

Alex's campaign notes

Name of the Campaign: Woven Fates

General Notes:

First and foremost, I want to make some comments regarding the campaign per se. This campaign started at a time Ravenloft was technically dead, this means, the line had finished and no more products were being published. The planning of it all was done using rules of the AD&D 2nd Edition and the beginning of the campaign was set for 751 BC, the default date set in Domains of Dread.

Meanwhile, Ravenloft was kind of resurrected, being the line taken up again by Arthaus, and a number of products are currently being published under this label using the rules D&D 3E, D20. Technically, though, Ravenloft is no longer a WotC product, for the rights of publication have been sold, so the new books can not make direct references to characters whose copyright is still propriety of WotC. For instance, Lord Soth, the former ruler of the domain Sithicus, is now referred by some oblique quote, like Black Knight or something similar.

Anyway, this change of editions happened still before the actual beginning of the campaign, in time for all the characters to be done directly in 3E. At the same time, the new books advanced the time line and the new default date for starting campaigns was now 755 BC. I, however, decided to keep my campaign starting at 751 BC.

There are some changes I had to make in canon. According to Bleak House, Van Richten died or disappeared in 750 BC, but I find the character so interesting that I've kept him alive thus far. Also, the Grand Conjunction has happened, but I plan to reuse some of the modules of 2Ed that detailed it. As such, events that in canon history happened between 736 BC and 740 BC may not have happened after all.

But the biggest change is, no doubt, the domain where the adventurers start. At the time I was planning everything, I was rather unsure and unknowing of Ravenloft lore. I knew nearly to nothing, having only Domains of Dread and the Van Richten books, so I felt safer carving my own domain, named Irvanika, letting the players in there, and forgetting the rest of the Core. Alas, the appeal of the published material is too great. What is the fun of taking the players to Ravenloft if you cannot show them what is Ravenloft? Who are Strahd, Azalin, Drakov, Van Richten, Weathermay, etc? Ravenloft is teeming with interesting characters and plots, with compelling storylines and adventure hooks, and I was anxious to let these show. And slowly, gradually, I came to understand that the creation of Irvanika had been a mistake. But it was done, and I was loath to go back. And so it was that Irvanika was placed in the very southernmost part of the Shadow Rift, bordering Barovia to the South, Borca to the West, Nova Vaasa to the East and Tepest and the Shadow Rift to the North. Snuggling right in the core of the Core, it was to be the

departing point for the players. The main story is still focused in Irvanika, but the stories of the PCs will take them to travel a significant part of the Core (if their players allow for it, which we can never be sure of) and in the end, the fate of Irvanika itself may have a direct and large influence into the lands of the Core. And so you're now warned that not everything you'll find here accords to what you may have read in Ravenloft books, but is a selection of what I like most about them.

PC's Description:

Evangelina Periesz (Eva)

Profile:

Evangelina (Eva for short) is an athletic and attractive young woman. She has black eyes set on a fair light skin, and her red hair gives her an appearance quite out of the ordinary. She is not very tall, but is muscular and well-shaped, and has trained her body both in strength and agility. She is a bit rough in her handling of people, without the romantic ways of city-ladies. She is mostly shy, but of late she has shown signs of wanting to come out of the shell and become bolder. She has always manifested an aversion to marriage, albeit not to men, and a strong curiosity of the world beyond her inn and the woods she knows from childhood.

Background:

Antonín Periesz is the eldest son of Popov Periesz, a well-known and well-liked innkeeper in both Keshgel and Ingelberg. He ran an inn called "The Walking Knight" that stood in the high road between Kleinstadt and the shunned Old Cathedral, which haunted the triple crossroads or Irvanika - the confluence of roads coming from Kleinstadt, Ingelberg and Keshgel. This road was the only coming from all the western countries leading directly to Falkovnia and from Kleinstadt a branch followed to Borca, thus the inn benefited from a steady afflux of merchants and travellers which made The Walking Knight prosper through generations.

Being the eldest, Antonín became the heir of Popov and thus the next innkeeper, when his father died. Antonín was married to Karlya Hoztov, second daughter of Josquin Hoztov, instead of her elder sister who died of pneumonia days before the arranged match. They lived at the inn. Antonín's brother, Boris, left for Keshgel after his own marriage.

Four years later, Karlya got pregnant and a girl was born: Evangelina, strangely with red hair. It was unknown in the family, but Popov claimed he had a grand-mother that was also red-haired and that Eva (for short) had taken the trait from her.

Eva grew at the inn, learning about the household chores very early. But the place was not entirely safe. Some of the guests were less than honoured people, and there always had been stories about the dangers of the night. Thus, Antonín wrote to Boris inviting him to come to live at the inn. This agreed, under the condition that he could work his trade as he did in Keshgel, as a blacksmith. Boris and Nadia, his wife, had a son, called Drulovic, and he and Eva became very attached and the closest friends in the world. They

spent most of the day together, but at night Nadia taught both of them all she knew about the nature and healing herbs. It was during these lessons that she found that Eva had some healing power of herself, but they never understood where that power came from. Surely, it wasn't from divine inclination, for Eva had none.

Boris was not only a blacksmith but also a skilled hunter, and many times he ventured into the woods learning all there was to learn about them. When Drulovic was ten years old (Eva was only a few months older than Drulovic), Boris started to teach him in the arts of the wood, fight and the handling of the sword. After an incident at the inn where Eva and Drulovic behaved bravely, he began to teach her also, at the request of Karlya. In the time they both could spare from the tasks at the inn, Eva and Drulovic continued happily with their training under Boris. Eva was given a beautiful mare, named Cal, and trained her to obey her voice.

Meanwhile, two new boys had been born at the inn: Mikhail, Eva's brother, and Feofar, Drulovic's.

When Eva turned eighteen, her father decided to marry her, but Eva was reluctant to the idea. Every prospect that Antonín found was scared away by pranks and other less pleasant accidents caused purposefully by Eva, Drulovic and their brothers. Only her aunt knew the true reason why she didn't want to marry: she was too attached to Drulovic, and afraid that marrying someone would take her away from him. But that time came, at last, when Drulovic himself married Thérèze and moved to live in Keshgel. Eva was twenty years old, and after that, she became sadder and more reclusive. But four years later, she received a letter from Drulovic asking her to join him in Keshgel, for he was needing her advice and companionship.

Gregor

Profile:

Gregor is 18 years old, but looks older. He's very fond of food and cooking lessons at the Monastery proved to be his most cherished memory after Ramirez and his teachings. Accordingly, he's overly large for his height which is worsened by the fact that he's short for a man of his age. He's well-humoured and, although given to fits of melancholy, mostly cheerful. He is lightly-tanned, and his hair and eyes are black.

Background:

Gregor was born in 733 in a poor family, and the last of many brothers. Unable to feed so many mouths, his parents abandoned him at the doorstep of the Monastery-School of Ezra in Irvanika, three years later. Thus, Gregor was raised as priest of Ezra, but during his early adolescence he found that was not his true calling, and that Ezra meant nothing to him.

Gregor was 17 when the monastery harboured a wounded man from far away lands, named Ramirez, asking for solace. They granted him residence within the walls of the monastery until he became wholly sound again. Unfortunately, this never happened and this man died the next year. In the meantime, Gregor befriended him and Ramirez saw him as a son that came to ease his last days after a whole life of bohemia and adventure, for this Ramirez had often times stolen for need and then for pleasure of a good

challenge. Much of what he gained was then wasted away in brief revelries and exquisite extravagancies. Within that year, Gregor learnt from him the basic of his craft, but he also learned something more determinant for his future: true faith in another god, whom Ramirez called the Morning Lord. And this new God's message seemed to Gregor to make much more sense, so that he turned, inwardly, to him and shunned Ezra. Equally, Ezra began to gradually forsake and remove her boons from him.

When Ramirez died, the last link that attached Gregor to the Monastery was broken, and he ran away to the nearest city: Keshgel. However, the forsaking of Ezra didn't bring recognition by the Morning Lord, and Gregor began to feel empty. A void within his soul, a sensation of solitude, the very absence of the warmth he had felt since childhood: the comfortable feeling of a divine presence in his heart was gone, and this threw Gregor near despair. He longed to feel again that heat, that assurance, and so his steps conducted him to Ezra's temple, surely the one place where he could receive guidance.

Nikola

Profile:

Nikola is 24 years old, and his harsh childhood has branded him with a deeply ingrained mistrust of human kind. As a result, he is very introverted, selfish and asocial, being easily labelled impolite at best and a worthless rogue at worst. His eyes are furtive and wouldn't look misplaced in a bandit. He is tall and slim, with green-brownish eyes and a deeply tanned skin.

Background:

As far as he knows, Nikola probably was born in the region around Ingelberg. He doesn't know exactly where, for all his childhood was spent roaming the land with his merchant step father, Delian, and his mother Denitza. Delian was a rude and ruthless man whose feelings towards Nikola were ambiguous at best: he probably hated him. It was usual to occupy him with impossible tasks so as to have an excuse to spank him afterwards. On the other hand, Denitza loved him above all and taught Nikola to read and write.

Delian was an unstable man, mostly due to his uncontrollable drinking habits. His violence was untempered, and Denitza suffered cruelly at his hands, being beaten every time he arrived home drunk... which was almost always.

Besides his mother, Nikola's only friendly companion was a little journal he had where he used to write his thoughts and visions of the world. He kept it secret and would not part from it ever. Not even his mother, whom he told everything, knew of his little relic.

Delian's alcoholic habits were worsening as time passed. Denitza could do little but urge him to stop, but he never did and one night spanked her to death. She grabbed a dagger trying to defend herself, but he caught it and stabbed her with her own weapon.

Denitza's last breath filled little Nikola's heart with an eternal incurable wound. Even today, he keeps a grudge for the thing that really took his mother's life: alcohol. Nikola keeps the dagger that took his loving mother's life away. It is both a memory of hers and an amulet.

He didn't blame (and still doesn't blame) his father, for he wasn't himself that night. He

began to drink even more to forget his dark deed, but the depression that fell on Delian made them lose the business and their possessions.

Condemned to roam the land alone and forage for food, they relied on the pity and mercy of other people in order to survive. They were beggars in the city of Ingelberg for two years. Delian now forced Nikola to rob and steal so that he could get drunk in the pubs. Meeting his father empty handed would result on a ruthless beating. But the respect he had for everything Delian had taught him had raised a steep wall that prevented any retaliation from Nikola to his step-father's violence. Despite fearing him, he loved him for he was his only live remembrance of his mother and the one responsible for rearing him. But the inevitable came and soon after his father died. He buried Delian next to Denitza and swore that he would not again return to that place while sore and grief plagued his spirit. His family legacy was a bloody dagger, cunning reflexes, a small pouch book and many sad experiences to share.

Nikola was alone now. He remained in Ingelberg time enough to "raise" some money and some decent clothing to travel. He was decided to leave that region and try his luck somewhere else. He believed that there could be a way to regain the warmth in his heart that he felt for brief moments while in the company of his mother. He just had to figure out how the world could give him that. He travelled north, reaching Keshgel. As this was a new town where he knew no one and had no sort of "reputation", he decided not to resort to his "deceiving skills" to gain a living. Ironically, he found work on a local jeweller where he was taught how to analyse precious gems. The shopkeeper needed someone to handle things at the shop while he made house calls to rich high class customers. Things went pretty well during the first months, but all became bitter when gems started to disappear from the shop and a local from Ingelberg recognized him and exposed his former reputation of thief and pilferer. The shopkeeper needed no better excuse to seize him and accuse him of the thefts. Nikola sworn his innocence but was nevertheless taken by the local guard and arrested. He was tortured in order to reveal where he had hidden the missing gems or to whom he had sold them.

Nikola held the torture thanks to 15 years of cruel treatment from his step-father, which had prepared him for that, at least. All this time, he claimed his innocence without anyone believing him, until one day the stolen gems were found at a rich class inn. Nikola was cleared of all charges and set free. Nevertheless, his reputation had been severely damaged. He was innocent, but everyone saw him like a common thief and his employer had to dismiss him because his regular customers would no longer enter his shop while the he was behind the counter. The only job he managed to get was sweeping inn floors and cleaning carrion. That was not the peace he was looking for. After a while, he knew he had to move on. He left north once again, and entered the woods that surrounded Keshgel.

His journey didn't last long. In his first night out, he was attacked by a savage wolf, but a hunter came by in the last minute and saved him. Severely mauled and unconscious, the man took him back to Keshgel and deposited him at the temple, under the care of Tersis Hauptmarsh. The hunter only said he had found him in the woods, being attacked by a wolf that he chased off, but he refused any kind of recompense from Tersis and all offers made by the priest to stay a while longer or take some refreshment. He left as quickly as he had come, without even telling his name.

Tersis tended to Nikola's wounds for a week before he finally woke up. He explained what had happened and that although his wounds were almost closed, he would still have to keep him around for observation for some more time yet. Nikola, knowing he was in Keshgel, didn't want to leave either, unless it was for departing north again, so he decided to stay for a while.

Vladimir Cartafor ("Gheata")

Profile:

Vladimir "Gheata" Cartafor is stern and kept to himself. He is markedly selfish and has little tendency to cooperate in a team. His cold, stern face, and his almost total absence of emotions, have earned him the nickname "Gheata", meaning "Ice". He prefers the mountains to the plains and cities. Physically, he's very strong, and has an impressive musculature. He's blunt in what he says and mostly doesn't care for the reactions of others. He wears his sister's earring with pride. There are only two things he really likes to do: to fight and to be with women. He is now 26.

Background:

Vladimir is the son of Vlad Cartafor. He was born in a village in the Vulkolak mountains and had a sister 3 years younger, Ilys, but her birth was tainted with the sorrow caused by their mother's death, which caused Vlad to move away from the village and avoid contact with other people. Alone, Vlad kept his sons almost always around him, teaching them to hunt, fish and everything about mountain's life. He also taught them to handle weapons, for there were many wolves around. As they grew older, Vladimir and Ilys remade their contacts with their home village, but Vlad kept himself away from people. He died of illness when Vladimir was 18 years old. Ilys married a boy from the village and brought him to their house. Vladimir chose to leave them alone and went south to Keshgel. Here, he got involved in a fight in a bar because of a girl, Nereel, who was being molested by the captain of the army, and Vladimir killed him accidentally. He was arrested, but the news reached her sister in the mountains, who came to Keshgel and with extreme audacity rescued Vladimir. They escaped to the high mountains and the guards forsook the pursuit judging that they would die up there. When they felt safe, Ilys returned home but Vladimir went north further up the mountains. Meanwhile, a bounty was declared on Vladimir.

Nereel, who turned out to be a bounty hunter, chased him and eventually captured him. Vladimir noticed she wore an earring that looked like one Ilys had. Questioning her, she simply said that she had taken it from Ilys after she killed her. Vladimir was incensed, but Nereel was too good for him and he was taken to jail and sentenced to 5 years. But this time, he escaped before one was complete.

Vladimir reappeared in Keshgel 7 years later, but with a totally different aspect. He had shaved his hair completely and developed his body considerably. He met the current general of the army, Vanna, and became her lover. Wandering around the army headquarters, he crossed paths with Nereel, now a Captain, but she didn't recognise him and was even noticeably attracted to his physical prowess. He welcomed that inclination and started a love-affair with her. Hearing talks around the headquarters, he found Nereel

had an old quarrel against Vanna: according to Keshgel's law, only the Council can declare death sentence upon someone. Any other killing is illegal. Years ago, Vanna found Nereel had a contract to kill someone and she foiled her attempt. Nereel was able to escape, but since then the two hate each other to death. Gheata then convinced Nereel to try to kill Vanna and said he would help her when he were with the general, but Nereel would have to let him go free without any incrimination. Nereel accepted, but to herself, she said she'd probably let Gheata be accused of Vanna's death and appear as his captor. On the appointed day, Nereel entered Vanna's room with a knife, but Gheata had warned Vanna and Nereel was taken. As the guards took her down to the dungeons, Gheata crossed them and ripped Ilys's ring from Nereel's ear, and then entered the room to spend the night with his lover. But in the middle of the night, a sudden urge awakened him. He got up, dressed and was about to leave when Vanna called for him "Vladimir, are you going to run away again?" He looked back. He thought she was sleeping. She said he didn't need to run away this time. Surprised, he questioned her and she said she had been in the bar seven years before when he had been first arrested and she was merely a soldier. She told him that he was no longer wanted for she had revoked the reward upon him. But looking to his face, she understood he would be leaving her this time. "I hope to see you someday, at least...", she said, to which he replied "You will!".

Yuri Azimov

Profile:

Yuri is 34 years old. He doesn't like idle talk, preferring to use all his resources to solve any problem that presents to him. Yuri is a man of action and analytical thought based on a strong faith and a broad knowledge about the world and those around him. He is a natural leader of groups and a motivator for others, but he's not quick to give his confidence to anyone.

Background:

Yuri was born in the north, in the city of Keshgel, but he became an orphan when he was 3 years old. Igor Nominov, a friend of his parents that was clandestinely preaching the teachings of Ezra (at that time, the church was not still established in Irvanika) took care of him. When the monastery-school was founded, in 732, Igor took Yuri there so that he could receive a more formal education. Five years later, he became an anchorite and was sent to Ingelberg to serve in the city temple, where he was for 10 years, when, for his unwavering dedication, he was sent to the small monastery north of Keshgel, the first outpost of Ezra to the north of the Vulkolaks and the spearhead of the missionary movement. After the mysterious disappearance of the local Toret, Yuri took his post. The land around the monastery was one of deep superstition, and the many disappearances that occurred during the first three years were many times attributed to supernatural causes: ghosts, werewolves and the fabled Mists. During this time, Yuri had not only to perform his clerical duties but also to give counsel and pass judgements to the inhabitants of the nearest villagers and even to help them in occasional hunts to the wolf. Meanwhile, he sent regular reports to the hierarchies of Ezra and, perceiving once again Yuri's virtues, they called Yuri back to Ingelberg, but this time with the purpose of

studying in the School of High Studies (the University of Ingelberg) and there investigate the answers to many of the questions raised in his letters.

He studied there for a year, under the tutelage of the headmaster Teblis Sinewicz in Philosophy and Professor Ivanis Erbius in History and Superstition.

In 751, Yuri is still a student at the University of Ingelberg and has the title of Warden in the hierarchy of the church.

Alex's session 0 - preparatory Session (ran individually with some of the players)

Starting Date: N/A

Starting Domain: Irvanika

From the Journal of Yuri Azimov:

Log Entry: 20-08-751

Today, a troubled man approached me with dark omens. In his eyes I saw madness and despair unbefitting his old age. There was something unearthly in his voice, which seemed to follow me around. He was singing for everyone who would listen, near the University. In his song he foretold doom to the Church of Ezra and a dark, evil minion rising from its ashes.

He approached me, surely because of my clothing, and spoke directly at me. The weight of countless years was visible on his hunchback and unsure stepping. Still, he laughed in a disturbing way: "You are lost, man", he said, "your faith will be no more". There was something in the way he spoke that sent shivers down my spine. I was unable to react and he vanished into the crowd.

From what I learned with professor Ivanis Erbius, sometimes the words of disturbed souls drive powerful curses. At least that's the folklore of the simple people.

Log Entry:21-08-751

I had the same nightmare, again. This is unlike me, to be disturbed by words of madmen. Could it be that he was something else? I must write my recollections of the dream. It will surely help me get a better understanding of the places it portrays.

I keep hearing the same sentence the harbinger of doom was singing at the University. And I see a place unknown to me; I do not recall seeing it in this city. There was a street and a square. Unfortunately, I awoke before I could see more. I must prepare myself and take notice of all the details of that place.

Log Entry: 26-08-751

The nightmare is indeed a repeating occurrence in my rest. Tonight I was able to see a palace, magnificent in architecture and size. It faced a square with a large fountain, the same square I saw yesterday. I could not tell if the square was part of the estate. The square was divided in two by small pine trees and bordered by a hedge-maybe a lane towards the palace?

Same day, later

I am now certain that those places do not belong in this city. Such a building would be well known. Those I spoke to assured me no palace in this city had a square in front that fits my descriptions.

Log Entry: 27-08-751

Again the dream disturbs my rest. I paid closer attention to the building and recall some details of the architecture. It had two wings to each side of the entry hall. On the far end of both wings was a smaller hall in the likeness of the main one.

Log Entry: 03-09-751

At last, some light. The place I've been going to in my sleep is no other than Keshgel's Kaisersplatz. I found it on one of the books of Professor Ernst Szekel, where the front of the palace is described as a great example of symmetry in building arts. Not to mention that the palace is a landmark by itself. I looked up more information on the palace-it is a government building and one of the largest palaces in Keshgel. Its owner has died without descendents many years ago and it was claimed by the state. Apparently, it is in the household of Lord Heimoltz himself, now.

I will make arrangements to travel to Keshgel. I must see this place I dream of. And also realize why I dream of a place I've never been to before with so much detail. I hope Professor Teblis Sinewicz understands my reasons. I'm not sure I understand them myself. May Ezra guide my journey!

Log Entry: 05-09-751

A trading caravan is going to Keshgel, under military escort. They depart with two-week intervals. I must prepare some luggage for this expedition. I do not know who or what is manipulating me... I think I'm spending too much time with professor Erbius. I'm seeing conspiracy where there is none, evident superstitious behaviour.

Log Entry: 09-09-751

My studies and easy city life made me neglect my gear. Most of it is ruined with rust. Because of that, I acquired new armour. It's an excellent chain mail. I also bought a heavy mace. It handled better than the light mace Mr. Katiuska had and the extra weight gave me a feeling of determination. I also bought a large metal shield. The ensemble is a bit heavy, but I believe it will prove very effective if I get in harm's way.

Log Entry: 11-09-751

I prepared a few scrolls with healing magic. Ezra blesses me with wondrous powers. I hope the use I'm giving them is acceptable. I must prepare some tokens so that I can ask for Ezra's guidance.

I must also look for holy water. In professor Erbius' classes, holy water was always depicted as a formidable weapon against evil. I know this is more folklore than scientific facts, but there is nothing scientific about my nightmares.

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12th September 751, 2nd Night of the Waxing Moon

Yuri departed early in the morning with a group of merchants that were going to Keshgel. Most were from Ingelberg, but some of the group were based in Keshgel and now returned home.

The journey passed without incident, but for the whole day the travellers watched the woods bordering the road suspiciously. Bandits were not unheard of, and although the army had, in the last years, almost stopped all the attacks, some of the merchants that were native from Keshgel told that a new group seemed to have appeared. They were bold and led by a bright young man, named Luigi Vampa who, above all, seemed more cunning than a fox and unusually noble in some of his attitudes, but equally ruthless and merciless when the captives displeased him by some breach of his etiquette. Most of the luck one had if caught by him was decided by how well people understood Vampa's motives and desires.

As would be expected, these news did not tranquilise the group, but at least this time, Luigi Vampa was looking somewhere else, and at nightfall they had arrived safely.

Yuri went quickly in search of Ezra's temple. He arrived late, and night was deep dark already, and so it took a while before someone came to open. Yuri was almost freezing in the night, but he tried not to think of the other more serious risks of staying outside. Although this was a squalid and poor part of town, which he found by direction of the merchants that travelled with him, it was not muggers and robbers that worried him the most: it was the notion that the forest was so near to the city and that wild beasts might come inside it. But his fears were unfounded, and after a while, the door of the temple opened and a warm light spilt outside:

"Yes?"

The man opening the door had the robes of a priest himself, and was aged between fifty and sixty years old. Yuri presented himself

"Good evening, I'm Yuri Azimov, priest of Ezra, and I have come to ask for your shelter."

The other studied him briefly, and seeing nothing to arouse his suspicion, he stepped aside saying

"I am Tersis Hauptmarsh, major priest in charge of Ezra's Temple in Keshgel. Come in, I offer you hospitality. You're probably tired, so we'll talk tomorrow. I'll take you to a cell you can stay."

The cell was spartan but enough for a life of abnegation and contemplation. Yuri lay down and soon was resting, without any care nor dream troubling his sleep.

13th September 751, 3rd Night of the Waxing Moon

The next day, Tersis and Yuri had breakfast together, profiting to introduce each other. Tersis was mostly interested in knowing about Yuri's motives, and why he had gone to Keshgel. He also took the opportunity to learn how the Church was going in Ingelberg. Yuri told him of his dreams and that he had identified the place as the Kaisersplatz. He didn't know the significance of it all, but Tersis suggested that might have been just a landmark to bring him here. If the dream had a purpose, that must be the man or the message, and perhaps the meaning for those will be in Keshgel.

Tersis was content with Yuri. As for this one, he thought Tersis to be a polite man, but stern and a bit on the conservatory side. He was more worried with protecting what Ezra

had achieved in Keshgel already than with expanding the religion to more worshippers. But he seemed to be well-liked and to be doing a good job. The first impressions were positive on both sides. Tersis also introduced him to the minor priest, his assistant, Josep Kirien. He was younger than Yuri but had performed his duties in the church for some time and had much confidence with the population. He did most of the street support, going to patients' houses and providing care for those needed. He also was the confessor of some of the churchgoers.

At the end of their first interview, Tersis explained the rules: he wouldn't force Yuri to participate in the rites, but if he wanted to help, he would be more than welcome. However, Tersis found it highly recommendable if Yuri could at least attend to the ceremonies. He could use the resources of the Temple for his own studies and researches, but they weren't rich and probably he would not be able to provide the material in most of the cases. They were supplied by someone from Mordent with almost regular shipments, but occasionally Tersis had to write asking for more, earlier than expected.

Finally, a last word

"I don't know how things are in Ingelberg, but here at night, it is not much advised to go out. This part of the city has no walls, and it is a rather shunned side and quarter. Most of these are lost souls which we do our best to recover, but you are still unknown here and some do not respect us, nor the help we can give them. You are young and well-apparelled, but that is not a perfect guarantee of safety."

Yuri then attended the morning ceremony, where Tersis introduced him to the assembly of believers. Then, he walked a bit around Keshgel before midday, and spent the afternoon reading about his things and talking with Kirien about the church, the city and its people.

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14th September, 4th Night of the Waxing Moon

Yuri turned on his bed, trying to ignore the knocking on his door. His sleep persisted for a few moments, but one more loud knock definitely awoke the priest. Yuri's eyes opened just into a slit, and he mumbled.

"So dark. Who can be waking me at this hour?"

It must be still two hours before dawn. He refused to acknowledge the call for just a few moments, but the insistence was too great to ignore anymore. Yuri finally accepted he had to know what was plucking him from bed at so early an hour.

He opened the door, and the disheveled figure of Tersis Hauptmarsh confronted him.

"Yuri, you must come quickly! Kirien is dead!"

Dead! At least, Tersis had been direct: Yuri startled into full awareness with his bluntness.

"Come, come, I need your help in this."

"But, dead..." Yuri was still numbed with the sudden news. "How ? Who?"

Tersis didn't answer at once. He led Yuri to Kirien's cell and, opening it, said

"That's what I'd like to find out. Here, I found him just a few minutes ago. I didn't even inspect anything."

Tersis opened the door wide, and Yuri looked inside. Everything looked normal, with Josep Kirien lying on the bed, apparently sleeping. The clothes were not even disturbed, suggesting a peaceful sleep. Yuri asked, instinctively

"He is dead?"

"Aye, he is. I was awaiting him to prepare the morning blessing but he was taking too long, that I came to see what was delaying him. The door was locked, as usual, but I have a master key. I frowned as I saw him on the bed, but when I approached to wake him, I noticed he wasn't breathing."

"And how do you think he died?"

"I haven't still inspected anything. I went to call you at once. But Josep was young and this does not seem natural to me".

"You said the door was locked, Tersis. From the inside?"

"I think so, his key is still on that table".

"And the window too is still closed, I can see".

The window Yuri referred to was a small opening on the wall, barely thirty centimetres wide, and fifty tall. It was the only opening into the cell, which was barely two meters deep per one metre seventy wide, and two meters high. The only furniture was Kirien's bed, a small bedside table and a chest for Kirien's personals. On the windowsill rested a small vase with a single flower, white with small red lines dividing the petals. On the table, a small note in fine feminine calligraphy read

"Kirien, meet me at the Ball. The Lady has a message to send you, but she fears writing you a letter. Bring the flower that has been delivered unto you. I'll carry a similar one and thus we'll recognise each other."

Yuri read the note and looked at the flower.

"Did you know about this, Tersis?"

"Yes, yes. A boy came to give them both to him, two days ago. Only that..." he hesitated, staring quizzically at the flower "it was distinctly red, by then."

Yuri looked at Kirien and inspected his body. He must have been dead for two hours, already, but there were absolutely no signs of violence, and Kirien bore a peaceful face, betraying neither distress nor a traumatic death.

Yuri and Tersis looked at each other. It was a complete mystery, but Yuri said

"Let me try to use Ezra's boons, perhaps there's some information She can give us."

"You're right, my son. Go ahead."

Yuri retired for a corner and knelt. He chanted a short prayer in a soft voice and rose. He approached Yuri and touched him, stretching his palm over his lips. His eyes illuminated with sudden understanding, then he turned, looked around the room, and concentrated on the flower. His looks abated and a feel of confusion spread on his face.

"So?" asked Tersis, eagerly.

"Poison! He's breathed poison."

"So I suspected, but where did that poison come from?"

"That's what confounds me. At first, I thought it could have come from the flower, but I detected no poison in it. We need more information."

"You're right. Let's go downstairs and have breakfast. There's much to discuss."

Yuri and Tersis closed Kirien's cell, and descended to the refectory. The sun was dawning.

"Yuri, I need to investigate this. Kirien has been murdered! This is serious, and I need to report to the Hierarchy why and by whom. Now, I'm too old for an investigation and moreover I can not leave the Church, for now I'm the only priest. I ask you, since you're of the Order and are free of regular duties, to take on this investigation. Find who murdered Kirien and why! I need a quick answer, Yuri."

"I can not refuse, since you ask me with the Church's authority, but I'll need some help. I don't know Keshgel. And what is this Ball the note spoke of?"

"The Ball then, first. It is the Opening of the Season, a party and ball at the mansion of Lord Francis Ratcliffe, Member of the Council. As for your ignorance of Keshgel, I have currently a youngling under my care, and he knows the city well. I've been tending him

and trying to recover his health after he was savagely mauled by a wolf. I trust he'll be willing to help you, if not for anything else, at least for me."

"Well, then, I hope you can convince him. He's help is much needed."

"We'll know soon enough. Here is the man."

Nikola entered the room then. He was a slim man, with a suspicious look in his eyes. He didn't seem at ease anywhere, and walked in a furtive manner, occasionally looking behind his back.

Tersis had a brief conversation with him and expounded the situation. Nikola received the news almost nonchalantly, without apparent shock. Yuri estranged his reaction, but Tersis later assured him it was normal in him. Nikola was quite cold since he knew him, and he assumed that trait came back from before the wolf's attack.

"You can't really change personalities, Yuri, you just have to learn to cope with them."

"I will try. I just want his help, but I'm not expecting a friend."

"It's a shame. Nikola could well use one, but he's a tough nut to crack. It will take long before he really trusts anyone. Well, I guess you have things to do."

The three men rose and set to go about their lives, each of them, but the surprises of the day were not over. When the three entered the main hall of the church, a large burly man, apparently barely twenty years of age, if at all, paced impatiently back and forth. Upon seeing them, he stood upright and with glowing eyes looked at Tersis, the oldest and most venerable of the group, he bowed and humbly said

"Eldest Father, I ask your blessing."

"Rise, my son. What troubles bring you here? I don't seem to know you, but something in your vests looks familiar."

"Father, indeed you're right... on both accounts, but a matter troubles me that I'd rather discuss with you in private."

"Hmmm... Today is not a good day, but so be it. If Ezra sends you on this fateful morning, perhaps it is for a purpose. Yuri and Nikola, do talk for a while and try to know each other. Please, wait for me here."

Yuri and Nikola stayed alone in the hall, but neither said much apart from some cold plain remarks about the weather. Yuri tried to break the ice, but Nikola evaded every question.

Meanwhile, Tersis led Gregor to a private study. Half an hour later, he returned and announced that Gregor would be joining the group.

"Gregor seems a reliable and resourceful man. He will be an asset to you. I would bade you go and study your facts, even check at Kirien's cell again, but I suppose Ezra still has one more surprise up her sleeve this morning. Here comes Drulovic, I can see..."

Tersis would have smiled if the situation weren't so dire. He was beginning to think Ezra really was caring for his investigation and sending him just the tools he was be needing.

Tersis went to receive Drulovic. He was accompanied by a girl Tersis had never seen before, but he hadn't to wait for Drulovic's introduction

"Good morning, father. This here is my cousin, Evangelina."

His tone was dull and subdued as always. Drulovic wasn't a merry man. His life in Keshgel had never been particularly successful but lately things had gone for the worst. Drulovic ended up indebted, disliked by his neighbours and his only succour and comfort were the two priests at the temple, especially Kirien, who had befriended him. Drulovic was eager to find him

"Please, father, where is Josep? I need to talk to him."

Tersis swallowed hard. He looked upon Drulovic almost as a son, one of the poor lost sheep that he felt the most for. But Josep and Drulovic were real friends, more so than Tersis could ever be. He hesitated for a moment, but eventually disclosed the truth

"I'm afraid a few things have changed here, Drulovic." And added in a soft tone, addressing Evangelina "You might like to brace him, young girl."

"Drulovic, I'm sorry to tell you that Josep has been called to Ezra's higher duties within the mists."

The news overwhelmed Drulovic. A sudden feeling of solitude in the world overfilled him and melted his legs. All his strength faltered and, quivering, he sat on the nearest stool. Babbling only incoherent words, weeping and hiding his face within his hands, Drulovic remained there, nearly absent for a long time.

Evangelina backed away, uncomfortable in the strange surroundings compounded with so extreme a situation. Tersis came to her.

"I don't know the relation you had with your cousin, but he is really lonely here in the city. Besides his wife, Thérèse, and Kirien, and I don't see him associate with anyone around. Josep was his only friend in Keshgel and he will feel his loss bitterly. But I'm sure his place is with the family. He will need you."

Drulovic rose, at last. With a stern face, he addressed Tersis

"How did he... ?"

"I don't know yet, son. But I'm starting an investigation."

"Would you care to join it? The fastest we reach the bottom of this matter the best and I think no one is spareable."

Drulovic shrugged and mumbled. With a dejected look, he said

"I don't think so. There are too many strange thoughts in my mind. I have to think. I'll go back to my wife. In normal circumstances, I'd do it without thinking, but this touched me strongly and I don't have the nerve to... to... you know."

"I understand", sympathised Tersis.

Drulovic turned and looking at his cousin, joined his hands in plea and asked her

"You'd do it, wouldn't you, Eva? You're adventurous and full of energy. Can't you take my place in this, please?"

Evangelina was surely taken by surprise, but she had always been very impulsive. She never really thought about it, just looked at his cousin and said

"You know I like you a lot, Drulo. Never mind, I'll do it for you."

Tersis blessed them both and then introduced them to the improbable group that had formed there on that morning. Then, addressed them with these words

"There is more than chance at work here. I'm sure you have been joined by Ezra Himself. As you already know, I found the poor Josep Kirien dead on his bed this dawn. He was a young, healthy lad, and such an event can't help but feeling strange. I need to present a report to the Church's Hierarchy in time, but I'd like to tell them more than just what I know. Therefore, I ask you to try to uncover the cause of this death that has taken our loyal servant to Ezra's will, Josep Kirien, so soon. I wish you good luck and Godspeed."

DM's Notes:

Session 0:

This session didn't really happen per se, it was more a collection of talks with some of the players and was designed merely to set them in place, that is, all of them go on the morning of the 14th September to the Temple of Ezra in Keshgel (second main city of my homebrew domain of Irvanika) where a strange death has happened. Yuri, being a priest of the church, is commissioned by Tersis to an investigation; Nikola is to be his guide, since Yuri doesn't know the city and, besides, Nikola needs to be redeemed, in a sense.

Gregor has in fact lost connection to Ezra. He is to be a Morning Lord priest, but since he hasn't been ordained one as yet, he actually has a chance of failing cleric spells: 1% for each day that passes beginning with 10% on the 14th September.

I've tried to begin the game with the ideal of a personal quest for each PC. Yuri's is triggered by his dreams, that brought him to Keshgel for a reason. There is something he's got to do here, and is not just the murder investigation (although that is the start of the main thread of the campaign). Gregor's is related to his vanishing spells, and will be completed in session 33. Nikola is intimately tied to his background, but will become definitely apparent again in session 33. Eva is a real problem, for she's the weakest PC as motivation goes. As of this writing, I can't tell you more about it for the players are still playing and I don't want to spoil things for them.

You'll notice Gheata does not appear in this first session. That's because at the time his player was studying abroad and his entrance was delayed. He has a rich personal story too that will cause some interesting turns in the campaign, but his real quest hasn't even become apparent.

The PCs are not professional adventurers. They are rather driven by circumstances and by the interweaving of their fates. As such, the level of confidence among them is very very low and the group only begins to come into a party after 20 or more sessions. One thing I can tell you is that it really is difficult to DM a party that role plays well and has conflicting personalities. Gheata and Nikola are the most difficult ones, as will be apparent in a few sessions time when they get expelled from the Temple.

The log entries at the start of the session are part of Yuri's personal log that is being written by his player. I liked them so much that I decided I could start these logs with them. As was already said, I hope this dream will become significant in the future, but since the campaign is still running, one can never say so with certainty.

The third part of this log is the actual part that really was roleplayed, although individually with Yuri's player. For the others, I merely gave an account of how they got there when they started session 1. I really liked the idea of the nove and the rose. There is a convoluted plot behind this that the players didn't find, but I can't give it to you yet. Suffice to say that Yuri was really clever to test the flower for poison, but failed to take the right conclusion. By the way, the flower was inspired in the Blood Rose as I read about it in Stu's campaign (which of course, all of you know in minute detail), but this one does something different. The players found almost everything about the flower later, but still miss the crucial point and so Kirien's murder is to present (after session 33) the longest open thread in the campaign.

Notice that Gregor talks to Tersis without the others knowing what happened. Gregor confessed to her that he didn't follow Ezra anymore, but he still got some spells from her. Tersis agreed to release Gregor from his vows to Ezra if he participated in the investigation, but for ease of play and so that I wouldn't be completely unfair, I kept Gregor's spells and didn't remove them altogether. If any rationalizing is needed, we can always say the DP grant him his clerical powers, although still with increasing failing rates.

