets, a Windcaller Compass, a Belt of Physical Perfection +4, a Key of Revelation (It is unblemished silver and becomes marred if the person whom it is entrusted to betrays the will of the giver.)*

**Challenge Rating:** 17

## BACKGROUND

Born the elder son of Morgan II Morre, third Duke of Blaustein, Roul Morre was born a Caliban, with azure blue hair, and, from his late teens, a thick blue beard. Morgan II's rule of Blaustein had changed Blaustein's standing in the world, from a pirate haven to a valuable commercial partner for many nations. But Raoul was not born for the life of a merchant; he idolized his grandfather, Raoul I the Reaver, and his great-grandfather, Morgan I the Pirate King. Morgan II started to grow distanced from his son, more and more, as he grew closer to his second son Bartolomew. Raoul left the island and became a legend of the piracy, his sporadic returns home only furthering his bitterness. When Morgan II died, he left the title to his son Bartolomew and that made Raoul's jealousy explode. "Bartolomew," he argued, "will turn into a Zherisian province." Some of the captains agreed, and a bloody civil war erupted. It was mercifully brief, though, because Raoul soon defeated his brother and exiled him. But Bartolomew Morre was soon back, backed by a Zherisian-Dementlieuse fleet. In the battle of the Bay

of Rais, Raoul defeated his enemies and enforced his rightful rule on Blaustein. He married his brother's widow, a woman he always fancied, but that was the first of many mistakes. Jealous and paranoid, he had his first mate create the silver Key of Revelation, and from that moment his path of darkness began. He killed his first wife in self-defense as she was trying to assassinate him, but he killed his second wife for jealousy, and when he killed the third one for a trivial disobedience, the Mists rose up in Rais.

## CURRENT SKETCHES

Raoul II Morre has riches, power, heirs (three sons and two daughters), respect, and fame but he is not sated with it. After the recent death of his last wife, he is starting again to look for a companion. He is fiercely protective of everything he believes to be rightly his and he expects loyalty and obedience from those he chooses to trust. Currently he is convinced that elevating the status of Blaustein will be the key to gain undying loyalty and he is resorting to unsavory means that he would usually shun.

## COMBAT

Raoul is a lethal hand-to-hand fighter and will readily brutalize any opponent so it's foolish to let him close the distance. Against cowards who refuse to engage him, he will use his pistol or leave them to his crew. Only in desperate situations, he will summon the specters of his wives.

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

*Curse of the Dark Lord:* Bluebeard is compelled to trust someone (until now a wife) with a task, to leave them his silver Key of Revelation, and then leave for a period until his Paranoid Intuition does not make him suspect something is wrong and he comes home and finds the key marred. Even the most trivial disobedience compels Bluebeard to kill the wife who failed him, cutting their throat, and then to hang their bodies in a room under his castle. This victim then becomes a specter in his service as a constant reminder of his crimes. Bluebeard hates the sight of his dead wives, and every time he has sworn that he



will never marry again. And every time, he breaks that promise, imprisoned in a loop he himself preserves.

*Captain's Glare:* Bluebeard can demoralize as a quick action. Once per day, a victim of a successful demoralize action is frightened for 1 round.

*Captain's Voice:* Bluebeard, 2 times a day, can use an action to give any ally able to hear in 30 feet from him a bonus of +3 to Hit Rolls and damage.

*Merciless Cutthroat:* Bluebeard can attempt a coup de grace every time he keeps an opponent immobilized for three consecutive rounds.

*Paranoid Intuition:* When someone breaks the trust of Bluebeard, he is somehow half-conscious of it and gains a +5 bonus in Sense Motive Checks against that person.

*Rejuvenation:* If Bluebeard dies, his body appears hanged on the wall of the room under his castle, together with his wives. He is revived after three days, surrounded by the Specters and their corpses. Only if the room is consecrated and the Specters destroyed, with their corpses buried, will Bluebeard stay dead.

*Summon Wives:* at will, Bluebeard can spend a full round action to summon the Specters of some or all of his dead wives (up to ten 10 HD Specters).

### LAIR

The Blau Schloss is house Morre's seat of power and the place where Bluebeard killed his wives to fulfill his wish of control. It is now a rank 4 Sinkhole of Evil with the ability of imposing the Fear, Obsession, Rage, and Despair conditions. (DC 23 Will deny)

### CLOSING BORDERS:

Bluebeard is not able to close the borders, and he is able to leave his domain at will.

## DREAD ALTERNATIVES:

### NEW MONSTER: GIANT BUNYIP

**XP** 2400

*N* Large magical beast (aquatic)

**Init** +2; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision, keen scent 180 ft.; **Perception** +8

### Defense

**AC** 14, touch 11, flat-footed 12 (+2 Dex, +3 natural)  
**hp** 74 (10d10+20)

**Fort** +9, **Ref** +9, **Will** +7

### Offense

**Speed** 15 ft., swim 60 ft.

**Melee** bite +12 (2d6+4/19–20 plus bleed)

**Special Attacks** bleed (1d8), blood frenzy, ghost sound, roar

### Statistics

**Str** 17, **Dex** 14, **Con** 15, **Int** 6, **Wis** 15, **Cha** 11

**Base Atk** +10; **CMB** +14; **CMD** 26

**Feats** Improved Critical (bite)(b), Iron Will, Power Attack, Skill Focus (Perception), Skill Focus (Stealth), Weapon Focus (bite),

### NEW TEMPLATE: SEAWOLF

**Acquired/Inherited Template** Both

**Simple Template** No

**Usable with Summons** No

Seawolves are humanoids with the ability to turn into bunyips and bunyip-humanoid hybrid shapes. Natural seawolves are born with this ability and have perfect control over their shapechanging. Afflicted seawolves contract this ability like a curse or disease from another seawolf; they sometimes change form involuntarily.

“Seawolf” is an inherited (for natural seawolves) or acquired (for afflicted seawolves) template that can be added to any humanoid.

**Challenge Rating:** Same as base creature or bunyip + 1.

**Size and Type:** The creature (referred to hereafter as the base creature) gains the shapechanger subtype. The seawolf takes on the characteristics of a bunyip within one size category of the base creature's size. A seawolf's hybrid form is the same size as the base animal or the base creature, whichever is larger.

**AC:** In hybrid or bunyip form the seawolf has a +3 Natural Armor bonus

**Defensive Abilities:** A seawolf gains DR 10/silver in bunyip or hybrid form. An afflicted seawolf gains DR 5/silver in animal or hybrid form.

**Speed:** Same as the base creature or bunyip, depending on which form the lycanthrope is using. Hybrids use the base creature's speed.

**Melee:** A seawolf gains a bite attack in bunyip and hybrid form.

**Special Attacks:** A seawolf retains all the special attacks, qualities, and abilities of the base creature. In hybrid or bunyip form it gains the special attacks, qualities, and abilities of the bunyip. A seawolf also gains low-light vision, keen scent, and the following:

*Change Shape (Su):* All Seawolves have three forms—a humanoid form, a bunyip form, and a hybrid form. Equipment does not meld with the new form between humanoid and hybrid form, but does between those forms and bunyip form. A natural lycanthrope can shift to any of its three alternate forms as a move-equivalent action. An afflicted seawolf can assume bunyip or hybrid form as a full-round action by making a DC 15 Constitution check, or humanoid form as a full-round action by making a DC 20 Constitution check. On nights when the full moon is visible, an afflicted seawolf gains a +5-morale bonus to Constitution checks made to assume bunyip or hybrid form, but a –5 penalty to Constitution checks made to assume humanoid form. An afflicted seawolf reverts to its humanoid form automatically with the next sunrise, or after 8

hours of rest, whichever comes first. A slain seawolf reverts to its humanoid form, although it remains dead.

*Curse of Seawolf (Su)* A natural seawolf's bite attack in bunyip or hybrid form infects a humanoid target with seawolf disease (Fortitude DC 15 negates). If the victim's size is not within one size category of the seawolf, this ability has no effect.

*Seawolf Empathy (Ex)* In any form, natural seawolves can communicate and empathize with buniyps, seals, and sharks. They can use Diplomacy to alter such a bunyip or animal's attitude, and when so doing gain a +4 racial bonus on the check. Afflicted seawolves only gain this ability in bunyip or hybrid form.

**Ability Scores:** +2 Wis, –2 Int in all forms; +2 Str, +2 Con in hybrid and animal forms. Seawolves have enhanced senses but are not quick witted, preferring to rely on instinct than on logic. In addition to these adjustments to the base creature's stats, a seawolf's ability scores change when he assumes hybrid or bunyip form. In humanoid form, the seawolf's ability scores are unchanged from the base creature's form. In bunyip and hybrid form, the Seawolf's ability scores are the same as the base creature's or the bunyip's, whichever ability score is *higher*.

## SEAWOLF DISEASE

A creature that catches Seawolf Disease becomes an afflicted seawolf, but shows no symptoms (and does not gain any of the template's adjustments or abilities) until the night of the next full moon, when the victim involuntarily assumes bunyip form and forgets his or her own identity. The character remains in bunyip form until the next dawn and remembers nothing about the entire episode (or subsequent episodes) unless she makes a DC 20 Will save, in which case she becomes aware of her condition.

A remove disease or heal spell cast by a cleric of 12th level or higher cures the affliction, provided the

character receives the spell within 3 days of the infecting seawolf's attack. Alternatively, consuming a dose of amaranth gives an afflicted seawolf a new Fortitude save to recover from seawolf disease.

### NEW MONSTER: GREATER SEAWOLF

Same as a common seawolf but for the following;

The base creature gets the shape of a Giant Bunyip;

The Armor Class bonus is +4

Challenge rating. Same as base creature or giant bunyip (whatever higher) +2

Seawolf Disease DC increase by one and can turn the victim in a Greater Seawolf.

Greater Seawolves can decide to infect their victims with the lesser form of the Seawolf Disease transforming them in regular seawolves.

### NEW RACES

#### CALIBANS

Calibans are called freaks by someone, the next step of human evolution by others. Calibans are believed by most to be all born deformed, but also with gifts to compensate for it; there are many calibans, however, which have been luckier and can hide their nature. Calibans are diffused through all the core, and everywhere they are often scorned and pitied. Some nations are more openminded, like Darkon, some others are really harsh places for them to live in, like Falkovnia. Calibans' average lifespan is a decade shorter than humans, with some significant exceptions.

Caliban Racial Traits:

*Size:* Medium

*Type (Subtype):* Humanoid (Human, Caliban)

*Speed:* 30 feet

*Ability Score Adjustments:* you can choose one Ability Score; that Ability Score increases by 2. Your Choice

will determinate the list which you may choose your Caliban feature – see below.

*Senses:* Darkvision, You can see in Darkness, black and White up to 60 feet.

*Caliban Features:* you choose one item in the ability group you decided to get a bonus to :

#### Strength:

- ❖ *Bite\** (1d6 + Strength Modifier, +1,5 x Strength Modifier if used as the only attack in the round),
- ❖ *Burrower\** (you have a Burrow speed of 20 feet and you can use an action to create a stable tunnel.)
- ❖ *Claws\** (1d4 + 1/2 Strength Modifier, secondary attacks)
- ❖ *Gore\** (1d6 + Strength Modifier, Double Damage if used at the end of a charge)
- ❖ *Inhuman Strength* (You are considered two size larger to lift and carry, and once for encounter you roll twice when you roll a Combat Maneuver Check based on Strength and you can keep the higher result)
- ❖ *Knock-Out* (You have the Improved Trip Feat, when you confirm a Critical Hit you can attempt to Trip your opponent as a quick action)
- ❖ *Powerful Build\** (You are considered one size larger wherever it would be advantageous for you)
- ❖ *Strong Legs \** (You can use your strength modifier for Acrobatics Skill to Jump instead than your Dexterity modifier and you can Jump without a running start without doubling the DC)
- ❖ *Tail\** (1d6 + Strength Modifier, +1,5 x Strength Modifier if used as the only attack in the round, you have 5 feet bonus to your reach to this Attack)
- ❖ *Tear Apart* (You have the Improved Sunder Feat, and you inflicts 50% more damage to objects)
- ❖ *Tentacle\** (You have a Slam attack as a secondary attack, 1d4+1/2 Strength Modifier, you have also the Improved Grapple Feat, and

you can grapple as a quick action if you confirm a Critical hit with this attack)

- ❖ *Unstoppable* (You have the Improved Bull Rush feat and you can initiate a Bull Rush maneuver as quick action if you confirm a critical hit. You have also a +5 bonus when you attempt to break through doors or walls)
- ❖ *Vestigial Arm\** (You have an extra arm, strong but unsuited to wield weapons or precision manipulation. You can use it to wield a shield draw an item or cast a spell. If you have this arm free you have a +4 bonus to any Strength Based combat maneuver)

#### Dexterity:

- ❖ *Agile Build\** (You are considered one size smaller for everything which would be an advantage to you)
- ❖ *Extra Joints\** (You have the Improved Grapple Feat, you also decrease by 5 the difficult class of every Escape Artist Check)
- ❖ *Flexible\** (You can shrink yourself to fit in a space twice smaller than you, you can crawl in such space without risking to get stuck and ignore penalties to check you make through small openings)
- ❖ *Inhuman Agility* (You are considered two times smaller to benefit from cover, pass over surfaces or through small spaces, you are also able to pass through the space of any creature at least larger than you and you ignore up to two additional enemies to Acrobatics Checks to avoid opportunity attacks moving in threatened spaces)
- ❖ *Long Fingers\** (You don't take penalties to Disable Device checks for not having the proper tools, and you have the Improved Disarm feat)
- ❖ *Long Legs\** (Your base speed increase of 5 feet, and you can make a 10 feet free step as a movement action instead of a 5 Feet one)
- ❖ *Monkey Paws\** (You have a Climbing Speed of 30 feet, if you are not wearing shoes you do not need free hands to climb)

- ❖ *Prehensile Tail\** (You can use your tail to pick things out of your backpack and to do a Sleight of Hands check as a quick action, you also have the Improved Trip Feat, and you can do a Trip Maneuver Check as a quick action when you confirm a critical hit, you use your dexterity in your Trip Maneuver checks.)
- ❖ *Ricocheting* (You can attempt an Acrobatics Check DC 15 as an opportunity action to halve your fall damage, to instantly get up when falling prone, to make a jump when you have fallen at least 3 feet like you had a running start and to instantly move up to half your speed when you are pushed against a solid surface)
- ❖ *Small Tentacles\** (You have the Improved Steal feat, and you can attempt a steal Maneuver as a free action when you confirm a Critical Hit)
- ❖ *Soft Steps* (You do not get a penalty to Stealth checks when you move at your regular speed and you give a +10 to every DC of perception checks to hear you move)
- ❖ *Uncatchable* (You have a +4 bonus against any attempt to restrain, slow down, paralyze or immobilize you, and the Improved Grapple Feat. When you Grapple to free yourself you can use your Dexterity modifier.)
- ❖ *Vestigial Wings\** (You can Glide up to your base speed. Good maneuverability. No fall damage, Fly is always a class skill)

#### Constitution:

- ❖ *Big Lungs\** (You can hold your breath up a number of rounds equal to 4 times your constitution score)
- ❖ *Extra Fat\** (You have Damage Reduction 1 and Cold Resistance 5)
- ❖ *Gills\** (You are amphibious, and you have a Swim Speed equal to your ground Speed)
- ❖ *Hump\** (You can stay without food one month +1 week x Constitution Score and water for one week +3 days per Constitution Score and you are unbothered by high temperatures up to 122°F)



- ❖ *Inhuman Resistance* (You are seen as two sizes larger to determine if you risk dying from Massive Damage, you have 1 HP bonus, and once per day you can decide either to ignore a condition after a failed Fortitude Saving Throw (but not characteristic Damage), or stay at 1 HP after you took damage that would drop you to 0 or less HP)
- ❖ *Large and Strong Stomach\** (You are immune to the sickened condition, and you have a +5 Bonus against ingested Poison / intestinal diseases).
- ❖ *Preternatural Health* (You are immune to 1 disease of your choice per Constitution Modifier)
- ❖ *Roaring Rage* (You can go in a state of Rage 1xday, You get a +1 to Hit Rolls and Damage Rolls, and a number of temporary HP equal to your total HD. You cannot use Feats and Skills based on Dexterity, except Acrobatics, Ride, and Escape Artist, Skill based on Intelligence, Wisdom, except for Perception and Charisma except for Intimidate. You can add Constitution to your Intimidate Bonus, and your Rage lasts 1 Round + 1 for Constitution Modifier)
- ❖ *Thick Skin\** (You have a +2 Natural Armor Bonus and you reduce by 10 any Swarm damage)
- ❖ *Tireless* (You do not need to sleep more than four hours every night, and you recover from Fatigue and Exhaustion with one hour of rest or half the required time if less the one hour, and you can keep doing tiring activities for 1 hour per your Constitution Score)
- ❖ *Toxic\** (You have a +5 bonus against wound and contact poison, and if you are bitten you are poisonous, forcing the biter to a fortitude ST DC=to 10 Half your HD+ your Constitution Modifier, or getting 1d4 Constitution Damage for 5 Round, 1 Success cures; you can also use your blood as a wound poison, applying it on a piercing or on a slashing weapon, inflicting on yourself 1 HP of damage, it lasts until you hit or for a minute)

- ❖ *Vitality* (You can ignore a number of negative levels equal to your Constitution Modifier, but you still die if they equal your level, you automatically remove one negative level every 24 hours, you also reduce by 5 Negative Energy damage)
- ❖ *Youthful* (You don't look your real age and you do not get the regular penalties for aging up, while bonus still stack. You still die when you hit your maximum age)

#### Intelligence:

- ❖ *Battlefield Analyst* (You instantly knows the rough strength difference of you and your enemies, once for encounter with a successful Intelligence Check DC 10+2 for every enemy you can see you can elaborate an effective battle strategy, gaining a +2 to either AC, Saving Throws, or attack for one minute against all the enemies. You choose how many of the foes you see you decide to include in this effect, adjusting the DC consequentially)
- ❖ *Big Head\** (You are immune to the stunned and dazed conditions, you have a natural slam attack on which you substitute your Intelligence modifier to your Strength Modifier to Hit rolls, if you hit you inflicts 1d4 +Intelligence modifier damage)
- ❖ *Eidetic Memory* (You automatically remember trivial knowledge bits (CD 10) in Knowledge abilities you have ranks into, you can't lose your way in a maze, you automatically pass any Intelligence check to recall information you have acquired in the last month, and you have a +2 bonus to any check for older memories)
- ❖ *Illithid Brained \** (You are conscious of any part of your body and you can substitute your intelligence modifier to your Constitution ability modifier when you make a Fortitude saving throw, or a Constitution Check. You also do not need to sleep when you take a long rest)
- ❖ *Mind Theater* (You can analyze any location in your mind noticing and examining every detail and foreseeing consequences of your action.

You substitute your Intelligence Modifier for your Wisdom Modifier in perception checks, you do not risk to activate a trap if you fail a Disable Device check of 5 or more)

- ❖ *Prodigious Knowledge* (Choose 1 Knowledge Skill per Intelligence modifier, in those skills you count as having ranks and you have a +2 Bonus to those checks. You gain a +4 Cognitive bonus to Hit Rolls against Creatures of a determinate Type if you pass the required Knowledge Check in one of a knowledge category you selected)
- ❖ *Quick Study* (You can make Knowledge checks as a quick action. You can also learn how a Trap or a Magical device works with a successful Knowledge: Arcana, and Knowledge: Engineering Skill Check, and a fail of 5 or more does not activate the trap)
- ❖ *Scarily Smart*\*(you may substitute your intelligence modifier for your Charisma Modifier in Intimidate checks, you can also roll on Knowledge: Arcana, Dungeon, History, Nature, Planes, or Religion, instead then Intimidate.)
- ❖ *Telepathic Mind* (You can talk telepathically with any creature you share a language with, up to ten minutes per Intelligence modifier)
- ❖ *Telekinesis* (You can telekinetically move objects at a distance up to 30 feet as a standard action, using your Intelligence Score as your Strength Score to calculate how much you can move. You can use this ability also to initiate a combat maneuver with -4 penalty in the reach, or use tools with the same penalties. This ability can be interrupted like a spell, and you use Intelligence to your Concentration roll)
- ❖ *Tongue Gifted* (You can choose 2 bonus languages for Intelligence Modifier, You automatically pass any Linguistic check to decipher a script in a non-secret language, and you can communicate simple concepts with any being speaking or understanding a language)
- ❖ *Two-headed*\* (You can roll Will Saves, Appraise Checks, Concentration Checks, Knowledge Checks and Spellcraft Checks Twice and keep

the higher result. You can also add your intelligence bonus against mind-influence effects and to initiative)

- ❖ *Unnatural Intelligence* (Detect Thoughts always recognize you as genius intellect level and the spellcaster need to pass a Will ST DC 10+1/2 your character level + your Intelligence modifier, or he cannot decodify your thoughts nor pinpoint your position; you can use any Intelligence based skill without ranks even if it would require training, and the DCs of such skill checks are lessened by 5),

#### Wisdom:

- ❖ *Bat Ears*\* (You have the Alertness feat, the DC for any Perception Checks based on hearing diminish by five, you automatically wake up from natural sleep with any noise, you can double the range you can make Perception Checks with hearing)
- ❖ *Dog Nose* \*(You have the Alertness feat and the scent ability)
- ❖ *Empathy* (You perceive emotions in 30 feet range, and strong emotions in a 60 feet range. You can determine the nature of the emotion in 15 feet range 30 feet for strong emotions, like a barbarian rage and fear inducted by the fear spell, and you do not know the exact position of the source but you can determine it with a move action. you pinpoint the source of the emotion in a 5 feet range)
- ❖ *Fly Eyes*\* (You only concede a +1 bonus when you are flanked, you have darkvision up 60 feet, and you have a +2 bonus to Initiative Rolls)
- ❖ *Healing Touch* (Three times a day you can cast Cure Light Wounds, as a Spell-like ability using your character level as your spellcaster level and your Wisdom Score as your spellcasting ability.)
- ❖ *Instinctive* (You can substitute your Wisdom Modifier for your Dexterity Modifier to Initiative Rolls, and you have a +2 bonus to Initiative and Intuition Rolls)
- ❖ *Lizard Tongue*\* (You have an elongatable tongue, you have +2 Bonus to Perception Rolls)

and you can perceive sizeable changes in temperature in a 30 feet range, working like scent, and climate in the space of an hour)

- ❖ *Third Eye\** (You have a +4 bonus on Perception Rolls, and you have a 25% chance to perceive ethereal creature or invisible creatures. If you do, that creature do not catch you flat-footed. You also roll twice any chance to miss due to ethereal-based effects, invisibility or concealing.)
- ❖ *Tremor sensitive skin* (You have tremor sense up to 30 feet; you can also use it when your bare hands or feet touch a surface. You have a +2 Bonus on Perception and a further +2 when you look for traps.)
- ❖ *Unnatural Wisdom* (You instinctively knows the rough difference of level between you and another character. You also cannot be fooled by minor illusions (Spell Level 0 or 1), and have a +2 Bonus at Saving Throws against illusions)
- ❖ *Void Mind* (You are immune to any effect which detect thoughts, and you have a +4 bonus to any ST against mind influence effect)
- ❖ *White Eyed\**, (You are considered blind to all adverse effects which need to be seen to affect you. You still are completely aware of anything in a 30 feet range and you can still see anything outside the range, but you need to concentrate on it, with Perception Check DC 10.)
- ❖ *Wild Mind* (You have a +5 bonus against mind-influence effects and once a day you can choose to act like you are affected by a confusion spell with these differences: instead then attacking a casual target or your allies, you aid your ally giving them a + 4 bonus to their next attack, or you get it if you can attack an enemy; when you would harm yourself you instead get +4 bonus to AC and ST until the beginning of your next turn, and when you would just babble you instead move in the most advantageous of the positions, without getting opportunity attacks. If you act normally, you have no bonuses. If you are afflicted by a confusion effect you can choose to be affected by this effect instead. It

lasts one round x Character Level+1 per Wisdom Modifier).

#### Charisma:

- ❖ *Animal Head\** (You choose an animal group, you can talk with animals of that group, and any animal of that group has its starting attitude toward you improved by 1. You also have a +2 in Animal Handling Checks)
- ❖ *Filthy \**(Your appearance and smell distracts your opponents, who get a penalty equally to your Charisma Modifier to any Deception, Insight, or Intimidate Check, and any creature with the Scent ability within a range of 30 feet needs to pass a Fortitude ST DC=10+1/2 your HDs +your Charisma Modifier or get sickened for 1d4 round and lose the scent ability for 1 hour. A success means the target won't be influenced again by this ability for one hour)
- ❖ *Faceless\**(Your regular face is devoid of traits, which increases the DC of any Intelligence check to attempt to recognize or describe you by your Charisma Modifier, and you have a +2 bonus to any Disguise Check)
- ❖ *Forked Tongue* (You have a +2 Bonus at Deception Checks; you also apply your Charisma modifier as a penalty to any opponent who can hear you when they make a Sense Motive Check)
- ❖ *Frightening Appearance\**(You have +2 to intimidate Checks and every time you use an Intimidate Check to demoralize someone in combat, the shaken condition lasts 1 round per your Charisma Modifier)
- ❖ *Gifted Artist* (You have a +1 Bonus on all Perform Checks; you instinctively know how any form of art works. You are also innately literate in any language you understand)
- ❖ *Hypnoeyes\** (Every opponent able to see you gets a penalty to their Will Saves equal to your Charisma, unless they avert their eyes, and once a day as a Spell-like ability you can cast Command. Your Spellcaster Level is equal to

your Character Level, and DC is equal to  $10 + 1/2$  your HD+your Charisma Modifier)

- ❖ *Illusionist* (You have a +2 Bonus to Disguise Checks, you can cast Ghost Sound Three Times a day and Disguise Self once a day, SL=CL and DC is equal to  $10 + 1/2$  your HD+your Charisma Modifier. You also impose on any opponent able to see or hear you a penalty to their Will Save to doubt illusions equal to your Charisma modifier.)
- ❖ *Kinesis* (At will, as a standard action, you can lift things like an invisible hand with a strength equal to your Charisma Score, in a 30 feet range, allowing you to operate tools at that distance with a -2 penalty to the check, you can also inflict damage using weapons you are proficient with, with a -2 penalty, or you can attack with a ranged attack with a bonus equal to your Bonus Base Attack+your Charisma Modifier which inflicts  $1d4$ +your Charisma Modifier points of Force damage)
- ❖ *Magic Expertise* (You have a +2 Bonus on Use Magic Device Checks, you automatically succeed in Use Magic Device Checks to use Wands with spells you have already successfully used once, you can make Use Magic Device and Spellcraft checks even if you have no ranks in it, and you substitute your Charisma Modifier for your Intelligence Modifier in Spellcraft Checks)
- ❖ *Silver Tongue* (The starting attitude regarding you of any creature with an intelligence score improves by one, you get a +2 bonus to Diplomacy Checks and you can make Diplomacy Checks in one round by increasing the DC by 5 instead of 10)
- ❖ *Undead Appearance\** (Non intelligent Undead do not attack you if you do not attack them first, and you have a +1 racial Bonus to any check to influence intelligent undead. You have resistance to negative energy equal to your charisma modifier)
- ❖ *Unnatural Charm* (You improve automatically by 2 the starting attitude of any creature with an intelligence score. You also ignore any

circumstantial penalty for Deception, Diplomacy, and Intimidate checks)

\*This feature is a visible mutation/deformity.

*Languages:* Common + another one on your choice.

*Favored Class:* any.

## ELVES (~~DUSK ELVES~~, ~~MIST ELVES~~)

Elves are one of the oldest races in the Core, being around since the first days of the Age of Creation. The two most common lines of Elves in the Core are the Dusk Elves of the Shadow Forrest and of Sithicus (living in Barovia, too) and the Mist Elves of Darkon and Nidala. Olive-skinned, dark-haired and tall, Dusk Elves are the proudest of their traditions, and they are reluctant to integrate in human society. They still see humans as interlopers and they are fiercely independent. Pale, fair-haired, blue-eyed, and slightly shorter, Mist Elves, while still proud, have accepted that their time as rulers of the Core is ended. They think that human ingenuity brings new ideas that their somewhat stagnant culture sorely needs. While Dusk Elves are still tied to places of natural power, Mist Elves have developed a unique urban culture. Many human cultures distrust elves for their ties with the Fey Realm. Dusk elves can live up to 7 centuries, while Mist elves up to 12.

### *Dusk Elf Racial traits*

*Size:* Medium

*Type (Subtype):* Humanoid (Elf)

*Speed:* 30 feet

*Ability Score Adjustments:* +2 Dexterity, +2 Wisdom, -2 Constitution.

*Senses* Twilight Vision, you see twice as well as a human in conditions of Low Visibility, like moon light, starlight, and torch light. When you are ten feet from a hidden door, you automatically roll a Perception Check. You have a +4 Bonus to Perception Checks.



**Weapon Proficiency** You are proficient with Longsword, Short sword, Short Bow and Long Bow.

**Woodland Stride** You ignore penalties for difficult terrain in natural forest terrains. You also do not leave tracks on those terrains.

**Sleepless** You do not need to sleep, only needing 4 hours of vigil trance (in which you are still conscious of your surroundings) to rest your body. You are immune to the Sleep spell and to Paralysis.

**Languages:** Common (Baloki) and Elvish (Sithican). Bonus Languages: Aquan, Auran, Celestial, Draconic, Ignan, Sylvan, Terran, Treant.

**Favored Class:** Ranger.

### **Mist Elf Racial traits**

**Size:** Medium

**Type (Subtype):** Humanoid (Elf)

**Speed:** 30 feet

**Ability Score Adjustments:** +2 Dexterity, +2 Intelligence, -2 Constitution.

**Senses** Twilight Vision, you see twice as well as a human in conditions of Low Visibility, like moon light, starlight, and torch light. When you are ten feet from a hidden door, you automatically roll a Perception Check. You have a +4 Bonus to Perception Checks.

**Weapon Proficiency** You are proficient with Longsword and Long Bow.

**Magic Familiarity** Knowledge (Arcana) and Spellcraft are always class skills for you, you are always treated as trained in those two skills, and you gain a +2 racial Bonus to both Skill Checks. You have a +2 bonus on Saving throws against Spells and Spell-like abilities. **Sleepless** You do not need to sleep, only needing 4 hours of vigil trance (in which you are still conscious of your surroundings) to rest your body. You are immune to the Sleep spell and to Paralysis.

**Languages:** Common (Baloki) and Elvish (Neblionese). Bonus Languages: Darkonese, Draconic, Dwarvish, Gnomish, Halfling, Lamordian, Nidalash, Okrainan, Treant.

**Favored Class:** Wizard.

### **DWARVES (COPPER DWARVES, STONE DWARVES)**

Dwarves originate from the island of Bluetspur in the Sea of Sorrows; they ran from the threat of the Illithids and initially settled in the Mountains of southern Darkon, back in the Age of Empires. Then they separated into two different peoples, traditionalist Stone Dwarves and business-oriented Copper Dwarves. Stone Dwarves settled in Darkon, with relevant enclaves in Tepest, Sithicus, Lamordia, Barovia, Borca, Zherisia, Collodi and Zeindost. Copper Dwarves formed smaller communities all around the Core. Stone Dwarves are the classical Dwarves, big bearded, stoic, proud, reserved miners, crafters, and builders. Copper Dwarves are more easy-going, risk-taking, fast-talking merchants and mercenaries, with shorter, trimmed beards, looser tongues, and quicker feet. Dwarves can live up to 5 centuries.

#### **Copper Dwarf Racial Traits:**

**Size:** Medium

**Type (Subtype):** Humanoid (Dwarf)

**Speed:** 25 Feet

**Ability Score Adjustments:** +2 Constitution, +2 Charisma, -2 Wisdom.

**Senses:** Darkvision: You can see in darkness up to 60 feet.

**Guile:** Bluff and Diplomacy are always a class skill for you, and you have a +2 Bonus to Bluff and Diplomacy Checks.

**Trade cunning:** you know approximately the real value of any item you are purchasing or selling unless it is altered by magic; you also have a bonus of 4 to any appraise Skill Check.

*Healthy:* You have a bonus of +2 against Poison and Disease

*Free Walker* You ignore difficult terrain due to trenches, rocks and mud.

*Stability:* You receive a +4 racial bonus to your Combat Maneuver Defense when resisting a bull rush or trip attempt while standing on the ground.

*Weapon Familiarity:* You are proficient with battleaxes, heavy picks, and Warhammers, and treat any weapon with the word “dwarven” in its name as a martial weapon.

*Languages:* You speak Dwarfish and Common. Bonus Languages: Any non-secret.

*Favored Class:* Bard.

### **Stone Dwarves Racial Traits:**

*Size:* Medium

*Type (Subtype):* Humanoid (Dwarf)

*Speed:* 20 feet; Your speed never gets reduced by your armor or encumbrance.

*Ability Score Adjustments:* +2 Constitution, +2 Wisdom, -2 Charisma.

*Senses:* Darkvision: You can see in darkness up to 60 feet.

*Defensive Training:* You get a +4 dodge bonus to their AC against monsters of the Aberration Type.

*Greed:* you receive a +2 racial bonus on Appraise checks made to determine the price of nonmagical goods that contain precious metals or gemstones.

*Hatred:* You receive a +1 bonus on attack rolls against creatures of the Aberration type

*Hardy:* You receive a +2 racial bonus on saving throws against poison, spells, and spell-like abilities.

*Stability:* You receive a +4 racial bonus to their Combat Maneuver Defense when resisting a bull rush or trip attempt while standing on the ground.

*Stone cunning:* You receive a +2 bonus on Perception checks to potentially notice unusual stonework, such as traps and hidden doors located in stone walls or floors. You receive a check to notice any such features that they pass within 10 feet of, whether or not you are actively looking.

*Languages:* You speak Common (Baloki) and Dwarvish. Bonus languages, Borcan, Collodian, Darkonese, Elvish (Neblionese and Sithican), Gnomish, Lamordian, Zeindostein, Zherisian.

*Favored Class:* Artificer.

### **NEW DOMAINS (AND SUBDOMAINS)**

#### **Balance**

You are balanced in mind and spirit and you never choose one extreme when you can walk the middle path.

#### **Mist**

#### **New Oracle Curse**

*Water Dependency*

### **NEW FEAT: EXTRA FEATURE**

Prerequisite: Caliban, Ability score linked to the selected feature 13 or higher.

Benefit: You can choose an extra feature from the list of the Caliban features. You can select this feat more than once; each time must choose a different feature.



# FROM THE COLLECTION: FONT OF MERCURIAL TEARS

BY BENJAMIN BAUML

*The Notes of Kranz Hauptschrei*

*Annotated by Tiberin Cybarde*

## Font of Mercurial Tears

**Minor Artifact**

**Body Slot:** —

**Caster Level:** 20th

**Aura:** Strong (DC 25) evocation

**Activation:** None (see text)

**Weight:** 25 lb.

*An expression of open-mouthed anguish is frozen upon this stone carving of a woman's head. Her wavy hair falls past her jawline, covering her ears, and her neck ends in a jagged break. Most intriguing are her eyes, which weep rivulets of silvery fluid.*

The *Font of Mercurial Tears* would be coveted by all those who desired wealth, if they knew of it. Liquid silver—not molten; it is as cold as the stone head itself—runs from the eyes and down the face of the *Font*. A volume of fluid silver secreted by the *Font* remains liquid so long as it is in contact with the *Font*. Over the course of a day, the *Font* creates 2d4 pounds of silver.

The *Font* has hardness 10 and 30 hit points.

*Prerequisites:* The *Font of Mercurial Tears* is a minor artifact, and cannot be created.

September 8th, 754 BC

As of today, I have the supposed miracle rock—the so called Font of Mercurial Tears—in my possession. Once again, Thyvault came through well within the desired time frame. I was presented with a small metal chest, wherein the Font lay on a bed of cloth, with cork wedged in around the sides to keep it from rattling about. It looked so plain—a grieving, female visage carved from stone, not performing any miracles.

And yet, as I lifted it free, a hint of the odd caught my attention. There were a couple of tiny metal nodules inside with it, as well as discolorations in the cloth, small blotches of silvery stains that dotted the material. If these were indeed solidified tears and tear stains, as Thyvault suggested, then there are a great many questions to be asked about their composition.

It will be a waiting game to see the rumored weeping in action. Some legends claim there are correlations between the volume which the Font secretes and certain events. I heard it told that the head belonged to a statue in an old temple, and began to weep after it was stolen by robbers. Supposedly, it now weeps at every blasphemy spoken in its presence—a rumor easily proven false. Another tale asserts that the head belonged to a living woman, bitten by a cockatrice as she tried to protect her baby. Each tear is said to count the soul of an infant gone before its

time. That one I will not test, of course. The story behind it, the premise of a serpent-incubated cockerel capable of petrifying with a bite, is just as frivolous as another story which lays the blame for the woman's death at the feet of a medusa. That particular variation gives an entirely untestable explanation for the tears, claiming that they pour out in an echo of the medusa's blood as she trims her snake hair. The trail of ludicrous tales is endless.

**Were it that a druid of sufficient acumen to perform a stone tell was known to me, perhaps I could learn the true story of this mystical rock. A commissioned legend lore corroborated Hauptschrei's stories, and provided a few more. Personally, I like the tale which claims that the Font was a failed attempt to carve a statue of Ezra, destroyed by its distraught creator. Now, it sheds a tear for each creature of the night that masses with its brethren in preparation for the Time of Unparalleled Darkness.**

Still, no matter the attempted explanation, there is no dispute of the claim that the Font can weep. This is physical, provable, and something I aim to see with my own eyes.

The true tests begin tomorrow.

September 9th, 754 BC

I kept the Font on a small pedestal under a bell jar overnight, with a sheet of fabric underneath. On awakening, I found quite the proliferation of metal nodules scattered within—196 to be exact—but no stains. Clearly, the Font could emit matter, but the mechanism was not yet apparent. Indeed, a new question was raised about the inconsistent manifestation of the phenomenon.

I weighed the nodules and took their volume by displacement. Altogether, they amounted to approximately two pounds, occupying slightly over three fluid ounces and two drams. The density is consistent with pure silver, and I subsequently found the nodules to possess the expected melting point. I had been wondering why there were so many more nodules under my bell jar than in the chest Thyvault

gave me, but I suspect those were just the ones he left for me. It is no matter; I am glad he didn't see fit to keep the Font itself. He has some degree of integrity.

I returned from my examinations to find a few more nodules. It clearly only took a scant few minutes on average for the Font to produce them, so I resolved to sit and wait for the phenomenon to occur. In short order, I was treated to the sight of silver fluid welling up in the Font's right eye, trickling down its cheek, gathering at the edge of its neck, then dropping to the surface underneath—landing as a solid.

I understand why other observers have considered this miraculous, though it is sad that the inquiry has historically ended there. It is also rather sad how inaccurately the name represents the phenomenon — it is as though those before me did not know what 'mercurial' even means! Actual quicksilver is strongly cohesive, with little adhesion to other materials. It would not form long rivulets clinging to the stone, as I saw, but collect in small droplets that roll down the surface. Also, it should never solidify at this temperature, and is noticeably more dense than silver, even as a fluid.

**For all his learning, perhaps Hauptschrei ought to have been a better student of language. 'Mercurial' is a poor translation of the Elvish 'nencelebrin,' which means 'akin to water and silver.' It is understandable that this was falsely equated with the Darkonese 'hydrargyrum,' though the connotation is different. The elves have their own distinct word for quicksilver: 'galdui.' The full Elvish name for the Font is 'Eithel o Nainië Nencelebrin,' literally meaning 'spring of lament akin to water and silver.' He is not wrong that 'mercurial' is inaccurate, but his contempt is misplaced.**

**Strangely enough, there do not seem to be any Elvish legends about the Font. Difficult as it is to collect documentation of the Font's history, the sources I found to support this etymology include reports of humans stealing it from elves perhaps a century or so ago. I am familiar with strange failures**



of *legend lore* regarding artifacts and individuals originating from before the emergence of their homelands from the Mists, but this theft supposedly occurred in Darkon long after its formation. Further delving into its history is warranted.

#### Limitations of Legend Lore and Vision

While *legend lore* and *vision* certainly relate legends that can be traced back into the false histories of domains, these legends only surface due to their perpetuation by individuals that have lived since the emergence of their domains. Sometimes, legends that should exist are conspicuously absent. For example, if humans had stolen the *Font of Mercurial Tears* from elves during the false history of Darkon, then human legends about the *Font* and legends about the theft of the *Font* from the elves would be revealed by these spells, but no Elven legends would be revealed, as the elves that possessed the *Font* did not exist, and had no legends of their own (at least, hypothetically, none that the human thieves would have bothered to learn and repeat).

However, the elves of which Tiberin Cybarde speaks did exist, and certainly did have their own legends. Why then were none revealed by *legend lore*?

When the next tear came, I determined that the silver was not molten by touching it with a strip of paper, which did not ignite. Not to mention, there was no sign of incandescence that would suggest extremely heated metal. There might be some sort of impurity that prevents solidification at a lower temperature. It must be rather volatile, seeing as it leaves the silver (or otherwise loses its efficacy) swiftly enough to solidify before it hits the table. It is quite a wonder that it lasts long enough to get off of the stone. Isolating this impurity would be an alchemical breakthrough, with quite the application to smithing.

Indeed, it would be impressive, particularly for a Lamordian. I know a spell that liquefies metal

without heat. Granted, it only lasts for a few seconds, but that is good enough for filling molds.

I let another few hours pass to collect more tears, which I transferred to my laboratory for later testing, seeking any strange new compounds. The Font itself I weighed, then immersed in a graduated tank half-full of water to take its volume. At approximately three quarts, weighing a bit over nineteen pounds, six ounces, its density is close to that of basalt. I will be leaving it for several days to see whether it weeps underwater, and if I can get an estimate of how much silver it produces on average.

#### September 18th, 754 BC

Over the past nine days, the Font produced between three and fourteen fluid ounces of silver each day. In total, seventy-six and a half fluid ounces of silver occupied the bottom of my tank—however, not in the form of loose nodules. It all remained liquid, hiding the neck of the Font beneath its reflective surface.

At first, I thought that perhaps the water had prevented the evaporation or decay of whatever compound kept the silver from solidifying. To my great surprise, when I removed the Font from the tank, the silver solidified the instant the head ceased to touch it. This had the unfortunate effect of ruining my graduated tank, but the phenomenon has become more intriguing in the process. Somehow, contact with the Font itself keeps the silver fluid.

My initial hypothesis was related to the idea of crystals forming around impurities; I thought perhaps that the surface of the Font somehow enabled a fluid state to be stable for cool silver. That couldn't be right, since there wasn't a clear way for the effect to transmit through the silver to affect all of the volume that does not directly touch the Font. Instead, I think it may be that some particular vibration from the Font promotes fluidity within the silver. If true, then it is a vibration which is too faint to feel with the hands. It may be untestable at this time, since any equipment sensitive enough to detect vibrations from the Font would need to be

isolated from seismic vibrations. Then again, data from a second device measuring only seismic activity could be used to remove the noise from the first device's data. Such a thing would require finer engineering than I am truly capable of, but it may be possible to commission. I will make some inquiries.

**I repeated this experiment without water, and instead of removing the head from its silver bath, I spun a dome of dead magic around it. I half expected an object as powerful as this to ignore my attack on its magic, but the silver did solidify, indicating a source for the liquefying effect that Hauptschrei would never have believed in. The Font was stuck in the silver of course, but my liquefying spell got it free. On the second casting, that is. I left the Font in the silver the first time to see if the newly liquefied metal would remain so due to contact with the Font, which was not the case.**

Whatever the exact reason, the mysterious staining of the cloth in Thyvault's chest had an explanation—it was caused by silver that had touched the fabric without leaving the head. To test this, I took wads of cotton fiber and affixed them to the Font's eyes for three hours. Indeed, when I removed them, I found them to be thoroughly silvered. I believe this presents an opportunity, as silver-impregnated cloth could hold the metal in a form more conducive to alchemical use. Under normal circumstances, an agent capable of dissolving silver is generally required to make it usable in formulae, which introduces extraneous chemicals. The right silvered, porous substance might just sidestep that.

**The supernatural applications of silver suggest other potential uses. Soaking a tunic with enough silver might deter certain lycanthropes, though perhaps only after the first bite. I could also see fools trying to bandage werewolf bites with silvered cloth, though by that point, it would be too late. While most whips wouldn't be of a suitable material, whips made of woven fibers, as opposed to leather, could perhaps be impregnated with silver in sufficient quantities to harm werewolves. Still, it would be more of a novelty item than an**

**effective weapon, and too much silver could stiffen it undesirably.**

I also weighed the head again, to see if secreting silver caused any fluctuation. There was no change.

September 19th, 754 BC

Most of today was spent creating a mold of the Font. The most exacting part of the process was affixing large, sturdy vents around its eyes, so the silver could escape without compromising the mold. The Font was upright in the mold, with the vents leading upward at an angle, causing accumulation of silver fluid until the level rose beyond the tops of the vents, spilling rapidly solidifying drops over the edge.

It occurred to me that this may present an effective way to use the Font to cast silver. While pouring from above would be unlikely to work, since any drops that lost contact with the Font would solidify separately from the rest of the material, filling a mold from the bottom up ensures continuity of the silver mass.

Once the mold was finished and the Font was removed, the voids from the vents had to be addressed. I elected to fill them in entirely, which resulted in the mold creating a replica with blank spaces for eyes. To remedy this, I took a quick impression of the Font's eyes in clay—quick enough that no tears were shed in the process—and cast replica eyes that could be affixed to the blank spots. With minimal scraping and patching, I had a decent, if lightweight, copy of the Font.

I had the replica sent off to Neufurchtenburg, where a stone carver I know will create a more accurate replica out of basalt. With this in hand, I ought to be able to compare balance and distribution of weight to see if the Font is truly solid rock, or if it possesses a non-uniform density. That could indicate formations within that could perhaps be responsible for its abilities.

September 29th, 754 BC

I received the basalt replica today. In the interim between placing my order and having it completed, I constructed an intricate device for affixing the Font between two revolvable rods, giving it a fixed axis of rotation. This enabled me to test its moment of inertia through multiple axes, then compare it against the replica. So far as I can tell, the two are the same, suggesting that the Font is indeed of uniform density.

The problem of how a rock can weep is becoming no more comprehensible. One might think that it consists of a special sort of basalt which causes metals to condense from the air upon it, but that begs the question of why the whole surface doesn't weep silver. A source inside seems more intuitive, but a source that does not throw off the Font's center of mass, nor cause it to become lighter when it weeps, is more perplexing. A deeper investigation is warranted.

Indeed, but deeper in a way Hauptschrei did not consider. I used magic to peer into the Ethereal Plane, where I noticed that the Font is constantly cloaked in low-grade resonance, with the particular tint of sorrow. Pain too, but perhaps that was Hauptschrei's doing. It could be that the Font has some capacity to feel, or that facsimiles of sorrow and pain are a byproduct of its magic. Watching for a while, I noticed that the resonant sorrow peaked in intensity right before tears manifested, as though producing silver is cathartic for the Font. This does not necessarily mean that it has the capacity to convert emotional energy into material, but it is a distinct and not unreasonable possibility.

September 30th, 754 BC

First, I took my chisel to the right ocular orbit, slowly chipping out the stone eye of the Font. There was a transient uptick in weeping during the chiseling, but it did not persist, particularly not in that eye, which did not weep at all after being removed.

I cut deeper and deeper into the head, looking for channels and reservoirs in the interior, but finding nothing of the sort. Silver continued to leak from the intact eye, but nothing came from the widening hole. With a chunk of cheek, one of temple, and another of hair all separated from the mass, I had to conclude that no deeper structure was present—at least none visible to the unaided eye.

I turned back to the removed eye and clove it in two, hoping to see some structure nearer to the site of the weeping, but again I was met with solid, undifferentiated rock. I put all of the chunks under a magnifying glass, then under a microscope, but still nothing presented itself. That I cannot identify the mechanism by which the Font produces silver is extraordinarily vexing.

I shall be consigning the Font to my vaults for a while. I have other objects to catalog and need more time to consider new angles of experimentation.

Grotesquely wanton as Hauptschrei's breaking of the Font was, it did provide one interesting insight. In my experience, victims of petrification do not look like plain rock inside; there is subtle variation in the stone due to differences in how certain tissues morph in the process. Similarly, if one attempts to un-petrify a stone carving of a person, one does not get a regular corpse, but a slab of solid, boneless meat, without regular muscular organization.

While it is possible that the Font was a person afflicted by a variation on standard petrification magic—perhaps a spell designed to foil reversal attempts—I am inclined to think that it was indeed carved. Why something that has never been alive weeps is not clear, but objects gaining some semblance of life are not unheard of either, usually because such tales have dark endings that are readily taken up by the rumor mill.

## EVERSTONE CONDEMNATION

### Transmutation

**Level:** Sor/Wiz 7

**Components:** V, S, M

**Casting Time:** 1 standard action

**Range:** Touch

**Target:** One creature

**Duration:** Instantaneous

**Saving Throw:** Fortitude negates

**Spell Resistance:** Yes

*Holding the stone heart aloft in one hand, you reach out and touch the chest of your foe. Under your fingers, his flesh calcifies, turning a terrifyingly final shade of gray. The heart disintegrates, its dust swirling through the air and entering his ears, eyes, nose, and mouth, which begin to harden as well. The stone that spreads from your fingers meets the rocky death mask growing across his face, and you know that his allies will be in for a terrible surprise should they try to undo your dread magic.*

This spell functions like *flesh to stone*, except as noted here. A creature petrified by this spell has its insides turned to solid, uniform stone, as opposed to preserving its organs and bone structure. If the target receives a *stone to flesh* spell or similar effect, its unpetrified body is a skinned-over slab of unstructured musculature, which dies immediately.

Seeing the unpetrified subject—its limbs bonelessly curled, its eyes red orbs of muscle—requires a DC 15 Horror save (and the one who reverses the petrification is likely to suffer a –4 penalty to the save due to being “inadvertently responsible for the scene”).

A *wish* or *miracle* can form the petrified subject’s insides into the proper structures to allow it to possibly survive turning back to flesh (subject to the same chance of death as described in the *stone to flesh* spell). In principle, lesser effects that can sculpt the stone of the petrified subject could render its return to flesh survivable, but the fine detail required (not to mention the necessary understanding of the

composition of stone found in a petrified creature) is extremely prohibitive.

*Material Component:* A stone heart chiseled out of a petrified creature, which cannot have been turned back to flesh since the extraction of its heart.

Once I was finished confirming Hauptschrei’s observations of the interior, I set about trying to repair his damage. There are spells to meld broken stone so that it is whole again, and though such magic generally does not restore enchantments lost to damage, I think the magic of the Font would have been strong enough to heal once the physical damage was gone. However, I decided to attempt something of greater personal significance.

Taking a new, complete mold of Hauptschrei’s replica, I added a vent around the left eye to divert toward the damaged one, then sealed the Font—with the removed chunks in their original positions—upside down within. This forced the tears of the intact eye to flow into the fractures as they built up. Once all of the cracks were filled, I once more swathed the Font in dead magic, solidifying the silver. Once the mold was stripped away and the excess silver from the vent was filed off, the Font was whole again, with a large silver scar through the right side of its face holding it together. It resembled a silver version of the Rokuma technique of *kintsugi*, repairing broken items with gold lacquer.

As I waited to see what would happen, I gazed again into the Ethereal Plane, where the pained resonance was subsiding. Though the sorrow remained, something resembling gratitude rose to greet me. Again, I cannot say with certainty that the Font truly feels, but it is hard not to believe that it does. Its face, fixed in eternal despair, did not register this gratitude, but it did give me a sign that I had done the right thing: a silver teardrop from the repaired right eye.

Soon after, I packed up the Font and sent it safely away. I knew a miser in Martira Bay that would



keep it protected until I had need of it again. Some say that any who enrich themselves with the tears of the Font will meet a terrible fate, and while the record of prior owners is far from clear enough to conclusively indicate the presence of a curse, I elected to distance myself from the object as soon as possible.

After all, I don't want to end up dead, like Hauptschrei.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: HIGH MAGIC BROUGHT LOW

Most deaths attributed to the *Font* are readily explained by greed—a source of endless wealth attracts some of the most ruthless people, many of whom would readily kill to possess it. Some others were mere happenstance or rumor, and there are a few people who have profited from ownership of the Font and not died for their fortune.

However, there are indeed some poor souls whose deaths can be attributed to the supernatural nature of the *Font*. Being in its presence creates a sort of feedback between its ethereal resonance and one's own, destabilizing one's emotions. After a week of fairly regular interaction with the *Font* (such as checking it every day to collect silver), a character must make a DC 20 Madness save. At the DM's discretion, this save could happen sooner if there is extensive interaction, such as spending hours each day experimenting upon the *Font*. If the character gets a minor Madness effect, they should receive the Horrified effect, with either the Obsession or Enraged moderate Horror effect conferred. If the character gets a moderate Madness effect, they should receive Depression or Paranoia. If they get a major Madness effect, they should receive Suicidal Thoughts.

Where then did the *Font* and its curse come from? Why do divinations fail to trace its history fully? Might the elves of Darkon know its secrets? In fact, they do not, for though the *Font* was stolen in Darkon, the elves who carried it hailed from elsewhere.

They were confused and frightened when they emerged from the Mists, refugees unprepared for opportunistic human marauders. Their former home had sheltered them, allowing no external danger to threaten their lives, no prying eye to glimpse their secrets, and no misery to pierce their minds. This is what the mage Viistaros forged for them with his high magic.

Once an elf of Faerûn, Viistaros was himself a refugee from the lost city of Myth Lharast. To his mind, the fall had come from within, when corrupt forces in the city itself twisted its mythal and erupted into conflict, making the city vulnerable to invaders and bringing down the judgment of Selûne. He wanted to make an eternal haven, and studied the abjorative arts necessary to make the strongest of wards. With his knowledge and his force of personality, he gathered several high mages to him, and set about weaving a mythal of his own.

Viistaros' masterpiece could repel the strongest invaders and foil the greatest divinations—even spells of a less direct, more esoteric nature, such as *legend lore* and *vision*—but that was practically a side effect in the mind of Viistaros. He knew that rot from within could spoil his brilliant dream, so he designed his ward to protect its people from themselves. Within his mythal, negative emotions were sublimated by magic, their energy transformed into precious metals which could be used to provide for the people, leaving them incapable of anything but contentment. Statues across the city wept, bled, and otherwise secreted copper, silver, gold, and platinum spun from their stolen woes.



The city of Myth Viistar prospered in this way for a while, but doom always follows oppression. Cutting out a large chunk of the citizens' emotional range caused the newest generations—born without understanding of fear, sorrow, and suffering—to develop strange tastes, unfettered by prior moral traditions. This drift worried Viistaros, not due to fearing a destructive schism—his mythal prevented the spread of unease and kept society from splintering as the younger elves became more and more detached—but due to concern that the eternal society he had made would cease to preserve the great elven culture he valued. Though he was loath to alter his mythal, lest the magic be corrupted or weakened in the process, he began to investigate it, looking to understand how it might be safely adjusted if the need truly arose.

To his horror, Viistaros found a terrible flaw in the course of his examinations. The rate at which emotions were dissipated from the mythal was not commensurate with the rate of absorption, and a buildup of dark feelings threatened to burst the great ward's seams. In dire need of a way to bleed off the excess, Viistaros gathered the other high mages of Myth Viistar to try and vent the excess energy in a controlled way. The task, however, was too much for them, and when they lost control, the vast flux of power tore Myth Viistar from the face of Faerûn, launching it into the Mists.

In the Mists, where emotions resonate strongly with the Border Ethereal, the torrent of emotions loosed from the adaptive, nearly sentient mythal reacted with the material of that ephemeral plane to birth a phantasmagorum, a malevolent spirit of the land that feeds on fear and tales of horror. Viistaros awoke, the only survivor among the high mages, and discovered that the mythal and the phantasmagorum had fused into one entity, a beast that was now starving. Where the spinning of metal from sorrow had been insufficient to keep the mythal in equilibrium, the leaking rifts the high mages had torn in the ward now threatened to deprive the phantasmagorum of sustenance and collapse Viistaros' greatest accomplishment.

Unwilling to admit that his experiment was a failure, unable to bring himself to collapse his corrupted mythal and free his people from imprisonment within the deranged phantasmagorum, Viistaros seeks to buy himself time to repair his creation, which he does by feeding the beast. With his powerful magic, he draws new victims from far and wide into Myth Viistar, where the phantasmagorum torments them.

Few have escaped from Myth Viistar, largely because the magic of the mythal makes it difficult to find the motivation to do so, even in the face of psychological abuse by the spirit of the city itself. As the phantasmagorum starves and the magic warps further, more of the older elves begin to see the hell that their savior has wrought, and the most confident among them have been taking flight. These were the elves that arrived in Darkon, carrying a fragmented keepsake of their old home that itself carried a fragment of the metal-making magic of the tainted mythal.

Perhaps *stone tell* could cause the *Font* to reveal its true origin, but only a greedy fool would seek out Myth Viistar. Visitors to the cursed city would return forever changed—if indeed they returned at all.



# G'HENNA, SURVEY OF A STARVING LAND

BY IAN FORDAM

## Introduction

We all know about G'Henna. It was a barren land. It was ruled by the mad priest of a god of hunger. He transformed heretics into beasts. Ever since the Great Upheaval, the land has been lost to the Mists.

—Except that G'Henna is not entirely barren.

—Except that Lord Petrovna turns anyone into beasts, not just heretics.

—And if Lord Petrovna is mad, then he has imposed his madness upon the entire land. Yet I, for one, don't believe he actually is. I think he is insidiously cruel. After you read about my encounter with him in the attached report, I suspect you will agree.

However, G'Henna actually *has* been lost to the Mists, and may it stay there, far from civilized people.

One stormy night when I was exploring the Fertile Valley, I ran across three men who invited me to take shelter in their cottage. Naturally I was wary, because something about the Ivitsavich brothers struck me as dangerous. However, they had me outnumbered and they had me surrounded and, besides that, I wanted a chance to dry off. Despite my concern—I'm not certain that I slept at all that night—the only time I felt truly threatened was when they thought I was making eyes at their younger sister. You know I have good instincts, and my

instincts told me that the Ivitsaviches were probably lycanthropes. Nonetheless they proved to be fair hosts, and we parted the next morning on good terms.

The worst dangers in G'Henna aren't the monsters in the Outlands, although there are dangerous monsters in the Outlands. No, the worst threats in G'Henna are the people and what they do to each other.

*Jaro Morys*

Dervich, late summer, 745BC

## AUTHORIAL INTENTION

The adventure module *Circle of Darkness* provides the most complete canon description of G'Henna yet published. This survey describes G'Henna as it existed prior to the events of that module. Although *Circle of Darkness* presents many intriguing adventure hooks, this survey does not attempt to repeat them all. The author trusts that the reader's time is better spent reading material which extends the original source.

For that matter, this survey also builds upon material published as "Scenes from a Starving Land" and "Secrets of a Starving Land" in *Quoth the Raven* Issues 28 and 29. I repeat myself only where I expand or revise the original articles.

## ZHAKATA THE BEAST GOD

I've never written a formal report before. I don't really know how to do it properly, so I'm just going to write it in a way that makes sense to me.

This is G'Henna, so I'm going to start with the Beast God, **Zhakata**, who stands at the center of it all, right alongside **Yagno Petrovna**, his prophet. Although the Beast God was once known in two aspects, the **Devourer** and the **Provider**, nowadays worship of the Provider is considered to be heresy. Zhakata is now the Devourer alone. Although I have noticed that G'Hennans still swear by both "Zhakata's Teeth" and "Zhakata's Mercy", only the Teeth are in evidence.

The Devourer's foremost tenet is that *starvation is sacred*. All food must be given to the Beast God ("Zhakata's Taking"). Fortunately for all of G'Henna, Zhakata deigns to give some back ("Zhakata's Dole"). The Taking occurs every dawn, and the Dole occurs every dusk (except on fasting days). During the Dole, the remaining food is distributed according to the worthiness of its recipients, as decided by the Church. The priests of the Church are considered most worthy, of course, followed by the Swords of Zhakata. (More about them later.) The common citizens of G'Henna come last, and so they receive the dregs, which are still much better than nothing.

To enforce the rituals of the Taking and the Dole, the buying or selling of food is considered heresy. (Heresies are taken very seriously in G'Henna, which may be why there are so many of them.) There are, however, notable exceptions. In this regard spices are not considered food, nor are alcoholic drinks, although a share of both are expected to be surrendered for the Taking. Apparently Zhakata likes his wine and his beer, or maybe it's just his priests who do. Most importantly, water is never forbidden.

The Church declares frequent fasting days. On these days, the Dole of Zhakata is not held, and no food is allowed to be consumed from dusk until the following dusk. (Nursing mothers and children too

young to have a proper name are exempt.) Lord Petrovna has declared that every third day shall be a fasting day, and he expects that the faithful outside of Zhukar will adhere to this pattern as well. However, the High Priest of Zhakata in Dervich, a man named **Deza Cozma**, declares fasting days seemingly at random, and he is despised by everybody in his city for this frivolous display of power.

As a consequence of the local attitude towards food, obesity is considered blasphemous. The G'Hennan definition of obesity is very broad, encompassing what we Darkonians would call "well fed". As with most matters of the Beast God's faith, enforcement grows more lax away from Zhukar. The most prosperous merchants of the northern city are quietly proud of their "Dervich bellies". Even in Zhukar, though, the most notorious brothel in the city is Hildegarda's, where the staff are all plump, even by foreign standards. Rather than being targeted by the Church of Zhakata, Hildegarda's is apparently very popular with the priests. (Everybody is tempted by what is forbidden, after all, and nobody in G'Henna is truly surprised by the priests' hypocrisy.)

There are two things to understand about the worship of G'Henna. First, what I have just described is the doctrine as broadly practiced in the capital city of Zhukar. However, the practice varies—sometimes greatly—as you get further away from the capital. Second, most of the people of G'Henna actually do believe in Zhakata, as preposterous as that sounds to the rest of us. Not only do they attend services and surrender their food, but they sincerely believe that their hunger is something holy, that it somehow appeases the Beast God. Even among the people of the Outlands, even among those people whom I suspect to be therianthropes, their belief appears to be sincere.

To them, starvation truly is sacred.

Everything in G'Henna falls out from this.



## DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE FALSE GOD

The bitter irony at the heart of G'Henna is that Zhakata does not exist. The spells and granted abilities of Zhakata's priests and paladins are provided by the Dark Powers.

As a young boy in the back woods of Barovia, Yagno Petrovna was regularly tormented by his older brothers for his feebleness and sickly constitution. One night his brother **Yoshtoi** locked him out of the family house, forcing him to spend the night in the forest where, he believed, all manner of frightful and deadly beasts lurked. Young Yagno found a cave where he huddled in abject terror until exhaustion finally claimed him. When he awoke the next morning, he saw the word "Zhakata" scrawled upon the back wall of the cave. Although this word was nothing but a code word between two Vistani brothers, marking the cave as a safe place to sleep, Yagno Petrovna experienced a moment of enlightenment. Clearly Zhakata was a mighty god who had protected him from the beasts of the forest.

The sacrifices began shortly thereafter, although they went unnoticed until the year that Yoshtoi's corpse was found. A family retainer went missing some time afterward. Two shepherd children died by suicide (or so it appeared, although by then suspicions were rising). Eventually the Petrovnas caught Yagno just before he could sacrifice his nephew. Only then did they finally chase Yagno into the Mists.

Belief is a powerful force in Ravenloft. Under other circumstances, the widespread G'Hennan belief in Zhakata might grant the Beast God a certain measure of reality. However, the Dark Powers find Yagno Petrovna's doubt so much more satisfying because his faith has nothing real at its heart.

## DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE DIRE FATE OF MISSIONARIES

No other faiths have gained a foothold in G'Henna. Because the practice of other faiths is considered heresy by the Church of Zhakata, few G'Hennans are willing to risk losing their humanity by converting. Furthermore, foreigners who preach another faith with insufficient discretion will receive a visit from the Church and the Swords and perhaps even the Fangs.

The Church of Ezra has been more determined than most faiths. Even so, Yagno Petrovna stopped imprisoning missionaries and started sending them back to their homelands. They returned as emaciated husks preaching the word of Zhakata. However, even after Yagno Petrovna's supernatural *charm* had broken, these missionaries remained incapable of consuming enough food to regain their previous health. Before long the Church of Ezra insisted to its wardens that they leave G'Henna alone.

On the other hand, priests of Zhakata have fared no better when preaching outside of G'Henna. After all, if one does not already believe in Zhakata, then the Church has little to offer new converts. Those who have little are loathe to sacrifice what they do possess, and the same holds true for those who have plenty. Yagno Petrovna is generally considered the Mad Priest of G'Henna, and so why would anyone willingly follow his teachings?

That said, there are rumors of a site sacred to Zhakata which was established by G'Hennan refugees in the years prior to Severing. Details of the Bone Cathedral may be found in "Olerick's Colloquial Guides Presents..." (*Quoth the Raven* Issue 28, p.101).



## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

The Taking and the Dole of Zhakata are two of the most prevalent religious practices in G'Henna, and the fasting days are another, but of course they do not define the full extent of how the Beast God is worshiped.

### SACRIFICES OF STARVATION

When I say that starvation is sacred, I mean that very literally. Anyone who starves to death voluntarily is held in tremendous awe by the community. Their names are etched into stone monuments which decorate the various parks around Zhukar. Most importantly, their families continue to gain the deceased's share of the Dole, meaning that there's a little more food available for everybody in the family who didn't starve themselves. Judging from the lengthy list of names on the monuments, a significant number of people have chosen this path. (Or had this path chosen for them. I'm not convinced that all of these volunteers truly volunteered.)

In addition, those who starve themselves for the glory of Zhakata are memorialized in another, more gruesome way: Their skulls are cleaned and decorated and turned into drinking vessels, which G'Hennans call *guesting cups*. In Darkon drinking

from such a cup would be pleading for a haunting. In G'Henna it is considered an honor.

As a minimally less extreme form of this sacrifice, there are people who vow to go on a starvation pilgrimage, usually in a group of half a dozen or so. They say goodbye to their families, attend their own funerals, and then leave Zhukar forever. Apparently their names aren't carved into the monument stones, and obviously their skulls aren't fashioned into guesting cups. Yet the funerals of soon-to-be pilgrims are grand affairs indeed. The Church even provides a measure of food. Most importantly, though, their families thereafter gain the appropriate share of the Dole. Although I've heard of several popular pilgrimage destinations, most pilgrims travel across the Central Steppes and through the Jackal's Run. Well-to-do families may pool their money to hire guards to accompany a group of pilgrims. Poorer pilgrims travel alone, defenseless against the wilds of the Outlands. (Most pilgrims do not survive the trip. They simply make their sacrifice in ways other than starvation.) Some pilgrims stay briefly in Dervich, but others stay indefinitely, even though it's blasphemy to live after you've promised to die. Some pilgrims bypass Dervich altogether just to avoid the temptation of staying. Those who continue cross the Fertile Valley until they come to the Dale of Martyrs.

### Journal Entry — The Dale of Martyrs

The trail which runs through the Fertile Valley ends in a single, if sizable, fertile valley. If you didn't know it was in G'Henna, you might think it was a paradise, at least until you noticed that the profusion of off-white rocks and branches were in fact skeletons. Dozens of them. Hundreds, maybe. I didn't bother to count the skulls. As soon as I realized what I was seeing, I turned and started scrambling back up the slope.

My guide, Maja Nestrovski, dropped immediately into a defensive crouch. "What's wrong?" she hissed.

"Skeletons! Hundreds of skeletons!"

Concern turned to confusion. "Yes?"

"What if they animate? I'm not bad with a sword, but I can't fight through hundreds of those things."

She shook her head, but I could still see her smile. She was trying not to laugh at me. "They won't animate. This is the Dale of Martyrs. Where the faithful come to starve themselves in Zhakata's honor. Willingly."

"They aren't restless?"

She shook her head again.

And she told me of pilgrims, usually from Zhukar, who journey to some holy site, and there they give themselves in sacrifice to the Beast God. Many such pilgrims cross the Fertile Valley, just as I did, until they come to the Dale of Martyrs.

"And they just sit down quietly and starve themselves to death?"

"Some of them chant prayers to the Beast God while they die."

"That sounds hideous."

From the expression upon Maja's face I learned that not every G'Hennan is fully devoted to the Devourer. "It is," she admitted, so softly that nobody but she and I and the restful dead could hear.

## FUNERAL CUSTOMS

According to G'Hennan tradition, every corpse is wrapped in a shroud, and whenever possible the family and friends of the deceased guard the body for two days before abandoning it to Zhakata's mercy. However, most of the other funeral details vary based upon region and social class.

Upper-class citizens of Zhukar—the priests, primarily, but also those whom the priests favor—are laid to rest in the catacombs beneath the city. The most honored citizens are mummified before being laid to rest; in Zhukar, mummification is a process designed less to preserve the body than to make it unpalatable to ghouls and other, more natural carrion-eaters.

The corpses of the poor in Zhukar are carried to a designated place in the city's parks, where gangs of criminals collect the bodies and cart them out into the mud flats. Burial in the mud flats is a very poor burial indeed, but the people of Zhukar prefer it to exposure in the Outlands.

Because the rising water table in springtime would cause tunnels to collapse, the ground beneath Dervich is not suitable for the construction of catacombs. High-ranking priests are placed in a niche in the Mausoleum behind Serghei's Temple. For others, burial in a cemetery outside the city is the most common way to lay someone to rest. The

wealthy have private lands set aside, but most citizens of Dervich are interred in one of several public cemeteries. Grave markers are not used.

In the Outlands, burial is reserved for only the most honored among the deceased. After all, burying someone deeply enough to avoid predators requires tools, and tools are precious. Most commonly, bodies are left exposed, laid out in a traditional way to indicate the deceased's acceptance of Zhakata's mercy. When possible, bodies are placed upon a mesa or other geological structure, making the carrion more accessible to birds, rather than ground-dwelling creatures.

## THE AFTERLIFE

According to the tenets of Zhakata, those who die having appeased the Devourer will spend the rest of eternity at **Zhakata's Feast**. They will be able to eat to their hearts' content, the sacrifices which they made in life returned unto them tenfold.

Those who do not will be stranded forever in the **Barren Fields**. Having seen G'Henna in the late summer, I cannot conceive how its people imagine the Barren Fields could be worse. Perhaps the ghosts of the unfaithful grow ever hungrier but, being dead, never die of starvation.



## ATTITUDES TOWARDS MAGIC

Arcane magic is forbidden without express approval of the Church of Zhakata, which requires a substantial donation to the Church. Which is to say, a bribe.

Despite the Church's official stance against arcane magic, Yagno Petrovna himself is fascinated by its

potential, as illustrated by his willingness to follow the Master of the House of Bones into the Badlands in 720BC.

Clerical magic, unless cast by a priest of Zhakata the Devourer, is absolutely considered heresy by the Church.

## DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE PETTY DEAD

Just because mummification in Zhukar isn't usually intended to preserve the bodies doesn't mean that the ancient dead don't occasionally arise. Consider the case of **Danko Miron**, a priest of the Will of Zhakata, who held a coveted position within the courts of judgment. Knowing that the competition among high-ranking priests often grows murderous, Danko Miron made contingency plans accordingly. He instructed his minions to embalm him upon his death, but not according to the traditional methods. Instead, they were to use a ritual which would allow him to rise as one of the ancient dead.

Danko Miron was killed. Danko Miron was reanimated. Now he gathers his forces to take revenge upon his rival. Assuming he knows which rival actually had him killed. He is fairly certain that he knows. And if he is wrong, what does it matter? All of his rivals deserve to die for plotting against him.

The return of Danko Miron might provide an opportunity for player characters to gain an ally within the Church, even if the ally in question paints Danko Miron's rising as a threat to all of the living rather than just an act of petty revenge.

## DREAD POSSIBILITY — CREATE FOOD AND WATER

An obvious solution to the problem of starvation in G'Henna is provided by the *create food and water* spell and similar magic items. However, the nature of G'Henna itself eventually interferes with such magics.

For every day that a spellcaster spends in G'Henna, there is a cumulative 10% chance that their effective level (for purposes of such spells only) will drop by 1. Checks only need to be made when the spell is actually cast. Once the caster's effective level has dropped, the cumulative chance is reset. When the caster's effective level eventually drops to 0, the spell utterly fails to function thereafter.

Magic items which create food and drink similarly lose power. For items with effects specified in terms of caster level, the effective caster level drops as described above. For other magic items, each failed check results in halving the amount of food and drink created.

## THE CREATION OF MONGrels

The final and most infamous of Zhakatan religious practices, though, would be Lord Petrovna's sermons. Lord Petrovna has decreed that every citizen of Zhukar gather in the Plaza of the Faithful to attend at least one sermon each week. From what

I've seen, most of them do, if not weekly then at least sometimes. I've read transcripts of several of the sermons, and I don't find them any more convincing than anything preached by the Zealots out of Nevuchar Springs. I had several people tell me that hearing Lord Petrovna speak in person would surely bring me into the fold, and that's why I've made it a



point to avoid the Temple District whenever he was preaching.

His words are not the source of the infamy of his sermons, though. No, when Lord Petrovna speaks from behind the **High Altar** atop the roof of the Temple, he often orders the Swords to drag a criminal before him. Lord Petrovna touches his victim (with a mere brush of his fingertips, I hear) and he *strips them of their dignity*. That's the euphemism which G'Hennans use to describe the transformation of someone from a human being into a mongrel. And then, depending upon the severity of the offense, Lord Petrovna might have the Swords hurl the criminal from the roof to the plaza below.

*Strip them of their dignity.* I've seen a number of mongrels by now, and the phrase is not altogether misplaced. Mongrels look like patchwork creatures, stitched together from three or four or a half dozen beasts. No actual stitches, though. The transformation is seamless. Most—but not all—of them remain roughly humanoid, but none of them could be readily mistaken for human. Many venture into the Outlands where they do not have to endure the presence of those who retain their so-called dignity, and where they can be more readily forgotten by their former family and friends. Mongrels are little more than beasts. That's the common wisdom anyway.

The corpses of mongrels pushed from the Temple are dragged to the mud flats and abandoned. If a mongrel happens to manifest wings and learn to fly mid-plummet, then obviously Zhakata has given them one last chance to return to proper worship. Those mongrels who are allowed to depart from the Temple less precipitously are officially shunned. Although they are not necessarily exiled from the city, the Inquisition does not look kindly upon any friend or relative who offers them succor. Mongrels survive by begging or by performing unpleasant tasks for meager pay. Many of them choose to depart the city. However, the worst of political dissidents are driven from the city. At first I was surprised to learn of this apparent mercy, but then I learned that Lord

Petrovna always offers a bounty for the dissident's head.

Exile has the same end result as being flung from the Temple, but the terror lasts longer for the victim.

How can people allow such a travesty? Because resisting the Prophet of Zhakata is heresy. And they all know what happens to heretics: They are stripped of their dignity and perhaps thrown from the roof of the Temple.

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY — MILUNKA ALBU AND LIVIU ZAITUC

During the Shapechanger Crusade, **Milunka Albu** disguised herself as a man and served as a soldier. **Petar Negrescu**, who later became the first Warder General of the Swords, accused her brother of plotting against Yagno Petrovna and had him executed. Milunka Albu bided her time and, years after the Crusade had ended, she found an opportunity to assassinate Petar Negrescu. Even after her actual gender was revealed, she was granted no clemency. She was stripped of her dignity and exiled to the Outlands. Rumor has it that she still lives, organizing the mongrels against the Swords.

Yagno Petrovna learned his lesson from allowing Milunka Albu to live. Consider **Liviu Zaituc**, who had been the High Priest in Dervich. After he killed Serghei Ojacarcu, he was brought back to Zhukar to be stripped of his dignity and exiled. His head was the first for which Yagno Petrovna offered a bounty.

#### CHURCH OF ZHAKATA

Having introduced the religion of G'Henna, I now turn my attention to the Church. You might think that religion and the Church belong in the same section, but one of my great revelations about G'Henna is that the two are only nominally related. I'm certain that some of the priests do truly worship the Devourer, but for the most part I suspect the clergy are atheists, particularly those who reach the

higher levels of the hierarchy. (Yagno Petrovna himself is an exception, but more on him later.) The appeal of the Church is twofold: food and power. I've already said that members of the Church get first (and therefore choicest) pick of the food from the Dole, and that's sufficient incentive for many people, especially those who belong to the lesser orders. However, for anyone who desires power, the only real path forward is through the Church. G'Henna is a theocracy, after all.

Nor does this atheism appear to offend Zhakata. All of his ordained priests manifest certain powers, most notably the Claws of Zhakata. Also significantly, priests are immune to the ill effects of another priest's granted abilities, which I am certain is the primary reason that advancement within the Church occurs most often via poison rather than via Claws. I've been told that in other lands priests' magic falters if their belief does, but in G'Henna the opposite may well hold true.

The most prominent branch of the Church is the **Will of Zhakata**, most commonly known as the **Inquisition**. They are the enforcers of doctrine and as such are the effective rulers of G'Henna. (Although the Chief Inquisitor answers to Lord Petrovna, the Prophet appears to give his Chief Inquisitor almost entirely free rein.) The Inquisition is feared by all other G'Hennans, including the other branches of the Church.

The current Chief Inquisitor is a man known only as **Rega**. He is rumored to be terribly hideous in appearance. So hideous, in fact, that I'm convinced he's not. His mononym is taken as a sign of his humility, setting aside his former family entirely in favor of the Church. More likely he had no former family, and now he is leveraging that lack for sympathy among the masses. This ploy does not appear to have worked. As Chief Inquisitor, Rega is still the most feared man in G'Henna.

However, I would be remiss if I did not mention **Jugo Hesketh**. He was one of Lord Petrovna's First Circle of disciples, and he outlived his other rivals to

become Lord Petrovna's most trusted companion. He held the title of Chief Inquisitor for twenty years before his disappearance and presumed death. My suspicion is that over the years he clandestinely accomplished much that Lord Petrovna would not have endorsed, but I also suspect that he restrained some of the worst of Lord Petrovna's impulses.

Ultimately all of the other orders within the Church are lesser orders:

- ❖ The **Heart of Zhakata** is the largest branch. Its members are responsible for interacting with the laity. In particular, they manage the Taking and the Dole. They handle the lesser sermons (that is, the ones not preached by Yagno Petrovna). They listen to the pleas of the faithful, and then, I suspect, they do nothing.
- ❖ The **Mind of Zhakata** operates the so-called University of Blessed Zhakata, which is closely tied to the Zhukar Library of Enlightenment.
- ❖ Junior priests comprise the **Voice of Zhakata**, serving as messengers for the Inquisition. Officially they have no power, but they do have the ear of the Inquisition, so it would be foolish to mistake them as powerless.
- ❖ The **Milk of Zhakata** operates the orphanages, which means they're in charge of the early indoctrination of the young. The individual priests and priestesses of the Milk have little power, but the order as a whole serves a crucial role in Lord Petrovna's rule of G'Henna.
- ❖ Since women are forbidden to serve in the Inquisition or the Mind, the branch known as the **Brides of Zhakata** provides a place way for pious women to serve Zhakata in quiet contemplation.
- ❖ The **Hands of Zhakata** were dedicated to Zhakata the Provider. However, after the Severing—which is what G'Hennans call the Great Upheaval—the Hands of Zhakata were declared apostate. Some of the Hands converted to other branches and gave up active worship of the Provider. Others fled Zhukar instead. Worship of the Provider is now

considered the worst of the heresies, and former Hands are treated with considerable skepticism.

*(Careful readers may have noticed by now that G'Hennans are supremely uncreative in their naming conventions.)*

I have just described the church hierarchy within Zhukar. A parallel hierarchy exists in Dervich, where **Deza Cozma** is the High Priest and **Ciorofor Vus** is the Chief Inquisitor. Apparently the High Priest in Dervich has almost always been someone appointed from Zhukar, as Deza Cozma was. However, Ciorofor Vus is native to Dervich, which I'm told is usual for the Chief Inquisitor. Here again, as with the Church and the Swords in Zhukar, Lord Petrovna seems to be positioning potential rivals against each other.

Although Lord Petrovna's title is the High Priest of Zhakata in Zhukar, he remains Deza Cozma's superior. After all, Yagno Petrovna is also the Prophet of Zhakata, and Deza Cozma is not.

## SWORDS AND FANGS

How does the Church of Zhakata stay in power? Part of the answer lies in Yagno Petrovna's horrific miracles and persuasive sermons. Part of the answer lies in the lesser, but still potentially deadly, magic which the priests of Zhakata wield. The rest of the answer lies in the **Swords of Zhakata**, particularly the **Fangs of Zhakata**.

The Swords of Zhakata are the army which supports the Church. Officially speaking, the Warder General of the Swords answers directly to Lord Petrovna and not to the Chief Inquisitor or anyone else in the Church hierarchy. This arrangement gives Lord Petrovna an army to use against the Church and a Church to use against the army, should such usage prove necessary. Nonetheless, the Swords have always supported the Church by enforcing its policies, and I found no record of any rift in any of the histories which I was shown. (Admittedly, these

histories were all Church histories, so I find that lack inconclusive.)

In Dervich the Swords are not kept as separate from the Church as they are in Zhukar. The Church and Swords are inclined to combine their strength against the Merchants' Guild.

G'Hennans have mixed reaction to the Swords. Most of them are envious of the fact that Swords have the second choice of food distributed during the Dole of Zhakata. Having a relative who serves as a Sword is considered good and useful. However, the Swords themselves are generally seen as bullies of varying degrees of competence. People fear the Swords nearly as much as they fear the priests, but there isn't the same reverence behind the fear. In fact, there appears to be a common undercurrent of disdain.

Based upon what I've seen, perhaps half of the Swords are mediocre soldiers. Their discipline is shaky, but at least they know how to use their weapons. On the other hand, a third of the Swords appear to deserve every bit of disdain which they quietly receive. They clearly serve for the food and the status alone, because they don't serve *well*. At the other extreme, the remainder of the Swords struck me as fully competent soldiers. The Warder General strikes me as one such. Also, Captain Anzya at Fort Grasu insists upon discipline, and her troops respond to her strictness with a loyalty which I hadn't noticed elsewhere among the Swords. Do not dismiss all Swords as incompetents.

The Swords serve in three broad ways. First, they comprise the city guard of both Zhukar and Dervich. Second, the Swords in Dervich prevent the factions of the Dervich Merchant's Guild from taking over the city with their private militias. Third, they patrol the Outlands, keeping the people safe from mongrels, kobolds, shape-changers, heretics, and other dangers. I get the impression that the Swords who are sent to the Outlands are more likely to be the competent Swords, although I cannot say for certain whether that's because the Warder General

purposely sends his best soldiers into the Outlands, or because Swords have to become better soldiers in order to survive for long out there.

However, no discussion of the Swords would be complete without a mention of the **Fangs of Zhakata**, who are the sacred champions of the Beast God. Unlike the other Swords, the Fangs are ordained members of the Church, which means that they are not vulnerable to certain priestly blessings such as the Claws of Zhakata. They also enjoy certain benefits of their own, including the ability to detect heresy, or so I have been told. Unlike the widespread atheism of the priests, one condition necessary to become a Fang of Zhakata appears to be faith. Personally I'm terrified by the notion of paladins of a god of starvation.

At any given time there are only two Fangs, the Senior and the Junior. The Senior Fang is always the Fang who has served longest between the two. If the Senior Fang dies, the Junior Fang becomes the Senior Fang. The Junior Fang answers to the Senior; the Senior Fang answers to the Warder General. Ostensibly this keeps the Fangs independent of Church politics.

Most of the people of G'Henna appear to live in awe of the Fangs of Zhakata. If anything, the only person they revere more highly is Lord Petrovna himself. Of course, Lord Petrovna has been alive much longer. Fangs of Zhakata often die quickly.

The first Fang was a young soldier named **Nicu Osovei**. He wielded the second of the three great artifacts of G'Henna, the **Sword of Nicu Osovei**. (I have already mentioned the G'Hennan lack of creativity in naming, yes?) Traditionally, the Senior Fang carries the Sword of Nicu Osovei, but over the years the sword has occasionally been lost and recovered.

## THE REALM

### GOVERNMENT

G'Henna is ruled by Yagno Petrovna, the Prophet and First Servant of Zhakata. Ultimately, he speaks the Word of Zhakata, and that Word is Law in G'Henna.

However, Lord Petrovna is more interested in theological matters than political, which means that the Church sets policy. In particular, because the Will of Zhakata—more commonly known as the Inquisition—is the most powerful branch of the Church, that means that the Chief Inquisitor oversees the governance of all of G'Henna.

The Swords of Zhakata enforce the decrees of the Church. The Swords are led by the Warder General. In addition to defending the Temple and its priests, the Swords also serve as the city guard and the army which patrols all of G'Henna.

Below the Church and the Swords is the civil government, which pays attention to the actual daily functioning of the city and the land. There is little glory in government work, but there is steady pay and a marginally greater share of the Dole.

Dervich has its own Church and its own Swords, and their structure is comparable to the Church and Swords out of Zhukar. In particular, the Swords out of Dervich are responsible for the protection of the Fertile Valley. However, Dervich is considered inferior to Zhukar in all things, and so its Church is considered subordinate to the Church in Zhukar, and its Swords are considered inferior to the Zhukar Swords. Most of the time Dervich is left to run itself, except that Lord Petrovna appoints the High Priest in Dervich and the Warder General as well. Once in a while trouble arises in Dervich, particularly from the Guild, but then Lord Petrovna ensures that the trouble is put down by those priests, Swords, and other citizens more loyal to Zhakata.

In Dervich, the civil government is smaller, but only because many of its functions are run via the **Dervich Merchants' Guild**. The Guild was in place before Lord



Petrovna arrived in G'Henna, and it ran the city until the course of the Shapechanger Crusade revealed how thoroughly therianthropes had infiltrated its ranks.

## LAW

Within G'Henna, laws fall into one of two categories. The most important ones are the Laws of Zhakata, that is, those laws which arise directly from the Church, particularly the sermons of Yagno Petrovna. All other laws are civil laws, less directly related to religious teachings. For example, matters of trade fall into the category of civil laws. Although civil laws are officially passed by bureaucrats outside the Church, they are never passed without the approval of the Inquisition.

A number of courts have been built in Zhukar and Dervich, scattered across the various districts to make them accessible. In these courts, members of the Inquisition serve as judges over matters of Church and civil law alike. They are aided by governmental functionaries who hold the title of judge, but really these so-called judges are just glorified clerks. The Inquisition makes the real judgments.

Punishments fall into three tiers. Minor crimes are punished with time spent in the stocks, which are a common feature in many public squares. Major crimes warrant imprisonment, either in the dungeons beneath the Temple of Zhakata (in Zhukar) or in the House of Reparations (in Dervich). In Zhukar, prisoners are often assigned to chain gangs ("work gangs") and tasked with labor such as shoring up the City of Bridges, driving the water wheels which lift water from the Drogach River to the aqueducts, or simply maintaining the city parks. In Dervich, the Merchants' Guild advocates against using work gangs, insisting that they take jobs from those who are willing to work. At the moment the Church seems inclined to humor them.

The worst crimes, of course, are crimes against the Church and the Law of Zhakata. They are punished by transformation or execution or both.

Unlike some realms, where the laws themselves change capriciously at the enforcer's whim, the laws in G'Henna—particularly the Church laws—are generally consistent. (Never mind Deza Cozma of Dervich and his arbitrary Fasting Days.) What varies is the severity of punishment for violation, although crimes against commoners are likely to be deemed minor and crimes against priests are likely to be deemed major. Transgressions against mongrels are often deemed not crimes at all.

Incidentally, the courts are also where foreigners must apply for a license to cast arcane magic within G'Henna.

## ECONOMY

Prior to the Great Upheaval, G'Henna benefited from its position at the center of the Core. Zhukar was well-positioned as a way station, and the entire Merchant District arose accordingly. In particular, G'Henna benefited from the availability of Falkovnian grain. Not only did it ensure that the priesthood remained well-fed throughout the Season of Zhakata's Banquet, but it also provided for a thriving Church-sponsored beer industry.

Even without grain from Falkovnia, the wide steppes of G'Henna still provide a surprising amount of wheat, corn, and oats, not to mention plenty of scrub grass for herd animals: horses, cattle, sheep, and goats. The Fertile Valley is well known for its vineyards, of course. Other common crops include turnips, beets, and potatoes. Because selling food is heresy, the Church reimburses the Merchants' Guild with food chits. (But food chits are *not* money. Ask anyone.) Granite and marble are quarried from the eastern face of the Hotath Mountains, and the foothills of the Pekkau Mountains yield granite as well. Precious metals are extracted from all three mountain ranges: iron and copper from beneath the Hotaths, iron and lead from the Blade Mountains,

and iron alone from the Pekkau range. Flax (or something close akin) grows throughout the mud flats east of Zhukar. Clay is bountiful along the Drogach River.

These raw materials must all be transformed into something useful. Wool becomes clothing. Leather becomes boots, pouches, belts, and straps. Iron is worked into tools and horseshoes and weaponry. Stone and clay become buildings and hideous statues of the Beast God. Common G'Hennans perform these daily transformations in exchange for food chits from the Church and actual coins from others who want to buy their finished goods. In the periods between meals and Lord Petrovna's sermons, a commoner's life in G'Henna has much in common with a commoner's life elsewhere.

The priests of Zhakata are at the very top of the economic pyramid. The soldiers of the Swords of Zhakata do not enjoy the same wealth, but still they do not lack for creature comforts.

Despite exorbitant taxes, many merchants remain prosperous, even after the Great Upheaval cut off their external trading partners. This is particularly true in Dervich because of the Merchants' Guild, but the Black Market makes this true in Zhukar as well, albeit for fewer people.

In the city of Zhukar, most families want to send their children to the University of Zhakata, hoping that they will be admitted to the priesthood and thus granted a life of greater privilege. There is also the belief that the families of acolytes are given preferential treatment during the Dole of Zhakata, although reality does not consistently support that belief. However, even if children are not accepted into the priesthood, perhaps they find occupation in the temple or, failing that, in the government district.

During my time in Zhukar, I stayed at a guesting house in the Merchant District, hoping that the presence of a Darkonian would draw less attention there. My hosts were a young couple who had inherited the guesting house from the wife's father

in more prosperous times. Their clothing was clean (for the most part), but faded and threadbare. Her skirt had been stitched together from at least two other skirts. His boots did not match. They were delighted to have my custom. One night I overheard them whispering a discussion about what to do with the meager profit they made after paying the Church for food chits to cover my meals. Should they buy new boots for him? Or a cradle for the baby they hoped to have soon? Or should they save to have the clay tiles of their roof repaired? Keep in mind that my hosts lived in the Merchant District, not the Old City, not the City of Bridges. They were not among the most destitute.

## DIPLOMACY

Ever since the Great Upheaval, G'Henna has been cut off from the other domains of Ravenloft. While we know that the Vintners' Faction of the Dervich Merchants' Guild has clandestine ties to certain Darkonian merchants via the Heretic's Egress, Yagno Petrovna and the Church of Zhakata have no official diplomatic ties with any other nation.

However, before the Great Upheaval, G'Henna had plenty of neighbors to interact with:

- ❖ The lack of nearby settlements or available roads prevented Darkon and G'Henna from requiring any official interaction. For the most part, G'Hennans saw Darkon as the place where all shapechangers had originated, and therefore it was distrusted.
- ❖ **Falkovnia** was G'Henna's primary trading partner despite an attempted invasion in 719BC. G'Henna imported grain and other foodstuffs, and it was a hub of trade with the eastern side of the Core.
- ❖ The Dilisnya Estate was very near the northern border of **Dorvinia**. However, if Ivan Dilisnya conducted any diplomacy with Yagno Petrovna, both sides were quiet about it. Markovia had no diplomatic ties with G'Henna (or anyone else).
- ❖ **Tepest** was G'Henna's secondary trading partner, even though most Tepestani found

most G'Hennans creepy. Both domains benefited from trade crossing between Falkovnia and Nova Vaasa.

- ❖ G'Henna had no diplomatic ties with **Keening**, given that everybody in Keening is dead.

## History

### THE ARRIVAL OF THE PROPHET

According to the people of G'Henna, in the days before Yagno Petrovna brought the revelation of Zhakata to their land, life was even darker than it is now, as difficult as that may be to believe. There was less food, and there was more danger, particularly in the form of shapechangers who preyed upon the people of G'Henna. The gods of G'Henna at that time were either powerless or uncaring, and they did not respond to the people's prayers.

And then, in 702BC, **Yagno Petrovna** arrived from the Mists, preaching the word of **Zhakata**. One of his first converts was **Jugo Hesketh**, who eventually became the first Chief Inquisitor of Petrovna's new church.

Until Yagno Petrovna and his **First Circle** arrived in Zhukar, G'Henna had been led by a dictator called **Domnitor Tchaushesku**. Tchaushesku was the first person Yagno Petrovna transformed into a mongrel. After that display, Yagno Petrovna declared himself the ruler of G'Henna.

### THE SHAPECHANGER CRUSADE

Also crucial in the early days of the church was **Serghei Ojacarcu**, who made the long and dangerous journey from Dervich to Zhukar to ask for the assistance of Petrovna and his church against the shapechangers plaguing Dervich.

Yagno Petrovna, with Jugo Hesketh and Serghei Ojacarcu at his side, recruited an army—the predecessor to the Swords of Zhakata—and marched northward. The power of Zhakata bound the shapechangers to partially-bestial forms, preventing them from infiltrating proper human society and

from accessing their most ferocious natural weaponry. Thus revealed, the shapechangers were slain or driven from the land. If any G'Hennans were uncomfortable that Zhakata the Devourer demanded the sacrifice of some of the shapechangers, they were also grateful for their freedom and the increase in bounty (slight though it was) brought by Zhakata the Provider.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE THREE DEMILORDS

When the Mists first brought Yagno Petrovna to the Outlands of G'Henna, Zhukar was ruled by **The Domnitor**, and Dervich was under the control of the Dervich Merchants' Guild, which was itself led by a cabal of therianthropes. The Domnitor was the first person whom Lord Petrovna turned into a mongrel.

Months later, Lord Petrovna marched to Dervich with a small army and revealed the cabal. While the Dervich Merchants' Guild survives to this day, its therianthropic leaders did not.

According to those knowledgeable few who have glimpsed the secret workings of the Land of Mists, the land of G'Henna may have been created without a single Darklord. Instead, Petrovna, the Domnitor, and the Head of the Guildmasters' Council may have started as three demilords, each possessing a lesser measure of power until one of them took full control of the domain.

That one, of course, was Yagno Petrovna.

### RASVAN REBELLION

While Yagno Petrovna and his army were away in Dervich for the Shapechanger Crusade, **Rasvan Ilie**—a former soldier for Domnitor Tchaushesku—led a rebellion against the priests of Zhakata who had been left behind.

When Yagno Petrovna and his army returned to Zhukar, they starved the city until its citizens turned against Rasvan Ilie and his supporters. Rasvan served



as Petrovna's mongrel jester for nine miserable years thereafter, and then the wretch finally died.

### PILGRIMAGE FOR THE PROVIDER

As part of the Shapechanger Crusade, Yagno Petrovna had gone north to Dervich. Three years after the completion of the Temple of Zhakata in Zhukar, Yagno Petrovna took a pilgrimage southward into the Outlands. He declared that since his northward trip had been in the service of the

Devourer, his southward trip would be in honor of the Provider. The people of Zhukar were excited but anxious, particularly since Yagno Petrovna insisted upon traveling unaccompanied except for a mysterious wizard who called himself **The Master**. Weeks later Yagno Petrovna returned, but alone. He did not speak of what happened in the south or what had become of the Master. He stopped preaching about the Provider, although that aspect was not declared heretical until 740BC.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE MASTER AND THE TALISMAN

The Master brought Yagno Petrovna to his lair in the Badlands. This lair, **The House of Bones**, was a complex built within the skeleton of some gigantic otherworldly beast. Before coming north to Zhukar, the Master had spent years in the House of Bones, studying planar lore, necromancy, and demonology. He wished to summon a fiend to do his bidding, but he was concerned that he lacked the strength to bind it properly.

The Master came north with his apprentices (who have been forgotten in the popular imagination, although their corpses yet remain in the House of Bones) and sought an audience with the High Priest of Zhakata. He convinced Lord Petrovna that they could work together to summon the aspect of Zhakata known as the Provider, bringing forth an era of prosperity. Lord Petrovna, secretly plagued by religious doubts, grasped at the opportunity to gain proof of Zhakata's existence.

The Master convinced Lord Petrovna that a focus would be needed, and so Lord Petrovna extracted a piece of the High Altar. This piece, subsequently known as **The Talisman**, allowed Lord Petrovna to carry a portion of the power of the High Altar with him (as Petrovna intended). With the Talisman at hand, Petrovna journeyed with the Master and his apprentices to the House of Bones. They scribed a pair of protective circles, and then they performed the summoning ritual.

The Master summoned a nalfeshnee tanar'ri, as he intended. The nalfeshnee looked much like the bestial depictions of Zhakata, but Petrovna was not fooled for long. For one thing, he suddenly grew blind to the Talisman, and its power was no longer his to command. For another, when he beseeched the fiend, calling it Zhakata and calling it the Provider, the fiend took terrible glee in informing him that Zhakata did not exist, not as the Provider, not as the Devourer, not in any aspect, anywhere.

Realizing that he had been duped, Yagno Petrovna stabbed the Master in the back, killing him. He took up the Talisman and fled via *word of recall*. He appeared at the High Altar and immediately fell unconscious; when he awakened, the Talisman was gone.

As of 750BC, the nalfeshnee remains imprisoned. Over the years he has managed to tear down the inner protective circle, the one created by the Master. The outer protective circle, which was created by Yagno Petrovna, yet remains. By draining the life of nearby vermin, the fiend has kept itself alive. It waits, patiently but furiously, for someone to come and release it.

See *Circle of Darkness* for full details.



## THE STARVING MARCH

In 719BC, Vlad Drakov of Falkovnia directed his troops to invade G'Henna. It did not go nearly as well as he had planned, of course. His troops encountered mongrels in the mountains. In the lowlands they encountered the Swords of Zhakata, led by both of the Fangs and supported by a significant number of priests. Mass starvation afflicted Drakov's soldiers, and they retreated.

## THE SEVERING

Many years later, the Great Upheaval cut off G'Henna from its former neighbors in the Core. The Church blames this upon the wrath of Zhakata the Devourer, of course. Yagno Petrovna had downplayed Zhakata the Provider ever since his pilgrimage to the south, but after the Great Upheaval, worship of the Provider officially became heresy.

Life in G'Henna has grown slowly but progressively more difficult. Although few people have noticed, the lands of the Fertile Valley have been producing less food. The winter of 743BC is known as the Winter of Dead Bees because every known hive in G'Henna died off. (Wild bees have not gone extinct, I noticed, but most G'Hennans don't realize this. It's still a bad situation regardless.)

## PEOPLE AND CULTURE

### CLOTHING AND FASHION

G'Hennans wear clothing. They do not have fashion.

The common people of G'Henna wear simple peasants' garb. Men wear homespun shirts and tunics. Depending upon their occupation, women might wear the same, or else they might wear long dresses. In nearly every case, the clothing is undyed and therefore colorless. Sometimes young women seeking husbands will purchase a bit of dyed cloth to signal their availability. The remnants of such

gestures can be seen in badly-faded kerchiefs and patches.

Within the Church, the clergy favor long robes with wide sleeves, much like the common Darkonian theatrical portrayal of a wizard. You can tell how highly a priest ranks by how much red his vestments contain. Only Lord Petrovna wears all red. The Chief Inquisitor, red with orange trim. Other high-up Inquisitors, orange with red trim. Lower ranks wear more yellow, and the lowest ranks—particularly orders other than the Inquisition and the Heart of Zhakata—wear white. When performing their sacred duties or otherwise being important, many priests wear headgear. The more elaborate the headgear, the higher-ranking the priest.

The Swords dress more plainly. Only the highest ranks, including the Fangs, have full uniforms. The middle ranks wear tunics. The lowest ranks wear armbands and hoods. As with the priesthood, the uniform, hood, or armband may be trimmed with red, orange, or yellow depending upon the rank of the wearer. However, the majority of a Sword's uniform is dyed black, a tradition adopted from the soldiers of the Domnitor.

### LANGUAGE

Balok is spoken by all citizens of G'Henna. Many older citizens also speak Falkovnian or Tepestani. Some merchants in Dervich still speak Darkonese.

G'Hennans recognize three accents: those spoken in Zhukar, Dervich, and the Outlands. In truth there are a number of different accents found across the Outlands, but they all get lumped together in the minds of city-dwellers. In addition, G'Hennans who remember the days before the Severing would also recognize the differences in accent as Balok is spoken in Barovia, Borca, or elsewhere in the Core. Oddly, Lord Petrovna himself speaks Balok with an accent which sounds very Barovian to my ear.

For the most part, Balok as written in G'Henna is very similar to how Balok is written in Barovia. The most significant difference I have noticed is that G'Hennans pronounce *ei* as a long *i*, not as a long *a*.

*See table next page*

## NAMES

Men's given names frequently end in either *-n* or *-r*. Otherwise, many end in a vowel, most commonly *-u* or *-o*, although *-a* and *-ei* also occur frequently. (G'Hennans consider *-aw* a vowel, pronounced slightly more drawn out than the similar vowel diphthong *-au*.) Otherwise, *-k*, *-l*, *-s*, *-sh*, and *-v* are all reasonably common endings. However, any number of other endings occur as well, just less often.

Women's given names are much more constrained. Most women's names end in *-a*, although sometimes *-i* or *-n* are used, instead.

In Zhukar, surnames tend to follow the same patterns as given names; the suffices *-vna* and *-vnaya* (meaning "son of" or "daughter of") have been dropped over time. Not so in Dervich, where many surnames still end with *-vich* or even *-ski*. In both cases, most surnames arose as patronyms, but have become family names instead.

Proper surnames are a sign of social status. Most priests have one, as do most prosperous merchants and the most important officials in the civic end of government. In Dervich, the highest-ranking members of the Guild also use surnames. In some cases (most notably the Chief Inquisitor calling himself simply **Rega**), powerful people demonstrate their supposed humility by abandoning the use of their surnames.

In cases where differentiation is necessary, G'Hennans still use patronymics and matronymics. This is particularly true in the Outlands, where surnames are almost never used.

All across G'Henna, someone with a surname is called by their given name alone only by their family and closest friends. In Zhukar and throughout the

Outlands, the convention is to string together given names and surnames as if they were a single name. For example, the first Fang of Zhakata is almost always referred to as *Nicu Osovei*, not *Nicu*, not *Osovei*. However, in Dervich the convention is to use the surname alone, specifying a given name only to distinguish among members of the same family.

Given the high mortality rate in G'Henna, children are not given formal names until their sixth birthday. They are called *bebelus* (or *bebela*) for their first year, and then they are called *unu*, *doi*, *trei*, *patru*, and *cinci* for subsequent years.

Formally speaking, the title *Lord* is reserved for Yagno Petrovna, the Chief Inquisitor, and the Warder General. In practice, anyone occupying a higher position in the church, military, or civil hierarchy is addressed as *Lord* or *Lady*. When addressing someone outside the hierarchy, *domnul* and *doamna* are used to indicate respect. Young women are sometimes addressed as *domnisoara*.

## GUESTING HOUSES

In G'Henna, *guesting houses* take the place of more familiar inns and taverns. However, selling food in G'Henna is both blasphemous and illegal, which impacts how guesting houses operate.

Those guesting houses which operate as inns are not much different from inns found elsewhere. Food cannot be purchased there, of course, but on non-Fasting Days the Dole of Zhakata provides each guest with additional shares based upon the current occupancy at their houses. (Those guests who tithe well to the Church are less likely to have their claims double-checked by the Inquisition.)

However, those guesting houses which operate as taverns must still abide by the Word of Zhakata. By Church decree, they must have at least one room for rent, but often they have only a single such room, very small, often tucked away under the eaves, perhaps already filled with household clutter instead of a bed. These rooms are rented for surprisingly cheap rates, no more than the cost of a drink, and

the first drink is usually on the house with the renting of the room. Sometimes free food is given out with the liquor, but in such cases the room's rent is more expensive. (Tithes to the Church aren't cheap.)

In addition to guesting houses, several enterprising merchants in Zhukar have opened exclusive social

clubs. For the price of a monthly fee (usually quite expensive), members are allowed to visit the social club any time during operating hours. Food and drink are offered for free, of course. Generally, these social clubs are available only to priests or Swords or their paramours.

