Quoth the Raven – 32th

A Fraternity of Shadows Ravenloft netbook

About anathema.

When your fate could be banishment, or worse…

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Speaking of anathema, any unauthorized duplication of this document will result in Wyan of Viktal asking you for a meeting in Tepest, “for a question or two”.

Introduction

"The dreamer whose dreams are non-utilitarian has no place in this world. In this world the poet is anathema, the thinker a fool, the artist an escapist, the man of vision a criminal." *(Henry Miller)*

"...the Church can claim but one invention as thoroughly original with her — namely, the doctrine of eternal damnation, and one custom, that of the anathema."
(Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, in *Isis Unveiled)*

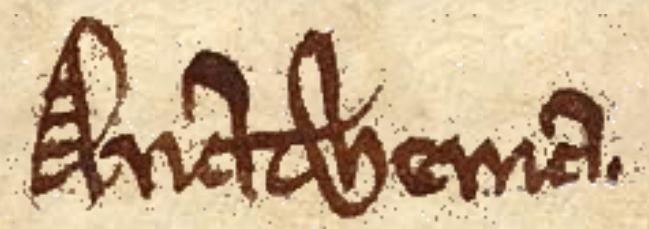
Esteemed members of the Fraternity,
Miladies,

Voilà, we again have the pleasure to release the 32th Quoth the Raven netbook.

This year's theme is... *Anathema!* So many examples in Ravenloft!

- A priest or inquisitor raising a hand in judgment, or a condemnation, while a cursed figure recoiling in shadows.
- Scrolls or sigils burning as they're read aloud in a consecrated cathedral.
- Something or someone detested or shunned. A lone figure outside church gates in the rain. Excommunicated? Disfavour of his God?
- A face branded or marked by a holy symbol that burns.
- A corrupted relic or idol that everyone avoids.
- A forbidden book chained shut in a monastery library.
- A gleaming votive statue in a temple, surrounded by flickering candles.
- A blood-stained altar where offerings have turned dark.

Anathema derives from Ancient Greek: ἀνάθεμα, anáthema, meaning "an offering" or "anything dedicated", itself derived from the verb ἀνατίθημι, anatíthēmi, meaning "to offer up". In the Old Testament, חֵרֶם (chērem) referred to both objects consecrated to divine use and those dedicated to destruction in the Lord's name, such as enemies and their weapons during religious wars. Since weapons of the enemy were considered unholy, the meaning became "anything dedicated to evil" or "a curse".



By the 6th century, the liturgical meaning of anathema evolved again to mean a formal ecclesiastical curse of excommunication and the condemnation of heretical doctrines, the severest form of separation from the Christian church issued against heretics.

In 1526, the word anathema appeared in modern English for the first time and was used in the sense of "something accursed". The "consecrated object" meaning was also adopted a short time later but is no longer widely used. Its most common modern usage is in secular contexts, where it is used to mean something or someone that is detested or shunned.

The Pharaoh Anhktepot, the living dead anathema of the Akiri Gods, to the rats infesting the streets of Pont-a-Museau. The calibans, the heretics of Nidala, to the ceremony of Zhakata's Taking and the leader of the Red Vardo Traders. The things shunned or condemned by the Church of Ezra, the Lawgiver, or other faiths. They carry the full weight of a spiritual curse.

The Unholy Symbol of Ravenkind. Sacred to the Morninglord, it can hurt vampires. To Strahd and his kind, it is an anathema — a relic of divine light in a land swallowed by shadow.

In domains like Tepest, the Hala worshippers are heretics. Their rites are considered anathema to Belenus's clergy or the Inquisition. Any who commune with the fey or the forest spirits are deemed anathema by the Inquisition — cursed, burned, or hunted as servants of evil.

Those who question the authority of the Lawgiver's Church are anathematized — declared enemies of divine law. Some are literally branded and exiled.

For Strahd, Tatyana is sacred; but for the Mists, her repeated rebirth is an anathema — a cycle that should not exist, breaking the laws of fate and death.

Adam, a man assembled from corpses — detested by his creator, rejected by the gods. His existence is a living anathema to the sanctity of life.

The Land of Mists is full of stories, objects and people that fit the description of anathema.

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

Darkon's History Explored

(Expansion of Arcane Age of Darkon QtR 31)

By Matt "strahosbuddy" Doyle

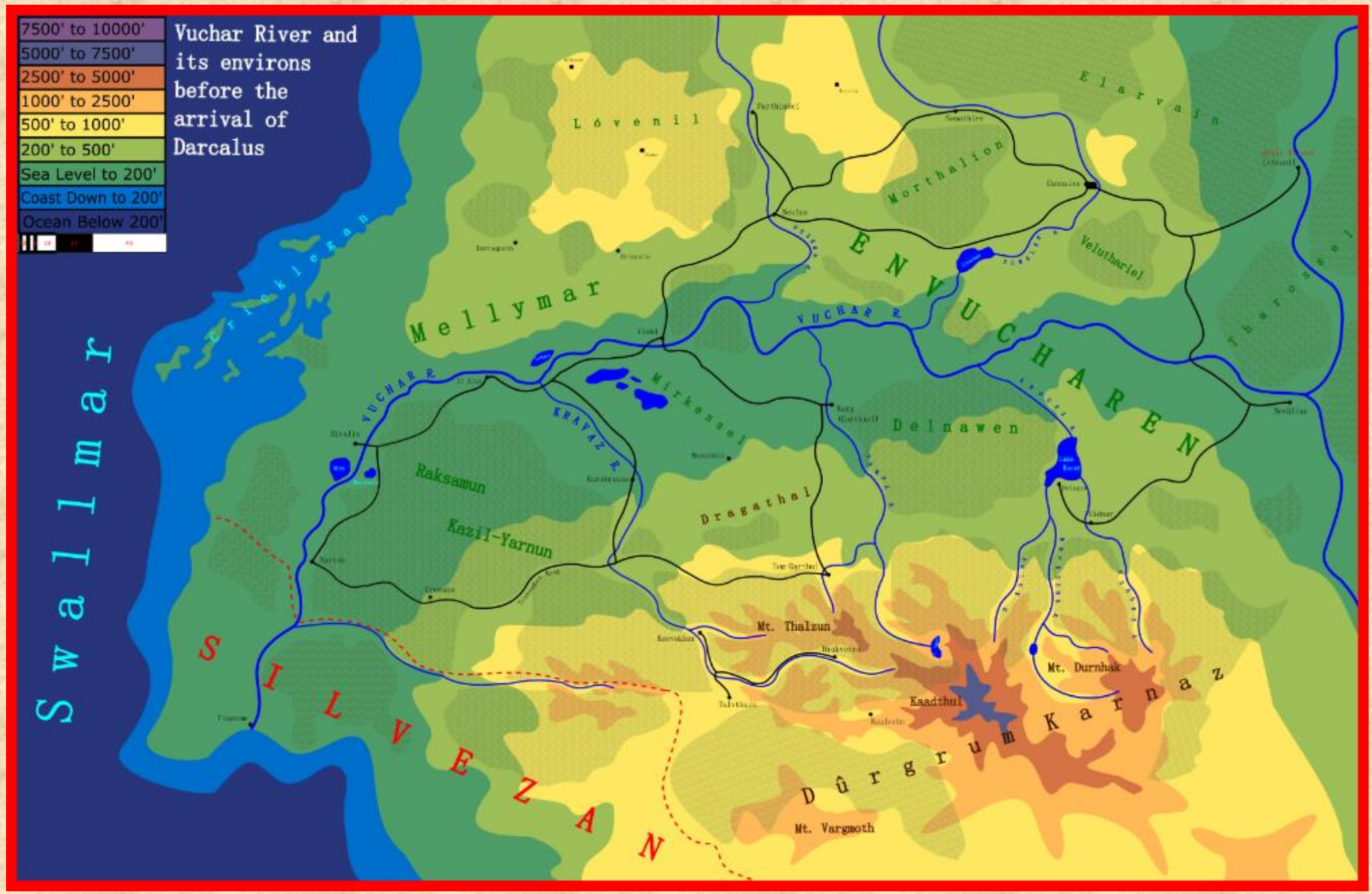
(Excerpt of a letter from Tarnos Shadowcloak to Malcolm Scott, date unknown)

…although I need not remind you of the dangers of the world around us and its peculiar inhabitants. For my own part, the discoveries made by our efforts have done at least as much to raise questions about the nature of our realm as to answer them. Peeling back the obfuscating layers of illusion and outright occult lies has given us a view of things none of these sheep, we walk amongst could comprehend even with two good eyes. Our interest, however, has ever been on the shepherds. To divine their purpose and the limits of their abilities—of which there must be at least some—would allow our fraternity to at last have that sample on which to focus our study. Each bit of collected knowledge, no matter how fine or seemingly insignificant, brings us closer to that goal, and for that reason alone we must never give in to the despair one encounters when discovering the meaning of one wheel, only to find more wheels within.

By now, it is clear that mystery is as much a part of this realm as the ground beneath our feet. So much knowledge has been created and shared, and so much more has been hidden in the hearts of men and ancient tomes. The sheer volume of intelligence regarding this world's properties, its folk, and the mystical energies we harness seems created to befuddle us as we find one incongruency after another. The realms of the deceased, for instance, are tantalizingly close by, as proven by the ability for even the low-skilled pretender to raise a corpse like the wizard-king—and yet we cannot

go to these places ourselves. We study illusion not because we do not believe what our eyes tell us, but because of the ways our memories get fooled as well. Tell me how the scrolls in Har-Thalen's library can record the words of an author dead three centuries on, when you and I both know the library has not even stood for a score of years. How many hapless travelers have we interrogated who initially spoke nothing but nonsense, and then unlocked one more clue to the possibilities beyond the Mists? My own kingdom robs the truth from the unwary, twists memory and history alike with an illusion of the mind, some long geas whose purpose seems little else than to increase the census rolls, and connects the newcomer to all the other residents around them until we, the educated, feel all the more foolish for believing the old truths we uncovered.

Darkon's own history is scarcely two centuries old, yet the tomes speak of a time we know to be fully fabricated. It is simple enough to discern the reason our shepherds go to such great lengths to create the appearance of antiquity; its absence would drive to madness all those who yet walk beneath the veil, thinking their world mundane. But I say there is still reason to study it. Fiction or not, the populace believes it. We are awash in information, in obscure scholarly pursuits and esoterica we have each deemed worthy of our attention. We are being shepherded as well, very much against our wills, and in spite of our collected power. Each piece we uncover is less of a victory and more a breadcrumb left for us by the silent powers that created our prison. When we discovered Darkon's history to be falsified to protect its inhabitants from asking questions that would lead down the path of insanity, we immediately threw suspicious glares at every shred of paper in our archives, tossed them aside as useless to our cause. Let us not play into the schemes of these shepherds. Instead, let us look for more clues in these elaborate lies, for once we dismissed their veracity it became the perfect place to hide the truth.


7500' to 10000'
5000' to 7500'
2500' to 5000'
1000' to 2500'
500' to 1000'
200' to 500'
Sea Level to 200'
Coast Down to 200'
Ocean Below 200'
Vuchar River and its environs before the arrival of Darcalus
Swallmar
Lôvenil
Mellymar
Morthalion
Elarvain
ENVUCHAREN
Veluthariel
Thartosel
VUCHAR R.
KRAVAZ R.
Mirkessel
Delnawen
Raksamun
Kazil-Yarnun
Dragathal
Mt. Thalzun
Mt. Durnhak
Kaadthul
Karnaz
Dûrgrum
Mt. Vargmoth
SILVEZAN

Darcalus found a thriving realm when he led his people from across the sea into what was known as Envucharen, literally the "lands around the Vuchar." Much of modern Darkon exists on the maps from those days, some carefully curled in amphora scroll cases in Castle Avernus, others riddled with mold and grime hanging on the walls of long-forgotten caverns beneath the Mountains of Misery. Accompanying histories indicate this map is from before the coming of Darcalus in 383, Barovian Calendar. Place names that have fallen out of use, or mark abandoned sites are prominent on these maps, but more haunting is the existence of lands beyond, unknown in the land of Mists, never visited by Azalin Rex—or maybe by any living thing at all.

Names like Rivalis, Nartok, Neblus, Viaki, Delagia, and Sidnar lend credibility to the map. Indeed the path of the Vuchar is familiar to anyone who has seen it in modern times, and so are the northern elevations around Mt. Nirka, although that name is omitted, and Mt. Nyid is nowhere to be found. The map's edges do not indicate a border to these lands and there is no telling how much further north or east they might have stretched. While the Darkonian language is understandably absent from the map, the ancient tongues of Darkon's tribes are prominent.

Envucharen was divided into rough quadrants controlled by the different tribes astride the mighty river, which ran east to west before gently turning southwest and emptying into the sea. Here we see the first glaring change to the map. No realm known to a modern Darkonian welcomed the Vuchar like Falkovnia or Lamordia. Instead, "Silvezan" is emblazoned in the bottom left corner, a name that appears nowhere else, unknown even to the Vistani. A city is marked at the mouth of the Vuchar in Silvezan's territory—Tiqaram. One can only guess how this harbor would have benefitted from wealth upriver reaching its quays. It is also strange that the Darkonians would not make anchor here, instead settling to the north before slicing through the middle of Envucharen.

The map is a look into history, of course, but what history came before even this epoch? As so much of the recorded history of the Nevuchar people is apocryphal, it is difficult to tell myth from fact. So let's start with the myth.

The Gray Realm

While the creation myth was adopted, and later misinterpreted, by the Darkonians, the Nevuchar explanation begins in Elaruith, a place of shapeless spirits and shifting form. In it dwelled an enigmatic steward of the silence, known as Alaate. It was attended by Lirvael the Unbinding, Numaren the Dream-Sleeper, and Vashira the Mirror of Echoes. This realm persisted for an untold age until the First Rememberer emerged. Walking up to Alaate, the First Rememberer gained solid form, and broke the silence of Elaruith with the clapping of hands. Alaate looked at the First Rememberer, called this because he remembered his own name. He spoke it aloud and became known as Ineveon. Ineveon spoke the names of those he had loved in a time before, and as he did, these remembered spirits became trees, rivers, stars, beasts, and, of course, people. At last, the world had come into being, and Alaate saw how love had been remembered and stepped out of this new era in reverence for the new creation.

Alaate remained in the diminished realm of Elaruith with the three attendants. Vashira stood near the Mirror of Echoes, which was the only way to return to Elaruith upon one's death. Upon crossing, the deceased would meet with Lirvael and Numaren so that their form could be unbound from the hunger and pain of life, but their soul would enter a restful state of dreaming, experiencing the deeds of the past, present, and future all at once.

Early Years

The Nevuchar always revered the night sky, with a simple oval constellation called Vashira in the southern sky year-round giving them hope for their quiet afterlife. The calm of the stars helped the Nevuchar create magic, through which they created great works that stood for centuries. The moon came to represent the protection of the gods, and chief among them was Sehann. Sehann showered gifts upon the Nevuchar, and their devotion to her persists to this day. The first enemy the Nevuchar ever encountered came from the stars, and they watched in rapt horror as their goddess did battle in the sky above. Little is written of the nature of this enemy in any tales yet discovered, but when Sehann revealed her plan for a final victory, she asked for the assistance of two mortals to give up their lives as they knew them, and their promise of Elaruith, to watch over their captured enemies for eternity.

The Nevuchar queen Elamaris and her consort Thalion were the obvious champions. Strong and wise, they were the epitome of all Nevuchar ideals. Sehann said she could capture their enemy in the moon, and would charge these champions with watching over it to keep the world below safe. Thalion was sure in his quest and comfortable in his sacrifice. He knew the virtue of his task and accepted it with glee. Elamaris, however, was torn between the will of Sehann and her duty to the Nevuchar. She knew Thalion to be the most pure of heart and full of wisdom, and this is why she loved him. She knew his strength was unmatched, and the Nevuchar would be losing their two greatest defenders if she joined him. She eventually convinced herself that Thalion could handle the task alone, and that she would remain below to watch over her people.

Thalion ascended to take his place as the guardian of the moon, and his name is still invoked with reverence as it is known he defends the Nevuchar from an enemy that would have eradicated them. Elamaris had her throne moved to a stone dais, open to the sky, and she adorned herself in silver raiment of mourning for her lost love. Sehann completed her plan to capture the enemy, but the light of the moon began to steadily wane. When just a sliver was left in the sky, Elamaris cried out to Sehann to tell her what was happening. Sehann explained that Thalion was not strong enough to guard the moon alone, and that he would constantly need to rest and regain his power. This is why the moon waxes and wanes, as Thalion struggles for eternity to keep the prison on the moon sealed.

Elamaris wept for the fate to which she had doomed her lover. She began to regret her decision and pleaded with Sehann to let her join him. The queen finally reserved herself to this cycle of suffering, which she could see each night. Thalion would weaken, and the moon's light would grow fainter, and wicked magic was known to flourish on these dark nights when he slumbered. But Elamaris would perform rituals to direct her own power toward the moon, encouraging Thalion to regain his strength and increase the moon's light to show he was fulfilling his duty. Elamaris became known as the Moon-Widow, and her reign became influenced by the great melancholy she felt for her decision to abandon Thalion and the will of Sehann.

Queen Elamaris is central not only to the Nevuchar's history, but to the Tempite's as well. While the Nevuchar remember her loss and pity her curse to witness the suffering of Thalion for all time, her actions upon the earth in the years after were not very well received by the Tempites. The Nevuchar had invented writing as a way to communicate silently, allowing the natural world around them to remain uncorrupted. The Tempite's oral tradition and penchant for mining and smithing created a noise that worried Elamaris. She saw a change in the ley lines, felt the current of the rivers weaken, and even thought the stars in the sky were moving as a result of the constant clanging of pick on rock and hammer on the anvil. The queen decreed that one day in ten should be kept silent, allowing the songs of birds and the babble of water over stones to help revitalize the world.

While the Silent Day caught on in Nevuchar homes, the industrious Tempites balked at the suggestion. Elamaris first attempted to buy silence, purchasing enough Tempite goods that they would not need to work so often. When this failed, she pointed to lower ore yields in the Tempite mines as a sign the world was in need of repair and begged for the opportunity to heal it with her silent magic. The Tempites sent a great orator named Vael to treat with the queen at a tall, smooth stone called Carthiel along the Tempe River, one of the Tempites' main tributaries to the Vuchar. Vael and Elamaris discussed the role their two tribes could play in the lands around the Vuchar. Vael acknowledged the significance of the great, wide river, and how its banks had been defended by the Tempites from lesser peoples who had attempted to build dams and master its flow. Elamaris bristled at the mention of such sacrilege and her mind connected Vael's people not with their dismantling, but with similar activities further up the Tempe. She took the examples Vael gave of Tempite industry—their mines, their great stone towers, the things that defined them—as examples of how they tried to control the world around them. The Nevuchar, she thought, were the only ones who could see the world's perfection, the only ones who could preserve it.

Vael surprised the queen when he began to recount the events in Elaruith to her. The Tempites had their own version of how the world was created, but Vael knew enough to speak to Elamaris from the perspective of the Nevuchar, how her people knew that all things would be separated from them once they passed Vashira. Lirvael would unbind them from all, even their beloved Vuchar. (While their names may look similar, Vael is pronounced with a short "a" and has two syllables in the lost Tempite language "va-EL"; Lirvael, in Nevuchari, also has two syllables: "lir-VILE") He urged her to have faith that the world was made perfect enough that it could not be upset so easily.

Knowing his answer, Elamaris asked Vael if his people could ever see the value of silencing their hammers for the good of Envucharen. Vael grinned and reminded the queen that the efforts of the Tempites had already increased the good of their land. Their metalwork adorned Nevuchari towers, themselves reinforced at their wooden roots with Tempite-designed stone buttresses. The Tempites had not sent a simple craftsman to treat with Elamaris, but a skilled speaker they felt was familiar enough with both their cultures to connect with her. But he could not know the depth of her mourning over Thalion, whom she had abandoned on the moon. Each example Vael gave of his people's progress sounded to her like one more shovel-full of earth pulled from the grave he was preparing for her people.

She declared, "Your hollowing of our world has thrown it out of balance. Ineveon named the things that would live when he remembered, and all else was meant to stay beneath. You are shaped from the lifeless crust of our world, and are best left as part of it." And with this, she bound Vael to the smooth stone of Carthiel, entombing his body and imprisoning his mind there. The Tempites would help Elamaris mend the world by letting things grow in silence as she had commanded, and Vael was the first victim.

At the loss of Vael, the Tempites struck back. An ill-fated battle raged in an area that would become known as Dragathal, the Valley of Weeping. Nevuchar forces marched in a phalanx of padded shields, mute as the dead, their enemy's weapons thudding dully against the quilted barriers, and grim archers silently loosed arrows into the Tempite host for days on end. The Tempite survivors, few in number but indominable in spirit, gathered themselves away from the range of Nevuchar arrows and defiantly screamed and beat great drums in the face of their sullen foes.

The Nevuchar eventually wore down the Tempites, pushing them ever further into Thalgrum, the mountains they called home. Faced with annihilation, the Tempites sued for peace. Elamaris accepted surrender, and vowed to return all Tempite

lands if she could enchant a great stone spire near the great waterfall with a spell of silence for one month to help regain the powers of the land and return balance. With magic unlike any wielded by a Nevuchar since, the enchantment caused the wind to die down, then dust settled at the base of the enormous spire, now called Varnathi. A sickly yellow light emanated from the rock, but it emitted no sound. It washed over Thalgrum, Dragathal, and all the Tempite lands, past the peaks of Vargmoth and Durnhak . The mighty spell rendered the voices of all within its range completely mute. The Tempites wept silently at first, sleeping through the first several nights without the usual recitation of poems or singing of songs. They woke without the traditional call of names for their children at meals or the workers at job sites. The trilling of insects, chirping of birds, and grunts of the hogs became deafening. On the appointed day, when the moon was full again, the Tempites arrived at the Spire of Varnathi in eager anticipation of the lifting of the spell. Elamaris, however, had been unsuccessful in repairing the land with her magic during the month of silence. So much of her power was spent in the creation of the silence spell, she had been unable to summon enough energy for additional magic. The Tempites had no written language, and had not taken to learning the symbols of their neighbors, so the epitaph was meaningless to them. The oral tradition of the Tempites prevented their initial understanding of the runes now painted upon the spire: Naeth Thalioneth. The implication from the Nevuchar was made clear, however. The silence would last until Thalion regained his strength; one more month.

Despair had taken hold of the Tempites, with the wordless sobs of their children shaking the beds of their parents as they rocked them to sleep. Another month passed. Unable to communicate, the Tempites could do little but go about their days in dour resignation. Upon the next full moon, they returned to Varnathi. Fewer Nevuchar greeted them this time, but the message had not changed. Naeth Thalioneth. Without the capability to plan or even beg for mercy, the Tempites returned to their homes and hung their heads to their families. Despair turned to madness for some, as their inability to speak did not stop the sound of their own thoughts, or the songs in their dreams which vanished with the rays of each rising sun. All of these things died upon their lips, and they could share none of it with their loved ones as they had all their lives.

Elamaris desperately tried to repair the earth, and although guilt gnawed at her for her horrible spell, she always felt she was frustratingly close to success each time the moon came full. And with each failure, she would again dispatch messengers to Varnathi to inform the Tempites: Naeth Thalioneth. This continued for 32 years. In that time, through involuntary dumbness, the Tempites began to forget the names of their loved ones. They forgot their language. They lost track of lineage and how they would select their kings. Their history began to vanish simply because it could not be told. A generation grew up in silence, their parents and grandparents passing without a sound, many suffering with the inability to ask for help with their ailments. The children of this era had no names, and no reference to what had been lost. Silence became normal, and those who remembered speech became embittered as they slowly lost grip of what had truly defined them.

During the decades of silence, the pilgrimages to Varnathi on each full moon were carried out with diminishing enthusiasm. It felt as though the Nevuchar had forgotten their promise to the Tempites, or perhaps they had lied to them. One craftsman, his name lost to history, had not given up on the promise, and dutifully marked off each day of the moon's cycle with a scratch or smudge of rock on rock. As he aged, he taught his son to do the same, and they began to embellish the marks in a way that became more than just a simple tally. Their marks began to denote the weather on each day. They developed pictograms to include on their new calendars which would represent people or animals.

The elders, those who once had a voice, were gathered to help assign a newly designed rune to everyday objects, and then to people in the place of names, and finally to concepts that no one could see. None of the runes corresponded to an audible sound, and to this day the language has not been taught to outsiders or spoken aloud. Although the name would not be applied until later, this inventor of language became known as Thuldin, the Silent Founder. The Tempites began to communicate again, they began to love again, and they began to rekindle the culture they had lost.

Elamaris, throughout the silence, had been shaken to her core. Unable to correct all the mystical errors she had found, she frantically reached for spells and solutions like trying to grasp fistfuls of water. The sacred silence of Elaruith seemed forever lost to her, and she realized attempting to recreate it in the mortal realm was folly. The only place where silence could really exist was among the stars, and she was filled with regret for her choice to abandon Thalion. Thus, she decided to join him, creating a great vessel with the help of members from the skilled tribes to the west. "Skilled" is actually what the Nevuchar called the Czhemel, naming them the Ambal, and welcoming their inventions into Envucharen. The craft was built over the course of a year, shaped like a great insect: delicate wings set into a carapace of silver and brass. For a power source, the Ambal created a great propeller, which spun at such speed to push the craft skyward. Laden only with thirty gowns for Elamaris to wear as she greeted Thalion each evening and the white gem of promise he had left in her hand when he embarked, Elamaris rebuffed offers from each member of court who deigned to accompany her. She assured them, from the quiet of the moon she could heal their world. Regarding the spell of silence, she promised herself to lift it once she reached her destination, still convinced her success depended on full concentration and no distractions from the Tempites she had doomed with her hubris.

The ship was called Lasurneth. Seated between its moth-like wings, the Queen of the Nevuchar smiled grimly at the court gathered around her. In all this time, no word or sign had come from Sehann or her clergy to bless the journey or warn against it. A mournful dirge rose from the lips of the Nevuchar assembled at the launch site. The propeller at the rear of the vessel spun madly, and the gusts created bent limbs and blew leaves off the trees around the palace. It's mechanisms—powered by magic and strange black powders provided by the Ambal—created a din that rose to drown out the singing, and cloud the mind of Elamaris. So eager for silence and calm in which to operate, she was distracted by the unfamiliar hum and the unfathomable gush of air behind her. Her want for quiet caused her to reach out to the power at Varnathi to help soften the sound of Lasurneth, and insulate her own mind from the cacophony in which she found herself.

Being the night of the full moon, the Tempites had gathered at Varnathi, as they had for 372 full moons before. Unaware of the existence of the vessel or Elamaris's plans to depart, their attention was drawn by a strange and distant hum. The wind kicked up unexpectedly and blew into their faces. The dull yellow light around the Spire of Varnathi seemed to intensify at the tip, but the dweomer had collected there from the ground. The yellow miasma of sorcery intensified at the top of the spire and took on the shape of a great spear. A sound like thunder roared out from Varnathi, and the spire began to crack. The yellow spear at its summit shot off into the night sky at a target the Tempites could not guess. Far off in the night sky, halfway between the moon and the horizon, the spear met its terminus, the great vessel of Lasurneth, and a great explosion filled the sky. Sprinkles of silver light shot outward as though creating new stars not yet named. The hum stopped and the wind died down.

Among the Tempites gathered at the place of their cursing was a young girl. Born in silence, she had grown bored with the adults milling around the spire and had quickly lost interest in the strange sound

from the night sky. Sitting on the ground, she realized a stepworm had crawled onto her hand. She watched the little worm stretch out its form, then gather its back half near the front, making a high curve of its back. Methodically it continued, step by step, as though measuring her hand like it had measured all the ground it had covered to arrive there. As the explosion rocked the sky, the stepworm stopped, as though surprised by the thunder, or even chilled by the odd wind. Rather than finish its next stride, the worm turned to face the little Tempite girl. She had never seen such a thing happen, and although she had no way to communicate, the actions of the little worm delighted her. Overcome with this joyful feeling of being trusted by the smallest of all creatures, her face opened in a wide grin. Her lips parted, and she laughed. The first laugh, the first sound, uttered by a Tempite in over thirty years.

The laugh was followed by more silence, the familiar stillness that had accompanied the air around the peak of Kaadthul for decades. Soon, however, the Tempites realized their throats felt loosened, air began to pass hoarsely up their windpipes and through their lips. First a hum, and then a wordless grunt. As they looked at each other with an uneasy anticipation, not believing it to be real, the Tempites suddenly erupted in a sobbing laughter, yelling gibberish words of a language they had yet to create, and crying at the end of their long-suffering. The young girl was hoisted on their shoulders, celebrating her laughter among the laughing sobs of her fellows. She would be called Tretamari, the "Stepworm's Joy" and would be known as the First Laugh through all of Tempite legend. Today, the phrase "laughing beneath new stars" is spoken by a Tempite trying to remind someone suffering a tragedy that it could be unlocking great joy that cannot yet be understood.

The stepworm has become a symbol in Tempite legend, representing the slow, methodical course that must be followed to create great works. On the day sound returned, the creature was given its own glyph in the nascent written language of the Tempites: Ω. Although the language is not taught to outsiders, this glyph appears on gifts from the Tempites, representing a friend for life to the typically dour folk. It is revered as a tiny creature, seemingly insignificant, but everyone knows it will one day become a geomoth and fly in the night sky, measuring new angles from a better vantage point.

Elamaris is a complex character in any history, but the Tempites are particularly unforgiving when discussing her. They refer to her as Vostraahlan Thalaemaaret, never forgetting that she unwove their speech, that she let her mourning for the stars overshadow her obligations to her nation and their neighbors. As they were reassembling their language and culture, the Moon Widow was never far from their memory.

The Nevuchar were thrown into a state of flux by the loss of their ruler. One member of the Queen's court called Hiraeth visited the Tempites upon the lifting of the silence spell. Unprepared for the initial gibberish of their invented-remembered tongue, Hiraeth misinterpreted the tale of the night, the obstructed view of Lasurneth's explosion, the laughter of Tretamari, and the new hope in the eyes of the tribe. As unfamiliar as they were with their own speech, the Tempites had also lost the subtleties of the Nevuchari language and customs. Hiraeth said, "Let the child of the moonlight stand before us, that we might know her name." The entire exchange escalated in confusion. Hiraeth's pleas to meet the girl were interpreted as a demand to turn her over. In their reintroduction to speech, the message was received as "Bring me the moon girl." To Hiraeth, the Tempite description of joy seemed like a celebration of the Queen's death. Hiraeth waited at Varnathi for four days, expecting the Tempites to return with the young Tretamari. When no Tempite returned to the spire, Hiraeth marched to the great waterfall at Tem-Darthul, ever the face of Tempite culture shown to the Nevuchar. After hours of calling at the city gates, a contingent of armored and sternly mute Tempite soldiers emerged. Still unaccustomed to speaking, an

elder among them stepped forward and stuttered as much broken Nevuchari as he could remember. The message was clear despite the botched vocabulary:

"*Nem. Varn. Trael. KREV!*" (now canonically translated as: "No name. No face. No girl. NEVER.")

Whatever Hiraeth requested would be denied out of hand. Tretamari had been hidden, as well as all the other Tempite children. None would walk outside of the stone fences of Durgrum Karnaz for an age. Convinced the Nevuchar would return to take revenge for the insult of laughing at their dead queen as the children grew older, even the Tempite women hid their faces from the world to keep Tretamari from falling into the hands of the Nevuchar. In practice, it may have only been Hiraeth who had any interest in the girl, but generations later, these traditions persist among the Tempites. Women and children are never seen outside the home, and outsiders are not invited into Tempite homes.

Middle Years

The Nevuchar continued to dominate the region for several more centuries. After Elamaris, the rulers were much more conscious of the effects of their magic and laws on their neighbors, at least in public. The major tribes on the south banks of the Vuchar River were the Tempites (whom the Nevuchar had always called "Polda", meaning strong), the Czhemel (Called "Ambal" by the Nevuchar, which translated as skilled), and the Kuduk (whom the Nevuchar called "Halamat": fish eaters). Creating a government that included all four tribes helped stabilize the region, put an end to petty wars, and clearly marked the regions of influence for each tribe.

The Nevuchar's power was focused mostly in the north, beyond areas that would follow Darkon into the Mists. The Nezron was the western border of these lands, and the cities of Neblus and Parthindel sat on its banks. At Parthindel, there was a great university for studying philosophy and history, and its name translates literally as "Learning of the Grey." Sanathiev and the capital Cannuine sat on the banks of the Somelen, which would become known as the Somulus after the arrival of Darcalus. In the east, the cities of Luhtanil and Nevulian (modern day Nevuchar Springs) sat on the waters of the Vuchar. These mystic cities drew magic from the sacred river, and just east of Nevulian, the two branches of the Vuchar converged and fed into the roots of a great tree that spanned both banks. Any secrets held beyond this are lost, especially the forest known as Tharossel, since after the arrival of Azalin, the Vuchar flowed directly from the Mists themselves and Nevulian's meager sunrise had to penetrate this swirling obstacle as well.

Cannuine was perched at a ninety-degree bend in the Somelen, allowing a full view of any boats traveling down river beneath the high arches of the bridge called Elenvarë, the Pathway to the Stars. Rising a hundred feet to clear the river, one could certainly appreciate the sky as they climbed it. On the opposite shore rose the hill called Calethin, which was high enough to shield the city from the sunrise until midmorning, giving the residents more time to appreciate the night. White limestone structures held heavy vegetation, luminescent moss and clinging vines covered walls and roof alike, giving the entire city an eerie glow without distracting from the stars.

In the age before Darcalus, the Nevuchar maintained a chain of vigilance along their northwestern frontier; not outward toward expansion, but inward, as though guarding against some great secret. Three watchtowers stood upon the high places that overlooked the Kuduk border: Hithcenda, Histon, and the greatest, Histirion.

Histirion crowned a solitary hill, its spire commanding the view across three forests: Lovenil, Morthalion, and Elarvain. Yet the garrison kept its eyes not on the trees, but on the sky. Situated at an equal distance from Parthindel and Sanathiev, the tower was supplied with the finest stores and manned by the most learned observers of the age.

Daily reports were dispatched to Cannuine, each one charting the passage of constellations, predicting eclipses, and recording the paths of comets. More than once, the tangled annals of the Kuduk were used to unlock hidden meanings in these celestial alignments. Atop the tower was a great glass crafted by the Czhemel, unequaled in its ability to peer into the heavens. It could even bring the moon's face into a clear view. The first attempt to observe a full moon through it ended in tragedy, as the chamber was filled with a burning white brilliance. When the light faded, the astronomers were gone, reduced to ash and scattered robes. From that night forward, the moon was observed only between its gibbous phases. Built in the days before the Silence with stone set by Tempite hands, Histirion became a symbol of unity and learning among the four tribes. In whispers, however, it was also said to be a planar waypoint and that its true purpose was not to *see* the stars, but to watch for something they feared might one day fall from them. Many messages came to the Celestines regarding a sundering of the realm, or some great loss. Nothing specific could be gleaned, and the Nevuchar began to study these dire messages more and more on their own without consulting stargazers from the other tribes.

While rarely welcome in Tempite towns, the Nevuchar of this new era tried to be compassionate toward their neighbors. Most knew it was the actions of their queen, not the Nevuchar themselves that had doomed the Tempites, but were careful to avoid the sensitive topic. Some Tempites took this as the Nevuchar ignoring the damage done to them, and the tragic misunderstandings between the two tribes continued. A village had sprung up around Carthiel, deep in territories the Tempites had ceded to the Nevuchar. But now that the tribes were all mixing, Tempites returned to the site of Vael's imprisonment. Elamaris no longer held control over the spell of silence, and it was assumed her spell imprisoning Vael had also faded. Tempite artificers arrived and split the smooth stone they had named Karg (prison) to find that Vael had died during his incarceration. The inside of the rock of Karg had been scratched with Nevuchari runes that captured the phonetics of the ancient oral tradition kept by the Tempites. The entire menhir was placed on massive barges and dragged up the Tempe River toward Tem-Darthul, where it rests to this day. With the help of Kuduk historians and Czhemel linguists, the symbols were used to replicate a language no one could remember written in an alphabet it had never used to connect the Tempites to a past from which they had been cruelly separated.

Both the Kuduk and Czhemel were troubled by how Elamaris's grief had turned her into a tyrant, and mourned for the Tempites. Although considerably less powerful than the Nevuchar and the Tempites, these cousin tribes supported Tempite recovery after the lifting of the Silence of Varnathi. The mercantile Czhemel opened trade through more rugged paths, over the hump of Mt. Thalzun. They maintained the road, called Ezhe-Karrath (vein of echoes) from Tem-Darthul into the heart of their forests and navigated the much less forgiving Kravaz River to supply smaller Tempite towns like Kaevakkur. They invited the Tempites into their trade hub nearer to the Nevuchar, the town of Kurnkravaz (which would be renamed "Corvia" when the Darkonians arrived, and the river would become the Corvus), and this allowed the younger, more eager Tempites a chance to reintegrate to life in the larger region. From their capital at Nartok, the Czhemel had collected the Tempite crafting methods from before the Silence. They brought examples of Tempite artifacts back to the slopes of Mt. Thalzun and reminded the Tempites of their ways. So much of the Ambal's abilities the Nevuchar admired had really come from the Tempites in ages past.

The Kuduk met with the Tempites at Kurnkravaz to retell the history of the world during the Silence. Tempite scholars picked the Kuduk language up quickly and used it as the common tongue rather than Nevuchari—loathe as they were to teach their new language to outsiders. Thanks to the diligence of the Kuduk, the Tempites were not left ignorant of the

ways of the realm. While much genealogy and family history had been lost, the Kuduk helped the Tempites reestablish family lines, celebrating the marriages and offspring that occurred while there was no ability to name them. The Kuduk introduced the Tempites to their new surnames, which were more physically descriptive or based on the profession. They established another trading post closer to their western capitol at Rivalis called The Crossing or "Il Aluk." The Kuduk lands hugged the southern bank of the Vuchar, intermingling with Nevuchar holdings. Their eastern capital of Delagia was on Lake Korst, close to Tempite lands and reflecting this influence even before the Silence. Of course the Nevuchar town of Sidnar also had a major influence in this region and the three rivers that fed Lake Korst—the Velox, the Khourx, and the Brakzund—felt like they were flowing out of three separate cultures.

The Kuduk established themselves as a welcome addition to the cities of Envucharen, not only for their cheery and agreeable disposition, but for their ability to create delicious meals from otherwise simple ingredients. Tallu and Talna are the source of this reputation, two plants that grow in the marshy area called Mirkessel and the slightly higher plain of Mellymar—the center of Kuduk lands. Tallu is a smoky spice used to make roots and tubers a bit more exciting to eat with a warming bite. Its sister, Talna, is considerably smoother and sweet without the added heat. It is often added to fine desserts or just packed between the cheek and gum for an enjoyable treat while traveling long distances. While Rivalis and Delagia were distinctly Kuduk, small villages dotted the rest of their lands with names like Mornibbit and Brinocle. Their northern frontiers were guarded by the great Nevuchar watchtowers Histon and Hithcenda. To the west was a great sea, which the Kuduk called Swallmar and avoided with great suspicion. The rocky and broken coast was very sparsely settled by a few adventurous Kuduk who had gotten a taste for shellfish absent from the Vuchar and the lakes around it. They called this region Cricklegan, and it is said one of their tribes had built a vast armada of ships to explore the world, but only one of them made it out of the reef-infested waters into the deep sea, and she was never heard from again. Tales like this usually end with a hearty laugh at someone so foolish to leave the Kuduk lands behind, with a common proverb being "A ship leaves the feast to chase saltwater soup" and "Swallmar serves no seconds!"

The Kuduk flourished in the years following the Silence of Varnathi, assimilating into the towns of the other tribes and growing in number equal to the Nevuchar, if not matching their influence. They endeared themselves to their neighbors by learning their customs and celebrating their holidays alongside them. While the Nevuchar constantly gazed at the stars for portents, the Kuduk carefully monitored the heavens to create the calendar of events that helped smooth the melding of cultures. Each tribal holiday was assigned a certain dish, and all tribes were invited to share it at the Kuduk celebrations. Tempite victories were celebrated alongside the birth of Nevuchar princes and the commissioning of Czhemel inventions. The Kuduk village of Darraquain became famous for their obsessive adherence to these calendar traditions, and the residents could tell you what they would be eating on any evening based on which obscure feast day aligned with the cosmic calendar. It was said a Kuduk child could recite the year's menu before they could count.

Yet modern scholars note that no other tribe's recordkeeping during this era was as pristine or as complete. Whole swaths of original tribal practices appear to have been overwritten, softened, or replaced with the "blended" Kuduk versions — in some towns, no memory of the original rituals remained at all. Whispered theories among the Czhemel archivists suggest that the Kuduk may have done more than merely recorded the cosmic calendar. Their mastery of the timing of celebrations gave them a subtle but overwhelming influence: by shaping when people mourned, feasted, or fasted,

they shaped how those people remembered. Some even suggest that Darraquain's calendar contains rites not shared with outsiders, ceremonies whose purpose was never mere celebration, but preservation of power. If any of this is true, the Kuduk's calendar may have been the first weapon ever used in the conquest of the tribes — a silent, sweet-tasting charm that made the insinuation of the Kuduk into the greater empire as innocuous as their well-timed festivals.

South of the Kuduk lands and west of the Tempites was the dense forest known as Rakşamûn Kazil-Yarnun, translated from the incredibly complex Czhemel tongue as the "Silent nest among tall shadows." The Vuchar turns south to contain this forest, and the Czhemel made it their home. Preferring to leave the forest intact, logging was kept to a minimum even though it was the most densely vegetated portion of Envucharen. Even Rivalis sprawls over a larger area, but the hill that the tiny Czhemel capital of Nartok climbed allowed a view over the top of the trees. While the Czhemel had a reputation as great merchants, and must certainly have had dealings with their neighbors to the south, not even their records say much about the nation of Silvezan, sprawled astride the Vuchar where it emptied into the sea. While not a part of the government formed by the Nevuchar, the Czhemel considered their friends in the "silver kingdom" to be allies as close as any other. Only passing references to how residents of Silvezan revered their cats hint at this lost culture.

The Czhemel were left to their own tinkering with machines and invention, protected by their stronger neighbors and only finding war when they sought it out, like so many volunteers did later on the slopes of Durgrum Karnaz. "Nekhzar tamal, vekhozar gamal" is inscribed over doors to workshops throughout Czhemel territory, and it translates as "quick failure is the path to perfection." Whether harnessing the rhythmic drop of water from a finely balanced cup to mark time or replicating the movement of a dozen weavers to produce bolts of cloth, the Czhemel constantly sought a way to turn sorcery or fantasy into reality. Their homes tick and whir with the nearly imperceptible sounds of running machinery, something the Nevuchar refer to as "Ambalhymn"

While not as ubiquitous as the Kuduk in the settlements of their neighbors, the Czhemel were always welcome for their gift of turning a clever phrase and their talent for unearthing irony where others found only sorrow. After the Silence, when the Tempites and Nevuchar had grown somber and grim, it was the Czhemel who reminded them that it was not a warrior who broke the spell, it was a laugh. Though Tretamari had long passed into legend, the Czhemel revered her nearly as much as the Tempites. They called her Kidah, a word that came to mean mirth in the face of all other things. While most cultures regardless of language would involuntarily cry out *aha* when a concept clicked into place, the Czhemel exclaimed *haha,* for to them discovery was like a joke finally understood.

This gleeful pursuit of improvement led Czhemel artificers to create intricate automatons or clever devices designed to repeat menial tasks or replicate the intricate movement of a craftsman's hands. Where others saw eerie mimicry, the Czhemel saw possibilities. Often presented as gifts, these devices occasionally stirred unease in their neighbors. They whispered that spirits must have been bound into the works, or that some quiet spell was nestled beneath each gear. Any who may have studied *Van Richten's Guide to the Created,* however, would look back on these machines and recognize the signature patterns of obsession: the late nights, the discarded prototypes, the chilling insistence that it would be better this time. Unlike the golems studied by van Richten, there is no record of these created assistants turning against their creators, at least before the arrival of Azalin.

The Tempites were forced to remain on a war footing despite the peace established with their northern neighbors. The mountains of the Durgrum Karnaz

had become overrun by mixed tribes and creatures from the south. The rocky slopes around Mt. Vargmoth, Mt. Durnhak, and the mighty 8,000-foot peak called Kaadthul were all turned into battlegrounds by these invading forces. It is unclear the true nature of this enemy, as conflicting reports came from each tribe's records, and the infant Tempite language was unclear or inconsistent in its adjective choices for their enemies. Their word for enemy "*nurveth*" actually sprang from what the Tempites had come to call the Nevuchar, a linguistic scar from a painful history. Appellations like "pointy beard" and "shadow teeth" were assigned to these people or creatures, but rarely was there consistency in Tempite descriptions. As the battles were fought both above ground and in the deep mines uncovered by Tempite digging, it is likely the enemy was goblinoid in nature, or possibly some version of fae spirit. Heraldry of the enemy forces was described as representing a serpent, or *urm* in the Tempite language. Battles were fought close to the capital at Tem-Darthul, raging in the mighty tunnel that connected to the city of Brakverra. At one point the Tempite town of Raudvehn was lost to this enemy, but was quickly reclaimed. While the Tempites preferred to defend the mountains themselves, the conflict eventually spilled over the slopes and north into shared territory. The tide turned grim when a powerful magician in Sidnar was revealed to be in league with the enemy. Called "Khalvren" this shadowy figure was quickly disowned by the Nevuchar, who said he had been a Kuduk hedge wizard from Delagia. The Kuduk said Khalvren had a completely foreign look to him, and did not think he belonged to any of the tribes around the Vuchar. The Tempites were quick to point to his origin in a Nevuchar city, claiming he was just another manifestation of their now ancient grudge against the ruling tribe. While powerful, Khalvren was still a servant to the Ture driving force behind the new southern armies. The Tempites considered him a distraction, forcing them to split their attention while their allies organized their forces. They referred to him as "*Skhald*," and combining this with the serpent he was distracting them from he was eventually named Urmskhal'd. (Later, this name would be bastardized as "Wormschild" by the Darkonians.)

Sidnar was mostly evacuated by peace-loving folk once Khalvren revealed himself. From his powerful citadel astride the Khourx he commanded a legion of flying creatures whose hides were like stone. The city was finally liberated by the Nevuchar knight Serethyn, called *Dhorvann* in later songs, meaning "unyielding." Leading a brave band of Kuduk, Czhemel, Nevuchar and Tempite champions, Serethyn scaled the citadel and drove Khalvren out. In the ensuing battle, both Urmskhal'd and Serethyn fell from the Brooding Bridge, and this sacrifice solidified cooperation among the tribes of the Vuchar from that day forth. Durnhak was the site of the final decisive battle toward the end of this age that finally brought peace. The Nevuchar, Kuduk, Czhemel, and Tempites all have great ballads written about the victory on the slopes of this eastern peak, and the Kuduk songs name Zhagvazurk as the leader of this host, and they call him Thurgulg after his defeat, meaning "broken in the depths." While they were defeated and scattered, stories persist that this enemy still exists in diminished numbers and the mountains are never safe from them.

Before the arrival of Darcalus, there was a Nevuchar king called Veytharion. He had heard all the prophecies, unclear as they were, about losing their realm to a darkness beyond the stars. With the spiritual center at Parthindel, the magical studies conducted at Luhtanil, the artisans in Sanathiev, and the political center in Cannuine, the nobles from those four cities were consulted by their king to determine how to stave off this prophecy. It was decided that a nexus would be created to bind the northern region, centered at Histirion. Powerful magic was woven along the road from Parthindel to Luhtanil, anchoring the land to its planar fabric. There was a plan to extend the nexus to encompass the entirety of the Vuchar, sacred artery of the realm. However, the Nevuchar placed priority on

their own tribe's survival first, and kept the anchor a secret from the Kuduk, Czhemel and Tempites.

The city of Neblus, closer to Parthindel and even Sanathiev than the rest of the Nevuchar lands near the Vuchar, was noticeably omitted from the binding rituals. The *maer* (baron) of Neblus was Thalorin, a cousin to Veytharion and one of his closest friends in his youth. Thalorin had married Nimriel, who Veytharion had longed for as a boy. Nimriel knew Veytharion would be king but still followed her heart to stay with the gentle Thalorin. The lack of tribal hegemony (five permanent Kuduk families made their home in Neblus) was the initial justification given for the exclusion of Neblus, but Veytharion had never forgiven Nimriel for choosing the lesser Thalorin, nor forgiven his cousin for not deferring to the elder when their pairing was first suggested. He chose to drop Neblus from the initial protection plan, and in turn doomed them to the unknown fate that awaited them.

Darkonian Arrival

While calendars in the previous ages were remarkably precise, aligning their years with the era counts of the Nevuchar and Kuduk remains challenging. This discrepancy leads to varying accounts of when the Darkonians arrived, depending on the historian consulted. However, by counting backwards through the Darkonian records, cross-referenced with the adoption of the Barovian Calendar by Azalin Rex in 579, the landing of their invasion fleet can be dated to 383 BC, 196 years prior. The purpose of such a massive host setting sail is lost to time. There are no records of prior contact with the Darkonians before their sails blackened the western seas. This *Classis Tenebris*, commanded by the unholy sorcerer Darcalus, clearly intended to conquer and settle the Vuchar valley. Perhaps Darcalus was driven from gentler shores or had glimpsed the land's promise through his eldritch scrying.

One fateful miscalculation was the hidden reefs guarding the western coast, which ripped through the mighty vessels upon arrival, earning the shore the name "Jagged Coast." Only one galleon, the black-hulled *Dominus Noctis*, survived the catastrophe; it served as both flagship and personal conveyance of the dread wizard. The Kuduk thorp at the landing site vanished into history, renamed as a grim memorial to the lives lost in the Bay of Martyrs during the invasion. Even now, Martira Bay delivers relics and shipwrecked debris to the shore, a silent testament to that dark day. Despite their losses, the legion marched inland, salvaging provisions and weaponry. Darcalus's mastery of arcane magicks, alien to Envucharen, spurred the invaders onward. Under the veil of night, bloated corpses of lost sailors were animated by Darcalus and unleashed upon the countryside, introducing a new terror to the native tribes: the walking dead….

…Continued in next year's issue >:-|

BLOODY BAROVIAN FOG! HOLD ON TIGHT; I'VE GOT A COMPASS SPELL. I'LL GET US OUT.
I CAN'T EVEN SEE MY OWN FEET OUT HERE...
No KIDDING! I'M SURE GLAD I RAN INTO YOU KIND PEOPLE. FEELS LIKE I WAS LOST AND WANDERING FOREVER!

Falkovnia

Land of Militarism and Tyranny

By Tommaso "Mistmaster" Mazzoni

Falkovnia at a glance

Official Name : Der Kaiserreich von Fakovnia
Culture level: Renaissance
Ecology: Full
Climate & Terrain: Continental, Falkovnia is a landlocked land of mostly plains with a mild climate around its rivers and a large, marshy forest in the middle with a colder climate in the hilly west.
Languages: Common (Baloki), Lamordian (Falkovnian), Darkonian, Dementlieuse.
Religions: The Steel Falcon Church, the Iron Church, The Church of Ezra the Protector, The Church of Andaral, The Divinity of Mankind, The Cult of Hala (Clandestine) The Cult of Lathurr (Clandestine), Kobold Religion,Dwarf Religion, Elf Religion, Halfling Religion.
Races: Humans 90%, 3% Kobolds, 2% Dwarves, 2% Elves, 1% Halflings 2% Other).
Government: De Jure Hereditary Absolute Monarchy, De Facto Military Dictatorship.
Ruler: Kaiserführer Vlad I Drakov.
Darklord: Vlad Drakov
Lightlord: The Lost King Gondegal Dekovan
Inhabitants: 20,000,000
Surface : 125,000 square kilometers.
Analog: Germany Late XIX early XX century.
Capital City: Lekar (400,000 in, Standard, L/E),
Important towns: Silbervas (200,000, Standard, L/E), Aerie (183,000, Non-Standard, L/E), Drakovburg (180,000, Standard,L/E), Morfenzi (180,000, Standard, L/N), Stangenstadt (80,000, Standard, L/G),
Borders: Northeast: Darkon, East: Tepest, Shadow Forest, and Borca, South:Borca, South-West: Richemulot, West: Dementlieu, North-West:Lamordia

Tropes

Falkovnia is a military dictatorship in a fantasy contest. It contains all the tropes of tyranny, propaganda, discrimination and brutality you can expect in such circumstances. It is also a land steeped in militarism where the army is the nation core and reason for being.

Domain Overview

The Land

The fist shaped land included between the Vuchar, Musarde, Arbket and Zhukfer rivers and the Zerbröckelnde Hügel (Crumbling Hills) is one of the richest and more fertile lands in the whole Core Continent. The borders are dotted of keeps and fortresses which take the role of villages and towns.

The five cities are industrialized metropolises, heavily fortified and all the countryside is dotted with fortified farm towns.

Lekar, the current capital city sits in the middle of two of the lakes known as the Raubvogelseen, or Raptor Lakes, The Adlersee (Eagle Lake) and the Eulesee (Owl Lake), with the third being the Falksee (Hawk Lake). The sprawling metropolis is the most well fortified and the second most industrialized city in the Core Continent. Shloss Draccipetri, the imperial seat of powers has been built on an island in the Eulesee.

The second-largest city, **Silbervas** is built on the shore of another lake, the Kriegvogelsee deemed to be the deepest of the Core, the place where the Musarde river is born and the Arbket River ends. The nearby lands are rich in ore, especially silver. The city is divided in two by the Schwarthag (Black Hag) River, which springs in the Nachtfliegenwald (Night-flies Forest). The city of **Aerie** in the South-east, seats where it oversees the homonymous channel, a hub of trade for all Falkovnia and beyond, which joins the Arbket and the Kralle (Talon) rivers, which is named Zhukfer, because once, the point the Aerie Channel starts from was a point where the Kralle River went underground and people believed the Zhukfer to be a separated river. The opening of the channel revealed the two being one and the same. In the middle of the Zerbröckelnde Hügel, where the Kralle River is born, you find **Drakovburg**, overseeing the many quarries which feed building activities in all of Falkovnia and beyond. In the north, just north of the Dunkelherzwald (Gloom Heart Forest) we find **Morfenzi** in a fertile plain created by the Drogach River, born from the northern Zerbröckelnde Hügel which flows in the Vuchar River, guarded by **Stangenstadt**.

The People

Falkovnian are law-abiding, hard-working people, who are proud of their nation's accomplishments. From the ruinous fall of the Lamordian Empire a new, stronger nation is born, and the majority of falkovnian genuinely believe it. Working and fighting are the two most noble activities for a falkovnian. Falkovnian are also all literate thanks to the mandatory school system. After school, all Falkovnian males are conscripted in the Falkovnian Army for three years and will serve as reservists for fifteen years more. Those who want a better life are prompted to enlist for life. Women can enlist as volunteers but face a harder path to the highest ranks. While Falkovnian society tends to be patriarchal, women are not per se barred from any aspect of society, but they need to struggle a lot as the state sees them primarily as a source of more people, and many falkovnian grew up convinced that the state is always right. However, Falkovnian are not a mass of brainless slaves; they tend to be creative thinkers but to apply that creativity to practicality. Non-Humans and Vistani-Bloodied are seen as strangers unless they serve in the army. The only exception are Dwarves which are respected for their weapon-making skills. People unable to serve in the army are seen with a mix of pity and disgust, but they are tolerated as long as they can still contribute somehow. Falkovnian do not fear magic, as long as it is in the service of the state. Military needs have produced several innovations, like railways, steam engines and zeppelins. Falkovnian laws are harsh and bureaucracy is strong; adventurers need a license bought in a city and are expected to collaborate with public officers if required. Spellcasters need to register in the Falkovnian Spellcaster Register. Magic Items need a state license to be sold, bought and used. Falkovnian citizens are used to this laws and also knows that petty officers are not above accepting "gifts"

History

Age of Creation

Zakhata the Lawgiver and Lathurr the Thunder Lord fought in the shape of hawks, creating the Falkovnian fertile plain. The Zweifalk, the double-headed falcon, is said to be born from the mingling of divine blood.

Age of Empires

The Olympian Empire, seated roughly in modern Barovia, subdued the Lamordic Barbarians, forcing them into the mountains (nowadays Lamordia). What is today Falkovnia was the grain basket of the

empire, and the city of Limnipolis stood where today is Lekar. They also forced Kobolds to refuge themselves in the forests, underground and on the Crumbling Hills.

Age of Darkness

Following the fall of Olympia, the Lamordic fought the Undead Tyrants of Darkon and the Dementlieuse Kingdom for control of the Hawks Plains, in Lamordian, Falkovnia. The Lamordians won and moved their capital to Limnipolis, rechristened Lekarstadt from the name of the Lamordian Emperor Lekar I. The Lamordian welcomed the elves and dwarves in their society, and tolerated the isolationist Kobolds.

The Modern Age

The Lamordian Empire came to include other than what are today Lamordia and Falkovnia, also modern Tepest, part of Darkon, Part of Dementliu, part of Invidia and several colonies overseas. Lekarstadt is shortened to Lekar.

The Current Age

After a grievous defeat against the Zherisian, the Lamordian Empire entered in a period of strife and decadence which was ended by Vlad Drakov and Gondegal Dekovan two lamordian empire falkovnian citizens who sought to make a name for themselves enlisting in the imperial army. In the ongoing civil war they made a fast career, and in a decade they were both ranked Brigade Generals; Vlad was the best tactic, Gondegal was the best strategist, they were a perfect team; so they decided to stop the folly of the civil war, and, in doing so, they carved a kingdom from themselves, and married each other sisters; the time of their joint rulership, with Gondegal ruling from Lekar as Kaiser and Vlad conquering land as Führer was a time of success and expansion, until a bloody coup was staged and Vlad concentrated all the power in his hands. The people of Falkovnia are taught that Gondegal betrayed the nation and tried to take all power for himself.

After consolidating power in Falkovnia, Drakov sought to rebuild the old Lamordian Empire so invaded Lamordia. He conquered almost all of it with a masterful campaign, the Mountain Campaign, but while he was busy with the Tepest Campaign, during a frosty winter, his trustful Governor, Oberkommander Karl von Hindergraft, was killed, mauled to death in his sleep, this sparked a rebellion which ended Falkovnian domination in Lamordia.A subsequent internal strife forced him to abandon the conquest of Tepest, allowing Tepestani, reinforced by Shadow Forest help, to fend off Falkovnian troops.

A couple of years later, Falkovnia invaded Dementlieu. Once again the superior military ability of the Kaiserfuhrer seemed to promise a crushing victory, but a border skirmish with Darkon escalated, forcing Falkovnia to slow operation down, missing ultimate victory in the siege of Port-a-Lucine. It was still a victory, partial as the conquest was, but it did not last, after one year, while Vlad launched a massive campaign against Darkon, the Dementlieuse resistance, backed by Mordentish and Pureterran forces, insurged. In spite of Falkovnia sending a punitive expedition against Mordentshire, Falkovnian forces began to stretch thin. The sheer dimensions of Darkon made impossible a fast conquest and the almost limitless resource of undead in Darkon's ranks meant that even consolidating the conquered territory was a difficult goal, forced to decide, after looting much from Dementlieu, Falkovnia retreated and signed the peace of Chateaufaux, concentrating all its strength northwards.

This campaign was a glorious victory, almost doubling the size of Falkovnia.... It lasted exactly one year from the signing of the Treaty of Ludendorf, after which, while Drakov was fighting a rebellion in Sielbervas, the troops of Darkon reconquered the lost lands, forcing him to hastily come north. Falkovnia only managed to stop them on the old borders.

Falkovnia launched, a year later, a campaign against Richemulot suspected of being the cause of the rebellion, but the Shadow Forrest launched an attack to avenge Falkovnian punitive expedition forcing peace with the return to the status quo.

Recently, Falkovnia conquered Borca and Dorvinia, only to be forced out, both by Barovian intervention and by the fact that during his fourth Campaign against Darkon, his garrisons in Borca and Dorvinia started to die of poisoning. The Signing of the Pact of the Seven Towers forced Falkovnia to relent, returning to a minimally changed border in its favor and to stall its campaigning until they could find allies. The Concordat of Silberbas to allow the Home Faith to once again operate in Falkovnia and the similar Concordat of Aerie with the Iron Church, allowing the same to the Iron Church of Zhakata is seen as ways to break isolation. After his last queen-consort died Vlad Drakov has started to inquire with Tepest for joining himself with their queen. Part of the collaboration with Lamordia allowed Falkovnia to start building its railway network, which will soon join all of Falkovnian cities.

Places of Interest

Lekar, the capital and largest city in Falkovnia, was once an Olympian city and then the capital of the Lamordian Empire. Lekar is divided in three districts, the Generäle-Bezekir houses the old Lamordian Imperial Palace, the Alte Bastei, or Old Bastion, which today is used as the general headquarters of the Falkovnian Military forces, the Generaloberkommando. It is also the place where there is the Akademie der Morgen Festung (Tomorrow Fortress Academy) the military school which trains the officers of the falkovnian armed forces, and doubles as university and arcane magic school and it is the place where the high officers and their families leave. It also houses the city public schools and the hospital. The Arbeiter-Bezekir (The Labourer District) houses the factories, the laborers' houses, the Marktplatz (Market Place) and various low-cost inns, brothels and breweries, also it houses the Zweifalk Dome, once the cathedral of the Iron Church, and the seat of the Pave of Falkovnia, now, the seat of the Steel Falk Church, the national offshoot of Falkovnian Iron Church and, also, the Großes Kolosseum, the public arena also used as a public auditorium, and execution place. Finally, the Kaiserlicher Hauptbahnhof, the Imperial Central station which connects Lekar with Aerie, and soon with Stagenstadt and with Ludendorf in Lamordia. The See-Bezekir (Lake District) is the foreigner district where the embassies of the foreigner countries are located, and also houses non-human citizens, and many good quality inns like the Stadt der Steine (City of Stones) owned by Frau Hildegard Guttsteine. Here you find the Palast Gerechtigkeit (Justice Palace) which houses the general directorate of two of the three police forces in Falkovnia. One is the Landespolizei, Lanpo for short (Territorial Police) which police small towns and villages and is employed for tax collection, handling of patrimonial crimes and civil rule enforcement. The second is the Kriminalpolizei, Kripo for short (Criminal Police) which handles violent crime, riot repression and special operations. The third police force maintains its central general-high quarter in Shloss Draccipetri (Draccipetri Castle), and it is the Falken Polizei, Falkpo for short, the falkovnian secret and political police which doubles as intelligence service. Draccipetri Castle is accessible through a bridge which from the harbor allows it to arrive at the Imperial seat of power, where the current wife of the Kaiserführer, when alive, and many of his children, live. The dreaded City prison, Die Hallen der Aufgespießten (The Halls of the Impaled) is in a dungeon under the Castle, and the ancient olympian ruins of Limnipolis are accessible from there. The main meeting hall of the divinity of Mankind, the Übermenschen-Halle (Superman Hall) is in the See-Bezekir. The ordinary administration of Lekar is in the hand of Stadtmilitärgouverneur Oberst Heinrich Tsyvlkevit

Silbervas is one of the richest cities in the Kaiserreich and it sits on the shore of the Kriegvogelsee. From there the Musarde river and the Arkbest river links Silverbas with the richest lands and seas. A rich silver mine is the principal source of the riches of the city. The city is divided in two by the Swartzhexe (Black Hag) River, guarded by an iron portcullis in the walls which can be closed in case of emergency, where Silbernest, the Kaiserführer summer palace is located. Next to it is the smaller Central Highquarter, where the Stadtmilitärgouverneur (City Military Governor) Oberst (Colonel) Lonz Schzonspeigel lives and from where he rules the city. Der Ertrunkene Fischer (The Drowned Fisherman) is among the most well-known restaurants and hotels in the city. A

famed veteran of the Third Dead Man Campaign, Gunther Müller owns it. The city public arena, civic auditorium and execution place, is the Silber Kolosseum. The Unsere Dame vom Schild, Our Lady of the Shield, Ezra's major cathedral in Falkovnia, has recently reopened; it is the seat of Ezra's Home Faith in Falkovnia. The city prison is the infamous Blutturm (Blood Tower) on the eastern gate on the river; it doubles as a garrison overseeing the silver mine.

Aerie is a major trading hub, overseeing the channel of the same name. The city is more open than the other falkovnian cities while still fortified with the great public park in its center, the Queen Crucea's Park. The city gets its name from the great Seilberhas Aerie, a great natural rock similar to a spire, which glows green and silver under the moonlight. The city has one of the biggest prisons of Falkovnia, the Haus der Türen, or House of Doors. The Garten Kolosseum, a part of the park, is used as a public arena, civic auditorium and execution place. At the entrance of the park you find Die High Spirit Terrasse (The High Spirit Terrace) a famous restaurant, inn and brewery owned by Dargin Warhammer, a retired dwarf veteran who had been the first commanding officer of both Vlad Drakov and Gondagal Dekovan. The Aerie Kaiserliche Bahnhof, the imperial station, allows quick travel for goods and soldiers from and towards Lekar. The city central high-command palace, the Grünes Schloss (Green Castle) also doubles as city prison, and the Stadtmilitärgouverneur, Oberst Gregor Feiggein, lives there. A temple of Lathurr was once here, near the northern gate of the park, but it has been razed to the ground. A temple of the Iron Falcon Church has been built on the ruins. The Eisernekirke, a temple of the Iron Church near the park western gate, is the seat of the Pave of Falkovnia, ever since the Concordat of Aerie. A smaller but brighter temple, belonging to Andaral the Morbinglord, is called the Tor der Sonne, the Door of the Sun, near the park's eastern gate. A holy grove of Hala is in the park, but is closed to the cult, at least officially.

The fortress city of ***Drakovburg*** was the first attempt of the Kaiserfuhrer to build a new capital city. The position of Drakovburg, at the feet of the Zerbröckelnde Hügel where the Kralle River is born, was considered more defensible than Lekar, and the many quarries in the hills made the city building quick. However the lack of river connection made the logistics of ruling from here too hard, and Drakov had to move back to Lekar. Shloss Drakov is still the personal residence of the Kaiserführer family in the center of the city, and the city still houses the Vigo Drakov der Ältere Denkmal Akademie (Vigo Drakov the Elder Memorial Academie) the second institute of military superior learning in Falkovnia, dedicated to Drakov own father Vigo the Elder to distinguish him from Vlad Drakov's second eldest son Vigo. Falkführer Vigo Drakov der Jüngere (the Younger) is the Stadtmilitärgouverneur of Drakovburg. He also oversees the Zentralgefängnisthe (Central Prison), a massive prison destined to enemies of the nation. The Viktra Drakov Denkmal Kolosseum is the public arena, civic meeting and execution place, and is dedicated to Drakov's mother Viktra. There is an unfinished Cathedral of the Steel Falcon, The Sthalfalk Kirke, which has been built on the ruins of a shrine of the Kobold Deities. Kobolds are an important minority in the city, their quarter, the Kobold-Bezekir, being a place where even the Falkpo thread carefully. The most famous inn in the city, Das Schwarzes Pferd, the Black Horse, is famously owned by a Kobold veteran of the campaign against the Shadow Forrest, Orruk Falkschild.

Morfenzi is the main hub for alimentary industries in Falkovnia with its meat processing facilities and its breeding farms. It is also the greatest leatherworking center of the whole Core. Morfenzi is a bit less oppressive than other Falkovnian cities. The Viehmarkt Kolosseum, is used more for its namesake function as a cattle market than as an execution place or as a public arena. The city has an Elven District which, thanks to the more pragmatic way in which the city is ruled by its Stadtmilitärgouverneur, Oberst Weistocht Theodorn, is a pretty clean, safe and ordered side of the city and without slums. The Rathaus (City Hall), once the seat of the civilian Bürgermeister (Mayor) has become the city garrison central high command. The city prison, the Alter Turm (Old Tower) is noticeably smaller, cleaner and tolerable than the average Falkovnian Prison. There is a Tempelstraße (Temple Street) which houses small temples and shrines of state-tolerated and

allowed cults. Das Leder des Metzgers (The Butcher's Leathers) is a famous inn and restaurant, owned by Vorst Grunheist, a veteran of the Fourth Deadman Campaign.

Stangenstadt is the jewel of the Falkovnian Crown. The only falkovnian city without a separate district for foreigners and non-humans, it is ruled in a fair and open-minded way by its Stadtmilitärgouverneur, Oberst Johann Furcht. He rules from the Alter Schloss, the Old Castle, massive but worn out by years. The city remarkably lacks a Kolosseum, holding public events and the rare executions in the Großmarktplatz (Great Market Square). The city has three market places: the Groß (Great)one holds the food, tools and clothes, the Kleinemarktplatz (Little Market Square) luxury goods and the Abenteurer Marktplatz (Adventurer Market Square) for magic items and other gear. It is the least bureaucratic-hinged place in Flakovnia to buy magic items. Also, it is the most open city in Falkovnia in regard to religious worship. Its Templeplatz (Temple Square) has shrines and temples of every religion present in Falkovnia, even the otherwise banished Hala and Lathurr and the racial deities of the main minorities. The city has the third and last higher learning facility in Falkovnia, the Marcus Fennelstock Akademie für Fortgeschrittenes Lernen (Marcus Fennelstock Academy for Advanced Learning) The Turm der Hörner (Tower of Horns) is the small, not overcrowded, clean and well-running city prison. The city has many inns and Die Zerbrockene Flitter (the Broken Bauble) is the most renowned. It is owned by a powerful landowner and businessman, Lothar Uberholt.

Religion

Human religions

The Steel Falcon Church is the L/E national falkovnian religion. It has branched off the Iron Church of Zhakata the Lawgiver and is under the direct authority of the Falkovnian state. It teaches the superiority of Falkovnian culture and that serving the state is a divine duty, as Vlad Drakov is the Chosen of Zhakata the Steel Falcon. All falkovnian citizens are equal under the Kaiser-Fuhrer and it's the quality of service to determine one station. Steel Falcon Priests, called Falkenfedern (Hawks Feathers), serve as military chaplains and healers in the Falkovnian Army. They also ran charities as a form of control of dissent and recruitment for the army. The church favored weapon is the short sword. Their domains are Community, Evil, Law, Nobility, Strength and War. Their holy symbol is a steel falcon with two short swords in his talons. The Stahlhandschuh (Steel Gauntlet) residing in Lekar is the spiritual head of the church and the role is chaired by the falkovnian Minister of Religious Cults himself.

***The Iron Church* of Zhakata the Lawgiver**, once one of the two most popular falkovnian faiths, has recently been allowed back in Falkovnia after having been forced to choose between merging with the Steel Falcon Church or disband. The Pave of Falkovnia resides in Aerie. The church teaches the importance of submitting to authority and following rules and appreciates the Falkovnian regime, even if it frowns upon the lack of a true hereditary nobility in Falkovnia. Its favorite weapon is the Spiked Gauntlet. Its alignment is Lawful Evil, its domains are Evil, Law, Nobility, Strength and War. The holy symbol is a closed book with a closed black hand on its cover. Priests of the Iron Church in Falkovnia usually work as aids for falkovnian police and armed forces.

The Borcan Home Faith, the Lawful/Neutral Church of Ezra the Protector, is a religion centered around the ideal of civilization, trade, solidarity and rule of law.It has been recently allowed back to official worship in Falkovnia, after having been banned during the Falkovnian invasion of Borca and Dorvinia. Its priests work as lawyers and attorneys at law helping commonfolk navigate the convoluted falkovnian bureaucracy. Its domains are Community, Law, Protection, The Mists and Travel. The Holy Symbol of the Church is a longsword on a shield with a wig of belladonna. The church weapon is a longsword. The Arch-Anchorite of Falkovnia resides in Silbervas, and it is named by the Bastion of Borca from a short list written by Falkovnian authorities.

The Church of *Andaral, the Morninglord* the Lawful/Good god of sun, healing, and hope is pervasive in Falkovnian rural society. Attempts to

banish the cult have been short-lived and counterproductive as the priest's presence allows people to endure difficulties better and so as long as nothing subversive happens, the Andaralian priesthood is tolerated. Nominally falkovnian Lightbringers answers to the Arch-hierophant of the Church of Andaral, in Vallaki, Barovia, but de facto, the head of the falkovnian branch of the church is the Hierophant of Aerie. Andaral's Domains are Good, Healing, Law, Protection and Sun. His favorite weapon is the Bastard Sword and his domain is the sun disk.

The Divinity of Self in Falkovnia still goes as ***Divinity of Mankind*** and is a harsher ideology than its Lamordian mother school of thought. In Falkovnia it teaches that mercy and sentimentality is for the weak, and ascension to divinity is open only for those who overcame weakness. Non-humans are regarded as inherently weak. It is a L/E religious philosophy whose members are often high echelons of Falkovnian armed forces and bureaucracy. Its Domains are Evil, Knowledge, Law, and Strength. Its symbol is a triangle with a broken chain, and its favorite weapon is a dagger.

The ***Cult of Hala*** is a Neutral Good ancient religion of natural magic, already scorned by the old Lamordian Empire but outrightly forbidden by the regime of the Kaiserführer. It is still practiced in secret in the rural villages, teaching the importance of living in harmony with nature, family and wisdom. Hala's symbol is a ring of 13 snakes, her favorite weapon is the dagger. Halan priesthood in Falkovnia is made up only by women, who work as midwives, schoolteachers, healers and apothecaries. In Falkovnia the domains of the cult are Animal, Community, Good, Healing, Magic and Plant.

The Cult of Lathurr, *the* ***Silver Falcon*** used to be the most popular falkovnian religion together with the Iron Church, but it was banned from the land for its blatant opposition to Drakov and his regime. The cult is still active in clandestinity and its priests are the soul of the falkovnian resistance. Lathurr, a Chaotic Good deity, teaches the paramount importance of freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of thought and freedom of choice. Lathurr's favorite weapon is the spear, and his symbol is a silver falcon with a lightning bolt His domains are Air, Chaos, Good, Liberation and Weather.

Kobold Religions

The Kobold Religion venerates a pantheon collectively called the ***Draukarikarreg*** The Scions of the Dragons, who are told to descend from the ancient dragon deities who sacrificed themselves to imprison the Dragon of Void. The central figure of the religion is the head of the Pantheon, ***Kurtulmak,*** *the Steelscale Sorcerer* (L/G) god of magic, craft, rulership, cunning, lizards and tunnels whose favorite weapon is the short spear. His domains are Artifice, Earth, Good, Law, Magic and Scalyfolk. His symbol is a spear piercing a dragon skull. His priests are advisers and protectors of the Kobold Community. He was the first Kobold created and in the battle of the Dragon-Deities against the Dragon of Void he broke the stalemate piercing the skull of the terrible primordial entity, getting mortally wounded in the process. Before leaving the realm of mortals, the Dragon-Deities breathed their power in Kurtulmak who ascended to divinity, and shared his power with his mate and their children who became the deities of the pantheon. There are many other important deities in the pantheon including Kurtulmak's mate ***Silba the Broodmother*** *(*Holy symbol: three eggs, Favorite weapon: dagger) (N/G) the goddess of life, love, fertility and prosperity *Domains: Charm, Community, Good, Healing, Protection and Skalyfolk) and their eldest children:

Gaknulak the Trapmaster (L/N), the god of protection and preparation, Favorite weapon: Hand axe, Holy symbol, Cauldron with whirling spiral. Domains: Artifice, Knowledge, Law, Protection and Trickery.

Kuraulyek the Wing-gifter (C/G), the god of freedom and wind. Favorite weapon: Dagger, Holy symbol: A pair of Dragon wings. Domains: Air, Chaos, Good, Liberation and Trickery.

Dakarnok the Brave (L/G), the god of war and courage. Favored Weapon: Spiked Club, Holy Symbol: Spiked Club on a shield. Domains: Glory, Good, Law, Strength and War.

Lygnastrek the Lazy (N/E) the god of sleep, appearance, idleness and parasitism. Favored Weapon: Dagger, Holy symbol: Leech. Domains: Darkness,Magic, Evil and Trickery.

Bralga the Tamer (N/G), goddess of hunt, agriculture and animal husbandry. Favored Weapon: Whip, Holy Symbol: Net. Domains: Animal, Good, Plant, Strength and Water.

Taava the Greedy (L/E) goddess of hoarding and riches Favored weapon: Dagger, Holy symbol: Gems in a Dragon Skull. Domains: Earth, Evil, Law, Protection and Travel.

Rakvilik the Loner (C/N) god of sun, independence and trading. Favored Weapon: Short sword, Holy Symbol: A Lizard training a wagon. Domains: Chaos, Scalyfolk, Sun and Travel.

Mera the Grave-Keeper (N) the goddess of the dead and hearth: Favored Weapon: Dagger; Holy Symbol: A Funerary Urn. Domains: Community, Earth, Fire and Repose.

Yaktirak the Tunnel-Collapser (C/E) god of destruction and revenge: Favored Weapon: Warhammer, Holy Symbol: A broken pillar. Domains: Chaos,Death, Destruction, and Evil.

Zirima the Tunnel-Watcher(L/G) the goddess of loyalty and vigilance. Favored Weapon: Spear, Holy Symbol: An pair of opened eyes on a shield with a spear. Domains: Good, Law, Nobility, Protection and Strength.

The Famous and the Infamous

Gondegal Dekovan

(Venerable Human Cavalier Order of the Broken Gallow 17 C/G)

This still strong-looking man, whose real age is betrayed only by his eyes and his snow-white hair, is the head of the Falkovnian Resistance and once he was the Kaiser of Falkovnia, the administrator and the kingdom builder. He was Drakov's best friend, his brother-in-law and brother-in-arms. Then Drakov betrayed him, or, as Falkovnian propaganda goes, he betrayed Drakov. His wife and children died in the coup, and he escaped, starting to stir up dissent and rebellion. His burden is that he loves his country and wishes not to see it plunged in a new civil war. He wants to depose Drakov in the way it most benefits Falkovnia, and he refuses the easy way out.

Adventure Hook: the adventurers have been betrayed, arrested, and are now going to be executed. Mercyfully, by beheading. But suddenly a group of people wearing silver falcon masks led by a white-haired knight appear out of a circle of shadows, and free them. Now the PC needs to decide what to do with their second chance.

Falkprintz Vlad Drakov

(Middleaged Human Roughrider Fighter 13 L/N)

Vlad the Younger is the heir of the Steel Falkon Crown. And everyone knows his father does not like this fact. First of all, the Prince himself. A good commander but not daring enough, a good fighter, but not brutal enough,a good ruler, but not firm enough, Vlad is simply not enough. Balding and clean-shaven, with the typical steel eyes of the Drakov line, but with the red hair of his Dekovan mother, only the love Vlad bore to his first wife, Queen Ryla Dekovan, has prevented Vlad die Junger from being passed over in the succession line. His only joy in life is in his own family and in a son whom he loves even if he resents him a bit, because Vlad III enjoys a better relationship with his grandfather than he ever did with his father.

Adventure Hook: Ordered by his father to sedate a rebellion from a village in the west, Vlad II knows he is going to disappoint his sire once again, but he is also unwilling to do as his father would, burn the village to the ground and impale all the adults. So he discreetly contacts the adventurers, whose fame as problem solvers has not gone missing. If they manage to resolve the matter before he arrives with his army, he could spare himself and the village an unnecessary carnage.

Falkführer Vlad Drakov

(Adult Human Mercyful Fighter 9 L/G)

This young man, the splitting image of his grandfather at his age, is everything his grandfather is not in terms of mercy, the ability to inspire trust and ability of delegating. At the same time Vlad I dote on him very much, treating him in a stern but caring way and never failing to praise what he sees as his talents, his bravery, his leadership and his loyalty. The young man on his part loves his grandfather but he is not blind to the monster Vlad Drakov can be. However, he is a dutiful son and grandson. Until now his grandfather always showed him his better side and never had him choose between honor and loyalty. But Vlad III knows that moment is coming soon.

Adventure Hook: And the moment is coming when his grandfather orders him to brutally execute a minstrel for a song Vlad perceives as treacherous. The minstrel is a friend of the adventurers who might be the only hope both for him and for the youngest Vlad.

Oberst Heinrich Tsyvlkevit

(Old Human Dirty Fighter 7, L/E)

Vlad field aid in many of his campaigns, the military governor of Lekar owes his career to blind loyalty and bootlicking. He also saved the Falkführer's life.

Adventure Hook: Heinrich is blindly loyal to Drakov in every aspect of his life... but one: he has a grandson in the resistance, one he has covered up for many times. This is something Vlad must never learn and Heinrich is ready to go to great lengths to avoid it as the adventurers will learn at their expense after they stumble on his secret.

Generalfalkmarschall Markus Vederrak

(Adult Human Fighter Sharptongue 8, L/E)

The Minister of Foreign Affairs is a pleasant man with a silvered tongue and a sharp mind. He is also shrewd and devious, and has managed to build quite an alliance net for his previously isolated country. He is currently dealing with Falkovnia's greatest enemy, the Darkonese Hegemony.

Adventure Hook: Darkonese support has been vital for the Falkovnian Resistance, but in the wake of a friendship treaty it would surely dwindle. The Adventurers might be the key to stop this treaty)

Falkführer Michael Drakov

(Middle Aged Wizard Battlemage 11, L/E)

The third-born male son of the Kaiserführer shares with his eldest brother the constant scorn of their father. Micheal, however, is doubly scorned for his pursuit of Arcane interests. As minister of Arcane he has relentlessly pursued the creation of weapons of great effectiveness, but his father still regards him as a weakling.

Adventure Hook: Michael is working personally on an Eldritch machine of destructive power and the adventurers are approached by a concerned part, maybe a Darkonese agent, maybe part of the Resistance who wants the machine destroyed and the project stolen.

Falkführerin Viktra Drakov

(Adult Human Fighter Tactician 12 L/E)

Viktra, of all the children of the Kaiserführer, is the one who resembles him more for every aspect: brutality, leadership, vision, shrewdness and martial talent. She even surpasses him in tactical mind. Unfortunately, she has an unforgivable flaw in her father's eye. She is a woman. He begrudgingly conceded her the Ministry for Female Affairs and the rank of Falkfürherin, but she has few prestige and power.

Adventure Hook: Viktra is ambitious, and she is tired of being overlooked and treated with condescension. If her father won't give her the honor and power she deserves, she will carve a throne for herself. She is amassing resources to conquer Tepest for herself but

she needs to distract her father and the adventurers might be exactly what she needs.

Generafalkmarschall Calons Weir

(Adult Human Fighter Skirmisher 10 N/E)

The tall and lanky minister of Intelligence is a shrewd person. He coordinates the Falkpo and has information on everyone in Falkovnia and beyond. Drakov appreciates his talents but does not trust him, Calons knows that and the number of conspiracies he stopped is speaking by itself. The truth is that he is loyal only to himself, but right now his fortunes are tied to Drakov's.

Adventure Hook: while Calon's effectiveness inside Falkovnia can't be ignored his spy network outside the borders is not as effective. He suspects that this is due to someone inside his own ministry sabotaging the works. He decides to discreetly employ the adventurers to investigate.

Generalfalkmarschall Jardian Kovedknochen

(Old Human Fighter Logistics Expert 11 L/N)

A veteran of Drakov campaigns and one of the very few the Kaiserführer accepts criticism from, the minister of Economy is absolutely not interested in power grabbing. The gray-bearded old commander is effective and manages to fund the projects without starving the falkovnian population, if his fellow ministers listen to him.

Adventure Hook: there is a deficit in the imperial treasury and Jardian suspects on fellow Minister Viktra Drakov. He can't involve police or the army so he decides to contact an old friend of his who then reaches for the adventurers.

Generalfalkmarschall Doctor Vjorn Horstman

(Adult Human Alchemist 10 L/E)

The Minister of Science is a cold and aloof man, who studied with Dr. von Mordenheim in Lamordia. He is the greatest Falkovnian scientist among those who are favorable to the regime.

Adventure Hook: The 7th Ubermensch Projekt is well on the way of completion, and it will give Falkovnia a huge military advantage. The Falkovnian Resistance and several spy agencies would like to avoid it, and the adventurers might be the right people in the right moment...or in the wrong one.

Generalfalkmarschall-Stahlhandschuh Joseph Falkendiener

(Middle-Aged Human Evangelist Cleric of the Steel Falcon Church 10, L/E)

He was a follower of Zhakata the Lawgiver in his youth but convinced himself that a foreign-based faith could not be the way for a true patriotic Falkovnian. He was the man behind the Falkovnian schism allowing Drakov to become both temporal and spiritual ruler of Falkovnia. Recently he allowed his fellow minister of Diplomacy to sign the Concordat which allowed the old Iron Church back in Falkovnia because Drakov agreed. But as Minister of Religious Affairs his goal stays the same, uniting all the people of Falkovnia behind Drakov and his ideals.

Adventure Hook:Drakov's birthday is one of the greatest festivities in the Falkovnian calendar and it is one of the holiest days for the Steel Falcon Church. When the Zweifalk Helmkrone, the ceremonial crown Drakov wears during the celebrations, is stolen, Joseph can't allow the news to become public; it would harm the reputation of both the church and the state. So he keeps the police forces out of the pictures and discreetly hires the adventurers to investigate.

Generalfalkmarschall Paul Amaranth

(Adult Human Demagogue Bard 10, L/E)

The Minister of Propaganda is the public face of the Falkovnian regime. He controls all the theaters, schools and publications. This ordinary man with short black hair and a clean-shaven face is a skilled

manipulator and he spins the official narration that Falkovnia must know. A lie repeated enough times with enough conviction becomes the truth.

Adventure Hook: when the proofs of many of his ministry cover-ups are stolen Paul will spare no resources to retrieve them, with the adventurers caught in the middle.

Großfalkadmiral Markus von Stahlfugel

(Adult Human Fighter Corsair 8 L/E)

This tall man misses one hand, but none would call him a cripple in his face. A sailor in a landlocked country should have little space to shine. Luckily for Markus, Falkovnia has flying ships. Markus is married and has three children he loves very much.

Adventure Hook: When his children are kidnapped Markus must find a way to save them without forsaking the almost completed new flagship of the Falkovnian Navy, Die Himmesfalke, the Sky Falcon, a gargantuan flying warship. The kidnapper asked him to sabotage the ship and destroy the projects. The Adventurers might be involved, even against their will.

Hauptman Marrow Ruvdokholt

(Adult Human Fighter Archer 7 L/N)

The Captain of the garrison in Lekar is an honest and hardworking member of the Kripo, and a veteran of the Borca campaign,and he strives to keep Lekar a peaceful and safe city, with a firm yet fair hand.

Adventure Hook: When a wave of criminality hits Lekar, and even the high ranks of the army are not safe from it, Marrow needs more than his men to investigate, so he commissions the adventurers, who are waiting for documents to be signed.

Oberst-Professor Mircea Giurgiu

(Middleaged Human Artificer 10, L/N)

The headmaster of the Tomorrow Fortress Academy, this distinguished and soft-spoken gentleman of Sanguinian ancestry is a war hero from the fourth dead man campaign, and one of the most skilled engineers in Falkovnia. He was the one who designed the ships of the falkovnian fleet, both the steamboats in the river and the flying ships. He sees himself as responsible for the grooming of the future generation of the Falkovnian Army and takes his job seriously.

Adventure Hook: Pupils are disappearing from the Academy campus. The Kripo is not resolving anything so Mircea reaches for old friends and contacts who then involve the adventurers.

Frau Hildegard Guttsteine

(Old Human Sorcerer Medusa Bloodline 9, N/E)

This unassuming old woman is a nice cook and a pleasant host, she owns the famous restaurant and hotel Stadt der Steine in Lekar, where many high-ranking officers go to dine.

Adventure Hook: Frau Hildegard in his youth was a lover of the Kaiserführer, but he refused to marry her after divorcing his fourth wife. She became bitter about it and this awakened her sorcerous powers. She cooperates with the resistance, but they are weary of her extremist tendencies. When the resistance gets wind of her plan to assassinate the Drakov family including the youngest, innocent children, the resistance contact the adventurers to stop her without jeopardizing their collaboration, if possible.

Erste Erleuchtet Michael von Bluhdt

(*Adult Human Cleric Hatemonger 7/Bard Demagogue 5, L/E)*

Lamordian by birth, he was a veteran of the Borcan Campaign who survived the poisonous attack by

miracle, he attempted to enter as a teacher in the Academy in Falkovnia but he was rejected. He then joined the Divinity of Mankind and soon took over the society becoming its First Enlightened. He turned it into the racist and ultraconservative organization it is today.

Adventure Hook: Von Bluhdt aims to purify Falkovnia from any non-human race. To do this he means to supplant Vlad who, while prejudiced against non-humans, is too focused on the army and on the state. For Drakov, a soldier is a soldier, no matter the race. Involved in the plot the adventurers must now decide if Drakov is after all the lesser evil because von Bluhdt means to commit a genocide.

Oberst Lonz Schzonspeigel

(Adult Human Wererat Fighter Armor Master 9, L/E)

The heavy-handed military governor of Silbervas is a relentless taskmaster. Obsessed with order and cleanliness, this blond man with tiny mustache is perfectly ready to order a dozen people to death, as long as he can watch from a distance.

Adventure Hook: The truth is that his obsession for cleanliness stems from hatred for himself and for what lives in the sewers which turned him in a wererat. He keeps his condition a very well kept secret, isolating himself in his vault during full moons. When a thief discovers this secret, he frames them for a homicide and puts a death sentence on their head. The adventurers might be the thief's only hope.

Sergeant Gunther Müller

(Middle-Aged Human Fighter Drill Sergeant 7 L/G)

This loud, tall man, with a graying redhead and a thick red beard, is always ready to share war stories with his customers in front of a tankard of beer in his inn, Der Ertrunkene Fischer, and thanks to his many friends and contacts in the army he is always ready to give a hand if someone is in need. Gunther has the distinction of having saved the Falkprinz in battle.

Adventure Hook: A staunch nationalist and patriot, no one could ever guess that he is the leader of the Resistance in Silberbas. The adventurers need to distract the Falkpo, while Gunther prepares the storming of the Blutturm, to free political prisoners.

Hauptmann Dante Marter

(Adult Human Fighter Sentinel 7 L/N)

The Captain of the Silbervas' garrison and head of the local Kripo is an honest, law -abiding citizen. His father was a lieutenant of the Imperial Army of Collodian birth, allegedly killed in the Silverbas rebellion, mauled by a wererat. He absolutely hates rats, wererats and every creature resembling them.

Adventure Hook: warned that dire rats infest the sewers of Silbervas, Dante decides to employ the adventurers as ratcatchers.

Hafenmeister Pietro Marter

(Adult Human Rogue Pirate 6/Fighter Corsair 1 N/E)

Captain Dante's estranged younger brother, after his father's death he traveled the world becoming a sailor. Back in Falkovnia he begged his brother Dante to help him enter the navy and gain the rank of Harbourmaster of Silbervas.

Adventure Hook: Pietro never served on a mercantile ship, he instead was a pirate, and he sold his crew to an enemy because he wanted to save his own life. Someone from his past, dead, alive, or both, is out for revenge. Since he became harbor master, he has fattened himself with bribes and overpricing the custom fees, so now he has enough money to employ the adventurers to protect himself without his malversation coming into daylight.

Arch-Sentire Magda Tarvheim

(Middle-Aged Human Cleric of Ezra 7 L/N)

Magda Tarveheim was born in Falkovnia, but had to leave the country for Borca when the worship of Ezra

was forbidden. Recently, the Signing of the Silbervas Concordat allowed the Church of Our Lady of Mist to be restored in Falkovnia, and Magda became the first new Arch-Sentire of Silbervas and the head representative of the Home Faith in Falkovnia.

Adventure Hook: As the representative of a foreigner faith, Magda is heavily under surveillance. Most of the personnel working in her household are Falkpo agents. Magda is interested in the well-being of the falkovnian practitioners of the Home Faith and until now she has maintained an unquestionable behavior. However, recently many non-human practitioners of the faith have been harassed. To bring help to them, circumventing the spies, the Arch-Sentire sends a ciphered message to one of the adventurers, which she knows personally.

Oberst Gregor Feiggein

(Middle-Aged Human Fighter Martial Master 10 L/E)

Colonel Feiggein hates administrative roles. He is born to lead soldiers in battle. To hear the scream of the slayed enemies and to crush the skull of the fallen under his steel boots. However, he is a soldier, and he obeys orders and does that to the best of his abilities. He rules the Aerie like he would barracks, and he is being surprisingly successful.

Adventure Hook: Colonel Feiggein still dreams of being ordered to lead a true army in a true war, and he might have found a way : to deliver Gondegal's head in the hands of the Kaiserführer. To achieve this goal he needs to gather information bypassing official channels. Here the adventurers could be useful. If they want to have their licenses confirmed they will have to comply.

Sergeant Dargin Warhammer

(Middle-Aged Stone Dwarf Fighter Foehammer 7, L/G)

This two-hundred-year-old dwarf was already in the army before the fall of the Lamordian Empire. He was the first instructor of both Gondegal and Vlad and also of other high-ranking members of the army and of the resistance. Of the first two, the first learned his morals, the second his ethics.He stayed humble, shying from power positions and refused all promotions, retiring as a simple sergeant after the Lamordian Campaign. Since then he owns Die High Spirit Terrasse, a renowned inn, restaurant and brewery in Aerie and a sort of neutral ground. By Vlad proclamation, no inspection, espionage, nor other police activity can be conducted on the ground of the Terrasse. Similarly, by Gondegal explicit wish, no demonstrative action nor targeted attacks must happen on the same ground. Agents of the resistance can rest and recover at the Terrasse, but never use it as a base of operations.

Adventure Hook: Every year Dargin's Birthday sees a three-day truce between Vlad and Gondegal starting at midnight the day before and finishing at midnight the day after. The night of the birthday, no matter where they were, they will present themselves at the inn door, with a gift for their old sergeant. They drink and talk about the good old times, apparently unaware of the blood spilled after. This year however rogue members of the resistance and of the Falkpo plan to try and assassinate each other's sworn enemy. Dargin gets wind of that, too late to stop the two from coming but early enough to enlist the adventurers to help him stop the plot.

Hierophant Galen Weißerlöwe

(Old Human Cloistered Cleric of Andaral 10 L/G)

This kind old man never left the care of his flock, not even when faced with fierce persecution. He even launched ferocious sermons against the Falkovnian regime, and denounced the Divinity of Mankind as a growing cancer in an already diseased society. One day Drakov met him in person, after attending a sermon with a whole division of his Talons, in full combat gear. At the end of the sermon, still caustic and vibrating, in spite of the intimidation attempt, Drakov was impressed by the "guts of that man" and declared that he was not to be harmed only to keep him and his flock under surveillance.

Adventure Hook: The Divinity of Mankind sees the Hierophant of Aerie as their worst enemy, and wants him removed from the picture. So they are planning to assassinate him and then have the fault pinned on the hated elvish minority. But the adventurers stumbled on the plan.

Pave Dieter Barenkov

(Middle-aged Human Cleric of the Iron Church 9, L/E)

Dieter was just a kid when the Steel Falcon Church separated from the Iron Church, and his family stayed covertly faithful to the true church of Zhakata. He managed to travel to Nova Vaasa where he was ordered and was named Episkop, returned to Aerie, and patiently waited. Finally, his patience paid him back when, as part of the Treaty of Friendship between Falkovnia and Nova Vaasa, it was signed the Concordat of Aerie, which reestablished the rights of the Iron Church. Dieter, a stint in the Falkovnian Army, was agreed upon becoming the new Pave of Falkovnia, a title he still holds.

Adventure Hook: Dieter wish for the Falcon Schism to end, and for the Iron Church to become the state Church of Falkovnia, to manage to do so, he plans to make the church useful for the Kaiserführer while at the same time putting the Minister of Religious Cults in a negative light. He has learned interesting information about Falkendiener's family, and there are rumors about his younger brother Fritz being a high-ranking leader of the Resistance, and he plans to manipulate the adventurers in verifying such rumors.

Hauptmann Gottfried Rattezenburg

(Adult Human Fighter Crossbowman 8, L/N)

Tall, dark-haired and dark-eyed, the captain of Aerie's Garrison, head of the city Kripo, is a level-headed man who represents a reasonable authority figure just below the hard-liner governor. He is a family man, with four young children and a beloved wife.

Adventure Hook: Gottfried's wife is an elf, disguised thanks to permanent magical surgery. Their children are half-elves, equally disguised as humans. While formally there are no laws against interracial unions, the scandal would destroy his career, so he keeps the secret. When someone learns about this secret and starts to blackmail him, he can't ask agents of the Kripo to help him, but he can enlist the help of the adventurers, which are waiting for their permit for magical items to be signed.

Hafenmeister Gerher Truantheim

(Middle-Aged Human Fighter Aerial Assaulter 7, N)

This balding, broad-shouldered man is the harbor master of the main trade hub of Falkovnia. Not above accepting bribes as long as no mayor is involved, Gerher is not greedy and is usually satisfied with running things smoothly.

Adventure Hook: Gerher is very proud of his Winged Armor, the symbol of his distinguished service in the Winged Zweifalk elite unit of the Falkovnian Navy. When the armor suit is stolen, a few days before Drakov's Birthday, when he is supposed to fly in Drakov's honor during the Great Parade, he is desperate to have it back in time and offers a generous reward.

Falkfürher Vigo Drakov

(*Adult Half-Fiend Vistaniblooded Fighter Fiendishblade 14, C/E)*

Drakov's beloved second son, born from his fourth wife Isabella Aderre, Vigo has been entrusted with the control of the greatest prison in Falkovnia, and with overseeing Vlad's vanity project of a new capital city, Drakovburg. While the project failed as the chosen location was not ideal, Vigo stayed as military governor of the city. He looks younger than his third brother Micheal, but that is seen as a perk he inherited from his father. Vigo is the most praised and trusted of all Drakov children.

Adventure Hook: The irony is that Vigo is not Drakov's child at all. He was fathered by the fiend known as the Gentleman Caller, who took Vlad's shape to lay with Isabella. At his birth only his mother saw beyond the disguise, but she tried to raise Vigo right. But the night she left with her daughter, a guard stopped her from taking Vigo too. His father convinced him that his mother left her, and this resentment allowed for his dark side to take over. But his brand of evil was different from Drakov's. Especially after his true father revealed himself. Vigo aims to turn himself into a full demon and to take over Falkovnia. But a part of him is still loath to usurp his alleged father directly. So he plans to manipulate the adventurers in killing Vlad Drakov. If in doing so he can also frame the Vistani people for the deed, all the better.

Vater Reinhard Drachenstern

(Adult Human Heretic Cleric of the Stahlfalk Church 9, L/E)

The head religious officer of Drakovburg is a pleasant, stout man with refined tastes. Not the typical Falkovnian state priest, he is focused on beneficial activities without any evident further goal.

Adventure Hook: The truth is that Reinhard is a devil worshipper who sacrifices innocent victims to his dark masters. When a friend of the adventurers denounce the disappearance of a little girl from an orphanage, Vater Reinhard shows himself very distressed, and asks them to investigate. Their lives might be the key to complete his goal and bring his master on the material world.

Falkhauptman Heinrich "Falkenschädel" Schmied

(Adult Human Talon Investigator Ruthless Agent 13, L/E)

This high-ranking member of the Falkpo and also a Talon, is notorious for using a gray mask resembling a falcon skull which gives him his nickname, Falkenschädel, the Falcon Skull. He is Vigo Drakov's right-hand and as the city garrison leader, the second most powerful leader in the city. As a Talon he is unquestionably loyal to the Kaiserführer who has ordered him to serve his son. And he obeys no matter what. Cynical and merciless Schmied is a cold-blooded assassin with no conscience. He is the most feared among all Talons and all agents of the Falkpo.

Adventure Hook: Heinrich is one of Drakov's illegitimate children. His devotion is absolute but he wants more than his father's pride. He wants the love Vlad shows to Vigo, and to do so, he plans to kill his brother and take his place. The adventurers seem to be the ideal scapegoat.

Oberst-Professor Kamille Schwarzlicht

(Old Human Alchemist Toxicant 9, N/E)

The head of the Vigo Drakov the elder Memorial Academy is a famous scientist and chemist. The queen of poisons, as she is called, has created many alchemical weapons that now boasts the might of the Falkovnian Army. She now teaches the new generations, as Drakovburg's academy focus a bit more on science and arcane than they do on martial techniques, strategy and tactics.

Adventure Hook: in spite of her retirement, Kamille is still involved in the development of alchemical weapons, and she is experimenting on political prisoners and other undesirables. When a pupil of the academy accidentally stumbles into her secret, Kamille kills her, and now the boy's father, a prominent merchant in Morfenzi, has employed the adventurers to investigate.

Obergefreiter Orruk Falkenschild

(Middle-aged Tunneler Kobold Underfoot Fighter 7, L/N)

This lively retired kobold Major-Corporal with scarred scales and a deep devotion for the Falkovnian state, is a veteran of the Fourth Deadman Campaign and he saved the life of the Kaiserführer himself. He is thus largely unmolested and his inn,

the Schwarzes Pferd Inn in Drakovburg, is freely frequented by humans and kobolds alike.

Adventure Hook: Under the inn's basement, Orruk's wife, Yrra (Middle-Aged Spellscale Kobold Oracle of Kurtulmak 7, N/G) has created a clandestine temple of the Kobold deities. When an agent of the Falkpo starts to investigate, Orruk has only one possibility to save his reputation and his family : the adventurers, his recurrent customers.

Der Basilisk

(Adult Spellscale Kobold Paladin Greyguard 13, L/G)

Ylrik Sharfeskala was barely more than a hatchling when his Kobold community was dispatched to make way for Drakovburg. His parents were killed and he was raised by his aunt, Yrra, a priestess of the Kobold Deities. In spite of his uncle's example, he believed that Kobold could be free only if the regime of the Kaiserführer was to fall. He has created the identity of the Basilisk with which he leads a main Kobold branch of the resistance.

Adventure Hook: The adventurers ran afoul of an high-ranking officer of the Falkpo which sends a squad of Talons against them. On the verge of being slayed, they are saved by the providential intervention of a kobold in full plate.

Oberst Weistocht Theodorn

(Middle-aged Fighter Spearmaster 11, L/N)

The Military Governor of Morfenzi is a reasonable man. While he is a loyal falkovnian soldier that does not mean he is a blind executioner. In Morfenzi, the law is still hard but it is applied with a grain of salt, the city garrison is handpicked among the most level-headed soldiers of the army. He keeps the city peaceful, clean and profitable.

Adventure Hook: Weistocht is a man deeply troubled from his past actions. In his youth he participated in the expedition against the Shadow Forest and there he was seriously wounded. Abandoned by his comrades and fated to die, he was rescued by a dryad. When his unit counter-attacked they "rescued" him, burning the dryad's tree and killing her in the process. From that moment on Weistoch suffers from terrible nightmares every night. His only solace is a sleeping potion he buys from Tepest. He is dependent on the stuff and keeps this dependence a secret. When the last batch of the potion is stolen, he can't allow the Kripo to investigate too closely on the matter. That is the reason he enlists the adventurers to find the missing crate.

Arkhiyepiskop Tsvtieyft Ten'smerti

(Adult Human Warpriest of the Iron Church 3/Cleric of the Iron Church 7, L/E)

The Arkhiyepiskop of Morfenzi is a native Vaasan citizen with a martial bent, who is convinced that Zhakata the Lawgiver wants him to return Falkovnia to the right path. And he is ready to use any means he possesses to achieve that holy mission.

Adventure Hook: Fed off with the Pave's prudent approach, Tsvteyft decided to have both him and the Stahlhandschuh Joseph Falkendiener assassinated, with the blame pinned on the Silver Falcon cultists. The occasion will be the pastoral visit of the Pave in Morfenzi, for the ordination of three new priests. On the same day, Falkendiener will be in Morfenzi to inaugurate a new church of the Sthalfalk. The cult of Lathurr gets wind of this plot and asks the Adventurers to help to stop it.

Hauptmann Urislav Jurgens

(Adult Human Urban Ranger 8, N)

Urislav Jurgens is a pragmatist and a very capable commander. He has no high moral code to follow other than common sense. Avoiding the shedding of blood when it is possible, gain a good amount of money to round up his future pension, and live long enough to retire in his home beside the river with his wife and his children.

Adventure Hook: Jurgens, as a pragmatist, is not averse to the practice of accepting bribes as long as they are incentives in doing a good job, and not disincentives. Closing an eye or two is acceptable as long as nobody is really hurt. However, one of his sergeants seems to have crossed the line too much. But he can't directly confront the man without a scandal occurring. So he asks the adventurer for a small favor.

Fraulein Nuriel Kaltáli Leichtfüße

(Young Adult Mist Elf Holy Liberator Paladin 7 C/G)

Nuriel Kaltáli, Lightfeet, is an Elf, a woman, and a follower of Lathurr, the Silver falcon. She is three times discriminated against in Falkovnia, but she never lets that deter her from doing the right thing. She hides in plain sight as a dancer in Morfenzi.

Adventure Hook: Nuriel works in Morfenzi aims to undermine the position of Tsvtieyft Ten'smerti, which she suspects of many grievous crimes. When the adventurers need a refuge, she takes them to the secret sanctuary of the Silver Falcon under Morfenzi. There she confides to them her suspects and asks them to help her to prove them.

Herr Otus Waasdrau

(Old Human Expert 5/Rogue 2, L/N)

The leader of the Merchant Guild of Morfenzi, Otus is very respected and influential in spite of never being a part of the Falkovnian armed force, as he financed the war effort and the arm race from the beginning. He is the richest man in Falkovnia, and there were rumors of him being the first civilian to join the imperial government. But if any such offering was done, it was politely but firmly rejected.

Adventure Hook: In his old age Otus is starting to regret his support to Drakov's regime. He finds especially appalling the so-called "Initiative for reeducation of criminals through work" aka work camps in which dissidents, minority members and petty criminals are forced to work as slaves with a very high rate of mortality. To stop that he has lamented a shortage of the workforce in his own industries, and asked for people from the work camps to be transferred in his own establishments from where he plans to smuggle them to safety. But the list of false documents he has prepared for his plans, including the officers he bribed for closing one eye, would damn him if it fell in the wrong hands, like those of the Falkpo. For that reason he needs the adventurers' help when he is informed about Falkpo getting involved.

Sergeant Vorst Grunheist

(*Old Human Fighter Shieldmaster 8, N/G)*

This old man was 14 when he enlisted in the Army for the Restoration of Lamordia, which then became the Falkovnian Imperial Army. He has fought in Drakov's wars for thirty years, and he has trained recruits on the Training Facility of Morfenzi for twenty more. When he finally retired, his own son now a Major, his grandsons starting their training, he bought an inn in Morfenzi, Das Leder des Metzgers, in which he now entertains the customers with his war tales.

Adventure HooK: Vorst has volunteered to command the local chapter of the Junge Falken (Young Falcons) a youth organization to teach kids the value of teamwork, loyalty, camaraderie, self-reliance and to break them into military mentality. Those groups organize social services around cities and districts and training camps in the countryside. While traveling towards Morfenzi, the adventurers find Vorst leading a patrol of kids to a nearby wood for one of such camps. One hour later, one of the kids, wounded and shaken, reaches the adventurers who are pausing for the night. He asks for help, as their camp has been attacked by …something.

Oberst Johann Furcht

(Adult Human Fighter Deadbane 15, L/G)

Johan Furcht was barely more than a boy during the Fourth Deadman Campaign but distinguished

himself for his heroic behavior, saving his whole battalion in a pitched battle. He impressed Drakov with his bravery and with his brutal honesty. So much so that he named him military governor of Stangenstadt. He turned the city into a model of life quality, uniting firm discipline and common sense with a sense of decency unusual for a high-ranking member of the falkovnian army. He is the object of scrupulous scrutiny from the Falkpo, as his growing popularity is fueling Drakov's paranoia. However, the Falkführer has yet to find a reason to remove Johann.

Adventure Hook: Drakov might have found the solution to remove Johann: he plans to promote him to General and assign him to the northern border. However, Johann is not keen to accept the new post, and plans to exploit a technicality. The rank of general is available only to falkovnian citizens from birth. He was born a Lamordian citizen and got falkovnian citizenship later. But the Falkpo has stolen and falsified the birth certificate to allow this promotion. Johann needs help from the adventurers to retrieve it.

Hauptmann Lana Dusklicht

(Human Investigator Hardboiled Detective 8, L/G)

Captain Dusklicht had a hard time in the Falkovnian Army as every woman has, especially since her talents lay in investigation and fact-check more than in strategy and tactics. She is a hard woman in a hard world, but she is sincerely caring for the well-being of the citizens in Stangenstadt and for that of the people under her command. She is loyal to the city's military governor.

Adventure Hook: when the Falkpo starts to threaten her family, husband and two sons, to get her on board with their attempt to frame Colonel Furcht Captain Dusklicht needs help from outside the ranks of her troops. The Adventurers seems to be her better bet.

Mutter Holle Haushälterin

(Old Human Cleric of Hala 10, N/G)

This stooped old woman has raised war orphans since the time of the civil war. Her wise words are sought out by many high-ranking members of the falkovnian army and government in Stangenstadt and beyond. This is the main reason no one ever objected to the Cult of Hala she openly professes. She heals the wounded, restores to health the diseased, delivers newborns and ensures the mothers live.

Adventure Hook: in Stangenstadt you find the only shrine of Hala opened to public worship in all of Falkovnia. The Falkpo keeps it under strict surveillance, but it seems unaware of the secret tunnel leading to it from the orphanage, where Mother Holle welcomes the adventurers. She has recently noticed interactions between alleged members of the Falkpo and her children. That innocent children are involved in the Falk Polizei plots against her is a step too low even for them. She suspects fouler plans to be in execution, so she asks the adventurers to keep an eye on the kids.

Gefreiter Friedrich Keldresh

(Adult Human Swashbuckler 9, L/G)

This tall, red-haired man is a reservist of the Falkovnian Army serving as an instructor of martial arts in the Fennelstock Academy. He is a renowned duelist winner of the Silberfalk Medal in the yearly Imperial Dueling competition for the last five years.

Adventure Hook: Friedrich is secretly a sympathizer of the Falkovnian Resistance. The adventurers must contact him to organize the destruction of a secret government facility where horrible experiments are practiced on kidnapped pregnant vistani women by a functionary of the Ministry of Arcane, Malazar Totenkralle (Human Wizard Necromancer 9 L/E)

Professor Marcus Fennelstock

(Middle-aged Human Wizard Abjurer 13, L/N)

The distinguished founder of the Fennelstock Academy for Advanced Learning, and its current headmaster, Marcus is probably one of the most powerful spellcasters in Falkovnia. A convinced pacifist, he has devoted his research on defensive magic.

Adventure Hook: a devoted Falkovnian patriot, Marcus never denied Falkovnia a contribution in defensive magic. Emphasis on defensive. But the Falkpo wants to press him to upgrade his spellcraft to offensive function, and they are threatening a promising student of his. Through a common friend, he manages to contact the adventurers to protect the student in question, and her family.

Herr Lothar Uberholt

(Adult Human Bar Tender Bard 9, C/N)

The charming owner of Die Zerbrochene Flitter in Stangenstadt Lothar is a very rich person, head of an ancient and wealthy falkovnian family which held a noble title under the Lamordian Empire. Lothar is a fast-talking man and a very good listener and he is always ready to lend an ear and give some advice.

Adventure Hook: Lothar dreams about having his family titles restored, but the Kaiserführer is really unwilling to entertain the possibility unless Lothar brings back the legendary armor of Lekar I. Lothar thinks he knows where the tomb is located but he needs someone ready to explore it. And the adventurers seem to be the right people in the right place.

Organizations

The Falkovnian Resistance is the Chaotic Good organization which puts together various organizations opposing Drakov's rule.The main forces included in the resistance are: the C/G Knights of the Circle which are focused on sabotaging, breaking prisoners out and counterpropaganda. The C/G Cult of Lathurr which contributes divine magic, healing and spiritual guidance. The L/G Scales of Justice, a movement of Kobold Civil Rights Activists,which fight for equality and the rights of the Kobold minority. The Friends of Freedom are a C/G secret society of intellectuals who focus on counterpropaganda. Gondegal Dekovan is the leader of the resistance thanks to his huge personal prestige, but the resistance operates on a cell base. Every cell has few contact with the others, it is the Cult of Lathurr which allows for communication and coordination. Members of the Karg Agency of Trouble Solving also support the resistance with information and magical resources.

***Dread Possibility**: The Enemy among Us. The Resistance has been infiltrated by members of the Falkpo, from its beginning. The Falkpo has no interest in completely dismantling the Resistance, because they see it as a useful controlled opposition. Some of the highest-ranking members of the resistance know this and use this infiltration to feed false information to the Falkpo. But this stall has fed up with some of the youngest members of the Resistance. This group has joined forces with the more radical extremists in the Falkpo, and they want to kill off each other's leadership, to then have a violent reckoning.*

Die Falken Kralle

The Talons of the Falcon, or, simply, the Talons are chosen from both the falk polizei and from the army. They are fanatically devoted to Vlad Drakov, and serve as special enforcers and executioners. Talons are magically branded, and they are stronger and more resilient than any other soldier, thanks to the troll blood used in their enhancing process. They serve for life. Drakov often assigns his commanders and ambassadors to take a Talon as a personal

bodyguard. The "honor" comes with pretty strong strings attached, though: if the commander or the ambassador deviates from Drakov orders or expectations, the Talon will kill them on the spot. Talons have no other rank than Talons. They only answer to the Kaiserführer himself, but they often collaborate with the Falkpolizei. When more than one Talon works together, the oldest one is in charge.

***Dread Possibility**: Ubermensch Projekt, the Talons are part of the attempts to create superior soldiers using Alchemy or Magic. This has produced the Talons themselves, (UP 1) the ogre-sized Falkovnian Riesenbataillon (Apply Ogre Size and Strength and Constitution, -2 Intelligence) (UP 2), the superior undead of the Totenbataillon (Zombie and Skeletons with intelligence 10) (UP 3 and 4), the Zweifalk-Human hybrid of the Zweifalk Elite (+4 Dexterity, -2 Strength, 30 Feet Fly speed (Good) a bite attack (1d6 damage+ Strength modifier) (UP 5), and the Half-golems of the Sthalbatailon (UP 6). But these are only the projects deemed successful. Dozens of unsuccessful projects yielded abominations as results. They were often eliminated swiftly, but, in some cases, the flawed specimens were spared and kept in seclusion for further experimentation. Between the failures it is rumored that there is one which is kept alive not because it can be useful, but because it can't be killed. A Talon with more Troll blood than average, and not bound from loyalty. (Human with the Talon Template, two claw attacks, +6 Strength and Fast Healing 5. without any loyalty binding them).*

The Falk Polizei

Better known as Falkpo, the Falcon Police is the political police, security service and the military intelligence service of the Falkovnian Empire. The Falkpo serves through the Ministry of Intelligence, directly at the behest of the Kaiserführer himself. The Falkpo oversees political prisons and the infamous "reeducation camps" and their black-crowned Zweifalk with two crossed short words is the most feared symbol in Falkovnia.

***Dread Possibility**: Jaegerfalken; What could be worse than a Falkpo officer? A Falkpo officer unbound by official protocol, backed by the full authority of the Kaiserführer. Heinrich Schmied might be one of such agents, but he wouldn't be the most infamous. Called the Vistani Hunter Falkoberst Hans Bluttfalk (Human Rogue Investigator 10 L/E) is rumored to have never failed a mission in his career.*

Lekar Central Guild

The L/N Central Guild in Lekar is the most powerful consortium of wealthy capitalists in Falkovnia. Magda Karopp (Human Expert 5 L/N) is the Guildmistress and the richest person in Falkovnia, and one of the few women Vlad Drakov begrudgingly respects. The Karopp, Uberholt and Waasdrau families all belong to the Guild. They all have contracts with Falkovnia of which they finance the powerful military industrial complex.

***Dread Possibility**: New capital, new opportunities. The Central Guild might be trying to pressure Drakov into trying his hand again with the building of a new capital city, in the heart of the nation. They might also be trying to pressure Drakov into allowing mass production of firearms. To Drakov, firearms can be useful as siege weapons, but are too dangerous as personal weapons, as they are too easy to use, and too cheap to produce, and might cause the Falkovnian State to lose its monopoly of violence. So, the guild might try to substitute him with his more pliable son.*

The Darklord : Vlad I Drakov

Venerable Human Fighter 17, L/E (17d10+119)(221 HP)

Size: Medium

Speed:30 feet,

Initiative:+5 (+1 in Castle Draccipetri)

Senses: Perception +17 Twilight Vision (+1 in Castle Draccipetri)

Armor Class: 36, Touch 22, Flat Footed 29 (+6 Dex, +14 armor, +5 deflection, +1 Dodge) (+1 in Castle Draccipetri)

Space/Reach: 1 square /1 square

Combat Maneuver Bonus/Combat Maneuver Defense*:*+25/41 (+4 Dirty Trick and +2 Disarm)(+1 in Castle Draccipetri)

Str:26 (20), **Dex**:22 (16), *Con*:22 (16), **Int***:*19, **Wis***:*15, **Cha** *:* 18

Saving Throws*:* **Fort** +21, **Ref** +16, **Will** +12 (+1 in Castle Draccipetri)

Special Qualities*:* Curse of the Dark Lord, Ageless, Bravery (+4 against fear) , Damage Reduction 10/-, Spell Immunity 5, Spell Resistance 30, Poison Immunity, Unbound, Regeneration 5; Sinkhole of Evil I.

Special Attacks: Force Borders. Rally Troops 4xday (Every Ally in a radius of 60 feet gets a +4 bonus to every Roll and to Armor Class and CMD for 1 minute.)

Melee*:* *Sthalfalk Kralle* +34/+34/+29/+29/+24/ +24/+19, 18-20 (1d6+21) (+2d6 vs Good Aligned Creatures) (+1 in Castle Draccipetri)

Ranged*:* *Sthalfalk Kralle* +34/+34/+29/+29/+24/ +24/+19, 18-20 Range 80 feet (1d6+21) (+2d6 vs Good Aligned Creatures) (+1 in Castle Draccipetri)

Skills*:* Acrobatics (+23), Bluff (+21), Climb (+28), Insight (+19), Intimidate (+32), Ride (+26), Perception (+19), Swim (+28) (+1 in Castle Draccipetri)

Feats*:* Authority (B), Brutal Throw (B) Combat Expertise, Dodge (B), Greater Dirty Trick(B), Greater Disarm, Greater Two-Weapon Fighting (B), Improved Demoralize (B), Improved Dirty Trick, Improved Disarm (B), Improved Feint (B), Improved Two-Weapon Fighting, Improved Unarmed Strike, Improved Weapon Focus (Shortsword)(B), Improved Critical Hit (B), Improved Weapon Specialization (Shortsword)(B), Intimidating Prowess(B) Mounted Combat, Ride-by Attack, Toughness, Two-Weapon Fighting, Weapon Focus (Shortsword), Weapon Specialization (Shortsword).

Properties*:* +6 Belt of Physical Perfection, *Sthalfalk Kralle* (+5 Unholy Ranged Returning Shortswords); *Kaiserfürstenrüstung* (+5 Mithral Complete Armor which includes the benefit of a +5 Cloak of Resistance, and gives the wearer Damage Reduction 10/-, at will with a swift action, it can turn itself in a full set of clean clothes of any fashion and return to its armor form. It keeps his bonus to Armor Class and Saving Throws, and the Damage Reduction in any form), Boots of Flight, Ring of Protection +5, Regeneration Ring; Wondrous Figurine (War Zweifalk It turns into a giant Zweifalk with full harness and armor, trained for war.) *Falkhelm* (combines a +2 Headband of Vast Intelligence, a Bastion Crown and a Cap of Free Thinking)

Challenge Rating*:*20

Background

Vlad Drakov life begun in the same moment as the life of his best friend Gondegal Dekovan who was born a few hours from him, in Adal, a village a day of March from Lekar, friends from a very early time, Vlad and Gonagal were both ambitious, disciplined and intelligent, and sought to make a name for themselves enlisting in the imperial army; in the ongoing civil war they made a fast career, and in a decade they were both ranked Brigadegeneral (Brigadier General). Vlad was the best tactician, Gondegal was the best strategist, they were a perfect team, so they decided to stop the folly of the civil war, and, in doing so, they carved a kingdom from themselves; the time of their joint rulership,

with Gondegal ruling from Lekar as Kaiser and Vlad conquering land as Fuhrer was a time of success and expansion, but Drakov heavy-hand approach started to open a rift between the two, with Gondegal criticizing Vlad mass impaling and razing villages to the ground.The rift grew larger and larger, and while both rulers were equally respected, Vlad was feared and Gondegal was loved. At the end, Vlad's paranoia and his lust of power pushed him into making a fatal decision; he staged a bloody coup against Gondegal, to concentrate power in his own bloody hands. He killed his own sister, his nephews, and his wife in the process. This ultimate betrayal marked the fate of the Kaiserführer. The Mists took away the wounded Gondegal, and Vlad, in one night, had lost, by his own hand, his best friend, the love of his life and the best partner he ever had, ascending to the role of Falkovnia Darklord.

Current Sketches

Drakov is in his nineties, but he shows fewer than fifty years. However, he knows that he will not live forever, thus, he is obsessed by legacy. He wants to complete the work he started together with Gondegal, and to do so he must conquer all the lands of the old Lamordian Empire. Until now he failed, but he is confident he will succeed soon or later. He is also obsessed with creating monuments and other memorabilia of himself. His third big head scratcher is succession. Oh, he has an heir, his heir has an heir and he has plenty of spares, but none of them satisfy him completely.

Combat

Drakov is always attended by six Talons in full battle gear, but he never shies from combat. He targets immediately any arcane spellcaster and will then move to the strongest melee fighter. He will expertly order his bodyguards and soldiers to eliminate any healer from the enemy party.

Special Abilities

Curse of the Dark Lord: Whenever Drakov leaves Falkovnia, a rebellion, a coup or a natural disaster happens thereafter a maximum of 30 days, and he is forced to come back quickly to keep the nation together. If he leaves a campaign before total victory, all land conquered will be lost in a maximum of one year.

Force Borders: Vlad Drakov can open the closed border of another Domain, and it stays open for 24 hours.

Unbound: Vlad can leave Falkovnia's borders at will.

Lair: Draccipetri Schloss is the seat of Drakov's family and government. The torture and executions which happens every day in the castle's prisons have turned the castle in a Rank 1 Sinkole of Evil which can bestow on every creature inside the Fear effect (CD 21 Will Negates)

Closing Borders: Drakov is unable to close Falkovnian's borders.

Dread Alternatives

New Monsters

Zweifalk (CR 1)

XP 400
N Small Magical beast
Init +7 ; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +10

Defense
AC 15, touch 14, flat-footed 12 (+3 Dex, +1 natural, +1 size)
hp 16 (2d10+4)
Fort +5, **Ref** +6, **Will** +3

Offense
Speed 10 ft., fly 80 ft. (good)
Melee 2 talons +5 (1d4+1),2 bite +3 (1d4)
Special Attacks: Sharp Pecks (With a Critical Hit confirmed with a bite inflicts Bleed 1)

Statistics
Str 12, **Dex** 17, **Con** 14, **Int** 2, **Wis** 16, **Cha** 10
Base Atk +2; CMB +2; CMD 15

Feats*:* Improved Initiative (B), Weapon Finesse.

Skills*:* Fly +11, Perception +16; Racial Modifiers: +8 Fly, +8 Perception,

Ecology
Environment: temperate hills
Organization solitary or pair
Treasure none

Description
These two headed falcons are vicious predators, and they are revered in Falkovnia as a divine messenger. They are often raised in captivity by Falkovnian officers and rich merchants.

Special Abilities
Double Headed: A Zweifalk rolls twice any Initiative, Perception and Will Save Throw and keeps the highest result.

Zweifalk, Giant (CR 3)

XP 800
N Large Magical beast
Init +5 ; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +10

Defense
AC 14, touch 11, flat-footed 12 (+2 Dex, +3 natural, -1 size)
hp 36 (4d10+12)
Fort +7, **Ref** +6, **Will** +4

Offense
Speed 15 ft., fly 90 ft. (good)
Melee 2 talons +4 (1d6+1),2 bites +6 (1d8+3)
Special Attacks: Sharp Pecks (With a Critical Hit confirmed with a bite inflicts Bleed 1)

Statistics
Str 16, **Dex** 15, **Con** 16, **Int** 5, **Wis** 16, **Cha** 10
Base Atk +4; CMB +8; CMD 19

Feats*:* Improved Initiative (B),Multiattack, Weapon Focus (Bite).

Skills*:* Fly +8, Perception +10; Racial Modifiers: +8 Fly, +8 Perception

Ecology
Environment: temperate hills or in captivity
Organization solitary or pair
Treasure none

Description
Created by the Ministry of Science, Giant Zweifalks are bigger, stronger, smarter and faster than their smaller cousins and are often used as a mount for the elite of the Falkovnian chivalry.

Special Abilities
Double Headed: A Zweifalk rolls twice any Initiative, Perception and Will Save Throw and keeps the highest result.

New Templates : Talon

Talon is an acquired template which can be assumed by any humanoid (generally only humans are accepted)
Talons are identical to the base creature except for:

Ability Score*:* +4 Strength, +2 Constitution

Natural Armor*:* +1 Natural Armor

Special Qualities*:* Same as the base creature + Branded: Talons have the zweifalk brand on their face which gives them a +4 Bonus on every Intimidate Roll. It also gives them a -4 penalty on every Diplomacy and Disguise roll.

Loyal until Death: A Talon has a +5 bonus to any ST against mind-affecting effects. If a Talon is under a mind affecting effect, they can roll the ST again at the end of their turn, every round.

Obedient: A Talon will never disobey a direct order from Drakov or from the person Drakov designed as their commander. If the Talon is afflicted by a condition which stops them from obeying, they can immediately roll a ST against the effect to interrupt it.

Tireless: A Talon needs to sleep only 4 hours to benefit from a rest.

Challenge Rating: as Base Creature+2

Character Options

New Races

Kobold

Small and scaled Kobolds claim to have been created by the ancient Dragon-Gods at the dawn of time. Kobolds live in underground communities in the hills and mountains or under the spellscales of secular trees. You find Spellscale, Tunnel and Winged Kobolds in Falkovnia, Tepest, Shadow Forest and Sithicus,

Spellscale Kobolds

+2 Dexterity, +2 Charisma, –2 Strength: Spellscales Kobolds are physically weak but really nimble, and they have a strong instinct and are perceptive and rich in common sense.

Small: Spellscale Kobolds are Small creatures and gain a +1 size bonus to their AC, a +1 size bonus on attack rolls, a –1 penalty on combat maneuver checks and to their Combat Maneuver Defense, and a +4 size bonus on Stealth checks.

Normal Speed: Spellscale Kobolds have a base speed of 30 feet.

Darkvision: Spellscale Kobolds can see in darkness up to 60 feet, in shades of gray, black and white.

Defensive Training: Spellscale Kobolds get a +4 dodge bonus to their AC against monsters of the Dragon type.

Dragon Breath: A Spellscale Kobold, 1 x day can breath a cone of 30 feet which forces every creature in the area to a ST DC equal to 10+½ the Kobold Hit Dice+ the Kobold Charisma Modifier to halve the damage from Acid, Cold, Fire or Electricity, the kobold decide the damage.

Dragon Dodgers: Spellscale Kobolds have a +4 bonus at saving throws against breath weapons.

Evocation Resistance: Spellscale Kobolds get a +2 racial bonus on saving throws against evocation spells or effects.

Hatred: Spellscale Kobolds receive a +1 bonus on attack rolls against dragons because of their special training against these traditional opponents.

Spellscale Kobold Magic: Spellscale Kobolds add 1 to the DCs of any saving throws to resist evocation spells that they cast. Spellscales Kobolds with a Charisma of 11 or higher also gain the following spell-like abilities: 1/day—*ear-piercing scream*,_flare, *spark*, and *telekinetic projectile*. The caster level for these effects is equal to the kobold's character level. The DC for these spells is equal to 10 + the spell's level + the kobold's Charisma modifier.

Spellscale: Spellscale Kobolds have a +1 Natural Armor Bonus which also counts for a Spellcale Kobold Touch AC.

Languages: Spellscale Kobolds begin to play speaking Common, Draconic, and Sylvan. Spellscale Kobolds with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Dwarven, Lamordian (Falkovnian) Elven, Gnomish, Goblin, Orc Sithican.

Favored Class: Sorcerer

Tunnel Kobolds

+2 Dexterity, +2 Intelligence, –2 Strength: Tunnel Kobolds are physically weak but really nimble, and they have a practical smartness which allows them to exploit the circumstances in their favor.

Small: Tunnel Kobolds are Small creatures and gain a +1 size bonus to their AC, a +1 size bonus on attack rolls, a –1 penalty on combat maneuver checks and to their Combat Maneuver Defense, and a +4 size bonus on Stealth checks.

Normal Speed: Tunnel Kobolds have a base speed of 30 feet.

Superior Darkvision: Tunnel Kobold can see in darkness up to 120 feet, in shades of gray, black and white.

Defensive Training: Tunnel Kobolds get a +4 dodge bonus to their AC against monsters of the Ooze and Aberration type.

Hatred: Tunnel Kobolds receive a +1 bonus on attack rolls against Aberration and Oozes because of their special training against these hated foes.

Scales: Tunnel Kobolds have a +2 Natural Armor Bonus

Trapsmith: A Tunnel Kobold has a +4 bonus in any Perception Check to find traps, and to any Disable Device Check to disarm them. A Tunnel Kobold who arrives at a 10 feet distance from a trap can roll Perception to notice it even if they are not searching for it. Any trap armed by the Kobold increases its DC by 2.

Trap Dodger: +2 AC and ST against Traps.

Languages: Tunnel Kobolds begin to play speaking: Common, Draconic, and Sylvan. Tunnel Kobolds with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Dwarven, Lamordian (Falkovnian) Elven, Gnomish, Goblin, and Orc.

Favored Class: Rogue

Winged Kobolds

+2 Dexterity, +2 Wisdom, –2 Strength: Winged Kobolds are physically weak but really nimble, and they have a natural perception of their surroundings and a lot of common sense.

Small: Winged Kobolds are Small creatures and gain a +1 size bonus to their AC, a +1 size bonus on attack rolls, a –1 penalty on combat maneuvers checks and to their Combat Maneuver Defense, and a +4 size bonus on Stealth checks.

Normal Speed: Winged Kobolds have a base speed of 30 feet. They also have 20 feet flight speed with average maneuverability. They cannot fly if encumbered or while wearing medium armor or heavier.

Lightning Resistance Electricity Resistance 10

Urd Magic: 1xday, Gust of Wind. Sp.

Twilight Vision: Winged Kobolds can see two times better than normal in low light.

Sharp Senses: +4 Perception. Ignores any distance penalty for the first 300 feet.

Languages: Winged Kobolds begin to play speaking: Common, Draconic, and Sylvan. Winged Kobolds with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Dwarven,Lamordian (Falkovnian) Elven, Gnomish, Goblin, and Orc.

Favored Class: Cleric

New Archetypes

Bard

Bartender

Bartenders are Bards experts in the use of alcoholic substances for creating magical cocktails. They are also quite dexterous and have good ears, getting informed easily.

Weapons and Armor Proficiency*:* a Bartender Bard is proficient in every simple weapon and light armor. This modifies the Bard Weapon and Armor Proficiency

Brew Potion: the Bard gains the Brew Potion Feat as a Bonus feat at level 1.

Bardic Performance: the Bartender Bard does not get access to inspire courage, inspire competence and inspire heroics. This feature modifies Bardic Performance.

Brewing

At first level the Bartender Bard learns how to prepare magical alcoholic drinks imbued with his magic power. The Bard can prepare three types of magical drinks, Cocktails, Fire Bottles, And High Spirits. Brewing works as the Alchemist's Alchemy features with these differences:

- Cocktails work as Alchemist's Elixirs, but can be used on others and can allow the Bartender Bard to delay her spells up to ten rounds. No more than one spell for 1 round x Constitution Modifier can be delayed at the same time this way.
- Fire Bottles work as Alchemist's bombs with the Bartender Bard level counting as Alchemist level to calculate the bomb's damage.as a Standard

action They can be drunk and spit as a breath weapon in a cone 15 feet long.

- High Spirits works as Mutagens but can be drunk also by other creatures. After their effect is over the target is nauseated for one round. This feature substitutes the spellcasting and cantrip features.

Discovery: at 1st level and every 2 levels after, the Bartender Bard gains a Discovery from the Alchemist list of discoveries. The Bard uses her Bard level as her Alchemist level to calculate if they qualify for a Discovery.

Drinking Buddy and a Good Listener *:* Bartender Bards add their Bard level to Perception Checks to listen to and hear, and to Diplomacy Checks to gather information. They ignore the penalty for using Perception through closed doors, noisy crowds and in combat. They can also automatically improve any non-hostile attitude towards themselves by one rank, by offering a drink to that creature. They also ignore the penalty for being a stranger in that community. This feature replaces Bardic Knowledge.

Poison Master: at level 5 the Bard can use poison without ever risking poisoning herself. They increase the DC of every poison they use by their Intelligence modifier. Once x day they can use the Poison Spell as a Spelllike ability. They can use the Poison Spell once more at level 11 and at level 17. This feature replaces Lore Master.

Cleric

Hatemonger

Many Clerics try to proselytize and increase their flocks, but hatemongers stir strife and direct their faithful to hate and destroy every enemy of their faith.

Alignement*:* Hatemongers must be of evil alignment. This modifies the alignment requirement for Clerics.

Domains: one of the two domains the Cleric selects must be either the Evil Domain or the Destruction domain with the Hatred Subdomain. This feature modifies the Divine Domain feature.

Hateful Words (Su): The Cleric can shake for 1 minute an opponent who is able to hear them if the target fails a Will Save DC 10+½ the Cleric's level+ the Cleric's Charisma modifier. The Cleric can use this feature 3 times a day plus his Wisdom modifier. If the target is immune to fear effects, it can't be targeted by this effect. If a target passes the saving throw, they are immune to this effect for 24 hours. This feature replaces one of the two level 1 domain powers.

Instill Hate(Su): at level 8 the Cleric chooses a target. Each of his allies gains a bonus equal to the Cleric's Charisma modifier to Hit Rolls and Damage Rolls for 1 minute. The Cleric can use this feature a number of times a day equal to 3+ their Wisdom modifier. This feature replaces one of the two level 8 domain powers.

Fighter

Deadbane

Deadbane fighters learn how to fight against undead. In spite of their lack of supernatural powers, they learn how to tap in their own life energy to damage the undead and defend themselves.

Class Skills: Add Knowledge(Religion) to the Deadbane fighter class skills list.

Life Guarded (Ex)*:* At level 3 the Fighter gains Resistance 5 to Negative Energy and a +2 Bonus to ST against Ability Damage, Ability Drain, Death Effects, Paralysis and Negative Levels.

At level 7, 11 and 15 this bonus increases by 5 and 2 respectively, up to 20 and +8 at 15 level. This feature replaces Armor Training.

Corpse Hacker (Ex)*:* At level 5 the Deadbane Fighter learns how to use his weapon in ways that overcome undead ability to avoid damage. At level 5 they can consider their weapon magic to overcome Magic/-Damage Reduction. At level 9 they can ignore Bludgeoning, Piercing and Slashing DR and hit incorporeal beings without failure possibility. At level 13 they can ignore special material damage reduction. At level 17 they ignore alignment DR. This feature replaces Weapon Training.

Armored against Spirit (Ex): At level 19 the Fighter can apply his Armor and Shield Bonus to AC including magical enhancement to his touch AC. This feature replaces Armor Mastery.

Bane of the Dead: At level 20 when the fighter hits an undead creature, it adds the fighter level to the damage. They automatically confirm a critical hit against undead. This feature replaces Weapon Master.

Fiendish Blade

Fiendish blades are tiefling or cambion fighters who tap in their fiendish heritage; they are able to summon powerful blasts of eldritch power in their weapons and enhance their armors with fiendish energies.

Prerequisite: Tiefling or Cambion.

Fiendish Armor(su): At level 3 and the Fighter gets Damage Reduction 2/Magic. The DR increases by 2 at 7th, 11th, 15th and 19th level At level 11 they can choose a special material to add to their DR. This feature replaces Armor Training and Armor Master.

Fiendish Weapon (su): at level 5 the Fighter learns to channel their fiendish power in their weapon. Any weapon the Fighter wields inflicts a bonus damage of 2 and all damage is converted into an energy damage (Acid, Cold, Fire). The type of energy is chosen when the fighter gets this feature. The damage increases by 2 at 9th, 13th and 17th level. This feature replaces Weapon Training.

Fiendish Weapon Master (Su): It works as Weapon Master but the Fighter adds 1d6 energy damage of their chosen energy type to the critical hit instead of increasing the critical multiplier. This feature modifies Weapon Master

Logistics Expert

Logistics Experts are fighters able to take advantage of the environment and to optimize the resources.

Skill Points: 4+the Fighter intelligence modifier. This modifies the Fighter skill points.

Class Skills: add Knowledge (Arcana) Knowledge (Geography) and Knowledge (Nature) to the list of the Fighter class skills.

Armor and Weapon Proficiency: the logistics expert fighter is not proficient in Heavy Armor and Shield Towers. This modifies the Fighter Armor and Weapon proficiency.

Optimized Inventory: Beginning at 2d level the Fighter learns to distribute the weight of their possessions so well that they can transport more than their muscles would normally allow. Increase each load value by 20%. The load values increase by 20% at levels 6, 10, 14 and 18.This feature replaces Bravery.

Favored Terrain: Beginning from level 3 the Fighter gets the benefit of the Favored Terrain feature but the Fighter gets a new favored terrain and improves the bonus from the previous one at 7th, 11th and 15th level. It works like the Ranger Class feature, but, starting level 7, the Fighter also ignores difficult terrain of not magical origin while in favored terrain. This feature replaces Armor Training 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Exploiting Terrain: beginning at level 6 when the Fighter is in one of their favorite terrains, they can flank an opponent even if their position does not qualify for flanking as both the fighter and one ally are adjacent to the same opponent. This feature replaces the bonus combat feat available at level 6.

Terrain Master: At level 19 all the Favorite Terrain bonuses increase by 2 and once per combat the Fighter can change his higher bonus Favored Terrain with any of the others they possess. This feature replaces Armor Master.

Mercyful

Some fighters only fight to preserve their own life and those of their allies. They have no love for blood shedding and, if they can, they prefer to knock their opponents out instead of killing them.

Not-Lethal Fighter: at level 1 the fighter gets the Not-Lethal Attack Feat as a Bonus feat. This replaces the bonus feat the fighter gets at 1st level.

Not-Lethal Weapon Training: starting from Level 5 every time the Mercyful Fighter attacks with a not-lethal weapon or uses a lethal weapon to attack in a not-lethal way, he gets a +2 Bonus to Hit Rolls and Damage Rolls. The bonus increases by +2 at 9th, 13th and 17th level. This feature replaces Weapon Training 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Knock-out(Ex): starting at level 8 if the Mercyful Fighter confirms a critical hit, they can force the target to a Fortitude Saving Throw equal to the damage inflicted. With a failure the target is unconscious until they are healed or attacked (any attack including the target causes them to wake up and defend themselves from the attack, albeit being still flat-footed, but not defenseless). This feature replaces the 8th level bonus combat feat.

Sharp Tongue

Some fighters can hold their ground as well on the battlefield as with words. And hone their tongue to make it another weapon in their arsenal.

Skill Points : 4+Intelligence Modifier. This modifies the Fighter Skill Points.

Class Skills: Add Bluff, Diplomacy, Perception and Sense Motive to the Fighter Class Skills.

Armor and Weapon Proficiency: The Sharp Tongue Fighter is not proficient with Heavy Armor and Tower Shields.

Social Battlefield (Ex) : the Sharp Tongue Fighter imposes a -4 penalty to any attempt made to Bluff, Intimidate or Sense Motive on him outside combat. The Fighter can also try and influence people with Diplomacy Checks with a full-round action taking a -10 penalty. This replaces the Bonus combat feat at level 1.

Silver Tongue (Ex): Beginning at level 2 the Fighter gets +2 Bonus to Diplomacy Check to avoid a fight, and they consider every hostile creature which has yet to act at the first round of combat as indifferent for the purpose of a Diplomacy Check. The Bonus increases by 2 at level 6, 10,14 and 18. This feature replaces Bravery.

Armored Mind(Ex): Beginning at level 3 the Fighter gets a +1 bonus to ST against Mind-affecting effects. They also increase by one the DC of any attempt to Intimidate and Feint against them. The bonus and the DCs increase by 1 at 7th, 11th and 15th level. This feature replaces Armor Training.

Barbed Tongue(Ex): At level 5 the Fighter gains the Improved Demoralise feat and the Improved Feint feat. They do not need to qualify for the feats. They also gain a +1 Bonus to Bluff and Intimidate Checks which increase by one at levels 9, 13 and 17.

At Level 9 they gain the Greater Demoralise Feat and the Greater Feint Feat. This Feature replaces Weapon Training 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Locked Mind(Ex): Beginning at level 19 the Fighter becomes immune to fear effects, detect thoughts effect and to Charme effects. This feature replaces Armor Master.

Words Master (Ex): at level 20, every time they succeed in a demoralizing or feint attempt, they get an opportunity attack against the target. With a confirmed critical hit they automatically impose the shaken or flat-footed condition on the target until the beginning of their next turn. This feature replaces Weapon Master.

Cavalier

Order of the Broken Gallow

Cavaliers who join the order of the broken gallow believe that death penalty and torture are universally wrong and must be fought against in any possible way.

Edicts: The cavalier must help any person at risk of execution or torture to the best of their abilities. The cavalier must abstain from threatening a sapient creature with torture or execution. The cavalier must avoid killing if not in strict self defense. The cavalier must work to undermine systems of power based on torture and the death penalty.

Challenge: Whenever an order of the broken gallow cavalier issues a challenge, the cavalier receives a +1

circumstance bonus on damage rolls against the target of his challenge whenever he is dealing non-lethal damage. This bonus increases by +1 for every 4 levels the cavalier has.

Skills: An order of the broken gallow cavalier adds Escape Artist (Dex) and Heal (Wis) to his list of class skills. An order of the broken gallow cavalier can attempt Escape Artist skill checks in place of a restrained creature in order to free them. In addition, whenever an order of the broken gallow cavalier uses Heal to cure the victim of torture, poison, or bleeding damage, he receives a bonus on the check equal to half his cavalier level (minimum +1).

Order Abilities: A cavalier belonging to the order of the broken gallow gains the following abilities as he increases in level.

Merciful Strength (Ex): At 2nd level, an order of the broken gallow cavalier gains the Improved Non-lethal Attack Feat as a bonus feat. They also gains a +1 Bonus to Aid Another rolls when they help people to pass Saving Throws. They also give an extra +1 Bonus to saving throws. The bonus increases by 1 at level 6 and every 6 levels thereafter.

Beacon of Hope (Ex): At 8th level, an order of the broken gallow cavalier can motivate his allies to resist even the grip of death herself. Every ally able to see the cavalier (including himself), applies the cavalier's Charisma bonus to saving throws against death effects and fear effects, and to Constitution checks to stabilize if dying. This bonus lasts for 1 round. The cavalier can use this ability once per day, plus one additional time per day at 12th level and every 4 levels thereafter.

Spare from Death (Su): At 15th level, an order of the broken gallow cavalier can save people from death effects, coups de grace, and death by wounds using his powerful will. As a full-round action, the cavalier enters in a vigil state. Every creature the Cavalier can see, including themselves, can't die from death effects, coups de grace, massive damage, or wounds. The cavalier can remain in this state for a number of rounds equal to their cavalier level.

Sorcerer

Medusa Bloodline

One of your ancestor was a Medusa or was petrified by one and returned to flash after a long period of time.

Class Skill: Craft (Sculpture)

Bonus Spells: disguise self(3rd), pernicious poison (5th), hold person (7th), stone shape (9th), hold monster (11th), flesh to stone (13th), hold person, mass (15th), entomb (17th), hold monsters, mass(19th).

Bonus Feats: Dodge, Improved Initiative,Iron Will, Point-Blank Shot, Mobility, Skill Focus (Craft[Sculpture]), Weapon Finesse.

Bloodline Arcana: When casting any spell that inflicts poison damage, you can also slow your targets. The spell deals half damage and living creatures affected by the spell are also slowed for a number of round rqual to half the total damage.

Bloodline Powers: The medusa is a cursed creature of poison and stone and you can gain some of that power.

Hissing (Su): At 1st level, you can talk with snakes as if you are permanantly affected by the Talk with Animal spell. At 5th level, the medusa blood allows you to talk with stone to communicate simple concept or with petrified creatures as well as if they were flesh and bones, as long you share a language with them. You can use this ability with stone a number of times equal to your Charisma modifier per day. You must tarhet a single object or block of stone

Poison Spit (Su): At 3rd level, you gain the ability to spit poison as a standard action up to 30 feet, as a ranged touch attack. You can spit a number of times for day equal to your character level plus your

Charisma bonus. With an hit you inflict 1d6 poison damage and the target must pass a Fortitude Save DC 10+half the sorcerer level+ their Charisma modifier or be slowed for 1d6 round.

Snake Hair (Su): At 9th level, you gain the ability to grow four snakes from your hair as a standard action. The snakes gives you all around vision and scent . You can dismiss the snakes as a free action.

Petrifying Stare (Sp): At 15th level, you can use petrifyng gaze one time a day for charisma modifier.

Medusa Form (Su): At 20th level, the full power of a medusa it is at your disposal. You can, once every 24h, to turn into a Medusa for 1 hour. You gain all the medusa abilities and attacks.

New Feats

Improved Not-Lethal Attack

Requisite*:* Wisdom 13

Benefits: The character can attack with a melee weapon or touch attack which inflicts normal damage to inflict not-lethal damage without penalties. They can also use ranged weapons and ranged spell attacks, to inflict not-lethal damage with a -4 penalty.

Normally you get a -4 penalty to inflict not-lethal damage with a normal melee weapon, and you can't do that with a ranged attack.

New Magic Items

Talon Armor

+3 Moderate Fortification Full Plate which allows whoever wears it to emanate a 30-foot radius fear aura 3 times a day (Will 21 Negates) which replicates the *fear* spell. The Armor inflicts a negative level to whoever wears it without being a Talon. It cost 40,000 gold coins. (Craft Magic Armor and Weapon, *fear*, *limited wish/miracle,* 20,000 gp CL 13)

Zweifalk Armor

+1 Mithral Full Plate which constantly has an effect of *featherfall* on it. 3 times per day the wearer can fly with perfect maneuverability with a 60-foot speed for 1 hour. It cost 20,000 gold coins (Craft Magic Armor and Weapon, featherfall, fly, permanence, 10,000 gp CL 9)

Graben Trilogy

Curse of Captain Garvyn

By Ian Fordam

To the Honorable Mademoiselles Weathermay-Foxgrove,

Sailors love to tell tales. This fact is well known and, based upon my own experience, actually true. In recent decades I have heard many tales of the so-called *Ship of Horror*, and the tales have grown over the years. As one who had the misfortune to serve upon that vessel and the great fortune to survive the experience, here at the end of my life I wish to set the record straight.

In particular, I wish to address Captain Garvyn and his curse. I would say that the captain was a good man who did some bad things, but it's also possible that he was a bad man who did some good things. I won't deny that he deserved his curse, but neither will I deny that he acted toward redemption.

Captain Garvyn got himself—and by extension his crew—involved in the business of grave robbing. The first time it occurred back on our world that was, and to the best of my knowledge the captain was the only one who knew. Yet that was enough for the Mists to snatch away the *Endurance* and all aboard. Since then we've had plenty of time to learn the unnatural tides of the Nebligtode Sea, but at the time we knew nothing except that we were suddenly sailing upon unexpected waters beneath unfamiliar stars. Peregrine—he was the Master Navigator—was panicked over this change, and the rest of us weren't much calmer. At least the Mists, in their subtle cruelty, released us near an island. Graben Island, as we shortly learned.

Graben Island offered a dock and people willing to accept our money, even if they did not share any of our languages. Shortly after we arrived a snow storm hit, even though we lost souls of the *Endurance* thought we were sailing summer waters. We spent two weeks at Graben Island on that first visit, which gave us plenty of time to learn some of the local language and for Captain Garvyn to make the acquaintance of Blaine Graben. I assume that's when the captain made his second damned deal, because when the storm lifted the captain presented Peregrien with a new set of charts and told him to navigate a course to Todstein.

After that we did a lot of business in our strange new home. Sometimes outside the Land of Mists too, or so I truly believe. The stars weren't always good at staying in place, although in short order they always returned to those patterns which matched Peregrine's new charts. Knowing what I now know, I do not understand why the Mists would relax their hold upon us, even temporarily. I only know that they did.

Inevitably, though, we returned to Graben Island, and from there we would sail to icy Todstein, delivering the corpses of the deceased to the Graben family mausoleums. Many of us wondered why the Grabens interred their dead someplace so inhospitable when Graben Island itself had plenty of unclaimed land available for burial. We wondered

why the corpses were always smuggled aboard in wine casks, as if the burial of one of the ruling family were something shameful. Those of us who carried the casks up the Todsteiner cliffs and into the mausoleums certainly wondered who performed the actual ceremony of laying the Graben family corpses to rest. Nobody appeared to live upon Todstein, yet the bodies were always gone when next we returned. We wondered many things, yet we dared not ask.

By that time we were cursed, every one of us who participated in this grave robbing, pretending to believe the lies that the damned Grabens had spun for us. Maybe some of us were soothed by the silver that they paid. Most of us, though, merely dreaded the thought of examining what we had done. What we were still doing, in fact, every time we landed at Graben Island. Whenever we hired new crew members, some of us old hands did our best to dissuade them from joining us on corpse runs, just so they would avoid the curse.

I still remember the first time I discovered what happened when I ventured too far from the *Endurance*. At first I thought I must have caught some swamp fever in Souragne, but then the chills faded when I turned back to the ship. I eventually tried measuring the boundaries, and I learned that I could go maybe five hundred yards from the ship before the curse afflicted me. The rest of the crew—those who had helped deliver corpses, anyway—reported the same. I even know one sailor, a fellow named Elling, who paid a bunch of new hires to escort him beyond what we called the freezing zone. He had hoped it was a wall that you could be carried across. It wasn't. When the new hires dragged his corpse back on board, they told how his skin had iced over and cracked. Not one of them actually sailed with us, and I can't hardly blame them.

Wasn't too long afterward that Captain Garvyn reached his limit. We were on our way from Graben Island to Todstein with the weight of our sins hanging around our necks. Out of nowhere the captain ordered some of the sailors to haul the special cask of wine on deck. They obeyed, of course, even the ones who knew what the special cask really contained.

Captain Garvyn stared at the cask, and he said, "You poor bastard. Whatever it is that happens to you on that dead rock, you can't possibly deserve it." He told the crew, "Break the cask open and give him a proper burial at sea."

There wasn't a man inside the cask. There was a woman, and we could tell she had been beautiful before she had died and gotten pickled. Somehow that made it even worse.

We threw her overboard. I think the crew all kept waiting for the captain to say a few words to lay her to rest, but he never did. Not that it would have mattered, I think. The captain was as damned as the rest of us, and how can the damned possibly give grace?

I wasn't privy to the next conversation between Captain Garvyn and the Graben family, but I know it did not go well. Blaine Graben informed him that the Master was not happy. At first I assumed that he meant Master Colin, the head of the Graben family, but nowadays I don't think so.

After that we ran another corpse or two for the Grabens, feeling worse and worse each time. The woman's ghost was haunting us by then, which didn't help and wasn't supposed to. When the captain told us to bring the latest special cask to the deck, I think we were all ready to do so. We figured anything would be better than running corpses.

We were wrong in that. The special cask held a little girl.

We threw her overboard as well, and nobody was surprised when she started haunting us. Basil, the cook, even took to sending food to the area she had claimed as her cabin.

I understand the next meeting with the Grabens did not go well either. If the Grabens had hoped to cow Captain Garvyn into submission, then they did not know the captain. They sent us immediately to sea with another special cask.

There was no question about delivering this latest corpse to the mausoleums upon Todstein, but we sailed all the way to the island. Within sight of its frozen shore the captain broke open the cask and threw the corpse overboard. In life it must have been a very ordinary man. But the captain turned to the island. He shook his fist and made rude gestures. "He's just some fellow!" he hollered. "But he's one of us, not one of yours!" He said some other things as well, but I understand that you mademoiselles are women of refinement, and I shan't repeat them here.

Over the years I've heard many people telling me that the captain and crew of the *Endurance* were cursed for failing to deliver those three corpses. No, our curse struck long before then. When we refused to deliver bodies to Todstein, that's when we started to reclaim our souls.

To our good fortune, we hired on a band of new crewmembers who were notable for two virtues. First, they were not truly sailors but adventurers, strong in arms and magic. Second, they were compassionate. When they encountered little Charlotte's ghost, they treated her as kindly as Basil the cook did. They pried into the ship's haunts and then into the curse which lay so heavily across us all. Upon learning the truth of the situation, they took matters into their own hands. For a miracle, they were able to locate and reclaim the mortal remains of those victims whom we had buried at sea. We sailed to Graben Island, and we laid the three ghosts to rest. But these adventurers did not stop there.

I hope that Graben Manor is still smouldering.

We sailed then to Todstein. The adventurers were determined to confront the Grabens' true master. We... well, to a man, those of us who had been cursed were apparently cursed with cowardice as well. Not a one of us dared to leave the ship and climb the icy trails to the plateau where the mausoleums stood. Not a one of us.

We watched the adventurers ascend.

And we waited.

And we waited.

And we knew—we somehow knew—when it was done. None of the adventurers returned, yet we knew that the Master had been destroyed. A hint of spring in the ever-wintry air, perhaps? Something changed, anyway.

Although our curse was not broken entirely, at least our cowardice receded. Captain Garvyn was the first to announce that he was going ashore. Brummett and Ralfeo, the first and second mates, rose to join him. Peregrine, too.

Garvyn turned to me. "Koresh, are you coming?"

"Not yet, captain." I had only been to the mausoleum once. Many of the rest of the crew had been there more often than that, and we had only one dinghy which could approach the island.

"Then the *Endurance* is yours to command."

By then we could all see the spirits who had gathered along the rocky beach, waiting restlessly for our arrival. Yet Garvyn and Brummett and Ralfeo and the others rowed to the shore regardless. They disembarked into the crowd of spirits, who closed ranks around them. It was as if a bank of mists had fallen, and we could see Captain Garvyn and the others no more.

There was no reclaiming the dinghy.

We have returned to Todstein seven times since, and each time more of us from the cursed crew has rowed ashore in a new dinghy to be met by the spirits. Only five of us remain. This next journey will be our last, and then the ship once known as the *Endurance*, now the *Redemption*, will take another new name under a new captain.

We men of the so-called *Ship of Horror* were never as good as we wanted to be, but neither were we as wicked as sailors' tales say.

Gratefully yours,
Koresh
former Master Gunner of the Endurance and Captain of the Redemption

Righteous Rulership

By Ian Fordam

~ 1 ~

Sarah Verber, Toret of the Church of Ezra of the village of Kirchenheim on the island of Graben, was on her knees pulling potatoes when the messenger arrived. As a girl she had dreamed of joining the Church so that she wouldn't have to perform tasks such as pulling potatoes any longer. Upon joining she had learned very quickly that service to the Church took a great many forms, including those she thought she had left behind her. Even as the Toret of Kirchenheim, she was the head representative of the Church in the village, but then she was also the only representative—well, nearly—in the village. That fact made administration easier but also meant she was responsible for feeding herself through the brutal Grabenite winters. Hence the pulling of potatoes.

The messenger was a young man whose name Sarah could not place, which meant he was not one of her congregation and not a member of one of the village's most prominent families. She definitely recognized him, though. She had sometimes seen him tending sheep in the Steinfelder, leaping from boulder to boulder with the same agility as the beasts he watched. His name might have been Runar Hoffsen, but she wasn't certain.

The young man who might have been Runar Hoffsen had run from the heart of the village, which was along a slight uphill path, yet he was not even winded.

"Fru Sarah?" he asked, as if there were any doubt about which woman might be pulling potatoes from the little plot by the temple.

Sarah kept her smile to herself, though. "Yes?"

"There's one of yours, down at the shore."

With that, the messenger—whose name was almost certainly Runar Hoffsen, the more she thought about it—turned and ran back into town. Grabenites were a sturdy people and not much inclined to conversation.

Sarah's own endurance had increased greatly over her four years in Kirchenheim, but even so she did not attempt to run into the village, not even following a downhill course. She walked swiftly, careful not to trip. She had been a clumsy girl, and maturity meant only that she was no longer a girl. Yet she came to the village proper soon enough, and from there it was only a minute or two to reach the shore where the Knechtschaft flowed into the sea. There she found a group of men, including Runar Hoffsen, huddled around a small boat. At her approach they turned and looked at her with steady, expectant eyes. None of them said hello. One of them pointed at the boat.

It was a small vessel, larger than the Grabenites dories (used for skirting the coast) but smaller than their knarrs (used for ventures into and across the sea).

"Found it on the water," one of the men declared. "Towed it here." The man who had pointed at the boat pointed again, most insistently.

Sarah peered over the gunwale. There was a man sprawled in the bottom of the boat, unconscious. Or maybe a corpse, dead.

"Is he alive?" Sarah asked.

Several of the men shrugged. One said, "We sent for you."

Fair enough, Sarah thought. She took hold of the gunwale and started to swing a leg over. To either side of her, someone grasped the gunwale to keep the boat from rocking beneath her. She made her way into the vessel without embarrassment and crouched down beside him. She touched the skin at his throat. Cold, but not corpse cold. And he was breathing.

Looking more closely at his features, she guessed that the man was Vaasi. At first she had assumed he was Mordentish, just because Runar Hoffsen had called him one of hers, and she was from Mordent. For that matter, if he belonged to the Church of Ezra, then she still would have considered him one of hers. However, she was certain that no Vaasi worshipped Ezra. Especially not one who wore the Lawgiver's amulet around his neck. The Grabenites had summoned her simply because the man was not a Grabenite. Which, fair.

Sarah unclasped her cloak and drew it over the man's form. To the gathered men she said, "Who has an extra bed cubby? More than anything else, this man needs warmth and food."

~ 2 ~

The next day Brage Odden accused Niklas Aarmes of shifting the boundary stones between their lands. Such activities were far from unheard of; doubtless Brage Odden had done the same now and again himself. Yet they did not reach a good-natured compromise—which usually consisted of moving the boundary stones to their usual positions and sharing a horn of mead in apology—or even agree to wait until the next assembly to resolve the issue. Instead the two men fought, at first with fists but then with knives, and Niklas Aarmes cut off two of Brage Odden's fingers.

Someone fetched Sarah Verber. *Oh, no, not again*, she thought. She prayed for Ezra's healing blessing upon Brage Odden. She was able to stop the bleeding and seal the wound against infection, but the fingers were lost. Niklas Aarmes was nearly as distraught as his neighbor. He had not intended to cause such harm. He had simply lost his temper.

~ 3 ~

Kjetil Haested had a spare bed cubby which he volunteered for the Vaasi man's use. Kjetil and his family belonged to her congregation, but she expected that they would have volunteered their bed cubby even if they hadn't. The Haesteds were good people. The Kirchenheimers all were, generally speaking. Not terribly outgoing, but good. Knife fights were rare.

Sarah Verber had prayed for healing for the Vaasi man as well. Truth be told, though, the warmth of the fire in the Haested's hearth probably did him as much good as anything. Nonetheless, if Sarah's prayers had helped to stave off frostbite, then she was glad to offer them. Even to someone who wore the Lawgiver's spear upon a necklace around his neck.

The Vaasi man remained unconscious all that day. When Sarah visited the next morning, the Haesteds reported that he had awakened during the night. They gave him broth, and he drank it. They tried talking with him, but he did not understand Grabenite. (Of course not, Sarah thought.) However, he had gone back to sleep before her arrival, so she decided to let him rest, and then she got distracted by the fight between Brage Odden and Niklas Aarmes. She did not return to visit the Vaasi man again until the next day.

When she did return, clearly the Vaasi man was feeling much better. Seeing Sarah, he sat up in bed, although he was careful to keep the bed furs wrapped around his torso. (Get used to the cold, Vaasi man, Sarah thought, uncharitably.) He gabbled at her in his native language. She spoke the tongue well enough to understand him, but she was wary of letting him know such.

"Do you speak Mordentish?" she asked in that language.

His face fell. “Some,” he admitted.

“But no Grabenite?”

“None.”

“You came to the wrong place, then, friend. The Grabenites won’t speak anything else.”

He pointed to the amulet around her neck, the one which depicted the shield, sprig, and sword. “Do you preach to them in Grabenite? Or Mordentish?”

“Grabenite, usually. But please don’t misunderstand me. A few of them comprehend Mordentish reasonably well, especially among my congregation. But they won’t talk to you in it. The Grabenites are a laconic people.”

“Is there nobody in this village who speaks a civilized tongue?”

“There’s Jean-Marcel. He’s Dementlieuse. His improperly civilized education might include some Vaasi.”

The Vaasi man sighed. “Then I shall be dependent upon you for translation.”

“Not if you’re here to preach.”

“I am not.”

Well, good, Sarah thought. Terrible shame that I don’t believe you.

She pointed to his spear amulet. “What’s that, then?”

He puffed his chest with pride. “Though I am not a *priest* of the Lawgiver, I am nonetheless a faithful follower.”

Ah, Sarah thought. Well, that’s too bad.

“My name is Sarah Verber. I have the honor to be the toret of the Temple of Ezra in Kirchenheim. And you are?”

“Mishnev Dmitrov. Late of Kantora. Not a priest.”

“Not here to convert the Kirchenheimers, then? I can’t imagine what else would bring you to these forbidding shores.”

“I am seeking something.”

“Oh? What? Perhaps I can help you find it.”

“I will know it when I see it.”

~ 4 ~

After departing the Haested home, Sarah did something that she had not done for years. She sought out Jean-Marcel l’Voy.

Like Sarah, Jean-Marcel was an anchorite of Ezra, and he spoke Mordentish natively. However, those two facts covered most of their similarities. Sarah was a Pure Heart, while Jean-Marcel was an Erudite. That meant she was in Kirchenheim to aid the community, and he was there to study it. How ironic, then, that he had come to the island to study the Grabenites’ dead faith only to find himself distracted by the mysteries of the Black Chapel. (The Erudites were often like that, Sarah had found.) Although four faiths had left traces in Kirchenheim, Sarah found it ironic that he studied the one which offered nothing more than a single empty building. Even the faith of the Ascended, as dead as it was, had left behind songs and stories aplenty. The Grabenites remembered their faith; they just didn’t believe in it any longer. Regardless, the Black Chapel had captured Jean-Marcel’s attention and held it for three years with no sign of slacking.

The Grabenites found Jean-Marcel as strange as Sarah did. Then again, they found any deviation from their own ways strange. At least Jean-Marcel was a harmless kind of strange and, in the Grabenite view, a generally foolish kind of strange. They treated him the same way that they might treat a runt piglet, something to be pitied and treated kindly until the inevitability of the world overcame it. He did not seem to have noticed.

The first winter that Jean-Marcel had spent in Kirchenheim had been spent in the Kirchenheim

Temple of Ezra, that is, under Sarah Verber's brand-new roof. If Sarah was put out by his presence, he was equally put out by hers. However, the Grabenites had made themselves very clear that, of course, the man of Ezra would live in the Hall of Ezra with the woman of Ezra. Hadn't she paid them to erect the Hall for just such a purpose? (Well, no, but.) At least the village elders had the great decency to send their strapping youths to stop by through the winter to ensure that Sarah and Jean-Marcel had neither murdered each other nor starved to death. When starvation became a very real possibility, the elders sent the strapping youths with some food. Enough food, in the end, although narrowly so. It was a miserable winter. Somehow they both survived.

Next spring the Grabenites had built Jean-Marcel a sod hut not far from the Black Chapel. As far as Sarah knew, Jean-Marcel had not paid them. She certainly hadn't, although she would have, and gladly, if she had not already spent the vast majority of her church-provided funds on the construction of the Kirchenheim Temple. They built it anyway. She liked to think that they had done so out of sympathy for her, although, of course, they would never say so. Happily, Jean-Marcel had moved into his sod hut and to all appearances never regretted it, no matter how mean and miserable the quarters. Sarah had delightedly reclaimed the Temple as her particular residence.

Sarah did not find Jean-Marcel in his sod hut, for which she was profoundly grateful. It turned out to be the single most vile-smelling residence she had ever approached in Kirchenheim, and she had entered houses at the end of winter where people had been cooped up indoors. She took a quick look and a quick whiff and hastily retreated. Had Jean-Marcel let perfectly good food rot in his home? She wouldn't have been surprised, not after the winter they had spent trapped together.

She did find him at the Black Chapel. He was in middle of making rubbings of what he insisted were mystic symbols carved into the black slate walls. (To Sarah they appeared to be chisel marks.) Every month during the warmer season he went into the village to pick up parchment, chalk, ink, and a stipend delivered from the mainland. In turn he delivered his stack of rubbings and other notes to be delivered back to his superiors in the Church. On his return he often stopped at the Horn and Hoof for some food and a flask of mead. Apparently, he liked to mingle with the Kirchenheimers and with the summer visitors, learning the village gossip with an increasingly glassy expression as his flask emptied. For their part, the Kirchenheimers enjoyed telling him tall tales, just to see what outlandish nonsense he would believe.

Sarah's personal suspicion was that Jean-Marcel was a spy of some sort. She just couldn't figure out why the Erudites would want to spy on her or anyone else in the village.

"Brother Jean-Marcel, I am sorry to interrupt you," Sarah said in Mordentish as she crossed the Black Chapel to the corner where Jean-Marcel worked.

The Erudite jumped, and Sarah heard the snap of the chalk in his hand.

"Oh—Sister Sara. How pleasant to see you?"

Jean-Marcel was dark-haired and dark-eyed. His pasty skin looked babyish compared to the wind-roughened cheeks of the Grabenites. Even in the last days of summer he looked as disheveled as if spring had just broken. At the moment he also looked startled.

"Pleasant to see you too," Sarah lied. "May Ezra's shield protect you. Have you heard about the new arrival?"

Jean-Marcel blinked, but then his eyes focused, and he straightened his stance. "Yes, I have."

"He's from Nova Vaasa."

"Yes. So I've heard."

"He wears the Lawgiver's spear around his throat."

"I suppose he would."

"But he says he's not a priest."

"He's probably not, then."

He was missing her point. Maybe deliberately.

"I don't trust him!" she blurted.

"Well—" Jean-Marcel stumbled. "I mean—of course not. He worships the Lawgiver."

"His faith teaches that our goddess is the Lawgiver's concubine!"

"Yes. But he's wrong. There is much in their doctrine that is heresy."

Jean-Marcel had no idea how deeply frightening Sarah found that particular belief. However, Sarah knew she could never explain why to him. Jean-Marcel was too much an Erudite.

"Just—just be careful, yes? Keep an eye out for him?"

"Oh," Jean-Marcel said. "Of course I will."

~ 5 ~

On his fourth day in Kirchenheim, Mishnev Dmitrov felt well enough to leave the Haested household for some fresh air. Remembering her first months in Kirchenheim, Sarah borrowed one of Kjetil's winter cloaks on Mishnev's behalf. Kjetil had no use for it before the snows fell, but Mishnev had not yet adjusted to the perpetual chill in the air. He accepted the cloak as if he thought he would find vermin within, but then Sarah noticed him wrapping it closely around himself at the first touch of the perpetual cold-edged breeze.

She led him uphill, away from the village, making certain to walk slowly enough that he could keep up without undue effort. She wasn't certain he had recovered from his shipboard ordeal, and she did not wish to exhaust him into a relapse. Nonetheless, a point needed to be made.

At the end of the overgrown path stood the remnants of a building. It had once been grand, at least on a Kirchenheim scale. However, it had subsequently been largely dismantled.

"This is your temple?" he asked skeptically as they drew near.

"No," Sarah said. "Yours."

There was no mistaking the altar. It had the particular dual joined-diamond shape of the Lawgiver's symbol. The altar itself was made from stone, doubtless quarried from the nearby Steinfelder. It had been capped with iron, as all of the Lawgiver's altars were. The rusted iron had wept orange down the sides of the stone. All furniture had been removed from the fane, reclaimed by Kirchenheimers who had better use for wood than letting it rot in an abandoned building. There was nothing to hide the wretched state of the altar.

"This is a travesty!" Mishnev hissed. He spoke Vaasi, and Sarah was careful not to react. "Sacrilege!" He wheeled upon Sarah, trembling with rage, and he demanded, in Mordentish, "How can they profane the Iron Faith this way?"

"Because the Kirchenheimers don't care about the Iron Faith. No more than they care about Church of Ezra."

"But you claim to have a congregation."

"I do. There are Kirchenheimer families who come every fifth day for services. Some of them, I am certain, do so only to be kind to me. Others wish to keep in my good side, since I can work minor miracles of healing, as you know. I have no evidence that any of them actually believe in Ezra. At this point I rather doubt that any of them do."

"Then why do you persist here—"

"Because it is my duty. You can understand that, yes?"

Mishnev still trembled within his borrowed cloak. For a moment Sarah feared that he would attack her, perhaps attempting to gouge out her eyes with his spear amulet. But then he swallowed his fury back into himself and grew still.

"I understand," he whispered.

~ 6 ~

On the walk back down the hill to the Haested home, Mishnev remained mostly quiet. As they drew close to the village border, he said, "I think that you do not like me."

"Your faith teaches that my goddess is a mere concubine to your god." At that Mishnev mostly looked confused.

Sarah's anger spiked. "With a bit of empathy, Mishnev Dmitrov, you might understand why that would make me wary of you."

After a pause, he asked, "What is *empathy*?"

She nearly laughed out loud at his audacity, but then she realized that he was merely unfamiliar with the Mordentish word.

"Empathy," she repeated, just so he could hear the word again. "It's when you put yourself in someone else's shoes. Try to see from their view."

She was afraid that the idiom would be lost upon him, but then he said, "Like when you ride a day upon another man's horse."

He was Vaasi. Of course with the horses.

"Yes," she said.

~ 7 ~

They had reached the relative flatness of the dirt road through the village when Sarah's attention was caught by a disturbance. Half a dozen children clustered around another child, whom Sarah recognized as Mette Melgaard. Mette's hands over her face did nothing to silence her violent sobs or to hide the blood on her fingers, mouth, and twill tunic.

Meanwhile, not far from the cluster Tordis Schau held her son Ottar clutched tightly against her torso while Ottar struggled and screamed. Ottar was eight years old but large for his age, and Tordis' grasp was hardly secure.

Sarah strode into the scene with full authority. Which is to say, she had none but what the Grabenites allowed her. Fortunately, they allowed her significant authority in certain situations, most of which involved sickness or blood. "What has happened here?"

Mette continued sobbing. Ottar continued screaming. Everyone else turned to Sarah. One of the children said, "He *hit* her."

In a voice thick with anger and humiliation, Tordis Schau said, "She *taunted* him. For how he talks."

Ottar Schau had been born with something wrong in his mouth which kept him from speaking clearly. Although he was not a stupid boy, he often sounded as if he were.

In her heart Sarah held considerable sympathy for Ottar, but she knew that Grabenite opinion would side heavily with Mette. Thus she said, "Even so. He should not have struck her."

From Tordis' agonized expression, she was painfully aware of the Grabenite opinion. But she was also Ottar's mother.

"May I attempt to calm him?" Sarah asked.

Tordis nodded.

Sarah touched Ottar's head and gently murmured an orison. Even though she spoke Mordentish, which Sarah was fairly certain Ottar did not understand, his screams subsided to angry murmurs. While he still wriggled in his mother's grasp, he no longer seemed on the verge of harming her in his urge to escape.

With that immediate crisis averted, Sarah turned her attention to Mette. The other children parted to let her approach the girl, who dropped her hands from

her face and stared willfully up at the Ezran priestess. Her nose was clearly, badly broken.

“I can heal you,” Sarah said. “If I do so, will you let this go?” There was a long moment of stillness, and then Mette nodded.

The blessing of healing took longer to recite than the calming orison, but at its conclusion Mette’s nose was straight again. The blood remained.

“There,” Sarah said. “Go home. Wash your face. Wash your tunic.” She tried to make her tone stern. “And I recommend that you do not taunt Ottar again.”

By this time Tordis had already carried her son away.

~ 8 ~

Mishnev Dmitrov had watched the entire scene without comment. Once the children had dispersed and Sarah resumed guiding him back to the Haested home, he said quietly, “Clearly the boy attacked the girl. Why?”

“He has difficulty speaking. She made fun of him for it.”

“Seems to me she got what she deserved. Why did you heal her? She should have been forced to live with her punishment.”

“Grabenite history is thick with tales of blood feuds gone too far. They have become very leery of physical violence. To their minds, the boy’s crime was far greater.”

“Even out here? So far from civilization? I would expect physical violence to be common.”

“The Grabenites prefer social pressure. They are quite good at it. Hence the boy’s mother’s embarrassment.”

Mishnev grunted. He did not seem convinced.

~ 9 ~

That night Mette’s two older brothers caught Ottar and thrashed him soundly, calling it a blood debt. Fortunately, Sarah had not exhausted the share of power which Ezra had granted her that day, and she was able to perform another blessing of healing upon Ottar. She did not think any of the damage would be permanent.

~10~

The next day, Sarah concluded her evening prayers to a nearly empty temple. Only Ingvar Rolfsen had attended, and as usual, he fell asleep midway through her prayers. (Sarah suspected that the elder was soothed by the sound of her chanting, and she was fine with that.) At the conclusion she approached Ingvar to wake him up. His aching joints would not be helped by a long sleep on her temple’s benches.

“Thank you, Fru Sarah,” he said, as he did every night. “Lovely ceremony.”

“I am glad you enjoyed it, Herr Rolfsen.”

Having engaged in their customary exchange, Ingvar shuffled contentedly out of the temple and toward home. On his way out the door he passed Ingrid Bjornsdottir, who was waiting on the threshold of the temple.

“Fru Sarah? May I speak with you?”

“Of course. Come in, Fru Ingrid.”

Ingrid was training to become a skald. Sarah knew that stepping inside the Temple of Ezra might be considered disrespectful to the skaldic tradition, but she felt that she should extend the invitation anyway. Ingrid could always decline.

However, she did not. She crossed the temple threshold, smiling.

“I wanted to thank you for healing Mette yesterday.” As an apprentice skald, Ingrid worked with the children regularly, teaching them the tales of their

heroic ancestors and of the Ascended. While the faith of the Ascended had died away after the day of the All-Father's Muting, the related tales remained an important part of Grabenite culture. "And Ottar as well."

"Of course. Healing is what I can best offer to the people."

"And we are grateful for it."

Silence hung for a moment between the two women. There was considerable room for resentment between them. The *godis* of the Ascended had once enjoyed such gifts as Ezra now offered through her anchorites, but no more. For her part, Ingrid was a pretty young woman and graceful besides. Sarah was neither pretty nor graceful, and the fact that she was sworn to chastity did little to diminish her self-consciousness around Ingrid and the other young women of Kirchenheim. Yet for all that, they filled little of that space with resentment. Sarah liked Ingrid, and she hoped it was mutual.

Ingrid said, "I also wanted to let you know. Your man is down at the Horn and Hoof."

"My man? Oh, you mean Mishnev?"

"Yes. Him."

"He's not my man," Sarah said, despite knowing that Mishnev would forever be known to the Grabenites as such. "If he's feeling well enough to venture forth and have a drink, then he's welcome to do so."

"He's started asking about the last one." Ingrid pointed uphill, toward the abandoned fane of the Lawgiver. "The priest who was here before you."

"Oh," Sarah said. "Well, then."

~11~

Although Kirchenheim was only a quarter as large as Graben-town on the far side of the island, in the past ten years it had nonetheless received a significant number of visitors during the summer months. The first visitors had been put up in spare bed cubbies, much as Mishnev had been, but when more arrived, alternative steps needed to be taken. For sleeping quarters, a rancher named Gundarsen had converted one of his barns into a flophouse. For food and drink, Audhild Hallum opened the Horn and Hoof. The Grabenites felt that charging visitors whom they welcomed into their own homes was a violation of hospitality. Charging them to sleep in Gundarsen's flophouse or eat at the Horn and Hoof, on the other hand, was merely business.

Although winter's chill had not yet fallen upon the island, the season had definitely turned to the tail end of the summer months. That meant very few foreign travelers remained in Kirchenheim, and so the Horn and Hoof became a haven for the locals instead. The Kirchenheimers were delighted to spend several weeks of evenings in each other's company before the snows descended and separated everyone into their individual homes for the winter.

Sarah strode downhill toward Kirchenheim as fast as she dared. Ingrid followed easily. "Are you going to burst in and yell at your man?" she asked, clearly eager at the prospect of seeing Fru Sarah lose her temper.

Truthfully, Sarah was annoyed but not angry. "No, not at all," she replied. "I just want to eavesdrop."

"Oh!" Ingrid said. "Glad you said something."

Ingrid led Sarah to the back door of the Horn and Hoof. The kitchen staff—mostly Audhild Hallum's offspring—were surprised by their arrival, but Ingrid placed a finger to her lips and silenced their objections. They kept working, and Ingrid and Sarah passed through the kitchen to the less obvious half of the common room.

Their stealth was wasted. Silence reigned in the common room, and so any entry was obvious. A half-circle of Kirchenheimers encircled Mishnev Dmitrov. Nobody was talking. Nobody was eating. Almost nobody was drinking.

Svein Stenseth sat at one end of the half-circle. He cast an angry look at Sarah.

“This man thinks we speak your Mordentish,” he growled in Grabenite.

“To be fair, you do,” Sarah pointed out, also in Grabenite. “What’s he want?”

“He wants to know what happened to his predecessor.”

“I see.” Sarah switched to Mordentish and addressed Mishnev. “Would it help if I translated?”

Mishnev glowered at her. “They pretend they don’t understand Mordentish.”

“I told you already that they only speak Grabenite.”

“Then how did you ever learn their barbaric tongue?”

“I landed first in Graben-town. Some of the merchants there have learned to speak languages of the Core. Only when I could speak Grabenite passably well did I come here.”

“Ask them what happened to Dommer Zykin Krokorov.”

Sarah was certain how the Grabenites would answer. “When spring broke he got into his boat and sailed away.”

One of the Grabenites said to another, “Stick man could not endure our winters.”

Mishnev objected, “You didn’t ask them.”

“I didn’t have to. That’s what they said when I first asked them the same question four years ago, and they have never changed their story.”

“He never returned to Nova Vaasa!”

“Many ships which depart Graben Island never reach their destination. Including ships which intend to return to the island. As you must have learned on your own approach, the icebergs and shoals and the currents themselves make the surrounding waters treacherous.”

Sarah could see Mishnev growing angry and then angrier at her calm answers. Fine. She was angry, too. On the other hand, she could also see the Kirchenheimers in the Horn and Hoof becoming enraged, and she was certain that she was not the particular target of their ire.

Mishnev demanded, loudly, “Very well, then. Will they at least tell me whether Dommer Zykin Krokorov took his spear with him when he ‘left’?”

“So you’re looking for a spear?”

“I am. Ask them.”

Sarah repeated Mishnev’s question in Grabenite. All of the Kirchenheimers stared coldly back at her.

Svein Stenseth rose. Flatly he said, “I have heard that he had the spear in hand when he was last seen.” He turned and strode out the front door. Even though nobody rose to stop him, he still gave every impression that he had to push his way across the room.

Sarah repeated Svein Stenseth’s answer in Mordentish.

“He has heard?” Mishnev said. “Has nobody seen directly?”

Sarah’s sense of possible violence was mounting. Had Kjetil Haested been in the Horn and Hoof, perhaps he could have defused the possibility by reminding his neighbors of his responsibilities as host. They probably would have listened to one of their own. In Kjetil’s absence, though, Sarah suspected that she would be held accountable for any violence.

She said, “Mishnev Dmitrov, I recommend that you thank these fine folk for their time and leave now.”

“I have more questions!”

“They have no more answers for you. Please. Go.”

In the end, Mishnev offered no thanks, but he did leave.

At his departure, the Grabenites turned back to their horns of lager and mead. In particular, they all turned away from Sarah. Apparently, some measure of their anger was reserved for her after all.

Ingrid Bjornsdottir noticed the same. “Perhaps you’d best follow your own advice?” she suggested.

Sarah did.

~12~

Sarah did not like goats. She liked goat cheese. Given that, she had a goat, which she milked daily so that she could make cheese. She knew it wasn’t particularly good cheese, but it was far better than eating nothing but salted cod all winter long.

She looked up from milking her goat to find Mishnev Dmitrov watching her.

“Oh,” she said.

“Those barbarians didn’t take out their anger on you, did they?”

“No. And they’re not barbarians.”

For a moment Mishnev looked like he intended to argue with her, but then he changed his mind. Probably because he also considered her a barbarian.

“So,” she said, turning her attention back to her goat. “You’re looking for a spear.”

“I am,” he said. He crouched down beside her. “A Spear of Righteous Rulership.”

“Sacred to your Lawgiver, clearly.” The spear was a symbol of the Lawgiver, much as the sword was a symbol of Ezra.

“Yes. Three were created, cast from sky iron. One remains at large, last seen in Liara over ten years ago. One was destroyed two years ago when a brave but foolish dommer attempted to assert authority over Prince Bolshnik to restore the Cycle of Stewards. The prince commanded far more guards than the dommer could rally to his cause.”

“Unfortunate.”

“For the dommer, yes.”

“And this Zykin Krokorov brought the third spear to Kirchenheim?”

“So I discovered. I am a student at the University in Kantora. There I stumbled across a collection of letters received by one of Dommer Zykin Krokorov’s peers. One letter remarked upon the theft of a Spear of Righteous Rulership from its vault in the Crimson Citadel-Fane. Another remarked upon the sudden disappearance of Zykin Krokorov, followed shortly by a third letter explaining that, no, Krokorov had not disappeared but had been assigned to Graben Island. The implication was that Krokorov had been discovered there and was allowed to stay.”

“What made you think the theft and the brief disappearance were related?”

“Sheer intuition.”

“That’s a mighty slender justification.”

“Except that I happen to be right. I am sure of it!”

“So Krokorov had a spear. Don’t all priests of the Lawgiver?”

“Well, yes. But that was not the detail which convinced me. No. You have tried to tell me that the Kirchenheimers loathe blood feuds. Yet this whole village feels on the verge of violence. You saw the men of that wretched tavern last night. They were ready to mob us both. And there was a fight between the children which we nearly saw.”

To herself, Sarah murmured, “Niklas Aarmes.”

“What?”

“Days ago Niklas Aarmes cut off half his neighbor’s fingers over a boundary dispute.”

"Yes. Exactly so. That's the Spear manifesting its influence."

"How can you be sure?"

Sarah could have sworn that she saw Mishnev's eyes darken. He said, "I'm one of the Lawgiver's faithful. And I can feel it."

~13~

Sarah might have dismissed Mishnev's assertions as the arrogance of the Lawgiver's faithful except that afternoon she was approached by Runar Hoffsen, whose usual carefree demeanor had been replaced by something like panic.

"Fru Sarah—" he gasped. "My brother—He's been hurt—" Wait. Yes. Runar was a twin. Bernt was his brother. "—and I hurt him!" Runar (or maybe Bernt) blurted. "Where is he?"

"The Steinfelder. We were bringing in the sheep."

The Steinfelder were the rocky meadows north of Kirchenheim. The ground was too riddled with boulders to be farmed, but many families pastured their sheep, goats, and cattle across the Steinfelder during the summer months.

"Lead the way," Sarah said.

On the march uphill toward the Steinfelder, Sarah could see both the Black Chapel and the Lawgiver's abandoned fane. Jean-Marcel l'Voy would be inside the chapel, making his meaningless rubbings in the hope of discovering and deciphering clues about the chapel's builders. For a moment she considered asking Jean-Marcel to accompany them into the Steinfelder. He was also an anchorite of Ezra, after all, and so could perform the same healing blessings as Sarah. She dismissed the idea, though. Convincing Jean-Marcel to abandon his self-assigned task would cost time which Sarah worried they didn't actually have.

Once they had ascended beyond the village boundaries and entered the Steinfelder proper, Sarah asked, "What happened?"

"We were wrestling. You know, as you do. Runar kicked me. You know. In the eggs. And I got angry. Really angry. I don't know why. I mean, it's not like it's the first time. And it's not like he meant to. We were just wrestling, you know? It happens. But I got angry. And when we were both standing, I pushed him. Hard. Onto a rock."

