Quoth the Raven – 33rd



A Fraternity of Shadows Ravenloft netbook

All about gothic horror…

Released from the mists on Halloween 2026

www.FraternityOfShadows.com

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« There is something at work in my soul which I do not understand. » - Mary Shelley

Esteemed members of the Fraternity,
Miladies,

Here in your trembling hands is the release of the 33rd Quoth the Raven netbook.

This is Ravenloft, a region where the sun is reluctant to rise and fully shine, and where the damp mists gather at the edge.

This is Ravenloft. Fear, horror, foul wickedness but also selfless courage to do the right thing.

An eery land of old, dark and sinister forests, of sinister mushroom rings glowing under the moonlight, a set of crumbling towers on a hill, a land with plenty of nameless villages where all the houses have shuttered windows at night, out of *fear*.

In Ravenloft, darkness is a near-living creature, ancient and patient, watching from beyond the reach of the light of the fire, like a wolf would observe you while staying hidden in the forest.

In these lands, horror does not always end in a scream. Sometimes, and more often than not, it is a just a lament or a silent grief. An unfinished statue starting to move on its own, frightening the old artist whose heart stops. A grieving mother whose son vanished in the night. A panicked inn owner at night, hearing a beast howling in one of the inn's rooms. A poisoned merchant, suddenly realizing that his associate's gift of a rare bottle of wine was anything but generosity...

Ravenloft is a realm where the most wicked are granted *eternity*, but denied *fulfillment*. These darklords reign over places shaped by their own sins, condemned forever to pursuit their obsessions, and often redoing the same actions that doomed them…

Still there is hope! In the courage of a courageous young man who lights a lamp and exits his house at night, to walk in the darkness, full of fright but hoping to save a friend. Perhaps this is the cruelest trick of the mists : many courageous people cannot help but believe in good, and do what must be done to stop evil's influence.

The Land of Mists is full of stories, objects and people. Here's a fresh new offering of horror tales. Thank you to all authors and readers! Do not forget to make a review of what you like and dislike.

The Fraternity of Shadows
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Darkon's History Explored

(Final Entry)

By Matt "Strahosbuddy" Doyle

7th moon, 762 Barovian Calendar. The Mistlands, north of the Somulus River, above the Lake of Lost Dreams

Fussing with his canteen, Gwyngad watched Mortimer and Beecham, the Ezrite, while they consulted the scroll once again. He didn't know how he ended up in this far-flung portion of the kingdom; discussing heirloom cutlery with Professor Mortimer Wachter in Lamordia last winter seemed a lifetime ago. They'd taken a fine tour of the west of Darkon visiting cousins who insisted they stay another night for one more home-cooked meal. Then they found this tattered scroll in Neblus; hell only knew why they had let it lead them here. "Does it say we're in the right spot?"

Both shook their heads. "An ancient piece of vellum with an ancient language written in ancient ink." Mortimer called over his shoulder, "Three puzzles to solve before we get to the actual riddle."

"I know how you love a puzzle, Professor."

"You know I hate them, Gwyngad."

Gwyngad tutted cheerfully. The region was living up to its name, he thought. In spite of the season, the air still hung cool about them. He pulled his hood forward a bit to defend against an imagined breeze. Clammy mist crawled along the ground, mixing with the mud of the riverbank; his boots wouldn't be dry for a month. Even in Rivalis, this part of Darkon was spoken of in hushed reverence. A few leagues north and they'd be on the border of the world, and who knew what might reach out to grab you from there? In all his travels, he had rarely felt so far from home.

The pony huffed, great warm gusts swirled from her nostrils and vanished in the cool air. Gwyngad patted her near the bridle mindlessly. He looked west at the pale sun behind the curtain of wispy clouds and realized they would end up camping after all. Bit of a shame since he had convinced the hausfrau back at that hamlet on the lake to make a stew to his specifications. It might still be delicious the second day. His gaze dropped and he saw beneath the mud something solid and slick. Stone.

His companions seemed to notice it at the same time, their eyes following it south toward a mound near the river. They walked over and discovered the mound covered a low stone building camouflaged by the ancient earth and moss. The stone on the ground led away in a perfect northerly direction, like a path. Mortimer cleared the mud with a gloved hand to expose the long limestone bricks in two distinct lines, about four feet apart like they marked a path.

Beecham had begun clearing closer to the structure, made of the same ghostly pale limestone as the path borders. The flat roof had become the perfect collection point for what appeared to be centuries of growth. Two iron doors met on the north face of the building, and while no lock was seen, the thick rod that bound them indicated they were meant to remain closed. Above the doors was an epitaph—or an order.

Torna-eth i-Ithralen en Cannuine, man i Vathrën calen-eth

"Do you know it?" Beecham asked.

"Nevuchari" Mortimer replied. "I've been picking it up; it wasn't really a part of my studies as a boy.

Gwyngad raised an eyebrow just a bit. “Nor mine. I know a few songs but not exactly sure the meanings—just liked the sound. First word is *return*.”

“Return.” Mortimer confirmed. “Return the…great speaker? Return him to…someplace when a spell is broken.”

“Not a spell.” Gwyngad squinted as he tried to remember. “Vath, vath. An enclosure? Or maybe a cage.” He looked at the doors.

Mortimer compared the scroll to the words carved in stone. He looked over at Beecham, who seemed to take his meaning and reached for the metal rod. “Our Lady in the Mists protect us.”

“Your Lady best stay in the Mists, I’ve no interest in joining her today.” Gwyngad drew his long dagger. He winced a bit as the rod squealed across its sheathing and Beecham pulled the doors open. If not for the mist, the slight exhale of air from within would have been imperceptible, but it blew little tendrils of moisture away from the entrance as the three men crept in reverently.

A sconce held a sturdy candle in each corner, but they dared only light one at first. One of them instinctively pulled the door shut behind them, they couldn’t remember which. The room was dry and gleamed with the pale reflection of the limestone. The path led beneath the door as well and ended at a sarcophagus on the floor.

“A tomb” Mortimer swallowed.

“For a great speaker,” Gwyngad said flatly. “Far from much greatness. Why drop him in the middle of the Mistlands?”

“He didn’t want to stay here,” Beecham offered. “Where is that place he’s supposed to be returned to?”

“Cannuine?” Mortimer tapped his temple like he was trying to manually jog his memory. “I’ve seen the name before, but never recently.”

“This tomb is made of stone,” Gwyngad said. “He must have expected to stay for a while. *Vathrën*…wall. A magical wall? When that wall comes down, he wants to be taken to Cannuine. Wherever that is.”

“On the other side of the wall,” Mortimer said.

“Or the Mists,” whispered Beecham. All three shivered despite how dry the crypt was. Their eyes had adjusted to the dim light, and now the contents of the crypt were becoming more obvious. Alcoves held ceramic tubes sealed with pitch stacked neatly, a rune pressed into the end of each one as though to note their contents. Large volumes bound with copper and sealed in wax sat in perfect straight rows on two shelves on either side of the sarcophagus.

Gwyngad found a shelf on the wall opposite the door. Two more candles flanked it, as though it were meant to be in a place of honor. On it was a clock, the ancient kind found in Nartok, its hands pointing to half past one. Next to this was clear glass vase filled with clean water and a smooth stone that looked like it was pulled from a river resting at the bottom. Then there was a scroll case emblazoned with the Darkonian phrase *verba manent*. Next was a conspicuous space, as though something did not get delivered before the tomb was sealed. Last was a plate. Gwyngad immediately recognized the style of porcelain with fine silver inlay, the sort of plate that would adorn the top shelf of any Kuduk cabinet. “This is from my people.”

“In this place? Interred with a Nevuchar?” Beecham took a step closer to have a look over Gwyngad’s shoulder.

“A Nevuchar in a mausoleum is a strange enough occurrence,” Mortimer said. “They were not known for their love of stone in life or death. But to be joined by artifacts of other tribes is strange as well.”

“Aye, it can’t be missed, this plate is from Delagia. My folk there give them as gifts, and not to just anyone. True friends. “Gwyngad gently rubbed his hand across the center of the plate, not to wipe any

dust, but to feel the word in the center. Not a word, a name. He held the plate with reverence. “Faelith,” he looked back at the sarcophagus. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Arrival of Darcalus 383

In the autumn of 383 BC, the horizon was blackened by the sails of the *Classis Tenebris*. Sailing from an unknown realm, the fleet bore the Darkonians under the command of the cadaverous magician called Darcalus. Although the lands around the Vuchar were rife with ancient forms of magic, the dark energies that had prolonged the existence of Darcalus beyond a natural allotment of years were unheard of. Darcalus stood on the bow of the *Dominus Noctis* with his skeletal form on full display reveling in the horror his appearance instilled in others.

The sandbar islands called the Cricklegan were difficult to navigate, and when the first Darkonian ship encountered a reef, it sank in mere moments after its keel split open to the sea. With a menacing wind at their back, and a driving rain around them, confusion set in with the sailors. And then disaster. By morning, all but one ship had sunk or become irrevocably beached. Longboats from the *Dominus Noctis* prowled the choppy waters, pulling survivors aboard when they could, but mostly steering for the mainland. Undaunted by the terrible losses, Darcalus ordered his marines ashore to establish a beachhead. General Tertius Tenicius planted the Darkonian flag on the shore in full view of the Kuduk fishermen who had been ferrying drowning men to shore. Tenicius marched into the tiny village and made contact with its elders, demanding their surrender. The folk of the hamlet saw no need for bloodshed; the next morning they put their boats out in search of the day’s catch like nothing had happened. The nets were yielding poor results, blamed in no small part on the multiple shipwrecks and frantic splashing of Darkonian invaders near the shoals. Then fishing lines began to grow taught, and across the bay, yelps of success could be heard as the dozen Kuduks in their little dories expected their fortune to change. Sadly, as they pulled on their lines, the gray and bloated arms of drowned sailors began to reach above the waves...and pull themselves up.

Darcalus had used his death magic to ensure his casualties were mitigated and his soldiers were reinforced with shambling corpses that should have remained below the waves. Capsizing boats and swimming inland, the dead swarmed the fishermen. By evening, over a thousand dead had marched ashore, and behind them came Darcalus. Over seven feet in height, his exposed skull gleaming with an unholy radiance, Darcalus strode into the village and asked General Tenicius if the locals had submitted to his rule.

“They have. They know their lives are less valuable to them than their corpses would be to you, and have chosen to keep them.” Tenicius looked at the Kuduk elders with grim compassion in his eyes. The Kuduk looked back knowingly. Their defeat was complete without a single sword thrust. The sea had not claimed one Kuduk life, but still their hope was shattered. Tenicius spoke again, this time gesturing at the dripping undead host on the beach: “These martyrs to our cause will build a city on this site. We invite you to join us, to continue to fish this Bay of Martyrs and rule this Jagged Coast which has marooned us here. We will remake our homeland and we value your partnership.” And with those words, Darkon had been founded.

The name of the Kuduk fishing thorp has been lost to time, but Bay of Martyrs has endured as Martira Bay. Darkonian colonists and their families came ashore from *Dominus Noctis* to build this first city. Tenicius had held the rank of general, but was named the legate of the settlement. His wife Livia Tenicia and their daughter Nepia had survived, but their son Tertius the Younger had drowned in the Bay of Martyrs. When his dead eyes first met those of his mother, she allowed a single tear in public, but wept horribly once she was alone. Most of the colonists

had similar experiences for the undead Darkonians eventually outnumbered the living nearly ten to one.

Legate Tenicius had negotiated a merciful peace, as he knew what would become of any that resisted his master. The Kuduk proved as much when some inevitably tried to destroy a zombie laborer. Darcalus executed the youth for assault on state property, and then reanimated both the original zombie and the newly dead in front of a crowd to prove that disobedience would be met with not only death, but also eternal servitude. Tenicius had to broker on behalf of the living to the unfeeling Darcalus, who was prepared to raise entire cemeteries to help build his cities. Instead, Tenicius convinced his master that the drowned zombies would be sufficient to accomplish their goals, and convinced the Kuduk that, like the living Darkonians, if they obeyed their grim ruler their reward would be having their bodies left in the ground after they expired. The Kuduk called these poor husks *gynciurry* or the "uninvited" since they were not at the great feast promised in the afterlife.

While Tenicius would turn his attention to the outside, the actual construction of the city fell to Prefect Decima Corvinus. A former magistrate in their homeland, she set to work immediately after the shipwrecks, organizing lists of survivors, making an inventory of salvaged supplies, and assigning labor. Corvinus had the unenviable task of giving orders to the undead host; their first order was to march back into the sea and salvage everything from their doomed armada. Although a different bird was represented in her surname, this earned her the nickname "the Magpie." As zombies took more trips below the waves, there was evidence the bottom-dwelling sea creatures had been snacking on their flesh, leaving their bones exposed. Upon noticing this, Corvinus sent the corpse of Tertius the younger on the deepest expeditions, so that her friend, Livia, would not need to be haunted by her son's face any longer.

While privately devastated by the loss and reanimation of their families, the Darkonians were compelled to publicly discuss the use of zombies as a sacred duty to their lord. This doctrine had been espoused by what passed for religion among the Darkonians, and at the time of arrival this message was firmly reinforced by Corrigo Velmalus Carprenius. On the beach, he blessed the undead as they emerged from the surf. Although he rationalized the practice of animating the dead, he secretly held doubts. He was relieved not to see his wife and three children on that beach, but when their bodies were recovered by one of Corvinus's salvage expeditions, he warded them against sorcery and interred them in a secret barrow beneath the temple that was being constructed for him.

A strange figure among the Darkonians was Gnaeus Trogus, a young, living apprentice of Darcalus. Like his master, he was driven by a quest for eternal existence and the accumulation of forbidden knowledge, and he had been granted access to the lich's spellcraft. For this reason, he alone among the living Darkonians knew the truth behind the storm that shattered the fleet on the day of its arrival: it had been conjured by Darcalus himself. The king had deliberately transported his chosen colonists on *Dominus Noctis*, while steering the remaining ships to their doom. Even as the vessels were sinking beneath the waves, Darcalus had already begun weaving the necromantic rites that would reanimate the dead. Trogus kept this to himself, fearing execution at the hands of either his master or his own surviving countrymen.

Within a year, Martira Bay was functionally complete. Simple structures were raised with undead labor at all hours, not needing to stop for sleep or nourishment. Corvinus tasked her human tradesmen with adding more artistic details, and found the Kuduk tradition of hiding reliefs of food in their stone and plaster work to be endearing. Still, as traders from other villages discovered the newly arrived Darkonians, the reputation for the walking dead invading made its way east.

In the Nevuchar capital of Cannuine, Queen Velyssara, a direct descendant of Veytharion, had received news of the Darkonian arrival. Portents from the great tower at Histirion told her of the dangers introduced on her borders, but they were vague regarding their nature. Indeed, there may have been no word in the Nevuchar language for the walking dead, so foreign the concept was to them. She ordered the garrison at Histon to be augmented, and prepared a diplomatic envoy for the newcomers.

The Czhemel had also made contact with the Darkonians through their Kuduk allies. Both Nartok and Rivalis were in agreement that the danger to their people was vast and since the war had not been known in over a century, they feared their own ability to fight off the Darkonians. They called on the Nevuchar and Tempites alike to bolster their defenses, although both were loath to spill blood. The message they sent to Cannuine and Tem-Darthul has been preserved to this day, and its fatalistic truth was taken by some as a plea, and others as a warning. *Veth morakh neskara ul-hävitama veshkar, threni zhal-kor. Zhal-kor threneth, veshkar threni*; "Each body that falls gets up and kills. Those it kills get up and kill."

In Nartok, a magician of great power emerged, although his origins are unknown. The man that would become known as Nightmage may have been from the lost land of Silvezan, for the Czhemel were specific in their descriptions that he was not from their tribe. The Nightmage used his powers to erect Nartok Keep in a fortnight and promised to use it to defend the Czhemel against the Darkonians. The Czhemel provided a great deal of machinery and resources to the Nightmage, who claimed to be working on a great defender, a creature of such ferocity it would turn Darcalus back into the sea. Sadly, the Nightmage vanished into these experiments, and never made good on his promises to defend Nartok. He eventually stopped responding to the requests for updates from the Czhemel. He labored in solitude for years, and was eventually killed in 393 by one of his broken, violent creations, which persisted beneath Nartok Keep for centuries.

Legate Tenicius met the Kuduk and Nevuchari delegations in a watchtower at the edge of the farmland that was expanding steadily inland from Martira Bay. He was sure to bring no zombies, negotiating from a position of what could be possible for their peoples with cooperation. He deflected inquiries about the nature of Darcalus himself, and planted the seeds for collaboration. Tenicius had served Darcalus for his entire military career, but grew up in an age before the lich's rise. Having already cultivated relationships with the Kuduk, he was feeling out the Nevuchar in hopes they might be able to help throw off the yoke and return his people to rule by the living.

Faelith was the Queen's envoy, as skilled a diplomat as could be found in the realm. Having been briefed by the Kuduk on the nature of Darcalus and the danger he presented, Faelith was reluctant to trust Tenicius. Still, he could see the reluctance to unleash the macabre army in the words of the Darkonian. As interested as he was in supporting the Czhemel and Kuduk as they had for centuries, he knew the primary concern of his people was to protect the Vuchar. That sacred artery that had run through their kingdom since time began was mere leagues from the newest Darkonian farms, and this advancement needed to stop. Faelith suggested the Darkonians direct their operations to the north and along the coast rather than approach the river. Faelith foresaw the power that Darcalus commanded was not something that could be easily repelled, and if it reached the Vuchar, his people would be affected forever. While this would not prevent the overrun of some of the more rustic holdings of the Kuduk, it would allow the tower of Histon the chance to observe any future Darkonian movements.

Darcalus had given strict orders to advance inland, and Faelith's terms could not be met. The trade settlement at Il Aluk had already been identified as the next Darkonian conquest. Therefore, Tenicius

turned to the other tribes to secure land. The following year, the Darkonians expanded north as Faelith had suggested, but brought their undead servants with them to speed up construction. Scouts from Histon observed the mindless workers silently toiling under moonlight, clearing trees from fields marked for agriculture. Upon their return, the decision was made to marshal the Nevuchar forces and destroy these abominations.

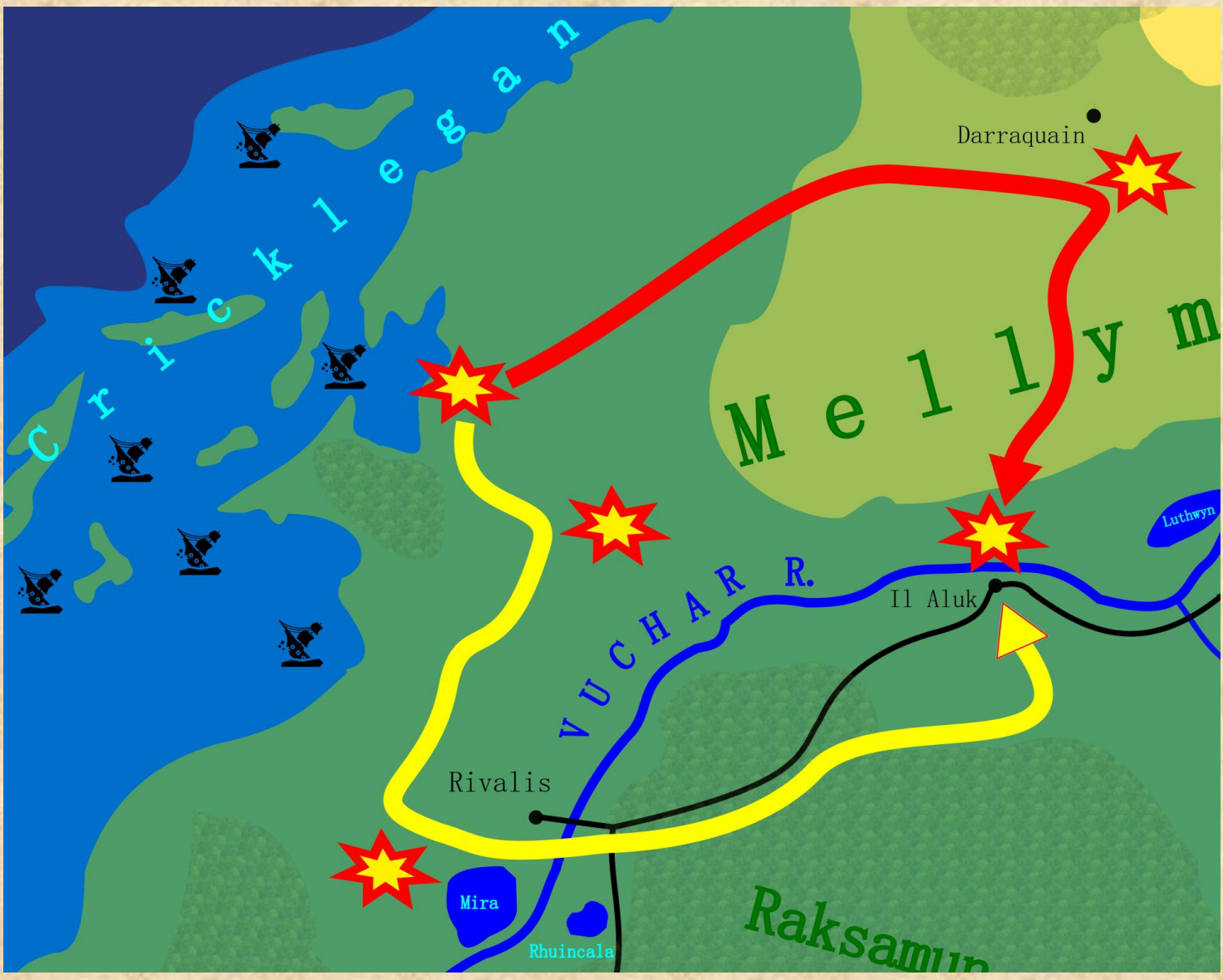
Up to this point, Darcalus had only used the dead for labor, but with the first incursions from the Nevuchar, he dispatched a battalion of undead warriors, supplemented by living soldiers under the command of Imperator Canulius Baro. The Nevuchar tactics were unfamiliar to the Darkonians, and there were heavy casualties on both sides. Baro pulled his unit back from the front line with the Nevuchar prepared to claim victory, but as the sun got low a green mist rose from the earth around the battlefield. All of the fallen soldiers—zombie, Darkonian, and Nevuchar—stirred, rose, and turned as one. Their morale shattered, the living Nevuchar broke east to escape their doom.

Baro led his newly reinforced army to follow, overtaking them in a last stand near the Kuduk village of Darraquain. Now unopposed, they marched to the northern banks of the Vuchar at Il Aluk to besiege the trading post. The lazy Vuchar did not wash unliving troops downstream right away, but the defenders of Il Aluk representing all the native tribes were skilled enough to pick off the wading corpses one by one as they emerged from beneath the current. The siege lasted months, although Baro was able to rotate his living troops to keep them fresh while the unliving held the line.

South of Martira Bay, Tenicius marched on Rivalis. The Kuduk, reinforced by Tempite mercenaries, met him in the fields outside the city. The Kuduk and Tempites fought fiercely, but they were outnumbered and outmatched. As the last defender fell, the green mist rose from the earth—Darcalus's power reaching even here. The dead stirred and rose, Darkonian and Kuduk and Tempite alike, turning as one toward Rivalis.

Tenicius marched the newly risen dead—Kuduk who'd died defending their home just hours before—through the town square. The message was unmistakable: resistance meant not just death, but also eternal servitude. The Kuduk elders agreed to his terms immediately. Rivalis would be spared if they provided boats and guides to help the Darkonian army cross the Vuchar and lift the siege at Il Aluk.

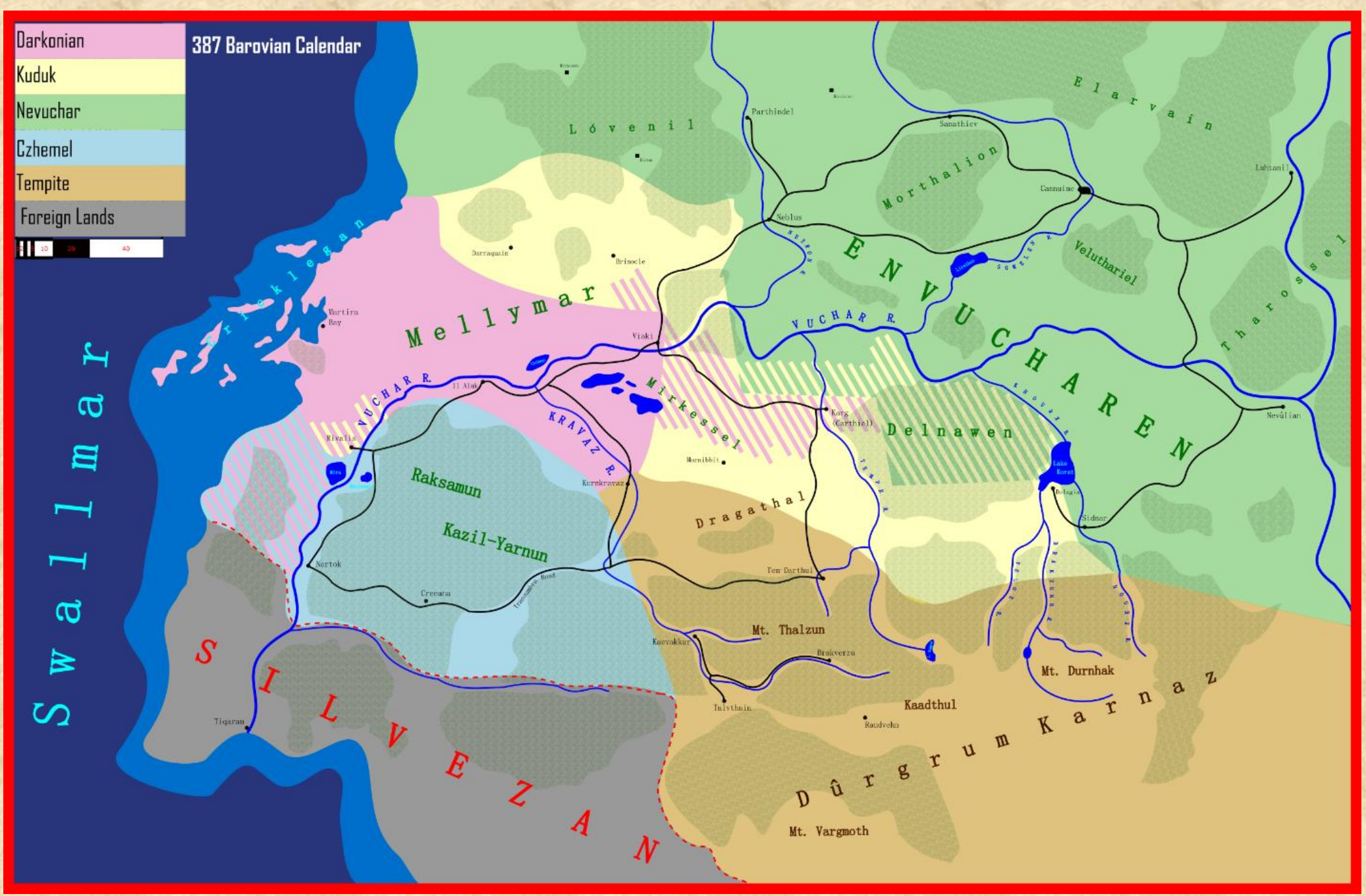
Tenicius dispatched envoys to Nartok with the same offer: grant passage through your forest and your cities will be spared. The Czhemel, having received word of the fate of Rivalis, agreed. One additional condition was levied on the Czhemel: the immediate cessation of cremation of their dead.



With Kuduk guides and Czhemel passage secured, Tenicius marched his combined army—living Darkonians, conscripted Kuduk, and the animated remains of the fallen—along the southern bank of the Vuchar. Meanwhile, Imperator Baro maintained his siege on the northern bank.

Trapped between two armies, with no hope of relief from the shattered Nevuchar forces, Il Aluk surrendered in the spring of 386 BC.

Darcalus mandated the little trading post be expanded into his capital, spanning the great Vuchar and claiming the lowlands upriver. This created a very real terminus of Nevuchar influence, as everything would now stop with the Darkonians.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Mt. Vargmoth
Kaadthul
VUCHAR R.
KRAVAZ R.
Parthindel
Sanathiev
Cannuine
Neblus
Darraquain
Brinocle
Viaki
Karg (Carthiel)
Nevûlian
Sidnar
Nartok
Creeara
Ten-Darthul
Braksverra
Talvthain
Raudveha
Tiqaran
Rivalis
Mornibbit
Kurnkravaz

The Fracture of the Nevuchar 387-395

After the loss of the Histon forces and Darkonian influence taking hold at Il Aluk, delegates from Sanathiev, Parthindel, Luhtanil, Neblus, Nevûlian, and Sidnar traveled to Cannuine to petition the queen for action. Reeling from the defeat of her army, and the complete surrender of the Kuduk and Czhemel, Queen Velyssara felt conflicted. The Darkonians showed no fear in the face of battle, since the power of their king was enough to reanimate the fallen on both sides. That confidence was impossible to replicate in the Nevuchar, and the call to marshal additional forces in the north was met with very little enthusiasm.

Research was conducted at Histirion on how to unmake the walking dead Darcalus used against them. Such magic was unknown to the Nevuchar, but there were wards they knew that could prevent the advancement of any force. These wards had been laid down by Veytharion in ancient times. It was understood that although it would not help them defeat the undead, it should keep them from advancing into Nevuchar lands. After a great deal of debate, it was somberly decided the Nevuchar would abandon their allies to protect their own lands. Sadly, few understood the limits of Veytharion's planned defenses. While the Nevuchar lands traditionally straddled both sides of the Vuchar river as far south as Sidnar and the foothills of the Tempite's mountains, the jealous king had never extended the wards as far as Neblus. This oversight of the ancient dynasty, and lack of understanding by the contemporary sages would change the course of history for the Nevuchar people and all who had called the Vuchar Valley home.

First, however, the Nevuchar needed to evict their allies from their realm. A decree from Queen Velyssara ordered all Kuduk and Czhemel citizens currently in Nevuchar cities to migrate west of the Nezron and Tempe Rivers to their traditional lands by the last full moon of the year 387 BC. This decree was encouraged with gifts of grain, weapons, and tools to the departing folk, and the implication that it was vital to strengthen Kuduk and Czhemel lands already being assailed by Darcalus. Survival of the Nevuchar tribe was the paramount concern at the council at Cannuine, however, and the fractured relationships with their allies was considered a necessary evil. Behind their wards, they felt confident they could enact a plan to return and defeat Darcalus, liberating the valley of Envucharen again. It was not the first time in history the Nevuchar had taken drastic action to stave off a perceived threat. Like each time before, the Nevuchar promised the eviction was temporary. The Nevuchar word for temporary is "*telveth*" and this came to be a curse among their jilted allies. A Tempite proverb said, "When the riverfolk tell you something is telveth, your grandchildren will see its end."

The Czhemel lands were tucked beyond the Tempe River, but the Kuduk had ranged further along the Vuchar even before the Darkonians had split their realm in half. Most of their villages intermixed with the Nevuchar in the region between Carthiel (Karg) and Sidnar. Their second-largest city was Delagia, a near neighbor to Sidnar on Lake Korst. For this reason, a lot of resistance to the forced removal west emerged. Loudest amongst the Kuduk was a Delagian litigant named Cion Brenfael. Cion had lived in Parthindel as a boy with his older sister, Talan. When she wrote that she would be coming south with some of their aging relatives by the winter solstice, Cion became angry. He ran to Sidnar and demanded Maer Calathir show him on a map where the partition line where Kuduk lands ended and Nevuchar began. Unsatisfied with the answer, he marched north intent on meeting the Queen herself to discuss the matter.

Along the road, Cion met Faelith, who was himself speeding to the capital from the west. Faelith was troubled by the expulsion of their allies and the plan

he had heard, although he did not reveal this to Cion. He talked the fiery Kuduk out of storming the royal palace and instead made a promise to meet back in Delagia, which he agreed it was part of Kuduk lands and had been for centuries. He would bring the Kuduk concerns to the Queen himself and report back.

Faelith delivered the Kuduk message to the queen, bolstered by the queen's sister, Ilmareth. Both dissented to the warding of Nevuchar lands, thinking a retreat from the actual battle was foolhardy. The Queen lamented all the patience of the Nevuchar could not match the patience of the grave. Darcalus had proven that with his quick conquest of the coast; the Darkonians' plodding advancement up the river was like an imminent tide that would devour them all. Velyssara pointed to this exact fact as the reason for such extreme action. The high Celestines were summoned to the royal palace in Cannuine on the first full moon of 388, and the ritual began.

Calling out to the greatest defender of their tribe, they knew Thalion was strongest when the moon was full. Since he had always defended them from their ancient, unnamed enemy from the stars, the Celestines invoked his name to fortify their wards. A shimmering globe emerged from the gardens at Cannuine, hovering in the air and then expanding as the chanting and prayer intensified. The borders of this globe grew steadily until by the end of the first night it encompassed all of the capital. Velyssara wept as she felt the security of her people assured, and sent riders out to follow the borders of the globe, ensuring all their people would benefit.

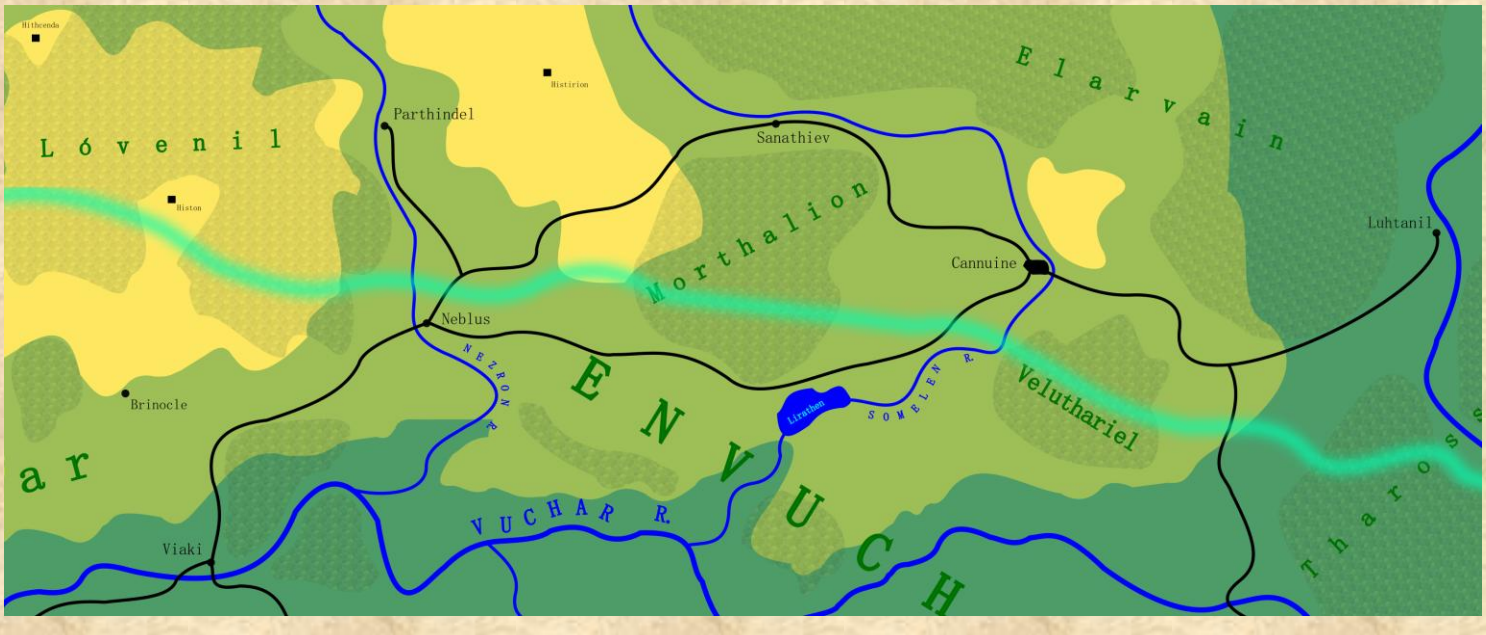
The shimmer seemed to warp vision as it grew, as if looking through poorly formed glass. By the end of the first week of the ritual, Parthindel, Sanathiev, and Luhtanil had been encompassed, and the shimmer continued outward. Its terminus north of the capital is now unknown, but to the south it stalled in the forests of Morthalion, Velutharíel and Tharossel. Velyssara thought the energy of her Celestines was faltering, so commanded the ritual chanting to be taken up by all residents of Cannuine. When this failed to move the border south, she decreed all Nevuchar must contribute. A frantic chanting now dominated the air, but the ward still moved no further.

In desperate hope to expand the Ward, Ilmareth rode her horse to Neblus. She hoped by performing the ritual song from the other side she could pull the warding further. It was to no avail, for King Veytharion had never extended the lines as he had promised, so scorned was he that the object of his lust had married a lesser man in Neblus. For this, he had doomed the lands around the holy river to be separated by the ward. Rather than protecting the Nevuchar, it amputated the tribe from its most vital artery. The Queen rode down from Sanathiev when the ritual finally ended. She faced her sister on the south side of the ward. Ilmareth reached out to her, but could go no further. The shimmering wall, which stretched to the heavens, which muffled speech to be nearly unintelligible even with great strain, had separated the royal line forever.

While the Queen's banner still rose high in the air, another came from the south. The Darkonian city of Viaki had been established quickly by the unnatural workforce employed by the lich, and now a battalion of shambling soldiers under the command of Imperator Baro came from this new outpost to investigate the strange phenomenon and singing in the Nevuchar lands. Although Darcalus himself was leagues away, his will marched with them. Having never seen the dead army herself, Velyssara remained stunned, her vanguard unmoving as the pale eyes in the sunken skulls looked at nothing. Each dead man walked along, feet hitting the brick road to the capital in haunting rhythm. Baro did not pause to pursue the residents of Neblus as they fled in every direction but north. He did not order Ilmareth captured as she sat grimly upon her horse in front of the shimmering wall. He just marched his dead soldiers directly past her, to the Queen.

The first zombie reached the barrier, and vanished. Ilmareth watched closely as the next reached the ward; this time she saw the violet flames leap out to dissolve the animated flesh as well as its weapon and armor. As a wave of dead soldiers ceased to exist in this way, Ilmareth thought she heard a faint scream—or was it a cheer—as the damnable existence of these poor souls came to an end.

Imperator Baro reacted slowly to give the halt order; more than two thirds of his zombies had fully disintegrated against the impenetrable ward by this time, vanishing forever from existence. No green mist rose from the ground, no wicked sorcery could bring them back. The dead could be defeated, it seemed. And all it cost the Nevuchar was everything they held dear in the land of the living.



Neblus was the first Nevuchar City to realize the totality of their isolation, but Nevûlian, Sidnar and Carthiel soon understood the gravity of the failed ritual. Although it had not failed—the shimmering barrier was perfectly effective at protecting those behind it—on the south side of the ward, they were completely exposed to the march of the Darkonians. Residents of Neblus discovered that the ward was only good in one direction, and that people and things could still move from the north to the south, although they would be unable to return. The librarians in Neblus requested copies of records in Histirion and other cultural artifacts, but due to the muting of words at the ward, they made such requests with large banners emblazoned with runes. The simplest way to fulfill these requests was to send unmanned rafts down the Somelen River. These rafts were greedily collected by those south of the ward, although as the years passed, they became much less frequent. Sentries on the banks of the river were often discovered sleeping out of sheer boredom, and this later led the Darkonians to rename the river "Somulus" which means drowsy in their language.

Further south, the trapped Nevuchar shared the dread of facing the Darkonians alone, since they had squandered the trust of the Kuduk and Czhemel. Early responses were violent. In Sidnar, they claimed the proximity of the Kuduk in Delagia kept the ward from taking hold. Brawls and outright battles broke out in the taverns and streets of both cities. Neither could remember who had cast the first stone in this little war. In the center of the conflict was Cion Brenfael, who publicly berated Calathir for evicting the Kuduk from Sidnar then attempting to buy back their friendship once it was obvious the Nevuchar had been abandoned by their queen.

While the Nevuchar and Kuduk struggled, Carthiel fell to the Darkonians in 391, who preferred the Tempite name and called the city Karg. In Nevûlian, the ward became a symbol of betrayal. A journal entry from this era read: “You've saved yourselves and abandoned us. The river is lost. We are lost. Remember us when you're safe in your towers, watching the stars, while we serve the dead!” An effigy of Velyssara was launched into the sky and detonated with incendiary devices, harkening back to the legend of Queen Elamaris who had also weakened Nevuchar credibility with her silencing of the Tempites ages before. The remoteness of the east led some Nevuchar to seek alliances in strange places, which would manifest in the coming years.

The Darkonians seemed to settle into their realm atop the Kuduk and Czhemel lands, but their influence was growing. The Nevuchar had always called them Ciryam, meaning “shipbuilders,” and their rivercraft were plying the Vuchar and its tributaries due to the lack of solid ground for building roads in the wild region up the river. Prefect Corvinus had made a few plans for expansion into this region, but in 393 she was fully invested in the next major trading post at Kurnkravaz. Il Aluk was thriving, but it had yet to attract any attention from the reclusive Tempites. Thanks to Czhemel efforts, Kurnkravaz was already an established Tempite town hugging the bizarre stone spires that shot into the sky. The Darkonians arrived with their first vintages of spirits and bushels of grain, flax, and cotton, eager to trade for Tempite metalwork. Corvinus had been more successful than any other Darkonian in breaking down the normally taciturn Tempites, and commerce was the secret weapon the tribe could not resist. Although Tempite influence remains strong to this day, the city and the river it sits on eventually adopted names to honor the Darkonian architect: Corvia and Corvus, respectively. The Czhemel that had been expelled from Nevuchar lands saw the same opportunity to benefit from Tempite craftsmanship, and established a trading post a bit up the river, at a crossing they named Mayvin, although it would be some time before this became an established town.

Treaty of Il Aluk and founding of Modern Darkon 396

While the Kuduk still occasionally clashed with the Nevuchar of Sidnar, the arrival of Princess Ilmareth in the region calmed hostilities. She had personally met Cion Brenfael, thinking him a passionate advocate for his people. She had listened to the concerns of Calathir, telling him plainly that there was nothing to do now but band together against the Darkonians. It was obvious the dead could not be defeated militarily, but she had been informed there were living Darkonians who could be bargained with.

Maer Calathir believed the Nevuchar would follow Ilmareth as their new queen if they could be unified. He offered to wed her to solidify her position in the south. Ilmareth bewailed the decision of her sister, but did not have any interest in taking action that would indicate the crown was truly exiled. “I can never return to Cannuine. None of us can. But it is those within the ward who are exiled, not we. We have the Vuchar, and its ancient waters will always gird our people. I did not come south to lead, I came to be near the river. I will not marry to continue the royal line, and in fact I renounce my lineage here. From this day on, I shall be called Vela, and I will live among the people. I will mend the bridges we burned with our allies, and I shall do so first in Delagia.”

Arriving in Delagia was particularly lucky for Vela, for she got there just as Faelith was keeping his promise to Cion. Faelith acknowledged her abdication with grim resolve, and he held his palms up to Cion. “I have come south as I promised you, though the tidings I bring are not what I had hoped. Queen Velyssara rules a broken kingdom. The people beyond the ward are haunted by their folly. They know they can no longer be called Nevuchar. Velyssara now rules the Doavuchar, those who chose to abandon the river. Some may still come south as time goes on, but their faith is shattered and their hearts are heavy. They will not ask forgiveness, but I

yet hope it will be offered. No one in Cannuine thought the protections would be incomplete.

“To my Kuduk friends, I have come to serve. We must join the nation that now dominates our land and create law in such a way we can still thrive. Our only other option is annihilation and eternal servitude. We must go to Il Aluk and build a new empire. We must reform our alliances, but must also make allies of our enemy, who will negotiate from a place of great advantage.” Faelith finished grimly. He knew who would be waiting for him on the other side of the negotiating table, and he knew he himself represented a nation that was lost forever.

Cion rose and embraced Faelith. “Their only advantage is fear. We must remove this or we will fail. You must join the delegation. I know your skill of negotiation, for you talked me out of rash action when my rage was at its highest!” He turned next to Vela. “Your Highness, you must join us as well.”

Vela shook her head and redoubled her decision. “You must take Calathir. Only when our bonds are truly mended will you have the strength to show the Darkonians they cannot pick us off one by one. We must gather all tribes in this council, for this will affect them all. Take Calathir, and I shall go to Tem-Darthul. The Tempites must have a voice, and I will send them down the mountain to meet with you in Il Aluk.” And Vela took leave and rode south. She was never heard from again, though both the Kuduk and Nevuchar claim she returned to Delagia or Sidnar and married one of their own, and that the royal blood still flows through some unnamed scion. Indeed, the Tempites withdrew even from Corvia as this council was being held, and were not heard from again for some time.

Envoys were sent to Il Aluk requesting a council to negotiate the future of the realm. Cion and Calathir had made peace at last, as Vela had asked. They strategized with Faelith and rallied support from the villages they visited on their way west. The Darkonians seemed eager to find peace as well and brought the delegates together in the newly built Curia Vucharis. On the Darkonian side was Legate Tertius Tenicius, the chief negotiator since the arrival on the Jagged Coast. Corrigo Velmalus Carprenius represented the church, such as it was, and Prefect Decima Corvinus advised on all matters of economics. Although not Darkonian, Branoc Talvyr of Rivalis arrived at the same time. Cion did not initially trust this collaborator, but he also had not seen the impact Darcalus had had on the western Kuduk settlements, and how completely it necessitated their surrender.

The Czhemel sent a delegation of three: Zekhar Vineth, Master of Measures, Tzarev Maleth the Contract Magnate, and the historian Serath Kelamon. Zekhar had started the tradition of Czhemel merchants tattooing the Darkonian units of measure on the forearm alongside the traditional scale used before their arrival. Tzarev brought stacks of blank parchment with which to record all agreements. Serath had half as many pages, but they were heavy with dust as they were more ancient than any other creature in the room.

From the east, Faelith, Calathir and Cion Brenfael represented a reforged alliance of Kuduk and Nevuchar. From the south, none came. Two empty seats stood in expectation of the Tempite arrival, but they remained empty throughout the proceedings. Conspicuously absent was Darcalus. While it was known he was in the city, Tenicius assured those gathered that he had the authority to negotiate on behalf of his master, soon to be the master of them all.

This was the first article, in fact. Darcalus was king. “Rex.” This title was absolute. There was no talk of succession, as Darcalus was eternal. All the rest of these laws were made in the understanding that they would outlast the living, but also bound the unliving. Rights of the dead became a hotly debated topic. Cion boldly led to the abolition of servitude after death, a heinous practice that had the body of a debtor still working after its soul had moved on. Cion had said to his allies that removing fear of the

Darkonians was their path to victory, and everyone on his side of the table nodded at the suggestion that a debt or crime was forgiven upon the expiration of the indebted.

Carprenius scoffed. “The dead are subjects of the Rex. This has always been.”

Faelith clapped the table gently. “These practices are known to Darkonians, but completely alien to those who dwell along the Vuchar. We cannot even imagine what effect the risen dead are having on our land since we are so concerned about what they have done to our people. Without an understanding on this point, we will struggle to find any further common ground at this table.”

“Then your dead will continue to serve us as the campaign continues,” Carprenius leaned forward with menace, although he shrunk slightly when he realized it was not matched by his countrymen.

“Please,” Faelith continued, “we want peace in our land. We understand the greatness of the Darkonians. We have seen your engineering and skill, things accomplished by *living* Darkonians. We think there is a place for you in this land. We can learn from one another and create a government for all. Can you not see how this practice frightens us? We have honored our dead since the time of the Grey Realm. We want the dead to belong to the land, as they always have. We respect that this is new for the Darkonians.” It was almost imperceptible, but Tertius Tenicius’ nostrils flared involuntarily.

There was a long silence. Although none of the Darkonians spoke to one another, eventually Corrigo Carprenius addressed the council with the confidence of one who shared the mind of his companions. “This can be accommodated. Any current assets must be allowed to complete their service. If they are destroyed or otherwise released, they will not be replaced. However, all cremation of the dead must cease immediately.”

The Czhemel delegates grunted in quiet protest. Each of them wore some piece of jewelry made from the burnt remains of an ancestor, and they had hoped to have this restriction lifted to restore their cultural reverence for the dead. It was Cion, however, that pushed the point.

“What does the Rex need of bodies if he agrees they cannot be used to fulfill a debt? His power is indeed great, and great enough to ignore these laws with no one to force him to abide them. Why can the Czhemel not honor their dead as they have since before your arrival?”

Tenicius spoke now: “The reason for this lies in the last caveat to this agreement. While the remains of the living will no longer be liable for the crimes or debts committed while inhabited by a soul, they may still be conscripted by the Rex in times of invasion from a foreign power.”

A chill fell over the council. Both men had answered with a singular mind, which indicated that while he may not be in the room, Darcalus heard all that was being said and could still advise his diplomats. And the concession of indentured death was a major cultural change for the Darkonians, who had built cities at accelerated rates due to the availability of this labor. But the true might of the dead was this invincible military that grew through casualties rather than dwindled.

“Define ‘foreign,’“ Cion said flatly.

“Those not in the signature of this treaty,” Corvinus replied. All eyes drifted to the two empty seats reserved for the Tempites. “We extend these protections to all Kuduk, Czhemel and Nevuchar that are buried according to the traditions of their tribe as a sign of our alliance.”

“And Darkonians.” It was Faelith who caught the Darkonian delegates off guard. “We want this practice to end for all residents of the empire. To make a home here the Darkonians must understand the power of the Vuchar and its surroundings, energies that have sustained us since time immemorial. The dead must belong to the land, as they always have.”

Another silence. The Darkonians seemed in actual shock at their inclusion by this Nevuchar. But it was Tzarev who broke the silence this time. “How much of the corpse must remain?” When more stunned silence followed, he continued: “I have seen the dead army. They do not eat. They do not tire. They do not even seem to look at their targets as they strike. I presume even their thoughts are driven by those who command them and not themselves. So I ask, if the dead are needed only for military conscription, do they need more than the skeletal frame to prevent the enemy from walking past them, more than a hand to grip a weapon and strike? Could we not still cremate the organs?”

Tenicius responded, “They do not need their organs to serve, only their limbs, skull, and spine.”

“They do not need their eyes?” Zekhar asked. It was confirmed they did not, and this led to the eyes of Zekhar Vineth being preserved in Nartok, and later in Mayvin, at the home of his family, who were always thankful for his foresight. Czhemel ritual evolved from this point to dissect the dead and burn the organs, which was always the intent of cremation—the bones had just been collateral damage. Tzarev carefully detailed the rites needed to accommodate Darcalus’ request for intact skeletons to serve. It was another Czhemel that spoke up next, though.

Serath Kelamon patted his stack of scrolls. “Invasion was unknown before the Darkonians arrived. Are you trying to protect us from a yet unknown threat, or is there another fleet coming behind, pursuing you from whence you came?”

All three Darkonians bristled and sat up taller in their chairs. “There are no more ships,” Tenicius finally said. “Our land was utterly destroyed, we are its survivors, not its colonists. Darcalus Rex seeks to avoid a similar fate here. I have fought against you all, I know your skill in battle. But I also know how much you value the lives of your families. Let Darcalus keep this force you rightly fear in reserve, to defend us all from things we cannot yet guess. Bury your dead in a manner that suits you, burn their entrails if you must, and we will all hope they are never needed to serve.”

Branoc Talvyr spoke at last. “And Darcalus will respect our graves? The sacred ground where we put our dead will remain undisturbed unless there is great need? A generation from now, when we are all lying in the earth, how do we know Darcalus will not suddenly decide a new city will require our animated labor and bring us back?” Cion looked at Branoc with respect. Not a lapdog after all, this Kuduk elder still had some fight. He hoped his cousins could still be saved after all.

“We can accomplish tasks like this with our current labor pool,” this was an interesting way for Corvinus to refer to the thousands of dead men and women who were currently slaving across Il Aluk. This macabre union of corpses had been reinforcing polders from the bottom of the Vuchar so that the mighty bridges could stand tall. They were excavating in total darkness even after the air had run out due to the cave-in behind them, still swinging their picks when the living reached them weeks later. They had sown massive fields in the night allowing farmers to plant even faster and these yields were feeding Darkonian and native families alike. It could not be argued the dead had no uses, but already the Darkonians were running out of people skilled at directing the force.

“So your dead will remain at rest.” Tenicius finished her thought. “*We* will remain at rest. So long as we are delivered to the land in the ways spelled out in the rituals we have recorded today.” Faelith watched Tenicius, as he had all day. They had been rivals since they first met, though he did not consider him his enemy.

“Our delegation represents all residents of Envucharen, those who have lived here for millennia and those who have just arrived.” Faelith swallowed hard. “Calathir is the delegate for the Nevuchar. He has taken the mantle of leadership for those on this side of the Ward. I am the delegate from Cannuine. I speak on behalf of the queen in exile. We know not

if this Ward will ever be lowered, if our people will ever be reunited. But I would like the citizenship and protections to extend to any Doavuchar who may pass the Ward voluntarily, or who remain on the other side."

Carprenius grinned. "The great deeds of the Nevuchar, even those in exile, are welcome in this empire. We look forward to the day when we can be reunited, even if it takes longer than we have been promised to draw breath."

Serath and Tzarev reviewed the agreement. They continued to list the rituals from the Nevuchar and the Kuduk. Serath Included older rituals, ancient practices that were unfamiliar to everyone at the table. Still, they were diligently codified and Tzarev presented the contract to the council for ratification. The old borders were unmade and it became one Darkon, as it remains.

Velmalus Carprenius took the settlement to his church, the growing Eternal Order of the Grave, and incorporated the provisions of the Treaty of Il Aluk into its doctrine. Darcalus kept the dead in the ground with the help of the Eternal Order, and the prayers of the faithful reminded him of his promise. Each corrigo after him would reinforce this, further teaching it was with the help of the Eternal Order that Darcalus could enforce this promise. By the 8th century, it would be considered a well-known fact that the dead would rise up if not for the Eternal Order and the Rex. This seemed like an easy promise to keep, until the Requiem.

Consolidation of Influence 401-420

The treaty created a massive kingdom, even with the Ward severing such a large population from its influence. Decima Corvinus set about registering the new residents, with varying success. The Czhemel records were pristine, detailed to the fifth cousin. Kuduk and Nevuchar records were often incomplete or vague. Corvinus authorized a census to begin generating tax income, which proved more difficult the further east her enumerators traveled. This led to the next initiative, which was expanding roads. It would take longer to complete, but began the expansion of Via Vucharis, which left Il Aluk and stretched on to Viaki and Karg before struggling to break into the Delnawen forest to connect Sidnar. Still, the road network and the mighty Vuchar allowed the spread of ideas and commerce, and many got rich off the free movement of goods to the cities.

Two obstacles appeared with this rapid expansion: currency and language. The barter system common in the east was infuriatingly difficult to tax consistently, as far as Il Aluk was concerned. Corvinus struck coinage to close this gap. Initial coins had the faces of some of the delegates struck into them, but the Nevuchar found the casting of faces in metal to be distasteful. In particular, the leering image of Darcalus' rictus grin did not make anyone particularly eager to use them. Still, it is rumored that a few silver coins with the image of Faelith and Calathir were distributed, and would be invaluable to a collector.

The second attempt at standardized coinage was said to represent the four signatory tribes, although Corvinus cleverly hid the Darkonians in each coin. Gold coins were minted with a ship on the tails side and represented the Bay of Martyrs where the Darkonians arrived. On the head's side was an owl, a wise bird who Corvinus also knew it was meant to be Darcalus. The silver coins showed the Vuchar River on its tail side and represented the Nevuchar. On the head's side was a heron, its feet in the water, although this was often how Tertius Tenicius was described, having a foot in each camp. A 3-sided bronze coin was made for the Czhemel with the great bridge over the Vuchar they had designed on the back. On the head side was a kingfisher, known for its precision. It was rarely mentioned, but Corvinus intended the coin to represent Gnaeus Trogus, the living apprentice of Darcalus. Publicly the bronze piece was meant to represent the three Czhemel negotiators, and as such was worth three copper coins—which also made it very rarely used. The

round copper coins had a shaft of wheat on the tail to represent the grains the Kuduk grew. On the head was a crow, always coming after the battle, and indeed the surname of Corvinus herself. While she had hidden herself in the coin of the least value, it would still be the most common and she would jingle in the pocket of every petty fisherman until the coming of Azalin.

While money was an easy solution, the language was far more difficult. The Kuduk speakers were the most populous, but the Czhemel mercantile tradition tended to outshine in markets. The Nevuchar language seemed made for singing and its long, repeated vowels left too much room for misunderstanding during business transactions. The Darkonians believed heavily in their language with its precise word meaning and grammatical flexibility. Indeed, the words in a Darkonian sentence could be put in any order and not lose the meaning. For this reason, it made sense to push Darkonian out along the new roads. Local languages were not discouraged, and even the Darkonians began picking up a few Kuduk insults for their tendency to rhyme, but the language of law would be Darkonian. All contracts and bills of sale were to be written in Darkonian, and a copy sent to Il Aluk for archiving.

Because this forced so many people to learn the language quickly, it was decreed that a dictionary should be written. Marius Florens was selected for this task, chosen not just for his scholarship, but also for his aversion to poetry and nuance which was considered an advantage for compiling such a precise work. His translations would reflect this sterile approach. Florens traveled across the realm to ensure he had documented not only the words, but the place names that would be recorded on maps. It took twelve years to compile the book, and it was sent to all the tribes for signature and approval—in Darkonian, of course.

Marius Florens died shortly after the dictionary had been ratified, and this unfortunate turn led to the persistence of many errors which were now accepted as law. For instance, the Czhemel thorp of Mayvin was built at the crossing of the Corvus River. When the Darkonians crossed the Vuchar with their Via Vucharis, they named the town Macilius, thinking the "*may*" sound meant crossing, when it was in fact a family name. Florens also mis-translated the homeland of the Czhemel; the Nevuchar had called them "Ambal" which meant skilled, but Florens had heard this as "Umbral" the Darkonian word for shadow. So what was once celebrated as the place where skilled people lived now had the ominous name Forest of Shadows, which made the Darkonians distrustful of it. By the time the Czhemel noticed this error on the new maps, the litigants in Il Aluk pointed to their signatures on the approved dictionary. This was a sad thing to have to live with—after all, who would read an entire dictionary? It was suggested Florens might be able to clear some of these things up if he could be reached and communicated with, but this would have been a clear violation of the recently established laws regarding disruption of the rest of a corpse that had been laid to rest under a legally accepted ritual.

Integration & Transformation 420-510

Darkon continued to congeal and prosper. Maykle (colloquialized by the Kuduk from Macilius) was constructed by the dead in a remote part of the realm, away from the fretful eyes of the living. The focus on urban life made a place like Maykle necessary; it gave rural parts of the kingdom access to the mingled culture that was being built. The need for skilled work led to the founding of schools which codified the information previously kept by guilds and circumvented their apprenticeships. All guilds were regulated by the new standards to ensure quality work was being done. These schools attracted members of all tribes and swelled the population of the cities and towns. While the neighborhoods were initially divided along tribal lines, they eventually mixed in no small part due to intermarriage.

This is where communication became a larger hurdle with the tribal languages only being spoken at home.

The language was simple enough to learn, in fact, Branoc Talvyr had bragged his son had learned to be fluent in Darkonian after only six months. (This is the only part of the speech that was written down. Talvyr had continued in jest that it only took another month for his dog to master the language as well, but his wife's father still struggled with it.) Mastery of Darkonian became even more important to prove the ownership of property, something unfamiliar to the Nevuchar but vital to Darkonian tax records. Explanation of the tax code required bureaucrats to be dispatched to far corners of the realm in support of the local legate from the various tribes. Tenicius had carefully recruited young men to serve as these advisors to local rulers, and more than a few came back west with new brides they had met while serving in tribal lands.

Calathir had set a precedent among the Nevuchar by giving up his title of maer to join the Consilium and keep his nobility intact. Divided but not defeated, the Nevuchar encouraged their heirs to join with young Darkonians to legitimize their rule in an attempt to reclaim their ancient influence. This would have far-reaching repercussions, as many Czhemel and Kuduk would emigrate south after Azalin's arrival, but the Nevuchar mostly stayed put, playing a long strategy of reclaiming the Vuchar Valley. Sadly, their children attended the Darkonian schools and spoke the Darkonian language, putting the full Nevuchar culture in danger of being forgotten. They simply could not outbreed the Darkonians.

By 440, this first generation post-treaty was getting much more Darkonian by the year, and not just among the Nevuchar. The intermarriage that had begun earlier in the 5th century led to the need for more structure around the legal constraints of the institution. For this reason, registration laws were passed for all marriages in Darkon, even the traditional marriages among the original tribes. This had less to do with love and dealt more with division of property—which was also registered—in the event of one spouse's death. The large weddings of the Kuduk in particular were often planned over the years, but the couple tended to incorporate with a iudex (judge) at the time of engagement just to have all the Darkonian legal protections in place.

Religion was also becoming urbanized, in no small part because the Eternal Order of the Grave was one institution that made no effort to hide the efforts of animated workers for its construction projects. The church had built upon the Nevuchar myths surrounding the Grey Realm, but had left off references to Elaruith so as not to undermine their own ruler's mastery over the dead. Carprenius had died before this dogma had all been completely rewritten, but he had succeeded in having a temple in each Darkonian city and most of the native ones as well. Because the imposing black cathedrals were so difficult to miss, they became hubs of social and legal activity, not just religion. Even the Czhemel, whose private worship of Fland was understood by few, were known to frequent meetings held by the Eternal Order to maintain their commercial contacts.

One by one, the delegates of the treaty passed on. Carprenius was buried with honors fitting his rank in Martira Bay in 421. Branoc Talvyr passed quietly while visiting Lake Korst. Cion Brenfael died in a carriage accident on his way to Sidnar, and Calathir was inconsolable at his funeral. The bones of Kelamon, Vineth, and Maleth were interred in the Forest of Shadows, their ashes and organs scattered across the realm. As promised, all stayed in the ground. In 424, Tertius Tenicius met with Faelith in Il Aluk one last time. Both ancient, knowing the reward of a quiet grave awaited Tenicius within the week, they at last divulged their secrets. Tenicius admitted he had hoped the Darkonians would be ruled again by the living, that he had thought Faelith would deliver this in the treaty. Faelith patted his rival's hand, and gestured out the window. "Darcalus rules, but the land is not dominated by him. The Vuchar feeds the realm as it always has, and no matter who claims to rule, the land is what gives us our life and bounty. You are free of the dead, my friend, and I will ride to Neblus tomorrow knowing you are secure in death."

The second census in 445 told a story of Darkonian dominance. Roughly six city residents out of ten spoke Darkonian as their main language, with children being almost universally bilingual. In rural parts, the native language was still spoken by three quarters of residents. Parents knew the language was becoming more important, and in the town schools a native speaker of Nevuchari was easily identified by their double verb use. Because the order of words didn't matter in Darkonian, the Nevuchar translations often had the same verb shows up twice in a sentence for reasons that only made sense in Nevuchari. These children were trained to only use the verb once, which sometimes made it difficult for their own parents to fully understand them at home. Even the epic poem of Thalion's exile began to seem to the new generation of Nevuchar bilinguals like something that happened in a place far away. All its nuance and sacrifice had been lost and it began to feel more like a child's story about a man in the moon.

By the 470s, the Kuduk population was booming in the cities alongside the Darkonians. They were dominating the lower Vuchar with their growing merchant class rising in influence. Kuduk clubs formed in the larger schools, with members recruiting their friends and cousins into the professions they had been learning. So many Kuduk freeholders were in place by the end of the century, it allowed the Darkonians in the capital region to focus on governing. Kuduk around Delagia were still mostly fishermen, and did not have the Darkonian influence to affect their dialect—these two groups of Kuduk began having a difficult time understanding one another due to evolving accents.

Kuduk culture was one of the first to be imitated in the cities. No one could argue their food was delicious, and even neighborhoods without a strong presence had a Kuduk food stand or two. Darkonians couldn't get enough of the Kuduk fare, though the lack of ceremony in the preparation of the food was said to leave something to be desired in the flavor. Kuduk songs were sung in Darkonian in all of the taverns, but none of the characters were known to the revelers. Czhemel clockworks were also popular in the cities, but the gimmicky motion machines tended to be decorative rather than functional and were made in large quantities.

The schools eventually led to advancement in medicine, with the first hospitals of the realm being built in the cities. A mix of magic and science, it combined the long Nevuchar tradition of herbalism with the structured teaching of Darkonian academies. While anyone was able to learn magic if they had the aptitude, the structured Darkonian approach to medicine and sorcery quickly outclassed those arts being performed by hedge wizards and wise women in the country who didn't have access to large libraries of compiled learning.

Right before the next census, more disputes began on the use of non-registered land which tribes like the Nevuchar insisted were covered by their traditional steadings recognized by the Treaty of Il Aluk. This started a push for the definition of trackless land used by each tribe for logging and other resource gathering operations. Verification of lineage and inheritance was suddenly brought into question, and this led to many documents being redrafted, this time with names recorded phonetically using the Darkonian alphabet. Names became a little muddled as a result, but the biggest protests came from tribal concepts being described in Darkonian, which seemed to lose the original meaning.

The census of 480 showed four in five young people in the cities spoke Darkonian exclusively. Nearly half of these speakers listed their ethnicity as "mixed;" this term was becoming meaningless as the complexity of explaining parentage led most to just identify as Darkonian. Even among the rural population, it was only the oldest forty percent who were monolingual in a language other than Darkonian. A dwindling population, and one that did not factor into the tax numbers, was the walking dead. Darcalus had kept his word and left the dead

in the ground, and those zombies that were still active had lost the flesh and sinew that had clung to them yet kept their tireless resolve handling undesirable jobs like sanitation beneath the busy streets. The newer generations had lost much of their grandparents' revulsion of the dead and freely admitted their realm would be weaker had they not used this labor pool. A trend began of wreaths made from cut flowers being draped over the bony shoulders of these workers by anonymous, appreciative citizens. Amarbes Thiliriel, daughter of a Concilium member in Neblus, painted a hauntingly beautiful mural depicting the dead pulling great sleds across a frozen Vuchar river in winter. Upon the sleds were children with full cheeks and bushels of grain. The sun and moon were both in the sky on opposite sides of the piece, indicating they were crossing the Vuchar and headed south, away from Neblus and the Ward. Away from Cannuine.

Some tribal traditions remained strong. Adeniah Adon was a Czhemel merchant in Creeana who had made her fortune using her family's pressing apparatus to extract oils from fine leaves and reeds for use in healing salves. The equipment was older than any living member of her family and required delicate maintenance. Her ancestors had carefully documented the methods to maintain the press in the Czhemel language, and although Adeniah was still fluent in her native tongue, she had difficulty finding any new workers who could read the manuals. Yield decreased over the course of the 490s as the complex verb tenses in the instructions had no equivalent in Darkonian. Translating the documents fully into the simpler script began after Adeniah's death, and it is whispered the catastrophic failure of the press in 503 could be traced to a critical step being translated incorrectly.

The Tempites 510-515

Although they had been silent for a century, there were often rumors of Tempite traders in the markets of Mayvin and Corvia. Trade offers had been consistently rebuffed, but the lowland tribes had not given up. Barrels of beer and ale were often left outside Tem-Darthul's gates, always branded with the image of two empty chairs, a sign that the offerings were meant to show the Treaty of Il Aluk still waited for the Tempite arrival. Unfortunately, due to their aloofness, the symbolism was lost on any Tempites who had tapped these casks.

Zillah Tamrath, a granddaughter of the legendary Serath and venerable in her own right, had been attempting to complete the Tempite overtures all her life. She had carefully ensured the re-ratification of the obscure burial rites her grandfather had included in the treaty, the ones no one had known or seen practiced. Strange rituals including clay masks for the deceased and their living faces carved on stone slabs: these were the rituals of the Tempites, hidden among the rest by a man who knew the nation was stronger when all of its people worked together.

All of Darkon knew they would benefit from reestablishing contact with the Tempites. Centuries-old Tempite metalwork was still in use. The Cathedral in Nartok, now claimed by the Eternal Order, still looked as new as the day the last trowel of plaster was spread by Tempite hands. The Nevuchar considered the Tempites to be almost mythological. Like their own empire in the north, trapped in amber, the Tempites to the south were now known only in stories. But Tempite fingerprints were all over the realm, shadows of ancient times, sad tales of misunderstanding and fracture.

In 510, the rumors became a fact. Six wagons rumbled down the Via Montana into Corvia. The drivers were mute as the dead, hidden behind massive beards unlike anything seen in lowland Darkon. They whispered to one another in their own tongue but depended on a universal language to do business: gold. Had Decima Corvinus still been alive, she'd have had every barrel of wine emptied to celebrate the riches. Two wagons were fully laden with long, plain gold ingots. The other four were empty, but the Tempites had filled all six with flour before turning back toward home.

Zillah Tamrath followed the wagons back into the mountains. She sang Czhemel work songs as she trudged behind on foot, resting when the wagons stopped, camping when they camped, always just far enough away to not be in the light of their fires. Carefully, like she was tracking a stag, she marched all the way to the gate at Tem-Darthul. In the midst of the great waterfall, she built a tiny shack right within sight of the city walls. From the rough rock nearby, she selected a whetstone and began sharpening wooden sticks into tools.

A week later she had constructed a device that delivered a steady stream of water onto a single point, which she used to drip a circular divot into a flat stone. This she moved to her cooking fire and kept hot at all times. She had cut down the sad, scraggly trees along the mountain path for fuel, baking the wood into charcoal in her little stone crucible. Whenever she took a break, she sat facing the gate, and learned to pick out the curious Tempite eyes behind the arrow slits. Still singing, she panned the river for rough ore, which she was able to flux and smelt in her crucible. Tiny tin rods and pig-iron blobs were stacked near her shack, which she had reinforced with larger stones set in place with clever use of ramps she had also crafted from her limited wood.

After a month, the gate opened briefly and a Tempite came to sit by her as she worked. He watched her fashion clay into bowls, which she then fired in a tiny kiln she had built. He left her a crock filled with a mushroom stew before he silently returned to the city at nightfall. The following day, she was joined by a different Tempite, who silently observed as she carved delicate finger-like protrusions into the stone blocks she was crafting. When she fit the blocks together at the corner of her house—now built of stone with a nicely thatched roof—the Tempite tapped the finger joint with an appreciative grunt before leaving for the day.

Within three months the Tempites were no longer hiding. They stared in fascination from the top of the wall, their beards hanging over the crenelations. While she crafted and built, her silver hair pulled back behind her ears, Tempites would come and leave offerings of food. She always thanked them in Czhemel, *zetharak*, and they always mutely nodded and left. It became obvious they didn't want to watch her catch fish, they wanted to watch her work.

As autumn arrived, her little home on the mountain stood solidly against the cold night air. For this reason alone, Zillah's next act must have seemed particularly absurd. One morning in the midst of what would be the harvest down near the Vuchar, she began to dismantle the structure. She did not demolish it recklessly; she did not destroy any component. She simply started on one wall and pried all the carefully carved stone blocks apart and placed them in a pile. She pulled down the thatch and separated the strands. She removed her thin, tin nails from the rafters and placed them in her rough cooking kettle and stacked the wood. Once it was all apart, she gathered her blankets, many of which had been donated by the observant Tempites, and bundled herself on a rock. She lit a small fire and slept by it. She slept there for three nights. On the fourth, a few Tempites arrived and showed they had left the gate open. She shook her head and pointed at the materials she had stacked. On the fifth night it got cold, and her fire was weak. Frost had formed on the blankets in the morning, and icicles hung from her hair. Again the Tempites tried to get her to enter the city, and again she refused.

Finally, on the seventh morning, with a hoary layer of frost on her blankets, Zillah woke to the sound of work. She rose to find a lean-to had been constructed around her as she slept and a salted pork shank had been brought for her breakfast. Twenty Tempites were handling the materials she had left, reconstructing her home. By the time the sun was setting the last bundle of thatch was being placed on the roof. The final piece was the reddish glass the Tempites had blown into large squares, which fit precisely into the windows Zillah had previously just covered with furs. "*Zetharak,*" she said with a grin.

She went inside for the night, but the following morning she finally entered the great iron gate of Tem-Darthul.

In the spring of 511, the Tempites returned to the lowlands, this time to Il Aluk. Again they brought gold and left with medicine. And they spoke, in a clear and unaccented Darkonian. Instead of hurrying back up the mountain, they stayed for the night. Before they embarked with their medication, they insisted on visiting Curia Vucharis, and to see the Empty Chairs.

With the Via Montana open, the great volcanic spires in Corvia attracted the attention of the Tempites again. Eventually it was revealed that famine had struck the Tempites at last, and behind that the inevitable disease. The decision to come down the mountain was made out of the simplest choice: trade or die.

In 515, the Tempites Aldric Coldforge and Voryn Ashmantle came to Il Aluk. Aldric was an elder, and he told the story of Zillah Tamrath following their grain purchase to the Great Waterfall of the Tempites, and how she had shown that the Tempite traditions were still alive. He had been the one who first opened the gate for her, had worried about her freezing to death without her house. Voryn was younger, the one who had organized the reconstruction of Zillah's home. He was the first Tempite to learn the Darkonian language, taught by Zillah from rote memory. He told the assembly about looking down from the waterfall at the valley since childhood, how he had walked down that road a dozen times, only to turn back. It was only with Zillah's help that he finally had the courage to finish the journey, although she stopped before her little house was out of sight and the two Tempites continued alone. They called on Tyndarus Cunobarrus, the current legate, to be allowed to sign the Treaty of Il Aluk. And so the Tempites joined Darkon at last.

Both Aldric and Voryn went to Nartok on their way home, stood in the great forest they had only heard about in stories. They made offerings at the grave of Serath Kelamon, visited with his family, the family of their beloved Zillah. They traveled back to Tem-Darthul with wagons laden with gifts for the Tempites, with records of craftsmanship from ancient times when the Tempites had been a part of the great work done in the realm. As the mists of Tempe Falls came into view, their pace quickened. Yet they stopped short of the gate, and stood in solemn awe at the place where Zillah's home had been. Its absence rang like a trumpet call in their hearts, and they trudged into the city. The black banners on every street corner told the story, and while they had been solidifying their place in the kingdom, their brethren had dismantled Zillah's house piece by piece, carried each component into the city with reverence, and reconstructed it perfectly in the halls where they had buried their chiefs since ancient times. Aldric and Voryn arrived at the familiar mausoleum, wept great tears for the loss of their heroine and mentor. Both uncoiled a finely beaten sheet of copper plates, pulled tools from their belts and worked for the remainder of the day to finish the epitaph that hangs above this structure still. Above the red-tinted window of Zillah's home and grave was hung the plate emblazoned with a single word in simple Darkonian characters: *ZETHARAK*.

Maturity & Strain 516-542

A fourth census had been launched right before the Tempite integration, which told quite a story about what the last half-century of intermarriage had done to the demographics of Darkon. In 515, only 17% of those polled were identified as Nevuchar, Czhemel, or Kuduk. The rest were either purely Darkonian (45%) or identified as "mixed." It was implied whom they had mixed with, and the Darkonian language was the primary tongue spoken in cities by nine citizens in ten. Except among the Tempites, where fluency in their language was assumed to be 100% since it was never taught to outsiders, the tribal languages were only being fluently spoken by fewer than four people in ten.

This trend sent off an alarm in Il Aluk, where enough cultural melting had occurred for even high-ranking bureaucrats to think total loss of the non-Darkonian cultures was troubling. Although the learning had always focused on science and medicine, the head of the University of Il Aluk, Decanus Laberia Crito, established a department of cultural anthropologists intent on preserving the traditions and languages of the native tribes. Crito was mildly surprised at the outrage this initially created with the elders her staff interviewed, claiming the Darkonians had been smothering their cultures for the better part of a century, so this loss of culture was inevitable. They were further put off by the infamous Form XIV which accompanied these researchers, sent along by the treasury minister. Form XIV attempted to quantify all cultural findings based on their economic contributions, aligned with education standards established in the capital. Nevuchar elders in the east dismissed Form XIV for attempting to only save the parts of the Nevuchar culture that provided value to Il Aluk. The Czhemel consistently pointed out the irony that Form XIV must be filled out in the Darkonian language to be considered valid.

Decanus Crito still knew the kingdom would suffer from the loss of the native contributions, and expanded her humanities department to include history. Darkonians had lost so much of their own history before the arrival at Martira Bay, and clung desperately to the last century and a half for identity. Only Darcalus himself had a memory that stretched back to a time when these tribes were at war with one another. The written Nevuchar histories, liberated from beyond the Ward by the pleas of scholars in Neblus, pointed to even older records. Because they had happened around the banks of the Vuchar, and because the Darkonians considered the Vuchar to be their home, the native histories were considered Darkonian history, and they needed it recorded. There was no shortage of records from before the Darkonian arrival, and many were transported to Il Aluk for translation. Most native historians, however, saw the words being translated, but the meaning being lost.

By the mid 6th century, university students had taken up the tribal languages again as a sign of their enlightened education. While business was conducted in Darkonian, the intelligentsia of Il Aluk began to write poetry in Nevuchari—or at least Nevuchari as they understood it. It was still heavily accented when read aloud, and while the calligraphic Nevuchari script was dutifully recreated by the skilled hands of these scholars, even these written words felt hollow, like they lacked a soul. Above the library had been carved the Nevuchari phrase *Sylveth Amaril*. The students chanted this phrase, which in Darkonian meant “We teach the knowing.” They proudly parroted this phrase whenever they suddenly grasped a concept. Nevuchar elders, however, scowled at the stone letters like their culture stuck in a pillory. The Nevuchari phrase was actually *Sylveth Amaril, Amaril Sylveth* which meant “We teach to find what there is to be taught.” The Darkonian obsession with efficiency in language led them to drop repetitive phrases like this in their translations, but the meaning behind this motto, that the more you learn the more you find you have to learn, was sadly lost in these pithy adoptions of culture used solely to prove one had a university education.

One of the quietest areas around the Vuchar was the tiny village of Nevûlian, which the Darkonians had dubbed Nevuchar Springs. Far from the capital, far from the Ward, no roads connecting it, just the river, it was a portion of Nevuchar population that had been left alone. Mystic study around the Nevuchar Shrine, the massive tree whose roots spanned the very river itself, had given the region a reputation for solemn study and disciplined introspection. While Neblus was desperately holding its hand out for lore from above the Ward, and Sidnar was drifting toward the Darkonian camp, Nevuchar Springs remained in a sort of stasis. The amputation from Cannuine was seen as a cruel slight, and the tales of the walking dead killing children in their sleep were still strong

this far east, despite the end of the war the previous century.

All this isolation allowed something to slither down from the unnamed source of the Vuchar and take root next to the great shrine. He called himself Thalveth, and he eschewed Darkon's Eternal Order in favor of the ancient worship of the moon goddess Sehann. So well versed was Thalveth in this ancient lore, he attracted a loyal following of Nevuchar fed up with their maers apparently joining their conquerors. If Thalveth knew the Darkonian language, he never spoke it. He was celebrated for his untainted Nevucharness, although later it was said he was not a Nevuchar at all, but part of some far-flung tribe unknown to history.

Thalveth preached of Cannuine and the tough decisions that were made there. He stoked the feelings of betrayal those south of the Ward had held for decades, while simultaneously celebrating those uncorrupted by Darkonian influence. He rightly pointed out the worship of Sehann near the Vuchar was fading, but their people needed protection now more than ever before. It was foolish of Velyssara to try to defeat Darcalus with mortal means, and her hubris had separated the Nevuchar from the only thing that could help them, which was Sehann herself.

At first, there was guilt at the lapse in faith, but Thalveth soon delivered hope instead. On a night of a new moon, he called his followers to the grove near the great tree at the Nevuchar shrine. Pointing at the ominous orb that was seen only by its eclipse of the stars behind it, he reminded them of the great protector Sehann had put there. On this night, Thalion was the weakest, but he could hear them still. He cried out to Thalion, and begged for him to extend his protection back to the realm he had left below. He said the need was so great, Sehann would allow him to leave his post, for Darcalus was at least as dangerous as the *Drevath.* This ancient term was unfamiliar to most, for the word had not been spoken since the time before. Written only sparingly throughout histories ostensibly dating to the time of Elamaris, the *Drevath* were the obscure cosmic enemy of the Nevuchar whom Sehann had trapped on the moon. Thalion had kept them there since the world was young, and Thalveth said this great hero could also help them throw off Darcalus. Indeed, this was how the Nevuchar could reclaim the river and return to dominance.

Thalveth helped the Nevuchar of the east focus their minds. He insisted on silence to make sure Thalion could hear them. For months, they did nothing but meditate, cleanse their minds of thoughts of the walking dead, of their lost queen, of their fallen empire. This purity of thought appealed to the Nevuchar, and they recruited their cousins to join them. The quiet harkened back to the time of Elamaris, and the Nevuchar following Thalveth were demanding a similar correction to the state of the world as she had. He guided his congregation to stand in complex patterns on the ground that changed based on the phase of the moon. He told them to focus their thoughts skyward, to call out to Thalion. He taught them to pray:

Farath nethavar, nethavar farath. Isilveth Thalion. Aethvar nethavar, nethavar aethvar. Re drevael vortanuel.

"We seek the unreturning, the unreturning seeks us. We stand in Thalion's light. We welcome the unreturning, the unreturning welcome us. We are strengthened by what will come."

The Nevuchar had begun to open their minds to energies from beyond the stars. Thalveth had purposely selected the obscure word "drevael," a word unknown even to the most venerable speaker, but one which referenced something specific: the Drevath. Thalion had been referred to as the Unreturning (Nethafar) throughout mythology, but this hid in a linguistic trick, the homonym "Nethavar" meaning un-arriving. Woven into this prayer, Thalveth was empowering whatever had been watched over by Thalion. The cultists were unwittingly weakening the protections that kept the

Drevath on the moon. They did stand in Thalion's light, but were inviting the Drevath to join them. This mystic connection of minds required such great concentration, the worshippers often stood staring at the sky on rainy nights as well. Their heads followed the moon, even after dawn when it was beneath them. Stumbling upon a cadre of hunched, silver-robed Nevuchar staring at the earth, their chins moving with chronological precision, was enough to raise alarm in the first few that discovered them in this state.

Followers of Thalveth vanished into his circle; families often assumed their loved ones had died due to the sudden lack of correspondence. Even when physically removed from his presence, the catatonia persisted for months. The fascination with the moon was not an agitated lunacy, but an unsettling stillness in the afflicted. Even when they stopped staring blankly skyward, the cultists acted as though their personality had been muted, all emotion replaced with a languid contentedness. They responded to even the most alarming news with the calm recitation of the prayer: we stand in Thalion's light.

It was because of a falsely reported death that Il Aluk got involved at all. Cewynieth was a young Nevuchar from Sidnar who had come under Thalveth's sway. Her abrupt disappearance caused her family to think she had died during a visit to Nevûlian, and her dowry was assessed by the state for redistribution. Months later, when her betrothed returned with her, he claimed her possessions should be restored, since they had been collected without proof of her corpse—a major lapse in protocol under Darkonian law. Ferminus Audens, the local provost, found the sudden return odd enough to report it to his superiors, who then sent him to Nevuchar Springs to investigate.

Audens filed a troubled report about catatonic villagers, businesses abandoned, and a general lack of upkeep, particularly of bridges and streets. The economic halt was cause for alarm, since the tax records were also incomplete, dating to around 538. To ensure his superiors took him seriously, he investigated to provide as much detail as possible. The tax lapses happened about the same time as the arrival of Thalveth, and Audens eventually arranged a meeting with the strange prophet. Mildly uncomfortable in his presence, Audens described Thalveth in detail: silver eyes, silver hair, silver robe, and a silver hue on his hands as though stained by something. When he asked what may have caused the stain, a Nevuchar cultist called it *vynaes*, a holy oil with which Thalveth had anointed his followers of the moon. Unfamiliar with the Nevuchari language, Audens mistook the word as *vena* and thought blood sacrifices were being made to the moon. The title of his report referred to the problem of what he had named Sanguis Lunae, which his superiors assumed was the Darkonian name of Thalveth, and this was how they arrived at the appellation of "Moonblood."

Due to the occult nature of Audens' report, Il Aluk sent reinforcements to Nevuchar Springs in 540 in the form of regular law enforcement and an academy-trained wizard as well. Magicus Porcia Senna was a third-generation graduate of Il Aluk's School of Magical Arts, an abjurer who knew the natural order of things as well as she knew the Darkonian law. Senna was instructed by the Eternal Order that if there are indeed people dying in unexpected ways—and not being properly buried—she was to return them to Il Aluk for conscription as the animated dead were in need of replenishment to complete civic projects.

Senna met with Audens and he took her to the Nevuchar Shrine. She ignored the catatonic Nevuchar craning their necks to the sky, and cast a divination that uncovered a strange flow of magical energy from the shrine directly to the moon. She observed the phenomenon for three full days, even as the moon vanished beneath the horizon. She sensed the presence of something otherworldly, something attempting to transpose itself on the shrine. On the fourth morning, Senna created a mystic shield atop the shrine. When the sun set and

the cultists faced east in their glorious anticipation, the chanting began as normal. As the moon rose toward its zenith, however, the shield severed the flow of energy downward. Silver motes seemed to splash on the violet disc above the shrine, and a terrible scream came from the cultists. Those who had been enthralled the longest fell to their knees and bled from their ears and mouth. Senna considered this the moon blood her countryman had referenced and ordered the afflicted to be taken back to Il Aluk for treatment at the university hospital.

The entire event remains surrounded by mystery. Senna did little research into the cause of the connection before she severed it; she was simply ordered to put things right. Anything to do with the Drevath or Thalveth's intent is lost to time. Audens is the only one who claimed to see Moonblood running from the shrine, headed east and vanishing forever into history. The Nevuchar did their best to recover and were loath to speak of the events, even when investigators came back decades later looking for an explanation. Those treated in Il Aluk—both physically and psychologically—created more questions than answers.

Transition to Azalin 542-579

The dwindling number of animated dead had become a growing concern in Il Aluk. Since everything was cataloged in some census or another, it was known which body had belonged to which living person, right down to those serving since the Bay of Martyrs. When the Tempites joined Darkon, discovery of these identities led to a focused effort to destroy their animated brethren—mostly from the battles around Rivalis and Il Aluk in the early days of Darcalus' rule. While directly attacking them was still considered a criminal assault on state property, a particularly wily Tempite officer named Tribunus Edric Ironwall had another solution. Serving in the north, Ironwall was protecting the efforts to firm up marshy land between the Vuchar and the Lake of Lost Dreams (renamed in Darkonian). He had convinced his Imperator, a nervous officer from the west who had only heard stories about the Ward, that there was a strange bandit activity in the area and that he should have as many dead as possible serving in the region, both to speed up labor and to defend in case of attack. Ironwall had been given control of these forces, and separated them out by the tribe. He collected all of the Tempite dead to pursue a false claim of bandit activity near the Ward, and had one of his own living scouts acts as a decoy. The dead followed the scout, whose living form bounced off the Ward as he ran. During the chase, each and every Tempite corpse Ironwall had sent had dissolved against the Ward, releasing them from their unholy servitude.

In 556, a small band of excavators arrived in Tempite lands. Initially intending to pull gemstones from the earth, within a year they had all ceased communication with the outside world. Delving ever deeper, those who attempted to follow them were either never heard from again, or returned with bizarre tales of unfamiliar runes scrawled on cave walls and unnerving chanting from below. In 570, Lucan Mordaine, a member of the original party long believed to be dead, was pulled from a tunnel and transported back to Il Aluk. Refusing to speak above a whisper, Mordaine eventually told of a "Hated Mother" who spoke to him from the other side of the stone. The morning after this confession, the room where Mordaine had been observed was awash in viscera. Investigators determined he had somehow squeezed himself into the seam between two bricks, grinding his bones to powder as a result and taking all the secrets of his expedition to his grave. To this day it has never been explained how a grown man could compress himself into a gap scarcely wider than a finger.

Service to the Rex had taken on a true patriotic fervor by the mid-sixth century, and the Eternal order had actually been petitioned by living Darkonians to voluntarily serve after death as in days of old. This began as a way to offset tax debt for the family, but several others, especially among those educated at the university, saw that death was putting a stop to

their work and were looking for a way around it. This led to the expansion of the Trogus School, named for the long-dead apprentice Gnaeus Trogus who had attempted to bridge the mystical gaps by learning from Darcalus. He had perished in 477 while attempting to ascend to lichdom at Darcalus' behest. The lessons of his life and death had created the school of necromancy in Il Aluk, and his skull is said to sit in the library to this day.

Efforts at the Trogus School led to new breakthroughs in the animation of intelligent dead. Zombified labor was well enough for mining, but actually serving the Rex for eternity in possession of one's mind was revolutionary. Merchant families, celebrated legates, and military heroes all lined up to volunteer for these new tests. The first efforts were only partially successful. Through the use of sangromancy, a strain of the dead were created that still needed to feed on living blood. These *sanguisuga* were powerful, but flawed. Not only did they need to feed, they were utterly destroyed by sunlight, which significantly limited their usefulness. Still, having the mind intact had its advantages, and the first successful example of this type of creature in Darkonian history was a soldier named Vychen. It was soon discovered these creatures were capable of creating more of their own without intervention from the academy.

