

Ken of Ghastria's campaign

General notes:

The campaign begins in Darkon in late 751, about one year after the Requiem transformed Il Aluk into Necropolis. As a starting point, I used John W. Mangrum's short adventure, *Near at Hand* (from *The Forgotten Children* netbook), to give the players a sense of Darkon's recent history and of the creepiness of Ravenloft in general. The sessions recounted here describe everything from that point on.

If you haven't read *Near at Hand*, all you need to know is that *Room to Grow* opens with two of the PCs escorting an insane dwarf to the Clangor Asylum in Maykle. The asylum then becomes the focus for the events in ***Room to Grow***, followed by a trip to Nevuchar Springs in ***The Bad Seed***.

The campaign stresses mystery solving and role playing. The players, though veterans, were relatively unfamiliar with Ravenloft, aware of it only as a setting that (in their minds) had undead around every corner. I decided to use this conception in my favor. Thus, the players spend most of the time in *Room to Grow* and *The Bad Seed* believing that their chief adversaries are undead in nature. The main menaces, however, are evil fey. (When the player of Krysta freely chose the Redhead feat at character creation, it wasn't easy keeping the grin off my face.) Also, the sessions occasionally use "Buffy"-style humor to offset and enhance the darker moments.

One rules change: When it came to druids, I went with the 2nd edition *Domains of Dread* attitude that there are no PC druids, since any druid in Ravenloft is probably insane. That always made sense to me. (And conveniently, it becomes a major plot point in the campaign.)

All players started at 1st level, which can be a death sentence in Ravenloft, but I wanted them to feel a sense of mortality. I knew they'd have an opportunity to get to 2nd or even 3rd level before the climax of *The Bad Seed*.

I must thank the Ravenloft community on the late Kargatane site, who helped me answer the big question in *The Bad Seed*: "What does one do with a bushel of insane brainstems?" With the conclusion of *The Bad Seed*, the campaign has paused, as one of the other players is taking his turn in our group's DM/campaign rotation for a few months.

The PCs:

Dragomir Anders (not his real name) – a LN half-Vistani wizard specializing in evocation. His father, of the Canjar bloodline, was a swindler who abandoned his family years ago; Dragomir has not seen him since. Dragomir is not above pulling a scam himself, however, and he uses a tarokka deck quite well. (He certainly doesn't have the gift of Second Sight, but he does have the Tarokka Natural feat from *Champions of Darkness*.) He has two sisters, the youngest of whom is running a brothel in Borca. (Despite the players' lack of Ravenloft knowledge, they've certainly given me juicy

subplots for future use.). His closest friend is the caliban Aagute. He is a passionate, extremely curious man.

Boris – a CG half-elven ranger and a Darkonian native. Originally hired by Dragomir to escort him through eastern Darkon, he finds himself caught up in the developing menace. He believes his mother was slain by a vampire when he was young, so he focuses his fighting talent on the destruction of the undead. He is very observant and patient.

Aagute – a CG caliban barbarian. Tall and bear-like, the hairy caliban knows very little of his past. He dimly recalls that he was once a human who was in love, but an angry wizard was jealous. When the woman rejected the wizard's perverse offers of love, the wizard slew her and turned Aagute into what he is now. He can't even remember his real name, or the name of the wizard, but "Aagute" stuck in his memory for some reason. He had no friends until Dragomir found him in the alleyways of Borca and befriended him. The compassionate and surprisingly wise caliban now happily serves as Dragomir's comrade and bodyguard. (Aagute's player is leaving the truth of his past entirely in my hands. Muahahaha!)

Krysta O'Shanna – a CG human priest of the Morninglord. A native of Darkon whose family moved to Barovia for unknown reasons when she was a child, Krysta has found her calling in the service of the Morninglord. However, Darkon continues to haunt her for whatever reason. Last year, her parents were visiting relatives in Il Aluk when the Requiem struck. And now, after maintaining a correspondence with the young Evan D'Aubric (see below), she finds herself returning to Darkon to help the boy. She has a warm and very forceful personality, with little patience for the intolerant or the cruel.

Evan D'Aubric – a CG human fighter. A teenager, Evan left home after a loved one's death at the hands of a vampire – or so he believes. (Yes, like Boris. As I said earlier, the players had "undead" in their minds when it came to Ravenloft, but I let them create their backgrounds, knowing that, as DM, I could reveal the "truth" later.) Young and somewhat foolish, Evan tries to follow the advice of his companions, especially his friend Krysta. (Note: Evan's player, a teenager herself, is the daughter of Aagute's player.)

Arvik – a NG human fighter from Sanguinia. A burly and VERY smelly hunter, Arvik was searching for food for his family when he became lost in a fierce snowstorm. He eventually staggered out into a land of green grass and rolling hills. Still, he collapsed from physical exhaustion and found himself in the Clangor Asylum in Maykle. Hygienically challenged and a little dim, Arvik is having a difficult time with the customs of the more "civilized" people of Darkon.

Secris Tern ("Turnkey") – a CN human rogue. Possibly an outlander, this shifty "locksmith" finds himself at the doors of the Clangor Asylum after a futile search for his village, which seemed to vanish into the Mists one night. (Or perhaps it was *him* who did the vanishing...) Turnkey tends to think with his mouth first, and his ethics are questionable, but his skills have kept the others from abandoning him to his fate – so far.

“Room to Grow”: session 1

Date: November 2, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: Maykle, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir (Kevin), Aagute (Brian), Krysta (Dave), Evan D’Aubric (Rose)

NPC’d this session: Boris (Andy)

FOLLOWING ON THE EVENTS OF “NEAR AT HAND” FROM *THE FORGOTTEN CHILDREN* NETBOOK...

As Dragomir and Boris prepare to accompany the dwarf Eisen and the insane Dunkel Kralle to the Clangor Asylum in Maykle, Dragomir’s caliban companion Aagute stretches in the damp, pre-dawn air about a mile away. He’s happy to be on the move again after a miserable night in the rain. A slight, yet breathtakingly beautiful young woman approaches out of the woods. She wears a simple cotton shift, and has long black hair, smooth alabaster skin, and an enticing smile. Her hands are behind her back. (DM Note: This is a *poludnica*, an evil fey described in *The Book of Sacrifices*.)

They engage in slight conversation, but when Aagute asks for her name, she smiles and says, “Madness.” Aagute, for a terrifying moment, staggers as he feels his sanity lurch at the edge of a black abyss, but he rights himself, both physically and mentally. The woman, grinning now, reveals a blood-encrusted sickle. She lunges forward and slices across the caliban’s chest, wounding him deeply. Aagute responds with a mighty swing of his greataxe! The woman (if that’s what she is) tries to flee, but Aagute finishes her off without hesitation.

After binding his wound as best he can, Aagute moves off to locate his friend Dragomir. Fortunately, the heavy rains of the previous day have left an easy trail to follow. By midday, Aagute finds Dragomir, who quickly introduces the caliban to the half-elven ranger and the dwarven guardsman. Boris, after hearing Aagute’s tale, wonders if this has anything to do with a recent string of deaths and disappearances on the Darkon roads. He tells the group that he’ll catch up with them at the asylum, and he backtracks Aagute’s path to investigate.

Thanks to Aagute’s strength, the other travelers (and the travois-bound Dunkel) reach Maykle by early afternoon. After dealing with the gatekeeper’s initial fear at the sight of Aagute, the group enters the grounds of the Clangor Asylum and makes the acquaintance of another traveler, Krysta O’Shanna. Apparently a cleric of some sort, she heals Aagute’s wound and mentions that she is here to find a friend, Evan D’Aubric; word had reached her that Evan was at the asylum, recovering from an undisclosed illness.

(DM Note: *Ravenloft Gazetteer II*, which describes the Clangor Asylum, came out after this session, so the major NPCs described below are different from those in that book.)

The asylum is a blocky, rectangular structure that seems to be waging a slow, but losing battle against thick vines, which reach out like jealous hands toward the barred windows.

Walking through the grounds, attendants in white coats accompany a number of patients in the returning sunlight. The group is escorted inside, where they meet the three senior staff members:

- **Dr. Waldemar Rollin** (Ari 2/Exp 5), a stocky, well-built man with thinning black hair and a small, but warm smile; he’s the chief surgeon (*visual*: Spanish horror actor Paul Naschy)
- **Dr. Bastian Reed** (Exp 4), a tall, curt, unapologetic man; he is the head administrator, as well as a physician and surgeon (*visual*: actor James Woods)
- **Warden Brigitte Eaton** (Clr 3/Exp 1), a beautiful, athletic woman who serves as a spiritual healer for the patients; she is a cleric of the Church of Ezra (*visual*: Jennifer Garner of “Alias”)

Dr. Rollin greets them politely; he’s clearly fascinated by the caliban Aagute. Rollin summons Reed and two orderlies to attend to and admit the growling, screaming Dunkel. Eisen bids a sad farewell to the travelers. He thanks Dragomir for his help, saying that although he and Boris could not save Dunkel’s mind, they may have saved the mad dwarf from a far worse fate.

Rollin offers a mild apology for Reed’s abrupt manner, explaining that he’s been under much stress this month. The number of patients has sharply increased, and the Center (as the staff prefers to call the asylum) is nearly at capacity. Krysta asks about Evan. She learns that the young man was brought here two weeks ago, suffering from mental and physical fatigue. He has had intense, feverish nightmares, inspired by the death of a family member underneath a vampire’s fangs years ago.

When the group first meets Warden Eaton, she is wearing the customary traveling garb of a priest of Ezra: chain mail, a tabard featuring a flaming sword crossed by a leafy branch, and a mace. Upon learning that Krysta is aligned with worship of the Morninglord, Brigitte is visibly mortified: “That ... cult?” (Krysta knows that her church has little influence in Darkon.) Tensions rise briefly, but Brigitte does not pursue discussion, and Rollin asks her to escort the travelers to a waiting area until he can arrange a time for Krysta to see Evan.

Warden Eaton tries (not so gently at times) to find out about the religious affiliation of the travelers. She tells them that the Time of Unparalleled Darkness is fast approaching, and only Ezra can provide people with the moral strength to do what is necessary to defeat the Legions of the Night. Although she finds no easy converts to the cause, she remains quite interested in their backgrounds; she has been working non-stop in the Center since her arrival three months earlier, and she is desperate to hear of experiences outside the asylum’s iron gates. She seems particularly fascinated by Dragomir and his self-professed search for knowledge.

She leaves to return to her duties, and the travelers look at some of the books lining the shelves in this small study. They find many medical books, including a recent book on surgical techniques and anatomy from a surgeon in Lamordia, as well as a well-traveled

romance novel and a textbook on the varieties and treatment of lycanthropy. The book deals largely with folklore; no physical cure for lycanthropy has been found, although powerful clerical spells have met with limited success.

Krysta shares what she knows of the Church of Ezra. There are four main sects or “devotions” of the religion in the Core, varying from an all-embracing belief in redemption to a darker, “by any means necessary” approach against the forces of corruption. The leadership of the Darkonese sect, based in Nevuchar Springs, follows the latter path. Dragomir says that he is on his way to Nevuchar Springs, looking to find treatment for Aagute’s caliban “condition,” as well as to track down rumors of lost tomes of ancient healing knowledge. Krysta is intrigued and offers to go along with them once they’re done here.

The travelers discuss what they’ve seen so far. They’re somewhat disturbed, not only by Brigitte’s religious fervor and Reed’s rudeness, but by the general atmosphere of the place. The faint echoes of screams seem omnipresent. Krysta wants to get Evan out of the Center as quickly as possible. They also realize that since the transformation of Il Aluk and the disappearance of the ruler Azalin a year ago, the various parts of Darkon have been regressing into virtual fiefdoms. If they were to seek a person in Maykle with the authority to overrule Rollin and the Center, they might not have much luck.

A short time later, Krysta receives word that she can see Evan. She tells the other travelers that they are welcome to accompany her. They go upstairs, their thoughts interrupted by the echoing sounds of screams and ravings. They are accompanied by a leering orderly named Thomas, who practically drools when in the presence of Krysta or Brigitte. Evan arrives from an opposite door, escorted by Dr. Reed; the stern-looking physician tells them that Evan may be allowed to leave tomorrow, pending a final examination in the morning. He steps out of the room, but Thomas remains behind, as dictated by the Center’s policy.

This is the first time that Krysta and Evan have met in person. Krysta feels quite protective of the teenager, and Evan is eager to leave, although he says the staff has treated him well. He seems to be in fine physical and mental condition. The travelers toss a few questions at Thomas regarding the Center and recent events. He doesn’t provide much new information, but he does confirm that there’s been a big increase in patients lately. After a few minutes, Dr. Rollin appears and says Evan should return to his room for now. If all goes well, he’ll be released tomorrow. Krysta asks if she can take Evan *now*, but Rollin politely insists that it’s in everyone’s best interest – including Evan’s – if a proper final examination is conducted. He invites Krysta and the others to stay the night at the Center, if they wish. Guestrooms can be made available. They’re also welcome to share dinner with the senior staff. The travelers accept, and they regretfully part with Evan for the time being.

Warden Eaton escorts the trio on a tour of the Center. She is dressed quite differently now, yet her medical gown still bears the symbol of Ezra. Brigitte’s attitude is similarly toned down; she engages the group in polite conversation about the Center and its goals.

As the sole cleric and “spiritual healer” present, she quietly expresses her exhaustion, but she firmly believes in Dr. Rollin and his methods. When asked about Dr. Reed, she says that he began work at the Center only days before she did. She adds that although he is a skilled surgeon in his own right, earning much respect in his homeland of Lamordia, Reed has been increasingly involved with the administration of the Center, trying to keep it running in the wake of increasing costs and patients. Dr. Rollin is constantly working on new ways to treat the mentally deranged; Brigitte says he’s pioneering a technique that severs a nerve near the brain and brings peace to the extremely violent cases.

On the tour, the group sees both Ward B, for the more peaceful patients (Evan has been treated here), and Ward A, for the more dangerous patients. Screams, curses, and insane babbling assail the travelers’ ears as they walk down the halls. Two comments in particular catch their attention: One is some sort of nursery-school rhyme from a disheveled patient called Enday; the other is a raving shout about a woman with white skin and insane eyes, and a black void. *Hmmm, this sounds familiar*, Aagute thinks. The group asks Brigitte about this patient. She believes his name is Karsten. He was found on the roads a couple of weeks ago, his mind completely shattered. She says that she hasn’t been able to reach him. When the travelers describe Aagute’s near-fatal encounter that morning, Brigitte’s eyes register some hope, thinking this information might be the key she needs to restore Karsten’s sanity.

The group also sees the grim-looking operating theater below the main floor. Blood stains on the floor and the smell of ammonia leave lasting impressions. Brigitte is saddened that such radical steps are required. (Dragomir and Krysta both sense that Warden Eaton considers her inability to help some patients to be a troubling, personal failure.)

Later, after they have had a chance to freshen up, they all meet for dinner. It’s a decent serving of food, certainly the best that the travelers (especially Aagute) have had in a while. Dr. Reed excuses himself as they enter, telling Rollin that he has duties to perform. As he steps into the hallway, they hear Reed mutter to someone, “I can’t *believe* that he’s letting them stay here!” A moment later, a startled Brigitte enters, wearing a flattering but simple dark dress. She offers an embarrassed and apologetic smile at the trio.

All the staffers are eager to hear stories of the road. Rollin, now wearing a velvet smoking jacket, and the other doctors ask many questions of Aagute, particularly about his dietary habits and sexual activity. Aagute glares when one physician absent-mindedly asks about taking a sample, but the caliban actually feels quite at ease: He can’t recall when people have treated him so politely and without fear. Dragomir and Krysta likewise consider whether their earlier concerns about the Center were justified. Dragomir relates his horrifying encounter of the previous evening to Krysta, Brigitte, and others. Brigitte later mentions that she has some books that the wizard may be interested in seeing, and she invites him to come to her quarters later that evening.

With a few cigar puffs, sips of port, and whispers of anticipation, dinner draws to a close.

“Room to Grow”: session 2

Date: November 2-3, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: Maykle, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Aagute (Brian), Boris (Andy), “Turnkey”/Secris Tern (Mike), Krysta O’Shanna (Dave), Evan D’Aubric (Rose)

Currently, the group is dining as guests of the Clangor Asylum in the city of Maykle in Darkon. They plan to leave the next day after the final examination of Evan is completed. As dinner concludes, Warden Brigitte Eaton, priest of Ezra, invites Dragomir to her quarters to show him books that he might be interested in. On the way, they pass a locked door with a sign that says, “Danger. Authorized staff only.” When Dragomir inquires about this, Brigitte says the room contains natural and alchemical mixtures and potions, which have been harvested, bought, or created by Dr. Rollin in his experiments to treat the clinically insane. Some of the potions are poisonous, and others could even cause brief bouts of insanity.