Oh goddess. Not a head injury. Please not a head injury. I can't heal those.

"What was hurt?"

Bernt pointed to his own shoulder and said an unfamiliar Grabenite word. Either clavicle or scapula, she assumed. Crucially, though, not the skull. Bones she could heal, but the brain was another matter.

"How far do we have to go?"

"Not far."

Bernt's idea of not far was an hour's strenuous hike across treacherous terrain. Sarah nearly twisted her ankle a dozen times. She was worried that she would have to expend some of the power which Ezra had granted her to heal her own injuries in order to get to Runar to heal his injuries. Fortunately, though, she kept her feet properly beneath her, and eventually they arrived.

Runar sprawled in the center of the family's flock of sheep, who milled unconcernedly around their tender. Runar himself was not nearly so unconcerned. He was alive, thank Ezra, and he was even conscious, but his color was even more alarmingly pale than usual for a Grabenite. He had been bleeding into the ground for two hours. From the way his shoulder twisted, he had broken both clavicle and scapula.

Sarah knelt beside Runar. "Well, that looks uncomfortable," she said. "I can heal you, but first I'm going to have to set your bones. Asking the

goddess' blessing to mend your bones does no good if they aren't in the proper position to—"

She interrupted her patter to shift the shoulder into place. Runar screamed, weakly, but then started laughing hysterically.

"I knew you were going to do that," he gasped, "but you still surprised me."

"Then I probably won't surprise you again—" She made another adjustment. He choked back another scream, but his eyes burned with sudden fury. That was the moment that Sarah believed Mishnev.

"You bitch!" Runar hissed. "Be *gentle*. I'm *injured* here!"

"That's 'Fru Bitch' to you," Sarah replied, suppressing her own anger beneath a facade of serenity. With that profane lead-in, Sarah started chanting the simple prayer for the blessing of healing. Just enough to stabilize him, maybe ease some of the pain. She was going to need to make another adjustment to his broken bones, and she didn't want him thrashing those bones back out of place.

"Bernt? Come hold your brother down."

Bernt knelt on Runar's opposite side, as indicated.

"Like this?" he whispered.

"Exactly like that."

With the third adjustment Runar gurgled angrily, but he did not scream. He did not even cuss. "Very well," Sarah sighed. She was finally content with the way his shoulder lay. "Now the real healing can begin."

For this wound, anyway. The malignancy of the Spear of Righteousness yet remained to be dealt with.

~14~

That night Sarah dreamed of Rikke Westgard on the day of her exile. Rikke had sobbed wretchedly the entire time, not because she was being exiled but because she was being exiled alone.

Rikke Westgard and Vegard Grimsrud had always been a passionate couple. Winters were difficult for any household, but Rikke and Vegard had a habit of emerging into the spring thaw with the announcement that they had divorced. By midsummer, unable to contain their mutual fire, they had married again. The rest of Kirchenheim was embarrassed upon their behalf, but for once civic disapproval proved ineffective. So it had been for two years before Sarah Verber arrived in Kirchenheim, and so it was during her first winter there.

At the end of Sarah's second winter, though, Rikke Westgard had emerged from the house alone, confessing to the murder of her husband. One of their usual arguments had escalated, and she had stabbed him with her fish-gutting knife. When he lay dead at her feet her fury subsided, leaving her nearly helpless with grief and self-loathing. Only her need to confess had prevented her from killing herself.

The hastily gathered assembly lacked the will to execute her for the murder. Instead they exiled her from Kirchenheim. As Andar Snorrisen's knarr had departed to carry her to Seeheim, Rikke Westgard had stood alone at the stern, tears running down her face. She believed that she deserved to die. Being sentenced to live without Vegard was worse.

~15~

Kirchenheim operated under an assembly. Twice each year, a representative from each household went to the assembly to discuss disputes and trade matters and any other issues which might concern the community. Sarah was used to operating within the hierarchy of the Church; although not as strict as the hierarchy of the Lawgiver's Iron Faith, it was nonetheless a well-understood hierarchy. The notion of governance via assembly made her vaguely uncomfortable, although it seemed to work well enough for Kirchenheim.

The problem, though, was the lack of any central authority to whom Sarah could turn. Eventually she

decided upon Erik Alriksen, the chief of the Kirchenheim Yeomanry. The Yeomanry was the village's civil defense organization. All able-bodied men were obliged to serve for one year out of every four, and since the Kirchenheimers were Grabenites, of course they did. Alriksen was the only full-time Yeoman, which meant he was as close as anyone Kirchenheim had to a consistent central authority.

She found Alriksen at the Arms-House. He greeted her with a crisp joviality which she had gleaned was his way of pretending to be polite. Alriksen was one of the most conservative Kirchenheimers. He refused to admit that he understood any foreign tongue or any foreign ways. He certainly didn't approve of a foreign anchorite building her temple on the slopes of his village, not even if he had taken advantage of her healing prayers himself. By the same token, though, she gauged that he would be willing to speak poorly of Dommer Zykin Krokorov.

Once the polite greetings had been completed—a process over which neither of the participants dawdled —she asked him, "What can you tell me about the priest of the Lawgiver who came to Kirchenheim?" There was no point in referring to him by name. Alriksen would probably pretend he did not recognize it, and he would certainly never use it.

"He wouldn't learn our speech. He was a stubborn bastard."

No shortage of those in Kirchenheim, of course.

"He tried to preach to the village?" she asked.

"Nobody listened."

"What happened to him?"

"He left."

"What *really* happened to him?"

Silence loomed between them for several long seconds.

Finally Alriksen said, "That's not my tale to tell."

Sarah next approached Geir Vik, who was one of the prominent men among the ranchers. After him, she talked with Rannveig Audsdottir, who held a similar position among the farmers. The fishers were not as well organized or as powerful, but Sarah ran across Andar Snorrisen and posed her questions to him. To Geir Vik she brought up the Spear of Righteous Leadership directly, and then again to Rannveig Audsdottir. By the time she spoke to Andar Snorrisen she had concluded that mentioning the spear was hindering her investigation. Even so, Snorrisen was no more forthcoming. All three informed her that the tale was not theirs to tell.

Sarah asked herself, then, whose tale was it? She turned next to the official tale-tellers of the village, Ingrid Bjornsdottir and her skaldic mentor, Olaf Njalsen. Ingrid insisted that she knew nothing of what had happened. She had been just a child at the time, after all. Her answer angered Sarah, who doubted that Ingrid had only developed insatiable curiosity as an adult. On the other hand, Olaf Njalsen's reply was thoroughly blunt.

"I'm not going to tell you," he said. "Nobody is, no matter how much you ask. There's no meat on that bone. Let it go."

"But why won't anyone answer me? Have I not earned any bit of your trust?"

Olaf was one of the oldest men in the village. His hair and beard, although neatly braided, had gone to an almost sickly yellow-white, particularly next to his pale parchment skin. To Sarah's Mordentish eye, he looked more than half a ghost, except for his eyes. They were a blue that was pale but not at all faded. He looked at her sharply, and he said,

"Not nearly enough. Everyone knows that anything we tell you will get passed along to the new Iron Priest."

"He says he's not a priest."

"And you believe him? I don't. Even if he isn't a priest, he's still fully dedicated to that Lawgiver of theirs."

Sarah sighed. "I don't believe him either, to be honest. For that matter, I don't particularly like him. I'm not inclined to tell him anything he doesn't need to know."

"Good. Now just convince the entire village."

"No easy task."

"No, it's not. Maybe start smaller. Convince this Iron-Not-a-Priest to stop stalking the village. He makes the women and children skittish."

"And the men too, clearly."

"Yes."

"I will try to talk with him."

"Good. But be careful around him. Fru Sarah, the people in the village have come to like you well enough. We don't wish anything ill to befall you."

From the Kirchenheimer point of view, that was high praise indeed.

~16~

Kirchenheim was not a large village. Sarah did not take long to find Mishnev Dmitrov where he wandered among the buildings at the northern outskirts.

"There you are," Sarah said. It seemed inarguable.

Mishnev did not argue. "Yes," he said.

"What are you doing?"

He turned a sly look in her direction. "Looking. You know."

"Find any hints?"

"No. I haven't covered the entire village yet, but I don't believe it's here. I think it's somewhere… north."

In the Steinfelder. Fortunately that region of the island was both large and largely empty. Unfortunately, though, the exception was the hamlet of Seeheim. Sarah wondered suddenly whether the Seeheimers were feeling the Spear's effects as sharply as the Kirchenheimers were. She hoped not.

"Ah," Sarah said to cover her twist of thought. "You'll be exploring outside the village, then?"

Mishnev looked northward where the land sloped sharply uphill, and he scowled. "Probably so," he said. "Suppose any of these Grabenites have a map they would sell me? Not to mention a thick coat?"

"I don't think they hold much stock in maps, but I can ask."

"And the coat?"

"Coats they'll be willing to sell."

~17~

Kirchenheimers considered nightfall an ideal time to go home, eat their dinner, and sleep in preparation for the next day's labors. During the summer months, the influx of visitors interfered with the Kirchenheimers' preferred schedule. That was one of the reasons for both Gundarsen's flophouse and for the Horn and Hoof; they gave visitors places to gather without excessively disrupting the locals. Fortunately most of the visitors departed Graben Island each year before it grew too bitterly cold, allowing the Kirchenheimers to return to their preferred daily rhythms.

Sarah was not a native Kirchenheimer, but she had found that she preferred to be snugly tucked away in her temple after dark. Given that, when someone pounded at the temple door hours after nightfall, she immediately rushed to the door, assuming there had been another Spear-influenced bout of violence for which her healing prayers were needed. She flung open the door.

Signe Stenseth and her daughter, Jannicke Sveinsdottir, waited outside. They appeared fully calm, as if nobody had been hurt.

“Good evening,” Sarah said, pretending that her heart wasn’t hammering in her chest. “Please come in. What brings you around?”

“Good evening, Fru Sarah,” Signe said, and Jannicke bowed her heard respectfully. They entered the temple, and Sarah closed the door behind them.

“May I offer you tea with honey?” Sarah inquired reflexively. “Or—” Because the Grabenites were not a tea-drinking community. “—mead?”

Perhaps assuming that the former offer would be less inconvenient for Sarah, Signe replied, “Tea with honey, please.”

“I as well,” Jannicke said.

Sarah brought them through the public worship area to the room which served as Sarah’s quarters. It was a quick matter to put the kettle back over the hearth and make another two cups of tea. She was generous with the honey.

Eventually Sarah settled down with her two guests. “What brings you around?” she repeated.

“We hear you’ve been asking about the first Iron Priest,” Signe said.

“We know what happened to him,” Jannicke said.

To Sarah, the young women of Kirchenheim appeared to be uniformly, boldly, unfairly pretty. Even so, Jannicke stood out from the crowd, especially since—having been married for three years now —she was socially considered past her prime. Her strawberry blonde hair had lost none of its shine, even braided and looped as befit a wedded woman. Although her mother Signe was weathered around the edges, nonetheless she had retained her own beauty longer than most women upon the island. Even more imposingly, Jannicke was an excellent axe-thrower. She would have won the post-planting games each of the previous two years except that she had been defeated by the only more skilled axe-thrower in the village: her mother, Signe Stenseth.

“Would you be willing to tell me?” Sarah asked.

Jannicke said, “Only if you swear on your goddess that you will not share the tale with the new Iron Priest.”

“I swear upon the shield, the sword, and the sprig.”

Jannicke looked at Signe, who nodded.

Signe said, “My daughter has always been pretty enough to draw attention,” which, in Grabenite terms, was immodest boasting. “The Iron Priest arrived here, and he paid us well to build his fane for him. Unlike you, Fru Sarah, he did not lend a hand in the construction. Clearly, he believed such labor was beneath him, to which all of us villagers took poorly. While we labored to build his fane, in addition to all of our own work, he made eyes at my daughter.”

Jannicke added “While I was trying to work. On *his* fane.”

“I was not terribly concerned. My daughter had demonstrated her ability to look out for herself. I did not think this Iron Priest was nearly as dangerous as some of her suitors.”

“Little did we know,” Jannicke said ominously.

“You should have seen him once his fane was finished. Including that ridiculous iron altar. He held his spear aloft and demanded that we attend his first speaking the next day. He looked pompous. He looked preposterous.”

“But we all attended,” Jannicke said. “He couldn’t compel us to obey, not the way he thought he would be able to, but I think he implanted a kind of curiosity in us.”

“And, of course, anyone who wasn’t present when he had his demand heard about it anyway, and they were curious too. Just naturally.”

"None of us thought there would be any harm."

"And, really, I suppose there wasn't. We all gathered at the fane. We thought he was going to come outside and preach, the way that our *godis* used to. No, no, he insisted that we come inside, as many of us would fit. And we did, because we were curious."

"Except that he preached at us in the Iron Tongue! None of us spoke that. Not a word!"

"We waited patiently, just to see what would happen. But all that happened was that he lectured at us in a language we could not understand, and then he dismissed us."

"We were… not impressed. Nobody showed up for his next preaching."

"Very few people, anyway. I don't think anybody attended his third."

"He was furious."

"Oh, so furious."

Jannicke smirked. "He complained to me about how none of us appreciated the words of his god. I told him that none of us understood the words! He got angry with me. I laughed at him."

"Probably a mistake," Signe chided.

"Yes," Jannicke admitted.

"So a week later Åsmund Sorensen went into his forge to stoke the fires only to discover that his anvil had broken apart. I saw it. The anvil looked like an apple gone rotten at the core, but instead of rot there was rust."

"There was. I saw it too."

"The anvil was ruined. Åsmund was horribly upset, which we can all understand. His very livelihood had been taken from him! But at the time we didn't know that the Iron Priest had anything to do with it. It was all very mysterious and disturbing."

"So a week later the Iron Priest approached me. He said, 'The smith's anvil. Clearly, it was made from some inferior iron. Where was it made?' I told him, 'The mainland. The whole village helped pay for it. It was supposed to be the best.' He said, 'Well, it wasn't. Do you mine iron of your own, around here? Or are you going to have to send back to the mainland for another anvil?'"

Signe nodded along, but clearly the tale had become Jannicke's to tell. She continued.

"I told him, 'The mines we have are mostly played out. But we'd have to send back to the mainland anyway. Åsmund Sorensen says he doesn't have the means to cast a new anvil.' The Iron Priest asked, 'Where are these mines?' I said, 'The Steinfelder.' He asked, 'Are they really played out?' I said, 'Mostly.'"

Sarah knew about the mines. Most of them were indeed empty of ore. A popular Kirchenheimer pastime was worrying about when the remainder would cease to yield their bounty.

Jannicke said, "So he asked me, 'Are there any still active?' And I admitted, 'Some.' He asked, 'Do you know which ones?' I said, 'No.' That's when his polite face fell away, and he said, 'You're lying to me.' And he slammed the butt of his spear against the ground. And he commanded me, 'Take me to the nearest active iron mine.'"

Even seven years later, Jannicke still looked frightened.

She whispered, "And I did."

Signe laid a hand upon her daughter's shoulder. Jannicke sat up straighter. She set down her nearly untouched tea cup.

"I had no choice in the matter. He commanded, and the spear compelled me. It had eaten iron, and now it had strength."

Sarah wanted to make certain she understood. "It had eaten iron? You mean, Åsmund's anvil?"

"Yes. He said that the spear needed to be close to iron to gain strength."

"Really?" Sarah said. "That strikes me as painfully—" She didn't know the Grabenite word and so had to resort to Mordentish. "*—literal*."

Jannicke and Signe were eventually able to translate that into its Grabenite equivalent, a word which meant *exactly what the gods said*.

Sarah explained, "Usually something like 'the Iron Faith' is taken to mean not *exactly what the gods said* but more like *what the gods meant*. The Iron Faith isn't really based upon iron. That's just a useful to way say that the faith is strong. Like iron."

Both Jannicke and Signe smiled at the explanation. Signe said, "You've listened to Olaf Njalsen and Ingrid Bjornsdottir tell their tales. You know we are familiar with *what the gods meant*."

"Yes. Sorry. I'm never sure if I'm making myself understood. So what happened next, Jannicke?"

"I led him to the mine, of course. The spear had compelled me to. Then and there I obeyed. Without any preparation whatsoever, I led him out of the village and into the Steinfelder. Cleverly he had specified an active mine, so I couldn't just take him to the nearest. No, I led him to the Jernåre mine, which was five or six hours' hike away. An hour or two into the journey, the sun set. Summer was at its tail end, and the nights were already bitter cold."

"Much like now."

"Yes. My only consolation was that it was worse for him. These Iron Priests have no liking for the cold! Have you ever been on the Steinfelder at night?"

"No."

"It's very lonely, especially when you're hours away from home. It's easy to imagine something is following you, even if it isn't. You can't help but think of tales of draugr and fetches and the Flayed Rider."

"I thought the Flayed Rider was supposed to be in the southern part of the island?"

"He is, but your mind starts wondering, *What if he's not?*" "Ah. Yes. Of course it does."

"It was a wretched hike. At least it was even more wretched for the Iron Priest than it was for me. He was strong enough in his way, but he did not have the strength of someone who works day in and day out. Several times along the way he had to command me to stop while he caught his breath, except that he would never stop long because stopping meant he got even colder.

"I'm just glad the clouds were thin that night, and the moon was mostly full. At least we could see well enough to avoid twisting or breaking our ankles on the rocks. You've not been on the Steinfelder at night, Fru Sarah, but you've been on the Steinfelder? You know how easy it is to hurt one's self, even at midday?"

"Yes."

"Trust me, then, when I say that it's worse at night. As I said, it was a wretched hike. I'm certain I got us lost once or twice, but then I got us found, and eventually we reached the Jernåre mine."

Jannicke paused, picked up her tea cup, took a sip of the now-cold brew, made a face, and then set it back down. She continued.

"I had hoped that some of the mine workers would still be on site to shut down the mine for the winter, and I had hoped that they would be able to save me. On the other hand, I feared that the spear would compel them to obey the Iron Priest as it had compelled me. Neither happened. The site was abandoned. I did not know that the Bertelsens, who claim the Jernåre, had quietly but finally declared it played out. They had moved their equipment and lumber to another mine further north. The site itself looked as if it had burned but without ash.

"The Iron Priest was not dismayed, though. He walked right up to the edge of the shaft and looked down into the darkness, and he started to laugh."

Sarah knew that the Kirchenheimers mined by digging vertical shafts. She had been to one site— as usual, to grant blessings of healing to the faithless—and taken the opportunity to look down. Although she had never suffered vertigo before, staring so far into the depths of the earth had made her knees and her head feel unsteady. She couldn't imagine how much more terrifying it would be in the dead of night.

"He laughed?"

"Yes. And then he said, 'I can feel it! I can feel the iron!' The Bertelsens would have been glad to hear that, I'm sure. He said, 'Once I can tap its strength, your entire village shall be mine to command! But first—'"

Jannicke hesitated, then said, "He commanded me to kneel before him. And I did so. He placed his left hand upon my head. He… caressed my skull. He raised the spear, which he still grasped in his right hand. And then—"

Signe Stenseth, many-time axe-throwing champion, declared, "—and then I took his hand off."

Jannicke beamed. "We *had* been followed, you see."

"I had seen my daughter leaving the village with the Iron Priest, and I knew something was wrong. So I trailed them across the Steinfelder."

"Mama's axe caught the Iron Priest in the wrist. His hand fell away, and the spear fell with it. The spear toppled over the edge. He just stared after. Me, my need to obey had vanished with the spear. I put my shoulder into his chest and knocked him backward into the shaft. I could hear him scream, and then I heard him not scream, suddenly."

"He was dead?"

"We weren't about to climb down into the darkness to check whether he was still breathing, but, yes, we are certain he was dead."

"By the time the Bertelsens hiked back to the Jernåre, encouraged by what I told them that the Iron Priest had said, the entire southern face of the mine had collapsed."

"So you never recovered the body. Or the spear."

"No, but a thick vein of iron had been revealed. The Bertelsens were delighted. That next spring they reopened the mine."

~18~

Every fifth day Sarah performed the proscribed worship of Ezra, delivering sermons and singing hymns to an empty temple. Kirchenheimers believed in working through the day, without interruption for frivolities such as religion. Given that belief, Sarah had taken to performing lesser ceremonies at dusk. The members of her supposed congregation were more likely to attend if they felt they had done the day's work. However, they seemed incapable of tracking which days were the fifth days, and so Sarah found herself preaching most evenings. She did not mind. She was there to serve her congregation; only by doing so would her congregation ever learn to serve Ezra. Regardless of her public sermons, though, she greeted each dawn by performing her personal devotions. Dawn was when the goddess granted her blessings. Sarah nearly always prayed for blessings for healing, except in the dead of winter when she sometimes prayed for the ability to endure the bitter cold.

Although Sarah still found her schedule in Kirchenheim to be uncomfortably improvised, the Kirchenheimers found it useful to drop by during the times when they knew she was likely to be at the temple: dawn, noon, and dusk. Even so, Sarah was surprised to find Mishnev Dmitrov waiting for her when she emerged from her private chamber following her morning prayers.

"Come to worship?" Sarah asked.

Mishnev scowled, but something at the edges convinced Sarah that he appreciated the absurdity of her joke. "I need to speak with you," he said.

"Please. Be welcome. Have a seat." She tucked herself into the nearest pew and gestured for him to do the same.

He did so. He said, "I was eavesdropping last night." There was no hint of embarrassment in his voice at this admission; eavesdropping was not wrong when he did it, after all. "I know that the Spear is buried at this Vein-of-Iron."

"Jernåre. Yes. Wait. You do understand some Grabenite, don't you?"

"Yes. Just as you understand Vaasi, I am sure." He spoke in that language, just to make his point.

Sarah contemplated pretending that she had not understood, but she did not think she could be convincing. Instead she scowled.

"Then why pretend that you didn't? Your task would have been much easier if you had simply talked with people in their native tongue."

"Because they *should* speak Vaasi. It is the only tongue recognized by the Iron Faith."

"But they're not going to. They're Grabenites. They are as proud of their language as you are of yours."

"Truthfully, apart from that, I also knew that I had you to get your hands dirty on my behalf."

"Which is why you listened to my conversation last night."

"Exactly."

"So. You know where the spear is."

"Not exactly, of course, but at least I know what happened to it. That is progress. Now I ask you to help me recover it and stop this spate of violence within Kirchenheim."

"Tell me, Mishnev Dmitrov. What do you intend to do with this spear, if you should happen to recover it? Do you also intend to rule Kirchenheim?"

Mishnev laughed. Bitterly. "No. I have higher ambitions than that. I intend to return the Spear to the Crimson Fane and use it to bargain for my reinstatement with the Faith."

"Ah! So you are a priest of the Lawgiver!"

"No, but I was. Until I fell in love with a woman from a far inferior class."

Sarah snorted. "I spent little time in Nova Vaasa, but even I know that men, including priests, take lovers from supposedly inferior classes *all the time*."

"I said nothing of being lovers, although we were. I said that I was in love with her. When my Svetlana and dozens of others attempted to resist one of Duke Chekiv's decrees, I attempted to intercede to save her life. I did not save her, and I was cast out of the Faith for my failure to respect the duke's authority over his people."

"The Lawgiver has no mercy."

"No. None. Nor should He. I am the one who failed. I merely wish to atone for my sins. Help me, Sarah Verber, and I swear upon iron and blood that I shall take the Spear far from these shores."

~19~

That evening Sarah preached to Ingvar Rolfsen, who slept through much of it and thanked her for the lovely sermon afterwards. Once Ingvar headed home, Sarah pulled on her heaviest fur coat and trudged up the hill to the abandoned fane, where she met Mishnev Dmitrov.

"You know the way to this Vein-of-Iron?"

"The Bertelsens drew me a map."

"You told them where we are going?" he snapped.

"I told them that I wanted to bring rest to Zykin Krokorov's uneasy spirit. They were all in favor of

that. Turns out that both of the 'accidental' deaths which occurred at the Jernåre over the summer were actually deaths by violence. The Bertelsens noticed the spear's influence long before any of the rest of us did."

"Unsurprisingly. They worked closest to the Spear. Is the mine still open?"

"It has been closed down for the season. Winter is fast approaching. I don't know if you noticed, but we had snow just before dawn. Not that it stuck, but we had snow."

"So none of the Bertelsens are headed that way for months. To guide us."

"No. However, remember that I have a map."

"Do the Grabenites often draw maps?"

"No."

"Then let us hope that they have done so well enough. I don't relish the thought of getting lost on these Stone Meadows."

"Steinfelder. No. Me neither."

The moon was not full, as it had been when Zykin Krokorov had compelled Jannicke Sveinsdottir to guide him to the iron mine. However, Sarah had brought a flint and a mainland-made lantern full of whale oil just in case. They did not need it at first, because Sarah recognized the nearest landmarks. However, two hours into their journey they had passed the last of the familiar landmarks and so needed to consult the map more often. Fortunately, Sarah realized that, although there was no formal road to the Jernåre, hauling carts iron from the mine to the village left a trail even upon the tough scrub of the Steinfelder.

The hike was not as grueling as Jannicke's had been. Sarah did not like and did not trust Mishnev, but he had not compelled her to accompany him. Although concerned about what might happen, she did not feel the same level of fear as Jannicke had. If nothing else, she had had time to prepare in ways that the Kirchenheimer girl had not. While Mishnev had wandered the village, conspicuously pretending that he still sought his quarry there, Sarah had taken the time to talk with the Bertelsens and others.

Eventually they reached the Jernåre. Sarah had been half afraid that they would stumble across the shaft and fall in, but it was a visibly gaping darkness within the night. Even more importantly, the Bertelsen's outbuildings stood out against the horizon, providing them with warning even before they drew too near to the mine.

Mishnev drew his breath in through his teeth, making a sound like a hiss. "I can *feel* it," he declared. "The Spear of Righteous Rulership is here!"

"Down there, anyway," Sarah said, pointing to the gaping darkness ahead of them.

"Yes. There is a ladder?"

"So I've been told."

Mishnev approached the shaft and started circling it counter-clockwise in search of the ladder.

He found it near the closest outbuilding.

"I'm climbing down," he said.

"Without light?"

He scowled. "If you aren't coming, then give me the lantern."

Sarah reached into the pocket of her dress and produced a large iron key. "Why don't we get supplies first? The Bertelsens gave me permission to borrow from their stores." She hoped that Mishnev did not notice how loudly she was speaking.

The nearest outbuilding contained rope, leather gloves, picks, crowbars, sacks, and more, including a second lantern and a refill of whale oil. They used a long rope to lower the second lantern, burning, into the darkness. The distance to the floor of the mine was not as far as Sarah had feared. They had enough

rope to lower a sack full of gloves, picks, and crowbars. Both ropes tied off to a thick wooden post sunk into the ground midway between the shaft and the outbuilding, just to keep the ropes from trailing off into the depths. They tried to figure out a way to use their last length of rope as a harness, just in case the ladder proved fragile. However, tying it too long would do no good, tying it too short would prevent them from reaching the floor of the shaft, and lowering one's self using the rope felt more treacherous than using both hands on the ladder. Worse yet, they started to bicker. Recognizing that as a bad sign, they decided quickly upon a path. Mishnev would be tied to the rope, which they would loop around the wooden post, which Sarah could brace herself against if Mishnev should suddenly fall. Sarah would be left ropeless for her descent, but they figured that if the ladder could hold Mishnev then it could hold Sarah's lesser weight.

By this time Sarah greatly regretted the decision to sneak off into the night, except that she knew Mishnev did not want to draw the attention of the Kirchenheimers. He would have insisted.

To Sarah atop the shaft, lying on her back with her feet braced against the post, feeding out rope in her gloved hands, Mishnev's descent felt as if it took a very long time, and then it was suddenly over.

"I'm down," he called.

"Then I'm coming," she replied.

Her own descent also felt like forever, although the worst part was stepping backward into the shaft to put her feet on the first rung. After that it was just descending a ladder into nearly complete darkness. She was very glad for sturdy Grabenite construction. Her fears of a fragile ladder proved unfounded.

Mishnev had not waited for her. A single jumble of rocks was stacked upon the shaft floor, and he had already taken up a crowbar to start moving the topmost rocks aside.

When Sarah reached the floor, Mishnev said, "Kind of the Bertelsens to erect a cairn for Dommer Zykin Krokorov." She couldn't tell if he was sincere or not.

"I don't think it was intended as a cairn," Sarah replied. "I think it was just a pile of rocks which they were afraid to move." At any rate Sarah was afraid to approach it. This close to the spear, she could also feel its presence, and it did not welcome her.

"No matter. I don't see anything here we shouldn't be able to move between the two of us."

"We should have asked some of the Bertelsens to join us. They're used to this kind of work. You and I? Are not."

Mishnev cast an angry glance over his shoulder. "Do you really think they would have agreed to help me?"

"Perhaps not," Sarah admitted.

The smaller stones, they could shift by hand, although that was hard work. The larger stones required both of them leaning hard on both crowbars. Fortunately, Mishnev was certain where beneath the jumble the spear lay, and so they could direct their efforts usefully.

A particularly troublesome slab of rock finally shifted far enough for gravity to do the rest of the work for them. Sarah skipped to jump out of the way as the slab lurched in her direction. Breaking a foot or an ankle would have been grievously unfortunate; she had prayed for fewer healing blessings than usual. Fortunately, though, she was sufficiently quick and, for once, not clumsy.

Mishnev cried, "I see it!" He started shifting smaller rocks out of the area exposed by the shifted slab.

Sarah offered a short prayer. Mishnev glowered at her briefly, but he was too intent upon digging out his prize to complain about her supposed heresy. She finished her prayer well before Mishnev could reach through the rubble to grasp the Spear of Righteous Rulership.

"Ah!" he said.

And then, triumphantly, again, "Ah!"

He looked over his shoulder at her. "Clear this rubble," he commanded. He spoke Vaasi.

She felt the compulsion, but then she felt it slide away from her. Quietly she thanked Ezra for the efficacy of her wards. At that moment she was tempted to smash Mishnev's skull with her crowbar, and if she had thought she would succeed at killing him in one blow, then she would have tried. However, the martial arts were not her strength, and she did not think she would fare well in a hand-to-hand fight against him.

Instead she quietly thanked her goddess for her protection, and she pretended to obey, throwing aside the rubble which covered the spear. Mishnev helped shove at rocks with his free hand, but he did not release his grasp upon the shaft.

"Do not touch the Spear," he growled. "Not the shaft. Not the point. Or else I will kill you." Truthfully, Sarah was eager to avoid contact with the spear. She wasn't certain her warding prayer would withstand that.

As she worked, Sarah took advantage of the glimpses she could steal to study Mishnev's expression. Even by the weak light of the lantern, she was struck by how different he looked, as if someone else's skull lay underneath his face. She did not like being trapped alone with him at the bottom of the mine.

Eventually enough rubble had been cleared. Mishnev stood, pulling the spear free, and he held it aloft.

"Finally!" he exclaimed, still in Vaasi. "Free!" Sarah saw him grasp his right wrist with his left hand and massage it, as if eager to verify its intactness.

He turned his attention back to Sarah. "I will ascend first. You follow."

Sarah could feign obsequiousness, or so she hoped. "Dommer, should I not precede you? Verify that the path is clear?"

She felt his anger almost as a physical force.

"I will ascend first," he repeated. "You follow."

There was nothing for it. She hadn't thought she could defeat him physically before he withdrew the spear, and with the spear in hand she knew she had no chance.

"Yes, Dommer," she replied.

She prayed silently to Ezra the entire time that the Iron Priest made his precarious way up the ladder. His progress would have been faster if he had been willing to release the spear, but, of course, he was not. Then again, he probably was in no hurry. He had already been waiting seven years.

She was grateful that he had left the lantern burning at the floor of the shaft.

At the top of the ladder, he called down, "You may ascend now!"

So she did. Climbing up was easier than down.

As she crested the ladder and stepped back onto the surface of the Steinfelder, Sarah discovered that the Iron Priest had positioned himself to be able to stare southward toward Kirchenheim while still watching her out of the corner of his eye.

"Lead me back to your wretched little village," the Iron Priest ordered. Again the compulsion failed to take hold.

A gull cried nearby. Or something that sounded like a gull.

Sarah did not give the countersignal.

"Yes, Dommer," she said, and she turned southward as if obeying.

Three steps later her foot slipped on a rock half-buried in the soil, and she fell forward toward the

ground. She managed to get her hands in front of her, catching the worst of the impact.

She wondered if she could kick the Iron Priest's feet out from under him.

She wondered if he would run her through with the spear.

While she was still deciding, she heard a young man's cry.

Moments later came the crack of a rock striking bone, barely softened by the thin layer of flesh.

Sarah looked over her shoulder to see the Iron Priest raising his left hand to his temple. He was reeling. He uttered an incoherent sound. He did not give a command.

A throwing axe embedded itself into his chest. It landed with a very satisfying thunk. The Iron Priest toppled backward. He was too far from the shaft to fall over the edge.

Sarah saw him tighten his grasp upon the spear.

"Defend me!" he cried.

Not knowing whether her allies were subject to his compulsion, Sarah twisted as rapidly as she could and threw herself atop the Iron Priest. With one gloved hand, she grasped the spear and tried to twist it out of his grasp. She grasped his jaw with her other hand, hoping to forestall him from issuing any other commands. He bit down. Fortunately, her other hand was gloved as well. She heard the sound of people running. She had no way of knowing who they were coming to aid. Time to act. Pushing with spear hand and jaw hand alike, she pushed herself as far above him as she could, and then she let her full weight drop upon him.

The back side of the throwing axe hurt terribly when it slammed into her breastbone, but it hurt the Iron Priest even worse. Her weight shoved the blade of the axe even more deeply into his body.

For just a moment, Mishnev's face looked like Mishnev's face again, and then he died.

~20~

Sarah's allies drew near. They were no longer under the spear's compulsion if they had been at all.

"Is he dead?" Runar Hoffsen asked. (Or maybe it was Bernt.) Both Hoffsen boys carried their slings still at the ready.

"Nicely thrown," Signe Stenseth said.

"Not as good as your throw, Mama," Jannicke replied.

Signe snorted. "My lamb, it is time for me to confess. Seven years ago I aimed for the Iron Priest's chest, just as you did. I missed but in spectacular fashion."

Sarah rolled off of Mishnev's body, holding the spear at a safe distance as she did so. She was not certain whether it still held the Iron Priest's spirit, but she certainly did not want it to touch her skin.

"Are you well?" the other Hoffsen asked.

"I am," Sarah confirmed.

Two others stood behind Runar, Bernt, Signe, and Jannicke. Sarah had expected to see Åsmund Sorensen, the smith, but she had not expected Jean-Marcel l'Voy.

"Jean-Marcel! You've come away from the Black Chapel."

"The goddess wanted me to see how this affair resolved itself," he said mildly.

Sarah turned her attention to Åsmund. "The Bertelsens said they have a small forge here," she said. "Is that enough for you to do what we need?"

Åsmund smiled. "Probably. But, if you think we can carry that spear back to town safely, I have a better idea."

~21~

Atop the rusting altar of the Lawgiver, Åsmund Sorensen pounded the Spear of Righteous Rulership to pieces. Both Sarah Verber and Jean-Marcel l'Voy confirmed that no trace of divine magic remained.

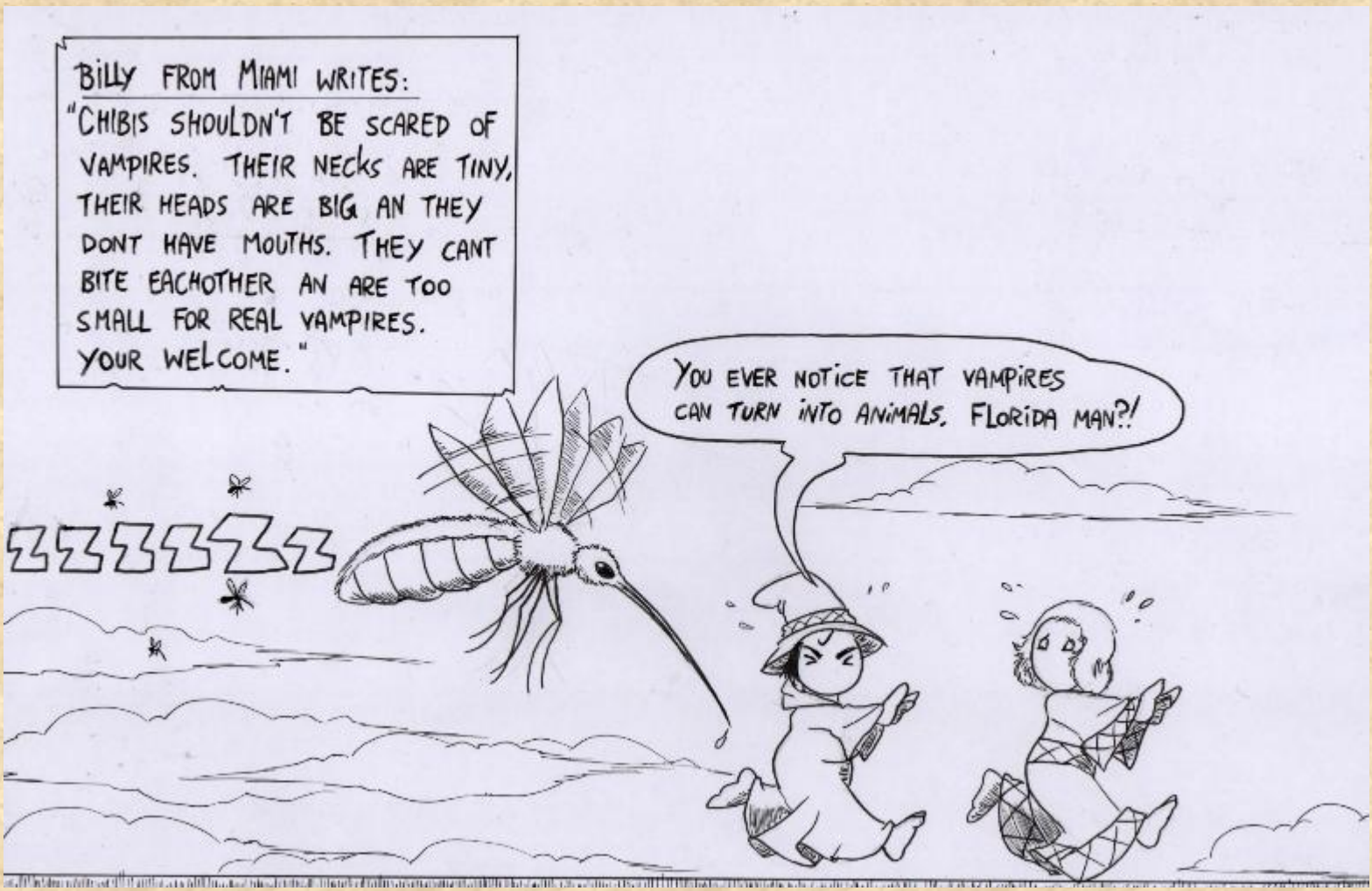
Zykin Krokorov's corpse was exhumed from his accidental cairn. He was buried beside Mishnev Dmitrov in ground which Sarah Verber had consecrated. She hoped that Ezran rites would be sufficient to lay both Vaasi spirits to rest.

Jean-Marcel l'Voy cast the necessary spell to contact his superior. "The Pure Heart woman has more spine than I had realized," he reported.

~22~

Sometimes Sarah worried that Bastion Otrava, head of the Pure Hearts, would never recall her to Mordent. If not, then she would live and die upon Graben Island.

On the other hand, on the rare mornings when the habitual cloud cover broke across the dawn sky, Sarah would look out of her temple and over the village, taking in the sight of the sun rising over the sea just as the fleet of dories set off for the day's catch. The brightness of the sun reflected upon the waves and the sails alike, rendering a brilliant seascape in contrast to the dark greens of sod and grass of much of the village. Such days happened infrequently, but on those days Sarah Verber felt she would be honored to live and die among the people of Kirchenheim.



Hot Time in a Cold Place

By Ian Fordam

Adventure background

Ever since 750bc, when Graben Island was drawn into the Core as part of the Nocturnal Sea, Graben Island has received much more attention than it did when it (along with Todstein) was isolated as an island of terror. The Fischer clan, backed by the Stromm and Cooper clans, has supported greater ties to the mainland. However, more conversative Grabenites have felt threatened by foreign influences upon their culture. In particular, they resent the several hundred sailors who descend upon the island every summer, fishing Grabenite waters for Grabenite fish. They also resent those Grabenite clans—the Fischers, Stromms, and Coopers—who encourage this incursion. Meanwhile, the Graben Family itself has remained largely mute upon the subject, leaving the progressive and conservative Grabenites to work out their differences.

One faction that has arisen from the conservative wing is called the **Sons of Flame's Father**. Its members consider themselves priests of the Ascended fire god Loptir, although they are not priests in game-mechanical terms. (Loptir, like all of the Ascended, fell silent during the All-Father's Muting.) They wish to establish themselves as the new leaders of a foreigner-free Graben Island.

Recently the Sons of Flame's Father came into possession of a *brazier of commanding pyre elementals*. (From the mainland, ironically.) Much to their frustration, because they are not spellcasters, they cannot use the *brazier* themselves to conjure any elementals.

However, the Sons have allied themselves with **Velferd**, the most powerful of the wise women of Graben Island (see the *Nocturna Sea Gazetteer*). As an adept, Velferd *can* use the *brazier*, and she attempted to summon a salamander from the Elemental Plane of Fire. However, Ravenloft being Ravenloft, she actually created a **pyre salamander** and an entourage of **pyre mephits**. Once she had conjured the elementals, she left the *brazier* (and thus control of the elementals) in the hands of the Sons of Flame's Father. Velferd's ermine dread familiar has warned her that the salamander will eventually break free of its controller, and she has no interest in being the controller when that happens.

The Sons want to bring ruin to those clans who most threaten the traditional Grabenite way of life. They will start with the Fischers, who are foremost responsible for turning cod into a commodity. However, once the Fischers have been sufficiently cowed, the Sons' attention will move to the Stromms and the Coopers.

Adventure Overview

The night that the party arrives upon Graben Island, the Sons of Flame's Father enact the first step of their plan. Every night the Sons will send their pyre salamander out to burn down one of the strongholds of the progressive wing of Grabenite politics. The first night, the **Fischer Packhouse** will burn; after that, the **Stromm warehouse** and then the **Cooper barrel factory**. If they have not been stopped by that point, then the Sons will set the salamander loose on the docks. (Note that this action will *not* be well received by most Grabenites, even those among the conservative wing. The docks are needed for the traditional way of life too!)

Of course, players often take adventures off the rails. If this happens, the material found in *Ship of Horror* and the *Nocturnal Sea Gazetteer* may be useful in expanding the adventure to accommodate whatever unexpected course of action the players may take.

A Note About Monsters

This adventure assumes that the *brazier of commanding pyre elementals* creates a pyre salamander and pyre mephits. These are formidable creatures! For a party of lower-level PCs, consider replacing the salamander with a lesser salamander (as described in the *Monstrous Compendium Planescape Appendix III*) and/or the mephits with either flame snakes or elemental vermin (from *Monstrous Compendium Annual Volume One*).

In all cases, the elementals created are "pyre" elementals, spawned from the Mists, not drawn from the Plane of Fire. They should be treated as their fire elemental counterparts except that they are not Outsiders and cannot *gate* in reinforcements.

A Note About Magic

This adventure also assumes that magic is rare in the Domains of Dread, and even a +1 weapon is hard to come by. Wizards and clerics are almost unheard of on Graben Island, giving PC spellcasters an unusually strong advantage within the adventure. DMs are encouraged to review the magic items and spells available to the PCs. Not every advantage should be thwarted, but it is always good to be prepared to anticipate what might happen. In certain circumstances, party strength may warrant increasing the number of elemental beings created by the Dark Powers when the *brazier* was first lit.

Arrival

So the party has come to Graben Island. The reason does not particularly matter; this adventure is unrelated to any larger mission in which they might be engaged. The important part is that they have come to Graben Island—in particular, Graben-town.

Whatever business brings the PCs to the island, this adventure works best if the party is not in a position to skedaddle after the events of the first night.

Seasons and Weather

This adventure assumes that the party arrives upon Graben Island sometime in the warmer months of the year, when the island is beset by its annual influx of foreigners. While it may be adapted to the winter months, the party and the Grabenites alike will be hindered by the continual problems of navigating through feet of snow and of not freezing to death.

Regardless of the time of year, the party will find the weather perpetually overcast and cold. Graben Island doesn't make itself any more welcoming to foreigners than its inhabitants do.

Where to Stay

If the party arrives by sea, they will have the opportunity to talk with the harbormaster, **Aesep Brand**. Due to his daily exposure to foreigners, he speaks a variety of languages: Darkonian, Vaasi, Liffen, a smattering of Mordentish, and, of course, his native Grabenite. If asked, Aesep can recommend places for the party to stay during their time in Graben-town:

- The **Black Sheep Inn** is the most expensive, but it's also likely to be the most comfortable. The food is plain but filling.
- The **Weighted Anchor** offers bunks but no food or drink. However, drinks and carousing (but still no food) may be found immediately next door at the **Capstan Tavern**. The Anchor is cheaper than the Sheep, but it's not as comfortable, particularly given the carousing next door.
- Rooms may be rented at **Fru Hjordis' Bunkhouse** at the edge of the immigrants' quarter. Breakfast and dinners are included. Fru Hjordis prefers longer-term tenants but will consider short-term renters for a slight premium on the rent. Also, do not flirt with Fru

Hjordis' daughter unless her daughter flirts back.

- There are also a number of nameless bunkhouses in the immigrants' quarter. They are commonly identified with a sign of a cod lying in a bed. They are by far the cheapest option, but the most crowded and the least safe. No food or drink is available; these are bunkhouses alone.

Any other Grabenite can provide the same recommendations. The difference is that Aesep Brand is used to dealing with foreigners and has learned to be cheerfully polite to them. The average Grabenite on the street is likely to be more sullen and resentful.

Stingy PCs may resist paying for lodging when they can camp out on their own. However, they will discover that all of the land in the basin where Graben-town stands is claimed by someone. "This land is mine. The Graben Family gave me leave to build my farm here." They will have to hike out of the basin to the Steinfelder or the Bludbadholz to find unclaimed territory to camp in.

The Wise Woman's Prophecy

While venturing into town, the party is approached by an old woman who rants at them (and everyone else in hearing) in Grabenite. This woman is **Velferd**, one of the wise women who sometimes serves as an irascible oracle. Here is what she says:

The whale road brings strangers
Who drag filth into the hearth.
As the jotuns' tears fall
The Trickster reveals his gift.

Immediately after reciting her prophecy, Velferd moves on to her next victim, whether foreigner or Grabenite. If the PCs interrupt her performance to try to ask her questions, she will pretend that she does not understand them until they let her continue on her way.

Any Grabenite who hears the prophecy can translate it, including the kennings within: the whale road is the sea, the jotuns' tears are snowflakes, and the Trickster's gift is fire. The locals can also explain that Velferd is not a madwoman but an actual oracle, so it is best to listen to what she says. Attentive PCs may glean that the people of Graben-town respect and fear Velferd, but they do not particularly like her.

Velferd is revealing the plans of the Sons of the Flame's Father as a way of advertising her own "prophetic" abilities. She isn't personally invested in whether the Sons' plan succeeds.

Settling In

Once the PCs have settled into their rooming situation of choice, they are likely to find a place to eat or drink or otherwise expose themselves to the community. In that case, they may overhear the following rumors from the foreigners:

d8	Rumor
1	"I really wish the Grabenites would build a lighthouse. Crossing the Nocturnal Sea is dangerous enough without that blind landing at the end."
2	"These bunkhouses are built to collapse. The Grabenites want to make sure we know we aren't welcome."
3	"At the end of every season I'm glad to be done with hauling fish, but still I'm glad to have the silver."
4	"The Fischer Packhouse is the only reason the island survives. Other than cod, what else does it have to trade?"

d8	Rumor
5	"I can't really blame the Grabenites for resenting us. I mean, we're taking all their fish."
6	"The beer that they sell down at the Black Sheep Inn? It's really not bad! Fills a belly nicely when the winter winds start blowing."
7	"Tevkik Demirkol got jumped last night by a bunch of Grabenites. Not youths, either. Adults. He might not have survived if somebody hadn't gotten that anchorite to come heal him."
8	"We're in trouble if the Family ever turns against us. Even the Grabenites who don't mind foreigners would help to throw us off the island if the Family said to."

Alternatively, they may hear different rumors if they end up someplace where the Grabenites socialize:

d8	Rumor
1	"The Fischer Packhouse is a terrible eyesore and an affront to our traditional way of life."
2	"Because of the Fischers, we don't have to scrape by the way we used to."
3	"We should build a lighthouse. It would make trade with the mainland easier."
4	"Can you believe the Fischers want to build a lighthouse? That will just encourage more foreigners to come!"
5	"I'm surprised that the Graben Family hasn't put an end to all of this reckless development. Then again, they don't have to live with it."
6	"The Graben Family should just tell the Assembly once and for all that the Fischers have their blessing. I'm tired of hearing the old-timers grouse."
7	"They're already planning to build a sixth dock, even though the fifth dock still isn't completed!"
8	"I'm glad to hear the Assembly is thinking ahead, already planning to build a sixth dock."

Brawl

As a final bit of scene-setting, the party witnesses a brawl between three sailors and five Grabenites. If the PCs are at a tavern, the brawl likely occurs just outside. Otherwise, perhaps it will take place on the road outside their sleeping quarters as they prepare for bed.

The party may intervene, and the Grabenites will slink away as soon as they find themselves outnumbered. If the party intervenes with the clear intention of aiding the sailors, the sailors are highly grateful. They have little money, but they will gladly spend it to buy the party a round. However, even if the party intends only to break up the fight, the sailors are still grateful. Similarly, either way the Grabenites are resentful, but not resentful enough to get into a fight they aren't likely to win.

If the party does not intervene, one of the sailors escapes, but the other two get badly beaten.

The First Night

Events of the First Night

After the party has gone to sleep, they will almost certainly be awakened by the commotion outside their resting place. (If anyone is keeping watch, they will definitely notice.) PCs who venture outside to investigate will immediately observe an orangey glow on the horizon.

"The Packhouse!" someone cries. "The Fischer Packhouse is on fire!"

And it is.

Contrary to the expectations of the Sons of Flame's Father, most of the able-bodied people living in Graben-town gather to fight the fire, conservative or progressive, native or immigrant. Untamed fire is *bad* in a town which depends so heavily upon its wooden boats and where so many buildings are at least partially constructed from wood and thatch. At least the only building which stands near the Packhouse is the Dry Dock, which is feeble reassurance to those people whose boats (and therefore livelihoods) are currently in the Dry Dock.

The PCs are very much welcome to join in the firefighting effort. Nobody will question them. Putting out the fire is too important. Unless the PCs have magic to affect the situation, they will be shuffled into the bucket brigade and put to work.

Forty minutes after the PCs arrive on the scene, the fire's intensity suddenly drops. (The *brazier* has extinguished after an hour, and the elementals have been summoned back into its ashes.) The attempt to tame the flames gains more ground from there, and two grueling hours later the fire appears to be out.

The Fischer Packhouse is a ruin. The stone-built lower portion of its walls still stand, but the wooden upper portion and the roof are all gone. The equipment is ruined. The expensive Richmuloise tin has melted into slag.

Ordinarily the Packhouse operates across two shifts. Fortunately, the fire started after the second shift, when the building was mostly empty. Mostly. There were six guards, four of whom escaped and helped to fight the fire. The other two are nowhere to be found. Also missing is **Hugo Fischer**, a foreman of the Fischer clan. The guards who survived report that Hugo Fischer had stayed late to work.

Despite the terrible fire, snow falls over Graben-town, reaching a depth of two or three fingers. Of course, such weather is extremely common at the present time of year. Most of the snow will melt after daybreak. That too is common as summer gives way to winter—or, as the Grabenites have it, as mud season gives way to snow season.

The snow steams where it falls upon the remains of the Fischer Packhouse.

Aftermath of the First Night

If the party is staying at Fru Hjordis' Bunkhouse, they will be present when her daughter **Margrete** bears ill news to her mother:

"They are saying that Hugo Fischer died in the fire."

"It saddens my heart to hear that."

"Mother—truly? You loathe the man!"

"I do. But he still doesn't deserve to be burnt alive."

Nor is Hugo Fischer's death the only rumor circulating about town. Several of the fire-fighters who were closest to the blaze swear that they saw a serpent of flame writhing within the Packhouse, surrounded by a half-dozen fiery little winged men. The serpent and winged men vanished suddenly, streaking into the night sky in a ripple of heat.

At this point there is little for the party—or anyone else—to investigate. Most Grabenites believe that the burning of the Packhouse is nothing but a horrible accident.

The Second Night

Events of the Second Night

When Pieter Fischer made his play to establish trade with the mainland, his first allies were the Coopers, who made barrels suitable for hauling lots of fresh fish. However, his most important allies were the Stromms, who ran the general store of the then-village of Graben. Their business contacts, maintained precariously over the years through the Call of the Claw Mistway, proved invaluable once the Nocturnal Sea formed.

Naturally, the Sons of the Flame's Father target the Stromm warehouse on the second night. The Sons attempt to summon the elementals at midnight, just as they did the night before. However, their attempts are met with frustration as the *brazier* refuses to light. After an hour's struggle the *brazier* finally ignites, and the Sons send the elementals out to the Stromm warehouse.

However, although most Grabenites do not yet realize the Packhouse fire was no accident, the Fischers and their allies have succeeded in their mercantile endeavors in part because of planning for contingencies. The Stromm warehouse and the Cooper barrel factory are now under heavy guard. In addition, the clans have discretely placed barrels of water around the buildings' perimeter.

(If the PCs used magic in the previous night's firefighting and were observed doing so, they may have been approached by the Fischers or their allies to help prepare for this eventuality. Even a low-level spell such as *purify food and drink*, which transforms salt water into fresh, can be useful in reducing the damage caused to buildings by the firefighting efforts themselves.)

Given the extra personnel on hand, it is inevitable that someone will observe the arrival of the pyre salamander and its mephit entourage. With a ferocious heat shimmer, the elementals arrive where they have been commanded, and immediately they proceed to ignite all flammable materials at hand. Some of the guards attempt to attack the salamander and mephits, but a few guards depart the scene in order to report to the Stromm clan that supernatural creatures are causing the fires.

If the PCs are at hand, their presence may significantly affect the outcome of the battle, particularly if they possess magic weapons. (The pyre salamander is resistant to non-magic weapons.) Otherwise the fight is a brutal one for the guards. They can distract the mephits from their incendiary mischief, but casualties are significant. Worse yet, the guards fare very poorly against the salamander. In fact, their most effective weapons against the salamander are the barrels of water distributed around the Stromm warehouse. While water does not cause damage to the salamander, it irritates it terribly, and time spent focused upon burning off the water is time not spent killing the guards or burning property.

At the end of an hour, the pyre salamander and any remaining pyre mephits are recalled to the *brazier*. They disappear suddenly, although perceptive observers may notice a heat shimmer rocketing toward the northeast.

Aftermath of the Second Night

Word of the flaming man-serpent and its winged minions spreads across Graben-town like, well, like wild fire. Nobody mistakes the two burnings as accidents any longer.

The Coopers openly prepare for an attack. They line their factory with even more water barrels.

If the PCs took an active part in the previous night's combat or have otherwise drawn attention to their abilities, they will be approached by **Giermund Liefsen**, a sergeant of the Yeomanry. (The Yeomanry are the closest thing the communities of Graben Island have to a police force or army.) He asks the party's aid in finding out who is causing these fire creatures to attack. If they can stop the arsonists, so

much the better. (Liefsen does not much care whether the arsonists are taken dead or alive. Alive would be marginally better so that they can be lawfully tried before the Assembly. However, dead is perfectly acceptable as long as there is proof that the deceased were the arsonists.) Liefsen offers a reward which the DM should scale to be enough to convince the players it *is* a reward, but it should also be apparent that it's the limit of what the town deacons could scramble together.

Meanwhile, Harbormaster Aesep Brand has been told to stop any ships from departing the island, and he receives the support of the Yeomanry in doing so. These orders come straight from Josiah Graben himself. The Family does not want the arsonists to escape.

The Third Night

Events of the Third Night

On the third night, matters do not go as planned for anybody.

A farmer named **Kjetil Geving** had been thinking about recent events, of course. On the third night, he even stayed awake deep into the night in order to rouse the household if the house should be attacked. However, as the hours tick by he forced himself to admit what many others by this time have realized: The Fischer/Stromm/Cooper alliance is the target, not a mere owner of a mid-sized farm. Worse yet, Kjetil began to suspect that one of his neighbors, who he knows tends toward the conservative wing of Grabenite society, may be involved.

Kjetil was not very smart and not always prudent, but he had his full share of Grabenite independence. He roused **Arvid Knudsen**, his most trusted farmhand, and despite the very lateness of the hour, the two men took the half-hour hike to their nearest neighbor's farm, Urness.

Much to their surprise and suspicion, when Kjetil and Arvid arrived at Urness, the main house was well lit and clearly awake. After instructing Arvid to keep watch but keep hidden, Kjetil knocked at the door at Urness. The door was answered almost immediately.

Kjetil had stumbled across the Sons of Flame's Father at the farm of its leader, **Sivert Urness**. The Sons had been struggling to light the *brazier* for nearly two hours since midnight. They even grew desperate enough to send one of their number to disturb the wise woman Velferd to request her assistance. (They assumed Kjetil was that member returning when they answered the door.) When Kjetil was brought into the central chamber of the farmhouse, he found his neighbor Sivert and half a dozen others there, gathered around a brazier which emitted an unusual amount of foul-smelling smoke.

Kjetil was not very smart and not always prudent, but neither was he stupid. He had expected to confront Sivert one-on-one. However, finding himself confronted with seven of his neighbors, all of whom were clearly displeased at his intrusion, he reconsidered his plan of action:

"What are you doing here, boy?"

"I—I'm afraid, Sivert. Afraid that my farm will burn next."

"Your farm is safe. Who would want to burn it? No, it's those of us who own real farms who need to worry. Go home, boy. Get some sleep."

"Thank you. I will."

Kjetil made a graceless exit as swiftly as he could, and he and Arvid begin the trek back home to Geving. The two men were halfway home when the 24th hour had elapsed since the *brazier* last extinguished itself. Sivert Urness and the Sons of Flame's Father finally succeeded in summoning the salamander and its escort.

"The boy saw too much," another Son argued as the pyre elementals smoldered at attention. "He needs to die."

"That's true," Sivert finally admitted, despite great reluctance. Kjetil was a farmer, after all. One of the good guys. "He does."

The place where Kjetil and Arvid were burned to ash remained smoking until the snow started melting at dawn. The salamander and mephits returned to the *brazier* and could not be re-summoned to destroy the Cooper barrel factory. Not that night, anyway.

Aftermath of the Third Night

The breaking of the pattern throws all of Graben-town into confusion, albeit reservedly happy confusion. The more foolishly optimistic, who do not realize they are in Ravenloft, dare to hope that the arsons have ended.

Although rumors spread more slowly among the outlying farms than in the town proper, eventually the townfolk learn of the inexplicable burning of a farmer and a farmhand. If the party questions further, they may learn that the burning happened on the road between the farms of Geving and Urness.

Even before hearing this latest news, though, it will become apparent to the party that the burnings have united the Grabenites and the foreigners in one way at least: All factions despise the arsonists.

The Fourth Night

Events of the Fourth Night

On the fourth night, the Sons of Flame's Father are finally able to send the salamander and mephits to attack the Cooper barrel factory. However, the Coopers are not caught at all off guard. They have spent much of the previous day relocating their tools and materials to other locations nearby, including the **Oppstegshall**. The Oppstegshall was once the Temple of the Ascended, and it remains dedicated to traditional Grabenite culture. There Anatal artifacts are proudly displayed and skalds recite the *Eddas* to teach the children of their heritage. It is also where the assembly meets. In other words, it is the building which the conservative foes of the Coopers are least likely to burn! Meanwhile, the Cooper barrel factory has been fortified with barrels of sea-water, just because those proved most effective against the flaming men-serpent when it attacked the Stromm warehouse.

The Sons of Flame's Father have paid attention to events in town, and they know that the factory has been emptied. Nonetheless, they feel that the statement must be made, and so the salamanders and mephits attack the factory. Particularly if the PCs have a scheme for fighting the elementals (even "hit it hard with magic weapons"), they will be supported by brave Grabenites. The Grabenites are pleased to receive aid, but they will not let it be said that they cowered while others fought for them.

The building of the Cooper barrel factory will likely be destroyed, but the livelihood of the clan will not.

Aftermath of the Fourth Night

At any point in this adventure, if the pyre salamander and all mephits are destroyed, the question remains: Who summoned them? Josiah Graben will not reopen the harbor until that question has been answered.

The events of the fourth night leave the Grabenites feeling more optimistic, but warily so. All three of the clans behind the progressive wing have been damaged? Will there be a fourth target?

Nobody knows. And that makes preparation difficult.

The Fifth Night

Events of the Fifth Night

If the elementals have been destroyed by this time, then, of course, there are no more burnings. The Sons of Flame's Father will slink into the shadows until they can coax another spellcaster into creating more elementals using the *brazier* for them. Velferd,

for one, will refuse, having seen the town turn against the arsonists.

Otherwise, the Sons of Flame's Father are torn. Some of them feel that the proper approach is to wait, letting the Fischers, Stromms, and Coopers realize how badly damaged they are. Let the progressives collapse upon themselves, as it were. Others argue that the new dock would be a good target since the new dock is only needed because of all the foreign vessels which now land at Graben Island. (Better yet, they have verified that all the ships docked at the fifth dock are all foreign-owned.)

Most audaciously, though, are the Sons who want to send the salamander to the fifth dock... *and then intervene*. By declaring themselves publicly as priests of the fire-god Loptir and supposedly using Loptir's gifts to dismiss the elementals, these Sons argue, they can take their rightful place as the new *godis* of Grabenite society.

The DM should decide which faction prevails based upon the players' reactions to the adventure thus far. If they have not gleaned the full significance of the clues pointing them to Urness, then the most satisfying choice may be for the Sons to choose to reveal themselves. However, if the party is close to piecing the situation together, then one of the less bombastic choices may be more appropriate.

Aftermath of the Fifth Night

With any luck, by the end of the fifth night, the Sons of Flame's Father will have been revealed, and their threat, eliminated.

Questions and Clues

The preceding sections give an outline of what will occur without PC intervention. However, the point of the adventure is that PCs *will* intervene and prevent the villains' plans from coming to fruition.

Much depends upon the party figuring out why the Fischer Packhouse, the Stromm warehouse, and the Cooper barrel factory are being targeted. Much of the prelude to the adventure involves the conflict between the locals and the foreigners. Some players may catch on immediately, but others may need to overhear a conservative Grabenite drawing the connection between the presence of the foreigners and the encouragement of the Fischers.

Even once the party guessed *why* the arsons are occurring, the next question is *who* lurks behind them. Most Grabenites don't want to speak poorly of their neighbors to foreigners, but certain foreigners who have established themselves within Grabenite society may be more willing to talk. **Toret Myrlos Kendren**, the Ezrite anchorite based in Graben-town, and **Barnabas Vincent**, the Mordentsman who founded the Black Sheep Inn, both fall into that category.

Some parties may pursue the question of who can summon entities such as the pyre salamander and its mephits. Magic is rare upon Graben Island, after all, with the lack of an arcane tradition and the Muting of the Ascended depriving the priests of spells. Velferd, the wise woman who prophesied at the PCs during the prelude, is the most likely candidate to ask such questions. She won't make much effort to be helpful, and she certainly won't turn upon her sometimes allies for fear of incriminating herself. Even so, she may accidentally reveal useful tidbits. For example, she may express certainty that whatever magic item is being used to summon the flame man-serpent must have come from the mainland. (The PCs may not have considered the use of a magic item.)

Alternatively, the PCs may be sent into the wilderness to speak with **Morthur Thjostolfssen**, a hermit who lurks at the fringes of Graben-town. He is rumored to possess some knowledge of magic. He actually does, too, although his ability to summon "fetches and fylgjas" is not nearly as great as he sometimes claims. He certainly knows nothing of conjuring fiery serpent-men. Nonetheless, he might be able to concoct a *potion of fire resistance* if

treated with respect and given hot food. (A hermit's fare is often eaten cold.)

Ultimately, though, the most important clues are the two which point toward the outlying farms northeast of Graben-town. When the elementals are recalled from a task, they leave behind a heat ripple which clearly points in that direction. More damning, though, is the location of the site where Kjetil Geving and Arvid Knudsen died: the road between Geving and Urness.

Eventually the party should make its way to Urness. Unfortunately, if the party arrives during the day or early in the evening, there is little amiss to see. The *brazier* is hidden away in the cow byre. Sivert Urness insists on his complete ignorance and innocence, but he makes no secret of his belief that the immigrants are behind it all. Clearly, it is foreign magic, isn't it?

The party's best chance is to wait until late evening, when the other Sons of Flame's father begin to gather at Urness. At first the Sons are simply a group of men, drinking mead and boasting about their farms. However, once the hour grows late and then early, they extract the *brazier* from its hiding place and attempt to summon the elementals. If the party can catch the Sons early enough, they can confront them in the act of attempting the summoning but before the 24th hour has elapsed. Alternatively, but more dramatically, they might catch the Sons of Flame's Father just after the elementals have been called forth but before they have been sent to their next target.

Most of the Sons of Flame's Father are male human Commoner 3, although some may have also acquired a level of Warrior from their time with the Yeomanry.

The Aftermath

The Fischers, Stromms, and Coopers have suffered a terrible financial blow. However, their existing wealth is sufficient to carry them through a period of recovery. (The Graben Family may quietly offer them financial support as well. Despite their seeming aloofness, the Family does benefit from Graben Island's increased trade.)

Hedda Geving, Kjetil Geving's widow, gains control of her husband's farm, at least until her eldest child comes of age. However, she will be guided by the expert hand of **Malfrid Geving**, Kjertil's mother. After all, following her own husband's death, Malfrid ran the farm until Kjetil came of age.

In long-standing Grabenite tradition, the penalty for the Sons' crimes against the Fischers, Stromms, Coopers, and Gevings is outlawry. From the time that the sentence of outlawry starts, anyone is legally entitled to kill an outlaw without reprisal. Therefore, outlaws are obliged to leave Graben Island for the duration of their sentence.

Sivert Urness, if he survives to be sentenced, will refuse to leave. He will continue to occupy Urness until he is killed... which will not take long. A great many Grabenites will be grimly delighted to see him punished for the lives and property lost.

The other surviving Sons of Flame's Father will submit to exile to the mainland.

Magic Items

Brazier of Commanding Pyre Elementals

This magic item is similar to the *Brazier of Commanding Fire Elementals*. However, it has the following differences:

- It only works within the Demiplane of Dread.
- It creates pyre elementals rather than summoning fire elementals.
- The initial creation of a pyre elemental may only be performed by a spellcaster, including a cleric, wizard, or adept.
- Once the elemental has been created, control may be passed along to anyone who burns material within the brazier, regardless of whether they can cast spells.
- The elemental emerges from the brazier only as long as a fire burns within it. Once the fire goes out—or is put out—the elemental is immediately drawn back into the brazier. Ashes continue to smolder, but a proper fire may not be relit for 24 hours.
- If the brazier is continuously fed with fuel, it will burn for up to 1 hour. However, at the end of that hour, any fuel remaining in the brazier will be instantaneously consumed, extinguishing the flame. Once created, if an elemental is not re-summoned for a week, it will discorporate. A new elemental must then be recreated by a spellcaster.
- Every time the created elemental breaks free of the creator's control, there is a 10% chance that the brazier melts and becomes non-magical.
- The elementals created are subject to the Dark Powers' whims. For example, the brazier may summon a pyre salamander and a bevy of pyre mephits instead of a pyre elemental.

Pyre elementals (or similar creatures created by the *brazier*) are not Outsiders and so do not possess a reality wrinkle. They cannot *gate* in other elementals.

Non-Player Characters

Kendren, Myrlos

(male human Cleric 7 of Ezra, Darkonian Sect)

Toret Myrlos Kendren sees strong parallels between the rise of the Legions of Night and Grabenite tales of the Twilight of the Ascended, and so he does not understand why more Grabenites haven't joined his congregation.

As a member of the Darkonian sect of the Church of Ezra, Myrlos Kendren leans toward Lawful Evil. However, this alignment is because of the Zealots' belief that the ends justify the means. Myrlos attempts to do good, even if he uses questionable methods to do so.

Myrlos Kendren may be used to bolster an under-strength party. If nothing else, he will gladly dispense healing to the injured. He could also cast *endure heat* or *resist fire*. For that matter, he might also cast the *blessed weapon* spell, described in *Quoth the Raven* Issue 30, p.124.

Liefsen, Giermund

(male human Warrior 10)

A sergeant of the Yeomanry in Graben-town.

If anyone in Graben-town carries a magic weapon, it is Giermund Liefsen. However, if he is badly injured during a confrontation with the fiery serpent-man threatening the town, Giermund may temporarily pass his weapon along to somebody brave and haler.

Thjostolfssen, Morthur

(male human Sorcerer 4 / Thief 4)

A hermit living in the Steinfelder near the Nordklippe, although he draws closer to Graben-town whenever winter draws near. He is generally considered a madman by Grabenites. Being mad is

forgivable. However, according to common rumor, Morthur possesses some knowledge of magic, enough to work illusions and to summon "fetches and fylgjas".

Urness, Sivert

(male human Commoner 4 / Warrior 2)

Sivert Urness is the head of the clan which lives at Urness, one of the largest farms at the edges of Graben-town.

Sivert Urness is one of the founders of the Sons of Flame's Father, and he stands at the center of the plot to use the *Brazier of Controlling Pyre Elementals* to drive the non-Grabenite forces out of Graben-town.

Sivert Urness is tall and burly, with a mighty beard (once red but now graying) that only adds to that impression. He has limped for years following an accident which occurred aboard a fishing knarr, but he considers that just part of the price of a life properly led according to tradition.

Velferd

(female human Adept 10)

"Charity." One of the oldest and perhaps the most knowledgeable of the wise women; certainly, she is the most opinionated. Her familiar is an ermine.

The Goblinwood

Land of the Goblins and other Forsaken people

By Tommaso "Mistmaster" Mazzoni

(Author's Note: Any information in this article which contradicts the Tepest article in QtR 30 must be seen as correcting that article.)

Goblinwood at a glance

Culture Level:	Medieval
Ecology:	Full
Climate & Terrain:	Continental; the domain is a thick forest dotted with hills and vales, with a vast net of caves and tunnels under its surface.
Languages:	Goblin, Giant, Draconic, Common (Baloki), and Lamordian (Tepestani).
Religions:	The All-Mother, Goblinoid Religions, Kobold Religion, Orc Religion, Ogre Religion, Troll Religion, Worg Religion.
Races:	Goblinoid 85% (45% Goblin, 25% Hobgoblin, 15% Bugbear), Kobold 6%, Ogre 4%, Orcs 2%, Other 3%.
Government:	Tribal Feudal Elective Monarchy.
Ruler:	Goblin King Reglish of Worgfort
Darklord:	Shingrak
Lightlord:	Krarga the Cave Prophet.
Surface:	8,456 km²
Inhabitants:	800,000
Analog:	Late IX century Germany.
Capital City:	**Worgfort** (12,000 inhabitants, Standard, L/E),
Important towns:	**Brokenbones** (10,700 in., Standard, L/G); **Bridgecliff** (4,000 in., Monstrous, C/E); **Wyrmvault** (2700 in., Non-Standard, L/N) **Fenris' Fang** (890 in., Monstrous, L/N)
Borders:	Enclave in Tepest.

Tropes

The Goblinwood is about the evil of ambition and colonialism, people seen as monsters, and monsters posing as people.

Domain Overview

The Goblinwood is a thick forest covering hills and vales. Deep cleaves and crumbling hills separate it from the rest of Tepest. The Wyvern Tail River is born from the Cave of the Mother, and it goes deep underground, going as far as Mount Lament in Tepest. The **Worgfort** dominates the center of the forest. In the west, the forest is less thick, and the land is more fertile. Here stands **Brokenbones**, the door of the Goblinwood, as it sits where the enclave is less isolated. Some kilometres east from Worgfort, you find **Fenris' Fang**, the highest point of the Goblinwood, where the packs of worgs meet, rest their old, heal their wounded, and raise their young. On the south, near the road to Kellee in Tepest, you find a cliff which overlooks the bed of a diverted river, now a road under an old bridge. Atop the cliff live the trolls and ogres of **Bridgecliff**, the largest troll and ogre community in the Goblinwood. In the north, where the Wyvern Tail River disappears underground, you find **Wyrmvault**, the subterranean city of the kobolds.

The People

The Goblinwood is the home of various peoples; most numerous are the goblinoids: goblins, hobgoblins and bugbears. After them are kobolds, ogre, orcs, trolls, and worgs. All the peoples in the Goblinwood share pride in their ancient traditions, and they call themselves the Old Folk. Forced to share a common territory and to cooperate to defend themselves from the continued advancing of the humans, they developed common traditions and a modus vivendi, a way to live together based on respect of each other's differences and on mutual assistance. Recently, in Brokenbones, humans have become a stable presence. More tribes are trading with humans now. Some groups, however, are more isolationist and anti-human than others.

History

Age of Creation

In the Age of Creation, the All-Mother created the world. She then gave birth to all living creatures in the All-Mother's Cave.

Age of Empires

In the Age of Empires, the Olympian Empire forced many goblinoids, orcs, ogres, and other Old Folk people to relocate to Tepest, after using magic to heavily decrease their fertility. This almost drove the peoples which today live in the Goblinwood to extinction.

A family of red dragons took those people under their protection, creating the Kingdom of Dragonwood.

Age of Darkness

When the entire Royal Dragon Clan was killed, the Kingdom of Dragonwood collapsed. When the dracolich Shingarak, last of the dragons, tried to crown himself king, the various Old Folk people allied with the humans, and together they bound Shingarak in his own lair.

The Golinkar Kingdom was born in Tepest under the hobgoblin Golink Dynasty.

The Lamordians and the Forfarians clashed in Tepest, but joined forces against the Golinkar Kingdom, which collapsed with the extinction of the dynasty.

The Modern Age

The surviving non-humans of the Golinkar Kingdom formed the Goblinwood Kingdom under the elective Goblin Kings.

The Goblin Kings swore their fealty to the Tepestani von Schnee dynasty after King Liutpold II managed to kill the dracolich Shingarak, after he had freed himself.

The Current Age

Reglish of Worgfort was elected King after the sudden death of his bugbear predecessor, Jurkab. He stipulated a new treaty with the Tepestani Crown, and formally outlawed raiding against Tepest. The Goblinwood today is prosperous, and its population is growing.

Places of Interest

Other than the hobgoblin fortress of **Worgfort**, the center of the Goblinwood has the Cave of the Mother, the All-Mother's holiest site. Worgfort has a mainly hobgoblin population, but it houses various species. The temple of the hobgoblin Divine Host is Worgfort's main spiritual center. The Goblin King Reglish rules from the Spear's Tip, a tall tower. The fortified city boasts the best smithies and carpenter shops, and after Reglish's election almost doubled in size, as the new king established a vast new bureaucracy. A new meeting hall for the assembly of the chiefs of the Goblinwood peoples, the Rulermoot, was realized at the feet of the hill where Worgfort is built. It incorporates the shrine of the All-Mother, so it is called the Mother Hall.

Several inns are available, either on the old or the new side of the city, the most renowned of them being the Horse Skull, owned by an old bugbear called Raknar Horsecleaver.

The town of **Brokenbones** is in a good relationship with the Tepestani village of Goblinwatch, up to the point that the Sheriff of Gobliwatch married the daughter of Nagdor, the hobgoblin Chief of Brokenbones. Nagdor resides in Dragon Spine, a tower built on the backbone of a great wyrm.

Brokenbones has a more diverse population than your average Goblinwood community, including a small but significant number of humans. People come here to engage in commerce from all over the Goblinwood, and its market and fairs are known even in Tepest. Brokenbones has a large temple dedicated to the All-Mother, and shrines for the various deities venerated by its various inhabitants. The Dragon's Tail is an inn run by a gentle, if goofy, ogre named Tirak.

The trolls and ogres of **Bridgecliff,** near the road to Kellee, are seen as tribal brutes, and they do practice a coming of age rite consisting in a troll (or an ogre) hiding in a secret room of an old bridge once built on the river they diverted. Here, they prey on unsuspecting travelers. However, they are also phenomenal lumberjacks, masons, and miners, and they run many construction projects around the Goblinwood. The seat of the Chief Margus Bridgestalker is the massive wooden fortress called the Logkeep, in the center of Bridgecliff.

A collection of shrines called simply the Prayer's Place is tended by a number of priests. Other than Vaprah and Vaprak, the major god of Bridgecliff is Geirdi, the Lawful Evil god of war and tyranny.

The Honest Pot is the loud tavern owned by Arananda, universally known as Granny Troll.

The Worg Packs gather under **Fenris' Fang**, a small mountain in the west of the wood. A village with the same name was built in caves at the feet of the mountain, and a thriving community of worgs and goblins live there under the rule of the Paramount Chief of all the Goblinwood Packs. The current elected High Leader of all the Packs, and Lord of Fenris' Fang, is the pragmatic Alwurn Quickfang. The Gathering Rock is the place where the various Pack elders and leaders gather to discuss and decide. It is a sacred shrine of the Worg Deities. The village is used as a nursing ground for pups, recovering safehouse for wounded ones, and retirement place for old ones in every pack. The Alpha's Den is a larger cave-house built for the High Leader and their mate. The village has a tavern, the Fat Hunter, owned by a quick witted and fast-talking goblin, Durak Worgfriend.

In Tepest, unconfirmed rumors speak about a secret kobold city in the hills of the southern woods, **Wyrmvault**. In the Goblinwood, all know that the city is real. Once, that was the lair of the Dragon Kings, but since their fall, kobolds rule it. The hereditary ruler of Wyrmvault is Prince Frandulak, who resides in Wyrmthrone, a majestic hall in the underground city. The city keeps the great Library of the Dragon Kings, which doubles as the Goblinwood's university, and its scholars train wizards from all over the

kingdom, albeit very cautiously. Rich mines keep the kobold treasury full.

A human with very convincing arguments has managed to open an inn in Wyrmvault, the Treasure in the Barrel. Their name is Strongjohn Taylor.

Religions

The All-Mother Cult is a religion which centers around a Mother Goddess, identified with different figures: Kikanuti for the goblins, Ladalgi for the hobgoblins, Araweena for the bugbears, Silba for the kobolds, Luthic for the orcs, Vaprah for the ogres and trolls, Rakhashi for the worgs and, recently, Hala for the humans. The All-Mother cult is a Neutral Good religion, and teaches the value of empathy, teamwork, patience, wisdom, love, and care. Its domains are Charm, Community, Good, Healing, Knowledge, and Protection. Her priests are teachers, midwives, herbalists, healers, scholars, and diplomats. Every inhabitant of the Goblinwood offers a prayer to the All-Mother at least once a week. Her holy symbol is a chalice, and her favoured weapon is the quarterstaff.

The **Goblinoid Religions** consist of three distinct pantheons, each with its own specific point of interest. Some priests interpret each deity of each pantheon as three different aspects of the same deity. The Goblin Pantheon is communitarian, the Hobgoblin Pantheon is martial, and the Bugbear Pantheon is tied to the forces of nature.

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Goblin Pantheon

The Goblin Pantheon is called the *Boret Kaal*, the Firsts among Many.

Kikanuti, the All-Mother, the leader of the Pantheon, is a Neutral Good Greater Goddess of water, hospitality, rain, fertility, solidarity, and prosperity.
Domains: Charm, Community, Good, Luck, Water, Weather.
Holy Symbol: a tall clay pot full of water.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

Her brother and spouse, ***Lughdor***, Golden Hand, is a Lawful Good Greater God of trade, justice, opportunity, skill, and resourcefulness.
Domains: Artifice, Good, Knowledge, Law, Nobility, Travel.
Holy Symbol: a coin with an open hand upon it.
Favoured Weapon: Shortspear.

Their brother, ***Maglubiyet***, the Conquering Wolf, is a Lawful Evil Greater God of war, conquest, wolves, slavery, violence, and tyranny.
Domains: Animal, Destruction, Law, Strength, Nobility, War.
Holy Symbol: A wolf head with a bloody axe.
Favoured Weapon: Battleaxe.

Khurgorbaeyag, the Slavedriver, the son of Maglubiyet and Mindragakni, is the Neutral Evil Intermediate God of strife, slavery, ambushes, betrayal, and raiding.
Domains: Destruction, Evil, Strength, Trickery, Travel.
Holy Symbol: A leather whip.
Favoured Weapon: Whip.

Tagunagk, the Smile of the Day, daughter of Kikanuti and Lughdor, is a Neutral Good Intermediate Goddess of sun, optimism, life, beauty, and health.
Domains: Charm, Good, Healing, Luck, Sun.
Holy Symbol: Mirror with a sun frame.
Favoured Weapon: Shortbow.

Shirnunk, the Laugh of the Night, is the Son of Kikanuti and Lughdor. He is a Chaotic Good Intermediate God of the moon, the hunt, the wildlands, night, and dreams.
Domains: Animal, Chaos, Darkness, Good, Plant.
Holy Symbol: A moon sickle with an arrow.
Favoured Weapon: Longbow.

Teyibulgam, the Nilbog, the Persistent, is Maglubiyet's twin, and is a Chaotic Neutral Lesser Deity of pranks, retribution, laughs, parties, and eccentricity.
Domains: Chaos, Community, Madness, Trickery.
Holy Symbol: A jester's hat.
Favoured Weapon: Light Mace.

Mindragakni, the Queen of Rats, is Maglubiyet's wife, a Chaotic Evil Lesser Goddess of pestilence, famine, bad luck and vermin.
Domains: Animal, Chaos, Destruction, Luck.
Holy Symbol: A rat's head.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Vinkurag, the Ineludable Judge, is the son of Kikanuti and Lughdor, a Lawful Neutral Lesser God of death, the dead, judgement, writing, and time.
Domains: Death, Law, Repose, Rune.
Holy Symbol: A tombstone with an open book on it.
Favoured Weapon: Light Crossbow.

Xelnariki, the Divine Cook, is the daughter of Kikanuti and Lughdor, a Neutral Good Lesser Goddess of agriculture, cooking, joy, meal-sharing, and food.
Domains: Community, Fire, Good, Plant.
Holy Symbol: A frying pan.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Yunaguti, the Crafter of Wonders, is the daughter of Kikanuti and Lughdor, a Neutral Lesser Goddess of magic, art, beauty, and craft.
Domains: Artifice, Charm, Knowledge, Magic.
Holy Symbol: A golden chisel.
Favoured Weapon: Warhammer.

Zulkavaeg, the All-Friend, is the son of Kikanuti and Lughdor, he is a Neutral Good lesser god of friendship, gentleness, safety, and cooperation.
Domains: Community, Good, Protection, Strength.
Holy Symbol: Two hands holding each other.
Favoured Weapon: Club.

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Hobgoblin Pantheon

The Hobgoblin Pantheon is collectively called *Duraal Lesh*, Divine Host.

The Leader of the Pantheon is ***Nomog-Geaya***, the Overgeneral, the Supreme Commander of the Pantheon, a Lawful Neutral Greater God of leadership, authority, logistics, strategy, tactics, training, and victory.
Domains: Community, Glory, Law, Nobility, Strength, War.
Holy Symbol: A battleaxe crossed with a longsword on a shield.
Favoured Weapons: Longsword and Battleaxe.

His wife and General Overseer of the Army, is ***Ladalgi*** the Mother of Victory, a Lawful Good Greater Goddess of fertility, defense, organization, resources, education, and innovation.
Domains: Artifice, Good, Knowledge, Law, Magic, Protection.
Holy Symbol: A shield protecting a basket full of food.
Favoured Weapon: Short Sword.

Maglubiyet, the Cunning, Nomog-Geaya's brother-in-arms, Head of Special Operations, is the Neutral Evil Greater God of honourless combat, ambushes, bloodshedding, victory no matter the cost, cunning, and ambition.
Domains: Destruction, Darkness, Evil, Strength, Trickery, War.
Holy Symbol: A bloody axe.
Favoured Weapon: Battleaxe.

Bargrivyek, the Peacemaker, son of Nomog-Geaya and Ladalgi, is the General Overseer of diplomacy and teambuilding. He is a Lawful Good Intermediate God of cooperation, harmony, diplomacy, peacekeeping, and alliances.
Domains: Community, Good, Law, Rune, War.
Holy Symbol: A sharpened quill on a parchment.
Favoured Weapon: Spear.

His sister ***Cyranna***, the Great Admiral, is the Lawful Good Intermediate Deity of naval warfare, the sea, sea weather, rivers, naval patrolling, and safe naval travel, also creator and protector of the koalinth (aquatic hobgoblins).
Domains: Good, Law, War, Water, Weather.
Holy Symbol: A stylized war galley.
Favoured Weapon: Harpoon.

Their brother ***Durgaryek*** is the Air Marshal, a Lawful Good Intermediate God of air warfare, archery, the sky, the sun, and favorable weather.
Domains: Air, Good, Law, Sun, War.

Holy Symbol: A sun disk with arrows in place of the rays.
Favoured Weapon: Longbow.

Their sister ***Ekyaga***, the Storer, the Overseer of the Resources, is the Lawful Neutral Intermediate Goddess of logistics, preparation, productivity, and resources.
Domains: Earth, Knowledge, Law, Travel, War.
Holy Symbol: A shield balanced on the tip of a spear.
Favoured Weapon: Spear.

Their brother ***Meriadar***, the Unifier, the Overseer of Trading, is the Lawful Neutral Intermediate God of trade, peaceful relationships, marriages, public relationships, mongrelfolk, and arbitration.
Domains: Charm, Community, Knowledge, Law, Travel.
Holy Symbol: A tablet made of different materials.
Favoured Weapon: Spear.

Their sister ***Lavendrak***, the Night Song, the Overseer of Rest is the Neutral Good Intermediate Goddess of vigilance, music, rest, dreams and the moon.
Domains: Darkness, Good, Knowledge, Protection and Repose.
Holy Symbol: a moon shaped shield with a trumpet.
Favoured Weapon: light mace.

Their youngest brother ***Fylravek***, the Spymaster, the Overseer of Security and Intelligence is a Lawful Evil Intermediate God of secrets, sabotage, spies, information gathering, and the night.
Domains: Darkness, Evil, Law, Knowledge, Trickery.
Holy Symbol: A pair of yellow eyes on a black shroud.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Their youngest sister ***Gyrilya* Joybringer**, is the General Overseer of morale. She is a Chaotic Good Intermediate Deity of entertainment, campfires, food, fireworks, art, and joy.
Domains: Chaos, Charm, Fire, Good, Trickery.
Holy Symbol: A campfire.
Favoured Weapon: Heavy Crossbow.

The children of Bargryvek and Gyrilya include:

Hrimalgyek, the Caller, the Overseer of Memory and Gatherer of the Troops, is the Neutral Lesser God of death, memory, preservation, and history.
Domains: Death, Glory, Knowledge, Repose.
Holy Symbol: A closed book with a quarterstaff.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

Ilikivaya, the Health-Keeper, the Overseer of Health, is the Neutral Good Lesser Goddess of medicine, food, rest, and care.
Domains: Good, Healing, Repose, Plant.
Holy Symbol: A roll of bandages.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Jurganek, the Rider, is the Chaotic Neutral Lesser God of cavalry, animal husbandry, bravery, and berserkers.
Domains: Animal, Chaos, Madness, War.
Holy Symbol: A stylized hobgoblin riding a direwolf while wielding a great axe.
Favoured Weapon: Great Axe.

Kiviltaki Bloodyhanded, the Overseer of Punishment, is the Chaotic Evil Lesser Goddess of pain, revenge, sadism, and cruelty.
Domains: Chaos, Destruction, Evil, Strength.
Holy Symbol : A pair of pincers crossed with a whip.
Favored Weapon: Whip.

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Bugbear Pantheon

The Bugbear Pantheon is collectively called the High Alliance, or *Tuul Kadrek*.

The leader of the Pantheon is ***Grankhul***, the Breaker of Chain, a Chaotic Good Greater Deity of strength, the hunt, freedom, fertility, and prosperity.
Domains: Animal, Charm, Chaos, Good, Liberation, Strength.
Holy Symbol: A hunting horn with a broken chain.
Favoured Weapon: Longsword.

His wife and queen is ***Araweena***, the Mother of Life, a Neutral Good Greater Goddess of rivers, childbirth, life, motherhood, spring, rebirth, agriculture, and fertile soil.

Domains: Community, Earth, Good, Healing, Plant, Water.
Holy Symbol: A grain of wheat.
Favoured Weapon: Sickle.

Hruggek, the Beheader, Grankhul's twin brother, is the Chaotic Evil Greater God of war, ambushes, violence, executions, fear, and brutality.
Domains: Chaos, Death, Evil, Madness, Strength, War.
Holy Symbol: A severed head.
Favoured Weapon: Great Axe.`

Galaweene, the Storm Bringer, Hruggek's wife, is the Chaotic Neutral Greater Goddess of storms, wildlands, wildlife, sea, soil, and volcanos.
Domains: Animal, Chaos, Earth, Fire, Water, Weather.
Holy Symbol: A cloud shaped as a bugbear female's head.
Favoured Weapon: Warhammer.

The children of Grankhul and Araweena are:

Durnek, the Joyful Sun, is the Chaotic Good Intermediate God of sun, joy, summer, travelers, and magic.
Domains: Chaos, Good, Magic, Sun, Travel.
Holy Symbol: A bugbear-head-shaped sun disk.
Favoured Weapon: Morningstar.

Feneewil, the Dutiful Moon, is the Lawful Good Intermediate Goddess of winter, responsibility, war, the moon, and strategy.
Domains: Air, Darkness, Good, Law, War.
Holy Symbol: A full moon with a female bugbear face upon it.
Favoured Weapon: Javelin.

Malgaruul, the Rhythm of Love, is the Chaotic Good Intermediate God of music, love, art, humour, and satire.
Domains: Chaos, Charm, Good, Knowledge, Trickery.
Holy Symbol: A drum.
Favoured Weapon: Mace.

Nevtaaren, the Planner of the Future, is the Lawful Neutral Intermediate Goddess of craft, work, architecture, smithery, and progress.
Domains: Artifice, Earth, Law, Knowledge, Rune.
Holy Symbol: A quill with a ruler.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

The children of Hruggek and Galaweene are:

Skiggaret, the Swift Assassin, is the Chaotic Evil Intermediate God of murder, darkness, treachery, strife, and crime.
Domains: Chaos, Death, Darkness, Evil, Trickery.
Holy Symbol: A black claw.
Favoured Weapon: Spiked Gauntlet.

Laanaeka, the Whim of Fate, is the Chaotic Neutral Intermediate Goddess of fate, death, change, rest, and autumn.
Domains: Chaos, Earth, Death, Luck, Repose.
Holy Symbol: A female bugbear's head made of autumn fruit and leaves.
Favoured Weapon: Longbow.

Retsalk, the Stalker, is a Neutral Evil Intermediate God of obsession, madness, shadows, serial killers, and sadism.
Domains: Darkness, Death, Evil, Madness, Void.
Holy Symbol: A shadow.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

The children of Durnek and Laanaeka are:

Karreg, the Party Soul, is the Chaotic Good Lesser God of parties, feasts, fun, and food.
Domains: Community, Chaos, Fire, Good.
Holy Symbol: An overflowing pot on a bonfire.
Favoured Weapon: Light Mace.

Gtervek, the Drunken Brawler, is the Chaotic Neutral Lesser God of wrestling, brawls, alcohol, and parties.
Domains: Artifice, Chaos, Madness, Strength.
Holy Symbol: A full tankard of beer.
Favoured Weapon: Unarmed Strike.

The children of Skiggaret and Feneewil are:

Tiiwalki, the Huntress in the Snow, is the Neutral Lesser Goddess of snow, mountains, frost, and survival.
Domains: Air, Earth, Strength, Water.
Holy Symbol: A snowflake shaped as a female bugbear's head.
Favoured Weapon: Shortspear.

Wergek, the Culler of the Weak, is the Lawful Evil Lesser God of pragmatism, social darwinism, hierarchy, and necessity.
Domains: Community, Evil, Law, Nobility.
Holy Symbol: A scale tipped with an axe.
Favoured Weapon: Axe.

Aneelki, the Starry Muse, is the Chaotic Good Lesser Goddess of stars, poetry, dreams, and prophecy.
Domains: Chaos, Good, Knowledge, Void.
Holy Symbol: A starry night sky.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

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Kobold Religion

The **Kobold Religion** is based on the idea that ancestral Dragon Deities created kobolds and sacrificed themselves to stop the Void Dragon. The Kobold Pantheon was born as a last gift from those deities. The Pantheon is called the *Draukarikarreg*, the Scions of the Dragons. The two major deities who have birth to all the others are

Kurtulmak, the Steelscale Sorcerer, a Lawful Good Greater God of magic, craft, rulership, cunning, lizards, and tunnels, leads the pantheon.
Domains: Artifice, Earth, Good, Law, Magic and Scalykind.
Holy Symbol: A spear piercing a dragon skull.
Favoured Weapon: Shortspear.

His wife is ***Silba***, the Broodmother, a Neutral Good Greater Goddess of life, love, fertility, and prosperity.
Domains: Charm, Community, Good, Healing, Protection, Scalykind.
Holy Symbol: Three eggs.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Their children (who are fully detailed in the Falkovnia article on page 26) include:

Gaknulak the Trapmaster (L/N), God of protection, and preparation; ***Kuraulyek*** the Wing-gifter (C/G), God of freedom and wind; ***Dakarnok*** the Brave (L/G), God of War and Justice; ***Lygnastrek*** the Lazy (N/E), God of idleness and the moon; ***Bralga*** the Tamer (N/G), Goddess of hunt and farming; ***Taava*** the Greedy (L/E), Goddess of hoarding and Greed; ***Rakvilik*** the Lone (C/N), God of the sun and travelling; ***Mera*** the Grave-Keeper (N), Goddess of the dead and hearth; ***Yaktirak*** the Tunnel-Collapser (C/E), God of destruction and revenge; ***Zirima*** the Tunnel-Watcher (L/G), Goddess of loyalty and vigilance.

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Orc Religion

The **Orc Religion** revolves around the love of Gruumsh and Luthic, the warrior sky-father and the shamanic earth-mother, and the relationship with their children.

The Orc Pantheon is called the Divine Clan, the *Hakdruk*.

The head of the Pantheon is ***Gruumsh* One-Eye**, the Chaotic Neutral Greater God of war, the hunt, resilience, storms, bravery, and fertility.
Domains: Animal, Chaos, Glory, Strength, War, Weather.
Holy Symbol: One opened eye.
Favoured Weapon: Longspear.

His wife is ***Luthic***, the Cave Mother, the Neutral Good Greater Goddess of motherhood, fertility, soil, caves, animal husbandry, and medicine.
Domains: Animal, Earth, Good, Healing, Protection, Strength.
Holy Symbol: A cave bear.
Favoured Weapon: Spiked Gauntlet.

The children of Gruumsh and Luthic are:

Bahgtru, the Strong Arm, is the Chaotic Good Intermediate God of brawling, simplicity, dumb luck, loyal competition, and friendship.
Domains: Chaos, Glory, Good, Luck, Strength.
Holy Symbol: Two bare hands bending a metal bar.
Favoured Weapons: Club and Unarmed Strike.

Ilneval, the Conquering General, is the Lawful Evil Intermediate God of strategy, militarism, tyranny, conquest, and oppression.
Domains: Evil, Law, Nobility, Strength, War.
Holy Symbol: A bloodied longsword.
Favoured Weapon: Longsword.

Jordavelc, the Curious Moon, is the Chaotic Good Intermediate Goddess of exploration, novelty, magic, the moon, and the night.
Domains: Chaos, Darkness, Good, Knowledge, Magic.
Holy Symbol: Two eyes on a full moon.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Milusac, the Brave Sun, is the Lawful Good Intermediate Goddess of sun, loyalty, honour in battle, bravery, and respect.
Domains: Glory, Good, Law, Sun, War.
Holy Symbol: A morningstar with the sun as the head.
Favoured Weapon: Morningstar.

Shargaas, the Silent Blade of the Night, is the Chaotic Evil Intermediate God of night, thievery, fear, secrets and winter.
Domains: Air, Chaos, Darkness, Evil, Trickery.
Holy Symbol: A skull on a black full moon.
Favoured Weapon: Short Sword.

Yurtrus of the White Hands, is the Neutral Evil Intermediate God of death, disease, old age, marshes, and poisons.
Domains: Death, Destruction, Evil, Plant, Water.
Holy Symbol: A pair of white hands on black.
Favoured Weapon: Unarmed Strike.

Zatelac, the Seagull Sailor, is the Chaotic Good Intermediate Goddess of sea, rivers, travelers, trade, freedom, and opportunities.
Domains: Chaos, Good, Liberation, Travel, Water.
Holy Symbol: A seagull.
Favoured Weapon: Rapier.

The grandchildren of Gruumsh and Luthic, including adopted mortals, are:

Adark, the First Orog, is the Neutral Good Lesser God of improvement, teamwork, generosity, and training.
Domains: Community, Good, Knowledge, Strength.
Holy Symbol: A stone pillar.
Favoured Weapon: Broadsword.

Brergath, the Smith, is the Lawful Neutral Lesser God of work, tradition, fire, and craft.
Domains: Artifice, Fire, Law, Strength.
Holy Symbol: An anvil with a hand upon it.
Favoured Weapon: Warhammer.

Grenda, the Mourner, is the Neutral Good Lesser Goddess of rain, mourning, comfort, and the dead.
Domains: Good, Healing, Repose, Weather.
Holy Symbol: A raining cloud.
Favoured Weapon: Shortspear.

Argould, The First King, is the Neutral Demigod of rulership, diplomacy, and pragmatism.
Domain: Charm, Strength, War.
Holy Symbol: A red crown on white with six arrows.
Favoured Weapon: Longbow.

Zaarrax the Bloodmaw is the Chaotic Evil Lesser God of bloodlust, massacres, and violence.
Domains: Destruction, Chaos, Madness, Evil.
Holy Symbol: A burning axe.
Favoured Weapon: Greataxe.

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Ogre and Troll religion

The **Ogre and Troll Religions** are perfectly complementary, both maintaining that the Divine Giants sacrificed themselves to imprison the Titan of Oblivion. The Ogre and Troll Deities were the Divine Giants' parting gift. Both the Ogre and Troll Pantheons are made up of ascended mortal spirits.

The two main deities, who birthed the first mortal ogres and trolls (who then ascended to divinity) were:

Vaprak, the Father of Ogre and Troll, is a Chaotic Good Greater God of cooking, physical strength, war, earth, fertility, and light.
Domains: Chaos, Fire, Earth, Good, Strength, War.
Holy Symbol: A roasting spit on a fire.
Favoured Weapon: Greatclub.

Vaprah, the Mother of Troll and Ogre, is a Chaotic Good Greater Goddess of fertility, healing, wisdom, love, rain, and plenty.
Domains: Chaos, Charm, Good, Healing, Knowledge, Weather.
Holy Symbol: A heart-shaped raincloud.
Favoured Weapon: Spiked Gauntlet.

The children of Vaprah and Vaprak are:

Anori, the Sun Carrier, is a Lawful Good Intermediate God of sun, duty, strength, generosity, and hard work.
Domains: Good, Lawn Nobility, Strength, Sun.
Holy Symbol: A sun disk supported by two hands.
Favored Weapon: Shortspear.

Geirdi, the King of Blood, is a Lawful Evil Intermediate God of war, blood-shedding, tradition, violence, and tyranny.
Domains: Destruction, Evil, Nobility, Strength, War.
Holy Symbol: An iron crown dripping blood.
Favored Weapon: Greataxe.

Girindr, the Two-Faced One, is a Neutral Intermediate Deity of fate, time, memory, magic, and cycles.
Domains: Knowledge, Luck, Magic, Rune, Weather.
Holy Symbol: Two heads, one of ogre and the other of troll.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

Gryska, the Winter Scourge, is a Neutral Evil Intermediate Goddess of winter, survival, cold winds, death, and loss.
Domains: Air, Darkness, Death, Evil, Water.
Holy Symbol: A frozen troll skull.
Favored Weapon: Dagger.

Hakuni, the Generous Provider, is a Neutral Good Intermediate God of trade, good luck, fertility, animal husbandry, and agriculture.
Domains: Animal, Good, Luck, Plant, Travel.
Holy Symbol: A bag full of food.
Favoured Weapon: Axe.

Kerra, the Redistributor, is a Chaotic Good Lesser Goddess of equity, freedom, change, and wit.
Domains: Chaos, Good, Liberation, Trickery.
Holy Symbol: A wheel.
Favored Weapon: Short Sword.

Madduga, Warden of the Bridge, is a Lawful Neutral Lesser Goddess of the afterlife, death, judgement, and travel.
Domains: Death, Law, Repose, Travel.
Holy Symbol: A bridge.
Favored Weapon: Scourge.

Muaj, the Warlock God, is a Chaotic Evil Lesser God of fear, dark magic, evil ogre magi, cruelty, and madness.
Domains: Chaos, Evil, Magic, Madness.
Holy Symbol: The horn of an ogre mage.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Nodda, the Moon Carrier, is a Chaotic Neutral Intermediate Goddess of the Moon, love, night, stars, lakes, rivers, merrows, and scrags.
Domains: Chaos, Darkness, Charm, Void, Water.
Holy Symbol: Two hands holding a moon disk.
Favored Weapon: Scythe.

Orra, the Crafter of Hope, is a Chaotic Good Lesser Goddess of imagination, crafting, wonders, and arts.
Domains: Artifice, Chaos, Good, Liberation.
Holy Symbol: A chisel.
Favored Weapon: Warhammer.

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Worg Religion

The **Worg Religion** revolves around *the Eternal Pack*, from which every worg soul comes and to which every soul returns. Central figures of the Pack are:

Fenris, the Great Heavenly Wolf, a peculiar declination of the Wolf God, is the Alpha Male and the Father of the Pack. Fenris is a Lawful Good Greater God of the hunt, the moon, the sun, duty, guardians, and the sky.
Domains: Air, Animal, Darkness, Good, Law, Sun.
Holy Symbol: A wolf chasing the sun, with the moon on his back.
Favoured Weapon: Spear.

Rakhashi, the Mother She-Wolf, the Alpha Female and the Mother of the Pack, is a Neutral Good Greater Goddess of earth, births, wildlands, the afterlife, guardianship, and springs.
Domains: Charm, Good, Plant, Protection, Repose, Water.
Holy Symbol: A she-wolf with two pups.
Favoured Weapon: Short Sword.

Garm, the Wolf of Night, is the great enemy of the Eternal Pack. He fought against Fenris to be the mate of Rakhashi, but was rejected and defeated. He is a more canonical aspect of the Wolf God, a Chaotic Evil Greater Deity of hunger, night, death, fear, hatred, and pain.
Domains: Chaos, Darkness, Death, Destruction, Evil, Madness.
Holy Symbol: A black wolf head with an open mouth full of bloodied teeth.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

The Famed and the Infamous

Krarga the Cave Prophet

(Old Orc Oracle 14 N/G)

This feeble old man is the most venerable religious figure in the Goblinwood. The opposite of what an orc is in the imagination of humans and other people, Krarga is frail and always plagued by some ache and illness, but he is gentle, kind, soft-spoken, and measured. But his frail outside belies the strength he possesses inside. When Krarga speaks, he never raises his voice, but everyone listens to him. He is painfully aware of the difficult times that are ahead for the Old Folk the moment he should pass away, and so he goes on enduring his own pain as a badge of honor. There is no easy way out for him, not as long as ancient evil still lurks in the Goblinwood.

Adventure Hook: Every year at the Mother's Cave, Krarga ritually blesses every pregnant individual who comes for this blessing. This includes eggs for the kobolds of Wyrmvault, who every year send ten of their eggs there for the blessing. This year, it includes a very important egg, the egg of the Princess of the kobolds. In his dreams, Karga has seen terrible doom befalling the yet-to-hatch princeling. So he sends for the adventurers.

Reglish Ironmace, the Goblin King

(Middle-Aged Hobgoblin Fighter 10 L/E)

Reglish is smart, cautious, and ruthless. He is a female-line descendent of the Golink Dynasty, and he covets that kind of power. 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 his recognition as vassal King, rather than Paramount Chief. He has reduced the raids, turning to smarter political actions.

Adventure Hook: Monarchy in the Goblinwood is elective, but Reglish would like to change it, 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 would then declare the Goblinwood's full independence, sacrificing a couple of villages on the border, and the life of his potential opponents. The Falkovnian Resistance, however, sent the adventurers to uncover this scheme.

Hurnag Stonehead

(Adult Goblin Barbarian Little Fury 7 C/N)

The small but determined Hurnag is the bouncer of the Horse Skull. Sometimes the customers underestimate him for his size, but they will not make that mistake twice.

Adventure Hook: A drunk ogre tries to harass the adventurers while they are dining. Hurnag kicks him out and then asks the adventurers to help him with missing barrels of ale in the storeroom.

Raknar Horsecleaver

(Old Bugbear Fighter Infantry Veteran 8 L/N)

The owner of the Horse Skull is a scarred old bugbear missing an eye, half an ear, and part of his nose. In spite of that, his jolly attitude and his vivid tales of raids and skirmishes against human knights make him one of his inn's main attractions.

Adventure Hook: A young human wearing a surcoat emblazoned with a crowned snowflake enters the Horse Skull inn and just stares at Raknar with hate. That night, Raknar is grievously injured. The adventurers know that young man and must find him before Hurnag does.

Nagdor Bonebreaker

(Middle-Aged Hobgoblin Fighter 9 N/G)

The proud hereditary chief of the Bonebreaker Clan, Nagdor was very traditionally minded until his daughter Harna fell in love with Simon Ralkin, the human Sheriff of Goblinwatch in Tepest. Initially opposing it, he grew to like his son-in-law to the point of opening regular trade between Brokenbones and Goblinwatch, basically opening trade between the Goblinwood and Tepest. He dotes on his grandchildren very much.

Adventure Hook: Friendship with humans paid off, as Brokenbones thrives thanks to it, but some of Brokenbones' older inhabitants struggle to accept it. When a human merchant is attacked on the road, Nagdor must know who did it. For that he can count on his son-in-law's old friends, the adventurers.

Harna Bonebreaker

(Adult Hobgoblin Ranger 7 C/G)

This extraordinary woman learned archery before learning to walk, and surpassed her three older brothers with the bow by the time she was 16. Twenty years ago, she met a human sheriff while hunting dire boars in the edge of the Goblinwood. He impressed her with his respectful manners and the ability to speak in Goblin. Love blossomed between them, and they married and now have 5 half-hobgoblin children. They spend half of the year in Goblinwatch the other half in Brokenbones.

Adventure Hook: After a rocky start, Harna's strong and generous personality has charmed Goblinwatch, but there are still a few bigots who think she does not belong and that her children are unnatural. The adventurers are old family friends and when someone threatens her children, they are asked to find out who.

Haruuk Ralkin of Clan Bonebreaker

(Young Adult Half-Hobgoblin Ranger 3 N/G)

This brave young man is seen by many as the living proof of peaceful coexistence between Tepestani and Old Folk. Unfortunately, many think he is an aberration. This, however, does not seem to deter Haruuk from trying to do the right thing, as well as he can.

Adventure Hook: When a group of Old Folk individuals wearing skeletal dragon masks try to lynch young Haruuk, the adventurers, old friends of the family, must stop them.

Simon Ralkin

(Adult Human Hunter 7 L/G)

This pleasant, strong-built man is the respected Sheriff of Goblinwatch in Tepest, but you often find him in the Goblinwood, attending his father-in-law's court in Brokenbones. He is the happy husband of Chief Nagdor's daughter Harna, and they have 5 half-hobgoblin children together.

Adventure Hook: When his children are the subject of yet another attempt on their lives, a distressed Simon asks the adventurers to help him find those responsible.

Surgan Bladehand

(Adult Hobgoblin Rogue 9 C/E)

Surgan is a vocal opponent of Nagdor's politics regarding humans. He has never tried to hide his visible disgust for the chief's half-hobgoblin grandchildren, and he is always trying to stir public opinion in Brokenbones against Nagdor.

Adventure Hook: Surran is a high-ranking member of the Dead Dragon Society, an anti-human secret organization nostalgic for the reign of the Undead Dragon. He has ordered Nagdor's younger grandchildren kidnapped. The adventurers stumbled into his plans and now can stop him.

Tirak

(Young Adult Goblinwood Ogre Expert 4 C/G)

Tirak is fat even for ogre standards, and that makes him a model of ogre male beauty. Tirak is not bright, but he is not stupid, and he is quite perceptive, observant, and a great cook. He is a bit naive and gullible, and sometimes his hands are too big for the job, but he always tries to help. He welcomes anyone at the Dragon's Tail Inn.

Adventure Hook: A human monster-hunter party from Tepest has captured poor Tirak, accusing him of being a kidnapper and child-murderer. The adventurers know he wouldn't harm a fly, and now need to save him.

Margus Bridgestalker

(Middle-Aged Goblinwood Troll Fighter 8 L/E)

The head of the powerful Bridgestalker clan of trolls and ogres, Margus is a feared yet respected leader, who, while following violent traditions from the past, is also able to think about the future, tying his people and the resources they control with the growing power of King Reglish.

Adventure Hook: The adventurers have killed Margus' son after being ambushed under the bridge. He wants revenge, but the adventurers can pay him the blood price instead. Of course, said price involves dealing with a dangerous creature, like a basilisk.

Burak

(Adult Goblinwood Ogre Barbarian 9 C/N)

Burak is one of the strongest warriors in Bridgecliff, but is also one of the least disciplined. He is not interested in being the chief, and Margus is cautious when Burak is involved. He is used as a ram, pointed in a direction and then followed in the wake of the destruction he inflicts.

Adventure Hook: Someone has told Burak one of the adventurers is slandering him. He challenges them to a traditional arena fight, no weapons, no magic. If the challenged one refuses, it would harm their reputation and the possibility of conducting any business in Bridgecliff. But Burak is notorious for often killing his opponents in arena fights, so they need to find a way for him to renounce the fight, without obvious magical means.

Otvak Blackclaw

(Old Goblinwood Troll Shaman of Geirdi 7 L/E)

In his youth, the stooped Shaman of Bridgecliff was a proud and fierce advocate of war and bloodshed. In his old age, he remains feisty in his devotion to bellicose traditions, but a bit more prudent in advocating actual warfare, especially against other Old Folk people.

Adventure Hook: The Blessing of the Weapons is a holy ceremony conducted yearly in the Shrine of Geirdi. All the warriors of the community participate, bathing their weapons in the blood of a dire boar, a dire wolf, and a dire bear, killed ritually. This year, however, the captured dire bear has managed to flee, and Otvak has no time, nor energy, to pursue it himself. Thanks to Geirdi, though, the adventurers are trying to negotiate with Chief Margus, and Otvak can ask for a "small task" to be done.

"Granny Troll" Arananda Blackclaw

(Old Goblinwood Troll Kitchen Witch 7 N/G)

This formidable old troll woman is the older sister of Otvak, and the two are on opposite sides. Granny Troll treats every person she meets as one of her grandchildren, giving them advice, good food, some practical help, and a scolding and some spankings if necessary. She runs the Honest Pot with a welcoming smile and a greatclub-sized wooden spoon.

Adventure Hook: Someone will be in trouble. Granny's recipe book has been taken. That book is more than a mundane cook book, and could be really dangerous. She asks the adventurers to recover it, promising them free food forever.

Alwurn Quickfang

(Adult Goblinwood Worg Ranger 7 L/N)

Leader of the Quickfang Pack, and Paramount Alpha of all the Goblinwood Worg Packs, Alwurn has been elected because he is cautious and pragmatic. He authorized his people to settle down in Fenris' Fang thanks to a community of friendly goblins. Many smaller packs joined them in the following months. Recently, he has accepted a small number of humans in Fenris' Fang after a wandering human healer saved his pregnant mate and their pups.

Adventure Hook: Someone is setting Alwurn up to make him miss the prey in the Holy Hunt, a ceremony the worgs celebrate to honour the Eternal Pack. Traditionally, if a pack leader misses the prey during this hunt, they must step down. The plot arrives at the Alpha's ears, and he asks the adventurers to investigate discreetly.

Zeema Strongmaw

(Adult Goblinwood Worg Fighter Savage Warrior 6 L/G)

Alwurn's mate, she comes from the Strongmaw Pack, and is one of the strongest warriors the pack has. She always wears chainmail barding and a pair of magical battlejaws to enhance her already powerful bite.

Adventure Hook: Zeema only allows herself to relax when in her den with her pups and mate. But someone is trying to kidnap her pups to blackmail her mate. Reluctantly, she entrusts the adventurers, who already saved them once, with guarding them.

Katherine Heretz

(Adult Human Alchemist 5 N/G)

A kind looking woman with long brown hair and chestnut eyes, Katherine was a wandering healer who was captured by a worg pack, and freed after healing their wounded. She managed to save the life of Zeema, Alpha Alwurn's mate, and safely deliver her pups. For her merits, Alwurn allowed human

traders in Fenris' Fang, a move which exposed the Alpha to several critics.

Adventure Hook: Katherine is hated fiercely by the more traditionalist faction of the pack. They are trying to catch her alone to eliminate her, so Katherine asks the adventurers to keep her company.

Kurn and Gralg Boggers

(Young Adult Goblin Ranger 5 L/G and Young Adult Infected Werewildcat Goblin Rogue 5 C/E)

The Boggers Twins are two young goblin brothers, very skilled in gathering resources and finding people, places, and lost things. They are both very friendly and almost indistinguishable from one another.

Adventure Hook: Gralg has been bitten by a werewildcat and is now an unpredictable wild fury. He turns not only with the full moon, but also if he falls asleep after seeing his brother being wronged. He will then stalk and eviscerate the unfortunate target. The adventurers are asked to investigate these cruel murders, and their first suspect is Kurn.

Mowar Starpaw

(*Old Goblinwood Worg Cleric of Rakhashi 8 N/G)*

Mowar is a grey-furred worg, slow in motion but quick in wit. Wise and knowledgeable, Mowar is the primary spiritual advisor in Fenris' Fang, and he is respected by the majority of the tribes.

Adventure Hook: Mowar's son Zuran has been initiated into the Cult of Garm, the Wolf of the Night. The leader of the Cult, Naggra Bloodfang (Old Worg Warpriest of Garm 7 C/E), has a grudge against Mowar, and Mowar suspects that Naggra wants his son dead to have his revenge. He asks the adventurers to help his son to stay alive.

Durak Worgfriend

(Middle-Aged Goblin Bartender Bard 5 N)

Durak loves gossip. He is always very well informed on whatever happens in the town and beyond. Durak is the *de facto* mayor of the city, thanks to his respected status among both humanoids and worgs. He is permitted to speak during Quickfang pack meetings, and can cast his vote. While he has a profit-inclined mentality, he tries to think about the well-being of Fenris' Fang first.

Adventure Hook: Durak is willing to sell the skin of the animals captured by the Quickfang hunters, but the Bloodfang tribe and some traditionalist elders see that as a profanation of the sanctity of the hunt. They are trying to sabotage the first expedition, and Durak asks the adventurers to protect it.

Prince Frandulak III Scalestorm

(Adult Spellscale Kobold Magus 8 L/N)

Prince Frandulak is the hereditary ruler of Wyrmvault, and he rules with a shrewd mind, always mindful of the centuries-old traditions of his people. Frandulak is a decision maker, but he always minds his advisors. He tries to balance his traditionalism with the need for progress his people have.

Adventure Hook: Recently, Frandulak has opened the Great Dragon Library to one human student. The young man brought several books from great arcane libraries all over the core. He was warmly recommended by an old friend of Frandulak's great-grandfather, the only human who has always been welcomed in Wyrmvault, Archibald Everlast. However, the decision has been met with hostility. The most vocal of the opponents has been his chief advisor, Shingrak. When young Haldron Tyrosk (Young Adult Human Wizard 3 L/G) is found in a confused state near the Library's restricted area, there is pressure to expel him from the city and the school, but on Everlast's input, Frandulak asks the adventurers to investigate.

The Weird Sisters

(Goblin Green Hag Bruja Witch 5 N; Hobgoblin Sea Hag Bruja Magus Hexblade 5 L/N; Bugbear Annis Hag Bruja Shaman of Galaweene 5 C/N)

The goblin Aunt Sankuti, the hobgoblin Aunt Marrika, and the bugbear Aunt Karaweena are peculiar bruja hags who were not humans to begin with. They got their hag powers thanks to bizarre fairy interventions, but they never were evil. This unique coven is interested in collecting stories and mementos, and they have resided in Wyrmvault for a decade now, where they own a bazaar.

Adventure Hook: Sankuti, a white haired goblin woman even smaller than average, suddenly bumps into the adventurers, who must help this old woman to return to her home. There, Marrika and Karaweena insist the adventurers share with them some juicy story. In exchange, they might get precious information and magical items with a generous discount.

Xurda Sparkletail

(Middle-Aged Kobold Wizard 7 L/G)

The Head Librarian of the Great Dragon Library of Wyrmvault is a dutyful and law-abiding woman, who firmly believes in using knowledge and magic for the common good. As the Librarian, she is also the headmistress of the University, and she is always ready to help her students.

Adventure Hook: The restricted section of the Great Dragon Library is very dangerous. When a tome on necromancy goes missing, Xurda employs the adventurers not only to recover the book, but also to close the breach in the Library's security.

Strongjohn Taylor

(Adult Human Rogue 7 N/E)

This pleasant looking human is the owner of the Treasure in the Barrell, an inn of growing reputation in all of the Goblinwood. He is witty and genuinely affable, even with his enemies. He is also the owner of the city's best furnished bazaar, and he is creating a net of trade agreements all around the Goblinwood.

Adventure Hook: Strongjohn is ambitious and merciless, and he aims to build a powerful criminal empire in the Goblinwood. While he avoids pettiness and unnecessary cruelty, and he will never kill someone when he can pay to get the same result, he will not hesitate to use any available means to reach his ends. If that means allying himself with the less than reputable organizations, he will. But racist fanatics who want to resurrect a dracolich are beyond the limit he imposes on himself, so he reaches out to the adventurers.

Organizations

The Order of the Wardens of the Cave is a Neutral Good order of warriors tied to the Cult of the All-Mother. Fighters, rangers, cavaliers, paladins, barbarians, and magi belong to the order's ranks, and they swear solemnly to protect the life of every living creature unjustly threatened. They also serve as honour guards in the Mother's Cave Sanctuary, which was their original calling, hence their name. The head of the Order is Lystrang Ironshield (Adult Hobgoblin Paladin Hope Bringer 9 N/G), who recently welcomed humans into their ranks.

Dread Possibility: The Mother's Bank

The Wardens have been growing in numbers and in wealth since the signing of the Treaty with Tepest. Their services are requested from various villages who want to commerce with humans unbothered. They are amassing a noticeable fortune from donations, and there are some high-ranking members of the order who are forgetting the reason the order exists. Will they try to seize power for themselves and make the order into a mercenary company?

The Covenant of the Old Folk is an anti-human Lawful Evil movement which wants the Old Folk to re-take the continent from the usurping races—humans and halflings, but also dwarves—starting with Tepest. They see gnomes and elves as cowardly collaborators, but they loathe them way less than they do humans. The head of the Covenant is a goblin only known as Wyrmtongue (Half-Dragon Goblin Bard Demagogue 9 L/E)

Dread Possibility: The Dead Dragon Society

The DDS is not a secret, but no one has yet uncovered a link between the Covenant and the Society. The Society is pretty hostile to both humans and the Old Folk, accusing both of the fall of the Undead Dragon King. However, its attacks are always strangely beneficial to the Covenant. The DDS is Chaotic Evil in its lower ranks, but its leaders are Neutral Evil and might ultimately work for Wyrmtongue. And who knows who Wyrmtongue's true master is.

The Darklord : Shingrak

Small Great Wyrm Red Dragon
Hit Dice*:* 29d12+58 (290 hp)
Speed: 30 feet, fly 50 feet (good maneuverability)
Initiative: +2 (+3 in Wyrmthrone)
Senses: Dragon Senses, Smoke Vision, Perception +34 (+3 in Wyrmthrone)
Armor Class: 25 Touch 19 Flat Footed 22 (+2 Dex, +6 Natural, +1 Size, +1 Dodge +5 Deflection) (+3 in Wyrmthrone)
Damage Reduction: 20/magic.

Space/Reach: 5 feet/5 feet.
Combat Maneuver Bonus/Combat Maneuver Defense:+31/43 (+3 in Wyrmthrone)
Str: 17, **Dex**: 14, **Con**: 15, **Int**: 22, **Wis**: 23, **Cha**: 22
Saving Throws: **Fort**: +18, **Ref**: +18, **Wil**: +24 (+3 in Wyrmthrone)
Spell Resistance: 32

Special Qualities: Curse of the darklord, immunity to fire and negative energy, vulnerability to cold, fire aura (2d6 fire damage, 5 feet, swift action to activate, free action to deactivate), perfect disguise, rejuvenation, sinkhole of evil, mastery 3.

***Special Attack*:** Dark fire breath (cone, 35 feet, 12d10 fire and negative energy, Reflex DC 26 half damage), incinerate (DC 26), frightful presence (DC 30, range 30 feet), manipulate flame, melt stone (half the range and the damage), animate (DC 26), dominate undead (6/day, Will DC 30, total undead controlled Hit Dice 116); paralyze (touch, Fortitude DC 30 negates, 1d6 rounds).

Attack*:* Melee: *Drakeskull Rod* +32/+28/+22/+18 (1d6 non-lethal bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing + 1d6 fire + 1d6 negative energy + 4, crit x3) and bite or tail +31 (1d6+4 non-lethal bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing) or 2 claws +31 (non-lethal piercing and slashing 1d4+1), bite +31, (1d6+3 non-lethal bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing), tail +31 (1d6+3 non-lethal bludgeoning), 2 wings +31 (1d4+1 non-lethal bludgeoning) or deadly touch +33 (1d6 non-lethal negative energy damage + paralysis (Fortitude negates)) (+3 in Wyrmthrone)

Ranged*:* Standard action, Dark Fire Dart +36, (2d6 fire and negative energy damage, crit x2, 120 feet range) (+3 in Wyrmthrone)

Skills*:* Bluff +38, Climb +35, Craft (Alchemy) +34, Fly +38, Intimidate +42, Knowledge (Arcana) +38, Knowledge (Dungeoneering) +38, Knowledge (History) +38, Knowledge (Religion) +38, Perception +46, Sense Motive +38, Spellcraft +38; (+3 in Wyrmthrone).

Feats*:* Arcane Breath, Combat Casting, Combat Reflexes, Diehard, Dodge, Great Fortitude, Iron Will, Maximize Spell, Multiattack, Quicken Spell, Silent Spell, Spell Focus (Evocation), Spell Focus (Necromancy), Still Spell, Toughness.

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 29th)

At will—detect magic, *discern location*, *find the path*, *pyrotechnics* (DC 18), *suggestion* (DC 19), *wall of fire* (DC 21)

Spells Known (CL 19th)
9th (4/day)—*meteor swarm* (DC 26)*, soul bind* (DC 26)
8th (6/day)—*entomb*, *trap the soul* (DC 25), *undead anatomy IV*
7th (6/day)—*limited wish*, *spell turning, greater teleport*
6th (7/day)—*antimagic field*, *contingency*, *greater dispel magic*
5th (7/day)—*polymorph*, *telekinesis* (DC 22), *teleport*, *wall of force*
4th (7/day)—*fear* (DC 21), *fire shield*, *greater invisibility*, *stoneskin*
3rd (7/day)—*dispel magic*, *displacement*, *haste*, *tongues*
2nd (8/day)—*aid*, *detect thoughts* (DC 18), *misdirection* (DC 18), *resist energy*, *see invisibility*
1st (8/day)—*alarm*, *grease* (DC 17), *magic missile*, *shield*, *true strike*
0 (at will)—*arcane mark*, *bleed*, *light*, *mage hand*, *mending*, *message*, *open/close*, *prestidigitation*, *read magic*

Challenge Rating: 21

Possessions*: Drakeskull Rod* (C/G Sentient +3 Light Mace, who has the properties of a *greater metamagic rod of quicken* and *maximize*. Thrice a day, it can emit a cone of fire 30 feet long, which inflicts 10d10 fire damage, Reflex DC 26 halves. The Rod contains the soul of Nyxatrin, Shingarak's youngest dragon victim. The baby dragon treats Shingarak as his elder brother, and usually does as he is told, but is prone to pranks and does not like to hurt people he perceives as nice or funny. He can speak an archaic form of Common and Draconic. In spite of his ability scores (Int 10, Wis 11, Cha 17) the Drakeskull Rod has an Ego score of 35 for the purpose of being used against its will, so it is very difficult to make him do what he doesn't want to. Once the Rod is wielded, the possessor must take it with him everywhere. If left alone, it will teleport to its owner's backpack or hand. The Rod will only accept being wielded by people he deems nice or funny. He will never accept being actively used against his big brother, or funny or nice people. At will, it can cast *pyrotechnics*, *ghost sound* and *mage hand*. Thrice a day it can cast *fireball*, twice a day it can cast *fire shield*, and once a day it can cast *telekinesis*. It can only be destroyed by sincere tears of remorse shed by Shingrak); two *bags of holding type IV*; any magical item CL 19 or less up to three pieces, CL 14 or less up to six pieces, CL 9 or less up to nine pieces; 200,000 gp + 50,000 gp in gems; *flask of alchemy*; *advisor vestments* (+5 deflection bonus to AC)

Background

Born as Shingarak, the youngest son of the first Dragon King of the then Dragonwood, Shiraxas the Wise, Shingarak was raised in the extended Dragon Clan, composed of a dozen dragon families. King Shiraxas ruled wisely for 600 years, then he rejoined the gods, to fight eternally against the Void Dragon. He left the throne to his oldest son after making each of his children, grandchildren, and the dragons of the clan swear solemnly that they would obey his laws and respect the succession by primogeniture. And for another 1000 years, things went smoothly. But Shingarak grew bitter, since he had become the oldest and most powerful dragon of Dragonwood, but was forced to obey his weaker nephew. So, he decided to take the throne for himself. With the expedient of a great feast, he reunited the whole Dragon Clan in the place where today Brokenbones is seated, the place where his father and eldest siblings rested. There, he sacrificed all of them in a dark ritual and became a dracolich, claiming Wyrmthrone for himself. But the Mists saw his guilt as oathbreaker and kinslayer, and they cursed him a first time, causing the people of Dragonwood to rebel and seal him in Wyrmvault. There he stayed in a miserable state until he was accidentally freed at the beginning of the current Age. After a brief rampage, Shingarak's undead body was destroyed by the fey-blessed human king of Tepest, but not before he had desecrated the remains of the dragons he killed to empower himself. This final act of evil sealed his fate. As he was destroyed he knew that, as a Dracolich, he could take over a reptilian body, but instead the Mists rose up.

Current Sketches

Shingarak awoke as a kobold, named Shingrak. He was not really a kobold; he was still a dragon, with all the magical and elemental power of a red great wyrm, in a kobold-size body. Shingrak wants to rule the Goblinwood and beyond, and he wants his undead dragon body back. He plays the role of the loyal advisor to the Prince of the kobolds, and he is respected for his magical prowess. But his blackened heart bleeds as he is forced to bow down to kobolds and watch as the kingdom he was fated to rule forever is mishandled by people he dismisses as inferior.

Combat

Shingrak is still physically powerful, but not nearly as much as a great wyrm should be. He resents the limitations his size imposes on him, and is ashamed of his reduced effectiveness in combat, where he is unable to kill people in melee. For this reason, he focuses on spellcasting, unleashing his spells and, if forced to, using his unsatisfying breath weapon. He relishes in seeing his enemies burn and raising them as loyal undead servants.

Special Abilities

Animate (Su): if a target is killed by Shingrak's darkfire breath, he can choose to not incinerate that target corpse and instead force it to do a DC 26 Fortitude saving throw. With a failure, the victim reanimates as a skeleton under Shingrak's control (which counts against the Hit Dice of undead he can control).

Perfect Disguise (Ex): Shingrak is indistinguishable from a winged kobold. The bipedal stance and using his claws for fine manipulation is painfully stressful for Shingrak, who gets a -4 penalty to every roll as long as he keeps the stance (included in Shingrak's armed melee attack and Craft skill).

Rejuvenation: If Shingrak dies, he immediately takes over a young kobold in the Goblinwood. The memories of people who have seen Shingrak dying are then modified, and his death is forgotten. He would be unable to reincarnate if no kobold was present in the Goblinwood at the moment of his death.

Curse of the Dark Lord: Shingrak is imprisoned in a kobold-sized mortal body, unable to turn back except when he is alone in a secret room he has created in Wyrmthrone. He is unable to directly harm kobolds, he can't lie to or directly disobey their ruler, Prince Frandulak, and he can't kill with melee attacks. To add injury to insult, his most powerful magical artifact, the *Drakeskull Rod*, is now possessed by an insufferable wyrmling brat who refuses to leave his company.

Lair

Wyrmthrone was his tomb for centuries, and now he plots nefarious plans in the secret rooms only he knows. The palace is a rank three sinkhole of evil which can bestow the frightened, fascinated, and rage conditions (Will DC 30 negates).

Closing the Border

If Shingrak wishes to close the border of the Goblinwood, any person trying to pass through needs to pass a DC 30 Will save or be frightened for one hour and run back in the direction he came from. He can close the border for up to one month.

Dread Alternatives

New Monsters - Cat, Wildcat

XP 200
N Small animal
Init +6; Senses low-light vision, scent; Perception +10
Defense
AC 14, touch 13, flat-footed 12 (+2 Dex, +1 Size, +1 Natural)
hp 12 (2d8+2)
Fort +4, **Ref** +5, **Will** +2

Offense
Speed 30 ft. Climb 30 ft.
Melee 2 claws +4 (1d3–2), bite +4 (1d6–2)
Space 5ft., Reach 5 ft.

Statistics
Str 6, **Dex** 15, **Con** 12, **Int** 2, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 7
Base Atk +0; CMB +0; CMD 6 (10 vs. trip)

Special Qualities
Perfect Balance (Ex): The Wildcat can always take 10 to Acrobatics and Climb rolls, even if in a hurry or threatened.
Light Steps (Ex): Add 10 to the DC of any Survival roll made to track a wildcat.

Special Attacks

Ambush (Ex): The Wildcat can act normally in a surprise round, and any flat-footed enemy hit with its melee attack gets 1d6 extra damage.

Feats Improved Initiative (B), Weapon Finesse
Skills Acrobatics+8, Climb +14, Perception +5, Stealth +12; Racial Modifiers +4 Acrobatics, +4 Climb, +4 Stealth

Ecology
Environment: temperate and continental forest or mountain
Organization: solitary or pair.
CR: 1/2

Description

Wildcats are twice as long and twice as heavy as domestic cats, and can be dangerous if they attack with surprise.

New Template - Dracolich

Dracolich is a form of lichdom reserved for dragons. It is identical to the lich template except for:

It can be acquired by any true dragon of age category old or older.

The Philacterium of a Dracolich can be destroyed. When that happens, the lich's soul must possess the first reptile body in a radius of 33 km. The body then regrows into the dracolich's undead form in 66 weeks.

New Player Races

Goblins

These small, short-lived, green-skinned humanoids are often seen as malicious tricksters out to ambush and rob "civilized" humanoids. In truth, they have one of the oldest civilizations in the Core, and form the bulk of the population in the Goblinwood. They also live in secured fortresses in Forlorn, in Sithicus' underground, and in the Shadow Forest.

Racial Traits:

+4 Dexterity, –2 Strength, –2 Constitution: Goblins are fast but weak, and fragile.

Goblinoid: Goblins are humanoids with the goblinoid subtype.

Small: Goblins are Small and gain a +1 size bonus to their AC, a +1 size bonus on attack rolls, a –1 penalty on combat maneuver checks and to their Combat Maneuver Defense, and a +4 size bonus on Stealth checks.

Normal Speed: Goblins are fast for their size, and have a base speed of 30 feet.

Darkvision: Goblins can see in the dark up to 60 feet.

Skilled: +4 racial bonus on Ride checks

Junk Tinker: Goblins use ramshackle equipment and vehicles that seem like they should never function. Goblins gain a +2 racial bonus on driving checks and on Craft checks to build or repair weapons or vehicles without the proper tools. They can make the attempt with any material that can hold the right shape for a few uses, but normally unfit materials produce items with the fragile quality.

Languages: Goblins begin play speaking Common (Baloki) and Goblin. Goblins with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Draconic, Dwarven, Elvish, Lamordian (Tepestani), and Orc.

Favoured Class: Rogue.

Hobgoblins

The ochre-skinned, disciplined, and well-organized hobgoblins are seen as tyrannical brutes bent on conquest, and while martial pursuits are important in their culture, they tend to apply the same self-discipline also in civilian pursuits. You can find them in sizable numbers only in the Goblinwood and Forlorn, but once they had a larger presence.

Racial Traits:

+2 Dexterity, +2 Constitution: Hobgoblins are fast and hardy.

Goblinoid: Hobgoblins are humanoids with the goblinoid subtype.

Medium: Hobgoblins are Medium creatures and have no bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Slow Speed: Hobgoblins have a base speed of 20 feet. However Hobgoblin Speed is not altered by wearing heavy armour or being encumbered.

Darkvision: Hobgoblins can see in the dark up to 60 feet.

Fearsome: Hobgoblins receive a +4 racial bonus on Intimidate checks.

Battle Ready: Hobgoblins get +2 to Initiative rolls, plus can don and remove any armor with a full-round action, and extract weapons with the same action they use to attack. They can sleep while wearing armor without suffering fatigue.

Languages: Hobgoblins begin play speaking Common (Baloki) and Goblin. Hobgoblins with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Draconic, Dwarven, Elvish, Giant, Lamordian (Tepestani), and Orc.

Favoured Class: Fighter.

Bugbears

The rarest of the major goblinoid races, these dark-furred, lumbering hulks are seen as a true menace by outsiders. In truth, bugbears use fear as a tool for their safety, as they have neither the numbers the goblins have, nor the sheer discipline hobgoblins display. What they do have is brute force and surprising sneakiness—a fearsome combination. They are found in sizable numbers only in the Goblinwood and the Shadow Forest.

Racial Traits:

+2 Strength, +2 Constitution, –2 Intelligence: Bugbears are strong and hardy, but not very bright.

Goblinoid: Bugbears are humanoids with the goblinoid subtype.

Medium: Bugbears are Medium creatures and have no bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Normal Speed: Bugbears have a base speed of 30 feet.

Darkvision: Bugbears can see in the dark up to 60 feet.

Sneaky Fearsome: Bugbears receive a +4 racial bonus on Intimidate and Stealth checks.

Powerful Build: Bugbears count as one size larger for every purpose which gives them advantage.

Languages: Bugbears begin play speaking Common (Baloki) and Goblin. Bugbears with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Draconic, Dwarven, Elvish, Giant, Lamordian (Tepestani), and Orc.

Favoured Class: Barbarian.

Half-Hobgoblin

The fruit of the union between humans and hobgoblins, half-hobgoblins have ochre-leaning skin tones and large ears, but for the rest they resemble humans more. Half-hobgoblins breed true, but they are very few in number, usually seen only around Tepest, the Goblinwood, and Forlorn.

Racial Traits:

+2 to One Ability Score: Half-hobgobin characters get a +2 bonus to one ability score of their choice at creation to represent their varied nature.

Medium: Half-hobgoblins are Medium creatures and have no bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Normal Speed: Half-hobgoblins have a base speed of 30 feet.

Darkvision: Half-hobgoblins have darkvision up to 60 feet.

Enduring: Half-hobgoblins receive Diehard as a bonus feat at 1st level.

Hobgoblin Blood: Half-hobgoblins count as both hobgoblins and humans for any effect related to race.

Intimidating: Half-hobgoblins receive a +2 racial bonus on Intimidate checks.

Multitalented: Half-hobgoblins choose two favored classes at 1st level and gain 1 additional hit point or skill point whenever they take a level in either one of those classes.

Languages: Half-hobgoblins begin play speaking Common (Baloki) and Goblin. Half-hobgoblins with high Intelligence scores can choose any languages they want (except secret languages, such as Druidic).

Orcs

Orcs are a race on the brink of extinction, amounting to a small number concentrated in the Goblinwood. They are not the brutes they are depicted as outside the Goblinwood, living simple lives full of spirituality.

Racial Traits:

+2 Strength,+ 2 Wisdom, –2 Intelligence, –2 Charisma: Orcs are strong and perceptive, but also blunt and not academically oriented.

Orc: Orcs are humanoids with the orc subtype.

Medium: Orcs are Medium creatures and have no bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Fast Speed: Orcs have a base speed of 40 feet.

Darkvision: Orcs can see in the dark up to 60 feet.
Smeller: Orcs have scent in a 15-foot range.

Sharp Senses: Orcs have a +2 bonus to Perception Checks.

Self Reliant: Orcs have a +2 bonus to Survival Checks.

Languages: Orcs begin play speaking Common (Baloki) and Orc. Orcs with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Dwarven, Giant, Goblin, and Lamordian (Tepestani).

Favourite Class: Ranger.

Goblinwood Ogres

Smaller than their brutish cousins, Goblinwood ogres are gentle giants of 2.6 meter average height, who love cooking, brewing, raising animals, and gardening. They also love eating and see plumpness and fatness as a signal of health and beauty. They usually live in extended families where several generations of ogre (who can live up to 200 years) live together. When they become adventurers, they do so to try new kinds of food and to find out new recipes to cook. Goblinwood ogres see Goblinwood trolls as a sister race, and they share the same faith.

Racial Traits:

+4 Strength, –2 Dexterity, –2 Intelligence: Ogres are incredibly strong but also slow, physically and mentally.

Giant: Goblinwood ogres are humanoids with the giant subtype.

Medium: Ogres are Medium creatures and have no bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Normal Speed: Ogres have a base speed of 30 feet.

Darkvision: Ogres can see in the dark up to 60 feet.
Ogre in a Pottery: Ogres have a +4 bonus on any attempt they make to break something with a Strength check.

Powerful Build: Ogres count as one size larger for every purpose which gives them advantage.

Big Eater: Ogres need 4 times the amount of food and water that a Medium creature requires.

Cast Iron Stomach: Ogres are immune to ingested poison and disease from ingested food, and can eat spoiled food without consequences, even if they won't like the taste. They also have a +2 bonus on saves against poison and disease.

Gustative and Olfactive Memory: Ogres automatically remember the taste and scent of everything they have tasted or smelled at least once. They have a +2 bonus to checks to recognize substances.

Sharp Nose: Ogres have a +2 bonus to Perception checks.

Skilled Cook: Ogres have a +2 bonus to Profession (Cook) checks.

Gullible: Ogres have a –2 penalty to saving throws against charm effects.

Languages: Ogres begin play speaking Common (Baloki) and Giant. Ogres with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Draconic, Dwarven, Goblin, Orc, and Lamordian (Tepestani).

Favourite Class: Barbarian.

Goblinwood Trolls

Smaller than their more feral cousins, Gobliwood trolls are deeply spiritual and have a strong sense of community and love traditions and stories. Goblinwood trolls can be 2.40 meters tall, but they tend to walk a bit stooped and so look shorter. They can live up to 600 years and see ogres as a sister race. If they go adventuring they do so for religious reasons or to add new stories to their long repertory.

Racial Traits:

+2 Dexterity, +2 Constitution: Trolls are resilient and surprisingly nimble.

Giant: Goblinwood Trolls are humanoids with the giant subtype.

Medium: Trolls are Medium creatures and have no bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Normal Speed: Trolls have a base speed of 30 feet.

Darkvision: Trolls can see in the dark up to 60 feet.
Claws: Trolls have sharp nails, long and resistant. They have two natural claw attacks; they inflict 1d4 + the troll's Strength modifier slashing damage.

Powerful Build: Trolls count as one size larger for every purpose which gives them advantage.

Scent: Trolls have the scent ability and a +4 bonus to Perception.

Light Sensitivity: Trolls are dazzled for one round under strong light.

Fast Healing: Trolls recover 1 hit point every hour while they are below half of their maximum HP. They automatically stabilize when they are at 0 HP or below, but they are still staggered and they lose one hit point when they do a standard action. Trolls recover a number of extra hit points equal to their Constitution modifier when they are healed. With a long rest, a troll recovers extra hit points equal to twice their Constitution modifier.

Languages: Trolls begin play speaking Common (Baloki) and Giant. Trolls with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Draconic, Dwarven, Goblin, Orc, and Lamordian (Tepestani).

Favourite Class: Fighter.

Goblinwood Worgs

These intelligent wolves have a sophisticated culture, built around the idea of the pack and the natural cycle. Worgs can live as long as humans, and are curious about the world. They form more complex societies than their more survival-focused cousins outside the Goblinwood. Young adults often go on adventures to discover new things and learn new abilities for the welfare of the pack.

Racial Traits:

+2 Dexterity, +2 Wisdom, –2 Intelligence, –2 Charisma: Worgs are nimble and perceptive, but also not academically oriented and quite introverted.

Magical Beast: Goblinwood worgs are magical beasts.

Medium: Worgs are Medium creatures and have no bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Fast Speed: Worgs have a base speed of 40 feet.

Darkvision: Worgs can see in the dark up to 60 feet.

Bite: Worgs have strong jaws and sharp teeth. They have a natural bite attack, which inflicts 1d4 + 1.5 x Strength modifier piercing, slashing, and bludgeoning damage.

Superior Scent: Worgs have scent in a 60-foot range.

Quadrupeds: Worgs are quadrupeds, so their carrying capacity is increased 50%, and they have a +4 Bonus to CMD against trip maneuvers. They cannot wear armor made for humanoids, and they have a –4 penalty on Climb and Ride checks.

Magic Hand: Worgs can use the *mage hand* spell at will to wield weapons, bear shields, use spells, and for other uses.

Natural Hunters: Worgs have a +4 bonus on Perception and Survival checks.

Speak with Wolves: Worgs can communicate simple concepts with wolves at will. **Languages:** Worgs begin play speaking Common (Baloki) and Goblin. Worgs with high Intelligence scores can choose from the following languages: Draconic, Dwarven, Giant, Orc, and Lamordian (Tepestani).

Favourite Class: Ranger.

Goblin Trapmaster, By: @bravepanther559, Character Art

New Archetypes

Barbarian Little Fury

Small size does not mean harmless. Little Furies have been overlooked because of their size all their life, and now, they will show everyone how much they were wrong.

***Requisite*:** Small Size or lesser.

***Class Skills*:** Escape Artist is a class skill for the Little Fury. This modifies the Barbarian class skills.

***Rage against the Titans*:** Whenever in a rage, the Barbarian gains a +1 bonus to attack rolls, and damage rolls for every size category their target is larger than them. This modifies the rage feature.

Escape Master: Beginning at level 3, the Little Fury has a bonus of +1 to their CMD against attempts to grapple and bind them, and a +1 bonus to Escape Artist checks. He can add his Strength modifier to Escape Artist checks instead of his Dexterity bonus. These bonuses increase by 1 at level 6 and every three levels thereafter. This feature replaces the trap sense feature.

***Rage Powers*:** The following rage powers complement the Little Fury archetype: Brawler; Brawler, Greater; Deadly Accuracy; Surprise Accuracy.

***New Rage Powers*:**

Giant Feller (Ex): While raging, the Barbarian is treated as two sizes larger to decide if they can use the trip maneuver on a target or if they can be targeted by an effect based on size. The barbarian must be at least level 6 to take this power. This power can be taken up to 3 times; its benefit stacks..

Half-Pint Menace(Ex): While raging, the Barbarian is considered as having the Under and Over feat, even if they don't have the prerequisite for the feat.

Fighter Infantry Veteran

Infantry Veterans are hardened survivors who learn how to break terrible charges from the cavalry and how to block rains of death, be it arrows or spells.

Front Line Fighting (Ex): At 2nd level, the infantry veteran learns how to hold the line. Increase their CMD against bull rush and push by 1. Also add 1 to saving throws against trampling and body slams. This bonus increases by 1 at level 6 and every 4 levels thereafter. This ability replaces Bravery.

Charge Breaker (Ex): At 3rd level, an infantry veteran gains a +1 bonus on attack rolls and damage with readied attacks against charging opponents, and at level 7 he can make an opportunity attack against a charging opponent. The bonus increases by +1 for every four levels beyond 3rd. This ability replaces armor training 1, 2, 3, and 4

Tower Shield Training (Ex): At level 5, an infantry veteran can use a Tower Shield as a melee weapon; it inflicts 1d10 + Strength modifier bludgeoning damage, and can be used to gain cover as a swift action. The infantry veteran gets a bonus of 1 to attack rolls and damage rolls if it uses the shield to attack. If not, they gain a +1 shield bonus to armor class, and if they use it to gain cover, +1 to Reflex saving throws. These bonuses increase by 1 every 4 levels after the 5th. This ability replaces Weapon Training 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Shield Wall (Ex): At level 19, if the Infantry Veteran uses a tower shield, they can't be targeted by single target spells or ranged attacks.

Hope Bringer Paladin

Hope Bringers are silver lifelines which keep people going in the darkest moments. They don't fight with weapon alone but also with the everlasting hope they incarnate.

Power of Hope (Su): At 4th level, a hope bringer learns to channel the power of hope to bolster her defenses and aid her allies. This class feature replaces the paladin's spells class feature. A hope bringer does not gain any spells or spellcasting abilities, does not have a caster level, and cannot use spell trigger or spell completion magic items.

At 4th level, the hope bringer gets one additional use of her lay on hands ability per day. They gains one additional use of lay on hands per day for every four levels she attains beyond 4th. She can spend a use of her lay on hands ability to channer the power of hope as a standard action. This causes an hopeful vibration to emanate from the hope bringer in a 30-foot radius. All allies in this area (including the hope bringer) receive a +2 morale bonus to AC and saving throws against fear as long as they remain in the area of vibration. This power lasts for 1 minute.

At 8th level, the vibration of hope heals the paladin and her allies, curing of them of 1d4 points of ability damage, as per the spell *lesser restoration*. A creature can only be healed in this way once per day.

At 12th level, the vibration of hope can stagger enemies in the area even undead, once per encounter (Saving Throw Will Negate DC 10+ half the Paladin level+ the Paldin Charisma modifier). In addition, the vibration grants the hope bringer and their allies in the area immunity to fear and fear effects and resistance 10 against negative energy.

At 16th level, the vibration of hope grants the hope bringer and their allies protection from critical hits. There is a 25% chance that critical hits made against the hop bringer and their allies in the area are instead treated as normal hits. This does not stack with other abilities that grant similar protection (such as light fortification).

At 20th level, the vibration of hope increases in size out to a range of 60 feet. In addition, all of its bonuses increase. The morale bonus to AC and saving throws against fear increases to +4. The amount of ability damage healed increases to 2d4. The energy resistance increases to 20 against negative energy type. Finally, protection against critical hits increases to 50%.

Reverberating Hope (Su): At 14th level, a hope bringer can unleash a 30-foot burst of sound as a

standard action. Evil creatures within this burst take 1d6 points of damage for every two paladin levels and are deafened for 2 round. Evil dragons, evil outsiders, and evil undead are deafened for 2d4 rounds on a failed save. A Fortitude save halves this damage and negates the deafness. The DC of this save is equal to 10 + 1/2 the hope bringer's level + the hope bringer's Charisma modifier. Good creatures within this burst are healed 1d6 points of damage per two paladin levels and receive a +4 sacred bonus on ability checks and saving throws for 2 round. A hope bringer can use this ability once per day at 14th level plus one additional time per day at 17th and 20th levels. This ability replaces aura of faith.

Kitchen Witch

Kitchen witches are a group who do their magic through cooked food and boiling cauldrons.

Magic Food: Kitchen witches can channel their non-harmful spells through food. They can have up to their Witch level + their Intelligence modifier in magical food rations prepared. If they store a spell in food, they can't cast it through normal means. They also reduce their allotted spell slots of any spell level they use by one when they prepare magic food. Consuming magic food equates to drinking a potion. This ability modifies spellcasting.

The following hexes complement the kitchen witch:

Hexes

Cauldron

Major Hexes

Cook People, Witch's Bounty, and Witch's Brew

Grand Hexes

Life Giver

New Grand Hex

Eternal Youth Elixir: Once per day, the witch can extract from her cauldron a dose of elixir. If drunk, it cancels any penalty for aging and bestows the monk's timeless body ability on the drinker. This effect lasts until the witch chooses to end it, or until the witch dies.

New Weapon

Battlejaws

This metal teeth set is made to enhance the bite attack of a creature. It is built expressly for the jaws of one kind of creature, and it is a simple weapon for the creature which can wear it. It increases the bite damage of that creature by one size category and still counts as a natural attack.

A Darkness Falls

By Mark "Rock of the Fraternity" Bartels

'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again'[1]

- English nursery rhyme, 1882 version

1. *Theft*

I'm lying in a hooker's bed when the call comes through on the shortwave radio. We're smoking cigarettes I brought in with me. The air drifting in through the open window is foul, and some damn' revival preacher is making a fuss in the street outside.

"What's that?" she asks me, curious, as the radio starts spitting out a garbled series of code words and numbers.

I tell her to shut up for a minute and grab my notebook and a stub of pencil from my jacket, hanging off the bed's headboard. Jot down what would sound like gibberish to the average person in the street, listen to the shortwave repeat its message another time to make sure I got it all, then get up and shut it off.

"So?" she asks me. "What was it?"

Work, I tell her. Or a hobby, depending on who you ask. There are always people watching the skies and keeping their ear to the ground, prod-noses who keep alert to weird stuff. Once they find it, they fling it into the aether so the right and wrong people will know about it and do something.

"Which one are you?" she asks, a bit of a crooked smile on her face. More charming than it ought to be.

I tell her that I'm definitely the wrong kind of person, the worst kind of person, but needs must when the Devil's driving and once more unto the breach, dear friends, here for the lack of a nail go I.

"Would you like some company for the road?" she asks me.

This surprises me – and I am also surprised to find that the idea does not displease me. I tell her it's not going to be a pleasure trip, and she might die along the way. She might die horribly along the way.

"You gonna keep me safe, tough guy?" she asks, teasing.

Only a fool would count on me to keep them safe, I warn her.

"Well," she says, getting up from the bed, "you're not the worst customer. I can die horribly right here, the next time Drunk Andy comes in and decides he wants to choke me again. He's killed two girls already, when he was shit-faced. Madam just

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[1] *"Humpty Dumpty has been used to demonstrate the second law of thermodynamics."The law describes a process known asentropy, a measure of the number of specific ways in which a system may bearranged, often taken to be a measure of "disorder". The higher the entropy, the higher the disorder. After his fallandsubsequent shattering, the inability to put him together again is representative of this principle, as it would behighly unlikely (though not impossible) to return him to his earlier state of lower entropy, as the entropy of anisolated system never decreases." -- quoted from the Wikipedia article on the character Humpty Dumpty.*

had the bodies tossed in the sewer; Drunk Andy's got a thick wad of cash."

This is hardly unusual, since the Division. Still.

I look her over, up and down. She's not *pretty*, exactly. Her face puts me in mind of a snake; her nose's been broken at least once and set inexpertly, and there's a mean creature staring out from behind her pale eyes and her crooked smile. A *surviving* type of creature. Not much to write home about in the chest department, but she's got the lean, muscular figure of a ballet dancer – or a stripper, more likely. Good bottom, *great* feet.

Not pretty, no. A mean, lean creature with a charming smile, trapped in this gross room instead of prowling the jungle.

What the hell. I tell her to get dressed within five minutes, or I leave without her, so she slips into an outfit that covers too little and hints at too much in two. No shoes, just fishnet stockings. She helps me on with my coat, then hooks her arm through mine. I snort at this, but just tell her to carry the shortwave and not drop it, or there will be trouble.

Out onto the landing we go, the creaking of bedsprings a muted whisper from behind the other doors. Behind each of them is another woman, indentured to this shitty brothel, all of them with their own tragic story and wish for release. The wallpaper is a faded shade of ugly green, peeling due to years of damp. It smells as foul inside as out, with an added soupçon of rotting house.

Down the narrow stairs we go, her managing not to jostle either me or the shortwave, my boot-heels scuffing and tearing the cheap carpet, and we come down to the foyer. The Madam is there, barricaded behind the front desk. Her face pales beneath the layer of pancake when she sees me coming. By the front door, the bouncer flinches and stands up very straight, appearing to want to flatten himself against the wall. His nose – broken with a single punch when he tried to frisk me – is still trickling blood.

The Madam licks her lips, clearly calculating her chances of getting out ahead. "That'll be two hundred dollars," she says, trying to sound brisk and self-assured. She makes an ugly face when I just laugh at her. It gets uglier when I tell her I'm taking the woman with me. "You can't do that!" she shrieks, and makes the mistake of looking to the bouncer.

I rabbit-punch the Madam when her head is turned, and she goes down like a marionette with its strings cut. Her skull makes a fun crunching sound when I hit her. On my arm, the woman briefly gapes in surprise, then grins like a tiger and tightens her grip on my arm. Charming. I look to the bouncer and ask him if he's got anything to say.

He shakes his head, eyes wide and fearful. "You take whatever you want," he replies.

2. *Blasphemy*

And so I do. I take the woman out to the parking lot, where my motorbike still stands waiting. Nobody's tried to steal it, nobody's gone through the saddlebags. I stow the shortwave, then pick up the woman – she makes a surprised little "Oh!"-noise – and set her down behind the saddle. What the hell. I ask her name.

"Dona," she tells me.

Suits me fine. I get in the saddle and want to let the bike roar, but that damn' preacher I heard the whole time I was with the woman – with *Dona* – calls out. Calls out to me. Suddenly she's standing by my bike, one hand gripping my sleeve. Eyes flashing like lightning, face gaunt, dressed to the nines in vinyl, sequins and lace, grinning like a rabid jackal. I doubt she's brushed her teeth this week, judging by the smell of her breath.

"Tell me," she says before I can tell her to get the hell off me and out of my way, "do you believe in the immortal soul?"

I am not drunk, and I have a moderately interesting woman now leaning against my back, arms draped around my waist and holding on tight as if to make sure I won't leave her behind. I am moved to speak the truth, and so I tell the preacher that yes. Yes, I do. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, I believe in the immortal soul.

"You've been fooled, then!" she cackles, gleeful. "Duped by the false gods and their snake-tongues! You don't have a soul, your whore has no soul, I have no soul. Souls don't exist! Stop letting yourself be fooled! All there is for us, is the here and now. We are just sad apes, shuffling around a world we've allowed lies to complicate. Embrace the beast you are and the Beast that made you to be one! Kill. Rape. Eat. Shit. Steal. Death is the end of everything, and you'll cease to be, you'll leave nothing behind another ape can't ruin. So do whatever you want and can get away with! Be *free*!"

I tell her alright, and I draw on her. She opens her mouth, suddenly scared, and I stick the barrel in her mouth. Thumb back the safety. Ask her if she still thinks I should just do what the hell ever I want, because she's pissing me off something fierce. Dona's hands travel from my waist to my shoulders; I feel her nails through my jacket, hear her breath quickening in either fear or excitement, and it's nice either way. Gets the old blood pumping.

I ask the preacher if she'd like me to be more than a sad ape in the concrete jungle. Ask her if she'd like me to aspire to something higher. Mercy. Goodness. All those beautiful qualities people used to hold in such high regard before the Division, before the whole country went to hell. She makes strangled sounds, tears streaming from the corners of her eyes, too scared to nod. I tell her she can wave her hand up and down if she wants to say yes, and she flaps both arms like she's about to take flight.

I pull the gun back, put the safety on and holster it. Then I tell the preacher she's wet herself. Her knees give out and she falls on her butt, looking up at me – at us – like a mountain is about to fall on her. I snort out a burst of laughter – Dona cackles like a witch from the old faerie-tales behind me – and I kick the bike into high gear. We're both still laughing as I send the bike roaring out into the street, scattering startled and cursing pedestrians behind us. Dona puts her arms around my waist and we're still laughing by the time we get to city limits.

Dread Possibility: The Church of the Lesser God and the Beast

The Church of the Lesser God existed before the Division. It served to unite those who believed in its namesake, the Lesser God; a being of unfathomable power that created the material universe because it envied the creations of other, higher powers, and seeded it with life for the same reason. Creating without any plan, the Lesser God made all the plants and animals, expecting them to move about according to their own impulses, die, and then be nothing.

The Church claims that other gods and spirits from "outside" intruded on their patron's territory. These intruders forced higher reasoning capability on the 'sad apes' (humanoids of all kinds) where this was neither solicited nor required, and thus caused the rise of civilization as it came to be known, as well as the 'delusions' of morals, ethics, and the immortal soul.

If the Church of the Lesser God has a message for the faithful, it is that they should find peace in accepting that life is finite and without purpose. One should act according to one's own instincts, where this is possible without inviting harm at the hands of stronger competitors or 'deluded' champions of civilization.

Post-Division, a radicalized offshoot known as the Church of the Beast has started preaching in all major cities. Unlike its 'parent', the Church of the Beast actively champions casting off the shackles of civilization and embracing one's inner animal, living wild and free as the Lesser God – who they call the Beast – intended. Preachers take to the streets, displaying their own freedom by doing and saying whatever they want, and exhort others to do the same.

Even in these troubled times, where the various States fail to cooperate with anything resembling effectiveness and outright anarchy has claimed many cities, the Church of the Beast is regarded with suspicion and even paranoia by those in power. This is not undeserved, as on at least two occasions its nihilistic message caused riots that saw major cities go up in flame, necessitating among others the creation of New Detroit.

Aliases: *The Blind God, the Idiot God, the Muddied Hand*

Iconography: When the churches' patron is portrayed, it is as a tall, muscular man with zero hair on either head or body. This champion of physical fitness has pale, hollow eyes that stare into the distance and may even appear to be blind. Its figure is often portrayed in a posture similar to Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man.

Alignment: Lawful Evil

Cleric alignments: Lawful Evil, Lawful Neutral, Neutral Evil

Portfolio: Apathy, creation, solipsism, envy, fertility, cruelty, oblivion

Domains: Creation (*Spell Compendium*, p. 272), Envy (*Spell Compendium*, p. 273), Fate (*Spell Compendium*, p. 274), Law

Favored weapon: Unarmed strike / natural attack

Prayers: Lay followers do not pray to the deity, for there is no point in doing so. The deity does not shelter his people, nor does he nurture or comfort them. He just expects them to be born, live, die, and return to nothing as they will. Only dedicated clergy – Clerics, Druids and other divine spellcasters – pray to the deity, and that to ask for spells which will help them achieve power, pleasure and comfort during their lifetime. Clergy of this religion pray at sunset, when darkness falls and feelings of futility and finality set in.

Temples: It is passing rare for either Church to construct buildings for purely religious uses. Any community center of library could be consecrated by the Church of the Lesser God for a gathering, then ritually desecrated once the session is over. The Church of the Beast favors desecrating the holy places of other faiths, but is just as happy to gather in swamps or garbage dumps; places of filth and sickness, full of the potential for harm.

Holy Book: The *Book of Reality* is a slim volume – part religious tract, part science manual – of two chapters.

The first chapter contains the bare-bones myth of the Church. The deity created the material universe and life just to see if he could, without any purpose greater than the desire to compare himself to other gods, and may indeed have forgotten about his creation. In time all his creations shall die and come to nothing.

The second chapter contains scientific texts that at least seem to confirm that all there is, is material existence. This chapter may vary from place to place, as local clergy present different texts to support the claims of their faith.

An addendum to the first chapter contains ritual prayers for those who wish to solicit the deity for spells, but no explanation as to why he would grant them. An addendum to the second chapter usually contains contact information for psychologists and other therapists, to help the faithful retain some semblance of sanity, as well as contact information for doctors and other personnel who are qualified to assist in painless suicide. The Church of the Beast either omits the addendum to the second chapter from their copies of the *Book of Reality*, or else replaces it with helpful directions to brothels, gambling dens and bars in the area.

Rites: Gatherings in the Church of the Lesser God tend to be surprisingly serene, and in the pre-Division era used to invite notable scientists to hold guest lectures on subjects of physics and biology to educate the faithful in the purely empirical nature of existence. Clergy of the Lesser God would then hold affirmative sermons, counseling the faithful to find peace in the knowledge that they existed and would cease to exist in accordance with the will of their creator, and to take pride in this. In the current state of nigh-anarchy, visits from notable scholars have become rare, and gatherings are held more to shore up a sense of community and discuss possibilities for the faithful to support each other on the social and economical fields in these trying times.

Gatherings in the Church of the Beast take the form of wild, orgiastic rites, where the faithful debase themselves and each other under the watchful eyes of clergy, who claim to embody the Beast for the duration. Blood sacrifice has become a mainstay of these vile rites, with the community often turning on the weakest among them – or on the highest-ranking clergy in attendance – and turning to cannibalism.

Taboos: The only true taboo the two Churches have, is the creation of undead of any kind. Creating such is considered an abomination not only against nature, but also against the decree of the deity that all that lives should eventually die and return to nothing. If undead are encountered in any region where the two Churches hold any influence at all, clergy and lay-followers alike can be relied upon to lend any aid necessary to put them down – although they may charge for services rendered afterward.

3. *Imprisonment*

We laugh a good long time after we've left the wretched preacher and the parking lot outside the brothel behind. We laugh like monsters, or like bandits. We laugh because it feels nice. The sun on our heads feels nice. The wind in our faces feels nice. Scaring some gods-be-damned preacher from the Church of the Beast feels nice, like honey or sunshine flowing through your veins.

I drive west, but stop in a shopping district right before we hit town limits. I hand Dona a wad of bills and tell her to go buy shoes, underwear, a toothbrush and whatever other toiletries she needs for a trip, but she only has fifteen minutes before I drive off without her. She takes the money and jumps off the bike, then runs for the shops.

I light up a cigarette, as much against the stink that's most everywhere in cities these days as to have something to do while I wait out the clock.

The truth? I didn't really expect Dona to come back. She could take the money and join an armed caravan to a nicer state; she could charm any old fool and move in with them, squeeze out some babies and grow fat on good cooking; or she could clean herself up nice and find a job that paid steady money. There were lots of things she could do, with a bit of cash to get her going. She could have a grand time of it, and I wouldn't bother to hunt her down. She'd been … fun.

When she comes back, sensible boots on her feet and a backpack slung over her shoulders, I'm a little surprised. Not displeased, though. I haul her

back up on the bike and off we go! Out to city limits, where there are barricades and hard men with rifles who used to be soldiers, now just thugs in service to the city lords. They ask if I have any papers, and I hand them some dollar bills. They wave us through, and I swing out onto the highway.

Nothing but open country all around us. Wheat fields burned and left to waste, all the way to the horizon, and the road that cuts through them in a straight line. The air is fresher out here, away from sewers that haven't seen maintenance for too long, away from factories whose owners don't bother with environmental concerns anymore, what with the breakdown of civil order. I breathe in deep, spit out a fly and clamp my fool mouth shut.

Still enjoying the fresher air, mind you.

We roar down the highway, the sun rising towards its zenith above. Dona thumps my shoulder with her open hand. “You want to eat?” she yells, trying to be heard over the howling wind.

I think about it and decide that yes, I could eat. There might still be some jerky in my saddlebags, but that's hardly a good lunch. I look ahead and – in the way distance – see a smudge by the roadside. A smudge that gradually resolves into a gas station with an adjacent parking lot and a store. There's a sign that welcomes us to 'Edgery's 18th mile'. I blink once; I snort with laughter.

“What's funny, tough guy?” Dona asks.

I tell her it's a private joke, but to wait outside until I call her to come into the store. I feel her shrug in agreement, and I pull into the parking lot.

“Want me to fill her up with gas?” Dona asks as I park the bike and get off.

Sure, I tell her, but again – don't come into the store until I call for her.

“Hail, Ming,” she replies, saluting with a cheeky grin.

That tickles my funny-bone something awesome, it really does, and so I am chuckling under my breath as I walk into the store. When was the last time I read a Flash Gordon-comic? I can't recall. A little bell over the door tinkles as I enter, and the air is cool and fresh; I can hear the hum of functioning air conditioning in the background. Passing the magazine rack, I see actual magazines there. Some pornography, some comics, *Young Bride, Better* Homes and Gargoyles, some stuff about boating and gardening. Passing through the store toward the counter and the pimply, redheaded attendant behind it, I see all the shelves are full. Good stuff, too.

“Good afternoon,” the kid in the striped apron says, sounding like he's reading from a script. “Welcome to Edgery's eighteenth mile. Would you be interested in sampling our store specials?”

I tell him no; I want to hear the rules. His face, already pasty-pale and sick-looking under the fluorescent lights, manages to get even paler. His eyes skitter away from mine like roaches fleeing the light.

“You – uh, I,” he stammers. “D – dunno what you're talking about. You mean you'd like to hear about our specials? Half price just n – ow!”

He yelps when I casually slap him in the face, forcing him to meet my eyes again. I wipe my hand on his apron and tell him I want to hear the rules, and it'll be worse for him if he tries to lie to me again. When he hesitates, I take a bit of pity on him and reach into my jacket pocket for my wallet, pull out one of the laminated cards I keep there. The kid goes positively green when he sees what's on the card.

“Y – y – you're management?” he gasps, throat visibly heaving, reeking sweat dripping from every pore on his face.

Well, I say, I own some stock in the company. They mailed me a manager's pass as a bonus. Close enough for government work, so how about those rules? This is a 'Five Rules'-chain shop, after all. 'E' for Edgery; the fifth letter. The eighteenth letter is 'R' for

rules. I tell him that I want to hear this dump's rules, chop chop.

"First rule," he mumbles, "front door should be locked promptly at two thirty-one in the morning, then unlocked at four twenty in the morning, no exceptions. Back door stays unlocked at all times. S – second rule: if the attendant ever hears a voice coming from the staff bathroom, they are to barricade themselves in the stock room and wait for an hour. Any merchandise stolen during this time comes out of the attendant's wages. Third rule: unattended children found in the store must be..." He falters at this, eyes skittering away from mine then back, full of loathing. "... must be escorted through the back door to the loading and unloading area, where they will be … be picked up. Fourth rule: attendants will not smoke while on shift. Fifth rule: the attendant's shift starts as soon as they sample the store's specialties and does not end until... until the next attendant samples the store's specialties."

I scoff; that fifth rule was a mean one. I tell the kid it sucks to be him. Staring out of the eyes of what looks to be some young, awkward boy is something very old and tired. I guess this place doesn't see a lot of traffic, and I remark on it. The kid shrugs, but says nothing. When I tell him I'm bringing my woman in and we're going to shop, but he's not allowed to offer any specialties, he shrugs again; broken, exhausted. Suits me fine.

Dona comes running up when I beckon her from the doorway, wiping her hands on her shorts. She smells faintly of gasoline and there's still some grease on her hands. Her hair is wind-blown and she's grinning like a kid on a school trip, back when there still were school trips. We both grab armfuls of food and drinks, some other stuff, and ferry it all to the counter.

"I didn't think any of this was still for sale!" Dona happily exclaims at one point, as she deposits big bags of crisps in front of the attendant. "This is amazing! How do you keep everything stocked?"

"Company's doing good business," the kid mumbles, and briefly closes his eyes. "Will that be cash or trade?"

Dread Possibility: Five Simple Rules

The Five Rules-company certainly existed pre-Division, but has benefited from the chaos and anarchy of the current age because it no longer needs to hide as much as it used to.

Traveling through the Divided States, people may stumble upon shops, or hospitals, or ranger stations, or prisons, or any other kind of institution that should be suffering terribly from the governmental collapse and the interruption of the supply chain, but is inexplicably thriving. The attending staff is clearly competent at their work and functioning as though the nation had not collapsed into a collection of uncooperative states and cities. Wages are being paid regularly, the power is on, the store rooms are fully stocked.

And this 'happy' state of affairs will continue so long as the staff follow five 'simple' rules. The rules differ for every one of the company's various facilities, and vary from common-sense (like not selling alcohol in the dead of night) through the absurd (no employee shall wear orange underwear on the outside of their clothes on Thursdays) to the bizarre (if lights flicker five times in a row, lie under the nearest table and plug your ears until an earwig runs over your face) to the grotesque (every third visitor on Wednesdays to be garroted and processed into hamburger meat; hamburgers to be given free as a gift with every purchase). Always, there is at least one rule that protects the staff; at least one rule that hurts the staff; and at least one rule that hints at the presence of some vile evil.

Employees of the Five Rules-company profess ignorance of the shadowy management's identities and the reasons for the rules, even under extreme questioning. The reasons why they might go along with the sometimes humiliating, sometimes

horrifying commands laid upon them are manifold. For all its downsides, working for Five Rules brings employment with steady pay, health, dental – even housing. Some people are so lost in the current state of affairs that any kind of directive gives them a sense of purpose. Even if goods show up seemingly out of nowhere and trash is collected by unseen and unheard forces, it's nice to have some shallow semblance of normalcy in one's life. And of course, there are the consequences of not following the rules, which may lead to mutilation and death – if the offender is lucky, that is.

Visitors to a Five Rules-facility have the best chance of survival if they stick to their business, do not stay any longer than strictly necessary, and never lose sight of an employee. Those who stay overlong or wander are more likely to run across the various horrors that Five Rules-facilities hide and coexist with.

Adventurers especially face danger when poking around a Five Rules-facility. Investigating that voice from the bathroom may bring them face to face with an intelligent (and ravenous) ooze boiling up from the sewers. Opening a door that is meant to be locked may bring them face to face with a Faceless Stalker, or a pack of them. Answering that phone which should be left ringing between two and three may result in your soul being sucked out through your ear, and bound in the phone's inner workings. Stay in the building during closing time, and you may discover it to be a giant mimic.

While the management of Five Rules is as mysterious as any supernatural threat out there, it is clearly not benign – and it is sadly highly creative when visiting its whimsical malice upon the world.

I give the kid a warning look. Dona doesn't notice; she's still gushing over how this store has everything she used to love when she was little, and how she thought this stuff wasn't for sale anywhere anymore. Then she digs into her back pocket and draws out a wrinkled dollar bill, which she puts on the counter.

“One for the tip jar,” she tells the kid, grinning. “This is a great place.”

When she's left, I put down a wad of bills to pay the bill (heh), then tell the kid to repeat the fourth rule. He does, and I reach into an inside pocket and pull out my carton of cigarettes. I tap out one and put it on top of Dona's tip (tap-top-tip, heh), then watch the kid's eyes go wide and hungry. I tell him it's one for the tip jar, and he stares at me. Hate and fear pass over his face like shadows.

I tell him it's a great smoke. This shit is Wandering Eye-grade dope. You'll die smiling after one puff, even if someone's ripping your guts out. His lower lip starts to tremble, then his whole body starts to shake, sobs ripping through him. Slowly, I pull a match from my pocket. An old-fashioned one. It'll stink of sulfur if he strikes it, and the sound... That nostalgic hissss. I put it next to the cigarette and tell him it's a little something for his trouble.

He's started crying out loud by the time I'm at the door, but the sound abruptly turns to laughter. Not wholesome laughter, either; that's the cry of the Crazy-Bird I hear. The tinkle of the bell almost drowns out the hissss of the match, but not quite.

There's a little skip in my step as I jog over to the bike.

4. Pursuit

Dona's already stuffed the saddlebags and climbed on by the time I get there. Her head is turned back the way we came, one hand raised to keep her hair out of her eyes as the wind whips it to and fro.

“See that?” she asks me, pointing at the horizon.

I look. I'm pretty sure I can see better than she can. There's someone there, a tall man in a dark hat and coat, looks like. Walking along slowly.

"Who'd go walking along the old highway nowadays?" Dona asks, puzzled. "If there aren't rolling gangs out, it's a scorcher out. There aren't always going to be shops like this one handy."

I suppose it is a scorcher. Hadn't really occurred to me until Dona mentioned it, but it explains why the city stank so bad. I tell her not to worry; if the guy holds on until he gets to Edgery's 18th mile, he can stock up. Might even survive until he gets to the next town. Speaking of which... I kick the bike into motion. Dona whoops and grabs onto my shoulders. We ride.

Dread Possibility: They See Me Rolling

'Rolling gangs' are one of the scourges of the post-Division era. In the current age, travelers are always in danger of encountering bands of motorized brigands, who may rob, kill and enslave anyone incapable of escaping them or fighting them off. Likewise, rolling gangs are known to assault small farming communities to steal food and other supplies.

These gangs are known for their practice of 'blitzing' and 'circling'; respectively performing rapid hit-and-run attacks or moving in circles around a target, softening it up with gunfire before they move in to take whatever they want.

Given the breakdown of federal authority, there is little communication between the surviving cities – and even less cooperation. This includes the various peacekeeping and police forces that struggle to keep the cities and towns from drowning completely in crime. A rolling gang known as a band of criminals in one town is another city's 'respectable' merchant group, and more than a few are actually in service to whoever has the funds and lack of morals to employ them..

5. Gluttony

We ride until we come to an elevation, where there's a little parking lot by the road. No gas station, no motel; just a parking lot and some weatherbeaten benches and tables. It'll do fine. I park the bike, lift Dona off like she weighs nothing, and start hauling food and a portable gas stove from the saddlebags over to a table.

It's amazing, the things you can whip up even with humble means – if you know how and the ingredients are decent enough. Dona is briefly surprised by the meal I put together. Then she's too busy eating to be surprised. Watching the way she engulfs the food actually sparks my own appetite a bit, and I eat more than the usual mouthfuls of jerky and water.

"This is delicious," she tells me when she finally pushes away the plastic lid she'd been eating off of. "But if I have one more bite, I'm gonna explode." She belches – and blushes.

I tell her not to mind it; in days gone by, a good belch was a compliment to the cook.

"You're a good cook alright, tough guy," she agrees, grinning. Then she asks: "What should I call you?"

I suggest Ming.

She giggles, eyes twinkling. "No, seriously. Or should I just call you Boss?"

I wave off the suggestion; too mobster for me. I take a sip of lukewarm beer to give myself a moment to think. Then I tell her she can call me Janie. Janie[2] Augustus[3]. That'll do.

"Janie," she repeats, cocking her head. "The family name sounds cool."

I shrug, and ask her if she's ready to get going, or does she need to squat first. She sticks out her tongue at me and starts bundling up the leftover food. I tap out a cigarette and look back along the way we've come. In the distance, there's what looks to be a man in an old-fashioned, dark hat and coat. Moving slowly, but closer than before.

"Can I have one?" Dona asks.

I give her a cigarette and light it for her. We smoke in silence, her leaning against me. The sky is vast, the sun is a hammer, and the wind ruffles our hair like an affectionate hand. Life feels … well, it feels alright. Maybe I should have gotten some company before now. I try to remember why I didn't, but fishing for those memories feels like poking a rotten molar with your tongue; there's this expectation of searing agony. I leave it alone.

6. Debauch

After lunch, we drive on until nightfall. Empty farmland gives way to sparse trees. We pass several ruined roadside towns without stopping or slowing down.

I could just barge into any building and sleep there without a care, even though the shadows are too long and *mobile* when we roar past the empty buildings. Yeah, *I'd* be fine. But I'd either have to watch Dona the whole night through or plug my ears when what waits there got to her. Not a good way to get a night's rest.

Instead, I drive on until we come to a bend in the road and an abandoned campsite. There's a ruined building that looks like an over-sized log cabin there, where people used to register for a night or a couple of days. There's a small lake, which looks nice enough under the night sky but would probably not be as pleasant in the cold light of day. It doesn't smell too bad.

I get my pup tent out of the saddle-bags and set it up. Next I build a fire in the handy-dandy fire-pit the nice camp site owners provided before they dried up and blew away like so many small business owners. Under the starry sky, we re-heat the leftovers from lunch, chow down and sip beers. There are crickets chirping. It all feels unusually idyllic.

"You're good at this stuff," Dona says. "All of this camping. Tents. Fires. Cooking."

I shrug. I'm a rolling stone, baby. Gather no moss, where I hang my hat is my home. But seeing as there's fewer hotels and motels nowadays and I like to have some semblance of comfort, I keep some skills honed.

"You think we could get some music on your radio?" Dona asks, her eyes on the stars overhead, her voice small and wistful.

I tell her not likely; not out here. When she sighs, I tell her she's got better odds of getting music out of *me*. I get my violin case out of the saddle-bags; snap the brass catches; swing open the lid. The hinges don't creak. The case is dusty and scuffed, but the violin, oh baby, that violin. She gleams under the stars, she gleams in the firelight. Gleams like polished gold, oh boy. I sit up on a stump and tune the strings. Then I play.

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[2] *More than likely meant to be the female form of 'Johnny', the protagonist of the Charlie Daniels Band song 'Devil went down to Georgia'. It is also possible that the phonetic similarity to 'Jamie', as in the character Jamie Moriarty of the series 'Elementary', plays a role. Suggestions that the choice of name was inspired by an appreciation of serial killer Janie Lou Gibbs are entirely spurious.*

[3] *A reference to Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, also known as the Emperor Nero*

'*Devil went down to Georgia*' first, of course. Always. Next, the Overture to *Les Danaïdes* as composed by Salieri. '*Samen zijn*', by Richard de Bois. First Dona claps her hands; then she stands and starts to dance, around and around the fire. I had her figured right, back in that poky brothel room. She dances well, and eventually slithers out of her clothes and into my arms.

I put the violin aside for a time, but I pick it up again once we've finished. I start playing the main theme of '*Titanic*'.

"How many songs do you know?" Dona asks, cuddled up against my side.

Enough to serve as bait, I tell her, waggling my eyebrows. She giggles and kisses me on the shoulder. I play some more, the bow moving as if by itself, it's so smooth on the strings.

"That's real pretty," Dona says, reading the room and nodding to my instrument.

It's the best violin in the world, I boast. None finer.

"I like the color," Dona tells me. "What kind of tree has gold wood like that?"

Not a blessed clue, I admit. If I knew, I might cut one down and make all sorts of stuff for my own pleasure. A cane; jewelry; the world's finest rocking chair.

"You can do woodworking?" she asks me.

Possibly not, I admit. But I can always pay or bully someone into doing it for me.

"Must be nice, to be able to get whatever you want," Dona says, staring into the fire.

That's me, baby. I can do whatever I want, whenever I want. And take anything that catches my eye, too. I play '*Devil went down to Georgia*' again. Anything at all. Yes, sir. I play '*Go where you wanna go*', by the Mamas and the Papas, but I play it slow. I play it sad. And I wonder why.

7. Nightmares (i)

I dream, and know I am dreaming. In the dream, I am young – younger, anyway. So is the world. So is my lover, the Other, with whom I am wandering through the forest. Later, we'll go to the nearby town to play, but right now we're moving through the woods, almost dancing *as we circle each other, fingertips barely touching. How wonderful it is to be young and beautiful and in love, I think.*

Of course I am beautiful, my skin the color of polished oak, my hair black as *sin and kinky as lamb's wool. Clad in ragged rags of green and gray, reeking of sweat and soil, I feel the smile on my face, feel the dapples of sunlight that fall through the canopy onto my skin.*

He, my lover, my beloved Other, is handsome as can be. Skin the color of the moon with a faint blush of life, hair the palest *gold. Elegant, well-groomed, dressed to the nines as befits a gentleman fine. He even has a cane in the hand not brushing gently against mine.*

If my smile is wide and his subdued, then I still have no need to doubt him; in the depths of his eyes, cold and blue as the Arctic ocean, I see only myself and the joy of having me. Also, that little smile of his dimples his cheeks in the cutest way. We move, dance-like, trance-like, my love and I, through the sylvan dream of green, our feet barely stirring last year's leaves, the dappled light painting us like snakes. At this point it's a race to see whether our passions will lead us to town, or to tumble to the forest floor in each other's arms first, and either is good. Everything is good.

Even the sharp crack of sound, hands clapping together once, that *makes us pause, is good. We look about and see a small group of men. Eleven men, one old, one young, the rest hard men with guns; typical bushwhackers. The old fella is dressed almost as fine as my love, in clothes as pale as the Other's hide. The hat with the wide brim looks stupid*

on him, as does the mustache-and-goatee combo on his face; it does nothing to hide his weak chin.

"Well there, boy," the old fella drawls as he walks up to us, all smug self-importance and a southern accent thick *enough to float a brick. "Seems to me you've got some merchandise you're looking to sell. Here's five dollars."*

He flicks five bits in my love's face and flutters his fingers at him, each one gleaming with rings. Two of the hard men come striding forward and grab the Other by his upper arms, start to drag him away. The old fella reaches for my collar, saying "Let's have a look-see what I paid for."

I grab him by the thumbs, and he seems startled by how quick I am. Next, he's clearly agonized by the way I snap *his thumbs. He certainly screams and collapses to his knees like a man in intense pain when I* squeeze *them. I play with him a little, letting up the pressure then increasing it, teasing forth different pitches of scream, cursing, and finally pleading from him as tears spill from his eyes.*

"Hey," I tell him. "Didn't you have some tough boys with you? Maybe they can help you."

I let go of one thumb and put my finger under his chin, force him to look back over his shoulder. His men are standing rigidly upright on tip-toe, like they've got nooses drawing *taut around their necks; eyes staring at something that clearly isn't making them happy. All except for the youngest, who is on his knees, struggling against the Other's arm around his neck.*

Feeling our eyes on his back, my love looks back, lips parting in a smile of beatific cruelty. His eyes are pools of true, blue malice. The old fella starts to beg again, but this time he's begging us not to hurt his son.

"Perish *the* thought*," the Other says. "Now then, gentlemen?" He nods to the hard boys, standing all in a row in front of him, their eyes mutely pleading. "Raise your left hands, please." They obey, raising their left hands like puppets on strings – their left hands, holding their guns. "Now squeeze, please."*

The heads of eight men pop like piñatas*, and all the party favors come spilling out. My love and I laugh, the shrill sound sending birds flying and small creatures scurrying into the undergrowth. The old man and the boy lurch and thrash, whimper, beg and curse at us. The ninth bushwhacker, his strings cut loose, looks at what has become of his buddies and vomits on his boots. Next he turns and runs. Odds are, he's headed for the village and there'll be a posse soon. Fun, fun, fun!*

"Bring the kid, bring the kid!" I tell my love. "Set him down here, where the old fart can see."

The Other looks surprised, but obeys. "What are we doing?" he asks.

"We're having fun," I tell him. "A little hors d'oeuvre *before the coming feast. Now then, young sir. Is this" - I wrench on one of the old fella's thumbs, making him scream - "your Daddy dearest?"*

The boy curses at me, calls me every vile name a beardless boy can think of.

"And you, sir," I say, "is this your bouncing baby boy?"

"Please," the old fella wheezes, pale and sweating and agonized. "Please. I'm sorry. I meant no harm. Anything. I'll do anything, just please don't hurt my son!"

"Such warm love!" I say. "Isn't it moving*, lover mine, the love between a father and his son?"*

"If you say so," he replies. "But lover mine, what are we doing?"

"The lad looks like he wants to save his Daddy dearest," I say. "Seems to me a man who wants to save his Daddy needs himself a gun. Give him one."

"Lover mine, what are we doing*?" the Other asks, confounded. "If we're killing them, why aren't we killing them?"*

"Trust me, it'll be awesome," I tell him.

I fix my eyes on the boy's, freeze him in place. He curses and sobs, but he stays put while my love picks up a gun, checks there's a bullet in the chamber, then slaps it into the boy's palm.

"Now then, young fella," I say with my most dazzling smile. "Do you have any *idea at all who you walked up to? Any idea at all?" His head jerks in the grasp of my will; he's trying to shake it. "Well, let me just say: my lovely love and I, we like killing things. Weak, little things. Like little old* men*!"*

I wrench up the old fella's arm by his broken thumb. He bleats like a lamb at slaughter, then screams like a goat when I start snapping his arm-bones, one by one by one. Crack and crack and crack.

"Stop it!" the boy screams. "Leave him alone!"

My lover is looking away, his smile gone for the moment. He likes killing, but he's not artistic about it. My lovely Other is a craftsman at killing; his deeds are elegant and efficient, flashes of lightning to the rolling thunder of mine. It's fine.

"I will, oh I shall," I lie to the boy. "If you put that gun under your chin and squeeze the trigger."

The old man gasps in a breath, opens his mouth to scream no. I reach in and rip out his tongue, whip it aside like a lady's handkerchief, followed by a ribbon of blood. He sits there, gagging and choking, unable to speak. His eyes full of tears and pleading, staring at his son. His son staring back at him, tears in his eyes as well, steel creeping into his eyes and his wobbling chinny-chin-chin, hand crawling up and up, inching the muzzle to his jaw.