## G'HEHNA PRONUNCIATION

Letter(s)	Sound	Example
a (terminal)	<i>u</i> in <i>fun</i>	Deshka
a (non-terminal)	<i>o</i> in <i>on</i>	Bajro
ah	<i>a</i> in <i>water</i>	Wahrg
ai	<i>i</i> in <i>hi</i>	Mihail
aj (Dervich)	<i>iy</i> in <i>hiya</i>	Pajich
au	<i>ow</i> in <i>how</i>	Tchaushesku
aw	<i>aw</i> in <i>saw</i>	Gimgraw
c	<i>k</i> in <i>take</i>	Constanta
ch	<i>ch</i> in <i>chip</i>	Savich
ci	<i>chi</i> in <i>chip</i>	Ciprian
dj	<i>j</i> in <i>judge</i>	Djordjevich
e (terminal)	<b>silent</b>	Tvoshe
e (non-terminal)	<i>e</i> in <i>pet</i>	Melko
ea	<i>ea</i> in <i>Berea</i>	Florea
ee	<i>ee</i> in <i>seek</i>	Franeek
ei	<i>i</i> in <i>hi</i>	Serghei
ez	<i>aze</i> in <i>haze</i>	Deza
g	<i>g</i> in <i>give</i>	Gimgraw
i	<i>ee</i> in <i>see</i>	Palosti
j (Zhukar)	<i>g</i> in <i>genre</i>	Jugo
j (Dervich)	<i>y</i> in <i>yes</i>	Ljubitsa
k	<i>k</i> in <i>take</i>	Kazimir
o	<i>o</i> in <i>go</i>	Garko
oi	<i>oy</i> in <i>toy</i>	Yoshtoi
ou	<i>oo</i> in <i>food</i>	Lacousto
q	<b>unused</b>	—
s	<i>s</i> in <i>see</i>	Grasu
sh	<i>sh</i> in <i>shush</i>	Bolsh
tch	<i>tch</i> in <i>hatch</i>	Petchko
tv	<i>t</i> and then <i>v</i>	Tvoshe
u	<i>oo</i> in <i>food</i>	Enescu
v	<i>v</i> in <i>have</i>	Vancho
w	<i>w</i> in <i>wax</i>	Wahrg
x	<i>x</i> in <i>fox</i>	Ruxandra
y (consonant)	<i>y</i> in <i>yes</i>	Yagno
y (vowel)	<i>i</i> in <i>hi</i>	Kydi
z	<i>z</i> in <i>zoo</i>	Zajec
zh	<i>z</i> in <i>azure</i>	Nadezhda
zm	<i>zm</i> in <i>hazmat</i>	Zmago

Most of the guesting houses in Dervich target a specific clientèle. There exist guesting houses for priests and others for Swords. There are guesting houses for each faction of the Merchants' Guild. Common laborers—those who are too lowly to have a position in the Guild—have their guesting houses, as do civil servants. Such guesting houses are eager to maintain a safe place for their preferred clientèle, and so they are willing to politely direct strangers to a more appropriate place.

However, certain guesting houses make their living by explicitly allowing patrons from all paths of life. These houses serve as neutral zones so that, for example, members of the Vintners might settle a dispute with members of the Farmers. Sometimes conflicts between the Guild and the Church might be settled there as well. Naturally, these houses also serve foreigners who might not have aligned themselves with a recognized faction of G'Hennan society. In such places one may speak one's opinion freely, I am told, but personally I would still avoid criticizing either Zhakata or his Prophet.

In Zhukar, those guesting houses which serve as taverns are usually patronized by residents of the immediate neighborhood. Given the social clustering of the neighborhoods of Zhukar, the overall effect is much the same as in Dervich, but the guesting houses of Zhukar are more insular. Outside of the Merchant District, foreigners will often be actively shunned.

### BEER, WINE, AND LIQUOR

G'Henna was once known for its high-quality beer. However, since the Severing cut off G'Hennan contact with Falkovnia, wheat has been in short supply. The only breweries remaining in G'Henna, both based in Zhukar, are owned by the Church, and only their lees are available to the common people.

The Fertile Valley is known for producing some excellent wines, known throughout the Land of the Mists as "G'Hennan red", in most of G'Henna as

"Dervich red", and in Dervich as "wine". G'Hennan red is even more highly valued than G'Hennan beer.

Given the rarity of beer and wine, most G'Hennans drink liquor. The most common are whiskey (particularly in the north) and a plum brandy called *tsuika*. Brandies made from other fruits are called *rachiu*. The most far-flung villages typically distill alcohol from sugar beets, which they call *coniac de sfecla*.

### ARTS

Unsurprisingly, most of the art produced in G'Henna is religious in nature.

For the average citizen of Zhukar, the most common form of art consists of the many, many statues of Zhakata the Devourer which decorate the plazas, parks, and other public spaces of the city. Many of these statues are cast in bronze, using lanolin models and clay molds, while others are sculpted directly from clay.

Sculptors in Dervich are less likely to work in clay, but more likely to work in stone. For example, the marble statue of Zhakata which looms over the Grand Foyer of Serghei's Temple may be the most terrifying and most beautiful statue in the land. Nonetheless, overall there are far fewer statues of Zhakata in Dervich than in Zhukar.

However, most of the stone statues found in G'Henna were not sculpted by any known human hand, but rather are found in the areas of the Outlands, such as Famine's Fastness and Bonefang Canyon. Occasionally the Churches in either Zhukar or Dervich will pay to have a particularly awe-inspiring statue hauled into the city.

In addition to these ungainly large statues, many families buy much smaller clay idols of the Beast God. The laity cannot properly worship Zhakata without a priest, but there's a pervasive vague hope that the Beast God will see and reward each family's adherence to the Word of Zhakata in the home.



Another city-wide form of art is the construction of mosaics. Sometimes they are created using painted cobblestones, such as Victory Plaza in Dervich. More commonly, though, G'Hennan mosaics are formed from dyed chips of bone. In particular, many of the hallways inside the Temple in Zhukar feature inlaid mosaics, the most famous of which is in the Sanctuary of the Hungry and is called the Eyes of the Beast.

Bone-carving is an art form practiced by many G'Hennans. Even though there is little commercial demand, it is considered an act of devotion to the Devourer.

The Church also commissions paintings of scenes from Church history. As an example, the Gallery of Enlightenment in the Temple in Zhukar features eighteen paintings. The Temple also features portraits of Lord Petrovna and various historical figures of the Church, such as Chief Inquisitors and Fangs of Zhakata.

## WHAT I HAVE ACTUALLY SEEN

Before I get into generalities about the geography of G'Henna, I want to explain what I have seen for myself, compared to what I learned from talking with others. Most importantly, I have verified that the Mistway known as the Heretic's Egress works as documented in the Bridgely report. I arrived in the Sunken Lands west of Dervich. I had no difficulty locating Dervich itself, where I stayed for several weeks, confirming more of Bridgely's findings. I ventured eastward through the Fertile Valley and then returned to Dervich.

From there I exercised my judgment. Bridgely himself never traveled outside the northern portion of G'Henna, so I felt that I should explore further. After departing Dervich, I traveled through the Jackal's Run and then crossed the Central Steppes to Zhukar. I did not encounter the infamous Jackal herself, which was disappointing but probably for the best. From Zhukar I had planned to follow the

Drogach River further into the Badlands, assuming I could hire a guide. On my way back to the Heretic's Egress, I had even considered a brief detour to see for myself a mongrel settlement of which I had heard word. However, my encounter with Yagno Petrovna left me shaken, and I have decided to return to Darkon as swiftly as I can.

## GEOGRAPHY OF THE OUTLANDS

The most important geographical detail of G'Henna is that the entire land is now surrounded by the Mists. Before the Great Upheaval, G'Henna stood at the heart of the Core, and any slender prosperity which it enjoyed stemmed from the trade which passed between its neighbors, particularly Falkovnia and Nova Vaasa by way of Tepest.

The second most important detail is that G'Henna appears to have grown since the days when it was a nearly-disregarded spot of land in the middle of the Core. Stranger things have happened in the wake of the Great Upheaval, but this expansion strikes me as worth mentioning.

## SEASONS AND WEATHER

Safe to say, most people think of G'Henna as someplace hot and dry, and during the late summer months, that impression is accurate. The seasonal rivers dry up, and even the mighty Drogach and Eel's Flow diminish. Doubtless summer is why the aqueducts of Zhukar were constructed. It is a dangerous season.

The dry season is made worse by windstorms (each called "Zhakata's Howl", of course), which scour the land. (These windstorms can happen year-round, but they are most prevalent in the late summer.) G'Hennans build windbreaks to lessen the damage to their crops and herds, but of course travel is rendered even more dangerous than usual. Oddly, though, the mongrels celebrate Zhakata's Howl, dancing in the midst of its fury, believing that the

windstorm might somehow restore their lost humanity.

Harvest follows late summer. It happens so quickly that it hardly qualifies as a season. However, it is absolutely essential. G'Hennans need to know when to transition from eking out as much growth as they can to stockpiling what they have grown.

Winters are brutally cold. (Fortunately I report this fact second-hand. I should return to Darkon well before the snows fall.) The Drogach and Eel's Flow both turn to ice. Apparently entire herds have been known to freeze to death where they stand. Food cannot grow, of course, so the people of G'Henna live upon their stockpiled food and pray to the Devourer that they have stockpiled enough. It is another dangerous season.

As dire as winter is, though, early springtime is deadly enough to be known as the **Season of Zhakata's Banquet**. Although the cold lifts and the snows melt, the newly-thawed rivers rise to deadly levels. Mudslides make travel through any of the mountain ranges perilous, and even the steppes grow muddy enough to hinder travel. By this time food stores have run low (and, in the worst years, empty), but planting cannot yet occur. Even the priests are reminded that starvation is sacred.

However, late spring eventually arrives, followed by early summer. Here is when G'Hennans benefit from the excess water of the Season of Zhakata's Banquet. I saw for myself that G'Henna is briefly a land where plants and animals can not only survive but thrive. People might too, if only this weren't G'Henna.

And then the dry end of summer rolls around again.

## Mountains

According to its citizens, G'Henna contains three mountain ranges. Although all three ranges were once considered part of the Balinoks, G'Hennans have their own names for them. Much of the western border of G'Henna is defined by the **Blade Mountains**, which also curl eastward into the

Badlands. Similarly, much of the eastern border is defined by the **Pekkau Mountains**. The **Hotath Mountains** occupy the northern border, but unlike the other two ranges, they also extend into the heart of G'Henna.

## Waterways

Two rivers are crucial to the people of G'Henna. The largest river, the **Drogach**, used to run from Tepest to the city of Dervich in northwestern G'Henna. Nowadays it still runs out of the Mists and then from Zhukar to Dervich, providing an important waterway in the late spring and early summer. In early spring the Drogach runs dangerously high, but by late summer it runs dangerously low, limiting the vessels which may safely ride its waters.

The second river, although shorter than the first, may be even more crucial. The **Eel's Flow** River wends through a valley in the Hotath Mountains. That valley is known as the Fertile Valley, which has provided the entire land with much of its food ever since the Severing. The Eel's Flow is fed by springs within and runoff from the Hotath Mountains, and it runs westward to Lake Brackish.

A third river, the **Ichor**, branches away from the Drogach and flows northeast into the Mists. It serves to divide the inhospitable lands of the mud flats from the even less hospitable lands of the Frying Pan, but apparently its waters do little to make either area more arable. Before the Severing, the Ichor used to run into the haunted land of Keening, and my own theory is that its lifelessness seeped upstream to linger yet today.

In addition to the Drogach, Eel's Flow, and Ichor, there are a number of seasonal rivers of note. In early spring the **Blood River** runs across the **Frying Pan** into the **Ichor River**. The **Eel's Tongue** runs into the Eel's Flow. The **Strahka** River runs westward through Bonefang Canyon within the Hotath Mountains into the Drogach, marking the northern end of the Jackal's Run. All of these rivers are

important sources of water, but inevitably they go dry by summer's end.

Before the Severing, the **Vacha** River used to loop from Dorvinia to G'Henna until it flowed back into Dorvinia. Since the Severing, the G'Hennan stretch of the Vacha has dried up entirely.

The other important body of water is **Lake Brackish** and its surrounding swamp. (Apparently it was initially called "the brackish lake", and that stuck as its name.) The northwestern corner of G'Henna, sometimes called the **Sunken Lands**, offers a significant and sharp drop of elevation from the rest of the steppe, where the city of Dervich stands.

Before the Severing, the Eel's Flow and the Drogach simply ran down the slope, eventually merging beyond the Falkovnian border. Since then, however, the combined waters have flooded the land, forming an extensive swamp. To the extreme northwest, the swampy land recedes, leaving a small lake which extends into the Mists. Although the Drogach and Eel's Flow both carry fresh water, the lake itself is brackish, hinting at the possibility that it now merges with some larger sea. (The Sea of Sorrows, according to some G'Hennans, but I never heard any rumors of such a passage from outside G'Henna.) However, if anybody has discovered the truth of this possibility, they haven't shared the secret.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE KEEPER OF BEES

A day's journey along the Ichor River past the point where it branches off from the Drogach, travelers might encounter an unexpected sight. To the north, at the edge of the rock shelf which defines the Frying Pan, are a dozen beehives. To the south is a stretch of the mud flats striking for its wealth of reeds and wildflowers.

The person responsible for this pleasantly unnatural site calls himself the **Keeper of Bees**. Anyone familiar with the breeds of the Arak would immediately recognize him as kin to the alven, except that he lacks wings and stands taller than most humans.

To others he appears as an unusually tall elf with black eyes, green-tinted skin, and bright red hair.

In truth the Keeper of Bees is an alven ranger whose physical form has been affected by the years he has spent trapped in G'Henna since the Great Upheaval. He can diminish himself to the natural size of his breed, regaining his wings, but only for 2d10 rounds. His alternate form is a giant wasp. His bees will swarm to defend him if necessary. Then again, he will protect his bees with equal fervor. After all, the hives are more important to him than any mere mortals.

The Keeper of Bees does not care for intruders, but he will be crisply courteous to any guests, offering them nourishment in the form of seeds, berries, flower petals, and of course honey. If necessary, he can also ferry visitors across the Ichor. (In the dry months, this is not necessary.) However, like all fey, the Keeper of Bees is very transactional. In exchange he will demand a song, a laugh, a heartfelt sigh, or some other expression of personality. Such gifts cost 1 CHA, which cannot be healed until midnight of the next new moon.

### VALLEYS

G'Henna may be bordered by mountains, but at least as important are the valleys within and between them. Most crucial is the **Fertile Valley** in the Hotath Mountains. Much of the food which feeds the entire land is grown within the Fertile Valley, not to

mention the grapes fermented to make wine and the barley used to produce both beer and whiskey.

The valley between the Blade and Hotath mountains is known as the **Jackal's Run**. Both the Drogach River and the Wine Road pass through the Run, making it an essential link between the cities of Zhukar and



Dervich. Naturally the Run is a prized location for bandits, mongrels, and kobolds who prey upon merchants traveling between the two cities. Traditionally the strongest bandit within the Run calls himself "the Jackal", but it is uncertain whether the Run was named after the first Jackal or whether the Jackal has always taken his name from the Run. Either way, to the best of my knowledge no actual canine jackals inhabit this valley.

Although the Fertile Valley runs deep into the Hotath range, rain rarely crosses over the mountain peaks. As such, the area east of the Hotath range is known as the **Frying Pan**. The Pan is one of the most desolate parts of G'Henna, occupied by kobolds and little else. I have heard tales of a windmill in the heart of the Frying Pan, but why would anyone build a windmill there?

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY — VALUAN'S WINDMILL

To pump water, in fact.

The windmill was constructed by an elven mage named **Valuan**. He was drawn into the Mists when he planned to do something genocidal about the verminous humans who were overrunning his people. (His plan failed, but he was drawn anyway.) Valuan was horrified to discover himself trapped in G'Henna, but worse yet, he was trapped among humans with nary an elf in sight. Ironically, perhaps, he has allied himself with the verminous kobolds of the Frying Pan, and he is perfectly willing to direct any lost humans into one of the kobolds' many traps.

Inspired by a post by Rotipher in the "Bait This Hook!" thread on the Fraternity of Shadows forum.

The city of Zhukar sits upon a rocky promontory shaped by the Drogach River. The mud flats to the east of the Drogach have a markedly lower elevation than the land to the west. The mud flats are a valuable agricultural resource for Zhukar. However, between flooding, pestilence, and predatory beasts, they are also a dangerous place to live.

East of the Blade Mountains and south of the Hotath Mountains is a broad, flat stretch of land known as the **Central Steppes** or sometimes the **Central Wastes**. Although the Steppes are much more desolate than the Fertile Valley, nonetheless they provide grazing lands for herds of cattle, goats, and sheep. In addition, mongrel camps dot the Steppes, perpetually moving as they get roused by patrols of the Swords of Zhakata. An unusually large and permanent mongrel camp has been established where the Trail of the Discarded reaches the Blade Mountains, far enough from Zhukar to make the Swords wary of venturing so far from the protection of the city.

The Central Steppes are also where the most important roads in G'Henna meet. The **Wine Road** leads through the Jackal's Run to Dervich. The **Trail of the Discarded**, once known as the **Grain Road**, heads westward, formerly toward Falkovnia. The **Goblin Trail** used to lead to Tepest, but it has fallen into near complete disuse since the Severing. Not so the fourth branch, which leads from the crossroads to the city of Zhukar. That fourth branch has no particular name that I ever learned, its importance overshadowed by the importance of its destination.

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE LONELY BOY

Occasionally travelers will encounter a solitary boy trudging along one of the roads passing through G'Henna, usually the Wine Road in the Jackal's Run, but sometimes the Goblin Trail as well. Dust cakes his skin. His clothes are tattered. He walks barefoot, leaving a long trail of bloodstains behind him. Worst of all, he is twig-thin, clearly on the verge of starvation. He is too weak to lift his head, yet somehow he continues to trudge.

Anyone who journeys regularly through the Jackal's Run knows him as the Lonely Boy, and they know better than to interact with him. The Lonely Boy died a long time ago, but his ghost still haunts the roads. He is harmless as long as you don't touch him or speak to him. However, if one of the living is foolish



enough to draw his attention, then the Lonely Boy reveals he is also a very hungry ghost, indeed. He will attack his prey, swallowing chunks of their flesh, until they are completely consumed or until the Lonely Boy is dispersed.

If dispersed, the Lonely Boy will simply rematerialize weeks later. Nobody knows how he might be laid to rest, and it's simply too dangerous to ask him.

## BADLANDS

To G'Hennans, any place outside the immediate environs of Zhukar or Dervich, even the relatively tame Fertile Valley, belongs to "the Outlands". However, south of the Central Steppes are the **Badlands**, which occupy the entire southern third of G'Henna.

Geologically speaking, the Badlands are what you think of when you think of G'Henna. Very little grows there except rock structures. (I jest. Most rock structures don't grow.) No rivers run through the Badlands. The only road is the abandoned Goblin Trail. There are occasional landmarks—an impressive ravine, the Lonely Tower, at least one shrine, the Valley of Dust, even Mirgau's Mesa. However, I have been told that getting lost in the Badlands is still catastrophically easy.

## CREATURES OF THE OUTLANDS

Small herds of cattle, goats, and sheep—both wild and domesticated—are common in the Outlands. I've heard tales about cows going carnivorous and goats which turn to stone, but frankly I'm skeptical. Supposedly wolves prey upon these herds, but I suspect that kobolds, mongrels, and fellow human beings are a greater threat than wolves.

A surprising number of giant insects inhabit G'Henna. I heard of giant tiger beetles, centipedes, wolf spiders, and wasps. These aren't just tales. I fought a giant praying mantis myself while I was crossing the Fertile Valley.

The Badlands in southern G'Henna are supposed to be home to many lizards, both mundane and giant-sized.

Lycanthropes are greatly feared. G'Hennans have tales of wereboars, werebats, wereravens, wereweasels, and wereleopards. They believe that all werewolves are Darkonian intruders, which may be why they typically use the more formal Darkonian term *therianthrope* instead of *lycanthrope*. I don't know that I met any therianthropes, although I do have my suspicions about the Ivitsavich brothers.

Another common shapechanger is the impersonator, which I've heard described as a jelly-like creature that can mimic the people it devours. Apparently they are a particular problem in Dervich and the surrounding area. In fact, someone told me that the Shapechanger Crusade was originally launched because Serghei Ojacarcu wanted the impersonators wiped out, but then Yagno Petrovna got distracted by the therianthropes infesting the Merchants' Guild.

Unsurprisingly, undead creatures are fairly common. Ghouls and ghosts, of course, both in the Outlands and in the catacombs beneath Zhukar. Ghosts and other spirits as well, not to mention giant skeletons, skeletal stags, and probably giant skeletal stags. G'Henna also has its *strigoi*, which may simply be vampires by another name.

Of course G'Henna also claims its share of truly odd creatures, living rocks and mushroom people, "color cats" and "golden dogs", even the dread catoblepas. However, the oddity which stands out to me is the Pride Eater. Some people claim that it feeds exclusively upon mongrels. (I'm not convinced that it is so selective.) Others say that it can transform people into mongrels, which I find horrifying but plausible. Some G'Hennans find that notion merely offensive, because apparently only Lord Petrovna is supposed to be able to strip people of their dignity.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — THERIANTHROPEs IN G'HENNA

The lycanthropes found in G'Henna have a striking difference from those found elsewhere throughout the Land of Mists: They are not necessarily victims of their bestial nature. No less an authority than Rudolph van Richten declares in his *Guide to Werebeasts* that "virtually all lycanthropes are highly malign" (*Van Richten's Monster Hunter's Compendium*, Volume I, p.145). This has certainly proven true of most werebeasts who from arrived other lands.

However, most G'Hennan lycanthropes are simply people in the Outlands trying not to starve. Most of them even worship Zhakata.

Perhaps the Dark Powers simply find the hatred of humans for therianthropes more entertaining this way.

### CITIES AND VILLAGES OF G'HENNA

Zhukar and Dervich are the two cities of G'Henna.

Zhukar is the capitol. It's where Lord Petrovna resides. It's where the High Altar sits atop the Temple of Zhakata.

Dervich lacks Lord Petrovna, and it lacks the High Altar. Therefore G'Hennans consider it perpetually inferior to Zhukar, even though much of Zhukar's food originates from the regions near Dervich. In any more sensible land, Dervich would be the capitol. However, this is G'Henna.

### ZHUKAR

Zhukar was built upon a rocky shelf in eastern G'Henna. The sometimes-mighty **Drogach River** curls around the shelf on its long path across the land. Every spring the Drogach rages with the snowmelt, eating away at the outer edges of the city. However, the Drogach subsides as the dry summer progresses, which gives work crews opportunity to rebuild those structures which shore up the city.

Additionally, the rock shelf is riddled with tunnels and caves. Some of these are natural, but they have also been expanded by work crews. Under the city is the network of catacombs where the important dead are buried. (The rest of the dead are abandoned in the mud flats east of the city.) Apparently the catacombs are plagued with ghouls, which shouldn't be surprising beneath a city where starvation is sacred.

The heart of Zhukar is the **Temple of Zhakata**, of course. At five stories high, it is the tallest building in all of G'Henna. (By Lord Petrovna's decree, no other building shall be built as tall.) Two or three times each week, Lord Petrovna preaches from the roof of the fifth story, where the High Altar stands. When Lord Petrovna chooses to strip someone of their dignity, he does so from the roof of the Temple. When Lord Petrovna decides that some heretic shall die, the Swords throw them from that same roof.

An entire district surrounds the Temple. This district includes the **University of Blessed Zhakata**, which is the heart of the Mind of Zhakata, and the **Zhukar Library of Enlightenment**, which technically belongs to the Mind, but is dominated by the presence of **Kazimir Shvek**, about whom I have more to say later. It also includes the **Hospice of Zhakata the Provider**, which had been operated by the Hands of Zhakata until they were declared apostate. The Hospice has been boarded up and abandoned, but to judge from the piteous cries sometimes still audible after dark, it is haunted as well.

### Districts

Zhukar was built as a succession of walled cities, which naturally divide it into a number of districts. The Temple District stands at the center, of course, and it is walled. The Temple District is surrounded by the Government District, which is also walled. The third wall encompasses High Town, a residential area. The fourth wall surrounds the Military, University, Business, and Old City districts. Finally, the fifth wall encircles the Merchant District and additional residential districts, including Low Town.

Regarding the walls: I suspect that the second, third, and fourth walls were built by the Domnitor, because they still appear solid. They were built from stone blocks and well-mortared, reaching approximately twenty feet in height. These walls include towers, walkways and battlements so that soldiers can mount an effective defense. The fifth and first walls, on the other hand, appear both newer and less defensible. They were built from clay bricks, many of which have been decorated with the Beast-God's snarling visage. These walls lack walkways and battlements. The fifth wall does have towers at each gate, but the wall around the Temple District has none. The best that can be said about them is that they were built as tall as the other walls. I suspect the first and fifth walls were built by the command of Lord Petrovna, not for defense, but to control daily access and to keep the work gangs productively busy.

Many high-ranking priests live in the Temple District, accompanied by those low-ranking priests who personally serve them. The remainder live in the various other districts of the city, near the court or school where they work. The Swords of Zhakata live in the Military District.

Of the five residential districts within the city walls, High Town is the most prestigious, and the Old City is the least so. Low Town receives its name not because of relative social status, but because it occupies a sunken part of the rocky shelf which supports the entire city. Two other districts, known as Residential North and Residential South, provide homes for those menials not wealthy enough for High Town (or even Low Town), but still sufficiently well-paid to keep out of the Old City.

Foreign merchants were once encouraged to set up shop in the Merchants' Quarter. That quarter has been much emptier since the Severing cut off access to foreign lands. The various factions of the Dervich Merchants' Guild still rent warehouse space there, and of course there were foreign merchants who got caught in G'Henna by the Severing. Apparently most of them fared quite well in the aftermath when

demand spiked for their wares, which were suddenly unavailable elsewhere, but without any further goods to sell, they live on dwindling savings. More canny merchants found some way to fit themselves into G'Hennan society, which probably meant signing up with the Dervich Merchants' Guild or else working with the Black Market of Zhukar.

One such merchant is a fellow named Erik Duemmler. I identified him as Falkovnian exactly as quickly as he identified me as Darkonian. Unless I miss my guess, he once served as a Talon for the Hawk Tyrant, but to judge from his limp he probably suffered an injury that forced him to retire. He came across as crisply pleasant, with a coldness underneath that could have come from his early years in Falkovnia or else from his later years in G'Henna. He asserted emphatically that he is meticulous about adhering to the laws of Zhukar, which could just mean he pays the appropriate bribes to Church and Swords alike. He also made certain that I knew he would pay very well for any information regarding the Heretic's Egress. As if I would share such secrets with a Falkovnian!

## THE ESTATES

Two districts stand outside the walls of Zhukar. The first is known as the Estates, or sometimes the Private Estates. It consists of seven or so manors built upon the mud flats across the Drogach River. That strikes me as an exceedingly foolish place to build any sort of structure, much less an expensive one, yet this is considered the most prestigious place in Zhukar to live (except for perhaps the Temple itself). Maybe the distance from the city makes the risk worthwhile.

The manors are all built upon wooden platforms supported by wooden poles sunk deep into the mud flats. Every spring, after the annual flooding of the Drogach has subsided, work gangs are brought in to repack earth around the poles and beneath the platforms so that neither poles nor platforms need to support the whole of the manor built atop them.



Nonetheless, every spring the Drogach rises and washes away the majority of the mud.

I never found anybody who could confidently say who resides in the manors of the Estates. The Warder General of the Swords, some said. The High Priest of the Mind of Zhakata. Not Lord Petrovna and not the Chief Inquisitor, who both live in the blessed austerity of the Temple. Much to my surprise, the only two names which were consistently given belonged to Edo Toknar and Ruxandra, who are both widely known as black marketeers. Given that they are allowed to operate regardless of their infamy, there is no doubt that they do indeed pay the appropriate bribes to Church and Swords.

### CITY OF BRIDGES

As much as the Estates are supported by an impressive feat of engineering, the City of Bridges is even more impressive yet. Nestled between the Military District and the North Residential District to one side and the Drogach to the other, the City of Bridges clings to the rocky bluff which supports all of Zhukar. Like the Estates, the buildings have been constructed upon wooden platforms atop wooden poles, but there the similarity ends. Whereas the

Estates represent the high end of the social scale in Zhukar, the City of Bridges represents the dregs. Even the Old City is held in higher regard. Most of the buildings are shacks, not manors. Some of the platforms rock unsteadily as weight shifts upon them. Some of the rope-and-plank bridges which link the platforms are in dire need of repair. Most of the City of Bridges feels as if it will soon tumble down the cliffs into the river, only to wash away unmourned.

Yet considerable money flows here as well. Hildegarda's "guesting house" was built upon the Wooden Plaza, the largest platform in the City of Bridges. (The other plazas in Zhukar are built from flagstone and decorated with ivory.) A sizable gambling hall stands opposite Hildegarda's. It has no sign and no apparent name, but clearly the citizens of Zhukar know of its presence. Agents of the Black Market may be contacted here, I've heard, although I understand that subsequent incriminating conversations are always scheduled elsewhere in the city. Those bridges and platforms which lead to the Wooden Plaza are kept in excellent condition because it would not do to endanger those priests and Swords who seek the pleasures of the district.

### *Journal Entry — Paying the Toll*

Apparently I have grown too reliant upon my local infamy. The thugs and thieves of Karg know me, and they would not risk the wrath of the Kargat by interfering with my activities. The thugs and thieves of Zhukar, on the other hand, have no idea of my connections. If I ever return to the City of Bridges, I will be certain to arrive via the Military District, where I would enjoy the protection of the proximity of the Swords. For my first foray into that district, though, I entered via the North Residential district, which I have learned enjoys no protections whatsoever.

I had barely reached the second bridge before I found my way cut off by a pair of ill-dressed, unwashed thugs. The first carried a blade, but a blade in such poor condition that I felt more threatened by tetanus than by its edge. The second thug carried only a length of wood, which he smacked threateningly into his palm. They were slightly absurd but also deadly sincere.

"Got to pay the toll," the first thug told me. "Ten stoneclaws."



That was a ridiculous amount. "I'll take another route," I said, turning warily back the way I had come. As foolish as I had been to enter the City of Bridges alone, I am gratified to report that at least I was not at all surprised to find another two thugs behind me.

I wasn't worried about my ability to kill one of them, even the one with the pitiful blade, and I had confidence that I could handle two if necessary. Four thugs, on the other hand, especially when they had me surrounded, was another matter. Somebody was bound to get sufficient grasp to hurl me off of the bridge, and my reputation in Karg wouldn't prevent me from smashing against the bluffs.

I was saved from my foolishness by the intervention of another man. He stepped up behind the first two thugs and cleared his throat. They turned slightly and then both startled.

"*Domnul* Lacousto!" the thug with the blade exclaimed. A certain fear spiked his voice.

According to the usual arithmetic, the thugs should not have been alarmed by this newcomer. Even if he chose to side with me in a fight, and I had no indication why he might do something so perilous, even then we would be outnumbered. And he was clearly an older man, in his early middle age, which did not bode well for his reflexes. At the same time, though, he was well-dressed, entirely inappropriately for what I had seen of the City of Bridges, and he carried a blade, a real blade, a full-length longsword. He had not bothered to draw it. He did not even have his hand upon its hilt.

"Is there a problem here?" this Lacousto asked.

The two thugs behind me were in full retreat. Ahead of me, the thug with the club was saying, "Oh, no, no, no, *Domnul*, no," while the thug with the inferior blade said, "We were just collecting tolls, *Domnul*."

"No tolls tonight, boys," Lacousto told them. "Not from this fellow." He gestured for me to accompany him, and because even my foolishness has its limits, I did. We turned away from the two thugs. Lacousto did not even glance back. I did, just once, and that was enough to see that the first two thugs were also in retreat.

"Please pay our respects to *Domnul* Toknar!" one of them called.

Once we were out of the thugs' earshot, I said, "Thank you for your intervention."

He nodded but otherwise remained silent. He led me through the City of Bridges, from platform to bridge to platform. Along the way I noticed his curious gait, and when I stole a glance downward I noticed that one of his legs was footless. He wore a cylindrical boot, wide enough to make patrolling the bridges feasible. Apparently losing a foot had not harmed his reputation.

He took me to the Wooden Plaza. Once there, he stopped and pointed at the nearest gate to the Military District. "Next time," he said, "use that gate."



## DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE FALL OF EMILION LACOUSTO

**Emilion Lacousto** was once a companion of Doctor Rudolph van Richten, who recorded Lacousto's destruction of the ghost of Karek Abjen in his *Guide to Ghosts*. However, since then Lacousto has fallen upon hard times. He lost his left foot in a subsequent adventure, and he would have died from the infected wound if not for the intervention of Edo Toknar of the Black Market. Since his recovery, Emilion Lacousto has worked for Edo Toknar in repayment of his moral debt.

Even lacking a foot, Emilion Lacousto remains a formidable fighter. Moreover, his reputation is certainly enhanced by the *flame blade* which he carries.

## AQUEDUCTS

The aqueducts are another unexpected feat of engineering. The city needs water during the dry months, and so stone aqueducts were built to carry water from the Drogach. The construction reminds me of the water wheels of Tempe Falls, but operating in reverse: a mechanism turns the wheel to move the water. Work gangs are tasked with turning the wheels which move the mechanism, which lifts the water into the aqueducts, which then carry the water to cisterns in the Temple and Government Districts and elsewhere throughout the city.

When water isn't in such short supply, the aqueducts stand unused. I can't help but think that if you somehow managed to bring an army to the gates of Zhukar without its food mysteriously spoiling, the aqueducts would be a fantastic way to sneak somebody inside to open the gates to the city from within.

## AVENUE OF THE FALSE GODS

Recall that Zhukar was built before Yagno Petrovna came to G'Henna. Most of the remnants from those earlier days are found in the Military District, which is not surprising, given the Domnitor's apparently very militant approach to governing. However, one particularly curious remnant still exists in the middle of what is now the Business District. Although most locals refuse to go there, I found a mongrel guide who was willing to show me around.

Temples—or rather *former* temples—line the **Avenue of the False Gods**. These are not grand edifices like the Temple at the center of the city.

Instead, they are merely buildings, once elegant but now falling apart, victims of abandonment and vandalism. Many of the buildings features bronze statues of the Beast-God. Both the Devourer and the Provider are represented. When I asked my guide why Zhakata would be represented on the Avenue of *False Gods*, he shrugged and told me that it used to be called The Avenue of the Gods, and it was where the people of Zhukar worshiped the Beast-God until the Temple was completed.

More curious but far more decrepit are the temples to other gods. One temple features two wolves. Another was dedicated to a king consuming his own flesh—or perhaps to the goddess who stood behind him. Other statues I knew even less well how to interpret. Other temples had been emptied and destroyed. I did not recognize any of the deities depicted, nor did my guide. However, I could not help but think of the Darkonian legends of the Horseman called Famine.

## DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE HUNGRY GODS

Well-traveled PCs might recognize some of the statues. For example, someone familiar with the Norse faith might recognize Geri and Freki, Odin's two wolves, whose names both mean "the greedy one" or "hunger". Other deities to be found along the avenue include Limos (with Erysichthon at her feet, half-consumed); the goddess Fames; and Pazuzu and Lamashtu locked in combat. Hungry spirits such as the Preta and the Hidarugami are also represented.

Even if the PCs lack the appropriate background to recognize any specific deities, they will still recognize that these are all gods and goddesses of hunger.

## DERVICH

Dervich stands in northwestern G'Henna, at the far western end of the Fertile Valley. It benefits from proximity to both the Drogach River and another, smaller river called the **Eel's Flow**. Moreover, it benefits from a lack of proximity to Lord Petrovna. In Dervich the power of the Church of Zhakata is partially balanced by the power of the **Dervich Merchants' Guild**, and the power of the Guild is partially balanced by the Church.

Unsurprisingly, then, there is no single building at the heart of Dervich. The **Guild Hall** is the headquarters of the Guild as a whole, although each of the individual factions has a building elsewhere in the city where it conducts its own business as well. Not far from the Guild Hall stands the headquarters of the Church. While officially known as the **Temple of Zhakata in Dervich**, everybody in Dervich—including every priest I ever spoke with—calls it **Serghei's Temple**. A man named **Serghei Ojacarcu** was the architect who designed and oversaw the construction of the temple. Although he heeded Lord Petrovna's decree about not exceeding the height of the Temple of Zhakata in Zhukar, the lack of a fifth story is the only way in which Serghei's Temple is less grand than the Temple in Zhukar.

In addition to being the architect of the Temple in Dervich, this Serghei Ojacarcu was a prominent figure in the Shapechanger Crusades. Therefore, even though he was not a member of the First Circle, he was largely responsible for the rise of the Church of Zhakata in Dervich. The priests claim him as one of theirs, and the Swords proclaim him as one of theirs, but from everything I've heard Serghei Ojacarcu belonged solely to Serghei Ojacarcu. Nonetheless, he possessed the third of three artifacts imbued with Zhakata's might. Years after his murder, the **Staff of Serghei Ojacarcu** remains in a place of honor in the main audience hall of the Temple in Dervich. In

addition to being a magical head-thumper, it glows in the presence of shapechangers, which has prevented any number of assassination attempts over the years. Although Zhukar may have the High Altar, Dervich has Serghei's staff.

The Temple in Dervich was built upon what is now known as **Victory Plaza** in honor of Lord Petrovna's triumph in the Shapechanger Crusade. On the opposite side of Victory Plaza is the **Miner's Manor**. It once belonged to the therianthrope head of the Guild, but has subsequently served as the home of the High Priest in Dervich. Unlike Lord Petrovna, who occupies humble chambers in the Temple in Zhukar, the High Priest in Dervich does not live in the temple, and he does not live simply.

## GATES OF DERVICH

Once Dervich was a walled city, but it has long since expanded beyond the walls, and the walls have been torn down for their stone. Nonetheless, several gates remain as landmarks. They are never closed, not even ceremoniously.

The following gates still stand:

- ❖ The Gate of the Faithful stands on the southeastern remnant of the city wall. The road to Zhukar passes through this gate.
- ❖ Unsurprisingly, the Ungur Gate opens onto the road to the village of Ungur.
- ❖ Finally, the Wine Gate stands to the east, and the road which passes through the Wine Gate leads into the Fertile Valley.

## THE HOUSE OF REPARATIONS

Serghei Ojacarcu did not plan for dungeons beneath the Temple of Zhakata in Dervich, so the Church had to build a separate prison. That prison is called **The House of Reparations**.

Aside from the commission of heresies and major crimes, the other prominent reason why people end up in the House of Reparations is the failure to pay off debts. The Dervich Merchants' Guild makes

frequent use of this punishment as a way to send a message.

## MAUSOLEUM

The building known as the **Mausoleum** was built behind Serghei's Temple. Important members of the Church are interred there, including every High Priest, Chief Inquisitor, and Warder-General who has served in Dervich. Serghei Ojacarcu himself was interred there: the only non-Church, non-Sword person given that honor, or so I am told.

## TARUS HALL

The headquarters of the Swords of Zhakata in Dervich. Named after **Toma Tarus**, the first Warder-General of Dervich. Although its structure is clearly an imitation of **Negrescu Hall**, its counterpart in Zhukar, it is slightly more grand than its inspiration. It was designed in Dervich, after all.

## VILLAGES

Human societies in the Outlands falls into two groups: villages and individual settlements. Apart from the number of people, the primary difference is the amount of oversight from the Church. Most villages (Ravnje is an exception) have a priest who acts as the headman for the village. The headman in every village is responsible for collecting the Church's share of the food and sending it along to Zhukar. Because it is not feasible to ship all food back to the city for Zhakata's Taking, just to return some as part of the Dole, people living in the Outlands are allowed to keep their own share for survival. However, many headmen err on the side of sending an overly-large portion of food, because the expected share sometimes changes suddenly and without warning.

Individual settlements, which usually consist of a single family, are also supposed to tithe a generous share of their food, but far fewer do. Settlements in the Fertile Valley do tithe; the Church in Dervich sees to that. Similarly, those settlements in the mud flats east of Zhukar have learned to account for priests from the city arriving unexpectedly to claim their

share. It's much the same for herdsmen who live upon the central steppes. However, priests rarely visit settlements more than an hour or two from Zhukar or Dervich.

Because of the presence of priests, villagers tend to be faithful worshipers of Zhakata. They know the Words and the Law, and upon very rare occasion someone from the villages is sent to Zhukar to attend the university, perhaps to become the priest for the next generation.

The individual families also consider themselves faithful to the Beast God. However, unless they originally came from elsewhere, they rarely know more than the most fundamental tenets of the Zhakatan religion. Nonetheless, many of them will leave a daily share of food upon a stone specially dedicated for sacrifice to Zhakata. The food is almost always gone the next morning.

Why might someone choose to live in the Outlands, particularly apart from the support of a village? An independent spirit. Exile. Escaping trouble elsewhere. Dislike of city life. Family tradition. These are all common reasons.

## THE GATHER

Although mongrels in the Outlands often clump together into bands for survival, one in particular deserves special note. I heard rumors that at the western end of the Grain Road, now more commonly called the **Trail of the Discarded**, is a permanent mongrel camp where many of those stripped of their dignity eventually journey to. Some of the mongrels in Zhukar speak of The Gather as if it were a lost paradise. I am certain it is not, although it may be large enough in population and far enough from Zhukar to avoid the worst of the Swords' attention.

When I was still planning to venture into the Badlands, I ended up talking with a tracker named **Zyina Amanar**, who I had heard was particularly knowledgeable about southern G'Henna. Most of what I know about the mongrels outside of Zhukar comes from my conversation with her.



According to Zyina Amanar, most mongrels attempt to form communities similar to the ones to which they formerly belonged. The Gather is a prime example. She says that if you didn't actually look at the inhabitants, you wouldn't be able to tell them apart from any other village of G'Hennans. They form families. They struggle to raise crops. Whenever they can, they ferment plums and drink *tsuika*. They get into fights with their neighbors. Although many of them eschew the Beast-God entirely, others still worship Zhakata despite their transformation, perhaps in a last attempt to escape the Barren Fields after death. Please do not misunderstand me: These mongrels live miserable and desperate lives. Then again, so do most other G'Hennans.

Then again, plenty of others make no attempt to live as they had. In some cases, their rage at their transformation drives them to strike at any untransformed humans they can find. In other cases, they isolate themselves entirely, unwilling to be around humans or mongrels alike. Zyina Amanar told me about **Raresh the Hermit**, who claims to have found actual solace in his isolation. Most don't, I suspect. In fact, a number of mongrels simply starve themselves to death, perhaps in a potential attempt at salvation, perhaps in sheer revulsion at their own transformed bodies.

Zyina Amanar just laughed when I asked if all mongrels howl at the full moon, which was one rumor I had heard. However, she confirmed that all mongrels do seem to react to the windstorms called Zhakata's Howl. In her experience, even those who do not cavort into the storm's fury grow jittery and anxious. There does appear to be some connection, although she has never known a storm to actually restore a mongrel's humanity.

## GRASU

Fort Grasu is a keep, not a village, but I'm going to write about it here regardless. Captain Anzya, the commander of the fortress, has done her best to make Fort Grasu self-sustaining. In addition to the patrolling and drilling which one would expect, her

soldiers herd sheep, tend a garden, brew beer, and make cheese. Those soldiers who have endured a G'Hennan winter at the fortress don't argue with the necessity of these tasks.

For half of the year, Fort Grasu is home to two patrols of Swords, which amounts to just over four dozen people. However, during the winter months Captain Anzya sends approximately half of the garrison back to Zhukar, in part because many of those Swords have concluded their tours of duty but largely, I suspect, because then there are fewer mouths to feed. I understand that the Swords patrol very little during the winter months, but I'm still surprised that the mongrels and kobolds of the Jackal's Run don't cause enough trouble during the winter to necessitate a full garrison.

When I arrived at Fort Grasu, requesting lodging for the night, I was subjected to two tests. First, I had to complete a number of pass phrases. Even though these pass phrases were all derived from the Word of Zhakata, I had been in G'Henna long enough to know the proper responses. Apparently the test isn't actually one of faith, though, but of mental acuity. The creatures which G'Hennans call impersonators are good at mimicking human appearance, but really poor at mimicking complex phrases. The second test involved pricking my fingers with two needles, one of silver, one of some dark native wood. Supposedly certain lycanthropes react poorly to silver and others to the wood. I'm skeptical of the efficacy of this second test, but the Swords firmly believe in it, so I let them prick me with their needles.

Once I had passed both tests, I was allowed into the fortress and made to feel welcome. I was a guest and treated as such. They even served me some of their beer without charging me anything for it. It was not good beer, but they warned me before I took my first sip, and apparently it is much better than it used to be when they first started brewing.

## KESHKA

Keshka is a typical G'Hennan village. Its population is approximately 100 people. It maintains a half dozen scrawny cows. It is encircled by a protective earth wall. It gets its water from a deep well at the heart of the village. The headman is a priest named **Tvoshe**, who strikes me as well-intentioned but narrow-minded.

## MOSTNOVASI

Mostnovasi and Ravnje are the two largest villages in the Jackal's Run. Mostnovasi is the smaller and less prosperous of the two. It is home to nearly 200 people. It stands south and east of the bridge where the Wine Road crosses the Drogach.

The headman of Mostnovasi is a priest named **Grgur**. He insists upon being addressed as *Preot* Grgur. (*Preot* is an old Balok word for *priest*.) He strikes me as a proud man without sufficient reason, but the other villagers don't seem to mind him much.

There are no guesting houses in Mostnovasi. Instead visitors are distributed among the villagers' residences. Tipping my hosts made them noticeably less resentful of my presence.

## NUSHAL

Nushal is a small village in the Hotath Mountains. I've never been there, but it is known for producing a style of cheese which is highly prized in Dervich and even Zhukar. From the descriptions I've heard, Nushal's Special is a medium-hard, whitish cheese similar to Two Brothers' Spotted Marble.

## RAVNJE

Mostnovasi and Ravnje are the two largest villages in the Jackal's Run. With a population of more than 200 people, Ravnje is larger and slightly more prosperous. It stands north of the bridge where the Wine Road crosses the Drogach.

The headman of Ravnje is a fellow named **Tibor**. His father was a priest of Zhakata and the headman of

the village, a combination which inspired young Tibor to run away to Dervich and join the Farmers' Faction of the Merchants' Guild. He eventually returned to Ravnje for his father's funeral. Upon learning that he was a Farmer, the villagers turned to him for advice on their crops. Several years later, Tibor still hasn't gotten around to leaving. Nobody in Ravnje (or even Zhukar) seems bothered that he isn't a priest.

Ravnje offers only a single guesting house, called **Nadezhda's** after its owner. However, the entire village supports its operation, contributing much of their food shares toward the daily communal meal. Visitors are welcome to join them, but to my surprise the usual G'Hennan overcharge for liquor was no worse than anywhere else that I stayed. All in all, I see why the Teamsters prefer to stop in Ravnje instead of Mostnovasi.

## SOBOTA

A village immediately northeast of Dervich. Although it was once the estate of a merchant made wealthy by trade with Falkovnia, the manor and its grounds were subsequently expanded into a resort village. The wealthy members of Dervich society—priests or merchants—rent cozy homes here, where they are waited upon hand and foot.

To judge from the little I could observe, Sobota is home to perhaps fifty permanent residents, who tend to a dozen visitors at a time. It could probably support twice as many visitors, but I've gathered that it rarely does.

Among the lower classes of Dervich, working in Sobota is considered highly desirable, if only for the many scraps of fine food which the wealthy discard.

## UNGUR

The village of Ungur stands where the Drogach splits apart and feeds into the swamp of the Sunken Lands. Maybe 400 people live there, making it perhaps the largest village in G'Henna. During the months of the year when the Drogach is navigable, Ungur serves as

a port village for Dervich. Naturally enough, the Merchants' Guild still possesses considerable influence there.

### VIASHPA

Back in Darkon I once heard tale of a grotesque fey who came to the G'Hennan village of Viashpa

sometime shortly after the turn of the century. This fey wept pitifully and murdered all who came near. And then it vanished, according to the tale. (See *Gazetteer Volume V*, p.14.)

I have never been to Viashpa, and to be honest I'm not entirely sure where in G'Henna it is or whether it still exists. Even so, I thought I should mention it.

## MAGIC ITEMS

### THE HIGH ALTAR

The High Altar sits atop the Temple of Zhakata in Zhukar. Its power cannot be used by anyone except Yagno Petrovna (with one exception, detailed below). However, the powers which it grants are manifold. They include the following:

**Transformation of the Faithful:** Three times per day, Yagno Petrovna may strip someone of their dignity with a touch. This ability only affects people who truly believe in Zhakata, but Yagno Petrovna has discovered this limitation, and he takes steps to hide it.

**Polymorph:** Instead of stripping a believer of their dignity, Yagno Petrovna may temporarily *polymorph* himself or another into a non-magical creature. This affect lasts no longer than 20 rounds.

**Sway the Masses:** Anyone listening to Yagno Petrovna preach for ten minutes or longer must save versus spells or be *charmed*.

**Shield of the Prophet:** Within the High Altar's range, Yagno Petrovna gains a +3 bonus to his Armor Class and saving throws. In addition, he regenerates 1 hit point per 10 rounds, regardless of how badly wounded he may be.

All of these powers require Yagno Petrovna to be within 300 feet of the High Altar or a piece of the High Altar.

The only other entity which can access the power of the High Altar is the fiend **Malistroi**, who is one of the primary antagonists of the module *Circle of Darkness*. Thanks to the Dark Powers, a fragment of the High Altar has become Malistroi's talisman within the Domains of Dread. However, as long as Malistroi is trapped within the House of Bones, it cannot access the Talisman's power.

### MASK OF THE VEILED VISAGE

Subsequent to the Shapechanger Crusade, Lord Petrovna and his advisors determined that the Fangs of Zhakata needed a way to pass unrecognized, and so two *masks of the veiled visage* were created. Unfortunately, both *masks* were lost shortly thereafter, when both Fangs were killed by mongrels or kobolds or another of the many dangers of the Outlands.

(There is some possibility that the Chief Inquisitor was behind the ambush. At any rate, that would explain how Rega ended up with one of the masks.)

The *mask of the veiled visage* is similar to a *hat of disguise*, except its wearer may only change his or her head. When activated, the mask merges with its wearer's face; when deactivated, or when its wearer is killed, it becomes a mask again.

Two masks exist. One is possessed by Rega of the Inquisition; the other, by Captain Anzya, the Sword of Zhakata tasked with stopping the Jackal.

### SERGHEI'S STAFF

The quarterstaff wielded by Serghei Ojacarcu during the Shapechanger Crusade is widely regarded as a holy relic of the Church of Zhakata. In truth, it is very nearly a simple *staff of striking*. However, in the presence of shapechangers or when charged to inflict additional damage, the steel cap at the head glows with a blue-white fire.

According to rumor, Serghei's staff also has the power to restore shapechangers to their most helpless forms, but that rumor is false.

Serghei's staff occupies a stone chest built into the audience chamber of Serghei's Temple. The lid of the sarcophagus is translucent crystal, so that the glow of the staff is apparent whenever a shapechanger approaches the High Priest's seat.

### THE SWORD OF NICU OSOVEI

The sword originally wielded by Nicu Osovei, now wielded by the senior Fang of Zhakata, is a longsword +2, +4 versus lycanthropes and shapechangers.

If wielded by a mongrel or kobold, Nicu Osovei's sword acts as a -2 cursed weapon. If wielded by a lycanthrope or other shapechanger, it acts as a -4 cursed weapon. In either case, a roll of natural 1 indicates that the sword has twisted to strike the wielder instead.

When wielded by a Fang of Zhakata, the sword of Nicu Osovei provides 20% magic resistance to its bearer.

However, the most curious feature of Nicu Osovei's sword is its ability to keep its wielder alive beyond normal limits. The wielder remains fully conscious and functional until his or her hit points reach -10, at which point death occurs as normal.

## FACTIONS, QABALS, AND SECRET SOCIETIES

### ATA-BESTAAL

When I was in Dervich the first time, I was approached by a G'Hennan man who demanded to know if I was Darkonian, as if that weren't clear from my features. Once I confirmed the obvious, he started speaking in some very cryptic terms. Eventually I realized he was trying to ask whether I was a lycanthrope. (Nor was that the last time I encountered someone convinced I must be, just

because I am Darkonian.) I told him I am not, to his evident disappointment. He slunk away quickly thereafter.

Several months later I was discussing heresies with Kazimir Shvek of the Zhukar Library of Enlightenment. While apparently a true believer, Kazimir Shvek nonetheless takes perverse glee in the ways that humanity has corrupted the Word of Zhakata. During this conversation he mentioned the **Ata-Bestaal**, a heresy which holds that one's animal nature is closer to the Beast-God than one's human nature.



"So why don't they volunteer to be transformed by Lord Petrovna?" I asked.

"Some do," Kazimir Shvek replied. "More or less. They speak their heresies and are so condemned to be stripped of their dignity." He leaned forward, and with a low voice and sly grin, he added, "I don't think they find it nearly as enlightening an experience as they hope."

### DREAD POSSIBILITY — THE SHARLING FACE

The Ata-Bestaal is one of the oldest heresies in G'Henna. In its formative days it consisted of G'Hennans who sought to provide comfort and food to relatives and friends who had been transformed into mongrels. Over time, the society became not just criminals but heretics, convincing themselves that their loved ones had been granted a blessing instead of a curse. Their mongrel nature brought them closer to the Beast-God. Clearly the mongrels were miserable not because they had lost part of their humanity, but because they had not lost *enough*.

The doctrine of the Ata-Bestaal twisted further when one of its members witnessed a lycanthrope changing form. (Perhaps this lycanthrope had been Darkonian, but perhaps not. Not all lycanthropes had been destroyed during the Shapechanger crusade.) Afterward, the Ata-Bestaal grew obsessed with becoming therianthropes themselves, a quest which greatly reduced their ranks. Finally one of the Ata-Bestaal became infected, but did not die of their wounds.

Nowadays, the inner circle of the Ata-Bestaal are all infected lycanthropes. Anyone who wishes to join the inner circle must allow themselves to be mauled by a transformed current member of the inner circle. Anyone who survives and is infected becomes a part of the inner circle. Those who survive but do not become infected are then forever considered unworthy of lycanthropy. However, they may continue to serve the Ata-Bestaal, particularly in its lingering role as caretaker of the mongrelfolk.

Over the course of every month, the Ata-Bestaal capture animals, foreigners from other lands, and traitors to the cause. These victims are all held in a large cavern somewhere beneath the northern Hotath Mountains. On the first night of the full moon, members of the inner circle enter the cavern, and they submit to their animal natures.

### BLACK MARKET

I have concluded that the Black Market of Zhukar is an essential part of the G'Hennan economy. Everybody insists that it is illegal, if they admit that it exists at all, but the Church doesn't seem concerned about stopping it. Without the Black Market, how would the priests get what they want?

The two most visible faces of the Black Market are Edo Toknar and Ruxandra, who have both become wealthy enough to live in the Estates just outside of Zhukar. Ostensibly they are both very successful merchants, who have been able to take strong

Even so, thinking later about those two conversations, I realized that the man in Dervich may have been a member of the Ata-Bestaal or a related cult. I am glad I did not decide to string him along with a falsehood (not that I was particularly tempted). There is no knowing what would have befallen me had he convinced himself that I possess some special connection to my animal nature.

advantage of trade agreements with the Guild in Dervich. However, it's an open secret that between them they own most of the City of Bridges (Ruxandra, for example, owns Hildegarda's, and Edo Toknar, the gambling hall across the way) and so control the shady underbelly of Zhukar.

I did wrangle an invitation to an actual Black Market night. The event was held in one of the city's breweries, which have largely been abandoned since the Severing cut off the supply of grain from Falkovnia. I had to give a password *and* offer a bribe to the doorkeeper, but then I was allowed to enter. Down in the brewery's basement, the Black Market

was in full swing. Exotic goods, including several items of a supposedly magical nature, were on display. No names were given, but I'm fairly certain that I was introduced to a certain infamous explorer of the Badlands, with whom I made arrangements to hire a reputable guide to the Outlands. I sampled a short but expensive glass of mead which the Mists had drawn in. (I'm not certain whether that was a euphemism or whether it really did come from some poor Outlander brought to G'Henna.) Most shocking, though, was the food being sold.

"And the Church allows this?" I gasped.

I didn't realize I had spoken aloud until a hard-eyed woman glanced at me and smirked. "Of course it doesn't," she said with flat insincerity. She pointed with her chin at a group of men whom I suddenly recognized had to be priests in plain clothes. "They would never. And if the Swords raid us tonight, just run. The Swords will only catch the people they've been sent to catch."

The Black Market isn't a significant faction in Dervich, which has its Merchants' Guild instead.

### DERVICH MERCHANTS' GUILD

Before Yagno Petrovna came to Dervich at the head of the Shapechanger Crusade, the city was run entirely by the Dervich Merchants' Guild. Although the Church now has official rule of the city, the Merchants' Guild still possesses more political power than any other faction in G'Henna. Now that I have witnessed something of Yagno Petrovna's fondness for playing every side against another, I suspect this division of power is intentional.

The Merchants' Guild is divided into factions. At the moment, there exist five primary factions (listed in descending order of influence):

- ❖ The Vintners focus upon growing grapes and producing wine.
- ❖ The Farmers are the faction dedicated to growing plants other than grapes.

- ❖ The Herdsmen tend to livestock and related products, such as cheeses.
- ❖ The Carpenters have a monopoly on all production related to wood, which includes the barrels necessary to produce wine and the wagons necessary to transport goods.
- ❖ The Miners deal with all aspects of mining, metalwork, and stonework. The Miners have held the lowest seat on the Guild Council ever since the Shapechanger Crusade. The Masons, Glassblowers, and Potters are sub-factions within this faction.

The Guild Council which directs the organization is comprised of the heads of each of the five primary factions. There are other factions as well—for example, the **Brewers** work with both the Vintners and the Farmers—but they do not have seats upon the Guild Council.

The final faction worth noting are the **Teamsters**. They are responsible for transporting goods between Dervich and Zhukar, and sometimes they receive contracts for transportation with the Fertile Valley as well. By all indications they should qualify as a primary faction, except that the Guild Council has refused to admit them.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough how much the Dervich Merchants' Guild controls the livelihood of its members. Common laborers live and eat in guesting houses dedicated to their factions. They do not pay the rent, but instead rent is deducted from their pay. Perhaps they have meager coin left over. More likely they accumulate a slowly accumulating trickle of debt. Because of this debt, being released from one's faction usually means a long stay in the House of Reparations. Or else freezing in the street come winter.

### FIRST CIRCLE

The First Circle is the name given to those outcasts who first encountered Yagno Petrovna in the Outlands and converted to the worship of Zhakata. The best-known members of the First Circle are Jugo

Hesketh (the first Chief Inquisitor) and Kazimir Shvek (the Recorder of the Words of the Prophet).

Nowadays, many G'Hennans assume that Petar Negrescu (the first Warder General), Nicu Osovei (the first Fang of Zhakata), and Serghei Ojacaru (the architect of the Temple in Dervich) belonged to the First Circle. Although all three were crucial in the early days of the Church, none of them were present when Yagno Petrovna first walked the Outlands.

## PEOPLE OF NOTE

### ANZYA (CAPTAIN OF FORT GRASU)

Captain Anzya has commanded Fort Grasu since 738BC. As captain, her primary mission is the protection of the people who live in and pass through the Jackal's Run. In particular, the Dervich Merchants' Guild is eager for her to capture or kill the bandit known as the Jackal, who preys upon caravans traveling to Zhukar. In 739BC Captain Anzya did succeed in killing the then-Jackal, but he was shortly thereafter replaced by a new Jackal, who claims to have been the previous Jackal's wife. Captain Anzya has not succeeded in negating this new Jackal, earning her the ire of the Guild. However, everyone else whom I've asked about the captain speaks highly of her.

The fortress receives quarterly shipments of food from Zhukar. Even so, Captain Anzya has taken steps to ensure that the fortress is not solely dependent upon the city. Fort Grasu has its own garden and a herds of goats, and from those resources the soldiers make their own beer and cheese. The reasons for her troops' loyalty are obvious.

Every winter, Captain Anzya sends approximately half of her forces back to Zhukar. For many, this return indicates only that they have completed their tour of duty in the Outlands. For others, it indicates that they do not meet Captain Anzya's high standards. (The captain tolerates nothing short of competence.) In addition, Captain Anzya is

suspicious of any Swords assigned to Fort Grasu from Dervich, given their inevitable ties to the Merchants' Guild. Swords from Dervich are never allowed to spend winters at the fortress. Those Swords who do remain, however, are among her most trusted men and women.

### DM NOTES — ANZYA

Captain Anzya has no interest in halting the Jackal's predations because she *is* the Jackal. By claiming a third of the food which passes through the Run and distributing it among the humans, mongrels, and kobolds who live there, she has saved many lives over the six years since she deposed the previous Jackal.

Part of the reason why Captain Anzya has been successful in her ruse is because she possesses a *mask of the veiled visage*. It allows her to *change self* at will, as long as the mask is worn. The two *masks of the veiled visage* were originally created to aid in the Fangs of Zhakata in missions which required stealth, but both were lost almost immediately. Anzya claimed the *mask* after defeating its previous possessor, a mongrel bandit in the Badlands.

Captain Anzya's other secret is her loathing of the Church of Zhakata. She became a Sword only because it was the best path she could see out of poverty and into security.

Goju Cojec, the Senior Fang of Zhakata, knows of Captain Anzya's double life, but he has not informed the Warder-General.

### CIOROFOR VUS (CHIEF INQUISITOR IN DERVICH)

During my travels I got the widespread impression that the Church in Dervich is simply a dumping ground for priests whom the Chief Inquisitor of Zhukar wants out of the capitol. Ciorofor Vus, the Chief Inquisitor in Dervich, is an exception. He is the highest-ranking native of Dervich in the Church of Zhakata, and he appears to hold his position because he is competent.



**DM NOTES — CIOROFOR VUS**

Viziers have a fell reputation as behind-the-scenes manipulators seeking personal power. Certainly Ciorofor Vus looks the part with his black hair, long-handled mustache, and triangular goatee. In truth he *is* a behind-the-scenes manipulator, but he has already achieved all of the personal power he sought. Knowing that the High Priest in Dervich is a figurehead position, he does not wish to ascend any higher in the Church hierarchy. Instead, he uses his position for the good of Dervich and G'Henna as a whole.

Make no mistake, though. Ciorofor Vus is at best Lawful Neutral in his outlook. He simply recognizes that he benefits most when G'Henna benefits. In particular, he does what he can to moderate Deza Cozma's frequently erratic rule. Sometimes he even succeeds.

**DESHKA (LIEUTENANT OF FORT GRASU)**

I found Deshka to be a very fascinating young woman. As one of two lieutenants at Fort Grasu, she is the second-in-command of the fortress. (Even the other lieutenant, whoever that may be in any given season, is clearly considered to hold rank below her.) Although I am certain she is not quite as young as she seems, her girlish appearance and chipper demeanor make that easy to forget. In fact, I thought at first that she was more mascot than actual leader. Yet the long-serving Swords at Fort Grasu speak of Deshka with great respect. She grew up in the Blade Mountains, and she kept herself alive for several years after being orphaned. In fact, she only came to the fortress when she was gravely wounded by a band of kobolds. She recovered and eventually joined the Swords (by Captain Anzya's fiat, which the Warder-General has apparently allowed). Deshka now serves as a scout and hunter. Multiple people asserted to me that the garrison would not have survived the most brutal winters in the fortress without Deshka's ability to forage.

**DM NOTES — DESHKA**

Deshka is a were-snow-leopard. Whenever visitors come to the fortress, she wears a woolen cap to hide her hair, which is white with black spots. Similarly, although her eyebrows are also white, she darkens them with cosmetics.

**DEZA COZMA (HIGH PRIEST OF ZHAKATA IN DERVICH)**

Deza Cozma is the latest in a long line of priests from Zhukar to be exiled by promotion to Dervich. Also per tradition, he is universally loathed by the people of that city. Their particular gripe against Deza Cozma is his tendency to decree fasting days arbitrarily and without warning. However, if it weren't that then the people of Dervich would still find some other reason to despise him. The High Priests in Dervich have never been chosen for their leadership skills.

**DM NOTES — DEZA COZMA**

Deza Cozma is a rarity among the priesthood: He retains some actual belief in Zhakata. Not that his faith prevents him from enjoying perks such as a luxurious breakfast every morning and a generous dinner every night.

**GOJU COJEC (SENIOR FANG OF ZHAKATA)**

Based upon everything else that I have seen in G'Henna, I never would have expected a Fang of Zhakata to be a reasonable, rational human being, yet that's exactly what Goju Cojec appears to be. (Maybe Zhakata's Mercy does exist after all.)

**DM NOTES — GOJU COJEC**

In "Scenes from a Starving Land", where Goju Cojec first appeared, he was listed as having a Lawful Neutral alignment. That was wrong! Because Goju Cojec is willing to bend the Law of Zhakata to achieve a societal benefit, he is actually Neutral Good. In other words, if Zhakata actually existed, then Goju Cojec would no longer be a paladin.



As matters stand, the Dark Powers apparently amuse themselves by watching Goju Cojec gradually realize that he's caught in a Church that does not actually share his values, sometimes in horrific ways.

### THE JACKAL

The current bandit calling herself the Jackal has proven to be more successful than most of her predecessors, at least in terms of how long she has been able to operate without being caught. She has been raiding the Run for nearly six years now.

However, I have some potential explanations for her success. For one thing, her bandits include kobolds and mongrels, which tells me that she probably has less to fear from those creatures than her predecessors did. For another, I have the suspicion that the villages of Ravnje and Mostnovasi benefit from her largess, which would leave them reluctant to betray her whereabouts. They might even pass word to the Jackal whenever the Swords from Fort Grasu are riding out. Finally, the Jackal has a reputation for fairness even among her victims. She takes only a third of the food from any caravan she raids, and if she is given her share, then the teamsters in charge of the caravans have no fear of violence from the Jackal or her bandits. Again, compared to traveling through the Run under her predecessors, this safety must be appealing to the teamsters.

From reports that I have heard, the Jackal is unexpectedly beautiful. She is also accompanied by a snow leopard. The people I spoke with called it her pet leopard, but my own suspicion is that the so-called pet is actually a lycanthrope. Given how much G'Hennans fear lycanthropes of any stripe, that makes the Jackal even more impressive to me.

### DM NOTES — THE JACKAL

As mentioned above, Captain Anzya is the current Jackal, and Deshka is her leopard companion.

### KAZIMIR SHVEK (RECORDER OF THE WORDS OF THE PROPHET)

Kazimir Shvek does not bother hiding his history. In 702BC, he was caught forging government documents, and the Domnitor exiled him to the Outlands as punishment. Surely he would have died there, except that he was among that band of exiles who first stumbled across Yagno Petrovna. With Lord Petrovna and the rest of the First Circle, he returned to Zhukar to wrest that city from the Domnitor.

Kazimir Shvek was one of the first priests of Zhakata. More importantly, he became known as the Recorder of the Words of the Prophet, responsible for writing down every one of Lord Petrovna's sermons. He marched with Petrovna's first army to Dervich during the Shapechanger Crusade. He befriended Serghei Ojacarcu, and years later he solved the mystery of Serghei's murder. He survived the machinations of both Jugo Hesketh, the first Chief Inquisitor, and Petar Negrescu, the first Warder-General. All the while, he quietly made himself the head of the Zhukar Library of Enlightenment.

Although he may not be the head of the Mind of Zhakata, to which he officially belongs, I suspect that his influence upon Lord Petrovna is stronger, if more subtle, than even the Chief Inquisitor's... even if he is merely the Recorder of the Words of the Prophet.

### DM NOTES — KAZIMIR SHVEK

Kazimir Shvek's influence upon the Church of Zhakata is even more pervasive than anyone else knows. For decades now he has been writing doctrine and passing it off as Yagno Petrovna's own word. His motivation for taking this risk is simple: He is demonstrating to himself that he is truly the greatest forger in G'Henna.

Yagno Petrovna almost never consults the records. Either he has not noticed Kazimir Shvek's expansions, or else he approves of what has been written.

Occasionally someone else does stumble across Kazimir Shvek's secret. Once it was a high-ranking priest of the Mind of Zhakata. More commonly, it is one of the junior priests assigned to make copies of the Records. In all cases, Kazimir Shvek denounces the discoverer as a heretic, and they are stripped of their dignity and executed. Lord Petrovna does not question Kazimir Shvek's accusations. After all, he is Kazimir Shvek. He is the last of the First Circle. And he is the closest that Yagno Petrovna has to a friend.

### REGA (CHIEF INQUISITOR IN ZHUKAR)

As I mentioned earlier, Rega is the Chief Inquisitor of Zhukar and the most feared man in that city. According to rumor, Rega is hideously ugly, but since he's also notoriously inaccessible, I'm not certain how anyone knows of his ugliness.

#### DM NOTES — REGA

Rega is responsible for the creation of a heretical cabal known as the Circle of Darkness. The Circle's goals vary depending upon whom you ask. Members of the Circle hope to restore Zhakata the Provider to G'Henna, ushering in an age of prosperity. Rega and Yagno Petrovna would assert that the Circle of Darkness is a honeypot trap designed to draw out dissidents so that they may be properly handled. What Rega would emphatically *never* admit is that the Circle exists only to help him reach and bind the nalfeshnee imprisoned within the House of Bones. Using the nalfeshnee's power, he intends to usurp control of G'Henna from Yagno Petrovna. (See *Circle of Darkness* for more details.)

Rega possesses the second of the *masks of the veiled visage*. He uses the *mask* to appear distinctively hideous as Rega; to appear menacing as the supposed leader of the Circle of Darkness; and to appear nondescript as **Madar**, a mid-level member of the Heart of Zhakata who also belongs to the Circle.

### VANCHO (JUNIOR FANG OF ZHAKATA)

I cannot tell whether Vancho simply enjoys murder or whether he only enjoys murder on behalf of the Beast God. Either way, the people of G'Henna had better hope that Goju Cojec lives longer than Vancho.

#### DM NOTES — VANCHO

Vancho does not have any hidden secrets.

Goju Cojec does his best to restrain Vancho. Others, such as the Chief Inquisitor, would like to take advantage of Vancho's formidableness in their own plans, but the same fanaticism which drives him is also a wild card. Only Yagno Petrovna has figured out how to use Vancho to his full extent, by giving him leave to inflict righteous violence in the name of Zhakata the Devourer.

### YAGNO PETROVNA (PROPHET OF ZHAKATA THE DEVOURER)

I find myself at a loss for how to describe Yagno Petrovna. He is a feeble old man, and he is terrifying. He may be the only person in the entire Church of Zhakata who truly believes the doctrine that starvation is sacred. I've heard rumors that he subsists largely on beef broth and toast. Having met him, I now believe it.



## *Journal Entry — Meeting Lord Petrovna*

I must confess that there was something thrilling about standing atop the Temple of Zhakata. Terrifying as well, especially since it was the middle of the night with only the moon to light our way. The city was so quiet that it felt dead, but that might have been nothing more than a trick of how high above the streets we were. Doubtless Swords patrolled and black marketeers evaded and mongrels scrounged for scraps and ghouls skulked for victims, but I could hear none of it. The breeze was dry and warm and steady.

The High Altar loomed before me, and it insisted upon my attention. It is a gigantic slab of marble, and I cannot imagine how Serghei Ojacarcu hauled it five stories up. At first I thought it was polished, but the more I stared at it, the more it looked greasy instead of shiny. Part of me wanted to touch it, but fortunately more of me was more clever than that. The edges are decorated with crystalline structures, as if the marble has extruded itself into bizarre geometries over the decades. Under the sunlight the crystals might catch the sun prettily, but under moonlight they looked phantasmal. However, a large piece was missing. Even I, a non-believer, could see the absence. I've heard that the High Altar glows whenever Lord Petrovna works his transformations, but at the moment it was reassuringly dark.

"So now what?" I asked.

"We wait," the priest replied.

After a while I asked, "How long?" I did realize that he almost certainly didn't know. Truly I did. I simply enjoyed needling him, all the more because I was beginning to suspect that I was being set up for something. Perhaps a little needling might be revealing.

"A little longer," the priest said. "Just wait here. Lord Petrovna should arrive shortly." He stared moving towards the stairs which led down from the fifth story.

His motion did nothing to alleviate my suspicions. I started to follow him, but then I heard the footsteps, and I halted. The priest stopped a few seconds later.

The first person visible was a young man who looked only half-awake. No surprise there, given that very early hour of the morning. He did not notice either of us for several steps. Only when he had ascended far enough to reveal his uniform did the young Sword's eyes widen.

"Lord Petrovna!" he exclaimed. "There's someone here!"

I could not hear the details of the response, but I heard there was a response.

The Sword said, "Emil Vaduva. And... someone else."

Emil Vaduva. I finally had a name for my priest friend.

The Sword continued up the stairs to the fifth story, pushed by the small crowd behind him. There was another Sword, similarly young. There was a Voice in his yellow robes. There was a trio of priests in their orange robes trimmed with red. Those vestments told me that they were moderately high-ranking priests, probably members of the Inquisition. And of course there was Lord Yagno Petrovna, Prophet of Zhakata the Devourer. He wore his red robes of office, but even had he worn nothing but homespun, I still would have recognized him.



He was tall and thin, so thin that I truly believed he might be the only priest to starve himself for the Beast-God. He radiated a grandfatherly benevolence, not that I was foolish enough to believe it. He also had a lizard's eyes and a lizard's smile.

"Good evening!" he greeted me, stepping past the two Swords. "I am Yagno Petrovna. And you are?"

"Jaro Morys," I replied. I was facing away from the High Altar, but somehow I knew it had started to glow. Because every Darkonian with ambitions learns how to grovel, I added, "My lord."

Perhaps Lord Petrovna recognized the reflex. He said, "You are Darkonian."

"Yes, my lord."

"I thought so. From your name and features."

"You are familiar with Darkonians, my lord?"

"I have known a few. Are you a wizard, Jaro Morys?"

He seemed so honestly curious I was half tempted to lie, but I did not.

"No," I said.

Lord Petrovna's expression faltered only slightly. However, behind me Emil Vaduva—who had done his best to slink away from the conversation—cursed under his breath.

"Are you a therianthrope, at least?" he hissed.

"N—" I said.

"He is not," Lord Petrovna stated, very definitely. "If he were a shapechanger, I would know. Believe me."

"Not every Darkonian is a wizard or a lycanthrope," I said. I was honestly rather offended by the implication.

"Do you intend to commit violence upon me?" Lord Petrovna asked.

"No, my lord." This, too, was honest.

"There. See. Emil Vaduva, if you wish to assassinate me, then you will have to pick your weapons with an eye towards their sharpness."

Lord Petrovna nodded to each of his Swords. "Please ensure that Emil Vaduva does not escape over the edge of the roof." They nodded back and moved to flank the hapless priest. I saw Emil Vaduva's hands twitch, as if he were thinking of invoking the Claws or casting a spell. In the end, he did not, and at the time I did not understand why he would submit so meekly to his fate. Only later did I realize that many G'Hennans would rather die human than as a mongrel. Even priests are reluctant to give up their chance of joining Zhakata's Feast. At any rate, the Swords were young, as I have said. They did not interpret Lord Petrovna's command as a directive to help Emil Vaduva take that first long step on a five-story walk to the ground below. They simply grasped his arms and held him still.

With the immediate threat handled, Lord Petrovna steered his attention back to me. He smiled broadly. "What brings you to the Temple at this unsociable hour, Jaro Morys of Darkon?"



I will confess that I considered attacking Lord Petrovna. He was an old man and looked feeble. I had a knife at my belt. His Swords were twenty feet away. The three Inquisitors and the Voice were closer, but I suspected they would all be useless in a fight except to get in the way. If I could destroy the Mad Priest of G'Henna and somehow survive, then Azalin Rex would be certain to reward me. He might even reward me if I didn't survive. But I don't like fights that I'm not likely to win, and one little knife against that lizard smile did not strike me as good odds.

I made the same choice as Emil Vaduva.

I said, "Once I realized I had been drawn into your realm, I wished to meet you, Lord Petrovna. Both because you are a figure of legend in Darkon and because I hoped you might know how to send me home."

If I am not mistaken, his smile warmed slightly when I called him a figure of legend. Either he did not realize that legends can be dark or else he did not care.

"I cannot send you home," he replied. "Zhakata has denied me that power. Believe it or not, although Zhakata has granted me certain gifts, He also sets certain obstacles in my path. I must prove my devotion daily, just like all the faithful."

Lord Petrovna could have been lying. He struck me as someone who would be very good at that. Certainly if he had attempted to bargain with me, favors for promises of freedom, I would not have believed him. As it was, I took his answer as a sign that he might not know about the Mistway which had brought me to G'Henna. Perhaps Zhukar was simply too far from Dervich, and perhaps the Merchants' Guild did hold its secrets tightly enough.

"Well," I said, bowing slightly. "I thank you, my lord, and I apologize for imposing on your time, particularly at this hour."

Lord Petrovna dismissed my worries with an idle wave of his bony hand. "It is no matter," he said. "I sleep very little. I find myself too occupied with mysteries I cannot unravel. Tell me, Jaro Morys, what faith do you follow?"

I had no interest in discussing supposedly heretic faiths with the Mad Priest of Zhakata. "None in particular," I replied.

"Is the Eternal Order no longer the state religion of Darkon?"

"It is, my lord."

"Do you not attend the mandatory services?"

"I do, my lord."

"Do you not believe in the teachings of the Eternal Order?"

Which was worse, to admit to belief in a heresy or to admit to no belief at all? "I do, my lord."

"Then why did you tell me that you follow no particular faith?"

"Because I feared your wrath, my lord."

Lord Petrovna smiled and laid his hand upon my shoulder. I wondered whether he would strip me of my dignity.

He did not. He smiled instead, but sadly.



"You are a foreigner," he said. "I do not expect you to follow the Word of Zhakata. I would welcome you, but I have no expectation that you will join me in my faith. Alas, there is always room for one more unbeliever's ghost in the Ever-Barren Fields."

The lizard was gone from his smile. He had absolute faith in the punishment of non-believers.

Over his shoulder, I saw one of the Inquisitors withdraw a dagger from the loose sleeve of his red-orange robe. This motion drew my attention and then my gaze.

Lord Petrovna noticed my distraction. He must have misinterpreted it, though, because he merely said, "Have faith, Jaro Morys."

The assassin had not chosen a poor opportunity. Lord Petrovna's attention was directed at me. The Swords were occupied with Emil Vaduva. And he must have judged, just as I had, that the other priests would only get in each others' way. He raised his dagger to strike Lord Petrovna's apparently undefended back.

The yellow-robed Voice, whom we had all disregarded, moved with a viper's speed. He caught the assassin's wrist and twisted his entire arm behind his back. The assassin cried out. His dagger rang against the flagstones. The Voice twisted further and kicked at the back of the assassin's knees. I heard the crack of a breaking arm. The assassin's face smashed against the flagstones, and the Voice knelt upon the assassin's back to pin him there.

Without looking behind himself, Lord Petrovna said, "Thank you, Vancho."

When the supposed Voice looked up, he was smiling. "It is my honor, My Lord." Vancho, too, believed in punishment.

Lord Petrovna turned away from me, and he crouched to touch the would-be assassin upon the forehead. The entire rooftop was illuminated for a moment by the oily gray light of the High Altar. I watched in horror as the assassin's skin blackened and flaked away, gathering in a whirlwind around his body. Moments later the whirlwind carried the ash high up and away. The creature left behind was something like a fox and something like a bird and very little like a human being. Vancho hurled him from the rooftop. Although the assassin now had wings, one of them was broken.

Emil Vaduva followed shortly.

Lord Petrovna turned to the remaining two Inquisitors. "Plot against your fellow-priests if you must," he said, "but do not plot against me. I will know. And you will be punished."

I left Zhukar the next morning, desperate to reach the *Heretic's Egress*, but even more desperate to be far from Yagno Petrovna.



## Journal Entry – Concluding Notes

I had planned to write up the majority of this report during my journey into the Outlands. Rather than venturing into the Outlands, though, I fled back to Dervich. I have rented a room in a traveler's guesting house while I wait for the Vintners to make their next delivery to the Sunken Lands. I know exactly where the Heretic's Egress is, but of course I need at least one corpse, probably two, to open it. Easier for me if the Vintners deliver a couple of carters for me to convert into corpses.

No matter. I can turn my journal entries and my notes into a proper report when I get back to Il Aluk. The only bit that concerns me are the rumors I've heard today that the Mists north of Dervich have started roiling unnaturally. The people of Dervich don't know what to make of it, except clearly nothing good. However, it sounds to me alarmingly like what happened during the Great Upheaval.

I hope G'Henna doesn't get Severed further. At least not before I get home.

Here ends the report of Jaro Morys, recovered from the ruins of Dervich.



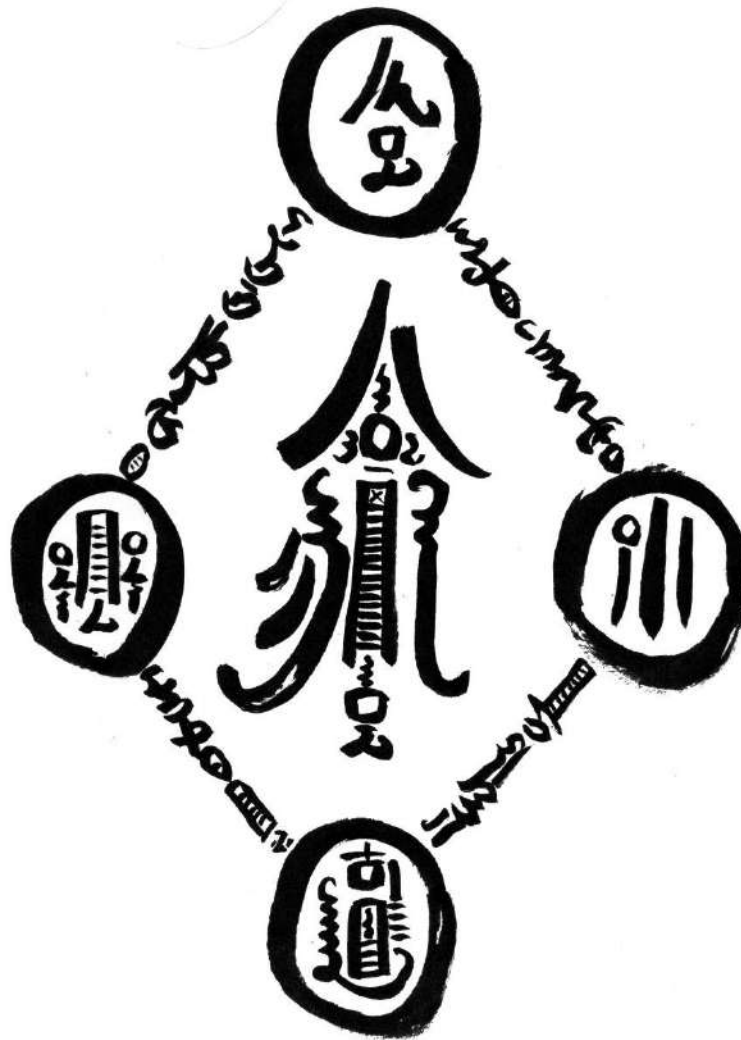
# Excerpts from: "The Register of Monsters"

by Stanton F. Fink





“There was Plato, too” — continued his majesty, modestly declining the snuff-box and the compliment — “there was Plato, too, for whom I, at one time, felt all the affection of a friend. You knew, Plato, Bon-Bon? — ah! no, I beg a thousand pardons. He met me at Athens, one day, in the Parthenon, and told me he was distressed for an idea. I bade him write down that ‘ο νους εστιν [[εστιν]] αυρος.’ He said that he would do so, and went home, while I stepped over to the Pyramids. But my conscience smote me for the lie, and hastening back to Athens, I arrived behind the philosopher’s chair as he was inditing the ‘αυρος.’ Giving the gamma a fillip with my finger, I turned it upside down. So the sentence now reads ‘ο νους εστιν [[εστιν]] αυλος,’ and is, you perceive, the fundamental doctrine of his metaphysics.” *Edgar Allen Poe*, “Bon-Bon”



# SIGHING BISHOP ACEDIO

The Sighing Bishop of the Ten Abominations is a demon lord of sorrow and lethargy. Acedio sprang forth in the Abyss from the souls of those who were damned through inaction, whether because despair had poisoned their wills to live, or who were paralyzed because of convenience and a suffocating status quo.

Those who have been invited into the clutches of the Deacon of Rot are given sanctuary in Acedio's Cathedral of Calm, where they brood on the decisions made during their miserable lives for all eternity as Acedio's mycellia slowly digests them. The Cathedral is an Abyssal layer said to be tucked away in a forgotten corner of Zuggtmoy's Palace, like a tiny parasite burrowing into a mushroom.

It is unknown whether Zuggtmoy approves of or is even aware of her squatter; those brave fools who have tried to broach the topic find themselves suddenly slain by Yibyiru, her major domo.

Acedio's schemes in Abyssal politics run deep, but he has no known allies aside from the other members of the Ten Abominations, and even then, his place within that circle is uncertain to outsiders. The Sighing Bishop's closest ally is his sister, the Last Angel, who also shares his Cathedral as her lair. Acedio enacts his plans through whispers and secret promises of easy salvation granted through eternal dreams. His servitors are despairing mortals who daydream of better chances, some of the more timid species of demon who fret about surviving in the Abyss, and various horrors who creep about in dreams.

The chief symbol of the Sighing Bishop is his Rosary of Stasis, which he uses to count the names of lives destroyed and souls lost to despair and inaction.

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# ACTAEON

Actaeon was a hunter, pupil of Chiron and ardent devotee of Artemis. Actaeon was a powerfully stout warrior possessed of winsome grace and boyish charm. Both of Actaeon's mentors could clearly see their pupil had an aching hunger in his heart.

Chiron taught Actaeon many things and skills, he taught the boy how to walk, how to hunt, how to be a gentleman. The sage set upon the boy many lessons, all of which were easily absorbed, frustrating both teacher and student.

Artemis, by contrast, simply encouraged Actaeon to hunt down whatever it was he needed to know. A thousand hunts later, Actaeon returned to his goddess to request a private audience. Artemis obliged, and after she dismissed her companion nymphs, no one saw the hunter again. Once in a while, other hunters hear Actaeon's voice bellowing in the wind, or see a mighty stag suspiciously resembling their missing comrade. Being far less worldly beings, the other hunters ignore these omens in favor of muttered gossip about their missing friend having drawn the Mistress of the Hunt's petulant pique.





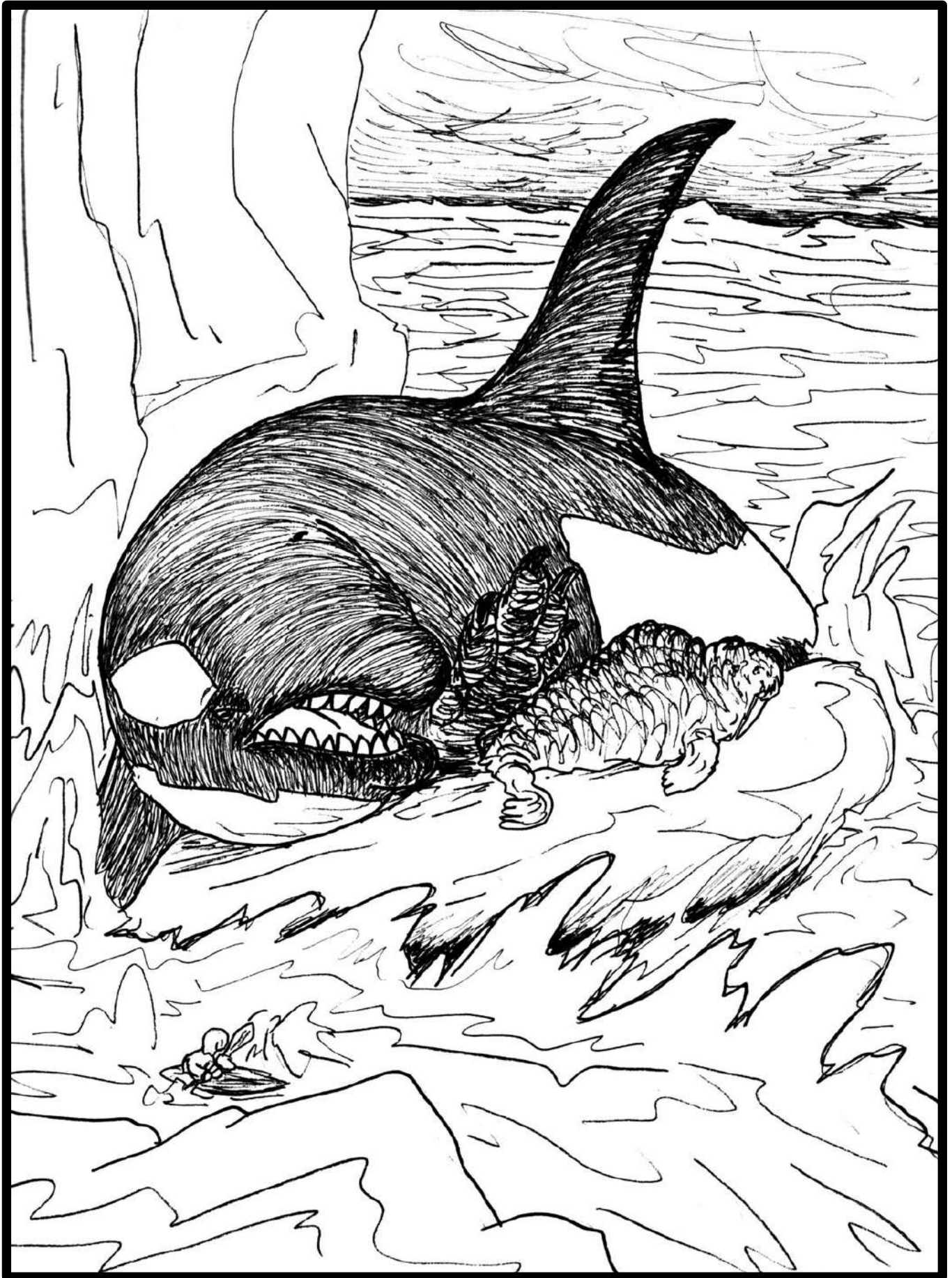
# AKHL'UT

The Kăk-whăn'-û-ghăt kĭg-û-lu'-nĭk, or Akh'ut, is a monstrous shapeshifter. In his home, the water, Akh'lut appears as a bull killer whale who can speak with a very loud voice. On land, Akh'lut becomes a gigantic, black and white furred wolf as big as a grizzly bear. Among people, Akh'lut assumes the guise of a very tall, very stout man, or, more rarely, a very tall, very stout woman, dressed in a parka of black and white fur made out of his own hide.

Akh'lut is a playful trickster who delights in destructive mischief. Akh'lut is not evil, he is simply uncaring of what happens when he applies his immense strength to the general squishiness of humans.

It is considered very bad luck to speak of Akh'lut, as his unrelenting wrath is the stuff of legend and scary bedtime stories. Even so, Akh'lut happily assists any human he befriends or finds amusing.





# BELEAGUERED ARTIST AMENTIA

The Beleaguered Artist of the Ten Abominations is a demon lord who claims dominion over artists driven insane by inspiration. Amentia dreams of conquest, hoping to show everyone, literally everyone, the glories of his vision for the universe. Amentia claims to be a veteran of the Dawn War, created by the Obyriths to serve as their chief artificer and tactician. Had the Obyriths and Primordials cleaved to Amentia's plans, so claims the Beleaguered Artist, the forces of Chaos would have won the Dawn War, and he would have been enshrined in the Abyss as "Emperor of Demons," enthroned upon a pile of a thousand dead gods. But, alas, Amentia's parents and benefactors had other ideas, and in their clashing quarrel of egos was born Amentia's brother and replacement, Superbio.

So wounded, Amentia withdrew from the Dawn War and retreated to his demesne, the Ten Thousand Tower, within the Abyssal layer known as the Graveyard of Dreams, to scheme and daydream of revenge and better things. The Tower is a vast, rickety, tree-shaped structure that stretches miles into an amethyst sky, made of jade blocks, stolen buildings, and scaffolding made of junk riveted together with still-sentient petitioners and living demons. It is where Amentia keeps his studios, laboratories and museums. The Graveyard of Dreams is a dreary necropolis populated by manes, and undead. The only reliable ways to access the Graveyard are through the Infinite Staircase, or within an amethyst fogbank at the very bottom of the Rift of Corrosion.

Amentia delights in receiving guests, so his demonic minions are under strict orders to greet and guide any intruders discovered. Amentia is a shapeshifter, and can assume any form he can imagine: his bad habit of changing forms in mid-sentence unnerves all but the most depraved of souls. His true form is a skinless, bandy-legged storm giant, woven of writhing worms, angel's wings and mannequin parts. The Beleaguered Artist's symbol and favorite weapon is a dancing flamberge named "Delightful Venom." Amentia happily loans Delightful Venom to anyone who asks, though, any sentient being less powerful than a demon lord who touches his sword is stricken with cursed insanity.

The Beleaguered Artist maintains cordial relationships with numerous demon lords and corresponds with several deities. His relationships with the other Abominations are extremely complicated. Depending on his mood, Amentia either rages against Acedio and Desperatia, or pleads with them for succor. He serves as the chief enabler for both Cupiditas and Gulo, securing numerous promises of assistance from them for his schemes. Superbio, in turn, serves as Amentia's favorite patron and hated arch-nemesis, while Malevolentia and Luxuria serving as his muses. Other powerful fiends avoid antagonizing Amentia, mostly because they are not in a hurry to replicate the catastrophic chain of events that turned the Abyssal layer formerly known as "Fortress Invincible" into "The Wretched Tarn."







# AYAKASHI

Ayakashi are demonic molluscs who rise up from the ocean depths to seize nighttime fishermen from their boats. Legends of ayakashi being greasy sea serpents inundating boats with oil are born from confused accounts of the creatures' slimy, grabby tentacles sloughing off copious mucus.

Ayakashi are strictly nocturnal, but not because they are undead spirits. Instead, they are nocturnal because of an unfortunate quirk of their demonic biology. Ayakashi violently combust into flames and explode, as though they were kegs of Greek fire, if they are caught in light stronger than a torch.



# AZ I WU GUM KI MUKH TI

Az I Wu Gum Ki Mukh Ti is the “Walrus Dog,” an unfriendly spirit who guards walrus herds from unworthy hunters. The Walrus Dog protects walruses from their predators, though will allow respectful hunters to pursue its wards to maintain the balance of things. Hunters who overhunt, or are disrespectful towards walruses earn the Walrus Dog's wrath, which will not abate until the marked fools die screaming as they slide down Az I Wu Gum Ki Mukh Ti's gullet.



# BA SHE

The Ba She, 巴蛇, is a great and greatly feared gigantic snake. Although its preferred prey are elephants, it will happily devour anything and anyone that cannot escape its jaws or its coils. In many cases, the Ba She does not even need to eat its victims to devour them: it is infamous for squeezing the flesh off of the victims' bones, and absorbing the crushed flesh through its otherwise iron-hard scales.

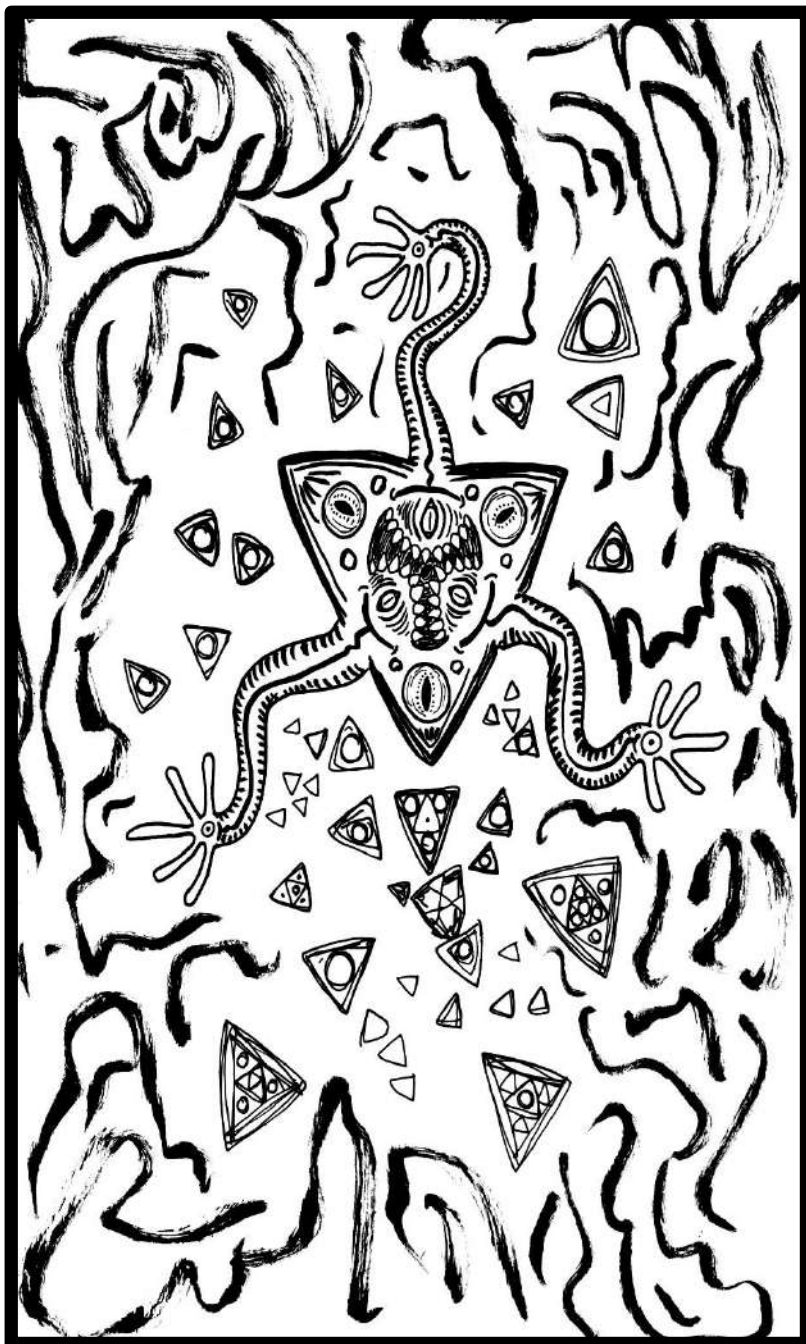
The Ba She lives in a cavern known as the "Elephant Bone Powder Hole," in reference to the fact that the place is littered with the remains of its past victims, including elephants, demons and various others. Despite the Ba She's terrifying reputation, the Elephant Bone Powder Hole sees a steady stream of visitors, demon and mortal alike, as the bones of Ba She's previous meals are collected to make heart and stomach tonics.





# BACTERIODES

Bacteriodes is a virusbeast in service to the Beleaguered Artist, Amentia. This triparite spirit serves as Amentia's favorite messenger. Rumor has it that Bacterioides speaks in nonsensical babbling that can only be understood by Amentia's minions and those touched by the Lord of Insanity. In truth, it's just a lie Bacteriodes spreads in order to frighten others, as it has the power to telepathically communicate with any sentient being. This power of telepathy is often used to facilitate Bacteriodes' other obligations as Amentia's assassin, eroding away a victim's mind until they become a gibbering, murderous puppet.





# BEHEMOTH

Behemoth is the greatest beast of the land, the most ferocious monster of the realm. None can surpass the power, might, strength, or virility of Behemoth: only Behemoth's elder sibling the Re'em surpasses him in size.

With his siblings the Leviathan and the Zuz, Behemoth protects the realm, guarding the land from threats and other monsters. It is prophesied that Behemoth will die fighting his sister-rival, Leviathan, during the conclusion of the end of the world, and that his flesh will feed the worthy.

Until this preordained holy doom comes to pass, Behemoth will remain unmatched.



# THE BIG BAD WOLF

Today, the Big Bad Wolf is a warning, a bogiedog who waits within the forest of hungry brambles, ready to pounce on and devour all of the young fools who were lured off of the path.

The Big Bad Wolf is a wolf in name only. He is a shapeshifter who wears many, many disguises. Sometimes, he is a lasciviously hairy aristocrat, a devious, hunchbacked peddler, a heroic huntsman, a helpful woodcutter, your grandmother from either side of your family, or even a curious, talking wolf.

The Big Bad Wolf is not a wolf. He does not think like a wolf, does not hunt like a wolf, and has no pack.

What the Big Bad Wolf is, no one can really say. Some say he was once a wolf who tried too hard to be a man, and paid the price. Some say he was once a woodsman who tried to stave off his death of rabies by becoming an evil spirit. A few gossip that the Big Bad Wolf is actually King Lycaeon, still searching, still struggling for release from the curse Zeus justly levied upon him so long ago.





## BIOPHOBIA 2

The Biophobias are, for lack of more precise terminology, a series of ectoplasmic beings who are the autonomous, sentient severed appendages of an incomprehensibly vast being in another dimension of the Far Realm. Biophobia 2 is a small, superficially rabbit-like creature that, in its true form, uses a pair of long limbs to crawl along surfaces while seemingly struggling to prevent itself from being thrust into the air due to insufficient gravity.

Much like Biophobia 4, Biophobia 2 is, apparently a devious schemer who disguises itself with powerful illusions, either by interfering with other beings' ability to perceive what it really is, or by folding reality in on itself. Unlike Biophobia 4, who appears to be amassing temporal power, Biophobia 2's motives are more difficult to discern. Biophobia 2 appears to be focused on masterminding large-scale disasters and small tragedies.

Those who would make themselves foes of this being should beware that it has great mastery of both illusions and necromancy. More importantly, its soft, but lethally venomous sting has mutagenic and mind-controlling properties.

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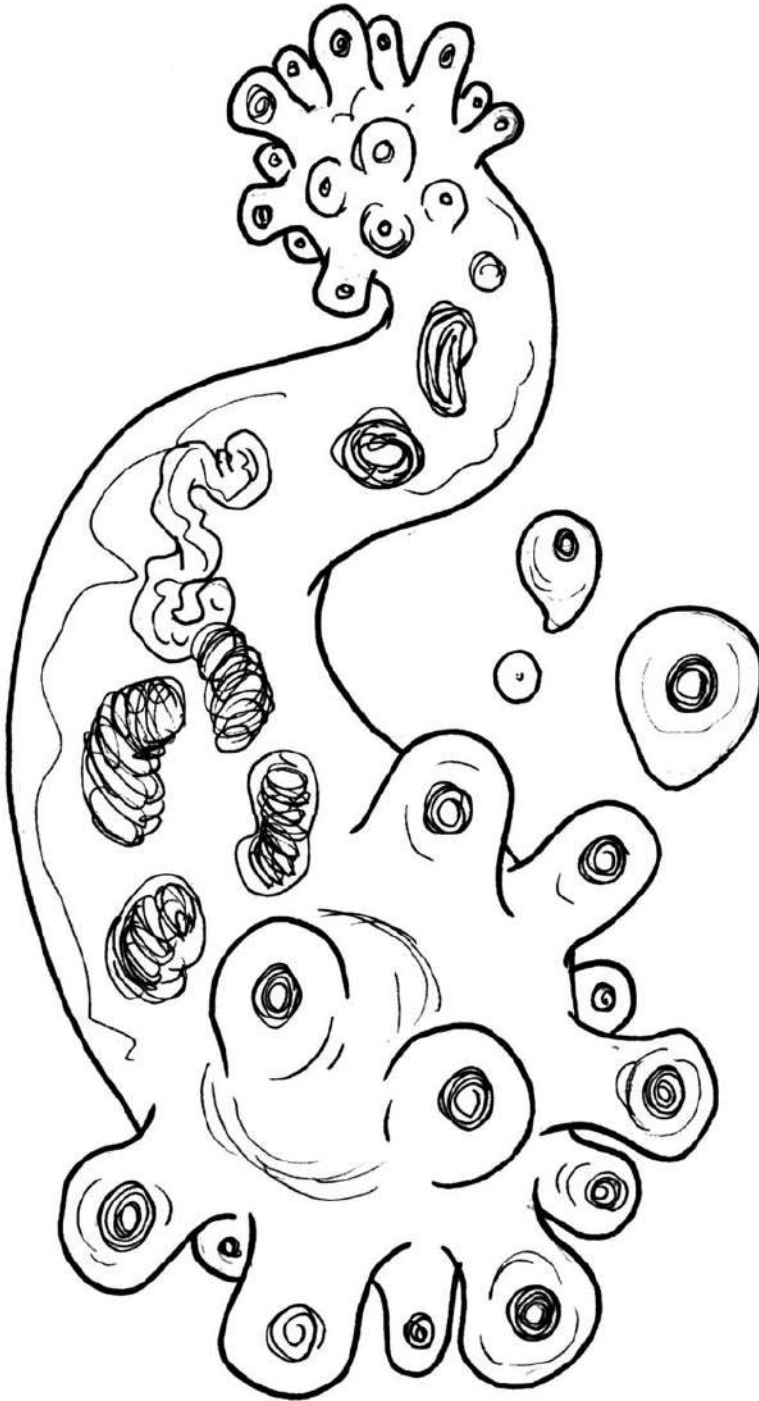
## BIOPHOBIA 3

In, or perhaps beyond the Far Realm is a dimension where all reality there is composed entirely of interconnected globules and strands of ectoplasm which, in turn, compose a sentient being comparable in size to the totality of the Prime Material Plane. Whenever this realm and the Prime Material connect, it attempts to invade by extending an appendage into ours, and when the two realms disconnect, the appendage is severed, becoming a self-aware, self-contained being termed a "Biophobia." It is through the behaviors of the Biophobias that the otherwise unknowable motives of their progenitor are deduced to be possessed of a pernicious malignancy rivaling that of the Infinite Layers Of The Abyss.

For example, Biophobia 3 is a long, ectoplasmic "twist" that, since being stranded here, consumes its victims through a disease it spreads. Biophobia 3 roams the Border Ethereal, secreting vacuoles of its own substance from either end of its "twist." These vacuoles are then thrust into the Prime Material, where they come in contact with living beings. Such infected victims either succumb to an enervating, gangrenous rash, or fly into a raging mania, or both, while secreting more infectious slime. As the disease runs its course, Biophobia 3 then commandeers its victims' bodies, forcing them to do its nonsensical bidding, until they die, whereupon their bodies are entirely consumed.



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# BIOPHOBIA 5

The power of a Biophobia is determined by how much of its progenitor-realm was able to extend forth at the moment of connection and how much was left over upon disconnection. Having said this, attempting to deliberately align the two realms in order to purposely create a Biophobia is a dangerously stupid idea, even if it results in the creation of a weak creature, given the Biophobias' difficulty in accepting even magical coercion and their universally pernicious habits.