I'm not extremely happy with how things turned with Drulovic. He looks like a wimp, which he should not be, but I needed Eva to step in and not him. So, I made that "I'm not prepared thing" and hope people don't notice too much. Before anyone asks, there's nothing between Drulovic and Kirien but friendship and, in fact, the problem that Drulovic feels like an unwanted foreigner in Keshgel. Whether there was anything censorable between Kirien and Thérèse will be an issue later on and will be a matter of hot debate among the members of the party.

Alex's session 1

Starting Date: 14th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

Drulovic went home, and the four retired with Tersis for a private study where they could be free from the people that regularly visited the temple every morning. The first impressions between them were cautious, and each one looked at the priest as the only person they would address. It would take a long time to build confidence between them. Tersis exposed the situation and what Yuri had found that morning in Kirien's cell. Since the poisoning seemed so far an inconclusive clue, all attentions turned to the note and the ball it spoke of. Tersis told them it would be open to the High Society and exceptionally, since this was the first of the Season and therefore an official happening, to a few more classes of the society, notably wealthy merchants and distinguished individuals. Naturally, if they wanted to go to the Ball, getting in would be a problem.

"Yuri will be able to enter easily. Since I am inherently Member of the Council, in virtue of heading Ezra's Church in the city, I cede my place to him with the excuse that he'll be staying in Keshgel for a while and needs to know the people. Evangelina will, I believe, be able to enter as Drulovic's company, since he's enrolled in the Merchant's League. As for the others, I think you'll have to find your own means of entrance. The Ball starts at nine."

After the conversation with Tersis, Yuri led the rest of the group to examine Kirien's cell. Gregor made a minute inspection of everything he could see, including Kirien's trunk, but they could find nothing new. The scarcity of clues made this death a veritable mystery. Yuri once again eyed the flower suspiciously, but he did not doubt Ezra's knowledge: there was not poison in the flower, and Kirien had been poisoned. At length, they left the room, and considered the clues they had: a boy had brought the flower and the note; the note seemed to be from a Lady who'd be at that night's Ball; nothing had been stolen from Kirien's; there were no signs of break in at all, and he had died peacefully, without any fight or sudden disturbance, since there were no signs of violence at all. The fact remained, however, that he had been poisoned, and the flower was, thus far, completely unimportant, or else it played an unknown role in the whole scene. The next step was clear: at the Ball would be another person with a flower like that one that could probably throw some light over the whole situation.

They spent the rest of the day in preparations for the Ball. The excitement grew as the hour approached. Yuri took hold of the flower in Kirien's cell. He kept it in the vase until late then, meaning to tuck it in inside his tunic only when he left to the ball. But, without so many worries, he arrived to the mansion where it was going to take place forgetting the flower at the church. Obviously worried, he found a small lad to whom he gave a trinket if he went back to fetch the flower for him.

Meanwhile, Drulovic and Evangelina had already arrived and entered the ball. The other two arrived slightly later: asking here and there, they had no difficulty to find the urban

manor of Lord Francis Ratcliffe. It was still soon, and the place teemed with last minute sellers and opportunists who presented their wares to the invitees. Especially numerous were the flower-sellers. No doubt, flowers were very appreciated by the local elite, for every woman bore in her at least one flower and even some men had their own too. They tried to note the flowers of the guests, as they climb out from their carriages and climbed the stairs of the mansion. But in the middle of the confusion, it was a vain effort. Thus, Gregor and Nikola addressed some sellers and tried to buy a certain white flower with deep red lines. That seemed to be a very strange request, for no one acknowledged that variety and so, invariably, tried to sell other qualities or deferred them to one Elineu Mitrescu, master florist of Keshgel.

Elineu Mitrescu himself was not hard to find, as he too was making good business on the stairs of the mansion. His reputation was superb in Keshgel and the highest dames only bought from him. Many delayed the buying to precise this late time for they knew Mitrescu would have freshly cut flowers at their best for the party. They found him so busy he could scarcely hear them, but Elineu was a kind old man, and between sales sympathetically told them to meet him next day at his shop. He had not the flower they sought, but if all they wanted was information, then he'd be more than glad to help.

There was nothing more they could do, so they walked around the house, looking for a clandestine entrance. Lord Ratcliffe's manor was not overly big, and it hadn't any green grounds around it. Its entrance gave to a large avenue, from which one small lane issued to border the left side of the mansion. The entrance was illuminated by two potent lamps, and two guards barred the entrance to interlopers. The right facade looked over another avenue that crossed the first one, thus placing the house as a fancy elegant corner. The small lane, on the other hand, accompanied the side of the house and separated it from the nearest property. It then connected to a street that led into the second avenue, and was parallel to the first, effectively bordering the back facade of the house. This side was dark, and all the windows in the ground floor were closed and barred.

Gregor walked around the house looking for some entrance, but when he was leaving the lane onto the street, a dark shadow approached and bumped into him. Gregor fell to the ground, and in the blink of an eye, saw the furtive figure reach up to him and leave in a hurry. He checked his belongings: his purse was gone, and within it, all his money.

"Lovely, now I'm stranded in a town I don't know, with people I don't know and without money. Bastard!"

At least, Gregor had a place to stay: he had paid a week in advance at the Red Boar. Crestfallen, he completed the tour around the house and met the other two in the dark lane.

"There's no back door we can use. No entrance... and I was robbed!"

The others tried to give him some comfort, but they turned to finding an entrance into the palace. They saw that, on the first floor, large windows spilled a bright light into the night, and deduced those should belong to the ball room. Three balconies projected outwards just above them. Gregor proposed:

"We can enter through this. I have a grappling hook with me, and we can lift ourselves over there."

Nikola nodded and Gregor threw the hook. In no time, he was on the balcony. It was still early, the guests were still arriving and no one was paying much attention to the balcony. They were lucky. Nikola, meanwhile, managed to climb with the help of his feet and

hands alone, and joined him.

"We still have to try to pass undisguised inside" said Gregor. "I'll pretend to be a fur seller. What about you, Nikola?"

"I'll stay here. I don't like these parties and these people. I'll espy them from this balcony."

Watching carefully the movement of the people inside, Gregor timed his entrance perfectly, completely unnoticed. He mingled without much difficulty, although it was clear that there were two distinct classes within: the nobles and the merchants.

Yuri waited patiently outside, until at last, the boy arrived with the flower. Yuri hid it well, taking care not to show it, and approached the gates. He showed a letter from Tersis Hauptmarsh declaring him as his representative and entered easily, in the stead of the Church of Ezra.

The Ball was brilliant and crowded. The First Balls of Keshgel were famous in Irvanika among the upper classes, and some families made the way from Ingelberg to attend it, although no one came from the backwards North of Irvanika. There were many young ladies who waited impatiently for the hour when they would be presented to the society, virginally sat along the walls, watching the party unfold. Their elders conversed in scattered groups among the brightly illuminated hall, drinking and tasting the delicately refined pastries that were brought by the servants.

In the middle of all this confusion, Yuri and the others opened their eyes and ears in search for the flower or some useful rumour. There were many people with flowers on their attires, but none was exactly like Kirien's. They checked and double-checked, but in fact, no one was sporting a flower that matched the description.

"It is still soon... perhaps that person will arrive later", tried to reason Yuri.

He briefly approached Evangelina and Gregor, but they feigned mutual ignorance.

Among the many rumours in the ball, one was prevalent among all others. It seemed that one certain Lord Jeremy Barthold, an arrogant man and well-known for his bad temper, was the father of some Lady Gowena, a charming beauty as few in Keshgel. Surely, she was the dream of any noble young man, and she herself was of high lineage on her mother's side. But for some reason, Lord Jeremy had forbid her from coming to the ball. In fact, rumours said he had indeed imprisoned her in her own house, locked in one of the towers. Invariably, people shook their heads at Jeremy's prepotency and bullying of his daughter, and more than one suggested that there was some dark family secret justifying their enmity. The fact remained, though, that Gowena, who had already come of age, was not allowed to frequent the society even though she would probably become its brightest starlet if she did.

Judging from the descriptions they heard, they soon could identify Lord Jeremy and ascertain all the impressions they had formed. The man was large, fat, but not tall. He had a deep resonant voice and he always spoke with a loudness more suitable for a singer on stage than for a delicate person. There was constantly an entourage around him, hearing him dissert about politics, morality and good manners. He was almost a zealot! It was

clear, after some time of observation, that he disliked profoundly being gainsaid, and for said reason, he threatened those that did with a mean look that suggested all the power and influence he had. The other always left the group or backtracked in his words, with fear of some reprisal.

Another focus of attention in the ball was a curious couple that was the object of everyone's curiosity. The man was tall, handsome, of a pure yellow blonde hair. All about him transpired class and an excelling education. He didn't speak but barely, however, always with distinction. Occasionally, people approached him, but it was evident they were doing it only for social duty and interest. They spoke just a little, but they couldn't avoid doing it with great deference. He, on the other hand, did not seem to be in the party to amuse himself, but rather to watch the others and take his amusement from that observation.

At his side, stood a young lady slightly shorter than him. She was completely clad in black, in a long dress that barely shower her feet, plain and almost unadorned, but leaving her shoulders, neck and most of her uppermost chest in plain view. She looked a bit pale and frail, but a simple and lovely silver necklace adorned her neck. Her eyes were ebony black and the hair, long and silk-lustrous, reaching at least the middle of her back, sported proudly the same dark hue. She was striking. Her beauty was perhaps off-putting, and even a bit scary, but she was, without the faintest glimmer of a doubt, extremely beautiful. She looked to her partner with respect, and remained silent unless that attitude could mean rudeness of her part.

Yuri was thus lost, studying the population at the ball, when he was approached by a distinct tall man with a soft and highly classed tone that approached him like this "Sir, I was looking for Tersis Hauptmarsh, but I have now been informed that he delegated his presence on you. As such, it is you I must address, as representative of the most significant Church in Keshgel. It is a matter directly of the jurisdiction of the spiritual realm, and I trust you'll be interested in it. Will you hear me?"

"Sir, first I'd have to know who you are."

"Oh, of course. Silly me. Lord William Milhouse" he declared, not without some faint trace of vanity, while bowing in a perfectly measured gesture. "My business is a matter of the church, but I shall not hesitate in taking it to the Council if need be. But since Ezra is represented here and now, it is my duty to present the case."

This piqued Yuri's interest

"Very well, I'll hear you."

"Then, perhaps you'd like to accompany me to a balcony? There are far too many ears and noise in here."

Yuri followed the suggestion and accompanied the man. The night was clam and pleasant, quite agreeable with last warmth of the summer. Milhouse drew a cigar and tentatively offered one to Yuri

"No thanks, I don't smoke."

"Your loss. They're magnificent" he expelled a puff of smoke. Then he began

"As I was saying, this is a matter of the Church, whichever that Church is. There is a street in this town where no one enters" his voice deepened to a dark ominous tone.

"There have been years that it is abandoned, dark, forgotten. People tell many things

about a house, at the end of the street, and the fame that it is haunted spread, so rapidly, that people avoid not only it, but the whole neighbourhood."

He paused and looked Yuri in the eye, with a solemn face, as if gauging the effect of his words. Drawing once again in his cigar, he continued, with a swelling barely disguised fury.

"Well, I'm a distinguished member of this city, my family has lived here for generations, and I love it as few do" (his voice was now growing perceptibly stronger). "And I cannot allow" his face was now red, and he stressed these words with a strong knock on the balcony's rail "that there are places in Keshgel where one can not go even by day!"

He paused a while to rest from his outburst. Regaining his composure,

"I don't know if the stories they tell are true. Superstition is very strong, as you might well know, and the tale is old. Even though, they say that in that house you can see a queer figure at the window. Sometimes, it's an old woman, famished and dressed in rags, all in black, with a sad or a malignant look, not all people agree. Other times, it's a young girl, with an angel face, always very sad, nearly transparent but also in rags and tatters. They say a witch lived there; they say a mother tortured her daughter and left her to starve. They say many things, but in truth, no one knows what is going there."

"Please, calm yourself" said Yuri, as Milhouse nearly had another outburst. He did, and continued softer

"For the welfare of our city, that zone has to be cleansed. And even though I consider it is only the duty of the church to do it, I'm willing to pay for that to happen. Now, are you going to do your task?"

After hearing patiently, Yuri answered evasively. He said he was new in Keshgel, after all, but that he would relay the matter to his superior. Perhaps he might find some people willing to help him if he were actually told to undertake the task. Milhouse was mildly satisfied with the answer and both returned to the ball, independently.

On another side of the room, Gregor had found Evangelina alone. She told him that Drulovic was not feeling well and had returned home. In truth, though, he had plainly told her that things were going bad for him in Keshgel, and he didn't want to be at the Ball, where so many people were that despised him or actively tried to harm him. He had come solely to give an excuse for Evangelina to enter. So, they banded together and feigned to be relatives. However, as time passed, they were clearly becoming more and more outside the ball. So, it was with an undisguised surprise that they watched the curious couple they had noticed earlier approaching them and bidding them good night. He offered them two glasses that he nonchalantly took from a passing platter, and with a casual, almost amused air, introduced themselves:

"Let me introduce ourselves: William Cairnstone, and Victoria Cairnstone."

Evangelina and Gregor bowed, and in turn told their names.

William continued, curious

"So, you seem to be as much outside this party as we are. You understand, social duty calls. I can't quite place you, though. You must be new, aren't you?"

Gregor hesitated a bit, slightly off-guard, but then answered

"Well, yes. I deal in furs and this is a good time to pass around Keshgel. I thought of coming to the Ball and smell some possible deal."

William looked at him, smiling, and then asked simply
"So, you're in the League, aren't you? That's odd!"

This remark left Gregor with the impression that William had seen underneath his disguise, but the latter quickly let the matter fall asking other minor questions. Eventually, Evangelina found it was time they too knew something about their new acquaintances. William replied

"Oh, we don't live exactly in Keshgel, but rather on a quaint comfortable house in the vicinity. I've been in the city for a few days, just to attend the ball. You know, everybody watches everybody in these meetings. This is when the most of political intrigue is done and put in motion. Don't be caught off-guard, you two" and smiled when saying these last words.

He further said that the family was old in Keshgel, but that it had moved outside and returned only recently, and at present, neither he nor Victoria did anything useful. They merely sought interesting ways to spend their time, as all the other nobles did. The talk had reached an end, and the two couples separated.

Yuri watched the final moments of the talk, and briefly felt an urge to join Evangelina and Gregor and ask about the strangers. He dismissed it quickly and concentrated on the flowers. Now it was late, and the person carrying the other flower should already be in the room. He surveyed the other guests attentively, he scanned every flower he saw and came, once again, to the disappointing conclusion that no flower like his own was at present in the ball. He barely had time to curse his bad luck when the host, descending the grand staircase at the end of the hall, announced that it was eleven o'clock, and with the sonorous gongs of the huge grandfather clock in a corner of the room confirming his words, he told the guests to give way in the dance floor, for the Ball was going to begin. The debutantes were the leaders, and at his request, they stood from their chairs, formed a line in the middle of the room and another line of impeccable gentlemen, some old, some young, joined them to lead the young girls on their first ball. The pairs were mostly their parents, but there were also some elder brothers or cousins. However, no betrothed were allowed, for only members of the family could thus introduce the starlet.

With the beginning of the ball, the party entered its final phase. The groups and talks diminished and nothing more of interest happened. Yuri tried, in vain, to find a flower like his. Near desperation, as already some of the guests were leaving, he chose to display his own flower for the first time, wandering around the room in the hopes that someone would notice, but eventually, the clock sounded three and the Master of the House announced the party was over.

The guests left for their houses. Nikola vanished alone and Yuri found a cab to take him, Gregor and Evangelina each to his destination. The driver, experience in his craft, perceived Yuri was new in town and charged a hefty sum. There were mild protests, but in the end he had to pay.

"City of thieves, this is..." , Gregor exclaimed unto himself. After leaving Evangelina at Drulovic's home, Gregor and Yuri agreed to go look for Elineu Mitrescu in the morning. Gregor would seek Yuri in the church.

Yuri spent the night at his room in the Church, but his sleep wasn't restful. For the whole night, he was disturbed by the howls of wolves seemingly too near from the city. Perhaps somehow induced by this disturbance, Yuri dreamt of the mad man... again. But now, the setting was different.

He was before the unkempt garden of a large house, fenced by a tall wall. The house was pink, once, but now it was so dark that it seemed almost black. Yuri was sure he had never seen this house. Yuri saw himself pass the gates into the garden. It was plain day and he could distinctly hear screams. They seemed human, but nothing in the dream suggested what their cause was.

15th September 751, 5th night of the Waxing Moon

The following morning, Yuri met Nikola again at breakfast. Hauptmarsh, too, was there, eager to know of their nocturnal inquiries. They said their search had been in vain, and Tersis suggested that they should seek about Kirien in the neighbourhood of the search. Yuri waited for Gregor, and when he arrived, the two of them set to look for Elineu Mitrescu's flower shop.

They found it after a while. Elineu was quite the charming old man, always serviceable and with a genuine will to be helpful. He asked if they had the flower with them, but Yuri said that he had taken it from the vase to take it to the Ball and that, meanwhile, it had died. Elineu shook his head but said

"No matter, from what ye told me, the'e's no doubt, 'tis a Spide'-Rose. 'Cause of the lines it leaves when it changes colour, ye see. Aye, it changes colour regularly, from complet'ly red to white wi' eight red lines. 'Tis very rare in Irvanika, kno' ye, and grows only in Borca, to the southwest."

"And do you have any for sale, here?"

"No, no, no! I don't sell that flow'r. People don't like it much, the'e's plenty mor' int'resting flow'rs here. But if ye fancy it, then my importer in Kleinstadt might know mor' about it, since he lives so near the border. And no, I don't think anyone else could be marketing it. In fact, I doubt even any of the others kno' about it!" he left an innocent laugh out and with that the conversation ended. They returned to the temple of Ezra, to decide their next steps.

DM's Notes - session 1:

The Ball was a device I used to get the PCs acquainted with something that will be important for the campaign, to launch another a few more threads. Also, I'm very fond of intensive and investigative roleplaying (and also of dungeon crawl, but so far I haven't been lucky in leading the PCs into one) and a high class social event seemed like the perfect place to begin an urban intrigue.

A few words about the Council of Keshgel. The cities in Keshgel are mostly self-governed. There is little the actual governor of the country (notice I prefer "country" to "domain") does in a national perspective. There is the army, sieged precisely in Keshgel, that is responsible to keep the roads safe and fight any war, but that's mostly it. The country is divided in half by a mountain chain called the Vulkolaks. I have things planned that take place in the northern part of the country, but I'm not too confident that the PCs will ever get there.

Keshgel is the northernmost city south of the Vulkolaks and has its own form of government: the Council. The Council has a representative of the church of Ezra (Tersis Hauptmarsh) and the general of the army (Vanna Shostakovitch, the same in Gheata's background) as permanent members and a few more aristocrats, which are chosen by election. The Council effectively dictates the rules. Since there is no militia nor proper law enforcement, the army officers double in as civil authority. Thus, Vanna is a very influential person.

The Ball went really well as a scene. I had prepared texts to read aloud so that I wouldn't have to improvise descriptions and that functioned very well. There were a few points where the players unwillingly helped me: Yuri took the flower out of the vase and hid it among his clothes, trying to see another one before he had to show his. At the end of the ball, having seen no other flower, he took it out hurriedly trying to incite the other person to reveal herself, but that never happened. Was it Yuri's fault for hiding it for so long, or was there no one at the Ball with another flower to show? Also, the flower withered after Yuri's treatment so they could not watch it cycle over the next few days, which would have been extremely revealing. And to know what cycle that is, they'll have to meet an expert... but not in Keshgel. They've remained reluctant to do that so far, but mainly because they were afraid (literally!) to travel outside of Keshgel. I had to push them and eventually force them to hit the road around session 14, once again helped by their own deeds. At present, I trust they'll be more road weathered and will not be afraid to lead the research about the flower to the end.

The scene with Gregor was semi-planned. I knew there was a thief around and had his stats, but I didn't know if the players would position themselves properly for him. As it happened, Gregor decided to walk the dark streets alone, and he was caught. The PCs had started with 900gp each worth in equipment and money. Since Yuri's player was the only one careful enough to equip his PC, the others were walking around with fortunes in their pockets. This was my first (and succeeded) attempt at reducing these walking banks. This made Gregor and the others doubly careful in the future as to where they walked with their purses unattended. Also, the mistrust between the PCs makes that they don't share money and since they didn't know each other's class (they have a pretty good idea after 30 odd sessions) they also don't share resources and there aren't overpowering players. If

they could cooperate better, they might be more effective, and this is a lesson they learn the hard way around session 16.

Lord Jeremy Barthold and Lady Gowena are characters I submitted to the Undead Sea Scrolls 2001. I wanted to play her story around Keshgel, so this Ball is an introduction to her, but the thread hasn't properly taken roots yet. The Cairnstone couple will be important, but so far they were merely intriguing characters. My players spent months making jokes about these two, curving two fingers in front of the mouth as two vampire fangs each time they were mentioned. They were wrong. But at least, their description really caught the player's imaginations.

William Milhouse, now, he represents the launching of yet another thread, which the PCs will take later on but, once again, fail to conclude. This will lead to their feeling overwhelmed and inefficient in the first sessions of the campaign, but eventually they'll begin having their victories and gaining confidence... Be warned, though, it will take a while. He is the clone of the Hon. James Martigan, from the Book of Secrets (Kargatane netbook) in the article Lights in the Fog by Andrew Cermak, transposed for my campaign (by the way, there's another NPC from that same article somewhere in this campaign. Try to identify him!). Initially I thought of putting him with a different name and that's who the session was ran. Afterwards, I repented and wished I had kept him being James Martigan, but it was too late.

You may notice Yuri's dream changed. The dreams he had in Ingelberg were meant to attract him to Keshgel. Now that he's there, the dreams take another setting, wishing to direct his attention to a specific spot in Keshgel. As it was, the Kaisersplatz was merely a renowned landmark, much like dreaming of the Eiffel Tower to come to Paris and only then of the specific place in Paris.

As for the flower, they began the research about it the following day. Elineu knows enough to identify it, but enough to solve the mystery. However, he unerringly tells them where they can find this information: in Kleinstadt, a week travel away. This was enough for the players to concentrate more about other things. None of them wanted to travel for that long (it turns out they eventually went to Barovia instead much later, and there they learnt the true meaning of travelling).

Session 2

Starting Date: 15th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

After leaving Mitrescu's shop, the hour for lunch drew nearer and so, tired and with empty stomachs, they entered a tavern and set to replenish their strengths. While they ate, Yuri tried to know Gregor better and, on understanding that he too was a man of the cloth, and therefore, to his view, trustworthy, he decided that perhaps Gregor would be a good companion for the task Milhouse had set him. Gregor accepted, in exchange for Yuri's help in solving any eventual problem he had. Thus, after lunch, they decided to go to William Milhouse's home, but they soon found out that the people they met in the street ignored its address as much as they did. They finally returned to the temple, reasoning that Milhouse would probably not be that a well known person for the common folk, but that surely Tersis would know him.

When they returned to the temple, they found that Evangelina had returned there too. She was feeling rather curious at what else the others had found meanwhile and, saying farewell to her cousin's wife, Thérèse, departed for the church. Seeing the rest of the group arrive, Tersis sent for Nikola, who was in his room and organized a meeting of the investigative team.

"What news from yester night's Ball?"

Nikola looked aside, Evangelina coughed and Gregor stammered.

"What bad signs are those? You discourage me."

"Well, not much, in fact, Tersis" began Gregor. "We saw no one with a flower like this one, but we found some things about it proper... "

"What things?" asked Tersis, intrigued.

"Well, it is Borcan, and very rare besides. Mitrescu has not sold one and none of the other sellers even appears to know that these flowers exist... That was it, I guess" summed Gregor.

"There's one more thing I'd like to report", intervened Yuri. "I met a gentle man at the Ball, by the name of William Milhouse, who wants the Church to undertake a task. He talked of an apparently haunted house in Keshgel, and wants me, or the Church, to try to discover if it really is so, why and to terminate the haunting if it indeed exists."

"I know of him. Hmmm, I didn't know specifically of that anxiety of his, but he's got a point in what he says. Lend him a hand if you wish, Yuri, but remember that your first task is this investigation."

"Sure, but where does he live?"

"Here, let me show you."

As Tersis drew a map for Yuri, Evangelina interrupted timidly

"If I may?"

"Yes, Evangelina?"

"Erm... There was a couple we met, they were called Kenstone, or Kernstone, I'm not quite sure. They were rather strange..."

"Yes, I saw them too", said Yuri, while Gregor nodded in agreement with Evangelina. He

added

"I was with Evangelina there when they approached us. They told us the family was old in Keshgel but that it had moved out for a few years and was returning now. The oddest thing about them is that they seemed complete strangers for everyone else."

"And they're strangers for me too", said Tersis. "I can't place them from their names alone."

Evangelina described them, with occasional prompts from Gregor, but Tersis shook his head in a negative manner. "I still can't remember them."

"They said they were living outside Keshgel proper, more near the woods, but they maintain a house in the city where they've been for a week. If we could locate it, perhaps we could investigate them."

"Then I'll try to find it for you" concluded Tersis. "And after all, there were a couple of interesting points in the Ball."

Tersis rose

"I have to go now, keep me informed of what else you find" and left.

Yuri and Gregor announced they would be going to visit Milhouse's, and the other two accepted the invitation to go with them.

They found Milhouse's address and knocked at his door. A butler came to open it, and ceremoniously introduced them to Milhouse's study, where the lord of the house chose to receive them. He explained the situation again, this time for the whole group, and said he could finance the venture to discover the truth of the haunting and if it existed, to eradicate the ghost. They were not easy to persuade, and agreed to the task only after Milhouse accepted to investigate the Cairnstone family, and whether it was old in Keshgel. They sealed the deal and Milhouse advanced them a purse containing 200 gold coins and they left to gather their first impressions about the mysterious house. But as they walked the streets in direction to the house, they saw a wooded barrel slip off a wagon and fall over a boy that was playing nearby. The boy contorted with pain, gesturing at his leg vehemently, and Yuri approached quickly. He turned everybody else aside and holding his holy symbol, and making his priesthood evident, he addressed the boy

"Calm and relax. Let me see how bad it is. What's your name?"

"Thomas", softly replied the boy.

"Well, Thomas, your leg is broken, but fear not, Ezra will help you." And with a short prayer and a move of his hands, Yuri made Thomas' leg wholesome again. Thomas couldn't believe his eyes! He got up, jumped around in disbelief, and then embraced Yuri and left in a run, laughing and singing down the street. Yuri, not wanting to attract attention, covered his head with his hood, joined the group and disappeared from the scene. In just a few moments, they arrived to the street that Milhouse had indicated: it was the street whence departed the shunned one, and indeed they could witness that effect by themselves now: the right side was an unbroken line of houses, all different and of disproportionate sizes, but on the left one there was a junction with a smaller lane. It seemed to cast a darkened light on the street, instead of the bright radiance one can see when there's an open space among buildings. There was something strange there, that

was for sure.

The people, they noted, always avoided the left side of the street, walking by the middle or by the right. More so, they avoided any look towards the lane, and simply ignored it, pretending it was not there. Many people looked at the group while they simply stood there, watching the others, but they noted that as soon as they began walking with the clear purpose of entering the lane, everybody else turned to look away and simply feigned they were not there... neither them nor the mysterious dark street.

Shaking off the unease that this attitude brought them, they crossed and entered the abandoned lane. It was now an old decaying path, and the air there felt colder. Not only that, the sounds seemed slightly muffled, as if the city had remained behind, in a different world that receded more and more with each step they took. The house was unmistakable: it stood some fifty metres ahead of them, on the left side, and it looked charred, as if blackened by some fire. It stood practically in ruins, but the door and a window on the lower left corner of the house, looking on the street, seemed to be in perfect conditions. On the other side of the street, all the houses had crumbled completely. There were some trees but they too looked old and decrepit. They stood there, looking at the house. The silence was now absolute.

They felt no fear, but rather a feeling of wrongness, of discomfort which made that none of them wished to take a decision or take a first step.

They stood there, looking at each other hoping that someone else would say something, decide something, but the silence continued to press heavily on them. The situation was becoming unbearable when Gregor and Yuri took the first steps to the house. The others followed.

They entered, all four, and what they saw puzzled them completely. The inside of the house did simply not correspond to the outside: the house was functional and whole, not the ruin they had seen, and it had as much dirt or cobwebs as if it had been abandoned only a few months ago... not years.

They were standing in an ample hall at the end of which a large staircase climbed to the left, leading to a balcony that overlooked the whole entrance. This was in fact the second floor of the house, but it covered only the left half. The hall was an ample space up to the roof. On the right wall of the hall, there was a single door, and on the left side, between the stairs and the front wall, another door was cloaked in darkness.

Nothing moved, everything inside the house seemed stopped in time. There weren't even signs of rats or the usual fauna that crawls in such places. Everything was dark and murky, but a pale grey iridescence seemed to illuminate the objects just enough for them to be perceived. They felt uneasy as they tentatively walked around the hall, it seemed they were cloaked in a kind of miasma that softened the floor, the touch, that bathed objects in an eerie cloud of vapour, making them seem smaller, farther than they really were, strange, colourless and distorted. Lines seemed bent and out of place, shadows could be perceived that swayed and stretched longer than they should. Only by the stairs there seemed to be a faint blue light that grew stronger as it climbed up. Even the house seemed to be more defined, as it were, upstairs than down below, where they felt lost within a dream.

They began to experiment a feeling of dizziness and, stronger than before, disquiet, discomfort, the desire to be somewhere else, back in the sun. An unnatural sadness fell upon them. A strong melancholy pervaded the house and depression entered their spirits.

They walked slower and their arms felt heavier, as if something inside the house battled actively against their will and determination. They opened the right door: it led to the kitchen and deposit, but the scene was more blurred, more undefined than the hall. They retreated, and opened the other door. This led to a small room full of broken furniture, and worn objects strewn around the floor. There were scratches on the walls, and everything seemed to tell a tale of frustration, of anger vented on the many scattered objects on the floor - withered flowers, torn books, ragged curtains, broken toys, smashed dishes, a toppled cupboard. There was a window looking to the street and a small chair by it that was strangely preserved. The next room was much the same, with a window giving over to lateral lane to the left of the house. As it stood just in front of the door, they were in shock to see the night starry sky through it! They opened the window and peered outside, and day it was! Confounded, they returned to the hall.

There were no sounds. Even though their steps seemed to be muffled they sounded too loud for them. And then, they heard it: a sobbing, a gentle, low sound that looked like a woman crying coming from the second floor, from atop the stairs, reached their ears and echoed throughout the house. This was too much for Nikola, who before all others recovered his will and left to the street. He sat on a stone on the other side and began taking deep breaths of air as if to cleanse himself from a polluted atmosphere.

Inside, though, a feminine figure dressed with a skirt reaching her ankles and a flowing blouse had come to the top of the stairs and mute, only with gestures, called and made signals for them to climb to her. Her long black, dishevelled hair fell to just above her shoulders. Her swollen eyes, reddened from weeping, sunk in an unusually pale face. Still, she was a beautiful woman. But her sorrow was evident. She was weeping, her eyes turned into fountains that had almost dressed her in tears. Hers were the hapless sighs they had been hearing.

Gregor and Yuri felt enticed by her, and an irresistible desire to climb the stairs filled them. The woman seemed to slide by, her legs hidden by the banister. For moments, it seemed she herself would come down, but she stopped just at the top of the stairs. They went all three to its base and Evangelina let go a cry of surprise and fear: she was barefooted, but the reason she noted this was because the figure was floating in midair. But Yuri and Gregor seemed oblivious to this detail and Evangelina looked dumbfounded as they walked as if pulled by strings to the banister, then the first step of the stairs and then up, slowly, surely compelled by some will other than their own.

Suddenly, Yuri snapped out of that trance, and understanding they were being manipulated, grabbed Gregor and tried to hold him. Gregor was still going up, unaware of Yuri's touch. Yuri then reacted with determination, held him firmly, and crying to him to stay in control of himself, pushed him back down the stairs. Evangelina was alarmed and fled the house, as the other two came running down the stairs, then to the door and then to the street in sudden fear.

DM notes - session 2:

This was a rewarding session for me, and it being the second one, it was a great incentive for the rest of the campaign. The highlight is certainly the haunted house. It is taken from an article I submitted to the Book of Sacrifices and it was the PCs' first contact with the supernatural. Also, it was my first test regarding moody, evocative descriptions. I must say it worked better than expected, the players were really fearing for their characters. And yet, there was no overt threat, no clear menace, it was all in the strangeness of the situation, the several points they could not explain: the night inside / day outside question, the blue light, the blurred surroundings, all this intrigued and frightened them, making one of the PCs leave the house early.

They never saw (this time) the sobbing woman, but they felt her influence: it is Dalia's Suggestion ability that draws Yuri and Gregor up the stairs, and it was with a little bit of help from the DM in the dice rolls that Yuri managed to wake up in time and get out bringing Gregor with him. Otherwise, the adventure might have ended a little bit too soon for everyone's tastes.

All in all, this scene was a success and contributed greatly to set the mood of the campaign (later on, one of my players complained it was too somber for the kind of character he had envisaged. When I had to lighten up a bit because I like to try different approaches, another player said she missed the horror scenes... you can never please all :-).

As for the results after the ball, the failure to find anyone with the right flower was a setback for them, and not wanting to follow Elineu Mitrescu's lead to go to Kleinstadt, they decided to focus on the haunted house instead. There is a reason for the flower to be Borcan, but they don't realize yet. Since I've purposefully discouraged the players from reading about Ravenloft before the campaign started, these subtle hints fall on deaf ears. For some reason, they took a special interest in the Cairnstone family and they sensed, correctly, that something was wrong. When they go to look for them, no one knows the name Cairnstone. There is also a reason for this, but I can't reveal it for the players haven't found it yet either.

The scene in Milhouse's study showed me how difficult it is to convince players to do anything for duty or good only. They will do it only if there's something in it for them, money in this case... a weakness I will use to my profit when they are in Barovia later on.

The incident with Thomas is not merely there only for flavour, although it looks so and it is partly so. But it is mainly the motive for Martha and Thomas to help them later on find who delivered the note and flower to Kirien.

Session 3

Starting Date: 15th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

The group lay scattered on the ground for a while, recollecting their bearing. At length, they got up and returned to the temple. Their first brush with the supernatural had been too unexpected for each of them, but more taxing for Nikola than for anyone else. It was around noon when they arrived. They had lunch alone, since Tersis was absent, and after that, they went separate ways.

Nikola went to look for a tavern in the low side of town, where even if he were recognized the damage wouldn't be too great. He was in need of some stiff drink to recompose completely. Evangelina returned to her cousin's home. Gregor and Yuri waited for Tersis and discussed the mysterious house with him.

"... I really don't know what happened inside, Reverend, but I feel we were pulled by someone. We were climbing those stairs because something else wanted!"

"I understand, Yuri, and you were really lucky to shake off that influence. Come with me, I am low on supplies and besides, the church is worried mainly with mundane things here in Keshgel. I don't have many scrolls around, but perhaps I can find something of use."

Tersis rose and asked Yuri and Gregor to wait for him. A few minutes later, he returned with one single scroll:

"Here, this is all I could find of use. As I told you, day-to-day life here in the church doesn't require much divine magic, so you're lucky I could even find this. Take, it's a prayer to Ezra, a small incantation but a very useful one - it will protect you from most wicked things, and as far as I remember since the last time I used one of those, it will protect your minds from unwanted intrusions too. Unfortunately, it isn't powerful enough to veil more than one person..."

"Never mind, Reverend, we'll manage, and thank you very much", said Gregor while bowing.

"Oh, by the way" he called. As they turned, Tersis continued

"A woman named Martha was here today. She wanted to thank you a service you did to her son. I told her I would give you her thanks, Yuri. You did well."

"Thank you, Reverend Father."

"But there's one more thing she said, and that might interest you."

"Yes?", they both asked.

"She said the boy who came to deliver the flower to Kirien was not from this neighbourhood. He was an outsider, although probably from the city. Ask Thomas if you find him, it was he who told his mother".

* * * * *

Nikola looked at his empty glass. The tavern was dimly lit, crowded and accordingly noisy, but neither of this made Nikola drop his guard. He was sitting in a corner, hidden in the shadows as he was wont to do. He had drank two glasses already and thought that

was enough, but at the same time, he was thinking this was the right place to find information, and so he sat and watched, looking at his glass as one who considers another go or one who is already past the ability to walk and ask for another one, but in reality, he was listening, carefully, to all the conversations around him. He didn't have much hope of hearing about the house they had been to that morning, but the possibility existed. Many of the conversations he picked didn't make any sense at all to him, since he had never before mingled with this part of society, as he was trying to clear his reputation. He listened and listened and contemplated buying someone a drink when he heard what he had been waiting for

"Ho, lads, ya kno' what's strange? I've seen this mo'nin', wi' me very own eyes, a group o' people walking down the old abandoned lane!"

"Nah, Gorr, ye dreamt!"

"I'm tellin' ya I did not! I saw them!"

"And what d'ye think they were doin' there? Talk to the witch? Feed the crazy lady? AHAHAHAH!"

The conversation ended in a huge laugh, but some minutes a later, a different group picked on the same thread, this time with more seriousness. Listening attentively, Nikola came to find that rumours spoke of a witch that had lived in that house years ago. They said her husband had left in disgust when he found out his wife's wickedness and she in turn had tortured her daughter until the poor went crazy. It had become a cursed place, and no one dared cross path with the witch, so the house and then the street were forsaken entirely. The witch, supposedly, died many years ago, but no one still dares enter the lane.

* * * * *

Evangelina profited the afternoon to talk a bit with Thérèse and try to find something about Kirien, but what she learned took her by surprise. Thérèse had never looked worried to Evangelina, at least not more than usual for everybody else, but that day, Thérèse cracked under her cousin's questions. She found out that not everything was going well with Drulovic, business had never looked good in Keshgel, competition was strong and they were drowning in debts. He was a horse dealer, but ever since he had come to Keshgel and bought that house for him and Thérèse to live in, he had been steadily driven aside by pure bad luck, malice and outright theft and intimidation. Now, after four years, they were bordering on bankruptcy and the situation looked as dire as it had never before. Thérèse tried to be strong always, but her own efforts were poorly rewarded as well, and although she tried all her best to cheer her husband, she feared he might be near to collapse.