A crack of sound, and all the boy's thoughts come out, spread over the forest soil and my lover's boots. The old man makes an ugly sound of despair and I snap his neck. Such art! Such fun! I laugh and laugh and laugh. When I hear the distant sound of hooves and feet, the shouts of men afraid and angry coming closer, lambs to the slaughter, I laugh and laugh and laugh*...*

But this *time, my lover laughs not with me. Silence consumes all.*

Silence will be all.

8. Gluttony (ii)

I start awake, feeling cold. Dona is not lying next to me, but from beyond the shelter of my pup tent come the scents of frying eggs, cheese and bacon and coffee on the boil, so I'm fairly sure where she'll be.

Turns out I'm right; Dona is by the fire-pit, working a frying pan and monitoring a percolating coffee-pot. She looks paler than yesterday, but smiles at me. "Breakfast is almost ready," she says. "Just a few minutes."

I say fine, and I go to the lake's edge to take a piss. Standing up from my squat, I see a dark figure across the water. A tall man in a dark hat and coat, a long scarf fluttering about his shoulders in the morning breeze. And me there in naught but my skin. Whatever. I give him a one-fingered salute and head back to camp, where Dona has breakfast ready and is actually laying out my clothes for me.

Such luxury, I say, grinning.

"Guess this trip reminds me of when I was little," she replies. Her voice falters, but when I gesture for her to go on, she does. "My family traveled around when I was little. We all had chores to do, every day, but it was … it was good. We were happy, I guess. I liked putting outfits together for my family. My Mom taught me to sew and embroider so I could fix damaged clothes."

I tell her that sounds sweet. For a moment I consider yawning, but then I realize I don't want to. Having a companion who can sew would be useful.

My clothes do wear out over time, and even if I'm not bashful about being seen in my skin, it'd be inconvenient if I'm in a city.

I eat, and note that Dona is only picking at her share.

“Stomach's a bit upset today,” she says. “Maybe I drank too much.” She hurries to add: “But it'll be fine! I'll be alright. We can keep going; I won't slow you down.”

I can tell she's not sure of that at all, but I give her my most beautiful smile – and scarf down both my share and hers. She laughs at that, genuinely delighted. Her smile dimples her cheeks – just a little bit, mind you – and I find myself remembering my lover, my Other, from the dream. Can't quite suppress the shudder that crawls up my spine, and Dona looks concerned.

For me. Could you credit it? I tell her it's a nippy morning, the wheel of the seasons is turning towards fall. The season of appetites is coming our way, don't you know?

After breakfast, Dona cleans the dishes while I turn on the shortwave and listen. There's some hissing of static, and just once, a snippet of the stream of code I heard at the brothel. Nothing changed, then. I load up my gear and load up my woman, then we take off.

9. Morbidity

Dona does not feel better as the day passes. Instead, she starts getting worse. Shortly before noon, she squeezes my shoulders and whisper-begs for me to stop. The instant I do, she scrambles off the bike, kneels in a ditch by the road and vomits under the blazing sun.

I smirk at the sounds she makes … at first. But she keeps going, as though she's throwing up every morsel of food she's ever eaten in her life – and I smell blood.

When I walk over to her, I see threads and splashes of red in the puddle of half-liquid puke. Clearly, this is more than a bit of road sickness. Dona's face has turned shades of green and blue; she's sicking up so much she can't breathe. She might die right here, while I look on and have a smoke. Or I could just hop on my bike and drive off, let nature take its course. Decisions, decisions...

I look at Dona, who chokes and gasps, unable to breathe, unable to speak. Watching her die would be meaningless. Moving along and leaving her alone would be meaningless. And I … I decide it wouldn't actually be that much fun. I stole her to have fun, didn't I? Didn't I? This isn't the fun I wanted to have. She dances well, she can cook, she can sew.

The Other, my lovely lover, told me I was wasteful. That's bullshit. I can manage my resources.

I dredge up a memory and lay my hand on Dona's heaving shoulder. I haven't done this in a while, so it takes me a few precious seconds. Slowly at first, then with growing confidence, I speak the words. No; the Words. Around us, the normal sounds of a hot day – chirping crickets, the rustle of the wind in the dust, the ticking of overheating asphalt – fades away into fearful silence. A bird whose presence I hadn't noticed takes flight from a hole in the ground and flees in terror.

Reluctant warmth wells up inside me, passes down my arm, through my hand and into Dona. She gasps in a breath, has a coughing fit, then breathes in again, desperate for air. I keep my hand on her, mutter the Words as they come. Dona's breathing grows steady; she wipes her mouth. Without turning back to me, she whispers: “May I have some water?”

I hand her a bottle; she rinses out her mouth and washes out the sick that got in her hair. Maybe I ought to have held it back for her.

“I'm sorry,” she says in a small voice. “I was so happy. Please don't leave me.”

I open my mouth to make a funny remark. What comes out is an assurance that I won't do that. Next thing, I've taken her by the hand and am leading her back to the bike. I tell her not to worry, I have a fair idea what's wrong. She just needs to get looked at by a doctor.

“Where are we going to find one?” she asks me, still in that small voice. “I don't think I can make it to the next city.” Her eyes are very large; the wild creature in their depths is weak and frightened, wants to bite at the world... and instead is looking to me for help. So foolish, it is. So why does it make a very small spark kindle in my heart?

I tell her we don't need to go all the way to the next city. There's a doctor I know why lives much closer than that.

10. Malpractice

The land is vast and broken. Where once there were miles of corn and wheat, there is now blasted sand and broken soil. Badlands, through and through. Only the road, artifact of a lost age, cuts through and provides safety. Well, *some* safety; rolling gangs will use them to hunt for prey. But some safety is better than none. Leaving the road leads to ruin, everyone who's traveled more than five miles outside the cities knows that.

I put Dona on my lap and tell her to hold on to me. Then I take the bike off the road. It's sheer foolishness, a good way to break an axle, to puncture your tires, to get stranded in the middle of nowhere and die a miserable death.

But I have unfair advantages. Under my tires, the broken land flattens and heals itself; sharp stones, thorns and even boulders move to clear the way, *my* way. Needs must, when the Devil drives, or so they say. I roar through the badlands, and they are as smooth and safe as the roads once were to innocent travelers under my wheels. I'd laugh my shrill, cackling laugh, if not for the woman clinging to me in her fever. When she's aware, her eyes look for mine and she smiles. Her eyes are glazed over and her smile is weak, but it is also trusting.

Well, obviously that's not why I'm going out of my way. Where else am I going to steal a sexy seamstress who can cook and dance? Mustn't be wasteful.

Through the badlands, the broken lands, I roar. I know where to go. I knew the place I am going was nearby, and I would have passed it by, knowing he is there and that he'd sense my passing. Knowing his anger and sorrow, his misery and desire. I would have laughed and laughed and laughed, my voice rising to split the heavens.

Now, I am heading towards him. And I sense him, sensing my approach. At the very edge of my senses, first, like maggots nibbling at my toes. Then his presence grows stronger, and I feel his surprise, his doubt, then his elation. Yes, yes, I am coming to see you. Get over yourself, brat.

Dona mutters and shivers. I slow down to whisper more Words in her ear when her shoulders start to heave, push the nausea down and down. I can't quite get rid of it, but I can make it manageable. She smiles again, and nestles her head against my chest.

“Ming the Merciless,” she mutters, one hand clutching at my collar.

That's me, baby. I'm the monster in your nightmares, and the nightmare in your reality. Me. Not the one we're going to see. *Me*.

The building is a stone shack behind barbed wire, two guards in faceless helmets and heavy-duty riot armor standing ready with heavy-duty shotguns. They tense when they see me come roaring up, weapons rising. I could smash through the barbed wire... but instead, I come to a full stop at a bow-shot's distance. I slowly raise my hand and turn my collar inside out, let the little steel pin that was hidden there sparkle in the blazing light of day.

An owl, dead on its back, a stake driven through its left eye, an arrow in its right eye. One of the guards has a set of binoculars up and jerks with surprise when he spots the pin. He gestures for me to wait and goes into the shack.

Time passes, and three guards come out. The one who went down might be one of them; I neither know nor care. What concerns me is that they hurry to open up the barbed wire and let me drive in. We exchange a series of ritual gestures – they grow nervous at some of the gestures I make, let alone the handshake – and then I tell them that I'm here to see the Doctor. I don't need to be able to see their faces to know they've gone pale; I can smell the piss-yellow stink of their fear on them. In spite of this, their voices remain even and controlled.

"You'll have to park out here, ma'am," one of them says, the faintest burr of an accent in his voice. "Nobody will touch your things."

Of course they won't, I tell him. People like to keep living, in a state other than blinding agony. They don't comment on this, but the stink of their fear grows just a little more piquant. I pick up Dona like she's a princess or a small child, and follow after two of the guards. Once inside, the shack is obviously the top floor of an elevator, all black steel surfaces.

"*Venator Erebi sum*[4]," one of the guards says. "*Sagittarius Nyxis sum*,[5]" the other chimes in.

Per me, qui vident caeci fient[6], I complete the rite.

The guards simultaneously press buttons on opposing walls, causing the elevator to shudder and descend into the depths of the earth.

[4] *"I am the hunter of Erebus." (In this context, Erebus is a primordial Grecian deity who is the embodiment of darkness.)*

[5] *"I am the archer of Nyx." (In this context, Nyx is a primordial Grecian deity who is the embodiment of the night.)*

Dread Possibility: Per me, qui vident caeci fient

On the Prime Material world where the Divided States were born, there existed the Illuminati. This secret organization had an American chapter.

Their Illuminati's history of the American Civil War claims its membership included people from both sides of the divide, united by true insight and a desire to ennoble and save the nation. In truth, they were opportunists who saw opportunity in the conflict and suffering to re-shape the nation in accordance with their own designs, and later claim control over the world.

Recruiting mainly from the rich and influential – bankers, noted scholars and high-ranking military officers, for instance – the Illuminati sought to advance their influence over all secular power from the shadows. It kept its membership together and encouraged both loyalty and vigorous service through a tiered system of access. Those who earned deeper access could lay their hands both on society resources and finances, as well as information gathered from other members. This allowed them to advance not only the cause of the Illuminati, but also their own standing in the world.

Another tool the society used to unite its membership was by appointing a shared Enemy. This Enemy was ignorance, credulousness, 'faith'; the Illuminati claimed to be an entirely secular and rational group, opposed to churches, monasteries, occult groups, and the inertia of the unlettered masses. Among each other, the early Illuminati professed nothing but disgust for the common man in his brutishness and submission to superstition.

[6] *"Through me, those who see shall become blind."*

Uninitiated people were considered to be little more than animals in need of breaking and steering.

This changed after the 1872 Harvard Massacre.

The Massacre, which almost disrupted the signing of the end-of-war treaty between North and South, came out of nowhere and shocked the entire nation to its core. Ever open to opportunity, the Illuminati sought to insert more of its members into Harvard's teaching body so they could shape and recruit from the scholars of tomorrow. In their eagerness, these agents were less cautious than they should have been, and they caught the attention of the Other.

While the exact course of events is unclear, what can be gleaned from the Obumbrati's secret history is that the Other captured and questioned some Illuminati agents, using hypnosis to make them biddable. The very next day, the Other simply walked into the Horsefriers' Club, a gentlemen's club in Boston owned by the Illuminati, and a frequent gathering-place for its leadership. Said leaders had been hotly debating ways to advance their agenda in the wake of the Massacre when the Other just appeared in their midst … and started talking. The Other was clearly drunk and half-deranged with fever and despair, and spoke without using any kind of occult power to force its stunned audience to believe what it was saying. In spite of this, no one could bring themselves to stop the Other from speaking, or to stop listening to what it said.

It is recorded that several members of the gathering became ill when they heard the dark truths the Other revealed. All of them hung on the intruder's every word. None of the bodyguards on the premises dared raise arms against the Other, being just as appalled and enraptured as everyone else. Night fell, several listeners suffered grand mal seizures or heart attacks, but no one even bothered to carry out their corpses.

When came the dawn, the Boston chapter of the Illuminati would be no more. Though the Other simply staggered out into the dawn and left the survivors alone, their prior dream of domination had been soiled beyond repair. Knowing what they now did of the world they inhabited, the members of the society were horrified.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, they had considered themselves a powerful and secret elite poised to seize control over the nation and the world. Now, they knew themselves to be prisoners of a realm in whose shadows lurked abominations beyond human understanding – and beyond their ability to counter or evade. Several members of the group left the building, either to retire to their homes and never contact the society again, or else to seek death in the river or at the end of a rope or the barrel of a gun.

Those who survived scraped up their courage and what little decency they possessed, and charted a new course. They remade themselves into the Obumbrati, and their numbers would grow explosively.

For a time, the Illuminati who still exist in the Divided States thought to reabsorb the Obumbrati in their ranks, but this proved impossible.

Not only did the Obumbrati recruit from all strate of society, seeking competence and dedication rather than wealth and power, making them incompatible with the Illuminati, but they had clearly defined their parent group as part of the Enemy. In addition, people who learned the truths that had caused the paradigm shift that lead to the Obumbrati's birth tended to agree with them and fall in line.

Once, the Illuminati claimed they brought enlightenment in the name of attaining power. Today, the Obumbrati strive to hide horrors from the sight of the innocent in the name of sanity.

They still move in shadows and sponsor science and the arts, but if they infiltrate the centers of power, it is no longer with the goal of attaining dominance; it is all with the goal of defending humanity from the horrors lurking all around in the darkness .

Monsters; cultists; psychopathic murderers. All these and more have been the target of the Obumbrati since its rebirth[7]. The organization still loathes faith and magic, but now it loathes them because they are gateways to the supernatural and unnatural that are the true Enemy[8].

Even in the post-Division anarchy, the Obumbrati manage containment facilities for creatures that are impossible to kill. They train and supply monster hunters, both those who are members of the society and those who are not. They sponsor artists and educators, casting their little light into the darkness of the Divided States, and they sponsor both the scientists who cut into and probe their prisoners, seeking weaknesses, and those who research technologies that might improve life for the people of the domain. Sometimes they even shore up the more enlightened dictators, imposing order.

Not for acclaim, not for control. For humanity. For sanity.

The elevator clanked and ground its way downward. It was noisy and it trembled several times, but it was running quite well for post-Division technology. The guards stood at attention at my shoulders; efficient, silent, alert. Like an honor guard. I liked the feeling. It made me think of the Civil War, when I'd spent time in the army. There might be some Confederate medals in my coat pockets, if I dug deep enough...

We come to a halt. I hold back from making a joke about this being the ground floor, everyone out for ladies' underwear and farming equipment. The doors open, and cold air comes blasting in. Cold and *foul*. I can sense great fans grinding away in the walls, can hear the hum of air purifiers running hot, but the air still smells of something that belongs in a barnyard, or possibly a zoo. Dona whimpers in my arms and buries her face in my chest.

Before me, there is a corridor that stretches away into a great distance, lined with cells. I start walking; I know the way. The guards march at my shoulders, march properly, and I find myself falling into step with them. Memories of the Civil War come bubbling up, but I push them back down. The present is more interesting.

Some of the cells have doors made up of iron bars. Others have great vault doors, such as you might expect in a bank. Others have panes of armored glass. Yet others do not seem to have doors at all, unless you notice the pattern of electrodes and emitters all around the doorway, projecting a

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[7] *The fact that Janie Augustus is a member of the Obumbrati in good standing – a high-ranking member, even – might be seen as contradictory, but then again... Janie is not something that can be easily contained or neutralized. If Janie is a member in good standing, free to come and go in all Obumbrati facilities, free to socialize with other members at their leisure, then at least the Obumbrati can keep track of them.*

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[8] *The Obumbrati face a problem, given their distaste for religious faith and arcane magic, combined with the way undeath and necromancy proliferate in the Dread Realms. Sincere members of the organization would not wish to linger on as undead caricatures of their living self, but few have the courage to embrace oblivion or face divine judgment.*

The Array was their solution. Elderly members of the society can request to have their living brains removed from their skulls and added to the brains of their predecessors in a vast tank of nutritious fluids, all of them linked into a whole by electrodes. The Array is by now at least a century old, and its communications to junior members has proven it to possess both a collective and individual consciousness, as well as genius-level intellect. The Array has been instrumental in many avenues of scientific research and long-term planning, although its communications are sometimes enigmatic at best. As a ***Dread Possibility****, the Array may not be what the Obumbrati think. It could be the equivalent of an Illithid Elder Brain, biding its time and manipulating the society that created it to increase its control over them.*

forcefield. *Actual* forcefields! Fascinating. The cells that genuinely have no doors are worrying in comparison.

The prisoners are interesting to look at in passing as well. Here staggers what looks like a skinned man, his eyes gouged out, his mouth a gaping hole with neither teeth nor tongue. Next, I see a great reptile, half rotted, lumbering around its cell and biting at the walls. A little girl in a bloodstained tutu twirls endlessly in a beam of light without a visible source, dust twirling and sparkling around her. A gray-haired man, naked and haggard, sits in the fetal position, trembling. He is surrounded by sheaves of blank paper, and ink oozes from his pores like sweat. A hard-faced young man in a Waffen-SS uniform snaps off endless Nazi salutes and screams vile rhetoric at us as we pass. A single monolith, polished smooth by pre-human hands, stands in the middle of a ring of dead insects and rodents, the runes etched into its surface spelling out a message of doom. Something that looks like a giant potato, covered in scabrous mold, lies rotting at the center of a cloud of very lively vermin.

I ask whether the ink-sweating man is a new addition, and note there is no door on his cell.

"He turned himself in," one of the guards replies. "Just walked right up to us and begged to be put in a cell. He had a society pin when he came in, but nobody knows who he is – or was. He walked into the cell, stripped down and told us what to do to contain him. Hasn't talked or really moved since we put down the paper, apart from shivering."

I ask what the deal with the potato is.

"That's above my pay grade, ma'am," the guard replies, politely.

I let it go. Who cares about a giant potato, anyway. Not me; I came to see the Doctor. From my previous visit, I know his cell is at the far end of the corridor, and so we move on.

Some of the prisoners take note of my passing, and they each react in their own way.

The pale, creeping things flatten themselves against the back wall of their cell and yelp in terror. The big, black hound throws itself against its cell door and bites and snarls at me, great gobs of drool sizzling on the floor; one of the guards expertly puts a bullet in each of its eyes, making the beast back up. It snarls at us as we move on, new eyeballs already growing in the sockets.

A vault door shakes and rocks as the creature behind it makes sounds that put me in mind of a swamp trying to talk; green slime oozes out underneath and we all make sure not to step in it.

The thing in the rough hump of crystal stirs painfully and reaches out its mind to mine: *'Love me, release me, I will be your new Other, let me into you and I will give you oblivion...'*

A thing that looks like an old-fashioned revival preacher flinches, and suddenly looks like an even more old-fashioned snake-oil salesman. It doffs its hat at me and whispers "*Want to buy something for the pretty lady?*"

I pause a moment to give its cell door an almighty kick, making it rattle in the frame. The shape-shifting thing flinches back, becomes a mass of twitching, shifting shadows with glowing eyes. All those eyes look fearful now, and its voices whisper messages of apology and appeasement. I bare my teeth at it and move on.

We finally come to the door at the end of the corridor. This is one of the vault doors, a heavy-duty one with two keypads and scanning equipment. They've upgraded the Doctor's containment since the last – first, and only – time I was here. I approve. The Doctor is clearly keeping the people here on their toes, still trying to get out whenever he can.

The guards go through the procedure to open the door. There are codes to enter, palms and even eyeballs to scan, keys to turn before they get to the big wheel. I can hear the hiss of a vacuum being breached, and hear a *lot* of devices clicking and humming in the walls. Yes sir, yes baby, they've gone the distance to make sure the Doctor stays right where he is.

I walk inside, and the guards close the door behind me. All the noises the prisoners make are cut

off. Inside, the air reeks of chemicals and decay. This is a large room, a jail cell the size of a barn. Large tables line the walls to both sides, laden down with a classic alchemical set-up to the left, the most advanced scientific chemistry equipment to the right. A narrow pallet bed lies against the back wall. Books lie any old where on the floor.

The Doctor rises from the pallet bed, a priceless copy of *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* spilling from his hands; he quickly wiped the drool from his lips. “Father...!” he gasped.

Next thing I knew, he was scuttling forward and fell to his knees in front of me, clutching at my coattails and Dona's legs. His eyes were shining and he was smiling widely, giving me a good view of his salt-white teeth, all filed to sharp points.

“Father, you've forgiven me,” he babbled. “Mother comes … she never forgives me, no matter how much I've done … But you've come to let me out … let me out … *let me out* ...” His pale eyes, inhumanly pale, inhumanly large, locked onto Dona and he started to drool again. “And you've brought a feast. We can dine together to celebrate my freedom, Father.”

He reached for Dona's calf, his cracked nails darkening with venom. I kicked him in the face, flung him back to his pallet bed.

Groggily, he clambered back to his feet. He gave me a sullen glare. “You haven't forgiven me, have you, Father,” he said; a statement, not a question.

I told him I hadn't forgiven him, but then I hadn't condemned him, either. That had been his mother, my beloved Other. If anyone was going to forgive him, it needed to be her. If he wanted to get out of here without his mother's permission, then he needed to sort it out for himself.

“Why are you here, then?” the Doctor, my twisted son, asked, pointed teeth grating and gnashing together fit to strike sparks.

I told him he was family, and he was a doctor; that made him my family doctor, and I had a patient for him to look after.

“Oh, she's terminal,” he said – lied. “I could tell at first glance. Best to put her out of her misery. I have a nice scalpel and some very tasty sauce...”

He stopped talking when I lowered my eyebrows, and quickly averted his gaze before I could impose my will upon him. “Then again,” he sighed, “I could take a look. Put her up on a table.”

I did as he asked, then stood at his shoulder, glaring at him while he stripped Dona down and got to work. Give him his due; when properly motivated and with something keeping an eye on him, he's a *very* good doctor. He got a lot of experience before he became too greedy and the pre-Division authorities caught on to what he was doing. The men in black hunted him down and turned him over to this facility to keep. When I came to see him – the only time until now – he whimpered and whined that the Other had lead the chase and begged me to release him, said she'd been cruel to him for no reason.

Nasty little brat, trying to play one parent against another. Nasty, greedy little brat. I like killing, I like hurting, and I've even eaten a few people, but that was when I was in sieges and all the other food had run out.

“Dolla, dolla, make you holla,” he said soon enough. He pointed out the eagle and bar code-tattoo on Dona's lower back, where once foolish young women had 'tramp stamps' inked down. “You bought yourself a slave, Father?”

No, I corrected him. I stole me a woman.

“Cheaper to do, I suppose, since it's you,” he said. “I haven't been outside for far too long, but I hear whispers. Sometimes they bring me people in need of doctoring, and they explain a little. You must know what they do to slaves, the Banks, to make sure they stay slaves. You must know what this is, mustn't you, Father?”

Dread Possibility: The Almighty Dolla Make You Holla

Given the all-around breakdown of civil authority, one might ask how an institution like the Banks might have survived in the Divided States. Without regulations, without peacekeeping forces, how could they keep their vaults safe and ensure that people continue to use the coins and bills they produce?

The regrettable answer is that the Banks of the Divided States did so through brutality and cult activity.

While society was reeling, the banks hired as many toughs and killers as could still be swayed through money, and organized them into rolling gangs and private armies. By hiring out these bands of toughs to nascent warlords and tyrants, they incurred political capital and ensured the emerging city-states of the post-Division era continued to use Bank-issued dollars as legal tender. They also used these brutes to force people to pay the Banks what their records said they were owed; mortgages, loans, no debt was too large or small for the Banks to demand payment in full, even if the country had broken down and civilization was going down the crapper.

Nowadays, dollars are still accepted as payment no matter where you go in the Divided States, because if you try to use barter or create different coins, the Banks will send big, burly men with guns, clubs and knives to educate you as to why you shouldn't do so.

As the dollar is now a rare unifying element of post-Division society, both a memory of the pre-Division past and something that is constant no matter where you go, it has sadly achieved a semi-mythical quality which the Banks deliberately encouraged. While the concept of a 'church of the almighty dollar' started as a joke, the Banks promoted it in a blatant attempt to gain spiritual capital. People who laughed or objected too hard soon got a visit from the Banks' crews of violent men.

As a result, there are indeed people in the Divided States who practice a cult-like worship of the dollar (and the concept of the economy at large), with true believers seeing it as an embodiment of prosperity and stability. The cult's message is that money is not just a way to acquire all the good things of the world, but actively their source. Acquiring money is its own reward and its own motivation, and no method for doing so is to be forbidden or denounced, save for forgery. Investing money in order to make more money is the greatest of virtues, because it keeps money moving; amassing wealth and keeping it locked away from all others is also laudable, but slightly less virtuous.

Iconography: The main symbol of the church of the almighty dollar is, predictably, a dollar bill.

Its unholy symbol is an American eagle, clutching a dollar bill in its talons.

Alignment: Neutral Evil

Cleric alignments: Chaotic Evil, Lawful Evil, Neutral Evil, True Neutral

Portfolio: Order, obedience, wealth, investment, avarice

Domains: Greed (*Spell Compendium*, p. 275). Metal (*Spell Compendium*, p. 276), Wealth (*Spell Compendium*, p. 281)

Favored weapon: Revolver

Prayers: Members of the cult pray at midnight, when they can safely hide their wealth from the eyes of strangers.

Temples: The only temples of the church of the almighty dollar are the offices of the Banks and the official Mint, now located in New Detroit. Few if any lay followers or even priests are ever allowed to enter these vaunted buildings; it is far more common for priests to bless or desecrate a random site for the purposes of rituals, then abandon it when they move on to their next venture.

Holy Book: *The Great Account* reads as a combination history book and economics manual, praising the influence of money as an abstract concept, with the almighty dollar as its supposedly perfected form. Buried among text that manages to combine dry summaries of numbers with rambling praise of cold, hard cash are subtle barbs aimed at such 'foolishness' as charity and community.

Rites: Believers of the cult gather on random occasions, basically whenever a priest believes it's time to remind people of the church's message. When the faithful gather, it is to hear priests speak of the value of the dollar and the stabilizing influence of money throughout the existence of humanity. Lay followers are encouraged to speak of their financial successes and the folly of those they know not to have honored the dollar. Rites end with the presiding priest paying those who have spoken (a minimum of one dollar) and the lay followers paying the priest for his blessing of their financial ventures and fortunes (a minimum of two dollars). Afterward, the congregation shares alcoholic drinks, often cheap beer.

The church only holds rituals at night, owing to the adage that darkness allows one to hide one's wealth more easily. Nights when the moon is waning or new are considered more holy than those when the moon is waxing or full, as the increased light would expose the believers' wealth.

Taboos: Counterfeiting is the greatest taboo of the church, with attempts to create new coin independent of the Banks, use of foreign coin or even barter just barely behind it. Charity is held as a cardinal sin as well.

Of course I knew, I told him. The Banks, the church of the almighty dollar, they of the sign of the eagle clutching a dollar bill, had survived the Division by evolving and growing more cruel. Among other things, they researched or purchased the special poison, the one you had to keep taking once you'd gotten your first dose, or you started dying in extreme discomfort.

And the Banks run the slave trade.

Dona had probably received the poison in her daily gruel, back at the brothel, and now she was dying of withdrawal. Anyway, I told the Doctor that I hadn't come here for him to state the flaming obvious; I was here so he could fix up my woman, cure and cleanse her of the poison.

“But are you sure, Father?” he whined, running one hand up Dona's long dancer's legs, drool running from his mouth again. “She'd be succulent, and I really don't mind eating your leftovers...”

“Boy, I will ***hurt*** you.”

The Doctor flinched, and I nearly did as well. The words had risen from my throat like a corpse rising from the bottom of a bog; unbidden, full of ills, and completely by surprise.

“Mother said that, when she dragged me into this wretched place and I tried to fight her,” the Doctor said, voice trembling, tears spilling from his luminous eyes like the drool had run from his lips. “Just that. You even sound like her. Gods and fish, Father! Haven't I suffered enough? *Let me out!*”

His earnest plea rang out, and rebounded off the walls. Wordless, I pointed at Dona; my wicked, wayward son choked back a sob and went back to work. Soon enough, he had taken a little blood from his patient and run it through first an alchemical and

next a chemical process, and prepared a liquid solution. It looked like piss, but smelled faintly of flowers. He filled a syringe with the stuff and injected about a third of it into Dona's carotid artery.

"The next dose in twelve hours," he said, handing me the syringe. "The third and final dose twelve hours after that. No more; no less. No sooner; no later. If you need something to keep the time..."

I took out my pocket watch. The silver casing is a bit scratched and battered now, but the mechanism inside still runs flawlessly. I noted the time, noted the scarred decorations of roses and hummingbirds on the casing, then tucked it away again. Snug and safe and beautiful and still impossibly dear to me; a gift from my beloved Other, back when we were younger and the world was a cleaner, greener place.

"You used to say that would one day be mine, my inheritance," the Doctor noted, eyes following the watch as it went back into my coat pocket. He sounded sullen and unhappy. His lower lip started to tremble when I scooped Dona up from the table and started heading for the door.

"It's not fair!" he yelled after me. "Father! You said I was your heir, your pride! How can you abandon me here? Is it because I chose science over sorcery? Is that why you can leave me in this wretched hole?!"

I turned to look at him, genuinely surprised. No, I told him, that wasn't why at all. His choice to pursue science, his determination to see his studies through, that was something I had been very proud of at the time – was still proud of, I suppose.

"Then why? Why?" he cried. "I am just like you! Your *son*, the only one who lived! We are the same, so why do I have to rot and starve down here? They feed me *chicken*, and *fish*, boiled to death! *Vegetables*! Father, please, have mercy! Be fair! Let me out! We are the same!"

This made me a little angry. No, I told him, we weren't. Not the same at all.

"What is different between us?" he pleaded. "Why should I suffer in captivity when you walk free and work your evil whims on the world?!"

I told him, the difference between us was that I do what I do because I *want* to. He does what he does because he *has* to.

I never let the Doctor out, never argued with the Other about trapping him down here, because I agreed with my love's decision. He wasn't fit to walk free. Once, our son had suppressed his impulses so he could master his precious science. But once that was done, all there was to him was his hunger and his urge to satisfy it.

He was our only child to survive, and he had become unhinged to the point that he ate his own mother's heart. I needed to brutalize him to get him to do a day's work. It was … sad. Worse, it was unbecoming. Let him rot and starve down here until he found self-control or time ended. Either-or.

I rapped my knuckles against the door, and it opened. I stepped out. When it slammed shut, it cut off the wail of my only living child's despair.

11. Pragmatism.

Standing outside the cell, there's a woman I do not know. Or do I? The guards have left, and she is just standing there, smiling slightly, eyes hooded. A dark woman in a pale gray suit, with some lacy frills at the collar.

"Greetings, Dark One," she says, politely. Then: "*Venator Erebi sum. Sagittarius Nyxis sum*." She tugs at her collar, letting the little pin shaped like a twice-pierced owl catch the glare of the overhead lights.

Per me qui vident caeci fient, I reply, tugging at my lapel to do the same. I lean forward to look her in the eye; squint. Have I truly never met her before?

"I was here the first time you came to visit the Doctor," she replies, inclining her head. "I was a junior undersecretary to the previous Director."

Oh, I remember that guy. First he tried to stop me from seeing my son; then he tried to lock me in with him; then he died. At length. The woman's smile widens incrementally.

"Yes," she says. "He did. Nothing like room at the top for fast-tracking promotions, is there? Is there anything that I might do to make your stay here more convenient, Dark One? And incidentally more brief?"

She's direct to the very edge of being rude, without stepping over it. I decide I like her. And I realize I left Dona's clothes behind in my son's cell, so I demand some new duds for my woman. Something that does not feature fishnet.

"Not a problem," the Director says, gesturing genteelly back the way we came. "We have a supply room full of confiscated clothing and equipment next to the elevator. Some of our 'guests' brought in some of it, and sometimes guards die on-site and leave their possessions behind. There should be something there that fits your companion."

She falls into step beside me, all ebony skin and Mona Lisa smile, hands folded before her like a nurse of old. When we pass, the things in the cells cower back in silence in a way they did not all do for me. Maybe I don't like the Director after all, stealing my thunder like that.

On a whim, I ask whether the Doctor's mother has been by of late.

"Your mate," she says, pleasantly. "Yes, your mate comes regularly. Once a year, like clockwork. Every thirtieth of April, to see the Doctor."

Visiting him for his birthday. I scoff. My Other, the great sentimentalist.

"Oh, hardly," the Director says. "We can hear the shouting through the door, usually. The Other comes here to see whether your child has changed yet. Improved, somehow."

Moved past letting his urges run his life, I suggest.

The Director purses her lips. "Perhaps," she says. "Though I think the Other wants something … a bit more from your son."

Like I said; the Other is a sentimentalist. A romantic.

"Perhaps," the Director repeats.

The pressure of a gaze freezes me in my tracks, the way I can stop others in theirs through eye-contact. I turn without meaning to, and find myself facing the man in the cell full of paper, the one sweating ink. He has raised his head and is looking at me, his eyes orbs of unrelieved black. Then I realize the blackness has deceived me; he is not looking at me, but at Dona. I … cannot read his expression. Is there pity there? He lowers his head too soon for me to interpret it, and the grip he had on me is broken. I curse under my breath.

"That was interesting," the Director says, placidly. "He hasn't moved since he came here, except to breathe and shiver."

I decide I don't like her after all and consider creating an opening for her own secretary to fill. But then I decide it'd be a hassle to do it without my hands, and I don't want to put Dona down on the floor in this place. For some reason, I feel tired. I want to leave.

12. ?

Dona starts to wake up when we're back on the road, the stone shack lost in the distance, my son's existence the faintest itch at the edge of my senses. She sighs, and her eyelids flutter. When she opens her eyes, her once-gray irises have taken on a shade of green. I probably should have asked my son whether his cure had any side effects.

"I feel better," is the first thing she says. Her voice is full of wonder. "Not good; better. I thought – I felt myself dying."

She clutches at me like a child, buries her face in my chest. I feel more than hear her whisper "Thank you."

I should laugh; I should mock her. Surely. I should point out she only fell ill because I stole her from the brothel and didn't think to bring a supply of the poison. But then she must have known the filth was in her system, and she never mentioned it herself. She must have known she would die on the road, so I should laugh.

A little spark inside, tickling me, grown a little larger. Why is it there? It's ridiculous. Just as ridiculous as putting one of my arms around her and slowing down the bike for a smoother ride.

Or maybe not. I do what I do because I want to; I told my son so. And I am not drunk and the sun is a hammer. Why would I waste time lying? I must be doing this because I want to. There; that makes perfect sense. That should explain everything.

13. ~~Sloth~~. ~~Sorcery~~. Recollection.

I find us a place to camp on a hill. Dona tries to help and I growl at her not to be stupid, then park her against a boulder while I pitch the tent and gather grass and weeds and sticks so I can build us a fire. As big a fire as I can manage; she still looks pale and she thinks she's hiding the shivers from me. Foolish.

There is not enough to burn. No trees, not enough scrub grass. The Division included armed conflicts and bombardments, all of them leading up to the Big Boom, and large parts of the country are … less than clement to life. Not bad enough to poison honest travelers, *never* enough to lay me low, but there is nothing to burn. And from the corner of my eye, I see Dona start to shiver more and more. Damn it.

'Wasteful.'

Out of my head, my Other. Shut up. I raise one hand to the uncaring sky, to the merciless sun, and fold in my middle and ring fingers, my thumb. I fork horns at the sky, then sweep my arm down to the miserable little pile of gathered scraps I gathered in a circle of stones. I bark a Word. Fire, blue and eerie and unnatural, flashes from my hand. Fire, yellow and lovely and natural, howls to life inside the circle of stones. It roars, it crackles.

I set up the pup tent, far enough from the fire so it won't catch a spark and burn down, close enough to get the benefit of the heat, and put Dona up inside it, wrapped in my blanket.

"Tired," she whispers as I tuck her in, eyelids already drifting closed. "Going to sleep a bit."

I check my watch, and it's time; I give her the second shot. She never even twitches, she just sleeps, peaceful as a dove. Waste of a perfectly good display of creepy arcane power, that. Disrespectful, is what it is. I am awesome, and I haven't cast spells in so and so long, I deserve an audience. Yes. Yes-I-do.

Gibbering, I am. Why do I feel relieved? Nonsense, all of it nonsense.

I roast weenies over the fire. Weenie after weenie after weenie. Just pile them on a plate and let them sit, growing cold, grease congealing. I don't feel like eating, Dona isn't eating. I look at my watch between weenies, which is also bloody stupid. I wonder why.

And

the

memory

comes

It surfaces like a crocodile from a watering hole; sneaking up on you all unnoticed, and then suddenly it's there, all teeth and bad times exploding in your face.

There was a fire, in the shadow of a hanging-tree. No whole corpses hanging there now, just bits of bone and rotting flesh. The grass was tall, shading us. The song of a flowing river drowned out the crackle of the fire and the song of the Other as she rocked our son.

I was tall, then, a tower of muscle and bone. We'd been to a circus, had seen all the performers and all the freaks, and our son … our son had fallen ill. It was not unusual. All the others had died, burned out. Just like them, he suddenly developed a fever. Soon he would be just one more little body to die and return to the earth. It should not be anything to get upset about, to dwell on. There was no logic in it.

The Other was upset about it. She was dwelling on it. My beloved love, who made killing a craft, rather than an art, who touted the value of

logic... was not being logical. She refused to just snap our little bastard's neck and end his suffering, refused to leave the spot. When I first suggested the one, she had stared me in the eye, and I was first to avert my gaze. The anger, the hatred I saw there, had surprised me, humbled me.

Tell the truth and shame the Devil; she had frightened *me.*

When I suggested the other, she just ignored me. She sat in place, holding our son, rocking him and singing to him in his fever. Singing a lullaby that I felt I should recognize, but did not. One time only, I asked what she was singing. She gave me a look of confusion, then shrugged and said she didn't know. But she never hesitated in her singing, and it felt – familiar, still.

She would not move. She smelled of sweat and dirt and our son's sickness, and she would not move from where he lay to hunt or bathe. It fell to me to keep the fire going, to go down to the river to fetch them fish and birds, to crawl through the grass in search of fat rodents, but this area was starting to play out. Animals knew what we were, and they were starting to flee the area. We had to keep moving.

I tried to tell the Other as much. If we stayed here, we'd both start to starve. If we starved... We were what we were. The boy would not survive either way. Better to –

She raised her head and stopped singing. Her eyes flashed a terrible warning, without the need to use hypnotism. I averted my gaze. She was hurting me, looking at me like that. Were we not absolutely in love, since forever before and for forever after?

"Of course," she says. "But this is our child*."*

We can always make another. I wouldn't mind making one right now.

"This is the only one to survive this *long," she says, her eyes glazing over now. And is that pain I see in their blue depths? Grief, where there should be only malice for the world and desire for me? "I am … so tired of watching them die."*

She lifts him up, gentle as a dove, holds him to her withered bosom. She is frail, too thin. She needs better food, more food than I've been getting her, needs to stop sharing what I catch with our brat. She needs to look to me *again with her love, not to him.*

The words fall between us like an axe-blade, and I realize that I should not have said them. Realize it too late. Her eyes come up blazing, too full of anger for hypnotism, but not for sorcery. She raises one hand to the sky; middle and ring finger and thumb curving in. I raise my hands before she can bark the Word and bring fire down on me for saying what I said. Raise them in a warding gesture, not in placation. I am just as powerful as she is, I remind her. She is my Other. I am her One. We should not fight. We can make more babies.

This baby, this son, twitches. He whimpers. He buries his face in his mother's bosom and starts to cry. Cold, he is whispering with his broken voice, he is so cold.

I suppose we could go steal some farmer's blankets, I offer, his coats and boots. The boy could stay by the fire while we move our bones and go do something fun. He'll be fine for a few minutes. A few hours.

The Other brings her hand down. Not on me, on the little fire. Makes it rise up, makes it roar and howl. The heat washes over us, makes us all sweat. The little boy, my son, heaves a raspy sigh of relief and falls asleep, clutching at his mother. What right has he to hang on her, when she should be only mine?

Her eyes blaze at me. "Go," she snaps, her power crackling on the air around us. "Go murder some farmers if you must. Come back once you've gotten it out of your system."

She should come with me. She should want *to come with me. We've always done everything together.*

"You never change," she says.

Why would I want to? I'm amazing, I'm great, I'm admirable. And she –

"But I *do," she says. "*I *change.* I *am tired of watching our children die. Of watching you cast them away like they mean nothing.* Wasteful*. Go away, go play your games if you must. I would be here."*

She holds our child close and starts to sing again. Not the lullaby that should be familiar. A song of Words. Trying to heal what can't be healed, to mend what isn't broken. She's tried before, started trying after a dozen dead children littered our path. It's never worked, no matter how she rearranges and changes the Words. It won't work this time.

Insulted, hurt, rejected, I turn away and go hunt, go play.

When I came back, our son's fever had broken. I could feel the pulse of his little life, stabilized while the Other's had grown feeble. But there was nothing feeble in her eyes when she looked up at me, surrounded by the bones of creatures she had lured to her and devoured. They blazed like jack-o'-lanterns, fierce and prideful, bluer than the sky above.

"Success!" was all she said, her voice dry and hoarse, dried blood on her lips.

I realized I had been away for days, while she worked a miracle somehow. My beautiful love had kept one of our children alive through the fever that always came.

And I had

done

nothing

me

wasteful

14. ~~Nightmares~~ (ii) Weenies

I jolted awake. The fire still howled and roared, feeding on the thread of magick I had fed into it. The Other's trick from long ago, when our son said he was cold. Always so clever, always creating new spells, like the one that saved our child's life. Night had fallen, and it would have been cold if not for the roaring fire. Dona slept peacefully, snuggled into my – her – blanket. The antidote, my brilliant son's creation, was doing its work.

Nearby, a plate of cold weenies, covered in cold grease. One by one, I chewed them up, swallowed them down. Hungering for nothing, tasting nothing. And I remembered coming to the fire, seeing the triumph on my mate's face as she held our child, alive in spite of my prediction that he would die like all of the others.

Remembered thinking I saw condemnation beneath the triumph, all the gods and fish help me, maybe even contempt? I remembered running, coming back with double armfuls of loot, brought back from the last farm I visited. Weenies. I roasted weenies one by one, fed them to my son and watched him grow stronger with every bite.

I rose and walked around, arms wrapped around myself. My stomach was full of good meat; it felt like it was full of ashes. The warmth of the fire enveloped me, yet I felt cold. Which was stupid. I didn't want to feel like this.

Weenies. A fire. Someone ill to take care of. And my Other had been near here.

My Other still had not given up on the son who ate her heart out of her chest, the son I'd failed and abandoned. The son who was bad and mad and ravenous.

Wasteful, it echoed in my head, and I wish it would stop. I wish I could sleep. But the fire was a pillar of flame, a beacon to any rolling gangs or ghoulies in the area. And I did not relish the prospect of more dreams. More memories.

Wasteful, I heard the Other say again. Triumphant through perseverance where I had failed through disinterest. I don't want to feel like this, I said out loud, and checked my watch.

This was not the same as that time. Not the same thing at all. I had abandoned my son to play. I had not abandoned the woman I stole to amuse myself. Not the same, no.

No, no, no, no, no, I told the stars above me,

exalted and cruel, my breath a plume of vapor on the cold night air. Autumn was lurking in the wings, in spite of the day's ungodly heat, and winter would come.

Winter would come.

15. ~~Nosy~~* (ii) *~~Inquisition~~ Pain.

I wake up lying in the dirt, my head pillowed in Dona's lap. The sun was behind her head, higher than I expected it to be, and she's an outline of shadow against the heartless sky. How long had I slept? Why had I slept on the earth, instead of crawling into the tent? Why did my head hurt, when I had not touched a drop of alcohol all day yesterday? Mysteries.

Dona was stroking my head, her fingers combing through my hair and gently rubbing my temples. It occurred to me that I should give her the final injection –

"You don't have to do anything," she tells me. "I took care of it. I feel better now. Lie still. You can rest a little longer."

I let the tension ebb from my muscles. But my head pounds, pounds, and I do not understand why. When was the last time I had a headache? When was the last time I felt any pain at all?

The mingled smells of gunpowder and blood on the air the screams of terror and pain the sound of a gun the Other's command the scratching noise of two quills on parchment

Memory – *my* memory – is like a mouthful of rotting and cracked teeth. My mind shrinks back from it. Yesterday's remembrance, yesterday's nightmare, had been bad enough. I do not need to remember what had happened, what soured the milk of my relationship with my beloved Other.

Wasteful.

Dona's troubles, combined with my visit to the Doctor, had brought that memory to the surface. I should be angry, should take it out on her, should soothe my woes with bloodshed...

Wasteful.

"Shh," she says, and wipes my cheeks. "Don't cry."

Cry? Who's crying? Not I. I am the Dark One, just ask that Director. Others cry because of me. I do not see wetness on your thumbs, woman, you are my loot. Nothing more. Nothing.

"I was... a little bit awake," Dona tells me. "In fits and starts. Couldn't move. Couldn't talk. But I could hear things, and I remember some."

Goody for her, what business is that of mine? Unhand me, infernal woman, release me from this feeling of lethargy, this pain in my *head*!

"I have a son, too," she says.

I freeze, the pain a needle piercing through my thoughts, fixing me to the earth.

"When I was little," she continues, "Ma, Pa and I used to travel. Pa was a plumber; he could find work anywhere, and people would pay. Mostly. Even nowadays – maybe especially nowadays, people like to be able to flush and know the pipes won't back up. Ma was a dancer; she'd dance on tables in bars and the like. She taught me. People liked to pay her less; thought she should be happy to dance for them, do... other things for them. Thought she should be property. That they had the right to *make* her property. Sometimes Pa had to crack skulls over her, and then we'd have to leave. We left so many towns."

Such is life, now. The old graces are gone. But I do not say this out loud.

"One day, we left one town," Dona says, "and a rolling gang caught us up before we got to another. Pa offered them our savings, but they weren't just any rolling gang. They were a gang in service to the church of the almighty dollar. A banking gang. Pa tried to fight, tried too hard, so they beat him and tied him to a truck, then dragged him. They dragged him all the way to the next town. They dragged him to death."

No memories surface at this. None that hurt me, anyway. I remember my parents, but that is a pain I processed long ago. They can't hurt me anymore. I've dragged men to death, though, for

giggles or because they angered me. But I do not say that out loud, either.

"They tattooed Ma and me, and sold us separate at the next town," Dona says, business-like. "Not before they had their own fun, though. I had my baby in the first brothel they sold me to. I got to nurse him, but they took him away once he was on solids. Made me swear obedience, swear on a dollar, for a promise I'd see him again."

She heaves a sigh and looks away from me for a moment to stare into the distance. Pain lingers in those newly green eyes, a pain like I have seen before. It makes me want to squirm like a snake, to look away. Yet I don't. Curious.

"I hated the bastard who put him in me. But not him. He was tiny and perfect, and he was mine. He smiled when he saw me. He grew in my belly, and I loved him.

"Been ten years since then," she says. "I'm never going to see my son again. I was so sick of being trapped, getting sold on like a sack of wheat, whored out. Times were, I'd've gone with the Devil hisself if he'd shown up to get lucky and offered me a ride out of town."

Her hand caresses my forehead and she smiles, half fond, half cynical. "Pretty devil," she says to me. "I'm glad you finally came walking through my door and took me away. Don't cry, pretty devil. I'm jealous. You can take whatever you want, go wherever you want, do whatever you want, and … and at least you know where your son is. He's not – *right*, but he's a genius. He saved my life. Ain't that worth something?"

I don't think it is. She has to understand, I've always known where he was, I just didn't care. I still don't care.

"Then why do you cry, pretty devil?" she asks, wiping the moisture from my cheeks again.

Memories, curse them for their pain. I don't want to feel, don't want to remember. Damnation, is this why I waited so long to find company for the road? Because it only stirs up memories? Should've left the woman at the brothel, should've just rode on in the trail the radio laid before me, should've...

Wasteful.

I hear myself speak out loud, say that he is the only one of my children to live to adulthood. All the others before caught the same damn' fever and died. I had no other children after him. He only survived because his mother, the Other – she changed. Changed herself, tried different things. She did what we hadn't done before. She applied herself when I didn't care, nearly burned herself out so he could live. Defied fate and won, gods and fishes be praised.

"She sounds like a good mother," Dona says.

That's not the point. She *made* herself a good mother, she changed. Changed for him, so he could live. And he repaid her by growing big and strong, filling his mind with all that science, and then he came home and staked her down so he could eat her living heart out of her chest.

Dona's hand flies to her lips, pupils contracting, throat convulsing. Yeah. That, right there – that is the right response to – but her thumbs are wiping fresh tears from my cheeks, and she kisses my forehead. What is happening? This never happened before. Surely. My head hurts.

"But," she says, "didn't you and that lady say that your – your wife? - that she visits your son in the cell?"

Sweet summer child. Call me a devil and you have no idea of who or what I am. Me and my Other, there's nothing that will stop these stones from rolling, these bones from shaking and rattling. Yeah, the boy ate his mother's heart, and then she dragged him down to his personal Hell. It makes me smile to think of it. And still we roll on.

"Pretty devil," she says again, caressing my hair. "Why are you sad, then?"

I lost my Other. No matter how many times I told the boy I was proud of him, no matter how much I spoiled him, encouraged him, he lived because she changed. I didn't change. I never changed. Things were never the same again, and I wouldn't change

while she kept on changing.

Gunpowder, blood and parchment. Apple blossoms. Waste.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Dona asks.

I would not. I find myself talking anyway.

16. ~~Harvard~~. ~~Massacre~~. ~~Monsters~~. Harvard Massacre.

The year was 1872, the place was Harvard, and the sound of bells and the scent of apple blossoms were in the air everywhere. Apple trees, planted hither and yon to celebrate the end of the Civil War, blossoming miraculously, impossibly before their time. People were moving around me, a sea of humanity, celebrating, joyous. It all felt quite … bracing, and I caught myself smiling as I skipped along to Memorial Church, a wrapped present in my arms.

All around, I heard voices raised in discussion and song. Most were northern accents, but there were some southerners in the mix as well. 'Peace' was a word that kept popping up. 'Hope' was implied. I smiled and smiled and smiled, struggling to hold back my shrill giggles.

I slipped into the church, unobserved. Where were the clergymen of the Roman Christ? Out among the flock, speaking stern words to counteract the harsh ones brought by priests of the Lesser God. Or over at University Hall to speak blessings over the preparations being made. A single, golden-frocked priest was lying face-down before the altar, and for a moment I thought he was dead. Then he rose to his knees, crossed himself and prayed.

Dread Possibility: the Blasphemy before the Cross

By now it should be fairly clear that the world the Divided States originate from is a parallel Earth; close enough to be recognizable, different enough for our purposes.

One of the most notable differences between the history of this parallel world and our own is that when early Christianity arose, the Romans elected not to try to suppress it, but instead incorporated the new religion into their own religious system by adapting it, stealing the parts they liked and warping the message of what they did not.

All the miracles and travels recorded in the New Testament on Earth, the Romans claimed as the works of one Marius Albius, a Roman scholar and philosopher, supposedly the chosen prophet of the sun-god Sol Invictus. Rewriting the New Testament, the Romans claimed that Marius had traveled widely in disguise, learning the ancient magic of Egypt and bringing the blessings of Sol Invictus to the least of people. This – so they claimed – he had done not to reconcile humanity and God, but to test humanity as the gods of old had always done. That Marius had (supposedly) died on the cross meant that humanity had failed the test, requiring mortals to atone and supplicate the gods more than ever before.

The cult – later the church – of Marius Albus grew powerful in part because it appealed to powerful people, and in part because its message was more easily assimilated by other cultures than one of peace and mercy. Its message is not a call to do good works, to be generous and forgiving, but to be obedient to power. Any power. It is the church of the rich and powerful, who it tells that their exalted position is their divine right. It is the church of the meek and fearful, who desperately long for guidance and want to believe that to be obedient to the law of the land and the authority of their masters is the same as being a good person, and will lead to a blessed afterlife in the Elysean fields.

Even today, in the Divided States, the church of Marius Albus is a broker in influence and information, growing wealthy by taking in the tithes and confessions of the small, then sponsoring and informing the strong in return for 'considerations' down the line. It is also a gateway to the Roman pantheon, leading people to continue to worship these gods of yore.

The church has very few true spellcasters, the majority of them arcane spellcasters masquerading as priests. (If you are using the Pathfinder 1st edition system, the *False Priest* Sorcerer-archetype could be used to great effect.)

(Some version of Christianity founded in true faith, rather than political opportunism, surely survives in the parallel world and the Divided States as well. But it is an underground faith, hiding itself lest it be stamped out by those who believe in Marius and Sol Invictus and call them heretics and blasphemers – a bitter irony, given that the faith of Marius Albus is itself a coldly deliberate heresy.)

Aliases: *The Guiding Sun*

Iconography: The church uses an image of the crucified figure of a handsome, clean-shaven man wearing a laurel wreath, both in statuary and as unholy symbols.

No matter the size of the crucifix, church law demands that it be made of solid gold, with a solar disc behind the head of the crucified figure. In the center of the figure's chest, there should be one or several rubies, either cut or assembled into the shape of a heart.

A genuine crucifix is an object of both veneration and avarice, as people who value them tend to guard them viciously against theft, and non-devout thieves see them as jewelry to be disassembled and melted down for the gold and jewels. Crucifixes carved from wood or stone, or crafted from 'inferior' metals are denounced as blasphemy by the church.

Alignment: Lawful Evil

Cleric alignments: Lawful Evil, Lawful Neutral, Neutral Evil

Portfolio: Order, obedience, authority, sun, information, influence

Domains: Law, Magic, Sun, Trickery

Favored weapon: Roman gladius

Prayers: When the faithful pray, they must pray thrice; first to Marius with the request to carry the prayer to Sol Invictus, then to the sun-god himself, and again to Marius to thank him for his intercession. Divine spellcasters pray at noon, when the sun is at the height of its strength. Lay followers are required to speak their prayers at dawn, so these may rise as the sun does, and so they will not interfere with the prayers of the clergy at noon.

Temples: The holy places of the church resemble traditional catholic architecture, albeit with a tendency to excessive opulence, and a recurring theme of golden solar discs throughout. Instead of statues of saints and angels, it features statues of Roman gods and goddesses who must be venerated alongside Sol Invictus and Marius.

Holy Book: *The Book of the Unconquered Sun* teaches not only the false tales of Marius Albius, but also the classic mythology of Sol Invictus, insofar as knowledge of these myths has survived until today, and the rest of the Roman

pantheon. It includes prayers to the god and his prophet, as well as several other powerful gods of ancient Rome. The Book teaches that even if these other gods – such as Jupiter and Janus among others – are not the focus of the church, the faithful must nevertheless respect their sphere of influence and show them proper deference.

Rites: The rites of this church are strictly regulated, with High Gatherings for those in power, and Low Gatherings for those who serve. Rather than partaking in communion, the gatherings find their climax in tithing, as the worshipers deposit gold coins in one offering-bowl upon the altar, and a few drops of their blood in another. The church accepts only gold coins, leading to some measure of strife with the church of the almighty dollar; those who cannot tithe in gold must tithe twice in blood.

It is worth noting that at High Gatherings, the priests read texts translated to contemporary English, whereas during Low Gatherings they use traditional Latin – a language very much not in use today among the common people.

During both kinds of Gatherings, sections of the life of Marius Albius are read from the Book of the Unconquered Sun, and admonishments are leveled against the gathered faithful. Light ones for those in power, heavy ones for those without it, and all encouraged to maintain order at all costs.

Taboos: Civil disobedience, anything ranging from talking back to a policeman to refusing to obey the laws handed down by the ruler of the land, is a taboo to the Church.

I considered clubbing him over the head, but the present called out to me. Snake-silent, I slipped by the priest and up the stairs to the bell-tower.

The Other was here, sitting in a window, looking down on the milling throng, a sketchpad in her hands. She was a woman this day – had been the same woman since we came here, no matter whether she was going through the rare manuscripts at Houghton Library or sitting up here, watching the people pass. Give my love her due, she had taken good care of her form, had dutifully groomed and fed and exercised it. Still, she had crow's feet wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, gray dusting her curls. Like the dust of this shrine to learning was seeping into her.

I said hello, my love.

She was slow to look up and turn around, the fire that once blazed in her eyes – all blue and cruel, thank all the gods and fish – banked to a dim glow. "There you are," she said to me. "Did you enjoy your walk?" She sounded a little abstracted, but kind. A novelty. One I did not like.

I told her that I had walked all around Harvard, that I had witnessed the preparations for the signing of the treaty. She grew a little more animated at that.

"Maybe I'll go see," she said, lifting her sketchpad a few inches, then letting it drop back into her lap. Her drawings were crude, stiff things, but still a marked improvement on the stick figures she'd struggled to put on paper at first. "This will be a historic day. I might sketch it."

She smiled a little at the thought, then frowned in puzzlement when I said no, she should stay right here. I skipped over to her, me a woman as well, delightful and young and full of the flush of vitality, dashed away the sketchbook and dropped the gift in her lap. Open it up, I told her.

Pages, loose pages of parchment fluttering all around. Her laborious sketches of campus, of flowers and trees, of birds and people coming and going. The scent of parchment in the warm summer air, the fluttering of drifting pages, or possibly of pigeons' wings as they flew by. My love, my Other, staring at me for a quiet moment before she unwrapped the present I had gotten her. The

Whitworth sniper rifle lay on my love's lap as the wrapping paper floated down, gleaming and polished, smelling faintly of gun oil. There were two belts of percussion caps and bullets, caught in little loops.

I smiled at my love, expecting her to smile, then to grin and laugh together... but my love did not smile.

"Why," she asked, slowly, "have you brought me this?"

Because I finally understood why she wanted to come here, I told her, and why she sat up here day after night, watching the bugs crawling past. I had underestimated how much of a craft she made of killing, my beloved love. She had teased me, making me figure it out, but it was a good joke, a cruel jest worthy of her. The war was winding down, our window to play and slaughter to our hearts' content closing, so we were here to stoke the fires of conflict. Her up here in the tower, with the finest sniper rifle available for money or theft, me below with knives.

I expected her to grin then, to praise me, but she just stared. "How many people did we kill during the war?" she asked me.

The question made no sense. I never counted them.

"But do you remember everyone you killed?" she asked me.

Why bother? There were always more to kill, if you gave the bugs enough time to breed.

"I remember them all," the Other said, simply. "From the man I brained with a rock because he wanted me for a mate and was strangling you, to the boy you tricked into committing suicide to save his Daddy, to every last person I personally snuffed out during the war."

She leaned back, eyes going distant, widening in – was that horror? "And I hear the screams of those who fell because of the tactics I whispered in the ears of Cameron and Stanton. I hear them in my dreams, my love." Her eyes blazed blue, the fire flickering, dancing. Where was the steady flame I had always loved?

"All those deaths," she said, as though she was a judge proclaiming a sentence to the condemned, "don't wash away what happened. Our son."

The one had nothing to do with the other, I said. The boy had – transgressed, and she put him somewhere he could not escape from. Along came the war, and we had played to our hearts' content. Why try to pretend the two had anything –

"My love," she said, interrupting me. "Why do you think I killed so hungrily, schemed so passionately to extend the conflict? You down south and me up north, throwing lives away as though scattering seed on the acres. Tell me. Why did we do it?"

Because I wanted to, I said, understanding nothing of this strange mood that had come over her. Because it was fun. Because we enjoyed killing.

"We did," she said, her hands moving on the rifle, loading it with smooth, practiced motions. Neither rushing nor dawdling. "I did. Like a child stepping on bugs, I loved it so."

Like predators in the woods, I corrected her.

"Just so," she agreed. "We were like animals, going wherever we wanted, doing whatever we wanted to whoever we wanted. Eating; fucking; killing. This was our world."

I wanted to question the past tense, but she talked over me.

"Like any animal, I wanted to have babies. To cast my bloodline into the future. One by one, they just … burned out, burned to nothing in my arms. I started to change, found myself wanting their life more than anything else, more than my own. Maybe I was maturing. Who can say. All I know is: I wanted them to be*, my babies. So I took the Words, the ones we two have known, started rearranging them, making new songs. I wanted them – so much! – wanted to teach them my songs, guide their steps, see them grow tall and strong. Everything. Anything. I would have given it to see my children live."*

A pigeon alighted on the windowsill, started when it spotted us... then stepped closer to my love instead of fleeing in terror. This … had never happened before. My love's face wrung with disgust, with pain.

"I love him so much. Seeing him grow made me so happy, so proud and relieved; I did it! But when he came to me, killed me, I knew. I knew he was just like us, the worst parts of us. Lying there, dying while he tore into me like a pig hunting truffles, I knew – I know... we were... wrong."

Ridiculous, I wanted to protest.

"Maybe we were right once," she said. "Maybe we really were animals once. I don't – I can't really remember anything before beating in that bastard's skull when he was trying to kill you. Do you remember?"

The smell of apple blossoms and parchment and gun oil. My love's eyes looking into mine as though searching for a truth I did not wish to share. I lied and told her no, I did not remember anything before then, either.

"Probably it doesn't matter," she whispered, one hand gripping the rifle, the other slowly caressing the pigeon. It preened under her attention, clearly enjoying it. "We haven't been right for a long time. I first suspected it with that boy. The bushwhackers... killing them was nothing. But that boy. You murdered him with his love for his father. They could have been monsters, and that still wouldn't have been right.

"And you... you only laughed and looked for worse things to do. And me, I... loved you, love you. I went along with it. Just shrugged it off, until my desire for children outpaced my love. And the fruit of that desire... My harvest was bitter. I joined the men in black, the hunters, and I sealed away our son behind iron and concrete, like a... A monster; I birthed and raised a monster*. Yet I love him still, can't stop loving him any more than I could stop loving you.*

"But I am tired*."*

A word like a slap in the face; the finality of it set the pigeon to flight, and I took a step back. My love kept talking, her voice a monotone, her eyes blazing steady but not bright*. Some essential quality was missing from her eyes, replaced by something new that made my hackles rise.*

"I lashed out," she said. "The war. Everything I did, me lashing out at the world, at the thoughts I was having. Trying to bury myself in bloodshed, to drown out what my heart and mind both were telling me. Gods and fish." She closed her eyes for a long moment, her shoulders sagging. "What right did I have to do that? None. None at all.

"Now, I am tired and I am ashamed*. I look back on what we've done, and I feel like there is a stone in my belly and my heart and my head. Everything feels unbearably heavy, and I... I am so ashamed. The feeling grew in me, tiny as a mustard seed before I could give it a name, and now it is so vast. So heavy. The harvest of my deeds covers an acre, and my hands should be dripping, there is so much blood on them.*

"I am tired and I am done*. I want to feel happy again about who I am. But that means I have to change."*

Ridiculous, utter nonsense! She is my Other, she is perfect the way she is, the way she has always been! She just needs to refresh herself, indulge in what has always made us happy –

*"*No*, my love," she says, gently – so terribly, awfully gently. Soft pain in her eyes and steel in her voice. "I must be stupid. Look how long it took me to get to a point where I could look back at what I have done and say, 'I was wrong'. But I know now. And I know it will take a lifetime to make up for what I've done. Many lifetimes. But – I can see a way forward."*

She leaned the rifle against the wall and smiled at me. A beautiful smile, parts trepidation, part hope; an expression that did not belong on the face of my love. It equal parts attracted and repulsed me, and my heart fluttered in my chest.

"My love, think of everything we've seen and done. I read the rare manuscripts and I learned so much, but I realized there are gaps in human knowledge as well, gaps we could fill! Here and now, with peace on the horizon, we could do so much

good, teach them, help them grow. We could spark a true golden age of culture and science and art! There is so much they don't know yet, so much good we could do, if we just try. I want *to try.*

"And as we teach, we can learn. My love... will you come with me?"

She held out her hand to me, smiled at me, her eyes so different yet so lovely.

I said no. I did not want this. I wanted my Other as she had always been, the tranquility to my tumult, the cold intellect to my boiling passion, united in our love of killing. We were two halves of one immortality, we were, had been since the beginning and would be until the end. She would be herself again when the dying started; the blood and the screams would brace her up and refresh her, like always. Always.

Still, it smote me to see the smile die on her face.

"What have you done," she said, not even a question, thoughts racing behind her eyes.

I had been all over campus, my love, including University Hall, where the signing would be held. Nobody noticed me planting the bombs, nor whispering the Words. Presently, I would go down the stairs and go over there, would light the spark to bring on the great burning and cry victory for the Confederacy. And the dead would rise to bring horror and contagion. What a wonderful war it would be, with some rallying to the cry, others rising in resistance, and the dead butchering without distinction. Could she feel it coming?

"Don't –!" she cried out, eyes widening, growing hypnotic, but I was already away and rushing down the stairs.

Come chase me, my love. Come play, my love. The carnage is coming, so move your bones and laugh, laugh, laugh!

"Stop!" she screamed behind me, and I heard her footsteps on the stairs. Voice full of rage, of despair. Soon she would laugh as I was laughing, I knew it. I was sure of it. I wanted it. Yes; this was what I wanted! The two of us running, fighting, loving.

The priest was at the foot of the stairs, questioning my presence, questioning the shouts. My knives lashed out; one for him, one for me. A wrench, a twist, a spray of blood. I was tall, a man, strong, covered in the blood and dust of a pretty young thing. I ran outside, laughing, ran into the tide of humanity. Screams, screams, pretty screams everywhere. I danced, I twirled, I cut and stabbed and ran. Blood and screams under the summer sun, I became a man, a woman, a child. Pink dust floated under the summer sun, smelling of foulness. Old, young, pretty, ugly, fair-skinned, dark-skinned, what did it matter? All the blood ran red.

A bullet grazed the top of my head and I heard her scream at me to stop. This was good, a good game! Body to body, I danced and twirled towards University Hall, the bugs running and scattering in confusion and fear all around me, impeding her progress. Up the stairs, into the hall, blood-splattered and eager. Those who tried to stop me fell, their forms became mine, and I finally crashed into the main hall.

Men, old men at the table, one Confederate and one Union. Quill pens poised over parchment. Their precious treaty, the end to my fun, the poison in my Other's veins. I stand there, grinning at them, grinning at the audience. All of them looking at me with first confusion, then with horror when they see the blood, see my knives. Boots pounding up the stairs behind me, hands reaching for me, and it matters naught, for they are gone, gone, gone as my pretty bombs ignite. Fire and rubble and noise erupting, washing all away, my laughter blending with the screams.

I find myself back in the form of a man, an old man, and oh, the irony... I am in the body of one of those old men about to sign the treaty, the Union man, am holding the treaty. He used his body to shield it, the fool, the pointless ape, and I rise to my feet clutching it to my chest, all hurts undone. The earth is shaking, shaking, as I declare –

"Be still."

My Other is standing before me, wearing the body of the Confederate man, half-leaning on the rifle I gave him. Me in his blue, him in my gray; my Other is beautiful either way. Blood oozing down his forehead, but already congealing, wounds healing. His eyes wide and blue and hypnotic, boring into mine. All around us the world is shaking, I am raging, trapped in my body as his will overwhelms mine. Slowly, woodenly, he reaches out; presses a quill pen in my hand.

"Sign," he rasps.

I rage, I rage, I rage...! How could he do this to me, control me like one of the bugs, ruin the fun! How could he! HOW COULD HE!

The smells of blood, parchment and gunpowder. Screams of alarm, screams of anger. Chaos is erupting outside, and I am trapped within. Jerkily, my hand moves, and the flesh remembers. I sign in the name of a dead man. Slowly, laboriously, the Other takes quill and parchment from me and signs, signs blindly, eyes locked on mine.

"Peace," he rasps, "in our time, lover mine. Goodbye."

He whispers Words, another new composition he never taught me, and he is gone, gone, gone. His clothes fall to the ground empty, his boots topple down, the rifle clatters against the torn-up floor, but where is my Other, where is my love? Gone, not even a prickle on the edge of my senses, and the damnable peace treaty with him! My heart hammers in my chest, my lungs labor for air, I cannot breathe, I cannot think, what has he done, forcing me to –

Wasteful.

I have wasted my love.

My love is gone.

I raise my head to the heavens, visible through a hole in the roof, and I howl my fury, my unending rage. The earth is shaking, or am I shaking? The world is shaking, and the skies cloud over, the summer sky hidden behind a congealing storm. Or is it fog? I do not know I do not know I do not know I do not CARE I want my Other I want I want I want

My inarticulate scream becomes a stream of profanities becomes Words. A song I did not teach my Other. I hear them stirring, stirring, fingers tapping and scrabbling at the rubble, stiffening limbs stirring, teeth gnashing with mindless hunger. The plague-dead, the hungry dead, they rise because I will it so, demand it so, and my knives come to my hands. All around me the dead rise as far as they can, or else they crawl, all falling in behind me as I start marching for the door.

There must be blood to salve my pain.

I want it, so it must be so.

This city, this shrine to learning,
this nation entire shall bleed

17. Theft **(ii)**

Dona is still stroking my forehead, my hair. I feel tears trickling down my cheeks, find myself wishing she would recoil, call me a monster, a villain. It would be so much easier if she would just fear me, despise me, hate me. So much easier. Why oh why did I take her with me? How is this happening?

"You did plenty of wrong, and I'm a little scared of you," she says, answering the questions I did not speak aloud, "but I don't hate you. How could I hate you? You're the first person in ten years to treat me kind. You set me free."

I stole her, made her my loot, my slave, that is not – She seals my objections with a kiss. To my forehead. Like the way the Other used to kiss our children? No. Not the same at all. But it soothes me, all the same.

"You've been nothing but good to me," she says. "So good."

Impossible. I am evil incarnate, I took her to keep her in bondage, my slave, a tool for –

"You gave me money and just let me walk," she reminds me. "I could have run and kept running.

There are still cities where they don't mind if you're marked by the dollar, so long as you have dollars to spend. No, pretty devil. Lie to the world, but this lie won't fly. Why did you give me a chance to run?"

Spending time with her had been... nice. Just that.

"Yeah," she says, smiling. "But there must've been other women, right? Men? Did you let them all run?"

Of course there had – not. I walked into that brothel on a whim, bedded a woman for the first time since Harvard just because I felt like it, because I wanted to. I always do what I want, just because I want it, because I –

"Did you feel lonely?" she asks, hand stroking my forehead. "Were you cold, pretty devil?"

I *had* felt cold. Empty. I fill that hole with death and smokes and beer, any chance I get, but I walked into that brothel, smelled out its pathetic sins, because felt I needed something a bit... more. A woman or a man to hold for a couple of minutes, the surge of an orgasm, yes. I'd thought that would take the edge off, but I wound up smoking with a snake-faced woman with dancer's legs who can sew and has a son and... and...

Gods and fish, I am cold. So cold. Dona holds me, cradles me. Not like a child. She is warm and soft and strong underneath and – and –

I am tired.

Stop talking in my head, my love. Is this what you felt, my love, over a century ago? This great weariness? Killing is fun, such fun, cruelty is my art – but I am alone. You are elsewhere, our paths have diverged, and I know, in the darkest recesses of my heart I know that we will not get back together. Tears, running down my face as I admit the truth.

I travel like a roaming virus, I kill, I feast, I party, I do whatever I want. But nothing is like it used to be. We used to be together, egging each other on, laughing, loving each other. Without you there, with you ranged *against* me, gods and fish preserve me – I have been a hypocrite to my son.

'The difference between us is that I do what I do because I want to, and you do what you do because you have to,' my ass. What's the difference if I have to keep telling myself I want to do what I do just to not feel bad? No difference, none at all.

"Pretty devil," Dona says, all kisses and caresses and her long, soft hair brushing my face. "You're not the same. He can't stop unless someone makes him. You can stop yourself."

The guards, the ex-soldiers I paid when we left town, I tell her, are dead. It used to be that if you thoroughly checked a dollar bill, you'd find trace elements of anything from feces to hard drugs. What was on the money I slipped them will have them dying in boils and agony; a trick I picked up from my errant son. That store clerk – I tricked him into breaking one of the Five Rules; even with my Cadillac dope in his system, he'll die screaming as much as laughing. I own stock in Five Rules; I could have reined them in down the years, could have saved lives in plethora. That whore-madam, I felt her skull crunch under my fist. She'll be lucky if her wits are only addled; she might be crippled or dead.

"Well, I don't care about her," Dona says, calmly, rationally. "She was awful to me and all the other girls."

She makes me laugh, laugh while tears are running down my face, which never happened to me before. What is happening to me? Who is she? Some witch, a priestess of the old gods this country seems to have left behind?

"Just me," she says, soothing my questions with kisses. "Just Dona. You saved me, you set me free. You fed me good food instead of poisoned gruel, you let me feel the wind and the sun again, played music for me. You've done plenty bad, sure, but you've been nothing but good to me."

Why, though? Why, why, why? We only met a few days ago, what is happening?

"I think you've just been lonely since your old lady split," she says, eloquent in her simplicity. "Being lonely is like sickness; it wears you down. Don't think there's some great meaning to it. Sometimes people

just run into each other and have a click. People who aren't special on their own, can be special to each other."

As simple as that? Is that enough?

"I hope it is," she says, her arms around me, her lips on my forehead, my eyelids. "You did me nothing but good."

Maybe. Being hugged makes me feel less cold, anyway.

"I'm glad," Dona says. Her smile turns sad, and it sends a chill through me. "I want you to be alright when I've – gone."

She glances up and away, turns back to me. I start to sit up; Dona tries to get me to lie back down, but there is a suspicion in me, and I would see. And I'm right; at a stone's throw from where I spent the night, there stands a tall, thin figure in a dark greatcoat, top hat on his head, scarf wrapped around him in a spiral to keep it off the ground. Alternating bands of black and charcoal gray. Pointy shoes, shiny as if freshly-polished, poke out from underneath the coat. Beneath the hat and within the collar, there is shadow with a faint double gleam; eyes staring beyond me, at Dona.

… Well, bugger *that*.

18. Greed. Affection?

I stand up, first against Dona's attempts to make me lie back down, then with her help. My head still hurts, my eyes burn from crying, but it's getting better. Am I feeling better? … Not sure. Ask me again later. But I know I'm starting to feel angry as I walk towards the figure in the wide coat, boot-heels crunching the dry earth and small stones underneath. I am grinning without humor, my teeth bared to the sun.

Give the … creature its due, it does not flinch or back up. It also doesn't look away from Dona, who is creeping along at my shoulder, whisper-begging me not to do it, to just stand aside.

Screw that. I am the Dark One. There is no evil in this land greater than mine, no *power* greater than mine.

None.

I square up to the tall figure, stand within its personal space and force it to look me in the eye at last. Even my eyes can't pierce the shadow under its hat, but that doesn't matter. Its eyes can see into mine, see the gray fire there. Though it doesn't move, its body language shifts subtly, gives an impression of drawing back.

That's right, I tell it. This is me, the Dark One. In this land, I am Lord. So now what? Is it going to try and stand up to me, ~~take what's mine take who's mine take my woman?~~ try and take Dona away? *Bugger* that. ~~Mine mine MINE~~ she's with me.

In the shadow, the gleams that I expect are its eyes widen. Now it speaks, its voice the dusty whisper of dust and gravel in the wind: *'She swore an oath. She broke that oath. My charter – '*

I punch it in the face, which feels weird. There's some icky slime on my knuckles, and it stings like the dickens – but the thing backs up a step, hissing like the wind in grass. Screw your charter. She's with me. I'll say it after all, mine *mine MINE*.

'My charter,' it whispers at me, reproachful.

I step up and punch it again. There is a crunching sound, as though I've just trod on the world's biggest beetle, and it makes a whining sound. Wind in desert canyons. The thing backs up another step, a second one. I raise my fist, the skin red and inflamed, and tell it there's more where that came from if it doesn't bugger off.

'For now,' it hisses, turns aside and vanishes.

Dona gasps. "I never heard of *anybody* running them off," she confesses. "Nobody ever escapes."

Baby, haven't I told you before? I'm the baddest of the bad, the greatest evil in the land, the Dark Lord. There is no power here greater than mine, nothing that can – she stops my jolly boasting with a kiss on the lips. A *good* kiss; it curls my toes. Been a while since that happened.

"You're so cool, baby," she finally says, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Heck yeah, I am. You know, this has been a very emotional day, but I am starting to feel better. Love – well, affection anyway – and violence. Yeah, this day is looking *up*. I grin and then I laugh; not as shrill and mad as it used to be, but still my laugh. Still the cry of a mad, bad thing walking the earth, looking for a place to do as it wills.

And the really fun thing is that Dona laughs with me.

Dread Possibility: *Bondsman*

In the Divided States, breaking publicly-sworn oaths carries a terrible risk. If you make a promise in hearing of witnesses, especially if you swear on what is considered a sacred object by any creed, cult or temple, and later break that oath, you run a 50% percent chance that a *Bondsman* will sense this broken promise and start pursuing you.

Initially, *Bondsmen* appear as tall (Medium-sized) figures all wrapped in dark, outdated clothes, such as might have been popular in late 19th-century London. When first spotted, they are barely within visible distance of their target, but each day they halve the distance, until finally they are close enough to strike. By this point, most ordinary people have gone into a stark panic and exhausted themselves trying to flee, or even taken their own lives to avoid what is coming.

Unless somehow prevented from closing the distance, the *Bondsman* will demand that the target of its hunt comes along willingly. Refusal to comply will cause it to shrug off its concealing clothes and attack. It is only at this point that the prospective victim and those around them find out what manner of being the *Bondsman* is; any supernatural creature, be it fey, undead or fiend, can take up the mantle of a Bondsman if they detect a broken promise. Then can follow by night and by day, without need for sleep or nourishment, so long as they are obeying the charter of the *Bondsman*, with none of their usual weaknesses and allergens applying so long as they wear the concealing clothing.

(DMs who send a *Bondsman* after their players are encouraged to tailor the challenge to the target – not to mention the nature of the promise broken. One encounter with a *Bondsman* could end in hilarity, when the creature casts off its cloak to reveal a Grig or a Pixie with delusions of grandeur. Another could end in wholesale slaughter, when the *Bondsman* proves to be a Pit Fiend. Keep in mind that although the charter of the *Bondsman* is to pursue oathbreakers, there is no requirement for them to have a Lawful alignment – nor an Evil one.)

The fate of those who willingly accompany a *Bondsman* is technically speaking unknown, for they are never seen again. Those who choose to fight a *Bondsman* will soon learn that it has a combat advantage against its intended target as though it were a Ranger with class levels equal to its Hit Dice, and the prospective target as its very specific Favored Enemy.

Once committed to a chase, *Bondsmen* are relentless. Only two things have been known to prevent them from fulfilling the purpose set forth by their charter, and these are death and the immediate presence of a Darklord forbidding them from going forward.

19. On the Road, Again.

We have a rushed meal – lunch, maybe? – and pack up, then get back on the bike. I could run some ruddy *Bondsman* off as often as I need to, but after everything that happened I'm full of nervous energy. Maybe I'm a little embarrassed for the way I cried and opened up and want to clear the area – and then again, maybe not. Not ashamed, I mean.

Face it, I'm not the same as the Other. She said she felt ashamed for all the killing; *I* don't. I just felt lonely, and that's sorted now, isn't it? I can see the road ahead. Not just the physical road, my path to the future. I've been drifting without purpose, now I can crib some purpose off of Dona. She's got the hateful Banks' tattoo on her back; I know people who can get that off. She wants to see her son? I can track him down, hunt the people who sold her. I can wash her feet in their blood, see if it amuses her. There's foods and booze and drugs to be had out in the Divided States, still. We can go sample them and see which please my baby, my new lady.

A lifetime of things to do. What a prospect. I ask her what she'd like to do first.

"Weren't we following that signal on the radio?" she asks, her arms wrapped around me as we roar down the road. "Don't you need to go there?"

Need, need. Not so much need. Work or a hobby, and neither matters that much anymore; I've got better things to do. I reach back to caress her hip, and she chuckles in my ear.

"What was it about, though?" she asks.

Oh, the aliens are coming from the moon, I tell her.

"No, seriously."

Yes, seriously. There are aliens up on the moon, and they're planning a landing. I usually go to see it, maybe kill a few and scare them back up, depending on which ones it is. They all fly in ge-nu-ine flying saucers, what they used to call foo fighters in the forties.

"There's more than one kind?" Dona asks, stunned.

Heck, yeah. At least three. The mushrooms, the lizards, the little grey buggers with the super-sized heads and eyes, the pale fellas in black. Maybe there's others, I dunno. Why?

"Can we go see?" she asks. "I've never seen a – a real alien. Is that alright?"

I give her hip a light squeeze, then put both hands on the handlebars and open the throttle all the way up so the bike bucks and roars like a dragon. Dona whoops with delight, and I find myself grinning as she squeezes me. The wind whips our hair back and the sun is a hammer in the big, blue sky. I feel good, *I feel good*, and the landscape whizzes on by.

20. On the Road, Again (ii)

We ride. Time passes.

The sun moves to set, and we camp by the side of the road. We set up camp together, then take turns cooking. I play the violin and Dona dances; we tell each other stories, memories half-remembered and crystal-clear. Some nights we fuck, other nights we 'make love', which is new and different. Something I heard of, sure, but neither the Other nor I knew how it was supposed to go. It's... nice. Yet other nights, we just lie next to each other, looking at the night sky.

I point out the waxing moon and the little dots of light swarming around it, foo fighters on the move. She asks me not to tell her more about the aliens yet, she wants to be surprised. That tickles me. Tell the truth and shame the Devil, it *delights* me.

The sun rises in the east, and we tumble out of bed and back into our clothes. We gorge on breakfast food, then get back on the bike and let it roar. When was the last time I filled it up with gas? Eh, who knows. Who cares. If we ever come to a gas station, I might let it guzzle a bit, but it doesn't really need any.

Around us, the landscape is changing. It starts to rise up, the road rising and falling along with it. First scrub grass, then lush grass covers the earth.

Then finally, there are the first trees, and a small stream parallels the road for a mile or so. Faint wisps of cloud gather in the sky, as if to shield us from that great big sun.

"Are they oak?" Dona asks me as we spot a dark green line on the horizon. "An oak forest?"

Could be, I say. Might be. I open up the throttle again so we'll see it all the sooner.

We're not at the forest yet when there's a sound behind us; the beeping of a car horn. Dona's grip on me tightens.

"Rolling gang?" she asks.

Not likely, I reply, looking back. What's catching us up, beeping the whole way, is a van with a fresh paint-job; flowers wrapped around flowers. I slow down some so they can catch up, and the van drives beside us. Down goes the dusty window, and I see two teens. A blond boy behind the wheel, a girl with striking red hair and glasses beside him. Bob cut. It suits her.

"Hey!" the boy yells, cheerfully. "Yo!" He holds up his left arm, hand turned toward his face. Flowers are tattooed all around his lower arm. "Free on the road!"

I hold out my own left arm, palm turned toward me. The little tattoo in the webbing between my thumb and index finger isn't as obvious as the boy's, but it's there, and the gesture and answering cry of 'free in the mind' are just as important. The boy whoops with joy; the redheaded girl smiles like the Mona Lisa and holds up her right arm as well. A single flower is tattooed all over the back of her hand.

"Do you know them, baby?" Dona asks.

I tell her to wait; it'll be a surprise. She lightly punches my shoulder, but laughs when she does.

The day moves to midday, and other vehicles start catching us up. An actual 1959 Continental Mark IV Town Car, lovingly restored and maintained. A rickety Volkswagen Beetle. Two motorbikes. Some hideous three-wheeled contraption that looks like it was assembled out of bike and car parts, an American flag and a Union Jack fluttering behind it. A van so dirty that I can't tell its original color. Only the driver of the motorized trike looks a day over twenty; all the others, including the girl clinging to the balding, bearded old man's back, look like kids that should be in high school or early college. They all show off their flower tattoos and call out 'Free on the road', then chirp back 'Free in the mind' to the others.

"Definitely not a rolling gang," Dona concludes. "But what are they?"

Midday comes, and as if on cue, we all park by the roadside. Both vans disgorge more kids than should have been crammed inside on a hot day, but the mood is good and cheer is high. All the kids are going around introducing themselves to each other. The bald old fella from the trike comes walking up to Dona and me, first. He has a firm handshake, like a hairy bear trap.

"Call me Lance," he says, his voice the fine baritone of a lifelong smoker. He has the flowers tattooed on his bald dome and, from the look of it, all the way down his back. "I was over in Shy-town, looking in the old sewer system, when I heard the word. You?"

I introduce myself as Janie Augustus and Dona as Dona Augustus. She kisses my cheek when I do. I tell Lance we were just going wherever when we heard the signal on the shortwave. He nods and tucks his thumbs in the straps of his vest. Underneath, his chest is bare.

"Good time to be riding. Less hot than last month, not going full winter yet. Rolling gangs still a bit slack after the summer heat, so I reckon we've got better odds than most to get back to wherever in one piece, so long as everyone keeps their head on."

"Is that your daughter?" Dona asks, indicating the young woman who'd been behind Lance on the trike, and is now spreading out a great big picnic carpet.

"Bless you, no," Lance chuckles. "My nurse. Got hypoglycemia and some other aches and creaks. She takes care of me and makes sure I don't eat

anything good."

He gives us a friendly nod and wanders off to greet some of the kids. The blond boy from the painted van is sitting on a tree stump, strumming a guitar. He's halfway decent, and soon he's got two girls dancing. One from that dirty van, the other from one of the two bikes. Everyone is chattering openly, no fear. Dona listens to them a bit, then looks confused.

"Were those two" - a young man from the other bike and a boy who looks at him with a certain gleam in his eye - "talking about *chupacabra*?"

More to the point, they were talking about whether there are *chupacabra* nesting in the depths of the Grand Canyon, or Stoker[9]-type vampires.

"They're all here to see the aliens as well, aren't they?" Dona guesses. "And they're all tattooed with flowers?"

Welcome to the Society of the Wandering Eye, I tell her. Though they'd answer to 'Meddlers' or even 'Medlars' as well in a pinch.

"But... what is it they do?" Dona asks.

Chase mysteries, basically. You can find them any old where, looking into the ruins of the pre-Division eras, investigating some of the more famous – and lurid – murders and other great crimes, or chasing myths and rumors. As far as I know, the flowers are a callback to the hippie movement; most of them either sold out in the seventies or got gunned down in the eighties, but some got out and kept carrying on, protesting governmental cruelty and consumerist society until everything went to shit and the Division happened. When people decided they wanted to get out of the city-states and chase their dreams and any whisper on the wind, the surviving hippies were a good source of trustworthy transport. Over time, they became all one thing. Dreamers and investigators, do-gooders and dope-heads.

"And you're one of them?" Dona asks, cheekily.

I smirk. Getting a tattoo is no great burden for regular access to Cadillac dope. Besides, I've been known to chase the odd myth to keep myself entertained. Gods and fish know I used to need it.

Dread Possibility: The Society of the Wandering Eye-

While Janie's summary of the Society is not entirely wrong, it only covers the very basics. The Society did indeed evolve from dreamers and eager minds, who joined the surviving hippies on the roads of the Divided States out of a wish to see what was out there and escape the anarchy and tyrannies of post-Division society. They are, indeed, landless wanderers who engage in free love and recreational use of mind-altering substances. They do wander in search of even the silliest

rumors, or just out of a burning desire to see what's over the next horizon.

What Janie does not mention is that the Society has actually solved quite a few mysterious crimes and found genuine paranormal events and creatures, simply because their enthusiasm spurs them to keep trying – and they share what they learn.

Members of the Society mark themselves with floral tattoos, not out of whimsy, but so that other members of the Society and people in need will know them to ask for help. Given that the Divided States are a Ravenloft domain, the Society has come across much that is dark in their sleuthing and paranormal investigations. Some have survived such encounters, and told others how they did it. When they solve crimes that local authorities do not care about or refuse to touch, they are occasionally rewarded with treasures of the pre-Division eras, or develop contacts that benefit the Society as a whole.

[9] *Bram Stoker, the author of* Dracula*, of course.*

They keep journals and share these among each other when they meet.

Some people join the Society because they feel drawn to the seemingly carefree, wandering lifestyle, or just to escape a bad situation. Others join because they see the Society as a useful vehicle for smuggling drugs and other contraband[10]. But at its murky heart, the Society is the Divided States' premier source of education for criminal and paranormal investigation. As naive as it may appear, the Society brings a great deal of hope to people who suffer from unsolved crimes and unnatural influences. They are a roving library of lore, which adventurers could benefit from accessing. And given what they learn and share, they are also the domain's only semi-organized college for magical and psychic studies – a school without walls or buildings, one that does not even require an entry fee, only curiosity and dedication to uncovering mysteries of all kinds

The girl with the red bob cut comes sauntering up to us, another girl on her arm. A real beauty, with long hair the color of polished oak and eyes dark as ink. Both have the flower tattoo on the back of their left hand, which strikes me as … surprising. Usually every member of the Society picks a different spot to mark.

"Hello," the redhead says. She takes a pair of glasses from her skirt pocket and slips them on. Rosy lenses gleam under the sun, as do her perfectly even teeth. "I'm Pat; this is Griffin. We were in Boston, chasing the Thunderbird. How about you?"

Just chasing the wind when we heard the radio, I tell her.

"I love your hair," Dona says. "So vibrant! Is that your real color?"

Pat lifts a hand to her bangs – I see a flash of unease in her eyes – then smiles. "All me, I'm afraid," she says. "If you're looking for something to spruce up your 'do, you might try Card over there. Yo, sister Card! Free in the mind!"

A girl from the other van, her hair a veritable rainbow of colors and shades, looks around. Just for a second, she grimaces when she sees who called to her. Just a second, and then she's all smiles, except in the eyes. She waves back, but not before going to stand between Pat and a young boy who might be her baby brother. He has her good looks, anyway, all Nordic blue eyes and blond hair.

"So," Pat continues. "Just traveling?"

Just traveling, I agree. The call on the radio was the first real trail I've had for... oh, quite a while now.

Pat pouts prettily; Griffin lowers her eyes and keeps smiling. "Nothing to share, then?" Pat asks.

I wouldn't say that. I tell Pat that I was in Old Detroit when the Packard automotive plant collapsed. Got a good look at what was down in the tunnels, then decided to take me a sabbatical to process all I saw. There's some good shit in my journal, for those as enjoy cryptology, symbolism, history and mythology.

"Far out," Pat says, eyes and smile widening. "Far out," Griffin murmurs in agreement.

"We need to swap notes," Pat tells me, as she smoothly steps up and plants a kiss on my lips. I feel

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[10] *As a **Dread Possibility**, the Lotus Society is a sub-sect of the Wandering Eye. While indistinguishable from other Meddlers to the casual observer, the Lotus Society is united by a tendency to uniformly place their flower tattoos on the back of their left hand, making them recognizable to each other and their customers. Members of the Lotus Society are for hire to anyone who is willing to pay, and basically embody every negative stereotype associated with the Society; they are drug-runners, level curses and stir up supernatural evils, mess up or clean up crime scenes so criminals go unpunished, and strive to master the darkest aspects of magic.*

her hand at my side, slipping something into my pocket. Then she moves on, giving Dona and me a little wave.

"She seemed friendly," Dona says, one eyebrow raised.

Funny, I reply. She seemed catty and greedy to me. Dona grins at this, and kisses me on the jaw. I fish out what Pat put in my pocket; a twist of paper containing two pale white pills. Like fish-bellies. Stamped in the middle of each is a bird clutching a lightning bolt. 'Chasing the Thunderbird', indeed.

"Are those any fun?" Dona asks.

Lots of fun, I confirm, until they wreck your liver. Then there's no more fun to be had, unless you've been very good and expect to go to Heaven. I put the pills back in the twist and resolve to chuck it into a bush first chance I get. Some of the kids are setting up a barbecue, so I ask Dona if she's hungry.

"I can eat," she says, grinning.

We go and loiter by the grill, chatting with the Meddlers until lunch is served. All-vegetarian food, but it's delicious.

21. Reunion.

When the group's finished eating, Lance suggests a meditation circle. "No hookah, though," he adds. "We've still got a ways to go today."

Nobody has real objections, not even me. My belly is full of good eating, my woman is hanging on my arm, and the nearby forest smells of greener, simpler times. It's all good, even without dope. So we all sit down in a circle and meditate. Sometimes people mutter strings of nonsense words as they slip in and out of a trance. Sometimes they say a Word, which is when the rest of the group pays sharp attention. I don't hear any Words I don't already know, but I am amused when I see Dona silently repeat the ones she hears, her brow wrinkling as she tries to make sense of them.

After the meditation circle, we all mount up, pile in, and kick off. The rumbling of engines fills the air as the Society of the Wandering Eye hits the road. For a while I ride next to Lance and his nurse, who move in silence.

Then we're next to Sister Card, who has tattoos of the Greater Arcana of the Tarot up her left arm, tattoos of ordinary court cards down her right arm, with flowers threaded in between. She talks a mile a minute about all manner of things. Have we ever seen a woman give birth to a ghoul, have we ever seen the autumn migration of the mothman, have we ever heard the shriek of the Jersey devil? Have we ever played lowball poker, or bridge, or assassin chess? The latter turns out to be a game thought up by a British author[11]. I might try it sometime.

Next we ride next to the first van we saw. Pat is driving, but the blond boy talks to us through his window. He's annoying, really; trying to flirt with both of us, then just with Dona. I consider speaking a couple of Words, or just reaching through the window to rip out his tongue – and then Dona laughs at something he says. Layers upon layers; she's not laughing with him, not laughing in appreciation of him. She's laughing because he's a silly little boy who thinks himself the gods' gift to women and can't see how ridiculous he is. That laughter smooths my hackles down, and I chuckle a bit myself.

On and on we go, the sun moving toward set, when we come to a fork in the road. And parked smack dab in the fork is a big, black car, like one of those old-time hearses. Even the windows are black; one-way glass. Standing in front of the car are a middle-aged man and a sour-faced woman, both wearing black shoes, black trousers, black coats... black shades. The middle-aged man lowers a sketchbook when we come into sight, and says something to the woman when she reaches for her coat pocket. She glares at him, but leaves whatever it is alone.

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[11] *Assassin chess was thought up by the late, great Terry Pratchett, and is played on the Discworld.*

"*Blindeyes*," someone whispers, and we come to a halt just out of shouting distance.

I am surprised almost beyond words. Almost. I tell Dona to stay on the bike, then call to Lance that I'll talk to the men in black if he doesn't mind.

"Think you can swing it?" Lance asks in a low tone.

Yeah. Yeah, I think I can swing it. I've met men in black before. Women, too. Turning, I tell Dona it'll be alright. Can she trust me? She kisses me full on the lips and sticks her tongue in my mouth, which is much more fun than it may sound to the uninitiated.

"Knock 'em dead, except not literally, pretty devil," she whispers in my ear. "Don't want to upset the little kids."

That's right, we have a few nippers in our little not-a-rolling-gang. I'd noticed, but not cared so much... Ah, well. More important things on my mind.

I get off the bike and walk up to the men in black, boot-heels rapping out a rhythm against the mildly abraded surface. They stand up straight when I approach, the woman reaching for her coat pocket again. The middle-aged man gives her a look, no more, but she frowns at him. Behind those shiny glasses, I expect she's glaring at him fit to kill. Doesn't matter.

I walk up to them, then stop at what I *think* is a polite distance? Forget the kids, I don't want to upset Dona. So I hook my thumbs in my belt and look at the middle-aged man. He looks right back at me, lightly tapping the sketchbook against his leg. His clothes are clean and well-cared for, but slightly rumpled. Male pattern baldness is waging war with thick, wavy white hair that falls down to his shoulders. Face clean-shaven, bushy eyebrows. Skin pale. He looks good and yet he does not. And this I say out loud.

"Years piling on," he replies, as he sizes me up. "You look well. How've you been?"

"Do you *know* this criminal?" the woman objects, hand now firmly in her coat pocket and presumably clutching a handgun.

I ignore her and tell the man I'm doing... better of late. I never expected to see him run with the men in black.

"Joined up about twenty, thirty years ago," he says. "Still trying to make a difference."

"*Agent* Johnson!" the woman snaps. "*Why* are you sharing private information with a criminal?!"

She's feisty.

"Agent Foxe, would you please enlighten me as to which crimes these people have committed?" agent Johnson asks, completely at ease. When the woman stammers, he adds: "I know that the Society of the Wandering Eye as a whole is suspected of dabbling in unlicensed criminal investigation, breaking and entering, smuggling and a mess of other crimes... but I do not recall hearing that any of these *individual* members of the Society before us are under suspicion. Are you privy to any briefs that implicate these *specific* people? Because I'm not."

"Everybody knows they smuggle drugs and mess up crime scenes," agent Foxe manages, sullenly.

"Quite possibly. However, there is no crime scene here, and we do not have probable cause to search their vehicles and belongings, do we?" agent Johnson says. "Please put the safety back on while I go have a chat with this individual, who is an old acquaintance."

"Bureau rules state that any interrogations should be performed by a minimum of two agents!" agent Foxe snarls.

"Yes. But I am not planning to interrogate anyone, I am going to have a talk," agent Johnson says, still calm and unruffled. "If you'll excuse us."

He makes a polite gesture, beckoning me to the side of the road, further from his fuming partner and the Society. There are a lot of eyes on us, which might otherwise annoy or amuse me. Right now, it leaves me … I suppose the best word is indifferent. Except for Dona's eyes. Having those on me right now is awkward.

We stop at the very edge of the woods, and I hear a nightingale start to sing, somewhere in the distance. That's new.

"You get used to it," agent Johnson says, voice pitched for my ears only. He takes his sunglasses off, revealing full black-on-black eyes. He frowns a little, then heaves a sigh. "Been a while," he says. "I never expected to see you here."

I get that. I wasn't expecting him here, either. I wasn't … looking. He just nods at that and glances at the Society. At my bike.

"She looks interesting," he says. "Not pretty, but definitely interesting."

He's right there. Interesting, and warm. She makes me happy.

"Well, then I'm glad for you," he says. He sounds sincere. "Given that you are not here for me, why are you?"

Do I really need to say it? The shortwave told me the aliens were going to land, so I came over. It was something to do, and I met Dona on the way. Don't tell me that he and agent Foxe weren't here because of the same reason.

"No, no, of course we are," he says. He breathes on his shades and polishes them with a large, pristine handkerchief. Black lace, which would strike me as funny, but... it's all awkward. "So," he continues. "*We're* here to monitor the landing and make sure nobody gets hurt, and your hooligans are here to... what? Talk to the aliens? Have a jam session? Maybe smoke a hookah of moon dust?"

Any of the above, or just to see them. You never really know with Meddlers, I tell him. It'll be fun to find out, though, won't it?

"You might ask yourself what *she* wants," agent Johnson points out, not unkindly. "If she makes you happy, doesn't she deserve the same consideration from you?"

He's got a point there; I hadn't thought of it that way. But she does want to at least see the aliens, which means *I* want to move along the road. Is he planning to get in my way?

"Not at all," he replies. "But we're going as well. Poor agent Foxe would chew my liver if I completely disobeyed orders. Can we agree to be … civil with one another on this? I don't interfere with you and your lady, you don't antagonize or murder poor agent Foxe? She's irritable, but she's been through a rough time. I'm mentoring her."

That sounds fair, really. And I don't need his agent Foxe. To be perfectly clear, and not to be cruel for a change, I don't need him anymore, either. So I'm going to ask for similar consideration from him with regards to Dona.

"Of course. Perfectly fair," agent Johnson says. He holds out his hand and I grasp it; we shake on it. Briefly, because all my nerve endings – and presumably his – come alive at the skin contact. We both clear our throats and march back to our own side. Still moving in perfect lockstep, after all the years since we last met at Harvard.

Awkward, so awkward, to meet the Other here and now.

We cruise along, the Society's varying vehicles and the Blindeyes' black hearse. The rumbling of engines in the air, the forest-scented wind in our faces. There is less conversation than before, with most of the Meddlers maneuvering to stay as far away from the hearse as possible without outright trying to shake it off. I get some dubious looks; me, the one who knows a man in black personally. I consider doing something about that – and then Dona kisses me on the jaw.

"You did great," she praises me, and the rising anger just drains out. I practically preen under the attention and rev the bike. She laughs and calls me silly. It surprises me how good that feels, too.

Dusk is here, and the combined group sets up by the side of the road. In deference to tensions in the air, the two men in black set up on one side of the road, and the Meddlers on the other. I regain some respect by doing the fire trick; the gathered Meddlers go ooh and aah at the way I conjure a spark and make the fire howl toward the sky. Next, Lance

conjures up some dust that causes the fire to spit little sparks that pop and change color like fireworks. This draws applause, even from me. It's a nice trick. I'll try if he wants to trade for it later. Dinner is prepared – vegetarian again, but good as anything – and fat cigarettes are handed around, the paper green and juicy.

The pleasant chatter dies away when ~~the Other~~ – agent Johnson comes walking over and sits down with us. He smiles pleasantly and warms his hands by the fire. Then he looks left, looks right, all conspiratorial, and taps his nose. The fire flares bright green, bright blue, purple, then orange again. Little sprites seem to be dancing in the flames, which makes the little nippers laugh and draws a smattering of polite applause from the adults.

"Never seen a Blindeye who did the Art before," the girl Card says in a loud, confrontational tone of voice.

"Ah, but I'm an old man, my dear," agent Johnson says, managing to sound avuncular. "I had a whole life before I put on the black. You'd be surprised how a person can change, and what they can pick up."

He snaps his fingers, and the fire-sprites start doing acrobatics and pratfalls. This is a big hit with the little children, and some even ask how the spell goes. One of the adults hands him a plate of food, which he accepts with good grace and eats with gusto. Afterward, he pulls out his sketchbook and starts drawing the people gathered around the fire. He's gotten better since Harvard; his pencil sketches are surprisingly lifelike – and again, a big hit with the little ones, who gather around him and demand he draw things for them.

He's definitely broken the ice. Instead of worry, the Meddlers are looking at him with curiosity.

"We should have some music," Pat suddenly says, and she goes to the flower-painted van. It turns out there's a man inside who hasn't come out yet. He's so thin, I get the impression he's sick. Thin, but tall. Scruffy and unshaven, he walks like he's half asleep, but is carrying a set of bongos. He plops himself down near the fire and I catch a whiff off of him; he reeks like he hasn't bathed in years and smoked pot every day of those years. For all of that, he plays his drums like a virtuoso, the rhythm matching the whirling dance of the fire, his hands full of life where the rest of him looks half dead.

And then the rhythm abruptly changes. From wild and energetic, it goes to a slow pulse, dirge-like. The music causes the fire to die down to smoldering cinders, in spite of the magick feeding it. It also weighs on my mood, and apparently the mood of everyone else around the fire. It's slow and weary, makes me feel like there's a stone seated between my eyes. Am I feeling lethargic? Am I feeling despair? Maybe a little of both. The Meddlers sit very still, eyes fixed on the drummer, all conversation and laughter stilled.

Next moment, the girl Griffin rises to her feet in one smooth movement. She starts to dance around and around the embers, her movements stiff and stilted. As she circles the dying flames, she casts off items of clothing, her Mona Lisa smile subtly ironic, maybe even cynical. Now all eyes are on her, seeking her in the growing darkness. Her back is tattooed, not with flowers, but with a figure that reminds me of the writings of Leonardo Da Vinci.

I feel Dona's hand on my arm. She clears her throat twice, then manages to whisper: "Baby. This is a snooze. You play better than this." And she pushes my violin case into my hands.

Snap go the catches, my hands moving of their own accord. My violin lies gleaming, the low glow of the embers reflecting in the glossy wood. I grab the bow, my hands seeming to move through molasses, and I raise the violin to my shoulder. It feels like I'm lifting a boulder, but my lady has praised my music. How could I not play?

The strings sing out the tune of '*Devil went down to Georgia*,' cutting through the slow pulse of the drums. The fire spits sparks and starts to re-kindle itself. The girl Griffin stumbles and halts, eyes large and staring at me. Dona leaps to her feet and walks over, takes the girl's unresisting hands and starts to dance, sweeping her along. There are hesitant cries of appreciation at the way my lady

dances, fluidly bending the girl Griffin to move along; I must match her. I put more oomph into my playing, jump to my feet, stomp my boot. The fire swells and roars, heat washing over us all, and the Meddlers shake off the weird spell of the drums. I hear laughter, people jump up to dance, and Lance starts singing the lyrics.

Round and round the fire we go, I play song after song. I make them swing, I make them dance, I make them sing, I make them laugh. I play '*Masculine women, feminine men*' by Edgar Leslie / James V. Monaco, I play '*Moondance*' by Nightwish, I kick up my heels, I lead a polonaise.

As we whirl around, I see the girl Griffin squatting next to the scruffy drummer, tugging at his sleeve – in vain. He's going wild, drumming up a storm, all sweat and fire and flashing teeth, grinning like a mad thing with fever-bright eyes. Waves of pure elation are radiating off of him. Suddenly the Other is there, 'agent Johnson', dancing with Lance, dancing with Dona, even dancing around me. A black shadow with a serene smile in the firelight. I suspect agent Foxe is nearby as well, lurking in the shadows, her face a mask of frustration. Doesn't matter.

I play! We dance! The fire rages! One more time! Overhead, the stars glitter like gems, cast upon the black cloth of infinity. The trees are dancing in the wind all around. Dona is there, her hands on my waist, her lips on my ear, my throat, my jaw. The violin sings and wails as we move together, the world moving around us. The Other sways past, leading the group's little children like the Pied Piper. They're laughing at the old man in black, who dances like a young man and does silly things for them to see. Laughing without cruelty. Pure joy.

In the shadows beyond the fire-light, I see four people standing and staring without any joy. Yes, there's agent Foxe, face twisting in mingled disgust and longing. Not far from her, there's the girl Griffin, whispering urgently – angrily – at Pat, who keeps waving her off and finally snaps at her. Card is squatting a fair distance away from them, eyes on the little blond boy who must be her little brother, surely. Who cares? We dance! My lady's kisses are hotter than the flames.

22. Non-engineered heroics.

I wake up in the grass, covered in dew, Dona snoring gently in my arms. Without waking her, I raise my head. All around, the Meddlers lie dreaming, faces as innocent as little children. The fire has long died out, but the air is balmy. The drummer is sitting upright by the fire, his drums nowhere to be seen.

Speaking of little children, the Society's little nippers lie in a pile like a nest of puppies. The Other and agent Foxe sit near them like guard dogs, him sketching, her glaring at me from behind her shiny glasses.

Carefully, gently, I ease myself out of Dona's arms, put my coat on her and make my way over to the two Blindeyes. Agent Foxe hisses like a scalded cat and makes herself scarce, but the Other – agent Johnson – remains in place. He offers me a cigarette, which I accept. It's one of the ones they're making in the Philadelphia area now; heavy, rich in flavor. I sit down next to him and smoke while he draws the scene around us.

I tell him I've been to see the boy in his cell.

“How was he?” agent Johnson asks, grief lurking beneath curiosity.

The same, I admit. I had to kick his ass to get him to save Dona from the Banks' poison, and he wanted to eat her the whole time.

“My poor son,” agent Johnson says, shaking his head.

Does he watch the children because of our son, I ask. Does he still dream of having babies to grow tall and strong, as he did when we were still together? When he looks at me, I hurry to assure him I don't ask this to hurt him – and believe it or not, I am sincere. The boy... he needs more time before he can be what agent Johnson wants him to be. Maybe a lot more time.

“Some dreams die hard,” agent Johnson says, shiny black glasses staring into the distance. “But that

dream must die. I didn't join the men in black for nothing; “no kings, no queens” and all that. It just wasn't meant to be, for you and me. Humanity must be my baby now, to raise tall and strong, to guide through the dark. And there's plenty of them.”

Is that what he's doing now, running with the Blindeyes? Raising humanity up strong?

“Can you think of a better way?” he asks me. “They're the last thing we have that even comes close to being a national police force. We have the files of the FBI and CIA that were, as well as those of the original Men in Black we drove back to the moon. We have the ghost of a memory in people's heads, of a time when there was a government that gave a damn and tried to keep order. It's not ideal, but it beats hitching my wagon to some tin-pot tyrant and playing Merlin. Give me time, and I'll make the men in black into something kinder and stronger. I'll – I *will* raise this nation back up from the dirt.”

Sounds ambitious, I tell him, but good. Worthy of him. Then I ask him if this is all as awkward for him as it is for me.

“Yeah. But it's over between us, love,” he says. “Has been for... a long time. We should act like adults and move on with our lives. Me in my chosen profession, you with your new lady.”

Does he begrudge me this?

“No. No and no, I do not. She makes you happy, and she's got a good head on her shoulders. Making you play the violin broke the spell of that wretched girl much more smoothly than snapping her neck or casting spells would have done. Half the people now sleeping peacefully here would have died from the backlash. Call me a liar if you can.”

I don't. He's right. And I have to admit, breaking that spell was a lot more fun through music than rotating the girl Griffin's head three hundred and sixty degrees would have been.

“Yes. It was nice. The drummer's dead,” the Other tells me in a low voice.

Was it agent Foxe, I wonder.

“No, she was with me after the dance, and she would have shot him if she was going to do it; he was stabbed through the heart. I think it was that girl who used his music to spread despair.”

Griffin.

“If you say so... Janie. Did you see her back?”

I did. On a whim, I ask whether the Other would like to join me for a little chat with the charming miss Griffin.

“Thought you'd never ask.”

We find her helping to pack up the flower-painted van, hauling the bongos into them together with the boy who was driving when we first saw them. He gives us a 24-karat smile and waves, all good cheer. The girl Griffin tries to give us her Mona Lisa smile, but it devolves to an ugly, sullen thing when we approach, our boots hitting the ground in the same rhythm. Beg pardon; my boots; his shiny, shiny shoes.

Drummer's dead, I say without preamble.

The blond boy shakes his head. “Poor Scruffy. He was hooked on the Thunderbird,” he says, sadly. “Forgot to eat most days, didn't know he was alive the rest of the time unless he was playing. Sad. I'll go dig him a grave.”

He walks off. When the girl Griffin tries to follow, the Other steps into her path. She tries to go around him, and there I am. Grinning without humor. She backs up a step, trying and failing again to put up that mysterious smile.

“Figure you were closest to that boy, once the dancing died down,” the Other says. “Nobody else was near him, and then everyone was so tired, they just piled up together and fell asleep. Not you, though. Once you got free of my friend's lady, you just lurked at the edges. If I frisk you, am I going to find a knife with that boy's blood on it?”

Turns out he doesn't have to frisk her. The knife comes out and she darts forward, aiming to stab either him or me – but she doesn't even get close before she meets our eyes and is frozen in

place, be it by his will or mine. Does it matter which of us it is? No, sir, no, sir. I ask if she stabbed the drummer.

"Y – es," she stammers, eyes full of hate.

"Why?" the Other asks.

"Pl – ayed," she stutters. "Pl – ayed when-I said. Stop. Wouldn-t list-en. M-onth-s-of obedie-ence. One st-upid fiddle and st-art-ed figh-ting ag. Ain."

We coax the truth from her, pull it out past her resistance, her will like a panicked bird beating its wings against the bars of a cage. She found Scruffy playing in a dive bar in New Detroit, realized his skill with the drums, how he could make people feel good by wanting them to. She tried to recruit him to her cause, and when he turned her down she slipped him some Thunderbird to make him biddable.

"Y-you'll both … sssuffer the wrathof. The. Beast," the girl spits, still trying to fight us off.

There it is. Girl Griffin's a missionary, one a damn' sight more clever than that idiot at the brothel. Not that that's saying much, what with her having her god tattooed on her back. Converting a bunch of Meddlers to the belief that all life is pointless would be quite the little coup, I suppose.

I take the knife from her hand, snapping her wrist for good measure. She winces and goes pale, but does not scream; that's all her, not our influence. It's a good switchblade; quality steel, cleaner than I'd have expected. I tuck it in my coat pocket and ask the Other if he wants to arrest the little shit.

"And do what, stuff her in my trunk?" the Other scoffs. He shakes his head at Griffin. "Your kind saddens me, little girl. Aren't things bad enough without you trying to steal hope away?"

Girl Griffin tries to spit him in the face, but can't quite get the impulse past our joint will. She's forced to swallow her phlegm down along with her rage, and starts to choke on it. Seeing as the – as agent Johnson doesn't want to arrest her, I consider telling that blond boy to dig two graves, or maybe a hole for two... But would Dona like it? I'm not sure. So I just tell her girl Griffin to turn around and hop it, and not to come back. She turns on her heel, movements as stiff and stilted as when she danced – my lady dances much better, hah! – and starts hopping along the road. Like a *jian-shi* with a heartbeat.

Agent Johnson looks at me, one eyebrow raised, and I think he's going to say something. He doesn't; one of the little kids has run up to him and is tugging on his coat. It's the girl Card's little brother, his face angelic, his eyes wide and innocent. Adorable.

"Mister," he says, "is it true you don't have eyes?"

The Other chuckles and lowers his shades. His eyes look normal; a very neat little illusion, so quick and small that I barely noticed. They're the same Arctic blue I have known before – but it's a fake, and the fire isn't there. No matter. He raises his shades, and I know his eyes will be black-on-black again; the mark of his order.

"Hey, mister," the little boy says, tugging on agent Johnson's coat again. "Is it true you all live in a white house in Washington and drink whiskey with every meal?"

"No, child," the Other replies. "Not Washington. We all moved to Philadelphia, so we can smoke cigarettes all day long. Go on and get yourself some breakfast, now."

The little boy nods solemnly and runs off, presumably to find his sister or some other adult willing to feed him. I tell agent Johnson I haven't been to Washington since the Division. Has he seen it recently?

"Most of it's still on fire," he says, his voice sombre. "Whenever a fire dies down, either the mutants or the madmen soon have it burning again. The pieces that aren't on fire glow in the dark. Even we only go there to show new recruits what it's like – through binoculars. Daren't get too close."

Bummer, I say, and offer him a cigarette from my own supply. We smoke until the blond boy comes back, tells us he's finished burying Scruffy, and

breakfast is ready. We don't talk about how I set off the whole mess in Washington and the Big Boom was – is – my fault as we walk over to where the Meddlers are putting food on plates, then food in bellies.

We both know.

I appreciate his silence.

Dread Possibility: the Big Boom

I have been deliberately vague about when the Division took place, and what form it took. Nor do I intend to fully spell out every detail, beyond what you will read in this Dread Possibility.

The Divided States as a domain were already torn from the parallel Earth and into the Demiplane of Dread in 1872 AD, when the Darklord triggered the Harvard Massacre in an attempt to further extend the Civil War after having already helped to keep it going twice as long as it did on our Earth. The Division was a slow-burning process that followed afterward. Even though the Other had preserved the peace treaty between north and south, and founded the Obumbrati in part to head off the Illuminati before they could establish a true tyranny, tensions remained high in the wake of the Massacre. No one had claimed responsibility for the carnage, and plague swept the nation afterward, caused by the Darklord's animating of hungry, pestilence-infused zombies. Small-scale uprisings and small civil wars were a regular occurrence.

It was not until the twenty-first century that the process reached its conclusion. The Darklord was in Washington at the time, influencing government in ways both subtle and gross, which caused the then vice president to shoot the president dead in the Oval Office – to save the country from an unworthy ruler, of course.

Instead of the country being “saved”, violence erupted as those who supported the freshly-slain president rioted in the streets and tried to exterminate all those who opposed him. The White House was likewise in an uproar; the vice president had already been beaten to death by the president's bodyguards, but those were now running rampant, killing freely as they suspected conspirators everywhere.

Before any sort of order could be restored, someone managed to get hold of the infamous 'nuclear football', or presidential emergency satchel, and opened it. Someone else was too quick to obey orders shouted over the telephone, and a nuclear missile was launched towards Washington DC. A single, “small” missile.

Washington DC lies in ruins to this day, most of them heavily irradiated. Downstream, the river Potomac is deadly poison, and much of Virginia has been abandoned. In spite of the city's deadly nature, it is still inhabited by – as the Other put it – “mutants and madmen”. The mutants are self-explanatory; they are the descendants of people whose DNA was warped by the radiation, causing them to be born twisted and wrong. (In game terms, the DM could use Calibans.) The madmen are tribes of devolved savages, who still venerate the slain president of yore as a holy figure, and all non-tribesmen as enemies and potential sources of food.

The Division caused the already unstable nation to fragment. Central authority had not simply been eliminated, but vaporized. All attempts to reestablish order were met with growing resistance and violence, and state by state, the nation splintered.

The only Washington resident to survive the nuclear strike was, predictably enough, the Darklord. Janie Augustus – or whatever she called herself at the time – had loaded up her motorbike and left town well before the vice president smuggled a revolver into the White House, in search of other places to sow chaos.

23. They see me ~~rolling~~ camping they hating

We have breakfast, and then we all stand in a circle around Scruffy's grave with hands linked. We sing a couple of songs, speak some prayers. All of us except for crabby agent Foxe, who watches us from a distance, the corners of her mouth drawn down so far it's almost comical. One of the women hesitantly sings a few bars of a hymn to Marius Albus. Nobody even looks at her funny, but then they also don't blink when Lance calls for the Norse goddess Hel to accept Scruffy into Niflheim. *Maybe* someone blinks when both the Other and I scatter a handful of red ocher on the grave; birthing blood for his reincarnation, if he wants one.

(How long has it been since I did that for anyone...? I'm not sure. It may have been when my mother passed, after I'd strangled my father for braining her[12]. He didn't get any ocher, I just cut him open and threw him in the bushes so the animals could get in. She got a proper stone cairn and as much ocher as I could find, ground down fine and with some of my own blood mixed in.

Dear old mum and dad. Her losing her mind due to years of privation, him losing patience with an old woman when there was a young one at hand. Young, and stronger than he'd expected me to be. I remember standing over his corpse and swearing to myself I wouldn't go out like him, nor like her. I was going to live. And I did.)

We clean up, mount up, pile in. The flower-painted van is still with us, blond boy behind the wheel. Pat doesn't try to strike up a conversation – didn't ask where Griffin had gone, either – but I catch her staring at me and at the hearse several times.

Sister Card drives beside us a ways, though. Not talking a mile a minute, but very deliberate. Seems the little blond cherub decided to ride with the scary men in black in their deathmobile, and she's not happy about it. He'll be the envy of every other little nipper in the group, though.

"Won't they hurt him?" Card asks, insistent. "You know what Blindeyes do to people! Drag them off, torture information out and shoot them, bury them on waste land."

I am amused. What does she think her little nipper knows, that men in black should want to torture it out of him? He's a very pretty little boy, but I'd wager that at his age he'll spill all his secrets for a candy apple.

"Maybe that's why they took him, then," Card says, conspiratorially. "That old man, he really likes children, doesn't he? Maybe *too* much."

I see red. Actual, literal red in an instant. We've done lots, the Other and I, but we never did anything like *that*. I've started to reach for my handgun when Dona reaches out and casually slaps Card in the face. There's a confused, wobbly moment before Card has regained control of her bike. Her face is pale, apart from the livid impression of Dona's hand.

"Agent Johnson is a friend of my lady," Dona says, her voice even and unfriendly. "A *good* friend. I know what folks who like kids too much act like; he isn't like that. Your little boy asked to drive in the deathmobile, and agent Johnson asked him if *you* wouldn't be lonely if he did before he let him get in. Now go away and don't talk anymore trash."

Sister Card opens her mouth to speak, notices the look on my face and falls back behind us. Dona caresses my shoulders until the tension oozes out and I don't see red anymore. I take a couple of deep breaths, and then ask in a small voice when she figured it out.

"Baby, don't feel bad," she says, one hand smoothing my hair back. "The two of you talk the same, move the same, even look a bit the same. It's obvious when you're standing next to each other. For

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[12] *If the reader has noticed that these events resemble the Other's earliest memories, they are correct. This is more than can be said for the Other, whose recollection of these events is... flawed.*

a moment, I thought he was your dad, maybe."

Oof, *bad* mental image, considering some of the things we've done...! But she's … not angry that I didn't tell her?

"No, you goof," she says. "I get it's awkward, especially when you meet an ex when you weren't expecting to. Just don't hold back from now on, please? You can talk to me. You're good to me, I wanna be good to you."

Sounds like a Hell of a deal to me.

"Is it bad for you, lover?" Dona asks. "To be here with him nearby? Do you maybe want to peel off, go somewhere else?"

I consider it, but not for very long. What I want is to make her happy, right? And she wanted to see the aliens for the first time in her life. So I say out loud that it's fine; we've talked it out, we're both ready to move on with our lives. Awkwardness be damned.

"That's good," Dona says, praising me. "Real good. Most people could only hope to be that mature after a bad breakup."

Keep praising me, baby. I'd be preening if I didn't need to steer.

"So," Dona asks, "explain something? How is he your son's mother when he's, well... a man?"

Ah, my darling, that's our special trick. I quietly explain that if one body dies and another one nearby is going spare because someone's let out the soul, we can just hop, skip and take over. The Other and I have been men, we've been women, in any combination you'd care to think of. Young or old, tall or short, fat or skinny, doesn't matter. We get in, take over, heal all the damage and little imperfections and carry on.

But the Other definitely was a woman when our son was born, just as I was a man. So forever and a day, and no matter what body we're in, the Other will be our son's mother. And I, his father.

"Wow," she breathes, clearly impressed. And why shouldn't she be? I'm amazing. So's the Other, I suppose. "Are you the only ones?" she asks. "You, him, and your son? Or do you have a, a people or whatever?"

A people? Nnnoooo. Not a people, no. I mean, we were *born* to a people, but they've been gone for forever. The last ones died around the time that Doggerland sank beneath the waves[13], long and long before we even got to this country. I don't bother Dona with the exact details, I just say that our people have been gone for a long time.

"You're lucky there were at least two of you left," Dona says. "Imagine being all alone."

I don't respond to that, but the thought does rattle around my head as we ride on.

Dona's right, of course. On reflection, being alone, having no one who really knows you and still keeps company with you, is ~~nightmarish~~ no fun. I'd been trying to enjoy myself after the Other left me, but it had been lacking. Until I stole Dona for a companion, and I started having some real fun again. Feeling possessive of another person, feeling cherished by another person, being the object of their affection and admiration... that was an exhilarating tonic.

I should have taken me a companion much sooner, but I'd been sulking, I suppose. Like the Other, after our son ate her heart, I was pretty much just lashing out all the time since Harvard. Trying to drown first my pain and then my loss in an ocean of blood. I regret nothing, of course. Why should I? I just did what I wanted. I always do what I want.

Turns out, I don't want to be all alone. It's not good for me. I was lucky to have stolen Dona. Come to think of it, a single lifetime isn't that long. I was going to have to do something about that. Right there and then, I couldn't exactly remember the Words and herbs I'd used, way back when in

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[13] *According to recent theories, this would have been around 6200 BCE.*

Doggerland to become immortal. But I could puzzle them out. I'd done it once, I could do it again.

I'd need to make sure as much of Dona's personality as possible survived the bifurcation of her soul to get her past mortality. I wanted her with me, after all.

Yes. That is what I wanted. I could work on it while we were doing the things she wanted. That, and finding a way to get rid of her Other before it could stake any kind of claim on her. She was mine. Mine, mine, *mine*.

Dread Possibility: the Immortal Divide

This, then, is the method by which Janie Augustus – also known as the One, the Dark One, the Dark Lord and any number of other names and epithets in the Divided States – and the Other achieved immortality during the Neolithic Age. In the beginning, they were one person. We may have our questions about the moral character of that person, given she desecrated her father's corpse and fed it to the beasts of the woods after killing him, but we should keep in mind that she was alive during a time when farming was still a new concept and life could be very rough and cruel. Also, let us not forget she had just seen her father murder her mother with the intent of making her, his own child, his next mate.

Even Janie does not rightfully recall the name of the individual she used to be; the Other does not remember being her at all. Whatever she called herself, this individual studied with the shamans of Doggerland, learning as much as she could of the Words of Power that can be composed into the chants of magic or magick, and the nature of the soul – and death. When she felt she was ready, she performed a ritual that separated her own soul in two distinct entities, 'bifurcating' it, as Janie puts it: the One – later the Dark One – and the Other.

The One inherited the lion's share of the preceding individual's memories and feelings, whereas the Other gained more of her intellect and magic. Incomplete as they were, they were wholly incapable of passing on to the Afterlife. They would linger in the material world as spirits, leaping from and destroying whatever body they inhabited as soon as it died, occupying the nearest dead body and repairing all of its defects, resurrecting it as their next vessel.

This may also explain why all but one of the children of the One and the Other conceived together died. Although they are independent, neither one of them is spiritually whole, and the souls of their offspring were inherently unstable, causing them to tear free from their mortal bodies. The only surviving child, the cannibalistic Doctor, does not share his parents' form of immortality; his is the result of the Other's spells, which bind his soul to his body with chains lighter than air but more powerful than mithral. Unless these spells are undone, he will forever linger in his body, regenerating all but the worst damage.

It might be possible to capture the One and the Other through magic, psionics or mad science. Powers that mimic the effect of Soul bind could capture them; Soul jar-effects could force them out of a vessel, but would not be able to stop them from leaping to the nearest corpse (and coming back for revenge).

Nothing short of a Wish or Miracle could force either of them beyond the veil separating the mortal world and the hereafter, though, and it's anyone's guess whether they would stay there or that they would be drawn back to the mortal coil so long as either of them lingered there.

Perhaps the surest method of defeating the Dark One would be to merge them with the Other into one being, and then force them into the afterlife. But be sure that by this point, these entities would both fight tooth and nail against any procedure that tried to reunite them, no matter how cordial their relationship might be. And even if they are reunited, who's to say the original individual would not fight twice as hard as her two parts...?...?

We pause around midday to listen to the radio and have lunch, and Lance brings out a dog-eared, but still legible map and proclaims we're close. Sister Card mentions she knows a camping site nearby, one still being managed by a family. If we pool what money we have, we can get a safe place to pitch our tents and sleep while waiting for the foo fighters to land. This suggestion finds favor with everyone, especially with Pat, who mentions she's been through the area before – while looking sister Card right in the eye.

"Have you?" Card asks, wide-eyed and innocent. "How about that! We should compare notes. Ride with me?"

Pat is amenable to the idea, and rides pillion when we all move on, her arms around Card's waist, lips at her ear. Rather pitifully obvious, my dear. Especially for someone else who's been around this area before.

We come up on the camping site around sunset, and it's a proper one. Log walls to keep out the rolling gangs; kitschy totem poles with little signs pointing to the parking place, the camping area, the public bathing area; a front office that looks like an oversized log cabin. I notice the motorbikes already parked, all of them covered with dust-sheets for the coming fall and winter. I also notice the family resemblance between the two young people who come out of the lodge to say hello, one boy, one girl.

By which I mean they resemble each other and they resemble sister – heh – Card. They sound a lot like her when they cheerfully welcome the Society of the Wandering Eye to Linden Lodge.

"Last safe campsite for rent between here and the border," the boy proudly proclaims.

The girl latches onto Lance as the oldest man in the group and starts to discuss the lodge's rates – and then the hearse comes rumbling up the driveway, and both she and the boy stare at it, slack-jawed. They actually back up a couple of steps when the doors open and the men in black get out – them and the beautiful little boy. He's clearly having a blast, and agent Foxe is hovering over him like she's his personal bodyguard.

"No need to worry," Lance tells them, a chuckle rumbling deep in his throat. "We're all friends here. Any chance of a discount since there's more of us?"

He starts negotiating the price while the kids are off-balance, which strikes me as sound business practice. I say out loud that my back teeth are floating, and I'm going to use the facilities in the office real quick. A quick kiss for Dona, and I jog through the office door and into the lobby. Inside as out, the place breathes pre-Division tourist trap charm. Stuffed animal heads on the walls, double winding stairs leading up to the first floor, more totem poles flanking the front desk. There used to be thousands of places like this, back in the day. It all feels very familiar, almost comforting.

The woman behind the desk also looks familiar, not just because she resembles sister Card and the two-man welcoming committee, but because we've met before. She was a bit slimmer then, her hair black instead of gray, but apart from that, Margot Linden has aged phenomenally. She flashes me a professional smile and opens her mouth to voice some pleasantry.

Then she actually recognizes who I am, her breath catches in her throat and her eyes grow wide with terror. How gratifying. She gasps, urgently rings the copper bell on the desk, and starts bowing her head. "Lord..." she manages to gasp out before I've reached her.

When I hop over the desk, she backs up in a flat panic, back bumping against a shiny, shiny board with keys hanging on it. One by one they fall to the floor, jingling and jangling. I kick her in the gut, driving the breath out of her and doubling her over. While she's still gasping, struggling to breathe, I toss her over my shoulder and head for the kitchen door; it's still in the same place it was the last time I was here.

The kitchen is big and sterile-looking. A couple of men and women whose faces clearly indicate membership in the Linden clan are prepping for some serious cookery, but back up in a hurry when they see me rush in. Except for a middle-aged

man with a beer belly, dressed in pristine chef's white. He goes pale and falls to his knees, babbling at me: “Lord... Lord, please! Please, Lord, no! No, Lord, no, Lord, no...!”

I swerve around him, heading for the walk-in freezer, and bark a single Word that causes the door to swing open. Cold air comes rushing out, smelling faintly of something unpleasant. All the hooks are occupied with shaved and gutted human carcasses, ready for the cooks to prepare them for consumption. I toss Margot Linden in. She cries out with pain when she hits the back wall; no matter. The *chef de cuisine*, her husband Gunther Linden, is clinging to my leg, begging; no matter again.

I raise my left hand and declaim Words, the incantation I first used at Harvard. The temperature drops, and yet there's a burning smell on the air. Margot Linden makes a whining noise deep in her throat, like a whipped dog, and starts crawling towards me. Before she's even halfway there, the carcasses stir. Limbs moving woodenly, they reach up and haul themselves off the hooks. As if on cue, they all turn to look at Margot, who crawls back until her back hits the wall again. The hungry dead are a bit unsteady due to the gutting, but it helps that they're still frozen. Even with their teeth ripped out, they should have no problem devouring Margot.

I start to close the freezer door when Gunther Linden says something that actually manages to catch my attention: “Please, Lord! Please, my wife! Not my wife! *Please*, Lord, *PLEASE*!”

His wife. Yes; he'd feel lonely without his mate. Gut-wrenchingly, soul-crushingly lonely. Like I did, after the Other left me. No, no, that won't do, that this scummy cannibal should have anything in common with me. I raise my right hand, and the hungry dead pause just as they are seizing hold of screaming, crying Margot Linden.

I look Gunther in the eye and ask him if he wants to save his wife's life.

“Yes!” he replies, wild hope in his eyes. “Yes, yes! Anything, Lord, I'll do *anything*!”

First of all, he's going to have to let go of my leg. Once he does, I tell him I don't want him or his sick kin dining on the people I came in with. I'm enjoying their company; it is unseemly that Gunther and his inbred brood should eat them.

“Wh – yes! Of course, yes!” Gunther babbles. “We – such as we are not worthy of tasting those who ride with you, Lord. Of course. No one will harm a single hair on their heads.”

In fact, I don't want him and his people snacking on anyone ever again. If I ever swing by this stinkhole again, I don't want to find longpork on my plate. Gunther goes pale at this, but he nods, wordless, desperate. He'll likely be dead as soon as I've left and his children decide that the taste of

Dread Possibility: Linden Hospitality

Late of the Washington DC region, the Linden family was originally one of the savage clans that fought over the ruins with the resident mutants and other barbarians. As they found themselves on the losing side of a series of skirmishes and raids, they made the revolutionary step of simply leaving the area.

Since their departure from the ruins of the nation's former capitol, the Linden clan has flourished. They have increased their numbers and executed raids on several isolated areas, like the camping site now known as the Linden Lodge. Instead of simply raiding them and burning them to the ground, the Linden family has taken these places over. They keep some of the original inhabitants alive long enough to serve as breeding stock and to force them to impart any useful skills they might have, then start plying those trades – to draw in prey.

To the uninformed traveler, any site run by the Linden family initially appears to be unusually welcoming, a breath of civilization. For a fairly reasonable fee, they will offer to give people safe haven, food, as many luxuries as is feasible in the post-Division era. And as soon as their visitors have been lulled into a sense of security, the family will kill them, rob the corpse and prepare it for consumption.

human flesh trumps loyalty to their Big Daddy, but that's no concern of mine.

At my wordless command, the undead turn away from Margot and start to limp and shuffle out of the freezer. The younger cooks make a run for it; Gunther just lowers his head and clasps his hands together as though he's praying. Maybe he is, who cares? I tell him and Margot that I'm expecting some hellacious hospitality for me and mine, including good meat. Not human flesh.

"We have venison and fish in another freezer," Gunther whispers without looking up. "Please. Please. Don't let the dead eat my children, Lord. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. We'll never hurt anyone again, I swear, I *swear*! Please."

Stop begging at me, you disgusting sub-human. They're off through the back door and into the forest to bury themselves. Give me no trouble and you'll survive to see the dawn. I kick Gunther away and head back outside, to where my lady and my traveling companions wait. Where the sun shines bright and hot. It's a good day, and I feel good about myself. It's nice to do good things, isn't it?

The Linden clan proves as good as Gunther's word. His children – many children, some with brood of their own – rush hither and yon to show us to the best spots to camp, where to get clean water, offer menus for dinner, insect cream, anything and everything, all at very competitive prices. Which is to say they're competing to be first to say everything is as good as free to my friends. While everyone else is setting up, I notice sister Card sneak off to the front office. I sneak after and listen in as she has a flaming row with Gunther. She's doing most of the screaming, Gunther is more soft-spoken, but very firm.

"What do you *mean*, we're not eating them?! I lured them here, all you need to do is close the gates and butcher the lot! Can we at least eat the boy? He's only half family, I've raised him precious as veal, he'll be *succulent*! I'll go butcher him myself if you've lost the stones, you old – "

I hear the sound of a good, hard slap, and sister Card comes running out, clutching one cheek. Now they both bear the imprint of a hand. She looks absolutely livid; it makes me smile the whole way back to camp, where Dona's just finished setting up the tent. I ask her if she wants to fool around in a real bed; we can take any that we want in the lodge for as long as we want. She pulls me down for a kiss, and whispers in my ear. Whispers something interesting.

We wander into the forest together, looking for a private spot while the Society and the two men in black busy themselves. And wouldn't you know it? We hear the sound of more arguing among the trees. This time it's sister Card and Pat having a row. I hold a finger to my lips; Dona nods, and we sneak towards the noise until we can see the two of them between the trees.

"It's *not* my fault!" sister Card insists, furious and almost nose-to-nose with Pat, who is eying her with frank disdain. "How was I supposed to know the old fart would lose his bottle?! Anyway, you didn't do much, you just backed me up when I suggested the place. You've got no right to make demands of me!"

"Beg to differ, little girl," Pat replies, smirking.

Sister Card goes pale with fury and actually starts to stand up on her toes before she can stop herself. "You've got no claim to anything," she hisses.

"I've got a claim to a *meal*," Pat snaps. "You agreed that I'd get to eat my fill of whoever I chose if I made my services available, in lieu of payment." Her upper lip curls up, exposing teeth that look wrong, and gums that look black. "You wouldn't be able to handle some of those Meddlers if they rallied their Art, not without me. All you've got is card tricks; false omens and cold-reading. You couldn't counter a *cantrip* without me."

"Well, now I won't *have* to counter any magick, will I?" Card sneers. "The bloody kine are my clan's honored guests somehow! Neither one of us is going to have a good meal."

"You retained my valuable services, and I will have the reward I'm due," Pat insists. "Maybe that tender-looking boy, if you can peel him away from the Blindeyes..."

This clearly upsets Card, though not for the reason someone else might expect. Quick as a snake, she's pulled a knife on Pat and is holding it at her throat. “He's mine as soon as I've got him away from the Blindeyes,” she whispers, murder screaming from every line of her face. “I birthed and raised the little shit like a prize calf. If anyone's eating him, it'll be *me*, not you!”

Card makes the mistake of closing her eyes for a split second in anticipation of that particular feast; she licks her lips and swallows convulsively. Pat speaks a single Word, and light explodes in the Linden girl's face. She cries out and stumbles back before she can stop herself, waves her knife around blindly. With practiced ease, Pat grabs Card by the wrist and darts her head forward. There is a sickening crunch, and Card utters a strangled cry. Soon she can't scream anymore, because her throat is swelling, her tongue waving from her mouth like a black flag. She falls to her knees, blood spurting from a venom-stained wound in her wrist.

Dona breathes in sharply. It seems the scene is upsetting her, so I speak a couple of protective Words, then break cover and saunter forward. Pat turns and glares at me, eyes widening, and she opens her mouth to speak, perhaps to cast a spell. Before she can get a Word out, my hand is on her throat and she goes pale as I start to squeeze. Hands scrabble at my wrist – then arachnid limbs scrabble at my wrist as the red-haired girl warps and shifts into a giant, red-furred spider. She's a decent size, the black hourglass on her abdomen well-defined; a sign of good health. She tries to web me up, but I just squeeze harder. The grip on the girl's neck has translated into a grip on the spider's head. Her chitin creaks and crunches as I exert more pressure, and the creature utters a tinny whine of agony.

Am I surprised by the change? Bless you, no. Remember that the little cow kissed me, right when she slipped me the pills? I've known red widows before, even kissed a couple for one reason or another. You never forget the taste of a red widow's lips – or rather, of their venom on *your* lips, believe you me. Provided you survive the experience.

I ask, purely out of curiosity, if she's got Words to cleanse Card of the venom she put in her. She can wave a leg – any leg – up and down if the answer is yes.

The giant spider waves several limbs with every sign of desperation. I ease up on the pressure just enough to allow her to change back, and kindly inform her she should start casting then if she wants to scuttle out of here with her thorax still attached. Pat gives me a look of powerless hatred, but does start to hiss and whisper Words in a composition I've never heard before. Card suddenly draws a single clear breath as the swelling of her throat reduces before my eyes, and starts to cough. Her wrist expels the venom and scabs over. For a wonder, when she looks up it is not with gratitude, but hatred equal to the spider's. Honestly, I should crush them both under my heel, but I'm doing this to make Dona happy. I assume seeing me wipe these little bitches' brains from my boot would not do that, so I play nice.

I give Pat a good, hard slap, knocking her down beside Card. Once her eyes stop rolling and focus on me again, I tell them both that they're disgusting freaks, and I want them to clear out within fifteen minutes.

“My boy – ” Card starts to object. I catch her eyes, bind her will within mine, and make her stop talking. I repeat my orders, and she unhappily nods. Pat won't even meet my eyes, she just raises a hand to shield her bruised face and hisses: “Yes, yes, we will go, we will!” To my surprise, the two of them help each other to stand, and they scuttle off while supporting one another. Tell the truth and shame the Devil, I did not see that coming.

I do see Dona coming, a second before she slams into me and throws her arms around my neck. She kisses every inch of my face she can get at, which is nice, very nice. I even manage to get a few kisses of my own in.

“Oh baby,” she says between smooches, “that was so amazing! You are so cool, awesome, powerful...” Her kisses travel down my face to my neck, and further. We soon enter what people once would have called indecent territory, but it's all good.

I feel triumphant, Dona clearly feels admiration, and we have a good time. The fact that we're doing it on ground marked with the blood of what I suppose we might call enemies just makes it even more fun.

Fin. The Fall of the Dark Lord.

I felt really good when we walked back towards the tents. Not just because of the sex. I'd gotten to flex my muscles, both magickal and physical, and Dona was rubbing herself against me like an amorous cat, full of admiration. There was a future ahead of me, adventures to be had, surprises to spring on my pretty – not gorgeous-pretty, but interesting-pretty – companion, a whole life to sample and change. It didn't hurt that it was a gorgeous evening, the night sky clear as a bell, the stars and the full moon shining down almost benevolently, the smell of more good food in the air.

Everything was looking up for me, which was just what I wanted. Strike that, wasn't it what I deserved? Was I not the architect of much of this land's history? If so, then the way all the little lives around me had developed owed something to me. Dona wouldn't have been in that brothel for me to pick up if I hadn't brought the central government crashing down, for one thing. And now she was with me.

What was that quote? "I love it when a plan comes together"[14]? Not that there *had* been a plan there – I don't predict the future, meeting Dona had been purely chance – but it was still good when my whims brought me great benefits down the line.

I hugged Dona tight and pointed to the moon, to the little luminous dots swarming around it. Pointed to a couple of dots that were already moving towards us. They must be moving at terrific speeds, but they'd slow down as they entered the upper layers of the atmosphere. They always did; it was that or burn.

"This is so exciting!" she said, staring at the moon and the little dots with the wide, happy eyes of a child.

Having her be so excited made it fun for me, too. I opened my mouth to say something witty and charming – and I heard a distant bang, that dopplered off the trees around the tents. Dona jolted, stumbled against me, and I felt a searing pain pass right through my body. In the wake of the pain, there was something sticky between us. I pried Dona off me and looked down.

My eyes grew blurry. I blinked them clear, and there was redness spreading from a gaping hole in Dona's side. There was more redness coming from a corresponding hole in my side. I opened my mouth to ask a question or speak healing Words – and blood came welling up my throat, choked me. I heard screams, the members of the Society of the Wandering Eye were screaming in fear. In the distance, there was another bang, but I felt no more pain.

All I felt was panic. I had to say something, had to make the magick, but I was drowning in my own blood, my legs couldn't carry my weight. I sank down and down and down, clutching at Dona – clutching at what had been Dona. Her eyes were still wide as a child's, but they were empty, her head lolling on a limp neck.

No

No

No

No

No!

NO!

But yes.

A wrench.

A twist.

A change of perspective.

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[14] *Janie Augustus clearly watched "the A-team" at one time or another.*

I was a woman, sitting on my knees in the cool grass, under the endless night sky. There was pain in my body, a great tearing pain because a heavy caliber bullet had torn right through me. My throat was full of blood, choking me. But it was mending already, flesh knitting together. I was coughing up the blood, and no fresh vitae came surging up.

Floating on the air, there was pink dust. In my arms, the sleeves of my favorite jacket, which held the shape of my previous body for a few precious seconds before it and the rest of my clothes fell limply to the ground. Pink dust in the air, smelling of rank foulness; the last remnants of my old body.

No

No

No

No

No

I scrabble at my jacket, find my pocket mirror, snap it open to see... a face, now my face. Not pretty. Not interesting, either. This face briefly puts me in mind of a snake, even though the broken nose is straightening itself out while I look, but it is losing its uniqueness. There's a mean creature staring out from behind eyes, which change from green to gray while I look. They start to blaze with my fire. Before I can beg for it to stop, every little thing that made this Dona's face is washed away by a wave of change. All the little imperfections 'healed' away.

After having known Dona, this new face appalls, repulses and sickens me. It's too balanced, inhuman. The ugliness of the perfect average beauty. I want to crush the mirror; instead I close it gently and stuff it back in my jacket pocket.

My new face. I beg out loud for Dona to come back, and I can barely hear myself over the sounds of screaming. More gunshots in the distance. Without conscious effort, I whisper a series of Words; a bullet ricochets off an invisible barrier that springs up around me. Useless, pointless. Come back, come back. I was going to show you everything, make you immortal, if you'd just stay with me, complete me.

I feel so lonely.

So cold.

I feel so angry, rage welling up inside. Rising, not just to my feet but a few inches into the air, my hair floating around me as though I were underwater. There are dead bodies on the ground; some men, some women; some young, some very young. Who cares. The only body I care about, the one I'm inside of, I want *her* to be in.

But she is gone.

I believe in the existence of the soul. Rather, I know it exists. What I did to mine, so I could live, live, *live*... But the Other left me, left me, and I, I do not, I can not – I hear the roar of an engine. My eyes focus, I see as though I'm looking through binoculars. The flower-painted van is roaring along the road, towards the gate in the log walls. Members of the Linden clan are running about in a panic, more afraid of my wrath than of bullets – very wise of them, to be sure – but uncertain whether they should open fire themselves.

The van's side is slid open, and I see, oh I see. Pat, sitting there, holding a M91/30 Pattern sniper rifle. She's smoking a cigarette and grinning at me, right at me, as though she can see me. Card is behind her, steadying and bracing her. Casually, Pat spits out the cigarette, holds up a middle finger for me to see, and blows me a kiss over it. Then she leans back to kiss Card. She slams the side door shut. I see the blond boy behind the wheel, grinning his 24-karat smile and waving at me.

Goodbye now, don't be a stranger, you hear?

Then they're gone, beyond my range of sight. For a moment they linger on the edge of my senses, like maggots gnawing at my toe-tips. Then nothing. Gone, but not forgotten. Too far away for me to launch a spell at. I could run after them, could mount my bike, maybe catch them up. Maybe.

But I don't want to.

I want Dona, and she is gone.

I want her, and she's beyond my reach.

I find myself kneeling in the grass, clutching my jacket as though it'll magically fill out, containing *her*. Slowly, I put it on. It shifts to fit my new frame, perfectly comfortable. Around me, there is silence, the Meddlers and the Lindens dead or fled. There is a distant droning in the sky – foo fighters coming nigh. I don't want to look up. Who cares about some fucking flying saucer, or aliens?

She did. She'd never seen an alien before. She was looking forward to it.

Tears running down my cheeks, hot as blood. Sobs, ripping themselves out of the core of me, wrenching themselves out of my throat and into the air. Oh, gods and fish, this hurts and I hate showing pain, hate showing vulnerability! I am alone, so alone.

So cold.

Footsteps in the dark, drawing nigh. I look up and recognize the Other, even though she also wears a new face.

"Agent Foxe...?" I croak.

"They snuck up on us," the Other says, empathy and pain bleeding out of her voice and into the air, her eyes haunted. "Shot us both in the back. They took the little boy. Gods and fish... Poor agent Foxe. She was going to leave the order, take the boy and raise him somewhere safe. I was happy for her. Poor, poor agent Foxe."

"There *is* nowhere safe," I say. This is not a complaint. It is a decree. If I can't be happy and safe, then no one can.

It's like squeezing a muscle you can't see or feel. This vast land has borders, and by an act beyond magick or thought, I close them. Death waits at the borders for anyone who tries to get in or out, a terrible death. And inside the borders, I wait. No; here I *hunt*.

For the second time in this body, I rise. This time, I rise to my feet.

"We'll hunt them down," I growl. "This land is *mine*. There's nowhere they can hide forever. Not from us."

The Other gives me a strange look. "And then what?" she asks. "No, stay a moment. Answer me. What do you want to do once we've found them? To be a monster, like our son? Will you hunt them down, just so you can tear them to shreds? Or will you be Dona's pretty devil, honor her memory, since she was so precious to you. Will you hunt to kill, or hunt to save the child? Revenge, or justice? *What do you want*, my love?"

I always do what I want.

But now that she's asked, I'm not sure what that is.

The Divided States at a glance

Culture level:	Ranging from 11 (Oil age) to localized 12 (Information age)
Ecology:	Full
Climate & terrain:	Temperate forest, hills and mountains; Warm desert, hills and mountains; Hot desert
Year formed:	1872 AD (local calendar) / 622 BC
Population:	296,148,166
Races:	Humans (96%), Calibans (2%), Other (2%)
Languages:	Angol*, Casian, Frankonet, Hoja, Ija, indigenous languages, many others
Religions:	Church of the Lesser God, Marius Albius, Roman pantheon, Church of the Almighty Dollar, many others
Government:	Mainly anarchy; localized tyranny
Ruler:	None
Darklord:	The (Dark) One, currently a.k.a. Janie Augustus
Nationality:	None

Year of joining the Wartorn Cluster: 740 BC

Only one nuclear warhead out of the Divided States' entire stockpile has been fired.

The rest are still out there.

Pleasant dreams.

Sri Raji trilogy

A Show of Strength

By Ian Fordam

Hollie Armstrong knew there was serious trouble when she received word that all three of the mainland trading companies wanted to speak with her. One at a time? Just a part of doing daily business. Two at a time? Again, part of doing business. She was a broker, after all, and she negotiated terms among the trading companies on a regular basis. Three at once? That meant there was a problem sufficiently significant for the trading companies to cooperate long enough to try to gang up on her.

She met with the company representatives in the Temple. Not in the main building but in one of the annexes, which had been built to offer privacy for delicate meetings such as this. In addition to the representatives, a priest of Rudri was present as well. Like Armstrong herself, the priests received their own cut of all trade that passed through Muladi, and they insisted upon having a witness to the discussion.

Harriett Hickling attended for the Colonials. She was the head of her company's operations in Muladi. Although elderly, Armstrong knew that Hickling possessed unexpected strength and toughness, both physically and mentally.

For the Boritsis, then, Tussio Bilotti attended. He too was the head of his company's local operations. As always he was immaculately dressed in mainland fashion despite the swelter of his temporary home. Armstrong herself had long ago taken to dressing as the Rajians did, but Bilotti insisted on dressing formally.

Griffith Rutt represented the Carlyles. He was not their official head, but Armstrong had never figured out the murky hierarchy of the Carlyles. Rutt was probably the second-in-command, she suspected, but even if not, he was definitely still a man of authority in the company. Hickling and Bilotti gave him respectful nods when he arrived.

Upon Rutt's arrival, the priest of Rudri handed him a cup of Gaudalur tea and then retreated to the edge of the room. His task was simply to observe.

"We have—" Hickling started.

"We have a problem," Bilotti interrupted.

"I am sorry to hear that," Armstrong replied, although she wasn't. This was how she made her living, after all. "How may I help you?"

Rutt had said nothing. He sipped his tea and carefully observed. Armstrong's ring of mind shielding gave an occasional hum in her brain, just to let her know that it had blocked a psychic intrusion. Armstrong wondered whether Hickling and Bilotti had similar protections.

Hickling gave Bilotti a seething sideways look. "Perhaps you would like to explain?" she said.

Bilotti ignored her venom. "It's the Easties," he said. "They have been failing to uphold their end of our agreements."

"In what way?"

"They are not providing us with goods."

Hickling interjected, “Four times in the past six months they claim that their caravans have been robbed on the road from Pakat.”

“All three of you have been victims of this misfortune?”

“Yes,” Hickling said.

“Twice,” Bilotti said.

Rutt simply nodded.

The East Rajian Trading Company was so named because it had been founded in Muladi in the eastern corner of Sri Raji. Ironically, though, their success came from venturing westward. As foreign companies, the Colonials, the Boritsis, and the Carlyles were all forbidden by the Maharaja’s decree to venture west of Muladi. The Easties, on the other hand, were Rajian and operated under no such constraint. That made them invaluable to all three foreign trading companies.

“I see,” Armstrong said. “I will talk with Gopal. But first, let us discuss my fee.”

* * *

Gopal Chaudhari had founded the East Rajian Trading Company some twenty-one years earlier. He had realized that there was profit to be made in transporting food from Muladi to Pakat, which had been perpetually on the verge of city-wide starvation, even among the priests and the rajas. Two years after that the Emerald Stream had manifested, opening a way to the waters around the mainland. The Maharaja had recognized the threat posed by letting foreigners run unfettered over his land, and so he imposed the ban on travel west of Muladi. (His Dark Sisters had enforced it.)

Hollie Armstrong had been the first mate of the *Luck of the Goddess* when it arrived in Sri Raji, and she had been the person who negotiated with the Dark Sisters for the crew’s survival. (That is, she had bribed them.) Another two years later, she returned on the second mainland vessel to pass through the Emerald Stream—this time deliberately. However, by then she had realized how she could position herself between the Rajians and the foreigners and make a profit doing so. Meanwhile, Gopal Chaudhari had prepared to assume a similar position west of Muladi in the event of the foreigners’ return, and so he was ready when they did. Armstrong and Chaudhari had worked together ever since.

They met in the same temple annex, and the same priest accompanied them as observer.

“Good afternoon, Gopal,” Armstrong said as the priest handed Chaudhari his tea. “Thank you for meeting with me.”

“The pleasure is mine, Hollie.” He always mispronounced her first name with a long *o*, but she had come to the conclusion that he intended it to be a fond nickname. She had long since stopped correcting him. “I trust you are well?”

“I am indeed, except for a matter of some small concern.”

“Perhaps I can aid you.”

“I have confidence that you can. More to the point, perhaps I can aid you. I have heard a disturbing report about your company’s fortunes.”

“Ah. I can imagine what you have heard, then.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you told me.”

“This is not information I would share with just anyone.”

“You know that I am not just anyone.”

“I do know, my dear Hollie, and so I shall tell you.”

“I am flattered at your trust.”

“We have been beset by bandits lately. We have lost three—three!—caravans along the Moksha Sadak and then a fourth along the Lambee Sadak when we tried to take the long way around.”

“So. Two sets of bandits.”

"No, only one. Or two connected sets, perhaps. There was a certain item stolen from the second caravan which appeared in the hands of a bandit who raided the fourth caravan, the one which took the Lambee."

"How inauspicious. I hesitate to mention this, Gopal, but I do so trusting that our friendship can bear bad news. I think somebody within your company may be cooperating with these bandits."

"While that possibility is bad, it is not news to me. I have already sent a missive to Jatayu Panda, warning him of a likely betrayal in our ranks." Jatayu Panda was the head of the Pakat branch of the Easties. He was also Chaudhari's wife's brother and had been with the Easties from their beginning. "In the meantime, I have considered hiring additional guards to protect my next caravan. Expensive but probably necessary."

"Ah. Who are you considering?"

"Taakat. They have the best reputation."

But they also have the influence to try to strong-arm you."

"I am a difficult man to strong-arm."

"Indeed you are. Even so. I would recommend hiring one of the lesser mercenary providers. In the meantime, do you wish for me to conduct an investigation of my own?"

"If you would, my dear Hollie."

"Of course. Once we discuss the matter of my fee."

* * *

After Gopal Chaudhari left the annex building, Hollie Armstrong waited several minutes while she finished her tea. Once it was apparent that Gopal Chaudhari would not be returning, Armstrong stood and turned to address the priest who had been witness to both conversations.

"Ah, Dipendra, what do you think?"

"I think this situation needs to be resolved."

"I agree. Would you be willing to contact Ishwar Dey?"

When the high priestess of Rudri next shed her mortal shell, Dipendra Vidyasagar was in contention to replace her. He stood at a high position in the temple hierarchy, one which did not ordinarily involve serving tea to merchants, especially foreign ones. Nonetheless, he had wanted to witness the conversations for himself, and just as importantly, he did not wish too many others to witness them. Still. Sometimes risks must be taken, and so men like Ishwar Dey become involved.

"I will do so," he said.

They did not need to discuss the Temple's share of her fee. That had long since been negotiated.

* * *

Ishwar Dey had been born to the noble Dey family, but the Deys were only one of several noble families in Muladi, all of whom claimed to be rajas of the city. Of course, the rajas could claim the title as much as they wished, but that did not change the fact that the priests of Rudri actually ruled the city. The rajas were useful for owning land and livestock enough to keep the city fed. (As rajas, actually maintaining the land and livestock were beneath them; those tasks were performed by the shudras.) They were also useful for the defense of the city. (But no such defense had been necessary since the Maharaja had led the destruction of Bahru nearly a century earlier.) In general, the rajas of Muladi spent most of their time simply entertaining themselves. (They were the envy of all vaishyas and shudras in the city, who hoped to be reincarnated in a higher caste in subsequent lives.)

Perhaps Ishwar Dey grew bored more easily than most of his kinfolk, or perhaps he felt a greater need to contribute to society. He would give a different answer every time he was asked, and he didn't much care whether you believed him or not. Regardless, he

had taken to hunting in the jungle around Muladi, as many rajas did. However, Ishwar Dey discovered a particular passion for it. Not for the killing of animals, necessarily, but for acquiring the knowledge of a terrain so dangerous and so far outside of his control. Before long he ventured into the jungles away from Muladi, even into the Yahasha Mountains to the north and the Vanyabhumi jungle to the distant south.

Ishwar Dey was a strikingly handsome man, his appearance only marred—or perhaps enhanced—by two scars across the left side of his face. He said they were inflicted by a tiger's claws, and he never changed this story. Had the tiger been even a finger-width closer, he said, then he would have lost an eye. He always spoke of this tiger with great respect.

* * *

Hollie Armstrong met with Ishwar Dey first in the usual annex in Muladi. Six weeks later she journeyed to Pakat to meet with him again. She had hired four guards—independent contractors with whom she had worked before—to escort her safely along the way. However much she trusted them, though, she found a week on the road with anyone exhausting. Once they reached the village of Matra, just a day down the road from Pakat, she took advantage of the token civilization to claim an hour's space. While her guards enjoyed the paneer biryani (and, on the sly, a cup of sooraa or two) served at the village's nameless inn, Armstrong took her own meal seated on a bench alongside the building, where the shade made the day's lingering heat almost bearable.

Armstrong had just settled herself onto the bench when something went *thunk* to her right. Immediately she threw herself to the left. She recognized the sound of an arrow sinking into wood. Although she hadn't been fired upon often in her life, it was not a sound easily forgotten. Only as she threw herself around the corner of the inn did she risk looking for her attacker, who turned out to be a woman standing at the edge of the jungle. She wore a black uttariya with gold trim and a matching antariya. Although she held a bow, she did not hold it at the ready. Her message had already been delivered.

"Beware, *mleccha*!" the woman called. "Return east where your presence is tolerated!"

Ah, Armstrong thought. A Dark Sister. And clearly a young one at that.

She drew herself straight, and she called back, "Please tell Anika that Hollie Armstrong sends her regards."

That perplexed that Dark Sister. Perhaps she wondered how a *mleccha* knew the name of one of the Dark Mothers. Perhaps she even recognized the name Hollie Armstrong.

At that point the four guards, who had also recognized the sound of an arrow from the other side of the wall, emerged in a rush from the inn. The Dark Sister faded away, back into the jungle from which she had come.

The most senior of her guards stepped directly in front of her. Over his shoulder, he said, "*Svamini* Armstrong! Are you hurt?"

"I am fine, Yuvan, but thank you. She meant to scare me, not harm me." Yuvan smirked. "Did she succeed?"

"She certainly startled me, anyway. What a foolish stunt. At least now she knows who I am."

"I fear that one day your name will not protect you, *svamini*."

"And that's why I hire you, Yuvan."

* * *

Hollie Armstrong met with Ishwar Dey in a Pakati coffee shop. Coffee had only been smuggled into Sri Raji within the past twelve years, and while demand in foreign markets drove its hasty expansion, it remained a luxury item that the craftsmen and

laborers of Pakat could not themselves afford. In the heat of the day the coffee shop was nearly empty, which suited Armstrong and Dey just fine. Nonetheless, they took the additional precaution of speaking in Mordentish.

Dey drove straight to the crucial point. “My wife, she is well?”

Armstrong smiled. She appreciated that Dey considered his family more important than business. “Yes. Lekha and the children are all well. She encourages your safe return, of course.”

“Good. Good.”

They both sipped their coffee.

“I hear you’ve had a busy time here,” Armstrong prompted.

“Quite,” Dey agreed. “Learning about the bandit was an easy matter. The name Rajesh Hudha was in the mouth of every third person in the city. Apparently he is a raja who has set aside his title to aid the hungry. He had promised to steal from the Easties and give food to the shudras.”

“And has he?”

“Stolen from the Easties? Yes. Given food to the shudras? Of course not. I haven’t spoken to anyone who has gotten so much as a handful of rice from this Rajesh Hudha.”

“And I don’t recognize Hudha as a raja name.”

“Nor do I.”

“Regardless of the likely falsity of his raja blood, do you have any suggestions how we might handle him?”

“Already done, Madame Armstrong. I had noticed that nobody spoke of the robbery of any caravan belonging to a company other than the East Rajians.”

“Ah. Well noted, Lord Dey.”

“I concluded that the East Rajians were being targeted in particular. I waited until their next caravan departed, and then I followed it. Discretely.”

“That would have been the fifth caravan they lost, then. You did not prevent the robbery.”

“Indeed, I did not. I was outnumbered. Nonetheless, I followed the bandits back to their lair. Oh, that lair! This Rajesh Hudha had claimed a small ruin. He may not actually be a raja, yet he was living like one. One with particularly bad taste.”

Dey shuddered. Armstrong smiled. Having seen what the rajas considered tasteful, she was quietly amused that anything could go too far.

“Once I knew where their lair was, I returned to Pakat and hired some men I know. We were no longer outnumbered, and once the guards had been picked off, we outnumbered them. The fight was brief.”

“You killed this Rajesh Hudha?”

“We did not, I am afraid. He fled into the jungle, along with one of his bandits. We took another captive. However, the rest we killed.”

“Do you believe the threat destroyed, then?”

“I do not. As I said, Rajesh Hudha escaped. More to the point, our captive was able to reveal something which I think you’ll find very interesting. I see that you are nearly done with your coffee. Finish your cup, Madame, and come with me.”

* * *

Ishwar Dey led her to a bhang den. Even mid-day, they had to step carefully among the many half-somnolent men who stretched out along the dirt floor. However, the back room was clear of bhang-drinkers, occupied only by three men, one of whom was tied with jute rope to a chair. He looked the worse for wear, probably not because of his time living out of Rajesh Hudha’s over-decorated ruin in the jungle.

"Here's where you earn your life," Ishwar Dey said to the captive. "Tell the rani what you've told me. Who funded your banditry and told you where to strike?"

The captive clearly knew his role. "Taakat," he gasped.

Ah. Armstrong asked, "To convince the Easties to hire more mercenaries, I assume?"

"I don't know. But Rajesh Hudra, he told us repeatedly that we were not to attack any Eastie caravan which was guarded by the Taakat."

"Not proof of my hunch but strong evidence in favor. Regardless. I know the next person with whom I should speak. Raja Dey, if you would escort me back to the coffee shop, please?"

* * *

The East Rajian Trading Company had offices in all three of the main cities of Sri Raji. Gopal Chaudhari oversaw the entire organization out of the Muladi office. A woman named Sulini Kumar handled operations in Tvashtipur. And Jatayu Panda ran the office out of Pakat, which was only slightly less important than the main office in Muladi.

Jatayu Panda had started off as head of the caravan guards for the Easties, a position he acquired when his brother-in-law Gopal learned that he had gotten into some legal trouble and needed to get out of town for a bit. He served very competently in the role for several years until he was badly wounded in the leg during a bandit attack. His brother-in-law then appointed him the head of Pakati operations, where he had served ever since.

When Hollie Armstrong entered his office, Jatayu Panda shot her an angry glare. Despite his inability to bend his injured leg, he remained physically imposing. He was a perpetually furious man whose first impulse to any threat was usually violence. Armstrong did her best to avoid flinching under his glare.

"Armstrong, is it?" Panda growled. "What are you doing in my office?" He spoke Mordentish.

She suspected it was an attempt to condescend to her.

She responded in Rajian. (She did not take kindly to condescension.) "I am here to broker an arrangement on your behalf. I encourage you to hear me out and then accept my offer."

"Talk quickly, then, *mleccha*."

"I have reason to believe that Taakat has been hiring and arming bandits to attack East Rajian caravans."

"Damn Taakat. You should be down at their offices, brokering for them."

"There is no reason for me to waste my time with figureheads. I happen to know that you are the actual head of Taakat."

"You cannot prove that preposterous lie."

"I don't have to. I just have to tell Gopal. He will see that you are punished appropriately."

"I should have you killed."

There was that first impulse. Fortunately Armstrong was ready.

"In fact, you should not," she said. "If I do not return to Muladi in another eight days, then a certain letter I left behind will be delivered to Gopal."

"I should have you killed," Panda repeated, but this time his heart wasn't in it.

"What you should do, sir, is back off. Do not continue the attacks upon East Rajian caravans. I don't care that you secretly run Taakat. I don't even care if your mercenaries get hired by the Easties to help defend their caravans. Just don't disrupt trade any further. Do you understand me?"

The silence lurked between them for a very long time.

"You are said to play fair," Panda finally said. "Do I have your word that you will not reveal me to that arrogant bastard in Muladi? Or any of his subordinates?"

"Provided you do nothing further to disrupt trade, then yes, you do."

"If you break your word, I will have you killed."

"I understand that. It is one of several reasons that I will not break my word."

* * *

On their way back east, Hollie Armstrong and her bodyguards stopped again in Matra just before night fell. Armstrong ate her dinner inside this time, not because of the Dark Sisters but because of mosquitos. Even so, her dinner was interrupted by a beautiful, mostly-young woman who took a seat opposite hers.

"Greetings, Hollie Armstrong," the woman purred.

"Greetings, Sister," Armstrong replied. She could recognize one of the Maharaja's Dark Sisters, even if she could not recognize this particular one. In her experience, the Dark Sisters tended to trade faces upon a regular basis. "Thank you for saying hello with words and not weapons."

The Dark Sister waved her hand dismissively. "I do apologize for that. Ishika is a new recruit. She is excessively enthusiastic."

"So I gleaned. Fortunately, though, her warning shot missed."

"Fortunate indeed. Despite her unwise approach, the point behind her message remains. You are far from Muladi, Hollie Armstrong."

"Yes, I am. But I assume you recall that I do not work for the foreign trading companies. The Maharaja's ban is not meant for me."

"It seems to me that you are, in fact, working for the foreigners."

"Ah, good Sister. I am taking their money, but you know me." She smiled tightly. "I am working for myself."

"A narrow distinction."

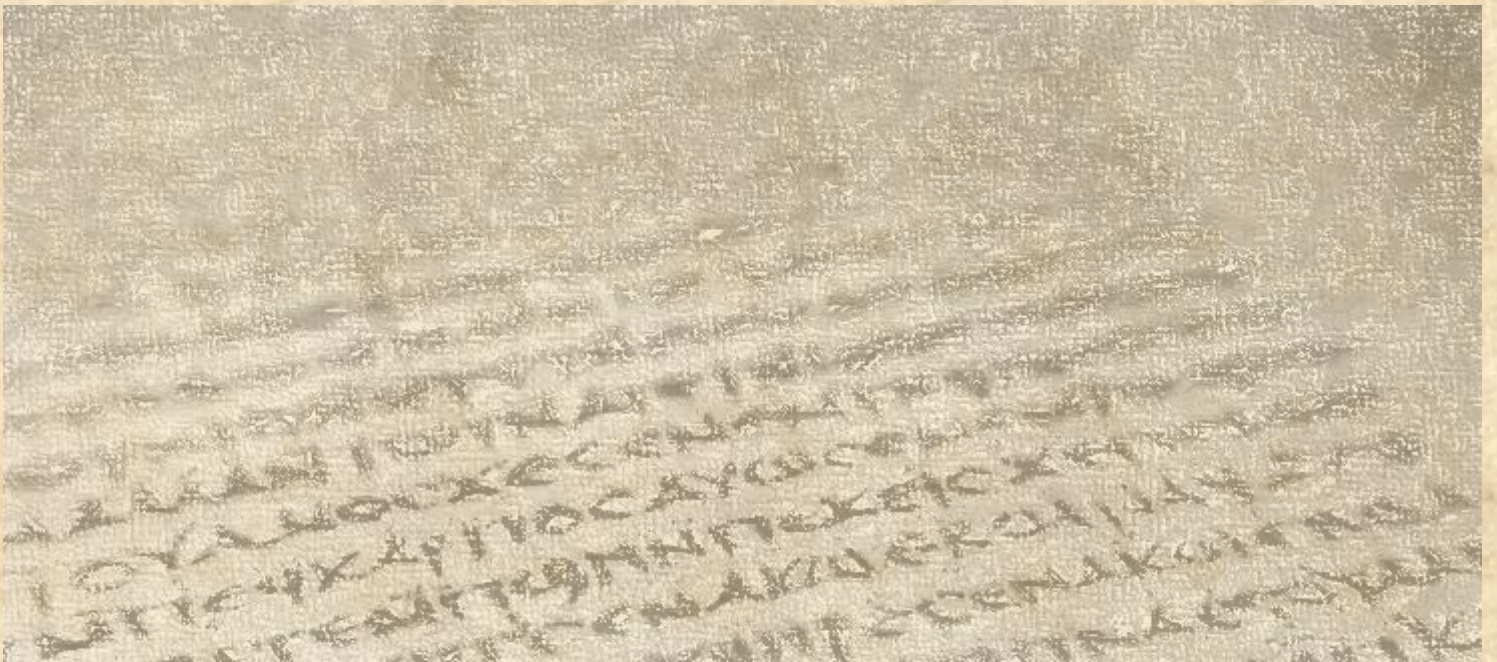
"A crucial one."

"See that you return directly to Muladi, Hollie Armstrong."

"I fully intend to, Sister."

* * *

Over the following weeks and months, Hollie Armstrong was pleased to see that Jatayu Panda kept his word. She appreciated when everything could be worked out to mutual satisfaction.



Beneath the Heels of the Dancing Goddess

By Ian Fordam & Adam "Speedwagon" El Akkad, with Jeremy Roby

Introduction

Sri Raji is the domain of Maharaja Arijani. Nearly a century ago, the Maharaja drove away the rakshasas which had been terrorizing the people of Sri Raji. Despite this passage of time, he still rules from the city of Bahru, his decrees conveyed and enforced by his agents, the Dark Sisters. The Maharaja is rumored to be a demigod, the child of the goddess Kali.

Sri Raji is a land of tradition, but in recent years it has also been a land in transition. The discovery of the Emerald Stream mistway has allowed for more consistent contact with the Land of the Mists as a whole. Those foreign trading companies which have established themselves in Sri Raji claim the credit for the years of prosperity which the land has recently experienced.

All is not as it seems. The land's prosperity may be a fragile facade. The Maharaja's benevolence may be sheer illusion.

The Land

Landscape

Sri Raji is infamous for its jungles, but its landscape is more varied than infamy expects.

Northern Sri Raji is defined by the long, high ridge of the **Yahasha Mountains**. **Mount Yamatali** is the highest peak in the range, but plenty of other mountains help shape a formidable border. Legend maintains that no one has ever returned from crossing these mountains, but truthfully almost nobody has ever tried. The peaks are too high for much vegetation or many animals to thrive, which limits hunting and foraging. And, of course, the temperatures plummet as one ascends.

Lower down the slopes, the conditions are not nearly as extreme. Coniferous trees (fir, spruce, and deodar), which are not found elsewhere in Sri Raji, are common there. However, certain wide-leaved deciduous trees (such as oak) are also present. Rajians call this narrow territory the Pahaadee Jangal, the "Mountain Jungle". At higher altitudes the trees grow in *sholas*, that is, stunted patches interspersed with alpine grasslands, but they reach full height further down the slopes. More animals make their homes at these altitudes, and certain ascetics do as well.

The Pahaadee Jangal extends from the middle reaches of the Yahasha Mountains and well into the foothills. Although the foothills are more jagged than rolling, nonetheless, they are considered habitable by the Rajians. Explorers might encounter any number of villages and hunter/gatherer tribes.

By the time the foothills have mostly flattened out, the Pahadee Jangal has given way entirely to more traditional jungles. Indeed, although most of Sri Raji truly is covered in jungle, it is equally important to note that each of the three cities is surrounded by a wide, flat plain mostly clear of trees. Part of each of these plains is dedicated to rice paddies which are crucial to feeding the cities. However, the remainder

of the plains is used for other crops and as pasturage for livestock.

The land continues to slope downward as one progresses southward across Sri Raji. In particular, the land drops suddenly east of the Rock of Indra where the East Damuhm branches off from the Damuhm River, and it sinks further toward the southeastern corner of Sri Raji. As a consequence of this descending elevation, many rivers and streams flow into that corner, earning it the name Anek Nadiyon ka Jangal, "The Jungle of Many Rivers". The land there is marshier than elsewhere, and mangrove trees are prominent.

Cities

Despite the dangers of the jungle, Rajians have carved out three cities from the wilderness.

Most visitors arrive in Sri Raji via the Emerald Stream mistway, which empties into Lake Veda near the city of **Muladi**. Muladi occupies Sri Raji's northeastern corner.

Tvashtipur—also known as Tvashti or Tvashsti—was built in southern-central Sri Raji. It is best known as the site of the **Great University**.

Due west of Tvashtipur lies **Pakat**. Historically Pakat has struggled more than Tvashtipur and even Muladi to keep its people fed, although that situation has been somewhat ameliorated as trade has spread across the domain.

In addition to the three fully inhabited cities, the **Accursed City of Bahru** lies high in the Yahasha Mountains. It was never a human city; it was built by rakshasas, who came down from Bahru to capture and torment the people of Sri Raji. However, the Maharaja Arijani taught the Rajians how the rakshasas could be slain, and he led an attack upon Bahru with the blessing of his patron goddess, Kali. The Maharaja killed the leader of the rakshasas himself. The rakshasas fled Bahru and have not been seen in Sri Raji since. The only inhabitants of the Accursed City are now the Maharaja and the priestesses of Kali.

All four cities are described in more detail below.

Jungles

As described above, the **Pahaadee Jangal** stretches the entire length of the Yahasha Mountains.

The "Bamboo Jungle", **Baans ka Jangal**, fills the area from the Pahaadee Jangal to the north to Pakat in the south, from the Misty Border to the west to the Bahkuku River to the east. Many plants apart from bamboo grow in the Baans ka Jangal, but bamboo is more prevalent here than elsewhere. Red pandas, who eat the leaves and shoots of the bamboo plant, inhabit this area.

The **Baadha Jangal**, "The Barrier Jungle", is the large jungle dividing Pakat and Tvashtipur. It is considered to stretch all the way from the Pahaadee Jangal to the southern Misty Border.

The **Bhuta Jangal**, "The Ghost Jungle", spans the area south of Muladi and northeast of Tvashtipur. The Lambee Sadak runs through it. The Bhuta Jangal earns its name not just because it is haunted (although it is; all of Sri Raji's jungles are) but because many of its trees grow an unnatural pale color and possess distended trunks and limbs.

Northeast of Muladi is the **Uttaree Jangal**, "The Northern Jungle".

South of Tvashtipur is the **Dakshinee Jangal**, "The Southern Jungle".

The Jungle of Many Rivers, **Anek Nadiyon ka Jangal**, occupies the southeastern corner of Sri Raji.

Rivers

Three major rivers (and one offshoot) cross Sri Raji. All three originate in the Yahasha Mountains.

The widest and deepest is the **Damuhm River**, which begins near the city of Bahru and then runs southeast past Tvashtipur. However, before reaching Tvashtipur, the **East Damuhm** branches off at the Rock of Indra. Both the main Damuhm and the East Damuhm rivers eventually run into the Mists.

East of the Damuhm is the **Vedama River**, which runs eastward to feed into Lake Veda. A river runs north out of Lake Veda and then swerves east to the Misty Border. This second river is considered part of the Vedama, although sometimes the two halves are called the West and East Vedama to distinguish them.

West of the Damuhm is the **Bahkuku River**. Once it departs the Yahasha Mountains, it runs southeast for two thirds of its length before cutting to the southwest. Most significantly, the city of Pakat sits upon its shore.

Each of these three rivers is considered sacred by those who depend upon their waters, and they are personified as beneficient goddesses. Inhabitants of each city love to argue with others about why their own river goddess is superior to the others. The point is not to win the argument but to praise the goddesses who bring life to each city. The goddesses' touch is believed to wash away impurity and sin.

In addition to these three major rivers, a vast number of smaller rivers and streams run through the land, many of them feeding into the Bahkuku, Damuhm, or Vedama. Even during the dry season, Sri Raji remains largely verdant.

Roads

The cities of Sri Raji are connected by a handful of roads. Near the cities the roads are constructed atop slabs of stone. However, as one departs the immediate vicinity of civilization, the roads devolve into wide dirt tracks fortified with gravel. By the end of the monsoon season, the gravel has often been washed away, leaving the roads untraversable until winter fully arrives.

The cities maintain only the portions of the roads nearest them, rarely extending beyond the stone slab sections. In recent years, the East Rajian Trading Company and similar organizations have taken the bulk of the responsibility for putting down new gravel elsewhere. Better roads mean more profits, after all. Pakat, in particular, is willing to donate gravel to the traders. Better roads mean more food.

The **Vyaapaar Maarg** ("Trade Route") leads west out of Muladi. Not far from Muladi, the **Lambee Sadak** branches off to the south. The Lambee Sadak extends far south and then west, eventually leading to Tvashtipur. However, the Lambee Sadak is also in chronically poor condition, making it the least used of the major roads.

The Vyaapaar Maarg crosses two thirds the breadth of Sri Raji before it dips southward to a crossroads. (The Black Baori is not far from the crossroads, which may explain why no village has arisen there.) To the north, the **Haathi ka Raasta** leads into the Yahasha Mountains, eventually reaching the Accursed City. However, the **Moksha Sadak** runs south from the crossroads.

The Moksha Sadak terminates in another crossroad where the village of Matra stands. From Matra, the **Pragya Sadak** runs a relatively short distance south to Tvashtipur. Another branch, the **Jangal Sadak**, wends westward to Pakat.

In addition to the roads, a countless number of paths cross the jungles to reach the various villages.

Flora and Fauna

Flora of the Wilderness

Mighty hardwood trees may be found throughout the jungles. The hardwoods include teak, sal (also known as *sakhua*), sandalwood, and rosewood. In addition to being hardwoods, both sandalwood and rosewood are also aromatic, which renders them even more precious.

Other common trees include the mango and banana trees, which are famed for their fruit. The betel tree produces nuts which many Rajians enjoy chewing. The pipal is a fig tree considered sacred. Meanwhile, banyan trees are known for their sprawling size and unusual longevity. At least three trees each called The Great Banyan exist across the jungles of Sri Raji.

Bamboo is another common plant found in the jungles, particularly the Baans ka Jangal. Although bamboo is a technically grass, not a tree, nonetheless it grows to tremendous heights.

However, the most infamous plants of Sri Raji are the dangerous ones, popularized by the writings of Prof. Abelhous Nicholsi and the lectures of Prof. Ekavali Giri. Such dread plants include the nightmare tree, scarab cap, blood rose, hangman tree, fearweed, bloodroot, death's head tree, and lashweed. Prof. Nicholsi also believed that the doppelganger plant might exist within Sri Raji, although he never found proof before his passing.

Crops

The primary food staple across all of Sri Raji is rice. Each of the three cities and most of the larger villages are surrounded by rice paddies. Meals are supplemented with fruit (such as mangoes and bananas), vegetables (particularly peppers), and spices (including curry, cumin, and cardamom).

In addition, the people of Muladi also harvest seaweed (nicknamed "peacock's tail") from Lake Veda. The bitter taste makes it a food of last resort, but when disease strikes the rice paddies, even brahmins eat seaweed. It is sometimes treated as a leafy vegetable, but other times it is prepared fried or even pickled.

Other common crops include cotton and jute. Cotton is commonly used to make clothing, while jute is used for cordage and burlap. Moreover, silk is produced in the village of Nanjivaram in the far northwestern corner of Sri Raji. This silk is highly prized by the priests and rajas, and in recent years it has seen demand in Paridon and the Core.

The two most common forms of alcohol in Sri Raji are *madhu*, which is similar to mead, and *sooraa*, a kind of beer. In addition, the drug *bhang* is made from ground cannabis leaves and consumed primarily as a drink. Opium is another Rajian drug, less widespread but more devastating to its users.

Domesticated Animals

The most common livestock are goats and sheep. Chickens, quails, and pheasants are also eaten. However, fish is the most common source of protein, particularly in Muladi. Certain ascetics have argued that meat should not be eaten at all, but this belief has not caught on yet with the brahmins and kshatriyas. Some vaishyas and shudras, who can only rarely afford meat, like to proclaim the virtues of a vegetarian lifestyle.

Cows are considered sacred in Sri Raji because of their association with a primordial mother-goddess. However, the power of this mother-goddess has been claimed by Kali. Perhaps in demonstration of this shift in power, only one herd of domesticated cows remains within Sri Raji, and that herd is tended by the Dark Sisters in Bahru. No bulls remain in the herd, but fortunately the cows appear to neither sicken nor age.

Dread Possibility — The Last Sacred Cow

One of the Brahmins has had a vision that the Dark Sisters' herd is dwindling, falling victim one by one to the Verggasyas and other predators of Bahru. Soon there will be only a single cow left. No Rajian is foolish enough to attempt to steal from the Dark Sisters, but perhaps foreigners may be convinced to attempt something so drastic?

Foreigners might be swayed by rumors that this last cow is Kamadhenu, the wishing cow who arose from the churning of the cosmic ocean. She is capable of producing milk for drinking and clarified butter (*ghee*) for sacrifices, but she can also produce more fantastic boons. For example, legend claims that Kamadhenu has conjured warriors to defend the one who possesses her.

For that matter, these rumors might even be true.

The bully kutta is a kind of Rajian mastiff. Bully kuttas have long been popular among the rajas of western Sri Raji for use in hunting. However, they can also be trained to protect homes and crops from monkeys, snakes, and even tigers.

Fauna of the Wilderness

Tigers are the most infamous wild animals of Sri Raji. Almost equally renowned, though, are the serpents of the jungles, both constrictors such as the python and venomous snakes like the cobra. Mongooses are known as enemies of the cobra and defenders of humanity. (The former is true; the latter, generally speaking, is not.)

Another well-known Rajian animal is the monkey. There are a number of distinct species, but most foreigners cannot distinguish between a rhesus macaque and a gray langur. Most species have tails of varying lengths, but none of their tails are prehensile. Monkeys inhabit jungles and human settlements alike. In the jungles they are considered playful and charming. In settlements they are seen as troublesome thieves and destructive to crops. In addition, a single species of gibbon inhabits the Dakshini Jangal; it is the only ape native to Sri Raji, although others have crossed over from the Vanyabhumi to settle outside of King Crocodile's toothy reach.

Less well known (but hardly less dangerous) than the tiger is the sloth bear of Sri Raji. Its sickle-shaped claws allow it to tear into termite nests and anthills in search of the insects which are their primary food source. (In addition it consumes fruits and other vegetation.) However, its claws also make deadly weapons. As well as, Sri Raji is also home to black bears, particularly in the Pahaadee Jangal, and red pandas, which primarily inhabit the Baans ka Jangal.

Hyenas are creatures of ill repute. Ordinarily they are carrion eaters, although they also consume fruit and sometimes have been known to kill prey themselves. Their teeth are shaped to grind bone. According to Rajian lore, witches ride hyenas, and certain wicked people possess the ability to transform into hyenas.

The rhinoceros inhabits the grasslands of southeastern Sri Raji and the jungle at the fringes of those grasslands. Although herbivores, they are tremendous and formidable. Despite the great danger of hunting rhinos, they are considered highly desirable because their horns are an important ingredient in Rajian folk medicine.

Other common mammals include ruminants such as deer, water buffalo, antelopes, and gaurs.

The jungles are also filled with a great variety of brightly colored birds, most of which foreigners would declare to be "parrots" although they belong to a number of different species. Parrots, particularly those species found in the Anek Nadiyon ka Jangal, are reputed to be able to mimic human tongues. Another distinctive bird is the peafowl. The male of the species is renowned for its train of long tail feathers with bright gold-colored eyespots.

The rivers offer their own selection of dangerous wildlife. Crocodiles and their narrower-snouted relatives, the gharials, lurk upon the riverbanks, particularly of the Bahkuku. Beneath the surface of the Damuhm and East Damuhm swim two particularly noteworthy species: a species of freshwater dolphins (uncommon but not dangerous) and a species of freshwater sharks (uncommon but dangerous).

Also worth noting are two animals which are not found in Sri Raji: horses and full-sized elephants. Horses are important in the sacred *Recalled Book of Knowledge*. However, there are none native to Sri Raji, and those which are imported from foreign lands inevitably sicken and die. Elephants are prominent in Rajian folklore, but nearly all of the elephants in Sri Raji are pygmy elephants, at most half the size of the beasts of legend. The only full-sized, natural elephant in Sri Raji is Supratika, who has been claimed by the Rajadhiraja of Pakat. (Airavata, the white elephant who comes to claim the Chosen of Kali, is full-sized but clearly a divine manifestation of Kali's will.)

Supernatural Beings

Rajian religion and folklore include many supernatural beings which exist somewhere between the mortal and the divine. The most infamous are the **rakshasas** who once occupied Bahru. Their lesser cousins, the **yatudhanas**, are more closely associated with the mortal realm, but they are still frightful creatures.

However, not all such supernatural beings are wicked. The **apsaras** are celestial dancers, and **gandharvas** are heavenly musicians. Both beings serve the devas, although legends assert that they may also be encountered in the earthly realm. Although faithful to the devas, in their interactions with mortals they are frequently driven by their whims and impulses.

Any number of supernatural beings occupy the moral spaces in between. **Yakshas** and **yakshis** are nature spirits, sometimes helpful, sometimes hostile to humanity. Similarly, **guhyakas** are said to occupy the mountains and hills. They are servants of Kubera, half-brother to the rakshasa god Ravana. Like Kubera, their relationship with humanity is ambiguous.

Rajians speak of two types of serpent-folk, the **nagas** and the **mahoragas**. Nagas are cobra-folk, while mahoragas are python-folk. Both types of serpent-folk claim a touch of the divine, but they are mostly mortal.