The most powerful of the known Biophobias, Biophobia 5, was deliberately created, and the tale of its genesis continues to serve as a warning: Some time after the Reckoning, Asmodeus was approached by a minor demon lord known as Viscount Phongo, Master Of The Quadruple Damned. Phongo allegedly propositioned the King Of Hell, asking in return for arcane resources, military assistance and promotion to Infernal Duke, the Viscount would then pledge his eternal loyalty and servitude to Baator in order to assist with bringing to heel two rogue Archdevils (one allegedly being Grazz't), and help Asmodeus win the Blood War, thereby conquering all of the Abyss. Thus swayed, the King Of Hell granted Phongo the resources he requested, coupled with an army composed of one thousand, one hundred and eleven Infernal legions.

On the day of the proposed invasion, Phongo personally lead his demonic and diabolic forces to the outskirts of one of his greater rivals' (depending who is spinning the story, it may have been Grazz't, Demogorgon, Orcus, or even Socothbenoth) layer, and performed a ritual to open a gigantic gate into the Far Realm in the hopes of summoning a Far Realm creature to begin the devastation. An arm the size of a mountain emerged from the gate, and reached out to grab and crush fully half of Asmodeus' loaned legions. When Phongo closed the gate, the now-detached arm coalesced into a five hundred foot long worm that grew building-sized claws and detached boulder-like blisters filled with caustic ectoplasm. This being, now designated as Biophobia 5, obliterated the remaining fiends under Phongo's command in short order, and then pursued the Viscount back to his own realm of the Fen Of Endless Fire, razing it entirely.

It is said that Phongo's rival did not notice Phongo's invasion until a week later. Some might dismiss this as a tall tale besmirching Asmodeus' judgment, but it is true. The Fen of Endless Fire remains in ruins, Viscount Phongo and Biophobia 5 both have given enormous bounties at Asmodeus' direct orders. Whomever can drop the Viscount at the King of Hell's feet will be granted a barony in Nessus, while whomever can bring proof of Biophobia 5's demise will be granted their personal choice of fifty of Malsheem's captive souls. Those who could bring Biophobia 5 to Asmodeus' heel would be rewarded with a duchy in Nessus and their choice of a thousand of Malsheem's captive souls.

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# THE BLACK ANGEL

The Black Angel is an ifrit who was once a servant of the demon lord Astaroth in the demon's disguise as "Treasurer Of Hell." As a show of good faith, and as an attempt at a bribe to prevent his own execution, the ifrit offered Asmodeus his own true name for safe keeping.

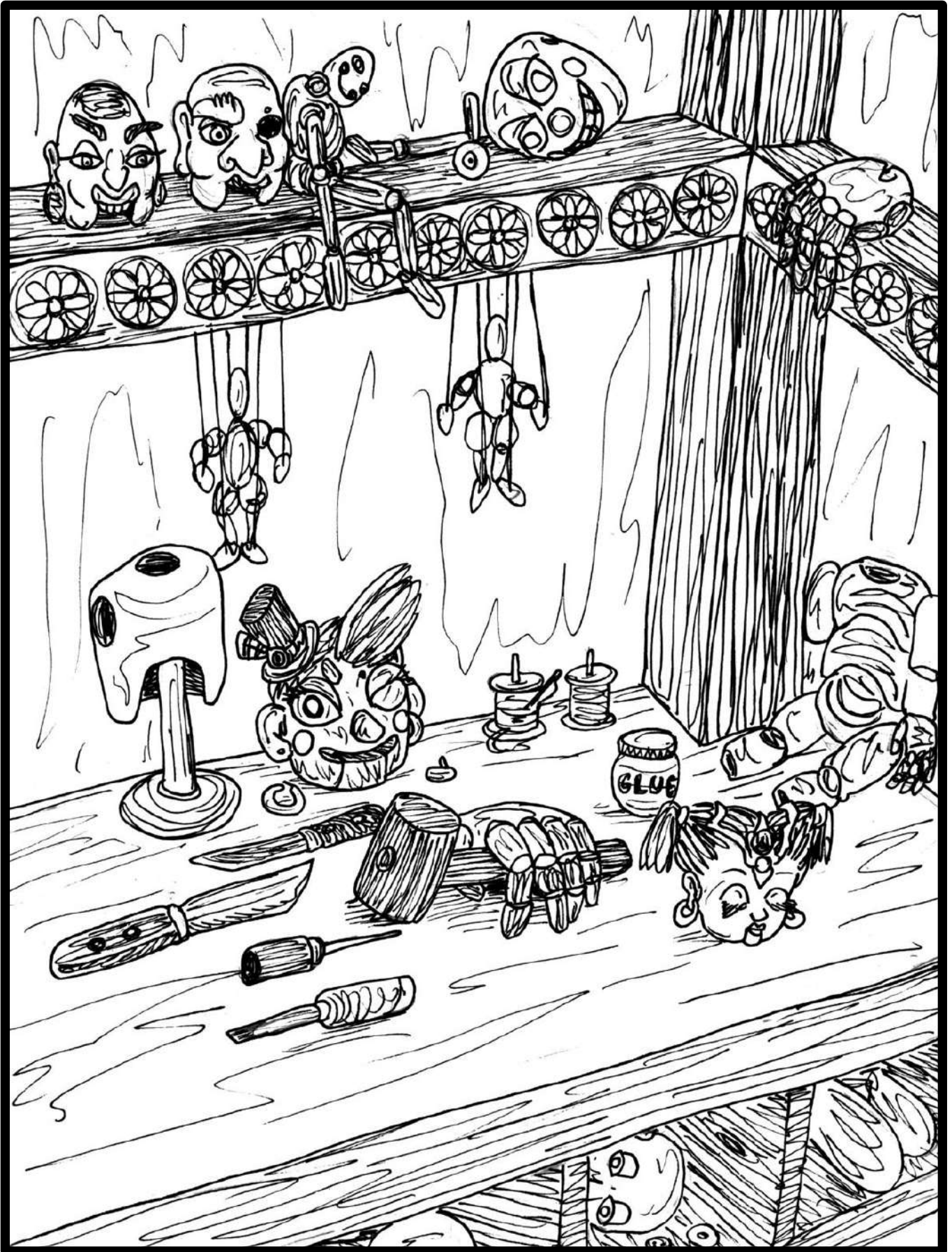




# CHANGELING

A changeling is a species of artificial faerie created whenever other faeries need to replace a kidnapped mortal without freeing them, or, more rarely, need to send a spy among mortals. Because the Faes are talented and imperfect craftsmen, changelings are living, self-aware automatons indistinguishable from very eccentric humans.

An old wives' tale claims that a changeling's doppelganger can be freed by beating the changeling to death with iron. Those Fae who catch mortals following this awful and awfully bad advice blight such abusive louts with deadly curses, provided the enraged Fae don't simply just murder them on the spot. The only actual way to free the original is to directly address the faeries, and firmly, but politely request the return of the aforementioned loved one. If the changeling has been treated well, if not kindly, during the impersonation, then the offending faeries will agree to the request, often on the condition of fulfilling a counter request. Pique and the kidnappers' attachment to the original are the primary factors in determining the inherent difficulty of the counter request, though, Fae are not that terribly motivated to make challenging counter requests of requestors who have been very kind to their changelings.



# CHICKCHARNIE

The Chickcharnie is an impish gnome, or a gnomish imp who lives in the depths of a forest with a discordant nature, either a tropical pine barren, or a distant rainforest with a defined and very snowy winter. In its lair, the Chickcharnie is content to perform auguries for its own entertainment while eating vermin boiled in sugar.

Many stories speak of Chickcharnie's surly disposition, and many more tales speak of the dragon's hoard of magical secret knowledge it begrudgingly bestows upon sincere petitioners who successfully woo it with "please," and "thank you" and a passably winsome smile. Mortals whom the Chickcharnie deems rude are murdered with curses and directed bad luck.

A knave once insulted the Chickcharnie, calling the fiend "an ugly chicken," and was duly cursed to have his head rotated like a confused owl. Thinking himself clever, the knave insulted the fiend a second time in the foolish hope of goading the Chickcharnie into twisting his head back into his head's original position. Instead, the Chickcharnie simply prophesied that stupid man would die, and wandered away. When the cursed knave returned to civilization, other people mistook him for some sort of monster, and drowned him in boiling pitch.







# CHIMAERA

Chimaera is a goddess of storm and flame, born of Echidna the She-Viper, and either Typhon of the Thousand Tongues, or the two-headed Orthrus. Chimaera is a triparite being who has the head of a lioness, the head of a goat, and a large length of python.

When Chimaera came of age and left her mother's lair in Arima, she found her own demesne on a mountain in Lycia. The Lycians then named the mountain after its new squatter, and it became an awful badland of flaming crevasses, filled with noxious snakes, pestiferous goats, and man-eating lions.



# CICADA EATER

Cicada Eater is a rogue god, having been disgorged fully armed and armored by his father, a draconian titan known as Ashu Kaa, the General In Vermilion, during the war between Ashu Kaa and the Gods. Ashu Kaa waged a war against the Gods for their offenses committed against his mother, the Ocean. The General's forces were routed, save for Cicada Eater, whom was ordered to retreat. Ashu Kaa was captured, then executed, and from his carcass new gods were created.

Cicada Eater came to the Citadel of the Gods, begging for clemency. The Gods, in turn, bid him enter as Their guest. Two gods who born from the corpse of Ashu Kaa, Geso Kaa, the Vermilion Tiger In Chains, and Atmasura, Pearly Mirror Of Envy, quickly realized Cicada Eater meant to cause harm, and so, cast him out of their betters' Citadel.

Unaware of Cicada Eater's treachery, the other Gods caught Geso Kaa, who had a reputation as a troublemaker, and cast him into the Wheel of Reincarnation as punishment for bringing harm to a guest. Atmasura, who was beloved within the Citadel, cursed the other Gods as naive fools for being unaware of Cicada Eater's obvious treachery, then set off to rescue his brother.

Cicada Eater currently remains lost in the realm between realms and adrift beyond time. Despite this, he has been able to amass cults who try to assist him in returning to reality, so he may continue his grandmother's plan to tear it down and reshape it into more desirable parameters.

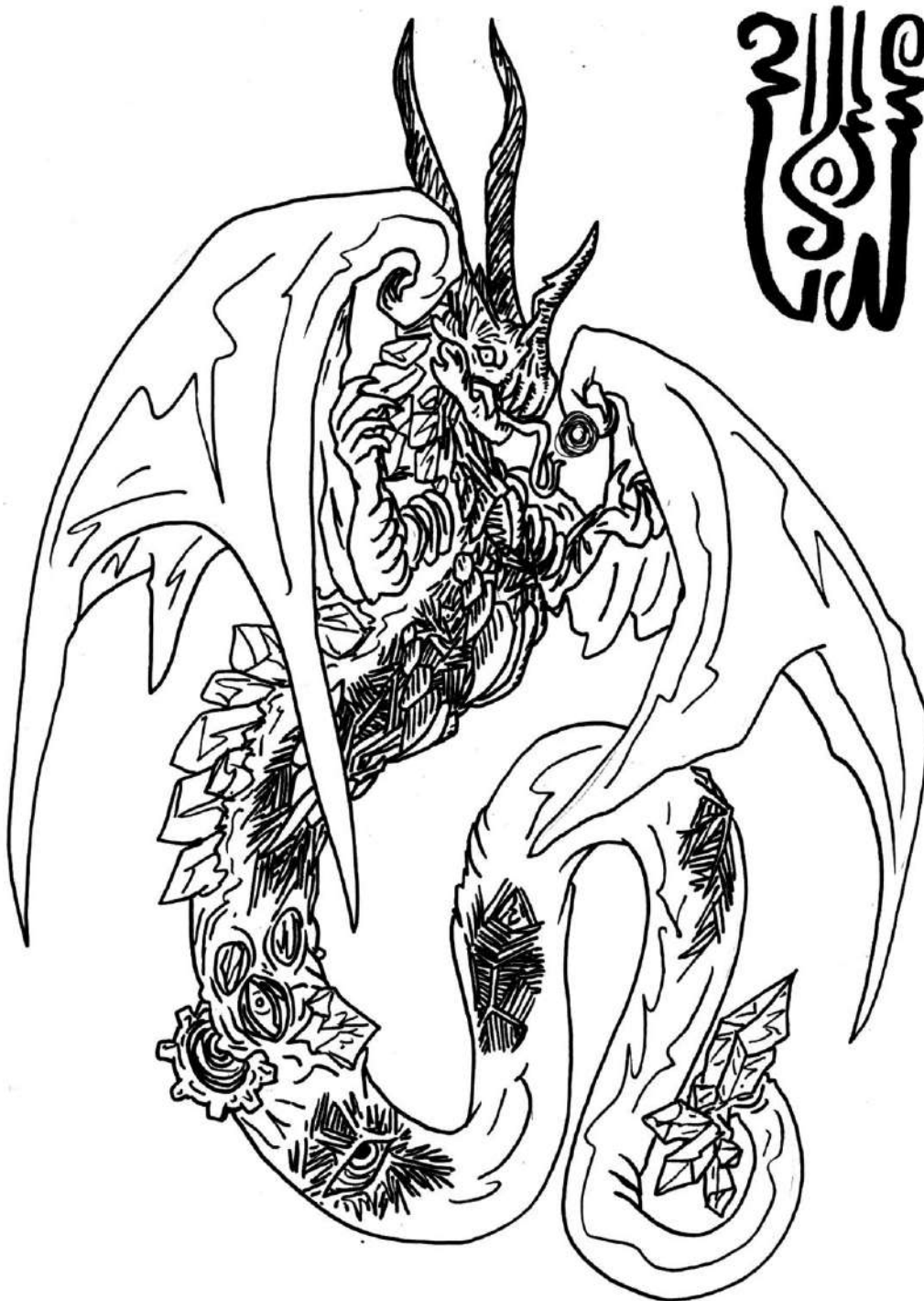


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# THE CLOCKWORK DRAGON GOD

An artificial god who takes the form of an immense dragon composed of mechanical junk and flotsam. It is whispered it was birthed from a child's dreams, and it birthed its form from the child's toys.



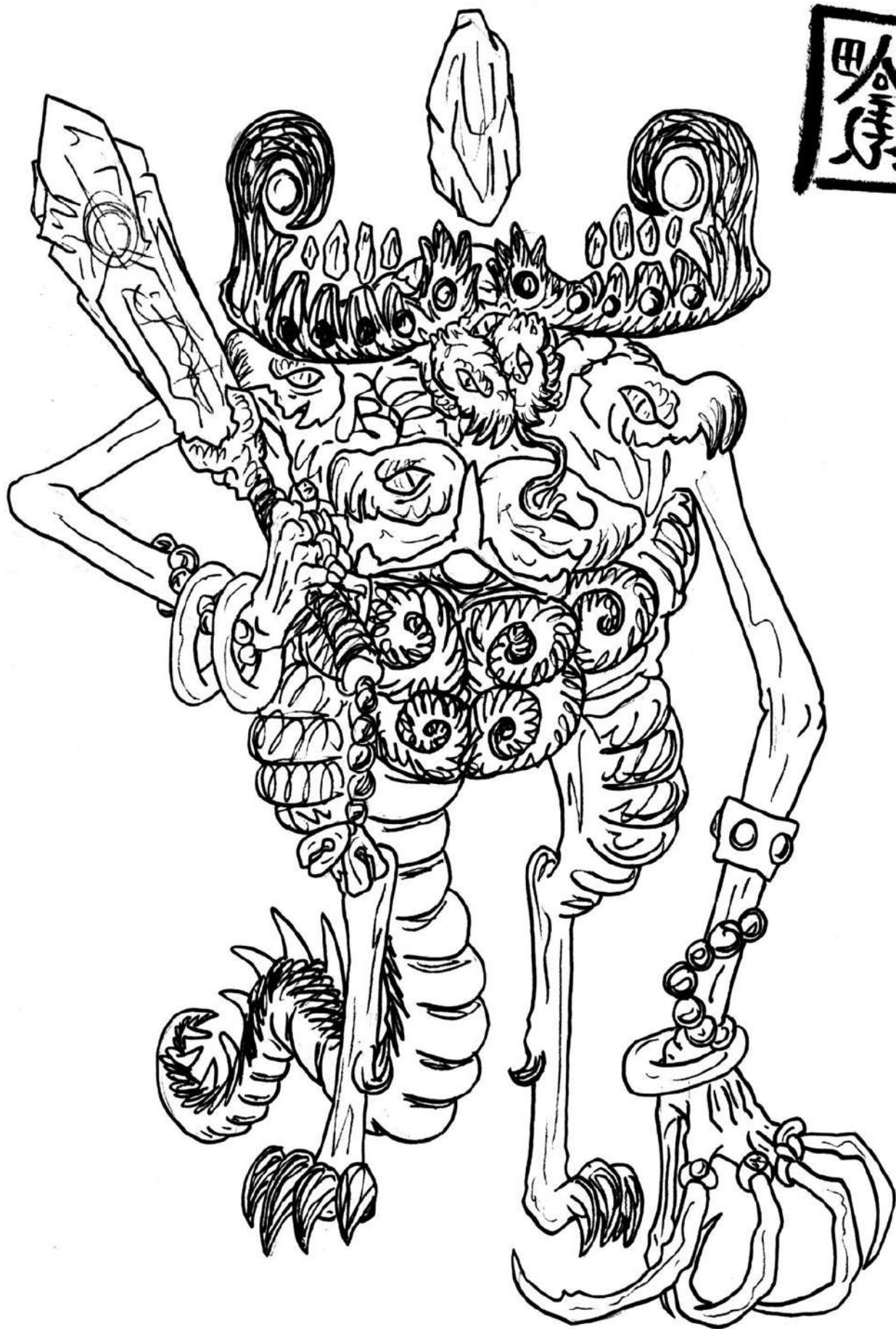


# SCHEMING TREASURER CUPIDITAS

The Scheming Treasurer of The Ten Abominations is a demon lord who claims to be the avatar of Avarice. Cupiditas claims to be originally born of the residual greed of evil dragons whose vile souls were personally cast into the Abyss by Tiamat, herself. Upon being dazzled by Amentias' ingenuity, astonished by Superbio's showmanship, swayed by Fraus' words, and awed by Gulos' voraciousness, Cupiditas swore an oath to assist the Abominations in their ultimate scheme to conquer the Abyss and annex the Universe.

The Scheming Treasurer is a vaguely humanoid being who can be best described as (looking like) a "clot of dragons." He lives in an Abyssal Layer known as "The Counting House Of Heaven," which he personally created by stealing a large temple from the realm of Solania in Mount Celestia, then sequestering it in a cave deep beneath Pazunia. The Counting House contains Cupiditas' riches, his legions of captives and petitioners, all of which he acquires through theft, clandestine purchases, and fiendish bargains. Some of Cupiditas' prisoners are the petitioners of his mortal cultists, or are former business associates, others are dragons and fiends who have been duped into being his eternal, unpaid staff and guards. The members of this last group do not understand that they had forfeited their ability to leave the Counting House forever in exchange for the privilege of manhandling the God of Greed's treasures.

Cupiditas' unholy symbol is his scepter, called "Rubric of The Universe." The Rubric is an orc-sized, luminescent diamond, shifting coloration as it moves, mounted on a shaft of platinum, adamantite and gold. The Rubric allows its wielder to understand the monetary value of anything and anyone it touches, or transform other beings struck with it into precious gems. The Rubric is an invention of Amentias, and was gifted to Cupiditas by Superbio to cement the Scheming Treasurer's place within the Ten Abominations. Other demon lords who grasp the characters of the Beleaguered Artist and the Emperor of Emperors whisper that the Rubric is both a bribe and a poison pill, in that the Rubric is designed to assassinate Cupiditas were he to scheme against his brethren, probably via a tremendous explosion.



# DANS

Dans, Fortune's Harpy, is a destructive spirit who takes the form of a magical sword of varying description, though, all forms possess the powers of flame and to fly about. Fortune's Harpy is a creature of bloodshed, and seeks to seduce and dupe mortals into wielding it. Occasionally, it will allow its pommel to be gripped by someone uncouth like a goblin or a bandit, but Dans prefers to be wielded by inexperienced warriors, or best, yet, by children. It feeds both on blood flow and traumatic emotions.

Dans is said to be such an adept shapeshifter that it has no true form. This rumor has some truth to it, as those few spellcasters who have been able to successfully use divination magicks on Fortune's Harpy perceive it as a painful blot of nothingness where that little plot of reality should be.

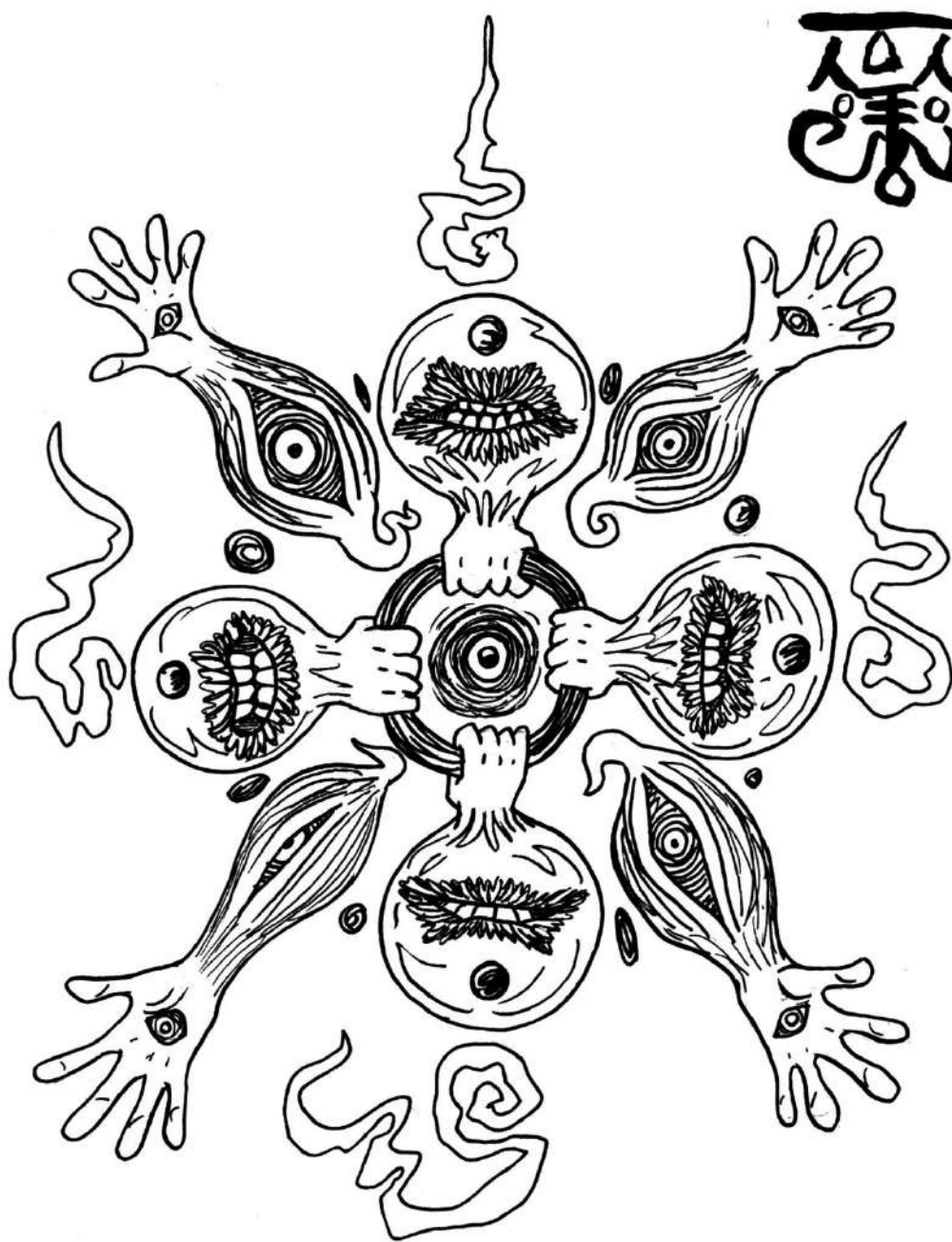
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# DELTAVIRUS

Deltavirus is a virusbeast descended from the god-feyr, Megalovirus. Deltavirus lurks in the Astral Sea, where it attacks astral travelers by attaching detached segments of itself to possess its victims. Such possessed victims return to the Prime Material Plane, or whatever their plane of origin, in order to do Deltavirus' (and Megalovirus') bidding.



# DESPERATIA THE LAST ANGEL

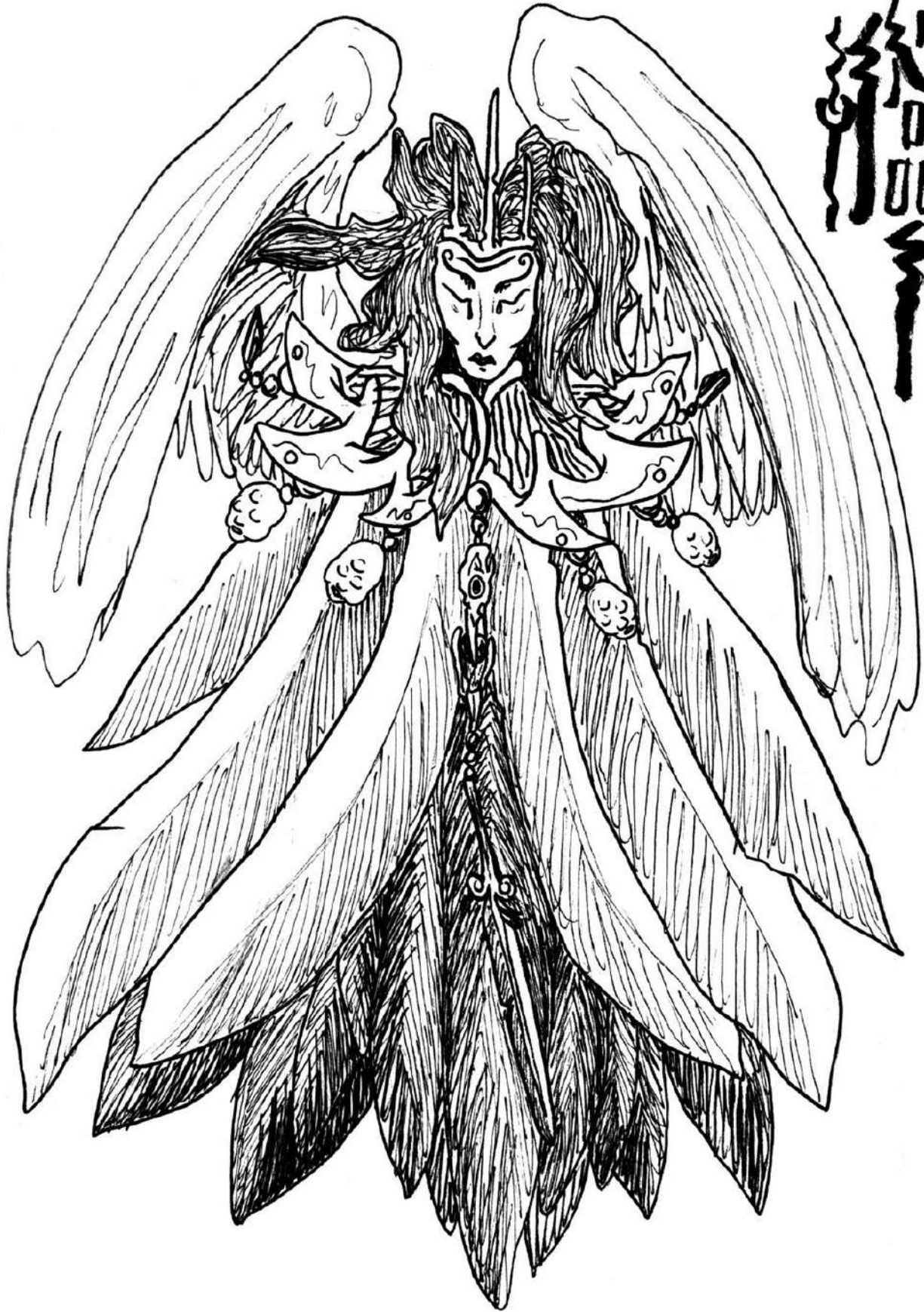
The Last Angel of the Ten Abominations is, technically speaking, both an angel and a demon.

When the obyrith lords gathered by the Queen Of Chaos came to discuss their plans of conquest, they summoned forth a vision of the future, of what would befall this Universe upon the completion of their plans. The vision they saw delighted them, at first. They saw a universe where the last god and the last devil had died long ago, where there existed no life at all, save for one winged being snuffing out the last of the stars, one by one. Looking more carefully at the vision, the obyriths realized neither they, nor their demon servitors dwelled in this future, either. The angel in their vision explained that demon and obyrith died out so long ago, so that no one remembered them. So angered, the obyrith lords cursed the angel and banished this vision, but the angel remained. Later, after the obyriths' failure and fall, Desperatia was invited by Amentia to assist him and his allies in their schemes. Since then, the Last Angel calls the other members of the Ten her kin.

Desperatia sees all existence as agonized suffering, and firmly believes the cessation of existence is the ultimate mercy. Despite her being, technically, an angel, Desperatia believes the best path to ending existence is through the vile machinations of the Ten Abominations.

The followers of the Last Angel share their lady's view that life is misery personified, and seek to spare others of the anguish of existence. As such her children are either members of very punctual suicide cults, or are mercy killers: all of her sanctioned followers arm themselves with copies of her unholy symbol, a dagger known as "Akhir Siksaan Keris." While the Last Angel does not ask much from her minions, she does require they do not take pleasure in murder, as pleasure is a sinfully unnecessary frippery, and, more importantly, she neither condones, nor tolerate additional unnecessary suffering spread in her name. Those who would turn to the Ultimate Mercy for the sake of causing unnecessary pain are captured, and imprisoned in hidden chambers of Acedio's Cathedral of Calm, where Desperatia demonstrates to them in gruesome detail exactly *why* life is suffering.

天照大神





# DRAGON

Dragon is an old thing who was once a serpent in Tiamat's brood. Dragon escaped the slaughter of his siblings by becoming a carp and swimming away.

When Dragon resumed his true form swimming up a mountain waterfall, villagers mistook him for a god. So, Dragon became a guardian beast for the villagers of the mountain, bringing his wards rain and good weather, while devouring bandits and other, lesser predators. As the years passed, Dragon's pets grew weary of their patron's jokes even as they suffocated under his tithes. The peasants' grumblings attracted heroes eager to free them. After eating a hundred, perhaps a hundred score of these would-be assassins, Dragon attracted the attention of the Gods, who then promptly dispatched their executioner, Jurong, Lord of Fire, to exterminate that thieving imposter.

Dragon's battle with Jurong destroyed his mountain aerie, and obliterated the mountain, too. Because Dragon has always been slippery, he survived his execution at Jurong's flaming talons. Now, Dragon masquerades as a man, sometimes as a lesser beast, while he schemes to build a new protectorate.





# EACH UISGE

Each Uisge is the greatest, most ferocious, most pernicious of the water horses. Some would compare it to Diomedes, others claim the Each Uisge was a child of Echidna and Typhon gifted to Epona.

Like its sibling, the Kelpie, Each Uisge presents as a fantastically handsome horse, sometimes bedecked in bejeweled riding gear, sometimes having fur shiny with dripping pond scum. Other times, the Each Uisge will appear as a donkey, a dog, a goat, a cat, or even a fearsome chicken. In any disguise, the Each Uisge has a cruel eyes that glitters with a terrifying light.

Despite its well-earned reputation as a relentless man-eater, the Each Uisge is a lonely beast. To balm its loneliness, the Each Uisge seeks a companion, often assuming the form of a strong, but beguiling man, or a fierce milkmaid to better woo a new friend with. These forays always end in tragedy, one way or another, such is the Each Uisge's curse, rampaging in retaliation to its companion's inevitable death, or worse, rejection.





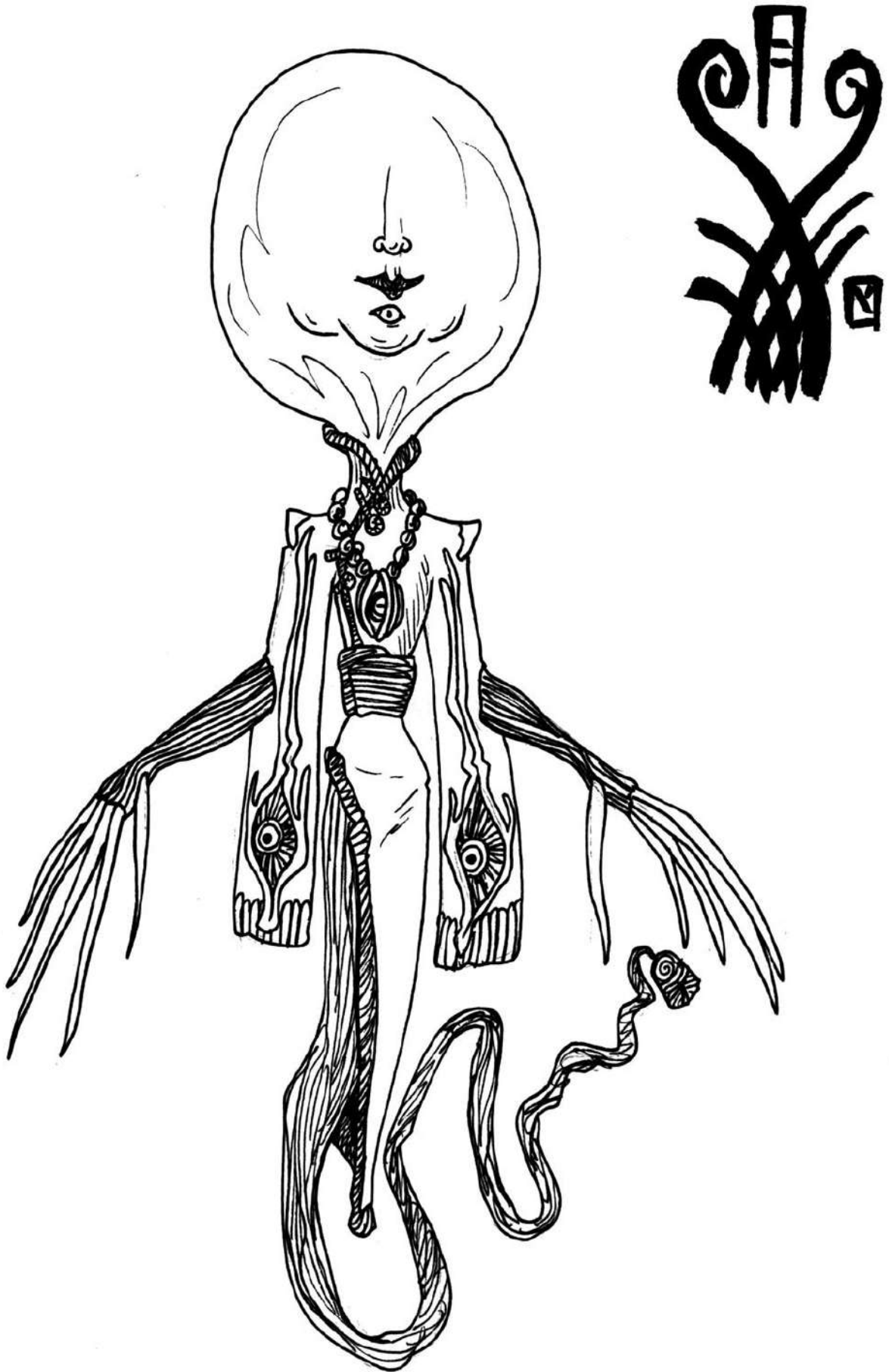
# EBDELLA

Ebdella the Devil Of Stagnation is an archdevil who currently lairs in a hidden sanctuary in Avernus. Once, Ebdella was an erinyes under Dispater Of Dis, first serving in the Iron Father's armies, and then, later promoted to a position within the bureaucracies of Dis. In ensuring the efficiency of her departments, Ebdella would eventually be promoted to a unique devil in recognition of her efforts.

Ebdella's subordinates were not fond of her, as being assigned to one of her departments meant seeing their own infernal careers come to a dead end. At first, it was assumed that she was stealing all of her lackeys' credit while passing all blame for her own failures onto them. But, as numbers began not adding up correctly, it was discovered that Ebdella was actually skimming off her assistants' life force for use in unauthorized experimentation.

For her wrongdoings, Dispater banished Ebdella from Dis under penalty of death should she return. Ebdella was spared from being executed, though, as Asmodeus saw value in her experiments. Thus, the Devil Of Stagnation was exiled to Avernus, where she labors hard, using kidnapped devils and waylaid visitors, to produce a result valuable enough to allow her return to good standing in diabolic society.





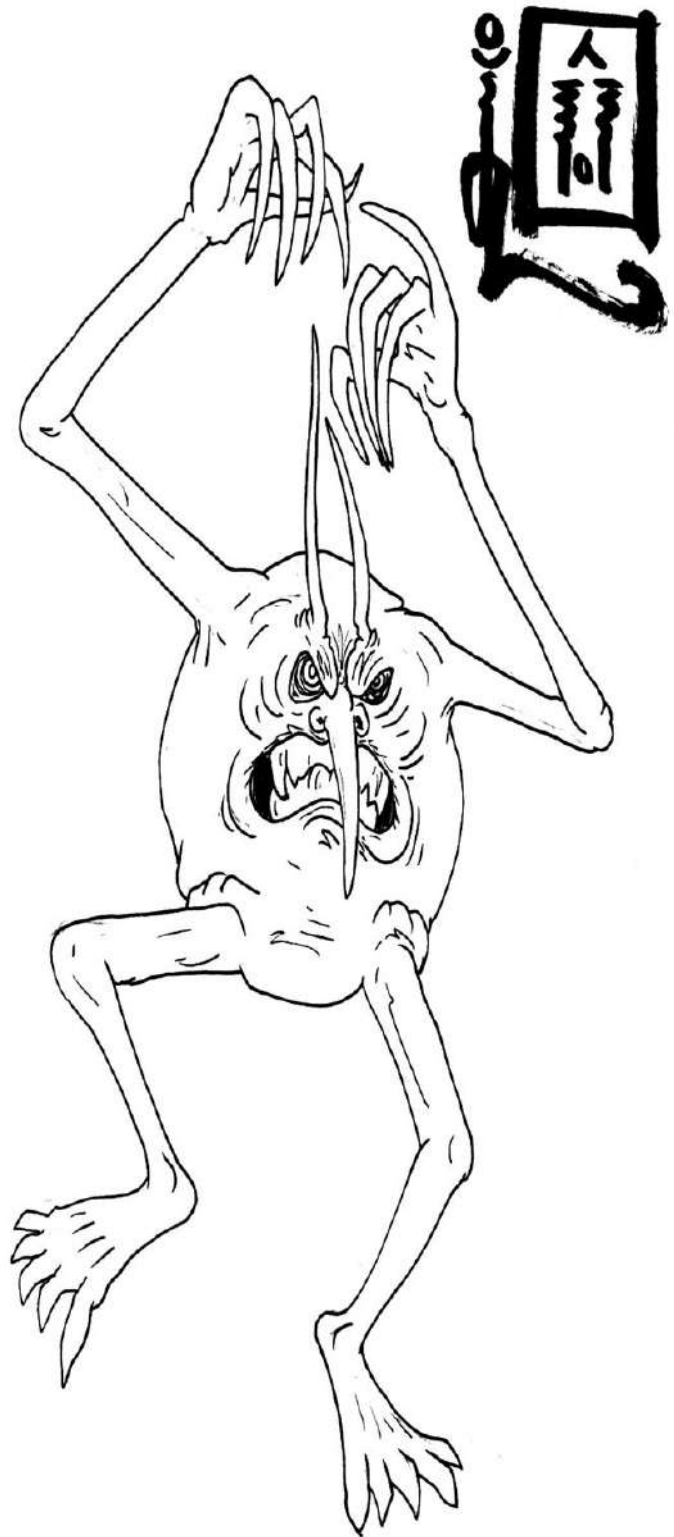
# EMISSARY OF SLEEP

The Emissary of Sleep is a demon who brings the gift of sleep everlasting to the long suffering, having been born of a now-dead civilization's yearning for eternal rest. The Emissary is the Herald of the Last Angel, who rescued this pernicious being from premature destruction.



# THE FALSE DRETCH

A weird demon who superficially resembles a dretch, but having much longer limbs, and possessed of a profound intellect.



# FEN HAHA

Fen Haha, the Gourd Princess, is a bug-eyed, insane green hag in service to the Green Empress. Fen Haha claims to be an apprentice of the Green Empress, and worships her mistress as a mighty goddess. The Green Empress, in turn, appreciates Fen Haha's devotion, seeing the insane crone as an invaluable subordinate.

Fen Haha proselytizes towards her fellow hags in the hopes of swaying them to her mistress' cause, whatever that is. Other hags who know of Fen Haha respectfully nod their heads while discretely muttering under their breaths, as while they have limited interest in joining Fen Haha's devotion, they give immense respect and caution to anyone who has the power to incinerate a trio of enraged annises with the casual shake of a calabash.

Unlike other hags, the Gourd Princess has no interest in eating children, given as how she adores younglings of all species. Instead, Fen Haha kidnaps children in order to train them as her disciplines so that they may eventually be returned to the world to spread her mistress' word.





# DECEIVING MERCENARY FRAUS

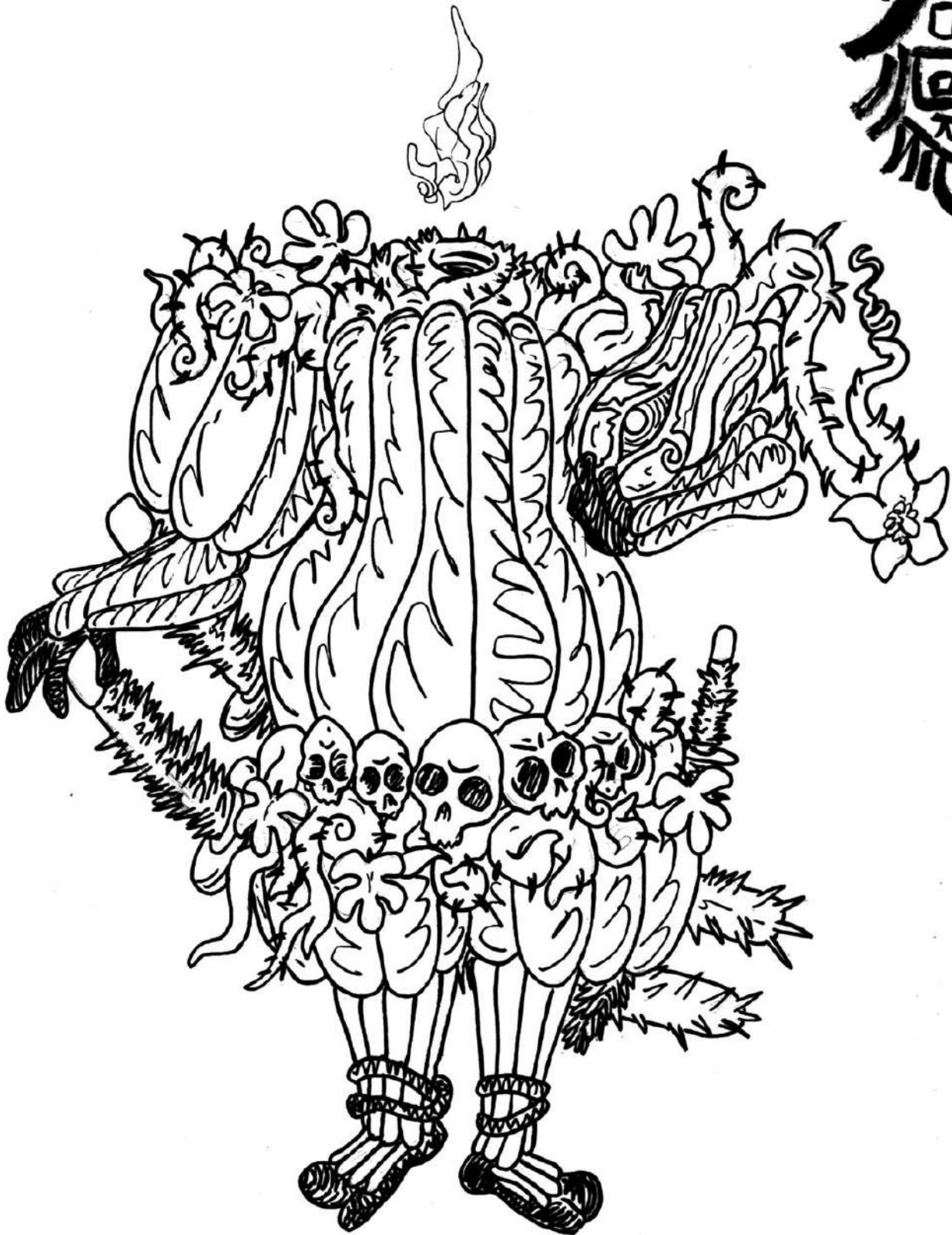
The Deceiving Mercenary of the Ten Abominations is the chief seneschal of Superbio, Emperor Of Emperors. Who Fraus was prior to his current role is unknown, but, there are a lot of speculation, even without the Mercenary's penchant for obfuscation. Some guess that Fraus was once an archdevil who was banished from Hell because his many, many, many contracts with mortals were invalid due to prematurely damning them without actually providing any promised goods or services. Others theorize that the Mercenary is actually some sort of primordial of deception whom the Obyriths enslaved by encapsulating him in his now-iconic pumpkin plate mail armor. Who he was only Superbio knows.

As mentioned, Fraus serves as Superbio's seneschal, acting as his messenger among other demon lords, while intercepting and relaying juicy gossip. Fraus has many minions of his own, some having been ensnared by the Mercenary's words, others freely serving the walking pumpkin patch out of a warped sense of honorable comradery between fellow confabulators. Whatever the Deceiving Mercenary's alleged origins, he was press-ganged into the Emperor of Emperors' service when Superbio confronted Fraus with a hidden truth so terrible that, if made public, it would mean Fraus' own excruciating death. As a show of good faith, Superbio has placed this secret in a box, hidden in a secret chamber behind his throne in his Abyssal Layer, "Palace Of Heaven." As a safeguard, the box is cursed to transport anyone who tries to open it without Superbio's permission to the Plane of Vacuum: Fraus has struggled this particular frustrating truth at least three times.

If he has a say in the matter, Fraus prefers not to fight opponents, but, instead, converse with them in order to enslave them with his literal chains of countless lies. Foes arrogant enough to assume that they are too canny to fall for the Lying War Chieftain's confabulations are met with his two great words, "Tongue" and "Truth-Cleaver," and his poisonous short sword, "Tact."



戲院



# GAGANA

Gagana is a talking bird who lives on the island of Buran in the middle of the ocean of Ros, where it serves as the caretaker of the Alatyr, “Father of (Precious) Stones.”

Gagana is described as having a beak of iron, claws of copper, and always in the company of its counterpart, Gaarafena the Serpent. While Gagana is very kind to visitors, laying candy eggs of sweet milk for them if they seem hungry, it does not hesitate to use its beak and its talons on anyone who attempts to interfere with its ward. Truly troublesome guests discover to their woe that Gaarafena is actually Gagana's venomous tail.



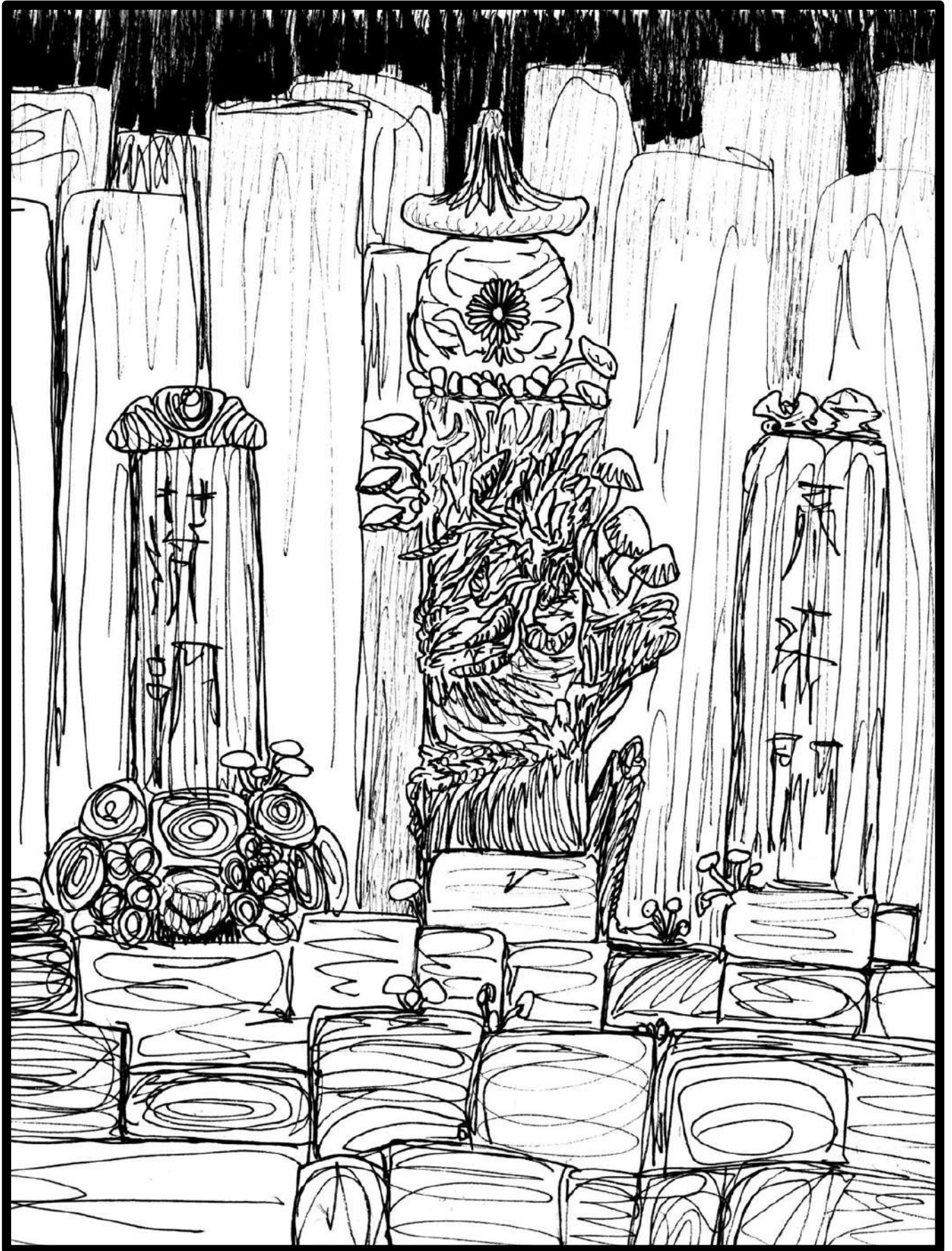


# GAKI

Preta, or gaki, are wandering spirits of the damned who destroyed themselves through their own gluttony. By day, these spirits are imprisoned in a sandstone cavern called “The Desert of Want.” Here, the damned wander about in misery, trying to eat each other while whining in agony about how they have no way to sate their eternal appetites. Demons come to the Desert, not to torment the damned, but to harvest and literally bottle the ambient suffering like a wine.

Because sandstone is porous, the preta flee into the Living World come every nightfall, where they attempt to consume things in a vain attempt to numb their pain, with limited success. Most gaki are unnatural scavengers who root through garbage, steal food, and beg for alms from the living. A few are vampiric parasites who feed on stolen bodily fluids. Come sunrise, the hungry ghosts are banished back to the Desert of Want to repeat their torment over again and again and again until, eventually, enough of their karmic debt is repaid to allow the damned soul to reincarnate.





# THE GARDENER

The Gardener is a bizarre earth elemental who has wandered various worlds of the Prime Material Plane for centuries, marveling at the various biomes it passes through.

The Gardener gets its sobriquet from its hobby of terraforming a stretch of land it claims, shaping the environment to conform to a current whim. The Gardener's in-depth study of botany and horticulture allows it to conjure all manner of terrestrial plants. One day, it may claim a horse pasture and transform it into a nearly impenetrable rainforest copse, only to turn the forest into a hedge maze of rose brambles the following week.

This spirit is fiercely territorial, and is quick to drive out anyone it perceives as disruptive, having a burning hatred of druids, as well as dwarves, elves, goblinoids, and anyone carrying an ax or a saw. Despite its aggressiveness towards interlopers and foresters, the Gardener tolerates squatters provided they don't attempt to countermand the spirit's aesthetics. In some instances, hags and other spellcasters have been able to convince the Gardener in creating arcane gardens on their behalf by carefully making polite suggestions and tasteful recommendations.



蘭



# GESO VAMIDAR

Geso Vamidar is a sorcerer-priest of the Apokryltaros. He prides himself on having literally stripped away all of his humanity in service to his master. He seeks to kidnap and forcibly convert more acolytes, as well as murder people to sacrifice and replenish his zombie legion.



# GRIMALKIN

Grimalkin is a demon who roams the night, devouring livestock and wayward travelers. By day, Grimalkin wears the guise of a feral housecat with dark, glimmering eyes. In this persona, Grimalkin hunts for wrens or mice while begging for milk. Those who offend Grimalkin are eaten alive after nightfall. Those who befriend him are carried off to live in his secret home forever.





# RAPACIOUS SOMMELIER GULO

The Rapacious Sommelier of the Ten Abominations is an ancient war hero of the Abyss, being a storied veteran of both the Dawn Wars and the first half of the Blood Wars. Gulo is a powerful tanar'ri prince created by the Obyriths from the hungry souls of cannibals, wicked gluttons and insane epicureans.

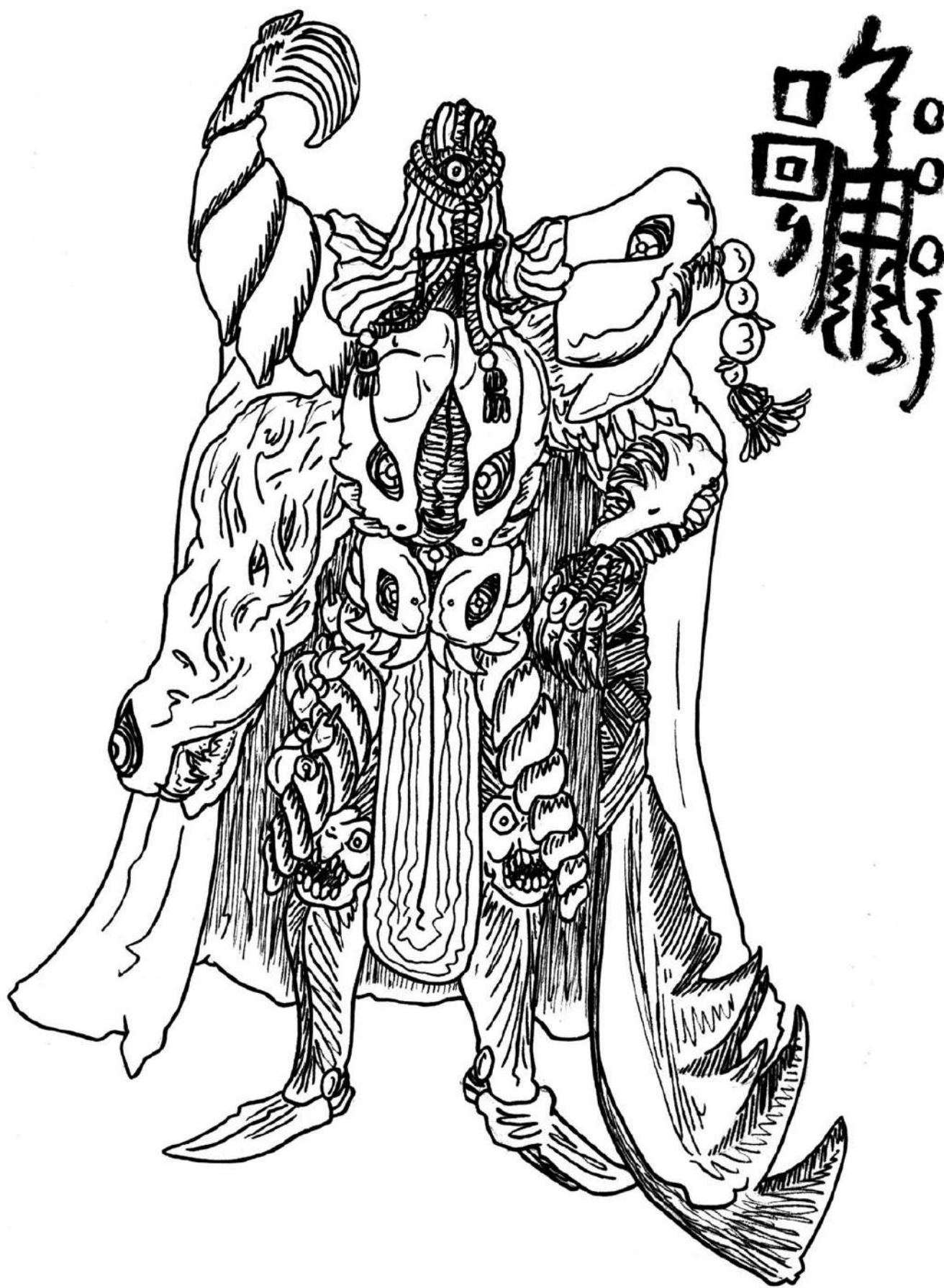
During the Dawn Wars, Gulo won hundreds of battles, legions of celestials and devils alike disappearing down his gullet (of course, victory never stopped him from devouring his own demonic troops, either). It is said that Gulo's fighting prowess won him enmity from both Heaven and Hell. During the Blood War, Gulo would withdraw his armies from battle upon hearing of his comrade, Shaktari, the Queen of Mariliths, being imprisoned in the Wells of Darkness, partly because he decided he no longer had a taste for warfare, and partly because he feared becoming another victim of treacherous envy like Shaktari.

The Lord of Gluttons retreated to his demesne in the Abyssal Layer of "Candy Mountain," a ridiculously idyllic realm where children play in meadows filled with fondant flowers and apparently tame demons labor away in sprawling vineyards and fruit orchards. Closer examination of Gulo's realm shows that the paths are paved with broken bones and chewed bits of metal, that the "children" playing are actually ghouls and dretches being fattened for harvest, and that the demons slaving away in Gulo's wineries do so out of great fear of being eaten by their master, overseers and the plants, themselves. When Gulo is not puttering in his viticulture labs, experimenting in his labyrinthine kitchens, wandering in his dungeon-pantry, or visiting Durao for sentimental nonsense, he is usually found in the Feast Hall of Candy Mountain, indulging in various pleasures. The Hungry King is always eager to receive guests, and is a very kind and generous host who delights in sharing his experiences and succubus attendants. Guests who are wise always bring a gift, partly to be polite, and partly to distract Gulo from devouring them on the spot.

The Rapacious Sommelier is a debauched hedonist who has fathered thousands of cannibalistic pleasure cults across the worlds devoted to sharing their lord's hunger. It was through his hedonistic impulses Amentia and Superbio were able to woo Gulo into allying with them, with Amentia demonstrating his knowledge of edible, consumable applications of alchemy, and Superbio's words whetting Gulo's slumbering appetite for conquest.

Gulo's unholy symbol is his gigantic military sabre, the Life-Destroying Mandible Sword. The Mandible Sword is said to be forged from the jawbone of an obyrith lord, the only remnant of whom Gulo could not eat.





# HAOOT

“Haoot” is a Beothuk word meaning “demon,” and referred to a carnivorous spirit of the howling wind. Haoot, named for its cry, preferred to eat the corpses of Beothuk, which was why Beothuk funerals were quiet, ritually secretive affairs.

When such a corpse could not be found, Haoot was forced to make do with the living. On sunny, windy days in Labrador, people would take shelter. If a large, dark shadow fell upon a person while there were no clouds in the sky, Haoot had marked that poor soul for his supper. Such a damned creature would then disappear in a blustering gust as Haoot gobbled him up.

What Haoot looks like, no one alive knows anymore.

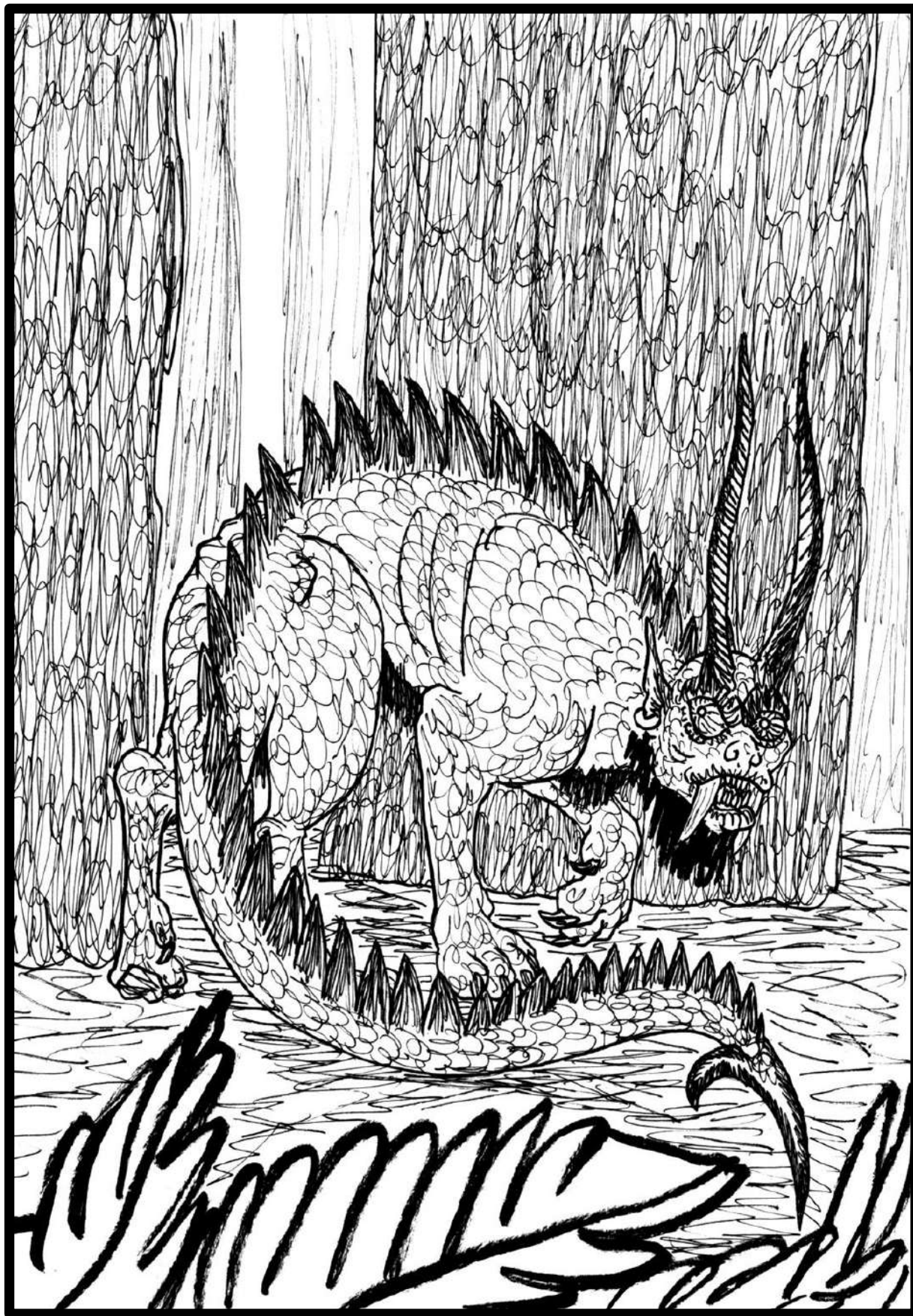


# HODAG

The Hodag is a fearsome critter invented by hoaxer and lumber scout Eugene Shephard. Shephard allegedly created the silly mythology of the Hodag to draw tourists to the city of Rhinelander, Wisconsin. What isn't discussed is that the real reason Shephard created the hoax of the Hodag was to obfuscate the fact that the Hodag was not only real, but was also Shephard's carnivorous alter ego. Another hidden fact was that Shephard was a veteran of the French And Indian War. As a British soldier, Shephard was following orders to kill survivors in a razed Mik'maq village. One of his victims attacked him, stabbing him with a knife while calling him "boef écaïlex" before dying.

Since then, Eugene Shephard would periodically molt off his human form to become a scaly, horned, man-eating beast. This situation continued until, in the summer of 1923, the last of several teams of monster hunters in the employ of the Smithsonian Institute accidentally blew Shephard, the Hodag, and their corpse up with too much dynamite. So they think.







# HŌKŌ

Hōkō is a deity who lives inside of a camphor tree. Most legends and bestiaries describe Hōkō as a monkey-like creature with the head of a man, and the body of a dog, and who was assigned to care for this tree by another deity. All sources always mention that Hōkō's flesh is delicious, and that his blood is an elixir of immortality.

Most sources neglect to mention that Hōkō was once a mortal wood cutter who mocked a forest goddess after cutting down her favorite tree. The irate goddess cursed the woodcutter to become an immortal monster trapped in her garden, and that his spirit would never pass on until he could restore the tree he destroyed, and unspeak the insults hurled.

Hōkō is immortal, but he is not invulnerable. What little respite Hōkō can be given is whenever he is slain and eaten. The cursed deity becomes whoever slays and eats him, and receives a little respite from his punishment assuming his killer's human identity until his killer's body painfully resumes his divine form.





# HU

Hu is the first tiger, and father of all tigers thereafter (obviously). Hu sometimes claims to be the first cat, too, but this is probably not true, as his mother is a very old leopard. However, it is true that Hu is the father of the White Tiger, of Tian Wu of the Eight Faces, Lu Wu, Guardian of Kunlun, and Lampago, and is the grandfather of Bi An and Satyral.

Hu is a complex and complicated being. On the one hand, Hu is a beast of justice, and a nurturing guardian of the weak and of cats, eager to devour wrongdoers and vermin alike. The Father of Tigers is a righteous foe of both Manticore and Qiong Qi. On the other paw, Hu is a patron of witches, a demon who teaches orphans to transform into tigers, and who teaches peasants to become drunken brigands, and it was Hu who taught cats necromancy.





# IFRIT

The Ifriti are a race of dangerous djinni described as either being beings of smokeless fire, or as murderous creatures of soot. Either description is both true and false, as ifriti are both invisible and consummate shapeshifters. Because ifriti normally appear as nothing, and work evil upon those who offend them, people are taught from a young age to be careful of where they step, and to be courteous, almost but not quite obsequious, lest they invite an insulted ifrit to give them the Evil Eye.

Sometimes, a person will deliberately seek to invoke an ifrit in the hopes of borrowing its power. If Destiny is merciful, the fool's life will be painfully short before Death seizes them. More often, Death dawdles for a while as just punishment for such egregious stupidity.



# IJIRAQ

Once upon a time, there was a hunter who went hunting with his friends, searching for deer. While tracking a huge bull caribou, a snowstorm whipped up. The hunter pressed on, while his friends returned to their village; the hunter preferred to freeze, and his friends would rather starve. When the hunter downed his quarry, he gutted it, and found himself eating its entrails, and devouring its carcass so thoroughly that he burst out of his parka, growing slick, thick black fur in the process. As the hunter struggled with his growing antlers, Ikketujok the Owl came to tell him that he was lost in the Land of the Dead.

Today, people call the hunter "Ijiraq," the Shadow Man. Ijiraq roams the snowy border between the Land of the Living and of the Dead, searching for lost people. Ijiraq appears as a bull caribou, taller than a tree, with black fur, and walking on his hind legs like a man. Sometimes he wears a polar bear's pelt on his humped back. Ijiraq looks like a shadowy blur, unless he's right in front of you, then you can look up and see his human face.

Ijiraq sometimes eats the people he finds. More often, he carries lost travelers back to his lodge, where he feeds and cares for them until they either become like him, or fade away.







# INDRIK

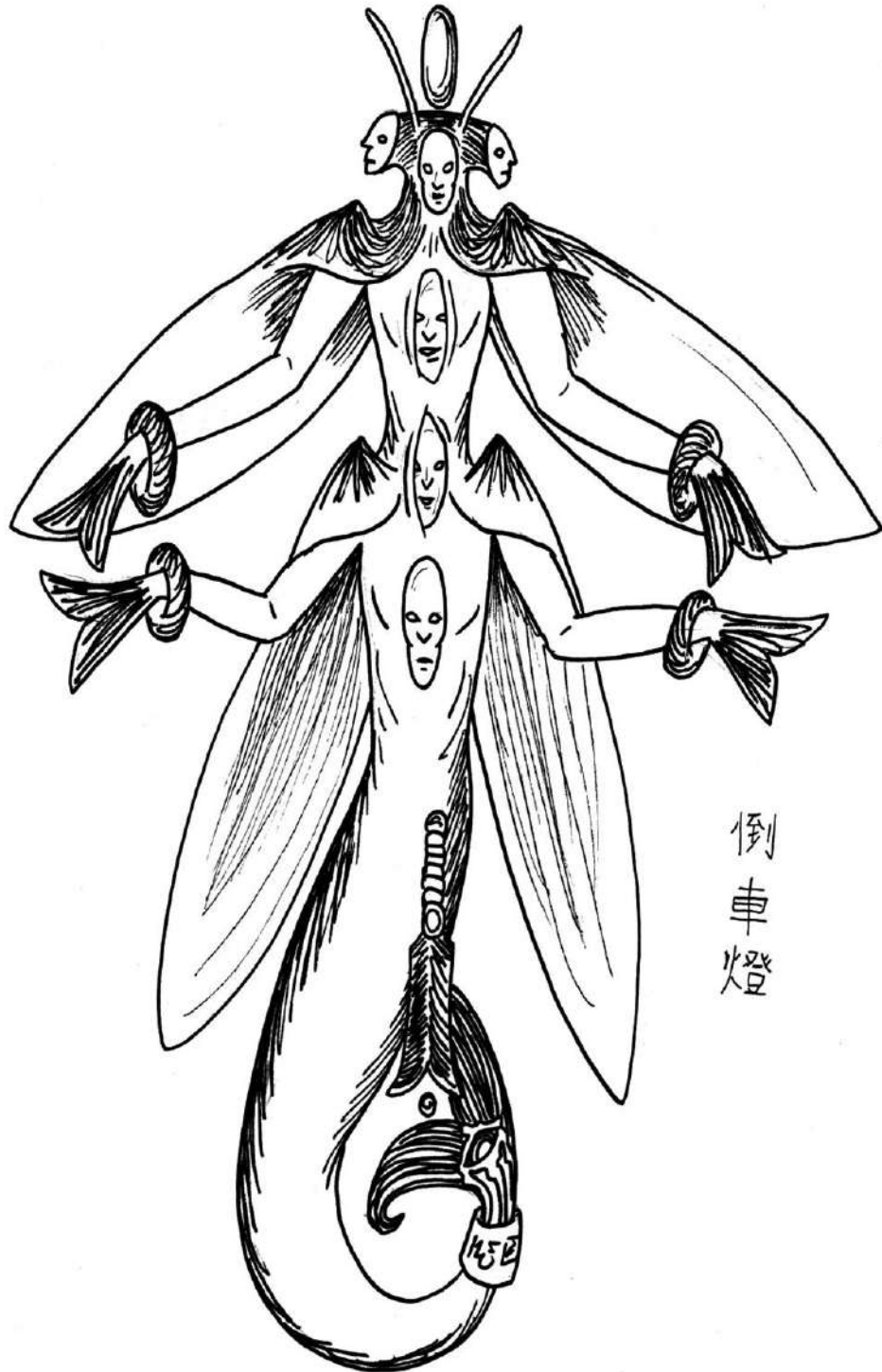
Indrik is a deity of beasts who claims all animals, except for some, certain humans, as his subjects. Indrik's abode is a mountain simply referred to as "Holy Mountain." From Holy Mountain, Indrik holds court, with deer and lions as his ministers, bears as his guards, tigers as his soldiers, horses and serpents as his messengers, and birds as his spies.

As typical of an intelligent beast of Indrik's standing, the King of Beasts is a schemer seeking to increase his influence. Most gossips assume he plans to sire an army of beast people who carry his potent blood in their veins. Others suggest he is fostering animal-worshiping cults: housecats and small goats are two popular sects of Indrik's.



# INVERSE LIGHT

Inverse Light is an evil deity of malignant revelations. It is said that to know of this being is to become (a part of) this being, thus, very little is known about Inverse Light.





# IRAM

The Poisonous War Chieftain is the chief enforcer of the Ten Abominations. Iram was born of both the petulant resentment of Amentia and the wrathful anger of Superbio when both were dismissed from their service to the Obyriths during the Dawn Wars. Amentia and Superbio both shaped this manikin, filling the Vessel of Hate with their ire, then arming him with the cursed great axe, "Cleft Of Poison" before sending him forth during the Eladrin Invasion to assassinate specific obyrith lords.

Iram despises the other members of the Ten Abominations. He resents his progenitors as being babbling fops who keep him on too short a leash, and he loathes Acedio, Cupiditas, Gulo, and especially Luxuria, as being useless, diddling ne'er-dowells. Iram has a special hatred of Malevolentia, as he sees her power plays as counterproductive and hates seeing her "pervert" the sacredness of wrath and anger into whimsical spite. The King of Hatred longs to have a closer connection with Desperatia, as he believes understanding the Last Angel's prophecies may be of use to his desire to destroy, but he cannot stomach her maudlin moping.

Iram longs to slay his brethren, or even at least be free of his obligations to the other Abominations. This is an impossible dream that frustrates him, though, as he knows fully well that the others would destroy and replace him with a much more compliant servant should he act on his desire for mutiny.

Between assassinations and decreed rampages, the Poisonous War Chieftain sulks in a dungeon within Superbio's Palace of Heaven. Iram bides his time by starting cults, recruiting mortals by offering them the chance to live out their revenge fantasies. Such cults rarely last long, as they disintegrate due to cultists eventually shifting the focus of their wrath onto each other.



葬



# IXIN

Ixin is a spirit of war and warfare who calls upon its devotees to claim what is rightfully theirs through force, irregardless of whether it truly is theirs. Cultists of Ixin are largely uncaring that Ixin is a patron of strife.



# JIA YU

Jia Yu was once a sage and a deity in service to Yan Di, the Fiery Emperor of the South. Upon Yan Di's defeat at the hands of Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor of the Center, Jia Yu, with some reluctance, became a member of Huang Di's court. Despite having once been a bitter rival's chief chancellor, Jia Yu quickly earned his new lord's trust and became one of the Yellow Emperor's most trusted advisers.

Jia Yu had a rival, a minor god named "Wei." Wei was Huang Di's valet for centuries, and became jealous of his master's new vizier. But being a mostly impotent spirit of dusting and clothes-folding who lacked the authority to touch an inkstone, let alone study poetry, Wei had no way of attracting Jia Yu's notice, let alone best the sage. So, instead, Wei manipulated Qinpi of Gu into becoming Jia Yu's rival. Wei nurtured the animosity between the two gods until their hatred destroyed each other and revived them as monsters.

Both rivals gone from Huang Di's court, Wei was certain his own promotion was at hand when his master requested a private audience with him at Shushu Mountain. There, Huang Di ordered Wei to confess what he knew of Qinpi's and Jia Yu's feud. Upon hearing Wei's role in this mess, the Yellow Emperor personally flayed his valet alive, and then sewed Wei's skin back on before commanding Zhurong, Lord of Fire, to incinerate the errant god.







# JOY OF SORROW

An evil spirit who was once a wicked sorceress. Through prowess of her debauched craft, she was able to become an evil spirit, and seeks to become a goddess of evil magic.

詭佳樂非心傷



# KINGU

Kingu the Usurper was a storm god, the youngest, greatest of the final brood of god monsters birthed by Tiamat, the Ocean Mother. Tiamat created Kingu to serve as a general for her army of children beasts, and, more importantly, to serve as a replacement for her murdered husband and coregent, Apsu, Lord of Freshwater. For this latter task, Tiamat gave Kingu the Tablet Of Destiny.

It was for naught, though, for when Tiamat was slain, her children were routed and slaughtered like crippled lambs while the Tablet Of Destiny was taken from Kingu as his carcass was butchered to sculpt the first humans.

But gods are troublesome creatures even after they die. Because Kingu lives on in us, he once returned as the thief demon Zu, The Darkness With Claws, to take back the Tablet Of Destiny. Zu failed, and was torn to pieces for his brash presumption. Despite his fangs broken, his talons shorn, and his wings plucked, Zu escaped.

One day, Kingu will return again, and one day, Kingu will reclaim the Tablet Of Destiny. What this entails for humanity, even the Gods tremble in fearful anticipation.







# KLUARA

Kluara is a demon summoned by wizards to “retrieve” something. The agreed upon target is invariably valuable to the summoner, whether in monetary or sentimental terms, as Kluara's price is a freshly stolen soul.

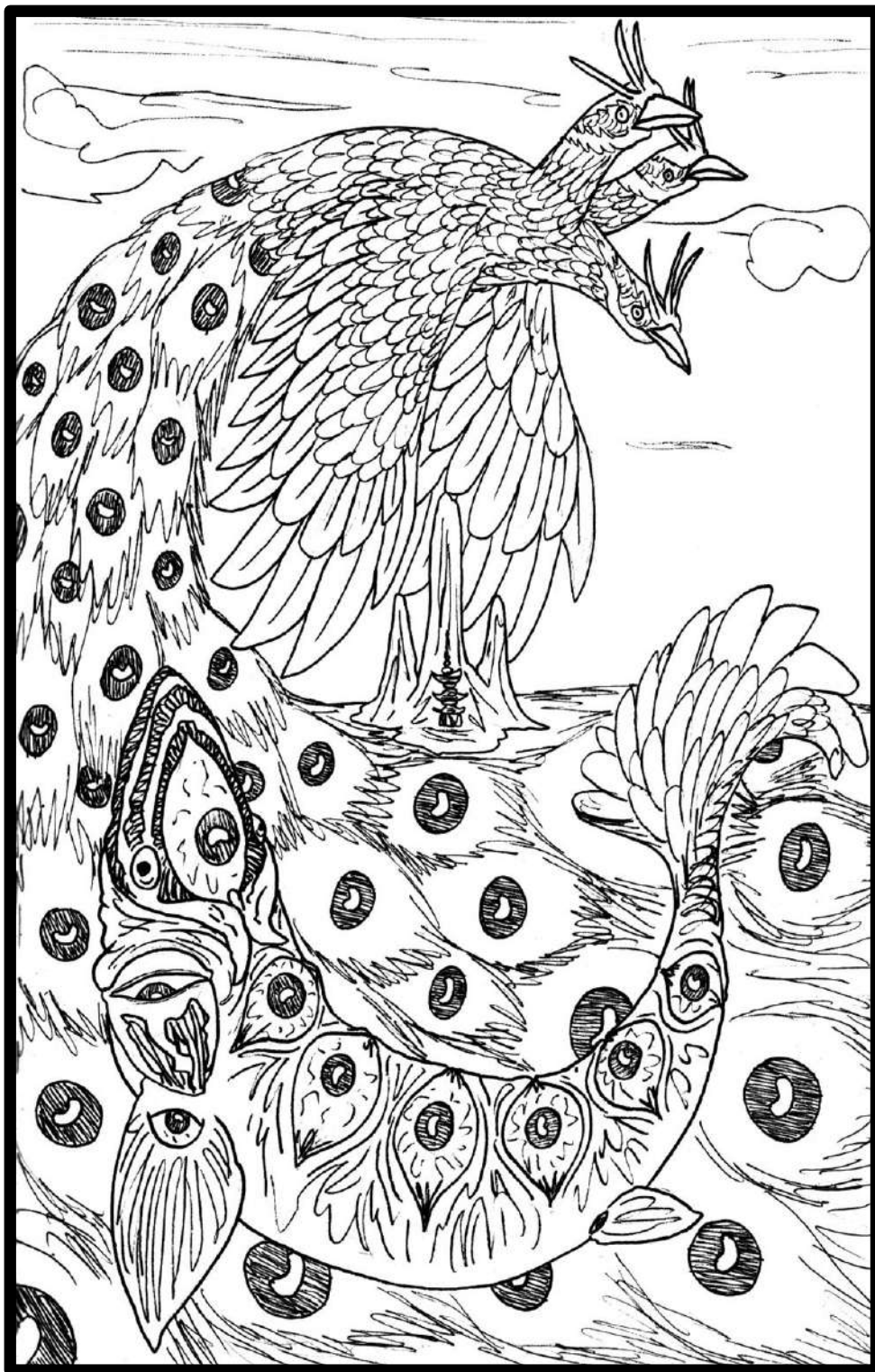




# K'UN PENG

The K'un is a giant fish who looks like a dragon, and lives in the depths of the Western Sea.

Once a year, the K'un emerges from the sea, grows wings, and becomes the mighty Peng. The Peng Bird then flies to Draconis, then Vega, and finally Mira. Once the Peng's journey is complete, it returns to the sea, shedding its feathers to become the K'un once more.



# KUPERREE

Kuperree is a gigantic kangaroo who can walk and talk like a man. Kuperree is an impossibly tall man who can leap to the moon, and wears the fur of a kangaroo. Kuperree is said to be wise and very helpful when he wants to be. Most other opinions of him, however, are complaints about how rapacious and lazy Kuperree is. When Kuperree isn't sleeping all day, he is devouring his neighbors and stealing their food.

Spotted Cuscus and Green Possum sought to stop Kuperree's predations, and almost slew him. Kuperree set them against each other, however, when he asked whom between them was worthy of striking the killing blow. While Spotted Cuscus and Green Possum bickered, Kuperree slew them, skinned them, ate their carcasses and wore their pelts as a nice, new loincloth.

Kuperree is not without his kindness, either. He once slew Ahidara Dara the Wicked Faerie by ripping off Ahidara Dara's pinions, and then cooking her into a stew to comfort Baramundi's Daughter after the Faerie tormented and deceived the girl.

If you have a request, you can ask Kuperree if he can help you, if you dare. The worst that could happen is that he simply eats you.





# LAMPAGO

Lampago is an enormous beast who lives in the sweltering jungles of Qin. Lampago resembles a tiger who is twenty hands at his shaggy withers. Lampago's lustrous fur is a dozen different shimmering hues of red, crimson, carmine, scarlet, ruby, vermillion. Many mistakes the monster for a bloody-maned lion, gossips slander that his fur is red to hide the bloodstains of his many, many, many victims. Gossips and deadly mistakes aside, Lampago uses his red fur to hide in grass and forest undergrowth. This power is a gift from Lampago's mother, Huangjiao the Yellowhorn. When Lampago hides, none, save for his mother's courtiers, Qiu Jing The Eagle With Poisoned Feathers, Duu Kala The Dove Of Blue Jade, and Neh Kyabos The Owl Who Is A Parrot, may see him.

Because Lampago has the handsome face of a strong man, he fancies himself an erudite Junzi, a kind and wise master of etiquette and hospitality. Those among his friends, wards, and lovers agree, but care to remember that a ferocious cat's heart beats within his warm, bountiful chest. Those who offend Lampago, or worse, rouse his lust for prey, are reminded that he is the sworn blood brother and rival of Manticore for a reason.





# LARVA

The Larva is a restless ghost born of the forgotten dead. When the living neglect to give a corpse its last rites, especially out of spite or callousness, the deity Charon denies the corpse's spirit entry into the Underworld. Such spirits then return to the lands of the living as beguiling, shapeless devils in order to torment those among the living who offended them.

The Larva can be distinguished from the Lemures in that the Larva always wears a mask. Sometimes, the mask is a warped caricature of whom it was in life. Other times, the mask is merely a grotesque aid that frightens the living.

The best way to exorcise the Larva is to remember who it was, and apologetically give it its long overdue funerary rituals. Barring that, there is not much that can be done beyond, ironically, ignoring the Larva and pretending it does not exist.





# THE LIAR'S LUCKY POTATO

At first glance, this creature appears to be a cadmium blue potato that is abnormally warm to the touch. When it is alone with its designated owner, or in the presence of those who suspect what it really is, the creature will open its many eyes to glower at the world around it. The "Lucky Potato" pretends to be a good luck charm, and engineers situations to place it into the hands of a child so it can have a host with whom to grant good luck to and telepathically impart wisdom upon. Technically speaking, the Potato does not, actually grant good luck; it steals someone else's fortune. A gold piece on the ground? Someone who needed it to buy food dropped it. Bobby got an A on his arithmetic test today? His sister Henrietta flunked her spelling bee because she forgot how to spell "phylactery." Because the Potato cannot abide naivety, if its owner doesn't realize where his good luck really is coming from, it will eventually break the news, preferably in a situation where it can encourage its owner to actively "seize (one's) own destiny," and thereby ~~corrupt~~ convince him into using its powers more actively and more maliciously.

What the Potato really is, is anyone's guess. Ancient texts on demonology give the creature a thousand different names, and hundreds upon hundreds of different stories that all describe it as either the last remnant of some slain demon god of unspeakable evil, or a larval obyrith that will herald the end of all worlds.

If asked, the Potato, itself, is coy about it, and will demurely suggest asking someone more knowledgeable, like Dagon or Pale Night.





# LOU CARCOHL

People have been eating snails since before they left the Cradle of Humankind. One snail understood this sad fact, and sought to revenge itself and Snailkind on humanity. One night, long ago, this wrathful gastropod crawled into the mouth of a sleeping man and ate him from the inside out, then did the same to his family, and then, the next nights, did the same to the man's neighbors. The survivors complained to the village lord. He, in turn, laughed in their faces, ceasing only when he was suddenly gobbled up by the snail, now big as an oxcart.

A hero came along to vanquish l'Caracol. When the hero's sword failed to pierce the creature's slimy hide, he tore up an oak tree to use as a club to smash its shell. The hero failed in that, too, instead, pounding Carcohl deep into the earth, eventually trapping it in a cavern filled with its own slime.

Lou Carcohl's shell remains intact, eventually becoming a hill forming the heart of the city of Hastingue. The beast still lives, as spelunkers entering Lou Carcohl's slime-filled tomb are seized and devoured on a routine basis.





# INSIDIOUS COURTESAN LUXURIA

The Insidious Courtesan is the spymaster of the Ten Abominations, having evolved from one of Gulo the Glutton's succubus maidens. In the Abyss, it's no secret that Gulo employs hundreds of succubi as his maids to service his byzantine appetites. One such servant decided to try and use Gulo's power to become Queen of Succubi. While that maid did succeed seducing her master, the consummation of their love/lust involved him devouring her whole, a common fate that befell many of her sisters in Gulo's employ. The Lord of Hunger would not have given that particular fling any further thought had Luxuria not crawled back out of his gullet, becoming one of three beings to ever escape Gulo's stomach (the other two being Ungovex the Nauseous, a malebranche devil who was choked on, then spat out, and a bralani eladrin named Storm Feather who cut his way out).

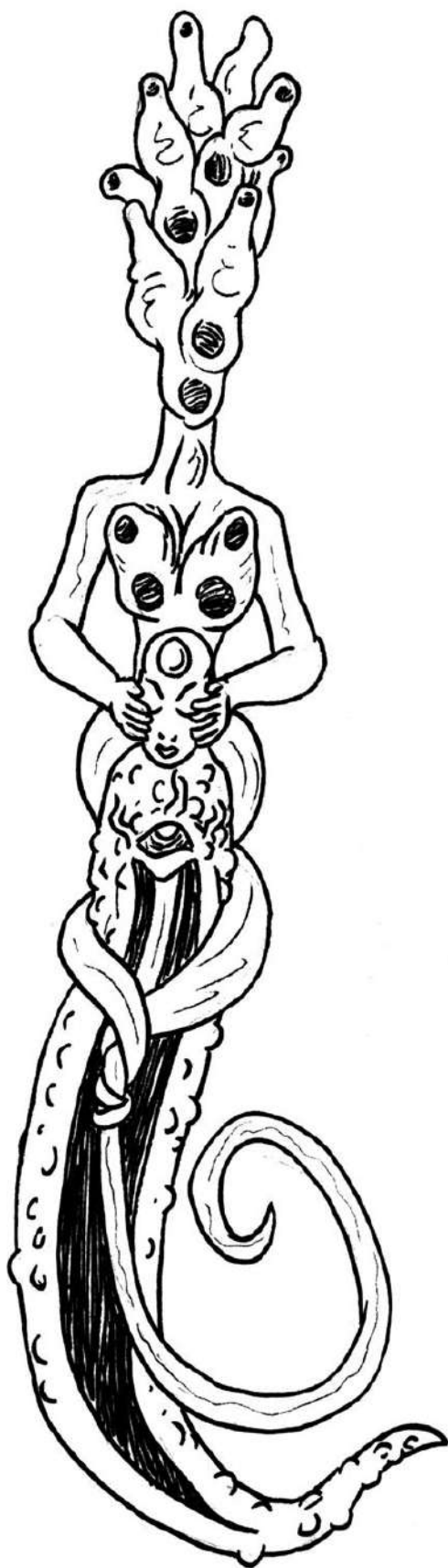
Since Luxuria's apotheosis, she realized her original goal was too narrow, too selfish. Instead, now the Insidious Courtesan believes she has been tasked to bring to the Universe the joy of consumption, whether it is bringing Gulo new victims, or dissolving new hosts from the inside out.

Having survived being partially digested, Luxuria can possess hosts, fiends and mortals alike, commandeering their bodies and rifling through their minds. To approach them, the Lady Of Want can use her Mask Of Want to appear as whatever her victim desires. Any useful information gleaned is passed onto others, while the victim, themselves, withers away as Luxuria feeds on their lifeforce.

As a courtier, Luxuria tries to avoid offending the other Abominations, at least, aside from Iram. The Insidious Courtesan loves to visit Acedio and Desperatia to discuss and plot unrequited love, and has extracted a king's ransom of favors from Cupiditas and Superbio through dint of her mastery of sycophancy. Luxuria serves her role as Amentias' muse, and sometimes model, very seriously. Luxuria's relationship with Fraus is a relaxed rivalry, where they trade quips and friendly barbs. That Fraus has repeatedly, but discreetly asked for her help in securing his freedom is a useful plum she eventually plans to utilize as soon as she finds the appropriate occasion. The Lady of Want's relationship with Malevolentia, by contrast, is complex and dangerous. Luxuria would be more cooperative in the Unrelenting Taskmaster's schemes and power plays if the latter wasn't so absolutely insulting towards her while trying to topple Superbio. As such, the Insidious Courtesan sabotages Malevolentia's schemes whenever the former feels slighted, and remains guardedly neutral whenever Malevolentia attempts to court her for assistance. It is no secret that Luxuria regards the Poisonous War Chieftain as a disgusting boor, and she secretly plots to engineer a situation where Iram and Malevolentia destroy each other, or at least cause them to simultaneously make Superbio lose face, thereby making him cast them out. To this end, the Lady Of Want has been surreptitiously scouting for replacements among Abyssal princes.



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# LYCAEON

King Lycaeon was the tyrant of Arcadia. King Lycaeon was a cruel and grasping thief who encouraged his subjects to be like him when he wasn't taxing them to death, or kidnapping them to feed his depraved hungers.

Zeus, King of Gods and God of Kings, grew displeased with Arcadia, and visited that land personally. Lycaeon soon realized that a stranger was wandering about in his kingdom, blighting everyone with plague. Lycaeon quickly understood that there was much more to this odd traveler than deadly sores.

When the "stranger" finally came to Lycaeon's palace, the king offered his guest a banquet. The guest declined, whereupon Lycaeon accused the "stranger" of being a bad guest. Zeus revealed himself, asking what sort of host would murder their own children as an elaborate prank at a guest's expense. The god cursed Lycaeon to be a sniveling thief for all time, and revived the king's children as ravening beasts. Pursued into the forests of Arcadia, Lycaeon stopped to see that he, too, was now a ravening beast.





# THE MACHINE GHOST

The so-called “Machine Ghost” is a peculiar spirit that visits children, offering its potent magical abilities as service. Requests of its master du jur were followed to the letter, ideally in a manner causing immense disruption, if not actual harm and havoc. A task given is followed to the letter, and will not allow its instructions to be modified until given another task to countermand the previous. The Machine Ghost would defend itself and its designated master to the death, unless explicitly ordered to stand down.

The creature is called a “machine” due to its stiff, mechanical manners, and for its metallic appearance. It is called a “ghost” because it is actually made of ectoplasm. What the beast is is not known. Some scholars claim it is a rogue modron, though Mechanus has no record of any model of modron that even remotely resembles it. Demonologists suggest it is from the Abyss, as the sigil emblazoned on its torso is a chaos symbol, and hypothesize that the Machine Ghost may be one of Haagenti's creations on the loose.





# UNRELENTING TASKMASTER

## MALEVOLENTIA

The Unrelenting Taskmaster of the Ten Abominations serves to marshal the cabal's demonic forces, and assist with the corruption of mortals. Unlike Fraus, Malevolentia's origins are well-documented, as she was once a noble from the Nine Hells of Baator with a penchant for cruelty above and beyond what was necessary in that horrid society. At the time, Malevolentia was a powerful wasp devil in the court of Glaysa, soon after Glaysa's ascent as Lord of the Sixth. There, the Princess of Stings strove to be a model devil, harsh, manipulative, and an obsessed poison apple-polisher. She successfully wowed her superior, at least until her charming novelty wore off, and her grating personality ground down the Princess of Hell's wavering patience. The Unrelenting Taskmaster's treatment of her own underlings began to impact the functions of the Court of Malbolge to the point where Glaysa was forced to begin an audit to understand why so many of her lower bureaucrats were transferring out of the layer or committing suicide en masse. Fearing for her own survival, Malevolentia tried to stop the audit by assassinating Glaysa, only to be soundly defeated. Glaysa was amused by Malevolentia's brashness, and permitted her to leave Hell on the condition she never return under penalty of death. The Princess of Stings keeps her badge of office, her barbed spear "Galling Eternal," as a memento.

In exile in Pazunia, the Unrelenting Taskmaster attempted to put together her own demon horde, only for her hordes to stampede themselves into the Grand Abyss to escape her tender ministries with each attempt. Superbio would eventually recruit Malevolentia into his court, initially to gain access to hellish secrets, then to elevate her as an assistant to the other Abominations to help corrupt mortals into their service. The Princess of Stings would excel at this latter task, teaching her victims that power is the equalizer, which must be hoarded. According to her, the strong must be punished for abusing their power, while the weak must be tormented, then destroyed for the treacherous threat they post..

Being a schemer at heart, Malevolentia seeks to take control of the Ten Abominations. She easily manipulates Cupiditas and Iram, and cautiously strings Gulo along. She regards Luxuria as a rival, and takes Acedio and Desperatia for granted due to their jadedness. Towards Superbio, she vacillates between insincere, hysterical groveling, and open defiance. Towards Amentia, she is always genuinely helpful, always sincerely courteous, as she bore full witness to the entire situation of the Fortress Invincible transforming into the Wretched Tarn, and has no desire to witness such a situation ever again, let alone be personally subjected to it.

Despite having overthrown Superbio for leadership of the Ten several times, she would be, in turn, overthrown in favor of Superbio immediately after, with the Princess of Stings then being reminded that her standing (and survival) in their group is entirely at the Emperor of Emperors' discretion.



# MANDRAKE

The mandrakes are of any petunia-like nightshades of the genus *Mandragora*, which came to Eurasia from the New World over twenty million years ago with the assistance of birds.

Herbalists use the mandrake as a soporific analgesic, usually to assist insomniacs, or numb the agonies of rheumatism and primitive surgery. The cord like taproots are popularly woven into little manikins, dressed in doll's clothing, and are sold as charms and amulets to ward against the very same evil spirits the living plants are constantly accused of cavorting with while alive and prior to harvest.

Witches and other magicians use mandrakes as dangerous reagents and bind them as powerful familiars who need to be addressed with royal honorifics.

Children are drawn to the mandrake's golden fruits, termed "Satan's testicles," or more politely, "Djinni's eggs." When perfectly ripe, the fruits are gelatinous and seedy, tasting like tangy drops of Heaven. When overripe, the fruit is bland and offensively insipid. Underripe, even slightly so, and the fruit is firm, noxiously acrid, and instantly deadly.



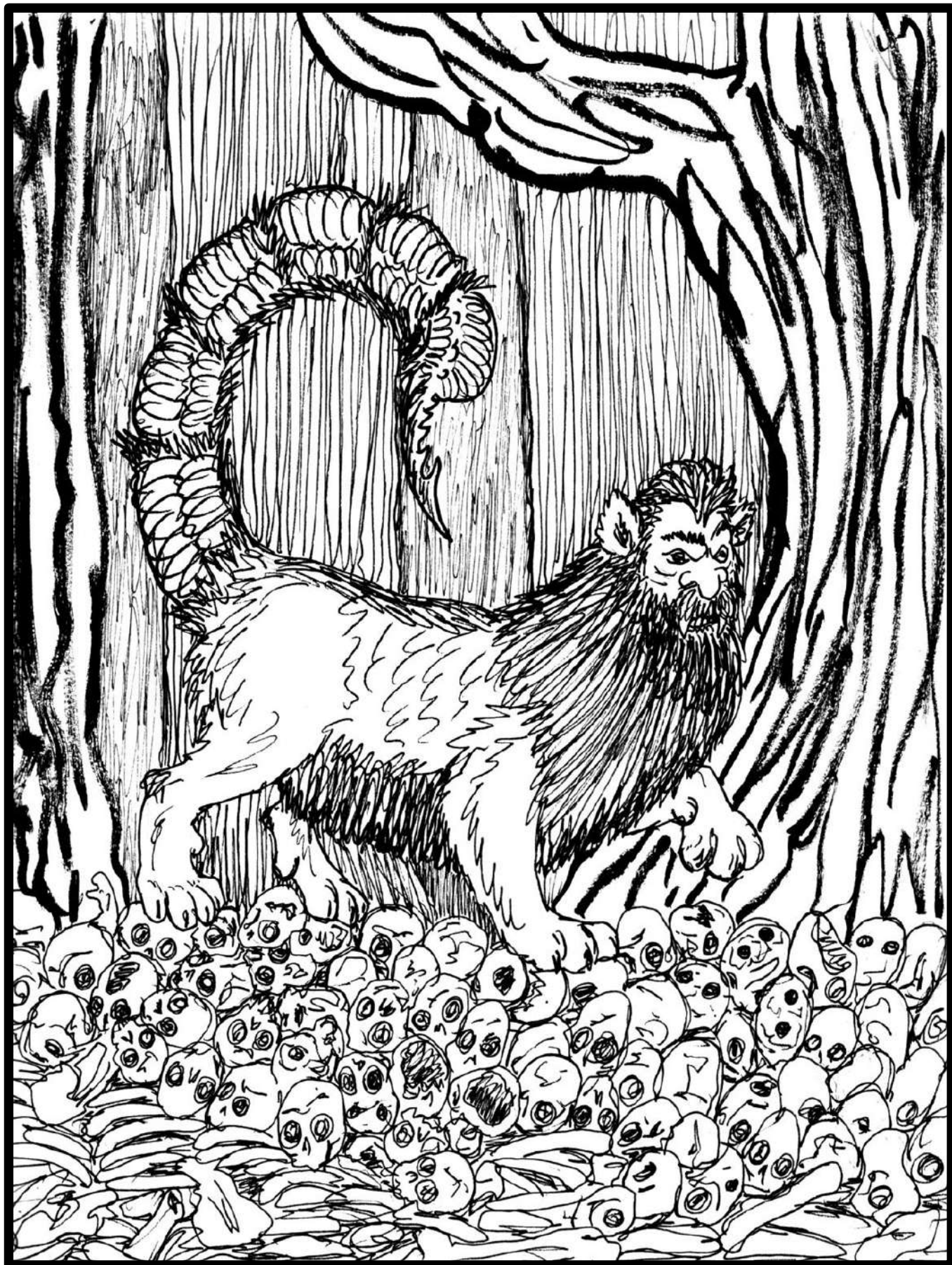


# MANTICORE

Who Manticore once was, no one knows anymore. Some say Manticore was once a ferocious tiger who loved the flesh of man so much, his becoming a man, himself, after eating so many did absolutely nothing to staunch his obsessively debased appetite. Others say Manticore was once a hunter who parlayed with a thousand different beasts to loan him their powers in return for helping them slay the monster preying on them. Once the hunter who was once a man slew the offending monster, he devoured the thousand beasts when they came to ask back what was rightfully theirs. When the hunter returned to his home to brag of his deeds, he found himself devouring his own family and then his countrymen, as well.

Today, Manticore is a cunning predator with the face of a man, the tenacity of an animal, and the bloodlust of a monster. Manticore loves to eat humans, wooing them with his songster's voice before stinging them and rending them with his cat's claws and triple rows of teeth. Once Manticore cared to think, but now, he forgets that he can. Take care not to remind him of this.

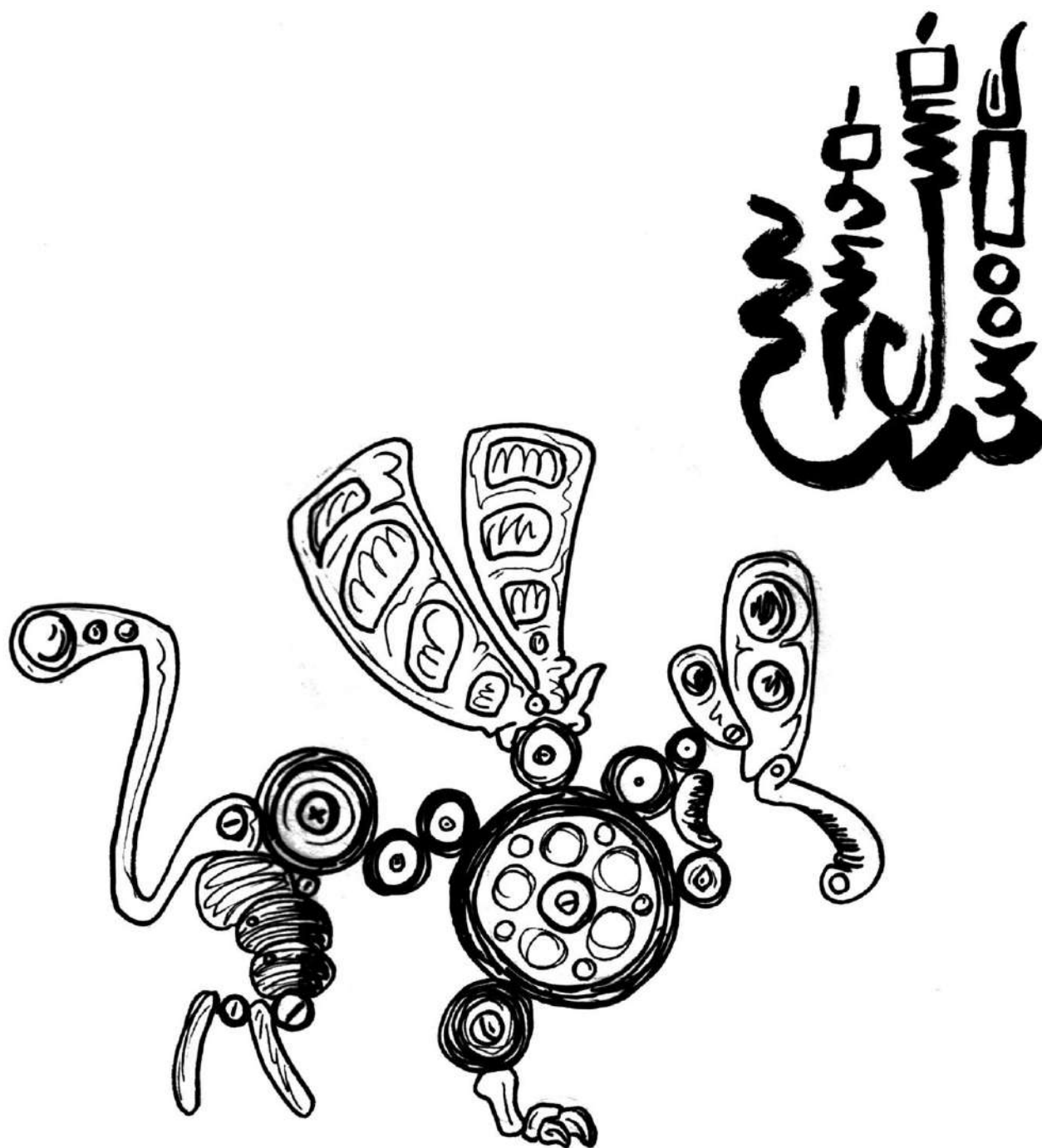






# MECHANICAL SPHINX

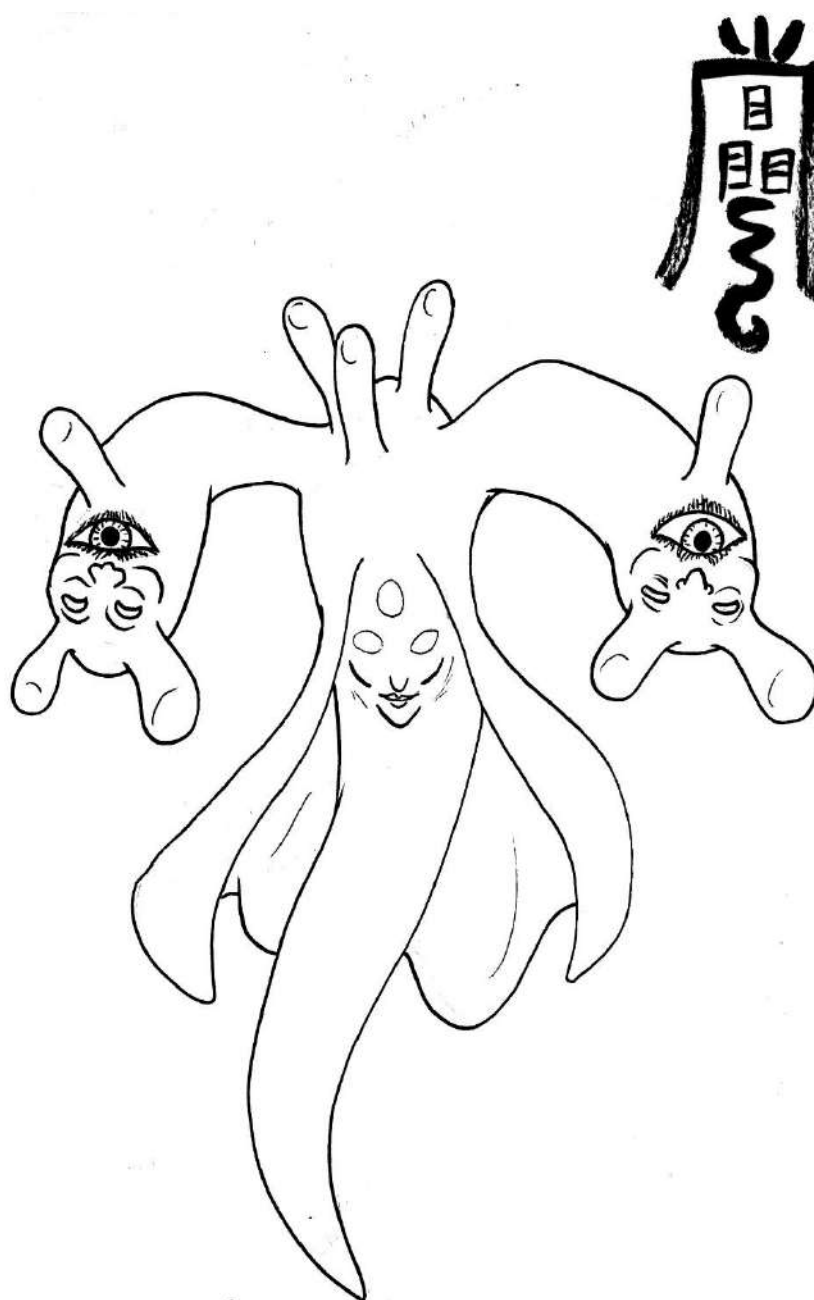
A peculiar spirit that built itself a body from metallic junk. It fancies itself a guardian, and dispenses nodules of wise-sounding nonsense to passers-by. Those who can recognize it for what it is can escape it, while those who cannot find themselves trapped in a labyrinth of flimflam within their minds.