Brigitte unlocks the door to show the young wizard. The small room contains a workbench with a mortar and pestle, test tubes, slides, and other testing equipment. Surrounding are shelves holding about three dozen containers – some liquid, some solid, and some gaseous (complete with airtight cork stoppers). Most of the names on the labels are unfamiliar to Dragomir, but the containers are color coded, with red labels signifying the most dangerous.

As Dragomir and Brigitte continue toward her room, Aagute finds himself the subject of relentless but harmless questioning by a junior member of the staff, Dr. Xanthus (*visual*: Matt Frewer), who is eager to learn as much as possible about the caliban as he can. Dr. Rollin, the chief surgeon of the asylum, follows a step or two behind, smiling and listening. Eventually, Rollin casually dismisses Xanthus, who backs away quickly. Rollin asks, “Aagute, excuse me, but do you ever wonder – if your condition is at all related to lycanthropy?” The caliban doesn’t understand at first, but he says his condition is the result of cursed magic. Rollin politely asks if Aagute would submit to an examination tomorrow before he leaves: blood pressure, flexibility, stamina, blood sample, and perhaps even a stool sample. “I’ve never had the opportunity to examine a caliban in such perfect, peaceful conditions. Others like you have not been as lucky to have friends like Mr. Anders. It may give me the opportunity to help any other calibans who come this way.” Aagute, who is amazed by the kind behavior he has encountered today, considers it. Rollin wishes him a good night’s rest after his long day.

Meanwhile, Boris the ranger receives permission to enter the asylum. (Dragomir and Aagute had left word that a companion would be joining them soon.) He tells Aagute that he went to the spot where the caliban had been attacked, but there was no sign of the woman that Aagute fought; her body apparently had been carried away, perhaps by two people. Boris and Aagute then spot Krysta O’Shanna, who is having a difficult time

extricating herself from the attentions of Thomas, the orderly. He has been following her ever since dinner ended, suggesting that she not be alone in such a scary place. Thomas has trouble taking no for an answer, but Aagute’s hot breath on the back of his neck causes him to rethink his plans for the night. Thomas backs off, but not before Dr. Reed, the administrator, appears and angrily chastises the orderly. Reed whispers something, which drains the color from Thomas’ face. Boris can’t make out what’s being discussed, but he does pick up the words “storm” and “volunteer.”

As Thomas skulks away, Reed says, “I apologize, Miss O’Shanna. He’s an idiot, but a strong idiot, and sometimes we must take what we can get. Few people come to a place like this if they can find work elsewhere.” He adds, “You are a distraction, though. All of you. You should leave as soon as possible.”

Boris, Aagute, and Krysta retire to their separate rooms. (Aagute was going to share a room with Dragomir, but the half-Vistani has not yet returned. Aagute is not surprised.)

In Ward B of the asylum, Evan is roused from his sleep by an odd shuffling sound, as though several people were moving awkwardly down the hallway. Thinking this is odd, the teenager looks through the barred window on his door, but he sees nothing. However, the patient in the cell across the hallway, also attracted by the noise, gapes in horror as the sight of *something* – but no sound comes out. And then, for several horrifying seconds, Evan sees something, too: an emaciated man wearing a black suit and tie, with grayish, shriveled skin, deep-set black eyes, and a lipless grin that reeks of malevolence. The figure just as quickly vanishes, and Evan retreats to his bed, noticing at that moment that all the voices in the hallway – especially the screams and moans from Ward B – have gone silent.

PRIVATE TO DRAGOMIR:

Walking with Brigitte toward her quarters, Dragomir sees that her room is, not surprisingly, next to the chapel. The symbol of Ezra (a burning sword with a branch across it) dominates the altar.

The decor of her room is quite comfortable and not at all Spartan. Brigitte's demeanor continues to be pleasant and seductive. In addition to the flowers and the decorative candlesticks, however, is a large gauntlet, displayed within a glass case on the wall. Upon closer examination, Dragomir sees that the gauntlet "holds" a chain bearing the symbol of Ezra. Brigitte says that the gauntlet belonged to someone she cared about -- a warrior who introduced her to the saving power of Ezra.

She touches Dragomir's face and whispers, “Do you believe in destiny, Dragomir? That man, Cyran, found me at the lowest point of my life. His appearance was seemingly random, much like yours today. He helped me, when there was no reason for me to expect help. It was destiny. And now, I am here, in this house of the mad and hopeless, my spirit beaten down every day. Joy -- pleasure -- seem like distant memories. And now,

you are here, and I find you incredibly desirable." (*DM Note: The “Cyrán” could be Cyrán Devichi, who is described in The Book of Secrets netbook.*)

Dragomir, conscious of his own psychological issues regarding relationships, politely declines the generous offer of sharing her bed. Brigitte is disappointed; the last few months have been very lonely ones.

They continue to discuss other matters, however, and Brigitte shows him a book that he might be interested in. It's a scholarly treatise on mental health and psychology, written by Dr. Rudolph Van Richten, originally of Mordentshire. Brigitte comments that Van Richten's thoughts are well respected by Dr. Rollin, although Rollin has certainly pursued his own course of research. (Van Richten apparently disappeared some months ago.) Dragomir then thinks, what the hell, and he and the magnificent Brigitte have great sex.

Some time later, as they talk in bed afterward, Dragomir thinks he sees something. He glimpses a phantasmal eye, staring down at them. The eye suddenly goes wide and turns a blood-red color -- and then the screaming starts!

PRIVATE TO BORIS – Boris’ dream:

You are standing at the edge of a forest. You see your mother run past you, toward the thickest part of the forest. You chase after her. The forest gets thicker and thicker. The light can barely penetrate. You hear whispers in the trees, "He's come..." You reach a glade, where the thickness of the trees gives way to brilliant sunshine. Your mother turns. Her lips changes from vibrant red to a darker shade, that of blood. Fangs extend down from her upper teeth. As the sky turns black around you, she opens her arms and says, "Welcome home."

You are abruptly woken by the sounds of screaming.

PRIVATE TO KRYSTA – Krysta’s dream:

You are running through the woods. At first, you are nervous and fearful. The woods get thicker and darker, and you hear little voices calling out. Your fear is replaced by excitement and a delicious thrill of anticipation.

You run forward, into the deepest, darkest part of the woods. Everything goes black -- and suddenly gives way to a verdant green paradise. You stride forward across the long grass, and you realize that you're naked. You don't mind. You know that something is coming. You lay down on the grass, full of erotic anticipation. Your heart beats faster, someone is coming...! "Krysta ... you've come ..." A delicate hand reaches out toward you, the blades of grass bending away from it as if in fear. The hand gets closer....

You are abruptly woken by the sounds of screaming

Shortly thereafter, everyone in the Center is woken from a sound sleep (or, in the case of some of the group, not so sound) by a crescendo of horrified screams, as though the door

to a sealed chamber of the dammed had been suddenly flung open. The screams are coming from Ward B. Everyone runs to the area, just in time to find some orderlies gasping in horror. Five of the patients have been murdered. Dr. Rollin examines the bodies and says that the brainstems have been removed from each victim, yet so skillfully and surgically that Rollin seems awed by the talent. Dr. Reed arrives shortly thereafter.

The position of the bodies indicates that the victims were held facedown on the beds while the operation was performed, and the frozen grimace of pain on each face shows that they were alive during the painful procedure. Yet no one heard anything. The orderlies were making their rounds, but they were only gone for a few minutes. Did the insane patients notice anything? A quick check reveals the following:

- **Roxanne**, tied up in a straightjacket, screams, “It’ll get me, too!”
- **Jonathan** howls, “Dogs! Big dogs! Arooooo!”
- **Frederica** says calmly, “My dead lover came to visit me. I know he’ll be back.”
- **Mikhail** feverishly mutters, “...must keep talking, must keep talking... They’ll see me if I’m quiet.”
- **Enday** rhymes (as he always does), “Can’t call out / Can’t even cry / The gentlemen are coming by / Banging on shutters, trying all the doors / Mister Book needs seven hearts / And he ... wants ... yours!”

The other four patients saw nothing, slept through the whole thing, or were too far gone to give any information anyway. Or so they say. (Two of these four: **Karsten**, the young man who they suspect encountered the same woman that Aagute did in the forest, and **Dunkel**, the dwarf who was driven mad by his undead hand and subsequently brought to the asylum by the others. Karsten speaks only rarely, and Dunkel drools and gibbers in a constant state of rage. The remaining two – **Stewart** and **Pierpont** – were asleep.)

Krysta, worried about Evan, grabs an orderly and runs to Ward B to check on her young friend. Evan is fine, though slightly shaken by his bizarre encounter.

As the group and the doctors try to make sense of what went on, Aagute sits down on the floor and simply *listens*. He overhears the orderlies wonder what happened to Thomas. When he brings this to everyone’s attention, the group and Brigitte make their way to the lecherous orderly’s tiny quarters. Brigitte angrily voices her belief that the Eternal Order must be involved. She shows little patience with differing opinions.

The door has apparently been broken open, and the room shows signs of a struggle. Thomas is not there. Dragomir casts *detect magic*, and he notices a glow on two vials: one empty, one full of a blue liquid. (The reading on the empty vial is residual.) Boris’ search of the quarters reveals a secret compartment containing a ruby earring, which also gives off a magical reading. Dragomir mentions that he got a glimpse of a red, phantasmal “eye” floating in the air in Brigitte’s quarters last night. He saw it for a split-second. It vanished just before the screaming was heard.

One of the guards at the gate arrives at this time, escorting a somewhat dirty, tired-looking man named Secris. He arrived at the entrance around dinnertime, looking for

shelter. The guard took pity on him and let him sleep on the ground until the morning, but the screaming awakened him as well, and he told the guard that he wanted to help them as a way of repaying their courtesy. When Brigitte asks, “Well, what can you do?” the man volunteers that he used to be a locksmith. They go back to Ward A and ask Secris to check the locks to the rooms of the murdered patients. He detects no signs of tampering.

After a search of the asylum uncovers no suspects, other bodies, or further clues, Dr. Rollin suggests that they go back to their rooms, try to get some sleep, and deal with this matter afresh in the morning. When they wake up a few hours later, they find that Warden Brigitte Eaton has gone to the Maykle authorities to report the crime. Dragomir magically identifies the items in Thomas’ room as a large *potion of clairvoyance* (3 doses left) and an *earring of persuasion*, which the half-Vistani promptly confiscates. How the orderly came to acquire these items is not known. {*DM Note: The phantasmal “eye” was Thomas’. The orderly had taken sips of the potion to spy on the lovely Brigitte in bed. The eye turned red when the Gentlemen attacked. The players – unfamiliar with Ravenloft’s alterations to magic – never made the connection between the potion and the eye.*}

Dr. Rollin asks if the group will assist him in finding out what happened. He says they are under no obligation, and he even adds that Evan is free to be released; he has no intention of keeping Evan in the Center if he can’t guarantee his safety, especially if the young man already has a friend here to claim him. The group agrees to help.

Knowing that an “official” investigation will begin shortly, the group then resumes its unofficial snooping. Dragomir successfully convinces most of the staff that his cards can uncover information, although some – especially Dr. Reed – remain skeptical. After he talks to the various members of the staff, he doesn’t believe that they are concealing any information about the murders. (He realizes that they may still have secrets, just not secrets about the murders.) They can’t help but wonder about Rollin, however, who is a skilled surgeon and alchemist, as well as keenly interested in surgical experimentation.

Using a wall mirror and his *tarokka* cards, Dragomir then tries to find the missing orderly, Thomas. What he sees in his scrying attempt is disturbing. It’s Thomas, but barely recognizable as such. He is wrapped in a straightjacket, and his face is one of babbling, pain-wracked madness. Dragomir tries to find the location, but he gets an odd sensation, as though Thomas (or what’s left of him) is not in the “real” world. Dragomir then “pulls back” his view in an attempt to see what’s around him. Dragomir’s eyes widen in horror and rage, and the wizard suddenly begins pummeling the wall mirror with incredible fury! Aagute and Boris leap upon him and hold the wizard down until his rage passes. His hands are covered in dozens of bloody cuts from the shattered mirror.

When he recovers his senses, Dragomir describes two figures, very similar to the being that Evan spotted in the hallway the night before. They were immediately aware of his scrying, and one even wagged his finger in disapproval! (*DM Note: These are the Gentlemen from the “Hush” episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and written up in “Noises in the Night” in The Book of Sacrifices netbook, with some alterations on my*

part. Dragomir failed a Horror save at the sight.) Brigitte uses the healing power of Ezra to treat Dragomir’s self-inflicted wounds.

Despite what just happened, Dragomir is intent on following up on this vision. They need to find answers, especially since there’s no way of knowing if more murders will occur tonight.

Evan, accompanied by an orderly, talks to some of the more coherent inmates in Ward A. The slightly hunchbacked Enday continues to rhyme constantly, and his earlier rhyme after the murders has made him particularly interesting. Evan has a difficult time getting through to the strange man, whose rhyming answers are mysterious, to say the least. Enday suggests that death is close by, but Evan wonders what he meant by “the rebellious green.”

Afterward, Dragomir suggests to the others that the *potion of clairvoyance* might help him contact or locate the strange beings. Others point out the inherent risk to Dragomir’s mind, especially after what happened that afternoon.

Aagute has been pondering the other questions: Why did some people see something, yet others saw nothing? Even more interesting, why did the killers go to the more violent Ward A, since the patients in Ward B would have been easier to subdue? And just what does a person *do* with brainstems, anyway? When Boris asks Rollin this question, the surgeon nervously observes that these aren’t just brainstems, but brainstems from dangerously insane people. Dragomir, aware of Rollin’s knowledge of alchemy, asks what could be created from this. Rollin can’t even imagine.

Boris asks Dr. Rollin to look at the medical records and see if there’s a common element among the victims. The answer: All were clinically insane, but the causes were different. Evan then asks about the person across the hallway from his room – what’s wrong with that person? Apparently, that person was diagnosed with “brain fever,” just as Evan had been when he first was brought here.

Aagute painstakingly tries to assemble the pieces of the puzzle. The caliban wonders if the killers can only be seen by people who have some sort of sickness in their heads. Certainly, most of the certifiably insane patients saw something, but people with less severe conditions, like brain fever, could see something, too, yet *they* were passed over as victims when they would have been easy prey.

Answers still need to be found ... and the fall of night is but hours away.

~~ END ~~

“Room to Grow”: session 3

Date: November 3, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: Maykle, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Aagute (Brian), “Turnkey”/Secris (Mike), Boris (Andy), Krysta O’Shanna (Dave), Evan d’Aubric (Rose), Arvik (Nanci)

During the afternoon, Warden Brigitte Eaton returns, along with the local Maykle constabulary. Chief Constable Gilros and his two officers ask many questions, and Gilros is understandably suspicious of the new arrivals, especially Dragomir and Aagute. However, the administrator, Dr. Waldemar Rollin, speaks up in their defense, which is enough for Gilros at the moment.

Gilros seems to be quite intelligent, not the classic “bumbling inspector.” After he and his officers interrogate the members of the party (who respond calmly and rationally), he seems convinced that the new arrivals are not involved. Secris, however, makes himself very hard to find during the officers’ investigations.

As the other inmates are questioned, Evan remembers his “cellmate” – more specifically, the patient in the room directly across from his own who also saw the gaunt humanoid figure last night. The patient’s name is **Arvik**, a burly but confused man who claims to have wandered in from another region. He was suffering from exposure to the elements, but Dr. Rollin allows him to be released. Arvik’s health is good, and Rollin says that until they know who or what committed the gruesome brainstem-removal murders, he can’t in good conscience keep an able man locked up helpless in a room.

Gilros asks Dragomir his opinion of the staff, which Dragomir volunteers. (He does not mention the magical earring and potions found near the missing orderly Thomas’ bed.) Later, when the officers have concluded their initial search of the area, Krysta and Evan question Gabriel Enday, the rhyming patient in the violent Ward A. The slightly hunchbacked Enday is certainly odd, but he answers their questions politely, if cryptically. Among his many comments:

Combat evil? Why, that’s madness.
Are you priest or adventuress?
Better foes would be the boneless
Root them out and make them homeless
Conflict comes – beware the warden
Doomed you be, lest you love the maiden

Clangor’s doctors are answerless
Their books and tomes leave them helpless
Assured they are in their cold might
Yet a new age shall put things right

Listen to me now, word for word?

Crazed am I, but you’re absurd!

Slippery facts you have inferred
Fatal paths you ... ah! My bird!

The last rhyme comes about when he turns to feed his "imaginary" bird, which Enday says lives in the old birdcage that he keeps under his bed. (The staff is aware of Enday's "pets," but Warden Eaton views it as a hopeful attempt at constructive, caring behavior from Enday.)

Back you must go, my friends unseen

Don't mind these fools, they're not too keen

A strong thunderstorm is predicted for the evening – at least that's what some people overheard from Dr. Bastian Reed's conversation the previous day. With more murders possibly in the offing for the evening and with no idea who or what is behind the gruesome brainstem removals, the adventurers wonder whom – if anyone – they can trust. Brigitte seems genuinely concerned for the welfare of the patients, but her devotion to the rigid doctrine of the Darkonese church of Ezra is quite strong. Dr. Reed is being secretive about *something*, and Dr. Rollin has been generous and open minded, but even he draws suspicion.