Rajian folklore describes many kinds of **bhootas** ("ghosts"). Bhootas are not the wispy phantoms of Mordentish folklore, but instead they are usually material. Most bhootas can change shape or stretch their arms to unnatural lengths. Fortunately, regardless of their shape they may be discerned by their lack of shadows. Among the people of Pakat, the **preta** (hungry ghost) is particularly feared. Similarly, the **chudail**, the ghost of a woman who died while pregnant, is feared across all of Sri Raji.

While bhootas are the spirits of deceased mortals, not all Rajian spirits were once living beings. **Pisachas** are evil spirits which haunt graveyards and possess corpses; they are sometimes considered a kind of rakshasa. The **vetala** is another kind of corpse spirit, although vetalas are more morally ambiguous than pisachas. Many other kinds of spirits abound.

Seasons and Weather

Rajians recognize three seasons: winter, summer, and monsoon. Winter lasts from November through February, according to the Barovian Calendar. It is the temperate dry season, sometimes called "Vritra's Wrath". (Vritra is an asura of drought.) However, this name appears to be more poetic than actual, because rains still fall throughout the winter. The summer season (March through June) is marked by a rise in temperature and an increase in rainfall. However, eventually the weather worsens into the monsoon season (July through October), also known as "Indra's Wrath". (Indra is the deva of rain.)

Regardless of the season, most nights are marked by an evening rain. During the summer and monsoon seasons, the evening rain is frequently indistinguishable from the afternoon and night rains.

Astronomy

Foreigners believe that Sri Raji has no moon. Rajians insist that they do have a moon, but is a *nirguna* ("formless") moon, invisible in the sky. Astronomers at the Great University can point to the complex calculations which they claim proves its existence. However, even the unlearned of Sri Raji believe in the nirguna moon. It is that place in the sky which hurts to look at too long.

The nirguna moon has phases. The three days of the "new moon" each month are the three days that sacrifices must be made from each of the three cities of Sri Raji. Moreover, during the new moon, staring too long at the absent moon causes stabbing pain.

Certain ascetics have sacrificed their sight by contemplating the new moon until they went blind. The waxing moon causes uneasiness in the viewer, but the waning moon causes outright fear. Only during the "full moon" does the sky feel non-threatening.

As elsewhere in the Land of Mists, the stars in the Rajian sky drift with the seasons. Oddly, though, they never return to quite the same position, and they don't appear to maintain the same positions in relation to each other. Even more curious, though, is the fact that the constellations—such as there are—do not match the astronomical records of the Great University. The difference was so great that, although the stars shifted again during the Rebirth of Kali in 740BC, this most recent shift garnered little attention. The stars had already revealed themselves to be unreliable.

Even though the nirguna moon is invisible, it still eclipses the stars behind it. By carefully observing this wandering darkness in the night sky, astronomers have been able to determine that the nirguna moon still follows the same course at the visible moon did. It is the one celestial body which has not changed its course.

Given these oddities in the night sky, the great science of astronomy has been rendered meaningless. The High Astronomer still lurks at the top of the Sky Tower, scribbling notes to himself all along the walls. He uses chalk when he can and blood when he must. Every night one of the students is sent with a bowl of rice to ensure that the High Astronomer eats something and, not coincidentally, to try to get some time on the telescope. Whoever discovers the pattern to the stars will become famous through the ages.

Timeline of Sri Raji

Date	Years Ago	Event
≈650BC	110	Bahaaduri becomes a proxy of Ratri to defend Pakat against rakshasa incursions.
670BC	90	Arijani kills Ravana's avatar, and Sri Raji forms
670BC	90	The original *Books of Knowledge* are lost, along with the wisest Brahmins (and presumably the bravest Kshatriyas and most skilled Vaishyas and most loyal Shudras as well).
≈671BC	89	A lingering rakshasa attempts to kill Arijani.
≈689BC	71	Arijani escapes assassination again. Ravana's Bane is stolen from him, or perhaps it merely vanishes.
≈702BC	58	Arijani avoids assassination by a Chosen foreigner
702BC	58	The high priest of Rudri selects a troublesome foreigner as a Chosen of Kali. The Dark Sisters express the Maharaja's displeasure. No foreigners are Chosen subsequently.
≈714BC	46	Arijani narrowly survives an assassination attempt at the hands of a foreigner wielding Ravana's Bane.
≈722BC	38	Arijani encounters and kills Roger Pembrooke.
722BC	38	Adyita Chopra is born
728BC	32	The high priest of Tvashtri is selected as a Chosen of Kali. He meets his fate in Bahru
732BC	28	The Gharial of Shadows threatens Pakat. Shortly afterward, the Temple of Ratri in Pakat undergoes a certain hidden change of leadership.
≈732BC	28	The Dark Sisters destroy the Temple of Abundant Serenity.

Date	Years Ago	Event
732BC	28	Rajian monks (that is, the ascetics at the Temple of Beauty and Grace) create Picalinni's Palette.
738BC	22	Most of the events of *Web of Illusion* occur, except that Arijani is not destroyed. Ravana's Bane is captured and held in the Astrasya Mandiram in Bahru.
739BC	21	The Dark Sister Tega reincarnates
≈739BC	21	Gopal Chaudhari forms the East Rajian Trading Company.
740BC	20	The Rebirth of Kali (more widely known as the Great Upheaval) occurs.
740BC	20	During the Rebirth of Kali, an avatar of Ravana forces his way into Sri Raji and Mahakala. The fight between Arijani and Ravana's avatar rages across Bahru, generally to Arijani's disfavor. Many Dark Sisters, including Suvarna, are killed over the course of the battle. Arijani is near defeat when the Grand Conjunction collapses and the avatar is driven from Sri Raji. Ravana's Bane vanishes from its secure storage place as well.
740BC	20	The Verdurous Lands cluster forms.
740BC	20	Raja Singh is the sole survivor of an expedition into the Wild Lands. Although he lives, he is afflicted with lycanthropy.
741BC	19	*The Luck of the Goddess* arrives via the Emerald Stream. Hollie Armstrong talks the Dark Sisters into *not* killing the crew.
≈742BC	18	Adyita Chopra and Peela move to Tvashtipur.
743BC	17	Raja Singh joins the Carnival as "The Hideous Man Beast" when it swings through the Wildlands.
743BC	17	Hollie Armstrong returns to Sri Raji and remains as a trade broker.
745BC	15	The Dark Sisters discover Suvarna's reincarnated soul in a male body. They promptly force another reincarnation.
746BC	12	Satyavant, the latest male reincarnation of Suvarna, is born.
749BC	11	Adyita Chopra and Peela depart Sri Raji for Darkon.
756BC	4	Satyavant arrives in Bahru.
≈757BC	3	Ayanna Hazra is killed by bandits. Shortly afterward, the bandit Daksh becomes a penitent.
≈758BC	2	The Dark Sister Tega reincarnates. (Again.)
758BC	2	Catriona nic Duibh finally finishes and submits her dissertation.
760BC	0	Now.

History

Mythic and Recent History

From the Rajian perspective, history may be divided into two periods. The first might be called mythic history because it deals primarily with the devas and asuras. This history was recorded in *The Books of Knowledge* and now *The Recalled Book*. The second period is recent history, which starts with the rising threat of rakshasas from Bahru and continues into the modern day.

This second period encompasses what certain scholars of the Land of Mists have termed "false" and "true" history of Sri Raji. The "false" history of Sri Raji, which occurred in the years immediately prior to 670BC, has its own mythic overtones, involving as it does rakshasas and Ravana and Kali. Nonetheless, Rajians consider this period to be part of their recent history.

From the outside perspective, there is a vast gap between mythic and recent history, but Rajians are widely unconcerned about that gap. To them, the

world has always been as it now is, except for some minor details.

Dread Possibility — The True History of the False History of Sri Raji

Before Sri Raji was drawn into the Mists, it was a backwater portion of a larger empire. However, because Pakat and Muladi stood upon a useful trade road, Sri Raji was an important backwater. People came from the larger empire and its neighboring lands, and sometimes they settled down. After all, Sri Raji was not yet an island of terror but a viable place to live. These newcomers were usually assimilated into the larger Rajian culture, but sometimes they left their mark upon that larger culture as well.

Rajians in general aren't particularly interested in their own history before the coming of the rakshasas, but the traces exist regardless. Adventurers might learn of ancient ruins from villages which stand nearby. Also, certain priest professors of the Great University of Tvashti are interested in historical details, even if those details contradict that history which the Dark Sisters prefer to propagate.

The Rise and Fall of the Rakshasas

Since time immemorial, Rajians lived in the three city-states and many villages of Sri Raji. They were a devout people, sacrificing to their gods and goddesses as *dharma* decreed they should. The conflict between the devas and asuras had little impact upon the mortal world.

... until the rakshasas came to the Yahasha Mountains and built the city of Bahru, which was dedicated to Ravana. By the time the rakshasas revealed themselves to the people of Sri Raji, Bahru had become a large city. Its inhabitants decided that they needed slaves for labor (and sometimes dinner), and so they descended from the mountains to kidnap Rajians. Before long the humans in Bahru outnumbered the rakshasas, although of course the rakshasas were far more powerful, both physically and magically.

However, the rakshasas made the mistake of allowing the humans to continue to worship the devas. They thought that Ravana was stronger than even the combined might of the gods. However, the goddess Kali, slayer of demons, brought forth her son, the demigod Arijani. She armed him with a weapon forged by the god Tvashtri. With that weapon Arijani killed Ravana and all of the rakshasas.

The Rise of the Maharaja

Although the city-states and villages of Sri Raji had been independent, they now acknowledged their savior as their proper ruler. Arijani became the Maharaja of Sri Raji. Although Bahru had been destroyed, he remained there to ensure that the rakshasas could not return. Among the ruins he founded a temple to his mother Kali. He served as her high priest, but he gathered other devotees around him to serve as her priestesses. Because "Kali" means "Black" in Rajian, these priestesses became known as the Dark Sisters.

For the most part the Maharaja remains distant from his subjects. Occasionally he issues a decree, which the Dark Sisters disseminate and enforce. Otherwise, the cities and villages are left to rule themselves.

Unfortunately, though, the first decree was the heaviest. With a heart burdened by sorrow, the Maharaja announced to his subjects that Mother Kali demanded a regular sacrifice. During each of the three nights of the new *nirguna* moon, someone is selected, one person from each of the three cities. A white elephant arrives to carry each Chosen One to Bahru, almost certainly to never see their family or friends again.

Children are told that the Chosen live peacefully in Bahru. Adults understand, but rarely admit, that the Chosen are sacrificed to Kali. Such is the price of the protection of the goddess.

So it has been for generations.

Dread Possibility — The Maharaja's Decrees

Arijani has issued a number of decrees over the decades, including the following:

- Every day of the nirguna moon, each of the cities in turn must send someone who has been Chosen to the city of Bahru.
- Foreigners in Sri Raji must be captured and killed, or at least the Dark Sisters must be notified of the presence of foreigners so that the Dark Sisters may capture and kill them. (Recanted.)
- Foreigners are not allowed west of Muladi. (Deliberately misinterpreted as, "Foreign trading companies are not allowed to operate west of Muladi".)
- Hot-air balloons and similar flying devices are forbidden.

The Rebirth of Kali

In 740BC—although the Rajians did not yet know of the Barovian Calendar—Sri Raji was rocked by earthquakes. The brahmins widely proclaimed that the goddess Kali was expressing her displeasure, perhaps even beginning the dance which marked the end of the Kali Yuga and thus the end of the world. Equally alarming, the next day was the "new moon" phase of the *nirguna* moon, and the peculiar lunar void which marked that phase failed to manifest. That month the white elephant failed to come for the Chosen, and Rajians widely feared that their Maharaja had fallen.

Yet the earthquakes lasted only one day. The new moon returned the next month. Eventually the brahmins proclaimed that Maharaja Arijani had been threatened but had prevailed. The latest incarnation of the rakshasa god Ravana had been driven from Sri Raji. Although the Kali Yuga had not ended, the goddess herself had been reborn.

Since her rebirth, Kali appears to have turned a kinder face toward mortals. For example, Maharaji Arijani has announced that some foreigners are now tolerated within the land, albeit under certain conditions. The Dark Sisters have allowed the East Rajian Trading Company to trade across Sri Raji, bringing food to Pakat and exporting knowledge from Tvashtipur. In general, the mood of the people is less fearful than it was before 740BC.

In addition, not long after the Rebirth of Kali the Rajians noticed that the misty border south of Pakat and Tvashtipur had retreated, revealing a vast expanse of jungle. In short order this jungle became known as the **Vanyabhumi**, "The Wild Lands".

The Luck of the Goddess and the Emerald Stream

Only months after the Rebirth of Kali and the revelation of the Wild Lands, Sri Raji was shaken again. In the midst of a monsoon, a wooden boat appeared in Lake Veda and wrecked upon its shore. Although foreigners had arrived in Sri Raji before, they had emerged from the Mists as individuals or families or even small bands. Never before had so many arrived at once.

The ship was the *Luck of the Goddess* out of Mordentshire, and its captain was James Wells. Even more crucially, its first mate was Holland Armstrong. As captain, Wells had learned to shout more loudly whenever his shipboard commands were not understood, but that habit nearly led to bloodshed on the shores of Lake Veda. Fortunately Holland Armstrong was a more diplomatic sort. Despite the language barrier, she negotiated for repairs to the ship, and once she had learned the rudiments of Rajian, she conducted trade between the Mordentsmen and the Rajians. Although the *Luck* and its crew departed shortly after the repairs were complete, the Emerald Stream had already been opened. A single departure would not prevent others from arriving.

The Age of Trade

Most of the people of Muladi—in particular, those who had not benefitted from the arrival of *The Luck of the Goddess*—feared the Maharaja's reaction to the foreigners' visit. However, retribution never came. Instead, the Dark Sisters eventually spread the word that foreigners were no longer to be killed, although they were not permitted to travel west of Muladi. That right was reserved for Rajians alone.

Dread Possibility — Foreigners in Sri Raji

Although Arijani has decreed that no foreigners are permitted west of Muladi, the Dark Sisters and many others have decided to interpret his decree as applying only to foreigners associated with a trading company. Independent individuals may still venture west, particularly if they seek the Great University.

For his part, Arijani has caught the Dark Sisters at their illicit reinterpretation. However, he has let their interpretation stand. He would rather learn what foreigners know, and an easy way is to let them teach at the Great University. As long as no large group of foreigners ventures too close to Bahru, Arijani is unconcerned.

After all, he can sense that Ravana's Bane is not within the borders of Sri Raji. Given that, he believes that he can be harmed but not killed, so what reason has he to worry?

Populace

Fashion

Rajian men typically wear a *dhoti*, which is a length of unstitched cloth wrapped around the waist and legs. The overall effect is similar to trousers but more comfortable in the Rajian heat. The dhoti may be worn with a *kurta* tunic. Rajian men often wear turbans as headgear.

Rajian women wear the *sari*, a length of unstitched cloth wrapped around the entire body. The sari is worn in conjunction with a fitted bodice called a *choli* and sometimes with a petticoat known as a *ghagra*. Scarves are frequently worn to cover the head.

Sometimes men and women alike wear the combination of an *uttariya* and *antariya*. The uttariya wraps around the back of the neck and around the arms, and sometimes it is worn to cover much of the upper body. The antariya wraps around the lower body.

All Rajian clothing is made in bright colors. Even the most faded clothing of the poorest shudra laboring in the Pakati rice paddies shows remnants of color.

Economy

The economy of Sri Raji operates at three levels. Among the shudras of the cities and the villagers from outside the cities, barter is prevalent. The higher-caste inhabitants of the cities, particularly the vaishyas (and the rajas who hire them), primarily use coins. However, among the richest of the rajas and most esteemed of the Brahmins, most transactions feature the giving or exchange of expensive gifts, a form of barter for the wealthy. The Dark Sisters fall into this third tier; they are given many gifts, sometimes with the understanding that the gifts will be passed along to Maharaja Arijani. Sometimes these gifts are repaid with leniency, but sometimes they are not.

The rajas own all of the land surrounding each city. The shudras work the land, and they are repaid with a portion of the bounty. Nor is this restricted to farming. Many shudras and even vaishyas perform services for the Kshatriya families for whom their own families have worked for generations. This arrangement is laid out in a text known as *The Laws of the Progenitor*, which carries an almost divine authority among the Rajians.

Each of the three cities mints its own coins, but they use the standard weights as declared in *The Laws of the Progenitor*. However, they are punched coins,

that is, punched from a sheet of precious metal and stamped haphazardly with a variety of designs. No two coins have the exact same shape or patterning. Without magic it is impossible to tell which city produced which coins. They are treated interchangeably.

Curiously, though, each city insists upon its own names for these coins. In Muladi, gold, silver, and copper pieces are known as the soma-drop, lotus-flower, and rice-seed respectively. In Tvashtipur, they are called the manipura (navel), anahata (heart), and vishuddha (throat); the platinum piece is the ushnisha kamala (crown). Pakat takes a third approach, using the names of the castes: platinum brahmins, gold kshatriyas, silver vaishyas, and copper shudras.

In recent years foreign coins have become more common in Sri Raji, particularly in Muladi. Sometimes they are melted down to make Rajian coinage, but sometimes they are traded directly. The novelty of foreign coins gives them a minor increase in value, enough for most Rajians to treat a slightly lighter foreign coin as having the same worth as a slightly heavier Rajian coin.

However, foreign coins are less valuable than other goods which foreigners possess to trade. Rajians are particularly interested in two things: exotic foreign magic and iron. The appeal of the former is obvious; who doesn't like exotic foreign magic? As for the latter, iron was known in ancient Sri Raji, but according to Rajian legend, the rakshasas of Bahru banned the use of iron by mortals. In truth they did not, but since Sri Raji was claimed by the Mists, the land has offered no new sources of that metal. As time passes, the amount of available native iron diminishes.

Language

Except perhaps for some of the most isolated tribes, everybody in Sri Raji speaks some flavor of a language broadly called Rajian. Muladi Rajian is distinct from the Rajian of Tvashtipur, which is in turn distinct from Pakati Rajian and the many dialects spoken in the villages. Nonetheless, these variations are largely mutually intelligible, and anyone who speaks one proficiently can usually decipher the others.

In addition, *The Book of Recalled Knowledge* is written in a language called Sacred Rajian. Sacred Rajian is also used in many households and village rituals as well. Because of its formal language and archaic formulations, it is more difficult to understand than the other flavors of Rajian.

Finally, there exist a plethora of village and tribal languages, particularly among people far from the cities. These languages are completely separate from the Rajian variations.

Attitudes Towards Magic

Magic is seen as one of the Great Sciences. Whether arcane or divine (or generated through asceticism), magic is viewed with respect and sometimes fear. Necromancy falls into the "sometimes fear" category, but so does the illusion/phantasm school of magic—known to the Rajians as *maya*. At its most benign, maya conceals reality, which is dire enough, but worse yet it is one of the most insidious tools of the asuras and rakshasas.

Attitudes Towards Non-Humans

While Rajian legends tell of many frightful creatures, they also include many wondrous beings as well, including celestial servants such as apsaras and gandharvas. Perhaps because of these legends, Sri Raji is more welcoming toward non-humans than most domains in the Mists. While a frightful-appearing person will be treated with initial caution, they will not be immediately denounced, and proper behavior will be met with acceptance.

Religion

See the article "Contradictions and Mysteries" after this article for a discussion of the Rajian faith.

Funeral Traditions

The *Recalled Book of Knowledge* declares that cremation is the true and proper funeral tradition.

Indeed, cremation is the preferred means of disposing of corpses across Sri Raji, especially among the Brahmins and Kshatriyas.

However, proper cremation ceremonies are expensive affairs. Acquiring enough wood to fuel a funerary pyre is not only pricey but dangerous, particularly in jungles around Pakat. Of course, the wood must also be dry wood, which is difficult to come by during the monsoon season.

As a consequence, most Vaishyas and Shudras are laid to rest in charnel grounds, their bodies left in the open air to decompose. (The Skull-Bearers in particular consider charnel grounds an excellent place to contemplate mortality and impermanence.) Wealthy Vaishyas may have mausoleums built for themselves and their family members. Many Kshatriya families build mausoleums as well because, as noted above, cremation is not always feasible.

Around the cities of Sri Raji, charnel grounds are usually warded by the priests of the predominant faith. The wards are designed to keep out wild animals and supernatural predators such as vetalas and pisachas. Villages do the same, but they have fewer priests to lend strength to their prayers. Ultimately a sufficiently mighty or canny spirit may be able to either evade or break the wards.

While cremation may be the preferred funeral tradition, attentive readers of the *Recalled Book* will find references to charnel grounds and even burials within its verses.

The Realm

Government

Maharaja Arijani rules Sri Raji. His word is absolute, backed by the blessing of Kali. On one hand, every adult in Sri Raji understands that the Chosen of Kali are sacrificed by the maharaja to appease his goddess. On the other hand, he rarely makes any other demands upon the populace.

As a result, each community in Sri Raji is left to govern itself. In Muladi the priests of Rudri have more influence than the rajas. In Pakat, the situation is reversed. In Tvashtipur, the Triad of Scholars oversees both the city and its Great University.

In Sri Raji, the title *raja* denotes not a singular ruler over an area but rather any male of noble birth. (The feminine form is *rani*.) This muddling occurred after many brave kshatriyas died in the fall of Bahru, leaving behind many claimants to lofty titles. Especially because Muladi is governed by the priests of Rudri and Tvashtipur is governed by the Triad of Scholars, those cities did not need to specify a singular ruler from among their rajas. Only in Pakat, where the kshatriyas still govern, is the ruler granted the title of *rajadhiraja* ("raja of rajas"), which falls below Maharaja Arijani himself yet still above the other Pakati rajas.

Villages have no rajas. A few are led by families who claim to be brahmins, although the priests from the cities would almost certainly argue that they lost brahmin status generations ago. Most villages are guided by a headman, headwoman, or a council of elders.

Each community considers itself separate from its neighbors. In other words, people from Pakat think of themselves as Pakati first and Rajian second. The only time that being Rajian unifies Rajians is when foreigners intrude. Otherwise, each community is on its own.

For the most part, the cities of Sri Raji leave the villages to fend for themselves in the face of flood or other disaster. Pakat is the exception. Rajadhiraja Chayan Yagnik knows that the city would suffer if the surrounding villages were unable to produce the spices which have proven so valuable to the Pakati economy.

Law Enforcement

The fundamental laws of Sri Raji derive from a text called *The Laws of the Progenitor*, which Rajians believe was written by the first man created by the

devas. Even Maharaja Arijani does not dare contradict *The Laws of the Progenitor*. Not openly, anyway.

In addition, the ruling bodies of each city have expanded the laws for their city. Such laws are rarely respected outside of the city limits.

The priests of Rudri are responsible for law enforcement in Muladi, but because such activities leads to interactions which are inappropriate for the Brahmin caste, they have organized a city guard to do the dirty work (ritually speaking) for them. Unexpectedly, though, the leaders of this guard tend to take their duties seriously, and this is reflected in the behavior of most of their underlings.

Similarly, Rajadhiraja Chayan Yagnik has organized a city guard. The officers of this guard are almost entirely the younger children of the Kshatriya families who might otherwise cause trouble. Of course, they do still cause trouble, just of a different sort. The City Guard of Pakat is notoriously corrupt.

In Tvashtipur, there are two branches of law enforcement. Those who graduate from the School of High Doctrine specializing in *The Law of the Progenitor* usually become city magistrates called Speakers for the Progenitor. They are aided by those who graduate from the School of Physical Discipline to become enforcers of the law.

Villages also adhere to *The Laws of the Progenitor*. While they may not have an extensive set of formal additional laws, they do have customs, which often carry the weight of law.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy is a tricky situation. The priests and rajas and people of Muladi all appreciate the benefits of trade through the Emerald Stream. For that matter, the people of the other cities would like a greater part of that trade for themselves. As such, the priests in Muladi have established an understanding with the Colonial Merchant Company, the Boritsi Trading Company, and other consortiums of the Sea of Sorrows. Likely other, quieter bargains have also been made.

However, as much as most Rajians appreciate the benefits of trade, many of them are also concerned about cultural contamination. The traditional ways are the best ways, of course. The *Book of Recalled Knowledge* and the *Laws of the Progenitor* both say so. Yet many people are adopting mleccha ways and attitudes, despite their apparent elevation of the Vaishya caste over Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The more reactionary Rajians want foreigners driven out of Sri Raji. The less reactionary just want the foreigners to stay in their designated quarter in Muladi.

Of course, the cultural melding goes the other way too. Certain adventurous Rajians have ventured through the Emerald Stream to the Core and beyond. Among the more cosmopolitan domains, anything Rajian is seen as delightfully exotic. On the other hand, certain unexplained killings in Paridon would be recognized by Rajians as the work of the Dark Sisters.

The discovery of the Vanyabhumi has created a further complication. No people have been discovered there, and so Rajians and foreigners alike have decided that ownership of that land is first come, first served. Rajian factions want the land and its bounty for themselves, and foreign factions resent that the Rajians won't let them simply cross Sri Raji to commence plundering.

Moreover, there is always the risk of Maharaja Arijani returning suddenly to his previous paranoia about foreigners. In particular, Rajians worry that he will decide to punish those who have consorted with foreigners.

Trade Within Sri Raji

For many Rajians, the most fortunate event in recent history is the discovery of Sri Raji by foreigners. Foreigners are willing to pay through the nose for Rajian spices; foreigners arrive in Muladi; spices are most available in Pakat. In short order a trade route

was established between Muladi and Pakat, to the economic benefit of both. Moreover, as word of the Great University spread to the Core, Tvashtipur also saw more visitors. Muladi acquired valuable spices; Pakat had access to precious food; and Tvashtipur was exposed to new knowledge. The villages in between gained new markets for their own products as well.

Of course, this new openness also threatens some aspects of traditional Rajian society. Villages such as Kurtepeta and Pradmapura have shifted a potentially dangerous amount of their crop production from food to growing more spices instead. While many of these changes are driven by foreign demand, there is demand among the cities of Sri Raji as well. In some cases, villages are shrinking as their young men and women venture into the cities where they feel they can earn more wealth through hard work. Most insidious of all, though, are some of the foreign ideas which creep into Sri Raji, particularly by way of the Great University of Tvashtipur. Foreign gods can be assimilated, but some foreign notions—"liberty, equality, fraternity"—may prove harder to swallow, particularly among the Brahmins and Kshatriyas.

Many smaller communities remain isolated and independent, rarely trading with any other communities. They are likely to be wary of and hostile to foreigners.

Trade With Other Domains

The first contact with foreigners via the Emerald Stream was accidental, but once the proper location and conditions were discovered, the trading companies of the Core and Zherisia moved in.

- The **Colonial Merchant Company of Zherisia** has found its greatest success in Sri Raji.
- The **Boritsi Trading Company** out of Borca only established a foothold in Sri Raji after the Colonials had settled in, so they are in the unfamiliar position of second place.
- The **Carlyle Trading Company**, also out of Zherisia, takes a distant third place. Nonetheless, they are ambitious.

Foreign trading companies do good business in their homelands with Rajian spices, food, and tea. Certain Paridoners have found industrial uses for rubber. Finished goods are also in high demand, and not only gems, jewelry, and clothing. The most humble carved statuette of a multi-armed goddess is a quaint article of folk art with considerable value in foreign markers. (A surprising number of Borcan, Dementlieuse, and Paridoner homes have idols of Kali prominently displayed.) Contact with Sri Raji has also produced a demand for exotic pets, particularly monkeys, parrots, and peacocks. These trading companies would all like to extend their reach further into Sri Raji. However, these efforts are discouraged by many Rajian factions, including the East Rajian Trading Company, the priests of Rudri in Muladi, and the Dark Sisters themselves. The Dark Sisters insist that the Maharaja has decreed that foreign trading companies must not venture west of Muladi, and the priests of Rudri willingly enforce that decree.

As a consequence of their distrust of foreign trading companies, the Easties refuse to grant any long-term special privileges to any of them. The priests of Rudri work to very actively (if discretely) play the trading companies against each other. The Dark Sisters will intervene (not at all discretely) if they believe that the Maharaja's decree has been violated, which only encourages each trading company to expose its rivals' violations.

Who's Doomed - Arijani

The rakshasa darklord of Sri Raji.

Background

Once upon a time, a man was sent to kill a woman, but he succumbed to passion instead, and they had a son together...

The man was an avatar of Ravana, the Rakshasa god. The woman was Mahiji, the high priestess of Kali in the great city of Bahru. Their child was Arijani, who was born far greater than human but, according to the rakshasas, far less than them. Although the

avatar of Ravana departed from Bahru before Arijani's birth, under the blessing of her goddess Mahiji raised her son among the rakshasas of Bahru. The rakshasas never let Arijani forget the inferiority of his mortal blood, and he grew to maturity steeped in resentment of and hatred for his own kind, just as Kali and Mahiji had planned.

In those days Bahru was ruled by the rakshasas, even though they were outnumbered by their weakling human slaves. (The rakshasas feared only the priestesses of Kali, and even them, not very much. They were merely human, after all, despite the gifts of their goddess.) Arijani spent much of his time among the humans, cloaked in illusion. He taught the humans the secret lore of the rakshasas, most importantly how to identify and destroy them. At first individual rakshasas went missing here and there, but this did not garner significant attention; rakshasas regularly wandered away from Bahru. Only gradually did the rakshasas realize that the humans were killing them, and it never did occur to them that one of their own kind might have betrayed them.

Finally the humans were caught in the act of destroying a rakshasa, and the other rakshasas struck back at the humans' impertinence. Great numbers of humans were slaughtered, and not more than a few rakshasas died as well. Arijani slew several of his tormentors himself, but for the most part he simply watched and reveled in the carnage.

The god Ravana noticed Arijani's glee, and he sent his avatar—the one who had fathered Arijani—to destroy the half-breed. However, Arijani and Mahija had planned for this inevitability, and they caught the avatar in a snare which deprived him of much of his power. The avatar offered a bargain: He would grant Arijani a divine boon, and in exchange Arijani would cease his hostilities against the rakshasas. Arijani accepted, asking the boon of invulnerability to harm by rakshasas, including Ravana himself. However, as soon as the boon was granted, Arijani broke his word and destroyed his father.

That night the rakshasas of Bahru fell to their invincible opponent, and Sri Raji was drawn into the Mists.

The Early Years of Sri Raji

For many years the people of Sri Raji had been plagued by the rakshasas from Bahru, which they called the Accursed City. In the weeks following the slaughter in Bahru, the Rajians witnessed the destruction of those rakshasas who had been outside of Bahru. The destroyer was clearly another rakshasa, who proclaimed himself Maharaja at each of the three human cities of Sri Raji. This did nothing to ease the fears of the Rajians.

However, several weeks later the priestess of Kali emerged among the people of Sri Raji, announcing that the rakshasas—even the one who had been so bold as to proclaim himself Maharaja—had been slain.

Their destroyer was Lord Arijani, a demigod who had been cut from Kali's own flesh specifically to free the people of Sri Raji from the rakshasas. Before long Arijani himself was acknowledged as the Maharaja, and the priestesses of Kali were his voice among the people. Arijani, it was said, needed to remain within Bahru to prevent the resurgence of his foes.

Foreigners and Other Enemies

Arijani has been the target of several assassination attempts over the decades of his reign:

The first attempt occurred very shortly after Sri Raji was drawn into the Mists. A particularly canny rakshasa had evaded death during the sacking of Bahru. Using his powers of illusion, he approached Arijani by stealth and attacked—utterly ineffectually. The assassin was destroyed, and Arijani was unharmed. Thus Arijani learned that the boon he had extorted from his father—that no rakshasa could harm him—was still in effect.

The second person to attempt to assassinate Arijani was a man whose beloved son had been Chosen. That night Arijani learned that he could not be

harmed by Sri Rajians. Only later did Arijani realize that Ravana's Bane had gone missing.

The third assassination attempt came from a foreigner who had been Chosen. That night Arijani learned that he could, in fact, be harmed by foreigners, and foreigners have not been Chosen subsequently.

In 714BC, another foreigner attempted to kill Arijani with Ravana's Bane. This attempt drove Arijani into his paranoia about foreigners. Afterward, Arijani had the Dark Sisters take the Bane to Tvashtipur and hire a smith to melt it down. The resultant silver mass was taken into a swampy area of the jungle and buried.

In 722BC, Roger Pembrooke ventured into Bahru and shot Arijani with his elephant gun. The considerable damage which his elephant gun inflicted upon the darklord did not, in the end, save Pembrooke.

In 738BC, Ravana's Bane resurfaced, apparently restored to its original form as a crossbow bolt, only to be melted down, only to be reforged again. It was a whole thing. Foreigners attempted to kill him. They failed.

Arijani's Torment

Maharaja Arijani is cursed such that, no matter how great his skills with the illusory *masquerade* are, he always appears as someone (or something) frightening to his viewer. While this might seem to be a very slight curse indeed, recall that Arijani grew up excluded by rakshasa society because of his human mother. He overthrew the rakshasas to earn a place in human society, and now he cannot hide his rakshasa nature from the humans.

The natural assumption might be that Arijani would find social outlet among the Dark Sisters, but that outlet is thwarted by the simple fact that most of the Dark Sisters don't actually like him. They tolerate him because of his raw power and his favor with their goddess, but the only ones who voluntarily spend time with him are those who think they can use him for their own purposes. (They are wrong in that.) Even his mother shows him a cold kind of fondness.

Since he cannot mingle among the people of Sri Raji, what does Arijani do all day? He does often pray to Kali. (By himself. He has learned that the Dark Sisters do not want him underfoot during their own prayers.) Sometimes he goes hunting in the ruins of Bahru. He prefers stalking Verggasyas and other monsters, but if no more exciting prey presents itself he is not above killing human survivors who lurk in the city. Other times he smokes a hookah, losing himself in hazy opium dreams. Mostly, though, he uses his Third Eye to scry upon his land or upon neighboring Saragoss.

In addition, Arijani is now compelled to consume a living, sentient creature on each of the three nights of the new *nirguna* moon. Sometimes he revels in his rakshasa power, but more often he is repulsed by the hunger which marks him as kin to his dire enemies. Most months he consumes someone who has been Chosen as his victim. However, if the evening showers fail to fall, as sometimes happens, then the Chosen must be set free. (The Dark Powers afflict great pain upon Arijani if he ignores this supposed omen from Kali.) However, even on those nights he must still consume someone, and one of the Dark Sisters becomes his victim.

Current Sketch

If asked what has changed in the generations since he killed the avatar of Ravana, Arijani would roar with laughter and insist that nothing significant has changed. The world is exactly as it should be.

He deceives himself, of course, likely more than he deceives anyone who might dare to ask that question.

The Rajian Perspective of the Maharaja

Maharaja Arijani was born of Kali to destroy Ravana. He did so, and for that victory he now serves as the Maharaja of Sri Raji. He is also the high priest of Kali. He has served in both roles for generations, which does not surprise Rajians. After all, they expect a demigod to be unaging.

Rajians do not know that Arijani's father was an avatar of Ravana or that Arijani is himself a rakshasa. Adult Rajians believe that the Chosen of Kali are sacrificed to the goddess, regardless of what stories they tell their children. They assume that Arijani performs these sacrifices because of course he does. As the high priest of Kali, that is his *svadharma*. However, they do not realize that Arijani actually performs the sacrifice by consuming the Chosen.

Non-Player Characters

Non-Player Characters — At Large

This section details non-player characters who may be reasonably be found anywhere in Sri Raji, including any of the three cities. These NPCs are not affiliated with any particular trading company or secret society.

Daksh

Daksh was once a bandit, waylaying travelers near the village of Dibri. In fact, he was one of the bandits who killed Ayanna Hazra. However, when her spirit apparently lingered at the site of her death, his conscience was badly shaken. He gave up his life of robbery and murder and became a penitent. He wanders from village to village, offering physical labor for food. Many mistake him for an ascetic, but truly he is not. He seeks atonement, not enlightenment.

Gopal

The uncle of Peela and adoptive father of Adyita Chopra. He grew up within a hidden enclave of *keimi* (weretigers) somewhere in the Rajian jungle. He later became a monk of the Temple of Abundant Serenity. During the Temple's destruction, he stole Adyita away to safety.

See *The Bright Triad: Dr. Odd*.

Hollie "Holland" Armstrong

A Mordentish woman who ran away to sea at a young age, pretending to be a boy and calling herself "Holland" instead of "Hollie". She eventually rose to the position of first mate of *The Luck of the Goddess*. When the *Luck* accidentally sailed through the Emerald Stream, she was the person who successfully negotiated for the ship's repairs and brokered trade with the Rajians. In particular, she convinced the Dark Sisters to allow the foreigners to live. Over the course of negotiations, her true gender was revealed, and she has not bothered hiding herself since.

Hollie Armstrong was aboard the *Luck* when it departed Sri Raji, heading back through the Emerald Stream. However, after word spread across the Core that a passage to fabled Sri Raji had been discovered, she was hired by the Boritsi Trading Company to rediscover the Emerald Stream. She did so, but at the end of this trip she elected to stay in Muladi as a free agent. The BTC allowed this defection only because the priests of Muladi made it very clear that the BTC would conduct no further trade within Sri Raji otherwise. Hollie Armstrong has since eased the ruffled feathers by striking deals which were highly beneficial to the BTC despite the otherwise dominance of the Colonial Merchant Company.

Hollie Armstrong continues to act as a broker for all foreign trade companies which come to Sri Raji. This position has made her very wealthy and highly regarded among the Rajians. (She may be a *mleccha*, you know, but she has the soul of a *kshatriya*.)

Make no mistake: Hollie Armstrong is out for herself first and foremost. However, she does not feel that others need to lose for her to gain. She is fond of the win-win situation.

Nowadays Hollie Armstrong worships both Ezra and Puchan, and she sees no conflict in that dual devotion.

Over the years Armstrong has acquired a number of useful magic items. She habitually wears a *ring of mind shielding* (which hums in her brain every time someone tries to read her mind) and a *cloth-of-steel sari (AC4)*.

Dread Possibility — No Dread

Hollie Armstrong is exactly what she seems. After years of hiding herself as Holland, she finds this transparency bracingly liberating. She is not undead. She is not a lycanthrope or any other kind of shapeshifter. She is not in any way supernatural. Nor is she evil. She is simply someone who has managed to build herself a very comfortable life by arranging deals between various parties who want to make deals.

Hollie Armstrong might serve as an aid to any newcomers to Muladi. She will make certain that she earns a buck doing so, but she provides value for the expense.

Katyayani

An Outlander, but one who worships Kali in her gentle and auspicious aspect. She is horrified by how the Rajians practice their faith. She preaches about Kali as she understands the goddess to be, which, of course, means that she is perpetually on the run from the Dark Sisters.

According to Katyayani, she hails from a land called Validan, but nobody in Sri Raji has ever heard of such a place.

Nayan Talukdar

The thief who stole the Dhusala Diamond from the Caverns of Wealth. While he has operated out of Pakat recently, he was actually born in Muladi.

Nayan Talukdar possesses a *ring of invisibility*.

Radjiff Chandor

A gifted hunter. An infected weretiger. Widower husband of Meedga Chandor. Hunted by the Dark Sisters and the Stalkers alike.

Radjiff Chandor is pleased to hire himself out as a guide for hunting expeditions, but be warned that what he's hunting may not be what his employers are hunting.

See *Children of the Night: Werebeasts*.

Rajesh Hudha

Rajesh Hudha is a near-legendary figure among the people of Pakat and its surrounding villages. He was once a raja, but he has given up his title to aid the impoverished. He steals food from the East Rajian Trading Company and distributes it to the hungry. Even though the threat of starvation no longer looms so heavily across western Sri Raji, the Pakati still hail him as a folk hero.

In truth, Rajesh Hudha is no raja, nor has he ever been. He is simply a bandit. He steals much more than just food, and even with food he only gives away enough to preserve his reputation. The bulk of what he steals feeds and enriches his group of bandits.

Roger Pembrooke

Roger Pembrooke came to Sri Raji via the Mists many years ago. He stands out as a foreigner, not only because of his pale skin and his russet-colored hair but also because he makes very little attempt to fit in. He prefers to speak Mordentish, but he rarely can because nobody understands him. You'd think he'd be better at speaking Rajian than he is, but he isn't. He always carries his trusty Schultheiss rifle, which he calls his "elephant gun" because the first creature in Sri Raji that he killed was an elephant. (A pygmy elephant, but still.)

Pembrooke tells many tales of the great hunts in which he has participated. He speaks of hunting elephants and weretigers ("Always carry an ivory knife, m'boy, if you know what's good for you.") and snake-women in the Accursed City of Bahru. He even tells of being honored at a distant village where they let him taste a drink they called *amrita*. He claims the drink made him immortal, because he has lived for decades since without aging. ("Yes, I've got a little grey in my mustache, but it was there before the

amrita, and it hasn't spread since.") His tales are too fanciful to be believed.

Truth be told, though, Pembrooke did venture into Bahru. He even unloaded his trusty Schultheiss into Arijani's chest before the rakshasa killed him. He remembers nothing of dying, but he did indeed die, and he has returned as a ghost. Ghosts in Sri Raji are usually material, and there is little to give away that Pembrooke is undead. Except, of course, the way his corpse and possessions discorporate whenever he gets killed again, not to mention the way he always returns after dying.

Roger Pembroke no longer casts a shadow. He has not noticed. The Rajians around him have.

Pembrooke should be played as the worst of the British Raj, except from Mordent. He may be used to add firepower to a party which needs some, but his foolhardiness should inevitably lead to yet another horrible death.

Sica

A dread doppelganger who has come to Sri Raji as part of the Carlyle Trading Company. It was known as Simon Carr at birth, but that is one identity which it no longer uses. It most commonly poses as Griffith Rutt and Dwaraka Buksh.

Soma Purusha

A Rajian sorcerer and explorer. Knows something of Ravana's Bane.

See *Van Richten's Arsenal*.

Yuvan

A bodyguard often hired by Hollie Armstrong when she travels.

Non-Player Characters — Expatriate

This section details characters native to Sri Raji (or who otherwise have spent significant time in Sri Raji) who have subsequently departed, sometimes due to travel, sometimes due to death.

Abelhous Nicholsi

Originally a professor of botany and biology at the University of Il Aluk, later a professor at the University of Il Aluk in Exile at Karg. He once took a sabbatical to study the deadly plants of Sri Raji.

Professor Nicholsi died some time between 751BC and 755BC. The circumstances of his death are not known. There is no evidence that his death was mysterious in any way, but that fact is itself mysterious, is it not?

Nicholsi worked with Professor Ekavali Giri during his sabbatical in Sri Raji. She worked to ensure that his thirteenth book, *Native Flora of the Tropical Forests of Sri Raji*, was published after his death.

See *The Book of Souls*.

Adyita Chopra

A water genasi who fled Sri Raji with her adopted sister Peela to avoid the fatal attention of the Dark Sisters.

See *The Bright Triad: Dr. Odd*.

Adramelech

A dread doppleganger who lived in Sri Raji for a time but now makes its home in Port-a-Lucine in Dementlieu.

See *Van Richten Society Research Files: Doppelgangers*.

Avatar of Ravana

Many decades ago, an avatar of Ravana became Mahiji's lover and, subsequently, Arijani's father. He was killed by Arijani in 670BC.

A second avatar of Ravana manifested during the Great Conjunction. Arijani's death at this avatar's hands was averted only by the collapse of the conjunction.

Presumably Mahiji knew her lover's name, but she has never shared it with her son. Since Arijani refuses to call him "Father", he always refers to him as "the avatar of Ravana". As for the second avatar, he

presumably had a name as well, but he never mentioned it during his brief, violent encounter with Arijani.

James Wells

The captain of *The Luck of the Goddess*. Good at navigation; not so good with diplomacy. He was the first captain to become widely known for piloting his vessel through the Emerald Stream. Accidentally, of course, but nonetheless he is credited in some circles for "discovering" Sri Raji. Holland Armstrong was his first mate on that journey.

Jaspor Picalinni

A painter. Arranged for a group of Rajian monks to create a magical palette for him. Annoyed the monks so badly that they cursed the palette.

To elaborate: Jaspor Picalinni was stolen by the Mists in approximately 732BC, years before the Emerald Stream opened. At that time foreigners were still threatened with death. Picalinni sought refuge at a nearby temple, The Temple of Beauty and Grace. The ascetics there accepted his presence, but only reluctantly, and only after he had demonstrated his own artistic talent.

Picalinni was awestruck by the quality of the paintings and sculptures on display at the Temple. He begged to be allowed to learn at the feet of the Temple's artists, and they gladly accepted him as a student. Unfortunately, though, Picalinni covered his own sense of inferiority with arrogance. He refused to admit that his techniques could be improved; he blamed his mediocrity upon the materials at hand. The ascetics swiftly lost patience with him, but having offered him their hospitality, they felt they could not simply abandon him to the Dark Sisters. Instead, they made a bargain. Since Picalinni felt the available materials were holding him back, they would provide him with a special palette, and then he would leave to find his way back to the Core where he claimed his talents would be properly appreciated. For his part, Picalinni accepted the bargain not because he truly valued the palette but because he thought it would make a good conversation piece back home.

And so the ascetics of the Temple of Beauty and Grace created the palette, and they enchanted it, and then—because Picalinni had only become more obnoxious over the course of his stay—they cursed it. (They did not consider this a violation of the hospitality that they had offered; the ascetics of the Temple, like the celestial servants they emulated, were too much driven by whim and impulse.) Picalinni accepted the palette and departed.

Picalinni's cursed palette eventually made its way to the Core.

See *Children of the Night: Werebeasts*, p.74-75.

Laasya

The first Worldbreaker (described in *Champions of Darkness*), who left Sri Raji in 740BC after a doctrinal disagreement with Mahiji.

Laasya was one of the Dark Mothers, and she took part in the defense against Ravana's avatar during the Grand Conjunction. Although she survived, she suffered a crippling wound. As such, she reincarnated into the next attractive young woman to be Chosen. The Chosen woman could well have been an apsara: lithe, beautiful, and strong. Perhaps something of her personality lingered after Laasya took her body, because Laasya became enamored with dancing. In addition, her attitude grew disrespectful (or so Mahiji felt). Laasya decided that Kali was urging the Dark Sisters to bring the Kali Age to its violent conclusion. Mahiji disagreed, and eventually Laasya simply left Bahru and Sri Raji.

Pasha Bella

A weretiger, but not one of the Stalkers. She is a member of the Kargat. The mother of two cubs. She was in Il Aluk during the Requiem. Presumably she has become one of the Slain in Necropolis.

See *Death Ascendant*.

Peela

The adopted sister of Adyita Chopra who fled with her to the Core. She belonged to a hidden enclave of weretigers somewhere in the Rajian jungle.

See *The Bright Triad: Dr. Odd*.

Raja Singh

An infected wereleopard. Afflicted with a reversed form of the curse which leaves him in bestial form *except* during a full moon. Currently travelling with the Carnival. (See *Carnival*, p.21-22.)

Vijaya

Vijaya is a Dark Sister whom Mahiji has sent through the Emerald Stream to learn about the wider world. In her several years abroad, she has not at all forgotten her mission, and she still sends regular reports back to Mahiji. However, she has learned of Laasya and her Worldbreakers, and the course of her explorations has been greatly determined by the trail of clues that the Worldbreakers have inadvertently left. Vijaya considers Laasya's teachings to be anathema, and she seeks to put an end to her heretical teachings.

Sites of Interest

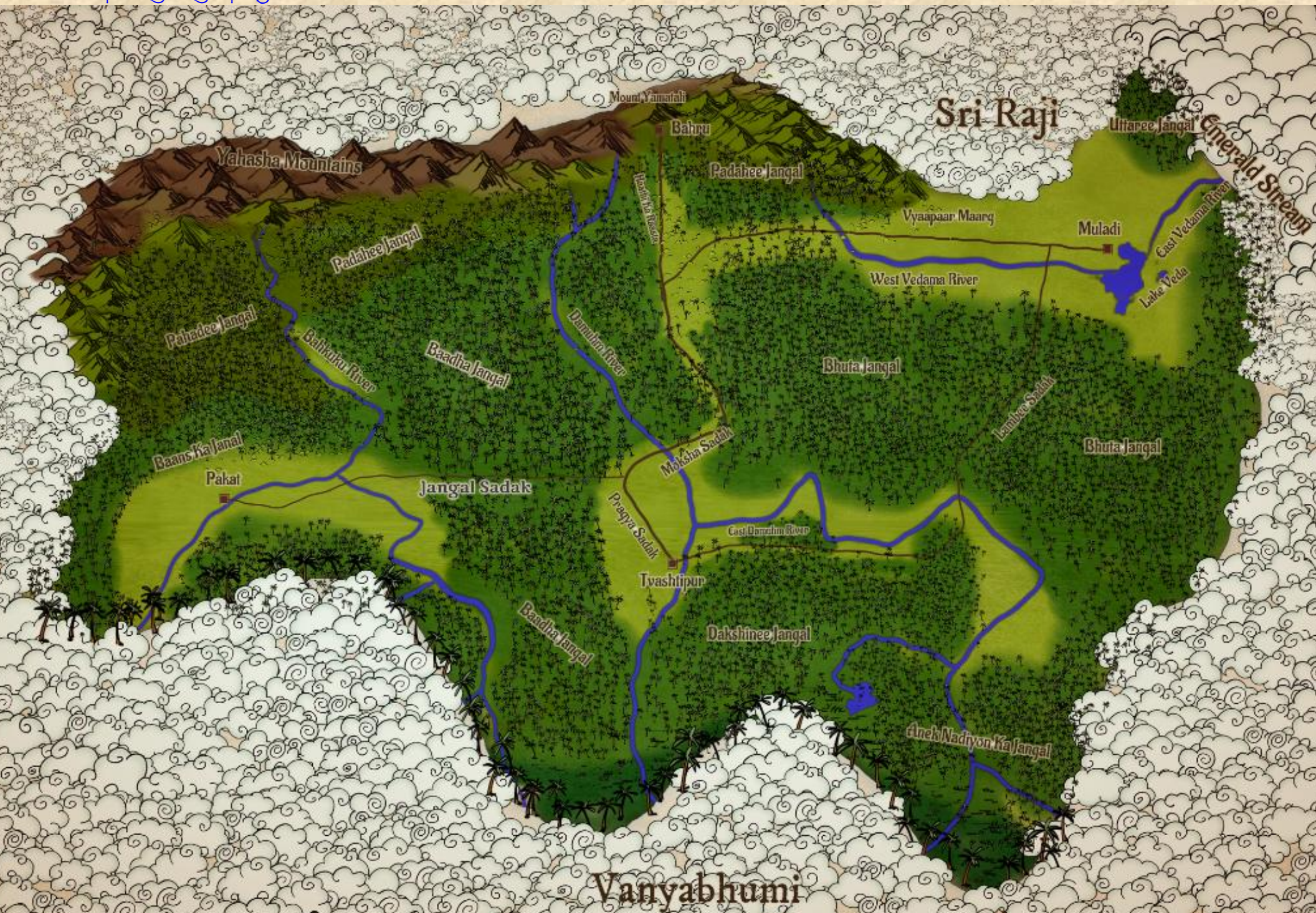
See the associated maps. **Map 1** identifies cities, roads, and jungles. **Map 2** identifies all sites which are well known to those who travel across Sri Raji. **Map 3** includes less-well-known sites. Some seasoned travelers can find their way to the sites on Map 3, but not all.

However, note that not all sites are included on the associated maps. Sri Raji is a land of mysteries (and contradictions), after all.

Legend Maps 2 & 3

1. Bahru
2. Muladi
3. Pakat
4. Tvashtipur
5. Bayar
6. Black Baori
7. Chatra of the Crossroads
8. Damuhm Baori
9. Kelashivir
10. Matra
11. Piriyaganj
12. Rock of Indra
13. Balua Pathar Quarry
14. Dibri
15. Jalanka
16. Kurtepeta
17. Nanjivaram
18. Pradmapura
19. Red-Earth Field
20. Roadside Shrine of Ayanna Hazra
21. Shrine of the Serpents
22. Stupa of the West
23. Temple of Beauty & Grace
24. Tirubani
25. Caverns of Wealth
26. Damuhm Waterfall
27. Gaudalur
28. Loha Mountain
29. Vanyabhumi Lodge
30. Temple of Abundant Serenity

Map 1: geography



Map 2: well-known places

Map 3: Complete / DM's map

Bahkuku River

The westernmost of Sri Raji's major rivers. The Bahkuku flows from the Yahasha Mountains, past Pakat, and across the southern border into the Wildlands.

Where it passes through the Baadha Jangal, the Bahkuku follows a treacherously rocky path. Most vessels do not dare attempt to navigate this stretch of the river. However, shortly before reaching the village of Tirubani, the Bahkuku's path becomes much clearer, and small boats may travel upon its waters.

Bahru

Population: 100 (99% Human, 1% Rakshasa)
Resources: death

Bahru, the Accursed City, was built by rakshasas, and the Rajians knew to stay far away. Subsequent to the destruction of the rakshasas, the Dark Sisters of Kali have claimed Bahru as their seat of power, and the Rajians still know to stay away.

Most of the buildings in Bahru were constructed from a stone which appears to be similar to marble. Some buildings are veined with black; others, with some copper-colored mineral; yet others are unveined. This stone is unusually strong, allowing the buildings to reach higher than mere human constructions. Moreover, their walls are thinner, giving them a deceptively frail appearance. Towers are rounded at the base, often spiralling at the top. Arches are common. Decorative elements are carved from sandstone, often painted with colors that generally remain bright despite decades of neglect. All in all, the buildings' appearance is very similar to traditional Rajian architecture but possessed of a more-than-mortal grace.

Despite two significant city-wide battles—the Purge of Rakshasas in 670BC and the Rebirth of Kali in 740BC—much of Bahru remains undamaged. Some towers have fallen. Some walls have wholly or partially collapsed. However, even the damaged stone resists grime, washing clean in the evening rains. Lianas and other vegetation may cover exposed surfaces, but their tendrils cannot penetrate the substance of the stone.

However, the beauty of Bahru is cold and dangerous. Certain traces of rakshasa influence remain, traps constructed of or hidden within deadly realistic illusions, the worst of which leave feeble mortals drooling helplessly while their minds wander in mazes without exit. Yet somehow these traps are still less deadly than the feral inhabitants of Bahru: dire hyenas, spirit nagas, ophidians, and more. Not to mention the Dark Sisters and Maharaja Arijani himself.

Bahru features three temples. All Rajians know of **Mahakala**, the temple where Arijani lives and worships. It is recognizable by its distinctive tiger-face entrance. It features many shrines within, although the heart of Mahakala is dedicated to Kali, of course.

Although the Dark Sisters help to guard Arijani and defend Mahakala, they do not actually live in Mahakala with him. (Truthfully, the presence of so many women annoys him.) Instead they have their own building nearby. The **Hall of the Mother** (sometimes known as the Hall of Sisters) is a combination dormitory and temple dedicated to Kali.

The third temple is the **Astrasya Mandiram**, which stands on the opposite end of Bahru from Mahakala and the Hall of the Mother. During the years that the rakshasas occupied Bahru, the Astrasya Mandiram was dedicated to Ravana, but it was abandoned after the rakshasas were destroyed. In 738BC, when Ravana's Bane was recaptured, Arijani ordered the Dark Sisters to guard it in the Astrasya Mandiram.

However, the temple was reabandoned after Ravana's Bane vanished during the Rebirth of Kali in 740BC.

Dread Possibility — The Children of Vergga

Bahru was once home to a spirit naga named Vergga. Although Vergga herself was destroyed by a party of foreigners in 738BC, she left behind a clutch of eggs. Those eggs have hatched, and the survivors have grown. These **Verggasyas**, as they call themselves, still occupy Bahru along with their ophidian followers. They hunt the human survivors and war amongst each other for supposed supremacy of the city. They keep safely away from Mahakala, knowing that the massed Dark Sisters could destroy them. However, by the same token the Dark Sisters are unwilling to pursue these nuisances into their lairs.

Balua Patthar Quarry

A quarry located within the uplands and foothills of Sri Raji's Yahasha Mountains. The quarry was once a well-used source of granite and sandstone, which allowed for a certain characteristic of Rajian architecture and sculpture of the past now known as "Rajian polish". The quarry itself was not always a quarry: it was first discovered, in the time of rakshasa dominance, as an abandoned rock-cut cave full of chambers filled with inscriptions dedicated to past kings and past gods. Most of the carvings are defaced, but a few remain intact. However, with the rise of the Mists around Sri Raji and the increasingly hostile wildlife of the very-nearby jungle, the quarry had to be abandoned. Among the folk of Tirubani and among merchants in Pakat, there is interest today in reclaiming the quarry and the secrets of "Rajian polish".

The Balua Patthar Quarry is otherwise a simple, albeit historically significant, quarry. No naga or monstrous spirits inhabit its depths. Granted, though, it does serve as a nice shelter for tigers or sloth bears.

Dread Possibility — Quarry Queries

The Colonial Merchant Company in Paridon has heard a rumor regarding the Balua Pathar Quarry. It is said that one of the inscriptions and carvings within the quarry belonged to a mighty king who could reliably see through the most potent illusions and disguises, magical or otherwise. Due to the paranoia in Paridon surrounding doppelgangers, this has gotten the company's attention. Even if these rumors were not true, such historical curiosities should surely belong in a museum in Paridon. Thus, the CMC may hire the PCs to explore the quarry and clear it out of any dangers within, so their own workers can move into the quarry and extract the wonders therein.

Of course, while no naga or monstrous spirits inhabit its depths, the kings of old made precautions. Namely, their spirits can possess and strengthen the tigers and sloth bears taking shelter in the quarry. Thus far, those possessed-and-strengthened tigers and sloth bears have driven out anyone who would reopen the quarry.

Bayar

Population: 450 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: cotton, dyes, cloth, musical instruments

A small village outside of Muladi, on the road to Bahru. The village itself is south of the Temple of Beauty and Grace, which is dedicated to gandharvas and apsaras. The Bayari specialize in clothing; they acquire much cotton from the cotton fields surrounding their village. Plants of indigo, haritaki, khair, palash, and madder provide the necessary homegrown dyes. The weavers, dyers, and other tailors of Bayar specialize in traditional clothing such as saris and dhotis, with the Bayari's unique clothing product being the jamdani. Additionally, because they are the closest settlement to the Temple of Beauty and Grace (while still being a significant distance away), the Bayari are also able to cater to the denizens of the temple (and occasionally receive

trade goods such as traditional musical instruments). Since the river flows into Lake Veda and their village is by the road leading to Muladi, the villagers also trade their woven cloths and musical instruments in Muladi. They usually exchange their own goods for Rajian silk sold in the marketplaces. Sometimes they sell them to outsiders beyond the Mists too.

When the white elephant of Bahru brings the sacrificial offering from Muladi towards Bahru, the instruments of the village play themselves. It's a mournful tone that echoes throughout the area. Some Bayari are horrified by this, while others feel it's a respectful acknowledgement of the sacrifices made to Kali.

The Black Baori

The last stepwell one sees before the Haathi ka Raasta terminates at the Accursed City of Bahru. It is up the road from the Chatra of the Crossroads.

Overgrown banyan trees and other vegetation dig their roots deep into the surrounding stone while slowly covering the stepwell. Errant monkeys, langurs, and pigeons can be found bathing here. Otherwise, the cool silence of still water is paired with mute carvings of elephants, honey-colored old stones, and dust particles dancing in the filtering sunlight. It's a deeply calming sight. However, it becomes less calming when you remember that this stepwell is the last thing most get to see before arriving at the Accursed City of Bahru. And only the keenest of ears can hear the slight sound of footsteps right behind your own...

Dread Possibility — Still Waters Run Deep

There is a spirit within the Black Baori who long ago suffered a great betrayal and was condemned to the bottom of the stepwell. The spirit allows none to drink from her waters without offering a prayer for her soul. If no one offers her anything, the waters turn black, and the previously calming influence of the stepwell becomes hypnotizing. So much so that visitors are enticed to throw themselves into its depths, where they are possessed and subsequently drowned.

When someone first approaches the water of the Black Baori, they will see the leaves that float on the surface of the water begin to form words, asking for an offering. The words remain for 15-30 seconds, but once that time passes, the spirit assumes that no one will make an offering, and she will become enraged.

If one wishes to fully avoid the spirit of the black waters, a *protection against evil and good* spell prevents the spirit from possessing oneself. The Black Baori's waters will still become black and rancid to taste, but one will be warded against the hypnotic effect. The spirit will rage impotently at those who do this and will shriek loudly. While this has no mechanical benefit, her scream is loud enough to attract the attention of others, stymieing anyone wishing to move discretely.

Interestingly, the Black Baori has irritated Arijani: Once, a Chosen of Kali decided to skirt their duty as a sacrifice by throwing themselves from the back of the white elephant and into the well. To this day, Arijani still feels quite cheated and would like to do something about the well and the spirit within. Nothing pleasant of course. And he would appreciate getting at least the remains of that Chosen.

Caverns of Wealth

Population: 200 (99.5% Guhyaka, 0.5% Human Proxy)
Resources: minerals, metals
An extensive set of caverns beneath the Yahasha Mountains. The home of Kahoda Dvivedi and his guhyaka followers. Kind of a temple to Kubera. Also kind of a pit.

However, the Caverns of Wealth are blessed with a bounty of minerals and metals, particularly rubies and silver. The rajas of Pakat would be delighted to get their hands on such wealth, and of course they are not alone in that.

Dread Possibility — Stolen Wealth

A man named Nayan Talukdar recently stumbled across the Caverns of Wealth. Hidden by the magic of his *ring of invisibility*, this brazen thief stole the Dhusala Diamond from its sacred chamber and escaped to tell the tale. In fact, he has told the tale to the rajas of Pakat, which has drawn far more attention than Kahoda Dvivedi will want.

Meanwhile, Kahoda Dvivedi has already discovered the theft. At the moment he is convinced that one of his guhyakas has taken the diamond as a prank, but he grows angrier each day that the diamond has not been returned. If he learns that the humans have taken it, the proxy and his guhyakas may go to war to reclaim it.

Kahoda Dvivedi

A proxy of Kubera, or at least he believes himself to be. In support of this belief, he does command a large tribe of loyal guhyakas. Kahoda Dvivedi and his guhyakas live in the Caverns of Wealth beneath the Yahasha Mountains.

Kahoda Dvivedi does not have a constant appearance. Most of the time he shifts between a portly, almost dwarvish human and a portly, almost dwarfish guhyaka. On the best days he appears as a strikingly handsome man. On the worst days he has extra limbs and grossly asymmetrical features. Frequently his shifts occur while he sleeps, but sometimes he holds a form for several days.

This physical instability reflects Kahoda Dvivedi's mental state. Ever since Sri Raji was drawn into the Land of Mists, he has been tormented by the isolation from his god. On his worst days he is highly paranoid, suspecting everyone of intended theft. On his best days he is equally generous, bestowing gifts —particularly mercy—upon his subjects and guests. Fortunately, his closest advisor, the guhyaka Nabhi, has grown adept at handling Kahoda's mood swings.

Because Ravana once stole Kubera's treasures and lands, Kahoda Dvivedi stands opposed to the rakshasa god. He holds no such grudge against the Dark Sisters.

Harit

A guhyaka spy and assassin. He is adept at disguising himself as human. Sent by Nabhi to retrieve the Dhusala Diamond, which was recently stolen from the Caverns of Wealth.

Nabhi

The closest advisor to Kahoda Dvivedi. A guhyaka of uncommon wisdom, particularly when it comes to managing his patron's moods.

Chatra of the Crossroads

Nobody would dare found a village at the intersection of the Vyaapaar Maarg, Moksha Sadak, and the Haathi ka Raasta; it is entirely too close to The Accursed City. However, as travel across Sri Raji has increased in recent decades, a chatra (waystation) has been built to afford some shelter for weary travelers.

The chatra is little more than a thatched roof propped up by a thick clay brick wall facing the west and a pair of bamboo poles to the east. Those travelers who use the Chatra regularly, such as the

Easties, often bring materials to repair the thatching or replace the bricks, particularly after the monsoon season.

Visitors to the chatra sometimes find a bowl of fruit waiting for them against the western wall when they first arrive. Nobody knows who supplies this food. Most visitors assume it is a beneficient spirit. Historically speaking, most chatras were operated by temples, so perhaps the assumption is a natural one to make.

The fact that this human-built shelter is still standing, despite its proximity to Bahru, is widely held as evidence that Maharaja Arijani drove all rakshasas from the land.

Damuhm Baori

Though most stepwells are located far from water sources as a practical measure, this particular stepwell is not too far away from the East Damuhm River. It was built long ago, before the coming of the rakshasas, but fell into disrepair. Originally it was intended to help purify the waters of the East Damuhm River, which was suffering from a virulent waterborne pestilence. The design of the stepwell was considered an important architectural and engineering marvel, and ultimately prevented further outbreaks of pestilence in Tvashtipur and the surrounding villages. After an unusually prolonged drought (lasting from 702-704BC), the University of Tvashti became understandably interested in exploring various methods of water conservation. Efforts were made to restore the stepwell and even improve upon its architecture. Since its full restoration (lasting from 703-708BC), the stepwell has been frequented by the occasional traveler outside of Tvashtipur as well as by Tvashtipurans venturing outside the walls of their city. With the establishment of the East Rajian Trading Company, the stepwell has been seeing much more traffic and use. Pavilions and arcades have been added to the topmost levels, coupled with historical carvings on the bas-reliefs. The University of Tvashti is particularly proud of their renovations to the latticework of interlinked stairways. They claim it gives the baori a sense of geometry that borders on the impossible. This pairs nicely with how the steps on all sides topple towards the bottom of the tank, arranged in an intricate criss-cross pattern that recalls the facets of a cut diamond.

Damuhm River

"River of Blood." A major river which traverses central Sri Raji. The Damuhm flows from the Yahasha Mountains, past Tvashtipur, and across the southern border into the Wildlands. Along the way, the East Damuhm branches off from the Damuhm.

Because of its depth and width, the Damuhm is the most navigable river in Sri Raji. However, its current only looks gentle. Its waters can be dangerously strong for the unwary.

The so-called "River of Blood" derives its name from the aftermath of Maharaja Arijani's slaughter of the rakshasas of Bahru. On that day the river supposedly ran red with the blood of the deceased. Since then, the Damuhm has been considered sacred to Kali.

Every year the waters of the Damuhm darken on the anniversary of Maharaja Arijani's victory over Ravana. That's what the Rajians claim, anyway, even if nobody knows for certain when that anniversary really occurs.

Damuhm Waterfall

The Damuhm river originates from here. It starts off smooth but becomes more turbulent as it nears the waterfalls. Once it reaches the drop-off, the water surges around big rocks and cascades down in three separate, gorgeous plumes.

From this majestic waterfall, legend has it that a misty “phantom-river” that connects all of the waterways of Sri Raji to one another will appear. If led by an experienced boat-captain, this can speed up the journey from one corner of Sri Raji to another from what could be hours or days to mere moments. But even though one needs an experienced boat-

captain to navigate it, it is not known explicitly what is needed to summon the phantom-river.

Dread Possibility — The Easy Way Out

It is said that by following this metaphysical causeway, one can escape the cycle of karma entirely. This is, of course, completely wrong: The lost river seduces those who seek the "easy way out". If the path to enlightenment is found within the self, then this is the heretical outer path that leads the would-be aspirant straight to Saragoss.

To represent this mechanically, consider how many Powers Checks the would-be aspirant has made (regardless of success or failure), particularly any Powers Checks related to transgressions which hold an especial weight in Rajian culture (such as the disruption of a sacrifice). If the number is 3 or above, then the PC is on the heretical outer path.

The entrance to the phantom-river may be found by sailing upstream directly into the base of the Damuhm Waterfall. Prayer may or may not be a necessary component, but certainly it seems appropriate to pray that the torrent of water does not destroy the boat and its occupants. Those who survive find themselves seized by the spray and mists of the waterfall. Despite the utter lack of visibility, the boat's pilot must then twist the vessel into the direction of the target waterway. If all goes well, then the vessel is carried to its destination, which may be anywhere in Sri Raji, whether it is a waterway or otherwise. Of course, if the crew's karma is poor, it's straight to Saragoss with them.

Any boat the size of a raft or larger would be sufficient to navigate this phantom-river.

Dibri

Population: 500 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: rice, bajra, lumber

A rural village on the Lambee Sadak, before a small bridge that crosses the East Damuhm River and flanked on both sides by jungle. It's not far from the roadside shrine of Ayanna Hazra.

Like most rural villages in Sri Raji, agriculture is the main economic focus. The banks of the East Damuhm River allow for the cultivation of rice and bajra (known as pearl millet to foreigners). Also, the jungles on all sides have allowed for significant harvesting of lumber. The village also occasionally hosts workers and other administrative officials from Muladi or Tvashtipur who need to maintain or check on the Lambee Sadak's bridge, which is large enough that riverboats carrying cargo can still pass beneath it and traverse the East Damuhm River if need be. This was the case during the earthquakes of the Great Upheaval, which severed the Lambee Sadak's bridge and connection between the three main cities of Sri Raji (with similar damage happening to the Jangal Sadak heading towards Pakat).

The village is led by **Chaitali Lahiri**, a kind middle-aged woman who likes to weave baskets and other goods when not helping with bajra cultivation. She handles relations between Dibri and officials from Muladi, Tvashtipur, and other villages who may visit. She also handles visits from factions like the Dark Sisters, which she has no choice but to tolerate. Aside from her, **Vinod Acharya** leads half of the village men in rice and bajra farming, while **Partho Vibushan** leads the other half of the village's men in cutting down the nearby trees. **Bhabani Panja**, one of the elderly women of the villages, helps teach the children basic knowledge all Rajians should know.

Finally, **Leena and Falgu Hazra**, mother and father of the deceased **Ayanna Hazra**, also reside in Dibri. Leena travels at least once per week to the roadside shrine which has arisen where her daughter was killed. She takes solace from the tales of her

daughter's spirit interceding to help others. Falgu's grief stabs anew every time he returns to the scene of Ayanna's brutal death. Nonetheless, he accompanies his wife to the shrine at least weekly. (He does try to dissuade her from visiting any more often, though.)

East Damuhm River

A river which branches off from the Damuhm.

Emerald Stream

A moderately reliable, two-way Mistway which connects Sri Raji to the Sea of Sorrows. Most of the time it opens safely into the middle of Lake Veda. However, sometimes the Mistway drifts slightly, and vessels are deposited in the West or East Vedama Rivers nearby. As a consequence of such drift, a minor ship repair industry has arisen in Muladi.

From the Sea of Sorrows, the Emerald Stream opens only during a storm (or at least a solid rain).

From Sri Raji, the Emerald Stream only opens when a vessel approaching the Mistway is helmed by someone foreign to Sri Raji. The Emerald Stream may have existed for many years before its revelation, but it was obscured by this strict condition from the Rajian side.

The Emerald Stream was first discovered in 741BC as part of the aftermath of the Rebirth of Kali.

Gaudalur

Population: 500 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: tea plants

Gaudalur is a village located deep in the Bhuta Jangal, just north of one of the many bends of the East Damuhm River. No major roads pass nearby, and so it is largely an isolated and self-sufficient community. In fact, Gaudalur would be even more isolated except that it harvests a particularly well-regarded variety of the tea plant. While the Gaudaluri usually enjoy the leaves by chewing them, the brahmins and rajas of the cities of Sri Raji steep the leaves in hot water to make a stimulating beverage.

Because Gaudalur is located far from the roads, the Gaudaluri typically trade with the Easties along the Lambee Sadak. The meeting point is well known to the Gaudaluri and the Easties, but they try to keep it secret from bandits and other trading companies.

Gaudalur is also known as the village where Aiyanar is worshipped. Rumors of Aiyanar's horses have reached the ears of the rajas just as the tea leaves have reached their lips. These rajas are reticent to believe that Aiyanar has only one horse and it is spiritual in nature. They would much rather believe that they could purchase (or otherwise acquire) such magnificent beasts for themselves.

Haathi Ka Raasta

"The Elephant's Way." The road which leads northward from the Moksha Sadak into the Yahasha Mountains and eventually to Bahru.

Jalanka

Population: 700 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: oranges

A village of stilt houses built near mangroves and at a small pond fed by the Bahkuku river. The river itself splits off into two branches, with both streams flowing into the vast river network of the southern Wildlands. Certain animals and fishes, such as dugongs and a unique river dolphin with an elongated snout, are found nowhere else but here.

The village was built a century ago by refugees fleeing invading empires. Guided by a vision, the leaders of the refugee group found the mangrove forests and settled near them, relying on the bounty of the mangroves and of the river to sustain their people. Shunning the outside world, the villagers thrived for a time. Now, after the Rebirth of Kali, merchants and explorers from Pakat, Tvashtipur, and surrounding villages increasingly attempt to trade with the villagers of Jalanka, but to little avail.

Jalanka's leaders are distrustful of all, and they seem to have a secret to protect.

Dread Possibility — The Sunken Temple

The vision that drove the refugees to settle at Jalanka was granted to them by the god Varuna. In addition to granting the refugees this vision, Varuna also gave the refugees a snake-pasha (a magical lasso in the form of a serpent) to be kept within the home of the village elder as a sign of Varuna's patronage. In exchange for peace and security from outsiders, the villagers were tasked by Varuna with restoring a temple which had been lost beneath the waters of the nearby pond. To aid with the restoration, Varuna sent a creature known as a makara which can lower the waters of the pond to provide the villagers with access to the sunken temple.

Unfortunately, before the temple restoration could be completed, Sri Raji was drawn into the Mists. As a result of the sudden separation from its deity, the makara's sanity has withered. It has become convinced that the proper way to fix any problem is to flood it. In part because flooding would destroy Jalanka and in part because of the debt that the villagers feel they still owe Varuna, the villagers wish to restore the makara's sanity—or at least convince it that there are no problems in the land and so flooding is not necessary. Thus far the people of Jalanka have only managed to distract the makara with great offerings of food. The food is sent on straw boats towards the sunken temple, where it is lazily dragged into the temple via whirlpool. Fortunately the makara sleeps for long stretches after its consumes the offerings, but whenever it awakens it interrogates the village elder to determine whether there isn't truly a great evil in need of being washed away.

Suraj Sathirathu, the village elder, has spent the majority of his life trying to find a way to do what Varuna has asked of their village, but he is now quite ill. He is convinced that the answer to Varuna's demand is to enter the sunken temple with the snake-pasha to bind the makara until it can be reminded of its true purpose. Unfortunately, the waters of Jalanka Pond are quite deep and murky, and Suraj is loath to sacrifice his fellow villagers on what could be a suicide mission.

However, other village elders, particularly **Nimrata Bharadwaj**, disagree with Suraj's judgment. In Nimrata's opinion, she would rather try her chances enlisting the aid of the Dark Sisters and great Kali. To deal with the errant servitor of a deity, one ought to use the servitors of an even greater deity. Besides, Jalanka's isolation has done nothing to resolve this issue. Regardless, the clock is ticking. Once Suraj passes, Nimrata will be the one to commune with the makara before the sacrificial food offerings.

Unfortunately Suraj is not certain that Nimrata can lie to the makara as well as he can.

Jangal Sadak

"Jungle Road." The road which leads from Pakat to the intersection with the Moksha Sadak and the Pragya Sadak.

See *Quoth the Raven* Issue 28.

Kelashivir

Population: 60 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: bananas, rubber, lumber

A banana and rubber plantation just off the shores of Lake Veda, at the mouth of the Vyaapaar Maarg. The plantation itself has been around since 700BC, but over the past twenty years it has started to grow. Because of the explosion of trade from the Emerald Stream, the foremen are considering whether to expand the plantation into a potential lumber camp, working in collaboration with carpenters and shipwrights of Muladi's docks and Muladi's many homes. The lumber harvested by the camp would be

used to repair ships damaged by the passage through the Emerald Stream (as going from an ocean to a narrow river can be hard on any ship's keel and hull). Additionally, much of the architecture of the thorps and hamlets surrounding Muladi and Lake Veda (and even those within Muladi, albeit poorer) is made from wood, further justifying the foremen's idea.

Also in recent years, Rishu Lata has discovered the value of rubber trees. Although Rajians historically had little use for rubber, Rishu Lata has learned that it is an important commodity for foreigners traveling to and from Sri Raji. Should there ever be a shortage of bananas due to pestilence or a need to diversify from lumber, Rishu Lata is pleased to see a useful alternative within reach.

Fateen Ghoshal

A tall, portly man with leathery skin and roughly callused hands. He belongs to the Shudra caste.

Despite his missing fingers (which he claims he lost to a Dark Sister, but he really lost as a result of trying to do carpentry while half-awake), he is one of the best shipwrights Rishu Lata and the other foremen have had the pleasure of working with. He finds himself fascinated with the carpentry and construction behind the foreign vessels that arrive in Muladi, and he has to be reprimanded by his superiors (like Rishu Lata) when he gets too carried away asking technical questions and not doing his work.

Okab Murshid

A hairy man with a lean figure, sporting unkempt jet-black hair with graying sideburns and hazel eyes.

He belongs to the Shudra caste.

Though Kelashivir now caters to foreigners and their ships, Okab thinks this is unwise. Who knows when the Emerald Stream may disappear, disrupting their livelihoods? Or what if the foreigners have dastardly intentions? Better to stick to bananas and rubber, and even better to keep such precious resources within Sri Raji instead of shipping them off to somewhere unknown where they will be of no use.

Rishu Lata

The main foreman of Kelashivir. He belongs to the Vaishya caste.

Rishu Lata is bald but does not like to be reminded of this. He takes his work quite seriously and is always rigid in his posture.

Rishu Lata took great pride in the work of his fathers before him in cultivating bananas and rubber, but always wanted to stand out compared to them. He was one of the first foremen to take advantage of the Emerald Stream's new economic opportunities, and he hopes that with enough business, he'll have enough money to commission a pleasure yacht of his own to spend his twilight years on Lake Veda.

Kurtepeta

Population: 450 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: turmeric
A village not far from Pakat where turmeric is grown. Its inhabitants celebrate an annual festival which they call "Unchaining the Ghosts". During the first part of the festival, the Kurtepetans dance and sing to the ghosts, encouring them to find their way back to the path of reincarnation. During the second part, they attempt to drive away any lingering ghosts with the smell of burnt turmeric.

Approximately half of Kurtepetans want to enter an agreement with the East Rajian Trading Company much as nearby Pradmapura has. The other half notes the presence of armed Easties in Pradmapura and argues against an agreement.

Lake Veda

The largest lake in Sri Raji. The Vedama River runs into Lake Veda from the west and flows back out again to the east. The city of Muladi stands upon its shores, and the Emerald Stream opens at its center.

The shores of Lake Veda are dotted with many rice paddies. In addition, Lake Veda is frequently full of fish, which provide one of the staples of Muladi diet. However, the piscine population suffers periodic die-offs which leaves the city short of food. (When this happens the people of Muladi assume that their patron goddess, Rudri, is angry with them.) Fortunately Lake Veda also provides plenty of seaweed to offer sustenance until the fish population can recover.

Lambee Sadak

"The Long Road." The road which branches off from the Vyaapaar Maarg out of Muladi and heads southward to Tvashtipur. Unlike the other major roads of Sri Raji, much of the length of the Lambee Sadak is largely a corduroy road, constructed from logs laid perpendicular to the direction of travel. It is also poorly maintained, meaning that travel along the rotting logs may be more treacherous than if the Lambee Sadak were a simple mud road.

Loha Mountain

"The Mountain of Iron." A unique mountain within the Yahasha Mountain range. While Mount Yamatali is well known for Bahru and the temple of Mahakala, this mountain is much more likely to be overlooked. In truth, it contains massive stores of highly magnetic iron on the side facing Sri Raji. The draw is so strong that iron items all face the direction of the summit with a perceptible pull.

Rajians are unaware of this resource. If someone were to discover it, the need for foreign iron would be greatly diminished.

Mahapralaya

Population: 5 (80% Human, 20% Other)
Resources: knowledge

An observatory in the Yahasha Mountains staffed by five Celestines.

Given the astronomical inconsistencies of Sri Raji, the usual Celestine approaches do not work here. The five Celestines in residence are attempting to put together new paradigms in divination via the stars.

See *The Undead Sea Scrolls 2002* for more about the Celestines.

Matra

Population: 850 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: hospitality
The village of Matra began as a simple way station, established by Jaidev Matra. The way station evolved into a small settlement (about the size of a thorp) as Jaidev Matra convinced more of his family members and workers to join him at his way station. As he gained more success from reaping the benefits of his strategic position on the road (heading directly to Tvashtipur or Pakat and even to Bahru), his thorp grew into a village, albeit a very guarded one. They're happy to do trade with others and to host guests, but guests—particularly foreign ones—are not meant to overstay their welcome.

Jaidev Matra dislikes the East Rajian Trading Company. He understands the necessity of it, sure, and even the good business sense behind it. But before they started their venture, he had a very good business going for him, with a niche that was barely ever threatened. As Jaidev Matra grows older and more infirm, he must spend even more time considering his potential successor, and the Easties only make this harder for him. And no, he won't listen to their offers of being a branch of their organization; he has his pride as an independent merchant to consider!

Finally, Jaidev Matra has an interesting relationship with the Dark Sisters. Though the women seldom need to visit merchants to get what they need, let alone merchants in a small village like his, he's located close enough to Pakat and Tvashtipur to significantly facilitate their overland treks across Sri Raji. Jaidev also gets visits from the Stalkers,

interested in knowing what the Dark Sisters may have bought and where they might be headed. Jaidev knows that the Stalkers won't ever come to his rescue if word gets out of his relationship with them. Jaidev knows that he's just a bad coincidence away from a Dark Sister and a Stalker meeting one another at his village to buy wares. He diligently prays to and thanks the gods everyday that this hasn't happened.

Dread Possibility — Neutral Territory

... except that it has. Over the years, it would have been impossible for the Dark Sisters and the Stalkers to have *not* met one another in the village. Every time this happens, the Dark Sister and the Stalker have stared one another down, growled, and then gone their separate ways. Both factions understand that Matra is too useful as a rest-stop to ruin it for a minor and indecisive victory over the enemy.

Jaidev Matra

The founder and patriarch of the village of Matra. He belongs to the Vaishya caste.

Jaidev knows how to fast talk and haggle with the best of them, and has a keen eye for business opportunities. He cares deeply for the village of Matra, seeing it as a testament to his life's work as a trader and to lives everyone who believed in his vision enough to move here. Though he used to be much more active in his youth, his back has deteriorated significantly in recent years, necessitating his wife's help in getting around.

Ojopati Matra

Jaidev's son. He is taller than his father but shorter than he thinks a young man his age should be, a fact which irks him.

Ojopati wants to be the next village patriarch once his father passes, but everyone else in the village believes him to be woefully inexperienced and unqualified. They are correct. Ojopati Matra does not understand subtlety nor how to haggle assertively without being needlessly aggressive or insulting. Despite this, he gets along well with the other workers and shopkeepers of the village.

Yamini Matra

Jaidev's wife and the main host of any guests that stay at Matra. She has a square face, tanned skin, and brown eyes. She likes to wear red and yellow garments when she can.

Though she treats any guests well, she makes sure that they do not overstay their welcome. She disapproves of her husband's dealings with the Stalkers and Dark Sisters, but she understands that those factions' visits to the village are inevitable given Matra's location at an important crossroads.

Moksha Sadak

"The Enlightenment Road." The road which leads northward from the intersection with the Jangal Sadak and the Pragya Sadak.

See *Quoth the Raven* Issue 28.

Mount Yamatali

The highest peak within the Yahasha Mountains.

Muladi

Population: 8200 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: fish, seaweed

Officially Muladi is run by one of the rajas of the Kshatriya caste, but everybody—rajas, priests, and other citizens alike—knows that he is merely a figurehead. The priests of the Temple of Rudri choose the official ruler of the city, whom they replace at will. They hold the true power in the city, even if the current raja has to deal with most of the day-to-day details.

Despite the Temple's actual civil authority, Muladi is not an oppressed theocracy like Zhukar in G'Henna

or Touraine in Nidala. The priests believe that their most important duty is providing proper sacrifice to their goddess, but after that their second-most important duty is overseeing proper governance of the faithful.

Unsurprisingly, the heart of Muladi is the **Temple of Rudri**, a grand edifice built at the edge of Lake Veda. A set of stone steps, called the **Festival Ghats**, leads from the entrance to the Temple of Rudri down into the waters of Lake Veda. Many sacred rituals are performed upon these ghats.

At the fringes of Muladi proper, the **Funeral Ghats** are stone steps leading from the city's largest cemetery down to the lake. These ghats were once used for many of the most important funerals held in the city, but they have been claimed by the Skull-Bearers and are rarely used by anyone else.

Apart from the temple and its surrounding buildings, the most prominent district in Muladi may be the **Trade Quarter**. The representatives from the Colonial Merchant Company, Boritsi Trading Company, and Carlyle Trading Company have all established themselves in this area. Originally the priests of Rudri decreed that foreigners could only lease property in this quarter because it was one of the poorer areas of the city. However, the trading companies have invested heavily in the quarter, making it the most fashionable place for people of the vaishya and shudra castes to live and work.

The headquarters of the Colonials and Boritsis are at opposite corners of an intersection. The east/west street is now called **Colonial Street**, and the north/south street is called **Boritsi Street**. The headquarters of the Carlyles is a block away at the intersection of Colonial Street and the much smaller, newly renamed **Carlyle Lane**.

The city of Muladi has a number of gates, the largest of which is the **Gate of Tears**. This gate opens upon a large plaza, the **Plaza of the Marut**, at the center of which is an onyx statue of a burly man twelve feet tall. This statue is called the **Marut of Muladi**. During the monsoon season, it is said to smile, very very slightly. Otherwise, its mouth is a flat line, disapproving of all who enter through the Gate of Tears. People leave offerings of flowers and rice at the Marut's feet. It is also worshipped in many household shrines across Muladi.

Dread Possibility — The Marut at the Gate

If the city of Muladi itself is ever threatened, the Marut will reveal itself as an actual marut from Mechanus.

Abhra Odja

The High Priestess of Rudri in Muladi. She has reached the far side of middle age but has not yet reached elderly. She was appointed High Priestess twelve years ago, but she has no intention of yielding her position before she next discards her mortal shell.

Thirty years ago one of her biological sisters joined the Dark Sisters. Perhaps because of this perceived betrayal, Abhra Odja tends to approve of anything of which the Dark Sisters disapprove. In particular, she supports the idea of foreign trade coming through Muladi. Not that she is blind in her support; in truth, she is wary of the foreigners. She simply believes that foreigners are less harmful than the Dark Sisters.

Dipendra Vidyasagar

A high-ranking priest of Rudri in Muladi. He is often the faith's liaison with Hollie Armstrong, which might explain why he often knows more about secular matters than his fellow priests.

Haran

The leader of the Skull-Bearers. A surprisingly gentle man, given his frightful appearance and shocking behaviors.

Dread Possibility — An Interview with the Vetala

Bhairava, who is venerated by the Skull-Bearers, is also known as the lord of ghosts. Perhaps, then, it should be no surprise that Haran is actually a vetala, that is, a Rajian vampire. While most vetalas are evil, faithful worship of Bhairava is said to purify the worshipper, even if the worshipper is undead.

Such is the case with Haran. He is devoutly interested in doing what is good for the people of Sri Raji. For one, he firmly believes that the Skull-Bearers provide a viable pathway for teaching people to recognize the essential impermanence of the mortal world; it is not the best path for all, but it is the only path which some souls can find. Second, if the city of Muladi ever finds itself under attack, Haran will lead a small army of undead in its defense.

Ishwar Dey

A raja of Muladi. A highly proficient hunter and explorer. Perhaps one of the most widely travelled people in Sri Raji.

Ishwar Dey and the Stalkers have a live-and-let-live understanding. Dey has killed several Stalkers, never realizing that they were lycanthropes until they reverted to human form after they died. Ordinarily the Stalkers would have marked Dey for death, but Dey knew enough of the Stalkers to make a formal apology. He now identifies himself when confronted by a tiger.

Lekha Dey

The wife of Ishwar Dey. Like her husband, she is also a proficient hunter, although she is much less often found in the jungle now that she and Ishwar Dey have children. If anything ill ever befalls her husband, she will be certain to arrange for rescue, recovery, or revenge.

Nikhil Gupta

The current Raja of Muladi, not to be confused with the various other rajas in Muladi. He was appointed by Abhra Odja shortly after she became High Priestess of Rudri. Knowing that the Temple policy has often been to rotate Rajas simply to demonstrate that they can, Nikhil Gupta has spent the last eleven and a half years waiting for the axe to drop. Despite this constant source of uncertainty, Nikhil Gupta has striven to administer the city with fairness and competence. The good reputation of the Muladi city guard is largely due to his attentive oversight. In turn, his fairness, competence, and attentive oversight explain why he has not been replaced.

Utpal Datta

Utpal Datta is an ascetic. He claims to have studied at the feet of the wise beast Sharabha. He has recently become the guru of Harriet Hickling.

Dread Possibility — The Deceptive Guru

Utpal Datta is actually a monk/sorcerer, and he's more sorcerer than monk. He simply finds the role of ascetic more useful to assume. He does pretend that his sorcerous abilities stem from his asceticism. Few Rajians (at least outside of Tvashtipur) are equipped to recognize the difference.

Utpal Datta has become Harriet Hickling's guru with the expectation that he will be able to make her into his subservient disciple. From there he intends to take control of the Colonials. However, Hickling won't be quite the pushover that he expects.

Manjivaram

Population: 350 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: silk
A village in northwestern Sri Raji known for its silk. In part because the villagers fear the theft of their

secrets and silkworms, they are not at all welcoming of visitors, even other Rajians. Instead, they bring their wares to Pakat via the Bahkuku River or (more commonly, now that the East Rajian Trading Company has grown so successful) to the crossroads where the Vyaapaar Maarg meets the Moksha Sadak and the Haathi ka Raasta.

The waters of the Bahkuku are notoriously dangerous, and so the Nanjivarami take pride in their ability to navigate the rocky stretches safely.

Pakat

Population: 3500 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: spices
Alone among the cities of Sri Raji, Pakat is actually ruled by the rajas, not the priests.

Historically speaking, Pakat has been known for two traits. First, the jungles around Pakat are filled with particularly dangerous beasts, plants, and spirits. Second, the people of Pakat are perpetually starving, even the members of the highest castes. The first trait may explain why the rajas rule Pakat; warriors were necessary to defend the city against such threats. The second trait was true until the East Rajian Trading Company opened a regular trade route between Pakat and Muladi. Fortunately the city of Pakat is now much better fed with food from elsewhere across the domain, and spices and other rarities from western Sri Raji are now available in the east.

If you want to buy Rajian spices in the Land of Mists, the **Spice Market** of Pakat is absolutely the place to shop. While prices here have gone up ever since the East Rajian Trading Company demonstrated that there was a market, there remains no cheaper place to find turmeric, cumin, cardamom, cinnamon, fennel seed, mustard, and many varieties of pepper. Only saffron may not be found here; the saffron growers of Pradmapura have struck an exclusive deal with the Easties.

At the other end of infamy, **Bhang Alley** is a long road in Pakat named for the many bhang shops along its length. It is known as the place where the most depraved and most deprived end up. "He has gone down to Bhang Alley" is Pakati slang for reaching rock bottom. More affluent bhang drinkers usually partake of this drug in other parts of the city.

Adjacent to the Spice Market is a building now known as the **Old Granary**. According to local legend, the raja who owned the Old Granary was a cruel man who gave his shudras little food, even on festival days, despite their hard work in his fields. One day the granary caught fire, perhaps because one of the workers lost patience, perhaps because one of the devas wanted to punish the raja, or perhaps because of a mishandled firework. Regardless of its source, the fire destroyed the summer's harvest, and Pakati legend insists that loss marked the start of the city's many years of hunger. The bhootas of those who died in the fire are propitiated each year with their own festival. The New Granary was built on the far side of Pakat.

Less noteworthy than the Spice Market, Bhang Alley, or the Old Granary is the **Temple of Ratri**. Although it is the largest and most important temple in Pakat, nonetheless its condition is poor and worsening.

Chayan Yagnik

The Rajadhiraja of Pakat. He is an elderly man who well remembers the years of unrelenting hunger in his city. He believes that the East Rajian Trading Company is almost entirely responsible for bringing relative prosperity to Pakat. He dismisses the claims of the priestess and priests of Ratri, who insist that their sacrifices have also curried divine favor.

Dread Possibility — The Rising Sun

Rajadhiraja Chayan Yagnik worships the sun god Savitri above all others. His intention is to diminish the city's financial support for the Temple of Ratri until the temple can no longer operate, and then he will announce Savitri as the new patron of Pakat.

Minja

Minja is an outlander who was drawn to Sri Raji along with her birth parents. They arrived during the height of Arijani's paranoia regarding foreigners and so drew the attention of the Dark Sisters. While fleeing Muladi down the East Vedama, their boat was struck by sheets of fire. Minja's birth parents died, but Minja survived. The next morning a man named Zind discovered her clinging to burnt wreckage.

Minja grew up as the daughter of Zind and his wife Alissa. The family moved to Pakat where Minja would not be recognized as the foreigners' daughter. To further hide her foreign features, she took to wearing a porcelain mask which covered her entire face. She had been mauled by a tiger, they claimed.

In 738BC Minja acted as a translator for a group of outlanders who had been drawn into the Mists from the world of her birth. The outlanders stumbled across Ravana's Bane and then attempted to kill Arijani in The Accursed City. Arijani clearly survived, but the fate of the outlanders is unknown. Minja herself returned to Pakat several weeks later and has refused to say what happened.

Subsequent to that encounter, Arijani relaxed his ban upon foreigners in Sri Raji. Although Minja no longer needs to wear her mask, she often does, having grown used to face the dangers of the world with it on. She is sometimes called "Minja the Mask". The nickname is used fondly by some and snidely by those who distrust her familiarity with foreigners.

Minja has subsequently married and borne children. However, her family life has not prevented her from aiding outlanders who find themselves in Pakat. She feels much less kindness toward foreigners from Zherisia and the Core. She feels they are too organized, too ready to take everything of value from Sri Raji that they can take. For that matter, she isn't certain what she thinks of the East Rajian Trading Company. On one hand, their organization feels... Coreish... to her. On the other hand, thanks to the Easties there is more food in Pakat now.

Although her mother has passed away, Minja's father Zind yet survives. He lives with Minja and her family.

Supratika

The pride of the menagerie of the Rajadhiraja of Pakat, Supratika is the only full-sized elephant known to exist in Sri Raji. In truth, Supratika actually comes from the Wildlands to the south. He has lost his ability to speak but not his ability to think, and he has concluded that life as the rajadhiraja's favored pet is far better than life too near to King Crocodile. The rajadhiraja treats him fondly and with respect, and that is enough.

Piriyaganj

Population: 800 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: opium, bhang
The village of Piriyaganj is located directly north of Muladi, bordering the Mists and not too near (but not too far away from) Lake Veda and the river that leads into the Emerald Stream.

The city of Muladi has been expanding for generations, cutting into the territory formerly claimed by a number of semi-nomadic tribes. Some of those tribes relocated deeper into Sri Raji, but others integrated into Muladi culture. The Piriya were one tribe which attempted to integrate, but many of its people were miserable in the city and wished to depart again. Eventually the Piriya split into three factions: one which went further into the jungles and vanished; one which was assimilated more deeply into Muladi society and also vanished; and the faction which founded the village of Piriyani.

Very shortly Piriyaganj became home to more than just people from the Piriya tribe. They were joined by other semi-assimilated tribal folk who wished to find compromise between wilderness and city. In addition, they were joined by all sorts of outcasts, including criminals. Piriyaganj swiftly adopted the policy of accepting anyone who contributed to the village.

Initially, the people of Piriyaganj focused on pastoral grazing of sheep and goats, while occasionally doing artisan work like broom-making, basket-weaving, and wood carving as a memento of their tribal roots. Because those tasks proved insufficient to support the village, the Piriyaganji also engaged in opium and bhang cultivation. Many of the Piriya were reluctant to do so, but it proved lucrative. In fact, particularly as the criminal elements of Piriyaganj have expanded, so has the production of opium and bhang.

Piriyaganj is led by a council of village elders, with the foremost two amongst them being **Amandara Viswan** and **Chandramauli Majumdar**. Amandara Viswan is the elderly daughter of **Karnavati Viswan**, the original founder of Piriyaganj. Amandra Viswan is beloved by most of the original families of the outcasts of Piriyaganj, but she is slowly losing power. Chandramauli Majumdar's ambition and charisma threatens upheaval in the face of stability, and she sees more and more newcomers to Piriyaganj willing to live turbulently if it means a greater possibility for material reward. With Chandramauli Majumdar taking a more prominent role as the face of Piriyaganj, the community has started to change rapidly.

Dread Possibility — Honor Amongst Thieves

Though they are away from Muladi geographically, they are not fully divorced from their former city: some of the exiles are resentful of the money being made and hoarded by Muladi, due to the Emerald Stream, and want to claim what they feel should have been theirs. Piriyaganj has thus become both a haven for outcasts and a haven for robbers, bandits, and other criminals—many of whom were already undesirable outcasts that viewed settling down in Piriyaganj as "rolling over and admitting defeat". The leader of the criminals, a man named Chandramauli Majumdar, takes pains to keep his more rowdy men in line while still ensuring a thriving black market of smuggled Rajian and foreign-made goods makes its way to Piriyaganj, while bribing the local government and staying beneath the Brahmins' notice. This isn't too difficult: Piriyaganj has its own opium (as well as bhang) fields that make their way to Muladi and certain unscrupulous foreign and local merchant groups are quite willing to look the other way. Even better that, to his knowledge, at least one Brahmin is willing to partake in the bhang.

Chandramauli believes strongly in the idea of "chaos is a ladder", and he is waiting for enough chaos in the civil government for the people he's bribed to take control, and thus make his own business go much better. Of course, Chandramauli also does not wish to overthrow the Brahmins—there is a natural order to anything, and it's the inversion of Brahmins to Kshatriyas that probably explains why Pakat suffers so much compared to other cities.

Pradmapura

Population: 650 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: saffron

A village near Pakat where nearly all of the saffron in Sri Raji is grown. The village entered into an exclusive agreement with the East Rajian Trading Company which has brought considerable wealth to the village. However, because Jatayu Panda insists that the Easties maintain a strong-armed presence in the village to protect their economic interests, many of the people of Pradmapura have come to resent them.

Pragya Sadak

"Wisdom Road." The road which leads from Tvashtipur to the intersection with the Jangal Sadak and the Moksha Sadak.

See *Quoth the Raven* Issue 28.

The Red-Earth Field

Not too far away from Pakat sits a massive field of red and brown clay. It was only recently discovered after the Great Upheaval, with the people of Pakat realizing that this was none other than naturally formed terracotta clay. Even more, this was far closer than the previous source, which was somewhere in the uplands of the Yahasha Mountains. Since its discovery in 742BC, Pakat and the surrounding villages have made sure to cultivate as much of the clay as they can, and they have made a reputation for themselves as skilled makers of ceramics.

Roadside Shrine of Ayanna Hazra

In 757BC a young woman by the name of Ayanna Hazra was travelling the road near her village of Dibri when she was killed by bandits. Her body was riddled with arrows. The bandits went to collect their arrows and rob the corpse before disappearing back to their hideout. However, the next day their arrows and Ayanna's possessions returned to her corpse as if nothing had ever happened. When the bandits returned to reclaim their possessions (rightful or not) the process repeated. Frustrated, the bandits hacked Ayanna's corpse to pieces and scattered the body parts into the jungle. The same thing happened again, with the body parts returning alongside the possessions and the arrows. Frightened, the bandits never touched the corpse again.

The villagers of Dibri tried to perform their funerary customs for Ayanna Hazra and discovered the same thing as the bandits. However, the villagers saw not an obstacle but a miracle, and they began to worship Ayanna as a folk deity. Now it is believed that Ayanna's spirit helps distressed travelers, especially young women and children. Those travelers who pass by her shrine stop to bow their heads and leave offerings in honor of Ayanna Hazra, and some also offer small toys and cloth dolls. It is said that a person who passes by without praying at the shrine is in for a dangerous journey.

Dread Possibility — Family Matters

Ayanna Hazra did indeed die at the hands of bandits, but her spirit remains by the site of her death and subsequent shrine. She helps distressed travelers, especially those that are fleeing from an obligation. However, recently Ayanna's afterlife has been disturbed: local bandits (though not those who killed her) have stolen blessed items which keep her at bay, leaving them free to attack travelers. Ayanna is deeply disturbed by her inability to help others, especially if the bandits go after women and girls whose situations remind her acutely of her own before death. Should that occur, Ayanna Hazra will put forth extraordinary effort to rescue the victim, including beseeching the help of others, perhaps even wandering do-gooders.

Rock of Indra

The East Damuhm River branches away from the Damuhm River at a place called the Rock of Indra. The rock itself is a massive granite protrusion, worn smooth by the waters but nonetheless large enough to endure through the end of the Kali Age.

According to legend, the deva Indra has pinned the asura Vritra beneath the rock. If this legend is true, then fortunately for Sri Raji, the Rock of Indra is no mere boulder but an entire granite shelf.

Shrine of Sharabha

A shrine where the beast Sharabha is said to live. Some believe that Sharabha dispenses wisdom to any who will listen. Other says that it will devour all who invade its shrine.

Shrine of the Serpents

A shrine dedicated to the serpent goddess Manasa. It was built around the Rainbow Arch where the faithful believe she first manifested in Sri Raji.

See *Quoth the Raven* Issue 28.

Skeleton Lake

Deep within the jungle south of Tvashtipur lies a beautiful lake. Its shores are pristine. Its waters are an amazingly clear azure blue. Only upon a closer look at this gorgeous site does one recognize something amiss: The presence of wildlife, from animals lapping at its waters to the call of birds high above, is conspicuously missing. The canopy of the trees is dense enough to entangle and obscure most rays of sunlight, so the clarity of the lake itself is inexplicable by natural means. And as visitors return their gaze to the lakebed, they see it: hundreds of skeletons, sometimes with flesh attached and well preserved.

A group of scholars, guarded by Rajian mercenaries, decided to explore the lake in 707 BC. None returned. With that, the scholars of Tvashtipur decided that it was best to leave the lake well enough alone.

Dread Possibility — Sacred Rest

The lake's pure beauty is due to its status as a sacred resting site. The waters have been sacred to the Ashvins (see "Contradictions and Mysteries") since before Sri Raji was drawn into the Mists. Indeed, the lake is thus a repository of the collective wisdom and knowledge of worshippers of the Ashvins.

Those who drink from or submerge themselves within the lake may benefit from the stored wisdom of the lake. However, thereafter they will instinctually seek out the lake in their final moments. Once they reach the lake to die, their memories and knowledge are added to the body of water alongside their bones.

Of course, if someone dies an unnatural death and cannot return to the lake, their knowledge cannot be saved. The Ashvins may request that potential visitors (like the PCs) to the lake to find the remains of such individuals and bring them to the lake, in exchange for a boon or information they can provide regarding the gods and legends of Sri Raji.

Those who draw the ire of the Ashvins (such as by conflating them with Tvashtri) are not killed but instead disoriented and sent on their way, away from the sacred waters. This usually means they get lost within the jungle and die of its many natural dangers. This is the fate that befell the scholars of Tvashtipur.

Stupa of the West

A solid cylindrical mound made of bricks and stone, bordering the Mists due west of Pakat. The stupa is a burial mound, ostensibly to a long-forgotten raja of Pakat's history. Occasionally, some rajas will claim that the stupa belonged to one of his ancestors, but no one takes these claims seriously. The stupa does not seem to have an outward entrance. Surrounding the mound are eight tall pillars made from sandstone. Each pillar’s zenith sports an animal etched into the sandstone. One can see a tiger, a lion, an elephant, a gorilla, a snake, a bull, a fish, and a horse on each of the eight pillars. Strangely, some visitors claim to hear the faint sounds of beasts as they approach. Perhaps because of this, animals refuse to approach the Stupa of the West.

Temple of Abundant Serenity

The Temple of Abundant Serenity was a temple in the southern jungles of Sri Raji. It was destroyed by the Dark Sisters.

Dread Possibility — Doctor Odd's Origin Story

The Temple of Abundant Serenity was destroyed by the Dark Sisters when they learned of the presence of a blue-skinned girl rumored to be a proxy of Indra. However, a monk named Gopal spirited the girl away before the Dark Sisters could reach her; those two were the only survivors from the Temple.

Temple of Beauty and Grace

Population: 100 (97% Human, 1% Apsara, 1% Gandarva, 1% Other)
Resources: beauty, also grace

The Temple of Beauty and Grace is a large underground complex carved into the foot of the Yahasha Mountains.

Unusually, the Temple of Beauty and Grace is home to ascetics both male and female, although they do live in separate areas of the complex. This arrangement makes more sense once one realizes that the temple is dedicated to gandharvas and apsaras, that is, celestial musicians and heavenly dancers. Every woman who serves the Temple knows how to dance, just as every man who serves the Temple knows how to play an instrument. Other forms of artistic expression are enthusiastically encouraged. The inhabitants of the Temple may not marry, but they are in fact encouraged to take lovers.

Given the environment of dance, music, and sensuality, one might argue that those who serve the Temple are not ascetics at all. The Servants of Beauty and Grace would argue that they deprive themselves of much to be able to dedicate their lives to their patrons and their art. They eat very little, they drink only water, and they sleep on beds of stone—except, of course, on feast days or other sacred celebrations.

The ascetics of the Temple are largely pious and good-natured, but that does not mean they aren't sometimes petty (as apsaras and gandharvas are sometimes said to be). After all, these are the people who made Picalinni's Palette and then cursed it because Jaspor Picalinni annoyed them.

Dread Possibility — The World-Preservers

The assistant to the high priestess is secretly an apsara, and the assistant to the high priest is a gandharva. Together they ensure that the temple remains dedicated to its namesakes.

Given their divine connections, the apsara and gandharva possess knowledge unavailable to most mortals. In particular, the apsara knows a ritual dance (and the gandharva knows the accompanying music) capable of interrupting the dance-accentuated spells of a Worldbreaker (as described in *Champions of Darkness*). They might even be willing to teach mortals, assuming the mortals give a gift of sufficient beauty or grace to catch the attention of a heavenly dancer or celestial musician.

Tirubani

Population: 400 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: sugarcane, lentils

A small village on the borders of the Bahkuku River, near the village of Kurtepeta and a boat ride away from Pakat. Tirubani does well for itself economically, focusing on harvesting sugarcane and lentils, which are grown in fields on the side of the Damuhm River, to trade with other settlements. The harvest itself is quite meager—enough to feed their village, but there is rarely enough of a surplus to trade with starving Pakat consistently.

The people of Tirubani have also made use of the Damuhm River to create rice paddies and other works of irrigation like small canals. They are loath to dig or build anything large enough to upset the sacred river's flow, nor do they wish to upset the flow of the river heading towards Pakat. Tirubani even has a friendly rapport with the village of Kurtepeta and considers themselves in a friendly economic rivalry.

Before the quarry to the north was abandoned, Kurtepetan and Tirubani villagers could both be found working within the quarry, and the village elders of both settlements had to agree on how much one village could take from the quarry at a given time.

Another fact that makes Tirubani noteworthy is that it is overwhelmingly made up of twins, with over a hundred twins from the families that settled in this otherwise small village.

Tvashtipur

Population: 2100 (99% Human, 1% Other)
Resources: knowledge

Also known as Tvashsti and Tvashti, recently this small city has been more commonly called Tvashtipur to better disambiguate it from the god Tvashtri. Rajians did not confuse the names, of course, but as an increasing number of foreigners visit Sri Raji, making the distinction has grown in importance.

Far and away the single most important institution in Tvashtipur is the **Great University of Tvashti**. Although foreigners think of it primarily as an educational institution, Rajians consider it a religious organization dedicated to learning. The Great University is run by three high priests of Tvashtri, known as the **Triad of Scholars**.

Tvashtipur is ruled by the same Triad of Scholars who run the Great University. However, the civil hierarchy is entirely different from the scholarly hierarchy except at the top. Most significantly, the civil hierarchy is comprised of Kshatriyas. At the top of that hierarchy is the Raja of Tvashtipur, but even the Raja answers to the Triad of Scholars.

Many of the most significant buildings in Tvashtipur are related to the University. In particular, the **Hall of Innovation** is dedicated to practical studies, including biology, metallurgy, and architecture. Meanwhile, the **Hall of Wisdom** is dedicated to more abstract studies, including theology, philosophy, and wizardry.

A small but essential building, the **Hall of Administration** serves as the meeting place for the Triad of Scholars. From this building the Triad directs the affairs of the university and the city alike.

The **Sky Tower** was the home of the now-discredited School of Astronomy. The wandering stars of the Rajian sky made the traditional discernment of omens impossible.

Although not associated with the University, the area called **Artisan Lane** is well known across Sri Raji. The name has become a misnomer; the lane has grown to occupy an entire small district spanning three parallel streets. The finest of craftsfolk are said to ply their trades here, and even if this claim is an exaggeration, it is only slightly so. Here beauty is as important as utility, whether one is shopping for a bejeweled gold necklace, a set of pottery bowls, or a wristband of pretty polished stones.

Within Artisan Lane stands the building once owned by the silversmith Kopa. Kopa ran afoul of the Dark Sisters and vanished. Others have attempted to occupy his smithy and step into his reputation, but all have failed. (The Dark Sisters, eager to use Kopa as an example, ensured that they did.) The smithy is now abandoned.

Bana Divekar

A raja of Tvashtipur. An avid hunter, and co-founder of the Vanyabhumi Lodge.

Kopa

A renowned blacksmith of Tvashtipur. At Sidrathi's request, he melted down Ravana's Bane, and then he later reforged it into a crossbow bolt.

The Dark Sisters learned of his unintentional involvement in the 738BC scheme to kill Arijani. Following their interrogations, they determined that he did not know the purpose of the bolt and had merely performed the work which he had been hired to do. Knowing that a craftsman of his skill might prove useful to the Dark Sisters some day, they allowed him to live.

A year or so after the interrogation, Kopa vanished. His neighbors assume he ran afoul of the Dark Sisters

again. However, he simply moved to another city and started a new life.

Vanyabhumi

"The Wild Lands." The vast jungle revealed south of Sri Raji when the Mists retreated in 740BC.

Vanyabhumi Lodge

A hunting lodge, recently built by Pakati and Tvashtipuran hunters, located due south of Tvashtipur within the southern jungle of Sri Raji.

The lodge is quite recent, having only been established in the last five years. It was a joint venture between scholar **Prashant Gaur** of the University of Tvashti and raja **Bana Divekar** of Tvashtipur. Prashant Gaur had made his career studying the flora and fauna of the jungles south of Tvashtipur, but ever since the Vanyabhumi had appeared, his attention had been drawn to the wonders of this new jungle. Knowing of Bana Divekar's great interest in recreational hunting, Gaur approached him for funding the construction of a hunting lodge from which expeditions into the Vanyabhumi could be mounted. The raja readily agreed, and he hired hunters from Tvashtipur and Pakat to aid in this endeavor.

Today the hunters of the Vanyabhumi Lodge benefit from the material support which the University can provide. In particular, both medicine and magical healing is vital for them, given the wide variety of unfamiliar pathogens found in the Vanyabhumi. In exchange, the scholars of Tvashtipur rely upon the hunters to provide information about the southern jungle of Sri Raji and the Vanyabhumi beyond. The hunters send back maps, plant samples, animal specimens, and many claims of untapped resources such as precious gems, metals, crops, and rubber. These reports incentivize exploration of the Vanyabhumi, which means that more funding rolls into the lodge. It's not the hunters' fault that said expeditions seldom ever return, let alone successfully. And it's to the hunters' benefit that no one has noticed that they are the only ones to survive such safaris unscathed.

The hunters are led by **Tarun Sarpal**, an accomplished middle-aged hunter from Pakat who gained fame from defending his city from the many tigers and other predatory animals that besieged it in his youth. He had crossed paths while hunting with raja Bana Divekar and was quite pleased to take up the raja's lucrative offer. He has recently gained a personal assistant who goes only by the name **Hemaraj**, a quiet and tall man who speaks very little and stares very much. Whenever asked where Tarun found Hemaraj, both will answer "a village somewhere nearby" and tersely leave the matter at that. The other hunters, if asked, may observe that there has been a strange enmity between the two since the latter was first brought to the lodge by the former, yet they both still collaborate.

Occasionally, Roger Pembrooke visits the lodge. However, when he does so, he is quietly despised for his arrogance and ignorance.

Dread Possibility — The King's Favor

The hunters have a vested interest in getting as many people killed as possible in their ill-fated safaris. On their first trip into the Wildlands approximately one year ago, they nearly died at the hands of the intelligent animals. They were spared only because King Crocodile was interested in the healing prowess of these new hairless apes, noting their resistance to the sleeping sickness of the Wildlands and their ability to survive better than most of the other humans who had tried and failed to exploit the land.

A bargain was struck: King Crocodile agreed to spare the hunters in exchange for both a steady supply of medicine and "game" in the form of hairless ape victims. However, the intruders would still be punished for violating the sacred home of the crocodiles. By King Crocodile's decree, the hunters would gradually become like crocodiles. Unbeknownst to the hunters, King Crocodile was

purely blustering— his supposed curse of werecrocodilianism is completely pretend. However, he has found werecrocodile servitors through the Way of the Winding Jaws connecting the swamps of the northern Wildlands to the edges of Souragne (as discovered by Sandover). Though King Crocodile, like most Wildlands animals, finds werebeasts deeply disturbing, he finds them useful while still being expendable. Even better than the "scaleless crocodiles" worship him. "Hemaraj" (real name Henri Emmanuel) serves as Sandover's eyes and ears on the far side of the Way of the Winding Jaws.

Having made this dark pact (and truly believing themselves to be cursed), the hunters are in an increasingly tight spot. It is only a matter of time until someone at the Great University connects the dots or until a far better equipped force enters the Wildlands and deals great harm to either King Crocodile or his subjects. Additionally, it is only a matter of time until one of the hunters decides to fully look into the specifics of his supposed "condition" and realizes the ploy.

Vedama River

The easternmost of Sri Raji's major rivers. The Vedama flows eastward from the Yahasha Mountains and into Lake Veda. From Lake Veda, the river continues eastward to the Misty Border. Sometimes the Vedama is called the West Vedama to the west of the lake and East Vedama to the east.

While the Vedama is not as wide or deep as the Damuhm River, it is largely navigable except for a stretch along the West Vedama now called **Ektaa's Rapids**. It gained its name from a merchant of Muladi who lost her boat, her fortune, and her life there.

Vyaapaar Maarg

"The Trade Route." The road which leads west from Muladi until it intersects with the Moksha Sadak and the Haathi Ka Raasta. Along the way, the Lambee Sadak branches off to the south.

Yahasha Mountains

The mountain range which runs along the northern edge of Sri Raji.

In ancient sources (*Realm of Terror*, p.85), this range is also referred to as the Yamasha Mountains.

Factions, Cabals, and Secret Societies

Dark Sisters

The priestesses of Kali who live in Bahru, the Accursed City, are known as the Dark Sisters. They serve their goddess and her son Arijani.

The highest-ranking Dark Sisters are almost entirely priestesses of Kali. However, there are many ways to serve the goddess, and the Sisterhood also includes archers, assassins, and ascetics.

The Public Face

Most Rajians know very little of the Dark Sisters except that they do lurk within the cities and jungles of Sri Raji. According to common belief, the Dark Sisters pay heed to whether the people of the land are adhering to their proper dharma. Do they pray to Kali? Do they praise the Maharaja? Those who do not might be quietly slain by the Dark Sisters. Of course such murders are only the Dark Sisters performing their own svadharma. Such tales might not be true, but they still suffice to keep the Rajians afraid of the Dark Sisters.

Svadharma or not, though, most Rajians are terrified of the Dark Sisters. Often strange women are treated with distrust. (Except for foreigners, of course. If they possessed sufficient karma to become Dark Sisters, then they would not have been born foreigners.)

However, not every priestess or priest who worships Kali belongs to the Dark Sisters. Even those dedicated to Rudri, Tvashtri, and Ratri give Kali her share of the sacrifice. Only Kali's most favored are brought to Bahru to join that secretive sisterhood.

The Hidden Face

All of the Dark Sisters sincerely revere Kali and wish to serve her, primarily by ensuring that she retains sufficient power to remain preeminent within Sri Raji. They believe that her greatest foe is Ravana, so they dedicate considerable effort toward destroying the Stalkers and any other allies of the rakshasa god. Similarly, they believe that Arijani is the single greatest manifested power upon Sri Raji, and they are eager to keep him properly directed to the service of Kali as well.

However, despite that unity, sometimes the Dark Sisters disagree about the best approach. In particular, after the Rebirth of Kali in 740BC, a Dark Sister named Laasya became convinced that the end of the Kali Age had arrived and the world should be destroyed. Mahiji, the leader of the Dark Sisters, disagreed, and so Laasya left. She followed the Mistway known as the Emerald Stream to the Core, where she became the first Worldbreaker and started recruiting non-Rajian devotees for Kali.

The Dark Sisters preserve their ranks through reincarnation. In particular, when one of the Dark Sisters grows too old or otherwise infirm, she will select one of the Chosen of Kali, inevitably a young and attractive woman. Using a rite of forced reincarnation, the Sister will exchange bodies with the Chosen. The Sister's abandoned body serves as Arijani's meal that night.

In addition, the Dark Sisters live dangerous lives, and sometimes they die over the course of their duties. When this happens, some of the remaining Dark Sisters venture across the whole of Sri Raji, seeking their reincarnated sisters with the aid of divination devices constructed from the deceased sisters' original skulls. When a reincarnated sister is found, the babe is brought back to Bahru (assuming it is female; if male, the babe is slain, and the hunt begins anew). Sometimes the reincarnated sister's memories can be restored, in which case she is granted a new, more capable body via the rite of forced reincarnation. Otherwise, the babe is raised into natural adulthood as a Dark Sister, educated in the responsibilities of her soul's lineage.

Those priestesses of Kali who have reincarnated most often lead the Dark Sisters, and they are sometimes called **The Dark Mothers** to indicate their status. Mahiji is the Dark Mother who leads the Dark Sisters.

Allies and Enemies

The Dark Sisters' strongest ally is Maharaja Arijani himself.

As agents of Kali, the Dark Sisters oppose the Stalkers.

Non-Player Characters

Anika

One of the Dark Mothers. She is Hollie Armstrong's advocate among the Dark Sisters. She sees the value of having a contact with links to (and an understanding of) the *mleccha* world.

Alone among the Dark Mothers, Anika is a monk, not a cleric. However, despite following a different path to communion with the divine, she is no less devoted to Kali.

Ishika

A recently recruited Dark Sister. Good with a bow, but maybe not as good as she thinks.

Ishika is highly ambitious. Unfortunately for her, she has the misimpression that the best way to rise through the ranks of the Dark Sisters is to demonstrate loyalty to Arijani. As such, she is currently one of Arijani's few spies among the Sisterhood. Doubtless Mahiji will be severely disappointed when she finds out.

Mahiji

The leader of the Dark Sisters. The mother of Arijani.

Mahiji is not a loving mother; her coldness toward her son is infamous among the Dark Sisters. She fears

his physical and magical power, and she also fears the possibility that one of the Dark Sisters might win his favor and supplant her. Even so, she is also proud of him, and once in a rare while she lets him know.

Tega

One of the Dark Sisters. Killed by the Stalkers in 738BC but not before she allowed Ravana's Bane to come into the hands of foreigners. Subsequently reincarnated and restored to her place in the Dark Sisters.

Tomor Ahmanja

One of the Dark Sisters. She very likely met her death on a hunting expedition led by Radjiff Chandor, but if so, she has doubtless been reincarnated to rejoin the Dark Sisters.

See *Children of the Night: Werebeasts*.

Dread Possibility — The Rite Gone Wrong

The Dark Sisters use the *rite of forced reincarnation* when a Dark Sister has met a misfortune such as death or middle age. The rite exchanges the soul of a Dark Sister with the soul of another, usually a young woman who has been Chosen for Kali.

Unfortunately, sometimes traces of the original personality linger after a Dark Sister assumes a new body. Laasya's sudden fascination with dance is a prominent example.

Dread Possibility — No Dark Brothers

Suvarna was one of the Dark Sisters killed by Ravana's avatar during the Grand Conjunction. However, many Dark Sisters were killed that day, and by the time Suvarna was located, she had grown to a toddler... in a male body. The Dark Sister who found her killed Suvarna's new incarnation, only to subsequently find her reincarnated as a male again. And again. And again. Finally the Dark Sister wrote Suvarna off a loss and returned to Bahru without her.

Twelve years later a boy named Satyavant arrived in Bahru, demanding access to the Dark Sisters. Some of those who remembered Suvarna were pleased by her return; others who remembered her were not. Much to the Dark Sisters' surprise, Satyavant refused the rite of forced reincarnation, preferring to remain male.

However, there was no room among the Dark Sisters for a Dark Brother, and so Satyavant was turned out from Mahakala to be killed by the nagas and other vicious inhabitants of Bahru. Against all of his former sisters' expectations, he has not been killed, and in fact he has gathered a small band of survivors around him.

The Stalkers

An organization calling itself The Stalkers serves the rakshasa god Ravana, who seeks revenge upon his deceitful son Arijani.

The Public Face

Most people who live in Sri Raji do not realize that the Dark Sisters face deadly opposition.

The Hidden Face

Since the death of his avatar at Arijani's hands, Ravana has only been able to manifest as whispers in the back of the mind. However, he promised the founder of the Stalkers that he would grant him the boon of reincarnation as a rakshasa knight who will rule Sri Raji. (For Rajians unconcerned with eternal dharma, a knightly if fiendish svadharma might sound more appealing than laboring in the rice paddies.) The founder has extended that same promise to all loyal Stalkers. Importantly, Ravana intends no deceit and fully expects to be able to keep his word, although, of course, the Dark Powers might have other plans.

Allies and Enemies

As agents of Ravana, the Stalkers oppose Arijani and the Dark Sisters.

Non-Player Characters

Jahed

The founder of the Stalkers. An outlander weretiger. Ravana has spoken to him directly.

Among the Stalkers, Jahed has been nicknamed "The Old Tiger", both as an acknowledgement of his advancing age and as a reminder that he is still ferocious. Jahed can no longer resume an entirely human form; he always retains a tail or paws or whiskers or some other feline detail. Given that, he no longer appears in public.

Kahleed

One of the Stalkers. He has risen to become Jahed's right-hand man. Because he is known to be a particularly deadly assassin, he is known as *The Claw of Ravana*.

Saptami

Several months ago a man walked up to the secret lair of the Stalkers and requested an audience with Jahed. Jahed agreed to meet with this stranger, and immediately afterward he announced to the Stalkers that the stranger—who called himself Saptami, "The Seventh One"—was an ally.

Saptami calls himself a *yatudhana*. Rajian folklore holds that yatudhanas are the lesser cousins of rakshasas, although it also uses the same term for wizards and sorcerers who consort with dark powers. Saptami appears to use the term as a title, indicating that he likely falls into the latter category. He is a lich sworn to the destruction of Arijani, and his chosen name implies that he may not be the only one. Either way, Saptami truly is an ally of the Stalkers.

Dread Possibility — The Claws of the Keimi

Keimi are Rajian weretigers. However, their shape-changing ability is natural to them, not a disease, not a curse. It cannot be passed on to others except by generic inheritance. They are no more inclined toward evil than any other people.

However, in most other regards keimi are much like standard weretigers. Although they are unharmed by silver, they suffer normal damage from any weapon which incorporates ivory into its design. (That is, a dagger with an ivory hilt will harm a keimi, even if the ivory never touches the keimi directly.) Similarly, they are unbothered by wolfsbane but sensitive to ginseng.

Given the lack of a proper moon in Sri Raji, Keimi are unaffected by phases of the moon. They can transform at any time they wish.

Note that the Stalkers are *not* keimi. The Stalkers' lycanthropy stems from an Outland source via Jahed.

However, this difference is not known to Rajians, who call all weretigers keimi.

The Great University of Tvashti

The Public Face

The Great University is run by the Triad of Scholars, who also rule the city of Tvashtipur.

The highest positions in the University are occupied by the priest professors of Tvashtri. In particular, only priests may hold the title of *professor*. Professors teach classes, although other priests are strictly researchers or administrators.

Non-priests may also teach at the Great University. If they can convince an existing professor that they have particular knowledge to impart, then they will be given an opportunity to lecture a gathering of any professors (and any other curious observers) who might happen to take an interest in the guest lecturer's subject. If the lecture goes well, that is, if the guest lecturer convinces the professors in the audience that their area of expertise is sufficiently interesting, then they will be hired as an *instructor*. Instructors are given a minimal stipend, but they may eat in the faculty hall free of charge, and if requested they will be given a dormitory room for their use.

Fields of Study

The curriculum of the Great University might be described as categorized chaos.

Professors are encouraged to give their own titles to their individual fields of study. Since professional regard depends heavily upon how many students a professor can entice into attending their lectures, many professors give their studies flashy titles to bait the hook. *Sacred Geometry—Is it theology? Is it mathematics? Attend the lecture to find out!* This competition results in a profusion of dissimilar names for similar studies.

Perhaps because of this competitiveness, there are no formal departments but merely alliances (sometimes quite temporary) among professors with similar interests. Sometimes long-term alliances become known as schools, but this is a convention of speaking, not a formal organization.

Generally recognized schools include the School of Astrology (not to be confused with the School of Astronomy, which is largely defunct), the School of High Doctrine (religious law), the School of Physical Discipline (health and fitness), the School of Plenty (agriculture), the School of Aggressive Flora (botany, particularly the dangerous plants), and the School of Structural Beauty (architecture).

Other individual fields of study include Ancient Languages (taught by Dhurban Ananda, among others), Extra-Planar Physics, Languages of Exotic Lands (taught by perpetual guest instructor Catriona nic Duibh), Occult Mathematics, Practical Necromancy... and, of course, Sacred Geometry. Any subject taught in the Core has its counterpart at the Great University, although that may be difficult to discern by course titles alone.

A student graduates whenever twelve professors under whom they have studied all agree that the student has graduated. Depending upon how much rivalry exists among the twelve professors, this process may take an exasperatingly long time.

The Hidden Face

The Great University has no secret goals. However, many of its professors and students have their own, frequently conflicting, agendas.

Allies and Enemies

Generally speaking, the Dark Sisters do not trust the Great University. Their own goals are not aided by an

educated populace. However, the Great University has given them no concrete reason to move against it.

Non-Player Characters

Catriona nic Duibh

An expatriate Tepestani woman. Studied religion at the University of Dementlieu. While trying to go to Nidala, she accidentally came to Sri Raji instead. Settled in Tvashtipur, where she now teaches languages of the Core, particularly Tepestani and Mordentish. She married a Rajian man named **Venkata Baj** and has a family with him, which certainly slowed down submission of her dissertation.

Dhurban Ananda

Professor of Ancient Languages at the Great University of Tvashti. Member of the Fraternity of Shadows.

The man now known as Dhurban Ananda was once a street urchin named **Jamal** who was discovered and adopted by **Professor Shakhan Ananda**, from whom he learned reading, writing, and the magic of illusion. Eventually he even became a professor at the Great University himself. Moreover, Shakhan Ananda was a member of the Fraternity of Shadows, and he saw Dhurban inducted into their ranks as well.

As part of his activities for the Fraternity, Dhurban gained temporary possession of Ravana's Bane. This merely material possession seems to have led to a more spiritual one: Since then, Dhurban has entered the process of transpossession with a rakshasa. Under the influence of this rakshasa—although little influence may have been needed—Dhurban ambushed, killed, and consumed his adoptive father. As his transpossession progresses, Dhurban has learned to hide its physical effects with illusions and his limited rakshasa ability to *alter self*.

Dhurban seeks to overthrow Maharaja Arijani, but his efforts are hindered by the boon which Ravana's avatar granted the Maharaja. Fortunately for Dhurban, the same boon appears to interfere with Arijani's ability to sense his reality wrinkle. Arijani knows of a blind spot within his domain, but he cannot pinpoint its source. He sends spies to learn more about this blind spot, but thus far Dhurban Ananda has been successful in discerning and destroying such spies.

During a visit to La Maison Soulombre, Dhurban brought Jawahar Zhost's backgammon set to the Fraternity of Shadows as a gift. (See *Quoth the Raven* Issue 29, p.8.) This treacherous gift may be intended to draw additional rakshasas into the Demiplane of Dread.

Radji, a dread viper, is Ananda's familiar.

See *The Undead Sea Scrolls 2002* for more about Dr. Dhurban Ananda.

Ekavali Giri

A Professor of Aggressive Flora at the Great University. She has a bubbly personality and is beloved by many of her students. She worked with Professor Abelhous Nicholsi during his sabbatical in Sri Raji. She claims that he "grew her from a seed", but this is hyperbole. Her work was already highly regarded at the Great University before Professor Nicholsi came to Sri Raji.

Jawahar Zhosh

A former instructor at the Great University of Tvashti. Created various animated figurines which eventually turned against him. (See *Ravenloft Monstrous Compendium Volume III*.)

Jawahar Zhosh also created an enchanted backgammon set which led to the transpossession of Dr. Dhurban Ananda by a rakshasa. (See *Quoth the Raven* Issue 29 for details.)

Paqui

In 738BC Paqui was a student assistant to Sidrathi at the Great University of Tvashti. He has subsequently

risen through the ranks to become a professor of Divine Materials and Mechanisms.

Prashant Gaur

A faculty member of the Great University and co-founder of the Vanyabhumi Lodge. He studies Applications of Exotic Zoology.

Savepalli Zakir

An instructor, likely of arcane magic, at the Great University of Tvashti. He provided spells to Perseyus Lathenna, who then provided them to the Weathermay-Foxgrove twins.

See *Van Richten's Arsenal*.

Sidrathi

A professor at the Great University of Tvashti. Retired, which at the Great University means he's teaching less often but, of course, still learning.

Zukti

A sweeper at the Great University of Tvashtipur from a long line of sweepers at the Great University. Although this fact is generally utterly unrecognized, Zukti is also one of the smartest people at the university despite being both a shudra and the son of an unmarried woman.

Certain professors and instructors have noticed Zukti and subtly encouraged his development. Professor Savepalli Zakir has left certain reading materials carefully unattended when he knew that Zukti would be cleaning shortly. Instructor Catriona nic Duibh, who is a foreigner and therefore something of a misfit herself, has even offered to teach Zukti; however, he has always declined, fearing for her reputation.

Zukti is a highly competent wizard. His broom serves as his spell focus. He is fiercely loyal to the Great University and likely to reveal the full extent of his knowledge only if the university is threatened.

The East Rajian Trading Company

The Public Face

Twenty years ago, more or less, a Muladi man named Gopal Chaudhari recognized a business opportunity. The people of Pakat needed food. The people of Muladi wanted spices. All that was necessary were some brave men to convey the food to Pakat and the spices to Muladi and, most importantly, a shrewd Vaishya to oversee operations. Fortunately for Gopal, while he was contemplating this revelation, his brother-in-law, Jatayu Panda, got into some legal trouble and found it opportune to leave town for a bit. A hasty bit of organization later, the East Rajian Trading Company made its first delivery from Muladi to Pakat. Since then, many other trips have been made, and the route has expanded to include Tvashtipur and a number of villages along the way.

Employees are frequently referred to as "Easties".

The operations of the East Rajian Trading Company have had an overall beneficial effect upon Sri Raji. The people of Pakat have more to eat. The roads are now better maintained, and the Chatra of the Crossroads has been built. However, these improvements are not due to any altruism on the part of the Easties but only because smoother operations lead to happier customers and happy customers lead to higher profits.

The Hidden Face

While individual Easties have their plots and schemes, the Trading Company as a whole has no secret agenda. They have plans to expand beyond the Verdurous Lands, yes, but that's not really a secret.

Allies and Enemies

Because the Easties have not expanded beyond Sri Raji, they have not drawn the ire of the Boritsi Trading Company and other mercantile consortiums of the Core. Yet.

Gopal Chaudhari is no fool. He ensures that the priests of Rudri get their cut of the profits, and therefore they support the Easties in their endeavors.

Similarly, the rajas of Muladi, Pakat, and Tvashtipur receive the occasional generous gift from Gopal Chaudhari, usually in the form of jewels or fine metalwork. (Never anything so crass as mere money.) Of course, the Rajadhiraja of Pakat is already indebted to the Easties for bringing more food to his city.

Arijani is fully aware of the East Rajian Trading Company. However, because they do not interfere with his regularly scheduled meals or otherwise interfere in religious matters, he is unconcerned by their presence. Nonetheless, the Dark Sisters—as well as the Stalkers—have inserted spies among the Easties to watch for misbehavior.

Finally, given the success of the East Rajian Trading Company, of course competition has arisen within Sri Raji. (See Taakat for an example.) However, none of the competitors have achieved the same level of success.

Non-Player Characters

Dwaraka Buksh

A scout for the East Rajian Trading Company. Known for being something of a loner, a trait which has only grown more extreme in recent years. He has been known to vanish, presumably into the jungles, for weeks on end.

Killed and replaced by the dread doppelganger Sica.

Gopal Chaudhari

The founder and head of the East Rajian Trading Company. He operates the Easties out of Muladi.

Gopal Chaudhari is married to Jyoti. He is sincerely fond of her.

Unlike his brother-in-law Jatayu Panda, Gopal has never been physically powerful. His years of success have left him softer, at least in appearance. The truth of the matter, though, is that Gopal is the more dangerous man, if only because his influence extends much further than his physical reach.

Gopal Chaudhari is a quiet but loyal worshipper of Puchan, the Rajian god of travelers. He does not neglect to venerate Rudri or Kali or any of the many other Rajian deities, but he sacrifices most often to Puchan. Given the success of the East Rajian Trading Company, apparently these sacrifices have paid off.

Jatayu Panda

The head of operations for the East Rajian Trading Company in Pakat. His sister Jyoti is married to Gopal Chaudhari.

Originally Jatayu Panda served as head caravan guard for the Easties. However, he was forced to abandon that role after he was badly wounded. He can no longer bend his left leg, and so he walks with a limp. However, he remains a physically imposing man. One is well advised to stay out of his physical reach when he grows angry.

Jatayu resents his brother-in-law tremendously. Not because of his injury, which he sees as just part of the price of doing business. No, his resentment comes from two decades of following his brother-in-law's orders.

Jyoti Chaudhari

The sister of Jatayu Panda and wife of Gopal Chaudhari. While not actually a member of the East Rajian Trading Company, she provides a crucial mediation between her brother and husband. She does this very intentionally, although she does not realize that her mediation is the primary glue which prevents the Easties from fully splintering.

Jyoti is sincerely fond of her husband. She is less fond of her brother's violent impulses, but she treats him with the appropriately dutiful familial respect.

Sulini Kumar

The head of operations of the East Rajian Trading Company out of Tvashtipur. She would like a larger slice of the pie.

During her tenure in Tvashtipur, Sulini Kumar has availed herself of the Great University. In addition to being skilled with bow and tulwar, she has also learned some magic.

Through her spies Sulini Kumar has learned that Jatayu Panda is the secret head of Taakat. She has not yet decided whether she wants to blackmail Jatayu or reveal him to Gopal Chaudri.

Ujwala Manwar

A caravan leader for the East Rajian Trading Company. Also one of the Dark Sisters. Her true loyalty is to the Sisters, but she is enjoying her time with the Easties.

Taakat

The Public Face

One of the foremost competitors to the East Rajian Trading Company is known as Taakat ("Strength"). It is not a trading company itself, but it hires out its employees as armed escorts and bodyguards, including for ventures into the thick of the jungles or even into the Wildlands. It actively seeks to hire the most formidable men and women away from the Easties.

Taakat is based out of Pakat but has a small branch office in Tvashtipur.

The Hidden Face

When business gets slow, sometimes Taakat employees pose as bandits and demonstrate to prospective customers why their services are useful. Sometimes they hire independent mercenaries (Rajesh Hudha, for example) instead.

The secret founder and head of Taakat is Jatayu Panda, the brother-in-law of Gopal Chaudhari and the head of operations for the Easties in Pakat. He seeks to diminish Gopal Chaudhari's power enough to slip out from under his thumb.

Allies and Enemies

The Easties would certainly oppose Taakat if they learned of its connection to Jatayu Panda. In the meantime, the Easties occasionally hire Taakat bodyguards whenever bandits along the roads grow too bold.

The Colonial Merchant Company (CMC)

This entry concerns the Colonial Merchant Company as it operates in Sri Raji. For a more comprehensive treatment, see the *Survey on the Zherisian Expedition* p.44.

The Public Face

Rajian opinion of the Colonial Merchant Company is sharply divided. Many Rajians believe that trade with the CMC has brought wondrous new possibilities to Sri Raji. Meanwhile, many others believe that the foreign influence is eroding the cornerstones of Rajian society. As the first and dominant foreign trading company, the CMC bears the brunt of the latter opinion.

The Hidden Face

While all three trading companies are cut-throat in their mercantile competition, the Colonials are by far the most likely to assert dominance by means of physical might. This approach is not what Harriet Hickling prefers, but her superiors on the Zherisian City Council have debated the possibility.

Allies and Enemies

The CMC is in open competition with the Boritsi Trading Company and the Carlyle Trading Company. At the moment the CMC dominates the market, largely due to long-standing good relations with the East Rajian Trading Company. The CMC has provided material support to the Easties upon occasion.

Non-Player Characters

Harriet Hickling

The head of the Colonial Merchant Company in Sri Raji. Known as "Hairpin Hattie" for the long iron pins with which she contains her hair. Elderly but not infirm, she is in fact a monk of the Celebrants of Humanity in Zherisia.

Hickling's disciplines prevent the dread doppelgangers from reading her mind.

Utpal Datta has recently become her guru. She makes no secret of her fascination with the Rajian ascetic tradition, but she feels no need to reveal her own abilities.

Thomas Brinckhurst

One of three Vice Heads of the Muladi branch of the Colonial Merchant Company. He makes no secret of his desire to become the head of operations in Pakat or Tvashtipur once the Colonials find a way around the Maharaja's decree forbidding foreigner trading companies west of Muladi.

Unfortunately for the real Thomas Brinckhurst, he was killed and replaced by a dread doppleganger in the Carlyle Trading Company. Unfortunately for the false Thomas Brinckhurst, this imposture has been detected by Harriet Hickling, who has quietly cut him away from any actual power.

Dread Possibility — Desperate Measures

Despite Harriet Hickling's attempts to keep the Colonials foremost among the foreign trading companies in Sri Raji, the City Council of Paridon—the government body behind the Colonials—are increasingly wary of the competition, particularly the growing influence of the Carlyle Trading Company.

If the City Council grows uncertain enough, they may attempt desperate measures, sending a trio of warships through the Emerald Stream along with soldiers armed with black powder weapons. After all, if the Colonials control Muladi, then they control all trade to Sri Raji. It is a risky proposition, one guaranteed to anger many of the factions of Sri Raji, but one must sometimes take risks in desperate times.

The resistance is certain to be stronger than the Colonials expect, particularly if adventurers (perhaps hired by Hollie Armstrong) happen to aid the Rajians. However, the invasion might still prevail... particularly if adventurers (perhaps hired by Harriet Hickling) happen to aid the Colonials.

The Boritsi Trading Company (BTC)

This entry concerns the Boritsi Trading Company as it operates in Sri Raji. For a more comprehensive treatment, see *Legacy of the Blood*.

Operations in Sri Raji are overseen by the Levkarest branch of the Boritsi Trading Company, which is operated cooperatively by Katarina, Bevel, and Hellana Boritsi. Katarina and Bevel feel that traversing a Mistway takes them dangerously far from home and its protections, but Hellena has visited Sri Raji once. She loved the opulence of the carefully curated slice of Rajian life that she witnessed, but the loathed everything else: the insects, the heat, the food too spicy to discern whether it had been poisoned. All in all, the Boritsis are content to leave the Sri Raji office in the capable hands of Tussio Bilotti.

The Public Face

Sri Raji is far enough from Borca that the reputation of the Boritsi family has not tainted the reputation of the Boritsi Trading Company. The BTC has its detractors, but it has its share of supporters as well. If nothing else, it is good for the Rajians that the Colonial Merchant Company has worthy competition.

The Hidden Face

While the Boristi Trading Company is fully willing to perform its usual skullduggery in order to gain advantage in its dealings or against its competition, its success in Sri Raji stems primarily from actual business dealings. The BTC has no military ambitions, nor does it seek to replace the Rajian power structure. In Sri Raji, if nowhere else, the Boritsi Trading Company is actually kind of the good guy.

Allies and Enemies

The BTC is in open competition with the Colonial Merchant Company and the Carlyle Trading Company. Tussio Bilotti has been tasked with supplanting the CMC's dominance in the Rajian market. However, he is also greatly concerned about the CTC's alarmingly effective spies. Because of these spies, the CTC is proving to be a more credible competitor than expected.

The BTC recognizes the importance of good relations with the East Rajian Trading Company. They would gleefully cut out the Easties if they could, but that desire is thwarted by the Maharaja's ban on company operations west of Muladi. The BTC has occasionally provided discrete support for other native Rajian merchants, but none of these merchants have grown large enough to threaten the Easties.

Similarly, the BTC treats Hollie Armstrong as an ally, largely in the hope that she will favor the BTC over the other companies. Sometimes she does.

Non-Player Characters

Adone Cirrito

A member of the Boritsi Trading Company in Sri Raji. He serves as a bodyguard to Tussio Bilotti. The Rajians find him especially fearful because he is a caliban. Some Rajians call him a yaksha, but he is not. He has tusks—not large tusks, admittedly, but he long ago learned how to grin in a way that shows them off. He has a jolly round face and a jolly round belly and (most of the time) a jolly round personality. That said, he takes his job seriously, and he is not afraid to inflict carnage when it is warranted.

Tussio Bilotti

The head of the Boritsi Trading Company in Sri Raji. He stands slightly shorter than most men, but he carries himself with such confidence that few people notice. He dresses in current Borcan fashion, even in the Rajian swelter. His mustache is always neatly trimmed. He rarely raises his voice, and in fact he is to be feared most when he speaks softly.

The Carlyle Trading Company (CTC)

This entry concerns the Carlyle Trading Company as it operates in Sri Raji. For a more comprehensive treatment, see the *Van Richten Society Research Files: Doppelgangers* p.246.

The Public Face

Many Rajians feel threatened by the influence which the Colonials and the Boritsis wield. They are more likely to support the Carlyle Trading Company since it is the smallest of the three foreign trading companies—smallest and therefore, to their minds, least likely to be able to destroy Rajian society.

The Hidden Face

The upper ranks of the Carlyle Trading Company are all dread doppelgangers, and this is true in Sri Raji as elsewhere. Their psychic and shape-changing abilities make them superlative spies.

Allies and Enemies

The CTC operates in a distant third place behind the Colonial Merchant Company and the Boritsi Trading Company. They are fine with being underestimated until they can topple the competition.

Alone among the foreign trading companies, the CTC has plans to infiltrate and overthrow the East Rajian Trading Company. Then again, among the foreign trading companies operating in Sri Raji, only the

leading members of the CTC are able to appear as native Rajians.

The dread doppelgangers of the Carlyle Trading Company would love to replace certain individuals among the competition, for example, Jyoti Chaudari. If only the woman wasn't always surrounded by people! Equally good would be replacing Hollie Armstrong. However, Armstrong appears to have an uncanny sense of self-preservation, and none of the doppelgangers' attempts have succeeded.

Non-Player Characters

Griffith Rutt

A Zherisian merchant, ranking high in the local branch of the Carlyle Trading Company. He is known for being both canny and persuasive.

Rutt has russet hair which he wears with muttonchops. He may also be recognized by his monocle.

Griffith Rutt is actually the public guise of the dread doppelganger Sica.

Montgomery Buckman

The official head of Carlyle Trading Company operations in Sri Raji.

Like Sica, also a dread doppelganger, although he has little time to spend in non-Montgomery Buckman guises.

Magic Items

Arijani's Third Eye

One of Arijani's most prized possessions is a magical lens mounted in a sea captain's telescope. (The telescope itself is not magical, but the lens inside is.) Using this telescope, he is able to scry the entire cluster. The *Eye* can see anything which it is pointing at, regardless of any intervening objects, but the trick is adjusting the *Eye* to the proper distance. (Where most telescopes have a knob to focus the field of view, the *Eye* has a knob which adjusts its range.) In particular, the further away that a desired location is, the harder it is to find the proper azimuth, elevation, and range to find the scene. It becomes impossible without a steady mount, which is why Arijani has a swivelling tripod for the *Eye*.

Another disadvantage of the *Eye* is that it is strictly visual. In particular, Arijani cannot hear any discussions which occur at the scene he is viewing. He has learned to read lips but not well. The Dark Sisters know that Arijani may well be trying to spy upon them, but they also know some of the limitations of the *Eye*.

The device now known as *Arijani's Third Eye* was a bribe given to him by Hollie Armstrong in exchange for not slaughtering the crew of *The Luck of the Goddess* when it arrived via the Emerald Stream.

Brahman's Egg

Brahman's Egg is a sacred relic, a tremendous egg—25 feet long and 15 feet thick—made of solid gold. In the aftermath of the destruction of Ravana's avatar, Arijani found this relic in the ruins of Bahru. He could not move it, not with muscle nor magic, and so he built Mahakala around it. It stood within Brahman's Pagoda, defended by mighty sorcery, until at least 738BC. Presumably it remains there still.

The reason that Brahman's Egg is immovable is because it contains the whole of Sri Raji. It may seem paradoxical that the Egg can stand within the land and yet encompass it, but that obstacle is not insurmountable for all-pervasive Brahman.

Cloth of Steel

Wearing heavy armor, such as the kind common in the Core, is dangerous in the Rajian swelter. As such, Rajians have found alternative ways to defend their bodies from harm.

Although *cloth of steel* appears to be ordinary cotton or linen, it is enchanted to harden upon impact. As a

result, it provides improved armor class against bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing attacks

Article	AC (2e)	AC (3e/5e)
antariya alone	7	13
uttariya alone	6	14
antariya and uttariya	4	16
dhoti	7	13
kurta	6	14
dhoti and kurta	4	16
choli	8	12
sari	5	15
sari and choli	4	16

In terms of game mechanics, treat *cloth of steel* garments as *bracers of defense*.

The origins of the techniques for enchanting *cloth of steel* are contested between the priests and professors of Sri Raji. Regardless, the techniques are now widely known. In fact, the only reason that *cloth of steel* is not more available across Sri Raji is because it is ultimately still cloth. Although it protects against sudden impacts, it is still subject to daily wear and tear. The typical *cloth of steel* garment unravels after 2d4 months of regular use.

Dhusala Diamond

A fist-sized diamond of unusual transparency but with an even more unusual greenish tint. It is considered one of the sacred treasures of Kubera, the Rajian god of wealth.

The Dhusala Diamond is a *gem of seeing* capable of piercing the illusions of even the greatest rakshasa.

Moreover, when the Dhusala Diamond is used in a sacrifice celebrating Kubera on a day auspicious to that deva, then at the conclusion of the sacrifice the diamond will eject 2d6 gems of random type and value from its heart. If selected randomly, there is a 25% chance that any particular day is appropriately auspicious. However, any Brahmin is 80% likely to be able to correctly identify the most auspicious day within the next 1d8 days.

If the Dhusala Diamond is removed from Sri Raji, its magical powers will refuse to function.

Ravana's Bane

As described in *Van Richten's Arsenal Volume I*, **Ravana's Bane** is a *+1 silver crossbow bolt*. Despite this modest enchantment, if Arijani's skin is pierced by this artifact, he will be immediately slain, perhaps even utterly destroyed. (The same effect also applies to any avatar of Ravana but to no other creature.) It causes double damage against rakshasas. Then again, it also draws the malign attention of rakshasas.

Rajian legends speak of Ravana's Bane as the weapon which Arijani used to destroy Ravana's avatar and defeat the rakshasas of Bahru. Some of those legends assert that the only way to destroy the Bane is to kill its intended target, at which point the bolt melts into slag; such legends do not explain why the Bane has survived the death of Ravana's avatar. Even if such legends are true, though, the Bane is not invulnerable to all harm. As a case in point, in 738BC a smith named Kopa melted down the Bane and then later reforged it back into the form of a crossbow bolt.

Another legend claims that the silver for Ravana's Bane was taken from the moon, and that is why Sri Raji has only the nirguna moon.

Arijani can sense the presence of Ravana's Bane within Sri Raji. In fact, its presence within 300 feet causes him physical discomfort. After Kopa reforged the Bane, foreigners brought it to Mahakala and attempted to slay Arijani with it. They failed, and the Bane fell back into Arijani's paws. However, its continued proximity escalated his discomfort into pain, and Arijani sent a contingent of Dark Sisters to guard it in an abandoned temple at the opposite end of Bahru. However, the Bane vanished during the Grand Conjunction—not just from the temple but from Sri Raji. After worrying for several years that the crossbow bolt had been taken by Ravana's latest avatar, Arijani eventually concluded that the Bane

had been taken too far away to be dangerous... or perhaps it had even been destroyed.

Other Magic Items

In addition to the magic items detailed in this section, *Van Richten's Arsenal* describes *The Bed of Meditation* and the *Hookah of Truth*, which may both be found in Sri Raji.

Also, *Jawahar Zhosh's Backgammon Set* is described in *Quoth the Raven Issue 29.*

References

Sri Raji is more completely detailed in the adventure module *Web of Illusion* than any other canon source. However, additional canon material about the domain as a whole may be found in the *Ravenloft Campaign Setting* and the venerable *Realm of Terror* boxed set.

Individual characters came from canon sources such as *Carnival* (The Hideous Man-Beast), *Children of the Night: Werebeasts* (Chandor Radjiff and supporting cast; Jaspor Picalinni), *Death Ascendent* (Pasha Bella), *Ravenloft Monstrous Compendium Volume III* (Jawahar Zhosh), and *Van Richten's Arsenal* (Soma Purusha, Savepalli Zakir).

The Boritsi Trading Company was first mentioned in *Legacy of the Blood*, while the Colonial and Carlyle Trading Companies first appeared in the *Survey on the Zherisian Expedition* and *Van Richten Society Research Files: Doppelgangers* respectively.

Prof. Abelhous Nicholsi first appeared in *The Book of Souls*. Dr. Dhurban Ananda and related characters debuted in *The Undead Sea Scrolls*, as did the Celestine Observatory of Mahapralaya.

The Shrine of the Serpents was first described in *Quoth the Raven* Issue 28. Meanwhile, Jawahar Zhosh's backgammon set received a write-up in *Quoth the Raven* Issue 29. For that matter, Adyita Chopra and her supporting cast are scheduled to appear in *Quoth the Raven* Issue 32.

Many, many details of supernatural beings from Indian faith and folklore were drawn from *Ghosts, Monsters, and Demons of India* by Rakesh Khanna and J. Furcifer Bhairav.

Contradictions and Mysteries

Excerpts from a Dissertation Upon the Sri Rajian Pantheon

Translated from High Mordentish to English by Ian Fordam

Dean Frederique
Department of Divinities
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You may be surprised to hear from me after so long, and you'll certainly be surprised to learn where I have been. On the other hand, I suspect that you won't be surprised to hear my admission that I was foolish to trust that sea captain who claimed he had discovered a way through the Mists to reach fabled Nidala. He found a path through the Mists, 'tis true, but it led to Sri Raji.

Clearly, then, I have been unable to write my intended dissertation comparing the faith of Belenus as practiced in Nidala and as practiced in my homeland of Tepest.

However, I submit to you instead a survey of the myriad deities of Sri Raji. This is a land of many contradictions and mysteries, including those found in its theology.

Catriona nic Duibh
Tvashtipur, Sri Raji
750BC

Overview of the Sri Rajian Faith

Underview of the Sri Rajian Faith

The faith of Sri Raji is a highly fictionalized interpretation of Hinduism as practiced in the Vedic and Epic eras. Like real world Hinduism, the Rajian faith encompasses millennia and multitudes. As such, it can indeed seem both contradictory and mysterious to the Western reader.

Furthermore, recall the Unspoken Pact: In the Land of Mists, the Dark Powers either restrict or impersonate the Powers of the Outer Planes. That is, not only are the gods and goddesses of Sri Raji imitations of the gods and goddesses of the world from which Sri Raji originated, but they are imitations of limited aspects of those deities. In particular, Kali in real-world Hinduism is a multi-faceted goddess. In Ravenloft, however, the Dark Powers present her as strictly evil.

The religious landscape of Sri Raji continues to be significantly shaped by Kali and Ravana (as they are interpreted by the Dark Powers). Both deities strive to stifle the influence of other Powers. Thus far they have prevented overt intrusions from the strongest. However, those deities who have indeed manifested aspects of themselves are the ones whom neither Ravana nor Kali find threatening, for example, fading ancient Vedic Powers (e.g. Ratri) or Powers who are part of a village tradition (e.g. Manasa).

This article assumes that on the homeworld of Sri Raji at the point when Arijani committed his Act of

Ultimate Darkness, deities such as Indra who were once regarded as supreme in the Vedas were fading in power. Meanwhile, deities such as Vishnu and Siva, who are central to the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, were ascendant but not yet ascended. Arijani himself was conceived as part of the divine conflict between Ravana and Kali, both of whom appear in the Adhyatma rescension of the *Ramayana*.

For background reading, consider *Hindu Gods and Goddesses* by W.J. Wilkins and *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. Although the latter book is a difficult read, it argues that we shouldn't blindly judge good and evil in Sri Raji the same way the we would in the Core. Is a rakshasa committing evil when it acts according to the svadharma of a rakshasa?

Before I delve into a description of any of the individual deities worshipped in Sri Raji, I begin with a discussion of concepts which are common across the land.

The Books of Knowledge

The most holy texts of Sri Raji are known as *The Books of Knowledge*, and they are held to be the sacred word of the gods as recorded at the beginning of time by an ancient sage. Unfortunately, the original four *Books of Knowledge* were lost generations ago. Nobody, not even the priests of Tvashtri, has ever been able to explain to me how they were lost. They say, "We have entered the Kali Age," but that answer satisfies the priests far more than this scholar. Regardless, *The Books of Knowledge* were simply, suddenly lost, along with those wise Brahmins who had committed *The Books of Knowledge* to memory. (The bravest of Kshatriyas, most skillful Vaishyas, and most loyal Shudras were lost as well, it is said.)

Fearing that they had lost the favor of the gods, those priests who remained did their best to capture all that they recalled of the proper rituals for worship. They remembered much, fortunately, which was collected as *The Recalled Book of Knowledge*. However, because it was not the verbatim word of the gods as recorded by sages, *The Recalled Book* is considered an imperfect text.

... as befits the Kali Age.

The Four Ages

Rajians believe that reality passes through an endless succession of cycles, and each cycle is divided into four ages. The **Krita Age** is a golden age, which eventually yields to the **Treta Age**, which gives way to a **Dvapara Age** in turn. Each successive age is more flawed than its predecessors. Finally, the Dvapara Age is followed by the **Kali Age**, an age of moral corruption and disintegrating social structures. The current age is the Kali Age, of course.

When the Kali Age ends, the goddess Kali destroys the world, which then begins anew in a reborn Krita Age.

Sacrifices, Devotion, and Asceticism

The Tale of Bhajya

Consider the case of Bhajya, an ascetic who lived in a village outside of Muladi. He became enlightened as a young man, four days before he was due to marry a young woman from a neighboring village. He broke the betrothal, much to his parents' shame, and went to live in the jungle. His parents never spoke to him again, but his younger brother brought him food so that he would not starve despite his austerities. Initially the rest of the village thought him mad, but gradually those who encountered Bhajya in the jungle returned to the village with reports of his growing power, which manifested as heat. Eventually his younger brother married, and the new wife complained incessantly about the food he brought to Bhajya. "It is no matter," Bhajya replied when he learned of her complaints. "I am beyond food." And apparently he was, for no man saw food pass his lips ever after. His younger brother continued to visit, though, and one day he told Bhajya that his wife had taken up with another, wealthier man. At this announcement Bhajya shook his head with sadness. "All women are unfaithful."

The next morning the brother's faithless wife and her lover were found in their bed, charred to ash. Bhajya now sat in the lotus position in the center of the village, meditating. When asked whether he had killed the pair, Bhayja turned his hot eyes upon the one who asked, and he said calmly, "Bring me water." It seemed safest to do so.

For nearly thirty years, Bhajya sat in the center of the village, eating nothing, drinking only water. In time it became tradition in the village for a man soon to marry to bring his bride-to-be before Bhajya and ask his permission to wed. If the bride-to-be was not pure, then Bhajya would burn her to ash. (The girls of this village soon became very careful about their purity.) In addition, Bhajya gained followers who asked him to share his enlightenment. Some followers starved, unable to live upon truth and water alone. Others failed in their asceticism by losing control of their power and burning up from the inside. None survived longer than five years.

Eventually the Dark Sisters learned of Bhajya, and three of them came to his village. "We are wroth!" they cried. "We have learned that you have committed violence against women! What have you to say?"

Bhajya raised his hot eyes and said, "That I am stronger than you."

Yet he was not. The Dark Sisters turned his heat back upon him, and Bhajya erupted into a pillar of flame. It burned with the full power of his asceticism, and everyone in the village—even the Dark Sisters— was burned as well. Only those fortunate few at the outer edges survived, and to this day they weep to speak of Bhajya.

In Sri Raji, worship takes three forms. The form demanded by the original *Books of Knowledge* (and still demanded by *The Recalled Book*) is sacrifice. In many faiths, worship is designed to earn divine favor so that the deities will aid the worshipper. In the Rajian faith, the sacrifice itself actually empowers the deity to aid the worshipper. Stealing the sacrifice, or more properly stealing the power created by a sacrifice, is a grave matter indeed.

For most daily rituals priests sacrifice clarified butter. However, for major rituals an animal is sacrificed. Apparently, the ultimate sacrifice is considered the *ashva* sacrifice; I had been in Sri Raji for years before I realized that *ashva* means *horse*, simply because there are so few horses in Sri Raji. The *ashva* sacrifice requires one hundred horses, and I'm not sure there are that many in the entire land. (Between the overly dry drought season and the overly wet monsoon season, pasturage is poor.) Lacking horses, other

animals are used instead, including bulls, rams, and goats. In Muladi, fish are often used. In Pakat, the Brahmins often resort to dough or rice shaped into the form of an animal.

A proper sacrifice may only be performed by a priestess or priest of the Brahmin caste. As mentioned above, the loss of *The Books of Knowledge* was accompanied by the loss of wise Brahmins. Nowadays Brahmins of the old lineages are nearly as rare as horses. As a consequence, the priests and priestesses of the Deities of the Cities do not possess the full religious authority of their predecessors. Most Rajians are relieved to know that someone still sacrifices to the gods, giving them strength and earning their favor. However, alternative forms of worship have also arisen.

The first alternative form is devotion. Every Rajian household has a small shrine to the god or goddess of the city. Family members worship at this shrine without the intercession of a Brahmin. Crucially, the sacrifices performed at household shrines never involve animals. (Properly speaking, animal sacrifices may only be performed by a Brahmin.) Bites of food or a collection of pretty flower petals may be offered instead. The poorest Rajian families still offer what they can: their devotion.

The second alternative form is asceticism. Effectively ascetics sacrifice *themselves* through voluntary privation. Some of them sacrifice on behalf of a god or goddess. Others sacrifice themselves to themselves, amassing power which would otherwise be given to the gods. Either way, ascetics are considered highly dangerous by the priests and most other Rajians as well.

A Plurality of Deities

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Sri Rajian faith is its inclusiveness. Certain deities are named in *The Recalled Book*, and of course they are part of the faith. Yet so many other gods and goddesses are also worshipped with equal acceptance. Later I will discuss what I call "village deities" such as Manasa and Aiyanar. Despite my terminology, any given household in one of the cities might also feature a shrine to a village god. Rajians do not take that amiss, nor do their priests, nor do their gods. Can you imagine such tolerance among the churches of the Core? The Home Faith, say, or the Lawgiver?

At any given moment, Rajians may proclaim one particular goddess to be supreme above all others, and at another moment they may proclaim that a different goddess is supreme. They see no contradiction in this. All that matters is that the appropriate gods receive appropriate praise and sacrifice at the appropriate time.

In my own household I have constructed a shrine dedicated to Belenus, at which I pray daily. A friend of the family, upon noticing the unfamiliar symbology, inquired about my god. After I explained about Belenus to him (in greater detail than he had desired, no doubt), he nodded sagely and said, "Ah, yes, an aspect of Savitri, then." At first I was offended, believing that he sought to bury my god beneath his own. Eventually, though, I understood that his statement was merely one of categorization. Belenus and Savitri are both gods of the sun. Belenus is still Belenus. Savitri is still Savitri.

Aspects and Avatars

... and Proxies! (Oh, my.)

The *Planescape* setting introduced the concept of proxies, that is, beings who are granted special abilities to act as agents of the Powers. Rajians draw no distinction between avatars and proxies, but the DM may find the distinction useful.

Avatars *are* a portion of divine essence. Proxies *possess* a portion of divine essence but remain their own distinct selves. In that regard proxies are much like clerics and paladins, only more so.

As a result of this difference, avatars are more powerful than proxies. They should be exceedingly rare. Proxies are slightly more common, but they

should still be rarely present and even more rarely encountered.

Although this article makes mention of a number of avatars and proxies, the DM should choose judiciously which ones, if any, they wish to use. Although there is room in Ravenloft for the sense of wonder in meeting such beings, too much divine presence would undermine the gothic tone of the setting.

A unique characteristic of the deities of the Rajian faith is their myriad aspects. In the Core, our deities tend to be monolithic in nature, their personalities constant. Belenus is a sun god. Yutow is a moon god, The Wolf God is, of course, a god of wolves.

Not necessarily so in Sri Raji. I offer the example of Rudri, whom I will describe further below. Here I simply assert that Rudri is sometimes the goddess of pestilence that afflicts the rice paddies and sometimes the protector who defends the city's inhabitants from the dangers of the jungle. Rajians see no conflict between this intermingled malevolence and benevolence; these are simply two aspects of this goddess.

The closest analog in the Core that I have found is the goddess Ezra. Each of the three primary sects of her church worships what I would now call a different aspect of Ezra. Her personality is adamant in the Home Faith, merciful among the Pure Hearts, and coldly intellectual according to the Erudites. Yet the adherents to the Ezran faith argue incessantly about which aspect is the true aspect of Ezra. Rajians would find such arguments ridiculous. They are all true aspects of Ezra.

[*Translator's Note*: Apparently Catriona nic Duibh is not aware of the revelation of the fourth sect of Ezra. Nonetheless, she would likely argue that Ezra displays a furious aspect when leading the Zealots. The rest of her assertion is unchanged.]

Another noteworthy Rajian belief is that their gods sometimes incarnate themselves in the mortal world. These mortal incarnations are called **avatars**. They each possess some measure of divinity. Although an avatar is never the whole of the incarnated deity, there are tales of a particular god's power being curtailed by the capture, cursing, or killing of an avatar.

Dread Possibility — Planting Seeds

Ordinarily the Dark Powers prevent the Powers of the Outer Planes from interfering directly with the Last of Mists. However, during the Grand Conjunction, the usual rules were temporarily suspended. In Sri Raji, Ravana was able to manifest an avatar in Bahru; the avatar was well along the way to destroying Arijani when the Grand Conjunction ended and the avatar was expelled.

However, other Rajian deities were more subtle. They planted the seeds for their own avatars or proxies, most of whom have not yet been sprouted.

Devas and Asuras

The gods and goddesses of the Rajian faith are called **devas**. Their enemies are the **asuras**. The asuras (and their earthly kindred, the **rakshasas**) try to steal the sacrifice—and therefore the divine power which the sacrifice provides—from the devas.

Across the Core, Ezra and her faithful confront the Legions of Night. In Darkon, the Eternal Order stands against the angry dead from the Grey Realm. In my own homeland of Tepest, Belenus protects his people from the insidious influence of the fey. We tend to have very definite ideas of "good" and "evil".

However, I have observed that the line between "good" and "evil" is not so sharply drawn among the devas and asuras. Some of the devas act in ways which we could consider immoral, and certain asuras are truly righteous, sometimes even offering sacrifices to the gods. In particular, the goddess Kali shows her most terrifying face to the Rajians. Even so, because she is a deva and therefore demands her share of the sacrifice, Rajians worship her with

sincere devotion. They hope to appease her. They hope she will yet show her more maternal aspect.

The asuras are asuras not because they are innately evil but simply because they are not devas. Asuras covet the power inherent in the sacrifice, and so they attempt to steal it.

On the other hand, proper behavior is fully expected among the Rajians. This behavior aligns closely with what the people of the Core commonly consider "good". However, in truth "goodness" in Sri Raji is believed to arise from adherence to one's **dharma**.

Eternal Dharma and Svadharma

Every living being has its duty, or *dharma*. There are two forms of dharma. The **eternal dharma** applies to all beings. For example, all beings should properly worship the devas. However, each being also has its individual **svadharma**, unique to its position in society. The svadharma of a Brahmin is to perform the sacrifices to the gods; of a Kshatriya, it requires rulership; of a Shudra, service.

Much like a Lamordian clockwork device, all of the gears and rods must fit together properly for proper functionality. One might also consider how the human body requires all of its organs to perform their specific functions. Only when all of the many individual components serve their individual svadharma can the whole of reality achieve its dharma.

Sometimes the two forms of dharma conflict. For example, entities such as asuras and rakshasas are bound by svadharma to interfere with sacrifices to the gods and goddesses. That is simply what they *do*. However, this is contrary to eternal dharma, which mandates the very sacrifices which svadharma obliges them to steal. Indeed, there are tales of asura priests who serve the gods. Are these asuras "good" for serving the gods (and eternal dharma) or "evil" for violating their asura nature (their svadharma). As I have mentioned, Sri Raji is a land of contradictions.

Caste

Fifth Caste

The caste system in Sri Raji does not completely align with the one in real-world India. The Vaishya caste in Sri Raji is more limited, with farmers and laborers being considered Shudras instead. In addition, Rajians do not recognize the Dalit caste which forms the lowest stratum of India's caste system. Those Rajians who might otherwise be considered Dalits in the real world are considered Shudras in Sri Raji.

Rajian society is formally divided into four castes: **Brahmins** (priests), **Kshatriyas** (nobles and warriors), **Vaishyas** (artisans and craftspeople), and **Shudras** (farmers, laborers, and servants). The castes are declared in *The Book of Recalled Knowledge* and presumably *The Books of Knowledge* before that.

Each caste has its own svadharma. Brahmins are expected to sacrifice to the devas; Kshatriyas, to rule; Vaishyas, to create material goods; Shudras, to labor.

Foreigners of any stripe are called **Mlecchas**, that is, barbarians. They exist outside the caste system, although for diplomacy's sake Rajians will pretend that important visitors are kshatriyas or even brahmins.

I have lived in Sri Raji for a decade and a half now. Half of Tvashtipur still considers me mleccha. Fortunately the other half considers me vaishya, although I am certain that started as politeness only because I married a vaishya man. They could have shunned us both, my husband and me, but instead they chose to categorize me within their system. According to *The Book of Recalled Knowledge*, such transgressions would never have occurred before the social breakdown inherent in the Kali Age.

Yet my situation is not the only instance of caste failing to be as immutable as *The Recalled Book* claims. Nor is caste the only important categorization of a person. In my experience, profession is at least

as important as caste. Fortunately for me, I am a scholar, and in Tvashtipur, at least, I have value.

Reincarnation and Karma

All actions carry a certain moral weight, which Rajians term **karma**. When one acts according to dharma (whether eternal dharma or svadharma), one accrues good karma. However, when one acts contrary to dharma, one accrues bad karma instead.

The Rajian faith teaches the doctrine of reincarnation, that is, rebirth after death. Crucially, one's status in the next life is determined by the karma which one has accrued. A Shudra who has accumulated more good karma than bad might be reincarnated as a Vaishya, progressing upward in the caste system. However, a Shudra whose bad karma outweighs the good might be reincarnated as an animal.

In other words, one gets what one deserves in the next life. As a corollary, those who are Brahmins and Kshatriyas are held to be morally superior to those who are Vaishyas and Shudras. Even after living in Sri Raji for so many years, I retain enough cynicism to admire what a marvelously self-perpetuating system this is.

To someone raised in the Core, the accumulation of good karma is self-evidently a desirable goal. However, some Rajians—particularly ascetics—believe that the true goal is to accumulate no karmic balance, to disassociate oneself entirely from the world, and to therefore achieve release from the cycle of reincarnation.

Dread Possibility — Reincarnation in Ravenloft

Escape from the Domains of Dread is notoriously difficult, perhaps even for the souls of the dead. Particularly in Sri Raji, the dead may simply reincarnate, perhaps advancing, perhaps regressing, perhaps simply replaying their lives again and again unless they can break the cycle somehow. Certainly the Rajians believe this is so.

The Deities of the Cities

I begin my survey with those deities which I call "The Deities of the Cities". Each one is the patron or patroness of one of Sri Raji's urban centers. However, with the possible exception of Bahru, where Kali appears to reign unchallenged, recall that many other goddesses and gods are worshipped alongside the patron of each city.

Kali, Patroness of Bahru

Of the four Deities of the Cities, Kali is the best known outside of Sri Raji, largely because her fierce reputation thrills the salacious appetites of audiences in the Core. However, she is by far the most influential across all of Sri Raji. She has a temple dedicated to her in the Accursed City of Bahru. She also has a presence in each of the other three cities and the many villages besides.

Kali is a goddess of creation and protection. I have heard learned people say as much, and I have read documents which assert that this is true. Yet both sources leave the impression that this creative, protective Kali occupied an earlier, better age. In Sri Raji, Kali only manifests in her aspect as a goddess of destruction.

Priesthood

The high priest of Kali is Maharaja Arijani himself. He is said to be a demigod. (Rajians commonly assume him to be the son of Kali, although I have my doubts.) Only the priestesses of Kali may look upon his visage without being destroyed by his terrible beauty. He is never seen in the other cities and villages of Sri Raji. He remains within the ruins of Bahru, propitiating Kali, and he only occasionally strays into the nearby jungle to hunt. He is said to ride a beast which falls somewhere between a horse and a tiger.

The priestesses of Kali are known as the Dark Sisters. They serve their goddess and the maharaja alike as spies and assassins. They wander all of Sri Raji. Some of the Dark Sisters are open in their devotion to Kali, performing daily rituals, including sacrifices, for their

goddess. However, others—I suspect most— remain hidden.

Rituals

The rituals dedicated to Kali which are described in *The Recalled Book of Knowledge*—which determines how they are commonly celebrated across most of Sri Raji—are similar to those rituals celebrated for other goddesses and gods: an invocation, a description of the goddess laden with superlative flattery, and an urgent request for her good favor, followed by the sacrifice of either clarified butter or an animal. These rituals are much less bloodthirsty than I would have expected, given Kali's popular reputation beyond the borders of Sri Raji.

That said, outside of Bahru little is known about how Kali is actually propitiated there at the heart of her power. However, this much is known: During each of the three nights of the new moon, a Chosen of Kali is selected from each of the three cities in turn. At dawn a white elephant arrives. The Rajians call the elephant Airavata after a majestic beast from *The Recalled Book*, but in truth there is little majestic about this creature. While it appears to be alive, nonetheless it has the pallor of death. It never makes a noise. It picks up the Chosen one, and then it returns to Bahru.

(Contrary to popular understanding in the Core, Sri Raji does indeed have a moon, of sorts. It is not visible to the naked eye, or at least not to the foreign eye. Nonetheless, Rajians know the phase of the moon.)

Rarely one of the Chosen returns from the Accursed City. They never remember what happened to them while there. They cannot explain what omen, auspicious or not, might have led to their return. Having been touched by divinity, they are revered, but they are never quite trusted among mortals again. Most just end up becoming beggars in the streets.

Parents tell their children that the Chosen of Kali populate the city of Bahru, living in something like paradise. I have told my own children this lie. When they are so young, it feels like a kindness. When they grow older, though, Rajians set aside this story and simply assume that the Chosen of Kali are the Dark Sisters' sacrifice to their goddess.

Reactions to Foreigners

Apart from the Dark Sisters, nobody wants to go to Bahru. However, as a foreigner, I was warned in particular to avoid the Accursed City. No foreigner has ever been known to return from that place. When I first received this warning, I dismissed it as merely the usual hyperbolic superstition, not to mention irrelevant since I had no intention of visiting Bahru. However, over the years I have come to believe its truth. I have never heard even rumors of a foreigner who has gone there and returned.

Dread Possibility — When the Rains Fail to Fall

According to *Web of Illusion*, evening rains fall (at least upon Bahru) nearly every day of the year. The rare occasion when the evening rains do not fall is taken as an omen which tells Arijani to spare his victim for that night. The victim is turned out from Mahakala and left to fend for himself or herself.

Sometimes such survivors are found wandering on the mountain slopes or in the jungles. They may even find their way back to their home cities. Upon leaving Bahru they lose all memory of meeting Arijani or anything else that happened to them in the Accursed City.

However, those who remain within Bahru retain their memories. They group together in small bands, hunting and being hunted. Although the Dark Sisters respect the omen and will not harm the survivors, plenty of other predators lurk in the abandoned city.

Rudri, Patroness of Muladi

Muladi is Sri Raji's largest city. The many rice paddies which surround the city should provide it with ample food, yet they are notoriously subject to plague and parasites alike. The people of Muladi survive largely upon fish and seaweed. Only the priests and rajas can afford to maintain herds of goats and sheep.

The goddess Rudri, patroness of Muladi, is described in ambiguous terms. On one hand, she is a goddess of pestilence and therefore believed to be responsible for the diseases which afflict the rice paddies. Yet she also protects the city and its inhabitants from the dangers of the surrounding lands and nearby Lake Veda. She receives praise for her strength, her intelligence, and her generosity. She is the lady of beasts and the lady of ghosts. She roams cemeteries and other impure places. She is said to be the mother of the forty-nine Maruts, who bring storms to Sri Raji. The storms are both beneficial, bringing fresh water to the city, and physically destructive in their fury.

Despite this seeming ambivalence, Rudri appears to receive the sincere adoration of the people of Muladi.

Priesthood

The priests of Rudri hold the power in Muladi. Nominally the raja rules the city, but he is wise to make decisions which favor the priests' desires. The people of Muladi know this, and they hold that the raja is showing proper respect for the divinely ordained superiority of the Brahmin caste.

Rituals

Mantras performed in Rudri's honor fall into four primary groups:

- general mantras praising Rudri's supreme glory;
- mantras requesting protection from various forms of pestilence (some of them very specific indeed);
- mantras requesting rain during droughts; and
- mantras pleading that Rudri not destroy Muladi with her storms during the monsoon season.

According to the priests, all mantras must be performed by a Brahmin and accompanied by a sacrifice, usually of a fish caught from Lake Veda. When the priests believe that someone in the city has offended Rudri by straying from their dharma—as indicated by a particularly virulent plague, lingering drought, or ferocious monsoon—they might even sacrifice an animal from their own herds instead of fish.

However, despite what the priests prefer, the same mantras are often performed by non-Brahmins in household shrines. The sacrifices are more humble, but the non-Brahmins believe them efficacious nonetheless. Words have power, no matter who tells them. Of course, the Brahmins would argue that truth implies that the words should only be spoken by those trained to speak them *correctly*.

The high priest of Rudri selects each Chosen of Kali. As such, the high priest of Rudri has very few open enemies.

Reactions to Foreigners

In the time since I arrived in Sri Raji, Muladi has benefitted significantly from trade with the Core. Even though the daily details of commerce are handled by vaishyas of the civil government, as overseen by the rajas, the priests of Rudri ensure their own involvement. Every vessel arriving or departing must be blessed by a priest of Rudri, and somehow the priest who performs the blessing is always present when the cargo gets tallied.

Here I should note that foreigners are not discouraged from practicing their own faiths in honor of their own gods. However, disrespect toward the deities of the Rajian faith—particularly Rudri but even fierce Kali, who is little loved in Muladi—will not be tolerated.

Rajians speak of the time that the high priest of Rudri selected a particularly troublesome foreigner as the

Chosen of Kali. Several priests and bystanders were slain before the foreigner could be subdued. Worse yet, two mornings after the foreigner departed for the Accursed City, the strangled corpse of the high priest was found in the city square outside the main temple. His intestines had been used to spell out a warning against sending unbelievers to Bahru. No foreigner has been Chosen since.

Ratri, Patroness of Pakat

The second-largest city is Pakat, which is approximately half the size of Muladi. However, the jungles which surround Pakat are even more dangerous than those which surround Muladi. Even the plants are carnivorous! As such fewer trees have been cleared, and there is less farmland available to grow food. The people of Pakat are perpetually starving.

Ostensibly the goddess Ratri looks over Pakat. She is a goddess of the night. Perhaps it is my bias toward bright Belenus showing, but I was surprised to learn that Ratri is broadly considered to be benign. She is a protector against dangers in the darkness, including beasts, monsters, and thieves. Rest each night is her gift to her faithful. She provides the dew each morning. Yet she is also the goddess of those dangers in the darkness.

However, Ratri's temple is not nearly as grand as Rudri's temple in Muladi. In fact, I find it a shabby place, even compared to the rest of the generally run-down city.

Priesthood

A high priestess heads the temple of Ratri, assisted by a group of priests. The priests are too few to keep the temple in good repair.

Ratri herself is venerated in Pakat, but her priests do not wield the same authority over her city as Rudri's priests do over Muladi. I suspect that they would like to (human nature being what it is), but in Pakat the rajas hold the reins of civic power.

Rituals

A ritual is performed at dusk every night. Most nights feature the same ritual, and the sacrifice is performed only in pantomime. (Animals for sacrifices are in short supply.) During the three nights of the new moon, a more significant ritual is performed, including the actual sacrifice of an animal. The high priestess insists that the faithful are required to attend at least one new-moon ritual each month, but the numbers in attendance indicate that her demand is largely ignored.

Most animals for sacrifices are given by the rajas. The high priestess and the rajas alike say that the donation is voluntary, but I discerned an undercurrent of resentment. Certainly, anyone apart from the rajas who brings a sacrifice (mammal, bird, or reptile, no matter how small) receives the gratitude of the high priestess. How much that gratitude truly matters is open to debate.

Whenever the high priestess of Ratri must select a Chosen of Kali, she enters a trance at midnight to learn who among the citizens of Pakat has been selected.

Reactions to Foreigners

Whenever I have visited Pakat, I have found it to be less welcoming than Muladi or Tvashtipur. Then again, Pakat has never benefitted much from foreigners, seeing little trade and little knowledge. Then again, Pakat has never offered much to foreigners either.

Dread Possibility — The Subverted Temple

In 732BC the city of Pakat was threatened by a creature which the Pakati dubbed the Gharial of Shadows for its dark and reptilian visage. The Gharial caused the Bahkuku river to run dry. Fortunately, the priesthood of Ratri had a contingency for such emergencies: the warrior Bahaaduri, a proxy of Ratri. Unfortunately, though, a faction of the priesthood had other ideas. They had decided that the Gharial should be worshipped, not destroyed. They usurped the traditional priests and imprisoned Bahaaduri, and they began sacrificing to the Gharial instead of Ratri.

In exchange, the Gharial has refrained from destroying Pakat, although it has grown restless over subsequent decades. It thrives upon stolen sacrificial power, but nonetheless it misses having a good rampage. Ironically, because it has agreed not to feed upon humans (except for those explicitly sacrificed to it), it feeds upon the creatures of the surrounding jungle. In their bid for power, the priests of the Gharial have actually (if unintentionally) improved the lives of the people of Pakat.

The Gharial of Shadows may be an offspring of the asura Susna. Alternately, if the *Father of Asuras* Dread Possibility is in play, then the Gharial is likely Tvashtri's offspring.

Dread Possibility — The Imprisoned Proxy

Ratri has been the patron goddess of Pakat since before Sri Raji was formed, and Bahaaduri is her proxy. By day she was an ordinary-seeming Pakati woman except that she never seemed to age. However, under darkness she gained the power of Night. In that guise, Bahaaduri defended her city from rakshasas whenever they strayed out of Bahru.

When Sri Raji was drawn into the Mists, Bahaaduri felt the severing of contact with her goddess, although much of her nocturnal power remained. Furthermore, Bahaaduri noticed that most of the priests and priestesses of her temple had vanished, leaving behind those whom Bahaaduri would have judged less capable of fulfilling their duties properly. Alarmingly, only Bahaaduri noticed this change; the others who remained thought that Sri Raji had always been as Sri Raji now was.

Although Bahaaduri never allowed herself to be recognized as a priestess (or mistaken for her goddess), nonetheless she reformed the priesthood of Ratri in those early years. She still considered herself the guardian of the city, even though rakshasas had ceased to invade from Bahru. When her night-time powers began to wane, she allowed herself to hope their waning was because she was no longer needed.

Unfortunately, in 732BC Pakat was threatened by the Gharial of Shadows. The Gharial was clearly a challenge appropriate for a proxy, and so the priests of Ratri performed the sacrifices which they believed would restore Bahaaduri to full power. Unfortunately, a subversive faction within the priesthood was actually stealing Ratri's power for the Gharial. They imprisoned Bahaaduri and took over the temple.

Bahaaduri has remained a prisoner for the subsequent decades. She is unable to tap the powers she once had, perhaps because of the darkless cell in which she is trapped, perhaps because the power has utterly left her.

Tvashtri, Patron of Tvashtipur

Tvashtipur (sometimes called Tvashsti, sometimes called Tvashti) is the smallest of Sri Raji's populated cities. Perhaps for that reason its people suffer the least. However, it is equally likely because the patron of Tvashtipur is the god of science and technology. Unlike Rudri, whose influence upon Muladi feels as oppressive as it is protective, and unlike Ratri, whose sphere of influence seems unrelated to anything which might aid Pakat, gifts from Tvashtri actually benefit his city.

Priesthood

The priests and priestesses of Tvashtri seem to me to be more secular than any other priests I have ever met, although they would swear otherwise. They consider the process of learning to be a sacred activity, and even a failed invention is a well-regarded sacrifice to their god. Although I have heard many students mutter brief prayers to Tvashtri under their breath, lengthy rituals are reserved for holy days.

Yet those who teach at the University are adamant that they are not mere professors but priests. The University itself is a temple.

When I first came to Tvashtri, the priests admitted me to the University grounds even though I was penniless and could not pay the usual admittance fee. Instead, they admitted me because I was desperate to learn. I trust that I have repaid them in fully with my willingness to teach them in turn—about Belenus, Tepest, and other places of the faraway Core.

Rituals

Few of the rituals dedicated to Tvashtri resemble those rituals performed for other deities across Sri Raji. I would say that no sacrifices are performed; the priests of Tvashtri would insist that ignorance itself is sacrificed. To them, the act of teaching is a sacred ritual. The act of learning is a ritual. Even the writing of this dissertation they would claim to be a ritual.

Junior faculty are often assigned the task of chanting the sacred formulas which are said to maintain the proper operation of the universe. Hearing a hundred voices chanting in unison is impressive, especially when you realize that what they are chanting is, for example, a list of the bones in the human body.

Holy days are determined astronomically, which produces a schedule I have never been able to discern despite my many years in Tvashtipur. Public rituals are performed on holy days, but even though they are more religious in content than the daily rituals, they are still lectures on the workings of the world. Perhaps once per year an animal is sacrificed so that we may learn a lesson in what the University of Dementlieu would call anatomy.

The priests of Tvashtri have constructed a mechanism for randomly selecting the Chosen of Kali. In 728BC the mechanism randomly selected the current high priest himself. That high priest, Dadabhvai Ayyangar, appointed an unexpected successor, resigned from his position, and went to Bahru to meet his fate. Since then, nobody in Tvashtipur has second-guessed the fairness of the mechanism.

Reactions to Foreigners

Tvashtipur is welcoming to foreigners, at least as long as they demonstrate an interest in learning. Better yet if they have something to teach.

Dread Possibility — The Father of Asuras

Among the Deities of the City as presented in *Web of Illusion*, Tvashtri is clearly the most beneficient. Yet he is known in Hindu lore as the father of two asuras, Vishvarupa and Vritra. After Indra kills Vishvarupa, Tvashtri (who may be Indra's father as well) creates Vritra to avenge Vishvarupa. However, Indra proves victorious against Vritra as well.

Perhaps some new asura child grows beneath the University of Tvashtipur, gathering power for his confrontation with the devas of Sri Raji. Either its reality wrinkle has not yet manifested in its pre-conscious state or else Arijani cannot discern the reality wrinkle of an asura.