Evangelina embraced her as she wept on her shoulder. Then she took her to a comfortable sofa, and let her rest alone.

After that, she went to look for her Drulovic. Since she had arrived to Keshgel, on the 13th, they hadn't talked but briefly. They had gone for a walk early the previous day, but as they had gone to the church so that Drulovic could introduce her to his friend, Josep, the events cast all their plans into turmoil and they hadn't been able to properly talk again. Now was time. She found him at his shop and passed the afternoon with him. But he was

as shut as a clamp, and Evangelina didn't learn much from him. She only managed to bring a smile to his face when she showed him her mare Cal, and what new tricks she had taught to her.

* * * * *

It was late, but Yuri remained awake. The events of the day danced in his mind and prevented his sleep. Restless, agitated, he turned and turned in his bed trying to shake away the images that haunted him until at last he got up.

"It's useless to be in bed if I'm not going to sleep", he said to himself.

Yes, it was late. It was almost perfectly dark outside, with the pitch blackness of the night tempered only by a still weak moon. Yuri watched the street from the window of his cell. No one, nothing,

"I must be the only person awake in this city", he exaggerated.

And then he looked better. A couple of shadows moved down the street, slowly but purposefully. But... they were not people:

"Wolves?!"

Yuri got dressed. "What are wolves doing in the middle of the city at night? In all my years, this is a first!" he thought. He grabbed his mace but didn't have time to put on his armour. "I'm not going into a fight", he tried to convince himself, "I'm just going to follow them."

When Yuri reached the street, the wolves had just passed the temple. They advanced slowly and sniffing the air, as if they were looking for someone, but not for prey... as if they were following a beckoning. As they turned a corner, Yuri had to run but when he reached there the wolves had gone, disappeared. Yuri looked around, trying to discern where they could have gone, but all he saw, or thought he saw, from the corner of his eye, was a shiny white figure riding a black horse, down in the distance, towards the exit of the city. It was just a glimpse, and Yuri wasn't really sure it hadn't been just a trick of his mind, so he decided to turn back and once again try to sleep.

16th September 751, 6th Night of the Waxing Moon

The following day, the group met at the temple again with the intent of exploring the haunted house, but this time they were going to forge a plan of action. They went back to the shunned lane and made their preparations outside. It looked as crumbling as on the eve, mystifying them after they had seen the walls and the roof still holding when inside. But then, that was not the only strange point about the house and they chose not to dwell on it.

"We have to go inside protected by Ezra's blessing", said Yuri.

"I want be going", said Nikola. "I stay outside while you explore."

"But what's the matter, Nikola? You're with us." asked Evangelina.

Nikola almost sniggered at her, mockingly.

"Yes, what a great thing. And from what you told me yesterday, that lady you saw is not exactly normal, is she? Are you such a good protection for me?"

Evangelina didn't know what to say so Yuri broke the silence.

"Well, that's set then. I'll pray for Ezra to guard us inside, but I have power for protecting only two people. Gregor, can you shield yourself from harm?"

"Sure, Yuri."

"Then I'll lay Ezra's boons on me and Evangelina."

Yuri chanted the sacred words and cast his protection spells. Gregor did the same but when something should have happened, he knew he had failed. He looked alarmed

"What happened?" asked Evangelina.

Gregor blushed.

"The Goddess has abandoned me... How stupid I was, of course" he said almost to himself, while covering his face in shame. Yuri had understood what had happened, although this was the first time he saw a priest being denied the gifts of his deity.

"Here, we still have Tersis' scroll. I'll use it on you, Gregor."

Yuri read aloud the magic script and then proclaimed.

"Now we are all as well protected as we can be against the dangers that lie behind that door. We should go in, the more we delay the more resolve we'll need. Let's go."

As they moved to the door, Nikola added

"Well, since you're going inside, let's make a test about that thing of being night instead of day. I'll be outside, in front of this window here. See if you can see me."

"Sure thing, Nikola", acquiesced Gregor.

The three entered, to find the house as still as before. Still the sobbing echoed. They tried to ignore it as they methodically performed the test suggested by Nikola. They looked at the window where he was supposed to be, but all they could see was the night outside.

There was no Nikola. Opening the window and peering outside, all was normal: Nikola stood there in bright daylight, with an emotionless face.

They went back to the hall.

"Whatever is the problem in this house, I think the solution must be upstairs", suggested Evangelina, with more bravery than she felt at the time. The others agreed and decided to climb the stairs. They were old and creaky, and the bluish light of the previous day was still there, descending the steps to reach and call them. Up they looked, and saw that the first landing gave to a corridor faintly illuminated by the same blue light, which led to one of the rooms. The girl they had seen was not on the stairs this time, and her sighs seemed to come from one of the rooms above.

They climbed, and followed the corridor. All the doors were closed, and everything was dark and almost indistinct save for the clearly illuminated room. They looked inside.

Sitting on a bed was the woman they had seen. She was crying.

They called to her, asked her name, but she never spoke. She seemed mute. But her expressions did change, and they tried to communicate with her by reading her face. She could understand them, apparently. She had quick changes of humour and so they tried to be careful on their approach. There were several things lying on the floor, objects that had remained behind and been preserved from the apparent mess and destruction of the first floor. They noticed the girl was extremely attached to them, almost in a possessive fashion, for she became alarmed when they touched one of them. She became furious when they asked her if she was married, but at the same time, all her attention was focused on Yuri and Gregor, ignoring Evangelina completely. But with patience, and after many questions, it became apparent that she seemed to be waiting for someone.

Gregor sympathized with the girl and longed to know her name. He wrote his in a piece

of paper and handed it to her. But as she was taking the note she hugged Gregor with a strength he had not expected. Immediately he felt a cold invade his whole body and sent shivers through his spine. He cried in shock and desperately tried to debarrass himself from her. He felt the cold numbing him and weakening his strength and his determination. It was a chill he had never experienced, an unnatural coldness that seemed like the grip of death. Evangelina was paralyzed. Yuri twice invoked Ezra to scare away the apparition, but to his dismay, she was not affected. Gregor, finally, with the last of his waning strength, managed to break free of the deadly embrace and ran out of the room and down the stairs like mad. The others followed suit, with Evangelina grabbing some of the objects on the floor as she exited the room. They all came out of the house in alarm. As they got outside, Evangelina examined what she had. They had seemed notebooks of some kind, but now, in her hands, there was nothing more than dust.

With the help of Nikola, they took Gregor back to the temple. A concerned Tersis healed some of the bruises Gregor had, but the only medicine for the weakness had to be a good rest in bed. He took him to a vacant cell and let Gregor rest.

"This matter is serious. You are probably not prepared to deal with the supernatural yet, my friends. I think you should get some advice first", recommended Tersis.

"I'll be in my room", was Nikola's only reply.

Yuri and Evangelina decided to visit William Milhouse again still that same morning.

They arrived to his house in no time, and were quickly admitted to Milhouse's presence.

"So, so", said he enthusiastically, nodding at Yuri, "your presence here must be a good sign. Have you decided to investigate the subject I told you of?"

"Indeed I have, sir, and I have even begun my enquiries already, together with Lady Evangelina here present and two more companions. However, we've run into some unexpected difficulties are came here to seek your assistance... knowledge wise, that is".

"Hmmm, I see. Please sit down, and explain me your dilemma".

Yuri told them what they had seen, how apparently there was a ghost in the house too powerful for them to deal with.

"In such matters", Milhouse observed, in a circumspect manner, "knowledge really is a necessary resource. I have no experience myself of dealing with the supernatural, rather I should say, of stalking the supernatural!"

His features had become hard like stone, and his look, lost in the distance, had turned to a menacing gaze, mirroring the internal anguish and fury that welled in his heart. Yuri and Evangelina noticed this change, but couldn't understand what motivated him so. He drew a deep breath in his pipe, and then, softening just a bit, went on

"But I should say a dear friend of mine, Dr. Rudolph Van Richten, is quite the expert in these matters. I met him once, long years ago, when tragedy struck at my door, and we've become friends ever since. At any rate, knowledge, he said, is the most potent weapon one can have against the scions of darkness."

He closed his hands so tightly that he'd surely have smashed a glass, were he holding one. He rose, and pacing back and forth, turned to Yuri and Evangelina and said:

"Rudolph has written a number of books on these dark subjects. Ordinarily, I don't speak of this with anyone. They are not safe for the common man. But you, Yuri Azimov, you

inherently have to deal with them by nature of your condition. And you, dear Miss, if you accompany him, surely you're hardened enough to go through such hardship. So, I beckon you to procure 'Van Richten's Guide to Ghosts'. Everything old Rudolph could tell you about hunting ghosts is there. I had two of those, once. Unfortunately, I've lent one of those to another party I sponsor and the second one was tragically lost in an accident a few years ago... some of my most precious books were consumed in a small fire here in the house. The material damage was not great, but the knowledge that was lost was... alas, irreplaceable. I trust, though, that you might still be able to find a lost copy around the city. Luckily, Irvanika is a quite forward country and these things are not forbidden as they are in other places."

"Thank you, sir. We're going to look for such a book", said Yuri.

"Before you go, don't forget to study about the house. The City Records might be a good place to start. Also, you might want to look for a medium"

"A medium, you said, sir?"

Milhouse nodded, lay his pipe on a table and sat comfortably again.

"A medium indeed", he continued, "those are the dealers with the other world. From what I remember reading, ghosts usually have a purpose and can be led to rest if that can be achieved."

He paused, enjoying the attention that he had captured in his audience.

"Any such means is preferable to a direct confrontation with the creature. The powers that they have from their unearthly existence are too terrible for the most of us and, the gods preserve us, we should deal the least possible with them. But mediums are at home in that ethereal realm. Those can be your best guides to such a resolution."

"And do you know any you can recommend us, sir?", asked an eager Evangelina.

"Not from experience, no, the one I dealt mostly with passed away some time ago. But I've heard speaking of one who seems to have a good reputation. Look for Professor Baku. He shouldn't be hard to find, and apparently he's a serious sort and has been garnering a good fame."

"We will. Thank you, sir."

"I'm glad I could be of use. I'm always ready to assist those brave enough to go on these missions."

When Yuri and Evangelina returned to the temple, Gregor was afoot again, feeling completely recovered. The four of them sat for lunch and discussed the plans for the afternoon: Evangelina was to go look for the City Records, Gregor was to find Professor Baku while Yuri and Nikola were going to track the book around some book shops.

They had to visit a number of them before entering a small shop crowded with books around everywhere. It was musty and smelled of stale air. They were greeted by a short, over-active man that seemed to be easily scareable and easily excitable. He spoke in a shrill voice, rather like an adolescent, but he was an amiable fellow. He loved his books exceedingly, as could be seen by the care with which they were treated. Yuri and Nikola wanted to browse them, but he denied it vehemently. Instead, he asked if they could tell what they were looking for. Luckily, he had just the thing!, and soon they came out with an old ragged copy of the Guide for the outrageous amount of 40 gold coins.

Meanwhile, Gregor found Professor Baku, after some enquiring on the street. The man wasn't difficult to find at all, and he led Gregor to his working room. This was heavily decorated with morbid items, mostly associated to death and the other side, like skulls, black candles, boned candlesticks, crystal balls and depictions of spirits, demons and other dark and ominous entities. The man itself seemed likewise sinister, of short stature, large, curly unkempt hair, and a beard that had been growing for months... at least.

Gregor presented the case and the Professor laid his conditions:

"I'll give you the first consultation free of charge, and then you'll tell me everything you know about the entity. Mind, we do not know if it is a ghost, it could be something else entirely". Gregor was impressed, thinking the man really must know his trade.

"Then, I'll visit the house with you, free of charge. After that, I'll give you a second consultation, this one you have to pay, and that's when I'll be able to tell you the necessary proceedings to finish the haunting. Some more consultations may be needed, but the price will always be the same: 30 gold coins. Now, it's up to you. I'll be waiting for your return, sir."

Gregor thanked him and went back to the temple to tell his findings to the rest of the group.

Evangelina went to the Council Hall of Keshgel and once there proceeded to the City Records. An old man came to greet her warmly and offered his services. He was around his seventieth autumn and walked curved forward. The skin of his front was ridden with deep insets reminding a tree's bark. His hair no longer covered the top of his head, but still grew mildly on the sides. He wore thick spectacles cut in semi-circle that tended to slip down his nose. His voice, frail and aged, was nonetheless enticing and his spirit seemed fresh and young. He was charmed by Evangelina and evidently glad to help her

"Oh, let's see, let's see, my dear lady. Oh, you're so young and beautiful... you remind me of a girl I knew back then. Oh, the memories, yes, yes.... what was it you were looking for? Ah!, yes, that house that people don't visit anymore.... Mmmm.... I think I remember her. She was called Sarah, but when I proposed her she said I was too short. Ah, but never mind. I found my wife later.... I'm lost again, aren't I? What was I going to.... ? Oh, of course. How silly of me.... that house.... Hmmm.... Hmmm.... It should be around here somewhere.... What is your name again, dear? Evangelina? How charming, it suits you.... And, do you have a sweet-heart? Oh, a girl your age should have... I had!" and he blinked his eye, punctuating his endless but warming prattle, "several!" He blinked again, nudging Evangelina. The little man could be delightful, but he was also despairingly slow and forgotten of things. At length, he found a piece of paper and let go a shout of triumph "Here! Ahahaha, I knew I'd find it. I'm still not that old, you know?"

Evangelina simply smiled with her eyes, shook her head and thought "Of course not, uncle..."

But he had indeed found what Eva sought. The last record concerning the house was dated 90 years back, and it signalled a purchase made by Minesta and her husband Holger. They were the last known owners.

"Is there anything about a daughter? A young girl?", asked Evangelina.

"No, nothing in these records."

"And what about burial records? Are there any?"

The old man scratched his face and said

"Hmmm.... no, actually, we do not keep those records. Those would be with the church, I wager.... oh, but it's gone now, ever since that dreadful burning. Because, you see, now we have the Church of Ezra here in Keshgel, but in that time, Ezra still hadn't come to Irvanika. Have I told you of the parties we made in those old times? There were lots of festivals and dances and.... oh, don't look at me like that, I know, I know... I lost myself again. Well, as I was saying... before Ezra, we had The Order (that's what it was called) and they were the ones who performed burials and kept the records about that. I don't know where those records will be now, if they exist and were not burned with the Cathedral, but I'll try to look for them. Is that well for you? Can you come back later?" Evangelina nodded and said she would return. She said goodbye to the nice old man and went back to the temple.

DM notes - session 3:

This session was the best of the early ones, with lots of activity and involvement from the players. It seemed really interesting for everyone, with the group still full of high spirits and trying to investigate several leads, so much that for this once I gave them XP solely based on their role-play.

The investigation about the ghost opened up the possibility of playing a medium, but that didn't result as well as I wanted. In short, they were deterred by the high demands Professor Baku made them and decided they didn't need him. They almost didn't, since they almost completely guessed the solution for laying the ghost to rest in the next sessions, as they investigated her past story. But the research was motivating. Still, they abandoned it too soon, as their lack of confidence began to show once the results didn't come immediately. That was one of the main problems in the campaign: motivating the players and really getting them used to the fact that this was not going to be a linear campaign with one quest after the successful completion of another. At this time, they were still seeing thread opening everywhere while not being able to conclude them. That's why I decided I would give them a minor adventure for them to solve easily in just a few sessions time. I can have depressed PCs, but not depressed players.

A nice in this session was the old man at the records. I made a different voice for him, more acute and paused than my own, and the players turned to me and said "wow, I really am seeing that person here." It was a stereotyped figure, anyway, so that makes it easier for the players to imagine the scene, but in truth, the voice coupled with the description I had given of him did the whole trick. Another important thing, I find, is to vary the things the NPCs say: how much they talk, if they lose track, if they are focused on the person they're talking to... This old man was really a friendly chap, of the sort who's alone a lot of time and when he sees someone young paying him attention he is infinitely happy. He really became obsequious to Evangelina, with a genuine wish to please her. That was a great moment for me.

Apart from this, there's not much else to say. Yuri sees a strange knight in town and will begin thinking about it seriously. He'll come with a theory for it later that will be interesting. All I can say is that this knight has already been talked in the campaign, but this is its first appearance. The wolves really came into town for a motive that has to do with the main thread of the campaign, which has many things running in the background.

The failure of Gregor's spell was deliberate, that is, I didn't roll dice this time. This was the first spell he cast in the campaign so I wanted to make sure he failed so that he and his player knew there was a problem with him. This will haunt Gregor progressively as he tries to cast spells and occasionally fails, which will make the character almost go into depression until he finally finds where he must go to solve his problem. That will be essentially the first thread concluded in the campaign.

This time, they were better prepared to face the ghost, as they knew at least she could control their minds, in a certain way. But they were not prepared for her deadly hug. Neither was I expecting it, but when Gregor approached the ghost, I decided she would not let go the opportunity she was craving for. Gregor lost 1 con point and 7 hp, which for 2nd level characters is too much. Yuri tried twice to Turn her, but with Turn Resistance and all, this was too much for him, so there they went again running from the house in fear. But they didn't give up just yet...

It is worth noting that only Nikola and Yuri stay at the temple. Evangelina stays in her cousin's and Gregor had paid for a week in advance in an inn, but quite obviously, the temple had turned into their main headquarters, so they routinely meet there for the discussion of their plans. But I didn't want them to be too reliant on safe places in Keshgel, so I began preparing ways to shake that security after this session.

Another minor point: the reason for Drulovic's lack of luck was only decided much later in the campaign, and it still hasn't been used at all, but it really isn't his fault, nor is he a hopeless whiner. There is a subtle hint in this log as to why everything goes bad for him and her.

Alex's campaign – sessions 4, 5, and 6

Session 4

Starting Date: 16th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

It was perhaps an hour before dusk when the group met all again at the temple and they of their findings to each other. Tersis, on the other hand, had news of his own: two girls had appeared that morning with a strange feebleness, even though on the eve they had been with perfect health. Neither of them was of sickly completion, so people found the fact odd and reported it to the search. Their symptoms were similar: paleness, general weakness and deliria. Tersis had been taking care of them for some hours.

After considering all they had found, they naturally asked Tersis if he knew anything of the records of The Order. The priest hesitated for a moment, and then said he had forgotten about them completely and that he would look for them that night. He made an involuntary movement of his eyebrows, a nervous twinge that only Nikola captured, but which revealed him that Tersis was not comfortable regarding that subject. Nikola kept this for himself, but remained intrigued and decided to investigate later when he had the chance.

That evening before dinner, as Tersis went to his room, Nikola followed him, taking great care not to be detected by the priest. He was not, and even caught a worried look from Tersis in the direction of a painting hanging on the wall in front of his door.

They had all dinner at the temple and discussed the matter of the ill girls. Yuri and Gregor suggested they could keep a vigil at their homes that night, to try to sustain the onset of the supposed disease, and Tersis agreed. Right after dinner, he went to the house of one of them to warn her parents that he would be taking two assistant priests later that night to assist the young girl.

While he went on this errand, Yuri and Gregor escorted Evangelina home. Alone in the temple, Nikola decided that was the right time to further his enquiries and try to understand Tersis' worries. He went to the corridor where the Priest's room was and gave a good look at the painting.

"Nothing out of the ordinary", he thought, but his trained senses and intuition clearly told him something else. He touched the frame, examined all its area and removed the painting carefully. As he thought, there was a small switch behind and he pressed it without thinking twice. A panel on the wall, just in front of Tersis' door, slid to the side, revealing a small chamber that looked like a private office. It was well kept, without dust and everything ranged perfectly. A small window let in the light, just enough to keep a small plant in a vase alive. A trunk leaned against the opposite wall. Nikola approached it: it was locked, but with his nimble fingers and a small set of tools he always carried with him he managed to open it without too much difficulty. Inside, he found many reams of papers, old looking, all of them, and a cursory glance revealed that they related

to several different matters. Nikola didn't study them, he was focused on only one thing: obituaries. He rummaged quickly by them and after a while found what he sought --- a simple

sheet with the sayings:

"Passed away: Minesta, Aged 57, Widowed, Resident in Wooden Gate Lane, 6;

Buried by: Dalia, Aged 23, Daughter"

Date: 17th March, 699

Nikola tried to put everything back as he had found inside the trunk, and then tried to lock it again. It wasn't easy, as his training was more on opening locks than closing them illegitimately, but at the end he managed... more or less. In fact, a trained eye could easily perceive things had been disturbed, but Nikola didn't even consider that hypothesis. He slid the panel back to place and went cautiously to his own cell.

"Well, Evangelina's home safe. Now, it's time for us to go take care of that girl."

Yuri nodded at Gregor's words and they quickened their pace. Tersis had given them instructions on how to get to the house, but before they reached it, an unmistakable sound reached their ears: a desperate cry for help. They ran in the direction of the sound and two blocks later found a man being attacked by two wolves. He was down on the ground, but not too wounded yet. Gregor and Yuri charged forward, the first grabbing his rapier, the second his mace and attacked the wolves. These stopped their attack and focused on the new menace that threatened them. This moment of respite was enough for the man to get up and run away. But the two priests were in for much more than they had expected. The wolves were savage, cruel and agile. Yuri was surprised by one and hit so hard that he fell unconscious on the floor. Seeing this, Gregor forewent his attack and praying with all his strength to whatever god happened to be listening he pressed his hands strongly on Yuri and prepared to channel and release the divine energy. Tears came to his eyes as he felt it flow indeed from his body to Yuri, and this one recover. But Gregor kept his guard down for too long and one of the wolves stabbed him deeply with one of its claws. Yuri rolled aside, from underneath Gregor, and with a violent blow of his mace, he smashed the wolf's head. He looked at Gregor quickly: he was down, out, and breathing heavily. From the corner of his eye, he saw the other wolf leap at him ready to tear at his throat. He had no time to react and closed his eyes almost instinctively, as a bright white light coming from behind the wolf obfuscated him. He heard the hooves of a heavy horse at gallop, he heard a blade swoosh and the disgusting sound of flesh being cut in two. A warm humid mass fell by him. He opened his eyes, hesitatingly looked aside and saw the other wolf cut in half, its entrails splattered on the street and spilt onto his own clothes. He nearly threw up, but controlled himself. Looking back, he saw no trace of the horse he'd heard, nor of the white light he'd seen.

"So it was no trick at all, yesterday. That knight I saw really exists!"

Yuri then turned to Gregor. He was alive, and with Ezra's blessings, Yuri restored him back to consciousness. He helped Gregor get up, held his arm around his shoulder and said

"We're both ragged and spent, friend, but we have a work to do tonight. Come, let's go."

Gregor replied

"You're in no better shape than me, Yuri. I can walk, let's just go as fast as we can..."

They both went through the street, at as brisk a pace as they could muster.

“I don’t think there will be more wolves tonight, Gregor.”

“Why?”

“Yesterday, I saw two of them pacing around the streets. That’s odd enough, wolves never come near civilization unless they’re hardly pressed, but these were looking for something. I suspect these two we killed tonight were the same ones.”

Gregor nodded, in silence. Some minutes later, he broke up

“And what do you think this means?”

“I don’t know, I still don’t know. There are a lot of strange things around.... Hey, look, we’ve arrived.”

Tersis was awaiting them. He found their appearance surprising and discomforting for the people of the house, so he quickly introduced them without giving much time for thoughts and led them to the poor girl’s room. She was called Enira, and had been in a steady state that night. She was cold and felt tired, and had remained in an intermittent state of sleep and vigil for most of the day. Yuri and Gregor spent the night with her, while Tersis, deeming it too late to return to the temple alone, chose to sleep in a room on the ground floor.

Nikola, in the church, slept uneasily. The night was filled with the howling of the wolves, lending an ominous feeling to its darkness. He rose and looked at the moon. It would be full soon enough, and for some reason, Nikola dreaded that. Then, he noticed that night the sky was full of bats.

“So many bad omens, what will this mean?” he thought, before going again to bed.

17th September, 751, 7th Night of the Waxing Moon

When day dawned, Enira’s condition was stationary. At Yuri’s behest, they called for her mother and asked her to perform an examination on her daughter’s body in search of some strange mark, something that could suggest how the disease could have been contracted.

“Should I look for something special?” asked the poor woman.

Yuri replied:

“Yes, parasite bites, for instance, mosquitoes, other insects or larger animals, like mice or even snakes. All these can pass a disease, and any of these things could have somehow attacked your daughter.”

“We’ll be waiting here outside, Madam”, completed Gregor.

Some minutes later, Enira’s mother returned.

“I found nothing, sirs.”

“Thank you, that’s all we can do for the moment. We’ll be back later. Take good care of her.”

They woke up Tersis and left the house.

“What now?” asked Gregor.

“I’ll be going back to the temple. I have duties there”, said Tersis.

“Very well... we’ll follow later, I think we should give a look at the other girl. It was really stupid of us to have stayed both in the same house when we could have divided our efforts.”

They went quickly to the house of the other girl, where they introduced themselves and asked how the poor infirm had passed the night. Her mother said that Miayla had held well, and her condition did not worsen.

“Ezra be praised”, said Yuri, “I’d never forgive myself if anything had happened to her that we could have avoided.”

Gregor then asked Miayla’s mother to perform the same exam they had suggested Enira’s. She did and she came later in alarm:

“I found two points in her thigh, just by the groin.”

“What kind of points?”

“They look just like two punctures, two tiny holes. Here, like this.”

She made a gesture signalling their shape and size. Yuri was pensive and then said “We can’t help more, and those marks might even not have anything to do with this, but we’ll study that fact and tell you later if you should be worried about it. For now, keep her warm and resting.”

The mother said she would and they left, going back to the temple.

Session 4 – DM notes

This session begins a new sub-thread: a strange disease is affecting two young girls whom they will tend over the course of a few nights... before it is revealed that it has spread alarmingly. This is an event in the main thread of the campaign, something that fits in the same masterplan that led to Kirien’s death. However, at the moment, it looks simply like a strange disease, something to keep the players busy.

I rolled checks for the disease only at dawn, so during the day the girls do always well. It’s the night that is most dreaded. The priest can help with their heal checks and if the girls passed three in a row, they’d be cured. This night, it was really bad planning to put all their resources in only one house and forget about the other one, but it didn’t harm because Miayla passed her test. As for the examination her mother did on her, I had them find the two punctures in her thigh only because the players explicitly said to look there. I don’t want to go in details about that yet, but the purpose of the marks in the groin is precisely to conceal them and so to make less clear what is the means of infection.

The nervousness of Tersis regarding the records of The Order was simply a hint to prompt Nikola to action. I was being too expositive thus far (and in fact that went on through the campaign, with very little dice-rolling) so I wanted to tailor some challenges for each character now and then. Since Nikola is a rogue, this was a good way to suggest the use of his abilities.

In story terms, the reason is tied with the story of the domain: Ezra is now the dominant religion but only after an all-out war with The Order, that resulted in the Lord of the Domain taking sides and extinguishing The Order to the best of his abilities (by burning their Cathedral down with all (?) the knights and priests inside...). Tersis is not

comfortable with that past and so does not want to reveal that the records of the order are actually kept in the Temple of Ezra. It is, as far as he's concerned, classified information. This was, I believe, when the players started disliking Tersis. He was a friendly character at first, but now the players began to notice he refused to take action and to enter combat. This, of course, was the DM trying to push the players themselves to do what had to be done, but it led to a certain lack of empathy between the PCs and this NPC.

The encounter with the wolves was another means to give action to the PCs. They've told me on occasion "Today it's Alex's campaign, we don't need to take dice." That gives you an idea how heavy on role-playing this was going, and I decided to sprinkle an encounter now and then. I'm not much favourable to tailored encounters, though, preferring a lot more those that make sense to the story, and let the players know (and I told them so quite plainly) that not all encounters are to win and they have to understand when it is time to flee. This was their first lesson regarding it, and it was a hard one: both Gregor and Yuri were reduced to below 0, but still within the -10 threshold. This gave time for them to heal each other, but only the final intervention of the White Knight saved them. Just for reference, this is the same knight that Yuri saw the other night. Is it a ghost? Can you tell? Yuri thinks so...

Session 5

Starting Date: 17th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

Evangelina woke up early. Her mind was too full of subjects dancing back and forth and she couldn't get to sleep again. She was aching to know if they would find any new information concerning the ghost. She gave a quick thought over the two girls and then dismissed it confidently, as she thought that by now they should be healed. She dressed quickly and headed back to the temple. When she arrived, she learnt the rest of the group still wasn't there, which upset her curiosity. She wandered aimlessly for a while and by then decided to visit the old man at the City Records.

Edgard Lescaut, the old man she had seen on the eve, was still there, with the same comforting but distracted look. The Records looked pretty much as if they were his own home, for he was wearing slippers and brewing tea in a corner of the room he seemed to have adapted to a small kitchen. A nice looking cake was started on a small table, and his chewing mouth betrayed his indulgence. He swallowed quickly and greeted her:

"Good morning, Miss, are you served?"

"No, thank you. I just dropped by to know if you had time to do that favour to me".

His face was alarmed

"Favour? Hmmm... did I promise something?"

Evangelina nodded affirmatively. The man moved the teapot to the table and thinking for a while, with a funny look, scratched his front and said at last

"Oh I see! You were here yesterday looking for some records... I'm sorry, but I forgot about it completely. What was it wanted me to check? Oh, right... burial records."

Evangelina agreed, disappointed.

"Look", the man continued, "come back this afternoon. I'm sure I won't forget. I'll even write this note here."

There was nothing else to do. Evangelina returned to the temple. Yuri and Gregor had arrived from their nightly errand, but they looked extremely tired. Tersis gathered the whole group, but the meeting was brief. No one had anything new to report, except Nikola, who said he had found something about Dalia. Tersis raised an eyebrow, and looked worried and suspiciously at Nikola, but didn't say anything.

After the meeting, Yuri and Gregor went to sleep, agreeing to get back for lunch. Nikola and Evangelina departed the temple and tried to hear the voice of the people regarding Professor Baku. Tersis, instead, waited for everyone to leave and went to confirm his suspicion.

He had the nagging doubt that somehow Nikola had been in his private secret room, and that didn't make him tranquil, far from it. He took just a minute to find that his suspicions were confirmed: someone had been there. He couldn't tell for sure it had been Nikola, but the coincidence was telling.

“I can’t believe that brat betrayed me after I tended him for so long. How ungrateful he is!”

Evangelina and Nikola returned two hours later. They had received mixed feelings about the medium, since many people preferred not to talk on the subject of spirits and ghosts. Still, the overall impression of Prof. Baku was good but also, as Nikola noted, they were dealing with mostly ignorant people and not true scholars who might be able to tell the difference between a liar and an honest practitioner.

When they arrived to the temple, Tersis was performing the mass celebration, and they decided to join the audience. They were not particularly religious, but they were intrigued by the attitude of the people. It looked like they were not as focused on the rite as they should be, for there was a lot of murmuring in the back ranks. They listened carefully, and perceived the people were concerned that Kirien had been missing for three days already. Ordinarily, when he was ill, Tersis would inform the believers of the fact, but this time he had kept silent. In the middle of the rumours, they picked another one that roused their interest, for some people made references to a married woman who had been seeing Kirien regularly, and that perhaps Kirien had eloped with her. After the celebration, Drulovic asked to speak with his cousin in particular. Eva had brought Mikhail and Feofar together with her to Keshgel, but now Drulovic thought they would be better at The Walking Knight. At any rate, this was not a good time to have young children living in his house, and they decided to take them home on the following day.

At lunch, the group reunited again, this time without Tersis, and planned their afternoons. Eva said she had a lead to follow and which she wanted to investigate. None of the men offered to accompany her, instead choosing to go see Professor Baku, so she returned alone to the City Records. There she met Edgard again who, this time, with a smile of recognition, told her:

“I did not forget you, Miss Evangelina. Unfortunately, all my inquiries were fruitless. There are no burial records I can track, but I remember an old saleswoman that still peddles the streets and roamed a lot around those parts. Perhaps she knows something. I’m sorry I can’t help you more, but if you wish, I can offer you a cup of tea and bit of this cake I’ve baked this morning.”

Evangelina smiled but refused. She was anxious to see if the woman could tell her something new, and went quickly in search of her.

She found her near the street of the haunted house, as Edgard had said. She was an elderly woman, almost in her nineties, but still selling fruit as in all her life. Evangelina introduced herself and asked if she could talk to her for a while. The old woman was only too willing to while her time away talking with someone young and gladly answered Evangelina’s questions.

“Oh, that poor girl, I remember her well.”

“Do you know her name?”

“Her name? Dalia, my sweet. It’s the name of a flower. A very beautiful one. She was beautiful too when she was young... and happy. But that must have been only in her childhood, I’m afraid.”

“Why in her childhood?”

“Because then she was free, and then she had friends and I saw her play with them, running around here. But one day her father departed with a caravan and never came back. Her mother fell ill and after that, I only saw her now and then, when she came to buy me something for them. I think I went to help her two or three times, but no more. If you saw her face... and the tears she wept! She made me weep too for her, for her suffering... I was so sad for her.”

“And then what? What happened?”

“What happened? Well, her mother died, it seems... No one knows for sure, but I haven’t seen her in years now... They say there was a witch there, but I don’t believe that. They say she’s a ghost and passes her time at the window, but I never go there either, so I can’t tell you... They say lots of things, actually, but no one really knows... But one thing is certain: that street is always cold. That’s a sure sign it is haunted and no one of good sense steps there anymore.”

“Thank you, grandma, you seem to have a good memory...”

“I do, my child, memories bring happiness too. Here, take two oranges. They’re sweet and fresh, you won’t regret them.”

Evangelina accepted and went away.

While Evangelina was away, Nikola, Gregor and Yuri went to consult Professor Baku. He was extremely happy to see them and welcomed the group into the room that served as his study. He assumed a distant and lofty air as they spoke with some unease. Baku heard them to the end, once more telling what they knew of the ghost, and then Baku rose and said it was time to see the house. Nikola led the group once more to the haunted building. Baku studied the house from the outside, approached the door merely to sense its energies, but didn’t go in. Briefly, he said he knew everything he needed and that now he was going to study the facts he had acquired. But they should go see him the following day, for then he’d have the plan of necessary steps to finish the existence of the ghost.

The three turned away, discussing Baku:

“What did you think of him?”, asked Gregor. He had a somewhat mixed feeling, but he wanted to know what the others thought. Nikola was blunt

“I don’t believe him. I think he’s only a charlatan.”

Yuri, on the other hand, was more decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. When they reached the church, Evangelina was not there, probably still on her errands, they thought.

“I guess we should go check on the girls, Gregor” suggested Yuri. The other accepted immediately.

They went first to Enira’s house, and there, Yuri asked her mother to inspect the body of the daughter specifically in the groin, to look for some puncture marks. Her reaction was much more violent than he’d expected. Enira’s mother was scandalized by the suggestion and cast them both out of the house. Yuri assured her he meant no harm, but in the woman’s poor mind, he was a pervert that mocked her and her daughter.

Yuri and Gregor, cast to the street, reacted with pragmatism.

“Well, we’ve done our job here, let’s see Miayla.”

Miayla was looking the same as before. She had not worsened, but neither had she improved. Her parents were still concerned, but Yuri and Gregor were at a loss to explain the disease, and worse even, to provide effective care against it. They suggested warming the girl up and feeding her steadily to combat the feebleness and the loss of energy, but these were merely good sense measures that even her mother could guess. They left, feeling powerless.

Returning to the temple, they found Evangelina and Nikola waiting there for them.

“Any news?”, asked the latter.

“None, they’re in the same condition.”

“Then that’s good!”, said Evangelina.

“Or bad. They haven’t improved either, after all. This waiting anguishes me”, mused Yuri, “and I really feel impotent to offer any good help. I’ll go back in the morning and see what progresses the night will bring.”

“Well, I’m going to the Red Boar. I’ve got the room paid, after all”, said Gregor.

“Wait! I feel like going out too, tonight, but I suggest you another one. Let me take you to a place where they serve really good grogs”, said Nikola.

And so they went both to an inn with the double-meaning name of “The Spirit Drink”.

There, they made friends with the innkeeper and Gregor even proposed to cook that night’s meal for him and his family. Amused by the prospect, the man accepted, and Gregor did so well that he offered him stay for a week. Nikola and Gregor slept that night over there.

Yuri, on the other hand, escorted Evangelina home and then returned to the church. He saw a number of deep black crows perched in the building in front of it watching intently the comes and goes of the street, but he didn’t pay them much notion. He went to sleep and rested peacefully, for that was a calm night, without howls or strange noises.

18th September 751, 3rd Night Before the Full Moon

In the morning of the 18th September, Evangelina, Drulovic and Thérèse departed to The Walking Knight, taking the two children with them. They would take almost a day to reach the inn, but the weather was good and they arrived safely and without problems.

In another side of town, Yuri and Gregor returned to check on Miayla and Enira, and what Yuri feared had happened: Miayla had grown weaker and paler, and her delirium proved stronger. When they knocked at Enira’s, her mother wanted to beat them with a broom, but Yuri managed to calm her. She didn’t let them go in, though, merely ascertaining that her child was “still the same.”

Nikola profited to question Tersis on Professor Baku, but this incensed the priest. Ruddy with anger at the mere mention of a medium, he said

“The spiritual is the realm of the church, and not of amateurs who pretended to be gifted dealers with the Grey World. And that Professor Baku is no better than all the others, just a fake master of shadows and spirits. Do not let me catch you speaking of mediums again, they’re charlatans, one and all.”

He was turning away after his outburst when he remembered suddenly:

“Nikola, someone’s been reading my private records.”

Nikola's expression became icy.

"And what's that to me?"

"I think it was you. Without my consent or authorization. That's a severe breach of confidence."

"You have no proof of what you say."

"Perhaps I do, Nikola, and you're wrong in that. But this is inadmissible. One more of that, and I throw you out. I expected a little more gratitude from you, after all I have done for your health and, indeed, your life."

He turned his back on Nikola and went away.

That afternoon, they went to see Baku again, and learned what the medium had found. With his arrogant look, in an ornate and infatuated speech, he declared he had identified the ghost as that of Dalia, daughter of Minesta, and that to banish her, a complicated ritual was necessary:

"This is no ordinary ghost, dear sirs. Dalia is a malevolent creature, begotten from the basest evils of this world. She herself", he cried, "is an abomination and an affront to the order of our world. We by force must cleanse that house, that sinkhole of evil, and banish the apparition to the nether worlds." He looked piercingly into their eyes, as if hypnotizing them

"Indeed, she is a strong spirit, as I have ascertained from what we have seen yesterday and" (another inflection in his voice) "today! For I went there again, and examined the house completely on the inside".