Dragomir picks a quiet spot and uses his *tarokka* deck to scry and “see” what Dr. Rollin is doing at that moment. As it turns out, Rollin is in the cell of a dwarven patient named Stragis, methodically and carefully removing a patch of skin from the oblivious (or drugged) dwarf. Dragomir hears Rollin say something about finding a cure for Stragis. He shares his observations with the others.

Rollin again invites the group to dinner. Since they have agreed to help him protect the patients and find out what's going on, it's the least he can do. Secris excuses himself after a quick meal, saying he's going to rest. He then sneaks into Dr. Rollin's study and looks around. Shortly thereafter, as the thunderous storm approaches, the lean and mean Dr. Reed also excuses himself.

The rest of the adventurers suspect something not quite right, so after a short dinner themselves (Rollin is a little ticked off by the many departures from his dinner table!), they descend the main stairs to the lower level, where the main operating theater is located. From behind the locked metal doors, they hear strange machinery in operation. Secris, who has rejoined them, picks open the lock like the skilled “locksmith” he is. (Yes, that's right, he's a locksmith. Ahem.)

Entering the room, they find a series of bizarre gadgets and wires. Sparks shower forth as the devices draw power from the storm. Inside, Dr. Reed and an orderly are performing a procedure on a patient strapped to a table with leather restraints. It's Dunkel Kralle – the insane one-handed dwarf that Dragomir and Boris met! As they challenge Reed, Dr. Rollin also arrives, drawn downstairs by the noise. He demands to know what's going on with this totally unauthorized procedure. Dr. Reed, caught off guard, explains his strong

belief in the potential of electrical shock therapy. (The adventurers had previously learned of his correspondence with a surgeon named Mordenheim in the domain of Lamordia about the “clinical power” of electricity.)

Before the discussion can continue, the entire operation chamber becomes completely SILENT. No voices at all. The group finds itself under attack by three loping, misshapen creatures that look like they had been men. In fact, two are wearing orderlies’ uniforms – and one of them is identified as Thomas, the missing orderly! Worse still, they’re not alone! Two gaunt men in undertakers’ clothes float noiselessly behind, yet most of the people can’t see them. (*DM Note: As Aagute had theorized, people with some sort of malady – like “brain fever” – have a better chance of piercing the Gentlemen’s veil of invisibility.*)

One of the bad things about silence is that most spells won’t work, which puts Dragomir and Krysta at a distinct disadvantage! Secris, Evan, and Aagute deal with the Gentlemen’s zombie-like “hounds,” while a scalpel-wielding Gentleman, who seems to shrug off any sort of physical attack, painfully slices into Dragomir. Krysta backs herself into a corner – and finds that she can speak again. The silence aura must have a limited range. The priestess of the Morninglord begins launching spells at her foe.

Dragomir is aided by an unexpected ally – Dunkel! The drooling, insane dwarf lunges at the Gentleman, which gives Aagute enough time to finish off the last of the “hounds” and deliver a staggering blow to the Gentleman – who stops smiling! That one hurt! The Gentlemen begin to retreat up the stairs. Brigitte finally joins in the action, too. Aagute, now fully enraged, cuts through the injured Gentleman, who noiselessly collapses. His companion, however, floats out the main entrance of the asylum and soundlessly soars straight **up** into the sky, where he is quickly lost in the turbulent rainstorm.

~~ END ~~

“Room to Grow”: session 4 (conclusion)

Date: November 3-5, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: Maykle, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Aagute (Brian), “Turnkey”/Secris (Mike)

NPC’d this session: Boris (Andy), Krysta (Dave), Evan d’Aubric (Rose), Arvik (Nanci)

In the aftermath of the Gentlemen’s attack, the adventurers stand in the darkened hallway of the Clangor Asylum, wondering what it was that they just fought. Nothing is left of the slain Gentleman but foul-smelling, ichor-stained clothes. Many of the gaslights are out, and the lightning from the slowly fading storm creates weird shadows around them. Warden Brigitte Eaton uses the blessings of Ezra to heal the slight injuries from the fight. They hear an argument brewing down the stairs in the operating theater. There they find

an orderly binding the arms of the insane dwarf Dunkel – stunned, but still alive, which relieves Dragomir, who feels he may owe the dwarf his life.

Dr. Waldemar Rollin is loudly berating Dr. Bastian Reed for conducting the totally unauthorized and unethical procedure on Dunkel. Reed argues that the “electrical shock therapy” devised by Dr. Mordenheim in Lamordia could revolutionize care for the mentally deranged, and he snidely adds that it’s a step above Dr. Rollin’s invasive procedures. The adventurers, by this point, have learned enough about the asylum to be disgusted with *both* men. Reed’s bizarre electrical apparatus is considerably beyond any technology they’ve even seen, to the point where – even to Dragomir – it looks like an evil arcane device.

Just then, the group hears a cry of pain from the hallway. They go back to the stairs and look up, just in time to see a bleeding orderly mumble in horror, “They’re *loose*...!” before he passes out. They look at each other and share the same bone-chilling thought: The inmates are free! They quickly recall how many patients are left: eight in the dangerous Ward A (the ninth, Dunkel, is out of action) and roughly an equal number in Ward B.

Rollin and Brigitte urge everyone to avoid seriously injuring the inmates, if possible. Dragomir, remembering his view of Rollin’s small alchemical lab, asks Rollin if he can create any sort of anesthetizing “bomb” that could knock out or stun someone from a distance. Rollin admits he’s never tried to create anything like that, but he seems intrigued by the challenge. However, he still needs to *get* to his lab.

Cautiously, they walk up the stairs back to the shadowy main hallway. They hear shouts from upstairs in the wards – along with a loud wolflike howl, which terrifies Secris, who has read Dr. Rollin’s journal entries about his questionable attempts to cure lycanthropy. They reason that the inmates might try to get weapons, and the kitchen seems like a good bet. Krysta, Evan, and Arvik go outside to look for escapees, while Boris escorts Dr. Rollin to his lab.

Secris, Dragomir, and Aagute move quietly and quickly toward the dining room and the kitchen beyond. Secris gets the drop on a crazed woman, Frederica, who had been waiting to carve him up with a meat cleaver. “I knew my dead husband would come back!” After a few punches, she falls unconscious, but not before gravely injuring Secris with the cleaver. Brigitte heals the wound.

More noises come from within the kitchen. A peek through the glass window in the door shows nothing other than a pot of boiling water. Dragomir, seeing a knife on a nearby carving table, uses a cantrip to levitate the object. Another inmate jumps up from his hiding place behind the table! He’s terrified that the invisible attackers have returned for his brain! Secris, Aagute, and Dragomir enter to deal with the inmate, Pierpont, but another inmate – Roxanne – reveals herself and throws the boiling water at Aagute. The caliban, though burned, grabs Roxanne and pins her to the ground. Secris confronts

Pierpont, who is unsure whether to attack Secris or the “invisible” knife wielder! Thanks to the confusion, Secris and Dragomir pummel the man into unconsciousness.

As they turn around, they learn that Brigitte has run upstairs to deal with the other inmates. The howling is louder! The trio goes up the stairs, where Secris again gets the advantage on an inmate: Jonathan, truly howling mad, was perched near the top step waiting to pounce on the noisier Aagute, but he’s unprepared for the stealthy Secris. The trio subdues him, and Secris – still worried about lycanthropy – checks Jonathan’s forearms. Yes, rectangular skin samples have been removed, just as with the dwarven patient Stragis.

One bit of good news: They can see that the door to Ward B remains sealed. Ward A is a different story. They see Brigitte fighting viciously with another inmate, Stewart, who has already knocked out an orderly. Aagute quickly pummels the man from behind. That leaves only three Ward A inmates left. Mikhail is nowhere to be seen, but Karsten, who had just come out of his catatonic state earlier that day, and the rhyming Gabriel Enday are both in their rooms. It’s obvious why Karsten didn’t leave, but Enday? When asked, the slightly misshapen man says the asylum is his home. Why should he leave? He asks Dragomir if he is a master of things arcane. Dragomir says he’s no master, but he does know things. Enday nods and asks Dragomir to talk to him – in private. The rhymer seems harmless, so Dragomir agrees. Brigitte tells Stefan, an orderly, to stay behind just in case. Aagute and Secris go outside to look for Mikhail, while Brigitte grabs the two remaining orderlies to search inside.

The fury of the storm is finally lessening, and Secris has no problem finding a series of bare footprints running through the mud into the neighboring trees. Since Mikhail mumbles constantly to keep “them” at bay, Secris and Aagute feel they’ll have little difficulty finding him. What they *do* hear, however, is something quite different: an odd growling sound coming from a few feet away. Aagute moves away to come at the foe from behind, while Secris uses his lantern to keep its attention focused on him. The growling gets louder, and one of the insane, zombie-like “hounds” leaps out at him! Secris evades its attack, cutting it with his short sword, and Aagute comes from behind and finishes it off, nearly cleaving it in two.

Secris opens his mouth to yell in terror – and nothing comes out! It gets VERY silent. Aagute’s voice is also gone. That means one of the Gentlemen is nearby in the dark woods! Secris doesn’t hesitate: He runs full speed back toward the asylum, and Aagute is only a step or two behind him.

Meanwhile, several minutes earlier...

As Enday starts talking to Dragomir, a ferret appears at the window of Enday’s cell. Enday says it’s a friend of his. The strange rhymer adds that he *knows* things. He has been given “gifts,” which he uses to help “the maiden.” Enday asks Dragomir what he thinks of thieves. Dragomir, slightly caught off guard by the ferret and the odd question, answers as best he can. Enday then says,

I like him not, a thief, a knave,
With fingers light and heart that's cold
I will get help from a new slave
Stefan, I say, this man now hold!

With that, the orderly Stefan lunges at Dragomir! Dragomir slips out of his grasp, but he can't totally avoid the stinging burst of sand that suddenly erupts from Enday's fingertips! Dragomir valiantly tries to punch Enday and break whatever control he has over Stefan, but Enday avoids the attack, and his nasty-looking ferret leaps up and savagely bites Dragomir on the shoulder. The half-Vistani drops. But just before he falls unconscious, he hears one last rhyme as Enday viciously yanks the *earring of persuasion* off Dragomir's ear:

My task now done, I must depart
But slay you now? No, that's unwise
My visions say you'll have a part
As I prepare the green's demise...

He awakens several minutes later as Brigitte completes another prayer to Ezra, healing the bite wound and the ripped earlobe. Enday has escaped, and an embarrassed Stefan apologizes to Dragomir. He says he just suddenly believed that Enday was his friend and that Dragomir was dangerous. Dragomir says he's not to blame. Brigitte adds that the animal bite was strangely difficult to heal. Whatever that ferret was, it wasn't normal. *(DM Note: The ferret is Maligned, using a "quickplate" from Privateer Press' Monsternomicon. Highly recommended, by the way.)*

As the other adventurers return, Dr. Rollin comes upstairs and is told that Enday is gone. The administrator's skin gets visibly pale as he hears the news. Secris discloses what he found in the journal about Rollin's nasty experiments on people he believed were lycanthropes. Brigitte is not happy!

After Aagute's intimidation and Dragomir's clever use of the *tarokka* to "reveal" the truth about Rollin, Rollin confesses that Enday was the only one who could keep the "curse" from taking hold of him. Apparently, weeks ago, Rollin was attacked in the woods by a vicious creature. Enday turned up at the asylum sometime later, and he convinced Rollin that he had been infected with lycanthropy and that only Enday's magics could keep him from turning into a savage, unthinking beast under the full moon. Since then, Rollin had been giving Enday the "royal treatment" at the asylum while he pursued his own surgical and alchemical solutions.

Rollin is now at the brink of despair. Dragomir says that Rollin can still live and pursue a cure, even if it means it must chain himself up during the full moon. Brigitte says, "That may not be possible." The Church of Ezra has an extremely black-and-white view when it comes to the supernatural. As far as Brigitte is concerned, Rollin is now "tainted with darkness" and can no longer serve as the chief of the asylum. She'll consider letting him have access to his laboratory, but she'll need approval from her superiors in Nevuchar

Springs. She then approaches Dr. Reed and tells him that he, too, is being removed. In the morning, he will be brought before the Maykle authorities ... or he can deal with an Ezra inquisition council. A fearful Reed chooses the local authorities.

They remember Enday’s birdcage. Dragomir says he can cast a *detect magic* spell in the morning, but Secris doesn’t wait. He returns to the room and touches the birdcage, setting off a *fire trap* that badly burns him. Brigitte uses what must be the last of her clerical magic for the day to cure the impatient man’s wounds. As the cage door opens, a nearly imperceptible *sigh* escapes from it. The rest of the evening passes uneventfully.

In the morning, orderlies find Mikhail’s body, and yes, his brainstem has been surgically cut out. (That makes six, or at least that’s how many they’re aware of.) A more careful inspection of Enday’s room reveals a key ring. It belonged to Thomas, the missing (and now dead/undead) leering orderly, and it has keys for nearly the entire asylum. Since Secris had already determined that the locks to the inmates’ cells had not been tampered with, it gradually becomes clear that not only did Enday let the inmates out, but he may have let the Gentlemen *in!*

As everyone gathers together and compares notes, many questions remain:

- Ψ Does Rollin have lycanthropy? It’s certainly possible that Enday arranged the whole thing in order to get greater access to the asylum and its inmates. An answer may not come for weeks: The next full moon is 24 days away.
- Ψ What *is* Enday? His powers at first suggest sorcery, but Dragomir isn’t sure. If Enday’s magic is not arcane, but perhaps it’s divine – or druidic? But druids in the Land of Mists are practically the stuff of fables, and they’re supposed to be insane. Well, maybe that’s the one thing about Enday that is true... (*DM Note: Enday is Druid 4 / Rogue 1, and he’s “fey touched” as described in the d20 Fiend Folio.*)
- Ψ Is he connected to the Gentlemen? Perhaps. Or perhaps he became Brainstem #7 after he ran out of the asylum. His body is not found, however.
- Ψ Why are the Gentlemen stealing brainstems? Are they simply bizarre collectors, or is there a purpose? Enday’s rhyme suggested that they needed seven. Do they have them? And just what would someone do with a bushel of insane brainstems?

Over the next day, Secris “kindly” volunteers to change the locks for all of the cells, just in case Enday has a copy. (Secris keeps a master set of new keys for himself. You never know.) As payment, Brigitte gives them the two “gas bombs” that Rollin created last night. Brigitte sadly must now take on the running of the asylum by herself, at least until the mayor of Maykle can arrange for replacements. She needs to contact Nevuchar Springs to inform her superiors and ask for instructions. Dragomir, pointing out that they’re were planning to go to that city, offers to take a letter to the church himself.

Over that day and the next evening, the adventurers take a welcome opportunity to relax and give Brigitte a hand with the difficult duties ahead. She’s stern and unyielding, but her heart seems to be in the right place as far as the inmates are concerned. Still, as the saying goes, “the branch that does not bend will break,” and the strain clearly shows on

her face. Dragomir helps her unwind during the evening, and he says he will use the *tarokka* to try to “look in” on her later.

By the morning of November 5, the group is ready to begin the trip to Nevuchar Springs.

-- The End? Perhaps Not ... For the following scene takes place in a forest ... somewhere in darkon ... --

The filthy, bedraggled man quickly makes his way through the dried husks of once-mighty trees. The withered branches stretch weakly toward him – a result of the strong fall breeze or a last effort at vengeance? No matter. He is near her now. His heart beats fiercely with adoration.

So caught up in emotion is the misshapen man that he clumsily trips over gnarled roots, cutting open his knee as he falls. He doesn't notice the pain or the blood. She is here.

My chest can scarce contain my heart
As I gaze upon my true desire
Your face, the finest work of art,
Enflames me like the hottest pyre

The task is done – they were like sheep
And soon the green shall in pain writhe
Despair's the crop that we shall reap
With Gentlemen and little scythes

But oh! New faces did I meet
A mage, a priest, a hairy brute
My visions show they will compete
The plan's begun – let fate take root!

~~ END ~~

THE STORY CONTINUES IN “THE BAD SEED”

“The Bad Seed”: session 1

Date: November 4-6, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: Maykle and the Vuchar River, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Aagute (Brian) “Turnkey”/Secris (Mike), Boris (Andy), Krysta O’Shanna (Dave), Arvik (Nanci)

In the aftermath of Enday’s escape and the chaos caused by the Gentlemen and the rampaging patients, there is a lot of cleaning up to do at the Clangor Asylum. Around noontime, Chief Inspector Gilros and his constables come to collect Dr. Reed, where he will await a hearing for his actions. Dr. Rollin is also being brought in, but only for questioning – even though his “research” into lycanthropy was much more insidious in the eyes of the adventurers. Krysta spitefully suggests that Rollin must wield considerable influence among the Maykle officials.