Dread Possibility — The Sky Chariot and Other Weapons

In the *Ramayana*, Ravana possesses a sky chariot created by Vishvakarma... who is also known as Tvashtri. The sky chariot was originally crafted for Brahma but then given to Kubera, half-brother to Ravana. Ravana deposed Kubera from his kingdom and stole his treasures, including the sky chariot.

Given this theft, Tvashtri is unlikely to be well disposed toward Ravana. His priests might craft a weapon powerful enough to strike down an avatar of Ravana... or else his son Arijani.

For that matter, a group of zealous students might be working to construct a new sky chariot, one which includes supernatural armament for use against Arijani and his patron goddess. If this ambitious plan receives Tvashtri's favor, then he might even imbue the sky chariot with a fragment of his divine power.

The Deities of the Temple

The Dream of the Great Temple

One vividly remembered night in 743BC I had a dream. Once I would have been hesitant to include such a fact in a formal dissertation, but my years of exposure to Rajian culture have increased my faith in omens and auspices. Besides, you may recall that my parents sent me west from Tepest because I often dreamed true dreams, and they did not wish me burned at the stake for that.

In this particular dream, I wandered through a ruined city overgrown with jungle ivy. I knew—as one knows in dreams—that this was Bahru, called the Accursed City. Similarly, I knew that the temple which I found was Mahakala, the temple of Kali where Maharaja Arijani resides.

The bronze doors of the temple swung open, and I entered. The first hallway was long and occupied by eight well-crafted statues of the same man—or, as I learned shortly, the same god. I had intended to scrutinize each of the statues in turn because I, like native-born Rajians, have learned to be alert for omens and auspices. However, I had no sooner turned my attention to the first statue when I heard a voice behind me.

"What are you doing here, in my temple?"

The voice was deep and rich. Its accent was nothing I had heard before, but it sounded more like Brahmin Rajian than anything else I recognized. I turned to face the speaker. He was very finely dressed in colorful silks. He was well built, and I suspect he would have been very handsome had he not possessed a tiger's head. I did not know whether this was his true form or a dream omen. Either way, I knew better than to trust him.

He blinked at me. Even upon his feline features, his surprise was apparent.

"I apologize for my rudeness, dear one. I did not recognize you."

He took my hand and bent over it. I am familiar with the Dementlieuse style of hand-kissing, where no contact is made between lips and hand. When Maharaja Arijani—for it was, of course, he—kissed my hand, I felt the brutal rasp of his tiger's tongue.

The scene shifted, as it does in dreams. We were still in the first hallway, but I was not myself. I was the woman for whom he had mistaken me, and he was showing off his home.

"This was the hall of Puchan," he said. "God of travelers. Now subservient to Kali."

The next hall was Rudra's. "Lord of Storms. Lord of Beasts. Now subservient to Kali."

The next, Indra's. "Lord of Rain and Rulership. Now subservient to Kali."

And so forth, through Siva and Vayu, Savitri and Yama, Varuna, Brahman. Now you know where I first learned about the Deities of the Temple.

Eventually we reached the Pagoda of Kali. "Mistress of All!" he declared proudly. "It was she who enabled me to defeat my father."

The Maharaja never told me who his father was, but I believe the answer is written plainly in Rajian legend.

Next I describe the gods whom I call the "deities of the temple". While my investigations started from a highly unlikely place—a dream—subsequent research has only supported my initial observations. Apparently, the deities of the temple were once worshipped in Sri Raji according to rituals described in the original *Books of Knowledge*. These rituals are not recorded in *The Recalled Book*, and these deities are no longer widely worshipped, at least not in the aspects represented in my temple dream. Kali is the exception, and even her worship has taken on a more specific aspect than those portrayed in the temple and the vaguely recalled lore.

Puchan

Puchan is a god of travelers and the protector of cattle.

Rudra

Rudra, “The Howler”, is primarily acknowledged as the god of violent storms, but he is also a god of disease.

Rudra is very similar to Rudri, the patron of Muladi. It is possible that they are two aspects of the same deity. However, it is also possible that Rudra is Rudri's husband.

Indra

Indra is another storm god, but he is considered less unruly than Rudra. Even so, he is a warrior, and lightning is his weapon.

Indra is often depicted riding upon a white elephant named Airavata. Maharaja Arijani's elephant bears the same name.

Siva

An ambiguous god. To judge from his pagoda in the Maharaja's temple, I would have believed him to be a god of fire, but upon reflection I think it more likely that he is a god of destruction by fire. Or perhaps he is simply a god of destruction, and fire was simply the means depicted in the Maharaja's temple. He shares similarities with Rudra and similarities with Kali. In the end, *The Recalled Book of Knowledge* and other rituals say too little about this god to draw any confident conclusions.

Vayu

The god of winds and sky. Like Indra, Vayu is also a warrior.

Savitri

A sun god, perhaps one of several or else the most prominent aspect of a single god of the sun. Also considered a god of life, light, and healing.

Yama

In Rajian lore Yama was the first mortal to be born and the first mortal to die, after which he became the god of the kingdom of the dead. He judges whether the dead have fulfilled their dharma and therefore whether they will be reborn as higher beings or lower. He is depicted as just, sometimes even cheerful.

Yama and Kali are both death gods. However, Yama, the god of the kingdom of the dead, should not be confused with Kali, whose sphere of influence includes killing and dying. Once someone has died, Kali appears to entrust what happens afterward to Yama.

Yama is said to have two dogs, each with four eyes, who guard the paths of the dead.

Varuna

A god of justice and rulership, protector of the cosmic order. Sometimes he is described as a god of the night but sometimes as a god of the waters. Occasionally paired with Mitra.

Brahman

The creator of the universe, which encompasses everything. He caused himself to emerge from a golden egg, and once born he created all else. All of reality remains part of the body of Brahman. Those who achieve karmic balance regain full unity with the creator again.

Brahman has four arms and four heads. According to the doctrine of Bhairava, Brahman once had five heads until he offended Bhairava, who cut off Brahman's fifth head in response.

Missing Deities

Certain deities I classify as "The Missing Gods" (and Goddesses). I have found only traces of them within *The Recalled Book*. They are not the patrons of any cities. No pagodas in the Maharaja's temple were devoted to them. In fact they have been almost completely erased. I have found no reason for their erasure. None of them have any apparent enmity toward Kali to explain why they might have earned her wrath. Regardless, they are vanishing from Rajian worship.

Agni

Agni is the god of fire, particularly the sacrificial fire. Although I have classified him as one of the Missing Gods, that classification is not quite accurate. Agni is invoked at the beginning of every sacrifice. However, once invoked he is then forgotten. I had lived here for a decade before I realized Agni is a god and not just the fire.

Ashvins

The Ashvins were twin gods of medicine and science. They are so strongly associated with horses that they are sometimes said to have horses' heads. They are mentioned in certain obscure mantras associated with Tvashtri. They are less concerned with mechanisms and weapons than Tvashtri and more concerned with healing.

Mitra

A god of cosmic law and order, always paired with Varuna. Although sometimes referred to as a composite deity, in other mantras they are implied to be distinct entities. Nonetheless, I found little to distinguish Mitra from Varuna.

Soma

The New Soma

A band of hunters has stumbled across a certain type of mushroom in the Yahasha Mountains. After discovery of the psychoactive properties of this mushroom, the hunters have decided that they have rediscovered soma, the sacred drink of the gods. Moreover, they have declared themselves the new priests of the god Soma.

These decisions raise two issues. First, the hunters belong to the Shudra caste, which (in the eyes of the rest of Sri Raji, anyway) has no business whatsoever concerning itself with Brahmin matters. However, much worse yet, their new soma tea does not grant them communion with the god Soma or any of the other Rajian deities. Instead, it has linked their minds with something else, something far outside the pale.

Unfortunately for the Kaalaan Makal—or so they now call themselves—there is a certain side effect to their frequent tea consumption. Those Kaalaan Makal who first declared themselves priests of the new soma have taken root in the jungle. Literally. At first they simply crouched down and sat still, but tendrils have emerged from their bodies to sink into the loam. Their eyes are sealed, as are their noses and mouths. For a while they hummed to themselves, but that too has stopped. Nonetheless, they still seem to be alive, and the other Kaalaan Makal insist they are happy, united with the Godhead.

The Kaalaan Makal are quite willing to share their tea with visitors.

Like Agni, Soma is a god of the sacrifice. In particular, Soma is the sacred drink of the gods, and Soma is the god of that drink. He is also the god of the moon, in which guise he is also known as Chandra.

Soma (the sacred drink) is no longer used in rituals because the manner of its creation has been forgotten. The priests with whom I've spoken say that it was created from the juice of a particular plant, but they cannot say exactly which plant. Such information must have been lost with *The Books of Knowledge*.

Ushas

Goddess of the dawn. The provider of life to all beings. Sister of Ratri.

I have found ancient mantras where Ushas is hailed as the greatest of all the goddesses, yet in Sri Raji she has been almost entirely overshadowed by Kali, Rudri, and Ratri.

Village Deities

Finally I draw attention to those deities whom I call the Village Deities. They are not part of *The Recalled Book*, yet they are venerated in rituals which are part of an oral tradition perhaps as old as *The Books of Knowledge* themselves. As my term for them indicates, most "Village Deities" are worshipped in the scattered villages of Sri Raji. However, there are also plenty of "Village Deities" worshipped throughout the cities as well.

Aiyanar

The Night Watchman

A proxy of Aiyanar resides in the village where Aiyanar is worshipped. By day he is an ordinary man who works in the rice paddies alongside his family. Every night, however, he takes upon his divine aspect. He summons his horse—the opposite of a nightmare—and patrols the village perimeter.

Aiyanar is a warrior who defends his village. Strikingly, he is said to ride a horse even though horses are so rare in Sri Raji. He derives his power from standing stones called *nadukkals*.

Bhairava

The god worshipped by the Skull-Bearers. He is frequently depicted as carrying a skull himself: the skull of Brahman's fifth head.

Bhairava is a fearsome god, the lord of ghosts, but he is by no means hostile to humanity.

Kubera

Kubera is an ambiguous figure. *The Recalled Book* says little about him except that he is the half-brother of the Rakshasa god Ravana and the king of evil spirits. However, following Ravana's theft of Kubera's kingdom and sky chariot, Kubera has allied himself with the devas. Nonetheless, he remains the king of the goblin-like Guhyakas.

Kubera is worshipped by several tribes of the Yahasha Mountains.

Manasa

The Shrine of the Serpents

Manasa is described in *Quoth the Raven* Issue 28, "Olerick's Colloquial Guides Presents… Sacred Sites and Legendary Landmarks", p.119.

A goddess of serpents. In the Core we would assume that she must be a malicious goddess, but Rajians view her positively. In fact, the Naga Festival in her honor is celebrated annually across Sri Raji.

Sharabha

Tales speak of Sharabha, a beast who lives in the eastern Yahasha Mountains. It has a lion's body and an eagle's wings and a four-armed human torso and a leonine face with an avian beak. It is ferocious yet wise, and some Rajians have begun to worship it as a god, making pilgrimages to its lair despite the dangers of the jungle.

Yakshas

Yakshas are nature spirits. Although they are tricksters, they are usually benevolent regardless. Most depictions I have seen show yakshas as portly men or full-figured women. They are reputed to be doughty warriors despite their domestic appearance.

Ravana

Ravana and Kali

After Ravana became a god through his great asceticism, his rakshasas grew bold. They raided many towns and villages, killing people and disrupting their sacrifices to the devas. The gods who rose against him were struck down by his mighty weapons. Kali grew incensed at the harm inflicted upon her worshippers. However, she restrained her anger until Ravana abducted one of her high priestesses. At this Kali donned her necklace of heads and her skirt of arms, and she went to war upon Ravana.

The battle was fierce. Ravana had ten heads; Kali cut one off with her bloody knife. Ravana possessed the indestructible sword Chandrahasa. With it he cut away the flesh of Kali's thigh.

"Goddess!" he cried. "I have cut away the flesh of your thigh! Will you not yield to me?"

"Never shall I yield!" the goddess replied. "I am far greater than you. Even the flesh of my thigh is sufficient to bring you low."

Ravana nearly laughed, but then he saw that the flesh he had cut away from the goddess had taken the shape of a man, one who was both Brahmin and Kshatriya, high priest and maharaja. He held in his hands a weapon fashioned by Tvashtri, god of craftsmen, god of artisans, whose mighty flying chariot Ravana had once stolen.

"What manner of being are you?" Ravana asked. "What manner of weapon do you hold?"

"Ravana's Bane," replied the man who was both priest and maharaja. He unleashed the weapon and destroyed Ravana.

Kali laughed and she danced, still bleeding from her wounded thigh.

I have one last deity to mention: Ravana, the god of the rakshasas. He was once an ordinary rakshasa who rose to divinity through asceticism. He is not the patron of any city. There are no mantras in *The Recalled Book* dedicated to him. To the best of my knowledge, he is not worshipped in any of the villages of Sri Raji. He seems best classified as one of the missing gods... except that he has not been forgotten in the same way that Mitra or Soma have been. He is universally recognized as Kali's greatest foe. He is called a god, yet he is nowhere worshipped... which is to say, he seems to be more an *asura* than a *deva*.

There are many myths of Ravana's destruction; I have included an example. While various tellings differ in their details, they all share much in common. In particular, none of the myths provide a name for the man who is somehow both Brahmin and Kshatriya, yet it is clear that Maharaja Arijani is intended. I would suspect this myth of being political propaganda, except that everyone in Sri Raji believes that the maharaja has ruled the land for generations uncounted. Is it possible that Arijani truly is a demigod?

A braver soul than I would be required to ask him.

DM's Appendix — Factions, Cabals, and Secret Societies

The Skull-Bearers

An Interview with Haran

After I learned of the Skull-Bearers, I journeyed back to Muladi to speak with them. Rather than finding them hostile to someone whom they might reasonably have expected to revile them, I found them startlingly welcoming. I was brought immediately to Haran, the leader of the Skull-Bearers. In truth, I was indeed revolted, but once I learned to ignore the grave ash and the human skulls, I found him to be a surprisingly thoughtful man.

At one point Haran declared, "We were all rakshasas once." There was an impish twinkle in his eye as he said this.

I started to protest this notion, but he was ready. He injected swiftly, "Oh, not you, of course. You are a *mleccha*. But those of us who were born in Sri Raji, we were all rakshasas once."

"You cannot mean to tell me—"

"But I do. We lived in Bahru, and the Maharaja struck us down. Because of our karma, we were reborn as the people and beasts of Sri Raji. That is why there are so few Brahmins, so few Kshatriyas. Across successive lifetimes very few of us have fulfilled our dharma enough to achieve such heights."

"So you are saying we are all evil?"

"Not at all. Yes, in a past life we all lived contrary to dharma, just as most people sometimes do across the long span of the Four Ages. However, we have the opportunity to improve ourselves across that same span, and I believe most of us here have. Sri Raji contains its dangers, certainly, but it does not

seem to have any rakshasas. Isn't that a wonder, given how we started? I, for one, am grateful for the kindness of the gods."

The Skull-Bearers are ascetics who worship a god they call Bhairava. They live in cemeteries, and they paint themselves with grave ash. They make bowls and jewelry from skulls and bones. They consume alcohol and smoke psychoactive herbs. Most Rajians find their behavior repulsive, but Skull-Bearers insist that they are merely acknowledging the necessity of death and paying proper due to the unpleasant, but still necessary, parts of reality.

The Public Face

Although the Skull-Bearers are based in the cremation grounds of Muladi, they may be found begging throughout the city. Most Rajians revile the Skull-Bearers, considering them to be lower than Shudras, outside the pale of proper worship. However, there is a contrary undercurrent belief that helping someone so reviled is a highly meritorious act, and so some Rajians will donate to the Skull-Bearers... usually without daring to make eye contact.

The Hidden Face

Contrary to all appearances and expectations, the Skull-Bearers are not evil. Most are neutral, and some are in fact good-aligned. For example, they do not seek to cause death but instead to force people to acknowledge its necessity and its importance. Their transgressions are aimed at opening the mind to non-traditional paths.

Skull-Bearers have influence over vetalas, pretas, bhutas, pisachas, and other forms of undead. Nearly all Skull-Bearers use this ability benignly, preventing such creatures from harming the people of Muladi. However, if the city were ever to be attacked, the invaders would find a most frightful army raised against them.

Allies and Enemies

The Skull-Bearers have no allies, even though they would argue that they actually exist in service of the enlightenment of all. Most traditional priests, including and especially the priests of Rudri, are opposed to the ways that the Skull-Bearers exercise their faith. However, the Skull-Bearers have never caused enough trouble for the Rudrivites to actually move against them.

When the Dark Sisters bother thinking about the Skull-Bearers at all, they take a certain dark glee in their transgressions. They assume that the Skull-Bearers would join with their own goddess of death. They are quite likely wrong.

See Kapalika on Wikipedia for inspiration.

Final Possibility — Siva

The priestesses of Kali believe that Ravana is the foremost god who seeks to thwart their goddess, but they may be wrong. Although Kali is given a number of origins in real-world Hinduism, she is frequently said to have been created from another goddess to combat asuras who threaten the devas. However, even after defeating the asuras, she remains caught up in her bloodlust, and her mighty victory dance threatens reality. Fortunately, existence is saved by her consort, the god Siva, who throws himself under her feet. Shocked by the disrespect she inadvertently shows him, she ceases her destructive dance.

Similarly, Siva is at work in Sri Raji, even though Catriona nic Duibh cannot discern his divine will at work there. Rudra is an aspect of Siva, as is Bhairava, as is Sharabha. Rudri is an aspect of Siva's wife Parvati. Other aspects are likely present as well. Siva seeks to thwart Kali—not to destroy her, but to remind her of her gentler self.

The Children of the Corn

(Post Apocaloft Expansion)

BY M. T. Kelly

Editor's note: *a large part of the introduction (background story parts) of this article draws heavilly from the Wikipedia pages on the Children of the Corn movies franchise.*

Gatlin, Nebraska

Excerpts from the published book 'Children of the Corn'

…My name is John Garrett, and before…things changed, I was well on my way to becoming a household name in journalism. Like most in the profession nowadays, I'm involved in trying to find out what's happened to the world and what shape the rest of the world is in. Even before… what happened, somehow, my life and career kept coming back to this particular story.

It involves what was at once the most horrible and most wonderful time of my life. Wonderful because I reconciled with my son, found my second wife, and my later daughter-in-law. Horrible because…. Well, you'll see the reasons why. I've published this story in magazines and newspapers several times before now, and because of this, other people who have encountered chapters of this cult in the years, since have gotten in touch with me to tell about what they experienced with them, as well.

I have made a point of verifying these accounts, first-hand, and both photographic evidence and documentation are all included in this book. This narrative will track this cult and the horrors it has committed in chronological order. Gratefully, my family, and I were only present for one of the following incidents.-

The Children of the Corn and He who Walks Behind the Rows - Gatlin, Ne

In Nebraska, there once was a small town named Gatlin. It was an agricultural community surrounded by huge cornfields. In 1981, the town suffered a severe drought and in a tent, a boy preacher identified as nine-year-old Isaac Croner, claimed that a god, whom he called "He Who Walks Behind the Rows", had spoken to him in his dreams. He told the other children that the adults in the town, whom he considered blasphemous, were the cause of their recent problems and led the children in establishing a death cult of children and teenagers to get rid of everyone over the age of 20. Meanwhile, the townsfolk had turned to prayer in hopes to ensure a successful harvest.

Isaac took all of the Gatlin children into the cornfields and indoctrinated them into the cult based on his bloodthirsty deity and, with his subordinate Malachai, led the children in an uprising that murdered all of the adults in town as human sacrifices. Two children, Job and his sister Sarah, were uninvolved in the sacrifices, having not attended the meetings with the other children, but they did witness the murders first-hand.

Two years later, two people,Vicky and her husband, Burt, traveled through rural Nebraska on their way to Seattle, where Burt was to start work as a physician. Meanwhile, a young boy named Joseph tried to flee Gatlin, got attacked in the corn, and stumbled out into the road where Burt accidentally ran him over. Burt discovered, however, that his throat had been cut beforehand.

At the same time, Malachai discovered Job and Sarah in their old house, dressed as grown-ups, listening to records, and playing a board game, all of which were forbidden. Malachai took them to Isaac to be judged and brought along one of Sarah's crayon drawings as evidence. Isaac, who had been expecting outsiders to come, saw that Sarah had drawn a picture of a car driving toward Gatlin and recognized her as having the 'Sight' or the ability to see the future. He recognized this as a blessing, especially after Malachai told him that he had already seen the car while chasing Joseph. Isaac ordered Malachai to assemble the children in preparation for the outsiders. Malachai, however, resented that Isaac punished neither Job nor Sarah for doing the forbidden.

Searching for help, Burt and Vicky found Diehl, an elderly mechanic and the last adult in Gatlin. He refused them service because he had agreed to supply only the children with fuel in exchange for his life. Malachai broke the pact and murdered Diebl after he tried to steer the couple away from Gatlin

Vicky and Burt explored the area and found Sarah alone in a house. When asked, Sarah gave eerie answers about the town. Since the phone there was destroyed, Burt left Vicky and Sarah together to find a working one and report the car accident. While he was away, Sarah and Vicky bonded over Sarah's crayon drawings and Vicky was pleased when Sarah drew one for her, but then shocked when the drawing was of her being dragged by a group of men holding bloody knives through trees. Malachai and his followers then entered the room, captured Vicky, and dragged her off to the cornfield, where they placed her on a cross to be sacrificed. Vicky awakened tied upright to the cross directly across from the remains of a man in a police uniform and surrounded by children waving farm tools and chanting, "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

At the same time, Burt was exploring the abandoned town and found every building decorated in one way or another with dried out corn cobs, leaves, kernels, and stalks, some arranged in religious symbols. He didn't notice then that he was being followed by Job the whole time. When Burt entered the local church, he found a congregation of children led by a girl named Rachel performing a cultural birthday ritual for a boy named Amos by drinking his blood from a pentagram-shaped cut on his chest. Amos had turned 19, and so was considered old enough for his "passing"—joining their god in the cornfield. Rachel stabbed Burt, who was rescued by Job and the two of them fled and hid in an old fallout shelter with Sarah where Burt learned the story of what happened in Gatlin.

Meanwhile, Isaac scolded Malachai for killing Diehl, their only source of fuel. Malachai responded by taking over. He was tired of Isaac's preaching and ordered Isaac sacrificed instead of Vicky. Isaac warned that sacrificing him would break their pact with He Who Walks Behind the Rows and the children would be punished. That night, though, Burt sneaked into the cornfield to rescue Vicky where he witnessed Isaac's sacrifice. He watched a supernatural light appear and devour Isaac. Burt then overpowered Malachai and convinced the children to abandon the cult and run. Suddenly, the walking corpse of Isaac returned to punish Malachai, informing him in a demonic voice that "He wants you, too", Isaac killed Malachai by choking him and breaking his neck.

A storm appeared, and Burt and Vicky sheltered with the children in a barn. Vicky read from Job's Bible and learned that the cornfield had to be destroyed by fire in order to stop the false god. Burt then tossed a Molotov cocktail into the field, setting it alight and destroying the demon along with Isaac, or so they believed. The couple returned to their car with Job and Sarah to leave Gatlin, but found the car disabled. Rachel attacked Burt, but Vicky knocked her out and they departed with the children on foot.

* * *

Burt contacted me after I published the account of my own experiences with the cult and he and his family agreed to be interviewed by me. Given my own experiences with these unnatural children, I was no less shocked to discover the sheer amount of insanity the cult actually practiced. Job was the most forthcoming of all and I was amazed at his ability to tell what happened without breaking down. Burt and Vicky decided to adopt Job and Sarah and help them come to terms with what happened. I'm pleased to say I recently attended their high school graduation, but the traumas of their parents' murder, their experiences with the cult, and their reintegration with modern society still haunt them. Sarah continues to draw pictures of future events and was even willing to recreate her crayon drawings from her time with the cult which has been included in this book. Furthermore, it was Burt and Vicky who reported what was happening in Gatlin to the state police, setting up what next happened to me and my family-

The Final Sacrifice - Hemingford, Ne

Two days after the events in Gatlin, the people of Hemingford, Nebraska decided to adopt the surviving children from Gatlin and help them start new lives. The well-meaning locals were unaware, however, when the children returned to the cornfield where one of the cult members, Micah, was possessed by He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

At the same time, in Hemingford, city reporter John Garrett and his son Danny, were having a bitter falling-out over John's failed relationship with Danny's mother. John was in town working on a story about the children of Gatlin to save his downward-spiraling career. He ran into two of his former coworkers, Bobby Knite and fellow reporter Wayde McKenzie, who were on their way out of town and who were later killed in a nearby cornfield after taking a shortcut in their van and a mysterious, powerful storm that lasted only minutes blew up and caused the surprisingly sharp cornstalks to wreak havoc upon them. Back in town, John met bed-and-breakfast owner Angela Casual and they soon became lovers. Looking to distance himself from his father, Danny befriended orphaned local girl Lacey, who told him some disturbing details about Gatlin.

Meanwhile, Micah and the other children murdered local woman Ruby Burke by sabotaging the hydraulic jacks supporting her house while she was underneath it, causing it to descend and crush her. Micah then killed another townsperson, David Simpson, during church services with a knife and a wooden voodoo doll, which caused him to bleed to death from his head and face. John started to question the town doctor about what was going on, but the doctor acted suspiciously and asked John to leave. Afterwards, the doctor called the sheriff and reported that John was investigating. The doctor was

later stabbed to death in his office by the children. Micah and the children also later killed Mrs. Burke's sister, Mrs. West, in the road and made it look like she was struck by a car.

John partnered with Frank Red Bear, a Native American professor from the state university, to try to make sense of the recent chaos and death. Frank led John to ancient Native American rock paintings, and told him that Native Americans believed the area around Gatlin and Hemingford held special power which could magnify good or bad, and that children were especially vulnerable: Frank recited a story which told of children killing their elders, but also how in the end with a funeral pyre. A good spirit would emerge and further stipulated that the rock paintings show this has not yet come to pass.

As they investigated the local corn storage, they discovered that town residents had been selling spoiled corn from the previous year's harvest along with the new crop to maximize profits. Growing on the spoiled corn was a dark-green acidic toxin which they believed was filling the town's air and contributing to a state of delusions in the children, rendering them emotionless and violent. The Sheriff discovered them spying on the site, tied them up, and left them to be killed by a corn harvester, but they escaped. Along the way, John questioned Frank further about what was going on. Frank told how Native Americans believed in a spirit who would seek revenge for perceived wrongs done to the land, and that He Who Walks Behind the Rows was this spirit.

The Sheriff and the rest of the Hemingford adults attended an emergency town-hall meeting to discuss the situation, but the children locked them inside and set the building afire, killing them all. The children then kidnaped Angela and Lacey and took them out to the cornfield where they pressured a confused Danny to join them in sacrificing Lacey, but John and Frank arrived driving the harvester. One of the children shot Frank with an arrow, wounding him while Danny and John freed Lacey and Angela and attempted to escape, but the cornfield seemed endless, and they shortly found themselves right where they started. Micah attempted to harness the power of He Who Walks Behind the Rows until Frank, as he died, restarted the harvester. Micah's robe got caught in the machine but at that moment, Micah was freed from his possession and called for help. Danny ran in to help him but was too late. The harvester pulled Micah in, killing him. The rest of the children scattered, and John, Danny, Angela, and Lacey left the clearing.

John and Danny later reconciled as they burned Frank's body on, what they believed, was a traditional Native American funeral pyre, before they, Angela, and Lacey, all drove off together. Some time later, Frank was seen doing additions to the rock paintings to show that the story had come to pass, with his spirit having become the protector of the area.

* * *

My entire family still has nightmares about what happened back then, but at the same time, it was what brought us together as a family. We don't like to talk about it much but sometimes we just can't avoid it. It really was a long time ago. It sometimes feels like it happened to completely different people. Danny and Lacey dated, off and on, all through high school and college in spite of Angela and I adopting Lacey not long after we got married. They were expecting their first child when the world went crazy and everything stopped working. Fortunately, everything got up and running in our local area in time for the birth. It was a boy and we named him Frank Red Bear Garrett after Frank, whom we all agreed, was the finest man we'd ever known. I, of course, dismissed his talk of good and evil spirits as old superstition at the time, but as I gather more and more stories around this cult, I find myself wondering if he wasn't right. If a protector spirit did rise after the events in Hemingford, it can only be hoped that it's at least as noble and brave as Frank Red Bear. I've since corresponded with his tribe and they also recognized him as an exceptional man. The rest of us can only hope to follow the example of people like Frank.

The Urban Harvest - Chicago Il.

Three years later, on a farm near Gatlin, Joshua and his younger brother Eli took refuge in the nearby cornfield when their abusive father came looking for them in a drunken rage. As their father approached with a scythe, Eli decided to stay behind and face him, despite Joshua's insistence they flee and find a better hiding spot. After rebuking their father for beating Joshua, he used a pagan Bible to invoke the power of "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" to have the cornstalks murder their father, turning his mutilated body into a makeshift scarecrow. Joshua returned to check on Eli and the two departed, with Eli's Bible being magically buried in the soil.

Eli and Joshua were taken into foster care by William and Amanda Porter of Chicago. The two boys did not mix well with a home in modern Chicago.Their formal, Amish-like clothes from Gatlin, Eli's fire-and-brimstone prayer at dinner, and them bringing a suitcase full of corn that Eli stole to Chicago struck their new parents and neighbors as unusual. On his first night in Chicago, after everyone else had gone to sleep, Eli quietly left the Porters', taking his corn-filled suitcase, and headed to an empty factory on the other side of the backyard fence. There he prayed to He Who Walks Behind the Rows and planted corn seeds on the factory grounds; rows of corn appeared almost instantly.

The next day the boys started school, and Eli nearly got into a fight with T-Loc, a student in Joshua's grade, and harshly criticized Joshua for playing basketball with some of the other students. Disgusted with their classmates' modern lifestyle, Eli decided to bring He Who Walks Behind the Rows to Chicago, and a homeless man who found the cornfield was murdered. Joshua became attracted to his neighbor Maria and befriended her brother Malcolm, gradually spending less and less time with Eli.

The social worker who brought Eli and Joshua to the Porters' then discovered that Eli was originally adopted from Gatlin, Nebraska and that he had not aged since 1964. She tried to warn the Porters, but Eli quickly burned her alive for knowing too much. Amanda noticed Eli's strange mannerisms, and when she tried to cut down his cornfield, it attacked her. She attempted to escape, but tripped on a pole and her head was impaled on a broken pipe, killing her instantly. William found the cornfield Eli had planted and realized that, with its seemingly perfect natural invulnerability to disease, ability to grow out-of-season and in the worst of soil, it could result in high agricultural demand. William began efforts to market the distribution of the corn and looked forward to the massive profits Eli's strain of corn would bring.

Eli neglected to inform his foster father of another property the corn possessed: it warps the minds of those who eat it, making adults enter a deluded state of cheerful, naive apathy and children turn into followers of He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Wiliam, having tasted the corn, became indifferent to everything except finding the means to distribute the corn, and eventually was able to find backers for the venture. Eli ultimately managed to sway the other students towards his beliefs, turning them against the principal and convincing them to abandon basketball and other typically routine activities. Alarmed at Eli's conversion of the students, the principal attempted to inform other staff, but they didn’t believe him, as Eli's efforts had actually restored order at the school to a degree few had thought possible.

By the time Joshua realized the full truth, Eli had killed the school principal, along with Malcolm and Maria's parents, and had gained full control of his fellow students. Joshua and Malcolm traveled to the farm in Gatlin and, after defeating Joshua's reanimated father, managed to find Eli's Bible in the cornfield. However, He Walks Behind the Rows attacked them with the corn and Malcolm was violently dismembered before Joshua managed to escape with the Bible and return to Chicago. William arrived at the factory and announced that Eli's corn would be shipped around the world. Eli then murdered him with a sickle. Joshua then arrived and confronted Eli, revealing that he and the Bible were linked, allowing one to survive indefinitely as long as the other was intact. Eli charged at Joshua, attempting to reclaim the Bible. But just as he managed to grab it, Joshua stabbed Eli with a sickle,

piercing the Bible in the process, and destroying both of them.

Just as all the students broke free of the corn's spell, He Who Walks Behinds the Rows emerged from the soil, taking the form of a grotesque giant worm-like monster. It began to kill several students, including T-Loc, and swallowing Maria. Joshua identified its weakness as the large, root-like section of its lower body, embedded in the ground. Using his sickle, Joshua sliced through this part, seemingly killing the monster. After it collapsed, Joshua freed Maria and left with the other students.

Meanwhile, a shipment of Eli's corn arrived in Germany, as the first of shipments all over the world.

* * *

This was the case that got me and many others wondering exactly what we were dealing with in regards to this cult. Every journalist gets wild stories of impossible events and it wasn't until I got there and saw the carcass of the creature that I realized that this wasn't just another group of kids who'd inhaled acidic toxins from spoiled corn. There had been all kinds of theories regarding the Children of the Corn as they came to be called. Some blamed demons and/or hell, others thought aliens from another world. There was a very interesting scientist who put forth a unity theory that posited that a meteorite that would have had to have crashed into Nebraska ages ago caused the local plant life to merge into a gestalt creature similar to an Armillaria ostoyae (I won't go into how much trouble I had making sure that got spelled correctly) which is a kind of fungus that is apparently the second-largest living organism on the planet and can spread itself in a vast living network across miles of landscapes, only in this case, it takes the form of fields of corn. Given my own experience with the spoiled corn and its acidic toxin, this actually sounded to me like a viable theory and I meant to follow up with the man but he went to Gatlin to further research his theory and vanished into the corn. Neither he, nor his corpse has been found since. Meanwhile, the carcass of the creature in Chicago was decaying rapidly by the time I finally saw it in person and has since crumbled away to dust completely. The scientists at Northwestern University in Chicago have been studying the dust ever since, with inconclusive results.

The Gathering - Grand Island, Ne

The next year, Medical student Grace Rhodes returned to her hometown of Grand Island, Nebraska to take care of her agoraphobic mother June, who refused to leave her yard. She was having recurring nightmares of being attacked by children. Grace also had to look after her younger siblings, James and Margaret. She took a job at Dr. Larson's local clinic, where she'd worked before. James and Margaret soon became ill, showing similar symptoms to those of the children in June's dreams. While working at Dr. Larson's office the next day, Grace noticed that many other kids had the same symptoms. During the night all of the kids got worse as their fevers skyrocketed, then suddenly it all stopped and the fevers dropped.

Local parents Donald and Sandra Atkins noticed that their son Marcus was acting strangely. One night, a group of children descended upon the house, led by a child preacher, and Sandra was murdered in front of Marcus. The police arrived and questioned Donald while Marcus fled into a field and was chased by the sheriff, whom the child preacher then confronted and killed. A suspect in his wife's murder, Donald went into hiding and was taken in by two elderly sisters, Jane and Rosa.

The children stopped answering to their names and claimed to be other people; longtime resident Dr. Larson recognized the names they used as those of dead children from the town's history. One night, he was killed in his office by two children, but when Grace arrived the next day, his body had vanished, and the children's blood tests revealed inexplicable signs of decay and death. June's recurring nightmares started up again—but she was not dreaming; it was all actually happening. She fled her house and drove away but spotted James entering an old barn, she followed him inside, after which children gathered at the barn.

Grace decided to go to Dr. Larsen's house to find him, but Donald hijacked her car and forced her to drive at gunpoint to Jane and Rosa's house. Rosa revealed that the child preacher, Josiah, was the illegitimate son of a local woman. He was taken in by traveling preachers and became a gifted preacher. Over the years, Josiah stopped aging and never grew out of boyhood. The traveling preachers gave him over to darkness to stunt his growth, but when word got out, they abandoned him. Josiah killed the preachers, then the townspeople burned him alive and sealed his remains in a well.

Meanwhile, Mary Anne, Grace's best friend and co-worker, was attacked and killed by Josiah. Grace and Donald returned to the clinic and discovered that Margaret was missing, but learned that Josiah's weakness was mercury. It was also revealed that Rosa was Josiah's mother. Margaret, James, Marcus, and all the other children gathered at the barn to offer blood to Josiah. Despite being a hemophiliac and at risk of bleeding to death from even a small cut, Marcus cut his hand and offered his blood to Josiah, while Margaret offered Josiah her soul. Marcus collapsed from blood loss and Margaret was pulled into the pool of blood, from which Josiah emerged.

Donald and Grace arrived at the barn and connected its sprinkler system to their supply of mercury. Donald filled two of his bullets with mercury and gave Grace the gun. Donald stopped Marcus' bleeding, but the children tried to kill him. Josiah attacked Grace, but she shot him with a mercury bullet. She then found the bodies of June and Dr. Larson before Josiah attacked her again. She then activated the sprinklers, which showered him with mercury giving Grace the chance to slash him with his own scythe, finally killing him. The children stopped trying to kill Donald and returned to normal. Grace found Margaret nearly drowned, but managed to revive her.

It was revealed that Margaret was actually Grace's daughter, and that she had abandoned her with June as a teenager. After the victims' funerals, Grace, Margaret, James, Donald, and Marcus all moved out of Nebraska.

* * *

Grand Island is considerably further east in Nebraska than the towns before it and, even more strange, this was a case of a forgotten instance of the cult somehow rearing its ugly head generations later. This raised several questions. One - how far can whatever is causing this reach without being directly transplanted as it was to Chicago; Two - how many instances of this cult have occurred in the history of Nebraska, indeed, in all of the Midwest, without the greater world noticing. I've driven through enough of the back parts of the Midwest to know how small and isolated these towns can be, so there's a certain logic to this cult taking over these tiny places, but Grand Island is a fairly good-sized city with a rail hub, highway access, a community college, and several manufacturing plants. One would think it would have the necessary size and infrastructure to at least notice this cult's presence before anyone got killed. It got me wondering what all this 'He Who Walks Behind The Rows' is actually capable of.

Fields of Terror - Divinity Falls, Ne

Two years later, a group of teenagers became lost in middle America and arrived in Divinity Falls, a ghost town along an old unused western Nebraska railroad spur that ran near the site of the town of Gatlin. A group of forgotten and runaway children had taken up residence in the town and had embraced the duty of serving "He Who Walks Behind the Rows". The teenagers were given less than a week by the runaways to get out of the town. However, they found that their car was destroyed, and held the children accountable. Allison, the leader of the teenagers, overheard that the children were the adopted wards of Luke Enright, a madman who considered himself the savior of the children, and the earthly representative of He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Upon remembering that her brother, Jacob, was also among them, Allison and the

rest decided to go to Enright's farm to discover the truth behind the bizarre cult.

Upon arrival, one of the children, Ezekiel, stopped the group, informing them they were on private property and had to leave. After a debate, Allison was finally allowed to see Luke. He informed her that her brother was there, and agreed to let her see him, only for her to be rejected by him for leaving him alone with their abusive father. Jacob informed her that he was engaged to be married to a girl named Lily, and also stated that she was pregnant with his child. Meanwhile, the rest of Allison's group were kept outside, where the men were intimidated by a physically powerful and exceptionally tall teen named Jared.

Ezekiel held a ceremony for the annual sacrifice to He Who Walks Behind the Rows, which involved a child who has reached 18 years of age leaping into a flaming corn silo where the god was supposed to dwell. Jacob was chosen, but he refused and told Ezekiel that his religion was false, angering him. Kir, one of the "outsiders", agreed to become a part of the cult after reading a part of their "Bible" earlier. After Jacob attempted to leave, Kir chose to take the fateful course, climbed to the silo, and leapt to a fiery demise. The rest of the group wished to leave the town, but Allison refused to leave without Jacob. They left her, and she eventually read a message Jacob left her in his Bible which translated to "Help", and she realized he wanted to escape. She enlisted the help of the sheriff to stop Luke and Ezekiel.

One of the outsider teens, Greg, who had developed a crush on Allison, chose to go back to help her so the rest decide to go as well. Allison, with the aid of the sheriff and the fire department, attempted to stop the silo fire and arrest Luke. While trying to extinguish the silo, the flames came alive and killed the two fire fighters, while Luke killed the sheriff and apparently himself after his head split open and a burst of flame shot through him. Ezekiel revealed that Luke had been dead for years, and he himself was the children's true leader. After killing two of the deranged kids, Allison met her friends, and an all-out battle erupted between them and the kids, ending with the deaths of everyone, except Allison. Allison eventually found her brother, and before dying, he told her how to stop He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Ezekiel tried to kill Allison, but after a struggle, she sent him falling into the silo to a violent, fiery death. She then dumped fertilizer into the silo, blowing it up and killing He Who Walks Behind the Rows, or so it was believed.

Allison then went to Lily's house where Lily's parents told her that Lily wasn't ready to raise a baby because she was a baby herself. Lily told Allison that it would be for the best that she adopt her baby. Later, while the baby was being comforted by song, the green-orange light of the silo fire burned in his eyes.

* * *

This happened much closer to the original site of the town of Gatlin but in this case, the child preacher exhibited an entirely new ability, that of animating a corpse, even making it speak. I visited Divinity Falls to view the remains. Nothing organic was found at the bottom of the exploded silo. This 'He Who Walks Behind the Rows' had also never used fire before. The more incidents that happened regarding the Cult of the Corn, the more mysterious it becomes.

Isaac's Return - Gaitlin, Ne

A year later, Hannah, a girl born in the original Gatlin, Nebraska cult led by the nefarious prophet Isaac, visited the town of Gatlin, which had been reoccupied by this time, looking for her birth mother. After a mysterious encounter with a street preacher named Zachariah, Hannah crashed her car in a cornfield. She was escorted to the hospital by the sheriff, Cora, where she was examined by one Dr. Michaels. There, Hannah learned that Isaac—long thought dead—had actually been hospitalized in a coma for years.

After leaving the hospital and resuming her journey, she was nearly driven off the road by a mysterious

truck. After checking into a motel, she met a pair of romantically involved teenagers in the motel office, the standoffish Morgan and her boyfriend, Matt. The next day, as Hannah was leaving, a small crowd gathered around her car, fascinated by her. Meanwhile, Isaac had awakened from his coma and learned he had a son. Hannah returned to the hospital and encountered a man named Gabriel, who helped her find her birth certificate. She was nearly attacked by a man named Jake with an axe, but he was stopped by Gabriel.

Hannah then experienced a number of strange visions, and learned from a strange boy with a machete named Jesse that the truck which attempted to force her off the road belonged to Rachel Colby, her own birthmother. At the town church, Rachel was confronted by Isaac, who accused her of betrayal. Dr. Michaels acted as a confidant to Rachel, urging her to stop him. Shortly after, Isaac killed Dr. Michaels before approaching Matt, and revealing him to be his son whom he hoped would carry on his legacy.Meanwhile, Rachel confronted Hannah, whom she claimed she had long believed to be dead, but was evasive regarding the events surrounding Hannah's birth, only commenting that it had been prophesied that Hannah would return to Gatlin on the eve of her nineteenth birthday.

That night, the cult gathered in the cornfield under Isaac's command and branded Matt as the first of the "chosen". Hannah arrived, but was injected with a sedative by the cultists. The cult then began a union ceremony between Matt and Hannah, but Hannah escaped. Rachel appeared at the gathering and claimed that Isaac was a false prophet. Morgan attempted to intervene to help Hannah, but was bisected by Isaac with a machete. Gabriel fled, reuniting with Hannah in a barn, where the two had sex. Matt proceeded to commit suicide by falling on a scythe.

Meanwhile, Rachel was held captive in the hospital basement. Gabriel killed Jesse before Hannah confronted Isaac, who believed himself to be “He Who Walks Behind the Rows”. Gabriel then utilized supernatural powers and forced Cora to shoot herself, before confronting Isaac with the revelation that he was in fact the firstborn child of Isaac's cult, and that Isaac denied him his birthright in favor of his own son.

Gabriel instructed Hannah to kill Isaac, but Rachel urged her not to. Gabriel then revealed himself to be fully possessed by He Who Walks Behind the Rows. He restrained Isaac with his supernatural powers, and killed him with a broken lead pipe. Rachel subsequently stabbed Gabriel then fled with Hannah as Gabriel remarked that "The seeds have already been sown". Gabriel's wound miraculously healed itself, and he began to set off explosions which killed Jake.

Hannah and Rachel left on foot, walking down a country road. Hannah was unaware of what Gabriel's words meant, or that she was pregnant with the child of He Who Walks Behind the Rows, continuing the cult's legacy.

* * *

With everything that happened in the world between the exposure of the first incarnation of these Children of the Corn like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and all the wars that happened afterwards, it is perhaps not surprising that no one bothered to check on the children of the cult or even verify the status of its first child preacher. Like all the other survivors of the cult, I just wanted to put it behind me and never think about it again. I probably never would have gone back, myself, if my journalistic career had been more successful. The curse of the Corn Cult continues to haunt me and I've had to tap into courage I never knew I had to keep reporting on it. My wife, son, and daughter-in-law have helped me a great deal, but they, too, are haunted by their experiences with the cult. After investigating this story, I made a point of tracking down every survivor of the cult and verifying their well-being. They all seem to be healthy enough but I can tell that they're all just as haunted by the trauma as I am. I also verified the status of all the child preachers who led the cult. There were gratefully no more Isaacs out there waiting to rise again. Sadly, I soon learned that there had been other instances of the Corn Cult we hadn't been aware of.

Revelation - Omaha Ne

Two years later, Jamie Lowell came to Omaha, Nebraska after numerous phone calls to her grandmother went unanswered. Her grandmother's apartment building, built next to a cornfield, appeared to be empty, except for two young, mysterious children who roamed about. Jamie discovered that her grandmother had received a notice of eviction. She went to see one Omaha Detective Armbrister, who was not much help. While at the local grocery store, Jamie encountered the children from the building, but they did not speak to her. Outside, there was a priest standing in the street, staring at her. She returned to her grandmother's apartment to discover a message: "Jamie go home".

Jamie questioned the building manager, Jerry Ulrich who was of no help. She investigated the basement and found a crop of carrots and tomatoes. She fled when she heard a group of children laughing and ran into a man with a gun, who told her to keep out of the basement. She later met two more tenants, an old man in a wheelchair, who swore at everyone, and a young woman named Tiffany, a stripper. Jerry invited Jamie to a BBQ on the roof, to which she agreed. On the roof, Jerry took a bite of corn and discovered there was blood inside. He was then shoved off the roof by the two children. When Jamie arrived, he was nowhere to be found, and she saw the priest watching her from the ground.

That night, Jamie had a nightmare in which her grandmother was lured from her house by a strange voice to some railroad tracks. The next day, Jamie went to see Det. Armbrister who revealed that Jamie's grandmother was part of a religious cult when she was a child 60 years earlier. The kids, who were led by a boy-preacher named Abel, committed suicide by entering a tent and setting it ablaze. Only Jamie's grandmother survived. Jamie's grandmother's apartment was built upon the site of the fire. This was ironic, because Jamie's parents were killed in a house fire.

Tiffany returned home and, while taking a bath, she was attacked by one of the children who used corn to strangle her, before taking her body. Det. Armbrister and Jamie arrived at the apartment, but didn't notice Tiffany's body lying nearby in the cornfield. Later, after Det. Armbrister left, the old man in the wheelchair was attacked by the kids and pushed through a stair balcony to fall to his death.

Jamie returned to the grocery store, which was ransacked. She spotted a girl wearing her grandmother's hat and chased after her, failing to notice the store owner's severed head inside a drink cooler. Jamie returned to the apartment, where she ran into the man with the gun. He revealed that everyone else had disappeared and that he was leaving. As he made his escape, the kids trapped him in an elevator and scared him so much, that he had a fatal heart attack. The kids then dragged his body off.

At the same time, Det. Armbrister was summoned to the grocery store where the store owners remains had been discovered. He made the connection to Jamie and headed straight out to find her.

Meanwhile, the priest arrived and told Jamie about the history of Gatlin, and the creature known as "He Who Walks Behind the Rows", who he apparently believed was the devil. The priest revealed that Jamie’s grandmother was dead and that, if she did not leave, she too would be killed. The priest then left and some of the children arrived to take Jamie down to the basement, where there were now rows of corn growing. Abel appeared and the children closed in on Jamie. One of the children revealed herself to be Jamie's grandmother and though a child, spoke in the voice of an old woman. Jamie fled, but Abel used his power to prevent her from leaving. Cornered, Jamie faced Abel and the children, who asked her to join them. Jamie agreed, but it was only a distraction so she could cause a gas explosion, though Abel was unscathed.

Abel used corn stalks to tie down Jamie, but she was rescued by Det. Armbrister and they both managed to escape before the apartment exploded and destroyed the corn as well. It was implied that the souls of the children were freed and Abel was killed.

* * *

Like pretty much everyone else in the nation at the time, I was functionally shattered by what happened on 9/11/2001, so when this happened barely a month later, both I and local authorities were caught completely off guard yet again. This time, it happened in Omaha which is the eastern most big city in Nebraska and nearly completely on the other side of the state. Furthermore, it was caused by an instance of the cult that predated the one in Gatlin, which had always been believed to be the original case. This case left all wondering exactly how old He Who Walks Behind The Rows is and how long he has haunted this region.

Genesis - California

In 1973, in a town twenty miles from Gatlin, children rose up and murdered their parents as they had in Gatlin years earlier. Forty years later, in the California desert, Tim and Allie's car broke down and they attempted to find shelter in a remote desert farmhouse after becoming lost. A strange Charles Manson-like character, The Preacher, allowed them inside to use the phone. The couple found out they wouldn't be able to get tow service until the following day. The Preacher and his Ukrainian wife Oksana (also known as Helen) let them stay the night with strict orders to be gone by morning, and not wander "where you are not invited". They found their hosts weird but didn't think much of it and headed to bed after dinner. Allie wandered off in the middle of the night after using the outhouse, and discovered the garage has been converted into a cult worshipping church. She then stumbled upon a crumbling outbuilding where she heard faint cries coming from a child.

Allie ran back and told Tim what she'd witnessed, but at first he didn't believe her. He agreed to confront the Preacher about the voices, but fell into a hypnotized trance while viewing digital photos in the Preacher's camera. The child then walked into the house and planted a seed inside Allie and disappeared before being seen. Tim and Allie tried to leave the house, but got locked inside by a supernatural force. Allie called the police, but was unsure if she got through as the line got cut off halfway. Allie fell asleep and dreamed about being murdered by children in a cornfield. Allie and Tim woke up to headlights flashing into the room and a cop arrived to check on the house but was thrown into the air and killed by the supernatural force. After witnessing this Tim insisted on answers from the Preacher, learning that the supernatural force needed children to survive and had already planted a seed inside Allie.

Come morning, a parcel delivery driver dropped things off at the house. He agreed to give Tim and Allie a ride into town. Tim had a bad feeling about the driver so he took off with Allie in the abandoned police vehicle instead. They got to the main road. The child in the outbuilding then killed Helen and psychokinetically caused Tim and Allie to have a car accident, in which Tim died. The parcel driver approached the accident and brought Allie back to the farmhouse where a group of children and their mothers greeted her. In a trance, she sat next to the little child in the outbuilding and began to sing to him. The child was then seen playing with a doll, then dropped it on the floor, which caused the cop's corpse to fall from the sky onto the ground.

* * *

This story reached me before …things changed and I wasn't able to investigate it. The idea that there might be branches of the cult in forgotten corners of the nation everywhere is very disturbing, but then again, this and Chicago seem to be the only outliers and this instance was carried by a survivor of the initial cult purge in Gatlin. Perhaps He Who Walks Behind The Rows, if it even exists, is not necessary to spread the cults influence. Perhaps survivors trauma is all that's needed to start it all over and over again. It may take generations for this cult to be eliminated from the world, if it even can.

Forbidden Lore

The Darklord

The Darklord of Gatlin is, of course, He Who Walks Behind the Rows, and the scientist, John Garrett met with who had the theory about Amillaria Ostoyae was actually closer than he realized. The entity that identifies as He Who Walks Behind the Rows exists as a vast network of plant matter that extends throughout most of the state of Nebraska, similar in structure to Amillaria Ostoyae. It feeds off the Ogallala aquifer for water as do all plants in the region and becomes active when corn grows tall above it. It's hard to guess how long it's been there since even before Nebraska was farmed, it was all grassland. The entity is similar in its powers to those of the entity, Cthulhu, only if it lurks below the land rather than the sea. It is also telepathic and visit its followers in dreams, but drives them to fanaticism rather than madness and usually only targets disaffected children rather than adults. It has become familiar with old school evangelical Christianity and has developed a corrupt doctrine through which it enslaves populations until someone is able to break its control. Its influence usually takes hold during hard times when people's spirits are low. It always begins by choosing one particularly disaffected and/or pious child from among a population and, through dreams and visions, leads them to believe that they have had divine revelations and must embrace the word of God as revealed to them. The doctrine begins with one biblical quote from Isaiah 11:6, "And a little child shall lead them." Child preachers are not unheard of in evangelical circles, so the chosen children's ideas are not dismissed as fantasy. The child preachers will lead the other children out into the nearest cornfield and deliver the message of He Who Walks Behind the Rows. The general thrust of the message is that all problems are caused by adults, and the best way to end problems is to destroy all adults in the community. Any person, child or adult, regularly exposed to this indoctrination will eventually become convinced of the truth of it and this usually ends with the children of the community killing all of the adults, including and especially the children's parents. Those murdered by the cult are generally buried in the cornfield where their bodies fertilize the earth and make the corn grow stronger. The children then become lifelong servants to the corn and He Who Walks Behind the Rows under the guidance of whatever child preacher has led them to this. He Who Walks Behind the Rows has proven able to confer gifts upon its followers, such as remaining young for decades at a time, or the ability to animate an adult's corpse, so that it seems the Children have adult supervision.

Since all children age, He Who Walks Behind the Rows has his child preachers eliminate members of the flock who grow too old. In Gatlin, this involved a ritual bloodletting of the congregant at 19 from a pentagram carved into their chest. The younger congregants would drink the blood until the 19-year-old was dead from blood loss, then the corpse would be taken to the cornfield for burial so that they may fertilize the growing corn alongside all who passed before them. The pre-ritual differed for male congregants and female congregants. At 19, a male congregant would choose a female with whom he would like to have a child and the two are left alone to procreate. Once the girl is verified as pregnant, the 'passing' ritual proceeds for the boy. A girl's ritual starts a year earlier. When a girl turn 18, it was she who would choose from the male congregants to father her child, then a year later, after her baby has been born and weaned. Her ritual of passing may proceed when she turns 19. It is unknown what other rituals most other chapters of the Children of the Corn practiced except for the one at Divinity Falls, who had their members cast themselves into the burning silo as offerings. Given the age of the cultists finally taken into custody by law enforcement when the assemblies were broken up, it's clear that something was done with older members, but it has yet to be learned what.

Sometimes, the Children of the Corn will allow older adults to live among them if they can provide needed skills like medicine, animal care, machine repair, or fuel formulation. Almost any other skill, like cooking or first aid, can be learned by the children so these people make a point of keeping their heads down and doing what's expected of them. They live in stark terror of the Children and it doesn't take much for

the child cultists to turn on adults, even if it's against one who provides needed resources or a relative.

Also, the corn, if planted somewhere outside of the Nebraska realm, can give rise to a separate, smaller, entity that will also cultivate its own cult of children swearing obedience to He Who Walks Behind the Rows. It is unknown if these satellite corn walkers are somehow the same entity or not.

The Corn and the Children

Once indoctrinated, the children will do literally anything for He Who Walks Behind the Rows. In Divinity Falls, one girl became so consumed by her indoctrination that she cast herself directly into the burning silo. Adults are not completely immune to the indoctrination but are generally able to shrug it off. That's why all adults, known or unknown, are targeted for murder the minute they enter the Corn Children's domain. Outsider children, however, are lured, taken, or just forced into the cornfield at the nearest opportunity so that they may be taught the doctrine of He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Sometimes, the cult will then give these children the task of murdering their parents, which they may or may not be able to keep themselves from doing.

As a chapter of the cult is established and all adults within a days walk are murdered or frightened off, The Children of the Corn claim all structures and vehicles within that area by putting cornstalks and leaves within them, sometimes.shaped into the form of religious icons. All symbols and texts in any local churches are changed to reflect the doctrine of He Who Walks Behind the Rows as are all learning materials in schools. This is often done by the child preacher and his closest followers themselves.

The corn itself has magical powers of its own. It can grow to maturity almost overnight, has a seemingly perfect natural invulnerability to disease, and the ability to grow out-of-season and in the worst of soil. Another property the corn possesses is it warps the minds of those who eat it, making adults enter a deluded state of cheerful, naive apathy and children turn into followers of He Who Walks Behind the Rows. This is perhaps its most insidious power as many greedy people may think they have found the solution to world hunger in this corn but may only spread a terrible pestilence masquerading as sustenance.

Confronting The Children and He Who Walks Behind The Rows

Outsider adults who find themselves confronted by a murderous band of Corn Children in a town or on a road are in a certain amount of danger but should be able to fight them off in most circumstances. Generally the corn children will be smaller than them and unskilled in fighting.The elderly and disabled can find themselves at a serious disadvantage, however. The children can be quite lethal with the sickles, axes, and other farm tools they have used their whole lives. But most adults with even a small conception of fighting skills will generally be able to fend them off or outrun them provided they don't panic. The children have also learned how to move very quietly and generally use ambush tactics. They usually strike from behind when outsiders aren't looking so those who have learned to pay attention to their surroundings can often catch them. Because of this disadvantage, the children will often try to trap adults in buildings or vehicles and light them on fire, but the worst thing they'll do is lure any outsiders into the corn fields where the corn itself will turn against them. He Who Walks Behind the Rows uses every part of the corn plant to lethal effect. The stalks, leaves, and roots all strike and entangle victims with surprising speed. The leaves, when dry, can be remarkably sharp and a person caught in them can find themselves cut up and bleeding badly. The stalks, when broken, can also be very sharp and make lethal projectiles when thrown by other cornstalks or driven by the wind. He Who Walks Behind the Rows has also demonstrated the ability to generate powerful, but very brief, wind and rain storms to attack it's targets. Every once in a while, one of the corn children will realize the horrible insanity they have been a part of and try to flee the cult. These 'unbelievers' are hunted mercilessly by the others and, should they step into one of the corn fields, the corn will turn on them as well. Many an outsider has been lured into the cult's town by a child's corpse found in the ditch between the road and the corn. To fight against He Who Walks

Behind the Rows and his children, one must destroy the corn, all of it, as much as can be destroyed.

This has been done by fire, poison, and the many large harvesting machines that are everywhere in farm country. The children and the corn itself will do everything they can to defend the crop, including and especially standing in front of a harvester, hoping the operator will stop which most do. Whatever the case, once enough of the corn is destroyed, the children are released from bondage to it, but not freed, for they know, as does He Who Walks Behind the Rows, that rain will fall again, plants will sprout, corn will again grow high, and the children will again hear the voices in their heads. To truly destroy He Who Walks Behind the Rows, almost all of Nebraska would have to be dug up to discover and destroy all the entity's roots beneath all the fields. This is fundamentally impossible since the day the mists rose, the central government and most technology that could do it was lost to the people of Nebraska.

Scarecrow Sacrifices - Occasionally, an adult or one of the cultists would do something that He Who Walks Behind the Rows, his local child preacher, or both, felt required a special example be made. When this happened, this person was tied alive to a cross in the cornfield as a sacrifice to He Who Walks Behind the Rows and left there to die. Once dead, the corpse was dressed in old clothes to disguise it and left there to feed the crows. This is not done by every chapter of the corn cult, but by some. These corpses, unless taken down and properly laid to rest, can be enslaved and used to defend the corn by He Who Walks Behind the Rows should the corn be threatened with destruction by outsiders.

Corn Bibles - Some of the child preachers chosen by He Who Walks Behind the Rows write down what is revealed to them in large books. Some of the preachers who were well schooled in scripture would rewrite the whole of the Bible around the doctrine of He Who Walks Behind the Rows. These Bibles are often decorated with corn kernels in patterns of holy symbols. They also become bonded to the child preachers are direct links to the power of He Who Walks Behind the Rows, and can keep them young for decades. The preacher can only be killed if the Bible is destroyed and vice versa. If the child preacher is killed but the Bible id not destroyed, then the child preacher will heal. If the Bible is destroyed but not the child preacher, then the child preacher begins to age at an accelerated rate and must recreate the Bible in order to save themselves.

The Realm

The realm of the entity that identifies as He Who Walks Behind the Rows stretches from the edge of North Omaha, NE in the east to Divinity Falls in the northwest corner of the state. It runs like a spiderweb under the earth along the Platte River basin, but can't grow under major, closely built, urban areas like Omaha. Most other 'large' cities in Nebraska have a fairly small, closely built, downtown area surrounded by suburban developments interwoven with farm fields. If these fields have spawned chapters of the corn cult, they have not been exposed, yet.

The Adversary

The Adversary of He Who Walks Behind the Rows and The Children of the Corn is the ghost of Frank Redbear. Frank was a doctor in anthropology of the State University, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln or UNL, famous for its Cornhusker sports teams, in that region. He came to Gaitlin and Hemingsford to investigate what drove the children at Gaitlin into committing the mass murder of adults there.

Frank Redbear was full blooded Ponca tribe and a descendant of the great chief, Standing Bear, who is famously remembered as the greatest civil rights leader of indigenous Americans that ever lived. When Standing Bear was on trial in 1879 for leaving Indian territory in Omaha Ne, The great chief was allowed to make a speech on his own behalf. Raising his right hand, Standing Bear proceeded to speak. Among his words were, "That hand is not the color of yours, but if I prick it, the blood will flow, and I shall feel pain," he said. "The blood is of the same color as yours. God made me, and I am a Man." Because of this speech and the decision rendered by the court, all indigenous Americans were officially recognized as human beings by American law from then on.

Frank teamed up with John Garrett, who became the Corn Cult's chronicler, to investigate what was happening. Frank led John to ancient Native American rock paintings, and told him that Native Americans believed the area around Gatlin and Hemingford held special power which could magnify good or bad, and that children were especially vulnerable: Frank recited a story which told of children killing their elders, but also how if it ended with a funeral pyre, a good spirit would emerge and further stipulated that the rock paintings showed that this had not yet come to pass.

He discovered the Afrotoxin in corn which contributed to the disaster, and that the townspeople were mixing in every year's harvest to expand their profits. The Sheriff discovered them spying on the site, tied them up, and left them to be killed by a corn harvester, but they escaped. Along the way, John questioned Frank further about what was going on. Frank told how Native Americans believed in a spirit who would seek revenge for perceived wrongs done to the land, and that He Who Walks Behind the Rows was this spirit.

John and Frank drove the harvester into the cornfield where they found John's son being harangued to join the Corn Cult in sacrificing a girl. John and Frank's arrival dispersed the Children but one of them shot Frank with an arrow, wounding him, while John and his son freed the intended sacrifices and attempted to escape but the cornfield seemed endless and they shortly found themselves right where they started. The Corn Cult's leader attempted to harness the power of He Who Walks Behind the Rows but Frank restarted the harvester as he died. The cult's leader's robes got caught in the machine and he was pulled in, killing him. The rest of the Children scattered, and John and his family left the clearing.

John and his family later burned Frank's body in what they believed to be a traditional Native American funeral pyre, before they drove off together. Some time later, Frank was seen doing additions to the rock paintings to show that the story had come to pass, with his spirit having become the protector of the area.

Frank's spirit will often appear to outsiders or cultists fleeing from the Corn Cult. He will never lead them away from their pursuers, though, only toward why they will need to destroy the cult.

Border Closure

When He Who Walks Behind the Rows and/or the Children of the Corn's leader want to prevent outsiders or fleeing cultists from escaping, the cornfields become endless and always lead back to the Children. The same thing happens to cars on the roads. All roads lead back to the Children of the Corn.

Dread Possibilities

All Those Lost - Anyone who has died at the hands of the Children of the Corn or been killed by the corn itself can rise again as some form of vengeful undead should the Neo-Red Death choose . The single exception are the Scarecrow Sacrifices which will always rise as thralls of the He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Outside the Realm - Unlike most other entities trapped by the Neo-Red Death, the entity known as He Who Walks Behind the Rows can establish itself outside of its assigned realm. If the corn is planted elsewhere, it sprouts up and generates a smaller version of He Who Walks Behind the Rows in that area, as it famously did in Chicago. It has the same weaknesses and can be destroyed in the same way, however.

The Corn Shipments - During the Chicago incident, a shipment of corn was sent to Germany where it still sits…waiting to be distributed, eaten, and or planted.

Gabriel's Child - Hannah walked away from her night with Gabriel and the Children of the Corn pregnant with his child. The child must have been born by now. What if it's a boy? What if it's a girl.

Survivors - Any adults that escape being murdered by the Children of the Corn and any Chidren who escape from the cult or survive a chapter's destruction never really get over the trauma. The horrors of their experiences can come back on them even decades later, especially should the Corn Cult rear its ugly head again nearby. That's what happened in the California desert and it's still there, even though it's right next door to several other realms.

Mr. Whippin - No one knows where he came from. Some say he is black, other white, all agree on what he wears. He's dressed in work boots, denim overalls, a plaid shirt, and carries a long four-inch wide leather belt in his hand. No one knows where he lives, either. All that's known for certain is that sometimes when a chapter of the Children of the Corn gets established, this man walks out of the morning haze and begins to stalk the Children of the Corn. Any he finds and catches, he thrashed their backsides until they cry uncontrollably. This whipping, while harsh, actually breaks the hold of the Children and the Corn and He Who Walks Behind the Rows has on them. Once the hold is broken, the children realize what all they have made to do and usually keep crying until they decide what to do next. Meanwhile, Mr. Whippin moves on to find and whip the next child. He's too big for any of them to fight off and even large groups of them can't seem to bring him down. He never stops until every child is freed from the cult or until He Who Walks Behind the Rows does something to stop him. There are stories of him being burned inside buildings and others of him being swept away by tornadoes. There are also all kinds of stories of his origins. Some say he's the parent of one of the child preachers who founded a chapter of the Children of the Corn. Others say he was a relative of one of the families who was killed by them and decided he had his own solution. Whatever the case, this is the enemy The Children of the Corn fear most.

Excerpts from:

"The Registry of monsters"

BY STANTON F. FINK

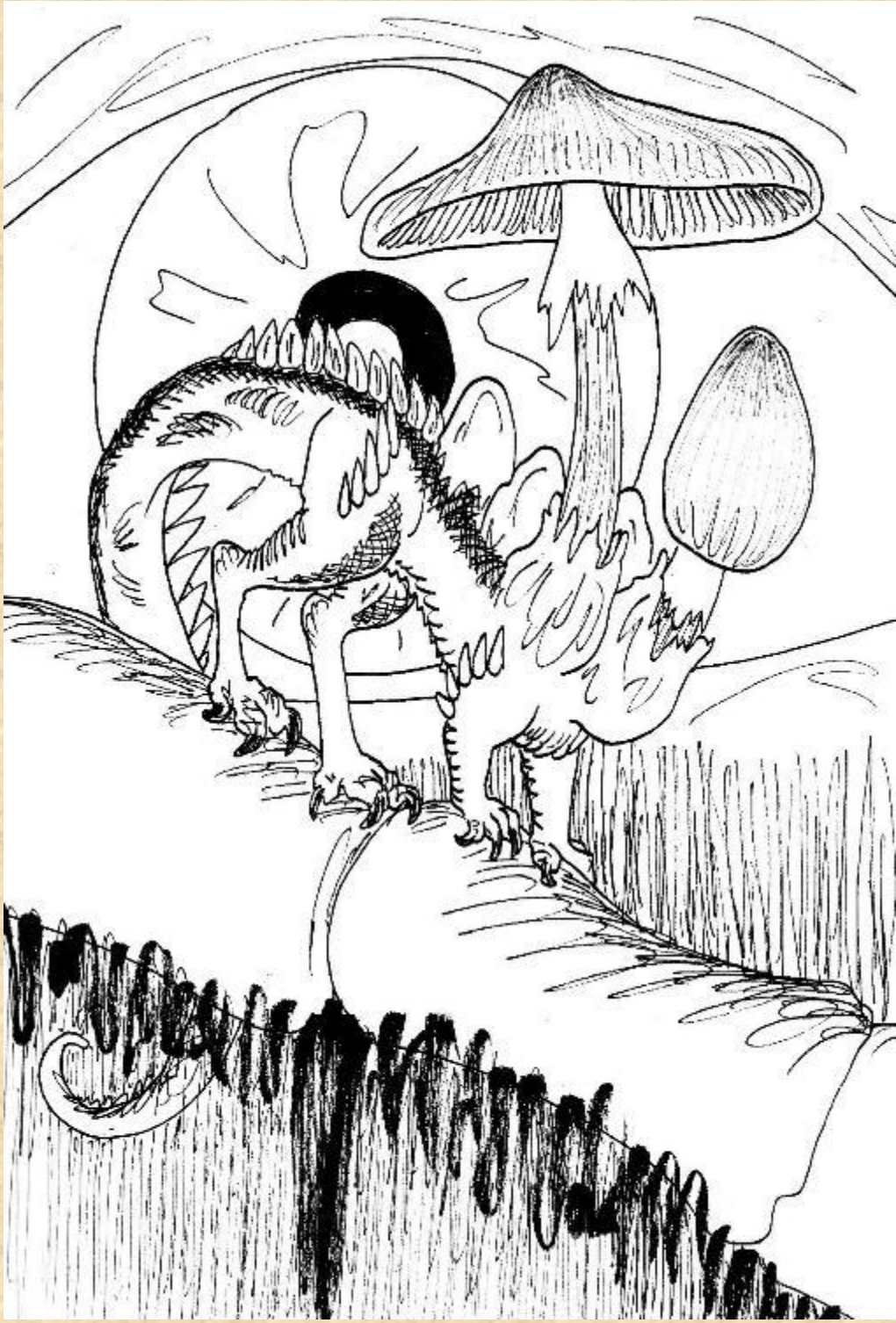
*"There was Plato, too" — continued his majesty, modestly declining the snuff-box and the compliment — "there was Plato, too, for whom I, at one time, felt all the affection of a friend. You knew, Plato, Bon-Bon? — ah! no, I beg a thousand pardons. He met me at Athens, one day, in the Parthenon, and told me he was distressed for an idea. I bade him write down that '*ο νους εςτιν [[εστιν]] αυγος*.' He said that he would do so, and went home, while I stepped over to the Pyramids. But my conscience smote me for the lie, and hastening back to Athens, I arrived behind the philosopher's chair as he was inditing the '*αυγος*.' Giving the gamma a fillip with my finger, I turned it upside down. So the sentence now reads '*ο νους εςτιν [[εστιν]] αυλος*,' and is, you perceive, the fundamental doctrine of his metaphysics."*

Edgar Allen Poe, "Bon-Bon"

Agaricisaurus

Agaricisaurus is a fungus shaped like a lizard; in lieu of a head, it produces a series of mushrooms to spread spores before it body breaks down. Agaricisaurii are found in the Abyssal layer known as the Crawling Forest, where they live among the branches of the crawling trees, either as arboreal vermin in their motile forms, or as their true form of a yeasty biofilm on their hosts' bark.

The main predators of agaricisaurii are the assassin cats who hunt them and eat them in a manner similar to how house cats stalk and devour earthly lizards. Visitors to the Crawling Forest are often tempted to eat agaricisaurii, as the beasts' mushrooms resemble edible earthly mushrooms. But, since the motile forms stay out of reach on their crawling trees' higher branches, most visitors rarely bother harassing the things.



Ailaria

Ailaria is an undead spirit who may have once been a cat, or possibly an obsessed cat-lover. Whenever Ailaria is roused from quiet, she behaves very similar to a poltergeist, but with a cat-themed bent, especially fond of knocking off delicate bric-a-brac of shelves, and rending upholstery.

If Ailaria is truly angered, she may manifest, appearing as a skeletal cat with flaming eye sockets and bat-like wings. Aliaria cannot manifest in an area warded with ribbons and cat hair, and not bring harm to living cats or cat lovers.

Alkaios

Decades ago, a human boy made a contract with an unknown being so he could ponder a question. As side effects of this contract, the boy, now calling himself "Alkaios," became an immortal shapeshifter who metamorphoses into a gargantuan Hercules beetle on the nights of the full moon or whenever he loses control of his emotions.

Alkaios has spent years exulting in and despairing over his situation in equal measures. What the question he ponders concerns, Alkaios has never spoken about with another soul since the initial forging of his contract.

Anyue

Anyue claims to be an avatar of the wicked aspects of the Moon, including insanity, deception, illusions, false hope, and transformation. Petitioners summon him to teach them the art of murder and mastery of shadow magic. Anyue is infamous for murdering petitioners or, worse, driving them insane with nightmares if he feels they have offended or, ironically, deceived him. In most cases, Anyue punishes disappointing students who behave too boorishly or who visit unwarranted harm upon unworthy targets, including the true innocent, young children, or the students of his lover, Daotaiyang, The Cruelest Sun.

Ashu Kaa

Ashu Kaa, the General In Vermilion is a gigantic, dragon-like primordial born of the wrath of the Ocean. Upon his birth, Ashu Kaa lead an army of his siblings in an incursion against the Gods, his mother's enemies. In his first battle, Ashu Kaa fought and slew ten score gods, wearing the heads of five, while incinerating the rest. In his second battle, Ashu Kaa spat out a son, the Cicada Eater, to assist him, but, the General was defeated. Upon defeat, Ashu Kaa ordered his son to retreat.

Now prisoner of the Gods, Ashu Kaa was taken to the Citadel Of Heaven, where he was humiliated by being shorn of his wings, his horns and his tail. Thus humbled, the Gods cut off the General's head, and further butchered his carcass in preparation for a feast. When the General's skull was split open, a luminous jewel rolled out, hatching into a beauteous youth who was named Atmasura, The Pearl Of Envy. When the Gods began to bicker over who would possess the youth, Ashu Kaa's guts burst apart as a beast, named Geso Kaa, The Vermilion Tiger In Chains, rose to defend his brother.

Assassin Cat

Assassin cats are cat-like tanar'ri native to the Abyssal layer known as The Crawling Forest, where they hunt the demonic vermin crawling on and among the crawling trees. They are called “assassin” because of their long, venomous tongues and the dangerously barbed stingers on their tails. It was once thought that there were two species, one with luxurious fur, and one entirely hairless beyond whiskers. Demonologists eventually found out the hard way that assassin cats shed their fur, either gradually in clumps, or entirely as a startling defense mechanism against predators undeterred by venom or stingers. Once shed, an assassin cat will spend about three months regenerating its fur coat.

Other demons sometimes capture assassin cats in order to domesticate them as standoffish, vermin-eating pets or as fickle guardians to protect their trainers and owners from feline enemies. Aside from feline tanar'ri, no cat, natural or unnatural, can abide the presence of an assassin cat, as whenever a feline, whether a lammasu, hellcat, feline rakshasa, weretiger or housecat, comes within 20 feet of an assassin cat, they are suddenly overwhelmed with uncontrollable rage, invariably directed at the nearest assassin cat. Assassin cats, in turn, apparently bear no ill will towards other felines beyond wanting to sting them for coming too close.

Ayakashi

Ayakashi are photophobic molluscan tanar'ri found in the Abyssal Ocean or any water-dominate layer. The ayakashi are the slug-like offspring of Sakasama No Megami-sama, a gigantic and incomprehensibly unpleasant marine deity or obyrith trapped in the Abyssal layer now known as the Huagong. Ayakashi often escape into the Prime Material Plane, lurking as nocturnal, sea serpent-like marine predators or tunnel dwelling horrors. Or at least until their physical bodies combust on contact with sunlight. Kraken-worshiping cultists sometimes summon ayakashi in attempts to make subservient recreations of their masters with limited success.

Ayakashi secrete copious amounts of slimy ectoplasm that they use to help them subdue prey, while keeping themselves hydrated. Alchemists have attempted to make use of this slime, though, its ability to combust in bright light limits its applications.

In the Infinite Layers Of The Abyss, ayakashi are regarded as dangerous vermin by other demons. Most demons kill them on sight, though a few domesticate them as ferocious guard beasts or zoo beast executioners.

Basabasan

Basabasan is a ghost of a chicken, appearing as a large, faceless cockerel with luminescent plumage. Instead of a face or beak, he has a single eye placed where his beak should have started.

Legend has it that a rooster was slaughtered for dinner by a callous farmer in a very sloppy fashion so sloppy that the bird's spirit returned from beyond the stewpot to haunt the farmer's entire family until they were all driven to madness, then death. Farmers who are cruel to their beasts attract Basabasan's bitter ire. Such marked individuals constantly hear a ruffling of feathers (the source of the ghost's name), and a gurgle that, somehow, people know should have been a cock's crow. Basabasan visually manifests in dark places and at night in order to frighten his victims. Farms that become Basabasan's hunting grounds are cursed; crops wither, and equipment spontaneously break while animals become sullen and unruly. Basabasan does not leave or relent until he is appeased. In most cases, this usually means the eventual death of the offending farmer, or the complete desolation of the marked farm. Exorcisms are unsuccessful unless they involve sincere contrition from the cursed.

The Bleeding Lord

The creature now known as the Bleeding Lord is a lich in service to the Green Empress. In life, a desperate, unhinged thespian bargained away his soul, name, life and face to the Green Empress in exchange for magical power, undead fortitude, and competent acting ability.

Now, the Bleeding Lord serves his mistress as an assistant in her schemes and as one of her many assassins. No matter what his disguise, the Bleeding Lord leaves a trail of stale blood wherever he goes.

Bottle Imp

A bottle imp is a devil of Hell that is imprisoned in an unbreakable glass container that cannot be damaged or even opened through earthly means. Devils enter into this situation for numerous reasons, be it penance, asceticism, orders given to them by their superiors, or even a desire to escape boredom.

The reasons why vary, but the offered schticks all revolve around providing some supernatural service, like granting wishes, magically curing terminal illnesses or producing good luck, all for the price of a willingly forfeited soul. In order to make things entertaining, mortals using the bottles are given a series of cruel contrivances as an opportunity to avoid damnation, popularly by finding a willing replacement (ironically, most religions unanimously declare the act of deliberately damning another soul as being punishable by automatic damnation, itself). One such tale is recounted by author Robert Louis Stevenson.

One notable exception to this game was a bottle imp who imprisoned himself in a poisoner's ring that “ate” bad luck. Potential owners were warned the ring would only eat a finite amount of bad luck before disaster would strike. Undaunted, a rogue took this ring, and used its misfortune dispelling power to seize control of a kingdom, only for his good luck charm to reach critical mass and explode, leveling the entire country during his coronation ceremony.

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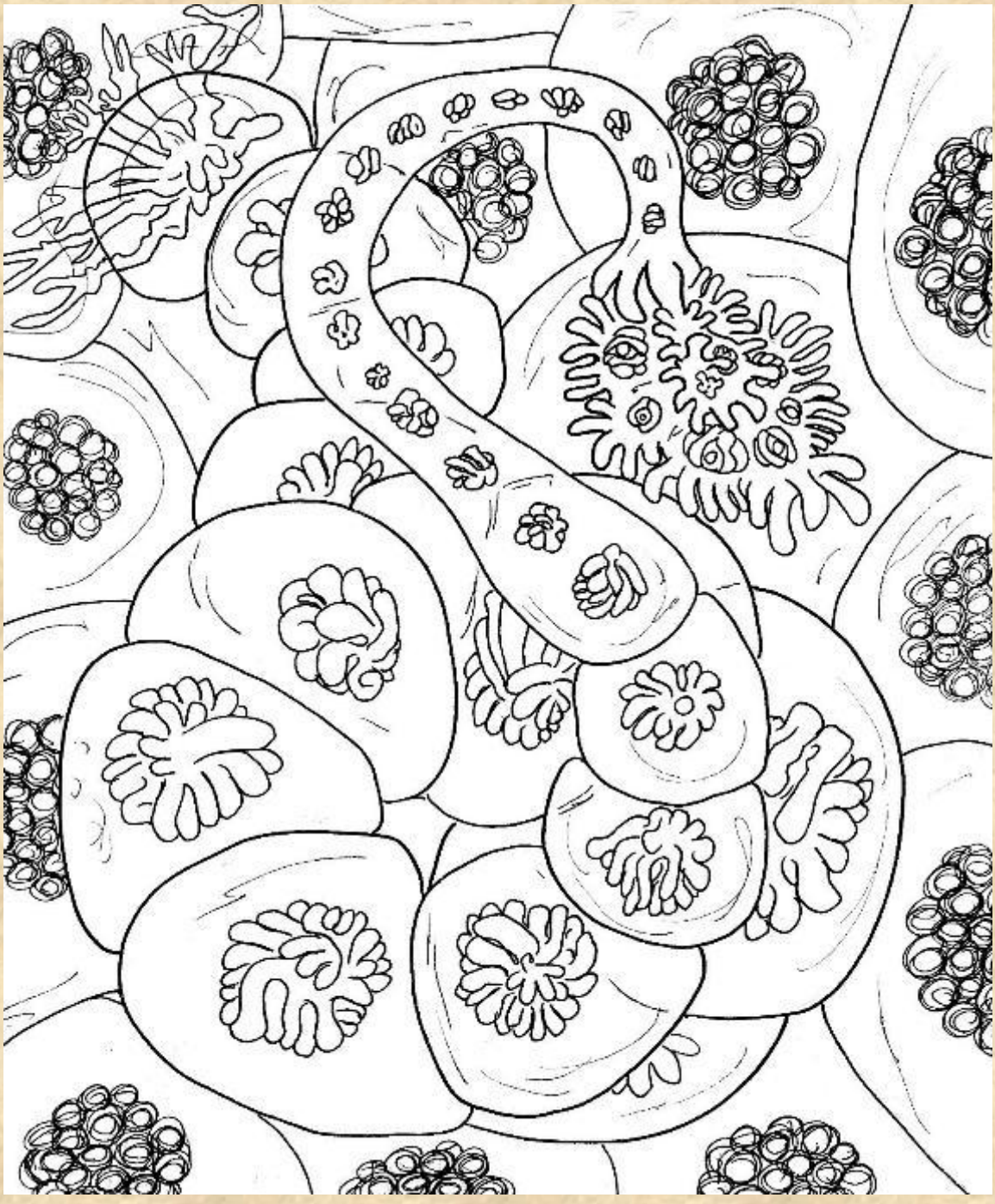
Chanjun

Chanjun, the Sovereign of Guts, is a gigantic parasite living in the small intestines of a dragon deity, Meide Chui, the "Crusher of Wickedness." Chanjun came to live in Meide Chui's gastrointestinal tract when Meide ate the Sovereign's previous host, the demon lord, Jaara Jun the Mountain Hammerer.

Meide Chui longs to be rid of Chanjun, but his boarder has proven to be resistant to eviction.



Chleuastos

Chleuastos the Smiling Whisper is an evil spirit who cannot be perceived or touched by anyone who is not smiling.

Chorus of Thousands

Chorus Of Thousands is a demon-beast who roams the Abyssal sky above the Abyssal Ocean. The horror is often seen over Burningwater and the Scalding Sea. Chorus Of Thousands allegedly lairs in a cave in the Bay of Tears, but no one dares to confirm this.

Chorus Of Thousands is a terrifying hunter who preys on whoever can hear its deafening cry.

Cicada Eater

During the rout of Ashu Kaa, the General In Vermilion, Ashu Kaa regurgitated a god to assist him. This spat-out son did as best as he could to aid his father, but, in the end, Cicada Eater was unable to stem the tide hammering against his father's forces. Cicada Eater prepared to lay down his new life to defend Ashu Kaa, but, the General ordered him to retreat, whereupon he fled into his grandmother's clutches beyond the reach of the Gods.

Cicada Eater schemed to avenge his father and grandmother, eventually journeying to the Citadel of Heaven. At the Gates of Heaven, Cicada Eater claimed he was naught but a traveling guest coming to pay his respects. The Gods welcomed their new guest with open arms and filled drinking horns, but his siblings, Geso Kaa, the Vermilion Tiger In Chains, and Atmasura, the Pearl Of Envy, saw through his ruse. For his troubles, Geso Kaa cast his wayward brother beyond the Citadel walls, even as Atmasura dispelled Cicada Eater's lies.

The Green Empress Ciyeh

The Green Empress Ciyeh is remembered by the descendants of her peoples as a horrible bogeywoman, a grasping tyrant who nearly slew the world as a side effect of her hubris.

Most modern historians dismiss the accounts of Empress Ciyeh being a malevolent diabolist as being a blood libel by misogynistic scholars eager to curry favor with Ciyeh's successors. Actually, those accounts of Empress Ciyeh's later reign were accurate, as Ciyeh was a powerful archmage who borrowed much of her power through a pact she made with the outcast god known as the Apokryltaros.

In the last few decades of Ciyeh's life and reign, she became obsessed with amassing enough power to transform herself into a goddess, or, according to others, a demon lord as powerful as her master. She had commissioned a device that would accomplish this; how it would have done so differs with each telling. All accounts agree that Ciyeh's device required the consumption of all of her imperial subjects in the presence of the Apokryltaros. Her attempts to summon the Greater King Of The Deeper Darkness was sabotaged either by a rogue rakshasa named Valserigrav, or the first Sui Hu, and this failure resulted in her own terrible death, together with all living things in her capital.

The Green Empress still exists as a ghost: sometimes a wandering ball of black and green flames that grants wishes to those wicked enough to pay her price, sometimes as an undead shell that continues to maintain a horrific parody of her empire.

Crawling Tree

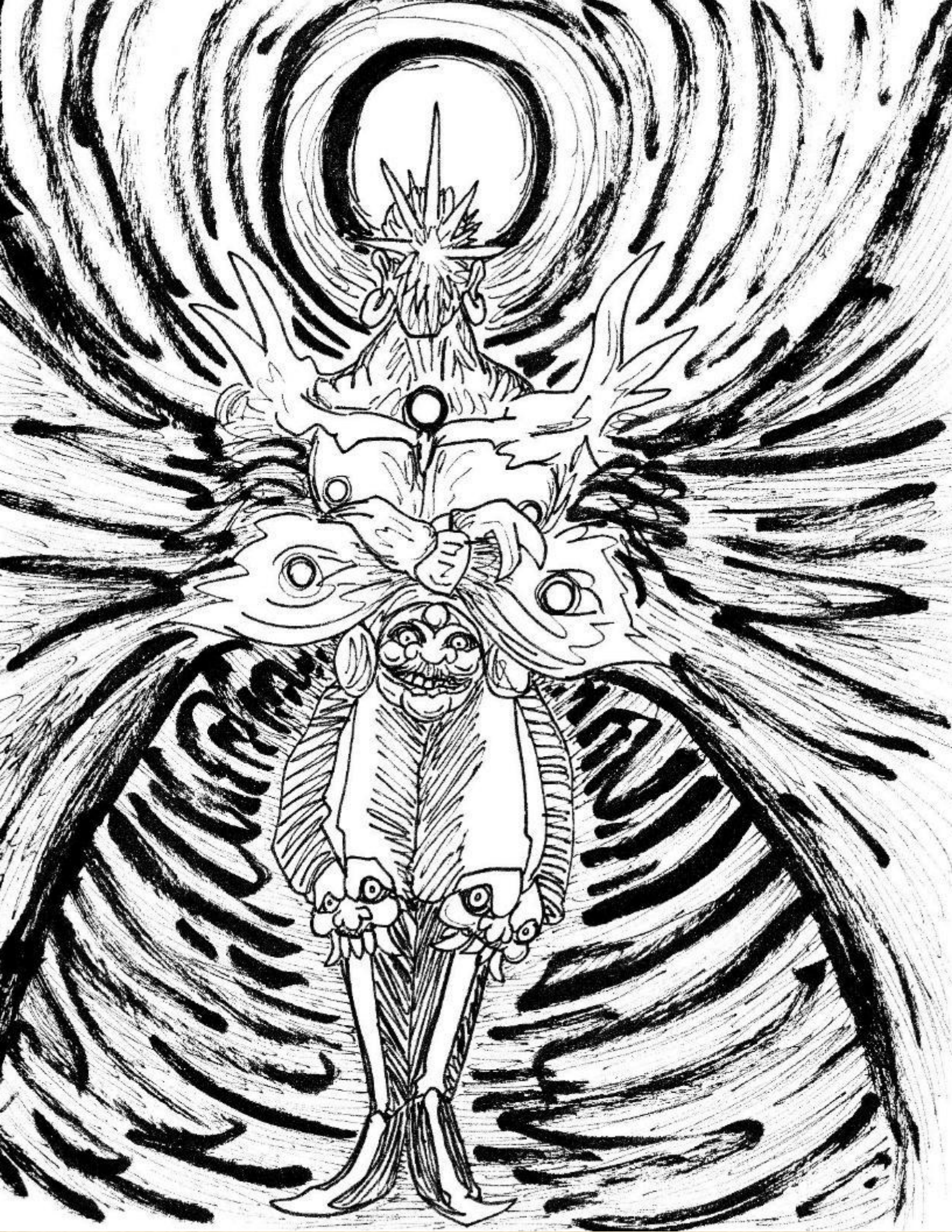
The Crawling Trees are demonic plants that live in and give the Crawling Forest its name. The Crawling Forest is a dreadful place filled with horrible, venomous vermin. The primary danger are the trees, themselves, as, they often trample unwary travelers. Because the Crawling Forest abuts the Forest of Suicides, harpies often attempt to roost in the crawling trees. The common occurrence of crawling trees bumping into the suicide trees, and causing the latter to cry out in pain happens frequently enough to allow travelers to navigate between the two places.

A crawling tree is a large, crooked tree with large eyes and leg-like roots. The Crawling Forest is a dark place, and the trees' eyes allegedly help them find enough light to attempt photosynthesis with. Visitors are cautioned to not bring light sources with them if they don't want to get trampled by the light-hungry trees.

Daotaiyang

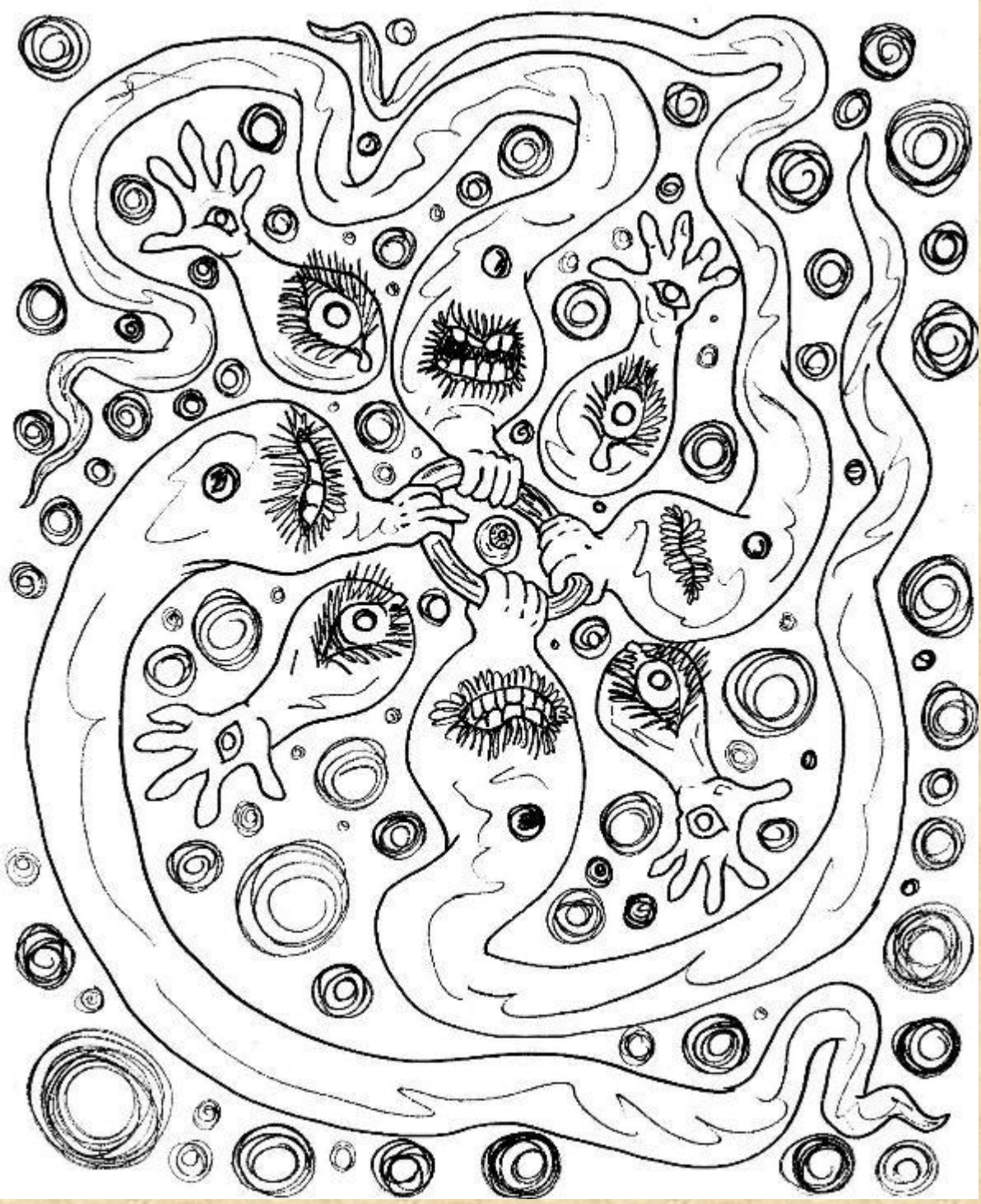
Daotaiyang, the Cruelest Sun, is an evil spirit who embodies harmful aspects of sunlight, like sunstroke, drought, heat exhaustion and sunburn. Daotaiyang is brutal, unrelenting, and brutally honest with his generally scathing opinions. Having said that, the Cruelest Sun is keen to understand the difference between brutal honesty and tactlessness, and metes out excruciating punishments to those of his followers who do not understand this difference.

The Cruelest Sun is venerated by both farmers desperate to escape his burning blessings, and unhinged martial artists seeking to literally incinerate their opponents. Daotaiyang asks his followers to never lie, and, more importantly, respect the followers of his lover, Anyue. Those of his students who disobey either of these two requests risk desiccating into agonized undead husks the moment they're struck by sunshine.



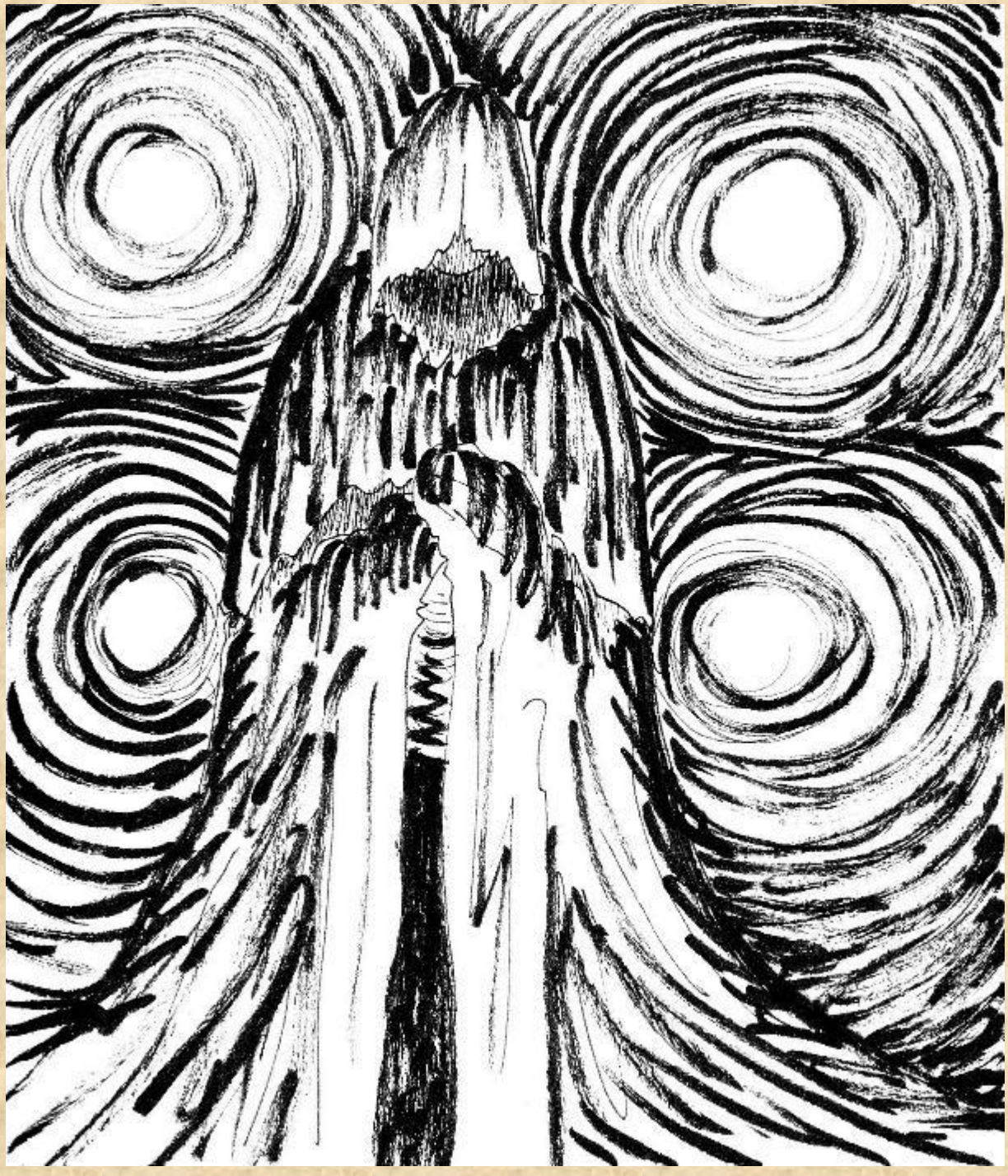
Deltavirus

Deltavirus is an enigmatic virusbeast in service to its progenitor, Megalovirus. In ancient times, Deltavirus escaped into the Astral Realm to avoid destruction at the claws of Taihu the Pox Tiger, where it remains today. The creature detaches portions of itself to attach to astral travelers. Such afflicted, contaminated beings are then surreptitiously relayed orders to further Megalovirus' plans.



Diabolos Incapuccin

A weird and mysterious baatezu hidden beneath an impenetrably heavy cassock. Apparently, a member of the Court of Nessus, the Devil Monk serves as a messenger, delivering handwritten letters to various persons in and outside of Baator. Some letters are indeed baleful, being explicit warnings or death warrants for the recipients, others merely playfully sinister, like gossip or offers of encouragement in otherwise secret endeavors.



Disease

In life, the person who would become this undead beast was a brigand chief whose thugs waylaid merchants and messengers traveling to and from Empress Ciyeh's capitol. When Ciyeh had one of her sons personally hand-deliver a warning to the brigand chief to cease his mischief, the chief cut off the boy's head and carved an insulting reply in the headless corpse's back. Now truly offended, the Empress sent three Imperial legions to rout that bandit clan and capture their chieftain. The chief was humiliated by first being forced to decapitate and similarly mutilate all of his surviving kin. To show her undying contempt for the chief, the Empress then wove awful curses upon him, mimicking horrible diseases while preventing him from dying.

Dogu

Dogu are a race of intelligent ceramic golems who were originally created to be crude eidolons and sacrificial stand-ins for religious ceremonies, particularly funerary rituals. Now, they are manufactured to be tomb and shrine guardians.

Dogu are intelligent enough to be given large suites of complex orders and follow through on them in a competent manner. Dogu are also intelligent enough to understand the concept of "disrespect" enough to resent it to the point of altering their given assignments to include extreme violence unless explicitly ordered not to.

Dosheem

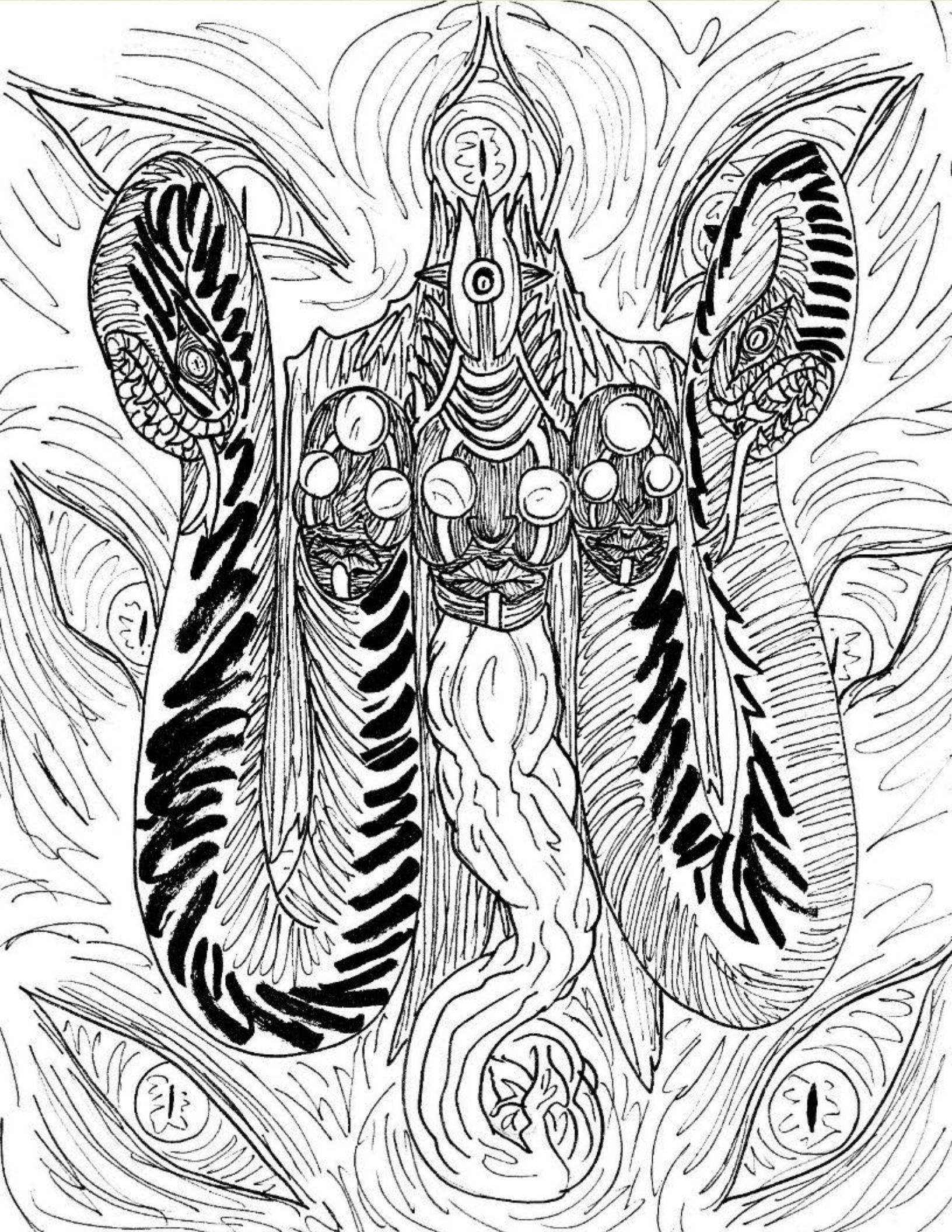
Dosheem is a spirit of poisonous fungi. It makes for a dangerous nemesis if offended, but, it can be a useful neighbor or an erratically generous benefactor if one takes the time to appease it.

While Dosheem has immense knowledge of alchemy and potion work, alchemists and potion makers as petitioners bore it. Herbalists and discussions of fungal aspects of ecology titillate it, by contrast.

Duping Xiaogui

The Duping Xiaogui, or "Poison Bottle Demon," is a species of artificial demon created by the Duping Yishi, or "Poison Bottle Ritual," a ritual contrived by the Tanar'ri and taught to their mortal disciples. Live, dangerously poisonous vermin are sealed with a specially consecrated jar to create a temporary body for an enslaved evil spirit. The more life-threatening vermin, the more powerful the emerging demon. However, it is strongly recommended against using supernatural creatures as a part of the Duping Yishi, as, unnatural beings disrupt the process, and poison bottle imps that are too powerful easily ignore orders given. Demon mentors often phrase this warning in a way to tempt their students into doing exactly that. Regardless of the individual or combined power of the components, the duping xiaogui's body breaks down after a week has passed or it has completed ten orders. Upon the body's destruction, whether from senescence or violence, the spirit returns to its prison to await the creation of its next body.

Duping xiaogui are created to perform "evil" tasks, like vandalism, murder, theft of magical objects, or serving as envoys to other evil beings, such as wicked fae, or demon-worshiping vampires.



Duping

A Duping is a bottle or a stoppered jar that is ritually consecrated/desecrated for the Duping Yishi, or "Poison Bottle Ritual." This is done by taking a finely crafted or expensive container, preferably one that has been stolen from a tomb, and (further) defiling it before binding an evil spirit within it. The evil spirit then is used to form and animate a temporary body from poisonous vermin fed into its jar.

The spirit loathes this situation, and longs to be free of its prison. Its freedom can only be attained through breaking its jar or undoing the ritualized defilement: either action is difficult due to the enchantments woven into the container. Freed spirits invariably seek violent revenge, ideally immediately, against both their jailers and any bystanders.

The Egg of Eternity

Most of the precious few scholars who know of the sentient construct referred to as the "Egg of Eternity" tend to dismiss it as either an eidolon or as an exceptionally powerful living idol. Both summaries are inaccurate, as both eidolons and living idols are modeled after obvious deities or themes. What deity or concept the Egg represents is unknown.

What is known about this six-foot tall, floating glob of darkness is that it is very intelligent, and is attended to by a fairly powerful cult of deranged, yet secretive arcanists. The Egg alternatively consumes or revives its devotees, sometimes transforming them into undead, or restoring them to life, as per its own inscrutable whim.

Etavirus

Etavirus is a shapeshifting virusbeast who serves as the majordomo of Iovirus. Etavirus is snarky and insulting, especially towards its victims, and even towards Iovirus. Iovirus is uncaring of Etavirus' flippant attitude, as its assistant always completes all of its assignments in a timely, competent manner.

Unlike most other virusbeasts, Etavirus can survive exposure to sunlight, provided it is wearing someone else's form. Otherwise, in its true form, Etavirus will burn to ashes.

Deceiving Mercenary Fraus

The False Urge, or "Pseudemiurge," is a malevolent being that pretends to be the Demiurge. It seeks to deceive people into shackling it into their hearts, provided they have invited it to speak to them (whether deliberately or coercion).

Victims of the False Urge become conduits for fiendish possession

Figarizard

The Figarizard is an unwholesome, magical hybrid of worm and reptile, resembling an unpleasant slug dripping with luminescent slime. Figarizard prey on vermin, and are especially fond of rats: prey is subdued with its venomous slime before being seized and swallowed.

Figarizard are biologically immortal, and can regenerate from small pieces. Figarizard are biologically immortal, but they can starve or dehydrate into a shriveled, dormant form. This leads to horrific abuse by magicians and alchemists who imprison Figarizard, then cruelly vivisect the beasts in order to harvest their organs, bones and humors for the manufacture of various alchemical reagents. Such arrangements rarely end well for either party, as Figarizard are a lot more intelligent than they appear, and are excellent escape artists who are eager to reciprocate abuse given to them

Frozen Scream

Frozen Scream is the ghost of a miner killed in a cave-in. Allegedly, the miner was killed in mid-scream, but, this is an ad hoc tale invented to explain the gruesome appearance of his manifestations.

Frozen Scream manifests by possessing and animating a boulder in order to attack any creature he can sense. He becomes even more aggressive whenever the stone his corpse was crushed beneath is approached by the living, as, if the boulder is destroyed, he passes on.

The Gardener

The Gardener is a bizarre earth elemental who has wandered various worlds 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.

Gedoushu

The Gedoushu are ayakashi who have evolved into complex, thinking beings possessed of frightening magical prowess, and appear as very large, comparatively irregular looking ayakashi, possessed of the power of speech. The threat of gedoushu is another important reason why most other tanar'ri take great pains to exterminate ayakashi whenever possible. Other tanar'ri also attack gedoushu upon discovery, too; shapeshifted gedoushu remain cold, clammy, and slimy to the touch.

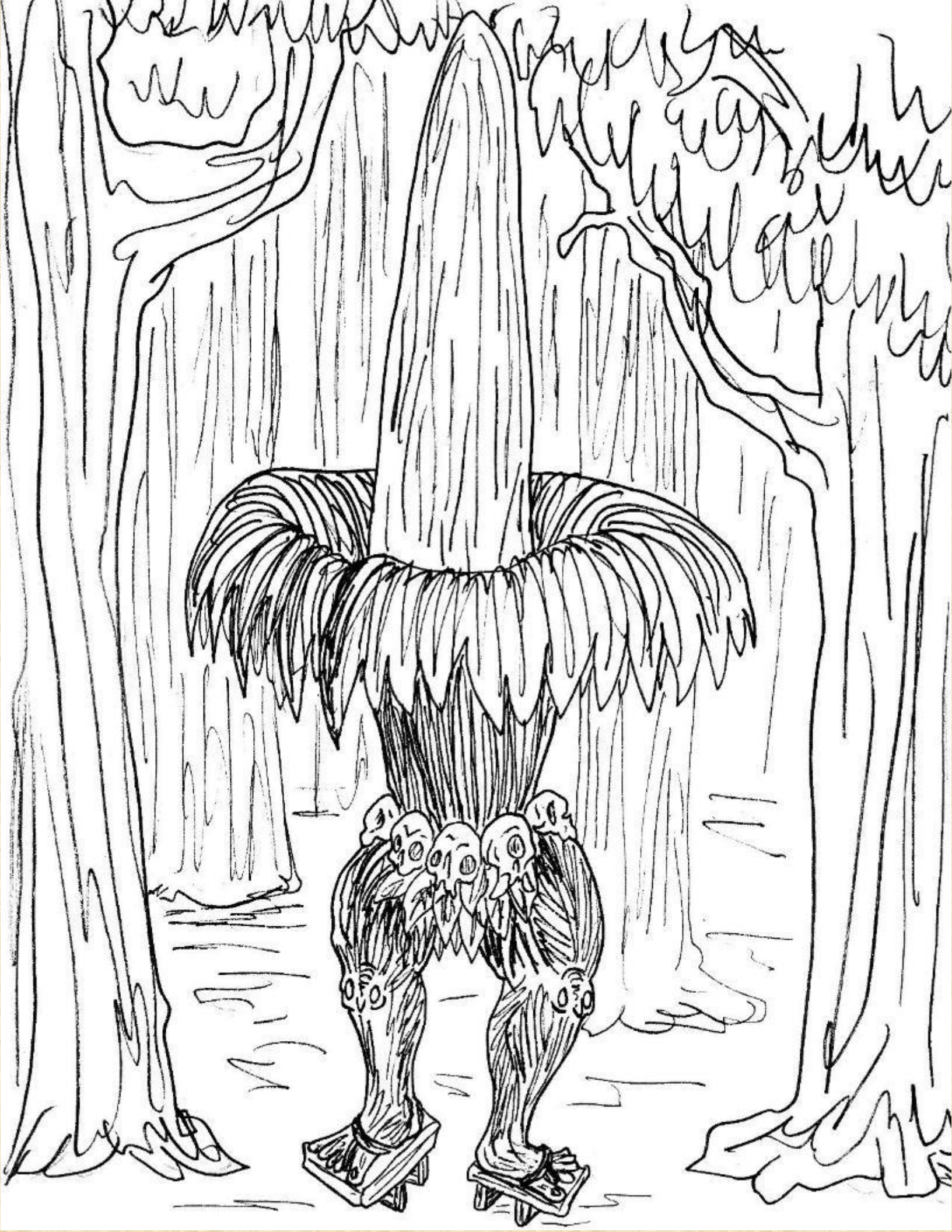
Gedoushu are scheming, shapeshifting villains to a one, though their motivations vary. Some set themselves up as high priests of their progenitor-mother, the Upside Down Goddess, laboring long and hard in desperately creating byzantine plots to free her. Other gedoushu are selfish predators who rapaciously hoard power and fortune for their own personal amusement. Even so, all gedoushu, even the "atheists" among them, fear their mother, and can be cowed into compliance even with casual mention of her. Such deceptions invariably end very badly for the deceivers the moment a gedoushu realizes their mother's name was used in a lie.

The Giant Eater

The being who would become the Giant Eater was once a boy living in one of many villages plagued by the predations of a rapaciously cruel giant. Deciding he was tired of the giant's malice, he snuck into the giant's fortress. Through strokes of luck and tricking the giant to fall on his own sword, the boy tasted his tormentor's heart's blood and returned to his village a hero.

Having literally tasted power, the boy set out to hunt more giants, allegedly to free their victims. In truth, the boy had grown inhumanly strong on the giant's blood, and was desperate to nurture his newfound addiction. A giantess whose sons were claimed by this "hero" cursed him so his hunger would destroy him over and over again. Eventually, the boy's attempts to sate his unending hunger caused him to grow into a giant, himself, then into a monster, whereupon his twisted body collapsed in on itself from the strain.

A mother's wrath rarely abates in death, and the Giant Eater's ghost seeks out a new host to repeat this cycle.



The God of Sin

Asmodeus, King of Hell, wears many masks.

Gyugai the Tomb Weird

Gyugai the Tomb Weird is an evil spirit that feeds on psychic residues and lingering regrets. It prefers to lurk in graveyards and tombs to do this.

Hermes Trismegistus

Hermes Trismegistus, the author of the legendary *Hermetica*, is a spirit of knowledge who teaches any asking supplicants the secrets of the mechanics of the Universe camouflaged as alchemical rituals. Hermes Trismegistus manifests as various beings described in alchemical texts, a popular form is the "Tri Prima."

Many spirits turn petitioners away if the latter are deemed unworthy. Hermes Trismegistus does not deny any petitioners, preferring, instead, to resolve the problem of impure intentioned or incompetent students by having them destroy themselves with their own lack of wisdom. This situation happens so frequently, it's not even funny even among demons.

The Horned Bride

The Horned Bride is a succubus who comes to unwise magicians to tempt her victims with promises of sex and magical knowledge. To demonstrate her alleged inherent moral superiority, the Horned Bride respectfully leaves alone those marks who do not reciprocate her seductions (she does not eat those whom she acknowledges as "wise," after all).

Ifriti

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.

The Indulgencemonger

The Indulgencemonger is a witchlike succubus who serves as the primary temptress of the Scheming Treasurer, Cupiditas. Mortals who seek business with the Scheming Treasurer must go find a crossroads next to a burial ground, ideally one containing the corpses of the wealthy or nobility, and wait until two in the morning. If she deigns to meet with them on behalf of her employer, the Indulgencemonger comes trundling forth out of the night gloom, carrying her bag of treasure. She will attempt to sell the potential customer some shining goodies from her sack before drawing up the paperwork needed for an appointment with Cupiditas. While refusing to buy her wares won't save a mortal from damnation, buying her wares expedites the process of dealing with her master.

In addition to actual treasure and cursed artifacts, the Indulgencemonger has reasonably priced, useful or interesting junk for every occasion, leading many amateur demonologists to summon her for the sake of buying perfect, last-minute birthday gifts or adding to personal collections. This situation irritates Cupiditas to no end, but, since he collects a fifty percent commission on every sale his spokeswoman makes, he limits his complaints about the matter to verbal grumblings.

ΚΟΥΡΦΟΣ
ΑΠΑΛΑ

Jascony

Jascony is a minor sea deity who looks like a gargantuan arthrodire placoderm. He often masquerades as an island in order to either eat ships or snooker maritime folks into placating him with humanoid sacrifices.

Kopilixixi

Kopilixixi is a being from the sky. He flew down from the Heavens in a flying chariot or yert, made of golden wings, light and metal, to teach the inhabitants of a remote valley the arts of metallurgy, electronic technology, and faster than light travel. His students recorded what he told them as best as they could through undecipherable pictograms carved onto basalt stelae

Kōsatsuhand

The Kōsatsuhand is an artificial spirit created by reanimating a severed hand through alchemical necromancy. Sorcerers often create a kōsatsuhand to serve as an assassin and secretary

Lagenadei

Lagenadei is an artificial deity created by powerful alchemists who imprisoned it in the apparently unbreakable flask it was born in.

Lagenadei resembles a golden dragon with three heads, one obsidian, which has mastery of necromancy and putrification, one milky quartz, which can heal any disease, poison, or injury, and a head of ruby and carnelian which can animate any being or object it glowers at.

If allowed to escape, Lagenadei will remake the Universe as per its own whims.

Lamdeth Cake

The Lamdeth Cake is an evil spirit that possesses tiered cakes and other elaborate pastries for the purpose of murder. It is one of the Beleaguered Artist's favorite creations-cum minions, often running errands and performing assassinations on behalf of Gulo the Glutton.

Most situations involve it being deliberately summoned to assassinate someone in a spectacular fashion. Occasionally, it deceives a chef into creating a host body for it, as its presence makes its host appear more beautiful than normal.

Lantana

Lantana, the Lord Of Brambles, Old Hoarwithy, is the patron spirit of weeds.

Lantana appears as a beast made of thorns, with a head of berries. Lantana's realm is a vast, teeming mass of parasitic thorn bushes that can only be accessed through centuries old gardens or certain Infernal or Abyssal forests.

Lingzhi Kongque

The Lingzhi Kongque is a fungal spirit of rot and growth, and of disease and healing, and of death and rebirth, symbolic of how the lingzhi infects its host, drawing energy out of wood into mushrooms filled with healing properties. The Lingzhi Kongque manifests as an enormous peacock made of *Ganoderma* fruiting bodies.

The Lingzhi Kongque is a patient, but insidiously sinister mentor. Those magicians who befriend Lingzhi Kongque risk making enemies of trees, their spirits and their products.

Liuchong

The Liuchong is an extremely aggressive creature that normally sleeps inside a meteor-like egg case that floats in the void between stars. Almost all humanoids regard it as an awful harbinger of especially egregious calamities due to a combination of its horrid disposition and using its powers to make things and people melt and explode.

Whenever the Liuchong makes earthfall, it hatches and causes a ruckus with the local lifeforms by trying to discourage contact using its radiation manipulation and acidic secretions. Eventually the Liuchong will attempt to return to outer space by secreting a new egg case that will be propelled beyond the reach of gravity through its radiation manipulation.

Lo Draq

Lo Draq is a shapeshifting trickster who poses as a wandering tinkerer or blacksmith. Lo Draq's true form is that of a shaggy-furred draft horse bigger than a carriage.

In his travels, Lo Draq attempts to befriend people, especially children, whom he adores. His attachment to his friends often creates trouble, as he causes property damage with his destructive clumsiness and immense strength. Often worse things happen whenever he attempts to mete justice on behalf of his friends.

Meimō Obake

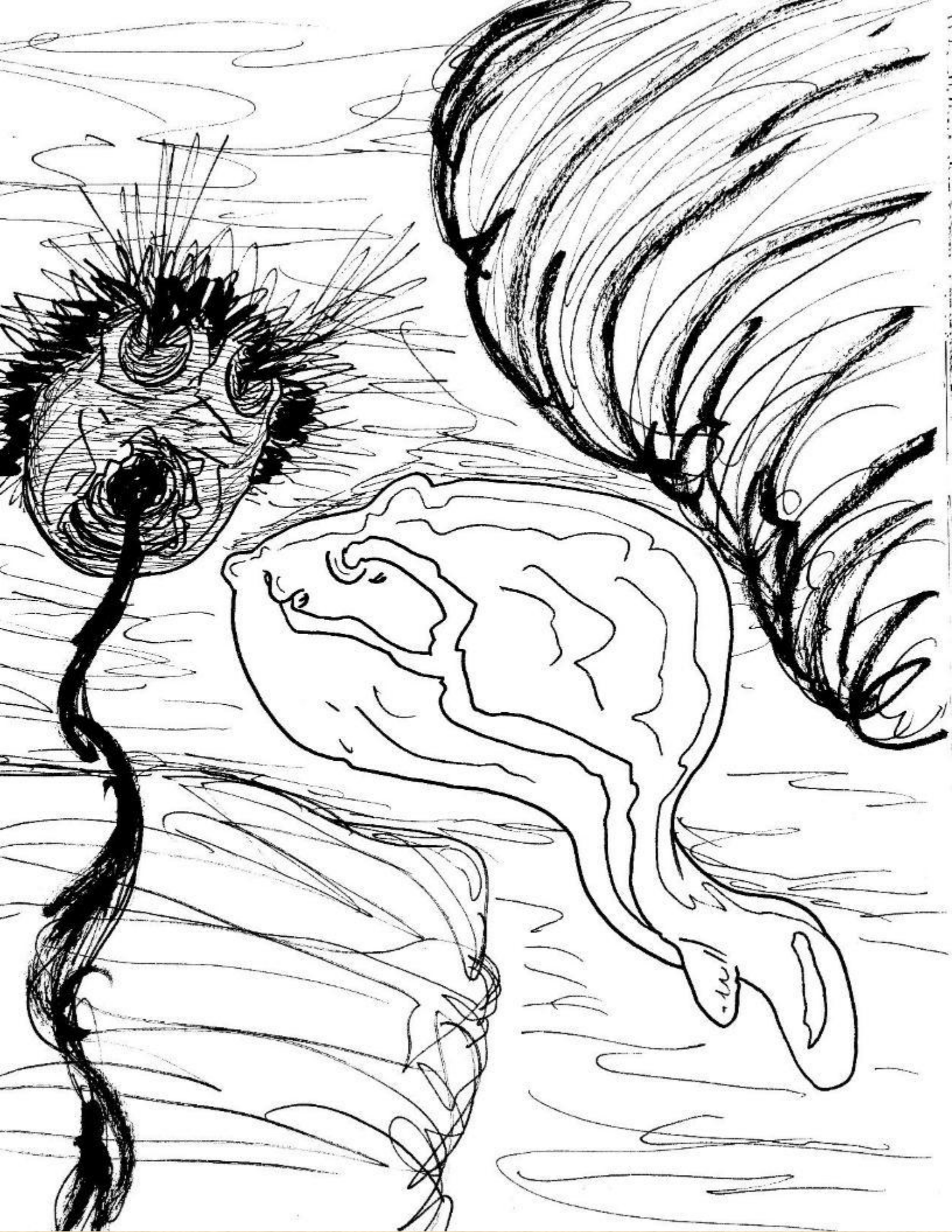
The Meimō Obake is a horrid demon that spreads a fatal disease that causes fever, spasms, hallucinations, madness and severe nasal congestion.

Most yokai, including many who are otherwise adamantly inimical to mortals, despise and revile the Meimō Obake, and freely offer assistance and remedies for its mischief and diseases.

Narcine

The narcine is a slug-like demon-beast that dwells in warm, moist Abyssal caverns. Unlike typical tanar'ri, the narcine is seemingly cowardly, and quick to retreat from perceived threats. Anyone stupid enough to follow a retreating narcine is liable to fall victim to traps that the creature has set (spiked pits and acid pools are favorites), or, be incinerated to death by the narcine's demonic radiance once the victims are in range.

Most other demons leave narcines alone. Once in a while, an exceptionally pretentious demon with lots of spare minions will set out to capture and tame a narcine, typically with limited results.



Necromalgam

The Necromalgam is a composite spirit formed from dozens, perhaps hundreds of destroyed undead creatures that agglutinated together. The Necromalgam constantly strives to add to its body in the vain hope of medicating its eternal hunger.

Queveruun

Queveruun is one of Amentia's chief minions. This archmage is a performance artist who engineers tragedies and calamities as testaments to his lord's power while feeding his own overwhelming need to promote otherwise needless suffering.

Queveruun's need to provoke often undoes his own schemes, and sometimes puts his own life at risk. At one point, Queveruun organized a party in the Thousand Tower without permission, leading to the vandalizing, then looting of one of the Beleaguered Artist's favorite galleries, and, worst of all, ultimately resulting in the loss or theft of the Uuparavat, one of Estagyunnos' more dangerous inventions. Queveruun has been charged with recovering the Uuparavat under penalty of being recycled into another one of Amentia's art projects.

The Red Lightning

"Red Lightning" is a title given to a weretiger or more rarely, a rakshasa, who demonstrates himself to be the current avatar of the cursed God Geso Kaa, the Vermilion Tiger In Chains, in his form of the Mighty Huntsman of Justice. The Red Lightning is an eternally stalwart defender of the weak, and a relentless avenger of the innocent.

Upon coming into his powers, whether through a curse, infection or puberty, the Red Lightning sallies forth to right wrongs, assist the powerless, slay monsters, vanquish evil, and, most importantly, thwart the machinations of the rogue God Cicada Eater. Legend has it were the Red Lightning were to deliberately betray his wards, he will die (and reincarnate to do additional penance). Perhaps this old wives' tale came about from seeing the Red Lightning die over and over in his duties.

Transformed, the Red Lightning becomes an enormous, shaggy-furred saber-toothed tiger who stands at least ten feet at the withers. His divine status often grants him additional supernatural powers unique to his current incarnation. Though, the Red Lightning has enhanced healing, even for a therianthrope, he rarely lives for long due to the rigors of his duties.

The Sac Man

Once upon a time, a brigand and his partner got into a drunken spat over who was the most evil of the most sinful person ever. Their quarrel raged so long that, well after the barkeeper threw them out, the Devil appeared to regale them with dozens of tales of far worse sinners. When the two drunken sots failed to get the Devil's polite and overly subtle hints to cease with their inane prattle, the Devil promptly snatched away the brigand's partner and stashed the fool into a sack. When the querulous brigand demanded his friend's return, the Devil laughed.

“You're just a bag of wind, what can you do?” the Devil replied. Thus cursed to be a living bag, the brigand was tasked to find a far more wicked replacement as ransom for his friend.

On dark, but windy nights, the Sac Man, as he is now known, travels with his ox cart, searching for sinners worse than he. If one says his name, he'll come to see if the fool is more wicked than he. If they are, he'll carry them away to see the Devil. If not, he curses them to watch their loved ones die one by one.

Sakasama No Megami-sama

Sakasama No Megami-sama is an inconceivably vast obyrith that resembles a deific mass of tentacles comparable in size to the archipelago of Aotearoa. During the Dawn War, she was sent forth by the Elder Elemental Eye to lay siege to various worlds, spewing forth her ayakashi and gedoushi children as she devoured whatever or whomever she seized. Despite questions about her sentience lingering to this day, she is recognized as one of the primary rivals of the Apokryltaros.

The Gods were frustrated by this horror, and agonized by her deadly persistence. Eventually the Sui Hu was tasked with subduing her. To lure her out of the ocean bottom, the Sui Hu slew a large tangle of her children. Thus enraged, Sakasama No Megami-sama followed the godbeast to the Abyss, eventually becoming entangled and stuck in a series of caverns underneath the Abyssal Ocean. This series of caverns would become the layer known as the "Huagong" or Flower Palace.

Despite its entrances and portals being sealed, warded or stationed with terrifying guardians, fools often come to the Huagong, thinking that they would be strong enough to slay the Upside Down Goddess, and finish what the Sui Hu was allegedly unable to do. Some survivors note that they apparently were unable to find her, despite encountering hoards of her rapacious children and impassible forests of tentacles. Other survivors have gone irreparably insane when they realized that the goddess fills up the entirety of her prison like an octopus stuck in a wine bottle.

Shade

Shades, or shadow people, are spirits born of desire and attachment. While a shade is not necessarily evil, its desires to fulfill and maintain its attachments to the world of the living easily cause them to become extremely malefic, especially if a shade faces difficulties in tending to its attachments.

Sigmavirus

Sigmavirus is an exceptionally cruel and violent virusbeast that serves the will of its progenitor, Megalovirus, mostly by performing assassinations as per orders given by Alphavirus, Iovirus or Omegavirus. While all of Megalovirus' offspring happily jump at the chance to kill in its name (except, perhaps, for Betavirus), Sigmavirus is called upon whenever an enemy is to be made an example of in a spectacularly unpleasant fashion.

Soon after Iovirus' liberation from the Chuanguan, there have been a series of unusually horrific murders in Zherisia where victims either have undergone an agonizing death via tetany after being stabbed with a barbed blade made of chitin, or have been cut into pieces via “slow slicing” with a barbed blade made of chitin. This strongly suggests that Iovirus has summoned its younger sibling to the Demiplane.

Slumber

"Slumber" is a powerful virusbeast who brings nightmares to all who meet its ineffable leer.

Presumably, Slumber possesses ill intent, but, the goals of this mute horror are unknown. Scholars and hunters have been driven insane merely by trying to piece together nonsensical clues retrieved from the nightmares of its victims.

The Snail Princess

The Snail Princess is a gastropod-like tanar'ri princess who presents herself as a gossipy dilettante and social butterfly. The Princess is also one of the favorite spymasters of the Emperor Of Emperors, Superbio. Anything she overhears or witnesses, she relays to her lord.

When the Princess isn't off attending some demonic party, snooping about in a get-together, or gabbing about juicy details to her boss, Her Highness will probably be prognosticating in her lair, a gazebo hidden in the maze garden surrounding Superbio's Palace of Heaven.

Solanarius

Solanarius is an ancient fiend who was venerated by witch-seers and primitive alchemists. Other fiends regarded the Great Sage Of The Below as an unimpeachable font of knowledge as powerful as his ally, Dagon of the Darkened Depths. Unlike Dagon, Solanarius was a gregarious creature, and perhaps that was his bane.

During the construction of the Nine Hells, Solanarius was invited to the Court of Nessus where Asmodeus personally requested the demon-sage's advice on numerous topics. Flattered, Solanarius accepted the King of Hell's proposition, wandering to and from the courts of the Lords Of Nine making welcomed suggestions and observing much. Eventually, though, the Greatest Sage of Hell realized that, upon accepting Asmodeus' offer, he was cursed to never leave Baator, and that the agents of the Archdevils had already censored any ritual to summon or even contact him. Now, Solanarius dejectedly accepts his fate as an infernal dilettante shuffled from one gilded cage to another.

Solanarius holds many secrets, including many secrets that would be damaging to the infrastructure of Hell. As such, Solanarius is assigned minders and bodyguards to protect him and either feed his visitors edited information or assassinate them as necessary. The positions of being Solanarius' minders and bodyguards are highly coveted in the Hellish Bureaucracy as they are “very cushy, very easy jobs.” Having said that, those positions' turnover rates are appalling, even by diabolic standards, as position holders are routinely murdered by impatient prospective applicants when they are not being demoted or executed as punishment for being indiscreet about using Solanarius to enrich themselves.

Despite pretending to be naïve, Solanarius is aware of his status as an inmate in a gilded cage. He has been secretly contacting his former cultists, now powerful fiends, themselves, in the hopes of reestablishing his cults, thereby eventually granting him enough power to escape and begin his revenge.

Spiivo

Spiivo is a faerie who was tasked to become the changeling of a child. But Spiivo became so enamored of his mark, he decided to become the changeling of the child's doll in order to serve as the child's guardian instead. Because Spiivo's lord was enamored of the child, too, and reconsidered the thought of exposing the soft and innocent thing to the grotesqueness of fae intrigue, his lord approved of this last-minute decision. Other fae who are aware of this situation think it's adorable. Other fae unaware of the situation dismiss Spiivo as a maudlin simpleton. Neither faction deigns to interfere with Spiivo's tasks or ward, however, as both groups remember quite clearly that Spiivo still serves as his master's chief assassin.

Inifinite Victory General Terataspis

Infinite Victory General Terataspis is a powerful demon created by Amentia and Superbio to serve as the commander and chief strategist of Gulo the Glutton's demon armies for the Blood War. Terataspis commands respect and courtesy from not only his subordinates, his peers and his rivals among the Abyssal forces, but also from Yugoloths and even some of his diabolic enemies. The General's battle prowess is unmatched on the battlefield. He is capable of mowing down entire legions by himself even as he leads his own troops.

Terataspis is deeply devoted to his master, and Gulo regards his General as the "son (he) deliberately forgot to eat." Terataspis is also extremely respectful to all of the other Abominations, save for Malevolentia, whom he secretly detests. The General takes extreme, granted hidden, offense to the Princess of Stings' attempts to seduce his master, and has been conspiring with Luxuria to dispose of Malevolentia in order to replace the Unrelenting Taskmaster, thereby sparing his master of the Unrelenting Taskmaster's machinations.

The Three Bad Goats

The Three Bad Goats are a trio of tricksters in service to the Green Empress, being members of her entourage of evil spirits. As their title suggests, they appear or manifest as a trio of talking goats. The trio present themselves as fortune tellers, and make various calamitously terrifying prophecies which they then engineer into happening.

It's not known if the Three Bad Goats are three beings who work in unison, or is a singular creature in three separate bodies.

Tilang

Tilang are a species of lesser tanar'ri originally created in memory of a now-extinct, hoofed predatory animal, superficially resembling a cloven-hoofed wolf ranging in size from a fox terrier to a draft horse. Legend has it that the demon lord who commissioned their genesis, the so-called "Horned Emperor," doted upon his creations, cherishing them well above his own children, despite his offspring staffing his court. The members of the Horned Court could not tolerate being snubbed so by their progenitor that they schemed to use his beloved pets to destroy him. This The Horned Children accomplished by "accidentally" spilling the beasts' food upon their father, whereupon he was devoured completely in a vicious frenzy. The beasts' hunger being only whetted by their now-former master, they then hunted down and devoured the Horned Children, too. Since their emancipation, the tilang have been hunted down by most other tanar'ri as a carnivorous, demon-eating menace.

Even so, animal lovers among the tanar'ri capture and domesticate tilang to use them as vicious lapdogs, tireless hunting beasts, and loyal guardian executioners. In particular, demons who have tamed tilang use them to incarcerate mortals. Most humanoids bitten by tilang become cursed, painfully mutating into yeth hounds upon nightfall or exposure to darkness. Sunlight temporarily reverses the transformation, but, as the curse progresses, sunlight becomes less effective in neutralizing this curse, to the point where it eventually only causes intense pain. Werebeasts and children bitten by tilang, in contrast, violently mutate into tilang.

Particularly unhinged arcanists bargain with demons to acquire various humors of tilang in order to use them for monstrous apotheoses.

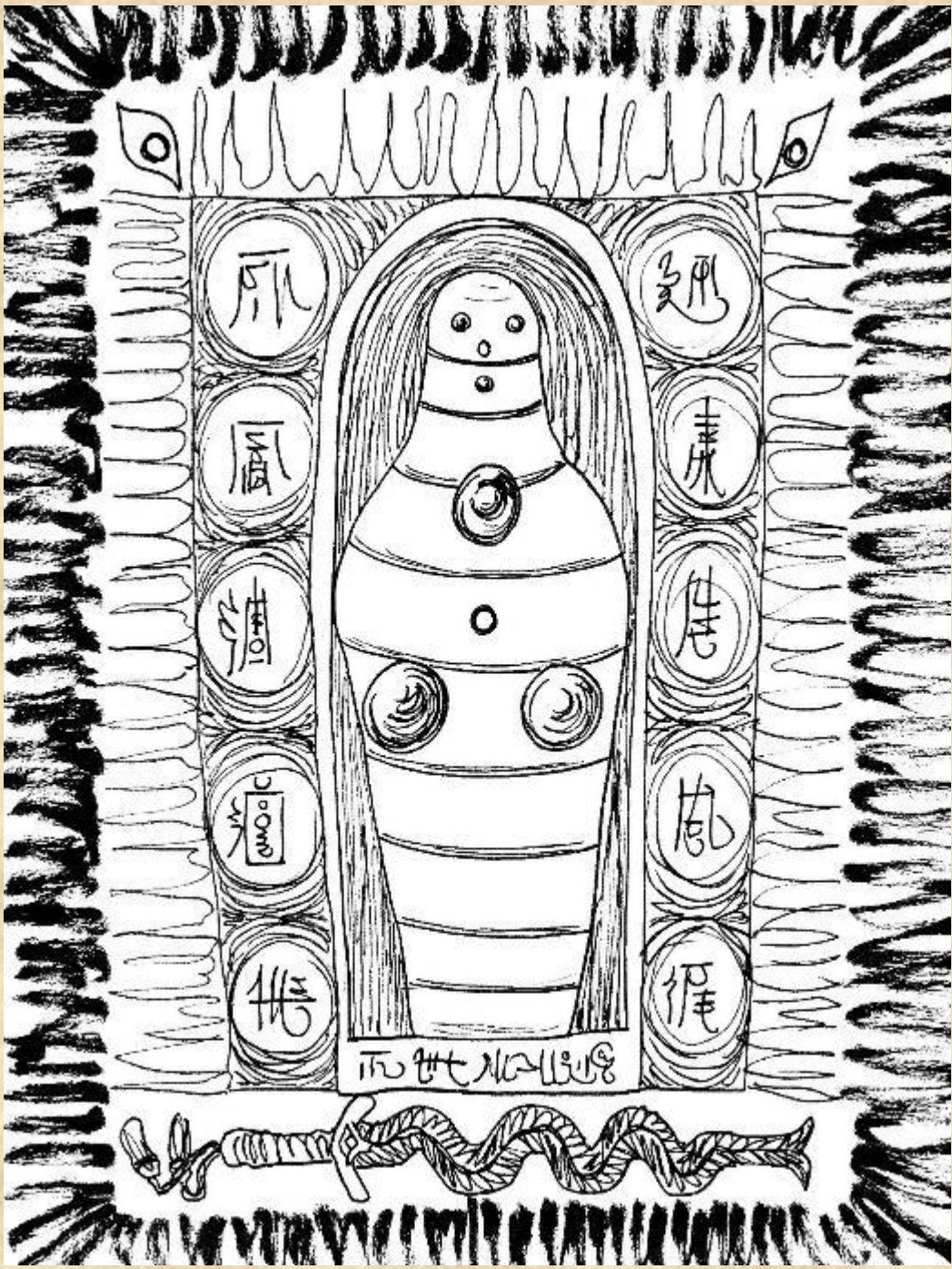
Utuvaagan

Utuvaagan is an evil spirit that possesses mortals for the purpose of scrying and spying on behalf of its master. A possessed host can sprout additional eyes as it needs, though neither Utuvaagan nor its host can cross a line of salt.

Uuparavat

Uuparavat is an artificial spirit crafted by Estagyunnos. The Lord of Art created Uuparavat to serve as a catalyst for a possessed being to evolve into its ultimate potential (hypothesized to be a gigantic monster). Amentia placed Uuparavat in a booby-trapped jar for safekeeping until he can find a suitable host for it.

Some time ago, Amentia's minion, Queveruun, threw a party in one of the art galleries of the Thousand Tower, and accidentally discovered Uuparavat's prison and discarded it without knowing what it really contained. This resulted in Amentia ordering Queveruun to retrieve Uuparavat's jar, intact, under penalty of death (we assume) via being recycled into an art project.



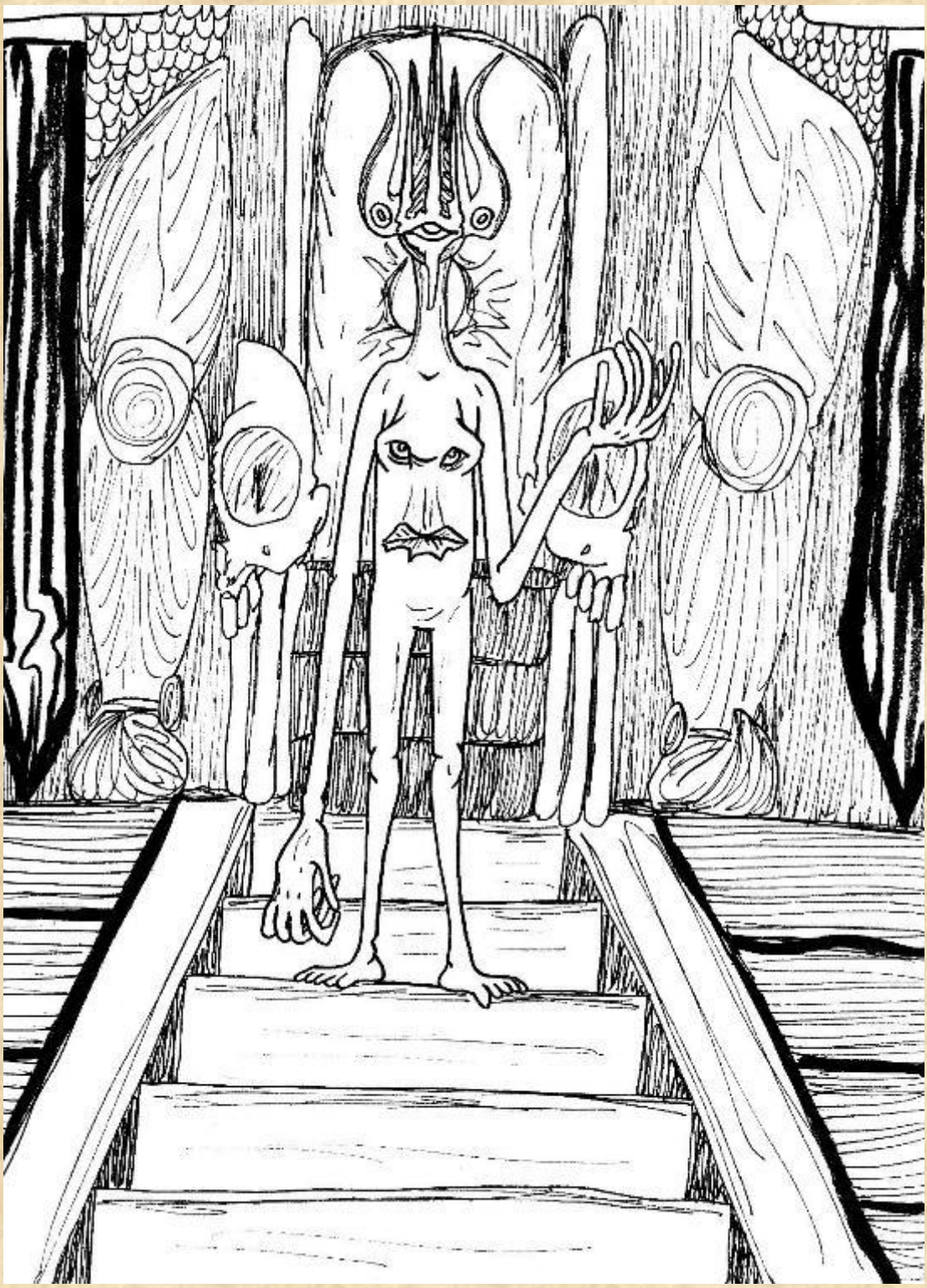
Vesnavaan

Vesnavaan is a sorceress in service to the Green Empress, having been one of Empress Ciyeh's apprentices. Vesnavaan is a necromancer who specializes in stealing the souls of beautiful women to empower the various dolls and mannequins she crafts. In a pinch, she happily steals the souls of men and children, too. She's not that fussy.

Xiqi

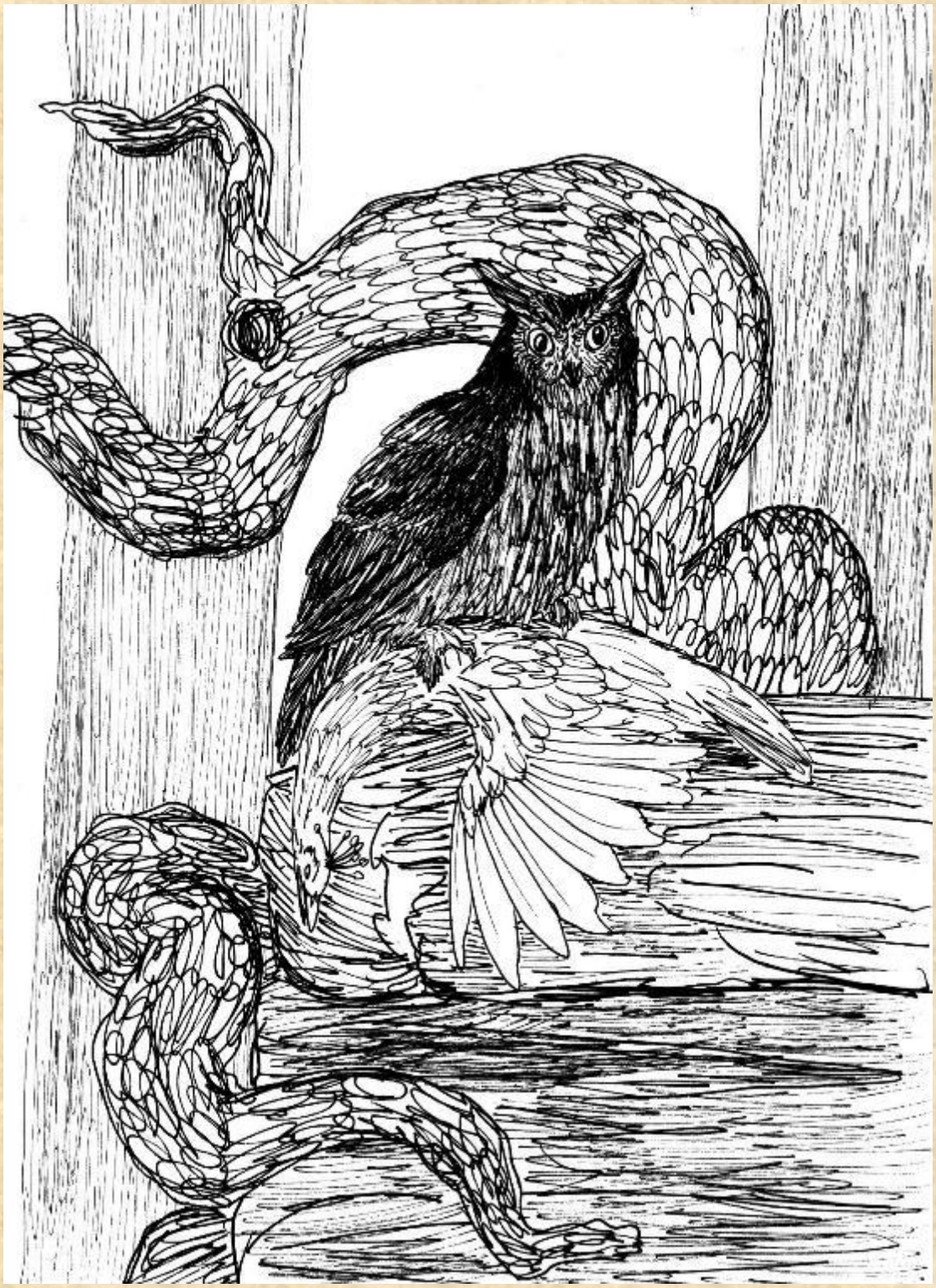
Xiqi is an ancient faerie who has been an important force within the Unseelie Court. Few have had the opportunity to see him, at least, see him for what he really is, despite feeling his suffocating presence everywhere.

Xiqi's greatest weapons are his intellect and his manipulative personality. Otherwise, he's actually a lot like a worm piloting a snail.



Xiu

Xiu is a spirit owl that eats other birds and bird spirits. Xiu is a weird creature: some say it's a very small owl, others say it's large enough to eat peafowl. It is the mortal enemy of the zhenniao or poison-feather eagles. The xiu's feathers can be used to counteract both the poison of the zhenniao and of the vipers from whom the zhenniao steal their venom from.



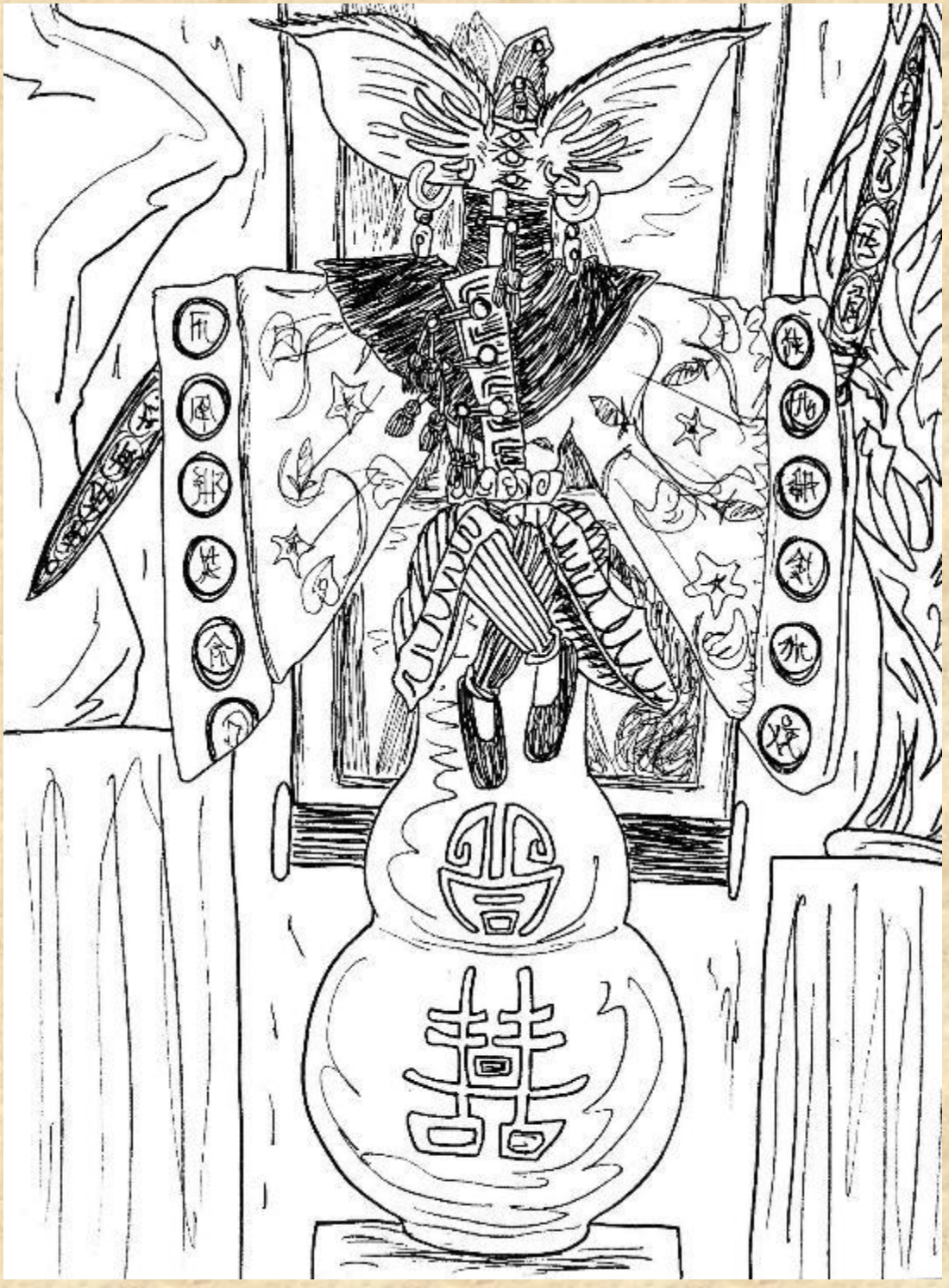
Tripsittaka

The Tripsittaka is a species of hyperintelligent bird that resembles a three headed parrot. Tripsittaka live in rainforests very similarly to macaws. They despise humanoids due to humanoids' propensity to chop their rainforests down, and enslave them for the pet trade. Tripsittaka often devise magical traps to humiliate and inconvenience intruders before killing them.

Xueling

Xueling is a fae assassin who eliminates those who have offended his clients, mostly fae nobility, though he has taken contracts from unwitting mortal children, too. Xueling is a very professional person for a faerie. He is very exacting with explaining his terms and requests others reciprocate accordingly.

Xueling despises bullies and others who abuse children. He has been known to waive his fees if given the opportunity to euthanize such vulgar beings.



Ymlerantia

Ymlerantia the Fungal Succubus, one of Zuggtmoy's daughters, is a large, demonic mushroom who uses the parasitic growths on her pileus in conjunction with her toxic, hallucinogenic spores to interact with and seduce her victims. Discussions of how to counteract her spores lead to a lot of stupid adventurers stupidly thinking that they can avoid falling victim to her by holding their breaths. Such fools succumb to the fact that her spores can infect them through skin contact.

Ymlerantia was once an ally and lover of Sighing Bishop Acedio. They broke up due to the Bishop finding Ymlerantia too ambitious for his tastes, and the Fungal Succubus being too intolerant of Acedio's stoicism. The two remain civil towards each other, but can no longer bear each other's physical presence.

Zagya

Zagya is a necromancer with a mercenary personality in order to maintain his cushy lifestyle filled with creature comforts. He is a master of enslaving the spirits of the deceased, and happily does so for a fee, usually in bricks of pressed tea leaves, especially aged puerh.

The Dark One

By Le Maxul

He finished shoveling the dirt, the bones and objects in the grave finally becoming visible. He picked up the coins covering the eyes, the kris held between the bony fists and whatever else had survived the passage of time, other than the bones themselves. Then, he began shoveling the dirt back on the grave site. Halfway through the shoveling, the wind howled somewhere in the distance, while the cries of animals echoed over each other beneath the night sky. Mist began to approach from the distance.

A few drops of cold sweat ran down his forehead and back. He dropped the shovel and quickly made his way out of the graveyard. He ran to the backside of a nearby hill as it began to rain, where he approached a mahogany tree. He glanced around a few times, scanning his surroundings as he kept biting his nails. In the next moment, the shadow of the tree seemed to shift, as a cloaked figure moved out of hiding. He released half a gasp, promptly covering his mouth with his hand.

"You're back… finally." the cloaked figure whispered. "I was beginning to worry, my good Perijon." the figure added with a grin, as they walked towards Perijon.

"Of course…" Perijon stuttered. "I told you, Love. I'm a professional of my word."

"Yes, yes, how could I forget…" Love added with a bit of laughter. "I presume you have what I asked for then," Love concluded, his expression turning grim as he drew a bag somewhere from among the folds of his cloak.

Perijon swallowed, nodded and began to pull various dirty objects from his belt and pockets, including a handful of coins, a kris, a small bell, a necklace and others. With trembling hands, he put the items in the bag, dropping a couple of them because of the trembling. At Love's fake cough, he dropped to his knees and started shifting his hands through the mud. "Love, you got a light?" he spoke. "Love?" he called again, looking up, but Love was nowhere to be seen.

Perijon rose to his feet, wet and dirty with mud. "Love!" he shouted one last time, as he looked around for a moment or two. The rain was turning into a storm. A few thunderbolts boomed in the distance, as thin fog began to climb the hill. Perijon began to run, dashing down the hill, running between trees in the dark of the night, when he hit a branch and fell, sliding down a wet muddy slope until he hit the base of another tree near the bottom. He grunted with pain as he stood back up, holding the left side of his chest. One leg was pierced by a thin branch. Perijon limped on down the hill.

Within a minute, Perijon was surrounded by the rain and fog. Thunder boomed from everywhere around him every few seconds. He kept stumbling on, when a dark silhouette moved between the trees. Perijon came to a stop as the silhouette darted from tree to tree, moving in a circle around Perijon, who moved around, trying to keep the silhouette in sight.

"Love!" he screamed. "Love! Is that you?" he shouted again, as the silhouette came forward from behind a tree again, only a couple of paces away from Perijon, revealing itself to be some kind of shadow, wielding a scythe of darkness. With preternatural agility, it danced around Perijon, spinning its scythe with one

hand while pointing directly at him with its shadowy finger. Perijon fell down, trying to speak but unable to make any sound. As he made an effort to stand, the shadow launched itself towards him.

It brought the tip of its scythe to Perijon's chest, carving it, as Perijon screamed in agony. His wounds were immediately turning a sickly black color, as did any blood that flowed out of his wounds. Tears ran out of Perijon's eyes as his consciousness faded.

Meanwhile, Love reached a wide, blackened tree. He climbed into the hole in its trunk and entered the cave beneath. Walking for a couple of minutes, he reached the other end of the cave, exiting into a dry, rocky desert. An eclipse was hanging in the sky, surrounded by dusty brown-gray clouds, emitting a wide but faint beam of light towards the ground.

Love took the hood off his head and pointy ears and began to walk forward, descending a slope towards a craggy valley. A couple of minutes later, the cry of some animal echoed from behind a rock nearby. Love looked in that direction and walked towards the rock. As Love reached it, a tiny catbear, wearing a long robe-like shirt, walked forward.

"Nyaw! Hello Love!" it growled softly.

"Nice to see you." Love replied.

"Did you get any?" the catbear asked with an anticipating look, rubbing its upper paws against each other.

"I did." Love replied, producing the bag from his cloak again, causing the catbear to jump with excitement. "Show me!" it said.

Love opened the bag, turned it upside down and scattered the items between his feet and the catbear. In turn, the catbear began to sniff the items. "I let the collector go, as you instructed… But isn't he a loose end? He could expose me or someone else."

The catbear moved its paw left and right. "Nyah, don't worry. If you told him to get them from where I told you, then he'll be dead within a couple of nights."

"I see…" Love replied, raising an eyebrow.

Then, the catbear produced a magnifying glass from inside the sleeve of its shirt, promptly using it to examine the items. "Nyaw! Well done, Love!" the catbear said. "I can see the strands of their fate extending from these!" the critter spoke and laughed.

"The strands… of fate?" Love asked with a perplexed look.

"Yes, yes." the catbear replied, tucking the glass back in. "These items held personal value and were closely tied to their owners. Because they were buried with them, their strands transcend the barrier between life and death, so they can be used to steal their fate!" the catbear explained, as Love's eyes began to widen. "That way, they can be turned into fateless servants!" the catbear concluded, as it gathered the scattered items into its sleeve, except one.

The catbear pointed at the remaining item with its claw. "You can keep that one. Along with this." the catbear continued, pulling a scroll from its sleeve. "A gift for your troubles. I think you'll like it."

Love gathered the dropped item into a pocket, then he read the scroll. His lips curled into a wicked smile. "So that's why I get to keep one."

"Exciting, right? You must be quite satisfied, right?" The catbear said, moving around Love playfully.

"Quite," Love replied and tucked the scroll into an interior pocket. "If that's all, I'll…"

"One more thing." the catbear interrupted. "You're also invited to…" the catbear made a short pause. "...the planar laboratory!"

Love smirked. "Gladly. Will you guide me there?"

"I can't, nya! I have something I need to do first. But don't worry about me, I'll be right behind you. Just head towards the place where the eclipsed beam hits the ground!" the catbear instructed, as it pointed with a claw.

Love looked towards the light and nodded, as he began to walk away from the catbear and towards the beam. As Love walked away, the catbear pulled one of the objects from its sleeve. Thanks to the lingering magic of its magnifying glass, it could still see the strand of fate as a bright translucent strand. Then, it looked towards its other sleeve, another strand extending out of it and towards Love.

Nyehuehue!

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People in Richemulot whisper about the outlawed cult of the Dark One. In Dementlieu, faithful of the Dark One are exiled from the cities. In Souragne, they live near coasts, where they practice tribal worship of the Dark One. Some of them are hermits who practice necromancy.

In what is being perceived to be the "last few decades", word of this faith spreads around across the domains in the Mists. The faith is seen as many things across the various Domains: a rival faction, a political threat, a blasphemous and heretical cult, warlocks or witches, necromancers and more. Shunned by the authorities of every domain in which it appears, the Dark One's cult is never accepted. In some cases, the faithful become marginalized somehow, as happens with urban exiles in Dementlieu. In other cases, such as Richemulot, the cult is outlawed and participating in this faith is a crime punishable by death!

Just as authorities are quick to antagonize the cult, so are various religious organizations. Churches and rulers often share interests, after all. Most religious organizations have proclaimed the faith of the Dark One to be unholy and anathema to their own faith.

Origins

Even among the faithful themselves, almost nobody is sure when and where the cult first appeared. A handful of elder members, who have managed to survive for a long time, trace the first references to the faith to some faraway domain called L'Morai. Apparently, when the swallows of L'Morai began to leave the land, the cult began to spread around the neighboring domains.

A handful of other members claim that the faith of the Dark One is much older than its recent reappearance. They purport that the Dark One was once worshiped more widely, venerated along Ezra and Hala, when all three faiths were still relatively young. These cult members think that once the church of Ezra became the most prominent and popular of the three faiths, it began to antagonize the other two, proclaiming them anathema and hunting them down.

Sacred Symbols

The most typical holy symbol of the faith is a representation of an eclipse, showing a dark circle and a white circle overlapping. Accordingly, natural eclipses are venerated by the cult and considered a good omen. Mysteriously, the cult also considers coffea plants and catbears to be sacred. Rarely, the cult creates or discovers jet black murals, carvings or sculptures, which depict a tiny catbear shaking a coffea plant.

The cult also considers the number 9, question-marks and spirals to be runes of power or significance, although they don't view them as sacred.

Initiation and New Members

Most cultists become part of the faith once they meet someone from the cult, and are seduced by promises of eclipsed knowledge, necromantic secrets, or even understanding of fate itself.

Sometimes, a person may come across a forgotten article or ruin related to the faith, in a domain or area where the cult doesn't operate. Such a circumstance often happens near a solar eclipse. When such a person remains undiscovered long enough, they begin a cult, recruiting other people they deem appropriate.

Cult articles explain how to awaken one's inner powers, granting magical abilities. Many new cultists join simply for the chance to learn more about this awakening. Older members note that the awakening process involves many rituals and complicated gestures, some of which resemble Ezran and Halan ceremonies. A new member's awakening typically coincides with a solar eclipse.

A few cult records have fallen into the hands of various organizations such as the Church of the Lawgiver, or the Darkonese sect of Ezra's church. The Thankless Guild of interrogators in Richemulot has obtained some similar confessions from captured individuals, suspected to be cultists. Apparently new members aren't allowed to access all of the cult's articles and resources until they've witnessed their first eclipse, even if they manage to awaken their inner powers without one happening, which is very rare.

Goals

The cult's goals are poorly or not at all understood by their antagonists and most folk. From what rival organizations can tell, the cult is spreading its influence and "awakening" more people to "unholy powers". The rivals suspect that the cult is trying to appropriate necromancy, as any cultists fought by these organizations use magic, employing light, darkness, and undead creatures to aid them.

The cult's true goals are only known to members who have witnessed an eclipse. During an eclipse, a cult member may hear a voice in their head, or in a dream. Sometimes, they're instead visited by a catbear, who claims to speak on behalf of the Dark One.

Such individuals are typically granted a mission or pilgrimage. The quest usually involves reading about the dead and discovering resting sites, stealing from graves, growing coffea plants or creating magic items related to the plant. Many members are perplexed by the first quest they're granted, but most try to complete it nonetheless.

Secrets of the Faith

A completed quest usually reveals to the member one of the faith's darkest secrets. Elder members sometimes whisper that these secrets were once all collected together in a single article, called the *Equation of House*. However, no fragment of the cult has a complete copy of it.

The Eclipse

One such secret explains that the Dark One exists simultaneously anywhere where the sun and the moon can been seen in the sky at the same time. Therefore, he exists in every solar eclipse as well, which is said to be a manifestation of the Dark One's influence and power. The secret further details that the Dark One dwells in an unimaginable planar laboratory, which is able to appear anywhere the enigmatic being exists.

The first secret of the faith details that light and darkness are not exactly opposite forces, but the same type of energy, bent in different ways. Thanks to various supplementary knowledge provided alongside this secret, the member becomes able to magically produce light or shadows, or even mix them in seemingly impossible ways.

Most superstitious folk who witness light and dark bent into each other are uncannily terrified. They often end up spreading false gossip that the cult has usurped their light from the sun, stars or faraway celestial powers. The cult's rivals are always eager to spread this rumor further and use it as an excuse to further defame the cult. Depending on their dogma, rival churches may declare even eclipses themselves to be unnatural, or omens of woe or misfortune.

Members who understand this secret learn and can cast a spell called *cosmic fire* (see below). Some of them can also see without light, or through voids that sight can't normally pierce.

Cosmic Fire

5th level conjuration
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: 60 feet
Duration: Instant
Components: V, S
A spatial rift opens up in a location you specify, spitting out an otherworldly energy. Choose one of the following damage types: force, necrotic or radiant. Each creature in a 10-foot radius, 40-foot-high cylinder centered on a point within range must make a Dexterity saving throw. A creature takes 8d6 damage of the chosen type on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

At higher levels. When you cast this spell using a spell slot of 6th level or higher, the damage increases by 1d6 for each slot level above 5th.

In older editions. You can have the spell deal non-typed damage, 1d4 points of damage per caster level (max 15d4), have a range of short, or allow for a Reflex saving throw or saving throw vs spell.

Impossible Science

Some members, usually those who have managed more than one mission, are invited to the planar laboratory. Of those who enter the laboratory, only a minority return. Members who return claim to have witnessed and assisted with one of the Dark One's unbelievable experiments. Mentioned experiments include the stitching of flesh and organs, wondrous machines or automatons, weaving of invisible strands, bending light and darkness, or infusing bizarre abilities into ordinary beings via injections and lightning.

Any member who returns after an experiment is quick to attempt their own reproduction of it. Displaying a zealous thirst for knowledge and little restraint towards the pursuit of their scientific endeavors, they often attract unwanted attention. Rival churches who learn of asuch n experiment are shocked by any information they discover. Usually, they immediately declare the process to be an unholy practice, before they burn or seal away any information they've acquired. Other rivals, especially ones with scientific interests, may attempt to reproduce the experiment themselves, often leading to some unpredictable result or catastrophic accident.

Fateless Undead

Another secret promises that when certain conditions are met, the Dark One can sever the strands of fate of deceased individuals and tie them to his own, effectively stealing their fate and dominating their souls, making them fateless undead. A cultist who completes a quest may be taught this rare necromancy. As intelligent, ethereal or incorporeal undead are often more powerful than animated corpses and easier to manage, any necromancer who learns this secret covets the fate-bending power. Members who learn this secret shift their magical studies toward necromancy, occasionally dominating even the souls of dead cult members.

When members of rival organizations learn this secret - via interrogation, investigation or other means - they're quick to brand the process as a corruption of fate, and therefore anathema to their own conceptions of natural or divine order. However, they fear that should they expose this secret, they may drive a number of ambitious heretics towards the cult. For this reason, they keep this knowledge to themselves, only sharing it with individuals whose faith and loyalty is beyond question.

Members who understand this secret can conjure misty **shadows** instead of animating corpses or bones when they cast the *animate dead* spell, but each shadow counts as two controlled creatures. They can also use the *create undead* spell to conjure a **shadow** or **spectre**.

Coffee

Sometimes, a cultist's quest may simply involve stealing coffee seeds, cultivating coffea plants in a new area, manufacturing ground coffee, or even trading it. There is no request more perplexing to members of the cult, as the request is never explained. Even the oldest cult members can't comprehend the Dark One's obsession with the plant.

Because the cult's dealing with coffee are not understood by their rivals either, the ignorant rivals are quick to assume the worst about coffea plants. Some declare them to be forbidden, commanding that the plants and any of their products are confiscated or burned. Others are more rational in their ignorance and speculate that the plants are used to somehow produce poison or similar hazardous substances. These rivals conduct their own research and experiments on the plant, declaring that it is dangerous and must be confiscated, but not necessarily destroyed.

Members who understand this secret do not speak of it.

Cult Fragments

Dementlieu

Dementlieu is one of the few places where the authorities don't really care about the cult. The local sect of Ezra has proclaimed the cult dangerous and blasphemous, but doesn't have the power to actively persecute them. Instead, they've managed to pressure authorities into exiling cultists from the cities. Most exiles have gathered at a very remote Estate of the Enlightened Life, where they can live away from the bothersome eyes of Ezrites and Anchorites. After destroying any remaining inhabitants of the estate, the cultists cultivated the nearby land into farms, where they grow food and coffee. A handful of cultists still remain undiscovered in the cities, relaying information by whispering beneath the moon, or delivering messages via catbear familiars.

The estate dwellers are led by the disfigured "Grandfather" Hongiorno Folozi. Hongiorno's hair is spiny and his body includes numerous scales with spiny hair. His left limbs are right limbs, and the positions of his left leg and right arm are reversed. In addition, his right eye and ear have sprouted smaller versions of themselves, growing in a row of gradually smaller copies that reaches the backside of his head. Hongiorno uses a wheelchair most of the time, often moved around by a subordinate, although he can walk on his own with a special long cane, albeit slowly.

Hongiorno claims that he hails from L'Morai, and that he's one of the original cultists that the Dark One brought under his service. He claims to have left the domain a few decades ago, when the swallows started to leave L'Morai, just as the Dark One had said.

Hongiorno tries to cultivate family-like bonds in the estate-dwellers, calling them siblings, children or grandchildren. He believes a sense of familiar unity is very important among the estate-dwellers, as the cult needs many capable hands to work the land. And yet, the cult members can have their differences, sometimes resulting in violence or death. Considering every member somewhat irreplaceable, Hongiorno creates some fateless undead creature out of every dweller who dies.

Hongiorno is a (9th level) bard, cleric or warlock. He is a human freak, whose only movement option is to crawl with a mere speed of 5 feet. With his cane, his speed increases to 15 feet. His ability scores are as follows: STR 9, DEX 8, CON 16, INT 12, WIS 16, CHA 16. He has learned the secrets of the Eclipse and Fateless Undead. He rarely carries a weapon.

Dread Possibility - Conflicting Truths

There's a hospice near the estate grounds, ran by Halan witches. Hongiorno considers them somewhat useful neighbors, until he learns that the witches believe that the Dark One, Ezra and Hala were once worshiped together, and they want to re-establish this faith. Hongiorno considers their belief false and decides that the witches are dangerous. He orders cult members to burn the hospice down and eliminate the witches, but the cultists he sends convert to the witches' side, creating a division in the cult instead, which leads to further conflict between cult members, just as Hongiorno feared.

Adventure Hook - Two Truths, One Lie

Building on the above Dread Possibility, the witches of the hospice aren't devotees of Hala, but hags who are trying to expand their coven by tricking individuals into their circle, disguising their rituals as Halan ceremonies. They use illusions to disguise themselves as humans. Hongiorno sends a group of cultists to the hospice, but they never return, prompting Hongiorno to send another group to investigate, which includes the player characters.

When they arrive, the characters will notice that their fellow cultists are fine, getting along with the witches. The hags will attempt to entice the characters into staying with them and accepting their faith, aided by the cultists already there. While they're there, the hags will try to trick the characters, to get them to participate in rituals that will place enchantments on their minds, with little chance of them realizing.

The characters must not only realize what's happening, but they must also convince the other cultists that the witches are hags or enemies, or they risk being attacked by them as well.

The cultists laying low in Port-a-Lucine have no official leader, but their efforts are somewhat coordinated by Lasarina Crook. Lasarina used to be a pirate, until she witnessed the sun's reflection on the sea as an eclipse; on that day, she first heard the whispers of the Dark One. Now, Lasarina coordinates the cult to work with smugglers who operate in the port, to receive or sell smuggled substances, including coffee and occult supplies. A few of the smugglers' dealings take place in the Red Widow Theater. Lasarina takes great care to keep her existence and position secret, even from other cult members, so that they can't expose her even if tortured or blackmailed. To communicate, she typically uses familiars to deliver messages. Lasarina and the cultists have managed to avoid capture so far, although an unfortunate cultist is killed every so often by the Red Death.

Lasarina runs a café-restaurant on the fringes of the Philosopher's Promenade, called Sometime's Star. She also lives in it. Lasarina only hires non-cultists to work there, who she drives hard to maintain the tapestries that hide cracks in the building's walls.

Lasarina is a dual-classed/multi-classed human with 2 levels of rogue, and the rest of her (6) levels are in wizard. Her ability scores are as follows: STR 10, DEX 16, CON 13, INT 14, WIS 9, CHA 14. She carries at least one hidden dagger on her at all times; often she carries more. Whenever she leaves Sometime's Star (a very rare occasion), she also carries a *potion of invisibility*.

Dread Possibility - Stolen Bodies

Lasarina bribes people from Zuvich Hospital to help her acquire corpse parts, which she rarely stitches together into undead servants. Tired of mindless zombies and the like, Lasarina manages to create a multi-limbed abomination, but the creature is rather passive. Dissatisfied, Lasarina attempts to compel a fateless spirit to possess her creation. However, she accidentally conjures a red shadow instead, which

possesses the creature. The creature begins attacking Lasarina, and although she may escape it (or not), the creature begins to stalk the streets and docks at night, looking for more members of the cult or smugglers working with them. If a citizen is accused of worshiping the Dark One, the creature tries to get to them before they're found, arrested or condemned. The bodies of attacked victims are never found, as the creature either consumes them, or uses them to grow its body further.

Adventure Hook - Trouble in a Bottle

The player characters are newly recruited cultists or cult associates, who participate in Lasarina's smuggling endeavors. Their operations go smoothly, until Lasarina delivers a message ordering them to infiltrate the d'Honaires' ball and steal a magical golden bottle from another attendant. The letter mentions that if they can't infiltrate the ball one their own, they should seek aid from three hags who live in the Three Odd Gables near the end of Mill Road. Finally, the letter warns the characters that if they reject or fail this mission, they'll be exposed to some authority and will face far worse consequences than exile.

The characters will have to use their wits, disguise and deception to enter the prestigious ball. There, the situation becomes more complicated, as the "noble" attendant is careless and revealed to be wearing torn clothes. Promptly, the attendant is turned to dust, while their possessions are taken by guards somewhere inside the estate.

If the characters manage to get the bottle out of the estate, Lasarina delivers another letter, instructing the characters to sell the bottle to a specific person at the docks. However, the disappearance of the bottle is public news by now, so the governor has the city guard looking for it. The governor also publicly hires Alanik Ray to aid the watch in their search. So long as the bottle remains in their possession, the characters are hunted by red shadows each night.

Dread Possibility - Scientific Misconduct

Hongiorno has heard about the *Madrigorian* and the "unbelievable device" it's said to describe. Through familiars, he stays in contact with Lasarina, urging her to find any information she can on it in Port-a-Lucine. Lasarina has met either Francois de Penible or Louise Chantelle in Sometime's Star; using enchanted coffee, she has managed to get some information, but her findings are rather incomplete. She's also afraid of sending cultists after aristocrats. Regardless, she sends messages to Hongiorno, filling some blanks with false information. Unable to contain their thirst for the machine, both Hongiorno and Lasarina have begun constructing their own versions of the machine, but the mistakes they've made and ignored would spell disastrous consequences if either machine is completed.

There is only one cultist remaining in Chateaufaux, called Gilzel D'Guini. Cut off from the rest of Dementlieu because of Chateaufaux's illusions and false mists, Gilzel only hears news of the cult from time to time. Meanwhile, he runs a low-profile grinding workshop, turning dry plants and seeds to powder or dust before selling them. Unknown to Gilzel, the latest messages that he has been receiving aren't from the cult, but from fiends who are living in Chateaufaux, posing as humans.

Gilzel is a (6th level) warlock or wizard. His ability scores are as follows: STR 11, DEX 12, CON 13, INT 12, WIS 13, CHA 13. He rarely carries any weapons.

Dread Possibility - Seeing is Being Tricked

According to a message from "Grandfather" Hongiorno, Gilzel is to leave Chateaufaux when the next eclipse happens. The disguised fiends in Chateaufaux were trapped there by a mage long ago. The mage's spell prevents the fiends from leaving Chateaufaux unless a mortal guides them, or they follow one beyond its boundary.

The fiends have attempted to trick various individuals into leaving the area, but none has managed to escape Chateaufaux so far. The desperate fiends believe that Gilzel might be able to do it. The fiends are uncertain about how powerful Gilzel is; they've learned not to understimate magic-users the hard way, so they don't dare attack or threaten him. Instead, they've attempted to trick Gilzel with false messages from other cultists, claiming some dire circumstance that necessitates his presence. For now, Gilzel remains skeptical of such messages. However, the fiends have devised a new plan as of late. They're preparing a magical ritual, one that will allow them to project an illusion of an eclipse on either the sun or moon. They hope that once Gilzel is tricked by the fake eclipse, he'll guide them to Port-a-Lucine or the cult's estate. The fiends plan to infiltrate the cult once there and slowly take control of it.

L'Morai

A few cultists are hidden among the outcasts of L'Morai, where the swallows are disappearing. As the outcast entertainers increase in population, they begin to congregate into small carnivals, so recruiting becomes gradually easier. The seniors of this fragment instruct their recruits to remain inconspicuous, explaining that the Dark One has promised to arrive in L'Morai when the final swallows have disappeared from the land, and the outcasts will gather into a single carnival again.

The authorities of the city of L'Morai have heard next to nothing about the cult. They have a vague idea about "some new fairy tales" being popular among the freaks. If the authorities were to learn of the cult's true nature, especially their enmity towards the city, the authorities would immediately mobilize their undead army to capture the freaks and interrogate them, leading to a probably chaotic attack.

Cultists hiding among the outcast carnivals beyond the Black Heath aren't led by a specific member, but there are two respected members among them.

One such member is Keeborn the Whacker, although he's told other cultists that the name Keeborn is an alias, and that his real name is Amvros. Amvros is a very tall individual with stocky hands, but his legs have fused into a massive, twisted tail. Amvros moves around by slithering slowly on his twisted tail, although he can move faster than a normal person if he also uses his hands to move.

As Keeborn, he's a smith and carpenter, who builds mallets, rods and other objects for the performances of his recruits.

Amvros claims to be an extremely old outcast and one of the original cultists that the Dark One brought under his service. He claims to have stayed back in L'Morai when the swallows began to leave the land because the Dark One instructed him to, unlike other cultists. Decades later, almost every swallow has disappeared, so Amvros fervently believes that the Dark One will keep his promise and soon arrive in L'Morai.

Amvros might be better used with monster stats, rather than class levels, but he always has the spellcasting ability of a (9th level) cleric, warlock or wizard. He also has all the 1st and 2nd level class features of the artificer class. He is a human freak with a speed of 10 feet, but when he's holding nothing in his hands, his speed increases to 40 feet. His ability scores are as follows: STR 9, DEX 8, CON 16, INT 12, WIS 16, CHA 16. He has learned the secret of the Eclipse. He always carries a large axe or hammer, along with a few throwing axes or hammers. Amvros is proficient with axes and hammers regardless of his class.

If the Mnemonic Schism dread possibility is in play, Amvros can make two attacks instead of one.

Dread Possibility - Mnemonic Schism

Amvros is a freak who rose long ago to become the puppetmaster and managed to return to the city of L'Morai. Once, Amvros was called Trajon the Tall; he began as a wrestler and racer. Once he returned to the city, Trajon rose to become one of the necromancers that command the city's undead troops. He was eventually spoken of as Trajon the Terrifying.

Eventually, he attempted a coup of the city, trying to claim power and the Statutes of l'Morai for himself. His supporters and his loyalist enemies were about equal in number, leading to a civil war. The streets were crawling with undead soldiers, assassins prowled on the rooftops, and the rituals of necromancers echoed every night. Eventually, the balance of the conflict tipped against Trajon when even neutral citizens turned against him, blaming him for the unrest. Eventually, Trajon's supporters were defeated; most of them were killed, while Trajon was captured. He was judged guilty once again by the Statutes of l'Morai. His body was Twisted a second time and he lost his memory of the past.

Through misty-colored dreams, Amvros has seen the memories of his past as Trajon, including the memories of his trial and punishment. Whenever he thinks about it, he sees the word "truth" uncannily written somewhere nearby.

Amvros believes that the Dark One has a pact with some celestial force associated with amber. He believes that the two are planning the destruction of the city. Driven mad by his conflicting memories, Amvros begins to forget about his cult allegiances. Instead, he schemes to take advantage of the attack to take over the city for himself, even if he has to turn his fellow outcasts and cultists against each other.

Another respected member among the outcast cultists is Marie. Her long hair appears to have once been pure black, but now much of it has turned gray-white, with a mysterious tint of red. She wears glasses with dark lenses, with long and wide cloth straps tied to them and meeting on the back of her head. Marie always wears a scarf or other neck-piece. Marie wears a long, robe-like coat made of multiple kinds of patches. She hides multiple knives and a boomerang on the inner side of her coat.

Usually, Marie performs acrobatic tricks or dart-throwing. She rarely talks during her performances. Marie's barker, Genris, is a recruit in the cult. He usually tries to hype up her performances with shouts and whistles.

Using her clothing and long hairstyle, Marie conceals the irregularities of her body: she has two faces and a twisted neck.

One face, the face she usually presents, is a normally solemn, aged face. Her eyes in that face are blind. Her other face, usually concealed beneath her hair and straps, appears younger, but is still wrinkled and inhuman; she has no nose on that face, only nostrils. She only has one eye on her second face, right on her forehead, with an eclipse-like iris and no pupil, like a dark blue moon eclipsing a red sun. Marie can see through this eye normally, but she rarely unveils or opens it. Marie's other senses are extremely heightened, allowing her to deal with opponents at a moderate distance.

Her twisted neck, usually hidden beneath a wide, opaque neck-piece, appears to have been twisted 360-degrees. Beneath the same neck-piece, Marie also wears a small pendant, which resembles two eyes, each crying a tear. One tear is a ruby droplet, the other one is a sapphire.

Marie rarely concerns herself with recruiting or promoting the cult's dogma among new recruits. She never talks about her past, either. Instead, she's respected among cultists because of the intense hatred she displays towards the city of L'Morai; a

hatred shared by most of the cultists. During the cult's hidden oratories, she presents them as unjust tyrants, unholy slavers, oppressors, thieves of bones and much more. Although she doesn't talk about her past, it's evident something has happened to her concerning the city or its citizens.

Marie has shared with the cultists that the Dark One spoke of his return. He promised to return when the last swallows left L'Morai. Marie has shared her belief that the Dark One works with a celestial force, planning for the destruction of the city. Many cultists anticipate the Dark One's return.

Marie might be better used with monster stats, rather than class levels, but she always has the spellcasting ability of a (9th level) cleric, sorcerer or warlock. She also has all the (1st-to-9th level) class features of the bard class. She is a human freak with blindsight out to 60 feet. Her ability scores are as follows: STR 13, DEX 19, CON 19, INT 13, WIS 9, CHA 19. She has learned the secrets of the Eclipse and Fateless Undead. She always carries multiple hidden daggers and a boomerang, and can scavenge other thrown weapons too if necessary. Marie is always proficient in these weapons, and with them she can make three attacks instead of one.

Dread Possibility - Absolute Vengeance

Marie hates the city for many reasons, including Twisting her body, erasing her memory, exiling her, forcing her into service, killing her friends and ultimately leading to her own death as well. However, she awoke again one day, pale and weakened, beneath a constellation that resembles the pendant she now wears. Two voices beckoned her to rise and stand once more. On that night, Marie first heard the Dark One and the celestial force of Tears, who had animated her once more, imbued with an inferno of hatred towards the citizen of L'Morai and an abyssal thirst for vengeance.

Her bottomless desire for vengeance doesn't end at just destroying the city. She doesn't plan to destroy everything, either. Instead, she plans to use her cultist allies to inflict as much suffering as possible, then obtain the Statutes of l'Morai and use them to reverse the situation between the citizens and the freaks. Effectively, she aims to enslave anyone who survives the attack and force them to work for the once-outcasts.

Adventure Hook - Attack on L'Morai

The characters are citizens of L'Morai, living their lives in the city, the black guard of L'Morai keeping the order as always. Every now and then, the citizens visit the freakshows beyond the Black Heath to enjoy games or make fun of the freaks.

Everything changed one night, when a great amber star fell from the sky, hitting the gate of L'Morai and causing a massive explosion. Everything in the area was demolished, including the gate and much of the wall. Every guard and citizen in close proximity died instantly. A short time after that, the citizens noticed multiple lights crossing the Black Heath and approaching. Very soon, the city was invaded by a horde of bloodthirsty freaks, wielding burning weapons coated in amber and ruby flames.

Since then, about half the city has been captured by the invaders; a number of buildings have been set on fire, and people have been burned on the captured streets. The black guard has suffered heavy losses. The guard informed the citizens that the invaders aim to kill everyone and burn the entire city to the ground. Since then, Maegant (a high ranking mage among the black guard) Charhodon D'Ules has been leading a conscription effort to strengthen the diminished guard.

Although the characters weren't killed, they've lost homes, loved ones and property to the explosion and invaders. Their misfortune may have urged them to join Maegant Natalos' conscription for the black guard, to fight against the invaders. As part of the guard, the characters witness various horrors, such as the undead soldiers of the black guard, or the

atrocities committed by the invaders. Slowly, they see the sins of both sides and come to realize that the entire conflict could be resolved if the Statutes of l'Morai were destroyed. But there are many who would rather see everyone killed instead.

The adventure can have many twists, especially if you decide to include the Dread Possibilities for L'Morai.

Richemulot

Considered outlaws to be executed, the faithful of the Dark One take extra careful steps to avoid being discovered in this rat-plagued domain. Often, they infiltrate any heretical sect of an already existing religion, such as the many heretical groups in the House of Sages, planning to corrupt the heretics into adopting the faith of the Dark One alongside their own. The cultists' activities have angered various groups, including the Renier family and other aristocrats, the churches of Ezra and the Rat King, certain academics and more.