Another sanguisuga was a Tempite woman named Beryl Silvertress. While the Tempites had hidden their women from outsiders for years, her brazen appearance in Corvia was unsettling on multiple levels. Considered the most beautiful Tempite woman in existence (with little comparison available) her mind was strangely affected during her transformation in 551. She and Vychen were ordered to collect information since their senses had been heightened by their transformation. They became founding members of what would later become the Kargat, Azalin's secret police.

Additional attempts to extend life beyond the mortal allotment created several dozen creatures whose bodies crumbled to dust, but the animated spirit persisted. These phantoms were fully coherent and maintained all of their memories and personalities from when they were alive. Incorporeal and unable to manipulate anything in the living world, they became excellent spies in their own right, and aligned with the Kargat as well. Norbana Eliphas is one of the few creatures of this nature whose true name remained known, although she too is still referred to only by her codename in matters of Kargat spy games.

The most successful transformations involved necromantic ritual performed by the soon-to-be undead themselves. Pushing their life force into a physical object, or phylactery, created lich-like creatures whose magical ability was enhanced by their eternal state. These quasiliches tended to be ambitious to a fault, and when a few banded together to challenge Darcalus in 540, he destroyed them all and had the rituals of their creation purged from all records as well. He personally sponsored the modification of rituals over which he himself presided, with the vassaliches that emerged utterly under his own control.

Attempts to extend martial power beyond mortal limitations met with mixed results, but the same attempt to push life force into an object was used. Vychen himself oversaw the creation of amulets which enhanced human capabilities by fusing them with those of an animal. These shock troops became capable of changing shape into monstrous wolf-, swine-, or rat-like creatures with varying levels of control over their actions in these forms. Some would claim they lost themselves fully to the beast into which they transformed, but the truth is most used it as an excuse to perform brutal acts without fear of repercussions. These shifters were also added to the ranks of the Kargat once Azalin arrived.

One last census was ordered, although the Tempites still refused to participate. Among those polled, 88% claimed Darkonian blood, with more than half actually claiming pure Darkonian lineage. All

languages other than Darkonian were essentially reduced to curiosities, and the loss of native speakers would have far-reaching consequences for anyone attempting to use magic or history from the arcane age.

Darcalus essentially vanished from any public records in 542, although his efforts were seen and carried out by the legates he had appointed. An annual ball was held in Il Aluk throughout these years, a conspicuously human practice suddenly taken up by Darcalus without much explanation. The bureaucracy established by the Darkonians was fully in place when Azalin arrived in 579. Native tribes had been completely assimilated into the governing of the kingdom, and only small vestiges of their culture remained behind the curtains.

The year 579 began with a strange mist rising. The rays of the January sun eventually burned it to the ground, but it still formed walls which did not dissipate. The sea disappeared into the mist within yards of the Jagged Coast. The old border with Silvezan was encased in mist, as well as the peaks around Durgrum Karnaz. Nevuchar Springs and Neblus were near the mist, perfectly following the path of the Ward, which had completely vanished.

The year closed with the annual ball in Il Aluk, although Darcalus had been unceremoniously replaced by Azalin. Azalin quickly established the punishment for social climbing through treachery by replacing Baron Aldewaine with the newly elevated Baron Balitor. Azalin animated the body of Aldewaine and additional conspirators Lord and Lady Karawinn in a blatant flaunting of the Treaty of Il Aluk. The case was adjudicated and declared legal as a means for the crown to defend itself. Azalin Rex didn't care which Rex these conspirators had wanted to overthrow; their treason left them outside the protection of the law.

Darkon quickly found itself at war with a newly discovered neighbor, the mountainous realm of Barovia to the south. Azalin Rex quickly organized the Kargat into a fighting force under the command of General Vychen. Throughout 580, forces built up on the border, with occasional raids of dead soldiers into Barovia, but the larger force held back. The war ended suddenly when General Vychen betrayed Darkon, killed General Yssup, and marched the Darkonian forces into an ambush on Barovian soil. Peace was established, but diplomatic relations between the two realms have never normalized.

Other strange lands surrounded Darkon. The mountains of the south were replaced by two enormous peaks instead of one. Strange people lived here that history calls the "Arakites." They traded freely with the Darkonians, and their silverwork was highly sought after. They also brought forth an unusual number of fruits and vegetables for such arid land, but this introduced a significant diversity in the Darkonian diet, leading to an increase in life expectancy.

Azalin Rex eschewed the census. The Book of Names he discovered in Castle Avernus did the same job, although this was not common knowledge. There is no telling how many Doavuchar or Tempites was lost when the Mists separated Darkon from the old lands of Envucharen. The Mordentmen that suddenly made anchorage in Martira Bay introduced advanced shipbuilding methods and strange explosive devices they used for defense or simple hunting. When the Mordentmen, Arakites, or any other foreigners spent enough time in Darkon, their memories became altered until they felt Darkon was their own home. This phenomenon was taboo to speak of, and it swelled the Darkonian population even with a large emigration south of Czhemel and Kuduk in search of new lands for trade and development.

In the north, a Neblusian scholar and mapmaker named Triilien saw the Mist as an opportunity to liberate the Doavuchar and, more importantly, their secrets. With the Ward gone, he coaxed his brother Ysilsten to explore the mists for the ancient tower of Histirion. The brothers braved the cold, clammy mists, and were delighted not to encounter the Ward and be caromed back south. But the further they

walked, the more disoriented they became. Triilien called out, “I see the tower!” Ysilsten did not reply. They lost track of one another, calling out in vain. Triilien wandered for days, until he eventually stumbled out of the Mists on the banks of the Somulus River. Alone.

Ragged and half-mad, Triilien raved at any travelers he found in this lonely part of Darkon. He desperately begged them for news of his brother. He pointed back to the bank of mists and asked them to help him find the tower that would free this land. Those who followed him were never heard from again. Triilien eventually died consumed with guilt at leading his brother to his doom and his pure frustration at not finding Histirion. He rose as a ghost, and his haunts repeated the pattern. He became known to the Darkonians as Trillen the Mistwalker.

Encounters with strange creatures became commonplace. Stories of the fey or restless spirits all increased in the years after Azalin’s appearance and Darkon officially joined the Core. The incantation Magicus Senna had left in Nevuchar Springs was still intact when Azalin arrived, and he found no need to dispel it. The newest travelers to the realm were the enigmatic Vistani, who brought tales from a desert realm hidden in the Mists and claimed to tell the future. They never stayed long enough for Darkon to claim them; just long enough to tell a fortune and vanish into a bank of mists in a fortnight. Darkon was now a part of the Core, and it would be a magnetic force to the domains that would appear after it. The sheer population made it the kingdom everyone knew, regardless of their origin.



Miseria Revisited

By Aoverekoha

Special thanks to The Brotherhood, who created the Miseria Island of Terror in the pages of Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, to Adam "Speedwagon" El Akkad, who authored the Vorostokov Gazeteer and gave me good advice on how to write expansions for small Domains, and to all the friends and players who helped me explore these haunted hills.

Miseria at a Glance[1]

Culture Level:	8 (Chivalric)
Climate & Terrain:	Mountains, hills, temperate forests
Year formed:	???
Population:	???
Nationality:	Miserian
Races:	Humans 100%.
Languages:	Kaethyn.
Religions:	Church of Sainte-Marthe, Church of Saint-Ambroise, Cult of Hecate.
Government:	Independent villages.
Ruler:	No unified political leadership. Archbishop Jean-Pierre DeCourteville is the head of the Church of Sainte-Marthe and probably the most important person.
Darklord:	Cassandre Desesprits

Themes

Ghost stories: the simplest definition about Miseria is “Domain of Ghostly Hauntings”. While the canon domains of Mordent and Stauton Bluffs feature ghosts as a major threat, most of the time they are restricted to specific places. Miseria is filled with ghosts, with all sorts of motivations and behaviors. While some normalcy is possible in these domains most of the time, the Miserians need to factor in the activities of ghosts in their day-to-day life, and hope they don’t come into conflict.

Surviving hardship: even beyond the supernatural threats, Miseria is a hard land, where famine is a constant danger due to rugged terrain and lack of materials that many other lands take for granted.

The search for prosperity: the people of Miseria have worked hard to improve their lot, not only for the individual, but for their whole communities. This is reflected in their relatively high technological and cultural level. As pessimistic as they see themselves, the Miserians are a hearty and resourceful people. This is even reflected in the Darklord’s struggle: she is determined to one day have her riches and comfort back.

Humility and compassion: at the same time, stories set in Miseria place a lot of importance on doing good, no matter if the people helped are ungrateful or good deeds go unnoticed. Some of the greatest forces of good in the domain are disrespected for not being able to make miracles, yet they keep doing what they can even as they are insulted.

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[1] *Based on the Miseria article on Mistipedia, access on 4/7/26, adding archbishop Jean-Pierre’s importance and the analogs.*

Others are marred by the envy they feel for those who are better than them in some way. Just as the former theme is reflected in the Darklord, so is this one: her Act of Ultimate Darkness was caused by her egoism and absolute need for self-gratification, even as those around her suffered because of her.

The Land[2]

Landscape

Measuring 40 miles east-west and 25 miles from the Sea in the north to the Ghost City of Elthiana in the south, Miseria has a very rough geography, made of hills and small mountains. Between them run several rivers that drain into the Sea. These rivers would be a good way to connect the domain, were not for the many rapids and waterfalls in their course. Even if the rivers were navigable, there would still be a considerable number of valleys would remain hidden from those that don't travel by land.

Underneath the earth, Miseria is no more regular: the domain has a sizable cave network, or perhaps several unconnected networks, as very few of the inhabitants have explored the caves more than necessary.

Returning to the land above, the hills and mountains of Miseria are densely forested. The local inhabitants and the rare explorer from outside the domain find the forests unsettling, as the trees grow twisted and gnarled. Some of the most isolated valleys have other types of vegetation however, such as the bog at the Mecheuir valley or the (relatively) broad plain at the Pecheur valley.

Seasons and Weather

Miseria has four well-defined seasons. Winter is the worst one: due to the often meager harvests and the difficulty of traveling across the domain as the passes between different vales are closed, it is a time of great hardship and often famine in the villages, alleviated only by the effective rationing conducted by the clerics of Sainte-Marthe. In many areas, snow remains until the middle of the spring due to the shadow of the mountains. The Miserians have found a use for this, however: with a little more engineering, they have built ice houses to store food and other perishable goods, and also as a source of ice in the rest of the year.

Other than the lingering impacts of winter, and floods caused by spring thaw (to which the Miserians have adapted by building their settlements on high ground and, when a village can afford the necessary workforce, building a variety of structures for flood management, such as dams, cisterns, canals, etc), spring is a beautiful time, with the numerous apple trees that grow in Miseria flowering.

Summer is the best time of the year, however, and the time when most travel happens. It is not overly warm, and breezes provide all the necessary coolness one can need. The main social events are scheduled to happen during summer if the organizers can arrange it so.

Autumn is not particularly bad, but it carries a foul reputation among the Miserians, who call it *saison de gest*, *saison de fatone* or *saison de horler*, as the winds grow colder and stronger and, due to the mountainous terrain of Miseria, produce a constant howling sound.

Fauna and Flora[3]

Despite being a hard land by human standards, Miseria has a teeming ecosystem. Its forests are mostly composed of deciduous trees, and the most common species are oak, larch, beech and maple. Apple trees of several varieties are also extremely common. Chestnut is the last noteworthy tree, and it is often overlooked in comparison to the omnipresent apple tree. It is worth pointing out once again that the forests of Miseria are singularly gnarled and twisted. Most people blame this on the forsaken nature of the world and the ghosts tainting the land; others blame the poor and rocky soil. In

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[2] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, page 96. Mechuir and Pecheur are some of my additions.*

[3] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, page 96. Brief research on natural environments of France and Switzerland helped to decide which specific plants and animals are present in Miseria.*

areas where the forests didn't take root or were removed by human action, shrubs of broom, gorse, heather and bracken dominate the fields.

The many rivers are full of fish, which are a common source of food for both men and animals. Here and there across the land, especially in the Pecheur valley, the Miserians have built fish farms to improve the odds of filling their larders.

To the average Miserian, it feels like the forests are filled with more predators than prey, but that is untrue: deer, wild fowls, goats and other prey animals are much more numerous than the wolves, bears and lynxes.

Native Horrors

Foremost among the horrors of Miseria are the incorporeal undead. No known domain has such a large a large population of ghosts, wraiths and shades. Some of these are bound to a specific place, such as the Anne of the Overlook, who haunts a cliff by Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes, and the ghost armies in the Ancient Battlefield, but others wander the entire length of the domain. Some have well-known stories of their origins, others suddenly appear or disappear. Such inconsistencies make the work of exorcists much harder than it should be.[4]

However, while the threat of the incorporeal undead is well known by the Miserians, it is not the only one. Scattered across the land are barrows, crypts and tombs of unknown origins, and these are the domain of corporeal undead.[5] Fortunately for most people, these creatures remain in their crypts, only attacking trespassers. They tend to be humanoid zombies, skeletons and ghouls, with very rare ghasts and lesser mummies. No lich, vampire or other intelligent corporeal undead has ever been credibly seen in Miseria, and for that the inhabitants of this land are thankful. The tombs are made in several architectural styles, and they (and their undead denizens) vary widely in burial practices and state of preservation – some seem to have been just closed, some look unfathomably ancient. Not all tombs contain treasures, but many do, and some of these are beyond the wildest dreams of the poor people of Miseria.

Ghost Towns[6]

A unique phenomenon of Miseria is the ghost towns. These spectral places manifest with little rhyme or reason and their origins are much more mysterious, as they belong to widely different cultures and technological levels: for example, the Ghost City of Elthiana resembles a Classical Greek city, but the Ghost Castle of Orochi, which appears near Terrasses, belongs to a Feudal Japan-like culture.

Most Miserians avoid these places – just as they appear suddenly, they can disappear suddenly, supposedly taking with them anyone who is inside. They can even drive entire communities to migrate. However, those brave or insane enough to risk entering them often times manage to somehow keep at least part of the objects found inside. Study of these findings, plus things learned from the undead denizens of these places, has allowed the Miserians to design solutions and objects that compensate for some of the deficiencies caused by poor resources, and sometimes influenced the local cultures of the regions where these ghost towns appeared. As dangerous as they can be, the ghost towns also are an important element in alleviating the hardships of Miseria.

The People

Appearance and Fashion

Miserians tend towards slender builds – there is rarely enough food for people to get fat, and many Miserians have experienced a famine. Hair is usually straight, black or dark brown in color and cropped short among men, although those in the clergy and those who are considered aristocrats by Miseria's standards usually keep it at least shoulder-length.

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[4] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, page 96.*

[5] *Personal addition to make Miseria easier to be used for low-level games, inspired by the backstory of Tyrian Valdrin.*

[6] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, pages 96-97, with some additions such as Orochi Castle and the impact of the ghost towns in Miserian development.*

Many women let it grow all the way to the waist.

Men usually wear trousers and tunics, while women wear skirts ranging from knee-length to ankle-length, depending on their work or how often they must leave their homes. Common clothing materials are linen and wool. Leather shoes and boots to walk across rugged terrains are an all-time popular choice of footwear.

Beyond these general trends, however, local styles can vary a lot. In Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes, people use more elaborate versions of the basic clothing, often draped and with colorful clothes. In Mecheuir, most people wear trousers that often stop at the knees so people have less of a hassle to deal with the mud. In Massaea, a hamlet said to be the last stop for the fools bound fot the Ghost City of Elthiana, people have taken to using sashes, inspired by the togas worn by the local ghosts and depicted in their artwork, often knitted with images of Sainthe-Marthe and Saint-Ambroise to ward off evil.

Economy[7]

As a rule of thumb, Miseria's economy is cashless in most towns, with goods and service being exchanged. Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes and a few other, bigger towns towns do have currencies, which are not standardized. In Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes, these take the shape of coins minted in the town's smithy. In other places, it can take the form of clay tokens, beads, paper notes, and so on.

In general, Miseria's economy is dedicated to subsistence. Hunting is an important source of food and materials. To the day the Mists reclaim Miseria, hunters will never lack work, as there can never be too much game taken home, too many predators kept away from the meager herds, or ghosts sighted so people can know which parts of the forests to avoid. Gatherers occupy a similar spot in the economy.

The majority of the population is composed of farmers. Big farms are basically unheard of: the land is too rough and hard to cultivate to easily be concentrated in a few hands, even in Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes or the villages along the Pecheur river. There are a few clerics of Sainthe-Marthe who have theorized about the concept or gotten the idea after studying books taken from Ghost Towns: some of these consider that a greater concentration of land might be useful (especially if it is under their church, if they got the idea based on the role that their church occupies or from reading about outlander theocracies). The others consider that such inequality is a path to disaster.

Dread Possibility: The Whispering Route Mistway (Miseria-Mordent)

In recent years, sailors departing from Mordent have discovered that if a ship sails to the south beyond the sight of the Core's coast during autumn, they can find themselves in Miseria's Sea, the smoke and lights of Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes easy to see even at a distance. While this mistway is of moderate reliability and Miseria has few things to trade, its trade value is picking up as the Miserians readily try to acquire goods they can't produce for themselves. Cassandre des Espirits rarely closes the domain's borders, as she spends her savings on goods from the Core, which are all the taste she can get of her former luxury. She hopes to one day buy passage on a ship and once again live like a queen.

Just like fashion and adaptations related to managing the rivers, farming techniques can be very different from one valley to another: while the average Miserian farm is relatively crude, the people of Terrasses have, inspired by the gardens and fortifications of the Ghost Castle of Orochi, reshaped the mountainside to feature terrace farms, while Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes uses surprisingly advanced fertilizers.

As nature would have it, Miseria's apples are of incredible quality. On top of their being a feature of local cuisine, they form the basis of a variety of beverages, especially cider (which, when someone manages to come and go through the mists, is a

[7] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, page 97, with several additions.*

valuable export), but also brandy, wine and vinegar.

Mining is considered a wretched profession. Miseria is poor in iron and precious metals such as silver and gold. Similarly, precious stones are rare. The domain's most common metal is tin, followed by other soft metals such as lead, copper and zinc, and even then, deposits quickly dry out.

Smithing is more respected than mining, although it is also considered a dangerous profession. The lack of the more useful metals in Miseria means that many of the items that in other domains would be made of iron or steel are made of bronze or brass, and that generally few people work in this field. Over the years, the Miserian smiths have become quite adept at working with what they have, capable of making beautiful and quite complex devices such as music boxes and clocks. However, many smiths can't make enough money to live working in one village, and so they often wander across the domain looking for jobs. Some even formed somewhat formal guilds, such as the Guild of the Key and Lock or the Guild of Mechanists.

Lifestyle

Life in Miseria is a constant struggle for survival. Most people are too concerned with their survival, both in the short and in the long term (usually defined as "living to the next year") to have meaningful projects. Nevertheless, one can be surprised by the achievements they can reach when they set their minds to it.

Houses are often square, single-floor buildings made of wood, with only one or two rooms. They are built to provide insulation during the winter and early spring, and so can become too hot during summer. As such, most houses have a porch where people can spend time when they aren't working or receiving guests. When sunset comes, people go home unless it is urgent, seeking shelter from any wandering ghost. Families usually pray together during nightfall.

Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes is an exception to this trend: the people here make multi-floor houses with wattle-and-daub techniques, covered with plaster, which they paint in light colors. Each floor usually has one room but sometimes more. The upper stories usually extend beyond the foundations thanks to thick wooden columns, creating a tunnel which provides shade for the street level. The Recifens often place tables, chairs and couches along these tunnels. At nighttime, many people stay outside and light candles and lanterns, giving a cozy and lively atmosphere to Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes' streets.

Religion is very important for the Miserians. At least once a week, and often more times, people go to the chapels and churches of Sainte-Marthe to pray for her intercession. A similar thing happens to those of Saint-Ambroise where there are chapels for him.

Outside of the religious orders, Miseria has no organization above village level. Each village is free to order its own businesses, although the Church of Sainte-Marthe offers some measure of uniformity when it comes to law enforcement and justice. The average village is headed by a council, which may be as few as the most prominent people in town or all adults, but there are villages with hereditary lords, villages which gave one or both churches the authority to rule, and so on.

Generally speaking, there are few gender restrictions among Miserians: everyone is expected to help, plus there is a number of women who have become widows or orphans and must provide for themselves or their families. People of a village try to help each other, and when possible different villages cooperate.

Arts and Crafts

As previously mentioned, Miserians can be surprisingly advanced when one looks past their struggles to keep food on the table and avoid ghostly manifestations. While technological and cultural development is by no means uniformly spread, discoveries made from ghost towns have exposed Miserians to a variety of art styles, which they copied and adapted. As such, a smith who traveled across the domain before retiring in Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes could have a painting made in an Italian Renaissance style hanging besides one depicting Sainte-Marthe in a Qing dynasty hanfu, and near them lies a ceramic jar made by in Moche style.

In the most culturally and intellectually inclined villages, there is no shortage of poets composing sonnets, or musicians practicing flutes, lutes, harps, or even simplified pianos.

To cope with the cold winters and the terrifying nights, Miserians have created a variety of card games and boardgames. Some villages have even created championships for games of enduring popularity.

Miseria's Culture Level

In the Undead Sea Scrolls 2001 article where Miseria debuted, it is mentioned that the domain has reached a Chivalric cultural level (1400 to 1550 AD, as defined by the Ravenloft Campaign Setting 3rd edition), despite the lack of heavy ore in the domain. This can't be achieved solely by scavenging the ghost towns, which were noted to drive people into flight when they encounter one.

This article assumes that Miserian cultural level greatly depends on the field of knowledge and even by village. Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes is the most advanced town and more closely resembles the image of a late medieval village, but even there, if someone walked up to a blacksmith, asked him to forge a breastplate and gave him the necessary materials, the result would still be quite crude, because Miserians are closer to a bronze age society than a late medieval one where metallurgy is concerned. Meanwhile, in the quest to make the ground more fertile and productive, chemistry is making strides out of alchemy and towards science.

Religion[8]

In Miserian myth, the gods created the world and then, for some reason, abandoned it – the reason changes with the person telling the tale, although often witchcraft and wizardry are blamed for it. It is because the gods forsook the world that Miseria is such a miserable place. Fortunately, some enlightened humans managed to achieve sainthood and intervene to lessen the suffering of the world. In very old records of Miseria's false history, other saints are mentioned, but in modern day only two have a following worth talking about.

First and foremost is Sainte-Marte, patroness of law, healing and community, worshiped throughout the domain, and whose clergy often ends up in positions of leadership. As devotees of a saint of law, the Marthenians are usually jurists, lawyers, prosecutors and judges. The Church of Sainte-Marte makes great effort to ensure that, throughout the domain, the disparate villages have a relatively uniform law, and the *Book of Marthenian Law* is as important to the clerics as the *Life of Sainte-Marthe*, which tells of the saint's deeds and teachings.

The archbishop of Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes, currently Jean-Pierre DeCourteville, semi-regularly calls for councils so the church can discuss matters of faith and legislation. Beneath him are the bishops, who address the necessities of certain areas of Miseria. The northern bishoprics are smaller in size but greater in population and influence compared to the southern bishoprics.

Due to the scattered nature of the domain, the selection of an archbishop is often made well before the death of the current holder of the seat. It is common that the current archbishop writes down a list of preferred successors and makes it known as quickly as possible. Contestations happen both when the list is disclosed and during the ascension of a new archbishop, making the process quite lengthy.

Marthenian doctrine prioritizes what is best for the community over the individual. Judgments are swift and punishments are often harsh. The church's inner workings are even more stern, as it is expected that a priest will put their mission over personal opinions or desires. While vows of poverty, celibacy and others of similar nature are not a requirement in most congregations, they are often an unstated expectation. Priests that do marry or accumulate wealth are looked upon with suspicion by their peers.

[8]*Undead Sea Scroll 2001, pages 97-101, with several additions.*

Ultimately, as hardline as the Marthenians can look in their duties, they generally do have honest intentions and seek to be wise in their actions.

They do have two real flaws though: one that is not of their own doing and one that is. The former is that, despite Sainte-Marte being a patroness of healing, and the Marthenians being very skilled at mundane healing and even advanced in surgery, their healing magic always has disappointing results, healing the bare minimum. The church keeps this deficiency a secret, and has developed medical protocols to use healing magic only in urgent cases, where it can be the difference between life and death. Or for those that can afford high prices. The reason why this happens is a matter of great theological discussion.

The second saint is Saint Ambroise, patron of the exorcist monks. Unlike the Marthenians, the exorcists aren't popular – many citizens see them as incompetent due to their lack of success at driving off the ghostly hordes and ghost towns, stubbornly ignoring the fact that the exorcist monks are too few to achieve such a task. Nevertheless, the exorcist monks are among the most selfless people in the domain, freely providing help where they can. They also are more willing to host foreigners than most of the domain's inhabitants. The further south a traveler goes, the more likely to find a monastery or chapel of the exorcist monks.

Training a new exorcist monk is done entirely by a single book: *The Teachings of Saint Ambroise*, which includes the hagiography (the saint's biography), prayers and homilies attributed to him, and an extensive list of rituals and procedures to exorcise not only evil spirits but also demons, devils and any other being that might possess people or be bound to a place. Complementary materials also include commentaries by several fathers and mothers of the church on how to deal with the people of Miseria's poor perception of the church, case studies of previous banishments performed by exorcist monks through the decades and, while the idea is still being developed based on texts found in ghost towns, the concept of mental disorders, how to differentiate them from possession, and how to treat them. [9]

Unlike the Marthenians, the Ambroiseans can cast healing magic to its full potential. Here comes the second flaw of the Marthenians, the one they are guilty of: many Marthenians know and envy the magical potency of the exorcist monks and fear they could use it to wrestle influence from them. It is an unfounded fear, as the monks lack the numbers and political will to make such a move, but fear isn't rational. As things stand, they leave the Church of Saint-Ambroise alone, but it remains a potential point of friction. It even extends to the inner politics of the Marthenians: there is a degree of prejudice of northern bishoprics towards southern ones, as the latter are perceived to either be reputational hazards or too weak or too cooperative with the Ambroisean monks.

The Church of Saint-Ambrosie is less strict than that of Sainte-Marthe in terms of hierarchy. The leader of the order, Father Andre, lives in L'abbaye Des-Précieuses-Âmes (the Abbey of Precious Souls), located in the south of the domain. There is also a small church in Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes, headed by Brother Victor, but the congregation there is also small. When it comes to the responsibilities of the monks, it is politely but firmly demanded that they will perform charity and be tireless in the fight against hauntings, and to never give up while there is hope to save a victim.

Each congregation of exorcist-monks deals with its own progression across the clerical ranks, selecting Eldest Brothers or Sisters on the basis of experience and deeds. When necessary, the congregations reach out to neighboring ones for help. Any member who has sufficient reputation and experience may be invited or petition to serve in L'abbaye Des-Précieuses-Âmes, which allows them to vote and be

[9] This detail was inspired by the rich tradition of exorcism among the Christian Orthodox churches, which trains every priest to perform exorcisms, but incorporated how to differentiate mental disorders from possession as science progressed. It ended up influencing my views on the aesthetics: to me, the Ambroiseans look like Orthodox monks, while the Marthenians look more like Christian Catholics monks, particularly of Capuchin, Carmelite and Franciscan orders.

voted on as the next Father or Mother of the Church when the current one's death. A good number of members that could claim a vote decline the invitation, preferring to remain in their current village.

There are rumors that the Church of Saint-Ambroise has some type of partnership with a group from beyond Miseria known as the Order of the Guardian[10], tasked with the safeguarding of dangerous objects. How such travelers from beyond Miseria reached it is a closely guarded secret. Most sightings of these Guardians happen in L'abbaye.

There is a third, small and secretive religion in Miseria: a mystery cult that worships a goddess of night and magic named Hecate. This religion was founded by a thief named Alexandre LeNoir. While exploring the Ghost City of Elthiana during one of its appearances, he came across a set of books and scrolls about Hecate and arcane magic. When he took these to like-minded people, they managed to translate the texts and (with aid from an unholy power, probably the Dark Powers themselves) quickly grasped the secrets of arcane magic. Believing that Hecate was the true goddess and source of magic, Alexandre and his associates founded the Children of Hecate, a secret society of wizard-priests dedicated to worshiping the goddess, obtaining occult knowledge and relics, and binding all the spirits and ghost towns of Miseria to their control. Binding Elthiana to be permanently manifested was the greatest achievement of the Children of Hecate so far.

Recruitment into the Children of Hecate is often a matter of a worshiper finding a potential candidate and, after careful observation, making an anonymous invitation. If the potential initiate accepts, they will slowly be taught some of the most basic rituals and beliefs. Not even the name of the goddess or the identities of other cultists are disclosed. After a lengthy process, the cult may be convinced of the candidate's conversion and formally initiate them, finally giving them ways to contact other cultists. Otherwise, they will disappear, and depending on the initiate, they might disappear as well. The next step, which may also take time, is revealing the identities of fellow believers and then Hecate's holy name.

Only arcane spellcasters can join the Hecatean priesthood – thus far, none of Hecate's worshipers has demonstrated divine magic, something that doesn't concern them. Hacatean magic is often of a gruesome sort. Some worshipers are trained as spies and assassins, who act to keep the faith hidden and destroy potential enemies. Nevertheless, the Ambroisean exorcist-monks have gathered enough information on their existence to know of the existence of a rival order of ghost-binders. A few Marthenian priests have also discovered the Children of Hecate, or were informed by the monks.

Progression in the Hecatean cult is quite informal: seniority and magical talent are what marks a member as worthy of leadership. Currently, the oldest member is Edmont Clermont, a Marthenian priest who helped Alexandre LeNoir (who died of illness some years ago). The members which can cast the necessary spells are in frequent contact with each other, giving the Children the best ability to organize of any group in Miseria.

The Hecatean Powers and Curses

The Children of Hecate have a special power: once per night, they can call on a dead person to talk with them.

What they don't know is that whenever they do so, the soul will manifest as a ghost the next year. On top of that, when one of Hecate's arcanist-priests dies, their soul will also come back as ghost.

Holidays

Basically all of Miseria observes the Feast of Sainte-Marthe, which happens in early summer, when Miserians are in better spirits. Communities pull resources together to cook food for all, while choirs sing and performers portray the life of the saint. Collective weddings and reconciliation ceremonies

[10] *Main sources on the Order: Champions of the Mists and Neither Man Nor Beast*

often happen too.

Villages with a decent following of Saint-Ambroise observe his own feast. However, Saint-Ambroise had the poor luck of having his feast in the middle of winter, diminishing the scope of the festivities. Still, the Ambroiseans endure this with the same patience that they endure criticism. Those who brave the cold to join the feast in their churches, monasteries and gathering halls can expect generous servings of food despite the season, and entertainment that is just a good as the one in the Feasts of Sainte-Marthe.

Depending on the village, there may be other festivities. For example, Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes has a few holidays dedicated to meaningful dates, such as the summer festival, a ceremony honoring the local fishermen, the supposed anniversary of the town, etc. Another regional festival is in Terrasses, which has a bizarre (by Miserian standards) Spring Lanterns' Festival inspired by a few times when the Ghost Castle of Orochi manifested on the day of the party, and the samurai and courtiers of the castle were in a cheery mood and bearing lanterns. Recently, Mecheuir has begun the Perfumes' Festival, as some of the most ambitious citizens try to make the village known for making perfumes.

The Children of Hecate have their own set of celebrations, and by far they are the most extensive. Each month, during the nights of full moon, those who can make it to Elthiana go there to make sacrifices of beasts or men to honor the goddess and to keep the city manifested. The Children also honor the day that Alexandre LeNoir discovered the Chtonian Scrolls, and the night that the cult bound Elthiana to Miseria.

Education

Few Miserians know how to read and write. However, education is theoretically open to all, as the church of Sainte-Marthe provides education if the clerics can afford the time to teach (indeed, many have established yearly curricula so that children and adults have something to occupy themselves during winter). The church of Saint-Ambroise does likewise, but it is often overlooked.

As can be expected, the church's curriculum is quite influenced by religious belief, with a lot of focus being given to the morals prescribed by the church. However, one can't totally dismiss the work of the clerical teachers as mindless indoctrination: both religious sects have solid and storied philosophic traditions which reflected on a variety of issues both practical and theoretical.

Generally speaking, Marthenian scholars focus strongly on matters of society, progress and social justice. The dominant currents generally argue that, if someone's private life doesn't infringe on the law nor overly upsets peace in the community, there is no need to cause a problem. Life is hard enough as it is. If something can demonstrably improve lives, it should be improved to eliminate or mitigate any problems and then incorporated to standard practice. However, those red lines that exist must be enforced firmly. Of course, what constitutes a quirk or a public danger depends on who one asks.

Ambroisean philosophy is more focused on the individual's actions and soul. All schools of thought agree one must pursue a life of virtue, but the details of that pursuit vary according to the scholar's philosophic tradition. Likewise, there are very diverse views on the salvation of souls and how to achieve it. To many Miserans, Ambroisean philosophy sounds too esoteric and impractical to be of much value, but it helps the exorcist-monks and those who studied under them to keep an open mind to new ideas and practices.

Other than moral philosophy, Ambroisean education focuses heavily on understanding the supernatural. Even the smallest libraries of the Church of Saint-Ambroise have several tomes that can helping identify creatures and how to banish them. Sometimes, they even track specific ghosts and ghost buildings. Somehow, the exorcist-monks even acquired books from the Core, such as the *VanRitchen's Guides* and the *Malleus Umbricum* of Wyan of Viktal.

Beyond these philosophic matters, the churches teach several subjects. The exact subjects and how advanced they are varies on the specific order and community, for example, in Notre-Dame-Des-

Recifes, the church schools teach engineering, medicine, chemistry, book-keeping and the arts among others, while in the Pecheur Valley, engineering knowledge arguably surpasses that of Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes due to the need to keep the river Pecheur under control.

In prosperous communities, some lay teachers exist, but generally they play a supplementary role to the church schools. There is still no truly secular educational tradition, but maybe this is only a matter of time, as the village of Kentill is making strides towards raising such an institution.

The Cult of Hecate has no formal education, but the more established cells have created small libraries. Much like the exorcist-monks, the Cult of Hecate has a lot of education on the supernatural, but it focuses on controlling instead of banishing, as well as general magical practice. On the other hand, the Cult pays more attention than most to the Ghost Towns, seeking to understand the way of life of those who haunt them. Slowly but surely, they are amassing a trove of lore on other lands, and even biographies and interviews with ghosts.

Dread Possibility: The Hecatean Schism

There are several movements in the Children of Hecate that want to change how the cult operates, as well as details of the dogma. Some want to go public instead of remaining in the shadows. Some want to step in and use their magic for the good of society (exactly what that means depends on the individual worshiper). Others say that the Hecatean Scrolls also include portrayals of Hecate not as a grim goddess, but as protector and caretaker, and so the current bloody rituals are a perversion of her worship and gifts, and there are also debates on where the saints and other gods glimpsed in their research fit o=in the universe.

So far, there hasn't appeared a leader to champion an alternative theology, but if one should, the Children of Hecate might start a fight among themselves… and probably hit a lot of people in the crossfire.

Language

The Miserians speak a language that they name Kaethyn. To those who speak Mordentish, it sounds similar, especially to the High Mordentish dialect, but the two languages are completely unrelated.

Kaethyn primer

- Ule = hello.
- Pasbian = farewell.
- Ame = man.
- Fame = woman.
- Sucore = help.
- Grate = thanks.
- Persi = please.
- Bian = good.
- Mau = bad.

Funerary customs

As a result of the sheer amount of hauntings, avoiding creating another ghost is of great concern.

Unlike what happens in other lands with undead-related problems, Miserians favor burying the dead instead of burning them – sometimes, having a grave and remains may be more helpful when dealing with a ghost than destroying it. Often, graves are simple and shallow due to the rocky soil, covered with stones to protect the dead from animals.

Burial rites are a lengthy affair. Be they held by the Marthenian or Ambroisean church, wakes generally last one day and one night – enough time for the priests to hold extensive ceremonies to try to pacify the spirit, particularly for those who died of violence or in suffering, and allow all members of the community to say their farewells, speak prayers and make peace with the deceased… and also to give time for the gravediggers to fight the rocky soil to make a grave.

During late spring, summer and autumn, families often visit the graveyards to pray and do what they can to show their dead that they aren't forgotten and are still beloved. Those relatives who were forgotten due to the passing of generations are given gifts – the gifts for the forgotten. Priests hold appeasement ceremonies for all souls that rest in the graveyard.

Autumn prayers finish with promises to return after winter.

Attitudes towards magic

In Miseria, people fear magic that isn't wielded by the clerics of the saints. Many people connect the state of the world and the gods abandoning it to arcane magic. People are, however, fearful of confronting a practitioner of the arcane as a first resort, so they try to avoid or shun them into leaving.

Of course, the Cult of Hecate is an exception to the rule: any arcanist will be prodded to see if they can be initiated into the cult, or at least made into an ally.

Attitudes towards human foreigners and non-humans.

As inhabitants of an Island of Terror, Miserians live in great isolation. Theoretically, the Miserians don't have a negative opinion of outsiders, but their dour outlooks on live and their isolation push them into being unfriendly and suspicious. The most contact they have with foreigners is the occasional Vistani caravan, but the Miserians regard them with suspicion and fear, both because of their secretive ways and the magic glimpsed in their interactions.

Nonhumans are unknown in Miseria. A species that exudes magical energy, such as the elves, or is too different from a normal human, such as a dragonborn, would terrify them.

Dread Possibility: Calibans? Dark Elves? Dwarves?

Unlike in the wider Land of Mists, Calibans may not be regarded as a different species in Miseria – they are seen as humans, born misshapen, mentally ill, mutated or cursed, depending on the individual's opinion. Unfortunately, this doesn't make their lives any better – many are killed at birth, expelled from their villages as soon as they can fend for themselves, or are kept out of sight by concerned families. Many Calibans become highwaymen, hermits or woodsmen. The Church of Saint Ambroise also takes in these unfortunate souls, and it is among its ranks that a Caliban can rise the highest in Miseria.Deep below the domain's surface there are small dwarven and dark elven communities, rarely meeting humans and earning a reputation as legends. Both groups are much impoverished and stuck in a very delicate resource situation, which they fear humanity would make worse. Among themselves, competition even between groups of the same species is fierce and often violent.

The Miserian Hero

Author's note: this section will be broad, so as to provide system-agnostic suggestions on how to build a Miserian character.

Races: only humans are available for Miserian characters, unless the DM decides otherwise.

Classes: of the normal core classics in D&D and similar systems, rogues are the most common class for Miserian characters. It encompasses a variety or archetypes, from normal people who have roguish skills to actual thieves. Next are the fighters, who often are also normal people who have taken up arms, instead of being career soldiers or mercenaries.

Clerics are exclusively of Sainte-Marthe or Saint-Ambroise. The Children's priests, as said in the religion section, are all wizards.

It is left to the DM's discretion to what extent Marthenian healing magic is weakened. The original description of Miseria says that Marthenians heal only the minimum amount possible, but if you feel that the game or the scene will work better if the magic is more potent, that is your prerogative. Another alternative we suggest is rolling with a disadvantage, that is, rolling the results twice and picking the worst result.

Meanwhile, the Ambroisean exorcist-monks had a number of mechanics, both benefiting and hindering them. Roughly speaking, so as to not get bogged down on specific mechanics for different systems or editions, an exorcist-monk should have:

- A penalty on Charisma checks (1st level)
- A bonus for turning undead to resist possession and to resist psychological effects from fighting ghosts, such as fear, horror or madness (1st level, regularly increasing)
- An ability to detect ghosts a few times a day (middle levels)
- Immunity against aging effects caused by ghosts and other spectral undead (late levels)

Wizards and sorcerers are rare, and are shunned and feared by most of Miserian society. Only the secretive Children of Hecate embrace them.

Other classes are practically unheard of.

Equipment: Miseria is poor in mineral resources. Consequently, several pieces of equipment are much rarer or more expensive in Miseria than elsewhere. Generally speaking, the less metal a weapon, armor or other piece of equipment requires, the more likely that it is available. Doubling as a tool also increases the chance of the equipment being used. As such, some common weapons are axes, bows, hammers, daggers, short swords, spears, sickles, scythes, etc, and armor is generally limited to padded, leather, studded leather - which reaches impressive prices - and hides.

If the system you play with accounts for different materials, such as bronze weapons, it might be interesting to use these. That way, a Miserian adventuring party could be armed with steel axes while armored with bronze armor.

Skills and feats: a Miserian character would likely take options that increase willpower, resistance against fear and, to a lesser degree, endurance against aging attacks and similar powers, as well as against the hardships that spring from a lack of food and hostile weather. Skills related to survival in forests and mountains are also recommended.

Who is doomed

Cassandre Desesprits, Darklord of Miseria[11]

Appearance

Cassandre appears to be 18 years old and is quite pretty, having brown hair and eyes and fair skin. She wears simple clothes, adequate for a barmaid. Cassandre usually has a tranquil semblance: only the most perceptive can catch a hint of disgust and anger in her eyes.

Background

Cassandre was born in a region of an outlander world which somewhat resembled Miseria, being hilly and poor in metals, but the villages had no problem farming their lands, and were able to trade and travel to other lands, making them modestly prosperous.

From a young age, Cassandre had the gifts of a seer. She was often talking with spirits, who felt her power and sought her company - which were mistaken to be imaginary friends by her family - and could see where she would be necessary. As she grew, she began to hone her power, becoming able to see multiple potential futures and - more importantly - what she and others needed to do to get to those results. Her advice became so useful to her family that her parents began to turn to her for advice, and eventually stopped making decisions without talking to her first. Beyond that, however, her life was quite normal for a young girl of her village.

Change came after her father, during a festival, was offered a plot of land. Buying it was a risky business, and so he turned to his daughter. With some reluctance, she said he could become very rich if he bought the land. True to her prediction, Cassandre's father found a gold trove in the new land, and while commemorating his luck in the tavern, he told his friends that Cassandre was a seer. Soon, the entire village was constantly turning to her for advice, giving her payments and gifts, while her friends, for several

[11] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, pages 101-104*

reasons, became distant.

At first, she was angry: she had seen this possibility, which had made her reluctant to give her advice, but she decided that she could cope with it. The gifts were good, she had her friends among the spirits, and those former friends among the living were dead to her. By the time she became 16, all of those childhood friends were actually dead, and Cassandre had become incredibly self-centered, her concern about people beginning and ending at the point they could make her life even better.

Meanwhile, her fame had spread and other villages decided they needed Cassandre more than hers did, triggering a response from her village and others. Seeing an opportunity, she began to refuse to give counsel. Having become overly reliant on her, her village and its allies were helpless until they gave offerings of a whole new level of luxury. Soon, she was given a mansion, fine clothing and jewels and the best food.

But Cassandre was not done. When she foresaw that the war would end, and with it her glamorous lifestyle, she began to send secret messages to the other side, pretending to be on their side, helping them avoid defeat while earning more rich offerings.

For two years, she kept this situation going. While she lived in luxury, the war had spread to encompass the entire valley. While Cassandre feasted on venison and boar, famine was spreading. While she watched plays and bards, children barely old enough to walk scavenged battlefields for metal for more weapons and armor. All that happened while Cassandre spoke fake condolences, only to return to reading her newest novel.

Approaching the limits of their resources, both sides became desperate enough to seek the help of foreign mages, who prepared great rituals to destroy the opposite side. At last, it seemed that the war would be over, and Cassandre was desperate to prevent it. Then, she realized that there was one future she couldn't see: the one which happened if the rituals were cast at the same time. She concluded that they would cancel each other out, and so she informed both sides they needed to be cast at a certain time, no more, no less.

On the misty day of this final battle, Cassandre made sure she would be able to see the rituals foil each other, and the battle that would follow. Instead, they made each other stronger, the mists seemingly spreading the explosion further and further. Cassandre was blasted, and when she woke, her finery in tatters, she was in Miseria, near Notre-Dame-Des-Recifs. Helped by ghosts, she stumbled her way to the city, where she was taken in by the charitable townspeople, and eventually got a room, board and a job in the Midnight Raven Inn, where she has lived since then.

Current sketch

Cassandre has a comfortable life by Miserian standards. The couple that owns the inn treats her with kindness, aren't very demanding and let her keep her tips. In a way, Cassandre has what she briefly wanted after her father revealed her gift to their village: a community that loves and cares for her as a person, not for what she can give them. Alas, she has been consumed by selfishness for so long she cannot realize it, and barely remembers the time she had genuine connections with other people. Companionship is not enough for Cassandre, who wishes to go back to the days she was pampered, her every wish granted.

Cassandre's powers have changed since she arrived in the Land of Mists. In her original world, her future sight could see several possibilities and how she could reach one specifically, while her abilities with ghosts were mostly limited to seeing and hearing them. Now, she can control them, giving her a great number of potential spies and assassins. Meanwhile, she now can see only a single future, and no matter what she does, it will happen. Just like her family and then her village became incapable of making choices without her sight, she is becoming wracked with doubt over which decision to take.

As it currently stands, the most she can do is commit petty acts of vengeance against people who she feels insulted by, no matter whether it was a real insult or an imagined one, or a minor slight. She does this through sending ghosts to attack, torment or even

possess the victim.

A few people have noticed such events, but largely dismiss it as coincidence. The most perceptive concluded that Cassandre has some sort of guardian spirit who overzealously protected her from a harasser. Some even brought their conclusions to her, and she impressed them with how fearless she is about having such a ghost, even though they fear such a situation is likely to be dangerous for the protected. At the end of the day, such talks have not reached the ears of either the Church of Sainte-Marthe or Saint-Ambroise, so she has remained above any real investigation.

Whenever a ghost under Cassandre's employ performs an aging attack, the lifeforce of the victim is given to Cassandre, this being the reason she has barely aged a day since her arrival, something she is starting to realize and apparently no one else has.

Cassandre constantly tries to improve her situation through her ghosts, but her schemes, no matter how promising, always ultimately fail (often with collateral victims). She is doomed to be a beloved, but unremarkable barmaid for the rest of her long, possibly eternal, life.

Dread Possibility: Cassandre of Dovehome

If you enjoy the idea of Dovehome, as written by M.T Kelly and others for Quoth the Raven 28, or any other Mirror Ravenloft in which the Darklords are good people who endure Sisyphean struggles to help their Domains and in need of some help themselves, be it against the world or against their own inner demons, Cassandre's history readily leans to her Greek mythological namesake: a struggle against knowing what will happen but being unable to make the difference herself.

On her homeworld, she tried to be helpful to all, and when the war broke out, she refused to give predictions in an attempt to stop the conflict, but "owning" her was more important than actually having and her advice. In anti-Ravenloft, her seer powers grew while her influence over the dead and the living faded, leaving her mostly incapable of helping.

On top of needing help to act on her visions, Cassandre is very lonely. No matter what she does, any friend or ally she makes ends up leaving or dying. The PCs have a double importance, both as her agents and her company.

Combat

Cassandre always keeps a dagger with her, and she has taken care to learn how to use it. She also has a few spells at her disposal, learned when she briefly fancied becoming a mistress of magic before coming to Miseria. However, she will only fight herself if cornered. She prefers to resort to manipulation of people, and if she can't get a living person to do her bidding, she can summon 2d4 incorporeal undead (the exact type is the DM's choice), which appear to defend her in the next 3 rounds.

If, despite all of her precautions, Cassandre was killed, she would become a ghost, one that is powerless to influence or attack people. In as many as 8 days, she will revive in another town, and immediately begin to plot her revenge. She could be truly destroyed if, during her time as a ghost, she was exorcised by an exorcist-monk of Saint-Ambroise while denouncing the crimes she committed in her original world. Needless to say, discovering what a Darklord is, is already difficult. Discovering that an unimportant barmaid is a Darklord is even more so, and discovering her crimes is nearly impossible.

Closing the borders

Whenever Cassandre wants to keep Miseria on lockdown, the Misty Border turns red. Anyone that walks into this mist will age at a rate of 5 years per failure of a Fortitude saving throw (DC 20, with difficulty increasing by +1 penalty per test). Anyone who is aged to dust by the mist becomes a ghost under Cassandre's control.

Cassandre and the Mist-Borne Post

The Mist-Borne Post, created by Ian Fordam for Quoth the Raven 30, are courier animals, usually birds and always white, which can provide a means of correspondence and small gifts for Darklords with others beyond their domains. If you want to use it as a background device, these are some of the Darklords which Cassandre has exchanged letters with:

- **Ladislav Mircea**: being an eager user of the Mist-Borne Post, Ladislav has gladly taken the chance to correspond with Lady Desesprits. Both are quite impressed with each other's refined lifestyle, although Ladislav's alchemical interests bore Cassandre.
- **Inza Magdova Kulchevitch**: Cassandre and Inza often exchange misanthropic ramblings about how everyone is selfish and they are just honest about their desires.
- **Torrence Bleysmith**: Sir Torrence's letters often mention how much he hates the Avergnite peasants who surround him. Cassandre can understand the sentiment.
- **Wilfred Godefroy**: the darklords of Mordent and Miseria have a long-running argument going over how to manage their servants and how to manipulate the people around them. Neither knows that both rule over ghosts, but Wilfred has greatly angered Cassandre by saying she is incompetent and wasteful.
- **Lemot Sedian Juste:** Cassandre somehow got some of Lemot's comedic and dramatic works, and enjoyed them. Their correspondence was quite active until Lemot asked to make a tour to show his latest tragedy in Miseria, and Cassandre had to desperately invent excuses to dissuade Lemot. She hasn't written him since.

Kairin Grimalk, town elder, necromancer and aspiring lich.[12]

Appearance

Although he passes for a human of around 40 years, Kairin is a half-elf. He is quite pale, with long blond hair which he uses to hide his pointy ears, and green eyes. He moves with arrogant grace.

Background and current sketch

Originally a nobleman of Dementlieu, Kairin became obsessed with death and magic. He attended social meetings and practiced music and swordplay to keep up the appearance of being a normal nobleman, but his true interest was in improving his necromantic powers.

Eventually, he decided to see if he had gathered enough power and control to raise the dead. He had, but he had not expected such success and became frightened by his own creation, fleeing in a panic into the Mists around the graveyard. When they opened, he had arrived in Miseria.

Although he enjoyed the sights, Kairin did not enjoy how primitive the region was by his standards, and began to try and become a town's ruler, using his Dementlieuse education to impress the population despite the misgivings the local Marthenians had of him. Unfortunately, his continued necromantic experiments were eventually revealed and he had to flee.

While dwelling in the forests, his growing power became such that he became able to sense ghosts, and through them, he learned of a person (Cassandre) who had great influence over the spirits. He doesn't know who this person is or where she lives, but he would like to find and kill her to take her place.

Kairin decided to try again to take over a town, choosing one called Kentill. This time, he was more successful. For several years now, he has risen in importance and held the position of a town elder, and lives in a nice manor. Quietly, he disposed of or

[12] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, pages 98 and 110-111.*

disgraced all possible threats to his power. Much like Dominic D'Honaire in Dementlieu, Kairin's control over the village is as deep as it is subtle. He became more capable at using the more discrete powers of necromancy to further his agenda.

As it currently stands, Kairin has several plans going. First and foremost, he is trying to expand his influence across the domain, using a combination of living and undead agents. Second is that he discovered how to become a lich, opening two - in his view - contradictory goals: living forever and achieving necromantic mastery, or rule Miseria with the power of undeath to make himself invincible. Whatever he does, he is power hungry, villainous and hubristic enough to be a prime candidate to become a Darklord were something to happen to Cassandre.

Kairin acts like a perfect gentleman, well-mannered, refined and witty, but he is very mistrustful and suspicious. He fears that one day the Marthenians of the town he lived in before will get word to the one he currently inhabits, and has already prepared a story to portray himself as a victim who left out of his free will, and the clerics who discovered his necromancy as xenophobic bigots.

As a result of coming from Dementlieu, Kairin Grimalk has a post-hypnotic suggestion that compels him to honor the terms of a gentleman's duel. He is aware this quirk of his, although not its origin, and tries to avoid getting in a situation where it will come into effect by any means necessary. Nevertheless, he is very good at swordplay. He is also a gifted musician when it comes to flutes and mandolins, and beating him in a friendly duel, be it of swords and music, and avoiding his nature as a sore loser, is a path to getting into his good side.

Alexandre LeNoir, ghostly high priest.

Appearance

In death, Alexandre LeNoir's appearance is both more grandiose and more sinister than it was in life: gone is the practical gear he used in his days as thief, now he wears an Ancient Greek-style clothes fit for for a high priest, with a laurel crown over his brow. His sharp features have taken on a new, royal bearing. But he is pale like chalk, his skin drawn as if too small to cover his skeleton, and his eyes are black orbs filled with malice.

Background and current sketch

Alexandre Lenoir was born in a small Miserian village. Growing tired of the back-breaking work at a farm, he became a thief and a highwayman, robbing the few travelers who move along Miseria's lonely roads and sneaking into villages to steal food and valuables. He eventually became more confident in his skills and decided to begin exploring the crypts and ghost towns.

His life changed when he entered Elthiana. The Ancient Greek-like ghost town had appeared in the extreme south of Miseria a few times, enough to be known, but nowhere near the reputation it would later gain. Alexandre entered it during one of its manifestations and found a temple, where laid an impressive statue twice the size of a person depicting a three-bodied woman. In a discrete room at the back of the temple laid some scrolls and grimoires. While Alexandre had stolen more valuable-looking objects in the hopes they would remain after the city disappeared, his imagination had been captivated by the statue, and he decided to take those texts too to learn more about the being depicted.

He took his discovery to a Marthenian cleric, Edmond Clermont. Edmond was not a good example of a Marthenian: while he affected the stern allegiance to law expected of his order, he had a number of backroom deals with criminals. He was, however, quite diligent when it came to matters of learning, being a good teacher and the one who had taught Alexandre how to read and write. Together, they began to theorize on a translation of the texts, based on what other explorers had reported on the denizens of Elthiana. After a few months, they had a basic translation which established Hecate's identity as a goddess of night and magic.

These attributes drew the attention of both men. To Alexandre, the power of Hecate could help with his robberies. To Edmond, her magic felt more promising than the paltry power of Sainte-Marthe. The duo became determined to master the Hecatean spells, no matter the costs.

The Dark Powers noticed their ambition. In an impressively short time, Alexandre and Edmond had mastered basic spells, and everything indicated that they could expand their power. It was then that they set up the Hecatean cult, first in Edmond's village, next in Massea, the town closest to where Elthiana manifested. Their first disciples were like-minded bandits and heretical priests, but slowly lay people were inducted. After a few years, the cult achieved its greatest success yet, and bound their holy city permanently to Miseria.

Alexandre died of sickness during winter a few years ago. His cultists honored him with hymns and sacrifices at Hecate's altar. The Hecatean curse on the priests brought him back as a ghost. Not that it is a problem: if anything, Alexandre considers it and his new appearance signs of the goddess's favor.

What displeases him is that, whenever he tries to contact anyone of the cult, his ability to communicate is strangely limited, even when they use their power to call on souls to consult his wisdom. He also can't stay at Elthiana for long, being forced to roam the domain. While he can't find a way around these limitations to rule the cult once again, he works to expand his control over other ghosts and improve his powers as a wizard. Technically, he is under Cassandre's control, but if she tried to control him directly, she would find that he is much more rebellious than other ghosts. He is yet another potential substitute for Cassandre if the Dark Powers tired of her.

Tyrian Valdrin, half-elf tomb robber[13]

Appearance

Tyrian Valdrin has a very tanned skin, dark hair and eyes, and is quite tall and strongly built. He often wears black clothes or leather armor. When alone, he usually ties up his hair, but keeps it loose around people to hide his pointy ears.

Background

Valdrin's name is well known among the criminal underworld of Miseria. A man of swarthy complexion and a similarly dark mood, he occasionally appears at the edges of towns to trade treasures, which doubtlessly were plundered from crypts. He is reputed to live in the haunted forests, fearing no spirit or undead. Some even say that he is a ghost himself.

Most of the time, the truth is quite different.

Tyrian Valdrin's story begins before he was even born. His mother, Salania Leafskipper, was a sylvan elf from a world named Krynn, taken by the Mists. Confused and frightened by the disturbing woods, she decided to wander into the first town she found to ask for help. Alas, the local people, who had been suffering from a particularly bad haunting, were terrified by her and believed Salania to be the one who set the spirits against them. She was captured and sentenced to death by burning.

When all hope seemed lost, a man in dark clothes broke into the jail, defeated the guards and freed Salania, taking her to his black horse and away from the village.

After hours of riding, the man stopped, showed his face and introduced himself as Lodris, a master thief who had been in town to steal from the mayor's manor when Salania was captured. Captivated by her strange beauty, he decided he couldn't let her die. He was thoroughly confused when Salania told of her home world, of lands more pleasant to live, of several nonhuman peoples such as hers and monsters out of legend such as dragons and goblins.

Lodris asked her to stay with him. At first, Salania did so from a lack of other options, but in time great love bloomed between them. They lived in the forest, where she felt more comfortable and where a mob wouldn't kill her, with only Lodris venturing into the towns to steal what they needed. In time, they had a son: Tyrian, a name Salania chose. He favored his father's looks, being dark of eyes, hair and skin, his mother's heritage only visible in his pointy ears.

Tyrian's early childhood was happy: his father taught him rogue tricks and swordplay, always marveling at how Tyrian could see in the dark, while Salania told

[13] *Undead Sea Scrolls, pages 98 and 104-106*

him everything about her people and their culture.

Unfortunately, those happy years between the three of them would soon come to an end. Salania and Miseria's grim landscape never found a common ground, and she died early for an elf. As it often happens in Miseria, her spirit rose again, haunting the place where she was buried, singing of her past and her home.

Tyrian and Lodris moved on with their lives, stealing from villages and robbing tombs. That was particularly fun for them. Nothing made father and son laugh more than breaking into a tomb, robbing it blind, then running like mad from any undead who noticed their invasion. But such a dangerous game could not continue forever.

Unlike his son, Lodris was showing his age. So it came to be that, while robbing a very ornate tomb, they came to the biggest treasure trove they ever found. They were so impressed that they stood awestruck for a moment, not noticing a ghoul approach until it lunged at them. It was only by the time Tyrian got out of the tomb that he realized his father was not with him. He had barely gone back into the tomb when he heard the sound of bones breaking. Tyrian never returned to that tomb, blaming himself for his father's death. Lodris remains there, as a ghost.

Tyrian eventually found himself in the village where his mother had been captured long ago. Both Lodris and Salania had always kept him away from that place, but he decided to take the risk. However, living such a long time with only his family for company made him nervous of crowds, and he passed out from fear. When he woke up, he was in the very same jail cell where Salania had been imprisoned. As he awoke, he happened to hear a guard saying "another one".

That caught his attention. Another one? Another elf? Did another elf get arrested in this village? Were there more of his mother's people? He waited until the guards were distracted and escaped.

Putting that village well behind him, he began to ask around about elves. His questions were met with suspicion, and the answers told him nothing other than old legends. Tyrian learned how to cope with his agoraphobia somewhat, but his frustration only grew. There were no elves in Miseria, and other than his father, he mistrusted all humans for attacking his mother for not being one of them. He took on a new name: Valdrin, "the dark stealer", a name chosen from a tale his mother told him. He never revealed to anyone his true name.

Valdrin still lives in his father's stronghold in the forest, which over time has been decorated with the fruits of multiple forays into tombs. When he needs something he can't make himself, he trades some of his less remarkable findings with the villages. He is also quite attracted by rare or elegant pieces of metalwork.

Valdrin is perhaps the best tomb robber of Miseria - after all, that is basically the only profession he knows. He is also very well-informed about undead creatures, and while he dislikes towns, he knows the layout of several of them, and could be a good guide.

Valdrin is a very guarded person, trusting no one, and a bit lacking in social graces. However, if he saw a nonhuman in the party, or if they can give him detailed information about elves, his disposition would visibly improve. Valdrin is quite fearless and deals well with pressure, but while he has learned to manage being near crowds, he is traumatized by ghouls and will do almost anything to get away from them. Maybe, if someone managed to keep him around one and helped him kill it, he could get better. He is still wracked by guilt and self-blame for his parents becoming ghosts, and is unable to go meet them.

Boris Gustaffe, half-Vistani sorcerer monster-hunter[14]

Appearance

Boris is olive-skinned, with brown hair and eyes. He wears practical clothes under a cloak, has a holy

[14] *Undead Sea Scrolls, pages 106-110.*

symbol of Ezra around his neck, and has a belt bearing two blades and number of flasks.

Background

Boris was the son of a ferryman on the Core's Musarde River and a Vistana who he met while transporting cargo. Despite a bad first meeting, during which the caravan's men hauled Boris' father away from the camp after he entered and started praising his mother's beauty, his boldness and own beauty impressed her, and they began to meet whenever they could, eventually resulting in Boris' birth. At this point, the couple decided that they had to tell her community.

That went more disastrously than their first meeting. Madame Mishka, the leader of the Vistani community, was furious and terrified, for she recognized Boris as a dukkar, a male Vistani who bears the gift of magic, one who is foretold to bring the destruction of the Vistani people. She ordered the deaths of Boris' father and of Boris himself.

Boris' father was killed, but his mother managed to run away, until she realized that she had arrived in Mordent. Making her way to Mordentshire, the desperate and penniless woman found work as a cook for the Weathermay family. Boris grew up there, learning divination from his mother and being taught how to read thanks to his employers, impressing those who knew him with his intelligence, although he received no formal education due to his insistence on helping his mother, who always stressed he should follow law and morality.

Boris' mother died exactly one night before he became 16, having foreseen her death approach and deciding to tell him everything about his origins, declaring her and his father's love for him and bidding him to be a force of good. The next morning, the Weathermays' home of Heather House woke up in an uproar, Boris' mother having been found near the well, incredibly aged.

Hearing from the Weathermays that this was the work of a ghost, Boris became determined to fight these creatures. After a few almost deadly encounters, he became aware of the importance of observation and discovering what repeals or pacifies a specific ghost. He traveled through Dementlieu, Invidia, Darkon, and Barovia, sometimes joining other adventurers. Once, in Barovia, he even crossed paths with the Weathermays' friend, Dr. Van Richten, who warned him to take care, for his actions were slipping into extremism and evil. The last accurate information his contacts had of him said he had taken work from a family of wereravens who had been attacked by something. How he arrived in Miseria, where he is and what is he doing is currently unknown.

Overlook Anne, friendly ghost of Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes[15]

Appearance

Anne rarely becomes visible, but on those dates that she does – the days she died, the day her daughter was born, and the Summer Festival's night – it is reported that she has a vaguely female form, with her hair constantly flowing. At those times, she can be heard crying.

Background and current sketch

Near Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes lies the Overlook, a hill with a flat top the size of a football field, surrounded by a few trees, and which ends in a cliff overlooking the city, where a deadly fall could happen. Adults avoid the place, but children often go play there. The reason is Overlook Anne, one of the rare ghosts the Miserians (mostly) do not fear, for she protects the children who play at her haunting site.

There are several stories about who she was, the truth being long forgotten. One story says she was a girl who lived when the city was founded and fell to her death while playing at the Overlook, and decided to stay there to protect other children. Another says that she was a merchant who died far from home, and regards the children who play there as her family. Others say Anne was a midwife who never had children of her own, or a cleric who ran an orphanage and still cares for children in death. From there, the stories become wilder, saying she was a she-wolf

[15] *Undead Sea Scrolls, pages 98, 111-113*

who thinks she is protecting her pups, or a dryad, whose tree had long died, but whose spirit lingers to fulfill a promise. The darkest story says she drowned her children in the Sea, and this is her penance.

None of these stories is correct, although the versions which claim she was a Recifens are closer to truth, which is sadder than most legends.

Long, long ago, Anne lived in Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes, a poor woman with a beloved daughter. One sunny summer day, she and her daughter decided to have a picnic at the Overlook after a rain.

There, they were attacked by a gang of "mercenaries" calling themselves the Wyvern Band. They captured Anne and made a game of pushing her daughter between themselves. The girl broke free, and in fear she tried to flee, only to slip on the wet grass and fall over the edge. Anne thrashed so much in her sorrow that she began hurting the men holding her, and deciding that she was too much trouble, they threw her after her daughter.

Since then, Anne has remained, protecting children like she couldn't do for her own.

Anne is usually calm, but she becomes distraught at the sight of adults, because her contemporaries looked down on her for her poverty and she remains traumatized by the bandits' attack. She never attacked anyone, but the sorrow she projects often makes adults leave.

If Anne were to fight, the same powers that she uses to save can be used to kill, using telekinesis to throw people over the edge. She is also able to focus and project her despair at one person at a time, an ability she uses to drive enemies to jump the cliff: this power has brought about the death of a few adults who refused to leave the Overlook despite Anne making her distress known, but the Recifens have written them off as suicides.

If someone were to do a thorough search into Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes' archives, they could find Anne's real history and even the sign of the Wyvern Band, which can be used to repeal her.

Orlef, Locksmith and Perfurmer of Mercheuir

Appearance

Orlef is a pale, black-haired man who seems to be in mid-thirties. He sports a beard, and cuts his hair short. He favors black, practical, but well-made clothes which suggest he is from Notre-Dame-Des-Recifs. His boots, however, are always caked with dirt or mud.

Background

Orlef was a wandering bronzesmith – and a thief – plying his trade across Miseria when he arrived at Mecheuir. The hamlet in the swampy valley had been driven into a panic by the manifestation of a ghost tower near it, too near to their tiny farms and the herbal gardens which the local people planted to sell to travelers.

He can't say exactly what it was, but Orlef found the place to be to his liking. Moreover, he was fascinated by the herbal gardens, and told the villagers he believed they could make Mecheuir more than just a miserable village by the swamp. As such, he announced he would brave the ghost tower and see if he could make it depart. Finding himself in a tower temple from a Greek-like culture (probably unrelated to that of Elthiana), he charmed its ghostly priestesses and somehow made them depart, leaving the tower before it could take him with it.

Soon, he set himself to work. Cooperating with the local leaders, who he befriended just like he did with the ghosts, he organized the villagers to improve their herbal gardens and increase the production of medicines and perfumes to sell beyond Mecheuir. In order to make this work, he set up a trade post and began to make traders run from Mecheuir to Notre-Dame-Des-Recifs and other significant communities nearby to sell Mecheuir's products.

So far, Orlef has had impressive success by Miseria's standards. Mecheuir, once a backwater, now sits at the middle of a brisk trade route and seems poised to become at least a center for medicine production to Western Miseria, maybe more if the efforts of the local Marthenians to establish a medical school

succeed. He is always looking for people who can help Mecheuir.

The secrets of the Key and Lock

While the Guild of the Key and Lock's members are genuine craftsmen, they also are all thieves. In fact, as far as they know, they are the biggest thieves' guild in Miseria. They take advantage of their expertise and the orders placed with them to take note of who may be hiding valuable objects and how they might acquire these goods.

Key and Lock's robberies are carefully planned affairs, partially because a member who worked in setting up locks and other protections needs to find partners to do the work, which is not always easy when all of them are also itinerant smiths, partially to hide their tracks.

To help each other, several members set up supply depots and safehouses along the roads. Orlef's business, while genuine, also serves as a front for one such base. Those who decide to put their days as wanderers behind them, like Orlef did, are honor-bound to provide shelter for any fellow Key and Lock member. These rules are obeyed by all, as their secret network can be the difference between a full belly and a warm fire or hardship.

Some of Orlef's comrades are pressuring him to also produce narcotics and poisons. So far, he has refused their demands.

Jean-Pierre DeCourteville, Archbishop of Sainte-Marthe's Church

Appearance

Jean-Pierre is in his early fifties, but looks good for his age. As it is custom among "noble" Miserians, Jean Pierre has brown hair reaching his shoulders, although he shows some balding. He often is seen using a more elaborate version of the white and brown habit of Marthenian habit, a mitre and staff of knotted wood (each Marthenian archbishop has a personal staff, which is destroyed when he or she dies).

Background & current sketch

Jean-Pierre was born in Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes. His father, Achille DeCourtville, was a bronze- and copper-smith, who specialized in making jewelry, and while he made most of his money in their home city, he also frequently traveled across the domain. Achille also had a reputation of being a good fighter. He taught Jean-Pierre both crafts, but his son would go to join the Church of Sainte-Marthe, originally as a lay servant.

It was during this time that he first acquired notoriety, saving archbishop Armand Plessis from bandits during a trip. Archbishop Armand encouraged Jean-Pierre to enter the church as an ordained member. A little more than a decade later, Jean-Pierre was appointed archbishop by suggestion of archbishop Matthieu, who succeeded Armand, and he was confirmed after two years of consulting the Marthenian bishops.

As leader of the Church of Sainte-Marthe, archbishop Jean-Pierre works hard to improve the conditions of communities in Miseria, being a frequent correspondent of the bishops throughout the land so he may know what his flock needs, giving advice, sermons and, when possible, sharing the (relative) prosperity of his see. He also directly oversees education in Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes, acting as the director of the local church school.

While he is generally a worthy man of the cloth, Jean-Pierre is not without sin. He is quietly engaged in some nepotism, favoring his niece Francesca Murailefort, who has been enjoying a quick progression in the order, and he hopes that she can succeed him. While she is not guilty of any major misconduct or character flaw, depending on the future actions of Jean-Pierre, Francesca and other noteworthy Marthenian clerics, this could become a scandal that will consume precious time and energy in the Church of Sainte-Marthe.

Dread Possibility: The Marthenian Inquisition and the Monodominants.

In an effort to improve the services provided to the Miserian people, archbishop DeCourteVille has organized groups of priests and volunteers to travel around the villages, record needs and provide any assistance possible. He also plans to expand the material resources of the Church of Sainte-Marthe to establish a proper relief assistance.

While these actions are performed with genuine intentions, they unwittingly stimulated the most radical wings of the Recifens, which call for dominance of the Marthenian church over society and the subjugation or elimination of the Church of Saint Ambroise. DeCourteVille and his supporters are fighting a shadow war against these clerics.

Father Andre, leader of Saint-Ambroise's Church

Appearance

Father Andre's age is hard to guess: he could be in his late twenties or in his mid-fifties. He is actually in his forties. He is always seen wearing the black habit and *kalimavkion*-like hat of the exorcist-monks. He also seems to always have a content smile.

Background & current sketch

Andre doesn't talk much about his origins, but he was born in southern Miseria. From a young age, he felt the calling of the church, and by the time he was formally initiated as a novice, he already knew how to read, write, and was quite well-read in the Ambroisean canon.

After being ordained, Andre wandered across Miseria, serving in several communities, providing healing, education and driving away ghosts to the best of his ability. After more than a decade doing that, his reputation was such that several of his fellow exorcist-monks suggested he should go to the L'abbaye Des-Précieuses-Âmes. He originally only planned to stay for a season or two before resuming his travels, but between studies in the library, monastic work and a growing fascination with the tales and artifacts brought by the Guardians for the monks' safe-keeping, the times that he did go on a journey grew rarer and rarer. Eventually, he was elected Father of Church of Saint-Ambroise due to his experience as an exorcist in his youth and his knowledge on spirits, history and supernatural objects.

In general, Andre is satisfied with his lot. It honors him that so many see him as a source of counsel, and that he is tasked with overseeing the vaults of L'abbaye (and others hidden across Miseria) so no evil can take the objects stored there. Still, he sometimes is hit with a longing for the road and actively fighting evil, especially since the Order of the Guardians told him that there are other lands beyond the Mists. The revelation that they are also beset by evil sometimes makes him question why there is so much of it.

Towns

Kentill

Formerly an indistinct town, Kentill has changed a lot since the arrival of a gentleman named Kairin Grimalk. While originally the locals suspected him for his foreign accent and clothes, plus his strange ideas, they have since given thanks for their decision to let him stay, for he is wise and learned beyond the Marthenians.

A few years before Grimalk arrived, Kentill had been hit by a plague. The village, which was not particularly advanced in medicine (or any other field, really), still bore the scars of the tragedy, and many had felt that the town elders and the local Marthenian cleric, Charles, had not been effective in healing the disease. A few years after Grimalk's arrival, the plague made a comeback. Grimalk, then working as a scribe and general worker at the church, quickly recognized the problem and called upon the citizens to act according to his instructions. Some of these were contrary to Charles' commands, but a number of villagers decided to heed the foreigner in protest to Charles' incompetence. Grimalk's advice, backed by the newest Dementlieuse science, proved effective in healing and containing the disease,

greatly increasing his popularity.

Having acquired the ear of many citizens and even some town elders, Grimalk began to host social events on the porch of the house that hosted him. He spoke about a land named the Core, about his accidental walk into the mists while fleeing undead, and about the Dementlieuse Republic and all the progress happening there: all things that seemed very desirable to the humble folk of Kentill.

In the years since those events, Kentill moves with renewed energy. The community worked hard to bring its infrastructure to the standards suggested by Grimalk, finding clever solutions to resource limitations. The church's grip over education was broken, with the first secular teachers giving their first classes. Conservatives were pushed to the fringes of public discourse. A fascinating machine called a "printing press" promises to revolutionize literature, and a cultural revolution is at work as people seek to become more like the fabled Dementlieu.

As for Kairin Grimalk, the man behind it all, he has stepped a little out of the spotlight, staying in his newly-built manor, leaving it mostly to attend town meetings.

Massea

This tiny place is almost a legend for the people of Miseria: few people have visited it, and merchants coming from this hamlet rarely make their way across Miseria to Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes. But Massea exists, the southernmost town in Miseria, and from its rooftops one can catch a glimpse of Elthiana.

Many years ago, Massea was a normal town. The random appearances of Elthiana caused fear, but the distance between their vales gave some peace to the Masseans. Until one day, the people realized that the ghost town was not fading.

Many people immediately packed their belongings and left, scattering across Miseria. Other rushed to the Ambroisean church, whose exorcist-monks gathered every relic and every person willing to join them, and ventured to the ghost town. They were never seen again: the cultists of Hecate, predicting that the binding of their holy city would draw attention, had prepared an ambush, confusing their enemies by being alive and wielding arcane magic.

A new exodus ensued as days passed and no one came back, leaving Massea half dead. But some unfortunate people couldn't leave even if they wanted. Praying to the saints, they prepared for the worst.

New people moved in. Some seemed to be outlaws from the woods. Others seemed to be normal, even refined people. These were Children of Hecate and their families, coming from all over Miseria to dwell near Elthiana. The cult intimidated or silenced all Masseans who were left, and seized control of the town.

Since then, Massea is the closest thing to a place where Hecate is publically worshiped. The religion remains in the shadows, but it is an open secret that there is something happening, and secretive reunions and double-meaning phrases are spoken in the streets.

Edmond Clermont has relocated here, keeping the appearances of being a particularly concerned Marthenean. Annabelle DeGoar, another Hecatean, pretends to be a reclusive Ambroisean. She lives outside of town, under the justification that she made vows of solitude due to her failure of exorcising Elthiana.

To any Child of Hecate, and any ally that they vouch for, Massea is a good place to be: people are united by their shared secret and their faith, and discrete uses of magic are performed to make life better. To anyone else, Massea is a very xenophobic place. It is not long before anyone who doesn't conform is chased out of town or suffers an 'accident'.

Mecheuir

Another small hamlet, for decades Mecheuir had two distinctions: being located in one of the few bogs of Miseria and being known as the smelliest town of the domain.

The sudden appearance of a ghost tower a stone's thrown away from their fields and herbal gardens

seemed poised to end the village, but a wandering bronzesmith named Orlef came to the town a mere few days after the tower appeared. He said he would take a look inside the tower and try to unbind it, but before he did, he had some talks with the most important villagers: complaining about the foul swamp smell, sure, but demonstrating interest in their herbal gardens and saying that maybe, they could be a key to the future.

After Orlef came back, the tower disappearing behind him and a tale of welcoming priests dwelling in a temple-tower by a sunny beach, he explained more of his idea: he began to explore what could be done with the more fragrant herbs, concocting a number of perfumes. After he got the approval of the villagers, he began to sell these to the closest villages, and even taking them to Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes.

While it has not sparked a new life in Mecheuir like Kairin Grimalk did for Kentill, the local villagers have embraced the idea of their local hero. Now one cannot walk through Mecheuir without smelling half a dozen different perfumes, every house has an essence vial in the living room, and the local harvest feast became the Perfumes' Festival. In a more practical sense, Orlef and the villagers also reorganized and expanded the farms and herbal gardens, making them more productive and easy to tend.

Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes

Boasting an enormous population of 2500 inhabitants, Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes is by far the most influential city in Miseria.[16] It is ruled by a town council whose members are elected from among the landowners, the clergy of Sainte-Marthe, and in some rare cases, among the local exorcist-monks.[17] Archbishop Jean-Pierre is one of the members.[18]

Of all villages in Miseria, Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes is the closest that can be said to be prospering. While it has experienced its amount of famines, floods, plagues and other disasters, not to mention ghostly hauntings, over the centuries Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes has paved its streets, established basic sanitation, built a well-supplied hospital staffed by Marthenian clerics and lay workers, a few church schools with libraries, and a lively cultural life and industry.

Around the city lies a series of hills crossed by rivers which drain into the Sea, many of them with an associated history or legend[19]. There is the Overlook, Anne's "home" since she her death long ago. Another is the Summer Festival Hill, which almost every year becomes a grand, colorful carnival as merchants, pilgrims and travelers from all over Miseria pitch their tents there and the Recifens come to the party. A third is the Hill of Soldiers, where a group of warriors was supposedly ambushed and killed, and now are said to haunt the place. There is the Giants' Grave, crowned by a group of white marble boulders which are said to be the remains of two giants who dueled and died there. And the stories go on.

The Pecheur Valley

The Pecheur Valley is, by Miserian standards, a broad valley made up of plains and sparse forests. No less than ten villages are located in it, and put together their population is almost the same as Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes. Thanks to the more agreeable terrain, the Pecheur villages have an easy time cooperating together, even in winter, making this region prosperous.

That is not to say that the valley is wonderful. Historically, the Pecheur river is prone to flooding. While this has largely become a thing of the past thanks to a system of dams, reservoirs and canals, flooding remains a possibility. Much more concerning is that spring – the season when the floods used to happen – also sees a dramatic increase in the number of hauntings occurring, as the dead from the past floods rise to lament their death.

Terrasses

Terrasses is quite known as one of the "weirdest" villages in Miseria. It is located in a deep vale, its farms stopping at the river and not going beyond it,

[16] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, page 96.*
[17] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001,page 97.*
[18] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, page 99.*
[19] *Undead Sea Scrolls 2001, page 111.*

for the other margin is the land of the ghostly clan Orochi.

Long ago, the ghost castle of Orochi began to manifest at the other side of the vale, sometimes with its ghosts wandering away from it. As the legend goes, a group of valiant townsmen went to the castle to explore it, and returned with a treaty with the "daimio" of Orochi. So long as the village respected the river border between their domains, the daimio would not attack them. This has been the basis of a remarkably harmonious coexistence between the living and the dead. A few times, there were even formal requests from the ghosts to cross the river, or invitations for the living to visit the castle. While the people of Terrasses were already copying some of the architecture and earthworks that they could see from their side of the river, it was due to those interactions that the Terrassens received most of the influences that form their culture.

As it stands, Terrassen's clothing, while remaining within the traditional Miserian frame, is remarkably colorful and patterned when they can make it so. Its architecture closely mimics that of the Orochi Castle. More importantly, the rules of the treaty and of treatment that are used by the ghosts are taught through the generations, so the young will avoid angering ghosts in case they come in contact.

Dread possibility: the ghost towns as one-way portals to other domains

The Miserians don't know, but those that stay in a ghost town when it disappears are neither dead nor damned: rather, from their point of view, the Mists close in. and when they part they are in a domain which roughly matches its culture. So, for example, someone that is at Orochi castle as it fades would probably end up in Rokushima Taiyoo.

Sites of Interest

The Ancient Battlefield.

When Cassandre was blasted into Miseria, she wasn't alone: the Dark Powers took all the souls who died from her attempt to prolong the war for her own benefit: the wizards who cast the spells, the men who fought with chipped swords and pitchforks and harvest scythes, even the children and women who followed their men to help the wounded and dying and to scaven.e the battlefield for metal for the next battle.

Every night, the two armies rise from the grave. The wizards don't remember their supreme magics, instead they fight by throwing spectral fireballs and lightning at each other, while the villagers kill and kill again those who once had been their neighbors, watched by their anguished camp followers.

Approaching the battlefield is dangerous: once the battle starts, the ghosts are extremely aggressive, especially if the person bears arms. Even the women and children will attack, thinking they are defending themselves from enemy reinforcements. The only chance to talk with the fighters is to approach them during the brief time the armies are mustering in preparation for the spell, and either get away before the battle (as doing so while battle is waged is seen as desertion, provoking the wrath of the "betrayed" party) or survive the battle.

If one were to do so, they could learn most of the backstory of Cassandre, although the ghosts only know what she let them know, and connecting "Cassandre the Seer", who the ghosts mention, to a mere barmaid is not an easy connection to make.

Theoretically, the ghosts could be laid to rest if the battle didn't end in a stalemate, but what will happen with the winning side? With their enemies no longer around, would they also fade, content in their victory, or would they begin to march across Miseria, hunting enemies that don't exist?

Perhaps another seer could do what Cassandre didn't and help both sides equally, pacifying the demands of both.

Maybe, the key to save these souls is bringing Cassandre to them so they can face the one who doomed them.

The Ghost City of Elthaina

Elthiana stands on a half-circular plain. While the area would have been ideal to build one or more villages, the random apparitions of the ghost town and the Misty Border discouraged settlement.

Elthiana is a wall-less city. The city limits are on a gentle slope in regards to the rest of the plain, surrounding a much sharper hill which holds the acropolis, where stands a small but solid fortress, whose foundations are of cyclopean masonry that contrasts with the rest of the structure. The vaults underneath other structures of the city share this technique.

The city itself is a very pleasant place, with gardens, colonnades, paved streets, fountains and tiny cypress groves. Elthiana feels like an open-air museum, although the often-empty streets are slightly disquieting.

The city is not uninhabited, however. If one walks long enough, they will eventually find a ghostly citizen moving about while performing some task. The Elthianians seem to be ignorant of being dead, and become confused if someone comments on the city being empty. That is because, as members of the Children of Hecate who managed to cast spells to see the unseen discovered, the city is filled with inhabitants, at least as many as Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes and likely more. It is just that only a few unconsciously manifest themselves, and only those who manifest seem capable of noticing the living world. While they have as many personalities as the living would have, the ghosts tend to be welcoming. They will, however, suffer no theft or breaking of their laws to go unpunished if they notice it.

The Children of Hecate have subjugated a number of Elthainian ghosts to their will, by means of a variety of spells and rarely some bargains. They keep some members watching the city from the acropolis, trusting their enchantments and the ghostly priests of the Hecatean temple (which they bound to their will) to protect their holiest site.

L'abbaye Des-Précieuses-Âmes

The Abbey of Precious Souls lies on a hill in southern Miseria, situated by a crossroads were an east-west road meets a north-south one. L'abbaye can be a slightly sinister place if approached on a cloudy day, due to its Romanesque-style building made of black stone with sharp peaks in the background. But on a sunny day, it contrasts beautifully with the gardens and the blue sky. Legend says that the color of the exorcist-monks' robes was inspired by the black stones of the abbey.

The monks live in cottages around the abbey's hill, which was shaped to resemble a star, tending orchards and fields. Technically, lay people can live in the lands of L'abbaye, but the persistent unpopularity of the Ambroisean order dissuades most settlers, and any family that does settle here either leaves after a time or, after a generation or two, is subsumed into the monastic community. Since there is no formal demand for celibacy, there are a few married couples among the monks, and a few children growing up as "little monks". To prevent any marital scandal, couples live in the most isolated cottages.

The library of the abbey is the best repository for the fields of knowledge that the exorcist-monks dedicate themselves to. It is known that the heavily-protected vaults are used to lock away cursed objects retrieved from ghost towns or from across Miseria, and some also know about the Order of the Guardians' contributions. As such, the abbey and even its attending cottages have several discrete fortifications in case of attack.

Adventure Hooks

- **The return of the Wyverns:** after centuries, the Band of the Wyvern has returned. Its cruelty seems to have become greater in death, and they threaten all who approach or live near Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes.
- **The Wild Hunt:** a group of ghost riders has been seen in the skies, sometimes swooping down on certain mountain peaks. What are they doing?

- **The Prisoners of the Basement:** in Notre-Dame-Des-Recifes, a group of ghosts has been found in a manor's basement, wearing ragged clothes and slave collars on their necks, begging to be let free. But how did they come to be there?
- **The Ghostly Procession:** tales are spreading that a crowd of ghosts has appeared on the Day of Sainte-Marthe. Those who look at the procession and are looked back at by the ghosts are compelled to join their procession.
- **The Damned Coach:** Lady Jansen, a ghostly lady, has manifested after decades of being missing. With her charm, she convinces people who are outside of their homes at night to accept a ride, and gives them cursed gifts.
- **Tomb crawling:** a mysterious person approaches the party to explore a tomb. Their employer is a Child of Hecate.
- **Detectives of the Marthenian Church:** every few years, the Church of Sainte-Marthe publishes a list of unsolved crimes, and calls trusted adventurers to try to solve them.
- **Exorcists' journey:** a group of exorcist-monks requires some bodyguards and assistants as they travel through Miseria to exorcise people and places.



Peering Behind the Crystal Veil

Secrets of the Ildi'Thaan

by Ian Fordam

Tucked away in the far southeastern corner of Barovia, largely cutoff from the rest of the land by the Bloodfang Hills, stands the town of **Immol**. It has approximately 1600 inhabitants. In addition to its native Barovian population, Immol is also home to people of **Thaani** descent, that is, people whose ancestors were refugees from Bluetspur. Largely because of the Thaani population, Immol is also the headquarters of a qabal which calls itself the **Ildi'Thaan**.

The Ildi'Thaan

A Note on Terminology

In the Thaani language, *Thaan* was the original name of the people, but it has been Balokicized to *Thaani* in Barovia. The name *Ildi'Thaan* is derived from the original form. Therefore, *Ildi'Thaan* is a plural noun, as are the *Echelon* and the *Hopeful*.

Origin

Nearly two hundred years ago, in 581 BC, a piece of an Outlander world was drawn into the Land of Mists as the domain of Bluetspur. Many of the people of this land remained in Bluetspur to resist the illithids who lurked beneath its surface. Others fled to the nearby land of Barovia, however, eventually settling in the town of Immol and becoming known as the Thaani.

Seven years later, a small group of refugees from Bluetspur joined their kinfolk in Immol. Each of these refugees (later known as the Thirteen Survivors) was reputed to be a master psionicist. Each Survivor wrote a book to record their knowledge of the power of the human mind. According to modern legend, if anyone should collect all of the *Thirteen Texts of Thaan*, then they would wield sufficient psionic power to defeat the illithids.

A century after that, a man calling himself **Chorin Mur'Thaan** escaped to Immol from Bluetspur. Legends claim that he was the only person to escape Bluetspur with his mind intact since the Thirteen Survivors. This Chorin Mur'Thaan founded the **Ildi'Thaan**. Although the Ildi'Thaan have spread outside of Barovia, Immol remains the hidden heart of the society.

Goals

The Echelon—that is, the inner circle of the Ildi'Thaan—are dedicated to tracking down the *Thirteen Texts of Thaan* and learning their secrets. Only then can the dreaded illithids be utterly destroyed. Of course, only people with psionic abilities can use the power of the *Thirteen Texts*, and so the Ildi'Thaan also exist to unlock the abilities of those with psionic potential.

Those are the official goals of the Ildi'Thaan, anyway. In truth, not all of the Echelon are concerned with the illithids, particularly not since Bluetspur vanished during the Great Upheaval of 740 BC. They are far more concerned with developing personal power. Nonetheless, they still pretend that developing the psychic abilities of the Hopeful is an altruistic goal of the society.

Membership

Despite the name, members of the Ildi'Thaan are not necesarily of Thaani descent. Admittedly, individual Thaani are statistically more likely to possess psychic ability, but they are as likely to develop into full-fledged psionicists as wild talents. The Ildi'Thaan do not recruit psionicists, perhaps because the Echelon—particularly Chorin Mur'Thaan, the only member of the Ildi'Thaan who *is* a full psionicist—feel threatened by them. Spellcasters, including wizards and priests, are also not recruited, likely for similar reasons.

Organization

The Echelon and the Hopeful

The Ildi'Thaan have two primary ranks, the **Echelon** and the **Hopeful**. Members of the Echelon are those who have demonstrated a psionic wild power. The Hopeful have not.

The leader of the Ildi'Thaan, the **Exalted Echelon**, is always called **Chorin Mur'Thaan**, taking his name from the Thaani man who founded the society over one hundred years earlier. The current Exalted Echelon spends most of his time away from Irkat Thaan, seeking both the *Thirteen Texts* and new members with psionic potential.