Dragomir and Warden Brigitte Eaton go to Reed’s room to escort him out. Brigitte seems very much on edge; the past few days have taken their toll on the woman, who may have to run the asylum for the foreseeable future. When the bitter Reed claims that Brigitte’s “fanaticism” is blinding her to the value of his experiments, she punches him – *hard*. Enraged, she is about to continue, but Dragomir gently stops her. She yells at Reed in anguish that he can’t possibly understand how much she’s sacrificed for the patients of the asylum.

Reed is led away by the authorities – a better fate, he knows, than going before an Ezra inquisition council. Rollin also leaves, but – as if to confirm Krysta’s cynicism – he returns to the asylum after a few hours of questioning. He has still been removed as the head of the asylum, but his future status will depend on a lengthy “investigation” by the Maykle authorities and whether he truly has been infected with lycanthropy.

Over the next day, the adventurers give Brigitte as much help as they can. Brigitte even accepts Krysta’s offer to tend to the patients’ needs. Dragomir spends time with Rollin, learning some of the good doctor’s skill with alchemy, while Boris explores the asylum’s medical library. He finds a volume written by **Vjorn Horstman**, a surgeon in Falkovnia (the harsh military dictatorship on Darkon’s southwest border). They also know from Secris – who now prefers to be called “Turnkey” – that Rollin and Horstman had corresponded, and it’s easy for Boris to see that Horstman was an inspiration for some of Rollin’s activities. Much of Horstman’s medical “technique” sounds brutal and sadistic. (*DM Note: Horstman is described in Children of the Night: Werebeasts.*) Boris also finds a much more enlightening tome written about 7 years ago by **Dr. Rudolph Van Richten** of Mordent (on the continent’s west coast). Van Richten seems to be a metaphysician of the highest caliber.

During the day, Brigitte has some good news for a change. **Karsten Ashbry**, the young man who had been showing progress ever since Aagute described his encounter with the strange woman in the woods, is fully conscious and surprisingly ready and eager to leave.

Brigitte, overwhelmed as she is, sees no reason to keep a fully functioning man locked up. Karsten, aware that he has the adventurers to partially thank for his recovery, meets with them. He’s a very thin young man with blonde hair, apparently with a high education, high spirits, and perhaps an equally high talent for exaggeration.

He says he’s heard from Warden Eaton that they’re planning to go to Nevuchar Springs, and he asks to accompany them. Not only is he an “experienced traveler of the land” and “an expert on the region,” but he remembers that he had left behind some journals at the Riverview Rest, the biggest – well, the *only* – inn in the city (*Gaz II*). “The elves aren’t all that welcoming toward newcomers,” he says. (Apparently, elves make up the bulk of the population.) Furthermore, Karsten says he’s an “expert boatsman,” which he says they’ll need on their journey, as there’s no direct road to the Springs. Dragomir and Boris confirm this, but no one is willing to accept this “expert’s” word on everything, especially considering that he’s just been released from an asylum. Of course, as Krysta notes, they’re leaving with three former patients!

One of those former patients, the hygiene-challenged Arvik, strides up to Karsten and says gutturally, “You heard of Sanguinia?” “Oh, yes! Sanguinia! A cold, bleak place with many mountains!” Arvik picks up the slight Karsten and says, “You take me there!” Karsten squeaks. The others convince Arvik to release the young man, who explains that he doesn’t really know how to get there, yet he’s heard of “mistways” – paths through the Mists between the Core and “islands” like Sanguinia.

He coyly suggests that the Vistani are the only ones who truly know the secrets of travel. He seems blissfully unaware of Dragomir’s heritage, but then Dragomir simply looks like a man with a dark complexion. (The other adventurers know, however, having seen Dragomir’s skill with the *tarokka*.) Krysta suggests that Arvik might as well travel with them until the grungy fighter can find a way to return home.

Karsten estimates that the journey eastward up the Vuchar River will take about 10 hours, and because the river is nearly impossible to navigate at low tide, they’ll have to stop at some point. A couple of the more geographically savvy adventurers wonder how they can possibly travel UP the river *toward* the ocean! Karsten says it’s a mystery recently “revealed” by the Mists. The source of the Vuchar – and indeed that entire part of the Darkon coast – was hidden in the Mists until shortly after the shroud of undeath fell upon the city of Il Aluk, now increasingly nicknamed “Necropolis.” But now the source of the Vuchar is revealed, and it’s a geographic impossibility, as the water seems to flow up from the Nocturnal Sea and into the Vuchar. More baffling still: It’s fresh water, not salt.

They decide to hire a boat – using their meager funds – the next morning and set out. Before they leave, Brigitte gives Dragomir a sealed letter, which she asks him to deliver to her superiors at the temple in Nevuchar Springs. It’s her report of what’s happened at the asylum and her request for advice on what to do about Dr. Rollin. She says she wishes she could go with Dragomir, but her duty is here. They part sadly, yet Dragomir says he will attempt to contact her. And so the adventurers bid a *very* fond farewell to the Clangor Asylum.

At the bustling Maykle riverfront (mostly humans, although one or two halflings are seen), they hire a boat, captained by a bulky woman named **Olsen**. Krysta successfully barter her price down to 27 gold pieces, which – even with a large contribution from Karsten – puts a significant drain on the travelers’ meager resources. She and her assistant **Kurt** are a little worried about the presence of a caliban on the journey, but Aagute’s rowing helps to balance the scales.

Olsen says she knows of a farmhouse along the Vuchar, run by the Swain family. She’s stopped there a few times when low tide has interrupted her trips to Nevuchar Springs. She hasn’t been there in weeks, but she says they should be able to spend the night safely on the property.

The river journey is free of danger, allowing the travelers a rare opportunity to relax and enjoy the scenery. (Nevertheless, they keep a constant eye out for ambushes. Goblin attacks are not unheard of.) They notice the odd, blood-red color of the mud along the river bottom. Olsen comments that it’s been that color ever since the Shroud fell over Il Aluk. “Right afterward, things were really bad on the Vuchar for a while. It had nearly dried up, fish were dying ... Things would’ve been a lot worse if not for the Shrine.” When they ask what the Shrine is, Olsen says awkwardly, “Uh, better you should ask the elves.” She’s never been to the Shrine herself, but the elves are very protective of it, and it has *something* to do with the relative purity of the Vuchar’s waters, at least in this part of Darkon. The Vuchar turns foul once it travels through Necropolis. (*DM Note: The Nevuchar Shrine is mentioned in Ravenloft Gazetteer II.*)

With little time before sunset, they arrive at the lonely dock near the Swains’ farm. However, it’s quiet. Very quiet. (They’re relieved that they can still *speak*, so it’s not the Gentlemen at work.) In the distance, they can vaguely hear the plaintive meowing of a cat. As they step on land, they soon discover the half-eaten, maggot-ridden carcasses of two cows.

Several of them venture forth to investigate the home. The windows and the front door have been smashed in. Krysta uses a magical *light* spell to guide them as they search inside. They find many smashed items, two empty bedrooms, but no people. (Olsen had mentioned that the Swains consisted of a man, a woman, and their daughter.) The door to the cellar has been barred from the other side. Damage to the door shows that something strong with claws had tried unsuccessfully to smash it open.

Outside, at the far end of the house, they find an exterior door to the cellar. It, too, has been barred from the inside, but Arvik and Aagute combine their strength to pull it open. Inside the dark cellar is a young girl, perhaps 15 – pale, unmoving, but alive and apparently uninjured. As they pick her up, she moans, “Mother, Father – dead...!” before passing out.

They find tracks in the ground outside: humanoid but bare. The tracks seem to go back and forth from the house to the nearby barn, the doors of which are wide open. Night has

now fallen, and the interior of the barn is hard to see. Boris and Aagute have better night vision, so they enter first and find two bodies. As they light the nearby lanterns, they see that the bodies of a man and woman – the older Swains – but horribly chewed up, like the cows. They’ve also been decapitated. A closer examination by Boris reveals that the heads were severed by something extremely sharp and, judging by the condition of the bodies, the flesh has been chewed *after* the bodies were killed.

Boris immediately considers the earlier beheadings that have occurred in the area. Either Aagute’s lady friend with the insane eyes and the sickle is *not* dead, or she wasn’t alone.

Krysta suddenly hears movement in the hayloft above them. Aagute grabs a pitchfork, throws it, and is answered by a vile hiss and rapid footsteps. A ghoul leaps out from the upper doors of the hayloft, breaking into a run toward the dock – and where Evan is carrying the unconscious girl. Dragomir, Aagute, and Arvik chase after it. As they do so, a second ghoul jumps down from the loft, landing right behind Boris and Turnkey.

Krysta calls upon the power of the Morninglord to turn the undead creature, but she has no success. After Dragomir fires his crossbow at the ghoul, it turns to fight its attackers, painfully biting and paralyzing the half-Vistani wizard, but it quickly falls. The second ghoul tries to run out the barn, surprising the shocked Karsten, who actually does manage to throw a weapon of some sort at it. He misses, yet Turnkey and Boris finish it off.

It’s now evening, and the tide is low. The travelers have little choice but to stay the night at the lonely, isolated farm.

~~ END ~~

“The Bad Seed”: session 2

Date: November 7, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: The Vuchar River and Nevuchar Springs, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Aagute (Brian), “Turnkey”/Secris Tern (Mike), Krysta O’Shanna (Dave), Evan D’Aubric (Rose)

NPC’d this session: Arvik (Nanci), Boris (Andy)

At the Swain farm, the travelers decide to spend the night within the house – after necessary precautions have been taken. They repair the door and board up the smashed windows as best they can. Krysta, troubled by the desecration done to the bodies of the Swain parents, briefly searches for a family plot, since the Swain family had lived here for at least a couple of generations. After a few minutes of searching, she finds it. However, burying two bodies in the middle of the night could be hazardous, so they decide to wait until morning.

During the night, the teenaged Swain daughter, **Trudy**, awakens from her feverish sleep. Krysta breaks the news about her parents. The girl confirms what they had already

suspected: The parents were decapitated first, and the ghouls came later, drawn by the odor of a free meal. Unfortunately, Trudy also confirms that there is more than one of the strange, beautiful, sickle-wielding women about. She said two of them killed her parents. Trudy takes an immediate liking to the hairy, bear-like Aagute. She says the caliban reminds her of a character from a story that her parents recited to her when she was younger. Aagute is flustered. Aside from friends like Dragomir, he’s rarely been treated with anything better than mere tolerance, and usually much worse than that.

The chatty, somewhat boastful **Karsten** offers to guard the boat that evening with **Olsen** and her assistant, **Kurt**, which comes as a great relief to the other travelers. (Mindful of Karsten’s recent recovery, they take care not to mention that the murderous women may be in the area.) Fortunately, the evening passes uneventfully, aside from a gentle rainfall.

At dawn, the ground around the farm is draped in a light, rolling mist. Aagute and Krysta are awake, and Aagute immediately has a bad reaction to what he sees. He had his own near-fatal encounter with one of the women on a morning just like this. As if on cue, he and Krysta spot a slender, beautiful woman peeking out at them from behind a row of cornstalks. By the time they rouse the other travelers, the woman has stepped back out of sight into the cornfield.

The travelers gather to discuss whether they should leave the farm right *now*. They have no idea what these women are, and Aagute knows that he barely survived his encounter with just one of them. One of the travelers makes a joke, which draws laughter from the others – laughter that is *echoed* by giggles from within the cornfield. Yes, they think, it’s time to leave now.

As they begin moving away from the house, *three* women – all breathtakingly beautiful, with long, dark hair, alabaster skin, and wearing simple white dresses – step out of the cornfield. They have odd smiles, and their hands stay coyly out of sight behind their backs. (*DM Note: More **poludnica**, evil fey described in The Book of Sacrifices, and last seen in session 1 of Room to Grow.*) As Turnkey grabs his sling, an intensely strong wind blows across the cornfield toward the travelers. Turnkey’s sling bullet is blown away before it travels more than a few feet. The three women smile coquettishly and suddenly reveal blood-encrusted sickles in their hands.

The travelers break into a run for the boat at this point. The women follow close behind, their gentle, almost-skipping strides covering more ground than seems possible. As the travelers jump onto the boat, Aagute stays behind for a moment to cover their retreat. He jumps on at the last second, just as the still-smiling women reach the dock. They begin rowing ferociously, and Dragomir casts a *disrupt undead* spell at one of the women. The arcane ray strikes her in the chest, but she stares at the spot and casually brushes her hand at it. Krysta, unfortunately, makes direct eye contact with one of the women. Suddenly, the lovely priestess of the Morninglord shrieks that the wood of the boat is *alive* and wrapping itself around her! She starts clawing furiously at her legs. Turnkey applies a novel medical technique – he knocks her unconscious.

Karsten is quite shaken by the whole affair. In a quavering but still calm voice, he recalls that this is exactly what happened to him as he was traveling through this region several weeks ago. Krysta’s hands are tied, just in case she is still raving when she wakes up.

Dragomir puzzles over his spell’s lack of effect. He was reasonably confident that the women were some type of undead. Perhaps they have some innate form of resistance against magic? Or ... perhaps they’re not undead? He realizes he’s never struck a living thing with that spell before. How would it react? He decides to zap Turnkey with the same spell! The effect is similar: It strikes Turnkey, but the magic fizzles harmlessly. So *if* the women are not undead, then what are they?

Krysta wakes up, but the hallucination has faded – for the moment, at least. She haltingly describes what happened as she made eye contact with the woman. She says she felt an intense malice as her mind teetered at the edge of a black abyss, but as she fell into the void, she felt something else from the woman – a sense of regret, of ... recognition? She doesn’t know what it could mean. Her companions notice that Krysta is definitely “off”; her speech, her manner, her thoughts all seem affected. *(DM Note: Krysta failed her Madness save against the poludnica’s gaze. Her Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma have all taken 5 points of damage.)*

Trudy, who had been fallen back into unconsciousness during the night, again wakes up. She’s starting to look better. When she realizes where they are, she asks what happened to the bodies of her parents. The unpolished Arvik says, “We left them there.” Trudy cries! The others assure her that there was nothing they could have done. Trudy, when asked about living relatives, says her mother has a cousin in Tempe Falls, a town in southern Darkon, and Krysta promises that they’ll make sure she gets there.

Within the hour, the small boat approaches the docks of Nevuchar Springs. They see that the river is pretty shallow at this point. Boats much bigger than Olsen’s simply couldn’t make the journey. Karsten reminds them that the elves who dominate the town’s population are wary of travelers. Many people have come to Nevuchar Springs seeking fortune and commerce since the Mists “revealed” the new coastline, which is about a mile away. The only inn in town, the Riverview Rest, is clearly visible a short distance up the river. It sits on top of a bluff, providing a scenic view of the surrounding riverfront.

Olsen greets an old elven sailor (“old” is relative for elves) named Felix. As Karsten warned, Felix greets the travelers cautiously, but he relaxes when he learns they’re simply traveling. Felix says that if they want the best treatment, they should be sure to say that they’re not settling into town. Dragomir wants to deliver Brigitte’s letter to her superiors at the Church of Ezra, and Felix points out the spire that stands above most of the other buildings in town. Olsen bids them farewell; she’s going to tell the constabulary about the murder of the Swains. (The travelers have already decided *not* to tell the Ezraiters about Trudy, fearing that she’ll be made a “ward of the Church.”)

When they step off the pier and on to the nearby grassy area, Krysta again begins to hallucinate. She sees the grass reaching up around her legs and trying to pull her into the

ground. Her panicked shouts begin to draw attention. Evan and Turnkey try to bludgeon her again (!), but Aagute lifts her off the ground, and Dragomir casts a minor spell to part the “dangerous” grass under her feet. This gives Krysta a chance to regain her senses, which she does, and she’s not pleased by the “blunt trauma” approach. Karsten goes off to arrange for their lodgings at the inn.

As they walk through Nevuchar Springs, they marvel at the obvious influence of elven architecture. While the town is very attractive in a rustic way, living trees make up part of the foundation or the support structure in many homes. Lovely, well-tended hedgerows line the streets. The travelers get curious glances from many of the townspeople.

The cathedral for the Nevuchar Springs sect of the Church of Ezra is rather nasty looking on the outside. This isn’t surprising, considering that it had been the main temple for the Eternal Order, a death-based religion that the Church of Ezra kicked out of town following the Church’s newfound popularity in the wake of Il Aluk’s transformation into Necropolis. Of course, based on the travelers’ brief experience with worshippers of Ezra, it’s not much of an improvement. The sword-on-shield emblem of Ezra adorns the main doors. An elven priest, wearing the same chain mail “vestments” that Brigitte did when they first met her, greets them and escorts them to a waiting area once Dragomir explains their purpose here.