The cultists in Richemulot are led by Seraphine Yudini in the House of Sages, a heretical astrologer who worships not only the Dark One, but also both Ezra and Hala. Her leadership cultivates interest in all three faiths among the cultists and heretics, although various members favor one faith over the others, leading to various degrees of discord, and occasionally violent conflict.

Seraphine is a (9th level) warlock (or cleric or wizard). She's a human. Her ability scores are as follows: STR 9, DEX 13, CON 11, INT 13, WIS 12, CHA 18. She has learned the secret of Fateless Undead. The only weapon she ever carries is a ceremonial dagger.

Souragne

The cultists of the Dark One are feared and shunned in this domain's cities, so they often gather and create smaller tribal settlements and outposts, almost always near a coast. In these settlements, the faithful combine tribal and voodoo elements in their worship. Their catbears are adept swimmers and they're often more feral, too. Cultists in this area prefer to create undead servants out of aquatic animals, or even intelligent aquatic creatures, instead of humanoids.

Dread Possibility - The Villain Within

The Sanctuary of Simple Souls in the House of Sages conducts séances every now and then. Seraphine likes to attend these séances, but during a certain séance something went wrong. Perhaps a spirit was angered, perhaps someone made a mistake during the ritual, perhaps a wrong book was used for instructions (such as the *Revelations of the Prince of Twilight*). Regardless, every attendant of the séance ended up possessed by some malevolent spirit.

Seraphine was possessed by the ghost of a mist-lost dragon, the most powerful of the possessing apparitions. The dragon ghost had forgotten their original name centuries ago, but they have recently been using the name Truleethixz. The ghost now rides Seraphine's body around, plotting with the rest of the possessing creatures on how to trick the entire House of Sages and the cult, so that everyone will end up possessed. Trueleethixz is able to use their breath weapon(s) and frightful presence through Seraphine's body. They also have access to Seraphine's magic and some of their own.

Truleethixz instructs the cult to stray from their search for inner power and quest for knowledge. Instead, Truleethixz urges them towards meditation and communion with the beyond, hoping to lead them to participate in the activities of the Sanctuary of Simple Souls without being too forceful.

Truleethixz dreads clerics, sacred symbols and other effects that can reverse possession. Truleethixz and the other possessing conspirators dread rumors about a certain *bell of warding*, said to be in a manor that sometimes appears in the Sauvage Peaks through the Mists.

The cultists in Souragne include many non-human numbers, including a number of humanoid-beast shifters such as lycanthropes, paka, red widows and similar creatures. There are also some draconians and strigoi among them.

The tribal cultists are very successful in cultivating coffea plants, even on the coast. Rarely, the cultists work with a smuggler or shady trader from a settlement in the east, selling ground coffee for items that are rare in the swamp.

The cultists are very wary of outsiders, who they fear may be spies of Anton Misroi, or inquisitors from the churches of Ezra or Saraei. Both Misroi and the churches have attacked some settlements they discovered, with most attacks being repelled by the inhabitants with the aid of the coven (see below). The cult's rivals have managed victories against a few outposts, capturing or driving away the inhabitants, and burning their plantations. The burning of their sacred plant intensifies the cultists' hatred for Misroi and the churches.

The tribal cultists are led by a crone called Ganymu the Wise, who often moves unseen from settlement to settlement. Ganymu has long curved nails and yellow eyes with slit-like pupils, that turn into eclipse-like irises during nighttime. She's said to have once been a paka, who managed to become an immortal hag after experimenting with various types of forbidden magics. Most shifters and witches in the settlements consider her a role model or outright envy her. Ganymu has chosen a single witch from each settlement as her apprentice, who act in her stead when Ganymu is missing. A number of witches have been punished, even killed, when Ganymu deems they made mistakes or defied her will.

Since the settlements are scattered around central and western Souragne, Ganymu has had to parley with two other, similarly skilled hags, both of whom dominate some other group in the swamps. As the three hags had some overlapping interests, they decided on a tribal treaty of non-aggression and formed a coven. Every so often, the three hags meet on one of the coasts that surround the Maiden's Island.

Ganymu can have stats similar to a night hag, but she also has the spellcasting ability of a (9th level) druid or warlock. She has learned the secrets of the Eclipse and Fateless Undead.

Dread Possibility - Three equals One

Long ago, Ganymu was tutored by the Maiden of the Swamp. The dryad wanted to help the paka witch grow in power and wisdom, so that someone would be able to challenge and contain Misroi's rule of Souragne. Unfortunately, the dryad sensed that the more secrets Ganymu learned, the more like Misroi she became. Disappointed, the dryad exiled Ganymu from the isle, warding its very ground so that Ganymu can't ever step on it again.

There are no other hags and coven. Instead, Ganymu is the ruler of three different groups; the cult, a group of nomadic humans who are also cannibals, and a group of spirit naga who are worshiped by some draconians. Of course, Ganymu hides this truth from every group. She doesn't care much about the cult, she only wants it and the other groups to serve her in a collective effort against Misroi's minions and the religious zealots of the churches. She hopes that one day, her groups will be able to wrestle away Misroi's control of the realm, but also that her servants will be fragmented enough to never consider overthrowing her.

Misroi is outraged at the cannibals, who constantly break his laws protecting corpses. He and the churches are also worried because of the frequent sighting of "magic-using" skeletal snakes. Misroi has realized that they are spirit naga, although the churches are ignorant of the nagas' true nature.

Adventure Hook - Rivers Run Red

An all-out war breaks out in the swamp, with Misroi's minions and church inquisitors on one side, and the coven's minions on the other one. The swamp is no longer safe for anyone, not fishermen, not workers, not even armed warriors and guards. Even some draconians have started moving toward the mainland.

Player characters can participate in this war on either side, but more interestingly, they can start as stragglers who are just trying to survive as they're caught between the two sides. They could be looking to escape, or fight for their home. However, if they're successful against their aggressors, they might give them just the incentive to cooperate against the characters!

Magic Items

The following magic items are associated with the cult of the Dark One. Many high-ranking cult members know how to sew a *sleeping catbears stuffy*, scribe *eclipse-depicting scrolls* or *spell scrolls* of *cosmic fire*, but almost none knows how to create *Dark One's figurines*, which are extremely rare even within the cult.

Dark One's Figurine

This onyx figurine is a rare wondrous item (CL9, strong Evocation and Necromancy). It's about the size of a medium creature's palm. It resembles a jet-black catbear, shaking a coffea plant. While a creature holds the dark one's figurine, it can use it as a focus for its spells, allowing them to cast spells with somatic and material components as if that hand was otherwise free. When the creature casts a necromancy spell, it can substitute the figurine for any costly material component that is worth up to 300 gold pieces. It can see in dim light and darkness (both magical and non-magical) to a distance of 60 feet. Finally, undead creatures within 30 feet of the creature cannot be turned.

Eclipse-Depicting Scroll

This rare black scroll (CL9, strong Abjuration) depicts an eclipse in the center of its writing. When you use an (standard) action to read the scroll, you gain resistance to necrotic and radiant damage for 1 hour (or you take half damage from damaging light and darkness effects such as *sunbeam* or *slashing darkness*). The scroll then disintegrates into shadowy motes.

Sleeping Catbears Stuffy

This couple of stuffed toys has been sewn together. It is an uncommon wondrous item (CL6, moderate Enchantment). The toys resemble tiny catbears and always feel soft when touched. You can snuggle with the stuffy to cast *catnap*, except it only affects you and no other creatures. Once this property has been used, it can't be used again until the next dawn.

In older editions: instead of casting *catnap*, you can take a nap for 1 hour, holding the stuffy during that time. When your nap is complete, you regain hit points equal to your level/HD.

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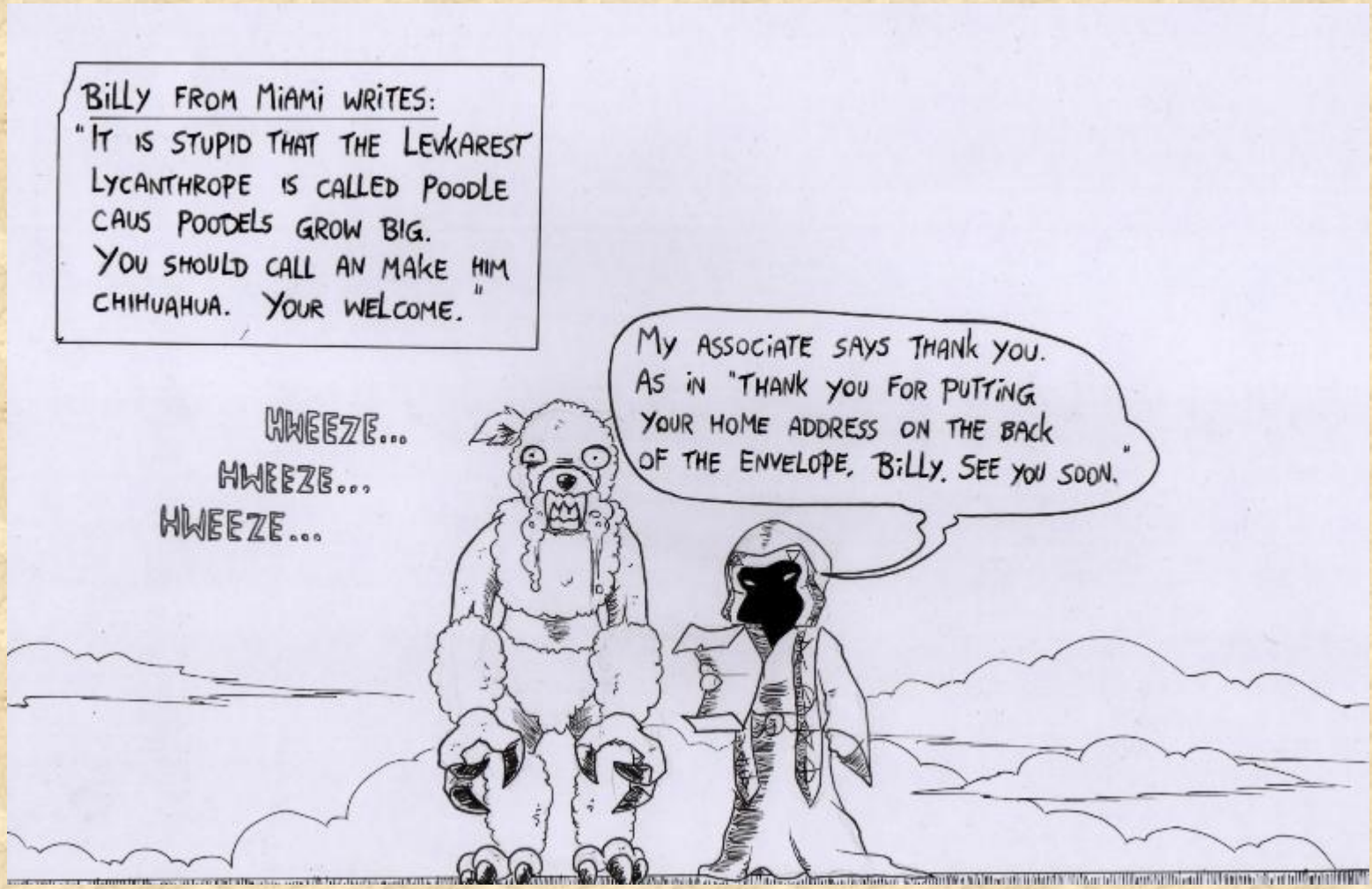
BILLY FROM MIAMI WRITES:
"IT IS STUPID THAT THE LEVKAREST LYCANTHROPE IS CALLED POODLE CAUS POODELS GROW BIG. YOU SHOULD CALL AN MAKE HIM CHIHUAHUA. YOUR WELCOME."
HWEEZE...
HWEEZE...
HWEEZE...
MY ASSOCIATE SAYS THANK YOU. AS IN "THANK YOU FOR PUTTING YOUR HOME ADDRESS ON THE BACK OF THE ENVELOPE, BILLY. SEE YOU SOON."

The Bright Triad

By Jeremy16 (aka Jeremy Roby)

Introduction

My name is Gilles Gaultier, a correspondent for the Chateaufaux Intelligencer. It is my desire to introduce to you, my esteemed readers, a most unique group of adventurers whose myriad exploits are nothing short of amazing, but have nevertheless managed to keep their names out of the spotlight for years. Indeed, if it were not for a fortuitous encounter (and subsequent information I gleaned from an anonymous informant), I would still be ignorant of this secret society and their activities even now.

Goals

Ostensibly, the Bright Triad is a group of heroes who have banded together to fight evil wherever it is encountered within the Demiplane. The name is a bit of a misnomer, however. (Or rather, as some attest, it is a deliberate subterfuge to confuse its many enemies.) It has many more than the three members its moniker suggests. When pressed about the appellation, my anonymous source reveals that in actuality it stands for the organization's three core values - Truth, Wisdom, and Justice.

While the group functions in many ways like a secret society, there are a few key differences. First, most members do not act in secret or attempt to hide their activities; rather, they freely tout their accomplishments and actively seek to be good examples to others. (They do not, however, ever advertise the group's existence or mention their membership within it.) Second, it is not really a team in the traditional sense. There is no fixed roster and no single leader. It operates more like a non-team, with members coming and going as they please. Indeed, no one is required to join any joint endeavor unless they wish to. And once such impromptu collaborations are complete, each member is free to return to their own life and pursue their own objectives.

Why would such heroes band together at all, if their relationship to the group as a whole is so tenuous? I am told that some find it convenient to have tried-and-true, battle-tested companions within arm's reach. Others are more than willing to throw themselves into harm's way to test their mettle and prove their worthiness (or perhaps their superiority) to their peers. Some are drawn to the high-minded goals championed by the organization. And still others are just plain lonely; the path of the righteous in Ravenloft is often a solitary one, and any chance to gather with sympathetic comrades is a welcome respite.

Background

The group's origin, as is common for these types of things, is shrouded in mystery. While no member tells the same story twice, I have managed to boil down the so-called “founding legend” into the following narrative:

A long time ago two wizards – one good and one evil - were locked in a great struggle. During their penultimate bout, the evil wizard, named Faust, left the good wizard for dead and moved forward with his plans to take over the world. The good wizard, named Magnus, managed through sheer strength of will to survive the encounter, but was grievously injured. While he recovered from this ignominious defeat, Magnus returned to the novel idea – which

in his hubris he had previously dismissed – of bringing together a group of powerful allies to aid him in his war.

Much like it is now, every man for himself was the prevailing attitude in those days, and it was rare to find anyone willing to risk their life for a noble cause. While Magnus' search for compatriots took some time, he eventually found three other great champions willing to heed his call – Bastion, a righteous and noble cleric, Striker, a brave and mighty fighter, and Raider, a stealthy and cunning rogue. Each individual's personality was so strong, however, that Magnus had to use all of his wizardly wiles to keep them united against their common enemy. With everyone's combined might, Faust was eventually defeated, but not before the evil wizard cursed his counterpart with his dying breath. (The power of this curse would be made clear only in time.)

While Magnus had learned a lesson in humility from this entire experience, his companions did not. After Faust's threat was over, they saw no reason to continue their alliance. When the wizard suggested they team up permanently to repair the damage that the evil wizard had done to their world, they refused. Magnus did not let that initial setback stop him from gathering more allies to work together, but Faust's dying curse struck again and again. Every group he established dissolved into petty squabbling and bitter recriminations within a year.

Eventually Magnus struck upon yet another novel idea – this time as a work-around to his nemesis' final words. Instead of wasting time and energy by forming a small group of trustworthy companions, he would create a large network of adventurers loyal to a set of ideals instead of to each other. He reasoned that if such a group became big enough, their combined chances of effecting positive change in the world would be all the greater.

It was Magnus who crafted the first cache of Farspeaking Amulets that the society's members carry even to this day (presumably having passed the secret of their creation on to his disciples and heirs). And in turn, each individual carries on the good wizard's mission to recruit exceptional individuals in order to increase the group's ranks.

As you can see, such a story is maddeningly short on detail. I could find no reference to time or place in any of the versions I was told. I can't even be sure that the names of each individual mentioned is their first or last. And their personalities, as presented, are so generic as to be ciphers. It's possible that this tale relates a real incident during Darkon's Arcane Age. It is also possible that all these events occurred on one of those infamous Outlander worlds that one hears tell of.

Dread Possibility: The Continuing Curse

The veracity of the group's origin story is left up to the DM's discretion, but the curse it mentions is all too real. While Faust's last words are not recorded, his dying curse has manifested in two distinct ways. The first aspect materialized in the rapidly changing roster and impermanent alliances that constantly formed and broke up, which plagued Magnus for the rest of his years and continues to this day.

The second, and more sinister, manifestation is that anyone who accepts membership within the Bright Triad gains a nemesis – a lifelong antagonist obsessed with thwarting that particular individual and who returns again and again to disrupt their goals. Each nemesis is uniquely suited to serve as a persistent foil to each hero and they usually have some tie to that hero's background. Some longtime members, believe it or not, even have more than one!

This facet of Faust's dying curse serves as a perpetual thorn in the side of the Bright Triad. No matter how hard each member tries to help others, their nemesis always counteracts their efforts in some way. Or else their nemesis occupies all of their attention and leaves no time for the member to perform any other good deeds. This explains why, even though this

secret society dedicated to effecting positive change has been around for years, they have had so little impact on the Demiplane of Dread. Those Darklords that are aware of its existence rarely waste resources to attack it.

MEMBERS

While many members may have extraordinary abilities, one does not have to have any special power to join this group. Anyone with an unwavering desire to make the world a better place (in whatever form that may take) is welcome. It is important to remember, however, that in the Demiplane of Dread it is often considered a suicide mission to confront the forces of evil; there are few souls brave or foolhardy enough to accept such a call when it is presented.

The only way to become a member is to be invited, or sponsored, by someone who is already a member. Each member has one Farspeaking Amulet that they are usually granted (see below for exceptions) during a short initiation ceremony. Henceforth, they always carry it on their person.

The main purpose of these amulets is to facilitate communication among the group's widespread membership. The way it works is simple. Anyone who wishes to call upon a colleague (i.e. the sender) needs only to touch their amulet and speak of the name of whoever they wish to contact. The person they call upon (i.e. the receiver) will then be notified of this request by a pulse of energy emanating from their own amulet. This sensation has alternatively been described as a slight vibrating or a warming sensation. If the “call” is accepted, then the sender and receiver are able to hold a telepathic conversation as if they were standing next to each other. I'm told the mental energy needed to maintain this type of contact is quite draining, however, and most members only use it to set up a time and a place where they can meet and converse in a more normal fashion.

Members can also use this amulet to pass on membership to an individual of their own choosing, foregoing the initiation process altogether. Some heroes give their amulet away to a trusted colleague when they wish to retire from adventuring, while others only relinquish it to a chosen heir upon their deathbed. Others simply ask a prospective member if they wish to join; and if they they assent, they are then escorted to the society's de facto headquarters in Aerie and are presented with a Farspeaking Amulet of their own.

As you can see, it is left up to each individual to screen potential recruits. And while this method of procurement seems laughably easy to infiltrate by those with evil intent, it is not as simple as all that. In order to be extended such a rare offer, one must prove their valor in the face of danger and willingness to help others time and time again. (My confidential informant even posits that each amulet has a failsafe which makes it stop working if wielded by beings of evil alignment.)

Many legendary figures have been rumored to be a part of the Bright Triad throughout the years. There is Janna Appleblossom, who operated out of Sithicus and is celebrated as a folk hero throughout the Southern Core. The people's champion, the Ruby Knight of Nidala, is also said to be aligned with the group. Even the mysterious Papa Bokor, the grim Voodan from Souragne, and the infamous pirate Captain Askleipkos, whose ship plagues the Nocturnal Sea, both seem to fit the profile as well. Some scholars posit that the dreadful figure known only as the Sin-Eater, whose mere existence is only hinted at in whispers, can even claim membership.

RECOGNITION

While the organization does not take great pains to keep its existence a secret, not every member is able to immediately recognize their fellows. Remember, there is no official roster, and in reality, each adventurer is only familiar with those they team up with on a regular basis. Indeed, I'm not sure if any one person even knows who all the members are.

Thus, it is imperative for members to quickly and easily identify each other when they meet in the field.

Two methods of recognition have been revealed to me, but there are no doubt several other options that I have not been made privy of.

The first is by the Farspeaking Amulet that each member carries. It should be noted, however, that not all members display this item out in the open. While it is true that each individual keeps it on their person, it is not always worn around the neck. Some choose to modify it by wearing it on a ring, bracelet, earring, or even a belt buckle! Other hide it completely by securing it within their clothing (such as a boot or cloak) lest such ostentatious jewelry draw unwanted attention.

The second way is by the exchange of a simple sign and counter-sign. If a member meets up with someone who they believe may be a part of the society, they will bring the conversation around to current events and casually say, "Trouble often comes in threes..." The proper response to this is, "...And so does the cure." If this call and response is completely correctly, they have connected up with a new, ready-made ally. If not, they may just have found a new prospective member!

HEADQUARTERS

While this group has no true headquarters, the city of Aerie, located in southern Falkovnia, is their de facto base of operations. Specifically, they use the House of Doors for transportation and the nearby Selberhas Aerie as their meeting spot. A long time ago, members unlocked the key to using the many portals found within to quickly traverse from one side of the Demiplane to the other. Supposedly, there are doors leading to every domain in the Demiplane, but only members know which portal leads to which land. This allows members to quickly join their comrades when needed.

As with all such things, this is easier said than done. Using these magical gateways takes its toll both mentally and physically. Only those of sound mind can survive the swirling chaos of energies that lie behind each door, and oftentimes fearsome and deadly creatures guard the path within. Not all who attempt to travel survive the trip; some members even forgo this method altogether, preferring to use more traditional modes of transportation.

This occult travel cannot occur in just any place, either. Only locations that hold great magical resonance such as the Hill of One Hundred Paths in Hazlan or the Arkalis Hills in Kartakass can be utilized. Some institutions of higher learning, such as the Brautslava Institute in Darkon or La Maison de Cent Papillons in Richemulot, are rumored to have special rooms infused with enough arcane energy to serve as starting and ending points, as well. (My anonymous source posits that the eldritch power required to effect such traversals is simply too great for any single person to control by themselves.)

As stated previously, the group uses the tower known as the Selberhas Aerie for special meetings. They have a standing date for meetings that fall on the Spring and Fall equinoxes each year. This is usually when the initiation of new members, if any are presented, takes place.

If a war council is ever called (an exceedingly rare circumstance), the participants can draw up their plans within the spire's inner sanctum, secure in the knowledge that their many powerful enemies cannot pierce through the strange, otherworldly energies that surround it. Alternately, the native population would not dare set foot upon the property, thus precluding any undue interruptions from that quarter as well.

INTRODUCTION REDUX

I share the following individual profiles to give a representation of the types of adventurers that have found a home within this secret society. To my critics, I want to make it abundantly clear - I do not seek to simply garner fame for myself by exposing these do-gooders and their activities. It is my sincere

hope that this article serves as a rallying cry to encourage others to follow in their footsteps...

"I've been thinking of returning to Necropolis for more research."

"I don't think that is wise, beloved sister. Remember what befell that professor you used to work with?

"Perhaps it's time for a new project, then... How about exploring what lies beneath that scabrous Shadow Rift?"

"I've heard tell it is a terrifying and deadly place. You may as well return to our homeland if you seek to reap such a whirlwind."

"I see your point... Thank you for looking out for me, sister dear."

- conversation between Adyita and Peela

ADYITA CHOPRA AKA DR ODD

Native Outsider (Water Genasi) Sorcerer 5 / Metaphysician 10: **CR** 16; **SZ** Medium Humanoid (5 ft. 4 in.); **HD** 10d4+5d4+15; **hp** 50; **Init** +1; **Spd** 30 ft., swim 30 ft.; **AC** 13 (touch 13, flat-footed 12); Atk +7/+2 melee (trishula 1d8); **SA** --; **SQ** Alchemical Healing, Alternate Form, Astral Projection, Elemental Traits, Ethereal Jaunt, Master Lecturer, Mind Healer, Rationalist, Skeptic, Weapon Proficiency (Martial); **AL** CG; **SV Fort** +4, **Ref** +4, **Will** +11; **Str** 10, **Dex** 12, **Con** 13, **Int** 16, **Wis** 17, **Cha** 14

Skills*:* Bluff +2, Concentration +10, Craft (alchemy) +5, Decipher Script +7, Gather Information +8, Hide +4, Hypnosis +3, Knowledge (arcana) +8, Knowledge (nature) +5, Knowledge (planes) +5, Knowledge (religion) +10, Listen +6, Move Silently +7, Perform (oratory) +6, Profession (metaphysician) +5, Search +7, Sense Motive +9, Spot +3, Survival +6

Feats: Acrobatic, Combat Casting, Dodge, Ethereal Empathy, Lightning Reflexes, Spell Focus (Enchantment), Spell Penetration, Trustworthy, Weapon Proficiency (trident)

Languages*:* Aquan, Darkonese, Mordentish, Rajian, Vaasi

Signature Possessions*:* Cloak of Levitation, Farspeaking Amulet, 3 Fangs of Protection (like Scarabs of Protection), 3 Figurines (crystal [spider], ivory [elephant], and obsidian [monkey]), Necklace of Third Eyes* (aware, clarity, improvisation, penetrate, sense, and surge), Spellsight Spectacles, Trishula (trident [Waverider])

* see *Magic Item Compendium* pg 140-143 for details

Metaphysician Spells *per Day* (9/5/4/3/2/1; DC 12 + spell level, DC 13 + spell level for Enchantment spells, 10th level caster):

0 – *dancing lights, daze, flare, light, ray of frost;*

1 – *burning hands, cause fear, charm person, color spray, hypnotism, magic missile, shocking grasp, sleep, tenser's floating disk;*

2 – *continual flame, darkness, daze monster, detect thoughts, flaming sphere, gust of wind, hypnotic pattern, scare, scorching ray, shatter, tasha's hideous laughter, touch of idiocy;*

3 – *daylight, deep slumber, fireball, heroism, illusory script, leomund's tiny hut, lightning bolt, rage, suggestion, wind wall;*

4 – *charm monster, confusion, crushing despair, fear, fire shield, lesser geas, ice storm, otiluke's resilient sphere, phantasmal killer, rainbow pattern, shout, wall of fire, wall of ice;*

5 – *bigby's interposing hand, cone of cold, dominate person, dream, feeblemind, hold person, mind fog, nightmare, sending, symbol of sleep, wall of force*

Sorcerer Spells *per Day* (6/6/4; DC 12 + spell level, 13 + spell level for Enchantment spells, 5th level caster):
0 – *daze, detect magic, mage hand, mending, message, read magic;*

1 – *alarm, comprehend languages, detect undead, identify, mage armor, true strike;*

2 – *detect thoughts, invisibility, knock, mirror image*

Alchemical Healing (Sp): Adyita is a master of chemistry and pharmaceuticals. She can craft one *cure light wounds* potion each day with a successful Alchemy check (DC 15). Crafting the potion takes eight hours of work and 20 gp of alchemical supplies. Adyita also gains a +4 bonus to Alchemy checks that do not involve crafting items.

Alternate Form (Ex): Three times per day, Adyita can change herself into water. She can use this aquatic form to travel covertly or squeeze into places she would not normally be able to enter. While in this state she is immune to piercing or slashing damage, and only takes half damage from bludgeoning attacks. If Adyita takes any cold damage in this form, she behaves as if under the effect of a *slow* spell.

Astral Projection (Sp): Adyita can attain this ultimate state of intellectual perfection once a week. Unfortunately, the strain takes its toll on her; she suffers the effect of a failed Madness check for the next 24 hours.

Elemental Traits (Ex)*:* Due to her Marid heritage, Adyita has several unique abilities and characteristics. She only takes half damage from fire attacks, but double damage from lightning attacks in either of her forms. She can breathe in water just as easily as she does in the air. She can also cast *control water* up to three times per day.

Ethereal Jaunt (Sp): Adyita has the ability to become ethereal up to three times per day, as in the *ethereal jaunt* spell.

Master Lecturer*:* Adyita can use her lectures to produce extraordinary effects on those around her up to five times per day.

- *Fascinate (Sp)*: Adyita can use her lectures to fascinate a creature. She makes a Performance check against the creature's Will save. If the creature succeeds, Adyita cannot attempt to fascinate again for 24 hours. If the creature fails, it sits down and quietly listens; it takes no actions as well as suffers a -4 penalty on skill checks made as reactions (such as Listen or Spot).
- *Inspire Competence (Su)*: Adyita can use her lectures to help an ally succeed at a task. An affected ally receives a +2 bonus on a skill check of the ally's choice.
- *Inspire Courage (Su)*: Adyita can use her lectures to inspire courage in her allies, bolstering them against fear and improving their combat abilities. Affected allies receive a +2bonus on saving throws against charm and fear effects and a +1 bonus on attack and weapon damage rolls.

Mind Healer (Ex): Any character afflicted with Madness gains a +4 bonus to Will saves to recover from it while under Adyita's care.

Rationalist (Ex): When Adyita encounters a supernatural creature or magical phenomenon that would force a Fear or Horror check, she can give a brief lecture to bolster the morale of her allies. Every ally listening to the lecture gains a +2 bonus to Fear and Horror checks. This ability can be used three times per day.

Skeptic (Su): By chanting a mantra of metaphysical precepts as a full round action, Adyita can shield herself and anyone within five feet from the arcane spells of others. For the duration of this chanting, she and everyone else gains Spell Resistance of 15.

Appearance: Adyita appears to be a typical female of Sri Rajian descent - she is short, has caramel colored skin, and an aquiline nose. Due to her Marid heritage, however, her skin is slightly mottled with blue tinting underneath (which has faded greatly since she was younger) and striking, deep blue eyes. Her figure is plump, but not overly so.

While working in her arcane laboratory or lounging at home, she wears her long, black hair in a simple braid or loose bun held with hair sticks. During more

formal occasions, such as when she is lecturing or out on a mission, she wears it in an elegant fishtail braid that falls halfway down her back, and adorns it with lotus flowers from her own garden.

She wears traditional Sri Rajian clothing, including a snug cotton blouse called a choli, and a long, brightly colored piece of fabric called a sari, which is tightly wound around her legs, with the ends draped over her shoulders and tucked into her waistband. When she travels or goes into battle, she adds a dark blue coat with long sleeves and an open front, known as a salwar kameez, which comes down to her knees (in actuality this is her Cloak of Levitation) to her outfit. No matter what the weather, she always wears sandals.

Adyita has a fondness for jewelry such as earrings and bangles – almost all exclusively made from gold. She owns several necklaces adorned with gemstone pendants and other ornaments (disguised among these more mundane accessories are her Fangs of Protection and Necklace of Third Eyes). She also wears a pair of plain wire-rimmed glasses, even though her vision is quite good (these are her Spellsight Spectacles that she uses in both the field and the lab).

Her most remarkable feature, however, are the twin tattoos on the back of her hands, which were given to her during her time in Tvashti. They are identical, and show a golden yellow sun with seven rays emanating from it. Set within the center of the sun is a bright green triangle, and set within that is a closed eye colored sky blue.

Background: Adyita is a water genasi, half human and half djinn. One day her mother, Lilivati, found a near-dead Marid (a water genie) in the river beside her village where she fetched water every day for her family. This powerful mystical being barely had enough energy to ask for the maiden's help before he collapsed on the shore. Despite being uneducated and inexperienced, she returned to the spot daily and slowly nursed him back to health.

It was during the course of these ministrations that they fell in love. The Marid, whose name was Azahel of the Seven Wells, revealed that he had been deposited in the river after being taken up and tossed about by a powerful supernatural storm of unknown origin. He discovered that he had no way of returning to his own plane, and so he set up a new home for himself and his bride in the jungles of Sri Raji, near the very spot where they first met. Soon Lilivati became pregnant, and nine months later gave birth to a blue-skinned girl whom she called Adyita.

Lord Arijani soon found out about this otherworldly visitor and sent the Dark Sisters to apprehend him for questioning. Adyita was only six months old when these deadly worshipers of Kali attacked her family. Though he fought valiantly to protect his wife and child, Azahel died during the assault.

Fortunately, Lilivati and Adyita escaped to a nearby monastery that gave them refuge. This was the Temple of Abundant Serenity. Due to her blue-tinted skin, Adyita was believed to be an avatar of Indra (a Rajian storm god), and was pampered by the acolytes she lived among. These were idyllic times for the girl, as she was taught reading and writing as well as history and religion (a luxury not often extended to girls in her culture).

This respite was short-lived, however, as the Dark Sisters were soon on her trail again. One day, they descended upon the monastery and killed everyone in it except for one monk, who spirited Adyita away. This monk, Gopal by name, happened to be a were-tiger who had retired to the religious order after the death of his wife some years ago. After the Kali-worshipers' onslaught, he returned with Aditya to his small enclave of natural were-tigers that lived deep in the jungle to the south. While Gopal's children were all grown, he did have a niece named Peela who was a few years younger than Adyita. When the two met, they formed a fast and inseparable bond.

Adyita spent another several years in this bucolic setting, and this is where her love of gardening initially developed. Her Marid ability of controlling

water naturally allowed her to excel in growing plants of all kinds. The more she used her sorcerous powers, however, the more she found herself unable to fully control them, and it soon became apparent that she would need to find someone who could teach her how to use her magic to its fullest potential. Accordingly, once she turned 20 years old she decided to leave for the nearest city, Tvashti.

Knowing the danger that Adyita would be exposed to, Gopal insisted that Peela go along with her as a companion and bodyguard. While the two girls were at first awed by the cosmopolitan atmosphere that surrounded the Great University, they soon settled into their own niches and began their studies in earnest. Adyita became the pupil of Swami Jayartha, who taught a sort of Sacred Geometry as the one true path to attain divinity; Peela. meanwhile, pursued a more practical discipline by becoming an acolyte of Kartikeya, the Rajian god of war.

Their training was cut short, however, due to the unfortunate reappearance of the Dark Sisters when they carried out one of their periodic purges of dangerous ascetics, who grew up about the Great University like weeds. While the Dark Sisters overlooked Aditya during this particular raid, the fact that they struck so close to home spooked her. She knew that the next time, she might not escape their wrath so easily.

The girls conferred and came to the conclusion that as along as Adyita stayed in Sri Raji she would know no peace; nowhere in the domain was safe from their adversaries, and they would forever be risking the lives of those around them. So Adyita decided to leave the domain altogether. She implored Peela to return to her own people in the jungle, but her friend refused to let her go on the journey alone. A fortuitous meeting with the traveling botanist Abelhous Nicholsi shortly thereafter allowed them to put their plan in action.

***

The pair first arrived in Martira Bay in 749 BC. Professor Nicholsi, serving as her de facto sponsor, introduced Adyita to various scholars and intellectual societies of the Core. With his encouragement she transformed her knowledge of exotic schools of magical thought into a career as a traveling scholar. During her first few years in the Core she did stints at the Brautslava Institute, the University of Dementlieu, and even as far afield as the University of Liffe. (This frequent traveling inadvertently saved her from the phenomenon of being “claimed” by Darkon.)

After the return of Azalin in 755 BC, Adyita found Darkon's political atmosphere too precarious. She had managed to remain neutral during all the petty local squabbling that took place during the Shrouded Years, but now both the Kargat and the Eternal Order approached her in hopes of recruiting her to rebuild their ranks. She initially rebuffed these offers, but she knew that eventually she would be given an ultimatum to either join them or die. Once again, she found herself caught between powerful factions that wanted to use her for their own designs.

This predicament, as well as the untimely death of her friend Professor Nicholsi, led her to flee Darkon for more amenable environs. But where could she go? She of course abhorred Falkovnia's brutal militarism, and was put off by Lamordia's cold rationalism. She eventually settled, like so many immigrants, on Richemulot.

Combat: While Adyita doesn't look like a typical fighter, she uses a simple misdirection to startle her opponents whenever she engages in combat. Although she appears empty-handed, she always has her trident within arm's reach – it is retractable and she wears it as a comb in her hair. When threatened, she simply plucks it from the back of her head and its handle magically extends out from the base while its tines extend from the comb. (This trick helped greatly while she was traveling through hostile domains such as Falkovnia.) She only uses her trident

as a last resort, however, when close quarters combat is unavoidable.

She is remarkably agile, utilizing her cloak's levitation ability to place her out of reach of most of her enemy's blows. She will float up and down and glide side to side constantly, only staying in place long enough to cast a spell before she begins her erratic maneuvering again.

In order to unleash her spells, she must perform intricate arm and hand movements, tracing arcane symbols in the air. She is very adept at this, and her movements are so smooth it seems as if she is performing a well-rehearsed dance routine. Whatever the incantation, each spell ends the same way – she crosses her arms with her palms facing inward. Then, the tattoos on the back of her hands begin to glow with a blue light, the eyes in the middle open up, and a mystical bolt shoots forth at her target. This entire process is so quick that most opponents barely have time to register what is going on before they are hit.

If her life ever seems to truly be in danger, she will activate her *alternate form* ability to disappear in a splash of water and trickle away to a safer spot. Otherwise, she never reveals this ability to anyone (besides Peela). This trick has enabled her to survive several situations that have struck down other, more powerful figures.

THE SEARCH FOR UNDISCOVERABLE COUNTRIES

Adyita currently lives halfway between Ste. Ronges and Mortigny in an out-of-the-way plantation called Mossdrake Mansion. (It is built along the Musarde River, and due to her Marid heritage she felt most comfortable living near a large body of water.) Soon after she settled down in her new home, Adyita entertained the thought of joining the staff of the University of Richemulot, but Peela could smell the fiendish taint on Prof. Dhurban Ananda and warned her companion against the move. That is why she took a position at the less well-known La Maison des Cent Papillons, further south in Mortigny. After professor Ananda's mysterious disappearance in 759 BC, however, she took a full-time position that opened up and has stayed at the University of Richemulot ever since.

Although her official title is Professor of Esoteric Philosophies, her knowledge base is deeper than that designation suggests. Most of her students, as well as the common folk she encounters, find it difficult to pronounce her full name, hence she has adopted the informal nickname of “Dr. Odd.” Her classes have proven to be very popular. Drawing from her vast knowledge of religion and magic, she reveals many of the hidden principles that control reality itself. And she regularly encourages her students to probe beyond the boundaries of their own consciousness in order to open their minds to new ideas and deeper truths.

Adyita peppers her lectures with mentions of cryptic concepts such as “The Untranslatable Theorem of Melat,” the “Infinite Equation of Ekkos,” or 'Tyknatic's Transversive Curves.” During a fight, or when demonstrating magical principles, she often makes strange exclamations, such as “By the Dread Denominations of Dinzag,” or “By the Multiples of Mezziac,” And whenever she wants to emphasize her words, such as when she curses or says a prayer, she swears by “The Holy Tangent,” “The Uncountable Pi,” or “The Seven Sacred Formulas.”

Unfortunately, she can also be very technical and aloof at times. Most of the time her thoughts are on such an elevated level that she forgets trivial details and ignores social niceties. (Peela smooths over these faux pas whenever she is present.)

Academics is only one facet of her life's work, however. The Sacred Geometry she studied under Swami Jayartha allowed her to access higher planes of consciousness far beyond mortal knowledge, and she feels that with her training and experience she is in the ideal position to unravel the very secrets of the Demiplane. Thus, she is constantly seeking out haunted locations and other sites with strong psychic

resonances, where she believes the membrane of reality is stretched thinnest.

This interest extends into studying the Misty Border and the the oubliettes that can be found within it, as well as so-called Sinkholes of Evil scattered about the land and the strange phantasmagorias that they sometimes host. In her mind, she is the only defense the innocent have in a world filled with otherworldly evil, and she considers herself the premiere occult investigator in the land.

Her main impetus in seeking out these dimensional borderlands is her hope to one day find the home plane of her father and return there to live among her own kind. She has pierced the veil on the corrupted elemental planes that the Demiplane has access to (Blood, Grave, Misty, and Pyre), but continues her quest to find the real thing. She is perpetually vexed that she cannot access the "pure" elemental planes she knows to exist, but continues to hold out hope for a breakthrough in the future.

Besides her occult studies, she has several other hobbies that she indulges in. She carries her love of gardening with her wherever she goes and finds the moist but mild climate of Richemulot an ideal spot for cultivation. She has a collection of exotic and native species in her personal garden; she is particularly proud of the lotus ponds she has built, which showcase some of her favorite varieties such as the Lotus of the Golden Wheel, the Cherry Lotus, and the Blue Star Lotus.

Another notable penchant of hers is collecting knickknacks and mementos, which she keeps displayed in her inner sanctum. Adyita claims that she holds onto these items in order to protect others, but in truth she is something of a packrat and loves keeping souvenirs of her cases whenever possible.

Her collection currently includes:

- An ornate iron urn in which she sealed a grave elemental during the course of the *Case of the Hungry Tomb* in Darkon.
- Three figurines – a crystal spider, an ivory elephant, and an obsidian monkey – that she created during her apprenticeship in Sri Raji. They serve as guards for the rest of the collection when Adyita and Peela are away.
- A large splinter from a scarecrow stand that she kept from the *Case of the Stalking Straw* (actually the Jacob Garvin Scarecrow) in Mordent.
- The full set – conch shell, dagger, and ring – of the Treasures of the Deep that she gathered from her multiple encounters with the Cult of Shaylot.
- A shriveled monkey's paw that she acquired after solving the *Mystery of the Screaming Swamp* while visiting Souragne
- Several papyrus scrolls that hold lost passages from the Akiri *Book of the Dead* that she procured during her expedition to the Amber Wastes with Dr. J.R. Livingston.

Dread Possibility: Azenwrath Ascendant

Adyita has unwittingly acquired a piece of Azenwrath's former body in the form of the splinter from the scarecrow stand that she displays. Unfortunately, the PCs happen to be visiting her just as the spellrune golem arrives in the vicinity. As Azenwrath draws closer, all the flora on the property starts revolting. Weeping Willows will lash at the windows and flower roots from the many ponds that dot the landscape will snake out and attempt to trip anyone who passes by. While Adyita has several magical defenses she deploys, the spellrune golem eventually breaches them all. Will the PCs take a stand and fight off the creature, or flee and try to survive the trek through the dangerous vegetation that surrounds the house?

FRIENDS

With so many hobbies and interests vying for her attention, Adyita has little time to develop close friendships. Most of her associates are fellow professors, current and former students, and other academicians. Indeed, two of the most important relationships she has developed during her time in the Core has been with the late Professor Abelhous Nicholsi of the University of Il Aluk, and Dr. J.R. Livingston of University of Mordent.

She first met Prof. Nicholsi in Tvashti, where they became fast friends due to Adyita's horticultural knowledge, and she frequently accompanied him on his forays deep into the Rajian jungles. They continued such collaborations even after he helped her move to Darkon. Indeed, they often ventured to the outskirts of Il Aluk after it was transformed into Necropolis, and jointly discovered the many unique properties of the Necropolitan Amaranth flower. Adyita still regrets her decision to not accompany him on what was to be his final expedition; she believes that if she had been by his side, he would still be alive.

Adyita's connection with Dr. Livingston is on a more personal level. They first met early in her career, when she visited the University of Mordent circa 753 BC, and she hit it off with the ruggedly handsome gentleman immediately. They started a torrid affair that grew quite serious for a time. She even joined him on his infamous Har'Akir expedition.

She was reluctant to move to Mordent permanently, however, for two main reasons – she felt that the land already had its share of champions, and she secretly worried that if she stayed there too long she would become lost within the ethereal resonance that permeated the domain. After she moved to Richemulot their relationship cooled quite a bit, but they still see each other when their schedules permit.

Initiation and Induction

Adyita is unique in that she did not have a sponsor recommend her for membership into the Bright Triad; in effect she referred herself. It just so happened that during her many travels, she would often stay at the home of her friend Fraulein Liebhelden, who resided in Aerie. Unbeknownst to Adyita, Liebhelden was a part of a secret society known as the Veiled Palm, a collection of psychics that use their paranormal powers for good. As Adyita's fame grew over the years, Liebhelden discussed with the other members of the group the possibility of admitting Adyita. They felt, however, that Adyita would be a better fit with the more active Bright Triad.

When Adyita discovered the existence of the group. she promptly began a campaign to prove that she deserved membership. Luckily, news of her many deeds had already reached the ears of several members of the group.

One of her earliest adventures in the Core occurred in 750 BC, when she was tracking down what she believed to be a killer ghost operating in Dementlieu. While consulting with some anchorites about the matter, she met up with the Gray Monk, who was in town investigating cult activity. It turns out they were working the same case – that of Donovan Kaizer, an undead murderer attempting to become the crime boss of Port-A-Lucine – and they joined forces to rid the city of this supernatural menace. She didn't realize at the time, but this was her first partnership with a future team member.

In the years that followed, Adyita racked up quite a list of accomplishments. In 751 BC she single-handedly smashed the Cult of Khepri, which was operating out of Martira Bay. Later that same year, she encountered and defeated the Golem of the Fens, a creature that even eluded the great Rudolph Van Richten. In 753 BC. she famously braved Lockwood Manor and purportedly sent several of the ghosts that dwelt there to their eternal rest.

Adventure Hook: The Ragman Rendezvous

Adyita came across this figure when she first moved to Martira Bay in 749 BC, and was intrigued by his altruistic mission. Indeed, it was her encounter with this strange manifestation of good that goaded her into being more proactive in helping others.

Even now, when she has moved away from Darkon, she continues to act as a chaperone for the Ragman's travels within Richemulot, protecting him (with assistance from Peela) from the depredations of the local wererats. Unfortunately, this time around Adyita plans on being out of town when the Ragman is due to appear and is seeking to hire a group of heroes to help usher her charge along his way...

With such a fantastic resume, along with the fact that she survived the perilous climb to the top floor of the Selberhas Aerie to meet with them during one of their periodic gatherings, the assembled members were duly impressed. While her methods were highly unorthodox, they clearly got results. Thus, in 753 BC her petition for membership was accepted and she officially joined the Bright Triad.

While Adyita is always eager to help out fellow members, most people that have worked with her find her personality and mannerisms slightly off-putting and only call upon her aid as a last resort.

The Tiger Lady

Of course, Peela is Adyita's most steadfast ally and oldest friend.

PEELA

Female Human (Natural Weretiger) Monk 7; **CR** 10 (5 animal, hybrid); **SZ** Medium Shapechanger (5 ft. 8 in.) 7d8 +7, 46 **hp**; **Init** +2 (+4 animal, hybrid); **Spd** 50 ft. (60 ft., climb 40 ft. animal, hybrid); **AC** 13 (touch 12, flat-footed 12) [17 {touch 14, flat-footed 13} animal, hybrid]; **Atk** +5 melee (tulwar 1d8+2 or unarmed strike 1d8+2) or +3 ranged (2 chakram 1d4+2) [+7 melee {2 claws 1d6 or bite 2d6} animal, hybrid]; **SA** Curse of Lycanthropy, Feline Empathy, Flurry of Blows, Improved Grab, Ki Strike, Pounce, Rake; **SQ** Alternate Form, Chemical Bane (fire lily), Damage Reduction (5/metal), Evasion, Fast Movement, Low-Light Vision, Purity of Blood, Scent, Slow Fall, Still Mind, Weapon Proficiency (Exotic), Wholeness of Body; **AL** NG; **SV** Fort +5 (+10 animal, hybrid), **Ref** +5 (+10 animal, hybrid), **Will** +5 (+7 animal, hybrid); **Str** 14 (26 animal, hybrid), **Dex** 15 (19 animal, hybrid), **Con** 17 (23 animal, hybrid), **Int** 14, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 12

Skills: Balance +3 (+5 animal, hybrid), Climb +4 (+7 animal, hybrid), Concentration +9 (+12 animal, hybrid), Craft (calligraphy) +7, Diplomacy +2, Escape Artist +4, Gather Information +4, Handle Animal +3, Hide +4 (+8 animal, hybrid), Intimidate +7, Jump +3 (+9 animal, hybrid), Knowledge (arcana) +4, Knowledge (religion) +7, Listen +6, Move Silently +7 (+9 animal, hybrid), Profession (bodyguard) +3, Search +4, Sense Motive +3, Sleight of Hand +2, Spot +6 (+6 animal, hybrid), Survival +3, Swim +2 (+8 animal, hybrid), Tumble +2 (+4 animal, hybrid)

Feats: Alertness, Combat Reflexes, Improved Disarm, Improved Natural Attack (bite) [animal, hybrid], Improved Natural Attack (claw) [animal, hybrid], Improved Unarmed Strike, Stunning Fist, Weapon Proficiency (tulwar)

Language: Darkonian, Mordentish, Rajian

Signature Possessions: Calligraphy Set (12 pieces of parchment and 3 pens), 2 Chakram (throwing disks [Sun and Moon]), Folding Boat, Tulwar (curved sword [Warchild])

Alternate Form (Su): Peela can shift into animal or hybrid form as though using the *polymorph* spell on herself. Her gear is not affected and she does not regain any hit points when changing forms. If slain while in her alternate forms, Peela reverts to her humanoid appearance. Changing to animal or hybrid form is a standard action and doesn't provoke an attack of opportunity.

Curse of Lycanthropy (Su)*:* Any humanoid hit by Peela's bite attack in animal or hybrid form must succeed at a Fortitude save (DC 15) or contract lycanthropy. Afflicted lycanthropes of Peela's bloodline are triggered by an elephant's trumpet.

Feline Empathy (Ex)*:* In any form, Peela can communicate and empathize with felines of any size. This gives her a +4 racial bonus to checks when influencing the animal's attitude and allows the communication of simple concepts and commands (if the animal is friendly), such as "friend", "foe", "flee", and "attack".

Flurry of Blows (Ex): Peela may strike with a flurry of blows at the expense of accuracy. When doing so, she may make one extra attack in a round at her highest base attack bonus, but this attack takes a -1 penalty, as does each other attack made that round. This penalty applies for one round, so it also affects attacks of opportunity Peela might make before her next action. She must use a full attack action to strike with a flurry of blows.

Ki Strike (Su): Peela's unarmed attacks are empowered with *ki* and are treated as magic weapons for the purpose of dealing damage to creatures with damage reduction.

Pounce (Ex)*:* If Peela charges a foes in animal or hybrid form, she can make a full attack, including two Rake attacks.

Purity of Body (Ex): Peela has immunity to all diseases except for supernatural and magical diseases.

Rake (Ex): When Peela successfully grapples a foe in her animal or hybrid form, she gains an attack bonus of +6 melee and a damage bonus of 1d6+3.

Slow Fall (Ex*):* When Peela is within arm's reach of a wall, she can use it to slow her descent and takes damage as if the fall were 20 feet shorter than it actually is.

Still Mind (Ex): Peela has a +2 bonus on saving throws against spells and effects from the school of Enchantment.

Wholeness of Body (Su): Peela can heal her own wounds. She can heal a number of hit points of damage equal to twice her current monk level each day, and she can spread this healing out among several uses.

Appearance: In contrast to her longtime friend, Peela is tall and lithe, with dark mahogany skin and light green eyes that seem to glow in the dark. She has high cheekbones and a narrow, hooked nose. Her gaze lingers on people's faces a little longer than is comfortable, reminiscent of a cat preparing to pounce on its prey. She has long, black, flowing hair with a few bright golden streaks running through it. Her arms and legs are slender but strong; her movements are graceful, but her manner is languorous. She never appears to be in a hurry.

Like her companion, Peela also bears twin tattoos from her time in Sri Raji. They spiral around both of her arms starting at her shoulders flowing all the way down to her wrists. These are not solid ribbons, however, but tiny figures posed in the various fighting positions of the Rajian martial art known as Kalaripayattu. There are 105 different stances in total (a holy number to the order she belonged to) and every time Peela mastered one during her training, she added it to her arms.

Due to her weretiger nature, Peela only wears loose-fitting clothing. She has never been comfortable wearing a traditional sari, as she found it much too constricting when she would transform. Her choli is not worn as tight as Adyita's, and it is made of a fine silk; the same goes for her loose-fitting trousers (known as dhotis). She wears no earrings, necklaces or bangles, and always goes barefoot.

She only wears her human form while in public or in while entertaining visitors, otherwise she enjoys lounging around the mansion and its grounds in her tiger form.

Background: Peela's upbringing was remarkably tranquil. The enclave of weretigers she was born into kept to themselves and were far removed from the constant feuding between the Dark Sisters and the Stalkers.

As a natural lycanthrope, she was raised to embrace both her human and bestial nature, and she sees no contradiction between the two. She doesn't see anything evil or sinister in this way of life; she believes that the law of the jungle is kill or be killed and she is simply following her natural instincts.

When she met Adyita, an entire new world opened up for her. Here was someone with strange powers and fantastic abilities that she couldn't fully comprehend. Clearly, the world was much larger, and filled with stranger things, than she could ever dream of!

As the two girls spent more and more time together, their friendship grew. They became completely inseparable, both in work and play. Adyita often regaled Peela with the stories she learned from her studies at the Temple of Abundant Serenity. And when Adyita decided to move to the city of Tvashti, Peela gladly took the opportunity to finally see the outside world for herself.

In Tvashti, Peela soon fell in with a cult dedicated to Kartikeya, the Rajian god of war. Kalaripayattu, a martial art native to Sri Raji, was taught to all of its acolytes. Adherents are taught to increase their strength, flexibility, and endurance through five sacred devotions – combat (hands), medicine (body), meditation (mind), astrology (fate) and spirit (heart).

Each sphere is related to all the others and one cannot become the perfect fighting machine without fully devoting themselves to mastering all of them. These precepts taught Peela that her strength should not be used to gain revenge, wealth or even fame, but as a tool to enhance herself both physically and spiritually. She carries these ideals with her to this very day.

When Adyita told her that she planned to leave Sri Raji, Peela did not hesitate to join her. She has no regrets about leaving her family behind, believing that if she is fated to see them again, then it will happen.

Combat: The pair of friends have developed a clever subterfuge when it comes to fighting. Adyita is the one who carries the tulwar at her side, while Peela is seemingly unarmed. When combat begins, Adyita will quickly toss the sword to Peela, who brandishes it menacingly to draw the attention of their assailants.

Somewhere in the middle of fighting, however, she will “lose” the sword on purpose and start attacking with her bare hands and feet. Becoming a blur of motion, she quickly pummels each foe into submission before jumping over to the next one.

Generally, Peela will start by directly attacking the most physically imposing threats, giving Adyita time to cast the proper spells. The pair work like a well-oiled machine, often conveying instructions with a simple glance or subtle head shake.

Peela rarely employs her throwing stars, only using them for warning shots or to intimidate her foes. Otherwise, she leaves them tucked into her waistband.

Current Sketch: While most people assume she is merely a bodyguard or a servant, Peela and Adyita share a much deeper bond. Though they come from different backgrounds, their friendship is unshakable, and either one would gladly die for the other.

Indeed, Peela's grounding presence is the sole reason Adyita has not become completely aloof and detached from the affairs of the world. Whenever her friend becomes obsessed with a new piece of research or caught up in a magical experiment, Peela is always there to draw her out again.

Besides keeping Adyita company, Peela pursues various interests of her own. She is always eager to

learn new skills. In the past she has learned to play various instruments such as the murali (a Rajian flute) and the sitar (a Rajian guitar), master traditional board games such as backgammon and chaturanga (a Rajian version of chess), and she is currently teaching herself calligraphy.

Due to Peela's werebeast nature, she and Adyita have been able to forge alliances with a handful of "good" werebeast factions, such the Brood of the Purple Moon and the Duskpeace Outcasts, both situated just across the border in Verbek.

Unlike Adyita, Peela is not interested in a long-term relationship, but she has had a couple of paramours in her time. One is Ronan Thunder, and whenever the Carnival is in town she is sure to come visit him for at least one night. The other is Jim Rook, who she met when she first came to Martira Bay and was impressed with his fighting prowess. In fact, he still makes sure to call upon her whenever he is passing through town.

Foes

Adyita has been very active in the Core ever since her initial arrival. And while she does not actively seek out trouble, trouble usually finds her.

Of course, foremost among her adversaries is Lord Arijani and the Dark Sisters. Luckily, that Darklord does not seem that interested in pursuing her... yet.

Another Darklord she has run afoul of recently is Jacqueline Renier. When she originally decided to move to Richemulot in 756 BC, she planned on residing in Pont-A-Musea. At first, she was even accepted into the Renier court due to her highly-acclaimed reputation.

This relationship, however, quickly soured after Adyita tracked down and killed (with the help of her fellow Bright Triad member, the Manhunter) the infamous "Shadow Killer" of Pont-A-Museau and revealed his identity to be Xavier D'Arcey, the celebrated author and poet. It seems that Jacqueline had a romantic interest in the artist and did not appreciate Adyita's part in his downfall. Soon thereafter, the matriarch of the Renier clan let her disapproval be known to Adyita and the itinerant scholar quickly left the city.

After Adyita settled outside of Mortigny, Jacqueline was still not happy that such a powerful force for good lived within her domain. She dispatched a series of wererat assassins to dispatch Adyita, but Peela easily killed them off in turn. The Darklord has since turned this setback to her advantage, however, as she sporadically sends ambitious rivals southward to prove themselves, fully expecting them to have a fatal encounter with the duo and bother her no more.

Adyita has also made an enemy of Death due to her frequent excursions to Necropolis between 751 BC and 754 BC with Professor Nicholsi. It seems the dead do not like giving up their secrets, and Death has issued an order to kill Adyita on sight. That is easier said than done, however.

Dread Possibility: Posi-Toxins

Adyita has recently discovered Kren's Crystal Distillery in some ruins she was exploring in Borca, and has begun tinkering with it. Using the Necropolitan Amaranth flower, among other ingredients, she has created various serums which she calls posi-toxins*. This unique series of potions is especially useful when battling the undead. They include Bloodwine, laced with garlic to target vampires, Lichbane, which targets undead spellcasters, and Liquid Mortality, which strips away undead traits. Such a collection of elixirs would be highly useful for anyone planning on fighting these so-called creatures of the night.

*see *Libris Mortis* pg. 74&75 for more details

And while Adyita is not afraid to venture anywhere, the Gray Monk, whose opinion she greatly respects, has repeatedly warned her about spending too much time in Dementlieu because of the strange possessing force that suffuses that land.

Nemesis

One recent excursion resulted in a new enemy for the occult investigator that she is not even aware of.

In 755 BC, Adyita accompanied Professor J.R. Livingston on an expedition to the ruins of an ancient city known as Deir el Medina. Their team uncovered many priceless treasures during their explorations, including three well-preserved scrolls that Adyita took home with her. She believes they may hold lost passages from the Akiri *Book of the Dead* and one day hopes to translate them and publish a paper on her findings.

The papyri she absconded with, however, were actually part of an ancient banishing ceremony performed against a fearsome naga priestess who led a small, but brutal cult that terrorized the region millennia ago. She and her followers were eventually rounded up and sealed away by rival priests of Ra. The scrolls hold nothing more than a series of prayers and other sacred passages that ward against evil. These objects, however, hold a fascination to the newly-awakened mummy, and she roams the land once again, seeking to punish the thief that interrupted her eternal slumber.

Death's Whisper

Undead Monstrous Humanoid (3rd Rank Ancient Dead Yuan-Ti Halfblood): **CR** 8; **SZ** Medium Humanoid; **HD** 7d12+7, 45 **hp**; **Init** +5; **Spd** 30 ft., swim 15 ft.; **AC** 28 (touch 21, flat-footed 27); **Atk** +11 melee (scimitar 1d6+6) or +10 (2 slams 1d6+6) or +4 melee (bite 1d6+6 plus disease) or +9 ranged (spit, disease); **SA** Constrict, Disease, Spell-Like Abilities, Spit; **SQ** Chameleon, Cold Immunity, Damage Reduction (10/magic), Darkvision (60 ft.), Detect Poison, Fire Vulnerability, Rejuvenation, Scent, Spell Resistance (16), Turn Resistance (+4); **AL** LE; **SV Fort** +3, **Ref** +6, **Will** +9; **Str** 25, **Dex** 13, **Con** --, **Int** 18, **Wis** 24, **Cha** 20

Skills*:* Climb +8, Concentration +11, Hide +8, Knowledge (history) +14, Knowledge (religion) +14, Move Silently +8, Listen +24, Spot +24

Feats: Alertness, Blind-Fight, Combat Expertise, Dodge, Improved Initiative, Toughness

Languages*:* Akiri, Draconic

Signature Possessions*:* Masterwork Scimitar

Cleric Spells *Prepared* (5/5/4/3; save DC 14 + spell level)*:*

0 – *detect magic, inflict minor wounds, read magic, resistance, virtue;*

1 – *bane, cause fear, command, inflict light wounds, obscuring mist;*

2 – *bull's strength, death knell, hold person, inflict moderate wounds;*

3 – *animate dead, dispel magic, inflict serious wounds*

Chameleon (Sp): Death's Whisper can psionically change the coloration of her body and equipment to match the surroundings, granting a +10 circumstance bonus to Hide checks.

Constrict (Ex): Death's Whisper deals an extra 1d6+3 damage with a successful grapple check against Small (or smaller) creatures.

Disease (Ex): Touch. Fort save (DC 14), 1d6 initial and secondary Con damage. Death's Whisper's mummy rot turns the victim's skin dry and scaly like a snake's skin.

Rejuvenation (Su): Death's Whisper is capable of drawing on the Positive Energy Plan to heal damage. This is a slow process and requires her to be inert for a pre-set period of time (she recovers 12 hp per hour after resting for one day).

Spell-Like Abilities *(Sp):* 3/day – *animal trance, cause fear, entangle*; 1/day – *deeper darkness, neutralize poison, suggestion*, These abilities are as the spells, save DCs are Charisma based, 8th level caster.

Spit (Ex): Death's Whisper can spit venom up to 30 ft. as a standard action. This is a ranged touch attack.

Opponents hit by this attack must make successful saves (see above) to avoid disease effects.

Appearance: Death's Whisper does not have legs; instead her torso trails off into a large tail that she uses to slither along the ground upright. Her skin is covered in scales that slowly transition from a light yellow around her face and shoulders, growing progressively greener and darker further along her body, until reaching the tip of her tail, which is nearly pitch black.

It is hard to tell that she is undead, because she does not bear the hallmarks of a traditional mummy such as wrappings or shriveled skin. Instead, her scales appear dried out and flaky, whereas normally they would glisten. Her red, glowing eyes are sunken in her face, with dark circles under them. Her mouth hangs open due to the fangs that protrude over her upper and lower lips.

Combat: Death's Whisper prefers to attack from the shadows, using her spells to disable foes before revealing her presence. She will also use her spitting ability to strike from afar, targeting any spellcasters first. After she deals with these threats, she will emerge and attempt to use her scimitar to quickly cut down any fighters that remain. She will retreat if overpowered, and use whatever minions she has available to cover her escape.

CREDITS

- The Cult of Kephri appears courtesy of Joseph Zettelmeir from the self-titled article in QTR #5.
- Deir el Medina appears courtesy of “Corners of the Core: Deir el Medina”; article in QTR #5.
- Donovan Kaiser appears courtesy of Jarrod R Lowe from the self-titled article in the Book of Souls.Jim Rook appears courtesy of “Children of the Night: The Phantom Fighter”; article in QTR #3.
- Lockwood Manor appears courtesy of Daniel J Bandera from “The Haunts of Lockwood Manor”; article in the Book of Souls.
- Professor J.R. Livingston appears courtesy of “Character Development: The Archeaologist”; article in QTR #5.
- Professor Abelhous Nicholsi appears courtesy of Christopher Nichols from the self-titled article in the Book of Souls.
- The Ragman appears courtesy of Ehren Bradbury from “The Tale of the Ragman”; article in the Book of Sorrows.
- Ronin Thunder appears courtesy of John Mangrum from “Carnival: The Ballyhoo”; article in the Book of Souls.
- Treasures of the Deep appears courtesy of Jaleigh Johnson from the self-titled article in the Book of Sacrifices.
- Xavier D'Arcey apears appears courtesy of Joseph “Bela” Zettelmaier from the self-titled article in QTR #8.

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In the time before time... the real and the unreal endlessly mixed together in a vast, swirling chaos. When the Great Spirit awakened, he saw that true Creation could not begin until the material was separated from the immaterial... dreams from reality. And so, the Great Parting came to be. But the Dream-Things did not like this new order, so they mimicked the Great Spirit and created gods of their own - the so-called Nightmare Court - to fight for their cause and prove that the dream world was more powerful than this fragile, new reality. Their goal is nothing less than complete control over all of existence and to return it to its primordial state. And that is why we fight them.

- Abber creation myth as told by Dances with Shadows

SPOTTED CLOUD AKA THE DREAMWALKER

Male Human (Abber) Shaman 13: **CR** 13; **SZ** Medium Humanoid (6 ft. 2 in.); **HD** 13d6, 46 **hp**; **Init** +2; **Spd** 30 ft.; AC 14 (touch 12, flat-footed 12); **Atk** +9/+4 melee (cudgel 1d6+1) or +6 ranged (slingshot 1d4+2); **SA** Banish Dreamspawn; **SQ** Create Dream-Catcher, Dreamshape, Dreamtelling, Spell Resistance (16), Weapon Proficiency (Simple); **AL** NG; **SV Fort** +8, **Ref** +4, **Will** +8; **Str** 13, **Dex** 15, **Con** 11, **Int** 16, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 13

Skills*:* Animal Handling +5, Balance +2, Bluff +3, Climb +7, Concentrate +8, Craft (weaving) +6, Diplomacy +2, Escape Artist +6, Heal +6, Hide +11, Intimidate +7, Jump +2, Knowledge (arcana) +4, Knowledge (religion) +4, Listen +3, Move Silently +11, Profession (healer) +10, Spellcraft +3, Swim +5, Tumble +2, Use Rope +5

Feats: Athletic, Back to the Wall, Endurance, Improved Initiative, Improved Oneiromancy, Magical Aptitude, Oneiromancy, Silent Spell, Still Spell

Language*:* Abber, Balok, Forfarian, Oneiros, Vaasi

Signature Possessions: 2 Abber Dream-Catchers, Bag of Boulders, Cudgel (dreamslayer weapon; +3 in dreamscapes [Daybreak]), Farspeaking Amulet, 4 Glitter Stones, Gray Morph (familiar [Twilight]), Robe of Many-Colored Hides, Slingshot, Strand of Prayer Beads

Shaman Spells per Day (6/4+2/4+2/4+2/4+1/3+1/2+1/1+1, DC 12 + spell level, 13th level caster, Domains – Dream [immune to fear effects], Healing [casts healing spells at +1 caster level], Knowledge [casts divination spells at +1 caster level], Trickery):

0 – *create water, detect poison, guidance, know direction, purify food and water, resistance;*

1 – *calm animals, cure light wounds, detect secret doors, disguise self, goodberry, magic stone, pass without trace, restful slumber, sleep;*

2 – *augury, barkskin, bull's strength, cat's grace, cure moderate wounds, detect thoughts, invisibility, owl's wisdom;*

3 – *clairaudience/clairvoyance, cure serious wounds, deep slumber, dominate animal, nondetection, stone shape, water breathing, wind wall;*

4 – *air walk, confusion, cure critical wounds, divination, dispel magic, dream walk, freedom of movement, manifest desire, manifest nightmare, phantasmal killer, rusting grasp;*

5 – *commune with nature, cure light wounds (mass), dream puppet, false vision, hallow, tree stride, true seeing;*

6 – *dream sight, find the path, fire seeds, heal, mislead, transport via plants;*

7 – *greater scrying, legend lore, regenerate, screen, sunbeam*

Banish Dreamspawn (Ex): Spotted Cloud is able to banish dreamspawn from either a dreamscape or the physical realm. This ability functions similar to a cleric's Turn Undead special ability. A banished dreamspawn must flee from Spotted Cloud's position by the fastest and most direct route possible for the next six rounds. This ability can be used up to three times per day.

Create Dream-Catcher (Ex): Utilizing weaving skills he learned as a child, Spotted Cloud has the ability to create an Abber Dream-Catcher and infuse it with magical properties. In the physical realm, this talisman protects its owner from the effects of nightmares or other mental intrusions from the Nightmare Court. When used in this way, each attempted attack shatters one of its glass beads (each Dream-Catcher starts off with five glass beads woven into it). When all the glass beads are destroyed, this item loses its power. When brought into a dreamscape, an Abber Dream-Catcher can also be used to locate and pass through nether portals.

Dreamshape (Ex): Spotted Cloud can manipulate his appearance and shape similar to a dreamspawn's

Alternate Form special ability while in a dreamscape. He can mimic any humanoid or animal form or even turn himself into an inanimate object (within one size smaller or larger than his true form). This ability functions like the *polymorph* spell and lasts a number of rounds equal to his shaman level. Changing form is a standard action and doesn't provoke an attack of opportunity.

Dreamtelling (Ex): Spotted Cloud can use his Knowledge (planes) skill to interpret his own or other people's dreams, thus gleaning useful information and insights. He can interpret the basic symbolism of a dream to figure out what sorts of concerns or fears are likely to have inspired it. (DC 10 – Dream features obvious symbolism, DC 15 – Dream involves cultural details or concepts with which he is not familiar, DC 20 – Dream represents memories of past events with which he is not familiar, DC 25 – Both previous conditions are true. Attempting to garner insight into future events, or events occurring elsewhere, by reading the prophetic images of a dream adds +10 to +20 to the base DC, depending on how obscure the omens are.)

Spell Resistance (Ex): Due to his extensive training, Spotted Cloud is very adept at telling the difference between illusions and reality. He gains a +6 bonus when rolling Will saves versus Enchantment, Illusion, or mind-affecting spells or spell-like effects. This bonus also applies to any psionic attacks that affect the mind.

Appearance: Spotted Cloud is a tall, imposing figure. He has a long stride, and lanky arms with great reach. His skin is bronze-hued and he has long, black hair, that he often wears in braids decorated with many different-colored beads. His face is clean-shaven but worn; he rarely smiles and it is impossible to read his mood.

He wears leather pants and leather shoes, along with a simple cotton tunic as a top. His most notable piece of clothing is the animal hide robe he always wears. It covers him from head to toe and the top is crowned with the head of a dead fox. This strange garb aids him with blending into the surrounding forest which he calls home. His robe has many hidden pockets, both inside and outside, which he uses to hide away his various spell components and magical items. He carries his cudgel in his left hand, and his slingshot is tucked into his belt and always rests on his right hip.

Background: At the age of 12 years old, Spotted Cloud had just begun his training to become an Abber shaman when his apprenticeship was cut short by the cataclysmic events of the Great Upheaval in 740 BC. Before the Grand Conjunction collapsed, one of the dreamscapes in the Ring of Dreams cracked open and released a Dream Vestige (see *Libris Mortis* pg 96 for details) that went on a terrific rampage that killed off every other person in his tribe. The only way he escaped the same fate was by running headlong into the Mists that sprung up. After wandering around aimlessly for some time, he was eventually deposited just across the border in Nova Vaasa.

Alone in a strange, new world, Spotted Cloud lived off the land as best as he could and tried to keep a low profile by staying away from towns and villages. Whenever he fell asleep, he saw the faces of his departed tribesmen, and he believed that their spirits were reaching out from beyond the grave to guide him. Eventually, he found a new home when a kindly farm couple that lived in the Pommel region hired him on as a live-in farmhand.

As the years went by, his dream powers began to manifest more and more. Due to his incomplete training, however, he wasn't able to control them, and was wary of using them openly. He mainly utilized these special abilities to help his inner circle of family and friends - by telling fortunes, finding lost objects, or banishing persistent nightmares for them.

The Nightmare Court, however, was soon alerted to the inexpert manipulation of the dream realm taking place outside of their own realm. The Nightmare Man eventually pinpointed the source of these disturbances and dispatched a night terror to

Spotted Cloud's home in order to eliminate the young upstart. Spotted Cloud's ability to read the future in dreams allowed him to anticipate the strike, but in the end he was not powerful enough to prevent the farmer's youngest son, Hamer (who was the Abber's best friend), from being killed during the skirmish.

Up until this encounter, Spotted Cloud was not certain that his homeland even existed anymore. He surmised that the attack somehow originated from the rulers of the Nightmare Lands, and thus his homeland must have somehow survived the Grand Conjunction. Now, he was determined to figure out a way to return to it. He also realized that as long as he lived, he would be a target for the Nightmare Court. Anyone close to him would be in constant danger, thus he left the farm he called home behind and once again found himself, at the age of 18, alone in an unfamiliar world.

Luckily, one night he met another dreamwalker like himself, an Abber shaman who called himself Dances with Shadows. He told Spotted Cloud that his homeland was transformed into a literal island beyond the misty border and returning to it was a treacherous undertaking. Dances with Shadows offered to take him under his wing so Spotted Cloud could survive the ordeal. But,= as the two met and talked more, they came to see an advantage in having an agent who could exercise his power outside of the direct reach of the Nightmare Court. Thus, after Spotted Cloud finally completed his mystic training, he elected to remain in the Core and continue to use his special abilities to help those plagued by the various machinations of the Nightmare Court.

The Nightmare Lands: A Glossary

The Dream Plane – A dimension created by the subconscious mind of all dreamers.

Dream Seed – A dreamer imprisoned within a Dreamscape, placed there by members of the Nightmare Court to feed off the energies they generate while sleeping.

Dream-Self – An idealized mental projection created by a dreamer.

Dreamscapes – Ethereal spheres that hold Dream Seeds and serve as the stage for nightmares, they are a level of reality between the dream realm and the waking world. Usually their existence is fleeting, but permanent ones can be crafted by members of the Nightmare Court.

Dreamspawn – Creatures native to the Nightmare Lands whose appearance and behavior are completely malleable, they feed on the mental energies of dreamers and interact with Dream Seeds within the Dreamscapes.

Nether Portal - A doorway between the waking world and the Dream Plane that allows travel into and out of Dreamscapes.

Netherstone – A flat, black stone with white patterns painted on it; allows Dream Seeds to escape Dreamscapes by opening a Nether Portal.

Night Terror – A special agent of the Nightmare Man that can breach the Veil of Sleep and enter the waking world.

Ring of Dreams – A band of Dreamscapes that circles the physical domain of the Nightmare Lands.

The Veil of Sleep – The boundary that separates the waking world from the Dream Plane.

Combat: In the physical world, Spotted Cloud prefers to fight from a distance, using his slingshot to strike from cover. When hunting for food or merely seeking to protect himself, he uses his standard slugs. He reserves his magical ammunition for more deadly combat situations. For instance, he uses his Glitter Stones to uncover enemies that use shadows or invisibility to hide their actions. He often uses the stones from his Bag of Boulders to surprise more powerful foes and knock them off their feet with one blow. He also uses his *fire seed* spell to enchant common pebbles and use them as incendiary projectiles when needed.

Alternatively, in the dream realm he prefers a more direct approach and is quick to wade into battle with his mighty club. He knows the opponents he finds there are both powerful and masters of deceit, and believes that direct physical attacks are the best method of disrupting their schemes. When he finds himself in a particularly vexing dreamscape, he often starts destroying background objects in order to lure out the mastermind (mostly likely a dreamspawn) that is controlling things from behind the scenes.

Interestingly, he uses his spellcasting abilities sparingly. This is in part because he does not want to rely on them too much, because he knows they are not as reliable in the dream realm as they are in the physical world. He most often uses his magic for defensive or investigative purposes only. On the rare occasions that he is traveling with others, he will also use whatever spells he can to make their journey together easier.

THE WATCHER ON THE WALL

Like most Abber people, Spotted Cloud has many names. His mentor Dances with Shadows gave him the name of Far Watcher in honor of his protegé's chosen mission. Spotted Cloud's enemies know him as Long Hunter, much for the same reason.

His current base of operations lies just outside of Immol in Barovia. It is far removed from the harsh grip of Strahd von Zarovich and the skirmishes of the Gundarakite rebels that oppose his rule in the western portion of the domain. Spotted Cloud feels a certain kinship with the small ethnic enclaves of Forfarians and Thaani outsiders that reside there. During his travels, he has had the opportunity to add the Balok, Sithican and Tepestani languages to his repertoire (along with the Vaasi tongue he originally mastered as a child).

While Spotted Cloud now knows that his home domain still exists, he has decided to remain in the Core because he believes he is uniquely placed to guard the waking world against intrusions from the Nightmare Court. Even though he regularly visits dreamscapes to meet Dances with Shadows and to aid those in the thrall of the Nightmare Court, he never enters the Nightmare Lands proper.

In addition to the usual machinations of the Nightmare Court, Spotted Cloud has discovered two extraordinary phenomena directly related to the Nightmare Lands which he believes pose a great danger to the rest of the Demiplane.

The first is a curious collection of rocks, which he has dubbed Nightmare Shards, that have been deposited in seemingly random locations. They are flat and have the same markings as netherstones, but whereas netherstones are black and have white markings, these rocks are white with black markings. And instead of creating a portal to escape a Dreamscape, these Nightmare Shards imprison anyone who activates them in an arbitrary Dreamscape located in the Ring of Dreams inside the Nightmare Lands itself!

Spotted Cloud discovered through his dream investigations that these stones activate at the touch of a sentient being, triggering the black markings to spread over the entire stone and then reach beyond its edges, enveloping the creature that touched it and any other sentient within a 10 foot radius. This “black hole” lasts for only a scant few seconds before it collapses in on itself, and leaves only the Nightmare Shard behind, appearing just as it was before.

NOTE: It is not a targeted individual's dream-self that is transported to the Nightmare Lands, but their actual physical body. Usually when an unsuspecting creature is thrust into the mad world of the average dreamscape, the result is a quick death. And when someone physically dies in a dreamscape, they don't just wake up like a Dream Seed would; they simply die. Nothing is left of their body in either the waking world or the dream realm.

The second strange phenomenon he has come across, which he has dubbed Dream Wells, are even harder to explain. They are places where reality and the Dream Plane mingle, producing weird and off-putting changes to the landscape and anyone who enters its boundaries. Basically, they act as free-floating Dreamscapes. They don't require a Dream Seed to sustain them, as they simply leech energy from the dreams of nearby sentient creatures. Each one creates unique effects that differs wildly from the next. Anyone that walks through them, however, can activate its reality-twisting powers, gaining the ability to form thoughts into reality.

While he is not certain of their origin, Spotted Cloud feels like these two phenomena are linked, and indicative of some new plot by the Nightmare Court to establish a beachhead in the waking world.

The Nightmare Lands: Deconstructed

Unbeknownst to Spotted Cloud or any other scholars of the Demiplane, the Grand Conjunction did more than just remove the Nightmare Lands from the Core and deposit it within the Mists as an Island of Terror. The violent sundering left fragmentary pieces of the dream domain scattered among the lands of the Core in the form of these so-called Dream Wells and Nightmare Shards. The vast majority of them are distributed across the Southern Core, specifically in Nova Vaasa and Hazlan (the two domains closest to the former location of the Nightmare Lands). Some have reached as far as Tepest to the north and Sithicus to the southeast. Interestingly, none have been discovered past the Shadow Rift, and it is unknown whether that shrouded domain simply dissolved them or that they rest intact somewhere below the roiling mists.

Luckily, both of these phenomena can be neutralized via a complicated ritual that Spotted Cloud has developed with the help of Dances with Shadows. When performed on the Nightmare Shards, their magical energy is drained away and they are reduced to just a normal piece of rock, which Spotted Cloud then adds to his cudgel. The Dream Wells, however, are usually too strong to be destroyed, so they are instead banished to the Ring of Dreams in the Nightmare Lands.

Spotted Cloud doesn't really need a job to survive as he lives off the wilderness, but he knows that a sack full of gold comes in useful when traveling in strange lands. Thus, Spotted Cloud also continues his fortune telling activities. After much trial and error over the years, he has perfected two main methods to maximize the effectiveness of his dream prophesying.

In order to tell someone's fortune based on their dreams, he puts them into a light trance where they can both hear and respond to his questions. He uses his vast knowledge of portents and dream imagery to decipher the meaning of future or past events. This service is what the vast majority of his clientèle seek him out for.

There are those customers, however, that seek him out for more serious intervention – those people experiencing recurring nightmares or who are being targeted by the Nightmare Court in some way. For these type of problems, Spotted Cloud takes a more active role. Sometimes these individuals come to him for an intervention, at other times it is a friend or family member that contacts him and he has to travel to the patient. It all depends on how far the attacks have progressed.

The method he uses in such instances is similar to the previous one. Instead of putting a charge into a trance, he sends them into a true slumber. Then,

after waiting for up to half an hour to allow the subject to enter a deep sleep, he puts himself into a trance that allows his dream-self to enter into the mind of his charge and witness their dreams firsthand. He has defeated countless dreamspawn in this manner and thwarted the nefarious plots of each member of the Nightmare Court several times over (earning their eternal enmity). After he has defeated the menace at hand, he will monitor his client for several days to make sure the depredations have truly ceased before moving on.

FRIENDS

After several run-ins with the Nightmare Court and its minions, Spotted Cloud has become extremely cautious about forming strong attachments to anyone. The initial attack on the farmstead where he lived was only the first such encounter. After he left to live on his own, he soon began a relationship with a Rashemi woman named Anshij. During one of his periodic sojourns, what he believes was a night terror sent by the Nightmare Man killed her and left her body to be discovered by Spotted Cloud when he returned. He has adopted an aloof attitude ever since in order to save himself and others from future tragedy.

That being said, he does prefer certain groups of people over others. He has a natural affinity for people who live simple lives or are at one with nature and honor the environment. He is sympathetic to the plight of the Rashemi in Hazlan, as well as the Druids in Forlorn. He finds their lives much more relatable than the snobby nobles or stuffy scholars he comes across.

For the most part, Spotted Cloud isn't concerned about holders of temporal power or domain borders; thus, he has his own nicknames for the denizens he walks among. He knows the Barovians as the People of the Cold Nights, and calls them the Fearful Ones. He knows the Vaasi as the People of the Long Grass, and calls them the Two-Faced Ones. He knows the Invidians as the People of the Sharp Tongues, and calls them the Hot-Headed Ones. He knows the Kartakans as the People of the Song, or the Joyful Ones. He knows the Hazlani as the People of the Whispers, and calls them the Harsh Ones. He knows the Sithicans as the People of Many Sorrows, and calls them the Shadowed Ones.

He is always on the lookout for allies that are outdoorsy, can survive in the wilderness, and can generally take care of themselves. He has fought alongside the anchorite Tara Kolyana, whose range of operations (she currently splits her time between the domains of Barovia and Hazlan) largely overlap his own. He also counts Jameld of Hroth as one of his most trusted friends. The elven ranger and the Abber shaman have forged an unbreakable bond after saving each other's lives many times over while fighting shadowy, supernatural forces within Sithicus and abroad.

Interestingly enough, Spotted Cloud counts one particular Darklord among his allies – Harkon Lukas. The two have only fought side-by-side in a couple of notable battles – once in 751 BC against the werewolf menace of the Howling Clan and again in 755 BC when he was personally summoned by the Darklord to assist in expelling the vampire trickster known as Jack Bequick, who had recently set up shop in the domain. Spotted Cloud is not aware of the Darklord's true wolfwere nature, but admires his battle prowess and the affinity with nature that he exhibits. They remain good friends to this day.

He also has loose associations with a handful of disparate entities within the region. He considers the Halan witches that operate the Hospice of Silver Light to be powerful healers, and holds the white witch Megan Llewelyn in high regard. He is also supportive of the Brotherhood of Contemplative Power, and often stops over at their headquarters when he is traveling through the area. He even has a begrudging respect for the Cult of the Morninglord and its priests, whom he counts as a powerful force for good.

Dread Possibility: Deep Dark Designs

Unbeknownst to Spotted Cloud, his mentor Dances with Shadows is actually in league with the Nightmare Man. The Darklord of the Nightmare Lands is painfully aware that his power has been weakened ever since the Grand Conjunction, when his domain was physically split off from the Core. He is actually using Spotted Cloud to collect the dream energy that was inadvertently dissipated through both the Nightmare Shards and the Dream Wells. For every site that Spotted Cloud shuts down, the Nightmare Man's power grows. And when the errant Abber shaman has neutralized enough of them, the Nightmare Man plans on trapping him in one of the permanent dreamscapes that he controls.

Initiation and Induction

Spotted Cloud was offered membership in the Bright Triad by the Gray Monk after a series of adventures they shared within the Southern Core. During his many travels, the Gray Monk noted that there were few individuals who resided in this area who were willing to use their skills to protect others, and Spotted Cloud's eagerness to lend a hand impressed him greatly. (His uncanny knack for surviving onslaughts from the toughest supernatural menaces was also a factor.)

The first time they met was on what the Gray Monk considers his trial by fire, an encounter with the Black Duke and his cultists in the small Hazlani town of Kubar. The fiend's cult had been operating there for years, but the powers that be finally sent a call for help in 749 BC, which brought the Gray Monk to the scene. Spotted Cloud, meanwhile, had been following strange premonitions of a great evil manifesting in the area and believed that the Nightmare Court was behind them. Instead, he encountered an entity that transcended the boundaries of evil that he was used to fighting. While the Gray Monk fought the fiend directly, Spotted Cloud rounded up the cultists and kept them from interfering. While the Gray Monk only managed to banish the menace temporarily, he gained a permanent ally for his effort.

The Gray Monk visited the Balinoks region several more times in the following years and enlisted Spotted Cloud's aid whenever he could – defeating Erich Reinhold, the legendary Leper Baron who stalked Immol circa 750 BC, and the Ghosts of Hospitality that lurked outside the hamlet of Forfarmax in Hazlan. After this last adventure, the Gray Monk invited him into the Bright Triad and he made a rare trip north for his induction in 751 BC.

He is happy to now have a network of people who seem able to take care of themselves, who he can call upon. Since joining the group, however, the only other member he has met is Aleka Kierkegaard. He calls upon either her or the Gray Monk whenever he has to venture into the city, using them as his urban guides. (Conversely, they use him whenever a trek into the wilderness is called for.)

He rarely visits the Northern Core and prefers to stay out of any major conflicts or contests with great powers. He is much happier handling the low-level threats he is accustomed to dealing with. His main use for his affiliation with the Bright Triad is to have more eyes and ears watching for incursions from the Nightmare Lands, but he is more than willing to answer a call for help if anyone needs him for a problem related to dreams or nightmares.

Spotted Cloud has one other unique ally that he picked up during his training to be an Abber Shaman...

Twilight (Gray Morph)

Native Outsider; **CR** 3; **SZ** Tiny Shapechanger; **HD** 3d8+3, 16 **hp**; **Init** +0; **Spd** 20 ft.; **AC** 14 (touch 11, flat-footed 14); **Atk** +5 melee (bite 1d3+1); **SA** Lullaby, Memory Drain; **SQ** Alternate Form, Damage Reduction (5/magic), Darkvision (60 ft.), Detect Thoughts, Fear Eater, Sunlight Vulnerability; **AL** LN; **SV Fort** +4, **Ref** +3, **Will** +4; **Str** 13, **Dex** 11, **Con** 12, **Int** 7, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 9

Skills*:* Bluff +2, Disguise +4, Hide +6, Listen +3, Move Silently +2, Sense Motive +3, Spot +3

Feats: Skill Focus (Disguise)

Language*:* Oneiros

Alternate Form (Su): As a standard action, Twilight can change its form as though using a *polymorph* spell. It can remain in its new form indefinitely. and can return to its normal form as a free action.

Fear Eater (Ex): Twilight is immune to all fear, horror, and madness effects. If targeted by a spell that would normally cause such an effect it heals 1 hit point per spell level. If Twilight's actions cause a target to fail a Fear, Horror, or Madness save, it heals 2 hit points of damage for a minor effect, 4 hits for a moderate effect, and 8 hit points for a major effect.

Lullaby (Su): As a standard action, Twilight can murmur softly in Oneiros, causing its foes to become drowsy. All opponents within a 20 foot radius must make a Will save (DC 14). Creatures who fail the save are fatigued for 1d4 rounds, or for as long as Twilight remains within 20 feet of them and continues speaking. Maintaining this ability is a free action. This is a sonic, mind-affecting ability.

Memory Drain (Su): Once per day, Twilight can make a touch attack that deals 1d4 Intelligence damage. Until the victim recovers all the lost Intelligence points, Twilight can use its alternate form ability to mimic any creature from the victim's memory.

Appearance: Twilight has three different forms that it regularly appears as – that of a spider, a bird, and a cat. Its bird form is that of a dun-colored nighthawk, while its cat form is black all over.

Its spider form doesn't appear like any terrestrial arachnid. Instead, it takes the shape of a dreamweaver, a species native to the Nightmare Lands. Its head and abdomen are rose in color, while its legs have gray and white stripes.

When not in any of these forms, Twilight resembles a small puddle of gray protoplasm. During daytime it can be found hiding from the sunlight in one of Spotted Cloud's many pockets. During nighttime, it creeps around Spotted Cloud's campsite. It is never found more than 20 feet from its master, unless it has been sent on an errand.

Combat: Gray Morphs are the weakest type of dreamspawn, and as such, Twilight seeks to run from combat if at all possible. If threatened it will use its disguise abilities to turn into an inanimate object. If forced to defend itself, Twilight will use its Lullaby ability to disorient its foes and then run away. (Spotted Cloud has forbidden it to feed off the dream energies of others.)

FOES

While Spotted Cloud has acquaintances in many organizations based in the Southern Core, there is one specific group located in Barovia that he doesn't care for at all, namely the Gundarakite rebels who are active in the eastern portion of that domain. He generally prefers to avoid political squabbles, but when he first heard of their cause he was sympathetic. After observing the collateral damage that their skirmishes create, as well as the shaky leadership of Ardonk Szerieza, he has withdrawn his support and gives them a wide berth now.

There is one other association that lies farther afield from his usual stomping grounds that has earned his enmity. Spotted Cloud became aware of of La Confrérie des Reveurs shortly after he left Nova Vaasa to be on his own. He was easily able to piece together its true origin and sinister purpose using his dreamwalking powers.

He knows they have established many branches in the more civilized domains of the Core, which gives him one more reason to distrusts cities. He is always on the lookout for active cells, and when he finds one, he calls in reinforcements (usually either Aleka or the Gray Monk) to aid him in breaking it up.

Lords of Nightmares

Even thought the Nightmare Court remain his primary adversaries, the majority of Spotted Cloud's work doesn't result in direct confrontation with these lords of the Nightmare Lands. Most of the time he deals with run-of-the-mill dreamspawn, such as morphs and ennuis that merely serve as catspaws or are engaged in their own petty schemes. Then there are the Night Terrors he has fought, which Spotted Cloud finds to be his some of his most dangerous foes.

The Ghost Dancer – This court member's focus is on those dreamers who feel great guilt or shame. Since Spotted Cloud still carries the guilt about being the only survivor of the Dream Vestige's attack on his village, the contests he has with this nightmare lord are highly personal affairs. Even though he has survived many such encounters, he always emerges a little shaken by the experience.

Hypnos – This court member focuses on those dreamers who are dealing with feelings of inadequacy, failure, or humiliation. He has sent countless hypnotized assassins against Spotted Cloud, who considers this nightmare lord one of his most tenacious enemies.

Morpheus – This court member focuses on those dreamers struggling with insanity or who are just on the cusp of madness and only need a little push. The Abber people traditionally give this nightmare lord a great deal of respect and a wide berth. Luckily, Spotted Cloud is immune to the particular form of attack Morpheus utilizes, so the two have not clashed often. Whenever the Abber shaman encounters a client dealing with Morpheus' attention, he will bring Aleka in on the case due to her expertise in this area.

Mullonga – This court member focuses on those dreamers who are consumed by fear. This nightmare lord enjoys tormenting Spotted Cloud with the memory of the Nightmare Vestige that killed his entire village. (In fact, she has imprisoned the very creature that caused the massacre and plans on sending it out to hunt him down once she figures out a way to control it in the waking world.) Even though Spotted Cloud has proved his bravery many times over and has eventually grown immune to her attacks, she still likes to strike out at him periodically just to keep him on edge.

The Nightmare Man – This court member chooses a much wider variety of victims than the others, but tends to focus on those dreamers who display great creativity and imagination, such as writers and artists. This nightmare lord hates Spotted Cloud simply due to the fact that the Abber shaman has thwarted so many of his schemes.

The Rainbow Serpent – This court member focuses on those dreamers who feel great betrayal and intense jealousy. Even though this nightmare lord has no hold over Spotted Cloud, it is the one he most frequently encounters when helping others.

Dread Possibility: The Seventh Member

For years scholars have debated the true identities and goals of the Nightmare Court. The one thing the majority can agree on, however, is that there are a total of six members. But, isn't seven the most magically powerful number? Indeed, Spotted Cloud believe he has discovered a hidden seventh member of the Nightmare Court...

He calls himself the Man in the Moon, and his home is known as the Crater, a large concave depression in the earth, with similar, smaller calderas dotting the otherwise gray, featureless landscape. It is lit with a silvery glow, and some have posited that it is located underground, because no sky can be seen overhead. His arcane relic is the Night Chariot, which he claims he uses to travel the night sky.

Unlike his co-Darklords, the Man in the Moon does not target dreamers experiencing negative emotions such as shame or betrayal; instead his victims are eager to prove their worth, such as the greedy or

prideful. He seeks out those who are are doubting themselves and then appears in their dreams to spur them on to success. Afterwards, he make repeat appearances to push them to take on bigger projects and seek out grander roles. He relentlessly pushes his chosen dreamseeds to their absolute limit (both physically and mentally) until he abandons them just before they crash and burn. While no profession is safe from his depredations, he tends to focus on those involved in the arts.

THE MAN IN THE MOON

Native Outsider; **CR** 20; **SZ** Medium Humanoid; **HD** 24d10+20, 144 **hp**; **Init** +6; **Spd** 30 ft., fly 60 ft. (perfect); **AC** 24 (touch 16, flat-footed 18); **Atk** +25 melee (2 slams 1d6+5) or +18 melee (cane 1d6+5); **SA** Charm Gaze, Sneak Attack, Spell-Like Abilities, Summon Dreamspawn; **SQ** Alternate Form, Damage Reduction (15/magic), Darkvision (120 ft.), Detect Thoughts, Low-Light Vision (60 ft.), Spell Resistance (24); **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +15, **Ref** +19, **Will** +24; **Str** 20, **Dex** 23, **Con** 16, **Int** 20, **Wis** 19, **Cha** 25

Skills*:* Balance +12, Bluff +21, Diplomacy +26, Hide +11, Intimidate +10, Jump +22, Knowledge (arcana) +15, Knowledge (nature) +8, Knowledge (planes) +23, Knowledge (religion) +16, Listen +10, Move Silently +10, Perception +18, Performance (dance) +20, Performance (sing) +17, Sense Motive +25, Sleight of Hand +15, Spot +6, Tumble +8

Feats: Alertness, Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Force of Personality, Flyby Attack, Leap Attack, Mobility, Negotiator, Power Attack, Spring Attack

Language*:* Oneiros, Telepathy (100 ft.)

Alternate Form (Su)***:*** The Man in the Moon can shift into his moon form as though using the *polymorph* spell on himself. Changing to his moon form is a standard action and doesn't provoke an attack of opportunity.

Charm Gaze (Su): Anyone within a 30 ft. range who looks into the eyes of the Man in the Moon must make a Will save (DC 28) or be charmed, as in the spell, for 2d6 rounds. The save DC is Charisma based. A successful saving throw negates the effect.

Spell-Like Abilities *(Sp):* At will – *confusion, dream, dreamwalking, nightmare, sleep*; 3/day – *major image, modify memory, phantasmal killer, suggestion;* 1/day – *deeper darkness, fear, greater teleport, invisibility.* These abilities are as the spells, save DCs are Charisma based, 12th level caster.

Summon Dreamspawn (Sp): Twice per day, the Man in the Moon can summon 12 HD of dreamspawn to come to his aid. The summoned creatures appear within 30 ft. of the Man in the Moon and are telepathically controlled by him. The summoned creatures remain until reduced to 0 hit points or dismissed. The Man in the Moon most often uses this ability to summon either two Shadow Morphs or an Ennui and two Gray Morphs.

Appearance: Although he claims to have had several different avatars in the past, he now only appears in two forms – that of a spindly humanoid figure with a moon for a head, or a large glowing moon with a human face.

His orb form floats lazily about and seems to change size at random, ranging in size from a fist to a house. His "face" also fluctuates crazily, going through all the phases of the moon – from full, to gibbous, to half, to crescent, and finally to a completely dark new moon - within a matter of minutes. (When this pattern reaches the new moon phase, only his lips and pearly white teeth remain visible.)

In his humanoid form, he wears a dark three-piece suit and completes the ensemble with a white tie and white gloves. He would present a dashing figure if not for the large crescent-shaped head that sits atop his shoulders. His face protrudes from the inside curve of the crescent facing forward. He capers around with endless energy or flails and splays in exaggerated poses. He speaks rapidly, and often repeats snatches of nursery rhymes randomly. He sings as well, reciting fragments of lullabies, poems

or songs that are in some way associated with the moon.

The longer he stays in each form, however, the more a macabre transformation takes place. While at first his features seem cartoonishly exaggerated, after a while tiny craters begin appearing on his skin, pockmarking his face and giving his body a dried out, withered appearance.

Combat: The Man in the Moon relies on his charm to win his battles, not force of arms. If his spell-like abilities fail to win over his opponents, he simply backstabs them at the first opportunity. This usually occurs in the middle of one of his "performances." He uses his frenzied dancing to hide his sinister maneuvering. Then, when he is ready, he lands behind his target and bludgeons them with either a blow from his cane or slams into them with his body.

Nemeses

Ironically, Spotted Cloud's most implacable foe is more like him than he realizes. Several years ago, the Nightmare Man came to the conclusion that the only way to stop such an irritating thorn in his side was to send someone who could strike on his behalf in the waking world. Even though he still allows other members of the Nightmare Court to regularly attack Spotted Cloud, he is not foolish enough to expect a permanent victory to come by this route. No, he needed someone who could not be counteracted by the Abber's mystical abilities over dreamspawn and their ilk.

The Nightmare Man found the perfect candidate shortly after discovering Spotted Cloud's nascent powers. It was a little girl named Glass Bird, who hailed from the same village as the Abber shaman. She ran away from the Dream Vestige's attack just like Spotted Cloud, but instead of being exiled in the Core, she was adopted by another tribe of Abber nomads. The memories of that fateful night continued to haunt her dreams, however, a fact which drew the Nightmare Man directly to her.

The Nightmare Man made Glass Bird a generous offer. He would give her a reprieve from the nightmares that plagued her, and all she had to do was hunt down and kill a rogue shaman. Glass Bird readily accepted, excited for the opportunity to see the world beyond the Nightmare Lands. She was also thirsty for a taste of real power, something her mundane life among her tribe could not provide. The Nightmare Man even granted her direct access to the Dream Plane in order to give her the ability to control nightmares even while she was in the waking world.

Over the years Glass Bird has hunted down and attacked Spotted Cloud several times. (It was actually her that killed his Rashemi girlfriend.) She often plans elaborate traps to waylay him, sometimes plaguing an entire community with nightmarish visions just to draw him out. Unfortunately, for all her efforts their battles usually end in a stalemate. His shamanistic dream powers and her nightmare-fueled abilities cancel each other out.

Glass Bird aka The Nightmare Spinner

Female Human (Abber) Bard 7 / Nightmare Spinner 5: **CR** 12; **SZ** Medium Humanoid (5 ft. 8 in.); **HD** 7d6 + 5d4 +12, 42 **hp**; **Init** +2; **Spd** 30 ft.; **AC** 15 (touch 13, flat-footed 13); **Atk** +6 melee (2 daggers 1d4+1) or +3 ranged (2 daggers 1d4+1); **SA** Deadly Nightmare, Inspire Fear, Nightmare Phantasm, Spirit Chill; **SQ** Bardic Knowledge, Bardic Music, Immunity to Fear, Weapon Proficiency (Simple); **AL** NE; **SV Fort** +3, **Ref** +6, **Will** +9; **Str** 11, **Dex** 14, **Con** 14, **Int** 16, **Wis** 12, Cha 15

Skills*:* Appraise +3, Balance +2, Bluff +5, Climb +3, Concentration +5, Decipher Script +2, Diplomacy +5, Disguise +6, Escape Artist +7, Gather Information +6, Hide +5, Intimidate +5, Jump +2, Knowledge (arcana) +3, Knowledge (history) +1, Knowledge (planes) +2, Listen +2, Move Silently +6, Open Lock +5, Perform +7 (musical instrument), Search +6, Sense Motive +5, Sleight of hand +5, Spellcraft +2, Spot +4, Survival +3

Feats: Acrobatic, Combat Casting, Deft Hands, Dodge, Stealthy, Track

Languages*:* Abber, Oneiros, Sithican, Vaasi

Signature Possessions*:* Boots of Speed, 2 +1 Daggers, Masterwork Pan Flute, Shadow Cloaker (Gnash)

Bard Spells *per Day* (3/3/2/0, DC 12+ spell level, 7th level caster):

0 – *dancing lights, ghost sounds, daze, lullaby, mage hand, songbird*;

1 – *cause fear, sleep, summon monster, tasha's hideous laughter*;

2 – *blur, darkness, invisibility, summon swarm*;

3 – *cure serious wounds, major image*

Bardic Knowledge (Ex): Glass Bird can make a special bardic knowledge check with a +9 bonus to see whether she knows some relevant information about local notable people, legendary items, or noteworthy places. (DC 10 – Common, known by the general population, DC 20 – Uncommon, known only to a minority of the population, DC 25 – Obscure, hard to come by and known only by a few people, DC 30 – Extremely obscure, forgotten by nearly all.)

Bardic Music (Sp): Once per day per bard level, Glass Bird can use her music to produce magical effects on herself or those around her.

- *Countersong (Su)*: Glass Bird can use her music to counter magical effects that depend on sound. Each round of the countersong, she makes a Performance check. Any creature within 30 feet of her that is affected by a sonic (or language-dependent) magical attack may use Glass Bird's Performance check result in place of its own saving throw (if higher).
- *Fascinate (Sp)*: Glass Bird can use her music to cause one or more creatures to become fascinated with her. She makes a Performance check against the creature's Will save. On a failure, Glass Bird cannot attempt to fascinate the creature again for 24 hours. On a success, the creature sits down and quietly listens; they take no actions as well as suffer a -4 penalty on skill checks made as reactions (such as Listen or Spot).
- *Inspire Courage (Su)*: Glass Bird can use her music to inspire courage in her allies (or herself), bolstering them against fear and improving their combat abilities. Affected allies receive a +1 bonus on saving throws against charm and fear effects and a +1 bonus on attack and weapon damage rolls.
- *Inspire Competence (Su)*: Glass Bird can use her music to help an ally succeed at a task. An affected ally receives a +2 bonus on a skill check of the ally's choice.

Deadly Nightmare (Su): Glass Bird can create a mind-affecting fear effect so strong that it can make a creature literally drop dead. She can target any one living creature within 30 feet, which must succeed on a Will save (DC 17) or die of fright. If the save succeeds, the subject is panicked for one round. A creature whose HD exceed twice Glass Bird's character level is unaffected by this power. It is considered a mind-affecting fear effect and a death effect, and can be used three times per day.

Inspire Fear (Su): As a standard action, Glass Bird can create a mind-affecting fear effect that makes a living creature within 30 feet ill at ease. The target becomes shaken for five rounds, but a successful Will save (DC 17) halves this duration. She can use this power five times per day, but multiple uses of this ability on the same creature do not stack.

Nightmare Phantasm (Su): When Glass Bird casts a *figment* or *glamer* spell, she can choose to weave a thread of nightmare phantasm into it as a free action. The spell gains the phantasm descriptor. Each time any enemy attempts a Will save to disbelieve the affected illusion spell, a tiny portion of the spell transforms into a phantasm effect that targets that enemy. The enemy becomes shaken for one round (no save). She can use this ability five times per day,

but no creature can be affected by this ability more than once in 24 hours. This ability is considered a mind-affecting fear effect.

Spirit Chill (Su): Creatures affected by a fear effect that Glass Bird caused take non-lethal damage as well, the amount of which depends on the potency of the fear created. Any creature that is shaken takes 1d6 points of non-lethal damage. Any creature that becomes frightened takes 2d6 points of non-lethal damage. And, any creature that becomes panicked takes 3d6 points of non-lethal damage.

Appearance: Glass Bird is of medium height and has the coppery skin and long black hair that the Abber people are known for. She is quite beautiful, with high cheekbones and alluring almond-colored eyes. Even though she is an assassin by trade, she poses as a wandering bard. She plays the traditional wooden pan flute of her people. It is the only remaining personal belonging from the time before her village was destroyed, and it was given to her by her grandfather.

She dresses in muted colors such as tan shirts and brown pants, that are far from the festive garb one would expect from an entertainer. She does, however, accent this drab ensemble with colorful scarves (ranging from navy blue and royal purple to forest green) that she ties up and down her arms and legs at the joints. She always wears a gray cloak wherever she goes (this is actually her pet shadow cloaker named Gnash).

Whenever Glass Bird performs a hit, she uses her nightmare powers to twist her appearance into what she terms her "Angel of Death" persona. Her hair grows wild and lashes all about her face and head like living tentacles. Her eye sockets become shrunken and her irises turn completely black. Her nose flattens, her nostrils widen, and her tongue becomes freakishly long, extending halfway down her torso. Her fingernails extend into long black claws and her palms grow mouths with vicious-looking teeth sticking out of them.

Combat: Glass Bird will first attempt to charm her enemies with her bardic music and then unleash her fear-inducing illusions to strike terror in their hearts. If her nightmare phantasms don't kill them outright, she finishes the job with a dagger to the throat. She loves instilling fear into her enemies, and enjoys playing cat-and-mouse-games before zeroing in for the final kill.

If she confronts someone she doesn't intend to kill or just isn't in the mood to fight (a rare occurrence), she will use her abilities to simply scare them away.

If truly pressed, she will sic Gnash on her opponents and then attempt to flee. She also employs Gnash against any henchmen or guards she encounters, which allows her up to deal with her main target personally.

CREDITS

- The Black Duke adventure appears courtesy of Ryan Naylor from the self-titled article in Children of the Night: Demons.
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and

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"Surely, in such enlightened times as these, only a fool or a madman would believe in devils."

"One doesn't have to believe in devils in order for them to exist. In fact, they would prefer that you don't. It makes you more susceptible to their lies."

"Lies? Such as?"

"I believe the greatest trick the devils ever pulled was convincing the world they don't exist."

- Conversation between Nicodemus Munchausen and Baron Melanthus of Vor Ziyden

ZEBEDIAH MUNCHAUSEN AKA THE GRAY MONK

Male Human (Quevari) Cleric 4 / Divine Exorcist 8 / Monster Hunter 3: **CR** 15; **SZ** Medium Humanoid (5 ft. 8 in.); **HD** 4d8+8d8+3d6+14, 71 **hp**; **Init** +1; Spd 30 ft.; **AC** 13 (touch 11, flat-footed 12); **Atk** +11/+6/+1 melee (short sword 1d4+1 or mattock 1d6+2) ; **SA** Smite Controller, Smite Possessor, Turn Undead; **SQ** Break Control, Craft Talisman, Monster Knowledge, See Controller, See Possession, Shielded Soul, Studied Foe, Weapon Proficiency (Simple); **AL** LG; **SV Fort** +13, **Ref** +4, **Will** +13; **Str** 14, **Dex** 12, **Con** 14, **Int** 15, **Wis** 16, **Cha** 13

Skills*:* Bluff +4, Concentration +5, Diplomacy +7, Gather Information +5, Heal +6, Intimidate +8, Knowledge (arcana) +4, Knowledge (history) +5, Knowledge (planes) +8, Knowledge (religion) +10, Listen +6, Move Silently +6, Profession (exorcist) +5, Search +7, Sense Motive +12, Spot +6

Feats: Ethereal Touch, Extra Turning, Ghost Sight, Improved Supernatural Resilience (paralyzing touch), Indomitable (demons/devils), Open Mind, Spirit of Light, Threatening Presence

Language*:* Abyssal, Balok, Darkonese, Falkovnian, Infernal, Mordentish

Signature Possessions: Censer of Warding, +1 Short Sword (ghost touch weapon), Farspeaking Amulet, 2 Flasks of Holy Water, Healing Salve, Manual of the Planes, +1 Mattock (blessed weapon), Monster Hunter's Kit, Radiant Sphere, Scroll of Mystick Cage, 1 Vial of Acid

Cleric Spells *per Day* (5/3+1/2+1, DC 11 + spell level, 8th level caster, Domains – Good [casts good spells at +1 caster level], Protection [can generate a protective ward as a supernatural ability once per day]):

0 – *create water, guidance, purify food and drink, mending, resistance;*

1 – *bless, cure light wounds, divine favor, protection from evil, sanctuary;*

2 – *aid, shield, zone of truth*

Monster Hunter Spells *per Day* (4/2/1; DC 12 + spell level, 3rd level caster, must choose and prepare spells in advance from the following list):

1 – *alarm, chill touch, detect magic, detect secret doors, detect undead, disrupt undead, hold portal, light, protection from evil, read magic, resistance;*

2 – *arcane lock, continual flame, darkvision, daze monster, expeditious retreat, knock, magic weapon, see invisibility;*

3 – *daylight, diminish undead, dispel magic, gentle repose, halt undead, magic circle against evil, tongues*

Break Control (Ex): Zebediah can break loose from Enchantment effects placed on him, and from attempts to possess him. If he is affected by an Enchantment spell or effect, or is possessed, and fails his saving throw, he can attempt to save again one round later at the same DC. If that attempt fails, then Zebediah can try again after one hour, and if that save fails he can try again every 24 hours thereafter.

Craft Talisman (Su): Zebediah can create a single-use magic item that holds spells until triggered by

imbuing a talisman with any 3rd level or lower spell that he knows. He must provide any material components or focuses the spell requires. The talisman has a base price of the spell level x caster level x 50 gp. Zebediah must spend 1/25 of its base price in XP and use up raw materials costing half the base price.

Monster Knowledge (Ex): Zebediah may make a special Monster Knowledge check with a +6 bonus to see whether he knows some relevant information about local monster legends, noteworthy places where creatures might dwell or renowned items used by or useful against monsters. (If he has 5 or more ranks in the relevant Knowledge skill, he gains a +2 synergy bonus on this check). A successful Monster Knowledge check does not reveal the abilities of a specific monster, but offers ideas as to its nature; nor does it tell the powers of a magic item, but it may give a hint as to its general function. (DC 10 – Common, known by the general population, DC 20 – Uncommon, known only to a minority of the population DC 25 – Obscure, hard to come by and known only by a few people, DC 30 – Extremely obscure, forgotten by nearly all.)

See Controller (Su): As a full round action Zebediah may observe any creature within his line of sight and determine whether the target is currently under a charm or compulsion effect. If the subject is under such an effect, he sees a luminous trail (the path of control) that leads off in the direction of the controller. No one except Zebediah can see this path. A controller that has a higher Charisma score than him they can make a Will save (DC 19) to keep their path of control unseen; if successful, Zebediah's See Controller power cannot reveal the path of control for the next 24 hours.

See Possession (Su): As a full round action Zebediah may observe any creature or object within his line of sight and determine whether the target is currently possessed by another entity. If the creature or object is possessed, he sees the possessor's outline superimposed over the subject. No one except Zebediah can see this effect. A possessing entity that has a higher Charisma score than him can make a Will save (DC 19) to remain unseen; if successful, Zebediah's See Possession power cannot reveal that entity for the next 24 hours.

Shielded Soul (Ex): Zebediah has developed an inner strength that helps him resist assaults on his mind or being. He adds his divine exorcist level to any saving throw he makes to resist charm, compulsion, a negative energy effect, or any effect from the school of Necromancy.

Smite Controller (Su): Zebediah can strike a supernatural blow against an entity using a charm or compulsion effect on another creature, provided that he has used his See Controller power to reveal it. To do so, he makes a melee touch attack against either the controlled subject or the controller. If the attack hits, Zebediah makes an Intimidate check as a free action; this is opposed by the controller's Will save. If the Intimidate check succeeds by 4 or less, the controller suffers wracking pains that impose a -2 penalty on all attack rolls, ability checks, skill checks, and saving throws for 1 minute. If it succeeds by 5 or more, the controller suffers wracking pains as above, and the charm or compulsion effect ends immediately, even if it cannot normally be dispelled. Zebediah can use this ability up to five times per day.

Smite Possessor (Su): Zebediah can strike a supernatural blow against an entity possessing a creature or object, provided that he has used his See Possession power to reveal it. To do so, he makes a melee touch attack against the possessed subject. If the attack hits, Zebediah makes an Intimidate check as a free action; this is opposed by the possessing entity's Will save. If the Intimidate check succeeds by 4 or less, the possessing entity takes 1d4 Charisma damage. If it succeeds by 5 or more, the entity takes 1d4+1 Charisma damage and is immediately driven from the subject. For the next 2d6 rounds, the entity must move away from Zebediah at its fastest speed. If it cannot move, it cowers instead. In any case, the entity cannot attempt to possess the same subject

again for the next 24 hours. He can use this ability up to five times per day.

Studied Foe (Ex): Zebediah treats outsiders (demons / devils) and incorporeal undead (ghosts) as studied foes. He has scrutinized the habits and weaknesses of his studied foes so closely that he gains a +1 bonus on Sense Motive checks when used against outsiders and incorporeal undead (and +2 against demons/devils and ghosts). Likewise, in combat he gains a +1 bonus on attack rolls and saving throws against outsiders and incorporeal undead (and +2 against demons/devils and ghosts).

Appearance: Zebediah is a middle-aged man of medium height who always has a stern look. He has short brown hair that is graying at the temples and worn in a messy combover. He also sports bushy muttonchops, but what can be seen of his face is wrinkled and weathered. His left hand is missing, cut off neatly at the wrist.

He does not wear the typical garb of a priest of the Church of Ezra. His clothing is closer to a contemporary Borcan nobleman than a simple cleric. He wears colorful, patterned waistcoats over starched cotton wingtip shirts with stiff collars and cuffs. His trousers are wide-cut, and he tucks them into weathered black walking boots. The entire ensemble projects the aura of a distinguished, if somewhat old-fashioned, gentleman.

When traveling, he wears a long, gray robe with with a simple rope cincture about his waist and a wide cowl covering his head. This is where his moniker, the Gray Monk, comes from, as this is the first impression most of his clients get of him when he arrives at their doorstep.

He walks briskly and is always quick to get to the point when speaking. Some people find his personality gruff, but he is actually very well-mannered and he can be quite tender when dealing with the sick or children. He has a deep voice that is commanding in a fight, but can also be comforting when needed. He is well-traveled due to his particular profession and is remarkably open-minded for a member of the clergy.

Background: Zebediah was a foundling, discovered in the ruins of a burnt-out village deep in the Blightwood of Borca when he was just 4-months-old. At least, that is the story he was told as a child at the orphanage he lived in. In actuality, Zebediah is of Quevari descent.

The Quevari

The Quevari are a strange, rarely-encountered people that resemble fair-skinned Vistani. Very little is known about them because they prefer to live in their own, insular communities, far away from the rest of civilization. They hide a dark secret, however - during the three nights of the full moon they turn into homicidal maniacs bent on eating the flesh of any outsiders they come across. The Quevari call this period of temporary insanity the Bloodmoon. While they remember everything that occurs during this time, they never speak of it to others.

The Quevari curse, however, did not manifest until Zebediah reached the age of 13 years old (at the start of puberty). So it came as a surprise to everyone when he attacked his fellow bunkmates in the boys' dormitory one night during the full moon. Luckily, he was restrained by the adult caretakers before anyone could be seriously harmed. Worried that he was possessed by an evil spirit, they restrained him and locked him in a room all by himself for the next two days and nights. After that, there seemed to be no recurrence so he was released.

The director of the orphanage, however, did call for an experienced exorcist from nearby Levkarest to come out and examine him. The exorcist, Nicodemus Munchausen, studied Zebediah closely but found no demonic taint. He knew, however, that there were several other supernatural diseases that could be plaguing the boy; indeed, he at first suspected the boy was a lycanthrope. At Nicodemus' instruction, Zebediah was separated from his fellows at the next

full moon; during the intervening month the exorcist researched the child's origin.

He feverishly pored over the records from the local church and eventually uncovered the truth - Zebediah was the only survivor of a massacre instigated by the Church itself! It was anchorites that torched his village and killed its inhabitants. It seems that the depredations of the Quevari in the area had reached a fever pitch, and the local populace demanded that the clergy do something about the evil on their doorstep. The anchorite that lead the raiding party couldn't bring himself to kill a baby, so he placed Zebediah in an orphanage for his own safety.

Nicodemus took pity on the boy, deciding to make him his ward and eventually trained him as his apprentice. When Zeb (as his adopted father took to calling him) turned 16, Nicodemus told him about his past, and together they visited the site of his original home. It was here that he picked up an abandoned mattock that he now uses as his signature weapon. It serves as the only physical link to his lost past.

While this revelation helped Zeb to understand his condition, it did not bring him any closer to resolving it. Every month, for the three days and nights of the full moon, Nicodemus locked his charge in a cell in the basement of their manor home. One time, shortly after Zeb turned 18, he escaped and attacked a chambermaid. Luckily, Nicodemus was up late studying and intercepted him before any permanent harm could be done to the girl. Zeb felt deeply ashamed by this particular incident, and the fear-stricken face of the girl haunted his dreams for a long time.

As the years went by, the bond between Zeb and Nico (as his adopted son took to calling him) grew. The exorcist saw the toll that this state of affairs was taking on the Quevari foundling and had not been idle. He constantly searched for a cure for Zeb's condition, becoming more desperate as each one failed in turn. All the while, the boy grew stronger and stronger with each Bloodmoon, and Nicodemus knew it was only a matter of time before the beast within would be fully unleashed. Plus, the old priest knew he would not be around forever to help the boy.

In the meantime. Zeb redoubled his scholarly efforts hoping to eventually become an anchorite and repay the debt he felt he owed the Church of Ezra for saving his life. Zeb vowed that he would use this second chance to fix the damage that his predecessors had done, as well as the trauma his “episodes” caused others.

After dozens of dead ends, Nico finally found a reclusive bruja in Valachan that showed great promise. This good witch asserted that she knew a sure-fire ritual that would shorn Zeb's “shadow self” from him. The only catch was that the boy had to sacrifice a part of himself – his left hand - in order to do it. Faced with the prospect of a lifelong curse that would threaten his loved ones, or going through life with only one hand, he chose to go ahead with the scheme. Luckily for him, this sacrifice seemed to work, as his monthly rages disappeared completely after the ceremony was performed. Finally, Zeb was free!

Combat: Zebediah has studied his chosen opponents (evil outsiders and incorporeal undead) and their motivations for years and survived many pitched battles against these creatures of the night. His fervor for chasing down entities that inhabit other people's bodies is fueled by his own personal experience. He knows how disturbing such a violation can be, and hopes to save other innocents from going through what he did.

He has two main weapons that he wields in his mission to rid the world of evil. When fighting fiends he prefers to fight in close quarters, using his blessed mattock. If he is fighting ghosts, he instead uses his masterwork dagger (which has been treated with Ghost Oil). Whatever the situation, he always wades into combat first. He knows that preparation is key when dealing with the supernatural, but also

believes that a quick, strong strike in the beginning of a battle can be decisive.

He doesn't like to rely too much on spellcraft because he knows the creatures he hunts can manipulate arcane energy much better than most mortals. He prefers to use more reliable items, such as his flasks of holy water and vials of acid, to augment his physical attacks. He mainly uses his spells to protect the innocent or heal his teammates.

Dread Possibility: A Fist Full of Cold Iron

After Zebediah embarked on his holy mission to protect the world from the depredations of evil outsiders, he added a unique weapon to his arsenal. Using funds from the Church of Ezra, he commissioned the creation of a prosthetic hand made of cold iron from the famous inventor John Garrett Daly. It is so masterfully crafted that the fingers are articulated and Zebediah can even use this prosthesis for writing!

If the DM wishes to add this augmentation to the priest's arsenal, treat his left hand as a light mace (1d6 bludgeoning damage) with a Cold Iron enhancement (10 hardness) that bypasses the damage reduction of any creature susceptible to such material (evil outsiders, Shadow Fey, etc.). He keeps this item in a burlap knapsack that he always carries with him, and only brings it out when it is time for battle.

The Rooting Out of All Evil

Zebidiah's mission is simple – he seeks to eradicate any taint of evil within the Demiplane. During his career, he has confronted and defeated some of the most vile monstrosities that have ever plagued the land. He has experienced evil firsthand, and knows it is more than just a philosophical or theological concept. He truly believes that anyone who scoffs at the the reality of evil is a fool who is risking their immortal soul.

His official position as one of the Home Faith's premier exorcists allows him to travel the Core extensively. While he is well-respected by the church and its adherents, his profession is not well understood, and he is treated with awe by priests and laymen alike. (Zebediah is even more respected in the less civilized domains he visits, as possession by evil spirits is considered a very real danger in less advanced societies.)

Currently he resides in a modest home (provided by the Church of Ezra) known as Furza Manor, which lies just outside of Sturben in Borca. He shares it with his wife Kalrissa DeShayes (an accomplished Wandering Anchorite in her own right). They are rarely home, however, as their duties require both of them to travel often. The aging Nicodemus takes care of most of the day-to-day affairs and general upkeep of the grounds while they are away.

The bulk of Zebediah's work lies in researching and seeking out demonic artifacts and evil cults, hoping to prevent additional infernal entities from being summoned into Ravenloft and released upon an unsuspecting populace. He is, of course, very familiar with Rudolph Van Richten's treatise on fiends, but out of the six fiends Van Richten mentioned in his book, Zeb has only encountered the Black Duke face-to-face. Mostly, Zebediah has encountered small, isolated cults dedicated to strange Outworlder gods such as Iuz and Orcus, or even more obscure deities.

A lot of the menaces he faces don't originate from the Lower Planes at all, because to the uninitiated a ghostly possession is hard to distinguish from its demonic cousin. A lot of the leads that his wife or the local clergy feed him end up being of this nature as well. Early in Zebediah's solo career, he collaborated extensively with the Cult of the Morninglord and visited Barovia regularly, and he is well aware that these creatures are just as deadly as his fiendish nemeses.

He has several key volumes that he cross-references when categorizing demonic or cult activity. Besides the aforementioned *Van Richten's Guide to Fiends*,

Zebediah also utilizes Yakov Dilisnya's famed pamphlet, *Five Visions of Hell*. He also has a dog-eared *Manual of the Planes* that Nico handed down to him, which he values above all other texts. (He is loathe to admit it, but even the Madrigorian, penned by the fiend Drigor, has granted him great insights into the mind of his sworn enemies.)

His methods of banishment and exorcising vary depending on whether he is confronting a fiend or a mortal possessed by a spirit or some other supernatural entity. Ironically, the steps it takes to banish a demon are similar to the steps it takes to summon a demon. (After all, in order to banish a demon you must first bring it into your presence and trap it.)

When attempting to free a mortal from possession, Zebediah usually performs the ritual of smiting in a bedroom or parlor of the individual's private residence. Other times, he performs his rites wherever the victim is currently being cared for, such as a private room in a hospital or a secluded alcove at the local chapel. The rites demand absolute silence and privacy, with only the victim's loved ones allowed to attend.

The entire regimen takes several hours to completed, and is filled with an exhaustive recitation of various prayers, holy catechisms, and sacred scriptures. After the ritual is complete, Zebediah can tell immediately if the supernatural control has been lifted, but it is such an intense process that the victim usually takes a few days to recover fully.

When preparing to confront a fiend directly, Zebediah knows that the success of the entire endeavor depends on how well-prepared he is. He prefers to choose the spot where the battle will take place, ideally locating it on holy ground. If that isn't possible, he will pick a clearing on the outskirts of town that is free of innocent bystanders and fortified by his own spells. Zebediah will include any member of the local clergy that he deems capable of assisting him, as well as inviting a trusted friend or two of his own (most likely compatriots recruited from the Bright Triad). The ceremony requires some sort of blessed centerpiece to center spells on, usually a small altar built especially for the encounter or borrowed from a nearby church.

Three steps must be completed in rapid succession. First, Zebediah must summon the targeted fiend by using either its true name or phylactery to draw it to him. Second, once his adversary appears he must cast Mystick Cage to contain it and prevent it from escaping. Finally, he must complete a Spell of Banishment, which he believes sends them back to the nether regions they originate from. This, of course, is easier said than done, which is why Zebediah always brings in extra firepower and has several back-up plans in case things go wrong.

(For all his extensive knowledge, the exorcist does not truly appreciate how hard it is to banish a fiend from Ravenloft. While he is aware that some rituals of banishment merely shunt the fiend to a different location within the Land of the Mists, he believes this is due to botched rituals and inexperienced hands, not because of the unique nature of the Demiplane itself.)

Even though he is free of his curse, Zebediah still carries the guilt of his youthful attacks with him. Whenever he feels exhausted and questions whether he has made any difference at all in the world, he remembers the helplessness he felt as a child and teen, and renews his vows to help others. He is especially tender with children who fall victim to outside attacks, but is quick to anger with bullies or those that try to control others either by word or deed. This is why he doesn't like religious zealots, because he feels that in their fanaticism they victimize more people than they protect.

Zebediah has one hidden desire, a secret that he shares only with his wife – the need to understand his true origins. Throughout all his travels, he is always on the lookout for other Quevari communities. If he were ever to encounter a community, he is not sure how he would react. He feels torn between his duty to save others, but also

his duty to protect the innocent. He holds out hope that he could find a cure for his people's Bloodmoon madness, but is doubtful he would be up to such a task and might have to make some hard decisions if his search is fruitful.

The Vault of the Virtuous

Zebediah's job isn't only about disrupting blood rituals and expelling demonic entities. He also seeks to rid the world of dangerous objects that tempt mortals into diabolic pacts or cause "accidental" possessions. This requires quite a bit of research, as he can't hunt down these items until he knows of their existence and the last place they were seen or used. He has traveled the Core and beyond, hunting legendary relics of evil by scouring arcane texts and spending vast amounts of time in long-forgotten libraries.

Once Zebediah procures these items (a hard enough task on its own), he has to find a way to keep them permanently out of reach of the innocent or gullible. This is where the Vault of the Virtuous comes in. Nicodemus' predecessor, Hezekiel Gemestrau, came up with the idea of a secret hiding spot for these cursed artifacts after he visited the Watchers at the Gate in Darkon while researching the origins of the Whistling Fiend.

For 75 years, the official exorcists of the Church of Ezra have been amassing forbidden artifacts and arcane texts in an underground crypt that stands on the grounds of Furza Manor (where the bodies of all exorcists of the Home Faith have been interred for nearly a century). Zebediah believes that such a safehouse, with its out-of-the-way location, the blessed ground that it stands on and the holy wards that are periodically renewed over it, is more secure there than in the hands of other church officials or group of do-gooders. The less people that know of the secret cache the better, as there are always fools out there who think they can use such hell-spawned items to their advantage.

Here is a complete list of items that have been accumulated over the years:

Blacker's Automatic Head – This is a helmet shaped like a Jack O' Lantern that changes the personality of anyone who puts it on, turning a meek person into a crazed killer. Interestingly enough, even though it has rested in this vault for 30 years, both Zebediah and his mentor Nicodemus have encountered this cursed headgear several times. (Clearly, there are several duplicate copies out there, all just as dangerous as the original.)

Book of Keeping – Zebediah found the remnants of an unknown yugoloth's Book of Keeping in the ruins of a long-abandoned chapel in, of all the places, Lamordia. He had heard of such things through his studies, but could hardly believe what he was seeing after he first discovered it. It is so damaged that it can hardly be read, but he keeps it in the vault out of an abundance of caution.

Decanter of Spirits – This is a glass pitcher that appears half-full with a blue liquid (which is actually the distilled essences of the souls within). Whenever it is opened, it can trap any nearby incorporeal undead; the owner, however, runs the risk of being turned into a wraith with every use. Zebediah got this from a fellow adventurer who succumbed to the item's curse and decided it was too dangerous to use for himself.

The Ebon Lyre – This darkly exotic musical instrument is imbued with the essence of a powerful demon. While it can enhance the bardic abilities of anyone who plays it, it will eventually consign their soul to hell. This was given to the Zebediah by the daughter of a a famous Kartakan bard, who had inherited it after her father's untimely death.

The Face of Apomps – This is a disturbing mask made out of a yellow-green leather (actually demon hide). This was procured by Zebediah's mentor Nicodemus, who took it off of a Darkonian serial killer after an epic battle that the old man loves to recount even to this day.

The Hellfire Knight Armor – This highly polished plate mail armor sports a pentagram on its breastplate. Zebediah procured this item off of one of the Black Duke's henchmen during his skirmish with that fiend in 749 BC. (He is not aware that a cell of the Guardians, known as the Hidden Forge, are searching for it.)

Revelations of the Prince of Darkness – This book, penned by Renthon Vorishtok in 705 BC, has been banned in all the domains of the Core. It is not really a book at all but a long, complex spell that when read allows dark entities such as fiends or shadow fey to possess a mortal's soul. There are several copies now residing in the vault, and Zebediah is always on the lookout for these missives wherever he goes.

FRIENDS

Zebediah's relationship with the Church of Ezra is not as cut and dry as one would think. This is not due to his checkered past, however, but because through his travels about the Core he has discovered that not all branches of the church are equal. While he fully trusts the Home Faith in Borca, the only other branch he has a cordial relationship with is the Mordentish one.

Closer to home, his spouse, Kalrissa DeShayes, acts as a Wandering Anchorite serving small, out-of-the-way communities that don't have a cleric of their own. The two met in 741 BC, while the Home Faith was restructuring after the events of the Great Upheaval (when Borca and Dorvinia combined into one domain). At first, it was a marriage of convenience, and the only thing they had in common was that they were both orphans raised by the Church. (The Home Faith prefers its anchorites to inter-marry with leading noble houses in order to strengthen its political connections, but since both of their lineages were unknown, Zebediah and Kalrissa were viewed as less desirable mates.) They have eventually grown to love and trust each other, however.

Now, Kalrissa serves as Zebediah's eyes and ears when she is abroad. If she encounters cult activity or other suspicious behavior, she sends a message to her husband outlining what she has found and requesting his presence. Most of the time these forays are false alarms with an entirely innocent explanation, but when Zebediah's does uncover more sinister happenings, it is usually early enough to prevent any real tragedies - all thanks to Kalrissa's watchfulness.

Initiation and Induction

Zebidiah's membership into the Bright Triad was sponsored by his adopted father Nicodemus, after his mentor decided to finally retire from his job. By that time, Zebediah had participated in several fights during the course of his training, but the one that convinced his mentor that Zebediah was ready to step into the role of church exorcist was a battle in 745 BC with a Falkovnian demon-worshiper known as Colonel Hellman, who was attempting to summon a demon from his keep, known as Castle Falkenstein, just across the border from Borca.

Long ago, Zebediah realized that his task is near impossible, or at least, admits that he cannot accomplish such a goal all by himself. Thus, he is one of the most active members of the Bright Triad, and is always trying to expand the group's impact, either by adding new members to its ranks or encouraging more cooperation between existing members.

Zebediah is one of the most well known members of the Bright Triad, and has worked with most other members. He first met Dr. Odd in 750 BC when they were both investigating a string of murders tied to the Dementlieuse crime lord Donovan Kaizer. He worked with her again in 758 BC (after she joined the Bright Triad herself and recently moved into the area), when he was asked by the local Ezran church in Mortigny to hunt down the vampire priest Cyran Devichi.

He first met Spotted Cloud in 749 BC, while fighting a cult of the Black Duke in the small Hazlani town of

Kubar. (This was his first solo mission after assuming the mantle of his mentor, and Zebediah considers it his “trial by fire”.) The pair met up again and again in the following years, when Zebediah fought a handful of undead menaces during his sojourn in the Balinoks.

Finally, Zebediah first met the hero known as the Manhunter while he was still serving as Watchkaptain in Morfenzi, helping him root out a cult of Marasmos that had formed in 755 BC. The pair seem to be on opposite ends on many subjects, but each recognized the passion the other holds for their particular mission, and it is their mutual respect that cemented their unlikely friendship. They shared a handful of adventures between the years of 755 and 761, both inside and outside of Falkovnia, and as soon as he felt it proper, Zebediah sponsored the Manhunter's initiation into the Bright Triad. They continue their close collaboration to this day.

FOES

Zebediah's relationship with the The Dementlieuse branch of the Church of Ezra is complicated. While on an early expedition with Nicodemus, his mentor showed him that all leading anchorites at Ste. Mere des Larmes were under the control of some nebulous manipulator that they were never quite able to track down (i.e. that domain's Darklord Dominic D'Honaire). Of course, Zebediah would love to free his brothers and sisters from this nefarious influence, but the sheer number of those affected staggers his mind. Instead, he avoids this domain if at all possible, and warns any friends to do the same if they value their soul.

His relationship with the Darkonian branch is just as nuanced. At first, Zebediah was in accord with Bastion Raines and the righteousness of his crusade, even if he thought the anchorite's methods were a bit extreme. However, after one particularly harrowing incident he believes this branch is doing more harm than good. (Indeed, it was this episode that led Zebediah to rely more heavily on Bright Triad members, rather than his fellow officers of the Church.)

He has also found himself at odds with the Tepestani Inquisition. He has visited the domain only a handful of times, and in general gets along well with the faithful of Belenus. But he has noticed the same type of maniacal fervor among the inquisitors as with Bastion Raines' flock, so he keeps them at arms length.

Zebediah's mission is one of faith, not politics, so he doesn't have a lot of opportunities to clash with Darklords. He believes, much like the rest of Borca's inhabitants, that Lady Ivana is an innocent girl doing her best to navigate the cutthroat culture of the domain's ruling class. Due to the demands of his job he has not met her in person, but he has been in her presence a couple of times at certain civic or church functions.

Adventure Hook: The Lady and the Demon

Zebediah has noticed a small reality wrinkle centered on Ivana at the most recent church event they both attended. This discovery is highly disturbing to him, and he fears that she may be falling under (or already operating under) diabolic influences. After completing some intensive research, Zebediah believes Ivana's bodyguard, the Jongleur, to be of demonic origins.

This presents quite a problem for him, as he has never encountered a fiend in such a high position in the government. He has decided that his best course of action is to hire a group of heroes to stage a kidnapping of Ivana in order to give him the opportunity to confront the Jongleur directly with a select group of trusted anchorites, and perform a banishment ritual to remove him from the picture.

Ironically, even though Invidia and Borca share a border, Zebediah has yet to encounter that domain's half-fiend ruler, Malacchio Aderre. He considers the

Dukkar to be just the latest in a long line of ruthless dictators that have ruled and warred over that land for decades.

A Catalog of Evil

Of course, the exorcist's main focus is on the powerful diabolic entities that periodically invade this land and the cults that propagate their worship. (Despite being a backwater Demiplane, Ravenloft is surprisingly full of demons from the Outer Planes who love tempting and terrorizing mortals.)

Here is the rundown of the most active and well-known fiends across the land and Zebediah's interactions with them (if any):

Baltoi (Marilith, Lamordia) – Unaware of her existence as he rarely visits this domain due to the Lamordians' bias against religion (see the adventure *Adam's Wrath* for more details).

Baphomet (Type Unknown, Richemulot) – Aware of its existence through rumors provided by local anchorites, but believes it's just one of several heresies that pervade that domain (see *Gaz III* for more details).

The Black Duke (Cornugon, Location Unknown) – Always on the lookout for this fiend, has encountered and defeated a cell of his Brotherhood of the Whip that took root in Hazlan early in his career.

Drigor (Shator, Location Unknown) – Always on the lookout for this fiend and his emissaries as he is in possession of the fiend's biography and has hidden it away for safe keeping, but has never encountered him.

Elsepeth (Succubus, Location Unknown) – Always on the lookout for this fiend, but has never encountered her.

Francois de Penible (Human/Kyton, Dementlieu) – Unaware of his existence as he avoids this domain completely (see *Adventure Hook: The Missing Volume*).

The Gentleman Caller (Incubus, Location Unknown) – Unaware of his existence or even the existence of his children (except for the Jongleur).

Inajira (Yugoloth, Barovia) – Aware of his existence through rumors (provided by the Cult of the Morning Lord), but has never encountered him.

Iuz (Greyhawk) – Has encountered and defeated several cults dedicated to this god of evil throughout the Core.

Lord Arijani (Rakshasa, Sri Raji) – Aware of his existence through rumors (provided by Dr. Odd), but has never encountered him.

Lou'gal the Smiling One (Type Unknown, Mordent) – Aware of his existence through rumors (provided by local anchorites), but has never encountered him or his emissaries (see *Gaz III* for more details).

Malastroi (Nalfeshnee, G'Henna) – Unaware of his existence, as he has never traveled to this domain.

Marasmos (Alkilith, Location Unknown) – Always on the lookout for this fiend, and has encountered and defeated several cells of its Cult of Suppuration throughout the Core.

Orcus (Diety, Forgotten Realms) – Has encountered and defeated several cults dedicated to this god of evil throughout the Core.

Styrix (Night Hag, Darkon) – Unaware of her existence as she has kept an extremely low profile and he rarely visits Darkon

Tsvtieyft Schattendertodd (Tenebris, Falkovnia) – Aware of the existence of its cult, the Lustmorde, and is actively working with the Manhunter to defeat its emissaries (see *Gaz II* for more details).

The Whistling Fiend (Babau, Location Unknown) – Always on the lookout for this fiend, but has never encountered him.

Adventure Hook: The Missing Volume

Zebediah has 15 out of 16 volumes of the Madrigorian in his possession. The missing volume is owned by Francois de Penible. He is obsessed with tracking this down, just as much for the information it contains as for the danger it poses to whoever is in possession of it. If he were to ever learn that it was in the hands of de Penible, it would be the one reason why he would return to Dementlieu. But knowing the power of the Darklord there, he would undoubtedly recruit a group of heroes of his own vetting to undertake such an endeavor.

Nemeses

While Zebediah considers all fiends and evil spirits that attack the innocent as his primary enemies, he has two particularly persistent foes he was unaware of until just recently. (The fact that he only has two is extraordinary when you consider just how much evil he has encountered in the Demiplane during his long career.)

His Greatest Failure

Following up on rumors of cult activity, Zebediah met up with Bastion Teodorus Raines and his Nevuchar Springs branch of the Church of Ezra in 754 BC, just as it was gaining traction in the region. The exorcist had been called upon to verify disturbing allegations of demon worship in the area. He personally did not like Raines' extreme version of the church's teachings, but could not question the leader's zeal.

Zebediah initially thought that the culprit was an outspoken critic of the Church of Ezra in the area. Unfortunately, over the course of his investigation, he discovered that it was actually one of Raines' acolytes that was being transpossessed by a demon who was causing all the trouble. He was able to confront the young acolyte, but his banishing ritual failed in that it only shunted the half-fiend to another location.

Even though the threat was ended, Zebediah blames himself for this failure because he let his bias blind him to the danger right under his nose. Ever since then, he has been wary of zealots, and has softened his stance considerably when dealing with those of a different faith or who hold different perspectives than his own.

The disciple, a young girl from Sidnar named Chargonne, got swept up in the furor of Bastion Raines' cause and easily fell prey to an erinyes that was drawn to her zealotry. The transpossesion process, unfortunately, was not complete, as it had only reached the third stage at the time it was exposed.

Thus. Chargonne is not fully human, but not fully demon either. While she did gain some special abilities, her body is in near constant agony due to the botched transformation. She only has two goals – to continue her quest to cleanse the Dread Realms of those who are not sufficiently obedient to her particular religious views (i.e. non-Ezrans), and to get even with Zebediah for interrupting what she views as her divine ascension.

Zebediah was not aware that Chargonne survived until he met her again some years later while visiting the island of Liffe. Chargonne had established a cult there to spread her holy word, but after considerabhle effort he managed to drive her away once again. No one knows where she ended up next, but Zebediah is not fool enough to think that he has seen the last of her.

Having been shunted off to yet another distant domain, Chargonne has once again regrouped and started building another cult dedicated to her divine mission. Her aim is to one day gather enough followers to get the attention of the original erinyes that answered her prayers and complete the transpossession process. (Little does she know that that particular baatezu, whose essence she carries within her, was so weakened by the transference that she was subsequently killed by a rival devil and thus her quest is destined to fail.)

CHARGONNE

Female Human / Erinyes (Half-Fiend) Fighter 6: **CR** 8; **SZ** Medium Humanoid; **HD** 6d10+24, 75 **hp**; **Init** +9; **Spd** 30 ft; **AC** 17 (touch 15, flat-footed 14); **Atk** +13 melee (longsword 1d8+8) and +12 melee (2 claws 1d4+5 or bite 1d6+5); **SA** Smite Good, Spell-Like Abilities; **SQ** Damage Reduction (5/magic), Damage Resistance (10/cold, 10/electricity, 10/fire), Immunity to Poison, Spell Resistance (16), True Sight; **AL** LE; **SV Fort** +10, **Ref** +7, **Will** +2; **Str** 21, **Dex** 20, **Con** 20, **Int** 14, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 16

Skills*:* Climb +3, Concentration +2, Handle Animal +2, Intimidate +7, Jump +2, Ride +8, Swim +3

Feats: Blind-Fight, Combat Reflexes, Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (longsword), Weapon Specialization (longsword)

Language*:* Celestial, Darkonese, Draconic, Infernal

Signature Possessions: Hellfire Longsword (Lancer [phylactery]), scale mail (-4 armor check penalty factored into statistics)

Smite Good (Su): Three times per day Chargonne can make a normal melee attack deal an extra 6 points of extra damage against a good-aligned foe. This manifests as a bright, orange flame outlining her longsword whenever she uses this ability.

Spell-Like Abilities *(Sp):* At will – *charm person, invisibility* 3/day – *darkness, produce flame, see invisibility*; 1/day – *desecrate, unholy blight*; These abilities are as the spells, save DCs are Charisma-based, 6th level caster.

Appearance: Chargonne appears similar to an average anchorite. She wears a white tunic over steel scale mail armor. She has a slender build, blue eyes, and her golden blonde hair is worn in a pageboy haircut. She is fair-skinned, but when agitated three angry red welts appear across her nose and cheeks. She explains these as holy stigmata that mark her as a chosen of Ezra, but in reality they are from her initial battle with the Gray Monk. She completes the ensemble with a long gray cloak (this hides her vestigial wings while in public).

She always carries her longsword in a gray leather sheath attached to her belt. (This also serves as her phylactery. If she is killed but the sword remains unbroken, her spirit will slowly take over the body of whoever takes it into their possession.)

Combat: Chargonne uses guile (and the spell-like abilities granted by her erinyes half) to get what she wants most of the time. But if flattery doesn't obtain her objective, she is more than willing to use threats of force. She prefers to go into conflict with a handful of henchmen backing her and always singles out her opponents when they are weakest. She is well trained in swordplay, but the angrier she gets the sloppier her swings and thrusts become. She also uses her spell-like abilities liberally, and views them as proof that she is Ezra's chosen champion.

A Hidden Evil

Quite simply, Lurk is the physical embodiment of the evil frenzy that was excised from Zebediah in his youth. Such an evil, which literally flowed within his Quevari veins, cannot truly be destroyed. Although his left hand was burned as an offering during the severing ritual, a piece of that inner darkness remained within the ashes and eventually reformed itself. It was this piece of Zebediah that now carries the Bloodmoon curse as well as an overwhelming need to destroy its estranged host.

Lurk has been forming and re-forming for years now. Most of the time, it is destroyed during its first (and weakest) phase, and never even reaches its target. But even though it has been “killed” time and time again, it always comes back to complete its unholy mission. As long as Zebediah lives, it will never truly die.

The first time this shadow-thing reached Zebediah was while he was in Tepest. The local inquisitor called him in on an unrelated case. At first, he thought Lurk was simply a minion of the Shadow Fey sent to kill him. But something about its presence

stirred up old memories in his head, memories he would rather forget. That feeling of unease continued past the completion of that mission, and while riding through Barovia on his way home, Lurk attacked him again. Both attacks failed to kill Zebediah, but he had a feeling that he had not seen the last of this creature.

Lurk is only able to regenerate during the three nights of the Bloodmoon, regaining his hand form in the exact spot where he died last. This is why he is sometimes able to reappear immediately to vex his foe, and other times it takes months for him to track his target down.

Since those encounters, Zebediah has consulted with his Bright Triad compatriots Aleka Kierkegaard and Spotted Cloud about this persistent shadow-creature that seems to be following him, and they assured him that it is neither dreamspawn nor fihyr. Zeb believes it may be a minor demon that has been summoned by one of his many enemies to vex him, but does not suspect its true provenance.

LURK – THE SHADOW THING

Native Outsider: CR 8 (CR 2 hand, CR 4 goblin); **SZ** Medium Humanoid (Tiny Construct [hand], Small Humanoid [goblin]); **HD** 8d8+8, 50 **hp** (4d10+4 20 hp, hand; 6d8+6 35 hp, goblin); **Init** +6 (+0 hand, +3 goblin); **Spd** 30 ft., fly 30 ft. (average) [20 ft. hand, 30 ft. goblin]; **AC** 13 (touch 11, flat-footed 13) [+16 {touch 13, flat-footed 16} hand, +14 {touch 12, flat-footed 14} goblin]; **Atk** +8 melee (2 claws 1d6+1) or +3 melee (bite 1d8) [+3 melee {claw 1d6+1} hand, +3 melee {2 claws 1 d6+1} or +1 melee {bite 1d4+1} goblin]; **SA** Bloodmoon, Spell-Like Abilities; **SQ** Blindsight, Damage Reduction (5/magic), Sensitivity to Light, Shadow Armor; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +6, **Ref** +7, **Will** +7; **Str** 13, **Dex** 15, **Con** 13, **Int** 12, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 15

Skills*:* Bluff +8, Concentration +8, Hide +8, Intimidate +10, Jump +10, Listen +13, Move Silently +10, Open Locks +8 (hand, goblin), Sleight of Hand +8 (hand), Sense Motive +7, Spot +9 (goblin, gargoyle)

Feats: Alertness, Dodge (hand, goblin), Improved Grab (goblin), Improved Initiative

Language*:* Abyssal, Balok, Darkonese, Falkovnian, Infernal, Mordentish (goblin and gargoyle only, hand cannot speak)

Bloodmoon (Ex): On the three nights of the full moon, Lurk can choose to go into a fit of rage and gain +6 Dexterity, +3 Strength, and +2 to its AC. It also gains +1 on attack rolls and +2 on damage rolls during this time. This condition lasts four rounds and can be used once per day.

Energy Drain (Su): The only way Lurk can grow into its largest and most fearsome form (the gargoyle) is by feeding on the vital essence of its victims. Living creatures hit by Lurk's claw attack gain one negative level. The DC is 14 for the Fortitude save to remove a negative level. For each negative level bestowed, Lurk gains 5 temporary hit points. Whenever it gains as many temporary hit points as it originally started out with, Lurk advances one step further in its evolution. It takes four successful energy drain attacks before it can grow from its hand form into its goblin form. It takes an additional seven energy drain attacks to grow from its goblin form into its gargoyle form.

Sensitivity to Light (Ex): Lurk suffers a -2 penalty on all attack rolls in bright sunlight or within the radius of a *daylight* spell. All successful attacks against it in these conditions automatically become critical hits.

Shadow Armor (Su): Lurk gains a +4 deflection bonus to its AC in dimly lit conditions (such as lantern, moon, or torch light; as well as areas illuminated by a *light* or *continual flame* spell). In total darkness, this bonus increases to +8.

Spell-Like Abilities *(Sp):* At will – *darkness, cause fear*; 1/week – *shadow walk*. These abilities are as the spells, save DC 12 + spell level, 10th level caster.

Appearance: In all three of its forms, Lurk appears as a three-dimensional shadow – pitch black and featureless. The only clue to what onlookers are

looking at is its distinct outlines. The hand walks around by using its five fingers like legs and the stump sticks straight up into the air. Its goblin form is short and squat, with long pointy ears sticking out from each side of its head. The gargoyle is much larger, with massive hands and feet that end in sharp talons. Giant wings stick out from its back. They drape around him like a cloak most of the time, but can expand up above his head and spread out from his body when he wants to use them for flight.

Combat: Not surprisingly, Lurk likes to hide in the shadows, stalking its victims for a time before lashing out when they least expect it. In his powerful gargoyle form, he is much more aggressive, using his monstrous appearance to instill fear in his victims first. Then he will use his spell-like ability to cause darkness to blind any opponent that remains uncowed.

He is a beast with a one-track mind, so he never runs away, even if it would be in his best interest. This is why most of the time he never even reaches Zeb's presence before being killed.

CREDITS

- The Black Duke adventure appears courtesy of Ryan Naylor from the self-titled article in Children of the Night: Demons.
- Blacker's Automatic Head appears courtesy of Alexei "Igor the Henchman" Podgouzov from the self-titled article in the Book of Sacrifices.
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- The Face of Apomps and Hellfire Knight Armor appear courtesy of Joseph "Bela" Zettelmaier and Jason "Javier" True from "Four Fiendishly Foul Items" in QTR #7.
- Francois de Penible appears courtesy of Stuart Turner from the self-titled article in Children of the Night: Demons.
- Marasmos appears courtesy of William James Cuffe from the self-titled article in Children of the Night: Demons.

***

"This is the fourth victim in as many weeks, sir."

"And the MO's the same?

"Yes, sir."

"Any clues left behind? Anything that could identify the culprit?"

"No, sir."

"I hate to say it, but I think it's time to call in the Falkovnian."

"You can't mean... the Manhunter?!?"

"Yes, I do. Sometimes it takes a killer to catch a killer." "...Very well, sir."

- Conversation between Schepmeista Hunzinger of Neufurchtenburg and his aide-de-camp Mr. Kruepper

Kale Duskholme aka The Manhunter

Male Human (Natural Werebat) Ranger 7 / Detective 7: **CR** 16 (4 animal, 8 hybrid); **SZ** Medium Humanoid (5 ft. 10 in.); **HD** 7d6+7d8+14, 66 **hp**; **Init** +3 (+9 animal, hybrid); **Spd** 30 ft. (20 ft., fly 45 ft.[good] animal, hybrid); **AC** 15 (touch 13, flat-footed 13) [21 {touch 18, flat-footed 12} animal, hybrid]; **Atk** +10/+5 melee (longsword 1d8+2) or +7/+1 ranged (hand crossbow 1d4+2) [+5 melee {2 claws 1d6+3} or +3 melee {bite 1d4+3} animal, hybrid]; **SA** Bat Empathy, Curse of Lycanthropy; **SQ** Alternate Form, Blindsense (animal, hybrid), Chemical Bane (evening primrose), Chemistry, Damage Reduction (10/magic), Favored Enemy, Knowledge (Law), Low Light Vision (human), Scene of the Crime, Target Bonus, Weapon Proficiency (Simple, Martial and Exotic), Wild Empathy, Woodland Stride; **AL** LN; **SV Fort** +7 (+11 animal, hybrid), **Ref** +10 (+14 animal, hybrid), **Will** +4 (+8 animal, hybrid); **Str** 14 (18 animal, hybrid), **Dex** 16 (25 animal, hybrid), **Con** 13 (19 animal, hybrid), **Int** 17, Wis 15, **Cha** 13

Skills*:* Animal Handling +5, Bluff +2, Climb +7, Concentration +3, Craft (alchemy) +6, Decipher Script +5, Diplomacy +13, Disguise +4, Escape Artist +6, Gather Information +5, Heal +7, Hide +10 (+16 animal, hybrid), Jump +3, Knowledge (dungeoneering) +4, Knowledge (geography) +11, Knowledge (law) +6, Knowledge (nature) +13, Listen +7 (+19 animal, hybrid), Move Silently +11 (+17 animal, hybrid), Ride +9, Search +10, Sense Motive +5, Spellcraft +2, Spot +11 (+17 animal, hybrid), Survival +7, Swim +3, Use Rope +2

Feats: Alertness (animal, hybrid), Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Flyby Attack (animal, hybrid), Iron Will, Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot, Rapid Shot, Stealthy (animal, hybrid), Weapon Proficiency (hand crossbow), Weapon Proficiency (longsword)

Language*:* Darkonese, Falkovnian, Lamordian, Mordentish

Signature Possessions*:* Bracers of Accuracy, Corsair's Eyepatch, 6 Crossbow Bolts (4 brainseekers, 2 heartseekers), Farspeaking Amulet, Hand Crossbow, Investigator's Kit, Lock Picking Ring, Longsword (Ravager), Set of Masterwork Manacles (anti-magic), Wolf (animal companion [Phantom])

Ranger Spells *per Day* (1; DC 12 + spell level, 3rd level caster, must choose and prepare spells in advance from the following list)*:* 1 – *accelerated movement, alarm, arrow mind, bloodhound, detect poison, endure elements, guided shot, hawkeye, sniper's shot, primal hunter, read magic*

Alternate Form (Su)***:*** Kale can shift into animal or hybrid form as though using the *polymorph* spell on himself. His gear is not affected and he does not regain any hit points when changing forms. If slain while in his alternate forms, Kale reverts to his humanoid appearance. Changing to animal or hybrid form is a standard action and doesn't provoke an attack of opportunity.

Bat Empathy (Ex)***:*** In any form, Kale can communicate and empathize with bats of any size. This gives him a +4 racial bonus to checks when influencing the animal's attitude, and allows for the communication of simple concepts and commands (if the animal is friendly), such as "friend", "foe", "flee", and "attack".

Chemistry (Ex): Kale has become a master of analyzing alchemical substances. He gains a +4 bonus to Alchemy checks that do not involve making items.

Curse of Lycanthropy (Su)***:*** Any humanoid hit by Kale's bite or claw attack in animal or hybrid form must succeed at a Fortitude save (DC 15) or contract lycanthropy. Afflicted lycanthropes of Kale's bloodline are triggered by the new moon.

Favored Enemy (Ex): Kale treats humans (specifically criminals such as madmen and serial killers) and undead as favored enemies. He gains a +2 insight bonus on Bluff, Listen, Sense Motive, Spot, and Survival checks when used against humans and

undead. Likewise, in combat he gains a +2 bonus on damage rolls against any human or undead.

Knowledge (Law) (Ex): When Kale makes a check regarding the laws of a domain other than Darkon, Lamordia, and Falkovnia he suffers a -10 penalty to all rolls. This penalty can be negated if the he spends at least one month in the other domain, studying its laws and history for at least one hour a day. Kale can make skill checks to learn what actions are legal, what typical punishments for crimes might be, the identities of the domain's most wanted criminals, and answer other legal questions.

Scene of the Crime (Ex): By analyzing the scene of a crime and studying minute clues, Kale can assess the motives or background of a single criminal. This ability draws on his familiarity with the criminal mind. Kale makes a Search check for the entire crime scene; the result determines what he can find. (DC 15 - Determine Motive, DC 20 - Determine Race and Gender, and DC 25 - Determine Primary Class.)

Target Bonus (Ex): Kale understands his quarry so well that he gains a +2 bonus to attack rolls against one specific individual. To receive this benefit, he must spy on the target for one day. Kale also applies this bonus to Bluff, Listen, Search, Sense Motive, and Spot checks when using these skills against the chosen target.

Wild Empathy (Ex): With his years of wilderness training, Kale has learned how to improve the attitude of animals. He rolls 1d20+5 to determine a Wild Empathy check result. The typical domestic animal has a starting attitude of indifferent, while wild animals are usually unfriendly. To use Wild empathy, Kale and the animal must be within 30 feet of one another under normal visibility conditions. Generally, influencing an animal in this way takes one minute.

Woodland Stride (Ex): Kale may move through any sort of undergrowth (such as natural thorns, briars, overgrown areas, and similar terrain) at his normal speed and without taking damage or suffering any other impairment. However, thorns, briars, and overgrown areas that are enchanted or magically manipulated to impede motion still affect him.

Appearance: Kale is a tall, wiry fellow with a slim build that belies great strength. He wears a black leather eyepatch over his left eye, and his right eye is slate gray. Despite, or perhaps because of this impediment, he is known for his piercing stare. He has medium-length brown hair, that hangs in greasy strands down to his shoulders. He doesn't sport a beard or mustache, but he does have a perpetual five- o'clock shadow. He speaks in a low, gravelly voice and rarely smiles.

Kale wears a black tunic over leather armor. The tunic has a hood that keeps half his face in shadows most of the time. He wears trousers that are always neatly tucked inside his black leather boots. He carries his handbow on his belt and his sword on his back, with the handle sticking up over his right shoulder (as he is left-handed).

In his animal form, Kale appears as a giant black bat with beady, red eyes. He mostly uses this form when he wants to travel long distances quickly (or shorter distances if doesn't want to be tracked). This is also the shape he takes when he surreptitiously feeds upon livestock.

In his hybrid form, Kale retains his humanoid figure but grows a pair of large membranous wings and pointed ears. His skin becomes covered with short, coarse black hair, and his eyes take on an unearthly red glow. Altogether it is a frightening image, and Kale mainly uses this form to strike the killing blow against his human prey.

Dread Possibility: The Disappearing and Reappearing Brand

While this author doesn't follow the rule that every Falkovnian is branded at birth on the forehead with a hawk insignia, if other DMs follow canon it significantly complicates things for double-agents or anyone else who wants to blend into a crowd. Azalin foresaw this stumbling block and gave Kale a mystical imprint that he can turn off and on at will. If he wishes to travel incognito he keeps the brand turned off, but if he is working a case in Falkovnia or neighboring domains he keeps it turned on as a way to intimidate others.

Background: Kale is a natural-born werebat from a small colony that inhabited a cave deep in the Forest of Shadows. Because of the sporadic assaults from the humanoids that inhabited nearby Nartok and roving undead (due to its proximity to the border with Falkovnia), an envoy was sent beseeching King Azalin for greater protection.

Azalin consented, but required two volunteers – one person to become his apprentice and the other to serve as his spy. Kale, a rather precocious youth who frequently got into trouble, volunteered himself for the latter position and was promptly shipped off to Falkovnia with forged paperwork. His mission was simple: he would be as Azalin's eyes and ears within the Falkovnian army, alerting the Darklord to any future armed expeditions Vlad Drakov may be planning.

Kale slowly worked his way up through the military ranks. His knowledge of Darkon helped him greatly in this role, and he soon became an elite scout that was sent out ahead of the main contingent of soldiers. In effect, he was a double-agent, pretending to spy for Drakov, all the while gathering intelligence for Azalin and feeding the Falkovnians false information. Kale enjoyed his work, and often daydreamed about the glory he would garner when he was called home by his king; perhaps he would even land an exalted position in the dread Kargat!

His efforts were all for naught, however, as five years into his tour of duty (in 750 BC) the Requiem occurred. Azalin's supposed disappearance thrust Kale into uncertainty over his position. He didn't fully trust that the spy network he worked so hard to maintain wouldn't fall apart without the king of Darkon's guiding hand. For a moment, he even entertained the idea of returning to his homeland to seize control of the local chapter of the Kargat in Nartok. Kale decided to sit tight, however, believing that Azalin would eventually return and reward him for his steadfastness.

Then the invasion known as the March of Doom occurred in 751 BC. Vlad Drakov's latest failed encroachment attempt served as a turning point for Kale. During the skirmish on the border he discovered that the cave his colony lived in had been used by the Falkovnians as an ammo dump, and when a horde of zombies came upon it the soldiers blew it up in a desperate gambit to escape from their undead enemy. Kale searched the cave system for days but found no survivors.

Now totally alone, without family or master, his fervor waned. He decided to semi-retire from both espionage and battle. He pulled some strings and managed to be hired on as Watchkaptain of the Morfenzi militia. It was during this time period that he was first introduced to the so-called Morfenzi Murders, and through the years he gained significant experience in dealing with these serial killers. He views these deranged madmen as nothing more than dumb animals that need to be put down for the good of society.

During the course of his duties, he noticed a peculiar set of killings tied to a group that he eventually dubbed the Cadre. This band of murderers utilized attacks based on common execution methods. Although Kale had dispatched several of these individuals throughout the years, the same pattern of killings kept re-emerging, even though the original

perpetrators had died or been apprehended. He soon came to believe that there was a wider conspiracy at work and decided to dedicate his life to uncovering the masterminds of this extraordinary criminal enterprise no matter what it took.

He eventually tired of filing paperwork and a chain of command that stifled his more hands-on approach, however. So in 761 BC, he fully retired from the Falkovnian military and moved to Neufurchtenburg in Lamordia. But that was not the end of his pursuit of justice. Now that he was a free agent, he decided to become a bounty-hunter. This new career allowed him the freedom he desired and also an avenue for him to use the detective skills he has so carefully developed before.

Combat: Kale has thorough training in both Falkovnian combat techniques and general swordplay. His supernatural abilities also aid him with wilderness survival. He leans both on his scouting and skirmishing experience when he enters combat. He prefers to use his crossbow for ranged attacks, especially while pursuing his targets. He rarely draws his sword, and when he does he aims to kill, not subdue, his opponent.

His eyepatch is a clever subterfuge as it is not a normal bit of leather, but in actuality a magical item known as the Corsair's Eyepatch. It does not impede his vision at all as it appears transparent to him. (When it covers his left eye, it grants him the ability to use *see invisibility* for 6 rounds. When it covers his right eye, it grants him the Blindfight feat for 1 minute.) The abilities of the eyepatch give him an edge when he is tracking magical or supernatural prey and he keeps this secret from everyone. He claims he lost his eye in a bar fight in Ludendorf after winning the item from a drunken sea captain in a game of poker.

His greatest strength, however, lies in his reconnaissance and investigative abilities. He has a keen gaze and often sees things that others overlook or disregard. When engaging in a pursuit, he often lays traps ahead of time and attempts to steer his quarry into them. Most of the time, he aims to capture his target so he can bring them back to the authorities alive and collect a bigger bounty.

While hunting as a werebat, he only uses his natural weapons. He tracks his target from high above, uses his sonar to pinpoint their location, then dives quickly and snatches his prey up in his jaws. He feeds on livestock most of the time, but occasionally kills one of the scofflaws he is searching for and uses them for a more substantial meal. No one notices their absence, and Kale does not feel any guilt over this type of feeding because he believes he is performing a public service.

Dread Possibility: Firearms and Frontmen

Kale's success as a bounty-hunter has drawn the attention of one of Lamordia's premier gunmakers - Goeb Gunsmiths (USS '03). Seeking an edge over their rival, Mackie Firearms (QTR #2), the company believes Kale would be the perfect spokesperson for their masterwork guns. Thus, they have sent him several free prototype guns for him to test out. Historically, Kale never cared for such modern weapons, but his stint in Lamordia has softened his stance on this front.

If the DM wishes to exercise this option, add a Masterwork Firearm to Kale's inventory (either a flintlock, matchlock, or wheellock pistol). Unknown to the bounty-hunter, this enterprise is fronted by members of the Syndicate of Enlightened Citizens, and that shadowy cabal hopes to win him over to their side and eventually have him serve as their personal hitman.

The Thrill of the Hunt

After all the ups and downs of his life, Kale just wants to lead a simple life free of unnecessary complications. He has two lairs, one outside Morfenzi in the Crumbling Hills, which he calls Der Kaninchenbau (or the Rabbit Hole); and one in the

Sleeping Beast foothills he calls Die Kehlsteinhaus (or the Eagle's Nest).

He is mostly active in the Northern Core, since that is the region he is most familiar with. His reputation precedes him and he likes it that way; it makes his job of intimidating his marks easier. The only reason he will go farther afield is to help his Bright Triad teammate, the Gray Monk.

His investigation methods are plain and straightforward, but highly effective. He is usually hired by small town officials, old army friends, or rich nobles with a personal problem they don't wish to be publicized. He specializes in high profile murders, rescuing kidnap victims, or hunting down notorious outlaws. Due to his reputation, he rarely has to go looking for work, and when he is on a case he sometimes disappears for weeks at a time.

Kale always starts by researching the circumstances around each case. He reads police reports (if any are available) and interviews witnesses. Then, he will attempt to interrogate likely suspects, or else place them under his own surveillance. If he hits a brick wall, he resorts to hanging out on the seedier side of town looking for leads.

He keeps a low profile during this phase of the investigation. The bounty-hunter will bide his time, watching his mark for several days to establish their routines. He has also been known to utilize informants to gain more information on his target's habits and who they associate with.

Once he tracks down the culprit to a general vicinity, he usually lays a trap - whether it is a physical ambush or a tempting plant to bring them out of hiding depends on the target. Kale likes picking the time and place of the final confrontation, and always uses the environment to his advantage. If he is hunting a recluse or outlaw that spends most of their time in the wilderness, he will resort to his werebat skills to sniff out their hidey-hole and attack in the middle of the night. He does the same to reach individuals who are well-protected, such as crime lords, because most criminals are usually not prepared for a lycanthropic attack.

Despite his supernatural nature as a werebat, h\Kale vastly prefers dealing with run-of-the-mill crimes as opposed to supernatural or magical ones. If he deems that a case is out of his wheelhouse, he will most likely consult with his Bright Triad colleagues Dr. Odd or the Gray Monk.

FRIENDS

There's no way of hiding the fact that Kale is a hard man to get along with. He has a checkered past and a lot of skeletons in his closet. Still, even if he hasn't always been on the right side of every issue, his heart is usually in the right place.

Even though he is sympathetic to the cause of the Falkovnian rebels, too many of those same rebels remember when he wore the falcon emblem while enforcing Drakov's bloody regime. They have no way of knowing he was only doing this as a double agent to keep his cover from being blown. Gondegal doesn't trust him at all, and the Knights of the Ashen Bough and the Freemen of Falkovnia give him a wide berth, as well. (This is one reason Kale turned to the Bright Triad in the first place.)

He has made friends with the sewer-dwelling social outcasts known as the Dark Men, however. Since their goal is simply to survive, any kind word or deed will be accepted by them. Kale uses them as a secret network of informants, since they can often go places others cannot. In return, he runs errands or does odd jobs for them that require interacting with the outside world. This setup reminds him of the way his clan operated back home in Darkon.

Kale has a wolf companion named Phantom, that he gained shortly after becoming a scout for the Falkovnian military. This loyal pet has remained by his side throughout all his many adventures, serving as either his scout, bodyguard, or spy whenever the need arises. She is even intelligent and tame enough to masquerade as a normal mastiff if Kale chooses to

bring her into a city, but she prefers to stay in the wilderness on the outskirts of town most of the time.

The only other person in the world he truly trusts is his best friend, and sometimes partner, Zebediah Munchausen. Between the Gray Monk's ardent morality and Kale's dark history, they make an unlikely pair. They bonded quickly after their first encounter, and each matches the other's intensity when working on a case together. (No doubt, the fact that both individuals carry a secret, dual identity helps them feel a kinship to each other.)

Initiation and Induction

When Kale retired from the Falkovnian Army in 753 BC and took his position as Watchkaptain of the Morfenzi town guard, he had no idea this was his first step into becoming part of something bigger than himself; he simply looked on it as a cushy job away from the eyes of both Lord Azalin and Falkfurher Drakov. He would bide his time, build up a nest egg, then leave for greener pastures.

This was not to be, however, due to a series of ever increasingly strange encounters. One by one, Kale was introduced to the Cadre, a group of killers that sporadically terrorized the entire region. Interestingly enough, for every time Kale hunted down and neutralized one of these criminals, a year or so later later a killer would crop up with the same MO. This puzzled him greatly, but none of his colleagues in other towns cared to follow up on these types of things.

A plague outbreak in 755 BC was the first time that he met the Gray Monk, who came into town and took Kale into his confidence. Zeb told him that the disease that was ravishing his town had a fiendish origin. When Kale took the lead and helped the anchorite defeat the evil cultists of Marasmos that were spreading it, he was greatly impressed by the Gray Monk's fierce drive.

The way the Gray Monk described how Marasmos and his cult propagated themselves struck a chord with Kale. Was the Cadre somehow part of a larger fiendish cult? The next time one of them reared their heads in Morfenzi, Kale called in the Gray Monk and laid out his suspicions to him. Together, they posited that a single powerful fiend is orchestrating the Cadre's actions for its own inscrutable purpose.

After exchanging several letters, arguing theories, and sharing a handful of other adventures (including busting up a cell of the strange Cult of Zebulon that had taken root in Morfenzi in 757 BC), the Gray Monk invited Kale into the Bright Triad. Kale accepted, finally feeling like he found a new outlet for his energies. The group also helped Kale find a new sense of belonging that he had been missing out on for years.

The only other member he has regularly encountered is Dr. Odd. He thinks she is playing with forces that will eventually destroy her, even though her expertise has come in handy on several cases. He will not heed any call to action from the larger membership of the Bright Triad unless invited directly by the Gray Monk.

In 761 BC Kale retired as Watchkaptain. He used the connections he had made with officials of all the other Falkovnian cities to transition over to a new career – bounty-hunting. This job gives him the freedom he desires and the money he needs to pursue his real goal of defeating the nefarious Cadre for good. As he has studied them throughout the years, he has found out they have been appearing further and further away from the epicenter of Morfenzi, a fact he believes shows that the demonic entity guiding their actions is growing stronger.

Adventure Hook: The Green Maiden Gambit

Kale has heard stories about this pseudonatural fey for years. Now that he has some free time, he is thinking of tracking her down and ending her reign of terror. Unfortunately, he has seriously misunderstood the nature of her threat, believing

that she is a reclusive serial killer hiding in the deepest parts of the Viglia Dormentia Forest. He is gathering a group of experienced hunters and trappers to form a dragnet and hopefully get to the bottom of the strange disappearances that have been attributed to the Green Maiden.

FOES

The time Kale spent as a double agent in the already dangerous domain of Falkovnia has taught him many lessons. He is a master at hiding his true feelings and allegiances from the powers that be, and no longer trusts any authority figures. He believes King Azalin no longer has a use for him, and the feeling is mutual. He thinks Vlad is a madman who will eventually be deposed.

Kale has even had a run-in or two with the infamous Vjorn Hortsmann, as he was once assigned to a special task-force to to take down a group of so-called Falkovnian Super Soldiers when they ran amok. He thinks the Minister of Science is a fool and his creations are unnatural abominations.

He has a Darkonian's usual antipathy towards the living dead, which was further cemented by their role in the death of his family in 751 BC. The Gray Monk has not only helped Kale to overcome his fear of the undead, however, but has even taught him techniques to hunt down and dispatch these supernatural menaces.

Even though he lives in Lamordia, he has not encountered that domain's Darklord, since he stays mostly on the Eastern side of the Sleeping Beast mountain range. He has interrupted the creation of several flesh golems, however, as the pattern of killings their mad creator's enact so often mimic the modus operandi of serial killers.

Kale's favorite opponents are the remorseless killing machines that go by a number of different names – thrill killers, lust maniacs or just plain psychopaths. Kale's obsession with these individuals is due to a couple reasons. Firstly, he believes man is the only animal that hunts its own kind, and the causes of such anti-social behavior intrigues him. Second, he admires the way these “lone wolves” stand apart from their fellow man, yet also blend into a crowd. In some ways it reminds him of how he has had to live his whole life. This strange affinity with his prey doesn't stop him from his overall mission to rid the world of these monsters, however.

In a relatively short amount of time Kale has racked up quite a list of famous cases that he has brought to a successful conclusion, including:

Eduard Duvoir – He was a maledictive wererat that preyed upon the citizens of Stangengrad circa 756 BC. This was the first serial killer case Kale consulted on as Watchkaptain.

Michel Le Perdu – He was a serial killer who terrorized Morfenzi for several years before being caught by Kale's squad circa 759 BC.

Henry Masham – He was a half-golem that stalked the slums of Lechburg circa 760 BC. Kale assisted the Gray Monk in tracking down and defeating him.

Lars Kerkman – He was a spider-like beast, also known as the Silken Strangler, that haunted Lekar circa 761 BC. This was the last case Kale solved before retiring as Watchkaptain.

The Headhunter – This was a brain collector that menaced Nartok in 762 BC. This was a highly publicized case and Kale's first freelance bounty-hunter job.

NEMESES

The Cadre

In reality, the Cadre is a a succession of random people who have become possessed by the Tsvtieyft Schattendertodd (see Gaz II for details). For every member struck down by Kale and his allies, the demonic entity chooses a new person to step into

the vacant role, using the weapons the killers wield to transfer the possession.

Two groups of people are the most likely successors – either a victim that was lucky enough to survive an attack or the person who killed the previous incarnation.

While the victim's physical wounds may heal with time, the mental trauma never goes away. Their thoughts inevitably return to the incident until they become obsessed with finding their attacker. They begin to haunt back alleys and lonely byways at night. And more often than not, they are on the scene when the current wielder falls. Then, they dart out from the shadows they were hiding in and snatch up the now owner-less weapon and run home with it.

At first the victim hides the weapon, only bringing it out and holding it at night. All it takes is a hint of evil in the soul, such as feelings of overwhelming rage or envy, for the weapon to seemingly come alive in their hands and start whispering to them. Eventually the weapon will contrive to nick them and draw blood - thus sealing a bond that is unbreakable until death. (It should be noted that even though the previous murder weapon transfers the possession, once the new victim becomes possessed they can choose another, more familiar weapon to use on their own murder spree.)

When the vanquisher picks up the murder weapon and takes it with them, either as a trophy or for evidence, the item lures them in with similar tactics. Their thoughts become progressively darker, returning again and again to how much better they could wield the weapon than its previous owner. As weeks pass, they become obsessed with planning the perfect murder. And then, one day, they finally give in to the urge to go out an enact their plan. And then the killing begins again.

THE AXEMAN

Male Human Fighter 6: **CR** 8; **SZ** Medium (6 ft 6 in.); HD 6d10+6, 64 **hp**; **Init** +; **Spd** 30 ft.; **AC** 14 (touch 10, flat-footed 10); **Atk** +6/+1 melee (battleaxe 1d8+5) or +5 ranged (2 throwing axes 1d6+3); **SA**; **SQ**; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +8, **Ref** +3, **Will** +2; **Str** 18, **Dex** 13, **Con** 16, **Int** 12, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 9

Skills *(27):* Intimidate +10, Listen +3, Move Silently +8, Search +4, Spot +2

Feats: Alertness, Combat Expertise, Combat Reflexes, Diehard, Great Fortitude, Power Attack

Languages*:* Abyssal

Signature Possessions*:* +2 Battleaxe (fleshgrinding* weapon), Chain Shirt, Executioner's Hood (like Hat of Disguise), 2 Throwing Axes

*see *Book of Vile Darkness* pg 111 for details

Appearance: The Axeman is a tall, hulking brute with a massive barrel chest and heavy, muscular arms. While stalking his victims he always wears a black executioner's hood with two eyeholes cut out but no opening for his mouth. He wears a dirty chain shirt for armor and tight, black pantaloons. His demeanor is emotionless and his gait is slow and plodding. He doesn't seem to feel pain, as he doesn't yell or scream even if wounded. In fact, he rarely speaks at all, only uttering his catchphrase just before he makes his kill.

His catchphrase is *"A head a day keeps Death at bay."*

Combat: The Axeman is the most physically imposing member of the group, and revels in his great strength. He swings his axes with enough power to embed them in a stone block or cleave wooden beams in half. He loves to terrorize his victims before killing them. He will step out of hiding and then stand stock still as he watches his target flee. Despite his slow gait, he somehow manages to get ahead of them. He always reappears right in the middle of their path, causing them to crash into his chest. And

in their moment of shock and despair at being caught, he swings his weapon and cuts their head clean off.

Variations: Some incarnations love to dismember their victims instead of outright killing them (whether they are alive or dead for this is another matter entirely). Some keep the heads as trophies and leave a string of headless corpses behind them. Others just leave the heads where they land. Most prefer using the double-sided battleaxe that most headsmen are known for, but a select few prefer to use smaller hand axes, that are normally used for cutting wood. These smaller axes can be thrown, thus allowing the Axeman to attack from a distance instead of just up close.

THE FLAYER

Male Human, Fighter 6; CR 8; **SZ** Medium; **HD** 6d10+6, 55 **hp**; **Init** +7; **Spd** 30 ft.; **AC** 13 (touch 13, flat-footed -13); **Atk** +6/+1 melee (falchion 2d4+1 or kophesh 1d6+1) and +5 ranged (throwing dagger 1d4+1); **SA**; **SQ**; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +6, **Ref** +5, **Will** +2; **Str** 13, **Dex** 17, **Con** 13, **Int** 15, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 14

Skills*:* Bluff +7, Hide +5, Intimidate +2, Listen +4, Move Silently +4, Sleight of Hand +9, Spot +6

Feats: Blind-Fight, Combat Expertise, Dodge, Improved Initiative, Lightning Reflexes, Point Blank Shot

Languages*:* Abyssal

Signature Possessions*:* +1 Falchion (implacable* weapon), +1 Kophesh (implacable* weapon), Skin Mask, 2 Throwing Daggers

*see *Magic Item Compendium* pg 37 for details

Appearance: The Flayer has a feral, deranged appearance. He wears a mask made of the sewn-together skin of his previous victims. He often sticks out his tongue and licks his "lips" in a very unsettling manner. He never wears a shirt, and his torso and arms are covered in knife scars. His movements are quick, but deliberate. He loves to leap from the shadows and ferociously pounce on his victims. Whenever he chases down a victim, he swiftly lopes along on all fours, snarling and howling like a wild beast.

His catchphrase is "*Crossed knives bring bad luck."*

Combat: The Flayer loves getting up close and personal with his victims. He always wields two blades when he attacks, cruelly slashing away at his target, then quickly dodging out of the way of any counterattacks. He never lets up on his assault and he never gives up, even if thing turn against him; he is like an unthinking beast, and the only way to stop him is to kill him.

Despite his ferocity, he never kills his victims quickly, preferring to take his time carving them up after they are incapacitated. He always cuts out his victim's tongue to stop them from crying out as he goes to work on them. He seems to consider every wound he gleefully inflicts as an offering to his dark gods.

Variations: Each incarnation focuses on claiming different parts of their victim's body, such as an ear or pinky finger. One of the most macabre was a killer who peeled the entire face off his victims, leaving behind a bloody, bleeding mess. Others simply carve esoteric shapes onto torsos, stab each extremity a ritualistic number of times, or brutally carve out a particular organ from their victim's body. Most are content to simply take a small patch of skin as a trophy.

THE HANGMAN

Male Human, Fighter 6: **CR** 8; **SZ** Medium; **HD** 6d10+6, 45 **hp** ; **Init** +7; **Spd** 30 ft.; **AC** 15 (touch 13, flat-footed 12); **Atk** +6/+1 melee (whip 1d3+1 or wire garrote 1d4+1) or +5 ranged (bolas 1d3+1); **SA**; **SQ**; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +5, **Ref** +5, **Will** +3; **Str** 15, **Dex** 16, **Con** 11, **Int** 17, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 12

Skills*:* Balance +5, Climb +4, Concentration +3, Escape Artist +6, Hide +8, Jump +8, Move Silently +4, Sleight of Hand +7, Spot +2, Tumble +4

Feats: Acrobatic, Agile, Deft Hands, Improved Grapple, Improved Initiative, Improved Unarmed Strike

Languages*:* Abyssal

Signature Possessions*:* Animated Whip (like Animated Rope), Boots of Spider Climb, Hangman's Gloves (like Gauntlets of Ogre Strength), Wire Garrote

Appearance: The Hangman is rather tall and lanky. He relies on stealth and cunning instead of brute strength. He has a thin, reedy voice and a disturbing, high-pitched laugh; in fact, he cackles incessantly after "hooking" a victim. His attire is the most distinct of the group – he always wears a black capotain hat and a voluminous black cloak over a plain tunic and breeches. (This helps him to blend into a crowd when following a target, and makes it easier to surprise attack them later.)

His catchphrase is *"Thirteen knots equals one good drop."*

Combat: The Hangman uses his Boots of Spider Climb to clamber from rooftop to rooftop, and when he finds a suitable target he "hooks" an unsuspecting victim by having his animated whip curl around their neck. Then, he gives the rope a forceful tug to lift the victim off their feet. He ties his end of the rope around a chimney or other convenient protuberance and then lowers himself to the ground while his victim struggles to breathe.

Even though he is not the most powerful or sadistic of his compatriots, he is a very crafty and determined foe. He is very patient, stalking his victims for days at a time and waiting for the perfect moment to strike. He enjoys tying his victim's hands behind their back with his bolas, then watches as they slowly choke to death.

If presented with a foe that can put up more of a fight, he uses his whip offensively, attempting to first disarm and then restrain his opponents. He relies on his Boots of Spider Climb to dodge and maneuver himself, and is not opposed to running away if he feels that he might be overpowered. At these times, he will use his bolas more defensively, trying to trip up any pursuers and stop them from following him.

Variations: Different incarnations of this killer use slightly different weapons. One particularly mighty version used iron chains instead of rope to strangle their victims. Others prefer to get more up close and personal, using a barbed wire garrote or even their bare hands to kill. Most are happy to simply suffocate their victims, but particularly brutal versions snap their victim's neck.

THE IMPALER

Female Human, Fighter 6: **CR** 8; **SZ** Medium; **HD** 6d10+6, 48 **hp**; **Init** +4; **Spd** 30 ft.; **AC** 17 (touch 14, flat-footed 13); **Atk** +7/+2 melee (needle 1d4+4) or +6 ranged (stake 1d6+5); **SA**; **SQ**; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +6, **Ref** +6, **Will** +5; **Str** 11, **Dex** 18, Con 13, **Int** 16, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 14

Skills*:* Concentration +6, Intimidate +8, Jump +3, Listen +2, Move Silently +6, Search +4, Sleight of Hand +8, Spot +4, Tumble +4

Feats: Iron Will, Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot, Rapid Shot, Two Weapon Fighting, Weapon Finesse

Languages*:* Abyssal

Signature Possessions*:* 2 Sets of Needles of Pain*, 3 +1 Stakes (souldrinking+ weapons), Studded Leather Armor

*see *Book of Vile Darkness* pg 115 for details

+see *Magic Item Compendium* pg 44 for details

Appearance: The Impaler's appearance is the most singular and outlandish – she sports a bald head with nails of various sizes sticking out of her face and neck. Her figure is slim but athletic, and she wears spiked, black leather armor from head to toe. She also wears two bandoleers, which hold her large wooden stakes and iron spikes.

Her catchphrase is *"The Devil passes through small holes."*

Combat: The Impaler usually attacks from a distance, attempting to impale her chosen victim by using her large stakes to fix them in place. She has unerring aim, and knows just the rights spots on the body to target in order to incapacitate her prey. Once she has accomplished this task, she brings out her needles. She loves torturing her victims and savoring their agony.

Despite her strange accouterments, she is remarkably acrobatic, performing graceful flips and spins to move around or dodge attacks. When forced into close quarters combat, she uses the Needles of Pain on herself to grant the ability to inflict intense pain by merely touching her opponent. She also likes headbutting her foes, attempting to snag them with the nails that adorn her head. She loves drawing as much blood from as many places as possible. Even though she is ostensibly the weakest member of the group, she is easily the most vile; to her, the infliction of pain is of paramount importance.

Variations: Different incarnations vary in their favorite killing blow. Some prefer to simply drive a stake through their victim's heart. Another would embed smaller spikes through both eye sockets. One particularly nasty version crucified their victims on a wall and left them to die slowly. Some also change up the type of material they use to create their spikes and stakes. Most use traditional wood or metal implements, but some use more exotic materials such as silver, crystal, or bone.

Dread Possibility: Murder Loves Company

If the DM so chooses, additional members can be added to this nefarious group. Their ranks can be as numerous and varied as the methods of execution used throughout history – burnt alive, disembowelment, gassing, electrocution, firing squad, stoning, etc. The only limit is what you (and your players) can stomach.

I have merely limited the group to the most common and illustrative forms I could think of. The following were key contenders for inclusion in the core group: The Reaper, who wields either a scythe or sickle, and uses the catchphrase: "The thinnest blade cuts deep." Or the Immolator, who wields a flaming baton or magical torch, and uses the catchphrase: "The flame is family." Or even the Electrocutioner, who wields magical gloves that shoot lightning, and uses the catchphrase: "Lightning never strikes the same spot twice."

Credits

- The Cult of Zebulon appears courtesy of Ehren Bradbury, from the article "The Acolytes of Zebulon" in the Book of Sorrows.
- Eduard Duvoir appears courtesy of Stefan Mac, from self-titled article in the Book of Shadows.
- Goeb Gunsmiths appears courtesy of Morten Olsen, Bill Theodoris, and Jaagup Irve, from the article "Ready, Aim, Fire" article in the Undead Sea Scrolls 2003.
- The Head Hunter appears courtesy of Andrew Hauptman, from the self-titled article in the Book of Sacrifices.
- Henry Masham appears courtesy of Stefan Mac, from the self-titled article in the Book of Sacrifices.
- Lars Kerskman appears courtesy of Nathan Okerlund, from the self-titled in the Book of Sacrifices.
- Mackie Firearms appears courtesy of Steven "ScS" Sutton, from the article "Extraordinary Expertise: Masterwork Firearms" in QTR #2.
- Marasmos appears courtesy of William James Cuffe, from the self-titled article in Children of the Night: Demons.
- Michel Le Perdu appears courtesy of John Kristian Spanberg, from the self-titled article in Undead Sea Scrolls 2002.