# MESSENGER OF CALM

A demon born of unanswered prayers for peace. It is one of the Last Angel's most cherished minions, bringing eternal calm wherever it goes. The Messenger of Calm's handiwork is easy to spot, as it distorts time and reality to trap creatures, mortals, fiends and celestials alike in motionless tableaux. The prisoners of these macabre dioramas are posed as clues for observers about the ultimate plans of the Last Angel for the destiny of the Multiverse.



# MESSENGER OF PEACE

A demon born of unanswered prayers for salvation and rescue. The Messenger of Peace brings the words of the Last Angel to those who suffer/exist, and gifts them entrance to the paradise of Oblivion. Even the undead fear its approach.



# MURDERNOSE

Murdernose is an evil spirit, possibly a tanar'ri demon. Murdernose is named so for its elongated, tooth-studded snout, which it uses as a weapon with which to commit murder. No less than a thousand hardy warriors have been cut into a mountain of bloody gobbets after thinking each would be Murdernose's match.



# MUVIRUS

Muvirus is a virusbeast descended from the god-feyr Megalovirus. Muvirus is a murderous shapeshifter who terrifies its victims with winsome forms in horrifying contexts before mutilating them to death. It is an eager lackey of Alphavirus, who delights in using its “grandchild” as an assassin.





# NAIHA

Naiha is a very old imp who has served and damned a very long line of masters. For a price, she can recount specific chunks of information pertaining to her various masters. For a steeper, dearer price, she can regurgitate some of the souls of her various masters.



# NUE

Nue is a wrathful deity of misfortune and turmoil who brings suffering and death to all who behold it.

Aside from being a powerful evil spirit, no one really knows what Nue is.. Some people hear its voice, and think it is a madman screaming into a storm of flame and hail. Some people see its paws, and think it is a tiger come to devour their families. Others see its head, and think it's a giant monkey come to bring curses. Still others see its coiling tail, and think it's a snake poisoning the land.





# NYHILUS

The Nyhilus is one of the more powerful servitors of the Apokryltaros. The Nyhilus is an evil spirit composed of negative energy, and assists to marshal the various fiendish armies of the Greater King Of The Deeper Darkness. The Nyhilus also establishes various mystery cults in the Prime Material Plane for the purposes of spreading corruption and ensnaring mortals.



# OEA

Oea is a mysterious being that wanders the spirit worlds. It appears to be intelligent, but is rarely persuaded to communicate, directly at least. Its name is an onomatopoeia of the sound its aura makes.

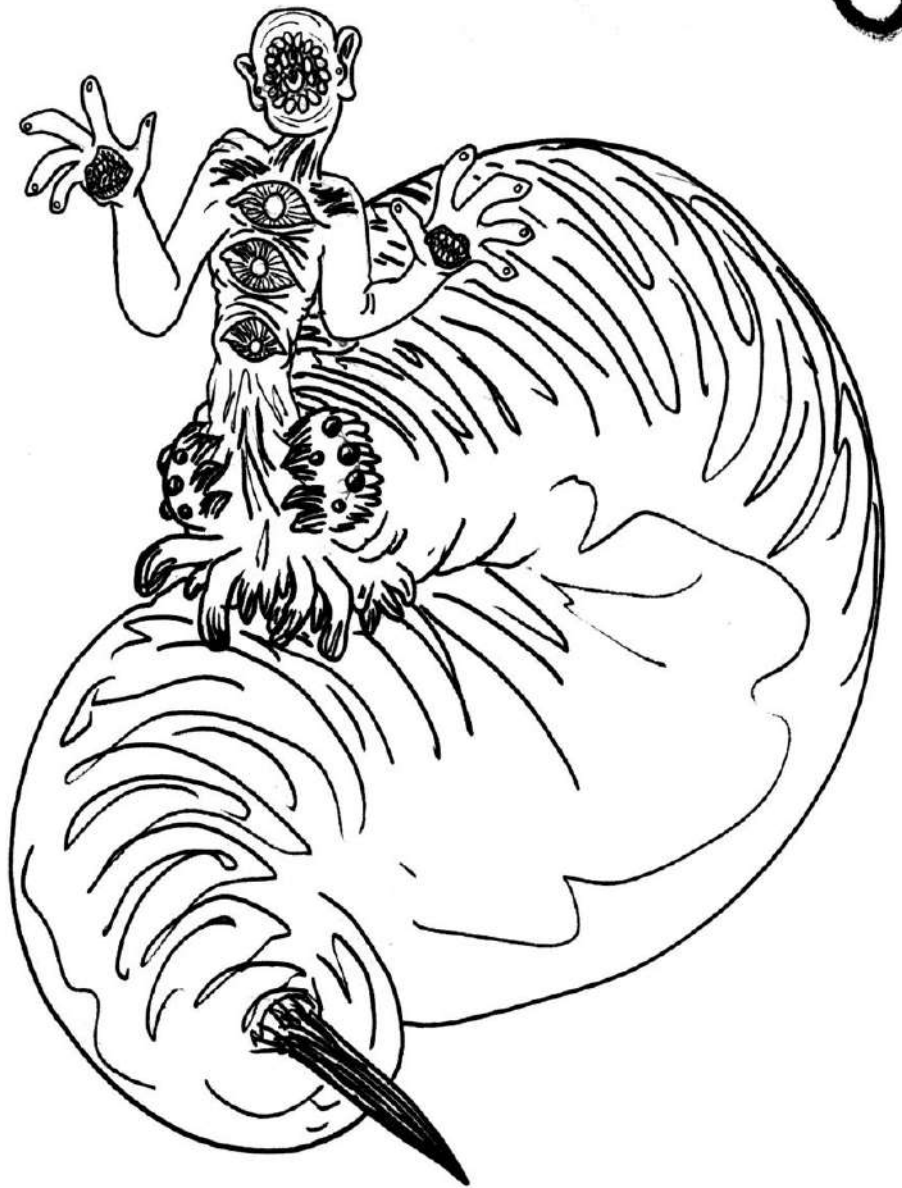




# OMEGAVIRUS

Omegavirus is a powerful virusbeast descended from the god-feyr, Megalovirus. Omegavirus can both weave arcane magic and channel the divinity of its ancestor.

The creature is, predictably, an arrogant schemer, and longs to receive its ancestor's blessing in ousting and disposing of both Alphavirus and Iovirus so only Omegavirus can be Megalovirus' second in command. Iovirus takes no heed of this rival so long as its junior stays out of its way. Alphavirus, by contrast, loathes Omegavirus as a rude and crude upstart, and actively plots to destroy its junior via proxy.



ஹெக்ஸா

# ORGAARA

Orgaara is a villainous shapeshifter who accepts assassination contracts from various magicians who summon it. Orgaara collects its payments and bounties paid to assist with the plans of its villainous sibling, Taiharion. Adventurers who thwart or stymie one invariably draw the wrath of the other.



# PAL RAI YUK

Pal Rai Yuk is a two-headed sea monster created by the deity Raven. That day, Raven was apparently inspired, by what, Raven has never elucidated.

Pal Rai Yuk is a rapacious man-eater, though, happily renders aid to those who propitiate him, whether through browbeating him in his father's name or offering him food and kindness.

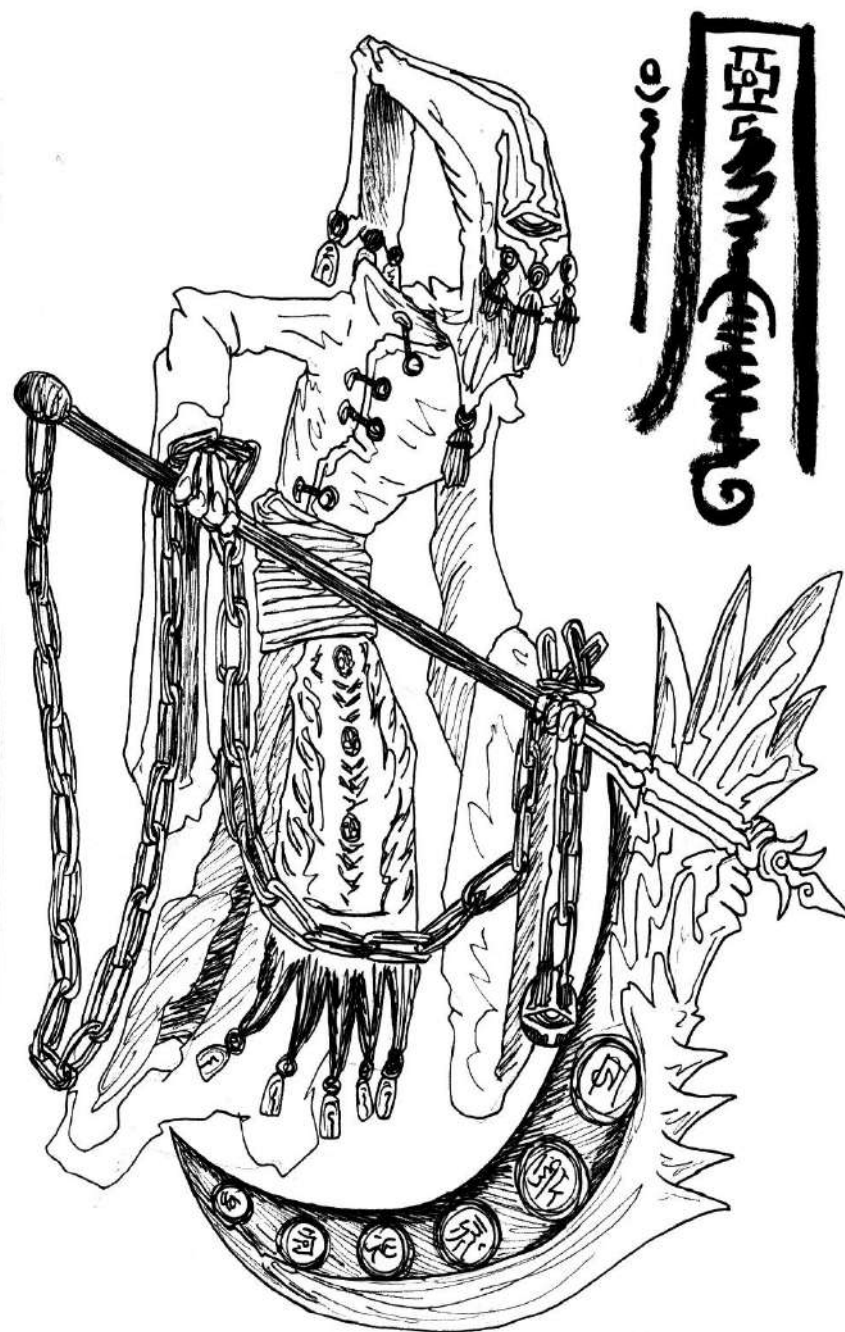
Pal Rai Yuk has two heads who often quarrel with each other as a hobby, bickering over who gets which choicest bite out of their latest prey. The beast's fur is very warm, and he gladly loans chunks of it to anyone who asks politely.





# PHIUNTAREA

Phiuntarea is a devil from Nessus who sallies forth beyond Baator to retrieve the damned souls of outstanding debtors. Some occasions see her retrieving the bodies of said debtors, too. Phiuntarea was promoted to this duty as recognition to her obsessed devotion to competence. Mortals often confuse her with psychopomps.





# PHOENIX

Phoenix is a gigantic bird with plumage of flames. Some say Phoenix is a god of birds. Others say Phoenix is the first bird, made immortal through dint of its ineffable glory. Phoenix is demure about this topic, frustrating even the worthiest among its favorite supplicants.

When Phoenix ends, its body is consumed in godly fire and dies. From its smoldering carcass, Phoenix emerges, reborn anew once more.



# POOKA

Pooka is a shapeshifter who cannot be seen by those not subjected to his protection or his pranks.

Some say the Pooka is a horse who steals. Anyone who rides the Pooka who isn't a child will be carried off into the night, and wake up entangled in a horse's bridle.

Some say the Pooka is a rabbit who brings good luck to good children who are polite to polite strangers, and breaks the bones of bad children who are naughty in his presence.

Some say the Pooka is a greedy cat who gobbles up food left unwatched, but brings candy to children who are hungry.

Some say the Pooka is a vengeful, petulant faerie who is compelled to rescue children from injustice before he can be permitted to return to Hell.





# QINPI OF GU

Qinpi of Gu, or Gu of Qinpi was a dragon with the head of a man, or a man with the head of a dragon. Qinpi was a minion of Huang Di, and a bitter rival of the deity Jia Yu. No matter how many times Huang Di cajoled, scolded, admonished, or threatened, Gu and Jia Yu always came to blows whenever they were in the same building.

One day, Qinpi of Gu concluded his hostilities with his coworker by brutally dismembering Jia Yu. Huang Di had Gu of Qinpi executed on the spot, and used his former errant minion's liver and heart as components for a magic ritual to resurrect Jia Yu. Because most things, including gods, who die are meant to stay dead until Yen Lo grants them permission to reincarnate, Jia Yu revived as a deranged menace. Such was their insane grudge that Qinpi's animosity refused to let him stay dead either, so he, too, returned to life as a giant osprey with tiger's paws. Both horrors continued their feud until they were both eventually euthanized by the Archer Yi.





# SARUGAMI

Once upon a time, a priest who was not as humble as he so proudly assumed set off into the mountains to preach the word of God at the barbarian tribes living there. Predictably, the priest was never seen alive again.

Soon after the missionary began his quest, the barbarians were driven from their redoubt by a horrible beast that appeared to be a cross between a bear with grasping, taloned hands, and a monkey with tusks. The town the barbarians took sanctuary in rounded up a hundred strong men, armed them with iron and flame, and with much bloody struggle, eventually slew the greedy thing.

When the survivors skinned the beast, cut off its claws, and pulled out its teeth, they saw that it was the priest. Apparently, the priest's own hubris allowed him to be bewitched by the demons of the mountain. And not learning the priest's lesson, the mayor's overweening son claimed the monster's hide, claws, and teeth for himself, only to become the beast reborn the next night.

And so, this cycle continued for centuries, with Sarugami growing stronger, bigger, fiercer and stupider with each successive rebirth.





# SATYRAL

Satyrал is the foolish protégé of Lampago and the awkward friend of Manticore. Some say Satyrал was a boy whom the great, sagacious Lampago tried to teach the arts of power to. Others claim that Satyrал was the one beast whom the arrogantly selfish Manticore took genuine pity upon. The gifts of either, perhaps of both would then warp whatever Satyrал once was into the mismatched brute he is now.

Satyrал constantly strives to prove himself as his mentors' equal, whether through haphazardly enacting incomplete war stratagems, or reciting half-remembered poems through a mouth obstructed with tusk-like fangs. Even so, many are the corpses of hunters who foolishly thought a shaggy harlequin like Satyrал would make for easy prey despite having a dragon's claws, a lion's thews, a mouth full of hooked teeth, and horns and hooves sharper than swords.





# SELKIE

The Selkie are a race of sea faeries who appear as large, intelligently eyed seals. If they so choose, a selkie can shed their skin and assume a human form, usually to either sate their curiosity, assuage their loneliness, or most often, to right a wrong committed in their keen sight.

When a selkie travels among humans, they either hide their skin, or wear it like a coat. A selkie takes pains to protect their skin, and will obey the orders of thieves who steal their skin. Because a selkie can eventually regrow their skin when it is lost or destroyed, it is unknown why they would allow another to command them this way. Some who know of this secret assume the selkie does so to seek subtle revenge, of which they are infamous for.





# SHAITAN

Some say the baneful creature now known as Shaitan was once a mighty angel, one of the mightiest of the Angelic Host. This angel hunted down and slew a thousand djinni for the crime of rebellion. But when this angel was asked to protect and aid the first humans, he refused, saying it was a crass insult to debase himself as a slave to monkeys made of clay. For the sin of hubris, the angel was stripped of his beauty and form, becoming a worm who lives in the minds of humanity.

Others say Shaitan is merely a djinn or an ifrit, a warped and twisted thing who lives in a cave. Shaitan has horns in place of eyes or hair, and sings a song with the voice of ten thousand voices. All songs sung are sung in imitation of Shaitan because Shaitan is the Angel of Inspiration, inspiring humans to act and create, irregardless of purpose or direction.

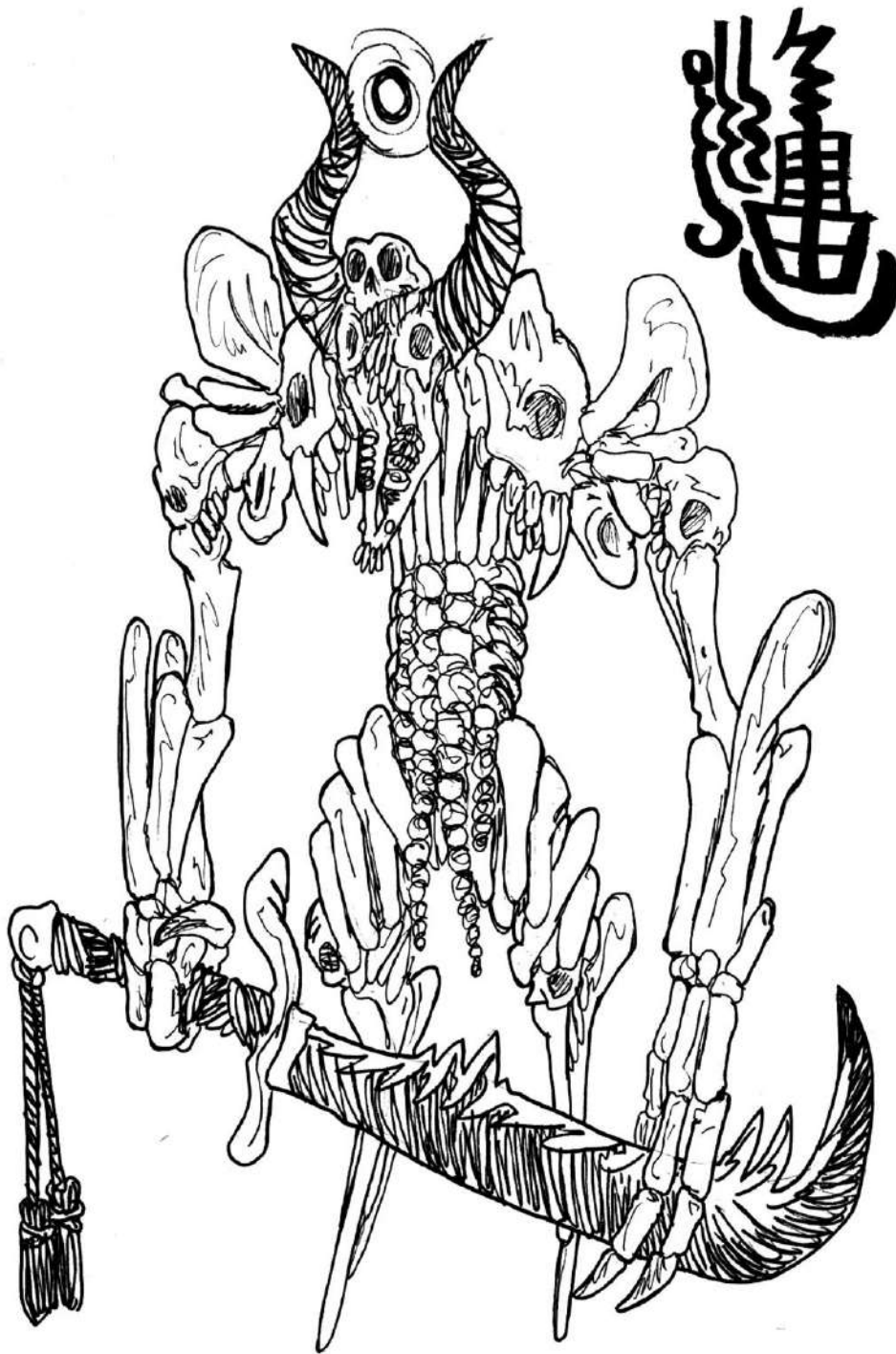






# SKULL KNIGHT

A necromantic golem that wields a sword. The sword is said to have been taken from a fallen hero, whose corpse makes up several components of the golem.



# SLUAGH

The Sluagh are the ghosts of dishonorable dead cursed as servants of the Fae. Sluagh take the form of large, dark gray birds with human faces.

As servants of the Fae, Sluagh carry off living mortals as per their masters' discretions and whims. Otherwise, Sluagh root on cliffsides. Most of the time, Sluagh sneer at the living, and steal from or prank them even without their masters' orders, though Sluagh are compelled to rescue mortals in peril on or near cliffs.

Sluagh are damned to serve the Fae until either the stains of their misdeeds fade, or when their masters see fit to dismiss their undead servants.



# SUI HU

Long ago, there was once a princess who was cursed to become a baiji because she took a lover who offended her father, the Emperor. The baiji's son became a monstrous tiger with the countenance of a snarling wolf. The Emperor's subjects became fearful, and the Gods subdued Sui Hu, placating him by making his mother a river goddess, and him Guardian of the Empire. Sui Hu delighted in protecting humans, but could not forget his mother's original slight. So, one day, Sui Hu succumbed to wrathful temptation and ate his grandfather and his uncle, the heir to the throne. The Gods then chained Sui Hu to the bottom of a lake as just punishment.

A thousand years later, Sui Hu escaped when a drought ate his lake. Freed, Sui Hu wandered the broken land, sorrowing at the suffering he witnessed. A boy attacked him in hopes of feeding his dying village. Moved by the boy's plight, Sui Hu fed himself to the villagers, and loaned the boy his pelt and his power. The boy quickly grew into a mighty hero who brought down the Peng Bird with a mere stick, wrestled elephants out of the mouth of the Ba She, and slew the Nyan with his bare hands. And the hero continued to grow and grow in might and power and legend until one day, he looked down at his paws, and realized he was the Sui Hu all along.

And so, a hero who hunts the Sui Hu must choose between being eaten by the Sui Hu, or being eaten by his heirs.





# SUNAMURA NO ONRYŌ

While it existed, the village of Sunamura was once famed for its pumpkin farms for centuries. At least until the urbanization of Koto devoured everything there. Before the pumpkin farms, Sunamura was a quiet backwater town that served as the lair of a cruel bandit.

This bandit, whose name is deliberately lost, preyed on the villagers even as he made them his personal slaves. This torment continued for years until one day, a vegetable peddler selling squash and melons came to Sunamura. In the process of showing his wares to the bandit, the villagers used the peddler's pumpkins to smash their oppressor's head in.

From the crude, little tumulus the now headless bandit was buried beneath sprang pumpkin vines that formed Sunamura's first pumpkin farm. Each night thereafter, until Sunamura's last field was paved over, the bandit's ghost would weave himself a new headless body from the pumpkin plants that ate his corpse, and then harangue any passers-by he could find into either helping him find his destroyed head, or giving him theirs as a replacement.





# SUPAY

Supay is the god of darkness, and lord of all who dwell within it, from moths to monsters. Supay often quarreled with Viracocha, the Daylight. Viracocha favored and protected humans, while Supay hunted humans with his children.

Mamakilla, the Moon, daughter of Viracocha, and wife of Inti, the Sun, urged her father and husband to be more diplomatic towards Supay, if only because “without darkness, what is light?” Mistaking her uninvited advice as treasonous defiance, Inti divorced Mamakilla, and her father banished her to the nighttime sky. In a misguided attempt to woo and comfort the exiled goddess, Supay captures humans, transforming them into his monstrous children. Supay hopes that, one day, he will create the perfect child among his beloved adopted children who will be strong enough to help him wrench the Moon out of the sky in order to guide Mamakilla into the safety of Ucha Pacha in Supay's underground kingdom.





# EMPEROR OF EMPERORS, SUPERBIO

The Emperor of Emperors is the de facto leader of the Ten Abominations, guiding its members' actions through guile and force. Superbio, the Glorious One, was born when Amentia bickered with the Queen Of Chaos and her host over how the Dawn War would be waged. When Amentia bored of this impasse, he tore himself in half, his ego apparently escaping from his head to take his place. This offshoot quickly demonstrated his obvious superiority, instantly marshaling thousands of demonic armies at a simple gesture. Superbio abandoned the Obyriths, too, when they would not make him supreme leader of the Hosts of Chaos.

The Prince of Princes would then return to his progenitor in the Ten Thousand Tower, where they would scheme for their shared revenge, creating Iram the Poisonous War Chieftain in the process. Later, the three would quarrel, abandon each other and reconcile, eventually agreeing that they would recruit other powerful fiends into their clique, eventually forming the Ten Abominations.

Superbio is often given the title "His Ineffable Glory," not so much a reference to his overweening vanity, but a subtle warning to not look at him directly. Like Amentia, His Ineffable Glory is a consummate shapeshifter, assuming forms to dazzle, seduce and terrify his audience with, and is actually quite subtle about it. Superbio's true form is hard to describe, literally, as he is so unbearably dazzling that visually oriented beings find it difficult to look directly at him. He is described as being vaguely arthropod-like, with horns, gilded, thorny tentacles, and carrying around an orb and scepter. The Emperor of Emperors lairs in his own Abyssal Layer, a city-sized, shimmering castle within a semi-infinite garden, all beneath an eclipsed sun, called "The Palace of Heaven." Some say Superbio deceived celestial architects into building it for him, others state the Palace was originally the 68<sup>th</sup> Layer of the Abyss now known as the "Swallowed Void," and was stolen from its previous owner and location through the Chieftain of Pride's craven machinations.

Superbio has established thousands of mystery cults throughout the Multiverse. Only a few of these directly worship him; the others either pretend to worship other powers or manipulate other cults in Superbio's name. As prideful as Superbio is, he is also cautious, and has seen thousands of other rivals and allies perish due to carelessness.

The Emperor of Emperors controls the other Abominations through threats, favors, and schemes, and is always confident about keeping them all in line. The only Abomination he truly respects and fears is his progenitor, Amentia, and he keeps the Beleaguered Artist under control through a careful regiment of generous rations of praise, and peculiar propositions, while curating those other beings who communicate with the Lord of Insanity. Superbio does not take a more direct approach with Amentia, as, the former is actually nothing but an extension of the latter, and must make sure the latter is not reminded of this.





# SYMBIOTE $\beta$

Symbiote  $\beta$  is a spirit that seeks a willing host so that it may experience mortality and growth. Unfortunately, all of the hosts it uses burn out too quickly to be of much worth for its purposes.





# TAIHARION

Taiharion is a multi-eyed sorcerer who schemes and plots for some unknowable grand plan. Taiharion has an infamous reputation for being a deadly illusionist. Its sibling, the shapeshifting assassin Orgaara, assists it in its schemes. They are devoted to each other, and attacking one invites revenge from the other.



# TAOTIEH

Taotieh was the family deity of a mighty dynasty of warriors and blacksmiths. Taotieh's clan described their legendary ancestor as being a massive, tiger-sized wolf with ram's horns and leering eyespots on his broad shoulders.

In the heydays of Taotieh's clan, he and his children were stalwart, righteous foes of evil, hammering away at injustice wherever they could reach. As time passed, Taotieh's children's children grew lazy and decadent, frustrating their founder. Taotieh became a confused predator, pursuing innocent prey and guilty quarry alike while his children became ravenous warlords and debauched parasites.

Then Taotieh's clan staged a bloody rebellion that failed. The surviving clansmen were hauled before the Emperor in chains, and were condemned to death. Taotieh was summoned to witness the destruction of his kin, but he devoured the lot of his disappointing spawn. That done, Taotieh then bit down on his own tail, and ate away until the errant god devoured his own body, leaving only his horned, bloody head. The Emperor had Taotieh's head laid to rest in a tomb with imperial honors out of fear that the god's ghost would continue his fearsome predations.





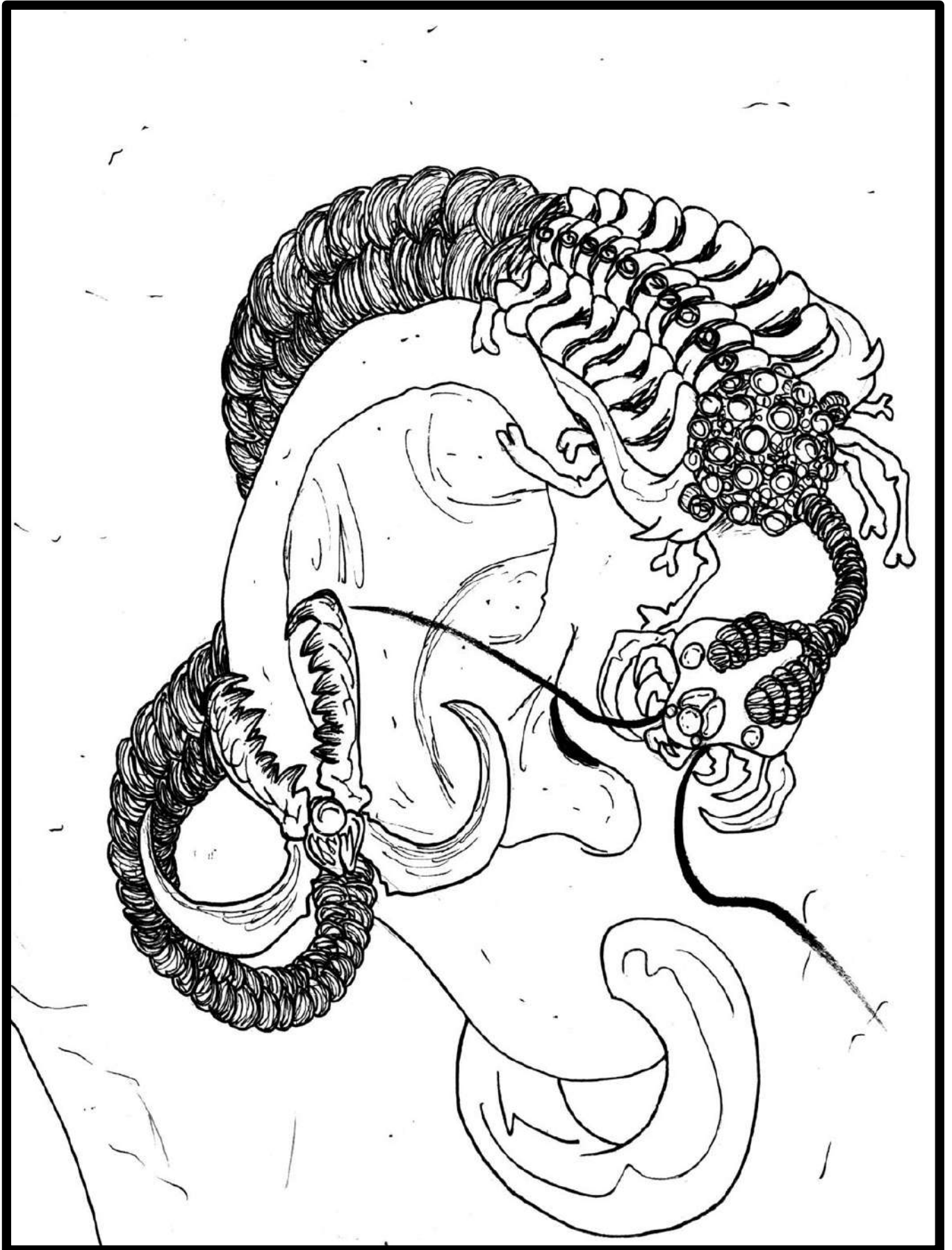
# TSUTSUGAMUSHI

Tsutsugamushi is an evil deity of disease, the patron god of scrub typhus. The Illness Insect appears as a peculiar arthropod, a vaguely earwig-like creature with a long tail ending in a massive pair of pinching forceps, with an ornate carapace covering its thorax, and has a bulbous head, covered in a face-like arrangement of compound eyes, and terminating from a long, spindly neck. People have been known to spontaneously break out in deadly cold sweats and panic attacks just from pondering whether or not Tsutsugamushi can fly. The Illness Insect manifests in the physical world by gathering together a large cluster of its children, ectoparasitic mites and lice, and thereby forming a body.

Although obviously pernicious, the Illness Insect is not malicious, as it spreads disease not because it wants to, but because it has to. Then there is how Tsutsugamushi has the intellect of a bug.

As terrible and horrible Tsutsugamushi is, it has a younger, far worse sibling, a maliciously intelligent, and malevolent disease maker simply known as “Dai Tsutsugamushi.” Some scholars posit that Tsutsugamushi was a prototype for this greater horror. Dai Tsutsugamushi is currently imprisoned in a booby-trapped bronze cauldron that is hidden at the very bottom of a cave complex beneath Tainan.





# VARGYR

Once upon a time, a brave, strong, handsome, but ultimately poor and lowly hunter wooed a cheesemaker's daughter. The fair maid returned his love, but her mother demanded a bride price of a hundred wolf pelts before she would allow her daughter to marry him. The hunter was in love, and happily gathered a thousand wolf pelts to acquire his sweetheart's hand.

Because he slaked himself on the heart's blood of a thousand wolves, the hunter became a giant wolf, himself. But the cheesemaker gave her word, and her daughter was in love. Thus, the fair maid's mother reluctantly gave her blessings for her daughter to wed this beast, the beau who was once a man. Soon after, the cheesemaker had a grandson.

The boy quickly grew into a big and rugged man like his father once was, and eventually left home to seek his place in the world. The hunter's son had, still has a long and lonely quest. Among people, others could plainly see the hunter's son was a raging beast underneath his shirt. Among the beasts, there was smothering terror as animals could clearly tell the boy smells exactly like his father. So Vargyr still wanders in search of his perfect place.

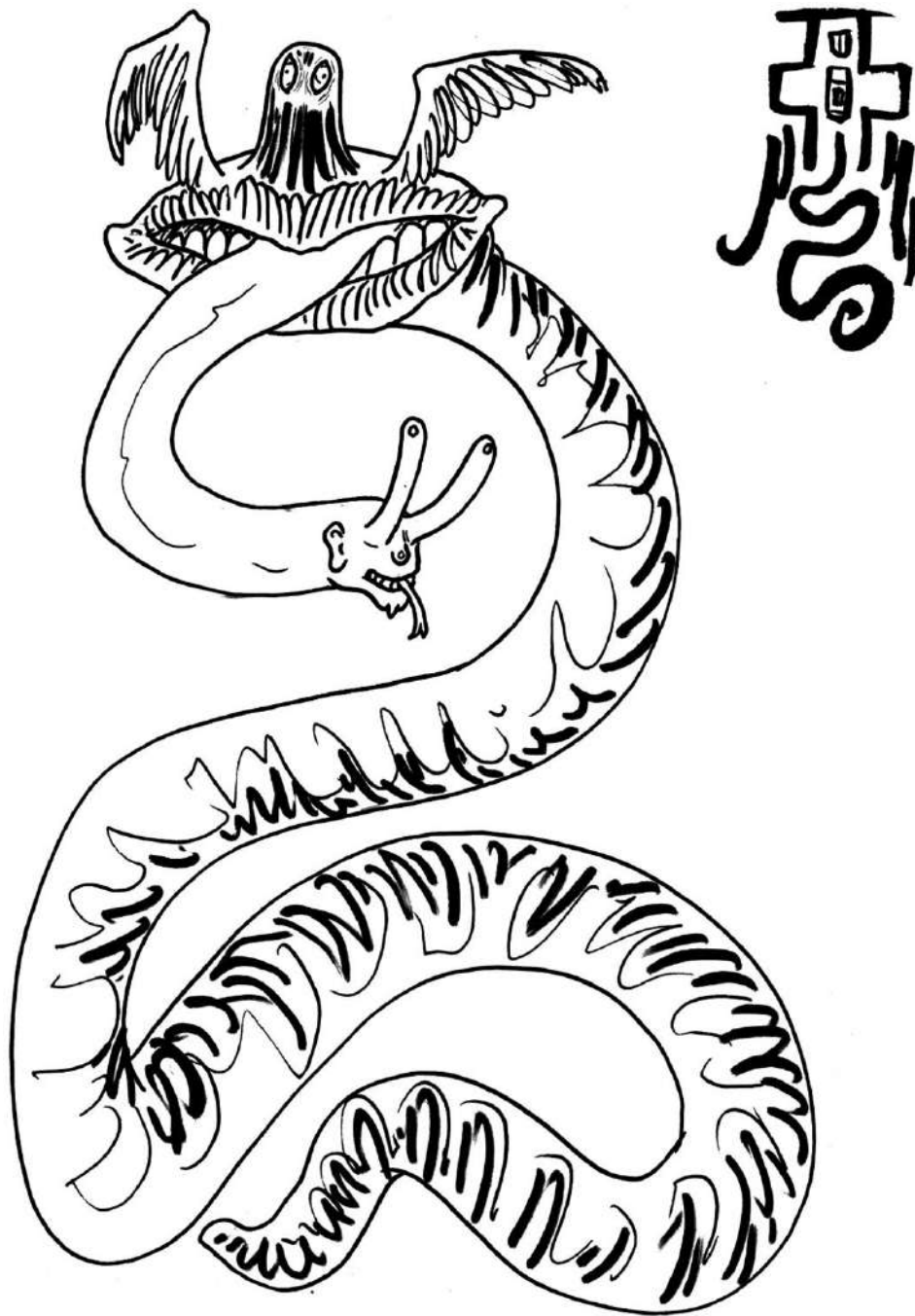






# VIRUSBEAST EBULARIA

Virusbeast Ebularia is a greater feyr that appears as an ethereal menace coiling around the ethereal countenances of its victims. Ebularia whispers maddening nonsense into its victims' ears as it slowly nibbles at their souls and sanity.





# VOSSOKO

Vossoko, the so-called “Tiger of Ennedi,” is a predator of elephants who lairs within a tumulus of elephant bones somewhere in the mountains of Ennedi. People call Vossoko “King of Lions” even though they fully well know that the Ennedi Tiger is not only not a cat of any sort, big, small or even medium, but that he has lived in the lands to the south of K'met long, long, long before the arrival of cats and hyenas, or the invention of dogs.

Vossoko is a burly, slinking, lumbering beast clothed in sumptuously black fur decorated in red stripes. He has teeth so large that, depending on who is spinning the tail, he either cannot shut or cannot open his tremendous jaws. People refer to Vossoko as a “tiger” because of his sibilant voice and his striped demeanor.

The Ennedi Tiger regards humanity with the same sort of cautious amusement a veteran warrior gives the tiny serpent or scorpion who felled him in just retaliation to a misplaced footfall. Sometimes, Vossoko will grant a person audience at his sepulchre-throne in his mausoleum made of elephants. Sometimes, Vossoko will lend a mortal some of his strength, other times, he hunts humans in their dreams.



# VUCUB CAQUIX

Vucub Caquix is a bird demon who announced himself soon after the destruction of the People of Wood. Whether Nine Macaw was a rogue god, or a parrot who became a sorcerous giant is difficult to tell, he was literally too brilliantly dazzling to look at directly.

Vucub Caquix claimed to be both the Sun and the Moon, and arrogantly took credit for Creation. All in all, Nine Macaw was a dazzlingly irritating thorn in the collective side of the Four Creator Gods. To punish this false god's egregious presumption, the Four Creator Gods tasked the Elder Hero Twins with assassinating the bird. To the Twins' sorrow, they were badly maimed as they discovered that the bird demon was a vastly superior combatant.

After Vucub Caquix trounced the Elder Hero Twins, he realized he had broken his tooth in the process. The Twins returned, now disguised as a pair of healers offering to cure Vucub Caquix's debilitating toothache. Having learned the source of the demon's power was his beauty, the Twins proceeded to pull out all of his teeth, peel off his golden face coverings, pluck out his resplendent crest, and steal all of his fantastic jewelry, leaving him as a maimed, withered bird now too pathetic to slay.







# XIVIRUS

Xivirus is a virusbeast descended from the god-feyr Megalovirus. Unlike many of Megalovirus' more powerful spawn, Xivirus is not a shapeshifter, but a parasite who can possess a victim it overwhelms. Outside of a host, Xivirus is an ogre-sized droplet of ectoplasm. In the center of its widest part is a leering eye formed of congealed cytoplasmic vileness.



# XURU DAU

Xuru Dau is a predatory spirit found in the Deep Ethereal. When it isn't slumbering, Xuru Dau hunts lost ghosts and other spirits while longing for the taste of flesh. Spectacularly foolish warlocks or other spiritualists sometimes summon Xuru Dau into the physical world in order to extract a task or secret from it. The spirit's presence in the physical world invariably presages catastrophe in addition to the ones it personally authors.



# ZHU HAI

Zhuhai was once a man, a cobbler to be more precise, whose family was devoured by the monster god Jia Yu. Zhuhai, alone, was spared because Jia Yu spat him out. Zhuhai wandered the land in search of Jia Yu, slaying dozens, then hundreds of the monster god's lesser brethren over the years.

One day, Zhuhai went to Ha Ka Dien, the chief deity of Beihuan Mountain, to ask the deity to advise him how to slay Jia Yu once and for all. Ha Ka Dien looked into the former cobbler's heart, and told the beast hunter that if he truly wanted to slay Jia Yu, he would have done so years ago. Angered, Zhuhai slew the deity's attendants in a rage. Ha Ka Dien drove the hunter from its abode, cursing him to become a giant, horned wolf with ten heads.

Ha Ka Dien told Zhuhai to eat Jia Yu's nine eyes if he wished to shed his extra heads, and bathe in Jia Yu's bile and heart's blood if he wished to slough off his horns and fur. Two thousand years since, and Zhuhai continues preying on man and beast alike in seeming ignorance of his old grudges with either Jia Yu or Ha Ka Dien.





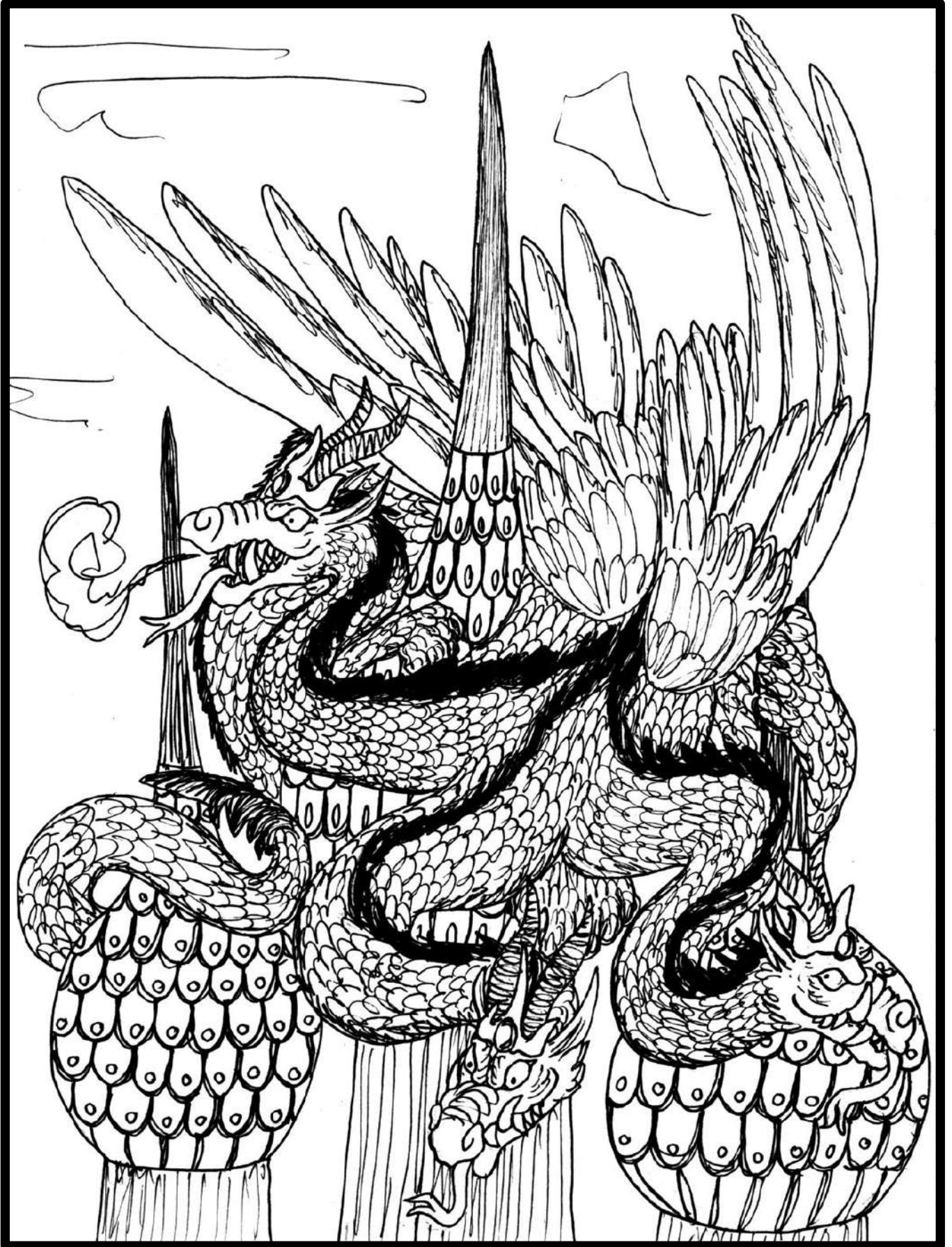


# ZMEY GORYNICH

If one listened to the narcissistic ravings of the Mountain Dragon, one would assume Zmey Gorynich was the father of Tiamat and Gaia, then married the Sky. In truth, this dragon had offensively humble beginnings.

Once upon a time, a peasant and his wife had a scrawny son they named “Gorynich,” in the hopes of inspiring greatness. Gorynich proved to be a troublesome son, a lazy daydreamer whom his exasperated parents often sent him to bed without supper. So, one night, the boy ran away from home again, and this time eventually found himself at the forest hut of a witch whom everyone called “Grandma.”

Gorynich pleaded with Grandma to make him big and strong like a bogatyr, so he could marry a princess. Grandma, who was tasked by her own granny to make dinner, tasked the boy to fetch a talking hare, a talking mushroom, and a talking apple, and bring them back to her kitchen. Grandma then warned him not to listen to his quarries' rantings. Gorynich found each, and ate each, becoming distressed as he pondered their warnings about how Grandma meant to kill and eat him. When he returned to ask why Grandma wanted to cook him for stew, her Granny assumed she was being lazy and ate her granddaughter. For being such a dunce, Granny gave Gorynich a jar of magic unguent, warning him to never use it. He drank it dry as he returned home. The last thing Gorynich's parents saw was a giant with their son's three heads approaching.

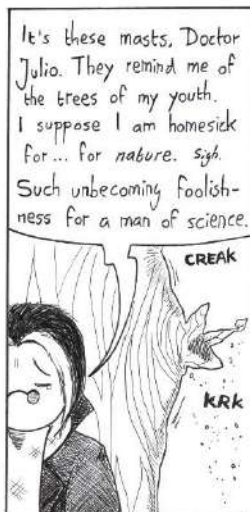








"Found you", featuring Urtica





# WARTORN GAZETTEER VOLUME II: CONQUISTA

BY MARK "ROCK OF THE FRATERNITY" BARTELS

## FOREWORD

*"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout.  
Till you have drenched our steeples,  
drowned the cocks!  
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!  
Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once  
That make ingrateful man!"*

- William Shakespeare, 'King Lear'

I passed an invisible line and crossed the border between Lilliend and Conquista in the dead of night, the vicious rainstorm that had come boiling out of the nighty sky crashing down all around me. No light guided my way, for the moon and stars were lost behind the clouds and I carried no lantern. Rather than carry or conjure a light, I had cast a spell of night-vision on myself; more than once, I had heard the clatter of armour and the grumbling of soldiers on duty to prevent invasion – as well as escape. Besides dodging patrols, I had to be careful not to get swept away by surprise mudslides and miniature avalanches.

Despite the chaotic circumstances, the moment of transition stands out clearly in my memory. You will scoff at my 'sensationalistic fancies', my *Master*. But

I stand by them; they have served me too well too often, that I should ignore them on your say-so.

With the rain hitting me as though it hated me, mud washing over my boots and the wind howling in my ears and tearing at my coattails, I swear I caught a whiff of a scent of incense. It was the kind of scent I have come to expect from the better churches – and then it turned into a foul, barnyard stench. At the same time, I swear I heard women's voices, laughing desperately, mirthlessly, as though struggling not to cry. The voices rose in pitch and turned into a despairing scream that faded along with the stench curdling my nostrils.

For a precious moment, I held position and cast a few simple spells of detection about me. Only when these revealed no unnatural predators lurking about did I continue my descent, scrambling, crab-walking, rappelling by my trusty mountaineering rope where necessary. As I went along my way, the slope of Lilliend's final descent gradually, so very gradually started to even out. The rain still fell in buckets, but the wind that had battered at me and tried to drive me back, faltered and died. As you can imagine, this greatly aided me in my further descent.

Have you ever physically climbed up or down a mountain, my *Master*? Unless you have, I feel you are ill-equipped to understand my feeling of elation when I breached the foothills at the base of the great slope, not to mention when I left those behind for flat ground. Well, relatively flat. I would soon learn that Conquista was also a land of heights and lows, just like Lilliend; it was just more gradual about it.

In my moment of delight, I turned to look back the way I had come. Be it ever so childish, I felt the urge to spit in the direction of miserable, backwards Lilliend – only for my mouth to run dry and cold shudders to crawl up and down my spine.

When I speak of an invisible line, my *Master*, let me assure you that I thought it a metaphor myself. Looking back, however, I could see where the Lilliend-Conquistan border lay very clearly. A storm was boiling up against it; great clouds churning like airborne oozes; winds ripping shrubs uproot and all to toss them into the sky; bolt upon bolt of lightning crawling along the line like luminous centipedes. Before my eyes, all the violence of the skies strained against an impassable barrier – and to my discomfort, did so in complete silence. Only the rain continued to pass through, but without the wind driving it along, it was more a chill caress than the lash it had been.

I did not like to think of the power needed to conjure such power and fury. Neither did I like to think of the power needed to so neatly and *selectively* block their progress.

Yes, my *Master*, I recall what your precious 'S' wrote of 'dread lords'. In light of what was happening right in front of my eyes, I belatedly realized the identity of that wretched vampiric ... *creature* I had battled in the Athenaeon Boarding School for Young Women<sup>24</sup>. And yes, I also realized how truly fortunate I had been to escape.

With a curse and a snatch of prayer to the dead patrons of the Eternal Order, I turned away from the spectacle of (super)natural violence and hurried into the sheltering darkness of a forest. Later, I would learn that this was the *brugia sombreada*; at the time, it simply felt like refuge. Above my head, interlocking branches and broad leaves kept out the rain. They also helped stave off an eerie sensation that I was being *watched* even as I gazed at the

power that had been called forth against me. While I hurried to find a place where I could safely camp and recuperate, three concerns presented themselves to me:

First of all, could the creature I fought at the school have been holding back during our fight? If she could conjure this much power, she should have been able to swat me like an insect. Or could she? A storm that strong should have been able to toss me about like a dandelion seed, rather than make my descent simply uncomfortable and dangerous. Maybe the beast's control was flawed somehow. Or maybe it was not she but some secret ally of hers who controlled the weather? I could not be certain, and that vexed me. It vexes me still.

Second, but by no means less concerning: who or what had put up that barrier to prevent the storm from chasing me any further? I had felt a sensation of being watched. Was that the vampire-thing or some other player taking an interest in my affairs? If the latter, then what were their intentions?

Third, *oh me oh my*, if the dread lady of Lilliend did have such power at her beck and call, then how will my *Master* fare when he finally comes a-sauntering down the Threefold Path and tries to steal her domain out from under her? Why, he might be in *danger*...!

*Hahaaa~! 'Oh, dearie me, what if the Master gets hurt?' Priceless. :)*

I chuckled a bit as I fled deeper into the forest. At the time, I thought that at least for the moment, I should be safe.

Soon enough, I would be disabused of such foolish notions.

At your service, (*Regrettably!*)

*Ciska*

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<sup>24</sup>For more details on Ciska's confrontation and brief fight with Darklady Camille Churnstone, please read the article 'Lilliend' in *Quoth the Raven* #25.



Ciska

## REPORT TWO: CONQUISTA

*“Kill all the blacks, kill all the reds  
And if there's war between the sexes  
Then there'll be no people left.”*

- Joe Jackson, 'Real Men'

After a night of uninterrupted sleep in my tent, I set out to scout the domain that lay before me. I had not been able to purchase any maps of Conquista in Lilliend (at least, none that seemed to have any basis in fact, rather than fancy), so I simply struck out to the east. Eventually, I would either find people or the opposite border of the land, at which point I could backtrack to the halfway point and travel north or south.

Fortunately, I did not need to go that far. Around mid-morning, I encountered a wide road in the

middle of the forest. But such a road! It looked to be all one piece, without any sign of masonry or joining, its surface smooth. Whatever material had been used was a dull black, apart from a double yellow stripe down the middle, and nature appeared to be giving it some berth. Grass grew up right to the edge, but nothing larger, and there were not even any dead leaves on its pristine surface. The road resisted my attempts to cut off a sample for study, but a few simple spells revealed it was non-magical, did not emit any harmful energies and lacked components that would poison me if I made contact.

So that is what I did. After weeks of clambering up and down inclines and forging through thickets, it was a great pleasure to be able to walk on an even surface. The road certainly augmented my travel time wonderfully.

By noon, I had reached my second sign of Conquistan civilization; a two-storey building by the road with an odd mechanical installation with two hoses attached in front of it and a pair of box-like, metal carriages beside it. There was no trace of any horses, but a scent of frying bacon hung upon the air, and two men came sauntering out of the building as I walked up to it. They did not look like much, though they swaggered like champions. Both were clean-shaven and tanned, but were edging toward middle age in years, and running to fat in the middle. They wore what was clearly a uniform; kaki trousers, shirt and jacket of red dungaree cloth, mid-calf boots, wide-brimmed hats and – most significant to me – a broad belt with a gun hanging on one hip, and a long knife on the other.

In light of the armaments in plain sight and the likelihood that these men represented some form of civil authority, I did my best to appear non-threatening and tried to initiate communications. Unfortunately, the two guardsmen proved to be disinterested in conversation with me and ignored me in favour of talking amongst themselves. From what I understood of their conversation, they were pleased to see me because they thought I was pretty, 'and now they would each have one'.

At this point they started to squabble about who I should 'belong to', with the taller laying a hand on his pistol to add weight to his claim. This caused the shorter of the two to back down – and neatly kept their attention entirely focused on each other.

I freely admit that I am not a crack shot, my *Master*, but even I cannot fail to put a bullet in a man's head when that man is standing still and focusing completely on something else. Note that I said before that I did my best to *appear* non-threatening; I had already loaded and primed my pistol once I saw the building. The taller man fell like a puppet with its strings cut, and the shorter one wasted a precious moment gawking at his corpse. This gave me the time I needed to duck behind a tree.

The still-living guardsman yelled, apparently convinced that I was running away, and fired what he called a 'warning shot'. Frankly, I did not and still do not see the point, as it came nowhere near me. I

firmly gripped my sword cane and incanted an incantation, the sound of which brought the oaf running towards me. To give him his due, he was faster than I had given him credit for, and he would have probably managed to put a bullet in my leg if not for my protective spell deflecting it. My opponent startled rather badly when his projectile cut a neat little groove in his ear as it *pinged* off my barrier, and I followed up by bringing the head of my still-sheathed sword cane up between his legs with all the force I could muster.

Once he was down on the ground, gasping wretchedly for breath, it was the work of a moment to *unsheath* my blade and put him out of his – and also my – misery. It was all done quickly and neatly, with style and a minimum of fuss, if I do say so myself.

*Chapeau, darling, chapeau!*

### CONQUISTA AT A GLANCE

<b>Cultural Level:</b>	Oil Age (11)
<b>Ecology:</b>	Full
<b>Climate/Terrain:</b>	Temperate forests, hills and mountains; desert plains and mountains
<b>Year of Formation:</b>	684 BC
<b>Year of Joining the Cluster:</b>	740 BC.
<b>Population:</b>	62,000
<b>Races:</b>	Human 75%, changelings 20%, sasquatch 2%, hags 1%, Ogier 1%, other 1%
<b>Human Ethnic Groups:</b>	Casian 32%, Canan 32%, Ulan 32%, Lilliender 1%, Vieuxlyese 1%, other 2%
<b>Languages:</b>	Casian*, Souragnien, Frankonet, Lelender, Ocham, Støj, Teuton, Tegensprog
<b>Religions:</b>	Taiia*, Brightwell, <i>il Demonio</i> , the <i>Loa</i> , Lökn
<b>Government:</b>	Constitutional republic
<b>Ruler:</b>	<i>il Presidente</i> Erik Hughmann; ( <i>la Infestación</i> )
<b>Darklords:</b>	Cliffton Willgoat; Euphonia Root; Fredewulf van Slecht, Sandra Williamson

With the second man down, I turned my attention to the building they had exited from. I reached for my second pistol when I saw a third and then a fourth person – a middle-aged man and a substantially younger woman – peek out of the doorway. I was

prepared to visit some more violence should that be necessary, but I was ... surprised.

The people who exited the building were more than willing to speak to me. As a matter of fact, they were absolutely garrulous, and startled me by falling to their knees and kissing my hands, of all things.



I came to understand that they were a married couple who tended what they called a 'refueling station'. Normally, they saw little traffic this far out, but scholars and guardsman – what they called *Hombres Valientes* – occasionally made the voyage respectively to study the forest and patrol the border. The pair I had dealt with were of the latter variety, but instead of doing their duty had made themselves at home, eating the couple's food supply, stealing what little money they had been able to save up, declaring the husband their servant and the wife *doméstica*. Given what the two guards had been debating with regards to me, I had a strong suspicion as to what that word meant. Protests and attempts at resistance had been curbed by harsh beatings and threats of death.

It would probably not surprise you, my *Master*, that the couple was more than happy at this point to overlook the small matter of me, an obvious foreigner, killing governmentally appointed guardsmen. The fact that they could see me standing comfortably in daylight without catching fire seemed to endear me to them as well.

After having given both corpses a few solid kicks to relieve his pent-up feelings, the husband proceeded to loot and strip them, and I assisted him in digging a pair of shallow graves out in the forest. We tacitly shared the spoils between us. I know I could have claimed all by right of combat, but I thought it best to maintain the couple's good opinion of me; I took one of the pistols and one of the blades, which were all of superior craftsmanship, and let the husband have almost all of the money. By the time we had finished, the wife had set out a reasonably decent lunch of fried bacon and eggs on fried bread, and my hosts insisted on pouring me the best beer their oppressors had left of their supply.

I do not think it an exaggeration when I say that this first encounter would set the tone for the rest of my stay in Conquista. Technological marvels and the tyranny of knife and gun; tensions leading to violence, which is treated as perfectly normal. Oh yes, and greasy food.

After lunch, I had a lengthy discussion with the couple. They told me as much of Conquista as they knew, and the husband offered to drive me to the nearest town in his *mobila*, which was one of the two carriages, while his wife would dispose of the other one somewhere in the woods, seeing as a crude marking on its doors and roof declared that it belonged to *los Hombres Valientes* and could lead to uncomfortable questions if it was found at their home.

My puzzlement at the offer, given the lack of horses, was short-lived. Soon enough, I was wedged in an uncomfortable chair, sitting cheek by jowl with the unfortunately fragrant husband while his *mobila* whizzed down the black road at breakneck speeds – no horses or other animals needed. My chauffeur was kind enough to explain the concept of what he called an 'internal combustion engine' to me, and seemed to both take glee in my surprise and curiosity and respect the fact that I did not fly into a blind panic. Apparently, most people who came in from the west did just that when first exposed to *mobila*.

Upon my question whether people from other points of the compass were similarly hampered, he spat out the window and said 'the scum' from Vieuxlyons to the east had similar technology of their own and stated his belief that 'the savages' from Masogan to the south did not even have the gift of fire.

Within the hour, I had been delivered to a small town and could visit the stores. I initially received some odd looks in the streets due to the clothes I wore, but the husband had given me advice on how best to fit in. I purchased a new wardrobe, then acquired a map and some books. My reconnaissance had officially begun.

## LANDSCAPE

To start this section, I would make a note of the sheer size of this domain. Even cursory research showed that it easily surpasses Darkon for sheer surface area. Its population of thousands, which might crowd

some of the lands I am familiar with, are left with an abundant amount of space into which to expand.

Traveling this whole land on foot or horse would have taken me years, which I judged unacceptable. My reconnaissance needs to be thorough, but I must not become too well-known for fear of attracting attention to your purpose here, my *Master*. It is for this reason that I sought the services of an individual capable of operating one of these miraculous *mobíla* at the first town I came to.

It did not take much time, and only a little coin, before someone referred me to a house on the edge of the community, where a fairly large family tended a farm and vegetable plot that seemed wholly unsatisfactory for the task of supporting them. The man who guided me there told me he was the family's landlord, assured me that I could 'have my pick' out of them for a modest sum – payable to him, rather than the family – and told me some of the younger men were certified to operate *mobíla*. He seemed amused that I took the time to introduce myself to the apparent head of the family and explain my purpose, then ask whether any of his youngsters was capable and willing to be my chauffeur and guide for the duration of my stay in Conquista.

*Bit of a red flag there. A bushel's worth of red flags, at that.*

The family head – a grizzled old gentleman with one eye and a bad limp – puzzled me by kissing my hands, then hurriedly limped off to fetch one of his grandsons from the field. The young man introduced himself to me as Hectór Seis, and practically fell over himself telling me how good he was at driving and repairing *mobíla*, showed me a piece of paper that he treated like it was worth his weight in gold and apparently proved he was certified at both tasks, then took me around the back of his family home to show me his vehicle. At this point, he stole anxious glances both at his landlord, who was starting to go red in the face with poorly-suppressed anger.

(Hectór later explained to me that the landlord had probably expected to collect a much less moderate sum by renting or selling me a *mobíla* of his own, and had not expected Hectór to have one available. From the delapidated state of the house, it was clear to me that he did not spend a lot of time there, so it was not so strange that he was unaware that his tenants had a vehicle to rent out.)

I confess the *mobíla* did not look like much to me, but then I had not been impressed with the design of other such vehicles I had seen up to that point. As Hectór assured me the thing would move and that he could repair any parts of it that broke down, I sealed the deal by spitting in my palm and shaking him by the hand. Both Hectór and the family patriarch looked stunned, but happily so. In contrast, the landlord's mouth dropped open in undisguised shock, and he studiously avoided coming within arm's reach of me afterward.

This mattered nothing to me; I had secured the necessary transport. I asked Hectór when he would be able to leave. He replied on the spot that he could go now. He only had a very few personal possessions he needed to bring, which he loaded into the back of the *mobíla* with commendable speed.

After this, there was an equally swift round of goodbyes between Hectór and his family. Tears were shed on both sides, but these were wiped away almost as quickly as they fell, and I got the impression that they were caused by happiness, rather than distress. I also got the impression that both Hectór and the family were in a rush for him to get away, with many a fearful and furtive look at the landlord. As we drove away, Hectór stole a few glances in the *mobíla*'s rear view mirror, but rather than being wistful or regretful, it seemed that he either feared pursuit or worried that he would see his family suffer abuse.

I shall now continue with my observations on the Landscape of Conquista.

From the map, the books, and my own observations – augmented by my excellent homunculus Firstborn

– I learned that Conquista was not quite as flat as it had seemed after my misadventures in Lilliend. As a whole, the land slopes up toward the north and down toward the south. The great rivers known as the *Wittwentraen* and the *Bitterflut* flow down from the west towards the east, and run across Conquista in fairly straight lines, cutting the land into three parts known locally as *cantóns*. Each *cantón* proved to have a fairly distinct ecology, which I will detail below.

Wedge between the extension of the *Wittwentraen* at its southern border and an extension of the Lilliender mountains to the north sits the northernmost *cantón*. The mountain range to the north – known locally as the Wrathwall – provides the northernmost *cantón* with an abundance of water the whole year through, as clouds that roll in from the ocean to the far south of Masogan crash against its high flanks, adding their moisture to waters gushing forth from hidden springs. Many small rivers flow down the flanks of the Wrathwall, feeding a plentitude of lakes large and small, or else continue to join the white-water rush of the *Wittwentraen* as it flows onwards to Vieuxlyons to the east.

On the subject of the mountains, I do not have much of interest to report. When the rest of the Cluster's domains first appeared, there were people who tried to blaze a trail through the Wrathwall in order to reach the northern half of the Cluster. Especially

after Vieuxlyons became the main trade contact between Conquista and the rest of the 'civilized' lands, people were keen to find reliable passes so they would not need to rely on the hated eastern neighbour. Such passes as they found did not lead all the way through, and the mountains proved to be full of unreasonable creatures; unreasonable and *hungry*.

Attempts to create a reliable trade-route by carving a passage through the mountains failed, and all the blasting and digging only seemed to stir the local predators up. There was talk of sending the armed forces in to support workers, but as there was a reported buildup of troops in Vieuxlyons at the time, the government refused to make forces available.

I spent some time surveying the mountains from a safe distance and received reports from my Firstborn and animal scouts. As a result, I can confirm the Wrathwall is home to eagles both normal and dire, as well as large bears. That being said, I rather suspect that the 'predators' that fell on any scout- or work-party that tried to find a way through were the Ogre tribes I discovered with the aid of scrying-spells. While they seem largely content to stick to their crude shacks and caves in the mountains, eating bears, mountain goats, the odd eagle and each other, it should come as no surprise that they considered humans walking right into their territory to be breakfast, lunch and tea arriving.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE HIGH CLANS

Ciska is not wrong in saying there are Ogre clans in the Wrathwall, who have their own territories and homes there, and react with predictable violence to intruders. What she *is* wrong about, is that the clans are content to remain in the heights forever.

Möde (NE female Ogre Fighter 4 / Cleric of Zivilyn 6) is an Outlander from Krynn, and a former soldier of the Dragonarmies. The Ogress ended her service without leave, having grown disenchanted with the way the army used Ogres as disposable brutes, and went into isolation to consider her future. She found her faith in the Krinnish god of wisdom through meditation, and might have spent her life in solitary contemplation, had she not been



found and routed by a group of human adventurers. Möde charged into a convenient fog bank, hoping to shake off her pursuers or set up an ambush. When she walked out of the fog, she had traveled very far, indeed.

To the savage Ogres of the Wrathwall, Möde was very impressive. As a former soldier, she is a physical powerhouse. As a priestess, she is a source of wisdom and power. Several foolish males tried to forcibly make her their mate, only for them to suffer humiliating beatings.

Möde could have taken over any tribe of her choice and become its matriarch ruler – but she felt that she had been granted a great task by the gods.

Instead of focusing on one tribe, Möde has been teaching any Ogre who comes to her willing to learn. Those who are strong and want to fight, she has been drilling as soldiers. Those who are cunning and want power, she has inducted as priests. The most important thing Möde's pupils are learning is that she has a vision for *all* the tribes of the Wrathwall.

With her apprentices slowly forming up into a proper army, Möde is absorbing clans not by beating them down, but by building them up. She has already taught the Ogres under her control to dig into the mountain and build hidden fortresses; she has taught them how to smelt and forge; she has improved their health with magic and potions; she is giving them power; and she is preaching of a future where the Ogres will leave the Wrathwall and descend on the fat, soft lands below.

It is not just Ogreish malice that guides Möde's program; she firmly believes her people can not survive indefinitely in the mountains, not without eventually driving each other into extinction or being routed by the humans below. Given these facts, Möde believes the best course is for those tribes willing to learn is to break out. While she has limited knowledge of the lower lands of Conquista, she has instructed her followers to bring her prisoners the next time humans intrude into the mountain range. Once Möde feels she knows enough, she will lead an army out into the *brugia fuerte* and from there into the *brugia zorra* to lay siege to Hughsrest. It would not be the first time she has been part of a siege, and with the nation's capitol and the government in her grasp, Möde thinks she can probably dictate terms to the rest of Conquista.

Wherever the land of the orthern *cantón* has not been cleared for farming or construction, it is covered in dense forest. The soil is highly fertile, leading to lush plant growth, both wild and domesticated, and allows farmers to easily clear two harvests every year. The forests of the north, which might seem to be all one thing, are subdivided by the locals into five areas known as *brugia*, based on the characteristics of the trees.

Westernmost, and closest to Lilliend, is an area of deciduous trees whose branches and leaves form an unusually dense canopy, leaving the ground beneath cool and casting a deep shadow even in midsummer. It is said in Conquista that if a tree ever dies in this, the *brugia sombreada* or Shadewood, it will not fall

because it is linked with and supported by every other tree around it.

Moving east and north, the area of forest that grows up to the foothills of the Wrathwall is a blend of deciduous and coniferous trees with particularly twisted, gnarled trunks and a stunted aspect. More widely spaced than the *brugia sombreada*, this is the *brugia fuerte* or Strongwood. If anyone expresses surprise at this name for the relatively small trees, locals will be happy to point out that these trees are unlikely to be torn from the earth and toppled by the annual spring floods spilling down from the Wrathwall. Rather than striving for height, the trees here struggle to expand their root system, granting them great stability.



Going south from the *brugia fuerte*, one enters a large area of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees that stretches all the way to the *Wittwentraen* – or would, if not for the presence of the northern *cantón*'s two 'great' cities and numerous towns and farms. Known – supposedly even famous – for the bright colours of the leaves as the season turns to autumn and its abundance of vulpine predators, this is the *brugia zorra*, or Foxwood. There are people who make a living by selling especially fine autumn leaves pressed between plates of glass to travelers from other areas in the domain or even abroad. In the past, this area was also known for the sale of very fine fox pelts, but these are now considered to be illegal contraband, and are thus only available on the black market.

Located at the heart of the *brugia zorra* are the northern *cantón*'s two 'great' cities: the nation's capitol and oldest city, Hughsrest – built on the north shore of the *laco colgado*, the *cantón*'s largest lake and named for the legendary sir Hugo the Conqueror, who local stories claim led the 'discovery' of Conquista – and Meyersville, a younger city named for Meyer Builterman, one of the last publically known members of a not-so-secret society called *los Viejos sagrados*.

Numerous villages, towns and flyspecks radiate out from the two cities. In Conquista, any man or woman with the means and gumption can take off into the unclaimed wilderness, clear a plot of land and start farming. So long as that person pays taxes promptly upon being asked for them, they are otherwise left to their own devices. A farm may dry up as its children leave, or it may attract neighbours, which causes a flyspeck to grow up around it, which may develop into a more sizeable town as various conveniences such as a post office and school are attracted.

One might expect the mighty forests of Conquista to quickly be eroded, but the truth is that more farms wither and die than grow into settlements, and the forest reclaims cleared land with surprising speed. I would find out why at a later date.

Moving on from the *brugia zorra* to the east, we come to an area of predominantly coniferous trees, which cover hills and ridges rising towards the border with Vieuxlyons to the east, even as the Wrathwall tapers down to the north. This is the *brugia serena*, the Silent Wood. Beneath the shadow of the trees, the landscape still bears the scars of battle; a silent reminder of the time troops from Vieuxlyons invaded and cut a bloody trail west- and southward in an attempt to reach Lilliend (recall the tales of 'Demonio-men' who attacked that domain, wielding firearms) as well as gain control over Conquista's black-oil-wells. In what I might call a typical display of the Conquistan attitude towards inconvenient truths, the area has been mostly abandoned, allowing the forest to hide the fact that Conquista is not an omnipotent powerhouse. It is passing rare for ambitious youngsters to set up farms here.

The *brugia serena* is a curiously quiet area, where even birds do not sing and foxes do not bark. Apart from sounds made by the people of Conquista moving through, transporting trade goods up and down the single road that cuts through the forest, the forest is eerily silent.

The only major settlement in the *brugia serena* would be the town of Alsem, which in fact straddles the border between the *brugia serena* and the last area of forest, the *brugia pestilente*. Founded once as a place to support and house border troops, Alsem has blossomed in recent years due to the opening of trade relations with the north and east of the Wartorn Cluster, which regrettably must flow through Vieuxlyons.

In spite of more ... 'relaxed' relations with the old enemy to the east and the recent economic boom, Alsem remains very much a fortified town. Rather than overgrow and cannibalize its defenses, the town rebuilds them larger, taller and stronger every time it expands. I will say more about Alsem further in this report but suffice it to say its streets and the region are patrolled far more dutifully than the western border with Lilliend.

Beyond the hill country leading *up* to the border, there is a slope leading *down* towards it. Here we find the final and smallest of the *brugia*, a minor wedge of land known as the *brugia pestilente*. Locals told me that this used to be simply part of the *brugia serena* until the appearance of Vieuxlyons and the toxic mire that surrounds it. As the spring floods from the tapering end of the Wrathwall blended with the poisons of the battlefield, these seeped into the earth of the descending slope.

As a result, the pine trees of the area have grown twisted and stunted (I personally saw several that grew in disturbing corkscrews), and the earth is constantly sagging and slippery. I had to avail myself of my climbing rope to get around and was obliged to buy several new pairs of boots after I completed my survey of the region, as the old ones were not just stained with filth, but actively *corroded* by it. Nothing grows in that poisoned soil apart from the tortured trees, and whereas the *brugia serena* is silent due to some baleful influence, the *brugia pestilente* is silent because no animal is stupid enough to try living there. Even insects avoid the place.

Local records suggest the borders of the *brugia pestilente* are static, but the current governor of Alsem has nevertheless ordered the digging of a deep trench along that border, right down to the bedrock, which has been filled with boulders and mortar to prevent the contamination from spreading.

Moving on south, we come to the middle *cantón*, bordered to the north by the *Wittwentraen* and to the south by the *Bitterflut*.

Transit across the river is facilitated by two great bridges, connected to the domain's impressive network of roads. I would like to point out at this point that the architecture of these bridges is truly impressive. During the Vieuxlyese invasion, troops bearing that nation's skull banner tried to blast the foundations of one of the bridges in order to limit and control traffic across the river, but even their

advanced explosives failed to do more than lightly scar one of the pillars.

(Sidenote: Given the difference in languages between Conquista and Lilliend, I would have expected the rivers to have different names in this domain, but even my most diligent research of old records did not reveal any mention of this.)

*That old ratbag 'S' liked to prattle on  
about False History.*

*Maybe she should've done more  
research into rewritten history.*

The landscape of the middle *cantón* is radically different from its northern neighbour. Where the north is covered in lush forest and the earth is fecund and yielding, here the soil is dry and needs a lot of coaxing before it will – grudgingly – yield a single harvest each year. Coarse sand and dry earth are the norm, strewn with small stones and dotted with patches of hardy cacti and agave-like plants. Temperatures in the middle *cantón* vary between scalding by day to intolerably muggy at night, and water and salt are valued considerably higher here than quality tobacco and whisky in the north *cantón*.

(Sidenote: I had to delay my journey to the middle *cantón* by several days because Hectór insisted that he needed to make adaptations to our *mobíla* in order to prevent sand and small stones from getting in the engine, and to prevent the engine from overheating. While I could not attest with absolute certainty to the effect of his efforts, I can report we only suffered some minor breakdowns in the middle *cantón* – which Hectór resolved handily enough – but I personally saw several dozen sun-bleached, roadside wrecks whose drivers had apparently not been as prudent.)

As a whole, the middle *cantón* is a land of curves and ridges. One would be hard-pressed to find a road

that runs in a straight line instead of looping left and right to follow the land. To the middle of the second *cantón*, the land rises into a terraced mountainscape called *los Mesas de Demonio*, or Tables of the Fiend. Driving along the roads that crisscross the *cantón*, the curvature of the landscape makes it entirely possible not to see what is happening twenty feet away to the left or right. There are many horror stories of people whose *mobíla* broke down far from their destination, only for them to die of thirst and exposure when they could easily have been saved – if only they had been able to see fellow travelers pass by behind the nearest ridge, or if those self-same travelers had been able to hear their screams for help over the roar of their own vehicle's engine.

One would not expect water to be such an issue in a landscape with two major rivers, but somehow the water never manages to reach the *cantón's* interior. Unless invest a lot of time and effort in digging wells, the land remains dry. There are barely a hundred reliable wells throughout the middle *cantón*, and it was clear enough that they exist mainly as waystations for travelers making the journey across; villages are few and far between in the interior.

Logic suggests there must be layers of bedrock beneath the middle *cantón* preventing water from spreading inland from the rivers or welling up from the depths, and my observations of the inland wells do bear this out, but as we both know, my *Master*, logic can not explain every phenomenon of our world. To wit: Over the past thirty years, there have been five attempts to construct aqueducts to channel the bounty of the *Wittwentraen* inland to allow more and bigger farms and towns to be raised there, but all have failed. I personally investigated each building-site, and the construction was sound in every case. My knowledge of physics and engineering state clearly that water *should* have flowed through the various aqueduct channels and invigorated the interior, but as numerous eyewitnesses told me, the water evaporated before it came anywhere near its target. Regrettably, the people of Conquista appear to have given up on the

idea, chalking it up as scientifically impossible based on 'observational evidence'.

As a result, the most bountiful farms of the middle *cantón* hug the shore of the *Wittwentraen*, and the regional capitol *Prosopis* is likewise situated there. Towns and villages are built near the farms, as in the north. People with the willpower (a *lot* of willpower) and means work the harsh land, struggling to provide enough food for the middle *cantón*.

Historical records suggest a similar arrangement once existed on the shore of the *Bitterflut*, where stands the city of *las Zorras*. Certainly I found plenty of ruins to corroborate this. Although the mineral-rich waters of the '*Flut*' are far from sovereign for farming purposes, as I already noted in my report on Lilliend, they must have once been much better for it than they are today.

The situation has changed, in part due to the appearance of Vieuxlyons and in a much larger part due to the rise of the local mining industry. Where once *las Zorras* was a normal population center, receiving the harvest of satellite towns and villages, producing various needful things and providing some semblance of civil order, this ended soon after the first black-oil wells were discovered by hopeful people prospecting for usable ore. Today, the landscape of the *Bitterflut's* shore is easily as polluted as the *brugia pestilente*, as shafts tunneled deep into the earth by indentured workers yield up as much toxic sludge as they do usable black-oil. Add in the vile backwash from Vieuxlyons' swamps, and the earth of the middle *cantón's* southern shore is effectively sterilised.

*Las Zorras* is now the center of the black-oil industry, where raw material pumped up from the depths of the earth is processed and loaded into cargo-*mobíla* for shipment north; in part for local use as fuel, and in more significant part for trade to the rest of the 'civilized' Cluster by ways of Vieuxlyons, which I was informed hosts the end station for a 'rail-network.'

(From context, this appears to be a network for far larger cargo-hauling machines than even the cargo-

*mobíla*, which I found to be quite impressive. I shall look forward to witnessing them with my own two eyes when I move on to survey Vieuxylions.)

Apart from the heavy industry necessary to store and process black-oil, *las Zorras* serves a second purpose. The city guards the one and only bridge across the *Bitterflut*, connecting the middle and southernmost *cantóns*, as the southernmost *cantón* connects to Masogan to the south. Ever since Masogan first appeared at the edge of the southern *cantón*, it has regularly vomited up waves of savage raiders. While their first attack came as a complete surprise and caused great destruction and human misery, most of the following attacks were met with an organized defense that included advanced firearms, some of them cannons so large that they needed to be mounted and anchored on the city walls of *las Zorras* to stop the recoil from knocking them over with every shot.

*Las Zorras*, then, oversees a massive chokepoint for every consecutive wave out of Masogan. The *Bitterflut* runs deep here, its waters are toxic due to the waste from the black-oil industry. While the savages are numerous, they are apparently hopelessly primitive and incapable of building their own bridges or rafts capable of making the crossing; they must either use the one bridge guarded by *las Zorras* or else remain in the southernmost *cantón*, which is virtually uninhabitable.

Every time a wave comes surging out of Masogan, the people of the city slam shut their gates and open fire, slaughtering invaders by the dozen. The guns are kept in pristine working condition and loaded at all times, and the bridge and the southern *cantón* beyond are under constant surveillance from lookout posts. It is now passing rare for more than small groups of particularly stealthy and quick-footed savages to make it into the interior, at which point they must still survive the trek through the waterless wilderness before they can reach anywhere to raid.

When I visited, I could see the bridge to the south was lined with skulls on stakes. The good people of *las Zorras* are not fool enough to leave the corpses of the dead to rot where they lie, for fear of causing a plague, but the heads of slain chieftains are scoured with lye, and the skulls set out as a warning for future attacks. To date, this 'deterrent' has failed to actually stop the Masogani from trying to rush across the bridge and reach the interior of Conquista as their forebears did long ago.

Given the level of security, crossing the *Bitterflut* is not an easy prospect – for the mundane. I had more trouble persuading Hectór that I would return for him than I did in casting a few spells to obscure my passage and enter the last part of Conquista. My guide was terrified that I would abandon him in *las Zorras* and just forge on through to Masogan or find another chauffeur.

(No, my *Master*; it would *not* have been more economical to do just that. At the time, I still needed to perform more in-depth research in Conquista, so I still needed transport. Finding another guide would have been a waste of time when I already had one who was compliant, respectful, efficient, and more than competent in all the areas I had anticipated and some I had not.)

Regarding the southernmost *cantón*, I can be brief. By day the temperature is hot enough that one might roast raw meat on any exposed boulder; by night the cold is so intense that it can freeze shut the mouth of anyone fool enough to lick their lips. This is the smallest of the three *cantóns*, and it is a sun- and wind-blasted wasteland, a desert so devoid of water that the largest lifeforms I encountered – apart from various vultures and other raptors circling overhead in the uncharitable hope that I would drop dead – were flies and other unpleasant insects. Should you wish to review my work, my *Master*, my pressing-book now contains a wide variety on the subject of buzzing insects that hunger for the salt of a woman's sweat or the blood beneath her skin. I admit I grew a bit irritable with their attention, which explains the



wide selection now preserved in my collection for future perusal.

*It is a vindictive woman indeed, who can look forward to gloating over bugs she's swatted for biting her. I approve.*

I toured the southernmost *cantón* for several days, using spells of invisibility when I drew closest to the border with Masogan. Honestly, the first glimpses I caught of that domain displayed far more grandeur than the area I was surveying. Masogan, from what I could see, is a primal land. The southern *cantón* is a miserable sandbox in comparison, where the sun bakes the water out of any creature unfortunate enough to be stuck there, the night's cold could kill the unprepared by freezing them, and insects barely survive by drinking the scant shadow of dew on the sand in the morning.

There are no deep wells in the southern *cantón*. I found the remains of camps, clearly set up by Masogani with invasion on their mind, some of them with crude and unsuccessful attempts to dig down and find water. Likewise, I found abortive attempts at building bridges from the southern shore of the *Bitterflut*, all failed due to what seemed to be a combination of a lack of practical knowledge as well as materials capable of withstanding erosion by the poisoned waters.

Apart from these sad ruins, I found no sign of anything resembling human habitation of the last piece of Conquista, and nothing even remotely interesting – with one exception. During my weary slog through the desert, I had one of my impressions, the ones you so enjoy disdaining, my *Master*. I do not know what set it off, but suddenly I felt that the scalding air of day turned as cold as it was at night on the instant. Overhead, the sun radiated darkness instead of light, and the sand itself seemed to growl and snarl at me.

Keeping in mind the last time I had such a vivid impression, I proceeded with all due caution, but I *still* thoroughly reconnoitered the area. So doing, I found an anomaly, hidden among the sand-dunes: an upward extension of the bedrock, hollowed out to form a cave either due to a very selective assault by the elements of nature, or else by unnatural forces. You need hardly ask which I personally suspect to have been the cause, my *Master*.

The place stank to high heaven, which was no wonder. Judging from even a casual study of the bones tossed into the back of the cave, the metal rings hammered into the walls and the stains thereon, the place must have been the site of at least a hundred murders by means of torture. In addition, someone had managed to haul a broken-down old *mobíla* into the cave, as well as a small barrel of raw black-oil, then tinkered with both using a crude workbench and what I identified as a caveman's take on alchemical tools. The twin stench of decay and black-oil were further enriched by an almost animal musk of unwashed flesh and old excrement. Various markings had been scratched and cut into the walls; these included some crude equations to do with the refinement of black-oil, as well as various blasphemous defilements of the holy symbols of Taiia.

Who- or whatever called this cave home was clearly vicious, stubborn and unclean. It was also absent during my visit, and the desert wind had blown enough fine sand into the cave to obscure any footprints. Judging from the dried excrement I found buried nearby, I would speculate that the occupant is humanoid and has used its captives for nourishment as well as entertainment, but that is all I can say with any certainty. I attempted to question some of the bones with necromancy, but they were curiously unresponsive.

As I had no idea where the occupant had gone, nor even how long it had been since it was last present, I made my way back to *las Zorras* to continue my survey. However, in keeping with your directives, my *Master*, I first availed myself of the serendipitously

provided collection of skeletons and skeletal parts but old and new.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE HOME OF EVIL

Ciska was more fortunate than she knows; the desert lair she found belongs to Conquista's first Darklord: Clifton Willgoat.

A rank 3 Sinkhole of Evil with a taint of Despair, Gluttony and Wrath even when the Darklord is absent, the lair's level soon rises to 4 when he is 'entertaining guests' – Masogani he captures on their way north, or people he drags south from the north or middle *cantóns* to die a miserable death in his home – or suffers the throes of frustration as he struggles to make lifeless matter obey his will.

Seeing as the occupant might have some magical abilities, I judged it wisest to haul my selection of the finest, most intact bones out into the desert sands before I drew out your scroll and set to work. I expect you will be satisfied; the next 'seed' of your conquest has been planted in an out-of-the-way area where it will not be disturbed by the local populace, and where it can easily avail itself of any Masogani who knuckle their way towards the *Bitterflut*. By the time you are ready to call it forth, I expect there to be a fine harvest.

### FLORA

Given the oddly different ecology of the three *cantóns*, I expected radically different plant life in all three, and I was not disappointed in this respect.

The northern *cantón* has the aforementioned lush plantlife. Coniferous and deciduous trees cover every inch of land that is not cleared by human hand or too steep too rocky for them to set root. Beneath the shelter of branch, leaf and needle, lush grass and various bushes cover the ground – again, unless this is cleared by human hand. Where humans *have* cleared the land, they soon plant various edible crops on whatever land they do not build their homes and

businesses on; grains, cereals, squash and other vegetables.

As I have mentioned before, the middle *cantón's* main flora consists of cacti, agave and similar leathery plants capable of storing moisture inside their leathery tissues. The closest one comes to a forest here, consists of patches of stunted acacia trees. While the locals regularly try to plant or transplant these, hoping to create genuine forests or at least patches of shade, even the hardy acacia does not do well in the *cantón's* stingy soil – not even with a lot of loving care, manure and precious water.

Regarding the agaves and cacti; given that they contain water, one might assume that travelers would avail themselves of such, especially in emergency situations. This is relatively safe as long as one stays close to the shore of the *Wittwentraen*, but the closer one travels to the *Bitterflut*, the more likely these plants are to contain some truly disturbing hallucinogenics and poisons. I spent a couple of highly entertaining evenings distilling some of these for my personal use later.

The south *cantón* has no plantlife worth mentioning. I surveyed it with my usual skill and precision, and I did not even find subterranean root systems.

### FAUNA

As with flora, the fauna of the three *cantóns* is distinct, with two exceptions:

Wherever one goes in this domain, one can always look up to see raptors circling. Hawks, falcons, eagles and vultures consider the whole domain their range. In the Wrathwall, one can find dire varieties of these aerial predators. I mentioned that I spotted some of them keeping an eye on me in the southern *cantón*, where animal life is virtually nonexistent. Presumably they watch all travelers in that desolate area, both coming and going, and like hope, hunger springs forever.

## DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE BIRDS

Ciska only mentions in passing the 'uncharitable' attention of the raptors of Conquista, but this can be a good tool for DungeonMasters to create an oppressive atmosphere.

Wherever the players go in Conquista, they notice the hawks and the buzzards circling – right overhead. Is this a sign of someone spying on them? Is it some baleful omen, or a sign that something is wrong with them that the animals have picked up on?

Soon enough they come to realize that the birds are circling over every settlement of any size. The birds descend as soon as they see anything – or anyone – fall dead, sometimes not even waiting for the killer to leave. Hawks or even eagles squabbling with foxes or coyotes over a freshly killed rat or rabbit are a common sight.

Imagine the players' horror if they arrive at the site of a killing and find the birds there, already pecking out the eyes or ripping open the abdomen of someone who had been helpful to them.

Maybe the worst part of the experience is that to the locals, this is completely normal. People and animals who die are quickly moved under cover, unless they are considered to be worthless, in which case the birds are allowed their fill before the remains are tossed in a ditch or a refuse-pit. When fights break out, nobody pays any heed to the fact that the sky is suddenly thick with raptors.

In the end, there is no supernatural reason for the birds' behaviour. Sooner or later, there is always more violence done in Conquista. Sooner or later, there is always another corpse to feast on. All the birds have to do is be patient.

The second exception concerns equines. Conquista is not unfamiliar with horses, ponies, donkeys and mules, but such animals are not in common use and rarely seen out and about. Mostly, equines are shipped from Umbrash to the northeast by ways of

Vieuxlyons and then moved west for sale to Lilliend. Roles normally performed by equines, such as pulling ploughs or carrying people, are assigned to various types of *mobila* or indentured servants for a very simple reason: equines do not breed in Conquista.

It does not matter whether these animals are treated poorly or well, they simply do not breed. Otherwise perfectly healthy animals will, if they remain within the borders of Conquista, show a complete and utter disinterest in reproducing for the full duration of their lives. No amount of encouragement, some of it quite advanced, has managed to solve the issue. Take the equines out of Conquista, however, and the 'little problem' goes right away. The enterprising merchants of Conquista have tried to use this loophole by having their animals do the deed and then moving them back across the borders, but this has in all known cases lead to stillbirths.

I would have investigated the matter myself, my *Master*, but that would require a longer stay in Conquista than either of us would be comfortable with.

Speaking of domesticated beasts, my *Master*, I suppose I should mention a relatively recent addition to the Conquistan cattle yards. The local cow breed of choice used to be the *lechito*, a fairly small, tan breed capable of surviving in extremes of both heat and cold. When trade with the rest of the Wartorn Cluster opened up around 750 BC, the nation of Lund started export of one of its signature products; a variant bovine known as the *Lundan Bess*.

The cows of this 'miracle breed' are easily twice the size of the *lechito*, and noticeably wider. An oddity the farmers of Conquista explained away by referring to the 'advanced breeding techniques of Lund', is that the *Lundan Bess* has a second set of udders, set between the front legs in addition to udders set between the hind legs as with normal dairy cattle. This produces a noticeably odd, awkward gait in adult specimens.

While these bovines are less tolerant to extremes of temperature, the *Lundan Bess* is famous for being



prolifically fertile. Adult females enter oestrus in mid-spring and – unless impregnated – do not leave it until the start of winter. Within twenty to thirty days after giving birth, the female reenters oestrus, and it is not uncommon to see them nursing one calf while having another growing in their womb. In comparison, *lechito* cows enter oestrus in spring, but do not re-enter it after giving birth until the next year rolls around.

A Lundan Bess starts producing milk shortly after impregnation. Once the creature starts lactating, provided they receive enough nourishment, one udder starts to fill up with milk just as soon as the other is being emptied. With the extra pair of udders, the Bess produces so much milk that farmers prefer to keep nursing calves with the mother, even when she is being milked regularly, to prevent distress to the animal due to buildup.

In addition to its capacity to provide superior volumes of dairy and its high reproductive rate, the Bess is extremely compliant and far more intelligent than its lumbering gait would suggest – and certainly much smarter than the *lechito*, which I found to be a dull-witted and somewhat hysterical animal even at the best of times. Many people assured me the average Bess is easily as intelligent as a well-trained dog, being able to learn several simple commands. One farmer I interviewed entertained me by having her favourite Bess solve basic sums by tapping the ground with a hoof.

The only downside to the Lundan Bess appears to be that normal cows often react with hostility to their presence, which I think may be due to one or a combination of three factors: a Lundan Bess looms over a normal cow, especially the somewhat scrawny *lechito*, and consumes a lot of the same food they rely on; a typical Lundan Bess, if added to an existing herd, tends to monopolize the bull; and once she produces milk, a Lundan Bess casually allows other cows' calves to nurse from her instead of driving them off. Then again, I am not an expert on bovines.

I believe more than advanced breeding techniques to lie at the root of this 'miracle cow', but their main application for any military plans seems to be in the production of dairy and meat, and possibly some work as draft animals. It is notoriously difficult to stir these beasts to anger – normal cows apparently tend to bully them – let alone make them attack. One sure-fire way to agitate them to the point of violence appears to be to maltreat their calves, but as they are valuable animals, this does not happen often.

A new variant has been bred in recent years by having Lundan Bess cows breed with *lechito* bulls. The resulting 'Conquistan Bess' is smaller than the Lundan, but meatier than the *lechito* and better capable of weathering extremes of temperature than the Lundan Bess. Small wonder, then, that they have found much favour with the farmers of the middle *cantón* and the local meat industry.

In the Wrathwall, one may encounter wild goats and sheep, which seem almost contemptuous of gravity as they gallop up and down steep cliffs and leap from crag to crag, looking for the lichens they eat. Apart from the Ogres, they are preyed upon by mountain lions, small bears and the previously mentioned eagles.

In the northern *cantón*, the wild forest is home to various rodents such as rabbits, mice, rats, voles and shrews. Their numbers are barely held in check by martens – weasels, ermines, badgers – and a large number of foxes, some few of them dire in size. As foxes are considered a pest by farmers, hunting them and the sale of their furs were considered popular pastimes before the Rat Plague of 718 BC, when the domain's vulpine population had been pruned back to the point that farms were overrun by rodents of all kinds.

The government immediately banned the hunting of foxes, and today the rodents are back under control. Predictably, fur-salesmen and farmers are now lobbying for a repeal of the hunting ban, so far without luck. Besides foxes, the north is home to a small number of wolves and bears; retiring creatures



who avoid contact with humans at all costs, but are still prized targets for hunting now foxes are forbidden.

Rabbits, mice, voles and rats are also in ample supply in the middle *cantón*, but here they are considered a valuable resource, rather than a nuisance. During our journey through the area, Hectór and I were frequently served a dish called *empanada de rata*, a fried patty of ground rodent meat – it is purely up to the results of the day's hunting whether you are served a patty of rabbit or vole meat – with spicy sauce, wedged between two slices of fried bread. At first I thought this a slight, but the dish was tasty enough and as I noticed locals were eating it with apparent relish, I decided to let the matter stand.

The dry air and high temperatures of the *cantón* make it a prime habitat for lizards large and small, as well as many kinds of snakes, some of which also make their way into the local cuisine and can be quite tasty. Apart from the aforementioned rodents, the domain's reptiles feed on the crawling vermin of the *cantón*, which include some delightfully venomous spiders and scorpions of quite amusing sizes. Near *los Mesas de Demonio*, Hectór and I found a shed skin that suggests the hinterlands may be home to the legendary dire scorpion, but I was unsuccessful in locating a live specimen.

*Alas... The dream lives on!*

Where foxes are practically the dominant land predator of the north, coyotes serve that role in the middle *cantón*. Skittish and feral, these canines also keep their distance from humans, but occasionally stray near to attack lone cattle, household pets, and the vermin attracted by farms and food stores. There are plenty of stories about coyotes attacking small children as well as travelers whose *mobila* have broken down, but I personally doubt their veracity. It is a rare Conquistador who travels anywhere without even a handgun, and I found that a single shot – even

a missing shot – proved sufficient incentive to send even a very large pack of coyotes scampering for the horizon.

As I mentioned before, the southern *cantón* has nothing in the ways of animal life except insects, and few enough of those. Presumably they feed on each other or wait in a state of hibernation for passing prey, such as the Masogani or published – dare I say celebrated? – scholars forced to travel to wretched backwaters by megalomaniacal –

But you take offense, my *Master*. To summarize, not even rodents or arachnids call the southern desert home; just the flies and the other insects. They are the only creatures that can find enough moisture to survive.

## UNNATURAL HAZARDS

Conquista is far from replete with supernatural beasts and boggles, my *Master*. A traveller has much more to fear from humanity when traversing the land, but I shall give a summary of my discoveries on this subject.

### FEY

I might have expected the unspoiled forests of the northern *cantón* to be home to Fey of all sorts, but found them to be in as short a supply here as in Lilliend. A small scattering of Unseelie Arak lurks in old cemeteries and the ruins of villages that have withered and died. I have no idea how they came to this place all the way from the Shadow Rift, but here they are. These creatures are as vile in Conquista as they are in the Core, yet they act with surprising caution; in Conquista the Arak creep about and avoid other creatures, rather than freely dipping their ladle into the stew of mortal life. I suspect the prevalence of advanced firearms and the possibility of iron bullets are the cause, but I was unable to interview an Arak on the subject.

A strictly local breed of Fey, known locally as *Skindalför*, are spoken of as a cautionary tale. (Literally; most of the people I spoke to mistakenly

considered them to be a metaphor for hitchhikers who repay the kindness of the one giving them a lift with violence and theft.) These all-female creatures haunt lonely roads and there solicit transport from passing travellers. Where once they would accost horsemen, now they flag down those who drive in *mobíla*. Woe upon the fool who offers a *Skindalför* a ride, for these creatures will quickly lull them to sleep or enchant them.

In the best case, a traveller wakes up the next morning and has to make the long journey home on foot, in the knowledge that their mount or vehicle is being ridden or driven to destruction, and they must explain its loss. In the worst case, the traveller awakens to find themselves fitted with bit and bridle so they may *themselves* be ridden to destruction.

I managed to communicate with a handful of *Skindalför* during my travels, and can report that they are, on the whole, flighty and selfish creatures, who care as little for mortals as mortals would for a random fly. Some exceptions do exist, however; in one farming community I came across a family that had been the recipient of regular gifts of wild game for generations, as a lone *Skindalför* was repaying a debt of guilt over an ancestor of the family she had robbed of his mount, shortly before he met with a grisly end in the Conquistan night. One other *Skindalför* I met – who tellingly identified herself as the first of her sisterhood – struck me as largely rational and capable of forethought. It is a pity that these qualities allowed her to identify me as a dangerous being; our conversation was brief, and she soon fled my presence.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: END OF THE DANCE

There are two reasons why Ciska has not found many Fey in Conquista. One is the Eastward Migration, of which she already found evidence in Lilliend. The *Skindalför* are the second.

Before Conquista joined the Wartorn Cluster, the domain's Fey – especially the local Arak – were part of its first Darklord's armies. Every time Cliffton Willgoat marshalled the evil creatures of the Mists to bring violence and misery to the human population, the Evil-aligned Fey gleefully joined in. In those days, the *Skindalför* were used by the Muryan tribe of Arak as a combination of saboteurs and cavalry; the Muryan sent them out to steal transport from humans and then use it at the front lines. The rest of the time, the Muryan used *Skindalför* as serving wenches and entertainers at their feasts.

Predictably, the *Skindalför* – who were tricksters, rather than diehard combatants – took the brunt of counterattacks and became less and less enthusiastic about the whole arrangement.

When Conquista joined the Cluster and the siren song of the Eastward Migration was heard, the Muryan tried to keep the domain's Fey together. This was not easy, as many of the creatures keen to depart were powerful in their own right. While their hated oppressors were exhausted from trying to wrangle other Fey, the *Skindalför* performed a coordinated strike across the land. Unlike most Fey, *Skindalför* are not sensitive to iron, be it cold or otherwise. Also unlike other Fey, they are quite interested in the advantages and use of modern technology. This allowed them to wield firearms with cold iron ammunition, and they knew that black-oil could be used to create powerful fires. In closing, they knew exactly where the Muryan hid once the sun came up.

It was easy enough for the *Skindalför* to fill the Muryan's barrow lairs with liquid fire, then gun down all those who scrambled to make it outside. Those Muryan who did not die outright from being shot with cold iron were dragged into the sunlight to burn. With the domain's Muryan population slaughtered within the space of a day, many of the Fey who had originally planned to stay decided to join the Eastward Migration after all. Those too stubborn or unable to move made sure to keep out of the “hitch-hiker faeries” way and maintain a low profile to this day.

## 'SASQUATCH'

There are numerous little towns and villages in Conquista that 'fail' for some reason. The rational mind suspects poor soil or resource management and the departure of young people to find more interesting lives elsewhere to be the main causes.

Occasionally, however, traces of violence are discovered, as unknown forces steal cattle and other food, assault lone workers, and finally bring fire and death to the whole settlement. Especially in the north, such villages are soon overtaken by the forest, as though the domain is eager to erase all trace of human infiltration. In the middle lands, such towns tend to be swallowed by the terrain, as wind and sand wear them down.

All such 'failures' are colloquially known as '*sasquatch* attacks', regardless whether they be violent or not. I do not actually know whether you have ever read Cobb of Tepest's *Guide to the Hidden Peoples*, my *Master*, but suffice it to say that the *sasquatch* or 'Bigfoot' is not normally known for its violent character. On the contrary, these hulking, hairy creatures are known to be retiring in nature, much preferring to hide from humans and similarly hostile creatures in the depths of unspoiled sylvan wilderness. A little light-fingered theft of the odd bucket of milk or handful of freshly laid eggs hardly compares to the kind of bloodshed attributed to *sasquatch* in Conquista.

In spite of Hectór's pleading that I 'leave well enough alone', I ventured into several areas supposedly known for *sasquatch* activity. All but one were a complete disappointment, as I found neither the creatures themselves nor traces of them. The one exception was when I spotted a single, overlarge footprint in the mud beside a minor stream running down the Wrathwall. While I was making a plaster cast, I heard the tell-tale sound of 'knocking' in the nearby forest; mindful of Cobb of Tepest's description of *sasquatch* communicating over long distances by striking trees with rocks or branches, I

recorded the pattern and tried to decode it – alas, without success.

Having decided thereafter that I needed to take a different approach, I investigated several 'failed' communities. Although Hectór was terrified to go near such sites, 'because sometimes they come back', I can report that less than half proved to be the result of deliberate slaughter and mayhem. The villages that failed due to violence had all been decimated by fire, and featured not so much mass graves as shallow pits where the fire-roasted and much-chewed remains of the townsfolk had been deposited – and desecrated. One site, fresh enough that I could still smell the taint of smoke on the air – featured puzzling tracks that shifted between humanoid footprints and goat-tracks.

It should be noted that the sites which had failed due to a lack of people, rather than having been deliberately extinguished, had indeed been reclaimed by the wilderness with unnatural speed. I am not mistaken on this, my *Master*; unlike you, I am well-familiar with the natural growth rate of trees and the structural integrity of the average brick building. Rather than the weirdly shifting prints I found at sites of slaughter, here I found prints of overlarge humanoid feet as well as heavy boots at the sites that had been overgrown by the forest.

Bootprints, my *Master*, which I discovered to be familiar! I needed to find a community about to go belly-up to confirm my suspicions, which was a bit of a challenge. Fortunately, I was able to fall back on the sociological models put forth by professor Grié of the University of Dementlieu's Faculty of Anthropology.

Yes, yes, I shall summarize: I found a community that was on the verge of ending, and camped out in a duck blind Hectór and I constructed in the nearby forest. I may have helped matters along just a smidgeon by sabotaging the annoying flyspeck's amenities, which would normally be bad science. Then again, I was not there to prove professor Grié's models, but to verify my own theory.

Once the last humans had left, it did not take long for my suspects to put in an appearance. They came out of the forest under cover of night: a mixed party of creatures united in size, but very little else. Most of them were indeed *sasquatch* just as Cobb of Tepest had described them in his mammoth text; large, hairy, eerily silent in spite of their hulking frames. These quiet, ape-like figures surrounded beings who were clothed in robes decorated with fanciful leaf-patterns, their demeanor noble though clearly inhuman and their tufted ears expressive: *Ogier*.