The interior of the cathedral is dark and austere, but with freshly painted walls and exquisite stained glass windows depicting Ezra’s lone stand against the forces of darkness. After a few minutes of waiting, they meet the leader and founder of the Darkonese branch, **Bastion Theodorus Raines** (*Book of Secrets, Gaz II*). Bastion Raines is a thin man, perhaps in his mid-40’s, with graying hair, spectacles, and a sharp jaw line and cheekbones. He greets them cordially and accepts the letter from Dragomir, although he doesn’t open it in front of them. He shows great interest in their brief description of the events at the Clangor Asylum, believing it further evidence that the Time of Unparalleled Darkness is fast approaching. Only those who remain “untainted” and show no compromise against the darkness will be embraced by Ezra. Krysta, through sheer strength of will, manages to refrain from comment. (She has not revealed her true calling as a cleric of the Morninglord, although she later realizes that this may come out in Brigitte’s written report.)

When the conversation turns to the mysterious women, Krysta mentions that her mind has been injured in the glorious fight against the darkness, and she asks if Bastion Raines could arrange for her to receive divine healing (in the form of a few *lesser restoration* spells). Raines bluntly asks, “Are you a follower of Ezra? Are you willing to get down on your knees and swear allegiance to Ezra?” Dragomir interrupts what was promising to become a very awkward conversation, and he asks if there is any task that they could perform to essentially pay for the casting of such divine magic. Raines gives this some thought, and he says that he’ll consider it – after reading Brigitte’s report. He’ll contact them later at the Riverview Rest. Without so much as a “Have a nice day,” Raines departs, and the group is quickly escorted out of the cathedral, not that they needed much prodding.

As they depart, Turnkey says he’s going to find the local weaponsmith that Felix recommended earlier. He wants to buy a couple of daggers. The others begin to head toward the inn, where they plan to relax before fulfilling their other reason for visiting Nevuchar Springs: a visit to the **Library Pharmacologae**, a famed repository of herbal and medical cures compiled by elven mystics (*Gaz II*).

On the way, however, they find the equally famous springs after which the town is named. It’s hard to miss **the Baths**, the largest building in town – a soaring marble structure surrounded by lush gardens. After speaking with the halfling attendant, they enter the public bath area. (All except for Arvik, whom they strongly encourage to take a *private* bath. Arvik’s shocked moans of surprise and delight echo throughout the building. It’s very disturbing!) Aagute reluctantly disrobes, causing a few shrieks of alarm from some of the bathers. Even though the other travelers vouch for him, a couple of the bathers still turn up their noses and leave. Still, this does not detract from the sheer delight that they experience in the magnificent bubbling waters. The waters are reputed to have rejuvenating properties, yet Krysta, though quite content, feels no different.

One of their fellow bathers, a more friendly and well-traveled half-elf, mentions that the springs suffered greatly after the “Shroud” fell over Il Aluk. The water became polluted with moss and strange growths. Fortunately, ever since the Mists revealed the coastline and **the Nevuchar Shrine**, the water has returned to its previous purity. This talk of the Shrine continues to intrigue the travelers.

Meanwhile, Turnkey finds the weaponsmith’s shop, which seems to be well equipped. Shortly after the shopkeeper greets him, however, two elven soldiers enter, looking like they’ve just come out of combat. They say they need more short swords quickly. Turnkey asks what’s going on, and they say the militia has been busy repelling another goblin attack near the Shrine. Turnkey says, “Well, I guess that’s where I’ll be soon enough.” What do you mean? “If there’s trouble, I’ll be in the middle of it.” Um, could you come with us, sir?

Turnkey is brought to the constabulary, where he declines to give direct answers to **Chief Constable Sulien Moonshadow’s** (*Gaz II*) questions about who he is and what he knows. The chief constable locks him up.

The others arrive refreshed at the Riverview Rest, where Karsten has already made friends with the innkeeper. But where’s Turnkey? A visit to the weaponsmith leads them to the constabulary and their own meeting with Chief Constable Moonshadow. They apologize for Turnkey’s behavior. They admit they’ve only known him for a couple of days, however – they met him at the Clangor Asylum. Moonshadow says, “That explains quite a few things.” “Well, he wasn’t a *patient*...” They then describe what happened at the Swain farm. Moonshadow says there have been a number of decapitations along the Vuchar River between here and Maykle, where the asylum is located. He also doesn’t seem to have a high opinion of the priests of Ezra.

After the travelers describe the women who are committing the murders and their apparent powers, Moonshadow asks two constables – a male human and a male elf – if they noticed anything like this during the goblin attack last night. “No,” says the human, whom Moonshadow calls Dering, “nothing like that. Just this weird silence.” *Silence?* Dragomir asks pointedly, “Was it a complete silence? Or were only your voices silenced?” “Hey, yeah,” says Dering, “we couldn’t give orders or anything, but we could still hear noises.” The travelers realize that they haven’t gone from one problem to another – they’re dealing with the *same* problem! As they begin describing the Gentlemen to Moonshadow, Dering starts chuckling. When his boss confronts him, Dering apologizes and says that what they’re describing is something from an old children’s story that parents used to tell kids when they were bad.

Moonshadow asks if these “Gentlemen” and the women could be connected somehow. Well, one group collects brainstems, and the other group is severing (and perhaps collecting) heads. But as for a purpose...? And if the Gentlemen are present during the goblin attacks, what could that mean?

The travelers ask about the Nevuchar Shrine. Moonshadow describes it as the single most important thing in the area. When they ask if it’s an elven shrine, he shrugs and says, “Frankly, I don’t know. It appeared only about a year and a half ago, but there’s writing on it that predates any civilization I’m aware of – even recorded elven history.” Fascinated, the travelers ask if they can see it. Moonshadow, grateful for the information they’ve provided, says it can be arranged.

~~ END ~~

“The Bad Seed”: session 3

Date: November 7-8, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: Nevuchar Springs, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Aagute (Brian), “Turnkey”/Secris (Mike), Boris (Andy), Krysta O’Shanna (Dave), Arvik (Nanci)

NPC’d this session: Evan D’Aubric (Rose)

Although the afternoon is past its midway point, **Chief Constable Moonshadow** agrees to take the travelers to the site of a recent skirmish with the goblins. (Along the way, they tease Turnkey about his apparently great talent in getting thrown in jail.) The militia’s base camp is about 1 mile from the mysterious **Nevuchar Shrine**. Moonshadow doesn’t go into too many details, saying that it’s a sight the travelers should see for themselves, but he credits the Shrine with keeping the taint of Necropolis out of the Maykle River and perhaps much of Darkon.

At the camp, the travelers see a variety of militiamen – elven and human – some of whom have been badly injured. Moonshadow says that two of his rangers – good ones – have disappeared while doing reconnaissance. Boris examines the corpse of a fallen goblin. Although the ranger sees nothing unusual in the goblin’s weaponry or armor, he does find

a strange tattoo on its upper arm. He copies it on a parchment for later reference. After talking to the soldiers who saw or participated in the last fight, Boris and the others reach the conclusion that these “hit and run” tactics over the last couple of days are highly unusual for goblins. They could be part of a diversionary tactic, perhaps to draw Moonshadow’s men deeper into the woods and away from the Shrine. Moonshadow agrees, but he can’t rule out the possibility of an attack on Nevuchar Springs itself. Seeing that it’s getting dark, he promises that he’ll have the travelers escorted to the Nevuchar Shrine at first light.

Returning to the Riverview Rest, they see an envelope waiting for them, bearing a wax seal with the symbol of Ezra. It seems **Bastion Theodorus Raines** has something to say! The venom and disdain in Raines’ voice is evident even in his writing, especially when he makes reference to Krista. Now that Raines has had time to read Brigitte’s detailed report of the events at the Clangor Asylum, he is fully aware of Krista’s status in the dangerously misguided “cult” of the Morninglord.

Nevertheless, Brigitte did apparently speak well of the travelers’ intentions and abilities. Raines notes he *did* promise to consider a task that the group could perform to “pay” for restorative prayers for Krysta, and a priest of Ezra can be counted on to honor his word – unlike practitioners of those *other* religions, of course.

Within the envelope is an ornate, golden seal bearing the symbol of Ezra. (Turnkey drools slightly.) In his message, Raines instructs the travelers to go to the renowned Library Pharmacologiae, which the group had been planning to visit anyway in hopes of finding a remedy for Krysta’s dementia. Raines tells them to speak with the librarians and deal with a “problem” there. He gives no other details, but he adds that the seal carries his authority throughout the city.

They sit down for a decent evening meal at the inn and discuss the day’s events and their next steps. Should they go to the library right now? What are the goblins up to? They know that the Gentlemen are here, but how does stealing brainstems at an insane asylum tie into the goblin attacks? Are the frightening sickle-wielding females involved as well? They’re aware that another traveler is sitting nearby, but they feel comfortable enough to speak openly.

The man is small and very dark skinned – certainly darker than anyone else they’ve seen in Darkon. He wears a thick reddish robe that’s obviously seen better days, and a red fez tops his nearly bald head. His eyes look tired, but they seem to take in with excitement every word from the travelers. Dragomir offers him a drink. The man thanks him and asks if he can join them at the table.

In a thick accent, he introduces himself as **Abu Al Mir**, a “trader” from the far-off land of Har’ Akir (*COTN: Werebeasts*). It doesn’t ring a bell with most of the travelers, but the ever-talkative Karsten Ashbry has heard of it. It’s an “island” in the Mists, a harsh desert land with a small population amid the incredible remnants of an ancient empire.

Abu acts very friendly toward the travelers, and he describes his own journeys through the Land of Mists. Most recently, he has traveled through Mordent and Richemulot, avoiding the harsh dictatorship of Falkovnia, before making his way into Darkon. He asks how long they’ve been in Darkon themselves. For most of the travelers, it’s been a few weeks. Boris says he was born here. Abu smiles and says, “Of course you have.” When the travelers ask him for information about the Nevuchar Shrine, he reveals that his “trade” is information. He goes around collecting information and giving it out, often for sale. (One has to make a living somehow.) He’s interested in hearing about their background, so he’ll tell them what he knows – if *they* tell *him* some stories.

Dragomir and Boris describe the tale of Dunkel Kralle. Krysta relates a “fictional” tale of the fate that befell her family when the Requiem turned the city of Il Aluk into Necropolis. (Abu nods sadly at this; he says he’s traveled close enough to view it from a distance, but that’s all.) Aagute tells his own bizarre tale – or at least as much of it as he can remember. Abu is quite intrigued by the caliban’s story.

After hearing about the Clangor Asylum, he asks, “Why do you call these creatures ... Gentlemen?” They say they just grabbed the name from a children’s nursery rhyme that Gabriel Enday recited. Abu comments on the fascinating imagination – and powers of perception – that children have. The travelers ask if Abu knows of a children’s tale involving the Gentlemen, but he says, “Not my mythology.”

He proceeds to give them as much information as he knows regarding the Nevuchar Shrine, much of which Moonshadow had already mentioned or at least hinted at. The Shrine is valued very highly by the elves; it seems to predate any civilization in the Land, even though it was “revealed” by the Mists not too long ago; and it seems to defy all natural laws. Abu smiles and says further description cannot do it justice.

Arvik asks if Abu has heard of Sanguinia. Like Karsten, Abu shows himself to be a well-traveled individual – he *has* heard of it! When Arvik asks if there’s a way to return to his cold, mountainous homeland, Abu says there is a “mistway” to Sanguinia, reaching into the Mists from the northern Darkon city of Neblus. However, it is a dangerous path, and arrival is not guaranteed. Casting a keen eye toward Dragomir, Abu says that only the Vistani has mastered the intricacies of traveling through the Mists.

He then shows the group a set of six-sided dice, beautifully painted and carved in what appears to be bone. Abu calls them the *diksha*. On each side is a tiny, ornate hieroglyphic, which Abu says represents one of the ancient gods of his homeland. In Har’Akir they are used for sport but also – in the right hands – for prophecy.

Naturally curious, Dragomir rolls the *diksha*:

1st die: The Commoner – Abu says, “You have a steadfast friend, someone who follows you willingly.”

2nd die: The Tomb – “You will soon enter a place of the dead.”

3rd die: The Shield – “You will encounter ... *something* that will give you protection.”

4th die: Metamorphosis – “A significant change or transformation will come across you in the future.” (The tone in Abu’s voice suggests that Dragomir would not be the subject of the change.)

5th die: Curiosity – “You have an insatiable desire for knowledge and new experiences.”

Krysta, perhaps emboldened that she hasn’t suffered an attack in several hours, tries it:

1st die: The Pharaoh – “Your path will cross with a powerful, perhaps feared, leader of men.”

2nd die: The Town – “A particular community has had a powerful impact on you.”

3rd die: The Shield – Abu raises an eyebrow, and he suggests that this part of Krysta’s reading may tie into Dragomir’s.

4th die: Destruction: “Ah,” says Abu, nodding. “The *destruction* of the community is what has most affected you.” It’s clear he’s referring to Necropolis.

5th die: Courage: “Inner doubts and fears plague you now. But you will find your courage.”

The conversation continues amicably for another hour or so, and Abu shows himself to be an excellent dining companion, and he hungrily devours his meat and gulps his wine between tidbits of information. Eventually, the tired Abu says goodnight and goes to his room. He plans to stay in the area for another day or two.

The travelers then discuss what to do next. Several suggest going to bed, since they’ll be going to the Nevuchar Shrine in the morning. They finally decide to walk over to the Library Pharmacologiae (even though it’s closed) and casually inquire about the “problem” that Bastion Raines mentioned. They ask Evan to stay behind and keep watch over young Trudy Swain – and don’t get any naughty ideas, boy!

The other travelers (and Karsten) walk through the darkened streets of Nevuchar Springs, and knock on the side door of the library. After they show the symbol of Ezra and say that they were sent by Raines, they meet **Cai Evensong**, the head librarian (*Gaz II*). (She’s dressed like a classic 19th century librarian, complete with tiny spectacles and hair in a tight bun – but she’s an elf!)

Like Moonshadow, she doesn’t seem impressed by Raines’ authority, but she agrees to show the travelers around the library, despite the lateness of the hour. She explains that over the past several weeks, odd passages have been spontaneously appearing in some of their tomes! Worse still, the “new” passages are disturbing and even necromantic in some cases (*Gaz II*). It’s spreading like a virus, and she’s worried that the many volumes on herbal and pharmaceutical healing will be wiped out in favor of this dark knowledge.

The travelers ask about the history of the library. They learn that, like the Last Redoubt (the cathedral of Ezra), the library had once been the property of the Eternal Order, the death religion that Raines and his followers kicked out of Nevuchar Springs shortly after the Requiem. Further questioning reveals that the “corruption” began in a specific section of the library.

Wondering if the Eternal Order had left some secrets behind, the travelers search that area of the library for a hidden passageway. Boris finds a concealed switch in the floorboards! Turnkey disables an old needle trap and turns the switch. A large section of the wall swings open, revealing a circular stone stairwell descending into darkness. On the inner side of the door is the fearsome hooded skull emblem of the Eternal Order. The travelers decide to go down, while Karsten runs back to the inn to fetch Evan. Cai and her assistant stay behind.

After avoiding another trap on the stairs, the group descends about 30 feet to the bottom, where they see a sturdy-looking door. A tiny beam of light seems to be coming out of a peephole near the center. An examination of the dust on the floor indicates that they're not the first to come this way, but it's probably been a while. Suspecting a trap, Turnkey tries to disarm it – and ends up getting shot in the shoulder by a tiny crossbow bolt. (A straightforward peek into the peephole could have been fatal.)

The lock on the door itself proves easy to open. Perhaps *too* easy, they think.... As the travelers suspected, the door opens into a tomb. (Wow, those prophecy dice work fast!) The only light comes from a small globe placed on the back of a crossbow bolted into place on the other side of the door. The travelers examine the area from the doorway before stepping in. The ceiling is very high, reaching perhaps up to street level. Four motionless skeletons wearing black robes and gloves stand in position on ledges about halfway up the walls. On the floor are six coffins, one of which is raised on a higher platform than the other five that surround it.

Cautiously, they step inside. The skeletons and the coffins remain motionless. The main coffin bears a plaque identifying the remains as those of **Anton Vosrode**, a senior cleric in the Eternal Order who died 40 years ago, back when that religion still wielded considerable power in this region.

As Aagute walks across the tomb towards another door on the far side, the skeletons on the walls move! All four raise their arms, and black beams of energy erupt from their gloved fingertips. Only Dragomir is successfully struck, and the wizard feels a wave of weakness. (*DM Rant*: Oh sure, the only one hit by the *rays of enfeeblement* is the wizard! Bad dice! Bad!)

At that moment, the five “guarding” coffins open wide, and more skeletons attack. Several of the undead wield formidable weapons or wear odd items, and one seems to have a black orb rattling around in its eye socket! A skeleton with a longsword painfully gashes Aagute. Krysta, Arvik, Turnkey, and Dragomir are also injured. Fortunately, not only do the skeletons fail to strike Boris, but the agile Darkonese ranger deals lethal damage to his horrible foes. Aagute and Arvik also smash their opponents into bony powder.