"Let's get to the proceedings, now. As I said, she is very strong, so I'll need to tap into your own mystical energies. For that, you'll have to be purified by a bath with special herbs and essences that I have. That will cleanse you. Then, you'll dress a white tunic each and all together deliver yourselves to a Charging of the Water. I'll explain: you'll all go into another room where a basin of water will be placed in the middle of you. I will burn special essences and their fumes will release your own spiritual fluids which the water will absorb. It is imperative that there are as few barriers between the water and your body as possible, hence the tunics. This Charging takes only an hour. You should be all present at the Charging. If anyone fails, the charge of the water will be weaker and it will be more difficult for us to banish the ghost.

Then, after the water is charged, I'll have to make the exorcism. We'll go to the terrain and sprinkle this mercury salt all around the house, creating an unbreakable barrier the spirit will not cross later. I'll pray, and you'll assist me, for three nights in a row, from sunset to sunrise, in front of the house. She will want to escape, doubt me not, but the salt will prevent her. And each hour that passes will weaken her. On the third day, I'll move inside and confront her, sprinkling her sinful apparition with the Charged Water. You'll see that after a few days she will be gone."

They nodded, unsure of what to say. It seemed an awfully lengthy and complex process, but all they had as proof it would work was Baku's word. Nikola asked

"How much will that cost us?"

With the agility of a true merchant, Baku said

"Exorcism, 500; nights praying, 10 each; material, other 10. That gives 540 gold pieces. And you owe me 30 for this consultation, already."

A whistle of surprise was all that came out of their lips.

“We’ll think about the exorcism and then tell you”, said Yuri. “Here’s your 30, but we have to go now.”

Yuri practically dragged them outside and they returned to the church. Once there, Gregor asked

“Why did you want to leave so quickly, Yuri?”

“The man is a charlatan, I can guarantee you that!”

“You can? Why?” asked Gregor

“Well, guarantee, guarantee, I can’t, but I feel it.... I’ve been reading the Richten’s book. He never speaks of such a difficult process. Plus, we know from what Eva told us that her father went away and never came back, right?”

“Right, so?”

“So, Nikola, it happens that I have seen her father! Or at least, I think I have...”

The others looked amazed, their pressing him to continue.

“I haven’t told you this, but I have seen a ghostly knight... twice, and on the second one, it saved my life and Gregor’s... It was when the wolves attacked us, and a knight riding in full light came and killed the wolf. It disappeared just after, but now I believe that is Dalia’s father that is still trying to find his house. If we manage to lead him there, I’m sure the haunting will end.”

“Well, that would spare us a good deal of money”, consider Gregor, “but why do you say he’s a charlatan?”

“Because of the complex ritual made just to take money from us; because he didn’t even enter the house, and I do doubt he has gone there this morning; because we’ve never seen him actually DO anything, only talk, talk, talk. Because I know things about her that he ignores. For instance, according to Van Richten, she must be anchored to the top floor. She never descended the stairs and in the first day she did want to. She just couldn’t. As such, the circle around the house would be completely unnecessary. I say that Baku is just a mount of gibberish talk, merely trying to swindle us.”

“So, let me see if I have this clear” interrupted Nikola, “you want us to go chase a ghost and lead him, is that it?”

“Yes, and I say we do it tonight.”

“I think I’m going to regret his, but let’s go.”

They had a quick dinner, packed a few things that might be useful, and ventured the streets at night. For two hours they walked looking for the bright white figure, but there was no sign of the Knight. Exhausted and crestfallen, they returned to their houses to sleep.

Session 5 – DM notes

The scene of Edgard Lescaut was brief. In short, I had forgotten completely that he had promised Eva to find those records, and when her player asked me that, I told her truth: Edgard forgot.

At the meeting, Nikola said he had found something but in fact never said what it was he had found. The only one that was alarmed was Tersis who later found out someone had been in the archives. He knows almost for sure it was Nikola, and if he needs a certainty, or I need to justify it, perhaps a judicious cast of Speak with Plants (remember the vase in the archives) can give him evidence enough. After this, Tersis begins to actively mistrust Nikola and even dislike him.

So far, they have received only positive information on Prof. Baku. That truly is so: he is talented at his work, which is to make people believe he communes with the spirits... although he doesn't. In short, he's a false medium who performs extremely well. So, the PCs will have to find by themselves the truth. I don't really know if they ever understood it, but the point is that they discarded Baku as possibility after his hefty requests. I think they noticed he was not being truly honest and when they later met another medium in whom Gregor believed whole-heartedly, I considered Baku's possibility over. Nevertheless, it served its purpose, although it would have been funnier to have them deal with him and fail.

At the church, they began to hear the first rumours of the populace concerning Kirien. Of note is the fact that people speak of a married woman that went to speak with him more often than should be convenient. Although this was not revealed yet, this married woman is Thérèse, Drulovic's wife. This is mainly to pique Eva's player and force her to do some action, but it won't result very well, I'm afraid. Also, it begins to sow in the populace the idea that Ezra's priests are not all that virtuous.

When Eva's player gave me her background, she said Eva was taking with her two kids, her brother and Drulovic's. The idea of the trip to take them back home was simply to allow for the appearance of Nostalia Romaine in the campaign and at the same time to give the idea of Drulovic's economic difficulties. This should give Eva a hint that he couldn't support her either, but she remained at his house. At this time, as a DM, I didn't like the fact that they (except Gregor who had been robbed and Yuri who had applied it in good equipment) had lots of money but didn't want to use it or spend it in any way. I really thought they could at least pay an inn, but that would still take some time.

Regarding Dalia, notice Baku's operation: he researched her quickly, as he has his sources, and found her name and that of her mother's. At least two people in the group already have this information, so they can vouch that he's telling the truth, but that isn't much of a proof. Then, as always for Baku, the spirit is extremely dangerous and must be banished, and that can only be done by a flashy expensive ritual... whose expenses are to be covered by the PCs, of course. It's his way of earning a living.

Yuri noticed, but more so because his player been reading the Van Richten's Guide to the Vistani, which I had lent to him without the DM's sections (essentially, photocopied from my own book). And this had given him ideas: he identified all the characteristics of the ghost that are mentioned in the text, plus the beautiful preservation (if I recall properly). And he had guessed that the knight was her father... which it isn't. And I guess that was the main reason why they left Baku. Unfortunately for them, the wild goose chase on

which Yuri led them that night was fruitless and the mystery remained. It was a good theory on the part of Yuri's player, but sadly not true. However, this is a good thing to happen in a research for a ghost's weaknesses.

Session 6

Starting Date: 19th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

19th September 751, 2nd Night Before the Full Moon

Gregor and Nikola returned late to the temple, and found Yuri walking disquietly in the hall. He was uncomfortable with the previous night's failed excursion to track the ghost. That didn't prove his theory wrong, but certainly made things more difficult for them. Now, they would have to guess if the ghost had a cyclic existence and learn it if they were at all to confront him. So, when Nikola proposed that they went asking William Milhouse for more funds to pay Baku's exorcism, he agreed without much effort.

Thus, they knocked at the nobleman's house and were introduced in his study.

"So, what brings you here so soon? Any novelty?"

Gregor began to answer, timidly

"Well, we..." but was rudely interrupted by Nikola

"We want money for your investigation."

Milhouse was slightly put off at Nikola's abrupt request.

"I have given you adequate funds already, I think. Have you spent it all?"

"You have nothing to do with that, old gaffer. We have a solution for your problem and it costs. So pay up, old scumbag, or do the job yourself... though I think you are too cowardly to actually do anything and so prefer to ask others to do your dirty works... Wimp."

Everyone was in absolute shock, now. This was a facet of Nikola they didn't know.

Milhouse's mouth turned into a thin sliver and his eyes turned glassy cold. But keeping all composure and dignity, he simply called for his butler and ordered

"Put these intruders in the street, and don't let them enter this house again. I won't hear any protest, so kindly leave and let me be in peace in my own home."

They were dutifully and swiftly escorted to the street, where the amazed Yuri and Gregor tried to find what had all that been about, but Nikola cast them wrathful eyes and insulted the pair with fouler words than he had darted at Milhouse. The other two attributed that to some madness or bad temper that had struck at Nikola, and hoped it would pass. They left Nikola by himself, and decided instead to visit Edgard Lescaut at the City Records, and see if they could find anything else about Dalia's father, that was now Yuri's main concern. The old man took the usual long time to come up with an answer, and the only thing he could tell them was Holger had been a travelling merchant. They returned to the church after this, where they considered their options:

"I'm at a loss, Gregor. I don't know what to do."

"Neither do I. I wanted to solve this matter with Dalia, but now what can we try? We can not battle a ghost!"

“We could, from what I’ve read, but I doubt we’d survive. We need to find the motive that keeps her haunting the living. I still bet the White Knight has something to do with her! Perhaps we have to look for him again.”

“I’m not sure. But what’s worse, Nikola has made us lose our support. I really don’t know what’s passed in his mind!”

Yuri nodded. He too was puzzled.

“And then there’s the matter of the sick girls. Tersis is there today, so I think it’s alright if we don’t go there. And in the middle of all this, we have neglected Kirien’s death which, in truth, is the only thing we should be investigating. But also in there we’re stuck! Kirien was poisoned, but how? Did anyone enter the room to poison him? But everything was locked! Was it suicide? Why? Who sent the flower? Why didn’t we see her at the Ball? And what is its role in all of this? I don’t get it, I need a sign.”

If a sign it was, it came later in the afternoon. A man named Ferrouche came to the church in search of them, saying that he was a medium and had sensed their need of guidance. Still chafed because of Baku, they thought he had simply heard them looking for a medium in the streets and now presented himself at an opportune time to try to make a living at their cost. He was an unassuming man, quite simple in his clothing, and even helpful-looking. He looked poor and quite distant from wealth or material interests, in fact, very much at a loss in this world. Yuri and Gregor scrutinized him, and gave a rather involuntary but disdainful look. But Ferrouche was undaunted by their cold reception, and pointing at Gregor, and concentrating, said solemnly:

“I don’t know you, but I can feel more than you know about yourself. I can feel there’s an emptiness inside you, there’s a void that festers in your heart and gnaws at your own soul, destroying your confidence. You feel weak and powerless, and yet, and yet... I can tell you that your fate lies in Barovia. The filling that will replenish your void, is in Barovia that you will find.”

These words jolted in Gregor’s mind. After that day in front of Dalia’s house when his prayers had not been heard, he had never again talked about his inner problem with anyone else. Even to the rest of the group he had not told the extent of the anguish he felt. And now, this stranger pierced his shell and awakened his pain with words that could not be more exact. But at the same time, he offered hope. This enlightened Gregor, and he lost any doubt that he had that the man was a genuine medium.

“I believe you. How can you help us?”

“Just tell me what it is you’re needing help for, and I’ll assist you”.

They told him of the mysterious house and ghost, and Ferrouche offered to go there with them. They thus left the temple and made their way to the house whence they had fled twice in haste. In arriving, Ferrouche opened the door slightly and gave a look inside. He immediately felt the assault of a foreign will on his mind, but after an initial surprise, he turned to the two priests and said

“Fear not, I will shield you from her. Come with me, please, and we’ll see what I can gather.”

Ferrouche led the group, as he walked around erratically, eyes closed but touching everything, without, however, climbing to the second floor. Occasionally, he had strange

tremors, and other times he seemed lost in sleep, but at length they came outside and Ferrouche told them:

“There is great suffering. Many feelings are warring inside, and covering the house in a shroud of sadness. And even though this is the most prevalent emotion that I could feel, I could understand there was also a great deal of hope and despair all around. There was a strong imprint of love mixed with a sense of duty in the whole house, but mainly around the stairs, but a love that becomes heavy and overwhelmed by the duty. And very strongly fixed around the chair in front of the window, an enormous potential for love that, alas, did not come to fruition. I also felt sorrow for one who left forcibly. From what you told me, I believe it was the ghost’s father that left to see if he could provide more for the family. And that sorrow is attached to images of a rag doll and small shoes, so I believe she was a child when that happened. Also, it seems that the greatest shift in emotions happened perhaps fifty years ago when the duty eroded and gave place to... to... that’s it, despair, all around just despair and loneliness. I guess that must be when her mother died, or slightly after.

I’m afraid this is all I can tell you now.”

Yuri and Gregor were amazed with how much he had told them. They reached for their purses (Gregor’s was still nigh empty) and asked how much he wanted for the service he had performed for them, but his answer was off putting:

“You don’t need to pay me anything, as long as you do me a favour too.”

“It depends. What kind of favour?”

“I have a friend of mine that is in need of help... or will be, but still doesn’t exactly know. She will be looking for heroes to help her, and one day, you’ll cross paths with her.

Please, help her, her quest is good.”

“And how will we know who she is?”

“Oh, that’s simple, she’s called Larissa Snowmane. Keep that name in your mind, please, and if you help her, you will have paid me.”

“I agree, Ferrouche, you have done more for me than merely this” said Gregor, shaking hands with him warmly. Yuri was more discreet, but vaguely agreed to help Larissa too, if he found her.

* * * * *

At the end of the day, Evangelina, Drulovic and Thérèse arrived in Keshgel. The meeting with family had been brief, for all of them wanted to be the least time away from the city. Together with them travelled a new acquaintance, a woman named Nostalia Romaine that was lodged at The Walking Knight. She said her carriage had broken down some miles back and while her henchmen fixed it, she rode ahead and stayed at the inn. She was a lady of high bearing, hailing from Levkarest, in Borca, and was headed precisely for Keshgel. When she heard that a group of people was going to her destiny, she asked if she could join them, leaving a message for her team to look later for her in Keshgel at the Royal Crown, where she would be staying. Evangelina spoke to her during the whole journey, and of course asked her if she knew whether a Spider-Rose was a poisonous flower. Nostalia acknowledged the flower, but as for its properties, she was fully ignorant and could tell nothing to Evangelina.

Session 6 – DM notes

This session marks a turning point in Nikola's character, and more headaches for the players. Nikola is subject to something of a full-moon fury, so during this day and the next ones, he is permanently in a bad mood, insult almost everyone and being unreasonably violent. The first damage that causes them is that Milhouse cuts their support. I really don't remember what his player said in the session, but I have the impression what I put here in the log is much milder than what happened. Still, it can give you an idea. The important fact is the meaning of the scene regarding Nikola's persona and the consequences.

The dialogue between Yuri and Gregor after they go to the records reflects what the players were experiencing at the time: three or four open threads - Kirien's death, the flower (if you choose to consider it), the sick girls and the ghost – and no clues to solve any of them. At least, in their perspective. I thought they had clues enough, except for the girls, if they wanted to delve deeper. But just to nudge them in some direction, I let Ferrouche enter the scene. I had prepared 3 true mediums for them to look up when they understood that Baku was a fake, but had decided that if they didn't do that, Ferrouche would be the one to present himself to them, and so he did. By now, the players are beginning to get paranoid at anything I give them, so Ferrouche quite clearly shows he's a true diviner when he tells Gregor exactly what his problem is.

Also at this time, I had more or less despaired of convincing them to go to Kleinstadt (as they should to clear the flower's story) and so I introduced a more urgent destiny: Barovia itself. The idea was merely to make them travel (I need them to increase a lot of levels before the campaign really gets going, and I intend to profit that to make them a tourist's guide to some of Ravenloft's domains) and when Gregor's player told me he wanted to learn Balok and be a priest of the Morning Lord, I decided they would go to Barovia. I also thought their priority really should be there so that Gregor wouldn't get harmed in game terms for too long a time. This had, at least, the benefit of giving the players some definite mission for a while, but it would still take a long time before they actually began dealing with it, mainly because other things got in the way and the PCs actually did somethings to their name.

Finally, Nostalia. I like the character a lot, and want to use it in some way. I still don't have clear ideas for how she'll interact with the members of the party later on, although she gets some bad word exchanges with Gheata (who will appear soon), but her presence in Keshgel has all to do with the flower. She is following another wrong lead, though, which, I hope, will result in another adventure for the PCs. And so far, that's all. Hope you like it so far.

Alex's campaign – sessions 7-13

Session 7

Starting Date: 20th September 751 (16th September 751)

Starting Domain: Irvanika

<Letter addressed to the General of the Irvanikan Army, based in Keshgel, Vanna Shostakovitch>

*14th September 751
Temple of Ezra, Keshgel*

Respected General,

It is my duty to inform you and the Council that, according to preliminary investigations, a murder has been committed this night in the person of Josep Kirien, Minor Priest of the Temple of Ezra in Keshgel. Motive and means by which it was achieved are thus far unknown. I, Tersis Hauptmarsh, Major Priest of the Temple of Ezra in Keshgel, have commissioned an investigation to uncover the truth of this crime, reporting both to the Ezran hierarchy and the Keshgel's Council. Respectfully, I ask you deign confer officialty to this investigation by sending to me an agent in representation of the Council.

Yours faithfully,

*Tersis Hauptmarsh
Major Priest of the Temple of the Church of Ezra, City of Keshgel
and also
Member of the Council of the same City of Keshgel*

* * * * *

16th September 751, 6th Night of the Waxing Moon

Gheata put the deer down and looked attentively, hidden by the dense copse of trees where he was. Careful not to slide down the slope, he studied the armed men that knocked at his house, further down the hill. He lived isolated in the mountain, in a small clearing, about two hours from the nearest village, and just ten minutes away from the forested slopes of this side of the Vulkolaks. He rarely had any visitors, and that was precisely the reason why he had come to live so high up in the mountain. The day was nearly ending, and his hunt had been successful, but as now he approached his home, those soldiers disturbed him. Gheata was not interested in meeting them, or rather the other way around, so he waited to see what they would do. They peered inside, examined the skins Gheata had drying outside, and checked his tool shed. It was not locked, so they looked inside but took nothing with them. Whatever their motives, their actions were not hostile or violent, and Gheata relaxed just a little, but he still remained carefully hidden. He saw them opening his front door and entering his house, and Gheata seeing this, Gheata advanced until he came to the limit of the trees. The soldiers left by then, and apparently happy with what they had found, left downhill again.

Gheata watched them until they vanished from sight, and then entered his house. His first reaction was to find if anything had been stolen. It had not. Instead, a curled message was laid on the table in the middle of his house. He read it at once: it was a note from Vanna Shostakovitch, his past lover, requesting his presence in Keshgel. She wanted to see him again, and plus, she might have need of his services. Gheata didn't think twice. He prepared a small bag, cleaned his trusted sword and lay down to sleep. He would depart early the following morning.

* * * * *

20th September 751, 1st Night Before the Full Moon

When Yuri and Nikola joined Tersis for breakfast, he announced them that he had sent for Evangelina and Gregor earlier. He had news for them. When the whole group was assembled, Tersis presented them a man tall and muscular, completely bald and with a fierce look. There was more than just a hint of savagery in him, and his look sent shivers down Evangelina's spine.

"This is Gheata. He will join your investigation in representation of the Council. I want this research to be formally legal so I'd rather that you have an agent of authority, somewhat, in the group. Gheata, General Vanna appointed you to this task, though you are not a soldier of the army, nor have you ever served officially. I'm not entirely sure I can trust you, but she surely has her reasons. Anyhow, I expect you to speed this investigation up and shield the other members from unwanted harm."

As soon as the introductions were done, Gregor and Nikola excused themselves with things they had already planned. Tersis frowned, but let them go, and while the two of them went on an early excursion to a pub, Yuri and Evangelina enlightened Gheata to what had already happened and what they were able to find in the past few days. When they had finished and Gheata was ready to begin enquiries, Gregor and Nikola arrived. Nikola was extremely sour that day, and he made some gross remark about Gheata. This retorted in tone, which angered Nikola. But he disguised it, and in the blink of an eye, as Gheata was distracted, he took a dagger from his boot and stabbed Gheata in the kidneys. This let out a howl of pain and with a movement swifter even than Nikola's own stabbing, he wielded his double-handed sword and applied a fending blow on Nikola. It hit him heavily on the shoulder and near the neck, cleaving almost five centimetres into the flesh. Bleeding abundantly, he fell to the ground and lost conscience at once. Gregor knelt beside him and quickly with dexterous fingers and some practice, he tended to Nikola:

"He's alive. With proper care, he'll live."

Tersis, however, was appalled. His face all reddened with the sacrilege of what he had seen, he cried in a wrathful voice

"You dare shed blood in front of the Goddess? You, that Vanna sent to me, dare strike in the sanctity of these halls? What kind of monster are you? And you, Nikola, what sneaky wickedness lies within you, what evils have I not been able to cure in your spirit? This cannot be! You have all offended the Beloved and Merciful Ezra, I have to cast you out."

"But, Father, surely you don't want us to take Nikola in the state he's in. He is in dire condition" said Yuri, his face flushed.

Tersis softened just a bit

"I grant you to tend to him until he can walk. Meanwhile, Yuri, you can stay here, but I'd rather not see the others around."

Gregor and Evangelina took Gheata with them to a pub so they could reflect on what had happened. They were all concerned with this turn of events, and they divided the blame equally between Nikola and Gheata. It sure had not been a good way to start a relationship. Yuri stayed behind to do his best in healing Nikola, which he did for part of the morning, but Nikola still remained in coma.

As for the others, they discussed possible new leads to follow. Gheata suggested they should find a list of all the people that had been at the Ball, and they went to the Council Hall to ask for it. Using his connection to Vanna, Gheata went to her with that specific request, and she promised she'd have it on the following day. She also advised Gheata to look for a certain 'Razors' in the dock district.

"You'll find him at night, most certainly, for he has that kind of bad reputation, but he's a true expert in poisons, from what I heard. He might be able to tell you something of how could Kirien be poisoned."

"And how do I find him?"

"Easy enough. He's got an ugly scar across his face and always carries at least two butterfly razors with him."

In the afternoon, Yuri went to visit Enira's house, and regrettably found out that she had died in the night. Unable to comfort the parents and with everything already taken care of by someone else, he went determined to see Miayla, resolute that she would not suffer the same fate. So this illness could kill, after

all. He spent the rest of his day treating her, before returning, by the end of the afternoon, to Nikola's bedside. While in Miayla's house, Yuri made himself sure that she was not poisoned. Although this relieved him, it also meant he continued at a loss to understand the cause of the strange illness, and how it might be stopped. He discharged upon her all his healing ability, hoping to see the poor girl improve, but to his dismay, not even Ezra's healing blessings were to any avail.

The others went to see Mitrescu again, and asked him if he had sold a Spider-Rose to anyone. Mitrescu replied slightly aghast

"Ye've asked me that befo'. No, I haven't, and I doubt anyone around has. But I did, some years ago. If ye want to know mo', meet my importer in Kleinstadt. His name is Irin Radislav, and surely he'll know if anyone has seen a Spider-Rose of recent. How far is it? Oh, I'd say from one to two weeks journey, depending on the weather."

They visited a few florists after Mitrescu and on the afternoon but none of them even recognised the flower. One of them, however, found it odd that a woman had just asked her that same question. She was about 1m70 tall, brunette, slim, "a true beauty", she said, "and she wears gloves, trousers and riding boots". They took notice of this, but couldn't take any conclusion from it.

At last, they entered a shop where a young girl assisted them. She was clearly not the owner, but she claimed she knew the flower they were talking of and that she could get one for them in as little as two days, if the price were right. They were happy to know this, should they decide to actually procure one, but were a bit dismayed when she was not able to accurately tell them the colour of the flower and when she hesitated about its true geographical origin.

The day was nearly spent when Gregor convinced Gheata to go back to the temple and present his apologies to Tersis. Perhaps he might recover his leniency and lift the prohibition he had set on them. Reluctantly, Gheata did so, and once there, with a more pressure from Yuri's side, he confessed his repentance to Tersis and asked for pardon. Tersis agreed, and acknowledged that Nikola was not his normal self that day, and that he was to blame too. He then confided the group that he did not completely trust Nikola.

"He's been attacked by a wolf, you know, and I want to keep him here for a while more, before I'm certain that no bad repercussions were left from that. I'm still not sure, and I dread his rages and uncontrollable urges. I may have to lock his room tomorrow..."

Evangelina returned home meanwhile. She met Nostalia on the way, and gladly conversed with her.

"So, are you enjoying Keshgel?"

"Oh, hi Eva. Do you mind if I call you that? No? Thank you. Well, yes, Keshgel is nice, but..."

"But?"

"Actually, I'm looking for someone, one Vladimir Prokopenko. He's murdered my sister, and I want revenge on him."

"No! Awful..."

"But true, unfortunately. I found he wore a flower like the one you told me of. Have you had any success in your errands?"

"No, not yet, but do you think there is a connection?"

"Well, that flower is rare enough. I bet we'll solve your murder when we find Prokopenko. I could even join your group."

"Perhaps, that's an idea. Tell you what, I'll meet you tomorrow and we'll talk of it, is that well for you?"

"Yes, good enough. I'm staying at the Royal Crown. You can drop by at any time, tomorrow."

"Thanks, I will."

They departed, and Eva went back to her home. That night, Gregor stayed at the Red Boar in the common room, while Gheata went to the Army Headquarters, a fortress in the uptown also known as Army's Lodge, where Vanna lived. She welcomed him into her bed and he passed the night in her arms.

Session 7 – DM notes

In session 7, Gheata's player was finally home again, so I introduced Gheata in the campaign. It was a bit sooner than I had expected, or rather, we played much less than what I had expected during that time, so the justification given in game for Gheata's presence in the party (that the group was taking too long) sounded too demanding from Tersis. I have rationalized it a little bit in these logs.

Gheata was from the outset a complicated character, mainly anti-social. Vanna doesn't fully realize this and so she sends him as her 'agent'. As it will soon become apparent, he's definitely not suited to be a law-enforcer of any kind except a tyrannical one, and so Vanna will strip him of that condition later on.

As for their relation, Gheata's player was confident that he still had Vanna's attention and I had not thought of how he'd play it, so in his first and night in-game, he simply said he'd be going to where she was and sleep with her. That didn't last, as you'll see later, because I really felt that was giving too much for free for a player. And frankly, Gheata is practically a nobody, albeit a strong one, and Vanna is The General of the country's army (yes, there's only one).

As for Vanna's name, it really is taken after the composer. I have other names taken from football players. At least, I know they are real names and have an eastern flavour.

The session proper began on the 20th (the scene on the 16th was never played).

The first incident of mark was also the first major interaction between PCs in the campaign. Nikola is, since the beginning, affected with lycanthropy (I warned the player of this possibility and he agreed with it, so I'm not being covertly unfair to my players), although I never said clearly that that was the case until much later, when Nikola had already abandoned the party (but still playing 1-on-1). The night following this day was the first night of the full moon, and I ruled that Nikola would be extremely aggressive and bad-tempered on this day and the two after that. I conversed with the player and he played his part admirably. When he saw Gheata and spoke to him for the first time, he did it in a rude manner, at best. There was a brief change of words and Nikola stabbed him (he's a rogue), but Gheata is of the kind to 'kill first, ask later'. He drew his great sword and cleaved Nikola in half... almost. Nikola fell to negative hp and the group had to tend to him for a while.

I was not expecting this turn of events (one of many surprises my players gave me), but that fell nicely with my need to take some protection from them. I was feeling that the PCs had too much for granted (and I was still a newbie Ravenloft DM) with too much to spend (I never got over this, I believe), so Tersis was enraged and expelled them, conditionally, from the temple. Yuri was the exception, because as a priest of Ezra he has right to sanctuary. Gregor is a hard case. Officially, he was educated in Ezra, but he is statted as a priest of the Morninglord (that's what he wants to be, but his history told otherwise) and at the moment he is in a limbo, being merely a 'failing priest of something'.

This was the first sign that Gheata really wasn't fit for an agent of authority, but since that excuse had been merely a way to integrate him into the group, I didn't play much on that.

Tersis later tells them that he has his suspicions on Nikola, while never saying them clearly, but this leaves the players guessing and expecting the worst, although without confirmation. And he did lock Nikola in his room.

The 'Razors' character is not relevant to the game. It was invented on the spot because the players wanted to follow that lead. But the investigation there will be an excuse for some interesting (in my opinion) and colourful scenes.

As for the illness affecting Miayla and Enira, the first one died as the rolls dictated, but I saved the other one. I wanted to keep her alive at least for a while more, but this gives a notion to the players that the

disease can be dangerous. Yuri tried all his curing spells on Miayla, but since the problem is one of constitution, it availed nothing to her. She was, in fact, at full hit points at the moment.

The encounter with Mitrescu was merely to point them to the next lead they should follow to uncover the mystery of Kirien's death. They never did, and until now, it remains unsolved. Even though I prodded them oftentimes in that direction, they always refused to go. In fact, Yuri's player is overly cautious, as could be seen in the ball when he refused to show the flower before the end and in many other situations along the campaign, and he was the first to say that he will not move away from Keshgel without a sound and well-founded motive... Guess I scared them too much with the common knowledge I gave them before the game started.

The woman who is also looking for the flower is Nostalia Romaine (RLMC II or Denizens of Dread / Denizens of Dark in 3.x, IIRC). Her purpose for me as DM was not very well defined, hoping her to be a love bait for some of the characters, a conveyor of news, merely an interesting character, a sexual interest of deviant tendencies (straying from Canon here, I know) or whatever. She has her own story and reasons to be in Keshgel, as she tells Eva, and that should lead the players to go after another mysterious killer (as they always are). However, I'm still waiting for the best time to start this thread.

Finally, the other florist who claimed to know the flower was merely trying to dupe them. They never showed signs of realizing this, but they still did not try to buy it there.

Session 8

Starting Date: 21st September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

21st September 751, Night of the Full Moon

Early in the morning, Evangelina went to the Royal Crown, searching for Nostalia Romaine. She must surely be affluent, for the Royal Crown, or Crown Royale, as many of its staff and hosts preferred to call it, in a nod to Dementlieuse fashionable dialect, was the most luxurious and accordingly the most expensive inn in Keshgel and perhaps the whole of Irvanika. It was so pretentious and grand that indeed its manager rejected the word 'Inn' altogether.

"This house" (and here he paused restfully, to adequately stress his point of view) "is a refined establishment of the highest patterns of elegance and savoir-faire. The Crown Royale is not an inn! Non, Monsieur. C'est un Grand Hotel!"

The Dementlieuse accent and dialect were present everywhere, as Dementlieu was the trend setter in the whole Core, the fashion cradle, the birth of all elegance. And so, its language was an absolute requisite in an establishment of the elite. In truth, it was not more than a new version of the same language spoken in Mordent and in most of the south-western Core, which appropriately bore the name Mordentish. But it had grown to be remarkably different, due to the meticulous and calculated alterations introduced in the language by the Council of Brilliance, first in Dementlieu, and then exported to the neighbouring domain of Richemulot and to a certain extent Borca, through the many plays, operas and even the first printed books and journals, that the high classes in these domains adopted it promptly. The folk, however, still adhered to Low Mordentish, the older and quainter version of the language.

Irvanika was too far away from Dementlieu to be reached by the culturing effect the other two domains received, and so High Mordentish, or Dementlieuse, never took effect. It was recognised only for effect, and perhaps most of the nobles knew it passably enough, but it was certainly not in wide use. As such, the effect of its ubiquity in the Crown Royale was stronger, and appealed definitely to the evocation of the luxury and elegance of Port-A-Lucine.

Evangelina entered the lobby of the Hotel with a mixture of awe and unease. She knew she did not belong there, and dodging the haughty looks that the early guests darted at her, she approached the reception desk and told the clerk that Mademoiselle Romaine was awaiting her. The clerk eyed her with a very blatant regard of despite and disbelief, but he did send a *valet* to Nostalia Romaine's *chambre* enquiring of her availability. The boy returned minutes later saying that Mme Romaine was ready to receive Evangelina.

She knocked at Nostalia's room, half-expecting to be ushered in by another servant, but a voice simply replied

"Come in, it's unlocked."

She did so, and was dumbfounded by Nostalia's appearance. She was wearing only her corset, and had the looks of one who had just awakened

"Please, my dear, make yourself comfortable while I turn myself presentable in a minute."

Eva did so, still surprised, but of course Nostalia's toilette took well more than a minute. She disappeared for a while in a side room where she washed herself and then came back to the room. She felt no compunction in dressing in front of Evangelina, who was slightly disturbed at the exuberance and liberty with which this woman she barely knew revealed her intimacy to her.

At last she had dressed into her favourite riding outfit and asked Eva what news she had.

They talked for a while about trivialities, and then Eva led the conversation to the Spider-Rose.

"Have I told you of Elineu Mitrescu already, Nostalia?"

Nostalia smiled at the treatment. Eva was getting self-confident enough to call her by her name.

"I believe you have, dear. He's the florist, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's right... Well, he told us of a certain Irin Radislav, his importer."

"Radislav? I've never heard the name. Have you talked to him already?"

"Huh... no. He lives in Kleinstadt. That's a week away from here."

"Kleinstadt, he? I almost passed there on the way here. And what was the point about that Radislav?"

"Oh, he supposedly knows more about this flower, and even more important, if anyone has acquired one of these flowers recently. I think I told you, these flowers come from Borca."

"Yes, you told me, Eva. But if that Radislav knows that much, I think perhaps we should go and see him. I don't trust sending him a letter. It would take weeks and it might well not reach its destiny."

"So? What do you propose?"

"You're together with a band of men, aren't you?"

"Huh.... yes, although that doesn't sound too nice of you."

"Oh, cut the modesty, Eva. You know I didn't mean it that way, but now that you blush, you should definitely look at that possibility. You're not married, you told me, so what harm can come from a little frolicking here and there? Anyway, I do not want to disturb you, dear, so let's forget I said that... for now. I might even introduce you someone interesting, one of these days.

At any rate, what I meant was that you should decide if you are going to see Radislav. If you do, I might go with you too. Safety in numbers, you know."

After this remark, they turned to lighter subjects. Nostalia was very fond of plays and music shows, and Eva was quite enthralled by the enthusiasm with which she spoke of it. But the shining moment came when Nostalia admitted that one of her favourite pastimes was riding. This, too, was a favourite of Evangelina, and they quickly decided to go riding in the City Park.

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Yuri's sleep that night was agitated. It had nothing to do with the dreams about the mad man that had brought him to Keshgel. Strangely enough, those had stopped. No, this time he had dreamt of wolves. Tersis' words about Nikola haunted his sleep. The possibility that he might be infected by the Dread Disease was clearly implied in Tersis' hushed fearful words. As he woke up, Yuri tried to organize his memories of what he had learnt in Ingelberg about lycanthropy. He was nearly sure he had heard of a way to detect it without error, but he couldn't recall any specific method. After some time of vain effort, he finally quit and decided to go visit Nikola. He prayed for Ezra's blessing and lightly touching him with his divine touch, he felt the healing energy of the Goddess flow through him into Nikola's body. His face flushed and his breathing normalized. He was back from his unconsciousness, but still soundly asleep. As Yuri came down, he crossed paths with Tersis in the corridor and gave him the good news. Tersis acknowledged but his face did not mirror any sign of happiness. If at all possible, his brow became only more worried.

"This priest is stranger by the day", Yuri thought as he came to the entrance hall, the area open to all believers, and there he awaited Gregor and Gheata, who had agreed to meet him there.

Tersis, meanwhile, went to Nikola's room and examined the patient. He locked the window and removed the key from it, and exiting the room silently, did the same to the door. He tested it once more and content with its sturdiness, went back to his duties.

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Gregor didn't go immediately to the temple. Ferrouche's revelations had incensed his desire to solve his communion with the Gods. Since he now had a place to go, his efforts were directed towards the journey he had to make, and he devoted the first half of the morning to finding a means of transportation to Barovia. It was not easy, but he came to find a guide that was willing to make the journey.

"Only to the Krezk Lake", he said, "after that you're on your own."

Gregor shrugged. No one else had been willing to make the journey so he could not question conditions. He agreed, but the man warned him that they had to depart before the end of October. After that, the roads south became impassable and he'd have to wait for Spring.

Then he went to meet Yuri at the temple. When he got there, Gheata had already arrived. He showed the others a list that Vanna had given him that morning: the list of the people that had been at the Ball.

"Now, we can track them down and study them, to see if they had any motive to kill Kirien."

The others flinched uncomfortably. That did not seem a good plan.

They simply delayed the list for later occasions and gave their attention to a more pressing matter: Miayla. They were going to visit her when they heard a racket coming from inside the temple. A man, which after a while they found to be Nikola, was shouting angrily accompanied by loud bangs on what seemed to be wood. They ran in the direction of the sound and found that Nikola was locked in his room, almost howling in a mad rage that he wanted to get out. Tersis arrived promptly, and answered the others questions with a stern gaze. He motioned them to return to the hall where he explained that he needed to take these precautions

"Tonight is the night of the full moon. As you can see, Nikola is extremely distressed and violent, and I don't want to take risks. That door is sturdy and it will hold his violence, but I will NOT open it before the full moon passes."

He didn't give any more details, but the others understood what possibility Tersis was implying, and they accepted it.

After talking with Tersis, Gregor and Yuri left Gheata to his own devices and went to Miayla's house and checked on her status. She was looking better than on the eve, but they still gave her some care for the remainder of the morning. Then they decided to look for the boy who had delivered the flower to Kirien. Looking among the kids in the street, they found Thomas and this led them to the other kid. After sweetening their tongues with a coin each, he told them that it had been approached by a woman with a note and a flower and she simply told him to give them to the young priest in the church. Of course she paid him, and he did his job. As for his appearance, he said she must be in her early twenties, a brunette but with light skin, and wearing a dark long dress.

This did not sound familiar to Gregor and Yuri, but they took notice of the information. Then they returned to the temple where they met Eva and Nostalia, who were waiting for them to have lunch. Eva made a quick introduction of her new friend. She told them she was looking for a certain Vladimir Prokopenko and that he might have a lot to do with the group's own quest.

"Probably we should all go to Kleinstadt", she concluded.