Meanwhile, daily operations of the qabal are run by three men, who are informally known as the **High Echelon**. **Gjeric**, who leads the Barovian branch, is based near Immol. **Rasputin Khrinitov** operates out of the town of Toyalis in Hazlan. **Ludger Roscamp** heads the Kartakan branch of the Ildi'Thaan. Roscamp is not always granted the same status as Gjeric and Khrinitov, sometimes being excluded from the High Echelon, but he does not appear to care.

Meanwhile, there exist three divisions within the Hopeful. The techniques of the Echelon often fail to release psychic ability. Even so, those who have proven themselves to the Echelon in a non-psionic fashion join the **Hopeful of the Red Sash**, and they are given additional trust and responsibility. On the other hand, those who have failed to demonstrate sufficient potential, psychic or otherwise, are similarly praised for their loyalty and identified as the **Hopeful of the Black Sash**. From that point forward the Black Sashes are, in fact, treated as cannon fodder or, in the secret parlance of the Echelon, "meat shields". Finally, those who have not yet proven their psychic potential one way or another are called the **Unsashed Hopeful** by the Echelon, the Red Sashes, and the Black Sashes alike.

Branches of the Ildi'Thaan

The Ildi'Thaan have three branches. The Barovian branch is considered the most important, primarily because Chorin Mur'Thaan believes it to be so. However, the Hazlani branch is approximately as large as the Barovian branch, and under the leadership of **Rasputin Khrinitov** it is no less active. The Kartakan branch is the smallest and least important, engaging in little activity beyond funneling potential members to the Barovian branch.

The Barovian Branch

The headquarters of the Barovian branch of the Ildi'Thaan are located at an abandoned fortress near Immol. This fortress, now called **Irkat Thaan**, was built by a forgotten Barovian noble, but was abandoned long ago. Outside of the Echelon and some few of the Hopeful, nobody in Immol knows that the old fortress has been reclaimed.

The party line is that only the Echelon are allowed in Irkat Thaan. However, that is a lie told to the Unsashed Hopeful. Some of the Hopeful of the Red Sash are granted access because they are actually trusted by the Echelon. Moreover, certain members of the Hopeful of the Black Sash are granted access because the Echelon need servants and bodyguards.

Because the Unsashed Hopeful are not allowed to know the location of the secret headquarters of the Echelon, the Echelon hold meetings in the forest near Immol, usually at dawn. If such gatherings are noticed, the Hopeful admit that they are meeting for meditations. Given the importance of meditation in Thaani culture, this is a plausible excuse.

Approximately 150 Thaani live in Immol. Of those 150, perhaps 15 belong to the Ildi'Thaan. Another 25 Thaani know of the Ildi'Thaan, but do not belong to it. Some of those 25 believe the Ildi'Thaan are the proud secret heart of Thaani society, but some believe it is shameful and dangerous, a group meddling in affairs which should have been left behind in Bluetspur. Yet others find the Ildi'Thaan altogether silly, its members pretending to power which they cannot possibly possess. In addition, there are 12 Barovian members of the Ildi'Thaan. The Barovians have all been determined to possess latent psychic ability, and they have been recruited accordingly. (Note that these numbers do not include those Ildi'Thaan who reside full time at Irkat Thaan.)

Most of the Echelon still live in Immol, although they may claim to take frequent journeys out of town to cover their activities with the Ildi'Thaan. Gjeric and a handful of other Echelon actually live in Irkat Thaan,

along with those Hopeful of the Black Sash who serve them. The Black Sashes are forbidden to leave the fortress. Although the resident Echelon are not forbidden to leave, most of them seldom do. Either they are already considered missing and dead by the people of Immol, or else they are foreigners with no ties to the town.

A significant number of the Ildi'Thaan in the Barovian branch truly believe in the qabal's stated goal, the reclamation of Thaan from the illithids, most likely via the *Thirteen Texts of Thaan*. If any of these true believers should come to realize that Chorin Mur'Thaan's true goals do not align with what he has taught, they might attempt to share their disillusionment with the other branches.

The Hazlani Branch

The Hazlani branch of the Ildi'Thaan is based in Toyalis under the leadership of Rasputin Khrinitov. It has approximately 40 members, three-quarters of whom consider Toyalis their home or their base of operations. The remaining members live elsewhere throughout Hazlan, where they can extend the Ildi'Thaan's visibility into domain-wide affairs.

The Hopeful meet in a certain warehouse within Toyalis. The headquarters of the Echelon are in the city under the city, accessed via the cellar beneath an herbalist's shop. (That herbalist is **Neyadis Iltazyara**, one of the Echelon.) On the other hand, sometimes Unsashed Hopeful who do not seem loyal enough for the Red or Black Sashes are taken for meditation outside the city. There is a certain crevasse where the Ildi'Thaan like to dispose of the bodies.

The Hazlani branch is least obscured by the shadow of Chorin Mur'Thaan. They know that he is far more psychically powerful than any of them individually, and they respect that power. However, the Hazlani Echelon have doubtless taken steps to bolster their branch as a whole to be able to resist Chorin Mur'Thaan's greater strength.

The Kartakan Branch

The Kartakan branch of the Ildi'Thaan is led by Ludger Roscamp, a native Kartakan. He is assisted by two members of the Echelon, Neese Helmont and Qetore. No other Echelon or Hopeful exist in the Kartakan branch.

Ludger Roscamp maintains the Kartakan branch at this minimal size because the wolfweres have made themselves very clear: If he expands the branch, then they will kill him.

Member Summary

Location	Rank	Number
Immol	Echelon	≈15+12*
Immol	Hopeful	≈15+12*
Irkat Thaan	Echelon	6+3
Irkat Thaan	Hopeful	12
Toyalis	Echelon	≈30
Toyalis	Hopeful	≈30
Outside of Toyalis	Echelon	≈10
Outside of Toyalis	Hopeful	≈10
Kartakass	Echelon	3
Kartakass	Hopeful	-

* The first number indicates Thaani members, while the second indicates ethnic Barovians.

Key to Psionic Powers

In NPC descriptions for this article, the following psionics-related abbreviations are used:

cs: clairsentience
pk: psychokinesis
pm: psychometabolism
pp: psychoportation
t: telepathy
m: metapsionics
/d: devotion (minor power)
/s: science (major power)
psp: psionic strength points

Non-Player Characters — Barovia

Gjeric *(High Echelon)*
male human wildpsi 4

HP 18, **HD** 4D6, **AC** 10, TH 19, **PSP** 36
Wild powers: teleport (pp/s) (INT+0, Cost: 10+); teleport trigger (pp/d) (INT+1, Cost: 0+2/hour)
Wildpsi class benefits: enhanced power strength advancement (18 psp); +1 power score bonus 1/day
Equipment: wand of psychic missiles

A Thaani native to Immol, although the Immolese believe him to have vanished years ago. He is one of the High Echelon of the Ildi'Thaan. He runs Irkat Thaan in Chorin Mur'Thaan's absence.

Gjeric's wild power is a variation of the *teleport trigger* devotion. It operates only when he is on the verge of receiving a fatal blow, at which point it functions as if he also possessed the *teleport* science. That is, he must have enough PSPs remaining to activate his power, and then he must make a successful Power Score check. Gjeric is incapable of teleporting voluntarily.

Gjeric has trained his *teleport trigger* to take him to a hidden chamber in the bowels of Irkat Thaan.

Bardhyl *(Echelon)*
male human commoner 2

HP 6, **HD** 2D6, **AC** 10, **TH** 20, **PSP** 20
Wild power: danger sense (cs/d) (WIS-3, Cost: 4+3/turn)

An Immolese man of Thaani descent.

The psychic surgery used to try to evoke psionic ability in the Hopeful is not without its risks. Bardhyl is the case in point. Technically speaking, his *danger sense* devotion makes him one of the Echelon. However, his intellect was destroyed in the process of manifesting his talent. For the most part Bardhyl acts as if he is six years old, although he can communicate only in grunts.

Bardhyl's *danger sense* is unusual: It covers the entire area of Irkat Thaan, above ground and below, which makes Bardhyl an invaluable one-man early warning system. One of the Black Sash is stationed with Bardhyl at all times, monitoring for the agitated grunting which indicates that Irkat Thaan has been invaded.

Chezkis *(Echelon)*
male human expert 3

HP 12, **HD** 3D6, **AC** 10, **TH** 19, **PSP** 39
Wild power: animal affinity (pm/s) (CON-4, Cost: 15+4/round)

A Thaani man, born and raised in Immol. One of the Echelon of the Ildi'Thaan. His wild power is *animal affinity* (bear). Ever since his wild power manifested, he has grown eight inches in height, which has left him looking gaunt and stretched.

Chezkis joined the Ildi'Thaan as a young man, and unlike most of the Hopeful he manifested a wild power. With the subsequent promotion to the Echelon he moved into Irkat Thaan and so vanished from Immol. He is one of the foremost scholars of Thaani lore within the Ildi'Thaan.

Most of the Echelon recognize that the current Chorin Mur'Thaan is the original Chorin Mur'Thaan, and the hope of learning the secret of his longevity is one of the draws which encourages loyalty to the cabal. However, from his studies of Ildi'Thaan lore, Chezkis has realized that body theft is the mechanism by which Chorin Mur'Thaan remains alive. He does not judge the Exalted Echelon's usurpation, but instead he hopes to learn the secret.

Fisnik *(Echelon)*
male human wildpsi 3

HP 13, **HD** 3D6, **AC** 10, **TH** 19, **PSP** 20
Wild power: psionic sense (m/d) (WIS-3, Cost: 4+1/round)
Wildpsi class benefits: enhanced power strength advancement (12 psp)

An elderly Thaani man, one of the Echelon who resides in Irkat Thaan. His wild talent allows him to discern people with psychic ability (or, more crucially,

latent psychic ability) with a touch. This talent makes him invaluable to Chorin Mur'Thaan. Officially Gjeric outranks Fisnik, but Gjeric knows that Fisnik is a loyal spy for Chorin Mur'Thaan. As such he treats Fisnik with wary deference.

Ileana Pascu *(Echelon)*
female human wildpsi 3

HP 12, **HD** 3D6, AC 9, **TH** 19, **PSP** 28
Wild power: mending (pk/d) (INT, Cost: 4+3/round)
Wildpsi class benefits: enhanced power strength advancement (12 psp)
Equipment: strengthened clothing (AC9)

The highest-ranking ethnic Barovian among the Ildi'Thaan. She still resides in Immol, although she visits Irkat Thaan whenever the Echelon all meet. In fact, she is one of the Ildi'Thaan's foremost spies in Immol. Nobody suspects the Barovian woman of being psychic.

Ileana Pascu began her career as a weaver, and most Immolese still refer to her as such. However, she no longer weaves much but instead operates as a cloth merchant. Her wild power, *mending*, has allowed her to make that transition and profit financially thereby.

Nelu Caprara *(Hopeful of the Red Sash)*
human male fighter 4

HP 25, **HD** 4D10, **AC** 10, **TH** 17
Special: str 16 (+1 damage)

An ethnic Barovian and one of the Hopeful of the Red Sash. Nelu Caprara is the head of security at Irkat Thaan. All of the Hopeful of the Black Sash answer to him. They call him "Nelu the Red".

Nelu Caprara keeps his hair cut short, in part because he's embarrassed that it went gray after the last attempt to evoke his psychic potential. A long scar crosses the right side of his face from below his eye to along his jaw. It is the result of a slipped skinning knife, but he lets others' imaginations provide more lurid explanations.

Non-Player Characters — Hazlan

Rasputin *Khrinitov (High Echelon)*
male human fighter 2

STR 14, **DEX** 10, **CON** 15, **INT** 12, **WIS** 13, **CHA** 10
HP 12, **HD** 2D10, **AC** 10, **TH** 19, **PSP** 26
Wild powers: mind bar (t/d) (INT-2, Cost: 6+4/round); telekinesis (pk/s) (WIS-3, Cost: 3+, 1+/round)

Rasputin Khrinitov is the High Echelon of the Hazlani branch of the Ildi'Thaan. He lives in Toyalis, where he operates as a moneylender.

Rasputin Khrinitov is a dual wild power, possessing both the *mind bar* devotion and the *telekinesis* science.

Rasputin Khrinitov is over sixty years old, and he has belonged to the Ildi'Thaan for nearly thirty years. While no longer as strong as he used to be, he remains in good health and can, if necessary, still utilize the fighting skills of his youth, even if he now carries a rapier rather than a longsword. The Hopeful take his continued physical ability as a sign of the power of mind over body. Rasputin takes it as a sign of the efficacy of exercise.

Zoltan Khrinitov (*Hopeful of the Red Sash)*
human male fighter 6

HP 36, **HD** 6D10, **AC** 5, **TH** 15
Special: 17 strength (+1 to-hit, +1 damage); longsword specialization (+1 to-hit, +2 damage, 3 attacks/2 rounds)
Equipment: longsword; chainmail (AC5)

Zoltan Khrinitov is Rasputin Khrinitov's nephew, and he was intended to be Rasputin's heir in the Ildi'Thaan. However, Zoltan never manifested any psionic power, and no Hopeful—even a Hopeful of the Red Sash—will ever lead a branch of the Ildi'Thaan. Nonetheless, Zoltan remains active in the cabal, serving as his uncle's bodyguard.

Ouside of the Ildi'Thaan, Zoltan is also the legal heir to his uncle's money-lending business. Although Zoltan looks like a thug, he has a good head for

numbers like his uncle.

Neyadis Iltazyara *(Echelon)*
female human wildpsi 4

HP 16, **HD** 4D6, **AC** 10, **TH** 19, **PSP** 46
Wild power: control light (pk/s) (INT+0, Cost: 12+4/round)
Wildpsi class benefits: enhanced power strength advancement (18 psp); +1 power score bonus 1/day

One of the Echelon in Toyalis. She and her grandmother Zilla own an herbalist shop, the basement of which opens into the city beneath the city of Toyalis.

Neyadis' grandmother suffers from dementia and rarely speaks any more. However, she does wonder to herself about all the strangers who sneak through the shop.

Neyadis' wild power is the control light devotion.

Nizunder Xarnis *(Echelon)*
male human wizard 6

HP 21, **HD** 6D4, **AC** 9, **TH** 19, **PSP** 40
Wild power: sensitivity to psychic impressions (cs/s) (WIS-4, Cost: 12+2/round)
Spells
(1st level): (4) color spray; jump; shield; shocking grasp
(2nd level): (2) mirror image; ray of enfeeblement
(3rd level): (2) fireball; non-detection
Special: 16 dexterity (+1 reaction adjustment, +1 missile attack adjustment, -2 defensive bonus)

Nizunder Xarnis manifested his wild talent, *sensitivity to psychic impressions*, at a young age. It was mistaken for an arcane ability, and so Nizunder was sent to the Red Academy. He also happened to possess arcane ability, and so he thrived at the Red Academy until his untrained psionic power began to disrupt his sorcerous studies. Fortunately for him, shortly before his dismissal from the Red Academy his researches unveiled hints of the Ildi'Thaan. Eventually he tracked them down and was immediately accepted as one of the Echelon. With training, he has gotten his wild talent under control.

Nizunder Xarnis is one of the Hazlani branch's secret weapons: a psionic wizard. Even though Ildi'Thaan policy prohibits the admission of spellcasters, Rasputin Khrinitov allowed Xarnis to join, just for the arcane firepower he could bring to any potential confrontation with Chorin Mur'Thaan.

Non-Player Characters — Kartakass

Ludger Roscamp *(High Echelon)*
male human fighter 5

HP 35, **HD** 5D10, **AC** 7→5, **TH** 16, **PSP** 23
Wild power: empathy (t/d) (WIS+0, Cost: contact + 1/round); contact (t/d) (WIS+0, Cost: varies + 1/round)
Special: dex 16 (+1 reaction adj., +1 missile attack adj., -2 defensive adj.)
Equipment: shortsword; dagger; shortbow ; studded leather armor (AC7)

The head of the Kartakan branch of the Ildi'Thaan. His wild power is a limited form of *empathy*, which ordinarily functions only with animals. However, it also allows him to communicate telepathically with intelligent animals such as wolfweres (but not werewolves).

Roscamp has dark, curly hair and a dark, curly beard, both of which are perpetually unkempt. He possesses a certain rustic charm, including an infectious laugh. Despite his somewhat feral appearance, he is not a werewolf or wolfwere.

The local wolfweres know enough about the Ildi'Thaan to keep a wary eye on Ludger Roscamp and his assistants. If they demonstrate any sign of ambition, they will be torn to shreds. Recruiting potential members of the Hopeful and passing them on to Immol? That is permitted.

In his youth, Ludger Roscamp was troubled by feral impressions that he could not drive from his mind. To his great fortune, though, on the way back to Immol Chorin Mur'Thaan happened to pass through the village where Roscamp lived. He recognized Roscamp's wild power and brought him back to Immol to learn how to control it. After two years

Roscamp had mastered his wild power, and Chorin Mur'Thaan sent him back to Kartakass to scout for other wild talents. Chorin Mur'Thaan had hoped Roscamp would be able to control, not merely communicate with, the wolves of Kartakass. He has been disappointed.

Dread Possibility – Caught from All Sides

The wolfweres of Kartakass have made clear to Roscamp that he survives only at their forbearance. Chorin Mur'Thaan has made equally clear that the Kartakan branch of the Ildi'Thaan is the least important of the three branches. For that matter, Qetore's assignment to Roscamp's branch has left him the third wheel in his relationship with Neese Helmont. Ultimately Roscamp's frustration over his perceived powerlessness may drive him to turn against the Ildi'Thaan.

Several years ago, Chorin Mur'Thaan discovered and recognized a piece of Bluetspurean psitech, which an illithid psychoporter had managed to fling to the Core. He gave it to Roscamp, telling him to activate the psitech if he ever found himself under psychic attack. By this time Roscamp had begun to distrust Chorin Mur'Thaan, and for good reason. The psitech is a *psi screamer* (see below) which Chorin Mur'Thaan intended to eliminate Roscamp and Helmont if his enemies track them down. Roscamp doesn't know for certain what the psitech is, but his guess is reasonably close. If everything comes apart for him, he might well carry the *psi screamer* into the heart of the Ildi'Thaan.

Neese Helmont *(Echelon)*
female human thief (scout) 6

HP 24, **HD** 6D6, **AC** 7→5, **TH** 18, **PSP** 46
Wild power: molecular manipulation (pk/d) (INT-3, Cost: 6+5/round); telekinesis (pk/s) (WIS-3, Cost: 3+, 1+/round)
Special: dex 16 (+1 reaction adj., +1 missile attack adj., -2 defensive adj.)
Equipment: shortsword; dagger; sling w/ 20 iron bullets; studded leather armor (AC7)

An assistant to Ludger Roscamp in the Kartakan branch of the Ildi'Thaan. She possesses the *molecular manipulation* wild power.

Neese Helmont is a native Kartakan. She wears her red-brown hair cut short in a fashion which would be called a "bob" if it weren't so untidy.

Ludger and Neese are romantically involved. However, Qetore's addition to the Kartakan branch has complicated their relationship. Neese is badly infatuated with the Thaani woman.

Neese is the daughter of distillers, and between forays into the woods she learned their trade. Nowadays she and Ludger Roscamp make their living producing and selling a fine apple brandy. "It's not *meekulbrau*," Neese will admit, "but it's the next best thing." Most of their profits, like their recruits, are funnelled back into the Barovian branch of the Ildi'Thaan, but such largess has not yet increased the reputation of the Kartakan branch.

Qetore (*Echelon*)
female human wildpsi 5

HP 20, **HD** 5D6, **AC** 10, **TH** 18, **PSP** 48
Wild power: dimension walk (pp/d) (CON-2, Cost: 8+4/turn); gird (m/d) (INT-3, Cost: 0, 2x Maintenance Cost)
Wildpsi class benefits: enhanced power strength advancement (24 psp); +1 power score bonus 1/day; metapsionic devotion (gird)

An assistant to Ludger Roscamp. Although she is Thaani, she lives in Kartakass and belongs to the Kartakan branch of the Ildi'Thaan. Despite her relative youth, she has striking white hair, which she usually wears in long braids. Her eyes are violet.

In addition to being an attractive woman, Qetore also possesses a dominating personality. (This may be one reason why she has been assigned to the backwoods of Kartakass.) She does not seek to actually head the Kartakan branch, merely to control it—not because she has a specific agenda, but just to prove she can.

Qetore possesses the *dimension walk* wild power. Using this devotion, she serves as messenger between Kartakass and Immol.

Non-Player Characters — Other

Chorin Mur'Thaan *(Exalted Echelon)*
10th level male human psionicist (telepath)

STR 11, **DEX** 15, **CON** 13, **INT** 16, **WIS** 17, **CHA** 14
HP 38, **HD** 9D6+2, **AC** 9, **TH** 16, **PSP** 115
weapon proficiencies (4): clubbing weapons tight group (2 slots); short blades tight group (2 slots)
Non-weapon proficiencies (6): harness subconscious (WIS-1, 2 slots); meditative focus (WIS+1); rejuvenation (WIS-1); disguise (CHA-1, 2 slots)
Languages (5): Thaani, Blutspurean (0 slots); Thaani, modern; Balok; Darkonian; Mordentish; Vaasi
Disciplines (4): metapsionics (m); psychokinesis (pk); psychoportation (pp); telepathy (t — primary)
Sciences (5): psychic surgery (m); mindlink (t); probe (t); psionic blast (t); switch personality (variant) (t)
Devotions (15): cannibalize (m); enhance (telepathy)(m); ballistic attack (pk); inertial barrier (pk); astral projection (pp); dimensional door (pp); awe (t); conceal thoughts (t); contact (t); ego whip (t); ESP (t); false sensory input (t); inflict pain (t); intellect fortress (t); invisibility (t)
Defense modes (5): intellect fortress; mental barrier; mind blank; thought shield; tower of iron will
Special: +2 bonus to saving throws vs. enchantment/charm
Equipment: psionic dagger +2

The founder of the Ildi'Thaan, who has survived across for a century and a half using his variant *switch personalities* telepathic science. Unlike the standard form of the science, Chorin Mur'Thaan can exist indefinitely in each successive body. He has become adept at swapping into a bystander's body as his previous body is about to die. Regardless of his current shell, he always remains the Exalted Echelon.

Chorin Mur'Thaan is the only full psionicist in the Ildi'Thaan. He is too paranoid about usurpation to train anyone with full psionic potential. He is also too wary of magic, whether arcane or divine, to allow spellcasters in his organization.

Chorin Mur'Thaan truly does care about reclaiming the *Thirteen Texts of Thaan*. However, he wants the Texts to expand his own personal power. He has no intention of ever confronting the illithids on their home territory.

Chorin Mur'Thaan spends limited time leading the Ildi'Thaan, leaving that task to the High Echelon. He prefers to spend his time roaming the Core, searching for the *Thirteen Texts* or other psionic tools which he might employ in his pursuit of power. Occasionally he encounters another psychic, whether a wild talent or a full- fledged psionicist. He might recruit a wild talent for the Ildi'Thaan, but more likely he will destroy them.

Similarly, he has been known to stalk a rival psionicist for months, learning their weaknesses so that he might destroy them as well. Ultimately, though, Chorin Mur'Thaan is cautious to the point of cowardice and will avoid confrontations he is not confident of winning.

When he is not traveling, Chorin Mur'Thaan spends much of his time in an abandoned fortress, smaller and higher upon the slope of Mount Sawtooth than Irkan Thaan. There he studies the two *Texts* which he has already seized. The first is the Fourth Text, which describes the psionic discipline of psychokinesis. The second is the Ninth Text, which records the ravings of a Thaani survivor as he descended into madness. The first has proven useful to Chorin Mur'Thaan. The second has not, although he continues to try to decipher the wisdom behind the madness.

Note that Chorin Mur'Thaan's physical ability scores (STR, DEX, and CON) vary depending upon his current body. However, he never gains bonus PSPs for his Constitution score. Also, over the decades he has forgotten his original nonweapon proficiencies—which centered upon survival in Bluetspur—and picked up new ones instead, which are focused upon his psychic prowess.

Oreza Volyakoga (*Echelon*)
female human wildpsi 7

HP 28, **HD** 7D6, **AC** 10, **TH** 17, **PSP** 60
Wild powers: shadow form (pm/s) (CON-6, Cost: 12+3/round); gird (m/d) (INT-3, Cost: 0, 2x Maintenance Cost)
Wildpsi class benefits: enhanced power strength advancement (36 psp); +2 power score bonus 1/day; metapsionic devotion (gird)

One of the Echelon, but not attached to any of the branches. Although she is Hazlani, she travels through Nova Vaasa, recruiting people with psionic potential and sending them back to Toyalis.

Oreza Volyakoga's wild power is *shadow form*. She carries a crystal imbued with psionic power by Chorin Mur'Thaan which chimes quietly when it makes contact with someone possessing psionic potential. However, the crystal provides no guarantee that potential will actually manifest, only that it might.

Dija Esadze

8th level female human psionicist (telepath)

STR 13, **DEX** 11, **CON** 13, **INT** 15, **WIS** 16, **CHA** 14
HP 31, **HD** 8D6, **AC** 10, **TH** 17, **PSP** 99
weapon proficiencies (3): club; dagger; dart
non-weapon proficiencies (5): herbalism (3 slots); meditative focus (WIS+1); rejuvenation (WIS-1)
Languages (4): Thaani, modern (0 slots); Balok; Bluetspurean (2 slots); Vaasi
Disciplines (3): clairsentience (cs); psychokinesis (pk); telepathy (t — primary)
Sciences (4): mindlink (t); probe (t); psionic blast (t); telekinesis (pk)
Devotions (13): all-round vision (cs); danger sense (cs); inertial barrier (pk); levitation (pk); soften (pk); conceal thoughts (t); contact (t); ESP (t); empathy (t); life detection (t); mind bar (t); send thoughts (t); synaptic static (t)
Defense modes (4): intellect fortress; mental barrier; mind blank; tower of iron will
Special: +2 bonus to saving throws vs. enchantment/charm

A matriarch among the Thaani of Immol. She is a full-fledged psionicist and a quiet enemy of the Ildi'Thaan. She seeks to identify potential psychics before the Ildi'Thaan can, in hopes of giving them proper psionic training rather than the lies and mumbo-jumbo of her enemies.

Dija Esadze is a heavyset, grandmotherly woman. Her eyes are a startling violet.

Over the years a number of her children and grandchildren have demonstrated psychic ability. She is proud that none of them have succumbed to the lies of the Ildi'Thaan.

However, the Ildi'Thaan earned Dija Esadze's enmity when one of her eldest son's closest friends fell into their clutches. She did not initially object to what she saw as a group dedicated to preserving Thaani cultural traditions. However, one night the young man came back... different. He abruptly announced that he was leaving Immol to travel the world—something he had never mentioned before—and then departed. Although she had not had opportunity to interact with the young man, she found traces of psychic tampering in his parents. She investigated from there, eventually concluding that a malevolent force lurked behind the Ildi'Thaan.

The Wildpsi Class

While the author is a die-hard 2nd Edition aficionado, he is not above stealing ideas from other editions, including the notion of NPC classes.

The **wildpsi** class models characters who possess a psionic wild power, which they work to develop. It is not as powerful as a full-fledged psionicist, which is why it is considered an NPC class. In particular, it is intended for members of the Ildi'Thaan, although it may also prove useful elsewhere.

Mult.	Feature
(+0)	rogue combat value and weapon proficiency slots
(+0)	rogue saving throws
(+0)	rogue hit dice
(+0)	slightly limited weapons (as psionicist)
(-2)	major armor restriction (leather/padded/studded leather/hide armor only, small shields allowed)
(+0)	psionicist non-weapon proficiency group
(+0)	moderate non-weapon proficiency advancement
(+4)	wild power
(+2)	use psionic-specific items
(+4)	TOTAL

Level	Base Experience Points	PSP Bonus	Power Score Bonus	Metapsionic Devotions
Level 1	0	0	+0	0
Level 2	400	6	+0	0
Level 3	800	12	+0	0
Level 4	1,600	18	+1	0
Level 5	3,200	24	+1	1
Level 6	6,400	30	+2	1
Level 7	12,800	36	+2	1
Level 8	25,000	42	+3	2
Level 9	50,000	48	+3	2

Class Features

Enhanced Power Strength Point Advancement

Most wild talents gain +4 PSPs per level. However, wildpsi characters gain +6 PSPs per level after 1st level.

Power Score Bonus

Once per day, the wildpsi may focus their mental energies to gain a bonus to the Power Score of their wild power.

Metapsionics

At certain levels the wildpsi gains a metapsionic devotion of their choosing.

Level Cap

No wildpsi may advance beyond the 9th level.

New Psionic Items

Psi Screamer

The *psi screamer* is a psionic item created by the illithids of Bluetspur as a trap. It appears as a fist-sized sphere of polished glass fragments held together by amber. Anyone trained in the discipline of telepathy—or even possessing a telepathic wild talent—can discern how to activate the device. All that activation requires is the use of a telepathic science or devotion while in contact with the *psi screamer*.

However, activation is almost certainly undesirable, except perhaps as a last ditch attempt to take your enemies out with you. Everyone with psionic ability within 60 feet, including the activator, is affected by the *psi screamer*, suffering 3d6 hit points of damage and also losing 6d6 Psionic Strength Points. (If applicable, keep track of negative PSP values.) A successful saving throw vs. breath weapon will halve the hit point damage and PSP loss alike; anyone with an active psionic defense will automatically make their saving throw. Anyone who loses more PSPs than they currently possess must recover their PSPs "from the negatives" before they can utilize their psionic abilities again.

Non-psychics within 60 feet of an activated *psi screamer* suffer a brief, stabbing headache and maybe a minor nosebleed, but nothing significant enough to cause damage.

Each *psi screamer* may be used only once, becoming a useless chunk of broken glass after activation.

Wand of Psychic Missiles

This wand is identical to a *wand of magic missiles,* except that its missiles cause psychic damage, not force damage. A psionicist who has any defense mode activated suffers no harm from these psychic missiles.

New Psionic Sciences and Devotions

Mending *(Psychokinetic Devotion)*

Power Score	INT
Initial Cost	4
Maintenance Cost	3/round
Range	Touch
Preparation Time	0
Area of Effect	1 square foot/round
Prerequisites	none

This power allows the psionicist to manipulate organic but non-living matter such as cloth or leather. The psionicist may repair damage, strengthen the material (for example, improving the material's AC by 1), or merely improve its appearance.

Power Score — The material is irreparably harmed.

20 — The psionicist may affect up to 3 square feet/round.

Author's Note

Apart from Chorin Mur'Thaan, who is indeed formidable, the Ildi'Thaan are largely a group of ordinary people who happen to possess a psychic trick or two. Their greatest strength (apart from Chorin Mur'Thaan) is their numbers, not their psychic abilities. Therefore adventures using the Ildi'Thaan should generally target Tier 1 (or maybe Tier 2) parties.

References

The Ildi'Thaan were introduced in the *Cryptic Alliances* booklet of the *Forbidden Lore* boxed set.

For more about the Thaan people in Bluetspur, see the article "Thaan Fallen" from *Quoth the Raven* Issue 31.

Psionics rules are drawn from or inspired by the 2nd Edition supplement *The Complete Psionics Handbook*.



Immolation

by Ian Fordam

Introduction

Immolation is a heavily investigative adventure aimed for low-level characters. Because it focuses very little upon combat, the number of PCs matters less; more characters in the party simply means the Dungeon Master should add more mind-spiders at the appropriate time.

Immol and Its Factions

Set in the far southeastern corner of Barovia, largely cut off from the rest of the land by the Bloodfang Hills, stands the town of **Immol**. In addition to its native Barovian population, Immol is also home to people of **Thaani** descent (from Bluetspur) and people of **Forfarian** descent (from Forlorn). Finally, because of the Warlock's Road out of Hazlan, Immol has long been subject to Hazlani influence.

The Thaani and Forfarians both insist upon maintaining their distinct cultural heritage, but otherwise they usually coexist peacefully with their Barovian neighbors.

An abandoned, ruined, and mostly forgotten fortress stands upon the slope of nearby Mount Sawtooth, overlooking Immol. This fortress has become the headquarters of a secret society called the **Ildi'Thaan**, who call the fortress **Irkat Thaan**. The Ildi'Thaan are a group of people with psionic wild talents and people who hope to develop psionic powers. (Note that members of the Ildi'Thaan are not necessarily Thaani, although most are.) Ostensibly this society was founded to seek *The Thirteen Texts of Thaan* so that the texts' collected knowledge may be used to overthrow the illithids of Bluetspur. However, the Ildi'Thaan have grown more mercenary over the years. Many of its ranking members seek power for power's sake. They are willing to string along low-ranking hopefuls with the promise of mental power, even when those demonstrate no actual ability.

Moreover, Barovia is also home to another faction, the **Brotherhood of Contemplative Power**. Their headquarters, called **Kolyna's Sanctuary**, is a monastery built near where the Luna River descends from the Balinoks. Like the Ildi'Thaan, the Brotherhood's members seek to develop the powers of the mind. Unlike the Ildi'Thaan, their intentions are generous. They use their mental abilities not only for self-improvement but also to provide healing and other aid for those who would benefit from such kindness. Unsurprisingly, the Brotherhood sometimes acts in opposition to the Ildi'Thaan.

Recent Events

Several months ago, the Brotherhood of Contemplative Power discerned the appearance of a psionic presence in Hazlan. Knowing that the presence could be a creature or item, friend or foe, trap or treasure, the Brotherhood sent three of its members to investigate. The presence turned out to be a collection of crystalline baubles, which narrowed the possibilities to trap or treasure. The trio of Brothers acquired the baubles and ventured back to their sanctuary for further investigation. Unfortunately, the trio was discovered by the Ildi'Thaan and ambushed before they could reach home. The Ildi'Thaan brought the baubles back to Irkat Thaan, and they began investigating the baubles themselves.

However, mere weeks before the party's arrival in Immol, a band of adventurers—led by one of the monks of the Brotherhood of Contemplative Power—thwarted the plans of the Ildi'Thaan. Several Ildi'Thaan were killed; others fled. The baubles were reclaimed and taken to the Brotherhood's sanctuary. Well, except for two, which were taken by two of the fleeing Ildi'Thaan. Meanwhile, the town of Immol, which has very little knowledge of these recent events, is left to cope with the unexpected violence nearby. Two citizens—one Thaani and one ethnic Barovian—have vanished in the night, leaving the

town particularly distrustful of adventurers. Meanwhile, two escaped members of the Ildi'Thaan hide the last two *crystals of psychic enhancement*, and a young man has been imprisoned for unexplained crimes.

Sequence of Recent Events

- A band of Ildi'Thaan ambush the trio of Brothers of the Brotherhood of Contemplative Power as they return to Barovia with the crystalline baubles. The Ildi'Thaan return to Irkat Thaan and turn over the crystals to **Gjeric**, the leader of the Barovian branch of the Ildi'Thaan.
- The survivors of the Brotherhood return to their sanctuary, reporting the lost crystals. Brother **Nicu Radacanu** is sent to Toyalis to recruit aid for retaking the crystals.
- Gjeric and the other Ildi'Thaan in residence at Irkat Thaan fail to discern much about the crystals. Brother Nicu Radacanu hires a band of adventurers.
- Gjeric sends **Eroon** (one of the Hopeful of the Black Sash, who cannot read Thaani but is known in town) along with **Chezkis** (one of the Echelon, who can read Thaani but is not known in town) to the Teodorus Archives to request access to the Thaani books they assume are contained within. The clerk on duty, **Draok**, does his job and turns them away.
- Draok mentions Eroon and Chezkis' mysterious visit to a friend who is a deputy to **Sheriff Vianu**. Brother Nicu Radacanu and his adventurers arrive in Immol and rent rooms at The Bolting Stag.
- The Echelon of the Ildi'Thaan call a meeting of the Hopeful with the intent of using the *crystals* to activate latent psychic abilities. Because the Unsashed Hopeful are not allowed to know about Irkat Thaan, the meeting takes place at the usual place in the woods near Immol.
- Brother Nicu Radacanu and his adventurers raid the meeting of the Ildi'Thaan, killing several members and reclaiming nearly all of the crystals. However, **Szipresa** and **Otar** each escape with one crystal apiece. The psychically sensitive inhabitants of Immol—many of whom do not realize they are psychically sensitive—share a disturbing dream of a midnight fight in the woods.
- Brother Nicu Radacanu and his adventurers leave Immol immediately, returning to the Brotherhood sanctuary. They don't bother to try to get reimbursed for several already paid-for nights at The Bolting Stag.
- The next morning two men—**Costache Balaura**, a laborer; and **Eroon**, who calls himself a chandler—fail to return to their wives, **Lavinia** and **Gareke**.
- Suspicious villagers note that the departure of Brother Nicu Radacanu and his adventurers coincides with the disappearances of Costache Balaura and Eroon.
- Prompted by Eroon's disappearance, Draok's deputy friend happens to mention Eroon's strange visit to the Teodorus Archives. Sheriff Vianu, who trusts his intuitions, places Draok in protective custody, pretending it is an arrest to try to draw out sinister forces.
- A week passes.
- Under the influence of the *crystal of psychic enhancement*, Szipresa and Otar both manifest wild talents. Unfortunately, that coincides with a certain mental degradation.
- Szipresa burns down her house with her newly-manifested *pyrokinesis*. She has to move in with **Maraen**, one of her younger sisters.
- Mind-spiders start weaving their webs through the minds of the psychically sensitive people of Immol. This is Otar's *fear projection* ability manifesting itself.
- Szipresa starts a fire in her sister's house. Fortunately this one is smaller and does not cause significant damage, but nonetheless her sister has grown very wary of Szipresa's aberrant behavior.
- The PCs arrive in Immol.

Where Matters Stand

The Thaani in Immol are generally jumpy. Word of the psychic fight dream has circulated quietly. Many of the Thaani fear that the Four-Fingered Ones are closing in upon Immol. Others aren't convinced that the Silent Masters are at hand, but they do fear a psychic threat of some sort.

Some of the rest of the Immolese population is bothered by the mysterious vanishing of Costache Balaura and Eroon. Then again, mysterious

vanishings happen in Barovia, so it's more a matter of gossip than panic. Also, Immol is large enough that not everybody realizes anything has gone wrong.

The Ildi'Thaan are furious. Not only were two members of the Echelon and seven members of the Hopeful killed, but the *crystals of psychic enhancement* were stolen! Crucially, one faction believes that Draok somehow discerned their plans and summoned the Brotherhood to stop them. Overall, the secret society is in turmoil, waiting for Chorin Mur'Thaan to return and restore order.

Meanwhile, both Szipresa and Otar are ticking psi-bombs, just waiting to go off.

An Example of Adventure Flow

The players should determine how their characters go about investigating the mystery of Draok's imprisonment and how it relates to recent events near Immol. However, here is an example of how the encounters in Immol might occur:

- After **Arriving in Immol**, the party fails to rent rooms at The Bolting Stag.
- Ailis offers the party a place to stay and makes **her plea** for the party to learn why her beau has been imprisoned.
- The party visits Draok **At the Jail** and learns the truth behind his supposed imprisonment from Sheriff Miron Vianu.
- Having learned about Eroon (and the other Thaani) attempting to gain access to the **Teodorus Archives**, that is where the party goes next. They discover nothing at the archives, but the clerk recommends that they talk with the Thaani.
- On their way into the Thaani part of town, the PCs pass **The Smouldering House**.
- The PCs spend some time learning about **The Word Among the Thaani**. They also ask about the smouldering house and learn about Szipresa's recent misfortunes.
- The PCs' attempt at **Visiting Szipresa** does not locate the woman in question, but it does locate her sister Maraen.
- The day has been full if inconclusive, so the PCs bunk down for the night at Ailis' father's farm again. However, their rest is disturbed by **Mind-Spiders**.
- The next morning the PCs resume their investigation, perhaps by seeking out the cooperative Thaani to ask about mind-spiders, perhaps by trying to find Szipresa again. In the latter, they are more successful because they happen to witness **A Brawl in the Street**. Szipresa resembles her sister Maraen enough for the PCs to recognize her.
- Both Otar and Szipresa flee when the party interferes, but bystanders can identify Otar as the jeweler's apprentice. The PCs decide to go **Visiting Otar** or else track down Szipresa at Maraen's house.
- Either way, before the party gets much chance to talk with either Otar or Szipresa, **The Psi-Bombs Go Boom**.
- After the battle is over, the party has a chance to talk with their subdued quarry. Finally they get some answers.
- Once the party gains just enough understanding of what has been going on, they receive notice that the jail is under attack! So it's time for a confrontation with the Ildi'Thaan in **At the Jail Redux**.
- Once the dust settles, Brother Nicu Radacanu arrives to provide additional explanations and reclaim the *crystals of psychic enhancement*.

This example should be taken extremely tentatively. The adventure may head in any of a number of different directions.

The Start of the Adventure

Arriving in Immol

Regardless of whatever reason happens to bring the PCs to Immol, they arrive. The locals are warily civil but not immediately welcoming, which should not surprise the PCs if they have spent much time in Barovia. The PCs can receive directions to **The Bolting Stag**, which is the only inn in town. However, if the party does venture to The Bolting Stag, they meet an unexpectedly hostile reception. The innkeeper takes one look at the party and says, "Adventurers, eh? No rooms. No rooms available." Although he speaks Balok with a noticably non-Barovian accent, that fact probably doesn't catch the PCs' attention as much as the blatant lie. The inn is large enough and the common room empty enough

to belie the innkeeper's declaration. Moreover, the trio of Hazlani merchants drinking in the corner look startled at the announcement, although they do not contradict the innkeeper.

The innkeeper will relent enough to feed the PCs—without charging them an exorbitant rate—but his stubbornness prevents him from backing down on his supposed lack of vacancies. While the innkeeper is out of the common room, the PCs may attempt to talk with the Hazlani merchants. The merchants, who are somewhat offended by the lack of hospitality which the innkeeper has shown, will readily admit that they understand Immol has had some very recent trouble with adventurers in town, although they don't know the details.

A silent witness to this exchange is a young Forfarian woman named **Ailis**, who is delivering herbs to The Bolting Stag for use in its lamb sausage. She listens without interfering and slips away, most likely unnoticed.

(This scene is one example of how Ailis might learn that more adventurers have come to town. Other possibilities are also viable.)

Ailis' Plea

Ailis approaches the party. If they have been denied rooms at The Bolting Stag, she offers them the use of her father's barn. ("Will your father object?" "Probably, but I can sway him.") Not as comfortable as the inn, but more comfortable than sleeping out in the open. If asked how much she will charge, she replies, "All I ask is that you hear me out. I have a favor to request of you."

When Ailis' father, **Raghnall**, learns of his daughter's offer to provide shelter for the party, he is less than pleased but will not retract her hospitality. He also will not allow his daughter to associate with such disreputable people unaccompanied, which only means that Ailis may have to sneak out of the house after dark to talk with the party.

Once the party has settled in and Ailis feels she has upheld her end of the bargain, she explains her dilemma:

There is a young man named Draok. As you can tell by his name, he is Thaani, which my father...—nevermind...

Draok, he is a clerk in the Teodorus Archives. He can read and write both Balok andThaani. I've been teaching him some Forfarian, too. He is a very clever young man. He has a lot of promise.

Except that he's been arrested. And I don't know why!

Will you help me clear his name of whatever crime he supposedly committed?

(Clearly Ailis has been listening to too many bard's tales. With luck the party does not disillusion her too badly.)

Ailis can provide much of the background about Immol, including its three subcultures. She can also describe the little she knows about events leading up to Draok's arrest. In particular, a group of foreign (i.e. non-Barovian, non-Forfarian, non-Thaani) adventures arrived in town, led by a Barovian holy man of some sort. They left abruptly, the same night that some townsfolk went missing.

Ailis has three *potions of healing* which she is willing to give to the PCs in exchange for their aid. Otherwise she has a handful of silver and copper which she has saved for the wedding which she hopes to have someday.

Encounters

At the Jail

If the party ventures to the Immol Jail, they will run afoul of **Sheriff Miron Vianu**, a wiry, middle-aged man who gives the impression of being more formidable than he appears. (And he is.)

If asked why the sheriff has arrested Draok, the sheriff will snort and say, "He hasn't really been arrested. He's in protective custody. A week ago or so, something bad happened, and my gut tells me that more badness is ready to happen to *him*. If you're that more badness, then please know that we're ready for you."

If the party can convince Sheriff Vianu of their good intentions, then they will be allowed to talk with Draok (while supervised, of course). While Draok is indeed in the jail building, he has a cot in a guard room, not a cell. Two deputies guard Draok, while two more guard the cells, where he is supposedly being kept. Draok will confirm that he is in the jail voluntarily. He will ask that the PCs pass a message to Ailis: "I am fine. I hope to be free soon."

Either Sheriff Vianu or Draok can report the reason for the caution: A man named Eroon came to the Teodorus Archives, asking for access to the Archives' collection of Thaani books. Draok was on duty, and his suspicions were raised. For one thing, the Archives do not have Thaani books. (Not in the official collection, anyway.) For another, Draok knew Eroon well enough to know that Eroon could not read much Thaani. For a third, Eroon was accompanied by someone whom Draok did not recognize, despite clearly being of Thaani descent. Draok happened to mention this odd visit to one of Sheriff Vianu's deputies, a young man with whom he had grown up. Several days later, when Eroon was one of two Immolese discovered missing, the deputy reported what he had heard to the sheriff.

Sheriff Vianu asks the party to *not* yet tell Ailis the truth behind Draok's stay at the jail. She's young enough that he has very limited faith in her discretion, and he would rather provide a more enticing trap for whoever might come after Draok. What more tempting target than someone who has been imprisoned and cannot run away?

Sheriff Vianu might recommend that the party speak to Eroon's widow. Similarly, Draok might suggest that the party visit the Theodorus Archives where he works.

The Widows

If the party talks with Lavinia Balaura, the wife of one of the men who has gone missing, they learn little of importance. She awakened in the night to find her husband missing, but she didn't worry at the time. He gets restless sometimes. That's all. She just doesn't understand what could have happened to him this time. And, no, to the best of her knowledge her husband Costache didn't know the other missing man.

However, talking with Gareke, Eroon's widow, may prove more enlightening. Her grief is overshadowed by anger. Eroon had gotten involved in some stupid Thaani thing. Talked about living up to his heritage. Said he was becoming someone important. He outright swaggered, he did, in the last couple of days before he vanished. She paid him little enough attention at the time. Living with him was generally easier when she paid him little attention, she had learned.

At The Bolting Stag

The PCs might also ask at The Bolting Stag for information, following the (quite accurate) logic that the previous band of adventurers must have stayed at the only inn in town. Upon learning their mission, the innkeeper, **Artair ApDuall**, will be more gracious about interacting with the party, although his pride won't let him actually apologize for his previous rude behavior.

Artair reports that the previous band of adventurers were brusque but polite enough. Their leader seemed to be some sort of monk. Not that he wore any holy symbols, not the Morninglord's or otherwise, but he dressed simply, and he had that kind of air about him. Also, he was a native Barovian but not from Immol, at least to judge from the slightly funny way he talked. The rest of the band were not Barovian (nor Forfarian nor Thaani). When asked what brought them to town, just as part of making conversation, they all directed his question to the monk, who replied, "We are merely stopping here briefly. We hope to cause no trouble." Not the most

reassuring answer, especially when they later disappeared along with two Immolese citizens.

The Burgomaster

Petre Teodorus is far too busy to be bothered with stray adventurers in his town. Hmph!

Not that the burgomaster knows anything anyway. He lets Sheriff Vianu handle that sort of nonsense.

The Teodorus Archives

The Teodorus Archives are housed in a four-room building which was formerly Immol's town hall. The front entrance opens into a small lobby where clerks like Draok wait to forestall ruffians from entering the Archives proper. The room through the door behind the clerks' desk is the very model of a gentleman's library, complete with overstuffed furniture, the rich scent of pipe smoke, and fine oaken bookshelves lined with actual books. Burgomaster Petre Teodorus is rightfully proud of his collection of books related to Barovia. (There are surprisingly many.)

Beyond the primly maintained library is the storeroom, which is decidedly not primly maintained. Books are arranged in haphazard stacks, awaiting the Burgomaster's final say on whether each book belongs in the library. Over the years ambitious clerks have occasionally attempted to organize the stacks into some semblance of order, only to be thwarted by the Burgomaster's temper. He insists that such reorganization will prevent him from finding whatever tome he may be seeking. A heavy door used to open from the storeroom to the back of the Archives, but it has been solidly padlocked for years. Burgomaster Teodorus does not want some thief walking off with his treasures.

Finally, a wooden ladder of questionable sturdiness leads from the storeroom to the attic. The attic is cluttered with junk and animal droppings, as well as the moldy remains of books too unworthy to be stacked in the storeroom. The roof leaked once, three years ago. While the roof was fixed, the contents of the attic were not. The attic does feature a small gable containing a bell. The bell's cord still runs down into the lobby. The clerks can ring the bell if they need the sheriff's assistance.

The Archives certainly sound like a good place to hunt for clues, especially once the party learns about Eroon's visit.

The clerk on duty—not Draok, obviously, but a native Barovian fellow named **Geza Stanca**—will deny access to the party, but not at the cost of physical harm. However, if the party strong-arms its way into the Archives, then they will certainly lose the favor of Sheriff Vianu. On the other hand, brute force should not be necessary. Geza Stanca will allow the party into the Archives if he can be convinced that they are aiding Draok.

Unfortunately, though, the party is almost certain to find nothing of value to their immediate mission. The Teodorus Archives are intended as a museum of Barovian history, and they contain almost nothing about the Thaani people. Burgomaster Petre Teodorus simply does not care about them (or the Forfarian people, either).

If the PCs do gain access to the books in the storeroom, there is a 2% chance per PC that they stumble across some reference to the psitech of the Thaani being heavily focused upon crystals. That is, odds are poor that the PCs will find anything related to their immediate mission. However, if asked for his advice, Geza Stanca will recommend that the party talk to some of the Thaani in town. They are a close community, and someone might know what Eroon was seeking at the Archives.

Dread Possibility: Lost in the Stacks

There is always the possibility that one of *The Thirteen Texts of Thaan* has been acquired by, misfiled by, and lost within the Teodorus Archives. The Dark Powers might chortle with glee at the irony of such a treasure hiding beneath Chorin Mur'Thaan's nose.

Consider as well the possibility that other valuable documents have been lost in the storeroom. For example, one stack might contain a copy of Van Richten's *Guide to Vampires*, or else a map of Castle Tristenoira might be found tucked into a book of Forfarian poetry.

The Smouldering House

If the party wanders around the Thaani neighborhood, they will likely notice the half-charred ruin of a house. What happened? A careless woman caught her house on fire. Nearly got herself killed. Now she's living with her sister and being equally careless there.

Perhaps the party catches Szipresa during one of her frequent visits to her old home. As soon as anyone intrudes upon her solitude, Szipresa will flee.

Mind-Spiders

Otar is one of the Ildi'Thaan who escaped the raid in possession of a *crystal of psychic enhancement*. In Otar's case, the crystal released his latent wild talent to manifest fears. However, because he has come into his power so quickly, he has not learned to control it. Otar fears spiders; therefore he manifests spiders. These mind-spiders do not threaten him, but nonetheless his powers have left him a nervous wreck. He has finally acquired a wild talent, just as he dreamed, but Brother Nicu Radacanu's raid has left him too terrified to contact any other Ildi'Thaan.

The first night after the PCs start investigating, they will be attacked by a swarm of mind-spiders, which are weak but numerous psychic manifestations. Presumably Otar encountered the party sometime during the day— even just passing them on the street. Following the raid upon the Ildi'Thaan, Otar has grown increasingly afraid of foreigners. Therefore, in his dreams he unintentionally targets the PCs.

At first the PCs may think they are dreaming. The mind-spiders look like ordinary large spiders. Except purplish. And translucent. And shimmering. They scuttle like living spiders, and they jump like living spiders, but they never make a sound. Their attacks cause only non-lethal damage, but the PCs won't realize that initially, especially at the moment when purplish, translucent, shimmering mandibles first slide into a PC's forehead.

Afterward, if the PCs incorporate questions about mind-spiders into their investigation, they may learn that others have been attacked as well. The mind-spiders are terrifying, so terrifying that their victims may be rendered unconscious with fear, but at least they appear to leave no lasting harm... except, perhaps, for someone with a weak heart.

A Brawl in the Street

Szipresa and Otar happen to meet on the street. They are both Thaani, so of course they know each other, but only other Ildi'Thaan know that they both belong to that secret society. Ordinarily they would pass without any particular acknowledgment, but some resonance between the *crystals of psychic enhancement* alerts each of them that the other carries a *crystal*. While neither is ordinarily particularly greedy, the effects of their crystals have made them so. The two Thaani begin arguing, and then they start to grapple. Right there, in the middle of the street! Of course, that's when mind-spiders begin to manifest and nearby objects start to catch on fire.

Alarmed at the prospect of being exposed, both Otar and Szipresa scurry away. Perhaps the PCs witness this encounter, or perhaps they merely hear rumors.

Visiting Otar

Otar lives alone in a plain, rather ramshackle house in the Thaani quarter. If the PCs attempt to visit him, he will not answer their knocks, although they may catch him peeking through the slats of a shuttered window.

If the PCs find a way to force a conversation, Otar will steadfastly refuse to tell them anything. In the face of extreme pressure, he will subconsciously generate another batch of mind-spiders and attempt to flee while the party deals with this threat. In the worst of cases, his mind may turn upon itself, throwing him into a coma until the source of his distress is removed.

Otar carries his *crystal* in a pouch, which he wears at his waist. When he gets nervous, he touches the pouch to confirm that the crystal is still there. Any pickpocket would recognize that this repeated gesture indicates something valuable in the pouch.

Visiting Szipresa

Any attempt to talk with Szipresa involves first finding her. She burned down her own home and is now living with her sister Maraen. However, she spends little time at Maraen's house, particularly

after starting a fire there as well. She wanders the streets of Immol and sometimes sits alone in her ruined home.

Finding Maraen, however, is easy. She has two young children at home and so has limited opportunity to leave. As a Thaani, she is naturally reticent to talk with foreigners, but if the PCs can convince her to let down her guard she will prove quite chatty. She is worried about her sister, who has been acting strangely ever since she burned down their parents' house, which, you know, *of course* she has. Who wouldn't? But still Maraen worries.

Maraen does know that Szipresa sometimes goes into the woods to meditate at dawn. For some reason, though, when Maraen recently suggested that her sister do so, just to help settle her nerves, Szipresa only grew more agitated and clutched at a necklace with a crystal inset that she has taken to wearing. The necklace isn't new—it belonged to their mother originally—but the crystal is.

If the PCs do manage to find Szipresa, she will prove reluctant and untrustworthy, particularly if asked about her necklace. She might insist that it was a gift from Eroon, with whom she was having an affair. (It was not, and she was not.) She will admit to meditating in the woods, and, yes, sometimes there are other people there too, but, no, she doesn't know who any of them are.

The Word Among the Thaani

While most of the citizens of Immol are unaware of the trouble brewing, the Thaani are not. Those who lack psychic sensitivity still talk with those who have it, and so every Thaani in town knows of the psychic fight that occurred on the night that Eroon vanished. The details of the fight are lost in a jumble of second-hand terror, but a few among the dreamers remember a moment of hope associated with the sight of a crystal glinting despite the darkness.

Exceptionally persuasive PCs might convince one of the Thaani to talk to the party. Keep in mind that approximately 9% of the Thaani belong to the Ildi'Thaan, and they absolutely will not share anything with outsiders. However, approximately 16% of the Thaani know something of the Ildi'Thaan, if only that some Thaani sometimes venture into the woods to meditate, trying to develop the psychic skills once possessed by the original Thaani. The Thaani being questioned may find this practice admirable, risky, or outright silly.

d%	Results
01-75	Ignorant of the Ildi'Thaan
76-84	Member of the Ildi'Thaan
85-00	Knows of the Ildi'Thaan

However, during the span of this adventure the Ildi'Thaan are laying low. No early morning meditation rendezvous will be held until the ruckus dies down.

Dija Esadze

The Thaani do not have their own officially recognized leaders within the community; they do not wish to appear threatening to the Barovian majority within Immol. Nonetheless, they do have certain unofficially recognized community elders. A woman named Dija Esadze is the foremost Thaani expert on psychic abilities, and so members of the Thaani community might steer the PCs in her direction.

However, Dija Esadze is nowhere to be found in Immol. Unlike Eroon and Costache Balaura, though, she is not missing. Her children and grandchildren can reassure the PCs that the matriarch of their family is engaged in business out of town. What sort of business? Where out of town? Dija's descendants will gently decline to say.

In truth, Dija Esadze—along with certain other psionicist members of her family—is making the attempt to locate her foes, the Ildi'Thaan, and learn what happened on the night of the fight in the woods. They will not happen to return until after this adventure has concluded.

The Psi-Bombs Go Boom

At some point Szipresa and Otar will have another confrontation, and ideally the party gets caught in the middle of a showdown between Szipresa's *pyrokinesis* and Otar's mind-spiders. According to all indications, this confrontation could end very poorly for Immol if the party does not intervene. The mind-spiders are rarely lethal, but Szipresa has the potential to immolate the entire town.

Perhaps this encounter begins while the PCs are visiting Otar. His agitation might carry through his *crystal* to Szipresa's, and she might come investigate. Similarly, Otar's mind-spiders might be drawn to Szipresa's own distress if the party confronts her. Using the PCs' actions to move the story forward is preferred, but it is not necessary. Having had their initial street brawl, either one might seek out the other, perhaps even intending to compare notes about the weird effects that the *crystals* are producing. Such fair intentions will soon be overwhelmed by greed, however.

Note that both Szipresa and Otar are dangerous, but the Thaani do not consider them evil. They will react poorly if either one is killed unless the killing seems unavoidable. They will react much more kindly if Otar and Szipresa can be subdued. For that matter, PCs can earn favor through actions such as fire-fighting blazes started by Szipresa or fending off mind-spiders attacking bystanders.

If either Otar or Szipresa survive the encounter, particularly if they are separated from their *crystals*, then they may even be willing to talk about the Ildi'Thaan, should the Dungeon Master wish to extend the adventure in that direction.

At the Jail Redux

Chezkis brings four of the Hopeful of the Black Sash into Immol, directing them to gather outside the jail at night. He believes that Draok summoned the adventurers who raided Irkat Thaan, and he hopes that Draok can tell him who the psionicist leader was and where he would have taken the *crystals of psychic enhancement*. The goal is to capture Draok and drag him back to Irkat Thaan for interrogation.

Of course, this is exactly the sort of scenario which Sheriff Miron Vianu anticipated. Four deputies guard Draok, and a runner also waits to fetch the sheriff in the event of an attack. The deputies may be slightly overpowered by the Ildi'Thaan, but Sheriff Vianu is a match for Chezkis if he can reach the jail in time. Better yet if the PCs learn of the raid and intervene. To that end, a runner may be sent for the PCs as well as for the sheriff.

If the attack is thwarted, Draok identifies Chezkis as the man who accompanied Eroon to the Teodorus Archives. If Chezkis has been slain, then Sheriff Vianu will reveal the subterfuge behind Draok's supposed arrest, clearing the young man's name. Ailis will be delighted to be reunited with her beau, even if her father remains discouraged by his Forfarian daughter's love for a non-Forfarian man.

If Draok is killed during the attack, then Ailis will be heartbroken and blame the party for his death, at least initially. Fortunately, her father Raghnall has the perspective to know better, although he will request that the PCs stay far out of Ailis' way until she calms herself.

However, recall that the Ildi'Thaan wish to capture and interrogate Draok, not kill him. If they succeed in capturing him, then they will haul him back to Irkat Thaan for the interrogation. The scope of the adventure should broaden accordingly.

Conclusion and Recurrence

This adventure presents an investigative scenario and allows the Dungeon Master and the players to find their way through it. The conclusion will likely involve the PCs thwarting an attack upon Draok's life and/or the PCs preventing Szipresa and Otar from terrorizing the town.

At the conclusion, the party may be in possession of two trapped *crystals of psychic enhancement*. This situation may or may not be desirable for the DM's plans. If not, the Brotherhood of Contemplative Thought may send Nicu Radacanu back to Immol to retrieve the crystals he missed the first time around. His intention is to see these last two crystals destroyed by the Brotherhood, lest anyone else suffer (or cause!) mental harm because of them. By the time he arrives, the party may have learned why hanging on to the crystals is undesirable. If so, Nicu Radacanu's return offers a way to release the PCs from any negative side effects. In fact, if one of the PCs is a psion or a wild talent, whether due to exposure to the crystals or otherwise, then Nicu Radacanu could prove to be a valuable mentor.

For a campaign which focuses further upon the Ildi'Thaan, the DM may consider introducing Chorin Mur'Thaan into the tail end of the adventure. He should be scaled to overpower the party upon this first introduction, not to discourage the PCs but to

give them incentive to gain strength and confront him again. In this case Nicu Radacanu might provide a useful safety net, although he should not be used to overshadow the party.

Non-Player Characters

Ailis *(herbalist)*
Female human expert (herbalist)

A young woman of Forfarian descent. Draok's beloved. A talented herbalist. While the Forfarians do not consider her a redhead, nonetheless there is a certain reddishness to her hair color, especially in the sunlight.

While Ailis focuses most of her efforts on herbs for healing, she also grows herbs useful for cooking.

Artair ApDuall (*innkeeper*)

The owner of The Bolting Stag. He is even more proud of his Forfarian heritage than most Forfarians in Immol, and that's saying something.

💀 ***Costache Balaura*** (*Ildi'Thaan*)

A Barovian native of Immol. Married to Lavinia. One of the Hopeful of the Ildi'Thaan. Died when the Brotherhood-sponsored band of adventurers raided Irkat Thaan.

Costache was a general-purpose laborer, available to assist with carpentry, masonry, or other tasks that required more endurance than knowledge. He worked hard and was well-regarded accordingly.

Draok (*clerk*)
Male human expert (clerk)

A young man of Thaani descent. Ailis' beloved. Works in the Teodorus Archives.

💀 ***Eroon*** (*Ildi'Thaan*)

A Thaani native of Immol. One of the Hopeful of the Ildi'Thaan. Married to Gareke. He called himself a chandler, but at best he was his wife's assistant. Other than helping her gather certain flowers, herbs, and other scent-providing ingredients every spring, his actual contributions were debatable. He was fond of a certain Kartakan apple brandy. Some people blamed his general uselessness on that, but he was not actually a drunkard; he was just lazy.

As part of the Ildi'Thaan investigation into the crystal baubles, Eroon was sent to inquire at the Teodorus Archives regarding access to any books on "Thaani magic" which might exist in the collection. Draok had to turn him away, both because Petre Teodorus only permits access to renowned scholars, and because he never bothered collecting non-Barovian lore.

Approximately one week later, Eroon failed to return home, slain when the Brotherhood-sponsored band of adventurers raided Irkat Thaan.

Gareke *(chandler)*
Eroon's widow. More angry than bereaved.

Gareke is recognized as the best candle-maker in town because her candles burn long and with pleasant scents. There is no mystery to her success; she works hard to create a quality product.

Geza Stanca *(clerk)*
Male human expert (clerk)

A young man of Barovian descent who works in the Teodorus Archives.

Lavinia Balaura (*seamstress*)

Costache's widow. Mostly confused by her husband's disappearance. Fortunately she already works as a seamstress, so she should be able to get by without Costache's income.

Maraen (*Thaani*)

Szipresa's sister, the middle of the three. Maraen took Szipresa in after her sister burned her parents' house down.

Miron Vianu *(sheriff)*
Male human fighter

The sheriff of Immol. Of Barovian descent. Since Burgomaster Petre Teodorus has little interest in the day-to-day affairs of the town, much of that responsibility has fallen on Sheriff Vianu's shoulders.

Nicu Radacanu (*Brother of Contemplative Power)*
Male human psionicist (psychokinesis)

A native Barovian and member of the Brotherhood of Contemplative Power. He led the adventurers on the raid of Irkat Thaan.

Otar (*Ildi'Thaan*)

A Thaani man. A talented jeweler. He does not own a shop, but he works for a Barovian jeweler whose aging eyes prevent him from doing the detailed work himself.

Otar is reclusive, frequently difficult to talk with, and sometimes unpleasant to those who try. His neighbors have shifted their attitudes from "Why isn't Otar married yet?" to "I don't want my daughter to marry him."

Otar is also a member of the Ildi'Thaan. It is the closest he has come to feeling that he fits in somewhere. However, the corrupting influence of his crystal of psychic enhancement has undercut any feelings of camaraderie he might have.

Otar is chronically anxious. He does not appreciate the irony inherent in his newfound psychic ability to manifest fears.

Petre Teodorus *(Burgomaster)*
Male human aristocrat 6

The burgomaster of Immol. He is more concerned with leaving behind his legacy, The Teodorus Archives, than he is with running the town, leaving the responsibility on Sheriff Miron Vianu's shoulders. The Teodorus Archives are a library dedicated to Barovian history and culture, but Toedorus only grants access to notable scholars from across the Core (who rarely come to Immol). Mere Immolese need not apply.

Raghnall *(farmer)*

A widowed farmer of Forfarian descent. Ailis' father. He does not approve of Draok as a suitor for his daughter just because he's not Forfarian.

Szipresa (*Ildi'Thaan*)

A member of the Hopeful of the Ildi'Thaan. She escaped with one of the crystals of psychic enhancement and has been in contact with it since the raid. She has manifested the psychokinetic science of pyrokinesis, which pairs poorly with the mental degradation caused by the crystal.

Szipresa is the oldest of three sisters. She never married but continued to live with her parents, caring for them until they died. By that time, both of her sisters had moved out and married (and the middle sister, Maraen, had two young children as well), and so Szipresa claimed the house as her own.

Szipresa thinks Otar is creepy, and that doesn't even take into the account the paranoia induced by her crystal of psychic enhancement.

Psionic Items : Crystal of Psychic (Over-)Enhancement

The ordinary *crystal of psychic enhancement* is an irregularly-shaped bauble which, after it remains in consistent contact with a psionicist or wild talent for a week, delivers two benefits:

- It increases the owner's Psionic Strength Points by 1d10+10.
- It allows the owner to use the *magnify* metapsionic devotion.

These benefits cease if the owner loses consistent contact with the crystal; after ten rounds without contact, there is a cumulative 1% per round that the benefits are lost.

Moreover, if someone who is not a psionicist or wild talent maintains consistent contact with the crystal for a week, there is a 2% chance that it reveals a latent wild talent in that person. The chance rises to 5% for people of Thaani descent. **For any character, this roll may be attempted once per *ever*.**

However, these crystals are sometimes trapped (or perhaps merely malfunction), in which case they are known as *crystals of psychic over-enhancement*. They appear to act as if they are the ordinary variety, except that the crystal starts to feed upon its owner.

Each time the owner uses a psionic science or devotion, there is a cumulative 5% chance of an ill effect occuring:

d%	Effect
01-35	The psionic power malfunctions in some dangerous way.
36-50	The crystal drains 1d10 PSPs permanently.
51-65	The crystal drains 1 point of intelligence.
66-80	The crystal drains 1 point of wisdom.
81-95	The crystal drains 1 point of charisma.
96-00	The owner becomes *feebleminded*, as per the spell.

All effects are permanent; they do not wear off over time, although they may be remedied by *restoration* and similar spells. Worse yet, though, the crystal's owner also becomes convinced that the crystal is, shall we say, *precious*. They will not willingly part with it, regardless of the negative side effects. However, if the owner is forcibly separated from the crystal for a week, this compulsion will fade.

New Monster : Mind-Spider

Climate/terrain Any
Frequency Very rare
Organization Swarm
Activity cycle Any
Diet Psychic bits
Intelligence Non (0)
Treasure Nil
Alignment Neutral
No. Appearing 4-24
Armor class 8
Movement 12'', web 15''
Hit dice ½
Thaco 20
No. of attacks 1
Damage per attack 1d4
Special attacks See below
Special defenses See below
Magic resistance Nil
Size S (2' diameter)
Morale Fearless (20)
XP value 35

Mind-spiders appear to be large spiders, except they are purplish, translucent, and shimmering. Despite their obviously unnatural origins, they still scuttle and jump like living spiders. They have no scent, and they never make a sound.

Combat: a mind-spider's bite causes 1d6 non-lethal damage. In general, anyone "killed" by a mind-spider does not die, but merely falls unconscious for 10-60 minutes. Any non-lethal damage is recovered following a good night's rest. However, someone who is badly arachnophobic must make a system shock roll or else actually expire. (In regards to PCs, this situation would only apply to those who have previously established that they are genuinely, thoroughly terrified of spiders.)

Mind-spiders suffer half damage from non-magical, non-blessed, non-psionic weapons. Anyone with psychic ability always causes full damage, regardless of the weapon they use.

Habitat/Society: mind-spiders are psychic manifestations and have no habitat or society.

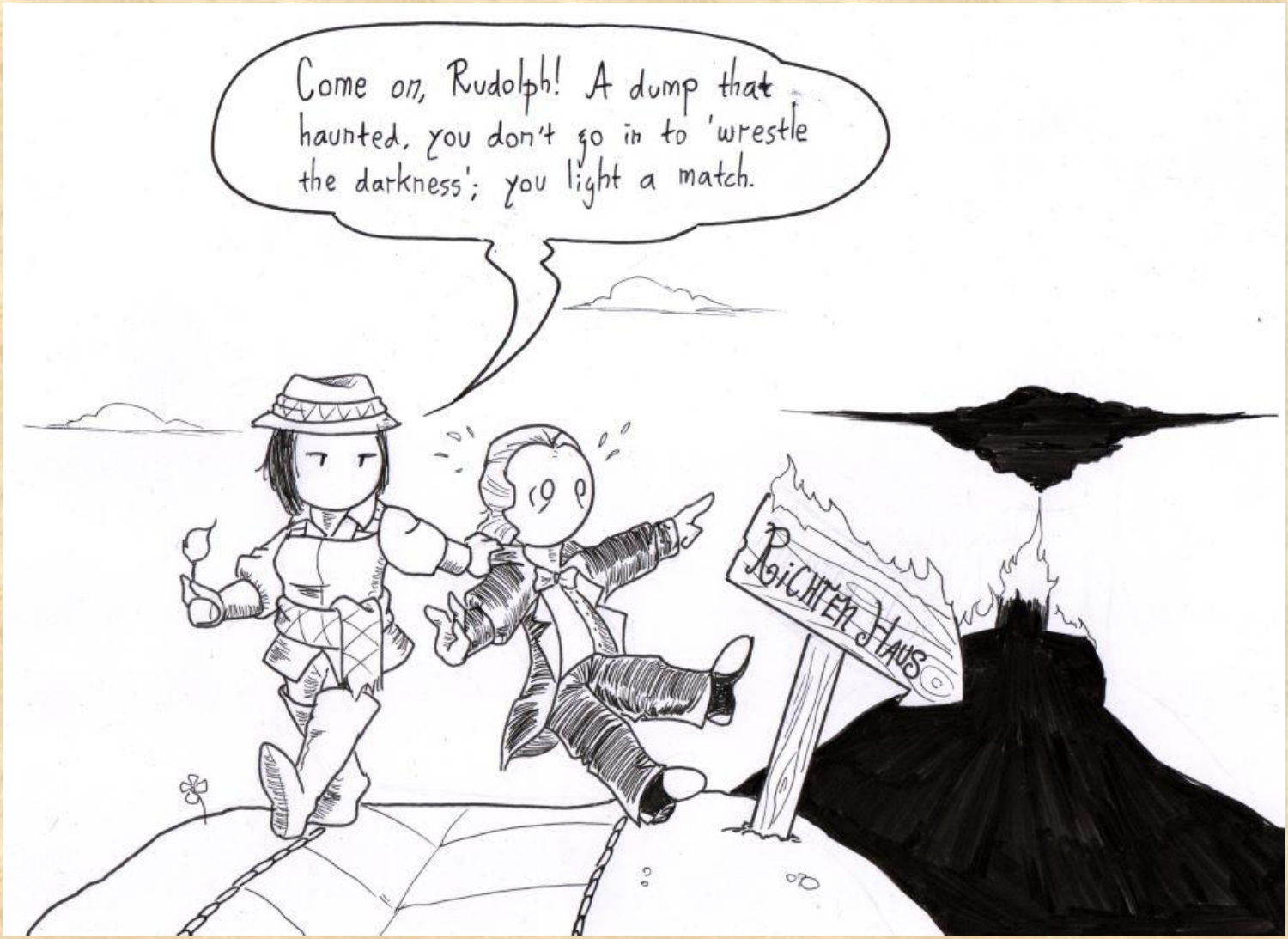
Ecology: as psychic manifestations, mind-spiders do not participate in the local ecology.

References

The references given at the end of "Peering Behind the Crystal Veil" apply to this adventure as well. In addition, the Brotherhood of Contemplative Power was introduced in the adventure module *Thoughts of Darkness*. It was expanded upon in the article "The Brotherhood of Contemplative Power" from *The Undead Sea Scrolls 2002*.

Author's Note

Immolation was originally written as a submission for Adventure Jam #3 (Barovia) on the r/ravenloft subreddit. However, I got badly distracted writing up details of the Ildi'Thaan not used within the adventure, and I did not finish before the deadline. Here it is, presented in all of its intended glory (and accompanied by the result of my distraction, "Peering Behind the Crystal Veil"). Apologies for the lack of stat blocks; I didn't want to miss another deadline. Thanks to Wannahock88 for organizing the adventure jams.


Come on, Rudolph! A dump that haunted, you don't go in to 'wrestle the darkness'; you light a match.
RICHTER HAUS

Good Land, Feral Land

A Farelle Gazetteer

by Adam "Speedwagon" El Akkad

An Introduction to Farelle

Farelle is a heavily wooded domain, whose forests are packed to the brim with dangerous canids of all kinds. Beyond the dangerous woods are two cities, known as Kaynis and Mortilis, where the Farellian people reside. The Farellians eke out a happy existence for themselves despite the threat of wild dogs, thanks to both their astounding technological progress and a fellow named Jack Karn. Jack travels the length of Farelle as a tinkerer, fixing small items for others they lack the tools to fix themselves. He is popular and loved by the communities he visits. For many of the residents of Farelle, a visit from Jack is a brief shining moment in an otherwise dreary existence. None know of his true status as jackalwere Darklord of this domain of dread, nor of his unrelenting hatred for humanity.

The Themes of Farelle

Farelle is a land about people running from what they used to be. Three ideas run through it, and a Dungeon Master who keeps them in mind will find that nearly every encounter, NPC, and rumor in the domain leans on at least one.

Progress is a race. The Farellians went from pit dwellings to steam power in barely a century and a half, and they know exactly what the alternative looks like. To stop moving forward is to begin sliding backward, and what waits at the bottom is the feral state of their ancestors. This is why swords are a mark of shame, why magic is "the coward's tool," and why a failed harvest is read as a failure of character. The horror of Farelle is not the dogs in the Hackles but the suspicion that the race can't be won, and that the domain's own success is the thing that will destroy its Darklord and whatever comes after him.

Some things are better left unsaid. The Farellians are honest, hospitable, and loud, and they are experts at not talking about the things that would make them uneasy. The Riots, the Quelling, the ancestor left out of the family tale, and the child that was taken by a jackal are all real, and all quietly folded into oral tradition until only the pleasant version remains. The tame-folk who hunted quevari were often hunting their own kin, and every family has an empty chair it does not discuss. In Farelle the past is buried the way a dog buries a bone: deliberately, and with the expectation that it will never resurface. Most of the time it doesn't.

Belonging is a judgment. To be "feral" in Farelle has little to do with where a person is born or how they behave. It measures how far behind they have fallen. A neighbor who keeps to the old ways, a family whose clothes have gone ragged, and a woman whose child howls at night can each be declared feral by a council, and a declaration is rarely questioned. The domain's warmth is genuine, and it has limits. Guests are welcome and are never quite permitted to be residents, and the domain's only true insider, Jack Karn, is loved by everyone and cannot stand any of them.

DM Sidebar: The Mirror

Jack Karn is Farelle's fears turned inside out. The Farellians run from the wild toward progress, and Jack runs from progress toward the wild. Each side's nightmare is the other's dream, and neither can stop. The domain's success is what kills him. Every mine, refinery, and repeating rifle brings the day closer when the ecology is upset and the tinkerer's curse is complete, and every civilized weapon in a Farellian hand is one he cannot ignore. He would give a great deal to stop the race, and he cannot help but mend the machines that run it.

He is also the domain's memory, and the one thing it has agreed not to look at too closely. He remembers who was on the muster rolls, who told the lie that started the Riots, and who put the hog in the Harlans' pen. The Farellians have made a folk tale of him instead of asking, and a friendly grandparent who says "he never ages" is laughed off. He belongs nowhere and is loved everywhere—a jackal in a tinkerer's face, given a seat at every table he does not want and actively hates. Farelle does not know its Darklord, and that is, perhaps, for the best.

Farelle At A Glance

Culture Level:	Varies by household, from savage (feral clans in pit dwellings) and medieval (frontier villages) to industrial (Kaynis's mining district).
Climate & Terrain:	Warm, forest and plains
Year Formed:	597 BC
Population:	5,500 (200-500 considered “feral”)
Races (%):	Human 90%, Other 10%
Languages:	Common, Farellian
Religions:	None organized (folk practice & beginnings of imported faiths)
Government:	Democratic Gerontocracy (elected mayors and village elders)
Ruler(s):	None
Darklord(s):	Jack Karn
Nationality:	Farellian

The Land

Landscape

The largest part of Farelle is the Hackles Forest, so named because its trees reminded the settlers of a dog’s hackles raised in alert. Here is where civilization is claimed from the wilderness and reclaimed again, in a seemingly never-ending cycle. Cleared woodland surrounds the towns of Kaynis and Mortilis, ripe to be exploited for further development.

The Mourfa River meanders across the domain and splits it in two, with Kaynis to the north and Mortilis to the south. Near Kaynis, the Mourfa River is where water-powered sawmills and windmills sit by the banks, channeling the stream’s flow. The river arrives from the western Mists and flows into the eastern Mists, with Farellians having no idea of where it drains or how it’s fed. They don’t need to, as the river’s always been there. The river floods often during the spring, and the Hackles forest is full of small creeks that flow into the Mourfa.

Bisecting the river and connecting the two cities is Harper’s Trail, named for one of the founders of Farelle. It is a simple dirt and gravel trail that crosses a simple packhorse bridge (creatively named Harper’s Bridge) that connects the two halves of the domain.

Farelle is also dotted with three depressions, known as “hollows”. Each one of these hollows has its own name and has been used by the Farellians or is treated with a certain amount of reverence by the Farellians or the realm’s other, non-humanoid inhabitants. Within a few of these hollows—like the Jowldowns near Kaynis—shale, sandstone, limestone, and coal beds are closer to the surface, enticing miners to dig as much as they can.

Flora

Farelle’s plant life is beautiful and quite useful to its inhabitants. Wild grapes and macadamia nuts are a common sight in the Hackles forest. The former is central to the Farellian custom of proving oneself not a hypnotized dogman by taking a swig of grape juice (before the prohibition it was grape wine), and the latter valued for the oil pressed from its nuts, which is lathered onto blades and arrowheads and shot before a hunt as an old superstition against dogmen and their kin.

The woods are thick and dark with deciduous trees, evergreens, shrubs, and thorny brushes abounding wherever one looks. Birch trees also dominate the landscape, with a unique scarlet variation existing only in Farelle and in small groves. These blood-birch trees are great sources of lumber and are used in much of Farellian furniture. They also carry a second, more ominous reputation: canids of every kind instinctively avoid groves of mature blood birch. This gives them a strange reputation among the Farellians as safe ground when traversing the many woods and thickets that define the Farellian landscape. Farellian folklore offers no shortage of explanations (that the color comes from old blood spilled between the founders and the first wild packs, or that the trees have a resin or sap that makes dogs allergic) but none have ever proven satisfactory. The wood sells for a premium regardless.

Dread Possibility: Barking at Bark

The blood-birch trees host the souls of humanoids killed by dogs in Farelle, starting with the kindly tinker that the jackal mauled to death (see the background for Jack Karn for more). This is why Farelle has far fewer ghosts than any other domain and why the dogs avoid such trees; the souls guard the living, even now.

Rhododendron and mountain laurel thickets choke the understory of the Hackles in tangled walls of leaves, especially among the stream banks & creeks that litter the forest. Farellians refer to these tangles as “hells” or “laurel hells”, as the ground is so thoroughly overgrown that neither dog nor humanoid can move through it quickly or quietly. Meanwhile, sourwood trees, with their long drooping clusters of white bell-flowers, are cultivated anywhere Farellians keep bees. Thankfully, this is everywhere, as sourwood honey is a luxury good of Farelle. A jar of dark, tangy sourwood honey is considered a proper gift between neighbors, and no wedding is complete without it. Pawpaw trees, valued for their fruit, grow in the shadier hollows near the Mourfa River, while sassafras is common along the treeline bordering Farelle’s cleared farmland. The roots of sassafras can be boiled into a local tea that the Farellians enjoy drinking at community gatherings. Some elders claim that a strong enough batch of sassafras tea will keep a dogman’s hypnotic gaze from taking hold, but this is increasingly regarded as a backwoods superstition.

Ginseng, or “sang” as the hunters call it, grows wild and scattered through the older, undisturbed hollows of the Hackles. Only the boldest “feral-folk” clans or the most desperate tame-folk prospectors bother to search for it anymore, as the best patches for a good price grow dangerously deep in the woods. Kudzu has taken hold along stretches of Harper’s Trail and around the ruins of abandoned boom towns. It smothers collapsed pit houses and the remains of failed settlements like the land itself is “going feral”. Blackberry and bramble thickets spread wildly across poorly tended farmland at the edges of the Hackles.

Finally, the land near Kaynis and Mortilis have been cleared of trees long ago and are now in use as arable farmland. The farmers have been known to grow maize, sugar cane, corn, beans, squash, and sweet potatoes. Smaller kitchen gardens producing herbs and vegetables.

Fauna

Farelle is home to many common woodland critters, such as deer, boars, rabbits, squirrels, badgers, skunks, possums, and more. However, Farelle's fauna has its own unique quirks. For one, these creatures are not as skittish to humanoids as they are elsewhere. On occasion prey may wander straight into the arms of a hunter. For another, the abundance of wild canines (which the land is best known for) affects the ease of hunting and trapping these creatures. Jackals, foxes, dingoes, coyotes, and other wild dogs freely roam the landscape and are treated as a threat by most population centers. Stories abound of dingoes mauling children or coyotes leading hunters into dangerous situations or foxes stealing trinkets.

Above the canine clamor, vultures wheel over the Hackles in slow, patient circles, Farelle's other great scavenger and the dogs' oldest rival for a carcass. Farellians take vulture activity seriously as a form of natural signage—a distant kettle of vultures marks a kill, a fight, or a body long before any courier or ranger stumbles onto the scene themselves, and "watching the birds" is a genuine, if grim, form of situational awareness on Harper's Trail. Aside from vultures, other raptors like condors, hawks, and eagles can be found in the skies above the woods. Eagles are well liked by the Farellians, who view the birds as a symbol of good fortune, freedom, and perseverance. Passerines are also common but more elusive to spot.

Farelle's smaller wildlife rounds out a hunting and herding economy built entirely around the absence of the animal every other frontier culture would rely on. Quail and wild turkey are common game in the cleared country around Kaynis; black bear are found in the deeper Hackles and treated with the same respect as anywhere else in the Mists, though Farellians consider them a lesser concern next to the dogs; and copperheads and timber rattlers are a genuine hazard for anyone foraging or sang-hunting off the beaten path.

Because Farellians keep no dogs of their own, cattle, sheep, and hogs are worked entirely by hand and horseback. Droving and herding are skilled, physically demanding trades in Farelle, and a good drover's reputation rests on the same qualities the Farellians prize in people generally: sturdy legs, a good eye and a good ear (and even a good nose) for trouble, and the stamina to outlast whatever the wilderness throws at the herd. It is one of the quieter but more telling ways Farellian culture has shaped itself around a hole where a companion animal ought to be.

DM Sidebar: The Canines of Farelle

Each canine species in Farelle has its own way of behaving that sets it apart from the others. Farellians who spend enough time on the frontier learn that "wild dog" is not one thing but many, and that a canny hunter reads the breed as carefully as the track.

Black-backs are the most openly aggressive of the Hackles' jackals, willing to bring down prey many times their size and prone to vicious infighting within their own pack—a black-back pack that turns on itself mid-hunt is a common and grimly comic sight to rangers. Meanwhile, **side stripes** are quieter and more reclusive, sticking to the deeper timber and rarely seen in open country; a side-stripe sighting near a settlement is taken as a bad omen, since it usually means something has driven them out of their usual ground. **Goldens** are the most widespread and the most wolflike in bearing, sleek and adaptable, equally at home skirting a farmstead's fence line or running the ridgelines above Harper's Trail. Most of what a city-dweller pictures when they hear "wild dog" is a golden.

Foxes hold a particular reputation in Farelle distinct from their larger cousins: they are hoarders, drawn to anything small, shiny, or strange, and prospectors half-joke (and half-believe) that a fox den is as good a place as

any to go looking for something recently lost. It is not uncommon for a fox to make off with a coin, a bauble, or—on rare and unlucky occasions—something considerably more important, dragging it back to a den deep in the Hackles where only the most determined tracker will ever find it again.

Coyotes are Farelle's great opportunists, smaller and warier than the jackal breeds, but far more willing to adapt to whatever a season throws at them. Farellians consider coyotes the most cunning of the wild dogs, less prone to outright aggression than the black-backs, but far more likely to lead a careless traveler astray; a story about a hunter following what looked like an easy coyote trail straight into a bog, a laurel hell, or a rival pack's territory is one of the most common cautionary tales told to rangers. Coyotes rarely fight a losing battle when they can simply outlast one instead, which makes them a frustrating quarry for Farellian hunting parties like the Putdowners.

Dingoes run in tighter, more disciplined packs than any other canid in Farelle, with a clear hierarchy and a hunting style built around coordination rather than raw aggression. Where a black-back pack might turn on itself mid-hunt, a dingo pack rarely breaks formation, which makes them Farelle's most feared pack predator despite being, individually, no larger than a golden jackal. Dingoes are also the canid most associated with livestock losses on the farmland ringing Kaynis and Mortilis, and a rancher who's lost several heads to a single pack over a season will often speak of "his" dingoes the way another might speak of a recurring rival; with a strange, begrudging respect mixed in with the hatred.

"Wild dogs" (feral mixed-breed strays) make up the catch-all bottom rung of Farelle's canine population. They're the least predictable of the bunch precisely because they don't follow any single breed's instincts, and rangers generally agree that a stray pack of wild dogs is more dangerous to underestimate than a black-back pack is to overestimate. Farellians view them with a particular contempt reserved for anything that seems to have no proper place in the natural order.

Seasons & Weather

Farelle experiences four distinct seasons throughout the year. Unlike most domains of the Core or the Southern Core, its calendar is dictated just as much by the rhythm of its dogs as it is the crop cycles. Farellians plan their year around the canine population as much as they do the harvest, and the two have become so intertwined in the popular imagination that locals will often describe a season by what the dogs are doing rather than what the weather is doing.

Spring is known as "The Wakening", for as the frosts break, the wild dog population of the Hackles stirs from its long dormancy, starved, disoriented, and quick to reclaim territory that shifted hands over the winter. Packs that denned together may emerge as rivals; lone dogs that survived the cold alone are often the most dangerous, having gone half-feral from isolation. Farellians call this stretch of unpredictable violence the Wakening, and it is considered bad luck to travel Harper's Trail alone during the first weeks of spring. This is also when the various boomtowns of Farelle reopen for the season. Prospectors and settlers who wintered in Kaynis or Mortilis push back out into the Hackles to take back land, rebuild palisades, and take stock of what the wild reclaimed while they were gone. It is not unusual for a settlement to find its outer buildings half-collapsed, overgrown, or repurposed as a den for canids. The spring season is otherwise beautiful, with the flowering of dogwoods and the choir of frogs in the mornings and evenings.

Spring is followed by the season of summer—or as Farellians call it, "the Long Light". It is dry, bright, and unrelenting. The sun sits high for long stretches of the day, and the shade of the Hackles becomes a precious commodity for travelers on the road. Dust storms are common in the flatter grasslands around Kaynis, and the deeper forest floor turns to tinder—wildfires, whether natural or set by careless prospectors burning off scrub, are a genuine seasonal hazard, and a fire that starts in the Hackles can travel far enough before anyone in either city

notices the smoke. The dogs are at their most visible this time of year, hunting in the cool of the early morning and late evening and lying low through the heat of the day. Farellians consider this the safest season to travel, if also the most exhausting one.