The four skeletons from the walls leap down to join the combat. The fighting in the dark, cramped tomb is fierce. Dragomir is attacked by two of the undead, and he falls to the cold floor. Of the original nine skeletons, four still stand!

The next session will continue with the third round of combat.

~~ END ~~

“The Bad Seed”: session 4

Date: November 8, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: Nevuchar Springs, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Aagute (Brian), “Turnkey” (Mike), Boris (Andy), Evan D’Aubric (Rose)

NPC’d this session: Krysta O’Shanna (Dave, although Andy chipped in Big Time), Arvik (Nanci)

Continuing the battle in the tomb of Anton Vosrode...

As the travelers fight the skeletons in the dark, cramped quarters, they seem to be getting the upper hand. However, an ominous spectral figure appears above the coffins! The ghostly figure appears as an elderly man, with long white hair, an ornate black robe, and a menacing, shimmering scythe carried casually in both hands. His voice echoes in the tomb: “Yes, my minions! Kill those who would violate my person! I need replacements for my guardians!” (*DM Note: Vosrode is a Rank 2 ghost. In life, he was Clr 7 / Wiz 1.*)

As the skeletons hear their master’s voice, their skulls bizarrely twist into grins of victory! The travelers sense that the undead have been strengthened by the ghost’s appearance. Krysta is savagely ripped by a skeleton’s claw. Turnkey, though injured, holds his own. Boris’ attacker tries to leap atop a coffin, but trips in the attempt. On the far side, Arvik and Aagute flank one skeleton, while Dragomir lies bleeding and unconscious on the floor.

Ignoring her pain, Krysta calls out to Vosrode, “We are not here to rob your tomb! We just want to pass through to the other door!” Vosrode holds up his hand, and Krysta’s skeletal opponent stops in mid-swing – but the fighting continues elsewhere! Arvik is badly injured, and even Boris finally feels the claws of the undead rip across his skin. Aagute and Arvik pulverize their foe.

Krysta says to Vosrode, “We just want to find out what’s causing the problem in the library!” The ghost says, “Library? *What* library? Speak up, child!” Suddenly, all the skeletons stop fighting, as Vosrode wants to hear what Krysta has to say. But the ghost abruptly vanishes! Aagute becomes tense, and his massive axe falls to the cold floor – as Vosrode possesses the caliban’s body! “There, now we can talk,” says Aagute, now speaking with perfect diction. “I doubt you’ll attack the body of your companion. Ah, fresh air – hmm, he’s a big one... Now, girl, what nonsense is this about a library?”

The adventures realize that a lot has happened since Vosrode died 40 years ago. While the presence of the library upstairs doesn't bother him too much, he is *furios* when he learns that the Eternal Order was kicked out of Nevuchar Springs by the Church of Ezra.

When Krysta describes the necromantic “virus” affecting the passages in the library's tomes, Vosrode doesn't seem surprised. He says he has been told he has a bad temper, and he was an alchemist of great talent in his day. It's possible that his anger could be inadvertently creating the dark passages. He explains that he had been “resting” peacefully until the screams of three of his servants awakened him in the netherworld. “Damned undead shrieking ... how can I get any rest? Something has happened to them – in the basement of my cathedral,” Aagute/Vosrode says. (The travelers don't remind him that “his” cathedral is now the Last Redoubt, the main cathedral for the Church of Ezra.) He says that the three people “have crossed into unlife,” sustained by pain and anguish.

At this point, Turnkey wonders, “Uh, hey ... Father? Can you do somethin' about this guy?” He points to the prone Dragomir. Aagute's eyes flare with dangerous power, but Vosrode controls himself and says, “Foolish boy! Go to the cabinet next to that coffin.” The cabinet contains a number of scrolls. Turnkey hands over the chosen scroll, and the group is treated to the odd sight of Aagute reading the words of a divine spell! He touches Dragomir, and the mage regains consciousness. (It is obvious to the travelers that Vosrode is not being “nice” – he's a rather tetchy old man – but he's more concerned about the fate of his fellow worshippers in the Eternal Order, and he knows that the travelers can bring him up to speed on current events.)

Evan enters the tomb at this point. Karsten had run back to the Riverview Rest to fetch him, and the talkative explorer has now taken over the guarding of young Trudy Swain.

Vosrode steps out of Aagute's body and manifests once more above his coffin. Aagute's spirit is chilled and his blood enflamed by the violation of his body, but he holds his rage in check. Vosrode then asks the group to go to the basement, retrieve the bodies of his minions, and bring them here so that they may have eternal rest in his presence. He turns to Krysta and says pointedly to the priest, “I want the bodies *intact*.” (No turning.) In return, he will do what he can to stop the spread of the necromantic passages upstairs – *and* he will reward the travelers.

Seeing that the group is poorly armed (and just plain poor) and warning them that the three undead will not go quietly, Vosrode offers them a down payment on their reward. He tells them to pick up a fallen skeleton's longsword (the one that injured Aagute) and an amulet with a bear-like symbol that was around the neck of another skeleton. He says the sword is enchanted, and the amulet provides protection. Dragomir is amazed: Abu's *diksha* prediction is certainly working fast! Boris takes the longsword, while Aagute wears the amulet.

Vosrode says the door on the far side leads to the sewers, where a carefully marked trail leads the way to a secret basement entrance to the cathedral. However, it is nearly midnight, and the travelers have had a very long day. They know they're in no shape to

trudge through the sewers and fight more undead. They ask Vosrode if they can rest the night in his tomb. The ghost, affronted by the thought, absolutely refuses. Just as well: The travelers realize that the librarians above must be worried. They have to go upstairs and say something soon.

Vosrode lays down one condition: The travelers must promise to do all they can to keep the existence of his tomb a secret. If the Church of Ezra finds out, Bastion Raines and his clerics will come down here – “and I will **not** be pleased,” says the ghost threateningly.

With Vosrode’s consent, Krysta reads two more healing spells from the scroll, restoring health to Arvik and Turnkey, and she then uses one of her own spells to further heal Dragomir. The half-Vistani wizard then asks if Vosrode could be patient for *one day* – they need time to rest and they risk drawing the attention of Raines and the militia if they stay down here much longer. Vosrode agrees.

Boris and Krysta wonder if there’s a way to get down to the sewers without going through Vosrode’s tomb again and disturbing the ornery priest’s spirit. The ghost says they can use a sewer entrance on street level, but the other side of this doorway is extremely well concealed. They’ll never find it unless they mark it somehow, and they need it to be their starting point for the short journey to the cathedral’s basement. Dragomir and Boris go through the doorway on the far side and catch a good whiff on Nevuchar Springs’ efficient sewer system. Dragomir marks the outside of the doorway with a Vistani symbol meaning “door,” then they return and tell Vosrode they’ll see him tomorrow evening if they’re successful.

Upstairs, the head librarian, **Cai Evensong**, is understandably shocked as she sees the group come up the stairs with ripped and bloodied clothing! As the secret door to the stairway closes, Dragomir deliberately and dramatically “seals” the doorway with wet blood from his own shirt! Before the tightly wound elven woman can fly into hysteria, Dragomir tells her that there is a great danger down there and that his “blood magic” will keep it there for a while. He strongly impresses upon her the need to keep this a secret for the time being, especially from Bastion Raines. He says they’ll return tomorrow night to deal with the problem for good. “Should anyone go down there,” he intones, “a terrible menace will be unleashed.” Confident that her fear will keep her silent, Dragomir and the others leave the library. Good night! Sleep well!

On the way back to the Riverview Rest, the travelers briefly ponder that they’ve received better treatment from the ghost of a death-revering priest than they have from Bastion Raines. And not only have they agreed to perform a task for the powerful undead spirit, but he’s going to reward them, too! (It’s a slippery slope in Ravenloft...)

DM Info: DREAM FOR KRISTA:

The dream proceeds as before. You are lying naked in the tall grass, feeling totally at peace. A slender, pale hand appears and begins to sensuously caress your body. Your

eyes are closed in lusty, impure delight; you can't see whom the hand belongs to. Your arousal grows as the loving caresses continue. The beautiful forest around you seems to sigh its contentment and pleasure along with you.

Even the tall grass begins to wrap itself around you – but here, in this lush paradise, you don't panic. You hear a throaty, feminine voice whispering deliciously near your ear: "See, Krysta, you do have a place here ... with us." Her hand moves tantalizingly lower and lower down your body. As you peak with ecstasy, the voice says, "You'll be home soon."

You suddenly wake up in bed, your body moist with sweat. As you try to pierce the fog around your confused mind, you hear another voice – a boy's? – at the side of the bed!

DM Info: DREAM FOR BORIS:

As before, you chase the beautiful woman into the woods. As you step into the beautiful glade, you now see that the woman is *not* your mother. She is, however, incredibly beautiful, and her soft, curvaceous body and full, red lips fill you with desire. She invites you into her arms, and you take her to the ground. Within moments, your bodies are intertwined in savage, naked passion. Never have you lusted after a woman as much as this. As you peak, you feel yourself losing something to her, and the beautiful scenery around turns blackened and barren. The great tree nearby takes on a gnarled, dead shape...

...and as you awaken in a sweat, you realize that the shape is the same as the tattoo on the dead goblin you saw yesterday.

After a few fitful, nightmare-filled hours of attempted sleep at the inn, the travelers gather downstairs for a dawn breakfast. Several of them look quite fatigued, and Krysta cautiously asks if anyone “heard anything” last night. She proceeds to explain that she woke up from a dream and heard a voice at her bedside saying, “They’re sorry. They didn’t know. But you *have* been misbehaving.” But she saw no one else in the room. She says it was a young boy’s voice, very innocent. Her companions don’t know what to make of it, and when Boris asks if it had anything to do with the dream that Krysta mentioned, Krysta looks a little embarrassed and says no.

As they discuss any possible connection between Krysta, the sickle-wielding women, and everything else that’s going on, two rangers – a male elf (**Tulain**) and a female human (**Lissa**) – arrive to escort them to the **Nevuchar Shrine**, as per **Chief Constable Moonshadow’s** wishes. The rangers, especially Lissa, look a little exhausted, too.

As they travel up the hill and near the river on this beautiful morning, Turnkey and Boris notice something *wrong* with one of the trees they’re passing. Something – a spear, perhaps – has struck this tree very recently. The sap still oozes from the spot. Turnkey then sees something else: a pile of feces. Not animal, and not human. “Goblins!” whisper

the rangers, alarmed. Everyone keeps their cool, however, not wanting to draw attention to themselves in case they’re being watched. Tulian sticks his finger in the vile mound; it’s hours old. The group continues on, but they’re now much more alert. Still, the knowledge that the goblins have ventured much closer to the Shrine than previously thought adds credence to the theory that the recent attacks have been diversionary tactics.

However, all thoughts of goblins and danger vanish as they walk past the final growth of trees and behold – the Nevuchar Shrine! (*Gaz II*)

At the edge of a cliff, overlooking the Nocturnal Sea, with the Misty Border visible to the northeast, stands a huge tree on an island in the river, at the top of an enormous waterfall – but the water is running from the sea **up** the cliff to the tree! The seawater surges around the thick roots of the great tree, and then flows mightily in Darkon as pure fresh water, creating the Vuchar River.

The tree’s width is about 25 feet and its thick trunk rises up into beautiful evergreen branches. Birds sing happily within the canopy, either oblivious to or reveling in the majesty of this magical wonder. It truly is an object of hope in what is often a dark, morose land. Krysta, whose dementia has seemingly been triggered by plant life, feels completely peaceful and safe.

The travelers are truly awed by the sight. Even Turnkey has nothing to say. The rangers let them get a little closer, and Dragomir can see what looks like characters carved into the tree, but they are so ancient that the characters now grow as *part* of the Shrine itself. The characters look elvish in nature, but they belong to no language that any elf living understands. The mystery is even deeper than that, because how could the Nevuchar Shrine predate any known civilization when the Mists “revealed” it only a year ago?

After the travelers stare at the Shrine for over an hour, the rangers escort them back down the hill. Although they half-expect an attack, none comes, and they arrive back at the Riverview Rest without incident. Tulien and Lissa quickly leave to report their findings to Moonshadow, while the travelers feel both overjoyed and exhausted by this morning’s trip. But there is still much to do before nightfall.

~~ END ~~

“The Bad Seed”: session 5

Date: November 8, 751 (Barovian calendar)

Location: Nevuchar Springs, Darkon

DM: Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

Active PCs: Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Krysta O’Shanna (Dave), Arvik (Nanci), Boris (Andy), “Turnkey” (Mike)

NPC’d this session: Aagute (Brian), Evan D’Aubric (Rose)

Feeling both energized and weary after their visit to **the Nevuchar Shrine**, the travelers decide to make the most of the day. Krysta and Arvik go with Karsten Ashbry back toward the **Library Pharmacologiae**, where the lovely but troubled priest of the Morninglord hopes to find herbal or alchemical relief for her dementia. (The travelers also realize that **Bastion Theodorus Raines** wasn't expecting them to begin their investigation of the library so quickly, so they likely have some time before he begins asking questions.)

Dragomir wishes to speak with Nevuchar Springs' resident wizard, **Simon Ostheim**. Aagute comes along to watch his friend's back, even though the caliban is leery about visiting an unknown spellcaster. Turnkey and Evan stay at the Riverview Rest to keep a protective eye on young, sad, innocent **Trudy Swain**, although Turnkey runs out to buy several daggers at the weaponsmith's shop. (Fortunately, he avoids arrest this time.) Boris scouts out the streets above **Anton Vosrode's** tomb, as they will likely be entering the sewers later today to retrieve the three now-undead Eternal Order acolytes.

At the library, things seem to be back to normal. Various scholars and students walk through the aisles, dusting off tomes and copying notes onto parchments. The wing of the library with the secret stairway to Vosrode's tomb has been temporarily closed, just as Dragomir had recommended. A sign saying “Renovations” hangs from the closed double doors. Krysta sees other people in religious garb wandering around. (This *is* one of the biggest repositories of healing knowledge in the Land, after all.) One of them is an attractive blonde woman, wearing the simple white garment of a priestess, or “witch,” of **Hala**, a religion worshipped mostly in the southern lands of the Core continent.

After Krysta's first attempts at introduction are absentmindedly ignored, the quiet witch introduces herself as **Giselle**, from the realm of **Valachan**, a lush, forest domain along the southwest coast. (Yes, she's far from home.) Arvik is immediately smitten by Giselle's Nordic-like charm! Krysta, who is defiantly displaying her golden disk of the Morninglord for the first time since entering the city, explains her condition. Giselle, touched and intrigued, agrees to help her look through the tomes for a possible cure. Arvik blushes whenever Giselle talks to him. Karsten, apparently incapable of whispering, is constantly shushed by other visitors as he wanders the aisles.

A couple of hours later, the priestly pair finds something. One tome contains a recipe for a broth. You don't drink it, *but* the vapors are said to have restorative properties. Inhaling them repeatedly over the course of a week or so could cure “illnesses of the mind” – or so the author reports. Most of the ingredients necessary can be found in this region, either growing in nature or at a marketplace or apothecary's shop. One ingredient, however, is much less common: *addlemind*. It's a moist, sickly looking fungus that, when harvested properly, produces a poison that has an effect similar to a *confusion* spell. Apparently, the alchemist/author found a way to use those same mind-altering properties to eliminate mental ailments caused by non-natural sources (like spells or spell-like abilities).

Unfortunately, Neither Krysta nor Giselle know where to find addlemind. In desperation, Krysta takes a risk and asks Karsten – who knows! “Why, yes, addlemind!” he says

triumphantly. “Oh, nasty-looking thing indeed. It tends to grow in wet, misty areas on hard surfaces – like tombstones! Hmmm, that reminds me of a crypt I visited in Mordentshire...” He believes they can find it in **the Mistlands**, a relatively uninhabited region in northern Darkon. It’s a day’s travel from **Neblus**, where a “mistway” to Arvik’s home of Sanguinia is said to be. One wonders just what other sorts of obscure knowledge Karsten specializes in!

Meanwhile, Dragomir and Aagute go to the simple, white, two-floor home of Simon Ostheim (Wiz 5/Ari 1). Rather than being the reclusive wizard that Dragomir expected, Simon is a boisterous, jovial fellow, possessing a wide belly, a neatly trimmed beard, and a propensity for pranks, like pretending to answer his front door as a servant. He’s fascinated by their tales (like many other Darkonians they’ve met, he takes Aagute’s appearance in relative stride after the initial shock), and he shares tea with them.

Simon is interested in Dragomir’s description of Gabriel Enday and his bizarre ferret, but he provides no additional insight. *However*, with regard to the Gentlemen, Simon says, “Well, if people are telling you it’s a childhood tale, maybe you can find something useful in a children’s book.” Dragomir says, “Hmm. That’s a good idea.”