The others considered the possibility of letting her join the band, but then Gheata arrived and said something incredibly rude about her. Insulted, the clearly noble woman retorted in a civil and arrogant manner and left the group, simply telling Eva to come with her to the Opera that night. She'd pay, and would introduce her to some interesting people. Eva agreed and Nostalia told her to meet her later at the Royal Crown. Meanwhile, Gregor shook his head in disapproval of Gheata's misplaced words. Yuri took the chance to excuse himself and go check a few things in his room. When he arrived there, he saw a small note on his bed, besides 30 gold coins. The note was from Nikola, saying he had left the group and taken a few things with him that might be useful. He left some money behind as compensation. Yuri gave a quick scan of his inventory: Nikola had taken the precious Van Richten's book, a rope and some oil. Yuri shook his head briefly, but then dodging the adversity of having to deal with so difficult a person as Nikola, he joined the rest of the group downstairs and all four had lunch at a tavern.

While they were eating, Evangelina overheard a conversation in a nearby table and blushed as she heard the suggestions that Kirien had been involved with Thérèse, yes, her cousin's wife, and that was probably why he had been murdered. She rose suddenly, and with a strong voice and stern face, half-unsheathing her sword, she told the gossipers that it was a lie and she was ready to defend her cousin's honour. The talks subsided and the people avoided the matter entirely, but Gheata registered the possibility. After lunch, Evangelina announced she would return home to have a private talk with Thérèse. Without her noticing, Gheata followed her.

Eva confronted her cousin-in-law about the rumours and she admitted that Kirien had made some advances indeed, but that she had resisted them all. She was clearly being honest, but before they could turn to lighter matters, a heavy pounding on the door startled them. Whoever it was, was almost tearing the door down, so Thérèse opened it. There stood Gheata who entered immediately and wanted to take Thérèse away by force, claiming that she must be accomplice to the murder of Josep Kirien. This incensed Evangelina, and she punched him. He responded with the flat of his blade and if it had not been for Yuri and Gregor, who arrived promptly, surely blood would have been shed. They managed to bring the two contenders to the street and lure Gheata away from the house. Eva stayed behind comforting Thérèse and apologizing for the unspeakable behaviour of that brute.

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When Nikola understood that no one answered his noise and cries for deliverance, he sat reflexively and decided to try other means. He grabbed his secret tools, the ones his father had given him to enter forbidden places, and set to work on the lock. In no time he had opened the door and, picking all his wares, stepped outside the room. He had taken a decision. He was a bad company for everyone else, and now Tersis was treating him like a prisoner. Well, he'd be no one's slave, and he was going to escape. He broke into Yuri's room and noticing the book on the table, picked it and put it in his sack. Then he reasoned that rope and oil might become useful and took them too. Finally, silent as a feather, he descended trying to avoid everyone. The church was mostly empty, too, so he left without being noticed. As he walked along the street towards the edge of town, he noticed, poised on an outlook over the road and surrounding countryside, the familiar figure of Tersis. This time, he did not hide, and addressed him purposefully.

"Look here, priest, why did you lock me today?"

Tersis was startled. He was deeply worried with something, and it was not Nikola. He watched the road from the Southwest anxiously, as if awaiting something that should travel from there. Nikola's interruption made him stutter

"Wh-What?"

"You heard me!"

said Nikola, grabbing the priest's vests.

This recovered his coolness, and with a warming face and reassuring smile, he bade Nikola to relax.

"I'm worried with you, my son. I've been keeping you safe for the past month... nay, not even a month yet, and I'm worried with you. This violence within you is not normal, and it seems to come only with this foul moon. Today is the dread night of the full moon. Dread for some unfortunates, though not for most of the people. But I think it has an effect on you, and it is not a good one, Nikola. That's why I locked you. Behind closed doors, you cannot harm others and I was trying to save you from that violence... But now, you're out here, and I can't do much for it again. Where are you going?"

Nikola was soothed by Tersis' words. With the best of his manners, he replied

"I don't know, away. As you say, I don't want to cause... harm... to others."

Tersis looked at him, understandingly. After some moments of silence, Nikola asked

"What were you doing here?"

"Alas... waiting for someone that is late.... and crucial for the church. But that's all I can tell you."

"Very well... then I'll ask you only one more thing."

Tersis nodded.

"When will I be cured?"

He looked at Nikola again and eyed him with intensity

"I don't know, my son, I don't know. Someday, I hope".

Session 8 – DM notes

Session 8 begins with Eva going to meet Nostalia early on. I did the encounter unsettling on purpose, merely to try to draw Eva's player out of the shell. She was very shy at the table, participating little, so I wanted to see if she reacted at all to Nostalia's strange behaviour. I was looking for some action, some decision, some emotion. It could be either repulse or interest, as long as it was there.

As it happened, there was not much of either. She did find Nostalia strange, and a bit too forward, but that didn't call for high role-playing from her just yet. But it helped, I think, in freeing her a bit. Eva will appear much more strong-willed later on, and I like to believe this encounter, and the one with the painter later at the opera, helped in that, even if just a little bit.

This day, Tersis did lock Nikola in his room. He was afraid of Nikola's violent outbursts. What he didn't expect was that he would react so violently at being imprisoned. I don't recall exactly, unfortunately, what happened for real, for my notes aren't too clear on this. After some thought and comparing with my registry, I decided the sequence of events described here is the most likely to have happened.

Meanwhile, in the back of all the other players, Nikola evaded the room. I exchanged notes with Nikola's player without anyone knowing what was going on, and he, with his roguish skills, managed to cool down, pick the lock, go into Yuri's room and snuff what he thought was most useful to him. He then fled the temple, merely wishing to be alone. I guess his motivation was that he was a danger for all the others in this rage, and no one knew yet that it had a limited duration. Also, I guess Nikola's player wanted to be alone for a while. As he told me, Nikola was deeply individualistic, and didn't trust anyone. So, the aim for his character in the campaign is to gain confidence in others, integrate himself in a group (Actually, it turned out that the first part of the campaign really is about the group solidifying together and begin working as one).

When he meets Tersis on the way out, this doesn't find that strange. It may be because in reality he unlocked the door (I honestly don't remember) but that is justified because at this moment, Tersis is deeply worried with some parcels that do not arrive. I'll explain better in a latter session, but this is the beginning of the thread of Tersis' death. It was planned from the outset, but I anticipated it to provoke the PCs leaving the city.

The broken leg that Yuri healed on Thomas now pays its fruit. Through him, the group learns that a brunette woman has delivered, indirectly, the note and the flower to Kirien. This is another crucial point, but its true significance should be revealed only much later in the campaign. Right now, this woman and other people are working in the shadows and the PCs don't have an idea of what they're doing (and in fact, what is the real plot of the campaign). The description was vague enough for them not to understand they have already seen this woman. Aside from that, this didn't give them new information. It's a shame, though, they haven't kept the note with them, for then they would later be able to compare hand-writings, when a second letter appeared (a few sessions from now).

Meanwhile, Gregor has decided he does want to cure his spiritual problems. I thought this was a good first quest to complete, so I became happy at the pressure Gregor began making for them to go to Barovia. I wanted them to leave Keshgel for I had not many adventures prepared for there (the thread suggested by Nostalia was a later addition, when I saw they were to stay in the city for a long while, but it still came not to be needed). This was ruined, somewhat, by Gheata's remarks towards Nostalia. It was not even a lewd remark, it was simply a base insult, perhaps because she was a noble. Nostalia did not join the group and I lost a motivator for the journey to Kleinstadt.

So, in came plan B. I began suggesting (rather, the folk did) that Kirien had been murdered by Eva's cousin, on a passional rage. They hear rumours that Thérèse and Kirien were going together (they were not, they were just close friends, she a dedicated loyal wife, he a trusted confessor just sometimes too eager to

be helpful). Eva is incensed at these suggestions in a tavern (one of those encounters to bring her player more to the game). This had the unforeseen side-effect that Gheata wanted to solve the crime quickly by presenting Drulovic as the murderer and Thérèse as an associate. No one believed the possibility, but in case I couldn't move the players away from Keshgel, Vanna would, and Drulovic would be sentenced. However, this gave us all yet another sign of how Gheata was going to be played (we were still adjusting to the character).

Sessions 9 and 10

Starting Date: 21st September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

After the incident in Thérèse's house, Gregor took Gheata away to help matters cool down. He tried to distract his companion and explain him that his attitude hadn't been the best. In fact, it was pretty strange for an agent of authority, he thought, but Gheata simply said it was part of his investigative methods. As far as he was concerned, she was a suspect. Gregor told him that his methods should probably be better used in another kind of subjects, which reminded him of Vanna's words.

"I have to go to the docks", he said, "to follow a lead. There's someone I want to meet there."

"Do you want company?" asked Gregor.

He shrugged without giving a straight answer, to which Gregor retorted.

"Then let's have dinner and go there together."

They went to an inn and ate the common dish, after which Gheata passed by the Army's Lodge leaving all of his valuables, except for a hundred gold coins, with Vanna. They then walked the empty streets towards the docks district. A low fog was coming from the river and descending over the town, muffling their steps. They hastened, until the dark and lonely cobblestone gave way to noisy dirt alleys where some still open windows spilled warm light into the night. They entered one of the first taverns they saw and sat at the bar.

They had been drinking for some time when they noticed that the people inside began looking worriedly to the windows. In just a scant few seconds, everybody was whispering instead of talking, and with a frightened look they locked and shuttered all the windows. The publican hurried to close the door and was about to place a heavy bar over it when loud knockings and shouts were heard from the outside.

"Let me in! Let me in! For all that is sacred, let me in!"

Through one of the last open windows, a strong, bald man, missing several teeth, peeped and exclaimed immediately after

"It's Seven-Fingers John, Flint. Let him in!"

The owner of the establishment, whose name was obviously Flint, opened the door just enough for the man to dart in, practically throwing himself to the floor, as if running from something. He had the look of one who had killed several people, and lacked three fingers in his left hand. His arms and even the face sported the many scars of one who knew naught else but a violent life. He was panting, and all he could say in a spent voice was "The Fog! The Fog is coming!"

He had barely finished uttering his warning already Flint had barred the door and lighting more lanterns.

"Yea, I had understood. But we're safe now. Every damn door and window is closed."

The raucous noise of some minutes before gave place to a disturbing and heavy whispering, as if these violent and truculent men did not want to challenge some impending threat.

Gheata and Gregor looked around the crowded room: the clients were of the worst sort they had ever seen and their faces betrayed base passions and immoral consciences. Bandit, pirate, murder, every single one of them was probably at least one of these. Gregor swallowed dry and asked for another rum. Gheata accompanied him and looked around again. The folk inside were tough, with many cruelties branded in their faces, but as the windows were being closed, their features had mirrored the anxiety and even fear that was inside them.

After a couple of hours, the uneasy feeling brought by the fog outside had passed and the ambient had returned to its usual rowdiness. Gheata tried to ask Flint some questions about 'Razors' but the man demanded some payment. After 5 gold coins, he said he should come some other night because 'Razors' was not there, and then he would introduce them.

"Come back tomorrow, for example..." he said.

Gheata and Gregor went to a corner where they could talk more privately, and the latter said

"My guess, if you want to know, is that 'Razors' is here... he's just trying to be difficult, to scare us away, perhaps."

"No one scares me", replied Gheata, "but I'm not fool enough to start a brawl here. I'll come back here tomorrow."

Gregor looked around studying the mob inside, and said at length

"I'll be coming with you."

Finding they had nothing else to do that night, they listened to the many tales that a storyteller was spinning in the corner. The last to get their attention was about a Lady in White that comes out in the dark hours and lures men away, never to be seen again. Soon after that, Gregor became sleepy and paying for a room, withdrew for it. Gheata, instead, chose to pay for a girl and spent the night with her.

* * * * *

That night, Eva met Nostalia at the Royal Crown and went with her to the opera. It was the premiere of the piece *Roberto, Il Diavolo*, at the magnificent *Teatro dell' Arcimboldi* (the most fashionable theatres in Keshgel, and most operas, had names in Old Kartakan, the most revered language in musical matters). As almost all operas, it was a tragedy telling the tale of a gallant man who earned his living by swindling rich women. Everything was fair game for him, as long as he could get rich or at least marry a wealthy heiress. Life, however, turned the full cycle as he later became ruined and saw his wife die and his daughter, whom he truly loved, go mad.

The two girls, however, didn't see much of the opera. As Nostalia dutifully explained Eva, high-class people don't go to the opera to watch it. They go there to be watched by others, so they came only for the final of the first act and spent the interlude wandering the halls and paying visits to other distinguished people in their own boxes. Despite being a foreigner, Nostalia was very well connected and it was apparent this was not her first time in Keshgel. They were strolling in the corridor, back to their own seats, when a man dressed in superb black with a finely grown and combed moustache, according to the most extravagant good-taste of the day, addressed the two companions, eyeing Evangelina covetously.

"Signorina, scusati, ma.... prego" he took her hand and kissed it softly and with extreme elegance and gentleness.

"Allow me to introduce myself" he knelt. "Mi chiamo Girolamo, an artist. At your service, Signorina." Eva blushed wildly while Nostalia laughed mockingly.

"You'll get used to these approaches. But Signor Girolamo is a renowned painter. A true artist from Kartakass", she said, instead giving her arm to the man.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of this awe, Signor Girolamo?"

"Signora Nostalia, if my eyes do not deceive me. Is it you? How long ago..."

"Always exaggerating, Girolamo. It was only last spring."

"Of course, of course... did you like your portrait? Did it fit in your hall?"

"Yes, it was charming, thank you. A master-piece, as always."

"Ah, Signora... I can do no other thing, when the model herself is of the utmost preciousity..."

Nostalia blinked at Eva, who was beginning to find the man funny.

"But now, if you allow me, it is your friend that caught my eye. Mia Donna, I have to paint her!"

"You see, Eva? Girolamo has liked you. It is quite the honour and if you want to earn real money, you could do some modelling for him..."

"Modelling?"

"Hmmm... you may be the shy kind, but... there's really not that much to it. You sit there or lie there for a few hours, comfortable, while Girolamo paints you. He does mostly nude pictures, but you get used to it after a while."

“Ah!” and Eva blushed again. “Perhaps some day, I’ll think about it” she spurted abruptly tugging at Nostalia’s arm.

“Bye bye, Girolamo. Better luck next time. We are going to see the Second Act now.”

“Mi spiace questa volta, ma chi sá, un giorno ? Arrivederci, Signorine...”

He waved as they left.

When the opera was over, the fog had completely blanketed the streets. The Royal Crown was a short distance away, but Nostalia had asked the Hotel clerk to have a closed coach waiting for her after the Opera. They arrived safely at the Royal Crown, but the clerk refused to let the Coach go out again, for it was too dangerous. Of course, walking home was out of the question for Eva. Nostalia said she could pass the night in her own room, but Eva preferred to pay for her own, although it was expensive.

* * * * *

22nd September 751, 1st Night After the Full Moon

Yuri spent the night in Miayla’s house, trying to help her during the night. He had bought some tools to aid him in his assistance, but she still woke to the dawn of the new day in critical condition. Knowing that there was nothing more he could do that day, he left her and decided to go to the church. He didn’t get there, though, for in his path, a great commotion diverted his attention. The same happened to Eva Gregor and Gheata who, returning from their nightly affairs, also found the agitation in the street intriguing. Even Nikola, who had simply disappeared from the rest of the group, happened to pass by at the moment.

They were in a small square so crowded that it looked even smaller. Women cried and wept uncontrollably all around, and people elbowed each other in an effort to approach the centre of the gathered crowd and understand what was happening. There were people trying to comfort others, but there were also many swearing vengeance. Against whom, they knew not, so they forced their way to the middle as everybody else tried and they saw a woman kneeling and shedding her tears copiously over a baby she held in her arms. It looked like the baby was being eaten, for there were little pieces of meat missing from one of her arms and legs. The people around the woman, very probably the child’s mother, were in a paroxysm of suffering, tugging at their very hair and tearing their own flesh. Even the men seemed upset with such monstrosity.

As Eva looked around, hoping to forget what she had seen, she noticed four other women in the same conditions. The group moved away from the scene, and questioning the mob they found out that all the children of the five successive houses in that street had disappeared in the night. A faint crimson trail seeped from one of the houses and led to the middle of the street, where the first woman held her baby. A metre ahead, a much bigger red pool was the starting point of another track that led to the door of an abandoned warehouse.

Gregor couldn’t stand the anger that was growing inside him. Stepping forth, he approached the men that seemed most determined to take some action. He simply said that he and his friends were decided to rout the beast that had done this. The people told them they never had seen the cause of this violence, safe that food had been disappearing mysteriously from the kitchens during the night and some of the men decided to keep guard. That was on the eve. That morning, the babies and younger children had disappeared and one of them had been found half-eaten in the middle of the street. As to the warehouse where the trails led, it was abandoned long ago, and no one claimed its ownership.

Gheata, Eva, Gregor and Yuri took their weapons ready and forced entrance into the warehouse.

The door opened easily into a dark room that looked like a wine cellar.

Nikola quietly followed them, saying once inside

“If you need an extra arm, I’ll lend it to you.”

There was some surprise, but there was no time for cheers. The trail followed into a big hole in the left wall that gave to the next house. Following the trail, they were jumped on by some rats, which still wounded some of them before being completely defeated, but they moved on. The basement of this house was divided into some very large rooms and twisting corridors, and in there they met some small, deformed whitish and horrible creatures that looked vaguely like human beings. Controlling their own aversion, the group pressed on and killed all the beasts, managing to recover two children still alive.

Grieving, they returned to the surface and presented the living children to their respective mothers, but all they could give to the other women was their sympathies and the bare comfort of revenge. They burned the

bodies of the beasts on the open square and the crude weapons they used on the fireplace of the abandoned house.

A man from the neighbourhood stepped forward representing his community, and addressing Gregor said "This is not much, but it is all we can afford. Thank you for saving our children and avenging our loss. We regret you could not do more, but it surely is not your fault."

He handed Gregor a pouch with 100 gold coins, but Gregor, with stubborn tears edging in his eyes, refused and said

"There is no need. Your gratitude is good enough. If I may, I'll take a bottle of wine instead."

Downcast, they walked away from the neighbourhood, for the morning was still young and there were things to do. Nikola was the first to speak

"I have helped you in attention for the time we have spent together, but I'm afraid I will have to go again. Perhaps we shall still meet again, but I know not when."

He simply turned his back and left, without anyone being able to say anything before he disappeared in the depths of Keshgel's crowds.

Sessions 9 and 10 – DM notes

Session 10 merely completed the fight that was begun in Session 9. Nothing else happened in that, so I joined the log for both in one single group.

In this session, Gregor and Gheata go to the docks to follow 'Razors' lead. As said before, this had no interest, but I wanted to provide action for my players. Rather, to oblige to their needs: where to go, what to see. Cautioned away by Gregor's having lost all his money in the first session, Gheata leaves almost everything with Vanna. By now, he is still too confident of her support, but I already had something up my sleeve. This time, I had prepared a number of bad things that could happen at night, such as bad spots in Keshgel where one could be drained of youth in a night and so forth (with low percentages of happening). They didn't fall on any of that, but I had prepared some descriptions to read aloud, and the first one was the scene with the fog. I think it was effective, especially the tidbit of the 'Seven-Fingers John'. I was picturing everyone in the tavern like the pirates in Stevenson's 'Treasure Island', and it is no coincidence the barman / owner is called Flint, the dead pirate they all looked back to as the patriarch of them all. The contrast of so many violent men in fear of the fog really gave a notion of how dangerous it should be.

The tale of the Lady in White was another thread I had prepared, and in fact, was already running, but it only worked for colour. I want to let them understand the superstitions and fears these people have, and that may affect them in very direct ways.

We also began to note here a trend in Gheata's character: wherever he is, he wants to sleep with a woman. If no one else is available, he looks for a prostitute. This gave me the idea of placing a Red Widow in his path, but that was too powerful for him. So I planned another encounter that came out really nicely. However, that is in a later session.

Nostalia and Eva went to the Opera. Among other things, I had decided on a cultural schedule for Keshgel. This month would have 6 events of note, and at this particular date, there were three shows available: an opera, a historic drama, and a tragedy. Nostalia picked the Opera (that means, the dice did so). I use Italian names for what is music related. For me, Kartakan is represented by Italian in the game. Even though it is supposed to be based in a Germanic culture ('Meistersinger' being a suggestive word), for me Italian is the language of music. That's why I have reused even the name of the theatres. If I'm not mistaken, the Arcimboldi is somehow related to the Scala in Milan, although I'm not sure of the connection. One of the other theatres was La Fenice, taken from the one that burnt a few years ago... I don't remember where, perhaps Venice.

The whole scene was strongly based on the way the opera is portrayed in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I'm not sure, either, but I believe the name of the opera I used is the name of an Opera some of the characters go to watch in that novel, and is even the title of one of the chapters in the book. I like these somewhat obscure references. Luigi Vampa, who's going to appear in a few sessions, is another one from the same book.

The scene with the modelling was another of those encounters to stir Eva. She shied away from it, though, but it did bring some colour to the session. Unfortunately, it didn't register in the long run, and even I had forgotten about it. Finally, the stay at the Hotel. This was a neat way to take 30 gp from Eva... I was guessing she would refuse Nostalia's offer.

If I have not blundered in the Italian words, these mean (in order):

"Miss, excuse me, but... please"

"My name is Girolamo"

"I'm sad this time, but who knows, some day?"

I will be glad to know if I have to correct something here and one of you tells me. Thank you in advance.

The battle scene on the 22nd was my first seriously thought combat session for the players. They were complaining they could not achieve anything, they could not complete anything, so I gave them a quest (a small one, true) that they could complete. Even today, after almost 30 sessions more, they complain of the same thing, although I do think they have accomplished several things already, but at the moment it was rather more important because there was no real unity in the group: Nikola had left, Gheata was mistrusted by everybody and Eva had never really showed clearly what class she was (remember no one knew the other's class when the game started). So, the only two that cooperated to some extent were Yuri and Gregor.

This combat was designed to draw everyone in (including Nikola) to have some dice-rolling fun and have them start thinking as a group. Of course, Nikola had to appear out of the blue to vanish again, merely to accommodate that, but I wouldn't let the player watch the others having fun while he waited for his turn to say what he was doing.... which was pretty much nothing.

In fact, it was more than one single combat, I guess it was about 4 encounters, and they came out well and glorified.

As for the beasts they were fighting, they never knew their names. They still refer to them as those 'white beasties', or something along those lines. I trust many of you will not have trouble recognizing the Bakhna Rakhna, especially because I used the ideas suggested in the book (Denizens of Dark / Dread).

The baby the mother is holding in the middle of the street was actually saved by a denizen of the fog as the Bakhna Rakhna was crossing the street (that was during the night when the Fog came down over Keshgel and scared everyone away): I theorized it had been a Mist Ferryman who had simply killed the beast. The child eventually died of bleeding.

Session 11

Starting Date: 22nd September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

The four remaining companions each went to his own affairs. Gheata went to the Red Boar Inn and decided to sleep the afternoon away, before the anticipated night's foray into the docks again. Gregor went to look for Ferrouche, asking if he knew anything about the Morning Lord. Ferrouche knew only some generalities about the cult, but every little thing that Gregor heard of it made him happy. After a brief interview, he went to Miayla's house just to make sure the poor girl was holding on to life.

Yuri had been there too tending to her for a while. She was still in the same condition, frail and panting, but at least she was stable. He returned to the temple in time for the day's ceremony.

To his surprise, he noticed that the audience that day was smaller than it should, and he could see many of the faithful stumbling and holding to walls so as not to fall. He brooded over the meaning of this and watched the ceremony unfold. Tersis conducted as usually, but that day the few people seemed little interested in the rites, agitated and unquiet. When Tersis at last proclaimed the ritual phrase "May Ezra's blessing fall over you", a clamour rose from the audience and a strong voice asked

"Where has Ezra been these days?"

A murmur broke out with many of the people claiming for more faith from that man, but others supported him and added

"Our children are sick! Our daughters have died, Father. Where is Ezra? What evil have we done for Her to punish us so?"

"My wife can not stand for three days now, and each night she gets worse."

"My two little children died yesterday of frailty, pale like the snow. What evil is this, Father?"

Tersis was appalled. For the last few days, his mind had been elsewhere completely, and he had wandered in all his free time to the south-western road. He awaited the delivery by Zamacois that brought some of the necessary materials from Mordent regularly. But this time, he was delayed, and Tersis was running out of supplies. This matter had made him neglect his many other duties, and now the angry voice of the people caught him by surprise.

Neither Yuri expected this turn of events

"Dear Ezra, please, don't tell me this has turned into an epidemic!" he murmured in alarm.

As the ceremony came to a close, Evangelina arrived, running and breathless.

Evangelina had gone back home, and after taking a short nap to rest of the exhaustion of the morning, she went downstairs. Only then she noticed that Thérèze had not yet left her room, and knocking at her door worriedly, her cousin answered with so feeble a voice that she hurried to her bedside. Thérèze was pale, listless, weak, very much like the symptoms Gregor and Yuri had noticed in Miayla and Enira.

"... and one of them has died already." she thought.

"Stay calm! Don't panic!" she said to Thérèze, "Try to breathe, I'm going to get help. I'll be back in an hour!"

Yuri reacted better than Tersis and made a quick plan, while the elder Priest disappeared for his room to reflect and organize his thoughts. Yuri, gathering the several people leaving the church, organized them in order to bring all their ill to the temple hall. He made someone go for Miayla and bring her there too, and addressing Eva, counselled her to bring Thérèze there as well. They needed to concentrate the sick to provide better care for them.

Eva ran at once, but at the middle of the way, she realized she should go first tell Drulovic the grim news and ask for his help to take Thérèze back to the church. Much to her surprise and chagrin, he was not there. "He must have gone home early", she thought, but when she arrived there, Drulovic was absent too. Unsure of what this meant, her pragmatism dictated that she took Thérèze to the church and think about the unanswered questions later.

* * * * *

Gheata fell into sleep without problem. He never had worries in life, accepting what it brought each day without caring about the next. His solution for all problems was simple strength and the imposing of his will. If anyone objected, he removed the objections... by force, usually, for he never tried to reason with anyone. As such, he barely had a conscience at all, and the minute he laid down to sleep was usually the same he sunk into oblivion. But the sleep that this afternoon brought him was much different, and very far from the usual repairing, restful repose.

Gheata dreamt, but this dream was not like any he had before had. It seemed much more real, with a sense of presence he was not used to. He walked down a street surrounded by houses, but the street seemed to grow wider as he moved on until the houses disappeared and a hazy fog blurred his vision. That haze turned soon to dense mist that seemed like a curtain spread before his eyes. He advanced now slowly treading on something he couldn't quite discern, but that seemed to hide the sounds and slow his progress. A cold wind caressed his cheek and a light appeared to his right. Looking in that direction, it seemed that the fog was opening and he could see farther, but all he saw was a tall caped dark figure sketched against the whitish background. As it approached, Gheata saw it was a black man-like shape, enveloped completely in a black robe that hid all the features of its face and body. But the figure carried a scythe, with a blade almost a metre long and walked slowly in Gheata's direction. He took his sword, and wielded it at the figure, but the shadow (for it looked as naught else but that) whirled its own blade in a movement so fast that Gheata only felt the blood running down from his arm. He thrust forward and hit the dark mantle but in the last minute the form slid aside and dug the point of the scythe right in Gheata's back, sinking it deep until it came out from his chest.

Gheata awakened suddenly with a cry and an intense pain. He touched himself in search for blood, but sensing none he reclined in bed trying to slow the pace of his heart. The dream had been vivid and he still recalled every minute detail. He was sweating and the fear he had felt had been all too real. He decided to stay in the room until Gregor came fetching him to go to the docks.

* * * * *

Gregor was surprised by a loud knock on the front door. He was conversing with Miayla's father about the state of her daughter when they were interrupted. A man had come swiftly from the church requesting that Miayla be taken there. Her father objected at first, but when Gregor understood the order had come from Yuri himself, and why, he convinced his host that it was really the best way to treat her. With the help of her father and the scout, Gregor took her to the church. Tersis seemed to have lost his mind and the control of the situation. Yuri was running the place and Tersis seemed to have demoted from his functions. He didn't think clearly and all he could say was that he had ran out of medical supplies and that they should have arrived weeks ago. Seeing that Tersis was in no condition to help, Gregor took an attitude. It was already dusk, but he ran to the Red Boar looking for Gheata and told him that an emergency at the temple prevented him from going in search of 'Razors'. Instead, he asked of his companion to go to the Fortress and send a surgeon to the church, for they were in dire need of them.

Gheata and Gregor left the Red Boar together, but they soon took different directions. Gheata headed for the Army's Lodge, but as he gave the first steps, a mist rising from the river came to lie over the streets of Keshgel. At first, Gheata didn't pay it attention, as he continued down the known path. There were few people in the streets and every door was closed. The rare windows still open shut one by one. It was cold and a gelid cutting wind froze Gheata to the bone. In no time, he was trembling of cold huddling from the ululating wind... when suddenly he understood that it was not only the gales that filled the sounds of night but rather that it appeared all the dogs in Keshgel were howling mournfully in unison, as in a dead man's toll, their laments dressing the night with sadness. Ten minutes later, it seemed that he hadn't walked much and that the streets were now much longer than on the other times and that the sound of his steps echoed more deeply. He noticed that he was absolutely alone and the only sounds he could hear were the cries of the wind, the laments of the dogs and the foreboding echo of his steps. In the distance, by the end of the

street, he saw a white light, but strangely diffuse, as if covered by some veil or mist. A kind of mist that seemed lingering and waiting for him to meet it.

Gheata pressed on towards it, unwavering. The mist welcomed him and all around Gheata changed: all he could see was a diffuse white and his steps sounded distant and reverberating over a metallic floor. His skin was humid and sticky and he lost notion of time and space. And then, he heard a sound that made his mouth dry: a prolonged howling, more acute than any wolf ever made, and right after a sound that sent shivers up his spine: two blades snapping like scissors repeatedly... just before him. Gheata looked around, half-guessing what made that noise. But when he expected to see a shadow like that of his dream, he saw several of them, approaching in his direction. He still pulled his sword from the sheathe but a voice in his mind cried incessantly

“Run! Run, you fool!”

This time, he did. He turned his back on the approaching reapers and looked for some place where the fog subsided. He found himself on the street again, still covered by the fog and chased by the dark figures. He saw doors and knocked wildly at them, but no one opened. At long last, he took a turn and the fog didn't follow. There were still people here. He mingled with them, rested for a while and regained his bearings. Recognizing the place, he reached the Fortress and addressed the guard on duty

“Hey, go fetch Vanna, I want to talk to her.”

The guard was outraged by the tone

“General Shostakovitch!, you mean”. But you are not allowed to see her.”

“You have not understood”, he said slowly and in a menacing tone. “I want to see her.”

The other answered in kind

“I have told you before, no one is to see her, and certainly not you.”

Gheata had not the habit of asking for things twice. He drew his sword, filled his chest and in a last attempt to solve things without blood-shed, and crying so loud as to wake up the entire building, he uttered:

“I want to see Vanna!”

The other swallowed dry and stepping aside let him pass.

But Vanna had heard the altercation and came to her ante-chamber still dressed in a night robe. A man followed her in the same guise, when Gheata appeared at the end of that corridor. They recognized each other, and Gheata bit his lip. Vanna just said in a mockingly contemptuous tone:

“Frankly, Vladimir, after all these years you haven't been here, did you ever think I would chastely wait for you?”

He didn't answer, but the use of his first name, that he had for so long abandoned, was like stirring a dagger in the wound. He said bluntly:

“I came here because there's problem at the Temple. They need help at once. Give me a healer or two that I can take there.”

And she answered in the same tone.

“Take whoever's available. The guard will point you to them.”

Turning the back on him, she grabbed her lover by the arm and they both went back to her room. Gheata stormed outside and kicked a stone in frustration.

“Damn!”

He commanded the guard to send for the surgeon and after he appeared some minutes later, Gheata led him to the temple. The night had settled entirely, but he hadn't finished his errands. He went to the same inn of the eve and decided to wait for 'Razors'. He sat down, ordered a stiff drink, and heard the tale the storyteller was recounting that night:

The night's full of dangers. Be ware the night outside your door, for the terrors of the dark abound at that hour and have no mercy of us, feeble mortals.

Many years ago, a sailor from the north, who called himself Siegfried, sailed up the Maritsa and arrived to Keshgel. With him he brought a dark man, athletic but with a deep, hypnotic and dangerous gaze. All those that looked upon him could not do but to divert their eyes immediately after: it was, they said, as if they were seeing the very flames from Hel!, and feeling that all their guilts were at once revealed. Siegfried was a knight of the light, but who was this man, emissary of darkness? Why was he with Siegfried?

Siegfried called him Al-Vatos, which they say means “Fate” in Pharazia. He brought with him two long sharp scimitars, he was completely bald but used a curled beard cut in square. He never uttered a word. They say Siegfried cut his tongue so that Al-Vatos could not curse him for his capture.

Aye, for they say Al-Vatos was no less than a demon that Siegfried had submitted and of whom he now demanded a service of redemption.

Alas, this world is corrupted and evil in its essence. It envies the light and the people that follow light, and places them challenges and more challenges until it corrupts them at last.

Siegfried travelled widely with Al-Vatos attempting to redeem his evil ways, but when they came to Irvanika, they say, it was the Demon who now held the power of the two: Siegfried sought Evil, he uprooted every creature of darkness, true, but far from redeeming them, he now destroyed them without pity. In nights of the Dark Moon, Siegfried's armour shone in the dark as he smote the scions of below. With strength of arm and supernatural dedication, he exterminated one by one the evils of this land.

Brave Siegfried, heroic Horseman, woe betided us that lost you to the night! Did he die? Did he stray from his path? Was he finally corrupted? Who knows?

The New Moon was his, but on the Full Moon, there was no Siegfried. On the Full Moon, a foul fog rose that came from the river and within it the sinister laughter of Al-Vatos could be heard when he snapped his scimitars and his eyes looked like two burning charcoals, showing those that stared at him the flames whither he'd send them.

Al-Vatos, black demon, fiery eyes and skin of ash: arms of steel cold as the night, hidden in the fog that protects the cowards: feared torch that burnt the souls of all those who crossed his way: heroes of light, champions of darkness, warriors of virtue or wells of vice, all fell before his fury and rage. All fell before his piercing blades. And where were you, Siegfried? Have you fallen too before Al-Vatos?

Much is said about Siegfried. Perhaps you'll hear some day that he could not resist the malice of the Black One. That even mute, his filthy obscene thoughts went gradually corroding the inner core of Siegfried until this one abandoned his fair fight and added his sword to Al-Vatos's in the fog of the night. But I think... I think not. Siegfried was a champion but he met his equal. And on a night of the Dark Moon, the light was snuffed out for ever. Siegfried fell and his clamour, his fury of battle vanished for ever more. The nights are now sombre, and the darkness of Al-Vatos, that, remains, and sometimes, it is still possible, in nights of fear, to hear his laughter in the fog. Far, far am I when the mists clamber from the river, far inside my house where they can not enter, because outside, Al-Vatos is lord and king and his are the souls of those he finds.

The tale threw the room in silence... it was well known, and this man told it particularly well, but the Fog that comes from the river had come just the night before, and its shadow cast a darkness in the spirit of everyone in there.

* * * * *

When Gregor parted ways with Gheata, night had fallen completely already and he felt uncomfortable. The streets were emptying quickly and soon he was the only soul walking dirty paths. Challenged by the darkness and the fog that was coming to embrace the buildings, he quickly found he was lost, and in a part of Keshgel he didn't know. Even more worried now, he adjusted his collar to withdraw the cold from his neck and walked defiantly against the wind. He was alone, and in a hurry to reach some safe haven... Alone? But...

"I hear footsteps!" he thought in alarm. He stopped and looked around him in a quick glance. No one. Again he walked. Again the same footsteps. They were coming from behind him. He looked again in a rapid movement but found no one. He started running and taking turns without thinking until he came against a wall. He was in an alley, and a narrow one at that... and the footsteps returned.

He shouted

"Show yourself!"

But there came no answer.

"You coward", he continued, "show yourself". He retraced his steps, but as he did so, a man-shape emerged from the top of the alley, cutting his way. The figure approached... it looked like a man, alright, covered in black from head to toe by a wide flowing cape, his face covered with a soft velvet mask.

Gregor wielded his rapier, and the figure produced one in turn.

"Come to play my game, huh?" he hissed, amusingly.

Gregor's limbs shook

"What do you want?"

The mysterious figure thought for a while, teasing Gregor with satisfaction and advancing a few steps, so as to come within range of a speedy thrust

“I am in a good mood tonight. I’ll give you an easy choice: whatever I find interesting on you or..... your skin.”

Gregor felt trapped. He had no desire to be robbed again, but much less wanted he to be killed. Still, in tight moments such as these, he very often lost control and tried desperate actions. He charged at the figure who simply vanished or dodged as if it had never been there.

Recovering his senses, Gregor walked away but the steps returned behind him. He ran, and through sheer luck, he came, after a while, into streets better known to himself and which still had a modicum of people in there. He arrived to the temple shortly, exhausted and worried that he might have imagined things.

Session 11 – DM notes

Session 11 saw was the true declared beginning of the thread of Tersis’ death. As I said before, this was a planned event at the outset of the campaign. It is part of the plot the villains have crafted. However, I was hoping to do it a bit later. But as my objective up to the moment was to remove the PCs from a sedentary life in a city where they don’t have much to do (or better said, I wanted to give them another kind of adventure at the early levels), I pulled it sooner to really stir them. Also, Tersis was becoming rather unliked by the players, and if I had him around for longer he risked being simply cut from their minds. As such, it was both useful for me and somewhat a relief for the PCs.

Why did this happen? I’m not really sure. I guess they were expecting Tersis to save them from danger now and then, and when he showed signs he did not like to fight and would not fight, they began thinking of him as a coward. Also, Tersis was stern and authoritative, and this didn’t fall well with the players (not the PCs), used as they were to being the owners of the place and having everything and everyone at their beck and call: free bed, free spells, free information.

This may actually be a misinterpretation on my side, but I really wished to make some things less than obvious and surely not easy for my players. I always liked challenges and I wanted to give them problems that would make them think and work to succeed.

At the same time, the outbreak of the disease that had been affecting Miayla and Enira was also a planned event. It didn’t come out as well as I had thought, for two reasons: first, it was too sudden (but had to come before Tersis’ death); second, the players did something I was not expecting – they took all the diseased to the church. This made it difficult for me to kill Tersis in the way I had planned, without anyone seeing, and that was the reason why Tersis proposed the guard shifts (next session) with Yuri and Gregor on the same shift. Luckily, the PCs agreed and only an NPC could have seen Tersis at the moment of his death: that he didn’t see it became easy enough.