Fear is one of the most destructive forces in the entire world. It can tear a brave man apart, break a smart man's will, destroy a timid man's life. The one who learns how to isolate fear, distill fear, and eventually tame fear will either become the world's most revered hero or its most hateful villain!

- From the personal journal of Dr. Horten Kierkegaard

ALEKA KIERKEGAARD AKA THE PSYCHIC SURGEON

Female Human Soulknife 4 / Analyst 9: CR 13; **SZ** Medium Humanoid (5 ft. 6 in.); **HD** 9d4+4d10+13, 47 **hp**; **Init** +2; **Spd** 30 ft.; **AC** 14 (touch 12, flat-footed 11); **Atk** +7/+1 melee (mind blade 1d6+2 or rapier 1d6); **SA** Mind Blade, Psychic Strike; **SQ** Eyes of Innocence, Gazing Into the Abyss, Insight, Likable, Mindbending, Mindshadows, Shadow Terrors, Superior Technique, Trusted Friend, Weapon Proficiency (Simple); **AL** LG; **SV Fort** +4, **Ref** +7, **Will** +10; **Str** 10, **Dex** 14, **Con** 13, **Int** 17, **Wis** 15, **Cha** 16

Skills*:* Bluff +5, Climb +2, Concentration +8, Diplomacy +10, Gather Information +9, Heal +3, Hide +3, Hypnosis +10, Intimidate +7, Jump +3, Knowledge (arcana) +4, Knowledge (history) +5, Knowledge (local) +5, Knowledge (psionics) +8, Knowledge (religion) +5, Listen +9, Move Silently +6, Profession (analyst) +12, Search +6, Sense Motive +11, Spellcraft +6, Spot +5, Tumble +3

Feats: Combat Expertise, Diligent, Iron Will, Logical Mind, Persuasive, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (mind blade), Wild Talent

Language*:* Balok, Darkonese, Mordentish, Vaasi

Signature Possessions*:* Boots of Riding, Farspeaking Amulet, Healer's Kit, Horse (Zephyr), Magic Bedroll, Mesmerist's Pendulum*, +1 Rapier (mindcrusher weapon [Whisper]), Ring of Mindshielding, Tanglefoot Pouch

*see *Legacy of the Blood* pg 35 for details

Analyst Spells *per Day* (4/3/2; DC 14 + spell level, 9th level caster): 1 – *cause fear, charm person, comprehend languages, daze, detect magic, doom, hypnotism, message, remove fear;* 2 – *calm emotions, daze monster, detect thoughts, eagle's splendor, lesser confusion, lesser geas, rage, scare;* 3 – *charm monster, crushing despair, lesser restoration, modify memory, suggestion, tongues*

Eyes of Innocence (Su): Due to her early childhood trauama, Aleka is one of the few adults that can perceive the true appearance of bogeymen as well as their evil intentions. (Most adults see them as normal people or don't notice them at all.)

Gazing Into the Abyss (Ex): By speaking with a subject for at least one hour each day for one full week, Aleka may cause the subject to make a DC 20 wisdom check. If successful, the subject gains a permanent +4 bonus or -4 penalty (depending on her intention) to any one type of save (Fear, Horror, or Madness). This close intimacy with the minds of others, however, threatens to crack her own sanity. Whenever Aleka uses this ability, she suffers the effect of a failed Fear save for the next 24 hours as a result of the treatment.

Insightful (Ex)*:* Aleka has gained the ability to predict behavioral responses to linguistic triggers. She has a +2 bonus on all Bluff and Sense Motive checks made against any creature with whom she can converse.

Likable (Ex): Aleka's training allows her to project an affable demeanor at all times. She has a +2 bonus on all Diplomacy and Gather Information checks.

Mindbending (Ex): By speaking with a subject for at least one hour each day for one full week, Aleka may cause the subject to make a DC 18 Wisdom check. Upon success, the subject gains a permanent +2 bonus or -2 penalty (depending on her intention) to all Madness saves. Using this ability to impose a penalty on Madness saves is grounds for a Dark Powers check (2% minimum).

Mind Blade (Su): As a move action, Aleka can create a semi-solid blade composed of psychic energy distilled from her own mind. This weapon is identical in all ways (except visually) to a short sword. While this weapon can be broken (it has a hardness of 10 and 10 hit points), she can simply create another one on her next turn. A mind blade is considered a magical weapon for the purpose of overcoming damage reduction. Aleka can also use her mind blade as a ranged weapon (within 30 feet). Whether or not her attack hits, a thrown mind blade dissipates afterwards.

Mindshadows (Ex): Using careful observational and linguistic techniques Aleka can identify things that frighten or disturb another individual with a DC 15 Gather Information check. If the check is successful, the subject gains a permanent +2 bonus or -2 penalty (depending on her intention) to all Fear checks against the stated source of fear. This ability can be used only once per source of fear on any given subject. Using this ability to impose a penalty on Fear saves is grounds for a Dark Powers check (2% minimum).

Psychic Strike (Su): Aleka can imbue her mind blade with destructive psychic energy. This effect deals an extra 1d8 points of damage to the next living, non-mindless target she successfully hits with a melee attack. Creatures immune to mind-affecting effects are immune to this damage. Aleka deals this extra damage only once per manifestation of her mind blade.

Shadow Terrors (Ex): By speaking with the subject for one hour each day for one full week, Aleka may cause the subject to make a DC 16 Wisdom check. If successful, the subject gains a permanent +2 bonus or -2 penalty (depending on her intention) to all Horror saves. Using this ability to impose a penalty on Horror saves is grounds for a Dark Powers check (2% minimum).

Superior Technique (Ex): Aleka knows the workings of the mind so well that she can attempt to impose her will upon others through subtle manipulation. Aleka has a +2 bonus on all Hypnosis and Intimidate checks.

Trusted Friend (Ex): After one hour of conversation, Aleka can make a DC 15 Bluff check. If successful, she places the target under an effect similar to a *charm person* spell, that lasts for a number of rounds equal to her analyst level. This effect is not negated by a *dispel magic* or any other spells or spell-like abilities.

Appearance: Like many Vaasi women, Aleka has the slim, athletic build that is required to survive on the rough plains. She has small ruby lips and pale skin with freckles around her nose. She wears long-sleeved blouses of white cotton, regardless whether she is out on the road or working in an office. Most of the time she augments this plain ensemble with a dark brown leather vest. Instead of trousers, she wears flared riding pants that allow her to sit astride a horse, but look like a skirt when she is walking around. She wears a wide-brimmed straw boater hat when outside, to keep the sun off her fair complexion.

Aleka's hair is chestnut brown and of medium length. It is thick and curly, and she only wears it up for special occasions. She is nearsighted, but only wears glasses when she is working in the office. When out and about, she always wears her rapier Whisper, but when she is in the office or in a session with a client she sets it aside.

Background: Aleka was born in the small town of Liara in 727 BC. She was the eldest of two daughters born to Horten and Serica Kierkegaard. Her sister Sonja was three years younger, and their mother died while giving birth to her.

Unfortunately, a second tragedy struck the family in 736 BC when the bogeyman known as the White Rabbit latched onto the guilt that little Sonja felt over their mother's death. Over the course of several weeks, she was tormented by this entity to the point that she eventually drowned herself in the Little Borchava River.

Aleka was so devastated by the loss of her little sister that she withdrew into her own world for a time. She, too, felt guilty because she never believed Sonja when she tried to tell her big sister about a creature that visited her and told her awful things. She just couldn't believe such outlandish stories were true.

Until Aleka spied the White Rabbit hiding behind a tombstone at her sister's graveside service, that is. Luckily, she was able to shake off its depredations after an intense inner struggle. (She did not realize it at first, but this initial brush with a bogeyman during her childhood gave Aleka the *Eyes of Innocence* ability.)

Wanting to get away from these painful memories, Aleka's father decided to move east to Egertus for a new start. Little Sonja's death, however, launched Horten on a new mission – to conquer fear. A doctor by trade, he theorized that fear was all in the mind and that the mind was simply an organ controlled by chemicals. He believed that if he could isolate, or somehow neutralize, the fear chemicals (or hormones as he called them) in the brain, then he would be able to prevent tragedies like the one that befell his daughter. He worked off and on with Dr. Illhousen at his clinic on the outskirts of town, though eventually their research went in different directions.

When she turned 18, Aleka desired to follow in her father's footsteps and started attending classes at Kantora University. She found their facilities woefully inadequate, however, for her goal of understanding fear and the myriad effects it had on the mind. She petitioned her father to let her attend the University of Dementlieu in the West, where she could study the most up-to-date techniques used to treat mental illness. Horten was initially reluctant to let her go so far away from home, but Aleka eventually convinced him.

During the course of her studies, Aleka spent several years working in madhouses such as Notre Dame de la Pitie in Port-A-Lucine and the Mikki Asylum in Chateaufaux. It was in the latter where she met her most interesting patient - Oscar Gleam. They had several conversations about bogeymen and their behaviors, and this is where she first realized that others had felt the depredations of such creatures. Aleka redirected her studies along these lines, and soon became an expert in these loathsome entities. Her exchanges with Oscar were cut short, however, as he escaped the asylum one night about a year after they met. She often wonders what happened to him and is always on the lookout for him throughout her travels.

By 752 BC, Aleka returned to her father's home, having graduated with a doctorate in Psychology from the University of Dementlieu. She had hoped to find a staff position at Dr. Illhousen's Clinic, but was surprised to hear that it had burned down a few years ago with no trace of the good doctor being found. Instead, she decided to open a practice of her own in Bergovitsa, where she could better help the poorer inhabitants of the domain, whom she felt suffered under more primitive beliefs about mental illness than the enlightened cultures of the Western Core.

In her absence Horten had been busy developing a revolutionary anti-fear serum. Throughout the years, he had tried several different chemical mixtures, but never managed to perfect his formula. Unfortunately, his efforts had not gone unnoticed by darker forces. A being known only as the Fearmonger heard rumors of Horten's research and decided to take it for himself. His aim was to mass produce the fear hormone that Horten had isolated, then inject it into others in order to make them his slaves.

At first, the Fearmonger disguised himself and approached Horten offering funds to further his research if he would only share his technique. When Horten rebuffed him (he had grown quite paranoid about his research falling into the wrong hands), the Fearmonger revealed himself and threatened the scientist. When Horten still refused to cooperate, the Fearmonger simply killed him and took the samples he was after.

The next time Aleka visited, she found her father's lab in disarray. She was able to piece together a general idea of what happened, as she found clues to the Fearmonger's existence in her father's journal entries. This was the second time her family had been attacked by creatures of evil intent. She swore then and there to prevent other families from being preyed upon by monsters that hide in the dark and use fear as a weapon.

Dread Possibility: The Anti-Fear Serum

While going through her father's personal effects, Aleka found out that her father kept a second, secret research journal that the Fearmonger overlooked. It seems that Horten was worried that the Fearmonger would steal his work, so he kept one key ingredient of his formula out of his official notes. After months of study, Aleka was eventually able to recreate the formula her father was working on and inoculated herself with his experimental anti-fear serum.

Initially, Akeka had no way of knowing whether the drug worked or not, but she eventually found that in times of need she can tap into a reserve of physical calmness and mental resilience that allows her to survive terrors which would drive others mad. This ability has saved her life on more than one occasion, allowing her to act when others have been paralyzed by fear or horror.

In game terms this gives her a permanent +2 bonus to any Fear, Horror, or Madness save she is required to make, and a +4 bonus (non-cumulative) to any Fear, Horror, or Madness save she is required to make for a creature or situation she has encountered previously.

Combat: Aleka's greatest strength lies in her quick wit and powers of observation. She uses her emotional intelligence and persuasive personality to defuse most conflicts through talking. Only when she is extremely pressed will she resort to physical attacks. Even if she is attacked while traveling, she tries to outrun her opponent or uses her tanglefoot pouch to stall them instead of fighting them off.

When confronted by human foes, Aleka uses her rapier for defense. She is not greatly skilled at dueling, but she is quick on her feet and can dispatch common brigands easily. When facing more monstrous opponents, however, she will she manifest her mind blade.

Aleka's mind blade manifests as a bright white light. It protrudes from the top of her wrist and she uses it to slash at opponents in close quarters. But as she continues to fight, the blade starts to turn pink as the batttle rages on. If the confrontation goes on long enough, the blade will turn a bright, glowing red. (Nevertheless, however it appears at the end of the battle, the blade always resets to white at the start of the next combat.) This tinting is a physical reflection of Aleka's inner struggle; she fears that one day she will give in to her anger and lose control of her powers. This is a side of her that she is not very proud of and tries to hide from others.

A Mender of Minds

In Ravenloft there are myriad monsters lurking in the shadows that prey upon the small and weak, but there are precious few people able to address the damage they so often leave behind. Who is willing to help the orphan overcome the guilt he feels about surviving the savage werewolf attack that killed the rest of his family? Who is willing to commiserate with the victim of vampiric depredations and dispel the recurring nightmares she lives with, even after her undead tormentor has been dispatched? Having been exposed to the dark underbelly of this world multiple times, Aleka has vowed to use all the powers at her disposal to aid victims of supernatural attacks in their recovery.

Although Aleka still maintains her office in Bergovitsa, she is rarely found there. Often, she only uses it as a layover in between her extensive traveling. She has regular rounds that she makes in

Barovia, Nova Vaasa, and Darkon. When she travels to Barovia, she always checks in with the Invich Orphanage in Vallaki as well as the Hospice of 300 Wounds in Teudeldorf. When staying in Nova Vaasa, she can usually be found at both the University of Kantora and the Kantora Orphanage. When she visits Darkon, she splits her time between working at the Clangor Asylum in Maykle and the Comfort House in Karg.

Aleka has visited almost every care facility or mental institution established in the Eastern Core. She prefers to focus on this region because she feels like the new psychological theories that have been developed in the domains of the Western Core can be of great value to the sometimes backwards cultures and people that live here. Each of her engagements usually lasts between three to six months, depending on the needs of her patients. Sometimes she is requested for special consultations that take her further abroad; she has visited the island of Liffe several times for just such occasions.

She is unique in that she specializes in cases affecting children. She works with a range of patients, from those children who have been struck dumb or catatonic, to those who suffer from wild mood swings or exhibit other dangerous behaviors. By working through their negative feelings, Aleka seeks to build up the inner strength of her charges by giving them hope of a brighter future. She is constantly sharing her motto, “Survival is a choice we must make every day.”

Aleka uses the analytical skills she has learned to hold a series of meetings with each patient in order to establish trust and fully understand the problems they are facing. She firmly believes bringing trauma up into the light and talking about it is a much better solution than hiding it. Her sessions are intensive, and last from two weeks of daily interviews, to three to six months of weekly appointments.

Aleka has an amazing track record, with the majority of her cases resulting in total recovery or at least a significant remission of symptoms, and thanks to Aleka's conscientiousness and tireless work ethic she has become an expert in her field.

After countless sessions, Aleka has isolated the behaviors of various entities (both natural and unnatural) that specifically target the young and impressionable – mainly bogeymen and fihyrs, but less commonly hags, shadow fey, and other assorted creatures of the night. So despite not setting out to become a hunter of supernatural monsters, she has familiarized herself with their temperaments and habits. Unlike most people who encounter such otherworldly menaces, however, Aleka feels that she has just the right training to defeat her foes.

Her work is not the only reason she travels so extensively. It also allows her to pursue her primary adversary, the Fearmonger. After years of investigation, she has uncovered a great deal about his methods, although she is no closer to figuring out what his ultimate goal is.

Through interviews with recovered abductees, Aleka has found out that the Fearmonger is seeking what he calls “fear seeds.” These are highly sensitive individuals (usually children) that exhibit extraordinary creativity or have wild imaginations. Some even seem to have latent psychic abilities (much like Aleka herself). What he is using these “fear seeds” for is unknown, but one thing she knows for sure, those that he successfully kidnaps are never seen again. A majority of the research she conducts involves identifying such “fear seeds” before the Fearmonger becomes aware of them, and protecting them from his depredations.

FRIENDS

While she is more than capable of taking care of herself, Aleka's greatest asset is her communication skill. Her cheerful demeanor and cherubic face inspire confidence in strangers, and her enthusiasm is infectious.

She maintains a vast network of correspondences with the leading psychiatrists of the Core, many of whom she was introduced or exposed to during her

time at the University of Dementlieu. She has consulted with Prof. Benjamin Hanlon of the Port-A-Lucine Asylum, and several of her former colleagues from the Mikki Asylum in Chateaufaux.

Lately, she has started exchanging letter with the illustrious James Mousel of the Mousel Sanitarium in Mordent; she is eager to learn more about the "analytical method" he espouses, while he seems highly interested in her father's collaborations with the late Dr. Illhousen. She also maintains a close working relationship with Dr. Clangor of the Clangor Asylum in Darkon. They share the same philosophy on mental rehabilitation of patients, and she consults with him frequently on cases even when she is working elsewhere.

The subject of her correspondences varies greatly, but usually centers on the latest psychological theories or new treatment methods. The scholars she exchanges letters with also debate the pros and cons of new diagnostic tools such as phrenology (wherein the contours of one's head correspond to and predict certain personality traits), or a test developed by the Lamordian doctor Herman Orschach, who believes a subject's response to a series of inkblot images reveals a person's inner mental state. They even dissect the works of past and present scholars, such as the Invidian alienist Frederico Nichi's "will to power" theory or the Richemulotese professor Sigmin Froyde's scandalous papers on love and the libido.

Closer to home, Aleka has fostered a loose network of associates that are all working to help the poor and less fortunate of Nova Vaasa. Aleka feels that if the terrible living conditions of the lower classes could be alleviated, it would go a long way towards "civilizing" her home domain.

The most prominent member of this group is Narana Hiregaard, the granddaughter of the famed Tristen Hiregaard. Narana owes a great debt to Aleka, as the analyst helped Narana overcome her own bout of temporary insanity when they first met; the young scion of that noble family now counts her as a trusted ally and will do whatever she can to help Aleka.

Many years ago, Aleka was introduced to Geraldine Harper (the headmistress of the Kantora Orphanage), whom she works closely with to aid the poor and downtrodden of that city.

Aleka also frequently collaborates with the Spirit Sisters, two young psychics that operate just outside of Bergovitsa. Their prophetic powers have helped her resolve many difficult cases, and Aleka is currently considering sponsoring them for membership in the Bright Triad.

She has also worked with Marynia Teslenko, an infamous Master of Curses (see *Champions of Darkness* pg. 80 for details) on several cases within the Eastern Core. Aleka senses the pain that this wandering cleric of the Lawgiver is carrying with her, and tries to check in on her whenever she can.

She even counts Lukas Duremke, the outlaw priest of the Lawgiver, as an ally. Due to his apostate status, they rarely meet (at least not on Vaasan soil), but she regularly refers people in need of his services to him and he is happy to reciprocate the gesture.

Finally, like most Vaasi, Aleka loves horse riding, and her father gifted her horse, Zephyr, to her on her 16th birthday. The two have been almost inseparable ever since.

Adventure Hook: The Clinic for the Mentally Distressed Revisited

Recently, Aleka has been having strange dreams regarding Dr. Illhousen, indicating that he is still alive. Unbeknownst to her, the Nightmare Court is targeting her in the hopes of luring Spotted Cloud into their clutches. Sure enough, she calls upon the Abber Shaman to help interpret these dreams, which seem to point in the direction of the burned-out clinic. When he arrives, Spotted Cloud discovers that Aleka has already been kidnapped by the Nightmare Man and hidden deep in the City of Nod. Now, he is

recruiting a band of heroes to guide through the physical domain of the Nightmare Lands and rescue his friend.

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Initiation and Induction

Aleka first met the Dr. Odd in 756 BC, when they fought together against the wereray Hilda Borganov and her Cult of Shaylot in a small coastal town called Tidemore in Darkon. Aleka was amazed to find another intellectual that fought to help others. Dr. Odd was immediately impressed by Aleka's quick thinking and intellectual bent.

Aleka's next encounter with a member of the Bright Triad occurred a couple years later, in 758 BC, when she was in Barovia investigating the bogeyman known as Fanton Griswold. She was able to defeat this fearsome creature with the help of Spotted Cloud. who served as her guide during the hunt. He, too, found Aleka to be insightful and capable of taking care of herself; the pair soon began collaborating on more and more cases. Aleka's familiarity with Dr. Illhousen's theories on the Nightmare Court have been a great boon to the Abber shaman, and he holds her in the highest regard for sharing this knowledge with him.

The next year, in 759 BC, Dr. Odd asked Aleka for her help in fighting a strange bogeyman known as Mister Fox, who had been preying upon the girls in isolated villages throughout Liffe. A year after that, Dr. Odd was invited to Nova Vaasa, as Aleka discovered yet another cell of Shaylot cultists operating in the coastal town of Egertus. It was after this adventure was completed that Dr. Odd invited her into the Bright Triad, and Aleka eagerly accepted, officially joining the group in 761 BC.

Dread Possibility: The Brotherhood of Contemplative Power

Aleka's soulknife abilities manifested late in her life (staying dormant until she finished college), and she had to learn how to master them all by herself. After they got to know each other better, Spotted Cloud referred her to the Brotherhood of Contemplative Power. During her next sojourn in Barovia, she managed to find the Brotherhood's compound, and she was welcomed by the psions there as one of their own.

She made several subsequent visits and slowly mastered her psychic powers. This is also the origin of her *mindcrusher* rapier, Whisper, which was gifted to Aleka in order to celebrate her accomplishments.

During the course of her studies, she also learned of the ancent menace of the mindflayers the Brotherhood guarded against. To Aleka, these creatures seem like a nightmare made real, and although she has never encountered them directly, she is always on guard against mental attacks. She has even started up a correspondence with Dr. Sean McClintock of the Saulbridge Sanitarium in Mordent, who has had several encounters with the illithids, in order to learn more about them.

FOES

Aleka's most persistent and pervasive foes is the group of fairytale creatures known collectively as bogeymen. From her first encounter with the White Rabbit when she was only nine years old, to the strange tales she heard from Oscar Gleam, she has always felt the specter of their presence lurking in the back of her mind.

Things That Go Bump in the Night

Alligator Lenny – Aleka has fought and defeated this bogeyman the most frequently, probably due to the widespread fear that children have about water and drowning.

The Bad Thing – Aleka has fought and defeated this bogeyman several times, encountering it most often at the local orphanages she visits.

Fanton Griswold – This was the first bogeyman Aleka encountered as an adult. She has done extensive research on his manifestations and regularly travels to Barovia to ensure he hasn't returned.

The Gentlemen – Aleka has fought and defeated these bogeymen several times, encountering them at least once in each asylum she has visited on her rounds.

Madame and Monsieur Croquemitaine – Aleka has never fought or encountered this pair, though she has heard rumors of their existence from several sources.

Mister Fox – Aleka has fought this bogeyman just once, and quite by accident. She was investigating a Liffen nobleman running a mail-order bride operation with Dr. Odd. It turns out Mister Fox was manipulating things from behind the scenes, but he unfortunately slipped away before they could catch him.

The Scissorman (DT&DL) – Aleka has never fought this bogeyman, but she is well aware of his existence and is very keen on hunting him down. She has investigated several cases where she believes he was involved, but has only ever seen the grisly aftermath of his appearances.

Dread Possibility: The White Rabbit Returns

The White Rabbit is a particularly loathsome bogeyman, that preys upon children who have been traumatized by major life events such as the loss of a loved one or the destruction of a home. It is known by many names in the stories told about it, such as Br'er Lapin and Ol' Cottontail. It first appears to its victim when they are alone, and draws them in with its cute appearance and shiny pocket watch.

The White Rabbit loves playing games such as hide-and-seek or tag, and slowly lures the child farther and farther away from the safety of their own home. After a few encounters that repeat this same pattern, the White Rabbit will eventually lead its victim to the scene of the initial tragedy (such as the burned out husk of a home or the grave of the dead family member). With the child's mental wound now freshly re-opened, this devious bogeyman will pretend to console them, telling its victim that it knows of a surefire way to escape the guilt they feel, promising if they only do what it says they will never have to worry about anything again.

It will repeat this cajoling until the child finally relents and agrees to go with them. Then, the bogeyman will lead them deep into the woods to a hidden hole and jump in, inviting the victim to follow him. Nobody knows what happens to the child on the other side, but they are never seen or heard from again. (It should be notes that many of the White Rabbit's intended victims take their own life prematurely.)

Small Fey (Bogeyman); **CR** 4; **SZ** Small Animal (2 ft. 6 in.); **HD** 4d6+4, 18 **hp**; **Init** +3; **Spd** 45 ft.; **AC** 17 (touch 16, flat-footed 13); **Atk** +4 melee (2 claws 1d4+1 or bite 1d3+1); **SA** --; **SQ** Bogeyman Vulnerabilities, Darkvision (60 ft.), Eyes of Innocence; Linguist, Taint of Evil; **AL** LE; **SV Fort** +2, **Ref** +6, **Will** +6; **Str** 12, **Dex** 12, **Con** 13, **Int** 10, **Wis** 17, **Cha** 14

Skills: Bluff +8, Climb +7, Diplomacy +5, Jump +12, Gather Information +7, Hide +10, Intimidate +8, Listen +10, Move Silently +11, Sense Motive +9, Spot +13

Feats: Improved Initiative, Lightning Reflexes, Run

Language: Any

Signature Possessions: Masterwork Pocket Watch, Portable Hole

Bogeyman Vulnerabilities (Ex): The White Rabbit is extremely paranoid about being caught, and is scared away by sudden, loud noises (such as gunshots or dogs barking). It is unable to harm those protected by bless spells (or similar protection or magic circle spells). The White Rabbit takes 2d4 damage from holy water, and can be turned by clerics of good deities as if it were undead.

Eyes of Innocence (Su): The true evil of bogeymen is clear only to the imaginative and innocent; to adults the White Rabbit appears as a run-of-the-mill hare.

Linguist (Ex): The White Rabbit can speak any language spoken in any community where stories about it are told.

Taint of Evil (Su): Bogeymen are so evil that they leave their taint on everything they touch. Any attempt to contact the White Rabbit or its missing victims mentally places the mentalist in direct contact with that evil, provoking a Madness save. Psychics who touch the corpses of victims must almost make a Madness save, as the victim's last moments are experienced firsthand.

Appearance: This creature appears as a portly white bunny with big white ears that stand up straight. It has gold, wire-rimmed spectacles, and wears a green-and-yellow-checkered vest, in which it carries a gold pocket watch, but wears no other clothes. Most of the time, the White Rabbit hops around on all fours, but every once in a while it stops and rears up on its hind legs. It takes out its pocket watch and looks at it, as if it were running late for an important appointment.

Combat: The White Rabbit will avoid combat if at all possible. If threatened, it will run away or hide. It will resort to using its bite or claw attack only if cornered by a large animal like a dog. When it does employ its bite attack, its mouth grows bigger and wider, with giant buckteeth protruding from it. The same thing happens to its paws, growing longer and sharper, when it uses its claw attack.

Nemeses

Ironically, the main foes that Aleka engages with most often are not bogeyman at all, but an entirely different class of monsters known as fihyrs. As the name suggests, these entities are a physical representation of common fears that both children and adults have regarding the world around them (such as bugs, enclosed spaces, blood, etc.) They are nightmares made real.

While fihyrs' origins may sound similar to bogeymen, there are a few key differences. The main way to tell whether you are dealing with a true bogeyman and not a fihyr is whether they follow “storybook logic.” Bogeymen have to follow the rules set out in the stories that are told about them; fihyrs have no such restrictions. Also, each bogeyman has a unique weakness that can be used to defeat them; all fihyrs have the same weakness – sunlight. Also, if a fihyr is killed, it ceases to exist; if you kill a bogeymen, however, there is a chance they can return as long as stories about them still circulate.

Many scholars posit that if a fihyr becomes strong enough and lasts long enough, it can become a bogeyman in its own right, but the process by which that happens is completely unknown.

Little Fears

Unbeknownst to Aleka, the Fearmonger is building an army. One that doesn't fight with swords or guns, but with fear itself. Originally the children he abducted were administered the version of the anti-fear formula he stole. Most simply died, others were driven mad. But a small fraction were transformed into monstrosities with strange forms and powers, dictated by their own fears; in effect, they became the very thing they feared the most.

Essentially, the Fearmonger has discovered how to create artificial fihyrs; ones that last longer and that are far stronger than the common types one would usually encounter. They also have more intelligence and individuality, but he has learned to control and manipulate them through lies and threats. They

must still feed on the fear they create in others, but now they have a special *fear sense* that allows them to hone in on individuals that fear the very thing they represent.

Creating a horde of fearlings is not the Fearmonger's main goal, but simply a means to an end. Through his own twisted experiments, the Fearmonger has found a way to gain power for himself by feeding off the fear of others. Unfortunately, this power does not last long, which is why he is always seeking new and better ways to instigate mass hysteria. One day, he believes he will find a way to retain the energy he gains through this method, and then he will stop hiding in the shadows and start a real campaign of terror the likes of which the Demiplane has never seen before!

FLESHBALL

Fleshball represents the fear of splinters, blisters, scabs or anything else that breaks through the skin and spills blood.

Aberration (2nd Rank Fihyr): **CR** 3; **SZ** Small Aberration (2 ft. diameter sphere); **HD** 3d12, 16 **hp**; **Init** +4; **Spd** 30 ft.; AC 14 (touch 14, flat-footed 10); **Atk** +2 melee (slam 1d4+2); **SA** Constrict; **SQ** Damage Reduction (10/bludgeoning); Darkvision (60 ft.), Frightful Presence, Immunity to Fear, Sunlight Vulnerability, Terror Sense; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +1, **Ref** +1, **Will** +2; **Str** 15, **Dex** 18, **Con** 11, **Int** 13, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 5

Skills*:* Balance +10, Disguise +8, Hide +14, Listen +6, Move Silently +4, Spot +7

Feats: Dodge, Mobility

Constrict (Ex): Fleshball can crush an opponent it has successfully grappled, dealing 2d6 bludgeoning damage.

Frightful Presence (Ex): Creatures with less than 5 HD within a 60-foot radius of Fleshball must succeed on a Will save (DC 11) or be affected as though by a *fear* spell. A creature that successfully saves cannot be affected by this same ability within the next 24 hours.

Improved Grab (Ex): When Fleshball successfully hits its opponent with its slam attack, it can attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If it wins the grapple check, Fleshball establishes a hold and it can use its Constrict ability.

Terror Sense (Ex): Fleshball can scan the minds of intelligent creatures and zero in on those that fear its particular form (up to a range of 3 miles). Once it is within 300 ft, Fleshball can zero in on one particular individual. This functions like the *detect thoughts* spell and is in continuous use.

Appearance: Like the name implies, Fleshball most often appears as a 2 foot diameter ball of flesh that oozes blood. It gets around by either rolling or bouncing. While it doesn't have organs in the traditional sense, Fleshball can create approximations of eyes, a mouth, and a nose when it wishes to communicate with others (which it rarely does). Its body is remarkably flexible, and is able to compress itself in order to squeeze into tight spaces or extend fleshy appendages to grab things that would normally be out of reach.

Combat: Fleshball is relatively weak, so it will often flee if it encounters resistance of any kind. But if it is dealing with someone it thinks is weaker than itself, it will first attempt to knock them down with its slam attack and then envelop them with its tendrils so it can use its constrict ability on them.

SLANTYMAN

Slantyman represents the fear of dead bodies; specifically, those that died by hanging.

Aberration (4th Rank Fihyr): **CR** 9; **SZ** Medium Humanoid (6 ft.); **HD** 8d12, 52 hp; **Init** -1; **Spd** 20 ft; **AC** 14 (touch 13, flat-footed 14); **Atk** +9 melee (2 slams 1d6+4); SA Animate Rope, Improved Grab, Strangle; **SQ** Darkvision (60 ft.), Frightful Presence, Immunity to Fear, Sunlight Vulnerability, Terror Sense; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +4, **Ref** +1, **Will** +7; **Str** 18, Dex 8, **Con** 11, **Int** 10, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 15

Skills*:* Concentration +6, Intimidate +8, Listen +10, Move Silently +8, Sense Motive +12, Spot +11

Feats: Great Fortitude, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (slam)

Animate Rope (Sp)*:* 3/day – as per the spell (8th level caster).

Improved Grab (Ex): When Slantyman successfully hits his opponent with both slam attacks, he can attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If he wins the grapple check, Slantyman establishes a hold and he can use his Strangle ability.

Frightful Presence (Ex): Creatures with less than 5 HD within a 60-foot radius of Slantyman must succeed on a Will save (DC 16) or be affected as though by a fear spell. A creature that successfully saves cannot be affected by this same ability within the next 24 hours.

Strangle (Ex): On a successful grapple check, Slantyman automatically deals 1d6+4 points of damage each round the hold is maintained and the opponent cannot breath.

Terror Sense (Ex): Slantyman can scan the minds of intelligent creatures and zero in on those that fear his particular form (up to a range of 3 miles). Once he is within 300 ft Slantyman can zero in on one particular individual. This functions like the *detect thoughts* spell and is in continuous use.

Appearance: Slantyman is a disturbing sight to behold. He never stands straight, as his upper half is always bent at an impossible angle. When he walks, his torso jerks forwards and backwards as his arms hang limply at his side. His eyes bulge, his tongue lolls out of his mouth, and a frayed noose hangs around his neck.

Combat: Even though Slantyman seems off-kilter, he is still very determined. Whenever he approaches a victim, he tries to knock the breath out of them with his slam attacks and then quickly establishes a grapple in order to choke them to death.

THE SLITHERING ONE

The Slithering one represents the fear of snakes and other creatures that crawl on or within the ground.

Aberration (3rd Rank Fihyr): **CR** 4; SZ Small Animal (3 ft.); **HD** 4d8+8, 23 **hp**; **Init** +3; **Spd** 20 ft., climb 20 ft., swim 20 ft. **AC** 15 (touch 13, flat-footed 12); **Atk** +6 melee (bite 1d4+4 plus poison) or +4 ranged (spit, touch poison); **SA** Poison, Spit; **SQ** Darkvision (60 ft.), Frightful Presence, Immunity to Fear, Sunlight Vulnerability, Terror Sense; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +4, **Ref** +6, **Will** +2; **Str** 17, **Dex** 17, Con 13, **Int** 11, **Wis** 12, Cha 12

Skills*:* Balance +11, Climb +14, Hide +9, Listen +7, Spot +8, Swim +10

Feats: Alertness, Toughness

Frightful Presence (Ex): Creatures with less than 5 HD within a 60-foot radius of The Slithering One must succeed on a Will save (DC 13) or be affected as though by a *fear* spell. A creature that successfully saves cannot be affected by this same ability within the next 24 hours.

Poison (Ex): Injury or contact, Fortitude DC 13, initial and secondary damage 1d4 Constitution. The save DC is Constitution based.

Spit (Ex): The Slithering One can spit its venom up to 30 ft. as a standard action. This is a ranged touch attack.

Terror Sense (Ex): The Slithering One can scan the minds of intelligent creatures and zero in on those that fear its particular form (up to a range of 3 miles). Once it is within 300 ft, the Slithering One can zero in on one particular individual. This functions like the *detect thoughts* spell and is in continuous use.

Appearance: The Slithering One looks like a giant albino snake with red eyes that glow in the dark. Like its name implies, it moves by slithering on the ground and because of its conspicuous appearance it keeps mostly to the shadows.

Combat: The Slithering One only emerges from hiding when it is ready to attack and hisses loudly to strike fear in its opponents. It prefers to use its spit attack to shoot poisonous venom from a distance so it can remain out of the reach of counterattacks. It is perfectly happy to poison its opponent and run away and let its deadly toxin do its work.

TWIST-TAIL

Twist-Tail represents the fear of rats and the diseases that they spread.

Aberration (3rd Rank Fihyr): **CR** 6; **SZ** Small Swarm (4 ft. 6 in.); **HD** 4d8, 20 **hp**; **Init** +2; **Spd** 20 ft, climb 20 ft.; **AC** 14 (touch 14, flat-footed 12); Atk +3 melee (bite 1d4 plus disease or 2 claws 1d6 plus disease); **SA** Disease, Stench; **SQ** Darkvision (60 ft.), Frightful Presence, Immunity to Fear, Sunlight Vulnerability, Swarm Traits, Terror Sense; **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +4, **Ref** +6, **Will** +2; **Str** 10, **Dex** 15, **Con** 10, **Int** 16, **Wis** 8, **Cha** 6

Skills*:* Balance +9, Climb +10, Hide +12, Intimidate +8, Listen +6, Move Silently +5, Spot +7

Feats: Alertness

Disease (Ex): Filth fever – Fortitude DC 12, incubation period 1d3 days, damage 1d3 Dex and 1d3 Con. The save DC is Constitution based.

Frightful Presence (Ex): Creatures with less than 5 HD within a 60-foot radius of Twist-Tail must succeed on a Will save (DC 12) or be affected as though by a *fear* spell. A creature that successfully saves cannot be affected by this same ability within the next 24 hours.

Stench (Ex): Any living creature that begins its turn within 5 feet of Twist-Tail must succeed on a DC 12 Fortitude save or be nauseated for one round. The save DC is Constitution based.

Swarm Traits (Ex): Twist-Tail is not subject to critical hits or flanking. It takes half damage from slashing and piercing damage. Reducing Twist-Tail to 0 hit points causes it to break up. It is never staggered and and cannot be tripped, grappled, or bull rushed. Twist-Tail is immune to any spell or effect that targets a specific number of creatures, with the exception of mind-affecting effects. It takes half again as much damage (+50%) from spells or effects that affect an area.

Terror Sense (Ex): Twist-Tail can scan the minds of intelligent creatures and zero in on those that fear its particular form (up to a range 3 miles). Once it is within 300 ft, Twist-Tail can zero in on one particular individual. This functions like the *detect thoughts* spell and is in continuous use.

Appearance: Twist-Tail appears to be a giant anthropomorphic rat, but is in actually a swarm of rats masquerading as one being. Its skin constantly shifts and ripples as the rats reposition themselves. Its odor is generally the first thing people notice about it, following by the dozens of squeaks that emanate from it.

Combat: Twist-Tail loves to gnaw and scratch at its prey, and once it obtains a grip (either with its mouth or with its claws) it seldom lets go. It is surprisingly hard to attack and kill, due to its swarm traits. If Twist-Tail loses half its hit points it will run away, add more rats to the collective, then return to attack again.

Fear Itself

The Fearmonger was once a man like any other, but due to constantly experimenting on himself, he has become nearly unrecognizable as such. In his haste to harness the power of fear, he has taken on some of the appearance as well as the abilities of that terrifying class of creatures known as fihyrs.

THE FEARMONGER

Aberration (5th Rank Fihyr); CR 12; **SZ** Medium Humanoid (6 ft. 4 in.); **HD** 18d12+18, 110 **hp**; **Init** +6; **Spd** 30 ft.; **AC** 20 (touch 12, flat-footed 18); **Atk** +12/+7 melee (quarterstaff 1d6+4 or touch 1d6+4 plus energy drain); **SA** Energy Drain, Fear Blast, Spell-Like Abilities, Touch of Fear; **SQ** Damage Reduction (15/magic), Darkvision (60 ft.), Fear Surge, Frightful

Presence, Immunity to Fear, Spell Resistance (18); **AL** CE; **SV Fort** +10, **Ref** +8, **Will** +13; **Str** 20, **Dex** 14, **Con** 13, Int 17, **Wis** 20, **Cha** 15

Skills*:* Bluff +9, Climb +6, Concentration +16, Craft +11, Decipher Script +8, Disguise +8, Gather Information +10, Hide +14, Intimidate +18, Knowledge (arcana) +14, Knowledge (history) +5, Knowledge (psionics) +8, Knowledge (religion) +12, Listen +10, Move Silently +14, Sense Motive +12, Spot +15

Feats: Cleave, Combat Casting, Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Expertise, Improved Initiative, Improved Toughness, Mobility, Power Attack, Whirlwind Attack

Energy Drain (Su): The Fearmonger bestows one negative energy level with a successful touch attack. After a successful application of this ability, he gains the following special attacks:

Fear Surge (Su): When the Fearmonger drains two levels with his energy drain ability, he gains a +4 enhancement bonus to an ability score of his choice for the next 24 hours. This does not stack with other level draining abilities.

Touch of Fear (Su): When the Fearmonger drains four levels with his energy drain ability, he gains the ability to instill fear in any living creature that he touches. The target must succeed on a Fort save (DC 18) or see a vision of the thing it fears the most and be paralyzed for 1d4 rounds. This effect cannot be dispelled, but *remove paralysis* or any spell that can remove a curse can free the victim. This does not stack with other level-draining abilities.

Fear Blast (Su): When the Fearmonger drains six levels with his energy drain ability, he gains the ability to project a 100 foot ray of energy that deals 6d6 points of psychic damage. A successful Ref save (DC 21) is needed to avoid damage. This does not stack with other level draining abilities.

The ability to utilize these special attacks only lasts up to 24 hours after the level draining takes place.(Any abilities gained through this level draining are doubled if performed on other fihyers.)

Frightful Presence (Ex): Creatures with less than 10 HD within a 60-foot radius of the Fearmonger must succeed at a Will save (DC 21) or be affected as though by a *fear* spell. A creature that successfully saves cannot be affected by this same ability within the next 24 hours.

Spell-Like Abilities *(Sp):* At will – *detect magic, detect thoughts, sending, true seeing*; 2/day – *command, dispel magic, ethereal jaunt, spectral hand.* These abilities are as the spells, save DCs are Charisma based, 15th level caster.

CREDITS

- The Brotherhood of Contemplative Power appears courtesy of Ed Kowalczewski, from the self-titled article in the Undead Sea Scrolls 2002.
- Comfort House appears courtesy of Andrew Hauptman, from the adventure"Kraxzat" that takes place in Children of the Night: Demons
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and

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DM Appendix: Whys and Wherefores

I have three aims in presenting this group...

The first is to provide DMs with alternative NPCs to fill the position of a paranormal investigator. I feel that Ravenloft has so many fantastic elements that one person can't possibly embody all aspects of that role. Yes, we have Alanik Ray as a stand-in for Sherlock Holmes, but there are other types that fit in the campaign setting just as well. For example, Dr. Odd is my attempt to create an amalgam of Dr. Strange and John Constantine (from DC's Hellblazer), as both of these individuals often deal with supernatural threats and invasions from other dimensions. And although this was not my intent, others see similarities between Manhunter and Batman, whose more down-to-earth detective skills have always been an integral part of that character's superhero career.

My second goal was to build characters using some of the Prestige Classes found in Heroes of Light, Legacy of the Blood, and other 3rd edition publications. I ended up using the Analyst PrC (LotB: D'Honaire family), Detective PrC (HoL), the Divine Exorcist PrC (LOTB: Godefroy family), the Metaphysician PrC (HoL), and the Monster Hunter PrC (RLPHB).

I really wanted to really see what these NPCs could do if they gained the full range of abilities for each Prestige Class, which is why I ended up making them such a high level bunch. This may turn some readers off, but if you think about it, it makes sense. Each NPC I outline could be considered an expert in their chosen field, and one doesn't become an expert unless they've survived a lot of formidable scenarios!

Finally, I wanted to give DMs tools and resources to introduce specific elements, such as bogeymen and serial killers, into their campaign. Any of these NPCs can be used as either a sponsor or mentor to a party of lower level PCs. Do you want to play an adventure set in the Nightmare Lands? Have your PCs meet up with the Dreamwalker who teaches them the rules of dream combat. Want to run an adventure where a fiend is the Big Bad, but you're afraid your PCs aren't powerful enough? Have the Gray Monk guide them in their investigation of a fiendish cult.

The secret society as a whole is useful in similar ways. Need a reason to send the PCs to Souragne so they can play through Night of the Walking Dead? Have them transport an item from one society member to another (possibly Papa Bokor, who resides in Port d' Elhour). Want to get your PCs on a boat so you can run Ship of Horrors? Have a society member hire your PCs as couriers to pass along a secret message to Captain Asklepios.

In addition, a DM could build a whole campaign around the PCs trying to prove themselves worthy of membership in this group in order to the gain powerful allies they may need to aid them in reaching their own overarching goals.

Collodi, Land of Puppets and Fables

by Tommaso "Mistmaster" Mazzoni

Collodi at a glance

Culture level: Chivalric
Ecology: Full
Climate & Terrain: Temperate on the coast, continental on the interior, Hills, Swamps and Forests dotted by cultivated fields, surrounded by mountains.
Languages: Common (Baloki), Elvish. Collodian, Zherisian.
Religions: Church of Andaral the Morninglord, Cult of Hala, Divinity of Mankind, Cluskan Pantheon.
Races: Human 88%, Vistani 9%, Elves 2% Other 1%.
Government: Hereditary Constitutional Monarchy
Ruler: Prince Gian Domenico Mazzanti Serbelloni Viendalmare
Darklord: The Coachman (Stefano Barbagallo)
Lightlord: The Blue Fairy
Analog: Pinocchio/Tuscany and Italy in early 1800.
Surface: 31,443 km²
Capital City: Acchiappacitrulli (N/E, Standard, 110,000 inhabitants)
Inhabitants: 1,500,000
Important Cities: Busy Bees Town (L/G, Standard, 30,000 in.), Collodi (N, Standard, 80,000 in.), Narno's Mouth (N/E, Non-Standard, 10,000 in.), Pleasure Island (L/E, Non-Standard, 5,000 in.)
Borders: West, Sea of Sorrows; North, Mordent; East, Valachan; South, Sea of Sorrows.

Tropes

The tropes in Collodi are those of Italian fairy tales, the evil being the evil of exploitation and power abuse. Fairies roam the land and often engage in pacts and games with non-fairies. Ancient religions survive side-by-side with more recent ones, and old, dark rituals happen in the deep of forests and swamps.

Domain Overview

Collodi is a land of cultivated hills and thick forests. A long river, the Narno River, flows across the middle of the nation from the east to the west, originating from its spring on Mount Godsthrone, the last height of the Balinoks. It touches all of the main towns, starting with Culla del Narno**,** Narno's Cradle, at the foot of Mount Godsthrone. The river also touches Hatred Hill, Colle degli Odii, which gives its name to

the old capital, Collodi, which in turn gave the Princedom its name.

The new capital, Acchiappacitrulli, is in a vale formed by the Narno in the center of the nation, and its main port, Busy Bees Town, lays on the mouth of the river. Off of the coast from Busy Bees Town, we have the infamous Pleasure Island, home of the Core's greatest carnival.

A little forest, Hala's Wood, grows nearby Collodi; it's the most ancient shrine of Hala in the region.

The much bigger and thicker Fairy's Forest surrounds the hills on which Collodi lies; it reaches the mountain on the northern borders, where live the Elves.

When the forest fades, and the river enlarges, you enter into the territory of the capital, Acchiappacitrulli. The name means “fool-catcher,” and the city is so full of brothels, gambling houses (*bisques* in Collodian), inns, and markets, that many fools are indeed caught.

The Cathedral of the Raven here is the seat of the local head of the church.

On the south lies the insidious Assassin's Forest, dotted with little hamlets and villages.

The Narno River then goes west, towards the sea, where lies Busy Bees Town, a thriving port and market town.

In the south, the Assassin's Forest gives way to the Fever Swamp, which borders the sparsely populated Coast of Donkeys.

A few miles away from Busy Bees Town, we find Pleasure Island. It's the site of the most notorious carnival in the Core, and the seat of Barbagallo Estate, home of the richest man of the domain. The island is also notorious for breeding a race of very intelligent, long living, highly resistant donkeys.

The People

Collodians are hard working, practical and have a dry humor, with an ever present ironic streak. Generous and pragmatic, they distrust strangers, but don't shun them; Collodians are traders, so they don't judge a possible customer by his race. The only ones excepted from Collodian hospitality are the Vistani; Vistani are seen as thieves, kidnappers, con artists, and a lazy lot. They can be fun, but all in all, better keep them out of the cities. This is the common attitude of Collodians on Vistani.

All Collodians, even nobility, are expected to have a trade of sorts. Even the Prince is a banker, at least in name.

Beggars are seen as pariahs, by all save the Church of Andaral, unless they are really unable to work. False blind or lame people are punished harshly by the law, and risk being forced out of a town, covered in tar and feathers.

Every Collodian kid needs to learn his letters, and three years of school is mandatory for every kid from 6 to 9. Many Collodians know how to write, read and count.

Collodians have a rich oral tradition, and they gather after dark falls to share stories together.

Collodians do not forget easily, neither kindness, nor wrong. If slandered, they can go to extremes to prove the slanderer wrong. The story of Matteo has become popular in the whole Core: Matteo was a homeless man, who made a living helping women with heavy chores, and frequently moved from farm to farm. One day, he complained about the quantity of food he got from a family, so the family head invited him to dinner, and gave him a rich feast. However, when Matteo was full and ready to go, the family head took out his crossbow, and forced Matteo to keep eating until he exploded. On the other hand, kindness shown freely makes a Collodian a friend for life.

All in all, Collodians are a good folk, but they do tend to be highly proud of their community achievements; bitter rivalries exist between neighbouring communities, and they can even erupt into small-scale wars. Every town is ruled by a council with an elected mayor, and the aristocracy hires security to enforce laws and patrol the streets. They are supposed to fund the public police too, but often neglect that duty. Elves, usually Sidhe elves or mist

elves, called Fanes by Collodians, live in the forests, while stone dwarves, or Nani, live in mountain strongholds. Marionettes (in Collodian, the plural is *marionette*, and the singular is *marionetta*) are living puppets born from magic wood. Various species of talking animals and various Vistani tribes also roam the forests.

History

Age of Creation

In the Age of Creation, Voltumna and Cel, Soil and Earth, birthed the world and all it contains. But from the primordial chaos came a monstrous giant snake, Tuchulcha, who tried to kill all the gods. Tuchulcha was imprisoned in the underworld by Tin, who succeeded his father Voltumna on the throne, but not before spilling the blood of the gods, causing the births of the many species of talking animals in future Collodi.

Age of Empires

The Cluskan people created a civilization which competed with the early Olympian Empire. They were defeated, but became a fairly autonomous province of the Empire itself.

Age of Darkness

Never invaded by the Tergs, the inhabitants of the Narno River Region created a number of city states. Of those, Collodi was the most powerful.

Modern Age

Barovian missionaries took the church of Andaral into the land of Collodi which, under its Prince Lorenzo I Serbelloni Viendalmare, became a unified nation. The capital was moved into Acchiappacitrulli by Lorenzo's Grandson, Lorenzo II.

Current Age

Marginally involved in the great war between Zherisia and Lamordia, Collodi signed a treaty of friendship and military mutual aid with Zherisia, with which it has mutually advantageous trade agreements.

Places of Interest

The Narno River flows through the middle of the nation from the east to the west. It touches all the main towns, starting with **Narno's Cradle**, which houses the last great sanctuary of the old Cluskan gods, the Lake of Idols. Narno's Cradle is ruled from Chestnut Tree Hall by the elected Mayor, Giangiovanni dell'Orto, who also owns the Old Shop Inn (in Collodian, la Vecchia Bottega).

The old town of **Collodi** is renowned in the Core for its wood-artisans, its clock-makers, and its leatherworkers, while the fields around it produce the best grapes and olives in the Core, which are then converted into the best wines and olive oils. The city's government is housed in the Old Palace.

The Dome of Light in Collodi is the nation's most ancient temple dedicated to Andaral. A little forest, Hala's Wood, grows nearby Collodi. It's the most ancient shrine of Hala in the region. The best Inn of the town is Melchiorri's Wine and Steaks, owned by Dario Melchiorri (Old Human Expert 7 N).

The much bigger and thicker Fairy's Forest surrounds the hills on which Collodi lies. It reaches the mountains on the northern borders, and there live the Elves.

When the forest fades, and the river enlarges, you enter the territory of the Capital, **Acchiappacitrulli**. the name means "catcher of fools," and the city is so full of brothels, bisques, inns, and markets, that many fools are indeed caught.

The Cathedral of the Raven's Feather here is the seat of the local head of the church. The New Castle is the current house of Prince Gian Domenico, and it is opulent, extravagant, and excessive. Many important inns and restaurants are present in the city, the most important being The Red Shrimp's Inn, owned by Urbano Lattanzi (Adult Human Rogue 7 N/E). Here you find the Palace of the 400, seat of the Parliament of the Princedom. The Hall of the 50 is the seat of the city council.

On the South, lays the insidious Assassin's Forest, dotted with little hamlets and villages. The Narno River then goes west, towards the sea, where, on its mouth, lies **Busy Bees Town**. A thriving port and market town, it houses a Monastery of the Divinity of Self Hard Work Home. Melampo's Kennel is the major inn in the city, and is owned by Donna Assunta Lumaca. The city is governed from the Hall of the Captains. Here, the Birri—Collodi's police corps—are less corrupt, thanks to their commanding officer, Carlo Alidoro.

In the south, the Assassin's Forest gives way to the Fever Swamp.

A few miles offshore from Busy Bees Town we find **Pleasure Island**. It's the most notorious carnival in the Core, and the seat of Barbagallo Estate, home of the richest man of the domain, and the hotel there is directed by famous retired adventurer Antonio Malestri. The island is also notorious for breeding a race of very intelligent, long living, highly resistant donkeys. The city council rules from the Leaning Tower, at the behest of Barbagallo.

Religions

Church of Andaral the Morning Lord

The Collodian Andaralian Church is not only in communion with the Church of Barovia, but it also uses the same holy symbol, the sun disk with a raven's feather. The Collodian branch of the church, however, puts an extra emphasis on charity, assistance to people in need, and care for orphans. Belief in the church of Andaral transcends social class in Collodi, and it teaches that a community has a duty to provide to people in need. It also teaches, however, that pretending to be in need to not work and parasitizing other people is very wrong. The Church is Lawful Good, and its domains are: Community, Good, Healing, Law, Protection, and Sun. Its favoured weapon is the bastard sword.

Cluskan Pantheon

The Cluskan Pantheon is the union of two distinct pantheons, both descendents of Cel and Voltumna. The **Aisersi**, the Light Gods, are the gods of the living world, ruled by Tin. The **Aisersei**, the Dark Gods, are the gods of the Underworld, ruled by Summanus, who rules together Manth as a vassal of their brother Tin. Tuchulcha, the Snake-Demon, is the father of monsters and black magic, and father of the Celscians, the demonic giants.

Tin: L/G, Greater God of sky, justice, fatherhood, wisdom, rain, and rulership. Father of the Gods, son of Cel and Voltumna.
Domains: Air, Good, Law, Nobility, Strength, Weather.
Holy Symbol: A red thunderbolt.
Favoured Weapon: Spear.

Uni: N/G, Greater Goddess of fertility, childbirth, motherhood, nature, family, and magic. Mother of the Gods, daughter of Satre.
Domains: Charm, Community, Good, Healing, Magic, Plant.
Holy Symbol: A crown with a chalice.
Favoured Weapon: Light Mace.

Alpanu: C/N, Intermediate Goddess of death, sex, rebirth, the natural cycle, and free will. Daughter of Manth and Mania.
Domains: Chaos, Charm, Death, Liberation, Repose.
Holy Symbol: A ruby.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Calu: C/E, Lesser God of wolves, death, night, and fear. Son of Manth and Mania.
Domains: Animal, Chaos, Death, Evil.
Holy Symbol: A wolf's head.
Favoured Weapon: Short Sword.

Catha: N/G, Intermediate Goddess of sunset, the new moon, rebirth, the afterlife, and speed. Daughter of Sutri.
Domains: Darkness, Good, Repose, Sun, Travel.
Holy Symbol: A four o'clock flower.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Cel: N, Greater Goddess of earth, caves, creation, motherhood, ore, and hard work. Sister of Sartre, wife of Voltumna.
Domains: Artifice, Balance, Charme, Community, Earth, Strength.
Holy Symbol: An egg-shaped stone.
Favoured Weapon: Sling.

Culsans: N, Greater Deity of judgement, doors, beginning, duality, wisdom, and ends. Son of Cel and Voltumna, brother of Manth, Nethuns, Selvans, Summanus, and Tin.
Domains: Balance, Death, Knowledge, Luck, Protection, Travel.
Holy Symbol: A two-faced head.
Favoured Weapon: Sickle.

Charun: N/E, Lesser God of greed, the Underworld, rivers, and monopolism. Son of Manth and Mania.
Domains: Evil, Repose, Travel, Water.
Holy Symbol: A bloody oar.
Favorite Weapon: Heavy Mace.

Feronia: C/E, Intermediate Goddess of wildlands, ferocity, hunt, blood, and beasts. Daughter of Tin and Uni, wife of Selvans.
Domains: Animal, Chaos, Evil, Plant, Strength.
Holy Symbol: A mouth with bloodied teeth.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Fufluns: C/G, Intermediate God of wine, joy, feasts, parties, and life. Son of Tin and Uni.
Domains: Chaos, Community, Good, Healing, Plant.
Holy Symbol: A grape.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

Hercle: L/G, Intermediate God of strength, heroism, bravery, honour, and loyalty. Son of Tin and Uni.
Domains: Glory, Good, Law, Strength, Nobility.
Holy Symbol: A lion head.
Favoured Weapon: Greatclub.

Horta: N/G, Lesser Goddess of horticulture, agriculture, floriculture, and abundance. Daughter of Satre.
Domains: Earth, Good, Luck, Plant.
Holy Symbol: A tree full of fruits and flowers.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

Laran: L/G, Intermediate God of war, protection, peacekeeping, health, and strength. Son of Tin and Uni.
Domains: Good, Healing, Law, Protection, War.
Holy Symbol: A shield with a spear.
Favoured Weapon: Spear.

Lur: L/E, Lesser God of death, sacrifice, victory, and war. Son of Manth and Mania.
Domains: Death, Evil, Law, War.
Holy Symbol: A drop of blood on a sword.
Favoured Weapon: Short Sword.

Mania: N/E, Intermediate Goddess of madness, suicide, ghosts, disease, and loss. Wife of Manth, daughter of Satre.
Domains: Darkness, Death, Destruction, Evil, Madness.
Holy Symbol: A screaming woman.
Favoured Weapon: Rapier.

Manth: L/N, Greater God of the underworld, funerals, judgements, fate, underground, and prophecy.
Domains: Earth, Death, Knowledge, Luck, Repose.
Holy Symbol: A stone coffin.
Favoured Weapon: Longsword.

Menrva: L/G, Greater Goddess of wisdom, rulership, teachers, writing, architecture, and civilization. Daughter of Tin and Uni.
Domains: Artifice, Community, Good, Knowledge, Law, Runes.
Holy Symbol: A stone tablet with a stilo.
Favoured Weapon: Spear.

Muntukh: N/G, Lesser Goddess of health, love, care, and nursing. Daughter of Laran and Turan.
Domains: Charm, Good, Healing, Protection.
Holy Symbol: A hand holding a spoon full of healing potion.
Favoured Weapon: Sap.

Nethuns: N, Greater God of water, aquatic life-forms, springs, floods, rivers, lakes, cultivation, and boats. Son of Voltumna and Cel.
Domains: Animal, Destruction, Protection, Plant, Travel, Water.
Holy Symbol: A waterfall.
Favoured Weapon: Trident.

Nortia: L/N, Intermediate Goddess of fate, prophecy, truth, old age, and wisdom. Daughter of Satre.
Domains: Death, Knowledge, Law, Luck, Madness.
Holy Symbol: Oracular sticks.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Satre: L/G, Greater Deity of seasons, fertility, abundance, fields, rest, and crops. Sibling of Voltumna and Cel.
Domains: Charm, Earth, Good, Luck, Repose, Weather.
Holy Symbol: An ear of wheat.
Favoured Weapon: Scythe

Selvans: C/N, Intermediate God of forests, wildlands, nomadism, vegetation, and wood. Son of Satre, husband of Feronia.
Domains: Chaos, Liberation, Plant, Protection, Travel.
Holy Symbol: A tree with a human face.
Favoured Weapon: Club.

Sethlans: N/G, Intermediate God of smithies, fire, craft, defense of beauty, and hard work. Son of Tin and Uni.
Domains: Artifice, Fire, Good, Protection, Strength.
Holy Symbol: A hammer and anvil.
Favoured Weapon: Warhammer.

Summanus: C/G, Greater God of the night sky, storms, magic, mysteries, vitality, and emotions. Son of Voltumna and Cel.
Domains: Chaos, Darkness, Good, Magic, Void, Weather.
Holy Symbol: A night sky with a thunderbolt.
Favoured Weapon: Javelin.

Suri: C/G, Greater God of fire, volcanos, light, souls, and rebirth. Son of Summanus and Nortia.
Domains: Chaos, Earth, Fire, Good, Repose, Sun.
Holy Symbol: A torch.
Favoured Weapon: Shortspear.

Tages: N/G, Demigod of prophecy, divination, and knowledge. Son of Voltumna.
Domains: Good, Knowledge, Magic.
Holy Symbol: A baby with the face of an old man.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

Tecum: L/E, Intermediate God of rulership, strictness, authority, tyrants, and statehood. Son of Tin and Uni.
Domains: Community, Evil, Law, Nobility, War.
Holy Symbol: A chain with twelve links.
Favoured Weapon: Heavy Mace.

Tivr: N/G Intermediate Goddess of the moon, night travel, hope, magic, and love. Daughter of Satre.
Domains: Charm, Darkness, Good, Magic, Travel.
Holy Symbol: The full moon.
Favoured Weapon: Shortbow.

Tuchulcha: C/E, Greater God of monsters, serpents, strife, poison, revenge, and dark magic, father of giants, demons and monsters.
Domains: Chaos, Destruction, Evil, Magic, Scalykind, War.
Holy Symbol: Three serpents intertwined.
Favoured Weapon: Whip.

Turan: C/G, Intermediate Goddess of love, beauty, fertility, spring, flowers. Daughter of Tin and Uni. Wife of Laran.
Domain: Chaos, Charm, Glory, Good, Weather.
Holy Symbol: A mirror.
Favoured Weapon: Dagger.

Turms: C/G, Intermediate God of merchants, thieves, mysteries, travel, and souls. Son of Tin and Uni.
Domains: Chaos, Good, Magic, Travel, Trickery.
Holy Symbol: A staff with wings.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

Usil: N/G, Intermediate God of sun, light, health, protection, and music. Son of Satre.
Domains: Artifice, Good, Health, Protection, Sun.
Holy Symbol: A sun disk with a lyre.
Favoured Weapon: Longbow.

Voltumna: L/G, Greater God of soil, fatherhood, statehood, fertility, authority, and wisdom. Husband of Cel.
Domains: Charm, Community, Earth, Good, Law, Knowledge.
Holy Symbol: A plow.
Favoured Weapon: Heavy Pickaxe.

The **Cult of *Hala,*** the Queen of Magic, is a N/G Religion, shared by humans—both giorgio and Vistani—and elves. Hala teaches respect for magic, life, and the wisdom of the fey. Her faithful are often marginalized. Her priestesses serve as teachers, midwives, healers, veterinary healers, and nurses.
Domains: Animal, Community, Good, Knowledge, Magic, Plant.
Holy Symbol: Nine linked circles.
Favoured Weapon: Quarterstaff.

The ***Divinity of Self*** is a L/N religious philosophy centered around the potential any sapient being has to become a deity. The Collodian branch firmly believes in hard work as the primary path to this goal. The Divinity of Self teaches to concentrate on what is important and to ignore the rest. School-teachers, small business owners and business people are usually the principal followers.
Domains: Artifice, Law, Knowledge, Strength.
Holy Symbol: A triangle made out of three pairs of compasses.
Favoured Weapon: Warhammer.

The Famed and the Infamous

The Blue Fairy

(Adult Sidhe Elf Fey Sorceress 10 L/G)

A powerful fey lady, she has protected children in the Princedom of Collodi for many centuries. She has the power to balance Barbagallo's evil, but she can't leave her forest if she isn't summoned by someone during the one night a month that the Star of Wishes is visible in the sky, or by someone who has earned one of her tokens. She is burdened by the necessity of letting people earn their happiness, and she must correct those she protects when they stray from the right path. This leaves her unable to ease the sufferings of many people, and forces her to impose quests on those who need to redeem themselves. Still, she is the greatest thorn in Barbagallo's side. The truth is that Barbagallo's Spring of Youth is fairy magic corrupted by evil, so she sees it as her duty as a fairy lady to protect the people of Collodi from him.

Adventure Hook: Kids are disappearing in great numbers, and a desperate mother invokes the Blue Fairy by appealing to the Star of Wishes. The fairy gave the mother one of her tokens to entrust to the hands of the adventurers.

Prince Gian Domenico Mazzanti Serbelloni Viendalmare

(Middle-aged Human Aristocrat 3/Rogue 2 N/E)

Gian Domenico is a buffoon; everything he does is excessive, and he spends enormous quantities of money. Luckily for his country, someone refills his coffers any time he empties them. This means however, that their whole country belongs, in practice, to one single person, Stefano Barbagallo.

The Prince is married, and he has three legitimate kids, and many illegitimate ones. Thanks to his passion for fencing and hunting, he stays fit in spite of his overindulging in food and alcohol.

He calls himself a banker, but, as greedy as he is, he makes very little money. He is always ready to

finance people who claim to be able to enrich him, even if he will try to take advantage of them in a very evident and poor fashion.

Adventure Hook: Once again Gian Domenico's attempt to scam someone ended with him getting scammed. But this time the whole of Collodi is going to suffer from it, since Lord Barbagallo is currently unavailable to fix the damage. If Gian Domenico can't retrieve the year's tax money he was robbed of in a week, Collodi will be bankrupted. Luckily for him, the adventurers are currently detained on phony accusations, so he can "persuade" them to help him.

Giuseppe Geppetto

(Old Human Artificer 10 N/G)

One of the most skilled carpenters in Collodi, and one of the more renowned artisans of the Core, Giuseppe Geppetto is a toymaker, clock-maker, and carpenter of growing fame. He is on friendly terms with the Blue Fairy and the elves of the Fairy's Forest, which give to him only their wondrous wood. A widower, and childless, his generosity towards kids gained him the friendship of the Blue Fairy, who transformed a puppet he carved with the wood of her forest into a living puppet, a marionette. He called the puppet boy Milegno, a portmanteau between the name Mileno and the word *legno*, Collodian for wood. Milegno achieved humanity, and gained a real human body. He took the name Mileno, from then on. However, his puppet body stayed as a marionette, a memory of what he was. To Giuseppe's eternal consternation, the Mists granted a soul to the wooden body of puppet-Milegno. Born from the worst facets of Mileno's character, burning with jealousy, he rejected his father's teachings. He became vicious in his pranks out of hatred for the adults, and at a certain point he tried to kill his human "brother," only to be stopped by Giuseppe.

Giuseppe does not hate Milegno, who now calls himself Maligno; he still loves him as a son, but, to protect his other son, he called for the help of the Blue Fairy. She suggested to give Mileno brothers and sisters to help him, and he created twelve more puppets. Three earned their humanity, and another three are still puppets, and are trying to do the same. The other six, however, fell under the malevolent power of Maligno, and joined him as his companions. Giuseppe mourns the loss of each of those "children," but he still believes they can be saved. He will gladly pay people to capture his wayward sons and bring them to him, and he will repair each of them if asked to, even if they then betray him. His children are: **Mileno**, 13 years old (Human Youth Rogue 3/Expert1 N/G); **Caterina**, 12 years old (Human Youth Sorcerer 3/Expert 1 N/G); **Francesco**, 11 years old (Human Youth Fighter 2/Expert 1 N/G); **Giovanni**, 10 years old (Human Youth Paladin 1/Expert 1 L/G); **Carlo** (Marionette Youth Rogue 1 C/G), who looks like a ten year old human boy, excepted for his pointed nose; **Maria** (Marionette Youth Wizard 1 C/G), who looks like a ten year old human girl, except for her cheeks and nose; and **Anna** (Marionette Youth Cleric of Hala 1 N/G, Innocent), who looks like a ten year old human girl, except for her hair. (For the Lost Children, look at Maligno's entry below.)

Adventure Hook: Maligno is at it again. He wants to steal Geppetto's batch of fairy-wood to create new marionettes for his nefarious schemes. To stop him, Giuseppe employs the adventurers under the strict condition that no permanent damage may be done to Maligno or any other marionette.

Maligno

(Marionette Youth Rogue 9 C/E)

Maligno looks like a human boy of ten years, except for his pointy nose, pointy feet, and armpits. To kids, he is friendly, fun, helpful, and protective, but to adults, he is cruel, lazy, greedy, and untrustworthy. He hates adults, and he is disloyal and moody towards those he calls goody-two-shoes—kids which actually mind adults. Maligno wants to destroy all adults, and sees Barbagallo as his second worst enemy, the first being Geppetto. He commands a band of six other puppets—his "siblings," which he corrupted—other marionettes, and dozens of children. Of his siblings, only three share his wickedness, though: Devil, Brute, and Nera

(Giuseppe actually christened them Davide, Bruno, and Rosa).

Devil (Marionette Youth Witch 4 L/E) is a red skinned puppet; he is cunning and methodical, and has had another carpenter rework his boyish appearance into that of a devil-child. He has a pact with a mysterious entity he calls the Funny Friend.

Brute (Marionette Youth Barbarian 4 C/E) is almost Medium-sized, and is painted green; he is slow-witted, but surprisingly powerful.

Nera (Marionette Youth Bard 4 N/E) paints her lips and nails black, but still looks like a ten years old girl, if a disturbing one.

Lorenzo, Beatrice, and Luigi are the more recent puppets to join Maligno, and they are not corrupted yet.

Lorenzo is Lawful Neutral, and was Devil's twin; they were carved out of the same log. Before his brother had himself reworked, they were identical.

Beatrice is the Neutral twin of Rosa, while Chaotic Neutral Luigi is the youngest of them all, and he is very disturbed by the cruelty of his siblings. He would run back home, if given the opportunity.

*Adventure Hook: **Luigi** ran away from Maligno's hideout and was captured by the Birri, the corrupt Collodian police corp. They have smuggled him to Pleasure Island, and there he will be tortured to reveal where Maligno's hideout is. Maligno needs to retrieve his brother before that happens, so he appeals to the adventurers for help. Of course, he plans to take advantage of their collaboration to blow up Barbagallo's estate and a good chunk of Pleasure Island, killing thousands of innocents in the process. But hey, for the freedom of children, everything goes.*

The Cat and the Fox

(Adult Malogatto Rogue 3 and Adult Kitsune Bard 3 N/E)

Gideon and John Foulfellows are a couple of thieves and con-artist, in league with Barbagallo. As a reminder of his power and as a token of his generosity, he twisted the nature of the two. Gideon is now a Malogatto; his true form is that of a grey, scrawny cat, but he also has a hybrid form, and he is unable to curse people. John is a Kitsune, but his true form that of a red fox. They must spend at least 8 hours every day in their animal forms. Gideon is mute, leaving the talking to the very silver-tongued but lame John, who leaves his brother the action. They often work as propaganda agents for Pleasure Island.

Adventure Hook: People are getting robbed, and someone got more than their purses cut. The Foulfellow brothers offer their help to the adventurers to investigate the matter.

Stromboli

(Middle-aged Caliban Bard 9 N)

Stromboli is not a Vistani, even if he dresses like one. His father was cursed by a Vistana witch, but his mother appeased her, and she raised Stromboli as one of her children. His curse gave him an ogrish, fearsome aspect, and his face is covered by a thick, black beard, impossible to shave. Every time he is enraged, he spits fire. He has a small cadre of puppets, whom he bought from Giuseppe Geppetto before he could animate them. He felt so lonely, that he he tried and managed to animate them, and they obey him, but they fear him. Every time he receives kindness and witnesses bravery for the cause of good, he bursts into sneezes, and he feels compelled to pay kindness with kindness, and reward such bravery. The sad thing is that almost all shun him, as they see him as a freakish Vistani. If more people showed him kindness, he would be a powerful beneficial force. His Great Puppet Theater is quite a famous show in the nation of Collodi, and he has exhibited in other countries like Borca, too.

Adventure Hook: The adventurers, in pursuit of a marionette assassin, disrupt Stromboli's show, and now must placate the puppeteer before he unleashes his marionettes against them.

Antonio Ciliegia

(Old Human Expert 10 N)

Mastro Ciliegia is Collodi's mayor and one of the most influential wood carvers and carpenters in Collodi. Once he was infamous for his drinking habits, but nowadays he stays sober. He is quite interested in expanding Collodi's net of business and finding new markets for its products.

Adventure Hook: Recently, Stefano Barbagallo has shown interest in opening a shop in Collodi, and he has offered a handsome donation to the city coffers. However, Mastro Ciliegia is not totally sold on of the whole business. And Barbagallo is pressuring him in a very worrying way, so much that he is very attracted by the wine bottle once again. Before giving in to the pressure, he asks the adventurers to find out if there is more at stake than what it seems.

Giangiovanni "Giangio" dell'Orto

(Middle-aged Human Commoner 7/Rogue 3 N/E)

The mayor of Narno's Cradle, and the proud owner of the main inn of the town, the Vecchia Bottega, Giangio is a wealthy farmer who produces the best milk and vegetables in Collodi.

Adventure Hook: Giangio is a cruel and greedy man who willingly employs Pleasure Island Donkeys, knowing they are kids turned into donkeys. For that, his hands are turning cold and his eyes yellow. His wife had been, until now, unaware of her husband's true activities. Since discovering the horrifying truth, she wants to save the kids, and asks the adventurers to help her.

The Old Lady of Chestnuts

(Old Sidhe Elf Cleric of the Cluskan Pantheon 11 N/G)

The mysterious head-priestess of the Old Deities is as old as the oldest chestnut tree. She resides in a house magically realized inside the eldest chestnut tree, near the the Lake of Idols.

Adventure Hook: Old forces stir, and the children of Tuchulcha—monstrous snakes and dragons fed by the evil that sacrifices innocent children to maintain itself—start harassing innocent people again. To stop them, the Old Gods told the Old Lady to talk with the adventurers.

The Green Fisherman

(Adult Scrag Ranger 1 C/E)

Once a brutish henchman of the Coachman, named Gastone, the Green Fisherman was punished for a failure, since he let a child escape from Pleasure Island. He was twisted into a sea-troll, and since then, he hunts both for fish and sailors on the coast near Busy Bees Town.

Adventure Hook: Gastone really wants only one thing: to return to his human form. To do that, he made a pact with the Sea Hag Aunt Gastalda (Old Human Sea Hag Witch 5 C/E). If he delivers her seven kids for seven nights, she will break the curse. The adventurers are informed of missing kids in a village near the coast.

The Judge-Mayor Marco Antonio Scimmione

(Old Greater Broken One Expert 5 L/E)

Corrupt and apparently obtuse, Marco Antonio Scimmione is the head magistrate in Acchiappacitrulli, and also the elected Mayor. Instead of applying the law, he uses his power to amuse the prince, arrest Barbagallo's enemies, and enrich himself with bribes. In truth, he hides a secret: he is not a human. He is a polymorphed, awakened Ape, which Barbagallo made his own trusted judge.

Adventure Hook: One of the adventurers is arrested by the Birri of Acchiappacitrulli and thrown in jail. Antonio is ready to parole them if they can give him "a very small economic contribution." Since it isn't small at all, the adventurers might have to pay for it in another way.

Jiminy Cricket

(Old Wise Cricket L/G)

Jiminy Cricket is a Wise Cricket, one of a magical race of crickets which helps the Blue Fairy to keep children on the right path. Jiminy was Milegno's and then Mileno's conscience. He takes his duties very seriously, and he is always on watch against the machinations of Maligno, the Coachman, and their minions. He can offer himself as guide to help any person whom he judges trustworthy.

Adventure Hook: More than a century old, Jiminy is one of the most trusted helpers of the Blue Fairy, and he has helped scores of people in his life. However, his heart aches thinking about the people he considers his failures, like Maligno. When Maligno exploits Jiminy's feelings in an elaborate ruse to blame him for the deaths of dozens of adults, his true friends ask the adventurers to help him out.

Lucio "Lampwick" Cigni

(Pleasure Island Donkey Human Youth Rogue 3 C/G)

A victim of the Coachman, he was aided by his old friend Milegno (Mileno) and the Blue Fairy to take advantage of the curse afflicting the Coachman, and gain his humanity back. His true form is still that of a Pleasure Island donkey, but he can take human form and retain it as long as he behaves. Whenever he misbehaves, he is forced into donkey form for a minimum of 1 hour and a maximum of 24 hours. Lampwick lives with the Geppetto family.

Adventure Hook: The red-headed, thin, and tall boy is now about fourteen years old. He has discovered a talent for drawing, and he is cultivating it under the paternal eye of Mastro Geppetto. However, he still uses his less mundane talents to help the victims of Barbagallo. This sometimes lands him in trouble, especially when his condition kicks in. Mileno asks the adventurers to keep their eyes on his wayward friend, whose heart is in the right place, but whose head sometimes leads him astray.

Monstro

(Colossal Awakened Animal L/N; 20 HD)

The unholy cross of a shark and a sperm whale, Monstro is the Guardian of Pleasure Island. He swallows all who try to arrive on the island or leave it without Barbagallo's permission. This fearsome sea monster is Barbagallo's ultimate weapon against any sea-faring enemy or merchant rival. He can create more, should the current one be slain.

Adventure Hook: Monstro feels lonely. More and more, he has taken to sparing people only to have someone to talk with. This behaviour is starting to annoy Barbagallo, who might ask some adventurer "to help rid the seas of that monster."

Andrea Medoro

(Old Dogwere Cavalier Wainraider 5 L/G)

The Mayor of Busy Bees Town, Mr. Medoro is a kind old man with a thick grey beard and a pair of mustaches. He is a reasonable man who often offers free rides on his stagecoach.

Adventure Hook: Medoro was born a dog, but he was awakened and turned into a dogwere by the Blue Fairy. He has served her faithfully from that day on, and he serves her still, using his position as mayor to assist his lady. When a new load of Pleasure Island Donkeys arrive in the harbour, he proposes to the adventurers to free them by simulating a theft.

Donna Assunta Lumachina

(Old Snailfolk Bartender Bard 4 N/G)

The owner of Medoro's Kennel Inn is a placid old woman. She is always patient and ready to help … in her own time, of course.

Adventure Hook: Lumachina belongs to the Snailfolk, a secret magical race of slow and pacific humanoids. She was the personal maid of the Blue Fairy for years, and the Fairy bought her the inn she now owns. Occasionally, she brings messages from the Blue Fairy to people she is told to contact. Of course, she

usually does it in her own time, so, when the message arrives for the adventurers, they usually need to speed up.

Sergeant Carlo Alidoro

(Middle-aged Dogwere Fighter 5 L/G)

Gruff, but honest and brave, Sergeant Alidoro has managed to turn the Busy Bees Town Garrison of the Birri into an honest and competent police force. He is very respected by the local population and by the majority of his men.

Adventure Hook: Once a loyal hound working for the Birri, Alidoro was awakened by fairy magic and his life was saved by Milegno, back when he was still a marionette. When he saved the marionette's life in turn, the Blue Fairy rewarded him by turning him into a Dogwere, and he used his human form and the secrets he had learned as a dog to take over the Birri in Busy Bees Town. Nowadays, he is always ready to lend a hand to adventurers in the pursuit of justice, and he has just heard about two suspicious brothers, the Foulfellows, down at the docks. He will not object to the adventurers investigating.

Scipione Antoniotti

(Adult Human Cleric of the Divinity of Self 8 L/N)

Scipione is the most important leader of the Divinity of Self in Collodi.This distinguished salt and pepper gentleman is a firm believer in the idea of hard work, responsibility, and self-help.

Adventure Hook: There is an ideological rivalry between the Divinity of Self and the Church of Andaral, as the latter puts the emphasis on charity and assistance, and the former on self-improvement and hard work. However, both religions agree on the importance of honesty and respect of the rule of law. So, when the Hierophant of Acchiappacitrulli (Old Human Cleric of Andaral 5 L/G) is kidnapped on the road to Busy Bees Town, Scipione employs the adventurers to rescue him.)

Achille "The Ringmaster" Malestri

(Adult Human Ranger Beastmaster 7 N/E)

Achille is one of Barbagallo's key henchmen; his circus features many of Pleasure Island Donkeys, and it's a traveling propaganda machine for the lucrative trade. Malestri is the Mayor of Pleasure Island, the director of Pleasure Island's Hotel, and also Barbagallo's personal body-hunter, and he pursues anyone who manages to escape from Pleasure Island.

Adventure Hook: The adventurers hear a small boy crying, and when they arrive, they see a donkey, crying with that kid's voice, while trying to escape from a ferocious hound. The owner of the hound is a tall man with ringmaster's attire.

Organizations

***The Militia of Public Security*,** better known as the Birri, is the army and police force of Collodi. Birri are often corrupt, lazy, and dumb, but there are important exceptions. They are often poorly paid, badly trained, and even worse equipped. No wonder many accept bribes.

Dread Possibility: Corruption of a Worse Kind. Some of the Birri might be corrupted on a worse level, having made a deal with the demonic god Tuchulcha and turned into Streghi. These Birri would have the tattoo of a serpent and would be able to transform themselves into serpentine creatures.

The Siblinghood of Mercy, also known as the Black Rabbits for the hoods with long ears they wear, are an order blessed by the Church of Andaral, who take care of the wounded, assist the diseased, and bury the dead. The head of the order is Brother Ignazio Coniglio (Middle-aged Human Monk 7 L/G).

Dread Possibility: The Black Coffin. Rumors are often heard that the Black Rabbits are more than goody-two-shoes with strange hoods. These rumors talk about a secret branch of the order, who accelerate

the departure of people responsible for the suffering of innocent. But of course, these must be rumors.

The Banco Collodiano, Collodian Bank, is the powerful institution which finances both government and private businesses. It is a Core-spanning economic power which deals in Zherisia, Borca, Dementlieu, and Falkovnia. While the Mazzanti-Viendalmare family founded the Banco, nowadays they play second fiddle to Barbagallo.

Dread Possibility: The Miracle Field. There is a legend in Collodi about a field where you can bury money and grow a tree of coins. For many, this is a scam created to con people out of their money of course, but there are rumors that the Banco knows where the field is. Someone says that the field is useless by itself. What you need is human blood to pour on it. Is it a coincidence that people in debt with the Banco often disappear?

The Darklord : Stefano Barbagallo (The Coachman)

Male old Human N/E Wizard Transmuter 13

Speed*:* 30 feet
Initiative: +2 (+5 on Pleasure Island)
Armor Class: 30, touch 17, flat-footed 28 (+2 Dex, +8 armor, +5 natural armor, +5 deflection) (+5 on Pleasure Island)
Hp 108

Space/Reach: 5/ 5 (15 with *Friendly Advice*)
Combat Maneuver Defense/Combat Maneuver Bonus: +19/+8 (+5 on Pleasure Island)

Ability Scores:
Str: 14, **Dex**: 14 (10), **Con**: 20 (16), **Int**: 26 (20), **Wis**: 15, **Cha**: 16.
Saving Throws: **Fort**: +9, **Ref**: +5, **Will**: +10 (+5 on Pleasure Island)

Special Qualities: *Speak with animals* (Continuous), benign face, limitless resources, DR 15/ feywood, SR 25, curse of the darklord, arcane bond, school specialization, rejuvenation, sinkhole of evil, mastery 5.

Special Attacks*:* Child hater, true polymorph, harsh punishment, charm person, baleful polymorpher.
Attack: Melee: *Friendly Advice* +11/+6 (reach 15, damage 1d4+5 slashing and grappled (+15 CMB, 35 CMD) + 1d6 damage against good aligned creatures, critical 19-20/x2).
Ranged: *+2 poisoned heavy crossbow* +9 (reach 24, damage 1d10+2 piercing and poisoned (Fort DC 18 negates, 1d4 Str every round for 10 rounds, 3 saves to cure), critical 19-20/x2).

Skills*:* Animal Handling +19 (+24 on Pleasure Island), Appraise +24, Bluff +19 (+24 as the Coachman), Diplomacy +19 (+24 as the Coachman), Intimidate +19 (+24 on Pleasure Island), Knowledge (Arcana) +24, Knowledge (Dungeoneering) +24, Knowledge (Geography) +24, Knowledge (Local) +24 (+30 on Collodi), Knowledge (Nature) +30, Perception +18, Sense Motive +18, Spellcraft +24, Use Magic Device +19, Profession (Merchant) +23.

Feats: Combat Casting, Eschew Materials, Extend Spell, Greater Combat Casting, Greater Spell Focus (Transmutation), Greater Spell Penetration, Greater Spell Specialization (Transmutation), Maximize Spell, Piercing Spell, Quicken Spell, Reach Spell, Scribe Scroll, Spell Focus (Transmutation), Spell Penetration, Spell Specialization (Transmutation).

Spells: 4/6+1/6+1/6+1/6+1/4+1/3+1/2+1 CL: 13 (15 Transmutation), DC: 18 + Spell Level (+2 Transmutation), Concentration: +27 (+5 on Pleasure Island).
Opposition Schools: Divination and Conjuration (**in Red**), Specialized School: Transmutation (**in Yellow**)
Typical Prepared Spells:

0: ***detect magic***, ***mage hand***, *prestidigitation*.
1: ***animate rope***, *burning hands,* ***enlarge person***, ***magic fang***, *magic missile,* ***reduce person***, *vanish*.
2: ***bull's strength***, *charm person, disguise self* (2), ***reach shocking grasp*** (30 feet), ***eagle's splendor***, *invisibility*.

3: *dispel magic, **monstrous extremities**, **spiked pit**, greater stunning barrier, suggestion, inflict pain*.
4: *charm monster*, ***earth glide***, ***mnemonic enhancer***, ***phantom chariot***, ***mass reduce person***, *true form*.
5: ***quickened piercing baleful polymorph***, *break enchantment*, *dominate person*, ***telekinesis*** (2).
6: ***disintegrate***, ***flesh to stone***, ***mage's elucubration*** (2).
7: ***piercing disintegrate*** (2), *limited wish*.
Challenge Rating: 19

Possessions: *Friendly Advice* (*+3 unholy strangling barbed whip* which doubles as a *greater metamagic rod of quicken*), *+2 poisoned heavy crossbow, bracers of armor +8*, *ring of protection +5*, *handy haversack*, *belt of physical might (Dexterity and Constitution) +4*, *headband of intellect +6*, *amulet of natural armor +5*, 1 scroll of every wizard spell existing from level 0 up to four, Up to 100,000 gp.

Background

Stefano Barbagallo was born in Busy Bees Town, the first son of a large family. His father, Giovanni Barbagallo, was a coachman, and he had to forfeit his childhood to help his father. He grew up resentful of his younger siblings, who enjoyed theirs, and he started to loathe children in general. When he was a young adult, he was apprenticed to a wizard, who recognized his hidden talents for Transmutation. Barbagallo studied for many years, and became a powerful wizard. When he emerged from his studies, however, his youth was gone. Bitter and enraged, Barbagallo swore to regain what he had lost, and decided to achieve that by destroying children's lives.

First, he worked to enrich himself, becoming the richest man in Collodi. Then, he endebted Prince Giandomenico to himself, obtaining many privileges; first of all, total autonomy of the little island in front of Busy Bees Town, which he renamed Pleasure Island. Here he built a great, permanent carnival, and started to lure in the children of all Collodi with promises of studyfree and dutyfree life. He enjoyed doing that in person, becoming known as the Coachman, driver of the Carriage which collected willing children.

On Pleasure Island, kids were free to enjoy any kind of entertainment, for a while. Then, the magic of Barbagallo kicked in, turning the kids into a magical race of donkeys. Barbagallo sold the donkeys to circuses, mines, farms, and other places of hard work, and used the energy collected from the kids' youth to restore his own.

One day, the parents of missing kids traveled to Pleasure Island in search of them. Barbagallo hosted them in his estate, appearing willing to help them and sincerly moved by their worrying. But it was a ruse, because the sadistic man offered the kids' parents their own kids in the form of donkey roast as dinner. Then he mocked them, reavealing to them the truth in front of Prince Giandomenico and other debauched guests. Finally, he turned the broken parents into dogs, and had them tossed to Monstro to eat. This final cruelty, endorsed by the ruling class of Collodi, sealed his fate as he was engulfed in the Mists.

Current Sketches

Barbagallo continues his activities, and he is now one of the richest men in the Core. However, now there are splinters in his wheel; his Pleasure Island doesn't work perfectly like before any more. Kids who are not really wicked often don't fall for the spell, or even if they do, not completely; they often manage to escape, and warn other kids away from him. To worsen the situation, Maligno, the adult-hating marionette, is leading a ferocious guerrilla war against Barbagallo and his business.

Combat

Barbagallo usually leaves dirty work to his henchmen, but in the three days he must face his curse, he retains his Child Hater and Harsh Punishment abilities, even if he can do only non-lethal damage.

Special Abilities

Benign Face: When posing as the harmless Coachman, collecting kids, every child (or child-like creature, including marionettes, gnomes, and halflings) has a starting attitude towards him of

Friendly, and he gets a +5 bonus to Diplomacy and Bluff attempts toward them.

***Curse of the Darklord*:** For three days, every year, the spell on the donkey kids wears off. If the children manage to reach Pleasure Island, and drink from Barbagallo's own Spring of Youth, before midnight of the third day, they get freed from the curse (to varying degrees, from completely to partially, like Lampwick), and Barbagallo become a donkey himself for a month. He hates this humiliation, but he is almost unable to prevent it, as his most powerful magic does not work on those children, and he is physically hampered from damaging them, dealing only nonlethal damage. His henchmen fall into a magical stasis in those three days, and are forced to act as if they were Lawful Good in the month following if Barbagallo becomes a donkey. They stay loyal to Barbagallo, however, so his empire does not crumble while he is incapacitated. Plus, while his body is still youthful, thanks to his spring, after he has been transformed into a donkey, he still looks like an old man. For the first month after returning to human form, nothing can disguise his age for more than thirteen minutes per day.

***Child Hater*:** Barbagallo has a +2 bonus to attacks, damage, spell DCs, and special ability DCs against children and childlike creatures (including marionettes, gnomes, and halflings).

***Harsh Punishment**:* Using his whip, Barbagallo can use his Intimidate bonus for a single attack, which inflicts damage as usual, against any child, childlike-being, henchman, or animal in his reach, once per encounter. If the victim fails a Will save against DC 30, Barbagallo can inflict upon it one of these conditions: shaken, frightened, confused, or paralyzed (for 13 minutes).

Baleful Polymorpher: Barbagallo can forget any prepared spell slot of 5th level or higher to cast *baleful polymorph*. If he prepares the spell regularly, he can modify it with any metamagic feat he has without changing his effective slot level. On Pleasure Island, he can ignore immunities to the spell.

True Polymorph: Eight times per day, he can change any creature into any other creature; DC 30 Will save negates. On Pleasure Island, he can use this ability at will, and he can ignore immunities.

Charm Person: Barbagallo may use *charm person* as a spell-like ability at-will on any child or childlike creature, including halflings, gnomes, and marionettes. A DC 25 Will save (30 on Pleasure Island) negates the effect.

***Limitless Resources*:** Thanks to his riches, Barbagallo has access to any item, given reasonable time. (reflected in his possessions)

Rejuvenation: If Barbagallo dies, he is immediately reincarnated in the nearest Pleasure Island donkey. He will be able to transform back into his old-looking human form after one month.

Lair

Pleasure Island is a perpetual carnival, and Barbagallo's estate holds great stables, a market, a palace, inns, and a harbour. Barbagallo knows every hidden passage and shortcut in the estate, and in its buildings.

The estate is a rank 5 sinkhole of evil which can bestow the Despair, Fear, Greed, Oblivion (memory loss), and Sloth effects (Will save DC 30 negates).

Closing the Border

If someone tries to leave or enter Collodi when the borders are closed, the person starts to laugh, and can only retreat from the border. People immune to mind-affecting effects are immune to this ability too.

Barbagallo can't close the border when turned into a donkey. Otherwise, he can close the borders for up to one year.

Dread Alternatives

New Monsters

Badalischio (CR 6)

XP 2,400
N Large magical beast
Init –1; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision; Perception +10

Defense
AC 17, touch 9, flat-footed 17 (–1 Dex, +8 natural)
hp 63 (7d10+21)
Fort +10, **Ref** +5, *Will* +5

Offense
Speed 30 ft. Climb 20 ft
Melee bite +10 (2d6+6 plus poison)
Special Attacks breath attack, gaze, poison.

Statistics
Str 18, **Dex** 10, **Con** 16, **Int** 2, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 11
Base Atk +7; *CMB* +12; *CMD* 21 (29 vs. Grapple, can't be tripped)
Feats Blind-Fight, Great Fortitude, Iron Will, Skill Focus (Perception)
Skills Climb +12, Perception +10, Stealth +14; Racial Modifiers +8 Stealth

Ecology
Environment temperate forest
Organization solitary, pair, or colony (3–6)
Treasure incidental

Special Abilities
Breath Attack (Ex): Cone 30 feet. Any creature in the area must succeed on a DC 16 Fortitude save or take 1d6 Constitution damage. Every round, for a minute or until they succeed, at the beginning of their turn, a victim must succeed on a DC 16 Fortitude save or take 1d4 Constitution damage. The Badalischio can use its breath attack as a standard action once every 1d4 rounds.

Gaze (Su): Paralyze a creature for 1 minute, range 30 feet, Fortitude DC 16 negates. The save DC is Constitution-based. The Badalischio can use its gaze at will.

Poison (Ex): Every creature bitten by a Badalischio must succeed on a DC 16 Fortitude save or take 1d6 Constitution damage. Every round, for a minute or until they succeed, at the beginning of their turn, a victim must succeed on a DC 16 Fortitude save or take 1d4 Constitution damage. Any creature who drinks the blood of a Badalischio that has been dead for no more than one hour is cured of any poison and immune to a Badalischio's poison for an hour. An adult Badalischio has 3d4 doses of antidote. A DC 21 Craft (Alchemy) check can preserve the Badalischio blood for one month.

Description: Badalischii are large snakes, more than 3 meters long, with the head of a rooster. They usually live in temperate forests and hibernate during winter. They are territorial and usually mate for life. Badalischii are sometimes seen as spawn of Tuchulcha, but they are not inherently malicious, and if you can find and hatch an egg, they will grow to be loyal to you.

Capra Ferrea (CR 3)

XP 800
N/E Medium magical beast
Init +4; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft, low-light vision; Perception +10

Defense
AC 15, touch 10, flat-footed 15 (+5 natural)
hp 40 (5d10+10)
Fort +6, **Ref** +6, **Will** +3
Immunities Fire

Offense
Speed 30 ft.
Melee gore +7 (1d8+3, double the damage if charging), tongue +5 (1d6+2, crit. 18-20/x3, piercing and slashing)

Statistics
Str 14, **Dex** 11, **Con** 14, **Int** 12, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 15
Base *Atk* +5; *CMB* +7; *CMD* 17 (21 vs. trip)
Feats Improved Initiative, Improved Natural Weapon (gore and tongue)
Skills Acrobatics +10 (+14 when jumping), Climb +12, Intimidate +13, Survival +12; Racial Modifiers +4 Acrobatics when jumping, +4 Intimidate.

Special Attack
Gaze (Su): Frighten a creature for 1 minute, range 30 feet, Will DC 14 negates. The save DC is Charisma-based. A creature that succeeds on the saving throw is immune to the attack until the end of the encounter.

Ecology
Environment any
Languages Common, Collodian, and Infernal.
Organization solitary, pair, or herd (3-6)
Treasure material worth 1500 GP.

Description: Capre Ferree (Iron Goats) are an intelligent and malicious species of goat, with black coats, burning red eyes, and iron horns and hooves. Their tongues are blades, long and sharp in every sense. They find great pleasure in tormenting people and making them tremble in fear.

Capra Turchina (CR 4)
XP 1200
N/G Small magical beast (shapechanger)
Init +7; **Senses** low-light vision; *Perception* +15

Defense
AC 18, touch 17, flat-footed 15 (+3 Dex, +1 natural, +1 size,+ 3 deflection)
hp 42 (6d10+6)
Fort +6, **Ref** +8, **Will** +4
Regeneration 5/Lightning, *Damage Reduction* 15/magic and cold iron, *Spell Resistance* 19

Offense
Speed 40 ft., Climb 30 ft.
Melee gore +7 (1d4) or weapon attack.
Statistics
Str 10, **Dex** 16, **Con** 12, **Int** 15, *Wis* 14, **Cha** 17
Base Atk +6; *CMB* +5; *CMD* 18 (22 vs. trip)
Feats Skill Focus (Climb), Improved Initiative, Nimble Moves
Skills Acrobatics +12 (+16 when jumping), Climb +17, Perception +15, Survival +11; Racial Modifiers +4 Acrobatics when jumping, +4 Perception.
Change Shape (Su)*:* With an action, the Capra Turchina can assume the shape of a human child at will.
Spell-Like Abilities*:* 3/day – *deep slumber* (Fortitude DC 19), at-will – *charm* (Will DC 17)

Ecology
Environment any mountain
Organization solitary, pair, or herd (3–6)
Languages Common, Collodian, and Sylvan
Treasure Double standard.

Description: Capre Turchine (Blue Goats) are magical goats able to shapeshift into human children. They usually work as messengers for powerful, good-aligned fairy ladies and lords. They have a beautiful blue coat, and their wool is able to heal wounds and stop spells.

Buffardello (CR 2)
XP 600
CN Small fey
Init +7; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +11

Defense
AC 18, touch 18, flat-footed 14 (+3 Dex, +1 dodge, +1 size, +3 deflection)
hp 10 (2d6+4)
Fort +2, **Ref** +6, **Will** +5; +2 vs. illusions
DR 5/cold iron; SR 13

Offense
Speed 40 ft.
Melee short sword +4 (1d4–1, crit. 19–20)
Space 5 ft., *Reach* 5 ft.
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 9th; Concentration +11)
At will—*greater invisibility* (continuous), *mage hand*, *ventriloquism* (DC 14)
1/day— *dimension door* (self only), *fear* (DC 16), *telekinesis* (DC 17)

Statistics
Str 9, **Dex** 16, **Con** 14, **Int** 14, **Wis** 15, **Cha** 17
Base Atk +1; CMB -1; CMD 11

Feats Dodge, Improved Initiative, Weapon Finesse
Skills Acrobatics +8, Bluff +8, Escape Artist +8, Handle Animal +5, Perception +11, Sense Motive +7, Stealth +16; Racial Modifiers +4 Perception, +4 Stealth

Ecology
Environment temperate plains
Organization solitary, gang (2–5), or band (7–12)
Languages Common, Collodian, Elven, Sylvan
Treasure standard

Description: Buffardelli are 1 m tall creatures with pointed ears and yellowish skin. They have heart shaped holes in their hands. Buffardelli are related to Brownies but they are larger and way more aggressive if provoked. Buffardelli protect kids, often with violent means. They are disgusted by cheese and people who eat while defecating, and will leave a household where they witness that.

Laughing Snake (CR 13)
XP 25,600
NE Huge dragon (fire)
Init +4; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., blindsight; tremorsense, see through smoke, Perception +30
Aura cloud of smoke (works as stinking cloud) (180 ft., DC 23)
Vulnerability to Humourism Once per round, if someone succeeds on a DC 23 Perform (Comedy) check, the Laughing Snake is staggered for one round and takes 3d6 damage. If its hp drops to 0, it explodes in a cloud of smoke. Laughing Snakes take a –5 penalty to saving throws against effects which induce laughter (e.g. Hideous Laughter).

Defense
AC 29, touch 8, flat-footed 29 (+21 natural, –2 size)
hp 216 (18d12+90)
Fort +15, **Ref** +12, *Will* +17
DR 5/magic; *Immune* fire, paralysis, sleep; *SR* 25

Offense
Speed 30 ft., burrow 90 ft.
Melee bite +24 (3d6+12+1d6 fire damage, crit. 19-20), tail slap +22 (2d6+12 plus grab)
Space 15 ft., *Reach* 10 ft. (15 ft. with bite)
Special Attacks breath weapon (50-ft. cone, 12d8 fire damage, DC 24), constrict (2d6+24), grab (Large or smaller), swallow whole (Large or smaller, the swallowed victim takes 2d6 fire damage, AC 20, 21 hp)

Statistics
Str 27, **Dex** 10, **Con** 21, **Int** 20, **Wis** 21, **Cha** 20
Base Atk +18; *CMB* +28; *CMD* 38 (42 vs. grapple, can't be tripped)

Feats Improved Critical (Bite), Improved Initiative, Improved Natural Attack (Bite), Improved Natural Attack (Tail), Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes, Multiattack, Skill Focus (Perception), Strangling Constrict (DC 27).
Skills Acrobatics+21, Bluff +24, Climb +29, Intimidate+26, Knowledge (Dungeoneering, Nature) +26, Perception +30, Sense Motive +24, Stealth +13, Survival +26, Swim +29
SQ Tongues

Ecology
Environment temperate forests
Organization solitary
Languages Common, Collodian, Draconic, Infernal, Sylvan
Treasure triple

Description: Laughing snakes are lazy and grumpy dragons, allegedly created by Tuchulcha. They are fearsome predators, and as greedy as red dragons, but their vulnerability to humour makes them less dangerous, as they prefer to stay in their subterranean lairs.

Linchetto

XP 400
C/E Tiny fey (shapechanger)
Init +8; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +8

Defense
AC 17, touch 17, flat-footed 12 (+4 Dex, +1 dodge, +2 size)
hp 4 (1d6+1)
Fort +1, **Ref** +6, **Will** +4; +2 vs. illusions
DR 5/cold iron; *SR* 12

Offense
Speed 20 ft., fly 30 ft. (perfect)
Melee claw +6 (1d3–2, crit. 19-20)
Space 2-1/2 ft., Reach 0 ft.
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 7th; Concentration +10)
At will—*ghost sound, mage hand, prestidigitation*
1/day—*grease* (DC 14), *summon swarm*, *ventriloquism* (DC 14)

Statistics
Str 7, **Dex** 18, **Con** 12, **Int** 14, **Wis** 15, **Cha** 17
Base Atk +0; *CMB* +2; *CMD* 11

Feats Dodge, Improved Initiative, Weapon Finesse
Skills Acrobatics +8 (+4 jump), Bluff +7, Escape Artist +8, Fly+16, Handle Animal +4, Perception +8, Sense Motive +6, Stealth +20; Racial Modifiers +2 Perception, +4 Stealth
Change Shape (Su)*:* With an action, the Linchetto can assume the shape of a tiny bat, a tiny cat, a tiny crow, a tiny mouse, a tiny snake, or a tiny spider.

Ecology
Environment temperate city
Organization solitary or gang (2–5)
Languages Collodian, Common, Elven, Gnome, Sylvan
Treasure standard

Description: Linchetti are beetle-winged fey able to shape shift. They are cruel and love to play nasty pranks, which can be deadly. They hate white candles and will leave any room where there is a lit white candle.

Malogatto (CR 2)

XP 600
CE Tiny magical beast (shapechanger)
Init +3; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision, Perception +6

Defense
AC 15, touch 15, flat-footed 12 (+3 Dex, +2 size)
hp 19 (3d10+3)
Fort +4, **Ref** +6, **Will** +2

Offense
Speed 30 ft.
Melee 2 claws +4 (1d2–1 plus withering), bite +4 (1d3–1) or dagger +4 (1d4)
Space 2-1/2 ft., Reach 0 ft. (5 ft./5 ft. in human shape)
Special Attacks curse (DC 15)
Spell-like abilities (CL 5th; Concentration +7)
At will—*fly* (only on self), *invisibility* (only on self)

Statistics
Str 8, **Dex** 16, **Con** 12, **Int** 14, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 16
Base Atk +3; *CMB* +4; *CMD* 13

Feats Ability Focus (Curse), Stealthy
Skills Bluff +8, Escape Artist +9, Perception +6, Stealth +18(+13 in human shape)

Special Abilities
Curse (Su): The first time the malogatto is wounded, or subjected to a combat maneuver, they can impose a DC 15 Will save on the attacker. On a failure, the victim is cursed for one day, taking a –4 penalty to attacks, damage, and saving throws. The save DC is Charisma-based.
Change Shape (Su): The malogatto can take a single human shape at will.

Ecology
Environment temperate hills
Organization solitary, pair, or band (3–9)
Languages Common; speak with animals
Treasure standard

Description: Maligatti (evil cats) are white and black or grey or fully black cats with green eyes, able to

turn into black or grey-haired young men. Maligatti are egotistical, greedy, rancorous, and selfish.

Scabodda

XP 1600
C/G Large magical beast (shapechanger)
Init +5; **Senses** low-light vision, scent (double range with sweets and candies; Perception +7

Defense
AC 15, touch 10, flat-footed 14 (+1 Dex, +5 natural, –1 size)
hp 66 (6d10+24)
Fort +9, **Ref** +8, **Will** +2

Offense
Speed 30 ft., climb 20 ft., swim 30 ft.
Melee bite +6 (2d6+6 plus grab) or tongue +6 (grab)
Space 10 ft., *Reach* 5 ft. (15 ft. with tongue)
Special Attacks fast swallow, pull (tongue, 5 ft.), swallow whole (1d6 bludgeoning damage, AC 12, 6 hp), tongue

Statistics
Str 19, **Dex** 13, **Con** 18, **Int** 10, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 16
Base Atk +6; *CMB* +11 (+15 grapple); *CMD* 21 (25 vs. trip)
Spell-Like Abilities (CL 9; Concentration +11)
At will—*colour spray* (DC 13), *hypnotic pattern* (DC 15).

Feats Improved Initiative, Lightning Reflexes, Skill Focus (Acrobatics)
Skills Acrobatics +14 (+22 when jumping), Bluff+7, Climb +18, Diplomacy +7, Perception +7, Stealth +10, Swim +16; Racial Modifiers +4 Acrobatics (+12 when jumping), +4 Perception, +5 Stealth

Special Abilities
Tongue (Ex): A scabodda's tongue is a primary attack with three times the reach of its bite. Its tongue deals no damage, but can be used to grab. The frog does not gain the grappled condition when grappling with its tongue.
Change Shape (Su): The Scabodda can turn into a medium sized female humanoid.

Ecology
Environment temperate marshes or water
Organization solitary or pair
Languages Common, Collodian
Treasure Standard

Description: Scabodde are massive but peaceful frogs able to turn into humanoid females. They are exclusively female, reproducing through laying eggs by parthenogenesis. Scabodde love sweets and candies and often venture into human lands to collect them.

Serpe Motro (CR 4)

XP 800
N/E Medium magical beast
Init +3; **Senses** scent; Perception +12

Defense
AC 15, touch 13, flat-footed 12 (+3 Dex, +2 natural)
hp 27 (3d10+6)
Fort +4, **Ref** +6, **Will** +2

Offense
Speed 20 ft., climb 20 ft., swim 20 ft.
Melee bite +6 (1d4+4 plus grab)
Special Attacks constrict (1d4+4), gaze, summon snakes (summons 1d4 constrictor snakes, 1d6 vipers, or 1 viper swarm.)

Statistics
Str 17, **Dex** 17, **Con** 12, **Int** 13, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 16
Base Atk +3; *CMB* +6 (+10 grapple); *CMD* 18 (can't be tripped)

Special Attack
Gaze (Su): Usable at will in a 30 foot cone. Those affected are dominated for 1d4 rounds. DC 17 Will negates (The DC is Charisma based, with a+4 racial bonus).

Feats Skill Focus (Perception), Toughness
Skills Acrobatics +15, Climb +11, Diplomacy+13, Perception +12, Stealth +11, Swim +11; Racial Modifiers +4 Perception, +4 Stealth, +8 Acrobatics
Languages Collodian, Common, can communicate simple concepts with snakes.

Ecology
Environment temperate forests, swamps, and fresh water
Organization solitary or couple
Languages Collodian, Common; can communicate simple concepts with snakes.
Treasure double standard

Description: Serpi motra are intelligent constrictor snakes who can control other serpents and even humanoid creatures. They are greedy and like to accumulate treasures in their nests.

Wise Cricket (CR 6)

XP 2400
N/G Fine magical beast
Init +6; **Senses** tremorsense, low-light vision; Perception +18

Defense
AC 20, touch 24, flat-footed 14 (+6 Dex, +4 size)
hp 49 (7d10)
Fort +4, **Ref** +6, **Will** +2

Offense
Speed 20 ft., climb 20 ft.
Melee walking stick +17/+12 (1 bludgeoning damage plus 1d8 psychic damage)

Statistics
Str 5, **Dex** 22, **Con** 12, **Int** 17, *Wis* 18, **Cha** 19
Base Atk +7; *CMB* -1; *CMD* 15
Special Attacks
***Admonishment* (Su):** Once per day per point of Charisma modifier possessed by the wise cricket, every creature able to hear the wise cricket must make a Will save versus DC 18. With a success, the targets are immune for 24 hours. With a failure, the targets are stunned for one round.

Feats Focus Ability (Admonishment), Skill Focus (Perform) (Oratory, Sing), Weapon Finesse
Skills Acrobatics +16 (+24 jump), Climb +14, Diplomacy +14, Perception +18, Stealth +28; Racial Modifiers +4 Perception, +8 Acrobatics to jump

Ecology
Environment any urban
Organization solitary, couple, or family 2-12
Languages Collodian, Common, Sylvan; can communicate simple concepts with animals.
Treasure standard

Description: Wise Crickets are a species of benevolent, intelligent, and cultured crickets with human-like features who often wander trying to help people with their wisdom. After ten decades they become old, and they obtain 2 more Hit Dice, +4 Intelligence and Charisma, and the ability to cast spells as a Bard of 9th level. The CR of an old wise cricket is 8.

Templates

Strego

Acquired Template

Streghi are humanoids who made a pact with the dark god Tuchulcha.

Required *Type* Any Humanoid.
Add the shapechanger subtype to the base creature
Alignment any Evil.
Ability Scores: +2 Intelligence and +2 Charisma
Change Shape (Su): At will, as a move action, a strego can turn into a snake with as many Hit Dice as they possess, plus the Tuchulcha's snake template.
CR +1

Tuchulcha's Snake

Acquired template

Tuchulcha's snakes are snakes touched by the influence of the evil god Tuchulcha.

Type changes to magical beast with the augmented animal subtype.

Alignment any Evil.
Ability Scores +10 Intelligence, +10 Charisma.
Hit Dice turns to d10, add 2.
hp +1 per Hit Die, if the DM does not wish to reroll.
Skill Points recalculate for the new Intelligence score

Special Attack
Poison (Ex): If already poisonous, escalate the damage die by one size, add 2 to the saving throw DC, and add one to the number of successes that it needs to be cured. If not, the snake gets a poisonous bite attack, which, with a failed Fortitude saving throw, inflicts 1d6 Constitution damage for one minute or until it is cured (2 successes to cure).
Languages Abyssal or Infernal, Common, Draconic
CR *+1*

New Monster Feat

Strangling Constrict

Prequisite: Constrict ability.

Benefits: After three consecutive rounds of inflicting constrict damage, the target needs to pass a Fortitude saving throw of DC 10 + half the creature's HD + the creature's Strength modifier. If the target fails, they begin to suffocate.

Character Options

New Player Races

Marionettes

Marionettes are small, childlike-beings made of magical wood. They are often created spontaneously when puppets are carved with the magical wood of the Fairy's Forest. Collodian marionettes are often the work of the great woodcarver Mastro Geppetto.

Type Humanoid (living construct)
Ability Score Modifier +2 Dexterity, +2 Charisma, –2 Strength. Marionettes are nimble and look adorable, but they are not very strong.
Size Small; marionettes are around 3 feet tall and average weight is around 20 pounds.
Speed 30 feet
Natural Armor Being made of magical wood, marionettes have a +2 natural armor bonus to their AC.
Fire Vulnerability Marionettes take 10 extra damage whenever they take fire damage.
Flexible Joints Marionettes have a +2 bonus to Escape Artist checks.
Made to Entertain Marionettes have a +2 bonus to any Performance check.
Language Marionette characters begin play speaking Common. Marionettes with high Intelligence scores can choose any languages they want (except secret languages, such as Druidic). See the Linguistics skill page for more information about these languages.
Favoured Class Bard

Dogwere

Dogweres are friendly and loyal dogs with the ability to turn into a human or hybrid form. They are often the result of fairy magic touching dogs, but they breed true.

Type magical beast (shapechanger)
Ability Score *Adjustments* +2 Constitution, +2 Wisdom, –2 Intelligence. Dogweres are resilient and strong-minded, but they are not very academically oriented.
Size Medium; dogweres have all the ranges of human height and weight in their human form. In their dog form, they are a medium sized version of their base dog form. In their hybrid form, they are between 5 and a half and 6 feet tall, and average weight is around 180 to 200 pounds.
Speed 30 feet.
Strong Nose Dogweres have scent with double normal range.
Natural Weapon (only in hybrid or dog form) bite, 1d6 + Strength modifier.
Perceptive +4 Perception.
Shape Change (Su) As a standard action, a dogwere can change between dog, human, and hybrid form.
Language Dogwere characters begin play speaking Common. Dogweres with high Intelligence scores can choose any language they want (except secret languages, such as Druidic). See the Linguistics skill page for more information about these languages.
Favoured Class Fighter.

Pleasure Island Donkey

Pleasure Island donkeys are intelligent donkeys that are able to speak. Some of them are human victims of a curse. They possess magic enabling them to form small communities and on some occasions they can gain human form (or regain their human forms).

Type magical beast
Ability Score Adjustments +2 Constitution, +2 Wisdom, –2 Charisma. Pleasure Island donkeys are durable and stubborn, but they are not very capable in interpersonal relationships.
Size Medium
Speed 40 feet.
Quadruped A Pleasure Island donkey can't wear armor made for humanoids, their carrying capacity is 50% higher than what their Strength score would allow, and they get a +4 bonus to their CMD against trip and push maneuvers.
Bray Once per day, a Pleasure Island donkey may bray loudly, and every enemy able to hear the character makes a Will saving throw (DC equal to 10+½ the Pleasure Island donkey's character level + their Wisdom modifier). On a failure, the target is stunned for one round.
Spell-Like Ability at will—*mage hand* (caster level equals character level)
Language Pleasure Island donkey characters begin play speaking Common and Collodian. Pleasure Island donkeys with high Intelligence scores can choose any language they want (except secret languages, such as Druidic). See the Linguistics skill page for more information about these languages.
Favoured Class Cleric

Snailfolk

Snailfolk are peaceful creatures mingling human and snail traits. Their height varies beetween 3 and 4 feet, with a weight varying beetween 100 and 160 pounds. They have colourful shells which can change colours and patterns. Snailfolks can change shape into one single human form. They live in the Shadow Forest and in Collodi. In Collodi, they live in secret familial units.

Type monstrous humanoid
Subtype shapechanger
Ability Score Adjustments +2 Constitution, +2 Wisdom, –2 Dexterity. Snailfolk are resilient and level-headed, but they are slow and clumsy.
Size Small
Speed 15 feet. They can't be slowed.
Shell Snailfolk have a +4 natural armor bonus. When they take a full-round action to defend themselves, they retire inside their Shells. In this state, they gain a +6 natural armor bonus, they can't be targeted by single target spells, and they gain damage reduction 10/–.
Spell Resistance Snailfolk have spell resistance equal to their Hit Dice + 5. They can benefit from innocuos spells at will.
Change Shape At will, as a move action, Snailfolk can change into a single human shape or return to their natural form. Their speed increases to 20 feet in human form.
Grease (Sp) Three time a day, a Snailfolk can use *grease*, as the spell. The DC is Wisdom-based, and the caster level is equal to the Snailfolk's character level.
Language Snailfolk characters begin play speaking Common and Sylvan. Snailfolk with high Intelligence scores can choose any language they want (except secret languages, such as Druidic). See the Linguistics skill page for more information about these languages.
Favoured Class Paladin

New Class Features

Balance Domain

Granted Powers: You pursue balance and equilibrium in all things, and you can transmit this balance with your touch.

Touch of Balance (Sp): You can touch a willing creature as a standard action, infusing it with the power of divine balance and allowing it to act for a minute like no negative condition is affecting it. You can use this ability a number of times per day equal to 3 + your Wisdom modifier.

Spear of Balance (Su): At 8th level, you can treat a weapon that you are touching as if it possesses the *equidistant* special weapon quality (see below) for a number of rounds equal to 1/2 your cleric level. You can use this ability once per day at 8th level, and an additional time per day for every four levels beyond 8th.

Domain Spells: *1st—peace bond, 2nd—peacemaker's parley, 3rd—mark of obvious ethics, 4th—purify body, 5th—serenity, 6th—balance of suffering, 7th—arbitrament, 8th—euphoric tranquillity, 9th—summon monster IX* (no non-neutral creatures).

New Special Material

Fairy Wood

Fairy wood is hard and as resistant darkwood, but it is also very easy to enchant (halves the price for enchantment bonuses). Any animal, beast or humanoid-shaped construct built with fairy wood has 50% chance to animate itself. Fairy wood items have the same cost as darkwood items.

New Weapon Special Properties

Equidistant Weapon

An equidistant weapon deals an extra 1d6 damage to any creature that is not True Neutral (C/N, N/E, N/G, and L/N), and instead inflicts an extra 2d6 damage to any creature of an extreme alignment (C/G, C/E, L/E, and L/G). Any non-True Neutral creature wielding an equidistant weapon gains 1 negative level that cannot be removed as long as they wield it (but never results in actual level loss). Creatures of an extreme alignment that wield it gain 2 negative levels. This special property counts like a +2 property.

Strangling Weapon

On a hit, a strangling weapon can attempt to grapple the target with a bonus equal to its total weapon bonus. Every round it inflicts its weapon damage upon the target or 1d4 damage, whichever is greater, and always lethal. After three rounds getting strangled, the target needs to make a DC 16 Fortitude save or start suffocating. This special property counts like a +2 special property. It can be applied to any flexible weapon, like lassos, chains, whips, nunchaku, nets, and similar weapons. To create a strangling weapon, a spellcaster needs the Create Magic Arms and Armour feat, to be level 7 or higher, and to have the spell *magic weapon*.

Heresy, Heterodoxy, and Heteropraxy

by Tonitrus

Most Honorable Perrine Étienne,

I write in an attempt to address a glaring oversight in the fields of study of academia in the Core. Even the prestigious University of Port-a-Lucine is no exception to this. As academics, we have an obligation to study all of the phenomena of this world with a curious mind and an unbiased intellect. While the universities of the Core study and teach the broad details of the various faiths our neighbors espouse, we allow the finer details to be discussed only by the superstitious and those heavily invested in the doctrines that they have come to make a part of their identity.

Recently I have found myself investigating the particulars of the religions around me with a patient and critical eye, and the depths of variation and culture I have uncovered in what I previously thought standardized and monolithic have left me both blindsided, bewildered, and fascinated.

While there are certainly many scholars that have touched on many of these topics as parts of other works, their contributions to the understanding of religious traditions has gone largely unappreciated. I have compiled these largely-forgotten sources together into a cohesive whole, to which I have added the results of my own inquiries.

It is my hope that some of what I have learned in my investigation will persuade the university to recognize this as a new field of study, which more deeply investigates the religious beliefs of the citizens of the various nations, and in so doing discover new insights into the human psyche.

Your humble servant,

Alphonse Dufort

Religious Monoliths

Growing up as a child of merchants, I had opportunity to travel to places that many others did not. On one of my first trips to Port-a-Lucine, I can still recall my parents' polite disinterest in the robed figures I persisted in asking about. Unable to arrange a meeting, I persuaded my mother to allow me to visit the library, where a librarian was kind enough to help me locate a book on the Erudites of the Church of Ezra, complete with illustrations similar to the individuals I had observed before. I read all I could about their customs and beliefs, which seemed quite strange to my young mind. Yet from the little understanding I could glean of their doctrine, it seemed as though there must be something of the divine in them.

Years later, I had occasion to visit the city of Levkarest and insisted on visiting the Great Cathedral there. I was enraptured by the wonder of the building, and my young mind felt for a moment that the divine hand of Ezra must both be real and touch our world in places such as this. I accosted nearby anchorites with questions, but was disturbed to discover that the practices and beliefs of these anchorites differed greatly from the ones I had read about years before. As particulars of the Ezran sects were beyond my young mind, I was overcome by the belief that one of these groups was simply wrong. Whether the Erudites or the Home Faith, one of these groups of believers was following their own faith *incorrectly*.

Once I'd learned of the sects and made space within my mental model for the different beliefs and practices of the Erudites and Home Faith, this wrongness seemed to disappear. While one of these sects might be more or less true than the other, there was no longer any confusion in my mind about followers of each sect pursuing their own beliefs. Despite this experience, I continued to make this error for many years to come. I posit that many intellectually-minded men and women commit this error on a constant basis.

Folk Religion

I hope to show that the division of Ezran beliefs into sects is unusual only in the sense that it has been codified. There is tremendous diversity of both belief and practice that permeates every faith in the land of Mists. Officials may dictate church doctrine from their temples, but the practices of the common folk rarely align. While this has often been viewed as evidence of the lack of understanding that the common folk have for their religion, it seems to me that this "folk religion" is an indeliable aspect of religious expression, wherein adherents are more concerned with improving their daily lives than they are with high-minded theological concepts.

While I initially chafed at this concept and sought to find new ways to categorize these issues, it slowly became apparent to me that these discrepancies are irreconcilable. I thus realized that it was only my bias for official texts and elaborate theological and philosophical structures that caused me to view these different perspectives as correct or otherwise. Abandoning these rigid constructions allowed me to better see the complex inner diversity that each religion possesses.

Folk religion practices are usually grudgingly tolerated by the clergy. These practice tend to persist regardless of what the clergy may do or say about them. Even the most high-minded religious leader is unlikely to choose to excommunicate the vast majority of followers, and even those clergy who are interested in arguing over these practices generally find it to be a completely fruitless gesture.

Official Concerns

In the interest of categorization, I have developed three levels of variation in religious belief with which we may analyze the faiths of our world. Churches and religious leaders are typically interested in orthodoxy. Less centralized faiths are often more interested in orthopraxy.

Orthodoxy ("correct opinion"): the official doctrine or belief of a faith-group, as defined by its leaders, text, or traditions. For the majority of faiths in the

Core, having the correct beliefs is the primary concern. Deviations from orthodoxy are handled in a variety of ways by church officials. Where a belief has been officially denounced and an official punishment proclaimed, I call that a heresy. If a variation in belief has no official punishment, it will be listed here as a heterodoxy. Not all heterodoxies are officially condemned.

Orthopraxy ("correct practice"): the practices that are deemed to be correct by a religious community. While more organized faiths define these practices through their ecclesiastical hierarchy, other faiths tend to define them more through common agreement of their adherents. Deviations from orthopraxy are categorized here as heteropraxy. While heteropraxy can refer to deviations in practices as a result of hypocrisy, here the usage is limited to genuine and well-meaning deviation in practice by individual members of a faith.

Types of Heterodoxy

While there is a large spectrum of different ways a particular belief can be looked upon by religious leaders, the majority seem to fall into four main categories.

Variant

The heterodox belief is viewed as a minor variant of an orthodox belief. If it is considered unworthy of note if it is considered unorthodox at all.

Example: Ezran doctrine often waxes poetic regarding the Legions of the Night. Whether these forces are literal monsters or the figurative dangers of evil is somewhat ambiguous, and Ezran doctrine generally maintains that ambiguity. When an individual or congregation takes the position that a particular teaching applies specifically to one or the other, this is regarded as little more than an oddity among other Ezrans. Here we would categorize such a position as a variant heterodoxy to distinguish it from the official position, even though the official position is nebulous.

Contemplative

Officials consider the heterodoxy an attempt to find a deeper orthodox truth. They may have some concerns about it, but they consider these new ideas to be mere contemplations of the depths of true orthodoxy rather than an actual deviation from orthodoxy.

Example: When Annette of St. Ronges wrote of Ezra's authority over the Mists, she did not describe literal fog or even the Mists of Death. She described instead the fog of war, the mists of fading memory, the lack of clarity from incomplete facts, and the despair of unknowing. To Annette, we are closest to Ezra when we abandon our preconceptions and accept that we simply do not know. Only then, she reasons, can one truly be guided by Ezra through the mists that truly obscure our lives and paths. Anchorites travelling dangerous lands often carry blades of Rongeise Steel that have had quotations of her words etched into them. Church hierarchy does not seem to regard this fact as particularly noteworthy, however. While her interpretation is certainly a novel one, and while not everyone agrees with it, her teachings are viewed as an attempt at getting closer to the heart of Ezran orthodoxy. The fact that those who endorse her views don't form a particular political bloc might also be a factor in the church's receptiveness to her works.

Disfavored

Beliefs that are not accepted by faith leaders, but are tolerated.

Example: Julius Faber, a member of the Cult of the Morninglord in Vallaki, has amassed followers by teaching that the light of the Morninglord must pervade all aspects of one's being. In thinking of evil, even in acknowledging its existence, one gives ground to evil. In his teachings, one triumphs over evil by refusing to acknowledge any form of darkness or suffering, and basking only in the light. This doctrine causes no small amount of irritation to other followers of the Morninglord, but the cult has made no formal effort to censure Faber or his adherents.

Condemned

Beliefs that are openly disliked by faith leaders and may result in private discouragement or social punishments, but haven't been raised to the level of heresy.

Example: Liffian theologian Balthazar Strazni attempted to correlate, rank, and analyze the deities of the Thousand Gods, searching for common elements of the deeper divine truth. In so doing, he correlated commonalities among beliefs and the deities that profess them in a way that lead some to view his work as a ranking of the divinity of the deities worshipped in Liffe and beyond. While Strazni passed before his work achieved the success it enjoys today, so-called Straznians view the Thousand Gods as representing a hierarchy of divinity, where some deities are more divine than others. While the Allgods Temple has proclaimed no official punishment for believing or promoting this idea, temple leaders regard it as antithetical to the teachings of the Thousand Gods and privately exert pressure on individuals (especially clergy) to reconsider what they consider to be a profoundly caustic and dangerous belief. Given time, the Straznian perspective could easily be declared heresy.

Heresy

As previously discussed, beliefs that have been officially denounced and prescribed punishments for expousing are labeled as heresy herein. However, it is important to mention that punishments declared by religious leaders may not always be enforceable by those leaders. Not all groups who have declared fatal heresies have had the authority to execute those guilty of those heresies.

In some cases, individual members of the faith may ignore this lack of temporal authority and enact the prescribed punishment regardless. Other times, the punishment for being a heretic falls short of the intended sentence and is downgraded to the most severe form the group is capable of implementing. Individuals declared to be heretics deserving of death may not always be openly executed, but they should expect hostility from the religious community in that area, and may be subject to attacks, threats, challenges to duels, or mass boycotts by the religious community.

Additionally, prescribed punishments for heresy are rarely prescribed or considered in a vacuum. Regional variations, as well as behavior by the accused, may vary the severity of any administered punishments.

Trials

Those accused of heresy are rarely subjected to immediate sanctions. Institutions typically have a formal process, which may involve an inquisitorial trial or a simple conversation with elders. The accused is nearly always given an opportunity to defend and clarify their positions, and generally given the opportunity to recant.

The process of recanting is highly variable. Generally the person denounces the beliefs they are accused to have held. Sometimes they are required to admit having held them. In other cases the accused can be considered to have recanted by simply agreeing to stop talking about it.

Whatever the exact process, those who recant are generally treated with leniency. What this means depends on a variety of factors, but usually entails a reduction in sentence. Some are let off with a warning, while others find their sentence downgraded in some way.

Even after recanting, those who have been formally charged with heresy and recanted can face scrutiny for some time. Past heresy is generally an aggravating factor in future cases.

Recanting Heterodoxies

Heterodoxies are not necessarily punished, but can have social penalties to those who espouse their views. Generally speaking, those who recant of these heterodoxies are welcomed back with open arms. A very dogmatic adherent who later recants may receive some skepticism, but for the most part, considering and rejecting heterodoxies is considered a normal part of growing in understanding of the faith.

Punishments for Heresy

Lay-restriction

Some beliefs are tolerated among the masses, but disqualifying for members of the clergy. The different faiths have different processes, doctrines, and terms for what I have come to call "lay-restriction." Despite these variations, this punishment is expressed similarly among all the religions I was able to analyze on this subject. Ultimately, a heresy with this punishment listed means that those who hold the heretical beliefs and do not renounce them may not hold any position of authority over others in the faith. They may be tolerated in purely administrative roles on a case-by-case basis, but they are not allowed in any position that would allow them to give spiritual, moral, or philosophical advice to others in the faith.

Example: There is a group of Ezrans that call themselves the Final Revelation. They believe that the message of Ezra is incomplete until the Fifth book of Ezra is revealed and becomes canon. While many Ezrans anticipate a fifth book as an inevitable completion of Ezran doctrine, the Final Revelation contends that the final book of Ezra will add context to the other books in such a way as to cause the teachings of all other sects to be in doubt until the final revelation is revealed. While this belief is tolerated among laity, Praesidius Postoya has ruled that this outlook is too damaging to the functioning of the Church of Ezra to be tolerated among the clergy. If the Bastions disagree, they have thus far done very little to make space for this belief system among the clergy of their own sects.

Public Shaming

The member is publically humiliated and shamed. This can take a variety of forms. In areas where the church holds political authority, shaming may involve the entire local populace. Where their authority is limited, the punishment is carried out by members of the local religious community, and outsiders may or may not be allowed to witness the proceedings.

An exhaustive list of the forms this might take would exceed the length of this entire letter, but shaming is typically focused on humiliation or embarrassment. It may involve stocks, thrown objects, forcing the accused to wear conspicuous marks, or carry signs. It might involve public beatings or extensively dressing down the accused, it might involve embarassing clothing, or forcing the accused to participate in humiliating rituals.

Example: In 731, a failed anchorite named Ion Dinu founded a community of free love in the village of Ivanesti, north of Sturben. While Dinu and many of his followers were ultimately excommunicated, church officials initially tried using a lighter hand. For the charge of blasphemy and heresy stemming from Dinu's highly-sexualized retelling of Ezra's mortal life, the church sentenced Dinu and his followers to a be coated in filth, then have their mouths ritually cleaned with soap in view of nearby Ezrans. Dinu and his more fervant followers resisted, but were beaten until they complied. Many who were subjected to the ritual reconsidered their membership and departed Dinu's group. The others persisted in their practices until they were excommunicated. After that, Dinu tightened his grip over the cult, causing it to devolve into infighting that led to its subsequent collapse.

Imprisonment

The accused is imprisoned for their crimes. This punishment is typically only available where the state enforces the will of a particular faith's leaders. Imprisonment is common among the Eternal Order and the Church of the Lawgiver in Nova Vaasa. It is somewhat less commonly prescribed by the Great Cathedral or the Church of the Lawgiver in Hazlan. It is rarely enforceable by the other Ezran sects, especially the Zealots, who have no capacity to legally imprison people. Imprisonment is sometimes unofficially practiced where churches lack the authority to do so, but is not generally considered worth the trouble.

Example: While the Eternal Order generally ignores local variations in practice, in 739 BC a community in Viaki began supplanting Eternal Order practices and teaching others to do the same. These variations originated in a man named Julius Celsus, who claimed the dead guided him toward the rites and rituals that most pleased them and that the rites of the Eternal Order were archaic and misguided.

Initially the state religion pressured Celsus to bring his rhetoric more in line with official doctrine and stop spreading the idea that his variations were superior, but Celsus disregarded them. As news of this began to spread, the Eternal Order simply imprisoned him and many of his fellows for heresy. His compatriots recanted after some time in prison and were subsequently released. However, Celsus' rhetoric only worsened during his incarcaration. In 743, he conspired with a local writer to accuse Azalin Rex of crimes against the state. Both were executed for treason.

Excommunication

The accused is officially expelled from the faith. They are not considered members of the religion, and are denied any sacraments they would formerly have had access to.

Example: The Tolker Heresy: Where the Church of the Lawgiver made inroads into Darkon, local clergy struggled with drawing in new converts due to the Vaasi-centric policy of the Church of the Lawgiver. In the city of Dinaria, in southeastern Darkon, the clergy began offering services in Darkonese. When the Nova Vaasan church found out about this, they immediately sent inquisitors to investigate and correct the issue. Among clergy along the outskirts of Vaasi-speaking populations, there was a brief uproar until the church began excommunicating everyone who spoke out.

Shunning

The member is effectively exiled from the religious community, who are banned from all positive social interactions with the person, including commerce.

Example: The works of Erik Alvsen are called "the Mordentish Heresy" for the Dementlieuese books the founder of the heresy was said to have been inspired by. A prominent noble, Alvsen taught that the social hierarchy of the Lawgiver was a hierarchy created by social contract, with obligations in both directions. Those in the hierarchy were to serve those above them, while those above them in the hierarchy were obligated to use their power and influence to benefit those below them. His philosophy encouraged the reform of a number of aspects of Nova Vaasan society in order to improve the social order.

While his arguments were pragmatic in nature, he and his works were dismissed by the church as a misguided, romantic expression of mercy that threatened the entire social order and displayed unacceptable leniency and false compassion. Alvsen and those who adopted his views were all excommunicated. Further, the Church of the Lawgiver ruled that "the Mordentish Heretics" be counted among the lowest rungs of society, lower than criminals and slaves, and forbade the faithful from interacting with them, save to drive them away. Alvsen was forced to go into hiding after one of his closest allies was killed by a Nova Vaasan mob instigated by the church.

Death

The member is sentenced to be executed for heresy. Where church officials lack the political authority to execute such a sentence, they often employ lesser punishments as a substitute. Those sentenced to death have often found themselves dead, though, even where the local church has no authority to enforce such a sentence. In some cases, this seems to be due to religious officials deliberately stoking animosity. In others, one or more members of the local congregation seem to have decided to take matters into their own hands.

Example: When Annabelle Viennes wrote her famous Lux E Cordis, it initially drew little attention, aside from some mockery of her sometimes-questionable Darkonese. In her book, she argues that love and compassion allow one to shine as a beacon of light in the lands of the dead, much more powerfully than the faint glimmers provided through the rituals of the Eternal Order.

Some of her contemporaries took her words to mean that the Darkonese state religion and its rites were wholly superfluous, which quickly attracted the attention of the Eternal Order. While the very dense text is often opaque, this reading seems beyond the scope of the book, which was not focused on doctrinal issues, but rather took the form of a strange

play that conveyed nebulous moral meanings by vague allegory. Nevertheless, when Viennes declined to defend herself against the charges, the Eternal Order had her burned at the stake, alongside the copies of the book they could account for at the time.

Variant Beliefs and Practices

The Church of Ezra

In the aftermath of the First Schism, the Church of Ezra created the Rite of Revelation to determine which sects are divinely revealed by Ezra, and which sects are heretical. To be recognized as a new Bastion, potentials must:

- Write a new Book of Ezra representing that sect's canon, and deliver it to the Great Cathedral of Levkarest for review and approval by the Praesidius.
- Manifest a previously unknown form of the Shield of Ezra, and teach that variation to five other anchorites.

However, the nuances involved with this process are complex. When a sect does indeed submit a new Book of Ezra for review, the review process may take some time. Likewise, a Bastion manifesting a new Shield of Ezra might take some time to do so, and even longer to teach other anchorites. Thus, while it is relatively simple to determine when a sect has passed the Rite of Revelation, it is substantially more difficult to distinguish a sect that has failed the rite from one that simply hasn't passed it yet.

The Home Faith has little interest in fighting the manifestation of the expected fifth sect, and so they try to use a light hand when dealing with new Ezran sects. Generally speaking, the Home Faith tries to avoid any punishment more severe than lay-restriction when dealing with new sects. If they feel they can do so, they will simply ignore the sect. However, if the beliefs of a sect are sufficiently unlikely to receive approval from the Praesidius, the Home Faith may reasonably conclude that a sect is unlikely to be divine in origin. In this case, they are more likely to attempt to combat the perceived heresy or heterodoxy directly. The Bastions of the other sects are further removed from the political and theological concerns of the Home Faith and evaluate heresy and heterodoxy in reference to their own sects.

The Mitakian Heresy

"The Mists of Death replied, saying, 'You proceed at your own peril. Only death waits you beyond the Veil. There are no gods or goddesses to save you or those you seek to aid. We are death. If you step into our embrace, you will join the the dead that lie beyond."

"And Ezra replied, saying, 'Then I give my life for the somber souls that walk this world and the world beyond. I will curse myself so that others may be blessed. I will bring a light to the darkness. I will remember among the forgotten. I will lift up the fallen from the depths. In your land of woe, I shall craft only weal. Even the Mists of Death will not obscure the light I raise within them."

-The Bride of Death 3:19-20, from the Mitakian Books of the Veil

Faction: Mitakians

Nicknames: *Somber Souls, Atheists* (derogatory), *Necromancers* (derogatory)

Creed: There are no gods and there is no realm of the gods. Ezra passed through the Mists of Death into the realm of the dead, where she works tirelessly to free the dead from their burdens and purify corruption in the world beyond. As she clears out these evils, the realm of the living improves as well. Her followers should help her in her campaign.

Text: The *Books of the Veil*, sometimes called *Ezra's Lost Teachings*, or the *True Book of Ezra*. Often called the *Fifth Book of Ezra* among Mitakians.

Rituals and Practices: Mitakians work to help ghosts rest peacefully and to reduce negative emotions that create sinkholes of evil and ghosts. They also focus on learning to detach from this world, so that when they reach the next world, they may aid Ezra in her quest. Mitakians in all domains celebrate Nocturne.

Status: Heresy

Prescribed Punishments:

- **Home Faith**: Excommunication and Shunning, occasionally Imprisonment or Death. The Home Faith finds the views of the Mitakians to be abjectly heretical and a danger to the community. They are generally content to shun Mitakians, and only pursue harsher sentences when there are aggravating factors.
- **Erudites**: Excommunication. Erudites don't go looking for Mitakians, but they consider the views of the Somber Souls to be too divergent from orthodoxy to be tolerated. Mitakians who draw the eye of Erudite officials and refuse to recant are excommunicated. Excommunicated Mitakians are otherwise tolerated unless they actively antagonize the Church.
- **Pure Hearts**: Lay-restriction. The Pure Hearts find Mitakian ideas dangerously misguided, but appreciate the efforts made to create good in the world and guide tormented souls to a more peaceful rest. They do not tolerate Mitakianism among the clergy, but offer only gentle correction to laity. The Pure Hearts find the "no gods or goddesses" rhetoric particularly grating. Heretics who lean into this concept may encourage heavier responses from the Mordentish Church, while those who lean heavily away from it may sometimes find their beliefs tolerated, even among the clergy.
- **Zealots**: Death. The Zealots consider Mitakianism to be an extreme heresy that undermines the faith in all sects. They further consider its embracing of the realms of the dead as holy to be a fundamentally dangerous idea that cannot be allowed to spread in any form. Even when the Zealots have no political authority to enact their punishment, the official punishment is nearly always death.

Beyond the Mists

The Mitakians manifest no Shield of Ezra, nor do they seem to have any capability with the Mists domain. They have an ability to repel and control undead which they call the Fifth Shield of Ezra, but it is not acknowledged as such by anyone outside their group. Essentially no orthodox Ezran of any sect believes that the Mitakians represent any kind of genuine revelation.

Mitakians believe that the normal story of Ezra is a corruption. Ezra did not become a goddess or enter the world of the divine, but instead she was a mortal woman who journeyed into the lands of the dead to fight the Legions of the Night there. Mitakians believe in helping Ezra in her work by laying ghosts to rest and conducting other, similar rites, but their detractors accuse them of atheism and necromancy. While their practices focus on breaking the chains of negative emotion on those who have passed on, their enthusiasm for dabbling in matters related to ghosts is often viewed as dangerous by outsiders.

The name “Mitakian” is of unknown provenance. In the Books of the Veil, Ezra names herself queen of a great city of the dead in the world beyond. Strong tradition among the Mitakians indicates that this city was named Mitakia, but it remains unnamed in the text. It seems more likely that the name originated from another source, but its etymology remains utterly obscure.

The Mitakians initially seem to have taken root in Mordent. Their holy text, which they call the Fifth Book of Ezra, is known to outsiders by its older name:

the Books of the Veil. The Mitakians claim that the texts that comprise the Books of the Veil precede the birth of Yakov Dilisnya by hundreds of years. Mitakian tradition dictates that Yakov Dilisnya drew upon stories from the Books of the Veil in order to compose the First Book of Ezra. To demonstrate this, Mitakians point to references and quotations from the Books of the Veil in ancient sources that predate the First Book of Ezra.

However, there are a few flaws with the Mitakian claim. The oldest references we have to the Books of the Veil contain few details, leaving us with no ability to determine whether or not the older text and the modern form of the text are the same. The other issue is the lack of Mitakian perspectives in these ancient texts. Where an ancient source seems to attest to the accuracy of a section of the Books of the Veil, the section tends to align with the First Book of Ezra. Where a portion of the Books of the Veil seem to favor a Mitakian perspective, the provenance of the verses in question seems inconclusive at best. The portions of the text that seem most Mitakian are those sections that seem to be missing from older Veil manuscripts.

The oldest variant of the Books of the Veil that I could find is from a portion of a collapsed temple that was found in a cave in the Balinoks, which has been named the Balinok Temple Codex. Despite its library having been destroyed by the ravages of time, a text was partially preserved inside what appeared to have been a magical jar. This text contains a number of books that do not appear in the Mitakian text, but it also lacks books that are present in the Mitakian text. It contains a number of different readings as well. In particular, the standard Mitakian line "there are no gods or goddesses to save you" reads simply as "there is no one to save you" in the Balinok Temple Codex.

The books of the Balinok Temple Codex are shorter than the Mitakian text and lack the fixation on the lands of the dead that so characterizes the Mitakian perspective. Instead, the older text seems to lack a firm distinction between the realms of the dead and the realms of the gods, including the inhabitants of each. While it is true that Mitakian understanding may be read into the Balinok Temple Codex, it is equally plausible to read the orthodox Ezran understanding. Given this, the Mitakian and Ezran traditions seem hard to disentangle from one another. It is hard to argue that the Mitakian understanding is older than the First Book of Ezra, without also allowing for the possibility that a largely orthodox Ezran understanding likewise is older than the First Book of Ezra. The two faith traditions are related, certainly, but that is where the certainty ends.

The Books of Ezra have little textual variation, being recent works that have been heavily printed. I sought older copies for the first three books of Ezra to little avail. My contact among the Mordentish sect was helpful, but said that the Pure Hearts do not maintain libraries as extensive as those among the Home Faith or even the Erudites. While the texts they made available to me were fascinating, they were not helpful in resolving these issues. The Home Faith had several hand-written manuscripts available, but they were all very similar to the official text. The Erudites had no variants of note either, but they did allow me to view a fascinating text that Bastion Secousse used as a source when compiling her Book of Ezra. Called the Gemstone Codex, it initially seemed useless for my purposes, describing a very standard Erudite understanding of Ezra's entry into the land of the Mists.

However, upon closer review, I saw that it too lacked a firm separation between the spirits of the dead and the gods themselves. While the Gemstone Codex distinguished these ideas more than the Balinok Temple Codex, the world of the dead and the divine world appeared to be one and the same in the Gemstone Codex, and gods and spirits seemed to be much more closely related than the orthodox view. Perhaps the original Ezran system of metaphysics combined these into one, and the Mitakian view and orthodox view are both theological innovations of a sort.

In the Mitakian view, Ezra was a mortal woman who passed through the Mists of Death in order to enter the realm of the dead. In this view, the Mists of Death are made from the same essence as ghosts, and the realms of the dead and the manifestations of the Mists are comprised of the same fundamental

nature. Rather than become a goddess, as orthodox Ezran doctrine attests, Ezra adopted a mist-like form to become a type of ghost.

Instead of struggling against darkness in this world, other gods, or even the Mists themselves, Ezra strives against the darkness in the lands of the dead. Drawing upon the power of her followers, Ezra seeks to eradicate corruption and darkness from the world beyond the Veil, hoping to to free the ghosts of the ancestors from their torment and enable them to join Ezra's righteous quest. Since the energies of the spirit world bleed into ours, as Ezra frees the spirits of the dead from their prisons, she betters the world for every living person.

This understanding alters how Mitakians view their duties in this world. Rather than just opposing the Legions of the Night in life, Mitakians believe that they may aid in the battle Ezra wages beyond the Veil. To do this, they seek to lay ghosts to rest, disrupt sinkholes of evil, and use rites and practices in this world to create a better reality on the other side of the Veil, which then slowly bleeds into ours. To their way of thinking, the Mists of Death are composed of the dead, and in leading the dead to righteousness, Ezra shifts the Mists ever closer toward goodness and beauty.

Additionally, Mitakians believe that in order to become a proper soldier for Ezra in the next world, each person must work to become a model ghost when they die, pursuing a sort of asceticism. The goal of these practices is to abandon deep attachments that might lead to darker impulses, so that the journey to the afterlife may be without anger, sorrow, loss, resentment, ambition, or a sense of incompleteness. A newly deceased soul, by their view, should enter the afterlife radiating with purpose, compassion, and righteousness, ready to abandon all causes but aiding Ezra in her ageless war.

Dread Possibility

While the work of the Mitakians is largely similar to the work of exorcists, white arcanists, and anchorites, the fear that outsiders sometimes have for Mitakian perspectives is not wholly without merit. In Corvia, a Mitakian cleric named Augustus Ilminis believes that the best way to help Ezra win her war in the Gray Realm is to break the veil between worlds, allowing Ezra to tap into the faith of all of her followers, living and dead. The power this would make available to her, he reasons, would allow her to end all evil in both realms. To this end, he has been collecting mystical relics for many years as well as collecting people with the skills he needs to accomplish his goal.

His plan is simple, but likely to cause massive catastrophe. By burying specially prepared items, he plans to create temporary leylines in order to create a kind of necromantic storm. Knowing that any leylines constructed this way would be brittle, Ilminis plans to activate them only on Darkest Night, when the Gray Realm is closest to ours, and even destroyed sigils might still contain some power to guide the energies he needs. To fuel this engine, he intends to use the massive necromantic energies that power Necropolis itself.

When the time is right, Ilminis will begin channeling energy from Necropolis into the many miles of crystals he and his followers have been secretly burying in geometric configurations around the city. Once his network of stones has sufficient power, Ilminis will release a surge of necromantic energy powerful enough to turn Necropolis inside out. What happens next is anyone's guess. The necromantic bubble around Necropolis might simply pop like a balloon, shattering the veil between the worlds throughout the entire Core. Bits of Necropolis might collapse, or the energy field around the city might expand greatly. The energies released might taint every domain in the core with necromancy. Ilminis might create a necromantic storm in the Gray Realm that never ends, and from time to time bleeds over into the land of the living. Regardless of the specific outcome, Ilminis must never be allowed to complete his ritual. His attempt to save this world would almost certainly doom it.

The Unparalleled Light

Faction: The Unparalleled Light
(although they are less a faction than a group of like-minded individuals of various sects of the Church of Ezra)

Nicknames: *Lighters, Iucundites* (derogatory), *Renegades* (for Zealots or former Zealots)

Creed: The revelations of Ezra to each sect must all be understood as part of the same revelation. Where the sects appear to disagree, their message has been misunderstood. The faithful should harmonize these understandings, using Ezra's mercy, compassion, integrity, and concern for the downtrodden as a compass to navigate any conflicts in the teachings thereof. Ezra will be returning soon, not in a time of unparalled darkness, but in a time of unparalled light.

Rituals and Practices: Discussing and working to harmonize the different perspectives and revelations of Ezra.

Status: Heresy (among the Zealots), Heterodoxy (among the Home Faith, Erudites, and Pure Hearts)

Disagreement Among the Sects

Purportedly a faction of heretics that seek to overthrow the Darkonese sect, in truth there is no group that calls itself by this name. Those the Zealots would accuse of being members are generally members of any sect of the Church of Ezra who have read and found some level of agreement with a book by Darkonese author Amelia Iucunda by the title “the Unparalleled Light.”

The book has been deemed a heretical text by the Zealots of Nevuchar Springs. Iucunda has likewise also been pronounced a heretic, and was ultimately forced to flee Darkon after an extended harrassment campaign. While heresies often form around groups of worshippers or cults of personality, there is no particular religious movement or group corresponding to this heresy. Zealots act like "the Unparalleled Light" is a religious sect lead by Iucunda, but nothing could be further from the truth. To the Zealots, those who espouse the views of the book are heretics and they assume the heretics must be working together.

The situation among the other sects is more complicated. Bastion Raines has the authority to declare what is and is not appropriate belief among the members of his own sect, and neither the Praesidius nor the other Bastions are inclined to dispute Raines' proclamations regarding the Darkonese sect. However, while the others might have some minor gripes with the book, they don't view its content as especially different from things their own members have privately said, contemplated, or asked about. Thus, the other sects are mild in their condemnation of the work, if they condemn it at all, but they are not particularly eager to defend it.

Raised culturally religious, Iucunda had been a faithful, if detached, member of the Eternal Order. After the events of the Requiem, however, Iucunda began to doubt the character and efficacy of the state religion. While writing another book, “the Lost History of the Mistlands”, Iucunda took a lengthy sabbatical in Nevuchar Springs to avoid distractions from her writing. While there, she quickly became enraptured by the dedication and zeal of Bastion Raines and his Zealots.

She quickly found herself attending services, and before she knew it, she was a full-fledged member of the nascent Darkonese sect, fully devoted to the cause and her fellow Zealots. She has even stated in recent years that despite all of the hostility that she has received, she still holds Bastion Raines and many of his closest supporters in the highest regard, and she prays daily that Ezra will find a way to heal the rift between their differing perspectives.

As described in the foreword of “the Unparalleled Light,” Iucunda had difficulty keeping up with deadlines on "Schism and Revelation," a book about the First Schism. This was largely due to her strong disagreements with Felix Wachter, whose book and letters she used as a source. When it seemed like she would be unable to complete the work, she reached out to the Chapel of Pure Hearts in desparation, begging them to help a humble Zealot understand how Wachter could view monsters as anything other

than the hostile forces of the Legions of the Night.

Bastion Otrava personally responded to the inquiry, sharing a number of Wachter's private letters, including several that Iucunda had no knowledge of. Otrava also provided several drafts of sermons that Wachter gave at various times, and relayed some private accounting of Wachter's words and deeds that had moved her, despite her hard heart at the time. Iucunda has stated that she initially found Otrava's reply to be pure hogwash, and only re-read it out of desperation. However, when she revisited the work, she was surprised to find the same light in Bastion Wachter's words that she had witnessed in Bastion Raines. In that moment, she began to wonder how Bastion Wachter and Bastion Raines could both speak for Ezra, yet end up in such different places.

Ultimately this line of thinking led her to pen “the Unparalleled Light.” She researched all the writings she could find by each of the Bastions and Praesidii, and worked diligently to create a common theological and moral framework for all sects of the Church of Ezra. In her mind, the sects all have a specialized role to play in the fight against darkness, but they are also minor variations on the same message. This attempt to shift perspectives led her to conclude that Bastion Raines had slightly misinterpreted his vision of the Time of Unparalleled Darkness, a fact that has greatly annoyed the Zealots.

“The Unparalleled Light” claims that Bastion Raines' visions are genuine, but his interpretation of them is incomplete. It argues that the battle against the Legions of the Night that Raines foresaw is less a physical battle than a spiritual one. While the book does not deny a physical battle like the ones the Zealots prepare for, it argues that the true battle is not physical at all. Thus, by focusing as hard as they do on the physical battle, the Zealots risk losing the true fight.

The so-called Time of Unparalleled Darkness, Iucunda argues, will begin in darkness, but shall ultimately be a time of unparalleled light, where Ezra's power will be unveiled to the world. In that battle, the weapons and battle-plans of the Zealots will be of great import, but Ezra's light will shine through the members of the other sects as well. Purity, compassion, and insight will be the weapons of the other sects, giving metaphysical might by Ezra's revelation. Those that trust in their weapons alone will succumb to the darkness, but those who channel Ezra's light and love will *become* weapons. It is purity, Iucunda argues, not violence that will win the war to come.

After leaving Darkon as a heretic, Iucunda sought admission to the Home Faith. While the Great Cathedral never denied her application, it was plagued with continual delays. Local Ezrans were wary about dealing with someone who had been branded a heretic in one sect and was now quietly being rejected by another. Alienated from the Borcan faithful and believing the Home Faith was deliberately delaying her application, Iucunda then moved to Dementlieu.

She was ultimately accepted among the Erudites, but was strongly advised to show deference to church hierarchy in any further examinations of church doctrine. She has said that this admonishment was wholly unnecessary, as she has no desire to trouble church leadership any further, and she hopes this controversy will fade in time. She remains disappointed that the Zealots have not lifted the charge of heresy, but is pleased to have joined a sect interested in introspection and mysticism.

Views Among the Sects

- **Zealots**: Heresy. The text is heretical among the Zealots, and those who espouse its views are excommunicated. They are often further shamed or shunned if they continue to draw the attention of the Zealots. While none have been officially condemned to death for these views, more than one adherent has been found dead under suspicious circumstances after preaching this message in earshot of the Zealots. For his part, Bastion Raines has condemned these killings.

- **The Home Faith:** Disfavored Heterodoxy. Despite never officially denouncing the book, “the Unparalleled Light” is disfavored among

the Home Faith, which dislikes the book challenging a Bastion's interpretation of his own visions. While many among the Home Faith might agree with Iucunda's interpretation of the visions, the sect's hierarchy is uncomfortable with such a direct challenge to a Bastion's authority. Given that the book goes out of its way to acknowledge Bastion Raines' authority as an prophet of Ezra and the leader of the Zealots – which Iucunda has repeatedly reaffirmed after the fact – it is unclear what kind of criticism toward a Bastion's view of his own sect would be acceptable to them.

To be clear, the Home Faith is not wholly opposed to Iucunda's commentary or criticism, it simply lacks the political and theological framework it would need to decide on an appropriate response. It is rumored that Praesidius Postoya personally intervened to delay Iucunda's application to join the Home Faith. Purportedly, Postoya was reluctant to officially deny Iucunda's application, but the church leaders could never agree on a path foward. Whether Postoya wanted to quietly kill the application or hoped Iucunda would eventually be admitted has never been made clear. Some Erudite officials believe that their sect was attempting to appease Postoya when they encouraged Iucunda to be more respectful of church hierarchy in the future.

- **Erudites**: Contemplative Heterodoxy. The Erudites are less concerned about Iucunda's questions regarding Bastion Raines' visions. While they might have preferred Iucunda to phrase the question more diplomatically, questioning established doctrine is a important part of the Dementlieu sect's history. The Erudites are concerned with peaceful contemplation, however, and encourage fans of the book to enjoy and discuss the work in a way that is respectful to other sects and does not cause unnecessary conflict.

- **The Pure Hearts**: Various. Among the Pure Hearts, the Unparalleled Light is considered a contemplative or variant heterodoxy, if it is considered heterodoxy at all. The difference in perspectives between the Mordentish and Darkonese sects leaves many members to conclude that there's something incomplete in the Zealots' revelation. Since the sect's founding Bastion still lives, it is also commonly assumed among Pure Hearts that Raines will receive more revelations from Ezra in time.

  If Iucunda had been a Pure Heart rather than a Zealot when she published “the Unparalleled Light”, it's unlikely she would have suffered any backlash at all. Many Mordentish church officials apparently wrote to Iucunda, encouraging her to seek admission among their sect. Given Iucunda's stated admiration for the Mordentish branch, her ultimate choice of sect might have as much to do with geographic concerns as religious ones.

Dread Possiblity

Iocunda is right, in a way. The Nevuchar Springs interpretation of Bastion Raines' vision is taking the sect to an increasingly dark place that seems to run against the values that Ezra is commonly understood to espouse. As things stand, many have questioned Bastion Raines' sanity. However, while Raines is a fanatic, his fanaticism is guided and tempered by vision. While he may resort to drastic measures, he does so in service of that vision. However, Raines' ability to generate fear in his congregation is much greater than his ability to get his congregation to see that vision. The fear he drums up generates more fanatics, but many of these fanatics are guided by hatred, cruelty, revenge, lust for power, and narcissism.

Bastion Raines faces a terrible predicament. He can see what is happening in his sect, yet he believes he needs an army for the Time of Unparalleled Darkness. The Zealots are currently growing quickly. If Raines cracks down on the darker elements, he risks fragmenting the sect into irrelevance, leaving Ezra without an army in the dark days to come. If he allows the cancer to fester, he risks growing a faction that ultimately turns against his goddess and joins the Legions of the Night he so desperately wishes to defeat.

Bastion Raines has been trying to replace this growing darkness with a focus on the mission, but has had limited luck. Ironically, Raines has has tried to acclimate his sect to the views of other sects as Iucunda appears to suggest. However, many view the Erudites as useless sophistry and the Home Faith as pointless pageantry. Worse, many who most need the message of the Pure Hearts hate the Mordentish sect and view them as heretics.

Massive ethereal storm systems have begun to manifest in Darkon. At their largest, they exceed the entirety of Nevuchar Springs. They flicker in and out of existence based on the movements of Zealots and nearby monsters in Darkon. They function as rank 3 sinkholes of evil, tied to hatred and fear. These storms appear near Zealots, especially when they gather with dark intent. When they perceive this storm at all, Zealots attribute the effects to the evils of monsters, or occasionally to visions from Ezra. Where monsters appear or Zealots embrace hatred and fear, this sinkhole raises to rank 4. Where both occur, rank 5.

These storms are fueled by the fear and hatred that Zealots have for the Legions of Darkness, and for the fear and hatred felt by those the Zealots have captured and tortured. For monsters and Zealots who lack dedication to Ezra's mercy or compassion, the modifiers are doubled. Zealots who believe in Ezra's mercy and compassion, like Bastion Raines, are affected as normal. Others are unaffected by these storms. The storms are perceived as though they were sinkholes of evil of 3 ranks lower by the latter.

Heteropraxy and the Sects

These variant practices are generally disliked by Ezran officials, who view them as superstition at best, or demonstrations of honor to old, false gods at worst. However, these practices are so ubiquitous that Ezran authorities have had little ability to affect them. In some cases, they have tried to create versions of these practices more in line with Ezran doctrine, but have had limited success in getting them adopted by the public. Some examples of these practices observed by members of each sect include:

The Home Faith

The Twilight Hunt: Where it is celebrated, the Twilight Hunt begins before dawn on the summer solstice. Hunting parties band together to hunt wolves or bears, although deer are commonly used as a substitute. The hunt ends when the sun rises. It is considered bad form to kill anything before the sun rises, or to kill animals that have not been pursued before the sun rises. This leads to many cases of hunters hounding wounded animals for lengthy periods of time, which has caused the practice to be considered cruel by many, and it is often exhausting

for the participants as well. Some communities have adopted variant rules to address these issues.

The Rebirth: Many Borcans practice a strange tradition where on certain days, they avoid lighting any new fires, instead using a fire from the previous day to start a new one. This ceremony is viewed as a rebirth, as the old flame is used to kindle a new one. This practice is common following dark or rainy days, and is most commonly observed on the first day of the month, although there are many regional variants. The lighting of these fires is often accompanied by words of honor, or perhaps worship, for the sun, which annoys Ezran authorities.

The Pure Hearts

Lost Coins: There is a widespread Mordentish custom still observed among the Pure Hearts involving discarding coins to honor, appease, or uplift the dead. Coins are thrown into the ocean, lakes, or into other unrecoverable locations after naming a deceased individual and offering a short prayer. Most individuals first deface the coin with a crude "D." Those with the necessary skills sometimes inscribe the name of the deceased. Others who find these defaced coins typically regard them as cursed and belonging to the dead. What this ritual is supposed to accomplish depends on the local community, the prayer uttered, and the value of the coin. Helping the dead rest, honoring them, freeing them from their burdens, and helping them pass on are all common examples, but many utilize this practice simply to send messages to those who have passed on.

Seven Candles: Although this practice has fallen out of fashion among most Pure Hearts, the dead are often consulted for various purposes among the Mordentish. The Seven Candles ritual begins by lighting six small candles and keeping them lit for three days and offering a prayer to the dead. Each candle has wax of a different color, and at the end of the three days, a larger, white candle is added, which is then ritually surrounded by the other candles. This candle melts the other candles' wax as well as adding its own. It is left to burn overnight, and in the morning, the wax that has dripped onto the floor below is analyzed as a message from the dead.

The Erudites

Secret Gatherings: While there is no established time or schedule for these gatherings, Dementlieu has a number of ritualized masquerade balls that they simply call "secret gatherings." These are typically held in public spaces, and it is considered bad luck to be recognized at one. It is likewise considered rude to talk about what happened at a secret gathering or to speculate who was involved. While this taboo specifically does not protect criminals, critics among the church and elsewhere claim that the anonymity of these parties leads to all sorts of debauchery and should thus be avoided. While some do use these gatherings as an excuse for excess, it seems more likely that the Church of Ezra objects more to the strangely ritualistic nature of the proceedings, which include ritual dancing and religious-sounding liturgical repetition that is nevertheless from no known faith tradition.

The Week of Mercy: Similar to Good Trollings Day in Mordent. In the summer, Erudites often throw back caught fish and release trapped animals. Many animals released this way are specifically caught for the purpose of releasing them. After this, they observe a weeklong fast from all meats. While the Erudites have no objection to this practice, the rhetoric that surrounds the Week of Mercy often has deeply animistic connotations that the sect tries to discourage.

The Zealots

Spirits of the Home: A holdover from the Eternal Order and older traditions, many Darkonians believe that their homes are inhabited by spirits that must be appeased with minor offerings, or else ill fortune will befall the home. It seems that there are nearly as many variations of this tradition as there are Darkonese homes.

Blood Wine: An additional holdover from practices involving the departed, people in Darkon often pour out blood red wine in an offering to the dead. An older tradition used blood, although this is generally discouraged. It is also especially disliked by the Nevuchar Springs sect. Wine is always poured onto ground that can absorb it, and a small prayer is spoken to the departed. In some areas and among

some communities, including the area around Nevuchar Springs, this practice can become incredibly complicated, involving lengthy recitations and attempts to mark the ground with strange patterns.

The Church of the Lawgiver

On the whole, the Church of the Lawgiver tolerates little variation in doctrine among its members or its clergy. Law comes from the Lawgiver, as transmitted through church hierarchy. Any action or thought against this divine mandate is the work of Mytteri ("Rebellion," the source of all evil in church theology). Additionally, due to the church's obsession with maintaining their version of the social order at all costs, it is prone to attacking even the mildest appearance of variation in doctrine or official church practice.

In Nova Vaasa, the Church of the Lawgiver rules with an iron fist and happily uses charges of heresy to coerce behavior. As a religious matter, the church pursues a political and social order, and thus church officials have no qualms about punishing political or social views or activities as heresy, which the church often calls "treason." Individuals have been imprisoned or executed by the Iron Faith for such reasons as:

- *Translating the words of the Lawgiver into Balok*
- *Opposing the institution of slavery*
- *Encouraging others to help the poor*
- *Preaching the message of the Lawgiver as a layperson*
- *Questioning the structural foundation of a building the church was using*
- *Producing a painting of an aerkebiskop that was deemed unflattering*

Yet it seems that for every time the Iron Faith has used a heavy hand in resolving what appears to outsiders to be a minor issue, there is a case of the church showing leniency, especially when the individual in question is rich or powerful. This has lead some Ezrans to accuse the Iron Faith of hypocrisy. The church had long persecuted practitioners of arcane magic, yet it turned a blind eye to Hazlik. It continued this willful blindness even when Hazlik made arcane magic legal throughout Hazlan, and when he built a school for arcane magic.

These irregularities don't seem especially unusual to members of the Iron Faith, but can be hard for outsiders to understand. Ultimately, every action the Church of the Lawgiver takes is undertaken to increase the church's political power. The church is much less concerned with theological or philosophical purity than with maintaining a social order with itself at the top. If it were to oppose Hazlik, the church might find itself persecuted in Hazlan, which would weaken its power there. As a result, Hazlani *kontors* tie themselves into knots trying to condemn arcane magic without attacking Hazlik. Arcane magic becomes a tool for Mytteri that corrupts all but the strongest, or arcane magic is evil, except perhaps when employed as a tool for the state. Or perhaps the *kontor* of a local congregation simply declines to mention it.

This politically-minded thinking affects the Iron Faith even to the lowest levels. A quiet individual with heretical opinions, who speaks of them only in private and with absolute deference to the hierarchy of the Iron Faith, might find themselves gently scolded, while an individual who makes the exact same statement in public might be summarily executed. The Iron Faith is most hostile to beliefs when those beliefs are politically inconvenient. Ultimately, at every level, the Iron Faith expects to be able to command the beliefs of its congregants. Failing that, it expects the congregants to keep their heresy to themselves. When accused heretics manage to avoid the worst punishments, it is generally because they either fully submit to church authority, or because the arguments they use to defend themselves are politically expedient to the church.

This political focus distresses many of the Iron Faith's clergy, who are wise enough to keep their displeasure to themselves. While many of the clergy are as self-serving as the church itself, there are many who believe the church's fixation on political power causes it to twist the words of the Lawgiver into their most tyrannical and unforgiving forms. Many *kontors* of the Iron Faith believe that maintaining order necessitates not only correcting one's lessers, but caring for their well-being as well. These individuals work to better their local communities and the individuals therein, and not merely to keep them bound to the often cruel whims of chuch and state. While they are deserving of honor, I regret not being able to name them here, lest the Iron Faith send its inquisitors after them.

Regional Variation

The Church of the Lawgiver rules with an iron fist in Nova Vaasa. Dissent of any kind is fervently squelched. In Hazlan, its status is more complicated. The Hazlani officials that handle day-to-day governance often find the Iron Faith useful as a tool for social control, if nothing else. While the Hazlani branch lacks the total control that the Nova Vaasa church maintains, the Hazlani church wields its influence effectively. In areas where the Hazlani church is deeply entrenched, it is capable of wielding nearly as much power as it would in Nova Vaasa. In other areas, Iron Faith clergy have to call in favors to deal with heretics. The church is careful not to bring charges it can't enforce, but is creative about finding alternative means of discouraging heresy if necessary.

In Hazlan the *Jernspørgsmålers* and *Didakti* have less sway, however. The *Didakti* ("Teachers") infiltrate congregations, concealing their identity. They ask probing, dangerous, or heretical questions of unsuspecting congregants, and gather intelligence. The *Jernspørgsmålers* ("Iron Inquisitors") are the true inquisitors, seeking out and destroying heretics. They utilize information provided by the *Didakti* in their investigations. Both groups have fewer numbers in Hazlan, and the Iron Inquisitors have less authority. Given that followers of the Iron Faith typically learn to keep their beliefs to themselves, the Church of the Lawgiver is much less effective in detecting and stamping out heresy in Hazlan. If the Iron Faith ever has a true schism, it will likely appear in Hazlan.

The Kriger Heresy

Faction: Krigers

Nickname: *Serpents*

Creed: Since the Lawgiver is the source of the authority possessed by religious and political officials, those who cannot hold their positions do not have the Lawgiver's blessing. Weak leaders are agents of Mytteri. When the Lawgiver tasks believers with correcting their lessers, he also means that they should throw off ineffectual leaders. Only in purging these weak officials may the true order of the Lawgiver be made manifest in this world.

Rituals and practices: Discreetly observing leaders for signs of weakness and undermining those who show them. Ritual competition is used to determine who should lead local groups of Krigers. Ritualistic handling of venomous serpents and subjecting oneself to venom.

Text: *The Hidden Disease*

Status: Heresy (punishable by death)

The Disease

In the city of Liara in 741, an anonymous note appeared on a local message board. Titled "the Disease," it excoriated a local drunk by contrasting details of his life with quotations of Iron Faith teachings. It represented the drunk as part of a disease infecting society. The letter was written in the fanciful script of the well-educated or well-to-do, but none in the city recognized the handwriting. Another note appeared the next month, and so on, for 13 total letters. Each letter followed the same pattern as the first. Posted like a periodical, each was titled "The Disease." Each mercilessly criticized an individual using the teachings of the Iron Faith. In general, the issues scolded those who occupied a low position in society. A slave was scolded for not being subservient enough. A poor elf from Darkon received scathing criticism for marrying a human. A local

woman was accused of witchcraft.

There were two exceptions, however. A church official received a blistering accusation of embezzlement, featuring a number of specific claims. A local *kontor* was brutally castigated for conducting services while intoxicated. These last two charges were taken down after a delay of several days. Political forces thought the letters might originate from the local church. Local church leaders thought they might be the work of the *Didakti* or the *Jernspørgsmålers*. No small number of both groups thought they might be supernatural in origin, due to the urban legends that had formed around them by that time.

Those 13 letters faded into rumor and legend, known only as "The Disease." Then, in 753, exactly 13 years after the posting of the last letter, another letter appeared. This one was titled "The Hidden Disease." The letters followed the same format and its handwriting appeared identical to those who had seen the originals. The letter charged the local *kontor* of violating his office for personal gain, of undermining the local order with his crimes, and worst of all in the eyes of the writer, of being feckless and weak. Additionally, where the original copies of The Disease had limited themselves to criticism, this new letter contained a call for action. It claimed that the *kontor* had lost the authority granted him by the Lawgiver, and it was the duty of every follower of the Iron Faith to overthrow him as a violation of the sacred order.

Each following issue of the Hidden Disease focused on attacking officials the writer considered weak and ineffective. Each advocated for the overthrow of said leader in what it argued was an act of faith. A guard was ordered by the local clergy to remove the first issue of the Hidden Disease, but he found a new copy posted mere minutes later. After he removed the issue a third time, he was found dead. The letter was found reposted on the message board shortly after.

After 13 more issues, the Hidden Disease also went silent. Inspired by these letters, a local man named Lasse Ravnsen gathered a group of likeminded individuals. Together this group produced a small book, also called “The Hidden Disease.” It took the theological concepts of the letters and attempted to develop a more general theology from them, discarding the specifics of the individuals they had condemned. The book is officially credited to Ravnsen, although he has repeatedly stated that it was a group effort, and that most of the book was written by those who wish to remain anonymous. Ravnsen has been quoted as saying that he could not remember the letters in their entirety, but that any deviations made in his text were entirely accidental.

The group, which calls itself the Krigers, quietly undermined religious and secular authorities in multiple cities in Nova Vaasa before the Iron Faith finally caught up. Ravnsen and each of the Krigers with him were summarily executed. Ravnsen's head is stored in the Black Citadel-Fane in Kantora as a testament to the fate of the enemies of the Iron Faith. Nevertheless, the Krigers did not die out. To this day, Krigers claim that Lasse Ravnsen walks among them, despite the records of the Iron Faith that record him having been executed no less than four separate times.

To the *Himmelsk Naeve* and the *Paves*, the Krigers represent an existential threat to the church's temporal authority. While the heads of the Church of the Lawgiver seem to view their primary duty as remaining in power no matter what, the Krigers believe that the Lawgiver wishes to overthrow leaders seen as ineffective. Worse, the theology presented by the Krigers is one that is very digestible to members of the Iron Faith. While Anarchy is a sin, strengthening the social order is one of the most sacred duties handed down by the Lawgiver. If the philosophy of the Krigers catches on, the endless masses of the faithful might rebel against the church hierarchy.

Dread Possibility

When the Lawgiver went silent during the Great Upheaval, *Biskop* Sigurd Anker had a crisis of faith. When he looked around for answers, he concluded that iniquity infected the social order that the Lawgiver had passed down. It seemed that no level of religious or secular power was free from this corruption. He came to resent the self-serving nature of the clergy, believing that political power was secondary to religious truth. Anker believed that proper order required leaders who were both competent and benevolent. When the Lawgiver apparently returned, *Biskop* Anker accepted the explanation that the Lawgiver has gone silent to defend the world from ruin, as he was instructed. However, he doubted whether the Lawgiver would have had to abandon the Iron Faith if it truly followed his will.

Having worked on illuminated manuscripts in the past, *Biskop* Anker had learned to imitate other styles of writing, even highly distinctive ones. He wrote “The Disease” to attempt to address some of society's wrongs, but discontinued it out of fear of the church's response. When a small riot briefly swept the city a year later, *Biskop* Anker was found among the deceased. Now a ghost, Anker waited for the Lawgiver to claim his spirit. When that never happened, Anker became even more convinced that the iniquity infecting society weakened the Lawgiver, and that the disease must be purged from the top. He wrote the letters known as “the Hidden Disease” as a ghost. When Ravnsen attempted to unite the philosophy of those letters into a single book, it was *Biskop* Anker that dictated much of the text. Anker is quite skilled at subtly using his ghostly powers. He can possess individuals without exerting control over them, manipulating their thoughts. He can even give individuals religious experiences and dreams this way.

Iron Faith records regarding Ravnsen's first execution are wholly accurate. By the time Ravnsen died, however, *Biskop* Anker knew enough to impersonate him with near-flawless precision. When he needs to, Anker can overcome the minds of susceptible individuals and simply act as Ravnsen. On rare occasions, he's simply manifested in Ravnsen's form, performing apparent miracles.

Anker believes that his crusade will lead to better leaders, who will improve society for every person involved. However, although his motives are ostensibly good, he views this world as a prison he desperately wishes to escape. While he has mostly used a light hand in finding like-minded people to join his crusade, he has gotten more aggressive in his attacks against weak leaders since his death, and seems to grow even more aggressive over time. He believes the only way to return his soul to the Lawgiver is to fix society. However, aside from being his unfinished business, the state of society has nothing to do with Anker's state as a ghost. As his desperation continues to build, it seems likely that his ruthlessness will eventually exceed his benevolence.

The Jurist Heresy

My laws have made order in the hearts of men. Chaos is cast down in every corner of the kingdom.
My judges[1] interpret[2] my precepts for the high and the low, shaping[3] my principles into iron decree.
- A translation of *The Truth of Iron* 9:31, using the Jurist understanding.

[1] "Officers" in the orthodox interpretation
[2] "Explain" in the orthodox interpretation
[3] "Casting" in the orthodox interpretation

Faction: Jurists

Nickname: *Interpreters, The Disobedient* (derogatory)

Creed: The Church of the Lawgiver misreads the Truth of Iron and Fetters of Bronze to amass power to itself. The Laws handed down by the Lawgiver were principles that were interpreted by local judges when applied to the local populace, leading to maximum social order. By perverting the nature of the Lawgiver's guidance, the church both disobeys the Lawgiver and corrupts society. The true Law can only be revealed by tailoring the Lawgiver's precepts to local customs, situations, and circumstances.

Text: The Jurists use the same texts as the Iron Faith, although their legal preferences lead them to favor the Truth of Iron and Fetters of Bronze.

Rituals and practices: Jurists place a high emphasis on study and analysis of the Law as passed down by the Lawgiver. In their local communities, they appoint judges to interpret the law for their local group, and even hold hearings similar to both secular and religious legal hearings.

Status: Heresy (punishable by death)

Jurisprudence

The Jurists are a fascinating movement within the Iron Faith. The church declared Jurism a heresy in 687 BC. Yet despite executing thousands of jurists, the movement quietly persists. While Jurists venerate Sainted Prince Gorkyn and his creation of the position of *Himmelsk Naeve*, they believe that church leaders abused the hierarchy that Gorkyn created in order to consolidate power amongst themselves, rather than keep to the Lawgiver's will.

The source of the heresy is the Old Vaasi word "*dómari*." The Iron Faith states that this word can mean "judge", "official", "chieftain", and so on. How the Iron Faith interprets which meaning it uses in which context is not completely clear to me, but they appear to favor the meaning of "official" in nearly every case, only interpreting the word to mean "judge" in contexts where a courtroom is specifically mentioned. Jurists assert that "*dómari*" always meant judge.

My knowledge of Old Vaasi is not suitable to give a definitive answer on the subject, but both readings seem potentially plausible to me. While I can't find any unambiguous cases where "*dómari*" means anything but judge, "*dómr*" can mean either judgement or fame. It seems plausible to me that "*dómari*" could refer to an official of high repute, which is consistent with orthodox readings.

The interpretation of the word "*dómari*" affects how one sees nearby words. If a "*dómari*" is a judge, then "*tolka*" likely refers to legal interpretation as jurists attest. If it refers to a ruling official, it could instead refer to a legal explanation, as the orthodox position states. It could also potentially refer to translating the law into a local language, which is an interpretation that might very well distress both groups.

These are some of the simpler discrepancies. In some cases, an Old Vaasi word is completely obscure. One tradition might dictate one meaning while a second necessitates the other. If I were to choose between the orthodox and the jurist readings, I would slightly favor the jurist position. However, this seems as likely a result of my own personal biases as true academic rigor.

Jurists claim the officials of the church have selected their reading to give themselves power, while church officials claim that jurists have chosen theirs so that they may rebel against church authority while giving lip-service to the Lawgiver. While I have little doubt in my mind that some officials are guilty of the jurist charge and some jurists are motivated by rebellion, as the Iron Faith claims, this dispute cannot be so easily explained. I have read the writings of several jurists, and spoken to a few in secret. I have likewise read the writings of orthodox church members, and spoken to quite a few about this topic. As best I can tell, both factions seem dedicated to following the Lawgiver's will, and both see their reading as the clear and obvious one.

Ultimately, jurists believe that the strict hierarchy of the Iron Faith is a perversion of the Lawgiver's will. They believe that the officials of the Iron Faith have conflated High Laws and Low Laws to give the church more authority than the Lawgiver intended. In their view, local laws for a local community are considered Low Laws, which should be zealously enforced to the letter. Laws of the political sovereign or the *Himmelsk Naeve* are High Laws, which are general precepts that should be interpreted in accordance with the facts, customs, and general situation of the local community.

For example, the prohibition against arcane magic is less of a problem for Hazlani jurists than orthodox clergy. To jurists, the prohibition is a principle that should be followed, but only in accordance with the local community and custom. They would assemble a court, debate various positions, and seek the solution that most benefits the order of the local community. They might decide to politely discourage arcane magic, or to focus on reducing the harm arcane magic might do to a community, or to an individual. While this isn't especially different from what orthodox church officials would do in practice, the jurists view this reinterpretation of higher law as both normal and proper. Orthodox members of the Iron Faith tolerate arcane magic because they feel they have no other option. They go against their beliefs because they are forced to do so. Jurists would adopt this same approach even if they weren't forced, if it seemed the best way to maintain the social order.

As perhaps the oldest continual heresy of the Iron Faith, the jurists have adopted many practices to avoid detection. To avoid the attention of the *Didakti* and *Jernspørgsmålers*, jurists take great care in how they present themselves to the church. Jurists largely keep their beliefs to themselves. When they do form communities, it generally follows lines of family or lifelong friendship. Jurists may attempt to recruit others into their cause, but must always address the possibility that they are speaking with *Didakti*. As such, they generally engage potential recruits in seemingly-orthodox legal discussions. Once an individual has been assessed this way by many different jurists, and after a substantial amount of time, the jurists vote on the inclusion of the member, which must be unanimous. If any jurist has any doubt, the group assumes the potential member is one of the *Didakti*.

The most common advice given to new jurists is "play dumb." The Iron Faith is a massive bureacracy that has many incompetent members. The church lacks the capability to send inquisitors after everyone that might seem useless. If a jurist needs to ask a heretical question, they're told to act ignorant and make the question seem innocuous. If they are engaged by someone they think might be a *Didakti*, they are told to act open, curious, and less informed than they are. Ignorance is not heresy in the Iron Faith.

If a local *kontor* wants to interpret a High Law of the church to fit with local circumstances, they're told to creatively misinterpret the law, drag their feet, or to continually ask questions to delay implementation. The Iron Faith has considerable ability to destroy heretics, but very little skill with handling inefficiency or incompetence.

As jurism sometimes arises simply by reading the Iron Faith's holy text, it is a difficult heresy to contain. Several fanes have discouraged reading the Truth of Iron and the Fetters of Bronze without church leaders present to explain things, although this practice seems ineffective at dealing with jurism. It's difficult to estimate the number of jurists in the church, but it seems likely that at least 5% of all the Lawgiver's faithful are jurists at heart, whether or not they are

in correspondence with other jurists. In Hazlan, jurism is on the rise, in part due to low numbers of *Didakti* and *Jernspørgsmålers*. Jurists would be a powerful tool for the Iron Faith if church leadership could make its peace with them.

Dread Possibility

Pave Stavroz Vatsisk is no heretic, but neither is he a fool. *Himmelsk Naeve* Pieter Jergaar has ordered him to adopt a hardline stance against all arcane magic in Hazlan, despite Hazlik's recent legalization and embrace thereof. Antagonizing Hazlik could easily end the Church of the Lawgiver in Hazlan, not to mention Vatsisk's own life. If Vatsisk refuses Jergaar's order, he rebels against the Lawgiver and destabilizes the Hazlani church.

Not long after the order, *Pave* Vatsisk and *Aerkebiskop* Verzin Lols interrogated an accused jurist named Klara Beck. Moved to scorn against the jurist's perceived arrogance regarding the Law, *Pave* Vatsisk decided to pose an impossible question. What would the jurist recommend if the *Himmelsk Naeve* ordered the entire Hazlani church to openly oppose all forms of arcane magic. The jurist considered the question for less than two minutes, then replied "If you read the Law correctly, there is no conflict." She then explained that as High Law, Jergaar's order is not directly binding. The *Pave* should simply provide a clarification on arcane magic, directing the *Aerkebiskops* to encourage avoidance of arcane magic without destabilizing the local order.

Aerkebiskop Lols and *Pave* Vatsisk both attempted to argue that Beck's position was heretical, but found her to be a skilled debater. Her execution was ordered several months ago, but each week it gets postponed by another week.

If *Pave* Vatsisk opposes Hazlik, the Church of the Lawgiver in Hazlan will end, one way or another. If he opposes the *Himmelsk Naeve*, he will cause a schism and be labeled a heretic. The Nova Vaasan sect might send forces to attack Hazlani churches. Many Hazlani faithful will side with Jergaar, further damaging the Hazlani church. While their conversations on the subject have been tepid, both *Pave* Vatsisk and *Aerkebiskop* Lols wonder why the Lawgiver would give them a choice where every option damages the church. Beck's words haunt both their minds. If she is wrong, why does her perspective seem like the only way forward? On the other hand, could a jurist Church of the Lawgiver even function? Would jurism not destroy church hierarchy?

If *Pave* Vatsisk adopts the jurist interpretation, he will be siding with a known heresy, but can avoid openly defying the *Himmelsk Naeve*. While this will not stop Jergaar from retaliating, it might limit the forces he can draw upon in Nova Vaasa, and it will cause vastly less strife and confusion among the Hazlani faithful than simply splitting from the Nova Vaasan church. The *Jernspørgsmålers* and other orders answer to both the *Pave* and the *Himmelsk Naeve*. If *Pave* Vatsisk defies Jergaar, he will force them into Jergaar's service. If he can avoid the conflict with Jergaar, perhaps enough Hazlani order-members will remain loyal to Vatsisk that he can avoid an open fight with the church. Additionally, the number of secret jurists and jurist-sympathizers in the Hazlani church will make it easier to maintain stability among the faithful.

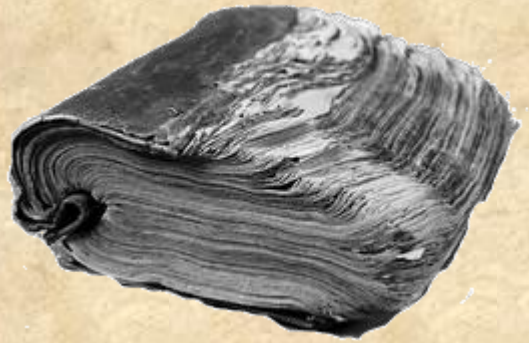
Jergaar is fully aware of the impossible situation he has put *Pave* Vatsisk in, however. Jergaar wants to unite the church and government of Nova Vaasa into one, ruled by the position of *Himmelsk Naeve*. He hopes to either solidify this power under himself, or to force Prince Othmar to accept the position. To do this, he needs the Hazlani church to fall, either to Hazlik or to apostasy. This will galvanize the faithful of Nova Vaasa enough to demand change. Therefore he must force *Pave* Vatsisk to choose between fighting the Nova Vaasan church or fighting Hazlik. The possibility of *Pave* Vatsisk adopting a jurist perspective to avoid the conflict has not occurred to him, however. If Vatsisk were to pull off such a maneuver, Jergaar would go to any lengths to drum up a fight with the Hazlani church.