Hectór and I observed the *sasquatch* standing watch while the *Ogier* issued a deep, rumbling song. I issued several minor spells of detection, but while the song resonated within my bones and had a noticeable supernatural effect – to wit, the vegetation within the now-abandoned flyspeck grew at a noticeable rate whereas the forest's edges crept in on it – it did not appear to be any kind of spellcasting as I understand the concept.

The *Ogier* and *sasquatch* melted back into the woods in complete silence after the last echoes of the song had died away. I briefly considered following them, but I remembered what that led to in Lilliend. I did not favour my chances against such a large party, should I walk once again into one of those accursed magic-dead zones, and my whole body be wracked by agony. Instead, Hectór and I remained in the area for a few days, during which we saw similar groups of *sasquatch* and *Ogier* repeat the actions of the first until the village was barely recognizable as such for all the greenery.

We departed afterwards, for I had more of Conquista to survey.

I can appreciate the notion of erasing an enemy's very trace from the earth, my Master, but if this is the extent that the *Ogier* and *sasquatch* are willing to go to when it comes to reclaiming their lands from human intrusion, then I expect that sooner or later they will be found and wiped out. The vicious goat-creatures (weregoats, perhaps?) might be more useful to your plans if you can find and tame enough;

at best the *Ogier* and *sasquatch* might be put to use as stewards of the wild areas, and possibly to assist in stimulating the growth of edible vegetation to nourish your subjects and troops.

*If you ever manage to get any of either.*

## History

The history of Conquista is a checkered and bloodsoaked one. It is also frustratingly contradictory, for reasons which will shortly become clear.

Let me start with the part of history that is agreed upon by all parties, quoting directly from a Conquistan history book: 'In a dim and distant past, before the cities were built, Conquista was a savage land, inhabited by a primitive people who worshipped a pantheon of false gods. They were backwards, barely capable of making fire, and that through witchcraft instead of striking steel and flint together.

From across the ocean came a noble and civilized people, flying the banner of the one true goddess, Taiia, filled with righteous zeal and supported by loyal slaves.'

(A brief interruption. This section of the tale might otherwise be labelled as Conquista's Creation Myth, except for one thing: Conquista's creation myth (which I will discuss in the section on Religion) is as hopelessly unreliable as its recorded history. On the one hand there is the creation mythos that is recorded in the holy books of Taiia, *Following the Sun*. On the other, there is a myth that supposedly combines the tales of Taiia's faith with those of the pagan society that inhabited Conquista before the invasion – but as you will shortly see, there is no way of telling who supposed locals were or what their society was really like.



Even the records of Taiia's church, as they are maintained in this domain, do not record why and how the conquering people came to be here. They came, supposedly with the intention to make the land useful and educate the primitives in the proper religion and civilization. Predictably, they did this by conquering the land, using their superior weaponry to defeat club-wielding primitives and fire to burn the shamans of the false gods and the witches who supported them in their wickedness. They enslaved the local people like they had the servants who accompanied them on their proud ships and put them to work.

Old villages were plowed under; forest was cleared to create farms; palaces and flat-topped pyramid temples were raised to the skies above; mines were dug into the earth below. Sadly, the newly taken slaves were surly and proud of their backwardness, to the point that they caused the slaves who had come with their new masters to grow restive. They taught their new kindred the ways of the false gods and witchcraft instead of taking Taiia into their hearts and embracing order. The rulers had to bring down their heavy hands and their whips on ungrateful, lazy and disobedient backs many times, and tried to teach the slaves to accept their proper lot in life.

This was all to no avail. The slaves continued to grumble and drag their heels, soliciting more punishment, then wept and complained as though it was unjust that they should be corrected for flouting the law of creation. In the end, there was a revolt, as the slaves dared raise their hands against their masters. Blood washed Conquista from shore to shore, and the heavens wept at the sight, unto the point that Taiia's ire was aroused, and her Judgment fell upon the land.

Conquista rumbled and shook, and the land was torn from its moorings and cast into 'a frightful place of fog and monsters', with the oceans of old lost and the glorious sun obscured more often than not. The violence escalated to the point that the land was 'torn apart into sections three', the current *cantóns*.

The land's 'rightful' rulers were forced to settle down in one area, when once they had ruled and roamed in all three, while the rebellious local slaves settled in another. Both tribes took some of the slaves who had come from across the ocean.

This, we could reasonably assume to be the seminal event that has led to Conquista's appearance in our world, my *Master*. Unfortunately, this history is unreliable. In order to explain, I must provide a bit of information which I would otherwise give later in this report.

Conquista's people are divided in three fairly distinct tribes, disregarding the odd hybrid. The two dominant tribes name themselves the Casians and the Canana. They have a language in common – Casian – and both claim that the language originates with them. The Casian tribe is known for having paler tones of hair and skin and eye; the Canan tribe is known for darker eyes and hair, and coppery skins. Both tribes claim that theirs is the people that came from across the ocean bearing the blessing and the faith of Taiia; both claim that the other tribe is the one whose ancestors existed as grunting primitives and worshipped false gods. The Canana even claim that the Casians named themselves for the language they stole from them and were too primitive to have a name for themselves. Meanwhile the Casians claim that the Canana grunted and hooted like beasts until they were taught – or rather, 'stole', a proper human language from their masters.

The third tribe, the Ulan, are known for having dark shades of hair and skin and eye. Both the Casians and Canana agree that it is the Ulan who were brought on the ships out of distant lands as slaves of the ruling class. I would make some startling discoveries about the Ulan, but that I will discuss in the Populace section, specifically the passage on Language.

Unto today, neither of the ruling tribes will agree as to which version of history is true. Did brave and vigorous Canana cross the oceans blue to righteously subjugate a race of pale, grub-like primitives? Did noble and refined Casians sail across the ocean

divide to nobly enslave a race of grunting, copper-skinned brutes? No one will agree, and even I could not find any evidence to say for sure what the truth may be.

Let us accept that the history to this point is probably nothing but *false* history and proceed with more reliable records as they have been held since 684 BC, when Conquista found itself surrounded by the Mists. The Casian people were living in the north *cantón*, the Canan people were in the middle *cantón*, and the Ulan were divided among the two. No one was willing even then to dwell in the wretched desert to the far south.

Having reviewed church records and the nation's holy books, I can confidently report that the priests of Taiia on both sides of the river *Wittwentraen* (whatever it was named at the time) proclaimed that the slave revolt had brought down the wrath of their goddess. They preached fire and brimstone from the pulpit, laying blame for the chosen people's diminished circumstances not with the slaves for revolting, but with the masters for not having been firm and heavy-handed enough.

Surprisingly, both the Casians and the Canana rankled at the clergy's admonishments. They became even less receptive when the Mists started to vomit up abominations such as they had never seen before; malign, powerful, and *hungry*. When the people cried out for the priests to bring the goddess's power down on the creatures hunting them, these 'holy' men and women failed. Even though the church records show that the clergy rallied 'magnificently' by claiming the people's weak faith had angered the goddess to the point that she cut them off from divine magic, this was also not well-received.

In defiance of the old rule by priesthood, both the Casians and the Canana – the Ulan tribe's opinion was not solicited – assembled councils of 'wise men' to meet the challenge of the era. From this point onward, church records are eclipsed in importance by state-sponsored history-keeping. None of the histories record the clergy's reaction when the

church's power was stripped away, but I can imagine a lot of impotent sputtering and screaming about eternal damnation, which was apparently ignored. The councils of 'wise men' started dictating policy based on stark pragmatism, rather than ideology, promoting rapid advancements in the sciences to replace the blessings of Taiia. In time, they even opened diplomatic dialogue with their counterparts in the *cantóns* of their old enemies.

With the Mists roiling with evil of all kinds and the night a time of unrelieved terror, the Casian and Canan 'wise men' joined hands against a common foe. Diplomatic accords were signed, stating clearly that all men were free, and none were slaves – not even the Ulan – and that all territory currently held was sovereign, thus ending the civil war and rendering any future acts of retaliation illegal. Other articles of the agreement placed secular power firmly in the hands of the 'wise men', who continued pushing the sciences and shared their discoveries with each other in spite of the complaints of their subjects and the priests, who would have preferred to hoard discoveries and eventually use them against their old enemies.

The policies and research of the 'wise men' bore fruit. A nation-wide education program produced people capable of doing things their ancestors had never dreamed of. Research into improving on traditional methods of extracting and smelting ore, farming and animal husbandry, led to superior techniques and superior yields. Experiments on raw materials brought about new and useful inventions. The internal combustion engine allowed for quick transport of resources throughout the country, too fast for most horrors from the eternal fog to be able to keep up, and doing away with any need for horses, which would inevitably panic in the face of night terrors. Newly trained doctors and nurses brought healing where the priesthood had failed, quite doing away with any need or desire for the temptations of witchcraft, which seemed to have disappeared at roughly the same time as priestly spellcasting. Firearms underwent a very rapid development, and

helped troops mounted on one-man *mobila* to perform hit-and-run attacks on the monsters plaguing the land.

Literacy, prosperity, life expectancy and health all improved at a rapid pace under the guiding hand of the 'wise men', who came to be hailed by the people they had served so well as *los Viejos Sagrados* or 'long bearded holymen'. If the darkness was not defeated, it was at least held in check and warded from the cities by a wonderful system of gas-powered streetlights and rifle-wielding troopers. If the Casians and the Canana did not love each other, they at least grudgingly accepted that cooperation was keeping them all alive, and the *Viejos Sagrados* were so wise as to spread the industry and laboratories that created all of their marvelous creations through both the inhabited *cantóns*, thus preventing either of the two dominant tribes from trying to rule the other by monopolizing some critical item or service. If the Ulan tribe's opinion was still not solicited, its members at least enjoyed a quality of life they had not had when they were still slaves. Hybrids of the various tribes were not well-received, but at least tolerated so long as they were willing to work towards the common good.

Even lost in the Mists as Conquista was, life was enjoyable so long as one was careful not to step outside at night and minded their manners when in armed company. The priesthood adapted, albeit reluctantly, and started praising *los Viejos Sagrados* as 'clearly' having been blessed with wisdom by Taiia herself.

Opportunistic as the priests were and are, they quickly switched to praising Hoyt Gunterbull once he started making a name for himself.

Casian-born Hoyt Gunterbull was a rarity, combining military prowess with political and social savvy. While his autobiography *Salvando la Conquista* ('Saving Conquista') – still required reading for Conquistan school children today – claims he was blessed with a vision by Taiia when he underwent his manhood trial, it is hard to say when he conceived of

the strategy, he used to conquer the domain. It is recorded fact that Gunterbull served with distinction in the army of *mobila*-mounted troops who acted as first responders whenever monsters surged out of the Mists. His valour – and even my research finds no trace that this was exaggerated – and tactical insight earned him an officer's title as well as fame. These he leveraged to make his word heard throughout the nation, and his word was poison.

Now that Conquista was experiencing prosperity, so said Gunterbull, it was time to reassess its government. Yes, *los Viejos Sagrados* had done well in educating the land, but they had more or less usurped power from the stewards who had been elected to wield it by the goddess. Even if modern Conquistans could agree that the church was no longer fit to rule and men must somehow earn Taiia's forgiveness themselves, surely they were civilized enough that they should not cater to the will of scofflaws and revolutionaries.

The use of the word 'revolutionary' was a masterful stroke, as in the subconscious of the Conquistan people this term is still equated with the slave revolt that brought the Judgement crashing down upon their heads. Suddenly *los Viejos Sagrados*, who had for twenty-two years ruled with little serious opposition and whose position had grown stronger with every invention and improvement, looked suspicious. Gunterbull spent four years dripping his poison into the ears of anyone who would listen to him, and eventually he got what he wanted: elections.

Gunterbull publically agreed with any of *los Viejos Sagrados* who looked up from their research long enough to notice what he was doing and protest that Conquista would not benefit from the rule of kings. No, what Conquista needed was to be ruled by a single man of proven worth and quality, appointed by the people's own vote. At this point he 'casually' reminded the people that *los Viejos Sagrados* selected members of their group behind closed doors, based on criteria they kept secret, and that often their members only announced themselves

when this was necessary to requisition something or to give orders, all too often without explaining their reasoning. What the people needed was a centralized government whose hierarchy was clear, its works transparent so it could be held to account if necessary.

The more politically alert *Viejos Sagrados* scrambled to make their organization more accessible to the public, but the level at which they conducted research and planned was too far beyond the comprehension of the common people that Gunterbull was mobilizing to his cause. In the eyes of this majority, which even then happily used but did not properly understand the scientific innovations provided to them, a heroic and handsome warrior like Gunterbull, who spoke 'sensible language', looked much more comprehensible.

At the end of Gunterbull's four-year campaign, the first general election of Conquista was held, and Hoyt Gunterbull was appointed as the nation's first democratically-elected president in the spring of 711 BC. He would design the rest of the government offices, cannibalizing the structure designed by *los Viejos Sagrados* for parts as he went along.

Gunterbull still had to work for his victory despite the smear campaign he had run against the scholars who had done so much to save the land. *Los Viejos Sagrados* had put forward a candidate of their own, whose name has been lost to history, but who was smart enough to explain his sponsors' policies and plans to the common people. Each candidate had gathered wealthy and influential men behind him. As Gunterbull was backed mainly by the army and his rival by business interests, their groups became known respectively as *Supremacía* and *Prosperidad*.

In the end, Gunterbull won by a wide margin after a series of 'unfortunate accidents' caused some of his rival's businessman supporters to withdraw, culminating in the death of that self-same rival during a fishing trip and the erasure of his name from all records.

*Already, the fine tradition of Conquistán elections had been set.*

Gunterbull achieved much during his reign as *il Presidente*. He had a particularly fine signet ring made as his presidential regalia; an item which has been passed to every consecutive president as soon as they took office. He passed law to build up the armed forces and fortify the cities, causing a significant decrease in attacks by night terrors. He also made mandatory a four-year military service for every able-bodied man, adding rules that allowed soldiers to rise through the ranks based on their achievements with disregard for their tribe. And he made sure to strip the power to determine policy or even act independently from *los Viejos Sagrados*, reducing them to his pet scientists.

Hoyt Gunterbull continued to rule Conquista for four years, only to retire in the winter of 715 BC as he felt he had done all he meant to do. Until the day of his death, he lived in splendor in the palatial villa he had ordered built for his retirement, enjoying a more than generous monthly stipend and occasionally dispensing advice and favours to junior politicians who came to see him.

### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: AN INFERNAL DESIGN**

The history of Conquista, starting with its arrival in the Mists to the point that Hoyt Gunterbull started his path to the presidency, is more-or-less correct, though it has been edited in places by Church and state alike to erase inconvenient people and institutions from memory. The tale of the first president, however, is a pack of lies. Hoyt Gunterbull was neither a hero nor a politician. Rather, he was a coward who deserted his unit in the face of an



attack by Mist-spawned horrors and left his allies to be slaughtered. In so doing, he caught the attention of two dangerous newcomers to the land.

What vile coincidence brought two fiends to Conquista at the same time, we may never know. *La Infestación* (see Who's Doomed) and the Red Haunt (see *Quoth the Raven, Issue #27: The Conferences of Victor Gagné IV*) were already familiar with one another. Though they were not friendly as such, they had agreed to resolve their philosophical differences on the supremacy of Order and Chaos through debate, rather than a reenactment of the Blood War in miniature. They had one of their liveliest arguments when they met in Hughsrest in 711 BC, but as neither was willing to back down, they decided that they needed to run an experiment to prove their point.

To this end, the two fiends had been looking for a suitable vessel that they would let them influence the domain's political landscape. Hoyt Gunterbull at least looked the part of a war hero, and his feeble, guilt-stricken mind buckled easily to their suggestions and offers. Pathetically eager to make something more of himself than he had done unto that point, Gunterbull signed on the dotted line at the bottom of a contract the two fiends offered him, and his course was set.

While Gunterbull did do the things he has been recorded doing, he did them with either *la Infestación's* or else the Red Haunt's help. Secure in their protection, he appeared to be fearless. Directed by their intelligence, he said the right things and charted a course for the domain. He never realised that to his dreadful patrons, what they did was not about seizing power, but conducting research into the limits of tyranny and anarchy. Even when Gunterbull died and his soul passed directly into *la Infestación's* grasp, he did not understand.

*La Infestación* has worked with Conquista's presidents since, and when one retires, she moves on to the next. In the name of scholarly integrity, she does not dictate their every action; she must know how mortals will react to her policies without interference, after all, but she exerceizes great influence. Several of Conquista's leaders have served their terms without realizing a fiend was so closeby, but while the Red Haunt now spends little time in the domain, *la Infestación* is always on hand. Literally, as the magnificent presidential signet worn by each ruler of Conquista is, in fact, her phylactery.

The 715 BC elections were held with haste; during his reign, Gunterbull had ensured that every major government decision required *il Presidente's* autograph, so he needed to be replaced before anything could be done. Conquista's second president was Erik Altermount, a Casian-born member of the *Prosperidad*. It was no secret that he was elected because the *Prosperidad* had not just been waiting for a chance but had been scheming and buying votes years in advance. Although the *Supremacia* cried foul and grumbled for the first half of his reign, Altermount served with such distinction that he earned even their respect, in no small part for what he did for the nation's education.

Rather than allow *los Viejos Sagrados* to judge whether men were worthy to join them by their own high standards, the new president re-designed the

national education plan. Rather than let 'some crusty elitists' decide whether a man passed or failed a test and was ready to move on to higher schooling, Altermount had a grading system implemented, whose specifics were decided upon by a panel composed of senior members of both the *Supremacia* and the *Prosperidad*. This did much to win him unanimous approval from both political blocs, and the feeble objections by *los Viejos Sagrados* were simply ignored.

*Note that no one in the panel was actually an educator or scholar.*

Erik Altermount served for four years, then retired to his own palatial estate in 719 BC. If he had not boosted the nation's defense against the horrors of the night, he had certainly strengthened its ability to overcome setbacks by shaping the workforce; his educational program was ideally suited to grind people into the roles society needed them to play, and the nation's food production had soared in both the north and middle *cantón*. He suffered a mild setback – mild to him, at least – due to the Rat Plague of 718 BC, but he managed to ride this out by shifting blame to the fur industry and the farmers who had denuded the domain's fox population.

By midwinter of 719 BC, the elections were in full swing, with the *Supremacía* using intimidation and the *Prosperidad* using bribes to get people to 'see things their way'. A third political group, *las Platas*, first came on the scene this year.

Offering to rule with an eye to the common good, rather than the special interests of the older parties, *las Platas* had neither army nor business backing; just some idealistic souls who believed Conquista could benefit from leadership that was ruled by conscience and compassion as well as pragmatism. Predictably, they suffered a crushing defeat while the big parties jockeyed for first place.

At the end of 719 BC, Leroy Foxskinner, a Casian-born member of the *Supremacía*, was voted into office. The first thing he did upon taking up the reins of power was to officially disband *los Viejos Sagrados*, describing them as 'a relic of a bygone age and a drain on government resources'. He pointed out that the centers of higher education founded by his immediate predecessor did the same work of providing education and performing research that *los Viejos Sagrados* had traditionally done and did so with complete transparency and without trying to seize political power.

The second thing he did was to combine the military, the police force and the nation's secret service into one body, which he named *los Hombres Valientes*, an act that did away with the mandatory military service imposed by Hoyt Gunterbull as the army no longer existed as a separate entity. Foxskinner declared that in this way, he was cutting down on 'administrative bloat' and would prevent inter-service rivalry. Every citizen of Conquista should feel secure in the knowledge that the men who kept public order were also licensed to bear heavy arms and kill the enemies of the state and would report any unlawful action directly to that state.

*I know I didn't feel comfortable when we first learned of this.*

I could go on, my *Master*, but suffice it to say that all the elected presidents have been Casian-born despite growing outcry from the Canan people, whose votes *should* count for just as much as any Casian's, and who have been putting forth candidates of their own. Somehow the two largest political parties never seem to pick these up; the elected presidents have all been from either the *Supremacía* or *Prosperidad*; and they have destroyed *los Viejos Sagrados* and turned the domain into a police state in all but name.

The Church of Taiia regained a lot of its influence, as the two dominant parties are fond of quoting from *Following the Sun* to support their candidacy during elections and justify any policies not met with universal approval. Each president is now sworn in by the current High Gazer<sup>25</sup> of Conquista, and it is not uncommon for the more senior members of the clergy to be sponsors – and powerful members – of one of the two dominant parties.

Still, Conquista was moderately pleasant to live in, with the rule of law enforcing cooperation between the tribes and trimming back the very worst excesses. Until 740 BC, when Conquistan history

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<sup>25</sup>A title comparable to the *Himmelsk Naeve* of the Iron Faith, or the Praesidius of the Church of Ezra.

claims that Taiia was pleased enough with the way her chosen people had governed themselves that she withdrew her Judgement.

Where the Core remembers the Great Upheaval as a time of terror and destruction, to the people of Conquista the date is a national holiday. Certainly, the land suffered great tremors and the Mists roiled and boiled (one account even claims that *los Mesas del Demonio* erupted like a volcano, sending a 'pillar of screaming fire' into the darkening sky), but when everything settled down, the Mists were gone and other lands had appeared at Conquista's borders.

The *Prosperidad* was clamouring for *il Presidente* to send diplomats into the neighbouring countries and start looking for trade opportunities. The *Supremacia* was clamouring just as hard for him to send scouts and see whether the neighbours were hostile or could be conquered. Before the sitting president of the time – a man barely remembered today by the name 'Jethro' (family name redacted from the history books) – had decided whose advice was wisest (or whose bribes and favours were most beneficial to him), the decision was taken out of his hands.

In the spring of 741 BC, a column of troops came rumbling out of Vieuxlyons to the east. There was no warning, no formal declaration of war; just an army flying a black skull banner and sporting firearms even more advanced than Conquista's own, riding on combat-*mobila* that were fitted with heavy armour and mounted cannons.

The invaders destroyed the town of Alsem on their way into the *brugia serena*, looting and killing with abandon. Having met with no significant resistance, the column's leadership smelled victory and split their forces in two; one third trundled east, cutting a bloody swath towards Lilliend; the other two thirds headed for the bridges to the south. We now know from reports of interrogations conducted upon prisoners, what the Skullmen were after; while the *Prosperidad* and *Supremacia* bickered and *il Presidente* hemmed and hawed, the Skullmen's

leaders had already been sending spies into neighbouring countries. They had found out about the black-oil wells of Conquista; and they knew that Lilliend had a more than ample supply of marriageable women. Both were desirable commodities to Vieuxlyons, which does not have any oil sources of its own, and whose population is relatively small.

*Il Presidente* Jethro declared a state of emergency and ordered the armed forces to the defense of the nation. Under his command, the police/army harried the invaders as they had done to monsters so many times in the past, executing hit-and-run tactics on one-man *mobila* instead of engaging the superior army directly. While the Conquistan troops suffered terrible losses, so did the Vieuxlyese.

The *westbound* column tried to hole up in Meyersville, hoping to restock on the city's food supplies and use civilians as human shields. To their dismay, they found the city evacuated, its food stores emptied of anything edible or potable and filled to the brim with explosives. Meyersville had been turned into a giant boobytrap with admirable speed. Its defenses shattered from the inside out when the bombs went off, and over half the column was wiped out before the survivors trundled further west. The survivors – many of them injured, their supplies dwindling – were whittled down further as they went.

At this point, President Jethro made the biggest mistake of his career. Fearing that the Vieuxlyese army would attack Hughsrest, he drew the *whole* police/army to its defense, ordering an end to the hit-and-run attacks on the southbound column and thus giving the Vieuxlyese free reign to cross the bridges. His decision did result in the westbound column being driven around the northern capitol, but also lead directly to the Siege of *Prosopis*.

Under constant attack by the now numerically superior Conquistan troops, the westbound column was worn down to a mere handful of frightened soldiers. In a last-ditch effort to achieve their target,

the last survivors abandoned their heavy combat-*mobila* and made a dash for the western border. You may recall, my *Master*, that the Lilliender people recall being invaded by '*Demonio-men*', who wielded firearms and had to be swarmed by troops before they could be put down like mad dogs. Certainly, the Conquistans remember that when they tried to take control of the powerful combat-*mobila*, they discovered that these had been fitted with boobytraps of their own and exploded, killing dozens of eager looters.

The *southbound* column crossed the bridges on its way to the precious, precious black-oil. Although the police/army had been ordered north, there was still a skeleton crew of troops in *Prosopis*, consisting of those too old and too disobedient to make the journey north, and they mounted an admittedly brave defense. The regional capitol of the middle *cantón* put up a much better fight than the town of Alsem had, but it fell in the end. Hundreds of civilians were killed, supplies were plundered, and the domain's second largest Ziggurat to Taiia was looted and reduced to rubble. The column went further south after setting as many boobytraps on the bridges as it could provide, once it proved impossible to destroy them.

All things being equal, it would be natural to expect the Vieuxlyese to have taken over *las Zorras* and the black-oil wells, then either sue for peace or dictate terms. They faced no more significant military opposition, after all, and the majority of the Conquistan army was not likely to pursue them as long as *il Presidente* Jethro was more concerned with his own *cantón* – and his own skin – than the defense of the middle *cantón*.

Except all things were *not* equal; the column moving south suffered from two factors it had not reckoned with.

First was the difficulty in finding nourishment and potable water while keeping the column moving through difficult terrain. Many of the combat-*mobila* broke down before the Vieuxlyese troops learned to

insulate them against the persistent heat, sand and small stones. The locals had wells, but they were so thoughtful as to pour diarrhetics and other unpleasant substances extracted from the desert cacti into these once they became aware of the invaders' approach, then fled with what food they could carry, after having set fire to what they could not. (Cleansing the wells of these would take years, further down the line, with some wells never recovering.)

Second was the revelation that magic had either returned to Conquista or had never been gone. Clerics of Taiia who prayed for the destruction of the invaders found themselves capable of conjuring pillars of flame and drawing horrible creatures out of the darkness; Witch-cults sprang up like toadstools and summoned plagues of insects and other morbidities from the depths of the desert; Voodan brought a pestilence of nightmares and fever down on the enemy.

In some ways, the spellcasters who banded together to fight the foe were more successful than the strictly martial troops up north. They had no delusions about being able to match the enemy on the field of battle, so that is not what they did; they struck under cover of darkness and from hiding, they attacked stragglers, they hit weaknesses... In short, they fought pragmatically, viciously, with an eye to incapacitating and killing as many enemies as they could, rather than fighting conventional battles.

After the slaughter in Alsem and *Prosopis*, I personally can not fault the surprise coalition of spellcasters – one whose formation was especially surprising as the priests of Taiia had done their damndest until then to stamp out all other kinds of spellcaster – and their strategy was effective. Some survivors of the westbound column managed to escape into Lilliend, but the southbound column was a limping remnant by the time it drew within sight of *las Zorras*. Here, the invaders found a warm welcome: the inhabitants of all the towns and villages that had emptied out at first sight of the Vieuxlyese troops had come here, and the last



remaining members of the police force had armed them.

Today, there stands a monument within view of *las Zorras'* northern wall, created out of pieces of Vieuxlyese combat-*mobíla* and built upon a mass grave; the invaders surrendered in the end, but after the final questioning was done, they were all put down.

*Il Presidente* Jethro suffered some unpleasant shocks after the war ended. Judging by his autobiography, *El Corazón de un Rey* (some copies can still be found in presidential memorabilia shops in Hughsrest), he fully expected to be hailed as a hero for 'saving' the domain's oldest and 'greatest' city. Instead, he was mocked and spat upon by the people of the middle *cantón* for abandoning them. The police/army, which was after all composed of men and women from all three tribes, was also not happy with him for using them to protect his own home while abandoning theirs. The *Supremacia* considered him to be an embarrassment; the *Prosperidad* was furious because he had endangered the domain's economy by abandoning the black-oil wells.

Of lesser importance is the founding of a minor political party called *espíritu de recuerdo*; by all accounts a group of deluded fools and unrealistic traditionalists, this party clamoured for the emptying of the office of *il Presidente*, and for a council of 'wise men' to dictate policy based on the writings of Hoyt Gunterbull. Apparently, they hold *Salvando la Conquista* on par with a god's holy book, and there are rumours that they actively worship their hero as a saint of Taiia.

The president tried to bluster and bluff his way past all the criticism and demanded that the middle *cantón* turn over the combat-*mobíla* that had been used by the Vieuxlyese. He held grandiose speeches about handing these machines of war over to the university at Hughsrest so they could be reverse-engineered, and their potential for destruction turned against the domain that had attacked Conquista without any provocation.

Pity for him that he did not wait with his speeches until the bridges had been cleared of boobytraps and communications between the *cantóns* were reestablished. You see, my *Master*, it turned out that the people of the middle *cantón* had – in the course of vigorous celebrations of their having not only survived but emerged victorious – festively blown up the remaining combat-*mobíla*.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: TAINTED MEMORIES

While *el espíritu de recuerdo* truly is a minor factor in the Conquistan political landscape, that does not mean it is harmless. Devoted to the word and supposed wisdom of Hoyt Gunterbull to a ridiculous extreme, the party's leadership has become a veritable cult of Conquista's first president, worshipping him not as a saint, but as a god on par with – if not superior to – Taiia.

This might not be much of a problem, if not for the fact that Hoyt Gunterbull's soul is still in Conquista, imprisoned in the phylactery of *la Infestación* alongside the rest of her private collection. The amount of worship *el espíritu de recuerdo* provides that soul is but a trickle, but it is a steady and unending trickle. Be it due to this genuine veneration having spiritual weight or a whim of the Dark Powers, but Hoyt Gunterbull's tortured soul is growing stronger without his fiendish owner noticing.

A day may come when Hoyt Gunterbull will return, as *el espíritu de recuerdo* has been praying for, but *la Infestación* has kept and tormented him for decades.

Should it come as any surprise that he has become hopelessly insane? And would anyone be surprised that he will return as some form of spectral undead... or something worse?

*Il Presidente* tried to regain the support of his military backers by blaming all the nation's setbacks on poor performance by the government offices as well as *Hombres Valientes* from the middle *cantón*, completely overlooking the fact that the Canan tribe's territory had suffered even worse than the Casian tribe's. He even held a speech which suggested he might be levelling accusations of grand treason and demand mass executions of 'uncooperative citizens'.

This did not go over as well as he had expected. One bright, clear midsummer morning of the year 742 BC, President Jethro's own *Hombre Valiente* bodyguards, following orders from their internal hierarchy, marched into his private residence and lifted him from his bed. In spite of his cries for help, *il Presidente* Jethro was dragged out in front of his residence. Here he was informed that the hierarchy and government offices had agreed that he was an unacceptable threat to national security, and he was forced to his knees and shot in the back of the head. Eyewitness reports state that he was crying and begging for mercy at the end, and no one, not even his own staff, spoke out or raised a hand in his defense.

Emergency elections were to be held, of course. The *Supremacia* put forward Casian-born Simon Goatwell, owner of a munitions factory; the *Prosperidad* presented Casian-born Victor Crowblack – and *las Platas* put forward Enrito *de los Lobos*, a Canan-born man who was being hailed in the middle *cantón* as a war hero.

To the great shock of the *Supremacia* and *Prosperidad*, they were unable to bribe and threaten people into sending votes their way and strip *las Platas* of support as they had done before; the full force of *los Hombres Valientes* was still present in the north *cantón*, many of whom were of Canan and Ulan birth, and the police/army felt as a whole that they had been used poorly. In the absence of a president to command them directly, they followed the edicts of their own hierarchy. Given that there was a *lot* of ill feeling against the two elder Parties in

Conquista just then, the hierarchy was not willing to entertain bribes to offer either party its support or bully *las Platas* into dropping out of the presidential race.

What made matters worse for the elder parties, was that every citizen knew *Supremacia* had not handled the war effort well, and that *Prosperidad* was in no hurry to fork over money to start repairs or provide for the displaced and injured. In contrast, *las Platas* were putting forward ideas – some of them fairly decent – to make reparations and upgrade the nation's defenses, and they were starting to attract some serious backers. Instead of investing the funds they received in their campaign for the presidency, *las Platas* used the money to help those in need. Rather than holding parades in Hughsrest, they moved into the middle *cantón* and the ruined Meyersville and Alsem and put their funding to good use. In other words, they invested their efforts where the suffering was greatest and most needed, literally putting their money where their mouths were.

As *las Platas* started to gain traction among the people, some very venerable members of both the *Supremacia* and *Prosperidad* rediscovered their conscience. They tended their resignations from their old allegiances and joined the 'upstart' younger political group, swelling its coffers and influence by leaps and bounds.

Instead of trying to win the hearts of the people by launching their own supportive efforts, the elder parties 'slammed the brakes' on the election, dragging their heels and using every trick they had available to them to delay the actual vote, then launched a smear campaign against presidential candidate *de los Lobos*, claiming that he had achieved victories in battle by means of magic, forbidden by the church of Taiia since times immemorial. All this achieved was a liturgical split.

The Church of Taiia in the north had weathered the war with Vieuxlyons relatively unscathed, as their biggest house of worship – the seat of Conquista's

High Gazer – stood in Hughsrest and the city had escaped all combat. Its clergy was more than happy to fall in line with the big money – I beg your *pardon*, my *Master*! Of *course*, I mean they were content to proceed with tradition and Church dogma, which states clearly that any magic not granted by Taiia herself, be it arcane or granted by another being of power, is a sin against the goddess.

In contrast, the Church in the middle *cantón* had suffered along with the people, given that the Ziggurat of *Prosopis* had been destroyed and its priests obliged to flee south to *las Zorras* with the common people. They had been forced to fight side-by-side with Witches and Voodan to save their *cantón* from the invaders, and rather than punish them for supposed blasphemy, they felt that Taiia had rewarded their courage and willingness to do what needed to be done by returning the power of divine magic to them. With the war over, it seems that the Church of the middle *cantón* felt a certain bitterness towards the northern sect, which had failed to come to their aid and was now trying to tell them that they should be ashamed and do penance for using Taiia's gift and consorting with her supposed enemies.

Rather than follow instructions from the High Gazer in Hughsrest to atone by publically condemning Enrito *de los Lobos* and start persecuting 'the pagans' who had come crawling out of the woodwork, the Church of the middle openly supported *de los Lobos'* campaign and offered the hand of friendship (or at least the hand of convenience) to the spellcasters who had been their allies in battle. Otto *tres Sombras*, formerly High Gardener<sup>26</sup> of *Prosopis*, now High Gardener of the Church of Taiia in *las Zorras*, performed a neat feat of liturgical wrangling by pointing out that there was precedent in Church history for sects reaching out to the followers of 'false' gods to show them that Taiia was the one true goddess, and that no power existed which did not ultimately originate with her. The goddess had

provided for her faithful, granting the tools needed to seize victory from the very jaws of defeat. It would be more in line with Taiia's generosity to reach out to the 'pagans' and help them see the truth through open discussion, rather than setting them on fire.

Although the High Gazer declared *tres Sombras'* declarations to be heresy and sophistry, the High Gardener had the full support of the faithful and the Church in the middle *cantón*, as well as the various Witch-cults and Voodan who stood to benefit from his more tolerant attitude towards their faiths and practices. *Tres Sombras* was politically savvy enough to realize he would need political as well as spiritual power to keep his position – and his head – and so he backed *las Platas* and candidate *de los Lobos* to the hilt.

I managed to sneak a glimpse at *tres Sombras'* private journal, now a relic enshrined at the rebuilt Ziggurat of *Prosopis*, and his motivation was cynical at the start; he was delighted by the power he had been allowed to channel by his god, and eager to expand it. He studied as much as he could with both Witches and Voodan and held long discussions on the subject of power with candidate *de los Lobos*.

But while the High Gardener's motive may have been to gain influence over the presidential candidate, it was he who fell under the other man's influence. It seems *de los Lobos* was not only a brilliant politician, but also sincerely idealistic and charismatic, and his wish for a better Conquista was infectious. By the time the presidential race erupted into full-blown chaos, *tres Sombras'* journal entries imply that he wanted *de los Lobos* to win not just to secure his own position, but for the sake of the nation's future.

The presidential race became an unprecedented clash between not the *Supremacía* and *Prosperidad*, but between these two parties (struggling to somehow balance jockeying for influence and cooperating against a common foe) and *las Platas*,

<sup>26</sup>A title comparable to a Sentire in the Church of Ezra, or an *Aerkebiskop* of the Iron Faith.

each backed by a different sect of the Church of Taiia. The smaller parties in existence at the time were also striving for advancement, though with little to no success. A lot of money was involved, with the *Supremacía* and *Prosperidad* trying to bribe and cajole influential people into supporting them.

There was also a lot of civil unrest; with the election dragging on, there was no one to sign off on the

government's attempts to get things done or answer petitions from the populace. People were clamouring for the elections to be completed, but the *Supremacía* and *Prosperidad* were certain that a proper count of the votes then and there would lead to a landslide victory by *las Platas*, and they would be damned if they would let that happen.

*Possibly literally, as such a victory could also lead to a major shift of power in the Church throughout Conquista, and High Gardener tres Sombras was as critical of the way they had mishandled the war as was candidate de los Lobos.*

Although the official historical record glosses over this, I gathered plenty of information that suggests candidate *de los Lobos*' life was threatened on many occasions. The candidate soldiered through; he had no family or lovers left by means of which he could be extorted, he had the backing of many spellcasters and growing political power, and he was determined to change the world for the better. Various attempts were made on his life, but his injuries were soon healed, and many members of *los Hombres Valientes* were eager to serve as his bodyguards.

With so many homeless and suffering, pressure was mounting for someone, *anyone* to formally take the reins of power and organize efforts to rebuild the nation. Conquista's government offices, as designed and founded by Hoyt Gunterbull, had never paid an excessive amount of attention to the will of the people, apart from calling for elections to get the office of *il Presidente* filled so the important papers would get signed. In the face of public protests, a constant stream of petitions and a buildup of paperwork awaiting final approval, even the crustiest government officers were just about willing to listen. For the first time in the history of Gunterbull's Conquista, no number of bribes or threats was enough to get them to 'play ball' with the two elder parties.

By the start of autumn in the year 743 BC, the government offices finally issued an ultimatum to the three major political parties; elections must be

held before the end of the year, no matter what. The *Supremacía* and *Prosperidad* balked at this, even as *las Platas* agreed wholeheartedly. Something had to give. And it did, but not what anyone had expected.

On the first day of winter in the year 743 BC, as temperatures dropped throughout Conquista (enough for it to snow in the northern *cantón* and for the far southern *cantón* to be halfway tolerable), the first wave of invaders came surging out of Masogan to the south. They were barbarians in the purest sense of the word, wielding weapons crafted of bone, knapped flint and sticks, dressed in furs and uncured hides. They were also as numerous as locusts.

By the time word reached the northern *cantón*, *las Zorras* and many of her dependent villages were either on fire or awash in blood. The Masogani were charging northward, dragging captives with them as slaves. Predictably, a cry for help reached the north. Just as predictably, *las Platas* was first to send people south, including many of the spellcasters who had fought so ably against the Vieuxlyese. Regrettably, candidate *de los Lobos* was among them.

*Los Hombres Valientes* were meant to join the battle, and they were arming up for the trip when a 'small surprise' stopped them in their tracks: a document bearing what appeared to be the autograph of *il Presidente* Leroy Foxskinner had been 'discovered' in the presidential residence after the execution of *il*



*Presidente* Jethro. Personally, I am convinced this was a clever forgery, planted on the orders of either *Supremacía* or *Prosperidad*, but it passed inspection.

The document was a proposal for the 'Equal Distribution Act'. In the name of encouraging *rapprochement* between the Casian and Canan people, it called for an equal exchange of Canan and Casian personnel between the two *cantóns* on an annual basis. Although the hierarchy of *los Hombres Valientes* protested against this, pointing out the crisis to the south, both the *Supremacía* and *Prosperidad* called in every favour they could to get the government offices to process the law, which they did. With the law ratified, it was the duty of *los Hombres Valientes* to select and escort people between the two *cantóns* right away.

All of this led to a predictable result. The forces under the command of candidate *de los Lobos*, expecting military backup to be right behind them, bravely engaged the barbarian horde in an attempt to guide them away from the villages and towns that were still struggling to rebuild after the Vieuxlyese invasion. Unlike the troops that had come from the east, the Masogani were fleet of foot and not unprepared for magical assault; they had their own shamans and priests with them. While the official histories do not record it, I personally have no doubt that *las Platas'* troops fought bravely. History does record that they were overwhelmed and wiped out to the last man while trying to cover the retreat of civilians – including candidate *de los Lobos*.

The Masogani managed to make it across one of the bridges to the north *cantón*, where they were finally met by *los Hombres Valientes* – those who were not occupied selecting and transporting people to fulfill the requirements of the Equal Distribution Act.

*Even with the wolf at their door, the  
little ants were compelled to keep  
working. Political madness is no less  
unsightly than any other variant.*

With the bridge as a chokepoint, the firearm-wielding troops were able to make a significant dent in the Masogani charge before they had to retreat and resort to their standard tactic of hit-and-run attacks. They managed to further whittle down the savages and force them away from the cities and towns of the north, and towards the final slope of Lilliend. You may recall that Lilliend's history does not make significant mentions of the Masogani, my *Master*, but then it also made no official mention of the Vieuxlyese; I had to ferret out that information by getting an old soldier drunk. Suffice it to say that none of the Masogani came back down the mountains, nor did the captives they were still dragging with them.

In the aftermath of this second invasion, Conquista was in an uproar. It was in desperate need of a calm and steady hand at the helm, a statesman capable of forging unity. What it got was James Johsson.

Johsson was an angry little man from a rich family with a loud voice, who spent more time shouting at people than he did listening to them. Somehow, this quality allowed him to replace Simon Goatwell as the candidate of *Supremacía*. Once he was appointed as candidate, Johsson used his grating voice to launch a series of angry rants that pretended to be political speeches. I have read transcripts of the verbal bilge he spewed, and the man was clearly either a lunatic or a shameless liar.

*The thought that any man sworn into  
a position of power by popular vote  
could be that insane is frankly  
terrifying, even to me.*

Johsson blamed the invasions on everyone he did not like. If Conquista's defenses and intelligence were weak, that was the fault of *Prosperidad* for not providing proper funding. If the Vieuxlyese had nearly made it to the black-oil wells, then this was

the fault of the Canan people for letting themselves be corrupted by pagans and witches. If the Masogani had wrought terrible destruction, then this was the fault of the Church of the middle *cantón* for not eradicating 'the heathen stain'.

Incredibly, his words were well-received – in the north, where votes could still be tallied at the time. Where candidate *de los Lobos* had helped men find their conscience, Johsson made them rediscover their wickedness and prejudice. He fanned the flames of inter-party rivalry; he fanned the flames of racial division; he fanned the flames of religious intolerance. The northern sect of the Church of Taiia adored and supported him, as did *Supremacía* and, to a lesser extent, *el espíritu de recuerdo*.

By the spring of 744 BC, the vicious little turnip was sworn in as *il Presidente* Johsson (completely based on votes from the north, as the middle *cantón* was in too much disarray to participate in the elections). The good people of Hughsrest celebrated his inauguration by lynching over a hundred hybrids of Casian/Canan blood, variously by hanging them from lampposts, drowning them, or setting them on fire. The 'festivities' were only ended when *los Hombres Valientes* dispersed the 'partygoers' with force; an act for which they would later be chastised by the new head of state.

As president, Johsson was as active as he was erratic. He firmly upheld the terms of the Equal Distribution Act, compelling both Casian and Canan people to migrate to the opposing tribe's *cantón* – but then he presented and had passed the Profession Requirement Act, which stated any man who sought to work a job of any distinction in the north *cantón* must be able to present documentation to prove they had been educated there. As a result, he condemned migrant Canan workers who arrived in the north *cantón*, often due to pressure from *los Hombres Valientes*, to menial jobs that most Casians considered to be beneath them. Those Canan *Hombres Valientes* still stationed in the north hurried to request transfers back to the middle *cantón*, just as Casian *Hombres Valientes* still in the middle

*cantón* hurried to transfer back to the north; neither group had been explicitly threatened, but both could read the writing on the wall.

When the government officials of the middle *cantón* pulled the same trick on Casian migrants that Johsson had on their Canan counterparts, condemning them more or less to serfdom, *il Presidente* ranted and raved about how the Canan tribe was 'mistreating good, honest Casians'. In retaliation, he limited financial and material support for the rebuilding of the middle *cantón* as much as he could.

Johsson created another law, the 'Useful Citizens Act'. Summarized, this piece of political madness states that every man should do what is most useful to the state. The farmer must produce food, the policeman must preserve public order, the banker must handle money, and the politician must control the country. As such, the UCA holds it as 'logical' that those who are 'free' to labour must bear a heavier burden of paying taxes than those who are 'tied up' managing the country. In other words, the working class of Conquista must pay higher taxes so as to support the ruling class, which has the 'heavy burden' of guiding the nation and providing leadership.

While this initially made *il Presidente* very popular with the rich and powerful both to the north and south of the *Wittwentraen*, he became the most hated president in Conquistan history among the working class overnight. Incensed at the wave of public protests his law caused, president Johsson ordered *los Hombres Valientes* to beat any protests down with extreme prejudice. He was apparently even angrier when this did nothing for his reputation among the working class.

Johsson's brutality became the impetus for the founding of *los llenos de protesta*. This is a minor political party commonly denounced as anarchists by the two eldest parties, but whose true message is that the laws and political traditions of Conquista are in desperate need of overhaul and should not be



held as sacred and inviolable. Personally, I found their arguments to be sound, and some of their suggestions for ways to improve the government are enlightened. It should come as no surprise that *los llenos de protesta* frequently ally with *las Platas* during elections.

Next, Johsson was responsible for the 'Religious Exemption Requirement Act'. This called for the Church of Taiia to strictly adhere to traditional dogma if it wanted to maintain its age-old exemption from taxation. This was an obvious stab at the Church of the middle *cantón*, which had taken a more permissive stance towards the Witch-cults and the Ulan Voodan faith, and one heartily endorsed by the Church of the north *cantón*.

All this achieved was to deepen the chasm already yawning between the Churches and government offices of the north and middle *cantóns*. While the taxation officers of the middle *cantón* claimed to be investigating their Church, they deliberately dragged their heels and submitted false reports to the north. The taxation office of the north was not too stupid to see this and sent many angry demands and chastisements to their counterparts. Eventually, communication between the two sank to an all-time low, with neither side trusting or respecting the other.

The middle *cantón's* Church and its 'pagan' allies were one of the few forces working for the restoration of the middle *cantón* at this time, and *il Presidente* Johsson was now seen by them as an enemy in power, rather than the head of state. The Church of the middle *cantón* officially distanced itself from the Church of the north, leading to accusations of heresy and an end to what communication and cooperation had existed between the two. Unsurprisingly, the Church of the middle promoted its then High Gardener to the position of a rival High Gazer, an appointment that continues unto today and is a sore point between the two Churches.

*Il Presidente* Johsson ranted and raved some more and made many public comments that a president

should be able to appoint and dismiss Church officials. Conflict or no, the High Gardener of the north was not willing to go along with this and made it very clear that Johsson would lose his support if he tried to push this plan forward. Although the president was clearly angered by this rejection of his authority, he ordered *los Hombres Valientes* to perform inspections of Church property in the middle *cantón* instead of trying to push his plan of becoming head of the Church as well as the state. When the police proved hesitant to violate Church property, Johsson openly offered them higher wages; a shameless and unprecedentedly public act of corruption that isolated *los Hombres Valientes* even as it persuaded them to barge into ziggurats and harass clergy and lay followers, assault and execute suspected 'pagans' on the spot and drive the magical community of Conquista back into the shadows.

Johsson's final contribution to modern Conquista was the 'Ulan Rental Correction Act'. Of all his laws, this one has the distinction of being his most diligently researched act of madness. More than once, *il Presidente* had publically lamented the fact that the Ulan people had rights on the same level as Casians, and could no longer be enslaved. Unfortunately for him, Hoyt Gunterbull had ratified the freedom of all men under the law, as granted by *los Viejos Sagrados*. Johsson publically complained – loudly, as usual – about 'secret societies undermining government policy', and then went to work designing his next law.

The Ulan Rental Correction played off of the guaranteed freedom of all men and the division of Conquista among tribal lines, as dictated by *los Viejos Sagrados*, with the accent being on 'men'. While it was given that the Ulan *men* were free, so argued *il Presidente* Johsson, the same had not been written of the Ulan *women*. He argued that the Ulan had, in fact, been benefitting from the service of slave-women for decades now, without paying the rightful owner: the Conquistan government. In addition, as the Ulan had never been allotted territory of their

own in the north or middle *cantón*, their presence therein should be considered as an act of vagrancy.

The Ulan Rental Correction Act 'graciously allowed' the Ulan men to retain 'the use of' their female relatives and their homes, but levied harsh fines against them – fines so high that they could never be paid in one lifetime. *Il Presidente* Johsson, having anticipated this, had added clauses that allowed for a system of indentures and transferral thereof, which enslaved the Ulan tribe to those with the wealth to buy up their debts through legal trickery instead of chains.

Apart from the Rental Correction Act's intended target, the Ulan, it had another group of victims: namely women clear across Conquista. The notion that a whole tribe's womenfolk could be slaves proved popular with a certain kind of man. To wit, the violent, swaggering, 'rugged' kind of man often idealized by Conquistador society.

While there is no law reducing Casian and Canan women to slavery, the thought that they could and perhaps *should* has become one of the main messages of another minor political party known as the *consejo de padres*. This group of throwbacks brays about 'traditional values' and argues women and Ulan are happiest when leading the strictly regulated lives of slaves due to their supposedly inferior intellects. The *consejo de padres* is a very minor voice in Conquista's political landscape, as it is split in two bickering factions, one of which extends the argument of a supposed predilection for happiness in slavery to the Casian tribe, whereas the other does the same for the Canan tribe.

*No prizes for guessing which cantón  
houses which faction of reactionary  
throwbacks, my Master.*

In 748 BC, Conquista was *still* reeling from the two invasions. Efforts to rebuild the middle *cantón* had been erratic at best. Requests for troops and weapons to guard against further invasion attempts from Masogan were ignored by president Johsson, or denied with snide remarks about the Vieuxlyese combat-*mobila* and how the Canana should just rebuild them. The reconstruction of Meyersville had been nearly completed, but Alsem was still in ruins, and *il Presidente* refused to send troops to guard the eastern border, claiming that the great cities were of greater concern.

Even with money flowing into the coffers of the wealthy and the poor too overtaxed to make much of a fuss, there was a general spirit of relief, as people expected Johsson to retire soon, like his predecessors before him. He was at best erratic when it came to approving and signing documents brought to him yet threw temper tantrums when people dared question his own proposals, such as when he tried to make *El Corazón de un Rey* required reading for school children instead of *Salvando la Conquista*.

To say that there was public outcry when Johsson declared that he was staying on as president would be an understatement. To say he reacted badly when his decision was not met with cheers and spontaneous celebration in all Conquista would be another. Johsson ordered *los Hombres Valientes* to beat down any and all public protests with lethal force. He also announced his intention to stay in power for the rest of his life, as well as hand-pick his successor, completely bypassing the election system created and codified by Hoyt Gunterbull.

In spite of vocal objections from the government offices, *both* the major and many of the minor political parties, as well as many prominent citizens, *il Presidente* Johsson was hell-bent on passing a new law that would make him president for life and allow him to determine the qualities of all his future successors. As the government structure created by Hoyt Gunterbull provided almost no tools to stop a president from doing whatever he bloody well



wanted, even effectively create a hereditary aristocracy out of whole cloth, this caused political chaos on top of the mess Conquista was already mired in.

Whereas *il Presidente* Jethro was executed by his own *Hombres Valientes* on charges of being a danger to his own country, Johsson had been paying his bodyguards lavish bribes. Lavish enough, in fact, that

none of the people who wanted him removed before he could tip the whole country over the edge could afford to have him bumped off. The nation waited in trepidation for the day of Johsson's scheduled unveiling of his new edicts and a return to the dark ages of kings and nobles.

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE FIENDS DIDN'T MAKE ME DO IT

Conquista suffers greatly from the manipulations of two powerful fiends: the Red Haunt and *la Infestación*. Neither was responsible for James Johsson.

In spite of his utterly vile personality and the evils he facilitated and encouraged, Johsson was wholly human and under no one's influence but his own. He was too willful for *la Infestación* to control, too self-centered to be influenced by *los Viejos Sagrados* or any of the domain's other secret groups – although he suspected their existence and was paranoid about nonexistent attempts to undermine him.

All the harm Johsson did, he did because he felt it was right that these things should be done, or because he felt they would benefit him personally. If anything, Johsson only caused trouble for the two fiends' various interests in Conquista. It should come as no surprise that they had a hand in removing him from office – and life.

Johsson's greatest achievement may well be that he caused the two fiends to directly cooperate on something for the first time since their co-sponsoring of Hoyt Gunterbull.

In this, Johsson may well be symptomatic of a trend in Conquista, namely that the greatest evils are not perpetrated by supernatural titans, but by ordinary men.

*No matter how bad things actually are in this domain, the Conquistan people find comfort in the notion that their oppressors can be voted out of power.*

*The idea does have merit. An aristocrat needs must be ejected from the Quality or his family line extinguished before his influence is ended, if then.*

*Where the people of Conquista are misguided is in believing the misrule ends when a figurehead is removed, when the political party they belonged to marches on undeterred and can try to get another president elected.*

I have read several transcripts of the big day, which vividly describe this weaselly, scrawny little man in a dark suit, who walked into the Amphitheater of Government House in Hughsrest as though he owned the place by divine right. A fat stack of papers under one arm, the president's signet sparkling on his finger 'like a diamond ring in a pig's ear'<sup>27</sup>, Johsson walked into the middle of the great hall, opened his mouth to speak – and here the transcripts become delightfully graphic – and succumbed to a series of tremors and seizures so violent that his teeth and bones shattered.

Judging by the loving detail provided in all the transcripts (Really, they read like penny dreadfuls), I am not the only one who was immensely cheered by the fool's unexplained death. In fact, while the transcripts make mention of the way *il Presidente* bled out on the Amphitheater's floor, no mention is made of anyone calling for a physician until *after* he had stopped twitching.

In the 'confusion' following Johsson's death, the drafts for his new laws were 'mysteriously lost'. By some fluke of circumstance, his mangled remains did not receive the state funeral each president should be entitled to, but became lost just like the paperwork.

*(Jokes that he was ground up for dogfood or pig slops, as well as funny remarks that he was so small that he may have just fallen through a crack between two floor-tiles abound.)*

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY: DOWN WITH THE DEAD

The two fiends worked together to give James Johsson the worst death they could, with the devil holding him in place while the demon savaged his body. Struck down at what should have been the moment of his ascendance to the status of king in all but name, Johsson died in protracted agony, and not one person reached out to help him. Even if he had

not been wearing the presidential signet, *la Infestación's* phylactery, it is doubtful that he would have passed on peacefully.

Johsson's soul has languished inside the signet since the moment of his death. The Red Haunt has no further interest in him, but *la Infestación* derives cruel pleasure from exposing him to hints of her essence, steadily driving him deeper and deeper into terrified madness. Even this may pale besides the torments she is planning for the future.

The government offices immediately called for new elections, and both the *Prosperidad* and *Supremacía* swung into action while the rest of the nation erupted into spontaneous seven-day festivities.

Emergency elections were held, and Justin Crowblack (younger brother to Victor Crowblack) of the *Prosperidad* took the helm of Conquista with remarkably little fuss. While he did not have any power to rescind laws already ratified by his predecessors, he did much to smooth out the people's complaints.

The new president made funds available to rebuild both to the north and south of the *Wittwentraen*, built bridges with the *Supremacía* by insisting on a buildup of the nation's defenses, and finally arranged for Conquistan scouts and spies to officially depart the Domain and gather information about its new neighbours. As president Crowblack sent members of *los Hombres Valientes*, who were after all also the nation's secret police, it should come as no surprise that far from all these spies managed to return alive and sane. Various concerns arose within Conquista, based on the information received.

The *Supremacía* was taken aback by the fact that all of the surrounding nations had either standing armies of dedicated soldiers or long-standing warrior cultures, in contrast to *los Hombres Valientes*, who had to do double and triple duty as guardsmen and secret police.

<sup>27</sup>As quoted from official press accounts.

The *Prosperidad* was troubled by the fact that most of the surrounding nations were technologically backwards, meaning that the black-oil and technological advances of Conquista would not be considered as valuable there.

The northern Church was worried because it seemed that Conquista was surrounded by pagans. Especially the presence of Brightwell-worship in most of the other Domains disturbed the High Gazer of the north, who was convinced that the Church of the middle *cantón* had been corrupted by the pagans and might ally with heathens across the border to overwhelm the 'true' faith.

The Church was rocked to the core by the discovery of other domains that already worshipped Taiia in her glory, with hierarchies of their own in place. While the Church of the middle was eager to perform a liturgical outreach, the Church of the north was against it; now that his own authority was even further diminished due to the discovery of other High Gazers, he feared his rival in the middle *cantón* would make alliances with them and have him ousted from his position.

Various 'traditional' Casian and Canan people were deeply concerned when they learned of the Domain of Raba, north of the Wrathwall. From the reports received, this was a nation inhabited primarily by Ulan; who was to say they would not try to ally with Conquista's own indentured populace?

Among the government, there was a growing concern that Conquista's more ambitious youngsters would strike out, not to build homesteads within the land, but beyond the borders, and so gradually bleed the Domain dry.

*Il Presidente* Crowblack tackled these concerns quickly and efficiently.

First of all, he earned the appreciation of the *Prosperidad* by sending envoys to neighbouring nations to enquire into the possibility of trade. There were some false starts (no one returned from Masogan, only women returned from Lilliend) and

some grumbling (many people were unhappy that the president was making overtures to Vieuxlyons), but eventually trade agreements were signed.

Second, while the diplomats and merchants were handing around the little chocolates (or dying a hideous death), the president had the nation's defenses at Alsem and *las Zorras* repaired and improved tenfold. He exhorted the universities to develop new and better weapons and *mobílas*, and demanded that the Church conduct high-level rituals to defend the nation.

Third, rather than keep secret the various horrors and dangers that existed in neighbouring domains, president Crowblack made this public knowledge. His broadcasts painted in stark and visceral colours a scene of lands where an ambitious young man could not set up a homestead, but rather would die a gruesome death. Most of the people who had been interested in emigration quickly changed their minds.

Fourth, the president encouraged both the Church of the north and the Church of the middle to communicate with their counterparts across the borders, and to send envoys. Whereas the Church of the north balked, the Church of the middle happily agreed. On the one hand, this allowed the Church of the north to fortify its position against 'foreign contamination'; on the other, it gave the Church of the middle enough potential power that the Church of the north (grudgingly) withdrew its fangs, with accusations of heresy and blasphemy dying down. Third, the Church of the middle's ecumenical efforts created a channel of communication with more far-flung domains, which would have its uses for the government, so long as it maintained good relations with the Church of the middle.

There were successes to be had during Justin Crowblack's reign, and there were setbacks.

Two years into president Crowblack's reign, the first Prostitute Murders occurred in Hughsrest. 'Night Butterflies' (as these men and women are colloquially known) were found in alleys, butchered



to the point that they were barely recognizable as human. Not many prominent people cared overly much about the murders, but the nation's media (ever eager to peddle scandal) made a lot of noise about them.

*Il Presidente* ordered the matter hushed up once one particular reporter started to connect some serious dots and announced all the victims had been members of trade union/minor party *las mariposas*. The government was not pleased with the suggestion that these were not random murders, but politically motivated killings.

In international news, Lilliend proved to be an isolationist country, its residents unwilling to migrate past their borders. While they were keen to see men move in, they had little interest in any trade goods other than horses, donkeys and other equines. Conquista had no native population of such animals (see Fauna), but the distant domain of Umbrash proved keen to sell as much horseflesh as the market could bear, once peaceful communications had been established through the Church of Taiia.

Unfortunately, in order for horses to make it to the Lilliender market, they had to be shipped through Vieuxlyons. The Vieuxlyese were accommodating in making their 'train' technology available and creating a trade route that was quick and efficient, but they did charge a toll fee for all goods to pass through their lands.

Vieuxlyons was very eager to purchase black-oil and technology from Conquista, but *il Presidente* Crowblack strictly forbade the sale of technology and put an annual limit on the amount of black-oil that could be sold to foreign customers. This did not make him many friends among the various domains that actually did have an interest in the noxious stuff, and his own *Prosperidad* was angry at the loss of possible revenue. On the other hand, the *Supremacía* was angry that *il Presidente* allowed the sale of black-oil to any foreign nation at all.

*Prosperidad* was particularly incensed when *il Presidente* granted asylum to the Vieuxlyese news

agency *la presse libre* and allowed them to set up a new office in Alsem after they had been forced to flee their home domain's regime.

While a tenuous peace now existed between Conquista and the at least semi-civilized neighbouring domains, Masogan remained a source of tension. Before the new defenses of *las Zorras* were completed, a second wave of Masogani snuck across the bridge to the southern *cantón* under cover of night and slunk past the city, into the middle *cantón*'s hinterlands. They made it to the bridges to the north *cantón* before the raiding of villages for goods and slaves was detected and managed to fight their way across and to the eastern border, carrying their loot with them. The defenses at Alsem managed to cut a significant number of the invaders down, in no small part because they seemed more in a hurry to escape, rather than fight.

Vieuxlyons later issued a formal complaint and demanded compensation for the damages caused by the savages as they made their way east. To the fury of basically everyone in Conquista, president Crowblack actually paid up.

Although president Crowblack had not done nearly as badly as his predecessors Johsson and Jethro, his career was cut short. In the spring of 751 BC, a *Hombre Valiente* named Forton Builterman – known for consorting with members of the *consejo de padres*, the *espíritu de recuerdo* and another group of throwbacks known as *los ermanos del cuchillo* – swaggered into the Amphitheater at Hughsrest during an official meeting of *il Presidente* and the senior officers of state, and casually shot the president in the head. He took the presidential signet from the dead man's hand, shot a few senior officers 'because he didn't like their faces' and plonked himself down on the president's designated chair, declaring himself the new king of Conquista, or *Hombre Fuerte*.

King Builterman was not a particularly good or efficient ruler – for one thing, he completely ignored the second string of Prostitute Murders, which swept



not only Hughsrest but also Meyersville – and he did not even reach the end of summer before he and his small army of disenchanted *Hombres Valientes* and members of organized crime syndicates were themselves gunned down on charges of insurrection and murder. His reign was an endless cycle of debauch and killing and did not reach beyond the city limits of Hughsrest.

Elections were held, and Erik Hughmann of the *Prosperidad* followed Justin Crowblack as president. He was still *il Presidente* at the time I arrived in Conquista, and I expect he will stay in power for some years to come. Hughmann proved to be a conservative and cautious head of state.

*Just call a spade a spade; the man's a coward and a crawler.*

President Hughmann maintained the mercantile efforts of Justin Crowblack, combined with a steady buildup of the defenses at Alsem and *las Zorras*. He saw to it that goods kept moving; horses from Umbrash to Lilliend, black-oil to Vieuxlyons and Malopelagio; wine from Lilliend to the rest of the Cluster; wine from Vieuxlyons to Lilliend; surplus produce from Conquistan farms to the rest of the Cluster. It is no secret that *il Presidente* would dearly love to secure a profitable deal for various types of ore, either with Raba to the north or the Broken Wheel, but the former is largely self-sufficient and disinterested in black-oil, and the latter has proven quite demanding when it comes to signing an ore contract.

As far as passing law goes, president Hughmann has also proven retiring. He signed the Decentralized Administration Act, which grants power of pre-approval to the government offices in both the north and middle *cantóns*. Pre-approval means that local government can put laws and motions into effect on a provisory basis while waiting for formal,

presidential approval. If *il Presidente* reviews these laws and approves them, all is well. If he refuses to ratify a decision, it can be scrapped with 'minimal damage'.

President Hughmann proved slightly more ambitious when it came to preserving domestic law and order. When the Prostitute Murders sprang up again in 752 BC and 753 BC (now spanning all of the domain's larger cities), *il Presidente* ordered additional night patrols by *los Hombres Valientes*. Regrettably, this did little to remedy the situation, as the murders 'inexplicably' took place at times and locations the patrols were not present.

Unlike his predecessor president Crowblack, *il Presidente* Hughmann did not try to hush up the killings, and let the press have free reign – especialle *la presse libre*, which laid some very damaging accusations at the doorstep of minor party *los hermanos del cuchillo*. After *la presse libre*'s office in Alsem was fire-bombed in the summer of 753 BC, president Hughmann personally sent a respected captain of the police/army to the city to take charge of the situation. Certainly, the foreign news agency has not been attacked again, and there have been no more Prostitute Murders in Alsem.

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY: MAKING YOURSELF OBSOLETE

The Decentralized Administration Act has significantly decreased the president's workload and relieved some of the pressure on local government, but has also caused a certain 'restiveness' in the nation.

There has been tension between the north and middle *cantóns* ever since the conquerors arrived and the land was divided between the Casians and the Canan, but *los Viejos Sagrados* and Hoyt Gunterbull united the nation. Hughmann's decision to grant power of pre-approval has people muttering in alleys as well as exalted offices that it should be possible for each *cantón* to effectively govern itself, without any need for a president.

(Certainly *el espíritu de recuerdo* applauds this way of thinking, and though they are still a minor party, their influence is finally, slowly increasing.)

No one is seriously thinking of secession yet – the north needs black-oil and the south needs more food than it can produce – but cooperation between the *cantóns* has always been fragile. If the balance between the two is disrupted in just the wrong way, Conquista may well be looking at a civil war.

It may be worth noting that this particular captain, one Francisco Hareleg, currently serves as the city's civil governor as well as chief of its detachment of *Hombres Valientes*. While he is unpopular with the latter organization's internal hierarchy, crime in Alsem and the efficiency of its governance have respectively fallen and risen in equal measure.

In 754 BC, after the Church of Taiia in the north complained to *il Presidente* about heresy and paganism in the middle *cantón*, Hughmann formally requested a meeting of the Church leaders so they could discuss their differences in a civilized manner. The High Gazer of the north bluntly refused to discuss anything with pagans, and the newly appointed High Gazer of the middle refused to leave her stronghold, implying that her predecessor, High Gardener *tres Sombras*, had been assassinated, rather than retired to contemplate spiritual matters.

President Hughmann 'regretfully' pointed out that he is 'merely' the temporal leader of the nation and not its spiritual leader, and as such he has no authority to demand that priests of Taiia set aside their differences. He ordered the founding of Choirville, a small town near the northern shore of the *Wittwentraen*, to serve as a meeting ground in case the various priests ever decided to extend each other an olive branch – then washed his hands of the affair.

When the Church of the north grumbled a little too loudly, *il Presidente* followed up with a public declaration that magic not granted by Taiia was

against the principles of Conquistan culture and law, and anyone caught using it should be detained and questioned by *los Hombres Valientes* 'to determine their character and resolve whether they are in fact a threat to the peace of the land'. Since the Witch-cults and Voodan had already mostly returned to hiding, this did not lead to the wave of arrests and executions the Church of the north had hoped for, but they accepted the declaration for the sycophantic peace offer that it was.

The northern Church's public grumbling was soon overshadowed in the media by the 754 BC Butterfly Murders. Where for the past four years women and men of the streets had been the victims of the gruesome Prostitute Murders, now 'men of repute' were being killed in the same back alleys where the 'night butterflies' had been losing their lives. Each victim was found either hacked nearly to pieces with a large blade or else with major bones crushed by a heavy implement; all had clearly suffered some form of chemical damage to the face and eyes, presumably from hurled acid.

Although minor political party *los hermanos del cuchillo* raised a stink – cementing the suspicion that the men killed had been affiliated with them and were probably responsible for the Prostitute Murders – there was surprisingly little motivation in society at large to investigate the matter. What animus there was, shrank considerably after newsbill *la presse libre* released an article linking all the victims to rather unsavoury business practices involving the trafficking of underage children and their induction into the domain's sex industry.

Although *la Supremacia* growled and grumbled about ordinary citizens taking the law into their own hands, the Butterfly Murders seem to have tapered off sharply after 754 BC until they now fade into the general mayhem that takes place in Conquistan cities after dark. Regrettably, so do further Prostitute Murders.

In 755 BC, *il Presidente* Hughmann published his memoirs – *Siervo de la Nación*, a tedious bundle of

waffling more suitable as cigarette and toilet paper than reading material – and announced his retirement; he was ready to cede the presidential office to the next man who wanted it badly enough. Like his more successful predecessors, he had set up a nice residence and a high annual stipend for himself.

To Hughmann's not-so-secret consternation, *Prosperidad* asked him (and more importantly, gave him the money) to run in the following elections as an independent candidate. When he proved unwilling, it seems he was invited to a number of very private discussions with the heads of his political party, which I take it to mean that he was bullied and/or blackmailed into doing it anyway.

Although he held a lackluster campaign, Erik Hughmann won the elections by a landslide and was reinstalled as *il Presidente*. This turned out to be a carefully balanced trap, set up by the *Prosperidad* and *Supremacia* working in tandem with the government offices for the first time in Conquista's history.

As an independent candidate, Hughmann has no *official* backing from any party; he must work to keep them all as happy as he can. It is in the man's nature that he keeps the most influential parties happy by either making concessions to their demands or finding something else of similar value to give to them. Clearly Hughmann no longer wants to do the job, and so he has given the government offices which should be reporting to him an unprecedented amount of leeway to arrange matters themselves. *Los Hombres Valientes*, who should ultimately report to *il Presidente*, are similarly receiving a lot of freedom to make their own decisions. In most cases, this means they run roughshod over people's freedoms.

So far as the common people are concerned, Erik Hughmann is a 'good' president because he personally does not make waves, is reluctant to pass new laws for fear of making enemies and strives to

keep the foreign trade going while maintaining the national defenses.

When *il Presidente* announced his desire to retire once again in 759 BC, there was an unusual number of minor problems and legal matters which had to be sorted out by the president. The government offices persuaded *il Presidente* to stay on 'until the crisis had been resolved'. After two years, Erik Hughmann declared that the crisis was duly over and announced his retirement. Someone promptly blew up his presidential residence, burning it to the ground. To Hughmann's horror, this meant he would be homeless if he stepped down now and would need to invest his stipend in building himself a new villa, rather than engaging in the kind of pleasant diversions most retired presidents had enjoyed.

As I said before, Erik Hughmann was still *il Presidente* in the winter of 766 BC, when I entered the domain.

During his reign, there have been three more major waves of Masogani trying to cross into the middle *cantón*, and an unknown number of minor ones. Thanks to the defenses at *las Zorras*, the damage these savages have inflicted on Conquista has been vastly reduced. The number of Masogani that have managed to bother the Conquistan heartlands or even reach Lilliend is negligible compared to the first two waves.

Trade is going strong, even if it does have to run through Vieuxlyons. If *il Presidente* Hughmann has not made significant improvements to the nation's diplomatic efforts nor brought in new allies, he has at least made sure the existing allies have not ended their treaties.

The north and middle *cantóns* pretty much run themselves now. When people are shipped between them in accordance with the Equal Distribution Act, these are typically small-time criminals and other undesirables.

As far as politics and *recorded* history goes, Conquista continues to muddle along, though not to improve. Erik Hughmann is a convenient weak man



in a position of power, a figurehead ruler who is struggling to stay balanced on top of a shifting heap. I doubt he will be allowed to retire until the big parties have a particularly charismatic candidate; the current way of doing business has proven to be highly effective.

As far as my up-to-date observations go, the whole Domain is a powderkeg just waiting for the first fuse to be lit, and there are several to choose from.

### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: TAKE UP MY BURDEN**

Il Presidente Erik Hughmann (N middle-aged male human Aristocrat 2 / Expert 3) truly is desperate to end his duties as ruler of Conquista, but it does not look as though he will be allowed to resign before he dies. Not unless he is replaced by someone the strongest political parties like better.

Should adventurers start plying their trade in Conquista, especially native-born adventurers, they may find that the president is surprisingly open to and even supportive of their activities. The more famous they become among the people, the greater the chance that they will be invited to a meeting with il Presidente, who will provide them with sage (and useful) advice, point out wrongs for them to right, maybe even sponsor their good works.

This is not a sign of a hidden desire on the part of il Presidente to cleanse the domain of all its wrongs. Rather, it is his attempt to set up someone else as a candidate for the presidency; someone so popular that they will win the favour of the power-blocs keeping him trapped in his current position. A likely candidate may soon find all manner of great deeds (of which they know nothing) being attributed to them because president Hughmann has the Hombres Valientes plant evidence.

The news agencies of Conquista may suddenly start singing their praises, and the two elder political parties may start vying for the unlucky adventurers' membership – or just skip straight to bribes and threats to bring them into line...

### **SIDEBAR: POLITICS AND HOPE**

It would be easy to consider Conquista to be a land beyond salvation, choked by intolerance, corruption and greed to the point that there is no hope left. But remember: this is Ravenloft, not Call of Cthulhu; the road out of the current misery may be steep, it may be long and it may be dark, but it does exist.

Player characters willing to invest time in actually saving Conquista from the corrupt temporal government can do so. In fact, the political system of this domain is in some ways much more open to change than the typical feudal society. Natives could get into one of the more benevolent political parties and work to swing votes to set course for a better future. If they support los llenos de protesta, for instance, they could help repeal any number of oppressive laws. Las Platas could help bring the whole nation on track to a brighter future if someone could get them more political clout.

Player characters who are strangers to the land could find one of those more benevolent parties and work for them, providing protection against Supremacía goons and making sure Prosperidad agents can't bribe key voters.



While la Infestación is sure to take note of any attempt to change the political status quo, the rules of the experiment she agreed on with the Red Haunt prevent her from taking a direct hand. She'll be there if the player characters actually manage to become or sponsor a new president, but she will not interfere with the elections. Such interference is more likely to come from one of the two elder parties. Clifton Willgoat and the other Dread Lords are a non-factor when it comes to politics in spite of being the domain's Darklords, so while the player characters will have their work cut out for them, the challenge is far from hopeless.

To the right kind of party, the challenge of swinging Conquista's government could be an epic challenge, spanning a campaign. Even a party that only wants to spend a limited amount of time in Conquista can make a difference by supporting one of the smaller parties during an election, protecting them from intimidation and worse at the command of the elder parties.

Here follows a brief summary of the way Conquista's political system works:

At the top of the pyramid sits il Presidente. Whoever fulfills this role is the supreme commander of los Hombres Valientes and may command them as a personal army. The president also has ultimate power to ratify or veto proposals presented by the government offices so they either become law or are erased. Il Presidente may also write laws and ratify them with complete impunity – unless there is unanimous objection from all government offices and whichever political party sponsored il Presidente's rise to power. In the latter case, it is up to the president to either amend or give up on the proposal – or bribe or threaten people into rescinding their objection. Finally, it is the president who appoints local civil leaders from a list provided by the government offices. Il Presidente's life is sacrosanct – unless the government offices and the internal hierarchy of los Hombres Valientes unanimously agree that the head of state has become a danger to that state and needs to be formally executed. Or unless someone decides to simply assassinate him.

One step below il Presidente are the hierarchy of los Hombres Valientes and the government offices.

Though los Hombres Valientes are paid out of the state's budget, the hierarchy is fully independent from the government offices and owes loyalty only to the office of the president – and as the case of il Presidente Jethro shows, there are limits to this loyalty. In theory, the hierarchy is composed of all senior regional commanders of los Hombres Valientes, working together to coordinate the defense of the nation and the administration of law and order within its borders.

In truth, the hierarchy has been split into two councils – one for the northern cantón and one for the middle cantón – since the days of president Johsson. Cooperation and deliberation are grudging affairs, unless the councils manage to find common ground, such as when it comes to chasing down and turning in criminals with bounties on their heads.

The councils are composed of the most senior and the most decorated commanders in each of the two regions. Any president who chooses to attend council meetings may claim the position of foreman and may bring out two votes per session. Membership in the councils is based on direct appointment by the president, or – if there is no president in office or there is an urgent need for fresh commanders – invitation by the sitting council members. Policy within the hierarchy is decided by what should be a simple majority vote, but the more cunning councillors make sure to convince their peers of the benefits of a proposal before they put it before the hierarchy.

Currently, the hierarchy's main concern is to do what is beneficial for los Hombres Valientes, rather than the state. An energetic and charismatic president might be able to shake up the selfish old people in charge of Conquista's armed forces, or could bring in enough new people of stronger morals and ethics to swing future votes.

The government offices are the bureaucracy of Conquista. They are the record-keepers of all business, of every significant event in the lives of the citizens (such as birth, marriage and death), trade and diplomacy with foreign countries, candidates to serve as local governors, major construction... in short, of everything that happens and might be significant. Based on these records, the government offices propose plans of action to il Presidente, allocate funds drawn from the national budget, contact citizens and local governance, alert los Hombres Valientes to alert them to crimes which need to be dealt with, and send forth agents to inspect and collect as needed.

It is said that there is an office for everything within and every concern of the nation, and this is true. Each office has its own leadership, appointed by rules unique to that office, and these leaders are united in Conquista's parliament, which advises il Presidente. Other than the president, the offices accept no superior and jealously guard their autonomy. While there has been an uncomfortable distance between the government offices of the northern and middle cantón since the Vieuxlyese and Masogani invasions, combined with the antics of presidents Jethro and Johsson, the offices have secretly been doing their best to mend the rift before it can become permanent.

While the offices theoretically wield great power and provide the president with a great deal of information, their every decision must ultimately be ratified by il Presidente or nothing is done (or at least, nothing becomes an accepted part of the law). Their power is further limited by the fact that they are supposed to be unable to exert executive power, which runs through los Hombres Valientes. (But see the section on the Record Office.) Finally, while the offices may call for elections to be held upon the death or retirement of the seated president and they may demand that the closing vote be taken, they may not otherwise influence the elections.

Provided the president agrees with the offices' proposals, however, they can do virtually anything else; they know exactly how much everything and everyone in Conquista is worth, and they control the nation's budget.

Membership in the government offices is a career for life. Young children are secretly screened during their primary education for qualities the offices find useful. Literacy and a capacity for arithmetic are strong qualifiers, but so is a disinterest in or even a disdain for the political parties.

While the offices must answer to il Presidente and il Presidente is normally the mouthpiece of whichever political party got him into office, the government offices view the parties' attempts to influence and control the ruling of Conquista as invasive and detrimental to good government – namely, based on the offices' own decisions.

While the offices tend to be reactionary and cling to their own traditions rather than face the present and the future, and they are not as immune to bribery and intimidation as they would like to be, they are not a force for deliberate evil. As a whole, they are genuinely interested in preserving Conquista, and are keenly aware of the biggest problems the nation faces. If they would just receive a president who has the intelligence to listen to them, the moral strength not to be swayed by the political parties and the charisma to energize his followers, the government offices could bring vast improvement to the land.



## DREAD DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE RECORD OFFICE

The government offices truly did not have executive power – until the spring of 746 BC, halfway during the reign of president Johsson. Conquista was still reeling from the effects of the Vieuxlyese invasion, il Presidente was clearly a madman whose decisions were pushing the nation closer and closer to the edge, and los Hombres Valientes were not about to dispose of the wretched man. At a secret – and highly illegal – meeting of the offices' representatives in the Amphitheater of Hughsrest, it was agreed that the offices needed some form of executive power, just so they could preserve the nation when all other options failed.

La officia del recuerdo, or the Record Office, was founded the next day without the president's knowledge. Its official mandate, just in case a future president or los Hombres Valientes noticed its existence, is one of oversight between the various government offices in both the northern and middle cantón by keeping independent records and pointing out inconsistencies. (Under President Hughmann, l'officia del recuerdo's existence was revealed, and it was given funds to do just that, creating an effective cover for its true work.) In truth, the Record Office is a spy ring, which acts both within and beyond the borders of Conquista.

Agents, masquerading as civil servants, Hombres Valientes, merchants or whatever other role is needed, go on 'fact-finding' missions. They use bribery, seduction, intimidation and lies to acquire information on matters that concern the government offices, but which fall outside their official mandate. At the order of the offices, agents may blackmail, deceive, sabotage, extort, torture and murder or whatever else is needed to preserve the best interests of Conquista.

Part of president Johsson's paranoia about secret societies trying to influence his reign was caused by then still green agents of the Record Office, who tried to get to him through the people he should have been close to. Alas, as Johsson held no true regard for anyone save himself, these attempts failed, and his personal security was too tight for him to be quietly removed from office. The current crop of agents is no less brutal than the first, but they are a lot more subtle – and they could be encountered anywhere in Conquista.

If la officia del recuerdo has any positive qualities, it is that it welcomes and employs everyone and anyone regardless of age, gender, species, tribe or place of birth, and that it does not tolerate internal squabbling. Anyone willing to swear absolute loyalty to Conquista is a possible asset. No amount of bickering between the government offices of the two cantóns has ever divided the internal order of the Record Office, which marches on with the sinister deliberateness of a spider.

Note that this organisation is not wholly devoted to Evil, but it is supremely ruthless, and it can draw on the gathered information stored by the government offices. As an ally or employer, it can be unnerving. As an enemy, it can be deadly.

Finally, we have the political parties. These are the voice of various interest groups, which seek to control the state by providing the president who reigns over the whole nation, and maintaining an influence over that president.

Although the parties are not officially members of the government, the parties can exert a great deal of power if they gain the ear of the president or key members of the hierarchy of *los Hombres Valientes*, be it through persuasion, threats or bribery. In addition, it is the collected political parties who organize nationwide elections and tally the votes once they have decided that the time is right.

Power blocs are likely to form during elections, as various parties pool their resources to amass more votes for a candidate they agree upon, or to 'persuade' voters that they should pick the bloc's favourite. As you might imagine, corruption and strife run rampant during elections, and many rivalries run deep.

Here follows a by no means exhaustive list of political parties active in Conquista, including their overall alignment and character:

*Prosperidad* (NE): 'Wealthy nation, healthy nation'. The *Prosperidad* believes that money is the root of all good things and finds its origins in old money and the largest businesses of Conquista. This party sponsors and encourages all kinds of trade, save for those monopolized by its archenemy, *Supremacía*. Unfortunately, the party firmly believes that the bulk of wealth and prosperity belongs in the hands of a select few; the financial aristocracy that makes up its own leadership. To *Prosperidad*, the citizens of the nation are assets to be worked hard (but not entirely to destruction), and foreign nations are markets waiting to be exploited.

*Supremacía* (LE): 'Strong nation, safe nation'. The *Supremacía* finds its origins in companies that fabricate and sell weapons, and families that used to be connected to the pre-*Hombres Valientes* army of Conquista. Even today, these families jealously guard their monopoly against 'incursion' by their most hated enemy, the *Prosperidad*. The *Supremacía* believes in a nation under an iron fist and the rule of the gun, with might making right. Non-soldiers should be made wholly subservient to the will of those who hold the power to kill, and foreign nations need to be subjugated or destroyed.

(Strongly allied with the northern sect of the Church of Taiia.)

*Las Platas* (LG): 'The common good is the greatest good'. The first truly benevolent political party of Conquista since its birth in the Demiplane of Dread, *las Platas* promotes seeking the optimal solution for as large a number of people as is possible. Although it has been denounced as 'unrealistic' and 'anarchistic' by the two elder parties, *las Platas* is strictly law-abiding and desires not so much a change of the system as a realignment of its priorities and an end to the prejudices that divide the Conquistan people.

(Strongly allied with the Church of the middle *cantón*; tentatively allied with *los llenos de protesta*; tentatively allied with *las mariposas*.)

*Espíritu de recuerdo* (LN): 'There is and has always been only one president'. Deluded traditionalists who worship the first president of Conquista, Hoyt Gunterbull, as the embodiment of all wisdom and justice, and preach that no man is fit to fill his position. *El espíritu de recuerdo* would see the office of the Conquistan president wholly dissolved and replaced with a 'council of wise men' skilled in the interpretation of Hoyt Gunterbull's writings, which they claim will lead Conquista to a glorious future.

(Typically pool their votes with *Supremacía* at the end of elections; do not receive much if any consideration.)



*Los llenos de protesta* (NG): 'No law is holy.' Although often accused of being anarchists, this group is actually starkly pragmatic and argues that the nation's laws should not be maintained as holy writ, but rather should be open to review, revision and redaction if they are found not to be in keeping with current conditions and the well-being of the state.

(Tentatively allied with *las Platas*; tentatively allied with *las mariposas*.)

*Consejo de padres* (CE): 'The superior man shall rule.' Potentially the most malign political party in Conquista, it is a small mercy that the *consejo de padres* is split in two regional factions; it already has an unhealthy influence on the nation's seedy underbelly. The message of the *consejo de padres* is openly sexist and racist, championing a return to the time when 'inferior' tribes and women were held as slaves of 'superior' men. The *consejo de padres* has been striving for full unification with *Supremacía* for years, but they have little to offer.

(Strongly supportive of *Supremacía*; tentatively allied with *hermanos del cuchillo*; openly aggressive towards *las mariposas*.)

*Las madres del Conquista* (NE): 'The mothers lend their strong sons to the nation'. Supposedly an all-woman party made up of Conquistan mothers who wish to show their patriotic devotion, *las madres del Conquista* are a minor group that calls for Conquistan women to teach and encourage their husbands and children to serve the nation by donating money to or enlisting into the service of the two elder parties and so 'preserve the Conquistan way'. During election season, the party inevitably hands its votes over to either of those two elder parties.

In truth, this is a mercenary group which hires itself out to both *Prosperidad* and *Supremacía* to swell their coffers and their workforce. The party's best-kept secret is that it is mainly run by the husbands of the supposed leading women.

(Allied with both *Prosperidad* and *Supremacía*.)

*Las mariposas* (N): 'Work is work'. Currently little more than a labor union, *las mariposas* represents the sex workers of Conquista, as opposed to the sex industry, which is controlled by *Prosperidad* and the *consejo de padres*. *Las mariposas* is striving for equal treatment under the law for those stuck in the industry, so far with little success. Its presence is strongest in the domain's larger cities.

(Tentatively allied with *los llenos de protesta*; openly aggressive towards *consejo de padres* and *hermanos del cuchillo*.)

*Hermanos del cuchillo* (LE): 'All law is absolute'. Once practically the trade union for *los Hombres Valientes*, *los hermanos del cuchillo* are fanatical adherents of both religious and secular law, which has recently begun calling for a unification of Church and State. Their influence waned and fragmented during the time of president Johsson, when *Hombres Valientes* violated Church property and executed priests in the middle *cantón*, and was further reduced due to the coup and failure of *el Hombre Fuerte*. Hated by the general public, *los hermanos del cuchillo* have been trying to ally with *Supremacía* and *Prosperidad* without much luck.

Not-so-secretly, *los hermanos del cuchillo* are behind a nasty string of prostitute-murders in the domain's greater cities, aimed specifically at members of *las mariposas*; all this achieved was the Butterfly Murders of 754 BC and an uncomfortable amount of scrutiny by *los Hombres Valientes* as well as *la presse libre*.

(Strongly allied with the northern sect of the Church of Taiia; tentatively allied with *consejo de padres*; openly aggressive towards *los llenos de protesta* and *las mariposas*.)

*Sangre de zorro* (N): 'Let blood and money flow'. One of the more recent of the minor parties, this is basically a trade union for the domain's fur industry. Its main – only – interest is in the repealing of the law that forbids the hunting of foxes within Conquista. While they would like to ally with *Prosperidad*, that party still vividly remembers the loss of profits caused by the Rat Plague.

(No noteworthy alliances or enemies.)

*La gente caliente* (CG): 'Any occasion is good'. Widely acknowledged as a joke, *la gente caliente*'s mission is to 'make every day a party'. Founded by (in)famous fop and wastrel Salvatore Badgerden (CG middle-aged male human Aristocrat 3) after the Vieuxlyese invasion, *la gente caliente* organizes huge parties at seemingly random occasions, using the Badgerden wealth to provide food, drink and gifts for anyone who joins in. No one seems to take the party's message seriously, but it is regarded fondly by both the rich and the poor.

It has gone almost completely unnoticed that Salvatore purposely throws his lavish parties in impoverished and otherwise miserable communities. As the head and last surviving member of his old, aristocratic line, he has a huge annual income and an inheritance that would be the envy of kings. Salvatore knows he is no politician and does not really trust any of the other political groups. All he knows is, that when he throws a party no one seems to doubt his motivations, and where his parties pass, the people are well-fed, happier than they were, and have some goods to sell for their future upkeep.

(No noteworthy alliances or enemies.)

## POPULACE

The people of Conquista are primarily divided by their ancestral tribe, and second by personal wealth. As I have mentioned before, the three tribes are the Casian, Canan and Ulan people – although the Ulan have a different, secret name for themselves. The main visible distinction between the three tribes appears to be the colour of skin one is born into. Hybrids of two or more tribes also exist, but are not considered to be a separate tribe; rather, they are treated as barely human.

## APPEARANCE

Casians have paler skin, hair and eyes. While they greatly admire blond hair and pale eyes (which are both prevalent in the communities of the southern shore of the *Iaco colgado*), they are prone to shades of brown in the former and shades of grey in the latter. Canana have a coppery skintone, and naturally dark hair and eyes. The Ulan have dark skin, ranging from the colour of ebony to coffee, and

naturally dark hair and eyes. In both Canana and Ulan, the presence of paler hair and/or eyes is considered to be proof of interbreeding with Casians, and much despised.

(Truth be told, *any* suspected trace of interbreeding between the tribes is much despised. Women who give birth to suspected hybrids traditionally face much shame in Conquistan society, and the offspring of such unions are often bundled off to state-run orphanages or quietly smothered and thrown to the scavengers, rather than raised by their parents. These people treat observably human children the way people in the Core often treat Caliban births, simply due to skin pigmentation.)

Apart from skintone, I found precious little to distinguish the human populace of Conquista. Both men and women have about twenty 'good years', during which most of them at least look slim and handsome. Past thirty, the looks of the average Conquistan decline harply, in no small part to their diet. Casian and Canana men and women both run to fat in the middle, with women receiving much scorn



for 'letting themselves go' and often engaging in attempts to diet which are counteracted by the nation's wretched cuisine. Ulan men and women, however, tend to grow skinnier and scrawnier over time as they have access to far less food than either of the other two tribes.

Men and women of all three tribes tend to develop facial wrinkles starting in their thirties, which men attribute to 'being rugged', whereas in women it is simply considered a sign of advancing years.

Members of the Casian and Canana tribes strongly favour straight hair, but a member of any of the three tribes may be born with curls. Among Casian and Canan men, it is considered proper for hair to be cut as short as possible; this is considered to augment their 'rugged charm'. For women of all three tribes and Ulan men, longer hair is the norm. This is actively enforced, as Ulan men who cut their hair too short face censure for 'aping their betters', any woman who cuts her hair too short is accused of 'being too manly', and any Casian or Canan man who lets his hair grow too long is accused of being 'effeminate'. Either of these transgressions against the norm brings with it a high likelihood of being

pelted with garbage or even savage beatings right out in the street. Long hair is traditionally braided, with Casian and Canan women using a single braid, and Ulan men and women using many small ones.

Where facial hair is concerned, the three tribes practice different customs. Most Casian men prefer to either grow a short, trimmed beard and moustache or else maintain a 'rugged' stubble as soon as they are able. Canan men prefer a narrow moustache and sometimes a goatee, which are kept immaculately trimmed, and shave off all other facial hair when possible; stubble on a Canan man is denounced as 'slovenly'. Ulan men are required to shave regularly, as any Ulan men who sports facial hair faces censure.

All three tribes take note of individuals of above-average height. With men this takes the form of admiration and an association with virile strength, whereas with women it is seen as a sign of a rebellious temperament and need of 'correction'. Most of the populace is decidedly average in height, however, with the townsfolk who live on the southern edge of the *Iaco colgado* a noted exception once again.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE LOST DAUGHTERS

Ciska is not wrong when she theorizes that the Changelings of Conquista are so integrated into human society that they would be actively prevented from following the Call, even if they felt it. What she does not know, is that there are precious few to Call to them, and unlike Changelings elsewhere in the Demi-plane of Dread, those in the Wartorn Cluster for some reason do not 'naturally' change into Hags as they approach middle age.

As to the former: there are very few Hags alive in Conquista today. During Conquista's isolation in the Mists, they were a favoured prey of the domain's first Darklord. As soon as the Wartorn Cluster formed, the surviving Hags fled across the borders. Even when the first Darklord lost most of the power he had to persecute them, Hags found Conquista to be unsafe; Witch-cults were rediscovering their power left and right, and few of them had any love for their kind. Only in recent history have Hags started trickling back into the easternmost part of the north cantón. Lurking in the *brugia pestilente* and the area near Alsem, they find themselves under the dubious protection of an aberrant coven of Witches that actually welcomes their presence. These Hags are constantly ready to flee, and are hesitant about adding to their number, considering the way newly transformed Hags often act out and make waves.

As to the latter: it is perfectly possible for a Changeling born in the Wartorn Cluster to live out her life believing that she is as human as the family she was born into. Given that Changelings always give birth to more Changelings, they suffer some loss of status in Conquista due to their inability to provide sons, but their natural beauty still

makes them desirable. Considering that people in Conquista frequently keep making children until they have an 'heir and a spare', the population growth of Changelings in the Domain and the wider Cluster is actually on the increase.

Theoretically, and provided the people of Conquista never discover the nature of these 'cuckoos', it is possible that in some far distant future Conquista will be inhabited mostly by Changelings.

At this point, I would like to point out the existence of an unacknowledged fourth tribe, which exists within the scope of the three preceding ones. During my stay in Conquista, I frequently encountered women who otherwise displayed the racial traits of the other three main tribes, but whose height was below the average, and who displayed a tendency to heterochromia. I had the opportunity to carefully examine both living and dead specimens, and I can confidently conclude that Conquista is home to an unusually large population of Changelings.

As these creatures' racial traits are not ones wholly unknown among the local populace, they are apparently not recognized as cuckoos in the nest. Still, their numbers left me wondering why the domain is not awash in Hags of all kinds. To the best of my ability to determine, it is passing rare for Conquistan women to suddenly feel a mysterious and unexplained urge to travel somewhere, leaving home and family behind. Of course, even if a Conquistan woman does feel such an urge, she is usually punished for 'shirking her duties' and confined to the family home.

Is it possible that the Changelings of Conquista are collectively so cowed by the local attitude towards women that they have grown immune to the Calling? And even if this is the case, where are they all coming from?

## FASHION

Surprisingly, the fashions of Conquista are divided not solely by tribal lines, but more by considerations of practicality, wealth and gender.

A working man or woman who toils on the farms or in the factories wears a shirt of thin cotton and hose

of dungaree cloth, held up with suspenders, over boots of thick leather. Depending on the seasons, the shirt may have short or long sleeves, and a jacket of dungaree cloth may be added. Only in the most bitter weather do the farmers of Conquista wear wide-brimmed hats, which are woven out of straw. Factory workers may count themselves fortunate to be able to wear a helmet.

People of different occupations wear different clothes, with strong differences between men and women. Men wear hose and long-sleeved shirts over calf-high boots. If a man is of low or middle income, their hose and shirts will be a universal tan; if a man is rich (or just trying to show off), the shirts is of pale cloth and the hose dark. For special occasions or inclement weather, the ensemble is rounded out with a cloth or leather jacket. It is considered the height of 'ruggedness' to wear the jacket unbuttoned even in the foulest of weather. While hats are looked down upon as a staple of farmers' wardrobe, every man born in Conquista wears a broad belt made of leather, with symbols unique to their family and marriage (if any) stitched on them. In addition to proudly proclaiming one's lineage, this belt may serve as proof of identity at checkpoints.

Women wear blouses with frills and laces over the chest, as well as skirts whose length varies with the age of the wearer, over slippers or high-heeled shoes. Among low to middle incomes, the blouse is typically as white as regular washing can get it, whereas the skirt is dark. Women of high income may wear any colour they please, but it is considered good taste to coordinate skirt and blouse or indeed, have these in the same colour. Young women – those unmarried and still in their 'good years' – are expected to wear the skirt at knee-length, whereas



women of other categories are required to wear them at ankle-length. In lieu of the 'manly' belt, women have the symbols of their own family – as well as those of their marriage (if any) – embroidered on their skirts.

Where personal ornamentation is concerned, Casian and Canan men wear rings signifying engagement to be married and marriage itself, if that, and nothing else. The presidential signet is a marked exception, which the people of Conquista explain as a sign that *il Presidente* is wed to the nation and governs it as a husband. Rarely, individual men will wear a single, thin earring of gold, which is meant to signal devotion to Taiia. In contrast, Ulan men are *expected* to decorate their hair with small ornaments such as beads and small animal bones, and frequently have pierced ears. While such ornamentation is frequently mocked by both Casians and Canana, it is at least not greeted with violence, whereas abstaining from personal ornaments would evoke such.

Women of all tribes are encouraged to pierce their ears and even their noses and lower lips, applying rings or studs of metal at least painted to look like gold or silver. Any woman in her 'good years' who does not decorate her hair with flowers or minor ornaments is accused of being 'dour' and may face censure; any woman who has left her 'good years' and decorates her hair is considered to be 'frivolous' and may face censure. Casian and Canana women of sufficient income frequently wear necklaces of hammered and etched metal, many of which bear symbols of note to their family or bear one of the holy symbols of Taiia, and are frequently commissioned in shops. Ulan women are expected to carve their own necklaces out of any bones available to them.

## LANGUAGE

The official language of Conquista is Casian, a language brought to the land by its conquerors, whoever they may have been. Casian is a fast-paced language with rigid rules for the conjugation of verbs and nouns, but no noticeable rules for word order in

a sentence. Unless one is well-versed in the conjugation rules, Casian speech comes across of confusing gibberish. With knowledge of those rules, it is possible to make sense of the chaos.

There is at least one regional dialect, spoken by the communities on the south shore of the *Iaco colgado*, which has more fixed sentence structure and borrows from two other languages (see *Støj* and *Tegensprog*, below).

### CASIAN PRIMER

English	Casian
Hello	<i>buendía</i>
Goodbye	<i>despedida</i>
Yes	<i>sí</i>
No	<i>no</i>
help!	<i>mi ayuda!</i>
go away!	<i>piérdase!</i>
Man	<i>hombre</i>
Woman	<i>mujer</i>
Ulan	<i>clavo (man) / clava (woman)</i>

I questioned my guide, Hectór, whether the Ulan had a language of their own. While he was initially reluctant to answer, I managed to gain his trust during our journey and he finally told me his tribe did indeed possess a native language, though it is not spoken in front of outsiders.

Are you paying attention, my *Master*? I hope you are. I discovered that when among each other, the Ulan speak what I recognized as a dialect of Souragnien. (For a primer, please see the Fraternity of Shadows' *Survey of the Souragne Expedition*, p.38.) While the Ulan dialect borrows words from Casian and the other languages of the domain, it would not be difficult at all for them to make themselves understood if they were to ever visit Souragne.

At this point, I must share with you something that Hectór and other Ulan told me in the strictest confidence, my *Master*. I would prefer not to, but as we both know I have less choice in my actions than I

am comfortable with. This, I attribute to your casting – yes, yes, getting to the point.

When among each other, or at least with people they can trust, members of the Ulan tribe refer to themselves as the *Children of Souragne*. They recognize a kinship with the dark-skinned people of Raba to the north, but they do not believe their roots as a people lie in that domain. Presumably they would seek these in Souragne, which to them is the mythical land of their forebears, 'where they were once free'.

I *reluctantly* recommend that you encourage this belief when the time comes to conquer this domain, my *Master*. Tell the Ulan that Souragne is real, tell them that there is a way for them to get there and you can give it to them. I suspect that the majority of the Ulan people in Conquista will flock to your banner for that greatest of all treasures: hope. And despite what the Casians and Canana think, the Ulan are neither stupid nor weak. Give them a reason to fight, and they will make a credible fighting force.

A final section, then, on the remaining languages of the domain.

Lelender, the language of Lilliend, is spoken by a small community of people who have fled the domain to the west to avoid falling prey to the 'mystery death' of men who have sired daughters. Ocham is known and spoken by a likewise small community of Masogani who have not only managed to make it across the southern bridge, but also to find some measure of acceptance in Conquista, even if it is as serfs in all but name.

Vieuxlyese is spoken with increasing frequency, due to the growing mercantile contact through the hated neighbour to the east.

All of this is to be expected; all of this is in the natural order of things as peoples meet and interact. So then how to explain the presence of two languages spoken in a specific region, to wit the south shore of the *Iaco colgado*? *Støj* and *Tegensprog* are distinct languages which appear to have common roots, but

are fully distinct from Casian and Souragnien. To the best of my ability to determine at this point in time, these languages are spoken nowhere else in the Wartorn Cluster; only in this domain; and only in this specific region.

In order to find an explanation for this minor mystery, Hectór and I spent some time on the south shore of *Iaco colgado* among the peak-roofed, long-stretching, single-story buildings of the local towns and villages. The work was tedious and made difficult due to the locals' insular nature. While they comply with the government with admirable alacrity, the so-called "south shore-communities" show a distinctly frosty attitude to people from other parts of Conquista when these try to visit or want to settle nearby. A tendency to greater height and pale hair- and eye-colours may make the people of the region desirable in the eyes of their neighbours, but they do not return the sentiment and they do not welcome outsiders to their villages and towns.

Simple observation suggested that the tall, pale blonde people were in fact hybrids of Casian stock with some other tribe. A little surreptitious breaking-and-entering soon proved that the local temples supposedly dedicated to Taiia were actually devoted to a different deity, whose name I understand to be *Lökn* – a word common to both *Støj* and *Tegensprog*, which has meanings of 'fire' and 'chaos'. Small wonder, given the typical Conquistan attitude towards people of mixed blood, that the south shore-communities are so inhospitable. Likely, only unfamiliarity with the results of crossbreeding with a hitherto-unknown people is what saves the south shore-communities from being censured and even annihilated by their Casian neighbours.

During my survey of the communities at *Iaco colgado*, both Hectór and I noticed a building tension as the lunar cycle edged closer to the dark of the moon. Villages that normally traded with their neighbours started to shun each other, and more and more people carried weapons in public. Merchants who had grudgingly sold us food now refused to take our money, the local *Hombres*

*Valientes* became blunt in their 'recommendations' that we leave the area, and on one memorable occasion we barely escaped a public stoning.

We hid in the nearby forest and continued our observations from another duck blind we had prepared beforehand, while my Firstborn lurked closer to the village. On the night of the new moon, the people of the nearest town doused all lights inside and outside their homes, and the normally quite choppy *laco colgado* became suddenly smooth as glass. It was only owing to my nightsight-magic that we were able to spot a group of armed men creeping towards the shore, where they hunkered down and waited. Hectór and I likewise waited to see what was about to happen.

Around midnight, the tranquil surface of the lake rippled and broke as two young people rose gasping and trembling from the depths. They were a young man and woman, both fair as the full moon, possessing considerable beauty, and dressed in one-piece smocks of cured deerhide. My Firstborn relayed to me that they spoke in *Støj* to one another – recognizable in spite of their chattering teeth and the absence of Casian influences – as they splashed and laboured their way towards the shore. Apparently, they were amazed by the fact that they were alive at all, and that there was land ahead of them. The male suggested that perhaps this was the mercy of 'Wödn' just before the hiding villagers

broke cover, lit their torches, and shot him in the head.

The villagers proceeded to seize the young woman, barking orders for her to be quiet when she screamed at the fate of her companion and forced her to her knees on the shore. A man I recognized as a local *Hombre Valiente* gave a little speech in *Støj*, informing the young woman that she was in the *dimmans sal* – from context, perhaps a place of judgment in the afterlife? – *Wödn* had forsaken her into the reign of *Lökn*, and she was now *doméstica* unto a new master.

At this point he drew his kukri and started to cut off her smock, and I was giving serious consideration to launching a *fireball* at the shore. Fortunately, my interference proved unnecessary; a shot rang out in the darkness, and the *Hombre Valiente's* brains exited his skull in a spray of gore.

It turned out that people from the neighbouring town had likewise come a-creeping, and a short but vicious battle broke out. Blood was shed on both sides, but the young woman was carried off by the people from the neighbouring village. Of course, I cannot guarantee her treatment there will be a great improvement over the fate of an enforced *doméstica*, but the general attitude of the people who took her was more along the line of those executing a rescue than those stealing slaves. I remain cautiously hopeful.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE DROWNING PATH

A one-way Mistway known as the Drowning Path lies hidden beneath the surface of *laco colgado*, one which only opens on the night of the new moon in Conquista. This passage provides a highly dubious chance of survival to young couples chosen in a distant Cluster known as *Hengtland* to partake in a religious rite to honour *Wödn*, the Cluster's supreme god of sky, war and magic.

*Wödn's* priests regularly bring human sacrifices to their god, and one of these involves selecting a couple of young lovers and forcing them to dive into the frigid waters of a well in the god's high temple. Nine times out of ten, these poor souls drown in the icy depths. On that rare tenth occasion, the couple unknowingly swims into the Drowning Path and ends up in the slightly warmer depths of *laco colgado*.

Ever since the Mistway first opened in 697 BC, local Casians have been intercepting the youths as soon as they appear on shore. In some cases, this has been an act of charity; the Casians took what they considered to be highly



beautiful people into their homes and protected them, helped them to adapt to their new surroundings. Inter-marriage was not unheard of. Regrettably, other communities were less kind and enslaved the new arrivals. Over the years, a considerable amount of interbreeding and cultural cross-pollination has taken place, the latter of which Ciska noticed due to the languages spoken in the region.

The belief that Conquista is part of *dimmans sal*, the hell governed by the *Hengtland* trickster god known as *Lökn*, has taken root in the area, and his worship has quietly replaced that of *Taiia*. Some people react to the notion that they are trapped in hell by trying to lead the best lives they can, acting with as much charity and wisdom as they can muster. Others see it as an excuse to act as badly as they want, because there is supposedly nowhere worse than *dimmans sal* anyway, and 'death' there should lead to reincarnation in *Hengtland*.