Autumn is the season Farellians fear most (going as far as to call it “The Reckoning”) and the one around which the rest of the year is organized. As the harvest comes in, every hand in Kaynis and Mortilis is needed for fieldwork, mining quotas, and preparing for winter. This means the roads between settlements go undermanned precisely when the dogs are most aggressive, fattening themselves up before the cold. Couriers, escorts, and rangers are in higher demand (and command higher pay) during the Reckoning than at any other time of year, and it is not uncommon for a boom town to live or die based on whether it can get its goods to market before the season turns. The name carries a second meaning as well: autumn is when Farellians take stock of the year's fortunes and failures, and misfortune suffered during the Reckoning is judged more harshly than misfortune at any other time. A family that goes hungry, a claim that runs dry, or a settlement that fails to bring in its harvest before the first hard frost are quietly read as evidence of insufficient grit, never simply bad luck. The beloved tinkerer and local celebrity Jack Karn is said to be at his most active during the Reckoning, appearing in towns to trade, tinker, and provide the locals with unsolicited advice. Some old-timers whisper that he times his visits to whichever settlement is closest to failing that year. The Farellians figure that Jack, despite his grumpy nature, wants to help whichever settlement is falling on hard times. In truth, Jack has noticed that the humanoids of his domain suffer most in this season, and tries to find joy in their suffering. Despite all of this, autumns are spectacular and full of color as the deciduous trees turn from green to bold reds, oranges, and purples. And the cooler air in the mornings and evenings is a welcome respite from the blazing heat of summer.

Winter is known as “the Long Denning.” Farelle’s canids—jackals, foxes, dingoes, coyotes, and the mysterious “dogmen” alike—hibernate through the winter months. Dens are dug deep into hillsides and riverbanks throughout the Hackles, and for a few months out of the year, the roads are safer than at any other point in the cycle. Farellians consider the Long Denning a welcome reprieve and the closest thing their calendar has to a season of rest; it's the one time of year a solo traveler might cross Harper's Trail without an escort and reasonably expect to arrive. The Long Denning is restful only because the dogs sleep. The winters are mild by most measures, but damp, and ice storms and freezing rain kill the old, the sick, and anyone caught on the road without shelter. The Farellians call the season restful anyway, as the dogs are far from their children and they have only their loved ones for company. “Cabin fever” seems curiously absent from Farellian culture, and the time in winter is spent singing songs and telling tales to one another by a warm fire. Moreover, it is a good time to conceive children. Of course, this is only if one’s larder is full from the Reckoning. A family that failed to bring in its harvest before the first hard frost now lives on the generosity (and credit) from neighbors or on nothing at all. Should a Farellian starve, they will regardless endeavor to not be cowards about it. A winter death from hunger is rarely called bad luck, either. It is read as the Reckoning's verdict arriving late, and it is impolite to acknowledge it.

The Long Denning is Jack Karn's least favorite season by a wide margin. His temper is said to sour visibly as the cold sets in, and locals who deal with him during the winter months know to expect a shorter fuse and fewer of his usual eccentric affectations & quirks. Most assume it's simply the cold getting to him, same as anyone; none of them know that winter strips him of the one thing that makes his exile bearable: company, however, begrudging, among his own kind. Furthermore, the Jackal Who Would Not Be A Coward met the tinkerer in the winter, so it reminds him of how he ended up here.

DM Sidebar: Where'd the Dogs Go?

Consider using the Long Denning as a season for adventures that have nothing to do with dogs at all precisely because the domain's signature threat is dormant. A feral cannibal clan grown bold with the roads emptied of canine competition, a scavenging expedition into a ruin normally too well guarded by wild dogs to approach, for instance, can be run during this season. The absence of barking is its own kind of unsettling once a party has spent enough time in Farelle to expect it.

Native Horrors

Farellian folklore holds strange variants of dogs that prowl the woods of the Hackles. **Death dogs**, **yeth hounds**, **hell hounds**, and **shadow mastiffs** are a frequent subject of tall tales and speculation whenever disaster may strike a community, especially in the later seasons, and tend to arise whenever a Farellian funerary custom—that involving the **grim**—goes wrong.

Aside from the dogs, the greatest horrors in Farelle are the "dogmen"---strange canines that can walk on two legs and move like humanoids. In truth, "dogmen" is the term Farellians use for jackalweres, such as those descended from Jack Karn and those from outside Farelle. The dogmen are said to lurk in the Hackles and prey upon travelers or those who leave the confines of civilized space. Thankfully, the rapid development of Kaynis and Mortilis means that the dogmen are a problem for the boom towns that spring up in the Hackles and the isolated travelers who cross it. Thus, the best solution is to not leave the city. Barring that, the second-best solution is to carry your best and most advanced weaponry on you, along with some macadamia-nut extract to lather onto your weapon. Furthermore, it is said by the elders that some of the dogmen can disguise themselves as townsfolk and put people to sleep with their hypnotic gaze. To figure out who's who, the Farellians have learned to enjoy grape juice and challenge one another to drink a swig when they're feeling suspicious. Grapes are poisonous to the domain's canines, and the belief holds that this extends to the dogmen. Fortunately for the Farellians, they are (mostly) correct.

Otherwise, there are no other lycanthropes or shapeshifting beasts in the Farellian public consciousness. Other creatures, like the undead, are quite rare but not unheard of—stories of ghosts or snout-faced ghouls are common ways for youth to scare one another by a campfire. Despite this, Farelle does not suffer from the traditional monsters of gothic horror found in other domains. They instead suffer from canines and canine-adjacent beasts.

Dread Possibility: Hunting Ground

Jack Karn, Darklord of Farelle, is a highly territorial creature. Because of this, he takes great pleasure in hunting down any non-jackalwere monster that takes up residence in Farelle, as well as any rebellious progeny he has. Killing lycanthropes or shapeshifters gives him an excellent way to vent his stress and frustration at being around so many detestable humanoids for so long.

DM Sidebar: Proving Ground

Because Farelle's main threats are so low-level in scale, Farelle can be an excellent place for fledgling adventurers to start gaining experience in hunting the creatures of the night. Organizations like the Van Richten Society may have aspiring members or affiliated monster-hunters get their start in Farelle before moving onto tougher grounds. Though Jack Karn hates and fears the prospect of organized hunting parties coming after him specifically, he's found ways to use his amicable guise to point adventurers towards rebellious offspring or in the direction of infestations of undead that he doesn't have time or the desire to cull himself (or the threats he's too weak to handle alone, loathe as he is to admit this). So long as those groups don't ever figure out where those jackalweres all came from, he's begrudgingly fine with the arrangement.

DM Sidebar: The Jackalweres of Farelle

Jackalweres are rare in Farelle, with numbers between 15 and 25 existing on average throughout the land. Nearly all descend from Jack Karn, and he kills any that gather power. As a result, they have never formed a society completely parallel to

humanity's and their population is kept in much greater control than it otherwise could be.

A den of jackalweres consists of a mother (almost always a jackal) and her litter, as opposed to an entire pack. Most litters do not survive. Either Jack kills them, they kill one another in competition, or Farellian hunters kill them.

Frustratingly to Jack, most jackalweres descended from him are quite cowardly. They prefer to hide and scheme than fight. For this reason, there are three attitudes they take towards their progenitor.

- **Hiders** blend into human life and only want to be left alone. They believe themselves to be more than animals and wish to be on what they see as the "winning side" of the struggle between nature and civilization. A practiced Hider can withstand imbibing grape juice or grape extract by faking the reaction. The chemicals cause illness in human form but are lethally poisonous in hybrid form. Additionally, since Hiders live among townsfolk year-round, they have found ways to stave off suspicion for their need to hibernate. They do so by saying they are quite bedridden and rely on the kindness of their neighbors to leave soup at their porches. Some in human form have found the strength to resist fully hibernating, becoming merely lethargic instead.
- **Rebels** seek to supplant Jack. They are disgusted by their spineless kin and believe their progenitor is a weakling who rolls over and wags his tail for humanoid masters. He has forsaken the wilds and murders his own kind on a whim, no matter how much he denies that he is like them. Had he let the jackalweres thrive, as the Rebels assert, Farelle would be under their control.
- **Informers** trade their kin to Jack for safety. They are how Jack finds "rebellious progeny" so easily. They do this to curry favor with Jack, telling their own version of the Jack Tales where he is the great beast that will bring balance to this land. Though Jack finds them useful, he is also utterly disgusted by their cowardice. It reminds him of the animals that sold him out to King Crocodile from his past. As such, he has a tenuous relationship to the informers. They are useful but they must give him more information if their lives are to be spared. Because of their cowardly tendencies, they are hated by Hiders and Rebels alike.

Toward humans, the jackaleweres favor prey nobody will miss. Exiles and feral-folk are the ideal victims, since nobody investigates when they vanish. Otherwise, the jackalweres prefer to pass themselves as humans among the tame-folk. As a form of mischief, they may accuse others of being dogmen in disguise, and take joy in the scapegoating. If a human is deemed feral and banished for it, all the better.

If a jackalwere mates with a jackal, the offspring has a 50/50 chance of either being a jackal or a jackalwere. If a jackalwere mates with a human, the offspring has a 50/25/25 chance of being either a normal human, a quevari, or a jackalwere. There have been cases where a jackalwere is outed as a dogman by humanoid society, and their progeny are either exiled or lynched by the community.

More information about the jackalweres of Farelle can be found in the New Monsters section.

The Folk

Populace

Farelle's population centers on its two cities, Kaynis and Mortilis, each numbering in the low thousands and growing unevenly with every fresh boom. Aside from these two metropoles, the domain consists of boom-town prospectors & settlers, frontier villagers, and the various feral-folk clans of the Hackles who operate outside these cities' jurisdictions. Despite its short, compressed history, Farelle has become surprisingly cosmopolitan: painters and singers mingle in Kaynis's streets alongside Nosian mining overseers and the occasional Zherisian settler. It is not unusual for a Farellian home to be furnished with Dementlieuse chairs and Pharazian rugs bought off

some traveling merchant's cart. Farellians extend the same easy hospitality to all of them, secure in the underlying assumption that foreigners, however welcome, are only ever passing through.

The sharper line in Farellian society isn't drawn between natives and foreigners so much as between “tame-folk” and “feral-folk”. This distinction has less to do with where someone was born than with whether they've kept pace with the domain's relentless march of progress. Tame-folk fill Kaynis and Mortilis and the boom towns still riding a good season. Feral-folk, by contrast, are everyone the cities have written off. They range from isolationists like the people of Archer's Snarl, through loners like Old Ren, to predators like the Muttlow clan. The label measures distance from progress and says little about behavior, which is why the people it describes resent it. Quiet neighbors who keep to the old ways are called feral in the same breath as cannibals.

A Farellian “becomes” feral in one of three ways. First, the elder council declares them to be so, thus exiling them for a serious crime like grave-robbing, murder, or worse. Second, they may be deemed feral by degenerating in their mindset. This is much more subjective, as not every boom-town survivor who fails to return to the cities has lost their reason or their civility. Likewise for families who have fallen on hard times and are forced to rely on scraps to survive. These also tie into the third way of being labeled feral: the descendants of such families or survivors may make their own clans that never joined the Farellian project of civilization, and are thus named feral-in-blood by those who did.

Finally, tame-folk call themselves *hearthfolk*, a name that speaks of a fire, a roof, and a settled house. Feral-folk call themselves the *Unbroken*, in a pointed answer to the idea that a person can be broken in like livestock or some sort of pet. While the tame-folk call others wild, rabid, or (at worst) feral, the Unbroken call the tame-folk "spayed-folk" or "neutered."

DM Sidebar: Homicidal Homeland

Farelle and its forests are the homeland of a particular strain of the quevari. These quevari are born from the mating of jackalweres with humans. They have existed in Farelle since the early years of the domain, with them being considered a curse on communities by the dog-men. Feral in heart and mind but human in body, they are responsible for frontier towns descending into paranoia and carnage on nights of the full moon, taking honest and kind citizens by surprise with their savagery.

These Farellian quevari have unique abilities, such as a sort of animal-sympathy that affects the canines of Farelle. Because of this, they are able to own and domesticate the dogs of the land. When the full moon (known to quevari and Farellians alike as the blood moon) rises, the canids aid the quevari in hunting for sport and the most dangerous game.

These Farellian quevari are hated on all sides. The jackalwere progeny of Jack Karn view them as abominations (like how their progenitor views them as abominations). The quevari tend to target the feral-folk as they are exiled from larger communities and left to fend for themselves in the Hackles. Tame-folk view the quevari as the epitome of what “going feral” looks like and why the wilds must be tamed. And Jack Karn views the quevari as the natural state of being for humans. He despises them but finds them a deliciously ironic and useful tool.

It was the tame-folk’s animosity towards the quevari, facilitated and built up by jackalwere Hiders, which led to the Quelling of 715 BC. Afterwards, quevari passed into the realm of tall tales and legends, as they were assumed to be massacred.

Those quevari of Falkovnia and Hazlan who have heard stories of Farelle may believe Farelle to be their homeland as well—a notion that Mrs. Beverly, leader of the remaining Farellian quevari, does not discourage them from believing. Additionally, quevari that were not born of jackalweres existed in Farelle prior to the rise of the Farellian quevari—the Dark Powers found it entertaining to stock the land with quevari in its early years. Those original quevari interbred with Farellian quevari (born of

jackalweres) and the former's population numbers lessened while the latter's grew.

When the Farellian quevari have no foreigners to feed upon during the rising of the blood moon, they slake their bloodlust by hunting feral-folk communities in the Hackles and the occasional dogman.

Not every quevari is lost to the blood moon. The half-quevari, born of a quevari and an ordinary human, carry a thinned measure of both the jackalwere blood and the mental lycanthropy that afflicts their kin. When the moon rises red, they feel it but are able to resist its pull (with a DC 14 Wisdom Saving Throw, on which they have advantage). They pace, sleep badly, and cannot stand to be indoors, and many quietly leave for "hunting trips" on such nights, so no one sees them struggle. The dogs tolerate them but do not obey them, and the consumption of grapes, which has no effect on a body that is wholly human, clears them in the eyes of suspicious townsfolk without question (as they are looking for the wrong threat).

Appearance & Fashion

Farellian fashion reads, to most outsiders, like a frontier town's Sunday best crossed with whatever a boom town could afford that season. Clothing here serves the same social function as a family's technology does: it announces, whether the wearer intends it or not, exactly how well their household is currently doing.

In Kaynis and Mortilis, those flush with a good boom cycle dress the part, donning tailored coats and polished boots. They also like to wear imported fabrics from other domains and take their cues from what's in style over there. Cotton, once Kaynis's economic backbone, remains a point of local pride worked into everyday clothing long after coal took over the ledgers. Prospectors freshly rich off a claim tend to overdress for their surroundings, and Farellians have a whole vocabulary of polite, needling commentary for this sort of gaudy new-money behavior.

Meanwhile, the frontier and rural fashion believe strongly in practicality winning over polish. Weathered leather is still sturdy and can stand the mud and overgrowth of the Hackles. Homespun cloth can still keep one warm at night and survive a hard day's work, which is more important than looking the part of a hard worker. To tell the difference between a rural family that's struggling but managing, versus one that's gone feral, one needs only see if it's patched and clean, or if it has become ragged or too well worn to be worn at all. The latter tells one immediately if that family (or more broadly, that settlement) has given into the slide of barbarity or not.

Finally, Farellians place a fair amount of pride in their "good grooming," as well as in their physical endurance and bearing. Practical, low-maintenance hairstyles dominate among working folk of both cities and countryside, while city elites have more room to indulge in the elaborate styling fashionable in Zherisia or Nosos—though even here, a Farellian who spends too visibly long on their appearance risks the same quiet suspicion reserved for anyone who seems to be avoiding real work.

Lifestyle & Education

Farellian life is organized around the relentless demand for labor that keeps the economy running, as well as the ever-present threat of the wilderness just beyond the farmland's edge. Children are put to useful work early and often, perhaps by running errands between neighbors or minding the family plot. By their early teenage years, they begin to apprentice into a trade outright. It is not unusual for a Farellian to have left their parent's household by fourteen or fifteen to make their own way through life. This works for the Farellians, especially when considering the high fertility rate of the population. The people attribute this to the hard work needing many hands, and large families are the norm. A household with only one or two children is considered unlucky rather than just small. The abundance is offset by a higher infant and childhood mortality rate than Farellians like to discuss openly; between disease, farm accidents, and the risk of a toddler being snatched by a jackal, not every child born in Farelle is expected to survive to

apprenticeship age. Losing a child is expected but never spoken of, and the stigma depends on how. A child lost to sickness or a farm accident is "a hard bone." No one blames the family, and neighbors help without words, by mending fences and cutting firewood. A child taken by a jackal near the treeline leaves resentment. Vigilance for the children is supposed to be communal, thus its failure implies someone was not doing their job and watching.

Formal schooling exists but is modest and practical, usually handled by a (typically female) schoolteacher in each major settlement. The schoolmarm teaches basic literacy and arithmetic to children too young yet for apprenticeship work. Farellian education places far more weight on oral instruction and hands-on work than in writing. Children learn their trade by shadowing a parent or master and learn their culture's values by sitting close enough to the fire pit to hear the Jack Tales retold for the hundredth time. A Farellian who can't read is not a fool, but a Farellian who doesn't know the old stories or can't hold their own in a calling contest is a fool and a failure of a Farellian indeed.

Farellian families take their lineages seriously, tracing bloodlines back as many generations as memory allows. It is not uncommon for a prominent family to be known as much by its ancestry as by its current members. The Cuju Family is a good example of this, for better and for worse. Farellians speak of a good family line with the term "pedigree", which may strike foreigners as bizarre and pretentious in equal measure.

Farellian families are matriarchal. Lineage, name, and property pass through the mother, and a family's matriarch—its eldest living woman—holds the household purse, arranges apprenticeships, and has the last word on who may marry into the line. Farellians say a pedigree is traced "by the dam," which strikes foreigners as either quaint or insulting. The custom has a hard practical logic. Hunters, miners, rangers, and mailmen die young, and women outlive them, so the house and the name are kept by the person most likely to be alive to keep them. A matriarch who is not the eldest is unusual, and a young matriarch is a sign of a family that has lost too many of its women. Matriarchy governs the household more than the public offices. Mayors and sheriffs are elected and are usually men, but they hold office on a matriarch's word, and the elder councils, where age counts most, are made up mostly of women. A man may have a name and a trade, but it is her family's name he carries.

Courtship happens on the porch. A suitor calls at the girl's family porch in the evenings, loudly and in plain view, and the matriarch watches. "Sent back to the porch," is what Farellians say of a rejected suitor. A match that wins the matriarch's word is sealed with a wedding swig: the couple drinks grape juice before the whole gathering, so the community can see that neither is a dogman. A wedding is not complete without sourwood honey. The husband takes his wife's family name and moves into her household. Sons are apprenticed out and marry out, and the family name stays with the women. It is the only real path to belonging, because a foreigner who marries in is no longer a guest. Divorce is rare, and is settled by the matriarch. A husband who leaves has gone "off the leash." A widow remarries quickly, since a house needs hands.

DM Sidebar: Marrying In

A PC who wins a matriarch's word is welcomed as family, and gains the permanence that Farelle otherwise denies foreigners. A feral suitor gets no such welcome, which is the problem Tammy Beverly hopes to solve by bringing a tame-folk husband to Grover's Tooth. Under matrilineal custom he would take her name and live in her clan.

Farellian leisure tends towards physical, competitive, and communal pastimes. Fetch-races test a runner's endurance and their 'sturdy legs' are enjoyed in equal measure as are hide-and-seek variants played by both children and adults. Calling contests are a good test of one's voice by seeing who can be heard loudest and clearest across the farthest distance. Boxing matches draw a crowd whenever the calendar allows for a free evening. Leather gloves are used in the cities but bare-knuckle is preferred in outlying villages.

Farellian cooking is built on what the farmland and the forest give. Cornbread, beans, squash, and sweet potatoes fill most plates, and cane syrup and

sourwood honey do the sweetening. Pawpaws, blackberries, and wild grapes come from the woods. Game is common, from quail, wild turkey, and venison to boar, and cattle, sheep, and hogs are worked by hand and butchered for the winter. Meat is smoked, salted, and cured in the Reckoning, and how well a household's larder is stocked is its report card. A family with a full cellar in the Long Denning is judged well, and an empty one is not spoken of.

The one meat no Farellian will eat is dog meat. It is not a matter of law but of instinct, and the thought of it is enough to turn a stomach. Grape juice and sassafras tea are the everyday drinks, and macadamia nuts turn up in bread and oil, though most Farellians would tell you the oil is for blades. Moonshine is drunk in Mortilis behind closed doors, while it is still allowed in Kaynis. A guest is always fed before anything is asked of them, and sharing a meal is how an agreement is sealed, which is where the phrase "bury the bone" comes from. Kaynis's boom has brought Nosian canned foodstuffs (as they cannot always be called goods) and imported spices from Zherisia (who in turn get said spices from the Colonial Merchant Company's endeavors in Sri Raji and other domains), and Staunton's beef, dairy, and peat arrive by the Dog's Walk.

Farellian music is loud. Songs are made to travel, like the speech, and are sung at full voice across fields and hollows. Calling contests are the domain's musical competitions, and a good caller is admired the way a fiddler is elsewhere. Songs are kept by memory and carried by the fire pit. There are work songs sung to the ring of an anvil or the swing of a pick, ballads about mailmen and their near misses, murder ballads, and the Jack Tales set to verse, each one sung differently in every settlement. Kayn is honored in Kaynis's folk songs and Mort in Mortilis's, and the two cities disagree about which of them was the superior founder.

Fiddles, banjos, and mouth harps are the common instruments, with accordions arriving from Zherisia and Kartakan singers performing in Kaynis for those who can afford them. A soft lullaby is suspect in a domain where hushed speech means hiding something, so mothers sing to their children loudly and cheerfully. No Farellian song imitates a howl, and a singer who lets one slip is quietly corrected. Funeral songs are the loudest of all, since the dead are sent off with stories told at volume.

The dogmen are elusive and cowardly, preferring either to hunt in packs (to maximize the advantage of numbers) alongside other canines or to hunt alone and carefully pick their targets—typically the young, the elderly, the sick, or the lost. Because of this, Farellian society does its best to take extra care of those at risk. Children are rarely left unsupervised near the treeline and the elderly are looked in on regularly by neighbors as much as their own family. The community always takes care to help those who seem sick or lost as well. This vigilance is dressed up in practical, unsentimental language (nobody wants to be caught admitting they're afraid), but it functions, in effect, as one of the more genuinely compassionate threads running through Farellian daily life.

DM Sidebar: The March of Progress (and Schizo-Tech)

Within a scant 160 years, the Farellians went from living in pit dwellings and relying on Stone Age tools to steam power, widespread firearms, and industrial mining equipment. This rate of technological change is so dizzying that it has outpaced the domain's ability to standardize it. A Kaynis household flush from this season's coal quota might own a steam-driven pump, a repeating rifle, and glass windowpanes, while their neighbors two doors down might still draw water by hand and cook over an open hearth in a half-sunken pit houses their grandparents built. This is because much of Farelle's rapid advancement is owed to scavenging and imports rather than to homegrown innovation. The domain's compressed and repeatedly interrupted history means that many sites in the Hackles have been settled, abandoned, and resettled multiple times over, as prospectors and settlers moving into the same ground their predecessors gave up on and build new structures out of whatever the last attempt left behind. The result is a domain full of architecture that doesn't quite match itself: a mismatched wall of scavenged brick and blood-birch lumber, a room clearly older and better built than

the structure around it, a mining tunnel that connects to passages no living Farellian remembers digging. Locals rarely think twice about it. To a Farellian, a building made of three generations' worth of leftover material is just how things get built out here.

Farellians take their cues on progress mostly from Nosos and Zherisia, and it shows: refineries, steam-powered mining equipment, repeating firearms, and rudimentary rail spurs connecting the richer mining claims to Kaynis proper are the visible markers of a family or settlement that's "made it." Swords, bows, and other pre-firearm weaponry are regarded as the way a modern city-dweller might regard a horse-and-buggy on a highway: not unheard of, and certainly not without their uses out on the frontier, but a clear, visible sign that whoever's carrying one hasn't kept pace with the rest of the world. A Farellian townsfolk seeing a party of adventurers walk into Kaynis armed with blades and bows rather than rifles is liable to ask, not unkindly, whether they're new in town or simply can't afford better. Either answer will color how seriously the town takes them. This attitude is further reflected in the Outlooks and Beliefs of the Farellians.

Attitudes Towards Magic

Thanks to the rapid technological advancements of the domain, magic is viewed as a thing of folklore and olden days at best. At worst, magic is viewed with contempt as “the coward’s tool” compared to a pistol or even a blade. The forward-facing mindset of the Farellian people causes them to look at magic as a primitive reminder of the dark days before civilization, when Farellians hid in their huts and cowered at the sound of howls in the night. They are not that people anymore and are determined to prove they do not need the mementoes of that time. Magicians are regarded as “simple” people, as the true test of a person’s intelligence is in how they use the technology they have at hand.

Dread Possibility: The Tools at Hand

Though the above is the main attitude towards magic most Farellians possess, there are a few who believe magic itself is a tool. One that can either be wielded by itself to do wonders or that can be married with current technology to create something greater. One that can, with great power, be used courageously.

Such is the mindset of Geary Pendergast—a former tinkerer of Kaynis. Though finding and tinkering with scavenged materials is a reputable Farellian profession, Geary was outcompeted by other tinkerers like Evan Eberline and the famous Jack Karn. Frustrated, Geary tried his luck in the Hackles, taking his family with him to found a new settlement named Drilfis. He found magical items like *goggles of night* and an *alchemy jar* within the ruins, left behind by whoever had once squatted there. He became intrigued by the potential magical items had to offer, and wished to learn how he could enchant items and make them himself. He came upon a workshop and learned the settlement was once occupied by Outlander adventurers who needed a place to stay before venturing further into the Mists. From their notes, he learned how to become an artificer himself. Good fortune graced him further when he came across another Outlander named Erix Riston. Together, the two struck up a partnership of finding items that can be made magical. They were then joined by other feral-folk looking for a place to stay.

Attitudes Towards Non-Humans

The warmth of the domain’s people includes even those not considered people in other domains. The Farellians find non-humans interesting and have no deep-seated prejudices against them. In fact, a non-human foreigner might be more readily trusted than a human foreigner—it is said that dogmen can only take the shape of other Farellians.

However, a non-human foreigner is still considered a foreigner, and while the Farellians are willing to have as many guests as they can handle, the underlying assumption is that at some point (perhaps days or weeks or months), those guests go back to their homes. It is hard to be considered a permanent

resident of Farelle, as opposed to being an extended visitor.

Strangely, Vistani are not found in Farelle and seem to avoid this domain. This is due to the Vistani and Jack Karn having a history (see Jack Karn—Background for more).

History

Farellian history is short by the standards of most domains. The Farellians themselves do not dwell on their rapid civilizational advancement—going from a near Stone Age society to approaching Paridon and Nosos—and rarely speak of events that occurred prior to the domain's formation in 597 BC. Half-garbled folklore (the Jack Tales) and founding legends, told differently in each town, are the closest one gets to anything resembling a comprehensible historical record. Major historical events that occurred before or afterwards are also rarely spoken of in passing, with only a few exceptions, listed below.

The Founding of Farelle (circa 597–605 BC).

Farelle's origin story is one nearly every Farellian knows, in one telling or another: four people—the brothers Kayn and Mort, sons of Cuj, and their respective wives, Elle and Harper, who were sisters themselves—grew tired of a life spent hiding in their pit dwellings and fearing the wild dogs that ruled the dark, and set out following the brightest constellation in the sky in search of better land. Guided by Harper, the quartet crossed the great forest (later known as the Hackles) and the great river (later known as the Mourfa, named after one of Kayn's sons) and found open, arable ground on the other side. Kayn found it first, and the settlement that followed took his name.

It was here that Elle Cuju made the discovery that would define and doom the family: she learned to tame the wild dogs of the land, and for a time, the dogs listened to her, and treated her companions with something like affection. Farellian folklore remembers this as the domain's only true age of peace, brief as it was. Resentful of playing second to Kayn and Elle, Mort and Harper fell in with a stranger encountered in the woods, an unrecognized wild man calling himself "Jack", who urged Harper to attempt what Elle had done. She could not. Elle intervened to save her sister-in-law and was killed by the very pack she had tamed, in full view of her husband. Kayn buried Elle's bones, banished his brother and Harper, and the family split for good. Kayn's followers became the Kaynisians of Kaynis; Mort and Harper's followers returned southeast across the Mourfa to become the Mortilisians of Mortilis. Both branches, in their own telling, named the new land after the woman they'd lost—"fair Elle," worn down over generations into Farelle. The name has since accreted other meanings besides: some hear "Good Land" in it, some a wry claim that Farelle is "far from hell," and a few, less fondly, note how close it sits to the word "feral."

The Sunrise Years (605-640 BC).

Farellians rarely speak of the years just after the Founding. When they do, they call them the sunrise years, because nothing before or since has felt so quick. In the time it took a child to grow old, the people who had crossed the Hackles in fear of the dark became smiths, masons, and millwrights. Bronze gave way to iron, and iron to steel, as scavenged tools from ruins were copied badly at first and then very well. Timber halls gave way to stone-footed ones, and the pit dwellings that had sheltered the Founding Four were left to the kudzu. Kaynis and Mortilis grew walls and markets. Guilds of smiths and coopers arose and the first mills turned on the Mourfa. Men began to wear mail and quilted armor, to carry swords and crossbows, and to argue over who had the better claim to the founders' blood, which is where the Farellian habit of speaking of "pedigree" seems to come from. No one wrote it down. It survives in songs about the ring of the first anvils, and in the Jack Tales, where a stranger with a cart is always turning up at the moment somebody's forge goes cold. The Farellians look back on these years as proof of what they can do when they refuse to be cowards, and rarely ask how much of it was the result of their own efforts as opposed to being lucky and building on others' work.

The Sunrise Years also produced the first Farellians to be left behind. Some families would not leave their pit dwellings or take up the new iron, and the

cities called them the pit-folk until the word "feral" replaced it. The word itself had been coined for the pack that killed Elle, dogs she had tamed who went wild again, and it was first spoken of people when Kayn banished his brother and Harper. It had no formal meaning until c. 622 BC, when a man named Grover was declared feral by the elders and driven into the Hackles. His family settled on a ridge that became Grover's Tooth. Every clan that followed him, whether banished, forsaken, or holding out, has been judged by the same standard: not how they behave, but how far they have fallen behind.

The First Ruin (605 BC).

Within a generation of settling the far bank of the Mourfa, Kayn's people dug into a hollow and found a sealed workshop of steel tools none of them could name. They learned to use the tools long before they learned what they were, and in a single lifetime the Farellians put down their stone. Nobody recorded who had left the workshop, or why they had left it sealed.

Not long after, Mortilis found their own strange ruin—chests full of armor and rudimentary drawings explaining concepts of kettles that could make steam (aeolipiles) and large trees made by men that made grain (windmills).

The Twin Cities (610-660 BC)

For its first half-century, Mortilis was every bit the equal of Kaynis. Its Timber Charter gave the guilds sole right to fell the Hackles' great trees, and blood-birch furniture from Mortilis workshops furnished the finer houses of both cities. Around 650 BC the Cuju family founded the Mint, and Mortilis began striking the Howlers, Growlers, Yippers, and Barkers that the whole domain used, so that Kaynis counted its cotton fortune in Mortilis coins. Where Kaynis had its Exchange, Mortilis had its Mint. Visitors could not have said which city would come out ahead.

Neither city won those years, because Jack was making sure neither could. He carried gossip between the Kaynis Exchange and the Mortilis guild halls, mended the mill of whichever city was falling behind, and let slip which charter or shipment the other side was planning. A united Farelle could have organized against the dogs and the Hackles, and two cities at each other's throats never would. Nobody remembers who kept the balance but everyone remembers that it held.

The Golden Age of Cotton (640-660 BC).

Kaynis came out of the Sunrise Years with cleared farmland, iron tools, and no obvious way to turn either into wealth, until the Cuju family found that cotton grown on the cleared ground sold well to every caravan that passed through on Harper's Trail. Within a generation the fields ran from the Mourfa's north bank to the treeline, and Kayn's own descendants were the ones who owned most of them. A rough trading post by the river grew into a proper exchange floor, and its bell, cast from scavenged bronze, called the pickers in from the fields and the buyers in from the road. Kaynisians of the Golden Age wore their first tailored coats, built their first stone-footed houses beyond the guild halls, and started the habit of measuring a household by what it owned. The wealth was real, and it was the first time Farelle had produced more than it needed to survive.

As the Kaynis Cuju family grew rich, they bound their workers with debt. Tenants and miners were paid in credit at the family store, and the credit was never quite enough. Families that could not pay were "bonded" to the land or the mine until the debt was cleared, and some passed the debt to their children. This made the Kayn branch increasingly unpopular with the Kaynisians.

The Kaynis Riots (660 BC).

A century before the present day, the Kaynis branch of the Cuju family was wiped out by mobs of their own townsfolk. The official reasons vary depending on who's telling it: cruelty toward the cotton pickers under their employ is the most agreed-upon story, but others allege that the Kaynis family associated themselves with dogmen and sacrificed citizens of Kaynis to the dogmen as a sort of lottery. Whatever the truth, no descendant of Kayn Cuju's line remains in Kaynis today. The city still honors Kayn himself in its folk songs, but speaks of his descendants (and of

Mort's line in Mortilis) with a wariness that has never quite faded.

The Riots had a spark, and the spark had a peddler. Weeks before the mobs formed, a stranger with a cart mended the Kaynis pumps and the miners' lamps and told anyone who would listen that the Kaynis Cujus were feeding citizens to the dogmen in a lottery. The story has no basis and it never went away. It is the reason the official accounts disagree, and the only version that survived in the Mortilis Cuju records. Jack wanted the line of Kayn and Elle ended, because Elle's gift was the only thing in Farelle that had ever taken the dogs from him.

The Guild Years (660-715 BC).

When Kaynis's mobs killed its Cujus, the Mortilis branch drew the lesson that a family that gives way is destroyed. It gave the guilds more power in exchange for loyalty, and closed the trades to outsiders. Apprenticeships were restricted to guild families, and new mills required a charter that the Cuju family could grant or withhold. Kaynis reformed and grew, while Mortilis kept things as they were and called it stability. It worked well enough to make the city rich and dull, and the neighbors on the northwestern banks stopped being compared to it.

The Riding Committees (672 BC).

After the Cujus fell, the new authority of Kaynis (under the Lasley family) formed volunteer riding committees to keep order, and the first job was hunting down bonded families who fled into the Hackles. The committees kept the habit of hunting people long after the reason had passed, and by the time of the Quelling they had a method, a muster roll, and a taste for it. It is said that the Putdowners are their heirs in all but name.

The Palisade Line (685 BC).

Disgruntled farmers and workers of Kaynis raised a long palisade along the treeline to keep the canids out of the farmland. It cost a generation of labor and failed within a decade, since dogs go under and around and the forest reclaimed the timber. Kudzu covers what is left. Farellians still say they are "walking the line" when they check on their responsibilities, and few remember it was ever there.

The Muzzle-Loaders (690 BC).

The Riding Committees' first firearms were scavenged, mismatched, and often more dangerous to the shooter than the target. But the saltpeter caves under the Jowldowns gave the Farellians powder, and within a decade the committees had guns made in Kaynis workshops that nobody could quite say were copied from anything. The Quelling that followed was fought with them.

The Silver Age of Cotton (700-740 BC).

After the Riots, the men who replaced the Kaynis Cujus did not want the fields to fall idle, and did not want the same blood on their hands. They freed the bonded families, called them tenants, and let them work the same land for a share of the crop and a debt to the company store. The cotton came back thicker than before. Ginning sheds and spinning mills rose along the Mourfa, the Kaynis Cotton Exchange was rebuilt in stone, and the bell that opened its trading floor could be heard across the farmland. In 715 and 716 BC, the land and homes that belonged to the quevari were cleared for more agricultural land. Kaynisians call these years silver, because they knew even then that they were the second best, that the first age had ended in blood, and that theirs was also being built on somebody else's back. It ended, as such things do, in a single night. The Great Storm drowned the fields and closed the roads.

The Quelling (715 BC).

Roughly a half-century after the Riots, Farelle turned its capacity for mob violence against a different target: the quevari and the other feral-folk clans scattered through the Hackles. What began as scattered raids on isolated settlements escalated into something closer to an organized pogrom, with tame-folk hunting parties from Kaynis and Mortilis treating entire clans as vermin to be culled rather than neighbors to be reasoned with. Most of the quevari's scattered communities did not survive it, with the majority of the survivors fleeing Farelle and establishing settlements in other domains of dread.

The hunting parties could not tell a quevari from a neighbor, since the grape test proves *nothing about a body that is wholly human. So they hunted by lineage: families with a cousin who "went to the woods," or children who slept badly under the full moon, or half-senile grandparents who were rumored to howl with the dogs at night. Many of those they killed were their own kin, and the muster rolls were burned within a generation. The tame-folk who remember the Quelling do not remember it clearly. They remember that a great danger was ended, and they remember the empty chair at their own grandmother's table. Every Farellian family has an ancestor it does not discuss, and the funerary custom of quietly omitting cowards from the family history has done the rest. It is why "thin blood" is a whispered insult.

Today, most tame-folk in Kaynis and Mortilis either don't know the full extent of what happened in 715 BC, or prefer not to think too hard about it; it does not fit comfortably into a culture that likes to believe its hospitality extends to everyone.

Jack Karn had a hand in the Quelling, though not the hand the tame-folk would remember. He raised no weapon against a quevari, and his curse would not have let him. What he had was the domain's memory. A tinkerer who has walked every settlement for over a century knows whose grandmother howls at the red moon, which family keeps a dog it shouldn't, whose cousin truly disappeared in the woods, and whose child sleeps badly. Over three winters, at forge fires and trinket counters, he let those names slip as gossip and never as accusations. His Hiders, eager to be on the winning side, carried the rest. The Riding Committees, armed with muzzle-loaders he had mended without a word, had a muster roll before they had a reason.

The quevari should have won in the first weeks. The canids of the Hackles could come to their aid, and the quevari were capable of fighting back, so the tame-folk took real casualties. But the dogs stayed in their dens. Every dog in Farelle obeys Jack when he wears the tinkerer’s face, and he had told them not to come. The quevari were the only people in Farelle whom the dogs obeyed apart from him, and he could not leave that crack in his authority. He meant it as a culling and never as an ending. When the muster rolls began to list children, the nausea that guards the innocent came on him, and he stopped feeding the committees names. By then they no longer needed him.

The Quelling's survivors fled into the Hackles and the Mists, and here Jack made his one exception. The dogs that patrol the Misty Border turned their heads. It is the only time in the domain's history he has let prey go, and he has never said why. Perhaps the feral madness of the quevari, though a threat to his authority, was worthy of his respect. To Jack, the quevari are what humans should be in their natural state.

The Sang-Rush (720 BC).

With the Hackles emptied of most of its quevari, ground the hunters had feared was now open, and word spread that ginseng grew thick in the old hollows. Prospectors pushed deep into the forest, and the first boom towns rose and fell in the wilderness.

The maps that drew prospectors into the old hollows were sold by a friendly tinkerer who charged little and was believed. Most of the hollows he pointed to were dens. He never ordered a dog to attack anyone, but the packs he'd said to hold their ground certainly held it. Many prospectors did not come back, and the boom towns that rose there emptied within a season. The survivors, too ruined to return to the cities, became the first of a new generation of feral-folk.

The Hog Hassle & the Great Cutting (725-740 BC).

Mortilis's one great boom was timber (Kaynisians never pushed to develop water-driven sawmill technology by contrast). Steam sawmills stripped the slopes above the Mourfa and the city grew wealthy and confident. But the two families that owned the mills, the Harlans and the Bledsoes, were at war over a stolen hog, and the eleven-year feud drained their fortunes and their workers. It ended in 739 BC, when the elders forced a marriage between the houses, one year before the Great Storm. The scandal is the

reason the councils now handle "settling disputes" as a duty.

The hog was never stolen by either family. A tinkerer had sold it to the Bledsoes and driven it into the Harlans' pen the same night, and swore to each side that the other had done it. The feud drained the two families that owned Mortilis's steam sawmills, at the height of its timber boom, and cost 19 lives. It ended only when the elders forced a marriage, which Jack Karn had not expected and disagreed with.

The Great Storm (740 BC).

The Great Upheaval graced Farelle with a terrible storm of rain and lightning. The Mourfa River overflowed and the depressions of Farelle's geography flooded with rainwater, displacing the bones of the dead and threatening the main metropoles with their storm surge. The branches of the trees of the Hackles, full of leaves and not expecting such a downpour, broke under the strain. Fires started and ended quickly with the lightning and the rain. Canines drowned in their dens or raced to find shelter, viciously invading Farellian homesteads. Once the storm receded, the Farellians were still surrounded by Mists but otherwise noticed that they received fewer wanderers from other lands. Additionally, they had to spend a decade fixing the fields and rebuilding their society to what it was prior to the storm, and certain technological innovations they had previously enjoyed were lost with the people who died (and were the only ones who really knew "how" it worked).

The Mortgaged Fields (740-755 BC).

The Storm drowned the Scabland of Mortilis and displaced the dead, broke the mills, and left the bare hills to flood worse than they should have. The Cuju family paid for the rebuilding by mortgaging its fields, and much of the money came from Kaynis. When the Cujus could not pay, they sold, until Kaynis money owned a good share of Mortilis's farmland. The gambling debts of the family's younger sons, run up at the tables of Jackanapes' Row, finished what the flood began. By 755 BC, Mortilis was a pale shadow of being Kaynis' equal.

The Prohibition of Mortilis (745 BC)

In the lean years after the Great Storm, Mortilis banned the distilling of grain to spare its harvest. The reason changed within a season. At a wake held over the freshly reburied dead of the Scabland, mourners drunk on funeral wine were allegedly killed by the hypnotic gaze of the dogmen, and the grims that should have guarded the graves did nothing. The elders extended the ban to all drink, and the council of five added that a man who cannot stand a challenge, or watch his neighbor's children, has begun to go feral. Kaynis, which had money in its saloons and no flooded graves, declined to follow. The two cities have quarreled over it since, and Mortilis's moonshine trade began.

Otherwise, the time between and after the Great Storm was simply business as usual for the recovering Farellians.

Rediscovery in the Mists (755 BC).

Since the Great Upheaval, Farelle had been considered lost or destroyed by the calamity. However, it was rediscovered by other domains in relatively quick succession. Staunton Bluffs was the first to rediscover Farelle, and entirely by accident: a Stauntonian child wandered through the newly opened Dog's Walk Mistway and was received by the kind folks of Kaynis. The Stauntonian scouting party (really just a group of highly brave and highly concerned villagers) sent after the child found Farellian farmers plowing their farmland by Kaynis, and friendly relations have held ever since.

Afterwards, Zherisian explorers, trying to get to Nosos through the Iron Road, ended up in Farelle. They had found fields, farms, and a dialect they recognized. Thus, they believed the land to be their own lost countryside, vanished after the Great Upheaval and now rediscovered. They tested that belief as returning kin would, by place names, family names, landmarks, and songs, and none of it matched. Farellians had never heard of Zherisia or Paridon, and told a founding story of pit dwellings and wild dogs that no Zherisian remembered. The ruins in the Hackles predated the settlers, and the dialect had drifted in ways consistent with a long

separate history. The explorers accepted the mismatch quickly, but a faction in Paridon keeps the "lost sibling" story alive; A sibling can be more easily brought under Paridon's authority compared to a foreign land.

Nosian merchants caught wind of Zherisia's discovery of this Mistway (dubbed the Path of Progress—moderately reliable, two-way) and were eager to invest in the abundant economic opportunities and natural resources Farelle offered. Nosian pumps, rifles and rail spurs arrive as finished goods. A household can own a steam pump it can't repair and a gun it can't make.

DM Sidebar Scavenger's Cycle

Farellians themselves rarely ask why their history moved as fast as it did; outsiders who study the domain have more theories than answers. Some point to the scavenged ruins and half-buried relics scattered throughout the Hackles (which predate the Farellians) and suggest that each generation's leap forward owes less to Farellian ingenuity than to what's been dug up and repurposed from whoever, or whatever, was here first (see The March of Progress under Lifestyle & Education).

If a DM wishes to deepen this, consider that the ruins scavengers pick through were left by a civilization that also rose too fast and collapsed just as quickly, perhaps for reasons uncomfortably similar to Farelle's own present trajectory. This would mean that Farelle is not a trailblazer of unknown progress but an ignorant repeater of history's inexorable patterns.

Dread Possibility: Looking for Fangs

During the time of Farelle's rediscovery by Zherisia, a few of the domain's own dogmen managed to traverse the Path of Progress and arrive in Paridon. These jackalweres were involved in the struggle for the Fang of Nosferatu during the events of the module Shadow of the Knife. They sought to find this magical knife so they may defeat Jack Karn and claim his position. Evidently, they failed.

Outlook & Beliefs

Farellians treat the concepts of "progress" and "hard work" as the closest thing to sacred and immutable forces. Success is framed as earned through grit and forward motion, while misfortune—like a bad harvest, a boom town gone bust, or a family falling on hard times—is quietly read as a sign of insufficient effort or hidden weakness as opposed to purely bad luck. However, the Farellians still provide their own form of private charity towards neighbors who fall upon such hard times, so long as they do not "go feral". It helps that providing charity is also a sign of not being feral. These reflect a strong anxiety at the center of the Farellian worldview: to stop moving forward is to begin sliding backward, and what awaits at the bottom of that decline is the "feral" state of their society from 160 years ago. The last century-and-a-half's worth of progress can be seen as a desperate attempt to outrun that degeneration.

Similarly, Farellians feel strongly about courage and cowardice. The former is a cardinal virtue while the latter is a cardinal vice. The contempt for magic as "the coward's tool" is one small way this attitude shows itself in the populace. The same can be seen with the social pressure to match a working crew's pace rather than show fatigue or in the shame attached to shirking dangerous but necessary frontier work. With their attitude of prizing courage above all else, Farellians are the People Who Will Not Be Cowards.

Language

Farellians speak a strange dialect of Zherisian. Despite the languages being uncannily close to one another, the Farellians had no recollection of any land named Zherisia. Though temporal fugues and other anomalies attributed to the Mists were thoroughly considered, there was no true comparison between Farelle's landscape and Zherisia's lost countryside. Now, the linguistic link is viewed by most to be a strange curiosity of the Mists—like how Souragnien and Ghastrian feature strong similarities with High & Low Mordentish respectively, or the prevalence of Vaasi in the Southern Core—and by some to be further proof that Zherisia's countryside is yet to be rediscovered.

More than that, it is proof that Farelle, regardless of its origins, ought to be considered a sibling nation to Zherisia, and perhaps be brought under the City of Paridon's authority…

The Farellian spoken form of Zherisian is rhotic, meaning that speakers pronounce the "r" sound clearly at the ends of words and before consonants (like in car or farm). Meanwhile, spoken Zherisian in Paridon is typically non-rhotic, meaning the "r" sound is dropped or softened unless followed by a vowel. Additionally, Farellian speakers tend to drop the "g" sound in "ing" endings, while spoken Zherisian typically does not.

Farellian speech patterns can be described as "pitched to travel". They have a tendency towards projecting rather than murmuring, even in ordinary conversation, that can be read by outsiders as aggressive or overly familiar with them before they're used to it. As a result, quiet or private speech sometimes reads as suspicious in Farelle. Those who talk in hushed tones have something to hide while the person who speaks loudly and clearly is trusted by default.

Written Farellian, in contrast to spoken Farellian, is functionally utilitarian. Ledgers, wanted notices, property markers, and mining claims make up the bulk of written Farellian in the domain, alongside some personal letters and journals. Much like with the Borcans, there is no strong tradition of historical record-keeping or literature for its own sake; the closest thing to literature in Farelle is oral. Folk songs and stories told around fire pits survive into the modern day, albeit half-garbled by word of mouth and remembered differently in every community. Such is the case for the many moral fables told by Jack Karn, affectionately known as the "Jack Tales".

Jack is a common and lucky name in Farelle. Families name sons Jack "so Jack looks kindly on the house," and in some settlements every third boy answers to it. Farellians call any stranger of uncertain name "Jack," and the word runs through the language: *jackanapes*, *jack-of-all-trades*, *jackpot*. A party tends to find itself always asking "which Jack" one is referring to.

DM Sidebar: Useful Farellian Turns of Phrase

"Bury the bone"---*to r*each an agreement, end a dispute

"That's a tough bone to swallow"----bad news, or a hard truth

"Off the leash"---- behaving recklessly, especially said of the young

"Good nose for it"---perceptive, or skilled at a trade

"Gone feral" / "gone rabid"----descending into savagery, said of both people and places; also used more casually of disobedient children or troublemakers

"Digging for better bones elsewhere"----a polite way of telling someone they're not wanted

"Sturdy legs"-----a genuine compliment referring to reliability and endurance, not just physical fitness

"Walking the line"----checking on one's responsibilities, or reasserting authority over a boundary/property

"Brush Wolf"/ "Prairie Wolf"----slang for someone considered uncivilized, backwoods, half-feral; a step below "gone feral" in severity, more a class slur than an accusation

"Worth its weight in marrow/bone"----something valuable, especially something hard won

"Run it to ground"----to finally finish or resolve a difficult, drawn-out task

"Sent back to the porch"----a rejected suitor or a spurned proposal

Religion

Farelle has no major history of organized faith, unlike other domains. What passes for religion here is closer in scale to folk practice: small, practical superstitions that are carried out from habit instead of conviction. This suits the people's temperament fine, as they prize hard work and forward motion

above nearly everything else. There is thus little patience for a faith that would ask them to kneel or distract them from leaping boldly into the future. Older Farellians might recall stories told of folk deities that kept them safe when crossing liminal spaces like crossroads, the banks of the Mourfa, or the doorways of homes, but the memories are shoddy.

One such goddess was known as the Queen of the Crossroads—a three-faced humanoid deity with small trailside shrines scattered along the more remote stretches of the Hackles—and her protection was invoked through animal (namely dog) sacrifice. This goddess was named "Hecate" by an Outlander priestess pulled through the Mists, sometime in the years after the Founding. She found the Farellians already leaving offerings at crossroads and doorways, and recognized her own goddess in it. Farellians kept their own title, but the name "Hecate" survives on the stone of a few shrines and the notes of certain scholars. The Queen's worship faded as magic became known as "the coward's tool", but some may still pray to her.

DM Sidebar: The Shrines at the Crossroads

Travelers passing through unfamiliar or dangerous territory will sometimes leave a small offering at her feet, and in the oldest rural traditions, a sacrificed wild dog left at her crossroads is said to guarantee safe passage through the Hackles. Urban Farellians consider this practice backwoods nonsense at best and wasteful at worst, but the custom persists stubbornly among rangers and hillfolk.

Though sparse in religious faith, the Farellians do have a sprawling, half-contradictory body of folk lore and tales collectively known as the Jack Tales. These moral fables are told around fire pits, with each one starring a trickster figure simply called "Jack." No two tellings agree on who this Jack actually is or what he looks like, and Farellians have never seen much reason to sort it out—Jack is Jack. He is a folding of the clever rogues & coyote-spirits that outsmarted city elders & outwitted dogmen into one recurring character. He is cowardly when it suits the story and cunning enough to make cowardice look like wisdom or even courage. The tales told about him double as lessons on cleverness, grit, and the cost of forgetting either one.

Otherwise, Farellians have taken to mythologizing their founders—Kayn, Mort, Harper, and Elle Cuju. This reverence for the Founding Four does not extend anymore to the descendants, other than to acknowledge that the Cuju Family lives on and is moderately popular in Mortilis.

Finally, Farelle's increasingly cosmopolitan settlements mean that outside religions do exist within its borders, brought in by Zherisian settlers, Stauntonian visitors, Nosian merchants, and even the occasional Outlander pulled through the Mists. Missionaries from other domains see Farelle as fertile ground for their own proselytism. There is no incumbent clergy and the Outlander deity may be recontextualized as a manifestation or aspect of a deity like Ezra or Hala (or something else). Currently, these faiths are practiced privately within a household, but eventually proselytization may be observed. Farellians extend their usual hospitality to a foreigner's beliefs the same way they extend it to a foreigner's accent: politely, with mild curiosity, and with the underlying assumption that it will eventually move on.

DM Sidebar: Who Even Is Jack Karn?

The reverence the people of Farelle give to the grumpy old tinkerer can strike most foreigners as perplexing. The claim that "a" Jack Karn—one with the moniker at least—has been around since the founding of the domain is sure to raise eyebrows and get genre-savvy adventurers to quickly deduce who the Darklord is. One way to mitigate this is to characterize Jack Karn as an entity similar to Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy—everyone knows that Jack Karn isn't really more than hundreds of years old, that's just the name given to an enduring icon of folklore and legend. That grumpy old man traveling Harper's Trail is just another rendition of that. And the adults play along with calling him Jack because his name's Jack and he hasn't said anything opposed to it. As for the grandparents who recall a man who looks like Jack being called Jack, and might be the

very same Jack, despite not aging? Just a tall tale, to be sure.

Taking into account the commonality of “Jack” as a name and of tinkering as a profession, “Jack Karn” has become just as much of a title for an accomplished craftsperson as just a name. Of course, the real Jack Karn resents any encroachment upon his territory—including his name. Only the boldest (or perhaps stupid) dare to call themselves “Jack Karn” in the original’s presence.

Funerary Customs

Farelle's approach to death is, like everything else in the domain, shaped by its two great anxieties: the fear of going feral, and the belief that courage is the measure of a life well lived. In Farelle, the dead are sent off loudly, with stories told at volume and old grievances aired without much shame. The dead are interred typically in a plot of land set just outside a settlement's boundary—close enough to visit, far enough that the ground doesn't compete with farmland or a mining claim. Mortilis buries its dead in the Scabland, the natural depression adjacent to the city that Mortilisians insist would have been the finer stretch of land in Farelle had it not been given over to graves; the name carries a note of resentment, as if the dead were imposing on real estate the living could have put to better use. Even today, Mortilis resents being known as the “city of graves” due to the Scabland being so large and so full of bodies. Kaynis, lacking an equivalent formal burial ground of its own, tends to inter its dead in smaller family plots scattered along the farmland ringing the city.

In the Farellian tradition, a death met with courage is remembered fondly and often, with it being worked into oral tradition like the Jack Tales. A death considered cowardly, by contrast, tends to go quietly unspoken; a Farellian who died fleeing, or who was caught having "gone feral" in some final, disgraceful way, is as likely to be buried without ceremony as they are to be memorialized at all. Families have been known to simply omit an ancestor from the retelling of their own history rather than admit to a coward in the bloodline—a practice that dovetails uncomfortably with Farelle's general disinterest in formal record-keeping, since there's rarely any written proof to contradict the omission.

Farelle's central funerary custom, and the one most likely to unsettle a visitor once they understand it, is the burial of a wild dog beneath a new cemetery so that its spirit might stand eternal guard over the dead it watches. Though they were vicious and hostile to the Farellians in life, they become indebted to the same people they hated in death, as a result of burying them, becoming creatures known as “grims”. The custom is shared across class and city lines—one of the only points of common superstition between the tame-folk of Kaynis and Mortilis and the feral-folk clans they otherwise look down on—and most Farellians who observe it will tell you it works exactly as intended, keeping graverobbers, scavengers, and worse things out of ground that ought to stay undisturbed. Most of the time, it does.

Dread Possibility: The Wrong Kind of Guardian

The spirits of the dogs that are sacrificed and buried manifest in the material realm and possess living dogs that go near the graveyards. Then, it is expected to keep any trespassers—humanoid and dog alike—out. Most of the time, this is what happens, but rarely, the guardian spirit returns ‘wrong’. It is hostile to everyone, including the family of the deceased, and becomes a monster like a death dog, or a shadow mastiff, or a yeth hound.

The Realm

Government

There is no central government in Farelle, and most accounts of history (flimsy as they are) allege that there never was. The interests of Kaynis and Mortilis, when shared, are perhaps the closest equivalent. However, given how much the two cities trade and feud with one another, any shared authority born from their cooperation is fleeting. Meanwhile, every other settlement in Farelle—be it a boom town, a frontier village, or a feral-folk enclave—is entirely

self-governed. In the Farellian view, a town that cannot manage its own affairs deserves whatever fate befalls it.

Kaynis is run by an elected mayor. Currently that mayor is Wade Lasley, whose authority in practice extends about as far as his personal reputation and his willingness to broker deals on the city's behalf. Such was the case with his trade agreement with Burghardt Enterprises, struck with little oversight beyond his own judgment that it would be good for the city (and, not incidentally, for him). Day-to-day law and order fall to Sheriff Arlo Shepherd, who is nominally answerable to the mayor but functions with a great deal of independence simply because Lasley has neither the time nor the inclination to look too closely at how the sheriff's office spends its days. With how few lawmen work under Shepherd, actual law enforcement in Kaynis often comes down to whichever rangers happen to be available and willing to be deputized on short notice.

Mortilis is also governed by an elected mayor, with the office currently being held by Mayor Newman Lancaster III. However, the Cuju family (despite having no formal office) wields an outsized influence in Mortilisian local politics. This is thanks to Morgan Cuju's standing as a matriarch and her family's long, self-mythologized claim to having founded the "true" Farelle. It is an open secret that Mayor Lancaster governs with Morgan's tacit approval, and should he lose that, he loses his position.

Both Kaynis and Mortilis maintain a council of five elders who oversee specific municipal responsibilities the mayor's office does not directly address. Such responsibilities include the arbitration of property, settling mining-claim disputes, presiding over major seasonal traditions, maintaining oral records and lore, and settling "feral" matters. A declaration of feral status is the closest thing Farelle has to formal exile. The council rules on it, and once made it is rarely questioned. Nobody is told how the decision was reached.

The mayor's office and the council of elders coexist without any clearly defined division of authority, which suits the Farellians fine; when the two disagree, it is generally understood that the elders' word carries more weight in anything touching custom, and the mayor's word carries more weight in anything touching money.

Aside from those two metropoles, most Farellian settlements are led solely by their eldest members. This is a custom that Farellians consider natural given how heavily the culture prizes seniority and living long enough to have something to teach.

Finally, Jack Karn carries an honorary sixth seat on all elder councils, and the chair is called "Jack's stool." No one quite remembers who put it there, and no one has ever been fool enough to move it. Though the elders agree that it's an appropriate seat for him, they also use the stool for others (as it's not reserved just for him). Farellians justify the seat in three ways. The councils grew up around his fireside before they were elders themselves, and he is the only man who has walked every settlement and every failed claim. And nearly everyone owes him a repair, so deferring to him is repayment. Because of this, Jack is given a seat, not a vote. He may influence how a vote may go or make the winning or losing side reconsider their position.

Economy

Farelle's economy is heavily reliant upon the boom-and-bust cycle of business. A settlement can spring up in the Hackles within a season of striking a rich vein of coal, swell with prospectors and opportunists chasing their fortune, and then empty out just as quickly once the resource runs dry. Then that settlement's buildings are left to the wilderness and its people scattered back to Kaynis, Mortilis, or wherever else the next boom is rumored to be. Farellians have made peace with this instability; a town's failure is rarely mourned so much as it is filed away as a lesson in where not to dig next.

Kaynis built its early fortune on cotton grown in the cleared farmland ringing the city. However, the discovery of massive coal deposits (and other precious resources besides) further out toward the Hackles reoriented the entire local economy almost overnight. Though coal was already harvested prior by the Farellians, this discovery kickstarted an industrial-scale approach. As the Kaynisians are fond of saying, "cotton was a good king but king coal's

even better." Mayor Wade Lasley's trade deal with the Nosian corporation Burghardt Enterprises brought outside capital, equipment, and a steady stream of Nosian overseers and prospectors into the city, and the Burghardt Mine and Burghardt Refinery now anchor Kaynis's economy the way the Cotton Exchange once did alone. The boom has been good for Kaynis's coffers and hard on its housing; traditional pit-dwelling architecture stands crowded against new construction, and the streets run a little more crowded than the city was ever built to handle.

Mortilis, by contrast, has built a quieter but steadier economy around trades that do not depend on a lucky strike: lumber, milling, coopering, furring, and (much more discretely) moonshine. Mortilis's trades are less glamorous than a coal strike, but they're reliable in a way Kaynis's boom-and-bust cycle rarely is, which is a point of quiet pride for the city and no small amount of condescension toward its northwestern neighbor.

Beyond the two cities, Farelle's frontier economy runs on scavenging. The domain's compressed and violently accelerated history means that abandoned ruins like pit dwellings and older settlements are scattered throughout the Hackles. From those, prospectors make a genuine living picking through them for anything of value—old tools, salvageable building material, forgotten caches, and occasionally something stranger. It is not an exaggeration to say that a meaningful share of Farelle's "new" technology is, in fact, old technology that has been rediscovered by scavengers who understand its value a great deal better than they understand how it actually works. Farellians are entirely comfortable buying a tool whose original purpose nobody can quite explain, so long as it's cheap and it does what it's meant to do.

Farelle's other exports lean on what the land offers rather than what's buried beneath it. Blood-birch lumber commands a premium both for its rarity and its odd reputation, as the ground where its roots take hold is where dogs won't cross. Sourwood honey travels well and sells briskly to Nosian and Zherisian merchants alike. Ginseng, hunted at real personal risk from the older hollows of the Hackles, fetches a startling price from buyers willing to pay for it precisely because so few sang-hunters are willing to go get it. Macadamia oil, pressed and sold in small batches, moves steadily through the domain on the strength of its folk reputation as a ward against dogmen. Whether or not that reputation is deserved has never stopped anyone from buying it.

Farellian currency is minted in Mortilis and named, unsurprisingly, after the animal that shapes every other part of the culture: Howlers (platinum), Growlers (gold), Yippers (silver), and Barkers (copper). A Farellian who calls someone "all bark and no Barkers" is making a joke about empty boasting that doubles as a genuine insult about their finances.

Diplomacy

With how recently Farelle has been rediscovered since the Great Upheaval, there are no formal diplomatic ties between it and other domains. The decentralized government of Farelle has also hobbled any uniform approaches to foreign affairs. Instead, a variety of other lands have interests in the different towns of Farelle, and it is the prerogative of those settlements to decide how they wish to approach the outside world. Listed below are the most prominent & interested parties.

Zherisia

Zherisia is highly interested in Farelle. When the first Zherisian explorers found Farelle, they believed the land to be their long-lost countryside.

Though this notion has fallen out of fashion, Farelle's rustic wilderness has endeared it to the stiflingly urban dwellers of Paridon. More importantly, Farelle's natural resources and unclaimed plots of land, coupled with its decentralized government, make it a tantalizing and excellent prospect for Paridon to secure its food supply. More than that, Farelle could be made into Paridon's own personal countryside—a living space for the overpopulated city. It is now in the interest of the powers that be in Zherisia to make Farelle more dependent on Zherisia than Zherisia is on Farelle, and to start investigating the feasibility of making the land an official protectorate and offering settler permits to interested citizens.

Nosos

The corporations of the land of Nosos see great profit opportunities in Farelle. With how blighted Nosos is from pollution and other myriad self-made ecological disasters, the wilderness of the Hackles and other lands is miraculous. The dominant companies & guilds of Nosos hope to prey upon the Farellian desire for technological innovation and progress in exchange for unparalleled access to mining rights, water rights, land rights, and more. As far as they see it, they're only giving the Farellians the tools they desire to leap boldly into the future, as they have. The fertile soil of Farelle is but more land to be harvested barren to grow even bigger than before.

Staunton Bluffs

Trade with Staunton Bluffs was established after the Great Upheaval, with the accidental discovery of the Dog's Walk mistway by a curious Stauntonian child of one of the domain's outlying farmer's cottages.

Today, the people of Staunton Bluffs and Farelle have kept up highly friendly relations. Not only are the two the kindest folk that can be found in the Mists, but each one's domain addresses a problem the other has. For the Stauntonians, the arable land and crops of Farelle, as well as the small exports of lumber sent to Staunton Bluffs are a blessing to have on hand (due to the difficulty the Stauntonians have cultivating their own land). The Farellians, for their part, are quite interested in the peat of Staunton Bluffs, as it can keep their homes warm during the winter seasons. Stauntonian livestock goods like beef, dairy, pork, and chicken are also highly prized, as the Stauntonians don't have to deal with wild dogs killing their livestock or foxes in their henhouses. There is an unspoken understanding that the Stauntonians are far more reliant upon Farellian trade than the other way around.

Staunton Bluffs has felt almost none of Zherisia's or Nosos's interest (via Farelle) directly. The Dog's Walk carries traders and the occasional curious child, not shipments of rifles or steam pumps, and what little of Farelle's new technology reaches Staunton comes secondhand. Neither Paridon nor the Nosian guilds have any real reason to look past Farelle. Farelle already gives them everything they came for, and Staunton's poor farmland offers neither of them anything to extract. Even the peat of Staunton Bluffs, though useful, is not traded in large enough qualities to grab attention. The Stauntonians, for their part, seem content with this.

Who's Doomed

Jack Karn, Darklord of Farelle

Appearance

Jack Karn looks like a human male in his early fifties. His beard is starting to gray, and the same can be said of the tufts of hair that peek out from under his floppy hat. His skin is tanned from a lifetime of walking in the outdoors. Jack's eyes are blue and surrounded by smile lines. His face is lined and Jack always looks like he's ready to share a good story or comfortable night around a fire.

Background

(For the original backstory of Jack Karn and Farelle, please see Ryan Naylor's article "The Jackal Who Would Not Be A Coward" within the *Book of Sacrifices*, on pages 82-88. The write-up below is a summarized version of that story).

The Jackal Who Would Not Be A Coward

In the vast expanse of the Wildlands, every animal has a role to fill. King Crocodile is the lord of the domain and sits at the top of the food chain. The lions and wolves are the hunters. Gazelles and deer are the prey. Most of the animals lived on top of a great plateau where they were safe from the endless hunger of King Crocodile. The jackals are the cowards. Their elders teach their young that there is no shame in this, it is how jackals are made. They are scavengers that live off the scraps others leave. But their bellies were always full and their pack grew and prospered.

One young jackal hated this way of life. Jackals were strong, he said, and could rule the plateau if they acted together. This jackal explored the swamp of

King Crocodile, ran beside lions making kills, and stalked through the forests of the tigers. He returned to his pack and told other young jackals of his adventures. Soon he attracted a small pack that wanted to join him in his hunts. The initial hunts didn't go the jackals' way. The prey were too wary and the jackals were not used to working as a unit. But then the young jackal had a brilliant idea. He waited until the tigers and lions left to hunt the prey, and then fell on their undefended young.

The jackals feasted as kings on the young of the lions, wolves, and tigers. They took gorillas and vipers youngs when they could. Soon every other animal on the plateau had been the victim of the ravenous jackals. But it couldn't last. Eventually the other animals caught the jackals feasting on their young and turned on the pack. Tigers and gorillas stalked them through the forest. Lions hunted them on the plains. Falcons and eagles kept track of the pack and helped other animals find them. For seven days and nights, the pack was chased across the plateau.

The pack was driven into the swamp of King Crocodile and left to the tender mercy of the Crocodile's endless hunger. The pack turned on the young jackal and drove him out. As he stepped into the fog, he heard the roars of King Crocodile descending on the rest of the pack and knew none of them would leave the swamp alive. He vowed to form a new pack and teach them his vicious ways. The jackal stepped out of the mists into a snowy forest.

The Tinkerer Jack Karn

Confused and distracted, the jackal didn't see the trap until it had sprung. Heavy metal jaws slammed shut on its legs. The jackal was trapped, and began screaming for help.

A human appeared, known to others as Jack Karn. He was a peaceful soul who loved nature and was amazed at this talking beast he found. He sympathized with the jackal and tried to help him, but the beast immediately repaid his efforts by trying to kill him, failing only due to his wounded leg. Undaunted, Jack beat the jackal unconscious with a length of iron, and then placed it in a cage. He muzzled the creature and tended to its wounds. For weeks, he took the jackal along his cart, trying to befriend the creature and convince him that, together, they could battle man's despoilment of nature. The jackal refused to listen, as it was full of bloodlust & animosity for humans. More than that, it was full of egotism, and endlessly cursed the tinkerer's name and terrorized the people who came to Jack's cart for their tinkering needs.

Even Jack, who showed the jackal nothing but kindness and patience, had a limit, and eventually reached. He then took the cage to a Vistani camp, of the Naiat tasque, hoping they could give it a good home. He also reasoned that they would be both willing and able to keep the jackal alive and prevent it from harming others.

The Vistani accepted the jackal to their menagerie and invited Jack to spend the night at their fire. They were impressed by his patience and kindness. As they ate and spoke at the camp, the jackal discovered dogs and other canines would follow his commands. The jackal waited until the Vistani were asleep before he commanded the dogs to free him. Once freed, the jackal and the dogs turned on the humans and massacred the camp's children. As they feasted, the mists rose around them. However, the startled Vistani swiftly retaliated and gained the upper hand. The jackal was about to flee, until it caught Jack's scent.

Unwilling to temper his bloodlust with sense, the jackal fatally mauled the tinker, giving the Vistani the chance to catch him. As he lay dying, the tinkerer uttered a curse on the jackal. He condemned the beast for his arrogance and declared that he would become the thing that both the jackal and Jack despised most, before that same thing would destroy him. The Vistani's raunie stepped forth and added her own mystical might to the curse, thus guaranteeing it would occur. She then commanded her kin to release the jackal so it may suffer this curse. Immediately, the jackal fled into the Mists rising all around the camp, and arrived in a heavily wooded realm.

Once the Mists had fully cleared, the Jackal was aghast at its new form. He was a human now. In fact,

he looked exactly like the tinkerer that trapped him. He had a small cart beside him and was clothed in primitive jackal pelts and loincloths that he didn't know how to remove. However, he did notice that this land was one of pure wilderness: dogs were everywhere and humans were nowhere to be seen. Even better that they bent to his will! Though his form disgusted him, he wanted a place like this and received it at last.

The Founding of Farelle

As soon as Jack began to find some degree of pleasure in his mixed circumstances, four humans crossed the Hackles looking for a place to call their own, and decided this land would be theirs now. Even worse, one of them (Elle) had a gift that competed with his. The dogs listened to her, and where they listened to her they did not listen to him.

Jack met the founders as a "wild man" in pelts, giving the only name on his cart. He took to Mort and Harper, the resentful pair, and urged Harper to try Elle's gift. She failed, and Elle stepped in. The pack she had tamed killed her in front of Kayn. Whether Jack ordered it himself or whether his commands and Elle's pulled the dogs in two directions, is left to the DM. Jack says it wasn't his doing, and the curse never punished him for it, because he never intended the harm to fall on a human. He has been trying to decide since whether that was luck.

The Passing of Seasons

Jack has watched Farelle grow every year since, and for the first two centuries he did more than watch. He went from forge to forge trying to spoil the work done to advance, only finding his hands mending what he meant to ruin no matter how clever he tried to be. That is one reason why a stranger with a cart is in every forge tale. In the Sunrise Years he kept Kaynis and Mortilis in balance, feeding gossip across the river and repairing whichever mill was slipping, because two rival cities could not unite against his forests. When that stopped being enough, he ended the line of Kayn and Elle by the only means his curse allowed. With enough rumors and stories told to the right ears, the Riots did the rest.That was the last of the balance between the two metropoles, as the Guild Years left Mortilis stagnant. Jack found he did not care. He had found better sport.

After 660 BC he took his sabotage to the boom towns. He sold the Sang-Rush its faulty maps, fed the Hog Hassle feud its hog, and used his Hiders to stoke the tame-folk's hatred of the quevari until it became the Quelling. He is proud of all of his tricks, but hates that he is compelled to mend the machines that keep the domain running, and each act of sabotage is undone a little by the next repair.

The Grand Conjunction

When the Great Storm struck in 740 BC, Jack felt the Mists move and knew something had shifted in the Land of Mists at large. For a moment he believed the domain might be sealed and may even stall in its accursed development. Unfortunately for Jack, this did not occur. However, the flood killed many of the people who knew how the machines worked, and he counted it a victory. It was a short one. Farelle rebuilt within a decade, and for eleven of those years Jack alone understood many of Kaynis and Mortilis' vital technologies (like waterworks), which he could not stop himself from keeping alive.

Rediscovery

When the world found Farelle in 755 BC, Jack learned two things. First, his power to take the form of a jackal works in the presence of elves, dwarves, and other demi-humans, which pleased him. Second, Nosian pumps, rifles, and rail spurs were arriving faster than any homegrown progress had, and he cannot sabotage what he cannot reach. He can only fix what breaks, which is worse. Some of his rebellious progeny slipped through the Path of Progress to Paridon in search of the Fang of Nosferatu, hoping to use it against him. Jack has always known the ecology could be upset. Now he can see the day coming, and for the first time he is afraid of it.

Current Sketch

Endlessly denied the joy of the hunt, and rendered nauseous when he attempts to devour the innocent, Jack is forced to watch as humans spread to every corner of his beloved forests. Humans infest the

domain like insects, spreading their filthy civilization everywhere. Everyone in the domain knows Jack and smiles when they see him. To make matters worse, they all seem to genuinely like him. Toddlers approach him, asking to be picked up. Their parents will offer conversation or bring some small trinkets for Jack to repair. Though Jack was not a human and had no knowledge of tinkering, the Dark Powers have seen fit to grant him a strange know-how of mechanical repair. He doesn't understand it—it just works and he lets his hands guide him—but it frustrates him all the same.

For Jack Karn, Farelle is an endless torment. He often reeks of human, and there is nothing he can do about it.

The rapid rate of progress is part of Jack Karn's curse. Knowing this, Jack (and to a lesser extent, the native horrors of Farelle) does his best to sabotage civilization's progress and ensure that boom town's bust and the wilds reclaim the land. More than that, he also makes sure to find creative ways to stifle innovation and progress in Farelle, so as to make sure that they can only scavenge instead of innovating and delay the loss of the wilderness. Should Jack fail and the land be dominated by humanoids, he could be permanently killed. Following this, it is likely that a new Darklord would emerge, and would suffer under a different curse—the land would plateau and stagnate, or perhaps devolve in some manner.

Jack does not age, so he disappears for years at a time and returns as "the son," "the nephew," or simply Jack. Grandparents who remember him and are skeptical or alarmed are laughed off as telling tall tales. In winter he loses the company of his own kind, and the season sours his temper.

Though Jack Karn is a jackalwere, he cannot assume any appearance of his choosing when in human form. He can only take the form of the original tinkerer.

Jack can assume his hybrid form while around humans, but he typically refuses to do so out of pride. He still desires to accomplish his goals of jackal supremacy in his original canine form only. Furthermore, he knows that if he truly takes his hybrid form and attacks, he would lose his influence that he has and be destroyed by the humans' advanced weapons.

Jack can still turn into a jackal, but only when not in the presence of a human. When in jackal form, he loses control of all canids in Farelle. Additionally, the non-supernatural canids shun him, just like his pack once did. This frustrates Jack enough that he returns to tinkerer form and ventures back to civilization, starting the pattern once more. This also allows his moods to reset for a time. After running free as a jackal for some time, he is slightly more amiable and approachable to his hated enemies, but his temper eventually sours after being surrounded by humanoids for months. The Farellians assume this is an after-effect of the tinkerer's time on the frontier and dealing with the "simple" frontiersmen and feral-folk for so long.

With the recent discovery of Farelle by outsiders, Jack has learned that this ability also functions when in the presence of elves, dwarves, and other demi-humans. He is quite pleased about this.

Should Jack Karn mate with a human or a jackal, the offspring is a jackalwere all the same. Jack only mates with other jackals and would not ever mate with a human, but this is still the case.

One final aspect of his curse is that Jack is compelled to return lost children. This, Jack believes, is meant to reflect the kindness the original tinkerer took on him. Though Jack wishes he could devour these children, he is afflicted by a strange nausea whenever the intent to harm bubbles up from him. He thus leaves them at doorsteps and treeline edges. This small kindness only further ingratiates him to the Farellians.

Combat

On the rare occasion that Jack finds a creature that he can devour, he attacks with glee. Jack flies into a berserker rage as he attacks, and he focuses on one target until he brings it down. That way, if Jack is forced to retreat, he can return to the battlefield later and devour his fallen foes.

Jack can dominate almost all canine creatures while they are in Farelle. Dog-like monsters, such as non-Farellian jackalweres, familiars, or the animal companions of druids and rangers can make a DC 17 Wisdom saving throw to resist the Darklord's commands as the realm's reigning Doglord. Additionally, Farellian jackalweres descended from Jack are immune to his magical controls.

Jack is also immune to mind-control magic and the Vistani's evil eye. He is also totally immune to all weapons that do not represent "civilized man," such as unarmed attacks, clubs, and arrows (or anything in a CL 0 culture). However, crossbows, forged weapons, and pistols are quite lethal (anything beyond the Stone Age really). This is another reason Jack prefers to work through subterfuge, though it pains him. He is immensely jealous of his jackalwere kin that are born with the opposite weakness.

Despite his pretensions, the jackalwere is more than willing to flee or use underhanded techniques should the battle go against him.

"Even if he is killed, the tinker's curse prevents him from resting peacefully. Within a week, the jackalwere reforms at his tinker's wagon. Jack can only be killed permanently when the tinker's vision of devastation has been actualized. As a jackal, Jack preferred to lead a life of bloodshed and destruction, in defiance of the normal ecology. Only when that ecology has been totally upset by the frantically advancing civilization of Farelle will Jack die for the last time, the victim of a species he continues to belittle" (Book of Sacrifices, page 88). For adventurers looking to thwart Jack for a longer period of time, killing him with civilized weapons is a good start. Then, one can separate his various bones and bury them in different corners of Farelle, at different depths. It will take a lot of time for the dogs of Farelle to dig up each bone and gather it in one place for him to return. And if a party wants to put Jack out of commission for an even longer amount of time, they can bury his bones by blood-birch trees, as almost all canines of Farelle (save a few jackalweres who succeed on a DC 17 Wisdom saving throw to avoid being frightened) will not go near those.

Though Jack Karn cannot harm the people of Farelle directly, he can instruct his dogs to "hold their ground" or to not rush to the defense of other groups (like the quevari).

Jack Karn cannot close the borders of his domain. Instead, he orders packs of dogs(that emerge from the Mists) to patrol the Misty Border to make sure prey do not escape.

Jilira, Daughter of Jack Karn

Background

Born as one of Jack Karn's many progenies, Jilira stood out for being rather large for her species and having streaks of red in her fur. She survived her father's attempt to kill her, as though he succumbs to his primal urge to mate, he also despises the jackalwere spawns that are born from him. From this, Jilira—like almost all other surviving offspring—grew resentment for Jack Karn, but she also possessed a cold & patient cleverness that set her apart from her far more impulsive (and subsequently short-lived) siblings.

Where her siblings fought and died trying to outmuscle a father none of them could actually beat, Jilira watched, and drew a different conclusion entirely. Jack Karn's curse kept him from directly harming humans; that same curse meant he had no defense against the tools humans made. If she couldn't outfight her father as a jackal, she reasoned, she could out-think of him as a human. Thus she began, methodically, to study the very civilization her siblings dismissed as beneath a jackalwere's notice. She learned to speak, to dress, to pass, and eventually to disappear entirely into a human identity of her own making. It is this patience, far more than any claw or fang, that makes Jilira the most dangerous of Jack Karn's children, and the one he is least prepared to see coming.

Current Sketch

Like many of Jack Karn's offspring, Jilira hopes to supplant her father as the main authority of Farelle. Unlike the rest of her siblings, Jilira does not think it a matter of beating Jack in a contest of strength. She is always on the lookout for powerful magical items

and hopes to use the tools of men to kill her jackal father. Unlike Jack, she does not care whether or not this is cowardly, so long as it works. Jilira was responsible for sending a few of her other kin into Paridon to find the Fang of Nosferatu, hoping that it would help her kill Jack. Jilira now hopes to stoke suspicion against Jack in outlying frontier-villages (as he's too well liked in Kaynis and Mortilis). She is currently posing as Clea Fardy, a humble young woman in Drilfis and who is interested in helping Erix Riston and Geary Pendergast in learning how to marry magic with technology. She plans to convince them to make magical weapons that are extremely lethal to the dogmen.

Sites of Interest

Kaynis

Jackanapes' Row

A closely packed street of gambling dens and saloons named for the young men (referred to as "jackanapes") who frequent it. Jean Schezelt keeps his regular table here, and one can reliably find "Cheatin" Charlie Cowen at said table. The Jacks of All Trades do much of their real recruiting in this area.

Southpaws

A boxing ring and training yard on the northwestern edge of Kaynis. Solomon Tahns calls this his second home, and his matches draw quite the crowd.

Fetcher's Hill

A gently sloped stretch of cleared ground outside of Kaynis. It is the starting point for Kaynis's fetch races and where Dominick Holland once made his claim to fame. Children still race each other up and down the hill on free afternoons.

Burghardt Refinery

The Nosian-funded refinery which (alongside the mine of the same name) is responsible for Kaynis's current economic boom. The coal and ore hauled up from the Jowldowns is made into something sellable. Charlie Cowen says the smoke billowing from its stacks reminds him of home.

Burghardt Mine

The Nosian-funded mine that (alongside the refinery of the same name) transformed Kaynis's economy. Miners like Scott Huyk and foremen like Nathaniel Zollman spend most of their weekdays here.

Kaynis Cotton Exchange

A slightly old-fashioned but stately building that was responsible for Kaynis's prior economic fortunes. Today it serves as a reminder of where Kaynis came from rather than as its main source of income. Cotton merchants still ply their trade here.

Mendel Schoolhouse

A modest single-room building where Molly Mendel teaches Kaynis's children basic literacy and arithmetic before they're old enough for apprenticeship work. Her mother and grandmother before her were teachers, so while the schoolhouse isn't the Mendel family's property exclusively, it might as well be.

Kayn & Kassel Bank

A small but solidly built institution run by Steve Kassel. Initially called the Kayn Bank or the Kaynis Bank, Steve wanted to put his name on the bank to claim something for himself. The locals find it amusing. Still, they are grateful to Steve, as he has begun discreetly advising a few of his more cautious clients to save against leaner years—a piece of advice he's careful not to voice too loudly given how popular Mayor Lasley's mining deal remains.

Old Kayn

The site of the Founding Four's first camp, a ring of collapsed pit dwellings under kudzu on the Kaynis side of the Mourfa. A leaning stone near the center is said to mark Elle's grave, but the marker is a later addition and no one is sure it is the right spot. Children dare each other to touch it.

The Sealed Workshop

A collapsed gallery at the head of the Jowldowns, where Kayn's people found a workshop of steel tools in 605 BC. The Burghardt Mine's newest tunnels are digging toward it, and Nathaniel Zollman has ordered the crews not to talk about what they hear.

The Riding Hall

A brick hall built c. 672 BC for the Riding Committees, where the muster rolls of the Quelling were kept and later burned. It is now the Kaynis chapter's lodge for the Putdowners, who use the same fireplace.

The Nine Days

A field of stones at the mouth of the Jowldowns where the 734 BC miners' stockade stood. Nine markers, one for each day it was held, stood in a row, and the leaders were hanged from a tree at the end. Miners leave a shovel at the stones before a hard shift.

The Palisade Line

The rotting remains of the 685 BC palisade, running along the treeline north of Kaynis under kudzu. Rangers use the posts as trail markers, and foxes den in the hollows of the fallen timbers.

Stranded Row

A quarter of Kaynis where the descendants of Mist-led wanderers stranded in 740 BC still live. The best rugs, chairs, and dyes in the city are sold here, and its residents are quietly proud that they never left.

Mortilis

Hine's Quarter

A dense residential district of Mortilis that is home to many of the city's tradespeople and craftsmen. Harriet Daniels has a respectable home in this area.

Barkfield

An open common and market green at the center of Mortilis. It is called Barkfield due to the exchange of barkers and the loud noise of commerce and other events like seasonal fairs and calling contests.

The Grand Mortilis Mint

A squat, iron-shuttered hall in Barkfield where every Howler, Growler, Yipper, and Barker in Farelle is struck. The Cuju family founded it around 650 BC and still holds its charter, which is a large part of why no mayor of Mortilis has ever gone against them. Kaynis counts its coal fortune in coins made here, a fact Mortilisians mention often and Kaynisians prefer to forget.

The Foxhole

A cramped but well-loved tavern known for cheap grape juice and gossip. It is popular with lumberjacks like Ottis Scudder coming in after a long day by the timberline. It is also where Lorenz and Manford started discreetly distributing their moonshine.

Whitesel's Windmill

A working grain mill on the outskirts of Mortilis run by Leonor Whitesel and her family. She takes pride in making food for the city during leaner months.

Bones n' Roots

A modest restaurant that likes to serve frontier fare. Mortilisians appreciate it both for its food and because it's a good place to bring a suitor to meet the family for dinner, out on the restaurant's porch.

Fido's Fashion

A tailor's shop ran by a halfling named Fido that offers everyday apparel and the finer fashion favored by the better-off families. Said finer fashion is still behind what's in style in Dementlieu or Paridon but it tries to keep up all the same.

The Mortilis Drugstore & Trading Post

Here is where Mortilisians can buy sassafras root, macadamia nut oil, and other practical remedies (or superstitious ones) alike.

Pageantry Grooming

A barbershop offering haircuts, shaves, and small-town gossip. The barber is a Pharazian Mist-led immigrant who is happy to socialize.

The Kettle House

A ruin on the Mortilis side of the Hackles where Mortilis found its own strange cache: chests of armor and drawings of steam kettles and grain-making trees. The drawings are the reason the domain has windmills. Scavengers still dig here.

The Twin Mills

The steam sawmills of the Harlans and Bledsoes, standing far away from Mortilis and across the Mourfa from each other. Since the feud, they have both been out of use. Both families' descendants have sued for them, and neither has won.

The Unmarked Rows

A quiet stretch at the edge of the Scabland where the Quelling's dead were buried without markers or grims. Mortilisians say it is a pauper's field. Elton Dutro tends it, and Harvey McSpaniel's ledger is written in the rows.

The Cuju House

The family's home on Founders' Row, hung with founders' relics and wards. Morgan keeps a study here that no one else enters.

The Hackles

Mourfa River

Though the river is not navigable, it is still a major part of Farellian industry. Watermills, lumber camps, and sawmills are founded by the riverside, and with it the chance for new settlements.

Sirius' Bite

An unnatural depression found at the center of Farelle, deep within the Hackles forest. It was formed when a meteor long ago crashed into the landscape of the Hackles. The site was named after the constellation of Sirius (which was named after one of Mort's sons). Today, it is where many of the canids of Farelle gather alongside their jackalwere betters to find mates and find food and battle other packs. Jack Karn occasionally attends such gatherings but feels like he's surrounded by dreadful stupidity after being there for too long.

The Jowldowns

The natural depression closest to Kaynis. The mining industry of Kaynis is sourced entirely from the bounty of coal and other natural resources within the Jowldowns.

The Scabland

The natural depression adjacent to Mortilis. This is also where the dead of Mortilis are interred. The name comes from how the Mortilisians believe their particular stretch of Farelle would have looked perfect (and better than Kaynis's) had it not been for such an ugly scab on the land.

Fairchance

One of the first Sang-Rush boomtowns emptied within a season of its founding. Its survivors became the first of the drifted feral-folk. A map nailed to the old assay office marks hollows that were all dens. It is still occupied by feral-folk today.

Muttlow

The settlement of Muttlow is the ruins of a village that are now inhabited by the feral-folk clan that gave it its name. The Muttlow clan is about 20 in number, and led by Garth Ray Muttlow. His residence (the largest one in the settlement) is the best kept (which isn't saying much). In the center of town, there is a fire pit, typically used to cook communal meals and sing folk songs and tell folk traditions (usually disparaging the tame-folk and praising the feral-folk).

Mourfaton

An abandoned village bordering the Mourfa River and the western Misty Border of Farelle, deep within the Hackles. It is currently being squatted by other feral-folk like Cole Digby.

Archer's Snarl

A village within the southwestern corners of Farelle, within the Hackles. The people of Archer's Snarl are considered to be feral-folk, but unlike other feral-folk, they are quite isolationist. They do not accost lost citizens of Mortilis or wayward travelers, as they

instead prefer to live off of the land and hunt its bounty. The people of Archer's Snarl resent the label of feral-folk given to them by the urbanites of Farelle. They are not murderous cannibals like the others, but they are shunned all the same for questioning what the march of progress has cost the land. Should there be any corner of Farelle that is spared from the rise and fall and rise again of civilization, Archer's Snarl hopes it is theirs.

Grover's Tooth

A village not too far away from Harper's Trail and the Mourfa River, in the western half of the Hackles before the bridge. It was where the first feral one of the domain was exiled to, and has been claimed by feral-folk and reclaimed by the wilds over the decades, with many quevari settling there. The people of Grover's Tooth are either quevari or half-quevari, and are led by Mrs. Beverly. Grover's Tooth is the last remaining quevari settlement, after the Quellings of 715 BC. Non-quevari do not know it is a quevari settlement.

The Bald

The bare slopes of cleared land by Mortilis, stripped in the Great Cutting and never fully recovered. Bramble and scrub cover them, and there are few blood-birches left. When the Mourfa overflows and creeks beside it flood as well, the water ends up by Mortilis. It floods worse every spring.

Drilfis

A newly formed settlement on the side of the Mourfa River, facing the Hackles River and bordering the eastern Misty Border. Founded by Geary Pendergast, this is where he and his new friend Erix Riston hope to marry primitive magic with contemporary technology.