Heteropraxy in the Iron Faith

The Church of the Lawgiver simply ignores most variant practices. If a practice leads to an action the Iron Faith considers heretical, it will step in if it feels it is necessary. Otherwise, the Church has very little interest in the particular practices of the masses, provided those practices do not undermine church authority. Some examples of these practices include:

Bearing the Torch: There is a common practice among the faithful in Eastern Nova Vaasa and Hazlan to light a torch or other candle to drive away Mytteri. In some places this is only necessary on certain nights, or when under the effects of ill fortune, but the timing is variable and unclear. People have started wearing carvings of torches using partially-charred wood to ward away Mytteri and other evil forces.

Fool's Night: Common throughout both Nova Vaasa and Hazlan is the tradition of Fool's Night, whose celebration is variable by locale. On the day before Fool's Night, people are encouraged to be lax in the fulfillment of their duties and to amuse themselves with minor diversions. It is also common practice to play minor pranks and jokes on one's superiors in society. It is considered very bad form for one's superiors to hold this practice against underlings, although it is also considered bad form to abuse the privilege of Fool's Night to embarass one's superiors. At the very least, it is substantially unwise to do so. It is not unheard of for an officer, noble, or member of the clergy to take a slow and lengthy revenge in retaliation for being humiliated on Fool's Night. In general, however, the upper echelons of society take the night in good humor.



The Church of Hala

In comparison to the Church of Ezra, the Church of the Lawgiver, and the Eternal Order, the Church of Hala seems very tolerant of different beliefs. Comparing the Ezran church to the Iron Faith, the Ezran church is clearly more tolerant of variation. Applying this same logic to the Church of Hala finds it vastly more tolerant than either. Individual Halan clerics, called witches (sometimes warlocks), display tremendous variation in their individual interpretations about Halan theology, and no one seems to be particularly troubled by this. While this marks a notable divergence from other religions of the Core, this fact contains a more fascinating truth.

While Halans are less concerned about the specific beliefs of its clergy, they are more concerned with the performance of Halan practices. While even the Church of the Lawgiver might ignore local practices that don't interfere with church operations, the Halans are very interested in making sure that Halans practice their magic correctly, maintain appropriate secrecy and discretion, and attend to the sick and the needy. The beliefs of the Halans who do or do not conform to these practices is essentially irrelevant to other Halans. Halans who fall away from their duties initially receive gentle correction from other Halans, although they are quite capable of shaming, shunning, or exiling people from their communities. Exile and shunning are the closest equivalent Halans have to excommunication, having no formal church hierarchy outside of the local community.

Violence between groups of Halans is rare, and limited almost exclusively to "Sorcerous Witches" and those who serve hags. However, even in the case of Sorcerous Witches, the Halans focus on orthopraxy is evident. Those who have been formally branded Sorcerous Witches are often tolerated if they reject hags and their servants, provided they perform their duties as Halans.

Halan Variations

In the interest of completeness, it seems fitting to list a few examples of the way Halan beliefs and customs may vary from community to community and individual to individual. As these differences don't

draw much attention from other Halans, they frequently lack the kinds of names we might expect from observing the other faiths.

The Origins of Hala

The most common depiction of Hala is the one given in the Tale of Ages. Hala was one of nine gods who built the world from the chaos of the Mists. After creation, mankind was left to its own devices. Hala saw that mankind's ignorance and shortsightedness led to suffering, and she alone intervened to care for and guide humanity.

Meanwhile, the Tepestani have a similar tale that speaks of an evil witch named Hallah who stole magic from the gods.

There are some Halans who believe in a form of the Halan myth that is somewhere between those extremes. In their telling, Hala was a mortal woman who petitioned the 8 (or 9 in some tellings) gods who crafted the world from the Mists. She sought comfort for the weak, the sick, and the downtrodden, and ultimately was permitted into the realm of the gods to perform this task.

This version of the story ends up being strikingly similar to the story of Ezra put forth by most Ezran sects. The Erudite version seems less overtly similar, but ultimately ends up containing the same themes as the Tale of Ages version: A goddess beseeched other godlike beings to help grant grace and mercy to mortals, and was accepted into their ranks for that purpose, where she now works as a guardian for humanity.

As a result of these similarities, there are many Halans who believe that Ezra represents either a different manifestation of Hala or a misunderstanding thereof. They even attribute Ezra's association with the Mists as being similar to Hala's requirement for secrecy. This is similar to the belief of many historians (including Sherman, Barre, and Lestrange) that Ezra may have been a priestess of Hala in life, although I have not yet found a Halan who expressed the belief in this form.

Witches and Warlocks

While in many locales, "witch" is a term that applies to all Halans capable of magic, some Halan groups maintain a gendered distinction between witches, who are female, and warlocks, who are male. In some communities, this is a simple difference in title. In others, they might restrict certain magical instruction to witches and others to warlocks. They might enforce a strict segregation system where each coven may only have witches or warlocks. The beliefs that prompt these differences are too many to list, and I'm tempted to file this under heteropraxy, except that Halans are generally unperturbed if a different community has different practices. While each community might believe strongly in its own interpretation of these concepts, as long as other communities are working to help the poor and needy and combat the magic of hags, Halans generally see little need for more than polite disagreement.

Similarly, some communities make a distinction between priests of Hala and those who are considered witches or warlocks. This distinction seems to be based on the type of training a Halan receives.

In both situations, traveling Halans typically utilize the term that is most recognized by the community they are visiting. In situations where visiting Halans disrupt local norms, such as when a mixed coven visits a community that enforces strict segregation, hosting Halans try to be patient with travelers. In cases where the visitors would remain for a lengthy period of time, the hosts often ask their visitors to reconsider their practices, or politely ask them to move on. In the worst case, multiple Halan communities might develop in a particular location with slightly differing practices.

Witchcraft and Sorcery

Halans are often skeptical of arcane magic. Those who practice witchcraft with arcane magic are considered "Sorcerous Witches," who Halans regard with deep distrust. Who is considered a Sorcerous Witch varies from community to community and even individual to individual. Some communities consider all arcane spellcasters Sorcerous Witches. Other communities consider Sorcerous Witches ones

who combine arcane practices with those of witchcraft. Others limit the description to those who are corrupt at heart.

Sorcerous Witches who ally with hags are always the enemy of Halans, as are those who selfishly use their powers, or who use their abilities to harm others. Sorcerous Witches who are faithful to Hala and who help the needy are typically tolerated, but may still suffer scrutiny or hostility from particular communities or individuals.

The Proper Use of Witchcraft

Halans are considerably less tolerant when it comes to witchcraft. Those who use witchcraft for personal gain or who refuse to help the needy find themselves unwelcome in a Halan community, especially if they use arcane magic. Those who deal with hags, attempt to learn or practice hag magic, or who harm others, might quickly find themselves marked for death instead. While the Church of Hala rarely has the political authority to put others to death, Halans do not hesitate to enforce these sentences themselves. This rarely causes issues with local governments, as hunting monsters and evil witches is almost never considered a crime, particularly when done by the generally-passive Halans.

Zherisia and the Divinity of Mankind

On the subject of Zherisia, I had hoped to greatly expand my knowledge of the practices of the Divinity of Mankind. While to most their views would seem strangely atheistic, I have heard rumor of a number of monastic groups that seem to take the Divinity of Mankind past the sort of philosophical mysticism of the official doctrine and into a sort of religion of its own. One of these groups, the Order of the Divine Way, seems to regard reality as composed of several layers, with more mystical, yet more real, layers above this world. In their view, our entire plane of existence is an echo of a divine reality, and the spark of divinity in man is an echo of the divinity of the divine man. Sadly, the correspondence I received left it unclear to me whether they believe the divine man to be a single man, the entire concept of man as an archetype, or a race of divine men. The quotations I received are, at best, obtuse. In any event, they seem to view the divinity of man as essentially a link to this higher world of concepts, encouraging mankind to abandon its attachment to this lesser world and ascend to this higher reality. What I have read seems to imply that they have turned the normally philosophical Divinity of Mankind into a full-blown religion. The Church seems to regard the Divine Way as more of a collection kooks than anything else. In my correspondences, I was not able to elicit any kind of opinion from the clergy on this subject. They all seemed to regard the Divine Way as being beneath notice. Those who commented on the apparent theology said it reeked of uneducated backwater superstition. This leaves me at a loss as to how to categorize the Divine Way. While their beliefs and practices differ from the main Church, no one seems to particularly care. To me it feels less like differing beliefs within the same religion and more like two separate religions.

Faction: The Order of the Divine Way

Nicknames: None

Creed: This world is a pale echo of the true reality, a divine world populated by concepts. While a spark of that divinity lives within every human, it is obscured by the distractions of this corrupted physical plane. To surpass this prison of the flesh and escape to the true reality requires separation from the distractions of the mundane and focusing on the truth.

Rituals and practices: Seclusion, asceticism, fasting, and meditating on the true essence of divinity that exists in each member of the human race.

Holy Text: *The Principles of the True Forms*

Status: Ignored heterodoxy, or possibly a separate religion.

There is, however, a group that has raised the ire of the Church, the prismatics. Named after "The Prism," a book by Zherisian philosopher Alexander Corwin, prismatics ride the line between heresy and heterodoxy. The Church of the Divinity of Mankind

seems hesitant to brand prismatics as heretics or openly prescribe sanctions against them, but remains openly hostile to the group. Major figures and minor members alike launch rhetorical attacks against the Prism whenever the opportunity arises. It is my humble opinion that the only thing keeping prismatics from being dubbed heretics is the Church's desire to appear more similar to secular organizations than other religious institutions.

"The Prism" is a fascinating text wherein Corwin applies rigorous philosophical analysis to Church philosophy. In so doing, he concludes that, by the Church's own axioms and logic, the Church artificially inflates the importance of mankind over other, similar races. He further concludes that this fixation on humanity robs society of the divinity that is present in elves, dwarves, and so on. Ultimately he considers elves, dwarves, halflings, humans, and even gnomes as different refractions of the metaphorical divine to which we should all aspire, which he calls the enlightened races. Each enlightened race has something to teach the other races, in his view. Even among non-prismatics, the text is popular among many in Paridon, particularly non-humans, although it receives a lukewarm reception among the half-elven community. The text is openly hostile to calibans, considering them a corruption of the divinity to which we should all aspire. Its commentary on half-elves is strange and, I would argue, inconsistent. On the one hand, it considers half-elves to be a merger of two types of divine light, which comes with its own gifts. On the other hand, it talks about this merger as if it makes half-elves less than both humans and elves. When asked, Corwin has added additional confusion on the subject, leading to a variety of interpretations of the relationship between half-elves and the Divinity of Mankind, which destabilizes their already strange position among the Church and its members. Corwin seems more interested in philosophical analysis than religious movements, but I personally find his continued lack of clarity to be a touch careless given the reach of his work.

Faction: Prismatics, sometimes called the Light of the Prism

Nicknames: Students, Artists (derogatory)

Creed: The enlightened races all contain their own spark of divinity. Members of each should learn from one another in order to improve themselves, their society, and the world at large. The divine wisdom that has been granted to the world has been divided among the enlightened races. Only in learning from the better natures of each race can we hope to move society away from the ills that plague it and into a proper utopia.

Rituals and practices: Prismatics seek to learn as much as possible about other enlightened races and cultures, seeking to find the best aspect of each and finding a way to model it in themselves. The more extreme members often try to imagine themselves having grown up as a member of another enlightened race, sometimes even adopting their style of dress. They welcome elves, dwarves, halflings, and gnomes among their gatherings. They also generally welcome half-elves, but sometimes have a tense relationship with them. Some communities have tried to work with half-elves to improve relations, while others ignore the problem.

Status: (de jure) condemned heterodoxy, (de facto) heresy (lay restriction, excommunication, or shaming)

Textual Variation

The printing press has had a major impact on academic study throughout the Core, and has reshaped our understanding of what books are and can be. When readers in the more civilized realms read a text penned by a modern author, they can be largely certain that they are reading the same book as any other reader, and that the attributed author crafted the text they are reading whole-cloth.

This understanding of texts is thoroughly modern, however. Even the Books of Ezra, which adhere closest to this model, show significant signs of influence from earlier works, which are not credited

in the texts. The later Books all draw on previous Books of Ezra, which is hardly surprising, but the First Book seems to draw on older texts or oral traditions that are less well-known among the general population.

A thorough investigation of scribal practices and traditions reveals that ancient manuscripts, both religious and secular, show significantly more deviations from one another than we would expect from modern texts. Sections appear in one manuscript, but not another. Expected sections go missing. Particular sentences are rephrased, sometimes in similar ways. Sometimes not. Words are added or omitted. Sections move around. Sometimes particular paragraphs even move around between different books.

In secular works, these tendencies are somewhat understood, and can be used to analyze and compare different manuscript traditions, and see how particular sections were edited, removed, added, or amended. In some cases, we can even make educated guesses as to why these changes occurred. Applying these techniques to religious texts is rarely done, however. Perhaps this is due to the lack of interest among academics, or due to the doctrinal headaches this process sometimes raises for believers.

Working Conditions

Copying a manuscript is a laborious and painstaking process that takes countless hours. The work is tedious and repetitive. It is very easy to make many kinds of errors, particularly after hours of working. A scribe who makes these errors often has difficulty noticing them, and even once noticed, they can be difficult to correct in a clear way. Furthermore, source manuscripts often contain errors of their own, and a scribe may have multiple source manuscripts with disagreements that they are then forced to resolve.

Common errors include duplication, where a scribe unwittingly copies the same sentence, paragraph, or section twice, and deletions, where a scribe unintentionally deletes a sentence, paragraph, or section. A common type of both occurs when the same word appears multiple times close together and the word appears at the start of the line. The scribe might lose their place and jump ahead to the second instance of the word, deleting the text, or they might lose their place and go the other way, inadvertently returning to the first instance of the word when they should be at the second, thus duplicating all the space between.

Corrections

The time it takes to transcribe a page is substantial, and the pages of older manuscripts are expensive. If a scribe made an error, the page could not be discarded. To fully correct an error, a scribe would have to scrape the ink off the page with a blade, then rewrite the errant portion. This further slows down an already arduous task, however, so other options are often preferred. A scribe might simply strike through the errant text, for example. Another common solution is to write the corrected text in the margins, allowing a future scribe to copy it into the body of a future copy. However, manuscripts often contain commentary in the margins as well. These corrections and commentary sometimes get confused, allowing commentary on the text to be copied unwittingly into the body of the text itself. This dubious new text is called an interpolation.

With only flawed source texts to copy from, scribes were (and sometimes still are) faced with the difficult prospect of resolving errors in the source material. If the source manuscript already has a clear correction, either in the main body of the text, or in the marginalia, the scribe can simply copy the correction from the source. In other cases, the scribe's own judgement must be employed. Scribes who encounter sections with missing or illegible words, or who encounter confusing source manuscripts, must rely on the information they have available to correct the issue. Similarly, a text may have difficult to understand sections or phrases that a scribe may need to clarify in the new text. Religious scribes often rely on religious tradition to correct these errors and ambiguities, which allows religious tradition to slowly shape the manuscript tradition of a given codex over time. Commentary that agrees with tradition is more likely to find its way into a text as interpolations. Difficult sections that appear to break with tradition are more likely to be considered errors

in need of correction or removal.

When we have multiple manuscripts with variant readings, we can compare them with one another. When we know the ages of particular manuscripts, such as through the historical record, or through scribal styles that match texts of a known age, we can begin to determine which sections of the work are older. This can sometimes be done through linguistic analysis as well. By comparing which sections appear consistently across versions, we can establish which parts of the text are more secure. Sections that are more commonly missing, or have a tendency to move around in a text, are less likely to be part of an original text. Interpolations can often be detected through their tendency to move around in different copies, as well as the fact that interpolations tend to break the flow of the text. If a few verses move around in the text and the text reads clearer by removing them altogether, it is likely an interpolation.

While more modern works like the First Book of Ezra do not show these tendencies, the First Book of Ezra overlaps greatly with many versions of the Books of the Veil. Both the Books of Law and the Books of the Veil show many signs of these edits, alterations, and interpolations, with both showing signs of being written in layers that were later accreted together.

Textual Criticism and Religious Texts

Included are some brief notes regarding holy texts of some of the groups mentioned thus far. An exhaustive description would potentially fill hundreds of pages.

The Books of Law

The Church of the Lawgiver makes textual criticism very difficult. The scriptures are fixed in canon, and the church has little patience for any deviation from the official texts. When a manuscript is found with minor deviations, the Iron Faith might order corrections, but in general the manuscript is declared heretical and destroyed. Most of the available Books of Law manuscripts are discovered in Nova Vaasa or Hazlan, and receive quick correction or destruction from the church.

Those that appear in other lands, where the church lacks this authority, tend to go missing. Individuals associated with the texts have reported being beaten and threatened by officials from the Church of the Lawgiver. While these reports are difficult to authenticate, there are two separate cases where Dementlieuese courts found that *Jernspørgsmålers* were responsible for violence and property damage related to such manuscripts. In one case, they were found to have even destroyed the notes that had been taken on the text.

Perhaps the most famous and interesting variant manuscript for the Books of Law is the Dark Musarde Codex. The book is bound in black leather, which is not especially uncommon. However, the pages have been treated with an unknown coating that slowly turns purple as it ages. Parts of the manuscript are only readable in direct sunlight. Officially, the codex has been lost to history, although many speculate that this is simply a lie to protect the text from the Church of the Lawgiver.

It contains the majority of the Truth of Iron and Fetters of Bronze, and portions of the Book of Stone, although the text is divided into two books:

- **The Book of the Law**
- **The Iron Faith**

The Book of the Law contains the majority of the canon Truth of Iron, as well as roughly a third of the Fetters of Bronze, beginning halfway through the canonical third chapter.

The Iron Faith immediately continues with the Fetters of Bronze, which it follows cleanly for 12 chapters. From that point in, the text switches back and forth between text from the Fetters of Bronze and the Book of Stone. Many verses from the Book of Stone follow sections of the Fetters of Bronze in apparent commentary on a given law or a given punishment. These verses don't necessarily follow the same order as the current Book of Stone, and many appear much earlier than one might expect.

This intermixing continues until the end of the canon

Fetters of Bronze. Afterwards, text from the Book of Stone continues, excepting most verses that had earlier appeared as commentary, although there are at least two duplications. With that, the Book of Stone comes to an end, despite only another 20% of the canon text appearing. Ultimately only around 53% of the canon Book of Stone appears. While there are several missing pages, analysis indicates that most of the missing text covers canonical Fetters of Stone verses.

The Dark Musarde Codex seems to display a much older form of Old Vaasi, but its provenance is unknown. It was discovered at an estate sale of an eccentric antiquarian, whose notes on the many manuscripts he possessed fail to even mention the tome. Assuming the manuscript is genuine and represents an accurate transcription, the Dark Musarde Codex prompts a number of interesting questions:

What did the Iron Faith prohibition on arcane magic actually refer to?

The text uses the word "*farskald*" to refer to an arcane spellcaster, but this word is unclear. It looks very similar to the word "*forskald.*" "*Skald*" can mean poet, or potentially bard. The "*for-*" prefix would indicate either an extreme form or a negative form. This could refer to a paragon of poetry, or perhaps an evil poet or bard. Since words are often associated with power, this may have simply been an older word referring to arcane spellcasters, but it might refer to something else instead.

Was the "Body Reflects the Soul" doctrine originally an interpolation?

The Dark Musarde Codex marginalia is consistent regarding commentary and corrections. Corrections are marked with an arrow pointing to the line of the verse, and further contain the letter "r" (for the Old Vaasi word for "correction"). Commentary is marked with a line from the comment to the line of the verse it comments on. While not every correction matches the current canon text, they are remarkably consistent with it. However, all three verses that deal with the doctrine that a person's physical form is a manifestation of their divine rectitude are marked as commentary in the Dark Musarde Codex. Two of these three verses are reported to be in different locations in other, older Codexes, which would be consistent with interpolation.

Is the distinction between laity and clergy a more recent innovation in the Iron Faith?

Fourteen different verses or sections in the Truth of Iron and Fetters of Bronze talk about the duties of clergy and laity. In every single case, the Dark Musarde Codex either:

- Lacks the verse in its entirety
- Divides the different duties between different levels of the social and political hierarchy, rather than between clergy and laity
- Assigns the duties to every member of the first kingdom by law

Why do the Black Trials and Crimson Faith not appear in the Dark Musarde Codex?

- Were they omitted for space for theological reasons?
- Are they later additions?
- Did those works begin in one or more separate textual traditions that were later edited into the canon texts of the Iron Faith? Would this possibility account for the missing portions of the Book of Stone?

The Books of Ezra

The Church of Ezra is less than a century old, and printed versions of each Book have been available to all but one of the authors. The Third and Fourth Books of Ezra have been printed since their earliest copies. The Second began to be printed a decade after the first copy was written. Each of these texts therefore avoid the common pitfalls resulting from hand-copying. Aside from minor typesetting issues, virtually every copy of each book is identical. When there are differences in editions, they are noted by the Bastion who originally wrote the Book in question.

The First Book of Ezra is only 33 years older than the Second, which is scarcely old enough to have

developed different textual traditions of note. The Great Cathedral's preference for illuminated manuscripts has left the First Book of Ezra to have the longest period of continual hand-copying, but the easy availability of official printed reference copies for scribes still removes much of the vagaries of scribal work.

The Third Book of Ezra is simultaneously older and younger than the First. In one sense, it's based on and inspired by Yakov Dilisnya's text. However, it is also purportedly based on much older texts than Dilisnya's. Portions of Bastion Secousse's book resemble the holy texts of Our Lady of Sorrows in Nueva Aragona. Other portions seem more similar to the Balinok Temple Codex. Others still seem closer to variant manuscripts of the Tale of Ages. It is difficult to examine these questions without access to the source texts that Bastion Secousse used to write her Book of Ezra. While I was allowed to view the Gemstone Codex during my visit to Ste. Mere Des Larmes, Warden Caille asked that I reschedule further visits until Bastion Secousse's health improves. Subsequent scheduling difficulties have prevented my return, for now. For their part, the Erudites seem greatly interested in my work and have expressed a desire to work with me further.

Illuminated manuscripts of each book are kept in the Great Cathedral, but it is both easier to copy from printed tomes and to detect and resolve errors using them. The similarities between Halan stories and texts like the Books of the Veil provide interesting opportunities for analysis for a scholar of religion, but the faith itself is simply too young for its holy books to show much internal variety.

The Gemstone Codex

An old, partially damaged manuscript discovered in Ste. Mere des Larmes by Bastion Secousse. The codex's name derives from the gemstones bound in the cover of the book. It is similar to the Books of the Veil in many ways, although it strongly implies, at minimum, that Ezra was already a goddess before joining with the Mists of Death. The text is notable for referring to Ezra as "Sainted Mother of Tears," like the Ste. Mere des Larmes cathedral, and "Our Lady of Sorrows," similar to the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Nueva Aragona.

While some damage to the text and writing irregularities cause some difficulty in determining the name of the goddess used in the Gemstone Codex, context indicates that she is named in the text only five times. In three of those cases, holes in the manuscript render the name missing or illegible. In the two legible places where the goddess is named, her name is written in a strange, archaic script.

While the script does appear to say "Ezra," as the Erudites who showed me the manuscript assured me, it is possible to read the strange text multiple ways. Additionally, it is not clear to me that the script represents an alphabet of any sort, much less that similar-looking letters contain the same values as we would expect from the writing in the surrounding text. In the time given, I was unable to reach a conclusion on the name of the goddess used in the Gemstone Codex.

The Books of the Veil

Often associated with the Mitakians, the Books of the Veil are generally considered heretical by Ezran authorities, but the truth is more complex. There are multiple manuscript traditions of the work, for which we have several well-attested manuscripts. Chief among them is the Balinok Temple Codex. Many of these other manuscripts contain little that the Church of Ezra would find objectionable. While Mitakian manuscripts focus on Ezra entering the realm of the dead, the non-Mitakian traditions seem to maintain a less rigid distinction between the realm of the dead and the realm of the gods. Put simply, the various non-Mitakian manuscripts can agree with both the Mitakian perspective and the orthodox perspective. Whether Ezra enters the realm of the dead or the realm of the gods is not a meaningful distinction if the realms are the same. In the non-Mitakian text, both the spirits of the dead and the gods are different types of divine entity, separated by power level, not category. The Gemstone Codex, used by as a source by Bastion Secousse to write the Third Book of Ezra, seems to also hold this view.

Ezrans who elect to read one of the Mitakian manuscripts generally find the text more palatable

than the Mitakian associations would suggest, and much of the text still would fit neatly alongside orthodox beliefs. Linguistic analysis suggests that the text is quite old, in accordance with Mitakian tradition. However, while there are many commonalities that indicate a common origin, the differences between the Ezran text and the Mitakian and non-Mitakian manuscripts indicate divergences beyond what might be expected if the Mitakian Books of the Veil were the original text, as Mitakians claim. The text seems to have been composed in separate layers over time, and the doctrines that seem uniquely Mitakian are not otherwise attested in the non-Mitakian manuscripts or the historical record prior to the modern era. The oldest sections seem most similar to both the Book of Ezra and the non-Mitakian manuscripts.

From the textual evidence, it seems that both the Mitakians and Yakov Dilisnya drew from older literary or religious traditions, at least some of which are attested in the non-Mitakian Books of the Veil.

The Hidden Disease

Essentially a call to arms for members of the Iron Faith to cast off ineffectual political and secular leaders, the Hidden Disease shows remarkably little textual variation. Even factoring in the small amount of manuscripts that have been documented, the text shows surprisingly few deviations. There is common agreement, including from Krigers, that the book was penned by Lasse Ravnsen. As such, the lack of errors can partially be ascribed to the age of the text.

Given the difficulties in scribal work described above, one would expect *some* variation in the extant texts from simple copy errors. While there are a few missing words and duplicated words here and there, these are vanishingly small in number. As the available manuscripts lack any sign of magical duplication, I can only assume that Krigers thoroughly memorize the text, then inscribe new texts from memory, rather than copying existing texts.

The Mother of Many

While no author is officially known, the Mother of Many is commonly understood to have been written by Ion Dinu or one of his disciples. The text is written in archaic Balok and references contemporaneous events that would place 200 to 300 years before the unification of Barovia in 0 BC. Nevertheless, its usage of Balok is inconsistent, and its poetry contains a number of wordplays that seem inconsistent with any writing date prior to 720 BC at the earliest. Additionally, even its archaisms seems modern compared to works from 500 years after it was supposedly written. Given that the first copy of the text appeared among Dinu's followers, it seems clear that its archaic words and setting are an affectation.

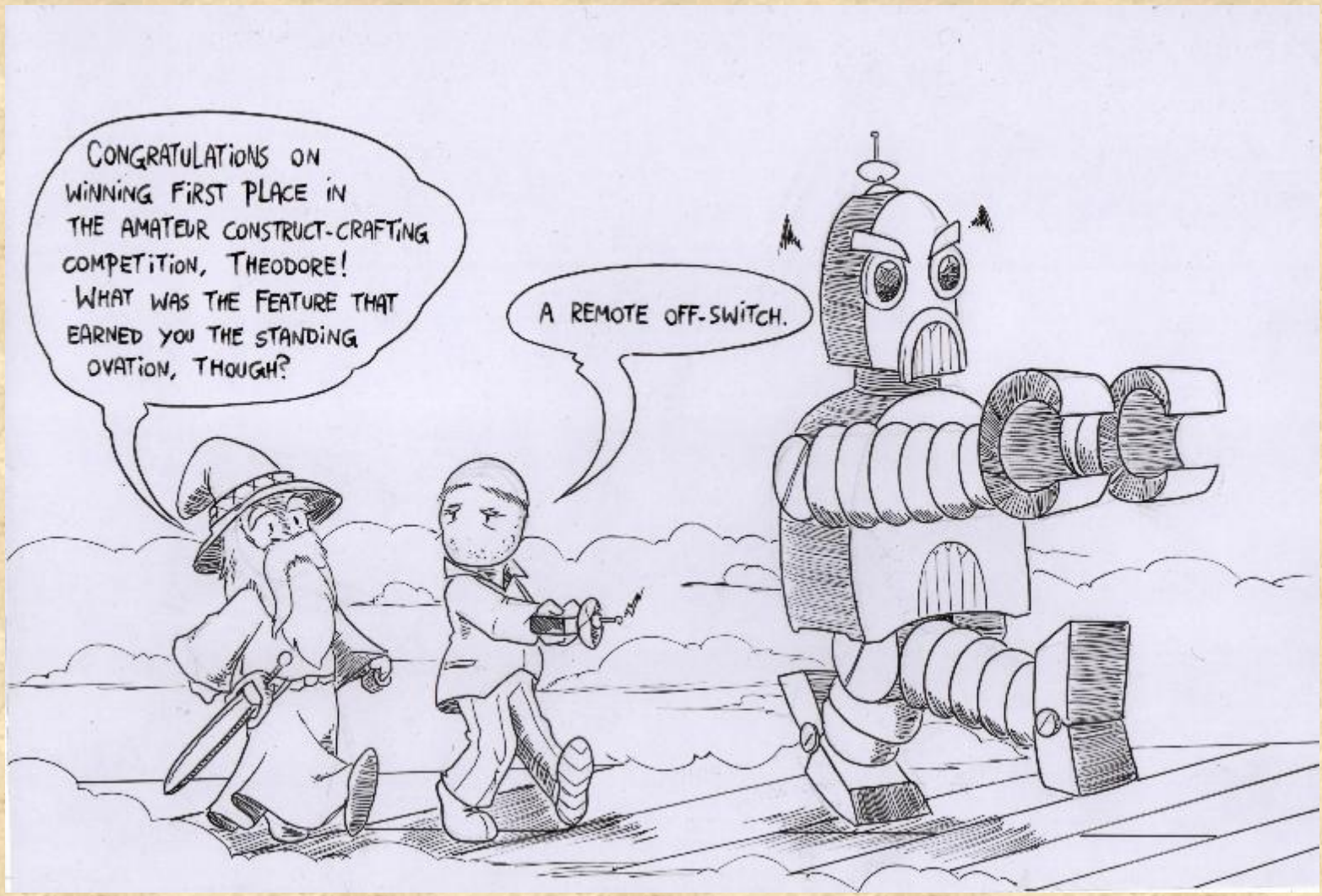
This book claims to depict Ezra's mortal life, which supposedly preceded the development of institutions like marriage or even the practice of pair-bonding. It claims that Ezra had many partners, and that every human that walks this world is descended from Ezra in some way. It advocates a sort of free-love-philosophy, but with strict hierarchical control over most aspects of life, including relationships. It is particularly unpopular among the faithful of Ezra, but its often-lurid prose is frequently found unpalatable among religious leaders of other faiths as well. Ezrans generally burn what copies of the work they can find. The Church of the Lawgiver seems to regard it as a particular threat to the societal order, and if anything is more zealous in destroying copies than Ezrans are.

Tale of Ages

The chief Halan holy text, the Tales of Ages describes the creation of the world from the chaos of the Mists by nine gods. Alone among them, Hala mankind's need for guidance and grace to reduce human suffering. I had limited access to copies of the Tales of Ages, but I noticed a fair amount of textual variation. Most of these variations are minor scribal errors and corrections, and don't affect Halan practices much at all. Some of the variations were scribal glosses or adjustments, where the scribe appears to have attempted to clarify a passage.

These variations often correspond to variations in Halan belief. The description of Sorcerous Witches is slightly varied in the manuscripts I reviewed. There were also variations regarding priests, witches, and warlocks, and the respective duties for each. I was

not able to find a copy that referred to Hala as a mortal woman, but I did find variation in the term used for Hala's divinity. In some manuscripts, including some older ones, Hala is referred to as "Hala the Holy," and a strict reading of the text leaves it ambiguous as to whether or not she is actually one of the Nine Gods. However, the text leaves little room for the interpretation that Hala was a mere mortal. Even if these texts are read to imply that Hala was not strictly speaking a goddess when she approached the gods, they still imply a level of power and divinity beyond what a mere mortal would normally possess. Without extra clarification on the subject, even the variant text implies that Hala was at least semi-divine when she sought to become a guardian of mankind.



Fractures of the Cog

More on The Broken Cog Cluster

By Doctor Necrotic (Brian Rubinfeld)

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The Broken Cog Cluster seems like a distant gleaming star from those visiting from the core Lands of the Mists or beyond. Light beyond light, wonder beyond wonder. Salvation, a break from the sordid, morbid, and bleak realms before you. Perhaps it is a chance to begin again and finally advance forward. At first, one may see incredible technologies and ideals gaining momentum. Marvelous. But, make no mistake, it is far from a shining beacon of hope. Upon first glance, one is bewildered if not overwhelmed by the incredible works of technology on display at not only universities and laboratories; but shops, homes, public spaces and more. These tools and mechanisms prove pervasive throughout almost all facets of society here, save for the remotest and most isolationist villages and hamlets. It is said that much of innovation is sparked from conflict, with storm clouds of war looming in the distance. A tense peace haunts the denizens of this cog. They may distract themselves with new frivolities brought upon by new markets, new opportunities, new indulgences; but it is no true escape from the dread brought upon by creeping realization. Some conflicts are contained within their respective spots, waiting to spill over and drag others into them. The public fears such things, but distant shadows practically salivate at the chance to test the effectiveness of terrifying weapons and heinous contraptions. This cog will break further, given enough strain. The sparks begin to ignite as the mechanisms buckle and ache. It begs the question, when will this glorious machine break down and explode? And from the fire, what would dare emerge? And those who foresee it all, more than mad soothsayers forced to watch an inevitable doom? Is such a malfunctioning machine cursed to break down or combust? Time will tell and omens look ill.

This is a continuation of my previous article on The Broken Cog Cluster, a series of domains that meld Zherisia and Nosos with various other industrial themed domains of dread, with nods towards the darker side of steampunk. The initial article cut back a lot of information and ideas, given new life here. And so, I wanted to take some time to look more into cultures, the darklords, factions at play, and more between these various domains.

Alleigosto

Alleigosto at its core is a land of contradictions. Ambitions of the olden empire have shifted to market domination. Old imperial names of *Thonia, Arcanalis, Thristarea, Romelius,* and more remain but mean nothing to the rising oligarchs and corporations of the land. Towards the urbanized centers of trade, it is something of a haven for innovators and creators, an ideal destination for travelers, and a thriving economy of commerce and ideas. But beyond it, the public begins to sympathize more and more with one of the dukes. This duke, ***Jereko Arcaico***, is a staunch critic of rampant advancement and unbounded technocracy. In his views, such things detract from the common folk, especially those of a considerably lower station. This isn't to say that people out in the country reject

"potentially hazardous" technologies that "threaten tradition", so much as many are stubborn in their own ways. Comparing the cities of ***Sorentrico*** or ***Valentia*** and the remote territory of ***Malgiallo*** offers a polarizing set of differences. The latter isn't alone. To the delight of many and the horror of others, other nearby villages and towns have no desire to end their relative seclusion. All the while, urban centers are hot springs of commerce, tourism, and exchanging ideas. Some blame this duke for rural seclusion, others praise him. But in the end, they fight a losing battle as time marches ever forward. As a whole, Alleigosto is a domain with themes of the failing footholds of traditions, inevitable progress, fearmongering, and technocracy. It also contends with trends of secularism butting heads with a religious establishment, markets radically reshaping society, and confusion over new social views.

A land rife with change, the traditions of the past collide with the promised progress of the future. With residential zones, women still gather water from cisterns to water campos[15], while children play in watery pools diverted from canals. All the while, people speak akin to the old language roots of "Imperius" under the more nationalistic lens of "Alleigoston" language. The locals see this as no different than using wells and playing in the river. Men have shifted from tilling the fields to operating equipment in factories. While the work is allegedly streamlined, it is no less straining upon them.

Despite being separated to act upon their various duties and tasks, the evening is always a time of family. Duty to your clan and your blood is an essential aspect of Alleigoston life, no matter how far modern society makes you travel. Even so much as writing a letter is a revered tradition, with many young scholars, skilled engineers, and voyaging sailors far from home. For the average citizen, modernity has merely changed the mechanisms of day-to-day life, not their values or bonds. While work culture has moved to something that harms daily life, the people adapt and try to endure. Despite being forced away from family more, many find ways to cope. Living and then working is the modus of these people, not working to make a living, after all.

This in turn has sparked an outbreak of a condition. While not as severe as the plague of Rockbaecche, so-called "worker's haze" is a kind of mental malaise that afflicts those within the top industries of Alleigosto. A mixture of pollution and depression induces a stupor-like state in workers, severe versions inducing catatonia instead. Many will say that this is a shift from once proud ways of life in a glorious empire, one which sprawled upon the entirety of this cluster at one point. This "Grand Imperium" is deeply lost to time, something scholars and archeologists seek to capture. In the last one hundred years alone, historians have attempted to excavate and salvage any proof of their once-mighty past of the empire. The Alleigostons are the true inheritors to such a legacy, but not everyone shares such views. For many, this is propaganda to help finish off their ailing cousin of Ichthyos, also descended from the same Grand Imperium of days old. Particularly conservative voices are especially aggressive towards anything that contradicts this ambitious return to an old empire. This is not to say some haven't leaned into such new ways of life.

Within ***Sorentrico***, a push for consumer expansion and hospitality has shifted how the city has presented itself. All aspects of the city were modernized, from leisure pursuits such as sports and fine dining to essentials such as plumbing and cooling. The aesthetics have become more flamboyant and festive, to the chagrin of the residents. In their eyes, such distinct use of color and flair are reserved for religious practices, to thank the Saints of Alleigosto for blessing them for their labors. The appropriation of garb, adornments, and decor similar to that of the church is considered deeply

[15] *A small square community garden*

disrespectful. However, it has proved enticing for tourism and thus a mainstay of the city.

Few aspects are as controversial within advancing society as the introduction of the railroad. Within Sorentrico alone, it was seen as crass commercialism and subtle imperialism upon their lands. Tensions with Rockbaecche were pre-existent, but the rail was a final straw for many. Conflicts erupted into full riots, before being quelled through well-timed diplomacy and financial compromises greatly favoring the Alleigostons. While travel on canals and rivers between cities has significantly decreased, with a massive decline in ferry jobs, the net positive of locomotion has won over much of the population.

As a whole, the work culture imposed on the land is alien at times. Sacrificing too much time from one's clan and oaths of faith is foreign to the natives. They view foremen and bosses as temporary leaders and nothing more. For many, work for coin is a means to an end, not a divine form of exultation in itself. Those who do are often outsiders failing to integrate with local customs. When jobs push too hard against this, revolts at workplaces may arise, especially as holy days and festivals draw closer. Merely confusing a devotion to faith and to work is often enough to offend a local. This has alienated a lot of the Eastern Cog[16] from them, causing stereotypes to surface of Alleigostons (and their neighbors, the Ichthyans) being lazy, stubborn, and emotional. This has in turn created resentment that paints others as entitled, soulless, and slave-driving.

Other territories are no less caught off-guard by this technological renaissance. ***Valentia*** was originally a retreat away from the hustle of Sorentrico, but traffic has since picked up from less wealthy folk who have fled there to avoid the rampant technocracy of their old home. While the creeping claws of progress will dig into Valentia in time, it offers nostalgia for many residents for now. La Piazza Valentia in particular acts as a nice ground for the public to commune with itself, without the endless noise of busy crowds and whirring machinery from the neighboring city. Nearby markets also offer less hassle and mayhem. The wealthier have taken notice of this cozier alternative, seeking to leap over as well, at the risk of Valentia being built up to accommodate this.

The faiths of Alleigosto have been shaken to some of their foundations in recent times as well. The week's end was always the time of Exalting the Saints. Alleigostons were expected to complete their work, change from work garb to their finest, and sing praises of the holy hosts that protect their fair land. Such processions usually involve gathering in the ***Chiesas of Saints***, temples dedicated to the national religion. However, the incorporation of a "Saint Ezra" has caused deep schisms within various congregations, who consider her an outsider imposed upon the public to appease the commercial industries. Others view Ezra as attempts to meld outside popular culture into Alleigoston culture in ways that make sense to their own traditions. It is agreed upon that a Protective Patriarch reigns over the saints, though, as the Supreme Saint. This general theocratic frame has maintained solid, even amidst new social challenges that his arisen.

One that has proved most conflicting is that of Ichthyan refugees. In the years since Ichthyan City split apart and partially sank into the sea, many fled from the neighboring domain. While similar in a lot of ways to the Alleigostons, these newcomers conflict deeply on aesthetics and values. For one, they think of the Saints as lesser to "The Gods", a concept considered heretical by the Communion of Clergy, a theological division of the city's houses of nobles. Likewise, their religious garb is considerably more drab and depressive, which is offensive to the vibrant and lively attire of native temple goers. So far, no major strife has evolved from this, as a number of Ichthyans are willing to assimilate to their

[16] *See map from QtR 31 on P. 227*

new culture. But, deep reluctance to let go of all traditions has been a source of growing divide between the communities. Curiously, Ichthyan tourists are immune to this, as they have helped to fuel the national economy.

This leap in industry has caused shock, awe, and terror from the populace. Among the most curious and unnerving creations of Alleigosto is the Automaton. These humanoid constructs are not only anthropomorphic in shape, but in action to a degree. Their speech and mannerisms carry an uncanny sense of familiarity. Their primary purpose was automation of industry, hence their name. At their core, they were built for simple and repetitive tasks that would risk wearing out a mortal body. However, rumors say that there is a darker truth to the thinking machines. The cold and calculating logic doesn't come from a series of algorithms and devices, but a preserved and functioning living brain. In a sense, they are an advanced take on brains-in-jars hooked up to construct bodies. However, they are imperfect machines powered by an equally flawed if unaware mind. This came about when inventors realized that the technology available to them wasn't there. Amidst a sudden revelation, one of them hatched the idea of experimenting on dying patients from the ***Hospital of St. Sanguinous***. Brains were harvested, preserved, and tested. The majority of them bonded with the host bodies. Any engineers involved in this project are sworn to secrecy, but many feel uncomfortable and seek to create their own thinking machines devoid of any organic components, but on par with their sheer computing potential. None have succeeded so far, only lesser automatons have come from this.

If those were the only technological revelations to shake Alleigoston life, then the status quo could attempt to endure. The corrosion of Ichthyos saw a flood of brilliant minds from the west, resulting in new approaches to agriculture and the gradual automation of that. Harvesting and assembly machines changed labor, sending countless farms into confusion and panic. The tradition obsessed Alleigosto, even beyond city limits, found itself at a crossroads. City life was already radically shaping anew, even rural life couldn't escape this inevitability. Only a few farms have taken up these new tools, only to see gradual returns on their investments. All the while, neighbors disparage them for turning back on the olden ways. And while both bicker, manufacturing companies gaze down at potential new property. Compared to this domain's past, such reactions are far less extreme. But, this says little of what came before.

Dread Possibilities

Once, Alleigosto was a royal territory of the Kingdom of Francheskio, a successor to their ancient empire of long ago. The king had appointed Alleigosto under the watch of Duke Jereko Arcaico I. This duke was a deeply miserable man, who hated anything that would change his pristine image of the land, despite its many faults. Well water was often putrid, the people lived in squalor and poverty, and the land was quickly falling behind living standards acceptable to the kingdom. His responses to the king's efforts turned from angry letters to violence. Envoys and even soldiers faced dire consequences as situations deteriorated. Rival houses were attacked, as well as civilians who sided with them. The ensuing genocide mortified the wider kingdom. The treacherous duke took his own life by slicing his throat before the king's army could slay him, as the duke's family was taken into safety. A cousin was called forth to aid in overseeing matters before being welcomed under the duke's role, or so official papers say. Tragedy surrounding a changing world haunted this cousin, who was nearly assassinated in a gruesome manner not unlike his relative. An automaton sliced the new Duke Arcaico's throat, nearly killing him. This cruel mockery earned him sympathy from those who had grown tired from uncontrolled industry. In reality, these were always the same man. He never escaped his fate, as killing him requires ancient weaponry since he became a dark lord. Despite all of this, he fears retaliation and has set up safeguards.

There are only so many times he can pose as new family members once he has been attacked. At some point, he has considered goading his own factions of anti-technological extremists against him, should he decide to end it all. As is, he has drawn the ire of technophobic factions from other lands, like the Brothers of the Land in Zherisia[17].

Automatons are deeply disturbing creatures with a macabre secret, but they aren't alone. A variant of these creatures, "Machine Men" are even more human-like in their presentation. They are truly sentient. This is because they have souls bound to them through dark arcane arts. When harvesting brains wasn't enough, the grim arcane underground of the domain proved inspiring. This, in turn, causes a deeper level of self-awareness in the automaton. Many of these creatures go mad in dark revelation, turning against their creators much like the dread flesh golem of Lamordia. This sad state of being is referred to by Alleigoston engineers in-the-know as "Rampancy." The construction of both would be nowhere without the medical industry of the nearby nation of Belagora influencing the region, complete with discarded cadavers to experiment upon. Initially, the basic automatons could only be crafted by a few inventors. Now, it is possible to churn automatons out en masse through factories thanks to outsourcing bodies. Thanks to a growing network of evil sorcerers investing in the project, machine men too may see mass production. The war in Darkheath and "criminal reeducation" in Belagora are especially useful in the construction of automatons and machine men alike.

While it has not been made known to many factions or interest groups, there is a growing concern that may stretch into calamity if not addressed soon. Through proxies, numerous houses have been cooperating with the Alleigoston military in the investigation of strange matters just beyond the border into Ichthyos, such as wicked occult rituals, strange disappearances, and the graphic results of heinous murders. Most recently, the waterlogged corpse of a sailor was found impaled on a spear and wrapped in treated seaweed. The body must have been placed on a beach before being taken by tide. Years of such suspicious activity has drawn frustration and suspicion towards their neighbors, resulting in one of many launched efforts to get to the bottom of matters. However, the most recent group has gone missing for weeks, risking a larger incident. Characters may be hired as envoys and resource gatherers if trusted enough by parliament, noble houses of high station, or an official of rank. The details of this mission are still nebulous, save for its operation name: "*The Shadow over Ichthyos*".

The city of Valentia is considered the safe haven for common folk who could escape from Sorentrico, as outside wealth began to reshape and alter the very face of that city. Likewise, many escapees of Ichthyos have made it home as well. As such, the general culture of this city feels like a hybrid of the two regions. This has conversely allowed spies under the orders of High Priest Obed Elos to better infiltrate and gather intelligence on Alleigosto. News of trends, issues, more often comes from the "greater city" pretty quickly and remain gossip of Valentia. The ***Arrosto del Macellaio Tavern*** offers especially juicy information to patrons, especially since the Rimpinzarsi family in Malgiallo supplies fresh meat cuts from their farm often[18]. The eeriness of the family adds attraction to the tavern. Even more secretive matters have their habits of getting here as well, as Valentia has a reputation of "evading prying ears" from the far busier Sorentrico. But, they aren't the only curious onlookers dwelling deep within urban reaches. The ***Death Merchants***, not to be confused with a similarly named Noson company, have a powerful stronghold underneath Valentian steel and stone, within catacombs and sewers sprawling underneath. These ancient dead[19] are interested in far more than just technocracy, suspecting something sinister about their

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[17] *Zherisian Gazetteer*

[18] *See Dread Possibilities of Alleigosto in QtR 31.*

[19] *See Dread Possibilities of Alleigosto in QtR 31.*

national neighbor as well. Their goals are pacification of the public while finding ways to seed living pawns into places of power. Only a few hybrid abominations from Ichthyos's cults have been uncovered through their investigations, sparking a shadow war. The threat of war against Ichthyos is likely to be pushed by them in the end, with several disappearances set up by these undead oligarchs being staged to further push conflict.

BELAGORA

Belagora is a land of opportunities and ideals at a steep cost. This land boasts innovation through philosophy, the sharing of ideas, cultural progress, and more. But, in truth, it is directed under the constant vigilance of the ***Council of Seven*** and their associates. All that changes and gains momentum only happens under their approval. Their observation skills carry a psychic presence to them, perhaps making this one of the few domains where allusions to psionics are appropriate. This facade of education, togetherness, and societal advancement helps to keep the image and values of the people strong. This cultural revolution has ultimately pushed back and suppressed religion. Though, many deep down believe in spiritual presences, especially in less tamed areas like the ***Bogdanovic Peaks***. The capital of ***Boleslawgrad*** embodies new social trends through ***Oblask University***, the capital building, numerous outreach programs, philosophy clubs, and communal gathering events; while more remote territories like ***Gorvestov*** carry more insidious purposes, such as correctional facilities and re-education centers. Those who cannot uphold core values are sent to such prisons of varying quality and cruelty. Even beyond prison complexes, deeply eerie and abandoned places like the ***Belanovich farmstead*** contain their own foul haunts. Even active medical campuses like the ***Yulgarovich Sanitarium*** are haunting in their own right. In spite of this, citizens live fairly normal lives, are ensured a majorly solid education, rarely face too much conflict or squalor, and usually seek to improve their communities in some manner. And those who prove valuable to the greater cause? Viable candidates for "mental improvement". After being chosen by delegates under the council, the screened individuals are brought before said council, where the chosen emerge far different than before. Belagora has themes in common with classic dystopian literature works and ongoing relevant themes: surveillance states, misinformation/destroying of evidence, mass distraction, use of terror to achieve goals, collectivist paranoia, and profane hidden punishment. Likewise, tales of psychic phenomena, Slavic mysticism, and medical horror are not unwelcome within this domain.

The image of unity is held above all, often at the expense of the individual. This is the way of Belagora. One had best keep their head down and suppress any thoughts that break the law. Offenses ranging from radical retaliation against the state to even lightly vandalizing a back alleyway are all treated as "considered crimes". This results in officers seeking out the potential threat. These laws in general focus on any act that would be seditious and question the authority of the council or their subordinates. Acts that go against the collective social pressure are targeted, such as non-political vandalism, continued obnoxious or intrusive behavior, overt hatred for social trends, or general disruption to the status quo. While the severity of the crime will result in severity of response, those found pondering such acts still face law all the same. Surveillance is conducted on a level unimaginable to mundane minds. It seems like a huge number of the civilians are little more than programmed drones made to watch[20]. Even meditating upon negative acts is just as much of a

[20] *See also Dread Possibilities of Belagora from QtR 31*

crime as conducting them, as the intent is just as harmful.

Those who have committed minor offenses will be forced to practice "Communal Virtues" as they must complete a rigorous and painful community service campaign. For lesser criminals, they may be forced to keep nearby cities or towns clean, at risk of exposure to dangerous sewage or sickly filth. In more extreme cases, certain criminals may be deployed to an off-shore island to deal with a dangerous pollution likely caused by the land of Nosos to the far west. In both cases, this harkens back to core virtues of Belagora having absolute cleanliness of not just the mind, but also the body.

The so-called "lesser criminals" of Belagora are the most fortunate, as those who aren't will get shipped out to Gorvestov. The cover of a small village hides that the locals are actually staff of the correctional facilities dotting the area. The facilities, while sleek and top of the line, are not made with inmates in mind. Faculty is given free reign on cruel procedures to ensure that inmates either never question authority again or never make it out alive. Scientists loyal to Belagora have been granted clearance, utilizing the prisoners for various experiments. This in turn grants valuable data to further advance the nation, as the prisoner has "given back to society". Majority of the captives were arrested ex nihilo, devoid of any trial for defending themselves.

Factories have emerged beyond village borders, especially right off the coastline, mostly for the purposes of forced labor. If the "rehabilitation centers" were well maintained or gave a false veneer of hope, labor centers rarely are. Such programs are often reserved for especially dangerous captives who prove "unsalvagable", even with the extreme mental measures employed. The chances of fatality within such work sites are much higher than other already brutal re-education programs. Many here will look the other way, especially hired hospital staff. While acts can be little more than butchery, they have helped propel the medical sciences forward countless years ahead of competition. Some thank the "altruistic sacrifices" of the "re-educated" for the amazing discoveries implemented across Belagoran hospitals. Likewise, the Belagoran market can cut prices on goods and outdo competition on the wider market thanks to this prison labor. Rival suppliers and manufacturers have begun to question why Belagora is so keen on selling at a loss for so long. This isn't to say that unethical research is only conducted in these re-education camps and compounds. Various hospitals, work centers, and more hold their dark secrets in this domain.

Those who do succeed in returning to civilization are completely changed by the ordeal. Most cases of reeducation are deemed "successful" by the terms of the state. They are reintegrated as mouthpieces and walking propaganda, showing the benefits of such measures. However, many minds cannot handle it in the long run and go mad, finding themselves at the mercy of seemingly charitable hospital groups. Most of these madmen seem cured at first, only to break down later. The extremely unfortunate don't even make it through initial reintegration programs.

The Yulgarovich Sanitarium in Boleslawgrad is one such place, where the lunatics are more case studies than patients. The doctors, many of which are blessed with psychic talents, do all in their ability to study the abnormal and broken mind. This is often done at the expense of the test subject, but the end results have granted all manner of fascinating data. These practices are suppressed from the public, who sees a center dedicated to caring for the mentally ill. In fact, its reputation as a safe haven has spread beyond the Cluster. The mental hospital upon the island of Dominia has expressed jealousy over this reputation, according to traveling sources. Many new patients have come from Arvoskev, all of which are claiming that their loved ones were taken over by

monsters after they killed them[21]. Such patients have been cordoned off into more secure wards due to their dangerous nature. Deeper psychological studies will be conducted on them, some of which may prove quite fatal. Despite the often wretched treatment of patients, the sanitarium has been the source of many breakthroughs. The University of Oblask Department of Psychology owes its existence to the mental hospital's many findings. Likewise, many new Codes of Conduct stems from a deeper understanding on how the mind functions, obeys, and even revolts against various stimuli. Even the Council of Seven has remarked on how all manner of new findings have helped them understand not just the mind, but a wider look at humanity.

The Society of Mentalism does as it proclaims, helps expand the mind through psychic potential. Its roots are driven by Belagoran spiritualism and occultism. However, as the council had pushed against religious influences, these interests were funneled through a lens of psychic enhancements and understanding of paranormal sciences. They are in truth a heavily regimented and restricted arm of Belagoran security and military. To better serve Belagora, members of the society undergo augmentations. Eyes and lips are constantly peeled back, with ducts supplying moisture. Society members are incapable of speech, except when using powers. Various implants are inserted into the cranium to help bolster psychic powers, with some higher-ranking members receiving nerve wiring from the head and through the body to help channel powers. One strange side effect of augmentation is total hair loss and a paler skin tone. Especially deformed and mutilated members do their best to cover their bodies, as to not alert citizens. Those who prove themselves worthy of the society also undergo a ritualistic cleansing process, rewriting the mind and soul of the inductee. Their sense of individual self fades, as they become a living instrument of the Belagoran cause. Due to being seen as a sort of military force, their presence is not appreciated for long in other territories. As such, they only appear beyond Belagora if cross-domain diplomacy calls for them. Since they are not one to speak, these are often in more grim situations when higher power is called for. Negotiation and diplomatic breakdown is often an example. While they await deployment, the correction centers of Gorvestov are quick to see their employment. Their psychic skills are invaluable in probing minds, as well as torturing them. Especially dangerous enemies of the state are reduced to being as non-threatening as possible by powerful Mentalists.

On the streets of Boleslawgrad and beyond, they are given purpose as a secret police force and social arbiters of truth. When not on duty for spotting subversion, Mentalists actively seek out youth with psionic potential. In their minds, these defenders of tomorrow are susceptible to instability and madness if not shielded from ill influences of today. With endorsement by the state, these talented young are "liberated" from their homes and brought into the Society to hone their gifts. This matches one of their mantras, "The Society is your Mother, your Father, your very core." It is the primary belief that all young members must be heavily indoctrinated as quickly as possible, to ensure that their minds are focused and stabilized. Despite being a non-religious organization, they deeply revere a book called the "Primary Regulations for Ultra Senses." This tome is the basis for much of the group's philosophies and ideologies. Those who cannot regulate and follow the "strictures" of their society are hunted down as the vilest of criminals. This extends to psychics who reject the societal order, as well as psychics who risk falling to mental illness or madness. They do not hold the same animosity towards the physically ill or crippled, viewing such psychics with reverence as they are "the mind triumphing over the body."

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[21] *See also: Puppeteer Parasite entry from QtR 31 or Broken Cog Monstrous Appendix.*

The Deity Builders exist where Gods do not. To replace faith and spirituality, one must keep Ritual, Myth, and Symbolism in a Secular context. This group seeks to make religious practices into pro-party aims. They are not endorsed officially by The Council, but they allow them to help bring focus and power back to their state. To civilian life, these busy bodies aren't unlike the mad zealots that plagued the land prior to The Council banishing religion outright. Some surmise that those who survived the exile simply switched sides and favored the Council instead of the Church.

With oppression and suppression just beyond the naked eye, one would assume there is no safe haven for liberty within this land. This is mostly true. One place where the facade of open discussion and discourse seems to be welcome is Oblask University. Various halls and seminars can offer places for visitors to discuss important matters, as long as they don't pose an issue to wider Belagora. The City Hall of Boleslawgrad has seen use for contending with more political matters in the region, as many "smaller issues" are delegated from the council to those working under them. It is possible to make an ally here, even if they shouldn't be trusted in the long term. A push for enlightened ways within the culture creates a sense of smugness and self-satisfaction when dealing with foreigners. Some view this as compensation for their language having an often guttural and harsh sound, a point of aggravation when also dealing with foreigners.

Dread Possibilities

The Council of Seven is a mystery to much of the population. Their humanity has literally been dead for much time. When the Council first merged, their very life essence and minds lifted from their bodies. What was left on the floor were hollowed out husks staring back at the collective void creature. Those vestiges of their old identities were discarded, nothing but empty corpses. Even if it was known who had joined the council, any trace of that member's identity begins to vanish from the minds of the public. This is quite rare and usually happens after a chair member steps down or a tragic loss occurs. Even then, it is not known who is replaced at any time. This is because the nightmarish conglomerate entity that is the Darklord blots out all knowledge on who or more truthfully what they are anymore. While almost all traces of humanity are gone from this darklord collective, the grim reality of their fate is not. Even with all of their power and control over the regime, their existence horrifies them. While the Council could leave their palace at any time, the sheer force of will they would have to exert to cloud everyone's minds so the public wouldn't be horrified would prove too much. It is far easier to gradually suppress and banish thoughts from the population, especially involving general identities.

However, with every identity that the Council of Seven devours, they retain and are plagued by everything about who that person once was. This proves both useful and hazardous for the darklord, as they may obtain useful knowledge of popular mindsets in the public, powerful contraptions, potential sedition, and far more. However, every moment of pain, every grim realization, every tragedy now afflicts them. That mind also gains some level of awareness over their inhuman fate as well, fighting to break from the hive.

This fits into another darklord curse, the need to replenish the hive. In time, the assimilated minds will try to kill themselves in order to end their connection to the hive. If enough information isn't siphoned before then, it is lost. And if the council drops below 7 minds for too long, they will fall deeply ill. It is unknown if they can even truly die in their state of eternal suffering. Meanwhile, their mortal alter egos are duplicated as living shells that will go about their remaining existence as soulless doubles. Most of these clones live up to a decade at most, with many more dying well before then.

Unbeknownst to the Deity Builders, they're building something akin to a Tulpa by accident. This quasi-

power is gaining momentum thanks to the Builders, who are none the wiser and would likely fail to see the irony of their actions. This collective psychic manifestation has little power for now, but could one day build into something far more dangerous. The Council is not disturbed by it for now, seeing a potential use in time. In time, forces may be gathered to dispel it and possibly the Deity Builders for failure to comply with state regulations.

Those who complete their re-education aren't sent back home yet, just because they've been deemed safe for society. First, they must be taken to the stronghold of the Society of Mentalism for final treatment. Typically, the bodies have their minds wiped and re-written to assure reintegration into civilization. As they have modified them as seen fit, these vessels are rarely inspected after "mental assembly". A child within the custody of the Mentalists has been discreetly sending messages through these victims of the re-education camps. Thus, this "mental acolyte" child has crammed calls for help within their minds just before deployment. Only one instance has been detected, where the body was taken back to the re-education center for analysis. So far, the acolyte has waited with little hope for rescue. But, should someone hear their pleas, there is hope for a successful breakout from not just the Mentalists' own stronghold, but all of Belagora. As for the patients themselves, the message will likely fade away in time. All in all, these glorified puppets will just carry out duties for the Belagoran order. Strangely, there is a chance that a few will break not only conditioning, but psychic brainwashing as well. Not only will they revert to their old "dangerous" and "individualistic" selves gradually, but many will worsen as they seek out revenge. Such rare cases are sought out to be slain, lest word of such failure get out.

DARKHEATH

Darkheath is a failed colony stuck in the sunk cost of endless war. Attempts to uncover any further information about the domain have largely failed, but a recent breach during a battle has resulted in classified information slipping the ranks. In 760 BC, select groups outside Darkheath learned of deeper truths. Terrifying humanoids called the beastmen seek to obliterate this once wondrous example of Blackmoorian brilliance. Thanks to the diligence of the ***Ministry of Ixion***, the ***Blackmoorian Royal Navy***, the ***Civilian Corps of Darkheath***, and other engaged factions, the tides have not fully turned in enemy favor. Breakthroughs on enemy weaknesses have allowed what's left of civilization to somewhat stabilize towards the coasts. The morale is still weighed down and the mood remains somber. No one knows for certain what hope the future can bring here. Figureheads like the ruling ***Royal Governor Higgins III***, the courageous war hero ***Fleet Admiral Holden***, and ***Minister of Science Ironwill*** attempt the impossible in attempts to lift the spirits of the masses.All of this is to fuel the fallacy that they'll actually finish these campaigns. Heritage relics and cultural artifacts have been sold off to help fuel the war. Likewise, some of the very same weaponry funneled out of Blackmoorian industries are sold off to the highest bidder. Privateers and mercenaries aren't above showcasing the glory of Blackmoorian techniques against hired targets. Desperation and dread breeds further extremism, as one of the few solutions proposed is a devastating super-weapon feared of purging all life in a region. This "Finale Bomb" may end the war yet, but at what cost? And so, let us look deeper at this war-torn land devoid of hope or an end to violence. Unlike prior gazetteers, there are no available Ministers of Propaganda to prevent the truth from emerging here. Darkheath is a domain of absolute despair and constant threat of violence. It has themes that draw from the hopelessness of war, an uncaring and obsessive bureaucracy, and the folly of propaganda when faced with reality.

Darklord: Stefan P. Holden Fleet Admiral of the Blackmoorian Imperial Navy

NE Human Fi (11)

Upon first inspection, Holden is a proud, dignified, confident, and battle-readied veteran eager to thwart the foes of Blackmoor. Despite aging well into his 40's, the man has a youthful vigor and physical strength more befitting of the peak physical condition of a soldier in his 20's. Salt and pepper colored facial hair and a somewhat receded frontal widow's peak hairline does highlight his age otherwise. His legacy is one of the few morale motivators in an otherwise broken land. Pirates from the fallen empire of Thonia[22], encroaching terrors of the Beastmen, and other threats to Blackmoor do little to frighten him anymore. For he is strength, he is legion, he shall help the forces of good prevail. To a degree, all of this is true. However, his campaigns and career obscure a grim past.

Fleet Admiral Holden was appointed to the military for the royal colonies of Blackmoor in 743 BC. He quickly earned distinction not just protecting the seas from pirates, but also the ongoing Beastman Crusades that took to Mystara's seas. Enemy ships were overtaken or submerged, with few casualties under the growing ranks of Holden. By 754 BC, his service was truly exemplary. With special distinction, he was honored with the title of Fleet Admiral of the Blackmoorian Imperial Navy. By 755 BC, a disastrous campaign against Blackmoorian enemies (Beastmen, Cultists, Thonians, et al) caused nearly everything to end as a strange mist rolled in to worsen matters in an already damaged colony. This record of events is public. In reality, Holden is a vain, narcissistic, distrustful, and hateful man hardly holding much in the way of honor. This is all the more evident by a prized mirror that he keeps in his manor, where he previously would obsess over himself in private. His goal was to purge anything he deemed disloyal to Blackmoor while finding ways to bring all glory and attention back to him. Many of his subordinates were gradually swapped out from competent but dissenting voices to sycophants who would adhere to any word uttered by the Fleet Admiral, something not even his own wit and tactical brilliance could offset.

With new hyper loyal crewmen by his side, his course was clear in saving Blackmoor. This mission was simple: help protect a recent colony while fending off the ongoing evils of the beastmen and other adversaries of the state. Unknown craft were docked near the colonial port. When hailed, the ships were revealed to be crewed by a mixture of beastmen and devotees to the Egg of Coot[23]. Upon discovery, battle commenced. Holden, a brilliant but front-fighting man, dispatched a smaller covert ship to slip around the battle and travel to the island. The crew, well armed and ready for action, was commanded to take the island back by force. After the vessels on the water were overpowered and the villages were cleared, a darker truth emerged. A mixture of illusion and enchantment magic revealed those slain to be brainwashed and disguised Blackmoorian colonists. In the eyes of the fleet admiral, it was likely that the beastmen employed dark occultists to masquerade the situation and mind control the innocent. Suspicious characters found nearby fled deeper into the territory, furthering his hunch, before unveiling another tribe of beastmen. While unfriendly towards the Blackmoorians, the beastmen claimed no involvement. The humanoids were cut down by cannonfire from the bay and soldiers on land. Even those trying to flee were massacred without a second thought. Holden demanded further action from his superiors, who wearily granted it. The ships

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[22] *The ancient empire that Blackmoor (and Darkheath) had broken away. Ever since, they feuded as Thonia sought to reclaim the territory. At some point in the future, Blackmoor conquers them instead.*

[23] *An enigmatic eldritch being that had tormented Blackmoor and beyond for ages, known for employing strange alien powers and devices.*

then began to patrol nearby waters, while soldiers deposited onto land were ordered to purge anything seemingly related to cults or beastmen, taking mages with them to dispel illusions. Many beastmen uninvolved with the politics or conflicts were found and exterminated over the course of days. Attempts at mutiny were squashed, as mortified sailors attempted to defect or rebel. Natives along the region were accused of Egg-cult worship and were likewise purged. As dust cleared, countless victims lay dead: *Oltec, Azcan*, independent beastmen[24], and various other victims. The admiral was crestfallen, collapsing in shock. He had orchestrated a pointless wave of death. While he didn't regret the removal of beastmen and other humanoids, the human deaths easily outnumbered that. But, not admitting defeat or deception, he only doubled down and demanded that anything resembling the beastman or cultist heresy be purged without question. In his mind, he was not tricked, but on a righteous cause, a holy war that he could win. His subordinates left to their grim task as mists surrounded him, and he closed his eyes in despair while lying upon the deck of his ship. The mists parted as Holden emerged aboard his flagship, HMS Tide Turner, not to find Blackmoor or its Brun[25] extension, but a new colony in need of his direction. Guilt and trauma still surrounded him, but this new site lifted his spirits … at first.

Holden has found that he can no longer truly win in any fight. Any victory is often pyrrhic, as either his enemies have learned means of countering his once-brilliant strategies or overwhelming odds shift drastically without rhyme or reason. For example, should he embark on a campaign along Timor's Strait, resources will drastically dry up for nearby land-based campaigns as beastmen overwhelm troops. Not even mist scholars know if these creatures were pulled from ancient Mystara or manifestations of the powers… or both. If there is a charge through No Man's Land eastwards, pirates and Thonian war fleets will torment the surrounding seas. Combat on the land may see the beastmen's raw might through endless wave tactics of enemy mobs, while coveted warmachines are used against the Blackmoorians. When soldiers are better prepared to contend with the flood of the horde, the beastmen find ways to surprise and catch the troops off-guard. As for the sea, the enemies of Darkheath prove more diverse in armies and tactics. Blockades of various ships form along the waves, formations pierce through Blackmoor lines, incredible firepower is more than capable of sinking the mightiest of Holden's fleets. Even less organized bands and militias, like raiders from Thonia or greedy pirate mercenaries, sneak onto the shore to pillage coastal cities and towns. As if all enemies are magically coordinated, Darkheath will suffer anywhere that Holden may win. And should he gain some ground, he finds another tragedy is revealing itself not far away. And thus, anything positive must be abandoned to face the new threat. When in the sanctity of his own home, he too is robbed of personal victory. Few things sustain the royal admiral than his ego and charming looks. And for part of his curse, both are crushed for him. When gazing upon his mirror, his reflection is swapped out with some manner of demonic or beastman-like monster. Anyone else who witnesses such a terror risks finding themselves falling into madness[26]. As of now, his prized mirror is cracked after he thrust a strong punch into it. He cannot accept that his "perfect features" are no longer visible to him, even if he maintains healthy habits and lifestyle in arduous times. To avoid looking at himself, he may lead discussion from subordinates towards him, to further inflate his ego. He has taken care when doing this, to not come across as weak or insecure.

Closing the Borders: When Fleet Admiral Holden decides to close the borders, ships will move along the misty borders, in the primary position to open

[24] *Ancient Mystaran populations, see also: The Hollow World Boxed Set.*

[25] *A continent on the world of Mystara*

[26] *(They must roll a save against madness)*

fire upon a target. Should the interloper call a bluff, an assault will begin until the target makes it clear they wish to return. The ships will then recede into the mists. Even on the eastern peninsula side of the domain border, ships will fire cannons with frightful accuracy. Those who engage with these fleets are viable to be killed unless they surrender. In the case of the eastern peninsula, soldiers may hail them after attempting to attack them. Should they fall, others will replace them until the players give themselves up.

One can still make allies and alliances within the wartorn wastelands of Darkheath. Beyond directly getting involved with the war effort, there are few ways to get involved within various factions if one can get past a seemingly awkward and uncanny "*Blackmoorian*" language[27]. And even then, the military divisions of Blackmoor present within the colony do not like mystery elements, such as mercenaries. It's not uncommon for accidental visitors to be detained, to ensure that they aren't spies or general enemy assets. The **New Blackmoor jail h**as been repurposed for this, as most of the criminals are sent off to war. Characters should expect rigid scrutiny before any consideration for recruitment to the cause. Much of this examination process is covert, studying such characters from a safe and warded distance.

Those who oppose Blackmoor may wish to throw themselves at the mercy of a beastman warlord. These loose orders are commanded by the strongest of a tribe or settlement who has asserted control through might. Beyond these groups are bickering warlords who only come together when a Blackmoorian attack is launched against them. Barring that, other chiefs compete for dominance. One figure is rising up, the overtly monstrous **Briarfangs Krogg**. This violet colored giant has 4 tusk-like sharp teeth sticking out, 3 fiendish eyes, pointed ears, and a massive rippling physique. The creature stands 8 feet in height, cheerfully gazing down upon all who would dare oppose him. This brute is in particular a master tactician and loves studying enemy technology for the purposes of thwarting or destroying it. Unlike other chiefs, Krogg sees outsiders as useful war assets and not more tools or distractions. Other warlords often view outsiders as slaves or far worse. But, for the stranded Blackmoorians already here, a dismal fate is all they can expect.

This isn't to say that one must enlist in the cause to get back in Darkheath. Day to day life has pushed many into extremes, civilians and military alike. A thriving black market has seen high-end weapons of warfare leaking into the wider Broken Cog. More powerful variants on the *repeating rifle* and *revolver pistol*[28] have proved especially popular. Likewise, all manner of illicit substances have made their way into the hands of buyers desperate to escape the horrors of reality. **Archilis Township** has been especially devastated by a growing drug epidemic, as citizens indulge in anything to escape the pains of endless warfare. Particularly chaotic or exploitative characters may get an upper hand through this unscrupulous source of trade. And given how overextended the military and law are, attempts to stop the outbreak of narcotics fail.

There has been one failsafe that has proved at least somewhat successful. **The New Blackmoor Safe Haven** is an underground complex designed to protect and shelter those deemed "important" to Blackmoorian civilization in the event of disaster. Kept secret from much of the laymen and commoner civilians, it has offered some level of temporary salvation for all manner of top military personnel, government officials, celebrated artists, calculating scientific minds, field experts, and more. Access points are limited to ensure secrecy. It is somewhat

[27] *An ancient Mystaran language unheard of anywhere else in the Lands of the Mists.*

[28] *See Masque of the Red Death for similar firearms, even Gamma World for especially dangerous steampunk firearm inspiration.*

likely that outsiders will discover an abandoned or ransacked one, but it is best that they prove themselves invaluable to the cause instead and find safer shelter. Otherwise, one should remain under the cloak of endless gunsmoke and combat. With so much conflict running rampant, a discreet touch is necessary for greater chances of survival. While many complexes are still in use, others have been abandoned due to external or internal conflict. These can provide temporary shelter, but it is just as likely that monsters have moved in or that the sites are deeply haunted.

Dread Possibilities

Despite being a failing colony, the people survive as they always have. Unaware that the darklord could end their suffering by admitting his hubris, they endure en-extremis to survive a violent land. As is, there are numerous rumors of terrible deeds enacted by the military to help turn the tides of war. Civilians have allegedly been captured for all manner of unethical experiments to create the perfect soldier. Those on the battlefield have sworn to secrecy upon seeing their ranks bolstered by emotionally numb cyborgs engineered into killing machines as well as the awakened dead used as shock troop fodder. Many of the fellow warriors on the battlefield have simply become jaded to the horrors around them to care. Ironically, in the recent past, they would have been fighting necromancers employing Heralds of Thanatos and mad scientist mergers of machine and flesh. Military and public alike have been gradually forced to accept them, as the situation of Darkheath deteriorates further. Mutiny and subsequent execution of traitors has only given more resources for these state-sanctioned necromancers and wicked mechanists. But, it begs the question how pro-Blackmoorian these lunatics and killers truly are.

The war to preserve Blackmoor against the endless tide of its enemies has long since been corrupted. Evil influences have taken many powerful figures beyond the Darklord. Some more recent recruits aren't even from the Pre-3000 BC[29] years of Blackmoor. One recent military official rising the ranks, the Sergeant ***Stepan the Rake***, is not from Blackmoor's continent of Skothar at all, but a paranoid researcher from the modern nation of Cimarron County in the Savage Baronies of Western Brun[30]. His passing familiarity with firearms technology and obsession with "lost secrets" allowed him to integrate easier. However, his own fearful nature and maniacal impulses are furthered by something else, lycanthropy. The Mystaran strain of werefox lycanthropy[31] does not discriminate based on gender like in other worlds. Much like the Darklord, Stepan suffers a rather malignant form of narcissism, he is obsessed with his own plans and will charm or mess his way into ensuring this happens. Deep down, he fears infecting others with his bloodline, but this has happened before. Curiously, many of those embraced by him have found themselves charmed by his mad ego. Gradually, he has deluded himself into being a savior of Blackmoor, a hero needed to change the past. Any concern about going back to modern Mystara has failed him.

ICHTHYOS

Fallen grandeur and hubris. These were the faults of Ichthyos. In ancient days, it was the seat of an eponymous empire that saw vassal states throughout the cog. Even Alleigosto was a sister state that lived to serve Ichthyos. Even before the

[29] *As in Mystaran Calendar of before cataclysm, not Barovian calendar. 3000 BC (Mystaran) is also when the Great Rain of Fire destroyed Blackmoor.*

[30] *A barony in the Savage Coast, one of the few places where firearms are known in Mystara.*

[31] *See Monstrous Compendium article.*

Gods punished the lands for their hubris, human folly led to decline, rebellion, and collapse of a structure too big to fall. The actions of an evil clan helped to bring the land further to its knees. But now? It proves far worse. Legends tell of a mighty empire by the sea that sank beneath the depths by the corruption of the ruling clan's ancestors. This family is led by their patriarch, the miserly and cantankerous ***Obed Elos***[32]. Despite a hoarse voice, looking to be in constant pain, and seeming impossibly ancient, Obed is neither a fool or overly feeble. He also serves as the high priest over the governing faith of the land. While the land should have risen up and punished the clan for its sins, the vile members of this Elos family seized remaining land and power, furthering worship of dark eldritch gods. However, as punishment for their hubris, much of their dominion was flooded, smashed, destroyed! Now, all that is left to govern over is a pitiful plot of land surrounded by waste and dread. Those who have attempted to flee this mess often find themselves assaulted by hostile watery waves or various nasty things written in Obed's religion, things known to locals as "deep ones". Those who ally themselves with the mad hermit, ***Old Zodak***, have some slim hope of survival. But, even the seemingly immortal ancient drunk is rare to offer much nowadays. While knowledge of the cults is limited outside of ***Old Ichthyan***, sometimes spelled *Old Icththyean* as well, few sane minds would ever want to enter such a foreboding land. Curiously, this name of the village is also the name of the native language often filled with sharp sounds and a rapid speech. Once, it was part of a thriving nautical and mining industry. But now, a pitiful shell is cut further and further off from the rest of the world. Decay and squalor infest a once-thriving realm, doomed to stagnate in its weird beliefs. The tainted Clan Elos tries to maintain what's left of their economic infrastructure and technology, but still risks regression into a lower cultural level. Likewise, this hasn't stopped its sinister cosmic corruption from reaching out and tainting others beyond. Ichthyos adapts themes such as rigid theocracies, the horror stories of H.P. Lovecraft, dilapidated old communities, and chilling isolation.

There is very little in the way of a power structure within Ichthyos beyond the church. And even then, this theocratic state is in dire shambles. The church seeks to operate all; the rusting remains of industry, the drying markets of trade, the vestiges of tourist commerce, the collapsing production of exported goods. Truly, it is the overseer of an empire in its dying gasps. Even with these great shortcomings, the Church is Supreme and the Church controls almost all that Ichthyos has to offer. The majority of the congregational members are actually deep one hybrids, either capable of disguising themselves through mundane means or hiding far enough away to not draw attention from outsiders. Those who are fully human prove brainwashed and often driven to madness. Despite the majority population of this domain likely to be deep-blooded monsters, the clergy likes to operate discreetly. Much of the full-blooded deep ones communicate in watery depths or through proxy networks. When presented with the rare outsider public, the church likes to maintain the facade of a charitable organization helping society to rebuild from calamity. Despite worsening the poverty afflicting the region, they create a veneer of aid and care. Much of the dogma states that salvation is at hand for suffering through the mundane doldrums of life. Your final reward is embracing your blood and joining the deep realms of the ancients forever. Before Ichthyos became a domain, this was meant to be a control mechanism meant to give Clan Elos more power. Ironically, it has slowly stripped the family of power unless the population of Old Ichthyan can be maintained, as he can never be a true deep one.

One of the last surviving vestiges of industry lies within supplying food. Agriculture just beyond settled limits allows for a variety of fruits and

[32] *See QtR 31 for more.*

vegetables to be exported for some commerce. However, the crux of food exports comes from the Whaler's Union. This collective of fishermen, hatchery attendants and whalers make up a lot of the business within Ichthyos. As they pull sway, even a begrudging respect with the Elos Clan, they are given leeway to do a lot of what they want. While much of the infrastructure is dilapidated or fading, the Whaler's Union has far more refined and enduring equipment. Many of the townsfolk of Ichthyean are deeply envious of the treatment they get, but are aware that they are perhaps a major source of meals and income. Likewise, it was their doing that allowed a fishing industry to begin with. Years of exploitative industry without second thought resulted in waters polluted by shale, runoff, diseased fish carcasses, and far more. Off-shore hatcheries, safe fishing techniques, and other approaches have somewhat solved this. The waters closer to the village remain awful, but salvation is not far away. Out of any group liable to deal with outsiders, it is most likely them. Thanks to a contract with High Priest Obed, they have a sort of arcane glamor placed upon them that makes them look fully human and not mutated. Many are perturbed that they must lower themselves to "aiding the non-blessed" or non-deep hybrids. Services extend to transporting outsiders in need, such as adventurers daring to examine the depths of the Ichthyan Sea. Their relations with the scholars stationed on Vizuvos have likewise improved over time, offering freight and ferrying at a discounted price to and from the Alleigoston mainland. Even somewhat far Nosos has begun to profit off of the fishmongers and their trade, as their pollution situation proves far worse. These pleasantries and services are all a mask. Their real purpose for all of this is luring the unsuspecting into traps where they may be offered up as sacrifices or used as pawns in games with their dark masters.

To say that there are no other groups present in Ichthyos is a lie, but they hold no prominence and carry no great importance. The further one gets from Old Ichthyan, the further one loses many of the trappings of civilization. Many villages reaching towards the northern mountainside are those who fled the horrors of the Ancient Ones, falling back to ancient beliefs or succumbing to the horrors of the wilderness. The isolated village of ***Nyx*** has suffered regression far worse than Old Ichthyan has, falling into a society more medieval than anything seen in the Broken Cog. However, their preservation of old religious values remains quite impressive, and is slightly perverted by time. Called "Pagans" by those who live in the sinking coastal city, they are treated as problems by the wider population. However, they remain fully human unlike most of said population. Their dedication to especially macabre subjects makes them all the more unappealing to outsiders, especially their namesake devotion to the death deity of Nyx.

Their garb better reflects earlier trends in their nation's history, going back to an ancient empire that their ancestors swore fealty to. A stola is common for women of Nyx, while a pallium is common for men. Due to being slightly more elevated towards the mountains, mantles are not uncommon to ensure warmth. Both men and women here braid their hair, with more ornate patterns and weavings used by those of a higher station. While Old Ichthyan has spades of old imperial design, the buildings within Nyx obsess over maintaining it. While sharing a love of white buildings and orange roofs with the folk of the sea, the Nyxians elect to install columns to support much of their architecture. Such a throwback is anachronistic to this domain, as well as neighboring Alleigosto. This is because the denizens consider themselves the inheritors of the olden throne, not the traitors by the poisoned and haunted sea. Their ascendency will only be complete if they succeed in subduing, capturing, and sacrificing Father Elos to the True Gods. Only then will the traditions resurface and allow the lands to heal. This is what their dogma says. ***Mariapol*** acts as the leader of this cult, claiming it is her duty to avenge the ways of the true faith while preparing the lands for their return. In the time since the founding of Nyx, strange

creatures of old myths have returned to the lands beyond the coast. Outlanders have had sightings of evil winged women, goat-legged men, and other monsters seemingly lost to time. The creatures are all wicked perversions of folklore, all seeking the doom of outlanders who come upon them. It is possible that the Pagans have summoned them to the land to fight by their side or perhaps it is some naive attempt to "restore normalcy" to a disrupted realm. Given a rising zealous attitude towards war, some suspect that other old gods beyond Nyx have joined in their crusade. A shrine dedicated to a satyr being has emerged within a nearby mountain cave. These supposed pagans, who have grown skeptical of their neighbor's technologies, are likewise relieved that the monsters that they conjured are resistant to mundane advanced weapons including firearms. However, the very rare enchanted firearm may still deal damage. A visiting martial ranger of Alleigosto found himself surviving thanks to an enchanted revolver against the clutches of a dread harpy[33].

Those who fear the pagans but haven't given up on their old life can still be found in Ichthyos as well, but most have fled towards the eastern coastline and closer towards Alleigosto. These better fit a vision of Ichthyos in its prime. They will be quick to tell you that various naval industries and imports were the epitome of the lands. All manner of rare stone supplies, nautical transport crafts, and fuels were technological specialties of the region. The total usurping of leadership and the great spiritual demise of the land resulted in most of that falling apart, save for the few bands of scrappy and determined patriots who would not let their beloved home truly die. But, they are not wide eyed idealists. There was no longer a market or any desirability in Ichthyhos proper. And thus, the edges bordering more prosperous nations became host to those plucky few who hadn't completely left their home behind. Deep hybrids have infested these villages as spies, to see what secrets they dare to withhold from Old Ichthyan. Much like that accursed place, the spies within these small towns and villages employ all manner of disguises to appear as human as possible. Some simply obfuscate by turning their grotesqueness into human deformities. The largest group to enact espionage is the aforementioned Whaler's Union, but these border state residents are somewhat more wary of them, due to their trade with the wider domain.

Dread Possibilities

Old Zodak is indeed mad, his mind mostly blasted by ancient curses and personal vices. But, the insight he still receives from his remaining gifts are about as close to divinations allowed within the Demiplane of Dread. If taken beyond town limits, he comes across as more sober and focused. While still crazed and jumbled, his shift in clarity is striking and alarming. His own curse is very much tied to Obed Elos, and finding a way to kill the Darklord would likely be an end to the poor drunk's own suffering. More than anything, he desires a peaceful drift into eternal rest. No locals know this, but they don't trust him enough to talk to or verify facts with him.

Obed has grandiose plans for revenge, so that way the ancient ones can recognize his worth. He seeks to flood much of the cog's coast, making it easier for deep ones to invade rival domains. Should these rivals drown, their goods and souls will be taken by the horrors and offered to their gods as tribute. It is unknown how such an apocalypse may occur within the cluster, but Elos research anything that advances his goals day by day. While the High Priest continues to seclude himself, interactions with the town have declined over the years. Desire to strike down others has hindered his ability to rule over his ruined territory… for now.

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[33] *A mists variant of the classical monster, conjured by cultists of Nyx.*

Nosos

The brazen destructiveness of industry, Nosos represents all of the horrors that fabrication and production can bring. A land experiencing total environmental collapse, even its Darklord ***Malus Sceleris*** finds himself facing the consequences. Critics are quickly silenced in favor of the various merchant companies that take the place of actual power within the city limits. Numerous clan-lead companies vie for different departments and claimants, so that way they may seize the city to their own ends in time. The purposes of many of these other companies are equally self-serving and often lead to destructive ends. The natural world beyond Nosos' city is all but lifeless, in some cases corrupted into something of a toxic graveyard. Something about this perfect cocktail of rampant pollution, widespread corruption, and unchecked futurist idealism has garnered the attention of something distant, something wrong. Malevolent forces have been drawn to sprawling vacant fields, as Noson security is too overburdened to truly stop them. Nosos takes from themes of rampant industrialization, environmental devastation, and market corruption. To a degree, the lands beyond the city also adapt cosmic horror motifs. Nosos is a land of artificial solace amongst seemingly endless manmade desolation.

To understand the power groups of Nosos, one must understand the workings and politics of the business groups and merchant families. Through them, the region is controlled with a tight economic grasp. And through them, new factions arise in response. The most well known or obvious of these groups are the Company Barons that act as the de facto ruling order of Nosos, makeshift noble houses born from guilds turned modern corporations. Below them are company leads, essentially the royal governors and sheriffs appointed to serve underneath them. In most regards, these people are figureheads to take blame and report interesting news to the true rulers. And so, the hierarchy trickles down until one reaches the common workers and the untouchables below them even. Fates such as "D-Class" or "Disposable Class[34]" are reserved for the lowest dregs of society, according to Noson standards. Groups like ***Scissa Sunt*** mining company seek to cleanse the wastelands through these "D-Class" agents, so they may reclaim bleak stretches for their own ends. Mining operations will only slow if they lack the sufficient bodies to throw at their growing problem.

The influence of the barons is felt from all peoples within this domain. The economy moves, shakes, and quakes with their decisions, how the companies endure such decisions, and the after effects that trickle throughout the domain. This can range from marketing ploys and trends, to straight up espionage and corporate warfare. Formal law is a joke, as the market ultimately regulates order in the land. Meritocracy and merchant princes, that is how the public understands order in Nosos. But others will argue it's barons take all, when companies aren't focused on embargos, tariffs, ploys, and more at their disposal. This overreach has inspired awe and imitation, but also seething hatred and retaliation.

Among the latter, none embodies this more than The Crossed Souls. This gang operates with an almost cult-like zeal. They revere the infamous terrorist Malachi Cross, the "Barmy Bomber", who threatened Zherisia and Nosos alike with an arsenal of explosives. When he died aboard the Hercule Express on its way to Nosos, disenfranchised mourners banded together in hopes of honoring his desires. This in turn resulted in copycat killers and chaos seekers reveling in pandemonium. The Crossed Souls are loathed by nearly all around them, citing them as violent nihilists and hatemongers. Their means of retaliation often involves relentless murder and destruction, in an effort to tear down all

[34] *Prisoners and other undesirables sent to handle deadly tasks. See also Broken Cog entry on Nosos from QtR 31.*

things they deem tied to the establishment. One recent matter, in 758 BC, involved a tunnel in the Expansio Bores just beyond city limits collapsing. The Crossed Souls snuck explosives throughout the shaft, waiting until the shift foreman entered as part of a safety inspection. Everyone in the tunnel was murdered, buried under hundreds of pounds of debris. Even the traitorous duke of Alleigosto fears aiding them too much, for fear that they may turn on him quickly. They are no fools, though, often operating as small cells under aliases and proxies to entice jaded or angry members of the public. Operations often begin small, such as minor petty crimes to get back at the effective authority that failed them. In time, proven contributors will be given more dangerous and damaging tasks until they have proven ready to kill. These cells are independent, but are somewhat cooperative with each other. With no overly formal structure, they are seldom seen at a base of operations for too long. Tracking and suppressing these groups has proved to be a major challenge.

Chaos strikes fear into the barely ruled Nosos, but a growing idealistic seeks to alleviate the fear and tension that this brings. The ***League of the Efficient*** seeks to clean up both the moral and physical decay present within the domain. Through new advances, they promote the health of the individual and health of society. Many members take up jobs in hygiene and sanitation, including cleaning the very streets. Often, they will employ prisoners seeking community service and rehabilitation. Neophytes and lesser members aren't beneath helping get rid of trash, while more the more esteemed prefer more clerical or municipal roles. Even the lower class are willing to be hired for these garbage collector jobs, if only because the Efficient pay well. But, who funds the funders? Rumors speculate from many sources, such as one of the Barons. Conspiratorial minds speak of foreign nobility, but this lacks a proper motive. For those paid in the field, it offsets the major risks that come with the territory. It isn't rare for the filth to destroy a worker's health completely. Many are content pushing it into the already heinous underground that coils and twists underneath Nosos. This underground is labyrinthine, perhaps from Old Timor's expansion in size and power. However, despite a love of cleanliness, Efficient methods still strike out against the influence of nature, something that has earned respect from Malus and his company's influence. The Efficient understand that only through technological advancement and progressive ideals can face the future. They view deviation, and nature itself, as manifestations of chaos and aberrant thought. To their utopian ideals, such things must be destroyed for the future to unfold. As such, they are deeply intolerant of less advanced societies, marking them as brutes and savages. Their intrigue surrounding theories of evolution has led to new theories that humans across various domains are distinct races, rather than a singular human race. Word of this reaching other lands has sparked mockery and outright backlash. The Divinity of Mankind from Zherisia has made brief contact with the Efficients. This outreach was out of initial diplomacy, but further attempts have been placed on hiatus for now. The Efficients are viewed as extremist and sneering technocrats, citing that they distort the three primary virtues of the Divinity too much. Despite this, Efficients hold the Divinity in high regard.

An Efficient who used a mistway to emerge into Lamordia found themselves ultimately skewered, following capture and questioning by Falkovnian scouts. Negative responses from these lands and more have made them deeply hostile towards many of the cultures outside of the Broken Cog, as well as some within it such as parts of Rockbaecche, the New Timor region of Zherisia, and Ichthyos. Despite hateful dogma, they also teach utilizing innovations to optimize the body and soul into absolute health. While they are more of a philosophy, their methods borderline on religion where one can perfect oneself, albeit at the cost of neighbors who disagree. Their headquarters, The Bastion of Efficiency, can be

found on Cobble Path Road in the East Hall quadrant of Nosos City. While the Noson population is preferred, regardless of social station, they welcome Zherisians, Alleigostons, and Belagorans. Rockbaecchers are held in suspicion, but may be granted clemency. Timorians, Ichthyans, and Darkheathers are strictly not allowed.

While still maligned and held in sinister light, it is possible to curry the favor of the strange underground dwellers below Nosos. As the primary city keeps building above and building higher, forgotten refuse and the neglected unworthy get buried below. Called "Mole Men" by those above the city streets, they're seen as scrap chasers, filthy miscreants, and general societal blights. Many are just the untreated, the homeless, and the runaways. Makeshift and semi-nomadic structures dot collided and corroded junk ruins, as pseudo-tribes shift about. Assessing their goals and motivations at initial glance proves hard, as so many individual groups form and break almost constantly. Many battle each other for resources, while others plot on how to be unseen heroes for those above. Some, having learned of the Marikith, seek to imitate them unaware that they may be corrupted into them. Some have come into contact and ultimately aligned with the Crossed Souls, seeking to enact revenge against a civilization that shunned them. More than anyone, they know of a sinister presence they call "Deep Timor", a series of tunnels controlled by sinister creatures called Marikiths.

Malus, the darklord of the domain, has taken an interest in sponsoring the purge of problematic elements in the wasteland. However, his methods are inefficient, as he fears and despises anything truly natural. The horrors of the wasteland epitomize industrial waste and its consequences upon the land, with the very spiritual essence of such decay materializing upon the domain. While this malignant energy is not well understood, some surviving on the fringes of the domain refer to this presence as "The Death Wyrm". It is known that this force isn't remotely a dragon, but a gradual manifestation upon the land. This creature, seemingly elemental in nature, was not just born from the land's dying screams, but also eldritch anomalies that have been attracted to the land. This wretched force, akin to the druidic spiritual powers of yore, is more about wrath and entropy than protecting stations of nature. Its origins may be tied to a strange temple found off the coast of Belagora, where a correctional penal colony is found now. Through its corruption, other strange and cosmic forces feel all the more attracted to Nosos.

It is said that a vile entity, known simply as "The Green Maiden" by the denizens of Falkovnia, has made the journey. Joining her is an ominous creature serving as her consort, appropriating the name of "Green Man". To the careless onlooker, he is a cross between a druidic knight and an anthropomorphic treant akin to a mythic "green knight" archetype. In reality, he is anything related to either, but a cosmic horror that mimics nature for his advantage. This alleged knight is too alien to be understood as honorable. His interests seem to be in slaying the last life in the wastelands and preparing the land for a new kingdom after entropy has burned away all else. Did this knight hail from the same strange realm as the maiden? Uncertain, but their agendas seem to intertwine.

There is an irony that will never truly occur to the Darklord or various other company barons. The very industries that grant the tools to fight these menaces also empower the very foes that the barons seek to stop. It's also possible that Obed's courting with deep horrors has invited dread things of beyond the stars to nearby lands. This is compounded by the remaining druids of Nosos turning to these cosmic horrors as dark saviors out to avenge nature for them. The ***Cinder Grave Circle*** is one such vindictive cult, corrupted through raw hatred and malice. Many of the members even know Malus, having cooperated with the darklord's father at one point.

There are other tales of darkness that permeate the dark corners of Nosos. A new trending narcotic has

become a sensation among the wealthy and powerful, with far less dependable variants surfacing for the common folk. This is Cargidan's Oil, named after a miner in the wastelands who discovered it. Prior to unveiling it deep within a cave, Cargidan was impoverished and frail, with few prospects in life. After striking the black gold, he pondered on making deals with barons and increasing his status. Within a few weeks, he managed to claw his way towards the establishment… at the cost of some affluent souls along the way, but they deserved it in his eyes. His competition was quick to loathe him, as he was some fresh upstart built from nothing but luck. His response was to mingle and introduce his product to others. But, like with others who sampled the oil for a variety of uses, they found it painfully addictive. The sensation it gave off was purely euphoric. Added to a smoking pipe, cooked into a beverage/meal, or simply inhaled through vapor brought an uplifting and motivating sensation. This was in truth not genuine, as no one felt like doing something to move themselves out of their negative situation. More so, this elevated high deluded them into thinking everything could be durable as it already was. This pacification caught the attention of other supreme barons, who wanted to ensure that Cargidan himself was as useful of a puppet as possible, so long as he didn't try to usurp too much power for himself. After making it clear that he wanted a more docile, calmer, and pleasant public; many of his detractors left him alone.

However, as with any abusive drug, there are side effects that are especially present in cheaper knockoff varieties. Cargidan's Oil has an especially ruthless withdrawal effect, inducing a mental numbness into outright loss of consciousness and even death. Subjects may fall into a semi-conscious state for upwards to a day or two if not administered a dose of the oil somehow. Prolonged use can generate some slight bodily resistance, but also a deeper and deeper chronic fatigue. Rest becomes less effective as a whole and the victim's energy and general health will gradually deplete. The stress placed on the body in turn puts pressure on the heart, elevating heart rate and toughening the muscle to compensate. It is not uncommon for addicts to suffer heart failure. Likewise, something within the oil seems to attack organs if taken in high enough doses for an extended time, revealing ulcers if not destroyed innards in corpses. Tests on cadavers have led physicians to speculate that the oil is alive. Even "activated" through heat, it seems to "hunger" after a time. The tough muscle of organs satisfies, as its presence creates stress on the body that prevents proper rest. This drug has become an epidemic in Nosos City, while Zherisia's Paridon has seen some usage in underground dens, but the parliament is pondering on a ban. However, this could be a useful tool in leverage against foreigners, in an attempt for the parliament to get the goods that they want, while having more social control with xenophobic policies that limit foreigners.

A new wonder has piqued the curiosity and evoked the horror of many. Presenting "*The Dread Possibility Engine*." Such a wondrous device need only be strapped upon a willful user's head to truly begin… or in some cases, unwitting victim. The strange apparatus-like creation sits heavily upon the dome of the wearer's head, as small arms are placed around points under a user's eyelids. Without great care, this can potentially scratch the corneas. Upon activation, the device scans a relaxed and dormant mind for "electric pulses" that it translates into imagery. These images are not projected anywhere outside of the wearer's mind. None of the images that follow are literal interpretations of knowledge or thoughts, but something more speculative. This machine not only samples the mind, but calculates various outcomes from those thoughts. For some odd reason, the majority of these calculations are morbid or concerning. Its initial use was at a science symposium within Lamordia. A judge, eager to try the device, shrieked in horror upon seeing images of her husband cornered and murdered by a wayward flesh golem. Another judge hailed from a faraway land called Alleigosto, only to be greeted by images

of rogue automatons gaining self-awareness and revolting. The device has been coveted more than once and has since moved between Lamordia, Zherisia, Alleigosto, Nosos, and Mordent. While it baffles the mind at why various thieves would willingly torture themselves with a malevolent device, its feedback seems all too accurate. The especially paranoid may find use in learning their possible fates. Its current mad holder is hiding out in Nosos, awaiting a means of fleeing back to Lamordia. The thief is actually operating under the proxy of a Doctor Mabiuse who has since turned to a life of crime. His specialty, prior to moving to Dementlieu, was in studying the mind. In depth and unethical research granted him an understanding into hypnosis. Negative reactions to his practice resulted in him ultimately closing down, resorting to using his new talents for crime. His latest unwitting victim, some hapless brigand, is just the latest stooge in a potential ploy. But, Dr. Mabiuse does not understand this Dread Possibility Engine yet. He sees mere potential to learn more of the mind, while expanding his criminal empire.

Now, what of the many travels that this foul artifact endured to get to Dr. Mabiuse? One example of this is Dr. Beauregard de Blauche, a native of Dementlieu who felt more comfortable in the clouds of smog and rivers of flaming sludge that fill Nosos. After a trek into the burned out and mutated blight zones past city limits, his mind was deeply scarred by an encounter with an incomprehensible entity. This inspired him to create his wondrous machine. All the while, an attendant of Lamordia's prestigious new school took a brief sabbatical leave to regain his composure. Dieter van Drachenfels was listless in the education world, preferring to be more hands on and explore his own way. Without intending to, one of his journeys leads him to discover a relatively safe mistway between Lamordia and Zherisia. This in turn led him to an ally of the Zherisians, Nosos. Von Drachenfels met de Blauche at a Salon of the Enlightened, a sort of gathering place for intellectuals. Eager for a test subject of his latest experiment, de Blauche lured the university student into his lab before forcefully strapping the mechanism around his head. The images exposed to the captured student nearly rendered von Drachenfels mad. With the mad doctor distracted, the student seized a moment to bash the device over de Blauche's head, killing him quickly. The device was still intact and the design documents were well scattered around the lab. Not wasting a moment, Dieter packed as much as he could and fled Nosos in a hurry. Returning to Paridon, he booked travel along the river and across the Lamordian mistway. In time, Mabiuse found him and the rest was history.

Iron City (Pocket Domain) - CL 7 (Medieval) - 10 (Industrial)

Iron City is an absolute contradiction. It retains much of the aesthetics and feel of its medieval past and cultural roots, but it cannibalizes new technologies and ideas from neighbors. This urban island city state is a bizarre blender of past and future colliding. It is decadent, self-absorbed, and a hub rife for both incredible exhibitions and daring acts of thievery. Iron City is a domain with themes of claustrophobic urban environments, distorted metropolitanism, an endless clash of law vs. chaos, and hidden conspiracies. The domain takes from various dark and dystopian urban focused media such as Dark City and Metropolis, but especially the THIEF trilogy of video games.

Darklord: Garret the Snatch, former religious monk turned infamous thief

CE Human Thief (10)

Iron City was once a subsidiary off the coast of Nosos; a short boat ride through the Ichthyan Sea would take you there. Many of the wealthiest and powerful barons proudly claimed the colonized property as their home. One could get away from the hustle, bustle, and infestation of rampant industrialization. Despite its name, Iron City was built from pining for a different time. Part of this was from the "diplomatic" initiatives of Duke Arcaico of Alleigosto.

For one ambitious thief, this whole city was one lucrative heist in the making. However, a moral dilemma tugged at him. He was a man aspiring to support a family, atone for leaving his religious upbringing and more. All the same, he was in too deep. This life of crime was his means of support, it would just take one extremely successful robbery to let him retire and give up such a wretched lifestyle. From breaking into the houses of nobles and high merchants to breaking prisoners from their holding cells, Garret darted about the shadows while wisecracking snide comments to himself along the way. In the end, this was his business and he didn't care much either way. However, he was presented with countless moral dilemmas along the way. His love captured, his employer falling ill, the presence of sinister factions, corrupt bureaucracy making its move. And every time, Garret favored continuing on the path of thievery instead of helping those around him. Time and again, he would lose his allies and witness loved ones dying. Instead of making him reconsider, he doubled down on his career choice in hopes of some day being rich off his spoils to retire to secrecy. This culminated with the climax of a shadow war. Three extreme factions made the city their center of conflict. A group of fallen druids wanted to suspend the encroaching industry that began to rise, sneering technocratic artificers wanted a base to accelerate advancements to new heights, and unhinged occultists wanted to revive their sleeping dark god whose essence lingered in the city. Garret played them against each other, until he stole the very artifact that all desired, "The Heart of the City". Prior to venturing out, the last members of his guild warned him that the power he sought was inherently tied to the land itself. An incredible magic flowed from within. This gem was Garret's undoing, as well as the city's. As it was removed from its cradle and taken from a temple below the city's earthy crust, chaotic energies surged and bounced cavern walls. The foundation of Iron City came into question, as buildings were hit with a dooming quake. Garret abandoned his stealth and took to ascending back into the city above. He was greeted with ruins and countless dead. In protest, he fled to his hideaway instead of taking accountability. It was then that strange mists materialized. In the year 745 of the Barovian Calendar, the city had changed.

The City of Iron is a land that was tearing itself apart, even before Garret got involved. It was the primary battleground for a war between fell druids, obsessive technologists, and mad occultists. From the outside, a group of onlookers gazed and manipulated the pieces. Skirmishes were at first brief and subtle, but engagements went from underground plots to urban violence. According to False History, all of these factions were once reputable for different reasons, only to be corrupted by outside influences across the Lands of the Mists. This is in fact pro-City propaganda that survived and was warped by The Dark Powers. The City Above is just a copy of the original city, before Garret caused its demise through greed and ignorance. It twists and reshapes, based on whatever heist the corrupted thief plans next. Nonetheless, he can never find any way out of the city. And by his curse, he'll always have a lingering desire to quit being a thief and start life anew. This is compounded by hearing the voices of everyone he abandoned, in favor of his dark trade. In truth, the original city exists. Its ruins were pushed below and surround the temple that once housed the "Heart of the City" gem. The ruins are a cursed place, full of vengeful spirits and insane cultists, alongside straggler dark druids and technologists. Garret is overwhelmed with a supernatural fear whenever he attempts to venture down below, refusing to stay for long. However, all sorts of treasures of the original city still await in closed vaults and hidden walls. Should one be willing to contend with the remnants of old residents, alive and unliving, it's possible to find all sorts of valuables. One particular place of suffering that also pushes him away is a living sinkhole of evil called "The Hallenberch Cradle". A mixture of combat hospital, quarantine zone, orphanage and insane asylum. An enclosed enclave of eternal misery, it was where Garret first understood his pathway to damnation. While he won't pursue

targets there, this isn't to say that this is a place of salvation, but rather the opposite.

Iron City is a curiosity, despite being a pocket domain attached to Nosos. While isolated, aside from Nosos, all manner of goods seem to flow in from other domains, if only to give Garret hopes of a better life or another heist. But, time and again, it proves out of reach, often because of some other distraction. However, another purpose of these connections is for rare and exotic goods to flow into the city, furthering the darklord's eternal fate as a thief. The Order of the Hammer, in particular, has found itself in the custody of several incredible works from the Broken Cog cluster. Thus, these domains have been a favorite spot for the Dark Powers to pull influence from. The Commerce Highway is a mistway that connects to and from Iron City, but with a catch. It has a habit of closing off between one domain and opening up to another at random. This isn't to say that the way back to Iron City is unreliable so much as it might not exist in the near future from when you left. This road has been tethered to Nova Vaasa, G'Henna, Dementlieu, Barovia and Invidia as well. But, no matter where the city goes and no matter what riches flow to the homes of the wealthy and famous, Garret will always be damned to continue his soulless life as a thief. But most of the time, the skylines are blighted out by the disgusting smog of Nosos, with no real view just beyond city limits. The filth and decay of its sibling state always ends up as an inevitable problem for Iron City.

Dread Possibilities

Dr. Herman K. Wilder is one of the largest critics of Nosos, with impossibly sharp insight into the sorrows that go on there. That is because he is no normal man, but one of the psychically gifted of Belagora. His actual name is Gerasim Wirakov. He is not a member of the Mentalists, but a former abducted child victim. Much of his childhood was spent being indoctrinated about the principles of the order. His escape came when several re-educated reverted to their previous criminal ways and sparked mayhem across Boleslawgrad. While the compound was on lockdown, Gerasim came to understand the layout and discreetly snuck away while most personnel were busy. Years passed and the child was declared dead, when in reality he gained a new life in Paridon as he emerged on a raft up the Nodnal. His life from there involved survival through his boons in the lower-class wards of Paridon, forced to find shortcuts through psychic gifts. Doppelgangers, sensing him to be a threat, discreetly attempted to remove him by any means necessary. Framed as a thief, the then-child was forcibly sent to Nosos to work in their factories as a means of paying society back. It was here where he began to learn the hellish hardships of this domain. Working into adulthood, he eventually regained citizenship within Zherisia before the countryside was revealed to him. From a small office, he began a news letter in an effort to bring awareness to the plights of Nosons and Paridoners to anyone else who would listen. Still unaware of the doppelganger threat, he otherwise decries the acts of plutocracy and oligarchy that afflict both domains. The truth surrounding his alleged doctorate is a mystery to Zherisians, it's possible that he fabricated it when reinventing himself as Herman.

Garion Old Tiller's family is in charge of an enterprise that keeps the domain of Nosos fed, in spite of no true agriculture or nature at their disposal. Through hydroponics techniques and artificial farming, some manner of food is produced and canned through their cannery facilities. The food is more clogging and fattening than nutritious, but Old Tiller's goal was more to see less starving people on the streets than seeing genuinely healthy people. As long as he makes sales and hears less reports over hunger, he doesn't care what more than means or implies. However, Garion ceased to be a living man several years ago. When an employee fell into a processing machine, he covered it up. To prove that nothing was out of the ordinary, he ate a meal with the employee's processed remains. This led to a craving for more

human meat. After hours, scoundrels were hired to bring bodies for meat processing. This craving turned to madness, and from madness? Ghoulification. Garion's ghoulish self is hidden during the daytime, but emerges at night. For this reason, he is seen overseeing matters prior to office hours in the early morning and calls an early curfew well before sunset. His peers simply see him as an adamant supporter of an "early to bed, early to rise" work ethic. Few questions his quirky desire to cover himself up prior to leaving the office late in the day. Many assume he's sensitive to the smog that often permeates the city.

Noson oil barons are more than aware of the struggling Ichthyos attempting to break back into the whale oil industry. This competition does not suit these company leaders, who have settled for sabotage operations. Unaware of the darker truths that lie deep in the Ichthyan Sea, all manner of unscrupulous folk have been hired for acts of piracy, disruption, and destruction. As if a beacon was lit, several of these mercenaries and criminals are outsiders. Thanks to the mistways along the Ichthyan Sea, particularly enterprising bandits from Blaustein have taken the call. Most of these sailors are brutes and pirates, not burdened by morality when at sea. Several curious spies from Darkon have likewise found themselves in recruitment here as well. Their interest is less in the mission, more in gathering intel on both Nosos and Ichthyos in general.

ROCKBAECCHE

The perhaps literal shambles of the Grandglennish[35] legacy, the once-mighty empire across the land. Despite the domain's name, the land it samples from is an off-shore colony, a "New Rockbaecche" built to spread their homeland's influence. The people of this New Rockbaecche were meant to act as leaders for Zherisians and other populations deemed lesser, only to succumb to their own hubris and implode whatever good will was held towards the fatherland. This former branch of Grandglennish power is nothing more than a plague-ridden despot state, overseen by a ruthless usurper. His promises of transitioning power after a crisis are wrought with lies and deeply seeded fear. Deep down, the regent leadership knows his time is limited, either from retribution or from the blight. As such, policies are reflected through martial law, targeting suspects of infection or even "intrigue". While this plague remains an issue beyond the primary capital of Dunwillow, the matter is currently less grim surrounding far more distant communities, who have revolted and taken matters into their own hands. With communication and transportation severed, these points of light distrust outsiders, are territorial, and are quick to react. As for Dunwillow, quarantine does not prove too successful, as the walled in denizens have begun to go mad. The regent not only dreads his comeuppance, but ultimately having no territory to rule over. Rockbaecche samples horror themes from zombie apocalypse fiction, as well as conspiracy thrillers and authoritarian dystopias. In particular, it is inspired by T*he Dead* series by George Romero and the 2012 video game *Dishonored*.

Regent Commander/Lord Regent Nicholas von Wilholt is cursed into being in a state of hypochondria, a deep and crippling phobic reaction to illness and the thought of becoming ill, as he senses that his doom is coming for him soon enough. This has been prohibitive to any action he wants to take, especially with finding a cure. This is all the more ironic, as he's actually immune to the plague, something that the Dark Powers likely bar him from ever finding out. His fears of being experimented on

[35] *The colonial power behind New Rockbaecche/the domain of Rockbaecche. See also the Broken Cog article from QtR 31.*

forbid him from learning of his strange condition, let alone using his own body to potentially find a cure. Any attempts that lead towards this are sabotaged, avoided, or dismissed by Lord Regent Von Wilholt. Worse, any time he becomes involved in the creation of a cure, tragedy either invalidates or destroys the results. Physicians, scientists, and more under his employment will never find any satisfactory discoveries unless they get ruined. As such, more and more analytical minds are reluctant to work with him unless they are directly called upon. This is often a death sentence, as the Lord Regent's increasing instability often leads to said researchers facing execution for their failures. In the meantime, containment and quarantine procedures have been swift, efficient, and brutal. This has meant that more innocents have been cut down than the infected undead, but it has put the rest of civilization in this domain at relative ease. These repressed citizens question when will the regent sponsor a successor, when will a cure be discovered, and when will normalcy return to this wondrous land?

Existence under regency rule has been tedious and dull, when it isn't ruthless and heartless. For better or worse, the new breed of undead is mostly contained within the domain. True to their name, ***crimson-blighted***[36] get their name from the red sheen coating them. This is from infected blood pumping out of the victim's orifices, pores, etc and covering everything. Other strains of strange undead are seemingly unrelated, even similar blights outside of Belagora's off-coast island. Other zombie-like dead seem to lack this strange sense of adaptation found in the Crimson Blights. They aren't intelligent anymore, or are they? Unlike with Rockbaecche, the problems there are well contained.

Meanwhile, the regent's ineffective rule has sparked unrest among the community. Many are sick of their squalid conditions, demanding something be done to treat the outbreaks. In fact, several former working groups have joined together as a kind of mob syndicate. Under the leadership of Delgan Magrem, ragtag groups of hard labor workers have turned into something of a crime family. With activities ranging from spying to extortion to outright assassination, the Oldentowne Family sends their regards. A most recent hit was against a research center to help cure the plague. A majority of the documents were stolen, with empire-supported researchers slain. Magrem wants to be the first to make a proper treatment, gaining both positive recognition and a means of conning the elite coffers of the city. The Oldentowne Rum Distillery has become his base of operations. Merely three blocks away, The Buckets of Blood Inn has become another place for this mob to blend in with the surly and flustered among the population. Mutual attitudes allow them to manipulate citizens all the easier.

However, not all civilians feel compelled to commit crimes. One olive branch has been extended to ready and able citizens, an organized militia group built with the intent of cutting down the undead to help take back regions of the land. This initiative has only helped keep the threat from worsening too much, even if it is sending well-covered and armored people to exterminate as much as possible. While any attempts at vaccines are merely hopeful tests and a sort of placebo, very few sent into combat the threat is turned upon returning. Those who do return are often fractions of their original numbers anyway. Most of these militia members are former convicts offered a chance at freedom in exchange for serving the state. When the undead are particularly aggressive, militias suffer far more fatalities and quarantine measures become less effective. Other than that, this method of fighting back the hordes has been at least a stabilizing effort to keep it from worsening. Likewise, it has been a particularly useful tool in enforcing order. Convicts have no say in forceful conscription, while free civilians may volunteer instead. So far, only the northern regions

[36] *See Monstrous Compendium article for QtR 32*

of the domain remain especially dangerous. Western, Southern, and Eastern reaches of Rockbaecche have seen far more effective containment. All in all, these are areas further away from the capital and royal castle. This doesn't mean that the areas aren't at risk of these crimson blight undead resurfacing though. Von WIlholt, well aware of the urgency of this matter, has only the intention of slowing or halting the plague by using prisoners as meat shields. Many in this paramilitary order undergo rigid training and desensitizing conditioning. Thus, many aren't against slaying innocents who come across as sickly when they aren't. This doesn't mean that many are mentally prepared for cordoned off wards that were lost to the blight. These walled off zones are extremely dangerous and liable to cost members every time they're entered. The expedition into the otherwise barricaded *Tradesmen Ward* of Dunwillow was a bloodbath, where the strange zombies tore through the hapless ranks of a militia. Of course, other factions have arisen to combat domain threats in their own way. Survivors remarked that their undead foes gradually incorporated some facsimile of tactics, but their superiors have dismissed this. Whole areas have been seemingly vacated, while others became ambush points where legions of undead would swarm soldiers caught off-guard. Crimson Blight undead have not displayed much in the way of intelligence until forces were gathered to take back the district of Dunwillow. This has coincided with experiments conducted by a Rockbaeccher scientist nicknamed "Mordenheim Jr." by his subordinates. The mad scientist has studied ways to stimulate a zombie's brain to turn them away from mindless desires for infection and violence. Many find this deeply creepy, while,some have linked the two events.

The Separatist Conspiracy is an Insurrection movement, organized by mixed political voices deeply critical of Von Wilholt and his cohorts. These opinions mix from deep traditionalists made aghast by calls for extreme change to progressivists who see through veneers of reform that amount to calls to suppression and colonial strife. While they lack the might of a major military force, they still contain some of the most brilliant tacticians, planners, diplomats and beyond to serve the armed forces of Grandglenn and her colonial powers. Likewise, rumors tell of an assassin that was formerly a personal guard and consort of the high royal family… particularly the princess. After the family was horribly slain amidst the initial outbreak, the guard disappeared and was feared dead. This fear changed in the months following the collapse of the state, as associates of Lord Regent Von Wilholt began to disappear. Some turned up dead, others humiliated, some simply never showed up ever again. Whether or not this "ghostly assassin" was part of the Separatist movement, he became their face. This perfect tool of propaganda could be used to frighten all loyal to the regency, as well as scare the populace into revolution or inaction based on where they stood. Long term association with this alleged ghost could prove harmful, so it wouldn't be outside of the possibility to try to destroy it when the time was right.

Separatists are first and foremost deeply loyal patriots to the Grandglenn cause. An outsider view will paint them as a splinter group of colonists eager to take the reigns of the empire. However, the random mixture of ideologies within this movement would prove that to be exceedingly challenging. To citizens of Rockbaecche, the Separatists can represent massive lists of possibilities and ideas. The military old guard critical of the Lord Regent sees this as an opportunity to roll back corrupt and weakening policies, in an attempt to consolidate power, rebuild strength, and bring a proper sense of function to the system. Rag tag rebels and outlaws see their chance to either make something of themselves in society or get retribution against the power without many of their cohorts directly turning on them. Some royalists even aid, however, they can, hoping that a proper successor to the crown will be named as the Lord Regent is put to the blade. The Grandglennish

high clergy sees a time of spiritual and moral decay, where divine retaliation must rain down upon a land coated in wickedness and sin. Save for the common folk, rabble, and criminals who have joined in this conspiracy against the state; those on top of the conspiracy have no intents in getting their hands too dirty. Once they do, they are more than eager to cast aside any cohorts who they've pushed to far ends. After all, they wish to be seen as legitimate heirs to the government, establishing an equally legitimate and lawful system. As such, those forced in extremis must eventually be destroyed. None, save for the leaders of the respective subgroups, are remotely aware of this. Should the ghost assassin be real, could he be a part of that grim reality? What other threats burden the Lord Regent?

Clan Zaritelli made itself something of a major pariah within Alleigosto seemingly ages ago, but that hasn't stopped them from effectively haunting Rockbaecche. Sprawling forces of entropy, weaponized decay, the festering taint of dark energy; all of these things still invigorate the shattered branches of this bloodline. In spite of serving exile from their homeland, they are an active portion of the criminal underworld that helped the plague to begin with. Their mixture of physician knowledge with vile sorcery has resulted in all manners of research into undeath, arcane blights, and far more. Such taboos are widely profitable through rings and networks that focus on trading in the occult. Geraldo, an enterprising upstart from the clan, in particular has taken to literal underground trade networks to ensure all manners of contraband, ritual components, and sickly spells go to and from destinations in this corroded and ill land. Like much of his family, any pretense of morality is long buried beneath deep profit motivations and an obsession with that which we were not meant to know. All things around him are mere discoveries or sources of revenue, any sense of humanity has long since died. His sorrowful complex of caverns and sewage tunnels operates beneath Humphford, a town that was a short distance from the Alleigosto border.

Much like Geraldo, Humphford was once ambitious and destined to expand its scope beyond just a humble rest stop. The rise in railway technology was to see to this. In fact, Geraldo was once a heavy investor in locomotion. His interest is still there, but just as a means of ensuring his macabre and wicked freight gets to destinations without being disturbed. To say he is alone in this enterprise is foolish. Prior connections with his family are still viable, even if heavily damaged by political scandals, a pandemic, and more. This includes lesser merchant houses, surviving Grandglennish nobility, equally enterprising dark mages, disgraced tinkerers successfully banished by Clan Arcaico and ragtag groups of miscreants looking for an easy job. Many of the warehouses around the town have been bought up for the uncanny and unnerving magnate, by means of safe storage, quiet meeting space, transit and more for his dark deeds. His current major goal is to unite other grim groups found within Rockbaecche, like the eerie witches just beyond Rollenbach Falls or mercenary smugglers off the coast of Rock Phare. The rest of the Zaritelli clan sees Geraldo as nothing more than a greedy fool with no larger ambitions, but his growing empire among the ruins and wreckage of the "New Rockbaecche" colony begs to differ. The rest of the clan heeds calls of ill omens and divine prophecies, but he fears that he would waste too many resources. In time, his criminal underground may fall in line with his clan and utilize their dark bloodline powers to take over. But for now, a total market takeover of the Broken Cog sounds far more appealing. One would think his prior use of dark arts would make him deeply taboo. He has just found ways to hide that while painting his public self as a black sheep of the family. All of this is a facade to make him look like a rebellious champion looking to fight the sins of his family's past. He is no less cruel and twisted than the rest of his clan. His investment in any transit surfaces for the public good are merely so he can buy trust and manipulate others without questioning. As far as he's concerned, it's all just business to him and little more. And by all means, to the public he is known as "Geraldo

Pharezsias" instead and he's the mind behind *New Humphford Freight & Transit*. This push for a new public image has remained a success so far.

Rock Phare (Pocket Domain) - CL 9 (Renaissance) - CL 10 (Industrial)

Rock Phare is a dying community. The fall of its iconic lighthouse spelled the end, and the circumstances behind it were especially tragic and disturbing. The fishing industry off the coast has faded due to wartime violence past the shores and pollution seeping into the water. The relative seclusion of Rock Phare was stifling prior, but it has been mostly cut off since the crimson plague has ravaged Rockbaecche. Rock Phare is a domain of coastal horror, not unlike Ichthyos. The domain samples from themes of sailor's tales, ghost stories, and a sense of isolation felt in remote lands. The tragedy of Smalls Lighthouse, the Little Ross Island murder, and the 2019 film The Lighthouse were all major inspirations for this domain.

Darklord: Richard the Lightkeeper, appointed lighthouse attendant for New Grandglen

LE Human Ghost

In life, Richard Cleersy (originally Clearsea prior to living in Rockbaecche) was a solitary man who took no interest in wider problems of the world. His family pushed him into naval service at a young age, when he already proved to be a shy introvert. Born of migrant parents, he was shocked that the navy would accept him to begin with. By his own surmising, the family adapted well to Grandglennish life, but Richard himself found much of it awkward. The rest of the family adapted well, even mingling with high society in time. He preferred not to, focusing on his own tasks. Despite an aversion to conflict and a dislike of company, he became a distinguished and proud officer during his adult years. Numerous acts of courage and bravery, such as warding off pirates, militaristic raiders, escaped criminals and other threats awarded him nicely. Much like his own personal goals, he desired to see the Grandglennish territory devoid of unwanted guests. Besides this, he pursued personal passions in his free time. Among his most beloved were sketching the wonders of the waves, observing the animals that dwelled within them, and musing on life upon the sea. After years into his career turned to ages, Cleersy grew older and his service on the field was at an end. In spite of this, Cleersy was just as energetic as ever. A ceremony for his service did not leave him empty-handed, as he was awarded a lighthouse to oversee. And thus, the Rock Phare Lighthouse was born, with a community slowly growing near it. For a time, this allowed him to not only guide sailors to safe harbor, but continue his artistic desires in peace. And for a time, this was an ideal life of peace and distance.

Richard was never an overly lonely man, as he often preferred isolation. It didn't bother him that marriage was cut off from him until his service to the lighthouse was concluded. This would soon change as he received a letter detailing his arrival at his lighthouse in the months to come, a sailor who was set to be trained as an eventual lighthouse keeper when the day came. Anticipation and fearing loss of quiet quickly turned to dread and frustration upon meeting his future replacement. The assistant was brash, crude, generally insufferable. How he became a soldier was a mystery to Richard, who saw nothing but a worthless brat at his doorstep. The trainee sought out easy shortcuts to problems and presented a consistently obnoxious personality. Tolerance for the terrible youth depleted, and the aging keeper grew to deeply hate the trainee.

One day, the apprentice busted into his superior's private gallery within a locked off room. Overcome by greed, the apprentice stowed several pieces in his keepsake chest. Following his training's completion, he was to leave home for complete approval. His plan was simple: steal more art and sell it at a premium. Richard caught on, waiting for the apprentice to sleep. Following this, he crept towards

his bed, smothering him with a pillow as a harsh storm raged. Soon after, a burst of wind battered the structure and shattered multiple windows. Torrents of rain splashed against both the stolen works in the bed chambers and in the private study below. This sent Cleersy into a fit of hysterical madness. Climbing to the lighthouse tower, he extinguished the light, causing numerous vessels to crash that night. The overwhelmed lighthouse keeper stumbled before tumbling to his demise down flights of stairs. The last thing he saw in life were patterns of strange mist.

As a ghost, he looked much as he did in life. His final moments of falling to the bottom of his lighthouse mark his bruised and cut open body. If it wasn't for this, he would resemble a middle-aged man with a light and rather pale complexion. His posture is slightly slumped from hunching over easels and cramped light fixtures. A life of constant interruptions has seemingly frozen his expression into a disinterested scowl. Sitting underneath his officer's hat is a set of drooping facial hair, known as sideburns. Likewise, a large but worn out mustache adorns his face like a badge of honor. His clothing, prior to extreme damage during his fall, was always regal and well tended to. While retired from serving on the waves, he took his old uniform very seriously and tended to it with care. As a ghostly undead creature, he is forced to look at the damaged mockery that it has become.

For years, the Rock Phare Light had fallen out of favor with the region and even into a state of neglect. The tale of Richard Cleersy spread far beyond the town, of a mad hermit who went and slew his successor. More unnerving was Cleersy's diaries and artworks, which detailed him witnessing average sea fauna at first, before slowly shifting to tales of sea beasts, mermaids, and other wild tall tales of the waters. Spliced with these fantastical entries were details of his growing disgust with the young apprentice. As his sanity depleted, the scrawlings became more unhinged. Complaints devolved into mad rantings, tales of the fantastic turned into shoreside macabre. Frightening accounts of sea devils, revived waterlogged corpses, and eldritch horrors from beyond haunted his dreams, his journal, and his canvas. When looters began to uncover his gallery of the bizarre, the hauntings began. The village that grew around the lighthouse slowly began to shrivel up. In its current day, the village is halved from its original size. It will continue to shrink, as few move in and more seek to get away. The plague has stymied this for now, as that proves to be the greater threat.

For a time, most people thought the lighthouse was finished and doomed to lie empty. Cleersy was never laid to rest, with his soul far more tormented. Attempts to recover the body and give a proper burial were halted by the strange hauntings, so it's likely that his corpse crumbles alongside the ruined tower. After his death, the damned spirit of the keeper found himself confined to his oceanic tower. His grasp at retirement was so close to him once, as he's now damned to do his duties for all time. For his actions, it was as if the waves and wildlife of the ocean avoid the lighthouse at all costs, making all around the ghostly keeper painfully dull. Still, he attempted to return to his creative works, only for some ship to call upon the damned soul's aid once more. As if compelled by a mixture of sense of duty and some curse placed upon him, he acts as he did in life and maintains the lights. These lights are quite dim, providing little to no use for ships who sail by. Many might not even notice them unless they focus on the old tower. Tales of the lights in the night frightened those who stayed in Rock Phare, but few came to question the abandoned lighthouse lest they fear wrath from the doomed occupant. Though, the more skeptical Rockbaecchers suspect that a squatting vagrant or secretive military operation is the face behind the stories.

Regardless, no one visits the lighthouse. Most who draw near, whether or not they believe in the supernatural, sense something deeply wrong about the derelict and prefer to turn away. Tales of disappearing thieves and dying pranksters have proved enough to keep the public away. Efforts to

plan for the tearing down and rebuilding of the lighthouse have likewise failed as well. Those who have broken in and witnessed the horror of the keeper's gallery have sworn to stay away. All have reported the works "coming to life", when these were in reality illusions and various effects. In truth, the damage dealt to them was in the end real. Despite the condemned property being cordoned off by fear, common sense, and paranormal activity; communities and naval bases still persist nearby.

House Harberschire lords over the community of Pardoner's Harbor, long detached from mainland Rockbaecche. As such, their troubles are much lighter than inland. This is a testament to procedures quarantining the plague to the western and northern sectors of this land. Overall, the noble house acts almost like its own independent state in the current age. Attempts to reel the coastal territory back into the rest of New Rockbaecche has proved difficult. On official papers, upheld from gradually rarer tax collections, Rock Phare as a whole is part of the same Grandglennish state. But, in action, they essentially act on their own accord. It's for this reason that it could be one of the few hospitable places for outsiders to establish a base of operations in the region. Of course, this assumes that they avoid the haunted lighthouse at all costs. In fact, many will inform you to avoid much of the remaining Cleersy clan for one's own sanity.

Early in Richard's life, the nobles of the land became good friends with him and other family, who served under the various noble houses as well. In fact, extended family is the reason why his parents joined the cause of Grandglen. For a time, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers, parents, would all try to get Richard to marry before giving up. This did put a strain on relations with nobles as well, due to the stubbornness to remain single. The Cleersy clan not only had a gradual falling out with Richard, they themselves fled after the lighthouse murder, many moving inland and others moving to Zherisia. The subject of Richard has become a deep taboo to family in other domains as such.

One distant clan member, ***Silas Cleersy,*** took after his uncle and became the keeper of Rockbaecche Point, across the cove from the decaying relic. He has since become a clan pariah. Silas's new lighthouse has remained in operation, while the other has made attempts to be preserved. An obsessive nephew, Silas desperately tries to raise funds in hopes of restoring the site of his uncle's demise to working glory… or at least as a proper tribute. However, people suspect that the naive nephew is almost as mad as his relative because of this. Nonetheless, relations with the new keeper are intentionally much nicer and more actively social. Richard himself has become aware of this. While touched by an attempt to honor him, Richard remains distraught that his own blood would try to usurp his position as prior lighthouse keeper. Should visitors come into contact with the spirit, mentioning Silas will either send him into contemplation or into rage. As for Silas, the light of his tower is stronger than he thinks. Travelers sailing in deep mists have a chance of spotting the beacon in the distance. Those who do have a good chance of making their way to this amazing cluster. As to how they might deal with heavy technological advancements is largely unknown. Mist scholars may consider this beacon something of a mistway assistant, should such a thing exist. As for Silas and the new tower, the future does not look bright. Superiors question the mental state of this worn down relative of Richard, fearing another incident. Silas fears that either authorities or a mob will rip him from his tower and place him in a hospital for his own protection, at least so say threatening letters.

Dread Possibilities

The royal family of Dunwillow had a secret to hide well before the plague. The ancestral castle is built over an ornate tomb belonging to an infamous relative who consorted with fiends. In reality, it was the queen's 3rd-great grandfather's evil pacts with fell creatures that made the initial outbreak of the plague far worse than it should have been. The very grounds surrounding Rockbaecche were always

cursed, with foul cultists arriving outside of kingdom limits to try to understand its mysterious power. Tales of this foul warlock were buried centuries before, swept away as rumors while other scandals and drama afflicted the lands. The dark sage is long dead, so knowledge of undoing his familial dread curse is likely lost. However, the deeper one descends into his tomb, the stronger it is felt. It is said that actual fiends have been bound within the musty ancient halls. It also explains how the remnants of the Rockbaecche royal guard uncovered diabolists not converted into the undead while trying to fight through the hordes that had taken the palace. The evil mages walked among the infected, while helping to kill the goodly interlopers. The horrid energy might explain a strange serpentine beast that now guards the lair. The aquatic thing lurks within the massive lake, lashing out at anyone who dares try to access the castle island.

The Huntsmans Woods were once a popular site for nobles to go on royal hunts. The plague destroyed this, even affecting the region in weird ways. The flora itself looks tainted and warped. In reality, it has nothing to do with the plague, so much as shadow fey accidentally establishing themselves here. Prior to being taken by the mists, these woods had sylvan influence. The fair folk were indifferent to the hunters, as long as they left tribute in response. After the forests met the mists, these sylvan folk were replaced as a path to the lairs of the shadow fey formed instead. These creatures lack the sense of honor and tradition that the native creatures from the prime understood. The fanggen, creatures akin to dryads, prove especially cruel deep within such woods.

Silas Cleersy fears for his future, with the denizens of Rock Phare declaring him mad for continuing his uncle's ambitions. Many intentionally seek to shut him down by declaring him mad. They may seek to discharge him from service as well. For now, Silas's lighthouse is under temporary suspension and inspection. Troubles will only worsen if Richard can influence the new lighthouse to fail, either through supernatural means or mundane help who sympathizes with the mad phantasmal keeper. This maddened ghostly uncle will not shy from his vindictive path, trying to banish Silas so he can be out of his "life". In the case of Silas, he is doing anything to hang on. Suspecting foul play, any investigators willing to take up the case will be hired. Recent events have been especially troubling. For the past several weeks, Silas's tower light has gone out several times. And when it has, a ghostly light has emerged from the old abandoned lighthouse. This light always leads sailors to their doom, which Silas gets blamed for. Unless this mystery is solved, the reputation of Silas will be forever destroyed and his life ruined.

The declining mental state of the Lord Regent is something that he has done all in his power to hide. Much of it is from the guilt and fear that has been building in him since his act of ultimate betrayal. His own curse has magnified this greatly, expanding it in terrible new ways. Among them is a truly frightening discovery. There is a phenomenon that Von Wilholt has slowly been made aware of, where the infected dead respond to his episodes of mania and anxiety. Attacks by these zombie-like creatures worsen and threats of outbreaks increase. This has in turn forced the Lord Regent into further isolation, causing less to be approved of under his leadership. To others, he simply looks like an inefficient and cowardly leader that lacks the spine of the royal family. But to him, he has come to fear himself. In his stead, appointed leaders in his stead have approached new agendas. The regent originally wanted to reinvigorate expansionism, reviving the Grandglennish imperial influence over other lands, especially Zherisia. This has only bolstered retaliation, as efforts have been strained by the plague. Zherisia alone has been stockpiling on weapons from both Nosos and the Darkheath black market, in the event that Rockbaecche goes too far in negotiations or straight-out attacks. Alleigosto has been keen on removing Rockbaeccher clients in response to ongoing behavior, but bringing them back if clients prove to

be desperate enough to face price gouging. This exploitation has in turn increased violent sentiment towards neighbors by the Rockbaecchers themselves.

ZHERISIA

Perhaps the oldest living state within the cluster, Zherisia hangs onto traditions better than Alleigosto. While no stranger to change, they've often felt less reason to. No land is as prominent and important to Zherisia as the capital city of ***Paridon***. It is here where commerce literally flowed through the river of the city. The Grand Conjunction nearly strangled that completely, as the lands beyond Paridon all but vanished. For 20 years, all beyond the city was deemed lost until they were revealed to the city dwellers once again. At first, it seemed much as it did all those years ago. This doesn't mean the locals are resistant to change, just things outside of their norms. This in turn has created a paranoid culture, one where they suspect even their neighbor could be something of a false double. This fear of fake doubles only worsens with shallow attempts at keeping up perceptions of the public. All have roles to play, lest you break or subvert them. Said culture also tries to sweep the mistakes of their past, such as trifling relations with the fallen land of ***Timor,*** now known as ***New Timor***. Despite a major disconnect with the wider politics of the cog, their internal strife encapsulates a growing fear that shall spread well beyond neighbors. Zherisia takes from themes of a quiet but paranoid society, sins of the past, and social division. Its brand of gothic horror takes heavily from tales of macabre and urban legends surrounding Victorian Age London as well as the city of Paris.

Paridon is the capital of Zherisia, a proud and tall standing city that has endured much torment in the last few decades. After the countryside seemed to vanish beyond the veil, the cityfolk grew desperate. Animal life nearly vanished, turned to emergency food. Parks and pockets of wilderness were torn up, repurposed for community gardens and agriculture. Many of these measures are still in some degree of practice, but trade has since opened up. And because of this, Paridon has been saved. Seven districts make up the majority of the urban landscape, before gradually drifting into the country. These sections of the city are the Docks, Riverside, Blackchapel, the Bowels, Shadewell, South Shore, and King's Quarters.

The massive docks are where most travelers, often captains, emerge from. This was especially the case when Paridon was hidden from the wider cluster. But, in the name of aquatic trade and movement of goods, this is still true. As the railway industry up north alters life in Zherisia, this slowly changes. Rails now connect many facets of Paridon and even the pathetic shell that is New Timor. To the west is the riverside, the commercial hub for much of Paridon. Both goods of domestic and "exotic" origin are found within the extensive market day stalls and stands. The famed Divinity of Mankind claims a temple in this ward beyond the markets. While one should keep an eye out for pickpockets, there are still marvels here like the massive bridge and clocktower which are both points of national pride. Moving across the bridge, one reaches the bowels. The clocktower watches over travelers as they cross, like some giant guard. Its purpose of timekeeping cannot be understated by Paridon society. Despite the name, the bowels are not a heinous or disgusting place. Rather, it is a somewhat clean district known for a very frightful middle class. Blackchapel is a miserable place of the lower class, which fuels the factories that border the riverside. Most of the city lives here, but few by choice. Its namesake is a church that has been taken over by the Divinity of Mankind as a charity center. The dark streets never seem to light up, even during the day, as apartments practically stack into each other. This form of cover has made Bloody Jack's reign of terror especially grueling in this district. On the other side of the coin is Shadewell, where wealthier and well-read

denizens roost. These impressive streets are well fortified with security, lest the common riffraff get close. The public prefers more posh methods of travel as well, where carriages are more common than the lowly act of riding a horse yourself. The king's quarters is where the true elite congregate, behind truly protective gates and walls. True grandeur lines the streets, reminiscent of times of mighty kings and kingdoms. The aristocracy is cut off from the common world, deluded to any matters in Paridon or beyond. Beyond the natives lies the somewhat barricaded area of southshore. Foreigners and outcasts find this lowly place to be home. With many locals suspecting that Bloody Jack is from here, the area is also known as "Jack's Path".

Social movements like the Rejuvenating Guidance and Brothers of the Land offer much criticism over Paridon's current happenings. Both are reactionary backlash against a society that does not want its members, but the former is considered more "enlightened" and less violent in their approach. The former is also doomed to burn out in time, but the latter is pure unfiltered rage that won't cease. Despite Zherisia bestowing a few privileges upon the population, such as widespread literacy, many see far too many detractors for any of it to be worth it. Decades of ignorance and neglect, as well as advancing automation, have made all of this work. Witnessing revolts against factories and facilities in Sorentrico and neighboring cities, countless Paridoners have become inspired. It's of some surprise, for those in the know, that Duke Arcaico has helped to pay bail fees for those imprisoned for revolting against industrial society.

Prior to 759 BC, Paridon was mostly alone, relying on strange paths connected to the River Nodnal for vague safety. The only salvation prior to that came from a trade agreement forged in 750 BC, when a mutual pact with the barons of Nosos led to much in the way of economic recovery and development. Soon after, new waters were revealed that allowed sailors to make safe passage to Nosos City itself. The cost of this dark deal was the worsening of the waters, with more filth drifting in. This land was very much not Zherisia though and not overly welcoming to its populace outside of trade. Unbeknownst to either, the foundations of the Broken Cog Cluster were forming around both domains.

Many would assume the countryside in between Paridon and New Timor is rather dull and uneventful, this is quite false. In fact, the constabulary has been stretched thin trying to extend itself from Paridon to handle a multitude of issues. The countryside has seen a massive uptick in crime since its strange return to the domain, with many nefarious ne'er-do-wells fleeing the city or lending aid to New Timor. For the locals, they blame an uptick of decadence and a decline in morality among the urbanites. Just as Nosos brings physical pollution, Paridoners bring mental and spiritual pollution. The rural denizens do not know what to make of the changed Paridon, having witnessed it seemingly days to weeks prior to the time leap. Despite having "not aged a day" since the lands beyond Paridon vanished, further strangeness has crept into the fields and hills beyond. Failed farmsteads have quickly become haunted places, reclusive properties see eccentric nobles fending off outsiders, common folk vanish in the woods, and other concerns arise. The terrors of the forests not cut down by loggers, developers and encroaching towns are said to be the ominous homes of the faerie folk. It could be possible that mistways to The Shadow Rift exist there. It's likewise possible that Mordent is connected to Zherisia as well now.

This says little of the countryfolk that have re-emerged in Zherisia as well. Overall, they are dazed, bewildered, mortified and more. Relatives saw within days or weeks have magically aged 2 decades before them. Urban society has drastically shifted well beyond real time. Confusion is the general reaction to the New Timorians, but the Paridoners even more so. This has ultimately alienated and isolated these denizens from all urban centers, now trying to distance themselves from a world that they no longer understand. This has worsened greatly, as

a buildup of pollution across the River Nodnal has spread to its returned rural branch, making the water quality more hazardous. Disgruntled rural denizens of Alleigosto have come to sympathize with these Zherisians. But, not every country resident feels this way. Many olden gentry and high society folk have been sent into a panic. As public records say that they vanished for decades or died, many are either completely ruined or forced to rebuild rapidly.

Sir Finn Hampton of Old Timor was a delegate from Timor who reinvented himself in Paridon as a magnate for a shipping company. After he vanished, his business all but collapsed as Paridon lost everything around it. His sudden return was met with a mixture of paranoid attacks and mocking ridicule. Scorned and dejected, he found a mutual ally in Geraldo Pharezsias of *New Humphford Freight & Transit*. Geraldo is actually of Clan Zaritelli, using an alias to carry on business as a merchant from "an exotic land". The company is mostly a front for illicit activity and crime, now exploiting Hampton for his wide knowledge of Zherisian nobility, even if it is somewhat outdated. Hampton is out for revenge, clawing down his former colleagues through almost any means.

Meanwhile, more deceitful nobles like Charles Morgansfield have proved far luckier. To the Paridoners, he is Charles the Second, or Charles II, the son of the noble thought lost to the mists. During his time in Paridon, Charles was considered a deeply disrespectful and pompous menace for parliament. His attempts to push agendas upon meetings would mark him as spoiled and brash. After resurfacing and learning of matters in the city, Charles devised a new identity and personality, portraying himself as a far more likable and agreeable son. With the help of some associates, he still pushes for influence and even a council seat, but through subtle diplomacy. His goal is to carry on a prior mission of pushing the poor out into the country, moving industry towards city borders, and making Paridon a bastion for the wealthy. Charles, making up for the time skip, has invented a backstory that his family fled to the "Golden Ward" or nobility populated district of Sorentrico in Alleigosto to wait out the turmoil. His most recent venture was buying out all the stock and supplies of the Whistlebridge family business. After a fire almost ruined the clan, they never truly recovered financially. Morgansfield is not aware of their accursed fate, nor does he care. However, his acquisition could have some haunted consequences.

Darklord: Sodo/Old Flickerflame, Boogeyman of Paridon

Dread Doppelganger

Sodo came from a society of shapeshifters called doppelgangers. However, his ambitions lead to him craving power, however, he could take and consolidate. This in turn led to the assassination and replacement of his doppelganger tribe elders. This wasn't enough for him, as he took action against the very leader of his people. It was then that the Mists acted against him.

Upon his damning acts, he found that his own gifts of shape-changing had been corrupted. He finds himself unable to keep a form for too long before it goes unstable and he finds the disguise warping in horrific ways. Furthermore, his strangling hands can no longer kill, lest he has other artifacts in his possession. The dreaded Fang of the Nosferatu proved to be a very deadly way to get around this curse, allowing him great power for claiming 6 victims across 6 consecutive nights every 13 years.

Closing the Borders only really happens within the city of Paridon itself. While Sodo can extend himself beyond the city, his ability to trap others only goes as far as there. Truly, he is cursed. However, within the city proper, alleyways and streets seem to distort in a manner that leads victims to head back to where they started. Beyond this maze-like effect, the rural lands beyond are vast and dangerous in their own regard. He cannot truly close borders there, but he can grab the attention of doppelgangers in the wider ranges and tell them to go to an area instead. This is not a charm, but rather a sensation that nearby

doppelgangers can feel and understand. They are free to respond to it as they wish. Often, fellow doppelgangers hailed in this manner share a mutual enemy.

Other dread doppelgangers do not suffer the restrictions of Sodo. Their presence within wider Paridon into greater Zherisia is far more widespread. In fact, their influence has spread to neighboring domains, especially the equally odd Belagora. Those in Paridon who fear rumors of doppelgangers suggest that many rural settlements beyond have been replaced by them, as nothing about them has changed in decades. It is possible that some of these cases are true, as some of the changing monsters have found lands beyond the city to be more palatable. Some have even taken refuge in the unstable chaos that is New Timor, taking up alliances with warlords and gang leaders.

Dread Possibilities

Within the last year, deeply accursed grounds were created by an anomaly from the sky. Due several miles east of the Queen's Grand Hills, one can find the site. On an otherwise calm and sunny day, a massive ship flew down from the sky. The vessel vaguely resembled a large corvid, with a frontal design directly forming that of a bird's head. The wreckage is patrolled by undead creatures, the majority of which were once human. The things are deeply territorial and will assault anyone who gets too close to the still smoldering wreck, still coughing burning embers after months. Anything useful would have burned up months ago. One noticeable detail, seen from afar, is that "Speed Bird" is emblazoned upon the sides in a language distinctly similar to Zherisian. The likelihood of it being the literal language is impossible. Against all reason, this detail has not been destroyed by the ongoing flames. The ship as a whole proves to be an anomaly[37]. Anyone who has evaded the undead and explored the wreckage has disappeared, with no one returning. Outlander scholars muse that this strange ship hailed from some skyward beyond called "Mistspace"[38].

The Hell Coal Express isn't the only phantasmal iron steed to gallop along the sprawling rails. The Knight Flyer is another vessel that has roots in another domain, known as Mithras Court[39]. How this pseudo-mistway came to be is veiled in mist to most. In actuality, it came about in seeming reaction to a séance gone wrong at the Grand Paridon Station. An attempt was made to reach out to and exorcise the soul of "The Barmy Bomber", at the request of a constable assigned to investigate and defeat the strangeness. ***Constable Gregory Maxson*** sought the grim soul of the violent anarchist. Instead, the medium gained the curiosity of something else… the attention of Sir Lucius Knight. How this came to be remains a mystery, but a steel chariot arrived for the spirit channeler and guests. Rather than boarding the sinister ride, the gathering scattered in terror. Maxson, humiliated, has slowly wondered about this new ghostly menace. Ever since, the train has emerged at the same time during the late hours of the night. Its purpose is shuttling victims to Mithras Court, either meeting their end in the tunnels surrounding the train or contending with the city block above. Those who survive the horrid things in the tunnel underground witness a gaudy statue as they ascend to the streets. It resembles a soldier, but has no face nor dedication. Such a thing is a mockery to Knight, but he can do nothing about it, especially because he's too focused on his big goals. All of this plays into an ongoing gambit for territory expansion. Sir Lucius Knight is a greedy and power hungry presence, with Paridon-esque city blocks as his mad

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[37] *This fallen ship is a spelljammer, somehow taken from wildspace and into the lands of the mists.*

[38] *A theoretical cluster of domains that operates on the logic of a Crystal Sphere from the Spelljammer campaign setting. It's possible that the ship itself acts as a mistway to it.*

[39] *See also, the novel, "Mithras Court"*

but constraining playground. Knight loves making deals with broken and weary souls, offering solace and solitude in exchange for them aiding in his awful ploys. The streets have minions and prisoners given their roles to get by in this cruel urban mockery, but few are overly content. They just live in fear and keep their heads down… and this is just during the day. Upon nightfall, the dead rise up to hunt the living. Unfortunately, daytime is only a few meager hours as night seems to last twice as long as it should. This harms the cityscape's ability to sustain itself, thus reluctantly relying more and more on Vistani that frequent the area. Knight is dissatisfied, resulting in him sending his agents who are able to pierce the veil into Gothic Earth where they lure others onto a similar train as the Knight Flyer. Heroes pulled in from either the London Underground of Gothic Earth or the Knight Flyer of Paridon are often the sort looking to take revenge on some calamity in their life. Unbeknownst to them, these were often caused by agents of Knight sent to find "new champions" that he can twist to his causes.

The fine art of photography has been sweeping the land, and not without its criticism. Some say that it takes away from finer arts; the deft touch of a brush stroke, the articulation of a sketch, the hand motions of pottery. Photography is stiffness, death. Some of those critics may be onto something. Likewise, there are fears that these devices can steal the soul. In one case, all of these statements have merit. The Taker's Box is one such infernal artifact to wind up in Paridon. Said to have originated in Gothic Earth, this picture box somehow wound its way down the rivers of Zherisia. The Taker's Box looks much akin to the recent wondrous invention that has taken the streets in awe. However, the burgundy tone of the box mechanism and reddish streaks on the lens set it apart from others. When used in place of a regular camera, nothing happens at first. However, as the photo finishes developing, the victims suddenly drop dead. Their very souls are slowly absorbed into the print. No one has confirmed its use or existence, as the camera is in the possession of a serial killer claiming to be a photography expert. This killer only emerges when he's ready to claim another victim through a fraudulent job, being a potential admirer or associate of the infamous Bloody Jack. This killer is in truth a rogue dread doppelganger, out to stir further anxiety and paranoia in Paridon. Motives point to a twisted sympathy for the Zherisian Brothers of the Land, a movement dedicated to curtailing technology in an effort to preserve working-class jobs. The more fear can be painted towards photography, the more fear can slowly escalate against all technological advances. Assuming various aliases, the doppelganger has met with members outside of Paridon city limits.

Paridon is overseen by a goodly "witch" who has helped to fight the forces of spiritual evil. The antithesis to this "Witch of Shadewell"[40] is a night hag who lives in the Queen's Grand Hills splitting Paridon and New Timor apart. ***Jilline the Accursed*** is the result of a ritual gone terribly awry. Once she was an eccentric swamp witch who avoided Paridon, viewing it a corruption of olden values. She was a quirky traditionalist, practicing the old ways and keeping to her pocket of nature. She received an ill-omen around 738 BC, doom was coming for Zherisia. In panic, she created a ritual to protect herself that took years to complete. When the Grand Conjunction caused dreadful mists to coat all beyond Paridon, she panicked as her magicks began to fail. Her spell began to twist, warp, and corrupt. The humble soul was taken by the mists, reemerging nearly 2 decades later as something new. Her new twisted form turned her from avoiding Paridon to despising it. Now she is a dark soul that seeks to haunt the night streets and dreams of the denizens. Well aware of Bloody Jack, she plans to use the killer in her own plot to tear down this city that caused her

[40] *Muriel McDunnough, a spiritualist combatting the forces of darkness, as referenced in QtR 31*

much pain. One of her pastimes is manifesting before children, just out of the sight of adults. Her goal is to induce paranoia in the young ones, causing them to seek an adult who will never believe them. Several children across Paridon are beginning to go mad from this before the year's end. Rumors of "Doppelgangers" have moved all the blame to them instead. The only new doppelgangers actually emerging are likely those posing as rural denizens in the lands beyond Paridon. New Timor is spared her wrath, as she sees it as a victim of Paridon. Even the countryside is not immune, as she sows thoughts of distrust and disdain towards urban dwellers towards those who were unveiled by the mists.

New Timor is, for many purposes, a wreck to gawk at. Attempts to rebuild have resulted in a mockery of what once was. Shanty towns have pooled into a city not even Nosos would claim. Life within this revived urban expanse is grim and cheap. Crime lords born and raised in Timor are contending with gangs that have fled Paridon, as the public is caught in the cross fire. To the chagrin of the old guard families, the Scrapping Chaps gang from Blackchapel has taken the industrial ward of New Timor, and have thus become a power player. Within the bounds of the supernatural, marikith and doppelgangers are both ongoing troubles for a far more aware population. However, a new threat keeps those in check. Psychic vampires[41] are a unique form of undead that harness both life energy and paranormal forces as sustenance. Mundane victims become lifeless zombies, while monsters simply fade out of existence entirely. These hunters have infiltrated gangs and criminal families, gaining prominence while using their gifts in secret.

[41] *These creatures use stats similar to the Cerebral Vampire.*

Mistways

The **Iron Spike Labyrinth** is a tunnel within the mineshaft of the Expansio Bores between Nosos City and the wider wastelands. Operations have barred access to all but the most qualified miners and those granted clearance by the foremen. The name comes from a rail spike curiously nailed into a sign, both of which goad visitors further to go deeper within. This passage can lead wanderers to a variety of urban domains across the demiplane, connecting to sewer passages, mountainous caverns, and even buildings. Those who got lost in the Iron Spike maze have found themselves in places such as Ludendorf in Lamordia, Paridon in Zherisia, Pont-a-Museau in Richemulot, Port-a-Lucine in Dementlieu, and even Lekar in Falkovnia. Even the notorious salt mine of Sithicus has been an egress point too.

The **Knight Flyer** isn't just a cursed locomotive, it's a mistway as well. Accessing the Mistway is simple, wait for the train to arrive upon the witching hour. There are usually signs of its arrival: sounds of a crowded station with no one there, a train lined with shadows of passengers that disappear upon deeper glance, the emblem of a winged knight's helmet emblazoned upon every car, and an eerie dim blue light emitting as it approaches. However, it's almost certain that it's a one-way path. As far as hapless passengers are aware, the trip to Mithras Court has a safe way back. They are fools. However, those who make the voyage to Mithras Court never get lost, but those who try to escape the dismal urban blocks? They are never seen again.

The patients of the Yulgarovich Sanitarium are undeniably mad, but often because of the physical and psychic torture that they often undergo. However, some think them worse for slightly different reasons. Enter beyond the **Halls of Sleep**. This Mistway is not unlike the infamous connective

room in Dominia. However, for one to access this mistway, they must first sleep anywhere in the asylum. The thought of either the Nightmare Court or the God-Brain must first pierce their minds somehow, resulting in a shadowy door emerging before the dreamer. Upon entering, they are greeted by a long, dark, and silent hallway. Upon wandering long enough, the dreamer will find themselves either in a cavern below Bluetspur or within the Nightmare Lands. Many patients of the Sanitarium have vanished this way, with the staff still up in arms over the mystery. Many tend to suspect that subversives and seditious traitors are to blame for this, causing paranoia to explode for periods of time.

This once again concludes our tour upon the mists, to lands seemingly glistening with hopeful ideals and creative innovation. In reality, the Cog is quite the broken place doomed to break down and collapse beyond repair once conflict proves too much. A time of unparalleled darkness may spell the end, should the growing pains and sorrows of the cluster never be resolved.

Monstrous Compendium - Broken Cog Appendix

The Broken Cog offers much in the way of wonders and innovations. But, life is never made easier within the Lands of the Mists. With such creations come dire consequences.

Ashen-Casted

Climate/Terrain: Ruins
Frequency: Very Rare (Darkheath - Demiplane Of Dread, Blackmoorian Ruins - Mystara)
Organization: Group
Activity Cycle: Any
Diet: Carnivore
Intelligence: 5-7 (Low)
Alignment: Any Evil
Treasure: Nil

No. Appearing: 3-18 (3d6)
Armor Class: 6
Movement: 12
Hit Dice: 3+4
Thac0: 16
No. Of Attacks: 1
Damage/Attack: 2-7
Special Attacks: Level Drain
Special Defenses: See Below
Magic Resistance: Nil
Size: M' (4' - 6')
Morale: Fearless (19-20)
Xp Value: 975 Xp

Creatures forged from a literal mixture of hubris, malice, and bloodthirst; burnt shadows cast off from a blast wave. These creatures were slain by advanced weaponry, brought back through sheer rage and dread. Most of them were tragic accidents, but truly warped minds may create and employ them on purpose.

Combat: Much like many undead, their attacks are brutal. Those damaged by the Ashen-Casted must succeed a Save vs. Death effect at a -2 penalty or suffer a recurring effect. At the start of each day, the character must make a Save vs. Death or receive a level drain. Bonuses can still be incurred through proper rest in holy, consecrated grounds or receiving a special means of treatment. Creatures slain by this effect cannot be resurrected.

High strength modifies the bonuses of the creature.

Typical for undead, they share the following defenses. They cannot be affected by *sleep*, *charm*, *hold*, death-magic, poisons, and cold based spells. Only their progenitor can give them commands as well.

In order to damage the Ashen-Casted, the weapon used against them must be a +1 or stronger magical weapon.

Habitant/Society: These creatures are a symbol of fallen society. They are literal shadows cast upon the

ruins of civilization itself, specters of the apocalypse. These fallen creatures exist to mourn over what they have lost, until an outsider dares to intrude upon the mass grave. In the case of the Broken Cog Cluster, they were born from world-ending weaponry. Darkheath was the progenitor of such horrors, before secrets were leaked to domains beyond. Explosives capable of washing a land in burning radiant light were the exact cause of these animated silhouettes of death.

Ecology: They are remnants of a land lost. They serve no greater purpose in the world, save as a lost soul trapped in the detritus of what was once theirs. They are unable to drift beyond what was part of their familiar world. Often this could mean a ruined village, or even a city. A dread familiarity keeps them locked near the sites of their death, not traveling too far on purpose. There is almost nothing left of them physically, save for what remnants they cling to hopelessly.

Automaton

Standard

Climate/Terrain: Urban
Frequency: Rare
Organization: Solitary Or Group
Activity Cycle: Any
Diet: Nil
Intelligence: Average To Highly (8 - 14)
Alignment: Neutral
Treasure: M, V

No. Appearing: 1 Or 1-4
Armor Class: 2
Movement: 9
Hit Dice: 5
Thac0: 15 (14)
No. Of Attacks: 2
Damage/Attack: 2 - 9, 2 - 9
Special Attacks: See Below
Special Defenses: See Below
Magic Resistance: 30%
Size: M (7')
Morale: Fanatical (18)
Xp Value: 1,400

These are incredible marvels of super-science, thinking anthropomorphic machines! Despite seeming like a cold calculating device, these constructs are capable of a great degree of logic and thought. Automaton design is standardized, to fit with an automated assembly line. The general structure is blocky, with the components of the automaton somewhat resembling familiar schematics and machinery. Most impressive of all are the calculating and computation devices, clicking and clacking away at various numerical formulas. Some prove more functional than others, but the vast majority of these automatons utilize such incredible technology.

However, there is a grim twist to some of these incredible machines, not everything is inorganic. Hooked up to a support system and given constant stimulation is a preserved living brain. While these brains have little to no understanding of their former owners, they remain healthy enough for use in these projects. So far, no particularly aberrant brains have been employed, lest they cause equally abnormal effects. These brains need not necessarily be human either, even if they most likely are. The teams of engineers brought onto these projects are not unified on accepting this. Many have taken to building their own thinking machines, just as capable of computing as the human mind. Efforts have resulted in sub-par automatons, but many have the end goal of phasing out a rather macabre part of the building process.

Combat: The automaton uses slams and punches as its main means of attack. Each attack is treated as a Magical Weapon. They also gain a bonus to THAC0. Thus, THAC0 of 15 would be treated as 14 instead.

Automatons have great strength, equivalent to 16. Thus, they gain a +1 bonus to damage.

A +1 or stronger magical weapon must be used in order to damage an automaton, as unique alloys used for armor plating are well resistant to mundane weapons.

Furthermore, an automaton cannot be affected by mind-altering spells, such as charms. They are not affected by poisons or diseases as well, save for a risk

of naturally occurring madness. Alteration spells that affect organic anatomy do not affect automatons.

***Habitat/Society**:* Despite often being brilliant, their purpose is often left to whoever has them. Free will does not come naturally to them, only more advanced models can hope to achieve this. Their status as sentient beings is currently up for debate, as are the many ethical concerns over owning an automaton.

Ecology**:* These creatures are constructs in almost every possible way, save for some of them having brains. These are creations of superscience and not the natural world. Their existence is likely an accident, reborn from tragedy and madness. It is said that the first automaton was born as a result of the sudden death of Clan Gorgontella's young ***Guillermo Gorgentella. The boy, while sneaking into a factory owned by his father, found himself in one of the machines. His head was among the only pieces of him not mangled. The family had heard rumors of a "Living Brain" in Dementlieu, and so they commissioned a new work to commemorate their son and his love of high technology.

Machine-Man

Climate/Terrain: Urban
Frequency: Very Rare
Organization: Solitary Or Group
Activity Cycle: Any
Diet: Nil
Intelligence: Average To Exceptionally (8 - 16)
Alignment: Lawful Neutral, Neutral, Lawful Evil, Or Neutral Evil
Treasure: M X2, V

No. Appearing: 1 - 2
Armor Class: 0
Movement: 16
Hit Dice: 8
Thac0: 12 (10)
No. Of Attacks: 3
Damage/Attack: 3 - 14, 3 - 14, 3 - 14
Special Attacks: Magical Attacks
Special Defenses: See Below
Magic Resistance: 60%
Size: L (10')
Morale: Fearless (19-20)
Xp Value: 6,000

Unlike the standard automaton, these come with a sinister secret, bound souls in addition to a brain. Despite this, they are not undead. These constructs carry a true sentience, compared to their lesser automaton brethren, especially those without a brain. Machine-men have a greater sense of reasoning, awareness, and possibly even empathy. However, the process that creates them also damages their very sense of being. Their identities are taken from them, as are most depths of emotion. They are still capable of understanding such, but struggle to replicate them organically. Likewise, they are far bulkier, as strange new technologies are needed to account for the occult science used to build them. Despite looking clunky and heavy compared to their lesser variants, they are actually stronger and faster.

Combat: Machine-Men attack as if they use magical weapons for their slam attacks. Added weapons are optional and could affect XP as such. Their THAC0 is effectively adjusted to 10.

Machine-Men have incredible strength, equivalent to 18. They gain a +2 bonus to damage.

A +1 or stronger magical weapon must be used in order to damage a machine-man.

Furthermore, a machine-man cannot be affected by mind-altering spells, such as charms. They are not affected by poisons or diseases as well, save for naturally occurring madness. Alteration spells that affect organic anatomy do not affect machine men.

Habitat/Society: Machine-men alone have no true society or place, nor are they remotely natural. However, few are aware of this. Those who begin to uncover their fate begin to slip into a mental state known as "Rampancy" by their creators. Rampant machine men are almost always driven insane by their revelations. Some will try in vain to reclaim a lost sense of life, while others will turn vindictive and

hateful towards organic creatures. Rampant Machine-men are always Evil.

Ecology: These creatures are maddened abominations, robbed of so much life and sometimes driven to a frenzied augmented psychotic state. Rampancy remains a tragic commonality for machine men. These living machines are an epitome of wicked technological craft.

Beastman

Climate/Terrain: Wartorn Wastelands/Demiplane Of Dread
Frequency: Uncommon (Darkheath), Very Rare (Other Domains), Rare (Mystara's Hollow World)
Organization: Tribal
Activity Cycle: Any
Diet: Omnivore, Preference For Meat
Intelligence: Below Average - Average
Treasure: L (C,O,Q×10,S)
Alignment: N Or Ne

No. Appearing: 1 - 4
Armor Class: 8
Movement: 12
Hit Dice: 2
Thac0: 19
No. Of Attacks: 1
Damage/Attack: By Weapon
Special Attacks: Nil
Special Defenses: Varies
Magic Resistance: Nil
Size: M - L
Morale: 13
Xp Value: 35

Remnants of an ancient past, much like long faded Blackmoor. True to the lore of ancient Mystara, Beastmen are consistently unique and diverse in appearance. It is almost as if their forms are generated at random. After Blackmoor fell to the Great Rain of Fire, the beastmen further spread out. They then began to solidify appearances into the various humanoid races that populate the world today.[42] These creatures were born of wicked souls, by the power of the Mystaran Immortal known as Hel. After the changing world caused them to solidify into the humanoids of current Mystara, the remainder were brought to the Hollow World. Cut off from Hel, they slowly gave up on their own motivations and shifted towards just survival on their own terms. Their story does not end in the world of Mystara, as they have emerged upon the Demiplane of Dread through mysterious means. So far, they are mostly found within the domain of Darkheath, which has its roots in the ancient land of Blackmoor.

Combat: Beastmen are keen on utilizing a mixture of primitive tools and weapons at their side. However, much like the humanoids that would come in the years to come, they are more than able to adapt. In small numbers, it's rare that the beastmen are too organized. But, in high enough numbers, they become a terrifying and formidable army. Armor is often a mixture of things cobbled from scraps and trophies. Larger beastmen use larger weapons, dealing more damage.

Habitat/Society: Regardless of where they are found, they are cruel and brutal people. Born from the spirits of evil beings under Hel's control, they channel this into a sense of superiority.

Within Ravenloft, they are locked into endless war within surviving Blackmoorians. They are prone to experiencing memories of dead souls that are grafted onto them. These beastmen will retain muddled and confused thoughts and memories of a past life, which risks insanity if pondered too deeply. These beastmen, driven to madness by Darkheath's curse, are often used as sacrificial body shields during raids against the colony of Darkheath.

Ecology: Within Mystara, beastmen were a progenitor race of the humanoids. Created roughly Mystaran-Calendar-BC 4500, as Hel reincarnated wicked souls as a personal army of monsters. This in turn sparked the Beastman Crusades of

[42] *For more on the Beastmen of Mystara, consult the Hollow World Campaign Setting Boxed Set.*

Blackmoorian legend. The Great Rain of Fire ultimately purged much of the population, save for those eventually taken to the Hollow World. Over time, beastmen mutated into the several humanoid races seen in the world today.

Within Ravenloft, these are indeed souls of the damned, but from far more tragic circumstances. Rather than Immortal magic, they are spawned by a Darklord's curse. Those who die in loyalty to the Darklord are reincarnated as a beastman, according to the domain's False History. Curiously, those who have wandered off into the mists have found themselves in other domains. A shocking number has unintentionally migrated to Darkon. The beastmen within the demiplane of dread are prone to the effects of Madness elaborated within the Ravenloft Campaign Setting.

Crimson Blight (Variant Cannibal Zombie)

Climate/Terrain: Any (Demiplane Of Dread)
Frequency: Uncommon (Rockbaecche), Rare (Neighboring Domains), Very Rare (Elsewhere)
Organization: Pack
Activity Cycle: Any
Diet: Carnivore
Intelligence: Low (5 - 7)
Treasure: Nil (Whatever Is On Victim's Body)
Alignment: Chaotic Evil

No. Appearing: 2 - 20
Armor Class: 6
Movement: 6
Hit Dice: 3+1
Thac0: 18
No. Of Attacks: 1 (Bite), 2 (Claws)
Damage/Attack: 1 - 4 (Claws) Or 1 - 6 (Bites)
Special Attacks: Plague
Special Defenses: Immune To Sleep, Charm, Hold And Poison
Magic Resistance: Nil
Size: M
Morale: Steady (11 - 12)
Xp Value: 270

A special kind of undead created through a plague. Their namesake comes from the fact that the infected victim proceeds to bleed profusely from multiple orifices before death and reanimation.These undead are deeply dangerous, due to a deadly infection stewing within the shambling corpses.

Combat: Crimson Blights attack primarily through zombie bites and scratching claws. Creatures hit by a zombie bite must Save vs Poison/Death Effects or contract the plague. This ailment acts rapidly, and within 1d6 hours without treatment via magic or a known cure, the victim will die and reanimate soon after.

Habitat/Society: These undead operate in some manner of collective thought. While it is not a literal hive mind, they tend towards group action rather than aimless roaming on their own. This behavior is not easily explained, save for that the plague that created them is supernatural in origin and exhibits strange properties such as the symptoms that manifest on victims.

Despite becoming zombie-like undead, they have a remedial recollection of old habits and ideas. While not active in seeking out victims, many will pointlessly toil with familiar actions. They will not think about them, just merely try to recreate them. This could be a type of chore, job, or activity. Often, the undead will recreate this poorly as they have no genuine engagement in the task.

Ecology: There is little that is natural to it, much like the plague that created them. They are tragic creations of a mad man's distorted plans. By all means, they are an accidental byproduct and nothing more.

Deep One

Creatures of the depths, well below the Ichthyan Sea. They are the children and devotees of eldritch horrors beyond the comprehension of mortal minds. Deep Ones have a vaguely humanoid shape, warped with distinctly aquatic and amphibian features. Their guttural and garbled language is maddening to human ears, a collection of sounds that should be impossible for their mouths. These creatures are inherently fanatical to their dark gods, despising

anything for the world above the waves. Their emergence upon the land signifies a gradual uprising of cosmic forces that we cannot fathom.

True Deep One (and Deep One Priest)

Climate/Terrain: Aquatic (Demiplane Of Dread)
Frequency: Rare
Organization: Tribal
Activity Cycle: Any
Diet: Any
Intelligence: Average (8-10), Highly Intelligent (13-14) (Deep One Priest)
Alignment: Neutral Evil
Treasure: L,M,N (Z)

No. Appearing: 1 - 10
Armor Class: 4
Movement: 9 L, 15 Sw
Hit Dice: 6, 9 (Priest)
Thac0: 13
No. Of Attacks: 2
Damage/Attack: 3-10 (Harpoon) Or 4 - 10 (Claws)
Special Attacks: Nil
Special Defenses: *See Below*
Magic Resistance: Nil
Size: M (7')
Morale: Champion (15-16)
Xp Value: 650 (Deep One) / 3000 (Deep One Priests)

Deep Ones are the children of a dark cosmic deity entombed deep beneath Ichthyos. It is their final goal to awaken their dark master and its allies, so they may retake the world in full. These creatures are grotesque, strange, and deeply unnatural to the world around them. Their qualities are both amphibian and aquatic in nature, belying something not truly beast nor man.

Combat: Deep Ones cannot be damaged by non-magical weapons, thus needing at least a +1 magical weapon in order to receive damage. Deep One Priests, however, require a +2 magical weapon in order for them to receive damage.

Deep Ones hit with great strength (18), especially with claws, thus dealing a +2 damage bonus on related attacks.

While in water, the Deep One can turn invisible at-will. This works like the *Invisibility* spell otherwise.

Some of these Deep Ones, devout to the ways of the ancient ones, have been given dark boons. These often manifest in the form of spells cast by a 9th level Priest. Deep One Priests are otherwise identical to other Deep Ones. They know the following: *Animal Animosity, Command, Create Water, Find Water, Water Sprint, Enthrall, Hold Person, Speak with Sea Creatures, Hold Animal, Water Walk, Acid Rain, Modify Memory, Watery Travel.* Deep Ones with this ability are treated as distinctly different from the regular monster. Use the XP listed up above for Deep One Priests with this ability.

Habitat/Society: Confining within deep oceanic realms, they revere sinister gods. Such creatures prefer to keep to themselves, except when they crave the reverence or enslavement of mortal humanoids above. It is rare for them to engage in direct conflict, except in defense. They would rather get everything they want through proxies or outright adoration, or at least worship of their gods.

Ecology: Deep Ones are inherently aquatic creatures. However, they may maintain existence on land for several hours, even days if they push themselves. If the Deep Ones do not overexert or severely damage themselves, they are otherwise immortal and are immune to effects that target age.

Deep Hybrid

Climate/Terrain: Coastal (Demiplane Of Dread)
Frequency: Common (Ichthyos), Very Rare (Other Domains)
Organization: Group
Activity Cycle: Any
Diet: Any
Intelligence: Average (10)
Alignment: Neutral Evil
Treasure: *Varies*

No. Appearing: 1 Or 1 - 10
Armor Class: 8

Movement: 12, 6 Sw
Hit Dice: 2
Thac0: 18
No. Of Attacks: 1
Damage/Attack: By Weapon
Special Attacks: Nil
Special Defenses: Nil
Magic Resistance: Nil
Size: M (5' - 6')
Morale: Elite (13-14)
Xp Value: 35

The unholy offspring of a human and a deep one. These creatures will in time grow into deep ones in their own right after nearly a century has passed. At a certain point, the denizens will begin developing disturbing aquatic features.

Combat: Despite their strange deformations, these aren't strong enough to give them a massive boon in fighting, save for an ease of fighting underwater without issue and breathing in water as well. Older hybrids may have a swim speed of 12, as well as certain abilities from the true deep ones.

Habitat/Society: These humanoid creatures cloak in the background of civilization, knowing that they will one day serve a greater purpose. Many act as operatives and spies, if they aren't outright active within the church.

Ecology: Deep One Hybrids try to hide their nature from outsiders, as they go about through their often eccentric and weird activities. Those who prove especially good at it are indistinguishable from fully human counterparts. Between mature adulthood and elderly age, they will metamorphosize into true deep ones.

Lycanthrope, Werefox (Mystara)

Climate/Terrain: Any
Frequency: Rare (Various Mystaran Domains - The Demiplane Of Dread), Very Rare (Elsewhere In The Demiplane Of Dread), Uncommon (Mystara)
Organization: Solitary Or Groups (Too Hedonistic And Self-Centered To Stay For Long)
Activity Cycle: Nocturnal
Diet: Carnivore
Intelligence: Average - Exceptional
Alignment: Neutral Or Neutral Evil
Treasure: E, Q (X5), S

No. Appearing: Solo (1) Or Small Skulk (1-3)
Armor Class: 4
Movement: 12
Hit Dice: 8+1
Thac0: 13
No. Of Attacks: 1 (Weapon Or Bite)
Damage/Attack: By Weapon Or 1d6/1d6+4
Special Attacks: Charms
Special Defenses: Silver Or +1 Weapon To Hit
Magic Resistance: Nil
Size: M (4' - 6')
Morale: 13 (Elite)
Xp Value: 800

This variant differs from other worlds', mostly within their abilities, core appearance, and gender restriction. While the Mystaran version lacks many magical powers, it makes up for that in less limited potential. Likewise, the Mystaran race does not take an elven form for their human/demihuman appearance. Finally, werefoxes from Mystara can be male or female. Statistics-wise, they are also different in that they do not have to have an elven base form, do not gain 1d4 levels worth of Wizard spells, cannot Pass without Trace continuously and their Charm ability is used 3 times per day while targeting one creature per use.[43]

[43] *For more detail, see the stat block and reference Creature Crucible 4: Night Howlers for more.*

Within the demiplane of dread, most werefoxes are actually separate cursed creatures called the fox woman. These creatures are afflicted elven and human women who suffer a condition similar to lycanthropy. With more doomed souls arriving from Mystara, they've met a new rival in the true werefox. The Mystaran werefox likely originated within the domain of Vasfar[44], before making its way to the core through Nebligtode and Nova Vaasa. Those who have fled the wrath of the Church of the Lawgiver have attempted to make homes within Verbrek and Darkon. Many have emerged into the Broken Cog Cluster by accident, usually by exploring the ancient ruins of a Blackmoorian colony in the world of Mystara.

Combat: Often rakish rogues, they're just as likely to employ sharp wit as a sharp blade. As listed above, they can only be hit with silvered weapons or a magical weapon of +1 of higher quality. Likewise, they have an ability to Charm any humanoid 3 times per day. It is not uncommon for the somewhat meeker werefoxes to take up arcane or bardic magic to supplement their wit.

Habitat/Society: In the best of cases, they blend in as merry pranksters or jovial bards. However, many will employ a far more malicious side. Self-absorbed and deeply pretentious, an offended werefox may do anything in their ability to humiliate or brutally murder their prey. But for them, it's also an act of theatre, they must make their victim into a show. Even among tenuous allies, massive egos will overtake the conversation. Likewise, a werefox's sudden fixations can not be swayed or changed too easily. And should one get in the way of an obsession, they will treat this target as a dire foe.

Ecology: They are clever hunters of convenience. Ill likely to go on a rampage, they'll often single victims out instead and slay them when no one will especially notice.

Puppeteer Parasite

Climate/Terrain: Demiplane Of Dread
Frequency: Rare (Belagora, Bluetspur), Very Rare (Ichthyos, Nosos, Hazlan)
Organization: Solitary
Activity Cycle: Diurnal
Diet: Nil
Intelligence: Exceptional (15-16)
Alignment: Neutral Evil
Treasure: Nil (Whatever Is On Possessed Victim)

No. Appearing: Solo (1) Or Small Pack (2 - 4)
Armor Class: 5
Movement: 12, Br 9
Hit Dice: 4 + 2
Thac0: 16
No. Of Attacks: 2
Damage/Attack: 1d4+1/1d4+1
Special Attacks: Digging Claws
Special Defenses: Hit By +1 Magic Weapon Or Better, Stealth
Magic Resistance: 20%
Size: S (1' Long)
Morale: 13 - 14 (Elite)
Xp Value: 1,400

Description. This grotesque and beastly thing is a maddening sight to behold. Its body shape is almost simian, if hairless, emaciated, slimy, and leathery looking. Its head carries a similar grotesque coating, but is elongated nearly to the point of exaggeration. This somewhat tube-shaped head ends with jaws that can compress akin to that of a leech or an eel, or stretch to something more canine. Many beady little eyes dot the top of the head. Its front paw-like appendages are tipped with razor sharp scythe claws. Standing at roughly 3 feet tall, the parasite can slink around on its strange appendages. Like a rodent, the parasite can compress its body to

[44] *A domain of dread rooted in Mystara's Northern Reaches. More can be found in Threshold Magazine, especially issues 29, 30, and 31.*

squeeze between various small surfaces with ease, with holes small enough for a wine cork. Despite its digitigrade stance, it can stand bipedally for a short period of time for 1-10 rounds. However, to maintain balance, it must return its front paws to the ground to move properly.

Combat. The puppeteer parasite can lunge up to 10 feet towards a potential host, assuming it can't just climb on or drop onto them. Upon striking with both of its claws, it will proceed to dig into the spinal column of the host, dealing an additional 1d10 damage. However, player characters under attack by a puppeteer may roll utilizing their strength against the creature to try to throw it off. This operates in a manner similar to initiating a grapple. However, any penalties that could apply to wrestling larger targets do not apply to puppeteers attempting to latch onto targets. If the victim is dropped to 0 hit points, the parasite immediately merges into the host and hijacks the body. This is done by the creature digging into the victim's flesh, burrowing inside and compressing its body to fit into the general anatomy of the host. However, if the parasite does not drop the victim to 0 HP, it may attempt to burrow into the victim after 3d4 rounds, where it automatically hijacks the host body. The host's mind is completely aware of what the puppeteer parasite subjects the host body to. Parasites can speak through the host body, even if the host mind is alive. Corpses hijacked by the parasite are not preserved and will still rot, while living hosts must be maintained by the parasite to prevent the host body from dying. Living creatures overtaken by the parasite convulse and jerk erratically, as the parasite reorients itself within the nervous system of its new body suit. The parasite cannot easily hide this, as this is often a natural response to their bodily hijacking.

Creatures overtaken by the puppeteer parasite must be slain and the parasite extracted before the host can be resurrected. Typical magical attempts to purge parasites and diseases prove dangerous to hosts, as the creature is well embedded into the host body. Not using more careful or stronger forms of magic has a 50% chance of removing the puppeteer. However, the host must make a System Shock roll or immediately die as part of the process. Sufficient damage to the host body, equal to ¾ of the host's total hit points, will cause the host to roll for System Shock. Failure causes the parasite to violently evacuate from the host body, dealing 2d10 damage. If the host is not dead, they are left with a lethal wound that requires treatment at once, lest the target take 1d6 damage each round until death. Other circumstances may cause the parasite to haphazardly leave a body in this manner, but are often by the parasite's choice. Curiously, *raise dead*, *resurrection,* or a *wish* spell is required to restore a host to normal without the potential of slaying the host.

When not holding a body, the parasite can move silently 75% of the time and can hide in its surroundings 60% of the time. While puppeting a body, it can mimic various functions that the victim could do in life. If it takes needed time, typically 1d6 hours with further details listed below, it can tap into enough of the victim's mind. And thus, it can attempt to replicate various abilities, including combat training and memorized spells. If the body puppet sustains enough damage, the puppeteer will burst from it, often inducing reactions of revulsion, shock, and horror in victims who witness the display. (If using rules from the Ravenloft campaign setting, appropriate saving throws would come into play. Otherwise, characters may roll saving throw vs. poison or feel deeply sickened, causing a 1d6 penalty to strength for 1d6 rounds.)

Habitat/Society. Puppeteer parasites communicate through a sort of "psychic network", allowing them to share thoughts between other puppeteers within at least 1 mile proximity. Their motivations are inherently alien to mortal races on the Prime Material or the Demiplane of Dread, save for a desire to assimilate any knowledge they can gather from hosts. These are no mere data collectors, as their extended presence has led to subversion and breakdown of the social structures their hosts once belonged to. Intricate manipulation, seeding paranoia to play victims against each other, twisted games of intrigue to create widespread dysfunction, and more fit into their dark games. Due to strong observational skills and intelligence, they are capable of blending into their host's environment as long as

they can gauge local values, customs, and everyday life from various resources. Barring that, they are capable of retrieving specific information from the host body via several hours of deep meditation. Typically, this can be accomplished within 1d6 hours. However, more hours are added to this process if the host is more intelligent than the average humanoid. For every 2 points of intelligence above 11, the puppeteer must add an extra hour to this meditation. Upon completion, it can harness every thought belonging to the victim's brain.

The puppeteers are deeply narcissistic and have a superiority complex; thus, it is hard to offer them anything either tangible or otherwise that they cannot obtain in other ways. Likewise, they view themselves as a superior adaptable life form, viewing all others as meat to borrow for various tasks. It is uncommon for the puppeteers to cooperate with other races, save for beings too alien for them to assimilate. They often find themselves trying other ploys to manipulate these targets. Prime entities that have particularly unusual material, such as gargoyles, cannot be assimilated. Creatures from beyond the Prime, such as devas, tanar'ri, baatezu, and modrons, are immune to their attempts, due to their anomalous extraplanar nature. Creatures with a structure of nerves and muscles can be assimilated, including stranger beings that are decisively non-human or completely alien, such as illithids or rather aberrant mongrelmen.

Ecology. These creatures have no true ecology of their own, at least one that is known to scholars. Legends tell of their dark origins, likely from beyond the Prime Material plane, or within a crystal sphere far too alien for most minds. Societies infested with them quickly run the risk of collapse, after being drained of resources. New targets will be sought out to ruin from there, all of this done stealthily. Their kind was once well versed in biomancy, a dark art that allows one to sculpt organic matter like clay. Many knew it as "flesh-craft." Their abilities to shape and control all matters of flesh was absolute. Through their strange, dark magic, all could be puppets through elaborate rituals. They could build organic weaponry, bastions, even new bodies. However, the forces of the cosmos (be they deities or just powerful planar beings) fought back and struck them down. After their ancient civilization fell, most of their flesh crafting knowledge faded, to their horror. It is unknown if they forgot it as time moved on or if divine means barred them from recalling. And over time, their grand intellect fell back as well, when they once rivaled that of illithids or possibly beyond. They seek to reclaim lost mental power through any means necessary. While they lost much of their skills in biomancy, knowledge on how to create more of them persisted. Such means of procreation prove far more heinous than their other abilities. When enough puppeteers gather together, they may sample biomass from various host bodies to build a new puppeteer. Any hosts used in this ritual are destroyed. Following this, they may conduct a ritual that takes 8-24 hours which promptly bring new life to the creature. Despite the strangeness of this ritual, these creatures are not very much alive.

How such a horrid beast can claw its way into the lands of the mists is largely unknown. The few scholars who have found Bluetspur and survive claim that the vile parasite has its roots here. However, since Bluetspur has vanished from the Core, those who postulated such things are declared mad and most of which have been confined to various mental retreat centers. By strange circumstance, several of them emerged around the sunken nation of Ichthyos as mists cleared.

The community of Arveskov has been devastated by these creatures as they moved from the Ichthyan Sea over to Belagora. These creatures were brought over by the trade ship of ***Andrei Borkarvsky***, while seeking to import Ichthyan fish towards the Belagoran side of the sea. Borkarvsky is he is known is long dead. There are few instances where a puppeteer will preserve a host body, Borkarvsky is one of those exceptions.

It is said that within the ruins that surround the far reaches of Hazlan, these things lurk listlessly and eagerly await new hosts. They have been somehow entombed deep within forgotten temples and tombs. Others escaped into the Nightmare Lands prior to its removal from the Core.

Shadow, Psychic

Climate/Terrain: Demiplane Of Dread
Frequency: Very Rare (Belagora)
Organization: Group
Activity Cycle: Nocturnal
Diet: Nil
Intelligence: Average (8-10)
Alignment: Neutral Evil
Treasure: Nil

No. Appearing: 1 Or 1 - 4
Armor Class: 2
Movement: 12
Hit Dice: 4+2
Thac0: 16
No. Of Attacks: 2
Damage/Attack: 2-7
Special Attacks: Mind Drain
Special Defenses: +1 Or Better Weapon To Hit
Magic Resistance: See Below
Size: S (4')
Morale: 19-20 (Fearless)
Xp Value: 975
Combat:

Psychic Shadows must be hit by magical weapons of +1 enchantment or higher.

Creatures hit by the psychic shadow's claws suffer similarly to regular shadows, except they affect the minds of their victims. They must save vs. Spell or suffer a drain to Wisdom. In addition, victims of extended abuse suffer from a distinct madness where they lose awareness of their surroundings, especially in regards to conflict or concerning matters. A heavily drained victim will fall into near comatose when addressed with problems around them. Drained points of Wisdom return after 1 - 3 days time. However, the madness and mental torment inflicted upon victims may not without additional aid, such as restorative cleric spells. As this madness often manifests in this domain as apathy, submission, and other acceptable behaviors, it is hard to detect.

Psychic Shadows are immune to numerous types of spells. Sleep, charm, and hold spells do not affect the shadow, nor do any effects that affect or interact with the mind. Psychic shadows are likewise immune to any cold effect based spells.

Curiously, psychic shadows are not undead and cannot be turned.

Habitant/Society: Their existence is much like the darklord, secretive and enforcing a ruthless status quo. Their powers help to ensure that conflict in Belagora is kept to a minimum, as the public is made easily manipulated and mentally pliable.

Ecology: These creatures are manifestations of the Council of Seven, spawned from their anomalous shadowy form. Much like the darklord, they pacify the public through their powers. They have no purpose in the natural world, beyond dulling their prey down and making them vulnerable to danger.

Thank you, valued scholar of dread anathemas!

Do not forget to leave feedback to the authors!