## LÖKN

**Titles:** Littlest Giant; Father of Beasts, Firelord; Bringer of Strife; Winter Horn

**Alignment:** CN

**Portfolio:** Cunning, deceit, fire, giants, ice, monsters, treachery, trickery

**Symbol:** A black ram with two curling horns; one horn lit on fire, the other covered in ice

**Worshippers:** Adventurers, Assassins, Rogues, Sorcerers, tricksters, wanderers

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

**Domains:** Fire, Knowledge, Trickery, Water

**Subdomains:** Arson, Deception, Education, Ice, Rivers, Smoke, Thievery, Thought

**Favoured weapon:** Dagger

*Lökn* is the trickster god of the *Hengtland* pantheon, simultaneously the oath-brother and sworn enemy of great *Wödn*, the patron of both ice and fire, and the keeper of the dishonoured dead. He brings chaos and suffering to the other gods and the mortal races, not out of wickedness, but to prove he is cleverer than the mighty, and his cunning is greater than honour and strength alike. To those who respect him, he is gracious and a source of sage counsel. To those who ignore or insult him, he is the source of all misery and woe.

In the prophecies of *Hengtland*, *Lökn* and *Wödn* are destined to one day meet in a battle that will end in one of their deaths, leaving the other to command all of creation. The people of Conquista's south shore-communities believe that they are either trapped in *Lökn*'s realm or else that the great battle has already taken place and the Father of Beasts has won, allowing him to rewrite reality in accordance with his every whim.

When depicted, *Lökn* takes the form of a tall, bare-chested man with goat's legs, shaggy black hair all down his back, and two curling ram's horns atop his head. His face is animated and he is quick to smile, even when he is enraged to the point of committing murder.

## LIFESTYLE & EDUCATION

For all of Conquista's scientific advancements and its often-complicated politics, the majority of its people exist in a stasis enforced both at their own level and from above.

Once a child is born into a Conquistan family, there is normally tremendous pressure on them to conform to expectations both social and familial. Children are expected to either do the same things their parents are doing, as well as strengthen the family by marrying well and making many babies.



Even if a child's parents should be willing to let their sprog determine its own course, the community in which they reside will react with hostility if the usual expectations are not met. As the old Conquistan saying goes, "a farmer's son should farm, a farmer's daughter should bear and feed farmers". Youngsters who set out to found their own farm, far from home, receive equal measures of admiration and scorn, and rarely return to their home community to visit.

While it is not unknown for the children of poor families as well as truly ambitious youngsters to try and make their fortune in the city, there are few to be found there. The families who command the truly lucrative businesses of the domain are easily as dead-set on keeping their fortune in the family as poor farmers are to see their farms handed down to their heirs. New arrivals in the domain's cities and larger towns can find *work*, to be sure, but this is rarely high paying. The factories, sweatshops, brothels and criminal gangs of Conquista always welcome new blood, but the ones in power over its institutions ensure their staff is worked hard, submitted to mind-numbing drudgery, and paid lightly. Only those lucky few who are both ambitious and shrewd stand any chance of succeeding, and they may have to dirty their hands in more ways than one.

The more progressive political parties have more than once brought up the concept of worker unions to allow for negotiation between employers and employees on an equal footing, but while there is no law against this, most nascent unions are soon stamped out by hired thugs.

Supposedly, every Conquistan is entitled to an education, and to some extent education is even mandatory. No sooner is even the most miserable flyspeck recognized as a 'town' than the government offices provide for a school building and books for children between ages six and twelve.

Regrettably, education is taken more seriously in the cities than it is in smaller settlements, where children are expected to learn no more than is strictly

necessary to do the work their parents do. They tend to be kept home from school whenever they are needed as an additional workforce, which is frequently, and an eagerness to learn more than is necessary is as likely to be punished as an unwillingness to study at all. Generally speaking, a child of the farms is expected to learn basic reading and writing, a few hymns to Taiia, and basic maths at school. Once that is 'out of the way', the local belief is that they learn what is truly important at their parents' knee.

In the larger settlements, 'having an education' is lauded as a quality for true ladies and gentlemen, and children may be encouraged to study hard so that they might qualify to attend *la Universidad de la Conquista*, the nation's oldest and largest house of learning in Hughsrest, or else the slightly less revered *Torre del Conocimiento Sagrado* in Meyersville. Youngsters who manage to qualify might manage to escape the expectation of having to 'do as their parents done' by graduating and attaining positions as teachers or researchers. Alternatively, they might at least secure higher-paying jobs as advisers or lieutenants to richer families.

I visited *la Universidad* and *la Torre* myself, as you might have expected, my *Master*.

As to *la Universidad de la Conquista*, I could summarize my findings in one word: appalling. Rather than encourage thought, this beautifully constructed house of learning champions rote learning and stale repetition. Stately professors in richly appointed, gold-trimmed robes drone on about how all that can be discovered *has* been, and all that can be known *is*. They spend classes quoting passages from books written by true researchers to their students, which are to be regurgitated word for word at exams. Failure to repeat exactly what has been 'taught' is considered a greater flaw than utter failure to understand and consider what has been recited.

From my perspective, *la Universidad* is a place where knowledge lies locked away to fade into oblivion. The

university has a stupendous library, a fortress-like building without windows which contains all the surviving books written by *los Viejos Sagrados*, and students are actively forbidden from reading them. Only teaching staff is allowed to select books, and then only books that are on an 'approved list' decided on by *la Universidad*'s head of college and its chaplain, so they may be read to the students.

The beautiful campus of *la Universidad* is home to much athletic activity, which is fine in and of itself, but I found it regrettable that this was apparently all that occupies the students' minds apart from classes, meals and sleep. If – do excuse me, *when* you conquer this domain, I encourage you to spend some time in the library of *la Universidad*, my *Master*. I know I did, after having snuck past campus security, and I found many volumes that charmed and enlightened me.

Moving on to *la Torre del Conocimiento Sagrado* in Meyersville, which was built by *los Viejos Sagrados* as a research center, only for it to be converted into a college after they were disbanded. This institute of higher learning is but half the size of the elder institute and not nearly as grand, but its black-robed staff appears to be genuinely interested in teaching and provoking thought. Where I had to sneak around *la Universidad* because campus security and the teachers were convinced I had nothing to offer, the teachers at *la Torre* welcomed me as a traveller and were interested in my knowledge of the wider world.

*La Torre* does not have *la Universidad*'s wonderful library – and requests to be allowed to view and even copy its texts are refused when not ignored – but I found the younger college's own collection of texts to be quite intriguing. Without access to the records of the past, the staff of *la Torre* is conducting its own research, and the students are a part of the whole process. This, at least, is one place in Conquista where 'learning at the knees of your elders' is leading to new knowledge and achievements.

I judge that the reputation of *la Torre* might eclipse that of *la Universidad*, if not for the fact that the

elder institute consistently smears its rival's reputation by referring to it as a vocational school, rather than a true college. No matter how many achievements the younger college makes in the fields of the sciences, *la Universidad* is quick to point out that they have books that already contain the conclusions drawn by *la Torre*'s energetic researchers, and unsubtly mocks all their efforts. The majority of Conquistan society completely overlooks the fact that *la Universidad* lets most of these books gather dust and fails to *do* anything with their contents, whereas *la Torre* is deeply invested in the search for both theoretical knowledge and practical applications.

My *Master* need hardly ask at this point which institute I personally preferred.

Continuing on from education, I should discuss the subjects of ritual and courtship in Conquistan society. For all the braying of the Church of Taiia in the north, I observed minor, everyday rituals which are considered a mainstay of Conquistan culture, yet which have no basis in Church tradition. While at *la Torre*, I had the opportunity to discuss these customs with Professor Ambrose, chair for the department of folklore.

At this point I would like to note that the Professor is a Vieuxlyese expatriate, who has managed to beat all expectations by not only achieving a position of authority, but by also being very well-liked. The Professor originally tried to teach at *la Universidad*, but he was 'let go' due to his unwillingness to conform to the local instruction style. He has found great favour at *la Torre*.

In spite of his advanced years, the Professor is wont to travel widely, and always returns with fresh stories of far-off places and their folk beliefs. I was fortunate to have caught him during my time in the domain, as the Professor was very helpful in discussing and where possible explaining a plethora of customs accepted as being part of Conquistan culture. I will discuss some of the more noteworthy ones:

At age thirteen, every able-bodied boy is expected to undergo a manhood trial; equipped with only a knife, a spear, a rope and a small bag of salt, they are sent forth from their home into the nearest wilderness on the first day of spring and expected not to return without an edible animal they have killed. Upon their return, the prey is cooked and eaten by members of the community. Boys who are unable or unwilling to undergo the trial are simply not recognized as *men* in society, and never allowed to marry. Frequently they are kicked out of their homes for 'shaming the family'.

In contrast, every able-bodied girl is required to sew or weave an item of clothing, typically a dress, out of materials she has paid for herself. By age thirteen, this garment should be completed; at this time, the girl is expected to go alone into whatever wilderness is available on the first day of summer and pray, then hang the dress on a tree or large cactus and return home, there to cook a meal for her family. Supposedly, this ritual is meant to check the homemaking skills of young women and teach them humility. I could not help but note that nowhere is it said or written that the girls should pray to Taiia. Possibly this is a degraded version of a ritual meant to appease the forces of the wild and gain their blessing?

On the first day of autumn, every woman who is a mother is supposed to go into the nearest orchard, pluck an apple and bring it home. A store-bought apple does not qualify. The woman must then cut the apple into equal parts and share it among the residents in her home, regardless whether they are man or beast, kin or servant or stranger. The condition of the apple is supposed to predict the family's fortune for the next year. Finding a worm in one's apple predicts a death.

On the first day of winter, all married women in a community must light a candle and walk widdershins around their town or city limits. When they return home, they are 'queen for a day', free of chores and duties. They must be pampered and indulged in

every way possible. Failure to do so is supposed to bring bad fortune to her family.

One particularly grim ritual is performed every time a man or woman is found to have so violated the laws of the land that the only acceptable punishment is death, yet whose crimes are too vile for them to be offered to Taiia (see Religion) and people are too enraged to simply lynch them. If such offenders are captured, they are kept alive, but not in comfort. These criminals are hidden from the eyes of the authorities, preferably in lightless rooms. There, they are neutered and have their tongues cut out by the local butcher. Should they survive, they are kept caged until sunset on midwinter's day. Any passerby who wishes to visit pain or indignity on them until that time is free to do so, so long as they do not kill 'the appointed'. When the first day of winter dawns, 'the appointed' is taken from their cage, has what gear remains to them stripped away, and a goatmask is stapled to their face. The criminal is then driven into the wilderness, and after an hour or so the local men pursue them with bows or firearms. In theory, these offenders are 'given to *il Demonio*', but I suspect the majority die with arrows or bullets in their backs and are left for the scavengers to pick over.

Professor Ambrose agreed with me that these rites might hail from an earlier culture, but he believed they might also hail from foreign nations. The manhood trial, for instance, is similar to one performed in Masogan, though the youth of Conquista are fortunate in that *they* are not required to consume hallucinogenic mushrooms to conjure 'spirit visions'. The young women's duty of hanging a self-made dress on a tree more closely resembles a custom from Umbrash, which is meant to appease local Fey. The autumn apple-picking and winter candle-walk resemble local customs from the Broken Wheel. As to 'giving the appointed to *il Demonio*', this is reminiscent of 'scapegoat' rituals... which may be found anywhere in this world of ours.

Now to courtship, marriage, and the title of *doméstica* / *domesticó*. For the most part,

Conquistador children's future marital partners in the rural areas are chosen by their parents. In the case of the Ulan, they may be decided for them by whoever holds the deed to the family debt. In the 'great' cities, children have more freedom to select a spouse of their own, but must either secure the approval of the head of their family or else forego membership in the family – a daunting prospect to many.

Once an engagement has been set, the prospective partners are formally and publically introduced to each other by their parents during the 'spring social', a community event for dancing and the sharing of food, and are expected to meet regularly thereafter 'so they can get used to each other'.

Given that the rural engagements are set up for the sake of the family's (or the creditor's) benefit, rather than notions of the children's happiness, the future partners are under a lot of pressure. Attempts to shirk the regular meetings or misbehaviour towards one's future spouse is cause for harsh punishment. Frequent cases where one or both prospective spouses decided to carve out their own future and simply left home and hearth behind rather than accept a forced marriage, typically lead to their being disowned.

By the time the prospective partners are old enough to be wed – typically after the woman has first entered menarche and after the man has built or bought his own home – the partners are ideally resolved to being stuck with one another. If they are fortunate, they may actually enjoy one another's company. Regardless, once they have been joined before the altar of Taiia at their local ziggurat, the newlyweds are expected to live together. Authority in the marriage is normally dictated by income; whichever partner brings in more money gets to decide. Regardless which of spouse is dominant, both have an obligation to produce an heir and a spare.

The latter duty brings about the possibility of change in, or cancellation of the marital arrangement. Should the woman be unable to give birth to an heir

and a spare (or at all), her husband is allowed to retain the services of a *doméstica*. The *doméstica* is a young woman still in her good years, whose parents or other guardians are agreeable to her being taken in not as a wife, but as a birth mother. Once the *doméstica* has given birth to the required heir and spare, she is free to choose to be released back to her own family with honour (and some financial compensation) or to be kept on as a servant or a new wife. In the latter case, the first wife is also released to return to her family, but with dishonour. I was given to understand that many prefer suicide or try to make a run for the border, rather than return home as a 'failed woman'.

Alternatively, a wife who has not given birth and is convinced that the fault lies not with her but with her husband, is likewise free to engage the services of a *doméstico*, a young man in his good years, whose parents or guardians are content to loan him out, to be blunt, as a stud. If this arrangement leads to the woman giving birth to a child in good order, she then inherits ownership of all the family's assets, and can claim an honourable divorce from her husband, who is then sent hence in disgrace. Suicide is an even greater risk among 'failed men', who face even more scorn than their female counterparts.

Justice is an odd thing in Conquista. A citizen who feels that they have been abused or deceived by another is free to alert *los Hombres Valientes*, and through them the courts. The courts are under the control of the government offices, and will guide investigation into the perceived crime. Provided the perpetrator does not bribe the right people or successfully falsify evidence to muddle the investigation, they will in due time be seized by *los Hombres Valientes* and forced to make reparations or incarcerated for a period determined by the courts.

Alternatively, if a crime is committed that causes public outcry and no one knows who to blame, scapegoats are sought to relieve the public distress. All too often, outsiders and minorities bear the brunt of this need for release. The notion that 'a Casian', 'a



Canan', 'an Ulan' or 'a halfbreed' was seen near the scene of a crime quickly becomes a certainty in the group mind of the masses, and the first person fitting that description is quickly run down and lynched in any number of gory ways. With this deed concluded, the lynch mob disperses, perfectly satisfied, and generally does nothing more to redress the wrongs committed. In recent years, the state has started to frown on mob justice, and more than one accused criminal has actually found refuge in police stations while *Hombres Valientes* investigate whatever act they have been accused of.

I personally tracked a dozen *Hombre Valiente* investigations, and while I must note they are only held for the benefit of natives born in Conquista and are rather plodding (perhaps to give suspects ample opportunity to make with the bribes), they tend to be thorough.

It is unfortunate, then, that the average Conquistán considers it to be 'whining' and a show of weakness if one carries tales to *los Hombres Valientes* instead of 'taking care of your own business'. Far more manly to loudly challenge your opponent in public, shout

vile insults in hopes of provoking them into physical violence and then beat, stab or shoot them. Men and women alike can be seen dueling, once frustration has reached a certain point and can no longer be repressed. The dead can no longer complain, and whoever is the winner is generally congratulated by their peers and can loot body and home of the dead to satisfy themselves.

Of course, one must choose one's target. Challenging someone wealthy enough to have bodyguards in attendance is an invitation to be gunned down like a dog, and it is a rare *Hombre Valiente* – like the now-legendary governor Hareleg – who will see a crime where most people simply accept such things as a normal part of 'civilized' life. Also, some people who can see the writing on the wall take measures to avoid having a shootout in the street, choosing either to flee (an act that brings much scorn, but has the benefit of leaving both detractors and would-be killer behind) or somehow subvert their opponent, for instance through poison or crippling 'accident'.

## THE CONQUISTÁN HERO

Races: Conquista is inhabited mainly by humans, but as noted above there is a growing population of Changelings. Calibans are increasing in number ever since magic returned to the domain, but are forced into ghettos along hybrids of the various human tribes. Half-elves are slowly trickling into the domain out of Lilliend, but few choose to stay in a land where racial differences often lead to violence. Ogier and Sasquatch dwell in the deepest forest, but from time to time an adventurous youngster may leave the sylvan deep in search of adventure in more receptive lands.

Classes: Brawlers, Fighters, Gunslingers and Rogues are the most common character classes of Conquista. Clerics, Inquisitors and Witches take up an honourable second place. Hunters and Rangers can be found in the more rural areas, highly prized for their ability to find food for their communities and deal with unreasonable animals.

Recommended skills: Bluff, Craft (mechanical), Disable device, Intimidate, Knowledge (local), Knowledge (nature), Profession (driver), Profession (farmer), Profession (radiographer)

Recommended feats: Bonebreaker, Diehard, Endurance, Exotic weapon proficiency (firearms), Expert driver, Far shot, Great fortitude, Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Jawbreaker, Neckbreaker, Point-blank shot, Precise shot, Quick draw, Rapid reload, Shot on the run, Skill focus, Skilled driver, Stunning fist, Toughness, Weapon focus, Weapon specialization

Conquistan Male Names: Cliffton, Francisco, Gunter, Hectór, Hugo, Jaco, Johanon, Otto, Ubaldo, William

Conquistan Female Names: Euphonia, Francisca, Irina, Jaci, Johanan, Rosa, Uvalda, Viola, Walia, Zecorra

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS MAGIC

I was puzzled by the Conquistan attitude towards magic, which varies from disgust to casual dismissal, and often within the same individual.

Professor Ambrose told me how, one year, arcane magic is considered to be an abomination before Taiia, as it draws not on her favour, and divine magic is grudgingly tolerated when practised by clearly identified clergy of the goddess. The next year, magic is dismissed as superstitious twaddle, and the worst anyone who claims to know anything on the subject can expect is condescending dismissal and light physical brutality; a kick here, a slap there. In other years, hysteria seems to sweep the nation, as everyone even suspected of knowing about magic – let alone practising it – is at risk of being seized upon in the streets and burned at the stake, *including* clergy of Taiia.

To summarize; magic is not accepted, and any mage takes their life into their own hands if they actually practise the Art where the uninitiated may see in Conquista.

Worse yet, from what the Professor told me behind closed doors, magic is not reliable in this domain. Admitting that he knew a very little about the practise of the Art, he revealed to me that sometimes whole years pass where magic is far more difficult to use than it should be. In other years, magic flows freely but with a vile undercurrent fit to curdle the soul. He had it on good authority that in some years, divine magic is far more potent than in others. The Professor himself was at a complete loss to explain this phenomenon but admitted that he had found occasion to perform research across the borders during times when magic flows most darkly.

In spite of magic's general... 'difficulties' in this land, I found there were several spellcasting traditions.

Walking down the street of any of the rural communities, the kind that do not have a ziggurat temple staffed by an experienced priest or where the local priest is somehow disabled, the keen observer soon spots furtive, but widespread use of minor charms and wards to safeguard home, acres and cattle.

Near the homesteads and workplaces of the Ulan people, I found no lack of knotted ends of string, tree branches tied with coloured ribbons and minor wood carvings; all imbued with sparks of divine magic and reminiscent of the *gris-gris* used by the Voodan of Souragne. As you will see in the section on Religion, I soon discovered that this resemblance was not accidental.

Near the homes of representatives of the other tribes, I observed women – and a few men – who quelled barking dogs or nagging spouses with a glance, called hitherto fractious beasts with a click of the tongue, soothed children with skinned knees with a kiss and a touch, and caused minor accidents to befall those who displeased them. All of these could be attributed to 'simply' being skilled at various tasks, except when observed through the lense of a minor spell of divination. Each of these quick acts released bursts of magic, which I identified as *Hexes*, special powers unique to Witches.

The reason these magics go unchallenged is, in my opinion, that they are useful and above all unobtrusive. Many Casians and Canana have a low opinion of the intelligence of their Ulan neighbours, and though they will casually destroy their 'tribal art' if they come upon it, they do not make any concerted effort to prevent it. The use of Hexes can easily be



disguised as any number of things, some of them skill in various areas, others as simple coincidence or misfortune. Any individual who seeks to do more

eye-catching things would be best advised to do so in anonymity and secrecy.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE TANGLED WEAVE

When Cliffton Willgoat was Conquista's sole Darklord, the domain was essentially magic dead. This effect – like so much of Cliffton's power – was disrupted when Conquista was joined to the rest of the Cluster and the position of the domain's dread lord started to be passed around between the currently four candidates.

Depending on which candidate is currently the Darklord, magic in Conquista reacts in different ways, and the general populace reacts to it differently.

If Cliffton Willgoat is Darklord, casting any kind of spell requires a Concentration check against a DC of 10 + spell level + Cliffton's Wisdom modifier. Currently, this means the DC is set at DC 12 + spell level. Failure to pass this check means the spell fails and is spent without effect. People at large react to magic with disdain and disbelief. Anyone who openly professes belief in or uses magic suffers a -2 modifier to social checks, may be subjected to casual violence (shoving, trip attempts, slaps) and insults.

If Euphonia Root is Darklady, divine magic flows more strongly and arcane magic is weakened. Any divine spellcaster who casts a Domain spell belonging to the spell lists of Taiia or *il Demonio* within Conquista will find that these spells manifest at +1 caster level. Any arcane spellcaster operating within the borders of Conquista will find that their spells manifest at -1 caster level. The populace shows more respect for divine spellcasters when Euphonia is Darklady; known Clerics of Taiia receive a +2 modifier to all social checks. Conversely, Clerics of *il Demonio*, regardless whether they are known or not, suffer a -2 penalty to social checks. Arcane spellcasters and Clerics of other gods are held in contempt as wielders of power that does not flow from Taiia. Once an arcane spellcaster or 'heathen priest' is revealed as such, they suffer a -2 penalty to social checks, and may suffer physical violence up to and including public execution.

When Fredewulf van Slecht is Darklord, magic flows stronger in some ways and weaker in others. Spells from the schools of Enchantment and Illusion manifest at +1 caster level from the moment the sun sets until it dawns, mirroring Fredewulf's desire to move in secrecy and manipulate people. The general populace is dubious on the subject of magic, with those who do not practise it and have never been exposed to it doubting whether it actually exists or not.

Finally, when Sandra Williamson is Darklady, magic runs darkly. All spells with the Evil modifier manifest at +2 caster level, and spellcasters must make a Concentration check against a DC of 10 + spell level when casting their first spell of the day. Failure means that Sandra's corruption seeps into their magic until the next dawn, applying the Evil descriptor to all the spells they cast until the next dawn. Displays of spells with the Evil descriptor to unprepared people of Conquista will provoke a Fear save, set against the DC of the spell cast. Any who fail erupt in murderous frenzy, and will do their utmost best to murder the spellcaster. During this time, magic is both highly potent and deeply hated and feared by the people of Conquista.



### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE WITCHES OF CONQUISTA

Witchcraft is far more widespread in Conquista than even Ciska realized. In spite of the hostility displayed against magic during the years when Cliffton Willgoat and Sandra Williamson rule as Darklord, and in spite of persecution by the Church of Taiia, most if not all communities have a coven of at least three witches. During the time that Conquista was magic dead under Cliffton's solitary rule, they took the form of village wise-women and herbalists, who preserved and passed down ancient lore. With magic returning to the land, they have been gradually rediscovering the ways of using that lore to wield power.

While the covens can be composed of members of the Witch class (see the *Advanced Player's Guide*, p.65), they can just as easily be members of any other spellcasting class with levels in the prestige classes Dread Witch (see *Heroes of Horror*, p. 98) or Wicked Witch (see the DM's Notes for this Gazetteer). Especially the Wicked Witch is steeped in the traditions of the craft in Conquista.

Every coven has its own focus and its own plans. Some are benign, wanting only to quietly help their neighbours while continuing to masquerade as herb-doctors. Others are malignant, seeing the people around them as either enemies or prey to feast upon. Regardless, every coven is composed of three members.

First is the elder witch. This is not necessarily the witch most advanced in years, but the one strongest in power. The elder determines the coven's policy when it comes to interacting with the surrounding world. She embodies both the apex of power and the established order. Her will is absolute unless she is overruled by the other two members of the coven acting in unison – or unless she is overthrown through violence or trickery.

Second is the middle witch. This position is usually held by a witch who managed to move up from the position of youngest by displacing the previous middle witch in one way or another, or who simply outlived the previous middle witch. Whoever holds this position is expected to be the elder witch's lieutenant and the younger witch's instructor in the secrets of the Art and other matters important to the coven. She also serves as the loremaster, keeping the records and secrets of the coven. The middle witch embodies support of the existing order, unless that order has grown too weak or too corrupt to preserve the coven.

Third is the younger witch. This is typically an apprentice selected by the elder. She embodies both potential for the future and the ambition to attain the power of the elder witch. Younger witches must study under the middle witch until and unless they are either ready to move up or move out. A coven may have many younger witches during its existence, as these apprentices either fall in battle against the middle or elder witch, or else move out to found a coven of their own in a different locale.

Certainly, the order of spellcasters whose existence I first detected in Hughsrest practice secrecy.

You may recall, my *Master*, that I found grimoires in the Athenaeum boarding school in Lilliend, their covers marked with a single eye before a solar disc? During my clandestine investigation of the library of *la Universidad* in Hughsrest, I found several more of

these tomes, hidden among the books left behind by *los Viejos Sagrados*.

The dust on most of these was undisturbed, but someone must have left them there. With this in mind, I soon discovered the subtle application of the sigil of the eye before the sun (see also Brightwell in the section on Religion) on various pieces of old masonry and carvings throughout the 'great' cities of



the north and middle *cantóns*, especially in places devoted to education or research. So subtle was their inclusion, in fact, that they are virtually invisible to the naked eye. Only when one's sight is enhanced with even a simple spell of detection do the sigils stand out, glowing with all the colours of the rainbow.

From time to time, *invisible writings* would be added under such sigils, providing coded dates, times and locations. My attempt to scry on these dates and places failed; my probe ran into a complex ward that blended arcane and divine magic. I count myself fortunate that I managed to escape retaliation; the inn where I'd cast my divination from 'mysteriously' caught fire not one minute after I was out the door.

Accepting that magic might not be the way forward, I observed several meetings by peering through windows with my trusty spyglass and reading lips. During the summer months, several of these gatherings were a bit lax about drawing the curtains, and I was able to learn a great deal. The gatherings were attended by men and women who wore clothing typical of the comfortably well off; one elderly specimen even wore the robes of a professor at *la Universidad*.

From what I could see of the blackboards they used and read from their own mouths, the members of this group are scholars of some distinction. They shared and hotly debated theories drawn from all the sciences as well as the Art. Practical demonstrations were an important part of the proceedings, and I saw some truly fascinating spells and inventions. As to the nature of the magic used, I must admit to both admiration and surprise; while these nameless scholars clearly made every effort to analyze and research their Art just as much as anything else, and they displayed an ability to pool their power, they drew from a wide variety of schools that included Wizardry, Witchcraft and the stunted magics of the Ranger during just the sessions I saw.

My curiosity and imagination were inflamed at first, but I lost my appreciation for this group when I learned more about them. You will find my reasons why in the section *Places of Interest*, where it covers the city of Meyersville.

### ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCIENCE

Apart from religious concerns, the Conquistan attitude towards magic is also coloured by the advances made by *los Viejos Sagrados* in the sciences. I can just hear you scoff, my *Master*, but consider the following:

Conquistan cities are blessed with a distributed energy network, which converts gallons of refined black-oil into energy, which can be used to bring warmth and light into the home, quite foregoing the need to gather firewood or purchase candles. This same technology pumps water out of the earth and into houses at the mere flick of a switch. The sheer luxury of this technology is as staggering as the price charged by various companies for its use. All the same, I worry I shall greatly come to miss it once I return to the Core. Maybe I could create my own version...?

Regardless, the availability of this technology frees up workers for other things, which means you could work your servants harder.

*Don't shoot us both in the foot, dear.*

Conquistan firearms are clearly years ahead of what can be found in the Core, with especially the revolver a fine addition to my arsenal, which precludes the need for constant reloading. Consider the benefits of outfitting an army with weapons such as these, or of using skilled snipers with high-powered rifles!

*(In game terms, modern firearms are available in Conquista, and guns are everywhere.)*

The availability of *mobila* allows one to travel at a constant pace, without needing to worry about the strength and endurance of an unruly animal.

(To determine the statistics of various types of *mobíla*, adapt existing land vehicles by replacing the method of propulsion with the internal combustion engine, and assume the Strength score of an appropriate Large creature; fuel requirement is one gallon of refined<sup>28</sup> black-oil per size category for every quarter mile<sup>29</sup>; driving checks are made with the new trained-only skill Profession (driver).)

In closing, I was introduced to a marvelous device known as a *radió*, which allows for both communication over long distances and for the dissemination of important information and entertainments for the masses. *Radió*-masts, metal towers with long 'antennas' set on top, are set at strategic high points throughout the domain,

receiving and broadcasting government announcements as well as various entertainments. Shoe box-sized, portable 'receivers' can be attuned to the 'signals' carried by the towers and translate them into sound.

Working with *radiós* is a tricky thing, and it is possible for an inexperienced 'operator' to receive nothing but static, but there is much to be gained from the technology. For one thing, Conquista is not the only domain in the Cluster to use this invention, and the careful listener may learn much of the state of the world – even things that others might have wanted to keep secret.



The Red Haunt in *Fine Conquistán Dining*

<sup>28</sup>Unrefined black-oil is useless as fuel, and in fact will wreck an internal combustion engine by clogging it up and solidifying. Refining a pint of black-oil requires a DC 25 Craft (alchemy) check and 100 gp in equipment and chemicals.

<sup>29</sup>To be blunt, Conquistán *mobílas* have lousy mileage. This is intentional, as the needs for black-oil are beginning to outstrip the available supply, and this is impacting the sale to other domains.

## DREAD POSSIBILITY: EVIL ON THE AIRWAVES

Radio technology in the Wartorn Cluster is well ahead of the Core (except, possibly, for whatever Dr. Mordenheim has created over the course of his research), but it is by no means a stable technology.

A standard, hand-held radio has a reach of perhaps 3 miles, and costs about 300 gp. If there is no radio tower to further boost signals or another hand-held radio within that range, then all one has is a piece of inert technology. A hand-held radio requires half a pint of refined black-oil to completely fill its fuel cell, but can function on this amount for about a year.

Attempts to use a radio receiver or transmitter both require use of the trained-only skill Profession (radiographer) every time a radio is used. Due to the mutable nature of the Demiplane of Dread and the perversity of the Dark Powers, failed checks can lead to some truly nasty results.

### Profession (radiographer) result table:

Natural 1- Instead of a mundane channel, the radio tunes into the thoughts and dreams of some unspeakable and unknown force of Evil. Those who listen are subjected to sounds and information that blast the mind and sanity. In the worst cases, the entity may address the listeners and take an active interest in them in the future. Roll a second Profession (radiographer) check; all listeners must roll a Madness save, with the result of the second Profession (radiographer) check as DC.

- |     |  |
|-----|--|
| 1   | Insufficient to find any frequency. Static and garbled sounds provoke feelings of visceral disquiet. Roll a second Profession (radiographer) check; all listeners must roll a Horror save with the result of the second Profession(radiographer) check as DC.  |
| 2-3 | Instead of a mundane channel in the reality the operator inhabits, the radio taps into a signal from a different, parallel reality. Sound quality varies from average to excellent. The channel provides information about completely unfamiliar places and plays strange music. If the radiographer is attempting communication, they come into conversation with a stranger from the other reality.  |
| 4-5 | Instead of a mundane channel in the reality the operator inhabits, the radio taps into a signal from a different, parallel reality. Sound quality varies from average to excellent. The channel provides information from a reality that lies close to that of the operator, but is not the same; the information gleaned is completely unreliable and consistently dark, speaking of acts of murder, cannibalism, war and other such atrocities, often mentioning people known to the listeners as either victim or perpetrator. If the radiographer is attempting communication, they come into conversation with an alternative version of the person they wished to speak to; this alternate version is invariably Evil, wholly depraved and possibly insane, not to mention hostile to the listeners. Roll a second Profession (radiographer) check; all listeners must roll a Fear save with the result of the second Profession (radiographer) check as DC. |
| 6-9 | Insufficient to find any frequency. Sound quality: meaningless static.   |
| 10  | Sufficient to find a familiar, public frequency. Average sound quality.  |



- Natural 13      Sufficient to find a stable, public frequency. However, the signal you receive has been altered by someone with the Influencer feat. Assign a number between 1 and 20 to everyone listening, then roll 1d20. If the number that comes up is the same as a number assigned to one of the listeners, that listener must save vs. the spell cast by the one transmitting the signal or be affected by it. The DM decides who is transmitting and why.
- 15      Sufficient to find familiar, public frequencies. Good sound quality.  
Not sufficient to find secret frequencies.
- 16-19      Sufficient to find familiar, public frequencies, as well as secret frequencies hidden by an ally or acquaintance. Sufficient to 'hide' one's own frequency.
- 20-      Sufficient to find familiar, public frequencies. Sufficient to find secret frequencies hidden by an opponent. Excellent sound quality.
- Natural 20      Flawless success; you find exactly the frequency you were looking for, with crystal sound clarity.

## RELIGION

### Taiia

The official state religion of Conquista is the faith of Taiia<sup>30</sup>, *the Blinding Light*, a sun goddess unknown in the lands of the Core to the best of my knowledge. According to her holy text, *Following the Sun*, Taiia is not merely the supreme goddess in the universe, but the *only* deity. She has neither equal nor superiors; all creation begins and ends with her, for she is both Creator and Devourer. By her whim do mortals live and die, and there is no hope in the afterlife save to be devoured by her and thus become part of her; all who do not find favour with the goddess must dwell eternally in the cold darkness of the void.

### Taiia

*The Watcher, the Maker, the Devourer, the Dancer, the Blinding Light*

**Symbol:** A solar disc with three eyes  
**Alignment:** Neutral  
**Portfolio:** The sun, creation, destruction, mortal life and death  
**Worshippers:** Everyone  
**Cleric alignments:** Any<sup>31</sup>  
**Domains:** (Creator aspect) Air, Chaos, Earth, Good, Healing, Knowledge, Law, Luck, Magic, Protection, Travel  
 (Destroyer aspect) Chaos, Death, Destruction, Evil, Fire, Law, Strength, Trickery, War, Water

### Subdomains:

❖ *Creator aspect:* Arcane, Caves, Cloud, Curse, Defense, Divine, Entropy, Espionage,

<sup>30</sup>See the 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition Deities and Demigods, p. 203-206, for the original version of this deity.

<sup>31</sup>Note that in the original version, Cleric alignments are more restricted depending on whether the Cleric in question chooses to honour the Creator- or the Destroyer-aspect of Taiia. In Ravenloft, this restriction is lifted.



Exploration, Fate, Fortifications, Friendship, Imagination, Judgment, Legislation, Lightning, Loyalty, Medicine, Memory, Metal, Purity, Redemption, Restoration, Resurrection, Revelry, Rites, Slavery, Solitude, Thought, Trade, Tyranny, Whimsy, Wind

- ❖ *Destroyer aspect*: Ambush, Arson, Ash, Blood, Catastrophe, Competition, Deception, Entropy, Espionage, Fear, Ferocity, Greed, Hatred, Ice, Judgment, Legislation, Slavery, Tyranny, Murder, Oceans, Plague, Psychopomp, Rage, Resolve, Revelry, Riot, Rivers, Smoke, Tactics, Torture, Undead, Whimsy

**Favoured weapon:** (Creator aspect) trident  
(Destroyer aspect) battleaxe

Priests of Taiia are easily recognizable by their shaved heads and the holy symbols they wear prominently upon their chests. Clerics who worship the Creator aspect of Taiia may only choose domains and subdomains from the list associated with the Creator aspect; Clerics who worship the Destroyer aspect may only choose domains and subdomains from the list associated with the Destroyer aspect. Clerics who worship the Creator aspect tend to wear orange or ochre robes; Clerics who worship the Destroyer aspect tend to wear black or navy blue robes.

I shall quote a common passage from the first chapter of *Following the Sun*:

"Taiia always was and always will be, her radiance illuminating the void around her.

On a whim, Taiia created three flowers; lotuses of differing colours. One lotus was white; this, Taiia placed upon the third eye set in her forehead. One lotus was red; this, Taiia placed upon her navel<sup>32</sup>.

One lotus was black; upon this, Taiia tread and danced, the swaying of her belly filling the red lotus with fire, her third eye gazing through the white lotus and filling it with light.

Thus did Taiia create the three strata of the world that is. The white lotus, filled with her light, is the celestial realm that is with Taiia. The red lotus, filled with her fire, is the mortal world, which is blessed by Taiia's warmth and cursed by her absence. The black lotus is the dark border between Taiia's blessed creation and the void, which is everything that is not Taiia, and thus is nothing.

By Taiia's dance, sparks of her glory were scattered around and around. Some fell upon the black lotus and cursed and wailed, becoming the foul spirits<sup>33</sup> that rebel against Taiia. They are doomed to spend eternity in the void, once Taiia's dance ends. Other sparks fell upon the red lotus, becoming the souls of mortal creatures, who would be clothed in mortal matter. Their fate is to loyally and passionately worship Taiia, regardless of whether she sends them blessings or curses, that she may call them to her and devour them upon their death. Should they fail in this solemn duty, their fate will lie with the spirits of the black lotus. A third measure of sparks fell upon the white lotus, allowing Taiia to delight in her own glory. She shall dance until she has grown bored, and her dance sets the world and the heavens in motion; once she stops, the time will come for her to devour all of creation and start anew – if it pleases her."

I must say that the core faith is light on dogma, other than 'Taiia is supreme and must be adored to gain her benevolence and avert her wrath'. People of all walks of life and conviction are welcome to join the clergy or simply to worship at the goddess's ziggurat-shaped temples, which range from the size of altars to great Ziggurats. Unfortunately, while it has only

<sup>32</sup>An oddity. No mention is made of Taiia having a mother or even being born. How then does she have a navel?

<sup>33</sup>Little context is given, but what references are available in *Following the Sun* are reminiscent of the fiends known as *Demodands*, who are indeed known for their blasphemies and hatred of established religions.

one commandment which people from the Core might find unpleasant – to wit, annual human sacrifice – it has few rules *against* objectionable behaviour, leaving it to the faithful to determine for themselves what they will and will not allow, so long as they keep worshipping Taiia with zeal.

As you might expect, my Master, this oversight has caused many men and women of low character to do or argue for all manner of vile things, claiming that Taiia condoned or even inspired them. It has also given rise to a diverse range of sects, each with a different focus when it comes to worshipping their radiant patron.

It has also given rise to the *Cielos vacios*- or Empty Skies-movement; this is a pseudo-political group whose influence seems to swell whenever anti-magic hysteria sweeps across the land. During these times, Empty Skies-aligned orators seem to pop up like mushrooms, loudly denouncing all faiths as crass deceit and manipulation of the poor. These demagogues then egg on and facilitate the worst excesses of the hysteria, providing transport, weapons and combustible fuel to the mobs that assault smaller, less defensible ziggurats and tear apart suspected mages in the streets. I count myself fortunate not to have been at ground zero for such an experience.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: EMPTY SKIES

The *Cielos Vacios* or “Empty Skies” is a far greater danger than Ciska realizes. Even during times when the nation is not in the grasp of the anti-magical and anti-religious mania that rises whenever Cliffton Willgoat (see Who's Doomed) is Darklord, the Empty Skies soldiers on in the shadows.

As a whole, the group holds the belief that all religions are falsehood; there are no gods or magic, only institutions that exist to deceive and exploit the weak by enforcing a code of behaviour and demanding tithes which serve the state, not the

individual. The common people must be freed from these deceptions by the only means that actually works: violence.

Membership in the Empty Skies is typically open only to the have-nots of Conquista, as the group mistrusts all who have wealth or just financial stability.

A rare few charismatic haves manage to retain a precarious membership by providing funds and tools the mob needs to enact its mission of slaughter during the times of hysteria, and to enable calculated assassinations during other times.

If *los Cielos Vacios* ever does manage to exterminate all the priests and mages in Conquista, its mission will not end there. As soon as all superstition has been eradicated, the movement will proceed to murder all politicians and guardsmen. Only when Conquista has been completely 'liberated', reduced to a primal state of anarchy where only the strength of one's arm decides their place and fortune in life, will the movement's goal be achieved.

One unfortunate common aspect of the Taiian faith is that it requires a human sacrifice at every temple of moderate to greater size on midwinter's and midsummer's day, respectively to beg the goddess's mercy and protection against the dark and cold of winter, and to thank her for the long days and

warmth she provides in summer. Legend has it that volunteers once presented themselves at their local house or worship, and used to compete in rigorous contests for the honour.

Nowadays, the sacrifice is selected by lottery from among the community's less reprehensible

prisoners, who are 'graciously allowed to cleanse their souls of sin' by taking part. I heard rumours that some of the more rural communities use the annual sacrifices to rid themselves of undesirables, but never saw evidence of this.

Sacrificial victims are sedated with whatever comes to hand. Copious amounts of alcohol are a popular means to the end of rendering the victim insensate, and have the added bonus that the sacrifice is often willing to cooperate if the booze is good. Various narcotics are also frequently used. Once sedated, the sacrifice is brought to the nearest ziggurat and staked out on top of it. The local high priest slits the wrists of the victim, allowing it to bleed out into a ceremonial trough, and then cuts out the heart. This organ is burned to honour Taiia, after which the rest of the body is buried in the local fields to bless the crops.

*Nothing better than corpses to fertilize crops, after all.*

Until roughly 742 BC, the dominant sect of Taiia's faith in Conquista was that of the Sungazers (LE). This sect is devoted to the Creator-aspect of the goddess, and advocates strict adherence to the teachings included in her holy book, *Following the Sun*, as well as an oral tradition. Whereas the former gives rules on how to worship Taiia in the temple, the latter dictates social mores and forms of behaviour supposedly pleasing to Taiia. Not coincidentally, the oral tradition encourages a strict segregation of society in tribes and castes, with the priest caste at the top of the heap. With recent developments, the Sungazers have been steadily losing ground.

The Cleansing Flames (CE) are presumably as old as the initial invasion of Conquista. Claiming to be devoted to the purity of Taiia's chosen people, this Destroyer-oriented sect operates in both the northern and middle *cantón*, masquerading as

members of other sects while monitoring the faithful for 'blood disgrace'. In less euphemistic terms, they seek to prevent interbreeding among the tribes and to eliminate any offspring that is born. Inter marriage is rare and the numbers of the Cleansing Flames are fortunately low, but a number of murders still occur every year. If caught at such crimes, members of the sect usually confess without hesitation, citing that they are divinely inspired and as such above secular law.

Starting in 742 BC, a relatively new sect came to be in the middle *cantón*. The Guiding Lights (N) were founded by those Taiian priests who had fought side-by-side with Witches and Voodan, and now found themselves reluctant to deal with these people as of old, by ways of trident, axe and fire. Claiming that the true will of Taiia surpasses her holy book, adherents of this Creator-oriented sect engage other religions through dialogue and diplomacy. Although their goal is always to persuade and convert, they are noteworthy scholars of both magic and religious lore, and are unusually well-regarded by non-Taiian faiths.

The Inner Eyes (LN) are a sect that was founded sometime after Conquista joined the rest of the Cluster. A rare monastic order, this Destroyer-oriented sect was founded by priests who were disappointed by the way the domain's people fractured and began mistreating one another as soon as Taiia's light returned, instead of being inspired by the goddess's grace to do better. The members of the Inner Eyes are mostly Monks and Brawlers, focused on the perfection of body and spirit alike. They are active in the community, chastising the debased, assisting those in genuine need, and cracking down hard on crime.

The Iron Suns (NG) are a Creator-oriented sect that advocates for a union of science and faith. They firmly believe that all things are granted by Taiia and can be used to honour her, including the mechanisms that are now commonplace in Conquista. Iron Suns broadcast *radió* programs, use *mobíla* to visit isolated communities, and sponsor the medical sciences as well as divine healing magic,



all to show people the joy of Taiia's bounty and win their hearts and souls for the goddess.

The Jasmine Dancers (CN) are an ancient sect, mostly found in the cities, which advocates the use of various narcotics and temple prostitutes to grant the faithful an experience of unity with Taiia. While one might expect this to be a festive and lighthearted sect, it is actually one of the Destroyer-oriented ones. Clerics aligned to the Jasmine Dancers take their quest for unity with the goddess *very* seriously, to the point that they will ruin the body in order to grant the soul unity with Taiia before she can turn her light away from the world.

A relatively minor sect, the True Gardeners (NG), has been operating in Conquista since the days of *los Viejos Sagrados*. Shamed by how a group of 'godless' scholars managed to unite the nation when the Church had not, the True Gardeners took up the challenge of uniting the nation's people in her name. Summarized, the True Gardeners' dogma is that all mortals are the creation of Taiia and equal both in

her light and in their duties to the goddess. Where many Conquistan temples practice segregation, forbidding Casians, Canana and Ulan from attending the same services, this Creator-aligned sect actively invite members of all three tribes to attend together and practice good fellowship even when not worshipping the goddess.

Although Taiia's church is the state religion, her mythos does not admit to the existence of any other gods, and most of her clergy is actively hostile to even the suggestion that other faiths might be operating in their territory, I had reason to believe that these still do exist.

As you already know, there are mentions of Voodan and Witches in the official history of Conquista. In addition, it is not uncommon for Conquistan people to curse misfortune as either 'Brightwell's malice', or to refer to particularly vile insults as '*il Demonio's bleating*'. It should not surprise you that I was able to discover information on three faiths that stand as rivals, even in opposition to the Church of Taiia.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: *THE GOLDEN ROSES* (IT)

A Creator-aligned sect unknown to the Church at large is *the Golden Roses*. Unlike the other sects, the *Golden Roses* are composed entirely of covens of Taiia-worshipping witches. While the sect agrees with the main Church that all existence and power flows from Taiia, it does not agree that arcane magic is an aberration, nor that witchcraft is a sin against the goddess. Instead, the witches worship Taiia as the source of their magic, and uphold her as an example to strive for: unrelenting power that accepts neither equal nor master. Typically, witches who are members of *the Golden Roses* focus on attaining power of one sort or another. Whether this be social, magical, political or merely personal does not matter; its covens pool their diverse potentials to achieve goals in the world and achieve dominance over the uninitiated.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: *THE BLACK SUNS* (LE)

Founded not long after 711 BC, this Destroyer-aligned sect is technically a heresy, possibly even a blasphemy. Its members firmly believe that Taiia is not the only god in the heavens; other deities exist, contesting her throne. And they must be exposed for the very real danger they are and be destroyed, along with their followers. Paranoid and crafty, members of the Black Suns masquerade as members of other sects and conduct an ongoing inquisition of what should be their fellow believers. They believe that agents of Taiia's enemies hide in her Church's hierarchy, and so they must seek them out and assassinate them. If they accidentally kill a true believer, that is no problem; Taiia will receive them. Vicious and ruthless, members of the Black Sun masquerade as heathen priests to encourage uprisings in the name of Taiia's foes, so their fellow believers may realize the truth and see the enemies hiding among them.



## THE LOA

Ironically, it was because I was performing my own religious duties that I was initiated into the Voodan traditions of Conquista.

During my survey of the south shore-communities at the *laco colgado*, I had come under rather more scrutiny from the local *Hombres Valientes* than I had anticipated. In consequence, I had been obliged to lean more heavily on the limited supply of spells provided by the faceless patrons of the Eternal Order than that offered by my grimoire, as a woman engaged in silent prayer causes less suspicion than one reading from a spellbook.

I felt compelled to conduct a proper ritual in compensation, and so erected a makeshift altar at our next campsite, then sent Hectór off to do one little task or another. I underestimated both his efficiency and his loyalty, and so it came to pass that my guide and *chauffeur* chanced upon me just as I was preparing to spill the blood of a rabbit on the altar.

Hectór took one look at the imagery of skulls and bones that I had painted on the flat(tish) altar stone and blurted out: “Miss Ciska, you worship the Lord of the Dead?”

(I am aware of your views, my *Master*, that the Eternal Order worships not concrete entities, but the force of Death itself, and the faceless patrons are but masks set upon the ultimate truth. And I will admit that your theory has merit; primitive man will try to put a face on things that he cannot comprehend or explain.

But as you know, this is not how I worship. Faith, to me, should be a thing of passion and conviction, not abstraction and cold logic. To me, although the patrons of the Eternal Order are nameless and faceless, they seem to be concrete beings with designs of their own. I imagine they take a dark delight in the efforts I have made over the years to identify them, that I might better understand and yes, worship them. Why should the Lord of the Dead,

greatest among the *Loa* of Souragne and a mighty spirit of Death, not be among their number? Even if he was not, what reason would I have not to welcome him?

And so, I did not lie when I replied to Hectór.)

I said to Hectór that yes, I worshipped the Lord of the Dead. When I invited him to join me, he did so, albeit reluctantly. He was visibly relieved when I was content to sacrifice the rabbit, rather than demand his blood be added to what was already dribbling down my altar. He spoke some prayers in halting Souragnien, but noted later that the way I worshipped was more like what he had seen in the Taiian temples than among the Ulan people.

It did not take a great amount of effort to persuade him to tell me more. As it turns out, while the Ulan are not unwelcome in the temples of Taiia, most of the goddess' sects in Conquista require that members of each tribe worship separately. One exception exists – the True Gardeners – but they are very much a minority voice. Although many Ulan do worship Taiia and accept her as the sole deity in the heavens, most feel unwelcome in the temples and so cling to the faith of their ancestors.

Voodan worship in Conquista is conducted in relative secrecy, away from the prying eyes of *los Hombres Valientes* and the ziggurat temples of the Maker and Devourer. On temporary holy ground, the faithful gather to be ridden by the *Loa*, dance, sing, eat, and drink cheap whiskey as opposed to the rum of their ancestors.

Hectór arranged for us to be invited to one such gathering, and it proved an interesting experience. For one thing, while the majority of the faithful were Ulan, there was a handful of Casian and Canan worshippers, as well as a considerable number of halfbreeds. For another, while the majority of *Loa* called upon during the ceremonies were known to me, there are spirits worshipped in Conquista which are unknown in Souragne. This, I would attribute to the fact that this is a different land, with a different

landscape and cultural heroes. A brief list of some of the more interesting examples follows.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE LOA OF CONQUISTA

The following *Loa* are presented in format similar to that provided in the DM's Appendix of *Dark Tales and Disturbing Legends*. While these *Loa* are local to Conquista, there is no reason why they could not appear in other domains – even in faraway Souragne.

#### *Lady of the Plains*

Worshipped mainly in the middle *cantón* of Conquista, the Lady is to that harsh and dry landscape what the Maiden of the Swamps is to Souragne. The Lady is an unforgiving teacher, who punishes the foolish and unprepared with death at a moment's notice, but grants her grudging blessings to those who are hardy and well-prepared. She knows all the secrets of the arid lands, both those that allow for survival and those that bring death, and every creature that is at home in these lands is sacred to her. Depictions of the Lady show her as a thin, sun-darkened woman in a loose robe of sun-bleached cotton. She walks barefoot even in the most inhospitable land, without the need of staff or cane, and her only possession of any beauty is a waterflask some whisper was given to her by *Papa Fleuve*.

**Alignment:** Lawful Neutral  
**Schools:** Abjuration, Conjuraction, Evocation  
**Domains:** Earth, Sun, Travel  
**Subdomains:** Caves, Day, Exploration, Light, Thirst, Trade

#### *L'Homme Broché*

The *Loa* of abomination, *L'Homme Broché* embodies the corruption of all things. When depicted, *L'Homme Broché* appears as a figure wrapped in burlap; his mouth is a thick line of stitched thread, his eyes are buttons. When he first appears, it is as a comical, doll-like figure that offers what appears to be helpful knowledge. Those who follow the trail of breadcrumbs laid out by the *Loa* soon regret it; once lofty ideals are exposed and debased into depravity; healthy flesh is twisted and broken; the mind buckles and succumbs to madness; the figure of the *Loa* becomes a towering behemoth of horror that mocks pain and demands worship. Even though all know that *L'Homme Broché* is a false guide who seeks to lead those who rely on him astray, he still receives a surprising amount of worship from scholars who do not mind paying the price of corruption, so long as they get to complete some grand project.

**Alignment:** Neutral Evil  
**Schools:** Divination, Necromancy, Transmutation  
**Domains:** Evil, Knowledge, Madness  
**Subdomains:** Cannibalism, Corruption, Education, Fear, Insanity, Memory, Nightmare, Thought, Truth



**Papa Fleuve**

The *Loa* of rivers, *Papa Fleuve* is presented as an old man who travels up and down the rivers on an old raft. He has neither home harbour nor a definite goal in mind, he just goes where the current takes him. He is the *Loa* who brings life to the land and helps travellers get where they are going, but he is an incorrigible trickster and flirt, who has a long list of failed marriages and dalliances stretching behind him. This may be why he is always moving on and has no home harbour.

*Papa Fleuve* encourages people to trade and travel, and he is highly popular among those of the Voodan faith who wish to be somewhere else than they are. In Conquista, this includes almost all of the Ulan people.

**Alignment:** Chaotic Neutral

**Schools:** Conjuration, Enchantment, Illusion

**Domains:** Charm, Travel, Water

**Subdomains:** Captivation, Exploration, Flotsam, Flowing, Love, Lust, Rivers, Trade

**P'tite Soeur Rénard**

The *Loa* of Justice, *P'tite Soeur Rénard* is considered to be highly dangerous even by those who bring her homage, and her *vévé* is always set well away from those of her fellow *Loa*. It is agreed among the Voodan that all who hope for and live for justice should honour *P'tite Soeur Rénard* whenever possible. It is also agreed among the Voodan that no one should actually call on her to act unless the need is dire. The fox-headed, vulture-winged *Loa* has no room in her heart for anything but justice. Although her judgment is always thorough and she is a staunch protector of the innocent, the sentences she metes out upon the guilty are terrifying, and may claim many collateral victims. It is whispered that even her fellow *Loa* are not above her judgment and punishment, which may be why her holy symbol is not allowed to touch any of theirs.

**Alignment:** Lawful Neutral

**Schools:** Abjuration, Divination, Evocation

**Domains:** Destruction, Law, Protection

**Subdomains:** Catastrophe, Defenses, Fortifications, Hatred, Judgement, Purity, Rage, Solitude

**Queen of the Green**

A counterpart to the Maiden of the Swamp, the Queen of the Green is the *Loa* of the forests, such as can be found in the northern *cantón* of Conquista, and of plants in general. She is a shy and retiring *Loa*, much beloved for the plants she fosters, but fearful of the ambitious hands and axes of mortals. She hides both her beauty and her injuries – she shares the wounds of her beloved woods – in the depths of the sylvan wilderness. In spite of her fear, she is drawn forth when mortals engage in agriculture and gardening, so much of which is about making plants grow. Time and again, she creeps forth, hoping that mortals have changed their ways. Every time the harvest is cut down to become food, or a medicinal herb plucked to make medicine, she flees back into the wilderness to weep green tears. When depicted, the Queen of the Green appears as a beautiful young woman covered from the neck down in a smooth fur of grass, which changes colour with the seasons. Her hair is a mass of plants and flowers. A gaping axe-wound in her side constantly weeps bright red blood. She wears a wedding ring, given to her by *Papa Fleuve*, and is one of few *Loa* who are always happy to see him arrive and content to see him part.

**Alignment:** Neutral Good  
**Schools:** Abjuration, Illusion, Transmutation  
**Domains:** Earth, Plant, Water  
**Subdomains:** Caves, Decay, Growth, Rivers

As Ezra is an unknown entity in Conquista, and Taiia is opposed to any faith other than her own, I had not expected there to be any kind of effort to incorporate the *Loa* into the belief system of a greater deity. To my surprise, the Voodan who presided over the ceremony I attended closed the festivities by leading those present in a brief prayer to a goddess whose name I knew from before: Brightwell.

I was fortunate to find a few Voodan who were willing to speak on the matter, and must again express my appreciation for Professor Ambrose, who was also highly informative on non-Taiian religious practices in this domain.

### BRIGHTWELL AND *IL DEMONIO*

You may well recall my religious survey of Lilliend, where Brightwell<sup>34</sup> is depicted as a goddess of the moon, darkness and dreams; there she is the source of all magic and monsters, and the evil god *il Demonio* is both her son by rape, and the father of her daughter, the good goddess Ashar (who appears to be unknown in Conquista) – again by rape.

Professor Ambrose told me that it is difficult to find any kind of information on Brightwell's origins and aspect in Conquista; the faith of the moon goddess has been persecuted even more viciously than that of the *Loa* or the outright malicious *il Demonio*.

*(A note for players and DMs: keep in mind that many though not all of the Conquistans covens worship Brightwell and/or il Demonio, and all preserve a long-standing oral tradition.)*

Even today, to be caught following either *il Demonio* or the *Loa* is grounds for physical violence and

criminal persecution in Conquista, unless one is fortunate enough to find asylum with the Taiian sect known as the Guiding Lights. To be exposed as a follower of Brightwell, however, is in almost all cases grounds for summary execution, especially during periods of anti-magical hysteria. Any and all acts of brutality on the part of those applying the sentence are downplayed in the news bills, if they are mentioned at all. Only recently has there been some pushback against this cruel practice, and that only in the *brugia serena*, ever since governor / guard chief Hareleg has started prosecuting those who kill Brightwell-worshippers the same as any other murderers.

The Professor had been fortunate, however, to lay his hands on a partial, fire-damaged document considered to be blasphemous in this domain. With the aid of Voodan oral tradition, I managed to piece together the lost pieces of the document, which is entitled simply *Eye Before the Sun*:

“The void came first. An endless expanse of nothing; a dark stasis. This state was disrupted by the birth of the light, and the light was Taiia. Her radiance travelled out to the limits of the void, but it was still and silent, and none sang the praises of Taiia.

Desiring adoration, Taiia created a flower; a lotus with petals of crimson red and a heart of gold. Every dewdrop upon the lotus was a world, bursting with life, and it sang the praises of Taiia as she danced round and round the blossom, drifting on the void.

But Taiia grew bored with her creation, and so she moved on, creating another lotus to drift on the void, and new mortals to praise and adore her. The first flower, having lost her light, grew dark and cold. Its

<sup>34</sup>See the *Lilliender Gazetteer*, in *Quoth the Raven* issue #25, p.144.



golden heart dimmed, and the dewdrops upon its petals froze one by one, countless lives snuffed out and unable to escape the wreck of the first creation. Their souls wailed and roamed about, trapped in the chains of (undeath?)

In the last world not yet frozen to death, the last mortals gathered together, (terrified?) of the approaching end. None cried out for Taiia anymore, for they knew she had abandoned them. Among them was a woman. She was beautiful, and for years she had sold her body to men and women of learning, in return for knowledge and training.”

(Professor Ambrose suspects that even this was a mistranslation, or possibly even a deliberate alteration of the source text due to Taiian influence. It is possible that the woman was a temple prostitute, which is a profession or calling of some distinction, as it supposedly allows for spiritual union with the goddess. Alternatively, she may have been a polymath whose character has been slandered by Taiian priests due to the nature of her discovery.)

“Where all had specialized in single fields of knowledge, she alone had mastered (many (?) / all (?) fields?). Where all cowered, she stood tall and spoke words that were blasphemy, yet also were salvation. The woman said that she understood Taiia, the (nature?) of the goddess, the *why* and the *how* of her. “I will show you these things,” she said, “if you will bow to me and worship me.”

Even with death and darkness approaching, there was debate and much argument against this. But with the woman came her (son?), born of her (whoring?), and he had a liar's tongue that spilled honeyed words, to set man against woman and brother against sister, until blood was shed, and the dissenting voices fell silent.”

(This is supposedly the origin of *il Demonio*, the son of Brightwell. Unlike in Lilliend, where the god Thunder-Father is acknowledged as his father, the deity's sire is unknown in Conquista. Some of the

Voodan I consulted with were of the opinion that *il Demonio* might somehow be the product of an ill-considered fling between Brightwell and *Papa Fleuve*, which suggests this *Loa* existed in these mythical before-times and had access to other 'flowers' of creation.

Given the origin tale told to me by Professor Ambrose, *il Demonio* could be the bastard of a nameless mortal.

An obscure fragment, which I found in the library of *la Universidad*, suggested that *il Demonio*'s birth was the result of an experiment the still-mortal Brightwell conducted on herself in order to investigate the limits of biological reproduction and the possibilities of scientifically creating life.)

“When the voices of the (dying world?) rose again, it was in worship not of Taiia, but of a mortal woman who had gathered great knowledge in defiance of the goddess, and it was in adoration of her snake-tongued son, who had united the voices into a choir. The woman raised her head and (hands?<sup>35</sup>) to the dark and freezing heavens, and darkness was what she claimed for herself: she became the second goddess, and her name was Brightwell. Her son clung to her heel as she rose from the world into the void, becoming the third deity, and he was *il Demonio*.

In the void, *il Demonio* whispered in his mother's ear that they might abandon the dying world and steal any number of living ones, but Brightwell shook him off like the loathsome thing he was. The dark goddess put her (clawed?) hands on the black and dying lotus and committed sin against the cosmic order by lifting it from its place. Thereafter, she lifted another lotus; one with petals of crimson red, and these two she merged into one. The sound of her blasphemy rang throughout the void, and Taiia drew near.

Now there was battle, as light struggled against dark. Taiia was mighty, but Brightwell was clever, and *il Demonio* was insidious. While the gods raged and

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<sup>35</sup>This might also be 'powers'.

fought, their blood raining down on the conjoined flowers, the living and the dead spilled from the lotus of black into the lotus of red. So has it come to pass that there is confusion, for in granting mercy to the dying world, Brightwell brought what was alien to the living world. In time, the gods ceased fighting, but forever do they stare at each other across the great lotus that is, which contains the world that is. This is our confused and broken world.

Adore Taiia and find grace with her, for she may devour your soul and add it to her glory. Or seek the power of your own mind and body with Brightwell, and transform the world that is into the world that could be, and may it be better. And none hearken unto *il Demonio*, who would betray and degrade all so he could have his mother to himself."

### BRIGHTWELL REVISITED

As a goddess of Chaos, Brightwell has multiple aspects, most of which are unique to a given region due to people's reaction to her and her diverse portfolio. In Conquista, she can be summarized as follows:

#### Brightwell

*Butterfly Queen, the Dark Wench, Divine Witch, Enemy of Taiia, Reflection of Taiia, Witch Moon, World-Breaker*

**Symbol:** A solar disc with a closed eye<sup>36</sup> before it

**Alignment:** Chaotic Neutral

**Portfolio:** The moon, arcane magic, chaos, darkness, night, prostitutes, science, the void, witchcraft

**Worshippers:** Prostitutes, scientists, witches, all who travel or work at night

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

**Domains:** Animal, Chaos, Charm, Darkness, Knowledge, Magic, Strength

**Subdomains:** Arcane, Captivation, Education, Ferocity, Fist, Fur, Love, Lust, Memory, Moon, Night, Revelry, Resolve, Riot, Rites, Thought, Whimsy

**Favoured weapon:** Sword cane

On the rare occasion that Brightwell is depicted in Conquista, she is presented as a woman of about average height with skin as pale as the full moon, her one visible eye and hair as dark as the starless night sky; the other eye is covered by a leather patch. She mostly wears a chainmail shirt over an unadorned robe of black cloth, but is sometimes shown wearing a coat that reflects all light, appearing stark white to the uneducated eye, or else wearing her chainmail over bare skin. No matter what she wears, Brightwell always wields her sword cane. Black bat's wings sprout from the goddess's back, and she wears black lotuses in her hair. When she smiles, her canines are long and sharp as a wolf's.



Brightwell

<sup>36</sup>Note that the symbol of *los Viejos Sagrados* is an open eye before the sun-disc.

Unto this day, the Church of Taiia's official stance is that Brightwell does not exist any more than any other god or spirit; there is only Taiia. In spite of this, the amount of hostility shown by the Church to even the least mention of the Witch Moon suggests that she is seen as the complete antithesis of Taiia.

To believe in Brightwell is to believe that Taiia does not reign supreme in the universe. It is to believe that her divinity can be analyzed and copied, maybe even torn apart and destroyed, by sufficiently clever minds. It is to believe that the will of Taiia can be flouted, her cosmic order disrupted. It is to believe that there exists a power which is not only strong enough to meddle in Taiia's affairs, but has done so with lasting effects to Taiia's creation. It is to believe that there exists a deity whose nature and works are fundamentally at cross-purposes to Taiia's.

Whereas Taiia's dogma is simply 'believe in Taiia or suffer a cold eternity', Brightwell's ethos is that the world is unfair and flawed, and such things must be corrected by our own hands. Professor Ambrose told me about other fragments he has discovered during his studies of Conquista's folklore, which indicate worship of Brightwell was fairly common in the domain's cities during its time of isolation in the Mists. While the common farmer would be more devoted to Taiia, as her light gives life to the crops, scholars and scientists found more favour with a goddess willing to upend the cosmic order and ignore tradition in search of knowledge and progress. It is a given that scholars are more prevalent in cities, which offer access to libraries and industry.

When Conquista came bursting back into the light, so to speak, the Church of Taiia stamped out the rival religion, or at least drove it into the shadows. Professor Ambrose was convinced that worship of Brightwell is still passed on in families of the more outflung communities, hidden from public scrutiny. This is a reversal of the previous state of affairs, as

the Church of Taiia now lurks closer to the centers of civil power and provides much less support to the rural communities, where the faith of Brightwell seems to have gone underground and provides clandestine support. The Professor also mentioned that prostitutes are often accused of worshipping the Witch Moon, due to the fact that they do most of their work at night, but this may be nothing but an urban legend.

For all his knowledge, the Professor was unaware that the Voodan of Conquista have come to adopt Brightwell as a protector, beseeching her to cast her shadow upon them so they will not be discovered and destroyed by Taiia.

That the Church of Brightwell is not even mentioned in the official history is a clear sign of just how thorough the Church of Taiia has been in its suppressive efforts.

In closing, we come to the last competitor in Conquista's spiritual landscape. *Il Demonio*<sup>37</sup> is the god of Evil in Conquista, just as he is in Lilliend. He is also accepted to be the son and 'most ardent admirer' of his mother, Brightwell.

*Disgusting.*

The deity is a boogeyman in a different way from his mother. Where Brightwell represents an affront to the *cosmic* order, *il Demonio* is an enemy to the *social* order. Brightwell challenges Taiia directly and sponsors the pursuit of the mind and personal power over tradition; her son encourages the wicked to do and take what they will, and wears away at the will of mortals until they give in to their worst impulses, eroding the fabric of society and civilization itself.

Among those native to Conquista who admit to believing in Brightwell and *il Demonio* but hold Taiia supreme, it is often muttered that the pair work hand in glove, with the son corrupting mortals so the mother can enlist them in grandiose schemes to

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<sup>37</sup>See the *Lilliend Gazetteer*, in *Quoth the Raven* issue #25, p.147.



change the world. As it was not possible to speak to priests of *il Demonio* (that I know of; if his organized worship survives in this domain, it does so in closely

held secret, just like Brightwell's), I can only speculate whether the god's faithful believe this as well.

### *IL DEMONIO REVISITED:*

#### *il Demonio*

*The Cruel, the Insidious, the Laughing Fiend, the Sick, the Treacherous, the Wicked*

**Alignment:** Neutral Evil

**Portfolio:** Evil, corruption, cruelty, depravity, madness, murder, pestilence, poison, rape, selfishness, treachery

**Symbol:** A black sun, rising from the Mists

**Worshippers:** The wicked, Alchemists, Anti-Paladins, Aristocrats, Assassins, Fighters, mad scientists, Necromancers, Rogues, torturers

**Cleric alignments:** CE, LE, N, NE

**Domains:** Charm, Darkness, Death, Evil, Trickery

**Subdomains:** Deception, Loss, Lust, Murder, Night, Thievery, Undead

**Favoured weapon:** Dagger

In Conquista, the Chaotic Evil and Lawful Evil sects of *il Demonio*'s faith are supreme. The former are typically opportunistic criminals, whose acts range from theft to murder for pleasure. The latter finds its membership among the 'haves' of the domain, who use their wealth to get what they want, and their position to make sure they stay wealthy at the expense of those beneath them and anyone who might conceivably threaten their position. Both sects lurk in obscurity, worshippers doing everything they can to hide their affiliation unless they are among allies or have an enemy completely at their mercy. There is no official uniform for followers of *il Demonio* in Conquista, but Clerics tend to default to solid black clothing.

Insofar as the faith of the Laughing Fiend is organized in Conquista, it is attempting to destroy the people's belief in Taiia and make inroads with the faith of Brightwell. As the Witch Moon's own Church is highly secretive in this domain, and what texts it has clearly paint *il Demonio* as her enemy, this is largely a wasted effort.

When the god is depicted in Conquista, he is presented as a tall, broad-shouldered man with a handsome face, shoulder-length and curling hair, and a square-cut beard. The deity's skintone varies according to who is calling for him, but his hair is always dark and he appears wearing old-fashioned clothes of black cloth, which include a stovepipe hat and a sword cane. Images of the god always show him carrying a thick book, in which he records the names of those who have had business with him and now owe him some debt, ranging from a promise to commit an act of evil to their very souls.

### THE REALM

At first blush, Conquista looks like a bureaucratic monolith, where every significant event is recorded by the government offices, tradition dictates aspect of public and private life, and the armed forces beat down all resistance to the regime. No doubt this is how the majority of wealthy natives would prefer it.

During my investigation, I spoke to many people and made many observations. There is a constant undercurrent of discontent in Conquista, one which ebbs and surges. Traditionalist Casians and Canana still resent each other over the idea that the other tribe caused the Judgment that brought the domain so much grief in the past. The Ulan are unhappy that their freedom and prosperity was stripped away

through legal trickery. The Church of Taiia, never as much of a monolith as its elders in the northern *cantón* like to pretend, is internally divided, with two major power blocs growling at each other across the *Wittwentraen*. The rich are doing their damndest to make sure that they stay rich and everyone else is too poor, tired and hungry to fight them. Although what supernatural presence exists in the domain is in hiding, its representatives chafe at having to creep about instead of dominating.

I was exposed to the concept of 'protest marches' early during my survey, as the town I ruined for my investigation into *Sasquatch* activity was already struggling to survive in the face of unfair tax burdens. The townsfolk marched down the streets of their own town and down the road to a nearby, slightly larger one, where they shouted epithets at the local mayor's office and waved banners with slogans like 'No blood from stones, no money from our homes'. Compared to some of the riots that regularly break out in the larger settlements and cities, it was fairly peaceful.

You may recall my mentioning the advantages of Conquistan technology, and my worry about becoming addicted thereto, my *Master*. The city-dwellers of this domain have grown up knowing nothing but such luxury, and when this is taken away because they can no longer afford it, they fly into pitiful rages that see them shout in the street, throw bricks at *Hombres Valientes*, loot stores, and generally act like savage beasts. Alas, as *los Hombres Valientes* have guns and permission to use them, truly violent protests seldom last long. The wealthy homeowners and masters of the city amenities are seldom bothered; they count their money, enjoy their own luxuries, and raise their prices whenever it suits them.

## GOVERNMENT

I could probably write a book on the subject of Conquista's government, my *Master*, but I doubt many would wish to read it. As I have already said a great deal on the subject in order to explain the

domain's history, you may wish to re-read this survey from the start to get a clear picture.

All I will add at this point is that the government and who is in power is a major concern for this domain. With the notion of the vote, every man and woman (who is not foreign-born and has never been arrested for a crime) supposedly has a say in how the country will be run. The local newsbills make a lot of fuss over every rumour of political and diplomatic shifts, and the domain's elections are a major event that elicits both ribald festivities and tragic inebriation.

## ECONOMY

Although the domain is home to a good deal of industry, as factories churn out weapons, vehicles, *radiós* and other technological marvels, the two key industries of Conquista are still farming and mining.

As I mentioned before, every individual with the will and wherewithal may set out to build their own farm and possibly found their own village (though in many cases, this will be seen as betrayal of the family and exile therefrom). In times gone by, the middle *cantón* was home to many mining operations, where ore was brought up by willing workers by the ton. The mining has now completely shifted to the extraction of black-oil; while no Conquistan would admit it, I surmise that the domain has completely run out of ore.

Both food and black-oil are shipped around the domain in massive quantities, but they are also sold across the border. One might assume that Conquista sells only what it does not need, but to do so would be to underestimate the greed of the merchant families that still run *la Prosperidad*. Contracts with foreign nations are for fixed quantities, which means that if the national surplus of food comes up short, stocks may be seized by the government in order to fulfill the contract and get the merchants their money. Until I learned this crucial fact, I had wondered just why a nation with such a robust food

production would occasionally see protests and riots about starvation in the smaller communities.

If not for the exploitative exportation and suspected lack of ore, I think Conquista could be wholly self-sufficient. It has arable soil, it has water, it has animals both wild and domestic. The need for ore to maintain the domain's technological standards means that the land must import, however, and that also necessitates export.

## DIPLOMACY

Conquista is in the unenviable position of liking none of its direct neighbours, but having to deal with them because the countries they like a little better lie beyond those neighbours.

**Lilliend:** The people of Conquista believe – not without reason – that Lilliend is a dangerous backwater, from which men do not return. Fortunately, the madness of Conquista's western neighbour is content to stay within its borders. As Lilliend is an exporter of fine wines and an eager importer of horseflesh, a good amount of business takes place every year, all of it conducted by woman merchants. There are rumours that some of the more mercenary merchants sell male prostitutes, indentured Ulan and children from poor families up the Final Slope, but nothing has been proven. Or if it has, that proof has not been allowed to become public.

**Raba:** *La Prosperidad* would dearly love to be able to deal directly with Raba and its legendary mines. Most traditionalists are content that the Wrathwall stands between them and a nation ruled by what appear to them to be Ulan. There is a small amount of trade, but as this must skirt the Wrathwall, only luxury items such as ivory, gemstones and cloth make the trip, and even then in small quantities.

**Vieuxlyons:** Even though Conquista's eastern neighbour is its gateway to the rest of the Cluster, owing to the trains that connect many of the domains to the east, memories of the war run deep. Most people in Conquista hate and fear the

Vieuxlyese, and not without cause; although Vieuxlyons maintains diplomatic relations with Conquista and funnels a lot of trade, there is no such thing as diplomatic immunity for anyone who crosses the border. It is not uncommon for foreigners to be killed there for breaking laws they were unaware of, or even for the crime of looking at the wrong person.

**Masogan:** Masogan is a primal land of barbarians and monstrous beasts. Diplomatic relations and trade are impossible, and the land to the south frequently vomits up raiders, which cause destruction and distress whenever and wherever possible. If possible, the people of Conquista hate Masogan even more than Vieuxlyons.

**Broken Wheel:** As a fellow Taiia-worshipping nation, an importer of as much food as Conquista is able to part with, and an exporter of ore, the Broken Wheel is an important mercantile partner. As a domain that is undergoing a scientific Renaissance in some of its cities, however, the Broken Wheel is threatening to become a competitor on the international market. Worse, the domain's budding industries may lead it to export less ore.

**Lund:** As a fellow Taiia-worshipping nation that imports food and exports ore and lumber, West-Lund is an important mercantile partner. For years, *la Supremacia* has been trying to put into effect a military pact that would allow Conquista and West-Lund to crush Viexlyons between them. Alas, as Conquista is also exporting foodstuffs to East-Lund, the chance of such a military pact ever becoming a reality seem slim.

**Umbrash:** As a fellow Taiia-worshipping nation that exports lumber and horseflesh, Umbrash is an important mercantile partner to Conquista. The King of Umbrash has mentioned more than once that he would like to create even closer bonds between the two nations, but as he has let slip that this is with an eye to crushing Lund through a unified strike, the government of Conquista has refused as politely as possible.



**Obissol:** Conquista's official stance is that there is no Obissol, and many of its people never even hear the name. The ones most likely to whisper about or enter the dread lands below are the indentured miners, who are forced to dig ever deeper into the earth until they either find untapped veins of black-oil or break through and fall into the shifting depths. Rumours are being passed around wherever the people of Conquista mine, but as it is impossible to make contact with the lower domain (breaches into its depths soon close of their own accord) and no one ever seems to return once they have fallen into it, there are no official relations with Obissol.

## SITES OF INTEREST

### HUGHSREST

The capitol city of Conquista is named for sir Hugo the Conqueror, nigh-mythical leader of the people who invaded ancient Conquista and enslaved its native population.

Hughsrest is one of the oldest cities in Conquista, as far as I have been able to ascertain. Certainly, the Casians believe that it is the first city in the domain, as their own view of history is that the Canana did not even have villages before they were taught to build by their 'betters'.

The city is built around several large monuments, including the tomb of sir Hugo, the great Ziggurat of Taia, *la Universidad de la Conquista*, and Government House. Radiating outward from these buildings, which are set upon a natural elevation, the city descends in concentric circles. What might be termed the noble district, inhabited not by people based (only) on lineage but (also) the amount of money they possess, lies at the lower slopes of the elevation. Here the streets are broad and city layout is clear and simple; the houses are built on a grand scale, many with at least elements of a suggestion of a pyramid building scheme without being too obvious about it.

Descending further, one comes to the area devoted to businesses, industries and the dwellings of the common people, which fit rather too snugly inside the city's high defensive wall. The people of Hughsrest take pride in the fact that their defensive wall is free of blemishes and scars, indicating it has never been besieged or even assaulted.

In the lowest district, the streets are wide enough to allow the smaller cargo-*móvil* passage, provided they drive slowly, and people and stalls are not in the way. I found the area frankly claustrophobic, with extra storeys added on top of buildings when the occupancy outgrew the space. Conquistan families tend to stick together unless children make a clean break, which is an issue when space to expand into is limited. Here the city truly feels old – old and outdated. The worst areas are ghettos, where people of Canan, Ulan and mixed blood are forced to live in cramped conditions that make a tin of sardines look roomy and pleasant.

A few notes on the city's special sights:

The 'tomb' of Hugo the Conqueror is a small necropolis, with the tombs of sir Hugo's wives, aides and most prized slaves and animals laid out concentrically around the small ziggurat that is supposedly his own final resting-place. This necropolis draws visitors from both Casians and Canana the whole year long, and there have been frequent demands, issued by Canana traditionalists, to 'release the remains of the greatest Canan of all time' to the middle *cantón* so he can be interred there with honour. Predictably, this is a source of much bickering between the tribes.

Out of curiosity, I investigated the necropolis and the central tomb with the aid of my homunculus and some light scrying, and I discovered an oddity. While the central tomb is indeed occupied by a corpse, it was not the mouldering remains of some ancient skeleton, but rather a fresh and badly mutilated body. I found occasion to return to Hughsrest after a brief absence to chase down some information, and

when I checked the tomb again, the body had been replaced. Most curious...

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: DISHONOUR OF THE DEAD

Frederic Houndstooth (CE middle-aged male human Brawler 5 / Assassin 2) is an inhabitant of Hughsrest, an assassin for a local thieves' guild, and a serial killer whose trigger is his own building stress.

A Casian / Canana halfbreed, Frederic has had a hard life; his parents, who married and had him out of genuine love, were murdered by members of the Cleansing Flames sect (see the section on Taiia's sects in Religion), and he was taken in by an orphanage. Growing up, Frederic only continued to suffer; there were no good jobs available for halfbreeds. When a back-alley thug decided to beat the young boy up for the sin of not having any money to steal, Frederic snapped and strangled and stabbed the man to death. The criminal guild the thug belonged to might have taken revenge, if not for the guildmaster seeing potential in the boy. Frederic has been working for the guild ever since, beating whoever the master tells him to beat, killing whoever the master tells him to kill, and at least he can eat and sleep well.

Unknown to the master, Frederic also kills for his own reasons. At least once every month, Frederic's frustration at the way his life has gone and the endless insults and taunting he must endure from 'pure'-blooded people drives him to find a victim, anyone even tangentially connected to the Church of Taiia, and slowly strangle and disembowel them. As Frederic hates Conquista and its traditions of racial purity, he has become fixated on Hugo the Conqueror as the start of all his woes.

He has broken into the necropolis that once housed sir Hugo's remains multiple times, and has been steadily destroying the remains of the domain's cultural heroes and replacing them with his own kills.

*La Universidad de la Conquista*, oldest and most prestigious college of the land, sits at the very edge of the innermost and noble districts of the city. I have discussed *la Universidad* earlier in this survey, but mention its location here, as it is a sore point between university staff and the government. Apparently when Sir Hugo ordered construction on *la Universidad*, the sages he had contracted demanded equal standing with Church and government, or even superior standing on top of the elevation. Sir Hugo had the loudest voices silenced by decapitation, and deliberately moved *la Universidad*'s location further down, claiming the top spot for his own monument.

Government House is built closest to the tomb of Sir Hugo. In this venerable but sprawling, marble edifice, the government offices store and maintain their files and perform all the work necessary to keep the nation limping along. The president meets with the representatives of the government offices in the Amphitheater at the center of Government House to discuss policy. The edifice is most emphatically *not* open to the public, and any unauthorized personnel who approach the building are shot on sight.

The First Ziggurat of Taiia is a great pyramid of sun-bleached sandstone, weathered by the elements, from which echoe the never-ending hymns to Taiia, great goddess of the sun. also known as the Great Ziggurat, it may not be the only temple to the goddess in Hughsrest, but it is clearly the oldest and largest of its kind. The Ziggurat is surrounded by beautiful, but rugged parks, which serve a purpose other than the aesthetic. On the rare occasion that multiple (or any) volunteers present themselves for the human sacrifice, they are tested here before the winner (or indeed, the sole candidate) is taken to the top of the ziggurat to supposedly meet their goddess, and the losers are unceremoniously executed and buried.

Where to stay in Hughsrest:

The city has ample venues to sleep and stay anywhere between a night to years, so long as one

can pay. Not all of these include meal or laundry service, but many do. Please note that only 'people of proven quality' (which is to say, people of lavish financial means) are welcome to stay in the inns and hotels of the noble district, and only priests and government employees can find lodgings in the inner district.

Foreigners like me must make do with the common district, which fortunately does boast some very nice inns. With the city importing resources to feed both its citizens and its industries, one should not be too surprised that good lodgings are available.

I personally recommend the Restless Hart (good quality rooms, excellent quality food), a fine old inn of reasonable rates, which stands in an area of the city blessedly free of crime due to the nearby presence of a ziggurat temple devoted to the Inner Eyes-sect. Monks and nuns of the sect frequently patrol the area, making an example of any who detract from the sanctity of humanity as Taiia's creation, and even *los Hombres Valientes* give them wide berth and let them get on with their method of crime prevention.

## MEYERSVILLE

Meyersville was built by order of and according to blueprints designed by Meyer Builterman, one of the last – one of the few – publically-known members of *los Viejos Sagrados*. Even before the Vieuxlyese invasion, when the city's defensive wall was first cracked open by Vieuxlyese cannon fire and then shattered by the massive explosion that wiped out a substantial part of the westbound column, Meyersville was known as the poorer sister of Hughsrest – but only among the people of the capitol. The truth is that Meyer Builterman's city plan was revolutionary for its time, and it was largely upheld during the city's construction.

Like Hughsrest, Meyersville is built on top of a natural elevation, but that is where the similarity ends. The city's roads are wide and straight, spreading out from the center in a spiderweb pattern

that neatly divides the city into blocks. All amenities and functions are spread throughout the city, so that a citizen can find a temple, their workplace or a government office without having to walk for hours or drive a one-person *mobíla* through congested streets. While there are practical objections to this decentralized construction, *los Viejos Sagrados* mostly lauded it for its defensive aspects; even if the city were to come under fire, enemies would not be able to knock out all the core facets of civilization with one lucky shot.

I must point out that racial segregation is also practised in Meyersville, but at least here the 'undesirables' are not pushed to the very edge of the city. Instead, they are deliberately separated into smaller numbers and located throughout the city in different blocks, effectively isolated from each other and surrounded on all sides by Casian 'neighbours'.

Among the city's best-known sights are *la Torre del Conocimiento Sagrado*, the second most highly regarded university in the land, and Schloss Lenkherr. In keeping with the decentralized philosophy of the city, *la Torre's* various faculties are spread throughout the city. This also has practical reasons, as specific forms of research benefit from easy access to particular industries.

Schloss Lenkherr, as the name suggests, is an edifice on the north side of the city that was built by refugees from Lilliend. The current man of the house, Malik Lenkherr, likes to spread rumours that his family fled due to a succession issue and that he himself has a strong claim to the throne. (Considering the usual standing and fate of men in Lilliend, I personally consider it far more likely that 'Prince' Lenkherr's ancestors fled to save their sons from being murdered just as soon as they had sired children of their own.)

It is a public secret that Malik Lenkherr is a sometime agent for the government, often acting as a diplomat abroad. For a young man, he is incredibly well-travelled and speaks a wide range of languages. He also proved to be irritatingly well-informed, as I had



barely been in Meyersville for a week before a footman dressed in the Lilliender style visited my inn and handed me an invitation to one of the Prince's famously lavish parties.

I accepted, and did learn some interesting things, not all of which pleased me. You will have to consider these discoveries for yourself, my *Master*.

Where to stay in Meyersville:

There are many places to stay and eat throughout the city, as its decentralized planning extends even to the housing of travellers, and the city does require a steady supply of food and raw materials, after which finished products need to be shipped out again.

For those with deep pockets, I would recommend the Steel Drum (excellent quality rooms, excellent quality food), a lavishly well-appointed hotel with no less than seven adjoining restaurants, each claiming mastery of a different cuisine from across the borders. (The Masogani kitchen is notoriously unpopular.)

More financially cautious travellers should try the Gatehouse (decent quality rooms, good quality food), an admittedly gloomy but scrupulously clean building that stands forever in the shadow of Meyersville's new defensive wall, but offers nourishing and tasty fare.

### SCHLOSS LENKHERR

Seen from the outside, Schloss Lenkherr is a copy of the royal palace of Luzander in Lilliend, but built in stone instead of moldering wood. It is also a rather more cheerful and welcoming place than the one it is modelled on; when Hectór dropped me off at the castle gates, these were wide open and I was offered a warm towel for my hands and face and a glass of rather fine champagne, imported from Vieuxlyons. Inside, the castle was dry, clean and smelled pleasantly of lavender and other flowers. There was a multitude of impeccably uniformed and well-

trained maids present to see to the needs of every guest, and pleasant music rang out through the halls.

Prince Malik – a handsome and elegant man with classic Lenkherr features – personally welcomed me, and gave me a tour of his home. We spent quite some time in the Prince's private art gallery, one which included not only masterpieces by established masters from throughout the Cluster, but also the work of promising new art students. His highness is known for sponsoring the faculty of the arts above all others, and this has certainly done wonders for his collection. We also toured the castle's chapel to Thunder-Father, a feature whose upkeep the Prince explained as a show of respect to his ancestors, as he finds his own spiritual needs satisfied by the Church of Taiia. His Highness left me in the castle library, citing an obligation to entertain his other guests, but I was not aggrieved; the expatriate Lenkherrs had gathered a substantial collection during their stay in the domain, and Prince Malik had added volumes on linguistics and foreign languages that I found very intriguing.

What I also found intriguing was a secret door, hidden behind a bookcase that swung outward at the press of a small button. Although I was reminded of my experiences in Lilliend, I dutifully entered the passage beyond, though not without slipping a metal card I had made for just this purpose between the door and frame before swinging it shut.

The tunnel was lightless, but I have kept spell prepared to let me see in darkness ever since my last fight in Lilliend. In addition, the floor was even, the walls clean and dry; this tunnel was well-made and saw frequent use. When I came to a crossroads, there were even helpful little signs, albeit signs written in an alphabet I did not recognize – and the sigil of the lone open eye before the solar disc was carved above every doorway. I released my Firstborn from an inside pocket of my highly fashionable cloak, one enchanted to act as a *bag of holding*, and bade him travel down one passage while I selected another.

My Firstborn would later report to me about wondrous laboratories and a library far finer than that kept by the Lenkherr family, waiting in serene darkness for great minds to use them, but I found something else. The corridor I followed sloped gently downward, and grew steadily brighter owing to fat candles set in wall sconces, until I felt the need to cloak myself in invisibility before continuing further. I might be a guest of the lord of the castle, but guests should keep out of areas kept secret – or at least not get caught therein. Eventually, the passage opened up into a gallery that overlooked a large underground chamber, the natural bedrock carved to create a natural amphitheater. For a moment I fancied that the Prince's party extended to these depths, as the clink of cutlery rose to me. Then I saw and *smelled* just who and what was dining here by candlelight, and I shrank back against the wall. You may call me coward if you wish.

Far below me, a company of four dressed in dark robes of stark elegance sat at a long, mahogany table with a fine, white silk tablecloth. They dined with golden cutlery from golden plates, devouring slices of fresh, red meat they carved from the woman who lay in the middle of the table. She was still alive, but immobilised and silenced by powerful spells of constraint. Pain and terror twisted her features, and her eyes rolled as they variously stared at and shied away from the creatures devouring her piece by piece.

I am confident in saying, my *Master*, that the leathery-skinned, reeking monsters were nothing other than ghoulish lords. Rather than carving knives, they used their claws to slice choice bits of flesh from their victim. Unusually for such horrors, they dined with stately elegance and maintained a conversation between bites of raw meat and sips of what at least looked like red wine, rather than blood. In spite of the nature of those speaking, the conversation itself was scholarly and fascinating; I listened entranced until I realised some of the arguments made seemed familiar. Then it occurred to me that I had absorbed them when I spied on those mystery mages, reading

their lips as I watched through my spyglass. The ghoulish lords even made reference to 'juniors having reported' this or that, implying there was some sort of hierarchy in place, with lesser members of the organisation passing theories and discoveries up the chain until they ended up here, with these monsters.

Then the conversation shifted to a topic that filled me with dread. One of the ghoulish lords spoke in a disturbingly high and fluting voice, asking whether 'the other woman' would be brought to the table for the group's dining pleasure as well. "You know," it said, "the red-headed foreigner who was spying on our juniors in *Prosopis*. She might be tasty."

"No, no, not just yet," another countered, with a casual wave of its clawed hand, a ring sparkling on three of its fingers. "Not before proper questioning. The boy upstairs is supposed to sedate her. After he's had his own fun, she'll be brought below. Doctor Alfredo" – a third ghoulish lord gave a leering grin in acknowledgment – "will make her safe for civilized company. The fingers *and* the tongue this time, I fancy. *Then* we will have her to dinner."

This statement elicited a brief round of polite applause that sent chills down my spine, especially as I noted that the fingers of the victim on the table had been cut off with a sharp implement, after which the wounds had been neatly stitched.

"On which note," the ghoulish lord with the three rings said as it rose to its feet, "I believe we should get on with our current guest. My friends, fellow seekers of true knowledge, before us lies Gracia *BelPied*, *grabador* for *l'officia del recuerdo*. She was found poking around in the private records of one of our juniors in *las Zorras*, and tonight we shall discover how much she revealed and how much *l'officia* knows and suspects. Doctor Alphonse, if you would?"

The ghoulish lord with the leering smile rose from his seat and produced a surgical tool, a cranial saw, which he applied to the victim with gusto. Although the poor creature convulsed in such a way that I would have expected her to die, the ghoulish lord with

the fluting voice muttered healing spells over her, forcing her to survive and experience what was being done to her. As the top of her skull rolled off the table and the ghouls took up saw-edged spoons, I could tolerate no more – and besides, I felt my spell of *invisibility* reaching the end of its use.

I turned and crept back the way I had come, calling for Firstborn with my thoughts. The metal card allowed me to open the hidden door even without knowing where the switch was on this side, and I reentered the castle. Perhaps more hastily than was strictly polite, I made my excuses to my host, who acted very solicitous when I mentioned a pounding headache and general feelings of nausea, and offered me a bed for the night. As I am writing these words, still in full possession of my fingers, my

tongue and my brain, my Master, you can hopefully deduce that I declined.

No sooner had I regained my lodgings, or I ordered Hectór to pack everything we owned in his *mobila*, and we left the city before dawn. I never returned to Meyersville, and spent a lot of my remaining time in Conquista looking over my shoulder. I do not truly know what kind of group this secret order of mages is, but I lack the means and personnel to conduct a thorough investigation. When you enter this domain, you should either tread carefully or else raze the underground network beneath Schloss Lenkherr and hopefully wipe out the group's leadership in one fell swoop, then coopt the whole thing, my *Master*.

#### DREAD POSSIBILITY: LOS VIEJOS SAGRADOS REBORN

The original *Viejos Sagrados* were a group of enlightened atheists and altruistic scientists, who took control of a floundering nation when no one else was willing to do so and evil pressed in from all sides. They united the bickering tribes, freed slaves and brought light to the darkness, and for this they were rewarded with betrayal and disbanding by the government. In 721 BC, all the group's assets and holdings had been divided among the government offices and anyone else who had the president's favour and wanted a piece. The group was consigned to history. And then a farmer's son named Mauro Bulterman had his manhood trial in the *brugia sombreada*.

Mauro was an intelligent boy, much to the sorrow of his father, who just wanted a strong worker instead of the book-loving 'wimp' he had been 'burdened' with. He was knowledgeable about the forest and its animals, he had learned a little about magic from his mother and others in the area who secretly practised witchcraft, and he had no doubt that he could find and kill an animal large enough to satisfy his father. When he entered the area where he expected prey, however, he discovered that another youth had come there before him, and something else had discovered that youth.

Overcome by a mixture of awe and terror, Mauro fell to his knees, his spear falling to the dirt. Before him stood a woman of inhuman beauty, clad in a coat that reflected the light so brightly that it seemed white, her hair a waterfall of red curls. In her arms she held a young man Mauro knew as the eldest son of his own hometown's mayor and a cruel bully, her lips pressed to his. With each passing moment, the light in the boy's eyes dimmed, until finally they were as flat and empty as a lizard's and the woman let him fall to the ground to drool and twitch. Now her dark eyes were on Mauro, and she asked him what his thoughts were.

"I think you must be Brightwell," Mauro confessed, "or else someone else... something else... of great power. I think he" - with this he pointed at the mayor's son - "probably attacked you; he's done it before when he meets women alone. I think that I am in danger, but you are glorious and interesting, and I would know more of you."

At this the woman smiled, and the sight made Mauro's heart tremble and his mind quiver.



"What if I do not kill you?" the woman asked. "What will you do then?"

"Then I will kill an animal and bring it home, to shut up my father at least for a day," Mauro confessed, "so I can read in peace and learn more."

"Do you like to learn?" the woman asked.

"Oh, yes!" Mauro enthused. "I love to read, to hear stories and try new things! The world seems vast and there is so much to see and do. If I had the chance, I would leave the farm and go to the big city, to *la Universidad* and *la Torre*, maybe even to the mountain school in the middle *cantón*, to see what I could learn! Ah, but that would take a lot of money..."

"Money is a lie humans made up for their convenience, boy," the woman chided him. "It is a useful lie, one that may draw some study, but a lie nonetheless. Money has no true, intrinsic value, and it matters less than people think. To what purpose would you study?"

"To... learn the truth of things?" Mauro answered, finding himself now uncertain.

At this, the woman sneered, even as she drifted closer to Mauro. He felt himself start to sweat in mixed excitement and terror as a scent of brimstone and offal wafted over him. "What is the truth," the woman challenged him, "if not that this world, in spite of all its beauty and mystery, is a broken and unfair place? In a just world, you would not need to hide your light from your own father, nor scrimp and save to see books that were written expressly to enlighten your thirsting mind... *Mauro*. Tell me now, and quickly: *to what purpose would you study?*"

Realization hit Mauro like a thunderbolt, and when he answered he did not speak to please what he believed was the dark goddess of Chaos, but from his own heart: "I would study so I could remake this world into one that is worthy of *me*."

"Then study with abandon," the stranger said as great batwings burst from beneath her coat, casting a chill shadow over Mauro. "Study without restriction. Study as though your life depends upon it, then study beyond the limits of fleeting life and stale morals. Do so, and you will not just please Brightwell, you will give worth to your studies and satisfy your *own* hunger."

The very next moment she was gone, leaving Mauro with only the mindless boy and a small bag that proved to contain some very fine gems. Mauro dutifully killed a rabbit and carried it home, but the very next day he left the farm over his father's bellowed objections. He knew the gems were priceless, and he had a grand goal in mind for them.

To his own way of thinking, Mauro Builterman refounded *los Viejos Sagrados* by gathering in those like him; people who wanted to learn and make discoveries. What he actually built was very different.

The new – current – *Viejos Sagrados* operate in strict secrecy, sharing knowledge freely only among themselves, and but sparingly with the outside world. Instead of teaching, they stimulate learning from behind the scenes, for instance by slipping books with their sigil, a variation on the holy symbol of Brightwell, into libraries for keen young students to find. If someone is able to find and interpret the clues that lead them to the group, they are welcomed; those who fail to do so are left to their own devices.

Where the old *Viejos Sagrados* were atheists and scientists who wished to serve the nation, the new *Viejos Sagrados* are as eager to master the arcane as the scientific for the sake of their own agenda, and are at their root



a theistic group that hails Brightwell as its sponsor. Clerics of the moon goddess are common among its members and indeed its leadership.

Whereas the original *Viejos Sagrados* wanted to understand and improve the existing world, the current organisation ultimately wants to tear down and rebuild the world that is, recreating it to be fair and just... by its own standards. As the *Viejos Sagrados* believe in the primacy of the mind, and consider most traditions to be stale restrictions, many (though not all) are amoral intellectualists, who look down on those who live based on pure emotion or the strength of their arms and back.

And perhaps most importantly, where the old *Viejos Sagrados* were brilliant, but natural mortals who gathered into a collective out of humanitarian motivations, the new organization was inspired by a supernatural force. Granted, inspiring a youth to study with abandon and giving him the funds to do so might not seem a very sinister act. Given that the supernatural force in question was one of the personas of the demon known as the Red Haunt (See *Quoth the Raven #27, the Conferences of Victor Gagné IV* and *Quoth the Raven #28, the Conferences of Victor Gagné V*) and also given that she has a lasting involvement with the new *Viejos Sagrados*, however, it might be best not to judge too quickly.

It is perhaps as well that Conquista joined the rest of the Wartorn Cluster, as many high-ranking members of the new *Viejos Sagrados* struck out to investigate other lands and there set up more chapters of the organisation. While this has certainly increased the group's membership, it has further weakened its already tenuous ability to act as a group. Generally speaking, each domain has its own leadership, which is reluctant to cooperate with their counterparts in other lands. Different opinions as to how to best rebuild the world now exist, instead of only one plan or alignment – like its demonic inspiration's – coming to dominate the whole group.

In Conquista, the leadership of *los Viejos Sagrados* has embraced undeath as a way to keep studying beyond the limits of both morality and mortality. Although Mauro Builterman himself is safely dead, his successors soldier on, seeking the very limits of knowledge and power through both magic and science. As they pass into undeath, they have discovered grisly ways of absorbing knowledge even from those who refuse to share. (See the Viejo Sagrado prestige class in the DM's Notes at the end of this Gazetteer.)

### CIVDADELA DEL RADIÓ

On the way south towards the Wittwentraen, a traveller may see a marvel of Conquistan science rise up from between the hills and trees. Hectór explained to me that the skeletal-looking tower of metal was one of the nation's most powerful radió-masts; a central junction where signals from across the north and middle cantóns are received and broadcast to lesser towers.

This, la ciudadela del radió, would seem to be a crucial part of national as well as international communications, as well as various entertainments. I was startled, therefore, when I discovered that the whole site is run by a single woman.

Sister Euphonia Root is an ordained priestess of Taiia as well as a licensed mechanic, who was kind enough to welcome Hectór and myself inside the small complex of crude shacks at the base of the tower, which serve her as both home and workplace. During our tour of the machinery, the sister explained that she belongs to a sect that believes modern technology and faith should march forward hand in hand, rather than in opposition. Apart from her duties in performing daily maintenance and managing the scheduling of various public transmissions, sister Root hosts a musical program whenever the schedule allows. She told me with a modest blush that her program, a succession of

Taiian hymns and prayers, has gained her a small following and even some fanmail.

When I asked whether the sister did not need any backup personnel, and did she never feel lonely in this isolated location, she was quick to reassure me. She regularly receives supplies, variously from Hughsrest, Meyersville or local communities, so she does not lack for visitors. If she ever runs into mechanical (or other) trouble she cannot manage herself, she has signal flares that will bring help running. As a devout priestess, she leads a simple life, but she enjoys the opportunity to be so integral to the nation and spread the joy of her faith.

At this point, she laid a hand on Hectór's shoulder and mentioned she would not object if we decided to spend the night. I had already opened my mouth to accept when my vision flickered, and it seemed to me that the sheets of corrugated metal that made up the shack's walls had turned to living, breathing flesh. The sister's body seemed to briefly bristle with black hair, and her face was mercifully cloaked in shadow.

I rejected her offer as politely as I could and hauled Hectór out of there. My guide seemed to be befuddled, obliging me to drive us a ways out until he suddenly begged me to stop so he could exit the vehicle and vomit by the roadside. He was unable to explain what had happened, but I suspect there is more to the 'good' sister than she let on.

#### **DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE VOICE OF EVIL**

Euphonia Root is an ordained priestess of Taiia, and believes in her with all her heart. She is also Conquista's high priestess of il Demonio, who she despises with all her heart. For her full backstory, please see Who's Doomed in the DM's Notes at the end of this Gazetteer.

Suffice it to say for now, that sister Root is one of the four villains who alternate in the role of Conquista's Darklord / Darklady, and both Ciska and Hectór were fortunate to escape intact. La ciudadela del radió is sister Root's stronghold, from which she transmits

signals augmented with the Influencer-feat (see New Feats). As such, Sister Root is both the source of the growing Church of il Demonio and the Black Suns heresy; those who feel themselves drawn to her by her special transmissions are converted to one of the two, or else typically do not leave alive.

The radió station is a Level 2 Sinkhole of Evil with taints of Lust and Cruelty at the best of times; this level rises to 3 whenever Euphonia is initiating souls into the Church of il Demonio and the ranks of the Goatsmen.

#### **PROSOPIS**

Once the capitol of the middle cantón and home of its largest ziggurat temple to Taiia, Prosopis lost both of these distinctions due to the Vieuxlyese invasion. Currently, Prosopis is the center of the middle cantón's agricultural industry and boasts the largest marketplace in all Conquista, as well as the most impressive border security after those found at las Zorras. For a major city, it has a surprisingly rural atmosphere, given its dependence on the farming communities.

Local architecture and city-planning is similar to that used in Hughsrest, and regrettably includes the ghettos of the outermost area, which in this case are inhabited by Casians, Ulan and hybrids. Unlike Hughsrest, Prosopis is built on flat ground and has undergone considerable renovation due to its devastation during the Vieuxlyese invasion. The streets are wide and well-maintained, to facilitate the movement of farming goods from the communities at the shore of the Wittwentraen, as well as cargoes of black-oil being moved north from las Zorras.

During my tour of the city, I found that while the local temple to Taiia had been rebuilt, it is a largely charmless building that sees relatively little traffic. Local priests admitted that there is a local superstition that the temple site is cursed, seeing how Taiia did not protect the original temple from its



destruction. Most of the citizens prefer to visit smaller holy sites around the city or worship at home, leaving the grand structure to collect dust while a skeleton staff of long-suffering clergy try to restore its popularity.

No effort has been made to rebuild the central hub of government offices that once existed in the city. The satellite offices necessary to maintain order and monitor society do exist, but these report first to the central offices in las Zorras and second – by many indications grudgingly – to the offices in Hughsrest. In place of the old hub, there now stands a monument to a man whose bones are supposed to be peacefully rotting in Hughsrest: the so-called 'true' tomb of sir Hugo the Conqueror. This grand edifice, built of black and white marble, stands waiting for the supposedly inevitable day that sir Hugo's remains will be 'freed' from his grave in Hughsrest and interred with much pomp and ceremony here, 'among his own kind'.

While Prosopis is not unimportant in the grand scheme of things and is still officially the capitol of the middle cantón, it is largely considered to be a city without prestige due to the removal of the religious and political hubs to las Zorras. Successive governors have launched schemes meant to regain its lost prestige, which include the construction of the 'true' tomb of sir Hugo and the creation of Conquista's largest and most comprehensive brewery. Although there are not many laws that regulate the brewing of alcohol in Conquista, and every farm and temple brews its own beer, it is generally agreed that the Prosopis Brewery produces the finest beers and whiskeys in the domain – although as usual, people may argue. The aforementioned people tend to be Casians with a greater than normal disregard for their Canana countrymen.

Another such scheme is the reconstruction of the middle cantón's Mountain School, or Academia del Sol de Montaña. This institute of learning, once venerable though never considered actual competition for the colleges of the north, was devastated along with the rest of the city during the

Vieuxlyese invasion. During the reign of president Johsson, no funds were made available for its restoration. With money and supplies having become available in the years since and Prosopis' prestige waning alarmingly, the city's governors pinned some hope on the University of the middle cantón.

Yes, my Master; I visited l'Academia del Sol de Montaña myself. The main building actually stands a distance outside city limits, on what I would describe as a tall hill, rather than a mountain, but obliging pupils who are not willing to stay in its dormitories to make a long and fairly arduous daily commute. móbila are not allowed on-site, but there are parking facilities at the foot of the hill. Satellite buildings are located variously out in the desert, nearby Prosopis or the farming villages. I must admit that the Mountain School is a pleasant environment for study; the buildings are modern and bright, the various libraries are up to date and of respectable size, even if they are not up to the standards of the library at l'Universidad in Hughsrest, and research and testing facilities are modern and well-stocked. I would favourably compare the Mountain School to la Torre in Meyersville, and perhaps even to the Brautslava Institute in Darkon.