Simon comments he used to do some adventuring himself, but a few months ago he decided to settle down. He makes himself available (usually at a price) to those who need his services. He’s done work for Chief Constable Moonshadow and even for Bastion Raines. He agrees to Dragomir’s polite request to teach him some spells, but with a condition: He wants Dragomir to find an obscure spell component that grows only in the land of **Forlorn**, located in the southern Core. It’s a white, translucent vine called *ghost threads* (*Gaz I*). Simon shows Dragomir an illustration from a book in his personal library. His need isn’t urgent, however. After shaking hands in “a wizard’s agreement,” he gives Dragomir a scroll containing two 2nd-level spells, with the understanding that Dragomir will fulfill his end of the bargain within several months.

Elsewhere, Boris explores the city. The library is separated from the back of the Last Redoubt cathedral by several small side streets. A storm drain on one of those side streets should lead down to an area of the sewers right next to Vosrode’s tomb, and from there they can follow the disguised path to the secret entrance to the cathedral’s basement. Boris sees that the grate can be lifted easily by someone of Aagute’s strength, although they’ll need a lookout at the street corner when they pull it off.

Everyone returns to the Riverview Rest for lunch, along with invited guests Simon and Giselle. (Yesterday’s dinner companion, Abu Al Mir, has not been seen today.) Arvik stalks into the kitchen and yells, “Where’s the meat?” “It’s coming!” replies the panicked cook. Boris and Krysta take their burly companion aside and explain proper inn etiquette.

Krysta, always eager to find someone who dislikes Bastion Raines, asks Simon what he, as a resident of Nevuchar Springs, thinks of the Church of Ezra. Simon looks around and says carefully that the Ezraiters have helped the city through difficult times. In the weeks after the birth of Necropolis and the pollution that affected the Vuchar River, Nevuchar

Springs was gripped by chaos. Raines and his followers came into town and seized upon the anger that many felt toward the Eternal Order. They kicked the Eternal Order out of town and provided what Simon describes as “the firm hand” that was necessary at the time. Whether or not that firm hand is still necessary is another question, he admits.

Boris asks if the Eternal Order left quietly. Simon shifts a bit in his seat and says, “No. There was ... violence.” Many residents felt betrayed by the Eternal Order’s teachings. In the push to get the Eternal Order out of the cathedral, some people died. But Simon suggests that leaving things as they were could have been worse. (The wizard is clearly uncomfortable with this topic.) After a few more minutes, Simon announces that he must return to his studies. He thanks them all for a wonderful conversation, and he graciously picks up the tab for lunch – to the great relief of Karsten, whose supply of gold has dwindled significantly. Giselle also takes her leave; Krysta is very thankful for the young witch’s help, and Giselle says she hopes to see her and Arvik again.

Alone once more, the travelers discuss what they’ve learned. They decide to enter the sewers at dusk. Since they have several hours until then, a noticeably tired and jittery Krysta says she’ll rest in her room. As she gets ready to stand up, she hears a young boy’s whisper in her ear: “*You’re not feeling well. That’s too bad.*” No one else heard or saw anything, and Krysta begins to doubt her sanity. Boris casually tosses salt in that direction, yet the crystals touch only the floor. When the distraught Krysta heads up to her room, Turnkey suggests placing a thin layer of salt crystals at the side of her bed. If Krysta *is* being visited by something, perhaps this will reveal it.

Dragomir takes the opportunity to go to the library and do what he originally planned to do: research Aagute’s condition and see if there is a way to restore Aagute’s original, human form. After a couple of hours, Dragomir finds an answer – but not the one he hoped for. Aagute is now a member of a totally different species: From a medical or alchemical standpoint, there’s nothing to “cure.” If his condition was brought about by arcane means or by a powerful curse (a topic familiar to anyone of Vistani blood), then perhaps only those methods can be used to change things. Dragomir wonders how to break the news to his friend.

Just as the half-Vistani wizard returns to the Riverview Rest, Krysta wakes up – and sees that the layer of salt has been disturbed! She can discern the outline of two bare feet, the size of a child’s, which apparently stepped into the layer of salt ... and then abruptly stepped out. Krysta gets out of bed and calls for the others. A thorough search of the room detects no intruders – invisible or otherwise – but the knowledge that Krysta’s visitor is a solid, physical being and not a figment brings her some much-needed peace of mind. Thinking ahead, Turnkey runs downstairs and buys some flour. Boris puts a small bag of it into his belt pouch.

As the sun sets, the travelers head toward the side street with the storm drain. (Boris believes that they’ll have several hours before any sewer workers begin their rounds.) Evan stays at the corner and keeps watch as Aagute and Arvik carefully and quietly lift the heavy grate, allowing the travelers to descend. Evan remains above.

Sewers smell bad, and this one is no exception. They walk along the narrow edge, trying to avoid breathing more than is necessary. They occasionally hear the squeak of rats, and they glimpse *something* moving in the water. Now and then, they pause and listen, wondering if Krysta’s invisible friend is following. They notice nothing.

They soon find the secret entrance to Vosrode’s tomb, marked by Dragomir’s *patterna* symbol. From there, they spot a series of recurring colored markings on the brickwork, leading deeper into the sewers. At one point, the travelers must wade through the vile water to get across the tunnel. Several of them feel disturbing movements around their legs, but nothing attacks.

As they travel underneath the walls of the Last Redoubt and get closer to the secret entrance to the cathedral’s basement, they find out that it’s not so secret anymore: a combination of mortar and wooden beams covers one section of the wall! The damp environment has weakened the mortar considerably, and Aagute, Dragomir, and Boris pull away enough of the wood to determine that the secret door opens *into* the sewer passageway, so the barricade was meant to keep something inside the basement. They pull open the door and step into the darkness.

The first room seems to be a guard room. No signs of people, but the wooden furniture has been *gnawed*, possibly by human-sized jaws. A secret door leads to a storage room. The crates inside have been broken open, revealing broken pottery and some paintings that have been damaged by the dampness. More disturbing are the signs of clothing on the floor; the robes have been shredded, as though by very sharp claws or knives. (The travelers worry that they might be dealing with ghouls.)

Although they find a second secret door, they travel instead through an open doorway at another wall. A short hallway reveals a stairway leading up (to the cathedral?), plus an archway leading into a much larger room. The dust on the first few steps on the stairway has been disturbed, but that’s it, as though something prevented movement further up the stairs. They try to stay as quiet as possible. Turnkey, cautiously approaching the dark doorway, thinks he sees something moving, but just for an instant!

They shine a light into the chamber. It was clearly used for ceremonies of some sort. Unlit torches line the walls, and a scorched, blackened circle dominates the floor, surrounded by odd symbols and a ring of a dried, dark substance. (Oil? Blood?) Several of the travelers now glimpse disturbing, humanoid shapes out of the corner of their eyes. They hear skittering, like that of several sets of claws, moving across the floor.

Staying in a tight formation, the group – led by Boris – moves toward the first unlit torch. As the ranger tries to light it, the skittering noise rushes toward the group! Again, out of the corner of their eyes, they can glimpse three obscenely thin humanoid forms with razor-sharp claws and insane red eyes, but they can’t see them straight on. Boris grabs the bag of flour and throws its contents directly in front of him, fully revealing one of the

horrible undead creatures. Its teeth and claws reach hungrily for him! (*DM Note: The undead are bony hands, described in VRGtWD*).

The creatures’ partial invisibility offers no protection against Dragomir’s *magic missiles*, and Boris and Aagute focus their efforts on the visible creature in front of them. One of the other creatures rips into Arvik viciously, taking a savage bite out of the warrior’s shoulder. Its blood-splattered eyes roll back in delight as it savors the Sanguinian’s flesh. Turnkey successfully hits with a thrown dagger, although another dagger misses the partially invisible creature and hits Arvik instead! Dragomir damages one with a *disrupt undead* spell, but another ray strikes nothing but darkness.

After a fierce combat, the three undead are defeated. Krysta casts healing magic. Although nearly everyone was injured, only Arvik suffered serious harm. Looking at the creatures’ claws and teeth, the travelers realize they were fortunate. (*DM Note: Truly. Not once was any of the bony hands able to use its rend attack.*) While looking for something in which to wrap up the creatures, they find another room beyond containing priests’ cloaks – and a larder of gnawed-on human bones. Dragomir’s *detect magic* spell reveals that one of the cloaks is magical, so they take it. They decide to come back and check out the untouched secret door after delivering their foul package to Vosrode.

As they wrap the bodies, they theorize that someone knew that the undead were down here and had therefore sealed the creatures in rather than risk combat. **But** as Krysta examines the corpses, she realizes that their living bodies had originally died of starvation. [*DM Note: Krysta’s player rolled a natural 20 on Knowledge (Undead).*] So *that* might mean ... that someone sealed up these priests alive! This horrifying possibility chills the group far more than did the sewers or the undead.

Minutes later, the travelers re-enter his tomb of Anton Vosrode. The ghost quivers in rage as they tell him what they suspect. Vosrode swears vengeance on the Church of Ezra. He’s not sure how far his power extends beyond this room, but he intends to find out. When they describe the stairway leading up to the cathedral, he says that it had a protective ward during his day, but the Ezraites have likely replaced it with a spell of their choosing. Vosrode is pleased with the group’s success, and he offers to make Krysta undead! “You’ll exist forever and have great power, child!” Krysta declines.

Turnkey “helpfully” suggests that Vosrode send a squad of skeletons through the basement and up the stairs to deal with the Ezraites. The other travelers (well, most of them) are appalled, but Vosrode evilly smiles and says, “I thought you were a complete fool, but you show promise, boy! Perhaps *you* would like to become undead!” The others swiftly derail this train of thought.

As the travelers lay the three bodies reverently into three of the empty caskets surrounding Vosrode’s, the ghost agrees to fulfill his end of the bargain. A skeleton climbs out of one of the other coffins and holds out a sack. Vosrode says that the items inside have been “left behind by others who were ... passing through.” (Ahem.) He identifies the items as two potions of *cure light wounds*, a *ring of protection +1*, a *ghost*

touch quarterstaff +1 (“Don’t get any ideas,” Vosrode warns), a *cloak of stealth*, and a masterwork pistol and a pouch containing 10 regular shots and 9 shots of *shock ammunition +1*. Vosrode proceeds to identify the priest’s cloak as a *cloak of resistance +1*, and Boris’ longsword and Aagute’s amulet as a *longsword +1* and an *amulet of natural armor +1*. There are also several clerical scrolls: *augment undead* and *diminish undead, invisibility to undead* (3rd level), and – of great significance to Krysta – two scrolls of *lesser restoration!*

(DM Note: I told the players to cherish these items and use them wisely, as magic items are rare in Ravenloft. They won’t see a bounty like this for a very long time. This reward represented their accomplishments, their excellent role-playing throughout the sessions, and the sincere appreciation of the, um, undead death priest! Their actions will have repercussions.)

Lastly, a skeleton holds out a black pearl and hands it to Krysta. Wondering what power it contains, Krysta asks Vosrode, “What is it?” Vosrode says annoyed, “It’s a black pearl, child!” Vosrode adds that despite his rage over his followers’ fate, he will curb his anger and hopefully cause the necromantic passages in the library above to fade. As the travelers exit through the sewer entrance, Vosrode bids them farewell. “Perhaps I’ll see you again ... in this life or the next....”

Back in the basement, the travelers open the secret door, revealing a small room with a large cabinet. From the cabinet’s double doors hangs a sign written in Draconic: “FORBIDDEN.” After Turnkey detects and disables a spear trap, they open the doors to reveal shelves containing a number of potions, scrolls, and a severed human hand. Labels identify the vials as two potions of *ghoul touch*, one of *remove paralysis*, and something called “Taste of Evil (Barovian).” The hand’s label reads “Severed spectral hand.” (Someone will have to touch the hand to read the rest of the information.) The scrolls will need to be unrolled.