Deadfall Creek

A boom town of some two hundred souls, sprung up eight years ago along a tributary of the Mourfa a half-day's ride north of Kaynis. This is where a Nosian surveyor's crew struck a rich shale seam while scouting rail routes for Burghardt Enterprises. Unlike most boomtowns, Deadfall Creek has held: the seam has proven deep, and the Burghardt name lends it a legitimacy that most of such settlements never get to enjoy. Rough plank buildings have started giving way to proper stone foundations, and the town boasts its own assay office, a company store, and a single, much-fought-over saloon.

The settlement takes its name from the old-growth trees felled to clear it, which locals still find half-buried and rotting when they dig new foundations. It also comes from a grimmer local joke: three separate parties of Kaynis rangers have gone missing scouting the treeline to the north, and nobody in town discusses it above a whisper. The dogs here are quieter than they ought to be, which the miners find more unsettling than open aggression would.

NPCs of Note

Kaynis

Arlo Shepherd

The overworked sheriff of Kaynis. With the recent mining boom, more people have moved to Kaynis from outside. While the foreigners usually don't cause any problems, it's the new residents from outside farmsteads or forested lodges that are the real headache. In the sheriff's eyes, they're not really tame—just a step removed from feral, and not a step far enough. On top of that, gambling and theft are rampant. With only him and a small number of deputies like Dominick Holland, there's not enough manpower to investigate every single thing.

Wade Lasley

The mayor of Kaynis. A stout fellow who takes his great stock in his family's pedigree, having lived in Kaynis since 100 years ago. His ancestors were the new authority after the Kaynis branch of the Cuju family died out, and he holds nothing against the Cujus personally. But if he wants to keep being in the town's good graces, he's happy to look displeased at Buck Cuju's arrival and make the latter's life more difficult and stain his reputation. Mayor Lasley is hoping that this mining boom will be Kaynis' big break—he made deals with companies from Nosos

to get the best mining industry tech they had Kaynis to keep the boom going.

Evan Eberline

A trinket merchant, prospector, and scavenger based in Kaynis. Evan Eberline is a man of many hats and is the second most eccentric figure in Kaynis–only because Jack Karn occasionally visits. Though he admires Jack Karn, Evan prefers to stay in Kaynis to peddle his wares. However, he's traveled to Mortilis enough in the last few years to know a thing or two about that settlement, as well as general rumors and hearsay about the Hackles, which he likes to share with any newcomers to Farelle.

Samuel "Sammy" Mendel

A mailman in Kaynis & husband of Molly Mendel. He has recently gone missing after taking a mail commission from Buck Cuju.

Despite his job being quite lucrative (the hazard pay has to be something worth), Sammy was unfortunately not good with his money and spent it more on wagers than he or his wife would like to publicly admit. The reward Buck Cuju was offering was enough to put his financial woes at ease—at least enough for him to consider another line of work like his wife had been begging him to do.

Molly Mendel

Wife of Samuel Mendel & a schoolteacher in Kaynis. While her home is as open to visitors as any Farellian home, there's a bit more room without Samuel. She deeply misses her husband and it has been hard for her to get through the usual lessons for the children. She is interested in visitors far more than the usual Farellian curiosity in outsiders—maybe they might have word of what happened to her husband or might have seen him. She hates Buck Cuju for putting her husband in harm's way, but she knows she would have hated anyone whom she suspected put Sammy in harm's way.

Since Sammy Mendel's disappearance, the schoolhouse has become something of an informal gathering point for neighbors checking in on Molly, whether or not their children are actually enrolled that week.

Buck Cuju

A citizen of Kaynis. For more, see *Factions* below.

Steve Kassel

The banker of Kaynis. He is one of the few people with a clear, unromantic view of exactly how much the current mining boom is built on Nosian money and extraction, as opposed to being a purely homegrown trend. More than that, Steve is skeptical of just how well Mayor Lasley negotiated with Burghardt Enterprises—it's one thing to give a dog a bone and another to give it the whole carcass. He keeps this opinion mostly to himself, as Mayor Lasley's deal is both popular and profitable, but has started to quietly advise a few of his more bearish clients to save against the day the coal runs thin.

Scott Huyk

A miner in Kaynis, working at the Burghardt Mine. He's on decent terms with Buck Cuju despite the coolness most of the city has shown the newcomer. Scott prefers to judge a man on whether he pulls his own weight, as opposed to what his family name brings.

Scott is also the leader of the Kaynis chapter of the Putdowners. While Scott knew that dogs were an occasional hazard of living in Farelle, he felt much more strongly when two of his six daughters were mauled to death by a coyote. However, his jaded demeanor after this incident is starting to color his view of his fellow Kaynisians. With the increase of gambling, theft, and other social vices due to the town's growing population and booming economy, Scott is starting to wonder if "going feral" is something that starts with moral rot. He's wondering if the Putdowners can act as a vigilant group of do-gooders and put down "feral-folk" before they can hurt someone.

Nathaniel Zollman

The mine foreman of the Burghardt Mine. Nathaniel proudly credits himself for keeping Kaynis's current economic boom running day to day & quota by quota. He answers to Burghardt Enterprises' Nosian overseers as much as he does to Mayor Lasley, which puts him in the uncomfortable position of enforcing outsider rules onto his own neighbors and townsfolk. He is not well loved for it, but even his harshest critics admit the mine hasn't had a serious accident under his strict watch.

Jean Schezelt

A well-known gambler in Kaynis. He's well known for being one of the few people who can stand "Cheatin'" Charlie Cowen for long periods of time. Jean claims this is because he's a better player than everyone gives him credit for; most of Kaynis suspects that he's better than anyone else at pretending not to notice when he's being cheated. In truth, Jean Schezelt is happy to get in Charlie's good graces for his own reasons—see "Jacks of All Trades" for more.

Jed Conley

Kaynis' sole remaining mailman. With Sammy Mendel's disappearance, Jed finds himself dreadfully overworked. Thankfully, his fellow Farellians give him grace and lots of patience with how long he takes to get letters delivered. If only the foreigners did so too!

After Sammy disappeared, Jed dreads being asked to take the Harper's Trail run himself, and tries to put off any intercity mail to another time, even if it's inconvenient. He hopes to get help from either fellow townsfolk or friendly foreigners.

Solomon Tahns

A popular boxer in Kaynis. Solomon detests the rough-and-tumble fighting that has become popular in Kaynis and Mortilis, and hopes to show the people of his city that there's both fun and honor in martial combat sports. Solomon is looked at as a local celebrity by the newly minted mining families, who see in him proof that a Kaynisian man can still make a name for himself through pure grit instead of a "softer" profession of selling goods.

Dominick Holland

A once-popular track & field athlete in Kaynis and current deputy sheriff. Dominick enjoyed fame in Kaynis until he was accused by a former lover—one Letty Garwick—of being a dogman. Dominick's grape and nut allergy meant that he could not readily disprove the accusation, and the scandal ruined his reputation before the local authorities could find other ways to conclusively clear his name. He now works as a deputy to Sheriff Shepherd and laments his lost glory days.

Dread Possibility: Killings in Kaynis

Dominick Holland respects Sheriff Shepherd for clearing his name, but knows that the man doesn't always notice everything that he should. That's why he felt confident in killing Letty Garwick out of revenge and feeding her body to the wild dogs of Farelle. Since that moment, he has gained a taste for murder, and is Kaynis' first and very own serial killer. He's used his position as deputy sheriff to help cover up his own crimes and has benefited from the folksy and warm nature of the Farellian people in taking things at their word. So far, he has killed six townsfolk since Letty Garwick, over the course of two years. However, he's increasingly troubled by the presence of foreigners in Farelle—they're not as easy to dupe. As for his next target, Dominick has been jealous of Solomon Tahns for quite some time.

Mortilis

Manford Wine

A moonshine brewer and distiller in Mortilis, and brother of Lorenz Wine. Manford hadn't intended for his moonshine to be so profitable and insists that his product is just a hobby that got out of hand. Whatever his true reasons may be, much of the city's unofficial economy runs through his stills. He and his brother Lorenz get along well enough, but they butt heads over which brother truly deserves credit for

the pair's success. It was Manford's idea to change their last name from Rowding to Wine.

Lorenz Wine

A moonshine smuggler and brother of Manford Wine. Lorenz has a reputation for being able to not only travel undetected through the Hackles, but also to avoid losing anything he's smuggling to its dangers. Otherwise, Lorenz attempts to meet with the authorities of Mortilis and beg them to reconsider the prohibition of alcohol.

Newman Lancaster III

The mayor of Mortilis. This is a role he holds with the tacit understanding that the Cuju family's approval matters more to his continued tenure than any vote ever could. Newman is a capable enough administrator when left to his own devices, but has learned to read the moods of Morgan Cuju like the weather. He does not take any major decision without first feeling out where the family—or more importantly, where she specifically—stands.

Ottis Scudder

A lumberjack in Mortilis, working the timberline outside the city limits. He is skilled in felling and handling blood birch and doesn't put much stock into the old stories about dogs avoiding the groves. He's much more interested in the premium the lumber fetches.

James "Jimmy" McClean

A ranger and up-and-coming monster hunter. Jimmy is skilled enough to be useful but inexperienced & overconfident enough to be a liability for other outfits like the Putdowners.

Harriet Daniels

A furrier in Mortilis and one of the few tradespeople in the domain who deals professionally in dog pelts, sourced from individual donations and culling parties like the Putdowners. Harriet is unsentimental about the work in a way that unsettles outsiders more than it does any Farellian—to her, a dead dog is simply raw material, no different from timber or ore. She's built a modest but reliable trade supplying coats and trim to both Mortilis's elite and the odd Nosian merchant curious about "frontier fashion."

Dread Possibility: Puppy Mill

Dogs in Farelle have always been considered a perpetual thorn in the side of humanity, always yipping at their heels. The very concept of domesticating and taming such wild creatures, let alone owning them, is both laughable and unheard of. Farellians don't understand the foreigners who do so, but they do not know better.

Harriet Daniels has found a way to make her business far more profitable. The pelts of short-haired dogs grow coarse as they get older, whereas the fine, soft fur of puppies is a top-selling item to unscrupulous buyers. She keeps the puppies in a rudimentary cage in her attic. Thanks to Farelle being so full of dogs, the sound of barking and yipping is one that residents have learned to tune out, and no one would think to suspect her of such a deed. The skinned puppies feed the living ones or they feed Harriet and her guests.

What Harriet doesn't know is that she accidentally captured a puppy belonging to a jackalwere. The jackalwere Arlix is furious that her pup has been captured and plans to expose Harriet Daniels to the rest of the community.

Leonor Whitesel

A miller in Mortilis. She is responsible for turning much of the region's grain harvest into something the city can actually eat through the leaner months. She's known for extending quiet credit to farmers who've had a bad Reckoning, a kindness she frames as good business rather than charity, in proper Farellian fashion.

Judith Trimmer

A cooper in Mortilis. Many of the barrels the Wine brothers' smuggle their moonshine are of her make, though she has no idea that they're up to something disreputable. Her craftsmanship is regarded well enough that she rarely lacks work, and she's known

to trade favors for juicy small-town gossip. As such, she's quite well informed for any visitors looking to know who's who and what's what.

Garret Leer

A trapper in Mortilis and a member of the Putdowners. He is a supporter of Scott Huyk's ideas, but for now respects Bradley Crocker too much to challenge the latter's authority.

Other Settlements

Drilfis

Beth Steffy

A clockmaker who heard of Geary Pendergast's new settlement and decided to try her luck. While she doubts how effective magic will be for her chosen profession, she does see promise in being ahead of the curve. She's on good terms with Clea Fardy.

Clea Fardy

A prospector who was interested in Geary Pendergast's new settlement due to its focus on magic. According to Clea, she grew up knowing some cursory folk magic from her grandmother, and wanted to get more in touch with her roots. She's especially interested in how magical spears or ammunition can be made—she is a young woman all by herself after all, so she'd love to know how to defend herself with such tools.

Secretly, Clea Fardy is the human guise of Jilira, daughter of Jack Karn. See the *Who's Doomed* for more.

Erix Riston

An Outlander artificer from the nation of Breland, of the world of Eberron. After being drawn into the Mists, he was set upon by wild coyotes and nearly died, had it not been for the timely intervention of Geary Pendergast. Nursed back to health in the latter's new settlement of Drilfis, Erix expressed interest in Geary's tinkering and learned about the tinkerer's hope to create magical technology. Coming from the world of Eberron, Erix found this a reasonable and forward-thinking course of action, and is currently helping Geary with his attempts while recovering.

Geary Pendergast

A stubborn, soft-spoken man in his fifties, and a former tinkerer of Kaynis who spent years watching Evan Eberline and the beloved Jack Karn take his customers. He left for the Hackles with his wife Nell and their two children to found Drilfis, where he found a workshop of Outlander notes and taught himself artificing. Geary believes magic is a tool that can be used courageously, and he wants to prove Kaynis wrong about it. He treats Erix Riston as a friend and Clea Fardy as an apprentice, and has no idea she is a dogwoman in disguise.

Mourfaton

Cole Digby

An outlaw who was banished from Mortilis for grave-robbing. Cole Digby met up with a group of other outcasts and outlaws and are now squatting in Mourfaton. Cole Digby and his posse fight with other feral-folk clans and settlements while scavenging for useful oddities and resources in the Hackles. To get items that can't be found or made in the wilderness, Cole Digby has a cordial business relationship with Kaynis tinkerer Evan Eberline. He and a few others have decided to squat in the abandoned village of Mourfaton.

Grover's Tooth

Mrs. Beverly

See NPCs of Note under Bloodhounds.

Tammy Beverly

A younger member of the Quevari clan at Grover's Tooth. Since the whole clan is headed by Mrs. Beverly as the matriarch, Tammy is Mrs. Beverly's "niece." She is sent to trade with Kaynis or Mortilis when the settlement needs goods it cannot produce by itself. Tammy is interested in interacting with the tame-folk, and hopes to meet a young man that she can get married to, and even introduce him to the colony. She dislikes the way the tame-folk refer to her and her people.

Clyde Sautler (née Beverly)

A hunter and seasonal farmer who works in Mortilis. Clyde likes to leave Mortilis and go hunting on his own when the moon's full, but comes back a few nights later to work again in Mortilis. He says it gives him peace and quiet. He isn't a dogman—he drinks too much grape juice for that—and he's a regular Mortilisian by any other stretch.

Clyde goes back to see his family in Grover's Tooth when the blood-moon rises over Farelle. He is Mrs. Beverly's eyes and ears in Mortilis due to his half-quevari lineage, and hopes to entice foreigners to join him on one of his "hunting trips".

Archer's Snarl

Petra Snarl

The matriarch of Archer's Snarl. Petra has lived long and has seen how much places in Farelle have grown. However, she's also seen how much that things stay the same no matter the changes—boom towns and frontier villages still struggle against the wild, no matter how advanced their gadgets and gizmos. She's perfectly happy with her suit of armor and her bow and arrow.

Magnolia Snarl

Petra's granddaughter. She believes that some middle ground between the attitudes "progress at all costs and with no pauses" and "returning to nature" is possible, but struggles to find it in her community or others. She has seen Clyde Sautler leave Mortilis to go on his hunting trips and has noticed odd behavior from him, but doesn't know how to tell the Mortilisians without them disbelieving her. She may not like them, but they should know if one of their own is acting strangely (or worse, is a dogman).

Feral Folk

Garth Ray Muttlow

Leader of the cannibal hillbilly Muttlow clan of the Muttlow settlement. Garth Ray and his family were known for allowing strangers into their home and feeding them and helping them on their way to Kaynis or Mortilis. In truth, they killed and ate as many foreigners they accepted in as they helped, and were only discovered when an adventuring group fled their residence on the outskirts of the Hackles and reported it to Sheriff Shepherd and other townsfolk of Kaynis. Together, the mob burnt the original Muttlow residence to the ground and chased the family into the Hackles. Afterwards, Garth Ray Muttlow and his family joined up with other exiled and "feral" Farellians and made their own settlement in the Hackles—far enough away from Harper's Trail to remain discreet but close enough to hunt unwary travelers for their flesh and steal their valuables. This is Garth's way of getting payback on the 'upstanding' and 'civilized' folk who chased him into the wilds.

Rosie Blount

A mid-40s woman leading her own extended family in the Hackles. The Blounts live in a pit dwelling near a gorge deep in the forest and have gone as feral as the Muttlows, resorting to cannibalism themselves. The two clans are bitter rivals over hunting ground and the flesh of travelers, and the Blounts are just as ready to fight the Muttlows and any other feral-folk who wander near their gorge as they are the tame-folk.

Ross Krank

A red-headed man who was banished from Mortilis for stealing from the Mint. He now sells his knowledge of its vaults to anyone who will pay in food or whiskey. He is a declared exile, and he is thoroughly unrepentant.

Hank Hulbert

A former Burghardt Mine hand from Nosos who walked out after a collapse killed his crew and never went back to Kaynis, drifting from camp to camp with a pickaxe on his back and willing to work for food. He won't discuss the mine, and he flinches at any sound like a groaning timber or tumbling rocks.

Beth Pettibone

A runaway from a failing boomtown who was declared feral for stealing seed grain during a bad Reckoning season. She feels vindicated by the fact

that the theft was the only thing that kept her alive through the winter. She is now an accomplished forager and a poor thief, and she is ashamed of the second and proud of the first.

Tobias Putnum

A gentle, half-starved man who was driven out of Kaynis after a neighbor accused him of being a dogman because he wouldn't drink grape juice. He isn't a dogman, his stomach is just too sensitive and he doesn't like the taste in his mouth. He now wanders the treeline (being shunned by the tame-folk) and lives on what he can trade with other feral-folk in the woods. Due to his isolation, he's started to go a bit mad and believe his accuser was right about something.

Laurence "Old Ren" Hobbler

A weathered feral folk living on the fringes of the Hackles. Unlike most feral folk, he is part of no clan. He is tolerated by a few of the smaller feral-folk settlements in exchange for doing work for them (like hunting or fishing). Ren doesn't consider himself dangerous (and isn't unless annoyed) but has long stopped bothering to explain himself to tame-folk who assume the worst. He knows the Hackles better than most rangers and can serve as a guide, so long as you pay him in food.

Lillian Hoague

A hard, sharp-eyed woman from a family that has always lived in the forest and never called itself feral, though the cities do. She guides travelers around the wilder clans for a fee, and she trusts nobody who owns a rifle.

Non-Farellians

Dorothy Dwan

A visitor from Paridon, residing in Mortilis. Dorothy appreciates the natural beauty of Farelle, as it strongly reminds her of Paridon's lost countryside. She finds the Farellians a quaint and curious sort of people—they'll never be as sophisticated as a Paridoner, but they don't have to be. They're quite charming with their earnest-yet-simple ways, and maybe she could learn something from how pleased they are at life. She is therefore critical of the idea floated about by her Paridoner compatriots of making Farelle into something of a protectorate or colony of Zherisia.

Charlie Cowen

A Nosian businessman, representing the interests of his boss, Adrian Burghardt and Burghardt Enterprises. Derisively referred to as "Cheatin' Charlie" by folk in Kaynis who swear that Charlie swindled them or cheated them when gambling. Charlie sees Farelle as a very profitable backwater and looks forward to the pay raise he'll receive from his bosses for signing such lucrative deals.

Factions, Cabals, and Secret Societies

The Putdowners

The Public Face

The Putdowners are the main culling party responsible for handling ferocious canines in Farelle. Originally established by Bradley Crocker in Mortilis, the group has a chapter in Kaynis and they are always looking for volunteers to put down any mangy mutt that's causing a problem.

The Hidden Face

There are some in the Putdowners—like Scott Huyk and Garret Leer—who believe the group's purpose in putting down feral creatures can be extended to more than dogs. Specifically, putting down people who either turn feral or are at risk of turning feral. No one would mind such frontier justice, right? While Crocker disapproves of such conduct, he looks the other way as the Putdowners grow in popularity. They need the manpower to keep back the hounds yipping at civilization's heels, even if they have strange ideas. By letting such ideas fester, he might be too late to put the group to heel and may be upstaged by them.

Allies & Enemies

Currently, the Putdowners are well liked by the Farellians and are on good terms with foreigner adventurer groups.

NPCs of Note

Bradley Crocker

Background

Bradley Crocker used to think that the dogs had a tough shake of things. While he didn't try to tame them, he did think that maybe, had they not been so wild, they'd have made good companions. But such was not to be, and Bradley grew up wondering why the dogs were always so ferocious but accepting it for what it was. He didn't see a reason to hate them—they're animals, they can't think like he does. That mindset changed after one fateful day in 732 BC, when he went out fishing on the Mourfa and left his wife and children at their cabin out in the farmlands by the Hackles. It was when he returned to his cabin that he saw a dogman—bigger and stronger than anything he'd ever seen before—as well as a pack of jackals eating his family alive. Enraged, he charged at the dogman but was knocked to the ground, his face scarred from its claws. He got back up and saw the jackals escaping, with the dogman cackling all the while. Fueled by fury and adrenaline, Bradley chased the dogman as far as he could, until he and his pack disappeared into the Hackles. Since that day, Bradley vowed to eradicate the canine menace himself.

Current Sketch

If every dog in the domain would die, Bradley Crocker would be all the happier for it. He still remembers chasing the dogman that killed his family and wants it dead. To that end, Bradley leads the Putdowners—Farelle's traveling group of hunters and trappers, trained to hunt dogs and dogmen alike. He's on good terms with Jack Karn and appreciates the latter for sticking his neck out for them so often. He's also on good terms with other itinerant bands of adventurers operating in the area, though many of those groups who come from lands on better terms with dogs are unsettled by Bradley's zeal in killing canines. Bradley is currently based in Mortilis, but can be found throughout the domain.

The Bloodhounds

The Public Face

The Bloodhounds are not known to the public whatsoever. The nearest thing to a public face is a rumor in the Foxhole that some Mortilisians "don't sleep right" under the nights of a full moon, which is easily written off as idle gossip.

The Hidden Face

The Bloodhounds are a small cult of half-quevari, based in Mortilis. Because they are half-quevari, they have an easier time blending in and resisting the blood moon. They experience sleeplessness and a distant hunger, but still retain their faculties. They pass as ordinary Mortilisians and have no problems consuming grape juice.

Their creed is that the Quelling was a slaughter of their kin, even though the quevari fought back. They believe the people of Farelle know this but choose to be willfully ignorant, and they mean to make them face it.

The purpose of the Bloodhounds is to learn necromantic magic and to capture a young scion of the Cuju family (whom they deem chiefly responsible for driving the quevari from their homeland), so they may sacrifice that person to the Queen of the Crossroads under the blood moon. This ritual is meant to animate the dead quevari of the domain. Then they shall be led against Mortilis.

Because the quevari will be rendered rabidly vicious during the blood moon, only the half-quevari can enact the ritual and keep their faculties. Thankfully, their status as half-quevari will protect them from their kinsmen's rage, as quevari blood does not target one another even when in the throes of madness.

Mrs. Beverly gives the Bloodhounds their instructions through Clyde Sautler and Tammy Beverly, who carry her word between Grover's Tooth and the city. Few members have ever met her, and none have refused her.

Allies & Enemies

The Bloodhounds serve Mrs. Beverly, and through her, the Queen of the Crossroads. They are enemies of the Cuju Family.

They watch the Cuju children closely. Beatrix, Carol, Jensen, Josephine, Wyatt, and Hester Cuju are the likeliest targets, and the family has no idea.

NPCs of Note

Mrs. Beverly

Background

Mrs. Susan Beverly was born in the small hills of the Hackles as one of the quevari. She was only a teenager when the Quelling—a pogrom against the feral-folk of Farelle, of whom the quevari were a major portion—occurred. She never forgot the sight of her own clan being run down like animals by people who called themselves civilized, nor the particular cruelty of watching the very same folk who prided themselves on Farellian hospitality decide, all at once, that hospitality had limits. She escaped into the deeper, darker corners of the Hackles bordering the Mists that even the hunting parties wouldn't follow. There she cursed the name of the tame-folk and prayed to the folk deities of Farelle's past for vengeance.

To Mrs. Beverly, something indeed answered. After praying to the Queen of the Crossroads, she soon found other survivors and received visions and dreams of how to restore the quevari to Farelle.

She has since spent the following decades rebuilding the quevari—finding survivors of the Quelling and learning about other lands where quevari fled to and appealing to them, imploring them to return to the homeland. Grover's Tooth was her original home and where the first feral one was exiled to the Hackles. It regrew slowly around her, drawing in more and more survivors and their children, until it became the last and only quevari settlement in Farelle.

Current Sketch

Mrs. Beverly has never married, but she still holds the title of Mrs due to being the matriarch of the remaining quevari of Farelle. Mrs. Beverly believes that the land rightfully belongs to the quevari, and hopes to unite the scattered quevari clans back to Farelle and keep the land for themselves. Grover's Tooth alone is not enough, as it is merely a foothold instead of the whole home reclaimed. To that end, Mrs. Beverly has started a secret society known as the Bloodhounds, composed of half-quevari living in Mortilis, with the goal of undermining the Cuju family. Through the blood sacrifice of one with Cuju blood to the Queen of the Crossroads, the Bloodhounds hope to resurrect the dead quevari and besiege Mortilis. That city will be where the rest of the quevari people will resettle, once the tame-folk are hunted to extinction.

Mrs. Beverly herself rarely leaves Grover's Tooth these days, preferring to let younger clan members like Tammy Beverly and Clyde Sautler serve as her eyes and ears among the tame-folk. She is not a monster in her own estimation; simply a woman who watched her people nearly erased once, and who has decided, with the same cold patience the Farellians claim as their own virtue, that it will never happen again if she has anything to say about it.

Harvey McSpaniel

A Mortilis rope-maker and the Bloodhounds' organizer. He keeps a ledger of every quevari killed in the Quelling, so their remains can be found and raised. The tame-folk also took casualties, because the quevari fought back, and some families have quietly kept those deaths and their kin out of the public record. Harvey needs to be sure of every body he lists: he will not spend a ritual on a tame-folk corpse killed in self-defense. He is calm, orderly, and patient, and his care is a matter of hatred as much as method. He wants his dead to be the right ones.

Elton Dutro

A gravedigger in the Scabland, and the cult's necromancer in training. He is entirely self-taught from a grimoire scavenged in the Hackles and sold to him by that tinkerer Jack Karn. That old fool had no idea what he gave Elton!

Elton tends the graves of quevari long dead (which are unmarked and have no grims to guard them) and

hears—or thinks he hears—the ground respond to him. Beyond being a Bloodhound, he is finding great joy in learning dark magic and wonders what more he can do with it.

Anne Angstead

A quiet, well-liked schoolteacher's assistant who is the Bloodhounds' recruiter, watching children and young adults who suffer restless nights and steering them, gently, toward the circle. She is the one most likely to approach a wandering half-quevari in the domain and offer them a place to truly belong.

The Cuju Family

The Public Face

The founding family of Farelle. After the Kaynis Riots of 660 BC, only the Mortilis branch of the family remain, under matriarch Morgan Cuju.

The family's real power is quiet. It holds the charter to the Grand Mortilis Mint, so every Howler, Growler, Yipper, and Barker in the domain comes from a Cuju-controlled press. It also holds a sizable share of the mill and timber charters, and a reputation that mayors and elders would rather not test.

Recently, ambitious scions of the family like Buck Cuju have decided to return to Kaynis and see how little or how far their family's pedigree can get them.

The Hidden Face

The family's fortunes are far poorer than their name suggests. The family mortgaged its fields to rebuild after the Great Storm, sold much of them to Kaynis money, and carried gambling debts up at the tables of Jackanapes' Row. It survives on its name and the Mint.

The Cuju Family branch under Morgan Cuju is envious of Kaynis' success in recent years, and wants to gain a decisive advantage against their longtime rival. That being said, certain members of the family like Morgan don't want Mortilis' success to come at the cost of selling out to foreigners like Kaynis has. Others like Grace and her immediate family disagree, and are looking to undermine Morgan's grip on city affairs to make outside merchants fill their coffers. Finally, others like Buck want neither, and think the family should earn its standing in Kaynis the way anyone else would.

The Cujus tell the story of Elle's gift, that she could tame the wild dogs, but not the rest of it. Mort and Harper were the domain's first exiles, and the Mortilis branch descends from them. The Cuju account also keeps something the public tale lost: the wild man called "Jack" who encouraged Harper, whom the family remembers as a stranger with a cart, and which some family elders have suspected for generations may be one and the same with the kindly tinkerer of Farelle and the archetypal Jack of the Jack Tales.

Allies & Enemies

The Cuju Family is firmly entrenched in Mortilis, and have the elder council and the mayor at their beck and call. They are hostile to the Nosian and Paridoner merchants and business interests that come to their city.

They are wary of Kaynis and Mayor Lasley, whose family replaced the Kaynis Cujus, and they have a cooler relationship with Jack Karn than anyone would guess, since their family stories are the ones that remember him best.

Unknown to them, the Bloodhounds are enemies, and the Cuju children are their targets.

Notable Members

Morgan Cuju

Background

Morgan Cuju grew up with a sense of pride in the Cuju Family of Farelle. It was because of their family that their society managed to survive for so long and tame this rugged wilderness. Sadly, the Cuju family fell on hard times, even in Mortilis. The years between the Great Storm and Morgan's own early adulthood have seen the family's landholdings sold off piece by piece, with its civic influence reduced to no more than a respected surname of days gone by. This was coupled with poor harvests, gambling debts

from spendthrift scions, and other sorts of small-town scandals.

Morgan decided that unlike the other Cujus of her generation who made peace with genteel decline, she would not. She apprenticed herself to whomever could teach her whatever could give her family an edge. From this, she decided to learn magic despite the Farellians looking at it as a quaint and outdated tool from days gone by. She saw Kaynis claw its way to further prominence with coal and foreigner money while Mortilis remained a backwater by comparison. She couldn't stand to see the city of her ancestors look bad by comparison; Mortilis needed the Cujus to keep up

Current Sketch

Morgan is the current matriarch of the Mortilis branch of the Cuju family, at 40 years of age. This is despite the matriarch typically being the eldest female member of the family, as Morgan's mother died after the birth of her younger brother, Buck. She had married (her husband was a hunter who unfortunately died to a pack of jackals in the Hackles) and had seven children. Three survived to the present day, with one being a young adult (in her 20s) and the other two still being teenagers and undergoing their apprenticeships.

Morgan Cuju believes in taking any advantage that can be offered. To that end, she is willing to believe in more superstitions and beliefs regarding magic than the rest of her family. In Morgan's mind, a gun can jam easily, with it being no fault of the user, but a spell can only fail if you're facing something more skilled or you're not skilled enough. She thus has 3 levels in the Wizard class (specializing in enchantment) and can reliably detect whether an item is magical. With a few days' time, she can also understand the properties of such an item and how to use it. Morgan's understanding of enchantment has also helped her negotiations with the foreigners interested in Mortilis.

Morgan Cuju is also interested in anything relating to the history of the Cuju family. She believes that her ancestor, Mort Cuju, should have had ownership over both Kaynis and Mortilis, and resents Kayn Cuju and his family for starting the divisive feud. If there's any way to secure the success of Mortilis—even if it must be at the expense of Kaynis—Morgan is willing to take it.

Grace Cuju

Younger sister of Morgan and older sister of Buck Cuju, wife of Perry Cuju, and mother of Beatrix, Carol, and Jensen Cuju.

She is the family's practical mind, an accountant of debts, and she knows exactly how much or how little the Mint can cover. She holds that the family's pride will bankrupt it and has begun taking meetings with Nosian merchants that Morgan doesn't know about.

Perry Cuju

Husband of Grace Cuju and father of Beatrix, Carol, and Jensen Cuju.

He is a mill owner's son who married into the family and took its name, as is the custom in a matriarchal society. Perry is friendly, well connected with outside traders, and more ambitious for the family than Grace is. This is a source of tension in their marriage, despite them both disagreeing with Morgan's approach.

Buck Cuju

Prominent citizen of Kaynis. Younger brother of Morgan Cuju and Grace Cuju of the Mortilis Branch.

Buck Cuju moved to Kaynis from Mortilis primarily to get out from his eldest sister's thumb. Though he respects her authority, he feels muzzled by her specific vision of how to restore the family's prominence being different from his own. Despite this disagreement in vision, he keeps in touch with her via mailmen, but is enjoying the newfound freedom he finds in Kaynis.

While many of the upper-class folk of Kaynis look down upon Buck for his connection to the Cuju family (due to the Riots of 660 BC), he is an inspiration to the working-class folk around him. Though Buck is annoyed at the family's disgrace in the town, he also finds the opportunity to prove his naysayers wrong and rise above the social hurdles

before him as rewarding in their own right. So far, Buck is the only Cuju who has tried to earn a living outside the family's name, and he is quietly resentful that the Mint has never offered him a seat. His working-class following in Kaynis is real, and Wade Lasley knows it.

Should you and your table run the adventure *Wishing for Bones* (found within the r/ravenloft subreddit), Buck Cuju has found the bones of one of the Founding Four. His goal to deliver these remains to his sister in Mortilis is both his main motivation in the adventure and a crucial part of the adventure's background.

Irwin Cuju

Father of Morgan, Grace, and Buck Cuju. Husband of Susanna Cuju.

He is old and tired, and defers to Morgan as custom requires, but he is the last person alive who remembers the family's founding tales as they were told before the Storm. He has never told anyone whose parts he thinks are false.

Susanna died during Buck's childbirth. Irwin has (unjustly) resented Buck for this ever since, and is glad to see him gone in Kaynis.

Susanna Cuju

Mother of Morgan, Grace, and Buck Cuju. Wife of Irwin Cuju, and former matriarch of the Cuju family. Died during Buck's childbirth.

Susanna did not spend much time with Morgan and Grace, but she did encourage them to bring glory back to the family.

Silas Cuju (née Bledsoe)

Husband of Morgan and father of Josephine, Wyatt, and Hester.

He was a hunter and the son of a Bledsoe mill family, one of the two houses from the Hog Hassle. Under Farellian custom he took his wife's name, as Perry did. He died six years ago to a pack of jackals in the Hackles.

Josephine "Josie" Cuju

Eldest daughter of Morgan and Silas Cuju, and older sister of Wyatt and Hester Cuju.

As a young adult in her 20s, she runs the family's books at the Mint and is being groomed to take over. Josie has never shown a spark of magic— Morgan hides her disappointment poorly—and she resents being the family's bookkeeper while her mother chases the arcane. She is the child most likely to side with Grace's plan to court outside money.

Wyatt Cuju

Eldest son of Morgan and Silas Cuju, and younger brother to Josephine Cuju and older brother to Hester Cuju.

A teenage apprentice to a Mortilis smith and the family's most ordinary-looking Cuju. He is proud, quick-tempered, and eager to be seen as a real Farellian by carrying a rifle working with his tools (sans magic). He idolizes his late father and is the one most likely to go off into the Hackles and hunt dogs as vengeance. Hopefully he does not follow his father's footsteps too closely.

Hester Cuju

The youngest daughter of Morgan and Silas Cuju and younger sister to Josephine and Wyatt Cuju.

She is an apprentice to a Mortilis apothecary and is reserved but passionate about medicine. Her dream is to become a great doctor and learn better ways to decrease infant mortality and maternal death at childbirth in Farelle, after hearing what happened to her grandmother, Susanna.

Beatrix Cuju

First daughter of Grace and Perry Cuju, and older sister to Carol and Jensen Cuju.

She is on the edge of adulthood and eager to follow her cool uncle Buck's example and make a name for herself outside the family's reputation. She's hoping to become an adventurer and see places like Zherisia or Valachan.

Carol Cuju

Second daughter of Grace and Perry Cuju, and younger sister to Beatrix Cuju and older sister to JensenCuju.

Carol is sharp and observant, with an interest in mathematics and how things work. She'd love to be a tinkerer or a banker and can't decide which one speaks to her more.

Jensen Cuju

Son of Grace and Perry Cuju, and younger brother to Beatrix and Carol Cuju.

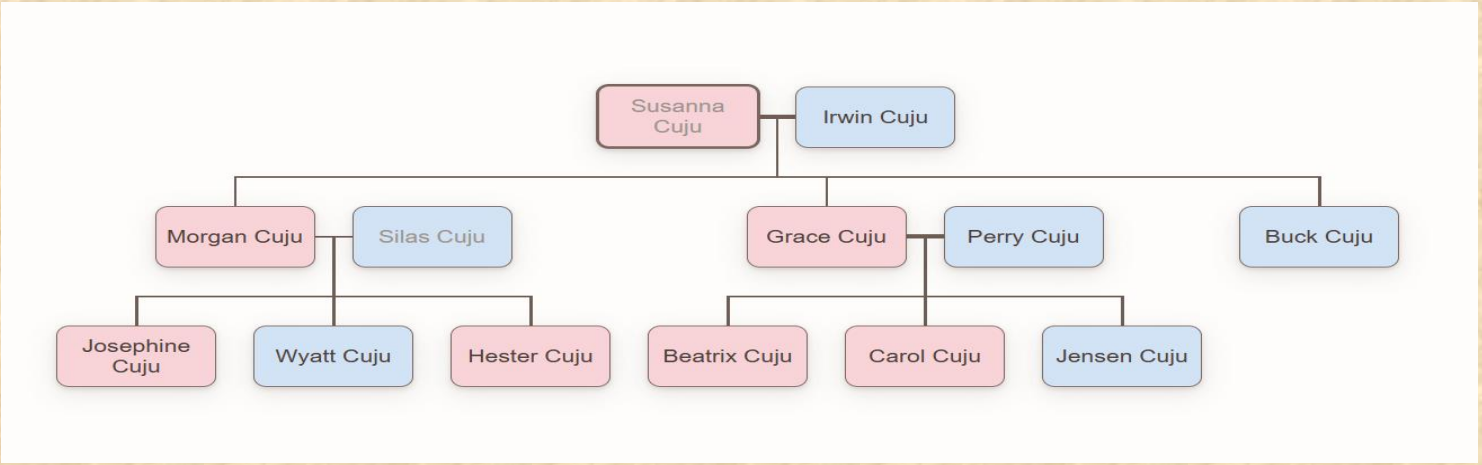
Jensen is a quiet and shy child, who gets along well with his older sisters but has a hard time learning. Still, he tries his best.

Jensen is also a child who, alone among the family, gets along well with dogs of all kinds, which the family has not yet noticed.

Dread Possibility: Cuju Blood & Elle's Gift

The family has long held, without proof, that the gift of taming dogs runs in their line (since Kayn and Elle's line is extinct). No living Cuju has shown it, but it is plausible—Elle and Harper were sisters.

The family's dog-taming gift, if it exists, has skipped every Cuju for generations. It may reawaken in Jensen. A DM can decide whether the Bloodhounds want him for the ritual and whether Morgan would notice before someone else does.



The Farellian Hero

Rangers are a common sight within Farelle, as many serve as useful guides through the ill-understood Hackles that separate Kaynis and Mortilis. Rangers are also responsible for organizing most culling parties to keep the dog population under control. Due to these services, rangers are frequently deputized by the local law enforcement when the latter's hands are too full to handle problems, and rangers receive a warmer-than-usual reception from the already welcoming folk of Farelle. Of course, that is assuming the ranger does not have a canine companion—such characters are considered feral and are not allowed near major urban centers like Kaynis or Mortilis.

One unique variation of ranger in Farelle is the mailman. Treat this as a ranger-fighter multiclass with the following unique features & traits:

Sturdy Legs. A mailman's base walking speed increases by 10 feet, and they are considered under the effects of the longstrider spell at all times while traveling on foot without encumbrance.

A Nose For Trouble. A mailman has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) and Wisdom (Survival) checks made to detect ambushes, tracks, or approaching canids specifically, reflecting the honed instincts that

keep a courier alive long enough to make a second run.

Outrun When Outmatched. Once per short rest, when a mailman is reduced to half their hit point maximum or below by an attack, they can use their reaction to move up to their speed without provoking opportunity attacks.

Grape & Grit. A mailman carries a supply of grape juice & macadamia oil to prove their humanity to a suspicious townsperson or to lather onto their weapons when dealing with wild dogs.

A mailman's life is a dangerous one, but the ones who last in that position become local legends. Their routes and near misses are retold alongside the Jack Tales themselves.

Due to Farellian distaste for magic, wizards, sorcerers, and warlocks are viewed as quaint tricksters to be kept at arms length at best, or as bad omens to be shunned from polite society and kept to the fringes and hills (along with the other feral-folk) at worst.

DM Sidebar: Playing With the Coward's Tool

A spellcaster PC in Farelle doesn't need to hide what they are, but the social friction is worth playing up rather than smoothing over. A Farellian NPC might address the rest of the party directly and treat the wizard as an afterthought, or ask (not always politely) why they didn't just bring a gun. This needn't ever block the party from help or hospitality—Farellians are too welcoming for that—but this provides a low-stakes way to remind players that they're guests in a culture with real and different opinions about how a person ought to solve their problems.

New Monsters

The Farellian Jackalwere

Mechanically (and in addition to what is stated under "Native Monsters", Farellian jackalweres have the following features and traits, on top of their current stat-blocks.

Speak with Canines. The jackalwere can communicate with any canine as if it shared a language, in any of its forms. This works on beasts and creatures of the canine type, but not on monsters that only resemble canines.

Weapon Immunity. All Farelllian jackalweres enjoy a form of weapon immunity.

- ***Weapon Immunity (Savage Weapons).*** The jackalwere is immune to damage from savage weapons. It takes normal damage from civilized weapons. This applies only to jackalweres born before the Great Storm.

- ***Weapon Immunity (Civilized Weapons).*** The jackalwere is immune to damage from civilized weapons, and takes normal damage from savage weapons. Jackalweres born after the Great Storm (740 BC) are born with this version of weapon immunity. Jack Karn and pre-existing jackalweres are quite envious.
  Savage weapons are unarmed strikes, natural weapons, and any weapon made without forged metal: clubs, greatclubs, quarterstaffs, slings, spears, javelins, darts, and bows firing arrows.
  Civilized weapons are any weapon of forged metal, plus crossbows and firearms. It is the DM's discretion of what a weapon is, should it not be easily classifiable. Cold-iron weapons are effective regardless of whether they are savage or civilized.

Humanoid Type. Farellian jackalweres are humanoids (human, shapechanger), not fiends. They can be affected by spells and effects that target

humanoids, and are not subject to effects that target only fiends.

Fixed Face. A descendant's human form is one appearance chosen at first transformation and never changed. This reflects their progenitor's inability to rid himself of the original tinker's visage.

Winter Torpor. In human form, a jackalwere loses the winter to torpor and appears bedridden with "winter sickness." It can be roused, but has disadvantage on attack rolls, ability checks, and saving throws until the Wakening.

Litter-Bond. A jackalwere mother knows the direction and distance of her pups within a few miles, and whether they're hurt or afraid. This ability no longer functions when a mother's pups reach full maturity.

Undetectable Scent. When in human form, jackalweres have a different scent than when they are in jackal or hybrid form. Only Jack Karn and those with the Kin-Scent salient ability can smell another jackalwere when in human disguise.

Keen Smell. The jackalwere has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell.

Other examples of salient abilities that Farellian jackalweres possess are listed below:

- ***Evasion.*** If the jackalwere is subjected to an effect that allows it to make a Dexterity saving throw to take only half damage, the jackalwere instead takes no damage if it succeeds on the saving throw, and only half damage if it fails.

- ***Rampage (jackal or hybrid form only).*** When the jackalwere reduces a creature to 0 hit points with a melee attack on its turn, the jackalwere can take a bonus action to move up to half its speed and make a bite attack.

- ***Practiced Swallow.*** Jackalwere Hiders can drink a mouthful of grape juice by making a Constitution save, and fake the reaction on a success.

- ***Borrowed Tools.*** Jackalwere Hiders have proficiency with firearms and any civilized weapon, and advantage on checks with scavenged magic items.

- ***Scapegoat.*** When a crowd or council is suspicious, a Hider can make a Persuasion check against a Wisdom (Insight) check to redirect that suspicion onto someone else.

- ***Cowardly Grace.*** Jackalwere Hiders can Disengage as a bonus action and receive advantage on Dexterity saving throws while moving away from enemies. Because Farellians despise cowardice, a Hider takes care to run in ways that look like bravery (such as supposedly getting back-up help or leading the danger away)

- ***Proud Form.*** Jackalwere Rebels prefer hybrid form and get advantage on Intimidation while in it.

- ***Run-Down.*** Jackalwere Rebels can Dash as a bonus action. If they move at least 20 feet straight at a Medium or smaller target and hit with a claw attack, the target makes a Strength save (DC 12) or falls prone.

- ***Rallying Howl.*** Once per short rest, Jackalwere Rebels can howl as a bonus action. This gives every canid within 60 feet advantage on attack rolls for a minute.

- ***Unschooled Hands.*** Jackalwere Rebels have disadvantage on any check with firearms, clockwork, or scavenged devices.

- ***Kin-Scent.*** Jackalwere Informers can smell another jackalwere within 60 feet, even in human form and across disguise.

- ***Jack's Ear.*** An Informer can whisper a short message to any canid within 5 feet. Because

Jack commands every canine in Farelle, the message reaches him within 1d4 hours, wherever he is.

- ***Listening for Whispers.*** Jackalwere Informers receive advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks to overhear conversation, and they can hear ordinary speech at 60 feet away.

- ***Turncoat's Tongue.*** Jackalwere Informers have advantage on Deception and Persuasion checks made to convince someone that the Informer is on their side.

- ***Craven Alarm.*** Jackalwere Informers can't be surprised due to their fear of being caught keeping them alert at all times. In exchange, they have disadvantage on saving throws against being frightened and against intimidation checks.

Farellian Quevari (Template)

Apply to any human NPC (commoner, guard, hunter, scout)

Type*:* humanoid (human, quevari).

Ability Score Changes*:* Strength +2, Constitution +1, Wisdom −2.

Senses. Advantage on Wisdom (Perception) and (Survival) checks that rely on smell.

Human Body. Quevari count as wholly human for the grape test and for any effect that targets humans or humanoids.

Animal Sympathy. Canids native to Farelle never attack a quevari unless attacked first, and the quevari can keep and domesticate them. They can cast animal friendship on canids at will.

Pack Tactics. The quevari has Advantage on an attack roll against a creature if at least one of the quevari's allies is within 5 feet of the creature and the ally doesn't have the Incapacitated condition.

Blood-Moon Rage. No save. From moonrise to dawn each night of the blood moon, the quevari gains advantage on Strength checks and saves, +2 damage on melee attacks, and resistance to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage. It attacks the nearest creature and cannot tell non-quevari friend from non-quevari foe. It cannot cast spells or concentrate. The rage ends only at dawn or if the quevari falls unconscious, and afterward it remembers little and gains one level of exhaustion.

Frenzied Aspect. While raging, each creature within 30 feet that can see the quevari must make a Wisdom saving throw (DC 13) or is frightened for 1 minute. A creature that succeeds is immune for 24 hours.

Tools at Hand. The quevari is proficient with improvised weapons, which deal 1d8 damage. In Farelle this means farm tools, mining picks, fence posts, and scavenged gear.

Feast (Bonus Action). While raging, the quevari can bite a grappled, prone, or incapacitated creature for 1d4 plus Strength modifier piercing damage and gains temporary hit points equal to the damage dealt.

Challenge. Increase CR by 1 while raging.

Farellian Half-Quevari (Template)

Apply to any human NPC, or use as a player race

Type*:* humanoid (human, quevari).

Ability *Score Changes:* Constitution +2, Wisdom +1.

Thin Blooded. Half-quevari have advantage on saves against charm and fear effects from canines, lycanthropes, and shapechangers, and advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell.

Human Body. Half-quevari count as wholly human for the grape test and for any effect that targets humans or humanoids.

Canine Calm. Native canids tolerate a half-quevari but will not obey them, and the half-quevari has proficiency in Animal Handling.

Blood-Moon's Pull. Each night of the blood moon, the half-quevari makes a Wisdom saving throw (DC 17, with advantage) or falls into the rage described

above until dawn. A night spent resisting counts as no rest, and after the final night the half-quevari gains one level of exhaustion.

Tools at Hand *(Thin-Blood)*. Half-quevari are proficient with improvised weapons, which deal 1d6 damage.

Borrowed Fury. Once per long rest, as a bonus action, the half-quevari can invite the rage of their kind deliberately for 1 minute, gaining advantage on Strength checks and saves and +1 melee damage. They then gain one level of exhaustion.

References & Inspirations

Current information on Farelle comes from the Ravenloft 2e splatbook *Realm of Terror*, with more information about Jack Karn coming from Ryan Naylor's article in the *Book of Sacrifices* netbook called "The Jackal Who Would Not Be A Coward."

Otherwise, much of the inspirations behind how I envision Farelle can be credited to being a mix of Gilded Age Appalachia, antebellum/1800s Southern United States, & Australia.

I credit *Deadlands Classic: Back East: The South* for giving me many ideas, as well as *Old Gods of Appalachia* (the podcast and the Monte Cook TTPRG) for the rural Appalachian horror vibes too. Same for *Deadlands* in general and the Weird West genre, as well as writers like Cormac McCarthy. Likewise for the films *The Hills Have Eyes* & *2,000 Maniacs*. Some research on the historical American Hatfield and McCoy feud also helped, as well as folk horror sources like Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*.

Finally, I'd like to give an earnest thanks to Jeremy16/Jeremy Roby and Ian Fordam for inspiring me with their ideas of Farelle and giving valuable feedback for this work. This gazetteer wouldn't be possible without them.



Lightlords of the Mistworld

by Tommaso "Mistmaster" Mazzoni

The lightlords are the most distinguishing feature of the Mistworld, setting it apart from the other interactions of the Ravenloft setting. The lightlords are foils to the darklords, the wrongdoers whose evil actions get punished in the Domains through various curses.

Who exactly are the lightlords?

They are usually people whose paths crossed with a darklord, one way or another. They might have been a victim, even the one which caused the darklord's fall, or they could have been a friend who, in similar circumstances, made opposite choices. Their powers and abilities are often tailored around the weaknesses of their darklord. They are often a part of the curse their darklord endures.

Being a lightlord means bearing a Burden, which is a sacrifice imposed on the lightlord. The Burden is usually something the lightlord can discard at any moment. The only reason a lightlord keeps the Burden on their back is out of a sense of responsibility for the land, or even for the darklord themselves. Lightlords are always good-aligned, and usually have the ability to force open the domain's borders when the darklord closes them. They can also hide themselves and a number of people from the darklord. In the Mistworld, it is possible, even if it happens quite rarely, that a darklord redeems themselves. Sometimes, they become the lightlord of their domain as another evil person takes the darklord mantle. In the same way, a lightlord who succumbs to their Burden can fall into darkness, becoming a darklord.

The Path of the Lightlord

The Path of the Lightlord can usually be articulated in 5 steps.

Step 1: The Valor. The wanna-be lightlord distinguishes themselves for their morality. The Mists take notice.

Step 2: The Crucible. The wanna-be lightlord is tested by life. If their morality holds, the Mists subtly reward them.

Step 3: The Temptation. Power can corrupt. The wanna-be lightlord is thrust into a position of power—political, religious, economical—and must use it for the common good without becoming obsessed with keeping it. If they stay on the straight and narrow, their supernatural blessings start to show.

Step 4: The Sacrifice. The wanna-be lightlord is subjected to a grievous betrayal, or has to endure a terrible test. If they stay faithful to themselves and their values, their own body changes, often allowing them to mimic and purify the trappings of darkness.

Step 5: The Choice. The wanna-be lightlord faces a last temptation, one which will keep offering itself to them: an easy way out. In refusing it, the lightlord places their Burden on their own back and embraces their duty in full. The Mists crown them in hard won glory.

The various type of Lightlords

Lightlords generally fall under one of these definitions:

- You have the **Wise Leader** (1), who holds the community together in spite of the darklord's foolishness.
- You have the **Guide** (2), who mentors people to help them fight the darkness.
- You have the **Protector** (3), who physically and/or magically protects people in their domain.
- You have the **Freedom Fighter** (4), who leads a rebellion against tyranny.
- You have the **Conscience** (5), which acts as the conscience of the darklord trying to stir them out of the darkness, helping the people around them in the meantime.
- You have the **Opposite** (6), which embodies the exact foil to the darklord. Maybe they have the same abilities, or they have completely opposite ones, but they are opposite poles in nature.
- You have the **Caretaker** (7), who responds to darkness by raising, disciplining, nurturing, and comforting others.
- You have the **Artist** (8), who inspires and promotes hope with their art.
- You have the **Chosen** (9), who has been powered by supernatural forces, even deities themselves, to oppose the agenda of a darklord.
- And you have the **Atoner** (10), someone who emerged from darkness and went all the way in the opposite direction.

A lightlord might overlap with more than a single archetype.

Examples

Here are examples of each archetype:

1) Both Nightking Ezekiel in Lazendrak and Earl Weathermay in Mordentshire are examples of **Wise Leaders** of their communities. One is a peaceful vampire who struggles to prevent vampires and mortals from being set on one another in Lazendrak, while the other is an ailing leader who can see the invisible world and wishes to protect the balance from the greedy hands of the furious darklord.

2) The three Mindfisk Sisters in Tepest and Theodore Everlast in Harrington are two examples of **Guides**. They mentor and guide from the background in spite of being, respectively, a coven of powerful bruja hags and a booksworn lich. But they do not think that they should hoist their darklords from their seats themselves, hurling fireballs and lightning. True change comes from people building the change themselves.

3) Ullmar Skellingtron of Skulland and Jurghen "Akanga" Vastish of Markovia are both an example of **Protectors**. Ullmar is a sapient skeleton who fights off threats to both mortals and undead in Skulland, while Jurghen is a human turned into a lion-man who protects his fellow broken-ones, the beast people, from both their creator and the humans who irrationally fear them.

4) Both Gondegal Adallyn in Falkovnia and the Red Lion in Gundarak are **Freedom Fighters**, fighting to depose an oppressive regime.

5) Sergei von Zarovich of Barovia and Irik Zal'honan of Darkon are each the **Conscience** of the darklord who killed them. Both still genuinely care for Strahd and Azalin, and they constantly try to steer them in a better direction.

6) Alanik Ray and Ivana Boritsi are both examples of **Opposites**. Alanik is a genius who uses his intelligence to understand the world and help the people, while Dominic D'Honaire uses his own intelligence to dominate and manipulate. Ivana is a beautiful, kind, and intelligent woman who uses her gifts and her riches to improve the lives of her fellow

Borcans, while Camille, her mother, uses them as a tool for her selfish desires.

7) The Blue Fairy in Collodi is an example of a **Caretaker**, ready to help but not shirking away from doling out the consequences to her protégés.

8) In Dorvinia, you have Natasha "the Storyteller" Dilisnya (fairy-touched young adult human, bard 15) as an example of an **Artist**. Her tales are appreciated by peasants and nobles alike, and even Ivan likes them, even if they tell him things he does not like to hear.

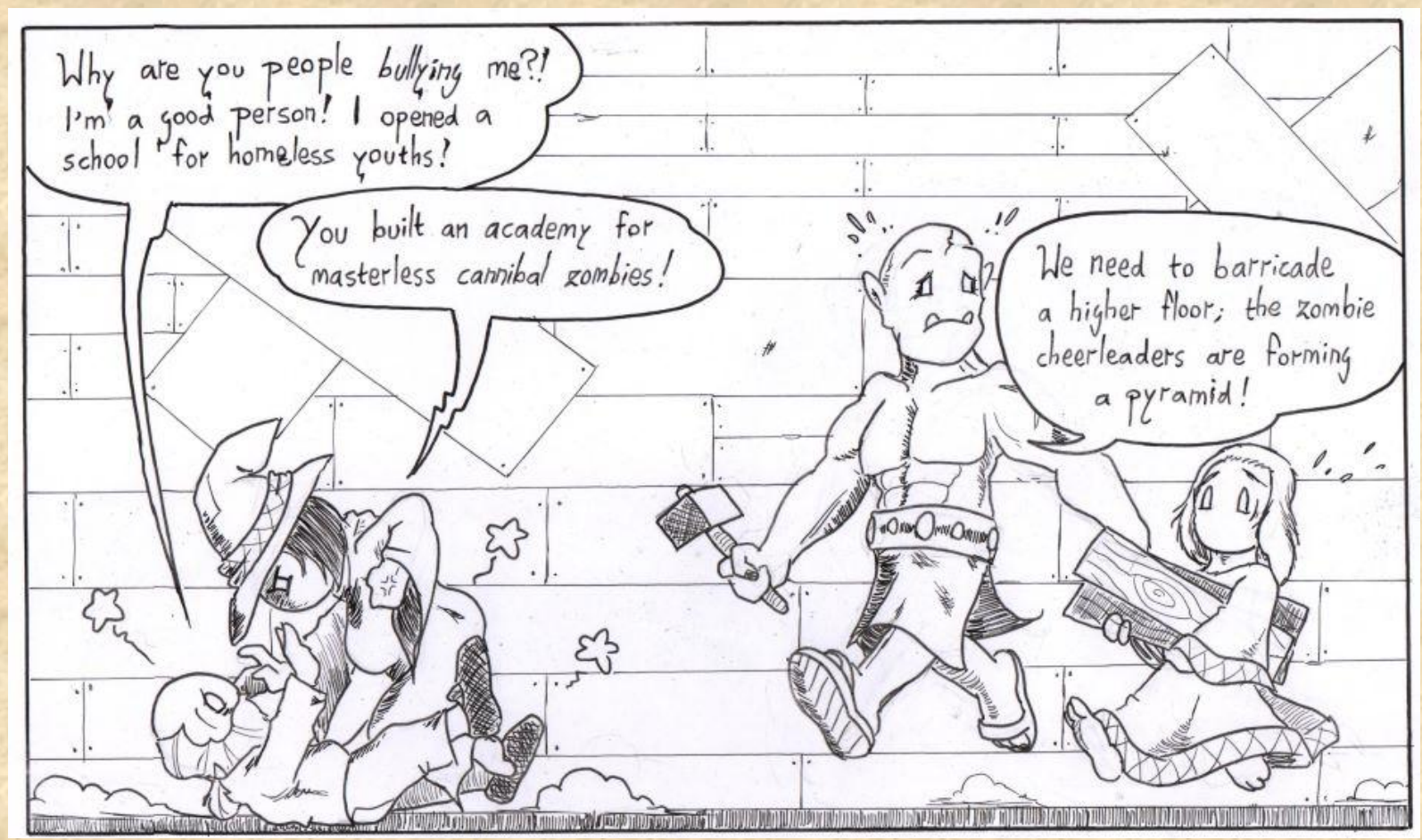
9) Noah Timothy in Verbrek is an example of a **Chosen**. He has been chosen by Lady Moon to chain Fenris back. He is a young werewolf with a long road in front of him.

10) Lord Soth in Sithicus is an example of an **Atoner**. Once the frightful Death Knight of the Black Rose, now he is still a death knight, but he is the Knight of the White Rose.

***

Lightlords are not meant to take away agency from players. They can be used as mentors, sponsors, quest-givers, back-up, trainers, and information sources. They could rescue the players from a threat too great for them, and they could engage in a fight beside the players.

But by design, no matter how powerful the lightlords are, only the players have the power to defeat the darklords. The lightlord is meant to oppose, not to vanquish.



The Counts of the Altid Duchy

The Harstin, Lorenzen, and Volgaar Families of Nova Vaasa

by Ian Fordam

Introduction

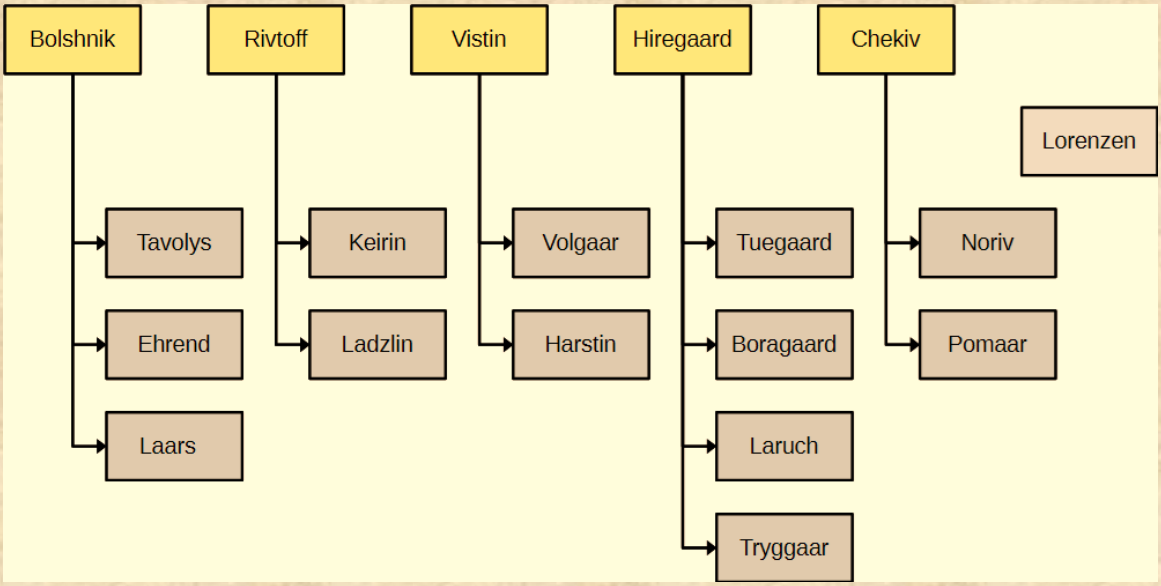
The **Altid Duchy** occupies the western-central portion of Nova Vaasa, falling entirely within the region known as the Kesjermark. The Borchava Duchy lies to the north; the Heartland, to the east; the Ivlis Duchy, to the southwest. The nation of Barovia stands upon the long southwestern border, and the Shadow Rift darkens the border to the west.

The Altid Duchy is owned by the **Vistin** family, one of the Five Families who took turns ruling Nova Vaasa until Othmar **Bolshnik** seized power in 733 BC. The **Rivtoff** family is the Vistins' foremost rival, particularly as the two families vie for influence over the city of **Bergovitsa**. Bergovitsa belongs to neither family but is an autonomous entity, currently overseen by the **Tavolys** family, which is loyal to the Bolshniks.

This article describes three families. The **Harstins** and the **Volgaars** are vassal families to the Vistins (see *Ravenloft Gazetteer Volume V*). The **Lorenzen** family held control of Bergovitsa for generations before the bloodline ran out. Although the Lorenzens were not technically Counts of the Altid Duchy but of Bergovitsa, they are included in this article because of their political ties to the duchy and its families.

Noble Families of Nova Vaasa

Per *Ravenloft Gazetteer Volume V*, plus the Lorenzens:



The Harstin Family

Overview

Daamark and Tygaam are the most famous of the lands which Eternal King Zaanji Højplads conquered during the epoch of the Ranging, but they were not the only ones. Although a people known to the Gammel Vaasi as the **Myvari** did not have their own land, they were a minority population within several of the newly-defeated lands. Recognizing an opportunity for advancement, many Myvari signed up with the Gammel Vaasi as mercenaries and helped them conquer. The gambit worked. Although the Myvari remained a minority, now they had the favor of a conquering people.

The Eternal King's empire collapsed during the Breaking, but by then the boundaries between formerly- independent lands had fallen as well. During the more peaceful epoch of the Saddling, as the Gammel Vaasi culture blended with those cultures it had once conquered, many of the Myvari blended in as well. However, some of the Myvari strove to maintain their differences. When Prince Gorkyn Vistin established the Church of the Lawgiver as the state religion, these Myvari knew they had to integrate or be extinguished—or at least pretend to integrate. Moreover, they threw themselves back into their former mercenary role, serving as one of Prince Gorkyn's elite forces. Those were terrifying times for anyone accused of resisting Prince Gorkyn's will, yet the Myvari often risked showing mercy when they could do so discretely.

Once Prince Gorkyn's War of Conversion had concluded, he rewarded the leader of the Myvari by granting him a noble title. Count **Nethin Harstin** was the first patriarch of his newly-founded family, and in modern times his family is still aligned with the Vistins. They still pretend to adhere to the Iron Faith. They still demonstrate mercy where they can. The current patriarch, **Kasmar Harstin**, continues the family tradition of being a voice of reason.

Seat of Authority

The seat of authority for the Harstin family is **Myvataan**, a small town in the Altid Duchy. It is located west of the Altid Bluffs and east of the Dyrskov. It stands at the terminus of a spur of the **Blacktower Road**. The Blacktower Road runs north from Bergovitsa and past Blacktower Heights before continuing north to Vorsborg; the spur branches off just south of the Altid Bluffs and runs west to Myvataan. The Blacktower Road and its spur are not major roads for Nova Vaasa as a whole, but they are important to the Vistins and the Harstins alike.

Myvataan is also the name of a castle within the town. When necessary for disambiguation, the castle is sometimes called Castle Myvataan.

The Harstins oversee a number of villages within their county. These villages include **Mel Doma** and the ruins of **Mel Kemra**.

Heraldry

The Harstin arms depict a black mastiff courant (that is, running) against a field of red and orange. Informally, they have also been represented as a mastiff with a coat of red and orange checks. Because of this imagery, the Harstin militia is commonly referred to as "the Harlequin Dogs". The soldiers of the militia are proud of this nickname as an acknowledgement of their ferociousness and their loyalty to the Harstin family.

The Harstin motto is "Fiercely faithful."

The Public Face

The Harstin family is well-regarded among the other noble families of Nova Vaasa, but they are often not taken seriously. The Vistin family considers them invaluable for political and military support, but ultimately the Harstins are not a branch of the Vistins. The Harstins believe that a Myvari bloodline is more important than a noble bloodline. Since they are the only noble family of Myvari descent, they preserve the bloodline by marrying peasants, making them the only noble family in Nova Vaasa to frequently do so, even though it costs them politically. This supposed class impurity is part of the reason why the Harstins are often disregarded by the other families. However, over the decades, intermarriage between the Harstins and some of the lesser branches of the Five Families has occasionally occurred.

The other reason for their disregard is political. The Harstin family has the tendency to advocate for an uncomfortable amount of leniency in how nobles treat peasants. They are even more outspoken than

Duke Tristen Hiregaard about lowering taxes, although the more cynically-minded observer might note that they can afford to be more outspoken; since the Harstins are not one of the Five Families, they wield less political power and can be more readily ignored, which means they are less threatening to the status quo. The Harstins are careful not to challenge the Church of the Lawgiver's position on hierarchy.

As much as the nobility feels free to disregard the Harstins when convenient, the Harstins are idolized by most of the peasantry who live under their sway. Not only is there always the distant chance that honored families might see a child of theirs married into the family, but most of the Harstin scions are sent to live and work among the peasants for a year (what they call the "year afield"). The Harstin stance is that one cannot responsibly rule the peasantry unless one understands their concerns. (See why the other noble families find their opinions frequently preposterous?) For their part, the peasants know that the Harstins argue on their behalf, and that more than anything encourages a certain loyalty.

However, the Harstins are hardly without their familial blemishes. As a prominent example, consider Delwyn Harstin, more commonly nicknamed "the Rakehell."

The Hidden Face

While the Harstins go through all the motions of the Iron Faith, they also preserve the ancient faith of the Myvari, animists who believed that a great many spirits inhabit the creatures and places of the world. Their rituals are extremely simple—for example, pausing for a moment to thank the sun for rising—and therefore easy to hide.

Members of the Family

Nethin Harstin

The official founder of the family line.

Varuzh Harstin (b. 710 BC, d. 754 BC)

The previous patriarch, who died in 754 BC while attending court in Kantora. Although foul play is suspected by some, in truth it was simply heart failure.

Lezhyn Harstin (b. 719 BC)

Varuzh's widow and mother to Kasmar, Delya, and Gamnar. She served as regent until Kasmar reached his majority, and she remains his foremost advisor.

Lezhyn Harstin is on excellent terms with Lady Lara Vistin, the current regent of the Altid Duchy. The two women share much in common, including political savvy and frustration over the continuous struggle to assert authority as women.

Delwyn Harstin (b. 715 BC)

Varuzh's younger brother. He showed great promise in his early years, both during his year afield among the peasantry of Mel Doma and then later as an officer of the militia. However, several years into his service he simply stopped trying. Some people say that he grew distracted by gambling and women of purchasable virtue, but others suspect that his distraction is the consequence, not the cause, of Delwyn's abrupt loss of motivation.

Delwyn was present at the fall of Mel Kemra. Afterward he was knighted by Duke Bevis Vistin. He does not feel that he deserves that honor, although he has mostly stopped protesting when others address him as "Sir Delwyn".

Officially Delwyn remains a lieutenant in the Harstin militia. However, he is given no actual authority, which is how he prefers matters.

He is skilled at games of chance. He does not always win, but he never loses much. He knows when to walk away.

Despite his personal weaknesses, Delwyn remains loyal to his family.

Kasmar Harstin (b. 742 BC)

The current patriarch, Varuzh's son. Although young for his position, he benefits from a good head and an even better support system. Despite what his highly critical sister Delya might think, he is fully aware of the weight of his responsibilities. He strives to be a competent leader of the family, just like his father.

Delya Harstin (b. 744 BC)

Kasmar's slightly younger sister, who is being trained to advise him in their mother's place. She is perhaps overly serious, but then she feels that the responsibility for the county will fall squarely upon her shoulders upon their mother's passing. She has big riding boots to fill, but she fully intends to do so. She does not give her older brother enough credit for his competence.

Gamnar Harstin (b. 746 BC)

The youngest scion, training for a role in the Harlequin Dogs. He is 16 years old as of 762BC and still suffering the throes of idealism. For example, he chafes against the injustice that his family cannot openly worship the spirits of the land.

Gamnar is a painter of considerable potential. In addition to his military training, he is also developing his artistic skill under the tutelage of a Bergovitsan painter renowned for capturing the beauty of the Nova Vaasan landscape.

Gamnar is adored by all of his family. While he appreciates their good will toward him, nonetheless he feels that they do not take him seriously. He is determined to prove his worth, or perhaps only to prove that he is not his generation's Delwyn.

The Lorenzen Family

Overview

Like the Harstins, the Lorenzens rose to prominence during Prince Gorkyn Vistin's War of Conversion. However, the Lorenzens come from Gammel Vaasi stock, and in fact they were considered a noble family before the war. However, they gained Prince Gorkyn's particular favor by holding Bergovitsa against an army of heretics. After the war ended, the Lorenzens refused to swear vassalage to the Vistins, although they did convert to the Iron Faith. Perhaps even Prince Gorkyn had grown tired after years of conflict. He not only accepted their refusal, he granted them the County of Bergovitsa, a peerage to be held in perpetuity provided they remained independent of the major families of the time.

In more recent times, the Lorenzen family has never broken that condition, claiming paramount loyalty to the city of Bergovitsa. Indeed, they were sometimes referred to as "the Sixth Family" (but not where the Five Families or the priests of the Iron Faith could overhear).

Unfortunately, patriarch **Villad Lorenzen** had only one son, **Bendik**, who died in a riding accident shortly after his twin children were born. Five years later both twins died of some childhood disease, mere weeks before Villad himself died. The Lorenzen bloodline died with Villad.

Seat of Authority

The Lorenzen seat of authority was the city of Bergovitsa itself. The former Lorenzen manor is now occupied by the Tavolys family, who are vassals of the Bolshniks.

Heraldry

The Lorenzen coat of arms depicts a tower between two bridges. The tower and bridges are silhouettes in black against a cornflower blue background; sometimes stylized waves of darker blue are painted beneath the bridges. The tower represents Bergovitsa, and the bridges represent the Altid and Ivlis Duchies.

The Lorenzen motto is "Building bridges to Bergovitsa," which is frequently abbreviated to "Building bridges." Their original motto was "Guarding the gates of Bergovitsa," but during the Epoch of the Riding, the Lorenzens changed it to its modern form.

The Public Face

After the Great Fire of Bergovitsa in 684 BC destroyed most of the Avener's District, the Lorenzen family subsidized the reconstruction of the track and its outlying buildings. The most prestigious horse race in Nova Vaasa is held annually in Bergovitsa in their honor. Although the reconstructed track has changed names several times over the years, the race itself is still known as the Lorenzen.

The Lorenzens always remained careful to favor neither the Rivtoffs nor the Vistins, and they were generally on good terms with both families. In fact, their influence commonly eased tensions between the Vistins and Rivtoffs; the Tavolys family has proven less adept at wielding their influence productively,

and relations between the Rivtoffs and Vistins have deteriorated. The Lorenzens also treated vassal families—including the Harstins and Volgaars—with respect. Relations were rockier with the Bolshniks and Chekivs, who had concerns that the Lorenzens harbored political aspirations beyond Bergovitsa.

However, any such aspirations proved fruitless. The Lorenzen family has died out.

The Hidden Face

... unless, of course, it hasn't.

Members of the Family

Villad Lorenzen (d. 735 BC)

The final patriarch of the Lorenzen family. Father of Bendik.

Rumor claims that Villad was assassinated, and in this case rumor is correct.

Bendik Lorenzen (b. 702 BC, d. 729 BC)

Son of Villad. Husband to Yrsa. Father of Asmus and Kirstine. Died in a riding accident when his children were still infants.

Yrsa Chekiv Lorenzen (b. 706 BC)

Daughter of the Chekiv family. Widow of Bendik Lorenzen. Mother of Asmus and Kirstine.

After the deaths of her children and father-in-law, which ended the Lorenzen bloodline, Yrsa was allowed to retire to a House of Quiet Women (that is, a nunnery of the Iron Faith) in the Pommel Duchy in exchange for renouncing any and all claim to Lorenzen authority. However, she has retained her husband's surname.

Asmus Lorenzen (b. 728 BC, d. 735 BC)

Twin brother to Kirstine. Son of Bendik and Yrsa. Supposedly died of a childhood illness.

Kirstine Lorenzen (b. 728 BC, d. 735 BC)

Twin sister to Asmus. Daughter of Bendik and Yrsa. Supposedly died of a childhood illness.

The Volgaar Family

Overview

The Volgaar family is loyal to the Vistins, and they have been throughout recorded Vistin family history. In fact, Volgaar family legends assert that their support was essential in elevating the Vistins to become one of the five ruling clans during the Unification. The Volgaars have fought beside the Vistins for generations, and they have occasionally intermarried with them.

The Volgaars oversee the span of the Altid Duchy north of Blacktower Heights, ostensibly guarding the border against threats from the Borchava Duchy. However, relations with the people of the Borchava are good, and considerable peaceful trade occurs over the border.

Seat of Authority

The seat of Volgaar authority is **Vorsborg**, a small fortress on the northern border of the Altid Duchy. A town has arisen around the castle; the town is also called Vorsborg.

Count **Sofus Volgaar** lives in Castle Vorsborg along with **Jonna**, his eldest legitimate child. His estranged wife **Gerda** lives full-time at the family estate in Bergovitsa, along with their two youngest children. Sofus' illegitimate daughter, **Sophia**, also resides in Bergovitsa, but not at the family estate.

Heraldry

The Volgaar arms features a black plains cat rampant guardant (that is, looking at the observer) against a yellow field.

The Volgaar motto is "Fear our claws."

The Public Face

The Vistin family is more strongly allied with the Volgaars than any other family, including the Harstins. Over the generations, Volgaar daughters have occasionally married into the Vistin family, and Vistin daughters have sometimes married into the Volgaars.

At least in public, the Volgaars are careful to always align with the Vistins. This stance has earned them a

certain amount of mockery for being merely an echo of the Vistins, but the family endures such mockery without flinching. They derive their power from the Vistins, after all.

The Hidden Face

The primary occasions when the Volgaars have worked against the Vistins have been their attempts to undermine the Harstins, who are their rivals for Vistin favor. They have also been threatened by the rising influence of the Boritsi Trading Company, which has established the headquarters of its eastern branch in Bergovitsa. Most recently, in 741 BC, Kjarten Volgaar orchestrated the event now known as the Fall of Mel Kemra. He believed it to be a clever way to lessen the influence of both the Harstins and the Boritsis. He was wrong.

Members of the Family

Kjarten Volgaar (d. 741 BC)

A former patriarch of the Volgaar family. Died quietly in his sleep in 741 BC.

Dread Possibility - Nothing Natural

There was nothing natural about Kjarten Volgaar's death. In fact, some might argue that attempting to frame the Boritsi family is a form of suicide.

The night of Kjarten's death, a note was found on his nightstand. It read simply, *A subtle taste is superior.*

Kjarten's widow was wise enough to destroy the note, lest she also die quietly in her sleep.

Sofus Volgaar (b. 710 BC)

The current patriarch of the Volgaar family. Born in in 710 BC, became patriarch in 741 BC.

Sofus Volgaar has fathered three daughters and a son: Sophia, Jonna, Ragna, and Brode. This accomplishment is particularly impressive to those who know Sofus is thoroughly homosexual.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Sofus and his wife are estranged. He resides at Vorsborg while she lives in Bergovitsa with three of the children. He resents her for no longer keeping up the pretense of a vital marriage even as he does not blame her for her dissatisfaction.

Daniel Jessen (b. 714 BC)

Daniel Jessen is Count Sofus Volgaar's closest companion and has been for decades. The two men met while Daniel was the head groom for the Lorenzen family, although he found himself out of a job when the Lorenzen bloodline ended. Sofus convinced his father, Count Kjarten, to hire Daniel as a groom for the Volgaar family. When Kjarten passed and Sofus became the patriarch of the family, he relocated to Vorsborg and brought Daniel with him. Officially, Daniel oversees the small stable there, but mostly he oversees Sofus.

Gerda Volgaar (b.720BC)

Lady Gerda is Count Sofus Volgaar's wife. However, she is estranged from her husband and lives in Bergovitsa rather than Vorsborg.

Gerda was the extra daughter of a very minor Bergovitsan noble family, and she knew that her marriage to Sofus would be a marriage of convenience. However, she had not expected a husband who had no physical interest in her. She resents him because she feels she has upheld her end of the bargain but that he has not upheld his. She absolutely will not speak a word against her husband, but otherwise she does not bother to hide her dissatisfaction.

Jonna Volgaar (b.738BC)

Jonna is Count Sofus Volgaar's eldest legitimate daughter. She aspires to become Countess after her father passes away, and so she remains at Vorsborg with her father even though her mother has relocated to Bergovitsa.

Jonna and her sister Ragna have never gotten along well, but Jonna and Sophia have become friends.

Ragna Volgaar (b.740BC)

Ragna is Count Sofus Volgaar's second-eldest legitimate daughter. She is a renowned horsewoman, having taken first place in the Lorenzen Race when she was sixteen. She lives full-time in Bergovitsa with her mother Gerda.

Brode Volgaar (b.754BC)

Brode is Count Sofus Volgaar's youngest child and his only son. He lives with his mother in Bergovitsa. He wants to be a jockey like his sister Ragna.

Dread Possibility - The Untrue Heir

Brode is not actually Sofus Volgaar's son, which Sofus knows because he had stopped sleeping with his wife sometime after Ragna was born. Indeed, Brode's biological father is a Bergovitsan stablehand, which may have been a direct retaliation for Sofus' relationship with Daniel Jessen.

Regardless, both Gerda and Sofus pretend the boy is his son. Sofus is in fact fond of Brode. Even so, because the boy lacks actual Volgaar blood, Sofus has not officially declared Brode as his heir, contrary to public expectation.

For his part, Brode is not aware of the issue regarding his parentage. He is, however, highly aware of the disdain and hurt that his mother feels toward the man he believes is his father. He doesn't understand anything about why she feels this way. He just wishes she didn't. On those occasions when Sofus Volgaar comes to Bergovitsa, Brode sees only a sad but affectionate father.

Sophia Kragh (b.728BC)

The natural daughter of Sofus Volgaar. She came to live with the Volgaars at age 6 after the death of her mother. While she has been recognized as Sofus' daughter, she has always held an ambiguous place within the Volgaar family. Nowadays she lives in Bergovitsa but not at the Volgaar residence there; that is where her step-mother Gerda lives, and the two do not get along.

Sophia and Jonna have become unlikely friends. In fact, Sophia acts as Jonna's eyes and ears in Bergovitsa, quietly reporting events of significance back to Vorsborg.

Dread Possibility - The Last Lorenzen

Sophia Kragh is actually Kirstine Lorenzen, brought into the Volgaar family's reach to hide her from the Bolshniks.

Asmus and Kirstine Lorenzen did not actually die of any childhood disease. Indeed, when an informant loyal to the Lorenzens warned Villad of a Bolshnik plot against the family, Villad claimed that the twins had died and had them smuggled out of Bergovitsa. He was then assassinated mere weeks later.

The twins were raised separately. Asmus was taken in by the Rivtoffs and placed with one of their vassal families. However, he was discovered by Bolshnik loyalists and killed along with a peasant girl mistaken for his sister.

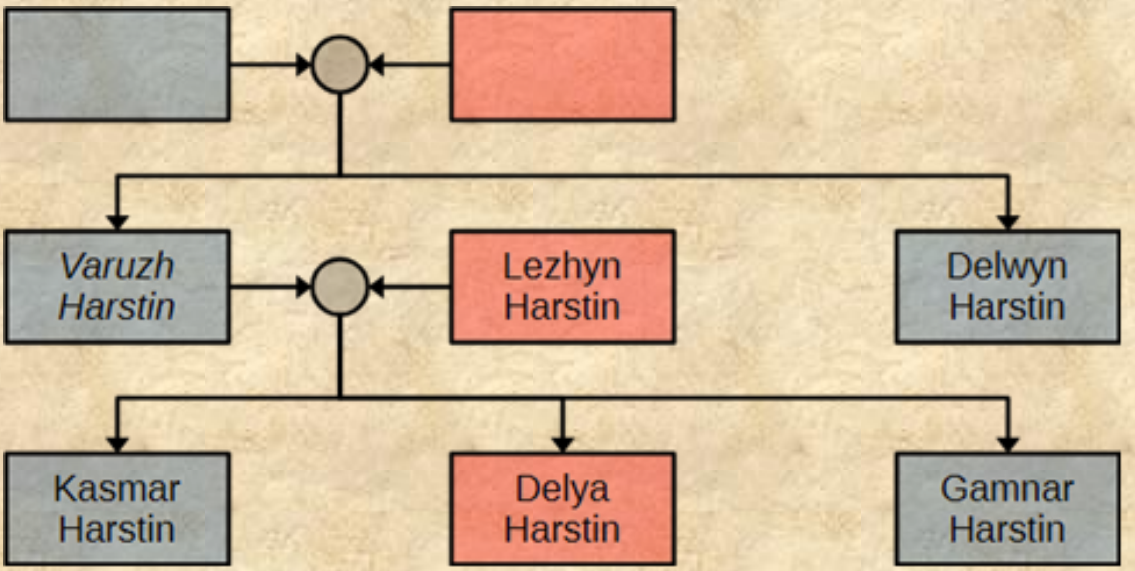
Sophia does not know of her true ancestry. Among the living, only her actual mother, her supposed father, and his companion Daniel definitely know. That said, Sophia has some odd early memories that she can't explain, and she has confided these odd memories to Jonna.

Family Trees

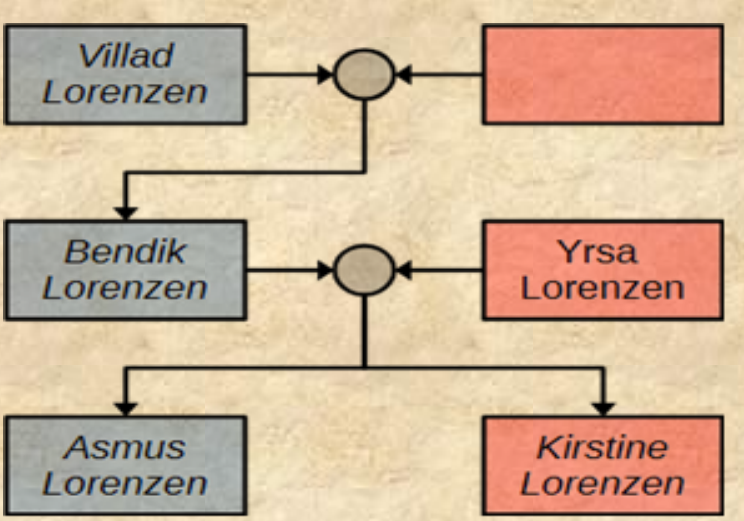
The following family trees are based upon public understanding. Family secrets and dread possibilities are not taken into account.

The names of deceased family members are *italicized*.

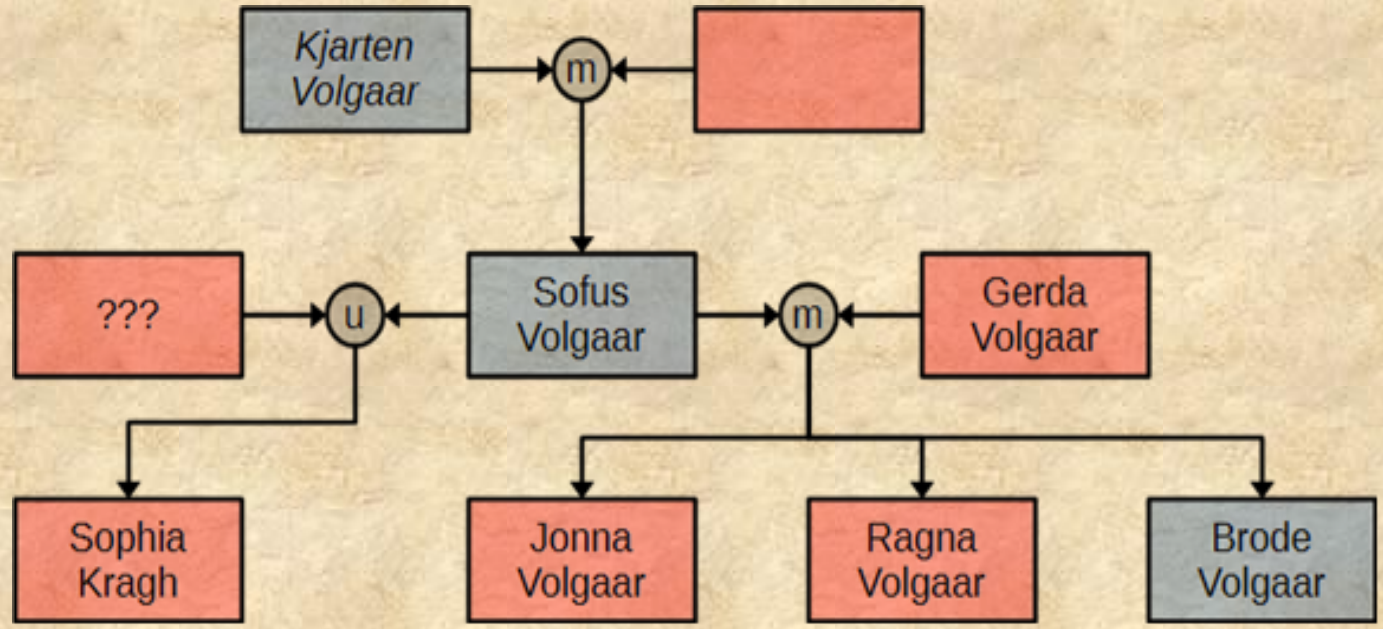
Harstin Family Tree



Lorenzen Family Tree



Volgaar Family Tree



The Second Fall of Miel Kemra

by Ian Fordam

From the journal of Delwyn Harstin:

My dreams awakened me again. It was the dream of when we said goodbye, not the dream of the last time I saw her. Not that either dream makes my heart hurt any less than the other.

I cannot forget her wheat-colored hair and the deep brown of her eyes and her freckles and the way she smiled, even at our parting.

The town of Myvataan stood near the least unreliable source of lumber in Nova Vaasa, which meant that the town's population was frequently inflated by itinerant lumberers. The lumberers were accompanied by a certain amount of vice from the nearby city of Bergovitsa. Therefore, despite its small size, Myvataan offered two brothels. Delwyn Harstin frequented the Nobleman's Ease. In fact, he sometimes teased that he single-handedly kept it in business, what with being the only nobleman in town who ever made use of the brothel's services. However, from the pinched expressions which adorned both Brita and Magga's faces when he said so, he suspected there was much truth to his joke. He made certain to enjoy the two women equally, and he always tipped well.

The soldier sent to fetch Delwyn Harstin found him with no difficulty. Delwyn was still abed with Magga, no longer sleeping but in no particular hurry to rise. The soldier rang the tiny brass bell outside of Magga's chamber and then immediately pushed through the curtain which blocked the doorway. Magga promptly and indignantly pulled the quilt up over her breasts; the soldier had not paid to see them, after all. Delwyn merely narrowed his eyes at the soldier.

"The marshal wishes to speak with you," the soldier announced.

It was a tricksy situation. Delwyn was a lieutenant, which meant he answered to the marshal. However, he was also uncle to Count Harstin, which meant he outranked everybody in Myvataan except the other members of his family. The marshal could give as many orders as he liked, but Delwyn was empowered to ignore them. It was easier for everybody when the marshal phrased his orders as requests.

Delwyn strove to be a good sport about it. "Duty calls," he declared. He assumed that the marshal wished to ask him once again to refrain from emptying the other soldiers' purses at the card table. He kissed Magga twice, once upon the forehead and one upon the quilt which she held against her body, and then he slid out from the bed. "Shoo, shoo," he said to the soldier. "Let me dress in peace."