Tersis’ inaction at the church was caused by my surprise, and also my initial resistance at having the church so crowded. It collided with my plans. But of course I let it go, and altered them accordingly. This reaction was another nail in the coffin regarding the respect the PCs had lost for him. By now, he was truly a useless unwanted priest.

Of course, now I had the problem that the church was full, but that tied in well with the scene of the death. I had expected the population to find slowly, and by word of mouth, but this rapid discovery also worked: basically, the population of the neighbourhood (and later of Keshgel) should lose the trust in the Church of Ezra. Being that there were only two official priests in the city, both of which are dead; the first suspected of reprehensible conduct, the second suspected of witchcraft, the standing of the church was no longer that famous. The idea of the disease was to pave the road to this, showing that the faithful were being attacked by some punishment and Ezra was powerless to prevent it. I remind you that all these events are being planned and executed by the same entity, although the players (and by majority of reason the PCs) know nothing of this and, at least as far as they have let transpire, do not even suspect of this. At the same time, some crows and other black birds occasionally kept watch over the church, noticing the comes and goes of the heroes and informing their masters of them, so that these could choose the best time to spark the actions.

After this scene, though, it seemed that the plot was moving too fast for what I wanted to do, so the next phases of the villain's plan will be more cautious, solid and will take longer. They had succeeded in removing a potential threat to their plans.

This will give me time, I hope, to build the PCs well, to give them some acquaintance with the setting and some of its characters and let them solidify as a group.

Gheata's dream was the first encounter of one of the PCs with the Nightmare Court. It was there merely for colour and foreshadowing, however still opening the door to another thread I'm keeping in store for when things are calmer. But since Gheata is that kind of guy who fears nothing, casting him in a dream where his physical stats don't help him at all might be an effective way to scare him.

I had a text prepared for Gregor and Gheata in their way to the docks. They would be caught by the fog and hunted by several mist-ferrymen. The dream was a warning. When Gregor didn't go with Gheata after all, I read the text only for the latter and made up something on the spot for Gregor.

As for Gheata, he had the same scene with which he had dreamt. As he had been so swiftly defeated in the dream (stopping at 1hp, and not negative, as the text might suggest), all the other players cried to him "Run, run!" (that was the 'voice in his mind') as his player was saying that he unsheathed the sword and stood for a fight. He thought better, and Gheata ran instead.

When he arrives to the Fortress at last, I gave him the scene I had hinted at in a previous log: Vanna isn't his anymore. This came unexpectedly to the player (although I had warned him that Vanna was my character now and I could do anything I wished to her, even though he had invented her and in his background). He was extremely arrogant in the session, as I tried to convey here, ordering the guard as if he were the king. That's why there's so much resistance, but when he succeeded at an Intimidate check, the guard went to call her. I loved his face when she appeared with a man, both wearing nightclothes and obviously coming from the same bed. He gave his message in an extremely dry tone and merely kicked a rock away on the outside. As the player explained me later, even this didn't affect Gheata emotionally that much. He simply kicked the rock, winning over all his frustration, and went on with his life.

But the night still had more surprises for him. I had another encounter prepared. The realization of Vanna's affair had an alternative way prepared, as he listened in the Tavern to where he was going her current love bragging about it. As he insisted on seeing her, I decided to give him this more effective version. This means the encounter I had prepared could happen without him knowing of Vanna or with his full knowledge. And at any rate, it depended on his renting another prostitute for the night. Of course, he did so, and I decided the scene was too good to let pass and played it on him, making that a very hard night (and day) for him. More on it on the next session.

The improvised scene for Gregor ran especially well and remained in our memories for a long while. I can tell you it did scare Gregor's player who at a moment was so unnerved by it that he charged into the opponent no longer caring if he would lose the character or not. I let Gregor live without harm for the purpose of the scene had been played: to create tension effectively.

Later on, outside the campaign sessions, I developed the character that stalked Gregor. He is awaiting a better time to be reintroduced in the campaign with a thread of his own that will involve Miayla as victim and bait for Gregor. But for that, they have to return to Irvanika first (it doesn't really matter if to Ingelberg instead of Keshgel, either of the cities will work).

The idea for the storm as described in the text for Gheata's walk (and also for the night of Tersis' death, on the next session) came from an actual walk I made to go to the swimming pool at night. It was not scary by any stretch of mind, but the wind was so fierce and one or two dogs were howling by then that I decided that subtly exaggerated it could give good environment. I prepared a description and read it aloud in the session, and what is in this text is basically a translation of that.

The story of Siegfried and Al-Vatos was a tale I wrote and told at the table. The main inspiration for it came from a book of the Fighting Fantasy series whose original name I don't know but is about killing a

vampire called Heydrich, if I'm not mistaken. There is a Paladin there, called Siegfried, that his brother to the vampire (how awfully cliché these stories seem! How many times does the vampire have to have a good almost sacred brother?). I took the character of Siegfried, changed it, I got the description of Al-Vatos from the images I had built while reading Arabian Nights and crafter his name from the word 'Fate' as to sound strange enough. The 'Al' article was merely to give it flavour. The rest grew by itself. I'm not sure my players liked hearing me telling a long tale (the text here is the exact translation of what I told them) but I thought it should fit in a Tavern where a story-teller is telling tales. Also, I do want my players to have knowledge of tales that may make them fearful.

Oh, the storyteller. I haven't detailed him at all, but for me, he's an old blind man with a dog by his side. Of course, I'm thinking of the character created by Jim Henson and which is one of my fondest memories of television from my teenage years. There is a possibility my vision for Al-Vatos also comes from a genie in one of the episodes of that series. Also, the story of Siegfried and Al-Vatos has the other use of somewhat explaining why everybody is so fearful of the night, even though the reality may have nothing to do with it (or it may, there is a 'real history' for the characters in the legend), for what stalks the fog are essentially Mist Ferryman (this was before the Guide to Mists, of course).

Session 12

Starting Date: 22nd September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

When the story-teller finished, Gheata thought it was about time he looked for 'Razors'. He approached Flint and with a sullen expression, this pointed a man to him, sitting at a table alone. Even among this crowd, he was sinister, but Gheata didn't flinch. He sat at his table and asked "Are you 'Razors'?"

The other looked at him, uninterested and answered in turn

"Who wants to know?"

Gheata didn't answer him and simply assumed the answer had been 'Yes'. He continued

"I was told you know a great deal about poisons... And I am looking for information."

The other liked Gheata's attitude, and studying at length his demeanour and aspect found that Gheata was a man of hard life too. He then spat to the side and acquired a paternalist tone

"I like you kid.... you have potential. And your eyes tell me you have already taken a person's life. There's a sparkle you never lose after that..."

He went on talking to Gheata in a rather mocking tone, but at the same time, with some degree of interest.

He said he might be interested in following Gheata's career, for he understood he could soon become, with the proper nurturing and accompaniment, a prosperous criminal.

With some prodding from Gheata, he eventually reached the subject of poisons and toxins. He told him about the Flakes of Morpheus, a whitish powder that can be dissolved in a drink and remains completely undetectable. It sends the victim into a deep sleep and then into a torpor from which she will never wake again. That was all he was willing to say about poisons. Gheata still asked about inhaled ones, but he had never heard of that variety.

"Still, if you are really interested, come here in two night's time and I'll have someone give you a hint to some folks that may know something about it."

After this, 'Razors' got up and left.

Gheata, finding he had at last some time to relax, asked for a prostitute and went for a room upstairs with her. Gheata undressed and put his clothes and weapons on a bench nearby, but he kept a dagger about him. He then undressed the woman and began collecting the service he had paid for. He was in the middle of it when suddenly a man burst into the room, protesting that Gheata had to leave immediately. He was caught by surprise and visibly furious.

"I have paid for the woman, you bet I will not leave here."

"Oh but you will. Lord Valdemar is here, and Janet over there is his private girl. You must leave at once."

"Oh Tom!", said the girl, "be careful with that brute."

Gheata, naked and holding only his dagger, plunged at the small man, apparently Janet's pimp, who had drawn a short sword. Dodging badly, Tom was severely wounded, but managed to slash at Gheata too.

Gheata managed to overbear him and push him off the room, closing the door behind him, but before he could gather his things, a kick threw the door down. A large man, sword in hand, stood in the doorway. Janet gasped

“Lord Valdemar!”

The man lost no time running into the room and charged against the naked Gheata. Gheata was caught flat-footed and, still undressed, received a severe blow on his side that felled him unconscious to the ground. Meanwhile, dark clouds gathered over Keshgel.

* * * * *

In the church, things were going smoother now. Tersis had come back and was helping the sick to the best of his abilities. Since they were four healers, and about twenty to thirty patients, he proposed that they should take shifts so that the people could have permanent attention. Yuri and Gregor agreed and took the first shift. A couple of hours before dawn, Tersis and the surgeon from the army relieved them and took the second shift. When the dawn came, it was a dark one. Heavy rain clouds had accumulated during the night and now cluttered the sky, spreading a sombre and ominous threat.

23rd September 751, 2nd Night After the Full Moon

An hour later, in the early morning, the clouds let their rain pour over the city in a tremendous storm. Its strength was unheard of and the people in the houses shied away in their beds. The hapless ones outside ran to shelter and the streets very soon were muddy while dirty rivers slithered by sinister alleys. The wind came to join its fury to the rain, turning the storm into a deluge. The blooming day became suddenly dark and angry, as if nature were manifesting her displeasure and all her fury at some sin of men.

In the middle of all that violence, steadfast against the elements, a Vistani caravan, composed of just a few wagons, arrived at the church. The drenched but still haughty captain went to look for Tersis. When he saw the Vistana, the priest jumped of excitement and sent them to the side gate to the yard at the back of the church. The captain told the caravan to wait where it was, while one of the wagons went to deliver the wares. Then he joined Tersis in the courtyard, who had recommended the surgeon to take care of the people until he came back in at most an hour. The surgeon acquiesced. Most of the people were asleep, anyway, but some of them were not and the vision of a Vistana dealing with the church priest didn't fall very well with them.

Across the street, Nikola got up from bed. He had lodged in an inn waiting for his anger to pass. He noticed it had come during the nights of the full moon, and now that the phase had passed, he experienced some relief and more control of his emotions. He came to the window and saw the narrow street that bordered the church's side. A gate was open leading to a yard he had never seen, but which seemed very ample. One Vistani wagon was moving away from it.

“I can't believe how they endure this storm”, he thought as he left the window and thought about what he'd do that day.

An hour and a half later, the rain finally stopped. The streets were still deserted and everything remained in the darkness. The wind still howled like a legion of ghosts and as in answer to some unheard signal, the dogs joined their moans, lugubrious and sustained, to the voice of the wind. Tersis still hadn't returned and the surgeon, finding it odd, decided to go look for him. He went to the courtyard where Tersis had gone and came running, livid, just a few seconds later. He was appalled, terrified by something. He awoke someone and, still with his thought muddled, told him to go fetch the General of the Army.

Then, a man came into the temple with horror written across his face. He had peered into the courtyard, for the side gate had remained open since the wagon left the scene. The people that were already woken awoke their companions and in a short time the rumour spread among them that something very sinister had been done by Tersis Hauptmarsh, something that defied the rules of the world and reeked of witchcraft. They left the church hastily, and Vanna arrived. Alerted by the surgeon, she had come with a handful of guards, but when she arrived and noticed the uproar in the population, she sent for some horsemen too.

Meanwhile, oblivious to all this, Yuri and Gregor slept and had unusually deep dreams that seemed extremely real and immersed them so much into it that anyone trying to wake them would have a hard time at it. The content of Gregor's dream was normal but Yuri's harkened to past dreams.

He was alone in the middle of the street, despite being in clear daylight. Suddenly, he heard behind you a voice that he seemed to have heard before, whispering: "You are doomed, man, and your faith will be destroyed". He whirled around quickly and saw a man he knew he had never seen, but whom he recalled with a distressing certainty. He turned again and saw the same man in another direction, but this time he shouted, instead of whispering, the same words. In only just a second, he was surrounded by a crowd of old men all alike, all yelling at his ears the same assurance of perdition. They closed in, trying to scream their message at Yuri's very ears, and grabbing him with such strength that they even drew blood. They grabbed, scratched and even tried to bite him and scrape his face. Yuri defended himself as best he could, raising his hands and pushing the men when suddenly he saw a white light overpowering the sun. From that light, a white horse emerged but he could not see the horseman. All he saw was a sword coming from the obfuscating sheen and reaping the men with rapidity, while the horse passed Yuri by. The old men were now prostrate on the floor. Yuri turned to see his saviour, but on the horse sat the old man again, and wielding a mace just like Yuri's trusted one. The man was still, and Yuri alone, with no one near him, but he felt wounds opening in his body and face. He shook trying to dodge some unseen attacker, but he felt no one touching him and still the wounds kept appearing. Then, he heard a gallop and the saw the horse thrusting in his direction. The old man raised his mace and vibrating a heavy blow over Yuri's head with a smashing sound.

Yuri awoke suddenly. The dream had left a torpor in him, an unwillingness to move, but there was a noise outside that called him to action. He awoke Gregor, on the room next door, and both descended to the hall, now empty: in compensation, there was a mob in the street in a standoff with the guards, who barred access to the church and the side alley. The crowd handled torches and improvised weapons, screaming insults to Ezra and threatening to burn the building, accompanied by strong words like "we're paying for the crimes of the priests", "all the church is corrupt", "death to the priests, death to Ezra" and alike. Vanna Shostakovitch, General of the Army, commanded their troops, ordering them to remain still and merely prevent the mob from attacking the church. She then entered the hall in an urgent step.

As soon as she saw Yuri, dressed in his Ezra garb, she approached him quickly and advised him to remain hidden.

"The people are furious against Ezra. I hope this will pass, but for now, you should know what happened. Tersis has been found dead... in very unusual circumstances. The surgeon found in the temple backyard and since the side gate was open, somehow, it was impossible to impede the population from finding out. You'll notice there's a nasty smell coming from there. That helped the rumour too."

"What rumour?" asked Yuri, taken aback with that much information.

"Rumours of witchcraft. Some ritual that apparently Tersis was performing and went very badly for him. Come, you have to see this, but for your own safety, you should leave Keshgel for a while, and real fast." Vanna led Yuri and Gregor to the courtyard.

The yard was an enclosure surrounded by a wall about two metres and a half high, except on the southern side, where it was limited by the temple itself. On the east side, a small gate led to the private cemetery of the temple itself, and on the west wall, a large gate served as access for wagons and coaches. That gate was now closed. Two cypresses rose at the corners of the northern side.

"Since I first arrived here", said Vanna, "no one touched any thing here inside. I was alerted by a notice sent by the surgeon. One of my guards passed by first and noticing a crowd that gathered by the west gate that was open, he dispersed the crowd and closed it. Since then, the news has spread like wild fire and now it's the concentration you have seen on the front side. From what the guards heard, someone saw a Vistana wagon passing this gate, but they caught nothing else.

In the middle of the yard, a macabre scene had unfurled. Tersis lay on the ground with his eyes opened in a grimace of horror. His fingers were contracted in the shape of a claw and his mouth was wide open. He was placed within a circle made of candles white, red and black. Exactly at the centre, was a pile of ash with a black pearl on top. Lying near Tersis were a letter and an empty bottle, and between him and the pearl, a sinister set of objects completed the picture: an extinguished fire, a black cock burned with feathers and with its neck broken, apparently killed in the scene, a club stained with blood, white powder sprinkled with

blood, recipients with a red oil that Vanna claims to have never seen and which seems to have been poured over the fire, a tambourine, egg shells around the fire and maracas.

A bit farther, outside the circle, lay a long narrow box, not dissimilar from a coffin, open and having its broken lid fallen a few centimetres ahead. A smaller box, also open, was near Tersis and in good state. It contained empty scrolls conditioned for archive, several flasks for potions, small boxes with herbs, candles, healing oils, recipes of potions or poultices and small religious accoutrements. Both boxes were marked with the symbols of Ezra.

Yuri looked at the scene with a cool face, and turning to Vanna declared

“I’m positive this is foul murder.”

“And what makes you say that?”

“I have no proper clue yet, but from what I know from Tersis, he wouldn’t engage in these practices.”

“I see... and for how long have you known him, truly?”

“Huh.... a couple of weeks.”

“So I thought. Have you noticed anything strange lately?”

“No, not much, safe that he said yesterday that the material for the church, which comes from Mordent, was heavily delayed. I wager part of this is it, but... Can I read the letter?”

“Sure.”

The letter was signed by a certain Ernestina, and written in a beautiful female calligraphy:

*Tersis, here at last follows your order, as my father had promised. I apologize for the delay, and I only hope the trouble has not been irredeemable. Together with it, I send this potion that my father had promised to you and the recipe to make it too. It’s a big help to combat fatigue and useful for arduous labour. I’ll endeavour to merit the trust that Tersis had given my father. Sincerely yours,
Ernestina*

The guards left them alone and the three investigated the scene. Drawing on his knowledge of religion, Gregor ventured that the setup seemed to be that of a Voodoo ceremony. Meanwhile, Nikola, who had watched part of the scene from his window, came to the gate and asked for admittance, which Vanna conceded, on behalf of Gregor and Yuri. They examined the coffin that stank of putrefaction. Nauseated, Gregor and Yuri looked aside, while Nikola profited to take the pearl that was on the ash. They studied the flask which apparently Tersis had drunk and the candles. Then they withdrew to the temple. Vanna gave them a log of correspondence between Tersis and a certain Zamacois

“I believe this will complete your information”, she said.

The document read like this:

05-10-748: Sent the order for Zamacois with the usual request

29-01-749: Today came the parcel from Zamacois. The provisioning is again complete.

03-04-749: New order. This material won’t last 5 months.

01-08-749: Parcel came on time. Zamacois doesn’t fail me!

30-09-749: I sent letter with urgent order. This season has been outside normality and I have spent everything too fast. At this rhythm, they won’t last 6 weeks.

08-12-749: It arrived. By the Vistani, as it had to be. I don’t like these people at all, they don’t make me comfortable, but they sure are fast. Even though, I had to ration for them to last, and these last days I could do nothing. But I have everything again, Ezra be praised.

29-03-750: Normal rhythm. New order. I should have them in 4 months, approximately.

19-07-750: Order arrived. Earlier than usual, but it is welcome. Jacqueline must be preparing something. It’s not her self to not delay the merchants in Richemulot. She probably has a new distraction.

25-09-750: The hour has come again. Another order for Zamacois.

27-01-751: *Came today, but this was the longest journey 'til now. It's a problem that Mordent is so far, I am subject to delays in all countries that the goods must come through.*

24-03-751: *Placed a new order to Zamacois. My reserves will end soon.*

24-06-751: *Zamacois is ill. What misfortune, I will be stranded without material if he doesn't recover fast.*

23-07-751: *The wares should arrive this week. My reserves are dangerously low.*

07-08-751: *Poor Zamacois, he's still ill. His daughter says she will assume all his responsibilities. Happily, she says she has dispatched the parcel.*

22-08-751: *It's two days now that I have been improvising. I have nothing to work with now...*

30-08-751: *It should have arrived a week ago, even considering Ernestina's warning. This worries me.*

21-09-751: *I can't fathom what's going on. Still no signs of the delivery. And now that Kirien is not here, everything becomes worse. Matters are tumultuous around here...*

* * * * *

When Gheata awoke, he was in a small cell with only a tunic covering his body and none of his belongings. Was he in prison?

Eva, on the other hand, went to look for Drulovic as soon as she could, and when she arrived to his stables (he was a horse dealer), she saw a note nailed to the door, saying that Drulovic had been arrested for debt. She went to the Fortress and inquired about his situation. They told her that the debt was of 500 gold coins to a certain Isaac Leibowitz. If the debt were not paid, Drulovic would be punished in the open square with the same penalty befalling thieves: his right hand would be cut. Furthermore, the house would fall to the creditor or else its inhabitants would become his servants.

When she learned of this, Eva demanded to talk to Isaac, furious at the prospect, but decided to settle matters. The guard told her to be there that afternoon at 5 o'clock. She asked if she could see her cousin, but she was not allowed to, so she went directly to Isaac's house. When she got there, she accosted a few street peddlers and asked them how the man was. She didn't like the picture: old, skinflint, lonely and unpleasant for other people. She hesitated before knocking.

Session 12 – DM notes

Fighting Fantasy books have been a lot of inspiration for me during the years. Admittedly, they are not very good for Gothic Horror, but there are many good things there to stir the imagination. One of the best books for me was *Talisman of Death*, and their portrayal of the Thieves and the Guild of Thieves was always at the back of my mind when I prepared the scenes in Flint's Tavern. Accordingly, 'Razors' assumes a patronizing tone as some of the Thieves do in that book, especially when they invite the hero to the guild by the treacherous way. When he suggests 'accompaniment' to Gheata and invites him to go there two days later, that's basically what he's doing: opening a way to invite him into a kind of Thieves' Guild. This never happened, nor will probably happen, but it was that flavour I wanted to convey in the character. The Flakes of Morpheus are an invented (I believe) poison. I had 2 or 3 more prepared, but decided to speak only of that. Morpheus has, of course, nothing to do with the Matrix character: it harkens back to Greek Mythology where Morpheus is the son of Hypnos, god of dreams (or sleep, I don't remember well. Either way, guess they divide both functions between them).

The scene of Gheata and the prostitute, Tom Rafferty and Lord Valdemar was one of the best in the entire campaign, so far, for the unusual of it, and the unexpected of it. To have a character fighting naked was also a surprise for the players and was one of the things that made it endure. They began to find it strange when I did NOT fast forward from the time when Gheata entered the room, and I incited him to describe what were his actions.

The fact that Lord Valdemar had a private whore is not an original idea. I picked it up from a Brazilian soap opera called 'Pedra Sobre Pedra' in the original, which might be translated as 'Stone Over Stone'. There, Murilo Pontes had only one special girl, Lola, in the village's brothel who serviced other clients but

was 'reserved' for him whenever he showed up. Also, he would go with no other woman. As far as I remember, she had an illegitimate son of his, and he was kind of Coronel in the area: basically, a rich and influent land-owner, of the kind to administer law by himself. There are a lot of these characters in Brazilian 'novelas'.

The 23rd was at last the day of Tersis' death. Yuri and Gregor had deep dreams to ensure they did not wake up during the crucial moment. Despite having the church full, it still came out as I wanted, albeit perhaps a bit forced. Nikola is around so that he can join the group again and there is no witness to what really happens. All that several people see is the Vistani in it, which is not good to start with, and all the scene of Tersis' death.

The scene was obviously staged as a Voodoo ritual (taking my own liberties here, as I don't know enough from Voodoo). Whether it was purposefully done by Tersis or someone else, that's what the PCs have to find out, and Yuri's player never believed, from the first minute, that it was Tersis' doing. For him, this is another murder, and he is right. But for the simple people, the only explanation is that Tersis was performing a foul ritual, which degrades completely his image in the eyes of the populace and that of Ezra herself. Of course, that was the planned effect of the villains behind this.

This should be an interesting investigation, I hoped, and the letter from Ernestina Zamacois was a clue to the path they should follow. Going to Mordent was a nice perspective for me, that could tie in with their asking help to the Senior temple of that particular church branch, leading to a quest for the Weapons of Sacrifice (by Paul Fox, in the Book of Souls, of the Kargatane) and meeting with Weathermay, the Twins and possibly Van Richten. A grand idea, to be sure, but they haven't followed it yet, unfortunately. Also, if they had kept the note from Kirien's cell, they could have compared calligraphies with Ernestina's letter... to find the handwriting to be the same, although disguised. Alas, they did not do this and so don't know this fact (that may also be crucial).

As a side note, the oil Vanna had never seen is palm oil, coming exclusively from Souragne. Also, the potion that was sent, 'together with recipe', was not actually what it was supposed to be, much to the contrary. Finally, the Black Pearl Nikola took is magic. None of the PCs have found this yet, much less its purpose. It is a spell focus for the main villain that allows him to cast spells without limit of distance, as long as the pearl is in the same domain as he. The pearl loses its magical aura outside that domain.

The pretext that Tersis needed goods from Mordent in a regular basis was a hard one for my players to believe. I somehow justify it with proper materials endorsed by the church and so, but it is strange that they should be needed in such a regular basis and with so short a life. As I said, it was a pretext. It can still be argued that Ezra is not well implanted in Irvanika yet, and that it still hasn't the necessary framework to provide for those things regularly.

Drulovic's arrest is the reason why Eva didn't find him early on. Since the Church has been taken from the PCs as a basis of operations, Drulovic's house is the one place that had to be removed from them. So, he went in for debts. There had been many hints from the start that things were not going well for him, so this was not a complete surprise. It was also an excuse for Eva to move away, for she'd have to rescue Drulovic (or ransom him) and after that he'd decide to begin a new life. Gheata, too, was now in jail, so that makes two people they had to free.

As for Isaac Leibowitz, the idea was to take Ebenezer Scrooge and pervert him, making even more dislikeable. As it happened, he never came to be used as a proper NPC and so I reused some of the ideas into making Eberhardt van Krugel that appears much later in the campaign when Nikola is again separated from the group. They both are money dealers, rich, selfish and magic users. They also have both some emotional defects that make them sexual perverts of some sort. But that will come when the story with Eberhardt begins.

The similarities to Scrooge are stronger with Eberhardt, beginning precisely with his name (from Scrooge to Krugel it wasn't that big a step). If for Isaac that had been just an unconscious need (the avaric villain), in the case of Eberhardt it was quite purposeful, following a suggestion by Gheata's player that it would be cool to have the story of the Ghosts of Past, Present and Future in the campaign. I concurred, but I was interested in Scrooge, not in the Ghosts, so this was not exactly what my player had in mind.

Session 13

Starting Date: 23rd September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

Gregor and Yuri kept the small box near Tersis in his office in the church, taking some of its contents for themselves, for they would probably need them. Yuri was especially careful to keep all the blank scrolls and to hide his Ezran vests from view, replacing them for some more practical and less conspicuous clothes. Vanna had advised them to go unnoticed for some time while the population was enraged with Tersis and the best thing to do was for them to leave the city. At least the church they would have to leave, for she was going to close it for everybody.

So, Yuri, Gregor and Nikola lodged at the Red Boar and had lunch there, after which Yuri spent the afternoon scribing a healing prayer in a scroll. In retrospect, the only good thing that had come out of the night was that Miayla was finally cured.

That morning, the sensation in town was the Vistani Caravan who, after the uncommonly violent rain, had roamed the streets of Keshgel in the usual gaiety of the Vistani, drawing the attention of all the passers-by. They made camp slightly outside town, after having drawn on the curiosity of possible customers.

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Eva thought for a long time about knocking at Isaac's and then rejected the idea. She ran to the Church to fetch Thérèse and was appalled to find all the commotion. She located her cousin and convinced her to prepare for a journey to leave Keshgel, telling her what happened to Drulovic. Then, she went back to the prison and this time she managed to talk to Drulovic. She told him that she planned to sell the house to Isaac to settle the debt and to return with him and Thérèse to The Walking Knight. Drulovic accepted if they could bring all his horses with them. Eva found no problem at all with that.

She then waited for the hour set for the meeting with Isaac Leibowitz. He came at the appointed time, helped by two young and stout men that acted as his bodyguards.

Eva found one of the accompanying men quite attractive, and made some covert lewd remarks at him. But she was leaving Keshgel now, and it was a bit too late for frolicking with anyone. However, Isaac misinterpreted the advances as being for him, and quite happy at being the object of female attention, he was happy to accept Evangelina's deal.

It was then set that the house and stables would be delivered to Isaac on the next morning but that the horses there would remain the property of Drulovic, who was set free against the payment from Eva to Isaac of half the debt.

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A little after waking up in the dank cell, Gheata heard the door open and saw Vanna enter. She mocked him, saying she wasn't expecting him to sink so low.

"Frankly, Vlady, to get yourself into problems because of a common whore... that is not your style, dear." Gheata was shackled to the wall and could not react to the General's insults. He refrained his anger and controlled it coldly.

"But now", she said more seriously, "I'm genuinely going to help you. You were found last night, naked and without anything, and accused of having wounded severely a certain Tom Rafferty and entered into a fight with Lord Valdemar Greyhound. The people at the inn where this happened didn't like you, as you'd expect. They simply threw you out to the street and called the guard. Since you haven't actually killed anyone, though I bet you had all the intention of doing so, I may release you without further punishment, but on one condition: you WILL LEAVE Keshgel and you have one day to do it. If tomorrow after noon I find you here, I will put you back in jail, and then things will turn much worse to you."

Gheata didn't speak, staring coldly at her.

"Of course, I have lost all confidence in you, now", she continued, "and you can no longer say you are my agent. But if you still think you can do something good and useful, go to Kleinstadt. I have received

messages from the Sheriff there who says he's been having problems dealing with some raids against his village. Go there, and make yourself a true man."

He bit his lip, but didn't show any other sign of offence. She whirled around and opened the door to leave. Then, she took a bag that was outside and threw it into the room.

"Here is your stuff. A girl came to bring them this morning. And here is your money too" and she threw a smaller pouch at him with the amount he had previously deposited there.

She left and a guard entered to unshackle Gheata, leaving immediately afterwards. He checked the contents of the bag and found his clothes and most of his adventuring gear, but he had lost his armour and all his weapons except for a dagger.

Gheata was seriously annoyed at having lost his greatsword. In Irvanika, such weapons were a relic of ancient times, a magnificent weapon to deal damage, but which no one made anymore. Not only that, but that was the weapon he was best with and the one he most identified himself with. He dressed and took his wares again and was set free.

His first decision was to buy new weapons: a flail, a Parthian rapier and a good deal of bullets. Then, he bought a leather armour. Thus equipped, he set his mind solely on recovering what, he reasoned, had been stolen from him.

Gheata found Lord Valdemar's house after some questioning, but the porter didn't let him in. He walked around the house and found an open window on the first floor. Sneaking into the property, and taking care that no one watched him, he managed to climb to the window and entered an office. He decided to listen at the door and heard two people approaching. As the people opened the door, he hid behind it and saw Lord Valdemar and a younger man, which he deduced being his son, enter the room. Acting with speed and making use of his advantage, he seized the younger man and pointed his dagger at the throat of his hostage. Lord Valdemar, surprised, was taken aback.

"What do you want, scum?"

"I want my weapons you stole from me. Or else, I kill your son."

Valdemar's features hardened.

"I view things quite differently. I took your things because I defeated you in battle, and it is my right. Not to mention I'm a noble and you're nothing. But I can't let you kill my son."

He rang a bell four times and half a minute later a butler entered. As he came in, he saw the quandary in which Valdemar and his son were and impavidly addressed his master.

"Bring me the swords I brought yesterday."

He bowed and left the room. Unbeknownst to Gheata, the four times Valdemar had rung were a sign of alarm. As the butler left out, he ran to fetch the swords, but traded the greatsword for another one: an old, reasonably blunt bastard sword. Then, he disposed guards on the corridor outside the office and on the rooms beside it with windows giving to the street. Finally, he came in with the utmost unaffected pace, as if he hadn't the least worry in the world, and delivered a bundle to Lord Valdemar. He traded it for his son and as soon as Gheata had the weapons with him, he ran to the window and jumped down.

Valdemar then gave a cry to his men. There were two at the windows adjacent to the office, and they fired a volley of arrows down at the robber. They missed, and Gheata, badly hurt from the fall, managed to mingle with the crowd and disappear.

He took the direction of the Vistani circus and wandered around there for one or two hours, but then he took the direction of the forest and prepared to spend the night there.

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Discussing possible destinations after leaving Keshgel, Gregor had convinced them to go to Barovia with him. He wanted to settle his matter for once and for all and since no one else had a better place to go, they conceded. Gregor made all the final arrangements on the afternoon, locating the man who was ready to take them in a covered wagon to Barovia. They settled on a place and time for departure on the next morning.

At night, Gregor and Nikola decided to give a look at the encampment of the Vistani, who as usual were giving several spectacles for the populace. They wandered freely among the people until the crowd simply dissolved as the people returned home. Gregor and Nikola were the last there, and were greeted by the Raunie, who said she knew she'd have two people to advise here in Keshgel. She invited them to her Vardo and offered them each a cards reading. They were suspicious at first, but the Raunie described each of them accurately, recommending Nikola to confide more in people. As for Gregor, she said that he had a problem

with his spirituality, but equally he was letting his material side prevail too much about the compassion and emotions he should have.

Nikola was slightly touched by the reading, but maintained a facade of disregarding it completely. "She's probably a charlatan", he said to Gregor.

Gheata wandered around, looking for a good place to spend the night without being disturbed. In his search, he saw a white horse galloping hard. Near to the road as he was, he looked and saw a white knight storming by and lost track of it. About an hour later, having followed the road in the same direction of the horse, he heard moans of pleasure, but saw no one, nor marks of anyone.

"Hmmm.... someone's having sex near here. Guess I'll let them do it in peace" and turned away from the sounds, looking for a better place to sleep.

Sessions 13 – DM notes

This was the final session in Keshgel (at least in this first part of the campaign), and it was devoted to the preparations for the journey. There were many hooks and stories left open, but I'm happy with at least having made the world feel something like alive. At any rate, they will come back, I hope (at the present point in the campaign, they still haven't). The exit from the city was harsh, sudden and somewhat imposed to all of them, obviously by will of the DM but justified in some measure by the circumstances that affected each of the characters.

The first matter settled was Drulovic's: Eva sold the house, voiding one possibility that I had made, should they want to remain in the city, that was their taking the house for themselves. Then, whatever had been hunting / haunting Drulovic would start affecting them. In the scene with Isaac and his body guards, Eva's player starting giving hints that she was more open, and she told us that Eva eyed covetously to one of the youngsters: this was the first sign of Eva's sexual awakening, that would come later with Gheata and continue through many sessions in a tense, kind of playful, always stated and never fulfilled relation with Gregor. In truth, this was more like Gregor trying to seduce her and she evading him, but as things are turning now, it may well happen that they will finally achieve it. However, that is still in the distant future (after session 38, at least).

Then, was Gheata's turn. Vanna comes to the cell to mock and taunt him and gives back his things, that some pious soul sent to the prison. Lord Valdemar, however, took his weapons, especially the Great Sword that is Gheata's favourite weapon. Plus, he's got Weapon Focus with it and 1.5 times his strength bonus. So, he was unsurprisingly mad and decided to retrieve them. In his mind, Valdemar had stolen his property; in Valdemar's medieval idea, he had simply taken what he had gained on the battlefield.

Vanna sends Gheata to Kleinstadt, in a vain attempt on my part to have someone venture into that side of the campaign world, meet one or two adventures along the way and a possible thread hunting a creature that is still 'being made' or preventing its creation. Also, that should be necessary to conclude Kirien's story. None of this happened, though. Gheata left the city but he stayed with the group and they eventually went all, safe Nikola, to Barovia.

Gheata immediately tried to get his property back, another thing I hadn't expected. He crafted a good plan (or I was too green to curtail it) and the dice helped him: Lord Valdemar would NOT lose his son, but he still gave a warning to his butler, so nor Gheata lost everything neither he got what he wanted: he still had not his greatsword. Not only that, he was much weakened from the jump to the street. I only curse my bad dice rolls for the archers in the windows that missed when they should not have to. But the story doesn't end here. As you will see in later sessions, Valdemar didn't throw his arms down.

The Vistani reading was something I had been envisioning for a long time, and I practically forced that into the campaign. Not that it was a great effort: you merely have to wave a tarot deck at your players and they'll jump in excitement for a reading... at least mine did.

I had bought the deck a long time before. There was one I had seen once in a shop and I loved its art ever since. It's not creepy, much to the contrary, but it is masterfully drawn. For reference, it is the Tarot of the Ages.

Leaving that aside, I studied a Tarot course in the net so that I had an idea of how to perform a reading and I could say something about each of the cards in there: both the Major and the Minor Arcana. Then, I performed the reading 'without a net', that is to say, I shuffled, they shuffled someone cut and I drew the cards that were on top, improvising over their real meanings and what I knew of the players. It was fantastic. Although I don't remember the cards that came out, nor what I said, I registered the general message. Of many things that could be said for each reading, I picked those meanings that could agree more with the players. I only made the reading after I had all the cards on the table. It rang especially true in the case of Gregor: although I hadn't yet fully realized that side of Gregor, or his player, there were many cards of the Coins (Pentacles) suit, suggesting a strong material bent. Gregor is a Cleric with a failing spirituality, multi-classed with Rogue, so I wove the reading about the clash between his spiritual and his material side. And even though he is at the time I write already a full Cleric of the Morninglord, having resolved the void inside him, his material and even greedy side has only become more evident in the sessions since then. It was as if the reading had really hit on something. A nice thought, indeed. I haven't been able to win the lottery, though.

As for Nikola, I think the reading hit on the mark for him too (of course I know a lot about the players and I made full use of that, as Andrew Hackard suggested in his "Fortune Telling for the Faint of Heart" (Book of Secrets of the Kargatane). But Nikola, keeping strictly in character, dismissed all she said, claiming she was a charlatan.

Finally, the final scene has Gheata hearing someone making sex in the wild. I had hoped she investigated the tracks, to find a beheaded man in the morning. This, too, is part of a thread that is already running, although I won't say more about it. But look in the Undead Sea Scrolls 2001 for the source article for it.

Alex's campaign – sessions 14-20

Session 14

Starting Date: 24th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

24th September 751, 3rd Night After the Full Moon

Early in the morning, Nikola, Yuri and Gregor took breakfast together before heading for the established local of depart. They paid 5 gold coins each for the travel up to Barovia. An extra 5 coins for the bother of going there on that time of the year were paid by Gregor. They all huddled in the covered cart, conducted by the driver, and their journey from Keshgel started. There was a slight fog that would make them go slower than possible.

Elsewhere in town, at about the same time, Evangelina concluded the deal with Isaac Leibowitz, giving him her cousin's house and then she, Drulovic and Thérèse got on their horses and departed to the Walking Knight. They took with them three other horses that merely carried wares.

As they travelled faster than the cart, after some time they met it on the road, and recognizing who the occupants were, they decided to follow their paths together again.