The teachers at the Mountain School are a professional but extremely stern crowd, who conduct both teaching and research with an atmosphere of humourless gravitas. Students are not allowed to treat staff with anything other than respect, unless they wish to have their educational privileges revoked – something which would bring with it considerable disgrace for their families.

As one might expect after reading the Mountain School's full name, it is an institution that at least makes concessions to the state religion. Lessons are started every day with a prayer session, during which Taiia is praised. A second prayer precedes the noon meal, and a third concludes the day's labours in the groves of education. A bell consecrated to the sun goddess, supposedly made of solid gold, rings out the hours of the day. A second bell said to be made

of iron dully claps away the hours of the night. My enquiries whether this second bell was also consecrated were ignored at first; when I persisted in asking, I was informed that the question was 'improper', and I was asked to leave the School's grounds.

While I did leave as requested, I returned to the main building under cover of darkness to conduct an inspection of the iron bell. This turned out to be a completely mundane item, but I discovered that the inside of it was carved with imagery that was distinctly non-Taiian, and in fact appeared to portray the variant creation myth of Conquista, the one that involves the rise of Brightwell and il Demonio through ascension. I was also well situated in the bell tower to witness the Mountain School's nighttime activities.

I already knew that there were dormitories present for students who did not wish to commute, as well as private quarters for the teaching staff. What I had not expected, was for many of these people to come spilling out of their sleeping quarters around sundown, dressed in heavy, black robes with red hems. Many, but not all, as far as I could tell. I observed these robed people gather in the main courtyard and there kneel to offer vocalisations that sounded very different from the Taiian prayers. The ritual reached its crescendo as a tall individual in a well-tailored suit of black cloth and a stovepipe hat appeared on the balcony I had been told was

reserved for when the master of college wished to address the student body.

Before, the various sounds had resembled the grunts and growls of wild animals, recognizable only as speech due to deliberate pauses and a certain cadence. When the broad-shouldered figure in black appeared, the sounds rose to a purely animal howl, which died the instant he raised one white-gloved hand. The figure spoke at length. His voice was smooth and cultured, and he spoke with conviction, his subject wandering organically from religious zealotry calling on people to cast down Taiia so Brightwell alone might illuminate the heavens, to complex alchemical formulae whose purpose eluded me, to subjects that I did not understand and have trouble recalling even now. What I do remember is the way the man seemed to fade in and out of his own shadow while he spoke, only to fully disappear in them when his speech reached its end.

At this point, the staff and students disbanded. I cautiously made my way around the school, and spotted several small groups engaged in rather different education than the daytime crowd. Both individuals I recognized as members of staff as well as students presided over groups of four students at most, discussing arcane matters instead of scientific, demonstrating spells or conducting experiments in alchemy. More than one teacher turned out to wear a golden amulet in the shape of an open eye before a solar disc, and so I made my way out of the Mountain School as stealthily as possible.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: NIGHT SCHOOL

The Mountain School was once a religious school dedicated to Taiia. This changed around 754 BC, the same time that Church of the north was complaining to the president about paganism and heresy in the middle *cantón*.

The Mountain School had always striven to impart true faith to its students, in addition to all the other knowledge and skills it taught. When the Church of the north vocally condemned the whole middle *cantón*, the headmaster of the time decided that the senior staff should attend the proposed meeting of religious heads in Choirville, even though the heads of the Church of the middle had refused. By doing so, he argued, the school's staff would show that the true faith transcended all barriers created by mortals.

None of the senior staff returned from Choirville, and when an urgent enquiry was sent north to ascertain their fate, the only answer was a curt 'accidental death', issued by the Church of the north.

While the remaining staff was reeling and emotions ran high, Fredewulf van Slecht stepped into the power vacuum that had suddenly opened up, like a germ casually drifting into an open wound. (See **Who's Doomed** for more information on this villain.) Under van Slecht's capable guidance, the Mountain School acquired additional funding, opened exciting avenues of study that drew in fresh students, and regained its confidence. It also became a secret bastion for the Church of Brightwell, in particular for that institution's Chaotic Evil sect.

By day, the staff and majority of students feign devout worship of Taiia. At nightfall, they renounce Taiia and pray to the goddess of chaos, darkness and witchcraft. If any students who are not yet members of the faith catch them at their devotions, or the lessons in magic and alchemy they teach among themselves, they are given the choice to join. Those who refuse 'have accidents' of their own.

As students graduate, they trickle out into the middle *cantón*, spreading their faith to their own children as they move through life. Unsatisfied with the pace at which his scheme is progressing, the now headmaster van Slecht has started teaching advanced classes from a tome he brought with him from a far journey, the *Libre des Ombres Secrètes*.<sup>38</sup>

Van Slecht preaches to his followers that they must amass sufficient power to overthrow the Church of Taiia and root her faith out wherever it hides in Conquista, so the Church of Brightwell may conquer all, tear down the world and rebuild it in her darkling image.

Where to stay in *Prosopis*:

The city's most famous inn is also its newest. *La generosidad del cervecera* (good quality food, average quality rooms) is built within bowshot of the city's famous brewery, and its cellars are frequently the lucky recipients of the brewery's latest products, which are offered so customers can try them out. While the inn's rooms are acceptable at best, they are at least kept scrupulously clean.

### LAS ZORRAS

The true heart of the middle *cantón*, *las Zorras* is the southernmost and most well-defended city in the entire domain. As it has borne the brunt of the Masogani invasions as well as overseen the decimation of the southbound Vieuxlyese column, *las Zorras*' defensive and offensive capacity are unrivalled in the whole domain, as is its industrial potential. If only the city were mobile, I fancy it could

crush Hughsrest and any other city and reign supreme.

Your forgiveness, my *Master*; a small jest on my part.

While *las Zorras* was left largely unscathed during the Vieuxlyese invasion, it suffered considerable damage due to the Masogani waves. When the damage was rebuilt, the Canana clearly prioritized defensibility and practicality over the architectural style of their ancestors. The city is still divided in districts, with the government offices and the city's largest ziggurat in the inner circle, the 'noble' district surrounding that, the commoner residential district is in the next ring out, and the ghettos at the very edge of the commoner district. Military barracks, heavy industry and compounds that house indentured servants are in the final, largest ring. In *las Zorras*, each district is walled separately, and there are cannons on top of every wall. Apart from enabling the city's defenders to keep shelling enemies who have managed to pierce the outer defenses, these cannons are a not-so-subtle warning

<sup>38</sup>For this fell tome's background, please read '*the Brightwell Legacy*' in *Quoth the Raven*, issue #22.



to the citizenry – not to mention the indentured miners – not to make waves.

While well-defended and vital to the proper working of the domain, I found *las Zorras* and its environs to be unpleasant, my *Master*.

As I mentioned in the History section, the shore of the *Bitterflut* is incapable of supporting plant life at this time; the farms that once fed *las Zorras* have died out, only to be replaced by mining camps. At one time, the earth must have been rich in valuable ore; under cover of darkness and spells of *invisibility*, I surveyed several deep shafts of a design familiar to me. All had been abandoned, however, and were stripped completely bare. Heavy equipment useful for the extraction of ore had largely been abandoned to rust, in spite of still being perfectly serviceable, leading me to suspect that there is no more ore to be had at all. Instead, the mining industry focuses completely on the extraction of black-oil, which is refined in the factories of *las Zorras* and then shipped

throughout the domain and beyond, in trade for the resources a large city requires – especially one that must oversee the sole choke point through which the savages of Masogan travel.

Black-oil mining, I soon discovered, is a foul industry. The substance is highly toxic, and the number of people willing to bring it up is small; most of the workers who go down into the earth to bring up 'the wealth of the earth' are slaves in all but name, consisting of both Ulan whose indenture has been sold and of criminals who have been sentenced to repay their debt to society through hard labour. From what information I was able to obtain, the death toll among the miners every year is grotesque. There is always a market for fresh convicts, who are then forced down lightless shafts with little if any training at gunpoint. Likewise, there is always a market for armed guards, brutes prepared to beat and terrorize the indentured and inured to pleas for mercy.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: DOWN THE MINES

In its natural state, black-oil is not so much a liquid as it is a chemical stew, which must be actively pumped up from the depths where it is encountered. Veins of the noxious stuff lie static in the depths until workers cut passages down to it and insert pipes to pump it to the surface.

Just the smell of natural black-oil is impossibly foul; anyone who breathes in near unrefined black-oil must make a DC 20 Fortitude save or become *sickened*. If black-oil is ingested or gets into an open wound in either its refined or unrefined state, it acts as a poison, requiring a DC 25 Fortitude save or else inflicting 2d4 Constitution damage in refined state, or 2d4 Constitution *drain* in unrefined state.

The dangerous qualities of black-oil are not the only reason for the high mortality rate among the indentured miners. Whenever the land trembles to signal the passage of the Darklord's mantle, tunnels collapse, burying workers in their hundreds. Pockets of radiation can be encountered in random places underground. Incorporeal undead drift from where they died in collapsed tunnels into new shafts to torment the living. Salt shadows lurk in the depths. Sometimes as veins of black-oil are pumped dry, unnaturally formed fossil golems or grave elementals rise up to destroy all before them.

Worst of all is the fact that the subterranean depths of Conquista border on the shifting labyrinth of Obissol. This truly massive domain underlies the Wartorn Cluster in its entirety, and it is never completely still. Unless the border is closed on either side, shifts in the labyrinth can suddenly open up great rents in the earth, and unsecured workers have been known to fall through.

Without security lines or other means to pull these unfortunates back up, they are abandoned to their fate, unless some truly brave soul decides to plunge into the unknown after them and try to give them aid.

Regardless, new arrivals in Obissol are soon noticed by its residents, and their fates often vary from the immediately lethal to the obscene.

Raw black-oil is refined into liquid fuel in *las Zorras'* industrial district, and the waste by-product gets pumped out of the city through lead pipes and directly into the *Bitterflut* to flow towards Vieuxlyons and the Broken Wheel. In a way, this makes sense; the waste is every bit as toxic as the raw black-oil, and will over time corrode even thick sheets of metal. One can go nowhere in the city and completely escape the stench that issued from the refineries' chimneys along with great belches of black smoke, however.

*(At the start of every day, both player characters and NPCs with reason to stay in las Zorras must roll a DC 10 Fortitude save or become nauseated for an hour.)*

There is a constant haze of smoke over the city, which thickens during the time that the refineries are in operation, and only ever disappears when strong winds disperse it. Everywhere I was able to go in the industrial district was blackened by smoke and filth, loud with the clanging and grinding of heavy industry, and thoroughly depressing. The miners who perform such essential work for the domain live in what are basically prison camps, and Hectór and I were regularly accosted by armed guards who variously demanded to either see the visitors' passes we were issued at the city gates or be bribed, or made spurious claims that Hectór was an escaped miner and tried to drag us both into a camp. After having had to shed blood and hide inconvenient corpses for the third time in one day, I washed my hands of the outer ring.

Moving inward from the industrial district, the commoners' residential area is not exactly uptown Port-a-Lucine, but it is tolerable. Every spring, the locals make an attempt to scrub clean their homes and the streets, taking brush and lye to the layer of soot – and worse – that descends on them throughout the rest of the year. Local government

encourages this effort, and makes the lye and other cleaning supplies available at no cost.

Many of the factory workers live in this district, but so do craftsmen who ply other trades. One can easily distinguish the two by looking at people's skin; those who struggle to refine the black-oil are noticeably paler, with pockmarked skin and prematurely thinning hair. A general air of infirmness and sickness hangs around them, and they are known to die early deaths, albeit not as early as those unfortunates driven down the mine every day.

I noticed there were a large number of small ziggurats spaced through the residential district; more than I would have expected even in a large city. When I enquired into the reason, the answer was simple and direct: the Church of Taiia in *las Zorras* ministers both to the indentured and the freeborn, but the local government will not allow for the construction of ziggurats in the outer district, where space is at a premium. Clerics who have the wish and perseverance to minister to the spiritual wellbeing of the guards and workers in the foul outer areas must each day travel to and from the residential district. Likewise, they must either haul the bodies of the dead back to their ziggurats for last rites, or consent to these being thrown into the polluted river.

Moving further inward, one comes to the local noble district. As in other cities, this is the district of the haves; those endowed with money because they own businesses and are active in the managing of money. Here one finds banks, business offices and other such conveniences. The buildings are kept scrupulously clean, owing to the efforts of a small army of indentured servants known locally as 'the Golden Pigs'. While they are housed in large basements and fed slop, are treated with casual disdain by the wealthy people whose houses and streets they clean and whose gardens and parks they

cultivate, and still suffer brutality at the hands of armed guards, membership in the Golden Pigs is considered to be a plum assignment for indentured servants. Considering the fate of those who toil in the mines, it is not difficult to see why.

Another institution one finds in the noble district, apart from those aimed at making money and lavish villas, is the offices of a government service known as *la officia del recuerdo*. When I asked about this lavish, independently walled building, answers varied from muttered comments about independent records to harsh stares and demands to see my visitor's pass. I got the impression that more goes on behind the pristine walls of this granite edifice than record-keeping, but I saw no way to enter the building without being apprehended. The grounds are patrolled all hours of day and night with attack dogs, and the building was apparently warded by priests with a viciously creative turn of mind.

I managed to learn a little something about *l'officia del recuerdo* later, but at the time I was in *las Zorras*, all that was clear to me was that the presence of the building seemed to weigh on the minds of all around me. Both guards and the rich gave it wide berth and seemed reluctant to discuss it, with some even going so far as to feign ignorance of its existence.

The innermost ring is home to the Great Ziggurat of Taiia in the middle *cantón*. While the building is not as impressive as its counterpart in Hughsrest, nor even the refurbished one in *Prosopis*, the ziggurat of *las Zorras* has a baroque beauty and sees heavy traffic. When the clergy of Taiia fled the siege of *Prosopis*, they brought every artefact and relic they could carry here, and here they remained. This temple is explicitly open to the public, with armed guards paid off by the Church guiding pilgrims safely to its always open doors. Inside, visitors can view galleries upon galleries of art glorifying Taiia, lovingly maintained by the priests.

Even I found the atmosphere inside the temple to be somewhat uplifting, and the local Clerics were both welcoming and educated people.

The local government offices are as luxurious here as anywhere else in Conquista, and just as paranoid about security. I was able to steal a few glimpses of gilded rooftops from a distance, across well-manicured parkland, but to go any closer would have invited prying questions or bullets lodged in my anatomy. You will have to be satisfied, my *Master*.

Where to stay in *las Zorras*:

Although the outer district has a wealth of flophouses and cheap inns, which offer large meals and stout beds for low coin and cater mostly to local security personnel, I can not recommend strongly enough that these be avoided. The inner districts of the city are rife with horror stories of travellers who made the mistake of seeking accommodations in the outer ring, only to discover upon awakening that staff had stolen their visitors' passes and other identity papers, then turned them over to the guards for the crime of vagrancy, after which they were hauled off to work in the mines.

In the common district, I can recommend *Miss Julietta's Haven* (average quality rooms, average quality food). While this establishment is not luxurious and the local food is far from excellent, the establishment is clean and the staff is polite and helpful. Miss Julietta, a respectable widow, has a wealth of information about the city and its people to share, and is highly respected by locals for employing mainly women who find themselves without other support.

In the noble district, I recommend *the Four Stars* (excellent quality rooms, excellent quality food). This hotel is easily the size of a minor keep, and hosts large numbers of guests with phenomenal service and discretion. I was informed in subtle terms that any manner of entertainment, varying from someone to warm my bed to entertaining substances extracted from local cacti, was mine for the asking – so long as I could pay. As a matter of fact, the only delight money can not buy you at *the Four Stars* is information; the seldom-seen owner has declared a strict moratorium on gossip or the



divulgence of confidential information. Any employee who transgresses against this rule will soon find themselves out of a job.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE SPY'S SPITE

*The Four Stars* is the property of Marilène BreChamps (CE female human Lilliender vampire<sup>39</sup> Rogue (Spy) 5 / Assassin 3). Marilène was originally ordered into Conquista by her sire, Lilliend's Darklady Camille Churnstone, to gather information and to murder Cliffton Willgoat for the crime of trying to propose an alliance.

Marilène noticed that her sire's control had ended as soon as she crossed the border before she ever found Cliffton, and abandoned the elder vampire's cause without a moment's hesitation. Through acts of murder and seduction, she gathered the funds and influence to open *the Four Stars*, a hotel so luxurious that it would have made her innkeeper parents weep with joy. It is also a spy's dream; secret passageways hidden in the walls allow Marilène and her small cadre of spawn to spy on guests in their most private moments, as well as feed shallowly on chosen victims.

By now, Marilène has a stockpile of information that could make her even richer than she already is, if she were willing to sell it... but she is not. When Marilène gained her freedom, she vowed she would never again be what Camille had wanted her to be. She continues to stockpile fodder for blackmail and extortion, but she is hoarding it to keep her hotel free and clear. Unless she is slain or she sees a dire need to use what she knows to maintain her freehold, she will continue to sit on what she knows, gloating at the thought of Camille's rage if she ever found out.

### THE GOAT IN THE ARCHIVES

When I decided that I knew enough of *las Zorras* for your purposes, my Master, Hectór and I promptly departed the city. Three hours out of the city, our *mobíla*'s engine started making disconcerting noises, then suddenly belched out great plumes of black smoke and ceased to function. As you may recall, this is a nightmare scenario in the sun-baked lands of the middle *cantón*, and Hectór reacted with all speed, opening the hood over the engine and bringing out his toolbox.

While my guide tried to find out what had gone wrong, I clambered up a nearby ridge with my spyglass, hoping to spot a nearby village or passing vehicle. A glint of metal under the sun caught my eye, and I was able to spot a *mobíla* that had been parked on a parallel road within walking distance, but appeared to be abandoned.

I slid down the other side of the ridge and made my way towards the other vehicle, hoping that it might have been left with the keys still in the ignition. If some fool was careless enough to abandon a working *mobíla* here, Hectór and I could continue our journey in comfort. If the driver was still there, I might be able to persuade or coerce him into driving us to *Prosopis* or a nearby settlement with vehicles for rent or sale.

As I approached the *mobíla*, I was hailed from behind by a loud, nasal voice. A man wearing the uniform of a *Hombre Valiente* came sauntering up to me, a rather dubious grin on his face and his shirt undone. He was wiping his hands on a rust-stained cloth, and his face was marked by heavy stubble that made him look unclean, rather than 'rugged'.

"Well, lookie here," he said as he approached. "I park to take a piss, and a beautiful *extraniera* comes walking up to me. Must be my lucky day."

<sup>39</sup>See the DM's section of the *Lilliender Gazetteer*, in *Quoth the Raven* issue #25.

He lunged for me the moment I opened my mouth to speak, and pulled my coat up and over my head, blinding and muzzling me. When I struggled to shake him off, I felt something sharp glide along my back, parting skin as well as cloth, and suddenly my coat and shirt fell away in two large pieces. The stranger slammed into me, bearing me to the ground. In one hand, he held the long blade of a *Hombre Valiente*; his other hand seized my throat. Black hair suddenly sprouted from his skin, and his face warped into a revolting hybrid of man and goat. Curled horns grew from his temples and open his mouth wide, revealing a predator's teeth and a salivating tongue.

*So I clawed him in the face.*

Startled, cursing and bleeding from four gashes in his cheek, the man-thing flinched back. I snatched at my fallen sword cane, managed to just graze it with my fingertips and gave a silent command. The weapon hurtled through the air and slammed into my opponent's head, knocking him off of me so I could roll to my feet. My cane came whirling back to my hand, and I drew the blade. When the goat-creature leapt to its... hooves... we were both holding steel and watching each other like back-alley knife fighters.

"*You think you can fight a chosen son of ia Demonía, perra?*" the monster whispered at me, as he started to move his blade in small, tightening circles.

Its jaws made its voice sound alien, its appearance was disquieting. I thrust all of this aside and raised my blade in a reversed, horizontal guard.

*And I started to sing.*

The goat-monster staggered, eyes glazing over, and I lunged and brought my blade down in a vertical slash. A finger and the long blade went flying, and the goat-creature screamed and leaped backwards. This put it in the perfect position for Hectór, who had

been sneaking up behind it, to club it over the head with a heavy wrench. It was already shifting back to its human form before it hit the ground, unconscious.

I took a moment to hog-tie the thing's ankles and wrists with its own belt before I went to Hectór's aid. He was bleeding profusely from a head wound, which took two healing spells before it was closed all the way, and he remained unsteady on his feet. I broke open the door to the *mobíla* I had found so Hectór could sit in the driver's seat and regain himself. Through trembling lips, he told me the goat-thing had come upon him shortly after I climbed up the ridge.

"It looked like a man, a *Hombre Valiente*," he told me. "Then it ... changed. Like sickness in my eyes; I couldn't think, couldn't breathe. He hit me in the jaw, then kicked me in the head when I was down."

Hectór credited his survival to having strained to lie still and limp in spite of his pain and confusion. Once the goat-thing turned its back on him, he got up and followed it as quietly as he could, suspecting correctly that it would go after me next.

"Somebody poured sugar into our fuel tank, looks like," he went on, angrier about the sabotage than his own injuries. "Our *mobíla* won't drive until we can flush the fuel tank out completely and fill it with fresh oil. I am sorry, but we don't have enough with us, miss Ciska."

"Fortunately, providence has provided us with a new vehicle," I told him. I turned to our prisoner. "And an interesting mystery to investigate. Note the feet, that were hooves just now; remember the sites of the destroyed villages up north, and the prints we found."

"It doesn't look the way *sasquatch* are supposed to," Hectór noted, dubiously. "Correct. We shall have to ask it several questions," I said. "Fetch something to stake it down with, and we shall ... *encourage* it to be truthful with us. But first, I want you to get me my spare shirt and coat from my luggage."



## Interrogation notes

Abbreviation: C = your humble researcher; S = subject; H = Hectór, my loyal guide; M = intruder.

S: (groaning sounds) "What – what the-?"

C: "Ah, awake again, are we?"

S: (grunting; sound of creaking rope) "What – ?"

C: "Do you like bacon?"

S: "What – ?"

C: (sound of knife being sharpened) "I *love* bacon. Just cut me some nice, long strips, plop some lard on a hot griddle and slap the meat down. Listen to that sizzle, *hm-hm-hmm!*"

S: (sound of creaking rope) "You going to pay for this, *perra!* You any idea who I am?"

C: "A naked man, staked out under the sun. Not much more to look at without your kit than with it on, are you?"  
(sound of knife being sharpened) "Nice day out, isn't it? Just look at that sun."

S: (sound of creaking rope) "I'm a *grabador!* I work for *l'officia del recuerdo!* You know what happens to fools who go up against us?"

C: (sound of knife being sharpened) "Doesn't make much difference to you if I skin you and leave you to fry in the sun, does it, little piggy?"

S: "What you call me?!"

C: "I *looove* me a good side of bacon. How about you, Hectór?"

H: "Love it, Miss Ciska. Ain't a real breakfast without bacon. Eat me some for every meal, if I can."

C: (sound of knife being sharpened)

S: "You think you scare me, *perra?*"

C: "Hold his ankle still, Hectór. I hate uneven cuts."

H: "Can do."

S: (incoherent screaming) "Stop! Stop!"

C: "You feel like answering some questions, piggy?"

S: "I – I let you go! You untie me *right now*, I let you go! You won't get any better offer than" – (incoherent screaming) – "Stop, stop, stop! What you want, what you want to know, *perra?!!*" – (incoherent screaming) – "Stop it, I'm sorry! What you want, *lady?!!*"

C: "Are there a lot of freaks like you in *l'officia del recuerdo?*"



S: "Who you calling a freak, you red-eyed *per* –" (incoherent screaming)

*So rude.*

H: "Oh! Look at that. The whole toe came off in one go, Miss Ciska! And you didn't even need to put any real force into it."

C: "It's all about knowing where to cut, Hectór. Would you like to try?"

H: "Well, if you don't mind –"

S: "*Stop, stop, stop it! Stop!* No! No others in *l'officia del recuerdo* like me! *La Demonia*, I am the first *grabador* she chose! I am special, her eyes and ears!"

C: "*La Demonia?* Not *il Demonio?*"

S: "*Sí, la Demonia.* Fools think Brightwell had a son, but she had a daughter. I know, I found out. She called to me through the *radio*, she brought me to her place. I was a fool like you, then; I thought she was just a fine woman, so I tried to take her. She showed me her truth, broke my mind, ripped out my soul, gave me *my* truth and made me hers. I am special, I am her eyes and ears in *l'officia del recuerdo!*" (sound of creaking muscles and bones) *Look on my truth and despair, perra. Through me, la Demonia knows all, sees all. You cannot escape her in her own land.*"

H: (sound of retching)

C: "Well, now. I've never seen a weregoat before, but I suppose it's not as ridiculous a concept as it sounds. Did she bite you? Is she a maledictive lycanthrope, or a natural one?"

S: "*You what? I mean – what do you speak of, mortal perra?*"

H: "Whoops."

S: (incoherent screaming) "*No, stop, STOP! You got more questions, lady? Ask! Ask!*"

C: "Did your demon-goddess bite you, to turn you into the freak you are? Or did she put her blood in your eyes? Did she tell you to wreck our vehicle and ambush us out here? The truth, now. I could stand to take a few more samples for my research, and I like lots of bacon with my meal."

S: "*No – no biting, no blood! I prayed to her under her mother's moon, she taught me the prayers to say, the power – my truth came to me. She wants your eyes, your blood. She saw you, saw your red eyes, and she wants your bits for her brew for Darkest Night.* (sound of creaking muscles and bone) *She thinks they'll make her moonshine special!*"

C: "What is this Darkest Night?"

S: "It's – it's, uh –"



H: "You don't need the freak to tell you that, Miss Ciska. Darkest Night is the summer solstice. It's coming soon. People whisper it's when witches gather to worship *il Demonio* and drink his brew."

C: "Wouldn't the winter solstice be the darkest night of the year?"

H: "Can't say, Miss Ciska. This is how it is, how it's always been."

C: "Sounds to me like you're getting less useful, little piggy. You mentioned taking my eyes..."

S: (scream of fright; creaking of bones and sinews) "*Nonononono, DON'T!* Take it away from my eyes! What you want?! Tell me what you want! I'll tell! *I'll tell you anything you want!*"

C: "Where is your mistress?"

S: "She – she travelling! Going to Darkest Night! I'm supposed to bring your eyes to her! She'll be in the *brugia zorra*, that's where the witches gather this year! Hon – Honeystone! She stayin' near Honeystone village! Honest! I swear! She brings her moonshine, like the other dark ones! They bring the 'shine to win the hearts of the witches!"

C: "Let's have a chat about –"

M: (sound of gunshot) "That was to miss. The next" – (sound of gun being cocked) – "is to hit."

C: "Fancy seeing you here. You do get around, your *highness*."

M: "Afternoon, Miss Ciska. Why don't you take your slave and this idiot's *mobila*, then be going on your way?"

S: "Please, brother, help me! They're insurgents, rebels, they work for *los llenos del protesta*, they're foreign agitators, they ambushed me, help me, they –"

M: "Shut your pie-hole before the flies get in, *idioto*."

C: "Brother, is it? I don't see the resemblance."

M: "You're a clever woman, Miss Ciska. Clever enough to know how this will go if you push too far. The idiot might've come alone, but I didn't. See the light reflecting off that ridge? I brought snipers. If you give me any more trouble than you've already done, you really *will* be in hot water with *l'officia del recuerdo*."

C: "You are generous to share so much information with me, your *highness*."

M: "Your fates are already sealed, my dear. As a gentleman, I am allowing you to live out your days until the hammer comes down. No need to thank me; just go."

C: "Hectór."

H: "Coming, Miss Ciska."

C: "Good day, your *highness*. Let me just" – (sound of gun being cocked) – "not take these tissue samples. I'm sure we'll meet again."

M: "We will not. Leave the knife; I have some questions of my own that I want answered."

C: "Enjoy the pork, your *highness*."



M: "I just might."

S: (incoherent pleading, screaming)

**Conclusion:** regrettably inconclusive.

The interference of Lenkherr, M., prevented me from analyzing the pieces of tissue I harvested from the goat-creature as a means to induce it to answer my questions, and also prevented me from asking questions about the inner workings of this *oficía del recuerdo*.

The only thing I knew for certain was that a progenitor creature had plotted attack on my person, and was now scheduled to attend a meeting of witches in the northern cantón.

As my survey of the middle cantón was reaching its end anyway, I made haste to return north, both to conduct my review of Alsem on my way to the eastern border, and to gain more in-depth information about Conquista's traditions of witchcraft. If I could capture and analyse the goat-progenitor, that might also provide some interesting information.

*Besides, nobody gets away with just attacking us.*

*Nobody.*

## HONEYSTONE

Honestone Village is an insignificant flyspeck, nestled among the hills of the *brugia zorra* of the northern *cantón*. Had it not been for the information I carved out of the goat-thing; I would probably not even have bothered to mention its existence.

The village's sole claim to fame is probably its bee-keeping industry. Every farmer in or near the village, in addition to working their acres and breeding cattle, keeps one or more hives and markets their own honey. I took some time to sample the various honey- and beeswax-related goods offered at the local market, and must admit that they were excellent. Generations of experience, fostered by sons and daughters being required and even forced to learn their parents' trade, clearly counts for something.

Honestone Village has little else to recommend it, apart from being largely self-sustaining. The village has a small hospital to oversee the medical needs of

its people, a small *radio*-tower to bring signals from the outside world into the citizens' homes, a small office that houses both the town's mayor and its sole *Hombre Valiente* to represent law and order, a small *mobíla*-servicing station, and a small hotel for the needs of travellers. Everything, in short, is small and bucolic. Apart from the odd drunken brawl at the end of the week, the whole place feels as though it were asleep, lulled into somnolence by the distant droning of bees.

When Hectór and I arrived in the village, this appeared to be the most exciting thing to have happened there in over ten years. Normally, the only visitors are merchants who delivered the few things the village cannot produce for itself, such as refined black-oil, and picked up goods for sale in other quarters. The town's sole *Hombre Valiente* was an old, overweight man who asked impertinent questions regarding my relationship with Hectór and searched my belongings for contraband. He demanded a bribe when he failed to find any, but the



sum was not insurmountable, and I sent Firstborn to steal it back before we left the village.

Where to stay in Honeystone:

If the law was impertinent and the dull-eyed stares of the townsfolk off-putting, then *the Angel's Roost* (good quality food, good quality rooms) was a welcome breath of civility and comfort.

The town's bar and hotel is small and its usual clientèle is rough, but its owner, Mrs. Angela Williamson, is fastidious about keeping her establishment clean and sets a very fine table. She welcomed Hectór and myself without missing a beat, asked whether we wanted one or two rooms with no show of hostility or judgment. Her husband was

taciturn but polite and helpful, and Mr. Williamson proved to be an able mechanic. He gradually warmed up to Hectór to the point that they spent an evening discussing the finer points of *mobílas* over beers in Hectór's room.

Mrs. Williamson provided me a wealth of local information, most of it sadly only of local importance, but her conversation was warm and sparkling. When I 'casually' mentioned the upcoming solstice, she was kind enough to warn me there had been rumours of strange people convening in a nearby valley and not to go anywhere near there if I was a virtuous, Taiia-fearing woman. At this point, it seemed to me that there was an ironic glint in her eyes, but it vanished before I could be certain.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE WITCH'S ROOST

Angela Williamson (NE female human Alchemist 1 / Bard 4 / Wicked Witch 5) is the elder of Honeystone Village's resident coven of witches, one which belongs to the *Golden Roses*-sect. She is also the youngest sister of Sandra Williamson, Darklady candidate, who *mostly* departed her sisters' coven and her role as the younger witch to found her own.

Since her arrival in Honeystone Village, Angela has corrupted a local farmwife and the town's resident nurse into joining both her coven and her mission to gain power by charming and seducing men. Together, the three witches have been steadily winding the region's rich and powerful around their little fingers, building their own influence.

Once a year, the three witches hunt young men when these leave home for their manhood trial, and devour three of them out in the woods in order to maintain their own youth and beauty. Angela's "husband" is actually her wicked familiar; as he was on the run due to false charges of having murdered his previous wife, he is in no position to make a lot of noise about having been magically enslaved, and he is mostly resigned to his fate by now.

Honeystone Village may be a tiny speck on the map, but its place in the honey-, wax- and sugar-trade provides it with ample wealth, a lot of which Angela is funneling into her own coffers. As merchants come to Honeystone Village, expecting to easily trick the farmers into deals lucrative only to the merchants, Angela and her coven separate and enthrall them, making sure to alter the deals to suit themselves. As her influence over the region's business grows, Angela anticipates a time when she can run for some form of office. Governor of a more prestigious town would be a good start. Her ambitions may be modest for a Williamson, but Angela is better capable of contentment than her sister Sandra.

## DEMON'S HOLLOW

Finding the valley was not that difficult; not for someone like myself, with access to such a fine homunculus.

Mrs. Williamson had not been wrong when she said a strange crowd had descended on the place, as my Firstborn reported to me the presence of men and women from all walks of life as well as all tribes, including numerous halfbreeds. All engaged in roasting small forest animals, boiling tins of food, and spinning crude wards around the campsites they had set up in the forest. All of them converging on a central point. Squabbles often broke out when the groups met up, and Firstborn reported that in some cases blood was shed.

There was a deep valley, like a great gouge in the land. At one time, there had been a circle of standing stones here, but some force had knocked these down. Some looked to have once been marked with the holy symbols of both Brightwell and Taiia. As the day of the summer solstice approached, the strangers converged on the gouge. From Firstborn's observations, I could tell that tensions were running high, and yet the bickering and killing had stopped. Each group found a place in the hollow to set up a new campsite and then... waited.

I asked Hectór whether he was willing to accompany me when I surveyed Darkest Night from a safe distance, and was pleasantly surprised when he agreed. He promptly took some of the pleasure out of it when he admitted that the townsfolk 'kept looking at him funny', and he worried that he would be murdered the instant I was out of town.

Unlike the various groups that had moved to the hollow, Hectór and I travelled there in a straight line, cutting down on travel time. We also had the advantage that we did not need to look out for other groups, as they were all already gathered at the hollow – or so I thought at the time.

We made it to the edge of the forest surrounding the desecrated site well in time for the solstice. Finding

it was no trouble, no trouble at all, even with night falling. The gathered witches, or so I supposed them to be, had lit great bonfires that were easily visible from a distance, and there was a thunderous sound of drums and shrieking on the air. I took a few sensible precautions before we crept to the edge of the woods, where we hunkered down to make our observations.

The sight before us was riotous, verging on hysterical. Many of the gathered people had divested themselves of their clothing and oiled up with various lubricants. Judging by sheer stench, while some favoured genuine perfumed oils, others had rubbed themselves with lard or engine grease. Many of those present were running around, screaming gleefully at the top of their lungs as though they were overgrown children. Others stood swaying and chanting, their eyes rolled up in the sockets, bodies jerking with involuntary movement while they vomited up sheer gibberish. Yet others were dancing while sharing sips of what appeared to be moonshine.

So far, this was no more reprehensible than many a raucous harvest celebration in Tepest, but I noticed a group of people sitting off to the side, surrounded by an enchanted circle. These were people not involved in any of the festivities, and who seemed to not have any magical ability... and from time to time the revelers would drag one of them, kicking and screaming, out of the circle to become part of their entertainment. The fortunate ones ended up spitted and roasted in the great bonfires – eventually. Those worst off were returned to the circle prison to await another round of 'fun and games'.

Hectór gagged and threw up twice at the various sights, then turned away and refused to look further. I envied him his freedom to do so.

The festivities had reached a fever pitch when suddenly, the drums all fell silent. I could see the musicians' hands still striking the stretched skins of their instruments for a minute or so before they noticed, but they leaped to their feet once they had

done so. All movement in the hollow ceased, and the only sounds were the crackling of the bonfires and the sobs of the 'party favours'.

Then there came a new sound; a harsh rattling, clanking sound. A man of mixed Casian-Canana blood appeared from the darkness to the north, his body covered with sweat, grime, a crude harness of even cruder tools, and nothing else. He looked surprisingly handsome, but his face was a mask of anger and disgust. He was pushing a steel drum up to the edge of the hollow, patches of rust spreading along its surface where his hands touched the metal.

Without a word, the man pushed his drum right up to the hollow's edge, then selected a hammer from his harness and knocked out a stopper set in the drum's lid. A liquid came spurting out, black as night and fragrant as jasmine. The scent of it hit me like a slap in the face, and I can only imagine how strong it must have been to those in the hollow. Below, the gathered revelers roared their approval and rushed in with cups, bowls, whatever could be used to catch this dubious libation.

Arms spread wide in a gesture of either blessing or condemnation, the naked man rose to his full height and bellowed at the gathered witches: "Choose *ME!*"

The revelers pushed and shoved at each other so they could catch as much of the black liquid as they could. More squabbling followed, as people fought to drink what they had caught or else steal another's portion. The bleating of a goat rang out to the west, cutting through the din. All eyes – mine included – turned to behold a hideous sight.

Standing on the western lip of the hollow was a creature that united the worst traits of human and goat, dressed in clerical robes of black cloth, emblazoned with golden suns. It radiated *wrongness* on both a physical and a spiritual level. It held aloft a great bowl of bronze, entwined snakes etched along its rim.

"Choose *ME!*" the abomination shrieked / bleated, and started to tip over the bowl. A golden liquid that

smelled of sun-touched hay and festering mushrooms struck me, making my eyes water. The revelers milled about, some lingering to catch the last dregs of the black, others rushing to catch the gold in their cups while the goat-thing capered and contorted its body. The naked man shook a fist at the goat-thing and shouted insults I could not hear over the din of the witches; grotesquely, it blew him a kiss.

A chill burned on the edge of my senses, and instinct made me look east. Standing at the sunward edge of the hollow, there now stood a tall, broad-shouldered man dressed in a suit and greatcoat of black cloth, shadows twisting around him. I could barely make out shining teeth and glittering eyes behind the murk, and a stovepipe hat that stuck up out of it. The apparition that had addressed the staff and students at the Mountain School had put in an appearance, and neither the naked man nor the goat-thing seemed pleased to see him. One of them spat in his direction, the other made an insulting gesture, and he tipped his hat to them with a wide, shimmering grin.

The revelers cried out in surprised pain and fear at the new arrival, flinched and cowered. Without a word, the third creature pulled a series of earthenware jugs out of his shadow and started pouring half-frozen slush into the hollow. As it fell away from him, the liquid steamed, thawed and became milky white, a smell of aniseed and something bitter making my gorge rise. The witches seemed less eager to collect his bounty than the preceding libations, but no sooner had one of them tasted it than the rest rushed in to gather what they might, some even stooping to lick it up off the ground.

My only warning of danger was Hectór's cry of alarm and his weight that slammed into me, knocking me down. A great wave of wind passed over me, tumbling my guide along. I sprang to my feet and found myself facing three women, two of whom – an imperious-looking redhead and a rather dumpy brunette – unknown to me. The third, however, was



Miss Williamson from Honeystone Village, who gave me a cruel smile. All three radiated baleful power.

“Choose *ME!*” cried the redhead as she raised her arms, palms aimed at me. “In this sacrifice’s veins, there boils the wine I have brewed for your consumption, a divine alchemy of her own blood and my little sister’s potions! Drink from her veins and known the enlightenment of the Lord of the Nine! Choose *ME!*”

With that, she directed a great blast of lightning at me. I blinked once as the spell struck me – and leapt forward. Around me, the redheaded woman’s magic fizzled against one of the warding spells I had cast on myself when I made my preparations. My sword cane left the sheath with a silken hiss, and I stabbed at Angela Williamson’s face, which displayed stunned surprise. She managed to dodge the worst of my attack, but I did cut a neat little groove along her cheek, which spurted blood. She shrieked most hearteningly and darted away.

“Don’t break the circle!” the dumpy brunette yelled at the departing Angela, and she tried to tackle me to the ground. I chanted a quick incantation and drove the heel of my hand into her chest, lightning arcing around and into her. She moaned in pain and fell back, hands fluttering with distress.

The redhead gestured at me and I was seized by invisible force, which hurled me away from her and closer to the hollow. *Like the damned vampire, curse her!* Hungry wailing rose around me as witches came boiling up from the depths, Hectór’s terrified voice calling my name. I struggled to regain my feet, to cast a *fireball*, but I was too late. Hands seized me, knives of flint bit into my arms and there were mouths lapping at my wounds. Terror rose from the depths of my gut...

The witches who had been sucking at my wounds reared back, gagging, clawing at their throats, and the whole damnable tableau froze. I stood mostly upright, held by a dozen hands, as the witches watched their comrades who had drunk from my veins contort on the ground as though in the grip of

epilepsy, eyes bulging, tongues swelling and blackening. One of them clawed at her own eyes in a mad attempt to relieve her agony, blood streaming down her cheeks and visibly turning black. Soon enough, they all fell still.

“Release me or suffer their fate,” I  
hissed.

I was released and the revelers backed off, their expressions sullen and confused. Before their confusion could give way to anger and more violence, I reached into the enchanted pockets of my coat and drew out a fat, round bottle of green glass. “Her brew has no power to delight,” I said, casting a mocking glance at the redheaded woman. “Try mine, instead. Choose... *ME.*”

I unstopped the flask and poured a green liquid that smelled faintly of citrus and sweetness into the first bowl that was extended to me, be it ever so reluctantly. The bowl’s owner lifted it to his mouth, hesitated, took a sip – and his eyes went wide as he gulped it down and held out his bowl again. He was pushed aside by a matronly-looking woman, and soon enough I was at the center of a shoving, arguing press of people, all eager for a drink – or another one.

Distantly, I heard the redheaded woman shriek curses at me, but she did not attack again. Bitter cold rolled over me a few times, and I heard other voices shouting in anger, but always in the distance. There were more and more witches, all shoving to get at me, and I obliged them, pouring out small drams until the bottle ran dry... and the witches started to stumble about, glassy-eyed and confused.

You may recall my mentioning that I had a lot of fun distilling the contents of Conquista’s cacti, my *Master*. I had brewed a very fine elixir, that combined some of their most potent hallucinogenics, and this seemed as good a time as

any to put it to use. While I can personally vouch for the taste of my creation, I was not sad to give it away; not too long ago, I had been in mortal peril, now the majority of my potential enemies were either waddling about or passed out on the ground.

*Small wonder. There was enough cactus-juice in that bottle to knock out a medium-sized town.*

With the masses pacified, I looked up to the creatures who had poured their own brew for their approval. The redhead and her accomplice had vanished somewhere, as had the tall man in black, but the naked man and the goat-creature were still there. If looks could kill, I would surely have been a sooty stain upon the earth; the goat-thing bared sharp teeth in a snarl more befitting of a wolf, and the man was clutching a crude dagger of flint and horn.

"You *dare*," the goat-thing bleated, voice trembling with rage. "You *dare* defile Darkest Night this way!"

"One should always seek to repay gifts in kind, *madame*," I replied, as I executed as mocking a bow in its direction as I could. "Many thanks for the agent you sent to collect my eyes. I hope you take as much joy from the night's festivities as I took from that *present*."

To my surprise, the naked man uttered a brief bark of a laugh and sheathed his blade. "Darkest Night

rushes to its end," he said, as though addressing the witches in their stupor, "and none has been chosen. That means the distinction remains *mine*!"

Somewhere deep under my feet, there was a tremor in the earth, and lightning flashed in the otherwise clear sky. The goat-thing bleated her denial, then hissed and made a gesture at me; index and little finger, forked like horns. "You will pay for this," it promised before uttering a spell that shrouded it in a cloud of inky darkness, which moved away into the forest.

The naked man sneered at me and made a dismissive gesture. "Leave my land," he ordered, regal as any king I could care to name. "You have repaid the debt you owed for nearly bringing the power of that bitch to the west into my dominion, but my gratitude has its limits."

I just nodded at him and went to collect Hectór. He was in a bad way – the witches had trampled and stabbed him while they were charging at me – but he was still breathing. I hoisted him onto my shoulder, disregarding his moans of pain, and cast what healing spells I had available as I carried him away from the hollow and back into the forest.

By the time we were at the forest's outer edge, where we had hidden the *mobila*, Hectór was able to walk with some help. I put him in the back seat and got behind the wheel, then drove us away from Honeystone Village. By now, I was persuaded that it was indeed time to go, especially considering the fact that all those witches would wake up sooner or later, but I had one final stop on the way.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: DREAD ELECTIONS

When Conquista stood alone, Cliffton Willgoat was originally its sole Darklord. He was the absolute master of the vile creatures that lurked in the Misty Border, and he would lead their charge against the feeble light of civilization.

That all changed when two fiends, the Red Haunt and *la Infestación*, started tampering with the land's politics. After the fiends had sponsored elections for secular leadership, the Darklordship itself was altered as if in response. First, Euphonia Root manifested herself as a rival for the title of Dread Lady around the time that Hoyt Gunterbull was elected as president; later, Sandra Williamson and her sisters arrived from some faraway place

around the time that the Vieuxlyese invaded; finally, there was Fredewulf van Slecht, who became a candidate for the position of Dread Lord sometime after he seized control over the Mountain School.

All of these villains are trapped inside Conquista, and all are cursed in their own way. But only one can hold the power of the land's Dread Lord at a time; the ability to close the borders, influence over the Weave, influence over the general populace and the full might of the land's dark heart, all of this resides with the one who is Lord – or Lady. And only the one who manages to win the greatest approval during Darkest Night will be able to claim the title for the next two years.

If one of the rivals wishes to make a throw for the lordship, they must attend Darkest Night, wherever the omens say it should be held. They must brew a special elixir (Craft (alchemy), DC 25), whose contents include – but are not limited to – one whole adult humanoid and one infant humanoid. This brew, they must make available to the witches who attend Darkest Night, then await their judgment. Whoever's elixir finds the greatest favour among the debauched revelers shall be the land's dread lord or lady for the next two years.

And those who willingly partake of the various draughts offered at Darkest Night must make a DC 30 Fortitude save, or else suffer an addiction that will draw them to the next Darkest Night as surely as a magnet attracts iron filings.

## ALSEM

Moving west from Meyersville in the north cantón, one comes to the city of Alsem, which sits on the very edge of la brugia pestilente. Judging by the stories I had heard of Conquista's history, I was expecting a small city, more border fort than metropolis. Memories of Schlotstein danced before my eyes as we drove up the wide road through la brugia serena, only to be dashed by the reality.

Alsem is both the first defense against invasion by Vieuxlyons and the channel through which all trade with the rest of the Cluster must flow. In times gone by, trade had to pass through the brugía pestilente and the Vieuxlyese border swamp, both highly toxic environments that included a steep slope. Nowadays, trade with Vieuxlyons travels through a series of manmade tunnels, punted along rivers that never see the light of day. Massive, oxen-propelled elevators carry goods and people up out of it and down into the darkness, and these impressive machines can be seen well over the city walls.

Nor are the two elevators – one forever ascending and one always descending – the only thing that makes Alsem's skyline extraordinary. As the city was

rebuilt after its destruction at the hands of the Vieuxlyese army, it incorporated not only elements of traditional Conquistán architecture, but also styles imported by Vieuxlyese refugees and travellers from further afield who wound up settling here. Notable edifices include the Palace of Justice, a genuine castle in the style of the Broken Wheel that houses the city's courts; the Tower of Arts, a minaret-bedecked structure of pale stone in the style of Lund that houses the city's largest educational center; and the Great Market, a cube bedecked with panes of dark glass in the fashion of Malopelagio's distant past.

Walking or driving along the bustling streets of Alsem, the traveler can see many more architectural marvels, not to mention the many parks and shrines to gods both local and foreign. People of all three tribes, as well those as of mixed blood and obvious foreigners, move through the city with a general sense of purpose and, dare I say it, peace of mind, none of them forced to stick to a specific area. If there are Hombres Valientes on every street corner, they at least give a clear impression of being there to keep the peace, not to bully and exploit people.

After the rest of the domain's cities, with their frequent squalor, segregation and frequent bouts of



violent crime, Alsem came as a great relief. I was surprised to find that there was no display of the many prejudices and hatreds so evident in the rest of the land, and enquired of several people to what they attributed the different atmosphere of their home. In almost all cases, the answer was that the city's most famous citizen was responsible for its turnaround.

Francisco Hareleg was appointed as chief of the city's Hombres Valientes and its governor in 753 BC by President Hughmann in response to the Butterfly Murders, and he started his investigation (which continues unto today by all accounts) not by rounding up 'the usual suspects', but by a purge of the city's guard.

To the common people's stark surprise, governor Hareleg got rid of every corrupt guardsman and replaced them by swearing in men and women of impeccable reputation, rather than thugs loyal only to him. He did not stop at cleaning up the guard, either; in his capacity as civil governor, the captain went through the local government offices with a fine-toothed comb, exposing even the least impropriety and reporting to the central offices. While not a farmer, an engineer or an architect himself, the captain set up so-called 'think tanks' of experienced men and women, making sure to include creative youngsters, much as the Viejos Sagrados had once done. He set them to work improving the city instead of accepting kickbacks from established firms, and actually followed up on their advice, using the city's funds to make improvements. He opened the city up to immigration, and relentlessly pursued and prosecuted everyone and anyone who disturbed the peace, meting out punishment in accordance with the letter and spirit of the law – and not a whit more nor less.

While captain Hareleg's policies would probably have seen him lynched or assassinated in any other city of Conquista, they have earned him almost universal respect among the people of Alsem, even among the criminal elements.

*Since the captain-governor took charge, there is actually wealth worth stealing, and apprehended criminals are subjected to trial, rather than summary execution.*

His rule initially did not sit well with 'traditionally minded' locals, but they were faced with the uncomfortable fact that the city's general populace hated them a lot more than they themselves did the captain-governor. 'Traditional' men and women had abandoned the city in its hour of need and delayed the reconstruction by years. In contrast, captain-governor Hareleg was pushing through reforms and seeing to it that criminals were arrested and tried with no exception, and attempts at bribery were – and still are – treated as criminal acts on every level.

Over time, those who remained opposed to the changes in the city either left or learned to keep their mouths shut and their guns holstered. The captain-governor has continued to demand integrity from his subordinates, and Alsem has flourished. When merchants complained about the difficulty of moving their wares through the brugia pestilente, the captain-governor signed off on the ambitious five-year project of constructing the Deep Way, the aforementioned network of underground tunnels that safely bypasses the poisons that have ravaged the earth above.

With the establishment of the Deep Way, the city gates that once led to Vieuxlyons were not just closed, but filled in, improving the city's defenses. The Vieuxlyese government initially grumbled, but as the underground river traffic proved far more efficient than overland transport, their complaints subsided. (A tactical error, I fancy; the gates are now blocked off, and the gates to the underground river can be closed and barred in case of a Vieuxlyese attack, which will cause the water to rise and fill the tunnels.)

Rumours persist that the tunnels were partially constructed with magic, rather than pure science, but Alsem is possibly the one place in Conquista where this is not immediate grounds for rioting in the streets. There is a fair amount of speculation that the Tower of Arts offers secret classes in forbidden subjects, although the resident teachers have always denied this.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE TWIN COVENS

It is true that no magic is taught at the Alsem Tower of Arts; instead, it is mostly taught outside the city walls, in the farming communities that lie in the city's shadow and feed it.

When the Williamson sisters (see *Who's Doomed*) first arrived in Conquista, they arrived near Alsem and found the local witch community in shambles. From the local witches' perspective, magic had only recently returned, and already their homes had been destroyed by a brutal invader. They were easy marks for Sandra Williamson's desire to create a new powerbase for herself, and let themselves be organized into a unified whole, rather than maintaining their old covens of three. She established her hidden academy of witchcraft in the towns of her followers, rather than allow it near her own home. Under her command, the local witches scoured the land for every child with even a lick of talent, sacrificing the boys to her patron Asmodeus and training the girls as apprentices.

As time went on and captain-governor Hareleg's works started healing the land around Alsem, however, things changed. More and more, local witches started questioning Sandra's murderous plans for the city and the land in general, until finally there came a split.

Today, there are *two* super-covens in the region of Alsem. First are Sandra's witches, operating in the farm country closer to the swamp of the *brugía pestilente*, and even in the swamp itself. 'Renegades' against her rule operate from the farms closer to the

city, however, and have made themselves known to captain-governor Hareleg. In typical – for him – fashion, the captain-governor has allowed the renegade coven to practice its Arts, find apprentices among the citizens and even offer their services to those interested in hiring them, so long as they break no laws. The renegade super-coven is steadily growing in numbers and means, as it has access to the domain's most diverse gene pool and its most ambitious markets.

### Where to stay in Alsem

Alsem is unusually hospitable to strangers for a Conquistan city, and provides housing for merchants the whole year through. Correspondingly, there are a great many inns, of which I will mention only a few.

*The Millhouse* (average quality rooms, average quality food) is a popular place for people just passing through. Although the building is not visually appealing and its fare is bland, the inn is quite large and has a great many rooms; it is rare indeed for visitors to be turned away due to lack of space.

In contrast, the *Iron Remora* (poor quality rooms, excellent quality food) is a nasty, smoke- and beer-stained dive near where the gate to Vieuxlyons used to be. There are bar fights most nights, though deaths and serious injury are exceedingly rare, owing to frequent guard patrols. People come here less to stay than to let off steam and to enjoy the inn's admittedly excellent food and drink. I had the best beer here of my whole stay in Conquista, and when I complimented the inn's owner for this fact, he personally saw to it that I remained unmolested when the evening's unavoidable brawl broke out, by pointing out that I was a 'special guest'.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

I am writing these words in my inn room in Alsem while Hectór sleeps; I have used every curative spell at my disposal, but he is still not fully recovered from what those witches did to him. His sleep is disturbed

by nightmares, and he has been scarred. Still, we do not have too much time to linger, given the demand of that naked man that we leave 'his' land.

Before we set off on our journey to Vieuxlyons, I reflect on what has occurred and what I have learned during my survey of this domain. There has been no sign of pursuit since we left the *brugia zorra*; I think the threat of provoking captain-governor Hareleg is preventing even the maddest of witches from disturbing us here.

*A cheering thought!*

Where Lilliend is a wretched, stagnated backwater, Conquista is a madhouse just waiting for civil war to break out. It is, in my opinion, only a matter of time before one of several groups sparks off a conflict that will tear this whole domain apart.

A race war could begin, as the Canana and Casians are both full of resentment towards each other over ancient and ill-remembered wrongs, and the Ulan resent being treated as slaves. Such halfbreeds as barely cling to life make up a not inconsiderable percentage of the population, and could easily do some rioting and warring of their own, if they found a leader.

A class war could begin, as the haves of Conquista use the law to squeeze the have-nots dry and keep them poor.

A holy war could begin, as tensions between the Church of Taiia in the northern and the Church of Taiia in the middle *cantón* continue to rise, and the Empty Skies-movement would destroy all faiths and plunge the domain into anarchy.

It is even possible that the Witches will unite under a charismatic leader and rise up against church and state both.

If the black-oil mines run dry as those that once yielded ore did, economic chaos will likely break out nationwide, and all hands will be raised against the government as one – and that is only if they have the time to do so before Masogan or Vieuxlyons invades.

Any of the *creatures* I saw oversee Darkest Night might have been this realm's Dread Lord, but I am uncertain which, even if that one man appeared to claim power. Or might they...? A Dread Lord certainly must exist in Conquista, but would it be a being of supernatural horror, when the land is so firmly in the grip of very mundane and realistic evils? Maybe the Dread Lord is a mundane master of subtlety, hidden in plain sight or in the obscurity granted by obscene wealth.

I regret to report that I am uncertain, my *Master*.

When you arrive in this domain, I recommend that you do not publically ally yourself with any one side, but rather pretend to bind yourself to all of them in secret. Spark off the inevitable war and guide it from the shadows, then publically present yourself as a saviour by killing your 'allies', then seizing and restructuring the oppressive government. Feign to rule with a fair and generous hand, destroy the current aristocracy of money-merchants (frankly, I do not see any use for them in your kind of world order, and you could use the cash), and let the people believe their voices are now truly being heard and of influence in the halls of power.

We both know this will be a pack of bald-faced lies, but you have never been shy about deceiving your victims, have you, my *Master*?

Regards,

*Ciska*



## From the private journal of Ciska:

I do not understand why they died. I have analyzed my blood over and over, and while there were indeed traces of potions left in my system – that witch Angela must have doused my food, *damn* her hide! – I can not explain why it would make my blood toxic to others. I do not understand.

I miss having access to a real laboratory, not just inn rooms and portable labs.

There was a murder in the city yesterday evening. A girl was attacked on her way home from work, dragged into an alley. The copy of *la presse libre* I bought reports that some creature with sharp teeth savaged the girl's chest and very little blood was found on the site. It sounds like what that damnable vampire did to Veronique. The guard is in uproar. So is the rest of the city.

I want out of here. We leave within the hour.

## DM's APPENDIX

### NEW MAGIC

#### Land-based Powers

If a fiend should choose to perform a Power ritual while within Conquista and is successful in its efforts, it would gain the *Universal hatred*-power. Once a day, a fiend with this Land-based power can cause all creatures within its reality wrinkle – except for itself – to look at each other with unreasoning hatred. All creatures affected by *Universal hatred* are compelled to attack a random opponent for one round per Hit Die of the fiend affecting them.

The DM assigns a number to everyone in the fiend's reality wrinkle, and players roll 1d20 or several d20 if needed to determine their target. Targets of *Universal hatred* must attack with their full strength, but may elect to deal non-lethal damage. The fiend who has initiated *Universal hatred* is never a possible target. If someone kills or otherwise incapacitates their target but is still under the effect of *Universal hatred*, roll another d20 to determine your next target.

Strong wills may overcome the power of *Universal hatred*; a Will save against a DC of 10 + the fiend's HD + the fiend's Cha modifier is required to prevent the power from taking hold. Every consecutive round of *Universal hatred*'s effect, a character may roll

another Will save to shake off the effect, but the DC increases by +1 per round.

Once the effect of *Universal hatred* has expired, those who failed their Will save even once are incapable of remembering why they engaged in violence. All they dimly remember is that they felt an eruption of uncontrollable hatred for whoever they attacked.

### NEW FEATS

#### Influencer (Metamagic)

You have the power to magically influence people through technology.

*Prerequisite:* Operator feat, Silent spell feat, 5 ranks or more in Profession (radiographer), ability to cast spells from the schools of Enchantment and/or Illusion.

*Benefit:* You can cast a spell over an open signal, as produced by Conquistan *radio* or Malopelagian *farview*, when you are transmitting. The spell must be from the school of either Enchantment or Illusion; unless you are in direct one-on-one communication with someone, the spell will affect a random person. (In gaming terms, follow the rules as stated under the Profession (radiographer) result table in the Dread Possibility Evil on the Airwaves.)

*Special:* A spell modified with the Influencer feat takes up a slot two levels higher than the spell's

actual level, and can not be cast without access to transmitting equipment.

### Operator

You are well-trained in the use of modern conveniences.

*Prerequisite:* 1 rank or more in Profession (driver) and Profession (radiographer)

*Benefit:* You always receive a +2 bonus to checks with the skills Profession (driver) and Profession (radiographer). Once a day, if you roll a natural one on a check using one of these skills, you may reroll. You must abide by the result of the second check.

## NEW MONSTERS

### SKYNDALFÖR (CR 6)

*'A pretty young woman with dark, braided hair stands at the side of the road, thumb extended to solicit a ride. As you slow to a stop, her smile widens, and her dark eyes sparkle mischievously. Somehow, she seems to be becoming more beautiful by the second. Your thoughts are becoming foggy. When she suggests you get out and let her drive away, it seems like the most logical thing in the world to agree...'*

### CG, CE or CN fey

**Initiative** +3; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +9

### Defense

**AC** 18 (+4 armor, +3 Dex, +1 shield); **DR** 10/oak wood;

Resist cold iron 6

**HD** (10d6+40) 75

**Fort** +7, **Ref** +10, **Will** +8

### Offense

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** masterwork pistol dagger +7 (1d4+1/x3)

**Ranged** masterwork pistol dagger +9 (1d4/x3)

**Space** 5 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.

**Special attacks:**

**Bit and bridle:** If a Skyndalför can get a special, Fey-crafted bits into the mouth of a helpless victim, that creature is considered to be *dominated* by the Skyndalför for as long as she keeps hold of the attached reins.

**Overclock:** If a Skyndalför is at the controls of a mechanical vehicle, she can cause it to exceed its maximum speed by a factor of two, at the cost of the vehicle taking 1d6 damage per round. Alternatively, the Skyndalför can cause the vehicle to exceed its maximum speed by a factor of x 3, causing the vehicle to take 2d6 damage per round. The damage stacks per round until either the vehicle is stopped or it becomes inoperable.

**Overdrive:** If a Skyndalför is riding a living or undead creature, she can cause it to exceed its maximum speed by a factor of x 2, at the cost of the creature taking 1d6 damage per round. Alternatively, the Skyndalför can cause the creature to exceed its maximum speed by a factor of x 3, causing the creature to take 2d6 damage per round. The damage stacks per round until either the creature is stopped or it dies / is destroyed.

**Ride anything:** Skyndalför can requisition magical saddles from Fey craftsmen, which adapt to the physique of any living or undead creature, allowing the Skyndalför to ride them as though they were a standard mount. Among Good- and Neutral-aligned Skyndalför, using these saddles on intelligent creatures is simple entertainment, meant for a brief laugh; Evil-aligned Skyndalför, however, will gleefully use this power to ride sentient creatures to destruction.

### Magic

Spells/day: 6 / 5; Save DC: 16 + spell level; Enchantment 17 + spell level

**Spells known:** 2 – *hold person\**, *daze monster\**, *recharge*, *unnatural lust\**; 1 – *charm person\**, *innocence*, *sleep\**, *technomancy*; 0 – *dancing lights*, *daze\**, *detect magic*, *lullaby\**, *mending*, *prestidigitation*

## Statistics

**Str** 13, **Dex** 16, **Con** 18, **Int** 13, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 22

**Base Atk.** +6; **CMB** +7; **CMD** 20

**Feats:** Exotic weapon proficiency (firearms), Gunsmithing, Spell focus (Enchantment), Spellsong, Technologist

**Skills:** Acrobatics +10, Bluff +12, Craft (mechanical) +12, Craft (weapons) +10, Disguise +10, Escape artist +12, Knowledge (geography) +8, Knowledge (nature) +8, Perception +9, Perform (dance) +13, Perform (oratory) +12, Profession (driver) +8, Ride +7, Stealth +9, Swim +5

**Languages:** Sylvan\*, Casian

## Ecology

**Environment:** any temperate

**Organization:** solitary, pair (mated couple), roadgang (3 – 24)

**Treasure:** masterwork pistol dagger, ring of protection +1, armored dress (as armored coat), magical bit, faerie saddle

Mostly unique to Conquista, the female only Skyndalför are enthusiastic equestrians and drivers who love racing under the moon. Since they killed off their old Shadow Fey masters, most Skyndalför have treated their lives as one big party, moving from one entertainment to another. As they do not own farms or factories of their own, they indulge their need for speed by stealing conveyances from mortals, who even the kindest Skyndalför often consider to be funny and clever animals.

Any Skyndalför will blithely charm and seduce any mortal who has a fast horse or a fast car, with the intention to steal said conveyance and use it for their own nighttime revels and races along abandoned roads. Kindly Skyndalför will drop their duped victim off at their home before speeding off; Neutral-aligned Skyndalför will abandon them without a second thought; Evil-aligned Skyndalför may bring the victim along, planning to fit them with bit and bridle and a saddle as soon as the conveyance has broken down, so they can next ride the victim to destruction...

## Combat

Skyndalför are not strong combatants, and they know it. If forced into battle, they prefer to do so on the back of a stout mount or behind the wheel of a *mobíla*, for the speed this affords them. They generally open combat with their magic, trying to persuade the strongest opposition to simply 'go away', then move on to the next strongest target. If they can manage to break a group of enemies up, Skyndalför tend to gang up on them if they have other Skyndalför available to help, hunting them down one by one. Their weapons may not be extremely powerful, but they are versatile, and more than one arrogant fool has been worn down by numerous bullets fired from the shadows, only to finally meet his end under a rain of quick, furious stabs.

## Society

Apart from their light-fingered theft of mounts and vehicles, Skyndalför have little to do with mortals. They might hunt and gather in areas where humans live, and thus pick up the odd crop or piece of livestock, but they do not clear out whole stables and acres. If a Skyndalför feels the need to reproduce, she might have a different reason to seek out mortal men, as they find the company of male Fey to be disagreeable.

Although the Skyndalför are not Shadow Fey, they prefer to stay underground when the sun is out, tinkering with pieces of machinery in their forges or comparing their winnings from races. These Fey tend to a nomadic lifestyle, preferring to travel lightly and moving from barrow to cave over the year, wandering freely among the northern and middle *cantóns* (Cliffon Willgoat's presence keeps them out of the south *cantón* as much as the blazing sun does). If two roadgangs meet, they exchange information freely and tend to have drinking parties and hold races, then part as friends. On the rare occasion that two or more Skyndalför come to conflict with each other, they seek arbitration from whatever neutral third party is available. On the rare occasion that this



is a mortal, said mortal had better choose very wisely; Neutral- and Evil-aligned Skyndalför have been known to carry disproportionate grudges.

### LUNDAN BESS (CR2)

*'The largest, fattest cow you have ever seen lumbers past you in the field, a second set of udders lolling between its front legs. It seems to be a friendly and complacent beast, but just for a moment, it glances at you and you'd swear you see a flash of something in its eye...'*

#### NG magical beast (human subtype)

**Initiative** -1; **Senses** Darkvision 60 ft.; low-light vision; scent; **Perception** +5

#### Defense

**AC** 13 (-1 Dex., +5 natural, -1 size)

**HD** 24 (3d10+6)

**Fort.** +8, **Ref.** +4, **Will** +3

#### Offense

**Speed:** 40 ft.

**Melee:** gore +9 (1d8+6); bite +6 (1d8+6); kick +6 (1d6+6)

**Space** 10; **Reach** 5 ft.

**Special attacks:** stampede; trample (2d6+9; DC 17)

**Spell-like abilities:** 4/day – *Message*

3/day – *Speak with animals*

1/day – *Share memory*

#### Statistics

**Str.** 23, **Dex.** 8, **Con.** 17, **Int.** 12, **Wis.** 10, **Cha.** 12

**Base Atk.** +3; **CMB** +9; **CMD** 18 (22 vs. trip)

**Feats:** Endurance, Iron will

**Skills:** Heal +5, Knowledge (local) +5, Knowledge (nature) +6, Linguistics +5, Perception +5, Swim +7

**Languages:** Ocham\*, Lundi, one additional domain language as spoken by owners; cannot speak.

#### Ecology

**Environment:** temperate plains

**Organization:** solitary, pair (one Bess, one bull [domestic, aurochs or bison]), herd (3 – 30)

**Treasure:** none

Known in most of the Wartorn Cluster as a 'miracle cow' that produces mass amounts of milk, is fast-breeding and can provide delicious meat, the Lundan Bess is one of the most popular exports of West-Lund. While most people in the Wartorn Cluster consider these cows to be the product of advanced breeding techniques, the Lundan Bess is actually the result of foul sorcery and a Darklady's spiteful cruelty.

To fully understand the Lundan Bess, it is necessary to know a little about the history of West-Lund. Before the current regime, West-Lund was ruled by Wise King Gregory, a young nobleman who governed with wisdom and diplomacy well beyond his years. When King Gregory mysteriously disappeared and Katherine Lavonie assumed control over the country, one of the few people who dared object was Bess the Good, the famous Witch in the East.

Bess was a witch in service to the throne of West-Lund and an on-again, off-again lover of the King. She was also one of the next people to disappear, but Queen Katherine was not satisfied with simply having her murdered; she handed Bess over to the not-so-tender mercies of her deranged pet archmage, who conducted a vile ritual on the Witch in the East ... and a cow from the farms that supplied the royal castle with dairy and meat.

The full fate of Bess the Good is a matter for later discussion. Her progeny – named 'Lundan Bess' by Queen Katharine herself – continue to proliferate unto today. Small wonder, as they were created to be fertile and have a powerful procreative drive. Today, the breed is highly valued and sold in many parts of the Wartorn Cluster.

Unlike the cows it resembles, the Lundan Bess is an intelligent creature, as incapable of humanoid speech as of communicating with natural bovines, unless they use their spell-like abilities. Usually, the Lundan Bess is unwilling to reveal its intelligence to the humanoids who claim ownership of them and put them to work as dairy, draught and meat cattle. Powerful instincts lead the Lundan Bess to constantly

eat and breed, but it is memory and fear that make them so compliant: every mother cow uses her innate magic to pass down to her calves the memory of the breeding pits in Lund, where their communal ancestor was reformed in agony by vilest magic. While their current lives are often demeaning, the magical beasts know there are fates far worse available, not only for 'uncooperative animals', but also for 'freaks of sorcery'.

### Combat

As Ciska notes, it is difficult to bring a Lundan Bess to the point that it becomes aggressive. Under normal circumstances, they retreat from threats in spite of their bulk. Of course, they do have limits, such as when their calves are threatened in their presence. Once angered, a Lundan Bess' first impulse is to trample and then to gore. Should multiple specimens be angered, they cooperate in a stampede. They focus on a target until it is disabled, then either move on to the next or find a route of escape.

### Society

In captivity, the Lundan Bess mimics the behaviour of the cows they are kept with as much as possible. They defer to strong personalities within the herd, as well as the humanoids who care for them, and pretend to have no more than animal intelligence. If allowed to not only breed but also retain their calves, Lundan Bess form tightly-knit family circles that maintain a polite distance from more ordinary cattle (with the exception of the bulls they need to continue reproducing), but mesh well with any new variants of their own species.

On the rare occasion that Lundan Bess manage to escape captivity, they continue to form small family circles, inducting wild aurochs or bison bulls they encounter during their travels into their herds. These herds avoid civilization, predators and large bovine herds as much as possible. Liberated Lundan Bess communicate not only through magic, but also through a code of long and short soundbursts, which sound eerily strange to anyone familiar with normal cows (if the DM so chooses, anyone who hears Bess

'talking' must roll a Fear save, DC 10). Liberated herds also engage in un-animallike behaviour, playing games, creating strange art and performing ritualistic behaviour to invoke the favour of any benevolent entities that might watch over them. Travellers occasionally stumble on traces of such activity and may carry the more portable thereof – like odd conglomerates of sticks or chunks of rock scratched and marked by hooves – home to be puzzled over by scholars.

Regardless of whether living in the wild or in a cattle-pen, Lundan Bess follow a loose hierarchy that starts with the first female in the group to have successfully given birth. If this first mother dies or otherwise becomes unable to lead, the position passes to the next oldest female to have given birth, and so on and so forth. Lundan Bess leaders are more mediators than anything else, allowing their kin to act on their own impulses until these lead them into conflict, and then step in. They also lead the charge if a herd goes into a stampede, and are on the lookout for threats to the herd and low-risk chances to escape captivity.

### CONQUISTAN BESS (CR 1)

*'A smallish cow with a tan hide and a second set of udders comes trotting up to the fence, regarding you with a soulful eye. You start to turn away, when you'd swear you could hear a whisper in your head. Something about sharing your sandwich with the nice cow...?'*

### CG magical beast (human subtype)

**Initiative** 0; **Senses** Darkvision 60 ft.; low-light vision; scent; **Perception** +5

### Defense

**AC** 15 (+0 Dex., +5 natural)

**HP** 14 (2d10+4)

**Fort.** +7, **Ref.** +4, **Will** +1

### Offense

**Speed:** 40 ft.

**Melee:** gore +5 (1d8+3); bite +3 (1d8+3); kick +3 (1d6+3)

**Space** 10; **Reach** 5 ft.

**Special attacks:** stampede; trample (2d6+6; DC 14)

**Spell-like abilities:** 4/day – *Message*

3/day – *Speak with animals*

### Statistics

**Str.** 16, **Dex.** 10, **Con.** 14, **Int.** 12, **Wis.** 10, **Cha.** 14

**Base Atk.** +2; **CMB** +5; **CMD** 15 (19 vs. trip)

**Feats:** Endurance

**Skills:** Heal +4, Knowledge (local) +5, Knowledge (nature) +5, Linguistics +5, Perception +5, Swim +7

**Languages:** Casian\*, Ocham, one additional domain language as spoken by owners; cannot speak.

### Ecology

**Environment:** temperate plains

**Organization:** solitary, pair (one Bess, one bull [domestic, aurochs or bison]), herd (3 – 30)

**Treasure:** none

Considerably smaller than their ancestors, but no less fecund and 'graced' with the signature second udder just like the Lundan Bess, the Conquistan Bess is a relatively young strain created by the Conquistan cattle-farmers by breeding the 'miracle cows' from Lund with the local *lechito*. Although they are intelligent magical beasts just like their ancestors, Conquistan Bess are very much a lesser version of the Lundan Bess. They are physically smaller and weaker, with less magical power. In spite of this, they are highly popular in the middle *cantón* of Conquista, as they are better capable of handling the intense heat of day in the area.

Conquistan farmers will swear high and low that their local strain is equal, if not superior, to the Lundan Bess when it comes to providing mass quantities of milk and beef to a hungry populace. Be it because they are smaller and slightly more dexterous or due to crossbreeding with the *lechito*, but the Conquistan Bess is noted to be more temperamental than their ancestors. They are still known for being obedient and easily trainable, but also prone to quarreling and playful behaviour.

### Combat

A Conquistan Bess is slightly more aggressive than a Lundan Bess, though not by much; they prefer to avoid danger and act meek, but it is easier to rile them up. They often make aggressive displays towards normal cows, forcing them to keep their distance. Like Lundan Bess, they also prefer to open combat by trampling an opponent once truly angered, then continue by goring, preferably when the enemy is prone. If they can set up a stampede, they gladly do so.

### Society

Both in captivity and in freedom, Conquistan Bess get along well with, and happily cohabitate with Lundan Bess and other regional strains of the species. They are less fond of natural cows – a sentiment usually returned in full – and like to enforce a certain distance. As they share their ancestors' reproductive drive in full, bulls form an exception to this.

Unlike the Lundan Bess, Conquistan Bess prefer to determine authority within their family circles by mock battles and displays. Whichever female manages to outbluff her competitors or defeat them in energetic pushing matches, can claim leadership for roughly a year. In mixed groups of Conquistan Bess and other strains of the species, Conquistan Bess tend to defer to power structures as preferred by larger, more powerful strains.

Liberated Conquistan Bess also like to keep their distance from humanoids, predators and bovines, but their journeys are more energetic. They can be seen running and playing for the joy of it until they grow tired, then relax in the sun or the shade rather than engage in ritual or artistic activity.

While they get along well with other strains of their family, the Conquistan Bess' lack of the *share memory* spell-like ability means they are not able to pass on the full horror of what was done to their ancestors in Lund. They are less cautious, and especially brash specimens may try to use their powers to sway humanoids into doing what they



want. As such, they are often considered to be brash and dangerous by other strains, who will share those

dark memories with as many Conquistan Bess as they can in an attempt to teach them caution.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE VOICE OF THE HERD

The sale of the Lundan Bess across the borders of Lund is more than Katherine Lavonie's way of swelling her domain's income by defiling the memory of one of her old opponents. West-Lund's merchants keep records of every customer to purchase even a single Lundan Bess, as well as the identity numbers tattooed inside of their ears.

At any time, Queen Katherine can have the spellcasters under her command use *Sending* to contact and interrogate Lundan Bess throughout the Wartorn Cluster. Since the magical beasts universally fear the wrath of the Queen and they still have relatives living in her lands, it is easy enough to intimidate them into answering questions.

One would not expect dairy cattle to be privy to a great deal of sensitive information, but Lundan Bess are intelligent creatures who observe the goings-on at the farms where they are kept, and farmers rarely guard their tongues around their cattle. If nothing else, they can provide information about farming trends and local shortages, fads and surplus. West-Lund can benefit from this by adapting its foreign trade accordingly by underbidding competitors, overcharging for essential goods and services, and developing new products in response to local needs.

War waged through finance and trade is no less a war than one waged through violence.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: THE PRICE OF FLESH

Lundan Bess are considered to be highly valuable dairy cows, and most farmers like to keep them alive and happy – and productive – for as long as possible. Unfortunately, there are people who prefer to see them as a source of delicious meat. This becomes problematic when one considers that, no matter what they look and sound like, Lundan Bess and their descendants are originate from human stock. Eating their flesh is, for all intents and purposes, cannibalism.

As expensive as the average Lundan Bess can be, their meat is not exactly a staple food. With the introduction of the smaller, cheaper Conquistan Bess, this is changing. As people start to grow accustomed to regularly dining on 'genuine Bess-flesh', they unknowingly flirt with the possibility of failing Powers Checks, as well as rising after death as ravenous ghouls.

Considering that Lundan Bess are being sold clear across the Wartorn Cluster and they are being cross-bred by enterprising farmers, it is not inconceivable that there will one day be mass eruptions of ghouls in all the domains that have purchased them...

## PRESTIGE CLASSES

### GOATSMAN

The appearance of the Goatsman inspires terror when he lurches forth from the darkness and shifts into his bestial guise; his touch and scent inspire disgust in those he approaches; his mind inspires madness in those who try to probe it; and all of this is exactly what a true Goatsman wants. Paragons of evil and terror, the average Goatsman has no greater motivation than to plunge society into chaos and reign over the ruins as an apex predator, molesting and devouring those who fall into his grasp. Worse are those who do not simply revel in their ability to sow horror and anguish, but actively use these powers to achieve some foul objective. It is the latter who organize gangs of Goatsmen into concerted attacks on the frail world of light and its inhabitants,

laughing at sorrow and pain and revelling in the slaughter.

**Hit Dice:** d8

**Prerequisites:**

**Alignment:** Any Evil

**Base attack bonus:** +3

**Skills:** Intimidate 5 ranks, Perception 3 ranks, Stealth 5 ranks, Survival 3 ranks

**Feats:** Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Voracious (*Van Richten's Guide to the Walking Dead*, p. 55)

**Special:** Must either have one's own species as a Favoured enemy as per the Ranger class feature or the Sword-Devil's archetype's Death Vow ability.

Must have murdered a member of one's own species for purely personal reasons.

LVL	BAB	Fort.	Ref.	Will	Special
1	+0	+1	+0	+0	Vile Transformation; familiar; Spellcasting
2	+1	+1	+1	+1	Goatsmark; Pain strike +1d6
3	+2	+2	+1	+1	Fiendish familiar
4	+3	+2	+1	+1	Goatsmark; Pain strike +2d6
5	+3	+3	+2	+2	Improved familiar
6	+4	+3	+2	+2	Goatsmark; Pain strike +3d6
7	+5	+4	+2	+2	<i>Faux henchman</i>
8	+6	+4	+3	+3	Goatsmark; Pain strike +4d6
9	+6	+5	+3	+3	<i>Devil-bought</i>
10	+7	+5	+3	+3	Goatsmark; Pain strike +5d6

**Goatsman magic:**

	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
1	2	—	—	—
2	2	0	—	—
3	2	1	—	—
4	3	2	—	—
5	3	2	0	—
6	3	2	1	—
7	3	2	1	—
8	3	2	2	—
9	3	3	2	0
10	3	3	2	1

**Class skills:** Acrobatics (Dex), Climb (Str), Knowledge (arcana) (Int), Knowledge (geography) (Int), Knowledge (nature) (Int), Knowledge (religion) (Int), Perception (Wis), Stealth (Wis), Survival (Wis)

**Skill ranks at each level:** 4 + Int modifier

**Class features**

**Weapon and Armor proficiency:** The Goatsman is proficient with all simple weapons, and with the greatclub, greatclub, kukri and machete. He does not become proficient with any kind of armour or shield.

**Vile transformation (Su):** Starting from first level, the Goatsman gains the ability to affect a repulsive transformation in himself. His body sprouts coarse, black fur; his feet become cloven hooves; his fingernails become claws; and his head twists into a grotesque mixture of his origin species and a goat. The transformation lasts for ten minutes per day per level in the Prestige class; this duration need not be used consecutively. While transformed, the character has low-light vision and scent, and can deliver bite, kick, scratch and headbutt attacks as natural attacks.

**Familiar (Ex):** At first level, the Goatsman gains a familiar. This creature functions much like a Witch's familiar, in that it is the Goatsman's source of magical power, and grants all the other benefits and gains all the abilities of a familiar of its type, as

explained under the Wizard class feature. Goatsmen must choose their familiar from the following list: bat, cat, goat, owl, pig, rat, toad, viper or weasel.

**Spellcasting:** Starting from first level, the Goatsman gains the ability to cast a limited number of spells (see the table 'Goatsman magic' above. The Goatsman draws spells from the *Witch* class list. In order to cast a spell, the Goatsman must have a Wisdom score of 10 + the level of the spell. Goatsmen benefit from having a high Wisdom score, in that it can grant them access to bonus spells and because their Wisdom score determines the save modifier of their spells.

Goatsmen gain their spells at sundown, by praying to their familiar the way a Cleric would pray to their deity. A Goatsman who does not have a familiar can not pray for, nor cast spells until they have replaced the familiar.

**Pain strike (Ex):** Starting from second level, a Goatsman can augment his unarmed strikes, causing them to deal more pain than they should. If a Goatsman can strike an opponent when that opponent is denied their Dexterity bonus or grappled, he can add bonus non-lethal damage to the damage roll. The amount on non-lethal damage increases at every even level, until it reaches 5d6 at tenth level. Pain strike stacks with Sneak attack and similar class features.

**Goatsmark:** Starting at second level and thereafter at every even level, the Goatsman gains a special ability from the following list. Each Goatsmark can only be chosen once.

- ❖ **Face of Terror:** Once for every three levels in the prestige class, a Goatsman with this Goatsmark can force those who see him transform into his bestial form to make a Fear check against a DC of 10 + level in the prestige class + Cha modifier of the Goatsman.
- ❖ **Heart of Darkness:** A Goatsman with this Goatsmark is so in tune with the forces of Evil that it radiates from them whenever they are in their bestial form and other creatures of Evil can



sense it and find themselves awed and cowed. This gives the Goatsman with this Goatsmark a +1 to Intimidate checks for every two levels in the prestige class when dealing with Evil creatures.

- ❖ *Mind of Madness*: Once for every three levels in the prestige class, a Goatsman with this Goatsmark can force those who are using Divination effects to read his thoughts, emotions, or aura to make a Madness check against a DC of 10 + level in the prestige class + Cha of the Goatsman.
- ❖ *Stench of Wrongness*: Once for every two levels in the prestige class, a Goatsman with this Goatsmark can release a vile stench. Within 10 feet of the Goatsman, a gas is released that provokes a Fortitude save with a DC of 10 + level in the prestige class + Con modifier of the Goatsman. Those who fail the save become *nauseated* as long as they remain inside the area and for 1d4+1 rounds after they leave it.
- ❖ *Tainted Blood*: A Goatsman with this Goatsmark passes on his corruption to his offspring like a lycanthrope. Children born to a parent with this Goatsmark will be natural lycanthropes with a goat aspect, and are predisposed to a Chaotic Evil alignment.
- ❖ *Touch of Horror*: Once for every three levels in the prestige class, a Goatsman with this Goatsmark can, when grappling an opponent, force his target to make a Horror check against a DC of 10 + level in the prestige class + Cha modifier of the Goatsman.
- ❖ *Voice of Terror*: Once a day for every three levels in the prestige class, a Goatsman with this Goatsmark can utter an ear-piercing shriek that forces all who hear it to make a Fear save against a DC of 10 + level in the prestige class + Cha modifier of the Goatsman.

*Fiendish familiar (Su)*: Starting from third level, the Goatsman can perform a ritual once a day to turn their familiar into a fiendish version of itself; apply the *fiendish* template to the familiar. The familiar remains in its fiendish state until and unless the

Goatsman performs the requisite ritual to return it to its 'normal' state.

*Improved Familiar (Su)*: At fifth level, the Goatsman learns a ritual that allows him to transform his familiar into a more impressive creature. The Goatsman must choose a creature from the list of creatures available to a Sorcerer, Witch or Wizard with the Improved Familiar feat; so long as the Goatsman retains this same familiar, the choice cannot be altered. After the ritual is completed, the Goatsman's familiar will change into the chosen form and stay in that form until the Goatsman performs a ritual to change their familiar back.

*Faux Henchman (Su)*: At seventh level, the Goatsman learns to perform a ritual that allows them to change their familiar into a half-humanoid, half-animal creature, or else into a full humanoid, as per the casting of the spell *faux henchman*. The familiar remains in the form chosen until the Goatsman performs the ritual again to change its shape.

*Devil-bought (Su)*: At ninth level, if the Goatsman dies, he can transfer his soul into the body of his familiar. The familiar effectively becomes a living phylactery and can perform any of the transformative rituals the Goatsman had already learned to perform by itself, on itself. The familiar is in control, but is in full communication with the Goatsman and might be relied upon to help him revive himself in one way or another. Or not, depending on how the Goatsman treated his familiar before this...

## GRABADOR

The grabador is the secret hand of l'officia del recuerdo, the state's subtle stiletto where the Hombre Valiente is its brutish gauntlet. A spy, an agitator, an assassin; whatever the government offices' clandestine agency requires is what the grabador does – and becomes. A grabador may spend a lifetime pretending to be something they are not, only performing their deadly role at a time of the government offices' choosing.



**Hit Dice:** d8

**Prerequisites:**

**Alignment:** Any non-Good

**Base attack bonus:** +3

**Skills:** Bluff 5 ranks, Disable device 5 ranks,  
Disguise 3 ranks, Sense motive 3  
ranks

**Feats:** Deceitful, Honor-Bound  
(Dragonlance Campaign Setting, p.  
86), Sense assumptions (Ultimate  
Intrigue, p.91)

**Special:** Sneak attack +2d6; must be able to  
speak Casian

LVL	BAB	Fort.	Ref.	Will	Special
1	+ 0	+ 0	+ 1	+ 1	Pistol-Whip (shaken); Social Graces +1; Sworn to the State
2	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	Hand of the State (d8) 1/day; Fool the eye
3	+ 2	+ 1	+ 2	+ 2	Eyes and Ears +1; Gentle persuasion
4	+ 3	+ 1	+ 2	+ 2	Social Graces +2, Hand of the State (d8) 2/day
5	+ 3	+ 2	+ 3	+ 3	Pistol-Whip (frightened); Sweet Corruption
6	+ 4	+ 2	+ 3	+ 3	Hand of the State (d10) 3/day; Eyes and Ears +2
7	+ 5	+ 2	+ 4	+ 4	Social Graces +3; Rapid Writing
8	+ 6	+ 3	+ 4	+ 4	Hand of the State (d10) 4/day
9	+ 6	+ 3	+ 5	+ 5	Pistol-Whip (panicked); Eyes and Ears +3
10	+ 7	+ 3	+ 5	+ 5	Social Graces +4; Hand of the State (d12) 5/day

**Class skills:** Acrobatics (Dex), Appraise (Int), Bluff (Cha), Climb (Str), Diplomacy (Cha), Disable device (Dex), Escape artist (Dex), Knowledge (aristocracy) (Int), Knowledge (geography) (Int), Knowledge (history) (Int), Knowledge (local) (Int), Linguistics (Int), Perception (Wis), Perform (Cha), Sense motive (Wis), Stealth (Dex)

**Skill ranks at each level:** 6 + Int modifier

### Class features

**Weapon and Armor proficiency:** The Grabador is proficient with all simple weapons, and with light armor. He does not gain proficiency with any kind of shield.

**Pistol-Whip:** In any round in which the Grabador has the opportunity to deal sneak attack damage to an opponent, they have the option to sacrifice the bonus damage to instead strike terror into the mind of their opponent. When a Grabador invokes the power of Pistol-Whip against an opponent, they still deal standard damage, and their target must roll a Will save against a DC of 10 + the Grabador's Cha modifier + the Grabador's level in this Prestige class. If the target fails the save, they become shaken from

first through fourth level, frightened from fifth through eighth level, and panicked from ninth through tenth level. The Grabador has the option of choosing which form of fear to invoke in a target.

**Social Graces:** Starting at first level, the Grabador gains a +1 bonus to any Bluff checks and untrained skill checks they must make to preserve a cover identity. This bonus increases by +1 at fourth, seventh and tenth level.

**Sworn to the State (Su):** A Grabador is officially sworn to obey and serve the domain of Conquista; not its rulers, not its politicians, not its wealthy elites. If a Grabador knowingly and willingly violates this oath, they suffer the inverse effect of the Honor-bound feat until they atone as per the spell atonement.

**Hand of the State:** Starting at second level, the Grabador gains the power to deal genuinely devastating damage to an opponent or item. Once a day, when applying sneak attack damage to a damage roll, the Grabador can advance the damage dice from d6 to d8. The Grabador must announce the use of Hand of the State before making the roll.

The Grabador gains additional daily uses of Hand of the State at fourth, sixth, eighth and tenth level. The damage dice rolled to determine sneak attack damage advance to d10 at sixth level, and to d12 at tenth level.

*Fool the eye:* Sometimes a Grabador needs to appear to be something they are not. Starting from second level, as a full-round action, a Grabador can alter their clothes by applying dirt, by inflicting damage, by sprinkling glitter or by other, more subtle means to look like something different. The clothes the Grabador is wearing can be made to look like a specific kind of outfit, so long as there is enough material to justify the illusion. Using Fool the eye grants the Grabador a +2 modifier to Disguise checks.

*Gentle persuasion (Su):* Sometimes the state does not need a stiletto, but a kind word. Starting from second level, the Grabador learns to use other peoples' secrets to turn them to his own will. A Grabador must study a target for at least one hour; this period need not be consecutive, but can be spaced out over a week. At the end of the hour, the Grabador makes either a Knowledge (local) or a Sense motive check against the target's Bluff (rolled by the DM in secret). If the check is successful, the Grabador can tailor his words and body language precisely to the target's preferences, and the target is considered to be charmed by the Grabador until and unless twenty-four hours pass or the Grabador shows hostility towards the target.

*Eyes and Ears:* The Grabador is the eyes and ears of the state, which means they accumulate and pass on vast volumes of knowledge. Some of this knowledge sticks, be it due to a Grabador's excellent memory or because they keep private files. Starting from third level, the Grabador gains a +1 bonus to all Knowledge skills that are class skills for the Prestige class. This bonus increases by one at sixth and ninth level.

*Sweet Corruption:* Sometimes what is needed to best serve the state is a hefty bribe in the right place. Starting from fifth level, if a Grabador has

determined another creature's price for betraying their current loyalties in favour of the state of Conquista, they can requisition funds to pay that price. The Grabador can requisition a sum equal to a maximum of 1,000 gp times their own ECL on a yearly basis, which is delivered to them as quickly as possible. The whole sum requisitioned must be paid to the target; skimming from this bribe is the same as betraying one's oath to Conquista.

*Rapid Writing:* Starting from seventh level, as a master of both forgery and espionage, the Grabador can either produce a convincing forgery (text only) or copy a text in half the time this would normally take.

## HOMBRE VALIENTE

The fist of the state, the *Hombre Valiente* is policeman, soldier and (supposedly) spy. Trained to inspire fear and wield arms, and widely recognized for the red coats they wear, the *Hombre Valiente's* duty should be to see that the law of Conquista is upheld. In practice, many of these guardsmen are more concerned with seeing to it that *control* is maintained; the control of the fist, the boot and the gun over those who are neither *Hombres Valientes* nor the rich and powerful who buy their services. While well-intentioned *Hombres Valientes* do exist, they are by far the minority, and even they are trained to apply force in order to maintain order.

**Hit Dice:** d10

**Prerequisites:**

**Alignment:** Any non-Chaotic

**Species:** Human, half-human, Giomorgo or Caliban

**Base attack bonus:** +5

**Skills:** Disable device 3 ranks, Intimidate 5 ranks, Knowledge (local) 5 ranks

**Feats:** Exotic weapon proficiency (firearms), Street smarts (*Ultimate Intrigue*, p. 92), Weapon focus (kukri)

**Special:** Must be able to speak Casian; must have been born in Conquista



LVL	BAB	Fort.	Ref.	Will	Special
1	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	+ 0	Knifepoint interrogation +1, <i>Badges of Office</i>
2	+ 2	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	Read the Street
3	+ 3	+ 2	+ 2	+ 1	<i>Posse</i> 1/day; Knifepoint interrogation +2
4	+ 4	+ 2	+ 2	+ 1	Roaring Flash
5	+ 5	+ 3	+ 3	+ 2	Knifepoint interrogation +3, Brothers in Red
6	+ 6	+ 3	+ 3	+ 2	National Security
7	+ 7	+ 4	+ 4	+ 2	<i>Posse</i> +2 2/day; Knifepoint interrogation +4
8	+ 8	+ 4	+ 4	+ 3	Roaring Thunder
9	+ 9	+ 5	+ 5	+ 3	Knifepoint interrogation +5
10	+ 10	+ 5	+ 5	+ 3	<i>Posse</i> +3 3/day, the Red Line

### Class skills

Bluff (Cha), Climb (Str), Diplomacy (Cha), Disable device (Dex), Intimidate (Cha), Knowledge (engineering) (Int), Knowledge (local) (Int), Knowledge (nature) (Int), Perception (Wis), Profession (Wis), Ride (Dex), Sense motive (Wis), Swim (Str)

**Skill ranks at each level:** 2 + Int modifier

Weapon and Armor proficiency: The *Hombre Valiente* is proficient with all simple and martial weapons, and with light and medium armor. He does not gain proficiency with any kind of shield.

### Class features

*Knifepoint interrogation:* Starting at first level, the *Hombre Valiente* can gain a circumstance bonus to social checks, so long as they have access to the masterwork kukri that is one of their badges of office – and the willingness to use it. In any round in which the *Hombre Valiente* deals damage to another creature with their kukri, they gain a +1 bonus to Bluff, Intimidate and Sense motive versus that creature. The *Hombre Valiente* has the option of dealing minimal damage, but does not gain the benefit of Knifepoint interrogation if he deals non-lethal damage. The bonus increases by one at every odd level, to a maximum of +5 at ninth level. This same bonus is added to the damage a *Hombre Valiente* deals when wielding his kukri.

*Badges of Office:* At first level, the *Hombre Valiente* receives a masterwork kukri and a masterwork revolver. These are as much identifiers of a member of the prestige class as the gilded badges they carry and the red jackets they wear, and grant the *Hombre Valiente* a +1 bonus to social skill checks when engaging with natives of Conquista. If a *Hombre Valiente* loses access to either or both these items, they can be replaced at any Conquistan police station free of charge.

*Read the Street:* Starting from second level, a *Hombre Valiente* starts building a network of contacts, composed of law-abiding citizens and criminal stool pidgeons alike. Once every day, when making a Knowledge check, the *Hombre Valiente* can add a bonus equal to one third their level in the Prestige class to this check (minimum of 1, rounded down).

*Posse:* No matter how strong or intimidating a *Hombre Valiente* is, he is only one man unless surrounded by his colleagues – and there are never enough guardsmen to go around. Starting from third level, the *Hombre Valiente* can gather a *posse* to assist them. This functions as though the *Hombre Valiente* had access to the Leadership feat, allowing him to draw temporary support from ordinary citizens who are friendly or indifferent to him. The *Hombre Valiente* must present his *posse* with a clear task (hunting down an escaped criminal, building defensive barricades around a village, guarding a police station), and must offer some form of

compensation. Compensation can range from actual money for services rendered, to something more abstract; a locally beloved *Hombre Valiente* can requisition aid on the basis that he needs help to protect the community; a feared *Hombre Valiente* can offer to not collect protection money for a month. Roleplaying is encouraged to resolve the matter of payment.

Once the task has been concluded, or even if the task requires more than one hour per the *Hombre Valiente*'s level in the Prestige class, the *posse* will disperse unless offered additional incentive or sufficient reason to stay.

At seventh level, a *Hombre Valiente* may assemble a *posse* twice a day, as though they were a character with the Leadership feat and as though their ECL were two levels higher than it actually is.

At tenth level, a *Hombre Valiente* may assemble a *posse* three times a day, as though they were a character with the Leadership feat and as though their ECL were three levels higher than it actually is.

*Roaring Flash:* Starting at fourth level, a *Hombre Valiente* riding in or even driving a vehicle can, as a full-round action, move up to the vehicle's speed and make an attack with his kukri at any point during his movement. The *Hombre Valiente* suffers a -2 negative modifier to attack rolls when using this ability.

*Brothers in Red:* Starting from fifth level, a *Hombre Valiente* is accepted to be a brother in good standing among other members of the Prestige class. A *Hombre Valiente* of fifth level and higher can enter any guard station where other members of this Prestige class are in command, and receive food, lodging, equipment worth up to 100 gp per their level in the Prestige class, and any reasonable support they need for the execution of their lawful duties.

*National Security:* Starting at sixth level, the *Hombre Valiente* has gained the trust of his superiors – sufficient trust, in any case, to allow them to access

secret government files to aid their investigation. Once a day, when making a Knowledge check, the *Hombre Valiente* may add a bonus of half their level in this Prestige class to that check. This ability does not stack with Read the Street.

*Roaring Thunder:* Starting at seventh level, a *Hombre Valiente* riding in or even driving a vehicle can, as a full-round action, move up to the vehicle's speed and make an attack with a one-handed firearm at any point during his movement. The *Hombre Valiente* suffers a -2 negative modifier to attack rolls when using this ability.

*The Red Line:* At tenth level, a *Hombre Valiente* is recognized to be a guardsman's guardsman, a paragon of his order. If a *Hombre Valiente* of this level makes it known to other members of his order that he is in need of support to solve a case, any reasonable support will be given, and equipment worth up to 500 gp per level in the Prestige class is made available without question (though it may have to be given back later). In addition, if a *Hombre Valiente* of this level is killed, the killer should hope and pray that no other *Hombre Valiente* ever finds out, for they will be hunted down unto the ends of the world...

## TECHNICIAN

Where technology becomes an accepted part of society, there must always be the Technician; part craftsman, part artist, the Technician can be a self-taught tinkerer or a dedicated student. In their work, they range from gas station attendants who jury-rig a vehicle so it can limp home, to the respected master craftsmen who perform vital maintenance for factories. No matter how they come to their craft or where they end up, but Technicians are a vital part of any technological society – and potentially a terrifying part of any armed forces, given their ability to sabotage equipment and set booby-traps for the unwary.

**Hit Dice:** d8

**Prerequisites:**

**Skills:** Craft (mechanical) 5 ranks, Craft (traps) 5 ranks, Disable device 5 ranks, Knowledge (engineering) 5 ranks

**Feats:**

Create device (*Legacy of the Blood*, p. 91), Technologist (*Technology Guide*, p.7)

LVL	BAB	Fort.	Ref.	Will	Special
1	+ 0	+ 0	+ 1	+ 0	Jury-rig / Booby-trap 1d6; Favored tech (1st)
2	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	Fix-it; Machine empathy
3	+ 2	+ 1	+ 2	+ 1	Jury-rig / Booby-trap 2d6; Gadget
4	+ 3	+ 1	+ 2	+ 1	Fix-it; Dirt under the nails 1/day
5	+ 3	+ 2	+ 3	+ 2	Jury-rig / Booby-trap 3d6; Favored tech (2nd)
6	+ 4	+ 2	+ 3	+ 2	Fix-it; Grease in the blood
7	+ 5	+ 2	+ 4	+ 2	Jury-rig / Booby-trap 4d6; Gadget (2)
8	+ 6	+ 3	+ 4	+ 3	Fix-it; Dirt under the nails 2/day
9	+ 6	+ 3	+ 5	+ 3	Jury-rig / Booby-trap 5d6; Favored tech (3rd)
10	+ 7	+ 3	+ 5	+ 3	Fix-it; Ghost in the machine

**Class skills:** Craft (Int), Disable device (Dex), Knowledge (engineering) (Int), Knowledge (geography) (Int), Knowledge (history) (Int), Knowledge (local) (Int), Knowledge (nature) (Int), Linguistics (Int), Perception (Wis), Profession (Wis)

**Skill ranks at each level:** 6 + Int modifier

### Class features

**Weapon and Armor proficiency:** The Technician is proficient with all simple weapons, and with light armor. He does not gain proficiency with any kind of shield.

**Jury-rig / Booby-trap:** Starting from first level, the Technician can give ailing equipment a last spurt of life, or turn completely innocent devices into lethal traps. When using Jury-rig, a Technician can grant a damaged or broken device 1d6 temporary hit points, allowing it to function as normal while these temporary hit points persist; the device will lose 1 hp per hour, or 2 per hour if it is used vigorously. Using Jury-rig requires a successful Craft (mechanical) skill check.

When using Booby-trap, the Technician performs subtle sabotage on a technological device (anything

with mechanical parts), which will cause it to inflict 1d6 damage on whoever is first to touch it after the trap is set. The Technician must specify a trigger that will set the trap off; this could be ambient room temperature or the temperature of the device; a specific amount of pressure, for instance of touch or being sat or stood upon; vibrations as of approaching footsteps, objects falling, or even voices. Regardless, these triggers are dependent on observable outside influences, and do not react to specific individuals or creatures. The type of damage depends on what kind of device has been sabotaged; for instance a chemical battery could shatter, splashing someone with acid; a *mobila's* seats could rupture, driving sharp metal springs into a body. Using Booby-trap requires a successful Craft (traps) skill check.

The number of temporary hp / amount of damage increases by 1d6 every odd level.

**Favored tech:** Starting at first level, and again at fifth and tenth level, the Technician chooses a particular type of technology. Examples of types of technology are: civilian land vehicles, military land vehicles, heavy civilian land vehicles, heavy military land vehicles, trains, handguns, rifles, heavy artillery, machinery, explosives, radio, traps, et cetera. At first



level, the Technician gains a +1 modifier when using class skills whenever he interacts with the type of technology selected. When he selects his second favoured tech, the Technician's bonus for his first favored tech increases to +2, and he gains a +1 when interacting with his second favored tech. When he selects his third favored tech, his previous bonuses increase again; his bonus for his first favored tech is +4, his bonus for his second favored tech is +2, and his bonus for his third favored tech is +1.

*Fix-it:* At every even level, starting from second level, the Technician gains a Fix-it, a special trick they can use when interacting with technology. Each Fix-it can be chosen only once, unless stated differently in the description. A list of Fix-its is offered here, but the DM and player are free to design more such tricks.

- ❖ *Better than new:* A Technician with this Fix-it knows how to upgrade existing technology so it performs better than expected. If a Technician with this Fix-it completely overhauls an existing piece of technology, he can improve one aspect of it (speed, AC, etc.) by 10 percent. The Technician can later upgrade the same technology to add the same bonus to a different aspect, but the costs of doing so increase by 20 percent for every preceding upgrade (costs applied after calculating in the effects of Cheap fix, if the Technician has this Fix-it).
- ❖ *Cheap fix:* A Technician with this Fix-it knows how to get parts cheap, and can reduce the cost of creating or repairing technology by a quarter of the normal price. This Fix-it can be selected twice, and its effects will stack.
- ❖ *Devastating effect:* A Technician with this Fix-it knows how to make boobytraps even more destructive than they already are. A Technician with this Fix-it adds an extra point to the damage potential of their booby-traps for every level they have in the prestige class.
- ❖ *Quick-fix:* A Technician with this Fix-it can reduce the time it takes to create, repair or jury-rig technology by a quarter of the time. This Fix-it can be selected twice, and its effects stack.

- ❖ *Shiny and new:* A Technician with this Fix-it knows how to polish and dent out old tech so it looks much better than it is. When using this Fix-it, the Technician essentially makes a forgery check by ways of a Craft (mechanical) skill check. If the check is successful, the technology looks pristine, and a Perception check opposed to the Craft (mechanical) check is required to reveal the hidden wear and tear.
- ❖ *Specific trigger:* A Technician with this Fix-it can fine-tune a booby-trap to the point that it does react to a specific individual or creature type. Booby-traps created with this Fix-it activate only for the specific target, and remain dormant for others.
- ❖ *Stable hand:* A Technician with this Fix-it knows how to make jury-rigged technology last. If a Technician has this Fix-it, machinery they jury-rig only lose one hp per 2 hours, or only 1 per hour if used vigorously.

*Machine empathy:* Starting from second level, the Technician displays an advanced artistry when dealing with mechanisms. Whenever a Technician is within 20 feet of a machine or mechanical device (such as a trap), even one that is hidden or invisible, he may roll a Perception check to detect its presence.

*Gadget:* At third level, the Technician learns to create a *clockwork familiar* as though they were a 7th-level arcane spellcaster with the Improved Familiar-feat (See the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Bestiary 5* for more details on clockwork familiars). The Gadget serves just as a regular clockwork familiar would and grants its master the same powers, but is non-magical and can only carry scientific items and items created with the Create Device-feat; attempts to carry magic items will cause the Gadget to shut down. The Technician can substitute knowledge of spells through Craft (mechanical) checks. The cost of creating a Gadget is the same as that for a clockwork familiar. A Gadget need not look like a particular animal, even if it has the same statistics; consider a drone craft with the statistics of a raven or a hawk, or a miniature tank with the statistics of a rat or toad,



for instance. A Technician can create multiple Gadgets, but can only have one active starting at third level, and two starting at seventh level. A Technician is not obligated to have even one Gadget active; having multiple Gadgets active does not cause the bonuses and abilities granted by these helpful machines to stack.

*Dirt under the nails:* Long-standing experience and constant tinkering have given the Technician an insight in machines that allows him to interact with them even when he lacks the correct tools. Once a day starting from fourth level, and twice a day starting from eighth level, a Technician can improvise the tools he needs to interact with mechanical devices without suffering any kind of penalty.

*Grease in the blood:* A true and tried Technician has so much feeling for and experience with his field of expertise, that he almost seems to be at one with them. A Technician has a 20% chance not to set off a mechanical trap he interacts with without realizing it is there. Mechanical creatures that are normally hostile treat the Technician with an attitude of Indifferent so long as he does not become hostile towards them and does not do anything that conflicts with their mission.

*Ghost in the machine:* At tenth level, the Technician's understanding of machinery reaches a high-mystical scope. When a Technician interacts with intelligent devices, creatures that are part-machine or entities that are possessing or trapped inside mechanical devices, provided the Technician is non-hostile and has never harmed these creatures, they start the encounter with an attitude of Friendly.