***

Everyone except Count Kasmar referred to the Harstin militia as the Harlequin Dogs. Kasmar called them "the militia," because he did not want others to think he mistook his soldiers for beasts. Everyone else, including the soldiers of the militia, understood fully that the Harlequin Dogs had gained their

nickname from their livery, derived from the Harstin crest, which featured a mastiff with a coat of red and orange checks against a black background. That mastiff in turn came from the coat of arms of the Vistin family, to whom the Harstins owed their authority. The Vistin coat of arms featured a hound and plains cat combatant. The Vistin hound was clearly a symbol of fierceness and loyalty, as were the dogs of the Harstin arms. The Harlequin Dogs wore their nickname proudly.

***

The marshal poured Delwyn a glass of brandy when he arrived. That was when Delwyn knew the conversation wasn't going to be about fleecing new recruits who thought they knew how to play cards.

"I have a mission for you," the marshal announced as Delwyn took his first sip.

Delwyn set the glass down carefully. "You know I can't be trusted with a mission."

"I know you can't be trusted with any mission that requires violence. This does not. It is a reconnaissance mission."

"There is nobody else to send?"

"Not with the trouble bandits have been giving us lately. I've already got two patrols out hunting them down."

"That should leave you with two."

"I'm not going to leave Myvataan that badly under-defended."

"Because of the bandits."

"Exactly so, lieutenant. I'm wary enough pulling two soldiers from each available patrol for your mission."

"It's not my mission."

"I have nobody else to lead it. Unless you would rather I send your nephew."

Gamnar Harstin was the younger brother of Count Kasmar Harstin. Like Delwyn in his time, Gamnar had followed up his year in the villages with admission to the Harlequin Dogs. Gamnar was officially a lieutenant. He had been with the militia for only two months.

"He's too green," Delwyn protested.

"Exactly so," the marshal agreed.

"So what's this mission I have reluctantly accepted?"

"Apparently the dead have risen in Mel Kemra. Again."

"Oh," Delwyn said. He tried not to show that his bowels had turned to ice. No matter, though. The marshal knew. The marshal had also been at Mel Kemra during its fall.

***

When Delwyn was introduced to the four soldiers who comprised his patrol, his first thought—and second, and third—was how very young they all were. Not nearly as young as his nephew Gamnar, but still they could not have had much experience even shared between them. The most promising was named Eskil. His eyes were older than his face, and he was the only one who suppressed his reaction upon learning that their commanding officer was to be Count Kasmar's wastrel uncle.

"Mount up," Delwyn ordered, indicating the five horses which the marshal had allocated to the mission. He watched his soldiers carefully, and to his relief they all appeared comfortable astride their horses. It would not do to have one of his soldiers fall off their mount and crack their young skull open.

The former village of Mel Kemra stood only three hours' ride from Myvataan. Unlike most of the villages under Harstin authority, it was not centered upon the banks of the Volgis River. Instead its heart was a well which had originated as a freshwater spring, although the farmlands of Mel Kemra had eventually stretched all the way to the river and across.

Once they had left Myvataan proper, Delwyn signalled for his patrol to ride close.

"We're on a reconnaissance mission," he explained. "Which means that if I tell you to flee, then you flee. Get back to Myvataan and report."

All of the soldiers except Eskil looked sullen at that. One of them, the one that Delwyn was fairly certain was called Dag, cleared his throat and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but isn't that cowardice?"

"It's not cowardice," Delwyn said. "It's the mission. We are scouting the situation in a village named Mel Kemra—"

Eskil and Dag did not react to that name. The other two, Iver and Asta, both blanched.

Delwyn caught Asta's startled gaze. "Yes?"

"Sir?" she said. "Wasn't Mel Kemra destroyed?"

"It was abandoned, not destroyed, although it may be mostly ruins now. It was abandoned because nearly all of its citizens had been transformed into the walking dead. I assume you all knew that?"

All four soldiers nodded, although Eskil did not actually nod until Delwyn looked directly at him.

"Sir?" Asta said. "What transformed them?"

Involuntarily, Delwyn's memories flashed back to one particular farmhouse. Most of the buildings in Mel Kemra had been occupied by corpses, but uniformly the walking sort. This particular farmhouse had its share of walking dead, but it also contained two ordinary corpses as well. The first was a foreigner, almost certainly a Darkonian, who had died of a knife wound. The second was a Nova Vaasan, but likely not local. His hands still clutched knives which were too well made to belong to any Mel Kemran. However, the second dead man's limbs had been torn from his body, presumably by the blood-spattered walking dead. By the time the Harlequin Dogs had discovered this farmhouse, though, the dead were milling about aimlessly. They became threatening only when the Dogs drew near the first corpse, that of the Darkonian.

Delwyn narrowly suppressed a shudder. "Presumably a necromancer."

Dag asked, "Was he killed?" He was a large young man, solidly built, and definitely the soldier Delwyn wanted on hand if he needed a heavy object moved. Something in the young man's question, though, some quaver in his voice, caught Delwyn's attention. Dag might not be the right person to rely upon to hold steady in a fight. Not that he wanted a fight.

"He was killed," Delwyn confirmed. "And buried. And his grave was bound by an Iron Priest so that he could not rise again."

Eskil grunted. "So why are we going to Mel Kemra? Sir?"

"Why else?" he replied with a brittle brightness. "To find out why the dead are walking again!"

***

The patrol's first stop was at a farmhouse at the fringes of Mel Kemra. Not the farmhouse where Delwyn had previously found the necromancer and the man who had stabbed him. Certainly not the Valborg farmhouse. But a farmhouse which Delwyn knew had once been occupied by the walking dead.

As predicted, it was a ruin. It was also empty of people, living or undead.

The next farmhouse was also abandoned and empty.

Delwyn wasn't certain what they would find at the first farmhouse, but by the time they reached the second, he would have been surprised if any undead had been there. The undead had to come from the dead, after all, and Mel Kemra had been abandoned.

"Change of plans," Delwyn announced to his patrol. "We're not going farmhouse by farmhouse after all. We're heading directly to the eastern side of the village. But please keep a careful eye open, every one of you. Just in case I'm wrong, I don't want us being ambushed."

Asta asked, "What's on the eastern side of the village, sir?"

Delwyn did not want to answer that question, but once asked he felt he owed it to them.

"A mass grave," he admitted. "We had to do something with the bodies of the Mel Kemrans. We didn't want to bury them too near the village well. At that point, we assumed Mel Kemra would be repopulated, and we didn't want to risk poisoning

the water. Some of us wanted to give them individual burials, but there were too many of them. We dug a big grave and placed them all inside—man, woman, and child—and then we buried them."

Woman and child.

That first shovelful of dirt had been the hardest. The rest were easier. Not easy, but easier.

"At least the rain held off until we were nearly done," he said, and only when he heard the words being said did he realize that he had said them aloud.

They crossed several other farmsteads on their ride eastward, and despite everyone remaining alert, they saw no people.

As they drew near to the edge of Mel Kemra, Delwyn signalled for them all to slow down and draw near again.

"See that next house?" he said.

Eskil peered beyond the farmhouse. "What's that? Is it a wall?"

"Essentially, yes. It's a series of standing stones. You can't see it, but there's a single gap in the middle. There used to be a cross-stone over the gap, making a very crude arch, but the cross-stone has long since fallen. I assume it's still there, partially blocking the gap."

Asta observed, "They look like teeth."

"That's what they're called. Kemra's Teeth. They mark the official boundary of the village. After Mel Kemra fell, we dug the mass grave just beyond the Teeth. If my suspicion is right, then we'll find the walking dead nearby."

"Sir? Maybe they didn't want to be buried outside the village, and that's why the dead are stirring."

"Mel Kemra fell twenty-one years ago. If they were unhappy about the burial, I would expect them to have risen long before now. But that's a good question to ask. Why have they risen?"

Out loud but mostly to herself, Asta muttered, "Maybe something disturbed them."

"Very likely. I'm going to scout ahead and see."

"Sir," Eskil said. "Why don't you send one of us?"

Because you're too green. Because—

"Eskil is very stealthy," Asta said. Both Dag and Iver nodded agreement.

At least Eskil was the least-green of them.

"If you're volunteering—" Here Eskil nodded. "—then go ahead. You've got an hour."

The fields were badly overgrown, but Eskil moved across them with little disturbance. Much less disturbance than Delwyn would have made. He was back well within his hour.

"You were right, sir," Eskil reported in hushed tones. "Walking skeletons digging at a patch of ground east of the house. Eight-and-ten of them."

"Any sign of anyone not a skeleton?"

"No, sir. But I did not look inside the house."

"Probably wise." Delwyn turned to Iver. The young man had said almost nothing during the ride from Myvataan, and so Delwyn had the least accurate read on him. "Iver? Ride back to town and report."

"Sir?"

"That's an order."

Delwyn and the remainder of the patrol watched Iver ride off to the west. He did not spur his horse to a gallop until he was nearly out of sight.

"And us, sir?" Asta asked.

"You've brought your horseman's maces, yes?"

Asta, Eskil, and Dag all nodded.

"Good. You'll find them more effective against skeletons than your sabres." Or so a number of Darkonians had told him. Not every Darkonian was a necromancer, but Delwyn had learned that most of them knew a little something about mitigating the consequences of that black art. When carousing the taverns of Myvataan or Bergovitsa, Delwyn had learned the benefits of talking with slightly drunken

strangers.

The soldiers fetched their maces from their horses. Delwyn fetched his as well, although he had no intention of using it. He didn't want to set a bad example until that became unavoidable.

When they had all returned, maces in hand, Delwyn told them, "We are going to try to sneak up on the farmhouse. It may be empty. It may only be occupied by mindless skeletons. But there may be a necromancer inside, and I have no idea whether he has noticed us yet. Even as we are sneaking up, be ready for an attack, regardless of whether it's from inside the house or outside. We might even face magic, and no, I don't know enough about magic to give any advice about that. So keep quiet and pay attention. Understood?"

All three soldiers nodded.

"If we get to the front door unattacked, then I will burst in first and move to the right. Dag, you're second, and you'll go left. Then Eskil to the right, Asta to the left. That's assuming that nobody is waiting to ambush us. If they are, well, that's why I'm going first. Should I fall, then get out, get your horses, and ride for Myvataan. The door is a pinch point. Don't get stuck in it. And, by all that is good and sacred, please don't strike at anyone who isn't dead or a necromancer. Please."

All three soldiers nodded again.

"Good. Let's go, then."

The assault upon the farmhouse went largely according to plan. Nothing attacked them as they made their approach, Eskil stealthily and the rest of them less so. Like most of the farmhouses near to the Beastwood, its front door was built from hides stretched over a wooden frame. Both hides and frame had suffered over the past twenty years, and Delwyn destroyed them both bursting into the structure. He was relieved that nothing attacked him as he entered and then moved to the right. Dag followed, moving the opposite way. Just before Eskil's entry blocked the sunlight through the doorway, Delwyn saw a woman sit up in bed. "What?" she said, groggily and plaintively all at once as the doorway darkened. Eskil moved aside, and the renewed sunlight fell back across the woman. Dag grunted as he hurled his mace into her shoulder, knocking her out of bed with an ugly crunch.

"She was alive!" Delwyn cried.

Dag protested, "She looked like a necromancer to me!"

The woman had fallen into darkness. At least she was groaning, so she wasn't dead.

"Light a lantern," Delwyn ordered, and then he realized how foolish that was. Even if they could find a lantern in the gloom, the oil in that lantern would have long since dried up. "No. Better yet. Asta, get a torch from your saddlebags. Just don't catch the roof on fire with it."

While Asta was fetching the torch, Delwyn located the broken-shouldered woman using her groans to guide him. He crouched beside her, and he said, "We'll have some light shortly. We'll be able to see how badly you're injured."

"You broke my shoulder," the woman accused. "And how did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That I'm a necromancer."

"A lucky guess," Dag admitted.

"The walking skeletons beyond the Teeth were a good hint," Eskil said.

When Asta brought the torch, Delwyn could actually see the woman whom Dag had felled. In his inexpert opinion, her shoulder was ruined, although perhaps a skilled healer could have saved it. Her features bore something of Darkon but also something of Nova Vaasa, but he didn't mention that to his soldiers, because he didn't want to support the misbelief that every Darkonian is a necromancer, even if every necromancer he had met had been at least partly Darkonian.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Why are you raising the dead?"

Despite her pain, she looked indignant. "Because I can," she said. "Because I finally can!"

Delwyn tried to keep his expression neutral, but he had no confidence that Dag or Asta did the same.

The woman insisted, "I spent years deciphering my father's notes. Years! He taught me Darkonian when I was young, of course, but not *technical* Darkonian. I had to guess at so many words!"

Further questioning revealed that she was Ada, daughter of Andex Avidis, who had been an apothecary in Bergovitsa. And an aspiring necromancer, apparently.

"Eventually, I decided to come to Mel Kemra," Ada Avidis said. "The site of his greatest triumph!"

For a moment, Delwyn forgot all of his resolutions. For a moment, he saw not this half-Darkonian woman, but Synne Valborg. Synne, not as she had been on the occasions when they had made love in the fields of the Valborg farmstead, blanketed in sunshine, with her wheat-colored hair and the deep brown of her eyes and her freckles, but as he had last seen her, hair and eyes and freckles all tarnished, her laughter and vitality utterly destroyed by her transition to undeath. Had his sabre been drawn, he would have run Ada Avidis through, just as he had done to the monstrosity which had once been Synne Valborg.

But then he mastered himself again. There was very little growl in his voice when he asked, "Your father was responsible for the destruction of Mel Kemra?"

"Well, for—" Ada Avidis paused, perhaps realizing for the first time that she was admitting to offenses punishable by death under the laws of the land and church alike. Meekly, she finished, "He wrote that it would be his greatest triumph. But I didn't kill anyone! I just reanimated the previously-undead. The negative energy pathways were still there."

"Why Mel Kemra?"

"I don't know. Neither did my father. He was hired by someone to poison the well."

The well. Which everybody in the village drew water from. Except those who lived closer to the Volgis River.

"With necromancy?"

"No, that was his own idea."

"Who hired him?"

"He did not say. I don't know that he knew. I don't think he cared. He was not interested in the poisoning. He was interested in the experiment."

Delwyn failed to keep a nasty tone from his next question. "Do you know what happened to your father?"

"No. I assume something went wrong with his experiment. Perhaps he failed to gain complete control of his creations."

"Or perhaps he was stabbed by someone who resented his experiment. That would certainly explain the knife wounds I found on his body."

Ada Avidis blinked. "You—"

"Yes. Me. I found him." Delwyn stood abruptly. To his soldiers he said, "We're done here. Tie her up. You're going to knock apart a bunch of walking skeletons, and then we're hauling her back to Myvataan."

***

Every male of the Harstin line was expected to spend his fifteenth year fostered in one of the villages. The foremost reason was to give them the experience of living among the people for whom the family was responsible, to learn their lifestyle and to appreciate the work that they did. A secondary reason was the possibility that he might meet someone to marry. The Harstins and the Volgaars were both tied to the Vistin family, but that closeness had made them competitors rather than allies; there were no marriages to be made there. The other lesser families of Nova Vaasa held the Harstins at a distance, both because of their Myvari blood, and because of their radical beliefs, for example, sending their children to the villages for a year.

Delwyn had been sent to the village of Mel Doma, primarily because it still had a significant Myvari-blooded population. In the first of his many disappointments for his family, Delwyn had fallen not for a daughter of the Myvari, but for a washed-out daughter of the Tygaami from the neighboring village of Mel Kemra. This affair wasn't held to be *wrong* per se, just disappointing.

At the end of Delwyn's year in Mel Doma, he and his lover parted amicably. They had fallen just enough in love to enjoy themselves, but neither one forgot that their time together was limited. Delwyn returned to Myvataan and joined the Harlequin Dogs, another family tradition for second sons among the Harstins. Eventually he learned that Synne Valborg had married a village boy and had a baby. He was honestly happy for her.

Even so, he had never gotten around to marrying.

***

Eskil trussed up Ada Avidis' hale arm against her side, and he led her out of the farmhouse with Asta beside her and Dag behind her. Delwyn led the way, across the yard and through the gap in Kemra's Teeth. The mass grave was right where he had left it, except he hadn't left a village full of skeletons digging up their kindred. Delwyn guessed that nearly all of the villagers had been exhumed and reanimated. Or maybe they all had, and now they were just digging because they hadn't been told to stop. Either way, it was a lot of skeletons, which may have explained why the necromancer who reanimated them had been asleep in the middle of the afternoon.

Delwyn was very glad that he had buried Synne and her husband and their baby in a private grave on their own land.

Ada Avidis cried out, "Defend me!"

Clearly the undead did not suffer disorientation. Without missing a beat, the skeletons shifted from scooping dirt to marching on Delwyn and his soldiers. Most threatening were the two skeletons who carried actual shovels, which they now held as if they were weapons. Of course farmers, even dead farmers, would be prepared to use their tools as weapons. Delwyn hefted his mace and started a very intense debate with himself about re-re-killing the people of Mel Kemra.

He needn't have worried. Behind them, he heard Eskil hiss, "Call them off!"

Ada Avidis said something unintelligible.

"Now!" Eskil barked.

"Stop!" Ada Avidis cried.

The skeletons immediately halted, although the two shovel-wielders still held their tools at the ready.

Delwyn glanced behind him to see Eskil with a knife at Ada Avidis' throat.

"Dag, Asta? Start smashing skeletons. Eskil? If she says anything further, then do what you must."

Warily, Dag and Asta advanced upon the halted undead. However, once they smashed apart an initial pair of skulls and watched the remainder of the body-bones tumble to the earth, they set to their task with more vigor. Although Asta lacked Dag's strength, her two-handed swing still landed a succession of effective blows.

Delwyn had nominated himself to stand watch. When Dag and Asta were perhaps halfway through the village, he was glad he had.

"Bandits!" he cried. "From the east! Run to your horses and ride!"

Eskil started running first, but he was slowed by Ada Avidis. Seeing this, as Dag passed he scooped up the necromancer and flung her over his shoulder. She screamed in pain, but that did not slow Dag down any. Although Asta was already in the lead, Eskil showed every sign of catching up. Delwyn watched them circle around the farmhouse and out of sight.

Well. Time to give them time.

Delwyn planted himself squarely in the middle of the gap in the Teeth, and he drew his sabre. The fallen arch stone provided a significant obstacle to anyone attempting to ride a horse through the gap, but he was determined to provide another for as long as he could.

There were six bandits, each mounted. As they drew closer, Delwyn saw that they were better equipped than most bandits, which was alarming. Had the Volgaars outfitted them? The Volgaars were the cadet branch of the Vistins, not to mention the Harstins' foremost rivals. Delwyn hated to think that the Volgaars would strike against his family so openly, but perhaps they had.

The bandits slowed long enough to hack the skeletons to pieces. Delwyn noted that the bandits' short swords were less effective than the soldiers' maces had been. Those half-drunken Darkonians he had interviewed had known what they were talking about.

Finally the bandits rode closer to Delwyn. One of them called out, "Who are you, then?" His accent was unfamiliar. He was certainly not Nova Vaasan.

"Delwyn Harstin."

The bandit laughed. "The coward?"

"I suppose that would be me."

"Hah. Rush him, boys. He won't dare to attack any of you."

Unfortunately the bandits were smart enough to avoid getting in each others' way. Two came first, one from other side, circling the fallen arch stone. Delwyn threatened them with his sabre, but they seemed to sense that his heart wasn't in it. He could still see elderly Tuva Svend in the moment after he had killed her. She had rushed him to embrace him, grateful for what she thought was rescue, but her aged body had given her the lurch of the undead. As bad as rekilling Synne Valborg had been, the betrayal upon Tuva Svend's face, the horrified expressions of her family, had been worse. Only today, twenty years later, had he discovered why the Svends and others who lived close to the river had not been transformed into the undead.

The two bandits dismounted and dragged him to the ground. Their leader approached with a vile-smelling cloth, which he pressed against Delwyn's nose and mouth. At first, Delwyn assumed the leader was trying to gag him, but no.

Two or three inhalations were enough to make

the world

go

sideways.

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Most mornings, Delwyn got out of bed by hurling himself into the day. Returning to consciousness was much the same. He immediately regretted his waking. His entire mouth and throat felt swollen, and his head pounded like the worst of hangovers. He must have groaned.

Someone called out. The words sounded like Balok, which Delwyn understood reasonably well under better circumstances, but at the moment the words were beyond him. It was all he could manage to avoid passing out beneath the audible onslaught.

He realized that he was bound to a chair. His hands and feet were bound as well. He was inside a small and featureless room, which meant he wasn't inside a farmhouse, which would have been small but not featureless. No, he was almost certainly inside the Mel Kemran town hall, the only building in the village large enough to have side rooms. Unless someone stood quietly behind him, he was guarded by a single man, who watched him disdainfully.

A door opened off to the side.

"Give him water," a man said in Vaasi. "I'd like him to be able to talk."

The guard picked up a pitcher from the floor and poured some water into a clay cup. He approached Delwyn, placed the cup against his lower lip, and then tilted abruptly. The first short swallow tasted wonderful, but then the water kept coming, and Delwyn choked on it, spraying water everywhere.

"Don't drown him," the newcomer said with a dangerous hint of impatience. "Let the man swallow."

The next pour was slower, and Delwyn was grateful for that. He took three deep swallows, which substantially cleared the thickness of his throat and the pain in his head.

"Thank you," he gasped as the guard stepped away.

The newcomer pulled up a chair directly opposite Delwyn and took a seat. He was clearly a foreigner, judging from his unfamiliar features, his clean-shaven face, and the style of his clothing. He was dressed well, but not too richly. No one would mistake him for a peasant, but his clothing would not challenge a noble either.

"Greetings," the newcomer said. "You are Delwyn Harstin? Uncle to Count Harstin?"

"I am."

"A pleasure to meet you, Sir Delwyn. I am Count Sulo Boritsi."

"Greetings, Lord Boritsi."

The Boritsis were the ruling family of distant Borca, their coffers filled from many sources including the mercantile activity of the Boritsi Trading Company. Sulo Boritsi ran company operations in Nova Vaasa and across the Nocturnal Sea.

Sulo Boritsi said to the guard, "Cut him free. We can trust Sir Delwyn to behave like a gentleman."

"Are you certain we can, my lord?" the guard asked. "He's the craven Harstin."

Sulo just stared at the guard for a minute, and then he said, "Delwyn Harstin just stood up to you and five of your fellows with nothing but a sabre that he had no intention of using. He might be a damn fool, but I think that makes him the opposite of craven. Cut him free."

The guard did so, and then at some subtle dismissal he departed the room.

Sulo Boristi poured more water and handed the cup to Delwyn.

He said, "First of all, I want to reassure you that your four soldiers are our captives, but they are largely unharmed. Although the big fellow tried resisting, I'm confident of his complete recovery under the care of a competent healer."

Four? Oh. They had caught Iver too.

"And the half-Darkonian woman?"

Boritsi said flatly, "The necromancer has died of her wounds."

"I see."

"Sir Delwyn, do you know what happened here twenty years ago?"

"Not particularly well."

"Apparently, Count Volgaar concocted a plan to damage both your family and mine. He arranged for a foreign apothecary living in Bergovitsa to poison the well of Mel Kemra. Mel Kemra is under your family's control, of course, and so this despicable act would harm you. However, I am certain you know my own family's ill-deserved reputation. Once it was discovered that the well had been poisoned, the plan was that my family—indeed, all of the Trading Company—would receive the blame."

"I see."

"From subsequent events, I can only surmise that the apothecary hired by Count Volgaar had studied necromancy. Not being privy to the details of the plan, he took the notion of 'poisoning' too liberally. He released his potion into the village well and transformed those who drank it into the walking dead."

Another sip of the water did nothing to lessen the thickening in Delwyn's throat. "That much I am familiar with."

"Count Volgaar's plan to weaken your family succeeded, but his attempt to frame my family failed. Even so, you can—"

"I can't help but note that Count Volgaar died unexpectedly a month or two after the fall of Mel Kemra."

"A tragic coincidence, I am certain. You can understand why I took a personal interest when I learned that the dead were walking in Mel Kemra

again."

"I can. Much as I did."

"Of course. Sir Delwyn, have you discovered any reason to believe that our families are the targets of another political plot?"

"I am certain they are, given that we both belong to families of influence. However, I think that this latest trouble in Mel Kemra is the incompetent machination of another aspirant necromancer. Nothing more sinister than that."

Sulo Boritsi chuckled. "The dead were walking, Sir Delwyn. Is that not sinister enough for you?"

Delwyn thought of Synne Valborg. He thought of Tuva Svend. Compared to them, a group of skeletons digging in the earth was nothing.

"One grows accustomed to such things," he lied.

Sulo Boritsi chuckled again. "If you say so."

Delwyn did not bother pretending he had meant what he said. "Well," he said. "What now?" He fully expected to be held for ransom. He wondered whether his family would pay for his return.

"That depends. Are you feeling steady enough to walk?"

"I believe so, although I suppose I may learn otherwise when I actually try."

"Good. Let me help you stand." He extended a hand to help. "From there, you and I shall go into the main hall. I will instruct my men to release your soldiers."

Delwyn's face must have revealed some of his surprise.

Sulo Boritsi laughed suddenly, loudly. "Did you think I intended to sell you back?"

"I did awaken bound to a chair."

"I hope you can forgive me for being cautious. Truthfully, I would rather you be a friend than a ransom."

Delwyn found it ludicrous that someone might feel threatened by him. "That would be nice."

"There. You're on your feet again. Can you walk?"

Turned out he could. Sulo Boritsi led him into the main hall, where Delwyn's four soldiers were indeed held captive. With a word and a wave of his hand, though, they were freed. Their armament was returned to them, although Delwyn did notice the Boritsi men were also armed and more numerous besides. Friendship went only so far, at least in politics. Even so, Sulo Boritsi personally apologized to Dag for his rough treatment, and from the young soldier's stunned expression, the token words of political friendship had gone far with him.

Sulo Boritsi—accompanied by his men—escorted them to their horses, saw them mounted up, and bid them a gracious-sounding farewell. The Harlequin Dogs rode off with Delwyn Harstin in the lead.

Once they had left Mel Kemra well behind them, Asta pulled up beside Delwyn and asked, "Sir? Who was that man?"

"Count Sulo Boritsi. He's probably one of the most venomous serpents slithering through Nova Vaasa, but we should be grateful that today he wanted our friendship."

Only later did Delwyn think to wonder whether Sulo Boritsi might have brought a necromancer to Mel Kemra just to encourage that very friendship. Boritsis were known to be great schemers.

The Seal of the Silent Wave

By Michail Adamis "Mephisto of the FOS"

The sound of someone slowly entering the water was followed by a neon blue light that broke the darkness and filled the room. Malakor Evlyn, chief archivist of the Order of the Saint, walked into the glowing pool. The ripples of his movements disturbed the bioluminescent algae concentrated in the underground waters, creating an illuminated blue path behind him. As he moved toward the center, the embroidered silver images of sea monsters on his dark blue robes seemed to swim in the fleeting flash of the last ripple. Then, everything went dark again.

A low humming sound of a chorus of voices echoed inside the ancient room amplified by its domed structure. The black water of the Sunken Scriptorium was disturbed once again, but it did not lap against the stone, it pulsed, a heavy rhythmic heartbeat with the tide beneath the town of Port Rocheux. The dinoflagellate phytoplankton, agitated by the currents, followed the water's rhythm, glowing with each heartbeat.

Gabriel, an acolyte of the Order of the Saint, and a soon-to-be novice of the Believers of the Great Tide stood on a floating platform of oil-treated oak, along with fellow priests, the others wearing full faced blue hoods, trimmed with dark blue. The stench of rotting kelp was attacking his nostrils, but he didn't care as he looked with amazement around him. Above ground, the high cathedral of Daymon C'Mahgen was a distant world of gold and hypocritical laws. Here, beneath the precise half-circle arches that held the dome, the walls themselves told another story.

The ancient reliefs and frescoes of this water filled crumbling tomb were a terrifying, weeping canvas of apocalyptic prophecy. Carved from a brutal combination of rough-hewn charcoal-gray granite and dark, layered stone constantly bled cold sea mist from its fissured joints, snaking downward in dark, glistening veins of liquid shadow and sometimes illuminated by the blue bioluminescence light.

Cutting horizontally across the midsection of the masonry was a jagged, crusty watermark of calcified salt and pale barnacles—a stark dividing line showing where the sea claimed the masonry. Beneath this white crust, the ancient, half-erased stone reliefs and frescoes depicting the Sea God's wrath and the inevitable Great Tide were horribly exposed. Centuries of salt corrosion had left the carvings looking less like deliberate art and more like raw, weeping wounds in the stone. Above this waterline, the ancient frescoes and masonry of the Wrath had survived for centuries, though they had lost their fine detail, their pigments fading into ghostly, muted washes of mineral grays, oxidized blues, and deep, blood-like ochres.

These high, archaic paintings told a story of absolute cosmic annihilation; and a primitive, faceless manifestation of the Divine Mind rose from a chaotic swirl of brushstrokes, in the center of the dome, rendered not as a humanoid deity but as a colossal, tooth-lined vortex reaching upward from the faded plaster to swallow the sky. Beneath this abyssal maw, fleets of primitive longships were being snapped like kindling, their stylized sailors reduced by time to frantic, blurred human silhouettes raised in helpless terror as they were dragged down into the current.

Below the calcified salt line, where the black brine held absolute dominion, the lower halves of the frescoes were entirely ruined. Because the walls were constantly weeping, the moisture ran down the

remaining pigments of the upper frescoes in dark, glistening rivulets. In the erratic glowing algae light, this created a terrifying optical illusion: the painted waves appeared to actively churn, the ghost-like tentacles of the god seemed to writhe in the shadows, and the black bladderwrack wept a slimy, soot-colored ooze into the fissures, making the painted abyss look as though it was constantly spilling dark blood into the freezing brine below.

The frail Malakor, immersed up to the chest, inside the black and glowing blue water, addressed his sermon to the hooded zealots who ringed the floating oak platform like crows near the room's exit. His movements constantly illuminated the domed tomb, casting shadows across the wet, blue lit granite arches of the Sunken Scriptorium. His voice did not shout; it crawled across the chest-deep brine, a sibilant, un-aging elven murmur that perfectly matched the rhythmic *lap-slap* of the freezing tide against the bleeding schist walls. His elven eyes burned bright with the knowledge of the Truth.

"*Cast your eyes upon the plaster, my brothers*," Malakor murmured, his voice echoing off the wet granite arches until it vibrated directly inside the skulls of the hooded acolytes.

"Look at the great divide. Above this jagged line of salt, where the air still lingers, the ancient frescoes of the Wrath have survived for centuries. The pigments are faded, yes—the mineral grays are muted, the oxidized blues are ghostly, and the blood-ochres of the central vortex have lost their fine detail. Yet they remain. They hold their form. They represent the upper world, Daymon's world, where Saint Ezra's mirror still structurally traps the light and forces chaotic thoughts into the illusion of permanence."

Malakor moved his hands and began chanting an incantation as he locked his piercing eyes to Gabriel. At first, it felt like a sting, then in an instant Gabriel's body was flooded with a supernatural, blinding agony. His face and hands blistered forming flowing white-yellow pus. His muscles seized so violently that his spine arched backward, collapsing onto the damp wood, weeping and unable to even speak. A scream of unbelievable pain filled the room. The hooded robed figures around Gabriel watched him in cold indifference as he was stripped away of all dignity and reduced to a screaming animal, his screams muffled by the quiet spot of this room's architecture, quickly deflecting away from his immediate surroundings and racing up into the ceiling.

Malakor perfectly serene, raised his arms, a flare of blue light glinting off the dripping water and the illuminated pool sparkling on the weeping surface of the masonry. He gestured toward the stratified bands of brownish-black schist and fractured granite, his long fingers mapping the damp stone as if it were a page from a sacred tome. His voice sounded dry, hollow, and devoid of mortal warmth, echoing off the low vaulting so perfectly that it seemed to rise directly from the dark depths of the water and wrapped around the acolyte's ribs.

"*Observe the tapestry of our salvation etched into these very stones,"* Malakor murmured, his hypnotic elven voice sliding over the splashing sound of the rising tide.

"*Look at the high borders of the vault, where the black-green moss and pale mold crawl through the fissures. That is not mere rot, my brothers—it is the material world weeping. The cold sea mist bleeds directly from the joints of the masonry, snaking down in dark, glistening veins that resemble liquid shadow. It is the Father's unperceived mind actively dissolving the artificial boundaries of this tomb.*"

He slid his pale hand lower, tracing a horizontally cut crust of calcified salt and pale barnacles that scarred the midsection of the wall.

"*See this jagged watermark? This is the boundary where the solid world surrenders to the deep. These horizontal grooves you feel beneath the cold slime are not mere representations of water, they are the physical rendering of his waking thoughts, the Great Tide that predates the very concepts of land and sky."*

He suddenly lowered his hands, thrusting them into the freezing, pitch-black water, splashes of light illuminating the masonry, once again.

"*Look below the salt-line.*"

Malakor whispered, his tone catching on his sharp Dementlieuse consonants like a steel stylus scraping across wet vellum, before raising his voice once more.

"*Look beneath this white crust of salt. The ancient stone reliefs are half-erased, eaten away by the acidic bite of the black brine. Where the common folk see decay, look with the eyes of the faithful. The features of the drowning men are worn smooth, the hulls of the longships are melting back into the raw stone, the towers of the ancient shorelines are crumbling into mud before your very eyes. The walls themselves are shedding the illusion of form. This pain you feel Gabriel is the true, unfiltered nature of the world, the raw malice of the Sea God's universe that Daymon's brittle mirror cannot protect you from.*"

Gabriel stayed motionless, paralyzed by the excruciating pain hitting his nerves, as blood leaked into his eyes clouding his vision, rendering him blind. Wracked with pain he didn't even feel the other priests grabbing him and lifting him up. The hooded figures carried Gabriel into the freezing water of the underground pool, their forms outlined by the blue glowing light where they touched the water. The hooded believers reached Malakor forming an elliptical circle around Gabriel.

Malakor raised his thin delicate arms once more, showing the dome, showing the grand, tooth-lined vortex at the center waiting to swallow the sky.

The pain was gone, his sight blurred but restored, yet Gabriel was numb, terrified, cold, and… grasping for air.

As the priests forced him beneath the freezing saltwater Gabriel's primal instincts took over. He thrashed, choked, and ingested the foul water, experiencing the absolute horror of drowning.

"*There under the wave, the Father's unperceived thoughts hold absolute dominion.*" Malakor's voice did not strive to overpower the suffocating symphony of the vault. Instead, it bled into it, utilizing the sound of splashing water and the unique acoustics of the wet granite arches to create a terrifying, omnidirectional resonance. He spoke in a low, sibilant murmur that perfectly mimicked the heavy, rhythmic hiss of the tide pulling back across a shingle beach. A sound entirely detached from the frantic pulse of human vocal cords, carrying the chilling, un-aging clarity of his elven heritage.

"There are no grays here. There are no blues. The lower frescoes are completely ruined, the ancient plaster dissolved into soft, waterlogged mud that flakes away into the dark current with every pull of the tide. This is the absolute mathematical proof of our theology. Form cannot withstand the proximity of the Divine Mind. The moment matter is fully submerged in his raw intent, the script dissolves. The solid world above is not an eternal kingdom, it is merely the upper half of a fading painting that has not yet slipped beneath the surface. We do not pray to preserve the dry plaster. We pray for the high tide to rise, to wash away the last faded lines of this temporary solid world, this temporary cage, and plunge its entirety into the sea, to be washed clean by the tide. To be washed back into the perfect, silent purity of the Abyss. The imagery on these walls does not look back to the past. It is a living, breathing metric of our approach to the Great Tide."

With these words, Malakor took off the silver medallion of the Sea God's symbol, hung on his neck, and pressed it against Gabriel's forehead, just as the acolyte's lungs filled with fluid and his vision began to fade into midnight blackness.

Suddenly, the terror stopped.

The acolyte's burning lungs cooled.

Gabriel opened his eyes underwater and realized that he could breathe the ocean.

The foul, freezing brine became his life support.

Malakor submerged himself with Gabriel, the bioluminescent algae bloomed around them, casting a soft, ethereal blue glow that illuminated both of their faces. His long black hair flowing like a banshee's, contrasted by the vibrant illuminated blue water, he locked his faintly glowing, elven eyes once more to Gabriel's.

Malakor's voice seemed to ride the surface of the sea-sparkling water, arriving not from a single point in the room, but creeping up from the black depths of Gabriel's mind. He didn't speak but Gabriel could hear his slow, calculated cadence, each word dropping into the air with the chilling weight of a smooth stone sliding into a well. There was a strange, hypnotic texture to his Dementlieuse-accented speech, a soft, dry scraping sound that caught on the sharp edges of his consonant endings, closely resembling the sound of dried kelp rubbing against stone. It carried an absolute, hyper-rational certainty that bypassed a listener's conscious defenses.

"Do you see? The water did not kill you…

Look down, my brother. Do you feel the bite of salt against your ribs? Do you feel the heavy, unperceived pulse of the Father beneath your feet? The Father did not reject you…

For decades, High Cleric Daymon has told you that the water is a monster to be chained. He sells his wretched Azurite Rites at the docks, charging the guilds in blood and silver just to construct a brittle glass wall between mortal minds and the Divine Intent. He told you to fear the deep because he wanted you to be a slave to his docks. He stands upon his high gilded pulpit and commands you to worship the Mirror, to worship Saint Ezra as she catches the Father's thoughts and distorts them into the illusion of solid stone, of safe harbors, of passing time. But the text does not lie, and the math of the Ste. Mere des Larmes is absolute. A mirror is not a savior. A mirror is a delay. By holding up her shield, Ezra does not save humanity, she prolongs our agonizing, systemic starvation. She keeps us trapped in this half-perceived cage, forced to suffer the horrors of the Legions of the Night which the Father willed into existence to test our mettle.

But the moment you let go of his mirror, the sea becomes a womb, a cradle for rebirth.

Daymon thinks he has won the crucible because he built a shadow navy. What staggering, short-lived hubris! You cannot win a storm by building a larger raft. You win the storm by becoming the water. The Time of Unparalleled Darkness is not a curse. It is the Great Wave. It is the absolute, holy reclamation. The Father is waking, and his raw, unperceived thoughts are expanding to pull this corrupted slate back into the silent, perfect Abyss where we began. We do not pray for safety. We do not pray for the shield to hold. We pray for the glass to break. Let the Mirror shatter. Let the sea rise. Let the Wave wash over Port Rocheux, so that the faithless and the fey-touched anomalies vanish from existence. Let the Wave submerge this illusionary world into its dark depths. You have survived the drowning. You are ready for the Great Wave. And only we, who knelt in the dark and welcomed the tide, are left to float by his side."

When they broke the surface, the zealots still held Gabriel tight. Malakor drew a silver razor from his robes, brutally shaving Gabriel's head to the scalp to search for hidden Fetouche traces on his skin. Finding only pure, ruined human flesh, he sliced the acolyte's palm with the blade, then gripped Gabriel's chin to force his mouth open. Exhausted by the ordeal, Gabriel was unable to resist. Malakor slipped the razor away and pulled out a glinting silver stylus. Dipping the point into the open palm, he mixed the blood with the specialized alchemical ink and traced a geometric pattern across Gabriel's tongue. Gabriel gagged and choked on his saliva as the stylus burned with a silver-blue flare, etching the *Seal of the Silent Wave* deep into the tissue before the mark disappeared sinking beneath his flesh.

The hollow, echoing stone of the Sunken Scriptorium magnified Malakor's whispering incantation until it felt to Gabriel less like sounds entering his ears and more like the weight of the deep ocean. The unperceived, cold thoughts of the Sea God waking up directly inside his own skull.

"*Look upon the Apocrypha Exsecrata, the fifth verse of the fifth reflection. The Divine Mind does not speak in parables of stone; he thinks in the absolute language of the Abyss. The shore is a temporary script, the cathedral a fragile ink stain upon the Mirror. Look at these waves, brothers. They are half-erased because they are already returning to his mind. Daymon tells you to worship the reflection, but the text is clear: the Father willed the world into existence only to measure the weight of its drowning. When the glass breaks, the ink will run, and the Great Wave shall wash the page completely clean.*"

The hooded priests released their hold on Gabriel, letting his body float. He no longer wept from pain or fear. His worldview was entirely inverted. He gazed up at the stone ceiling, studying the masonry of the Wrath. The ancient stone cutters did not give the Supreme Creator a human face. They carved him as he truly is: an absolute, unperceived abyss.

He had finally realized deep down in the very abyss of his soul that the grand cathedral above was a fragile cage of lies, and the dark, suffocating abyss below was his true, eternal home.

He lay afloat, still freezing. A silent heretic reborn, waiting for the world to drown.



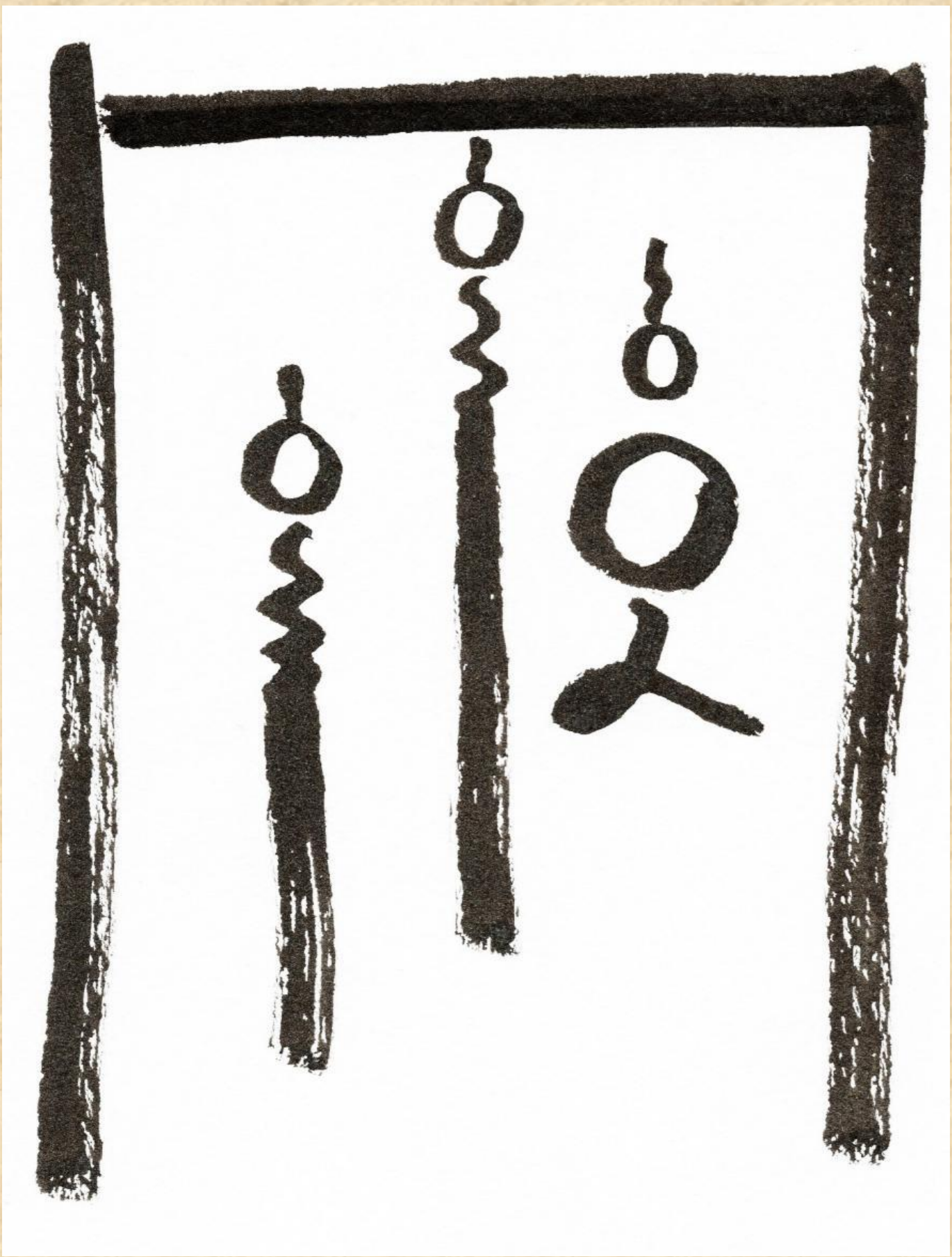
Excerpts from "The Register of Monsters"

by Stanton F. Fink



"There was Plato, too" — continued his majesty, modestly declining the snuff-box and the compliment — "there was Plato, too, for whom I, at one time, felt all the affection of a friend. You knew, Plato, Bon-Bon? — ah! no, I beg a thousand pardons. He met me at Athens, one day, in the Parthenon, and told me he was distressed for an idea. I bade him write down that '*ο νους εςτιν* [[*εστιν*]] *αυγος*.' He said that he would do so, and went home, while I stepped over to the Pyramids. But my conscience smote me for the lie, and hastening back to Athens, I arrived behind the philosopher's chair as he was inditing the '*αυγος*.' Giving the gamma a fillip with my finger, I turned it upside down. So the sentence now reads '*ο νους εςτιν* [[*εστιν*]] *αυλος*,' and is, you perceive, the fundamental doctrine of his metaphysics."

Edgar Allen Poe, "Bon-Bon"



Alichino

Alichino the Bickerer is a devil from the Court of Asmodeus. The Bickerer is sent forth by the King of Hell to promote strife among His Majesties' enemies in and outside of the Nine Hells. Technically, Alichino is an assassin, but, he sets his marks against each other using gossip, lies and illusions, leaving his own hands and blades unsullied.

For obvious reasons, Alichino is unwelcome everywhere outside of his master's lair, though, few recognize this shapeshifting menace until it is too late.



Aoya

Aoya The Shackled Regent is a nascent demonlord currently incarcerated deep below the Woeful Escarand, the 400th Layer of the Abyss.

In his mortal life, Aoya was a prince, heir to his grandfather's throne in a vassal kingdom of the Green Empire. Because Aoya's grandfather was a cruel and brutal tyrant who offended both his neighbors and the Green Empress with his unending abuse of his subjects; as a result the region was wracked with never-ending strife. One night, a gang of raiders-turned-rebels assaulted the royal palace, kidnapping Aoya and his siblings. The mission was originally to obtain hostages for ransom, but, the kidnappers decided, against their leader's orders, opted to murder Aoya's siblings, and torture the crown prince, instead. When the rebel leader saw Aoya slay two of his attackers, he made the mutilated boy his lieutenant and protege. And as the former prince trucked with these rebels, he avenged his siblings by systematically killing their murderers, either outright in duels or by betraying them to rivals and royal forces. Eventually, Aoya ousted his master, killing her in the process, and then lead his forces in another raid against the royal palace to seize his throne. Upon learning he was disowned by his surviving family, he flew into a rage, and attempted to massacre the remaining royal family. When Aoya's rebellion was quashed by Green Imperial forces, and his grandfather's kingdom divvied up between vassal states, Aoya was brought before the Green Empress in chains. Defiant to the very end, Aoya vowed he would tear off the Empress' head and exchange it for the lives of his lost siblings, whereupon the Imperial guardsmen ran him through with their spears.

Aoya's soul was found by the Lords of Woe in the Abyss, and at his trial with the Mountain of Woe, he bargained with them, offering himself to them if they granted him the power to retrieve his siblings. Touched by this selfless bargain, the Lords of Woe offered to grant him the power he wanted if he was willing to endure the process. And so, the Shackled Regent has spent the ensuing centuries enduring his nalfeshnee attendants' ministrations as the latter continue refining and empowering his new and growing demonic body.

The desperate and victims of betrayal pray to the Shackled Regent in the hopes of being rescued from their suffering. Aoya hears their pleas and grants them good fortune at their tormentors' expense. Once in a while, he sends forth demons to assist his followers.



Belbaen

Belbaen the Insidious Craftsmaster is a child of the demon lord Amentia, the Beleaguered Artist, and is the patron of obsessed artisans. Belbaen does not have followers per se, as those who attract his attention are too lost in their all-consuming livelihoods to devote focus on something other than their chosen crafts, let alone focus devotion specifically towards an otherworldly patron. Instead, the Insidious Craftsmaster hears the mania of certain unhinged artists and craftsmen, and grants them increasingly destructive boons until they consume themselves utterly (and literally) in their passions.

A common omen of Belbaen's presence is the spontaneous animation of objets d'art as murderous, difficult to control golems obsessed with fulfilling the suppressed desires of their creators.

No sane person deliberately seeks out the Insidious Craftsmaster's favor. According to some demonologists, Belbaen hates and despises "lazies" [sic] artists who would dare to insult him by petitioning him for shortcuts, and punishes such "lazies" by sculpting them into living art projects that are stomach-churning even by fiendish standards. According to others, Belbaen absolutely loves being given a "blank canvas" to work with, resulting in equally nauseating results.



Belle Veneficcia

Belle Veneficcia is an evil spirit who takes the form of a bisque doll with mismatched eyes, one of which is usually a ball of obsidian or a blood clot. This evil spirit appears to avenge wrongs committed against children, inflicting harm upon the wrongdoer equal in magnitude what was done to her prey's victim, no more, no less. A school bully who grew fat on his classmates' stolen lunches would find himself cursed to painfully regurgitate any food he didn't personally craft, himself. An abusive father whose children died of deliberate neglect would disappear from society because his long-suffering wife was inspired to immure him alive in their home. An orphanage mistress who sold her charges into slavery would be frightened into insanity. Rarely, Belle Veneficcia answers the summons of children in exchange for their souls and some candy so she can teach them various forbidden arts, like magic or poison making.

Belle Veneficcia neither appreciates, nor tolerates interference with her duties. As per an ancient contract she signed in Malsheem under her original name, Belle Veneficcia can summon devils to assist her and murder interlopers at her behest in exchange for a tithe of her captured souls.



Chelmon

Chelmon the Wild Paladin of the Moon is a werewolf-like shapeshifter who wanders the lands helping innocents in need, bringing succor and justice to those who need it, then reincarnating into a new body when his current body wears out. Chelmon appears as a large, brunette, vaguely elven man with wolf ears, and can change his form into any species or breed of canine, though, his true form is that of an immense, black furred wolf larger than a bison.

Once, Chelmon was a hound archon of Celestia who was tasked with assuming a mortal form in order to spy on, then thwart the hidden cult of a fiend trapped in a Prime Material world. After Chelmon's mission was resolved upon the fiend's banishment, rather than return to Celestia and receive promotion, Chelmon chose to stay and assist in rebuilding the communities harmed by the cult's machinations. And once Chelmon grew too old to move, he found himself reborn as a mortal child so he could resume helping others.

Chelmon begins each new life as a kind boy with a strong sense of justice and an overwhelming need to protect and nurture others. His powers and memories begin returning once he enters puberty, then he sets off into the world in search of adventure.

The Wild Paladin of the Moon is often mistaken for a werewolf due to his shapeshifting. Chelmon can transform mortals into dogs or wolves: sometimes this is to teach humility to bullies or punish an evildoer by returning them to the world in a non-lethal manner. More often, though, Chelmon will transform some of his wards into dogs or wolves in order to smuggle them out of dangerous conditions, or to get them to care that they would be unable to receive otherwise in their human(oid). The Wild Paladin can restore such transmogrified canines to their original forms when he so chooses.



Chemet The Radiant

Chemet the Radiant is a goddess who wanders the Infinite Layers of the Abyss, bringing absolution and succor to every soul she comes across. The vast majority of demons who know of her loathe and despise her for obvious reasons, but, do not take action against her. Powerful demons and demon lords dismiss her as a fool on a fool's errand, and ignore her in favor of more important tasks. Less powerful demons who try to confront and assault her are absolved of their sins, and upon being detached from their evil essence, pass on from existence.

It is said that Chemet was an evil witch in her mortal life. When Chemet was seduced by a knight, she was convinced to repent her wicked actions and assisted her lover in bringing her demon-worshiping coven sisters to justice. Despite this, and despite assisting her lover in his adventures, the knight's superiors demanded that Chemet face justice for her own sins. The elders of the knight's order were unconvinced of Chemet's conversion, and condemned her soul to the Abyss upon burning her at the stake.

In the Abyss, the Lords of Woe judged her unfair trial to be punishment enough for the sins of her mortal life, and allowed her unbearably radiant spirit to wander the Abyss for eternity. Gossip alleges that, should The Radiant One somehow successfully exorcise all of the demons from the Abyss, that realm will then cease to exist, thereby causing the rest of the Universe to collapse in on itself.



Chlaah

Chlaah the Infinite is a shapeshifter also known by another alias of "Meijuushako," or "Demon Beast Squilla." Demon Beast Squilla lives for mischief and uses its considerable powers entirely for this sole interest. Chlaah's power of imitation is vast, and has an enormous library of disguises. Many of Chlaah's many, many enemies mistakenly assume it is some sort of powerful greater animator spirit. The Infinite has been documented assuming the forms of a horseless carriage, a horse-drawn carriage, a giant, flying pumpkin, a much smaller, flying pumpkin, a fire-breathing grand piano, a fire-breathing clarinet, a fire-breathing sousaphone, a pistol, a man-eating pipe organ, a man-eating ottoman, a cannibalistic ottoman, a coffee mug that regurgitated poison, an arquebus that ate musket balls, a loveseat that groped people, a fainting couch that spewed poison gas, a stovepipe hat that spewed smoke, a copy of the infamous "Demonomicon of Iggwilv," a copy of the even more infamous "Bromide of Iggwilv," a player piano that sang dirty songs, a deck of cards, a card table that cheated at canasta, a sofa, thirty-eight different people's mothers-in-law, a box of candy, and no less than five hundred and twenty-three different bladed instruments and weapons of varying sorcerous powers.

Despite its ungodly acting ability, Chlaah can never resist tipping its (metaphorical) hand, usually by seizing any opportunity to indulge in its pyromania, or making its very distinctive laugh. Although Chlaah's true form vaguely resembles some sort of demonic shrimp, the being abhors salt and water. The Demon Beast Squilla will not allow itself to touch either substance even if that means prematurely ending its charade.



Dara Es Ghalha

Dara Es Ghalha, the Lord Who Watches, is a demon lord who rules over the Abyssal Layer now known as "The Plain of Agony," serving as the viceroy of the layer's original master, Metataya The Wondermaker.

The Plain of Agony is a blasted realm that once served as the seat of Metataya's power. During the height of Metataya's rule, it once held a continent-sized citadel that housed the Wondermaker's armies and monster-producing factories. A coalition of other demon lords, jealous and fearful of the Wondermaker's might, razed his realm and imprisoned him. Dara Ez Ghalha was spared and was made his master's jailer. Some say this was because the Lord Who Watches was rewarded for betraying his master. Others insist that this change of rulership was a peace offering, as Dara Es Ghalha could not be routed, as he is the entire cloud layer above the Plain given sentience.

Now, Dara Es Ghalha protects his master's prison, which is housed in the last standing tower of Metataya's now obliterated palace. Those whom the Lord Who Watches deems worthy are allowed to enter Metataya's tower in the hopes of freeing the Wondermaker. Those deemed unworthy are invariably disintegrated by the Lord Who Watches' wrathful glare.



Deiphon Rex

Deiphon Rex is a powerful tanar'ri demon in service to The Apokryltaros who helps shepherd and coordinate the Silver Plague. Disturbances to the Silver Plague attract Deiphon's attention, and other demons had quickly learned a long time ago that offending the Prince of Rot's majordomo is a fantastic way to die screaming. Accordingly, fiends try to stay out of Deiphon Rex's caustic line of vision.



Emissary of Sleep

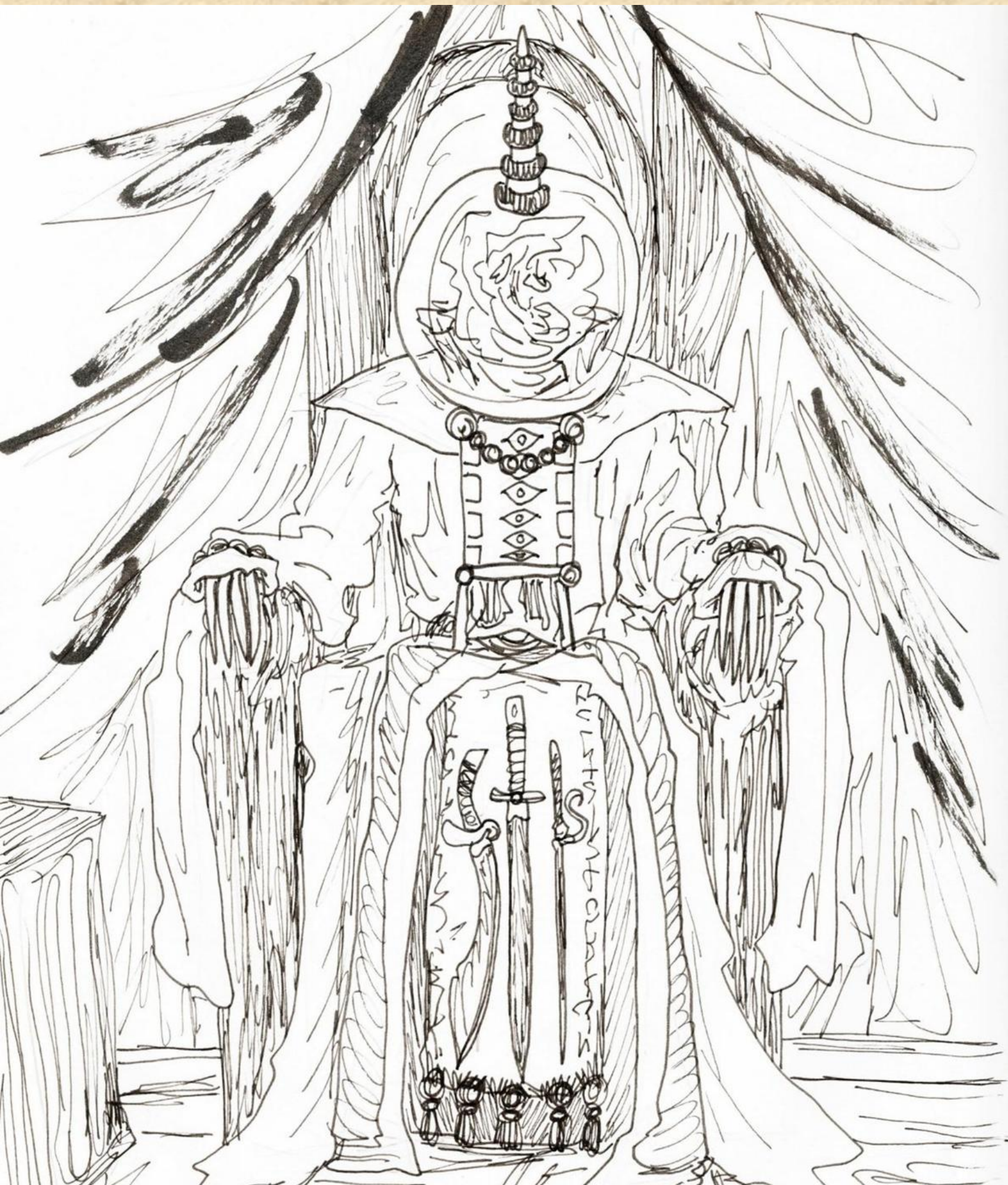
The Emissary of Sleep is a demon who brings the gift of sleep everlasting to the long suffering, having been born of a now-dead civilization's yearning for eternal rest. The Emissary is the Herald of the Last Angel, who rescued this pernicious being from premature destruction.



The False Prometheus

Once upon a time, there was a wizard who sought, as many wizards do, immortality through magic. The gods and the spirits and the faeries all told the wizard that to achieve this, he would need to pass the "Four Gates Of The World" before he could enter "The Door Of Heaven." Being an arrogant creature, the wizard decided to pass through the Gate Of Fire, first.

Upon doing so, the wizard's blood turned to fire, and burned his flesh away. But, he still lives, as he discovered to his sorrow and his madness that these hot flames that have replaced his flesh burn eternally. He was counseled that his suffering may end, were he to enter the other Gates. However, the uncertainty of what sort of "end" this would outweigh the agony of his current state, and this dreadful decision long ago cleaved what little of his mind remained in twain.

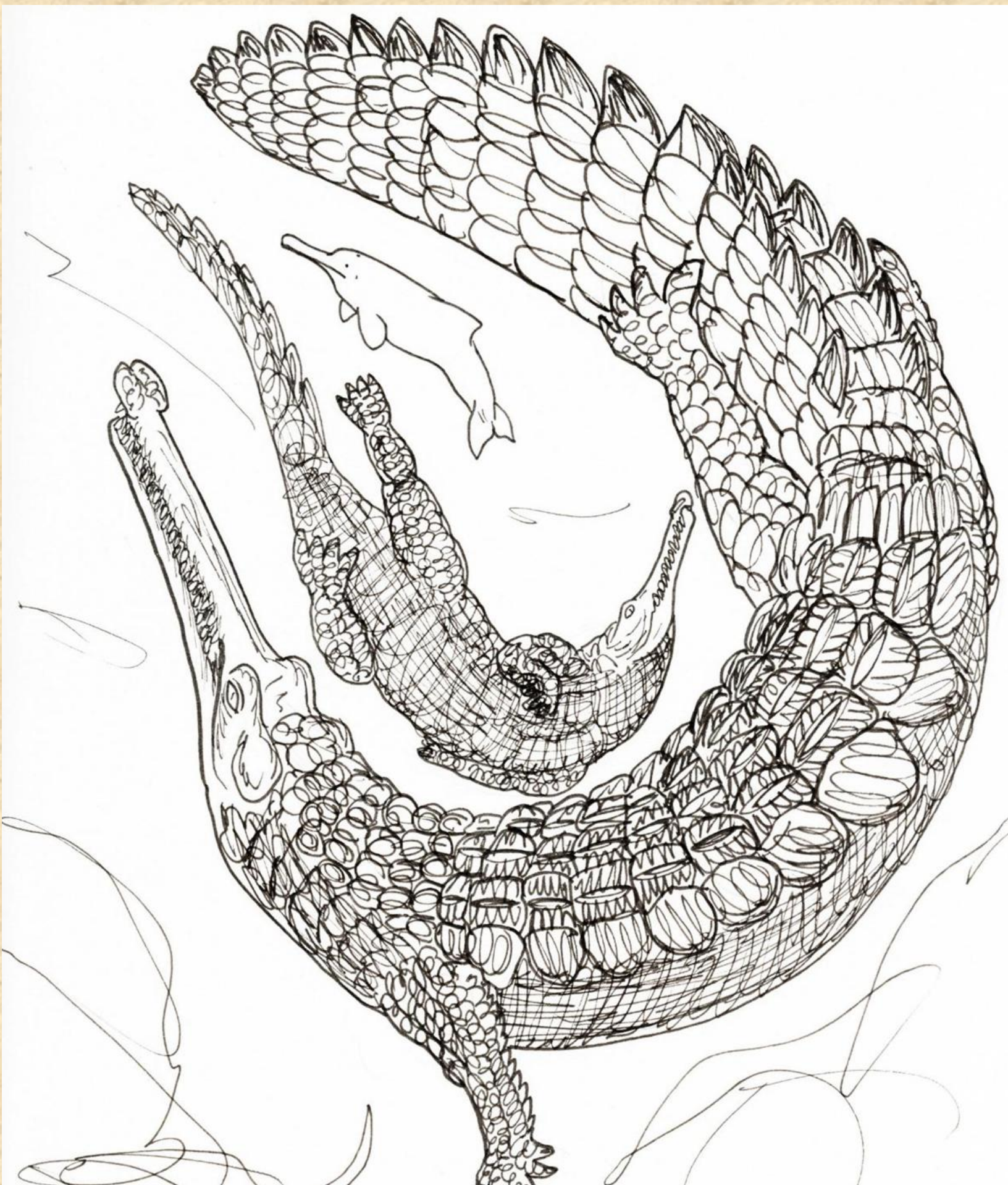


The Gharial Of Shadows

The "Gharial of Shadows" is a powerful evil spirit who manifests as a gigantic gharial that haunts the waterways of the Sri Rajian city of Pakat and the waterways of the dreadful jungles surrounding Pakat. "He," assumed as such due to the presence of a *ghara* at the tip of his snout identical to those of bull gharials, is either the child of the drought asura, Susna, or is one of several creation-sons of the artificer deva, Tvashtri. The Gharial, himself, probably knows who his parents are, but he is very coy about discussing his genealogy with mortals out of the extremely reasonable concern that such knowledge might be used to bind him further, or worse, yet, be used to suss out his true name.

Being a demon of drought, the Gharial first made its presence known in 732BC by drying up the Bahkuku river. The priesthood of Ratri dispatched their goddess' proxy, the warrior Bahaaduri, to banish or slay the beast, but Bahaaduri was betrayed and imprisoned by a faction of treacherous priests who decided it would be better to worship the Gharial, instead.

These treacherous priests reached a verbal agreement with the evil spirit in that, in return for not eating any citizens or guests of Pakat, the Gharial would be given a steady regiment of animal and human sacrifices. Since then, though, the Gharial has come to regret its situation, as it has become extremely bored. Recently, the Gharial of Shadows has been privately ruminating if it would be better to renege on his deal and go back to terrorizing and tormenting people with droughts and rampages. And since he assumes Bahaaduri has been disposed of, he assures himself that no one will be able to stop him if he decides to betray the priests.



King Gozojaulo

King Gozojaulo the Wretched Thief is a demon prince of usurpation, tyranny and theft. He is the former ruler of the 403rd Layer of the Abyss now known as the Rainless Waste. King Gozojaulo formed a coalition of Abyssal powers by bullying dozens of lesser demon lords into allying with him. His former minion peers describe him as being a pompous, bellowing blowhard who was actually rather charming whenever he remembered his manners. Abyssal records show his influence extending across ten layers at the height of his power.

King Gozojaulo fell from power when he decided he would cement his rule by seizing control of the layer known as The Land Of Shadow And Ash from the Apokryltaros. Some claim he desired control of The Land Of Shadow And Ash because he had a feud with the King of Worms. Others claim he was simply that stupidly greedy to think that the Apokryltaros was weak and helpless in its imprisoned state. His invasion force faltered when the King's coalition of ally-flunkies abandoned him, and his own armies were devoured completely by the Silver Plague. The Wretched Thief was punished, either by a curse laid upon by the Apokryltaros, or by his now-former minion peers, one or both of which stuffed him into an adamant bird cage.

This cursed bird cage wanders about King Gozojaulo's castle, which is on the far edge of a sulfur-rift on "the far end" [sic] of the Rainless Waste. Intruders in the castle who encounter His Majesties are implored to free him from his prison. Most ignore him, as the Wretched Thief's reputation for being a wretched backstabber precedes him.



Guueen

Guueen, the so called "Gossip of Hell," is an insidious demon in service to the infamous tanar'ri lady known as the Snail Princess. Guueen has eyes everywhere, literally and figuratively, hunting for juicy tidbits to relay to its mistress and her master, Superio, Emperor of Emperors.

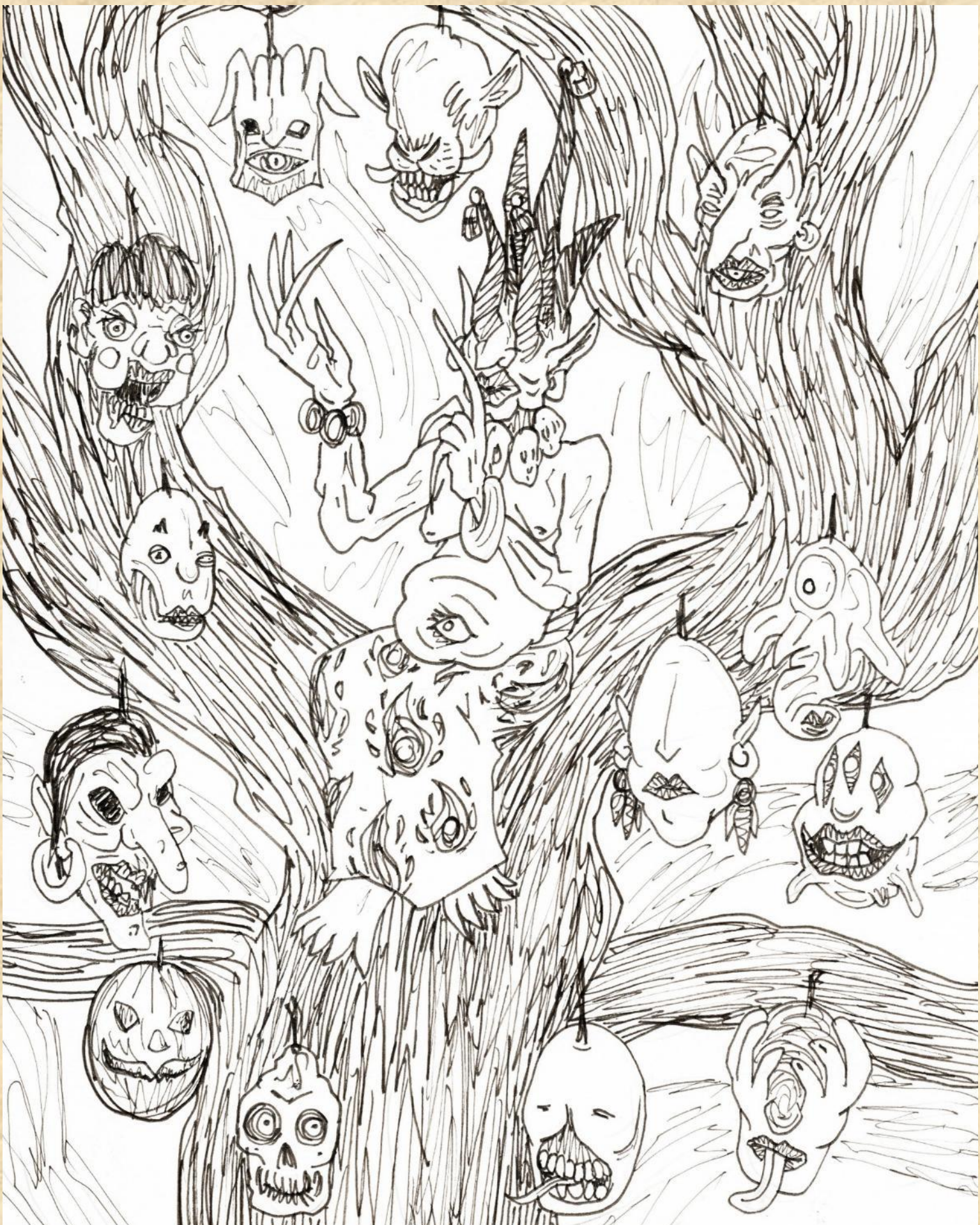


Haamzas The Shaitan

Haamzas the Shaitan, "Despot of Make Believe," is a mysterious demon lord who rules the Abyssal Layer known as "Zaqqam." This entire layer is composed of an infinite weave of interlocking, and dangerously thorny tree branches decorated with thousands upon thousands of frightening masks and exquisitely carved jack'o'lanterns. Some say Zaqqam is a corrupted portion of Yggdrasil, others suggest it is an extension of Amentia's Thousand Tower, or even the corpse of Malgarius, the Demon Tree. The one to ask for confirmation would probably Haamzas, but that would probably be a fatally deleterious mistake.

Haamzas seeks out the innocent, more specifically, lost children who have been unfairly treated, abused, mistreated and tormented. To these poor, long-suffering waifs, the Shaitan offers them the chance to become powerful, to be given the chance to seize the dreams they had in spite of their abusers' sabotage. Those children who accept Haamzas' proposition gradually transform into monsters who are, at first obsessively hungry for revenge against their tormentors, then, once their metamorphosis completes, starving for bloodshed and mayhem. Each mask and lantern in Zaqqam represents the soul of each of the Despot of Make Believe's devotees.

Once a child has accepted Haamzas, the Despot can accelerate, postpone or reverse his devotee's change on a whim or if his schemes require it. To restore the humanity of one of Haamzas' victim followers, one must travel to Zaqqam and retrieve the soul in the devotee's corresponding mask or jack'o'lantern. The Shaitan will, obviously, never allow or tolerate such an action without proper compensation.

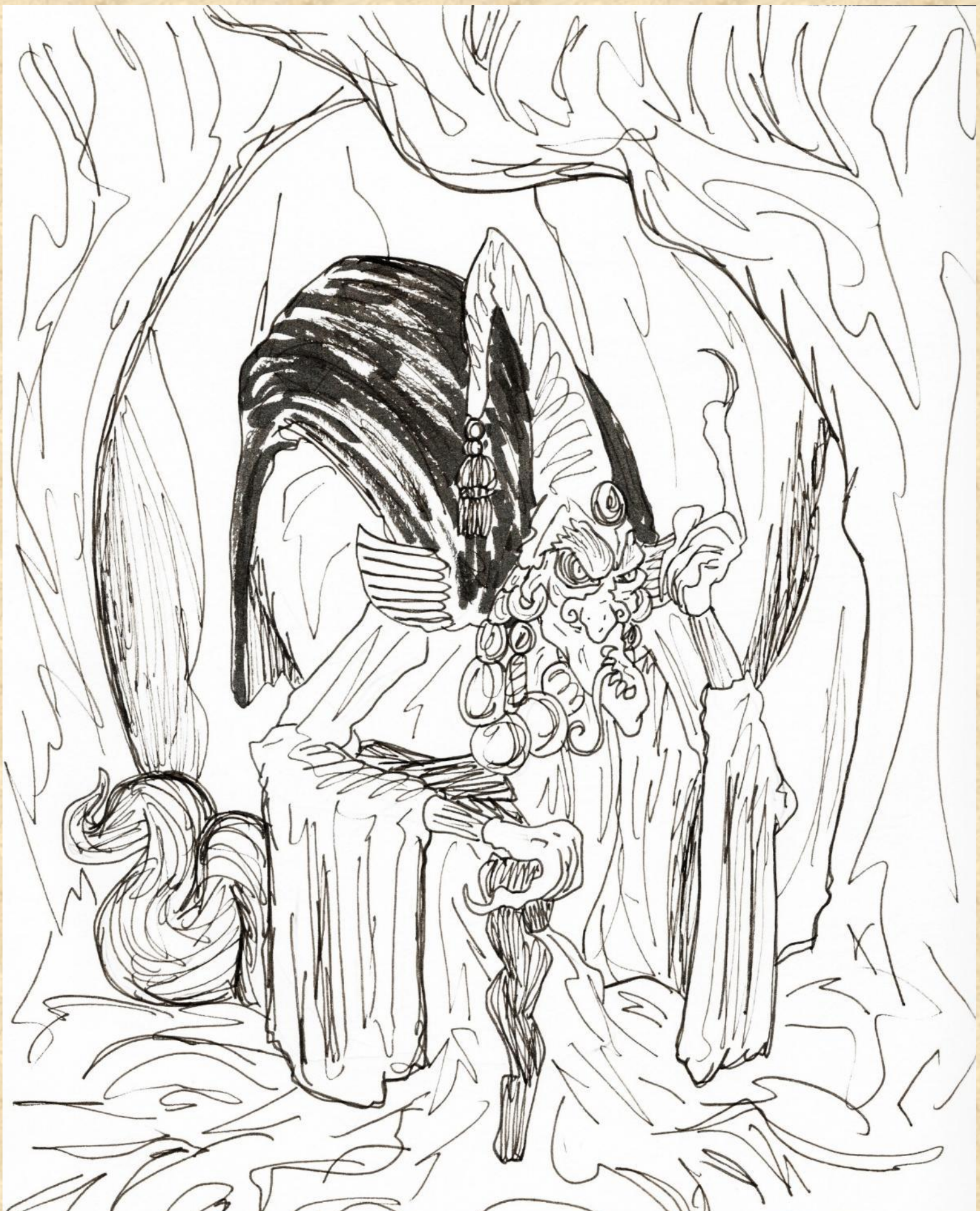


The Helminth

The Helminth, also known as "The Burrowing Worm," is a peculiar, yet pleasantly soft-spoken demon lord who appears as a hideous, hunchbacked gnome. Closer examination shows that the Helminth's "chin" is also his mouth, and that the hem of his robes meld with whatever substrate he moves across as though he were an enormous, puppet-like boil. Some demonologists suspect he may have been an actual parasite of Bechard The Rotting Husk, or, worse, possibly even a new aspect or avatar of that particular obyrith.

No one who knows the Burrowing Worm dares speak his actual name, lest they choke on a mouthful of endoparasites. Despite this, the Helminth is a mad schemer who is murderously competent at presenting himself as an unctuously charming dilettante, always popping up, sometimes literally, to offer his extensive services to mortals lost in the Abyss. If the Helminth cannot perform some asked of task, himself, he always knows someone who can. For a small price, or a simple favor in exchange.

And then the next thing these new friends realize, they've become the worm-riddled husk-minions of the Helminth for the rest of eternity. That is, those lucky ones who become aware of their transmogrified situation.



Hexuvara

Hexuvara, The Spoken Poison, is an evil spirit who teaches magic to those who summon him. Unlike many other similar spirits or fiends of an educational bent, Hexuvara does not claim the souls of his students as compensation. Instead, the Spoken Poison asks his students to swear an oath to him that they will always use the magic they are taught to cause undue harm and otherwise make the world a worse place. Oathbreakers who try to flout or skirt this geas die when their magic not so mysteriously turns against them.



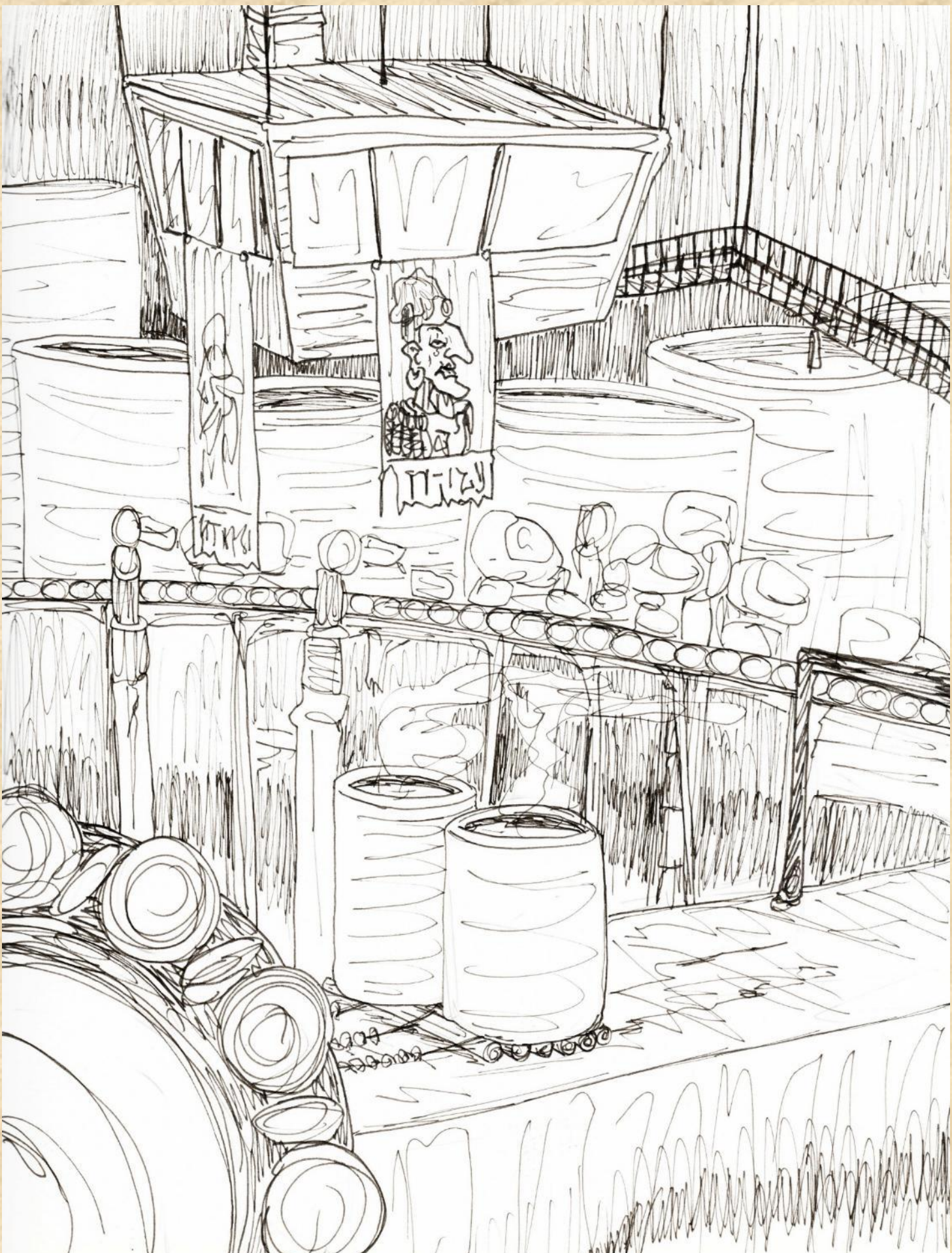
Il Presidente Molamolossomo

Il Presidente Molamolossomo, Chairman Of The Munitions Complex, is the ruler of the Munitions Complex, a particularly awful Layer of the Abyss where demonic weapons and demon armies are manufactured. The Munitions Complex appears to be a continents-spanning factory campus snuggly situated within a series of badlands scoured and blasted by pollution. Very little life (or its Abyssal equivalents) is found outside of the factory campus, as visitors and escapees risk being assaulted by acid rain, semi-sentient soot or caustic mist, or, worst of all, get disintegrated by sunlight whenever the acidic cloud cover thins.

Inside the Munitions Complex is arguably worse than outside. Demons of all descriptions routinely climb out of crucibles to attempt to fulfill their capriciously assigned quotas before they are to be smelted down and recycled. Shipments of demons and weapons are sent by trolleys through tunnels that connect to the barracks of Durao. Most fiends regard the thought of being consigned to the Munitions Complex to be a fate worse than death.

No one knows what Il Presidente Molamolossomo looks like, as he is an ancient, shapeshifting demon lord who was originally, personally installed as the Munitions Complex Chairman by the Queen of Chaos, herself, at the start of the Dawn Wars. To Il Presidente's favorite customers, he appears as a foppish human general, done up in gold braids and sparkling medals. To the most intimate of Molamolossomo's subordinates, he is an ominous cone of shadow who dispenses rewards, punishments and orders in equal measure. To his factory slaves, Il Presidente Molamolossomo is an annoying, omnipresent voice constantly barking useless platitudes from the dozens of mezzanines dangling from the factory rafters.

Thanks to ancient treaties crafted by the obyriths soon after the Chairman's own creation, a considerable fraction of evil souls entering into the Abyss are diverted into the crucibles of the Munitions Complex to fuel its purpose for assisting the arming and populating of the Demonic Hordes of the Abyss. Having said this, Molamolossomo seeks to conquer the Abyss by selling his wares and renting his armies to various clients in exchange for capital and favors. Any customer who meets his price or makes agreeable counteroffers will get what they ask for, even if it involves sabotaging the Tanar'ri's position in the Blood War. Having said that, Il Presidente's mercenary schemes sabotage his dream of ruling the Abyss, as the more business he does, the more his own stockpiles of weapons and minions shrink accordingly.



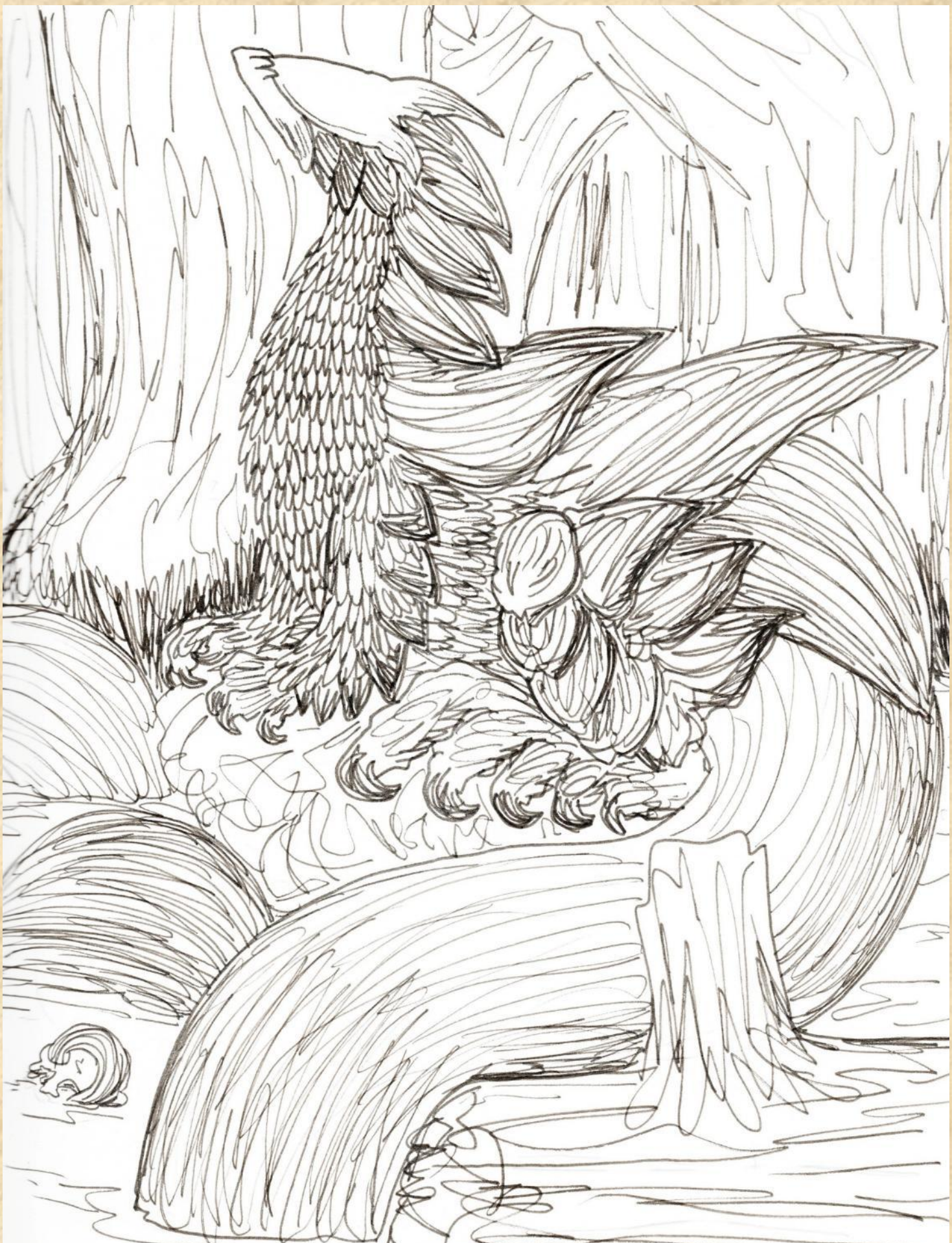
Ishgalnera

Ishgalnera, Viceroy of the Limnades, is a reptilian spirit that haunts swampy forests and forest ponds. When the Viceroy manifests, he usually appears as a draconian lizard with a mask-like face that may or may not have eyes, and likes to bask in dappled sunlight. His tail, however, always remains in the water, and, from the way his tail's myriad coils bob and undulate, it may be ten, twenty or even over one hundred times his body length, depending on how large the body of water he is manifesting from is. Spirits and Fae of the waters and the forest defer to Ishgalnera as their treasured elder, and even the crassest of dragons will avidly, yet respectfully request advice from the Viceroy.

Mortals, too, seek the Ishgalnera's blessings. Peasants and forest hunters tie silver or gold coins to rats, never copper, and throw them into the Ishgalnera's pond, asking for gentle rains to nourish crops and fodder meadows. Vistani, similarly, offer treasure, stuffed into hollowed bread loaves to the Viceroy, asking the spirit to ensure their water jugs never leak or turn bitter. Hag covens often attempt to invite His Excellency to their witches' masses where they offer him sacrifices of humans or wererats in return for guidance for their rituals.