At the beginning of the afternoon, the group was attacked by a brown bear that, to all appearances, was ravished with hunger. He didn't even measure his adversaries, and charged forward at the travelling companions. Drulovic first tried to appease the animal, but seeing that his efforts were fruitless and the beast was really hostile, he turned to fighting it to protect his own. He excelled at it, and managed, almost single-handedly, to keep the bear at bay, but it was the cart driver, with a deadly accurate shot, who felled the enraged bear. But it had done great damage, and Yuri was busy healing the wounded. Even Eva contributed with a healing while Gregor, doubting his capabilities, was awed to find that this time some god or goddess answered him and allowed him to channel healing magic twice.

After the fight and the recovery afterwards, they continued until dusk, and made camp. The fog had persisted the whole day and so they had made only 12 miles.

During the night, they were approached by a wolf pack that surrounded their camp and watched them from a distance. They kept a nervous watch the whole night, but the wolves did not attack. One of them, however, the largest in the pack, seemed to stare with intensity at Nikola in particular.

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Gheata had slept somewhere in the forest during the night, providing easily for himself. But tiring of walking, he returned to the Vistani campsite, hoping to buy a horse there. Unfortunately, they were gone and left trace neither of their presence nor of their destination. Resigned, Gheata continued the road on foot, in the direction of the Walking Knight, that was the first stop on the road to Kleinstadt.

He soon found out the tracks of the horse he had seen on the eve, but decided not to investigate.

“It is not my affair, anyway.”

He continued walking peacefully down the road, until he heard, coming from his back, the noise of horses running at great speed.

“This is becoming a habit”, he thought, and just for prudence decided to hide in some bushes. He soon was glad to have done so, for he saw six knights speeding down the highway equipped for battle and wearing arms with a chief or on field sable and a silver greyhound. He recognized the arms of Lord Valdemar without difficulty, and reasoned that they should be after him. Letting them go on, he continued until nightfall, when he camped off the road again.

25th September 751, 1st Night of the Waning Moon

Night passed without incidents of any kind. On the morning, both the group and Gheata continued their ways neither of them aware that they were following the same direction and that, despite being on foot, Gheata managed to be faster, due to his prolonged experience at living in the wild.

That day also passed smoothly until the early evening, when the cart was suddenly stopped by a log fallen on the road.

“Hmmm... this will delay us”, said Eva, “but I can make the horses take the log off the road.”

She was about to set to that task when an arrow whizzed by her and sunk into a tree nearby. She was transfixed in place, but Gregor noticed the arrow had a paper furled around it. He unwrapped it and read a message that was written there in unadorned calligraphy:

“Give us your money, and we’ll let you go through!”

Session 14 – DM notes

This session was only the beginning of their journey from Keshgel. The road they are taking will lead them to the Triple Crossroads of Irvanika and from there to Ingelberg. For Eva, this was the only place to follow, as she is going to her father’s inn and this is the direct route. But for the group going to Barovia, the direct road between Keshgel and Ingelberg, which Yuri followed on his coming to the former, was a better route. Since I wanted them to be together, I told them rumours that the river Maritsa had overflowed making the road impassable, and forcing them to take the wide route. Also, I didn’t want Yuri to pass by Ezra’s High Temple, which I eventually placed near this latter road when I decided the Cathedral (see later) would be at the crossroads.

There was not much happening in this session, save for the battle with the bear. As for Gheata, he is being now chased by Lord Valdemar’s men. The noble has a home in the city, but he prefers to live in the countryside in his old mansion. He is now returning there, but has set his men after Gheata, angry at his defiance.

The arms given in the text, ‘chief or on field sable and a silver greyhound’, are an accurate blazon. I’m a fan of heraldry and so I decided to draw correct arms that could fit his name. As it were, I chose a charge that is the noble’s family name and merely chose two colours that please me, without any meaning associated. For those that don’t know what all this means, the shield can be described as being black, with a horizontal yellow band on its top and a silvered, or white, grey hound in the middle.

The wolves surrounding the camp at night are following the pack leader who, incidentally, recognized Nikola somewhat. It is the same wolf that attacked him before the campaign began and he has taken an interest in him. For the moment, he’s only watching, and keeping their nerves up.

Finally, though it sounds strange, and my players objected, there is nothing wrong at Gheata going faster than the cart. The horses, pulling a cart, loaded and all make the same speed as a human, at least following the rules. Gheata is travelling light, he follows the road and may run from time to time, pressing on his march. He does go faster.

Session 15

Starting Date: 25th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

An ambush! They should have thought of it. To tell the truth, they probably never paid much attention to stories about bandits. And perhaps even more important, the only time they heard them was when they were at the ball, already so distant in their memories. And now, they had been caught totally unawares. The message that came with the arrow left no doubts: pay a toll or suffer the consequences. Gregor wrote a note

in a paper, asking simply "How much?". He wrapped it around a stone and threw it at the trees. The answer came as the first demand: "500 gold pieces".

Hefty, outrageous sum! They spoke no answer. Instead, they prepared for battle and drew their weapons. In seeing this, a volley of arrows rained on them with deadly accuracy. Drulovic was pierced three times and fell unconscious. A shot echoed and Dinech, the driver, fell down, silent. Thérèse, nimble, hid behind the cart, but the rest of the group decided to run for the protection of the trees, denying the bandits the advantage of firing at an enemy on open ground. Alas, the assailants reacted accordingly and dexterously climbed down through previously prepared ropes. The group was all scattered and in an instant they were outnumbered and in a remarkably adverse position. Nikola quickly felled one of the bandits, but then the battle went horribly wrong. All of them were wounded and the bandits moved quickly and managed to evade all their best efforts. Seeing this, the leader, which had remained on the branch of a tree, called for surrender.

Acknowledging their desperate predicament, the group gave in and accepted the bandits' terms. The leader descended from the tree, and told them to stand still while he searched them. Yuri asked for permission to heal their wounded, and the leader assented to it. Eva approached her cousin: he lay still, but he was still alive, though in danger of life. She applied a patch on Drulovic and meditated for a while bringing him from the verge of death. He remained, however, unconscious. Yuri, on the other hand, checked on Dinech: "He's dead. Nothing can be done for him."

Meanwhile, Gheata had steadily walked following the road when, at a distance, he saw the quandary of his companions. Swiftly but silently, he approached the cart and managed to remain hidden from everyone else.

The leader proceeded with the search, and found only Nikola's pouch. But when he was going to take it, the former refused and pointed his rapier at the leader's chest.

"No one will take anything from me"

The leader's eyes widened with a sudden anger

"Cooperate!"

"I meant what I said!" was Nikola's cold answer.

And then everything fell apart. The leader released a shot from his pistol straight into Nikola's chest. There was no chance to avoid it, and he was knocked to the ground almost lifeless. Gheata sprang to the action but they were outnumbered in the proportion of one to two. The leader avoided to wound and fought defensively, more worried with defending one of his mates while he searched Nikola. He found two pouches and weighing one of them, considered it enough and handed it to the leader. Meanwhile, the other bandits had pounded heavily on the ambushed travellers and soon only Eva and Yuri were standing. Content with the pickings, the leader then called the attack off and they vanished hastily. Yuri knelt on the ground, incredulous, and uttered a silent prayer. Almost absent-minded, he then checked on his companions' state, but couldn't rouse any of them.

"How are they?", asked Eva anxiously.

"They'll live, but I can't do anything else for them today. Night has fallen. It's not good for us to stay here.

Do you know where we are?"

"Yes. We're a little more than an hour away from an inn. I'll take that tree from the road, while you put the folks in the cart. Let's hurry, I don't like to be here at night."

Session 15 – DM notes

The scene with the bandits was their first real test, and they failed completely. They never worked as a team and as such were quickly overpowered. It's not that the bandits were of a higher level, but they were more and had strategic advantage. The idea, anyway, was not to kill them, but merely to rob them and, frankly, to have bandits and some danger on the road. Otherwise, all those stories about not being safe to travel would not make any sense.

The group surrendered because they were being swiftly beaten. The bandit leader was, despite my players' opinions to the contrary, honourable in the same way as Robin Hood was (and he was modelled a lot after him) and so he made a genuine offer of truce to the players, with the implicit statement that he gave them life and respite in exchange for what he wanted. But when Nikola refused to cooperate, he was angry and had no time for negotiating and indulgence. He simply had not patience for people who were on the losing ground and still tried to make demands. He shot Nikola. Logically. His actions afterwards, in the second part of the encounter, agreed with his first offered truce: he did not fight aggressively, looking instead for loot, and he defended his own. When he found enough money, not exactly the 500gp he had asked, but almost that, he called the attack off, honouring his motives and sparing the victim's lives.

As a final note, the bandit leader is called Luigi Vampa, name taken straight from the Count of Monte Cristo. He's a remarkable bandit there, cultured --- he's reading Caesar's Comments in his cave when Albert de Morcef (I believe) is taken captive --- and honoured in some way. Vampa and Robin Hood were the two main inspirations for this bandit in the campaign. He had been talked of already in the first session, but the players missed it.

Meanwhile, Gheata is together with the group again.

Notice Eva's final remark. She knows perfectly where she is, although the others in the group are not aware of this. And the reason she doesn't like to be there, is the Cathedral, which they will pass in the next session.

Session 16

Starting Date: 25th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

Yuri and Eva looked around, stupefied. The fight had been swift and disastrous. Five of their companions were fallen on the ground, one of them dead, while of the bandits only one had been downed. They had been severely overwhelmed and taught a cruel lesson about fighting to die and yielding to survive.

But time grew short for reflections and musings. The outlaws had escaped, but it was already night and none of them was thrilled with the idea of learning the truth behind the many folk stories about Irvanikan nocturnal wildlife.

They hurriedly put the wounded on the cart and Eva spurred the horses forward. It was little more than an hour and a half of travel to The Walking Knight, but it seemed much, much longer than that. As they moved, the shadow of the night seemed to become darker and thicker, like something unnatural, and they began hearing muffled giggling around them. They looked around, nervously, without stopping but couldn't find the source of the voices. The sounds continued, and they seemed distinctly human, but also sadistic. Unease filled their hearts. Trying to perceive what hid beneath the shadowy bushes and trees, they began to see small pinpoints of blue light, hovering about one meter from the floor. They moved constantly, blinking, with an eerie glow. Yuri startled and Eva did too, at first. But then she released a pure laugh of relief and said

"It's only glow-worms."

Yuri relaxed, but like an echo to Eva's, the phantom giggles turned to phantom laughs and the dust on the road began to swirl in front of them in a hypnotic dance. Yuri's nerves cracked, as all his alarms sounded. Fighting with himself not to show his discomfort, he stood upright, held forth his holy symbol and shouted with more conviction than usual, perhaps to soothe his own disquiet

"Get back, fiends of the night! In the name of the Goddess!, get back and hold us no more!"

The night quietened at once. Even the wind broke off, for a minute and the glow-worms vanished. Yuri and Eva alone seemed alive on the road. They were thus for perhaps half a minute, then Eva prompted the horses and they proceeded to the inn as fast as road and night allowed. Not long after, the road turned and a massive silhouette, outlined as a darker dark against the nightly sky, emerged before them.

Eva whispered

"It's the Dark Cathedral. Let's hurry" and jolted the horses with all her strength.

It always had this effect on people. By night or by day, the Cathedral was an ominous spectacle best avoided by anyone with sense. It was not a welcoming sight. Those brief instants before the looming shadow seemed unreal. There was no wind, no birdsongs, no wind rustling in the leaves. Even the horses shuddered and became silent for a moment. Nothing in the whole nature could remain oblivious to the ominous outline: a tall building, with towers challenging the skies. It was nothing more than a dark and overpowering form but an inexplicable chill irradiated from it, and its body resembled more a giant centipede than a building. The buttresses were topped by ornate turrets and the towers of the facade by sharp pinnacles. The many gargoyles decorating the roof and the enormous entrance gate, that looked more like a gaping demonic mouth added to the gruesome feel, that only became more evident as they noticed that the whole structure was darkened, as if it had been burnt. It was a daunting ruin.

They sped through the night and finally reached the inn, sweating from the effort and, probably, the commotion of the day's events. A burly cheering man came to greet them, and his eyes filled with joy and surprise as he cried

"Eva! You're back"

"Father, I'm so glad I'm here."

Yuri, not expecting this turn of events, stood unknowing of what to do. But the couple embraced and turned back to reality in an instant.

"I need your help, father. Drulovic is wounded, and a couple of friends of mine are also. Can you lodge us tonight?"

"Sure, sure. Come, bring the cart to the stable, we'll take care of them in a moment. Warn your mother, she'll find you rooms and whatever help you need. I'll take Drulovic upstairs."

Antonín, Eva's father, took Drulovic to his old room upstairs. Then he came and helped Yuri lead the cart to the shelter, barn and stable at the same time, where Yuri laid the wounded on improvised beds of straw. Antonín offered help to tend to the injured, but Yuri dismissed him to his many other duties, saying that he didn't want to disturb him and that probably what he could do would be enough.

Working alone, but methodically, he invoked the powers of Ezra and successively restored to health Gregor, Nikola and Gheata. Conscious once more, they rested for a while, although with divine healing recovery is almost immediate. Gregor was the first to get up, though his head still pounded a bit. He measured the situation and reasoning with fully practical sense, he examined Dinech's body. He took from him his money pouch, a pistol and his rations. Yuri flinched a bit at his actions

"Don't you feel any qualms?"

"No." Gregor replied surprised. "Should I?"

"Well, I guess so, yes. He may be dead but that's still stealing."

"If that's all it is, then I can live with it. Besides, I need it much more than he does."

He rose, visibly unshaken by Yuri's comments and retired for a corner. He mumbled a prayer to his god, unsure he'd be heard this time. He didn't think he's taking Dinech's things would anger the Morninglord, always the compassionate and hopeful god. He prayed, and with joy he felt new strength refilling him. He had been heard. This intermittency of his spiritual powers was a mystery, but each time the God heard him he felt a new warmth within and a greater hope in the future. He approached Gheata and, grateful to his god, asked for his blessing again to heal some of his companion's wounds. With exhilarating joy, he saw them close before his touch. Still, to his dismay, Gheata was still in a serious condition. He could walk and perform strenuous actions without problem, but he was still considerably in less than full health.

Yuri looked askance at his actions, and in his head tried to accept the fact that Gregor had the favours of some god, a good healing god, despite some of his actions violating his own moral code.

"Well, there is not only Ezra in the world, and perhaps I shouldn't question others actions unless they're openly evil. After all, Ezra does not condone but neither does she condemn thieves that come to her teachings."

Nikola sat. He looked at the others and with a grim voice

"So, we're alive after all. Who'd say so! I mean, what a wonderful day we had today! Where will we go tomorrow? Throw us off a cliff? 'Cause if we keep acting recklessly like we did today and without trusting each other, I really think we're better off dead."

"Throw yourself. We're alive." cut Gheata.

"No need for harsh remarks, Nikola.", said Yuri "We were lucky they left before we were all dead, but I'm rather happy that I'm still alive and can try again. And you bet I won't be caught so easily next time."

"Yeah, yeah, Yuri. That's what you say. And I guess I should trust you, since you brought us here and didn't leave us to die in the road, but somehow I feel that we should have been more of a team back there in the road."

"And perhaps you should have kept your word and let the man take your pouch. All you did was getting us another beating. We were all standing until then, weren't we?"

"Cut that crap off, Gregor. You know full well what it is like to be robbed. I remember you didn't like it either."

"Better that than to be dead, anyway!"

"Now, stop all of you", echoed Yuri's strong voice. "You are acting like grown children! Of course we're all mad at getting that much in risk, but we're now all safe. We have lived to fight another day. So, let's get the tempers down, learn the lesson and have dinner, right?"

"If our problem was not being a team, then we can begin right now. I have three rooms and a full table set waiting for us at the inn. Come and forget what's past."

They followed Eva's advice. While dining, Yuri asked Antonín about the cathedral. The man was silent for a few moments, then pulled a chair and sat with them. In a conspiratorial tone, he whispered its story.

"Way back, some thirty years before this day, there was a church known here as The Order.

I remember it. I used to go to the church myself. As far as I can remember, and my father tol' me so, this was always the religion of Irvanika. An' it was rich an' powerful. Anyway, you can imagin' that from the size of that huge Cathedral. It was there all me life, an' they say it was built centuries ago.

Well, let me go back to hist'ry. The Order even had a military faction of Knights. I never understood too well what the Knights were for. Apparently, they travelled abroad and brought riches, but there were rumours that sometimes they threatened people to be of the faith. Me, I was always a faithful, they never had to scare me or my father, so I canna tell if these stories are true!

But The Order was becoming too rich and too powerful. An' you don't need me to tell you that Lord Heimoltz was becoming... uh, displeased with that. He wanted their money, I tell you.

He outlawed them! Of course the monks and Knights didn't like it, but he came with his army and sieged the Cathedral. Oh, but he didn't want a military victory. He simply had the doors sealed and burnt the whole thing down. It was in the night, actually. We heard their cries for hours and I know I had nightmares for a week. I saw Knights burning inside, with their roasted flesh coming at me and ordering me to open the door. As if I had anything to do with it! Lords, I still shudder to remember it."

He got up and served himself a drink.

"It's getting late. We'll talk tomorrow, is that alright?"

They took their leave and retired to their rooms.

26th September 751, 2nd night of the Waning Moon

The following morning, they took breakfast in the common room. Yuri's main concern was the burying of the dead coach driver, Dinech. But his plans were suddenly altered. It was obvious that three men in a table nearby were ostensibly looking at them, mainly at Gheata. They were dressed in some kind of uniform, with a black cape with a yellow trim and a silvered hound in the middle.

He sunk in his chair trying to seem oblivious and disguising his presence but he had been seen and identified by those men.

"Gheata, who are they?" asked Gregor.

"Some men. They're after me."

"Do you think we'll have troubles with them?" prompted Nikola.

"Probably yes."

"Oh no, just when we needed to rest..."

Eva got up and went to her father, murmuring something at his ear. Some five minutes later, he addressed the importunate men and stated clearly that he wanted no troubles within the inn. If they had any score to settle with any one else, then they should do it outside.

The men looked gruff but remained silent and in their seats. Meanwhile, through the room's windows, Gregor noticed that another one with equal uniform was outside harnessing their horses.

Sessions 16 – DM notes

The giggles around the road are taken from local folk tales I've heard in a village in the North Portugal, commonly told there. I've taken a few notes from one or two occasions that I was there and I had the chance to speak with local people and hear their tales. These giggles are commonly attributed to witches (a very prevalent belief here) of the malefic kind, said to wither wombs, rob wine in the night, shape shift, lay charms, kill men or make them mad and several other things. I heard a story there of a man that was going down a road with his donkey when he started hearing laughs and muffles from the trees around the road and then was taken in the air in some kind of whirling and landed somewhere far from where he was.

In this session, I did not want them to be attacked by witches of any kind, but I wanted to let them feel anxious. The giggles started it, and when they saw the lights, both players (Yuri's and Eva's) were scared. But Eva made a successful check, she being a ranger and all, and found it was only glow-worms. I passed her a note saying that, and when she read it, she laughed out loud, which left Yuri's player puzzled. The whirlwind after the laughs was taken from the story I told you above and it called, with a hint from me to the player, for a Turn Undead check. Yuri stepped boldly, happy to use his ability, and the effects stopped. Technically, this was wrong. There were no undead there. But Turn Undead is mostly a display of strong faith, so I reasoned that it should be used against hags / witches, which are always, in the folk tales, abjured with prayers and religious manifestations.

As for the glow-worms, I had first seen them that summer on a foggy night in Sintra, at an inn where I was passing holidays, very high in the hills and near the Palácio da Pena. I was really impressed with how you only see a light (in my case, it was bluish) dancing around, blinking in mid air, and I found that in the right circumstances, it could be very scary.

Meanwhile, I profited the holidays to collect stories about satanic rites, which according to the locals have in those hills one of the preferred locals in the Iberian Peninsula. The hills are called Monte da Lua (Mount of the Moon) apparently a very old name, predating the more harmless Serra de Sintra. I have not used these tales in my campaign yet, and I probably won't, but I like to have stock of ideas.

The Cathedral is part of the old story of Irvanika and is very relevant to the main plot, but in this session it is merely another point to scare them. Its description was based on two real cathedrals, but once again I'm not sure which, I believe they were Chartres and Rouen. I had pictures of them in a book dedicated to Gothic Art (the real medieval one, not the Literary Gothic!) and showed them to my players, just to give an idea.

Then at the inn, the first of many times where I truly failed to call for a Powers Check: Gregor loots the body of the coach driver. Yuri reproaches him, but let it pass. It would happen many more. I'm more aware now, and I've vowed to call for these checks more often.

As for the Cathedral, the tale Antonín tells is basically right. Lord Heimoltz is the dark lord of Irvanika, but he doesn't play a part in this campaign, aside from background as this. The Order is a religion I made with some traits of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, and its faction of Knights is akin to the Templars or other militaristic orders. In short, they became powerful, arrogant and intolerant, forcing the others into their own way of salvation. Then, as happened with the Templars, they were too powerful for their own good and someone cut their wings. Unlike Philippe le Bel, Lord Heimoltz has some power at his disposal that allowed him swift action and total extermination without length planning, so the whole church was extinguished, locked and burnt together with the Cathedral... only, as is almost always the case, a few ones escaped. The main plot is precisely about those ones, and I'm already saying too much.

In result of the crime that happened there, the Cathedral is a Sinkhole of Evil, which justifies why people are very reluctant to go near it. Unfortunately, it stands just at the main crossroads of Irvanika, joining the roads that come from the three cities in the south: Ingelberg, Keshgel and Kleinstadt. So, it is pretty much unavoidable for any one wanting to go the west, including Falkovnia and Borca. As for the Walking Knight, it is about an hour on the West road, the one that goes to Kleinstadt.

As for the men looking at them, they're Valdemar's goons. Two of them have taken the other route, towards Ingelberg, and will never be met by the group. But these four have turned west after the Cathedral and came to stop in the only inn for a good while. Of course, there will be trouble with them, but that is in the next session.

Session 17

Starting Date: 26th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

The breakfast had ended. With a new day beginning, they pondered on their destiny. It was not clear that they were a group travelling together. It was not even as much clear that they would continue the same way. The only one of them that really had a place to go was Gregor: he needed to go to Barovia to solve his... spiritual problems. And with the coming winter, he needed to go there at once. Nikola just wanted some place with lots of people where he could hide and try to start his life anew... again. Would he continue forever like this, running from kith and kin until some day he'd wake up dead in a gutter? Would he ever establish himself and truly begin to live a normal life, like everybody else? Gheata, on the other hand, just wanted to go down for a while, to hide from Lord Valdemar's goons and, probably, start a new life also. Vanna had told him he might be useful in Kleinstadt, but the journey there could take up to a week, and with an angry lord on his tail, he did not want to go alone. Yuri also felt cast away without a purpose. He had his overarching duty to the church: at least, the mysteries of Kirien's and Tersis' death would have to be solved. But there were other questions in his head: the mysterious dreams that had brought him from Ingelberg to Keshgel had stopped, but he still remembered them. They surely had purposefully brought him to Keshgel, but why? Right now, he felt Gregor could need his help. He was the person he was most comfortable with in the whole group, and had decided to help, but without knowing what the other two intended to do, he couldn't decide. As for Eva, she was home, so she probably wouldn't continue with them. At last, they all agreed they would continue together until Ingelberg, and they would see later what to do.

Meanwhile, the three men continued sat at the table eyeing them. Their next stop set, the band hesitated on what to do. Another fight was the last thing they wanted. Gheata was still in need of medical care, and Eva and Nikola went to see her mother looking for some salves and ointments that might be helpful. In the room, Yuri conferred with the other two.

"Folks, it seems we're all a bit afraid that those soldiers will come after us, but it is ridiculous to stay here paralyzed by such fear. My religious duties call me to action: I must go bury Dinech and I need your help. Well?"

Yuri's words were enough to rouse them. The three of them left the inn by a side door into the outside and proceeded to the barn where they had left Dinech and the cart. Eva's mother gave them a few things and proceeded to give advice on how best to apply them. Nikola, feeling such knowledge was completely wasted on him, came back to the room, just in time to see their table empty and the three soldiers leaving by the front door. He quickly perceived the situation. Gazing through the window, he watched the four men conferencing and deciding on a course of action: three of them went to his right, surrounding the house by the same side Yuri and the others had taken before and the remaining one followed in the opposite direction. He rightly assessed the situation and understood his friends might be in problem. Discreetly, he exited the inn by the same door as the soldiers and followed the trio at a distance. The barn was beyond the southern wall of the inn, but since its front was narrower than the inn's, it was completely hidden from his view. When the soldiers turned to the barn, they disappeared from Nikola's range and so he hid in the corner of the house, spying upon them. From his spot, he could well see the three soldiers trying to kick down the barn's door. He surmised Gheata and the others must be inside. Carefully, as silent as he could be, Nikola drew his pistol and set watch. If things got dangerous, he'd be ready for them.

After talking with her mother, Eva crossed paths with her father. They had barely had any time to talk so they conversed a while about her few days in Keshgel and why she had come back. He told Eva it was nice to have her in the inn again, that there was plenty of work to do and one extra person was never too much. Besides, with the fortnight fair beginning in two days, she couldn't have appeared at a better time. And, as her father told her at each opportunity, perhaps she could find a man to go home with.

Eva didn't know what to say. She had gone to Keshgel at the behest of her cousin. She had come back with him because the situation had grown bad to his side. And in the mean time, she had become involved with four other men and began an adventure, of sorts. And now, what of her? She was at home, but they were probably moving on. And yet.... she felt like going with them. She was happier in the wild than with people around and the boring life at the inn was very short from her true expectations from life. But she couldn't decide just yet.

She left her father and came back to the room, but no one was there. She went outside to look for them and saw Nikola hiding, with a pistol in his hand. Understanding he was spying on the soldiers, she decided to go around the house to appear on the other side, and maybe help in flanking them.

Meanwhile, Yuri, Gregor and Gheata had arrived to the barn and closed and barred the door behind them. They barely had time to ready the horses when they heard an authoritarian voice outside

"In the name of Lord Valdemar Greyhound, open the gate"

They asked their motive, to which the captain of those men replied they merely wanted the bald muscled one. They refused to open the door and remained barricaded inside the barn. The captain then tried to kick the door open. Gregor and Gheata braced the door and held the first impact, but at the second kick they felt the wood cede a little. Yuri meditated for a while and commandingly said to the captain "Flee", his voice imbued with Ezra's authority. The man stopped in mid run, and incapable of controlling himself ran away from the stable door. The others looked at each other amazed and joined their leader.

"The command won't last more than a minute. They will be back after that" sighed Yuri.

"Then we have to prepare for them. This door won't hold, so I guess the best we can do is to fool them. Let's remove the bar. When one of them comes running again, he'll fall here inside and we gain the advantage."

Gregor's plan was sound. They prepared quickly. As Yuri had warned, the soldiers were back, but from the cracks in the gate, they only saw two. The captain, as Nikola from his hiding point had seen, had gone around the barn to the southern front, where there was a gate not a metre and a half high. Still, he had no means to warn his mates. Neither had he time to react. The first man came and with a kick threw back the door. He didn't expect it to open so easily and for a moment stood there looking in surprise. It was enough for Gheata to shoot at him, missing by a hair and closing later with his mace. The full brunt of the weapon hit him square in the face and the man fell dead. Seeing the situation was controlled and knowing of the captain's position, Nikola ran from his hiding point and gave him chase. Gregor and Yuri closed upon the other one who, outnumbered, proved little match for them. With another mighty blow of his mace, Gheata threw the second one down. Meanwhile, the captain had already turned around and, aiming from the south gate of the barn, shot his crossbow with certain aim. Yuri was hit, but survived the blow. Nikola arrived too late to prevent him firing but closed immediately with his rapier. Warned of the captain's presence, Yuri and Gregor opened the gate and joined the fray. Gheata, on the other hand, looking at the man at his feet, saw that he still breathed. With refined cruelty, he drew his dagger and knelt by the man's throat. Meticulously, he approached it from his neck and slit it open, blood gushing forth freely. Bearing a wry smile, he carved a 'G' on the man's front with the tip of his dagger. A cloud covered the sky and a chill went up Gheata's spine. A distant thunder echoed, even though there were no signs of rain or storm. A cold haze numbed Gheata for a while, but he shook it off and stood untouched and unwavering. He took from the dead his crossbow and some bolts and then went back to the south gate, where his friends still held the captain.

Meanwhile, turning the western corner of the house, Eva had spotted the fourth soldier, walking with care not to alert anyone. Eva approached him but a misplaced step broke a dry branch and warned the soldier of his presence. Affecting innocence and pretending casualty in her being there, she gave him her most beautiful and enticing smile, accompanied with a sweet

"Hello!"

and slowly and nonchalantly passed him by, disguising her true intentions.

The man, however, taken by her alluring gaze and charming voice, forgot completely about his companions. Nor did he, in truth, think they were in any kind of danger, and as is usual with lewd men as Valdemar's soldiers mostly were, he gave in to his basest instincts and grabbed Eva and groped her. Eva, sensing she could control him, turned back and with an appealing voice said simply

"Yes?"

and began to embrace him as well. The man was taken by surprise, her reaction so much beyond his expectations. But definitely forgetting why he was there, he became as charmed by Eva.

"Not here, darling. Let me take you to some place more private", she said. Holding his hand, she continued towards the south wall of the barn.

Meanwhile, the captain fought for his life with Nikola, Gheata, Yuri and Gregor. Nikola fatally pierced him just as Eva and the last soldier turned around the corner. What he saw broke off completely Eva's seduction. In a moment, he waved his sword at her, but she dodged it. Then he turned back and ran as fast as he could. Eva gave chase but couldn't run well in her dress and lost ground to him. In the aftermath of the battle, Yuri healed Gheata's remaining wounds, while Gregor once again looted the fallen soldiers, taking a crossbow, some money and some bolts.

Session 17 – DM notes

Session 17 was mainly about another battle for the PCs, but also a crucial point regarding the destiny the PCs would be following. Gregor was set, and I reasoned that should be their priority because the PC, as it was at the moment, was penalized in relation to the others. Yuri had a mild inclination to follow and support him. As for Nikola and Gheata, they merely did not want to go on alone, but Eva really had no reason to leave home and continue adventuring, unless it were for a quirk of her own personality. That's why I threw the comments from her father. Eva had detailed in her background that she was rather averse to marriage, and so I gave her the prospect of a rather dull domestic life and a man to marry. Her player was ticked off and she decided to go on a while more. So, I managed to prod them to go at least until Ingelberg, in the hopes that the group would eventually coalesce and form a cohesive party.

The battle itself ran pretty well, and one of my players said afterwards that he really liked how their enemies changed tactics in the middle of the fight. Yuri's word "Flee" was an actual casting of the Command spell. In this combat, Gheata shone for the first time, showing that despite all the problems he caused, he was a useful member of the party. But he also killed one of the men with cruelty and so had to roll his first (and hitherto only, but probably he already deserved more) powers check. He passed, though. That same night, I had improvised and recorded a piece of music on my digital piano, with the sound of slow strings. It was meant merely to set the mood at the beginning of the session, but I had passed it over. The moment of the Powers Check was the ideal one to play it, and though unexpected, the result was spectacular.

As for Eva's attitude regarding the soldier, it was really the initiative of her player. I had the guard be too forward, expecting Eva to finally come out of her shell and show that she is a warrior type (up to the moment, she'd been merely a 'lady' in the campaign). But her player surprised me. She decided to seduce the man and play along, seeming happy with his advances and trying to lure him away to the barn. I never understood if she meant simply to distract him and take that advantage to attack and kill or simply wanted the opportunity to "be with a man". At any rate, she did spice up her character here, and this incident probably served as spark for Gheata's invitation in the next session. I considered she had 'charmed' her opponent with a Bluff (seduction) check.

Session 18

Starting Date: 26th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

With the flight of the last remaining soldier, the fight was over and the band allowed itself a moment to rest. It had been their clearest victory yet, and so soon after the disastrous encounter with the highwaymen it served well to raise their morale once more. Almost cheerful, no doubt relieved, they began to feel more confidence in themselves to survive together. Gheata had been extremely helpful this time, which showed that despite his rude and selfish personality it could yet be important to have him around. As to what exactly was Eva thinking she would do with that soldier, leading him by the hand to the barn, they had no clue, and all, but Gheata, chose to ignore her motives: surely, she guessed her companions were there and was trying to lead him to a trap. Gheata, though, looked upon her with other motives. Slyly eyeing Eva as she ran to give chase to the soldier, but obviously at a disadvantage in that long dress, he considered that perhaps there was more in her action than merely a womanly preference of clever seduction over violence and that maybe, just maybe, she really might be looking for a male... physically looking for a male. Yuri's determined voice called him back to reality

"Well, we had to bury Dinech. Now we have three more bodies to bury. It won't do to leave them here, and we owe it to Eva's father at least. Come, let's put them on the cart. Eva will lead us to the nearest village. Eva? Where's Eva?"

Eva came back soon enough. The man had flown on horse towards the north. They would never catch him now.

"Eva, is there a cemetery nearby?"

"Uh... yes, there is! There's a village a bit to the west, near the Kleinstadt road. It will take us about an hour to get there, and it has a cemetery"

"Right, then take us there".

They lay the corpses in the cart and rode to the village. The weather was turning foul. Dark clouds covered the sun and its faint and filtered light dimly lit the day. There was a bland moisture in the air and a soft but cold breeze.

"Autumn is upon us, I reckon. Well, it's its time, I guess."

They arrived there without incident and immediately went to look for the caretaker of the graveyard. There was an area there left aside for common digs and the unknown deceased and there they buried Dinech and the three Greyhound soldiers. Yuri performed the rites and bade them eternal rest, after which they returned to the inn.

The morning was spent, and the first couple of hours after noon had already gone. They set for lunch and sadly recognized they wouldn't be able to depart that day. There were but three hours of sun left after they finished their meal. Scant time for travel and reach a place to spend the night. Gregor was disheartened. His anxiety to reach Barovia was obvious. Ever since he had learnt the solution for his spiritual conflict was there, he loathed every hour that prevented him from travelling in that direction.

"Much though I may be anxious to depart, I guess we can go no farther today. This business with Gheata's pursuers made us waste one day of travel. Might as well go rest, now"

"You're right, Gregor, but since we're here, there's a place where I'd like to go. That cathedral on the crossroads.... it intrigues me. I wish to go there."

"What, are you mad Yuri?" Eva startled. She nearly stood in alarm.

"But... you don't know what you're looking for."

"And what is that, Eva? What is there about that Cathedral that makes it so dangerous?"

"I don't know, but.... it's bad, it's evil. Everybody knows that.... I've heard that all my life! Stay away from the Cathedral if you want to live long."

"Yes, alright, but.... what's in there?"

Eva sat, blushing, her reply soft and timid

"I don't know... really, but these tales say there's something evil inside. I don't know what, but I don't want go near there any more than I have to"

"Well, then, I'll go. Anyone else?"

"Not me, thanks"

"Gregor is out. What about you two?"

"I fear no one. I go". Nikola accompanied Gheata

"You can count me in too."

"Then, we'd best go now. The sun doesn't wait for retarders and I want to be there with plenty of light."

Yuri, Gheata and Nikola departed immediately. They took an hour to arrive at the crossroads. Looming in before them, there it was, that massive construction: a large, tall Cathedral of a bygone era. Its façade bore the pride of those that had built it. Two massive gargoyles guarded the entrance while two high pinnacles pierced at the sky, in search for some God. Did they ever find it? Who knows? As they had seen before, it had been burnt in the past. They remembered Antonín's tale, and the full horror of that fiery punishment bore hard into them: the Cathedral had been burnt to punish the Knights of the Order. The Cathedral had become a version of a witch burning in a monumental scale: a full host of Knights had been sentenced inside, crying for life, barred from the outside as all around them turned into flames, a living hell. No wonder people avoided it. Its size commanded respect; its testimony of a massacre invoked fear. Unique within the ruin shone the rose-window above the door. It lay unscathed as if no fire had ever touched it.

The three stood in awe by the road, looking up to encompass the full view of the Cathedral's majesty. Yuri boldly stepped forward, followed a fair distance by Gheata. Nikola remained on the road. Yuri stopped, gazing at the stained-glass. The clouds had opened and the sky was visible again. The setting sun would soon shine upon it, and surely inside the nave the rays would light the church like fire. It is to the great rose windows above the entrance doors of most churches, those with the entrance facing west, that the Alchemists call the Rose of Fire. The sun shines with a reddish light when it sets and Red is the colour of the end of the Great Work: The Rubedo, the Work on Red. Noon is Albedo, the second stage, the Work on White, which follows Nigredo, the Work on Black. There's no window pointing east. At the start of the day, no light shines within a Cathedral, but it will enter through its southern stained-glass at midday. North, however, will always look up to the night, for though there is a window in that direction, the sun is never there.

Would it be a coincidence that the church was destroyed by fire and the western window was the only untouched remain of the church? These questions danced in Yuri's head. The obscure knowledge he had gained when studying at Ingelberg returned to his head in a disorganized mass of incoherent and disconnected facts. Was it a coincidence? Fire, Rubedo? Had it anything to do? This was a doubt he wanted to clear. He took hold of his holy symbol, mumbled a prayer and meditated. He waved it at the church, silently, steadfast and attentive.... No, nothing. There was no magic there, no lingering trace of any arcane or divine energy anymore. Perhaps inside he could feel it. The building itself could be like a shroud for any faint sacredness that still remained inside... though the cruel burning surely had desecrated the building. He approached, boldly as before, but holding the Holy Symbol. He felt that Ezra cared for him and would protect him in the darkness. He was but seven metres away from the door when, from a little mound to the left of the road, no more than forty centimetres high, a hazy vapour began to rise. Its form was vaguely feminine but bore resemblance to no one Yuri knew. Wisps of cloud trailing behind it, waving in a wind Yuri could not feel, it stretched its hand in Yuri's direction, palm opened in sign of forbiddance. Yuri froze on his tracks. Gheata eyed the thing alarmed. He drew his pistol but his legs wavered and slowly, hesitantly, began to walk backwards to where Nikola still was. This looked at the scene without understanding. The horse neighed nervously, and Nikola calmed him, and mounted. Only Yuri remained in place, until the figure spoke

"Go back, Yuri, go back! There is a great darkness inside, greater than you can face. Go back!"

The figure remained diffuse, and after speaking its piece it began to dissolve quickly. It could not easily abide the sun. Yuri hesitated. He looked at the cathedral again and at the symbol in his hand. Shaking his head, he turned back, unsure of that being the right choice.