As they stare at the contents, they become aware of a slight clacking and rattling behind them...

~~~ END ~~~

### “The Bad Seed”: session 6 (conclusion)

**Date:** November 8-9, 751 (Barovian calendar)

**Location:** Nevuchar Springs, Darkon

**DM:** Ken Hart (a.k.a. Ken of Ghastria)

**Active PCs:** Dragomir Anders (Kevin), Krysta O’Shanna (Dave), Aagute (Brian), Arvik (Nanci), Evan D’Aubric (Rose)

**NPC’d this session:** Boris (Andy), “Turnkey” (Mike)

Back in the secret room in the basement of the **Last Redoubt** cathedral, the travelers examine the items found within the cabinet marked “FORBIDDEN.” In addition to the potions described previously, the cabinet contains scrolls with two divine spells (*death knell* and

*delay poison*) and two arcane spells (*vampiric touch* and something called *black lightning*, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-level spell that deals out electrical and profane energy). Dragomir cannot restrain his curiosity, and so the half-Vistani wizard picks up the desiccated human hand, identified as “Several spectral hand.” Now that he can read all the information on the tag, he realizes that – despite its appearance – it’s a wand (*RLDMG*). A disgusting wand, but a wand nevertheless, and it does cast the spell *spectral hand*.

With the exception of the *delay poison* scroll, there’s a dark theme to the items in this cabinet – a fact quite apparent to the travelers. They claim the items nevertheless.

As they prepare to leave, they hear a slight clacking and rattling behind them. Turning around with their weapons ready, they see a skeleton at the doorway. The rattling sound is coming from a black orb that’s rolling around in one of its eye sockets. The skeletal minion of **Anton Vosrode** points with one arm backward (toward the sewer entrance) and up. The travelers quickly realize that something unpleasant is happening on the streets of **Nevuchar Springs**.

*Five minutes earlier:*

Evan D’Aubric, remaining on guard at the corner near the storm drain, is bored. The young boy is jolted alert by a succession of sounds: breaking glass, a horrified scream, and strange, bestial laughter and grunting. The grunting appears to be coming closer! Evan tries to hide in the shadows of an alleyway – and fails. Two goblins round the corner, spot him, and attack! They injure him badly with their morningstars, but Evan bravely manages to impale one, then the other, with his rapier.

Minutes later, as the travelers reunite on the side street, they all hear the sounds of fighting, screams, and breaking glass. The city of Nevuchar Springs is under attack.

Before the travelers can act, they have to dodge a stampede of citizens who rush toward the sanctuary of the Last Redoubt. Fearing for the safety of young, innocent **Trudy Swain**, they run toward the Riverview Rest. Along the way, they see fires blazing on the beautiful, tree-lined streets. Three shadowy figures race across the street in front of them. Goblins! After a brief fight, the goblins are slain.

A few moments later, they run past the house of resident wizard **Simon Ostheim** – and it’s on fire! They can see that a side window on the first floor has been broken in. Aagute and Arvik smash the front door open. One wall of Simon’s library is aflame, and Simon himself lies motionless on the floor, flanked by two dead goblins. From Simon’s neck protrude two small darts covered in a black liquid – but the wizard is still alive. Dragomir suddenly notices the position of Simon’s body: His hand is pointing toward his desk. (*DM Note: A natural 20 for Dragomir’s Spot check.*)

As Aagute carries Simon out of the burning building, the others try to save whatever they can: a couple of potions, some tomes and correspondence, a ring, and a staff. Ignoring the stinging smoke in his eyes as best he can, Dragomir quickly looks at the books scattered on Simon’s desk:

- “Astrological Phenomena,”
- “Great Fish Recipes,” by Eric DuVore, master chef of the Court of Ghastria,
- “The Small Herbalist’s Companion,” and
- “Classic Fairy Tales”

They grab these books and head for the inn, which has been turned into an area for the injured. **Giselle**, the attractive witch of Hala, is aiding the wounded. She’s pleased that Arvik is well. They ask her to tend to Simon immediately; the city may need the wizard’s power before the night is out. But there’s no way to tell what damage the goblin poison may have already done.

Fortunately, Trudy is safe. (So is **Karsten Ashbry** – not that anyone asked.) **Chief Constable Sulien Moonshadow** (*Gaz II*) arrives. He’s clearly been in several battles. He says that dozens of goblins struck shortly after sundown. They’ve been coming from all different directions, but they’re striking in “hit and run” attacks, with small groups breaking into buildings, setting fires, and attacking people seemingly at random. He’s sent out men to summon the rest of the militia from the woods, where they had expected an attack. The goblins had never shown the audacity to invade the city itself!

The adventurers again feel that someone must be orchestrating the goblins’ recent attacks. They ask a couple of Moonshadow’s rangers if they have noticed anything unusual today, like a strange silence. The rangers say they did hear something – or, more specifically, they *didn’t* hear something.... The silent area was in the forest, about a half-mile from the **Nevuchar Shrine** itself.

Dragomir takes a moment to open Ostheim’s book of fairy tales. As expected, there’s a bookmark, which opens onto a tale of ... the Gentlemen! (It seems that Simon’s curiosity was piqued by his earlier discussion with Dragomir, and he followed his own advice to the young mage.) The Gentlemen are boogeymen of Darkon and Tepest folklore, silently floating around and stealing voices. They seem especially fond of hospitals and asylums, and they often go on seemingly bizarre quests. (Like *stealing brainstems*, perhaps?) In the fairy tale, they could only be killed “by the scream of the sad princess.”

When Dragomir tells the others about this, Krysta wonders, “Sad princess? Do you think it could be ... Trudy?” The Swain farm was certainly not a palace, but the family had been there for a long time (there was even a marked graveyard nearby), and who knows what really defines royalty? Aagute thinks that it’s possible, but the others are reluctant to bring the young girl into danger unless they’re certain.

The adventurers say this entire attack could be a ploy to draw Moonshadow’s people away from the Shrine. While Moonshadow agrees, he does need just about everyone right now. The adventurers agree to go to the Shrine on their own. Moonshadow assigns the female human **Lissa** and the male elf **Tulain** to again escort them to the Shrine.

Before they can leave, **Bastion Theodorus Raines**, the high (and highly arrogant) priest of Ezra in these parts (*Book of Secrets, Gaz II*), steps into the inn to share information

with Moonshadow. He’s quickly informed that the travelers may have saved Simon’s life. Raines walks over and stiffly thanks them for their service to the city. He says that he has opened the Last Redoubt’s doors to all comers and the injured, and several of his priests are now in the streets to “deal with this vile infestation.”

Dragomir briefly describes the Gentlemen fairy tale, and he asks the priest if he has any ideas as to what the “sad princess” might mean. Raines says coldly, “Fairy tales? It’s been my experience that these stories speak in allegory.” Dragomir assures him that the Gentlemen are real. Raines leaves to return to the cathedral, but he prays for Ezra’s blessing to be upon them this night.

To the group’s amazement, they see Karsten directing Giselle in the creation of a poultice to counteract the poison in Simon! When questioned, the self-described explorer says, “*Ohhhh*, a little tidbit of information here, a nugget of a fact there, such an *exciting* life I’ve had! Conspiratorially speaking, I *have* dabbled in alchemy, you know!” Even more amazing, he volunteers to go with them to the Shrine. *(DM Note: Karsten’s secret? He’s a poisoner by trade. He’s Exp 1 / Seer 1. Yes, he’s psionic, too. That’s one reason for his quick recovery at the asylum. The PCs have no idea.)*

Moonshadow must leave to direct the defenses and the counterattack. Boris and Turnkey offer to help him, and so the trio departs, carrying the prayers of the rest of the group. As Krysta gets ready to leave, she again hears a sad childlike whisper: “*You’re just going to make things worse.*” Instantly, she spins, reaches down, and grabs something! The others had also been waiting for the invisible friend to return, and they act quickly. Arvik and Evan get solid handfuls of something, and everyone now hears a young boy’s voice, “*Let me go! You’re hurting me!*” They order him to show himself, and he does: He looks like a small human boy, perhaps 5 years old, with cherubic cheeks and ... pointed ears!

He struggles to escape, even attempting to bite Arvik at one point, but the Sanguinian’s hold is firm. Under firm questioning from Krysta and the others, the childlike being reveals the following:

- His name is Nethanil, and he calls himself a “boowray” (*Denizens of Darkness, with modifications for plot and effect*).
- He’s been visiting Krysta at the orders of the **Green Maiden**, whom Nethanil loves very much. The Green Maiden wants Krysta to join her. She’s been speaking to Krysta in her dreams. *(DM Note: This is **not** the Green Maiden from Gaz I. But I did borrow the name!)*
- Why? “*Don’t you know?*” says Nethanil innocently. “*You’re of her bloodline.*” Back at the farm, the sickle-wielding woman had recognized the link the moment she made contact with Krysta’s mind, but it was too late to stop the insanity gaze.
- Conclusion? The Green Maiden could be *fey*. And perhaps her minions as well?
- Nethanil says, “*They told me to do it.*” Krysta wants to know who the other person in “They” is, so she and Dragomir describe **Gabriel Enday**. Yes! The insane druid – last seen at the end of “Room to Grow” – is in Nevuchar Springs.

— Nethanil’s loyalty to the Green Maiden is unshakable. He seems unable to understand – or unwilling to accept – that the Green Maiden, by association with the murdering women and the Gentlemen, must be evil.

Krysta hesitantly tells the others that she’s had disturbing and somewhat *intense* dreams recently, featuring a woman with a soothing voice and smooth, pale skin. She sees only the woman’s hand. Boris speaks up and says that he has had similar dreams! In Boris’s dreams, however, he sees more than just a hand. The woman is irresistibly beautiful, but in a lusty, not pure way. The big difference is that the location in Krysta’s dream is a forest of unmatched beauty and serenity; in Boris’s dream, the beautiful forest quickly becomes blackened and barren. One of Moonshadow’s rangers, who is having an stab wound bandaged, overhears this and says that he’s had the same dream as Boris! A quick survey of other nearby rangers shows that some shared Boris’s dream, and others did not. (*DM note: The common element is Darkonian ancestry, but the PCs don’t have time to worry about that right now.*)

As the questioning of Nethanil continues, Trudy calls from the top of the stairs, “Is everything all right?” She’s a little troubled by the sight of her friends grabbing and intimidating a small boy. They assure her that all is well, but Nethanil simply stares at her, twisting his head one way, then the other, like a fascinated animal. He softly says, “*She’s ... white.*” Krysta says to the others, “OK, she’s coming with us.” Aagute, who had come to this conclusion earlier, shakes his massive head and says, “You people think too much.”

The travelers demand that Nethanil take them to the Green Maiden. He happily says he’ll do so, although it’s not a short journey. The group realizes that there are more immediate concerns than a confrontation with the Green Maiden, so they tell the “boy” to take them to Enday instead. Nethanil struggles and breaks free of Arvik’s grasp, turning invisible again before he even touches the floor. Dragomir kicks out at the spot and hears a pained “*Ow!*” but Nethanil retaliates by biting the wizard’s ankle. The others cannot get a firm grasp, and Nethanil runs off. Krysta calls out, “Hey! I thought you promised to take us to Enday.” The invisible Nethanil calls back, “*You know where he is.*” Dragomir counters, “Yes, and we’ll be sure to tell him who sent us!” “*Ahhhh!*”

Krysta quickly borrows a chain mail shirt to cover Trudy, then the group races out of the Riverview Rest and through the chaos of the Battle of Nevuchar Springs. Trudy rides on Aagute’s back, and the rangers Lissa and Tulain lead them back to the Nevuchar Shrine.

As soon as they come within sight of the Shrine, they swiftly duck to avoid crossbow fire. Between them and the Shrine are 12, maybe 13 goblins. At the far side of the river stands a hunchbacked man in a dark green cloak – Gabriel Enday! Aagute and Dragomir quickly notice something else: At the base of the giant tree are *four* Gentlemen! Two are digging at the roots with little shovels while the other two converse – silently, of course. Hanging from the crook of the arm of one Gentleman is ... a picnic basket! (One guess what that contains.) To the side of the Gentlemen are three of their zombie-like “hounds.” *Not good.* Enday calls out:

A cycle it is, like spring through snow  
Yet this harvest is dark and dire  
Bad seeds from Clangor Gentlemen sew  
Let insanity now this land acquire!

Dragomir alerts the others to the Gentlemen’s presence, then the wizard casts his last spell of this long day: *sleep*. Five of the goblins immediately drop to the ground! The two rangers stay in the back and fire arrows. Aagute puts Trudy down and runs to attack the nearest goblins. Arvik also charges forward, while Evan and Karsten return crossbow fire. Krysta prays for the *blessings* of the Morninglord to be upon her friends.

The Gentlemen begin to plant their grisly “seeds” into the hole at the base of the Shrine – and an eerie silence again steals everyone’s voices! Aagute engages in combat with two goblins, one of whom seems to be the commander. Two other goblins flank and badly injure Arvik. Dragomir, grabbing his crossbow, and the two rangers open fire on Enday. Evan fires on a goblin, while Karsten – already wounded by a javelin – shockingly runs across the river to engage his attacker in hand-to-hand combat!

Though injured, Enday still manages to say:

Fall you shall, so I decree  
Except for one with ties that bind  
She soon will want to come with me  
The rest of you shall be entwined!

The Gentlemen’s voice stealing apparently doesn’t include Enday! The grass suddenly rises up and grasps at everyone except Karsten and Arvik, who are too far away. Krysta is also untouched, but the beautiful priest’s dementia is triggered at the worst possible moment! She begins shrieking silently as imaginary plants try to drag her into the ground.

Aagute, entangled by the grass, is attacked by two goblins. Though wounded, he still slays the goblin commander. Arvik downs a couple of his attackers, but other goblins injure him further. A bleeding Karsten kills his goblin, then looks for easier targets: the sleeping goblins nearby. Meanwhile, the Gentlemen have finished planting (*cue the title music*) the Bad Seed! Frightened birds abruptly fly out of the branches of the Shrine, and the surging water around the tree begins to churn and turn foul. Everyone present instantly senses that something BAD is happening to the Shrine.

Just then, poor Trudy – already weighed down by the chain shirt – panics as the grass itself tries to hold her. The young girl *screams* for all she’s worth – a scream that slices through the Gentlemen’s silence like the sharpest knife! The four Gentlemen suddenly bolt upright and begin to shudder uncontrollably. As Trudy’s scream reaches its climax, the Gentlemen’s heads explode like overripe melons! The bodies topple to the ground. The hounds stand where they are, apparently shocked by their masters’ demise, but they follow the Gentlemen’s last orders: *Let no one near the tree.*

Dragomir, his voice returned, yells at the rangers and Evan to fire at Enday, but Evan again shoots a goblin instead. Tulain is held by the plants, but the human Lissa shows herself to be surprisingly tough as she wrestles herself free and fires at the druid.

However, the tide begins to turn against the travelers: Enday’s weird ferret returns and attacks Arvik, then Karsten. Its savage bites leave both men unconscious! (*DM Note: Besides having the Maligned “quickplate” from Privateer Press’ Monsternomicon, the ferret also benefited from a greater magic fang spell.*) The bark of the Shrine begins to turn black, and Enday calls out to Krysta to walk with him in the forest! Krysta, her force of will still impaired by her dementia, succumbs to the *charm* and happily walks toward the druid. Dragomir, Evan, and the rangers are too far away to stop her, and the only ones closer are unconscious or entangled!

Just as all seems lost, Aagute goes into a bestial rage! The caliban barbarian savagely rips away the entangling plants and charges full speed at the surprised Enday. He plunges the blade of his greataxe into the druid’s side! Enday gurgles blood, then mumbles:

Gentlemen’s death? That’s unforeseen.  
No longer can I plan anew.  
In dreams I’ll see the maiden green.  
Until next life, I say ... *adieu* ...

As Enday dies, his spell upon Krysta fades. Instantly free to act, the priest brandishes her holy symbol toward the three hounds and invokes the brilliant power of the Morninglord! Cowering before the display, the hounds stagger into the woods. Ignoring the zombies, Dragomir and Aagute rush toward the Shrine and dig up the foul package of, yes, insane brainstems. Instantly, the black corruption of the Shrine stops and the waters regain their normal color. Not knowing what else to do, Krysta casts a healing spell upon the great tree, then tends to the injured members of the group. Trudy, bewildered, walks toward the Shrine – and two branches eerily bend forward slightly, as though to embrace her.

The bark of the tree soon regains its normal, healthy color, and the sounds of wildlife return. Whether Krysta’s spell or Trudy’s presence had any effect or if the quick removal of the brainstems was enough to “heal” the Shrine, the travelers have no way of knowing.

When they try to lift the bodies of the Gentlemen, the corpses fall apart ... as piles of dead leaves. They take Enday’s body, but his bizarrely powerful ferret is nowhere to be seen.

Weary, but still worried about the fate of those in town, they return as quickly as possible to Nevuchar Springs. Chief Constable Moonshadow, injured and exhausted, tells them that the battle is over. The goblins have been slain or driven back into the woods. He estimates that at least *four dozen* goblins were involved in the attack. (Add to that the 12 the group fought at the Shrine – a significant assault.) Victory did not come easily: Moonshadow says that at least 40 people were killed, mostly in the early moments or from being trapped in burning buildings. The damage to the town is great. Bastion

Raines, his followers, and visiting clerics like Giselle are exhausted from treating the wounded, but the constable says the valor shown by the townspeople has been inspiring. He goes on to praise Boris and even Turnkey (!) for their help in routing the invaders.

They're relieved to see that Simon Ostheim is recovering, though slowly, from the effects of the poison. Dragomir credits him with their success tonight. If not for the information he found, things could have been very different. Meanwhile, Karsten walks around the inn, helping himself to drinks and telling everyone he can about the magnificent battle that took place at the Nevuchar Shrine.

After helping the militia deal with the wounded and the dead, the travelers enjoy many hours of much needed rest. (Boris enjoys a peaceful sleep; Krysta doesn't remember her dreams, but she wakes up feeling a strange sense of loss.) In the morning, as they eat breakfast, they are constantly interrupted by people who want to meet “The Saviors of the Shrine”! (Karsten's tales, and probably the reports of Lissa and Tulain, have spread quickly.) A little embarrassed by the attention, especially after so much death, the travelers – now heroes – try to downplay their role in the night's events.

They soon receive a summons to go to the Last Redoubt. Sometime later, they enter the courtyard to see a crowd of townspeople gathered before the steps. Bastion Raines stands before the main doors and announces that Nevuchar Springs has suffered greatly, but things would have been far worse “if not for the actions of a group of strangers whom Ezra brought into our midst. I give you ... the Saviors of the Shrine!” Great applause breaks out, although the travelers see tears of grief on the faces of some of those present.

Raines stands with them as they ascend the steps. He says to the crowd, “Yes, we have suffered terribly. But find hope in the knowledge that there are those who – like you – will stand up and fight against the darkness.” The travelers see that Raines's words do comfort the crowd, although they also realize that Raines is not a stupid man: He knows he can use the travelers' new status to his own advantage.

Inside, Raines thanks them for their service to Nevuchar Springs. (He's sincere, but not enthusiastic.) He adds that he's just spoken with **Cai Evensong** (*Gaz II*), the chief librarian, who has informed him that the travelers had investigated the “problem” at the Library. And now the necromantic passages have begun to fade from the Library's tomes. (Whether he knows the whole truth is another question.) He looks at Krysta and says, “I have a promise to fulfill.” He excuses himself and sends in a lower-ranked priest of Ezra, who casts several *lesser restoration* spells upon Krysta. (Tellingly, Raines did not cast the spells himself.) Krysta's mental strength is not entirely restored, but she's feeling much more herself.

So, what next? Krysta would like to head north and collect samples of *addlemind*, as Karsten described. Traveling north would also bring them to the town of **Neblus**, where a “mistway” to Sanguinia lies, and several of the travelers have expressed interest in joining Arvik in a trip to his homeland. Dragomir, at some point, needs to travel to **Forlorn** and collect samples of *ghost threads* for Simon. Dragomir had also heard

interesting rumors weeks ago about a coastal village called **Locknar Cove** (*Book of Sacrifices*). It lies at the border between Darkon and Nova Vaasa. The Mists revealed it shortly after the birth of Necropolis.

Last but not least, they did promise to escort the orphaned Trudy to her relatives in Tempe Falls (in southern Darkon). When Moonshadow becomes aware of this, he offers to take Trudy himself to Tempe Falls if it'll make things easier for the travelers. After all, Trudy is a hero herself. Krysta appreciates the offer, and she says the decision is Trudy's.

For now, though, Moonshadow and the townspeople are in no hurry to see them leave. (Bastion Raines's opinion is a secret.) Besides the fact that there's much rebuilding to do, Moonshadow asks for help in guarding Nevuchar Springs until he can hire more rangers and Ostheim recovers fully from the poison. The travelers will decide what to do – as soon as they enjoy hours of well-deserved rest at the Baths.

-- The End ... for the moment. But imagine, if you will, the following scene taking place in a forest ... somewhere in darkon ... --

“Why?” wails the childlike figure. “Why? I love you! It wasn't my fault!” The small figure struggles uselessly in the arms of two twisted men. The green and brown attire of Darkonese rangers fits awkwardly on their misshapen bodies. The woman casually waves a sleek, lovely hand. Another woman – beautiful, with dark hair and black eyes – steps forward, holding a sickle in one hand and a small tin plate in the other. She kneels down in front of the childlike figure and places the plate underneath his right foot.

“Tell me the truth,” says the first woman, speaking with a voice as soft as the flutter of butterflies. “What did you say? What did you *learn*?” The second woman smiles. She places the blood-encrusted edge of the sickle against the boy's toes.

The first woman, her beautiful green eyes sparkling like emeralds, continues, “Speak a lie, and I'll be forced to feed you – one piece at a time – to my new pet.” She lovingly regards the large ferret pacing excitedly by her feet. The animal salivates. “I don't want to, but he does need a treat to compensate for his great loss.” She loses herself in thought for a moment, and she leans her lithe body against the withered bark of a great, dead tree. “It's just as well,” she whispers. “I desire my family *whole*.” Turning back to the boy, she says, “Now, did you tell them about me?”

“No, I .... Ahhhhhhh!!!”

~~ END ~~