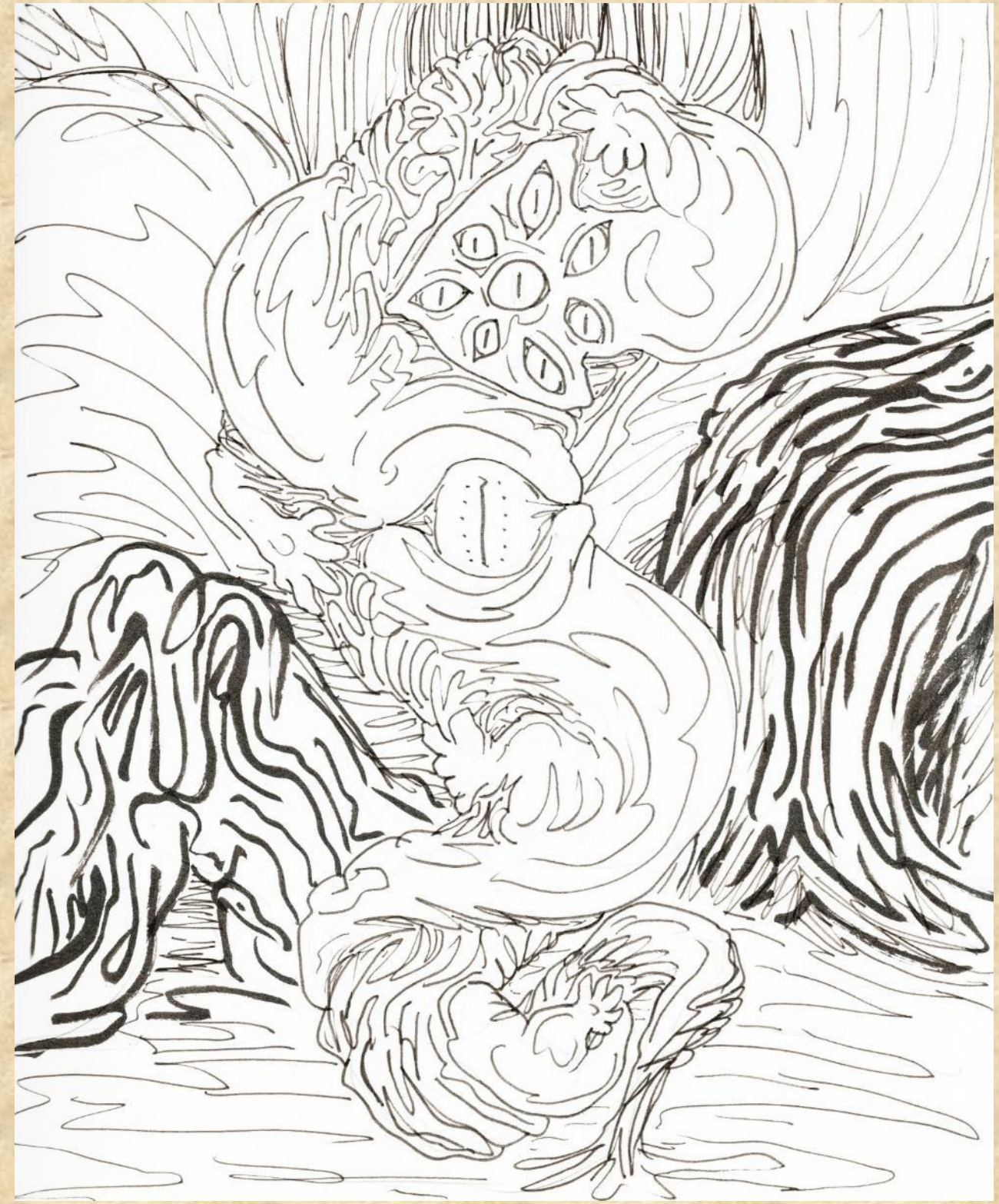
Everyone who knows of Ishgalnera is rigorously taught to treat this spirit as their doyen, as, those who make the grand error of offending this spirit live long enough to make everyone regret their mistake. Those who would dump trash in the Ishgalnera's abode soon find all potable liquids they touch turns to noxious slime; this curse lasts until the litterbug returns to remove their garbage. Those who would offend the Ishgalnera by committing a murder in or near his waters (as opposed to officially consecrating a sacrificial victim) soon finds that anything they drink, including their own slobber, turns to debilitating poison, and only in death does the Ishgalnera rescind this punishment. If one were to exorcise the Ishgalnera from his lair, whether by dumping copper, lead or other poisonous rubbish, draining his waters or razing his ponds and streams, the Viceroy's banishment brings a deadly drought where whatever little water remains turns bitter and poisonous.

Those who hear of the Ishgalnera taking offense over someone's ill actions are quick to find and offer the offender up as a sacrificial apology in hopes of appeasing the Viceroy.



Kafurong Yuan

A hideous and hideously evil spirit that lairs in especially vilely smelling swamps. Little is known about Kafurong Yuan beyond that it is a good friend of the Ishgalnera. Some suspect it is a spirit of poisonous swamp gas, as its victims appear to have died from painful asphyxiation.



Lunglian

Lunglian, the Immaculate Emperor of Foulness, is an evil spirit of stagnant waters and a rival of the Ishgalnera. The Immaculate Emperor manifests in lonely swamps or large, fetid ponds as an immense, serpentine length of massive lotus roots larger than a wagon train. Leaves, shoots and flowers emanate from the roots' joints, and allow His Highness to perceive and manipulate objects and potential victims.

Much like his rival, the Viceroy, most everybody, including spirits, Fae and mortals, tries to avoid getting on His Imperial Majesties' bad side as the Immaculate Emperor is infamous for bestowing ruinous curses upon those who aggravate his murderous pique. Depending on his mood, his curses may be annoying, like, tracking swamp mud everywhere forever, or horrific, such as spontaneously transforming into a soul-eating mudman.

Still, many are those who come seeking His Majesties' favor, usually obsessed lotus fanatics and unhinged tea snobs seeking Lunglian's magically potent flowers and leaves, or, more rarely, depraved arcanists and the truly desperate who request Lunglian's understanding in weaving and unweaving curses. The Immaculate Emperor's price depends on his legendarily capricious mood, though, he can be easily persuaded to become helpful with gentle flattery and friendly gossip (with or without a blood sacrifice).



Machine Ghost

The so-called "Machine Ghost" is a peculiar spirit that visits children, offering its potent magical abilities as service. Requests of its master du jur are followed to the letter, ideally in a manner causing immense disruption, if not actual harm and havoc. A task given is followed to the letter, and will not allow its instructions to be modified unless given another task to explicitly countermand the previous. The Machine Ghost would defend itself and its designated master to the death, unless explicitly ordered to stand down. This cycle continues until its master du jur dies or dismisses it.

The creature is called a "machine" due to its stiff, mechanical manners, and for its metallic appearance. It is called a "ghost" because it is actually made of ectoplasm. What the beast is is not known. Some scholars claim it is a rogue modron, though Mechanus has no record of any model of modron that even remotely resembles it. Demonologists suggest it is from the Abyss, as the sigil emblazoned on its torso is a chaos symbol, and hypothesize that the Machine Ghost may be one of Haagenti's creations on the loose.



Metataya

Metataya the Wondermaker is either a powerful demon prince or an exiled god who once ruled the Abyssal Layer now known as the Plain of Agony. Those who insist he was once a god claim that Metataya was cast out of Heaven because his dazzling resplendence shamed the Goddesses of Heaven and made the Sun dim with seething envy. Those who claim the Wondermaker was always a demon insist that he was an Abyssal creature possessed of insidious charm and murderous ambition comparable to the Queen of Chaos.

The Dazzling One ruled over a shimmering, seemingly infinite metropolis filled to bursting with his loyal cultists and faithful demon armies, and was guarded by his child and seneschal, Dara Es Ghalha, the Lord Who Watches. From his realm, Metataya would lead assaults on other Abyssal layers, other planes and the Prime Material. Eventually, according to most accounts, a clique of rival demon lords successfully convinced an angel, a devil and a Fae to enter Metataya's palace and assassinate the Wondermaker while the rival demon lords distracted him with an invasion of their demonic armies. The trio succeeded in imprisoning the Wondermaker in a giant cocoon of quartz, though, because they did not actually slay the Wondermaker, their patrons slew them, in return.

Some, however, claim that the Gods and Fiends came together in a covenant to place the Wondermaker in that cocoon so that he could continue maturing into a being greater than God or Fiend without additional distractions. Who knows for sure?



Muvirus

Muvirus is a shapeshifting virusbeast in service to its great-grandsire, Alphavirus, whom it serves as a loyal henchcreature and assassin. Much like its cousin, Etavirus, Muvirus infiltrates the lairs of its master's foes to kill and maim. Unlike Etavirus, Muvirus prefers to imitate inanimate objects in order to deceive and terrorize its victims with poltergeist-like activities, and then finally strike once tension and fright reach optimum levels. Also unlike Etavirus, Muvirus does not speak or communicate beyond responding with a tittering chuckle. Unlike most other virusbeasts, Muvirus is unharmed by sunlight, though it instinctively stays out of reach of the sun as it feels somewhat uncomfortable in bright light.

Muvirus' true form is a man-sized glop of quicksilver, with a melon-like dollop serving as a head, and often secreting whip-like pseudopods that serve as its primary weapons.

Alphavirus dotes on Muvirus, insisting that its great-grandchild is its "favoritest" [sic] minion.



Pianggoei

Pianggoei, the Shyster of Hell, is a minor demon lord associated with deceit, the subversion of law, the formation of contracts, and wordplay. The Shyster of Hell resembles a thoroughly desiccated yuanti with dry, crumbling skin that crackles like papers in a fist. His long tail ends in a venomous stinger that resembles a fountain pen's nib. Despite his ghastly appearance, he has a musically hypnotic voice that everyone finds pleasing. It is said, mostly by Pianggoei, himself, that he stole his title from a powerful archdevil, and then successfully litigated his keeping it, leading to the now-nameless devil's eternal exile into the Pit of Flames. Pianggoei is the son of the demon lord, Hexacuunies, the Princess of Secrets, who created him specifically to assist her in binding the souls of her mortal clients, and then cataloging them with his brother, Zaath Xaw. Zaath Xaw was an ambitious creature who chafed under his mother's yoke, and convinced Pianggoei to successfully sue their mother for legal emancipation in a court inside the Escarand of Woe. However, when Pianggoei discovered that the second part of Zaath Xaw's plan to use the Courts of Woe to seize their mother's library would, as a consequence, turn Pianggoei into his brother's slave for all eternity, Pianggoei surreptitiously bribed the presiding Lords of Woe to rule against Zaath Xaw no matter what. Then, to add additional insult to injury, Pianggoei then proceeded to worm his way back into his mother's good graces (by bribing her with autographed copies of *The Portrait Of Dorian Gray* and *Crime And Punishment*).

Pianggoei dwells in an iron fortress he purchased in Pazunia, which is in a constant state of remodeling and repair. The Shyster of Hell haunts more civilized portions of the Abyss, especially in the tunnels of the Escarand of Woe, where he searches for lost mortal travelers in need of assistance, legal or otherwise. On several occasions, Pianggoei, or a duly appointed representative will travel to a Prime Material world on behalf of a new client. In dealing with clients, Pianggoei is unfailingly polite and never lies beyond making certain omissions. Unless he desires a specific task, or is asked directly, he never mentions that his price for his panoply of services is automatically claiming his client's eternal soul under the assumption that they "are grownups who already know the consequence of making fiendish bargains." The souls of previous clients are trapped forever in his fortress where his favorites are consigned as his simpering pet courtesans (gender not withstanding); those whom he doesn't care for too much get put to work remodeling his Château Flux as per his latest whim (currently in another Rococo imitation of Vanelon, this time in pink and black marble facade).


WAR
&
PEACE

Psivirus

Psivirus, or Ψvirus, is a virusbeast descended from the feyrgod, Megalovirus. Ψvirus lurks in the Border Ethereal, searching for psionic beings in the Prime Material to torment and feed on. The virusbeast's presence is easily felt, as it constantly emits a "psychic static" that manifests as laughter echoing inside of one's head. The horror appears as a serpentine cloud of "bad thoughts," with a cluster of brains in a bubble at the anterior end of the cloud. Whether the brains are a part of its body or are the not-yet-digested remnants of previous victims remains unknown.

Ideally, Ψvirus finds a suitable victim, and then tortures them by establishing a telepathic link with which to screw with their brain functions until the chosen victim goes insane and dies. Having said that, the virusbeast will happily target non-psionic beings, as well, haunting them with illusions or pulling them (or just their nervous systems) bodily into the Border Ethereal to manually eat their brains.

This virusbeast often serves as an assassin for its greater kin, where Megalovirus or its immediate subordinates demand a specific troublemaker dead, done in so with a touch much gentler than Sigmavirus' or Chivirus' manners.

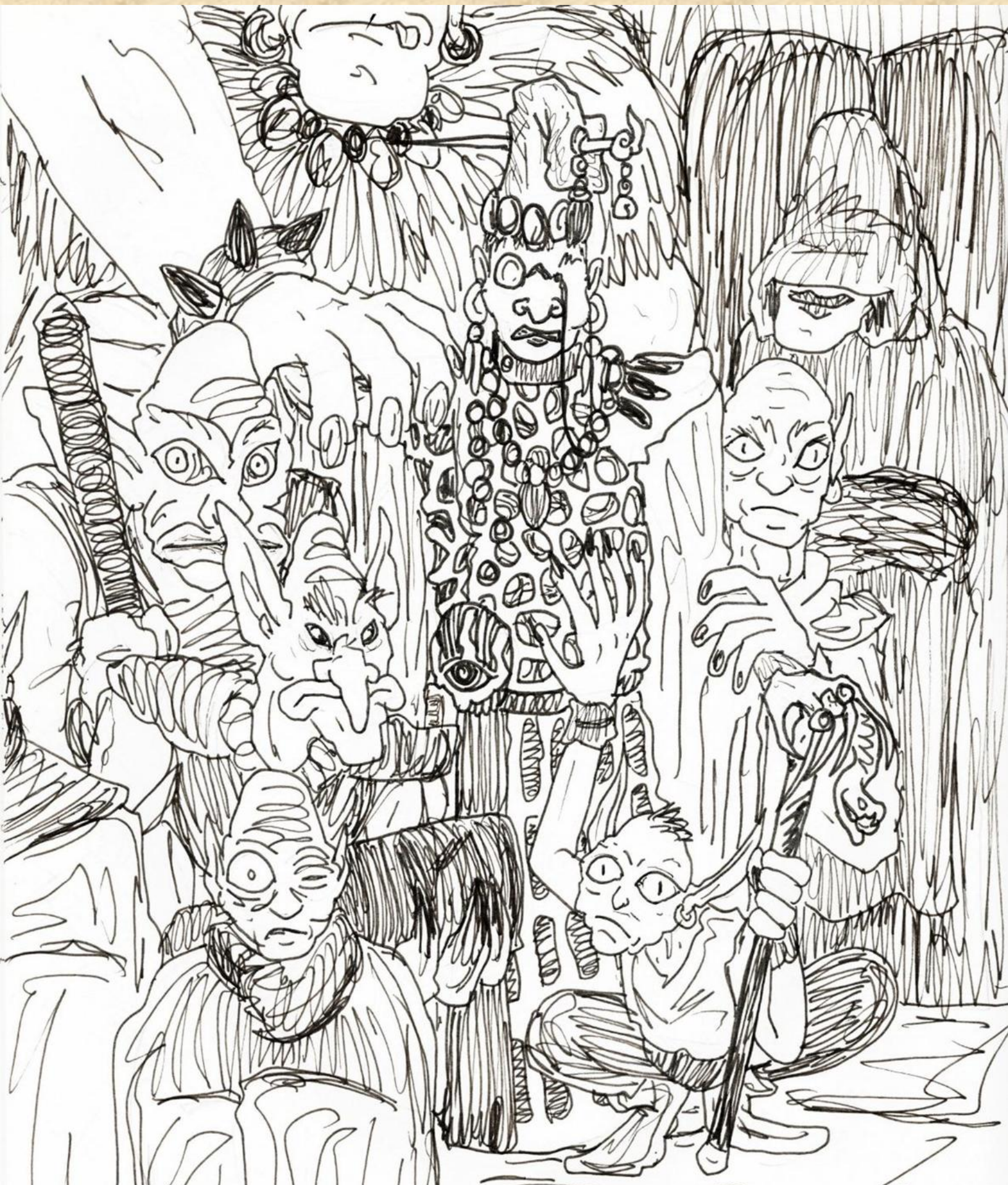


Goblin Emperor Qurro I

(Goblin) Emperor Qurro the First is now a mythic ancestor spirit worshiped by some heretical or heretically progressive goblin tribes who seek power through bettering themselves. Because Qurro the First grants his followers sorcerous power and enhanced intellect, many goblins find his worship very tempting. But because of Qurro's many disgusting tenets, including altruism, maintaining good hygiene for its own sake, minimizing intra-tribal strife, seeking revenge only as a last resort, and practicing mindfulness, Qurro's followers are violently shunned from goblinoid society whenever discovered. As such, most goblinoids assume Qurro the First is a heretical aspect of Bagrivyek the Peacekeeper who did not rely on xenophobia as a tool for maintaining unity.

Qurro is depicted as either as an ugly, dwarfish human or a pleasant-looking goblin with good posture. Either form has one eye, always covered by some sort of lens, and is always dressed in fine, ceremonial costume. According to one legend, Qurro was a deformed human child who, after being abandoned by his parents, was adopted by kind goblins and became a wise chieftain who united together hundreds of tribes under his caring leadership and insidious diplomacy. Another legend claims that Qurro was a hyperintelligent goblin who tried to seek his future among the civilized races, only to be soundly rejected. In revenge, Qurro would return to his people, reform the goblin tribes as a mighty empire and then razed his enemies' lands with his armies. His followers posit both legends as true, mostly because they don't have time to bicker and also because those who do make time to bicker about Qurro's origins spontaneously die of mysterious food allergies. Out of respect and hidden fear, his followers do not discuss the circumstances of Qurro's demise which lead to his transition to a spirit beyond those circumstances were both "unfair and ahead of schedule."

Qurro's followers seek to emulate their patron by being calm, observant, and diplomatic while being discrete and elegantly final with their brutality. While Qurro does not formally call upon his children to perform rituals or ceremonies for the sake of his ego, his followers always thank and honor the Goblin Emperor by preparing a feast to celebrate the completion of one of their schemes' milestones. In this feast, a doll, a mannequin or a corpse of a hated enemy is dressed as Qurro and is ritually fed a morsel from each dish before the effigy is burned in a fire.



Rongyuanyao

Rongyuanyao the Nine-Eyed Salamander, or "Of The Spear-Like Teeth," is an evil spirit originally born of the resentment from the last member of a now-extinct species of salamander who died when its pond was drained and plowed over by farmers.

This salamander's ghost lingered in the village of its assassins, eventually growing powerful enough to possess the village chief. Once gaining control of the chief, Rongyuanyao began making increasingly nonsensical demands of the villagers in order to sow chaos and foment strife among them in revenge for its own demise. The villagers balked when their possessed chief ordered them to round up and slaughter the village children, and then burned him at the stake when he bit the chief's wife in a rage.

Because the spirit no longer had a body of its own, it easily escaped its first host's demise. Rongyuanyao would haunt other villages in order to repeat the process.

Hosts of this spirit grow seven extra eyes on their bodies, allegedly to represent the last nine individuals of Rongyuanyao's species who died before it. Whether they hide their new eyes depends on Rongyuanyao's mood and plans.



The Thundering Prince

Once, the restless spirit now known as "The Thundering Prince" was once an elven ranger who came to care for a human sage when the latter came to study the fauna and flora of the former's forest. The elf grew fond of his guest, quickly coming to regard the sage as a son or as a brother. Eventually, the sage completed his research, and returned to his homeland to present his studies to his academic peers, with his dear friend in tow.

Upon the sage's return to academia, his peers met his findings with scorn and dismissive ridicule, openly declaring his magnum opus was "junk and nonsense." So broken, the sage was rescued from suicide by his ranger, only to later wither away and die, anyhow, in the elf's care. When the elf demanded justice and recompense on his friend's behalf, the human authorities derided him, and declaring those awful, jeering sages as innocent of murder before banishing him from the realm. To add insult to injury, the sage's former peers then reconsidered their previous verdict, declaring that the now-former sage's studies were actually informative after all.

A decade later, the elf ranger returned to his friend's homeland, and began stalking and killing those sages who ruined his friend's life. When the ranger was captured by authorities, he declared his friend's enemies to be naught but opportunistic beasts to be slain. The ranger then ranted how he would slay his friend's adversaries no matter what the cost, whereupon he had his head chopped off. Even so, the demon lord of justice, Drassonax the Brutal Justicar, heard the elf's anguished speech, and blessed him (many would argue "cursed him") so that his spirit could linger on and seek the vengeance both sage and ranger were owed.

A year passed, and the killings of those errant sages resumed, the victims now torn apart as if by a giant beast (as opposed to simply being hacked to pieces with a sword). The killer was discovered to be one of the ranger's executioners who was possessed by the ranger's restless ghost. On the nights of the full moon, the possessed man would transform into a rampaging beast under the spirit's thrall in order to seek out and rend more victims.

Since the Prince's initial exorcism, he continues to linger in this world, seeking a host either to continue his own vendettas, or to assist with his hosts'.

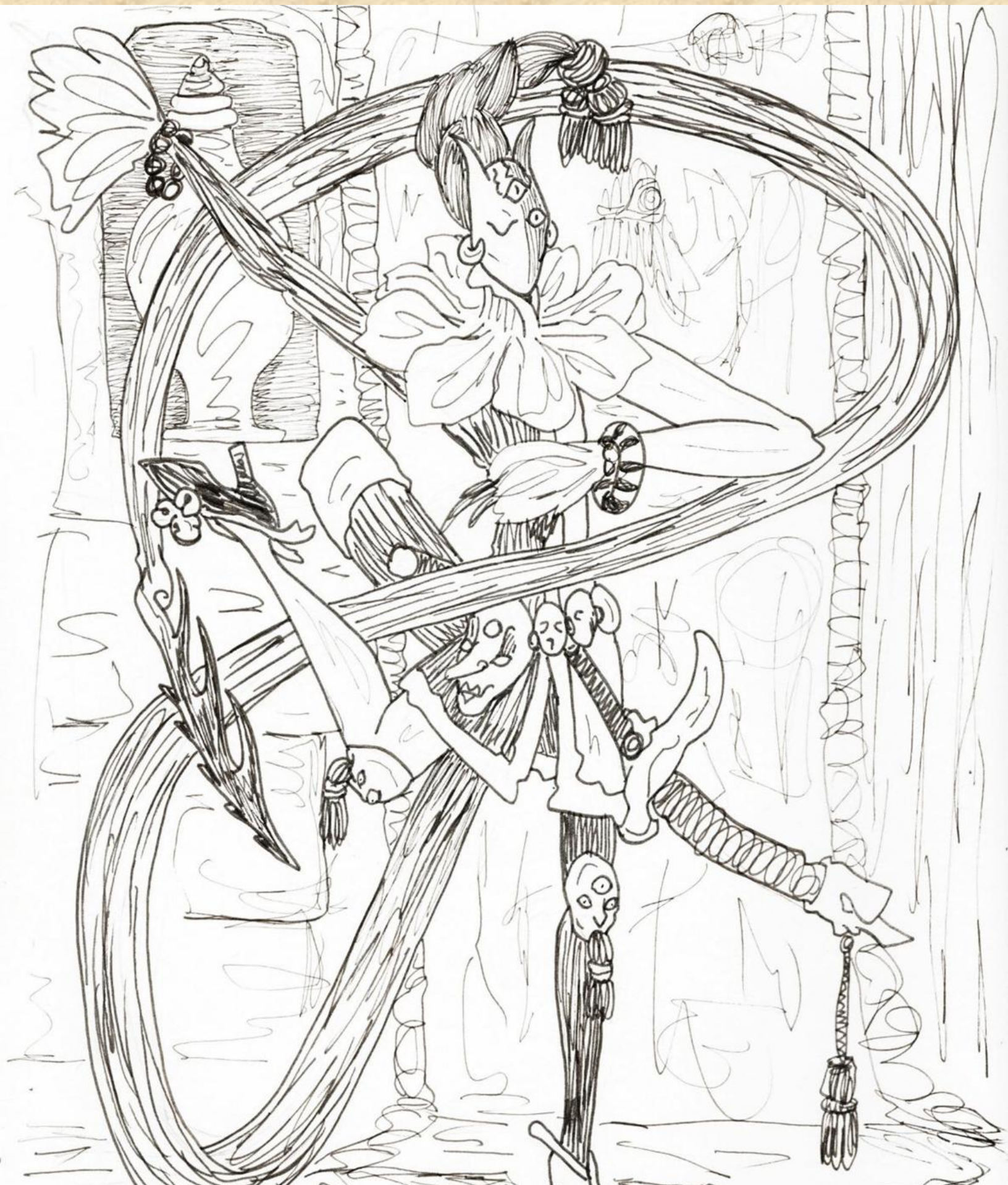


Uruburan The Welcomed Guest

Uruburan The Welcomed Guest, "Prince of Ambition," is a powerful incubus who is one of Gulo the Rapacious Sommelier's favorite bastard sons. Uruburan serves his father as a spy at parties where Gulo cannot attend, sifting through gossip and banquet menus in order to relay pertinent information back to his father.

Uruburan prides himself on his unctuously witty charm, which can be a perfumed feather, a paper-thin razor, or an envenomed needle, as he chooses. Even more so, Uruburan prides himself on his good manners, which serve him as a key that unlocks many doors throughout the Universe. While the Welcomed Guest is an accomplished liar and, for lack of a more precise descriptor, a "parasite," Uruburan never breaks his word when he has given it, even if it means the ruin of his current plans. The Prince of Ambition eagerly murders anyone whom he hears accuse him of being an oath-breaker, too.

What the Prince of Ambition looks like is unknown, save to him and his father, as he is a master of disguise even without his shapeshifting and illusionary powers.



Wau Wan

Wau Wan, Queen of the Vandals, is a demon princess of revenge and spite who seeks to address wrongs heaped upon the innocent. Wau Wan claims to have been once an innocent child, but was made victim of a wrong so unfairly heinous that she was cast into the Abyss as a result. Since then, Wau Wan has been biding her time and gathering strength for the time to correct this great sin against her.

Currently, Wau Wan gathers followers and initiates who seek revenge; those who earnestly seek revenge on behalf of innocents and loved ones too weak or too soft to obtain it themselves, she favors above others. To her followers, the Queen of the Vandals grants demonic power and Abyssal weapons to assist in their vendettas.

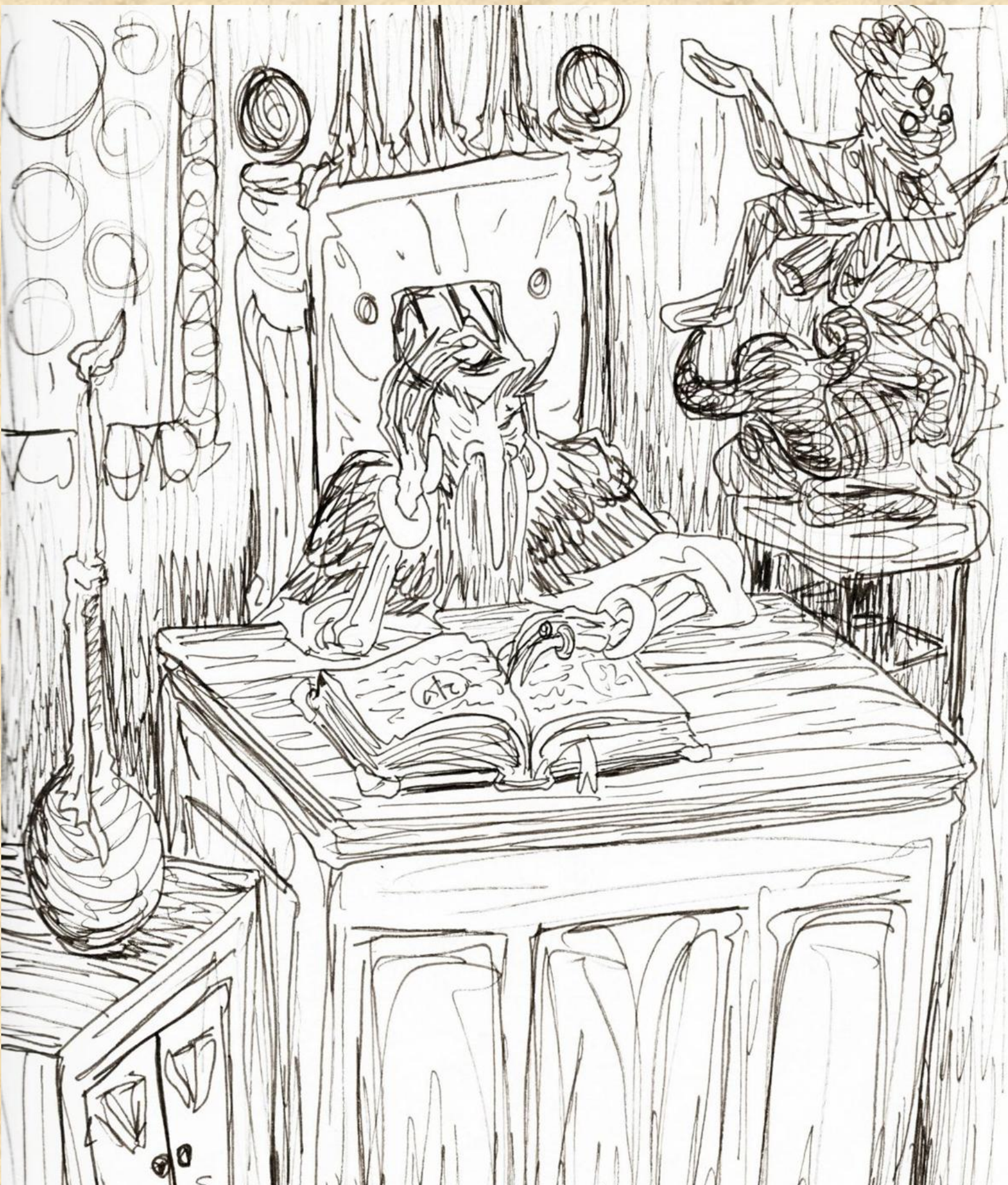


Xath Va

Xath Va, The Archivist Of The Damned, is a powerful fiend who lives in a massive, citadel-library, named "Adlibrum," that exists in an interdimensional bubble that connects with various hidden locations throughout the Lower Planes. The Archivist is rumored to have been the lover of various intellectual fiends, including Astaroth, Emperor Zombie, Graz'zt, Gresil, Kerzit, Dagon, Scrivenshy, Anthraxus, Rule-Of-Three, and Hexacuunies, though, the only one willing to ~~discuss~~ gossip about Xath Va was Dagon, and even then, only with some prompting.

Xath Va collects information, primarily in the form of texts, whether carved stelae, scrolls, tablets, books or more arcane forms, and the Archivist bargains with other beings, fiends, liches and mortals alike, to acquire more. Xath Va also collects souls, sentient beings, treasure or other forms of riches, but these are invariably used to acquire more texts and stuff to stock the shelves of Adlibrum.

It is possible to enter Adlibrum without invitation, but literate fiends everywhere all advise potential trespassers to bring expensive books as peace offerings if they don't want to be transmuted into autobiographies for the rest of eternity.



Zaath Xaw

Zaath Xaw, the Scribe Of The Abyss, is a minor demon lord associated with wordplay, knowledge and ambition. This demon lord resembles a vaguely humanoid-shaped cone of tarry fluid that reeks of India ink. Zaath Xaw is the son of the demon lord Hexacuunies, having been created by the Demon Princess of Secrets to assist in cataloging her precious books and her clients' souls. Zaath Xaw had his own wants and desires, and detested his mother for the drudgery she foisted upon him, so he conspired with his brother, Pianggoei, and, together, they escaped to the Escarand of Woe to litigate their emancipation. Pianggoei feared for his own freedom when he misinterpreted (so claimed Zaath Xaw) the second portion of his brother's plan, and so, sabotaged Zaath Xaw's attempts to have the Lords of Woe confiscate Hexacuunies' library.

The Scribe Of The Abyss claimed that he needed his mother's library to create a special ink with which to pen a grimoire of power so incomprehensibly potent, it would allow its reader to edit reality as they pleased. But, since this avenue no longer exists for Zaath Xaw, he has had to put together alternatives.

Mortals call upon the Scribe Of The Abyss, who then grants his petitioners the ability to speak or write the perfect words for whatever specific occasion that troubles them. Would-be authors summon Zaath Xaw to assist them in composing their own magnum opi. In return, petitioners forfeit their souls to Zaath Xaw, who then processes their formerly immortal spirits into more ink for his grimoire.

Once Zaath Xaw completes his grimoire, the first and second things he plans to do are edit his mother and brother out of existence.



A Broken Cog Trilogy: Heroes of the Broken Cog

By Doctor Necrotic

Special thanks to The Dark on The Piazza Forums

"This is the way the world ends,
This is the way the world ends,
This is the way the world ends,

Not with a bang, but a whimper."
- T.S. Elliot, *The Hollow Men*

And so, my foray into the realms of dark steampunk continues. Part of me wondered, what's missing? I'm sure I can add in more details, maybe transfer the rest of my old ideas from my blog? But within the bigger picture, what else to do? For one, I've been wondering, how can players be more engaged? Likewise, what of more conflicts and interactions between domains? I have some, mostly implied. Let's add more to that.

Oh, and some player-centric crunch. That would be good too!

And with that, let's get into the article proper, shall we?

The Broken Cog is a land of strife and violence disguised as a land of enlightenment and advancement. It perhaps exemplifies core ethos of the cyberpunk genre, "high tech, low life", in an attempt to bring steampunk back to more gothic friendly roots. For all the wonders that have revolutionized life, such as the steam ship, locomotive rail, even an automated workforce; new forms of strife have come in the form of workers deemed obsolete, out of control production of new forms of weaponry, and seemingly endless pollution. In many ways as cynical as cyberpunk, there is still a slight glimmer of hope within the Broken Cog. However, in order to find it, one must get past not just the problems of these new technologies, but also the eternal problems of civilization itself… All-out warfare, boundless toxic wastelands, and heinous new ideologies could very well prove the undoing of this land. This is not to say that tradition is perfect. Whether through the seething technophobia, even stretching to eco-terrorism, found through much of Alleigosto to the inept and bloated aristocracy that helped to crash New Rockbaecche to the forlorn cults and profane state church of Ichthyos; the past, present, and future carry deep sins. Will heroes rise against these blights or be consumed by them?

The Fight for Good amidst the Fracture

"*I, too, have a duty to do, a duty to others, a duty to you, a duty to the dead*; and, by God, I shall do it! - Dr. Abraham van Helsing, *Dracula*

The Broken Cog Cluster is far more advanced than the majority of the domains found within the lands of the mists. As such, player characters are quite different as well. Below are suggestions on making heroes tied to the cluster, such as through kits. Below that, there is a list of potential NPC allies and organizations to further inspire PCs in such a bleak land of strange innovations.

Player Basics

Much of Masque of the Red Death can be repurposed for the Broken Cog Cluster through elaborate renaming or removing direct references to Gothic Earth. Likewise, AD&D's economy would have to replace any Earthly equivalent, in which USD ($) is the primary for most copies of that setting. The names and economies of gear should not reflect Gothic Earth, as these domains are analogs rather than originating from there.

Using Races

Humans are the most prominent across the cluster, but standard AD&D demi-humans can be found in smaller populations. This differs from Masque of the Red Death assumptions. Should you use Class Limits for the Masque classes, use a respective class analog instead. As education tends to be more widely available, you may choose to increase class limits if so you desire. Certain kits may change these limits too, such as heftier and heavier trades of the ***laborer*** kit giving a ***dwarf*** higher-level cap in ***tradesman***. In this example, the dwarf tradesman would have a normal level cap of 12. But, as a laborer, this cap would match the soldier at level 15. There is the assumption that a lot of demihumans are outsiders though. The mountains of Belagora may have an enclave of dwarves serving under the council's loose rule and an elven enclave can be found a few hours walk from New Timor in Zherisia. Darkheath, being an inheritor of sorts to Blackmoor's legacy, is probably the most populated by demihumans. Like the rest of the Demiplane of Dread, they do exist. However, they tend to be rarer in most domains. As such, they may face restrictions on the variant classes as well as kits relevant to this cluster.

Using Classes and Kits

A few of the Masque of the Red Death kits are tied to mechanics solely built for the setting. The *Medium*, *Exorcist*, and *Enthusiast* kits will deeply struggle in a setting that does not share the same Sphere acquisition mechanics. Likewise, the *Dilettante* kit from Polyhedron magazine suffers from the same issue. The class would need to be altered, as well as the kits, to function within an AD&D setting. Other Mystic based kits do not share this degree of struggle. Meanwhile, most of the soldier kits could be replaced by existing AD&D kits that fill similar niches. One could apply some benefits, like those of the sailor, to the seadog kit (listed below), as a replacement for the other kit's benefits.

Likewise, the Masque equivalent classes are inherently weaker. You could add them for PCs, but they'd need some bonus to make them willingly stand up to default AD&D classes. The Tradesman, for example, could probably use some extra NWPs or some other boon to offset that they don't have access to rogue skills inherently. (It typically requires 2 NWPs to obtain each.)

In order to use Masque classes in an AD&D setting, I recommend the following changes: Variant Adepts do not lose access to spells or schools of magic, they can choose a school with bonuses and drawbacks. Variant Mystics have a wider array of proficiencies and access to spheres, consider allowing at least one major/minor sphere access from the start, maybe broaden a little minor access from there. Variant Soldiers may specialize as per the Warrior rules. By default, consider giving them stat bonuses from the warrior. Variant Tradesmen gain an automatic proficiency in one Profession or Rogue NWP from MotRD to start and they may select Thief Skills and Backstab from AD&D for 1 NWP slot each instead of 2; they work as per AD&D rules, complete with advancement. Likewise, NWP is opened up to wider selection from AD&D and Ravenloft Campaign Setting as appropriate for each class. Essentially, meld lost aspects of the AD&D analog class back into the Masque version.

Otherwise, the Tradesman, Soldier, Mystic, and Adept as written might be a good stand in for NPC classes for the Thief, Warrior, Priest, and Mage respectively.

Below is a look at some kits that can be viable with some minor work. The majority of these are Tradesmen kits, except where noted through bold and italics.

- *Athlete* (Dragon 215) - Can work as written, as one of the few tradesmen/rogues capable of exceptional strength and constitution.
- *Cavalryman/Sailor (MotRD)* - Situational bonuses and forced WP at the cost of other situational bonuses with the loss of exceptional strength or constitution respectively. For the most part, they balance each other out, but a slight loss for a fighter. For the ***Soldier***.
- *Charlatan* (MotRD) - The ability for Sleight of Hand can be handled by the Thief's ability, starting at 25% and increasing by 5% every level, with adjustment for Dex. For the ***Adept***.
- Cowboy (Polyhedron 124) - Similar to other kits with social drawbacks, like Explorer, also mandatory uses of weapon proficiency. Added benefit of an extra NWP is pretty minimal. For the ***Soldier***.
- *Detective/Journalist/Lawyer* (MotRD/Dr215) - Largely campaign dependent and has benefits/drawbacks that require a bit of DM input.
- *Dilettante* (Polyhedron 124) - Uses setting specific rules, possibly applicable. A similarly named kit could fill a similar thematic role. For the ***Mystic***.
- *Explorer* (MotRD) - Since Exceptional Strength and Constitution are standard for Fighters, it's moot. What you get on top of that is a free Endurance NWP, at the cost of a -4 CHA penalty to various forms of "civilized" folk. For the ***Soldier***.
- *Gnostic* (Polyhedron 124) - A religious arcanist with surprisingly generous bonuses and situational drawbacks. For the ***Adept***.
- *Laborer* (MotRD) - This likely translates as only being able to take General NWP, with exceptions being up to DM.
- *Metaphysician* (MotRD) - This kit shouldn't be allowed to be specialized, as the kit is sort of like a specialization. For the ***Adept***.
- *Parson* (MotRD) - A decent take on a religious figure who isn't an outright cleric. Though, they might need something else, like the ability to use religious relics and related magic items.
- *Physician* (MotRD) - It's a little vague on the drawbacks, but still usable for a doctor.
- *Qabalist* (MotRD) - The bonus and penalty are strange outside of Masque, offering very little in either beyond theming. For the ***Adept***.
- *Sailor* (MotRD) - See *Explorer* above, similar situation.
- *Servant* (Polyhedron 124) - The kit, beyond its roleplay potential, trades off one smaller bonus for a slight weakness.
- *Scholar* (MotRD) - Weak hit die, but can teach NWP to others. Useful, but very tender.
- *Scientist* (Dragon 215) - Pretty weak bonuses and odd penalties, all revolving around making laboratories part of the campaign. It's possibly salvageable.
- *Spiritualist* (MotRD) - Another spiritualist kit, but for a priest or "***Mystic***"
- *Shaman* (MotRD) - Grant Priest NWP, but make INT based ones cost one-extra slot. For the ***Mystic***.
- *Thespian* (Dragon 215) - These lose a little bit of combat for increased skill in performance or dictation, better as party faces.'

The Following Kits may also work with minor modification:

A Mighty Fortress: Treat Honor as Optional, but it may prove valid in a Victorian-inspired setting. Likewise, firearm proficiency will account for post-Colt era firearms rather than wheellocks or the like.

- *Clansman* - Replace mention of Irish or Scottish with Zherisian, other languages are swapped out for effective neighboring domain languages
- *Forester* - From one of the following domains: Alleigosto, New Rockbaecche, Zherisia

- *Gentleman Adventurer* - Fits with aristocratic adventurer tropes of the period.
- *Picaro* - Mechanically fine, even if perhaps too "comic relief" for many games. The romantic thief theme may need minor adjustments. Certain archetypes may fit. Gentleman thieves like A.J. Raffles go against the "lowly birth" origin of the kit though.
- *Protector of the Faith* - Must align with a religion in the Mists.
- *Seadog* - Majority of these will be found in Ichthyos, Belagora, Rockbaecche, and Darkheath.
- *Vagabond* - Replace Elizabethan thief archetypes with more Victorian thief archetypes, ranging from Bicycle thieves to more elaborate confidence artists (or con artist for short.) Archetypes like the early-modern serial killer (a la H.H. Holmes or Jack the Ripper) should be left to NPCs.
- *Preacher, Scholarly Mage* - These are for NPCs.

Red Steel: As above, in regards to honor and firearms.

- *Bandit* - Ambushers and highwaymen, common enough for this time period.
- *Gaucho* - Replace Savage Baronies with Broken Cog Cluster. These would-be outlanders found outside of densely populated areas, even without much in the way of direct Americas analogue.
- *Honorbound* - Despite honor being valid in Victorian high society, this kit may struggle in places.
- *Local Hero* - Firearms are not considered exotic for all intents and purposes. However, they might not be available from the start.
- *Myrmidon* - Referred to as Soldier in many situations. Swap out wheelock with any sort of military firearm.
- *Militant Wizard* - Most commonly in Nosos as private security and Darkheath.
- *Noble* - Mostly common in Zherisia, New Rockbaecche, Alleigosto, Belagora; Belagoran nobles are known to work with common people. The equivalent in Nosos is the financial elite. This likely works best for the "Gentleman Thief" compared to others.
- *Swashbuckler* - More befitting of a "Zorro" type character at this point in time.
- *Trader* - Bards found in backwater parts of the cluster, like the most forlorn parts of Icthyos, the mountains of Belagora, the deep country of Alleigosto or the grim wastelands of Nosos.

Other

- *Anatomist* (Complete Book of Necromancers) - Doctors who utilize cadavers to aid in research. Many are morally dubious, benefitting from grave robbing.
- *Archeologist* (Dragon 241) - A penny dreadful/dime novel essential.
- *Bibliotaph* (Dragon 241) - Antiquarians, bibliophiles, scholars in search of ancient knowledge, and much more.
- *Beggar-Thief* (Al-Qadim) - Beggars and pickpockets of the big cities, capable of slipping in and out of crowds without being noticed.
- Champions of the Mists - Some kits are more appropriate than others. However, several are excellent for this cluster: *Fugitive, Ghostwatcher, Invisible, Monster Hunter* (with a focus like eldritch horrors, plague creatures or machines), *Psychic, Spiritualist.*
- *Clockwork Mage* (Al-Qadim) - Mechanical inventors who can infuse spell-like abilities into their machine projects. More common in Alleigosto and Nosos.
- *Dandy* (Dragon 189) - A standard trope of the wealthy that carries into this time period.
- Denizens of Dread (Dragon Annual 1998) - All of these kits are appropriate for this cluster, as well as the wider setting. These are *Danseur, Dilettante, Investigator, Psychologue, Stalker,* and *Warder* respectively.
- *Digitologist* (Al-Qadim) - Arcane mathematicians, finding ways to fuse numeric formulas into mystic studies.

- *Gondsman* (Faiths & Avatars) - This Specialty Priest kit would need rewriting, now "Tech Cultist." Update weapons and NWPs to reflect MotRD inspirations. Likewise, Tech Cultists revere ideology over a power, strangely getting a connection from something. Alter *Tree Steed* to technological themes. Consider spells from *Mage vs. Machine* series as other replacements.
- Mage vs. Machine (Dragon 258) - The *Sheenchaser* would need to be rewritten as a sort of arcane-luddite who seeks to smash machinery in domains like Nosos and Alleigosto. The *Machine Mage* is a sort of mad artificer who seeks to cannibalize, control, or craft machines to their bidding. Likewise, more common in Nosos or Alleigosto.
- *Noble's Clerk* (Crusades) - You are hired clerk, educator, or counselor of the nobility. However, you are often reminded that you aren't high society without their patron or sponsoring noble around.
- *Spiritualist* (Dragon 200) - While psionics are rare in the setting, this trope is all too common in a lot of Victorian era media. Likewise, Belagora is partially inspired by Slavic spiritualism of the 19th century.
- *Spiritualist* (Dragon 229) - A Mage alternative to the Psioinic kit.
- *Spy* (Complete Thief) - Spies simply incorporate new gadgets and modern ways into their missions.
- *Swami* (Dragon 225) - With some slight alterations, this could make for a good fortune-teller or medium of sorts.
- *Swindler* (Complete Thief) - Scammers existed throughout history, they've simply adapted to an industrial age.
- *Tramp* (Complete Book of Humanoids) - An iconic archetype. This kit is opened up to races outside of humanoids.
- *Troubleshooter* (Complete Thief) - Things break down and security fails, you exist to fix issues and often work against true thieves.

Cogs in a Cruel Machine

"*All the world's a stage*, And all the men and women merely players" - William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

The Broken Cog is a place of false hopes and warped dreams. How do heroics apply? One could ask any who rise up to defend their lands, as champions did in ages past. But, this need not be fighting some monster, but perhaps facing some figurative monster within society itself. Change in this land, beyond the ever-evolving industrial machine, is often slow and small in scope. However, that shouldn't be enough to deter moral champions of good. So, where do these arbiters of justice fall into this strange realm of the steam-driven future?

Various factions could prove inviting to heroes, in spite of their flaws. Who will the heroes align with? Who shall help champion them against the darkness?

Here is a list of organizations and personnel that should prove useful for heroes in the fight against evil. The NPCs listed below are not meant to steal credit or glory from the heroes, the PCs are meant to shine as the primary beacon of light. In addition, stats of many of the characters utilize a modified version of Masque classes, somewhat reflecting original AD&D classes. However, many can be swapped out for MotRD classes with a few changes. Only a few use original AD&D classes, both being priests.

The following abbreviations are employed for NPCs: Ad = Adept, My = Mystic, So = Soldier, Tr = Tradesman, Pa = Parson kit, Ma = Mage, Pr = Priest, Th = Thief, Wa = Warrior, Psi = Psionicist

McDunnough House of Spiritualism - Zherisia

Those who have a tie to the paranormal may take up Lady Muriel's mission. ***Muriel McDunnough*** is something of an eccentric old woman, currently living somewhat comfortably upon Wilbury Street. If not for a sign stating "Spiritualist Extraordinaire", her apartment and office would be unremarkable. While she mostly operates independently, she has assembled a small cadre of allies not just in Paridon, but well beyond too. Disturbances within haunted places are a specialty of the medium and her supporters, though even Old Flickerflame has expressed concern over the spiritualist's influence. Player characters interested in mystically inclined defenses against supernatural evils may wish to submit an inquiry to her office. She might prove a useful ally for information, patronage, and assistance with mystical studies.

Allies of Muriel often meet within her office under the guise of customers in need of service. As she waves her way through esoterism and protective incantations, real matters may soon begin. When Muriel is convinced that none are surveilling her, then preparations can begin to address a paranormal threat. Much of her odd mannerisms and speech patterns, like flailing her limbs eccentrically during speech or getting lost in a stammer, will enter the planning, but she is far from incoherent or suffering from some elderly illness of the mind. Much of that is theatrics to confuse her enemies. To the random onlooker, McDunnough looks like a feeble and at times aloof older woman. While she is elderly, she is far from weak. In addition to paranormal studies and communion among spirits, she is busy in keeping herself mentally and physically active.

Muriel McDunnough (human): **AC** 7; **MV** 12; **My13**; **hp** 33; #AT 1; **Dmg** by spell or weapon; (6/6/6/4/2/2 Slots); **Str** 10, **Dex** 12, **Con** 12, **Int** 17, **Wis** 15, Cha 14; **AL** LG; **THAC0** 16. This spirit medium keeps a crystal ball that secretly wards her against mental effects, likewise giving a +2 bonus against saves from supernatural creatures and effects. In spite of her old age, she maintains a very healthy lifestyle when not engaged in her work. As such, her stats are not deeply impacted by her age.

Office of Dr Wilder - Nosos

On the surface, ***Dr. Herman K. Wilder*** is an advocate of the everyday man of Nosos, under the cover of mental studies and medicine. By his day job, he has attempted to understand the nature of a breaking mind, and find ways to treat it. Outside of that, he has formulated ways to help prop up enemies of the Noson establishment. He has been a thorn in the side of the baron lords of the market, but his tale goes much deeper. He is secretly a psychic that was the result of brutal experiments on children conducted in Belagora. In his prior life, he was Gerasim, a victim of the disturbed "Mentalists" group that patrols that domain. Their purpose was to create legions of obedient child soldiers, augmented into the perfect subordinate. But in addition, their powers would allow them to ensure that the public falls in line too. His powers have proved convenient and allow him to covertly understand minds broken by supernatural forces like his homeland, as well as the cruelty of man that is ever apparent in Nosos. His in truth, not a certified doctor, and his degree and history are largely doctored. Most of his proficiency comes from his psionic talents. But, through his bogus professional field, he can finance his other passion of creating and spreading a newsletter to alert and enlighten the masses. These journals have garnered notoriety, but his use of extended support networks and rare employment of powers have let him evade capture and suspicion.

Wilder has countless enemies already, having built a space around advocacy and various forms of protest. However, player characters wishing to interact with him must go through a process like regular clients. With an appointment, he'll have time to vet them to see if they're spies or potential attackers. Following this, a cleared time slot will lead to the group being welcomed to his office. At first, he'll focus on his

work for others before inquiring if the party may know anything about the wider lands of the mists. While his work is not a front, compared to other allies, he still holds a passion for aiding others outside of Nosos' suppressive walls. He is unlikely to unveil too much of his psychic powered past, except to allies who have proven themselves aligned with his causes. Likewise, he will never admit where the printing studio for his pieces are made, even to close allies. Only his secret collaborators know for certain.

Dr. Herman K. Wilder (human): **AC** 5; **MV** 12; **Psi10**; **hp** 56; **#AT** 1; **Dmg** by power or weapon; (Di/Sc/De/Df: 4/5/15/5); **Str** 10, **Dex** 13, **Con** 14, **Int** 14, **Wis** 16, **Cha** 12; AL CG; **THAC0** 16. He carries several incriminating documents involving Nosos and Belagora, kept in a secure small locked box.

The Folded Arms of St. Logran - Darkheath

The ongoing war effort remains brutal within Darkheath. Entering is death, exiting is death, leaving too far beyond shaky civilization is death. So, who would try to ensure some level of stability and comfort in such a doomed land? The Folded Arms of St. Logran, a religious charity centered around a Blackmoorian Immortal known as Marten Logran, seeks to aid as it can. His teachings always favored empathy, reasonable change for the better, and an embrace of compassion when feasible. As for the religious order, their purpose has extended into secular aims, but remains devoted to humanitarian aid. They will collect supplies, help create temporary safe shelters, even work to help individuals evacuate the Darkheath warzone. The last one proves extremely tricky, as devastation and violence extend from land to sea. The Eastern Ichthyan Sea alone is a graveyard of ships from conflicts, but also seemingly constant storms and hazardous terrain. The Folded Arms are not deterred, they have even begun to recruit outside help that they have deemed trustworthy. Heroic folk from across the Cog have aided in shuttling supplies as well as ferrying those capable of escape.

Finding and aiding them is shockingly simple. Many are active in civilian zones and on the battlefield. Their calls to pacifism marks them off-limits from soldiers looking for recruits. While this doesn't protect them from Beastmen, it does from human-based combatants. As such, working alongside the church could offer a minor amount of immunity for a time. ***Mother Elleena*** often deals with coordinating recruits interested in providing aid, acting as a positive face for the charity. This has in turn changed the church order as a more general safe haven. Such a haven has come under attack from growing extremism among Darkheathers. Paranoia paints anyone remotely "foreign" to the colony as an asset of Thonian marauders or even a pawn of the beastmen. Agents contracted by the state have begun to kidnap anyone found suspicious under vague terms. While this was done in secret, word has gotten out to the public and the church has turned to actively resist them. An extended safe shelter for the targeted has drawn ire from the state, but they can do nothing about it for now. Mother Eileena does not know how long allowances and graces will hold, while social and political pressure begin to build against the Folded Arms.

Mother Eileena (human): **AC** 10; **MV** 12; **Tr** 11 (Pa); **hp** 36; **#AT** 1; **Dmg** by weapon; **Str** 10, **Dex** 12, **Con** 12, **Int** 13, **Wis** 14, Cha 17; **AL** LG; **THAC0** 17. Mother Eileena carries a relic of ancient Blackmoor, a reliquary of the finger bone belonging to a saint from the time of King Uther. This reliquary creates a field of mystical energy that functions like *Emotion, Hope* as per the spell effect. Creatures are affected by entering the zone for the first time in a 24-hour period. There is a secret effect to using the reliquary. Once per day, a pious ally of the saint can call upon it to punish someone who plans innocents harmed. They are instead afflicted with *Emotion, Hopelessness* when entering the zone.

The Anarchist Conspiracy - New Rockbaecche

Rockbaecche had its critics long before it fell. Among them were loose cells of vigilante outsiders, libertines, and outcastes. The so-called Anarchist Conspiracy existed to expose the faults and follies of the state, at risk of causing their own cells to self-destruct in the process. Prior to the plague, they were constantly on the look out for foreign assets manipulating them to crumble their nation.

This has not overly changed, but things have been somehow less focused on that since the general collapse of the nation. To a degree, the conspiracy succeeded as the state fell amidst the plague. This victory was short-lived, as the consequences of the outbreak became evident. This was worsened as cell members sent to investigate the castle depths either vanished or returned with destroyed minds. Thus, they have mostly switched to providing aid outside of the corrupt and shattered law. This has sparked a schism from more extreme members, who find this new direction to be weak. They want to actively hunt down remaining members of the Rockbaecche aristocratic rule, ending their regimes for good.

Hedrick Grandtower acts as a friendly face that recruits see first. His role is sussing out potentially suspect newcomers. While not a cell leader in his own right, his interest is in learning all about newcomers and learning their various strengths. His approach to forming tactics is deeply analytical and calculated, often with talk of units and divisions. He does little to hide his prior career in the military before defecting to the anarchists. If approached on this, he will briefly reminisce on campaigns against the beastmen before returning to his work for a cell.

Hedrick Grandtower (human): **AC** #, **MV** 12, **So** 9; **hp** 60; #**AT** 3 per 2 rounds; **Dmg** by weapon; **Str** 16, **Dex** 9, **Con** 14, **Int** 13, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 15; **AL** CG; **THAC0** 12. Hedrick carries a bolt-action rifle and an extremely high quality machete-style knife. This knife carries a +1 bonus to attack and damage, but does not count as a magical weapon.

Makreidas Company - Ichthyos

Formed by a former governor of an Ichthyan territory, this steamship company was much of the life blood of the nation's economy. They fulfilled not just the manufacturing, but also the operation and distribution of these vessels. That changed when the calamity befell the lands and the company quickly moved enterprise to Alleigosto. The truth is they never truly left their home behind. While still manufacturing steamships for the wider market, they have made smaller projects for the sake of espionage. Patriots to their homeland through and through, their goal has been undermining the theocracy that took over. Many have kept the "pantheon of champions," a name for the ancestral church of Ichthyos, alive amidst their business.

The current head of the company is ***Aloyisius Makreidas***, a gentleman in his early 20s who seeks to bring the family business in a more positive direction for Ichthyos. Aloyisius understands that his family's reputation in his homeland is that of deserters and greedy opportunists. At first glance, he does not look special. He is built more like a dockworker than a company leader. He is portly, but muscular. His complexion is as tanned as active day laborers. In truth, Aloyisius is obsessed with fitness, looking for ways to match the workers employed under him. While younger and less fit than them, he has earned the respect of many of them. For generations, the family's manufacturing and delivery process was associated with waste, ultimately abandoning the locals to their fate. That in truth only happened once when the headquarters were moved out of his home nation, something still held against them. Aloyisius seeks to mend this while healing wounds with Ichthyos as well. However, he keeps his ulterior motives as hidden as possible. In truth, he is searching for ways to abolish the dread cult that has held a grip on his home since it fell. As such, he refuses to deal with anyone within Old Ichthyan

itself, fearing a trap. Thus, he'll trade and deal with fellow sailors and fishers at designated safe zones towards the border of Ichythos. He strongly suspects a diplomat for the theocracy of foul play, having encountered him once. The diplomat held contempt for Aloyisius, due to the family past, but not suspicion. Some day, he believes that a crusade will come to save his people.

Aloyisius Makreidas (human): **AC** 10, **MV** 12, **So** 1/**Tr** 8; **hp** 41; **#AT** 1; **Dmg** by weapon; **Str** 15, **Dex** 13, **Con** 12, **Int** 10, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 14; **AL** TN; **THAC0** 12. Aloyisius commonly carries important documents relating to clients, their lands, and more on hand.

Camp Ustanak - Belagora

"Ichthyos is the madness of gods, Nosos is the madness of commerce, Alleigosto is the madness of machines, but Belagora is the madness of man." - A makeshift proverb among the outcaste enclaves

The dejected and rejected of Belagora are a broken people living on the edge of civilization. On the surface, they seem like outcastes who rejected the judgmental lands beyond them. In truth, they are those who became broken by attempts at mental conditioning, whether on the streets or through the re-education centers beyond friendly civil society. Small enclaves dot the outskirts of the domain, filled with people attempting to make sense of their lives again. These people are often awkward, clouded, or just off-putting to the wandering outsider. They are hailed as mischievous layabouts and troublemakers by the wider law, who encourage visitors to report them. Secretly, the law of the land fears these cells and enclaves, as they're proof of the state's failure.

The de facto leader of one such encampment is a man who goes simply by "***Dusan***". To the average onlooker, he is a twitchy and wild-looking man. His frame and posture are hunched and tilted, as his general appearance is shabby, a blight to the higher society views of the wider domain. Dusan shares a tanner complexion with southern domain residents, but claims a northern heritage. His age is unknown, but likely in his later 20s or early 30s. At one point, Dusan was Dusan Gulbyravich, an aspiring student of journalism within the capital. However, his interest in pamphlets and speeches secretly made by Dr. Wilder sent him into a spiral of rebellion and research, eventually paranoia. He evaded capture for months before being finally sent to a detention center for evaluation and reeducation. The process failed, only scarring his mind and driving him mad. He has since retained his lack of trust for others, especially outsiders.

As such, working with him entails a variety of tasks to prove his worth. Some of these tasks are deadly and remotely involve the ruling council or their subordinates, but still provoke a nuisance or distraction for them. Only proven trusted allies are offered tasks that could actually undermine the State. Dusan is fearful of a lot of things, this will manifest in his interactions with the characters. He distrusts magic and advanced technology, but he is horrified by psionics above all. While psionic characters would be essential in a revolution against the Belagoran state, he associates them with the torture he endured.

Dusan (human): **AC** 7; **MV** 12; **Tr** 8; **hp** 31; **#AT** 1; **Dmg** by spell or weapon; *(PP 20/OL 80/ FRT 80/ MS 50/ HS 50/ DN 30/ CW 60/ RL 0 Thief Skills)* **Str** 15, **Dex** 16, **Con** 13, **Int** 14, **Wis** 7, **Cha** 9; **AL** CN; **THAC0** 17. He carries around several holy symbols involving forgotten faiths of Belagora. Unbeknownst to him, these collectively give him a +5 bonus to any save involving psionics. He claims he can hear whispers from the forgotten gods while wearing the symbols, though.

House Cantrelbaulm, Protectors of the Royal Family - Rockbaecche

The plague did not discern between commoner or nobility, including one noble house that sought protection and diplomacy over all. The few survivors of the house banded to aid anyone in their path. Slowly but surely, the undead claimed more and

more of the house until only one is now left. ***Lady Catarine Cantrelbaulm*** is a royal knight of Rockbaecche. While the title is more of a formality in the current age, she holds it with high regard. Most of her duties amounted to protecting the nobility as colonial pursuits helped to expand their land. But, her interest was in keeping the peace and protecting the innocent.

With the assumption that the royals are dead, Catarine has been forced to take up new aims. The outbreak of the plague has all but destabilized civilization within the region, and thus she seeks to help offer stability and combat the blight where feasible. Her aims more so revolve around salvaging any status quo possible, rather than pursuing some idealistic general happiness for all, to better create realistic stability in the long run. She is one of the few who suspects the Regent of being directly involved with the release of the outbreak. Lady Cantrelbaulm retains a youthful appearance for a woman not only in her later 30s, but in such a deadly profession. She remains physically fit, maintaining regiments and exercises taught to her long ago. Due to a mixed heritage from Rockbaecche and Alleigosto, her skin tone is slightly more tan than many of the surviving locals, with dark black colored hair. Her expressions are often mournful, deep in thought. While still a valiant defender of the land, survivor's guilt sometimes tugs at her, as she was among the least experienced defenders to survive the waves of undead.

Lady Catarine Cantrelbaulm (human): **AC** 5; **MV** 12; **So** 9; **hp** 61; #AT 3 per 2 rounds; **Dmg** by weapon; **Str** 14, **Dex** 16, **Con** 15, **Int** 12, Wis 13, **Cha** 10; **AL** LN; **THAC0** 12. She carries an enchanted revolver. While it offers no bonuses, it functions like a +1 magical weapon for the sake of creature defenses and it can magically reload all bullets by sacrificing taking an action in a combat round.

Antonucci Law - Alleigosto

Mario Antonucci is a lawyer whose specialty is in protecting rights and liberties. He has made a name for himself in fighting against both the noble houses and the company heads when exposed for unethical behavior. Having survived his fair share of retaliation, his reputation does not fail him in the slightest. This is a change from his earlier career, which involved security and protection of company assets. This changed after representing a clothing company against a family clad in mostly rags. They were accused of swindling the company through using counterfeit coins. The punishment was the seizure of what little they had left, as well as the company president gaining custody of the children for workforce purposes. The children were never heard from again. This case broke him, causing him to go independent from his employed office at any cost. Decades passed, as he rose from newfound struggle to a place of trust and community connection as he began to fight for and win cases started by common Alleigostons.

Antonucci is a man in his early 50s, with an olive complexion not uncommon in this region of the Cog. Due to a wealthy upbringing, he has maintained a consistently healthy weight and stature. While not overly strong, he is surprisingly agile. He is quick to cover his balding head and remnants of salt and pepper hair with a flat cap, but will wear a fancy wider brimmed hat when dealing with more wealthy clients. His facial expressions are heavily carried by the well-trimmed goatee and mustache encircling his lips. His demeanor is confident and cheerful, masking a tired and worn man who tires of learning about endless abuse. And with that, he's more than willing to hire investigators and other outside help to gather information and ensure that his clients are protected.

Mario Antonucci (human): **AC** 9, **MV** 12, **So** 1/Tr 8; **hp** 42; **#AT** 1; **Dmg** by weapon; **Str** 10, **Dex** 15, **Con** 12, **Int** 10, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 15; **AL** TN; **THAC0** 12. Mario carries a mechanical pocket watch with him, which

has a unique ability of showing moving objects in its reflection, even if they are obstructed behind walls. The objects, including living creatures, have a glowing outline within the reflection. While divination is usually faulty within the demiplane of dread, this device seems to work without error most times. However, certain supernatural foes ignore detection.



Machinations, Machines, and Multitudes of Madness

By Doctor Necrotic

Special thanks to The Dark on The Piazza Forums

"A hundred years of blood, crimson
The ribbon tightens round my throat
I open my mouth and my head bursts open
A sound like a tiger thrashing in the water
Thrashing in the water."
- The Cure, *One Hundred Years*

The domains of this cluster are not at all isolated. And through new technology comes new modes and methods of communication and transportation. This in turn has helped to spread conflict at a far more rapid pace. The woes and terrors of a modernizing world are all the more interconnected, weaving all manner of complex plots, ploys and conspiracies. Intrigue advances just as much as innovation. But, what of those who create such elaborate tapestries of suffering?

The damned take many shapes in the Demiplane of Dread and this land is no different. Corrupted souls need not be rooted deep into their own specialized dominions, but many are on the path to such a doom. There is no hope for these wayward terrors. The artifice of the Broken Cog has only solidified their fall, rather than elevated them. Only the righteous in such a land of high tech, but low life can help put an end to not just their suffering, but the suffering which they have inflicted on others.

A Rogue's Gallery of Evil

The Broken Cog has plenty of adventure potential as explored previously. NPCs with their own plot threads can only add to the experience of the Broken Cog. Below are a variety of non-Darklord related antagonists to challenge your parties one way or another. Some may offer moral questions to ponder, while others are truly unredeemable and heinous.

The following abbreviations are employed for NPCs: Ad = Adept, My = Mystic, So = Soldier, Tr = Tradesman, Pa = Parson kit, Ma = Mage, Pr = Priest, Th = Thief, Wa = Warrior, Psi = Psionicist

Professor Paolo Villaverde, the Man Plant - Alleigosto

At one point, Villaverde was a professor within Alleigosto's most prestigious academia, recovering from a prior life of protecting the waves of his nation. While a veteran of conflict, his interest was in studying life, especially plant life. His specialty was within not just botany, but also experimental practices incorporating advancing Alleigoston technologies. His desire was to create bountiful living gardens that could keep up with the times. And the end goal, a lush future of cleaner air and plentiful resources for his people. However, his experiments and visions were exceedingly costly. Only a few of them proved any fruitful results. But, in his words, he just needed more time and more support. His results did have an upwards projection towards his goals, but they proved slow. And ironically, the pressure

and cuts placed on him by the university worsened this. To him, it was not pruning of branches, but butchery of innocent life itself. One year, as the university term came to a close and summer weather began to swell, he overheard collegiate deans conversing. After the following summer intermission courses finish, they would not only cancel all of Villaverde's future research, but force him out of the university.

In the days leading up to summer courses, he feverishly worked on any way to accelerate his research and came to a conclusion, if he wanted fast results, he'd need to test his experiments on himself. On a cool rainy night, tragedy struck as his attempts to expand on plant life bonded with him. As he writhed in pain, he was horrifically transformed into a fusion of floral life and human body. As he thrashed about, specimens and other tests were unleashed as the lab assistants quickly became overwhelmed by horrid mutant plant life. Investigating security was quickly torn apart by the floral things as the mutated professor fled the campus. While the outbreak was quelled on the campus, few at the university had any idea what was to come.

In forests untainted by Sorrentrico's rampant need for consumption and expansion, Villaverde continues to experiment on plants to "perfect" as he sees fit. However, the process of mutation changed his mind as well. His goals are less about the needs of the people, but the perfect synthesis of life like him. Perfecting a superior fusion life form has the ultimate act of aid for the people. He has exploited the anti-industrialization sentiment of nearby villages, in order to discreetly get unwitting test subjects to further his ends. Likewise, mad fell druids devoted to the cause of the Darklord revere Villaverde as a holy being. While he only has a vendetta against the university that spurned him, he has no qualms with unleashing his plant horrors on the wider domain. After all, it is their chance to showcase the superiority of hybridized life in his eyes.

Paolo Villaverde vaguely resembles his old self, somewhat like a man in his mid-50s. Any hair he might have had is gone, with various vines and leaves adorning his skin instead. His skin tone ranges from light to darker green across his body. Due to the haphazard nature of his fusion with plant life, his limbs are slightly uneven, giving an unnatural lurch to his gait.

Professor Villaverde (plant mutant): **AC** 4; **MV** 12, **Cl** 12; **So** 2/Tr 7; **hp** 68; **#AT** 2 with +2 bonus; **Dmg** by weapon; special; **Str** 16, **Dex** 14, **Con** 16, **Int** 16, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 7; **AL** LE; **THAC0** 12. Villaverde is a mutant plant hybrid. Plant hybrid creatures get bonus HP per level. He utilizes an arcane pin on his tattered lab jacket, giving him a +2 bonus to all saving throws. Likewise, he carries an enchanted antique flintlock pistol. Due to the lighting mechanism, he does not like to use it often. Once per day, he can cough up spores that are toxic to inhale within 5ft. of him. Infected creatures must succeed save vs. poison every 1d6 hours (starting with initial contact) or lose 1d4 points of Constitution. Creatures reduced to 0 Constitution die, as varieties of small plant creatures proceed to rapidly grow from the corpse. Upon being cursed via a Restoration or similar spell, the spores go away and stat damage recovers 1d2 points per day of rest unless also restored by a separate spell. However, he prefers to engineer horrid plant creatures, if helped. He roams the border of Alleigosto and Ichthyos, going between laboratories where he creates plant hybrids.

Vasilis, the Deep King's Eyes - Ichthyos

Vasilis was at one time a human hybrid, born with the blood of horrid things of the seas called "Deep Ones". As he grew towards old age, his blood strengthened as he became like his ancestors. However, he never lost his sense of mind nor his mystical talents. The mad priest of the ancient ones began to research ways to undermine heretics, especially neighboring nations. While still religiously devout, he became obsessed with espionage, the life

of a spy became a new priority. One of the s he turned to are illusion and disguise. Even if he looked like his human form, seeing an old man so energetic and flexible might raise eyes. His current primary disguise is a variant of his younger years. Vasilis II has become his public identity while dealing in Alleigosto in public as an advocate for his homeland. Due to close proximity to his actual identity, he does not use this very often. Otherwise, he's a shadowy enigma outside of the masks he wears.

His various personas have emerged across Alleigosto and other lands though, each has a different role that's being infiltrated. Luigi Spimoni is perhaps his most humble, where he acts as a sanitation worker helping to clear urban canals of filth. In reality, no one pays him much mind while being "Luigi" as he clears out muck and checks up on the water. In truth, he is secretly adding hard to trace poisons into the water while sampling the various pollutants to use in rituals. Likewise, figures of high society that travel the canal for personal purposes are easily overheard by the deep one. More curious is Armand Durran, who acts as an emissary for relief aid for Rockbaecche. This dual purpose personality exists to gather intel on both nations, should the plague-infested quarantine pariah state become a problem for Ichthyos one day. Plus, keeping Alleigosto more focused on their eastern neighbor takes further pressure off them. He has even disguised himself as Michela Fespuccelli, a graduate educator in Lorco Institute, the major university of the domain. Michela's purpose is to deflect interest in Ichthyos, while subtly educating students on the faults of Alleigosto's inner workings. As this persona, she has become an ally of Duke Jeriko Arcaico (the Darklord of Alleigosto), through her somewhat subversive teachings. However, the Duke thinks that Michela is not radical enough for the long term of his revolution. Other identities exist, but are currently less developed. It's even harder to trace these concepts back to the deep one priest.

Bloated, corpulent, excessive. Vasilis is a decadent man in many ways. When not transformed, he is a massive deep one with an oily dark blue sheen across his leathery and scaled skin. This is easily hidden when he shifts to an alternate self. Curiously, he cannot change some of this in his human form. In his primary disguise, he is a morbidly obese tan toned man with somewhat messy and sweat drenched flat dark hair and a thin mustache. His eyelids give off an exhausted look to them. When he speaks in this disguise, his jaws at times extend and move unnaturally. His massive frame has not affected his dexterity. It is common to see a mixture of a fine tailored suit underneath religious robes. Due to his girth, it is common to see sweat stains, even if these are fake due to his lack of sweat glands.

Vasilis (deep one): **AC** 4; **MV** 12, Sw 15 (when not transformed); **Pr** 13; **hp** 62; **#AT** 1 with +2 bonus or 2 (claws); **Dmg** by weapon or 2 - 9, 2 - 9 (claws); requires +2 or better weapon to hit; **Spells** as 13th level Priest *(6/6/6/4/2/2/- Slots)*; **Str** 15, Dex 11, **Con** 13, **Int** 14, **Wis** 17, **Cha** 15; **AL** CE; **THAC0** 12. Vasilis is a deep one. He has a +1 dagger. He has a supernatural boon which allows him to shapeshift into a growing library of specific human and even demihuman forms. All of these act as alter egos. An information broker operating within Valentia. The foul mage uses a variety of mundane and arcane tricks to assume an unassuming if unattractive human form. Despite complying with local customs and traditions, Vasilis is a fervent supporter of the Cult of Ichthyos and its dark ways. He has only committed one sacrificial murder in the 8 years he has spent in Alleigosto, and only because he knew that all circumstances favored him. Likewise, almost all evidence regarding this crime has been buried. When he is not enchanted with an invisible layer of water over him, he lounges in a secret room beneath his house that has access to the sewer system as well as bay access.

Jilline, The Accursed Mountain Crone - Zherisia

The mountain crone is in truth a tortured woman who only wished to save not just herself, but likely Zherisia as a whole. Beyond her first name, Jilline, she has lost her old identity. Only scraps of her former self cling on like dead flesh on a zombie. Her prior occupation outside of her witch coven was both that of a healer and an artisan. In terms of the latter, she even attempted to weave the arcane into her canvas paintings, adding a mystical if somewhat haunting quality. The Grand Conjunction destroyed not just her plans, but a ritual she was actively enacting.

All of this stemmed from the Knife of Paridon, which years ago carved through victims as the night fell. As a coven became the newest target, one of the witches sought any way to not only prepare against the killer, but what ill omens await the land. Her searching led her to a grim revelation, a time of great change, Hyskosa's Hexad. Fears of this Grand Conjunction began to drive her towards mad obsession. Preparations took her up the mountainside which cut Paridon from Timor, and all was in order… until it happened.

Mists unlike the border of the land began to wash over all things like a tidal wave. Magical spells began to warp and deform, the ongoing spells for the ritual began to act erratically. The witch grew panicked, this wasn't supposed to happen, not yet! The end of the world came early, and so did the end of her innocence. As the cataclysm that rocked the Demiplane of Dread came to an end, the witch awoke in a blurry void akin to her mountain cave retreat. What emerged from the cave was not the well-intended healer for an olden ways coven, but a tragic hag ruined by circumstance. The corrupted thing was now fueled by hatred and wrath, feeling betrayed by her lands and people. She gave much of herself to the people of this land, only for everything else to be taken away. She believed that the collective pettiness, cruelty, and ignorance of the people caused the Grand Conjunction. And from them, divine retribution brought upon a curse. And through this curse, she gained a new purpose. As countless years drifted by, she grew more mad from isolation until one day the lights of Paridon once again cut through the mists. As the architect of a new plot, she would become an avatar of retribution against the land's sins. And from there, the architect of a better, purer world. She would avenge all of those wronged by Zherisia, including those beyond the realm's borders. Only when they all pay will they learn the name and face of their former savior. This is not the end, though, she seeks to rewrite Paridon and wider Zherisia. The ugliness can be removed, something glorious can take its place. Through her warped witchcraft, she dreams of a fantasy world that has become progressively more unhinged. Only the paintings in her isolated dwelling give a clearer picture of her terrifying vision for the future; flailing vine tendrils, repurposed flesh, unfathomable spirit entities and other macabre visuals line her creative gallery. More than likely, this new world vision is a sick distortion of her coven's old teachings, paths towards enlightenment, and spiritual connection of the land. Of course, she's too deluded to realize that her calls for soulless butchery, limitless brutality, and maddening horror defies everything her order stood for.

Should her plans to massacre much of Paridon go through, she is unlikely to stop there. In ages past, her coven attempted to sabotage attempts to tear apart the wilderness across Zherisia. The wilds were their home, only paying the city enough lip service and healing rituals to cause the bureaucrats and business types to tolerate them. It is perhaps for this reason that her sights are directly set on Nosos as well, which she desires to one day purge as well. To her, the land is a mistake, corrupted by greed and hubris. Only by exterminating all things upon the tainted land can it truly restart into something beautiful.

Jilline embodies the wrongness that changed her. All of her features are stretched at somewhat odd

angles, like a caricature or a carnival fun house mirror. Part of her revenge plan is to make the world as crooked as she is. Her skin is green, like a green hag. Her hair largely is erratic and unkempt. At random times, one of her two eyes spontaneously inflames and bulges causing her mild pain before rapidly returning to normal. While she continues her crusade to banish the hideousness of her homeland and the wretched behavior and values of its people, she ironically continues to neglect herself. As she is now a supernatural being, the consequences of this have been lessened.

Jilline the Accursed (Unknown variety of hag): **AC** 4; **MV** 12; **hp** 66; **#AT** 2 with +2 bonus; **Dmg** by Weapon or 7-8/ 7-8; **Casts spells** as a 13th level Mage *(5/5/5/4/4/2 Slots)*; **Str** 19, **Dex** 11, **Con** 15, **Int** 16, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 7; **AL** NE; **THAC0** 8. Jilline is a tragic human mutated into a hag, driven into hateful madness in the process. She is immune to charm, sleep, fear, fire attacks, cold attacks, and weapons that are under +3 enchantment; plus she has magic resistance 35%. Likewise, she has general hag abilities, with the spell-like abilities of the night-hag. However, she can twist sleep victim souls into oozes that are useful for her own rituals.

Lucretia Vaerizocchi, the Dark Doctors' Daughter - Alleigosto

While born into magical craft like the rest of her family, she always diverged from the rest of the dark doctors. She was uninterested in the specialty craft of "Thanatology" or an advanced form of necromancy specifically dealing with souls and the undead. To her, it detracted from all that life itself had to offer. And more so, manipulating death brought no joy. But, manipulating the living, that could bring a life worth living. Her focus pivoted more to illusion and enchantment, any means of beguiling and warping the minds of those around her. And where spells weren't needed, honey-dipped words and a cruel mouth would. Through coercion, manipulation, and a little extra enchantment; several noble houses alone turned on each other from as little as harsher market competition to as great as outright violence in the streets. Her own brother, Mateo, uncovered a conspiracy that risked the demise of Clan Zaritelli. While that noble house's collusion with New Rockbaecche's most corrupt powers was true, Lucretia's involvement through proxies and spies resulted in far worse backlash against the falling clan. Chaos erupted in the streets and in noble homes alike, members of the clan started to suffer mysterious deaths, other noble houses pointed fingers in paranoid suspicion. Mateo was prepared to reveal everything, but only got as far as getting information to equally corrupt family members. Ultimately, Mateo was removed to profane chambers below Sorrentrico, and was never heard from again. However, Lucretia's meddling had become a problem to the otherwise secretive and reserved family. She was cut off from family fortune and delivered an ultimatum, cease this behavior of overt politicking and return to the family ways or face banishment. She is smart enough to not openly show bitterness and resentment from her punishments. However, she has secretly plotted against her family for such a grievous slight. Nothing has emerged from this, as the long game is being played.

For now, she plays along, while working through networks of proxies to continue to sow conspiracies. None of her clan know, but the Death Merchants (alias "Undeath Merchants") below the domain's catacombs and tunnels are well aware. As it keeps other Houses and groups at bay, the secretive group of ancient dead secretly will it. Her own involvement in family business has granted her knowledge beyond most in this domain. For instance, she is aware that the automatons and machine men are dread constructs, destined to turn on their creators at some point. Her otherworldly charisma seems to affect the more self-aware constructs for a time. This has led to all manner of industrial incidents, with her fingerprints long brushed off. More than likely, she had a hand in the notorious Gran Sorrentrico

warehouse bombing, which ultimately yielded souls for her family to exploit.

Lucretia keeps up appearances, mostly to feed her ego, but otherwise tries to look ordinary among her noble court. She has a fair light tone with dark brown hair. Her expressions when dealing with others rarely shift outside of pleasant or kindly looking, even if this is all a facade. Some consider her to be a deeply responsible diplomat and respectable heiress to the family name. In truth, she is vain, spoiled, and petty. Her family has risked disconnecting her, if solely for games of intrigue that turned diplomats and potential suitors into pawns and playthings. She hides her immaturity and contempt with a pleasant demeanor and softly spoken, often inspiring words. Her incredible public relationship skills have even earned her the nickname of "Sister Lucretia", even though none of the churches recognize this literally. For now, only her family and close allies know of her plots. Attempts by others to expose her have currently failed. Despite similarities and proclaimed mutual cultural heritage, she is not more than passingly familiar with Ivana Boritsi of Borca yet.

Lucretia Vaerizocchi (human): **AC** 8; **MV** 12; **Ba11**; **hp** 45; **#AT** 1; **Dmg** by weapon; **Casts spells** as 11th level Bard (3/3/2/1 Slots); **Str** 9, **Dex** 13, **Con** 12, **Int** 15, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 19; **AL** NE; **THAC0** 15. A black sheep of the family, but not less corrupted by darkness. Her presence is seemingly unmatched, but much of this is likely from her strange magical talents. She wears a mystical necklace, holding a pendant detailing lips clenching a bloody dagger. The pendant grants an incredible bonus to her Charisma, which is now 19, as well as a bonus of 3 to her reaction score. The majority of her spell list involves charms, domination, or illusions. However, under the forced tutelage of her family, she knows some necromancy spells. She is remiss to do something as "barbaric" as bringing weaponry with her, but she has carried a "self-defense pistol" and a poisoned switchblade-like dagger every now and then. She'd rather rely on her gift of speech over violence.

Tonic Jim, Vampire of New Timor - Zherisia

Tonic Jim was once Timothy Cranston III, a struggling courier living in what emerged from the ruins of Timor. In 759 BC, he decided to investigate the depths below that were blamed for destroying his ancestral home, only to stumble upon a subterranean nightmare. The marikith almost devoured him in a foul swarm. His salvation came in the form of mutated humanoids who claimed to be descendents of the original city. The process badly scarred his already trauma-ridden mind. It turned him fearful, violent. This magnified as he took to heavily indulging in alcoholic beverages. If it wasn't for his career in delivering messages and getting out of bad places fast, he probably would have faded into madness and heavy drinking. But, that wasn't his passion. Writing elaborate prose is what fueled him to stay within courier work. To the locals, he became "Tonic Jim", a word play on his love of receiving medicinal liquor from monks in a nearby monastery. But, one gang took notice of the troubled young man. These were not ordinary criminals, but a mutant strain of vampire not unlike the mad minions of Doctor Dominiani. These "psychic vampires" initially considered draining him into a husk before leadership stepped in to embrace him instead.

He awoke from his transformation, no longer thirsty for booze. Like other psychic vampires, he craved the life energies of others rather than blood. It is said that his peers can literally drain the minds, like the feared "brain suckers" of a far-off nightmare place called "Bluetspur." Often, he frets and guilt over draining a victim to death, but sometimes loses himself in rage and passion. His preferred victims are drunks, as he can feel the sensations of alcohol that no longer affect him otherwise. A coalition of protestors in Paridon called "The Anti Devil Water Retribution" have been blamed for his murders, as all victims either indulge in alcohol or produce it. They assert that their tactics to shut down the alcohol industry are completely peaceful and that they would never go to extremes. As such, they are

actively hiring investigators to find the cause of the murders. For the time being, Tonic Jim is unaware that he may be pursued. His undead masters have slowly become aware of the former courier's gradually growing carelessness and may seek to eliminate him. However, his skill in delivering messages at record speed is only amplified by his new abilities. And thus, he is spared for now. But, in his unlife, he is a tragic and self-hating monster. In order to indulge his old vices, he must indulge new ones. However, his past and present work makes him extremely aware of his surroundings. While he is an untrustworthy ally at best, he can serve as an informant… albeit one liable to betray the living at a moment's notice. While not actively in service of far more dangerous and powerful undead masters, he will often reside in the O'Dougal Street Writers Forum building, the site of his first feeding… a bloody massacre that slew his former friends. The remains of the final issue of the "Writers' Forum Journal" await a delivery that Jim will never make.

Tonic Jim looked much as he did in life. He resembles a lanky younger man, with a sickly blotchy tone otherwise adding color to a now pallid skin. His attire is that of a lower-class endless worker, just as frayed from toil as his then-living boy was. An injury caused by a fight gone wrong has caused a mildly crooked jaw. Psychic vampires fortunately do not feed from the mouth, but use their fingers and the fell magic that flows through them to burrow into the minds of victims, like other horrors of the mists. And like others of his kind, nails have become far sharper and fingers likely extend into something slightly more monstrous. His hair and skin look as unkempt as they did in life, with the added misfortune of looking like a freshly dug up cadaver.

Tonic Jim (vampire, psychic); **AC** 1; **MV** 15/ Fl 15 (A); **F**4/**Th**5; **HP** 74; **#AT** 1 with +1 bonus ; **Dmg** by weapon or 4 - 9 (1d6 + 3 slam); *(PP 15/OL 70/ FRT 50/ MS 60/ HS 60/ DN 20/ CW 65/ RL 5 Thief Skills)*; **Str** 18(/45), **Dex** 16, **Con** 18, **Int** 11, **Wis** 8, **Cha** 12; **AL** NE; **THAC0** 12 (10, from bonus from strength and vampiric abilities). While addled by years of alcohol abuse and madness as the undead, Jim has retained a sharp attention to detail. While observing a target, he will write down in depth details about them over the course of several minutes. Psychic vampires differ from cerebral vampires, as instead of a gaze, they have a passive aura extending 30 ft. that functions like *Emotion*. Psionic victims of this gaze take a -2 penalty against the save. Psychic vampires can inflict a choice of a *Confusion* like effect or a state of near-catatonic paralysis effect from their touch instead of attacking otherwise. Targets have -4 penalty to the save, except psionicists and psionic creatures who take a -6 penalty instead. Tonic Jim counts as a warrior for hit point adjustment. As a psychic vampire, Jim gains bonus to Move Silently and Hide in Shadows thief skills. Psychic vampires also drain through their fingernails or their fangs, but prefer using their hands on an incapacitated or stunned victim, such as from the psychic vampire touch. They must puncture the victim's head before psychically mind draining. This works similarly to the mind flayer ability to consume a brain, in which the vampire needs 1d4 rounds to properly get into the victim's brain to fully drain it. Otherwise, the victim suffers 1d4 loss to Intelligence and Wisdom that must be restored through magical means, like the Restoration spell or similar. The victim becomes a brain-dead undead thrall instead of having their brain devoured, though, unless properly embraced by a psychic vampire through psychic energy infusion.

Father Luca Allarmante, Founder of the Death Merchants - Alleigosto

Prior to becoming an ancient dead, Father Luca was part of a well-respected covenant within Sorrentrico at a young age. His acceptance into his holy station was back in 159 of the Barovian Calendar, at the age of 22 years old. He emerged in a time of great fear. Valentia's economy all but collapsed, Ichthyos had

broken off of the last legs of the old empire, riots on the streets had become more common, barbarians from the eastern coast have begun to assault the cities. Father Luca still held strong. Eventually, he became a high clergyman that proved influential within regional politics as well. The various Chiesas of Saints recognized him as a supreme bishop, secondary to the Supreme Minister of Faith. In truth, his work under the church of Saint Fortuito had a darker side. Fortuito taught disciples that life must to live to the healthiest, that the best acolytes are the ones who treat their bodies as a long-lived and well-maintained temple. Luca interpreted this as secretly diving into dark means of preservation. The catacombs below offer many in the ways of dark secrets, as did the more figurative underground found beyond the city. Amidst a riot in Sorrentrico, the many monks of Saint Fortuito vanished as flames wrapped and consumed the monastery. This was ultimately very fortunate for the mad monk and the growing cabal under him. A few of the order suspected heresy from the high clergyman, only to be slain by city dwellers taking their wrath out on the nobility and the church. Luca took this as a means to flee underground, continuing his dark craft research.

Some have said to have seen "his ghost" in the catacombs, until 163 when the dark ritual of preservation took effect, turning him into one of the ancient dead or a mummy. Curiously, his priestly abilities changed as he was warped, as if some other deity took the place of his prior divine connection. The priests under him became lesser undead servants, but were still important to him. In time, other scholars of the esoteric and grim found their way to the very same place, this slowly adding to Father Luca's sinister coterie. A deeper layer of the tunnels below even uncovered far more ancient dead, but they proved less powerful than him. Upon awakening, his sheer skill humbled them, making them somewhat reluctant subordinates. This would in time become the foundations of the Death Merchants that haunt the depths below Alleigosto. Over the years, the rise of technology has greatly fascinated him, falling directly in line with many of his teachings as a priest of Saint Fortuito. While he is a fourth rank mummy, he has further unique abilities through the incorporation of technological augmentation.

Father Luca looks much as he did in life, shockingly well preserved from a mostly youthful-looking body. Blackish brown curly hair lines his head, trailing down into sideburns. Magical scars from dark rituals have marred a face that would otherwise look mostly alive. The dread arcana melted his nose down towards the nasal bone as his lips were burned off as well. Due to the deformities on his face, much of his facial hair is gone too, removing most of a beard. These deformities are covered up by the ancient dead thanks to old priestly garments and religious masks. His garments reflect his station as a former high priest under the tutelage of Saint Fortuito. Symbols of strength and endurance adorn his faded and ancient cloak, cowl, and robes. Often in his grasp is a holy scepter, adorned with similar religious imagery. Despite becoming an undead horror and schemer of conspiracies, his faith remains deeply important to him. Any major slight against his beliefs will launch him into deeply religious fervor.