The three riders came back to the inn, distraught, and they arrived just as the sun set. Soon, the warmth that spread from the fire in the common room was all the comfort they needed. They didn't speak of the

evening's events. The Cathedral was a theme none of them wished to bring forth, not even Eva or Gregor. Instead, they focused on the leaving the following morn and the warm dinner before them.

After the meal, the residents gathered in the common room as was usual at The Walking Knight. Yuri alone retired for a private room set upon brewing a healing mixture. Things were beginning to feel strange and dangerous, and surely one balsam only would not be enough.

The others joined the gathering below. As it happened, the wind began to howl outside though the night didn't become stormy. But the voices lowered and in a few moments, a storyteller began spinning a tale of ghosts. When he finished, the first reaction was silence, but then it drew an applause from the audience and a new round of drinks. It was then that a tall elegant man, finely dressed with a carefully trimmed moustache, and probably in his middle thirties, took centre stage and announced his name: Edward Pond, one of the most esteemed and famous poets throughout the core. And tonight, since the mood was so appropriately set for it, he would recite one of his last writs: [The Raven](#). Pond was a master reciter. His voice vibrated with a frightening, masterfully studied tone. His words echoed the terror felt by the poem's narrator and he easily enthralled the audience. Well, most of the audience.

Eva and Gheata were whispering to each other. She was seeing a new face of his: tender, seductive. For all his physical prowess and almost absent affection, he was showing himself capable of other more appealing endeavours to her feminine desires. He wove his charms like a web. Eva protested, but only mildly. In truth, she too wanted him. But she was unsure.

"I must not. I barely know you and I've never been with a man."

"Well, if that is a requisite, then you'll never be with one. You have to let go, it's not something to dread, it is a part of everyone's life, and it has to start with someone. Better that it be with someone you know. Let it go, Eva, I'll teach you."

"But it is my first time. You.... be gentle please."

"I will."

They left and went upstairs.

Gheata slept that night in Eva's room. The usual silence of the night was only here and there disturbed by gentle sighs of pleasure and surprise. Only too late did Eva remember that her parents slept in just the room next door, and that they probably had heard her stifled moans. As for the Gregor and Nikola, they heard something unusual but slept without cares. Only Yuri, absorbed by his work, failed to notice anything. He finished late and threw himself heavily on the bed.

That night, Yuri dreamt. He saw himself before the Cathedral once again, but this time he was alone. He approached the door, even as he'd done before, and once again a mist rose from the little mound. A feminine figure took form and warned him "Do not approach more, Yuri. There is evil too great for you in here." The shape was vague as it had been before the church, but it slowly became more defined: a longsword, a shield. It continued "I have other plans for you." Yuri awoke, a single word dangling on his lips:

"Ezra?"

Session 18 – DM notes

Session 18 was simply an aftermath of session 17, without much happening. They buried the dead and prepared to depart on the next day. With so much free time, Yuri decided to study the Cathedral. The Cathedral is a haunted place, a sinkhole of Evil, and extremely dangerous for the PCs right now. It also wouldn't be good to the story if they went there at the moment, so I scared Yuri away. Eva, being from the area, knows all sorts of bad stories about it so she was afraid to go near and even tried to demotivate Yuri. But he went there all the same.

The detail of the Red Rose was not important, I believe. The player asked me if it was untouched because of magic or other reason, but I hadn't really thought of it. It was put in merely for flavour, but it generated extra interest. As it was, I ruled it there was no magic in it.

The ghost that appears at the entrance, in bright day light, is merely an improvised form to scare Yuri away as a last resort. He did back way, for the player understood the Meta-Game significance of this ploy.

As for Gheata, he is always uncomfortable with the supernatural. Although claiming he does not fear anything, that is not entirely true.

That night, Yuri began brewing potions. He made a few over the next days. But for the night in the common room, I had prepared a reading: Edgar Allan Poe's the Raven. I thought of reading it myself, but even if I tried I'd never be able to tell it interestingly, so I looked for it and was lucky enough to find a site where Basil Rathbone narrates it superbly. Only the introduction and the conclusion of the package are an awful distraction to the poem, so one has to be careful to pause at the right time.

As for Rathbone, he was the most famous Sherlock Holmes on film before Jeremy Brett. Of course, Edward Pond is merely a name suggestive of Poe's.

Finally, there's Gheata's wooing of Eva. The whole thing was arranged with a lot of paper exchange between the two players, but they let me read the messages once, when they told me they were both going upstairs. The notes were lost, unfortunately, so I couldn't write exactly what they said. Gheata stressed that she should not be afraid, and she asked him to be gentle. He merely said 'Ok' (but I don't use 'Ok' in the logs) without paying much attention to it and without really meaning it.

As for who heard it, I had the players roll Move Silently and Listen checks and rolled Listen for her father too. Everyone was aware of it except Yuri.

The conclusion of the log is merely for colour. The ghost Yuri saw was not Ezra, although it may have been sent by her specifically. The dream was merely to clarify things.

Session 19, Rebirth

Starting Date: 27th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

27th September 751, 3rd Night of the Waning Moon

The day dawned with a sense of urgency. The band was anxious to be on the move for weather wouldn't wait for them. The rain on the eve had been a warning of their lack of time: one week more, and Barovia might well be impassable. They didn't even know if it wasn't already too late!

But not all of them shared the same worries. Eva came down to the common room with a mixture of apprehension for her parents' reaction and a sense of wonder and fulfilment for finally feeling a woman. Of course Gheata was not a model companion, she knew that. She understood this had been an extraordinary night, rare in all circumstances, and that he had not sought her out of love. Lust was the right word: cold and plain, and Eva knew Gheata was not the man of her dreams. Looking at him now, sprawling at a table covered with breakfast, she could once again ascertain that he wanted nothing more than her body. Physical pleasure was all he cared for: emotionally, Gheata looked as cold as ice. But still, it had not been a mistake. Finally, Eva understood she was no longer a little playful child and that something was lacking in her life. Something she could not find at The Walking Knight. She had to carve her own destiny, to set on her way into the world. She felt a certain wanderlust, something that prevented her from staying and... In fact, she didn't quite feel capable of looking her father in the eye. She felt embarrassed and slightly ashamed. She would go, she would depart with the band. And perhaps find what could fill her desires.

They broke their fasts almost silently and in a hurry, when Antonín came to them with a curious remark

"Hello sirs, I know you be leavin' an' all, but I canna fail my customers, especially the good ol' ones. And that ol' man you can see o'er there asked me the simple favour o' tellin' you he 'has words to partake with your ears'... Aye, that's what he said, really! Hahaha. I tell you, he's good gent, he'll make you no harm. Oh, he looks sheepish, aye, but I can tell he's keen as a hawk. Go there and hear his words, I say."

So they did. The man was in his early seventies and the first impression he gave off was that of a miserable old fellow. Early in the morning, he kept a wine bottle by his side, and looked like he had passed the whole night at the table. 'Part of the furniture' was the image that sprang to mind. Nearly bald, the little hair left dishevelled and dirty, sad mien, tired smile. He looked downtrodden and vanquished by life.

"Come, fellows. I may be more than I look, and I'm sure this old face of mine puts you off as it did to many others, but be not afraid. I'm Hrinek.", he said. He sensed their suspicion. "I'm old, yes, but I've travelled the roads when I was younger. And even if today I'm too old to do it, I owe it to me to help those I see ready to enter the same predicaments I suffered. Come closer by, sit here with me, I don't bite!"

"There, there you go. You haven't noticed me, perhaps, but I have little else to do than looking around. I see all, I hear all, and I think I know more of you than you yourselves do. I have seen you yesterday. You're not the usual band one sees around here. You don't behave as an old group of friends, but you show more companionship than a congregation of business colleagues. I've known many like you through my life. I've been one of them! But those times are past now. I watch... and help".

"You intrigued me last night. A group such as yours travels this land very rarely, and survives for long even less often. So I set to watch you. And the foremost sensations I feel in you are ... inadequacy, unease, lack of belonging, to a place, a group or a fraternity. You, Nikola, for instance"

"How do you know my name?!", said Nikola, alarmed.

"It's not hard, when one listens attentively. You were here last night. So was I..."

"As I was saying, you Nikola, will never belong anywhere unless you acknowledge what the others do for you. Twice have you been dearly helped in the last month, twice by two men, and yet your gratitude was none. If not for them, you wouldn't be alive now, but your thanks are dearly bought indeed. Besides, Nikola, there's a curse upon you. It will always keep you apart from the others until you lift it. Just be wary of the savage lands, where instinct can overcome reason, and be afraid of the full moon."

"In you, Eva, I feel a longing, a yearning for something that not even you can know. You need something, an objective, that fills the void within you. And this void you have will set you constantly astray, wishing to belong but cast away by your own desires. And these may be dangerous! Be wary of them, take care with what you wish for you shall be cruelly tested."

"Gheata, you're the wild card out. You do not belong because you do not want to. You are the dark soul and your life will be ridden by problems, but all of your own invention. It's not the fate that is against you, it is you yourself. I cannot tell you more except that you are the master of your own ways".

"Gregor and Yuri, I have left you for last because you are the most impenetrable for me. I sense a kind of spirituality within you that shields your thoughts from me. Your paths, I cannot see, but I understand the role you play: you are the glue that will hold the loose rocks. You are the force that will keep the group together. And it is as a group that you will have to function if you want to survive."

"You were cast into a great plan you don't understand. The wheels were set in motion and the Plan is fulfilling. It is slow and will not constrict you for a long time, but it is in motion and you were caught in the net. It holds the fates of Irvanika and its consequences may be grand for this land and those around it, perhaps even the whole Core. And your actions may prevent it. You do not belong anywhere, the few ties you had have been cut. Eva has said even now goodbye to her childhood, her house, her family. You are ready to be thrown in the world and be like sand in the cogs. Your actions may yet bring great good to this troubled land. Just remember not to be over anxious. Evil will never be absolutely vanquished, but if you can hold it once here, push it back over there, now, and then, and then again, then your actions will be like shining fires in the darkest night. And for that, they will be most valuable than a large bonfire under sunlight. Value your deeds, have faith in you, and in the joy and consolation you can yet bring to many. But remember, you can only do it as a group. And, in truth, you have no one else but each other, no other place to belong".

It was time to leave. His last words had been no more than a sign to depart. They took their wares and set to deal with Drulovic about the horses. Without too much haggling, they soon came to an agreement: Drulovic was to keep the cart and the two heavy horses and in exchange he would give them four of his light horses. He had no need for them now, and the cart was far more useful. They set on the road, all five, towards Ingelberg. In the summer, fast riders could cover the distance in one day, but with the current weather and with all the appearances of getting worse, they were counting themselves lucky if they could do it in three days. The first hour rode by quickly, but after that it began to rain. The conditions worsened steadily and the rain became a downpour accompanied by a cold wind. With the afternoon, cold became colder and rain turned to snow: the first flakes of the winter that was doubtless arriving. Their spirits decreased as the day grew older and the snow heavier. The road disappeared beneath the white blanket and before long the horses were almost fighting to move forward. The group looked preoccupied for a place to stop and wait the night out when a man, seemingly despaired emerged from a path to the left of the road. They heard his cries in the wind:

"Is there a doctor among you?! Can any of you help my wife? She's gone into labour and I need help, desperately".

He was panting, nearly breathless. The track he had followed diverted from the main road. It was bordered by thick forest but fifty metres way at its closest point. It led to a small group of scattered houses, small farms that could be considered neighbours only in this isolation that tended to make an acquaintance of anything in one's horizon, no matter how far. All lay white before them, white and silent as winter. Eva and Yuri offered their assistance, and the group followed the man.

"I'm Alistair, and my wife's Anita. I have sent for a midwife hours ago but she hasn't come. I don't know what happened, maybe she was caught by the snow, or she had an accident herself, but with the night falling, I don't expect her to come and I really need help".

They entered Alistair's house. They could notice that the nearest one was some hundreds of metres away, but that, and the ones after that, looked normally inhabited: there was fire in the chimneys and they had signs of normal life. Upon entering the house, Alistair ushered Yuri and Eva into the main bedroom, the others remaining in the common room, that doubled as kitchen and sitting room. Anita was lying on the bed, visibly in great pain. Judging from her cries and suffering, the baby should be born soon. There was no time to lose, Eva set to organize everything immediately: she asked Alistair to bring, with the utmost urgency, hot water and clean towels to help her. She then tried to soothe Anita, easing a bit of her pains. Yuri, at the same time, helped competently, as one knowable in such matters. Alistair returned and everything was in place for the birth, but the baby longed and didn't come. At the same time, Anita's yells increased in volume and moaning, as the wind outside seemed to howl as an echo in answer to her hurtful cries. And the baby still didn't come. The time passed unnaturally slow: one hour, two hours saw no change in the situation. Yuri, turning to Alistair, asked if this had happened before, but he said they had never had any babies, so he couldn't tell. "Perhaps then it is due to being the first time", said Eva.

Yuri felt for the baby, trying to understand if it was in the wrong position and if he could correct the situation, but to his dismay he couldn't place it within Anita's belly. He looked puzzled to Eva, unsure of what to do. She understood his apprehension. The tension mounted, Anita was on the borders of collapse and the wind announced a storm outside when at last, fluid came out, and Anita relaxed and a smile announced her contentment for the baby born. Alistair moved to the end of the bed to be the first to receive his son, except that... there was no baby.

Alarmed, dumbfounded, all three looked at each other without understanding. Alistair was first to recover and said

"Please, let's keep this a secret. Tell her simply her baby was stillborn. Any thing else will make her mad."

They looked to her needs for a while, until Anita fell asleep. "Let's now leave her alone, to rest. Remember, not a word about this to her."

Meanwhile, the other three tried to accommodate themselves in the small room. They waited impatiently and with growing anxiety. The cries they heard were not of the kind to leave them rested and outside the situation wasn't improving either. To compound matters, Gregor saw, by one of the windows, a wolf outside in the snow, rounding the house.

At length, Alistair came out, with Yuri and Eva.

Nikola sprang to ask "So, is it a boy or a girl?", but the reply was nothing of what he expected. "It was stillborn", was Alistair's gruff reply. In shock, Nikola perceived Yuri waving his head negatively. Alistair cut

"Stay here. I'll get you hot food and see if you can sleep here. If not in the house, at least in the barn. It's night now, and it's better for you to stay than to go anywhere" and left the room.

"You were saying no with your head, Yuri. What happened there? Stillborn?"

"Actually, Nikola, no. There was no baby!"

"No baby? How, no baby?"

"Well, no baby.... We just stood there looking stupidly at her. The fluid came out, she relaxed, she eased she smiled and after a while she went to sleep, but baby ... well, it never came out"

"Oh my, she gave birth to a spectre!"

"Don't play with serious things, Nikola. But if you want my feeling, this does not bode well at all."

"Well, then it will get worse, Yuri", interrupted Gregor, "There's wolves outside".

"Wolves? So near the house? But that's unusual. What might they be wanting?"

"I don't know, but if you want my opinion, we spend the night here as he said and leave first thing in the morning to go on with our trip. I really don't feel like spending overtime in this house", finished Gregor.

"We'll see about that..."

Alistair came just a few minutes after with a hot meal

only a few metres from the house, but the weather is awful and if I were you, I'd rather stay here, no matter how cramped."

They ate fast, remembering suddenly how hungry they were. Alistair led them to the room and went to his wife. The group debated their actions in the morning and waited a while without actually trying to sleep. It was as if some dark foreboding kept them awake and told them there was something yet to do before calling it a day. And if they did feel this, they were right. Alistair came back three hours later

"Erm.... Yuri, Eva there's something you have to see."

He led them to the main bedroom. The scene was disturbing. Inside, Anita was sitting on a chair, her arms poised as if feeding a baby, caressing him gently. Only that in her arms they could see nothing. As they entered, her eyes grew wide

"Isn't he beautiful?"

and she looked once again at her invisible baby with adoring eyes. But no one else could see what she was looking at. Above her arms, they could simply see her white gown. White and...

"Look!", cried Eva.

And all of them saw, with a slight touch of horror in their faces, a tiny red spot appearing on her gown over her breast, and increasing to reach up to the size of a child's palm. Alistair turned his eyes with disgust and shame and while the others looked quizzically at each other, Yuri stepped forward and holding his holy symbol, invoked the blessings of his goddess and concentrated. He fanned his attention in the direction of Anita but after a few seconds, he shrugged, disappointed, and said.

"Nothing! I can feel no magic here."

"That spot... is it blood?", stammered Eva, but no one could answer her.

"Anita, he's a very beautiful child, but doesn't he hurt ? He seems to suck hard."

Anita's eyes brightened once more

"Oh no, miss. I'm already used, he never hurt me before."

They shook off the incongruence of her answer as caused by the extreme tension of the last few days, so Yuri simply said

"Eva, you'd better stay here with her and calm Anita. I think we belong outside."

As they stepped outside of the room, Alistair burst into tears, incapable of holding any more grief and consternation. He felt impotent, powerless to help his wife and ashamed in front of strangers.

"I have to tell you the truth, I have to.... I can hold it no longer... the truth" he mumbled within his tears, his face hidden in his hands. Yuri patted him on the shoulder "What truth?"

He raised his head and looking straight at Yuri

"I lied there inside. We've had a baby before. It was a year ago, precisely. But he ... he ..."

They waited for him to regain his composure

"Barton was three months old. We went for a walk outside. I was going to chop wood for the winter and Anita was carrying him in the sled. I don't know what happened, it was too fast. Anita looked aside, something caught her attention. I swear!, it was just an instant, but when she looked again, there it was! A wolf cub, still small but dragging my dear Barton away. I ran, and Anita ran too. But the cub was faster than we were and soon its mother appeared. It gashed at Anita as she desperately tried to hold Barton. I chopped the wolf in two and the cub run afraid, but Barton was still on the red-tinted snow. So still... I can see him yet.... so still, so cold."

"Anita wept like the sky in a storm. We couldn't bury him that day. The snow was freezing cold and for a week it snowed like not even the elders had seen. We were locked in the house. Anita couldn't release Barton, she didn't accept he was gone. At last, I buried him eight days later but Anita became like mad. She was always calling for Barton, Barton, Barton and refused to accept he had died. She became melancholic and distressed. She only got better when she knew she was pregnant again. She was so happy! Another son was the chance to restart, to be mother again, to have a child again. When she learns what happened, I doubt she'll be able to take it... I don't know what to do!" and began to sob uncontrollably.

Alone in the bedroom with Anita, Eva looked stupidly to the red spot on her vest. Anita put her "child" to the side "I'll let him sleep now. He's so small, and so beautiful, but he needs rest!" and took a finger to her lips warning Eva to be quiet. Eva approached intent on understanding better what the spot was. She touched Anita's dress

"Doesn't it hurt here? Aren't you bleeding?"

"No", came the puzzled reply, "look!"

and undid a bit of her gown to reveal an unblemished breast. No mark of wound or bite. Just clean soft skin. And the cloth looked as if it simply had been red in that particular spot ever since it had been made. Eva didn't know what to think when suddenly, she heard the sound of a rattle behind her. Turning quickly, she saw nothing out of the ordinary. Everything was in place. Just then, in the corner of her eye, she thought something had moved and that the towel at the top of the pile on that stair in the corner had just been hovering half an inch over the others and fallen just when she looked. She rubbed her eyes. Was it the late hour? Weariness? Lack of sleep?

Sessions 19 – DM notes

As far as I remember, this was the first session to have its log written. So the style may be a lot different from the one in later sessions.

The man that asks to speak with them at the Walking Knight is kind of a seer. It was just a means for me to pass certain suggestions to the players as to what they should do about their characters, some hints of what is affecting them. In the case of Nikola, he quite outright suggests his lycanthropy but also a trait that Nikola has and that will make playing a bit difficult: he wants to trust no one. The piece spoken to Eva alluded to the Wishing Imp, which at the time I was contemplating to put in as Eva's personal quest in the game (every PC has one). But I abandoned that idea later on, and I'm not keen to retake it. Still, the advice is perfectly general nevertheless. The suggestion for Gheata hints that if he becomes corrupted by the Dark Powers, it will all be because of his own misdoing.

The final paragraphs after the comments on Yuri and Gregor are a general idea of what good heroes can achieve in Ravenloft. In the whole, this encounter was to give a sense of purpose to the players, some

morale back, meaning that only because they haven't solved much yet they are not total failures. They had to understand that and want to go on. This campaign will take off very slowly, and I need cooperative players.

Apart from that, this whole session and the next were dedicated to the first formal adventure in the campaign: Stuart Turner's 'Rebirth' (see the Netbook Forgotten Children, from the Kargatane). The main problem with this was how to make the PCs trust Alistair. They found it odd that none of the neighbours was there to help, and in fact that was very hard to justify. As for the adventure itself, Nikola did say "she gave birth to a spectre, even without knowing anything of the adventure. I found that remark so apt that I included it verbatim in the logs.

Session 20, Rebirth (conclusion)

Starting Date: 27th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

Eva left Anita hurriedly and came back to the room to see Alistair crying with the face cupped in his hands. Nikola and Gregor paced nervously, while Yuri sought to understand more of Alistair's story.

"Why is it that you came looking for help on the road, when you have neighbours nearer?"

Alistair raised his head. He tried to quickly wipe his tears and look strong
"I was expecting the midwife. She was to come from the road. Besides... Since all this happened... since Barton..." he sobbed "... was taken by the wolf, I've kept to myself. It shames me... and I've no nerve to appear before my neighbours. I'm sure they think as I do."

Gheata interrupted

"You're ashamed that your son has died?"

"Because I let him!" He burst standing abruptly. "I let him die, can't you understand? One moment he was there and the next he was being dragged by the wolf, but I was there."

"And didn't you scare the wolves? Didn't you attack them?"

"Of course I did! But when I got to Barton he was already badly mauled. He never recovered."

"And do you think you could have done any better?" asked Yuri.

Alistair hesitated, sat again and let a breath come out

"I do."

"Well, then. Perhaps it was meant to be. Fate can not be defeated and you surely couldn't do more than you did. You'll have to let go, you'll have to overcome it. Give some rest to yourself, earn some respect for you again."

With these words, Yuri tried to calm Alistair down.

And then he burst

"Please, you've got to help me. What is happening is not natural. This is surely priest's job and I can see you are one. Will you help me?"

Yuri was a bit dumbfounded and tried to digress

"I can do nothing right now. We'll see if Ezra helps me in the morning".

Alistair looked abated. He eased a bit, stood and went up to the window. He gave a brief look outside and closed them. Then, he bade everybody good night and went to his bedroom.

The others retired for their own room and conversed for a while.

Yuri was the first to speak

"I don't trust this Alistair guy. Something tells me he hasn't told the whole truth."

"Why?" questioned Gregor

"I just think it's not natural for someone to shun the neighbours for his son dying in an accident. He's hiding something, I'm sure."

"Mayhap he's just strange. I've heard of a guy once in a remote village that stood closed inside his house for forty years without wanting to see anyone. Someone would take him food and leave it on the door, but I

know no one else ever saw him during that whole time... They called him Uncle Gamish, but no person knew what he looked like. Perhaps this Alistair is like him, perhaps he is a bit paranoid and thinks the others will always evaluate him and doesn't dare to risk it. I don't know, but perhaps it happened as he told us."

"Perhaps, Gregor, but I still have my doubts... Well, and what about tomorrow?"

"I say we sleep and leave as soon as we can. If the woman is delirious, there's nothing we can do about her." Nikola answered quickly and Gregor concurred "I agree with him".

"Perhaps... but in the morning, I'll be better prepared than today and there are some things I want to try. But be ready to depart early."

They then went all to sleep and did so surprisingly without worries of any kind.

28th September 751, 4th Night of the Waning Moon

Gheata was the first to get up. He heard some noise from the main room and went there, to meet Alistair who was preparing breakfast. They were soon joined by Nikola and Eva.

"Good morning. Anita is still in bed, resting. I'll have tea and milk ready soon, you can pick what you want. Where are the other two?"

"Oh, they're in the room... preparing. I'm sure you can hear the chants if you try." explained Eva.

"Hmmm... that's well then."

"And how's Anita?" asked Nikola, interestedly.

"She's doing well, I think, given the circumstances." Alistair visibly didn't like to touch the subject, so they dropped the conversation.

This was the front room in the house, the one that served as kitchen and common room. Two doors led to two bedrooms in the wall opposite the entrance and another to the left, that seemed to always be opened, offered entrance into a room with a larger table, clearly intended for happier gatherings and that seemed to have had not much use for a reasonable time. Its only window was shut and it had no lights, but the light coming from the main one and from the lit fire where food was cooked was enough to illuminate it a bit. They were casually sitting at the table when a rattle could be heard and all of them saw the pots lined on the bar being agitated one by one as if the earth was shaking. Yet, nothing else trembled and they looked stupefied as the pots shook from the rightmost one to the leftmost one and then... the one that was on the fire was violently knocked to the side and the scalding water it contained splashed all around. Nikola let a cry slip his lips as he got burned, but all the others managed to avoid it.

They looked around in confusion. Eva got up and ran to the bedroom and huddled in a corner. "I don't want to have anything to do with his!" she cried startled. Gregor and Yuri remained oblivious to her.

Alistair was locked in disbelief. Nikola tried to convince himself with a vain explanation

"Perhaps there was a draft..." but he knew the futility of his words. He looked to the fire without understanding but calling up all his practical sense said

"I guess it's better to clean this up and start again."

His words woke Alistair "Yes, yes, you're right" and he began to move quickly. But the rattling came back and soon Gheata saw the water in the basin being waved around, as if someone was playing with it.

"Well, we still have that boiling water in the basin!" said Gheata, while looking for the mouse that shook the pots, still believing in a natural reason for what had happened.

Alistair was dismayed

"That water is there since yesterday. It must be as cold as the weather..."

And then it stopped. The alarm in their faces couldn't be greater, and they all had grown considerably paler. "Alistair... excuse us for a moment". Nikola and Gregor went back to the bedroom, leaving Alistair shocked in the room.

Eva came to them.

"Those two must be almost finishing, but why did you come back? Don't tell me something else happened."

"Yes... some invisible thing was playing with the water in the basin." told Nikola

"And... we heard that rattling again" added Gheata.

Eva blushed.

"I didn't tell you yesterday, but I heard it too. And I saw something strange... a towel falling from the air."

Nikola spoke the thought in the others' minds.

"So, this rattling seems to signal the entity that is doing all of this, if there is one."

and he offered a plan of action

"Then I say we try to catch it. Let's get some blankets and hear where it is then try to catch it".

Nikola agreed, but Eva refused to leave the room

"Thanks, I'm pretty well here..." she stammered.

Gheata and Nikola went back to the room, carrying a blanket each. Gheata also had his flail ready for whatever might be the case. Alistair was sitting, musing upon the strange disturbances. Nikola interrupted him

"Do you have any flour?"

"Why, sure! Here".

And then the rattling came. Already expecting it, they tried to locate its origin and could see the curtains waving near the floor. Nikola took a fistful of flour and tried to throw it, but let it fall before completing the movement. His second try, however, was successful: the flour took form for a brief second, then fell to the floor evenly. In that brief moment, it had stood in midair in an almost spherical shape.

Nikola cried

"Wretched thing, I don't know what you are, but at least I know you are there. I won't cower before you" but there was much more courage in his words than he really felt. Alistair nodded, his own suspicions confirmed by Nikola's flour attack.

Yuri and Gregor arrived at that moment, leaving Eva alone in the bedroom, expecting that her friends would be able to solve the strange situation without needing her. Yuri was approaching Alistair to speak to him when Gregor, Nikola and Gheata cried almost at once

"Look!"

A blue handprint of a small baby child had appeared on the wall. It was a right-hand impression. And then again, and then once again. Three times the small right baby hand was left in blue on the wall. It looked like aquarelle paint. This time, Nikola retreated away from the wall. He was running out of possible explanations. But Yuri, seeing that time had passed for words, put thought into action and began an incantation. He concentrated for almost a minute and then said with conviction

"There is a restless spirit in this house. An afflicted soul. It's not very strong but it's still a suffering being. It is going to the dining room."

Telling everybody to back away he began a chant to his goddess. When he finished, he looked enveloped in a blazing aura, seeming taller and more commanding, with a stern and at the same time more attractive face. He seemed to be older in years but of a timeless age, compelling as a King of old, bathed as he was in Ezra's radiant splendour. At the same time, they heard the rattling once again, and could see a small candle floating at about fifty centimetres from the floor in the adjoining room. But it was lit and that worried them more than anything else up to the moment. Gheata was quick to react. He grabbed a blanket and threw it to the other side of the room, as Nikola, Gregor and Alistair backed in the opposite direction and Yuri put forth his symbol and displaying an immense divine power sent away the command of Ezra

"Flee, spirit! Be thou of darkness or innocent as a child, back away, for this is not thy abode! Leave us be in peace and leave this house for ever!"

Everything happened too fast. The blanket missed the candle by a few centimetres. The flame faltered but held and then, just one instant later, the candle fell without support to the ground, lighting the blanket.

Nikola and Gheata were first to act, and stomping quickly on the flames they soon extinguished them. A sense of relief pervaded them, but Yuri was not sure

"I don't think it has really left. It may give us rest and respite for a moment but I feel it will come back". This, however, allowed them to rest for a while. For a scant ten minutes, they eased themselves on chairs, thinking on what to do. If it was indeed the case that Yuri's effort had not been definitive, then they still had something to do. Their rest was broken by Anita's sudden arrival from the bedroom. She looked weaker and tired. Two new red spots were on her dress

"Good morning. How are you? Have you seen my Barton around?"
Nikola badly disguised his yellow smile, but she didn't notice and he played along

"Oh, he's been around. And he's been quite misbehaving too!"
"That's my Barton, so small and yet so charming. Where is he? I can't see him"
Nikola continued the farce "He must be playing in the back."

Alistair approached Yuri and asked him to speak in private, where Anita could not hear them. Yuri retreated a bit too harshly and Alistair noted his resistance
"What happened? Why did you react thus? I merely wish to ask for your help."
"I find it odd that you ask me what happened. After all I've seen in this house, I'm not sure I can trust you."
"I've told you everything as it happened. What else is casting doubts in your thoughts?"
"I'll keep them to myself, if I may."
"Then keep them. But at least, help me and my wife, rid us and our house of these supernatural things!"
"Ah!, then you know it is supernatural. And yet you didn't tell me why you think that!"
"Why, for Belenus' sake. If what we have seen isn't supernatural, what the heck is it? I've never seen water dancing on its own! I've never heard stories of a candle flying by itself, and you saw it as clearly as I. If something is not natural, if something is not in nature to do, then by all heavens, it is supernatural to me!"
His last sentence was uttered in mounting rage. His face had blushed red and his fists closed, but it wasn't a direct threat to Yuri: it was merely the frustration of his powerlessness to defeat what was beyond his comprehension.

Yuri accepted his views, but still said in a low tone
"How long has this been happening?"
"How long? Never, it started only today."
"Then I think you're the cause of this haunting, Alistair. You are the reason why Barton's still around. You haven't come to terms with his death. Nor you, nor Anita. Telling her to accept that seems to be beyond human strength but you at least are more reasonable than her, you still see reality as it is. Accept your failure, it was not your fault. You have to move on. Speak with your wife, convince her of this and when you come to terms with it Barton will leave you again."

Alistair heard and retreated. That hypothesis had not come to him before, but it made some sense. Yuri, on the other hand, deciding he still had to shake Anita's views somewhat challenged her openly

"Anita, don't you think Barton is too precocious for a child with only one day? He can already walk around the house and knock things over. Isn't this odd for you?"
Anita looked at him surprised. There was some rationality in her yet and Yuri's question sunk hard into it. She bit her tongue and replied with a decreasing, less and less assuring voice
"No, no... he's just... a special child. He's my baby and he has come back to me!"

She remained silent, but it was apparent she was not in peace. She retreated into a semblance of absent-mindedness as she tried to reconcile her newly returned child with the fact that he had been born the previous day. Something in her mind spoke of the impossibility of it all, and she remained lost in thought.

Seeing this, and understanding that Anita began to slowly understand what was going on, Yuri spoke for everybody

"There are other possibilities for this haunting, for it is indeed Barton's ghost that has come back to the house. I think he may have been called by the immense dedication of his mother, and the relentless inability to allow his death. But this dedication may not be the only thing locking Barton in this world. Many times, ghosts are held on this side for the presence of a material focus or the unfulfilment of a special task. I doubt Barton had any pressing task to achieve so I'm leaning for the material focus. The problem is: in so short a life, what could have become so important to him, to what would he be so attached that could become a focus for his spirit? I can think of only one thing..."

"The rattle!" said Nikola with a burst of comprehension. "Is there a rattle in the house, Alistair?"

"There was, Barton's rattle. I buried it with him."

Suddenly, they heard the rattling again. The door to the guests' bedroom had opened of its own accord and Eva, whiter than the walls, tiptoed into the main room

"It is here again!" she waveringly moaned.

They were distracted by Eva's appearance and the return of the rattle. As Yuri had feared, Barton had not left the house. Suddenly, the priest turned to Alistair and asked

"And did Barton's rattle sound like this?"

The expected answer came immediately "Yes, very much like this."

"Then perhaps the rattle is the focus but since it is buried with Barton, it is beyond our reach."

"Why, Yuri? Surely, Barton was buried near here, wasn't it Alistair?"

"Yes... just under that tree over there. See?"

"So," continued Nikola, "we simply go there, take the rattle and break it apart."

Yuri and Eva protested vehemently "that's desecration! I cannot allow you to do that!"

Anita's voice sounded suddenly, disturbing and incoherent in the middle of the argument

"No, it isn't. I took it from there."

Everybody stopped at once and looked at Anita.

"What did you take?" asked Gregor.

"The rattle. I took it from the coffin before it was buried."

Anita was still absent-minded, speaking automatically as if in a trance, compelled to speak by some other will. She remained in conflict within herself: she still wanted Barton near her, but the clash between her desirous will and her reason within reality was being slowly won by the latter. Reluctantly, Anita was forcing herself to speak against her desires, and that she did with the utmost sufferance and effort. Yuri's voice sounded soothing and relaxing

"Where is it, Anita? Where did you keep the rattle?"

"In my drawer, besides my bed."

Her eyes were dry, but they seemed to not hold her tears for long.

"Take me there, Anita. Give me the rattle."

Anita got up and followed by Nikola and Yuri went into the bedroom. Slowly, achingly slowly, she opened the drawer, took the rattle looking mesmerized at it. She looked at it as if her whole baby was there, as if it were infused with the very essence of Barton. She clinched it strongly to her chest with both hands and still automatically, expressionless, left the room. Yuri put his arm around her shoulders and led her to the door

"Come with me, Anita. We've got to give Barton his toy for him to be peaceful again. Come with me."

Anita followed, without contesting. She held the rattle dearly to her, but she had begun to weep.

Yuri and Anita left the house. Two wolves emerged from the nearby woods, as if summoned by something or someone. The rest of the group followed. Anita and Yuri paced slowly, and the wolves remained at a fair distance of them, alternately looking at them and the tree where Barton's body rested. Alistair went ahead of them to the barn and brought back two or three shovels. Nikola, with his hand in his pistol, followed Anita and Yuri while the others offered escort ahead of them. They arrived to the tree without the wolves moving any nearer, but when Alistair began digging in the snow, a bombardment of snow balls coming from mid air flurried onto them. Yuri held his holy symbol, but as he began to conjure Barton, it simply flew from his hand. Yuri could feel a stronger force fighting against his grip and effectively wrestling his holy symbol from him.

"Telekinesis! Drat!"

The shower of snow balls stopped and the two wolves came running in with deadly intent. Alistair begged for a weapon and Gheata lent him his flail then unsheathed his own hand-and-a-half sword. Nikola drew his pistol and set ready to fire at a wolf that might run in his direction. But the others were ill prepared and the first wolf was on Gregor before this could react. Still, he dexterously avoided it. His next swing was deadly and pierced the beast from side to side through his heart. It gasped, the blood spurted tingeing the snow with ominous red, and died almost instantly. The other wolf made a run on Eva who, distracted by the one that had attacked Gregor, had kept her back to it, but a well placed blow by Gheata saved her from being actually attacked. As the wolf leapt at her, Gheata's full swing severed its head from its body and its life ebbed instantly.

All was silent. The two wolves had been defeated without mercy. Alistair dropped the flail, took his shovel again and feverishly began to dig and dig until in no time the coffin was exposed.

"Now, all we have to do is open this and put the rattle inside. I'll..."

Just as he was going to open it, Yuri stopped him, holding his hand

"Don't. There must be another way."

Alistair begged despaired "Please, let me do it."

and Nikola seconded him. Yuri reluctantly yielded and stepped back. Alistair asked for the rattle and opened the coffin. She assented and he tossed the rattle into the coffin, and closed it promptly. In that instant, a wail of grief pierced everybody's ears and finally Barton became visible. He was holding to his mother dearly, she held him with all her love and strength, but all of them could see the adorable baby being pulled from her irresistibly by an unseen hand, while vanishing at the same time. Anita tried to hold him overdoing her own strength but Barton was gone.

Anita collapsed to the ground, crying without restraint.

"Barton, Barton... For the second time I lose you... Oh, Barton, dear child..."

Alistair came to embrace her, and planted a kiss on her forehead and holding her with love. He eased his hand into her long hair, and caressed it without speaking a word. Eva and Gheata decided to cover the coffin once more, while the others looked away from the intimate couple.

At length, Alistair stood and said

"I cannot thank you strongly enough. The loss of Barton again will be a heavy blow for Anita, but I trust in time she'll understand that was the only solution. The spirit was killing her, she was weaker I reckon, and she'll know this spirit was not truly Barton. It was not natural. Perhaps with time, we'll even have another child, one that is truly alive, and make her forget about Barton. Thank you once more.

I'm not rich, but I'll offer you what I have. Come inside, and I'll make you a hot meal. No doubt you'll be wanting to leave in the afternoon, since the morning isn't old yet. I'll offer you some rations for the way, you may need them. Come, warm by the fire and prepare as well as you can to go back to your life. Come, friends, and thank you again."

Sessions 20 – DM notes

Not much to say about this one, since it continues session 19.

The spell Yuri casts before turning Barton is Eagle's Splendour, to give him extra Charisma for the turning. In Yuri's dissertation about the Ghost, one can see his player had been reading the Guide to Ghosts (which I had lent him) for serious. I was pleased to see that in game terms.

In the end, I was happy with how this adventure ran.