## VIEJO SAGRADO

Guardians of ancient lore and questors for new knowledge, the *Viejo Sagrado* seeks to learn the secrets of the universe both through scholarly study and a spiritual exploration of many forms of divination. Dedicated to the furthering of knowledge from the shadows, as well as rebuilding the world that is into something better, the *Viejo Sagrado*

learns to wield great power in groups and varied power by themselves. As the group offers little in the way of morals or ethics, a *Viejo Sagrado* can become saintly or vile beyond belief, depending on their personal convictions.

**Hit Dice:** d6

### Prerequisites:

*Special – This Prestige class has requirements for advancement beyond the prerequisites for entry. This reflects the fact that los Viejos Sagrados are a secret society which practices different levels of initiation.*

*Note also that while the two ultimate levels of the Prestige class in this volume of Quoth the Raven require a Chaotic Evil alignment, there are three other sects with different ultimate levels and different abilities granted thereby.*

#### Level 1:

- Alignment:** Any
- Skills:** Two Knowledge (any) 5 ranks, Linguistics 5 ranks
- Feats:** Skill focus (Knowledge [any]), Psychic Sensitivity (or ability to cast psychic spells; *Occult Adventures*, p. 138)
- Magic:** Must be able to brew 2nd-level extracts or cast 2nd-level spells.

#### Level 5:

- Alignment:** CE, CG, CN or N
- Skills:** Craft (calligraphy) 3 ranks, Knowledge (any) 9 ranks, Linguistics 9 ranks, Perform (oratory) 2 ranks
- Feats:** Two of Skill Focus (Knowledge [any]), Weapon Focus (cane)

**Magic:** Must be able to brew 3rd-level extracts or cast 3rd-level spells from one class list; must be able to brew 1st-level extracts or cast 1st-level spells from a second class list.

**Special:** Must have invested 1,000 gp in writing and publishing a book on a scholarly subject.

Linguistics 13 ranks, Perform (oratory) 5 ranks

*Level 9 (Conquista):*

**Feats:** Voracious (*Van Richten's Guide to the Walking Dead*, p. 55)

**Alignment:** CE

**Skills:** Craft (calligraphy) 5 ranks,  
Knowledge (any) 13 ranks,

**Special:** Must have invested 4,000 gp in writing and publishing a book or several books on a scholarly subject.

LVL	BAB	Fort.	Ref.	Will	Special	Magic
1	+ 0	+ 0	+ 0	+ 1	Eye of the Titans; Secret signs	+1 spellcasting / alchemy level
2	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	Dream Oracle	+1 spellcasting / alchemy level
3	+ 1	+ 1	+ 1	+ 2	Teacher's cane	+1 spellcasting / alchemy level
4	+ 2	+ 1	+ 1	+ 2	Practical studies	+1 spellcasting / alchemy level
5	+ 2	+ 2	+ 2	+ 3	Circle Leader; scholar of note +1	+1 level of lower class
6	+ 3	+ 2	+ 2	+ 3	Conclave of dreams	+1 level of two classes
7	+ 3	+ 2	+ 2	+ 4	Flame of Knowledge	+1 level of two classes
8	+ 4	+ 3	+ 3	+ 4	Practical studies	+1 level of two classes
9	+ 4	+ 3	+ 3	+ 5	Great Circle Leader; scholar of note +2	+1 level of lower class
10	+ 5	+ 3	+ 3	+ 5	Devour Knowledge; Tenure	+1 level of two classes

**Class skills:** Appraise (Int), Craft (Int), Heal (Wis), Knowledge (all) (Int), Linguistics (Int), Profession (Wis), Spellcraft (Int)

**Skill ranks at each level:** 4 + Int modifier

#### Class features

**Weapon and Armor proficiency:** The *Viejo Sagrado* is proficient with the cane, the dagger, the quarterstaff, the sword cane, the kukri and hand crossbow. He gains no proficiency with any kind of armor or shield.

**Alchemy / Spellcasting:** Some ability to brew extracts or cast spells is a prerequisite for entry into this Prestige class. At every level in the Prestige class, the character's ability to brew extracts or cast spells increases as though they had taken another level in a class that granted them access to alchemy or magic. They do not, however, gain other benefits a character of that class would have gained, except for additional spells or extracts per day, spells or

extracts known, and an increased effective caster level. If a character had more than one spellcasting or alchemy-wielding class before becoming a *Viejo Sagrado*, they must decide to which class they add the new level for purposes of determining spells or extracts per day.

This progression becomes more complicated starting from level 5, when a *Viejo Sagrado* must have access to alchemy or magic from at least two different class lists. At fifth and ninth level, the character only gains more access to extracts or spells from the weakest of the lists to which they have access. At sixth, seventh, eighth and tenth level, they gain access to more extracts or spells of two of the class lists to which they have access, one of which must be their weakest list. If the character has access to more than two class lists, they must choose to which of the stronger alchemy or magic class lists to apply the increase in power.

**Eye of the Titans (Su):** At first level, a *Viejo Sagrado* must choose to see as either Epimetheus or as



Prometheus. If they choose to see as Epimetheus, the *Viejo Sagrado* gains a constant +2 bonus to skill checks with Knowledge (history) and Psychometry (Appraise). If they choose Prometheus, they gain a +2 to Craft (alchemy) and Prognostication (Sense motive) checks.

(For the rules to Automatic writing, Prognostication and Psychometry, please see the rules for Occult Skill Unlocks in *Occult Adventures*.)

*Secret signs (Su)*: Members of *los Viejos Sagrados* learn a secret language of symbols named *Agabria*, which they use to communicate by marking them on buildings. In effect, this is a free bonus language with no spoken form. Members of the order can instantly recognize these secret signs; outsiders need to make successful DC 20 Perception checks to even recognize these are more than random graffiti, followed by DC20 Linguistics checks to interpret them. Particularly paranoid *Viejos Sagrados* may even use invisible ink or magical writings to further obscure the existence of these messages; other members of the order are still able to instantly see and recognize them for what they are.

*Dream Oracle (Su)*: Starting from second level, *Viejos Sagrados* learn the art of oneiromancy; predicting the future through dreams. When the *Viejo Sagrado* goes to sleep, they can ask the DM to roll a Prognostication (Sense motive) check for a question they wish answered, as per the Occult skill unlock, even if they have already used Prognostication earlier that day. The omens they gain manifest as vivid dreams. (Note that if a character asks questions about particularly evil or frightening suspects, the DM may opt to subject them to a Fear, Horror or Madness check as the character's dreams are filled with terror.)

*Teacher's cane*: At third level, the *Viejo Sagrado* is awarded the privilege of wielding a *teacher's cane*, one of the order's badges of recognition. The *Viejo Sagrado* must travel to a stronghold of the order and present a masterwork item – a cane, a club, a quarterstaff or sword cane – to be enchanted during

a ritual of circle magic. Once the object is so enchanted, the *Viejo Sagrado* can have it charged with spells he can not himself cast.

Each *teacher's cane* holds nine spell slots, which a *Viejo Sagrado* may use during circle magic rituals to store spells from class lists to which the *cane's* owner does not have access; fellow *Viejos Sagrados* may donate these spells if properly compensated. Each slot is of a different level, ranging from level one to nine. A *Viejo Sagrado* can trigger the *teacher's cane* to cast each of these spells as a standard action once a day, as though cast by himself; he can not trigger a spell of a level higher than he is able to cast himself, even if it has been imbued into the *teacher's cane*. Spells may be switched out for others during ensuing circle magic rituals.

If well-imbued, a *teacher's cane* is a highly versatile tool – or a deadly weapon – in the hands of a clever thinker. It may be enchanted further, but should be considered to carry a +3 enhancement.

*Practical studies*: At fourth and eighth level, the *Viejo Sagrado's* broad studies allow them to add a skill to their list of class skills that is not already one of their class skills. They immediately gain one bonus skill rank in that skill, and the associated +3 class skill bonus.

*Circle Leader*: Starting at fifth level, the *Viejo Sagrado* can become a circle leader and act as the focus for circle magic – but only with others who have levels in this Prestige class. (See page 59 of the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* for details on circle magic.)

*Scholar of note*: Starting from fifth level, the *Viejo Sagrado* is considered to be well-known in academic circles. The *Viejo Sagrado* gains a +1 reputation bonus to social skill checks when among people who can be considered to be educated, or at least aware of who is who in high society. This bonus increases to +2 at ninth level.

*Conclave of Dreams (Su)*: Starting from sixth level, *Viejos Sagrados* can communicate with each other in their dreams. So long as two or more *Viejos Sagrados*



are in the same domain and know that they are within the same domain, any *Viejo Sagrado* with access to Conclave of Dreams can initiate a shared dream. The shared dream lasts for five minutes per effective character level of the highest-ranking *Viejo Sagrado* in the link, divided by the number of *Viejos Sagrados* sharing the dream. Inside the dream, the *Viejos Sagrados* can communicate with full control of their mental faculties, such as these are in the waking world.

*Flame of Knowledge (Su)*: At seventh level, owing to lessons taught to the order by the Red Haunt, the *Viejo Sagrado* gains a limited access to a mad, seething energy that eternally consumes itself and regenerates on that very consumption. This eerie, wailing, blue flame is Un-Fire. (See also *Quoth the Raven* #29, p. 223). A *Viejo Sagrado* can 'sacrifice' a daily use of the spells locked in his *teacher's cane* (but only those spell slots he can access) to produce a 10 ft. cone or 30 ft. line of Un-Fire, or else to manifest as additional damage when striking an opponent with the *teacher's cane*.

The flame feeds on all kinds of physical matter – including the bodies of enemies.

'Sacrificing' a spell to generate a charge of Un-Fire counts as a move action; wielding the Un-Fire counts as a standard action. The Flame of Knowledge deals 1d8 Un-Fire damage per level of the spell slot sacrificed. Damage dealt by Un-Fire bypasses all damage reduction and energy resistance, and should be considered to be cursed damage.

Any victim struck by Un-Fire must roll a Fortitude save against a DC that equals 10 + the level of the *Viejo Sagrado* channeling the Flame of Knowledge in the prestige class + the level of the spell slot sacrificed to generate the charge of Un-Fire. If the target fails the save, the damage dealt by Un-Fire can not be healed or repaired outside of holy or unholy ground. If a creature is killed or an object destroyed by Un-Fire, they must make the same save, against the same DC. If the save is passed, nothing more interesting happens than standard death or

disassembly. If the save is failed, unattended objects collapse into Mist and fade away, and creatures' souls are immediately awoken as ghosts.

*Great Circle Leader (Ex)*: Starting from ninth level, the *Viejo Sagrado* has mastered the art of circle magic and can lead a great circle. A great circle can have a total of nine assistants instead of five. All of these assistants must have levels in this Prestige class.

*Devour knowledge*: After having attained *Tenure*, a Chaotic Evil *Viejo Sagrado* can acquire the knowledge of another living or undead creature by devouring its brain. Eating the raw brain of a creature that is either freshly dead or helpless transfers the knowledge of the victim into the *Viejo Sagrado*. In game terms, this grants the *Viejo Sagrado* a circumstance bonus of +1 to Knowledge checks for every four character levels of the victim for a duration of twenty-four hours. After this period, the knowledge is considered to have been 'digested', and the bonus fades. If the *Viejo Sagrado* does not record the knowledge so gained before the twenty-four hours are up, it is forgotten.

*Tenure*: The Chaotic Evil sect of *los Viejos Sagrados* reserves a special alchemical brew for those elites who reach the tenth level of the Prestige class. Upon imbibing the potion, the character falls into a coma and dies over a period of twenty-four hours. Ninety-two hours after imbibing the potion, the character rises as a Ghoul Lord. The character's physical ability scores change to reflect those of an average Ghoul Lord, but their mental ability scores remain the same as they were in life, and their personality remains largely the same – though their hunger may twist their outlook considerably.

## WICKED WITCH

Go into the woods and veer from the true path, and the wicked witch will catch you and devour you. Or perhaps she will bind you as her servant for life... or worse. The Wicked Witch is the archetype of the witch from fairytales; the one who brews mysterious potions under the full moon and casts spells with



wicked abandon, all for her own gratification. But she is also a student of a tradition of circle magic and secrets that date back to before Conquista's entrapment in the Mists; secrets that defy death and time. While many who follow this path to power fall to Evil as did the land their tradition springs from, not all need do so. A well-intentioned (though never *Good*) member of this tradition may do great deeds in the world, either striding forth without fear of death or defeat or secretly brewing tonics and cures for those in need.

**Hit Dice:** d6

**Prerequisites:**

**Alignment:** Any non-Good

**Skills:** Craft (alchemy) 5 ranks, Knowledge (arcana) 5 ranks, Knowledge (religion) 3 ranks, Spellcraft 3 ranks

**Feats:** Brew Potion, Spell Focus (Enchantment, Necromancy or

Transmutation), Voracious (*Van Richten's Guide to the Walking Dead*, p. 55)

**Alchemy:** Able to brew 1st-level extracts

**Magic:** Able to cast 2nd-level spells

**Class skills:** Craft (Int), Fly (Dex), Knowledge (All) (Int), Perform (Cha), Profession (Wis), Spellcraft (Int), Use magic device (Cha)

**Skill ranks at each level:** 2 + Int modifier

### Class Features

*Weapon and Armor proficiency:* The Wicked Witch is proficient with the dagger, punching dagger, quarterstaff, machete, light crossbow and bayonet. She gains no proficiency with any armor or shields.

LVL	BAB	Fort.	Ref.	Will	Special	Magic
1	+0	+0	+0	+1	Witch's Brew	+1 alchemy
2	+1	+1	+1	+1	Wicked Familiar	+1 alchemy and spellcasting
3	+1	+1	+1	+2	Witch's Brew	+1 alchemy and spellcasting
4	+2	+1	+1	+2	Wicked Feast (one month)	+1 alchemy and spellcasting
5	+2	+2	+2	+3	Circle Leader	+1 alchemy
6	+3	+2	+2	+3	Wicked Determination	+1 alchemy and spellcasting
7	+3	+2	+2	+4	Witch's Brew	+1 alchemy and spellcasting
8	+4	+3	+3	+4	Wicked Circle	+1 alchemy and spellcasting
9	+4	+3	+3	+5	Great Circle Leader	+1 alchemy
10	+5	+3	+3	+5	Wicked Expectations	+1 alchemy and spellcasting

*Alchemy and magic:* At every level, the Wicked Witch gains access to more extracts per day, extracts known and effective caster level as though she had taken another level in whatever class first enabled her to brew extracts. She does not, however, gain other benefits a character of that class would have gained, except for additional extracts per day, extracts known, and an increased effective caster level. At second, third, fourth, sixth, seventh, eighth and tenth level, the Wicked Witch gains access to more spells per day, spells known and effective caster level as though she had taken another level in whatever class first enabled her to cast spells. She

does not, however, gain other benefits a character of that class would have gained, except for additional spells per day, spells known, and an increased effective caster level. If the character has access to more than one alchemy class list and/or more than one spellcasting class list, they must choose to which they want to add the additional levels.

*Wicked Might:* At first level, the Wicked Witch gains the feat Greater Spell Focus for one school of magic for which she already has Spell Focus as a bonus feat.



*Witch's Brew*: At first, third and seventh level, the Wicked Witch can choose a bonus feat from the following list: Bind Greater Undead (*Van Richten's Guide to the Walking Dead*, p. 90), Bind Lesser Undead (*Van Richten's Guide to the Walking Dead*, p. 90), Brew Greater Potion (*Dark Tales and Disturbing Legends*, p. 190), Extra Discovery (*Advanced Player's Guide*, p. 160), Greater Skill Focus (Craft [Alchemy]), Skill Focus (Craft [Alchemy]), Superior Alchemy (*Legacy of the Blood*, p. 91)

*Wicked Familiar (Su)*: Starting at second level, a Wicked Witch may choose one creature of Medium size or less to become her Wicked Familiar. The target creature must be willing or fully restrained, and must undergo a one-hour ritual under either the new (if unwilling) or full moon (if willing), at the end of which it must roll a Will save as though subjected to a *geas*-spell cast by the Wicked Witch.

If the creature willingly submits or fails its Will save, it becomes bonded to the Wicked Witch. The two creatures so bonded receive certain benefits. Once a day, if the Wicked Familiar is subjected to spells or powers of the Enchantment school, they can use the Will save of their bonded Witch in stead of their own to resist. Once a day, the Wicked Witch can issue a command to her Wicked Familiar as though she were casting *suggestion*, but without actually having to cast a spell or the school of Enchantment at all. The Wicked Familiar suffers a -2 penalty to all such commands from its Wicked Witch. At no time can the Wicked Familiar travel more than three miles from its Wicked Witch, lest it be wracked by hideous agony (no save) unless it returns to her side.

If the Wicked Familiar is a creature of the Wicked Witch's own creation, such as an undead or construct, it no longer counts against the maximum amount of HD of creatures the Wicked Witch is able to control.

*Wicked Feast (Su)*: Starting from fourth level, whenever the Wicked Witch commits the act of cannibalism and devours the flesh of a corpse of a creature of her own type, she can choose to forego

the normal benefits of the *Voracious*-feat and instead draw on the vitality of her victim to refresh her youth and beauty. For a duration one month after engaging in the Wicked Feast, the Wicked Witch can reverse her physical aging and returns to an age category immediately preceding her current one. Her physical ability scores revert to how they were in the preceding age category, but her mental ability scores remain the same. Any scarring or mutilations that were not present when the Wicked Witch occupied the preceding age category disappear for the duration of the effect.

Note that no matter how many creatures she devours, a Wicked Witch can gain the benefit of Wicked Feast only once a month. The effects of Wicked Feast do not render a character immune to magical effects that induce or reverse ageing.

*Circle Leader (Ex)*: Starting at fifth level, the Wicked Witch can become a circle leader and act as the focus for circle magic – but only with others who have levels in this Prestige class. (See page 59 of the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* for details on circle magic.)

*Wicked Determination (Su)*: Starting at sixth level, the hold of the grave over a Wicked Witch weakens – or perhaps her will grows too strong for it to hold her. If a Wicked Witch dies and her corpse is not ritually mutilated, consecrated or burned, she will rise as a ghoul in 1d4 days on the hour of sunset. Her mental ability scores remain the same as in life, but the Wicked Witch is ruled by her hunger the same as other ghouls. Unlike other ghouls, the Wicked Witch feels a supernatural connection to her grave (or at least the place her body lies when she rises to undeath), and is forced to return to it to sleep away the daylight hours, limiting the distance she can travel. If a Wicked Witch manages to return to life, the connection to her grave is broken.

*Wicked Circle (Ex)*: Starting from eighth level, a Wicked Witch can ritually form a bond with up to two other Wicked Witches. When this coven of three is within five feet of each other, all gain the benefit of



Spell Focus for any two schools of magic for which they do not already have the feat (the two schools may not change once they are chosen). In addition, each member of the Wicked Circle gains a +1 to Initiative and three bonus hp for every other member who is within five feet of her, so long as they maintain their proximity. If this coven is ever broken, new members can be selected.

*Great Circle Leader (Ex):* Starting from ninth level, the Wicked Witch has mastered the art of circle magic and can lead a great circle. A great circle can have a total of nine assistants instead of five. All of these assistants must have levels in this Prestige class.

*Wicked Expectations (Su):* Starting from tenth level, a Wicked Witch may cheat death by invoking the terms of a prophecy. In order to invoke Wicked Expectations, the character must create a magic item or potion worth 100,000 gp (and whose creation involves harvesting at least ten bodies of creatures of her own type), then determine a specific location and time of the year, and a specific type of user. This could be 'a human virgin', or 'a member of my bloodline'.

Next, she must die of causes other than old age, and be beyond the ability of Wicked Determination to save her.

The correct user must, at the correct time and in the correct location, perform the correct act involving the item or potion created. If all the requirements are met, the Wicked Witch is revived as per *True resurrection*, no matter how much time has passed since her death. Her physical and mental ability scores are as they were before the moment of her death, and she remembers and has access to any spells she had remaining at the time. Extracts will need to be brewed afresh, however.

## Who's Doomed

CLIFTON WILLGOAT; FATHER OF CONQUISTA

**CE male human Expert 2 / Ranger (sword-devil) 4 / Technician 2 / Goatsman 5**

**CR 15**

**Size** Medium; **Init** +3; **Senses** Darkvision 60 ft.; **Perception** +10

### Defence

**AC** 18 (+3 Dex., +4 Cha., +1 Dodge); **SR** 19

**HD** (9d8+18) + (4d10+8) 128 hp

**Fort** +12, **Ref** +10, **Will** +10

### Offense

**Speed** 30 ft

**Melee** +2 dagger +11 (1d4+4 (+2d6 vs. good-aligned creatures); 19-20/x2; unarmed strike +11 1d3+2

**Ranged** sling +12 (1d4+2)

### Statistics

**Str** 14, **Dex** 16, **Con** 14, **Int** 13, **Wis** 17, **Cha** 18

**Base atk** +9; **CMB** +11; **CMD** +24

**Feats** Alertness (B), Combat expertise (B), Create device (Brew potion), Create device (Brew greater potion) (B), Dodge, Endurance, Extra death vow, Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Technologist, Voracious

**Skills** Acrobatics +9, Appraise +9, Climb +8, Craft (alchemy) +17, Craft (leather) +5, Craft (mechanical) +10, Craft (traps) +13, Craft weapons +5, Disable device +13, Intimidate +12, Knowledge (engineering) +10, Knowledge (nature) +10, Perception +10, Profession (driver) +7, Stealth +15, Survival +14 (+16 to follow tracks)

**Traits** Charming, Desert child

**Special qualities** Close the Borders; Combat style (Underhanded); Father of the Dead; Father of Decay; Father of Goats; Darklord's Curse; King of the Mists; Lilim-kissed; Sinkhole of Evil; Unaging

Class abilities Death vow (+2, 4/day); Familiar (rat); Favored tech (civilian land vehicles); Fix-it (*Quick-fix*); Fiendish familiar; Goatsmark (*Face of terror*, *Voice of terror*); Improved Familiar; Inspiring example; Jury-rig / Booby-trap 1d6; Machine empathy; Pain strike +2d6; Slashing fury; track; Untouchable; Wild empathy

**Languages** Casian\*, Frankonet, Lelender, Ocham, Teuton

**Equipment** Spell component pouch, artisan's tools, harness, +2 unholy dagger "*Leonteus*" (intelligent item: CE alignment, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 10; Ego modifier +4; telepathy; senses 30 ft.)

**Magic Spells/day:** 4/3/1; Save DC: 12 + spell level.

**Typically prepared spells:**

3 – *barrow haze*; 2 – *cure moderate wounds*, *false life*, *hidden presence*; 1 – *command*, *cure light wounds*, *dancing darkness*, *mage armor*

### Background

Once, Cliffton lived in a very different Conquista; this was Conquista on the Prime Material plane. In that rough world, which had its own unfairness but was blessedly free of the tribal divides that taint Conquista in the Demiplane of Dread, Cliffton initially hoped to become a celebrated *corredor*, a driver of fast *mobílas* for the delight of crowds and cash prizes. Sadly, he was found to lack the necessary reflexes, and certainly did not have the necessary financial backing. Next, Cliffton wanted to become a mechanic, a part of the teams that helped champions achieve victory – but his grades and skills weren't up to the task.

What Cliffton got, was a job at a refueling station in the desert near the then-town of *Prosopis*, fixing the *mobílas* of travellers who were experiencing minor problems. He found the work monotonous and insulting, but was stubbornly unwilling to put in the work to qualify for better positions. The only thing he found remotely acceptable in his life, was his spouse: Gramarcia. Although she was neither wise nor clever,

she was loving and beautiful, and Cliffton was the center of her world. If there was anything she was unhappy with in their frugal lifestyle, living in a two-room shack near Cliffton's workplace, it was that their love had not been blessed with a child.

In Gramarcia, Cliffton found peace at the end of his workday. Tragically, he also found his damnation through her. One evening, a local *Hombre Valiente* made a pass at Gramarcia when she and Cliffton were in the bar for a drink, and fueled by equal parts possessiveness and beer, Cliffton took a swing at the man. He was beaten down and tossed in the local drunk tank for his trouble, with the policeman promising he'd spend the next ten years of his life doing hard labor as he walked away.

To Cliffton's great surprise, that same *Hombre Valiente* released him and tossed him onto the street the next morning, telling him to 'thank his old lady'. Cliffton returned home, where Gramarcia gushed about how happy she was that she'd been able to get him out, "And maybe now we'll have the baby!" Understanding now what his wife had done to secure his release, Cliffton was not filled with gratitude and humility, but with anger at this unintended criticism of his manhood. He beat sweet, uncomprehending Gramarcia unconscious and left town, determined to find a better life.

All he found on the road was more frustration and setbacks, stoking his rage. He worked for an old farmer up north, until the farmer's wife offered him a job as a *doméstico* so she could give her husband an heir. When Cliffton flew into a rage at the perceived insult, she easily tamed him with a Witch's magic, got what she wanted from him, then told the farmer Cliffton had tried to rape her; he barely managed to escape being run through with a pitchfork. He travelled south and found work at another refueling station, only to be arrested by local *Hombres Valientes* on completely fictitious charges. After a night of beating and otherwise molesting him in the local jail, the policemen drove Cliffton out into the desert, stripped him of his last belongings,





stapled a goatmask to his face and left him to die. This was their idea of casual, 'harmless' fun.

Cliffton limped through the blazing sand, and when he could no longer limp, he staggered, determined not to let fate destroy him like this. In the end, he crawled like a worm, blinded by sun and sand, dehydrated, still bruised and bleeding. And then his fingers touched the hilt of the knife, as lost to the sand and sun as he was. It whispered in his mind, told him its name was "*Ixion*", and that it would help him get what he wanted... what he deserved. Even dying, Cliffton could sense the weapon's utter malice; what remained of his rational mind and his heart knew that death and the hope of Taiia's embrace were better than what the knife wanted for him. But then it added it would help him get revenge, and he whispered "Yes".

*Ixion* kept its promise. It filled Cliffton's battered body with strength, allowing him to return to staggering until he reached the end of the desert. A woman in a *mobila* spotted him and stopped, moved by kindness to help him. After an hour or so, Cliffton – now well-nourished and even more hale – casually ripped the mask off of his face and helped himself to her vehicle and started retracing his steps. With *Ixion* whispering in his mind, he stalked the policemen who had abused him and rendered unto them a torturous death. After which, he used their supplies and ammunition to set the town they had watched over on fire. As the townsfolk, who had known nothing of Cliffton's woes, fled into the desert night, he stalked and butchered them one by one.

He returned north and sought out a certain farm, where an old man and his young, now pregnant wife worked the soil. Even though he considered the possibility that the witch-wife might be pregnant with *his* child, Cliffton buried them both in their own acreage – eventually, and not before he was completely satisfied.

Finally, Cliffton returned to *Prosopis*-town and a certain shack. He was enraged when he saw a *Hombre Valiente* well-known to him swagger into

what had been his home, calling out for 'his woman' to put his meal on the table. When he heard Gramarcia cheerfully welcoming the policeman and the voice of a wailing infant, he truly saw red. He drained the fuel from the policeman's *mobila*, drew a circle around the shack and lit it on fire as a distraction before he charged into the house, *Ixion* in hand. This time, it was the policeman who fell, stabbed in a dozen places before he hit the floor. Gramarcia was too busy trying to save her baby to flee; when the blade went in, she cried out in despair – for her beloved husband Cliffton, not the policeman, to save her.

Cliffton paused for a moment, confused. Then he saw himself in a framed picture of his wedding day, still in point of pride on the wall; a goat-faced, wolf-toothed, black-furred abomination with a hideous blade in its grasp, the blood of his wife on its hands. And maybe, a cold voice whispered in the back of his head, the blood of *both* of his children. Smoke stole the sight of horror from Cliffton's eyes, smoke that turned cold. Smoke that turned to Mist.

When the Mist cleared, Cliffton found himself in a Conquista transformed. The weathered towns he had known were replaced by great cities, and to the north the dry desert of his youth was transformed into lush farmland. Also changed were the people; they had become harsh and intolerant of one another, the unfairness that had lurked beneath the surface of Cliffton's birth world dragged to the surface to fester and befoul everything.

Although he learned to resume his human form over time, Cliffton could find no acceptance among the people of this new Conquista. His facial scars made many suspect that he was one of the vile criminals who were sent out in winter to die or be killed. His mixed heritage, which had been perfectly normal in his birth world, was a source of scorn and disgust even among those who did not mind his scars. And perhaps worst of all, the touch of his skin now caused man-made fibers and alloys to rot and rust at an accelerated pace, leaving him bare and unable to wield the technology he had loved.

Cliffton turned to the darkness for comfort, learning to master the horrors that lurked in the domain's Misty border as well as the evils that dwelled within his land. For decades, he was the general of an army of merciless monsters, the living incarnation of *il Demonio*, the only being in Conquista capable of wielding true magic... and instead of wallowing in his isolation from humanity, he came to love his new existence, using murder and cruelty to salve his wounded ego.

And then the earth shook, the mountains roared, and the sun broke through the Mists.

### Current sketch

Cliffton's second fall from grace may have come because he found happiness in his condition; he knew himself the undisputed king of his domain's supernatural evil, the incarnation of *il Demonio*, and he revelled in it.

When the two fiends overturned Conquista's political landscape to test their theories, the Dark Powers took the opportunity to overturn the domain's Darklordship to put a fresh edge on Cliffton's torment. No matter how many times he now calls the Mists, no armies answer his summons. His condition as a Goatsman is no longer unique; in fact, Euphonia Root is initiating people in it as a sign of submission to *il Demonio*, which Cliffton considers a deadly insult. He is reduced to petitioning the witches he once hunted for sport in order to maintain his power, and is unable to directly attack the contenders for his throne. When murder rises in his heart, he must prey on the weak and lonely, instead of seizing victims by grand displays of force.

Once again, Cliffton feels like a helpless, powerless outcast.

In recent years, Cliffton has been trying to contact the Dread Lords of nearby domains, hoping to create alliances that will allow him to destroy his hated rivals. Camille Churnstone of Lilliend proved to be a misandric madwoman who tried to have him assassinated for the temerity of contacting her.

Unrak Wormtrail of Masogan is a kindred spirit with whom Cliffton can commiserate over the unfairness of fate and discuss alchemy, but who is unable or unwilling to dispatch agents to help him. Queen Katherine Lavonie of West-Lund has been so helpful that Cliffton has become suspicious of her motives; she sent him the magical dagger *Leonteus*, a creation of horn and flint that he can actually wield, and only asked that Cliffton let her know if refugees from her land try to settle in Conquista. Even though she might give him more, Cliffton dares not ask.

### Combat

Cliffton avoids combat with multiple opponents like the plague, unless he can cobble together some support – a rare thing nowadays. The last time he tried, he was nearly killed by a party of adventurers, and lost the dagger *Ixion* as he fled for his life, forcing him to petition Queen Katherine for a replacement. He much prefers to run if challenged, then sneak after enemies and use opportunities to attack them one by one, preferably after they've been softened up by traps. Once he has psyched himself up and cast whatever buffing spells he can, or when he comes across a solitary and weak target, Cliffton assumes his monstrous form and leaps into battle, initially stabbing wildly, then moves in for a grapple and starts biting his enemy, literally attempting to eat them alive.

### Lair

Cliffton's main lair is a cave in the southern *cantón*. It is the one place in Conquista where he feels at all comfortable and in control anymore. Here, he can trap, torment and devour victims without needing to fear persecution. Here, he can tinker with the lifeless matter that resists his mastery in the form of a wrecked old *mobíla* he swears will one day run as good as new. Here, he can brew potions and conduct acts of alchemy that are decades if not centuries ahead of their time... and here he can pretend, if only for a while, that all of this makes him strong and proud, rather than a miserable exile seeking comfort in loneliness and the suffering of helpless victims.



## Closing the Borders

When Cliffton is Darklord and wishes to close the borders of Conquista, he starts laughing like a mad thing. The instant he does so with the intent of closing the domain, every woman with even a hint of magical power starts to laugh hysterically as well. The gathered sound travels to the borders of Conquista, where it forms a sphere of sonic energy around the domain. The border effect is soundless once it goes into effect, and is only visible as a slight haze in the air. (A DC 20 Perception check reveals its presence.)

Passage through this sphere is impossible for all except creatures naturally immune to sonic damage and (super)naturally incorporeal beings. All others who attempt to pass the sphere immediately suffer 13d8 sonic damage (no save) and are hurled back in the direction they came from.

## Darklord's Curse

Cliffton's curse is isolation and lack of prestige. Once, he was a part of human society, but he disdained his lowly position and grumbled over it instead of working to better himself. Now, he is potentially a figure of great power, but no one respects him for it. In his human form, he is considered to be disgusting because of his mixed blood. In his bestial form, he was once a unique figure of terror, but now he is one of many – with Euphonia Root's activities causing ever more 'Goatsmen' to arise – and he dares not act as openly as he once did. All of this, and his isolation, wears at his sanity.

Cliffton does not realize that he could receive all the adulation he ever wanted, if he would share his knowledge of alchemy. In his crude laboratory, the Darklord of Conquista has crafted spectacular elixirs, and even designed a method to refine raw black-oil to usable fuel without generating any toxic by-products and without wasting as much of the volume. If Cliffton revealed his discovery to the world, he would be hailed as a hero by *prosperidad* and *supremacía* alike for the way his process would revolutionize the black-oil and vehicle industries.

Alas, as Cliffton seldom talks to people, he has no idea just how revolutionary his discovery is...

## *Father of the Dead*

This ability only comes into full effect when Cliffton is the current Darklord.

If Cliffton comes across mindless undead like skeletons or zombies, he can take command over them like an Evil-aligned Cleric of a level equal to his ECL. This control lasts only during the hours of darkness, with the undead breaking free from Cliffton's control as soon as the sun rises. There is no upper limit to the number of mindless undead Cliffton can control in this way.

When Cliffton is not the Darklord or when he is among the mindless undead during daylight hours, *Father of the Dead* merely functions as though Cliffton had the Cold One-feat.

## *Father of Decay*

Man-made fibers start to rot as soon as they touch Cliffton's skin, and even metals not naturally prone to oxydation rust. Cloth falls apart in seconds, leather and furs stripped from dead creatures take about an hour to decay. Metal objects require anywhere between a day and a week to fall apart, depending on their size. Other materials, such as wood, stone, bone, flesh and horn are unaffected.

## *Father of Goats*

As Conquista's very first Goatsman, Cliffton can transform into his monstrous form whenever he wants, for as long as he wants. He does not have a set duration that limits his change.

## *King of the Mists*

This ability only comes into full effect when Cliffton is the current Darklord.

Five times a day, Cliffton can summon the Mists, calling them to roll inward from the borders of Conquista to wherever he is. Summoning the Mists is a full-round action, and the Mists require another full



round to come to Cliffton. Once they arrive, Cliffton gains total concealment and can, as a move action, teleport instantly to any place in Conquista where he has been before, with the exception of places that are currently holy or unholy ground. The Mists fade over thirteen rounds after Cliffton has departed.

Before Cliffton's position as Darklord became challenged, he was able to teleport up to thirteen other creatures along with him whenever he summoned the Mists. Currently, he can only teleport himself, whatever equipment he has on him, and one creature of up to Medium size – provided that Cliffton is grappling that creature and has it restrained.

When Cliffton is not the Darklord, *King of the Mists* allows him to conjure a *solid fog* five times a day, as a spellcaster with a caster level equal to Cliffton's ECL. Cliffton is always the center of the spreading fog.

#### *Lilim-Kissed*

Trading with Queen Katherine of Lund has cost Cliffton more than he realizes. As long as he carries the dagger *Leonteus*, Queen Katherine can freely enter his mind whenever he sleeps, no matter what measures he takes to shield his dreams. Once inside, she can alter his dreams to suit her own purposes. Already, Cliffton has had recurring dreams of embracing a beautiful, red-haired woman who makes him feel peaceful and content...

#### *Unaging*

Cliffton has not aged a single day since Conquista was dragged into the Mists, and unless he ever leaves the domain, he never will – unless he is killed.

## EUPHONIA ROOT; VOICE OF EVIL

**LE female human Cleric 6 / Ranger 1 / Goatsman 6**  
**CR 15**

**Size** Medium **Init** +1; **Senses** Darkvision 60 ft.; Perception +10

### Defence

**AC** 15 (+0 Dex., +3 armor, +2 natural)

**HD** (6d8+6) +

**Fort** +11, **Ref** +9, **Will** +12

### Offense

**Speed** 30 ft

**Melee** +2 battleaxe +13 (1d8+4/x3); unarmed strike +11 (1d3+2)

**Ranged** *Fire bolt* +9 (1d6+3 fire)

### Statistics

**Str** 14, **Dex** 10, **Con** 12, **Int** 13, **Wis** 21, **Cha** 14

**Base atk** +9; **CMB** +11; **CMD** +21

**Feats** Alertness (B), Improved grapple, Improved unarmed strike, Influencer, Operator, Silent spell, Spell focus (Enchantment), Technologist, Voracious

**Skills** Bluff +13, Craft (alchemy) +17, Craft (mechanical) +10, Intimidate +10, Knowledge (religion) +17, Linguistics +6, Perception +13, Profession (driver) +9, Profession (radiographer) +13, Sense motive +7, Spellcraft +8, Stealth +8, Survival +13 (+14 to follow tracks)

**Traits** Charming, Deft dodger

**Special qualities** Closing the Borders; Darklord's Curse; Great Influencer; Mother of Night; Sinkhole of Evil; Unaging

**Class abilities** 1<sup>st</sup> favored enemy (humanoid: human), Aura (Lawful), channel negative energy 3d6, *copycat* 8/day, domains (Fire, Trickery), Familiar (weasel), Fiendish familiar, *fire bolt* 8/day, Goatsmark x 3 (*Face of terror* (DC 18), *Tainted blood*,



*Touch of horror* (DC 18)), Improved familiar, Pain strike +3d6, track, Vile transformation, wild empathy

**Languages** Casian\*, Frankonet, Moutere, Teuton

**Equipment** Unholy symbol (Taiia) (doubles as amulet of natural armor +2), spell component pouch, vial of unholy water, +2 battleaxe, cleric's vestments, bracers of armor +3, belt of mighty constitution +2

### **Magic**

**Cleric spells/day:** 4 / 5+1 / 4+1 / 3+1; Save DC: 15 + spell level; Enchantment spells 16 + spell level

#### **Typically prepared spells:**

3 – *command\** (Influencer), *dispel magic*, *fireball* (D), *inflict serious wounds*; 2 – *cure moderate wounds*, *eagle's splendor*, *hold person\**, *inflict moderate wounds*, *invisibility* (D); 1 – *burning hands* (D), *command\**, *cure light wounds*, *protection from chaos*, *shield of faith*; 0 – *detect magic*, *light*, *purify food and drink*, *stabilize*

Goatsman spells/day: 5 / 3 / 2; Save DC: 15 + spell level; Enchantment spells 16 + spell level

#### **Typically prepared spells:**

3 – *charm person\** (Influencer), *share senses*, *suggestion\**; 2 – *glide*, *hidden speech*, *vomit swarm*; 1 – *charm person\**, *mage armor*, *touch of blindness*, *wave shield*, *web bolt*

### **Background**

Euphonia Root was born in a tiny Conquistan village. She was born beautiful, and her parents expected to see her wed to a family with better finances, thus improving their own fortunes. Unfortunately for them, Euphonia fell in love with Taiia at a young age, and refused all notions of marriage as she wished to enter the Church. No amount of beatings and shouting could dissuade the girl, and she was finally released with bad grace to enter the novitiate.

Once she was out of the village, Euphonia never looked back. She devoted herself to her studies and her adoration of Taiia was noted and respected by

her fellow novices and instructors alike. Temple life agreed with her, with its strict rules and regulations; the only thing Euphonia had trouble with was deciding which sect she would follow. On the one hand, she greatly respected the Inner Eyes for their discipline and honing of body and soul alike. On the other, she was fascinated by the idea of spreading the faith through modern technology, as the Iron Suns did. As she was growing to womanhood, she even learned to enjoy the Jasmine Dancers' search for unity with the goddess by uniting with the bodies of other faithful.

In the end, Euphonia chose the Iron Suns, and managed to attain an important position at *la ciudadela del radio*. She would bring prestige to the Church by performing important work for the northern *cantón*, and she would be able to spread the blessed word of Taiia during her downtime. Euphonia accepted with a glad heart, and for a time all was well; she worked hard to serve the Church as well as the nation, and she was content.

But then she grew bored. In the Church, Euphonia had been able to spar with her fellow novices or enjoy the odd embrace after lights out; at *la ciudadela*, the only people she saw were deliverymen, most of them well past their 'good years' and married besides. Quite a few flirted with her, but they were not to her tastes, and she spurned them, earning a reputation for being 'contrary' in the towns that were supposed to supply her.

Euphonia could have asked for a leave of absence, or even a reassignment to a ziggurat where she could interact with a wider selection of people, but she was hung up on the prestige of her position, the service she was doing for blessed Taiia. Instead of leaving her precious position, she decided to bring what she wanted to her. It took Euphonia a while to perfect the power of an *Influencer*, but she did; and then she started hurling a message into the atmosphere, calling men of a certain age and appearance to attend her in her isolation.

At first, all was well – for Euphonia. Men would come to her, confused as to why they had made the voyage, but pleased enough with their reception. Once Euphonia was done with them, she sent them on their way. But then came the pretty boy, the one whose name she never even learned. Instead of rushing into her arms, he accused her of being a witch who had lured him out of his fiancée's bed, and in his knee-knocking terror he brandished a pistol.

Euphonia killed him with two quick swings of her battleaxe before he could pull the trigger, but she was mortified by what had happened. (At first.) How could her actions have been misinterpreted so completely? All she had wanted was a little fun. Was she not a blessed daughter of Taiia, one who did important work for Church and state? The more she considered what had happened, the angrier Euphonia became. Who was this foolish boy to accuse her of witchcraft? He must have been mad! Worse, he must have been bedeviled by actual witchcraft! This fiancée of his must be the culprit, the cause of all this unpleasantness, hiding even now in the guise of a virtuous young girl.

And Euphonia realized that she could do something about that.

Where before, she had called out to men to help her relieve some stress, now Euphonia started calling out to the worst people in Conquista, men and women alike who did not believe in Taiia. She called, and when they arrived at *la ciudadela* she killed them, scourging their filth from the earth. It was well and right that they should die... but then came the one who believed least of all in Taiia. He came at night, as the moon rode in the sky. He was a man, but a man with the head of a goat and black hair bristling all over his body. Euphonia was so shocked by his arrival that she did not struggle when the monstrous being embraced her, and that may be the reason why she survived her encounter with Clifton Willgoat – not that she knew him by this name, nor did he bother to introduce himself.

Indeed, Euphonia believed that she had been visited by *il Demonio* himself. Almost, the horror of what had happened caused the priestess to leave her isolation and seek out help from the Church she belonged to. Almost. But as she was packing her bags, a thought came to her; her calling had brought the dark god of evil to her, the one the Church had always taught her did not exist, yet plainly *did*. Who knew what wickedness he was committing in the shadows, with the clergy of Taiia none the wiser? The *Loa* of the Ulan? Hated Brightwell? And *her* voice had drawn one of these horrors out of hiding!

It was pride that made Euphonia stay where she was, pride verging on madness. She continued to call, bringing people to her who were motivated by wickedness and people motivated by a burning zeal. The former, she encouraged to be their worst self and to embrace *il Demonio* as the patron of their vile urges. The latter, she forged into a sect of her own: the Black Suns. If *il Demonio* existed, or so she thought, then so must the other gods. And they were all the enemies of Taiia, hiding in the darkness instead of opposing her openly in the light, where the goddess might destroy them. This was not acceptable, and so Euphonia Root would ensure that it would not continue.

If a Church of *il Demonio* truly exists in Conquista, then Euphonia Root is its architect. Ever since she reached her conclusions, she has been luring evil men and women to her lair and organizing them in the worship of the god of evil. Her sole purpose in this is to embolden them so they will gather all other evil mortals under their god's banner, and openly challenge Taiia, that they may be destroyed. The “*sasquatch* attacks” that can actually be blamed on Goatsmen rampaging in the countryside are indirectly her fault. At the same time, she founded the Black Suns-sect to purge the faithful of weakness and to drag the followers of Taiia's enemies into the light. If a holy war ever breaks out in Conquista between the Churches of Taiia and *il Demonio*, this too will be Euphonia's fault – and she will consider it her greatest honour and achievement.



In the end, there is no one single act that made Euphonia a candidate for the position of dread lady; it is the accumulation of years of sowing harm out of a conviction that she alone knows what is right.

### Current sketch

Ever since she achieved her 'enlightenment', Euphonia has been labouring toward the ultimate victory of Taiia by building up what she expects to be both the opposing armies. She spends long hours making *radio* programs and manipulating signals that pass through her hub. Using her powers as an Influencer, she convinces people to come to her lair. Once they are there, she studies them and determines which purpose they might best serve.

(Adventurers might get swept up with the Black Suns, if they are followers of Taiia and Euphonia manages to persuade them. Depending on how they play it, they might inspire either a schism in the sect's ranks or else a reconsideration of the whole group's methods. Euphonia will be furious either way, and will likely try to relocate to a new lair.)

When Euphonia discovered that she had become a Goatsman, she believed this was evidence that she had fooled *il Demonio* and even learned to embrace her foul new abilities. As a Goatsman, she has more options to enchant her listeners, and more power with which to push her visitors over the edge and into the dread embrace of *il Demonio*; she can subject her victims to Horror checks by transforming once she has embraced them.

### Combat

Euphonia actively avoids combat, and has gone to a lot of trouble to make sure all the fighting done in either the name of the Black Sons or the church of *il Demonio* happens a long way away from her. Her own survival is paramount; she alone sees the truth (or so she believes) and so she must survive to pave the way for Taiia's ultimate victory. She will flee conflict without an ounce of shame, using her *Mother of Night*-power to cover her escape.

If combat is unavoidable, Euphonia opens by conjuring darkness, in order to give herself an advantage. She generally eschews weaponry and favors dealing unarmed strikes, augmented with *inflict*-spells, and grappling those weaker than her with the aid of *bull strength*, then biting viciously at her opponent's face and throat. Only when she needs to hide her identity as a Goatsman does she wield the battleaxe that hangs from her belt.

### Lair

In spite of the bad memories she has of the place, *la ciudadela del radio* is Euphonia's home and base of operations. Contrary to what might be expected of someone with her proclivities and activities, her quarters are clean, orderly and strictly functional, even Spartan. Even the 'playroom', where she torments those who she would drive to madness and service of *il Demonio*, is lacking in opulence of any kind. Euphonia prefers it this way, with a clearly dedicated place for everything, everything in its place, and everything clean and ready for use.

### Closing the Borders

When Euphonia is Darklady and wishes to close the borders, she must weep over running water. As the sound of her crying travels downstream, every woman in Conquista who hears it likewise starts to cry. The gathered sound travels to the borders of Conquista, where it forms a sphere of sonic energy around the domain. The border effect is soundless once it goes into effect, and is only visible as a slight haze in the air. (A DC 20 Perception check reveals its presence.)

Passage through this sphere is impossible for all except creatures naturally immune to sonic damage and (super)naturally incorporeal beings. All others who attempt to pass the sphere immediately suffer 13d8 sonic damage (no save) and are hurled back in the direction they came from.

### Darklord's Curse

Euphonia curse is one of denial; visitors are constantly dropping by her Lair, but the kind of visitor she wants most at a given moment is denied to her. When she wishes to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, she is visited by zealous believers who are ripe to be converted into followers of the Black Suns; if she feels the stirrings of her love for Taiia, she is visited by corrupt souls who are perfect for initiation into the ranks of the Goatsmen; and when she most wants to corrupt people into servants of Evil, she is visited by men she finds physically attractive. Only when she ventures outside of her Lair is she free from the endless waves of visitors, but then she needs to actively track down the people she wants, which is a chore.

### Great Influencer

When Euphonia is the Darklady of Conquista, her Influencer-feat takes on great and terrifying power. She can affect up to thirteen people at a time every day with one use of the power, and she can roughly tailor the kind of people affected. For instance, she can specify that only people of a particular alignment should be affected by the power, or people of a specific tribe, or people of a specific age bracket, or people of a specific profession or character class. The DC to resist the effects of Euphonia's Influencer power increases by +2 whenever she is the Darklady.

### Mother of Night

When Euphonia is Darklady of Conquista, she can conjure a *widened deeper darkness* three times a day as though she were a spellcaster whose caster level equals her ECL. Within the darkness, only Euphonia can see; all others, even those with spells that normally pierce *deeper darkness* or special variants on Darkvision, are completely blind.

When Euphonia is not the Darklady, she can conjure a *widened barrow haze* three times a day as though she were a spellcaster whose caster level equals her ECL.

### Unaging

Euphonia is as beautiful and young-looking today as she was the day she decided to bring the church of *il Demonio* into the light. She is immune to all forms of aging, both natural and supernatural.

### DREAD POSSIBILITY: CHILD OF TWO DARKLORDS

Even though Cliffton Willgoat barely remembers having met Euphonia Root before she became a rival, and she certainly has not recognized him as her fiendish visitor on the occasions they have met in later years, they did lie together. At the time, Euphonia really was as young and healthy as she continues to look to this day, and Cliffton certainly did not take any precautions to prevent himself from impregnating her.

If that night bore fruit in the form of a child, and Euphonia sent it away to be raised by someone else – be it in a rare benevolent impulse or unwillingness to deal with the consequences of that unholy union – what kind of person will it grow into? Will it take after its vile parents in some way, perhaps inheriting Cliffton's predisposition to violent rages or Euphonia's hubristic arrogance? Will it simply be a happy, well-adjusted child, unaware of what might happen if either of its parents suddenly develops an interest in its future? Or will this child be a perfected evil, a dread lord to eclipse all the other candidates of Conquista...?

## JEAN AMBROSE

### CG Old-aged male human Expert 2 / Investigator 3 / *Viejo Sagrado 2*

**CR 6**

**Size** Medium; Init +2; Senses Perception +5

#### Defence

**AC** 12 (+0 Dex., +2 shield)

**HD** (5d8+5) 44 hp

**Fort** +5, **Ref** +2, **Will** +7

#### Offense

**Speed** 30 ft

**Melee** +1 sword cane +4 (1d6/x2)

**Ranged** masterwork dagger +5 (1d4-1)

#### Statistics

**Str** 8, **Dex** 10, **Con** 13, **Int** 19, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 16

**Base atk** +4; **CMB** +3; **CMD** +13

**Feats** Great fortitude, Psychic sensitivity, Skill focus (Knowledge [history]), Skill focus (Knowledge [local]), Skill focus (Knowledge [religion])

**Skills** Appraise +13, Craft (alchemy) +12 (+15 to create items), Diplomacy +9, Knowledge (arcana) +15, Knowledge (aristocracy) +12, Knowledge (engineering) +13, Knowledge (geography) +14, Knowledge (history) +19, Knowledge (local) +16, Knowledge (nature) +13, Knowledge (religion) +17, Linguistics +12, Perception +5, Sense motive +5

**Traits** Mathematical prodigy, Reactionary

**Class abilities** Alchemy; Dream Oracle; Eye of the Titans (Epimetheus); Inspiration (5 points/day); Investigator talent (*Effortless Aid*); Keen recollection; Poison lore; Poison resistance +2; Secret signs; trap sense +1; Trapfinding

**Languages** Frankonet\*, *Agabria*, Angol, Casian, Draconic, Hoja, Ija, Lelender, Mordentish, Moutere, Ocham, Rumalai, Teuton

(The languages Frankonet and Teuton are spoken widely in Vieuxlyons as it exists in the Demiplane of

Dread, but Angol and Rumalai are known only on the world that domain was torn from.)

**Equipment** Formula book, portable alchemy lab, bag of holding II, +1 sword cane, masterwork daggers, scholar's outfit, flask of red wine, ring of protection +2

**Alchemy** Professor Ambrose prepares extracts as a 5th-level Investigator.

Extracts/day: 5/3 Save DC: 14 + extract level

Typically prepared extracts:

2 – *bear's endurance* x 2; *false life*; 1 – *comprehend languages*, *cure light wounds* x 2, *endure elements*, *expeditious retreat*

Formulas known: 1 – *Comprehend languages*, *cure light wounds*, *detect undead*, *endure elements*, *expeditious retreat*, *firebelly*, *heightened awareness*, *jump*, *keen senses*, *shield*; 2 – *Bear's endurance*, *false life*

#### Background

Professor Jean Ambrose hails from the same Prime Material world Vieuxlyons comes from, and he was considered an old fool and a laughingstock there. In an age of rationalism and science, Jean Ambrose alone believed that the forces of darkness, particularly the undead, still lurked in the dark corners of his world. Instead of teaching classes at the university that gave him the title of professor, he plumbed its archives for evidence of the dark forces that haunted his nightmares, until finally he found a clue to a vampire nest – scant hours before he was summarily fired and ejected from the premises.

Determined to prove he was right and save the world in the process, Professor Ambrose packed both himself and the only student who still believed in him off to distant Rumal, to find the castle of an unaging and immortal nobleman. He was woefully unprepared for what happened, and barely managed to get himself out in one piece. His student, his protégé, his only friend Edmund, was not so fortunate. Once he had recovered from the



experience, Professor Ambrose set off to find Edmund, now in the company of his sire and mistress, a flame-haired vampiress who had been daughter to the nobleman the Professor had thought to defeat.

The hunt brought him to occupied Vieuxlyons in his motherland, and there he was present for the seminal event that drew it into the Mists... taking him along for the ride.

### Current sketch

Professor Ambrose was appointed as a ranking member of the Vieuxlyese ministry of culture and education for a time, but he renounced his position and departed the domain for Conquista as soon as the Wartorn Cluster formed. Unto this day, he regrets having been part of the domain's government, even if it was against his will. A shell of his former self, he presented himself at *la universidad*, hoping to spend his twilight years teaching. When he was ejected from that institute of learning, he went to *la Torre*, where he was better received... and regained the fire in his belly.

It was at *la Torre* that a traveller told the Professor of a red-haired noblewoman and her 'pet' he had encountered in a distant part of the Cluster; a young man who sounded remarkably like poor Edmund.

Until this point, the staff and students at *la Torre* had simply thought the Professor eccentric and sweet; after he learned he might still have a chance to redeem himself, he became (in their eyes) energetic and amusing. The skinny, balding old man with his drooping moustache is forever on the go to learn more, to impart knowledge on the most obscure minutiae of folklore and foreign culture, and

sometimes even takes students along on his rambling trips and mad adventures. He has published numerous books on the subject of mythology, monster lore and fairytales, often failing to distinguish between fact and fiction but on occasion supplying surprising insights<sup>40</sup>.

The Professor barely noticed when he was appointed as Chair of the college's folklore department, but he definitely paid attention when he was recruited by *los Viejos Sagrados* by virtue of his scholarly achievements. Membership in the secret society has expanded his ability to seek out his old student, as well as converse with scholars from all around the Cluster, after all.

### Combat

The Professor is as good as useless in combat, and he knows it. He much prefers to gather information and then recruit able-bodied help over charging into the fray; he's learned this much from his earlier mistakes. If he does become embroiled in *melée*, the Professor prefers to throw masterwork daggers at enemies (coated in poisons if necessary) or else to flank with someone more battle-ready than himself. If he is up against enemies alone, he immediately uses his extracts to cover his escape.

### Lair

Professor Ambrose has rooms on the campus of *la Torre*, where he keeps his impressive archive of collected lore, an arsenal of weapons either outdated or too heavy for his withered body to wield, a narrow bed, a work bench and a decrepit old wardrobe. The place seems in constant danger of collapse, and the Professor only stays there when he

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<sup>40</sup>It is important to note that Professor Ambrose is *no* Rudolph van Richten. He has survived more scrapes with monsters through bald-faced luck than actual skill, but on the other hand he is a truly dedicated student of his subject matter. As he survives more encounters with the forces of darkness, his expertise is slowly increasing, and the veracity of his books is growing at the same pace.

has classes to teach; the rest of the time he spends on the road, chasing rumours.

### SANDRA WILLIAMSON, QUEEN OF THE CRAFT

**NE female human Alchemist 2 / Wizard (Necromancer) 3 / Wicked Witch 8**

**CR 15**

**Size** Medium; **Init** +0; **Senses** Perception +10

#### Defence

**AC** 18 (+3 Dex., +1 Dodge, +4 mage armour)

**HD** (2d8+2) + (2d6+3) + (8d6+8)

**Fort** +8, **Ref** +7, **Will** +8

#### Offense

**Speed** 30 ft

**Melee** Quarterstaff +10 (1d6/1d6+6/x2)

**Ranged** Bomb +7 (1d6+4/x2)

#### Statistics

**Str** 17, **Dex** 10, **Con** 13, **Int** 18, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 14

**Base atk** +6; **CMB** +9; **CMD** +19

**Feats** Bind lesser undead (B), Bind salience, Brew potion (B), Command undead (B), Elemental spell (electricity), Empower spell, Extra discovery (*extend potion*) (B), Greater spell focus (Evocation), Point-blank shot, Scribe scroll (B), Skill focus (Craft [Alchemy]) (B), Spell focus (Evocation), Spell focus (Necromancy), Throw anything (B), Voracious

**Skills** Appraise +12, Craft (alchemy) +23, Fly +10, Heal +9, Intimidate +11, Knowledge (arcana) +20, Knowledge (nature) +15, Knowledge (religion) +15, Linguistics +9, Perception +8, Perform (sing) +9, Spellcraft +20, Survival +6

**Traits** Fiendish confidence (*Faiths of Corruption*, p. 5), Magical knack (Wizard)

**Special qualities** Closing the Borders; Darklord's Curse; Draught of Youth; Queen of Air; Sinkhole of Evil

**Class abilities** Alchemy, arcane bond (staff), arcane school (Necromancy), bomb, cantrips, Circle Leader, Discovery (*Shock bomb*), grave touch 6/day), mutagen, opposition schools (Conjuration, Enchantment), poison resistance +2, poison use, Wicked Circle, Wicked Determination, Wicked Familiar, Wicked Feast, Witch's Brew x3

**Languages** Angol\*, Casian, Frankonet, Infernal, Ocham, Teuton

(The languages Frankonet and Teuton are spoken widely in Vieuxlyons as it exists in the Demiplane of Dread, but Angol is known only on the world that domain was torn from.)

**Equipment** Spellbook, spell component pouch, +3 quarterstaff (enchanted to function as a *witch's broom*), various potions, masterwork dagger, barbed pentacle of Asmodeus (*Gods and magic*, p.54), girdle of giant strength +4 (as belt), alchemist lab

**Alchemy** Caster level 10; Extracts/day: 6/5/4/2; Save DC: 14 + formula level; Evocation 16 + formula level; Necromancy 15 + formula level.

Typically prepared extracts:

4 – *cure critical wounds, dragon's breath*; 3 – *amplify elixir, cure serious wounds, remove disease, seek thoughts*; 2 – *alchemical allocation, cure moderate wounds, elemental touch, languid venom, transmute potion to poison*; 1 – *body capacitance, bomber's eye x 2, cure light wounds, obscure poison, shield*

Formulae known:

4 – *Cure critical wounds, dragon's breath, freedom of movement, neutralize poison*  
3 – *Amplify elixir, cure serious wounds, remove curse, remove disease, seek thoughts*  
2 – *Alchemical allocation, cure moderate wounds, elemental touch, languid venom, restoration, transmute potion to poison*

1 – *Body capacitance, bomber's eye, cure light wounds, disguise self, keen senses, negate aroma, obscure poison, shield*

**Magic Caster** level: 9; Spells/day: 5/6/5/4/3; Save DC: 14 + spell level; Evocation spells 16 + spell level, Necromancy spells 15 + spell level

Typically prepared spells:

4 – *enervation\**, *insect spies*, *lightning ball* (Electricity-fireball); 3 – *greater thunderstomp*, *lightning bolt*, *shocking ray* (Electricity-scorching ray), *vampiric touch\**; 2 – *aggressive thunderhead*, *command undead\**, *false life\**, *protection from arrows*, *shocking hands* (Electricity-burning hands); 1 – *cause fear\**, *chill touch\**, *glue seal*, *ray of enfeeblement\**, *repair undead\**, *thunderstomp*; 0 – *dancing lights*, *detect magic*, *ghost sound*, *open/close*, *touch of fatigue\**

Spellbook (Sandra owns many spellbooks and scrolls, and it is safe to assume that she can reproduce every Necromancy and Evocation spell of 4<sup>th</sup> level and lower. She consistently keeps a book with her that contains the following spells):

4 – *Animate dead\**, *bestow curse*, *enervation\**, *insect spies*, *symbol of laughter*

3 – *Fireball*, *fly*, *greater thunderstomp*, *lightning bolt*, *pierce disguise*, *vampiric touch\**

2 – *Aggressive thunderhead*, *command undead\**, *false life\**, *flaming sphere*, *scorching ray*, *suggestion*

1 – *Burning hands*, *cause fear\**, *chill touch\**, *comprehend languages*, *glue seal*, *ray of enfeeblement\**, *repair undead*, *shocking grasp*, *thunderstomp*

0 – All except *conjunction* and *echantment*.

## Background

Born in the same world that spawned Vieuxlyons, Sandra Williamson was the middle of three sisters, born in a decrepit old cottage in the deep woods. The Williamson family hailed from a long line of Asmodeus-worshippers, and had become backwards and inbred after they were forced into hiding.

Blessed with natural intelligence and charisma, Sandra could have easily liberated her sisters and herself from the control of her doddering elders. Instead, she chose the power offered by the Lord of the Nine, plunging into the dark lore gathered by her ancestors and the study of alchemy. As part of her studies, she tested a poison on her older sister Dora that would leave her dull-witted and somewhat feral ever after, considering it a great success, especially as her younger sister Angela became very obedient when she saw what Sandra had done.

Sandra's devotion to both her studies and her faith saw her rise in the ranks of the Williamson family until she became its head at the unprecedented age of sixteen. Again, Sandra could have changed the course of her family's history, brought them out into the light and away from the decay and squalor in which they lived. Instead, she celebrated her appointment by sacrificing her grandmother, who had been both her mentor and the previous incumbent of the position.

Now that she was in charge, Sandra scaled up the wicked acts her family committed. They had always worshipped Asmodeus, sacrificing any traveller unfortunate enough to wander near their forest hideout. Sandra commanded her elders to travel further and further out, attacking isolated towns and abducting young children both to fuel her experiments and to offer up to the archdevil. While her relatives struggled to please her, Sandra delved into the secrets of necromancy. She welcomed back her exhausted relatives with a drink she promised would give them fresh strength... which it did, in the sense that it killed them and brought them back from the grave as her undead servants, far better suited to doing her bidding.

In the wake of her familicide, Sandra lived alone at the cottage with her two sisters; her undead relatives slumbered in the family graveyard out back until she needed them, but as her power grew, she needed them less and less. Sandra knew her acts had pleased Asmodeus, but she wanted to do more for the fiend, that she might receive more.



When world war broke out, Sandra saw it as a sign that Asmodeus was trying to break free from the Nine Hells and ascend to godhood. She took her two sisters and ventured out into the world. There were many people who were afraid enough to take any kind of offer, and these she initiated into the cult of her vile master and into her own form of witchcraft, or else sacrificed them. As the numbers of her followers swelled, Sandra would use their amassed power to animate the dead on battlefields and released them to spread random slaughter. She would poison the water supplies of innocent villages that had thought themselves safe from the war, and lured unhomed and orphaned children into the dark, to die either in her rituals or on her dining table.

At the apex of the war, Sandra's journey had led her to Vieuxlyons, where her instincts and auguries told her an act of great evil would be done. She arrived in time to see the whole town explode and exulted in the carnage, crying out to her master in front of her amassed followers and undead slaves that this, *this* must surely be the sign of his freedom from Baator and his ascension to the heavens... and that she was prepared to receive his reward for her having taken him this far.

Sandra's wickedness and greed for youth and power had pleased her master in the Nine Hells. Her arrogant belief that he somehow needed her to achieve his ascension, not so much. The great tower of flame bent and came crashing down on Sandra, her sisters, and all who followed after.

Much to her surprise, Sandra awoke not in the halls of Asmodeus, but in Vieuxlyons as it exists in the Demiplane of Dread. Her undead cohorts and witch followers were nowhere to be seen, but her sisters were still with her, and she believed they would be enough to help her rebuild.

The domain of Vieuxlyons proved wholly unsuitable to Sandra's ambitions, however. Vile as they were, the Skullmen patrolled everywhere, making it extremely difficult for the three witches to prey on the frightened townsfolk, who clung tightly together.

Forced to withdraw to a copy of the Williamson cottage they built in the deep woods, the three sisters bided their time, with Sandra and Angela painfully aware of every year they aged, though Dora was oblivious.

When Vieuxlyons joined the Wartorn Cluster in 740 BC and the Skullmen prepared to invade their neighbours, Sandra saw it as another sign from Asmodeus. She forced her sisters to mount their brooms and follow after the great mass of troops trundling its way into Conquista. In the wake of the devastation the Skullmen wreaked on Alsem, Sandra took her sisters hunting for survivors. She was first of the three sisters to sink her teeth into human flesh in their new home, and so doing sealed herself as one of the new land's potential Darkladies.

### Current sketch

Sandra is obsessed with three things; maintaining her own youth and beauty, maintaining her tenuous power over her super-coven, and raising the banner of Asmodeus over all of Conquista. The first of these three she achieves through the casting of spells and brewing of potions, especially the dreadful *draught of youth*; she has already seen what happens to people who overindulge in cannibalistic cuisine in the Demiplane of Dread, leading her to mistrust her own *wicked feast*-ability. Many of her lesser tonics and tinctures are sold off to other Wicked Witches to keep them loyal – as loyal as evil spellcasters get – but the *draught* is reserved for Sandra herself, to keep Dora in line, and to occasionally buy Angela's services.

Sandra desires nothing less than to ride her super-coven's power to a position as both Conquista's true queen and the high priestess of Asmodeus. When the moon is new, she goes hunting for human prey, both to use as components for her grisly experiments and to sacrifice to her dreadful patron. It is Sandra's fondest hope that the Lord of the Nine will forgive her if she brings him enough offerings, and raise her up as his lieutenant – or his bride.

Frustrating Sandra's efforts is the city of Alsem, which has become the focus of a rival super-coven, and the captain-governor Hareleg, whose guardsmen scour the countryside every time an abduction or murder is reported. More than one group of Wicked Witches allied with Sandra has been caught and dragged off to face trial and sentencing. Sandra remembers a time when none dared report such things, and she would dearly love to murder the captain-governor with her bare hands, if only he were not guarded and warded at all hours by loyal followers. She is likewise frustrated by how incomplete her power over Conquista is; she resents having to compete against the other candidates for the Lordship, when unlike her, none of them are witches. The fact that the voters are motivated purely by the intoxicating effect of the various potions on offer, rather than loyalty to her as Conquista's greatest witch, is a source of unending annoyance to her.

### Combat

Sandra is fearless in combat, throwing bombs from overhead, raking her enemies with lightning, then swooping close to seize isolated targets and drop them from a great height or drain their vitality. While she is deadly when augmented by her spells and potions, she has been known to take foolish risks if angered and proceed to physical combat instead of casting spells, confident as she is in her Wicked Determination saving her from death, and her sister Dora using the various scrolls in their cottage to return her from *undead*.

### Lair

The Williamson sisters recreated their family cottage a second time out in the *brugia serena*, Dora and Angela having been sent into Vieuxlyons to bring everything they could carry from the previous recreation – even including the cobwebs, at Sandra's insistence. A classic fairytale witch's cottage, the Williamson homestead is rickety, gloomy and looks filthy. Inside, racks of potion vials and spellbooks attest to Sandra's obsessions, as does a wooden

table with shackles at both ends and distressing stains on the woodwork.

Sandra's only company in the cottage these days is Dora, as Angela has long departed to forge her own destiny, as well as her latest Wicked Familiar. This is typically the latest of Sandra's experiments in augmenting the undead, which she tests out on zombies.

### Closing the Borders

When Sandra is Darklady and wishes to close the borders, she flies as high into the sky as she can and starts to sing. Every woman in Conquista with even a spark of magical power starts to sing along, and the gathered sound travels to the borders of Conquista, where it forms a sphere of sonic energy around the domain. The border effect is soundless once it goes into effect, and is only visible as a slight haze in the air. (A DC 20 Perception check reveals its presence.)

Passage through this sphere is impossible for all except creatures naturally immune to sonic damage and (super)naturally incorporeal beings. All others who attempt to pass the sphere immediately suffer 13d8 sonic damage (no save) and are hurled back in the direction they came from.

### Darklord's Curse

Sandra's curse is incompleteness. For a long time, she was able to wield great power through her sisters and advanced circle magic. Ever since she became one of the Dread Ladies of Conquista, that familiar power has been denied to her; Angela left to build her own power base, and fate conspires to drive off or kill every other candidate for the position of youngest witch in Sandra's coven. Dora's company irks her more and more as the years pass and her older sister slips ever closer to becoming a ghoulish lord, but she is the only person who has remained loyal. Sandra delights in leading circles and great circles of her fellow Wicked Witches, but trusts none of them as she fears they see her incomplete coven as a sign of weakness they might exploit.

In truth, Sandra feels lonely. While she was never a loving sister to her siblings, she spent decades living together with them, and she has trouble seeing anyone else as a 'real' person, rather than a potential meal or sacrifice. As Dora slips ever further away and Angela refuses to help unless she is paid first, Sandra is tormented by self-pity and fear of a future in which she is truly, completely, alone.

#### *Draught of Youth*

Rather than cannibalize humans to preserve her youth as per *wicked feast*, Sandra can boil a full-grown human down in her cauldron, stir in various reagents and thus concoct three doses of the *draught of youth*. This brew allows anyone who imbibes it to reverse their age by one category for the duration of a month, without the need to suffer the negative effects of the *Voracious* feat. Knowingly and willingly imbibing the potion does, however, provoke a Powers check.

To Sandra's confusion and anger, she is only capable of brewing the *draught of youth* when she is Darklady of Conquista. Attempts to brew the potion fail catastrophically when she is not, the cauldron's contents exploding like a bomb.

#### *Queen of Air*

When Sandra is Darklady and airborne, any spells she casts from the school of *Enchantment* is automatically Extended and Widened as though she were a spontaneous caster with these feats, but without requiring a higher-level slot.

### FREDEWOLF VAN SLECHT

#### **CE male half-fey Rogue (False Medium) 13**

##### **CR 15**

**Size** Medium; **Init** +1; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +10

##### **Defence**

**AC** 18 (+3 Dex., +1 Dodge, +4 mage armour); DR 5/cold iron

**HD** (13d8+13) 89 hp

**Fort** +5, **Ref** +8, **Will** +4

##### **Offense**

**Speed** 30 ft

**Melee** +2 cane +11 (1d6+5 (+2d6 Evil) / 19-20 x 2)

Ranged masterwork hand crossbow +10 (1d4 / 18-20 x 2)

##### **Statistics**

**Str** 16, **Dex** 12, **Con** 13, **Int** 13, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 19

**Base atk** +9; **CMB** +12; **CMD** +22

**Spell-like abilities:** (racial) 2/day – *cause fear*; DC 15

2/day – *scare*; DC 18

(Rogue)3/day – *detect magic*

2/day – *silent image*; DC 15

Caster level: 13

**Feats** Ability focus (*scare*), Create device (Brew potion), Hypnotism, Improved critical (cane), Improved initiative, Weapon focus (cane), Xenoglossy

**Skills** Bluff +20, Craft (alchemy) +17, Diplomacy +10, Heal +12, Intimidate +21, Disable device +13, Disguise +12, Knowledge (local) +10, Linguistics +10, Perception +9, Ride +10, Sense motive +14, Sleight of hand +13, Stealth +17

**Traits** Bully, History of heresy

**Special qualities** Closing the Borders, Cold Fear, Darklord's Curse, Lost in Shadow, Sinkhole of Evil



Class abilities Advanced talents (*dispelling attack, opportunist*), Dim the lights, Evasion, false sensitivity, haunting presence, Improved uncanny dodge, Rogue talent (*fast fingers, major magic (silent image), minor magic (detect magic)*), sneak attack +7d6, Uncanny dodge

**Languages** Dutch\*, Barovian, Casian, Darkonese, Lamordian, Mordentish, Teuton, Vaasi

**Equipment** +2 unholy cane (as club), masterwork hand crossbow, bolts, unholy symbol of Brightwell, unholy symbol of Taiia, original *Libre des Ombres Secrètes*, gloves f dexterity +2, hat of holding (as bag type II)

### Background

Fredewulf van Slecht was born in the chill depths of the Vallaki Asylum of Broken Souls. His mother was a gifted witch, possessed of rare powers and intellect, but trapped in the asylum. His father was a boogeyman that had sprung from a Sinkhole of Evil beneath the asylum's foundations, one which masqueraded as alienist Dr. Emilio von Hochhausen. Theirs was a union not of love, but of cruelty and domination, yet even Dr. von Hochhausen could not have foreseen what fruit his crime would bear.

Once conceived, the boogeyman's spawn developed with unnatural speed, fed both by his mother's magic and the ambient evil of the nearby Sinkhole. While in the womb, he feasted on his mother's mind, causing her to fall into a deep stupor as he drained parts of her memory. Within hours of his conception, he was born. Within a few hours more, he was grown to maturity. His roars of triumph did not stir his mother, who would remain catatonic for days afterwards and did not remember the birthing, but they brought his father running. What happened between the two of them remains known only to father and son, but it ended with von Hochhausen hiding himself in the

Sinkhole for a few days, while the halfbreed fled out into the Barovian night.

The offspring named itself 'Fredewulf' for one among many memories he'd stolen from his mother; one of a beloved male relative. He named himself 'van Slecht'<sup>41</sup> as a sardonic joke. He travelled the Core for a few years, honing a natural predilection for cruelty into a skill. He came to specialize in psychological abuse, mentally crippling his victims by playing on their hopes and fears, abusing their beliefs and dreams through lies and hypnosis. Physical abuse came only at the end, when his targets were completely cowed and broken. If he had a true ambition during his formative years, it was to seize his mother from the Asylum of Broken Souls; he wanted more of her essence than he had already taken from her. He wanted *everything*.

When the Core proved inhospitable to his ambitions, van Slecht travelled out into the Mists, chancing upon the Wartorn Cluster around 753 BC, and discovered the Mountain School of Conquista in late 754 BC. Recognizing the floundering institution as just the chance he had been looking for, van Slecht stepped into the power vacuum and steadily corrupted both the staff and the majority of the student body. He became the *de facto* head of the local Chaotic Evil sect of Brightwell, even though he was no believer himself, and started his scheme to corrupt the whole middle *cantón*. To his way of thinking, using Brightwell's faithful to destroy the reigning Church of Taiia was a perfect way to plunge the domain into both temporal and spiritual chaos, which would yield up a bumper crop of potential victims for his 'tender attentions'.

If van Slecht had worked at this scheme patiently, it might well have worked the way he had expected, but he had never been a patient creature, and his many setbacks gnawed at him. Even putting aside the fact his father had driven him from the place of his birth, van Slecht had encountered many evils that were stronger, wiser, more cunning than he during

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<sup>41</sup>'Van Slecht' translates from Dutch as 'of evil'.

his travels – and had not tolerated his presence in their territory. On top of this, he knew his mother had broken out of the Asylum under her own power. She was far stronger than he, too powerful for him to dare try to subdue directly, and did not even realize his very *existence*...

Van Slecht needed an edge of some sort, one that he found that edge in Richemulot, where a dangerous tome from Gothic Earth had appeared. The *Libre des Ombres Secrètes* called out to van Slecht across the gulfs of the Mists, and the hybrid recognized it from one of the memories shared between his mother and he, rather than one stolen outright. He knew the tome was exactly what he needed. Upon arriving at the book's sanctuary, however, he also knew that the wards set upon it were too powerful for him to breach.

Instead of trying to attain the strength he needed, van Slecht tricked his mother into freeing the book for him through a series of catspaws. He caused her to be hunted and tormented, he awakened memories of abuse in her, and he stole the book that had whispered promises in her ears of escape from the Demiplane of Dread. With all that done, he returned to Conquista to cement himself as a figure of power – and for his vile obsessions and obscenities, he became trapped there as one of the domain's Darklord candidates.

### Current sketch

Van Slecht has struggled to secure and expand his powerbase, with mixed results. He has strengthened the position of Brightwell's Church in the middle *cantón* and presents himself as the goddess's high priest; he is the headmaster of a respectable institute of learning, with growing influence on the intelligencia of the middle *cantón*; he has delved into the contents of the *Libre des Ombres Secrètes*, expanded his alchemical skills, and made partial copies available to his followers.

None of it has given him the feeling of security and control that he desires. Although he absorbed much knowledge from his mother, van Slecht is not a

researcher like her, and he lacks understanding of the Demiplane's nature. He does not understand why he has become trapped in Conquista, nor why he must compete with the other candidates on Darkest Night to have access to the fell power he discovered within himself, power that he craves absolutely. If he dared, van Slecht would murder his rivals on the spot, but the truth is that he does *not* dare; while he puts up a front of unflappable calm and sinister, condescending amusement when he converses with others, he lacks confidence in his ability to win a fight. He was always more prone to flee from conflict and lure enemies into traps, or else trick them into believing he was more formidable than he is, but now he does not even have the option of fleeing the country.

As van Slecht's essential cowardice conflicts with his hunger for power and the need to at least feign control, his already twisted psyche is growing more and more unstable. He relieves his mounting stress by inflicting horrid cruelties on creatures he has managed to render incapable of escape or retaliation, or else fooled into believing he is their rightful master.

Van Slecht may wear the mantle of Brightwell's high priest, but he does not have her favor and secretly fears her wrath. In the years leading up to his theft of the *Libre des Ombres Secrètes*, van Slecht would happily and blasphemously draw parallels between his own relationship with his mother and the twisted connection between Brightwell and *il Demonio*. Today, while he publically urges the other faithful of Brightwell to destroy the world and rebuild it in her image, he privately debases himself before the goddess's altar and tries to appease her with lavish sacrifices.

Another concern that weighs on van Slecht's mind is the fact that Conquista is not lacking in its own villains. *Los Viejos Sagrados* have infiltrated the Mountain School several times, leaving behind books and even seducing candidates to join them. *La officia del recuerdo* has sent agents several times, and it took all of van Slecht's skill at manipulation to

prevent them from betraying his operation. As he cannot directly attack the other Darklords, he forever fears that they might be scheming against him. Worst of all, van Slecht is afraid because now his mother is aware of his existence, if not his identity, and may be coming for him. He does not believe for a moment that he could defeat her if she genuinely desired his death, and even Conquista is not large enough to hide from her forever.

### **Closing the Borders**

When van Slecht is Darklord of Conquista and wishes to close the borders, he must go to the highest point within his sight and there unleash an unearthly howl. As the sound travels outward, every woman with even the least amount of magical power repeats the scream, until the sound reaches the borders of Conquista, where it becomes a sphere of sonic energy that surrounds the whole domain. The border effect is soundless once it goes into effect, and is only visible as a slight haze in the air. (A DC 20 Perception check reveals its presence.)

Any creature that tries to pass through the barrier immediately suffers 13d6 sonic damage and is hurled back into the domain from which it tried to exit when it came into contact with the border (no save). Creatures that immune to sonic damage are unharmed, but are still hurled back. Incorporeal creatures can pass through van Slecht's closed border without ill effect.

### **Darklord's Curse**

Put simply, van Slecht's curse is cowardice and paranoia. He was always more prone to flee if an opponent put up a credible fight, and this has developed into debilitating fear as he is now trapped inside Conquista. Van Slecht must use drugs to achieve a restful sleep; if he does not take his 'special drink', he is wracked by nightmares of being hunted down by his various enemies; his parents, the other Darklords, others he has angered or hurt over the years.

In combat, if van Slecht is injured by an opponent, he uses his move action every round to get as far away from that enemy as he can. He is unable to control this impulse until and unless he has killed or incapacitated the one who hurt him. If forced to flee, he will endlessly obsess over the possibility that he is being hunted, plots revenge in a dozen different ways only for fear to keep him from actually executing any of them, and a fresh face will be added to his nightmares.

Van Slecht believes that he could counteract his fearful tendencies if only he could finish draining his mother, but she is either far away beyond the Mists and out of his reach ... or, as he fears, she is coming to him with vengeance on her mind and spells dancing at her fingertips.

### *Cold Fear*

When van Slecht is Darklord of Conquista, the range of his fear-inducing spell-like abilities is doubled. His *cause fear* ability affects creatures of 10 HD and less; his *scare* ability affects creatures of 12 HD and less. In addition, the ambient temperature sinks to the freezing point in a 20-ft. radius around van Slecht for four rounds after he has used a charge of his abilities.

Even when van Slecht is not the Darklord, he feels cold as though he were frozen, and the air in a 5-ft radius around him is so cold that living creatures require cold weather gear, *endure elements* or stronger magic to be near him without suffering discomfort.

### *Lost in Shadow*

Whenever van Slecht is the Darklord and stands in shadows or full darkness, he can render himself quasi-real and fade into the darkness at will as though he had cast shadowform on himself. Five times a day, he can use shadow walk; the power can not take him out of Conquista, but he can move freely inside of it.

Even when van Slecht is not the Darklord, natural shadows and darkness seem to cling to him,





imposing a 50% miss chance on any ranged attacks aimed at him. Only direct light from the sun or daylight-effects can strip him of this protection.

### *LA INFESTACIÓN*, DEVILISH SCHOLAR OF POLITICS

**LE Medium outsider (devil, evil, extraplanar, lawful)**

**Cleric 4 / Rogue 3, *Vieja Sagrada* 1 / *Grabador* 1**

**CR 19**

**Init** +6; **Senses** Darkvision 60 ft., see in darkness, *true seeing*; Perception +16

#### **Defence**

**AC** 23 (+6 Dex., +1 Dodge, +6 natural)

**HD** (9d10+45) + (8d8+40) + (1d6+5) 216 hp

**Fort** +16, **Ref** +17, **Will** +15

**DR** 5/good; Immune fire, poison; Resist acid 10, cold 10; SR 19

#### **Offense**

**Speed** 30 ft., fly 50 ft. (good)

**Melee** +1 longsword +20/+15 (1d8+8/19-20)

**Ranged** +1 flaming composite longbow +19/+19/+13 (1d8+6/x3 plus 1d6 fire) or rope +19 touch (entangle)

**Spell-like abilities (CL 12<sup>th</sup>)**

Constant – *true seeing*

At will – *fear* (single target), DC 19), *greater teleport* (self plus 50 lbs. of objects only), *minor image* (DC 17), *unholy blight* (DC 19)

1/day – *summon* (level 3, 2 bearded devils, 50%)

#### **Statistics**

**Str** 20, **Dex** 23, **Con** 21, **Int** 14, **Wis** 19, **Cha** 21

**Base atk** +12; CMB +17; CMD +34

**Feats** Combat reflexes, Deceitful, Dodge, Elemental spell (Fire), Honor-bound, Mobility, Point-blank shot, Psychic sensitivity, Rapid shot, Sense assumptions, Skill focus (Knowledge [local])

**Skills** Acrobatics +18, Appraise +11, Bluff +19, Craft (calligraphy) +10, Diplomacy +14, Disable device +16, Disguise +17, Escape artist +15, Fly +19, Intimidate

+17, Knowledge (aristocracy) +10, Knowledge (history) + 11, Knowledge (local) +15, Knowledge (planes) +9, Knowledge (religion) +8, Linguistics +12, Perception +16, Perform (oratory) +13, Sense motive +16, Stealth +15

**Traits** Fencer, Scholar of the great beyond

**Special qualities** Corruption points 12; Disguise thoughts; Land-based powers (*Alter reality*, *Corrupt the Weave*, *Modify memory*, *Shadowform*); Phylactery; Reality wrinkle (425 ft.)

Class abilities Channel negative energy 2d6, Evasion, Eye of the Titan (Prometheus), Lorekeeper, Pistol-whip (shaken), Rogue talent (*fast stealth*), Secret signs, Sneak attack +2d6, Social graces +1, Sworn to the state, trap sense +1, trapfinding

**Languages** Infernal\*, *Agabria*, Balok, Casian, Celestial, Darkonese, Draconic, Lelender, Mordentish, Teuton, Vechorite, telepathy 100 ft.

**Equipment** Hat of disguise, +1 longsword, +1 flaming composite longbow, spell component pouch, disguise kit, noble outfit, bag of holding II

**Magic** *La Infestación* casts spells as a 5th-level Cleric. Spells/day: 4 / 4+1 / 3+1 / 2+1; Domains: Knowledge, Magic; Save DC 14 + spell level)

Typically prepared spells:

3 – *deeper darkness*, *dispel magic*, *speak with dead* (D); 2 – *cure moderate wounds*, *hold person*, *magic mouth*, *silence* (D); 1 – *comprehend languages* (D), *cure light wounds*, *entropic shield*, *protection from good*, *shield of faith*; 0 – *bleed*, *detect magic*, *read magic*, *stabilize*

#### **Background**

Once a trusted lieutenant (and sometime concubine) to a higher-ranked devil in the Nine Hells, *la Infestación* bridled at her home realm's culture of misogyny and the fact that she kept being passed over for promotion in favour of inferior 'colleagues'

by a master who was far more interested in indulging his own appetites than he was in upholding the law of Baator.

She prepared a palace coup, bribing key officials, readied paperwork that would prove her fitness to lead in her old master's stead and sharpened her blade... and all her work came to nothing. When she tried to pull down her master, none of the devils who'd sworn loyalty to her would step forward, and her evidence of her master's weakness and folly was dismissed out of hand. She had been not simply betrayed, she had been played from the start, the system of Hell that she had championed rigged against her without her even realizing it.

If not for her combat skills, she would definitely have languished in a prison cell, the plaything of every torturer eager to ply his craft. Instead, she was forced on the run in the fetid wastelands outside of Hell's dread cities, an exile, a renegade in name. The shame tore at her like rabid weasels, distracting her to the point that when the Transposition began, she did not realize it until she found herself in the Demiplane of Dread. The year was 625 BC and the place was Vechor.

*La Infestación* was offended by the land's chaotic changes, and believed herself to be trapped on a layer of the Abyss. She was initially confirmed in this belief when she left Vechor for Darkon and made the acquaintance of a *Tanar'ri* – a Devoratrix who introduced herself as the Red Haunt. To *la Infestación*'s dismayed surprise, the demon was actually friendly and accommodating, and told her a great deal about the place in which she now found herself. While the erinyes saw merit in a land where her former master and his cohorts could not reach her, she felt uncomfortable around the Red Haunt and struck out on her own, rather than become her ally.

Over the years and then decades that followed, *la Infestación* sought a purpose for herself in the Demiplane. She observed the actions and rule of the various Darklords, studying the politics of the

Demiplane, and occasionally acted as a mercenary for villains whose valour or discipline appealed to her, but she was never quite satisfied. Worse, she could never completely shake off the Red Haunt, who would drop in on her for a chat every few years. Her personal code forbade her from attacking a creature – even a foul demon – who was nothing but forthcoming to her, but she found it an endless source of confusion and frustration to deal with a being that was unapologetically Chaotic, yet so utterly devoted to knowledge and study instead of violence... and which challenged her own beliefs and theories on so many points. While the disagreements between the devil and the demon never went beyond spirited debates, which all too often revolved around the supremacy of order and chaos when it came to Evil, the primacy of either tyranny or anarchy, they eventually reached a point where *la Infestación* could no longer tolerate not knowing which of them was right. The Red Haunt might be content to debate the issues that separated them for eternity, but *la Infestación* desired conclusive, observational proof.

The domain of Conquista was to become the unfortunate test subject to prove their theories. Working in tandem, the two fiends overhauled the domain's political landscape, with *la Infestación* taking up a position to sponsor and support centralized tyranny. The Red Haunt promised she would plant but one seed of anarchy and then step back, wagering that *la Infestación* would soon see that no matter how tightly she clenched her fist around order, chaos would sprout.

Current sketch *La Infestación* exists in a state that vacillates between grim determination and frenzied confusion. She has put herself close to the centers of Conquista's political, military and religious power since 711 BC, nudging the mortals who she considers to be her tools to centralize power and strike down all dissent, just as was done in Baator. Instead of achieving the dreadful order of her home realm, *la Infestación* has seen tensions rise year after year, and recognizes the early warning signs of civil war.

She believes that any of these might have been caused by the Red Haunt's solitary 'seed', but is unable to tell what that seed is.

*La Infestación* has sought the patronage of Taiia, great goddess of the sun, and can move freely in the halls of the Church. She has infiltrated the ranks of *los Viejos Sagrados* and *la officia del recuerdo* and is privy to many of their secrets. Her phylactery graces the hands of all the presidents of Conquista, allowing her to know their minds. She has seen the hand of the Red Haunt in the creation of *los Viejos Sagrados* and many other events, such as the rise of multiple Darklords, but as the demon is not dictating their every activity and their goal is not anarchy for its own purpose, she can not consider any of them to be the 'seed'. Every day not engaged in studies of politics or attempts to subtly steer Conquista, *la Conquista* seeks the tool or agent that the Red Haunt has used to cause distortions to arise in the domain... and fails to see that the very tyranny she sponsors is what is causing them.

Unknowingly, *la Infestación*, champion of order and tyranny, is herself the seed of anarchy.

### Combat

While *la Infestación* is a capable warrior in her own right, she prefers to operate from behind the scenes and not interfere directly unless she has to. Even when she moves, she prefers to direct agents to do her fighting and killing for her. As a junior officer in *l'officia del recuerdo*, she can certainly have people she finds 'inconvenient' marked as enemies of the state and assassinated. As a priestess of Taiia, she can drop a word in the ear of any of the less benevolent sects that certain people are blasphemers or worshippers of Brightwell.

If forced into battle herself, the erinyes casts every buff she can on herself, then opens hostilities by hurling her rope at the strongest *melée* combatant present. She ignores spellcasters until they figure out that all their elemental spells turn to fire in her presence, rendering them useless against her immunity. She approaches battle rationally and

efficiently, eliminating possibilities of her defeat through such tactics, focusing on a primary target until it lies dead at her feet before moving on to the next. Although *la Infestación* can still call forth bearded devils to support her, she has not done this in a long time; getting rid of the wretches once they realize they are unable to leave is an unpleasant chore.

### Lair

*La Infestación*'s primary lair is a secret suite of basement rooms, dug underneath the Great Zigurrat of Taiia in Hughsrest. Here she keeps her private shrine to Taiia, her arsenal of weapons and her archive of books, both those written by herself over the course of her studies of politics and those she has been given as gifts or purchased from other *Viejos Sagrados*. She keeps a secondary residence in Meyersville; a small but well-appointed villa she uses only to meet with agents from the various secret orders she belongs to. Nowadays, she rarely travels far from the domain's capitol, desiring to be close to where her phylactery is.

### Land-based powers

*Alter Reality* (Vechor); *Corrupt the Weave* (Umbrash); within *la Infestación*'s reality wrinkle, all spells that deal elemental damage function as though they had been altered with her Elemental spell (Fire) feat; this means that she is completely immune to the effects of any spell aimed at her within her reality wrinkle if that spell deals elemental damage; *Modify Memory* (Sithicus); *Shadowform* (Sithicus) – *la Infestación* admired Lord Soth's martial power and strict adherence to the letter of the Oath and the Measure, and frequently dwelled in his domain until he became lost to despondency; she visited after Inza took over, but was far less charmed by her reign.



**MALIK LENKHERR****NE Male human Aristocrat 2 / Rogue 3 / *Grabador* 3 / CCD 2****CR 10****Size** Medium **Init** +2; **Senses** Darkvision 60 ft.; Perception +10**Defence****AC** 16 (+2 Dex., +2 natural, +2 shield)**HD** (10d8+20) 92 hp**Fort** +7, **Ref** +9, **Will** +8**Offense****Speed** 30 ft**Melee** Unarmed strike +7 (1d3+1/x2); +2 whip +9 (1d3+3/x2)**Ranged** +1 Lucky (*Ultimate Combat*, p.142) revolver +9 (1d8+1/x4)**Statistics****Str** 12, **Dex** 14, **Con** 14, **Int** 15, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 18**Base atk** +6; **CMB** +7; **CMD** +18**Feats** Deceitful, Exotic weapon proficiency (firearms), Great fortitude, Honor-bound, Improved grapple (B), Improved unarmed strike, Sense assumptions**Skills** Appraise +7, Bluff +17, Diplomacy +15, Disable device +10, Disguise +9, Knowledge (aristocracy) +16, Knowledge (geography) +11, Knowledge (history) +11, Knowledge (local) +16, Linguistics +12, Perception +10, Perform (dance) +10, Profession (driver) +13, Sense motive +14, Use magic device +12**Traits** Dark Charm (*Lilliend Gazetteer*, *Quoth the Raven* #25, p. 121), Deft Dodger**Special qualities** Path of the Incubus (*Charm of the Pit*, *Lustful Gaze*)**Class abilities** Evasion; Eyes and Ears +1; Fool the Eye; Gentle persuasion; Hand of the State (d8) 1/day; No Greater Honour; Rogue talent (*Combat Trick*: Improved grapple); Sneak attack +2d6; Social graces

+1; Sworn to the State; Touch of Pleasure 2d6; trap sense +1; trapfinding

**Languages** Lelender\*, Casian, Draconic, Frankonet, Hoja, Ija, Lundan, Moutere, Sylvan, Teuton**Equipment** +2 Whip, noble outfit, +1 lucky revolver, bullets, disguise kit, oil of silence (*Ultimate Combat*, p. 143), amulet of armor +2, ring of protection +2**Background**

While Malik Lenkherr proudly proclaims himself to be a scion of the main royal line and possibly the rightful King of Lilliend, he is actually the progeny of a Lenkherr cousin branch that fled the domain, rather than allow its sons to be slaughtered as soon as they had sired children. Not all the family managed to survive the descent of the Final Slope, and those who managed to make it to Conquista were an impoverished remnant. By the time Malik stood to inherit the castle the family had managed to build near Meyersville (after a previous residence near Hughsrest had been casually destroyed by locals and even more of the family slaughtered 'to show the foreigners who was boss'), the family was impoverished.

Young Malik joined Conquista's secret police right after his studies in diplomacy and politics at *la Torre* to change his own fortunes, more than those of the family. He was a cunning agent and a ruthless manipulator, preferring to worm his way into the confidence of foreign nobility and seduce bored or simply incautious women, then to blackmail them with evidence of the debauch to which he had himself enticed them. His successes saw him well-rewarded by his shadowy masters in *l'officia del recuerdo*, allowing him to restore the family home and live in a style befitting his grandiose self-image, but his advancement up the ranks levelled out and then stopped. The government offices were too well aware of the Lenkherr scion's selfish nature, and did not completely trust him, even with the restrictions of his oath to Conquista.

Malik was approached by an even more secretive organization than *l'officia* that had been monitoring him even as he did Conquista's work abroad. What this organization's recruiter told Malik of a great threat to the Wartorn Cluster did not interest him so much as the very real threat to his own wellbeing, now that he knew about the CCD. He immediately agreed to join. The various freedoms and rewards membership has brought him, as well as the prospect of gaining more prestige in the Cluster at large, has pleased him well.

### Current sketch

Malik Lenkherr is wealthy beyond avarice and arrogant beyond understanding. He manages to hide his negative qualities behind a powerful charisma and the elegant manners of a born aristocrat and a trained diplomat.

While he performs missions for both *l'officia del recuerdo* and the CCD as a secret agent and assassin, and is well-paid by both, this is simply not enough to satisfy his hunger for riches, women and excitement in his life. As a result, Malik has reopened chambers beneath his ancestral Schloss Lenkherr that his father and grandfather once made available to *los Viejos Sagrados*. While not a member of their order himself, he is considered to be a high-ranking accomplice and rewarded for his services.

If Malik could be said to have an overarching, long-term goal, it would be to see the great enemy of the CCD overthrown, and then to ride the wave of prestige all the way to the throne of Lilliend. Barring that, he will have to make do with being one of the richest men in the Cluster and having a harem of the Cluster's most beautiful women to serve him and bear him sons.

### Combat

Malik is reasonably fearless in combat, but prefers to lead with his firearm, gunning down opponents from cover before they can do the same to him. In close-quarters combat, he favours unarmed strikes and grapples. What he prefers most of all, however, is to

have powerful backup nearby to assist him or even clear up squabbles before they can reach him, personally. His whip has never seen combat, and is reserved for ... private occasions.

### Lair

Schloss Lenkherr is a perfect replica of the Royal Palace of Luzander in Lilliend, except rendered in stone instead of wood. The perfection extends only to the surface, however; underneath the surface are tunnels and chambers the Lenkherr family in exile has used to prepare escape routes, engage in smuggling, and recently to accommodate the Conquistan sect of *los Viejos Sagrados*.

Malik lives in opulent luxury in the castle when he is at home, surrounded by the tender attentions of a legion of maids – most of them women whose lives he ruined in their home countries and drove to addiction with his abilities, then brought home to serve him. Malik also has a fiancée, a Conquistan girl named Alexandra from an old aristocratic line, but she is little more than an ornament to him. Alexandra very expressly does not begrudge her fiancé his debauched lifestyle; she knows of the secret chambers where Malik spends some of his time, and the things he does there to satisfy his increasingly depraved lusts.

### CCD prestige class abilities:

*No Greater Honour (Universal) (Ex):* Membership in the CCD and an oath of loyalty to its goal supersedes all other oaths demanded of a secret agent. Malik can act against the best interests of Conquista, so long as he truly believes that this is for the greater good of the Wartorn Cluster in general and the CCD in particular, without suffering any negative effects from *Sworn to the State*. He is otherwise still bound to the rules of the Honor-bound feat.

*Touch of Pleasure (Broken Wheel) (Ex):* When touching, performing a touch attack, grappling or wielding his whip against another humanoid, Malik can fill the target with thrills of physical pleasure instead of pain by stimulating their pressure points.

In effect, Malik deals a number of points of pleasure equal to his sneak attack damage (though he still deals standard damage when using this ability as part of an attack).

If the number of pleasure points equals or exceeds the target's hp, the target must make a Will against a DC 19 (10 + Malik's Rogue levels + Malik's CCD levels + Malik's Cha modifier) to fight off the effect. If the target fails the save, they are considered to be *charmed* by Malik for the next two hours and will not attack him unless he attacks them or close allies of theirs where they can see within that time. At the end of this period hours, the target must make another Will save against the same DC. Those who fail must follow the rules for addiction, with Malik's touch as their drug. This addiction deals Wisdom damage and its effects can be progressive.

*Hidden Architectures (Umbrash) (Su):* As a CCD agent, Malik can use magic items without penalty, even if those items are designed to serve only members of a specific species, class, alignment or nationality. His mandate as a CCD agent supersedes all considerations of nationalism or privilege. He gains a +2 class bonus to all Use magic device checks.

If working together with other CCD agents with this same ability, Malik and these other agents can pool their personal energy when using a magical device as a full-round action. If their collected levels in the CCD prestige class are higher than the caster level of the magic item in question, it functions as though its caster level had been raised to equal the collective CCD levels of its users.

#### TERROR TRACK: PATH OF THE INCUBUS

*Charm of the Pit:* Failed Powers checks have granted Malik a substantial boost to his Charisma score, but the irises of his eyes have turned an inhuman, feral gold. While his elegant charms are well able to compensate, he has an Outsider Rating of +1.

*Lustful Gaze:* Failed Powers checks have granted Malik a magical ability. Twice a day, he can use *charm person* on a person he finds sexually attractive, as a gaze attack. His caster level equals his ECL, and the save DC is determined by his Charisma score.

Even as this power increases Malik's ability to seduce targets, his control over his base impulses is weakened. When he encounters people who he finds sexually attractive for the first time, he must roll a Will save against a DC of 15 to stop himself from trying to seduce them on the spot, even if doing so would run counter to his current mission or personal interests.

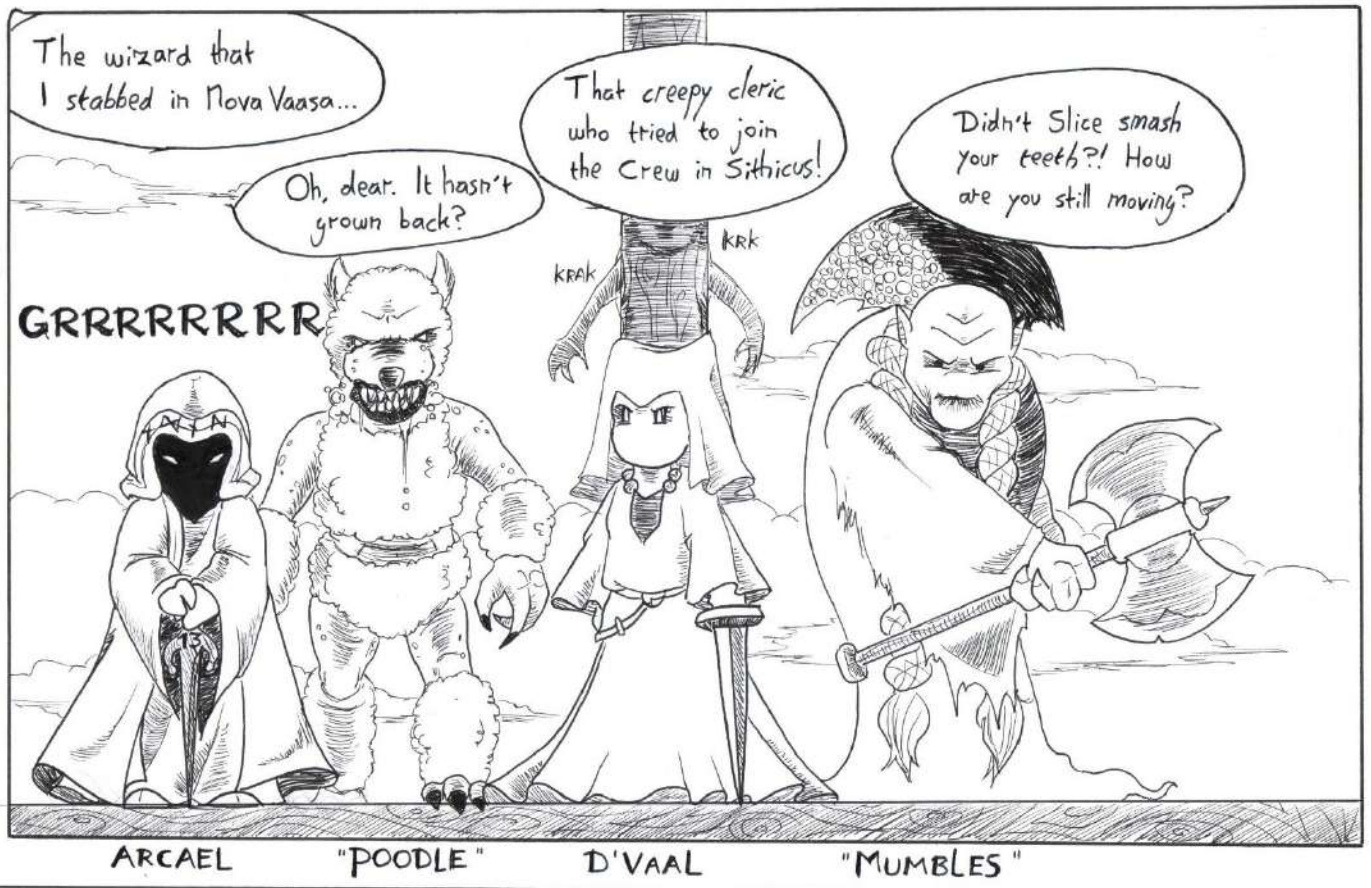




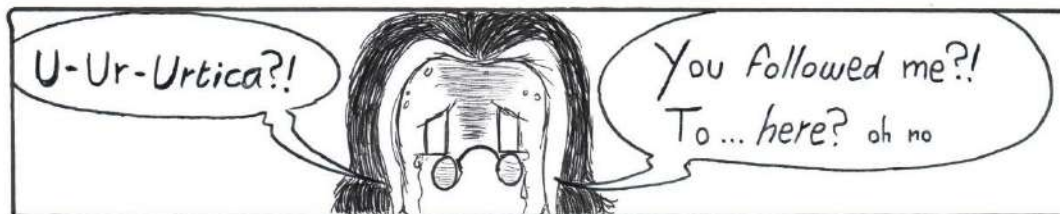
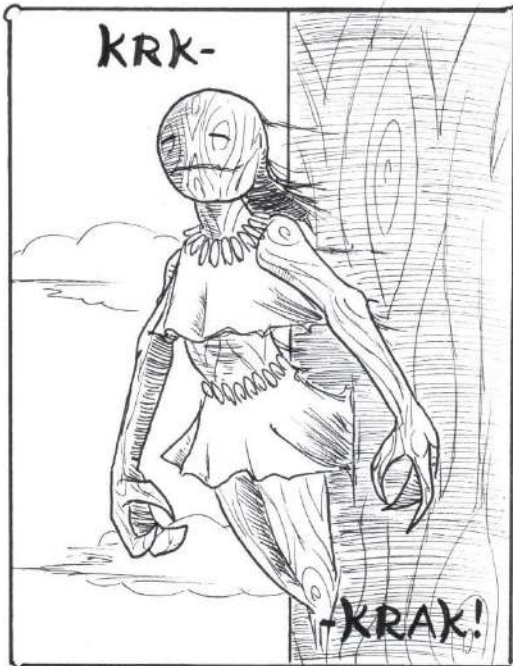














The Fraternity  
of  
Shadows

THANK YOU, DEAR SCHOLAR OF DREAD!  
DO NOT FORGET TO LEAVE FEEDBACK  
TO THE AUTHORS!

(BUT DO NOT INVITE THEM HOME, WE NEVER KNOW...)