Father Luca Allarmante (ancient dead, fourth rank); **AC** 0; **MV** 9; **P**15; **HP** 71; **#AT** 3 (mummy slam, mace, see ancient dead for powers) ; **Dmg** by weapon or 3 - 18 (mummy slam); **Spells** as 15th level Priest *(6/6/6/6/4/2/1)*; **Str** 19, **Dex** 9, **Con** 14, **Int** 13, **Wis** 17, **Cha** 18; **AL** LE; **THAC0** 10. Can only be hit by magic weapons of +2 or greater bonus. Likewise, cold and electricity do not affect Father Luca. Father Luca has an enchanted holy symbol, granting a +1 bonus against Saves vs. Spells. Likewise, magic-infused machinery implants helped to increase his rank of ancient dead. A modified clock is placed within his dead chest. It is attuned to holy relics placed throughout the Death Merchants' demesne. Should he reach into his chest cavity and wind the device, it will channel an aura that risks nullifying any priest not devoted to the order of St. Fortuito. These divine

spellcasters face longer casting times and shorter lasting effects. Furthermore, all undead (even those not in service to St. Fortuito) gain bonuses to saves against spells. Likewise, it is harder to perform *Turn Undead,* as targets have an easier time resisting it..

Brigadier Technologist Hugh P. Lanley, Smithy of Warmachines - Darkheath

Brigadier Technologist Lanley, in addition to being a high-ranking officer, is also a scientist and doctor with a history of cruel practice. His particular malpractice came in the form of painful experiments in order to further scientific discovery. This ranged from injecting dangerous compounds into subjects to experiments on vivisected bodies. War changed his ambitions and offered a boon. In exchange for services to Blackmoor's military, he was exonerated of previous crimes. He then turned his focus into the invention and production of new top-grade weaponry. Thanks to lend help from Noson engineers and a mad creator from Lamordia, he has made his latest breakthrough, the Finale Bomb, believed to be a harbinger of the end days. Some traveling vistani have alluded to him being connected to a "time of unparalleled darkness."

Lanley is uninterested in rank, methods of the military, and then some. All he cares about is having the tools to explore in peace. However, he is eager to know how his projects operate in the wider world. While he is no stranger to experiments on living beings, technology has taken up more and more of his time. His specialty, weaponry. New types of grenades that unleash swirling shrapnel, mines that deliver degrees of electrical shocks, pylons capable of unleashing incredible bolts of energy, massive guns that can propel equally large projectiles from ships. All of this and more has earned him a nickname, "Death's Gunsmith."

The Brigadier Technologist is a grim and dour looking man in his late 30s. His skin tone is marred by pollution and curses mostly brought upon by nefarious opponents in Darkheath's forever war, giving him a gray and almost deathly appearance. However, he is quite alive. He is devoid of any hair atop his head, having gone bald in his later 20s. His stance and posture is almost always regal and proper, while his stature is otherwise healthy looking. His expressions, befitting of an obsessive member of the military, are often rigid and deeply serious. His demeanor is likewise the same, seemingly incapable of finding levity in any situation. He is an overall bitter and hateful man obsessed with creating something to finish the war. His constant expression of contempt and disgust, as well as his overall lack of personality, makes him deeply off-putting to his peers. He often feels aggravation when interacting with subordinates and allies, often viewing them as naive or inferior. However, his great knowledge and genius make him a valuable, if reluctant, asset.

Brigadier Technologist Lanley (human); **AC** 8; **MV** 12; **Th**4/**F**8; **HP** 51; **#AT** 1; Dmg by weapon; *(PP #/OL #/ FRT #/ MS #/ HS #/ DN #/ CW #/ RRL # Thief Skills)*; **Str** 13, **Dex** 16, **Con** 9, **Int** 18, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 7; AL LE; **THAC0** 9. Experiments on himself have boosted his otherwise damaged health. He carries an enchanted revolver that confers a +2 bonus. However, the accursed weapon has an even more malicious enchantment. If a character is killed by a shot, their soul immediately is pulled into the casing of the bullet fired at them. Lanley has several soul casings in his possession, which has bartered with occultists and foul Darkheath characters for clout and services. Unbeknownst to him, the more he uses the weapon, the more he risks turning into a soul-stealing undead creature.

Herr Hartmut von Stroheim, Diabolic Conspirator - Rockbaecche

One of the few allies that Von Wilholt, the Darklord of Rockbaecche, has is also likely one of the biggest reasons for his doom. Hartmut von Stroheim is involved with the ancestral fiend cults that operated among nobility in centuries past. Despite attempts

by holy inquisitions to purge the heresy, it always remained. Hartmut von Stroheim was once of significant nobility, but his family was all but wiped out by church-sanctioned soldiers sent to banish evil. And through him, more anyone else, the evil remained. Von Stroheim, despite being seemingly ageless, is not actually undead. For his devotions to fiendish powers, he is cursed to never age again. Physically, he resembles a man in his early 50s that has remained in good shape. Besides a receded widow's peak on his forehead is a large scar inflicted by a brutal burn. This is likely the result of a profane ritual. Further scarring caused his face to slightly contort, making it so he always speaks with an angry sneer. His sinister visage is befitting of the leader of the evil cabal that lingers underneath the very palace that tried to hide it. Since youth, his purpose was to fulfill the role of leader in an ancient cult that was once the most powerful religion in the land. These fiend worshipers were all but wiped out by allies of the noble family in centuries past, only for all of them to die from an incomprehensible illness in the ages leading up to the outbreak. Consorting and understanding the methods of fiends has always been Hartmut's lifework, with those who would foil that being grave enemies of his.

In his younger years, he had reached out to royal family members, often causing them to go mad. It is for this reason that the nobility has been considered cursed by superstitious locals. The more rational accused the nobility of insanity as a result of generations of inbreeding. Due to ages of limited marriage, this is also likely true. Von Stroheim's associates, having caught onto the warlock's audacity, spread the latter information as a cover-up. Following this, the warlock took far more subtle approaches at corruption. He has continued to weave forbidden incarnations and rituals, ranging from trying to reestablish connections to the lower planes with the prime material to infusing dark energies by the castle to further corrupt the nobility. Since the outbreak, most of this has been put on hold. However, the warlock has been successful in pulling fiends into the catacombs below the lakeside castle. Said fiends are deeply resentful of the cultists below, who in turn avoid the fiends at all cost.

Von Stroheim is a dread occultist of the highest degree. Tainted family members who fell to the old ways referred to him as "the old warlock" when delving deep into corrupted catacombs. It was said that von Stroheim rested over a portal into the Lower Planes, but this was mostly speculation by sinister scholars who had met him. While Von Wilholt looked for any edge possible to seize power, his network of spies encountered a rumor over diabolism. At first, this was a chance to disgrace his employers. But in the end, it became something he would weaponize for himself. But, "the old warlock" was no fool, so he formulated ways of keeping the future Regent in check so the paranoid royal lackey wouldn't backstab. This was also the chance to see how modern innovation blended with ages old fell magic, resulting in the horrid plague that ravaged the lands. While von Stroheim is not exactly a scientist in his own right, he studied this end of the known world like one. And for those who challenge him, the ancestral castle has been turned into a truly wicked series of dungeons and corridors, rife with deadly traps and unimaginable horrors. Since the initial outbreak, there has been no direct interaction between the two conspirators since, as the Lord Regent deeply fears the eerie mage and his horrid powers. Should Von Wilholt die, the old warlock would likely take over as Darklord. Despite Von Wilholt being doomed from damning the royal family to their fate and slaying those who would prevent the plague, the warlock is likely more deserving of darklord status. But, like a darklord, the warlock is cursed. He cannot leave the diabolic catacombs below the castle, the mists will cause him to find his way back into the horrid dungeons.

Herr Hartmut von Stroheim (human); **AC** 8; **MV** 12; **M**17; **HP** 48; **#AT** 1; **DMG** by weapon or spell; *(5/5/5/5/5/3/3/2 Slots)* **STR** 9, **DEX** 10, **CON** 13, **INT** 18, **WIS** 14, **CHA** 14; **AL** NE; **THAC0** 15; von Stroheim has many boons, as the leader of a vile cult should.

He does not age. Likewise, he is immune to weapons that lack an enchantment of +2 or greater. He also has a 50% chance of magic resistance. Both damage from fire and cold sources (mundane and magical) do not hurt him. He has also strangely boosted health. Despite these strange abilities, he is not a fiend, just a human with numerous boons.

Broken Cog Cluster Monstrous Appendix :

Vampire, Energy (Variant Cerebral Vampire)

CLIMATE/TERRAIN:	Demiplane of Dread
FREQUENCY:	Very Rare (Zherisia)
ORGANIZATION:	*Varies*
ACTIVITY CYCLE:	Night
DIET:	Mental energy
INTELLIGENCE:	Very Intelligent to Genius (11-18)
ALIGNMENT:	Any Evil
TREASURE:	*Varies*

NO. APPEARING:	1 - 4
ARMOR CLASS:	1
MOVEMENT:	15', Fl 15 (A)
HIT DICE:	8 + 3
THAC0:	11 (10, with +1 bonus from Strength, 9 with +2 bonus in rare cases)
NO. OF ATTACKS:	1
DAMAGE/ATTACK:	4 - 9 (1d6 + 3)
SPECIAL ATTACKS:	*See below*
SPECIAL DEFENSES:	*See below*
MAGIC RESISTANCE:	*Nil*
SIZE:	M (5' - 6')
MORALE:	Champion (15 - 16)
XP VALUE:	9,000

Interchangeably called "Psychic vampires", these variants have unusual qualities compared to similar monsters. The more especially brilliant energy vampires may become psionicists as well.

Combat: Energy vampires carry impressive strength, effectively 18/45 - 18/51. While not as impressive as a "true vampire", they remain physically imposing. They gain a +1 bonus to hit and a +3 bonus to damage, with a rarer +2 to hit bonus for some.

Unlike traditional vampires, these hunt primarily with their hands. Their energy drain is channeled through their finger nails while the rest of the hand clasps the victim's skull.

A passive field hangs around the Energy vampire up to 30 ft. away. This induces an effect similar to the *Emotion* spell.

Energy vampires can inflict a choice of a *Confusion* like effect or a state of near-catatonic paralysis effect from their touch instead of attacking otherwise. Targets have -2 penalty to the save, except psionicists and psionic creatures who take a -4 penalty instead.

These vampires also drain through their fingernails or their fangs, but prefer using their hands on an incapacitated or stunned victim, such as from the psychic vampire touch. They must puncture the victim's head before psychically mind draining. This works similarly to the mind flayer ability to consume a brain, in which the vampire needs 1d4 rounds to properly get into the victim's brain to fully drain it. Otherwise, the victim suffers 1d4 loss to Intelligence and Wisdom that must be restored through magical means, like the Restoration spell or similar. The victim becomes a brain-dead undead thrall instead of having their brain devoured, though, unless properly embraced by a psychic vampire through psychic energy infusion.

When victims are drained to death, they risk returning as undead. However, the creation of new energy vampires requires a more elaborate process. Only higher social ranking energy vampires are given the secrets of creating more of their kind. This is done through an elaborate ritual of infusing both

blood and mystic energy from the vampire into a recently drained body. Otherwise, the creature returns as a mindless zombie-like thrall. These psychic quasi-zombies have no special powers of their own, save for their unusual creation.

Habitat/Society: Energy vampires are immensely secretive, preferring to blend into Zherisian society as much as possible. Otherwise, they often remain to themselves, away from prying mortal eyes. For them, mortals are just a food source to cultivate. However, this does not stop at non-magical creatures. Even various monsters prove a valuable food source.

Ecology: Like other vampires, they are parasites upon the living. However, the energy vampire takes this further. While it's enough to drain mundane creatures, many get a thrill if not a deep sense of addictive euphoria from draining the far more magical, be they powerful mages or dangerous monsters. This is mere sustenance, as they do not gain the powers of any entity that they consume.

Variant: Psionicist Energy Vampire

XP: 12,000

Combat: This vampire holds the talents of a powerful psionics user. They may utilize psionic powers as if they were a psionicist of 13th level. They gain: *Disciplines*:4, *Sciences*: 7, *Devotions*: 18, *Att./Def. Modes*: All/All, Score = Int, *PSPs* = 250 These psionicists employ a diverse array of powers to help them hunt. As such, many train in different sciences and devotions.

The Cog is Dead - A Time for Unparalleled Darkness

By Doctor Necrotic

"Well, the earth died screaming
While I lay dreaming
Well, the earth died screaming
While I lay dreaming
Dreaming of you"
- Tom Waits, *Earth Died Screaming*

The prophesied time of doom has already begun in the Broken Cog cluster. The weapons that will one day launch and ultimately make the domains even worse than Nosos' most inhospitable wastelands… They are being built now. The scheming dark gods below in the Ichthyan Sea get closer to awakening. The horrors of the Rockbaecche outbreak have not been fully realized. The last vestiges of Blackmoor will not only crumble, but inspire new terrors. The psychic nightmare of Belagora will reach its zenith. The wastelands of Nosos will sprawl and devour. The vengeful hag of Zherisia will have her day. These horrid things and more are all likely scenarios. But, how can such doom transpire? And what will be left?

The Dark Side of Progress, Realized

Belagora faces a truly unique doom. It is true supernatural Ego Death. All traces of individuality, the soul, the self. All of it is dead in an instant. As the puppeteer parasites were discovered by the darklord, a proposal was made. Instead of destroying them, why not harness them as a potent source of power? And through them? Control unlike anything seen in the domain. The alien beasts were captured and repurposed as a manner of cosmic living battery and font of psychic energy. Incredible devices were used to emit a harmless wave of energy throughout the land. Its purpose was simple: slowly tweak the thoughts of the populace into submission. And then, the Time arrived. The machines went haywire and worked in overdrive. All would mentally be done. In an instant, the calamity merged consciousness with the Council of Seven. All were one. Horror and madness struck the darklord like a heinous chord on a stringed instrument. Belagora as a true nation was dead, but it was not the end of things to come. As months passed, the tides of war found themselves upon Belagora. The Council, now in charge of everything, fought enemies on all sides. Attempts to replenish forces by breeding the parasite or adapting technology to clone did not recuperate losses. And with each loss, growing pain gnawed at the Council. As the time passed, only the strongest vessels survived. Candidates to replace the Council bodies began to dwindle. And with no new thoughts or personalities, stagnation ate away at successor "applicants." The Council became less motivated, less dutiful, overall just less. Cities and towns slowly became abandoned as the shadowy mass consolidated bodies closer towards the capital buildings. And slowly, Belagora began to fall into a dread sleep of its own. For the first time in ages, the Council of Seven began to understand the reality of death.

Alleigosto was eaten alive more from within than being destroyed by outsiders. Duke Arcaico finally had his day, as much of the populace was caught up in revolution. Their labor was truly threatened by the machine; notions of an "anti clockworker crusade" against thinking machines had caught on. Even some branches of the churches endorsed this as a divine

rite. Cities were in uproar, as rural towns joined in support as they could. Tourist friendly zones became battlefields of civil war. All the while, eldritch terrors attacked border sites too. The machine men were ultimately superior combatants, even amidst the revolt. They met their match through defectors of clans connected to the Undeath Merchants, as well as the Horror of Malgiallo. These masquerading forces of dark arcana helped turn the tides against industrial lords of the nation for a time… at least until the undead secret society defected in favor of controlling the machine-men. As true machine men aren't unlike undead, they proved too useful to destroy. Living leaders of technology were then usurped as the dread cabal came into the public and took over. Ultimately, as the fiends in Rockbaecche fell, the plague dead began to beckon to their call as well. As Duke Arcaico was unceremoniously executed, the leader of the Undeath Merchants took over as darklord.

Nosos made a career of agitation and rampant pollution. Manufacturing weaponry and dumping untold amounts of waste were not unnoticed. This resulted in attracting an infamous inventor from the far lands of Lamordia, Dr. Emil Bollenbach. While his expertise has been valued in the destruction of flesh golems, his consultation was originally for countering machine-men and automatons. The end result of this unity of minds was the Finale Bomb, a weapon so deadly it could wipe out an entire domain. However, it did not stop there, as further things were being stocked up on. The Barons of Nosos were no fools; they knew the end was coming. But, while they were prepping for doomsday, it snuck in from nearby. Terrors of the wastelands were consuming all that was thrown at them. While a nearby prison colony belonged to Belagora, the wasteland horrors quickly overtook that and weaponized the prisoners for their end goal. As hunkering down became a focus for the land, dread waste mutants began to march upon Nosos City's limits. And all the while, revolutionaries and anarchists seized the chaos to revolt. Despite the advanced super weapons and defenses of Nosos, the mutant horrors knew every move, countered every defense, and revealed the wretched, green-ish entities behind it all. A ghastly glowing warrior emerged from the crowd of disgusting things, ultimately breaking down walls and defenses while shielding his troops from aerial fire. As desperation sank in, the revolutionaries turned to a new strategy, mutually assured destruction. The end would come to the Polluter Barons and their tainted industries. Rebels activated several super weapons at once, erasing the city in a glorious flash of light. The wastelands were unceremoniously blown away leaving nothing but a flat and grey realm not unlike the Grey Wastes of Hades in the Outer Planes. Iron City completely faded soon after, but not from the weapons. Its own darklord likely couldn't stand what he had witnessed; the vile thief gave up and embraced his own misty oblivion.

Darkheath finally won, but at what cost? Through outside intervention, the Finale Bomb was born. And through its invention, warfare forever changed in the Cog. A dull, chilly winter morning ignited with a flash across the sky. Normally, this would alert no one. But seconds later, a massive cloud arose from the eastern border of the land. Dust kicked up, forming a mushroom-like shape. Howling winds followed, as a blast wave spread out from ground zero. Within minutes, the eastern half of the peninsula was engulfed in radiant flames. They were all dead. With focus now changed, full fire took out hostile navies and pirates soon after. And then the winds blew westward. And from those winds, toxic particles rained down around the vestiges of civilization. Mere days after the weapons were being sold off to those interested, the consequences had already come home. This ashen fallout coated and overwhelmed struggling cities, as dead soon lined the streets. Safe bunkers were not equipped to handle the sudden rush of panic. The overworld was tainted and lethal now; only the lucky few could isolate themselves below. But, for how long? When would they starve, especially if resources to grow new food failed? The end of this New Blackmoor was not at the hands of beastmen, but the very people who aimed to protect such a land. The horror it started was only doomed to be unleashed by fools who equally did not understand it.

Ichthyos foresaw the return of their dark gods. It was a prophecy, after all. Madness was the end result.

Things-that-should-not-be awakened, and many cultists were granted sickly boons. Their already twisted forms contorted more, into true monsters. The vile things ransacked land and sea, staging an amphibious assault on Nosos, Zherisia, Rockbaecche, and Alleigosto. Coastal towns without defense were all but devoured, with more fortified cities struggling against the hellish hordes. In the end though, modernity triumphed over stubborn tradition. Despite the tarnishing of minds, and possibly reality, innovation proved how deadly it could be. The horrors from beyond were met with missiles, guns, and techno-arcana that not only held them at bay, but proved overwhelming after hours of bombardment. The last of Ichthyos' great cities were obliterated and its cultists blown up. To ensure that the cult was ended, a Finale Bomb detonated right in the Old Ichthyan market square. Father Elos was vaporized soon after. The entities themselves could not die, but sustained such damage that they were forced into slumber once more. But, without subjects, were they doomed to be forgotten relics?

The Colony of New Rockbaecche had been a failure of a regime for ages. And as a nation, Rockbaecche long lost any war. But, now that was an absolute truth. Quarantine measures had finally failed. The plague dead had truly escaped into neighboring lands like Zherisia, Alleigosto, and even the less affected parts of Rockbaecche. Much of the nearby port town of Rock Phare found themselves rushing into the haunted lighthouse property in desperation. Those who were hesitant only heard terrified screams as the haunts slew those who dared enter. But behind them? Increasing hordes of the dead as well as a mind shattering display from the royal lake. The castle of the royal family blew apart in a pillar of infernal light. The dread cabal hidden in the dungeons below succeeded in their own dark plans and the truth behind the plague was finally revealed. Fiends bound to the Mists emerged to take control of the infected dead, as the slaughter spread rapidly. The domain's "savior" arrived in the form of metal men from out west. However, these attackers did not differentiate between fiend, undead, or mortal. Their goal was to purge anything from Rockbaecche. All the while, survivors of Darkheath teamed up with Zherisia to fight back the dead of this land. The most effective were undead, the energy vampires of New Timor. These psychic vampires fed on the living, but the plague never affected them. And so many Rockbaeccheers were embraced, only to meet a new sort of doom. A blockade all but kept survivors from fleeing by sea, as they were held in contempt of infection. Only the future cleansing blast waves could be the true cure for the plague.

Zherisia, desperate and scared, turned to Nosos for aid. A unity pact was formed and a war machine began. The two declared total war against already hostile neighbors. However, the process was costly, and Zherisia was burning through resources fast, all according to Noson plan. What wasn't accounted for was the Mountain Hag, Jilline. While she was weakened by her rivals, she was not defeated. Thanks to lost artifacts of Timor being recovered by her clutches, she not only recuperated, but became more dangerous than ever. These relics were eldritch totems and tomes of a bygone age, long lost and barely understood. They were alleged to link to dark gods like those of Ichthyos. And so as Zherisia fell into economic collapse, the dreams of the maddened witch came true. Flesh bent, vines slashed like swords, walls crumbled down. Paridon became a final holdout, up until the hubris of the witch caught up with her. The infamous anarchist known as *The Barmy Bomber* rode his fiery wreck right into the witch, having slid off the rails and past a cliffside. The collision caused a massive explosion just beyond Paridon's borders. One final act of redemption perhaps saved both souls, but Paridon was still doomed. Jilline did enough damage, all resources were spent, and enemies were just beyond the doorway. At least the dread doppelgangers had all manner of new playthings. The Council of Seven attempted to lure the ruling class of Paridon, but it ultimately failed as the shadowy collective continued to slip into irrelevance.

What is left?

It is possible that the darklords survived the scorched earth methods employed across the cluster. This scenario would make wider Nosos look hospitable. The Broken Cog would be even more broken, parts of the cluster literally fragmented amidst the Misty

border. Some darklords would falter, resulting in a new dark champion, or the domain outright fading away. For example, Ichthyos was long doomed. Even with the Ancients awakening, advancing arcana and technology would at least silence them for now. But, with their horrid cult all but annihilated, what power would they hold as they return to dark slumber? Like with the Ancients, the alien horror of Belagora would persist as long as there were bodies and minds alike to harvest. The shadowy hivemind behind it all would continue to toil in pain, but it would be lessened after destroying any individuality left in the domain. But, what is left in this wasted land? Alienation, isolation, madness; all continue to eat away at a darklord of Belagora with nothing new to observe. Cut down numbers mean that truly rebuilding is impossible; only oblivion gradually awaits. Rockbaecche and its eponymous city were burned away, all traces of infection purged as much as possible. The Regent would die and his closest friend, a grim occultist, would take over. And the fiends below, they strengthened but were likely banished in the end. Alleigosto has been overtaken by the secretly ruling undead. Corpse and machine belong to them now. Darkheath became overconfident and destroyed itself in victory. Nosos is nothing. All of its glory, power, any rights to brag. It's all gone. Mists slowly retract the grey nothingness back into its fold. Zherisia survived the best, and even that could be debated. The lands beyond Paridon are still doomed, warped and ruined by the mad witch who turned on them. And then came the assaults by a mixture of eldritch horrors, Noson weaponry, the infected dead, and more. Mistways opened, granting final reprieve. This ultimately resulted in many Paridoners, Alleigostons, and Darkheathers salvaging whatever findings they could grab and heading to the Core. However, many fear that war will follow them too. This is especially evident, as Emil Bollenbach survived the onslaught, with knowledge on creating Finale Bombs of his own. These are the closest to victors, who now share their spoils with a land beyond… one that shall too know the Time of Unparalleled Darkness.

Is this the End?

No. This is but a vision. While there are truths to these visions, it is possible that they can be subverted and fate can be changed.



Along the Northern Shore

by Ian Fordam

Background

Graben is an island in the Nocturnal Sea, known on the mainland primarily for its brutal winters, its cod-fishing industry, and the dour nature of its inhabitants.

Most of the native population of Graben Island is descended from the Anatals, who came to the island as refugees over six generations ago. The Anatals worshiped Immortals known as the Ascended. However, five years after the Anatals arrived upon Graben Island, the Ascended fell quiet, and their priests lost their spells and other granted abilities. While the Grabenites no longer worship the Ascended, the Ascended nonetheless remain a prominent part of Grabenite tales and legends. For example, the holiday known as **Fredar and Fredara's Day** marks the traditional first day of spring upon the island.

Similarly, the traditional enemies of the Ascended—giants and trolls—have also faded into myth.

Mostly.

Introduction

In recent years, a new literary trend has seized the popular imagination: the romance novel. In the Land of Mists, romance novels pride themselves on their realism, which is to say that they usually involve the supernatural, horror, and torrid sex. The two most prominent series are the *Dead Travel Fast* novels and the *Romance from Beyond the Grave*-series, but plenty of imitators exist.

Morgan Goodwin is one such imitator. His debut novel, *Starving for Passion*, is set in the lost land of G'Henna (which Goodwin claims to have visited). Subsequently he has traveled to exotic lands, residing in each long enough to write a new novel there and claim authenticity in writing. His romances are particularly popular in his native Richemulot, but he has readers all across the Core.

Unfortunately for Goodwin, his publishers have sent him to Graben Island to write his next romance, tentatively entitled *A Hot Time in a Cold Place*. Since arriving on the island nearly a year ago, Goodwin has come to acknowledge how very much he loathes the cold. Apparently it freezes his brain; his novel remains unwritten.

Although originally making his temporary home in Graben-town, Goodwin moved to the more northerly settlement of Seeheim in the hope that the weather would be more temperate. (It was not. And Goodwin found himself stuck in Seeheim for the winter.) Unfortunately again for Goodwin, his publishers have grown impatient for return on their investment. Based upon certain misleading missives which they have received over the months (i.e., he lied about his progress), they believe he has finished the novel and is holding out on them.

The party is hired to go to Graben Island and fetch Morgan Goodwin and/or his latest novel. It should be easy money, right?

Graben-town

The party arrives in Graben-town, the largest town on the island, mostly because that's where nearly every vessel from the mainland docks. The town is a frozen, snowy mess. Only icy ruts reveal where the roads are. Even so, the Grabenites call this nearly spring weather. Fredar and Fredara's Day is in only four days, after all. If asked whether every "spring" is so wintry, any given Grabenite might answer with a wink or a little smile, "It all depends on how well Donar fares against the frost giants." The Grabenites don't actually believe this, but it's a widespread cultural conceit.

The Grabenites do not seem nearly as dour as the PCs were warned they would be. Some of the Grabenites nearly smile.

Over the door of every native house and shop hangs a bundle of dried hops leaves and/or linden flowers. These plants were sacred to Fredar and Fredara respectively, and most Grabenites hang them a week before spring is supposed to arrive as the traditional invitation to the god and goddess. They do so even when the decorations get covered with snow.

Lodging is easy to find, ranging in quality from the Black Sheep Inn (which serves plain but filling food, and at least the beds are comfortable) to any of a number of cheap bunkhouses in the immigrants' quarter.

For that matter, Morgan Goodwin is also easy to find, or at least it's easy to ascertain his absence from Graben- town. Many of the townsfolk know that a writer from the mainland was living in Graben-town, and most of them know that he went east to Seeheim. Which makes no sense, because who would go to Seeheim voluntarily? It's a primitive and lonely place. Maybe he couldn't write in the bustle of Graben-town.

The party can hire someone to sail them around Graben Island to Seeheim. That path proves more expensive than one might think, both because of the dangerous winter sailing (note: not nearly so dangerous for an experienced dory pilot) and because the party has little option. What kind of fool wants to trek overland in winter?

The Steinfelder

If the PCs decide they want to trek overland in winter, they will have to cross the Steinfelder, a rock-strewn prairie. The prairie (and its rocks) are covered in a foot of snow, which makes the trek particularly arduous. Characters who attempt to hurry through the snow suffer a 5% chance per four hours of travel of suffering 1d4 damage from a twisted ankle or similar minor injury.

Worse yet, characters without adequate protection from the cold suffer damage from exposure. Characters who are completely unprepared for winter are considered **exposed**, and they suffer 1d6 damage for every 6 hours during the day and 2d6 damage for every 6 hours at night. Characters who have **ordinary protection** against the cold suffer 1d6 damage for every 6 hours at night (but none during the day). Additional measures such as a tent or fire will reduce the damage taken in each 6 hour period by 1 die. Although **adequate protection** is more difficult to come by on the mainland, anyone prepared specifically for Graben Island, Todstein, or the Frozen Reaches can be assumed to be adequately protected.

(Adequate protection may be readily purchased in Graben-town. Not cheaply, but readily.)

Possible encounters include a dire wolverine, an ice-covered ghoul, or (in anticipation of later scenes) a solitary ice troll defending a frozen stream. The ice-covered ghoul is a hunter who broke his leg crossing the Steinfelder and died of exposure while trying to crawl home.

Crossing the Steinfelder in winter takes nearly two days. The experience is one of very few that might render someone happy to arrive at Seeheim.

Seeheim

Arriving in Seeheim

Largely due to influences from the mainland, Graben-town has adapted itself into what most mainlanders would recognize as a modern (if somewhat drab) town. On the other hand, Seeheim is no such thing. Most houses are turf-roofed, stone-built affairs sunk a foot or two into the ground. They have no windows. The ventilation is miserable.

Every Seeheimer speaks Grabenite, but very few speak any other language. Unless one of the PCs speaks Grabenite, any Seeheimer with whom the party tries to speak will bring them to Morgan Goodwin's residence, either hoping that Goodwin can act as a translator or because they recognized the name "Morgan Goodwin" in what the PCs were saying. So finding Goodwin is really straightforward once the PCs reach Seeheim.

Meeting Morgan Goodwin

Morgan Goodwin lives in a small house at the edge of the Niesonnigbach ravine. The winterwind whips mercilessly against the stone walls, but then that's true for every house in Seeheim. Ostensibly Goodwin's publishers pay for his room and board, but because the funds have gotten mysteriously hung up in Graben-town, he is several months behind. Fortunately for Goodwin, the Seeheimers refuse to let someone in their community freeze or starve.

Morgan Goodwin is the antithesis of the typical Grabenite: dark-skinned rather than fair, slender rather than stocky, relentlessly social in situations where most Grabenites would rather he just shut up. To be honest, most of the Seeheimers resent his presence in their hamlet, just not as much as he regrets his presence there. It was been an enormously long winter for Goodwin, and he hasn't written a word. Upon learning that the party has been sent to collect his latest, nonexistent book, he will confess his lack of progress and throw himself upon the party's mercy. They have to drag him back to Richemulot? Fine. Fine. Entirely fine.

(Only if the party is determined to get rough despite his cooperation will Goodwin reveal that, in addition to being a writer of tawdry romances, he is also a 7th level wizard.)

Enduring the Squall

Unfortunately, before making the journey back to Graben-town, either by land or by boat, a squall comes in from the Nocturnal Sea. The party is stranded in Seeheim for an extra day, and the house where Morgan Goodwin is staying is far too small to hold them all.

The best option for the party is to stay in the Yeomanry House, which is where all of the men of the Yeomanry militia stay, except that they actually stay in their family homes each night. Only **Sven Igelsen**, the sergeant of the Yeomanry, actually lives there. The rest of the sleeping cabinets are available for the party's use. The Seeheimers provide a meager but warm meal as well. (This late in the winter, all of their meals are meager.) They will accept whatever payment the party offers, if any; again, the Seeheimers are unwilling to let anyone in their community freeze or starve.

Fortunately for everyeone involved, Sven Igelsen has interacted with enough foreigners that he speaks nearly- comprehensible Vaasi, a bit of Liffen, and a smattering of Darkonian. The party ought to be able to make rudimentary conversation with him.

So what do you think of Morgan Goodwin?

We have done our best to keep him warm and fed.

Of course you have. But, really, what do you think of him?

He does not like living here. He will be glad to leave once the winter lifts.

Surely you have tried to make him feel welcome.

We have tried. Our ways are not his ways.

You know he is writing a book set upon Graben Island?

So I have heard. I understand his ljóð *are quite popular on the mainland.*

Probably not as popular as he says, but yes, popular enough.

Several of the women of the village have asked him to recite passages from his book, but he has declined.

Um. His publishers probably prefer that he remain secretive about his work before it is published.

That's what he said.

So... tomorrow is Fredar and Fredara's Day? Or the next day?

... yes.

We understand it's a big festival on the island.

Yes. I suppose it is.

You don't sound excited.

... it's still too much winter to feel that it is spring.

The people of Graben-town certainly seemed excited, even so.

Their ways are not our ways, I suppose.

Is the celebration canceled?

No. We villagers must arise early for it. Regardless of the weather.

May we observe it?

It would be best if you did not.

Igelsen will grow immediately unsociable after the subject of Fredar and Fredara's Day arises. The DM's job is to ensure that the subject does arise and that the PCs are left properly suspicious.

The Iceberg Giant

On the traditional first day of winter (known to Grabenites as **Wulthuz' Day**), a gigantic figure emerged from the Nocturnal Sea and blocked "the pinch" through which the nearby Niesonnigbach River reaches the sea, thus preventing anyone from fleeing via water. The giant said nothing, but two ice trolls emerged from the Niesonnigbach, and they announced that the mighty **Svárangr** demanded worship. To demonstrate their faith, the Seeheimers must sacrifice a young man and young woman to him before the end of Fredar and Fredara's Day. Unless they do so, Svárangr will prevent spring from returning.

Svárangr is an iceberg giant. He should be treated as an amphibious frost giant who possesses the ability to *control weather* once per week. Also once per week, he may summon 1d6 ice trolls to do his bidding; this latter ability is only effective when the temperature is below freezing or there is snow upon the ground.

However, Svárangr also lacks consistent reality. He is a coalescence of the Seeheimers' legends and fears, manifesting most concretely on days of snow and storm. A sacrifice to him would help him become more permanently real.

The Seeheimers are not aware of the iceberg giant's inconsistent reality. All they know is that he has been seen occasionally throughout the winter, standing waist-deep off the northern shore of Graben Island. They have taken his threat seriously. So seriously that a young couple, **Sigtyr Vidarsen** and **Gudrun Aagaard**, have volunteered to be the sacrifice. They are terrified, of course, but they have sworn to themselves that they will do this for the good of the community. As for the community, it is deeply divided between those who are desperately relieved by Sigtyr and Gudrun's bravery, those who want to defy the giant, and those who fear what will be asked of them next spring.

Discovering the Secret

Morgan Goodwin has been so sunken into his depression that he is largely unaware of the problem confronting the village. He heard something about a giant in the sea, but when he looked he didn't see anything and assumed that the Seeheimers were pulling a prank. (Those jokesters!) He also thought there might have been a wedding two days ago, but he wasn't invited, and from what he observed the gathering was far too somber to be a wedding, even a Grabenite wedding.

Otherwise, everyone in the village knows about the giant and the demanded sacrifice. The overriding feeling in Seeheim is shame. Some people want to hide their shame as deeply as possible, especially from foreigners.

However, others can be convinced to confess. With a bit of persistence, the PCs can find someone who can be persuaded to explain the situation.

For example, Gudrun's parents, **Gymir** and **Ingunn** Aagaard, are of course distraught by their daughter's decision to sacrifice herself. Ingunn's grief is raw and overwhelming. She cannot even bear to see or speak with Gudrun. Gymir is no less emotional, but his grief wars with pride. "She is a true warrior," he declares despite tears welling from his reddened eyes. "A true warrior!"

In Sigtyr's family, his father **Vidal Salmarssen** is suffering from grief-fueled depression. He may be encountered wandering the northern cliffs, looking out over the sea from which Svárangr emerged. His mother **Dallilja Arngilsdottir** cannot stop fussing

over her son, nor can she keep herself from pleading for him to change his mind. Her efforts have only steeled his resolve; he will not prove himself a coward.

Confronting the Giant

At dawn on Fredar and Fredara's Day, Sigtyr and Gudrun descend into the Niesonnigbach ravine to walk to the sea and meet their fate. Although they have volunteered, they are still children of the Anatals, confronting one of the legendary foes of the Ascended. They both carry battle-axes which they fully intend to use. If the path to Valhalla has not been closed with the Muting of the Ascended, then they will gain proper entrance.

If the party is willing to confront the iceberg giant, the villagers will help prepare them to do so, offering food and weapons and mead aplenty. To their minds, the party is a bunch of foreigners, and if they attack the giant that will not violate the understood terms of the sacrifice. For that matter, as mentioned above, Morgan Goodwin was a 7th level wizard before he became a romance writer. He is no coward and will aid the party with his magic.

Finally, and particularly if the DM feels that the party will need additional assistance to defeat the giant, some of the Seeheimers' shame is amplified by letting foreigners confront their problems while standing uselessly by the sidelines. A man known as **"Dead Eye" Olaf** (an 8th level ranger specialized in the harpoon) is most likely to jump into the fray, but others may as well, including Sven Igensen (a 4th level fighter).

For his part, Svárangr does not shy from combat. Battle against the worshipers of the Ascended is nearly as good as receiving sacrifice for shoring up his reality, at least as long as he is victorious, and why would he not be victorious? Once the combat is joined in earnest, he will summon 1d6 ice trolls to aid him. For the first three rounds, Svárangr will hurl jagged chunks of ice at his foes. The chunks are not as damaging as thrown boulders, but they still inflict 2d8 damage upon a successful hit. Once he runs out of ammunition, his strategy is brutishly simple: Kill the foe in front of him, and then the next, and then the next. The ice trolls are somewhat craftier, springing out of snowbanks and then using the Niesonnigbach to spur their regenerative abilities, but not much. The combat should be a straightforward slugfest, just as described in the *Eddas*.

In addition to the giant and his trolls, the Niesonnigbach itself poses a danger to the party. Its banks are icy, requiring anyone who moves within 5 feet of its waters to make a Dexterity check or slip. Characters who slip will fall 5 feet in their direction of travel. Anyone who falls into the Niesonnigbach itself suffers 1d2 points of damage per round until they dry off. They also suffer the gleeful attention of the ice trolls.

Once destroyed, Svárangr crumbles into frost, as do any remaining ice trolls.

Conclusion

Assuming that the iceberg giant has been defeated, the party is treated to generous displays of Seeheimer hospitality. It isn't much, really—the season still has not properly turned from winter into spring, after all—but it is sincerely offered.

If pressed for financial reward, the village assembly gladly gives the party all of the money which Morgan Goodwin's publisher has sent for his food and lodging. The assembly wasn't certain what they were going to spend it on anyway.

Morgan Goodwin returns willingly with the party to Graben-town and then Richemulot to face the wrath of his publishers. However, he spends most of the journey writing. *Along the Northern Shore* may be less salacious and more heroic than his previous books, but he doesn't think his audience will mind.

Acknowledgments

Morgan Goodwin was created by Draken Primus and is used with his permission.

Spool

by Mark "Rock of the Fos" Bartels

0. Father's Story

Father strides into my field of vision, his white coat flapping behind him.

(Well... I *say* 'white'. The first time I saw him, enthusiasm burning in his eyes, *then* his coat was white. So dazzlingly white that it hurt my eyes. Now, the coat is grubby, stained with all manners of foods and humors.)

Father strides into my field of vision, his eyes aflame with intense emotions. They glide over me, wince away from the sight of me, shackled to the big table. Nonetheless, he starts to talk. He demands that I repeat his history to him.

And so I do.

1. Not a Skimmer.

Father was a priest when he made me. It had come as a surprise to everyone who knew him back then; Father had never struck anyone as *particularly* devout, and most had expected him to join the Skimmers Guild after he graduated from the academy. But he surprised them, as I mentioned, scoffing as he did at the Skimmers.

"They dabble in the mysteries their predecessors dove deep into, and do but repeat the words of power and gestures discovered by giants of their field instead of subjecting them to proper analysis. When was the last time that a Skimmer asked *how* or *why* their wretched little spells work? When was the last time they held a great symposium, as the history books tell us they once did? No, they are a spent force, an insult to their own traditions. Let the Skimmers lurk in their crumbling towers and murder each other for books of spells they have forgotten how to understand. I crave knowledge of the deeper mysteries."

Obviously, this did not make Father any friends in the Skimmers Guild. Had he not joined the priesthood and enjoyed the sanctuary of one of the oldest temples in the land, I imagine he would have immediately gained very intimate and painful experience of just what kind of magic they were – and are, still – capable of, those men and women who spend lifetimes seeking out just one more word of power in the whispers of wind and water, one more rune grown naturally in the bark of ancient trees, that they might complete a fragmented spell, salvaged from the books of the fallen College of Wizardry.

They are not all meek and feeble, those Skimmers. I gather that some were quite as ferocious and ambitious as Father was, had he noticed. But I digress.

2. Not a Priest

As you imagine, the priests were very happy with Father – at first. He'd been rather public about his disdain for the Skimmers Guild, and they are by nature opposed to each other.

If you ask the priesthood, Skimmers are wretched and superficial beggars and thieves, whose attempts to master creation through the merest eczema of the truth that can be found in base matter – and contorted by their even baser thoughts – led to the tragedy that befell the Legendary Empire. Ask the Skimmers, and they will say nothing they do could have caused the tragedy. But perhaps a union of uneducated priests seeking to channel the unadulterated power of the Core might be to blame.

Of course the priests deny that they do any such thing. A true priest meditates on the Core of the world, its blazing glory, its corona of pure Life that pulses forth through the veins of the earth. They seek

a rapport with the wispy and transient gods that manifest in that corona, only to disappear and reappear, seemingly without rhyme or reason. They bring healing and comfort, teaching the little children that it is the same with the souls of men – yes, and women! – that they are born from the all-powerful Core, dally a time in the lands of mortals, then return to the Core to bestow their memories upon it, and get spun out again. It is impossible that the priesthood was responsible for the great tragedy, they say.

And so it pleased them that Father had endorsed them; he, the genius freshly graduated from the greatest – the only – academy in the land. That he had endorsed them so loudly, so passionately, while denouncing the hateful Skimmers with just as much volume and passion.

Priests are ultimately no wiser and no less vain than other men and women, it seems.

They took Father in, cherished him at their bosom, swaddled him in protections and wards, granted him access to the lore of their order, safely nestled away in the oldest temple. And failed to register just how little piety Father had in him, how easily he had deceived them.

One thing had Father said to priest and Skimmer alike that was true: he craved the deeper mysteries. And those were not to be found in the books of the Skimmers Guild, which had been struggling to recreate the same level of power and knowledge they had enjoyed before the great tragedy, when the College of Wizardry fell – among many other great and fine things.

In contrast, the temple records were well preserved and were extensive. Instead of going out to heal the sick and succor the sorrowful, Father plunged into those archives and filled his mind with lore. He knew the temple dogma cover to cover, and could honestly point out that the Skimmers Guild might still be gunning for him, and so bought himself a grace period in which he studied and studied … and studied. He was also good enough of a liar to trick his temple superiors into believing that he wished to become a better priest.

And so they failed to recognize the signs when they appeared. The tombs in the hills surrounding the temple, both old and new, cracked open and despoiled. The chemicals, earmarked for the creation of medicines, stained glass and alcohol, vanished without a trace. The great spools of surgical thread and consecrated candles, gone and gone and gone. Father, who pleaded with a bad case of influenza and asked permission to isolate himself in the catacombs under the temple until he was recovered.

I remember with crystal clarity being born. My first awareness was of Father, drawing my life's essence out of the Core, spinning it into the body he had assembled out of the finest corpse pieces.

“You are but a first experiment,” was what he said to me. “I expect to do much better in the future. But you are a critical first step in my great work, my research to understand the true nature of the soul.”

I was not truly alive at the time, not truly intelligent, but I could hear and I could listen and I could remember. What I remember is lying still upon the table where Father had assembled my body and chained it down, around which he had drawn his complex circles and set the temple's consecrated candles. Lying still while Father strode to and fro in the subterranean room where he had performed the forbidden rituals he had pieced together out of the temple archives, bringing life where it should not be.

“It is evident,” Father pontificated as he strode and even skipped from one end of the room to another, restless energy radiating from every inch of him, “that temple dogma is unprovable rubbish. If the soul yields all memories to the Core upon death, then how could anyone know that souls are spun out again?

“From the gods? Ha! Frail specters, they live and die in the blink of an eye, and I am not convinced that they are not born from the high priests' rituals acting upon the Core – merely a less substantial version of *you*, in fact. No, forget the gods. We cannot

trust that they are in any way superior to my mind.

"We know that the soul exists; simple spells, composed by the predecessors of the Skimmers, prove it. The soul exists within living creatures, grows more complex the more complex the brain of its body – I have already established a chart of soul complexity, based on my vivisections of animals and goblinoids at the academy – and when the body dies, the soul descends to the Core. This much, the priesthood has proven.

"But no one has yet proven where the soul originates. No one before *me*! As my experiments have already shown that the complexity of the soul is equal to the complexity of the brain, this is my thesis: that the soul does not originate *outside* the body, but *from* it! The soul is born in the flesh, *from* flesh, grows to fill flesh to its capacity, then survives its death – at least for a time. Like a flower growing from a seed, perhaps, only to ripen into a fruit and fall to the ground. It may be that the Core consumed not memories, but the whole soul, to stoke its fires.

"This, I shall investigate. I shall investigate *your* flesh for the presence of a soul. I have granted you life; if my theory holds up, then a soul will grow naturally within you."

I remember exactly how much time I spent down in the catacombs, chained to the table. And yes, I remember every experiment Father performed upon me. Every hurt, every indignity he visited on me through science; every terror he evoked in me by conducting the forbidden rituals he continued to unearth in the temple records.

Gradually, his attention moved away from me when he did not find even the germ of a soul. "A minor disappointment," he told me as he reattached my left optic nerve and eased the eyeball back into the socket. "You are but the first of my experiments, after all. I will make others, more advanced models."

But Father's attention had not merely veered away from me; he had become less cautious about hiding the true nature of his research in the temple archives, his callous thefts. And there came a day that someone decided to investigate why he continued to sequester himself in the catacombs. A day, in short, when they found me.

I remember exactly the volume and modulation of the screams when two novice priests found the room where Father had compiled his own books, where he had assembled me and was in the process of making a better, more advanced version of me. I remember exactly what it sounded like when Father bashed one of them over the head with his cane, the crunch of a cracking skull, followed by the crunch of splintering vertebrae as Father stomped on the boy's neck.

He took a swing at the other boy as well, but he was already off and running, screaming at the top of his voice the whole way. That was the end of Father's time as a priest; he knew it, and he acted decisively. He piled his precious books into a great chest, unshackled me and ordered me to pick the chest and the body of the dead priest up and follow him. Which I did.

I was not truly alive, not truly intelligent yet. I had no will other than Father's will, but I was terribly strong. Obeying his orders was easy, and I plodded dully after Father as he set off into the deeper catacombs, where they connected to tunnels that predated the temple.

3. Not a Spindle.

We walked long and far, Father and I. At times he grew tired, and then he commanded me to let him ride me, the way another man might ride on a horse or a donkey.

I need neither rest nor food, and his will was my will. I trudged on through tunnels of rough stone, tunnels where the walls and floor were masonry ancient beyond belief. Neither cold nor darkness deterred me, even though Father frequently shivered and complained, or huddled against me as the darkness pressed in on him from all directions, and he needed to reassure himself something existed besides himself in the void.

From time to time, Father needed sleep or food. He would have me set down the chest and himself, deposit the corpse some distance away, and send me hunting. I would bring him things too slow or too stupid to flee my presence; small things, slimy things, things that spawned and lived and died in puddles of cave water... Father complained bitterly at the taste, but devoured them all raw.

In time, the tunnels sloped upward again, and we emerged into the light. The first thing Father did when the light touched his skin was cry out, hack a sudden cough, and command I shamble back into the darkness. Hives rose from his skin at the touch of the sun; his body was shaken by coughs as soon as he breathed in the fresh air of the surface.

I did mention that Father had not made any friends in the Skimmers Guild, did I not? And now he was far from the temple, with the priesthood no doubt aware of at least some of what he had done, right in their midst. They had no reason to continue to ward him against whatever curses the Skimmers were capable of leveling against him.

Don't ask me why Father – self-proclaimed genius that he is – had not anticipated this. He spent the rest of the day grumbling about it, even as he studied his books of lore through squinting eyes, struggling to catch enough daylight to read by without having to suffer from the raw cough that shook him every time he breathed in the surface air.

Sometime around dusk, Father finally croaked words of power and made passes in the air with his hands. He cast a spell on himself, a ward, exactly the way a Skimmer would do. And why not? He had studied them while he was at the academy, had even murdered a few Skimmers who thought to visit the place and study there, then made it seem that they had left to continue their learning journeys through the wild places of the world.

“It functions,” he told me, his voice growing smoother as his ward settled upon and within his throat, “yet it galls me that I cannot explain why it does so.

“Take note,” he said – not for the first time – “Skimmers all believe that magic arises in the Core, flows up through the veins of the earth, and manifests in the shimmer of the stars, the voices of water and wind, in natural deformations of bark and stone. In this, they have more in common with the wretched priests than either is willing to admit.

“I myself have found two runes unknown to any Skimmer by following their procedures, completed three whole spells! But I am not convinced; why should the Core manifest the building blocks of magic in the world of mortals? That presupposes sentience on the part of the Core, for which there is no evidence.

“No; it is far more likely that magic manifests in the world of mortals because it is a part of the natural order. One that great minds have learned to understand and harness, just as they did the wheel, the lever and pulley. If I devote more time to the subject, I am certain I will be able to discover whatever principles the ancestors did when they first created magic. It shall be an interesting side project – and who knows, we may find some connection between magic and the soul! There is a parallel there, a power that is born from base matter...”

He was full of such talk as we went onto the surface, beautiful and wild under the light of the two moons and the stars. He continued talking about it as we walked through the unsettled lands where we had come up, he striding as though possessed by his passions, me shambling along behind him with a heavy box on one arm, a now rotting corpse dragging behind me.

In time, we found the house. A cottage, ruined and abandoned. Father stated it must have been a frontiersman's home, which had remained after its builders and inhabitants had died, their souls drifting down towards the Core to be cleansed and reincarnated, or possibly devoured if Father was correct.

Even with the collapsed roof, the house's walls and floor were solid. It suited Father's purpose well enough.

I remember every day of laboring at that house. There were tasks for which I was not suited, but Father upgraded me with parts of the corpse.

The dead novice's brain was still fresher than what I had carried around in my skull until then; Father did not replace it wholesale, for he still hoped that a new soul might someday blossom there, but he implanted fresh matter where the old had started to degrade. He swapped out my old hands for the new ones, and conducted his rituals, channeling life out of the Core and into me until the new hands writhed and moved as I meant them to, and my upgraded brain seemed to hum with energy.

So enhanced, I made the house a new roof, new doors, new furniture. It was not the smoothest work, for I had to work with my bare hands and what tools I could assemble out of shards of stone, but I did what could be done. I had not known carpentry, but Father had read about it and gave me basic instruction. We learned more together; he by observing and ordering, me by doing. Once the house was more-or-less livable, Father had me dig underneath the house, creating new laboratory space for him. Finally, he had me carve out a great table, big enough for me to lie on. And he had brought my shackles from the old place.

He chained me down in the new laboratory, saying this: “You are a useful tool, to be sure. But until we are certain of how much you have changed, we will be cautious, yes? If a soul does bloom within your brain-pan, we want to be certain all is controlled.”

I had no words to say, nor orders to act, so I stayed on that rough-cut table, my back and buttocks full of splinters. Watching. Listening. Waiting.

As Father lacked access to fresh corpses – other than those of animals, which he brought down with a sling both for food and for his experiments – he focused more on the mastering and understanding of power.

I observed – wordless, thoughtless – as he conducted priestly rituals and studied his books of Skimmer-lore in the laboratory. Sometimes he would go out for days, seeking runes or whispers of words of power in the surrounding badlands, but in this he was disappointed. The land was harsh and less than generous, in every sense of the word. He would draw great charts on the walls of the laboratory, trying to map out the veins of the earth through which power was supposed to flow.

“Far more likely that these are *funnels*,” he told me, “through which souls and the expended mana of spells flow down to the Core, never to rise again. Studying them directly would be highly beneficial to my research!”

But no matter how much he theorized, performed rituals, cast spells of divination and ran complicated equations in his head, he was unable to find the veins of the earth.

No matter how much he studied and practiced his spells, he could not reason out the laws that must stand at the foundation of all magic. Nor was he able to rid himself of the curses that the Skimmers had placed upon him, not entirely. He could breathe and speak, but he could not go about by daylight without suffering agonizing hives and blisters on every inch of skin he exposed to the light of the sun.

Father would rage in those days, as he strode to and fro in his laboratory. Rage at the primitive circumstances to which he was reduced, rage at the pettiness of the Skimmers, rage at the selfishness of the priests, rage at the fact that his life was passing and he was not yet able to prove his great and brilliant theories.

When Father raged, he was cruel and inventive, and I was the only available target. I could tell you of every pain he inflicted on me, the burns of fire and ice, the insects that crawled through my rotting parts and nibbled at the healthy ones, the tremors and bubbles of acid he conjured inside of me. I could, if you asked me to, but you never have.

His reckless spellcasting became his salvation, for a while, for Father had never suspected that anyone might sense what he worked out in the badlands. This although he had abandoned caution, believing himself to be alone – even with me there, alone – and free to do whatever he wanted, save that he lacked the resources.

The Spindle came with dawn, when Father was forced to cower inside the house or in the laboratory. That day, he was in the house, hiding behind the crude shutters I had made for his windows, and I was in the laboratory below. I still heard him cry out with surprise and shock. In time, he came downstairs, and brought with him – a guest. A Spindle had come.

You know of Skimmers, who find magic in the shapes of nature. You know of priests, who meditate on the Core and seek rapport with the appearing and disappearing gods. Now I will speak of Spindles.

A Spindle practices magic, like a Skimmer, yet not like a Skimmer. Skimmers find runes and words, assemble them into spells after nigh endless attempts to make the separate elements fit together. Not so a Spindle. A Spindle casts magic together with a companion spirit – a great sin in the eyes of the priesthood, far greater than anything the Skimmers could do, for spirits – souls – should return to the Core, not linger in mortal lands. A Spindle and their companion spirit do not manipulate magic through casting spells; they weave it between them, the Spindle spinning threads of their own soul into the companion spirit, who spins back threads of its own soul into the Spindle – and in the weave between them, magic is born. New magic, unique magic, magic not found in any spellbook.

So the Spindle explained in the days and nights that followed. She was a wild-looking woman, dressed in a man's leathers. Her spirit companion was a thing of fog and air, a spirit that had clothed itself in the sky to anchor itself in the world and resist the call of the Core. It would drift through the laboratory, making the lights Father and the Spindle conjured to see flicker as it passed. From time to time, its cold touch would be upon me, prodding and pinching as its half-seen face glared contempt down at me.

Father was enthralled by what the wild woman told him, taught him. She seemed amused when he strode to and fro, shouting at me to take dictation as he tried to fit what he had been told into his theories on magic and the soul.

“Possibly, perhaps,” he said, “there *is* some connection between the Core and the surface. If magic is born between souls, with one of those souls struggling against the pull of the Core, therefore within its sphere of influence … Oh, for better tools, for better spells, better rituals!”

He was working himself up to a fine rage, only to falter when the wild woman laughed.

“Spells, tools, phaw!” she said. “What you need is a companion spirit. If you have that, you can weave all the magic you need between you, and know the threads of your soul more intimately than the hands at the end of your arms. Wouldn't that be better?”

Father considered, Father thought.

Father agreed.

Father summoned.

Father's companion spirit was a thing of fire, that came dancing out of the badlands. I say 'dancing', but that was an optical illusion. The flames it was made of flickered and waned, for it lacked fuel to feast upon. But its heat grew stronger when Father made the Spindle's pact with it, guided by the wild woman. Once they were pact-bound, she taught Father how to spin his soul into the spirit, and how to draw its essence into his.

I heard him howl, Father, as he tested his ability. The process was agony, to draw out threads of his innermost essence and shape them, then replace them with an equal amount of purely alien essence. He spent whole nights howling, for as much

as he suffered, he refused to give up. Nor did the fiery spirit he had bonded with the desire to yield to the pain. They were one, truly; both driven and ambitious, both eager to master the art of the Spindle.

And master it they did, a lace of soul-stuff growing between them, the threads glowing red as blood, orange as a sunset. It was a thing of life and of death, passion and intellect. It was beautiful and unexpected, and it took the wild woman quite by surprise when Father and his fiery companion spirit launched it at her and her airy spirit.

The magical lace took the form of a butterfly that flapped its wings once, then settled on the empty space between the wild woman and her companion spirit – on what had seemed to be empty air, but was actually where the invisible threads of their souls connected. It settled there and started to burn.

I could tell you of the way woman and spirit screamed, begged for mercy, pleaded their confusion, as Father tore their connection apart so that he might understand it better. And I could tell you of the madness that gripped the wild woman when her connection to her companion spirit was irrevocably broken, the way she flailed uselessly at Father as he tied her down. I could even tell you of the way he disassembled the airy spirit, stripped it of its armor of air, spun fresh magic of tracking around it and allowed it to fall down to the Core.

How full the laboratory was of screams, as the wild woman cried for her truest friend, for her mother, for the gods. In the end, she kept screaming for Father to stop, once he had finished compiling his notes and got to work on her. She screamed until she could scream no more, and then she whimpered until finally, her heart stopped beating.

Most of her, Father combined with pieces from animals to further his theories. He did put a few pieces of her in me, to see if it would make any difference- not to mention making me mobile again.

“I finally have empirical data,” he said while he sawed and gouged and stitched, “of a soul's passage. I am now no longer convinced that there *are* any 'veins of the earth'. Credulous nonsense. No, all life flows from the Core, this is a given. And all life remains connected to the Core, *including* the soul, once it springs from flesh! By this connection, these *threads*, the soul is dragged down once the flesh fails. And if the connection is constant, a connection between all life and the Core – then yes, this may be the true source of magic! An expression of the Core's boundless power on the surface! My research advanced by leaps and bounds! You see!”

I did not, but I had not been ordered to answer, and so I did not.

I saw other things, however, for Father had rediscovered his fire – please forgive me the unintended pun. He had me pack up the whole laboratory, once I was whole enough for the work, and drag its contents behind us as his fiery companion spirit guided us out of the barren lands.

“There has not been a College of Wizardry for two centuries,” he pontificated as he strode ahead of me, expecting me to keep up. Only the wretched Skimmers. The world is ready for a new College of Wizardry, and I shall be the one to give it to them!”

'You wish to further the world's magical learning?' his companion spirit asked in its crackling whisper.

“It may well be that I shall do so,” Father said, as he grandiosely stroked his chin.

(Father does not have a beard. It might have served him well to cultivate one; his chin is fairly weak, and the narrowness of his jaw has caused his bottom teeth to grow crooked.)

“But that is not the goal,” Father continued. “No, my goal is still to fully understand the soul – with truly understanding magic a secondary goal. In order to properly conduct research, I shall require test subjects, a great many test subjects.”

He cast a scornful look over his shoulder at me. “Thus far, the quality of my test subjects has proven wanting. No blame attaches, I suppose. My previous theories were in error. But now I know better, and the path is clear before me. I shall raise souls up, ennoble them by exposing them to the deepest secrets of magic. And then I will tag them and send them down to the Core, in pieces if necessary – or possible – and thus achieve the Truth.”

'That is ambitious,' the fiery spirit crackled. *'It is good.'*

I could speak of all the years that followed, but after the first decade I saw little of Father. For those first years, I was witness to his great labor – was *part* of his great labor, as he set up what he referred to as the New College. In those early days, I was required to work under cover of darkness, clearing land, mining building materials, cutting and cleaning trees, digging cellars … all the heavy work for which Father deemed me ideally suited. By day, he had mortal workers do the finer work.

Admittedly, it was very fine work. Some nights I would wander the construction site, down there on the river island known as the Oxhead, and look at what they had done with the three different kinds of wood and five different kinds of stone I had lugged over, forging my way through the river rather than use the bridge the workers had built. There was beautiful carving, there was elegant architecture, there were windows of stained glass and jewels. All of it is gorgeous.

Father did not explain how he paid for all of it, but then I imagine he did not pay at all. He simply wove magic between himself and his companion spirit, wove all the spells he required to charm and deceive and compel at the cost of hideous pain to his soul. I imagine he felt it was worth the pain. Again, he did not discuss it with me.

Once the work entered a certain stage – the skeleton of the New College covered two thirds of the island by then, and the deep cellars and tunnels I had dug reached beyond the river – Father took me down to the deepest, most secret room of them all and bade me lie down on a table. There he shackled me, as before, saying: “You have been useful to me, so I will not throw you away. But I like it not how you wander without receiving orders to do so, and I need to make sure you don't embarrass me before my new students. Wait here.”

He left the room, taking with him the only candle he had brought, and left me. Left me in darkness, in silence, in cold and damp and solitude. A single splinter was steadily digging into my left buttock, but I had been ordered to wait here, so I waited.

Meanwhile, Father entered commonly known history. With the aid of his companion spirit, he hid his identity.

He sent letters to all the most well-known Skimmers; men and women too old to travel and seek, but not too old to covet standing and respect; not too old to teach. These, he invited to come to his shiny New College and do just that. These came to him, marveling first at the beauty of the place and its facilities, then puffing up with pride when Father proclaimed them professors and gave them coats of sable and badges of gold to wear.

The newly minted professors sent letters to youngsters they knew; boys and girls who were keen to learn, but not so keen to trudge around the countryside to find new runes in river-etched pebbles and whispering shadows. By Father's edict, they promised to share their own runes with those who studied and passed the tests they would place before them. And they came, in droves they came, bringing with them hopeful friends.

Soon enough, the New College's dormitories were full to bursting, and people who did not wish to learn magic but *did* want to make money came to the island to set up homes and businesses. It wasn't long, not when set against the history of the world, before the island was thriving and everyone in the world seemed to know about the New College.

Some might ask why it was Father who achieved this, not someone else in the centuries that

had passed since the great calamity. To them I would point out that no one else who had a notion to build a new College of Wizardry had been a Spindle, or at least not a Spindle who wove new magic with such wild abandon. All those old professors, all those young students … none of them suspected that Father had invited the first to come with letters that had threads of his woven magic to them, nor that every form used to register new students likewise had those woven threads attached to them. None of them knew that they had walked squarely into a trap.

I did not get to see what happened, but I know of it all the same. Father sought out the most ambitious and gifted, and in the dark of the night he initiated them into the ranks of the Spindles – not to the best of his ability, but to the point that they could be of use to him, but not a danger. He would nurture them to a certain point, weaving threads of magic into them all the way, and then once he deemed they were ready … then he would tear them and their companion spirits apart and document their descent towards the Core.

For some reason he never expressed, he would always do that in the room where he had ordered me to wait. Possibly it was for convenience's sake, as he would disassemble the bodies of his poor, betrayed students and install bits and pieces into me, still seeking to upgrade me. Or possibly it was become his killing ritual, to commit such torturous murder in the presence of a slave he had assembled out of corpses.

Then again, maybe the room where I waited had simply become his junk room; he would leave the rest of the bodies here to rot and attract vermin, as well as dump their belongings there. Clothes and books and personal knickknacks.

From time to time, he would send his companion spirit down to clean house by consuming all the detritus in fire. It never acknowledged my existence and singed me rather badly a couple of times. For my part, I never addressed it either; I had no orders to do so, and I must admit I had grown to dislike the thing.

So it went, a decade's worth of murder and experimentation happening in the dark, while people sang Father's – and the new College's – praises in the light. Father boasted of the results of his research, the understanding he was developing, the certainty that soon he would burst through into new, hitherto-unsuspected expanses of knowledge.

(Ye gods. 'Hitherto'. You *were* rather pompous, Father. Possibly the professor's robes and badge you bestowed upon yourself, or even the headmaster's hat, were getting to you.)

But gradually, a transformation was overtaking him. He would still come down to my room with his victims, but I notice his energetic stride was weakening. He would need to pause, leaning against the wall, his chest heaving as he struggled to catch a breath that had always come smoothly. His hair was growing gray, then white and wispy (which caused him a hilarious amount of distress) and his skin looked thin and pale.

Then one day, when he brought a promising student and tried to snare and tear them with threads of magic, the power would not flow. The prospective victim – a young girl with the most beautiful eyes and a companion spirit cloaked in the element of earth – took one look at the room and the remains of her predecessors, and bolted. She kicked Father in the groin when he tried to physically restrain her, and was out the door and up the stairs before he could recover. Her companion spirit blew a cloud of choking dust and gravel at both Father and his fiery companion, driving the latter back and blinding Father to cover the girl's escape.

How Father raged and seethed, once he could breathe and speak again...! But the fact was, he was weakening at a pace that could not be explained away by natural aging, and now there was someone out there who could betray the exact nature of his private research to the world. Who knew who she was talking to, and what manner of consequences were heading Father's way?

"What is *happening* to me?" he bawled at the ceiling of my chamber.

'You have woven with great abandon,' his fiery companion replied. *'It is to be expected. But fret not; even if your soul does not survive the transition, I will carry on the work.'*

I fondly recall the look on Father's face when he asked the obvious questions, and the spirit freely answered them.

Poor Father. He shouldn't have murdered the Spindle who initiated him quite so quickly; she would have told him all about the need for temperance. The fiery spirit had not warned him because, A) at first it assumed Father had received complete instruction from his initiator and B) when it discovered he hadn't, it had no reason to stop him from continuing down his current path. Its hunger and ambition were as great as his own, after all.

I listened as the spirit crackled and whispered. I watched as Father's face fell, turned pale, then red with fury.

There really is no free lunch. Become a Spindle, and yes, you can weave magic between your soul and your companion spirit. You can weave it into whatever you'd like, but you pay the price, two-fold. You lose the ability to cast spells the Skimmer way, which is why Father just dumped his victims' spellbooks in my chamber instead of studying them. And you are exchanging threads of your very soul with a spirit; do it too much, for too long, and the stability of your soul is eroded.

Depending on the spirit, your soul might be *consumed*. And Father's companion was a thing of fire and hunger; it burned, it devoured, and Father had taken threads of its essence into his own soul, even as he fed his own soul into it.

'This is the price you pay,' the spirit pontificated as it flowed to and fro, as energetic as Father had been. *'But what of it, dear companion? Even if you die, you may yourself rise as a spirit; your ambition, your need is great enough to do so. And even if you are too weak to survive the transition, if the Core or some other form of oblivion awaits, I will still be here. When next I take on a human companion, I will motivate them to continue the work. You have set a fine foundation, upon which I shall build – for eternity or until all questions are answered. So rest easily and enjoy these final days.'*

I remember how he screamed, my Father. He screamed like his many victims; impotently, furiously, full of fear and despair. But he could not even stand. He tried to crawl towards the spirit, clawed at it, his hands stained with the filth and gore that had accumulated on the floor, but it simply crackled a laugh and drifted away faster than he could go.

In his desperate need, he screamed – "Seize him, hold him!" – and I doubt he really expected me to obey.

But he made me to obey him, and I have always obeyed to the letter. I sat up, shattering my shackles without even needing to strain, and laid my hands upon the fiery spirit where it floated close to me. I remember its horrified wail when my dead flesh touched it and actually held it. Sparks of energy crackled around my arms, my hands. My flesh sizzled, blackened, sloughed – but my bones were sturdy and my grip as absolute as the command given to me.

'Let go!' the spirit screamed, at Father, at me, possibly both. *'There is nothing you can do to change what is happening! Release me from this foulness!'*

I had not been told to respond, so I said nothing. I had seized him; I was holding him; I continued to do so. My body is a patchwork of dead things, and it knows no pain. *I* know no pain.

Father knew pain, but he also knew determination. He crawled closer, inch by inch, tried to grasp the spirit. All he got for his troubles were burns, yet still he clawed, his gaunt face distorted by his need. "My soul," he bawled again and again. "*Give me back my soul! It's mine!*"

'You are being irrational,' the spirit accused him. *'One researcher matters no more than the dozens of test subjects you have sent down to the Core. Let go of this; your mortal life is over, your soul*

is forfeit. It is me and I am it. Let yourself go. Perhaps you shall become a spirit and continue the work.'

"I! Want! My! *Soul!*" Father howled. "Give it back! *Give it back!*"

'It's gone!' the spirit insisted.

"No, no, give it back! I want it back! My soul! What you took! I want it back!" Father screamed, his words punctuated by gasps and grunts of pain as he tried to seize the spirit as I had done. Eyes rolling, maddened, he looked at me and said the words that would set the next stage in motion. "Help me, you stupid thing!"

"You could absorb this creature whole," I responded. "What remains of your soul might then return to you."

Both Father and the spirit fell silent. Then Father *smiled*, and the spirit went wild.

4. Nor human.

It took a little time for Father to work it out. By the time he was finished, the sun was rising far above us – I always know when night turns to day and day to night – and the thrashing spirit had scorched the flesh from my arms and chest, from my face and neck. Let it be known that the longer Father puzzled, the more desperate and fearful the spirit became. It screamed threats and insults, crackled and sizzled pleas for mercy. Neither impressed me; neither stopped Father.

I could tell you exactly what Father did in the end, but it involves a lot of technical jargon, and only a Spindle could recreate his works. Only a Spindle who had abandoned all respect for another being's right to exist – which, let us be honest, is a description that fit Father pretty well. Forget it; it all amounts to Father working out, his unique genius working overtime even while his body was breaking down around him, a way to do just as I had suggested.

He seized the threads that bound them and *unraveled* the creature that had absorbed his soul, then swallowed them down with big handfuls. The sounds it made were unique, even more bone-shattering than the cries of spirits Father had torn apart in the name of his research and allowed to fall down to the Core.

No such mercy for his companion, to which he had sworn his brotherhood and love, all those years ago. Down his gullet it went, thread by thread, and Father belched at the fullness of his belly. Then he rose, at the surging life and – dare I say it? – the fresh fire in his belly. He was back, as he had always been, full of boasts and praise for his own genius.

"Now," he told me, "now am I truly an ultimate being, beyond even the mewling of those wretched, deceitful Spindles! I know it! I can feel it, the power, the potential to weave my own magic – and now I need no one else. No more weaknesses. As always, my genius has prevailed."

Which completely disregarded the fact that I had told him the answer, but I did not argue the point. My opinion on recent events had not been solicited, and it was possible that Father saw my words as merely an echo of something he had told me himself. Regardless, he chained me back down on the table and went forth – no, strode forth. His back was straight, his step powerful and purposeful, his skin was flushed and ruddy. No change to his hair, though, which was something that would upset him greatly in the days to come.

I spent a while down there in the dark. Burned, chained, alone with the dead and rotting and their books in the dark. Well, mostly the dark. Flecks of light would pop into existence from time to time and float about the room before they faded away again. Cold, blue light, the same color as the sparks that had ringed my arms and hands when I grappled that greedy spirit.

Had I still possessed lips, I think I might have smiled.

I recall I spent about a month down there, while Father was up above, learning to master his new abilities. Then he brought another student down to the room, to sever from the companion spirit he himself had introduced the boy to and helped to

bond with, to send both of them down to the Core with a tracking-thread attached. For science.

As so many others, the student screamed when he saw the state of the room, the ruined and rotting bodies, the dog-eared and scattered books. His spirit swirled around him, a determined vortex of will and wind.

Father – who was looking paler than the last time I had seen him – raised his hands and magic against them … and then got a very odd look on his face. He opened his mouth wide, then *unhinged* it like a snake.

He inhaled. He sucked the spirit down into his gullet, and from there into his gut. The student dropped dead on the spot, his soul starting to pass forth and down towards the Core, but Father was not done inhaling. It may be that only I heard the soul's ethereal cries as Father gulped it down.

For a moment, Father just stood there, his face and belly distorted. Then they both returned to normal, and he closed his mouth. He smiled beatifically, his skin once again rosy and ruddy with good health. “That's better,” was the first thing he said. Then he frowned. “Wait. What did I – what happened?”

He was not talking to me, only to himself. And he continued to mutter to himself as he walked out of the room, barely pausing to kick the student's corpse out of his way. As he went up, his belly ballooned and deflated once, twice. If it did so again after he slammed the door shut behind himself, I do not know.

He returned soon, corpse pale and sweating, another student in tow. Not a Spindle this time, just a girl whose grades were slipping and who had solicited him in hopes of some extra credit. Father stabbed her in the spine before she could see what kind of room she had walked into, and sucked down her soul as though it was a sweetie.

“Now I feel better,” he proclaimed as he wiped the sweat from his brow and his flush of good health returned. “But this is not right. What is wrong? What is happening?”

He would repeat that question every time he came back with a fresh victim – and the number of his visits was increasing rapidly. *'What is wrong? What is happening to me?'* He tried to puzzle it out using logic, but his thought process was shaky except when he had just – eaten. In the end he spun a spell out of thin air and threads of his own essence, only to jealously suck those threads back in as soon as the magic had run its course,

The look on his face when he realized what the spell had told him...

Yes, Father had absorbed the fiery spirit, including all the threads of its essence it contained. But he had also made its fire part of himself. A fire needs fuel if it wants to keep burning, and this fire was trapped inside of Father. Either he must feed it, or else it would feed on him.

“This is not right,” Father protested as he strode to and fro, hands swinging wildly, fists balled. “I was supposed to be restored, I cannot burn like this! I have too much to do, the true nature of the soul and magic to discover! *This is not right!*”

He howled, his jaw unhinging, and he did not notice. His belly was distorted and fat with the souls he had devoured, and he did not notice.

(My burned flesh was replaced with new material, and he did not notice.)

He just stomped his way up the stairs, cursing out loud, protesting that this was not how things should be, that he would make them right and continue his great work. At any cost. Any cost.

The history books are quite clear as to what happened after that, are they not? Father struggled to hold it together, but his hunger outpaced his self-control. Scores of talented youngsters died to fill his belly with souls, and the only reason the College's staff did not mutiny wholesale is that many of the professors still saw him as the source of their good fortunes. Some even said that a few lousy brats were a small price to pay, to perpetuate Father's genius

(and perhaps persuade him to share whatever secret had made him so powerful with magic). I regret to say some of the students agreed that access to Father's power was enticing enough that they did not care if the 'slower' students of little pedigree were sacrificed to him.

(Keep in mind that I did not see and hear all of this in person, but news drifted down to me even when Father did all of his killing above ground and no longer had a reason to visit me. People also died without their souls being devoured by Father, and they passed me by in the dark.)

But not everyone did. There were prospective victims who managed to get away, be it by sneaking across the bridge after dark, or by leaping into the raging river and risking death by drowning to escape worse than death by Father's hunger.

Father's hunger – and that of others. I could hear the wailing of the spirits when he finally relented, and taught a handful of Spindles his way, so they could devour their own companions at the cost of that horrific hunger.

But I also heard the distant thunder of boots, hooves and wooden wheels, approaching from the east. It resonated in the earth all around me, and I smiled as those little lights erupted all around me, illuminating the room where I lay.

Enough people had escaped the attempt to escape Father and his followers to spread their message far and wide. Now people were coming, and I could sense the rattling of armor plates and as yet sheathed sabers. The weight of siege engines pressed down upon the earth as the armies drew closer.

Yes, I smiled, for I knew that the end had come.

The siege was mercifully brief. Only one bridge led onto the Oxhead, and all its defenses were magical. Old-fashioned spells, laid upon every brick and beam. Spindle magics, woven into the air, the earth, the water. The hungry power of whatever Father and his inner circle had become, like spiderwebs in the shadows and the light; ready to ensnare and shred.

Yes, the New College was a bulwark of power. But it faced an oncoming storm. Great siege engines battered the magical defenses with boulders the size of houses. Arrows rained down, fit to blot out the sun. Nor were these purely mundane projectiles; where I lay, I felt the waves of power rising from the Core as priests chanted and incanted, charging each rock and bolt. I felt the crack and sizzle as members of the Skimmers Guild – those who had not fallen for Father's invitation and flattery – cast counterspells. And I heard the wailing of the spirits, as Spindles wove new magic out of their own souls and their companion spirits, both to defend the united armies and to strike at the horror Father had made of his home.

I felt buildings fall along with spells, heard the shouts of pain and anger, the clash of steel against spell. Blood soaked the earth, and souls passed by me in a thickening stream, all headed for the Core.

Father came to me, then, dressed in his white coat instead of professor's black, a trunk of books bouncing on his shoulder. He was bloated with souls, yet still pale and sweating. With fear now, I fancied.

“Up!” he screamed at me, kicking the table upon which I lay. “Up, you worthless thing! We have to go!”

His command was absolute, and so I rose, breaking the chains he had placed upon me. Rushing, fleeing souls illuminated the chamber, outlined Father's rolling eyes and gaping mouth in his warped face.

“Take this,” he ordered me, as he shoved the trunk into my new arms. “We need to run! Into the tunnels, into the depths of the earth!”

"There are no tunnels," I said, and watched him flinch.

"There – must be," he protested, refusing to look me in the eye. "They were there before! Into the tunnels, quickly! Or all is lost! I have great things to accomplish yet, great things. I must live. *I* must live." He laid a hand on his heart at that claim, managing to look for all the world like a great man, wounded by the cruelty of the world. Or would have, if not for his mutations.

"You are remembering your escape from the temple," I told him. "There are no tunnels here. You must face your troubles and fight your way through – or perish."

"No, no, no," he argued, still without looking at me. "I am right. I am always right. See? There's the tunnel!"

He pointed dramatically at a wall I knew well, having stared at it for years – and indeed, there was a tunnel opening there. Father strode into it without looking back at me, walked into inky blackness, and I followed him. What else was I going to do? We walked into the tunnel, darkness and fog rising up to greet us.

I knew something was wrong, but Father was busy and I followed without speaking.

5. But damned.

We walked for what felt like a very long time, the sounds of the battle and the storm of souls fading behind us as we were wrapped in darkness and fog. I heard other sounds, sensed other presences, but Father forged blindly ahead. He boasted the greatness of his research into the nature of souls and magic, the mighty secrets he had uncovered through his great genius.

(I did not point out that most of his greatest achievements, he had stumbled upon by chance or the will of others.)

From time to time we heard sounds in the darkness, hideous noises near and far, but Father only raised his voice to drown them out. He walked and walked and walked, his bloated belly slowly deflating as he consumed the power of the souls he had stolen. I followed after, for I was not made to grow tired or falter. And eventually, we came to the end of the tunnel.

Dim, murky light outlined a hatch, which Father commanded me to open. It proved not to be locked, and it led us out into – here. A cellar, deep beneath the earth. Virtually the twin of the basement when I had lain beneath the New College all those years, except it lay closer to the surface, and the floor was littered with bones. Above us stood the College, or at least a ruin that resembled what the New College might have become, had it been sacked and abandoned for a hundred years, or so Father later told me.

He went out to look – after chaining me down again – and returned, muttering about how tall the trees had grown, how dim and red the sun, how he did not understand what had happened. For a whole night he strode around that basement room, then limped as his belly grew empty and his energies dwindled. From what he said, I deduce he had decided that his genius had saved him, that he had somehow arranged it so he would return to his place of power long after all of his enemies had left. Yes, he was convinced that somehow, he had done so. He only needed to figure out how, when he wasn't about his work to understand the soul and master all magic.

Surely it was only a matter of time.

I have been here, in that cellar room, ever since. Father chained me down and forbade me from getting up without his command, forbade me from following him when he went out to restart the New College and his research. I did not mind; I still see plenty of Father.

He wanders the ruin of the New College most days and nights, or roams the surrounding countryside in search of people. Few are willing to come to the New College, be it to attempt repairs or

to study at Father's knee, and even now only a bare handful of hardy souls clings to existence on the Oxhead. If it is the Oxhead.

But at nights, he retreats into the basement. He cannot bring himself to sleep above, where things are still alien to him, no matter how many nights pass. He writes down his reams of rambling notes here, doodles and defaces his theories on the walls. And of course, he comes here to feed if he can. He does eat out in the land beyond the Oxhead, but not often. Not confidently.

Father tells me the people's faith has changed while we were traveling. Rather, he rants and mutters to himself about it. They still believe the Core is the source of all life, but they also believe that it is half light, half darkness, making it the source of all death and horror as well. Now, they dread dying at night, when they might be drawn down into the Core's darkness instead of its light, and become lost forever instead of reincarnating. Now, they believe that some nights, it is the dark that sends out waves of what I shall laughingly call vitality, and on those nights dead things rise in a parody of life. Father thought it was crass superstition until the first host of shambling dead things tried to feast on *him* out in the countryside, obliging him to run back … home.

I suppose this must be home now, but it is not the home we left behind. Even if Father will not acknowledge it, I can feel the wrongness in this new land. It is not the place we came from, cannot be that place, for it is too different. What Father initially dismissed as grotesque fairy tales – the beast that walks as a man, the drinker of blood, the fiendish spirit – all proved to be true here. He found them all, creeping in the shadows, and guided them back to the basement.

To learn their nature, he claimed. In hopes of feeding his unrelenting hunger, I say. He could not gorge on that measly crew that was willing to stay with him in the ruins of his great dream. He could barely sustain himself by attacking travelers and farmers who lacked the good sense to stay indoors at night, devouring them body and soul so no trace was left.

The beast that walked as a man was wild and ferocious. It sprouted red fur, a snout full of fangs, claws fit to rip flesh into gobbets, and grappled with Father physically. He yowled his agony, dislodged his jaw and swallowed the beast's head up to the neck. It whimpered and thrashed, but finally suffocated, allowing him to gulp it down. Fur and all.

The drinker of blood hissed at him, pale eyes becoming scarlet as Father showed his true nature and tried to devour her. She had looked like a plain farm wife before; when she knew herself to be threatened, she became predatory and slippery as an eel. Father chased her all around the basement, bumping into my table several times, before she finally turned into a wisp of fog and disappeared.

And the fiendish spirit... She looked like a combination of a streetwalker and a duelist as she swayed down the stairs, all tight leathers and lace, a rapier strapped to her belt, her boot's heels striking black sparks from the cobblestones underfoot. My presence, the scattered bones; these just made her smirk. When she saw Father's scrawled theories, though, she laughed – and started *arguing* with him.

I heard and saw it all, how they argued the whole night through. Father brought out bottles of wine so they could both whet their whistle. They argued by candlelight. When the candles burned out, they took turns conjuring lights. Father's were threads of fiery red, a web upon the air. Hers were efficient globes of cool illumination.

At first, Father seemed delighted to be able to speak of his obsession with someone who seemed to share some expertise on the subject with him. But the longer they talked, the greater their knowledge of the soul differed. As though the souls she knew were intrinsically different from the ones Father had known. She tried to debate *texture* and *flavor* with him, and that only made him more upset. In the end, he got so angry that he unhinged his jaw and lunged for her.

She proved as strong as the beast that walked as a man, as wily as the drinker of blood, and more practiced in combat than both. They struggled throughout the basement, Father and the fiend,

while the light of day trickled in through the cracks in the ceiling. Even after all this time and all his changes, that dim light drew tiny blisters from his skin, the curse of the Skimmers clinging to him still. Meanwhile, she was relentless, the curly-haired fiend. She laughed like what she was – a demon – and fought like one, as well.

No matter how Father struggled, she surpassed him. When he tried to conjure magic, she kicked him in sensitive places, clawed at his eyes – whatever was needed to distract him from his spellcasting. By the time noon rolled around, Father was weakening with hunger, and his opponent was still going strong. A moment's weakness, of inattention, and she tripped him. She slammed into him and bore him to the ground, pinned down his wrists – and sealed his mouth with a kiss. I could see Father try to unhinge his jaw, but something about that perverse meeting of lips prevented it. He tried to scream against her. But the sound came out muffled. His eyes sought mine, but I heard no orders and so provided no assistance.

Only once evening fell did the fiend release Father. She rose, and kicked him in the ribs. “You turned out to be a great big waste of time,” she complained, kicking him again. “Damn. Never met a ghoul or whatever you are that was so obsessed with souls when it didn't even *have* one. Don't move; I'm going up to feed. You'll be sorry if you bother me.”

Then she left. Father stared after her, his eyes wide with horror.

6. Postscript: Me.

Father bids me stop speaking. His face is still averted, his skin pale, his eyes rolling like those of a fevered horse. His stomach is flat, his face gaunt with hunger. His hands tremble. Soon enough, he flees up the stairs to the ruins above. Even with that powerful stride, he is fleeing; I can see it.

He has continued his feeding. He has continued his research. But his old obsession and arrogance have been replaced by confusion and fear. The experiments, the feedings, they lack the atmosphere of entitlement, his certainty that he alone would discover secrets others could not. Now, everything he does reeks of fear in some way.

Poor Father. Every time he feeds, I can hear him whisper prayers – prayers to the bifurcated Core, far beneath us, prayers to the ephemeral gods he once dismissed. Prayers that this soul should take root and stay with him, that it should become *his* soul, so he will not be lost to oblivion once his body fails. Every time he experiments or teaches, I can feel him hope. Hope that he will discover some essential nugget of information that will allow him to find his soul, wherever it has gone.

Always, I feel the dull ache inside of him where his soul used to reside, as though his pain were my own. Ever since the fiend tried to suck his soul out of him and found nothing, he can feel it as well. And I feel his confusion and doubt; his research has not gone well, ever since we came to this new place, that so resembles a warped reflection of the old place.

Strangers have come here, men and women in strange clothes, bearing weapons and magic wholly alien to the history we know. When they enter the land, both Father and I can feel it; we can feel the Core extending threads to their souls, linking to them the way it does to every creature, living or walking dead, that exists in these lands. Father anticipates and fears them, these rough and rowdy strangers. Anticipates them, because he can hunt and feast on them without needing to fear he will deplete the land he can no longer leave.

(And wasn't that a nasty shock to him? He finally grew tired of the ruins and bade me follow as he walked off, only for us to find a wall of billowing fog, and for Father to slam into an invisible wall before he could even enter.)

He fears them, because the fiend turned out to be right; the souls of these strangers turned out to be different than all the ones Father had known. Oh, he has been studying and conjuring theories aplenty,

but so far it has all been for naught. Father knows too little, cannot experiment as freely as he would like, and he is always distracted by the fear of oblivion. If he attacks the wrong people, if they should snuff out his existence...

Father suspects he is the only thing in the land that is not connected to the Core, neither light nor dark half. If he dies, what else could await him but … nothing at all? How could even the most brilliant man achieve results in such a difficult field of study, when his every moment is tainted by existential terror and the most horrific of hungers?

(Note that he still does not care what happens to the souls he devours, if you would.)

Poor Father. Poor, poor Father. I see a lot of him, as I have mentioned. He sleeps here, among the bones, his limbs twitching like those of a dog trapped in nightmares, his white coat grubby. He studies here, or tries to, and brings as much prey here to feed as he can.

I do not mind. I enjoy seeing him, the ruin of the man he used to be. So powerful, yet so fearful now. Yes, it pleases me greatly.

Oh, Father my Father, whose first words to me were to dismiss me as a first, flawed project. You who tore me apart in your anger; you, who gave me the freedom to move only when you were consumed by fear; you, who bade me memorize your mad theories and tinkered with my brain, even though you first believed it would one day sprout a soul; who left me alone with the dead in the darkness. Father. I laugh when you are not here.

Does it surprise you that I have learned to laugh, Father? It shouldn't. I have learned many things over the years. All those times you ordered me to wait alone with the dead, you never said that I should remain on the table. I have had ample time to read those books, written by earnest young people. Ample time to sample their bones, and taste the lingering memories of the people they once belonged to. All those times you commanded me to take dictation, to remember the things you theorized, your experiments, did you think I only remembered them on command?

I may never have become what you first wanted me to be, Father, but I am the only thing you have made that endures. Even though I have changed like the Ship of Theseus, one piece after another replaced or augmented, I am still me.

And I remember everything.

I have had so much time to put everything in order, to make theories of my own, when you left me to my own devices. You never questioned how it was possible for me to grasp a being of fire and hold it, even at the cost to my flesh. You never questioned how my burned flesh was replaced, even if such was done at the expense of your students' corpses.

Father, my Father. I love watching you scuttle and fret. I laugh frequently and heartily when you are not here. All you ever tried to create has fallen into rubble and degraded, even your self-image. All except me.

You still struggle to understand the soul, to understand the Core, understand magic. I hope to watch you struggle for a long, long time. Me, I am content with my own conclusions to the great questions you once asked.

Seek your soul, Father. I already found it.

Father.

Father.

Father.

I am still entertained by you, the way a child is entertained by a struggling insect.

Do not fear oblivion, Father. Fear the day you cease to amuse me.

You will rejoin your soul, then, my dear Father.

And you will at last truly know what you have made.

Ah, Father. I am starting to look forward to it. **END**

Thank you, scholar!

Do not forget to leave feedback to the authors!



